

TAMIL DEVOTIONAL POETRY – VISHNU

Overview As noted in the companion essay about the Tamil devotional poems to Siva, devotionalism (*bhakti*, 'to share' or 'take part in') was a literary and religious movement that originated in south India in the early sixth century CE. While traces of devotionalism can be seen in the late *Upanishads*, in the *Bhavadgita* and earlier classical poetry (in both Sanskrit and Tamil), this new attitude did not take full literary form until Tamil poets began to sing of Siva and Vishnu with a passion and an immediacy that was unknown in Indian literature. Although the poems in praise of Vishnu emerged at the same time as those dedicated to Siva (c. 500-900 CE), the Vishnu poems have a very different ethos. The fierce asceticism of the Siva poems is replaced by a softer contemplation of Vishnu. While the Siva poems focus on the physical and bodily aspects of their god, the Vishnu poems are more cerebral and celestial. There is less ecstasy and more theology, less geography and more cosmology. This does not mean that the Vishnu poems are any less intense in their devotion; indeed, they are drenched in love. One translator called his book of these poems 'Hymns for the Drowning' because they are immersive and overpowering. That watery image comes straight from the poets themselves, who were collectively called 'The Deep Ones', from a word (*alvar*) that means someone who is 'immersed,' 'deep' or 'sunk.' There were twelve Alvars, or Deep Ones, who composed more than 4,000 poems, which were later collected in a single volume called the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* ('Divine Collection of Four Thousand [poems]').

History During the four centuries after classical Tamil poetry (c. 500-900 CE), south India was ruled by three major kingdoms: Pallavas in the north (around present-day Madras); Pandyan in the south (centred on Madurai) and Cheras in the west (modern-day Kerala). Although each had a capital city, none of these kingdoms was a highly centralised state; instead, each consisted of a confederation of rulers who controlled small territories. The intense competition in trade between them was matched by a fierce debate between rival groups of Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. The patronage of kings was contested by poets, performers and scholars of different philosophical and religious persuasions. This was the historical context in which these Vishnu (and Siva) poems were composed in the Tamil region of south India. And it is the passion and the brilliance of these poems in praise of Hindu gods that is, in part, credited with defeating the rival religions. Devotionalism, it is sometimes said, 'sang Buddhism out of India.' That result was achieved by 1000 CE, at which time the surviving poems in praise of Vishnu were collected and edited into a single manuscript by a scholar named Nathamuni. Little is known of his life, except that he lived in the late 10th century, perhaps a generation or two after the composition of the poems. Legend holds that Nathamuni travelled widely in north India and when he returned south, he heard someone singing beautiful songs. One song-line said 'this is only ten out of a thousand.' Intrigued, Nathamuni then set out to find the remaining 990 verses. Once he found that first thousand, he tracked down three more sets of a thousand verses each, and in the end compiled the text we have today of 4,000 verses. Some of those poems are still sung today in several temples in the state of Tamil Nadu in south India.

Cultural Significance These Tamil poems in praise of Vishnu are some of the most affecting verses in the long history of Indian literature. They are also the earliest examples of devotional literature that would later spread to other major languages in India, including Sanskrit. For south India, they are especially significant in mapping a sacred geography for the worship of Vishnu, naming temples with idols of the god; not only that, but the poets themselves became recognised as saints and are worshipped in temples and shrines scattered over south India. In this way, along with their Siva counterparts, these poets created and shared a new religious vocabulary, a special idiom that exists until this day. These poems are thus part of a living religious tradition of hymns that are chanted in temples and during festivals. At one particular temple, Srirangam in Tiruchinopoli, there is an annual ten-day festival devoted to the hymns of Nammalvar (see photo above). A professional reciter dresses in ritual finery to sing the hymns to Vishnu, who is listening in his temple. These passionate poems to Vishnu set a tradition that then continued into north India, especially in Bengal where they led right up to the poems of Tagore in the modern era.

More than this, these poems also articulated a separate school of Hindu philosophy known as 'qualified monism' (*visista-advaita*). The problem faced by the original poets was that neither monism

(in which everything except *brahman* is illusion) nor dualism (in which there is a separation between humans and gods) was acceptable. In monism, there was no possibility of a relationship with god because there was no distinction between them, while in dualism, there was an unbridgeable gap between man and god. So, the idea of 'qualified monism' emerged, in which the worshipper could approach god as separate and then merge with Him. It allowed for both the ecstasy of love and the stillness of union.

Poets The Vishnu devotional poets were many fewer than their Siva counterparts—only 12 as opposed to 63—but they were as diverse as they were prolific. Among them were a king, a Brahmin, a petty chieftain, an Untouchable (from the Pannan caste) and a woman (Antal). Although, like their contemporaries devoted to Siva, they wandered the countryside singing of Vishnu and worshipping at his temples, some of them took up long-term residence in a particular holy place or temple. All twelve poets were regarded as saints and provided with hagiographical legends that explained their births as reincarnations of Vishnu. However, two poets have captured the imagination of the public and scholars: Antal and Nammalvar.

Antal Antal (9th c. CE), the only woman among the group, composed two famous poems, one of 30 verses and another of 143 verses. In these poems, she expresses her intense love for Krishna, using persona and imagery that would later become famous in Sanskrit poetry (notably the *Gita Govinda* of the 12th c.). Some Tamil scholars and commentators at the time and afterward found her language too erotic, and her poems were not always included in manuscripts of the corpus of Vishnu devotionalism. Tradition holds that she wrote these two poems at age fifteen or sixteen. There are also many legends of Antal's love for Vishnu, but all contain the story that she refused to accept any man as her husband and would wait until the god married her. When Vishnu finally accepted her and arranged an elaborate wedding procession, Antal was impatient, jumped off the wedding palanquin and ran into the temple to throw herself at Vishnu's feet. Once inside the temple, she disappeared and, it is said, merged with the god. Certainly, Antal was worshipped as a goddess, and several temples were built in her honour; also, most temples to Vishnu contain a shrine dedicated to her.



(bronze statue of Antal, 14th century, Madurai)



(Antal shrine in a temple at Belur, 12th c. CE)

Nammalvar Nammalvar ('Our Alvar') is the best-known and the most prolific of the twelve 'Deep Ones.' He was born into a high caste of peasant landowners (Vellala) in the 9th century CE, wandered widely, composed a thousand poems and died at the young age of 35. Beyond this, the details of his life are hazy and legends abound, but the story is still worth telling. When he was born, the happy mother tried to breast feed him, but he did not suck. The baby made no sound whatsoever and sat motionless, as if deaf and dumb. His parents took him to a temple and left him in front of a statue of Vishnu. Soon, the child got to its feet, walked to a tamarind tree and climbed inside a hollow in the trunk. There he sat in a yoga posture, with his eyes shut. Meanwhile, in north India, a poet named Maturakavi suddenly saw a great light in the sky and followed it thousands of miles to south India, to the tamarind tree, where he found the baby in silent meditation. Maturakavi then asked the child, 'If the eternal soul is embedded in the physical body, what does it eat and where will it rest?' The child answered, 'That it will eat, there it will rest.' Maturakavi realised that the child meant that god was everything and everywhere. Then the baby broke its silence and sang more than a thousand hymns, each beginning with the last word of the previous one. As a single, continuous, but ever-changing form, the poem itself represented the never-ending and boundless Vishnu. These 1,102 verses are known as the *Tiruvaymoli*, or 'Holy Word of Mouth', and became so important that they are also called 'the Tamil Veda.' Such was Nammalvar's fame that soon after his early death (aged 35), death masks were made to enable artisans to cast bronze statues of him, which were then installed in several temples. Today, his songs are still chanted in rituals at these temples. When one reads or hears his poems, one can understand why he is so famous. His verses are passionate as both poetry and philosophy. They are personal in their affect and yet complex in design. They ponder and they wonder, they are tender, joyful, clever and subtle. They approach the despair of separation but never linger. In the end, they immerse one in the bliss of god.



(statue of Nammalvar decorated for a festival at Srirangam)

Poems and translation

1. From *Hymns for the Drowning*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 2005

We here and that man, this man,
and that other in-between,
and that woman, this woman,
and that other, whoever,

those people, and these,
and these others in-between,
this thing, that thing,
and this other in-between, whichever,
all things dying, these things,
those things, those others in-between,
good things, bad things,
things that were, that will be,

being all of them,
he stands there.

[Note: 'He' in the last line refers to Vishnu. Each of the Tamil personal pronouns ('he,' 'she,' and 'it') has three forms: 1) for near the speaker, 2) far away and 3) in the middle. There is also a distinction between 'we' (inclusive) and 'we' (exclusive)].

This poem sets out the paradigm for Nammalvar's whole corpus of more than a thousand hymns. It begins with a seemingly meaningless list of personal pronouns and impersonal nouns, but its purpose is soon apparent when the poem ends abruptly with the final line in which all the little bits of our fluctuating world have been gathered together in the stable form of Vishnu. The poem is a perfect illustration of the dual-layering of Nammalvar's hymns in which the language enacts a philosophy. The words break up our sensory world into fragments, which are then put back into a single transcendental reality. This is the poetry of 'qualified monism' (see section above on 'Cultural Significance').

2. From *Hymns for the Drowning*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 2005

Poets,
beware, your life is in danger.

the lord of gardens is a thief,
a cheat,
master of illusions;

he came to me,
a wizard with words,
sneaked into my body,
my breath.

with bystanders looking on
but seeing nothing,
be consumed me
life and limb.

and filled me,
made me over
into himself.

Here, again, we see how Nammalvar weaves together the worshipper and the worshipped. The poet and Vishnu are merged, one consumed by the other, performing an act of double identity. Notice, also, that the poem is spoken by Nammalvar himself and addressed to other poets, warning them that to engage in this type of immersive poetic contemplation of the god is dangerous. 'He' (that is, Vishnu, and not the poet) is the 'wizard of words' because he gave life to Nammalvar which allows him to breathe and to speak. Devotion, true devotion, is a serious business.

3. From *Hymns for the Drowning*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 2005

Only men who live by the Vedas qualify,
can wear your feet on their heads,
lord of blue-black body
and eyes like lotuses,

but, you know, when the town's cattle moo
coming home,

the blind one moos too:

So I too speak of you,
how else?

This poem displays Nammalvar's playfulness in his otherwise deadly serious verse. But it also expresses the poet's humility in recognising his lack of qualifications to sing about Vishnu. Only truly virtuous men, who live by the scriptures, are fit to serve god ('wear his feet on their head'), and the poet does not include himself among that elite. He is a poor, stumbling idiot, who, like the blind cows, bleats out his poem, in imitation of the others.

4. From *Hymns for the Drowning*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 2005

Worker of miracles,
magical dwarf,
and killer of the demon
named Honey,

only you can tell us:

becoming fire, water, earth,
sky, and wind,

becoming father, mother,
and the children too
and all others
and all things unnamed,

the way you stand there,
being yourself—

what's it all about?

Once again, Nammalvar presents himself as an ignoramus, unable to comprehend the mystery of Vishnu. The opening lines refer to two of Vishnu's avatars (the dwarf who expanded and measured the world in three steps; and the horse-headed form who came to earth and destroyed a demon named 'honey'). The poet is astounded by the ever-changing diverse manifestations of the god, who makes up the five elements as well as every member of a family. It is all so inexplicable. The poet seeks understanding, but only Vishnu himself knows the answer.

5. From *Hymns for the Drowning*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 2005

He is both the crooked
and the straight
the black
the white
the truths
the lies
youth and age
the ancient and the new:

our lord lives
in Vinnakar [sky city]
strong-walled well-made city
and his grove there
is the triple world
of the gods

The two halves of this poem tell a philosophical truth. In the first, Vishnu is presented as a mystical reconciliation of opposites; he inhabits both sides of a binary statement, transcending their opposition. In the second half, Vishnu is given a physical description and lives in a concrete location. As the 'qualified monism' school of Indian philosophy argued, god is both the invisible essence and an embodied presence.

6. From *Hymns for the Drowning*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 2005

First, the discus
rose to view,
then the conch,
the long bow,
the mace,
and the sword;

with blessings
from the eight quarters,

he broke through
the egg-shell of heaven,
making the waters bubble-

giant head and giant feet
growing away from each other

time itself rose to view.

how the lord
paced and measured
all three worlds!

This well-known poem is crammed with mythological features and stories of Vishnu. The poet begins with a catalogue of his insignia (the conch, the discus, etc.) in order to allow the reader and listener to visualise Vishnu. Then he switches to an ancient myth of creation, in which Vishnu emerges from an egg and fashions the world. Finally, the poet refers to another one of Vishnu's avatars, Vamana the dwarf. The story goes like this: A demon king sponsored a ritual sacrifice to display his power. He invited all the gods and demons to come and receive gifts from him, thereby making them his allies. Vishnu appeared in the disguise of a dwarf, who when asked what gift he wants, said, 'Give me just the land I can cover in three steps.' The demon king looked at the little figure, laughed and told him to ask for more, anything he wants. The dwarf repeated his statement that three steps of land is all he needs. When that gift was granted, the dwarf expanded into a giant figure, who takes three steps. With the first, he covered the earth, with the second he conquered heaven and his third step was placed on the head of the demon king, pushing into the underworld.



(temple stone sculpture of Vishnu as the expanded dwarf, who takes three steps to measure the cosmos, Badami, 8th c. CE)

7. From *Hymns for the Drowning*, translated by A K Ramanujan, 2005

Being all three worlds
and nothing
being desire
being rage
being both the flower-born Lakshmi
and anti-Lakshmi,
black goddess of ill luck
being both honour and shame
our lord

lives in Vinnakar
city named Sky
which the gods worship lovingly
and in my evil heart he lives forever.
flame of flames

This is an appropriate poem with which to end this discussion of Nammalvar's vision of Vishnu. It begins with a reference to the cosmic dimension of the god (described in the previous poem about the dwarf who expands into a giant) and then lists a series of opposition that this transcendental mystery reconciles. The poet ends with a contrast of his own: a celestial being, living in the sky, who also lives in his heart. It is the ultimate expression of how the macrocosm becomes the microcosm and vice versa. And the, at the very end, we get a symbol of the poet's unquenched thirst, his undying passion burning inside him.

8. From 'Dark Clouds be my Messenger' by Antal, translated by Sarukkai Chabri, 2016

Monsoon clouds you spread and spread
to hood earth, your torrent slashes
The sky, you shake the honey-heavy blossoms
of Vengadam hill and strew scented petals.
Go tell the dark lord who killed the demon Hiranya
ripping him with paws of fury
That he has robbed me of my bangles.
He must return them to me now.

Whirling clouds you enlarge in anger
and growl across the sky rending it open

with lightening. Spilling honey you tear
flowers, petals spatter like blood on earth.

Go to the fierce lord who roars and mauls
tossing his mane as his paws rip insides out.

Tell him I'm bloodied. He must heal
with long caresses, still me in his thrall.

Engorged with anger
nails extending he kills
plunging wrists in blood

from these very hands I seek
fondling
gather in my swollen ripeness

as spilling nectar
my body's bloodflower
bursts

Antal, the young and only female poet among the Alvars, has borrowed a well-known convention of using rain clouds to take a message to a lover (compare, for example, Kalidasa's 'The Cloud Messenger'). But then Antal does something very different. She brings in the story of Vishnu's avatar that killed the demon Hiranya in a bloody battle in order to convey the ferocity of her love for Vishnu. She places herself in the role of the mauled victim, ripped apart by claws. Rarely has love-making, especially with a god, been imagined with such visceral and shocking imagery.

Reading

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

A.K. Ramanujan, *Nammalvar: Hymns for the Drowning*, 2005

Vidya Dehejia, *Andal and her Path of Love*, 1990