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## **Tirumaṅkaiyālvār's *Maṭal* Poems and Social History of Early Medieval South India**

SUMMARY: Tirumaṅkaiyālvār (ca. 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), one of the South Indian medieval poet-saints, was an ardent and prolific exponent of early Tamil bhakti ideology, focusing on Viṣṇu as the Ultimate Being. In his two *maṭal* poems, he used the literary techniques known to classical Tamil poetry to express his devotion and love towards his favourite God. Although not adopted directly, the main theological concepts of later Śrīvaiṣṇavism seem to play an important role in his stanzas. In this paper I am trying to apply some of them (in the most general way) to analyze Tirumaṅkai's stand and his probable influence on philosophical notions of the later Śrīvaiṣṇava doctrine.

KEYWORDS: Tirumaṅkaiyālvār, Śrīvaiṣṇavism, Tamil poetry, bhakti, prapatti, maṭal.

### **1. Tirumaṅkaiyālvār and Śrīvaiṣṇavism**

Tirumaṅkai, who lived most probably in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., is one of the twelve Tamil Vaiṣṇava poet-saints called the Ālvārs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> He is the author of six works. Besides his magnum opus, i.e. *Periya tirumōḷi* of 1084 stanzas, his other compositions are: *Tirukkuruntāṅṅakam*, *Tiruneṭuntāṅṅakam*, *Tiruveḷukkūṟṟirukkai*, *Cīriya tirumaṭal* and *Periya tirumaṭal*. They are all included in the collection of *Nālāyira tivviyaṭ pira-pantam* ('The Four Thousand Divine Poems'), which is a holy scripture of Tamil-speaking Śrīvaiṣṇavas.

Their activities in early medieval South India (ca. 600–900), along with the efforts of their Śaiva counterparts, or the Nāyaṅmārs, gave birth to the so-called bhakti movement (Iraqi 2009: 103; Thapar 1979: 186), which was not only a movement of great religious importance, but also a system creating and propagating a new social formation (cf. Gurukkal 2010: 197, 292–293).

The theology of Śrīvaiṣṇavism (Tamil: Tiruvaiṣṇavam), being a dominant and distinct Vaiṣṇava tradition (known also in Sanskrit as the Śrīsampradāya or ‘the Tradition of Śrī’) in Tamil speaking South India, developed later by the Ācāryas (10<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> cent.), was largely based on the mystical poetry composed by the Ālvārs. Obviously, the system of Śrīvaiṣṇavism developed drawing inspiration also from various other sources, such as early Tantric Vaiṣṇava schools of Pāñcarātra and Vaikhānasa, as well as Advaita Vedānta, among others. In bhakti poetry of the Ālvārs and Nāyaṅmārs, we deal with a metaphysical description of their own religious experiences rather than the doctrinally fixed and commonly approved religious views of supreme reality. On the basis of mystics’ visions presented in their poems, later teachers of a new tradition of Śrīvaiṣṇavism living after Rāmānuja, the founder of Viśiṣṭādvaita school of philosophy (11<sup>th</sup> century), created a theological doctrine, trying to change the poetical but personal experiences of the Ālvārs into a system of philosophical language of intellectuals (cf. Seshadri 1998: 16). As Orr (Orr 2000: 22) notes, the concept of bhakti expressed by the poet-saints was then (during the later Chola period) “intellectually elaborated” by sectarian teachers, “who developed the sophisticated theological systems of Śaiva Siddhānta and Śrīvaiṣṇavism”. Likewise, focusing on Vaiṣṇava circles alone, Raman (Raman 2007: 174) writes that students and followers of Rāmānuja began the task of building a ‘doctrinal superstructure’ onto the Tamil devotional poetry of the Ālvārs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The basic distinction between an intellectual and an emotional variety of bhakti in early medieval South India was proven well enough in the study done by Hardy (Hardy 2001: 38). It may be then intriguing to further determine

Therefore, it would be interesting to try to see how such an intellectual 'superstructure' could possibly be constructed and imposed. In order to do it, two poems by Tirumaṅkai have been selected, i.e. *Cīriya tirumaṭal* ('Short Holy Maṭal') and *Periya tirumaṭal* ('Long Holy Maṭal'), both of them based on the ancient theme of 'riding a maṭal', a motif known to the classical Tamil poetry of the pre-bhakti period. Thus, these two Tirumaṅkai poems can be read in the light of later Śrīvaiṣṇava theology or at least analyzed in the main terms used by this school—e.g. bhakti, prapatti and kainkarya (Tamil: pakti, pirapatti, kainkaryam).

## 2. Riding a maṭal, or the painful practice of bhakti

The mysterious word spelled as *maṭal* and found in the titles of these two texts is of great interest and importance. This keyword brings to mind one of the most interesting social customs of classical and medieval Tamil culture. The term *maṭal* means "flat leaf of palm plantain and screwpine; jagged stem of a palmyra leaf; 'horse' made of a palmyra leaf" (Zvelebil 1986: 22). The concept of riding such a horse made out of fan-shaped palmyra palm leaves (*Borassus flabellifer*) is inherited from the ancient Tamil caṅkam tradition of love poetry, in particular from the poems based on the erotic theme of one-sided

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the mutual relations between both of them and indicate their possible influences and connections elaborated by the adherents of these two paths of religious practice. This paper attempts to re-read the literary output of Tirumaṅkai's emotional surges in terms of the doctrinal exegesis of Śrīvaiṣṇava intellectual circles. It is assumed that the mystic ecstasy expressed in the Tamil songs of the Ālvārs met with a significant response of the lower social strata, and could not be ignored by the higher ones, associated with the ideas of Brahmanic Hindu tradition. The emotional outbursts were, thus, expressed in a new mode, using a given set of philosophical concepts, which, in turn, infrequently had to be modified or created anew. The interpretation of the ideas found in early medieval poetry of Tamil mystics might not always work in the light of the concepts known to the later period, but some attempts might prove it worthy.

love (Zvelebil 1974: 106). According to the stanzas,<sup>3</sup> a disappointed lover, not able to meet his beloved and fulfill his desires, was riding on a palmyra stem, or on the figure of a horse designed out of palmyra fronds (Zvelebil 1974: 106). A threat to commit a *maṭal*, or to ride a *maṭal* in public, was an essential but most extreme device to achieve his main goal—to meet his beloved once again.

The custom was rather degrading and humiliating for the hero (Dubianski 2000: 111; Zvelebil 1986: 22), but his primary intention was indeed to threaten the girl, so that she would agree to meet him immediately, frightened by the possible scandal and its future consequences.

Exposed to the public in rather unusual circumstances, sitting on the construction made of dried leaves, behaving like a madman and going literally crazy, shouting and screaming out his love-torments, the hero expected that his beloved, scared of others' talks, could not withstand the social pressure and would act according to his expectations.

What seems to be very interesting in the poems of this kind is that they actually do not describe the custom of riding a *maṭal* in detail, but rather focus on the very act of threatening (cf. Shanmugam Pillai and Ludden 1997: 21).

This is exactly the case of Tirumaṅkaiyālvār's *maṭal* poems, with the only but very important difference that this particular threat comes from a heroine, not a hero. Thus, it is just the other way round and contrary to what is said in the famous *Tirukkuraḷ* (ca. 5<sup>th</sup> century; couplets 1131–1140) that women are not expected to do it (cf. Parthasarathy 2002: 79; Venkatesan 2007: 5).

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<sup>3</sup> The references to 'riding a *maṭal*' are not frequent in the corpus of Old Tamil poetry; the custom is mentioned some 13 times, mainly in *Kuruntokai* 14, 17, 32, 173, 182; *Narriṇai* 146, 152, 342, 377; *Kalittokai* 138, 139, 140, 141 (Zvelebil 1986: 99). In the case of *Kuruntokai* 14, the *maṭal* situation is suggested only in the *kiḷavi*, or the 'colophon' (cf. Wilden 2006: 181). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

Interestingly, the heroine of *Periya tirumaṭal* refers to this convention, and refuting it completely, she says:

... māṅṅ nōkkin  
*aṅṅna naṭaiyār alar ēca āṭavarmēl*  
*maṅṅnum maṭal ūrār eṅpatu ōr vācakamum*  
*teṅ uraiyil kēṭṭu arivatu uṅṭu ataṅṅai yām teḷiyōm*  
*maṅṅnum vaṭaneriyē vēṅṅiṅōm* (PTM 38–40).<sup>4</sup>

It is heard and known that in Southern speech [e.g. texts] there is one utterance saying that those [ladies] who have doe-like eyes and walk like swans do not ride around the village on the *maṭal* for [the love of their] men, while [others] slander [them]. We cannot understand it. [So that is why] we have chosen the northern way.

To support her point of view, she indicates, as the examples of women who were ready to sacrifice themselves in the name of love, the heroines from Sanskrit literary tradition. Thus, she mentions Vaitēvi following the steps of her lord Irāmaṅ (PTM 51), then relates the stories of Vēkavati (PTM 52–54), Ulūpi (PTM 55–59), Uṣai and her friend Cittiralēkai (PTM 60–64), as well as Umai (PTM 65–71). In her opinion there are many other women known from Sanskrit tradition who actively sought to be happily married out of their own choice, and to enumerate all such cases would really take as much time as telling the whole story of the *Mahābhārata* (*paṅṅi uraiṅkuṅkāl pāratamām*; PTM 72). This is one of infrequent early instances where these two traditions, the Northern and South Indian ones, are explicitly mentioned as completely different, contrary and opposed to each other.

The poetry of Tirumaṅkaiyālvār belongs to the bhakti period and besides drawing on classical patterns, it also uses ideas characteristic of this kind of literature. The heroine of his *maṭal* poems is, as in the case of Tamil classical poetry, anonymous and suffers from

<sup>4</sup> For Tamil quotations I am using the edition of Kōpālayyar (Kōpālayyar 2007), where words are separated, neglecting, thus, sandhi and metrical rules.

what is traditionally known as a *kāmanōy* or ‘love-sickness’.<sup>5</sup> We meet her for the first time in *Cīriya tirumaṭal* when, after seeing a young musician dancing in the streets, she immediately and unconsciously falls in love with him:

*nīrār kamalam pōl Ceṅkaṅmāl enru oruvaṅ  
pārōrkaḷ ellām maḱiḷap paṛaikaraṅkac  
cīrār kuṭam irāṅṅu ēntic celunteruvē  
ārār eṅac colli āṭum atu kaṅṅu  
ērār iḷamulaiyār eṅṅaiyarum ellārum  
vārāyō eṅṅārkkuc ceṅṅēṅ eṅ valviṅaiyāl  
kārār maṅiṅiṅramum kaiṅvaḷaiyum kāṅēṅ nāṅ  
ārāṅum colliṅrum kolḷēṅ arivaḷintu  
tīrā uṅampōṅṅu pēturuṅvēṅ... (CTM 11–15).*

When the *paṛai*-drums were beaten, I saw a man known as The Dark [One] Having Red Eyes like water lotuses, [who was] dancing in the street with two heavy pots for the joy of the all onlookers and saying “Who? Who [is next to dance with me]?”. [My] beautiful tender-breasted [friends] and [elder] mothers—everyone was asking [me]: “Didn’t you go [and see]?”, so I went. [And it was] out of my bad *karman* that I couldn’t see [my] colour of dark beautiful gem and the bangles on my hands. If anyone said [anything nice to console me]—I couldn’t accept it. Having lost [my mind and] senses, with an incurable body, I was bewildered.

This kind of unexpected but very deep and strong feelings make her physically and mentally disordered—pallor, the loss of weight causing her bangles to slip off her hands, and fever are major bodily manifestations of her love-sickness, all in accordance with the well-known principles of Tamil poetics (Kusio 2007: 122). In order to cure the heroine, know the basic cause of her sufferings and to remove the symptoms of her sudden illness and mental indisposition, her mother ordered a peculiar ritual of divination performed by a specialist known as the *kaṭṭuvicci*. When the *kaṭṭuvicci* in her ritual trance

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note here that *bhakti* in Tamil Vaiṣṇava circles is defined as a disease, especially an incurable one (*tīrā nōy*). *Vaiṅava uraiṅṅai varalāṅṅu murat tamiḷp pērakarāti* (2001, vol. II, p. 563).

makes the diagnosis, it turns out that the heroine is in love with no one else than Viṣṇu himself, known here under the name of Ceṅkaṅmāl (The Dark [One] Having Red Eyes). **Physically healed, but emotionally still unstable**, the heroine sets out to find him again and to be with him forever. She boldly says:

... *nāṅ avaṅaik*  
*kārār tirumēṇi kāṇum aḷavum pōy* (CTM 68–69).  
 [...]  
*ūr āya ellām oḷiyāmē*... (CTM 75).

In all [these] places [...] I will go [and search for] him till I see [his] holy [beautiful] body [being dark] as the clouds.

Then, in *Periya tirumaṭal*, we see her<sup>6</sup> while searching for and finally finding him in one of the temples, where, at the very moment of seeing him, she again manifests the well-known symptoms of *kāmanōy*, and almost loses her consciousness:

*maṅṅum maṅaiyōr Tirunaṅaiyūr māmalaiṇṇōl*  
*poṅ iyalum māṭak kavāṭam kaṭantu pukku*  
*eṅṅuṭaiya kaṅkaḷippa nōkkinēṅ nōkkutalum*  
*maṅṅaṅ tirumārpum vāyum aṭiyiṅaiyūm*  
*maṅṅu karatalamum kaṅkaḷum paṅkayattiṅ*  
*poṅ iyal kāṭu ōr maṅivaraimēl pūttatupōl*  
*miṅṅi oḷipaṭaiṅpa viḷṅnāṅum tōḷvaḷaiyūm*  
*maṅṅiya kuṅṅalamum āramum nīḷmuṭiyūm*  
*tunṅu veyil viritta cūḷā maṅi imaippa*

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<sup>6</sup> Again, according to the literary conventions of Classical Tamil poetry, the heroine of *Periya tirumaṭal* is anonymous. We can assume that most probably she is the same person who, in *Cīriya tirumaṭal*, suffered from the pangs of love and left her family in order to search for her beloved. Due to bhakti modes of literary creativity we can also add that the heroine(s) of both these works represent(s) their author—Tirumaṅkai. As Venkatesan writes: “the beloved is Vishnu, the lover is Tirumankai in his female persona” (Venkatesan 2007: 5).

*maṅṅu marakatak kuṅṅiṅ maruṅkē ṍr*  
*iṅ iḷa vaṅcik koṭi oṅṅu niṅṅratu tāṅ* (PTM 73–78).

[...]

*eṅṅuṅṅaiya neṅcum aṅṅivum iṅavaḷaiyum*  
*poṅ iyalum mēkalaiyum āṅku oḷiyap pōntērku*  
*maṅṅum maṅiḷaḷalum āṅkkum mati ukutta*  
*iṅṅilāviṅ katirum eṅ taṅakkē veytu ākum* (PTM 80–82).

In Tiruṅṅaiyūr, where Vedic [Brahmins] live, having entered and gone [through] the doors of the golden temple resembling a high mountain, I looked at [him] to delight my eyes. While looking [at him], Lord's chest, mouth, both [his] feet, hands and eyes—all appeared bright as the blooming of a forest of golden lotuses [seen in the pond against] the gem-hued mountain. [When his] waist-band, armlets, earrings and necklace, [his] tall crown and a brilliant diadem-gem [in his hair] were shining—near [him], the hill of emeralds, [the Goddess] was standing, a young and sweet vaṅci creeper. [...]

There [in his presence], [when] I came [to a state of suffering so that] my heart and mind, [my] bangles and golden waist-belt [began] to disappear, the rising sea is roaring [at me], and the [cool] rays of sweet full moon are as if [scorching] heat for me.

It should be noted that in both these texts, God apparently does not respond to the efforts of the girl. She searches for him, but he is indifferent. That is why, wanting to win his heart, she threatens—just like the hero of earlier Classical caṅkam texts—to ride a *maṅṅal*. She is ready to face the world and finally meet her beloved one, no matter what others might say. To achieve her goal, she is ready even to commit this ridiculous, irrational, degrading and humiliating act of riding a horse made of palmyra palm leaves. Thus, in *Ciṅṅiya tirumaṅṅal* she says desperately:

*kārār tirumēṅi kāṅṅum aḷavum pōy* (CTM 69).

[...]

*ūrār ikaḷilum ūṅṅātu oḷiyēṅ nāṅ*  
*vārār pūm peṅṅai maṅṅal* (CTM 77).



I will go [and search for him] till I see [his] holy [beautiful] body [being dark] as the clouds. I will not stop [myself] without riding the long and beautiful palmyra-palm *maṭal*, even if the villagers would despise me.

And again in her threat in *Periya tirumaṭal*, she openly poses a strong condition:

*kalnaviltōl kālaiyaik kaṇṭu āṅku kaitoḷutu*  
*eṅ nilaimai ellām arivittāl emperumāṅ*  
*taṅ aruḷum ākamum tārāṅēl taṅṅai nāṅ* (PTM 134-135).

[...]

... *ulaku aṛiya ūrvaṅ nāṅ* [...] *maṅṅiya pūm peṅṅai maṭal* (PTM 148).

Having seen the bull with the arms being said to be [strong] as rocks, having worshipped [him] there, and letting Him, Our Lord, know all about my state [of mind], then, if He would not give [me] his grace and body, I (...) will wander around on the palmyra-palm *maṭal* to let the world know [about his ways].

It seems that the most important moment in both poems is the first meeting of the hero and heroine. In both cases the heroine had just seen the young man and immediately lost her mind or consciousness (*aṛivu aḷintu*; CTM 15). His activity in their relationship is almost none. We even do not know whether he was able to see or notice her. In *Ciṛiya tirumaṭal* it happened just in the street near her house, where he was dancing with the pots to the rhythm of the drums; in *Periya tirumaṭal* it happened in the temple of Tirunaṅaiyūr (present Nācciyār kōvil), where he was standing on the altar with his wife resting on his body. This is the case of what in Hinduism is generally called *darśana*—‘seeing [God]’, the main form of contact with the deity. So God in *Ciṛiya tirumaṭal* is seen in the street while moving; in *Periya tirumaṭal*—while standing inside the temple premises. In addition, he is not standing alone, since he presents himself together with his wife, which is a very typical image for the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. In Śrīvaiṣṇava temples of today one can encounter two types of *mūrti* (Tamil: *mūrtti*),

or idols, which are simultaneously worshipped. One type is installed permanently at the temple's altar (*mūlavār*), the other—located in front of it—is movable, used for processions and also worshipped outside the temple during festivals (*urcavar*). So the idea of these two different forms of God's *mūrti* is well represented in the *maṭal* poems of Tirumaṅkaiyālvār. The other Śrīvaiṣṇava concepts are also traceable in his works.

Generally, in bhakti poetic tradition, a woman symbolizes the human soul (Parthasarathy 2002: 80, 157). She permanently strives to connect with her beloved (God). Thus, the girl in Tirumaṅkai's poems, in accordance with the tradition of bhakti imagination, represents the human soul striving for contact with God. The blackmailer is here the heroine (or the human soul), and the person being blackmailed—God Himself.

As shown by Parthasarathy (Parthasarathy 2002: 80), in the poetry of Ālvārs, *maṭal* represents nothing but devotion—bhakti. For bhaktas even a mere suggestion of separation from God leads to riding a *maṭal*, it is a state of near death (Parthasarathy 2002: 81).

### 3. Prapatti, or the eternal love-sickness

This method of approaching God through the fierce practice of bhakti is quite opposed to the prapatti (or śaraṇāgati), which is a concept of absolute surrender to God. The idea of peculiar but unreserved surrender as another path—besides bhakti—leading the soul to liberation was very much discussed in Śrīvaiṣṇava circles. In the interpretation of Śrīvaiṣṇavas, it is God who determines the liberation of the soul, it is he who attracts the soul and draws it towards himself. This is exactly what happens in Tirumaṅkai's poems. In this way God shows his grace, making the soul prepared for its liberation, which is again understood as the love between God and the devotee or their soul (Young 1999: 244). Teṅkalai, a southern school of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, recognizes both of these paths leading the soul to liberation, but it also says that bhakti is inferior, subordinate to prapatti. But generally, as Hardy notes: “Śrīvaiṣṇavism makes it quite clear that bhakti

is the strenuous affair of *yoga* exercises, and introduces as an 'easier' alternative *prapatti*, 'surrender in love'" (Hardy 2001: 37). As we can see, the views on the mutual relations of these two means leading to liberation are not always consistent. Moreover, the Teṅkalais are of the opinion that bhakti has its importance both before and after the act of *prapatti*. After the act of *prapatti*, a soul should strive for a more sustainable and even stronger union with God, just on the path of bhakti (Younger 2002: 56).

This is evidently seen in both Tirumaṅkai poems, where the act of heroine's *prapatti* can be understood as her first encounter with God, which resulted in her indisposition manifested as *kāmanōy*, the love-sickness. At the time of direct contact with him, the heroine loses her mind, the world around her is not important any more, she loses touch with reality. We can say that at this very moment the heroine or the soul entrusts her/its future life to God. She, or the soul, while seeing him, entrusts her/its liberation (as we can see, God does not respond, prompting her to try a *maṭal*, or continue the practice of bhakti). His rejection is like the separation of lovers, one cannot stand it. The soul is no longer able to exist in the manifest world, the lack of immediate liberation causes unbearable pain and suffering. We can say, thus, that at the core practice of South Indian bhakti (understood here in terms of riding a *maṭal*) is the pain and suffering caused by the inability to immediately reach and attain (including physically) God. Viraha-bhakti, or the devotion arising out of separation, is the most typical feature of the religious phenomenon that Hardy labelled as 'emotional *Kṛṣṇa* bhakti' (Hardy 2001: 9–10). To practice bhakti in South Indian cultural milieu is to suffer, be frustrated and distressed. However, the unbearable feeling of separation, which is the basic cause of the devotee's inner desperation, gives him very great strength and vigour as such—e.g. the heroine of *Cīriya tirumaṭal* leaves her home alone and sets on pilgrimage to find her beloved, she is even ready to perform a *maṭal*. Bhakti, which according to the Śrīvaiṣṇavas should be practiced after

the act of prapatti, is active, lively, even insane and uncontrollable (just like the *aṇaṅku*, an exceptional power known to ancient Tamil culture).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, we can say, using V. Turner's terminology, that such a soul (like the heroine in love) is in a particular state of liminality. It is no longer a soul unconscious of the existence of God, because it had already seen and recognized him and as a result it completely surrendered to him, but has not yet been released or liberated by him (like the girl who met her lover, but still did not make love with him).

According to the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, in the case of a prapanna (Raman 2007: 121), that is a person who submitted himself to God in the act of prapatti, it is not a soul but God who is an active doer, an agent of the action. Hence, when it comes to the salvation of the prapanna, in such a case there should be no delay. God does not need to wait until *karman* of the soul stops functioning, he may take the soul to himself whenever he wants. But that does not actually happen. The prapanna,

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<sup>7</sup> When discussing the possible origins of the rite of 'palmyra palm horse riding' (*maṭal ērutal*) known from the *caṅkam* texts, A. M. Dubianski (Dubianski 2000: 111) mentions "an analogy of an offering in front of the locked temple of the goddess Korṟavai". The heroine, locked at home, whom the desperate hero cannot meet directly and threatens to publicly disclose her name, resembles the said goddess in her demoniac aspect. Dubianski continues this thought, saying: "Disclosing his beloved to the community in such a way the hero possibly wishes to draw attention to the dangerous aspect of the sacred force inherent in her; the force which is at the moment (out of wedlock) in an uncontrolled state" (Dubianski 2000: 111). In the context of *bhakti* ideas expressed in Tirumaṅkai's two *maṭals*, we can say that—similarly—the heroine is ready to disclose God's forces, i.e. to tell others about his still unrevealed qualities and powers. Tirumaṅkai as a mystic in his visions had a close contact with God and now is ready to describe it. The similarity of God in the medieval *maṭals* by Tirumaṅkai and the threatened heroine of Classical *caṅkam* poetry is clear, but does not work quite correspondingly since God is not locked nor left alone as she was. Being so, his inner and sacred forces might not be dangerous and uncontrolled as is the *aṇaṅku* of the locked girl (or the goddess).

rather than terminate his life after the act of prapatti, is still alive. Likewise, in the *Cīriya tirumaṭal*, the heroine, after hearing the fortune-teller's diagnosis that her love-sickness is caused by the One Who Has a Thousand Names (CTM 52), is still uncured and suffers a lot (CTM 54–57).

There remains another problem—why the prapanna after performing the act of prapatti does not live in happiness but still is in the state of agony. It seems that God intentionally keeps the soul in such a state so that He is still remembered and desired by the soul. Reaching the complete state of happiness by the soul would mean the oblivion of God. Further physical existence of the soul is in fact completely necessary for the experience of God.

As shown by Raman in the context of the poetry of Nammālvār (Raman 2007: 171), the desire to unite with God actually rises after the act of prapatti. It has its end only when the senses and body cease to function. Because after prapatti the soul is still separated from God, the body shall continue its functions and work of its senses. It may therefore have visions of the imagined shape or form of God.<sup>8</sup> But it is not sufficient, it is not a substitute for full salvation, because it is the product of the senses. In fact, the soul is still separated from God and is painfully longing to be finally united with Him.

#### 4. Kaiṅkarya, or pleasing God by suffering

Kaiṅkarya, or offering service to God, being the “essential religious duty of a devotee of Viṣṇu” (Chari 2000: 290), is another term used

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<sup>8</sup> It is quite important that, for example in *Periya tirumaṭal*, the heroine first sees the shape of God, then she loses her senses, then recovers and only after that in the poem we have a description of various forms of God. The same situation is present in *Cīriya tirumaṭal*—a detailed description of God's form is done only after the kaṭṭuvicci's visionary diagnosis is over. The heroine learns about the God as soon as she recovers, that is after performing her prapatti. The very vision of God's body makes her getting ready to ride a *maṭal*, or to practice the emotional form of bhakti.

by the Śrīvaiṣṇava theologians that helps us to better understand Tirumaṅkai's poems. This obligatory duty to please God should be performed without thinking of any future benefits for the devotee; it is performed only for the pleasure of God. Of course, different acts of this kind of service were enumerated in religious treatises, all of them corresponding to the different capacities of the devotee. It is important that these services should conform to the wishes of God (Chari 1998: 291), and whatever is done by the soul is actually prompted by Him. As Chari stresses, the mere vision of God might be regarded as divine service (Chari 1998: 291).

Coming back to the *maṭal* poems, it may be puzzling why in order to describe his feelings towards God and to propagate a new kind of religious devotion, Tirumaṅkai chose the humiliating and ridiculed act known in the past. As we know from the post-caṅkam *Tirukkuraḷ*, men riding a *maṭal* were thought to lose their manliness and, being ridiculed, were the subject of gossip and mocking. They were considered as shameless and pitiful. In such circumstances, it was really not an easy decision for a man to ride a *maṭal* since his masculine honor suffered, his male dignity was lost. Here the blackmailing of God seems to be an act which should not be ridiculed, but is given as an example of proper conduct, of most appropriate behaviour. The threat of riding a *maṭal* in the context of bhakti is positive because it is believed that the soul seeks unity with God at all costs, even at the cost of blackmail, or being ridiculed in the eyes of others. Rangaswami (Rangaswami 1997: 94) writes that when the follower of Śrīvaiṣṇavism makes his religious duties (kaiṅkarya), in his action he can go even as far as the activities incompatible with his svarūpa, his own nature. The faithful one is in fact obliged to fully devote himself to his duties. In the case of a Śrīvaiṣṇava devotee, his being dressed in feminine attire and performing *maṭal* aims to shame God if he does not care about the bhakta's prapatti (Rangaswami 1997: 101) or self-surrender. So *maṭal* can be seen in the community of Śrīvaiṣṇavas also as one's own kaiṅkarya, a duty and religious discipline of the follower who goes to extremes in order to gain the favor

of his beloved God. The disgraceful meaning of the act of threatening one's God is reduced by the theological assumption that kainkarya as such is an act not only totally pleasing to God, but also stimulated by him as the only active Being. Just like the heroine of *Cīriya tirumaṭal* was charmed and attracted by God as a young musician-cum-magician (who actively was encouraging young maidens to dance with him, doing it also for his own pleasure<sup>9</sup>), the girl in *Periya tirumaṭal* might be viewed as the soul compelled by God to do a peculiar kainkarya for his own pleasure. God is seen, thus, not as the one whose being is threatened, but the one who actually helps the soul to approach him and gain release.

### 5. Tirumaṅkaiyālvār and Śrīvaiṣṇavism—once again

Early medieval South India witnessed a series of significant changes in various spheres of life. Socio-economic processes of this period, such as the emergence of caste institution, a new agrarian irrigation-based dominance system, a new political structure and division of labor, infrequently referred to as the 'Indian feudalism' or just the 'New Social Formation' (Gurukkal 2010: 15), had also a strong impact on philosophical worldview and religious activities. The bhakti movement, strongly opposing in Tamil India to the Buddhist and Jaina ideas, reinterpreting to some extent Hindu doctrines as well,<sup>10</sup> was also influenced by historical developments. The cult concentrated around local temples, various local God manifestations representing him simultaneously as the king and the Lord, the newly created ideal of a perfect devotee seen as the God-King bonded slave—all these, and generally speaking

<sup>9</sup> The words *ār ār* "Who? Who [is next to dance with me]?" (CTM 12) clearly indicate that it was his own wish to continue the play. Consequently, riding a *maṭal* can be understood as the act of serving God according to his intention and due to his expectations, leaving one's own benefits aside.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in *Periya tirumaṭal* (11–38) we have discussion on the traditionally recognized four *puruṣārthas*, resulting in the total rejection of them all except the *kāma* (love; desire).

the whole ideology of early bhakti imagination, reflected social realities of the time (Gurukkal 2010: 293). The voice of suppressed lower castes, to which many Tamil poet-saints belonged, expressed in their visions of the assumed better divine world and the promises of God's eternal love and grace, was later in the Middle Ages incorporated into the religious system supporting contemporary social transformations. The songs of many low-caste or even untouchable saints became the holy scripture of orthodox Brahmins. In fact, it seems that in early Tamil bhakti tradition, the elements of social protest were not so much expressed as in the case of the North, focusing rather on the levelling of caste or sex barriers (Viswanathan Peterson 2007: 9). As Zvelebil (Zvelebil 1973: 194) argued, the Tamil bhakti movement was not a 'positive' social protest, but it should be rather understood as 'social negativism'. In both of Tirumaṅkaiyālvār's *maṭal* poems, we can see traces of such an attitude, for example in the bold refutation of the generally recognized *puruṣārthas* or accepting the so far male dominated custom of riding the *maṭal*, which was to be performed openly in the public sphere of social life; then the heroine's abandonment of her family and household in the search of her beloved, and rejection of social bondages and obligations during her lonely journeys to different temples, etc.

As has been already mentioned, the bhakti movement in Tamil India (especially Śaiva bhakti) was largely built in opposition to Buddhist and Jaina views. As noted by Zvelebil (Zvelebil 1973: 195), due to their teaching that the final liberation could be achieved only through getting rid of society's influences, "they were strong enough to be very probably a powerful antisocial factor in the Tamil society in the middle of the first millennium A.D.". The other interesting factor was that they (especially Jainas), although significantly contributed to the development of Tamil literature of this period, neglected the language spoken by the masses. In the common understanding, their philosophical and ethical concepts, strong asceticism, Northern origin and political connections, as well as ignorance of the linguistic



intricacies of the Tamil diglossic situation, gradually made them more or less alienated from the rest of society.

The bhakti movement appeared in contrast to these points—bhakti poets spoke about enjoying the world and merciful gods in their material forms who could be reached by everyone, regardless of their social or economic status. They also used the local language as well as earlier classical and probably folk Tamil literary devices and motifs. Historically, early medieval South India witnessed the stable political growth of local dynasties—the origins of the Pallava kingdom, and later Chola dominance, etc., which undoubtedly contributed to ‘a strong Tamil national feeling’ (Zvelebil 1973: 197). This ‘return to the roots’ of the traditional Tamil cultural environment, or some kind of ‘first Tamil renaissance’, most probably explains Tirumaṅkai’s decision to apply the old theme of customary ‘riding a *maṭal*’ to propagate his new religious path and his own emotional devotion. The nature of Tamil early bhakti in its socio-historical context can, thus, be characterised as ‘the movement towards communal solidarity’, the building of new ‘devotional communities’ (Viswanathan Peterson 2007: 9).

Śrīvaiṣṇavism, born as a distinct religious tradition of South Indian Vaiṣṇava communities, continues these tendencies, accepting both Tamil and Sanskrit sources. The devotional poetry of Tamil Ālvārs provided a basis for subsequent theological speculations, both in Tamil and Sanskrit. These two tongues were mixed in medieval South India and a hybrid language known as Manipravālam (Tamil: maṇippiravālam) was used prevalently by the Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars in their theological works and commentaries. This duality of traditions accepted by the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, their school of Ubhaya-Vedānta, or in the words of Hopkins (Hopkins 2003: 31) “a vigorous synthesis of the religious and cultural idioms of Tamil and Sanskrit”, is undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of Indian thought.

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