Gracious Possession, Gracious Bondage: Śiva’s Arul in Māṇikkavācakar’s Tiruvācakam

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Abstract The primary concern in this paper is to examine the nature of Śiva’s arul—his generative and salvific energy—as portrayed in Tiruvācakam, Māṇikkavācakar’s important but understudied text of medieval bhakti poems. Close attention is paid to the poet’s description of Śiva’s arul as inducing seemingly incongruous ontological states of being—one of ecstatic possession that results in rapturous dance and one of spiritual bondage. In doing so, this paper posits that Māṇikkavācakar is using arul as śakti is used in the philosophy of the Sanskrit Śaiva Siddhānta tradition and argues that this is an early attempt to localize the Śaiva Siddhānta in a Tamil milieu, as Tiruvācakam appears several centuries prior to the initial Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta text. In doing so, this paper also highlights the ways in which poetic narratives can embody a broader philosophical debate rather than serving merely as a vehicle for philosophical ideas.

Keywords Māṇikkavācakar · Tiruvācakam · Śiva · Arul · Bhakti · Śaiva Siddhānta

Śiva’s arul—his creative and salvific energy—functions in seemingly incongruous ways in Māṇikkavācakar’s Tiruvācakam (“Sacred Utterances”), a Tamil text of medieval bhakti (devotional) poetry. In these poems, and indeed in Tamil Śaiva thought as a whole, arul is regarded as Śiva’s foremost aspect as it is responsible for creation of the universe, for his manifestations in the world, and for ultimately freeing the soul from spiritual bondage and samsāra, the cycle of rebirth. In this
paper I will explore the ways in which Śiva’s arul generates what appears to be opposing ontological states of being—one of ecstatic possession that results in rapturous dance and one of spiritual bondage. I will analyze two poems—Pōṟṟi Tiruvakaval (PT) or “Sacred Hymn of Praise” and Nīttal Viṇṇappam (NV) or “Petition for [Bodily] Abandonment”—that are concerned with one of these respective conditions. In PT, Māṇikkavācakar provides an account of arul oozing out of his heart—the seat of the soul—irrupting cognitive processes and inducing an overwhelming state of ecstatic possession. NV illustrates the disposition that seemingly hinders the effects of Śiva’s arul and Māṇikkavācakar pleads to experience it again. One question that the poet poses in the latter poem is why does spiritual bondage—karma (action), māyā (illusion), and mala (primordial defilement)—remain active if the rapturous effects of arul have already been experienced? Māṇikkavācakar assumes possession to be a sign that these three bonds are no longer operative and he can worship unremittingly until death, when he will be liberated from the cycle of rebirth. This study takes this question seriously and offers a theory for his inability to experience Śiva’s overwhelming presence, namely that arul is creating bondage-like conditions to assist the poet in overcoming his attachment to the mundane world.

Previous studies of Tiruvācakam have operated under the assumption that it is philosophical but devoid of a systematic worldview (Navaratnam 1951; Yocum 1982) or that it exhibits only a burgeoning Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy (Zvelebil 1974). I am of the opinion and will hopefully demonstrate that the two poems under consideration here represent an early attempt to articulate pan-Indian Sanskrit Śaiva Siddhānta doctrine in Tamil cultural and literary idioms. The title Śaiva Siddhānta purports the “final conclusion” (siddhānta) of knowledge of Śiva. This knowledge is found in the 28 Śaiva āgamas—Sanskrit liturgical texts that form the basis for Siddhāntin ritual and theology.¹ The āgamas are believed to be divine revelation, and thus, on par with the Veda Śamhitās.

Scholarship over the past two decades or so has countered the once-prevalent opinion that Śaiva Siddhānta was of twelfth-century, Tamil origins. While there were regional schools, Davis’ (1992) study of the tradition has shown that the Siddhāntins imagined themselves as a network of interrelated lineages that spanned the subcontinent and reached to Southeast Asia. The earliest extant inscription pointing to the presence of Śaiva Siddhānta in Tamilnadu is found on the Kailāsanātha temple in Kāaćipuram, announcing the Pallava king Narasimhavarman II’s (695–728) allegiance to the path of Śaiva Siddhānta and to the theology of the āgamas. While this undoubtedly points to the existence of these liturgical texts by the eighth century, based on ninth-century commentaries, Lorenzen (1972) argues that Śaiva Siddhānta as an order distinct from other Śaiva orders probably occurred more than a century after the Kailāsanātha inscription.² Davis (1991) further notes that while the dawn of Siddhāntin self-definition is vague, by the tenth century

¹ See Arunachalam (1983) for an overview of the genre and the texts.
² Lorenzen’s (1972, pp. 1–12) argument is based on commentaries by Śaṅkara, Vacaspati Miśra, and Bhāskaraśārya. This is not to say that Śaiva Siddhānta in some form was not present in Tamil Nadu prior to the ninth century; the important component here is the mapping out and articulation of distinct groups within the wider Śaiva community.