

Tamil Saivite Bhakti Literature: Devotion, Poetics, and Philosophical Underpinnings

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Abstract

Tamil Saivite Bhakti literature, spanning from the 6th to 12th centuries CE, represents one of the most profound expressions of religious devotion in Indian literary history. This paper explores the genesis, evolution, and philosophical dimensions of Tamil Saivite Bhakti literature, focusing on its poetic fervor and theological richness. It examines the contributions of key poet-saints, including Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar, and Manikkavachakar, and analyzes their hymns in relation to social reform, metaphysical thought, and artistic aesthetics. Highlighting the literature's enduring impact, the study demonstrates its role in shaping Tamil cultural identity and influencing later devotional traditions.

Key Words: Tamil Bhakti, Śaivism, Thevaram, Tiruvacakam, Nayanmars, Devotional Poetry, Tamil Literature

Introduction

Tamil Saivite Bhakti literature emerged as a vibrant expression of religious devotion during a period marked by social and cultural transformations. The movement, led by the Nayanmars (Saivite saints), sought to democratize religious worship and challenge the dominance of Vedic orthodoxy. The compositions, primarily hymns, celebrated Lord Śiva as the supreme deity, emphasizing personal devotion (bhakti) over ritualistic practices.

The roots of Tamil Saivite Bhakti can be traced to the Thevaram hymns composed by Appar, Sambandar, and Sundarar, followed by the philosophical and lyrical Tiruvacakam of Manikkavachakar. These texts not only articulated theological tenets but also wove themes of love, surrender, and divine grace, creating a paradigm shift in Tamil spirituality.

The Great Four Nayanmars

The Four Great Nayanmars—Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar, and Manikkavachakar—stand as towering figures in Tamil Saivite Bhakti tradition. Their contributions laid the foundation for a devotional renaissance, making Śaivism a dynamic and accessible faith. Each saint brought unique perspectives and poetic expressions to the movement.

Appar, also known as Tirunavukkarasar, emphasized humility, repentance, and service to Śiva. His hymns in *Thevaram* portray an intense personal relationship with the deity, often highlighting themes of deliverance and gratitude. Appar's rejection of Jainism and return to Śaivism symbolize the transformative power of Bhakti. He traveled extensively, spreading Śiva's glory and restoring temples. Appar's verses are marked by deep philosophical reflections and vivid imagery, portraying Śiva as both a destroyer of ignorance and a compassionate savior. Appar's devotion was practical, focusing on temple renovations and acts of service, underscoring Bhakti as action as well as emotion.

Sambandar, the child prodigy, is celebrated for his lyrical brilliance and divine inspiration. He is believed to have received divine milk from the goddess Parvati, symbolizing his spiritual enlightenment. Sambandar's verses exude joy and praise for Śiva's beauty and compassion, reflecting unwavering faith. His confrontations with Jains and his miraculous acts reinforced Saivite dominance. Sambandar's hymns often celebrate Śiva's grandeur while also invoking maternal imagery, portraying divine grace as nurturing and protective. His poetic style blends elegance with simplicity, appealing to both scholars and lay devotees.

Sundarar, renowned for his personal and conversational tone, presented Śiva as both a friend and benefactor. His poems in *Thevaram* narrate his struggles and triumphs, depicting Śiva's role as a protector. Sundarar's hymns resonate with human emotions, portraying the deity's intimate bond with devotees. He often addressed Śiva in informal, affectionate terms, reflecting a friendship-like relationship. Sundarar's work humanizes the divine, making Śiva approachable and relatable, and highlights themes of gratitude and divine intervention in overcoming life's trials.

Manikkavachakar, whose *Tiruvacakam* blends mysticism with philosophical inquiry, represents the meditative and introspective dimension of Bhakti. His hymns explore the soul's yearning for union with Śiva, highlighting divine love and surrender. Manikkavachakar's poetry bridges devotion and metaphysics, making his work timeless. Unlike the other Nayanmars, his focus shifts to inward contemplation and the dissolution of the ego. His verses are imbued with longing, portraying divine love as both blissful and painful, capturing the paradox of spiritual union.

These saints collectively transformed Tamil Bhakti into a deeply personal and communal experience, blending devotion, philosophy, and aesthetics.

Appar (Thirunavukkarasar): A Beacon of Tamil Saivism

Appar, also known as Thirunavukkarasar, stands as one of the most celebrated saints in Tamil Śaivism and a pioneering figure of the Bhakti movement. His life story and hymns resonate with devotion, philosophical depth, and an enduring spiritual legacy. This essay explores Appar's transformative journey, literary accomplishments, and the profound influence he wielded on Tamil culture and Saivite philosophy.

Born in the 7th century CE in Tiruvamur, Tamil Nadu, Appar's early life was steeped in religious traditions. Named Marulneekiyar by his parents, he grew up in a pious Saivite household. However, youthful exploration led him to embrace Jainism, marking the beginning of a period of religious experimentation. This phase was abruptly interrupted when Appar fell gravely ill, and in his desperation, he turned to Lord Shiva for help. His miraculous recovery marked not only a physical healing but also a spiritual rebirth, setting him firmly on the path of Saivite devotion. From then on, he was called Thirunavukkarasar, or "King of Speech," for his eloquent compositions in praise of Shiva.

Appar's literary contributions form the cornerstone of his legacy. He is credited with composing nearly 4,900 hymns, though only 313 survive today. These hymns, preserved in the *Thevaram*—the first seven volumes of the *Tirumurai*—reflect deep devotion, philosophical insights, and critiques of superficial rituals. Appar's verses emphasize surrender to divine grace, the impermanence of worldly pursuits, and the importance of heartfelt worship over

ostentatious practices. His poetry also addresses social issues, advocating equality and the accessibility of worship to all.

The life of Appar is punctuated by pilgrimages and miracles. He traversed Tamil Nadu, visiting and sanctifying numerous Saivite temples through his hymns. Legends abound about the divine interventions he experienced, from surviving persecution by Jains to enduring physical trials with unwavering faith. Appar's humility is equally noteworthy—he swept temple floors and cleaned pathways as acts of devotion, earning widespread admiration as a servant of God.

Philosophically, Appar's teachings emphasized devotion over rituals, service to temples, and the idea of equality in worship. His rejection of superficial practices in favor of inner piety resonated deeply with the Bhakti movement's ethos. Appar advocated "Kainkarya" (selfless service), which he demonstrated through his life of simplicity and humility. He believed that devotion to Shiva transcended barriers of caste and class, a revolutionary idea in his time.

The influence of Appar on the Bhakti movement is profound. His hymns rejuvenated Śaivism, countering the spread of Jainism and Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Appar's emphasis on personal devotion and his poetic eloquence inspired later saints, including Sundarar and Manikkavasagar. His verses continue to be sung in temples and festivals, serving as a spiritual and cultural touchstone for Tamil Saivites.

Appar's legacy endures through rituals, literary traditions, and temple worship. Venerated as one of the 63 Nayanars—saint-poets who shaped Tamil Śaivism—Appar's contributions transcend time, offering solace and inspiration to devotees. His works not only preserve Tamil culture but also advocate values of devotion, humility, and equality.

Appar's life is a testament to the transformative power of faith and divine grace. His hymns remain timeless expressions of devotion and philosophy, securing his place as one of the greatest spiritual leaders in Tamil Śaivism. Appar's story of spiritual rebirth and unwavering faith continues to inspire generations, making him a beacon of devotion and service in the annals of religious history.

The Origins and Development of Saivite Bhakti

Tamil Śaivism gained prominence as a counter-response to Jain and Buddhist influences in South India. Appar (7th century CE), one of the earliest Nayanmars, composed deeply emotional hymns, such as those in the *Thevaram*, which praised Śiva as the destroyer of ignorance. Appar's verses highlight Śiva's omnipresence and his role as a compassionate redeemer:

“O Lord of Tiruvaiyaru! You dwell in my heart and mind,

Dispelling the darkness of my soul.” (*Thevaram*, 4.2.5)

Sambandar, a child prodigy, extolled Śiva's beauty and benevolence, blending devotional fervor with poetic elegance. His hymns also served as social commentaries, challenging caste and gender hierarchies:

“To the lowly and the high, He grants grace equally,

The Lord of the dancing flames.” (*Thevaram*, 2.1.10)

Sundarar, known for his intimacy with Śiva, humanized the deity through affectionate and conversational verses, addressing him as a friend and benefactor.

Manikkavachakar and the Mystical Turn

The *Tiruvacakam* of Manikkavachakar represents a mystical and philosophical evolution within Saivite Bhakti literature. Unlike the earlier Nayanmars, Manikkavachakar's hymns delve into metaphysical themes, exploring the transient nature of life and the eternal nature of divine love:

“What use is this body, this fleeting dream,

When You, my Lord, are the only truth?” (*Tiruvacakam*, 3.4.7)

His work bridges poetry and philosophy, reflecting influences of Advaita Vedanta and Śaiva Siddhanta, thus positioning Tamil Śaivism as both a devotional and intellectual tradition.

Conclusion

Tamil Saivite Bhakti literature stands as a testament to the transformative power of devotion. Through its poetic beauty, theological depth, and social inclusivity, it shaped the religious and cultural landscape of Tamil Nadu and beyond. The hymns of Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar, and Manikkavachakar continue to inspire spiritual seekers, offering timeless insights into the relationship between humanity and the divine.

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