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**Drowning in the Beauty of the Lord:
A Glimpse at the Medieval Śrīvaiṣṇava Commentators' Interpretation
of the *pādādi-keśa-varṇana* of Tiruppāṇ Āḷvār's *Amalaṅkātipirāṇ****

SUMMARY: This article explores how three medieval Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators—Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai (13th c.), Aḷakiya Maṇavāla Perumāḷ Nāyaṅār (14th c.) and Vedānta Deśikaṅ (14th c.)—deal with the passages that describe the different body parts of Raṅganātha, the main Deity in Śrīraṅgam, in Tiruppāṇ Āḷvār's (9th c.) set of ten verses. Known as *Amalaṅkātipirāṇ* (AAP),¹ this decade, now part of the *Nālāyira Tivviyap Pirapantam* (or *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham*), follows the eyes of the poet, as they gradually move from the Deity's foot to His head. The commentators make the most of these descriptions in order to emphasize the importance of beauty, which is visible, hence accessible, to everyone in His *arcā* ('sacred icon'²) form and which is inextricably linked to His other attributes like sovereignty.

KEYWORDS: *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham*, Śrīvaiṣṇava commentary, Tiruppāṇ Āḷvār, *Amalaṅkātipirāṇ*, Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai, Aḷakiya Maṇavāla Perumāḷ Nāyaṅār, Vedānta Deśika

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¹ For more on this text, see Hopkins 2004, Hopkins 2005, Hardy 1991, and Dhananjayan 2001.

² The definition of *arcā* is complex in this context. For more information, see Narayanan 1985.

Introduction

For the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, a commentary is no doubt a means of elucidating a text, and also of illustrating theological concepts, but it is also meant to provide them and their audience with divine *anubhava* ('experience', 'enjoyment'). In Steven Hopkins's words,

[...] in this tradition, [...] to comment on a text is not so much to dissect it into minute doctrinal particulars, but rather to re-experience it. Commentary here is a kind of imaginative participation, a 'spiritual enjoyment' equal in the intensity of relish to the enjoyment of God in the root text. (Hopkins 2005: 22)

And what topic can inspire enjoyment in the heart of a devotee more than the form of his/her favourite Deity? That a short decade should get three commentaries by important Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas gives us an idea about how special it was thought to be. And one important reason why it was so is that it focused on the beauty of a tangible Deity in the form of an accessible *arcā*. And for the *viśiṣṭādvaitins*, the belief that God has forms and attributes such as beauty is something that distinguishes them from the *advaitins*, for example. So theologically, the beauty of the Lord is an important topic. Is this obvious in the way the three commentators comment upon the passages describing Raṅganātha's limbs? Do they favour one function of the commentary over the other? Are their styles and intentions similar? If not, where and why do they differ, especially given that the last two commentators will immensely influence their respective followers, and progressively (if unwittingly) cause a schism in Rāmānuja's school, centuries after they lived? Because, due to lack of space, it was not possible for me to use the whole texts of all three commentaries for this article,³ I have chosen to focus here on a few sample passages in which the Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators comment upon the physical aspect of the main Deity in Śrīraṅgam in order to see what they make of it and to seek answers to these questions.

³ This is the main aim of my next book, in which I will include the complete translations of all three commentaries along with a study of the different commentarial styles, methods and their theological implications.

1. The poet, the commentators and their commentaries

Hagiographical works, such as the *Divyasūricaritam* and the various *Guruparamparās*, like the *Ārāyirappaṭi Guruparamparāprabhāvam*, tell us slightly different stories concerning the Ālvār:⁴ that he was an outcaste (something that cannot be proved from the content of that poem, which is devoid of even a signature verse), who had no access to the temple of his favourite god, Raṅganātha, in Śrīraṅgam. To cut a long story short, the Lord decided to see him, and therefore commanded that he be brought inside the temple. As the Ālvār was reluctant to tread upon the sacred space, one of the priests carried him over his shoulder. Seeing the icon of Raṅganātha, the Ālvār, enraptured by its beauty, sang ten songs and disappeared in the *sanctum sanctorum*. This text was first commented upon by Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai (traditional date: ca. 1250 [Raman 2007: 61]), the earliest among the three, known as the *vyākhyāna-cakravartin* (‘emperor of commentaries’), since he has commented upon the whole of the NTP, among other works. The next was by Aḷakiya Maṇavāḷa Perumāḷ Nāyaṅār (ca. 1207–1309 [Mumme 1988: 9]), the son of Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai’s co-disciple Vaṭakku Tiruvīti Piḷḷai. He has composed commentaries on two more works belonging to the NTP, but he is more known for his *Ācāryahrdayam*, a *rahasya-grantha* (‘esoteric work’), which praises the greatness of Nammālvār and compares the *Tiruvāymoli* with the *Bhagavadgītā* (Reddiar 1977: 774–775). Nāyaṅār is also the brother of the more famous Piḷḷai Lokācārya, whose set of works is seen as one of the triggers that progressively led to a theological schism among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. This split resulted in the formation of two schools, the Southern one (*tenkalai*), to which this commentator would have belonged had he lived later, and the Northern one (*vaṭakalai*), which now reveres as its head the next commentator, Vedānta Deśika.

Deśika (traditional dates: 1268–1369 [Raman 2007: 4]), a well-known philosopher, theologian and poet, has composed works in many genres, but only a handful of commentaries (of which two at least are lost to us),

⁴ For the different versions of the story and their analysis, see Hardy 1991.

including the one on AAP, known as *Munivāhanabhogam* (‘the enjoyment of the one who had a Muni [or ‘the sage’] as his vehicle’). Although a commentary, this work, which deals with theological tenets, is also traditionally considered as a *rahasya-grantha*, often published along with his other minor works, known as *cillarai rahasyaṅkaḷ*.

An anecdote with virtually no historical value (except for letting us have a glimpse of the kind of animosity that existed between the people of the two schools) links Piḷḷai, Deśika and the writing of the *Munivāhanabhogam*: a pre-19th century (Raman 2007: 51) *teṅkalai* hagiographic work known as *Paḷanaṭai viḷakkam* by Tirumaḷicai Anṇapayyaṅkār (also known as Kōyil Kantāṭai Anṇaṅ) narrates that an old, dying Piḷḷai points out to Deśika that he had an unacceptable take on a number of religious issues, including his strict views on castes, which does not befit a Śrīvaiṣṇava. The older man guides him with good advice and, eventually, being requested by Deśika, he asks him to choose one among the icons that he himself had worshipped. A blindfolded Deśika picks Tiruppāṅālvār’s icon, and understands what the divine message was: devotion is greater than caste. And it is in these circumstances that he wrote this commentary on AAP, following Piḷḷai’s suggestion.⁵ This story was, of course, refuted by the *vaṭakalai* side, but without entering into the fray of the debate, we can simply point out that Deśika was much younger than Piḷḷai, and, in fact, could not possibly have met him at all. Whether they met each other or not (Nāyaṅār was probably personally acquainted with Piḷḷai), the two later scholars definitely knew of Piḷḷai’s commentary on AAP, as we shall see.

2. Making basic comments

Sometimes, the words in the original poem are easy to understand and the commentator does not need to give their literal meanings. Therefore, he either looks beyond their surface meaning and offers them

⁵ It is not yet clear to me how old the story is and when it was first told, as I am still trying to get hold of older hagiographic works that may have mentioned it.

inner, often theological interpretations; or, he just writes for the sake of, so to speak, enjoying a good talk about God together with the fellow devotees in the audience; or else, he does both at times. Let us see how this reference to the Lord's mouth is analysed: *māyaṅār ceyya vāy aiyō eṅṅai cintai kavartatuvē* (AAP 7)—‘Oh! The red mouth of the venerable Dark One has stolen my mind.’⁶

Pillai: *ceyya vāy—śtrīkaḷuṭaiya poy cirippilē tuvakk_u uṅṅārkk_u i- cirippu kaṅṅāl porukka oṅṅumō.*⁷

The red mouth—Is it possible for those who are entangled in the fake laughter of women to bear [it] if they see this laughter?

Nāyanār: *ceyya vāy—śtrīkaḷuṭaiya poy cirippilē tuvakk_u uṅṅārkk_u i- cirippu kaṅṅāl porukka oṅṅumō.*

The red mouth—Is it possible for those who are entangled in the fake laughter of women to bear [it] if they see this laughter?

⁶ All the translations given in this article are mine unless stated otherwise. For a complete translation of this poem, please see the appendix.

⁷ Various issues need to be taken into account while transcribing Maṅḍiravāḷam and solving the sandhi in the text, something that Erin McCann and I have been testing for a while. We are yet to find a satisfying solution, hence the seeming discrepancies (e.g. the *-um* suffix is left attached to the word that precedes it, while the absolute *āy* is placed after a hyphen). I humbly request the reader to check out the original text in the *grantha* script (in the published *Amalaṅṅātipirāṅṅ* commentaries, *Amalaṅṅātipirāṅṅ vyākhyānaṅkaḷ* 2009 for example) in case of any doubt. The text in Maṅḍiravāḷam has not been given here due to lack of space. The same goes for the Tamil text as well. As for proper names in Maṅḍiravāḷam (such as *Ācāryahrdayam*), they combine both Sanskrit and Tamil, hence transcribed in a hybrid way. In fact, Deśika himself ought to be spelt as Deśikaṅ, as this appellation is a fusion of two languages and traditions (Sanskrit word with a Tamil ending in this case), and it is how the name is still pronounced by the erudite Śrīvaiṣṇavas. In this article, however, it has been left in Sanskrit for convenience's sake. Please note that proper names in Sanskrit, especially mythological ones, have been transcribed according to the Sanskrit phonetic system, even though they sound different in Tamil. As for place names, unless they are well-known (like Madurai or Chidambaram), I have written them as they are pronounced in the local language.

Piḷḷai makes an indirect comparison between the Lord’s smile and women’s laughter, which is pejorative here: besides being human and fake, hence ephemeral and motivated respectively, it is ensnaring, possibly because it keeps a soul tied down to *samsāra*. And we have to read between the lines to understand that God’s smile is the opposite, being divine, eternal, natural and enchanting for good reasons. It is not clear here whether the barely veiled criticism of men who fall for the feminine charm is destined for any man, or for Tiruppāṇālvār in particular, who is the one after all who claims that his mind was captured by the beauty of the Lord’s mouth. But then, none of the commentators (nor hagiographical works) mention his having been enticed by a woman, unlike Toṅṅaraṭṭipōṭi Ālvār.⁸

We can notice that Nāyaṅār has nothing to add, and therefore simply repeats Piḷḷai’s comment verbatim, unlike Deśika:

Deśika: ceyya vāy aiyō eṇṇai cintai kavarnatativē—vāliyat_u ōr kaṇi kol’ eṇṇalām paṭi-āṇa varṇamādhuryādikaḷai uṭaitt_u-āy, vaiyam ēlum uḷḷē kāṇalām paṭi-āṇa ceyya vāy eṇ cintaiyai paṛittu koṇṭatu.

The red mouth has stolen my mind—the red mouth—which possesses colour, sweetness, etc. in such a way that one wonders, “Is it an excellent ripe fruit?” (TVM 7.7.3), and which is such that all seven worlds can be seen inside [it]—has taken my mind by force.

Not repeating his predecessors’ interpretation, Deśika first gives a *pramāṇa* (‘authoritative evidence’ or ‘valid means of knowledge’⁹) to show that Tiruppāṇ is not the only poet to mention the red mouth of the Lord.¹⁰ However, this quotation does not seem to bring anything

⁸ Hagiography claims that he allowed himself to be seduced by a temple-dancer. His own work *Tirumālai* presents association with women as rather negative. In fact, Piḷḷai seems to echo *Tirumālai* 16: *mātarār kayal kaṇ eṇṇum valai uḷ paṭṭ_u aḷuntuvēṇai* (‘me, who am sinking having been caught in the nets called the *kayal*-fish[-like] eyes of women’). This is an idea that is neither new nor uncommon in *bhakti* poetry.

⁹ The Śrīvaiṣṇavas seem to use this word to refer to quotations that support their claims and that serve as authoritative evidence.

¹⁰ When they want to prove a point or show that an Ālvār’s word is valid in a wider context, the Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators quote a *pramāṇa* from a set

new to the commentary, except that the Ālṅvārs have had similar ideas about God. The second thing that he does is linking the *arcā* of Raṅganātha with the Lord's incarnation (*vibhava*) as Kṛṣṇa—to which he alludes through his mention of the world being visible inside His mouth—and through that, to His form as the Creator, Protector and Destroyer of all, who holds everything within Him. He therefore uses the occasion to reiterate Nārāyaṇa's supremacy, which paradoxically co-exists with His accessibility (both in His *arcā* and *vibhava* forms), of which the whole event is an example (i.e. Kṛṣṇa obeying a human mother).

We can see here that Deśika goes slightly beyond making basic comments, even though all three commentators seem to agree that this part of the verse does not need a literal gloss.

3. Indulging in the divine *anubhava* of the Lord's beauty

In the following case, in which Raṅganātha's clothes are described, nothing but enjoying the description of the Lord's beauty is all that the commentators seem to want unanimously: *araṅkatt_u ammāṅ arai civanta ātaiyiṅ mēl cenrat_u ām eṅ cintānaiyē* (AAP 2)—‘My thoughts have gone to the red cloth around the waist of the Lord of Raṅgam.’ The words are, once again, fairly easy to understand. So what does the commentator do in such a situation?

of works that are agreed upon as valid and therefore are in common with other religions which consider themselves as following the Vedas, e.g. the Vedas, certain *upanīśads* and *purāṇas*, etc. To have such a common corpus—despite the fact that universal agreement was not always easy to reach or apply—made it easier for theologians of different sects within the Vedic fold to have a common ground for debating and establishing “the truth.” But while these *pramāṇas* are Sanskrit works, the Śrīvaiṣṇavas include also the Ālṅvārs' works in their list, especially the *Tiruvāymoli*, which is quoted here, especially when their target audience is composed of fellow Śrīvaiṣṇavas. It is also worth mentioning here that Deśika restricts himself to quoting non-Vedic *pramāṇas* in his Maṇipravāḷam works, as the latter are accessible to a wider audience that might include non-Brahmins and women, who are not supposed to listen to or utter the Vedas.

Pillai: *arai civanta ātai—uṭai ārnta ātai; cekkar mā mukil; tiru mēṇikku parabhāgam-āna tiru pītāmbaram.*¹¹

The red clothes around the waist—‘A cloth that spread as a garment’¹² (TVM 3.7.4); ‘[wearing] a great, red cloud’ (*Tiruvācīriyam* 1); superior sacred gold garments for the sacred body—¹³

Pillai gives two *pramāṇas* from other works of the NTP to show that His wearing clothes, and that their colour is red, are facts established by other Ālvārs too. We may notice in passing here, that the shortness of the quotations—sometimes without an accompanying verb to introduce them, which could make it easier for us to understand them¹⁴—leads us to believe that the commentator presumes that everyone in his audience knows the whole verses, and can follow his reasoning without his being elaborate.

¹¹ Whenever a commentator writes an incomplete sentence (e.g. when his gloss is a clause with an absolute), I have left it as such in English, because this is a matter of stylistic choice or an idiosyncratic practice, which is not necessarily to be found in all the commentators. Deśika, it seems to me, tends to write complete sentences more often.

¹² Literally, this is what these words mean, as both *uṭai* and *ātai* mean ‘clothes’ and ‘cloth’ respectively. Periyavāccāṇ Pillai, in his commentary on the TVM, seems to take *uṭai* as *iṭai* (‘waist’), but the *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* does not cite any such meaning for *uṭai*. At best, *uṭai* can mean wealth, so that we can translate this passage as ‘He with garments that abound with wealth.’ Having said that, we do find expressions such as *uṭaitāram* (‘cord or girdle used as an ornamental belt over the waist-cloth’ TL), which seem to indicate the words *iṭai* and *uṭai* may have been interchangeably used at some point in time.

¹³ The VG defines *parabhāgam* as *mēṇmai* (‘superiority’), hence this translation. This expression can also be understood as ‘sacred gold garments that are superior **to** the body.’ Another possible reading is ‘the sacred gold garments that **form** the outer part of the sacred body.’

¹⁴ This is the case of ‘a great, red cloud,’ where quoting an extra word ‘wearing’ can make quite a difference, for otherwise even God can be described as a cloud.

Nāyaṇār: arai civanta āṭaiyiṅ mēl—meghaśyāmam-āṇa tiru araikku parabhāgarasāvaham-āṇa tiru pītābarattiṅ mēlē.

Upon the red clothes around the waist—Upon the sacred gold garments that are delightful and that form the outer part of the sacred waist, which is black like the clouds—

Nāyaṇār goes a step further when he uses the more subjective ‘delightful’ to describe these clothes.

Deśika: arai civanta āṭaiyiṅ mēl—‘paṭi cōti āṭaiyoṭum pal kalaṅ-āy niṅ paim poṅ kaṭi cōti kalantatuvō’ eṇṇum paṭi tikaḷāniṅṅa tiru araiyilē, madhukaiṭabharudirapaṭalattālēpōlapāṭalamāy, maratakagirimekhalaiyilē bālātapam parantāppōlē irukkīṅṅa tiru pītāmbara viṣayam-āka.

Upon the red clothes around the waist—On the topic of the sacred gold garments—which are as if the morning sunshine spread across the girdle of the emerald mountain, being pale red as if due to the coating of Madhu’s and Kaiṭabha’s blood—around the sacred waist, which shines in such a way that one [could] say, ‘Did the brightness of Your beautiful gold [-like] waist mix with the clothes that are bright by nature along with various ornaments?’ (TVM 3.1.1)

And Deśika goes a little further still by giving two comparisons to describe the exact shade of redness of the clothes (the morning sun and the *rākṣasas*’ blood), one of which links Raṅganātha to Viṣṇu who kills the demons.¹⁵ This is a means of showing that the Lord who appears in the *arcā* form is the same as the One in the *vyūha* (‘emanation’, tr. Grimes 1996: 143, 356) one, a practice that had already been adopted by the Āḷvārs. And Deśika also gives the extra interpretation that both the Lord’s waist and the clothes that He wears are inherently good-looking and add to each other’s beauty by quoting a part of a different verse from the TVM.

We can notice that all three commentators make explicit what the Lord is wearing (*pītāmbara*—‘yellow clothes’). But, except for Deśika, the others do not add much in terms of explanation. And even

¹⁵ There are many version of this story. Madhu and Kaiṭabha were born in Viṣṇu’s ears. As they persecuted Brahmā by stealing and hiding the Vedas, Viṣṇu killed them both.

Deśika does not get too theological here. They are all seemingly content to enjoy the description of the Lord's beauty, while hinting at the fact that the other Ālvārs have described His clothes in a similar way, which is a means to prove the validity of Tiruppāṇ's words, but also probably to show that, ultimately, all the Ālvārs said the same thing(s).¹⁶

4. The Lord's beauty as a *vyāja* for theologizing

At times, the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas use any excuse (*vyāja*) to make theological points, for example in some of their comments on AAP 1, *araṅkatt_u ammāṅ_u tiru kamala pātam vant_u eṅ kaṅṅiṅ uḷḷaṅa okkiṅratē* '... it is as if the holy lotus feet of the Lord of Raṅgam come and stay in[side] my eyes.'

Pillai: *tiru kamalapātam*—*cevvīyumu, kuḷirttiyumu, vikāsamumu, parimaḷamumu toṭakkam-āṅavai. ādityaṅgai kaṅṅāl-irē tāmarai alaruvatu; i- tāmaraiḱku ādityaṅ ivaṅ: pīrāṭṭi tiru mulai-taṭaṅkaḷilumu tiru kaṅkaḷilumu orri koḷḷumu tiru aṭikaḷ. ivaruṭaiya taḷir puraiyumu tiru aṭikaḷ iruḱkiṅra paṭi.*
ammāṅ_u tiru kamala pātam—*toṭarntu varuḱaiḱku pṛāpti.*

The sacred lotus feet—Redness, coolness, brightness, fragrance, etc. It is when perceiving the sun that the lotus blooms; he [Tiruppāṇ] is the sun for this lotus. They are the sacred feet that the Goddess presses against [Her] sacred breasts and [Her] sacred eyes. [This is] how 'His sacred feet, which resemble tender shoots' (TNT 1) are.

The Lord's sacred lotus feet—[their] destiny is to come following [me].

Pillai begins by giving a string of nouns without placing them in a complete sentence. He also gives a *pramāṇa* from Tirumaṅkai's *Tiruneṭuntāṅṅakam* (TNT), but, once again, he is so succinct that it is not necessarily possible to grasp the purpose of this quotation or its whole meaning unless we have some more context: *taḷir puraiyumu tiru aṭi eṅ talai mēlavē* ('His sacred feet, which resemble tender shoots, are on my head')

¹⁶ An oft-repeated quotation, which I have not been able to trace yet but which is frequently mentioned for example by Velukkudi Krishnan (Velukkudi 2016) in his oral discourses, is *pēciṅṅē pēcum ekakaṅṅtharkaḷ*— '[the Ālvārs] had one voice that spoke what was already spoken [by the others],' i.e. they spoke in one voice.

is the complete sentence in TNT 1, which helps us draw the parallel between Śrī placing His lotus feet on her breasts and eyes, and Tirumaṅkai placing them on his head.

Piḷḷai then takes the feet/lotus metaphor of the Āḷvār further, by reminding us that the sun is what causes the flower to bloom, and who in this case represents the sun that causes the lotus feet of the Lord to bloom. However, his use of *ivar* (‘this person,’ 3rd honorific) is ambiguous here. Is it here a reference to Tiruppāṇ, which would be a logical reading? Often, Piḷḷai uses the honorific form for the Āḷvār (e.g. in the *Perumāḷ Tirumōḷi*), and the non-honorific 3rd person masculine for the Lord. But here, the 2nd *ivar* in the paragraph (with a possessive suffix) unambiguously refers to the Lord (‘His sacred feet, which resemble tender shoots’). And it is Nāyaṅār who steps in to clarify the ambiguity, but before we see how he does it, let us point out that Piḷḷai’s last sentence about His feet (‘[their] destiny is to come following [me]’) declare that the Lord cannot help but follow the devotee, such is His *vātsalya* (‘filial love’). Once again, this shows the Lord’s *pāratantrya* (dependence) on the devotee, whereas one would expect only the latter’s dependence on Him.

Nāyanār: *tiru kamala pātam*—*perukk_u āṟṟilē ilivār teppam koṇṭu iliyumāppōlē oru tāmarai pūvai dṛṣṭāntam ākkukīṟār. cevvi, kuḷṟitti, nāṟram, vikāsam ivai tāmarai pū pōlē irukkaiyālē. ādityasannidhiyilē alarum tāmarai pōlē āśritasannidhiyilē alarum tāmarai āyṭtu tiru aṭikaḷ. pirāṭṭi tiru mulai taṭattilum, tiru kaṅkaḷilum orṟi koḷḷum tiru aṭikaḷ. ivaruṭaiya taḷṟ puraiyum tiru aṭi irukkīṟa paṭi. ‘ammāṅṅ tiru kamala pātam’ eṅkaiyālē prāptamum-āy prāpyamum-āṅṅa tiru aṭikaḷ eṅkai. “nārāyaṅa caraṅaṅkaḷ!” eṅṟa paṭi. vantu eṅṟu aṭiṅṟaiya upāyapūrti collukīṟatu. vantu—vidhiśivasanakādyair dhyātumatyantadūram-āṅṅa tiru aṭikaḷ kiṭṟ eṅ aḷavum vantu viṣayikarittatu.*

The sacred lotus feet—like those who descend in a flooding river do so with a raft,¹⁷ he turns a lotus into an example. Because these—[the feet’s] redness, coolness, fragrance and blossoming—are like a lotus flower’s.

¹⁷ As we shall see later, the Lord’s beauty is here (and elsewhere) compared to a powerful flood which tends to carry away the devotee, who, in this case, tries to hold to His lotus feet—a derisory support, itself being beautiful—in order not to be swept away by the currents.

Like a lotus that blooms in the presence of the sun, [His] sacred feet are lotuses that bloom in the presence of those who have taken refuge. They are the sacred feet that the Goddess presses against [Her] sacred breasts and [Her] sacred hands. [This is] how ‘His sacred feet, which resemble tender shoots’ (TNT 1) are. Because [he] says ‘The sacred lotus feet of the Lord,’ it means that the sacred feet are both what is suitable (*prāptam*) as well as what is fit to be obtained (*prāpyam*). It is like saying “Nārāyaṇa’s feet.” By [saying] **having come**, their being the completeness of the means¹⁸ is mentioned. Look! The sacred feet that ‘are infinitely [too] distant to be meditated upon by the creator, Śiva, Śanaka, etc.’ (*Stotraratnam* 47) came all the way to me¹⁹ and considered me as an object worthy of attention.’

Nāyaṇār draws the parallel between the lotus/sun and the Lord’s feet/the devotee’s feet in a clear way so as to leave no confusion (see underlined passage) as Piḷḷai did.²⁰ Similarly, when Piḷḷai is cryptic, Nāyaṇār makes sure that he is clearly understood. For example, Piḷḷai glosses ‘lotus’ with a string of nouns in what is not a complete sentence: it is understandable that a commentator who has commented upon the whole of the NTP might not find it necessary to repeat what he has probably written many times before, especially since this comparison is commonplace—which also means that it is not impossible for the audience to guess what Piḷḷai means. And yet, Nāyaṇār makes this explicit by placing these nouns in a proper sentence: ‘Because these— [the feet’s] redness, coolness, fragrance and blossoming—are like a lotus flower’s.’ So it seems to me that Nāyaṇār’s commentary functions almost like a subcommentary when needs be: it clarifies Piḷḷai’s words when they are too elliptical, and follows or even repeats him when there is nothing more to add, like the following sentence and quotation in the passage, which are almost taken verbatim from Piḷḷai’s work. But he does not systematically stop at that: he adds extra

¹⁸ S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar, one of the modern commentators, explains that the feet are filled with the quality of being the means (in Balaji 2009: 74).

¹⁹ Literally, ‘they came up to me.’

²⁰ While explaining Piḷḷai’s comment, Aiyangar feels it necessary to clarify who the sun is: *inta pāta tāmaraikku cūriyaṇ tiruppāṇālvār*—‘The sun for these lotus feet is Tiruppāṇālvār’ (Balaji 2009: 54).

evidence (*pramāṇa*) and develops an idea when he deems it useful, e.g. when he mentions a theological interpretation of the role of the feet (*prāpya/prāpta*).

When writing his own comments, Nāyaṇār is not necessarily very clear himself, e.g. when he says “It is saying ‘Nārāyaṇa’s feet’”, which is rather unclear. S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar, a modern commentator who explains the commentaries in modern Tamil (in Balaji 2009: 74), glosses this as *dvayattil conṇa paṭiyē ‘nārāyaṇa caraṇaṅkaḷ’ enra paṭi*—“It is saying ‘Nārāyaṇa’s feet’ as uttered in the *dvaya* [-mantra].” For one thing, we can see that he draws a parallel between the Ālvār’s words (that simply alluded to the sacred feet of the Lord) and one of the most sacred mantras for the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. And for another, it is interesting to see that Nāyaṇār rightly presumes that he does not need to make a whole sentence or give more of the quotation because everyone would know this quote—for all the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, for whom this text is destined, would have been initiated into the *dvaya-mantra*.²¹ But what is even more interesting here is that instead of quoting directly a part of the mantra in its original Sanskrit, which by the way uses the dual form (*nārāyaṇa caraṇau*), he translates it into Tamil in plural. Why would he do so? Was there a mistake while transmitting the original text of the commentary in the form of a manuscript? Was the Sanskrit deliberately removed for whatever reason and the Tamil translation inserted at a later time, especially when they were printed in book forms? While I have not yet been able to consult a manuscript of Nāyaṇār’s commentary, I think it can be safely claimed that he did actually use the Tamil *nārāyaṇa caraṇaṅkaḷ* simply because the mantra is exclusively reserved for the initiated, technically not to be revealed or uttered even partially to non-Śrīvaiṣṇavas. And the access to a *vyākhyāna*, whether orally spoken or read from a written source, cannot be easily restricted, hence the precaution, which is rather similar to Deśika refraining from quoting from Vedic sources in his Tamil or Maṇipravāḷam writings (see fn. 11).

²¹ For more on this two-lined mantra, see Mumme 1987: 5.

What does Deśika do here?

Deśika: *tiru kamala pātam*—*pāvanatvabhogyatvaṅkaḷālē śubhāśrayaṅkaḷ-āṇa tiru aṭikaḷ. tiruvukku līlakamalam pōlē irukkīra pādam eṇṇavumām.*

The sacred lotus feet—They are sacred feet that are the shelter for auspiciousness due to [their] purity and [quality of] being enjoyable. It also means that they are feet which are like the play-lotus for Śrī.

He seems to be comparatively less expansive on this occasion, maybe because the other two have dealt with the most important issues. Therefore, he comments on what has been left out, i.e. the word *tiru*, probably derived from *śrī*. He gives it two alternative interpretations: either it refers to a quality (glossed as *śubha* ‘auspicious’, etc.), in which case it would function like an adjective for either ‘lotus’ or ‘feet’; or to Nārāyaṇa’s wife, in which case *tiru* is a proper noun in an unmarked genitive case in the original verse. It is worth pointing out here that the Ālvārs often play with the ambiguity that is produced by the polysemic quality of the word *tiru*.

5. Different commentators, different focus

Sometimes, where one of the Ācāryas has nothing much to say on a passage that is commented upon, the second one finds in it an occasion to indulge in divine *anubhava*, while another finds it necessary to point out its theological importance: ... *ayaṇai paṭaittat_u ōr eḷil unti* (AAP 3)—‘on the navel that has the unique beauty of having created Brahmā’—

Pillai: *eḷil unti*—*iḷaki patikkai. ‘prasavāntaṅca yauvanam’ eṅkīra paṭi anrikkē irukkai.*

A beautiful navel—To remain fresh.²² Being unlike what is said in [the words] ‘and youth ends with the delivery [of a child].’²³

²² Literally, ‘to abide having been refreshed/sprouted.’ It is not very clear what this expression means, not the least because *iḷaku* can equally mean ‘to grow weary.’ This translation is based on the VG (*iḷamaiyil ūṇri nīrkum*—‘it remains firmly established in youth’) and its definition. Krishnaswami Aiyangar (in Balaji 2009: 127) does not gloss this either. Velukkudi simply refers to the fact that the youthfulness of the navel remains as such, unlike for women (Velukkudi 2008). Therefore the translation I have given here seems to fit the context.

²³ This seems to be a part of a floating verse. For more on this, see Balaji 2009: 127.

Piḷḷai makes here an implicit reference to Nārāyaṇa giving birth to Brahmā, thereby hinting at His being the Creator of all, hence His supremacy. Furthermore, almost as a joke, he points out that unlike for women, youth does not end for Him at the birth of a child, which brings out the Śrīvaiṣṇava belief that the Lord is ever-youthful, being untouched by *prakṛti* (‘material principal’). We can notice that once again Piḷḷai contrasts Nārāyaṇa with an ordinary woman, as he did when he compared His smile with a woman’s.

On this occasion, instead of making explicit Piḷḷai’s allusion to a rather well-known myth, Nāyaṇār focuses on the beauty of the Lord:

Nāyaṇār: *ōr eḷil unti*—‘saundaryākhyā sarid urasi vistūrya madhyāvā-ruddhā sthānāḷpatvād viṣamagatiḷvartagartābhanābhīḥ | prāpya prāpta-prathima jaghanaṃ vistūryā hastinātha srotobhedam bhajati bhavataḥ pādadeśāpadeśāt’ *eṅkiṛa paṭiyē saundaryam ākiṛa periya āṛ-āṇatu, tiru muṭi-ākiṛa malai talaiviṇṇiṇṇum akaṇṇa tiru mārp-ākiṛa tāḷvaraiyilē vantu kutikoṇṭu, ankē parantu kīḷ nōkki ilintu, ciṛṛiṭai-ākaiyālē ankē iṭṭaḷappaṭṭu, piṇṇu tiru nābhi-āy culi ārupaṭṭa, eṇṇa kaṭavatirē.*

A unique, beautiful navel—As described in [this verse], ‘The river named “Beauty” spread across [Your] chest [but] is restrained at the waist. It has [Your] cave-like navel for an eddy created by the current, turbulent due to narrowed space. When it reached [Your] bottom, endowed with broadness, it widened, and, O Lord of Hasti, divides itself into streams in the guise of Your legs’ (*Varadarāja Stavam* 55),²⁴ it ought to be said that the great river that is [His] beauty came from the top of the mountain that is [His] sacred crown, to the foot of the mountain that is [His] large sacred chest, and took abode [there]; and spreading there, [it] descended towards the bottom, and gathered together because ‘[His] waist [was] narrow’ (TVM 5.5.8); and then the floods whirled and rushed down becoming the sacred navel.

Basing himself on a verse from a *stotra* by Kūreśa (12th c.), one of Rāmānuja’s disciples, by quoting and paraphrasing it in Maṇi-pravāḷam, Nāyaṇār expands on the metaphor of the Lord’s beauty being a river, the vividly visual commentary here being purely for the sake of enjoying such a beauty.

²⁴ Translation made in consultation with Victor D’Avella and Harunaga Isaacson. See Nayar 1994 for the translation of the whole poem.

Deśika: *ataṅ mēl ayaṅai paṭaittat_u ḍr eḷil unti*—*anubhūtam-āṅa tiru pī-āmbarattukku mēl-āy itīṅ niṟattukku nikar-āṅa civanta tāmarai pūvai uṭaitt_u -āy, atiṅmēlē vyaṣṭisrṣṭisamayattilē murpaṭa ayonijaṅ-āṅa brahmāvai srṣṭitta adviṭiyam-āṅa aḷakai uṭaitt_u-āṅa tiru unti. brahmāviṇuṭaiya srjyatvam colla, kaimutikanyāyattālē rudrendrādikaḷuṭaiya srjyatvam collir_urām. itāl pratribuddharkku śriyaḥpatiyai oḷiya śaranyāntaramum, prāpyāntaramum illai enrat_u-āyirru. inku brahmāvai conṅatu mumukṣukkaḷai srṣṭitta upakārattukku udāharanamum ākiratu.*

Above that, a unique, beautiful navel that created Aja—The sacred navel, which, above the sacred yellow garments that were enjoyed [in the previous verse], possesses a red lotus flower that rivals their colour, [and] which has the unique beauty of having first created upon it [i.e. the lotus] Brahmā, who is not born of a womb, during the time of the individual creation (*vyaṣṭisrṣṭi*)—Speaking of Brahmā being created [equals], *a fortiori*, [to] speaking of Rudra, Indra, etc. being created. By this, it amounts to saying that for the enlightened, there is no other refuge or goal other than the Lord of Śrī. Mentioning Brahmā here is also an example of [His] favour that [consists] in creating those who wish for liberation.

As Nāyaṅār leaves aside the Lord’s navel’s link with Brahmā, Deśika takes it up and establishes again the supremacy of Nārāyaṇa, who creates everything when nothing material exists after the *prākṛtika praḷaya* put an end to everything and everyone.²⁵ And by doing that, he insists on Him—as opposed to those who were born through His favour, including Brahmā as well as Śiva and Indra, whom, according to the commentator, the Āḷvār did not even bother to mention—being the sole refuge for the clearsighted devotees. In passing, Deśika goes further and states that because creation gives the *jīvas* an opportunity to try and achieve liberation, it is an act of divine benevolence.

Conclusion

One thing we notice immediately is that both Nāyaṅār and Deśika (the latter knowing the former’s commentary) knew Piḷḷai’s work.

²⁵ *Praḷayas* are of many types: the *naimittika* (‘occasional’) does not destroy Brahmā’s world; the *prākṛtika* (‘material’) occurs at the end of his lifetime; the *ātyantika* (‘final’) coincides with the individual soul achieving liberation; and the *nitya* (‘constant’) refers to the end of the body (i.e. death).

And they seem to write according to what Piḷḷai has already produced: Nāyaṇār, apparently by following him, clarifying him and adding to his comments when necessary, and Deśika, by choosing to focus on what has been left out by Piḷḷai (and by Nāyaṇār). We also notice that sometimes Nāyaṇār's commentary seems to be a companion work to Piḷḷai's, almost functioning like a subcommentary, while Deśika's seems like a fully-fledged work that stands on its own. It would also seem that while the first two commentators seem to focus more on the divine *anubhava* that derives from speaking of the Lord's beauty, Deśika seems to give equal importance to the enjoyment of divine beauty and the theological interpretation of the text.

But I hasten here to clarify that these are merely preliminary conclusions based on the comparison of a fraction of the three commentaries, and taking them to be final can be misleading. It is therefore essential to thoroughly study the entirety of all three works, but also other relevant works, like Deśika's Sanskrit poem *Bhagavad-dhyānasopānam*, which imitates AAP, as well as commentaries on other types of works within the NTP, in order to see their undeniable intertextuality at play, and to draw conclusions about the nature of the Śrīvaiṣṇava commentary in Maṇipravāḷam.

Appendix : A philological translation of *Amalaṅātīpirāṇ*²⁶

amalaṅ āti pirāṇ aṭiyārkk_u eṇnai ātpaṭutta
vimalaṅ viṇṇavar kōṇ virai ār poḷil vēṅkaṭavaṅ
nimalaṅ niṇmalaṅ nīti vāṇavaṅ nīḷ matiḷ araṅkatt_u ammāṅ tiru
kamala pātam vant_u eṅ kaṇṇiṅ uḷḷaṅa okkiṅratē. 1

As the primordial, blemishless Lord submitted me to [His] devotees,
 it is as if the holy lotus feet of the immaculate One, the King of the celestial beings,
 Him from Vēṅkaṭa with groves filled with fragrance,
 the spotless One, the impeccable One, the righteous celestial Being,²⁷
 the Lord of Raṅgam with lofty ramparts,
 come [and] stay in[side] my eyes.

uvanta uḷḷattaṅ āy ulakam aḷant_u aṅṅam uṛa
nivanta nīḷ muṭiyaṅ aṅṅu nērnta nicācararai
kavarnta vem kaṇai kākuttaṅ kaṭi ār poḷil araṅkatt_u ammāṅ arai
civanta āṭaiyiṅ mēḷ ceṅṅratām eṅ cintāṅaiyē. 2

My thoughts went to the red cloth on the waist
 of the Lord of Raṅgam with groves filled with scent, of Kākutstha,²⁸ with
 cruel arrows
 that robbed [the lives of] the *rākṣasas* who opposed [Him] that day,
 of Him with the long crown that grew so that [it] touched the [cosmic] egg,
 having measured the world with a rejoicing heart.

manti pāy vaṭa vēṅkaṭa mā malai vāṇavarkaḷ
canti ceyya niṅṅāṅ araṅkatt_u araviṅ aṅaiyāṅ
anti pōḷ niṅṅatt_u āṭaiyum ataṅ mēḷ ayaṅai paṭaittat_u ōr eḷil
unti mēlat_u aṅṅrō aṭiyēṅ uḷḷatt_u iṅ uyirē. 3

The sweet life inside of me, who am a slave, [is fixed], is it not,
 on the cloth like the colour of the twilight and on the navel above [it],
 which has the unique beauty of having created Aja,²⁹

²⁶ Although Hopkins has already published a translation of this decade, I am giving here mine because it is philological and is closer to the text, which is important while working with commentaries. Besides, it makes the access to the text easier for the reader.

²⁷ This can be split as *nītavāṅ avaṅ*.

²⁸ Rāma, as being the descendant of Kakutstha.

²⁹ Brahmā, as being the unborn one.

of Him on the serpent-bed in Raṅgam, who stood, so that the celestials worshipped, on the great northern mountain of Veṅkaṭa, where the female monkeys leap?

catura mā matiḷ cūḷ ilaṅkaikk_u iraivaṅ talai pattu
utira ḍṭṭi ḍr vem kaṅai uyttavaṅ ḍta-vaṅṅaṅ
maturam ā vaṅṭu pāṭa mā mayil āṭ_u araṅkatt_u ammāṅ tiru vaviṙṙ_u
utarapantam eṅ uḷḷatt_u uḷ niṅṙu ulākiṅṙatē. 4

The golden girdle—on the holy belly of the Lord of Raṅgam where big peacocks dance as bees sing sweetly, of the ocean-hued One who, [first] chasing [him] away, discharged a cruel arrow

so that all ten heads of the lord of Laṅkā, surrounded by big, square ram-parts, dropped off—stays inside my heart and pervades [it].

pāram āya paḷa(m) viṅai par_u aruttu eṅṅai taṅ
vāram ākki-vaittāṅ vaittat_u aṅṙi eṅ uḷ pukuntāṅ
kōra(m) mā tavam ceytaṅṅaṅ-kol aṙiyēṅ araṅkatt_u ammāṅ tiru
āra mārp_u at_u aṅṙō aṙiyēṅai āḷ kōṅṙatē. 5

Severing the grips of ancient karma that had become a burden, He made me partial to Him. Other than doing [that], He entered me.

Have I made severe, great penance [for this]?³⁰ I do not know. Is it not the chest of the Lord of Raṅgam with Śrī [and] a pearl necklace, that made me, who am a slave, [His] slave?

tunṭa(m) veṅ pīraiyaṅ tuyar tīrttavaṅ am ciṙaiya
vaṅṭu vāḷ poḷil cūḷ araṅkam nakar mēya appaṅ
aṅṙar aṅṙam pakiraṅṙatt_u oru mā nilam eḷu māḷ varai muṙṙum
uṅṭa kaṅṙam kaṅṙīṙ aṙiyēṅai uyya koṅṙatē. 6

³⁰ The *ceytaṅṅaṅ* has sometimes also been interpreted as a 3rd person masculine singular, so that we can translate this as ‘Has He made severe penance [for this]?’ Aiyangar clearly points out that this is a 1st singular that can also be read as the 3rd person (Aiyangar in Balaji 2009: 179), which is something that all three commentators suggest. Among the Śrīvaiṅavas, the belief is that it is up to God to make efforts to get the human soul into His fold, and not the other way round (Velukkudi 2018). In fact, the Southern school even discourages any action on behalf of the devotees to attain God, because their efforts cannot get them anywhere. For a more detailed discussion on the topic, please see Raman 2007, which is wholly dedicated to this question, as well as Umakantham 2001.

Look, the throat—which wholly swallowed the seven great mountains,
the big, unique earth, the outer worlds³¹ [and] the [cosmic] egg of the celestials,
of the Father who dwells in the town of Raṅgam surrounded by groves
where bees with beautiful wings live,
of Him who destroyed the affliction of the one with a sliver of the white
crescent moon³²—took me, who am a slave, so that I was saved.

kaiyiṅ āṛ curi caṅk_u aṅal āliyar nīḷ varai pōḷ
meyyaṅār tuḷapa virai āṛ kamaḷ nīḷ muṭi em
aiyaṅār aṅi araṅkaṅār arav_u iṅ aṅai micai mēya māyaṅār
ceyya vāy aiyō eṅṅai cintai kavartatuvē.

Oh! The red mouth—of the Deceitful One who dwells upon the sweet bed
that is the snake, Him from the beautiful Raṅgam, our Father with a lofty
crown emitting the scent of the abundantly fragrant tulsi, Him with a body
like a tall mountain,
Him with a blazing discus [and] a spiralling conch in [His] hands—has
stolen my mind.

pariyaṅ āki vanta avuṅaṅ uḷal kīṅṭa amararkku
ariya āti pirāṅ araṅkatt_u amalaṅ mukattu
kariya āki puṭai parantu miḷirntu ce vari ḍṭi nīṅṭa a
periya āya kaṅkaḷ eṅṅai pētaimai ceṅṅavē. 8

Those great, long, dark eyes—gleaming [and] spreading to the sides
of the face with red streaks that run [across them], of the immaculate One
of Raṅgam,
the primordial Lord, hard [to approach] for the immortals, who tore [apart]
the body of the *asura* who came [to Him], as a bulky one—have driven me mad.

āla mā marattiṅ ilai mēḷ oru pālakaṅ āy
ṅālam eḷum uṅṭāṅ araṅkatt_u araviṅ aṅaiyāṅ
kōla(m) mā maṅi āramum muttu tāmamum muṭiv_u illat_u ḍṛ eḷil
nīla mēṅi aiyō niṅrai koṅṭat_u eṅ neṅciṅaiyē. 9

Ah! The blue body—with a unique beauty without limits, [shining with]
strands of pearls and necklaces with big beautiful gems,
of Him on the bed [that is] the snake in Raṅgam who swallowed the seven
worlds as a unique infant [lying] on a leaf of a big banyan tree—has
completely pervaded my heart.

³¹ The oblique cannot be kept here as it does not make sense in this list.

³² Periyavāccāṅ Piḷḷai interprets this as Candra, the moon-god, not Śiva who bears the crescent.

*koṅṭal vaṅṅanaṅai kōvalaṅ āy veṅṅey
uṅṭa vāyaṅ eṅ uḷḷam kavartāṅṅai
aṅṭar kōṅ aṅi araṅkaṅ eṅ amuṅṅai
kaṅṭa kaṅkaḷ marṅ_u onṅriṅai kāṅāvē. 10*

My eyes that have seen my Nectar—Him from the beautiful Raṅgam,
the King of celestials, Him who stole my heart, Him with a mouth that ate
butter as a cowherd,
Him of the hue of the clouds—shall not see another thing.

List of abbreviations

NTP	<i>Nālāyira Tivviya Pirapantam</i>
TL	<i>Tamil Lexicon</i>
TNT	<i>Tiruneṭuntāṅṭakam</i>
TVM	<i>Tiruvāymoḷi</i>
VG	<i>Glossary of Historical Tamil Vaishnava Prose</i>

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Stotraratnam. See *Stotramālā*.

Tirumālai. See *Nālāyira tivviya pirapantam*.

Tiruneṭuntāṅṭakam (TNT). See *Nālāyira tivviya pirapantam*.

Tiruvācīriyam. See *Nālāyira tivviya pirapantam*.

Tiruvāymoḷi (TVM). See *Nālāyira tivviya pirapantam*.

Varadarājastavam. See *Stotramālā*.

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