

A Theme of Self-Humiliation in the Poetry of Tamil *Bhaktas*

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Abstract

It is well known that the religious movement called the emotional *bhakti* distinctly proclaimed itself in the poetry composed in Tamil language by Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints in the period between 6th and 12th CE. One of its major contents is a description of emotional attitudes of an adept towards the god. The range of such attitudes is very wide and includes different human emotional states beginning from overwhelming joy and ending with gloomy and even tragic feelings. Among them a position of self-humiliation or self-condemnation of a devotee appears to be rather prominent. Poems composed by the saints (*nāyaṇārs* and *ālvārs*) give a great number of examples demonstrating the emotion of self-humiliation. Usually, poets call themselves slaves or servants (*aṭi, toṇṭaṇ*), often dogs (*nāyēṇ*), sinners (*pāvīyēṇ*) and so on. They also express feelings of self-disappointment, remorse, inner struggle, despair. One of the interesting turns in such revelations is a feeling of despise towards one's own body which is looked upon as a dirty substance, not fit to get in contact with the god. The paper has its aim to represent the theme of self-humiliation of adepts with more details and examples.

Keywords: Tamil poetry, emotional *bhakti*, *nāyaṇār*, *ālvār*, self-deprecation.

The contents of the old Tamil poetry (roughly the first half of the first millennium) is traditionally divided into two sections – *akam* ('the inner') and *puṇam* ('the outer'). The first is devoted to love and family matters, the second mostly consists of poems extolling kings and chieftains. Poets who composed

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panegyric songs praised the patrons for their military skills, valour and also for their generosity. In spite of the fact that many poets and performers who visited the courts of chiefs belonged to low social strata, due to their important role in what can be called ‘a praise-ritual’ they were respected and well rewarded for their activity. At the same time, they understood the distance between them and their patrons and sometimes notes of self-humiliation appeared in their songs. For example, the poet Ālattūr Kīlār addressing the king says: ‘I am nothing!’¹. Another poet follows suit: ‘What is the measure of ours, those who were born and raised in your shadow!’². Though such passages could imply the difference in the social positions of the parties, they can also be interpreted as the poets’ humble estimation of their artistic gift which is not sufficient to properly eulogise the greatness of their patrons. ‘How should I speak about you?’³, exclaims another poet. Such tunes of self-humiliation which are in fact rare in old Tamil anthologies form, however, a characteristic feature of the later religious poetry which describes a relationship between an adept and the god.

This poetry was born within the religious movement called the emotional *bhakti* and was represented in texts composed in the Tamil language by Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints in the period between the 6th and 12th centuries⁴. One of its major contents is a description of the emotional attitudes of an adept towards the god. The range of such attitudes is very wide and includes different human emotional states beginning from overwhelming joy and ending with gloomy and even tragic feelings. Among them a position of self-humiliation or self-deprecation taken by a devotee looks rather prominent. Poems composed by saints (Śaiva *nāyaṇār* and Vaiṣṇava *ālvār*) provide a great number of examples demonstrating this emotional attitude. The feelings of one’s unworthiness, guilt or humility became an important feature of a *bhaktā*’s psychological portrait.

Self-deprecation which sometimes comes to the degree of self-flagellation can be considered in terms of a ritual behaviour which in the end serves as a way to point out an enormously high status of the patron in the dichotomy “adept/god”. It is worth noting that in the poetic texts we are dealing with, the authors position themselves as *bhaktas* and, thus, express their personal feelings which at the same time represent the characteristic emotions of a religious person

1. PN 34, 19: *yāpō tañcam*.

2. PN 38, 10-11: *niṅ niḷal piṅantu niṅ niḷal vaḷarnta em aḷavu evaṅō*.

3. PN 39, 13: *yāñkaṇam moḷikō yāṅē*.

4. The expression “emotional *bhakti*” was coined as the contradistinction to the “intellectual *bhakti*” of the *Bhagavadgītā*. See Hardy 1983, 41.

as a type. It should be added that these emotions are far from being straightforward and include a range of psychological states, such as self-disappointment or even self-despise, remorse, doubts, inner struggle, despair and the like.

The motive of self-humiliation is perceptible first of all in terms which poets regularly apply to themselves: a slave or servant (*aṭi*, *toṇṭaṇ*, *āḷ*), a dog (*nāyēṇ*), a sinner (*pāvīyēṇ*) and so on. The term *aṭi* can be considered the most frequent. The first meaning of the word is ‘a foot’. Due to the process of semantic extension it comes to denote a person who find himself at the feet of his master, or lord, that is ‘a slave’ or ‘a servant’. In the context of religious poetry this word loses its negative connotation and functions as a synonym of a devotee who worships the god’s feet and praises them.

The same can be said about the term *toṇṭaṇ* (‘a servant’)⁵. From this point of view the nick-name of one of the Vaiṣṇava poets *toṇṭaraṭippoti*, literally ‘the dust under the feet of the slaves [of the God]’, contains not only tones of self-humiliation but also the pride of being among a group of Viṣṇu’s adepts (*ālvār*). The semantics of the noun *āḷ* is connected with the verb *āḷ* (‘to rule’), and the typical complex verb *āṭkoḷ* often met with in poetry means ‘to subdue, to take as a servant’. The ambivalent character of these terms seems to be clear.

But the tone of self-humiliation is much more prominent in the semantics of one more frequent term – *nāy* ‘a dog’. ‘I am a dog’, ‘I am an ignorant dog’ says one of the Śaiva poets Cundarar⁶. The same lexicon is used by Māṇikkavācakar: ‘I am a dog’, ‘in my doggie body’⁷ and other poets. One can argue that the comparison of oneself with a dog may signify a position of high self-estimation since the dog is universally considered to be an animal strongly devoted to its owner. There is no denying that such a notion can be discerned in the given examples.

However, in India the attitude towards dogs is known to be predominantly negative which is sometimes stressed by poets. For instance, Māṇikkavācakar says addressing Śiva: ‘you invited me, a dog, to the good Tillai’⁸. A parallel passage

5. The usage of terms *aṭi* and *toṇṭaṇ* in the poetry of Cundarar is shown in the article by Olga Vecherina (Vecherina 2017).

6. *nāyēṇ* (Cundarar 1994, 42; *Venneyallūr* 2, 1); *aṭivīlānāyēṇ* (Cundarar 1994, 399; *Tiruvatikai* 38, 6). In quotations of Cundarar’s verses the name of the poem and the number of the lines are given. In the case of the Māṇikkavācakar the numbers of the part and lines are added.

7. *nāyīṇēṇ* (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 35; TV II. 127); *nāy uṭal akattē* (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 59; TV III. 172).

8. *nāyīṇēṇai nalamali tillaiyuḷ [...] varuka eṇa* (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 35; TV II. 127). Tillai, or Cidambaram, is one of the most famous and sacred Śaiva temples in South India.

clearly supports this interpretation: ‘Oh flawless, who took me, contemptible, as a slave’⁹. A juxtaposition between the low and high, that is the adept and the god, is quite obvious here.

The poetry gives many examples of poets’ self-deprecation. Cundarar calls himself *koṭiyēṇ* ‘rude’, states that *pala poyyē uraiṅpēṇ* ‘he a liar’ (Cundarar 1994, 43; *Venneyallūr* 4, 3), *pāviyēṇ* ‘a sinner’ (Cundarar 1994, 394; *Tiruvārūr* 1, 2), compares himself with a ‘demon’-*pēy*: *pēyāy tirintu* ‘strolling as a demon’ (*ibid.* 2, 3) etc. He is echoed by Māṇikkavācakar: *pollāviṇaiyēṇ* ‘I committed bad actions’, (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 5; TV I. 25), *koṭiyēṇ* ‘I am rude’ (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 59; TV II. 171), *nalamtaṇilāta cīriyēṇ* ‘I am little, lacking goodness’ (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 11; TV I. 58), *nāyiṇ kaṭaiyāyk kiṭanta aṭiyēṇ* ‘I am a slave who is lower than a dog’ (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 11; TV I. 60), *pēyaṇēṇ* ‘a demon’ (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 100; TV V. 23, 7), *vañcaṇēṇ* ‘an impostor’ (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 133; TV V. 73).

Self-humiliation of the *bhakta*-poet constitutes an unavoidable part of a complicated system of his relationship with the God, of a pallet of his emotional states and moods. One of these deserves special mention. This is a suffering from being separated from the God. It is very emotionally expressed by the words of Cundarar:

pattimaiyum aṭimaiyiyum kaiviṭuvāṇ pāviēṇ
pottīṇa nōyatu itaṇai poruḷ aṇintēṇ pōy toḷuvēṇ
muttaṇai māmaṇitaṇnai vayirattai mūrkkāṇēṇ
ettaṇai nāl pīrintirukkēṇ eṇ ārūr iraivaṇaiyē

I am a sinner to abandon *bhakti* and slavery,
 I have learned the meaning of my inner malady. I shall go and worship
 [Him], a pearl, a great precious stone, a diamond.
 A fool, for how many days will I be separated from my God from Ārūr?
 (Cundarar 1994, 394; *Tiruvārūr* VII 51. 1, 2).

In this strophe of the *patikam*, sung for Śiva in *Tiruvārūr*, Cundarar combines a high estimation of the God with straight self-deprecation. He accuses himself of being far from Śiva, of giving up his service to him.

This motive is even more expressively presented in the *patikams* of another Śaiva poet – Appar, who was once converted to Jainism but, due to a miraculous

9. *nīcāṇēṇai* (Sansk. *nīccha* ‘lowness, meanness’) *āṇṇukoṇṭa nimala* (Sansk. *nirmala* ‘flawless’) (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 136; TV V. 78).

recovery from a disease, returned to the Śaiva faith. His poems are full of reminiscences of his Jaina past and of remorse and repentance.

kati oṅrum ariyātē kaṇ aḷalait talai paṇittu kaiyil uṇṭu
pati oṅru neṭuvitīp palar kāṇa nakai nāṇātu ulītarvēṅku
mati tanta ārūril vār tēṇai vāymaṭuttup paruki uyyum
viti iṅṅi mati iliyēṇ viḷakku irukka miṇmiṇit tik kāyṅta āṅē

I was lacking the [true] understanding and the way of salvation [attained]
 by drinking mouthfuls of the honey streaming in Ārūr
 that gave the knowledge to me who roamed not knowing any shelter,
 with inflaming eyes, having plucked hair from my head,
 eating from my hands, not being ashamed by mockery,
 when many people saw me in the long streets of the town.
 (Appar 1985, 7; VII 5, 7).

When poets call themselves fools or ignorant, they do not only mean self-accusation but sometimes also that Śiva is not comprehensible to an ordinary mind. For instance, Māṇikkavācakar says in one place: *ēṇṇai eṭṭiṇōṭu iraṇṭum ariyēṇaiyē* ‘you accepted me who do not know what eight plus two will be’ (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 119; TV V. 49). It is extremely doubtful that the poet is confessing his ignorance in simple arithmetic. It is possible that here he meant ten syllables of the Śaiva *mantra* *ōm civaṇāmacivāya*. In this case he reproaches himself for not knowing it, thus committing a fault.

Such self-accusation is often connected with emotions of remorse and vexation produced by the poet’s state of apathy, his doubts and hesitation, the lack of religious ardour. These moods are met with in the hymns of many *bhakta*-poets, but in Māṇikkavācakar’s monumental composition *Tiruvācakam* they are reflected in an especially expressive way. It seems that he managed to touch on all aspects of the relationship between the God and the adept, describing the dynamics of the adept’s spiritual life, his inner torments and pursuits. Emotions of self-accusation, self-humiliation take a great deal of space in his hymns. One more example:

viṇaiyilē kiṭantēṇai p pukuntuniṅru
pōtunāṇ viṇaikkēṭan eṇṇāy pōla
iṇaiyaṇṇāṇ eṇṇu eṇṇai ariṇittu eṇṇai
āṭkoṇṭu em pirāṇ āṇāyṅku irumpiṇ pāvai
aṇaiyanāṇ pātēṇ niṅru āṭēṇ antō

alaṛiṭēṅ ulaṛiṭēṅāvi cōrēṅ
muṇaiṅaṅē muṛaiyōṅāṅ āṅa vāṅu
muṭivu aṛiyēṅmutal antam āyiṅāṅē

To you, who came to me, when I was in [the snares] of *karma*,
As if you say: “Enough, I am a destroyer of *karma*”
And informing me – “I am such”, took me in service,
To you, who became a Lord [to me],
I am like an iron doll: I do not sing, do not dance all the time, Lo!
I am not suffering, not withering, not losing my breath.
Oh, my leader! Is it a right way I am standing on?
I do not know a decision. Oh, you who have become the beginning and the
end! (Māṅikkavācakar 1997, 99; TV V. 22, 88).

It is worth noting that such spiritual struggles are sometimes accompanied with
the motive of a physical, bodily impurity.

uṭaiyāṅē niṅ taṅaiuḷki uḷḷum perukum perumkātal
uṭaiyār uṭaiyāy niṅpātam cērak kaṅṭuṅku ūrnāyiṅ
kaṭaiyā nēṅneṅcu urukātēṅ kallā maṅattēṅ kaciyātēṅ
muṭaiyār pulukkūṭu itukāttuṅku iruppa tāka muṭittāyē.

Oh, Master! You who are the owner of those
who own the great love, which softens the heart, who think of you!
On seeing them reach your feet I, who am lower than a village dog,
I, with ignorant mind, do not melt in my heart, do not weep.
You chose that I shall be here to save this nest filled with worms up to the top.
(Māṅikkavācakar 1997, 123; TV V. 56).

The motive of bodily impurity, along with the motive of the falseness of the
sense organs (by the way, common not only for Hindu but for Buddhist and,
especially, Jaina teachings) appears more than once in the poetry of
Māṅikkavācakar and can also be considered as a sort of self-deprecation.

The motive of a bad *karma* (*valviṅai*) can be added to this. It is also often
mentioned in the poems and can be treated as a kind of original sin, which the
poet tries to expiate by addressing the only person who can help him, that is Śiva.

One more aspect of the poet’s self-criticism is his complaint of his weakness,
solitude and inner disorder.

taṅmai piṛarāl aṛiyāta talaivā pollā nāyāṅa

puṇmaiyeṇai āṇṭu aiyā puṇame pōka viṭuvāyō
eṇṇai nōkku vāryārē eṇ nāṇ ceṅkēṇ emperumāṇ
poṇṇē tikaḷun tirumēṇi entāy eṅku pukuvēṇē

Oh, Leader whose entity is unknown to others!
When ruling over me, the unworthy, a lousy dog,
will you let me go aside, o Lord?
Who will look at me [then]? What shall I do?
Oh, our greatness, our father, whose sacred body sparkles with gold!
Whence shall I go?
(Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 125; TV V. 59).

In many other places Māṇikkavācakar speaks about himself in like manner: *taḷarntēṇ* ‘I am exhausted’, *aṭiyēṇ* ‘I am a slave’, *tamiyēṇ*, *taṇiyaṇēṇ* ‘I am alone’ (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 78; TV IV. 170; Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 101; TV V. 26); *cōraṇēṇ* ‘I am tired’ (Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 24; TV V. 57). As if concluding his inner struggles, he states that he despises himself (*iḷintaṇṇai eṇṇai yāṇē*)¹⁰. He simultaneously praises Śiva and asks him to end his life, but at the same time implores his mercy, pointing out that ‘the duty of the great is to be patient to the faults of others’ (*piḷaittavai porukkai ellām periyavar kaṭamai*)¹¹.

The verbal behaviour of an adept described here should not be taken too literally. Different human feelings, including self-deprecation and self-abuse, can be very strong and reach the level of ecstasy, but in the context of religious poetry, they represent a ritual behaviour. Māṇikkavācakar should be looked upon not only as the usual personal disposition of the adept but as attributes of his specific ritual behaviour. The idea that underlies such behaviour is to place oneself far from the sacred object and then to overcome the existing distance and in the end to reach the object, that is the God. From this point of view, it represents a sort of spiritual pilgrimage and the tactics of self-humiliation metaphorically express such a distance. There is no doubt that this ritual behaviour constitutes the so-called “rite of passage”. As is known, this rite has three stages and during the second, that is the middle one, a participant loses his usual characteristics, moves away from his normal state and enters the stage of liminality, during which he usually undergoes different trials and sufferings. This is the period of spiritual and mental transformation which leads to the third stage, the stage of renovation or revival. For an adept it means that the God

10. Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 129; TV V. 66.

11. Māṇikkavācakar 1997, 129; TV V. 66.

accepts him, recognises him as a servant and gives him a place at his feet. It is worth noting that the rite in question has all the features of an initiation, and its middle stage is usually combined with the process of learning and acquiring knowledge. The tutor and master in this case is, of course, Śiva himself. There are too many places where poets mention how Śiva enlightened them, eliminated their ignorance, gave them the true knowledge and showed them the way to salvation. In one place Appar describes this powerful and almighty teacher in an extremely expressive way, addressing him thus:

āṭṭuvittāl ār oruvar āṭātārō
aṭakkuvittāl ār oruvar aṭānkātārō
ōṭṭuvittāl ār oruvar ōṭātārō
urukuvittāl ār oruvar urukātārō
pāṭṭuvittāl ār oruvar pāṭātārō
paṇivittāl ār oruvar paṇiyātārō
kāṭṭuvittāl ār oruvar kāṇātārō
kāṇpār ār kaṇṇutalāy kāṭṭākkālē
 (Appar VI. 95, 3).

If you make [us] dance is there one who won't dance?
 If you subdue [us] is there one who won't be subdued?
 If you make [us] run is there one who won't run?
 If you make [us] melt is there one who won't melt?
 If you make [us] sing is there one who won't sing?
 If you make [us] serve [you] is there one who won't serve?
 If you show [something] is there one who won't see [it]?
 Who will see, oh you with the forehead eye, when you don't appear?

At last, the period of trials comes to its end and Śiva pays attention to the *bhakta*, chooses him as his servant and grants him his grace. In terms of the rite of passage this is the point where its third stage starts, that is the period of revival and new life. It manifests itself in the abrupt change of the inner state of the adept. The former melancholy, inactivity, hesitations and doubts, self-humiliation and self-abuse change to an emotional outburst, ecstatic behaviour and joy. They are expressively depicted in the lines of Māṇikkavācakar:

tappā mētām piṭtatu caliyāt
talalatu kaṇṭa meḷukatu pōlat
toluṭuḷam uruki aluṭuḷal kampittu
āṭiyum alariyum pāṭiyum paraviyum

*koṭṭum pētaiyum koṇṭatu viṭātuteṇum
paṭiyē yākināḷ iṭaiyaṛā aṇṇin
pacumarat tāṇi aṛaintāḷ pōlak
kacivatu perukik kaṭaleṇa maṛuki
akaṇikuḷain taṇukula māymey vitirttuc
cakampēy eṇṇu tammaic cīṛippa
nāṇatu volintu nāṭavar paḷitturai
puṇatuvākak kōṇṭa liṇṇic
caturīḷan taṛimāḷ koṇṭucāruṇi
katiyatu paramā aticaya māka
(TV IV. 59-72).*

[He] grasped me not letting me go away,
As wax before the constant fire
[My] soul, worshipping [him], melted,
The body trembled with weeping,
I danced, shouted, sang, prayed.
As jaws and fools [never] let go what [they] take,
Thus, I became with my never failing love,
As a wedge driven into a young tree,
The tears increasing, I was like the storming sea,
The heart was soft and the body was shivering,
People laughed – the demon! – [but]
I threw away shame and considered scorn as a decoration,
Never swerving, I lost cleverness, but acquired knowledge
And thought as a higher wonder of my fate...

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