

## TAMIL DEVOTIONAL POETRY – SIVA

**Overview** Beginning about 500 CE, a broad-based movement of devotionalism (*bhakti*, 'to share' or 'take part in') began to transform Indian culture and literature. We can trace the origins of this devotionalism back to the late *Upanishads* and the Sanskrit epics (especially the *Bhagavad Gita*), and there are also young shoots visible in both Sanskrit and Tamil classical poetry. However, this new religiosity, in which an individual worshipper nurtured a direct bond with a specific god or goddess, did not flower into literary form until the 6<sup>th</sup> century. For some, as yet unknown, reason, this major development in Indian culture and literature first surfaced in Tamil, spread north to the Kannada area (another Dravidian language) and then, by 1500 CE, to every literary language in the sub-continent. The social dimension of this devotional movement, however, might provide a hint for its southern origins. As mentioned in the essay on classical Tamil poetry, the great gods of Hinduism do not play a prominent role in that early literature (c. 100-500 CE); nor do Brahmins. Now, however, only a century or two later, Tamil poets are singing the praises of Siva (and Vishnu, as well). For the first time in Indian history, then, Hinduism is articulated in a language other than Sanskrit and largely by poets who are not Brahmins. In other words, devotionalism was a democratising movement, which allowed people outside the priestly elite to speak of gods in their local language.

The Tamil hymns in praise of Siva are also new in their ecstatic mode of expression. Poets are in love, in deep and passionate love, with the god. The poet is the lover; Siva is the beloved. There is also a new concept of Siva (or any god) as the mechanism of release from the suffering inherent in the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Now god has the power of 'grace' (*arul*), which the devotees seek in order to be free from the karmic cycle. Another novel element in this poetry is the focus on place, specifically on the temples dedicated to Siva. The poems mention 270 different temples scattered across the Tamil-speaking region of southeast India, where the devotee can have an 'audience' with the god.

All in all, then, these devotional Tamil poems in praise of Siva mark the beginning of the long transition from classical to modern Hinduism. The wonderfully evocative short poems of classical Tamil may be loved by scholars, and the public, but they are not, like these bhakti poems, still sung. These devotional poems are deeply personal with a raw, almost wounded, quality. They bear the scars of love for Siva.

**History** Tamil devotional poetry emerged at the end of the Sangam period (about 500 CE), when south Indian culture began to absorb influences from the north. Sanskrit texts, mythologies, gods and Brahmins (as well as other ritual specialists) became part of the court of the Pallava kings in the northern part of the Tamil-speaking region. Through this geographical and cultural bridge, came stories and iconography of Siva and Vishnu, around whom the bhakti movement coalesced. These gods replaced the kings of the classical poems, so that now the Tamil poets sang of deities and not worldly sovereigns. The king's palace became the god's temple. The king's patronage, which kept the bards alive, became the grace dispensed by a god to his devotees. The various stages of love, such as suffering, anxiety and separation, were now experienced by the poet in his passion for god, not the girl next door.

One literary bridge that the new poems used to cross from classical to devotional forms was a genre known as 'the guide' (*arruppatai*). In these guide poems, composed at the end of the classical period, a poet leads another poet to particular destination. Again, however, there is a crucial difference: whereas the destination in the earlier poems was the court of a generous patron, now the destination is a temple of Siva.

To understand the emergence of devotionalism in south India during the period from 500-900 CE, we also need to recall that it was a time of fierce competition between Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Not only did philosophers and poets of the three religions compete for royal patronage, their followers sometimes attacked and injured each other. There is good evidence that Hindu kings and minor rulers persecuted Buddhists and Jains.

It was one of the most famous of all Tamil kings (Raja Raja Chola I, r. 995-1014 CE) who ensured that these Tamil poems about Siva would be available for posterity. By the time he came to the

throne, most of the core of these poems had been circulating in oral and manuscript form for two or three centuries. He, however, had the foresight to commission his court poet (named Nambi) to compile and edit them into a single collection. The result is a compendium of 12 'books,' which (with some later additions) is known as the *Tirumurai* ('Sacred Way'). The core of the collection is the first seven books, which contain nearly 800 poems by the earliest poets: Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar. These books, collectively called the *Tevaram*, contain the poems that formed the heart of Tamil devotionalism for Siva; they are the poems that have been transmitted by a song tradition from the seventh century to the present day, when they are still heard in temples and in formal concerts. The eighth book (*Tiruvacakam*), containing the hymns of a somewhat later poet (Manikkavacakar, 9<sup>th</sup> c. CE), is also popular. Books ten through eleven contain the hymns of more minor poets. Book twelve is a hagiography of all the 63 poet-saints known as *Periya Puranam* by Cekkilar (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE), which is the subject of a separate essay.

**Cultural Significance** The impact and continuing influence of these poems on south Indian culture has been immense. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the *Tevaram* (the first seven books of the collection of poems) is regarded as a 'Tamil Veda' (indeed, this term is often used by scholars and public commentators). There are older strata of Tamil literature, but none has an equivalent emotional purchase on regional culture. Most importantly, the poems mark the beginning of a major shift in Indian religious thinking (the devotionalism of *bhakti*), with its more immediate and direct relationship between worshippers and deities. But the poems have also transcended their historical context and become a repository of cultural identity for Tamils, a potent weapon in the ongoing debate between north and south in contemporary India. They express a south Indian Hinduism, influenced but not dominated by myths, practices and literary conventions from the Sanskritic north. The poems sing with passion and intensity about the places in the Tamil-speaking country where Siva can be worshipped; those 270 named temples in actual towns and villages render the somewhat vague feelings of cultural identity concrete. The great majority of those temples still stand, and still receive pilgrims and daily worshippers, some of whom sing the poems composed more than a thousand years ago. Even some of the poets themselves, especially the trio of Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar, became deified, and images of them were cast in bronze and consecrated in temples. Today, when millions of Tamil people visit temples, listen to CDs and attend musical concerts, they will hear the songs of these poet-saints. Their legacy continues.

**Poets** The Tamil bhakti poets who sang in praise of Siva are collectively known as Nayanmars ('leader,' 'master'). There are 63 names listed in the canonical compilation of poems (*Tirumurai*), of which about 20 were Brahmins, though most came from middle-ranking castes. Some were landowners, some were merchants and some were oil-mongers and farmers. A few were labourers. Several were women. Among them all, however, four names stand out: the three poets whose work forms the first seven books of the *Tirumurai*, and a fourth, whose poems are collected in the eighth book.



(stone images of, from the left, Manikkavacakar, Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar)

**Appar** Perhaps the best-known of all is Appar ('Father'), so called because he was the oldest of the early poets. Born in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, probably in a warrior or Kshatriya caste, Appar was influenced by Jainism in his youth and joined a Jain monastery, where he undertook severe fasting

and meditation. When he contracted a bad illness, however, he was only cured after visiting a Siva temple. From then on, he was a fervent supporter of the worship of Siva and helped to convert a Pallava king from Jainism to Saivism. Living to an old age, he travelled the country, leading a small group of worshippers, visiting Siva temples and singing of their power to heal and bring release. His poems are so intense and moving that Appar himself became the object of worship.



(carved wooden image of Appar, perhaps 18<sup>th</sup> c.)

Sambandar Sambandar, one of handful of Brahmin poets, was a contemporary of Appar, and accompanied him on many of his pilgrimages. He is credited with engaging Jain scholars in debate and defeating them in a famous event in the city of Madurai. Although he died young, perhaps before 25 years, he composed thousands of hymns, of which 384 survived and are contained in the canonical collection.

Sundarar Completing the famous trio is the poet Sundarar (8<sup>th</sup> c. CE), another Brahmin, who was born a decade or so after the first two. He is unique among the Nayanmars poets in that his parents are also listed among the 63 poets. His marriage to a non-Brahmin woman caused some dissent among his followers, but his poems, all 1026 of them, silenced the controversy.



(bronze statue of Sundarar and his wife, 12c. CE?)

Manikkavacakar The fourth famous poet, who was born much later, in the 9<sup>th</sup> c. CE, was Manikkavacakar ('He of Jewelled Speech'). His poems are somewhat different than those of the other three in that they are more mystical and full of visionary experiences had while contemplating the forms of Siva. Legends of his life claim that he was a close advisor to a king of Madurai but left his post in search of enlightenment.



(bronze image of Manikkavacakar, holding a palm-leaf manuscript on which he has inscribed a poem, 10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

## Texts and translations

Appar (all translations from *Poems to Siva* by Peterson, 1989)

1. On strong shoulders like coral hills  
Lie coils of matted hair  
Like branching sea-coral.  
Around the hair a hooded snake  
Winds like a streak of coral.  
With the snake my Father bears  
The coral red eye,  
And the young moon  
Is a white flower on his crest.

This first poem introduces Siva by providing a description of his form. He is depicted in his ascetic mode, with matted hair and a snake curled up in the braids. He also displays his 'third' eye, the crescent moon and a white flower—all distinctive features of Siva's iconography in south India. The repeated use of 'coral' (*pavalam*) is noteworthy. In Tamil, coral has a red-hue, somewhat softer than the fire-engine red denoted by other Tamil words. The total picture that the poet builds up is one of devastating beauty, for that is the image that many worshippers have of Siva. It is also characteristic of Appar (and other devotional poets) that he makes you 'see' the god. He doesn't simply speak about him, his powers, his grace, etc. He enables you to visualise Siva and, thereby, to have a more direct experience.

2. If you could see  
the arch of his brow  
the budding smile  
on lips red as the *kovvai* fruit  
cool matted hair,  
the milk-white ash on coral skin,  
and the sweet golden foot raised up in dance,  
then even human birth on this wide earth would be a thing worth having.

This second poem by Appar illustrates further the 'personal' touch of these devotional poets. Here the poet is describing the god as Nataraja, or 'Lord of the Dance,' perhaps Siva's best-known sculptural form. But what is important is not the form itself but Appar's description of his experience of it. Again, it is the 'seeing' that counts, his arched brow, his smile and his 'sweet golden' foot. The listener/hearer can see this Siva because the poet is the 'seeing eye'. The feeling expressed by the poet is also distinctive, for it is a personal reaction, an individual's thought, which is something not often found in Sanskrit classical poetry. Here, though, we smile as we hear the poet say, in effect, 'Siva is so gorgeous that just to see him is worth all the pain in life.'

3. See the god!  
See him who is higher than the gods!  
See him who is Sanskrit of the North  
And Southern Tamil and the four Vedas!  
See him who bathes in milk and ghee,  
See the Lord, see him who dances, holding fire,  
In the wilderness of the burning-ground,  
See him who blessed the hunter-saint!  
See him who wells up as honey  
In the heart-lotus of his lovers!  
See him who has the unattainable treasure!  
See Siva! See him who is our treasure  
here in Siva-town.

This is yet another visualisation of the god in verse. Most of the images presented by the poet evoke a separate story or incident in the myths of Siva that would be familiar to most worshippers. The repeated injunction to 'see' (rather than to 'know' or 'understand') is at the heart of these devotional poems.

4. Bearing the axe, the skull bearer came  
 Riding on a swift bull;  
 Making sweet speeches, He entered our homes;  
 He won't take alms from us, nor will He leave.  
 Instead, He speaks only deceptions and wiles,  
 As if to seduce all who look at Him.  
 The Lord of Aamaatthoor, Who will neither accept  
 The petty alms we offer Him,  
 Nor reveal His designs,  
 Is a handsome man, indeed

Tucked into this array of verbal images is the naming of a place (Aamaatthoor), where a physical image of Siva stands. Again, the poet shows us Siva in his familiar guises, wearing a necklace of skulls and riding on a bull, but now he emphasises the god as love-thief. Not someone to simply admire or show obeisance to, but someone who steals your heart. This, of course, is a neat borrowing of conventions and stock figures from classical poetry into the new devotional poetry.

- 5 & 6. They call Him beggar, they speak ill of Him  
 They have fallen from the Path, those Buddhists,  
 and those erring Jains  
 But the Divine One who came to earth and begged for alms  
 He is the thief who stole my heart away  
 The elephant charged, bore down on Him  
 Oh wondrous sight! He tore its skin and wrapped it 'round  
 Some call Him madman – He is our Lord of Brahmapuram.

I shall call you madman  
 Madman draped in elephant skin, poison-throated madman  
 Madman sporting midst the fires of the burning ground  
 Madman clad in tiger skin, madman who enslaved even me  
 Tell me friend what strange man is this?  
 His form is smeared with ashes while a serpent  
 rears upon His hand  
 In cryptic speech He seems well-versed,  
 what manner of man is He?  
 Why look at His ashes or fear His serpent  
 Or heed His elusive Vedic talk? All you need to know is this  
 He is the Essence– the God of all that lives and moves

This pair of poems emphasise Siva as a mad ascetic. Wrapped in a tiger skin, dancing in the funeral ground, his naked body smeared with ash, he is no normal man. He is beyond all conventions and ordinary social rules, a beggar and a thief, but he is admirable, nonetheless. He tore the skin off an elephant and made it into his cloak. He is a learned speaker, if a little 'cryptic,' and he opposes 'erring' Jains and Buddhists. He is beyond all categories, the 'essence' of all life.

### Sambandar

From *Poems to Siva*, Peterson, 1989

When our lord who is both end and beginning  
 Dances to the deep sound of the *mulavam* drum,  
 Holding blazing fire in the hollow of his hand,  
 As the mountain's daughter watches,  
 The Ganga's murmuring stream with foaming waves  
 Flows over the cool crescent moon.  
 He who smears his body  
 With ash from the burning-ground  
 Is our Lord who dwells  
 In Vetkalam's fine town



(a shrine in the Siva temple at Vetkalam [Thiruvetkalam], mentioned in the poem above)

This poem by Sambandar opens with a rare metaphysical statement—Siva is beginning and end—but quickly reverts to more traditional and precise details of his iconography. He is the dancer, who holds a drum in one hand and fire in another, while he skips over corpses on the funeral pyre. The reference to Ganga's water evokes a myth about the 'descent of the Ganges' when the gods persuaded Brahma to release the pent-up river in heaven so that it would cascade to earth and refresh the parched land. But people were afraid that the terrible force of the falling water would destroy life, so Siva agreed to break the force of the water by letting it run through his hair and then to earth. Notice that the poem also completes its journey from the abstract to the particular by mentioning a specific temple in the town of Vetkalam.

#### Sundarar

(from *Sources of Indian Tradition*, edited by A.T. Embree, 1988)

Oh, Lord, without any other attachment, I cherished in my mind only your holy feet. I have been born with your grace and I have attained the state in which I shall have no rebirth. Oh benevolent Lord of Kudumudi, you are worshipped and praised by everyone. Even if I forget you, let my tongue go on and on uttering your name and your mantra of *na-ma si-va-ya*.

Here we hear the poet declare the ultimate aim of devotionism, and all Hinduism, the release from rebirth. The difference is that this desired state has been gained not by meditation alone (although Sundarar says that he has focused only on Siva, with no other bonds) but by the grace (*arul*) of the god. Siva is benevolent, but the worshipper must be steadfast to become a suitable recipient of that grace.

#### Manikkavacakar

1. (from *Sources of Indian Tradition*, edited by A.T. Embree, 1988)

I am false, my heart is false, my love is false. But I, this sinner, can win you if I weep before you, oh, God, who are sweet like honey, nectar and the juice of ripe sugarcane. Please bless me so that I might reach your holy feet.

Manikkavacakar, who composed his poems more than a century after the earlier trio of poets, emphasises the extent to which the worshipper must debase himself in order to receive Siva's grace. These lines of self-abnegation do not read well in translation and tend only to make readers cringe or purse their lips. However, this self-denial is seen by the poet as an emptying of the pride that is an obstacle to the bliss he hopes to gain by losing himself and merging with the Lord ('reaching his feet').

2. (from *Tiruvacakam*, translated by G. U. Pope, 1884)

Melting in the mind, now standing, now sitting, now lying and now getting up, now laughing and now weeping, now bowing and now praising, now dancing—in all sorts of ways, gaining the vision of the Form [of Siva] shining like the rosy sky, with my hairs standing on end—when will I stand united with and merged within that exquisite gem of Lord?

One element of Siva bhakti poetry that separates it from its predecessors is the celebration of ecstasy. Unlike the calm contemplation favoured by the *Upanishads*, or the courtly consideration of beauty in classical poetry, these devotional poems speak of madness, a frenzy of love in the worshipper, which matches that of Siva himself, who is often called a 'madman.' Taking leave of one's senses, however, was the only way of losing one's ordinary identity and entering into an ecstatic merger with Siva.

### **Reading**

Indira Peterson, *Poems to Siva: the Hymns of Tamil Saints*, 1989

Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: the Poetics of Tamil Devotion*, 1987