

The Place of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār in South Indian History

Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār's poetry bridges the classical Tamil world and the devotional milieu in which Sanskritic myths are localized in a Tamil landscape and infused with Tamil modes of relating to the divine. Although Ammaiṃār does not directly praise the Tamil land or Tamil language as the later Śaiva poets do, her poetry is animated by literary and cultural elements that are defining features of the classical Tamil world. Ammaiṃār makes reference to many of Śiva's heroic deeds as related in Sanskrit myths and epics, but she is especially devoted to Śiva dancing in the cremation ground, a scenario that resonates profoundly with Tamil ideas of death and desiccated wastelands. In order to understand how Ammaiṃār's poetry situates Śiva in the Tamil landscape, in this chapter I present a brief historical overview of the milieu in which Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār composed her poetry, including the literary traditions that inform her work.

A vivid portrait of life in Tamilnadu in the early centuries of the Common Era emerges from the earliest surviving Tamil literature, which was likely composed or compiled between the first century BCE and the fifth century CE. Literature can convey certain social and cultural facts, but since it "refracts as much as it reflects," it is necessary to "enter the realm of the symbolic values that writers express through the 'facts' and 'objective entities'" (Ramanujan 1999a, 52). In classical Tamil literature human behavior and natural landscape are key components of a poetic system that reflects and structures the values and aesthetics of the Tamil world during the centuries leading up to the beginnings of devotional Hinduism. By outlining a chronological development of cultural and literary ideas and practices in Tamilnadu, I aim to convey the complex environment that Richard Davis describes as the "shared religious culture where divine figures, literary tropes, and ritual forms could all be reincorporated, reformulated, and resituated for polemical purposes" (Davis 1999, 218).

This early literature consists of the first Tamil work on grammar and poetics, the *Tolkāppiyam*; ten long poems by ten different poets called the *Pattuppāṭṭu*; and eight anthologies (*Eṭṭutokai*) of poetry that is divided into two types: *akam*, “inner” or love poems; and *puṛam*, “outer” or public poems about kings, war, heroism, death, codes of conduct, and so on. These poems were composed by Pulavans, “wise men.” Although the poems are clearly rooted in an oral culture, they are syntactically too complex to have been simply extemporized, and may have been composed in writing; A. K. Ramanujan calls the poems “witnesses to a transition” (1985, 273). The Brāhmī script, which was probably the first script used for Tamil, was introduced into Tamilnadu in approximately the second or third century BCE. From ancient times two forms of Tamil seem to have been in use: a spoken form with many dialects, and a written, standardized language. Several centuries after the texts’ composition, this classical literature was labeled “Caṅkam” literature, referring to three *caṅkams* or academies of poets that, according to legend, each met for thousands of years in ancient kingdoms in or near the city of Maturai that were subsequently washed away by floods. In addition is the *Tirukkuraḷ*, traditionally attributed to Tiruvaḷḷuvar and probably composed 450–550 CE, a compendium of aphoristic verses about ethics, virtue, love, politics, and economic issues that continues to be esteemed in Tamil culture.¹ The *Tirukkuraḷ* delineates the social and moral milieu in which Ammaiyār composes her poetry, but it is the *akam* and *puṛam* poetry that Ammaiyār draws on to give voice to her uncompromising love of Śiva and her conviction that he is the divine hero who conquers evil and through whom the devotee can conquer death. The varied scenes of love and heroism in the classical poetry become the stages of devotion to Śiva and the arenas of his heroic activities.

In the *Tolkāppiyam* the *akam* and *puṛam* poems are characterized by *tiṇai*, which is most often translated as “landscape” or “poetic situation.” But Martha Ann Selby suggests these words are inadequate to convey the scope and boundary of this concept. She says, “*Tiṇai* is, in a very real sense, the artistic space circumscribed by the poets, along with everything contained therein. I tentatively choose the word ‘context’ to translated *tiṇai*, but what must be understood is that this context includes geographical space, time, and everything that grows, develops, and lives within that space and time, including emotion” (2000, 33). There are seven *tiṇai* or contexts for *akam* and for *puṛam* poems; each of the five major or “middle” contexts is assigned to a geographical landscape that contains characteristic flowers, birds, animals, people, drums, and gods; each landscape is connected to

a particular season, time of day, and subcategory or theme (*tuṃai*); and finally, each context has a fixed behavior, mood, or emotion that on one level defines the context. The behavior or mood of each *akam* poem is a phase in the love relationship between a man and a woman. The five main *akam* contexts, named after a flower or plant found in each landscape, are: mountain (*kuṃṃci*), first union; pasture (*mullai*), waiting for a lover to return; countryside (*marutam*), infidelity and resentment; seashore (*neytal*), lamenting the lover's absence; and wasteland (*pālai*), separation. Many of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār's poems take place in a *pālai* landscape. The last two situations in *akam* poetry are not related to a particular landscape and are not the subject of true love poetry, which is well-matched or proper love. These situations are mismatched love (*peruntinai*), and unrequited love (*kaikkilai*). The characters in *akam* poetry are not named, but are restricted to a few anonymous, conventional types: the hero and heroine, the heroine's foster-mother, friends and messengers, the concubine. The poet does not speak directly to the reader or use the poet's own voice, but rather allows the reader to overhear the characters' dialogue or monologue: The heading for a poem might be "What Her Girl Friend Said."

According to the *Tolkāppiyam* the seven *tinai* for *puṃam* poems are parallel to the landscapes for *akam* poems; six of the seven are given a plant name. The seven *puṃam* contexts are: cattle raid (*veṃci*), invasion (*vañci*), siege (*uḷṃnai*), battle (*tumpai*), victory (*vākaḷi*), struggle, endurance (*kāñci*), and praise of heroes (*pāṃṃ*). Although the correspondences between the *akam* and *puṃam* contexts may not be immediately clear, the *Tolkāppiyam* commentators explain that the first union of lovers, for instance, corresponds to a cattle raid because both are first encounters, and take place in the middle of the night, in the mountains, and in secret. In contrast to the overheard dialogues of conventional character types in *akam* poetry, the *puṃam* poets speak in their own voices, or as a bard or drummer, specify individuals by name, and portray particular circumstances and "real" people in history. The contexts of the poetry provide a provocative outline of some of the important social, cultural, and religious themes in Tamilnadu during this period, as well as the imagery that will inform the work of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. Ammaiṃyār speaks in her own voice as Śiva's *pēy* and ardent devotee. She builds a vivid and adoring image of Śiva as the Lord of the Universe by evoking his many heroic deeds and describing his attributes in detail.²

Although *akam* and *puṃam* poems are categorized separately, in practice they overlap and intersect: The two genres of poems differ in theme and emotion, but share a repertoire of imagery, "a

live vocabulary of symbols; the actual objective landscapes of Tamil country become the interior landscape of Tamil poetry" (Ramanujan 1994, 108). In this poetry nature and culture are not opposed, but work together to embody meaning concretely, not through metaphysical abstraction but through physical detail (Ramanujan 1985, 286–287). The geographical landscape becomes a kind of map of the human self. Selby cites a vivid example of one *akam* poem in which a woman talking to her mother laments her absent lover; in the last few lines of the poem elements of the seashore (*neytal*) context are literally mapped onto her body:

The place between my breasts
has filled up with tears,
has become a deep pond
where a black-legged
white heron feeds.

Here the woman's salty tears correspond to the pond on the seashore; the heron is her lover, feeding on her. In this poem the environmental imagery remakes the woman's body. Although every poem in the anthologies does not unify the geographical landscape with the speaker's body this literally, the geographical imagery of the poetic system stimulates and articulates the transformation of human emotions, thoughts, and desires (Selby 2000, 52–54).

Whereas *akam* poetry is concerned with the many phases of human erotic love, *puṛam* poems focus largely on kings and heroes. Many (if not most) of the *akam* poems are in the voices of women, as opposed to the overwhelmingly masculine voices of the *puṛam* poems. During the Caṅkam age there were many small kingdoms, or *nāṭus*; the most powerful kings of the time were the Cōlas, Cēras, and Pāṇṭiyas. The king was expected to rule justly, ensure a rich harvest, be a generous patron, and achieve victory on the battlefield. War seems to have been virtually constant, and many of the *puṛam* poems describe in vivid detail the extraordinary heroism and strength of the king and his warriors and the bloody carnage on the battlefield. Victory and a hero's death on the battlefield both bring honor; having a good name in public is a central concern. Women in the *akam* poems fear that their lovers will betray or desert them, thereby robbing them of their chastity (*karpu*), and their good public name. Wives and mothers in the *puṛam* poems dread hearing gossip that their husbands or sons were killed running from the enemy, and rush onto the battlefield to see their men's wounds:³

When she heard the many voices saying . . . “her son was
 afraid of the enemy army
 and he showed them his back and ran!” then rage
 overcame her . . .
 And when she found her son who was scattered
 in pieces, she felt happier than she had been the day she
 bore him.⁴

Widows were expected to maintain their chastity after their husband’s death by living restrained, ascetic lives, giving up their ornaments and shaving their heads. Some widows chose instead to accompany their husbands in death, sometimes by immolating themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres, or taking their own lives and being buried in the same urn with their husband. A memorial stone (*naṭukal*) was erected to house the powerful spirits of heroic warriors and chaste wives, which would be worshiped with offerings. Heroic warriors earned war anklets (*kaḷal*), made of gold, which symbolized their victory over their enemies and which were distinct from the anklets worn by women (*cilampu*). The war anklet is one of the elements signifying heroism that Kāraikkāl Ammaiār uses to convey the victorious stature of the god Śiva.⁵

Although Caṅkam poetry is concerned mostly with the elite members of Tamil society, the *cāṇṇōr* or “noble ones,” and reflects their aristocratic values, the poems are also populated by many groups or castes (*kuṭi*) of people that are identified by their occupation and which form a Tamil social hierarchy or caste system that existed before the North Indian *varṇa* system spread into South India and the two systems fused together. Several important castes are considered to be of lower birth, or Pulaiyaṅs, people whose occupations brought them into contact with polluting or threatening forces, such as death, and who were restricted in their interactions with higher castes. Many of these low castes were bards and musicians that performed a variety of functions in society; they were clearly distinct from the Pulavaṅs or poets who composed the poems. Bards sang the praises of kings, and played drums in battle. Drumming is particularly important in the Caṅkam world; many groups of drummers are frequently mentioned.⁶ Dancing is also an important activity; the poetry describes many festivals at which crowds of people, especially girls, come together in joyful dances, such as the *tuṇṇakai*. Music and dancing are integral to the ritual worship of Murukaṅ, whose name means “one who is youthful, beautiful.” He is one of the few named deities in the Caṅkam poems, and appears to be an indigenous Tamil god.⁷

Drums were integral to the king's activities, especially warfare; they contained a kind of power that infused the king and his army. Each ruler possessed symbols of authority such as a tutelary or protected tree and a royal drum, or *muracu*; a victorious king would cut down his enemy's tree and take his drum. The *muracu* or royal drum was bathed and offered sacrifices of blood and liquor. Before the battle began, a drummer beat a huge drum to call the soldiers to the battlefield; drums were said to cause enemies to be defeated. When a warrior did not achieve victory and was wounded, drummers and bards played for him, providing a kind of protection from the forces unleashed around him. In many poems the carnage of the battlefield is described in gruesome detail: rivers of blood flow, dead bodies pile up, and severed body parts are scattered everywhere:

How can the war flare up now and soldiers brace against
 advancing troops?
 Demonesses, garishly glowing, plunge their hands into the
 wounds of warriors
 who have died there in battle and smearing their hair red
 with the blood,
 they dance then to the sad throb of the *paraī* drums beaten
 in slowed pain.
 Vultures are feasting on the army . . .⁸

The battlefield draws spirits and other creatures that feast on dead bodies and inhabit places of death. The Tamil word for demon or ghoulish is *pēy*, the word Kāraikkāl Ammaiār uses to describe herself in her poetry. Male and female demons are common beings in particular Caṅkam landscapes, along with spirits that are generally malevolent and cause suffering. The battlefield is another arena where particular kinds of dances take place. Here the *tuṇaṅkai* is performed by female demons and corpses that rise up in response to the dance's rhythm; Korṛavai, the goddess of war and victory who lives in the forest, is also said to dance the *tuṇaṅkai*. Demons dancing the *tuṇaṅkai* appear in Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's poetry.⁹

The battlefield is a place of brutal death, but it is also a realm of transition; the death or defeat of one king brings increased honor and power to the conqueror. The heroic king brings in "an unending harvest of victorious wars" (Ramanujan 1985, 115), and the battlefield is often homologized to the process of the harvest:

. . . I have come here, to the field where the gurgling
 blood rises

and spreads across the earth, since a cloud of glowing
 weapons
 has rained down the ripe, wished-for fruit and when the
 rich
 curving grain is cut, the stems heap up and elephants
 circle
 like buffaloes to thresh and reduce the many piles of fallen
 corpses. . . .¹⁰

In addition to the battlefield, fearsome beings inhabit the cremation ground, another place of death and transition that is described in many *puṣam* poems. The burning ground is salty, dessicated, a wasteland where only plants that can survive extreme heat and aridity can live. Owls shriek; scavenging animals, ghouls, and demonesses feast on the rotting flesh of corpses left among the ash and bones. Low-caste men perform the funeral rituals. On the battlefield the victorious warrior fights his way to honor and fame; but the cremation ground is everyone's ultimate destination:

. . . This ground,
 it is the end
 of everyone in the world,
 looks upon the backs of all men,
 and hasn't seen anyone yet
 who will look upon its back.¹¹

The word most often used in the poetry for cremation ground or burial ground is *kāṭu*, which also means "forest," "jungle," "desert," "dry land," "place," and "border, limit." In Tamil Caṅkam culture the *kāṭu* is conceived of as a dangerous, uninhabitable wilderness area outside of human control, and has traditionally been contrasted with the *nāṭu*, the agricultural and inhabited land, and the *ūr* or village, a distinction that continues to be a vital part of Tamil culture today.¹²

The *kāṭu* is connected to the *pālai* landscape of *akam* poetry, the wilderness or desert wasteland that signifies separation. The *pālai* is a kind of drought-resistant tree; this landscape has no specific geographical location, but is any area that the midday summer heat has burned into a wasteland. *Pālai* poems may describe the lovers' elopement and the hardships they endure, including the pain of separation from their families. But the most common *pālai* poems describe the hero's solo journey through a harsh and dangerous wasteland in search of wealth or education so that he can marry his lover. The wasteland is a chaotic territory of transition between settled, inhabited landscapes.

The extreme heat, dessicated plants, and wild animals and birds mark the landscape as an alien world that the hero endures by thinking of his beloved. Many of the poems move from outside to inside, from the desolate landscape outside to the hero's heart and the image of the lover he had to leave. The *puṟam* situation of *vāikai* or victory in war also takes place in a wasteland; the poems praise the achievement of the hero, who has survived the dangers of the battlefield and endured the long separation from his wife.¹³

In the post-*Caṅkam* period this poetic system will be used to portray outer and inner devotional landscapes. The longing for a lover and the pain of separation in *akam* poems will be redirected toward god in devotional poetry. Likewise, the praise of a king or hero that is central to *puṟam* poetry will provide a language and set of images through which devotees envision and connect to the divine. Fear of public shame will become the sense of separateness from others as an emerging devotional community. The cremation ground with its fearsome creatures will carry over into *Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's* poetry, but will convey a devotional vision of the world.

Caṅkam literature reveals a social, cultural, and religious milieu characterized by North Indian as well as indigenous Tamil elements. Scholars have long debated how much of the culture depicted in the poems comes from North India, and how much is "pure" Tamil. The elements of the poetry and the *Caṅkam* world discussed so far seem to predate the introduction of North Indian culture, but cultural elements from regions north of the Tamil country were clearly impacting the South Indian world from early on; the way that Sanskrit language and North Indian ideas and practices were selectively woven into Tamil culture is hugely important in the later development of devotional Hinduism, as well as in *Kāraikkāl Ammaiār's* poetry.¹⁴

Some features in *Caṅkam* literature obviously spread into the Tamil land from the north. Vedic sacrifice, Brahman priests, and Vedic literature had spread throughout the subcontinent by the turning of the Common Era. There are many descriptions of Brahmans reciting the Vedas and performing sacrifices in *Caṅkam* literature. Brahmans apparently lived apart from other groups and kept away from polluting animals like dogs. At least some Brahmans were vegetarian; some of the poets were Brahmans. Some poems make references to the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *Tirukkuraḷ* is organized according to the Sanskritic three aims of life, which also appear in the poems: *dharma* (*aṟam*) or morality; *artha* (*poruḷ*) or wealth, public life; and *kāma* (*iṅpam*) or sexual pleasure. There are several descriptions of ascetics who have renounced the world and practice *tapas*, or austerities in

order to achieve liberation, *mukti*, the fourth aim of human life. Many poems include the doctrine of karma and reincarnation.¹⁵

Brahmanical deities from the North were well known in the Tamil country by the Caṅkam period. Indra, Kubera, Varuna, Paraśurāma, Balarāma, and the devoted wife Arundhatī are mentioned in the poetry. There are several references to Māyōṅ, the Tamil name for Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa.¹⁶ Although the name “Śiva” does not appear, there are a few references to the god Śiva in Caṅkam poetry: He is described variously as blue-throated, having an eye in his forehead, wearing a crescent moon, bearing Gaṅgā in his matted hair, and possessing a banner marked with a bull. He gave the gods victory when he conquered the three-walled city with an arrow; he prevented the demon from raising the mountain he is sitting on. He is associated with Death. He is called the Primal Being, and is associated with the four Vedas. He is also described as the god worshipped by sages or Brahmans in a temple.¹⁷

The *Cilappatikāram*

According to Zvelebil (1973, 172), “the first literary expression and the first ripe fruit of the Aryan-Dravidian synthesis in Tamilnad” is the epic *Cilappatikāram*, “The Story of the Anklet,” written in approximately the fifth century and traditionally ascribed to the Jain prince-ascetic, Ilāṅkō Atikaḷ.¹⁸ The epic tells the story of the hero and heroine, Kōvalaṅ and his chaste wife Kaṅṅaki. The action takes place in all three of the Tamil kingdoms: the Cōḷa, in the northeast part of the Tamil country; Pāṅṅiya, in the south and southeast; and the Cēral, on the west coast (what is now the state of Kerala). The epic is divided into three books, each of them named after the three capitals. Each book embodies a different dimension: the Caṅkam poetic categories of *akam* and *puṛam*, to which is added the mythic (*purāṇam*) realm. “The Book of Pukār” explores and celebrates the many facets of love through *akam* conventions; “The Book of Maturai” describes the heroine Kaṅṅaki’s destruction of the city of Maturai and her transformation into the goddess Pattinī; “The Book of Vañci” uses *puṛam* conventions to praise the king and celebrate his victory in war. *Cilappatikāram* encapsulates many facets of the complex cultural and religious milieu of the Tamil country in which Kāraikkāl Ammaiār composed her poetry. Part of the “Aryan-Dravidian synthesis,” the epic expresses a broader portrait of Śiva than is seen in Caṅkam literature, including his connections to both Sanskritic and Tamil goddesses. In the epic Śiva performs

his dance of destruction in the cremation ground, an image that is central to Ammaiār's devotional world. The doctrine of karma and rebirth is integral to the Jain epic, as well as to Ammaiār's poetry, although the paths to liberation from rebirth are different for each poet. In addition to the epic's rich evocation of the Tamil world that informs Ammaiār's poetry, the figure of Nīli, who plays a part in Kōvalaṅ's fate, bears important associations with the story of Kāraikāl Ammaiār and the temple town of Tiruvālaṅkāṭu.¹⁹

The story of the epic *Cilappatikāram* begins in the Cōla capital of Pukār (Pūmpukār) on the east coast, where the hero and heroine, Kōvalaṅ and Kaṅṅaki, belong to prominent merchant families. They marry and enjoy many years of wedded bliss. Then Kōvalaṅ abandons his wife for the courtesan Mātavi; Kaṅṅaki is heartbroken but faithfully waits for his return. Kōvalaṅ squanders all of his wealth on Mātavi, but sours on their affair and returns, remorseful, to Kaṅṅaki, who as a devoted wife not only accepts him back but also gives him one of her jeweled anklets to sell in order to begin a new life. They travel through the forbidding, desolate forests to the city of Maturai, the capital of the Pāṅṅiyaṅ kingdom, along the way meeting the Jain ascetic Kavunti, who becomes their guide and companion. In the forest a Brahman on pilgrimage from the Cōla country tells Kōvalaṅ that Mātavi has given birth to their daughter Maṅṅimēkalai, who is the heroine of the great Tamil Buddhist epic *Maṅṅimēkalai*. But Kōvalaṅ had a dream about his own death and fears returning to Pukār, so he and Kaṅṅaki continue on toward the capital.

Kōvalaṅ leaves Kaṅṅaki in the care of a herdsman outside the city and reaches Maturai alone. He fatefully sells the anklet to the king's goldsmith, who has stolen the queen's anklet but falsely accuses Kōvalaṅ of the theft. The Pāṅṅiyaṅ king responds hastily to his goldsmith's accusation and without a trial orders Kōvalaṅ to be executed. When Kaṅṅaki hears about her husband's tragic death, she rushes into the city and finds him in a pool of blood. She has a vision that he ascends to heaven. Kaṅṅaki then goes to the palace to confront the king; she breaks open her anklet to prove Kōvalaṅ's innocence: her anklets contain rubies; the queen's contain pearls. The king realizes his guilt and his failure to rule righteously and dies; the grief-stricken queen dies after him. Kaṅṅaki then tears off her left breast, curses the unrighteous city, and throws it at Maturai, her chaste power burning the city down, sparing only "Brahmans, good men, cows, chaste women/The old, and children."²⁰ The goddess of Maturai comes to Kaṅṅaki and tells her that events in Kōvalaṅ's past life resulted in his death in this life. He was a man named Bharata and worked for

a king; he mistakenly thought a merchant called Caṅkamaṅ was a spy and beheaded him. Before Caṅkamaṅ's wife Nīli took her own life, she cursed Bharata. The goddess then tells Kaṅṅaki that she will soon join her husband in heaven.

Kaṅṅaki journeys west to Neṭuvēl (Murukaṅ) Hill in the Cēral country. There the local hill dwellers witness the gods taking her up to heaven. The hill people take their story to the Cēral king, Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṅ; a poet tells the king about the tragic events in Maturai. The queen wants Kaṅṅaki to be worshiped as a goddess. Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṅ declares that he will install a memorial stone (*naṭukal*) for Kaṅṅaki brought down from the Himalayas. During his march north he conquers several North Indian rulers, who then carry the stone south to the capital city Vañci, where the king installs the stone image of Kaṅṅaki, now the goddess Pattīni ("chaste woman"), in a temple. In response to the Brahman Māṭalan's counsel, the king performs the royal sacrifice (*rājasūya*) to establish himself as the ruler of the entire Tamil country, and along with the invited kings, worships Pattīni.²¹

Cilappatikāram contains many elements that are familiar from Caṅkam poetry. The epic is filled with detailed descriptions of music and dance, including the frenzied dancing of a possessed temple oracle (Canto 12). The god Murukaṅ is prominent, and in a few songs the mother of a love-sick girl thinks she is possessed by him (Canto 24). After burning the city of Maturai, Kaṅṅaki, now a widow, goes to the temple of the goddess Korravai and breaks off her bangles (23.181). Kings are praised for their righteous rule, their generosity, and their prowess in battle. Demons and demonesses (*pēymakal*) dance on the battlefield and feast on corpses; the battlefield is compared to a cremation ground (Canto 26). When Kaṅṅaki and Kōvalaṅ leave their families in Pukār and go to Maturai, they travel through a threatening, desolate *pālai* landscape (Canto 11). When the Cēral king hears the story of Kaṅṅaki's ascension to heaven, he installs a memorial stone (*naṭukal*) to the woman who was deified through her power of chastity (The Book of Vañci). This is the first Indian record of the deification of a woman of the Vaiśya caste.²²

In addition to familiar Caṅkam characteristics, the epic encompasses many elements of northern provenance that have clearly pervaded the Tamil country by the fifth century and become integral to the culture. The doctrine of karma and reincarnation is central to the epic; Kōvalaṅ's untimely death is precipitated by his actions in a previous life (23.145–176), and Kaṅṅaki's tragic situation results from her failure to observe a vow for her husband in an earlier life (9.54–56). One of the main characters, Kavunti, is a Jain ascetic; she

serves as a guide and protector for the hero and heroine, and when she hears about the terrible events in Maturai, she starves herself to death (*uṇṇānōṇṇu/sallekhana*) in penance (27.82–83).²³ In addition to Jains, there are references to Buddhists, yogis, ascetics, Ajivikas. Girls perform the dance of Kṛṣṇa (Māyavaṇ) and his consort Pinnai;²⁴ several other avatars of Viṣṇu are praised (Canto 17). The Caṅkam goddesses Aṇaṅku and Korṛavai are identified in the epic with several Sanskrit goddesses, including Durgā, who rides a lion and killed the buffalo demon, and Umā/Pārvatī, the consort of Śiva (Canto 12; 20.34–36). Kālī is said to live in the forest, like Korṛavai (20.39). When Kaṇṇaki arrives at the palace gates to confront the king about her husband's death, the gatekeeper describes the enraged and vengeful woman to the king as "not Korṛavai . . . not Aṇaṅku . . . not Kālī . . . not Durgā" (20.35–44), foreshadowing the divine power she utilizes in destroying the wicked city.²⁵

In contrast to his marginal presence in Caṅkam poetry, Śiva plays a larger, though not major, role in *Cilappatikāram*. There are references to Śiva throughout the epic, and some of his attributes are familiar from Caṅkam poetry. Drums sound from his temples (13.137–138; 14.7–14). In the epic Śiva is described as residing in the Himalaya mountains (28.225–229); as manifesting in himself the entire universe (26.55–59); and as causing events through his grace (30.140–141). Śiva is also explicitly connected to the goddesses Umā and Kālī; one passage refers to the marriage rituals for Umā and Śiva (25.132–134). There are also two descriptions of Śiva dancing his dance of destruction, which will be discussed in the next chapter.²⁶

Early Devotional Poetry

In general, Caṅkam poems did not convey overtly religious themes; although some poems allude to various deities and practices related to them, these are secondary to the focus on the natural and social worlds. There are, however, two exceptions from the later Caṅkam period (ca. fifth–sixth century CE) that mark the beginning of devotional poetry in the Tamil land. One of the ten long poems, the *Tirumurukārruppaṭai*, praises the Tamil god Murukan, who by this period had become fused with the Sanskrit god Skanda, the son of Śiva and Pārvatī who was born to battle the demons. In the Caṅkam literature he is associated with the hills, and is said to live in trees, especially the *kaṭampu* tree; he rides a peacock; and he is called Cēyōṇ, the Red One. He is also called *kaṭavuḷ*, a term for the divine that in a later period designates a

transcendent divinity, but which in the Caṅkam context appears to mean a deity one should sacrifice to or worship. Murukaṅ is also associated with another important word for divine power in Caṅkam literature, *aṇaṅku*, which means “affliction,” “suffering,” “fear,” and “killing,” as well as “deity,” “celestial woman,” “demoness,” and “demon.” *Aṇaṅku* can possess a person or dwell in a particular object; Murukaṅ is said to cause and dispel *aṇaṅku*, especially in young women. In several *akam* poems, the mother brings a love-sick girl to the vēlaṅ, Murukaṅ’s priest, not knowing the girl is in love and thinking she is possessed. The vēlaṅ, “he who has a spear,” dances his frenzied possession dance, the *veriyāṭu*, to diagnose the girl’s affliction. Sometimes a priestess or woman diviner (*kaṭṭuvicci*) was called on. In other worship contexts, crowds of girls perform the *veriyāṭu*; lutes, pipes, and drums are played. This kind of ecstatic connection to an immanent divine will carry over into devotional worship.²⁷

The *Tirumurukārruppaṭai* is a “guide poem” (*ārruppaṭai*), a *puṛam* form in which two bards meet on a road and converse; one bard praises his patron’s generosity and prosperous realm, and urges the other bard to visit this ruler’s court to seek his patronage. In the *Tirumurukārruppaṭai* a Murukaṅ devotee tells a neophyte about the beautiful god and the six hills that are his sacred dwelling places in Tamilnadu. The six sacred places are identified with Murukaṅ’s six faces, so that the Tamil land is made into the body of the god. Instead of the wealth given by a king, Murukaṅ bestows personal salvation on his worshippers. Here the Sanskrit gods Viṣṇu, Śiva, Indra, and Brahmā are subordinated to Murukaṅ. He has a Sanskrit wife from the heavens, Teyvayānai, the daughter of Indra; and an earthly Tamil wife, Vaḷḷi, daughter of a hunting tribe.

In this poem, the poet describes one of the places where Murukaṅ dwells, accessible to his devotees:

Where goats are slaughtered,
 where grains of fine rice are offered
 in several pots with flowers,
 and His cock-banner is raised . . .

wherever devotees praise
 and move His heart;

where His spear-bearing shamans
 set up yards
 for their frenzy dance . . .

and in the awesome vast temple
 where the daughter of the hill tribe
 worships . . .

singing *kuriñci* songs . . .
 where the daughter of the hill tribe
 sounds Murukan's favorite instruments
 and offers worship to Murukan
 till He arrives
 and comes into her
 to terrify enemies and deniers . . .

He dwells in all such places
 and I speak what I truly know. (Ramanujan 1985, 215–217)

In this poem the description of the worship of the god evokes the Caṅkam descriptions of the frenzied dancing and music that were integral to the worship of Murukan, the participation of women in his worship, and the shaman-priest's and the woman's possession by the god. Murukan dwells in the hills; the "daughter of the hill tribe" sings *kuriñci* songs. In the *akam* landscape the heroine meets her lover in the hills; here, the woman is possessed by the god. In the Caṅkam poetry the worship of Murukan was a subsidiary element, serving to highlight the love-sickness of the heroine; here the *akam* landscape localizes the god, who is praised in the *puṇam* mode as a powerful god whose heart is tender, but who terrifies his enemies, and lives in a vast temple in a beautiful realm. In the eleventh century the *Tirum-urukārruppaṭai* was included in the Tamil Śaivite canon; it is the only Caṅkam poem that is also part of a devotional corpus.²⁸

The Caṅkam anthology *Paripāṭal* originally contained seventy poems to the gods Cevvēḷ (Cēyōṇ/Murukan), Tirumāl (Viṣṇu), the river Vaiyai (Vaikai), and the Pāṇṭiya capital Maturai located on this river. Only twenty-four poems have survived, seven of them to Tirumāl, and they are the only Caṅkam poems dedicated to Viṣṇu. These are likely the earliest devotional poems in Tamilnadu, as well as in India.²⁹ One *Paripāṭal* poem celebrates one of Tirumāl's sacred places, Māḷirunṅam, "Tirumāl's Dark Hill," near the city of Maturai and still the location of a popular Viṣṇu temple, called Aḷakar Kōyil. The praise of the god's sacred place parallels the *puṇam* praise of the king's prosperous, well-protected realm, as well as the close attention to the natural landscape in *akam* poetry.

...
 fragrant blue lilies

blossom in all its ponds,
the branches of *aśoka* trees
growing at their edge
are covered with blossoms . . .
the beauty of this place
is like the Black God himself . . .
the name Iruṅkuṅram

has spread far and wide,
on this great, bustling earth
it boasts fame in ages past
for it is the home of the dear lord
who eradicates delusions
for people who fill their eyes
with his image. (Ramanujan 1999d, 241)

The *Paripāṭal* poems incorporate elements of the *puṛam* mode of praise for a heroic king, but instead celebrate the heroic feats and generosity of the god. In Ramanujan's translation of *Paripāṭal* 2 we read:

. . .
O lord fierce in war,
the discus in your hand
cuts off the sweet lives
of enemies:
heads fall and roll
wreaths and all . . .
and lie dead at last
in a mire of blood.

That discus
consumes enemies at one stroke:
Death is its body,
its color the leaping flame
of bright fire
when gold burns in it.

The battle scene, with the heads rolling in blood, echoes the macabre battlefield scenes depicted in *puṛam* poetry; but here we know the hero is not a human king, but the god Tirumāl/Viṣṇu because of the discus in his hand, a reference from Sanskrit myth and iconography.

In another verse of the poem Tirumāl's grace is said to be "a sky of rain-cloud/fulfilling everyone." Rain signifies generosity in the Tamil

land where rains are often scarce; in *puṛam* poetry a ruler's generous patronage is often likened to the rain. In addition, here the darkness of a storm cloud evokes Tirumāl's blue-black color. In contrast to the shaman-priest (Vēlaṅ) who performs rituals to Murukaṅ, in later verses of this poem Tirumāl is identified with a carefully delineated Vedic sacrifice performed by Brahmans. *Paripāṭal* 3 celebrates Tirumāl by saying "In the Vedas, you are the secret./Of the elements, you are the first." In other verses of the *Paripāṭal* poems Tirumāl is the One, beyond understanding, transcending time, the essence of the universe. The Tamil sense of the sacred as immanent in special places, people, and things localizes Tirumāl in the Tamil land, but he is at the same time conceived of as the transcendent Absolute. These early poems represent the first time in India that philosophical and religious concepts are conveyed in a vernacular language instead of Sanskrit. They extend the classical landscapes and motifs into the devotional realm, but it is with the hymns of the poet-saints that devotional poetry truly flowers.³⁰

Bhakti

Historical changes during the late Caṅkam era would help usher in the period in which devotional poetry flourished. In North India the Guptas (320–540 CE) identified themselves as *bhāgavatas*, devotees of god; they officially sponsored Viṣṇu, whose mythology became part of their politics, and they built temples. The earliest *purāṇas* or mythological texts were recorded during this period. In South India the Kalabhras (Tamil Kaḷappāḷar) ruled from the third to the sixth century; the historical record for this period remains thin, but it is clear that the Kalabhras supported Buddhism and Jainism, both of which prospered during this period—Jainism, in particular, flourished. From approximately 550 to 900 CE, the Pallavas ruled from their capital in Kāñcipuram, and the Pāñṭiyas reigned in Maturai. Both of these kingdoms were powerful supporters of the devotional traditions, patronizing Brahman priests and constructing temples. People and influences from the north moved southward more rapidly during this period. Devotees composed devotional poems to Śiva and Viṣṇu, becoming the poet-saints of the traditions, and initiating the vernacular bhakti movements that would spread throughout the subcontinent.³¹

Bhakti is usually translated as "devotion," but the English word does not adequately convey the multivalent meanings of the Sanskrit term, which is derived from the verb *bhaj*, which means "to share

with," "bestow," "serve." *Bhakti* encompasses the sense of participation and love between god and devotee that characterizes the hymns of the devotional poets.³² *Bhakti* developed from Vedic roots, revisioning both the Vedic notion of action in the world in pursuit of religious goals and the Upaniṣads' solitary pursuit of liberation. In the dominant Upaniṣadic path, the renouncer engages in reverent meditation on the Ātman-Brahman in order to realize the identification of his true Self with the Absolute. Theistic conceptions of the impersonal Absolute emerge in two late *Upaniṣads*: Viṣṇu in the *Kaṭha* and Rudra-Śiva in the *Śvetāśvatara*. In these texts the Lord is the transcendent creator who is also immanent in the human self. It is also in these two texts that the concept of divine grace appears. The *Śvetāśvatara* emphatically proclaims that the creator of the universe and the cause of liberation are one God. Through the power of his austerities, his deep love (*bhakti*), and God's grace, the devotee knows the Lord and achieves salvation.³³

Bhakti as the path to salvation through the love of God is fully explicated for the first time in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (ca. 300 CE), in the context of the *Mahābhārata*. This text introduces concepts that will remain central to later *bhakti* texts and practices, including the poetry of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār. In this text Kṛṣṇa explains the path of *bhakti-yoga* to the hero Arjuna: one should act in the world but relinquish the fruits of action and dedicate them to the Lord. Like the renouncer the *bhakta* should sever his passionate attachment to worldly goals, yet unlike the renouncer he should not pursue salvation physically removed from the social world. In contrast to the Vedic structure of performing rituals in prescribed spaces and at prescribed times, the *bhakta* should at all times be focused on the Lord, performing all action as a sacrifice to him, pursuing liberation in the world. This interaction between the perspectives of renunciation and commitment to action in the social world is inherent in the *bhakti* path.³⁴

The *bhakti* path that Kṛṣṇa lays out in the *Gītā* is not simply one of faith or reverence (*śraddhā*). In a vivid illustration of the breadth of the *bhakti* path, Kṛṣṇa delineates four kinds of *bhaktas*: the afflicted (*ārta*), the seeker of wealth (*arthārthī*), the seeker of knowledge (*jijñāsur*), and the sage who has the true knowledge of the Self (*jñānī*). Kṛṣṇa says the *jñānī* is the highest of the *bhaktas*:

They are all noble, but I regard
the man of knowledge to be my very self;
self-disciplined, he holds me
to be the highest way.

At the end of many births,
 the man of knowledge finds refuge in me;
 he is the rare great spirit who sees
 "Krishna is all that is."³⁵

Kṛṣṇa makes it clear that knowledge is necessary for liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The bhakta's direct emotional connection to the Lord is grounded in the understanding that Kṛṣṇa is the Absolute, the All. This tension between knowing the Lord as the Supreme Principle of the universe (*nirguṇa*), and as the loving individuated God with particular attributes (*saḡuṇa*) is integral to the hymns of the devotional poets, including Ammaiyār.³⁶

The Tamil poems of the *Paripāṭal* and the *Tirumurukāṛruppaṭai* are considered the first devotional poems written in a vernacular language in India.³⁷ Between the fifth and tenth centuries the Tamil poet-saints, the ālvārs and the nāyanmārs, wrote devotional poetry to Viṣṇu and Śiva, wandering from place to place singing about god, spreading temple worship, creating a sacred geography and firmly establishing the bhakti traditions in Tamilnadu. Their poems became part of the sectarian traditions and are still sung in temples today.

The twelve ālvārs, "those who are immersed," wrote poetry to Viṣṇu. The tenth-century devotee Nātamuni collected and arranged their poetry in the *nālāyira-tivīya-pirapantam*, "The Four Thousand Sacred Hymns." The *mutal mūvar* or "first three" poets were Poykai, Pūtam, and Pēy, and probably lived in the sixth or early seventh century, possibly during the same time as Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār. These three poets each composed an *antāti* of one hundred verses in *veṅpā* meter, all similar in content. This is the same form as two of Ammaiyār's poems. The lives of the ālvārs were collected in the Sanskrit text *Divya-suri-caritam*, "Characters of the Sacred Ones." According to legend, the three poets met each other at the temple in Tirukkōvalūr, where, as they huddled together in the darkness during a severe thunderstorm, they felt the presence of a fourth person and realized that Viṣṇu had joined them. The legend says that their close encounter with the Lord inspired each poet to write the first verse of his *antāti*. Pēy ("Demon") and Pūtam ("Ghost") probably received their names because they were "god-possessed." The poetry of these first three Vaiṣṇava saints is more personal than the classical poetry or the early devotional poems; the personal voice of the poet characterizes bhakti poetry. Viṣṇu temples usually contain shrines with figures of the twelve ālvārs.³⁸

The Tamil Śaiva Tradition

The sixty-three nāyanmārs, “leaders,” are the saintly devotees of Śiva canonized in the Śaiva tradition. Only six of these saints wrote poetry, including the *mūvar mutalikal*, the “First Three Saints,” commonly known as Appar (Tirunāvukkaracar), Campantar (Tiruñānacampantar), and Cuntarar (Nampi Ārūrār). The corpus of their hymns would later become known as the *Tēvāram*, part of the central Tamil Śaiva scripture. Cuntarar, who lived two centuries after Appar and Campantar and whom scholars date between the late seventh century and the first half of the ninth century, is responsible for compiling the list of saints in an eleven-stanza poem called *Tiruttonṭattokai*, “The List of the Holy Devotees,” in which he names sixty-two saints.³⁹ A fourteenth-century work, the *Tirumuṟaikanta purāṇam*, “The Story of the Discovery of the Sacred Text,” describes how the eleventh-century Cōla king Apayakulacēraṇ, after hearing some of the poems sung to Lord Śiva in a temple, asked the poet Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi to find and organize the hymns of the Tamil saints. Helped by the god Gaṇeśa, Nampi found the ant-eaten manuscripts of the saints’ hymns in a sealed room behind the dancing Śiva in the great Chidambaram temple. Nampi organized the hymns into the Tamil Śiva-bhakti canon, the *Tirumuṟai*: The mūvars’ hymns, the *Tēvāram*, form books one through seven; the *Tiruvācakam* and *Tirukkōvaiyār* of Māṇikkavācakar became the eighth book. The ninth-century Māṇikkavācakar was never added to the official list of sixty-three saints, but he and the First Three are considered the *nālvar*, the “Four Revered Saints” in the Śaiva tradition. The ninth book of the *Tirumuṟai* contains musical compositions probably sung in Cōla temples. Book ten is Tirumūlar’s sixth- to seventh-century work *Tirumantiram*, considered the earliest work of Śaiva Siddhānta philosophical speculation. The eleventh book is a compilation of many texts spanning several centuries, including the poems of Aiyāṭikaḷkāṭavarkōṇ, a Pallava ruler and early Śiva devotee, and Kāraikkāl Ammaiār, who is considered by many scholars to be the earliest poet to write poems to Śiva in Tamil. Nampi Āṇṭār Nampi’s work, including his hagiography of the Śaiva saints, concludes the eleventh book. The twelfth and final book of the canon is the twelfth century *Periya Purāṇam*, “Great Story” of Cēkkiḷār, the definitive narrative of the sixty-three saints.⁴⁰

One of the major issues in scholarship on bhakti is whether, and to what degree, bhakti is a movement of social protest against caste hierarchy, status, and orthodoxy. Overall, bhakti poetry extols

the meaninglessness of caste in the eyes of the Lord, in contrast to the overtly aristocratic poetry of the classical age. However, approximately one-third of the Tamil poets are of Brahman origin, including the four major Śaiva poets and eight of the twelve ālvārs. Āṅṅāl is the only female ālvār; Kāraikkāl Ammaiār is the only female nāyanmār poet. A large segment of the sixty-three Śaiva saints comes from the high-ranking Vēḷāḷar peasant caste and the chieftains associated with them.⁴¹ Both the Vēḷāḷar landowners and the Brahmans supported the worship of Śiva and Viṣṇu. At the same time that the Śaiva poets sang about the temples emerging in the Tamil land, temple rituals were being created and compiled in Sanskrit liturgical texts called Āgamas, the earliest of which appeared by about 700 CE. The Āgamas are considered revealed texts, originally coming from Śiva himself; they detail all aspects of temple worship, including the transformative rituals that lead the priests (*ācāryas*) and adepts (*sādhakas*) toward liberation. The Pallava kings instituted the singing of the nāyanmārs' hymns during worship in the temples, a practice the Cōlas continued.⁴²

Śaiva Siddhānta, "perfected Śaivism," was the system of philosophy and ritual practice that emerged from the Āgamas, and was the dominant Āgamic school by the ninth and tenth centuries. The origins of Śaiva Siddhānta are not entirely clear, but it apparently developed in central and northern India, then spread to the south through Brahman preceptors connected to temples or to monastic lineages. Śaiva Siddhānta seems to have emerged as a distinctly named order in approximately the ninth century, after the rise of Śaṅkara's non-dualist Advaita Vedānta philosophy, when observers divided the greater Śaiva community into four orders: the Pāśupatas, Kālāmukhas, Kāpālikas, and Śaivas. From the tenth through twelfth centuries, Śaiva Siddhānta spread to many regions of India. Due to political changes in North India in the thirteenth century, Śaiva Siddhānta lost its royal patronage and rapidly died out in northern areas.

In the Tamil land, inscriptions state that the Pallava king Siṃhaviṣṇu (ca. 550–610) studied the Āgamas, and the Pallava king Narasiṃhavarman II (ca. 690–728) was well informed about the Śaiva Siddhānta path. In the sixth- to seventh-century work the *Tirumantiram*, the tenth book of the Śaiva canon, Tirumūlar refers to nine Āgamas, as well as specific Āgamic rites and temple worship. All three *Tēvāram* poets Appar, Campantar, and Cuntarar mention the Āgamas; these bhakti poets delineated movements that self-consciously created Tamil Hindu solidarity centered on temple worship. As Śaiva Siddhānta became established in the Tamil land, several endogamous clans of the Ādiśaiva or Gurukkaḷ (Kurukkaḷ) Brahman subcaste transmitted