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## Chapter 5

# ‘Slaves of God’: Extreme Religious Dependency in Medieval South India (800–1100 CE)

## 1 Introduction

Civilisations, both of the ancient and the modern world, have witnessed many forms of slavery and dependency. The forms of slavery that have been amply researched so far have mostly dealt with the counter-position of two agent forces: on one hand those in a dominant position (e.g. rulers, masters, winners), on the other those in a condition of dependency: captives, slaves, subjugated peoples.

However, certain peculiar forms of dependency have also existed which cannot be classified under the opposition of the two above-mentioned categories; one of these may be found in the culture of medieval South India<sup>1</sup> where what might be defined as ‘self-inflicted slavery’ came to the fore.<sup>2</sup> It had to do with a state of absolute submission to the person’s chosen deity, especially to Lord Śiva; so much so that the devotee, referring to themselves as ‘slave of god’ (*adyar* or *tondar* in Tamil sources), was even willing to undergo acts of self-sacrifice in honour of the divine, including oblation of parts of their own body or even their life.

Acts of self-oblation were not unknown in some ancient civilisations which abound in sacrificial rites. Just to mention one famous example, in Asia Minor, the priests of the goddess Cybele were reputed to castrate themselves in honour of the deity, and images of castration clamps used as instruments for such acts have, actually, come down to us.<sup>3</sup> But when it comes to medieval South India – particularly from the ninth to the twelfth centuries – we find that manifestations of votive self-mutilation were widely practiced, not only by the so-called ‘slaves of god’,<sup>4</sup> who were regarded as true and proper holy

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1 Although the concept of the Middle Ages is of western origin, such a definition is commonly applied to a specific period of Indian history, approximately from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries. Cf. Kevasan Veluthat, “Into the ‘Medieval’ – and out of It. Early South India in Transition,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 58 (1997): 1–46.

2 Although rarer and less intense than in the south, instances of violent devotion are also present in North India.

3 J. Peter Södergard, “Ritualized Bodies of Cybele’s Galli and the Methodological Problem of the Plurality of Explanations,” in *The Problem of Ritual*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck (Stockholm: The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History Åbo, Finland, 1993): 169–93.

4 The canonical ‘slaves of god’ hailed from Tamil culture and lived between the sixth and the tenth centuries; they comprised sixty-three Śaiva devotees (Nāyanmār) and twelve Viṣṇu devotees (Āḷvārs).

persons or saints,<sup>5</sup> but also by other devotees, mostly (but not exclusively) Śaiva. This paper attempts to throw new light on the multi-layered meanings of the extreme religious dependency of the Śaiva devotees in the region encompassing modern-day Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Such violent devotional acts of the ‘slaves of god’ have been long-standing objects of scholarly study and debate, as their lives and poetical works have also been. Even so, some puzzling questions have still not been properly answered, namely,

- a) why did the Hindu devotees’ sacrifice of parts of their own bodies or even their own lives gain such popularity especially in medieval South India, reaching its apex around the twelfth century?
- b) why was partial mutilation no longer considered sufficient, and self-beheading became the most precious and auspicious offering?

Any attempt to answer these research questions can only begin with an overview of this singular practice of violent devotion.

## 2 Violent Aspects of Hindu Devotion in Medieval South India

Many literary, epigraphic and sculptured sources bear testimony to blood sacrifice and self-directed violence characterising the devotional milieu in South India from about the seventh century onwards.

For instance, as Kalidos has pointed out, the early medieval *Devīmāhātmya purāṇa* (*adhyāya* 13, v.12, roughly fifth to seventh centuries), and the late twelfth-century *Kaliṅkattupparaṇi*, in describing how Durgā may be propitiated, also speak of the *navakhaṇḍam* offering. It was widely practiced in medieval Tamil culture and consisted in the devotee’s cutting off one or more of their nine (*nava*) vital organs or body-parts (*khaṇḍam*), and oblation them to the goddess.<sup>6</sup> The twelfth-century hagiographic Tamil text *Periya Purāṇam*,<sup>7</sup> which is, in turn, based on earlier works like the tenth-

5 As used in a European context, the word ‘saint’ is equally applicable to a holy devotee in South India. Vidya Deheja, *Slaves of the Lord. The Path of the Tamil Saints* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988): 1.

6 Raju Kalidos, “Iconography of Maṣṣasuramardini: A Probe into Stylistic Evolution,” *Acta Orientalia* 50 (1989): 21. It may be noted that, in earliest Tamil culture, the *navakhaṇḍam* offering was celebrated in honour of the hunter-goddess Korāvai, deity of war and victory, later assimilated to Durgā. Cf. V. Murugan, *Tolakāppam in English* (Chennai: Institute of Asian Studies, 2001): 399.

7 The *Periya Purāṇam*, attributed to the sage Sekkizhaar (Cekkilar), constitutes the final part of the *Tirumurai* ‘Book of the Holy Order’, the canonical text of Tamil devotional literature. The *Periya Purāṇam* has been published in a number of editions. This paper refers to the 1985 edition by G. Vanmikanathan Pillai, *Periya Purāṇam. A Tamil Classic on the Great Śaiva Saints of South India by Sekkizhar* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985).

century *Tiruttoṇṭar Tiruvantāti*,<sup>8</sup> describes the life-stories of the sixty-three canonical Śaiva devotees (Nāyaṇmār), celebrating and sanctifying violence towards their relatives and their own selves in honour of Śiva.<sup>9</sup> For example, the devotee Kaṇṇappaṇ takes out his own eye with his arrow to heal and restore the bleeding eye of Śiva's *līṅga* (*Periya Purāṇam* vv. 818–827).<sup>10</sup> The story of Kaṇṇappaṇ, frequently represented in art, both painted and sculpted (Plates 5.1, 5.2), contains all the elements of the *bhakti* message: the irrelevance of caste, the refusal to blindly follow religious impositions and the paramount love and devotion to the god.<sup>11</sup> Another devotee, Kaṇṇampullar, unable to offer anything else to Śiva, burns his own hair (*Periya Purāṇam* vv. 4057–40961).<sup>12</sup> One more self-sacrificial rite, well attested to in many literary and iconographic sources, has to do with cutting off one's own head and offering it to the chosen deity.

A number of scholarly studies have sought to explain the meanings of such violent self-sacrificial acts. One of these explanation posits that on a metaphorical level, self-sacrifice could be related to the ancient idea of 'initiation by death', whereby love for god transubstantiates the lover: killing the sinful flesh of the outer body purifies the inner one,<sup>13</sup> in other words, death is not the end, but rather a transformative event leading to the cessation of a conscious state and consequent rebirth on a superior plain.<sup>14</sup> The consistent presence of blood could be explained as the regenerative element of life: '[. . .] in blood and death the sacred power that regenerates life reveals itself'<sup>15</sup>

8 The *Tiruttoṇṭar Tiruvantāti* is attributed to Nanpi Āṇṭār, the collector of the *Tēvāram*, the first seven books of the *Tirumurai*.

9 Depictions of salient episodes from the lives of the sixty-three Nāyaṇmār often adorn the external walls of Hindu temples, a major example being the Darasuram (Tārācuram) temple in Thanjavur, where the complete set of life-stories is portrayed. J. Ralston Marr, "The Periya Purāṇam Frieze at Tārācuram: Episodes in the Lives of Tamil Śaiva Saints," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 42, no. 2 (1979): 268–89.

10 Vanmikanathan Pillai, *Periya Purāṇam. A Tamil Classic on the Great Śaiva Saints of South India by Sekkizhar* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985): 527–29.

11 Vidya Deheja, *Slaves of the Lord. The Path of the Tamil Saints* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988): 23, 79–81.

12 Vanmikanathan Pillai, *Periya Purāṇam. A Tamil Classic on the Great Śaiva Saints of South India by Sekkizhar* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Matha, 1985): 462, 463.

13 Dennis D. Hudson, "Violent and Fanatical Devotion among the Nāyaṇārs. A Study in the Periya Purāṇam of Cēkkilār," in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotee. Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): 389.

14 Mircea Eliade, *Miti Sogni e Misteri* (Milano: Rusconi, 1976): 255–63; Mary Storm, *Head and Heat. Valour and Self-Sacrifice in the Art of India* (London/New York/New Delhi: Routledge, 2013): 5.

15 Dennis D. Hudson, "Violent and Fanatical Devotion among the Nāyaṇārs. A Study in the Periya Purāṇam of Cēkkilār," in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotee. Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): 390.



**Plate 5.1:** Kāṇṇappan takes out his own eye to heal the bleeding eye of Śiva's *liṅga*. Gouache painting on paper.

and 'the blood sacrifice produces the creative seed'.<sup>16</sup> Blood in itself is seed; its potential creative power is stressed in many Indian myths.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths. Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980): 108.

<sup>17</sup> David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths. Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Śaiva Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980): 103, 104.



**Plate 5.2:** Kaṇṇappaṇ takes out his own eye to heal the bleeding eye of Śiva's *linga*. Vaidyēśvara temple, Talakad, Karnataka.

Another oft-quoted reason lies in the devotee's desire to demonstrate the extraordinary, emotional and ideal nature of his love for his god:<sup>18</sup> a love that gives no room to the mundane, earthly values of righteousness, prosperity, and affections, including family bonds.<sup>19</sup> In order to describe the kind of ardent love (*aṇpu*, in Tamil) that goads one to perform outstanding devotional acts, C. Vamadeva has coined the term *vaṇṇaṇpu*, violent devotion.<sup>20</sup>

According to A. Monius, such violent aspects of mainstream religious expression should be seen in the light of a spiritual and cultural background where the god is the player engaged with the devotee through the fabric of a cosmic love-play, whereby 'the rivers of blood on the battlefield are of no more cosmic or moral import than rivulets

<sup>18</sup> As far as we know, blood sacrifices were performed exclusively by men.

<sup>19</sup> Dennis D. Hudson, "Violent and Fanatical Devotion among the Nāyanārs. A Study in the Periya Purāṇam of Cēkkilār," in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotee. Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed. Alf Hiltebeitel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): 377.

<sup>20</sup> Chandraleka Vamadeva, *The Concept of Vaṇṇaṇpu 'Violent Love' in Tamil Śaivism, with Special Reference to Periya Purāṇam* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995): 35.

of water trickling through a sandbox in the arena of *lilā*, where Śiva serves simultaneously as lord, referee, and playmate'.<sup>21</sup> Recently, some scholars have come to consider these violent acts to be a kind of bargaining with the god in difficult times of famine and social upheaval which were, indeed, quite common in medieval South India.<sup>22</sup>

It has also been argued that the violent devotional displays as represented in art and described in Hindu texts like the *Periya Purāṇam*, should be viewed as a kind of antithesis to contemporary writings by the religious enemies of the Hindus, mostly Jainas, that promote a different ethos and lifestyle.<sup>23</sup> By contrasting the devotional heroism of the Hindu saints with the asceticism of the Jainas, such texts would function as instruments of a competing propaganda, as an alternative and more refined way to carry on the doctrinal disputes that had long sustained rivalry between religious communities in medieval India. Indeed, it is well known that polemical literature also served as a 'self-definition',<sup>24</sup> wherein, as certain scholars maintain, opposition to Jainism was central to the identity-building process for Tamil Śaivas, especially in the royal courts.<sup>25</sup> The violence intrinsic to the texts should therefore be seen as a part of courtly polemics – and not necessarily as reliable historical facts – where the poet-saints cast themselves in the role not only of religious but also of political heroes, upholding Tamil Śaivism against foreign 'others' with their own blood and devotion.<sup>26</sup>

We shall return to all these conjectures later, with new hypotheses. So far, the phenomenon of devotional self-sacrifice in medieval India appears to have been analysed most commonly from a religious and symbolic-metaphorical point of view, or else considered as a device for religious propaganda. In this paper, I am approaching the question not only in terms of its religious connotations, but also its socio-historical and martial implications, which would offer us a better window to understand certain fundamental motives for the violent aspects of such devotional behaviour. Let us begin with a look at the dawn of the so-called 'Indian Middle Ages' and its antecedents.

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21 Anne E. Monius, "Love, Violence and the Aesthetics of Disgust: Śaivas and Jains in Medieval South India," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 152.

22 Mary Storm, *Head and Heat. Valour and Self-Sacrifice in the Art of India* (London/New York/New Delhi: Routledge, 2013): 269.

23 Anne E. Monius, "Love, Violence and the Aesthetics of Disgust: Śaivas and Jains in Medieval South India," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 139, 140. The Jaina text *Cīvakaśintāmaṇi* in its turn ridicules human love in its many aspects, including love for god, and seeks to denigrate non-Jaina religious tendencies.

24 Indira Peterson Viswanathan, "Śramaṇas Against the Tamil Way, Jains as Others in Tamil Śaiva Literature," in *Open Boundaries*, ed. John E. Cort (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998): 164.

25 Steven M. Vose, "The Violence of Devotion. Bhakti, Jains, and the Periyapurāṇam in Telling Early Medieval Tamil History (7th to 12th c.)," *Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School* 1 (2006): 104.

26 Steven M. Vose, "The Violence of Devotion. Bhakti, Jains, and the Periyapurāṇam in Telling Early Medieval Tamil History (7th to 12th c.)," *Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School* 1 (2006): 105, 106.

### 3 Social – Historical – Religious Setting

From before the Christian era, the two main *śramaṇa* (non-Brāhmanical) religions, Jainism and Buddhism,<sup>27</sup> had played a dominant role in South India, in religion, politics, society and economy.<sup>28</sup> Jainism, in particular, prospered as nowhere else. In present-day Tamil Nadu, for instance, a corpus of records, dating back to pre-Christian times, reveals that the Jains were already present in the region, especially in the district of Madurai.<sup>29</sup> Their influence continued to grow in the following centuries, so much so that, at the beginning of the Christian era, vast territories from the western to the eastern coast of Deccan had fallen under their influence.

For several centuries Jainism, which proliferated into a number of monastic schools, remained a widely practiced religion in South India, and one of the most important sources of cultural production. Imposing ruins and rich artistic and heritage monuments still bear witness to the bygone splendour of the Jainas.

This started changing from about the seventh century. At that time, the decline of the vast Gupta Empire led, particularly in the south, to the rise of a mosaic of regional kingdoms, often at loggerheads with one another. Such political instability with the discontinuous geography lending itself to regional fragmentation, affected trade, both along the maritime routes within India and towards the west, which was in its turn weakened by the so-called Plague of Justinian.<sup>30</sup> As a result, most Indian cities, especially those located along the main old trade routes, declined as social, economic and political points of reference. The metropolises that had prevailed in previous ages gave way to smaller, though often thriving, pilgrimage towns, where life revolved around religious institutions.

The twilight of the cities, which brought about a shift from a market-based exchange economy to an agriculture-based subsistence economy, affected the Jaina financial system. It was rooted in urban and mercantile trade, and so ideally suited to allowing them to practice their ideal of non-violence. Jaina monastic establishments, located in the suburbs or on the main trade arteries, also declined. Although they

<sup>27</sup> Buddhism had taken refuge in the south as early as the reign of the emperor Aśoka Maurya.

<sup>28</sup> Much evidence, including from archaeology, which is often underestimated by scholars, confirms the widespread diffusion of Jainism and Buddhism in the pre-medieval period. Cf. Giovanni Verardi, *The Gods and the Heretics. Crisis and Ruin of Indian Buddhism* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2018): 13–87.

<sup>29</sup> Vidya Deheja, *Slaves of the Lord. The Path of the Tamil Saints* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988): 25.

<sup>30</sup> The Plague of Justinian was a pandemic that afflicted the eastern Roman Empire, the Sassanid Empire and port cities around the entire Mediterranean during the reign of the Roman emperor Justinian I (527–565 CE). There were repeated outbreaks over a period of two hundred years.

were landowners, the Jainas had derived most of their profits and livelihood from trade with passing caravans – as the Buddhist monasteries had.<sup>31</sup>

The complex socio-historical situation<sup>32</sup> and the growth of a new agrarian society favoured entrenched agrarian interests and, consequently, increasingly large groups of Brāhmins, already linked to the land by a bond as strong as it was ancient. In time, the Brāhmanical agrarian settlements grew in importance. They controlled huge real estates and even entire villages, donated by devotees and sovereigns, so that Brāhmins were able to effectively counter the territorial and socio-political expansion of other religious groups. The Brāhmanical power-base, rooted in land grants and special economic and administrative privileges, was further consolidated due, not least, to the rise of two new closely-connected epoch-making changes. One was the spread of the *bhakti* movement,<sup>33</sup> the other the rise of the Hindu temple complex, which became not only the centre of village religious and social life, but also of a new political and economic power structure. The development of the 'Hindu temple ideology' as a symbol of a renewed Brāhmanical power went hand in hand with an increasing antagonism towards other creeds, such as Buddhism and Jainism, for religious and socio-economic predominance. Moreover, as Verardi has pointed out, the model of society promulgated by the Brāhmins was a *varṇa*-based state society which involved strict observation of caste and sub-caste. It caused strong opposition, especially from those who viewed the caste system as flawed.<sup>34</sup> The hostility between Brāhmanical sects and the *śramaṇas* was not limited to the doctrinal debates and defamatory disputes that had long been a feature in the competition between religious communities in medieval (and pre-medieval) India. In fact, the rivalry had acquired a militant complexion from quite early on.

In the course the twelfth century, the new web of religious and socio-economic conditions further exacerbated such conflicts. This was the period that saw an upsurge in commercial activity, aided by the rise of a monetary financial system.<sup>35</sup> The revival of

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31 It has long been recognised that both the Jaina and Buddhist monastic communities, from their very inception, maintained close links with members of the mercantile class.

32 For more information see R. Nath Nandi, *Social Roots of Religion in Ancient India* (New Delhi/Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1986): 18–26.

33 The term *bhakti* may be generally translated as 'devotion' to a deity, even though the meaning of the word has changed over the centuries, coming to embrace concepts of respect, love and personal surrender to the god as well. The earliest traces of a devotional approach to the divine may be found already in the mysticism of the *Upaniṣads*, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*; however, a large-scale *bhakti* movement with specific traits, although not uniform, originated in Tamil Nadu between the sixth and seventh century CE. Cf. Krishna Sharma, *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement. A New Perspective* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987): 8–35, 201–54; Muttayil G.S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat, "Bhakti Movement in South India," in *The Feudal Order, State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India*, ed. Dwijendra N. Jha (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000): 385–410.

34 Cf. Giovanni Verardi, *The Gods and the Heretics. Crisis and Ruin of Indian Buddhism* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2018): 255–58.

35 Cf. Tejaswini Yarlagadda, *Social History of the Deccan* (Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakasha 2004): 97.

trade encouraged the growth of a new class of merchants (mostly Śaivas), who came into conflict particularly with the Jains who, despite their continuing loss of power, still maintained a certain economic influence in South India, especially in Karnataka.<sup>36</sup> Obviously, the Śaiva-Jaina conflict was not only a matter of commercial competition: it also became an ideological one, since both the Hindu and Jaina shrines drew their wealthiest patrons from their respective trading communities. Religious competition was therefore always involved and, in this respect, the twelfth century represented a watershed. It witnessed not only the maximum expansion of the Hindu temple complexes and the Brāhmanical agrarian settlements – which prospered as never before, thanks to the support of many ruling families<sup>37</sup> – but also an increasing popularity of two major Brāhmanical creeds, Śivaism and Viṣṇuism. To the detriment of the *śramaṇas*, the twelfth century also saw the emergence in Karnataka of yet another (counter) tradition: the Liṅgāyat/Viraśaiva movement,<sup>38</sup> which soon encountered violent resistance from the ancient Jaina communities. The Jainas had to fight on two fronts: against the Śaiva militant groups on one hand, and the Viraśaivas on the other. Competition frequently led to large-scale bloodshed.<sup>39</sup>

## 4 Medieval Inter-Religious Struggles

As can be seen from this brief historical overview, despite the oft-lauded religious tolerance intrinsic to India's civilisation (especially in the Brāhmanical-Hindu milieu), the Middle Ages, particularly in the south, were characterised by violent inter-religious conflict, in particular between the Śaivas and the Jainas. A considerable number of historical sources bears witness to these bloody struggles, even if we admit the possibility – as is often the case – of hagiographic, mythological or narrative exaggerations.

<sup>36</sup> Uma Aery and B.S. Mathur, "Some Aspects of Trade in Jain Literature (800–1200 A.D.)," in *Medieval Jainism: Culture and Environment*, ed. Prem Suman Jain (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1990): 85–93.

<sup>37</sup> Among these royal dynasties were the Western Cālukyas and the successor dynasties of the Kalachuris and Seunas who patronised a number of Śaiva sects, particularly the Kālāmukhas. David N. Lorenzen, "The Kālāmukha Background to Viraśaivism," in *Studies in Orientalology. Essay in Memory of Prof. A.L. Basham*, ed. Sachindra Kumar Maity, Upendra Thakur and A.K. Narain (Agra: Y.K. Publishers 1988): 278.

<sup>38</sup> The Liṅgāyats, bearers of the *liṅga*, are also known as Viraśaivas (heroic Śaiva). The two terms are generally used interchangeably, although some scholars believe that the Liṅgāyats and the Viraśaivas used to be two different groups which came to blend together only in the course of recent history. Malleshappa M. Kalburgi, *History and Geography* (Belgaum: Liṅgayat Adhyana Academy, 2005): 2–34.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Pandurangrao Bhimrao Desai, *Jainism in South India and Some Jaina Epigraphs* (Sholapur: Gulabchand Hirachand Doshi, 1957): 29; Dwijendra N. Jha, *Rethinking Hindu Identity* (London: Equinox, 2009): 27–47.

This corpus comprises inscriptions,<sup>40</sup> literary works,<sup>41</sup> manuscripts – mostly gathered during the nineteenth century by Col. Mackenzie and later examined by the Reverend William Taylor<sup>42</sup> – and iconographic sources. The latter, which by their very nature required patronage, tend to contain precise references to contemporary facts.<sup>43</sup> What's more, the discerning eye is able to detect allusions to historical facts hidden under the veiled guise of certain iconographies.<sup>44</sup> Last but not least, archaeological remains often unequivocally document devastations at the hands of man, often corroborated by inscriptions.<sup>45</sup> Such is the case of many Jaina and Buddhist places of worship, which were desecrated by the Brāhmins. Take, for instance, Sarnath, one of the main centres of Buddhist worship, which was the object of repeated destructions, the last time in the twelfth century when *stūpas* and monasteries, sacked and burnt down, were replaced by an imposing Śivaite temple.<sup>46</sup> Or think of the Jaina sanctuary in ancient Puligere (modern Lakṣmeśvara, in Karnataka), whose splendour and successive spoilage at the hands of a Vīraśaiva devotee in the twelfth or thirteenth century is not only described in literature,<sup>47</sup> but still visible in the sanctuary itself. The building shows traces of mutilation, especially in the sculptures of the seated Jinas, which, framed in niches, adorn the parapet of the temple (Plate 5.3). Notably, a few Jaina images happen to have survived, as has been the case also with other *basadis* which had suffered similar assaults: these might represent a kind of a triumphal celebration, a reminder that the longstanding

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40 Pandurangrao Bhimrao Desai, *Jainism in South India and Some Jaina Epigraphs* (Sholapur: Gulabchand Hirachand Doshi, 1957): 397–403.

41 *Bhakti* literature, the hymns of the sixty-three Śaiva devotees (Nāyanmār) above all, beyond devotion and love towards the divine (Śiva), show continuous conflicts and marginalisation of the *śramaṇic* religions. R. Champakalakshmi, “General President’s Address: The Making of a Religious Tradition. Perspectives from Pre-Colonial South India,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 70 (2009–2010): 7.

42 Giovanni Verardi, *The Gods and the Heretics. Crisis and Ruin of Indian Buddhism* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2018): 34–36.

43 Giovanni Verardi, *The Gods and the Heretics. Crisis and Ruin of Indian Buddhism* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2018): 20.

44 In the early and late medieval periods, Indian iconography developed sophisticated iconographic innovations which, through the use of allegories and allusions, reflected the contemporary socio-historical situations. Tiziana Lorenzetti, “Art and Society in Early Medieval India,” in *The Complex Heritage of Early India. Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, ed. Dwijendra N. Jha (New Delhi: Manohar, 2014): 645–67.

45 Among these inscriptions, we might cite those of Aṇṇigēri, Dharwar district (*South Indian Inscriptions* 1986, vol. 15, n. 59: 82 [Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India]), and Tālikōṭi, Bijapur district (*South Indian Inscriptions* 1986, vol. 15, n. 56: 79 [Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India]), which document the brutal extermination of Jaina groups and the destruction of their *basadis*.

46 Giovanni Verardi, *The Gods and the Heretics. Crisis and Ruin of Indian Buddhism* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2018): Appendix by Federica Barba, 523–45.

47 Cf. R.C. Hiremath and M.S. Sunkapura, eds., *Somanātha Caritra by Rāghavāṅka* (Bangalore: Kanada Sahitya Parishat, 2004).



**Plate 5.3:** Jaina sanctuary (now Viraśaiva), Lakṣmeśvara, Gadag, Karnataka.

Jaina supremacy had been overcome (Plate 5.4).<sup>48</sup> After being despoiled, the temple was converted for ritual use by the Viraśaivas, and re-named.

It is therefore no coincidence that numerous medieval epigraphic sources describe the Brāhmins as engaged in warlike activities and receiving military training.<sup>49</sup> Often, such military education was often given in centres called *sālai* (or *ghaṭikās* in Cālukya and Pallava territories), generally attached to local temples.<sup>50</sup>

## 4.1 Militant Attitude and Self-Sacrifice

Hand in hand with their militant attitude towards the *śramaṇas*, doomed to be the losers, medieval Śaivas tended to champion the cause of Śiva with fanatical devotion, even to the point of votive self-sacrifice. Beyond its long-debated religious-symbolic-

<sup>48</sup> Julia A.B Hegewald and Subrata K. Mitra, "Jagannatha Compared: The Politics of Appropriation, Re-Use and Regional Traditions in India," *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics* 36 (2008): 26.

<sup>49</sup> Dwijendra N. Jha, *Rethinking Hindu Identity* (London: Equinox, 2009): 37, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Dwijendra N. Jha, *Rethinking Hindu Identity* (London: Equinox, 2009): 38.



**Plate 5.4:** Jain image saved, Jain sanctuary (now Viraśaiva), Lakṣmeśvara, Gadag, Karnataka.

metaphorical significances, such an act should be seen and understood precisely in relation to those inter-religious struggles. Indeed, self-oblation also retains a great martial importance: it manifests extreme courage, strength and heroism, qualities indispensable in a period of constant warfare. In addition, we must also consider the long-standing intimate connection between votive self-sacrifice and military exploits that can be found in many cultural contexts.

A warrior's self-oblation to ensure victory of the king and the kingdom's welfare is well known in a number of ancient traditions, particularly in medieval south India, where the king was seen as the guarantor of order and prosperity in his domains. Tamil culture, with its deeply embedded concept of martial suicide as the ultimate expression of loyalty to one's own sovereign or commander, abounds in such examples; a number of literary texts, such as the *Tolkāppiyam*,<sup>51</sup> the oldest compendium of Tamil grammar, allude to it.<sup>52</sup> To this day, in Tamil Nadu, the phrase *senchorru-kadan*, 'the debt of red [blood] rice', is used as a metaphor for loyalty; it stands for the ritual of rice,

<sup>51</sup> *Tolkāppiyam* is difficult to date. The original narrative may go back to the pre-Christian era. However, most scholars date the extant manuscript versions between the second and the fifth centuries CE. Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India* (Leiden: Brill 1973): 138.

<sup>52</sup> 'the warrior offering his crowning life to fire in fulfilment of his vow [ . . . ]'. V. Murugan, *Tolkāppiyam in English* (Chennai: Institute of Asian Studies, 2001): 412.

shared by the king or commander with his warriors who vowed to immolate themselves in battle for him.<sup>53</sup> According to Tyagi, the red-rice ritual was described by two Muslim travellers in ninth-century Tamil country.

A quantity of cooked rice was spread before the king, and some three or four hundred persons came of their own accord and received each a small quantity of rice from the king's own hands, after he himself had eaten some. By eating of this rice, they all engage themselves to burn themselves on the day the king dies or is slain; and they punctually fulfilled their promise.<sup>54</sup>

It is worth noting that the fifth- or sixth- century poem *Cilappatikām*, celebrative of the hero committing the warrior's suicide, describes a *modus operandi* that was to become very common in the centuries to come: self-decapitation.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, several Maravar warriors<sup>56</sup> are said to have cut off their own heads at the feet of the goddess Durgā to ensure the victory of their king over his enemies.<sup>57</sup> A number of images of such self-annihilation have come down to us. One celebrated example is to be found in a rock sanctuary at Mahaballipuram, where a devotee is shown beheading himself as a token of honour to Durgā (Plate 5.5). Similar examples are sculpted on the so-called 'hero memorial stones' found primarily at medieval sites in South India, called *saavan kallu* by the locals.<sup>58</sup> Self-decapitation, underpinning multiple levels of symbolism concentrated in the image of the head,<sup>59</sup> was considered to be not only the most precious and devotional offering, but also the most courageous. This is precisely what displays the bond developing between the figure of the over-zealous devotee and the image of the hero-warrior, destined to become one of the leitmotifs in late medieval Hindu South India.

53 Vidya Prakash Tyagi, *Martial Races of Undivided India* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications 2009): 278.

54 Vidya Prakash Tyagi, *Martial Races of Undivided India* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications 2009): 278, 279.

55 Prince Ilango Adigal, *Shilappadikaram (the Ankle Bracelet)*, trans. Alain Danielou (New York: New Directions, 1965): 776–85. Quoted by Mary Storm, *Head and Heat. Valour and Self-Sacrifice in the Art of India* (London/New York/New Delhi: Routledge, 2013): 269.

56 According to a number of scholars, Maravar, one of the oldest social groups to be mentioned in Sangam Tamil literature, are a warlike tribe confined to the modern-day districts of Ramnad, Madurai and Thirunelveli. Pamela G. Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 9–12, 25–31.

57 Mary Storm, *Head and Heat. Valour and Self-Sacrifice in the Art of India* (London/New York/New Delhi: Routledge, 2013): 268.

58 Cfr. Mary Storm, *Head and Heat. Valour and Self-Sacrifice in the Art of India* (London/New York/New Delhi: Routledge, 2013): plate VII.

59 In many ancient traditions, the image of the head has always concentrated multiple levels of symbolism and meanings, being considered the noblest part of the body, the seat of the major senses, locus of the intellect and the dwelling-place of the inner powers, including that of regeneration. Mary Storm, *Head and Heat. Valour and Self-Sacrifice in the Art of India* (London/New York/New Delhi: Routledge, 2013): 147, 148, 151.



**Plate 5.5:** Varaha cave, Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu.

## 4.2 The Devotee as Hero Warrior

The conceptual equation of devotee and hero-warrior, where self-sacrifice in the name of devotion to the god merges with martyrdom and heroism in battle and evolves into a paradigm of heroic devotion, must have penetrated deep into the collective South Indian medieval imagination, so much so that its echo can be traced in a sixteenth-century Telugu novel. In it, the poet Piṅgaḷi Sūraṇa asserts that any devotee bold enough to cut off his own head and offer it to the deity will not only have it restored by an act of god, but also gain the power to destroy enemies or anyone who attempts to kill him.<sup>60</sup> An emblematic example – the probable inspiration for Sūraṇa's

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<sup>60</sup> Velcheru Narayana Rao and David D. Shulman, *The Sound of the Kiss or the Story that Must Never Be Told [by] Piṅgaḷi Sūraṇa* (New York: Columbia University Press 2002): 47, quoted by Gil Ben-Herut,

story – is the case of the historical figure Rāmayya, a twelfth-century Śaiva devotee and most likely a Vīraśaiva faithful, who during a violent controversy with the Jainas, was challenged to prove both his devotion and the power of his god by cutting off his own head and asking Śiva to restore it. There are different versions of Rāmayya's tale, infused with elements of laudatory mythology. One of the most famous is the Abalūr inscription in the eastern wall of the Someśvara Temple at Abalūr, Karnataka, which is usually dated to the end of the twelfth century.<sup>61</sup> It relates that, having invoked Lord Śiva for the grace of post-mortem restoration, the hero-devotee Rāmayya proceeded to decapitate himself. After the severed head had been offered to Śiva and exhibited in public for seven days, the god restored it to Rāmayya's neck and 'the head became sound again, without any scar' (line 43).<sup>62</sup> The miracle thus proved Rāmayya's bravery, his firm devotion and total surrender to his god, and the absoluteness of Śiva's omnipotence. Whereupon, the inscription says, there ensued a battle against the Jainas, led by Rāmayya, who, naturally, went on to win.

An extraordinary but little-known relief illustrating the Abalūr inscription is to be found in the same temple, directly below the inscription. It is a long frieze from the Western Cālukya period, conceived as a linear and continuous narrative. At the beginning of the representation, the severed head of Rāmayya, well detached from the rest of the body, lies on the pedestal (*pīṭha*) of a Śiva *liṅga* (Plate 5.6). On the right, Rāmayya has received his head back from the god and is ready for battle against the Jainas. After their defeat, Rāmayya and his warriors destroy a Jina image (Plate 5.7). In the last scene, Rāmayya celebrates his victory by lifting a Śiva *liṅga* (Plate 5.8). The sacred symbol is placed in the middle of the composition on a high pedestal flanked by two figures (the one on the left is identifiable as the hero-devotee Rāmayya himself), in a posture of homage, worshipping the *liṅga*. Twelfth-century Karnatik literature, marked by *vīra-rasa* or 'emotion of heroism' in the battlefield,<sup>63</sup> often refers to Rāmayya as the emblem of the perfect devotee-warrior. But there is more to it.

General scholarly opinion holds that self-decapitation, which is clearly very difficult to accomplish in practice, was merely a symbol or metaphor. In other words, texts, inscriptions and visual artefacts cannot be considered reliable proof for concrete facts. However, in my opinion, the concept of such practices, known as *dehatyāga*, body abandonment, is so deeply rooted in South Indian culture (even today) that it is hard to

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"Literary Genres and Textual Representations of Early Vīraśaiva History: Revisiting Ekānta Rāmayya's Self-Beheading," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 137.

61 John Faithfull Fleet, "Inscriptions at Ablur," *Epigraphia Indica* 5, inscription E (1898–99): 237–60.

62 John Faithfull Fleet, "Inscriptions at Ablur," *Epigraphia Indica* 5, inscription E (1898–99): 256.

63 Shadakshari Settar and Malleshappa M. Kalaburgi, "The Hero Cult," in *Memorial Stones: A Study of Their Origin, Significance and Variety*, ed. Shadakshari Settar and Gunther D. Sontheimer (Dharwad/Heidelberg: Institute of Indian Art History and South Asian Institute, 1982): 16–36.



**Plate 5.6:** On the left, the severed head of Rāmayya lies on the pedestal. On the right, Rāmayya has received his head back from the god and is ready for the battle. Someśvara Temple at Abalūr, Karnataka.



**Plate 5.7:** Rāmayya and his warriors destroy a Jina image. Someśvara Temple at Abalūr, Karnataka.

believe that they were exclusively metaphorical.<sup>64</sup> Not to mention the eyewitness accounts that have come down to us. Of course not all the sources are to be taken at face value; however, the very quantity of evidence compels us to consider that at least a good portion of these narratives refer to actual events. Of the eye-witness accounts, the testimony by the late fifteenth-century Italian traveller Niccolò da Conti, a former pontifical secretary, is particularly reliable. He not only reports a Śaiva devotee intent on committing self-decapitation, but also offers a vivid and detailed account of how this oblation was carried out in practice. The faithful – Conti writes – would present himself with a sharp, crescent-shaped blade placed on the back of his neck with a cord attached to the two extremities of the blade. Images of such objects have come down to us. At the

<sup>64</sup> This is also the opinion of some scholars who have long studied the phenomenon of self-sacrifice in India. Cf. Mary Storm, *Head and Heat. Valour and Self-Sacrifice in the Art of India* (London/New York/New Delhi: Routledge, 2013): 17; Mary Storm, "An Unusual Group of Hero Stones: Commemorating Self Sacrifice at Mallam, Andhra Pradesh," *Ars Orientalis* 44 (2014): 63.



**Plate 5.8:** Rāmayya celebrates his victory by lifting a Śiva *linga*. Someśvara Temple at Abalūr, Karnataka.

critical moment, the devotee would bend his legs, loop the cord under his feet, and then, suddenly, stretch them to the full, thus cutting off his own head in one single stroke.<sup>65</sup>

At this juncture, considering that the tribute of one's own head was not merely metaphorical but, often, referred to real events; considering also the exaltation of the saint-devotee as a warrior-hero, and the consequent belief in the power of self-oblation to guarantee victory in battle, it is plausible that the whole self-sacrificial code of ethics, in the Hindu society of medieval south India – full-blown by the twelfth-century, a period of actual inter-religious strife – was above all a psycho-strategic device, with magical and supernatural overtones, unachievable to the adversary's weak religiosity. By intimidating the enemy, already on the altar of moral courage, it served to anticipate his complete physical subjugation: the ultimate military objective.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

To sum up, self-directed violent acts – self-decapitation in particular – beyond their religious-symbolic-metaphorical connotations and beyond the many cultural implications, appear to have enjoyed great popularity in medieval South India: above all as an effective military strategy to intimidate and prevail over ones' enemies, religious enemies in particular. Such acts not only illustrated the courage and the sublime martial qualities of those who carried them out, but also the devotee's total trust and submission to the god (i.e., his being 'slave of god', in order to be 'supreme over all else'), who is shown as being so powerful as to be able even to resurrect the dead and, therefore, to grant victory. All this would have inspired terror and awe in the enemies, all the more so if these acts were actually performed.

Moreover, as modern anthropological and psychological research has proved, self-sacrifice builds trust, earns followers and, at the same time, facilitates cohesion within a group.<sup>66</sup> The latter point is of particular importance when the commitment of one's followers is essential, as it would have been in the constant bloody struggles of medieval south India.

Reading votive self-sacrifice in its proper military context appears to be supported by the long-standing tradition, deeply rooted in the south Indian ethos, whereby such violent acts would ensure victory, to the point that they were even exalted as yogic

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<sup>65</sup> Richard Henry Major, *India in the Fifteenth Century: Being a Collection of Narratives of Voyages to India in the Century Preceding the Portuguese Discovery of the Cape of Good Hope; From the Latin, Persian, Russian and Italian Sources* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1842): 27–28.

<sup>66</sup> Yeon Choi and Renate R. Mai-Dalton, "On the Leadership Function of Self-Sacrifice," *Leadership Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (1998): 475–76; Tiziana Lorenzetti, "Heroic Self-Sacrifice in the Medieval Liṅgāyat Tradition," *Proceedings of the 24th Conference of the European Association for South Asian Archaeology and Art, Naples (2018)* (forthcoming).

practices to overcome one's enemies.<sup>67</sup> In addition, such a reading would also account for the bond between the figure of the over-zealous devotee and the image of the hero-warrior that was to become a leitmotif in late medieval Hindu south India.

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<sup>67</sup> Gil Ben-Herut, "Literary Genres and Textual Representations of Early Vīraśaiva History: Revisiting Ekānta Rāmayya's Self-Beheading," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 138.

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