The Tiruvaymoli of Satakopan

Translators: Archana Venkatesan (UC Davis) and Francis X. Clooney (Harvard)

Song 1.5

1.5.1
The source of the seven wealthy worlds, lord of the dwellers in the sky
I accused him, “You stole and stealthily ate the butter, thief!“ I have done terrible deeds;
but then for Pinnai whose smile is like a talavu blossom, the chief of the strong cowherds,
crushed seven young bulls — my father, I think on this, I fade.

1.5.2
If — thinking, fading, heart dissolving, melting, the many immortals and all the sages
string garlands for you, offer water, sandal, incense, worship you —
you are the seed of everything one thinks of, you are without beginning and without decay —
can it besmirch your greatness such as the mind can know, mysterious one?

1.5.3
“The many dwellers in the sky and all the sages learn in great wombs what to do —
so create those wombs,” he said, and created the perfect Nanmukan.

He is beyond all knowledge, his feet spanned every horizon,
he is mother to all living beings, he is singular in form.

1.5.4
Singular in form, the one seed, he is the source of the three,
he becomes the many dwellers in the sky and all the sages, each and every thing,
the peerless great ocean emerged from within him, but inside it he sleeps,
lord of the dwellers in the sky, great mysterious one, lord of Vaikuntha, my lord.
1.5.5
On your chest rests the innocent doe-eyed woman, O Madhava,
to straighten the hunchback you used your toy bow, O Govinda,
you who are the color of a dark gem, light that fills the sky, O Madhusudhana,
be gracious and grant that despite my deeds I may join your sweet flowerlike feet.

1.5.6
Medicine that cures me of my deeds, chief of those who dwell in heaven, O Kesava,
root of the clan of cowherds and their wives, great mysterious one, O Madhava,
you pierced seven *mara* trees dense with leaves, O Sridhara —
such is your nature and such are your names: even as this servant says this, he faints.

1.5.7
This servant has little knowledge, but even to the wise he is elusive,
Kannan who wears garlands of fragrant cool lovely *tulasi*,
Tirumal who ends his servants' bonds to their decaying bodies:
“Let me see you!” this servant cries out. Is there a foolishness greater than this?

1.5.8
Long ago you ate the seven worlds and emitted them again,
by your mysterious power you entered the world, you ate the butter
taking on an insignificant, base human body —
if a little remained in your stomach, lest there be any paleness for humans,
was eating that ghee medicine for dissolving that earth, O mysterious lord?

1.5.9
We will not perish —
to kill the giant big deceitful demoness lying in speech,
the pure little child made her poison milk ambrosia and drank it like ambrosia,
our amazing lord, unique chief of the heaven-dwellers,
spouse of the lotus woman, everyone’s mother, lord unto himself, my own lord —
to his great form we cling.

I.5.10

Thrusting away the double strong deeds that cling,
destroying their bewildering hold, finishing them off,
purifying, that the mind might rest in him, he has purified this place,
he is the flame of perfect knowledge, beyond all limits up, down, around,
the life’s breath of what has form and what does not, my tall lord.

I.5.11

Astonished, saying over and again, “Mal, wonderful lord, great and wonderful!”
by the grace of God gone wild Satakopan of Kurukur thrives,
and of his thousand played by masters of mother’s milk Tamil, musicians and devotees,
those skilled in just these ten will never fall ill.

About the Author

We do not know much about the great Tamil mystic and poet, Satakopan. He lived sometime during the late ninth century in the deep south of the Indian peninsula in Kurukur, a town located on the banks of the Tamparaparani. He authored four major poems, of which the Tiruvaymoli (Sacred Speech) is considered his most important and influential. While historically verifiable information about Satakopan may be scant, his miraculous life is deeply etched into the consciousness of many Tamil devotees of Vishnu. He is revered as the foremost of Vishnu’s devotees known as the alvar (those who are immersed in love of god) and is affectionately referred to as Nammalvar (our alvar).

When Satakopan-Nammalvar was born, he neither cried, nor spoke nor opened his eyes. Instead, he crawled into a hole in a tamarind tree, and sat there engrossed in meditation for a number of years. One day, Maturakavi a young man in search of a teacher, perceived a bright star in the sky. It He followed the star, which lead him to the silent, meditating boy. Maturakavi posed the boy a riddle: “If a small thing is born in the stomach of a dead thing, what does it eat and where does it lie?” Satakopan responded just as obliquely, “It eats that, it lies there.” Impressed by the young boy’s answer, Maturakavi accepted him as his teacher, and the one thousand verses of the Tiruvaymoli flowed out of the boy-seer in an intense aural/oral encounter.

About the Work (Translator’s Statement)

The Tiruvaymoli (Sacred Speech) is a ninth century Tamil devotional poem of 1102 verses composed by Satakopan. In praise of the Hindu deity Vishnu, the poem explores complex theological questions about the nature of god and the terrestrial worlds against the backdrop of the poet’s personal quest for liberation from the endless cycle of birth and death. The Tiruvaymoli, divided into 10 books of 100 verses each,
uses several registers to develop the narrative of the poet’s mystical union and separation from Vishnu, until he finally achieves the desired union in the climatic tenth book. Nammalvar writes equally evocatively in the third person, of Vishnu’s infinite compassion, in the first person of his perceived unworthiness of Vishnu’s grace, and in the voice of a young girl expressing her desire for Vishnu, whom she imagines as her lover. Each of these rhetorical registers meld together seamlessly to create a graphic landscape of the poet’s ecstatic devotional experience and the philosophical ideas that emerge from said experience.

The poem’s genre, known as the antāṭi, is an effective example of Nammalvar’s subtle use of rhetoric, poetic form, and philosophy. In the antāṭi genre, the last word of each verse is also the first word in the verse that immediately follows it. Thus, the first word of the poem is also its last. For Nammalvar, a master of this genre, the antāṭi also makes a significant theological point about Vishnu’s nature as the universe’s cause and its end; of the endless cycle of birth and death from which only Vishnu can offer release; where the poem that has neither beginning nor end becomes the very embodiment of Vishnu’s unfathomable nature.

The Tiruvaymoli is visionary in scope and execution and is a foundational text in South India. It is the bedrock on which an entire philosophical system developed in the eleventh century, and the ideas expressed in the Tiruvaymoli influenced the later ecstatic devotional movements of India. Attesting to the poem’s extraordinary significance, beginning in the 11th century, innumerable commentaries have been composed for it, and contemporary writers continue to author interpretations elucidating the poem’s relevance for a modern audience.

The collaborative translation with Prof. Francis X. Clooney, S.J. (Harvard University) of this literary and theological masterwork is offered as a contribution to the Tiruvaymoli’s wide-ranging relevance. Guided by the knowledge that the Tiruvaymoli is both a work of theology and literary achievement, our collaborative translation owes as much to the text’s many commentaries as to our own close readings. Our English rendering of this profound and moving poem seeks to honor both its literary and theological legacy.