

Introduction: Woman, Poet, and Mystic

Āṅṭāl and the Saints of South India

In the Tamil country of South India, between the sixth and the tenth centuries, there emerged a remarkable group of holy men and women who transformed the religious milieu of the south. Blazing a trail for the path of love, they emphasized utter surrender to a personal god whom they approached on intimate terms, as child, friend, slave or lover. They composed poems in praise of their deity, frequently using as their model the poems that glorified their monarch, and at times adapting popular ballads to their use. Most of these hymns (poems) were set to music, in many instances to melodies prevalent among the people, thus making their verses accessible to the masses. So strong was the influence of these saints that South India, once dominated by the faiths of Jainism and Buddhism, now became a stronghold of Hindu worship.

These holy persons were referred to as Nāyanmārs or leaders if they were devotees of god Śiva, and as Ālvārs or “those who dive deep (into the divine)” if they worshipped Viṣṇu. There were sixty-three Nāyanmārs of Śiva, of whom several appear to have been legendary figures, and twelve Ālvārs of Viṣṇu, all of whom were historical personages who composed poetry. Āṅṭāl, known also as Kōtai or “She of the fragrant tresses,” was one of the twelve Ālvārs of Viṣṇu,¹ and the only woman amongst them.

The saints of South India acquired a position of such great eminence that a cult arose around them. Bronze images of both Nāyanmārs and Ālvārs were commissioned by every temple for placement in the innermost courtyard beside the sanctum sanctorum. Frequently temples commissioned a second set of images, usually of stone, while quite often their

portraits were painted on the temple walls. Their images were bathed, clothed, and adorned, and ritual worship was offered to them in a manner similar to that accorded to the deity of the temple. There were special observances in the temples on their birthdays and death anniversaries, and these ceremonies included a recital of their hymns. The twelve Ālvārs were given a unique status since they were considered to be *amśas* or secondary incarnations of Viṣṇu's companions and his attributes. Pride of position in this scheme went to Kōtai who was regarded as an *amśa* of Viṣṇu's second consort Bhūdevī, the goddess earth. The title Āṅṭāl as "she who rules (the lord)" was assigned to her because she achieved the closest possible relationship with Lord Viṣṇu.

Āṅṭāl's Place among the Ālvārs

The twelve Vaiṣṇava saints span a period of three centuries from roughly 600–900 A.D. The earliest among them are a group of three saints known as the Mutal, or First Ālvārs who may be placed in the early seventh century, while the latest is that most revered saint Nammālvār and his disciple Maturakavi who belong around the year 900 A.D. It would appear that the woman saint Āṅṭāl lived soon after the year 800 A.D. The evidence for this date is indirect and depends largely upon the date assigned to saint Periyālvār or Viṣṇucitta, her father by adoption. In one of his poems, Periyālvār refers to a ruling Pāṅṭiya monarch Neṭumāraṇ as one who extolled the lord of Tirumāliṛuñcōlai (Viṣṇu). By and large, the Pāṅṭiya rulers were staunch Śaivites, and the only monarch referred to in the inscriptions as a *parama vaiṣṇava* or great Vaiṣṇava is Jaṭila Parāntaka, who ruled from 765–815 A.D., and was also known as Neṭun-jataiyan and Māraṇ-jataiyan. However, it is also possible that Periyālvār was referring to the next Pāṅṭiya ruler, Śrīmāra Śrīvallabha, who though not specifically hailed as a Vaiṣṇava, was known as Neṭumāraṇ and was monarch from 815–862 A.D.² Periyālvār and Āṅṭāl would appear to have been prominent in the first half of the ninth century.

Several attempts have been made to date Āṅṭāl on the basis of astronomical observations contained in her *Tiruppāvai*. Her assertion, in its first song, that it is the full moon day of

the month of Mārkaḷi, when combined with her statement in song thirteen that “Venus has risen/Jupiter has gone to slumber,” has led scholars to propose the date of November 27, 850 for the composition of the poem. However, as Filliozat points out in his detailed discussion of astronomical dating,³ it is possible to find such a concomitance of planets in several other centuries, and a date of 731 A.D., for example, is equally feasible. According to an alternate system of calculation, based on astronomical data contained in the fourteenth century hagiographical text, the *Kuruḥparamparāpirapāvam 6000*, certain scholars have suggested a date of May 27, 725 (or May 29, 1205) for the birth of Āṅṭāḷ. A thirteenth century date may certainly be ruled out, and while the correspondence of dates in the eighth century is intriguing, it would appear that the most persuasive date for Āṅṭāḷ is the year 850, suggested both by song thirteen of *Tirupḥāvai*, and the historical data regarding Pāṅṭiya king Neṭumāraṅ.

The Ālvārs were part of a *bhakti* movement in the Tamil country which resulted in the overthrow of the Jain and Buddhist faiths and the establishment of the supremacy of Hindu worship. The prime movers in this movement appear to have been the Śaiva saints, in particular the two seventh century Nāyanmārs, Campantar and Appar, who actively confronted the heterodox faiths, defying their leaders and challenging their authority, proposing debates and performing miracles. According to hagiographic accounts, Campantar conclusively defeated the Jains, largely by the display of miraculous power, and converted the Pāṅṭiya monarch of Maturai to the worship of Śiva; Appar, by similar means, won over the Pallava ruler of Kāñcipuram. Campantar, in particular, expressed himself strongly and vociferously against these heterodox sects. He composed over four hundred *patikams*, songs consisting of ten or eleven verses, and he generally allocated the tenth verse of each *patikam* to the condemnation of the Buddhists and Jains. Other Śaiva saints, including eighth century Cuntarar and ninth century Māṅikkavācakar continued this stance of hostility and opposition, although perhaps to a lesser degree. The Ālvārs, by and large, did not enter the fray or participate in dispute and argument. While they appear to have approved of the

resistance offered by the Śaiva saints, they contented themselves with occasional disparagement of the Buddhists and Jains. Vaiṣṇava hagiography narrates only one instance of confrontation in its tale of Tirumaṅkai Ālvār removing a golden image of the Buddha from a monastery at Nākapaṭṭinam, melting it down and using the gold to cover the temple spire at Śrīraṅkam. In general, the Ālvārs appear to have preferred quietly to propagate the path of Viṣṇu bhakti and sing the praises of their lord. Their devotional fervor and incessant adoration of Viṣṇu is reflected in the four thousand devotional verses that they composed.

Most of the Ālvārs divided their devotion between the various forms of Viṣṇu. For instance, monarch–saint Kulasēkhara sang of the primal form of Viṣṇu as lord of Araṅkam, lord of Vēṅkaṭa, lord of Vittuvakoṭu; he sang of infant Rāma, and Rāma in banishment; he sang also of baby Kṛṣṇa. However both Periyālvār and Āṅṭāl sang almost exclusively of Kṛṣṇa. Periyālvār composed a single hymn devoted to the primal form of Viṣṇu, while his *Periya Tirumoli*, a corpus of fifty songs, praises Kṛṣṇa.

Āṅṭāl wrote two works, both dedicated to Kṛṣṇa—the popular *Tiruppāvai* of thirty verses and the relatively unknown and neglected *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, a set of fourteen hymns in one hundred and forty–three verses. Today, the *Tiruppāvai* is sung especially by young unmarried girls during the month of Mārkaḷi (December–January). Its popularity may be attributed to the belief that taking a vow to bathe at dawn each day of the month and to sing Āṅṭāl’s thirty verses will bring maidens an early and happy marriage. Recorded versions of the *Tiruppāvai* are readily available, and its verses may be heard throughout the month of Mārkaḷi over the official Indian radio network of South India. There are at least four translations of its verses into English, and one into French.⁴ By contrast the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* is lesser known and is not chanted in temples or at religious festivals, and only a single English translation of its hymns exists.⁵ Its mode may be classified as bridal mysticism and Āṅṭāl uses the lover–beloved mode, one of the accepted ways of approach to the godhead. Āṅṭāl’s uninhibited expression of the pain of separation from the beloved and her incessant yearning for his presence, added to an occasional use

of sexual terminology, appears to have been responsible, in part, for its neglect. Most devotees would find it difficult to relate to this mode. In fact, it was only after three years of studying the hymns of the saints that I was finally able to persuade my Tamil pundit that we should take up the study of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* or “Sacred Song of the Lady.” Only the sixth song of this work, the marriage hymn commencing with the words “*Vāranamāyiram*,” is widely known; it is, in fact, recited at many Vaiṣṇava weddings in South India. Brides regard Āṅṭāḷ with special reverence and frequently young Vaiṣṇava girls are bedecked as Āṅṭāḷ on their wedding day in the hope that divine favor may descend upon them.

Another reason for the exclusion of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* from temple rituals lies in the fact, aptly pointed out by Dennis Hudson, that its hymns are the expression of a singular, individual path to god, a “solitary unitive experience,”⁶ that is quite inapplicable as a mode of worship for the general populace. Clearly, it is the communal ideal of the *Tiruppāvai* that has led to its position of supreme importance in temple ritual, and to the corresponding neglect of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* which describes the unique path of a single saint.

Śrīvilliputtūr and the Legend of Āṅṭāḷ

In the temple of Śrīvilliputtūr in Tamilnāṭu, the first puja of the day, performed at dawn, includes an extraordinary rite which infringes all *sāstric* tradition. This rite, faithfully observed each morning, involves the transference of Āṅṭāḷ’s discarded garland of the evening before to the person of the majestic reclining Viṣṇu. Hindu ritual ordains that flowers offered to the godhead must be absolutely pure; used flowers, those which have dropped to the ground, those which have been smelled or otherwise “polluted,” are taboo. In fact, hagiographic tradition narrates the story of a Śaiva saint who cut off a queen’s nose for having smelled a flower set aside for the worship of Śiva; it further informs us that the king, equally perturbed by this act of pollution, cut off the hand that picked up the flower with the intention of smelling it.⁷ In such a context, the singular nature of the rite of the discarded

garland at the temple of Śrīvilliputtūr becomes doubly significant.

As the temple doors open at dawn, preparations are afoot for the *uṣā-kāla* (dawn) puja which is first performed in the Āṇṭāl shrine. At the completion of this worship, even as the richly garbed bronze image of Āṇṭāl stands freshly garlanded, the partially wilted garland which she had worn all night is carried in procession through the temple to the shrine of the reclining Raṅkanāta. At the appropriate moment in the morning puja of Viṣṇu, Āṇṭāl's discarded garland is placed ceremonially around his neck. At noon, this same garland travels to the shrine of Āṇṭāl's father Periyālvār, and is offered to him. Honored visitors to the temple of Śrīvilliputtūr may be blessed by having Āṇṭāl's discarded garland placed momentarily upon them, and they may be given one of its wilted flowers as *prasātam*. This unique ritual, in which the wilted garland worn by Āṇṭāl the previous evening is placed upon the image of the mighty Lord Viṣṇu, is a daily reenactment of a crucial point in the legendary story of Āṇṭāl's bhakti, her total rejection of human love, her longing for union with the lord, and the lord's ultimate acceptance of her as a special devotee and as his bride.

Śrīvilliputtūr is today a modest town with a population of 150,000. Little remains to remind us of its erstwhile prosperity or its magnificent "storeyed mansions" so proudly described by Āṇṭāl in the signature verses of the fourteen poems that comprise her *Nācciyār Tirumoli*. Only the famous temple with its single towering *gopuram*, the tallest in all of Tamilnāṭu, stands witness, both outwardly and in its ritual worship, to Āṇṭāl's bhakti and her fame as a saint. One may note that the *gopuram* is in direct alignment with the shrine of the reclining Raṅkanāta which was the original focus of the temple. The Āṇṭāl shrine, which contains a standing image of Viṣṇu as Raṅkamannār with Āṇṭāl as his consort to the left and Garuḍa to the right, is located off-center within the temple complex and is clearly a later addition.

The *Śrīvilliputtūr Sthala Purāṇa*⁸ confirms that the shrine of reclining Viṣṇu is the original sanctum of the temple. This mythical account of the temple, which draws on hagiographic texts, but is written in a popular and naive style, explains the

name of the town as being the new town (*puttūr*) built by a chieftain named Villi; the word Śrī was added because the goddess Lakṣmī, as Āṅṭāl, chose to take up her abode there.⁹ The hunter–chieftain Villi, following the instructions received from Viṣṇu in a dream, searched for an image of reclining Viṣṇu, and having found one in a forest, he built a shrine to enclose the image, and later constructed a town around the temple. The *Sthala Purāṇa* further relates that Viṣṇu’s consort Bhūdevī (goddess earth) asked as a boon of Viṣṇu that she be born on earth as his greatest devotee. In the spiritual context it is believed that on earth alone, and in a human body alone, can one experience the bliss of longing for the divine and feel the divine presence. The *Purāṇa* relates that Viṣṇu responded to Bhūdevī’s request and blessed her to be daughter to Periyālvār. It was thus that one day Viṣṇucitta, a priest at the Śrīvilliputtūr temple, discovered an infant girl lying amidst the *tulasī* bushes (sacred basil) surrounding his home.

Hagiographic Accounts of the Life of Āṅṭāl

Two main documents, both hagiographies, constitute our prime source of information for the legend of Āṅṭāl. The first is the fourteenth–century text, *Kuruparamparāpirapāvam 6000* or “6000 Verses on the Glory of the Succession of the Gurus,” composed by Pinpalakiya Perumāḷ Jīyar¹⁰ in mixed Sanskrit and Tamil known as Maṇipravāla (*maṇi* = crystal:Sanskrit; *pravāla* = coral:Tamil). The second is the Sanskrit poem *Divyasūricaritam* or “Characters of the Sacred Ones” by Garuḍavāhana Paṇḍita, assigned at one time to the twelfth century, but in recent scholarship reassigned to the fifteenth century.

The Tamil hagiography commences the life of Āṅṭāl by comparing Śrīvilliputtūr with the sacrificial ground where Sītā was found by Janaka, and informs us that Bhūdevī manifested herself as an infant girl at the spot where Viṣṇucitta was hoeing the ground for his sacred basil. Naming the child Kōtai of the fragrant tresses, Viṣṇucitta raised her as if she were the goddess Śrī. As a very young girl, she would, in her father’s absence, adorn herself in bridal garb and wrap around her glossy tresses the long garland that had been prepared and set

aside for the evening puja of Viṣṇu. Thus adorned, she would gaze into a mirror to see if she looked a bride fit for the lord. She would then return the garland to its place, and Viṣṇucitta, unaware of the “desecration,” would offer the garland to Viṣṇu. Many days passed in this manner until the Ālvār discovered Kōtai’s secret. Deeply perturbed by the flagrant disregard of *sāstric* rules, Viṣṇucitta performed the evening puja without making an offering of the garland. That night, Viṣṇu appeared to him in a dream and told him that the garland worn by Āṅṭāl was especially dear to him and had an added fragrance. Viṣṇucitta realized that Āṅṭāl was no ordinary child but had in her a touch of the divine. Wondering if Pinṇai, Nīlādevī or Śrīdevī had taken birth thus, he gave his daughter the name of *cūṭi-koṭutta-nācciyār*, meaning “lady who gave what she had worn.”

Now more than ever, Āṅṭāl set her heart on the lord and totally rejected the idea of marriage with a mere mortal; she would be the bride of none but Viṣṇu. Āṅṭāl’s days were passed increasingly in the contemplation of Viṣṇu and it was at this time, according to the hagiography, that she composed her *Tiruppāvai* and *Nācciyār Tirumoli*. Āṅṭāl was firm in saying she would look at none other than Viṣṇu. Since the lord had manifested himself in one hundred and eight sacred places, Viṣṇucitta wondered which of these forms she had in mind. In response to Āṅṭāl’s request, he sang in praise of the character and deeds of each of the many forms, and as Āṅṭāl listened to the beauty of the lord of Śrīraṅkam, she was overcome by the intensity of a love which arose from the depths of her being.

Āṅṭāl’s single-minded absorption with the lord of Śrīraṅkam filled Viṣṇucitta with deep anxiety for his daughter. But the lord appeared to him in a dream and assured him that he, Viṣṇu, would accept Āṅṭāl as his bride. It is said that Viṣṇu himself arranged for Kōtai to be brought from Śrīvilliputtūr in full bridal regalia, accompanied by all the fanfare of a royal marriage party. When the bridal procession arrived at the sanctum of reclining Raṅkanāta at Śrīraṅkam, Āṅṭāl emerged from the curtained palanquin, walked up to the image, embraced the feet of the lord, and climbed upon the serpent couch only to vanish mysteriously. She had merged with the beautiful temple Raṅkanāta, stone symbol of her beloved! The

lord addressed Viṣṇucitta as his father-in-law, offered him honors, and requested him to return to Śrīvilliputtūr and continue to serve him in that temple.

The Sanskrit poem, *Divyasūricaritam*, varies from the Maṇipravāla account only in minor details; however, it elaborates upon the story towards its conclusion, informing us, for instance, that Viṣṇucitta took his daughter to Nammālvār to obtain his blessings for the marriage. The poem also adds to the importance of Śrīvilliputtūr by relating that after the miraculous merger at Śrīraṅkam, a formal marriage was celebrated in Āṅṭāl's home town on the full moon day of the month of Paṅkuni. The author devotes almost four chapters of his poem to a description of this glorious wedding which was attended by all the Ālvārs.

Āṅṭāl, from Her Own Poetry

The only historical material that we possess regarding the life of Āṅṭāl is the internal evidence of her poems. The *Tiruppāvai* and each of the fourteen hymns of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* ends with a signature verse in which Āṅṭāl indicates her relationship with Periyālvār, using the words “Kōtai of Viṣṇucittan,” (Periyālvār), or “Kōtai of the chief of brahmins” (*paṭṭar-pirāṅkōtai*); presumably she was his adopted daughter, although she does not specify this. It is intriguing to note that in five signature verses she refers to Viṣṇucitta as *kōn* (king) of Villiputtūr or Putuvai, while three verses variously describe him as *man*, *mannan*, and *nampī* (all meaning lord, chief or master). Unless we choose to explain such words as serving a purely rhetorical function, the implication seems to be that in addition to being a *paṭṭar* priest who served at the temple of Villiputtūr, Viṣṇucitta had an additional status akin to that of chieftain, perhaps mayor. Kōtai also hints at her own beauty, describing herself in the signature verses of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* as “she of the long tresses” (hymn 4), “long-eyed” (hymn 5), “she of the fine forehead” (hymn 8), “Kōtai of the curly black tresses” (hymn 9), “glossy-haired Kōtai” (hymn 12), “whose eyebrows arch like a bow” (hymn 13), and finally as *viyan* (hymn 13), which may be translated as “she of excellence.”

The corpus of poems composed by Āṅṭāl's adoptive father, Viṣṇucitta, contain no direct reference to his daughter. However, two of the hymns in the third decade of his *Periya Tirumoli*, spoken in the voice of a lamenting mother whose daughter is in love with Kṛṣṇa, are full of nuances and lend themselves to the suggestion that Periyālvār composed these verses with his own daughter in mind. For those among the devout who believe in the legend of Āṅṭāl's life, such an assumption would not be far wrong:

I have but one daughter—
the world hailed my great fortune.
I raised her as if
she were the goddess Śrī—
lotus-eyed Māl took her away.¹¹

However, Viṣṇucitta states clearly in the signature verse to this hymn that he is not speaking in his own voice:

The sorrowful words spoken by the mother
were sung by the *paṭṭar*
of prosperous Putuvai.

The Fame of Āṅṭāl: Art, Taniyans, Inscriptions, Literary Works

A tenth century bronze image of Āṅṭāl, revealing a sensuous modelling (see cover), stands within the shrine of the Śrīvilliputtūr temple. It displays a heightened awareness of form, with a supple treatment of the planes of the body and a smooth unpronounced curve of the stomach that is typical of bronzes of the workshop of Chola Queen Śembiyan Mahādevī,¹² and it was probably produced around the year 970. The stylized bands of the ends of the lower garment as they rest upon her thigh, the treatment of the extra length of skirt which has been pleated to fall between her legs in folds, and the manner in which the necklaces rest between her breasts and encircle them are characteristic of this period of perfection. The worn condition of the bronze reflects centuries of ritual bathing and extensive worship; devotees,

of course, only view the richly decorated image, draped with heavy gold saris and adorned with sumptuous jewelry and fragrant flower garlands.

In the same tenth century, *ācārya* Uyyakkoṅṭār of Śrīraṅkam wrote two single verses known as *taniyaṅs* (singletons) as a prelude to Āṅṭāl's *Tiruppāvai*, glorifying the song and its author. Both *taniyaṅs* refer to the event central to her legend, Viṣṇu's acceptance of the garland she had worn.

Let us meditate upon
 Āṅṭāl of Putuvai
 where swans wander in the fields—
 the lady who gave
 to the lord of Araṅkam
 this polished garland of songs,
 the fine poems of the *Tiruppāvai*
 which lend themselves to melody—
 the lady who gave to the lord
 the garland of flowers
 she had worn.

The second *taniyaṅ* links the *Tiruppāvai* to her later work *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, and contains a reference to its first hymn in which Āṅṭāl requests the god of love, Maṅmatha, to unite her with the lord of Vēṅkaṭa:

O creeper of radiance
 who gave what she had worn—
 you of bangled hands
 who sang of the ancient *pāvai*
 conferring blessings on all who heard—
 you sought the lord of Vēṅkaṭa,
 prayed to be taken to him.
 Grant that we never ignore
 your great words.

A century and a half later, *ācārya* Parāśara Paṭṭar composed a Sanskrit *taniyaṅ* for the *Tiruppāvai*, alluding to its nineteenth

song in which Āṅṭāl and her companions rouse Kṛṣṇa who is sleeping with his head resting against Nappinnai's breasts:

She awakened Kṛṣṇa
 who slumbered beneath
 the rising breasts of Nīlādevī.
 She enjoys the lord
 whom she enslaved
 with her discarded
 garland of flowers.
 She reveals to others
 that which is revealed
 in a hundred *śrutis*.
 To that revered Kōtai
 our obeisance.
 May her fame live on
 until the end of time.

The *taniyans* of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* are of a later date than those that preface the *Tiruppāvai*. The earliest, composed in the twelfth or thirteenth century by Tirukaṇṇamaṅkai Āṅṭān, visualized Āṅṭāl as an incarnation of Bhūdevī, hence a fitting companion for Śrī Lakṣmi:

Gracious companion
 to the lovely goddess
 whose seat
 is the fresh blown lotus—
 Beautiful peacock,
 queen of Mallināṭu,
 softness incarnate,
 radiant light
 of the cowherds
 of southern Putuvai—
 Fitting consort to the cowherd lord.

This verse prefaces the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* in all printed versions of the four thousand verses of the Alṽars, the *Nālāyira Tivya Pirapantam*.

A second *taniyan*, more intimate in tone, alludes pointedly

to the content of the hymns of the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*. This anonymous verse, included only in certain printed versions of the *Tirumoli*, commences with a reference to its seventh hymn which Āṇṭāl addressed to the conch shell that was fortunate enough to be held in Viṣṇu's hand and raised to his lips when he wished to blow it:

She queried
 the conch shell
 about the flavor and fragrance
 of the red lips
 of the lord of illusion.
 She dressed
 her glossy tresses
 with the glorious garland
 of *katampa* flowers
 intended for the lord of Araṅkam.
 That soft-spoken parakeet
 of the forest groves,
 esteemed lady,
 queen of southern Mallināṭu—
 Forever
 our refuge will be
 her holy feet.

Inscriptions indicate that by the early twelfth century the fame of Āṇṭāl was so well established that a garden at Śrīraṅkam was named after her as “Kōtai Āṇṭāl Tirunantavanam” or “Sacred Pleasure Garden of Kōtai Āṇṭāl”. The epigraph giving us this information¹³ is dated in the eighth year of King Vikrama Chola, or 1126 A.D. At Śrīvilliputtūr, Āṇṭāl's divine status was never in doubt. A lengthy inscription in the temple,¹⁴ dated in the year 1454, takes the form of a love letter from Viṣṇu to Āṇṭāl and testifies both to Āṇṭāl's high status and to the renown of her poems. The “letter” quotes numerous extracts, even entire verses from the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, including its most dramatic verse from hymn thirteen in which Āṇṭāl vows to pluck out her breasts and fling them at the lord if he does not come to her. A few phrases from the better known *Tiruppāvai* are also quoted. The “love letter”

concludes by declaring that the lord, well-pleased with Āṅṭāl, ordains that the honors accorded to him should be extended also to her.

The legend of Āṅṭāl spread beyond the Tamil country, and the Vijayanagar Emperor Kṛṣṇadevarāya (1510–1529), an ardent Vaiṣṇava and apparently a special devotee of Āṅṭāl, wrote the Telegu poem *Āmuktamālyada*¹⁵, which revolves around her life. The Telegu version follows the Sanskrit hagiography, *Divyasūricaritam*, in carrying the story one step beyond Āṅṭāl's miraculous merger with the Śrīraṅkam stone symbol of her beloved, and relates that in deference to the wishes of Periyālvār, the lord of Śrīraṅkam traveled to Śrīvilliputtūr, where he ceremonially married Āṅṭāl.

The Viṣṇu Legend in Āṅṭāl's Poetry

It is clear from both the *Tiruppāvai* and the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* that Āṅṭāl's chosen god is Kṛṣṇa the cowherd lord, beloved of the *gopīs* (cowherdesses); however, the emphasis in the two works is somewhat different. The thirty verses of the *Tiruppāvai* are set in Āyarpāṭi or Gokula itself, and Āṅṭāl presents us with an early morning pastoral scene with buffaloes grazing, cows lowing, and Āyarpāṭi maidens churning butter. Kṛṣṇa is specifically identified as a cowherd's son, and as one born into a cowherd clan. He is extolled as the radiant light of the cowherd clan, one who dwells on the banks of the sacred Yamunā, and lord of Maturai of the north. References abound to his many exploits as Kṛṣṇa—his destruction of the demoness Pūtanā, cart-demon (Śakata), horse-demon (Keśin), crane-demon (Baka), calf elephant (Kūvalayāpīda), and finally evil king (Kaṁsa). While the verses of the *Tiruppāvai* undoubtedly revolve around Kṛṣṇa, it is apparent that Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa are not sharply differentiated in Kōtai's awareness. On occasion Kṛṣṇa is visualized in his cosmic form as one who slumbers upon his serpent in the milky ocean (verses 2 and 6), or as the child who lay upon the banyan leaf (verse 26). Two of his incarnations are extolled, as *Vāmana*, the dwarf who spanned and measured the worlds (verses 3, 17, 24), and as Rāma who destroyed the king of Laṅkā (verses 12, 24). These references, however, are

overshadowed by the setting of Kṛṣṇa's Āyarpāṭi in which the entire *Tiruppāvai* episode is re-enacted.

In the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, the situation is somewhat more complex, and the geographical location of the fourteen hymns remains uncertain. Only hymn two in which the *gopī* girls build sandcastles, and hymn three in which they plead with Kṛṣṇa to give them back the clothes he has stolen while they were bathing, may be seen as occurring in Āyarpāṭi. The action of the remaining hymns takes place in an unspecified location in South India, most likely in Āṅṭāl's home town of Śrīvilliputtūr itself, while hymn nine is specifically located in Māliuruñcōlai, modern Alakarkoil, some twenty-five miles from Maturai. The central figure of Āṅṭāl's *Nācciyār Tirumoli* hymns too is undoubtedly Kṛṣṇa. Yet hymn eight, in which Āṅṭāl sends the clouds as her messengers of love, is dedicated in its entirety to the lord of the Vēnkaṭa hill (Tirupati), while hymn eleven, in which Āṅṭāl exclaims that the lord has taken all from her, extols in each of its verses the lord of Araṅkam (Śrīraṅkam). In addition, an entire series of verses in the *Nācciyār Tirumoli* contain references both to an aspect of Kṛṣṇa and to one of the manifestations or incarnations of Viṣṇu.¹⁶ A verse which commences by addressing her lord as Govinda (cowherd lord), proceeds to describe him as one who spanned the earth and measured it, a reference to Viṣṇu's dwarf avatar also known as Trivikrama (hymn 2, verse 9). A verse sung to Kṛṣṇa perched high up on a tree with the garments of the *gopīs*, addresses him as lord of Laṅkā or Rāma. Displaying her sense of humor Āṅṭāl, as one of the *gopīs*, tells Kṛṣṇa that he is indeed the king of monkeys (hymn 3, verse 4), implying that they now understand why Hanumān and his clan followed him in his incarnation as Rāma. A third verse speaks of Govinda (cowherd lord) who lives on the hill of Vēnkaṭa or Tirupati (hymn 8, verse 3), and a fourth speaks of the lord of Araṅkam (Śrīraṅkam) who claimed Rukminī as his own in the Kṛṣṇa avatar (hymn 11, verse 9). Yet another verse which refers to the cowherd lord who dances with the waterpots, describes him as reclining in Kuṭantai (Kumpakōṅam) and also speaks of him as having slumbered upon a banyan leaf (hymn 13, verse 2). Examples of this type could be multiplied to demonstrate that Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa existed side by side in Āṅṭāl's consciousness.

A rough count of references to Viṣṇu reveals fifteen verses that speak of the lord of Vēṅkaṭa, eleven of the lord of Māḷiruñcōlai, ten of the lord of Araṅkam, ten of the lord of the milky ocean. Of the incarnations, Trivikrama (mentioned fifteen times) and Rāma (ten allusions) were favorites, although references are made to Varāha and Narasimha as well.

Yet it is Kṛṣṇa (sixty references, which is roughly the sum total of her visualization of other forms of Viṣṇu) who is undoubtedly the source of Āṅṭāḷ's inspiration and the central figure of her verses. While this is evident throughout the *Nācciyār Tirumoli*, it is perhaps clearest in the last few songs of this work. In the twelfth song, Āṅṭāḷ appeals to her family and friends, telling them of her determination to go to her beloved, and asking them to send her to the land of her lord. In successive verses she asks them to take her to a range of sites associated with the Kṛṣṇa legend—to Maturai (Mathura) where Kṛṣṇa fought the Mallas, to Āyarpāṭi (Tamil for Gokula in Vṛindāvan), to the threshold of Nandagōpa's house, to Bhaktavilōcana where the cowherds received sacrificial food, to the tree at Bāndiram where Baladeva fought the demon Pralamba, to Govardhana where Kṛṣṇa held aloft the mountain, and to the city of Dvārka where he reigned as king. The signature verse sums up the Kṛṣṇa legend, stating that Āṅṭāḷ beseeched her relatives to take her to the dwelling places of her lord, "beginning with famed Maturai/ending with Dvārka." In the climactic thirteenth hymn where a desperate Āṅṭāḷ threatens to pluck out her breasts and fling them at the lord to quench the fire of anguish within her, she addresses him as lord of Govardhana, again a reference to cowherd Kṛṣṇa. In the last hymn, quiet finally descends upon her as evidenced by the peaceful detachment of its question-and-answer mode. In each verse Āṅṭāḷ queries if anyone has seen her lord, and in each verse the answer she receives, refers to her cowherd lord, "we saw him there in Vṛindāvan."

The Pāvai Vow¹⁷

The *Tiruppāvai* revolves around the purely Tamil tradition of the *pāvai* vow of the month of Mārkaḷi (mid-December to

mid-January), associated in earlier literature, however, with the succeeding month of Tai (mid-January to mid-February). The vow was undertaken by young unmarried girls who, throughout the month, bathed at dawn in the cold waters of a river or pond to secure the blessing of a happy married life. In his discussion of *pāvai* ritual, Norman Cutler draws attention to a reference to the practice in one of the hymns of the *Paripāṭal*,¹⁸ a work assigned to the sixth or seventh century. The poem, dedicated to the Vaikai river, describes young girls bathing at the chilly hour of dawn, drying their clothes beside the fires kindled by brahmins along the river banks, and addressing the Vaikai river, praying for a fine lover and many children. In this work, and in several others of an early date, the vow is undertaken in the month of Tai. Cutler suggests that the shift to Mārkaḷi, evidenced in Āṅṅāl's *Tiruppāvai*, is the result of a shift from the lunar to the solar calendar, which has since been the norm in Tamil-speaking areas of South India.

One assumes that it was from a variety of such sources belonging to the early Caṅkam anthologies, all of which reflect the popularity of the *pāvai* ritual, generally in a secular context, that Āṅṅāl found material for her *Tiruppāvai* poems which she adapted to the worship of Kṛṣṇa. Śaiva saint Māṅikkavācakar probably drew on the same sources for his *Tiruvempāvai* in which the god addressed is Śiva. A Jain *pāvai* song of early date, belonging perhaps to the eighth century and addressing the deity as Arivaṇ, has survived as a single verse only, but it contains the essential components of the *pāvai* theme.¹⁹ It provides a glimpse into the adaptation of the theme to a religion that stresses world renunciation, and it also highlights the great popularity of the *pāvai* tradition in Tamil-speaking areas of South India.

The only Sanskrit work to speak of the *pāvai* theme is the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* which, we shall see, was compiled in the period following the Tamil saints. The Tamil *pāvai* vow, unknown to the rest of India, finds mention in one relatively brief, though important passage in the tenth book. We are told that in the first month of the winter, the maidens of Gokula took a vow to worship the goddess Kātyāyani, who is also addressed as Bhadrakālī, in order to gain Kṛṣṇa as their spouse. Bathing at dawn in the waters of the Yamunā, they

fashioned an image of the goddess from the sand along the river bank and worshipped her with offerings of flowers, fruit, rice, incense and lamps.²⁰ It would appear that the authors of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* felt that they could not entirely omit reference to the popular and widely prevalent Tamil *pāvai* vow. Yet, since their audience would not relate to it or understand its significance, they played down the theme.

An integral part of *pāvai* ritual is bathing in the waters of a river, tank, pond or lake. Māṅikkavācakar's *Tiruvempāvai*²¹ commences with a series of verses in which young girls are aroused from sleep to go bathe in the waters; it proceeds with stanzas that speak repeatedly of the pond, its surroundings, and the playful bathing of the maidens. The Śaiva poet describes the girls splashing around in the pond and plunging into its waters (verse 11), tells us that the pond is filled with lotuses (verse 12), that the waters cover the breasts of the maidens, that flocks of cranes come to the pond which is fringed with dark water lilies, and he speaks of the musical jingle of armlets and anklets as the girls jump playfully, scooping up the foaming waters (verse 13).

Āṅṭāl's *Tiruppāvai* presents a striking contrast to this water imagery. While Āṅṭāl too allocates ten verses to arousing maidens to go bathe in the waters, the group never go to a pond or lake. Instead they go to the home of Kṛṣṇa's adoptive parents, Nandagōpa and Yaśodā, and awaken them; next they proceed to awaken Kṛṣṇa's cowherd wife, Nappinnai, and beg her to awaken her lord. The maidens then praise Kṛṣṇa and ask him to "bathe us now in the waters" (*ippōtē emmai nīrāṭtu*). It is clear that Āṅṭāl's bathing (*nīrāṭal*) has a wealth of significance beyond the simple literal bathing suggested by the *pāvai* vow.²² Kṛṣṇa (the divine) is envisaged as a *tīrtha* or sacred purifying waters, and the "diving deep" is somewhat akin to that envisaged by the term "Ālvār" as "one who dives deep (into the divine)." Only in this context does the absence, in the *Tiruppāvai*, of any description of bathing in physical waters, be it pond, tank, or river, make logical sense. Only then may we understand Āṅṭāl's request that Kṛṣṇa should "bathe us now in the waters," to be understood as the divine waters of Kṛṣṇa's grace. As an aside, it may also be mentioned that *nīrāṭal* (bathing in the waters) and *cunaiāṭal* (bathing in a hill tank) are

both euphemisms for sexual union. And sexual imagery, as we know, has long been used in Hinduism to describe the union of the individual soul with the universal soul. As Dennis Hudson phrases it, the goal of the maidens is “intimate service to Krishna which may mean sexual union with him, euphemistically referred to as a bath; ‘bathing in Krishna’, one might say, is the goal—a relationship of service so total that there are no limitations whatsoever.”²³

A parallel to Āṅṭāl’s vision of *nirāṭal* as bathing in the sacred purifying waters of the divine, may be seen in a hymn of the seventh century Śaiva saint Appar. A song extolling Śiva of the shrine of Tiruvānaikkā, near Śrīraṅkam, has the following invocatory refrain to each of its ten verses:

O infinitude of fresh, cool waters—
I plunge, I revel.²⁴

Also significant in the context of the *pāvai* vow is Āṅṭāl’s assertion, in the very first verse of *Tiruppāvai*, that the lord himself will give the young maidens the *parai*. In several succeeding verses (8, 10, 16, 24, 25, 27–30) she states that they have gone to the lord to receive the *parai* that he promised them. The word *parai* literally means “drum,” and the drum sound, signifying creativity and prosperity, is considered auspicious. The beating of the drum initiates all sacred as well as secular ritual, and it is believed that sacred power can be transmitted through the sound of the drum. In the context of the *Tiruppāvai*, the transmission of potency through the sound of the drum may be equated with the transmission of divine grace. In its symbolic meaning, the giving of the *parai* signifies the bestowal upon the devotee of all her desires; it can also be interpreted as the joy of being with the lord and the honor of serving him. The bestowal of the *parai* also indicates the successful completion of the *pāvai* vow. For Āṅṭāl, of course, to obtain Kṛṣṇa’s grace, and to be one with him, is the only goal, the only heart’s desire. Āṅṭāl’s *nirāṭal* (bathing in Kṛṣṇa) precedes the bestowal of the *parai* (nearness to Kṛṣṇa, fulfillment).

The words *ēl ōr empāvāy*, which occur as the refrain to each of the thirty songs of the *Tiruppāvai*, as indeed of

Māṅikkavācakar's Śaiva *Tiruvempāvai* and also the Jain *pāvai* poem, have posed a problem of interpretation to all who have tried to translate or study these poems. Some translators have totally ignored the refrain²⁵; we feel it deserves a place since it supplies the very word form that occurs in the title of these poems. The word *pāvai* means a young girl or woman, an image or doll, and also the vow of *pāvai*.²⁶ In the course of the thirty *Tiruppāvai* songs, ignoring for the moment the refrain, the word is used in the first sense of young girl (song 13) and in its last meaning of vow (song 2). In translating the refrain to read, "Fulfill, O song of our vow", we have been influenced by several factors. Not the least is the fact that the refrain, sung by Āṅṭāḷ in the context of Āyarpāṭi and Kṛṣṇa, is used in identical form by both a Śaiva poet and a Jain author. It seems to us that the refrain must necessarily be applicable to all three works. Common to all three is the fact that the songs are sung by women, that young girls are awakened from their sleep, called to bathe in the waters and then praise the lord (Śiva in the case of Māṅikkavācakar, and Arivaṅ in the case of the Jain poet). Āṅṭāḷ's bathing, as we have seen, falls into a unique category. Common to the *pāvai* songs, in symbolic terms, is the awakening of those oblivious of the divine, their purification (bathing), followed by beseeching the lord for his grace. The phrase *empāvāy* seems to mean "O our vow" as also "O our song" (*pāvai* songs having become a separate category), with the word *pāvāy* being in the vocative case. The words *ēl* and *ōr* seem to be mere expletives. We have added the request "Fulfill" because it seemed to us that this is the unspoken prayer of the refrain. "Fulfill, O song of our vow" appears suitable also as refrains to the Śaiva and Jain poems. We might add here that such a translation of the refrain would accord with the interpretation of the celebrated thirteenth century commentator Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai²⁷ who suggests the meanings of "vow" and "song" for *empāvāy*, and explains *ēl* and *ōr* as expletives.

An alternative interpretation of the refrain would be "O our lady of the vow".²⁸ In this meaning, the phrase *ēl ōr empāvāy* could be considered as compact with the two meanings of image (translated here as lady) as well as the vow itself. We have already alluded to the *pāvai* vow mentioned in the