

Swarthmore College

Works

Religion Faculty Works

Religion

2002

Singing The Body Of God: The Hymns Of Vedāntadeśika In Their South Indian Tradition

Steven P. Hopkins

Swarthmore College, shopkin1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>



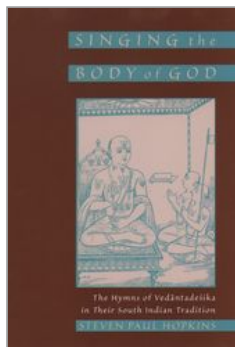
Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Steven P. Hopkins. (2002). *Singing The Body Of God: The Hymns Of Vedāntadeśika In Their South Indian Tradition*.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/56>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



Singing the Body of God: The Hymns of Vedantadesika in Their South Indian Tradition

Steven Paul Hopkins

Print publication date: 2002

Print ISBN-13: 9780195127355

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: November 2003

DOI: 10.1093/0195127358.001.0001

Introduction

Singing in Tongues

Steven Paul Hopkins (Contributor Webpage)

DOI:10.1093/0195127358.003.0001

Abstract and Keywords

After an opening section that tells the story about Vedāntadeśika's encounter with Vishnu at Tiruvahāndrapuram, and the saint-poet's compositions in honor of that god in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prakrit, this introductory chapter summarizes the main themes of the book. First, a overview of Vedāntadeśika, his historical context, his works in Sanskrit, Tamil, Prakrit and *maïpravāōa* ("jewels" and "coral", a prose form that combines the Tamil and Sanskrit languages) and significance in his time as a *kavi* (poet), a "lion among poets and philosophers," as a "master of all the arts and sciences," and as a logician/debater/philosopher/poet who synthesized local/regional Tamil with pan-regional Sanskrit. Other core issues include tensions in Vedāntadesika between the "poet" and "philosopher," between intellectual and "emotional bhakti" and divine presence and absence, along with "holy seeing" (*darōan*) and the "body language" used to describe the "beautiful holy bodies" of Vishnu's temple icons in three south Indian shrines. Methodological framework of the study includes a detailed consideration of Sheldon Pollock's theories on Sanskrit cosmopolitanism along with the "vernacular cosmopolitan" in South Asia after 1300, along with John B. Carman's notions of complementary and contrasting polarities and A.K. Ramanujan's theories on varieties of reflexivity in Indian literature, with help from the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce on "iconic" and "indexical" signs. Introduction concludes with a detailed discussion of textual sources of

Vedāntadeśika's Sanskrit and Prakrit stotras and Tamil prabandhams, and a reflection on translation.

Keywords: bhakti, cosmopolitan, darśan, Māipravāḍa, polarities, prabandham, reflexivity, signs, stotra, Tiruvahāndrapuram, translation

*ākṛṣṭavānasi bhavān anukampamānaḥ
sūtrānubaddhaśakuni kramataḥsvayaṃmām*
Oh so steadily,
of your own accord,
out of innate compassion, you draw me
to yourself
like a bird on a string!

—Vedāntadeśika

Devanāyakapañcāśat, 8

*tanme samarpaya matiṃca sarasvatīṃca
tvāmañjasāstutipadairyadahaṃdhinomi*
But give me mind and the goddess of the tongue for singing
and I'll straight away
delight you
with words of praise!

—Vedāntadeśika

Varadarājapañcāśat, 4

The Poet and His God on the Road to Kāñcī

It is full dark, so the story goes, on the road north to Kāñcīpuram near the river Peṇṇai. We are in the Tamil Land, in the deep south of India, sometime in the late thirteenth century. The great scholar, religious teacher, and poet, Vedāntadeśika, is on his way out of town, just a few miles down the road from the village of Tiruvahāndrapuram, the “Town of the Holy King of Serpents,” near the coast. We must imagine the rest: all of a sudden, the air around him streams with light, a clear high incandescence that obliterates the darkness. Then, after this first bright explosion, a deep orange glow settles on everything. The paddy fields and crouching areca and palm groves bristle with tawny flames. And with the flames comes, impossibly, a gentle rain, sweet on the lips. A god stands before the great teacher-poet: it is Devanāyaka, “The Lord of Gods” himself, the form of the god Vishnu at Tiruvahāndrapuram, a god he has just left behind in the **(p.4)** village temple after evening worship. But now Devanāyaka stands on the road, a glistening black deity with his halo of burning air, his weapons shining, a monsoon cloud just before the rains. And the poet begins to weep; his hair stands on end. As he would later write of Devanāyaka:

You never turn from those devotees, O Acyuta,
whose minds,

like moonstone that sweats
under shining
moonlight
melt into a flood of tears at the sight of your face,
whose bodies bristle, their hairs standing on end,
like *kadamba* trees
bristle with buds
after a storm.¹

The god asks the poet why he is leaving without having composed songs in his honor. He tells his poet not to leave his village shrine until he has sung in his own words “what is sung in the old Veda.”

Vedāntadeśika, it is said, returned immediately to Tiruvahīndrapuram, “like a bird on a string,” to the village temple, to the sacred hill and its wish-granting tree, where he had spent thirty years in spiritual practice. Before he left for good, tradition says, he sang the ravishing beauty of Devanāyaka's body in hymns of great theological sophistication and sensual immediacy. Many of these hymns—in their detailed descriptions of the god's body from head to foot—become “verbal icons” of the icon of Vishnu at Tiruvahīndrapuram. He would sing in lavish terms of this body of god in three different languages. In Sanskrit . . .

O Lord of Gods,
like your long garland,
Vanamālikā,
stirred into bright bloom, my mind,
radiant with wonder

becomes an ornament
for your neck

which wears fine tattoos
from Padmāvati's
lovely bangles
like a conch
blue black
as the eye of a peacock's tail

from the glow of your
dark light . . .²

(p.5)

in Prākṛit . . .

How is your waist
still so thin,
when you hold in your stomach
the eggs

of worlds,

like big bubbles on the ocean of primal matter,
stirred to its depths
by the moon
of your will?

. . . A lover's beauty,
deepened by the emerald ladles of your shins
and the twin jewelled mirrors
of your knees,

O Acyuta,
never leaves your feet
which bear the marks of the lotus
like Lakṣmī . . .³

and in Tamil . . .

. . . O Lord of Truth to your servants,
your lovely body
is dark as lamp-black
as the deep blue
kāyā blossom.

O munificent king who showers grace
like torrents
from a monsoon cloud
over Ayintai town,

if we do not forget the beauty
of your body,
we will not be born
again!⁴

According to his own account, Vedāntadeśika eventually composed in praise of Devanāyaka fifty verses in Sanskrit, the “ancient tongue”; a hundred songs in “charming Prākṛit,” a southern literary dialect of ancient love poetry and rival Jain poets and philosophers (whose early center of power was in neighboring Cuddalore); two long lyric praises and several poems in classical genres in the “graceful Tamil tongue.” To this day, during the month of Tai (December), devotees in Vedāntadeśika's religious community ritually reenact this event by walking in procession with the decorated images **(p.6)** of the poet and Devanāyaka to the shores of the river Peṅṅai, where they stay for a day, and return to the temple shrine in the night.

Whatever the historical veracity of this encounter, the implications of the story's central image—the desire of a vividly embodied and beautiful god for the songs of a particular singer-devotee—is clear. The god of this poet seeks and enjoys his

own praise: human hymns are valorized as a source of divine longing and pleasure. Also clear in this account is Vedāntadeśika's studied comprehensiveness, his meshed linguistic world. A full praise of the deity demands more than one tongue. "His own words" mingle various literary forms of his Tamil vernacular, southern literary Prākṛit, and pan-regional Sanskrit. To "sing the body of God" in Vedāntadeśika's aesthetic and religious universe is to make explicit and self-conscious a polylingual discourse that expands upon earlier poetic traditions inherited from his fellow Ācārya-poets who wrote in Sanskrit and the Tamil "Āḷvārs" (those "immersed [in God]"), saint-poets who flourished in the deep south of India from the sixth to the ninth centuries C.E.

Summary of Themes

Vedāntadeśika: "A Lion Among Poets and Philosophers"

This book is about this extraordinary thirteenth- to fourteenth-century South Indian saint-poet, theologian, and philosopher Veṅkaṭanātha or Veṅkaṭeśa (c. 1268–1369), popularly known by the honorific Vedāntadeśika ("Preceptor of the Vedānta"). Vedāntadeśika is one of the most important brahman Ācāryas (sectarian preceptors) of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community of South India, a community that worships a personal god in the form of Lord Vishnu, one of the high gods of Hindu tradition, along with his consort-goddess Śrī or Lakṣmī. This community, which first developed around the tenth to eleventh centuries, claims the Tamil poems of the Āḷvārs, especially those of the saint-poet Nammāḷvār, as equal in status to the Sanskrit Veda. Long after Deśika's death,⁵ he was claimed as the founding Ācārya of the Vaṭakalai or "northern" school of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, centered in the ancient holy city of Kāñcīpuram in northern Tamil Nadu. Deśika's early association with the northern city of Kāñcī would be a significant source of his broad learning, his polylinguism, and what might be termed his "cosmopolitanism." For Kāñcīpuram, even before the time of Deśika, had long been associated with multiple religious communities—Buddhist, Jain, Hindu—and a decidedly cosmopolitan atmosphere. The city had deep roots in transregional brahmanical Sanskrit learning, though it also fostered the development of regional cosmopolitan literatures, most notably in Pāli and Tamil. Deśika emerges as one of the most cosmopolitan of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas. Though he wrote primarily in Sanskrit, a language of supreme aesthetic and religious currency in northern Tamil Nadu, he also composed significant poetry in regional literary Tamil and Māhāraṣṭrī Prākṛit (the most refined southern form of literary Prākṛit, a cosmopolitan cousin to Sanskrit, the language of the great fifth-century poet and playwright Kālidāsa, and of an ancient southern anthology of love poems attributed to a certain King Satavāhana Hāla, c. second century C.E.). His lyric hymns in these three languages mark a zenith in the development of medieval Śrīvaiṣṇava literature and are a vivid example of a particularly southern cosmopolitanism. Along with working in three major languages of his southern tradition, Deśika was a master of many genres of philosophical (p.7) prose and poetry. He wrote long ornate

religious poems (*kāvya*s) in Sanskrit; a Sanskrit allegorical drama (*nāṭyam*); long religious lyric hymns (*stotras* and *prabandhams*) in Sanskrit, Prākṛit, and in Tamil; and commentaries and original works of philosophy, theology, and logic in Sanskrit and in a combination of the Sanskrit and Tamil languages called *maṇipravāḷa* (“jewels” and “coral”). Tradition ascribes to him the resounding epithets of *kavitārkkasiṃha*, “a lion among poets and philosophers (or ‘logicians’),” and *sarvatantrasvatantra*, “master of all the arts and sciences.” Deśika's work is a kind of compendium of much that went before him in South Indian philosophy and religious literature; like St. Thomas in the medieval Christian West, his work is encyclopedic, though it also evinces a creativity and artistry that transforms everything it touches. There also is something of the vigorous genius of his near-contemporary Dante as well.

Yet in spite of his laudatory epithets and impressive body of work, on the whole this poet-philosopher has been relatively ignored in Western comparative studies of Indian philosophy and literature. Such neglect not only skews our sense of the history and character of South Indian devotion but obscures a compelling example of creative cultural and linguistic synthesis. We see this spirit of synthesis embodied in Vedāntadeśika's traditional epithets. He was master of all “tantras” (this term embraces multiple genres of texts); he was also both a *kavi* (a master poet) and a *tārkkika* (a “logician/debater/ philosopher”). Tensions and complementarities between poet and philosopher, the devotional lyric and theological prose, are enacted within the same person.

In both classical and medieval India, to be called a *kavi* was not merely empty rhetoric. One had to earn such a title. Poetry was as competitive a field as theology in medieval as well as in ancient India.⁶ A *kavi* in the Sanskrit tradition had to have mastered all the poetic meters, aesthetic conventions, and other formal rigors of a demanding and highly cultivated art. In Deśika we not only have an example of a *kavi* in the traditional literary sense but a *religious poet* who has mastered and integrated into his spiritual art all the conventional tools of secular poetics. Though Deśika's blending of secular and religious genres (or work in more than one language) is not unique in the Indian, or more broadly South Asian, context, he is certainly a neglected South Indian example of such a poetic and linguistic synthesis.

I will explore the many continuities between this thirteenth- to fourteenth-century poet-philosopher and the earlier generation of Tamil poet-saints and Ācārya-poets who composed in Sanskrit; I will also discern ways in which Deśika's work represents a departure from both Ālvārs and Ācāryas. Deśika's devotional poetry combines in a dynamic way the local/regional literary prestige of Tamil as a language of “emotions” with the pan-regional aesthetic prestige and power of Sanskrit (with Māhārāṣṭrī as Middle Indo-Āryan literary spice). Deśika's writings expand the linguistic field of South Indian devotion beyond the normative claims either of Sanskrit or Tamil devotional texts. His language

choices embrace both the singularity of Sanskrit as divine “primordial tongue” and the subordinate *but equally divine* claims of his mother tongue, Tamil.

The Philosopher as Poet in Three Languages

For a thorough assessment of Deśika the philosopher “as poet” we need to examine his work in more than one of his working languages, comparing his poems in different languages to one another and to earlier Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prākṛit models. In doing **(p.8)** so, we will see that Deśika is more than a Sanskrit poet who simply “translates” an “original” Tamil bhakti tradition rooted in the Āḷvārs, or a “Tamil” poet bent on “Sanskritizing” his mother tongue. The situation is far more complex.

As we will see, like many of his Ācārya predecessors, Deśika moves the “Tamil tradition” of passionate devotion forward from its purely local and regional focus to a broader, translocal context through his Sanskrit and Prākṛit compositions; but at the same time he composes his own original Tamil poems, which expand and affirm Tamil literary tradition without being diluted or muted by Sanskrit.

Ultimately, his work transcends both a certain Tamil-centeredness and a focus on Sanskrit alone, twin ideologies that had flourished in various historical contexts and communities in the south of India from the time of the Āḷvārs to Deśika's own time. The South Indian devotional tradition becomes in Deśika's work a multilingual, multi-centered tradition. This is why I will speak, for instance, not merely of Deśika's hymns in their “Tamil,” but more broadly—as the title of this book indicates—in their “South Indian” tradition.

The Poet Against the Philosopher

In my exegeses of the poems I will also address and further elaborate on a theme first addressed by the scholar Friedhelm Hardy almost two decades ago in an essay on one of Deśika's *stotras*: the tensions between the theological vision in the poems and the theology expressed by the very same poet's prose.⁷ Such tensions are most suggestive for a comparative study of philosophical and poetic writing. Deśika was not only a *kavi* and a *tārṅkika* but also an “Ācārya,” a sectarian “preceptor” and “teacher,” a scholastic commentator and interpreter of the tradition of the Āḷvārs as well as earlier Ācāryas like himself. He generated both “primary” and “secondary” texts, integrating what we might too neatly divide into the categories of “poetry” and “philosophy.”

Tensions in the poetry arise specifically around the issue of surrender (*prapatti*) to God. Deśika's hymns to Vishnu articulate a vision of surrender that seems to be more radical than that outlined in the poet's own doctrinal works. The doctrine in prose cautiously affirms human self-effort in the action of grace, while the poem emphasizes helplessness, the absence of any human “means” to salvation. Doctrine in the poem—as Hardy long ago noticed, and as my study will underscore—is more “fluid,” less monolithic than doctrine outlined in prose.

Intellect, Emotion, and the Goddess of Poetry

Ultimately, we see in Deśika how philosophical positions and doctrines, when put into poems, are transformed by a master of both genres. The medium of the poem offers Deśika the philosopher a unique space of interpretation, distinct from his own prose commentaries and independent treatises.

I will argue that in the poem we have displayed in a most complex form Deśika's union of intellect and emotion; philosophy and poetry; the sensual/erotic and intellectual dimensions of devotion. In Deśika's love lyrics, the "mind" is often portrayed as a lover, a "lady in love" who pines in separation from her Beloved. The mind is a passionate, even erotic instrument in the drama of divine union and separation. In one **(p.9)** *stotra*, Deśika prays for *mati*—"mind, intellect"—and *Sarasvatī*—a goddess of the tongue, the goddess of poetry—so he can properly sing a praise for Lord Vishnu. This certainly implies that for Deśika the intellectual and "poetic" dimensions meet in the song—each is crucial for the hymn. Yet the space of the poem also provides what Deśika himself will describe as an "overflowing of ecstatic experience" (*anubhava parivāhamāka*), implying that in the poem one may find a certain overflow of "experience" beyond the structures of theology and even poetics.

"Singing the Body of God": The Praise of Shrines and Their Icons

I focus my textual analyses in this book on Deśika's praise-poems to three iconic forms of Vishnu, *mūrtis* or *arcāvatāras*. In doing so, I concentrate on shrines and temple images that were most important to him: the shrine and icons of Varadarājaperumāḷ in the northern temple town of Kāñcīpuram; those of Lord Devanāyaka at the small village of Tiruvahīndrapuram near the western coastal town of Cuddalore; and finally, the shrine and icons of Lord Raṅganātha at Śrīraṅgam, a temple complex that became, by the tenth century, the most important southern center of power in Deśika's community.

These hymns of Deśika to the beautiful icon-bodies of God both vividly reflect his rootedness in the icon-based poems of the Āḷvār and Ācārya traditions and express some of the most emotional aspects of Deśika's own devotional poetics. This makes them particularly suitable for comparative study. In such poems that "sing the body of God" we can most vividly see his distinctive contributions to the South Indian Vaiṣṇava tradition he inherited. Both similarities and differences with regard to Āḷvār and Ācārya bhakti are most clearly inscribed in these particular kinds of hymns. Moreover, such icons in "beloved places" inspire some of Deśika's finest poetry.

Deśika's poems in praise of temple images go even beyond those of the Āḷvārs and Ācāryas in their vivid, at times erotic portrayal of the "beautiful holy body" of Vishnu in the temple. Vishnu's icons here are far more than mere pointers to or reminders of their divine referent; rather, they are seen in the eyes of the saint-poet as living "bodies" of the deity, the concentrated form of the godhead

in the small space of a precious metal, wood, or stone figure. In the saint-poet's "devotional eye," to use a phrase of Richard Davis, they are "pieces" of heaven on earth, and in some instances make earth—for the other gods as well as for human devotees—preferable to heaven.⁸ In Deśika's devotional poetics, "holy seeing" (*darśana*)—seeing and *being seen* by God—is the experience of a beauty (Tamil: *aḷaku*; Sanskrit: *lāvanya*, "glowing loveliness") that saves; for Deśika, what we might term the "aesthetic" and "religious" mutually inhere in the vision of the body of God, both on a theoretical and on an experiential level. Deśika the poet consistently expresses, in his passionate devotion to these "accessible" earthly bodies of God, a reversal of values characteristic of an earlier generation of saint-poets.

Throughout this book I will analyze in some detail the "body language" used by Deśika to describe religious ecstasy before temple images, showing its relevance to theories of religious symbolism, divine embodiment, the poetry of "presence," and to a disputed point among scholars of South Indian devotion: the existence of "emotional bhakti" in the work of a generation of poets and theologian-commentators after the Āḷvārs. For, in spite of Deśika's poetry of presence, inherited from a confident scholastic tradition and from structures of divine mediation, we will also see that he is in touch with elements **(p.10)** of an experience of divine *absence* and deferral, the agonies of divine separation, even a certain paradoxical experience of "absent presence" or "separation-in-union," found most powerfully in the poems of Nammālvār.

Methodological Framework

Vedāntadeśika and Religious Cosmopolitanism

The issue of audience in Deśika's work is complex and is bound up with the cosmopolitan venue of his natal city of Kāñcīpuram, as well as the long, and sometimes antagonistic, history of Sanskrit and Tamil in the south. His narratives speak of his many travels and contacts with various sectarian groups throughout the north and south of Tamil Nadu and what is now the state of Karṇāṭaka. His audience seemed to combine thoroughly polyglot religious scholars and poets of different traditions within and outside of the Hindu fold, with those whose learning emphasized the supremacy of Sanskrit or Tamil alone, or those for whom Māhārāṣṭrī was a language of prestige.

But issues of audience and identity are also bound up with Deśika's place at the intersection of two important literary/historical streams. Deśika the thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Kāñcī Ācārya, lived well into what Sheldon Pollock has termed "the vernacular millennium," an age of literary "vernacularization" that spread throughout South Asia from approximately 1000, reaching its peak at about 1500 *c.e.*, and that included the development of new cosmopolitan forms of Tamil literature;⁹ at the same time, Deśika was a member of a brahmanical religious elite (centered in Kāñcī, the "north" of the "south") among whom

Sanskrit was enjoying a resurgence of literary and philosophical/commentarial production.¹⁰

I have already spoken of how Deśika affirms the aesthetic and religious ideals of Sanskrit and Tamil. Historically speaking, using Pollock's framework, we can say that Deśika's work affirms the transregional, universalistic values of the "Sanskrit cosmopolis,"¹¹ a pan-South Asian elite cultural formation whose geographical range, at its peak development from 300 to 1300 C.E., spanned the length and breadth of South, Central, and Southeast Asia; at the same time, his accomplished poetry in Tamil is witness to his place in a long, many-sided process of vernacularization in the south. One might say he embraced the twin values of Sanskrit (and Prākṛit) cosmopolitanism and Tamil vernacularism,¹² though, as Pollock remarks, Tamil, in fact, had long laid claim to its own cosmopolitanism; it was a literary vernacular that had long "become cosmopolitan for [its] regional [world]."¹³ What Deśika does is compose in what had long been rival cosmopolitan languages in the deep south: pan-Indian Sanskrit and Tamil, one of the richest examples of a "cosmopolitan vernacular."

Language choice is as key an issue in the history of literatures and polities in South Asia as it is in the history of East Asia and premodern Europe. The choice to be vernacular, and the choice to be translocal and cosmopolitan—or even more, the choice to make of the vernacular a vehicle of a cosmopolitan vision—are very important, and little-studied elements of historical/cultural formations. While this book is neither a full-fledged historical argument about language choice nor a detailed study of cosmopolitanism in premodern Tamil Nadu, it will be clear throughout this book in what ways Pollock's arguments about cosmopolitanism and the vernacular shed light on Deśika's complex literary and cultural synthesis.

(p.11) To put it simply: Deśika represents a late religious flowering of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, and, at the same time, as a South Indian brahman embracing both Tamil and, in one notable instance, Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit, he affirms the values of the cosmopolitan vernacular. In this comprehensiveness Deśika the Kāñcī brahman-artist joins a significant cohort of cosmopolitan writers that spans the Jains in northern and southern India to Buddhist poets in Śrī Lankā who flourished during and after his lifetime.¹⁴

Deśika's cosmopolitanism, rooted in his early training in Kāñcīpuram, is the self-conscious embrace of both local/vernacular or regional identities and the translocal, pan-regional values of his social-cultural milieu. Such a "twin valorization," articulated in works of art, theology, or philosophy, can lead to quite an elaborate balancing act.¹⁵ The cosmopolitan intellectual localizes the translocal and translocalizes the local, playing one off the other, creating a discourse where both are affirmed.

Complementary and Contrasting Polarities

These issues of local and translocal discourse bring up a central dynamic of this study. The argument of this book is structured around several complex “reflexive” oppositions that emerge in Deśika's poetic work. “Reflexive” here means that these oppositions are never between isolatable wholes. At times, one pole of the opposition may “problematize” the other, but will never entirely replace it; the “other” is always there as a necessary complement or even foil. Such oppositions may also reflect upon and respond to each other, and in some instances, even complete each other. Oppositions are not univocal, but multivalent. John B. Carman, in his recent work on intra- and extradivine oppositions, has spoken of complementary or contrasting *polarities*. At bottom, whatever the relationship, the poles cannot be separated; they are different, but not divisible.¹⁶ This vocabulary of “polarity” is best suited to the problem of oppositions and their relations in Deśika's work.

Thus, the relationship, for instance, between poetry and philosophy; Tamil and Sanskrit; local and pan-regional; cosmopolitan and vernacular; sacred and secular; intellectual and emotional; divine “presence” and “absence;” or this-worldly and heavenly is never simply one of “pure” opposition or univocal relation in Deśika. When we look closely at Deśika's poems, as well as his prose and the work of his own commentators, we see many forms of relation emerge. And there is no isomorphy between these various oppositions, that is, they do not all reveal the same degree of tension or tenor of relationship. While some are complementary, others emphasize contrast and a certain tension.

Modes of Reflexivity

I will also utilize A. K. Ramanujan's thesis on varieties of reflexivity in Indian literatures in an attempt to place Deśika's work within his “South Indian Tradition.” I will follow Ramanujan in utilizing Charles Sanders Peirce's “semeiotic” vocabulary to speak of *iconic* or *indexical* symbols. I have already mentioned Deśika's cosmopolitanism, and the polyglot and/or specifically Sanskritic or Tamil-speaking audience, but how do Deśika's poems in the three most important religious tongues of the South resonate with other earlier poems within the religious and literary traditions he has inherited, **(p.12)** particularly the Tamil compositions of the Āḷvārs? Does he piously imitate previous poets or, perhaps in subtle ways, stake his own claim as authoritative master? Or is he somewhere between these two extremes, neither “ruining the sacred truths” nor passively mirroring earlier masters?¹⁷

Ramanujan has claimed that traditional Indian commentators do not see Indian literature in historical perspective; rather they form what he calls—citing T. S. Eliot—a “ ‘simultaneous order,’ where every new text within a series confirms yet alters the whole order ever so slightly, and not always so slightly.”¹⁸ How then does Deśika's Sanskrit and Tamil poetry “confirm yet alter” the “order” of South Indian literature, most specifically, the Tamil literature of devotion? Our

eye is on both the ways Deśika's work “confirms” and “alters” what is, in our lens of interpretation, the very fluid and dynamic “order” of bhakti literature in the south.

As we will see, in only a very few cases might Deśika's work be seen as *iconic* in relationship to Āḷvār bhakti in Tamil; that is, some stanzas bear a kind of “geometrical” resemblance to poems of the Āḷvārs. There is certainly an attempt by his modern commentators to push Deśika's “iconicity” (religious and literary equivalency) with the Āḷvārs, a push that reveals more about modern attempts to construct a “Tamil Deśika” after the model of the Āḷvārs than it does about Deśika's poems themselves.

However, as we will see especially in chapter 5, there *is* a context in which Deśika's poems can be seen as “icons” of sorts. While they are not iconic “translations” of earlier works in the semeiotic sense, portions of the Ācārya's hymns that describe the beautiful bodies of Vishnu from foot to head or head to foot act like verbal “icons of icons.” Such descriptions, called *anubhavas* or “enjoyments” of the god, do bear a certain “geometrical” resemblance to their divine referent. I will carefully distinguish between these different modes of “iconicity” throughout this study.

Ultimately, using Ramanujan's analysis of patterns of reflexivity in Indian literature and Peirce's semiotic, I will argue for the overall *indexical* nature of Deśika's poetry vis-à-vis the Āḷvār tradition. This is to say that while Deśika's poems may reflect at times—in vocabulary, setting, and imagery—certain elements of the earlier Tamil tradition, they are nonetheless embedded in a specific context all their own, a cosmopolitan context where Sanskrit, as transregional “mother tongue” beyond all mother tongues, held pride of place among all languages, though without ever replacing Tamil and the most refined form of Prākṛit. Put another way: the *icon* “idolizes,” while the *index* “alters” by referring or signaling to its own context without which it would make no sense.¹⁹ Deśika “makes it new” without sacrificing tradition. This is no Bloomian agonistic “transuming” of one's “father tradition,” but rather a creative appropriation that furthers while it affirms a long literary tradition.²⁰ As I have noted, Deśika's vigorous, self-consciously refined and original verses “idolize” only the body of God.

A Note on Sources and Translation

Stotras and Prabandhams

All of the poems discussed in this book have been edited and commented upon by Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas from the early years of this century, and, as far as I know, there are no significant textual variants (other than minor misreadings here and there) or textual **(p.13)** problems connected with any of them. Because Deśika's Sanskrit *stotras* have a long history of liturgical use in temples, there are many editions of the “Deśika Stotra Mālā,” including little pamphlets printed for use at

temples. Throughout the book I have utilized several published editions of Deśika's Sanskrit *stotras*, all of which include the Prākṛit *Acyutaśatakam* with Sanskrit *chāyā* or paraphrase/translation. Along with the *Śrīmatvedāntadeśikagranthamālā*, edited by K. P. B. Aṅṅaṅkarācāriyar and Śrī Sampatkumārācāryasvāmin (in several volumes, 1940–58), the collected Sanskrit works (including the Prākṛit) without commentary, I have consulted many older edited versions of individual *stotras* with Sanskrit, Tamil, Prākṛit, or *maṇipravāḷa* commentaries. I have carefully cited the most important of these, such as the Sanskrit commentary on the *Bhagavadḍhyānasopānam* of Veṅkaṭagopāladāsa (Śrīraṅgam: Śrīvāṅivilās Press, 1927) and *Śrīmānigamantamahādeśik'-anugrihinam Varadarājapañcāśatstotram Śrīnivāsācāryakṛtavṛyākhyāsametaṃ* on the Varadarājapañcāśat (MS text and Sanskrit commentary at the Institute Francais d'Indologie, Pondicherry, n.d), in the footnotes (where appropriate) and in the bibliography. When I was at the revision stage of this book, I was able to use a printed version of Śrīnivāsācārya's commentary in Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat's edition of Deśika's *Varadarājapañcāśat*, an edition that was very helpful to me in the final stages of this study.²¹ Such commentaries are a rich source of interpretive material and deserve a study unto themselves, particularly with regard to their language use in the early years of the century up to the 1940s. One of the more erudite of these commentaries, for example, is the *Acyutaśatakam* with the Prākṛit commentary (*Prākṛta PrahriyāVyākhyā*) by Deśikācārya, the Sanskrit commentary of Tātācārya, and the *maṇipravāḷa* commentary by Raṅganāthācārya (Grantha and Tamil scripts, Kumbakonam, 1910, 1911).

Overall, I am deeply indebted to an edition of Deśika's *stotras* that has become standard since the 1960s, the *Śrīdeśikastotramālā, uraiyuṭaṅ*, edited with a modern Tamil commentary and word gloss by V. N. Śrī Rāmatēcikācāryar (Madras reprint, 1982 [1966]). The Tamil commentaries and individual word-glosses are obviously meant to introduce Deśika to a modern Tamil-speaking audience of devotees who do not necessarily know Sanskrit, but they are neither elementary nor simplistic. In many cases Rāmatēcikācāryar summarizes the basic lines of interpretation of earlier twentieth-century commentators, along with the important narratives connected with the texts, and so his commentaries are useful tools in understanding Deśika's place in his community and that community's sense of Deśika in the tradition of Sanskrit and Tamil literatures. As I discuss later in some detail, Śrīvaiṣṇava commentary is far from reductive, but exhibits, in many areas of interpretation, creativity and imagination. I will refer throughout this study to core insights of Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas that come from a close reading of the commentaries.

The case of the “Tamil prabandham” is far more complex. Unlike the Sanskrit *stotras*, the Tamil poetry does not have a long tradition of individual commentary, though there do exist at least two individual volumes on the *Mummaṇikkōvai* from the late 1940s and '50s (see bibliography). As we will see

in more detail later, the *Navamaṇimālai* and *Mummaṇikkōvai* are unique in many ways among Deśika's Tamil poetry; they are recited at the temple of Devanāyaka Swāmi at Tiruvāhindrapuram, though they have a limited liturgical use elsewhere.²² Most of Deśika's Tamil *prabandhams* come from his larger *maṇipravāla* works, where they are framed by Deśika's own prose commentaries and additional Sanskrit verses. The *Meyviratamāṇmiyam* is set within Deśika's *maṇipravāla* prose “place legend” of Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple called *ŚrīAttikiri Māhātmyam*, which (p.14) includes Sanskrit poems as well. Though this text was most likely recited liturgically at Kāñcī from an early period, it has not attracted its own separate commentarial tradition. Tamil rarely stands on its own in Deśika's work, or even, as we will see, in his narrative biographies; rather, Tamil stands *with* Sanskrit, and the prose vehicle *maṇipravāla*, a mingling of the two tongues, often mediates between them. But here, we must again discuss Rāmatēcikācāryar's editing skills.

Deśika's Tamil poetry never stood alone as such, as a separate body of work (as “book”: *nūl* or *grantha*), over against the Sanskrit *stotras* or the Āḷvār *prabandhams*, until Rāmatēcikācāryar published his edited collection of the “Deśika Prabandham” with “simple” Tamil commentary, individual word glosses, indices of first lines, and detailed glossaries (*Śrītēcikappirapantam*, *uraiyuṭaṅ*) in 1944. Prepared in the 1930s and 1940s, and ready for publication in 1941, the *Śrītēcikappirapantam* is a landmark work produced during an efflorescence of the “Tamil consciousness” movement in South India. It carefully extracts Deśika's Tamil poetry from its original context in many disparate sources, mostly from *maṇipravāla* doctrinal texts known as *Rahasyas* (“secrets”), and systematically comments on each stanza, translating the many unfamiliar archaic Tamil words and verbal forms into their modern Tamil equivalents, and glossing Tamil philosophical vocabulary into more familiar Sanskrit terms. As in his edition of the *stotras*, Rāmatēcikācāryar's commentaries provide a summary of the texts and close reading of significant passages. The Ācārya not only tries to place Deśika's *prabandhams* in the stream of Sanskrit and Tamil religious literatures, but, most significantly, as we will see, he argues for the continuity, even the *equivalency*, of Deśika's Tamil with the Tamil of the Āḷvārs. The *Deśika Prabandham* is, of course, to be set beside the companion Sanskrit volume of *stotras*, embodying the Ubhaya or “dual” Vedānta of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas; but even more significantly, it is meant to be set beside the *Diviyapirapantam*, or collected poems, of the Āḷvārs. We will have many occasions to look more closely at this claim for Deśika's Tamil.

At this point, we need to bear in mind that Rāmatēcikācāryar's *Deśika Prabandham* was produced in a politically and socially turbulent time in south India, one that saw the veritable apotheosis of a long process by which the literary history of the South had been constructed as a pointedly “Tamil” history, and the history of Sanskrit learning and brahmanic influences in South India had been systematically suppressed.²³ In the years 1940–42, as the *Deśika*

Prabandham was being prepared, U. Vē Cāminātaiyar, the great anthologist of early saṅgam poetry and other Tamil “classics,” was publishing *En̄Carittiram*, “My Life Story,” in twenty-two installments in the popular Tamil weekly magazine, *Āṇanta Vikaṭaṇ*. This autobiography, as Ann Monius has recently argued, is far from a naive or “artless” reflection by a humble itinerant scholar; it rather represents a subtle and often artful construction of Tamil literary tradition as monolingual (ignoring the long history of interaction between Sanskrit and Tamil), nonsectarian (ideologically neutral), and morally pristine. Cāminātaiyar also veritably erases any evidence of the considerable role the Sanskrit language played in his own Smārta brahman background, all for the sake of establishing the sacred supremacy of Mother Tamil (*tamiḷtāy*).²⁴

It is not difficult to see Rāmatēcikācāryar's edition of Deśika's Tamil *prabandhams* as a phenomenon of—and perhaps a response to—this period's Tamil “revivalism” in its (sometimes excessive) defense of the “Tamilness” of the brahman Deśika, the poet and **(p.15)** religious scholar who also composed exemplary Sanskrit works. It is as if Rāmatēcikācāryar wanted to say: Deśika, this brahman Sanskrit poet is also “Tamil.”²⁵ But of course this is “Tamil” in a way that would have never made sense to the fourteenth-century Ācārya.

Finally, it seems that for some time (by the '30s and '40s) the Vaṭakalai brahmans themselves had too much emphasized Deśika's Sanskrit works, to the detriment of the Tamil compositions. There is some evidence that Vaṭakalai tradition privileged the care and preservation of (and commentary on) the Sanskrit works over those composed in Tamil.²⁶

We will return many times, in the course of this study, to these extremely important issues, though in the context of a study of Deśika's work in its own time and provenance.

The Task of the (Poet) Translator

Though this thematic study does not focus on translations per se, my translations from Deśika's three languages form the backbone of this book and its argument, and so some reflections on the act of translation are in order.²⁷

As someone who was writing poetry long before I began the academic study of religion and refashioned myself as a scholar-translator (poet), I have labored to “elevate,” in John Cort's phrase, adapted from Derrida, “the living body of Sanskrit [and Tamil, and Prākṛit] poetry into American English.”²⁸ This is no mean task, and there are few good models and few teachers to serve as guide, particularly for Sanskrit. As Hank Heifetz, one of the best translators of Sanskrit poetry into American English, has observed, scholarly translations of Sanskrit poetry into English have generally been of very poor quality.²⁹ This contrasts with the history of poetry translations from Chinese and Japanese, for example, which seemed to begin on the right foot with the work of Ezra Pound (through

Ernest Fenollosa's notes) and Arthur Waley, and continued in translations by modern and contemporary poets like Witter Bynner, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and Cid Corman.³⁰ Thus, the American translator from East Asian languages (academic or otherwise) begins work with exemplary models in clear, uncluttered, American English. The translator of Sanskrit and many other South Asian languages, on the other hand, is hampered by what Heifetz has called a long "tradition of the bad," a style he refers to as "Indologese." "Indologese" has its roots in nineteenth-century scholarly translations, though its impress can still be felt, in modern Indian and non-Indian translations into English. The characteristics of Indologese, according to Heifetz,

are stiff, archaicizing diction (full of words like "wanton" and "charming"); the use of emotionally impoverished, merely "educated" language; antiquated inversions of sentence structure; and iambic rhythms (used directly or present as underlying patterns) that are inappropriate to the quantitative effects of Sanskrit verse and alien to the far more varied rhythmic achievements of twentieth-century poetry, developments which open up far more interesting possibilities for the translation of rhythm.³¹

One must add to this mix of false archaisms and dead notions of high poetry a tendency to overload translations with untranslated technical terms and plenty of parenthetical fill-ins (inherited from the translations of philosophical texts), and you get something well-nigh unreadable. Often, much Sanskrit poetry has simply been translated into barely readable prose, which has done much to obscure the poetic merits of **(p.16)** large bodies of work, simply killing the language for most contemporary readers of poetry.³²

Vedāntadeśika has been particularly badly served by this latter tendency. Much of what I have translated in this book has been translated into such Indologese, in prose or verse incarnations. I cite one example at random from a contemporary Indian English translation of the *Devanāyakapañcāśat* (verse 40):

O Devapati! Victory be to Your shanks which helped You in carrying messages (as the ambassador of Pāndavas), in carrying away the clothes of the cowherdresses and in following (hunting down) the asuras. They shine like (=are shaped like) Manmatha's bugles, quivers and vessels called Kalāchī.³³

This is supposed to translate the following Sanskrit stanza:

*dūtye dukūlaharaṇe vrajasundarīṇām/
in being a messenger / in stealing the fine cloth dukūla dresses / of
the lovely girls of Vraj
daityānudhāvāna vidhau api labdhasāhyam//
pursuing the daityas / in being expedient / also/[they] helped you
obtain
kandarpa-kāhala-niṣaṅga-kalācika-ābham/*

of Kāma-vīṇā / stringed instrument or drum-quiver-waterpot-like /
resembling
jaṅghāyugam jayati devapati tvadīyam//
pair of calves / victory! / O Lord of Gods / of you.

I have rendered this verse as follows:

When you ran as messenger
between armies
or when
you snatched
the fine *dukūla*
dresses from the pretty cowgirls
of Vraj—

even when you ran down
the fleeing daityas,

they were there
to help you.
They shine like the slender vīṇā, the drum,
the quiver,
and golden waterpot
of Kāma,
divine Lord of desire:
May your two fine calves
be victorious!

I have sought in this book to translate Deśika's metrically and syntactically sophisticated poetry into contemporary American verse, avoiding the pitfalls of previous generations (**p.17**) of Indologese. I want to make poems in English that are not “dead on the page”—poems that follow, as much as possible, not only the densely woven imagery of the originals, the musicality of their phrasing, but what Heifetz calls “rhythms of feeling for the ear.”³⁴ Although I have tried to stay as faithful as possible to the original—in many cases, even in word order and delicate balance of verbal forms—these translations are not meant as trots for discursive arguments, but are (new) (English) poems that, like the originals, are meant to be read aloud, and to stand on their own as distinctive forms of artistic and theological expression. In this I have been deeply influenced not only by Heifetz's work in Sanskrit but, above all, by translators who have worked with Tamil, Kannaḍa, and Telugu languages, from George Hart and A. K. Ramanujan, to David Shulman, Velcheru Narayana Rao, Indira Peterson, Norman Cutler, and Vasudha Narayanan.³⁵ I might also mention the idiosyncratic but compelling volume of poetic translations from Prākṛit and Sanskrit by W. S. Merwin and J. Moussaieff Masson, *The Peacock's Egg*.³⁶

But it will be obvious to anyone familiar with A. K. Ramanujan's exemplary translations from Kannaḍa and Tamil that my aesthetic ideals and even basic forms on the page—the visual orientation of phrasing and spacing—follow his

model.³⁷ I have attempted to match the varying semantic, syntactic, and metric rhythms of the original in the visual placement of English words on the page, along with length of phrasing and word order (thereby speeding up or slowing down the reader). My translations not only reflect the relative line length and complexity of meters in the original languages, from the most economical Tamil *veṅpa* or Prākṛit *āryā*, to the most elaborate Tamil *viruttam* or the Sanskrit *śārdūlavikrīḍita* (the long, loping “tiger’s play” meter); but I also try to give the English reader a sense of the multiple internal rhythms of each unit of each line of this remarkable poetry by breaking up into separate concrete units (both visually and syntactically) what are single nominal or participial phrases in the original. For instance, in Tamil Deśika writes a clipped rhythmic, internally rhyming, alliterative and elliptical phrase *oru caṭai oṅriya kaṅkai tantaṇa*—literally, [the “Lord’s flower feet”] “which gave the Gaṅgā [which] mingled in one of the [matted] locks.” In my English this becomes a line broken into visual rhythmic fragments:

they gave us the Gaṅgā
who fell, caught
by a single lock
of Śiva’s
matted
hair . . .³⁸

This is my attempt to capture not only the meaning of the original but also something of its internal music and rhythm (breathline and measure) into a contemporary idiom of American English poetry. This approach also holds true for long, richly evocative epithets, which can often be translated as descriptive phrases. Even individual phrases will evoke more than one simultaneous meaning: we will see how rich the Sanskrit epithet *avyājavatsalam* is—the Lord whose “tender mercy is without pretext” will occupy us for many pages, and will draw after itself a cluster of translations.³⁹ Finally, individual words—nouns or verbs—will draw to themselves many registers of meaning: the **(p.18)** rich semantic registers of the Tamil word *aṅpu*, “love,” will call for some detailed attention. Often I will translate the multiple senses of a single Sanskrit, Tamil, or Prākṛit word with two overlapping English words or phrases. For instance, the Tamil phrase *mukīlmatiyāy* literally means “[one whose] mind having grown dim,” but *mukīl* can also mean “to close up” or “fade” as a flower. I will translate such an expression with both senses (images) in mind:

but his mind had grown
dim, closed
like a bud,
darkened by ripened karmas
of many
past sins.⁴⁰

Only rarely will I actually add in English a word or descriptive phrase not present in the original. This will be to give the reader a sense of a rich image or set of images folded into in a single Sanskrit, Tamil, or Prākṛit word or phrase (this is actually quite a common phenomenon). One of the most striking “transgressions” of this sort occurs in my translation of verse 49 of the Prākṛit *Acyutaśatakam*. The phrase is *ghaṇakandalikandakaalīkhambhasamāim*: “resembling the [soft] stems of plantain (*kadalī*) and roots of thick *kandali*.” Both these images are meant to evoke frailty and transience—for some commentators *ghaṇa* also has the separate meaning of “cloud”—but *kandalikanda* houses a particularly evocative image. In Tamil, as the commentators note, white-flowering *kandali* evokes *nāykkuṭai*, a small frail growth seen in fields after rain.

I have tried in my translation of this Prākṛit verse to foreground this image. First, a transliteration and literal translation of the original, in measured, economical *āryā* meter:

ṇa mahenti ṇaṇavantātaraṅgaḍiṅḍirabubbuasaricchāim/
do not take as great / those who know / of waves in the sea / foam /
bubbles/ resembling
vihipamuhāṇa paāimghaṇakandalikandakaalīkhambhasamāim:
beginning with Brahmā and others / realms:stations / thick:or
clouds /
kandali roots / *kadalī* or plantain stems / resembling.

Now, my translation:

Those who know think little
of the starry realms of Brahmā
and the others—

those places:
like the bubbles and spume of waves or clouds,
like the soft stems
of plantain

or the frail roots
of white-flowering *kandali*

(p.19)
thick
in fields
after rain.

I will cite in footnotes all cases where my translation departs significantly from the original, and will discuss in the notes and in the body of my analysis all significant interpretive issues related to prosody and vocabulary. While the English verse will mean to stand on its own as a literary translation, the notes and my running commentaries will provide crucial philological and Indological groundwater, especially for those who know these three languages. This will be at times a precarious balancing act: on one side, I affirm the virtues of a

scholarly study with close reading of the original texts; on the other, I desire to create English poems and avoid the pitfalls of Indologese.

One final point, and two final examples. Ramanujan has called attention to the “left-branching syntax” of the Tamil language. This is to say, word order in Tamil can be the exact opposite of English. In Tamil one would read “all people / complete compassion-raining-Ayintai town,” or “Brahmā and others beginning with-realms,” and would have to reverse the order in translation, often supplying missing (but implied) prepositions. This left-branching syntax is also central to Sanskrit and Prākṛit prosody. It goes without saying that I have reversed many left-branching phrases and compounds in this study, and supplied my share of prepositions, though, as a careful reader of the translations and footnotes will observe throughout, I have most of the time sought to preserve the overall word order in an individual stanza. That is, my English poems often try to preserve the mysterious and sometimes charming quality of left-branching syntax. The reader of these poems in the original first meets with a series of descriptive phrases, images that build one on the other, modifying sometimes what turns out to be the subject of the phrase or sentence, and sometimes the object; often only by the very end of the stanza do we have a subject in the nominative case and a finite verb, and the mystery is solved! I have tried to come up with an English equivalent to this game of suspense, and in the process I hope I have not tortured English syntax too much.⁴¹ I cite at random a Sanskrit example from *Devanāyakapañcāśat*:

Though it is so thin,
O Lord of gods,
it swallowed

and spat out

this entire
universe;

its three soft
folds
mark nothing less

than the three-fold
division
of worlds;

(p.20)

in its fragrant lotus navel
a bee
the shape of Viriñca,
Lord Brahmā,

has its little house:

like a waist band

my mind

adorns

your sweet belly.

I will end this discussion with a final example—with transliterated text and literal translations—from a Tamil poem that will be very important to this study. By now I hope the reader can detect various strategies present in the translation, as well as get a sense of the sound, word order, and felt rhythms of the original:

talaiviṅṅnilaimai kaṅṅṅu tōḷi iraṅkipēcutal:

of the heroine / the condition / seeing / the concerned friend /
speaking:

ārkkunṅkaruṅṅai poḷivāṅṅayintaiyil vant' amarnta

“full / complete / all people: mercy: raining / gushing: to Ayintai:
coming:
remaining:”

karkkoṅṅṅalai kaṅṅṅa katal puṅṅamayil kaṅṅṅaiyā

“black cloud: saw: love / passion: mountain wild peacock: shedding
tears:”

vērkkum mukiḷkkum vitirvitirkkum veḷki vevvuyirkkum

“sweating: horripilating: shaking / throbbing with intensity:
ashamed / shy:
panting / sighing:”

pārkiṅṅṅavarkk' itu nām eṅkol eṅṅru payiluvamē.

“to those who see this [condition]: what shall we say?”

The concerned friend speaks, seeing the condition of the heroine:

Sighing, she quivers with desire
then shrinks with
shame; damp with sweat,
hair standing on end,
her eyes fill with tears—

she is a wild peacock of the hills
crying its desire
in love

when she sees the dark cloud come to rest
over the town of the serpent king,
raining sweet mercy

on all its people.

(p.21)

What shall we say to them
when they see this?⁴²

Between my English translations and occasional philological notes on the syntax, vocabulary and, if relevant, the sound (alliteration, play of consonant clusters or sibilants, etc.) of the original, I hope the reader will gradually develop a taste for the richness of this remarkable body of poetry, so remote in time, but not, I trust, in literary and religious sensibility.

Outline of Chapters

In chapter 1 I give a thematic overview of Deśika's work and milieu, his Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition and his theological debates with his Ācārya colleague in the southern city of Śrīraṅgam, Piḷḷai Lōkācārya. This chapter will also include a brief survey of previous scholarship and a special focus on Deśika the philosopher and theologian as poet. I will also address Deśika's aesthetic and religious links with important earlier and later Vaiṣṇava texts and traditions, from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Kṛṣṇakarmāṃṛta* in South India to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal. Chapter 2 discusses the traditional sacred biographies and important inscriptional sources that give us a sense of the poet-philosopher's place in history between two of the most important South Indian dynasties of the "late medieval" period, that of the Cōḷas and Vijayanagar.

We will see in chapter 2 how Deśika was a politically transitional figure. Though he is emphatically seen by his tradition as a sacred "temple" and not a secular "court" poet, we see, at least in two Śrīraṅgam inscriptions attributed to him as well as in his relationship with a young Telugu prince, that he put some of the weight of his religious authority behind the emerging Vijayanagar empire. His praise of a victorious brahman general of Vijayanagar at Śrīraṅgam anticipates alliances of secular and religious power commonplace among Ācāryas of his own community a generation later.

Both the discussions in chapter 1 on Deśika's home city of Kāñcīpuram and those in chapter 2 on Deśika and the early Vijayanagar will shed historical and cultural light on elements of Deśika's cosmopolitanism. These first two chapters, along with this introduction, form part I of the book and serve as a prologue to a study of Deśika's poetry and poetics of devotion.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with three of the most important of Deśika's Tamil *prabandhams* written for icons at Kāñcī and Tiruvahīndrapuram. These chapters will attempt to situate Deśika's Tamil work within the history and poetics of Āḷvār devotion. Attention will be given to both similarities and differences between Deśika's Tamil poetry and Āḷvār Tamil. Each chapter will use traditional Tamil literary genres of *akam* ("interior") and *puṛam* ("exterior") to frame a

discussion of distinctive differences between Deśika's praises of Varada at Kāñcī and Devanāyaka at Tiruvahīndrapuram.

Ultimately, the texture of Deśika's Tamil poems reflects a dynamic integration of “northern” Sanskrit theology and poetics and the elaborately figured Tamil of late medieval times. We will also look at some fine examples of stanzas that seem to use the motifs and personae of classical Tamil (they are framed by the Tamil commentator as such). We will begin in these chapters an extended treatment of the theme of self-effort, **(p.22)** helplessness, and surrender to God, showing how the theology of the poems differs from that in Deśika's doctrinal prose work.

Chapter 5 explores the Sanskrit-Tamil relationship from a different perspective by comparing a Sanskrit *dhyānastotra* by Deśika that describes the body of Raṅganātha-Vishnu from the feet to the head with its literal model, a Tamil poem by the Untouchable bard Tiruppāñālvār. Both poems are *anubhavas*, limb-by-limb “enjoyments” of the body of God, a distinctive genre of devotional poem indebted to a secular poetics of erotic description. The comparison will include citations from Deśika's own prose commentary on Tiruppāñ's poem, and will enable a close reading of continuities and differences between Deśika and the Ālvār. We will see, for instance, how Deśika's poem, using Sanskrit poetic motifs, is even more erotically charged than Tiruppāñ's vernacular praise.

This chapter will also give us an opportunity for an extended meditation on Vishnu's erotic body in South Indian Vaiṣṇava spirituality. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 form part II of the book. Part III begins with chapter 6, where we return to praises of Varada, and moves on to Devanāyaka in chapter 7, but this time in the form of Sanskrit *stotras* and the Prākṛit *Acyutaśtakam*.

Chapters 6 and 7 will do for Sanskrit and Prākṛit what chapters 3 and 4 did for Tamil. They will focus on the poetry and poetics of Deśika's *stotras* in praise of the same forms of Vishnu. They will compare these poems to those in Tamil, noting continuities in overall devotional attitudes toward Varada and Devanāyaka; we will take note of some major thematic and imagistic allusions in Deśika's Sanskrit and Prākṛit to the Tamil Ālvār tradition, while also not losing sight of the considerable contributions of Sanskrit and its cosmopolitan cousin to the equation. The resources of the Sanskrit and Prākṛit traditions are mined by Deśika in a number of striking ways—particularly in the areas of punning and double entendre—to intensify the erotic atmosphere of devotion to the “body of God.”

The Sanskrit and Prākṛit poems also express in even clearer terms than the Tamil *prabandhams* divergences from the poet's own doctrine of self-effort and salvation. Such divergences bring Deśika closer to the theological position of his Śrīraṅgam opponents—a fact that I interpret, not as self-contradiction or inconsistency, but as an example of a subtle and creative *appropriation*.

The poem's "emotional" space allows Deśika to assent to his opponent's assertions about the "helplessness" of the devotee in the action of divine grace, while defending—albeit by a hair's breadth—his doctrinal notion of self-effort. Self-effort is reduced, as Hardy has observed, to "almost zero" in the semantic spaces of a Deśika poem. Even more paradoxically, Deśika seems to imply that the very prayer claiming one's helplessness and utter dependence on Vishnu is itself a theologically necessary "pretext" for salvation. "Self-effort" here is in the poetic act of praying itself, *wherein one claims one can simply do nothing to earn or deserve salvation*.

The conclusion will focus on the cluster of themes around which many of my arguments coalesce: that of Deśika the philosopher as poet; the relationship between Tamil, Sanskrit, and Māhārāṣṭrī; Deśika's cosmopolitanism; the roles of intellect and emotion in Deśika's bhakti poetics; and icons, the body of God, and Deśika's theology of beauty. It will also deal with the issues of Deśika's choice of languages, the nature of his poems' **(p.23)** reflexivity within South Indian bhakti literature, and how these issues relate to Sanskrit and "vernacular" cosmopolitanism in thirteenth- to fourteenth-century northern Tamil Nadu.

This last set of issues will open up an area that will need much further reflection. For it is precisely this "late medieval" context of multilingual devotion signaled by Deśika's texts that is the least known and studied era in the history of South Indian devotion. This book seeks to bring some of the riches of this period to the academic study of South Indian religious literature through one of its most distinguished religious artists. **(p.24)**

Notes:

- (1.) From *Acyutaśatakam*, 58.
- (2.) From the Sanskrit *Devanāyakapañcāśat*, 28.
- (3.) From the Prākṛit *Acyutaśatakam*, 38 and 42.
- (4.) From the Tamil *Navamaṇimalai*, 6.
- (5.) Venkaṭanātha is referred to by a variety of names in the secondary literature. Throughout this study I will refer to Venkaṭanātha as "Deśika," a shortened form of his epithet commonly used in both Indian and Western writings.
- (6.) See the narrative sources on Deśika's life outlined in chap. 2 for many stories of theology and poetry "contests."
- (7.) See Friedhelm Hardy, "The Philosopher as Poet—A Study of Vedāntadeśika's *Dehalīśastuti*," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 7 (1979): 277–325; here p. 277.

(8.) See Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). I will utilize the theoretical perspectives of Davis, along with the work of Richard Freedberg, C. F. Fuller, and Gérard Colas, among others, in my discussion of Deśika's poems for icons.

(9.) See Sheldon Pollock, "India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000-1500," in *Early Modernities*, a special issue of *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (summer 1998): 41-74; see especially pp. 51-52.

(10.) Such elites would include, among others, brahman intellectuals in Vijayanagar circles and in developing Śrīvaiṣṇava communities in northern Tamil Nadu.

(11.) For a detailed treatment of this, see Sheldon Pollock, "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300-1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology," in *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*, edited by Jan E. M. Houben (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), pp. 197-247.

(12.) Both Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛit and Apabhraṃśa, as Pollock notes, are "Sanskrit's equally cosmopolitan cousins." See Pollock, "India in the Vernacular Millennium," p. 71.

(13.) For an outline of the "cosmopolitan vernacular" see Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," *Journal of Asian Studies* 51, 1 (February 1998): 6-37. This issue of the journal is dedicated to "Cultural Ideologies of Language in Precolonial India." I have also profited from Pollock's essay in manuscript, "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Before Modernity." See also the article by Ann Monius, "The Many Lives of Daṇḍin: The *Kāvyaḍarśa* in Sanskrit and Tamil" (*International Journal of Hindu Studies* 4, 1 (2000): 1-37), which traces the long and continual interaction of Sanskrit and Tamil in the south, and, on the level of literary production, their mutual influence and prestige. Monius rightly points to important medieval examples in the Tamil Buddhist grammar, the *Vīracolīyam*, and the Tamil "translation" of Daṇḍin, the *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram*, of a poetics which creatively combines Tamil and Sanskrit prosody, figures of speech, and poetic style. As Monius notes in a commentary on the regional marking of two major poetic styles, for the *Vīracolīyam* and the *Taṇṭiyalaṅkāram* "vaidarbha" or "southern style" simply equals "good poetry," whether it be composed in Sanskrit or Tamil. These texts were composed sometime between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, right in the midst of Pollock's "vernacular millennium."

(14.) See, among many works in Siṅhala from this period, the thirteenth-century *Kavsiḷumiṇa* ("The Crest-Jewel of Poetry") of Parākramabāhu, the prose narrative *Pūjāvaliya* ("Garland of Offerings") of Mayūrapada Buddhaputra, as well as Śrī

Rāhula's fifteenth-century *Kāvyaśekhara* and his *sandēśa* or “messenger” poem, the *Sāḷalihinī Sandēśaya* (“The Messenger Starling”). As I will note throughout this study, there are many points of similarity particularly between Deśika and Śrī Rāhula. For an English translation of the *Kavsiḷumiṇa*, see *The Crest-Gem of Poetry—Kavsiḷumiṇa: The Sinhala Epic in English Verse*, trans. W. R. McAlpine and M. B. Ariyapala (Colombo: The Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, 1990). For a discussion of Sinhala *sandēśa* poems, see C. E. Godakumbura, *Sinhalese Literature* (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries' Co., Ltd., 1955), pp. 183–208.

(15.) This is similar to what Paul Rabinow describes in his analysis of “cosmopolitan intellectuals,” though without his sense of the cosmopolitan person only as “critical” outsider. Deśika, of course, is very much a cosmopolitan “insider.” Cosmopolitanism, says Rabinow, is “highly attentive to (and respectful of) difference, but is also wary of the tendency to essentialize difference. . . . [It is] an ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates.” “Twin valorization” is his phrase. See Paul Rabinow, “Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 234–61.

(16.) In *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), Carman analyzes in detail varieties of intra- and extradivine polarities in several world religions. He argues for the multivalency of polarities, outlining several types, including those which emphasize contrast; harmony, and simplicity (monism), and those that affirm one pole of the equation (duality), stress a mystical transcendence or arrival at a higher, third term of synthesis. See his remark on intradivine polarities, relevant to polarities in general: “Affirming a polarity involves not only the recognition of two contrasting poles but also the insistence that these qualities belong together. Neither is to be denied; both are essential to the divine nature” (*ibid.*, 13).

(17.) I refer here, of course, to Harold Bloom's thesis on the anxieties of influence in Western literary art, where each writer in the “tradition” must appropriate and “transume” previous masters, staking his or her own claim to originality beyond measure. See, for a synthetic view of this agonistic picture of influence, Bloom's Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

(18.) See Ramanujan, “Where Mirrors Are Windows,” p. 190.

(19.) I combine here the argument in Ramanujan's article "Where Mirrors Are Windows" with his Peircian analysis of modes of translation, in "Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in *Many Rāmāyaṇas : The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

(20.) For Harold Bloom's thesis on the Freudian anxieties of influence, see *Ruin the Sacred Truths*. My argument on Deśika most closely resembles George Steiner's argument on Dante in his recently published Gifford Lectures for 1990, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). Steiner stresses the "shared, collective fabric" of Dante's texts, and argues persuasively for the "collaborative nature of *poiesis*." (p. 85). Steiner's insight is worth quoting in full:

It is not actual historical collaboration I have in mind, that between a Goethe and a Schiller, between a Brahms and a Schumann, between fellow-Impressionists, important as this is. Rather, I want to point to the elected presences which makers construe within themselves or within their works, to the "fellow-travellers," teachers, critics, dialectical partners, to those other voices within their own which can give to even the most complexly solitary and innovative of creative acts a shared, collective fabric. (ibid.)

As I have already noted, there are intriguing similarities between Deśika and Dante on many levels of poetry, theology, and philosophy. As I hope to prove, Steiner's thesis on Dante's "triplicity," the "intersecting spheres of creation in the religious, the metaphysical, and aesthetic senses," (p. 78) can be applied to Deśika as well.

(21.) See *Vedāntadeśika, Varadarājapañcāśat, with Sanskrit Commentary by Karūr Śrīnivāsācārya*, ed. and trans. Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1990).

(22.) I am grateful to His Holiness Śrīmad Āṇḍavan Swāmikaḷ of the Āṇḍavan āśrama in Śrīraṅgam for answering my questions about the liturgical use of Deśika's Tamil poetry during our meetings in Chennai (Madras) and Śrīraṅgam in November of 1997.

(23.) Brahmans had for some time been portrayed as foreigners and cultural interlopers in the South. See Eugene Irshick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795-1895* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), for detailed argument on the construction of a new vision of the South Indian past in the nineteenth century and the uses to which that new construction of history was put by various later Tamil "revivalist" (read: "constructionist") movements, including the Tamil Self-Respect movement, the Non-Brahman movement, and a variety of Dravidian nationalist movements.

(24.) I am indebted in this discussion to the important paper by Ann Monius, "U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar and the Construction of Tamil Literary 'Tradition,' " presented at the Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wis., October 17, 1997. See also the detailed study of the history of Tamil as "goddess" and "mother" by Sumati Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

(25.) The English foreword to the *Srīṭēcikapirapantam* by Sriman V. V. Srinivasa Aiyangar ("reprint from the text publication—1941") articulates much of this sentiment, even alluding to the exemplary work of Cāminātaiyar.

(26.) This was underscored by R. N. Sampath, the Vaṭakalai scholar with whom I read most of the texts in this book. See the 1941 foreword by Srinivasa Aiyangar: "Probably also the fact that his followers call themselves Vadagalais [the "northern" tradition] had a great deal to do with the proper lack of appreciation of his place in Tamil language and literature," p. 23.

(27.) I am currently preparing a companion volume to this one for Oxford University Press entitled *An Ornament for Jewels: Poems for the Lord of Gods by Vedāntadeśika*. This book will include complete translations of *Devanāyakaṇcāśat*, *Mummaṇikkōvai*, *Navamaṇimālai*, *Acyutaśatakam*, and stanzas on Devanāyaka by Tirumaṅkaiyālvār.

(28.) See John Cort's review article, "Elevating the Living Body of Sanskrit Poetry into American English," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 26, 1-2 (1991): 44-76.

(29.) See the introduction to his splendid translation of Kālidāsa's *Kumārasaṃbhava: The Origin of the Young God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 14-15.

(30.) See Cort, "Elevating the Living Body," and Heifetz, *Kumārasaṃbhava*.

(31.) Heifetz, *Kumārasaṃbhava*, 15.

(32.) I remember, in this context, a conversation I had with poet and translator Clayton Eshelman on a bus from Providence back to Boston. When I told him I was studying Sanskrit, he remarked that Sanskrit—judging by the translations he had read—was to him "dead on the page."

(33.) From Late Sriman S. S. Raghavan, Dr. M. S. Lakshmi Kumari, and Dr. M. Narasimhachary, trans., *Śrī Vedānta Deśika's Stotras* (C.I.T. Colony, Madras: Sripad Trust, 1995).

(34.) *Ibid.*, 15.

(35.) George Hart, David Shulman, and Vasudha Narayanan have translated into clear, concrete English many important texts from Sanskrit and Tamil in their secondary studies (see, for instance, Hart's *The Poems of Ancient Tamil*, Shulman's *The King and the Clown in South Indian Poetry*, and Carman and Narayanan's *The Tamil Veda*), while Hart's translation of Tamil caṅgam poems, *Poets of the Tamil Anthologies*, and his collaborative volume with Heifetz, *The Forest Book of the Rāmāyaṇa of Kampan*, are exemplary translation/studies, as are Peterson's elegantly organized *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* and Cutler's *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion*. I might also mention Narayana Rao and Heifetz's translation of Telugu poet Dhūrjati, *For the Lord of Animals*; Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's anthology of Prākṛit verses from the *Gāthāsaptasatī*, *The Absent Traveller*, and outside the area of South Indian literature, Hawley and Juergensmeyer's *Song of the Saints of India* and Dilip Chitre's fine versions of Tukaram for the Penguin Classics, *Says Tuka*. All these translations have, at one time or another, influenced my work here (for full citations, see bibliography).

(36.) *The Peacock's Egg: Love Poems from Ancient India*, trans. W. S. Merwin and J. Moussaieff Masson. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981). This is a fine poet's set of translations that remain, in many cases, quite close to the originals—in spite of the unmistakable imprint of Merwin's poetic voice.

(37.) See *Speaking of Śiva, Poems of Love and War, The Interior Landscape*, the posthumous volume translated with Narayana Rao and Shulman, *When God Is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Kṣetrāyā and Others*, and especially *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Viṣṇu by Nammālvār* (see bibliography for full citations).

(38.) *Navamaṇimālai*, 1.

(39.) See chap. 6.

(40.) *Meyviratamāṇṇiyam*, 5.

(41.) Such a play of suspense around a single phrase has musical analogues in the elaborate *alāpana* (melisma) in south Indian Carnatic music or the improvisatory *viruttam* among the *ōtuvārs* or south Indian Śaiva temple singers. See discussion in Indira Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 59–75. A Western musical example that comes immediately to mind is Benjamin Britten's *Lachrymae* (*Variations on a Theme of Dowland*), Op. 48A, and his *Third Cello Suite*, Op. 87, where one hears a string of variations first, which sound like so many fragments; only at the very end, do we hear the “theme” itself upon which the variations were based.

(42.) *Mummaṇikkovai*, 6.

Access brought to you by: