

MAPPING THE ILLUSTRATION OF LORD SIVA AS A HEROIC TAMIL KING AND GOD IN APPAR'S HYMNS

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Abstract:

Appar Tirunavukkarasar Nayanar was one of the four Saivite spiritual teachers who succeeded in conjuring up a tangible or substantial image of Siva in the devotee's mind through poetry. This paper attempts to present a critical reading of the Hymns of Appar, Saivite saint by evaluating the representation of the popular Hindu deity Lord Siva in the hymns in relation to the Bhakthi poetry of the seventh century. The characteristic of religion often transposing onto literature and it's soundness in the case of Saivism, which animates Bhakthi poetry is another aspect explored in the paper. Even though Saivism, refers to the tradition which follows the teachings of Siva and which follows the deity Siva, or sometimes his consort and power, Sakti, the hymns of Appar are not just about religion, but are also vehement expressions of a culture and society as they are in a participatory medium and establish a contact between the devotees and Siva. Analysing the hymns in terms of the socio political situation in the backdrop, render concreteness to the image of Siva, who could be read as a powerful King loved by his subjects and praised by the bards in his court. The central aim of the paper is to demonstrate how the realistic iconography of the hymns facilitates the depiction of Siva as a Tamil heroic King and God, an ideal celebrated during the politically volatile Pallava period.

Keywords: *Religion and Literature, Saivism, Lord Siva, Bhakthi Poetry.*

Excruciation of a region's history informs the readers how religion has occupied a major role in the development and evolution of its civilization and culture. Religious history of India is not an exception as the then dominant religion Hinduism enriched the cultural and human development as a whole. Saivism, a sect of Hinduism has had an elongated and incessant tradition which transcended the lives of people. "Saivism refers to the traditions which follow the teachings of Siva and which focus on the deity Siva, or sometimes his consort and power, Sakti" (Flood 149). Literature and religion are intertwined in a way that the latter often transposes onto the first and it is the same with Saivism too, which invigorates Bhakthi poetry. The fundamental aim of this paper is to exemplify how the Tamil poet Appar carved the image of Siva as a Tamil heroic chieftain and a God in the hymns by providing a close reading of the poems in relation to the Bhakthi poetry of 7th century.

The Bhakti movement had its origins in Tamil Nadu in 6th century C.E before it spread to other parts of the country. A.K. Ramanujan describes Bhakti as "a great, many-sided shift [which] occurred in Hindu culture and sensibility between the sixth and ninth century" (103). Romila Thapar explains the possible reasons for the widespread admiration that Bhakthi received. She observes, "It may have been a reaction to the formalistic Sanskrit culture and religious practice introduced into elite circles, and a reluctance to be subordinated to this culture" (355). Among the first cults devoted to Bhakti were the Tamil Vaishnava and Saiva sects popularly known as Alvars and Nayanars. These saints wrote devotional hymns in Tamil, which were "the first literary expression of emotional Bhakti" and the "first Hindu sectarian scripture in a vernacular language" (Peterson 4). These cults identified themselves as the true advocates of the Hindu tradition and denounced the two unorthodox religions of Jainism and Buddhism. They travelled with

fellow devotees to worship and sing songs in praise of Lord Siva and Vishnu at temples and shrines across the length and breadth of Tamil Nadu.

This enquiry has been narrowed to a study of the hymns of Saivite saints (Nayanmars), with the focus on the *Tevaram* poet Appar (Tirunavukkarasu). 796 hymns were collected by Nambiyandar Nambi in the 10th century during the reign of Rajaraja I to constitute the *Tevaram* corpus, the Saivite canonical literature. This massive volume encompasses 383 hymns (*padikams*) written by Campantar, 313 songs (*paattu*) by Appar and 100 hymns of Sundarar. The songs combine the essence of classical Tamil poems of love and war, Vedic hymns, folk songs and Sanskrit *Stotras*. Their songs were associated with particular temples and were later incorporated into the rituals of temple worship.

In the Tamil literature that preceded the *Tevaram* authors, “Siva has no indigenous persona comparable to Vishnu as *Mayon*, the pastoral God of the late classical Tamil poems”. In books like *Tolkappiyam*, there is no mention of Siva but the classical works like *Narrinai* and *Paripadal* provide descriptions of his physical features. In 6th century, the Nayanmars visualised and celebrated the cosmic dimension of the image of Siva using iconographic and realistic imageries in their hymns and songs. Appar who lived in the 7th century spent some years as a Jain monk before he re-embraced Saivism. His poems reflect the remorse at having paid heed to the “mean Jains” (Nagaswamy 16). Appar's poetry conjures up a “concrete image of Siva” in the devotee's mind (Peterson 29). For example,

See the lord; see him, who dances, holding fire, In the
wilderness of the burning ground
On strong shoulders like coral hills Lie coils of matted hair
Like branching sea coral Around the hair a hooded snake
Winds like a streak of coral. With the snake my father
bears The coral red eye
And the young moon
Is a white flower on his crest. (Appar IV. 114.1)

In this verse, Appar presents the image of Siva as *Nat raja*, the cosmic dancer. He doesn't employ clever conceits or fanciful imagery to enrich the aesthetic of the stanza. Simplicity of expression and realistic iconography make the poem different from the Sanskrit court poetry. Appar creates a straightforward, solid image of Lord Siva in the hearer's mind when he says, “on strong shoulders like coral hills / lie coils of matted hair” (3-4). He adds sensory detail - “around the hair a hooded snake / winds like a streak of coral” - to complete the word-picture (6-7). This resembles a “heroic praise poetry, in which a loyal poet will not praise anyone other than his master; but the poem also rejects the classical panegyric modes (“bounteous as the rain”, etc.) used in praise of kings and chieftains.” (Sastri 164)

Similarly in the song titled “Portrait in Silver”, Appar presents the image of Siva as *Bhikshataka*. “He bears a skull / Like a silver conch shell / His twisted white sacred thread / Shines like a strand of silver rope” (1-4). The “skull” is like a “silver conch shell” and he has a “twisted” “white” sacred thread. No complex figures/ poetic devices are utilized. This description might be considered as the poetic counterpart of the iconographic depiction of Siva as *Bhikshataka* that we see in South Indian Siva temples. The figures of speech are derived from nature and their everyday experience. “The characteristic genius of this poetry is in its lack of metaphysical abstraction; even its most complex thinking is done in terms of physical detail” (Ramanujan 28).

In verse IV.8.10, Appar invokes the popular image of Siva as *Ardhanareeswara*. He sings about the “earring (*curul*) of bright new gold” that “glows on one ear” and the “coiled conch shell (*kuntalam*) that sways on the other”. He shows the reader how the Lord comes with “matted hair adorned with sweet *konrai* blossoms on one half of his head/ and a woman's curls on the other”. In the Vedas, Siva is represented as Rudra-Siva, who manifests himself in all elements of nature. Appar perceives Siva as “the sprout and root/ true friend to his devotees” (VI.229) and as discernible in “the wild aspects of nature and in all forms of

life” (Peterson 95).

So Appar tries to depict Siva as the mighty God of Dance whose stage is the cosmos; as the divine power who does miraculous deeds to save the universe and takes up multiple forms. He offers “a suggestive, sharply defined descriptive vignette” (Peterson 27) of Lord Siva. The God is perceived by the devotee himself, through his own eyes. There are no poetic intermediaries to “steer” him away from the experience, thus rendering the image of Siva as a familiar figure, more or less like a popular Tamil chieftain (87). This mode of praise seems to be a deliberate act from the part of the poet to graft the hymns onto the socio political reality of the age. This takes us to the next part of our enquiry. Siva is described as “Lord”, “chieftain” and “King” in many of Appar's poems. For example, in the verse IV.48, he sings, “The lord of Appati/who wears the blooming *konrai* in his hair” (1-2); verse IV.121.1 shows “The Lord of Arur/who wears the *aksa* beads” (1-2); verse IV.20.10 calls upon “that Lord of Tiruvarur” and verse IV.31.4 speaks of “Katavur Virattam's Lord”. There are references to Siva as “The King of Pacur”/ “The King in Alappur” (VII.47); and “the king of the Himalayan gods” (I.69). IV.30.2 hails Siva as the “chieftain of Kalippalai's seashore tract”. Throughout the hymns, Siva is praised as the Lord who presides over a particular place or the King/ dweller of a particular South Indian shrine.

The Nayanar's model for the image of Siva was the “Tamil king/ruler”, who was the embodiment of all ideals and was the hero who saved his land from invaders and performed miraculous deeds for the sake of his countrymen. Verse IV. 114.1 can be studied as a *Purampoem*. The references to wilderness, fire and redness enlist war imagery to praise a hero of war, possibly the King who won the battle, rescuing the subjects a hero who is compared to a god and is unequivocally praised. It would be instructive to compare the structure of Appar's hymns and that of a *puram* poem, translated by A. K. Ramanujan.

My lord has great shoulders
Though he now eats rice pap in prison. And I,
outside his prison
Grow sallow as gold For want of him.
When he enters the battlefield And takes on those
warriors Who brag at the festivals
In the great resounding city,
He is the swell and ebb of the sea In the harbor
That terrifies sellers of salt.¹⁶
(Nakkanaiyar: *Purananuru* 84)

The point of this poem is the extolling of the hero's strength and power. He has “great shoulders” and is the “swell and ebb of the sea”. This is the same tone that Appar's eulogy of Siva embodies. Appar addresses Siva as “My lord” in most of his hymns. In a similar vein, Appar too praises Lord Siva who “shot at the citadels” and “swiftly subdued the demon “and is the leader of the “*ganas*” (Peterson 127). The Nayanars seem to assume the persona of the devoted bards at the Tamil courts who sang songs in praise of the King to win favours from him. “The King in Tamil literature is seen to control the forces of nature and when he goes to the battlefield; it becomes a ground for the unleashing of sacred forces” (Paul and Yandell 246). This magical aura which surrounded the battle resulted in the deeds of individual heroes taking on heightened importance. Hero stones were erected in Tamil Nadu not simply to honour the hero but “to provide a place for his powerful spirit to inhabit” (Sastri 235).

For a period of over 300 years from the middle of the 6th century A.D., the history of South India is “virtually the story of mutual conflict among three powers seeking constantly to extend its empire at the expense of its neighbours. The three powers were the Chalukyas, the Pallavas and the Pandyas” (Sastri 132). It was the time of constant wars, raging battles and shifting boundaries. The Pallavas under Mahendravarma I fought a number of battles with the Chalukyas. If we interpret the hymns with this socio

political situation in the backdrop, the image of Siva could be read as that of the powerful King loved by his subjects and praised by the bards in his court. Mahendravarma I was a great patron of art and architecture. Interestingly,

Appar's Siva "listens and takes delight in their songs" (II.42.4). The fact that "queens occupied a position of equal importance with the King" could be seen reflected in the glorification of 'Ardhanareeswara" (Sastri 45). To add to it, the process of localisation takes place in Appar's hymns, thus "merging his cosmic persona with his local identity" (Peterson 34). He sets the Lord's gallant acts of destruction - burning of the three cities, execution of the Love God *Kama* and the cosmic Dance of Nata raja in Tamil rural areas, possibly equating them to the heroic acts of the Kings in their exploits. For example, Appar explains the legend of Ravana's effort to uproot Kailasa in verse IV.39. 10 as set in Aiyaru shrine.

The demon was crushed, And fell down
on the earth; Yet when he gained
wisdom,
The Lord who dwells as honey in Aiyaru
Blessed him with his grace. (5-10)

Lord Siva is well known for a multiplicity of representations; as Flood observes, Siva is a "god of ambiguity and paradox" (150). In Appar's poems, we see two distinct images of Siva emerging simultaneously. One is that of Lord Siva, the most powerful among the tripartite, according to the Saivists. There is a self-conscious love for the deity expressed in the poems peculiar to Bhakthi tradition. The diverse images converge at a single point Siva as the "god who delivers his devotees from fear" (Peterson 38). Another picture is also articulated in the poems that of a quintessentially Tamil king-hero-god who dwells in Tamil landscapes. In several ways he manifests as the true hero of *Puram* poetry, the Tamil King or chieftain in Appar's poems.

Thus, with the detailed and expansive images of Siva that Appar brings in the poem, he evokes a collective voice: the voice of a whole land. In what can be called a unique accomplishment, Siva is presented as the all-embracing God and the brave chieftain of Tamil land in the hymns. The hymns acquire the form of a participatory medium- establishing a contact between the devotee and Siva. But they are not just about religion, but are also vehement expressions of a culture and society. Such a study of the context and meaning of the *Tevaram* poems helps us to learn not only the history of the religion but also the values and ethics of a whole generation. Practising Saivites in Tamil Nadu attach a symbolic value to *Tevaram* and even today, there are temples dedicated to Siva in nearly every village where devotees meet and chant the hymns and celebrate festivals associated with the saints. This reminds one of what A. K. Ramanujan remarked about *Tevaram* poems, "The Tamils, in all their 2000 years of literary effort, wrote nothing better". (115)

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