# Introduction

## On *Erotic Devotion*

From its formative period in the seventh to ninth centuries onward, South Indian devotional poetry was permeated by erotic themes and images. In the Tamil poems of the Saiva N5yanm5r and the Vaispava Ali(ārs, god appears frequently as a lover, in roles inherited from the more ancient Tamil love poetry of the so-called *sarigam* period (the first centuries A.D.). Poems of this sort are generally placed, alongside their classical *sarigam* models, in the category of *akam,* the "inner" poetry of emotion, especially the varied emotions of love in its changing aspects. Such *akam* poems—addressed ultimately to the god, Siva or Visnu, and contextualized by a devotional framework, usually that of worship in the god's temple—are early South Indian examples of the literary linkage between mystical devotion and erotic discourse so prevalent in the world's major religions.

A historical continuum stretches from these Tamil poets of devotion all the way to Ksetrayya and Sârangapapi, a millenium later. The *padam* poets clearly draw on the vast cultural reserves of Tamil *bhakti,* in its institutional as well as its affective and personal forms. Their god, like that of the Tamil poet-devotees, is a deity both embodied in temple images and yet finally transcending these icons, and they sing to him with all the emotional and sensual

intensity that so clearly characterizes the inner world of medieval South Indian Hinduism.' And yet these Telugu devotees also present us with their own irreducible vision, or series of visions, of the divine, at play with the world, and perhaps the most conspicuous attribute of this refashioned cosmology is its powerful erotic coloring. As we seek to understand the import of the Telugu *padams* translated here, we need to ask: What is distinctive about the erotic imagination activated in these works? How do they relate to the earlier tradition of South Indian *bhakti,* with its conventional erotic components? What changes have taken place in the conceptualization of the deity, his human devotee, and the intimate relationship that binds them? Why this hypertrophy of overt eroticism, and what does it mean to love god in this way?

Let us begin with an example from Nammalvar, the central poet among the Tamil worshipers of Visnu, who wrote in the southern Tamil area during the eighth century:

> The whole town fast asleep,
> the whole world pitch dark,
> and the seas utterly still,
> when it's one long extended night,
> if He who sleeps on the snake,
> who once devoured the earth, and kept it in his belly,
> will not come to the rescue,
> who will save my life? (5.2.1)
>
> Deep ocean, earth and sky
> hidden away,
> it's one long monstrous night:
> if my Kannan too,
> dark as the blue lily,
> will not come,
> now who will save my life,
> sinner that I am?
> 0 heart, you too are not on my side. (5.2.2)
>
> 0 heart, you too are not on my side.
> The long night with no end
> has lengthened into an eon.
> My Lord Rama will not come,
> with his protecting bow.
> I do not know how it will end—
> I with all my potent sins,
> born as a woman. (5.2.3)
>
> "Those born as women see much grief,
> but I'll not look at it," says the Sun
> and he hides himself;
> our Dark Lord, with red lips and great eyes,
> who once measured this earth,
> he too will not come.
> Who will quell the unthinkable ills
> of my heart? (5.2.4)
>
> This lovesickness stands behind me
> and torments my heart.
> This eon of a night
> faces me and buries my sight.
> My lord, the wheel forever firm in his hands,
> will not come.
> So who will save this long life of mine
> that finds no end at all? (5.2.6)

The speaker is a young woman, obviously separated from her lover, who is identified as Kannan/Krsna, the Dark God, Rama, and others—that is, the various forms of Visnu as known to the Alvar devotees. The central "fact" stated in each of the verses—which are

taken from a closely knit decade on this theme and in this voice—is that the god-lover refuses to come. The woman is alone at night, in an enveloping black, rainy world; everyone else in the village, including her friends and family, has gone to sleep. She, of course, cannot sleep: her heart is tortured by longing, an unfulfilled love that can be redeemed only by the arrival of the recalcitrant lover. She seems quite certain that this will never happen. Her very life is in danger because of this painful inner state, but there is no one to help her. She blames herself, her "sins," her womanhood—and perhaps, by subtle intimation, the god-lover as well, callously sleeping on his serpent-bed (or, in the final verse of the sequence, 'engaged in yoga though he seems to sleep").

All in all, it is a picture of plaintive and frustrated desire. It would be all too easy to allegorize the verses, to see here some version of a soul pining for its possessing deity, translated into the language of *akam* love poetry. Indeed, the medieval Vaisnava commentators go some way in this direction, although their allegoresis is neither as mechanical nor as unimaginative as is sometimes claimed.' But scholars such as Friedhelm Hardy and Norman Cutler are surely right to insist on the autonomy of the poetic universe alive in the Alvars' *akam* poems. To reduce this poetic autonomy to metaphysical allegory is to destroy the poems' integrity, and with it most of their suggestive power.' So we are left with the basic lineaments of the love situation, so delicately drawn in by the poet, and above all with its emotional reality, as the bedrock on which the poem rests. Using the language of classical Tamil poetics, which certainly helped to shape the poem, we can label the situation as proper to the *mullai* landscape of the forests, with its associated state of patient waiting for the absent lover. The god himself,



Mayon, the Dark One (Krsna), is the *mullai* deity, and the ceaseless rain is another conventional marker of this landscape.' As always in Tamil poetry, the external world is continuous with, and expressive of, inner experience. Thus, in verse 10:

> Even as I melt continually,
> the wide sky melts into a fine mist
> this night,
> and the world just sleeps through it
> saying not a word, not even once,
> that the Lord who paced the earth
> long ago
> will not come.

The heroine is slowly turning to water, "melting," in the language of Tamil devotion, and although there is pain in this state—the pain of unanswered longing—it is also no doubt a stage in the progressive softening *(urukutal)* of the self that Tamil *bhakti* regards as the ultimate process whereby one achieves connection with the object of one's love.

And things are yet more complex. The blackness of night seems to imitate the role of the god; like the latter, the darkness is enveloping, saturating the world. It is also, again like the deity, cruelly indifferent to the heroine's distress—another form of detachment, like the sleep that has overwhelmed the village (and the god). Internal markers of the *mullai* landscape thus resonate and alternate with one another, reinforcing its emotional essence within the speaker's consciousness. And, again, the basic experience is one of separation (Sanskrit: *viraha),* nearly always a constitutive feature of the *bhakti* relationship between god and human devotee. Other features of this relationship are also evident in the poem. For example, one immediately observes the utter asymmetry

built into the relation: the heroine, who in some sense speaks for the poet, is relatively helpless vis-à-vis her beloved. She can only wait for him and suffer the torment of his absence. He, in contrast, is free to come or not, to show compassion, if lie wishes, and save her life—or let her die of love. There is no way for her to reconstitute his presence. The whole universe proclaims to her his remoteness, seemingly both physical and emotional; she is dwarfed by the inherent lack of equality between them. Interestingly, she blames her situation in part on her womanhood. Being a woman puts her precisely in this position of helpless dependence. She is not even in control of her emotional life: she accuses her heart of having turned against her ("you too are not on my side"), as if a part of herself had split away. This sense of a torn and conflicted personality is typical of the Tamil *bhakti* presentation of self. Overruling passion for the unpredictable and usually distant deity has disrupted the harmony and coherence of the devotee's inner being.

Contrast this picture—blocked desire, unending separation, a world turned dark on many levels, the helplessness of womanhood, a shattered self—with one we find in Ksetrayya:

Woman! He's none other
than Cennudu of Palagiri.
    Haven't you heard?
    He rules the worlds.

When he wanted you, you took his gold—
but couldn't you tell him your address?
    Some lover you are!
    He's hooked on you.

*And he rules the worlds*

I found him wandering the alleyways,
    too shy to ask anyone.
I had to bring him home with me.
Would it have been such a crime
    if you or your girls
had waited for him by the door?
You really think it's enough
to get the money in your hand?
Can't you tell who's big, who's small?
    Who do you think he is?

*And he rules the worlds*

This handsome Cennudu of Palagiri,
    this Muvva Gopala,
has fallen to your lot.
When he said he'd come tomorrow,
    couldn't you consent
    just a little?
Did you really have to say no?
What can I say about you?

And *he rules the worlds*

The senior courtesan or madam is chiding her younger colleague. God himself has come as a customer to this young woman, but she has treated him rather haughtily—taking his money but refusing even to give him her address. The madam finds him wandering the narrow streets of the courtesan colony, too embarrassed to ask for directions. Although his real nature and power are clear enough—as the refrain tells us (and the young courtesan), this customer rules the worlds—it is the woman who has the upper hand in this transaction, while the deity behaves as an awkward and essentially help-

less plaything in her control. He wants her, lusts for her, and yet she easily eludes him. Their relationship, such as it is, is transactional and mercenary, and the advantage wholly hers. If Nammälvdr showed us an asymmetrical bond between the god and his lover (who speaks for the poet-devotee), here the asymmetry, still very much in evidence, is boldly reversed. Moreover, the emotional tone of the Telugu *padam* is radically different from that of the Tamil decade. The atmosphere of tormenting separation, *viraha,* has dissolved, to be replaced by a playful though still far from harmonious tone. God and woman are involved here in a kind of teasing hide-and-seek, with money as part of the stakes, and the woman is an active, independent partner to the game.

It is not always the woman's voice we hear in Ksetrayya; on rare occasions, the male deity-lover is the speaker. But the image of the woman—the human partner to the transaction—is on the whole quite consistent. Usually, though again not always, she is a courtesan, practiced in the arts of love, which she freely describes in graphic, if formulaic, terms. She tends to be worldly, educated, articulate, perhaps a little given to sarcasm. In most *padams* she has something to complain about, usually her divine lover's new infatuation with some rival woman. So she may be angry at him—although she is also, at times, all too easily appeased, susceptible to his facile oaths of devotion. Indeed, this type of anger—a lover's pique, never entirely or irrevocably serious—is the real equivalent in these poems to the earlier ideology of *viraha.* The relationship thus retains elements of friction and tension, though they are less intense than in the Tamil *bhakti* corpus. Loving god, like loving another human being, is never a simple matter. One might even argue that the god's persistent betrayals, his constant affairs with



other women, are felt to be an integral and necessary part of the love bond (just as quarrels are seen as adding spice and verve to love in both Sanskrit erotic poetry and classical Tamil poems). Indeed, these tiffs and sulkings, so perfectly conventionalized, come close to defining the *padam* genre from the point of view of its contents, which sometimes function in a seemingly incongruous context. Thus, in a dance-drama composed during the rule of Vijayardghava Nayaka at Tafijaviir and describing his marriage to a courtesan, the bride sings a *padam* immediately after the wedding ceremony, in which she naturally complains that her husband is (already?) betraying her: "You are telling lies. Why are you trying to hide the red marks *she* left on your lips?'"

We should also note that, despite the angry recriminations, the quarrels, and even the heroine's occasional resolve never to see her capricious lover again, many of the *padams* end in an intimation of sexual union and orgasm. A cycle is completed: initial love, sexually realized, leads to the lover's loss of interest or temporary disappearance and to his affairs with other women. But none of this prevents him from returning to make love to the speaker, however disenchanted she may be, as Ksetrayya tells us:

I can see all the signs
of what you've been doing
till midnight,
you playboy.
Still you come rushing
through the streets,
sly as a thief,
to untie my blouse.

In general, physical union represents a potential resolution of the tensions expressed in many of the poems. In this respect, too, the *padam* contrasts strongly with the Tamil *bhakti* models.

It should now be clear why the courtesan appears as the major figure in this poetry of love. As an expressive vehicle for the manifold relations between devotee and deity, the courtesan offers rich possibilities. She is bold, unattached, free from the constraints of home and family. In some sense, she represents the possibility of choice and spontaneous affection, in opposition to the largely predetermined, and rather calculated, marital tie. She can also manipulate her customers to no small extent, as the devotee wishes and believes he can manipulate his god. But above all, the courtesan signals a particular kind of knowledge, one that achieved preeminence in the late medieval cultural order in South India. Bodily experience becomes a crucial mode of knowing, especially in this devotional context: the courtesan experiences her divine client by taking him physically into her body. Even Annamayya, who is primarily concerned not with courtesans but with a still idealized series of (nonmercenary) love situations, shows us this fascination with bodily knowledge of the god:

> Don't you know my house,
> garland in the palace of the Love God,
> where flowers cast their fragrance everywhere?
>
> Don't you know the house
> hidden by tamarind trees,
> in that narrow space marked by the two golden hills?
>
> That's where you lose your senses,
> where the Love God hunts without fear.



The woman's "house of love" *(madanagrha)* is the true point of connection between her and the deity-lover. This notion, which is basic to the entire *padam* tradition, takes us considerably beyond the sensual and emotional openness of earlier South Indian *bhakti.* The Tamil devotee worships his deity in a sensually accessible form and through the active exploration of his emotions; he sees, hears, tastes, smells, and, perhaps above all, touches the god. But for the Telugu *padam* poets, the relation has become fully eroticized, in a manner quite devoid of any facile dualistic division between body and metaphysical or psychological substratum. Put starkly, for these devotees love of god is not *like* a sexual experience—as if eros were but a metaphor for devotion (as so many modern South Indian apologists for Ksetrayya insist). Rather, it is erotic in its own right, and in as comprehensive and consuming a form as one encounters in any human love.

Still, this conceptualization of the relationship does have a literary history, and here we can speak of a series of transformations that take us from *safigam* poetry through the Alvdrs and Ndyanmär to the *padam* poets. As already stated, the ancient tradition of Tamil love poetry, with its rich body of conventions, its dramatis personae, and its set themes, was absorbed into the literature of Tamil *bhakti.* In effect, *bhakti* comes to "frame" poems composed after the prototypes of *akam* love poems. The verses from Namrn5lv5r cited above, in which the lovesick heroine laments the absence of her lover who is the god, are good examples of this process:

> If my Kannan too,
> dark as the blue lily,
> will not come,

now who will save my life,
sinner that I am?

What might look like a simple love poem has become something else—a lyric of devotion, which uses the signs and language of *akam* poetics but which subordinates this usage to its new aim by internal reference to the divine object of worship, replete with mythic and iconic identifying traits.[6] By the time we reach the Telugu *padams,* the process has been taken a step further. The "reframed," bhakti-oriented love lyric has now acquired yet another frame, which reeroticizes the poem, turning it into a courtesan's love song that is, nonetheless, still impregnated with devotional elements, by virtue of the prehistory of the genre. This development, however, takes somewhat different forms with each of the major *padam* poets and thus needs to be examined more closely, in context, according to the sequence in which it evolved. Indeed, if we focus more on context than content, our perspective on these poems changes significantly. Although all of them, even those seemingly closest to out-and-out love poems, retain a metaphysical aspect, the exigencies and implications of their social and cultural milieux now come to the fore. In what follows, we briefly trace the evolution of the *padam* in context from Annamayya to Ksetrayya.

## On Contexts

Thilap5ka Annamayya composed a song a day for his deity, Lord Venkate[g]vara of the temple on Tirupati Hill, where the Tamil and Telugu lands meet. According to Annamayya's hagiographer—his own grandson, Tiruvengalanatha—Annamayya's son Veda Tirumalayya had these songs inscribed on copperplates together with his own compositions. Considering the total number of songs—Tiruvengalanatha speaks of some thirty-two thousand'—this was a very expensive enterprise indeed, which reflects the status of the poet's family as servants of this most wealthy of the South Indian temple gods. The copperplates were housed in a separate treasure room within the Venkat6vara temple at Tirupati; inscriptions suggest that the treasure room was itself an object of worship. Annamayya's songs were probably sung by courtesans who led the processions and danced before the deity in the temple.

The copperplates divide Annamayya's songs into two categories: the metaphysical and the erotic. It is conceivable that Annamayya's career had two corresponding phases, but it is more likely that this classification resulted from a later act of ordering the corpus. In any case, the two categories are reminiscent of Nammälvär's poems. Indeed, Annamayya is believed to have been born under the same astrological star as Nammalvar and is sometimes regarded as a reincarnation of the Tamil poet. Our first concern, then, is with the manner in which Annamayya uses the language and imagery of eroticism to express his type of devotion.

The courtly tradition in both Sanskrit and Telugu subsumed sexual themes under the category of *srngararasa,* the aesthetic experience of desire. Many long erotic poems were composed on mythological subjects, with gods as the protagonists, as well as on more secular themes, with human beings as the heroes. Still, it was considered unsuitable to depict the lovemaking of a god and a goddess, even for devotional purposes; such depictions were thought to block the highest aesthetic experience. (Hence the controversy in Sanskrit aesthetic texts over whether *bhakti* is an aesthetic experi-

ence, a *rasa,* or not.) Some even insist that such descriptions constitute a blemish because the god and the goddess are father and mother of the universe; explicit reference to their lovemaking is thus offensive.

But for Annamayya no such barriers exist. He describes how Padm5vati, Lord Venkate§vara's consort, sleeps after making love to her husband:

> Mother, who speaks so sweetly,
> has gone to sleep:
> she has made love to her husband
> with all her feminine skills
>
> and is now sleeping
> long into the day,
> her hair scattered on her face.'

Annamayya has songs describing the lovemaking of the goddess, Alamelumanga/Padmavati, in all conceivable roles and situations. Nor is Annamayya content with love between god and his consort. He goes on to describe the lovemaking of other women with Venkate[g]vara, these women representing every erotic type described in the manuals of love *(kamagiistra).*

For Annamayya, love/devotion is an exploration of the ideal experience of the divine. Most often, he assumes the persona of the woman who is in love with the god—either the consort herself or another woman. Unlike later *padam* writers, Annamayya does not describe a courtesan/customer relationship between the devotee and the god. No money changes hands, and the woman does not manipulate the customer to get the best deal. In Annamayya it is always an ideal love relationship, which ultimately achieves harmony. God here is always male, and he is usually in control. He



has the upper hand, even when he adopts a subservient posture to please his woman. The woman might complain, get angry, and fight with him, but in the end they make love and the god wins.

When we come to Ksetrayya, however, the situation is transformed. For one thing, Ksetrayya composed during the period of Vijayaraghava Nayaka ($16_{33}$-$16_{73}$), the Telugu king who ruled Taii.jâvfir and the Käveri delta. This period witnessed a significant shift, leading to the identification of the king with the deity.' Earlier, the god was treated as a king; now the king has become god. For the *bhakti* poets of Andhra, however, especially of Annamayya's period, the king was only too human, at most sharing an aspect of divinity, in the strict Brahminical *dharma§cistra* tradition. These poets did not recognize him as their true sovereign since for them the real king was the god in the temple. But during the Nayaka period in South India (roughly the mid-sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries), the distinction between the king in his palace and the god in the temple blurs and even disappears. Ksetrayya could thus address his songs to the king and at the same time invoke the god.

Furthermore, this was also the time when cash began to play a more powerful role in interpersonal transactions. A new elite was emerging, one composed not of landed peasants, as in Vijayanagara times, but of soldier-traders, who cut across traditional social boundaries. These people combined two qualities usually considered incompatible in the Brahminical worldview—martial valor and concern for profit, the quality of a *ksatriya* (warrior) and the quality of a *vai§ya* (trader). Earlier, when god was king or when the king shared only an aspect of the divine, kingship was ascriptive. To be recognized as a king, one had either to be born in a particular

caste as a legitimate heir or to fabricate some such pedigree. Now, in the more fluid social universe of Nayaka times, ascriptive qualities like birth became less important than acquired qualities like wealth. If a king is god, and if anyone who has money is a king, anyone who has money is also god. For Ksetrayya, therefore, who sings of kings as gods, the shift to customer as god was not farfetched. Courtesans, who earlier were associated with temples, were now linked to kings—any "king," that is, who had money. The devotional mode, however, did not change. The new god, who was not much more than a wealthy customer, was addressed as Muvva Copia, as Krsna is known in the local temple.

The shift did not happen overnight. Even in Ksetrayya we still encounter songs in which the divine aspects are more dominant than those of the human customer. But there are songs unmistakably addressed to the latter. Although the devotional meanings still linger, one sometimes suspects that they are simply part of the idiom, often not much more than a habit. The direction is clear and pronounced when we reach Sarafigapäni, where money is almost the only thing of value. Here any customer is the god, known as Venugopala (again after the local name of Krsna).

We have a slightly earlier precedent for this shift in Rudrakavi's *laniirdandstakamu,* a composition of eight stanzas that are also sung, though not to elaborate music like the *padams* (nor are they danced to). The theme of this sixteenth-century poem is familiar: the poet assumes the persona of a woman who is in love with the god Janardana (Krsna); she complains that her divine lover is seeing another woman. These songs are very much like Annamayya's, except for one major difference. Here the woman threatens the god, although in the end she is still taken by her cunning lover.



Rudrakavi anticipates Ksetrayya's attitudes; he represents a transition.

Annamayya's songs (and probably also Rudrakavi's) were sung in the temple. There is, however, no evidence that Ksetrayya's songs were sung in temple rituals. Ksetrayya's songs survived among courtesans and in the repertoire of the male Brahmin dancers of the Kucipudi tradition who played female roles. That Ksetrayya traveled to many places to visit courts and temples is clear from the many specific vocatives in his songs (including one even to the Muslim Padshah of Golconda). As we have already mentioned, temples and palaces were associated with courtesan colonies, and it is quite likely that Ksetrayya was composing songs for these courtesans to sing—to a deity, king, or customer, the three categories having been, in any case, conflated into one.

We should also note that in these songs the courtesan and the god-customer acquire individual identities. Telugu scholarly tradition later attempted to reduce them to character types, based on conventional Sanskrit texts on erotics and poetics, but such classifications miss the special quality of Ksetrayya's poems and personae. For instance, women's roles in drama, dance, and poetry were classified into fixed types according to the woman's age, body type, and sexual availability. For example, a heroine is *sviya,* "one's own wife," *anyä,* "another man's wife," or *sämänyä,* "common property," like a courtesan. Depending on her experience, she is *mugdha,* "an innocent," *praudha,* "the bold one," or *madhyd,* "the in-between." Heroines are also classified into eight types according to their attitudes toward their lovers. Permutations and combinations of these and other categories yield a staggering number of different types of heroines. An anonymous late-eighteenth-

century Telugu work, the Spigiirarasamarijari, attempts to apply such a scheme to Ksetrayya's songs and even expands the classifications further. Ksetrayya's depictions are, however, much too individuated to fit any such prefabricated typology.

The attempt to justify these songs by invoking academic *(śastric)* categories is a characteristic response to perceived needs. First, there was a wish to make Ksetrayya's work acceptable to scholars—to legitimize his status as a poet in a way that would allow his courtesan songs to be read as poems of §rfigärarasa, the refined "taste" or "essence" of sexual love, thus giving them a place with the works of the great poets of Sanskrit and courtly Telugu. Second, there was a concomitant desire to dilute the realistic sexuality of the courtesans and to read into these texts elevated meanings of spiritual love. These are two sides of a single process, which requires some further explication if we are to understand the evolution of current attitudes toward Ksetrayya and his "biography."

Around the turn of the century, with the advent of Victorian moralistic attitudes in public life, sexuality and eroticism in Hindu culture and literature came to be seen as a problem. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries social reformers in Andhra opposed the institution of courtesans per se. Kandukuri Virēśalingam (1848-1910) started the antinautch movement, which advocated that respectable men should not visit courtesans. Until this time it had been considered prestigious for a man from an upper-caste family to maintain a courtesan. Important men in society prided themselves on their association with courtesan dance groups, which were named after them. People in high positions, such as district magistrates and police commissioners, sponsored courtesan singing groups *(melams);* anyone who had business with



the officer was expected to attend such performances and give a suitable gift *(ösagulu)* to the courtesans, a percentage of which went to the sponsoring officer. As can be imagined, this practice led to corruption in high places. The antinautch movement addressed itself to these social ills with puritanical zeal. But the movement had a negative effect on dance and music. The courtesan had traditionally been the center of song and dance in South India. Housewives were normally prohibited from appearing in public, and certainly from singing or dancing before men. By contrast, the courtesan enjoyed a freedom usually reserved for the men; not only did she not suffer from many of the restrictions imposed on women but she was given the same honor shown to poets in a royal court. Names of great courtesans such as Mácaladevi are known in literature dating from the Kakatiya period.[1] Some, such as the learned Rafigajamma, were prominent poets in the Nayaka courts.

But all this was possible only to a woman born in a courtesan caste. By the nineteenth century women born in other castes, for whom marriage was prescribed, were not free to cultivate any of the skills courtesans practiced. Any effort on the part of the family woman even to try to look beautiful or display womanly skills was severely censured. Thus, looking into a mirror at night or wearing too many flowers on certain occasions would bring down the wrath of the elders and accusations that the woman was behaving no better than a courtesan. No insult could be worse: in family households a courtesan was regarded as the most despicable thing a woman could become. By this time, then, the world of women was clearly divided into two opposed parts, that of the courtesan and that of the family woman, and neither of the two wished to be mistaken for the other. Chastity, modesty, innocence, dependency,

the responsibility to bear male children to continue the line, and the bringing of prosperity to the family by proper ritual behavior—these were the roles and values assigned to the housewife. These very qualities would be considered defects in a courtesan, whose virtues were beauty, boldness in sex and its cultivation, and a talent for dancing and singing in public. A courtesan could be independent, own property, earn and handle her own money; cunning and coquetry were part of her repertoire. She had no responsibility to bear children, but if she did have a child, a female was preferred to a male. Indeed, a male child in a courtesan's household was both a practical problem and an embarrassment.

Given that these two worlds were so clearly divided, a movement to abolish all courtesans endangered a valuable part of the culture—all that related to song and dance. Granted, in the twentieth century attempts were made to interest young women from respectable families in dance and music so that they could perform in public. Prestigious institutions like Kalakshetra in Madras presented the courtesan dances in a cleaned-up form, renamed the genre Bharata Nayam, and provided it with an antiquity and respectability aimed at making it acceptable to educated, upper-middle-class family women. Still, it was not easy to get these women to sing Ksetrayya's songs, with all their uninhibited eroticism. Doubts and hesitations persisted. Thus, E. Krishna Iyer writes in his English introduction to G. V. Sitapati's 1952 edition of Ksetrayya's *padams:* "Is it proper or safe to encourage present day family girls to go in for Ksetraya padas and are they likely to handle them with understanding of their true devotional spirit? At any rate can a pada like *'Oka Sarike'* ["if you are so tired after making love just once"] be ever touched by our girls?' Apologetics mix with a



palpable fear of the explicit eroticism of these poems, Krishna Iyer arguing that the people of Ksetrayya's time had a strength of mind we no longer possess.

The trend was now to reinterpret sexual references and representations in Hindu religious texts, ritual, art, and literature by assigning exalted spiritual meanings to them. Even so, many valuable religious and literary texts were proscribed as obscene, while others were published with dots replacing objectionable verses, sometimes spanning whole pages. [12] In an effort to protect traditional texts from disappearing altogether, certain scholars and patrons of art produced limited unexpurgated editions exclusively for scholarly distribution. For works like Ksetrayya's there was yet no reliable printed edition; the songs were preserved in palm-leaf or paper manuscripts. Scholars like Vissa Apparavu and patrons like the Maharaja of Pithapuram (who had long family associations with courtesans) attempted to collect and publish these texts, the Maharaja, for example, sponsoring G. V. Sitapati's volume of Ksetrayya's songs. The effort was laudable and did save the literature from utter extinction. But in order to save the songs the new patrons and scholars "spiritualized" them, arguing that these were by no means erotic courtesan songs. The apparent eroticism was only an allegory for the union of *jiva* and *i§vara,* the yearning human soul and god.

According to hagiographic legends recorded at this stage, Ksetrayya was above all a devotee. Subbarama Diksitulu, author of the *Sangita sampradaya pradars'ini* (1904), tells a story about "Ksetrajfia," as he calls him in a conspicuously Sanskritized form. This Ksetrajna, while still a child, was taught a *gopala mantra* by a great yogi. The boy spent many days uttering the *mantra* in the

temple, and eventually the god Gopala—deity and patron of the erotic—appeared before him and blessed him. Ksetrajna immediately broke into song. He traveled to the courts of Tat-ION/Ur, Madurai, and Golconda, composed songs in praise of the kings there, and was honored in turn by those kings. [13] In another story, reported by the scholar Rallapalli Anantakrsna arma, Ksetrayya, a singer and poet who had earned the patronage of kings for his songs about them, returned one day to his native village, Muvva, where he fell in love with a courtesan at the local temple of Muvva Gopala. The courtesan objected that he sang only about kings, never about the god of Muvva, with whom *she* was in love. So, in order to please her, Ksetrayya sat in meditation for a long time until the god appeared to him and blessed him. From then on, in an ecstasy of divine love, Ksetrayya went from temple to temple, singing to Muvva Gopala. That was why he was called Ksetrayya, one who knows the *4etras* or holy places.

Vissd Apparavu reports that a similar story is told by the villagers of MOvva, supposedly Ksetrayya's place of birth. According to this story, Ksetrayya's real name was Varadayya. He was an illiterate cowherd who often whiled away his time sitting in the local Gopala temple. Once he fell in love with a shepherdess (or, in another version, a courtesan) who rejected him because he was an unlettered lout. Varadayya then sat, adamant, inside the temple until the god appeared before him and gave him the gift of song and poetry. Varadayya became a devotee of the god, and his love for the woman was transformed into a spiritual quest in which she, too, took part. The, two of them are said to have roamed the countryside, singing together."

This type of story is obviously intended to "reframe," and thereby deeroticize, Ksetrayya's poetry. Modern Telugu films about Ksetrayya have also followed this line. Another, perhaps older, type of legend, however, celebrates Ksetrayya's role as a court poet. Vijayaraghava Nayaka, the king of Tafijävnr, is said to have honored Ksetrayya and given him a high position at court. At this, the other poets grew jealous and complained that it was inappropriate for the king, who was a great scholar himself, to elevate Ksetrayya to this level. When Ksetrayya learned of this opposition, he left the last two lines of a song (the *padam* known as *vadaraka po pove)* unfinished, telling the king that he should have it completed by his other poets while Ksetrayya was away for three months on a pilgrimage.' The poets struggled for three months but were unable to complete the poem. When Ksetrayya returned, the humiliated poets fell at his feet and begged forgiveness for talking ill of him. Ksetrayya then finished the song. This kind of legend, typically told about court poets such as Kdliddsa, tries to assimilate Ksetrayya to the category of court poet, whereas the legends retold by Vissa Apparavu and Rallapalli Anantakrspa Sarma attempt to make him into a temple poet.' In both cases, though, we observe a similar drive to obscure or explain away the underlying eroticism of the *padam* corpus.

## On *Reading a Padam*

Employing but a small number of themes and voices (the courtesan, the god/customer, a senior courtesan who may even be the madam of the house, and sometimes a married woman who has taken a lover), Ksetrayya creates a lively variety of poems with unusual details. In one, a married woman who finds herself pregnant berates

her lover, demanding that he "go find a root or something" to terminate the pregnancy. In another, a senior courtesan, talking to a younger one who is discontented with her lover, says, somewhat testily, "When your Muvva Gopala joins you in bed, if you, my lovely, get ticklish, why complain to me?" We have chosen here only one of the poems for detailed comment—and bear in mind that, in other poems, similar devices may carry very different nuances. Even though these poems belong to the tradition of "light" music (as opposed to the classical tradition, though they do find their way into classical repertoires) and some even sound like American pop songs of the "he-done-me-wrong" variety, every one of the poems in this volume would repay the kind of attention we suggest in what follows, however lighthearted, simple, or even pornographic they may appear at first sight. And indeed they are pornographic in the etymological sense of the term: they are songs for and about courtesans (**Greek porne, "prostitute").**

**Here is** poem 175 from the Ksetrayya collection:17

A *Woman to Her Lover*

How soon it's morning already!
There's something new in my heart,
Muvva Gopala.

Have we talked even a little while
to undo the pain of our separation till now?
You call me in your passion, "Woman, come to me,"
and while your mouth is still on mine,

*it's morning already!*

Caught in the grip of the Love God,
angry with him, we find release drinking
at each other's lips.



You say, "My girl, your body is tender as a leaf,"
and before you can loosen your tight embrace,

*it's morning already!*

Listening to my moans as you touch certain spots,
the pet parrot mimics me, and 0 how we laugh in bed!

You say, "Come close, my girl,"
and make love to me like a wild man, Muvva Gopala,
and as I get ready to move on top,

*it's morning already!*

As mentioned earlier, every ***padam*** begins with an opening stanza, which provides the refrain. This is divided in the original into two parts called ***pallavi*** and ***anupallavi,*** refrain and subrefrain. The refrain is repeated at the end of each ***caranam*** or stanza, as the translation suggests, although we have chosen to abridge the refrain to a phrase.

Characteristic of the refrain is the way it brings closure to each stanza yet returns the listener to the opening lines. The refrain completes the sentence, the syntax of the stanza; it also satisfies the expectation of the listener each time it occurs. Thus, with each succeeding stanza there is a progression and at the end of each a regression, a return that nonetheless gives the repeated phrase a new context, a new meaning. In this poem, the stanzas together also move toward a completion of the sexual act, with the lovers asking for more. When the poem is sung or danced to, the ***pallavi*** line is played with, reached differently each time and variously enacted, suggesting different moods in song and different stances and narrative scenes in a dance performance. In this sense, only the

words of the refrain are the same with each repetition: the more it remains the same, the more it changes.

Yet each time the refrain occurs, it laments the lack of completion. *"It's morning already!"* bemoans the frustration of unsated desire. In the original Telugu, all the verbs of the stanza are nonfinite, whereas the verb in the refrain is finite and thus completes the sentence. In terms of meaning, however, the refrain insists on the lack of any satisfying climax and closure. This self-contradictory structure—the form at odds with the meaning—seems to suggest the insatiability of sexual satisfaction. Desire always wants more; the appetite grows on what it feeds on.

This piece—like all Ksetrayya's poems, even the ones that depict lovers' quarrels and infidelities—ends in union: "and [you] make love to me like a wild man, Muvva Gop51a." Still, the next line, which begins a new sexual move, ends in dissatisfaction, as the speaker blames that intrusive, ever-recurring morning. These features—the context of dance and song, and the poem's very form, which recapitulates desire from arousal to climax and maybe a return to another beginning—give such songs a light-winged quality of celebration and a very physical playfulness. Likewise, the diction of the *padam* tends to the colloquial and the familiar. For example, the language of the poems consists mostly of pure Dravidian words, with very few Sanskritized forms, and the poet often uses the intimate vocative *ra,* which—so a popular oral verse tells us—is appropriate to the speech of young people, to the battlefield, to poetry, and to situations of lovemaking.' In general, the sounds reinforce the meanings, often subliminally. For instance, in the second stanza the lines have four second-syllable rhymes: *iddara, koddiga, niddara,* and *muddu.* The soft dental double consonants



(-dd-) tend to remind a Telugu speaker of touching, pressing, tightening, embracing, and other such kinesthetic sensations. This particular series also constitutes an internal progression that culminates in *muddu,* a common word for "tender" or "sweet." The poem is thus building toward this moment of tenderness, before the refrain cuts it off with the dawn. Similarly, the last stanza has second-syllable rhymes on liquids—ka/a/a, *ciluka, kaliki, kalasi*-which suggest gliding and quick movements. Language-bound as they are, such phonesthemes are impossible to render in another tongue; they are, like so much else in poetry, a translator's despair.

### *Conclusion*

If we compare the *padam* just analyzed to the Nammalvar poem with which this introduction began, we can sense the distinct evolution of the *padam* tradition away from its roots in Tamil devotionalism. Here there is no sense that the speaker is in the wrong; she is not waiting eternally for her lover's arrival; there is no landscape of sky and cloud and dark night waiting with her, symbolic of the god's engulfing nature. Nor is the god himself invoked with all his insignia (wheel, mace, lotus feet), nor are we reminded of his many cosmic avatars and acts, against which the speaker's little drama of unrequited love is played out. *Viraha,* separation—a dominant mood in Nammälvdr and other *bhakti* poets—is here located in the past and thus relegated to the early part of the poem ("Have we talked even a little while to undo the pain of our separation till now?"). If the tradition of love poetry and all its signifiers are enlisted to speak of the human yearning for the divine, here the signifiers of *bhakti* poetry are only fleetingly alluded to, often by no more than the local name of the god, Muvva Gopala.

To repeat: the original context of the Ksetrayya *padams* was the courtesan's bedroom, where she entertained a customer identified as a god. No amount of apologetic spiritualizing, no hypertrophied classification in terms of the Sanskrit courtly types, should be allowed to distort the sensibility that gave rise to these poems—even, or especially, if this sensibility has largely died away in contemporary South India. At the same time, we should not make the mistake of underestimating the vitality of the devotional impulse at work in the *padams*. These are still poems embodying an experience of the divine. The *bhakti* idiom is never truly lost through the long process of reframing. One indication of its survival is the existence in the *padams* of strong intertextual resonances, as themes and phrases proper to South Indian devotionalism and familiar from its basic texts are assimilated to the *padam's* erotic context. Thus Ksetrayya's heroine complains that she has wasted much of her life in ways remote from her real goal, sexual union with her lover:

> When will I get married to the famous Mannku Ranga?
> A daughter's life in a lord's family,
> I wouldn't wish it on my enemies.
>
> Some days pass as your parents do your thinking for you.
> Some days pass brooding and waiting for the moment.
> Some days pass pondering caste rules.
> Meanwhile the bloom of youth is gone
> like the fragrance of a flower, like a trick of fate.
>
> *I wouldn't wish it on* my *enemies*

The literature of *bhakti* is full of such laments. In Tamil we have Cuntaramarttindyanar (9th century), who often reproaches himself in similar terms:



> So much time has been lost! .. .
> I have wasted so much time being stubborn.
> I don't think of you,
> don't keep you in my mind.°

Or, in a manner verbally very close to Ksetrayya's formula:

> Those days that I leave you
> are the days consciousness fails,
> when life leaves the body
> and one is carried away
> on a high funeral bier."

The precise formula—"some days *(kOnälfu)* pass"—occurs elsewhere in Telugu, for example in the *Venugopala§atakamu,* sometimes attributed to Sarafigapâni (though it was more probably written by a later poet at the Karvetinagaram court, Polipeddi Venkatarayakavi):

> Some days passed not knowing the difference
> between grief and happiness.
> Some days passed in youthful longing for other men's wives,
> without knowing it was a sin.
> Some days passed begging kings to fill my stomach,
> as I suffered in poverty.
> Time has passed like this ever since I was born,
> swimming in the terrible ocean of life in this world.
> 0 Ver¡ugopäla, show me compassion in whatever way you like,
> just don't take account of my past.2'

Echoes such as these help establish the *padam's* peculiar cultural resonance as a devotional genre building upon, but also transforming, powerful literary precedents.

Let us try to sum up and reformulate the distinctive features of

this form. Like much of the earlier *bhakti* poetry, the *padam* generally prefers the female voice. Some *padams* present us with the persona of a married woman addressing her lover, in a mode of erotic violation. Here, marriage and the husband function as the necessary backdrop to the excitement of real passion, as in many of the poems of *Krspa-bhakti* from Bengal, although in the *padams* the woman largely retains the initiative." But, from Ksetrayya on, the female voice is most often that of the courtesan, a symbol of open, intensely sensual, but also mercenary and potentially manipulative sexuality. We thus achieve an image of autonomous, even brazen, womanhood, a far cry from the rather helpless female victim of the absent god in Tamil *bhakti.* In other respects, too, the differences are impressive. The torments of *viraha* have given way to less severe tensions relating to the lover's playboy nature, his betrayal of one courtesan with another, his irrepressible mischief and erotic games. Desire is far less likely to be blocked forever, and many of the poems culminate in orgasm, often openly mentioned. This, then, is more a poetry of union than of separation. In contrast to the torn female personality of Tamil *bhakti,* the courtesan in these poems is remarkably self-possessed. Indeed, the balance of power has dramatically shifted, so that it is the god who frequently loses himself in this woman, while she is capable of toying with her lover, feigning anger, or mercilessly teasing him. She may also, of course, be truly abandoned, left languishing in ways reminiscent of earlier models, but more often she embodies a mode of experiencing the divine that is characterized by emotional freedom, concrete physical satisfaction, and active control. It is the courtesan, after all, who has only to name her price. Undoubtedly the most trenchant expression of this perspective is the anonymous *padam* addressed to Lord KOnkan6vara:



I'm not like the others.
You may enter my house,
but only if you have the money.

If you don't have as much as I ask,
a little less would do.
But I'll not accept very little,
Lord KOnkabe§vara.

To step across the threshold
of my main door,
it'll cost you a hundred in gold.
For two hundred you can see my bedroom,
my bed of silk,
and climb into it.

Only *if you have the money*

To sit by my side
and to put your hand
boldly inside my sari:
that will cost ten thousand.

And seventy thousand
will get you a touch
of my full round breasts.

Only *if you have the money*

Three crores to bring
your mouth close to mine,
touch my lips and kiss.
To hug me tight,

to touch my place of love,
and get to total union,
listen well,
you must bathe me
in a shower of gold.

But *only if you have the money*

What could be clearer than this escalating scale of prices? The god can decide for himself what he wants—or rather, can afford. One is reminded, somewhat ironically, of the list of rituals, each with its set price, performed for pilgrims at South Indian temples. There, however, it is the devotee who pays the fee, while the god, addressed in the act of worship, is the ultimate beneficiary of the gift. An even more powerful inversion—and an indication of just how far the *padam* tradition has traveled away from earlier *bhakti* models—is expressed in an image painted by the Vira§aiva poet Basavanna (12th century), with reference to rituals of a different sort:

I drink the water we wash your feet with,
I eat the food of worship,
and I say it's yours, everything,
goods, life, honour:
he's really the whore who takes every last bit
of her night's wages,

and will take no words
for payment,

he, my lord of the meeting rivers!"



rTho Grnif

## *The Madam to a Courtesan*

Woman! He's none other
than Cennudu of Palagiri.
Haven't you heard?
He rules the worlds.

When he wanted you, you took his gold—
but couldn't you tell him your address?
Some lover you are!
He's hooked on you.

And *he rules the worlds*

I found him wandering the alleyways,
too shy to ask anyone.
I had to bring him home with me.
Would it have been such a crime
if you or your girls
had waited for him by the door?
You really think it's enough
to get the money in your hand?
Can't you tell who's big, who's small?
Who do you think he is?

*And he rules the worlds*

This handsome Cennudu of Hagiri,
this Muvva Copia,
has failed to your lot.

When he said he'd come tomorrow,
couldn't you consent
just a little?
Did you really have to say no?
What can I say about you?

*And he rules the worlds*

Ksetrayya 176
"cellabo palagiri cennucle vidu kOmm5"
raga: gankarabharauamu



## A Woman *to Her Lover*

"Your body is my body,"
you used to say,
and it has come true,
Muvva Gopala.

Though I was with you
all these days,
I wasn't sure.

Some woman has scratched
nail marks on your chest,
but I'm the one who feels the hurt.

You go sleepless all night,
but it's my eyes
that turn red.

"Your *body is* my *body," you used to say*

Ever since you fell for that woman,
it's my mind
that's in distress.

When I look at those charming love bites
she has left on your lips,
it's my lip that shakes.

"Your *body is* my *body," you used to say*

Maybe you made love
to another woman,
for, 0 lord who rules me,
my desire is sated.

Forgive me, Gopäla,
but when you come back here,
I'm the one who feels small
with shame.

*"Your body is my body,"* you *used to say*

Ksetrayya, GVS 1:2
"ni menu n5 men'anucunu"
raga: yadukula kambhoji



## A *Woman to Her Friend*

Friend, tell me, who is more wicked, he or I?
Explain it. Now we'll know who's what.

When we are on the bed of gold,
playing at love talk,
he calls me Kamaläkshi,
the other woman's name:
I am so mad, I hit him as hard as I can with my braid.

*Now tell me, who is more wicked?*

When lustily I jump on top
and pound his chest
with my pointed nipples, he says,
"That girl Kanakangi is very good at this."
I slap him hard with all five fingers.

*Now tell me, who is more wicked?*

After making love, as always,
I fondle his feet, soft as a young leaf,
when the other woman's
love potion goes to his head,
he talks in his sleep about her,
lying right next to me:
so I sink my teeth into his lips.

*Now tell me, who is more wicked?*

Ksetrayya 104
"e'varivalla duduku"
surata

## A *Girlfriend to the Woman*

Woman: that Varada* loves you so.
I'm here because I couldn't watch him suffer.

He puts his hand on his cheek,
smiles his little smile,
and says to himself,
"Oh I knew it:
she'll never come back.
I can't forget
the love we had before.
To live without making love
to that lovely girl—
is that called living?"

*That Varada, he loves* you so

He is quiet for a while,
and then he sighs:
"Where did I go wrong?
I can't bear
to be apart from you
even for a little while.
My mouth cannot speak," he says,
and buries his head in his hands.
If I ask, he only says,
"What help can you be?"

*That Varada, he loves you so*



That Varada, that Muvva Gopala,
he babbles on and on.
"The miracle
that happened then,
will it happen again?"
He thinks, and sighs,
and sighs again,
and says, "This is what fate has done.
This dreadful thing
called love
I wouldn't wish it on my enemies."

*That Varada, he loves* you *so*

Ksetrayya 43
"intiro varaduniki"
raga: dhany5si