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Viśiṣṭādvaita in Nammāḷvār's Tiruvāimoḷi

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Viśiṣṭādvaita, a qualified non-dualistic Vedāntic philosophy, is embedded in *Tiruvāimoḷi*, the seminal Tamil devotional work of Nammāḷvār (c. 9th century CE), the foremost among the twelve Āḷvārs of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition. *Tiruvāimoḷi* occupies a distinctive position as both bhakti poetry and theological text. While the formal systematization of Viśiṣṭādvaita is traditionally associated with Rāmānuja (1077–1157 CE), this study argues that Nammāḷvār's hymns already contain a coherent articulation of its essential metaphysical and soteriological principles. Through a close thematic reading of selected decads, the article demonstrates how *Tiruvāimoḷi* enunciates the Viśiṣṭādvaita's threefold ontology of Brahman, sentient souls, and insentient matter, and affirms their unity through the doctrine of śarīra–śarīri-bhāva (the body–soul relation). It further explores Nammāḷvār's consistent depiction of Nārāyaṇa as Brahman endowed with infinite auspicious qualities and an exquisite physical form. From a soteriological perspective, emphasis is placed on total surrender as the decisive means to liberation and eternal service in Vaikuṇṭa as the ultimate goal. The article concludes that *Tiruvāimoḷi* contains the central doctrinal architecture of later Viśiṣṭādvaita, even though its arguments are presented through poetic experience rather than a systematic exposition.

Keywords: Viśiṣṭādvaita, Nammāḷvār, *Tiruvāimoḷi*, prapatti, śarīra–śarīri-bhāva.

Introduction:

Viśiṣṭādvaita is a major Vedāntic philosophy that articulates a qualified non-dualism, affirming that Brahman is the sole independent reality while sentient selves and insentient matter are real but dependent on Brahman. In contrast to the radical monism of Śaṅkara's Advaita and the absolute dualism of Madhva's Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita maintains a doctrine of unity-in-difference and reconciles the general opposition between philosophy and religion by grounding theological devotion in rigorous ontological argument. Rāmānuja's *Śrī Bhāṣyam* (commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra*) established the comprehensive exegetical and philosophical foundation for Viśiṣṭādvaita. Rāmānuja's hermeneutical strategy reconciles the ostensible contradiction between those Vedāntic passages affirming the ontological distinctness of Brahman and the individual self (*bēda-śrutis*) and those proclaiming their non-difference (*abēda-śrutis*) by privileging a third class of mediating texts (*gāṭaka-śrutis*), which are construed as disclosing the foundational relation of ontological dependence between Brahman, on the one hand, and the plurality of individual selves and the material world, on the other. The antecedents of Viśiṣṭādvaita systematic theology predate Rāmānuja by several generations. Nāthamuni (823–951 CE) laid the foundational groundwork in his *Nyāya-tattva* and *Yoga-rahasya*, which Yāmunācārya (10th century CE) substantially advanced through the explicit philosophical argumentation in *Ātmasiddhi*, *Īśvarasiddhi*, and *Āgamaprāmāṇya* — defending the ontological reality of self and world, critiquing Advaitic monism, affirming Nārāyaṇa's supremacy, and establishing *bhakti* and *prapatti* as the tradition's central soteriological pathways. That these commitments possess a still longer prehistory is suggested by Rāmānuja's own invocation, in the *Śrī Bhāṣya*, of earlier exegetes such as Bodhāyana, Dramiḍa, and Taṅka as authoritative predecessors. Of those who came after Rāmānuja's time, Sudarśana Suri and Vedānta Deśika made immense contributions to firmly establish the Rāmānuja's doctrines of Viśiṣṭādvaita. This study examines an earlier and less systematically articulated stratum of Viśiṣṭādvaita through Nammāḷvār's *Tiruvāimoḷi*, which attracted an extraordinarily rich commentarial tradition (vyākhyānas), in which scholars such as Pillāṉ, Nampillai, and Periyavācān Pillai systematically revealed the hidden or implicitly articulated Viśiṣṭādvaitic inner meanings of Nammāḷvār's imagery and diction. The argument advanced here engages and contests the position that the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition reinterpreted the Āḷvārs' emotional devotion in philosophical terms which were not intended in the original poetry: the poems do articulate a coherent philosophical vision — encompassing the nature of Brahman, the status of the individual self, the reality of the world, and the means and ends of liberation — thereby

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establishing it as a significant early source for the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition.

Ontology, Soteriology, and Telos of Viśiṣṭādvaita

Hindu philosophical analysis is often organized around three interrelated concepts: the nature of ultimate reality (tattva), the means of achieving it (hita), and the final goal of human existence (puruṣārtha). The following sections briefly outline Viśiṣṭādvaita's characteristic positions on these themes before the analysis turns to their articulation in *Tiruvāimoḷi*.

a. Tattva— Ultimate reality

Viśiṣṭādvaita's Ultimate reality (tattva) is threefold: the Supreme soul (Īśvara, Brahman), sentient souls (cit or Jīvātmā), and non-sentient matter (acit). All three are real, but are unequal in dependence. Īśvara stands in an intimate relationship with cit and acit: the latter two form the body (śarīra) of Īśvara, while He is their ātmā (soul), being the principle of their creation, existence, control, and support. This doctrine is the śārīrā-śārīri-bhāva, or "everything is His body," which is the philosophical cornerstone of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Just as the whiteness of a white cloth cannot be separated from the cloth and cannot exist by itself, cit and acit cannot be separated from Īśvara, who is at once immanent in the world and transcendent of it. He is real, infinite, complete with consciousness and unsurpassable bliss; possesses a perfect and beautiful divine form (divya-maṅgala-vigraha); has infinite and unblemished auspicious qualities (kalyāṇa-guṇas); and is beyond full description or definition. His relationship with Jīvātmā is of nine types: Father–son, Protector–protected, Master–slave, Husband–wife, Knowledge–known, Owner–owned, Bearer–borne, Body–soul, and Enjoyer–enjoyed. Viśiṣṭādvaita draws a fundamental distinction between an entity's essential nature (*svarūpa*) and its attributes (*dharma*), the latter having no existence independent of their substrate.

Unique to Viśiṣṭādvaita is the concept of attributive knowledge (dharma-bhūta-jñāna): a form of consciousness belonging to both Jīvātmā and Īśvara (though infinite for the latter), through which objects are apprehended. As eternally self-luminous beings, *Jīvātmā* and *Īśvara* stand in relation to *dharma-bhūta-jñāna* as a luminous body stands to its luminosity: the latter is an attribute of the former, not identical with it.

b. Hita— Soteriological Path

Viśiṣṭādvaita grants philosophical primacy to absolute surrender to God (prapatti or śaraṇāgati) as the supreme and most direct means to attain Him. While it acknowledges the classical three paths of action (karma-yoga), knowledge (jñāna-yoga), and devotion (bhakti-yoga) as valid prerequisites, prapatti is singled out as uniquely accessible, since it requires no special qualification of birth, learning, or ascetic discipline. Prapatti's two indispensable conditions are the complete absence of any independent means (ākiñcanya) and the absence of any other refuge (ananya-gatitva), together constituting a state of utter helplessness that throws the soul wholly upon God's grace.

c. Puruṣārtha—The Goal

For Viśiṣṭādvaitins, liberation (*mokṣa*) is not mere cessation of worldly bondage but the soul's attainment — having fully realized its *svarūpa* as one of perpetual subservience to the divine — of direct experience of *Īśvara* and the rendering of unhindered, eternal service (*nitya-kainkarya*). Such a liberated soul acquires an equivalence with God in eight qualities, excluding His lordship and creatorship. Release from *karma* is thus not the culmination of the spiritual journey but its beginning. The soul's experience and serving of *Īśvara* depends ultimately on divine mercy (*kṛpā*), and even in liberation the *Jīvātmā* retains its individual identity, remaining eternally distinct from God rather than merging into Him.

Nammāḷvār and Tiruvāimoḷi

The *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* is the canonical collection of approximately four thousand Tamil hymns on Nārāyaṇa, composed between the fifth and tenth centuries CE by twelve mystic poet-seers known as Āḷvārs—a Tamil term meaning "those who are immersed (in God)"—drawn from various social strata, castes, and genders. Its hymns are outpourings of direct God-experience, steeped in loving piety and profound theology. A poet and philosopher, Nammāḷvār is the most prominent among the Āḷvārs, revered as the foremost among those who walk the path of prapatti. The distinction of his hymns among the Tamil bhakti poetry of his era lies in their dual character: they are simultaneously intensely devotional and rigorously philosophical. Nammāḷvār is the only Āḷvār included in the venerable lineage of ācāryās (preceptors) of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition, a distinction that underscores his theological authority.

Nammāḷvār composed four works in the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham*: *Tiruviruttam*, *Tiruvāciriyam*, *Periya Tiruvantāti*, and *Tiruvāimoḷi*. Śrī Vaiṣṇava ācāryās revere these four works as the Tamil equivalents of *Rig Vēda*, *Yajur Vēda*, *Atharva Vēda*, and *Sāma Vēda*, respectively. Nādamuni, who retrieved and compiled the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* after it had been lost for generations, praises Nammāḷvār as the "one who made Vēdas in Tamil" in the invocatory poem he composed for Madurakavi Āḷvār's *Kaṇṇinuṇ Śirutampū*. The designation is not merely honorific: it signals that *Tiruvāimoḷi* carries the same revelatory authority as the Sanskrit Vēdas within the Śrī Vaiṣṇava epistemological framework of ubhaya-vedānta.

Of the four works, *Tiruvāimoḷi*, which means "Divine Utterances," is the largest and the most celebrated. The driving force and central theme of this work is Nammāḷvār's mystical love and longing devotion,

his yearning for personal experience of God and to surrender to Him. Its 1,102 hymns are arranged in ten centums, each comprising ten decads, and each decad consisting of eleven hymns—with the exception of one decad that contains thirteen—composed in the exacting antāti format, in which the final word or syllable of each verse serves as the opening of the next, weaving the entire corpus into an unbroken verbal devotional garland. The philosophical and theological scope in the bhakti-soaked divine hymns of *Tiruvāimoḷi* is remarkable. Even though he does not present them as a fully systematized philosophical school, Nammāḷvār expresses the core doctrinal tenets of Viśiṣṭādvaita in *Tiruvāimoḷi:* it is Viśiṣṭādvaita in substance, but not Viśiṣṭādvaita as a formal philosophy.

Core Viśiṣṭādvaita Metaphysics in Tiruvāimoḷi

Nammāḷvār's presentation of Brahman is consistently marked by the dual emphasis on lordship (paratva) and easy accessibility (saulabhya); the jīva is articulated through subservience (śeṣatva) and sole dependence (pāratantrya); and the world is affirmed as real within the śarīra–śarīri framework. Correspondingly, the means (hita) is depicted not as autonomous effort but as God-centered dependence culminating in prapatti, while the goal (puruṣārtha) is not liberation construed as cessation of bondage, but as eternal God-experience and uninterrupted divine service. Thus, in *Tiruvāimoḷi*, tattva is never a mere doctrine, hita a mere method, and puruṣārtha a reward. Here, tattva is realized through experience (anubhava), hita through helpless longing, and puruṣārtha is crowned as eternal divine service.

Tattva: Brahman (Īśvara)

Nammāḷvār establishes Nārāyaṇa as the inner dwelling (antarayāmi) luminary, personal, immanent, unblemished, transcendental, indescribable, endowed with complete self-luminous knowledge, divine qualities (kalyāṇa-guṇas), beautiful form (divya-maṅgala-vigraha) and Lakṣmī as His inseparable consort. *Tiruvāimoḷi* opens with an inquiry into the nature of Brahman, and in the process, Nammāḷvār illuminates the doctrines of Viśiṣṭādvaitic philosophy with precision and poetic power.

In every hymn of the first decad of *Tiruvāimoḷi*, Nammāḷvār establishes the essential nature of Brahman. The very first hymn of *Tiruvāimoḷi* poses the essential qualities of Brahman as a set of three defining questions and proceeds to answer them in the subsequent hymns of the decad. Nammāḷvār says:

> "Who is He, the possessor of unsurpassed untainted auspiciousness
> Who is He, the grantor of enlightened knowledge and bhakti
> Who is He, the Lord of ever-mindful nityasūris
> Take refuge to His luminous Feet and be saved, O my heart"! (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1.1)[1]

Thus, the first hymn establishes the characteristics of Viśiṣṭādvaitic Brahman as one having lordship over everything, possessing innumerable auspicious qualities, having a beautiful physical form, and transcending all other beings, including the gods. The hymn also outlines the nature of His transcendental realm (nitya-vibhūti), the true nature of Jīvātmā as having Brahman alone as its master, the knowledge of Jīvātmā flowing from Brahman's grace, and devotion as the means of attaining that grace. As Nammāḷvār describes Brahman as possessed of a physical form with qualities, he directly repudiates the Advaitic doctrines of Brahman as without qualities and without form.

That Brahman is ontologically distinct from cit and acit and possesses a self-luminous nature all His own is established consequently:

> “Bereft of base qualities, the mind’s wisdom unfolds
> Neither that cannot comprehend Him, nor can the senses
> Perfect in knowledge and bliss, through all time
> Incomparable is He, none is His equal" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1.2)

Having established His essential qualities, lordship over eternal spiritual realm, and distinctness from cit and acit in the first two hymns of *Tiruvāimoḷi*, Nammāḷvār completes the circle in the third hymn by establishing His lordship over the material world, thereby affirming that He is the Lord of both worlds. By saying that He regulates and protects the entire cosmos through the formless cit and the formed acit, the immanence of Brahman in both cit and acit and the intimacy among the three entities are affirmed. Nammāḷvār returns to this theme of Brahman's immanence throughout *Tiruvāimoḷi*, making it one of the most persistent theological assertions of the work:

> "As water, land, fire, air, the vast ether
> As two luminaries, Śivā and Brahmā, You became!
> At least once, holding the sharp-edged discus and conch,
> Come before this sinner, for earth and sky may rejoice”. (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 6.9.1)

Nammāḷvār validates that He are the inner dwelling soul of water, earth, fire, air, and vast ether; of moon and the sun of Brahmā, Śivā, and all other gods in the above hymn.

> "Māyā! Vāmanā! Madusudā! enlighten me
> As fire, as water, as land, as ether, and as air

As mother, as father, as child, as all beings, as all things

And as Yourself You stood. What marvellous modes"! (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 7.8.1)

"In the cool water of the vast ocean,

In the wide earth, boundless sky – everywhere

In the subtlest spaces, beings of those places

You pervade, concealed, O All-Devourer". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1.10)

Though He pervades the entire vast universe as an exceedingly subtle presence, He dwells with equal intimacy within every drop of the fathomless ocean, within the most infinitesimal of spaces, and within the self-luminous, atom-like Jīvātmā—and yet the very entities He indwells remain unaware of His presence. Such is the measure of His omnipotence: The greatest nonetheless pervades the most minute.

In subsequent hymns, Nammāḷvār details how the true nature of cit and acit is subordinate to Brahman. Nammāḷvār affirms that the true nature of men, women, and transgender persons; of good and dreadful things; of the destroyable and the indestructible; and of the past and the future is to be within Brahman's control, as He creates (sṛṣṭi) them through Brahmā in whom He dwells, enters them as their inner soul, and then absorbs them within Himself during dissolution (pralaya) through Śivā in whom also He dwells. Thus, Nammāḷvār acknowledges the existence of various gods and their devotees but establishes that Nārāyaṇa is the one who provides the sustenance and protection (sthiti) of everything in this world as everything falls within His domain.

In *Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1.7, Nammāḷvār articulates Viśiṣṭādvaita's foundational doctrine of the śārīrā-śārīri-bhāva: the transcendental and immanent Īśvara as the soul of the body constituted by cit and acit. Nammāḷvār says:

"With eternal ether, fire air, water, land as foundations

He, who creates everything, and within them

Pervades, hidden, as life pervades in the body.

He, the All-Devourer, present in the luminous Vēda". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1.7).

The Lord, who is in the Vēdas, created all materials with five elements as primary sources and then pervaded them, as ātmā pervades the body, yet hidden. He is within and without all things. As Nammāḷvār says in the important hymn, the epistemological basis of the śārīrā-śārīri-bhāva is the Vēda, which is known as śabda (verbal testimony), one of Viśiṣṭādvaita's three means of valid knowledge (pramāṇas), alongside perception (pratyakṣa) and inference (anumāna). Read in isolation, the hymns up to *Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1.6 could be mistaken for enunciating Advaitic philosophy (as they assert that everything is Brahman); it is this *Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1.7 that clarifies this by specifying that Brahman's relation to the world is that of a soul to its body.

In the next verse, Nammāḷvār turns to refute Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of emptiness (śūnyavāda), which asserts that all phenomena are empty of independent, inherent existence:

"If one says He exists, all forms are His

If one says He does not, all that is formless is His

Existent and non-existent, He nevertheless truly exists

The all-pervasive One, possessed of both qualities" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1.9)

Whether theists say God exists or atheists say He does not exist, the outcome is that God exists, since existence must be predicated of Him even when one denies it. One cannot establish His nature through the methods of presence and absence alone. All subtle and gross things in this material world are the subtle and gross attributes of Him. As the inner dweller of all entities, He is always everywhere.

Nammāḷvār's hymns are replete with descriptions of Nārāyaṇa's auspicious qualities (guṇas), a key characteristic of Viśiṣṭādvaita's Brahman. Apart from the six primary guṇas—omniscience (jñāna), omnipotence (bala), sovereignty (aiśvarya), potency (śakti), vigour (vīrya), and splendour (tejas)—employed to establish Nārāyaṇa's supremacy, Nammāḷvār composed numerous poems about His other qualities, and specifically about His easy accessibility (saulabhya) (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.3), clemency (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.4), gracious condescension (sauśīlya) (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.5, 9.3), honesty (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.8), love (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 4.3), and compassion (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.10), among many others. For a poet-saint like Nammāḷvār, the experience of His guṇas is of such paramount importance that he places it above even mokṣa:

"Though born in a lowly body, can learning His ineffable qualities

And singing nectar-like poems among His devotees, compare to

Obtaining His grace to serve His lotus-feet,

And drowning in the swirling deluge of His effulgence?" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.10.5)

"Can revelling in His ineffable qualities ever rival the sovereignty of

The discus-wielding One who killed the raging, red-faced elephant?

The master of Garuḍa, who seized and ended

> The life of demon with red hair and glowing eyes?" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.10.6)

The commentators have found philosophical significance even in this apparent excess: they read it as an expression of the principle that the enjoyment of Brahman's qualities is not separable from mokṣa but is its very content.

The hymns describing the beauty of Nārāyaṇa's divine form are among the most celebrated passages of Tamil literature. Nammāḷvār's command of Tamil is evident in decad after decad in which he lovingly describes each feature of the divine body (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 3.1, 5.3, 5.5, 7.7, 9.7, and elsewhere), as though seeing Him in person. Adopting the literary convention of the longing woman (nāyakī), Nammāḷvār says:

> "Mother says I dishonour our family, bars me from His sight
>
> Yet, having seen the Lord of Tirukkurunkudi, ringed by cool gardens
>
> His vine-like long nose, lotus eyes, red lips,
>
> His dark beautiful body, and four arms flood my heart" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 5.5.6)
>
> "Mother is angry; I sulk, with my beautiful face buried in my palms
>
> Yet, having seen the Lord of Tirukkurunkudi, surrounded by broad ramparts
>
> His lotus eyes, slender hips, graceful form, and
>
> His shoulders caressed by dark tresses stand before this sinner". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 5.5.8)

In every hymn of *Tiruvāimoḷi* 7.7, Nammāḷvār dwells upon each part of the divine face: eyes as just-bloomed lotuses, a nose as a karpaka creeper, lips like a piece of coral, eyebrows as Kāmadēva's bows, a smile as bright lightning and a string of pearls, tender ears adorned with makara earrings, a forehead as the eighth phase of the moon, lustrous complexion, fragrant black hair with the scent of holy basil, and a shining crown. He also celebrates the innumerable divine deeds of Nārāyaṇa throughout *Tiruvāimoḷi* as further evidence of His supremacy.

Thus, Nammāḷvār establishes the Viśiṣṭādvaitic Brahman through His immanence and controllership, qualities, physical form, and divine deeds - all through the medium of rapturous devotional poetry of *Tiruvāimoḷi*.

Cit (Jīvātmā)

Alongside his sustained exposition of Brahman's true nature throughout *Tiruvāimoḷi*, Nammāḷvār enunciates the Jīvātmā's true nature — self-luminous (svayam-prakāśa), servitude (śeṣatva), atomicity, attributive knowledge — across the work, especially *Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.8. Here the poet-philosopher turns the light of inquiry inward, producing a sequence of hymns in which his own experience of self-realization becomes the vehicle for expounding the Viśiṣṭādvaitic doctrine of the self.

In *Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.2, Nammāḷvār references the three categories of Viśiṣṭādvaita's cit: nitya (free souls in Vaikuṇṭa), mukta (souls liberated from worldly affairs), and baddha (souls wallowing in saṃsāra). The faulty association of soul and body is addressed in *Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.2.4 and more directly in *Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.8.2, where Nammāḷvār addresses his own soul and body as separate entities:

> "Within my soul and within my body; within and beyond the universe
>
> Indescribable, incomparable, nonpareil is He.
>
> Endowed with bliss like the essence of untainted honey
>
> Unsurpassed, with unparalleled wisdom is He" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.8.2)

Brahman is the antar-yāmi of my soul and my body, as also of all the things in this entire universe, yet He remains indefinable. In subsequent hymns, Nammāḷvār provides what is in effect a Viśiṣṭādvaitic commentary on the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* verse (6.8.7) tat tvam asi which literally means "that you are":

> "To attain the Lord of ever-wakeful nityasūris, by His grace
>
> I held Him within my mind, that too by His grace.
>
> Revealing to me the ignobleness of body, life, and all world
>
> He exposed the true nature of my soul, thus made me His" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.8.3)

The last line implies that the Lord showed Nammāḷvār that he was His form to the extent that the word 'I' indicates Him, and not Nammāḷvār.

Jīvātmā's ontological dependence on Īśvara and its status as His property is central. Nammāḷvār says:

> "He, the first of all things and beings, who made me His,
>
> He, the primordial cause of Śivā, Brahmā and all nature,
>
> Is the One as sweet as honey, milk, sugar and nectar,
>
> Is the One who stands within my body, breath and knowing". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.8.4)

The Lord, who is the primordial cause for cit and acit, and who expanded as Brahmā for creation, as Śivā for dissolution, and remained as Himself for the protection of

the universe, is the most enjoyable to Jīvātmā—like honey, milk, sugarcane, and nectar—as Jīvātmā is His belonging. The ātmā, which pervades my body, life, and knowledge, is His body, and He made me realize it.

Nammāḷvār also describes Jīvātmā as supremely subtle—possessing a distinguished nature that is incomprehensible even to the most knowledgeable persons, and unrealizable without the Lord's grace even when it is intellectually understood (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.8.5). He also addresses kaivalya (the solitary self-enjoyment of the liberated soul without serving God) in *Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.8.6 and 8.8.7, acknowledging it as a recognized spiritual goal while ranking it below the full mokṣa of divine service:

> "Freedom from bondage wins the soul (kaivalya) mokṣa
> Cast off even that, and submit unto the unchanging One". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.2.5)

When attachment towards anything other than the Lord is given up, Jīvātmā becomes fit to attain kaivalya mokṣa. However, eradicating even such thought of kaivalya, and giving up attachments towards everything else, approach and submit to Him.

Nammāḷvār firmly rejects the Advaitic doctrine that Jīvātmā and Brahman merge into undifferentiated oneness after mokṣa. Mokṣa preserves the individuality of Jīvātmā, as the Jīvātmā and Brahman are ontologically distinct: their attributes differ in magnitude and kind, and their coalescence is an impossibility.

> "Union of distinct ones is great; if that impossibility were,
> Then that becomes Him, whose fluttering flag bears Garuḍa
> Sages preaching such false ideas of liberation
> Remain bonded here forever, age after age". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.8.9)

Though it would be wonderful if Jīvātmā and Brahman were to unite and become one, it is impossible. Jīvātmā cannot become one with the Lord; Jīvātmā will forever remain Jīvātmā. The critique is pointed: those who teach absorption into the Absolute are themselves bound, unable to attain the liberation that only correct understanding of the soul's relation to God can confer.

Jīvātmā's true nature encompasses not only subservience to Nārāyaṇa directly but also to all of His devotees (bhāgavata-śeṣatva), since proximity to the divine is itself a mark of spiritual superiority. This concept is an integral aspect of Nammāḷvār's theology. Śrī Vaiṣṇava theology treats service of God's devotees as a natural extension of service of God Himself, and thus service to the Lord's devotees is ranked as a constitutive element of mokṣa rather than a preliminary to it. Nammāḷvār dedicates *Tiruvāimoḷi* 3.7 and *Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.10 to this theme:

> "One with lustrous form with lotus-eyes
> One most sweet, Supreme, resting in the Milky Ocean
> Whoever holds the treasure of His enjoyment
> Forever shall be my masters, those great ones". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 3.7.1)

All devotees of Nārāyaṇa are my masters, irrespective of their status by birth, caste, or actions, as they have the wealth of the Lord's association. He declares that paying obeisance to the feet of God's devotees surpasses all the wealth of the three worlds, kaivalya mokṣa, and even serving God's own holy Feet directly (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 8.10.2)—a declaration of remarkable theological radicalism that the commentators have carefully nuanced and elaborated.

Acit (Prakṛti)

The third constituent of Viśiṣṭādvaita's ontological triad is acit—insentient matter in all its forms, from the subtlest primordial nature to the grossest material objects. In *Tiruvāimoḷi*, acit is addressed primarily through the lens of the reality of the world, its impermanence and its capacity to distract Jīvātmā from its true goal. The lure of the sensory organs, the need to extricate from saṃsāra, and the cultivation of a God-oriented mindset are key preoccupations of the text.

In *Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.2, Nammāḷvār instructs on how to approach God and confronts the impediment that the body's attractions represent:

> "Fleeting as lightning, this body with the soul
> Knowing this, inquire a little and reflect". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 2.1.2).

The body is temporary and the sensory pleasures it offers are equally transient. The only legitimate purpose of Jīvātmā obtaining a body is to use it as a vehicle for liberation. Hence the mouth should speak only of His ever-overflowing qualities; the mind should dwell on His peerless and beautiful form; and the hands should perpetually offer Him flowers.

Nammāḷvār's disdain for worldly desires, including wealth and temporal relationships, is equally pronounced:

> "Once a reigning monarch, ruling the world,
> Now bearing broken pots, his legs mauled by a black dog,
> Begging for alms, for the whole world to see!

Meditate without delay on Nārāyaṇa's feet and attain release". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 4.1.1)

Wealth is so transitory that it will disappear any day. God is the only permanent One and so submit to His feet for liberation. He should be the One you strive for, not transitory wealth.

The philosophical implication is clear: attachment to acit—in any form, whether wealth, relationships, or bodily pleasures—binds the Jīvātmā in saṃsāra and delays its realization of its essential subservience to Brahman. The sensory pleasures are frivolous compared to the ever-present ecstasy of being in God's grace.

In *Tiruvāimoḷi* 10.7.10, Nammāḷvār lists the 24 basic elements of Viśiṣṭādvaitic acit that constitute the material universe - five subtle objects of senses (sound, touch, form, taste and smell), five sense organs of knowledge (eye, ear, nose, tongue and skin), five organs of action, five great elements (earth, water, air, fire and ether), mahān, ahankāra, mind and primordial matter - which he requests to be destroyed for attaining liberation.

Core Viśiṣṭādvaita Soteriology in Tiruvāimoḷi

a. Hita (Means)

Viśiṣṭādvaita holds that total surrender (prapatti or śaraṇāgati) is the supreme and most direct means to liberation. While it still holds the classical path of devotion (bhakti-yoga) as valid and necessary, prapatti is preferred as it open to all—regardless of caste, gender, or social standing—because it rests not on the Jīvātmā's merit but on divine grace obtained by total surrender. The twin qualifications of singular unqualified dependency (ākiñcanya) on Him and sole refuge (ananya-gatitva) in Him, constitute the only necessary components of prapatti.

Nammāḷvār's view of hita aligns with this framework: while he extols piety as a means to reach God in many hymns, including,

"Accessible to His devotees with piety, not so for others

Awe-inspiring Supreme, He is Lakṣmī's consort

Yet for stealing the churned butter, had His chest bound

To the mortar: His simplicity indescribable truly"! (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.3.1)

he emphatically affirms the efficacy of total surrender:

"To those who surrender at His Feet

He grants Vaikuṇṭa after death

The Lord of Tirukannapuram, guarded by ramparts

Is love personified to His devotees"! (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 9.10.5)

Nammāḷvār himself performs prapatti in four consecutive decads (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 5.7–10), and most famously to the Lord of Tiruvēṇkaṭam in *Tiruvāimoḷi* 3.3 and *Tiruvāimoḷi* 6.10. The latter contains what many commentators regard as the most complete poetic expression of prapatti in the entire canon, with Lakṣmī as the mediatrix. Nammāḷvār accords a central and indispensable place to Lakṣmī as Nārāyaṇa's inseparable consort and prays consistently to the divine couple together for surrender and the attainment of liberation:

"Vowing never to part Him even for a moment, Lakṣmī abides on His chest

One with incomparable glory, Lord of the three worlds, my Master

O Lord of Tiruvēṇkaṭam, adored by the unmatched dēvās and ṛṣis

You alone are my refuge: I surrender to Your feet"! (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 6.10.10)

That his prapatti is grounded in unqualified dependency and sole refuge is evident in these hymns:

"He of lofty qualities, ruler of all with infinite wisdom

To Nārāyaṇa's steadfast feet, surrender". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.2.10)

" End my misery – or not; I have no other God

O wondrous Lord of Tirukkuṭaṇḍai, wielder of curve-mouthed discus

As my soul departs the emaciated body

Grant that I leave, clinging fast to Your feet". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 5.8.8)

Nammāḷvār further declares that such prapatti will confer equivalence with God in eight qualities (parama-sāmyāpatti mokṣa):

"Bearing choice flowers, water, lamps and incense

The dēvās with their chief, sit and worship

The hills of Tiruvēṇkaṭam, which grants us

Liberation equal to His own". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 3.3.7)

This is consonant with the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*: "One who knows Brahman becomes like Brahman" (3.2.9) and "Having all blemishes eliminated through brahma-vidyā, one becomes fully equivalent to Brahman" (3.1.3).

Nammāḷvār also emphasizes the Lord's easy accessibility (saulabhya) as an inducement to prapatti. The God who as Kṛṣṇa walked the dusty streets of Mathurā and accepted the hospitality of cowherd folk is not distant and forbidding but intimately present and

approachable through simple acts of worship—flowers, sandal paste, incense. The recurring tenor of many related hymns is the plea that God remove the bondage created by the accumulated weight of previous deeds and extend His grace unconditionally.

Transforming himself into a damsel in distress across no fewer than 270 hymns, Nammāḷvār employs the literary conventions of Tamil love poetry to articulate the soul's longing for God. He is the bereft beloved woman (pārāṅkuśa nāyakī) in some hymns; in others, he speaks as her mother or her dear friend. These are not mere literary ornaments: they express the theology of the soul's absolute dependence on, and intimate relation to, God. The intimate relationship between Brahman and Jīvā as that between lover and beloved—master and surrendered soul—is a recurrent and theologically significant motif throughout the Āḷvārs' corpus, including *Tiruvāimoḷi*. As the master, Nārāyaṇa ought to come to the lost Jīvā's rescue. Nammāḷvār says:

> "Will you fly to the discus-wielding Lord
> with sweet lips, O parrots!
> Tell Him of my love to embrace Him and
> return quickly?
> Perch upon my hands, facing my friends
> with sword-like kohl-lined long eyes
> And partake of aṭicil, filled with ghee and
> milk?" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 6.8.2)

b. Puruṣārtha (Goal)

Tiruvāimoḷi is in complete alignment with the soteriological vision of Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy, in which the goal for all Jīvās is liberation (mokṣa)—understood as the experience of the full glory of Nārāyaṇa in the company of His eternal devotees, while performing unhindered divine service. Nammāḷvār emphatically instructs that Nārāyaṇa alone can grant mokṣa:

> "He, Lakṣmī's peerless Lord,
> Grants hard-to-attain liberation
> He, with boundless fame,
> Annihilates the twofold karmā" (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.6.9)
> "Serpent-bed recliner, Lakṣmī's consort
> Supreme above the other two
> Incarnate as all, liberation-bestower
> The boat to cross the sea of births". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 2.8.1)

Yet it is vital to note that for a saint like Nammāḷvār who is immersed in God's experience, the authentic puruṣārtha is seeing God satisfied by his unhindered servitude, submissiveness to His will, and constant enjoyment of Him, His divine deeds, and His auspicious qualities.

Nammāḷvār goes to the extent of transcending even the canonical Viśiṣṭādvaitic formulation of puruṣārtha in favour of God-experience (bhagavad-anubhava) in this world itself. In *Tiruvāimoḷi* 2.9, where Nammāḷvār speaks of the essence of puruṣārtha, he says that he does not even desire the attainment of the eternal joyful service in Vaikuṇṭa; his only goal is to have God's divine Feet on his head and nothing else. The underlying meaning being that the endless joy of being subservient to God is his puruṣārtha and nothing else matters to him.

> "Famed liberation, heaven or hell
> Be they mine or not after death
> Only may I enjoy the birthless One
> Who yet is born – unceasingly, forever". (*Tiruvāimoḷi* 2.9.5)

The commentators read this not as a rejection of mokṣa but as its most refined formulation: the puruṣārtha is not the institutional framework of liberation but its living content, which is the enjoyment of God.

As one utterly dependent on God who possesses no independent means of achieving anything, Nammāḷvār pleads incessantly for God's grace to remove the worldly obstacles created by accumulated karmā and to draw him into His presence. He is thus both the means (upāya) and the goal (upēya). Nammāḷvār dedicates hymn after hymn to this plea, and the anguish he experiences at the delay in God's response generates some of the most emotionally powerful verses in the canon. This anguish is itself a form of prapatti, of total dependence on God's will. In *Tiruvāimoḷi* 10.10—the culminating decad of *Tiruvāimoḷi*—Nammāḷvār describes eschatology in detail, explaining Jīvātmā's journey to Vaikuṇṭa to serve the divine couple, presenting it as the fulfilment of all his longing and the answer to every hymn he has sung.

The entire arc of *Tiruvāimoḷi*, from its philosophical opening in *Tiruvāimoḷi* 1.1 to its culminating vision of liberation in *Tiruvāimoḷi* 10.10, thus traces the soul's journey through longing, surrender, and ultimate union in service—the full doctrinal content of Viśiṣṭādvaita rendered in the passionate medium of Tamil devotional poetry.

Conclusion

Tiruvāimoḷi thus stands as both a masterpiece of classical Tamil devotional poetry and a philosophically rich articulation of the core doctrines later systematized within Viśiṣṭādvaita. The foregoing analysis suggests that Nammāḷvār may be described as Proto-Viśiṣṭādvaitic in doctrinal content, insofar as his hymns consistently bring forth the ontological triad of Īśvara, cit, and acit; interpret the relation between Brahman, soul and the world through the śarīra–śarīri framework; and affirm liberation as

eternal service rather than ontological absorption. At the same time, the theological-philosophical concepts in *Tiruvāimoḷi* are not present through formal dialectical methods, but its theological-metaphysical claims are unfolded through a poetics of spiritual experience—direct God-experience transmuted into hymns. What distinguishes Nammāḷvār is therefore not merely that he expresses devotional longing, but that his devotion is wrapped in philosophy. The unique hermeneutical tradition of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism recognized this philosophical depth and developed an extensive exegetical tradition that articulated the implicit philosophical meanings embedded in poetics. The result is a corpus—*Tiruvāimoḷi* together with its classical commentaries—that stands as one of the most fully realized examples of the integration of devotional and philosophical religion. Thus, the text may be read as an early and authoritative articulation of the philosophical intuitions that later received systematic formulation in the works of Rāmānuja and subsequent Viśiṣṭādvaitic thinkers.

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* All translations from Tamil and Sanskrit in this article are the author's own, unless otherwise indicated. The author has consulted Prativadi Bhayankaram Annangachariyar's *Divyartha Deepikai* in preparing these translations.