

First Song of the Tiruvaymoli, the Holy Word of Mouth

BY SHATAKOPAN

Translated by Archana Venkatesan and Francis X. Clooney

This Tamil-language composition of 1,102 verses, by the South Indian Vaishnava poet Shatakopan (ninth century CE), reflects philosophically on the transcendence of the deity Vishnu and his divine consort Shri Lakshmi, on the loving involvement of God in the world in forms such as Rama and Krishna, and his divine presence in temples all over South India. In one hundred songs of eleven verses each, Shatakopan calls for ascetic practice, devotion to the Lord, and complete surrender, and, in many poems, expresses the experience of one who longs for the coming of God like a lover in the night. The song that follows is taken from a new translation of the whole Tiruvaymoli, in progress.¹



Who possesses the highest, unsurpassable goodness? That one.
who cuts through confusion and graces the mind with goodness?
That one.
who is the overlord of the immortals who never forget? That one.
at his luminous feet that cut through affliction bow down, and
arise, my mind.

Such minds that cut through impurity, then blossom and rise,
he is beyond even their experience, and beyond those things the
senses experience:
this one, the total goodness of experience, in future, present, or past—
there is no one like this one, no one greater than him in my life.

If you say, “He is not that,” “He has this” then he is difficult to fathom;
in earth and sky he has form and has no form;
he is of the senses, yet not of the senses, limitless and pervasive,
that singular one who is goodness, and to him we draw near.

We—that man, this man,
the other in-between, that woman, this woman,
the other in-between, whoever she is, those people, these people,
the others in-between, that thing, this thing,
the other in-between, whichever it is, those things dying, these
things,
the others in-between, bad things, good things,
things to be, things that were—all this he became.

1. The translators would like to express their indebtedness to several excellent translations of select verses by A. K. Ramanujan, and by Vasudha Narayanan and John Carman.

As he knows, each knows, each has his own path
each his own lord and so reaches his feet,
and each one's lord is a faultless lord—
so each might reach him in his own right way, he is always there.

“He stands, he sits, he lies down, he wanders.”

“He doesn't stand, he doesn't sit, he doesn't lie down, he doesn't
wander.”

If you think he always acts just one way, he is hard to fathom,
he always acts that way, my steadfast one.

Steadfast sky, fire, wind, water, earth,
when they spread forth he becomes them all in their entirety,
in all these things he is as life in the body, hidden and pervasive,
he is in the luminous scriptures, he has eaten all these things, our god.

The gods find it hard to fathom that highest god, who became all
things
beginning with the sky, beginning with the greatest, and then ate
them all,
he burned the three peerless cities, and bestowed knowledge on
the immortals,
as Aran, as Ayan, he destroys, makes, and is the world.

If you say “he is,” he is, and his form is all forms,
if you say “he is not,” and his formlessness is these things without
form—
if this is his quality, that he is and he is not,
then with a nature that is both he is limitless, pervading every thing.

He pervades the cool waters of the wide wide ocean,
this wide world, the earth and flawless sky,
every small hidden place and everything shining there—
hidden everywhere, pervading every thing, he ate it all, that
unshakeable one.

Unshakeable sky, fire, wind, water, and earth—
pure sound, vigor, strength, coolness, and patience:
as all these the highest one abides, and at his feet
Shatakopan of Kurukur composed these fine thousand verses,
and of them this ten are your freedom.

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