

# Taking a First Look



Let us begin in the middle of things:

*She worships lofty Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam with its great houses,  
flawless jewels,  
so leave her alone, women, have no hopes regarding her;  
she cries, "the bright, radiant conch and discus," she cries, "the  
wide lotus eyes,"  
she keeps standing there, tears welling in her radiant kuṇḍai  
flower eyes, she bursts. (1)*

*She has entered Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam noisy with the deep din  
of festivals,  
so have no hopes regarding her, this girl with her sweet nectar  
words;  
transformed, she stands speechless, crying, "lord, God of gods,"  
her mouth twisting this way and that, her eyes welling tears,  
she bends, she breaks, she comes apart. (2)*

*This girl with her sweet poetic words has entered  
Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam with its cool paṇai trees and green  
groves on river banks,  
so have no hopes regarding her;  
tears flowing from her slender eyes, she raves about how  
he lay upon the waves of the sea,  
measured the whole earth, herded the cows. (3)*

*After seeing Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam where people prosperous in  
the abiding four Vedas dwell,  
she's lost all self-control, see, she's beyond you, women;*

she cries, "Lord Kaṇṇan, dark as the sea, is everything that can  
be learned,"  
she has no modesty left, she keeps rejoicing, delighted within,  
she melts away. (4)

The poor thing, she melts, her face shines, for after entering  
Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam  
you showed her the lord with the red lotus eyes, the splendid  
light;  
starting then, her eyes have rained like clouds, she is amazed,  
women,  
her mind has gone inside there,  
she keeps on looking in that direction, worshipping. (5)

Everywhere you see sugar cane, tall ripening paddy, and luxuri-  
ant red lotuses  
at rich Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam on the north bank of the cool  
Porunal;  
after seeing this she looks nowhere but that direction, all day,  
every day,  
and the only word in her mouth is the name of the jewel colored  
one, women. (6)

Women, this great lovely peahen, this little doe, has escaped our  
hands,  
whatever you say she hears nothing but "Tolaivillimaṅkalam;"  
is this the outcome of things she did before  
or the magic of the cloud colored lord?  
all she wants is to learn his signs, his names. (7)

She worshipped Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam on the northern bank of  
the Porunal  
where the perfect Vedas and sacrifices and great women mingle  
together;  
from that first day until this day, that girl with eyes dark and  
wide  
keeps crying, "Lotus eyed one!" she weeps, she fades. (8)

She grieves all day long, her face alarmed, tears splashing,  
crying, "Jewel colored one!" so even the trees pity her;  
ever since she learned the name of that city  
all she does is join her hands in worship and say,

*"Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam, home of the one who split the horse's mouth!" (9)*

*Is she Piṅṅai born here? or Nīlā? or the Lady?  
what marvel is this? she stands calling, "My tall lord!"  
To hear the name of that town, to bow before  
Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam  
where he who came before stands, sits, dwells—that is her only  
thought. (10)*

*In thought, word, and deed Śaṭakōpaṇ of splendid Kurukūr  
reached the point of calling the lord of the gods his mother and  
father;  
whoever masters these ten pure Tamil verses about  
Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam from his venerable thousand verses  
will serve Tirumāl. (11)<sup>1</sup>*

This song is about a young woman who went to visit a temple; it is also about the other women from the village, her neighbors, who had evidently prompted her to pay this temple a visit. It tells us what happened to her, and what did not happen to them, as a consequence of that visit.

Though the young woman's words are quoted, it is actually a friend of hers who does the talking. First (1–5) the friend valiantly tries to explain to the neighbors how the young woman is preoccupied with God, and how it is futile on their part to try to get her to return to normal. Indeed, she claims, her plight is all their fault, for it was they who had taken the young woman to the temple town of Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam at festival time. They had walked through the lovely temple precincts (environs which are still lovely today), they had entered the temple with her, and with her viewed the lotus-eyed lord enshrined there. For them it was a quick, pious look, a paying of respects, after which they could return to their homes, to normal life, quickly settling back into their ordinary activities. But the young woman could not forget what she had seen, she could not simply observe and then move on. Her ordinary life came to an abrupt halt. The women, it seems, had very much underestimated the impact a temple visit could have on someone; they

wrongly assumed that the young woman was more like themselves.

In the next verses (6–9), the friend focuses on the young woman's current state, how since then she has lived entirely and only for God, her world occupied by a divine presence—filled with sacred memory—and yet torn apart because she wants more than she now has. Her memory is not enough, the temple image is not enough, she wants an enduring presence and immediacy; she has seen too little to be satisfied, too much to settle for less. She looks only toward the temple (6), crying out the names she heard and the divine emblems she saw there (7). She is slowly reduced to crying just one name (8), to the simplest act of worship (9).

The tenth verse of the song forms a brief third section. Here the friend, who had been trying to manage the situation, stops short, astonished as are the women. Her words stumble, reduced to questions; amazed at the extent of the young woman's preoccupation with God, the friend begins to wonder whether the young woman is one of the lord's three divine consorts: this unusual obsession with God is perhaps a manifestation of divinity.

The 11th verse of the song shifts to yet another level of discourse; it is a statement about the first ten verses, about the young woman and her neighbors, and about the friend who speaks of them:

*In thought, word, and deed Śaṭakōpan of splendid Kurukūr  
reached the point of calling the lord of the gods his mother and  
father;*

*whoever masters these ten pure Tamil verses about*

*Tirutolavillimāṅkalam from his venerable thousand verses  
will serve Tirumāl.*

This verse invites listeners to become part of the story they have listened to, to become intimate with the lord like the author Śaṭakōpan; to master his verses—to memorize them, recite them, understand them—and on that basis become able to enter into service of the lord, Tirumāl.

## I. Some Opening Questions

Thus goes VI.5, the 5th song of the Sixth book in a very large Tamil work known as *Tiruvāymoli*, “the holy (*tiru*) word (*moli*) of mouth (*vāy*),” composed by a south Indian Hindu named Śaṭakōpaṇ in the 9th century. He was the most important of the twelve saints from that time period, known as the *ālvārs* (i.e., “those immersed” in God) who composed songs in praise of the God Viṣṇu.

This song by Śaṭakōpaṇ is not meant to stand alone, it has connections. In its place among 100 songs composed by Śaṭakōpaṇ of Kurukūr as his *Tiruvāymoli* (and thereby also in relation to the larger set of devotional songs of the *ālvārs* known as the “Divine Text,” the *Divya Prabandham*), this song about Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam has been remembered, recited, used ritually, meditated on, taught, and written about by the Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindu community of south India, over the past 1000 years, as it still is today. For a thousand years the *ācāryas*—revered teachers—of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition doted over each word of this song (as they did with the other 99), reverently, lovingly, passionately uncovering the deep meanings they found within it. For a thousand years devotees have listened to their *ācāryas* and taken the song to heart, seeking, if not to be divinely radiant like the young woman, at least (for now) to find their way to service of lord Viṣṇu, Tirumāl.

Let us listen-in on what they have to say. Tirukkurukaippirāṇ-pillāṇ (henceforth, and more easily, Pillāṇ), the 12th century *ācārya* whose commentary is the earliest to come down to us, had this to say in introducing the song:

In the preceding songs the *ālvār* has meditated on how the Lord dwells in various holy cities, Tiruviṅṅakar, etc., His divine descents, His divine deeds, all His auspicious qualities, His beauty, etc. Now he expresses his delight—but also the sheer depression which comes about because he cannot achieve external union with that Lord. He expresses his feelings in the voice of the young woman. Because she desires to see the Lord in Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam, but is unable to get to do that, she is exceedingly depressed, and

so she cries out, talking about His good qualities—His beauty, etc.—His symbols and deeds, and about Tirutolaimaṅkalam. When her mother and relatives see this, they are afraid—“We have lost her!”—so they decide, “We must stop her from loving Him!” and entreat her friend to help out. But the friend looks at them and speaks in this song.<sup>2</sup>

Nañcīyar, a generation later, adds:

The friend understands what the young woman is thinking, and says: “After seeing Tirutolaiṅkalam, from that time on she abandons everything inside and outside, excepting the glance of her Lord, Aravinda. He is her everything: her mind, her speech, her body are very much inclined toward Him.” She makes them aware of how her nature has matured and says, “After showing her Tirutolaiṅkalam as the place to enter, are you now thinking of ‘saving’ her? is that possible now? End your hopes in regard to her!”

In a much ampler comment which builds on the earlier ones, Nañcīyar’s disciple Naṃpiḷḷai<sup>3</sup> observes that here the *ālvār* is speaking about his own true nature and not just about the lord; he is vividly explaining the hardest thing of all, the essence of the human self. Periyavācāṅpiḷḷai, a contemporary of Vaṭakkutiruvīṭṭipḷḷai and another disciple of Naṃpiḷḷai, reflects on earlier understandings of the song:

Earlier *ācāryas* had this to say: “In previous songs the *ālvār* experienced Kṛṣṇa; unable to contain that joy inside him, a desire for external union was born. But when he could not get that union, he experiences total dependence on the Lord. He expresses this in the words of the young woman.”

But Bhaṭṭar had a different view: “Previously the *ālvār* had already experienced flawless joy, so the previous interpretation cannot explain the link of those songs with this song. Rather it is like this: just as when someone is drinking water and begins to choke, and his experience of the sweet taste is disturbed and he is afflicted, so the *ālvār* is describing here

how his experience of delight has been disturbed and he has become dependent on this other.”

Or, perhaps: from the first verse of *Tiruviruttam*<sup>4</sup> to this point he had never had a full experience of the Lord—but now he has one. He describes that abundant inclination toward the Lord that has arisen within him. Up to this point he had spoken about the Lord of all, whereas in this song he is speaking about himself.

Śatakōpan, they find, is himself the young woman who has lost the ability to exist separately from the lord. As they read each verse, the *ācāryas* elaborate such connections and meanings, always with an eye toward what all of this means for the audience of simple believers listening to their teachings. At the end of the 11th verse of VI.5 Nāṃpiḷlai emphasizes the song’s power; it equals that of the lord’s ancient descents (*avatāra*) into the world, just as it equals the ancient Sanskrit *Veda*, rendering it in the clear Tamil vernacular: “Just as the lord of all descended here in like form to other beings, here the *Veda* itself descends in their midst in Tamil form . . . For Tamil expresses the *Veda*’s meaning most clearly.”

Even as the song is identified as a local, Tamil work, it seems also more broadly universal. The reality of the song is meant to become the reality of the attentive listener: those who are skilled in repeating these verses will surely get to be servants of the lord, the husband of the Goddess Śrī. The song intends wider audiences, replicating and expanding its presence through a series of new ears, new voices. Recitation widens the audience, and in the audience there are those who will also come to recite and perhaps explicate the song again, adding their voices to the conversation around the young woman’s unforgetting preoccupation with her lord. Whoever can hear and speak, that is the audience for the song, and there too are those who can learn to see as she saw, by way of the song.

It is possible too, as we trace the widening conversation encircling the young woman’s cry, that the song—by itself, with the 99 other songs, with the *ācāryas*’ explications of it—has something to say to the real newcomer, the true outside reader, who

encounters the song in a foreign place, foreign tongue, for some reason or another: curiosity, reading, keeping busy, becoming a scholar, seeking truth, seeking God. This listener, casual or engaged, hears and possibly has something to say regarding the song. But with what practical import can such really new readers meaningfully can engage the religious worldview inscribed in the song? Indeed, can readers from outside the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition become at least able to understand what it would mean to worship the lord who “lay upon the waves of the sea, measured the whole earth, herded the cows”? Or are the intellectual, cultural, religious distances from the song to the modern reader so great as to bar any such engaged, affective encounter?

Such questions are clearly not simple ones to answer, and even estimates of their significance must vary. Insofar as they are taken as straightforward and highly particular questions posed to individuals who must decide how to respond personally to potentially spiritual opportunities, they are not answerable here; they must be left to those individuals in their own social and (non)religious settings. It is possible, though, to ask how we read and how we handle what we have read, about what we do with what is truly new to us, and about the power of texts, religious texts in particular. We can examine how a text like *Tiruvāymoli* comes laden with possibilities, how it invites the casual reader to become deeply involved in the world which opens from within the song. From looking at this song and then at the others that accompany it, the reader may in the end be invited into a kind of seeing-through-texts, wherein these words—unusual, obscure, translated, hampered—become the vehicle of substantive religious encounters.

Such possibilities must be located according to who is seeking them, and we shall have to move consciously back and forth, in and out of religious environs as we proceed, noticing how religious and academic perspectives variably overlap, diverge, conflict, totally miss one another. Still, a common starting point is the attentiveness to the value of language that most of us share today. The Śrīvaiṣṇavas of south India, like many Christians and members of other religious communities, think that no one in this life can simply and directly see—have an unmediated experience



of—God. The religious person ends up talking boldly of things he or she does not know, drawing blindly, in the dark. Yet, at the same time, such words mark both one's distance from some higher goal—God, whatever—and the path by which that distance can be overcome. Words make proximate what they obscure; understanding them, (re)voicing them, one begins to see through them: they are limited, and they are windows.

But there is a long way to travel before we are ready to say more on the possibility of such verbal insights. We must first become familiar with the words themselves. We shall first have to examine *Tiruvāymoli* as carefully as possible, as the context where songs like VI.5 belong, in order to see the opportunities this text has opened and the demands it has placed on its readers. This we shall do by attention to *Tiruvāymoli* itself (chapter 2), and by attention to the particular, exemplary fashion in which it has been used by the Śrīvaiṣṇava community (chapters 3 and 4). Only then, with the spectrum of possibilities of both text and tradition before us, can we attempt to locate ourselves, experimentally rephrasing what we know, what we have read, with whom, who we are, in relation to these songs (chapter 5).

In the remainder of this chapter there are some exploratory inquiries to be carried out as we assess the problems before us and the resources available to us when we read *Tiruvāymoli* and posit that there can be religious significance in doing so. In section two, we review first the text and its contexts—when have we read enough? In sections three and four, we look for the author in his text and listen-in on the community which read and passed the songs down—with whom are we to read? In section five, we uncover some of the resources and expectations we ourselves bring to our reading—who are we, most of us outsiders to that community who yet venture to read these songs, to converse with these *ācāryas*, to see through these songs? Let us take up these points consecutively.

## ***II. Getting Inside Tiruvāymoli***

Let us first pay closer attention to what it means to understand a song, such as the one with which we started, about the young

woman who visited Tirutolaivillimaṅkalam. This is a song that presents itself well; it has a story to tell and a point to make. One can get quite far by reading the song and following out the implications of what it says—and even further if one listens-in on what the *ācāryas* had to say about it.

Yet as we have noted, this song is not meant to be read separately. It is only one among a hundred songs in *Tiruvāymoḷi*, a large text in the Tamil language, dedicated to lord Viṣṇu, and composed by a person named Śaṭakōpaṇ (or Māraṇ), known more familiarly as Nammālvār—our saint, our *ālvār*—in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. His songs offer many different perspectives on Viṣṇu—as manifest in transcendent glory, as creating, controlling and destroying the universe, as present in various descents (*avatāras*, especially as Kṛṣṇa, Rāma and Vāmana the dwarf), at holy places such as Tiruveṅkaṭam (more commonly referred to as Tirupati), Kurukūr (the present day Ālvārtirunagari), Śrīvilliputtūr and Śrīraṅgam, and as dwelling within every person. The songs also represent different personae in relation to Viṣṇu: the humble devotee, the lover from the beginning intermingled with the lord, the young woman in love with her absent lover, the visionary seeing devotees on their way to heaven, the thinker who wonders whether even “Viṣṇu” is a good word to indicate the transcendent Viṣṇu. In some songs it is this lord who is addressed, in others the community of devotees, in others the unheeding people of the world; in some, the poet appears as if speaking largely to himself (yet so as to be overheard in his soliloquy). Almost none among the 100 songs can be said to be entirely simple and straightforward: themes are combined and intertwined, played off against one another over and over; even at verse one, we are always already in the midst of a religious discourse that is part remembered, part expected, part happening even as one hears of it. Yet *Tiruvāymoḷi* is also narrowly fixed in its form, almost entirely predictable. It is comprised of 1102 verses divided into 100 songs of 11 verses each,<sup>5</sup> and the 11th verse of each song is always a kind of secondary reflection on the first ten.

*Tiruvāymoḷi* is also woven together and in a circle, by means of what is known as *antāti* (“the end-to-beginning” style): the

last word of each verse is always the first of the next, the last in X.10.11 being the first in I.1.1. When the Śrīvaiṣṇavas build an entire world within the boundaries established by the songs, they have been invited to do so by *Tiruvāymoli*, ever turning-in upon itself, recollecting everything within its circle of songs. As far as possible, we too will seek to contain our analysis within that circle, testing where we can reach within those confines.

Of course, a decision to work within the confines of the text is itself a kind of fiction, one which stands at odds with legitimate concerns about context, history, distance, etc. At the beginning of this book we must account for choosing a limited focus, what we think we gain and lose in paying little direct attention to the broader context of *Tiruvāymoli* in history, culture, and literature. It is certainly not true that *Tiruvāymoli* lacks context or does not need any. It was composed against the background of a rich religious and cultural tradition in the Tamil area, which was also already open to northern, Sanskrit influence. It was composed when other Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva texts—dedicated respectively to Viṣṇu and Śiva—were being composed, and one can find without too much difficulty other songs by other authors about the same temples and myths and religious values of which Śaṭakōpaṇ sings.<sup>6</sup>

There are obvious candidates which provide directly relevant context for *Tiruvāymoli*—beginning with the three other works attributed to Śaṭakōpaṇ, *Tiruviruttam*, *Tiruvācīriyam*, *Periyatiruvantāti*; and then the other works of the *Divya Prabandham*. Some of these works are likely to have been composed earlier than *Tiruvāymoli* and therefore might conceivably be influences on it, while others at least suggest illuminating comparisons. Parallel Śaiva devotional songs have many of the same literary and devotional motifs. Older Tamil works survive from the four or five centuries before *Tiruvāymoli*, ranging from the love (*akam*) and war (*puram*) poetry of the *caṅkam* period to *Paripāṭal* as well as certain songs in *Cilappatikāram*. Nor can one ignore Sanskrit works, such as the *Mahābhārata*, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, in which the myths and narratives to which Śaṭakōpaṇ refers are elaborated. These aid us in specifying the meaning of *Tiruvāymoli*, and may have aided Śaṭakōpaṇ

as well. To know about these varied works will surely help us to understand *Tiruvāymoḷi* better, so that we can assess more surely the choices Śaṭakōpaṇ had before him in deciding what to use, and how, in composing *Tiruvāymoḷi*. Not to know the wider context surely threatens to distort our reading.<sup>7</sup>

Even as we acknowledge the importance of paying attention to all the relevant details of context, we must assess carefully what we can and cannot do at the present stage of scholarly inquiry. For one thing, there are considerable difficulties to be faced in understanding these other older and contemporary works before reference to them will aid us in understanding *Tiruvāymoḷi*. They are often large and complex, and many of them, particularly in Tamil, have not yet been studied carefully by modern scholars. Most of them are in fact less well understood than *Tiruvāymoḷi*, which has profited from the fact of the large commentarial tradition around it and from a variety of modern studies.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, when one does try to specify relevant connections, it is striking that contextual studies often remain inconclusive or insufficient to establish definite historical connections or literary influences such as would pin down the inherited and original features of Śaṭakōpaṇ's achievement. Beyond the kind of generalities I have already hinted at—"older and contemporary works are important"—there is very little in the way of direct evidence which indicates that Śaṭakōpaṇ, strikingly original in his re-use of available resources, actually borrowed from any actual source, or actually knew of any of the other works one might think he should have known about. Given this situation, much remains tentative, and many questions are left open for later resolution.

But a final, basic point is that *Seeing through Texts* is an impatient book. Though informed by a concern for the wider context, it represents a theological project which does not wait upon the completion of the relevant research by other scholars. Although very much open to improvement and correction, its premise is that we can get quite far by learning to think, imagine, and desire within the world bounded by the songs of *Tiruvāymoḷi*. Just as it would be unfortunate to jump to conclusions, it would be unfortunate to postpone serious consider-

ation of the text as a literary whole until that future date when the context is exactly understood. This study takes the swifter path, engaging *Tiruvāymoli* as an integral literary document possessed of its own dynamics as a work of literature, with its own style of interaction with its readers. None of which features can be ignored merely in favor of understanding its components in relation to components of other earlier and contemporary texts.

Awareness of the broader context provides a note of caution to accompany this study. We will try not to discover uniqueness where it is not actually to be found, nor to make too much of features that may turn out, in fact, to be rather common. Conversely, we will highlight what seems unusual and rare, and also what is missing, such as what one might have expected to find in a work like *Tiruvāymoli* but does not. Still, our major concern is to be something like an *ālvār*, immersed in the songs; we shall suggest the manner and implications of this gradual immersion in chapter 2.<sup>9</sup>

### ***III. Pondering the Author: Sifting the Multiple Contexts***

The opportunities and risks of a focus on the text as given to us rather than on the resources exterior to it which enable us to dissect it become all the more clear when we consider the text in relation to the most important contextual factor, its author, Śaṭakōpaṇ. How ought we to take into account his intentions in composing the songs? Who was Śaṭakōpaṇ, what ought we know about him, when is the narrative “I” truly the voice of the author? If we focus our attention on Śaṭakōpaṇ, are we better able to understand *Tiruvāymoli*? If we resist the appealing but vague category of experience, how are we to read what is before us and yet find the author in that reading?

The problems related to an understanding of the author are of course complex, and many of them have to do with literature in general: problems regarding authors in general, authorial intention in any kind of writing, the inscription of self in writing, the existence of authors behind texts, etc. Such larger

concerns cannot be resolved here, but we must at least keep in mind the caution against naiveté to which they exhort us. Let us review what we know about the author Śaṭakōpaṇ from his songs and from the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition; I will show how these resources together confirm our instinct to interpret the text as an integral whole.

### 1. *Locating Śaṭakōpaṇ Historically*

Insofar as research can make a contextual, historical contribution, we must concede that the materials available for this research are minimal, insufficient for the construction of a reliable and comprehensive biography of Śaṭakōpaṇ. However, some minimal specifications are possible. The basic historical sketch has been given numerous times, most recently and competently by G. Damodaran (1978) and F. Hardy (1979); I will borrow from their accounts in rehearsing the main lines of the story of Śaṭakōpaṇ.<sup>10</sup>

Śaṭakōpaṇ probably lived in the 9th century CE, though some scholars have placed him as much as two centuries earlier,<sup>11</sup> in Kurukūr deep in south India, in Tamil Nadu. His real name was probably Māraṇ—perhaps his grandfather's name, perhaps a name given in honor of the king in whose court his father may have served. It was probably only later he was given the honorific name "Śaṭakōpaṇ," which is explained variously in relation to his power to destroy ignorance.<sup>12</sup> Damodaran suggests that the relative inaccessibility of some of the hill temples of which Śaṭakōpaṇ sings may indicate that he was from the hill country of modern Kerala, to the west of Tamil Nadu. The elegance and sophistication of his compositions and the inclusion in them of a significant number of Sanskrit words suggest that Śaṭakōpaṇ was a well-educated person. There is not much else to add to this scant account that is of direct importance to how we read the songs.

### 2. *Finding Śaṭakōpaṇ in his Songs*

As we delve more attentively into the songs themselves, other kinds of useful information come to the fore, particularly re-

garding the construction of Śaṭakōpaṇ as a spiritual figure. To begin with, the 11th verses which conclude each song—perhaps Śaṭakōpaṇ's own verses, a kind of reflection on his own songs, perhaps the work of a very early redactor<sup>13</sup>—are vivid and ample in the spiritual characterization of Śaṭakōpaṇ they offer; they set the tone for how he was to be remembered in later generations. According to these verses, for example, Śaṭakōpaṇ is the one:

*“who lives by the grace of Māl, astonished and crying repeatedly, ‘Māl, wondrous lord, great wondrous one!’”* (I.5.11);

*who spoke “about how he desired the lord Kaṇṇaṇ, God of gods, who stands the very highest,”* (I.9.11);

*who possessed “an insatiable love for the Cause of all things without exception, the light,”* (II.1.11);

*“who knows that there is no other way to rise than Kaṇṇaṇ's bright lotus feet,* (IV.3.11);

*“who thought only about reaching the holy feet of Nārāyaṇa, Keśava, the highest light,”* (IV.9.11);

*“who daily has only one thought, ‘Our refuge is the feet of the lord on the snake,’”* (V.10.11);

*“who has reached the point of calling the lord of the gods his mother and father, by thought, word, and deed,”* (VI.5.11);

*“who was the sort to see that nothing here nor there can exist without holy Māl,”* (VII.9.11);

*“whose mind is purely for the pure one, who thinks, ‘there is no other refuge after knowing the pure one,’”* (VII.10.11);

*“who grieved about parting from him of whom the lovely, decorated cowherd women cry out in the evening unable to live apart from him,”* (IX.9.11);



*“who is crowned with the grace of the tall one,”* (X.5.11);

*“who has destroyed desire and gained release, who calls on  
Araṇ and Ayaṇ and Ari who encompasses and fulfils  
desire,”* (X.10.11).<sup>14</sup>

His songs are

*“composed in awe,”* (VII.7.11),

*“uttered from knowledge,”* (VII.8.11),

*“a work of humble service,”* (IV.1.11, X.1.11, V.6.11, etc.)

And so on. Such characterizations contribute to a spiritual biography—Śaṭakōpaṇ as the paradigm of full, perfect devotion—not a historical one. Yet they are important, primary responses to the energy and passion of the songs, and they suggest how the tradition will think of him, how he functions in relation to his songs.

It is reasonable to move beyond the eleventh verses to the body of the songs themselves, to fill out this literary and spiritual portrayal of Śaṭakōpaṇ, extrapolating from the verses to their author. The tradition has done this fairly liberally; the *ācāryas* work with the hypothesis that everything in the songs marks some moment in the *ālvār*'s inner journey. This verse, in the young woman's voice,

*“My rice for eating, my water for drinking, my betel for chewing,  
my lord Kaṇṇaṇ!”  
she keeps crying, tears flooding her eyes;  
when she searches for his city, abundant in his excellence, in all  
the earth,  
Kōḷūr is surely the place my young doe will enter.* (VI.7.1)

was taken by Nañcīyar to indicate that the *ālvār* neither ate nor drank, but depended on the lord alone: “His nature was such that he could not for a moment endure separation from the lord, he who from his birth had the lord as his sustenance, etc.”<sup>15</sup> In introducing I.10.8,



*When I hear someone say, "Nārāyaṇa our Treasure,"  
tears flood my eyes, I search for him;  
how amazing, day and night he never stops favoring me,  
my master, young master, he never leaves me. (I.10.8)*

Nāṃpiḷḷai offers this fascinating anecdote, one of just several which tell us something about Śaṭakōpaṇ "outside" his songs:

The āḷvār thought, "Up to now we have erred in thinking and speaking; now we must put all this aside and go to a place where His qualities are not celebrated." So he lay down near a ruined wall, covering his head. But just then a man came along carrying a heavy bundle; as he put it down he sighed, 'Śrīmāṇ Nārāyaṇa!' When the āḷvār heard these words he was astonished that his senses were so inclined toward what he heard. (I.10.8)

Apart from such individual verses read autobiographically—as verses in the Psalms have been read to indicate events in the life of King David—there are some entire songs which seem particularly to invite autobiographical interpretation. Several seem prompted by visits to particular temples which Śaṭakōpaṇ appears to have known in detail,

*Flocks of herons daily feeding in the flowering marshes,  
when you see the lord with the berry-red lips and discus in his  
hand,  
the lord who lives in Tiruvaṇṇāṭṭūr where fine rice ripens tall—  
worship him, tell him of this sinner's love. (VI.1.1)*

Some seem to presume his encounters with devotees,

*This alone suits my eye:  
the people of Vaikuṇṭha's lord are established everywhere in this  
world by their marvels, but they do one thing only;  
have no doubt, there is no escape, even if you are born demons  
or ungodly folk:  
they will kill you, sirs, overturning this age. (V.2.5)*

or his encounters with worldly types,

*Skilled singers of such fine songs,  
 why do you put aside the lord of our heaven-dwellers  
 who shows the path to travel from age to age, many ages with-  
 out end,  
 just to sing of others hardly worth thinking of? (III.9.3)*

or his sudden realization of some aspect of God's grace,

*In that time when I did not know you, you made me love your  
 service,  
 in the midst of my unknowing confusion, you made me your  
 servant;  
 disguised as a dwarf, you asked, "Three steps of earth, great  
 Bali,"  
 you tricked him unawares,  
 and now you've mingled inside my self. (II.3.3)*

or his vision of the faithful on their way to Heaven,

*The people of the heavenly worlds worship, they pour out  
 incense and a fine rain of flowers  
 before the people who belong to him who once measured the  
 earth;  
 silent sages along both sides cheer them on, "Come higher!"  
 they step forward saying, "This is the road to  
 Vaikuṅṭa!" (X.9.3)*

These verses are lovely and memorable; yet the difference between the "I" in the songs and the "I" of the author cannot be overlooked; the effect is not so much to establish the identity or history of the author as to infuse the songs with the values of first-person recollection: the depiction of "I" is one more tool at the composer's disposal.

Four songs (III.9, IV.5, VII.9, X.7) gain particular prominence because they appear to express Śaṭakōpan's self-identity directly, as the speaker turns explicitly to a consideration of his own craft and articulates his self-understanding of his art.<sup>16</sup> III.9, already cited, portrays what one bard has to say to other bards. In each verse, in one way or another, the speaker insists that he sings only of the lord and that those who do otherwise are to be criticized: "These lords think of themselves as something spe-

cial; they esteem their riches as true wealth—why should I sing of them?” (2); “others hardly worth thinking of” (3); “frail men” (4); “You’ll get no rewards to keep, by wearing out your mouths praising the glories of wealth: it’s like digging around in a dung heap!” (5); “there are no real benefactors in this world. But even if you praise your own favorite god with sweet songs, you still reach holy Māl with the bright, radiant hair” (6); “So what words can I mouth about foolish people?” (8); “I am not one to mouth the praise of men” (9). We have here a strong public voice; in some loose sense at least, Śaṭakōpaṇ seems to be a member of a “poets’ guild.” He has peers to argue with, he is not alone.

IV.5, VII.9 and X.7 reflect on the experience of inspiration, and the involvement of the lord in the composition of these songs in his honor. IV.5 reiterates, in a kind of refrain, the speaker’s amazement that he has been allowed to undertake the precious task of offering songs to the lord, by the lord’s grace. His words, the garland he offers to the lord, are totally satisfying to himself, and amazingly marked by the kind of intimate union he seeks. These verses are indicative of the song’s direction:

*The unfalling one who dwells within the bounds of undying joy,  
excellence undying, flower eyes, lord of heaven-dwellers,  
I praise him with garlands of songs undying through time,  
I come near him, I dwell within the bounds of undying joy.*

*To those who come near him in worship, the lord comes near,  
and makes their deeds go away;  
his the lovely feathered eagle, his the war discus,  
my tongue praises him with garlands of song and I come near  
him;  
but I cannot understand how he’s made my self his self.*

*The lord shows us the right way, the lofty lord of the immortals,  
the one who spreads out all things, my lord;  
I praise him, weaving a garland of words, I have reached the  
state of rejoicing every day,  
my deeds and diseases become ashes before the wind. (IV.5.3–5)*

Subsequent verses similarly weave together praise and self-reflection: “. . . I praise him with garlands of songs with proper words, I get inside him: from now on can there ever be anything difficult for me?” (6); “. . . it’s my destiny to weave garlands of fine words about him: what then could I lack?” (7); “. . . is anyone in the wide heavens equal to me who can compose such garlands of words?” (8); “. . . I have threaded this radiant Tamil about him, cloud of joy for his servants.” (10) These testimonies naturally encourage us to look on *Tiruvāymoli* from the perspective of its author; though in the middle of this garland woven beginning to end, they succeed in getting us to look again at the whole, in terms of what it might have meant to Śaṭakōpan.

We hear most clearly of the divine origins of Śaṭakōpan’s intensely personal songs in VII.9, which announces the unity of divine and human voices, as the poet meditates on how his words are, at the same time, really divine words:

*He has uplifted me for all time, day after day he has already  
made me himself;  
Now he sings himself through me in sweet Tamil,  
my lord, my First One, the abiding light: what can I say about  
him?*

*What can I say about him?  
Become one with my sweet life, he sings in me these sweet songs  
which I sing in my own words,  
he now praises himself in his own words, my marvellous one,  
the First One who in three forms sings ahead of me.*

*He does not sing his song about himself by the sweet songs of  
the best singers  
but now joyfully he becomes one with me and through me  
sings fine songs about himself: Vaikuṅṭa’s lord. (VII.9.1, 2, 6)*

Operative here are both a sense of divine intervention—every word is God’s—and the speaker’s conscious assent to this process—his words are all the richer because they are not merely his and because he knows this. The lord speaks, the text is in-