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**The Female Voice and the Crossing of the Boundaries of Scholarship:
A Note on the *Rahasyam* of the Lady from Tirukkōḷūr, with
a Complete, Annotated Translation***

SUMMARY: The Śrīvaiṣṇavas are prolific writers, who masterfully used multiple languages for composing works in a range of genres, from commentaries to esoteric works, from devotional poetry to hagiography. But while this community, roughly half of which consists of women, claims equality with a difference for women—which includes the right to liberation at death and to religious, albeit non-Vedic, learning—it hardly seems to have encouraged them to emulate the male authors and produce works of any kind. Despite this attitude, a few female voices, sometimes muffled as they can be, are heard across the centuries. One such voice belongs to Tirukkōḷūr *penpillai* (“the woman from Tirukkōḷūr,” 12th c.?), who allegedly spoke words betraying her scholarly knowledge, and that, too, to the great Rāmānuja himself. Who this woman—who ventured into the jealously-guarded male domain of

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scholarship—was, and what her ‘composition’ deals with are the topics of this brief essay.

KEYWORDS: *Tirukkōḷūr peṇṇiḷḷai rahasyam*, Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiography, Rāmānuja, women’s literature, *Paṇṇīrāyirappaṭi guruparamparāprabhāvam*, *Mummaṇi rahasyam*, Piḷḷai Lokam Jiyar

Introduction

Anyone who wishes to study Indian women, listen to their voices, and find alternative conceptions in Indian civilisation, often startlingly different from what one is used to in our classics, should turn to materials like the lives and poems of the women saints, women’s tales, songs, riddles, games and proverbs in oral traditions all over the country, and the myths and cults of goddesses.
(Ramanujan 1992: 64)

The *Tirukkōḷūr peṇṇiḷḷai rahasyam*¹ (henceforth *Rahasyam*) is a highly popular work among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, found within the hagiographic work *Paṇṇīrāyirappaṭi guruparamparāprabhāvam* (GPP12k).² It is also the main work in the collection named *Mummaṇi rahasyam*

¹ *Rahasyams* are esoteric works that are part of Śrīvaiṣṇava literature, which were initially conceived to explain the hidden meanings of the *mantras* (and other such important topics) sacred to the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. This particular work is also known as *Tirukkōḷūr ammā vārtaikaḷ*—‘The words of the lady of Tirukkōḷūr.’

² A preliminary research points to the existence of two manuscripts of the *Rahasyam* at the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library (GOML) in Chennai, India, but I am yet to come across a manuscript of the whole of the GPP12k. While most existent publications of the *Rahasyam*—which often include (sometimes lengthy) explanations of cryptic words—are not scholarly ones, the 1909 edition of the GPP12k seems like the result of serious traditional scholarship, whereas the version re-edited in 2018 appears to introduce typos and other errors. Please note that due

(‘The three gems of *rahasyam*’ or ‘the secrets of the three gems’), all consisting of words allegedly spoken by women. The *Rahasyam* is made up of rhetorical questions, which, in this case, are asked by an unknown woman in reply to Rāmānuja’s query as to why she was leaving the sacred town of Tirukkōlūr, which he was so eager to reach.³ These *vārttais* (‘phrases’), despite being words of humility, could sometimes come across as challenges, and at other times, as lecturing words: after all, they are pronounced by a woman who is justifying her decision to a man of Rāmānuja’s calibre, answering him back with questions of her own. How is it then that the *Rahasyam* is not perceived as being transgressive? Has its persistent popularity been translated into further scholarship at the hands of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, who are known for their commentarial works? If not, in what way does this work and its popularity celebrate the crossing of boundaries and venturing into an almost exclusive male domain of literate scholarship by a random woman?⁴

The question of authorship and date

The authorship of this *Rahasyam* is doubly problematic, as we need to assert the authorship of this particular text (i.e. the *Rahasyam*), as well as that of the whole GPP12k. The latter is attributed to Piḷḷai

to the restrictions of movement caused by the pandemic, I have been unable to check any manuscripts for this article.

³ The second work is known as the *Tiruvallikkēṇi peṇ rahasyam*, a set of 108 questions posed by a woman from Tiruvallikkēṇi in reply to Maṇavāla Māmuṇi’s (15th c.) three questions. The third and last one is called *Ciṅṇiyammāl rahasyam*, which consists of 24 questions asked by Ciṅṇiyammāl in reply to the same number of questions posed by Poṇṇatikkaḷ Jīyar, Maṇavāla Māmuṇi’s disciple. I plan to translate and study these works in the near future.

⁴ The only written Śrīvaiṣṇava work attributed to a premodern woman so far is a commentary on the *Tiruvāymoḷi* (TVM), Tirukkōṇēri Dāsyai’s (“handmaiden from Tirukkōṇēri,” 13th c.?) *Tiruvāymoḷi vācakamālai* or *Vivaraṇaśatakam*. For more on this, see Narayanan 2002 and Young 1997.

Lokam Jīyar (ca. 16th c.)⁵ by most scholars.⁶ As for the *Rahasyam*, tradition has attributed it to a woman solely known after her native town, which, as we saw, plays a part in the story that states the origin of this work. She is almost a mythical figure, whose very existence can only be known through a brief mention in Nampillai's *Ītu Bhagavadviṣayam*, a 13th-c. commentary on Nammālvār's *Tiruvāymoli*,⁷ and through the GPP12, as far as I know. Was the *Rahasyam* really authored by a woman? How do we assess that? Does it even matter, since the Śrīvaiṣṇavas consider it a woman's work (and that is what matters most for this study)? Does the way Śrīvaiṣṇavas deal with this text still not show us their opinions on women theologians and authors?

⁵ See Kīruṣṇamācāryar 2018 [1909]: ii–iv and Vēṅkaṭācāryar Svāmi (in Kīruṣṇamācāryar 2018 [1909]: xiii–xiv) for a discussion on the topic of authorship and dating. Kīruṣṇamācāryar notes the abundance of interpolations and thinks that this work follows closely Piṅṇalakiya Perumāḷ Jīyar's *Ārāyirappaṭi guruparamparā-prabhāvam* (GPP6k). Vēṅkaṭācāryar Svāmi convincingly argues that the GPP12k is the first part, and the *Yatīndrapravaṇaprabhāvam* is the sequel of Piḷḷai Lokam Jīyar's hagiographic work.

⁶ M. S. Ramesh (Ramesh 1996: 61) names Tiruvāymoli Piḷḷai (ca. 14th c.) as the author, which does not seem very likely to me, as Piḷḷai himself is mentioned as the source of a story which is reported by an Ācārya a couple of generations later ('Thus graciously said Tiruvāymoli Piḷḷai, according to the Periya Jīyar of Vāṅamāmalai'; See Appendix for the whole passage). It is, of course, possible that this particular passage is a later addition. Unless I thoroughly study the whole work and separate the original layer(s) from later additions, I will not be able to pronounce myself on the topic in a definite way.

⁷ I found this reference at an advanced stage of the publication of this article, and have therefore been unable to deal with it more amply. This extract from the *Ītu* commentary on *Tiruvāymoli* 6.7.1 only gives an outline of the story: *emperumāṅṅār terkē eluntaruḷā nirkā, etirē varukīrāḷ oru peṅṇiḷḷaiyaiḱ kaṇṭu, 'enku niṅrum?' enṇa, 'tirukkōḷūril niṅrum' enṇa, 'a- ūril pukka peṅkaḷum pōka kaṭavar āy iruppārkaḷō?' enṇaruḷic ceytār* - 'When Rāmānuja graciously went to the South, he saw a woman coming in the opposite direction, and asked [her], 'Where from?' As [she] said, 'From Tirukkōḷūr', he graciously said, 'Can women who have entered that town even leave [it]?' In this kernel of the anecdote, which ends here in the *Ītu*, the woman is thus neither named, nor identified. Moreover, she does not say much either.

The GPP12k contains interpolations (See fn 6).⁸ Is the *Rahasyam* one such passage? It is not really possible to say. While *guruparamparās* such as the *Divyasūricaritam* (DSC) and the GPP6k tell the life stories of the Ālvārs and mostly of well-known Ācāryas (such as Rāmānuja or Maṇavāla Māmuṇi), the GPP12k includes stories of lesser known Śrīvaiṣṇavas, including non-Brahmin ones and women. It may have been within this framework that both the story and the words of this lady were included in it. Were they written by Jīyar in order to show that the Śrīvaiṣṇava fold is open to one and all, and values everyone? Or were they truly words of someone else, possibly a woman, which circulated in Jīyar's times although barely hinted at (and *en passant*) in the *Ītu*, and which Jīyar incorporated in his work, glossing them in his own words? It is possible, but we cannot prove or disprove this hypothesis. But would the Śrīvaiṣṇavas deliberately indulge in and perpetuate a *factio poetica* in order to further their own agenda, whatever it may be? It is hard to say.

Given the authorship issues, dating this composition is also difficult. If written by Piḷḷai Lokam Jīyar, then the GPP12k probably belongs to the 16th c., with the *Rahasyam* possibly forming an older layer.⁹ This last hypothesis is plausible, as the language used in the *Rahasyam* seems different from the rest of the work (see below). But it seems doubtful whether it really belonged to Rāmānuja's period as it claims to.¹⁰ Given

⁸ See also Caṭakōpaṇ's (Caṭakōpaṇ 2008) pick of the *vārttais* that he considers as interpolations in fns 50, 51, 53, 56 and 58.

⁹ If the *Rahasyam* is an interpolation, then the best we can do is to suggest a *terminus ante quem* based on the date of the two palm-leaf manuscript copies that exist at the GOML (see fn 7), which I have not had the occasion to check yet. If Tiruvāymoḷi Piḷḷai is the author, then it would be from the 13th c., which does not seem plausible to me, especially since the language itself does not seem that old.

¹⁰ It is also difficult to see how words addressed to Rāmānuja could refer to him in the 3rd person (indirectly in *vārttais* 57, 71 and 72, and directly, albeit euphemistically, in 62; see fn 52 for another point of view on the last occurrence). Moreover, his disciples' disciples, such as Parāśara Bhaṭṭa, are also mentioned, which seems to weaken the particular date claim. As for a sample of the Tamil language closest to Rāmānuja's time, space and thought, we only have Tirukkukurukai

that a few Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas are mentioned in it (see Table 1), and because the latest of them seems to be Parāśara Bhaṭṭa, we could presume that these sayings originated around his lifetime (ca 12th c.). However, this reconstruction could be endangered by a seeming quotation from Maṇavāla Māmuṇi's (15th c.) work (see fn 28). Further questions arise in this connection: Could it be that this expression (*piñc' āy paḷuttāl*—‘She who ripened while being unripe’) was used by someone before Māmuṇi, who simply re-used it?¹¹ Or, could this particular *vārttai* (11) be a later insertion? But then, there are a few other *vārttais* (60, 61, 73, 76, 78) that seem to mention events that could not have happened before this alleged meeting between Rāmānuja and the woman. How could we explain them? Are they all later insertions? Or could they be signs that the author, while in the process of making their words seem to have come from older times than they really were, included later elements in a fit of oblivion or distraction? If so, why did she most scrupulously try to limit herself to mentioning people who lived during or before Rāmānuja's lifetime? Is this an attempt at building a certain aura around this teacher?¹²

Pirāṇ Piḷḷāṇ's commentary on the *Tiruvāymoḷi*, the *Ārāyirappaṭi*, and a couple of other poetic works, e.g. Tiruvaraṅkattu Amutaṅṅār's *Irāmānuca nūṙṙantāti* and Aruḷāla Perumāl Emperumāṅṅār's *Jñānasāram-Prameyasāram*. Being of a different genre and size, it is a challenge to compare them with the language used in the *Rahasyam*.

¹¹ Caṭakōpaṇ (Caṭakōpaṇ 2008: 88) states that commentators have used this expression to refer to Āṅṅāl, but does not give any precise source. I am yet to come across this expression elsewhere, as neither the electronic text of Periyavāccāṇ Piḷḷai's commentary on Āṅṅāl's *Nācciyār tirumoḷi*, nor Piḷḷai Lokam Jīyar's commentary on the *Upatēca rattinaṁālai* have yielded anything.

¹² Besides, how could the story of a relatively unknown (possibly fictional) person, Koṅku Pirāṭṭi, be known within her lifetime by a woman of a different region? See also fn 49.

Table 1. A list of (possibly) historical people mentioned in the *Rahasyam* (and who are attested in other works)

No of <i>vārttai</i>	Name/expression given in the <i>Rahasyam</i>	Relation to Rāmānuja
57, 71, 72	Rāmānuja (unnamed, only alluded to)	-
62	<i>Emperumāṅār</i> (Rāmānuja)	
37	<i>Tirukkaccinampiyār</i> (Tirukkacci Nampi/Kāñcīpūrṇa)	teacher
56	<i>Vaṭuka nampi</i>	disciple
59	<i>Nāthamuni</i>	(Yāmuna's grandfather)
60	<i>Mārutiyāṅṭāṅ</i> (Cīriyāṅṭāṅ)	disciple
61	<i>Ālvāṅ</i> (Kūrattālvāṅ)	disciple
63	<i>Nallāṅ</i> (Nallāṅ Cakravarti)	disciple
64	<i>Ālavantār</i> (Yāmunācārya)	teachers' teacher
65.	<i>Teyvavāriyāṅṭāṅ</i>	(Yāmuna's disciple)
66	<i>Amutaṅār</i> (Tiruvaraṅkattu Amutaṅār)	disciple
69	<i>Periya Nampi</i> (Mahāpūrṇa)	teacher
70	<i>Tirumālaiyāṅṭāṅ</i>	teacher
71	Tirukkōṭṭiyūr (Nampi)	teacher
73	<i>Naraiyūrār</i> (Naraiyūr Araiyyar)	disciple
75	<i>Tirumalai Nampi</i>	uncle? and teacher
78, 80	[<i>Parāśara</i>] <i>Bhaṭṭar</i>	disciple's son/disciple
79	<i>Empār</i> (Govinda Bhaṭṭa)	disciple
81	[<i>Villiputtūr</i>] <i>Pakavar</i>	?

Other possibly historical people are the lady from Koṅku (40) and Kaṇapurattāḷ (76).

Language and structure of the *Rahasyam*

The GPP12k is composed in Manipravalam, a highly Sanskritized form of Tamil, a veritable lingua franca for many Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas,

as we can see from the sample text which introduces and concludes the *Rahasyam* (See Appendix). As for the *Rahasyam* itself, its language can be better defined as Tamil, rather than Manipravalam, especially when compared with the rest of the GPP12k. For, after all, most of its Sanskrit-origin words are proper names.

The work itself is a set of 81 rhetorical questions, which the Tirukkōḷūr lady fires away in reply to Rāmānuja's original questions. And the interrogative sentences merely replace a negative answer, as the expected reply is no.¹³ The narratorial voice, which does not allow us to determine its gender, is always the grammatical subject. Each question includes a comparison, and roughly follows the pattern: 'Did I do such-and-such thing, like so-and-so did?' The so-and-so often includes a name of a real or epic/Purāṇic character, both male and female (both at times suffixed with a honorific marker, e.g. *tirumaḷicaiyār* in 13 and *devakiyār* in 22), and even non-human (the elephant in 42). And their action refers to something praiseworthy that they did. The Tirukkōḷūr lady asks whether she accomplished such great actions in order to deserve staying at an auspicious place like Tirukkōḷūr.

The *vārttais* themselves are elliptical, and sometimes downright cryptic. For example, "Do I not know of 'another God,' like Madhura-kavi did?" (21) But then, a Śrīvaiṣṇava audience would either have a teacher to explain to them what is not self-evident, or they would

¹³ One of the anonymous reviewers made the following interesting point: "... the meaning of the verb in this particular form (ceyteno, enreno etc.) can be understood as the exclamation, such as: didn't I do...?, didn't I say ? (whether I did not do?)—as a positive statement. In this case the author being a *bhakta* addresses the God saying that he/she identified himself/herself (or melting) with the heroes mentioned. And, perhaps, it is a kind of a complaint: I did all these things but you do not gratify me (also a typical motive in *bhakti* poetry). It is but a suggestion but I think this approach is possible. (sic)" While this certainly is a possibility, I have simply followed the traditional interpretation here, which fits best with the context given for the birth of this *Rahasyam*. Besides, with all the will in the world, the lady of Tirukkōḷūr could not possibly have given up her body like the ascetic's wife (3) or served human flesh to God like Ghaṇṭākarna (6). So I am not sure that the interpretation would be entirely possible.

be knowledgeable enough to understand on their own (e.g. who Madhurakavi is and what is meant by his not knowing another God but his teacher Nammālvār), for the *Rahasyam* was definitely written by a Śrīvaiṣṇava for fellow Śrīvaiṣṇavas, as the references to their Ācāryas¹⁴ and the Śrīvaiṣṇava *paribhāṣai* ('jargon')¹⁵ show.

The contents of the *Rahasyam*

Each *vārttai* gives a name or an epithet of a character or person, which makes the *Rahasyam* rich in stories and allusions, and possibly in historical events. Other than the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas (and other potentially historical, or at least non-epic/Purāṇic people), most other characters belong to the two Sanskrit epics and the Purāṇas,¹⁶ mostly the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, although the source of the Kṛṣṇa stories for the author could also be the Ālvār poetry.

The prominence of Rāma-related stories (21 or 22 of them) is unsurprising, given the obvious preference for this incarnation over Kṛṣṇa or any other for the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas (especially those from Śrīraṅgam¹⁷), from at least Nampīlḷai onwards.¹⁸ Kṛṣṇa follows, with 14 allusions or direct mentions.¹⁹ As for women characters, 14 of them are mentioned in the *Rahasyam*, which represents one fifth of all references. While this does not allow us to deduce the gender of the author, it does help us note that there may be a will to have a relatively balanced list of men and women.

¹⁴ For example, Kūrattālvār, one of Rāmānuja's disciples.

¹⁵ For example, the expression *periya uṭaiyār* ('the elder lord') is used to refer to Jaṭāyu (48), and *perumāḷ* ('great man') for Rāma.

¹⁶ There are a few exceptions, like King Toṭṭaimān (5), who appear in minor Purāṇas.

¹⁷ See Narayanan 1994 for more on this topic.

¹⁸ In at least two cases, we can see that non-Vālmīkian stories were also known to the author, e.g. the help of the squirrels in the building of the causeway (25), or Ahalyā turning into a stone (10).

¹⁹ Rāma: 4, 7, 10, 17, 18, 19, 20, 25, 27, 29 (32), 35, 39, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 53, 54, 67. Kṛṣṇa: 1, 2, 3, 6, 16, 22, 23, 24, 26, 28, 43, 44, 52, 55.

Table 2. Women referred to in the *Rahasyam*²⁰

Divine women	Goddess [Sītā] (4)		Semi-divine women	The ascetic's wife (3), Anasūya (7), Ahalāyā (10), Devakī (22), Yaśodā (24), Śabarī (50), Draupadī (55)
	divinised	Āṅṅāḷ (11)		
Humans	others	The woman from Koṅku (40), the hunchbacked woman (43), the woman from Kaṅapuram (76)	rākṣasīs	Trijaṭā (18), Mandodarī (19)

It is noteworthy that no stories from the Vedas or the Upaniṣads, which are traditionally considered as parts of the Vedas, are mentioned. Could that be because women were not supposed to know them?²¹ It is hard to say, although it does seem that the author remains on safe ground.

In contrast, Śrīvaiṣṇava theological ideas and ideals abound, for example, having absolute faith in God (e.g. 42, 55); respecting the Ācāryas more than God (e.g. 21, 56, 60, 61, 65, 76); considering that being a Śrīvaiṣṇava is more important than the caste one is born into (63, 69); believing oneself to be inferior (75), especially to the other Śrīvaiṣṇavas; being favourable to God (17, 27); and serving God (e.g. 31, 36, 37, 41, 46, 54). It does not seem that anything in this text could go against the Śrīvaiṣṇava beliefs, there is nothing revolutionary, nor are there ideas which advocate anything for women, for example.

²⁰ Please note that some categories might overlap, and some women are difficult to fit into any.

²¹ It would be worthwhile to see what this author's Brahmin/non-Brahmin counterparts did, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

The author's extensive knowledge is unquestionable: s/he knows and uses various sources, but also glosses words from original texts freely or even quotes them directly sometimes: thus, reported speech from epic and Purāṇic works is common (e.g. Dhruva's words in 8, Kṛṣṇa's parents' in 23 and Vasiṣṭha's in 39). Direct quotes also exist: Periyālvār's, Nammālvār's, Kulaśekhara Ālvār's and Madhurakavi's words are quoted in 11, 14, 15, and 21 respectively. The most striking direct quote is: *ahaṃ vedmi* ('I know'), a direct Sanskrit quotation from VR 1.18.4 (in 20), which shows that the author was exposed to this language; and Maṇavāla Māmuṇi's words in 11, which we discussed above in connection with the dating.

Let us now read through the *Rahasyam* in order to try and answer some of the questions that we have raised.

Tirukkōḷūr peṇṇiḷḷai rahasyam: text and translation²²

1. *alaittu varukinṛēṇ enṛēṇō akrūrarai pōlē?*

→ Did I say 'I will bring [Kṛṣṇa]' like Akūrā did?

V:²³ 1b *varukinṛēṇ* T1; *varukirēṇ* T2+T3+T4

²² This text is based on the Kīruṣṇamācāriyar edition of 2018, which itself is based on a 1909 edition. I have corrected some typographic errors, solved the sandhi, and checked for variants in a couple of printed editions of the *Rahasyam* while waiting to check the existent manuscripts. Please note that the Kīruṣṇamācāriyar edition (2018) gives the text in Tamil with numerical diacritics to mark the Sanskrit sounds that do not exist in Tamil (e.g. *ka*, *ka2*, *ka3*, *ka4* refer to *ka*, *kha*, *ga*, *gha*). Therefore, I have directly given the word with the proper diacritics. I have not modified the text while transliterating, except when I found obvious typos. While it is true that the text is Tamil (more than Manipravalam), except perhaps for the proper nouns, because the transliteration corresponds to an edition that marks out the Sanskrit syllables, I have done the same.

In the notes following each statement, I have tried to give the context which will help the reader understand the meanings of the elliptical *vārttais* (>), and give a source when it is known to me. Please note that the sources I cite are not necessarily the only ones or the oldest for any given story. Between {} I have given the traditional interpretation (based on Velukkudi n.d.) on what the specific quality is, which the lady claims to be lacking.

²³ V = variants. T1 = Kīruṣṇamācāryar edition; T2 = Rāmānujan edition; T3 = Caṭakōpaṇ edition; T4 = Velukkudi. Between '{}{}' are additional variants that are

> Akrūra agreed to bring Kṛṣṇa to Mathurā as per the order of Kāṁsa, who planned to kill Him (BhP 10.38) {bringing God along and eagerness in meeting the Lord}

2. *akam oḷittu viṭṭēṇō vidurarai pōlē?*

→ Have I cleared the house/the mind²⁴ like Vidura did?

V: 2bc *oḷittu viṭṭēṇō* T1+T2+T4; *oḷintuviṭṭēṇō* T3

> Vidura cleaned his house for Kṛṣṇa's visit/ his heart to let Him in (MBh. 5.89) {being with a pure heart}

3. *dehattai viṭṭēṇō ruṣipatniyai pōlē?*

→ Did I give up the body like the ascetic's wife?

> When Kṛṣṇa asked some ascetics to feed Him and His friends, they ignored the request. Their wives, however, did feed the boys, disobeying their husbands. But one of them, who was kept back by force by her husband, gave up her life (BhP 10.23)²⁵ {giving up the body if His grace is not forthcoming}

4. *daśamukhaṇai ceṛṛēṇō pirāṭṭiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I kill/hate the ten-headed one, like the Lady [Sītā] did?

mentioned by each edition. Please note that I have recorded only the significant variations, and left out the differences when I suspected a typo, a different way of transcribing a Sanskrit word in Tamil or sandhi-related choices. Also, in the construction *X pōl* ('like X'), X can sometimes take the accusative in Tamil (*X-ai*), and T3 seems to prefer to have the accusative marker, while the others do not (NB: Kuruṣṇamācāriyar 2018 is not consistent with the usage of the accusative, but I have followed the edition all the same). So I have also ignored that 'variant', especially since it is not clear what T3's sources are.

²⁴ *Akam* can mean both in Tamil, and both are true in the case of Vidura. It might also be possible to read this as *akam* = *aham* + *oḷittu viṭṭēṇō* = have I destroyed 'I' (in the sense of egotism). Caṭakōpaṇ (Caṭakōpaṇ 2008: 18) takes it this way.

²⁵ Another version suggests that she did so because she was not taken back by her husband (Velukkudi s.d.: 3).

> Sītā indirectly killed Rāvaṇa/ She detested all the offers of luxury that he made Her (See for example, VR 5.19–20) {staying firmly dependent on no one but the Lord}

5. piṇam eḷuppi viṭṭēṇō tonṭaimāṇai pōlē?

→ Did I revive a corpse, like [King] Tonṭaimāṇ did?

> A Brahmin requested the king to take care of his family while he was away in Kāśī. When he later sent for them, the king realised that he had neglected his duty and the family had died. He then worshipped Veṅkaṭeśvara, who resuscitated that Brahmin family²⁶ {possessing such love for God}

6. piṇa-virunt' iṭṭēṇō kaṇṭhākaraṇṇai pōlē?

→ Did I serve a feast of corpse, like Ghaṇṭākaraṇa did?

> Ghaṇṭākaraṇa, a Rākṣasa, offered a Brahmin's corpse to Kṛṣṇa as per the Rākṣasa custom, as a result of which he reached Vai-kunṭha (*Bhaviṣya purāṇa* 80–92) {worshipping God everyday, which will destroy karma}

7. tāy kōlam ceytēṇō anasuyai pōlē?

→ Did I adopt the form of a mother, like Anasūyā did?

> This is a reference to Anasūyā acting as a mother to Sītā during the initial part of Her stay in the forest (VR 2.110) {feeling motherly affection for God}

8. tantai eṅkē eṇṇēṇō dhruvaṇai pōlē?

→ Did I say, 'Where is [my] father[’s lap]?', like Dhruva did?

> The child Dhruva sought to sit on the lap of his father, who ignored him in favour of his stepbrother. Dhruva then went

²⁶ Velukkudi (s.d.: 5) cites as a source for this story the *Veṅkaṭācala māhātmya* 10 (which I have been able to trace) in the *Tīrthakāṇḍa* of the *Brahmāṇḍa purāṇa*, which I have not been able to trace.

to the forest, sat in penance and gained a most prominent position thanks to Nārāyaṇa's boon (*Viṣṇu purāṇa* 1.11–2; BhP 4.8–9) {considering Nārāyaṇa as one's father and all other relations}

9. mūṅṅ' eḷuttu conṅṅēṅō kṣatrabandhuvai pōlē?

→ Did I utter the three syllables, like Kṣatrabandhu did?

> A royal prince of a vile nature, he was chased away into the forest by his people. But he saved a drowning ascetic, who suggested that he recite God's [three-syllabled] name. As a result, Kṣatrabandhu was saved from his fate (*Viṣṇudharma purāṇa* I.94) {reciting God's names}

10. mutal aṭiyai perṅṅēṅō ahalikaiyai pōlē?

→ Did I obtain the feet of the First Cause [of the universe], like Ahalyā did?

> This is a reference to Ahalyā being redeemed from her husband's curse thanks to Rāma's foot²⁷ (VR 1.49–51) {bearing the dust from the feet of God on one's head}

11. piṅc' āy paḷuttēṅō āṅṅālai pōlē?

→ Did I ripen while being unripe, like Āṅṅāḷ did?

> Āṅṅāḷ is ripe with devotion for Kṛṣṇa at a very tender age²⁸ {being devoted to God even as a child}

12. emperumāṅ enṅṅēṅō paṭṭarpirāṅ pōlē?

→ Did I say, 'Our Lord', like Bhaṭṭarpirāṅ did?

²⁷ While Vālmīki's version suggests that she lies in dust, Kampaṅ has her turned into a stone, upon which Rāma steps and removes her curse. It does seem that this *vārttai* has this latter story in mind.

²⁸ This question almost includes a direct quotation from Maṅavāḷa Māmuṅi's *Upatēca rattinaṅmālai* 24 (*piṅc' āy paḷuttēṅō āṅṅālai* - 'Āṅṅāḷ, she who ripened [while] being an unripe one').

> This is a reference to Periyālvār, who established Nārāyaṇa as the sole God at the Pāṇḍya king's court in Madurai (GPP6k, 'Periyālvār vaibhavam')²⁹ {establishing Nārāyaṇa as the Supreme Being/ being enslaved to God and performing service to Him}

13. āṛāyantu viṭṭēṇō tirumaḷicaiyār pōlē?

→ Have I examined [all the doctrines] and given up [the rest], like the honourable Tirumaḷicai [Ālvār] did?

> This Ālvār examined many doctrines (DSC/GPP6k, 'Tirumaḷicai pirāṇ vaibhavam') and declared in his *Nāṇmukaṇ tiruvantāti* (96),³⁰ that he had realised that Nārāyaṇa is God {analysing what true faith is}

14. avaṇ cīriyaṇ eṇṇēṇō ālvārai pōlē?

→ Did I say, 'He [God] is an insignificant/small one', like [Namm]ālvār did?

V: 14a *avaṇ* T1+T3(+T2+T4); *nāṇ* T2+T4

> Two possible interpretations: 1) If we take the variant in which "I" (*nāṇ*) is the subject, then the Ālvār³¹ calls himself a small/insignificant person, as in TVM1.5.7 or 4.7.1.;³² or, 2) if the subject is in 3rd person, then God is said to be small because He lives in the devotees' hearts {accepting that I am insignificant}

²⁹ *Emperumāṇ* is also a direct quote from his *Tiru pallāṇṭu* (10).

³⁰ *iṇi arintēṇ icarkum nāṇmukaṇkum teyvam | iṇi arintēṇ emperumāṇ unṇai iṇi arintēṇ |*

kāraṇaṇ nī karṇavai nī karṇavai nī nal kiricai | nāraṇaṇ nī naṇk' arintēṇ nāṇ.

'I have now understood [You as] Śiva's and the four-faced one's God!

I have now understood You, O our Lord! I have now understood that You are the Cause, You are what has been learnt, You are what is to be learnt, You are Nārāyaṇa of good actions. I have well understood.'

³¹ The appellation "Ālvār" by default refers to Nammālvār in the Śrīvaiṣṇava milieu.

³² TVM 1.5.7. *aṭiyēṇ cīriya nāṇattaṇ* ('I who am a slave, one of insignificant knowledge'); TVM 4.7.1. *cilam illā cīriyēṇ* ('I, an insignificant one, devoid of good conduct').

15. *ētēnum enṛēṇō kulaśekharaṣ pōlē?*

→ Did I say, ‘Anything!’, like Kulaśekhara [Ā]lvār did?

> This Ālvār says in his *Perumāḷ tirumōḷi* 4.10 that he is willing to be born as *anything* on the hills of Venkaṭam {wishing to be always united with God}

16. *yāṇ satyam enṛēṇō kruṣṇanai pōlē?*

→ Did I declare, ‘I am the Truth’, like Kṛṣṇa did?

> This is traditionally interpreted as ‘I speak the truth’, although Kṛṣṇa, as opposed to Rāma, is known as a liar {telling the truth}

17. *aṭaiyāḷam conṇēṇō kabandhanai pōlē?*

→ Did I describe [identifying] marks, like Kabandha did?

> This Rākṣasa attacked Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa before they cut his arms off, and thus released him from his curse. He then suggested that they meet Sugrīva in order to get Sītā back, and gave them directions to get to him (VR 3.68–9) {giving help to the Lord}

18. *antaraṅgam conṇēṇō trijaṭaiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I give secret [news], like Trijaṭā did?

> Trijaṭā, a Rākṣasī in Laṅkā, consoled Sītā and told Her of her dream of better things coming up for Her (VR 5.25) {speaking good words to people}

19. *avaṇ teyvam enṛēṇō maṇḍōdariyai pōlē?*

→ Did I say, ‘He is God!’, like Mandodarī did?

> Mandodarī, Rāvaṇa’s chief wife, warned him that Rāma was no ordinary human, but God (VR 6.99³³) {recognising God}

³³ The verses that assert this statement are not part of the critical edition. See instead the Sastrigal edition (Sastrigal and Sastri 1933).

20. aham vedmi enṛēṇō viśvāmitraṇai pōlē?

→ Did I say, ‘I know [Him]’, like Viśvāmitra did?

> Viśvāmitra requested a reluctant Daśaratha to send Rāma with him to protect his sacrifice, insisting that he knew what Rāma was capable of (VR 1.18.4³⁴) {knowing and speaking the truth}

21. tēvu marr’ ariyēṇō madhurakaviyār pōlē?

→ Do I not know of ‘another God,’ like Madhurakavi did?

V: 21c ariyēṇō T1+T2; ariyēṇ enṛēṇō T3+T4(+T2)

> Being exclusively devoted to his teacher Nammālvār, Madhurakavi Ālvār declared that he knew no other God in his *Kaṇṇi nuṇ cīru tāmpu* 2 {having firm belief in one’s Ācārya more than in God}

22. teyvattai perrēṇō devakiyārai pōlē?

→ Did I beget God [Kṛṣṇa], like Devakī did?

> Devakī and Vasudeva gave birth to Kṛṣṇa (BhP 10.3) {being so full of good merits as being blessed to bear God in one’s womb}

23. āḷi marai enṛēṇō vasudevarai pōlē?

→ Did I say, ‘Hide the discus!’, like Vasudeva did?

> Kṛṣṇa was born with his four arms, discus and conch. His parents did not want Him to show His discus, etc., so as not to attract Kaṁsa’s attention (BhP 10.3) {worrying about the safety of God}

24. āyaṇai vaḷarttēṇō yaśodaiyārai pōlē?

→ Did I bring up the Cowherd [Kṛṣṇa], like the honourable Yaśodā did?

V: 24a āyaṇai T1+T2+T3; āyaṇāy T4(+T2)

³⁴ *aham vedmi mahātmānaṁ rāmaṁ satyaparākramam* (‘I know that Rāma is great and truly valorous’; Goldman 2007 [1984]: 163).

> (BhP 10.5 onwards) {raising Kṛṣṇa as a cowherd so that everyone knows how accessible He is}

25. *anuyātrai ceytēṇō aṇilaṅkaḷai pōlē?*

→ Did I follow [the monkeys], like the squirrels did?

V: 25a *anuyātrai* T1+T3; *anuyātrañ* T2+T4

> A story from a non-mainstream version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* describes squirrels following and helping the monkeys while they built a causeway to Laṅkā so that Rāma could recover Sītā {performing even little acts of devotion according to one's capacity}³⁵

26. *aval poriyai tntēṇō kucelarai pōlē?*

→ Did I give flattened rice, like Kucela did?

> Kucela/Sudāmā, Kṛṣṇa's childhood friend came to meet Him. Being impoverished and burdened with a large family, he brought flattened rice as a gift for Him (BhP 10.80) {performing service with no selfish motive}

27. *āyutaṅkaḷ tntēṇō agastyarai pōlē?*

→ Did I bestow weapons [upon Rāma] like Agastya did?

> Agastya gave weapons including Viṣṇu's bow to Rāma (VR 3.12) {helping in the mission to protect God}

28. *antaraṅgam pukkēṇō sañjayaṇai*³⁶ *pōlē?*

→ Did I enter [the room and witness] intimacy, like Sañjaya did?

> Sañjaya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's charioteer and advisor was sent by him to see the Pāṇḍavas after their exile (MBh 5.58). Kṛṣṇa let him witness a private time, during which He, His wife Satyabhāmā, Arjuna

³⁵ See Buck 2000 [1981]: 277.

³⁶ T1 has *janakaṅaiṇai pōlē* here, but given that the next statement also has *Janaka*, I presume that it is simply a typo, especially since mentioning Sañjaya makes sense here. All other editions have *sañjayaṇai*.

and Draupadī were lying in one bed, which convinced Sañjaya that given this kind of friendship that they had with Kṛṣṇa, the Pāṇḍavas were bound to win {getting to witness an intimate scene involving Kṛṣṇa}

29. *karmattāl perrēṇō janakarai pōlē?*

→ Did I obtain [realization of God] by means of karma[yoga], like Janaka did?

> Janaka, Sītā's father, was known as a performer of the karma-yoga. Cf. *Bhagavadgītā* 3.20 {performing karma-yoga, understanding the nature of the self}

30. *kaṭṭi' avañai kaṇṭēṇō tirumaṅkaiyār pōlē?*

→ Did I see [the real] Him by biting [His toe], like the honourable Tirumaṅkai [Ālvār] did?

> When Tirumaṅkai, who took up highway robbery in order to feed the Vaiṣṇavas, managed to get all the jewellery of Nārāyaṇa, who came disguised as a bridegroom, except for the tight toe ring, which he removes by biting it off. But Tirumaṅkai could not lift the bundle of jewellery, so he asks the Bridegroom what magic He wielded to pull this trick off. To this, He recited the Nārāyaṇa *mantra* in his ears, which later allowed him to realize God (GPP6k, 'Tirumaṅkai-yālvār Vaibhavam') {being the object of God's causeless affection}

31. *kuṭai mutalāṇavai āṇṭēṇō anantālvāṇ pōlē?*

→ Did I become things like [His] umbrella, like Ananta-Ālvāṇ did?

V: 31b *mutalāṇavai* T1; *mutalāṇatu* T2+T4; *mutal* T3

> Ananta-Śeṣa (with the suffix 'Ālvāṇ' that refers to a great devotee) is said to take many forms (bed, seat, and so forth) whenever Nārāyaṇa comes down to the earth³⁷ {performing service to God taking suitable bodies for that purpose}

³⁷ Cf. *Mutal tiruvantāti* 53.

32. *koṇṭu t̥irintēṇō t̥iruvaṭṭiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I go about carrying [Him], like Garuḍa/Hanumān did?

> Both Garuḍa and Hanumān carried Nārāyaṇa on their shoulders³⁸
{carrying God on the shoulders}

33. *īlaiṇṇu viṭṭāy t̥irttēṇō nampāṭuvāṇai pōlē?*

→ Did I end the tiredness and thirst [of a Rākṣasa-birth], like Nampāṭuvāṇ did?

> Nampāṭuvāṇ, an outcast singer-devotee, removed a Brahma-Rākṣasa's curse by giving him the merits of his singing of one particular melody for God (*Kaisika m̥ahātmya* in the *Varāha purāṇa*) {having such greatness that God Himself mentions you³⁹}

34. *īṭaikaliyē kaṇṭēṇō mutal ālvārkaḷai pōlē?*

→ Did I see [Him] in the threshold, like the first three Ālvārs did?

V: 34a *īṭaikaliyē* T1+T3; *īṭaikaliyil* T2+T4

> The first three Ālvārs (Poykai, Pēy and Pūtam), who met on a rainy night in a threshold in Tirukkōyilūr, felt jostled there, and realised that it was Nārāyaṇa present among them (DSC/ GPP6k, 'Mutalālvārkaḷ Vaibhavam') {seeing the Lord, as He shows Himself to you}

35. *iru maṇṇar perrēṇō vāṇmīkiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I get [to raise] two kings, like Vālmīki did?

V: 35d *vāṇmīkiyaip* T1; *vālmīkiyaip* T2+T4; *vālmīkaraip* T3

> After Rāma sent his pregnant wife to the forest, Sītā stayed at Sage Vālmīki's ashram, where She gave birth to twins, Lava and

³⁸ *Tiruvāṭi* ('sacred feet') generally refers to Hanumān (also known as *ciriyā* ['younger'] *tiruvāṭi*), while Garuḍa is known as the *periyā* ('elder') *tiruvāṭi*, following the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition that considers the devotees to be the equivalent of their Lord's feet.

³⁹ The story is told by Varāha-Nārāyaṇa in the *Varāha purāṇa*.

Kuśa, future kings, whom Vālmīki took care of from the time of their birth (VR 7.58 onwards) {raising and educating the Lord's children}

36. *tirumālai tntēṇḍō toṅṅaraṭippoṭiyār pōlē?*

→ Did I offer [Him] sacred garlands/[the poem] *Tirumālai*, like Toṅṅaraṭippoṭi Āḷvār did?

V: 36a *tirumālai* T1; *irumālai* T2+T3+T4 ⁴⁰

> See fn 40 {offering garlands without selfish, ulterior motives}

37. *avaṅ uraikka peṅṅēṇḍō tirukkaccinampiyār pōlē?*

→ Did I get Him to speak [to me], like the honourable Tirukkacci Nampi did?

V: 37d T1 *tirukkaccinampiyār*; T2+T3+T4 *tirukkacciyār*

> A non-Brahmin teacher of Rāmānuja's, Gajendradāsa/Kāñcīpūrṇa served in the Varadarāja temple in Kāñcīpūram, where he waved the fan for the Main Deity, with whom he had one-to-one conversations (GPP6k, 'ḷaiyāḷvār Vaibhavam') {performing private service to and receiving instruction from God}

38. *avaṅ mēṇi āṅṅēṇḍō tiruppāṅarai pōlē?*

→ Did I become His body, like Tiruppāṅ [Āḷvār] did?

> The supposedly outcast Āḷvār saw His favourite Deity in Śrīraṅgam for the first time, and disappeared in Him (GPP6k, 'Tiruppāṅāḷvār Vaibhavam') {merging with God}

⁴⁰ Rāmānujaṅ (Rāmānujaṅ 2009 [2000]: 25) suggests the variant *iru mālai* ('two garlands'), which he explains as being either a reference to Toṅṅaraṭippoṭi-yāḷvār's two compositions (*Tirumālai* and *Tiruppaḷḷiyelucci*), or to the two garlands, the *pūmālai* ('flower garland') and the *pāmālai* ('song garland'), which he offered to the Lord. Velukkudi (s.d.: 36) points out that *iru* can mean either great or two, the greatness of the garland lying in its being given without expectation of return.

39. *aṇuppi vaiyum eṇṛēṇō vasiṣṭharai pōlē?*

→ Did I say, ‘Send Him [with Viśvāmitra]!’, like Vasiṣṭha did?

> When Daśaratha hesitated to send Rāma with Viśvāmitra to help protect his sacrifice, the family preceptor, Vasiṣṭha, convinced him to do so (VR 1.20) {having the greatness of convincing Daśaratha, or the latter’s to obey}

40. *aṭi vāṅkiṇēṇō koṅkil pirāṭṭiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I obtain [Rāmānuja’s] foot[wear], like the lady from Koṅku did?

V: 40c *koṅkil(r)* T1+T2+T4; *koṅkup* T3(+T4)

> Sumatī, known as the lady from Koṅku, was initiated by Rāmānuja into the Śrīvaiṣṇava faith. But as she forgot what she had learnt from him, he taught her again following her bold request, and gave her his sandals (GPP12k, ‘Iḷaiyālvār Vaibhavam’) {obtaining and worshipping Rāmānuja’s sandals}

41. *maṇ pūvai iṭṭēṇō kuruva nampiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I place earthen flowers, like Kuruva Nampi did?

V: 41d *kuruva* T1+T3; *kurava* T2+T4

> Bhīma, a potter and a devotee of Veṅkaṭeśvara, made earthen flowers, and offered them to Him, every night. These flowers would be found upon the body of Veṅkaṭeśvara, while King Toṅṭaimāṇ’s flowers, offered at the shrine itself, would be found beneath {doing private service to God, and offering flowers with pure devotion, which were accepted by the Lord}

42. *mūlam eṇṛ’ aḷaitṭēṇō gajarājai pōlē?*

→ Did I call out ‘[Primal] Cause!’, like the king of elephants did?

> Unable to protect itself from the crocodile, an elephant called out to the Lord, who hastened to help it (BhP 8.2–4) {calling out the Lord}

43. pūca koṭuttēṇō kūṇiyai pōlē?

→ Did I give [unguents] to anoint [Him], like the hunchbacked woman did?

> A provider of unguents for Kaṃsa in Mathurā, this woman gave some to Kṛṣṇa, after which He straightened her back (BhP 10.42) {giving something befitting for Kṛṣṇa}

44. pūvai koṭuttēṇō mālākārarai pōlē?

→ Did I give flowers, like the garland-maker did?

> Traditionally, this garland-maker was the one who provided garlands for Kaṃsa in Mathurā, and who gave a few to Kṛṣṇa (BhP 10.41) {making pure offerings to God}

45. vaiṭṭa iṭattu iruntēṇō bharataṇai pōlē?

→ Did I stay put where I was placed, like Bharata did?

V: 45b *iṭattu* T1+T2; *iṭattil* T3.

(NB: 45 and 46 are interchanged in some editions.)

> Bharata obeyed Rāma without questioning Him, when He asked him to stay back and take care of the kingdom (VR 2.105) {serving Him according to His wishes}

46. vaḷi aṭimai ceytēṇō lakṣmaṇai pōlē?

→ Did I perform service [Rāma on His] path, like Lakṣmaṇa did?

> As opposed to Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa refused to obey Rāma when He asked him to stay back in Ayodhyā, and followed Him to the forest and served Him devotedly (VR 2.37 onwards) {performing all kinds of service to God}

47. a- karaikkē viṭṭēṇō guha perumāṇai pōlē?

→ Did I take [them] to the other shore, like lord Guha did?

V: 45e *perumāṇaip* T1; *perumāḷaip* T2+T3+T4

> Guha took Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa across the Ganges (in e.g. *Perumāḷ tirumōḷi* 10),⁴¹ and then, later, took Bharata and the others so that they could meet Rāma (VR 2.83) {being friends with God}

48. arakkaṇuṭaṇ poruṭēṇō periya uṭaiyārai pōlē?

→ Did I fight with the Rākṣasa, like Jaṭāyu did?

> When the eagle Jaṭāyu (known affectionately as *periya uṭaiyār* among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas) saw Rāvaṇa carrying Sītā away by force, he fought him and was eventually killed by him in the process (VR 3.49) {giving up life for God}

49. i- karaikkē ceṇṇēṇō vibhīṣaṇarai pōlē?

→ Did I come to this shore, like Vibhīṣaṇa did?

> Leaving his brother Rāvaṇa and his country Laṅkā behind, Vibhīṣaṇa crossed the sea in order to join Rāma (VR 6.12) {giving up one's relatives for God, and trusting Him to give him refuge}

50. iṇiyatu oṇṇu vaittēṇō śabariyai pōlē?

→ Did I place something sweet, like Śabarī did?

V: 50b *oṇṇu* T1; *eṇṇu* T2+T3

> A huntswoman and a disciple of the ascetic Mataṅga, Śabarī served sweet fruit to Rāma, as He came to her ashram while searching for Sītā (VR 3.70) {choosing the best fruit offering to Rāma}

51. iṅkum uṇṇu eṇṇēṇō prahlādaṇai pōlē?

→ Did I say, '[God] is here, too!', like Prahlāda did?

V: 51a *iṅkum* T1+T2+T3; *iṅku* (T4)

⁴¹ In the VR, Guha does not perform that act. See Anandakichenin 2014.

> As his father Hiranyaakaṣipu asked him if Nārāyaṇa existed even in a certain pillar, Prahlāda declared that He did. The former broke it, and Nārāyaṇa appeared in the form of a Man-Lion from it, and killed him (BhP 7.8) {establishing the omnipresence of God to an adverse person}

52. *in̄k' illai en̄rēṇō dadhibhāṇḍai pōlē?*

→ Did I say, '[He] is not here!', like Dadhibhāṇḍa did?

> Chased by His angry mother, Kṛṣṇa hid Himself inside a big pot with the help of Dadhibhāṇḍa, who duly told her that He was not there. But once she left, he refused to let Kṛṣṇa out unless He gave *mokṣa* to him as well as to the pot, to which He agreed⁴² {committing acts of (de)merits for His sake}

53. *kāṭṭukku pōṇēṇō perumālai pōlē?*

→ Did I go to the forest, like Lord [Rāma] did?

(VR 2.37 onwards) {considering good and evil things that happen to one as one and the same}

54. *kaṇṭu vantēṇ en̄rēṇō tiruvaṭiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I say, 'I have come back, having seen [Sītā],' like Hanumān did?

(VR 5.63) {serving God in a great way}

55. *iru kaiyum viṭṭēṇō draupadiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I let [down] both arms, like Draupadī did?

> Seeing that she could not protect herself by holding on to her clothes when Duḥśāsana disrobed her, Draupadī stopped making any efforts and surrendered unto Kṛṣṇa (MBh 2.61.40d*) {having unshakeable faith in God}

⁴² This story is popular among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, but it does not seem to exist in any of the Purāṇas.

56. inku pāl poṅkum enṟēṇō vaṭuka nampiyai pōlē?

→ Did I say, ‘Milk will boil over here’, like Vaṭuka Nampi did?

> Vaṭuka Nampi/Āndhrapūrṇa refused to come out and worship the processional Deity, because watching over the milk that he was boiling for his Ācārya (Rāmānuja) was more important for him (GPP6k, ‘Vaṭukanampi Vaibhavam’) {treating the Ācārya as God}

57. iru miṭaru piṭittēṇō celva piḷḷaiyai pōlē?

→ Did I hold [Rāmānuja’s] great neck [in embrace], like Celva Piḷḷai did?

> When Rāmānuja found in Delhi the *utsava-mūrti* (‘processional icon’) of the Tirunārāyaṇapuram (Melkote) temple, the *mūrti* of the Lord (named Celva Piḷḷai, or ‘beloved child’) came on His own and embraced Rāmānuja (GPP6k, ‘Iḷaiyālvār Vaibhavam’) {being embraced by God}

58. nil enṟu perrēṇō iḷaiyārrūr nampiyai pōlē?

→ Did I get to say, ‘Stay [here]!’, like Iḷaiyārrūr Nampi did?

V: 58b *enṟup* T1+T2+T3; *eṇṇap* T4(+T2); 58d *iḷaiyārrūr* T1; *iḷaiyārrukkuṭi* T3; *iṭaiyārrūr* T4

> When old Nampi expressed his worry about ever attending any festival in Śrīraṅgam again, the Lord said ‘Stand there!’ and gave him *mokṣa* right then {being close to God and consider visiting Him as good as having food}

59. neṭum tūram pōṇēṇō nāthamuniyai pōlē?

→ Did I go very far, like Nāthamuni did?

> A king and his wives visited Nāthamuni during his meditation. When the latter later heard about the visit, he thought that they were the Lord and His entourage, and followed them for a long distance. (GPP6k, ‘Śrīmannāthamunikaḷ Vaibhavam’) {having pure devotion for God and seeking Him out}

60. *avaṅ pōṇāṅ enṟēṅō mārutiyāṅṭāṅ pōlē?*

→ Did I say, ‘He has left’, like Mārutiyāṅṭāṅ did?

> Rāmānuja had to exile himself when pursued by a Cōḷa king. Mārutiyāṅṭāṅ Cīriyāṅṭāṅ, his disciple, went to Śrīraṅgam and returned to announce this king’s death after twelve years, which paved the way for the Ācārya’s return to Śrīraṅgam⁴³ (GPP6k, ‘Iḷaiyālvār Vaibhavam’) {serving the Ācārya}

61. *avaṅ vēṅṭā enṟēṅō ālvāṅai pōlē?*

→ Did I say, ‘No need for Him [Raṅganātha]’, like [Kūrattā]ālvāṅ did?

V: 61b vēṅṭā T1+T3; vēṅṭām T2+T4

> The above-mentioned Cōḷa king gave the command that those associated with Rāmānuja should not be allowed inside the Śrīraṅgam temple. When Kūrattālvāṅ once went there, a guardian was willing to let him in in spite of his connection with Rāmānuja (his Ācārya), because he thought Kūrattālvāṅ to be a good individual. But the latter refused to enter the temple, refusing a sight of God that came without an association with His Ācārya⁴⁴ {refusing God for the sake of the Ācārya}

62. *advaitam veṅṟēṅō emperumāṅṟai pōlē?*

→ Did I defeat *advaita*, like the honourable Rāmānuja did?⁴⁵

Rāmānuja refuted the tenets of *advaita*, *inter alia* {establishing the Vedic path}

⁴³ Caṭakōpaṅ (Caṭakōpaṅ 2008: 434) points out that this event would have happened a long time after Rāmānuja’s meeting with the Tirukkōḷūr lady, and that this must be an interpolation.

⁴⁴ Caṭakōpaṅ (Caṭakōpaṅ 2008: 443) makes a similar remark as for *vārttai* 60 (See fn 50).

⁴⁵ Caṭakōpaṅ (Caṭakōpaṅ 2008: 449) thinks that the scribe who wrote down a copy of the *Rahasyam* could have used the word *Emperumāṅṟar* for Rāmānuja, rather than the 2nd person singular.

63. aruḷ āḷi kaṇṭēṇō nallāṇai pōlē?

→ Did I experience the gracious discus, like Nallāṇ did?

V: 63b āḷi T1+T2+T4; āḷi T3(+T2+T4⁴⁶)

> This Brahmin performed the last rites of a man whose body he found afloat a river, upon seeing the embossed conch mark of a Śrīvaiṣṇava on his shoulders. So the rest of the village shunned him for that. One day, the Lord claimed through a priest that *that* man was a *pollāṇ* ('a bad man') for them, but a *nallāṇ* ('a good man') for Him {being good to the [Śrīvaiṣṇava] people}

64. anantapuram pukkēṇō āḷavantārai pōlē?

→ Did I enter [Tiruv]anantapuram, like Āḷavantār did?

> An *Araiyar*-priest recited *Tiruvāymoḷi* 10.2 in Śrīraṅgam, which invited people to go to Anantapuram. Hearing this, Āḷavantār/Yāmunācārya felt that it was a hint for him, so he went there taking his disciples along, except Teyvavāriyāṇṭāṇ (see next *vārttai*). This made him miss an important appointment that he had made with Kurukai Kāvalappaṇ to learn secrets on yoga (GPP6k, 'Yamunait-tuṇaivar Vaibhavam') {getting hints from God}

65. āriyaṇai pirintēṇō teyvavāriyāṇṭāṇai pōlē?

→ Did I part from the teacher, like Teyvavāriyāṇṭāṇ did?

> See note on the previous question (64). This disciple became ill after parting from his Ācārya, so he was taken to him. As he got closer to his teacher, he got better and better (GPP6k, 'Yamunait-tuṇaivar Vaibhavam') {suffer from separation from one's Ācārya}

66. antāti conṇēṇō amutaṇārai pōlē?

→ Did I utter the [*Irāmānuca nūrr*]antāti, like the honourable [Tiruvaraṅkattu] Amutaṇ did?

⁴⁶ Rāmānujaṇ (Rāmānujaṇ 2009 [2000]: 80) gives the variant *aruḷ āḷam* 'the depth of [His] grace.'

This is a work on Rāmānuja in Tamil, considered to be as important as the *Nālāyirativviyapirapantam* {making efforts to have Rāmānuja’s greatness known}

67. anukūlam conṇēṇō mālyavānai pōlē?

→ Did I speak what is favourable, like Mālyavān did?

> Mālyavān was Rāvaṇa’s mother’s paternal uncle, who advised him to give Sītā back to Rāma (VR 6.26) {giving good advice even to evil people}

68. kaḷvaṇ ivan enṇēṇō lokaguruvai pōlē?

→ Did I say, ‘He is a thief!’, like the teacher of the world did?

> Based on Velukkudī n.d.: 68, *lokaguru* is sometimes taken as a reference to Nammālvār, who called Nārāyaṇa’s incarnations as Buddha (TVM 5.10.4) or as Vāmana (TVM 3.8.9) deceitful; or it could refer to Tirumaṅkai Ālvār (TNT 8); or even Śiva (as per TVM 2.2.10) {having a close relationship with God}

69. kaṭal ḍcai enṇēṇō periya nampiyai pōlē?

→ Did I say, ‘Sound of the ocean!’, like Periya Nampi did?

> Periya Nampi performed the last rites of his non-Brahmin co-disciple Māranēri Nampi. When egged on by the others, Rāmānuja asked him why he did so. Nampi then asked him whether the various Ālvārs’ verses, which placed devotion over birth, had any meaning at all (in which case his act was justified) or if they were meaningless like the sound of the ocean (GPP6k, ‘Ilaiyālvār Vaibhavam’) {ignoring the caste of the devotee}

70. curri kiṭantēṇō tirumālaiyāṇṭāṇ pōlē?

→ Did I constantly revolve around [Rāmānuja], like Tirumālaiyāṇṭāṇ did?

V: 70c *tirumālaiyāṇṭāṇ* T1+T3; *mālaiyāṇṭāṇ* T2+T4

> One of Rāmānuja’s teachers taught him the TVM without leaving him. Or this can be interpreted as the teacher-disciple relationship was twisted around (*cūrri*), given Rāmānuja’s [superior] knowledge (Velukkudi n.d.: 70) (GPP6k, ‘Īlaiyālvār Tirumālaiyāntāṇiṭattu Tiruvāymolī kēṭṭal’) {teaching Rāmānuja}

71. *cūl-uravu koṇṭēṇō tirukkōṭṭiyūrār pōlē?*

→ Did I obtain an oath, like the honourable one from Tirukkōṭṭiyūr?

V: 71c *cūl* T1; *cūl*⁴⁷ T2+T3+T4; 71d *tirukkōṭṭiyūrār* T1+T3; *kōṭṭiyūrārai* T2; *kōṭṭiyūrārai* T4

> This teacher of Rāmānuja’s had the latter visit him 18 times before initiating him into a sacred *mantra*, but not before making him swear not to give it indiscriminately. But Rāmānuja revealed it to the common man in public (GPP6k, ‘Īlaiyālvār Tirukkōṭṭiyūr Nampiyiṇiṭattu viśeṣārtham kēṭṭal’) {bearing love for Rāmānuja like Tirukkōṭṭiyūr Nampi}

72. *uyir āya perreṇō ūmaiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I have [Rāmānuja] as [my] life, like the dumb person did?

> Rāmānuja placed his feet upon a deaf-and-dumb devotee in order to grant him *mokṣa*, as he was incapable of receiving any instructions from him (GPP6k, ‘Īlaiyālvār Vaibhavam’) {believing that Rāmānuja’s feet are the goal}

73. *uṭampai veruttēṇō tirunaṇaiyūrārai pōlē?*

→ Did I renounce the body, like the honourable one from Tirunaṇaiyūr did?

V: 73c *tirunaṇaiyūrāraip* T1+T3; *naṇaiyūrāraip* T2+T4

⁴⁷ Please note that *cūluravu* is found lexicalised in the *Tamil Lexicon*, while *cūluravu* is not. Moreover, *cūl* has the meaning of oath, which suits the context here, which *cūl* does not.

> When someone set the Deity of a temple on fire, this priest threw himself on the deity along with his family, and they all gave up their lives to protect Him⁴⁸ {sacrificing one's body for safeguarding God's sacred 'body'}

74. *eṇṇai pōl eṇṇēṇō uparicaravaṇai pōlē?*

→ Did I say, 'Like me!', like Uparicaravasu did?

> This king mediated in a problem between ascetics and gods, saying 'Be like me!' (*Matsya purāṇa* 152) {following dharma}

75. *yāṇ ciṛiyaṇ eṇṇēṇō tirumalai nampiyai pōlē?*

→ Did I say, 'I am an insignificant one!', like Tirumalai Nampi did?

> Tirumalai Nampi/Śrīśaileśa Pūrṇa himself came to receive Rāmānuja during his visit to Tirumalā, and explained that he had not been able to find anyone less important than him to do the task (GPP6k, 'Tirumalai Nanpiyiṭattu Uṭaiyavar Śrīrāmāyaṇam kēṭṭal') {considering oneself as inferior to the other Śrīvaiṣṇavas}

76. *nīril kutittēṇō kaṇapurattālai pōlē?*

→ Did I jump into the water like the woman from Kaṇapuram did?

> This woman threw herself into the floods to protect her teacher, when the raft that she was travelling in needed to be unburdened a little. In the end both escaped⁴⁹ {protecting the material body of the Ācārya and having complete faith in him}

⁴⁸ Caṭakōpaṇ (Caṭakōpaṇ 2008: 536) points out that this event could not have happened before Rāmānuja's time, and that it is mentioned in Piḷḷai Lokācārya's *Śrīvācanabhūṣaṇam* 1.84 (14th c.). Please note that the Tirunaṇṇaiyūr Araiyaṇ is mentioned in earlier texts, including Periyavāccāṇ Piḷḷai's commentary on *Perumāḷ tirumoli* 5.1, although it is not clear whether this particular event involving him was narrated before Lokācārya.

⁴⁹ This Ācārya has been identified as Nampiḷḷai by the GPP6k ('Nañcīyaṇ nampiḷḷai vaiḥavaṅkal'), which does not name the woman. If the event did happen, and that too, during Nampiḷḷai's time, then this *vārttai* is an interpolation.

77. *nīrōrukam koṇṭēṇō kāciciṅkaṇai pōlē?*

→ Did I take lotuses [to the Lord] like Ciṅkaṇ from Kāci?

V: 71a *nīrukam* T1; *nīrōrukam* T2+T4; *nīrūkam* T3⁵⁰

> A devotee used to swim across the Ganges to bring lotuses for the Lord, which made him proud. Once, he got stuck in a whirlpool and he prayed for help. Saved, he got back safely to the banks without letting go of the lotuses that he had picked {putting full trust in God}

78. *vākkiṅāl venṛēṇō bhaṭṭarai pōlē?*

→ Did I win by means of words, like [Parāśara] Bhaṭṭa did?

> While still a child, Bhaṭṭa won in an argument against Sarvajña Bhaṭṭa, a renowned scholar (GPP6k, ‘Bhaṭṭar Vaibhavam’)⁵¹ {winning arguments thanks to verbal prowess}

79. *vāyil kaiy iṭṭēṇō empārai pōlē?*

→ Did I put [my] hand in the mouth [of the snake], like Empār did?

> Empār saved a snake by removing a thorn stuck in its mouth {having compassion for all living beings}

80. *tōl kāṭṭi vantēṇō bhaṭṭarai pōlē?*

→ Did I come back showing the shoulder, like [Parāśara] Bhaṭṭa did?

> Velukkudi (Velukkudi s.d.: 80) points out that this question does not have a clear source. Bhaṭṭar was accidentally hit on the shoulder and showed the other shoulder to receive another shove, as he was

⁵⁰ T1 seems to be a typo. While *nīrōrukam*, which means ‘lotus’ is suitable, T3 opts for *nīrūkam* (Caṭakōpaṇ 2008: 568) taking it to mean *nīr* + *ūkam* = ‘deliberation [made upon] the water,’ which sounds far-fetched to me.

⁵¹ Caṭakōpaṇ (Caṭakōpaṇ 2008: 578) suggests this *vārttai* is an interpolation, as this is a later event.

sorry to have stood in the way of a religious procession {having great devotion}

81. *tuṛai vēṛu ceytēṇō pakavarai pōlē?*

→ Did I make [the choice of] a different ghat, like Pakavar did?

> Villiputtūr Pakavar preferred to use the ghat of a waterbody used by Śrīvaiṣṇavas, rather than the one used by the fellow Brahmins {having a mind to serve}

Conclusions

We can see that the author, whoever s/he may be, is an educated, knowledgeable person, who knew the epics, Purāṇas, Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiography and theology well. As mentioned earlier, there is nothing to show in the text itself that it was composed by a woman, and to some extent, it does not really matter, because the tradition does believe her to be a woman. On the one hand, we can go with the tradition and believe the author to be a woman, and on the other, we could still see how this *Rahasyam*, attributed to a woman, has been dealt with, compared to other writings. First of all, it has probably been praised and made popular, because although (supposedly) produced by a woman, it does not threaten the established practices. And despite having a challenging tone and a scholarly content, it does not cross the boundaries of the acceptable, as it insists on its author's worthlessness again and again, besides not touching upon exclusive material like the Vedas. On top of it, it incorporates all the important Śrīvaiṣṇava theological ideas, which it presents as ideals.

Secondly, there is no traditional commentary on the *Rahasyam* that is comparable to, say, Maṇavāla Māmuṇi's (14th century) *Upātēca rattinamālai*, which was commented upon by Piḷḷai Lokam Jīyar, or even a commentary by an eminent 20th-century scholar, like Prativādi Bhayaṃkaram Aṅṅaṅkarācārya or Uttamūr Vīrārāghavācārya. We may wonder whether the reason for such neglect is the nature of the work (hagiographic prose has hardly been commented upon),

its size or the language of the composition, the general belief with regards to the identity (read, the gender) of the author or the tradition⁵² to which it belongs (see below). It does seem, therefore, that this work, other than leading to the composition of two works of a very similar nature (that are part of the *Mummaṇi rahasyam*), did not disturb or erase the boundaries of the male dominion over serious scholarship.

This *Rahasyam* (as well as the other two mentioned in fn 4) clearly points to an affiliation to what would much later become the Teṅkalai (‘southern school’) tradition, and so does the only premodern written work by a Śrīvaiṣṇava woman, Tirukkōṇēri Dāsyai (see fn 5), presumably a disciple of Nampiḷḷai (13th c.). Why did the premodern women of the Vaṭakalai tradition not produce any writing? Did the different beliefs and status of women cause this discrepancy? These are some questions that need to be explored further.

Appendix

Tirukkōḷūr peṇpiḷḷai rahasyam: the text within which the *Rahasyam* is found.

*tirukkōḷūrukku emperumāṅār eḷuntaruḷum pōtu, tirukkōḷūrilniṅṅrum
oru peṇpiḷḷai etirē vantu daṇḍaṇiṭṭu niṅka, ‘peṇṇē! nī eṅkuniṅṅrum
purappaṭṭāy?’ eṅru kēṭṭ’aruḷa, peṇṇum, ‘tirukkōḷūrilniṅṅrum
viṭaikkoṇṭēṅ’ eṅru viṅṅappam ceyya, ataṅait tiruccevic cārri
aruḷi emperumāṅār, ‘oruvar kūrai eḷuvar uṭuttuk kāy kiḷaṅku
cāppiṭṭu, “tiṅṅam eṅ iḷa(m) māṅ pukum ūr” uṅakkup purap-
paṭum ūr āyirē!’ eṅr’ aruḷicceytār. ataik kēṭṭu antap peṇpiḷḷai
viṅṅappam ceyta paṭi eṅṅaṅam eṅṅil ‘atiyēṅ, nāyantē! nāyantē!*

aḷaittu varukirēṅ eṅrēṅō akrūraraip pōlē (...)

⁵² On the two Śrīvaiṣṇava subsects, Vaṭakalai (‘northern school’) and Teṅkalai (‘southern school’), see Mumme 1988.

ityādiyiṅ paṭiyē, “mai niṅra varai pōlum tiru uruvē vāṭṭāṟku e- nanri ceytēṅō eṅ neñcil tikaḷvatuvē” eṅkiṟa paṭi ippaṭiṭ paṭṭa jñānaṅkaḷ uṭaiyār jñānattilē oruttaruṭaiya jñānam aṭiyēṅukku uṅṭāṅāl, tirukkōḷūril viṭai koṅ’irukkalām. anta vyājam aṭiyēṅukku illai. mucal puḷukkai vayalilē kiṭant’ eṅ? varappilē kiṭant’ eṅ? eṅru viṅṅappam ceytu, ‘devarār eḷuntaruḷi maṅgaḷāsāsanam ceyt’ aruḷiṅāl vaitta mānidhikkum madhurakavikkum nityotsavapakṣotsavamāsotsavasamvatsarotsavādikaḷ uṅṭākum’ eṅru viṅṅappam ceyya, attaic tiruc cevicārriṭ pōra ukant’ aruḷi, antap peṅ piḷlaiyiṅ tirumālikaikku eḷunt’ aruḷit taḷikai prasādamum śrīpādatīrthamum a- peṅ- piḷlaikku sāditt’ aruḷiṅār eṅru tiruvāymoḷippiḷlai aruḷiceytār eṅru periya vāṅamāmalai jīyar aruḷiceyt’ aruḷiṅār.

When Rāmānuja was approaching Tirukkōḷūr, a woman came on the opposite [direction] from Tirukkōḷūr and stood [there] making obeisance [to him].⁵³ As he graciously asked [her], ‘O woman! Where have you set out from?’, the woman respectfully said, ‘I have left from Tirukkōḷūr.’ Rāmānuja, who graciously heard that, graciously said, “Tirukkōḷūr, the town which my young deer[-like daughter] enters for sure” (TVM 6.7.1),—[to enter which] seven people wear the clothes of one and eat fruits and vegetables⁵⁴—has become a town that you leave!’ If one asks how that woman, hearing that, spoke respectfully, [it was thus]: ‘I am a slave, my lord, my lord!

Did I say, ‘I shall bring [Kṛṣṇa], like Akrūra did? (...)

According to these [vārttais], as said in “What good did I perform for Him of Vāṭṭāru, whose divine form is like a black mountain, [for Him] to shine in my heart!” (TVM 10.6.8), if I, a slave, had the knowledge of [at least] one among those people [mentioned above], who had such [types of] knowledge, I could have arrived in Tirukkōḷūr. I, a slave, do not have such an excuse. What does it matter if rabbit dung lies in the field or if it lies in the ridge?’

⁵³ For the sake of comprehensibility, the long sentences in Manipravalam have been turned into short, finite sentences in English.

⁵⁴ This simply means that one goes to great trouble to just go to Tirukkōḷūr.

Speaking respectfully thus, she respectfully made the [following] request, ‘If Your Highness would come [to Tirukkōḷūr] and worship [there], the regular, fortnightly, monthly and annual festivals will be conducted for [the main Deity] Vaitta Mānidhi and Madhurakavi.’ Graciously listening to that and rejoicing exceedingly, he went to that woman’s house and graciously bestowed the gift of [leftover] boiled rice [after he had it], and sacred water from [His] feet upon that woman. Thus graciously said Tiruvāymoḷi Piḷḷai,⁵⁵ according to the Periya Jīyar of Vāṇamāmalai.

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⁵⁵ This is Maṇavāḷa Māmuṇi’s (Varavaramuni’s) Ācārya.

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GPP12k = *Paṅṅūrāyirappaṭi guruparamparābrabhāvam*. See *Tirukkōḷūr peṅṅillai rahasyam*.

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