

Tiruvācakam as Lived Theology: Emotion, Experience, and Śaiva Mysticism

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *Tiruvācakam*, composed by Māṇikkavācakar in the 9th century CE, stands as one of the most profound spiritual texts in Tamil Śaiva literature. Unlike doctrinal treatises or systematic theological expositions, *Tiruvācakam* articulates theology as lived experience—embodied through emotion (*bhāva*), surrender (*śaraṇāgati*), and mystical intimacy with Śiva. This study examines *Tiruvācakam* as a form of lived theology, where spiritual truth is not merely conceptualized but intensely felt, sung, and enacted. Māṇikkavācakar's verses dissolve the boundaries between devotee and deity, intellect and emotion, ritual and realization.

Methodology: In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.

Analysis/ Results: Drawing upon Śaiva Siddhānta, bhakti poetics, and comparative mysticism, the paper argues that *Tiruvācakam* functions as an experiential theology that prioritizes inner transformation over metaphysical speculation. The text's recurring motifs of tears, longing, divine grace, and ego-annihilation reveal a theology rooted in personal encounter rather than institutional dogma.

Originality/ Values: By situating *Tiruvācakam* within the broader framework of Tamil bhakti traditions and global mystical literature, this study highlights its enduring relevance as a spiritual manual that integrates ethics, aesthetics, and transcendence. The paper ultimately positions *Tiruvācakam* as a timeless testament to Tamil spirituality's capacity to articulate the deepest truths of human-divine communion through lived emotional experience.

Type of Paper: Exploratory Research.

Keywords: Tiruvācakam; Māṇikkavācakar; Lived Theology; Śaiva Mysticism; Bhakti Aesthetics; Tamil Spirituality

1. INTRODUCTION :

Tamil devotional literature occupies a distinctive place in the religious and cultural history of India, particularly through its ability to integrate metaphysical depth with emotional immediacy. Among its many masterpieces, *Tiruvācakam* stands unparalleled in its intensity, lyrical power, and spiritual authenticity. Composed by the saint-poet Māṇikkavācakar, *Tiruvācakam* is neither a philosophical system nor a ritual manual; rather, it is a spontaneous outpouring of the soul in direct communion with Śiva. This specific piece of work is so great and sweet that it is said in Tamil Proverbs: *Tiruvācakattiṟku urugār oru vācakattiṟkum urugār*, (One who does not melt for *Tiruvācakam* will not melt for any literary work). In Tamil, the individual soul is referred to as "Cheevaa". In the philosophy of Saivism, this jeeva (soul) is said to be covered with three impurities (Anava - pride, and the other two are Karma and Maya), which hinder the soul from realizing God, and it is only Shiva who can remove these impurities. The oft-quoted Tamil adage, "*Tiruvācakattil uraiyādhadhu yedhu?*" (What is there that is not found in *Tiruvācakam*?) captures the text's comprehensive spiritual scope (Nasti (2022). [1]).

This work approaches *Tiruvācakam* as "lived theology"—a mode of theological expression grounded in experience, emotion, and transformation rather than abstract reasoning. Māṇikkavācakar's verses

articulate a journey from ego-bound existence to divine absorption, marked by longing, despair, ecstasy, and surrender. Theology here is not argued but enacted; God is not defined but encountered. The devotee's tears, trembling voice, and self-effacement become valid theological categories (Pillai (1989). [2]).

He starts with Namaccivāya vāḷga! Nāthan tāḷ vāḷga!

Imaiḷpoḷudum en neṅḷil nīṅḷādān tāḷ vāḷga

Kōkaḷi āṇḷa kurumaṇiṭan tāḷ vāḷga

Āgamam āki niṅḷru aṅṅippān tāḷ vāḷga

Ēkan anēkan iṅḷaivan aḷi vāḷga

Praise to Namaśivāya! Praise to the sacred feet of the Lord!

Praise to Him who never leaves my heart even for a moment.

Praise to the jewel-like Guru who ruled Kōkaḷi;

Praise to Him who stands as the Āgamas and lovingly embraces the devotee.

Praise to the feet of the One who is both One and Many, the Supreme Lord.

(Kōkaḷi is an ancient Śaiva sacred centre remembered in *Tiruvācakam* as the realm where Śiva ruled as a jewel-like Guru. It symbolizes divine governance through grace, inner transformation, and spiritual authority, preserved in bhakti memory rather than surviving geography.)

In Śaiva Siddhānta, liberation (*mukti*) is achieved through divine grace (*aruḷ*), and *Tiruvācakam* dramatizes this principle experientially (Gardner Harris (2016). [3]). The text reflects a dynamic interplay between human helplessness and divine compassion, making it accessible across social, intellectual, and temporal boundaries. This introduction sets the stage for examining *Tiruvācakam* not merely as a literary or devotional artifact, but as a living spiritual testimony—one that continues to shape Tamil religious consciousness, temple culture, music, and ethical sensibilities even today (Rajarajan (2023). [4]).

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

- (1) To examine *Tiruvācakam* as an expression of lived theology rooted in emotional and spiritual experience.
- (2) To analyze the role of *bhāva*, surrender, and grace in Māṅikkavācakar's Śaiva mysticism.
- (3) To situate *Tiruvācakam* within the broader framework of Tamil bhakti and Śaiva Siddhānta traditions.
- (4) To assess the contemporary spiritual and ethical relevance of *Tiruvācakam*.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

1. **U. V. Swaminatha Iyer** (1921) [5]. In *Tiruvācakam: Mūlamum uraiyum* [Tamil text with commentary] emphasized *Tiruvācakam*'s linguistic purity and its role in preserving Tamil devotional idiom, highlighting its emotional spontaneity rather than doctrinal structure.
2. **P. Sambamoorthy** 1964) [6]. *South Indian music* (Vols. 1–5) analyzed *Tiruvācakam* from a musical and aesthetic perspective, underscoring how melody amplifies devotional emotion and collective spiritual experience.
3. **K. A. Nilakanta Sastri** (1955) [7]. *A history of South India: From prehistoric times to the fall of Vijayanagar* – he situated Māṅikkavācakar historically, identifying *Tiruvācakam* as a crucial bridge between early bhakti fervor and later Śaiva Siddhānta consolidation.
4. **Contemporary scholars of comparative mysticism** have drawn parallels between *Tiruvācakam* and global mystical texts, recognizing its experiential theology akin to the works of Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross [8-9].

4. MĀNIKKAVĀCAKAR AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TIRUVĀCAKAM:

The Life of Māṅikkavācakar:

Māṅikkavācakar, believed to have lived between the 9th and 11th centuries CE, emerged from a Brahmin family in Thiruvathavur, near Madurai. His journey from a minister in the Pandya kingdom to a revered saint is marked by a transformative encounter with a sage, which led him to renounce worldly pursuits in favor of spiritual enlightenment. This pivotal moment not only altered the course of his life but also gave birth to the *Tiruvācakam*, a testament to his deep devotion and mystical experiences (Chevillard (2022). [10]).

The Cultural and Religious Landscape:

During Māṇikkavācakar 's time, Tamil Nadu was a melting pot of various religious and philosophical ideas. The influence of Shaivism, along with the presence of other sects, created a rich tapestry of spiritual thought. The *Tiruvācākam* emerged as a response to this milieu, articulating a personal and emotional connection to the divine that resonated with the common people. It served as a bridge between the esoteric teachings of Shaivism and the everyday experiences of devotees (Nasti (2022). [1]).

Māṇikkavācakar occupies a unique and exalted position in the history of Tamil Śaiva literature, standing at the confluence of political authority, spiritual awakening, and poetic transcendence. Traditionally dated to the 9th century CE, his life unfolded during a transformative phase in South Indian religious history, when the rigid structures of ritualistic Brahmanism and temple orthodoxy were being re-energized by the emotionally charged bhakti movement. *Tiruvācākam*, his magnum opus, emerged from this socio-religious milieu as a text that redefined devotion through lived experience rather than inherited authority (Pillai (1989). [3]).

Hagiographical accounts preserved in the *Periyapurāṇam* present Māṇikkavācakar as a high-ranking minister under a Pandya king, entrusted with royal resources and administrative responsibility. His encounter with Śiva at Tirupperunturai, leading to the renunciation of worldly power, symbolically reflects the broader cultural shift of the time—from political dominance to spiritual surrender. While historical details remain interwoven with legend, the narrative itself reveals an important ideological transition: spiritual authority increasingly derived from personal realization rather than institutional position.

The period of Māṇikkavācakar coincides with the crystallization of Tamil Śaiva bhakti, following the foundational hymns of the Nāyaṇmārs such as Appar, Sambandar, and Sundarar. Unlike his predecessors, whose hymns often engage temple-specific praise and moral exhortation, Māṇikkavācakar's *Tiruvācākam* delves inward, articulating an intensely introspective spiritual journey. This inward turn mirrors the maturation of bhakti from public proclamation to personal transformation. Historically, it marks a movement toward interiorized devotion, aligning emotional experience with metaphysical aspiration.

Politically, South India during this period witnessed the consolidation of regional powers, particularly the Pandyas and later the Cholas, who patronized Śaiva institutions. *Tiruvācākam* must therefore be understood within a context where state power, temple economy, and devotional expression were deeply intertwined. Māṇikkavācakar's rejection of royal privilege, dramatized through his spiritual conversion, subtly critiques material authority while affirming divine sovereignty. His poetry thus reflects both engagement with and transcendence of contemporary power structures.

Philosophically, *Tiruvācākam* predates the formal codification of Śaiva Siddhānta but clearly anticipates its central tenets, especially the doctrines of *āṇava* (ego-bound impurity), *aruḷ* (grace), and *pati-pāśu-pāśa* relationships. The historical significance of Māṇikkavācakar lies in his ability to embody these metaphysical concepts poetically before they were systematized scholastically. His work demonstrates how lived devotion functioned as a precursor to later theological formulation.

Linguistically and culturally, *Tiruvācākam* represents a milestone in Tamil literary history. Its sophisticated use of metaphor, emotional cadence, and musicality reflects the evolution of Tamil as a sacred language capable of expressing the subtlest spiritual states. In an era when Sanskrit dominated formal theology, Māṇikkavācakar's Tamil hymns asserted the legitimacy of vernacular spirituality, reinforcing the democratizing impulse of the bhakti movement.

In sum, Māṇikkavācakar and the historical context of *Tiruvācākam* reveal a pivotal moment in South Indian religious consciousness. Rooted in a dynamic socio-political environment yet transcending it through mystical vision, *Tiruvācākam* stands as both a product of its time and a timeless spiritual testament. Its enduring relevance lies in its capacity to transform historical circumstance into universal spiritual experience, affirming devotion as lived, felt, and realized across generations.

5. LIVED THEOLOGY: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY :

The concept of *lived theology* offers a powerful interpretive lens for understanding devotional texts such as *Tiruvācākam*, which resist systematic theological categorization yet convey profound spiritual insight. Unlike classical theology, which privileges doctrinal clarity, metaphysical argument, and institutional authority, lived theology foregrounds religious experience as the primary site of meaning-making. In this framework, theology is not merely articulated through abstract propositions but

embodied in emotion, practice, memory, and transformation. *Tiruvācakam* exemplifies this mode of theological expression, presenting devotion as something intensely felt, enacted, and realized within the devotee's inner life (Pillai (1989). [2]).

Conceptually, lived theology draws upon phenomenological approaches to religion that prioritize first-person experience. In *Tiruvācakam*, Māṅikkavācakar does not define Śiva through attributes or metaphysical categories; instead, he encounters the divine through longing, surrender, anguish, and ecstatic joy. These affective states function as theological knowledge in themselves. Emotion (*bhāva*), vulnerability, and self-negation are not treated as secondary or subjective but as authentic pathways to truth. The divine is known not by rational comprehension but through relational intimacy, where the self is gradually dissolved in divine presence.

From a methodological standpoint, interpreting *Tiruvācakam* as lived theology requires moving beyond textual analysis alone. A hermeneutic–phenomenological method becomes essential, wherein the scholar attends to the experiential dimension embedded in poetic language. Metaphors of tears, burning desire, silence, and abandonment must be read not merely as literary devices but as indicators of spiritual states. This approach recognizes the text as a record of inner transformation rather than a treatise of beliefs.

Further, lived theology necessitates an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates literary criticism, religious studies, and anthropology. *Tiruvācakam* was composed for singing and communal recitation, situating theology within performative and ritual contexts. Thus, the analysis must account for how music, rhythm, and repetition shape religious experience. Temple rituals, collective chanting, and musical rendering become extensions of theology in practice, transforming private devotion into shared spiritual consciousness.

Importantly, lived theology also challenges binary distinctions between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, emotion and reason, or personal and communal faith. In *Tiruvācakam*, theology unfolds in the tension between human helplessness and divine grace (*aru!*). Methodologically, this calls for sensitivity to paradox and ambiguity, allowing the text's contradictions and emotional intensity to remain unresolved rather than systematized artificially.

Finally, approaching *Tiruvācakam* through lived theology underscores its contemporary relevance. In an age dominated by rationalization and institutional mediation of faith, *Tiruvācakam* reasserts the primacy of inner transformation. The conceptual and methodological framework of lived theology thus enables scholars to appreciate the text not merely as a historical artifact, but as an ongoing spiritual practice—one where theology is lived, sung, and realized rather than simply believed.

6. EMOTION (BHĀVA) AS A PATHWAY TO THE DIVINE:

In *Tiruvācakam*, emotion (*bhāva*) is not a peripheral element of devotion but the very medium through which the divine is encountered and realized. Māṅikkavācakar elevates emotional experience to a sacred status, presenting intense feeling as an authentic pathway to Śiva. Unlike philosophical traditions that privilege intellectual discernment or ritual exactitude, *Tiruvācakam* affirms that the deepest spiritual truths are accessed through the vulnerability of the heart rather than the certainty of reason.

The emotional spectrum in *Tiruvācakam* is remarkably wide, encompassing longing, despair, self-reproach, ecstatic joy, and overwhelming gratitude. These emotions are not episodic moods but stages in a transformative spiritual journey. The poet's frequent references to tears, trembling, and burning desire symbolize the dissolution of ego and the softening of the self, rendering the devotee receptive to divine grace. Emotion thus functions as a purifying force, eroding pride and self-sufficiency.

Bhāva in *Tiruvācakam* also reflects a deeply relational theology. The devotee addresses Śiva not as a distant metaphysical principle but as an intimate presence—compassionate, playful, and responsive. Emotional intensity sustains this relationship, transforming prayer into dialogue and devotion into lived encounter. The oscillation between separation and union heightens emotional depth, making longing itself a form of divine proximity (Dehejia (1990). [11]).

Importantly, Māṅikkavācakar's valorization of emotion challenges the hierarchy that often places reason above feeling in religious discourse. In *Tiruvācakam*, emotion becomes epistemic—it generates knowledge of the divine through experience. This aligns with broader bhakti traditions where love (*anbu*) supersedes logic, and surrender surpasses effort.

Moreover, the musical and performative dimensions of *Tiruvācakam* amplify its emotional power. Sung in temples and communal settings, the hymns allow individual emotion to merge with collective

devotion, creating a shared spiritual atmosphere. Through *bhāva*, *Tiruvācakam* reveals that the path to the divine is not linear or analytical, but affective and transformative—where the heart, broken and offered, becomes the doorway to transcendence (Zvelebil (1974). [12]).

7. GRACE (*ARUL*) AND THE ANNIHILATION OF EGO:

In *Tiruvācakam*, the concept of divine grace (*aruḷ*) occupies a central and decisive place, shaping both its theological vision and its spiritual psychology. Māṇikkavācakar presents liberation not as the outcome of human effort, ritual competence, or intellectual mastery, but as a gift bestowed by Śiva upon a devotee who has been emptied of ego. This emphasis reflects a core principle of emerging Śaiva Siddhānta, where divine grace alone dissolves the bonds that imprison the soul.

The annihilation of ego (*āṇava*) is portrayed in *Tiruvācakam* as a painful yet necessary process. Māṇikkavācakar repeatedly confesses his inadequacy, moral frailty, and helplessness, not as expressions of despair but as acts of radical self-disclosure. Such self-negation is not self-hatred; rather, it is the stripping away of false autonomy and pride that obstruct divine presence. Ego, in this framework, is the primary barrier separating the soul (*paśu*) from the Lord (*pati*).

Grace intervenes precisely at the moment of complete surrender. Māṇikkavācakar depicts *aruḷ* as spontaneous, compassionate, and transformative—an unmerited descent of divine love that reconstitutes the devotee's inner world. This grace does not merely forgive; it reshapes perception, desire, and identity. The devotee no longer acts as an independent agent but becomes an instrument of divine will, reflecting a profound shift from self-centered existence to God-centered being.

Significantly, *Tiruvācakam* frames this process through emotionally charged language, reinforcing that ego-annihilation is experienced affectively before it is understood philosophically. Tears, trembling, and silence mark the moment when grace overwhelms selfhood. In this way, *aruḷ* functions as lived theology—grace is not explained but encountered.

By emphasizing grace over effort, *Tiruvācakam* offers a radical theological vision that subverts merit-based spirituality. It affirms that true liberation arises when the self ceases to assert and begins to receive, making ego-annihilation not a loss, but the gateway to divine union (Peterson (1989). [13]; Cutler (1987). 14]).

8. RITUAL, MUSIC, AND COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN *TIRUVĀCAKAM*:

Tiruvācakam occupies a distinctive space in Tamil Śaiva tradition where personal mysticism is inseparably woven into ritual practice and collective religious life. Although born from Māṇikkavācakar's intensely individual spiritual experiences, the text was never meant for solitary contemplation alone. Its structure, rhythm, and emotive power clearly indicate its intended use in temple rituals, communal recitation, and musical performance, thereby transforming private devotion into shared spiritual experience.

Ritually, *Tiruvācakam* is deeply embedded within Śaiva temple worship. Its hymns are recited during daily pūjās, special festivals, and devotional observances, serving as vocal offerings to Śiva. Through repeated chanting, the text becomes part of the embodied rhythm of worship, allowing devotees to internalize its theological and emotional depth. Ritual thus functions as a medium through which the devotee reenacts Māṇikkavācakar's journey of surrender, humility, and grace.

Music plays a central role in amplifying the spiritual efficacy of *Tiruvācakam*. Set to traditional melodic frameworks and later adapted into Carnatic musical compositions, its verses rely on melody, tempo, and repetition to evoke deep emotional resonance (*bhāva*). Musical rendition dissolves the boundary between word and feeling, enabling devotees to experience theology affectively rather than cognitively. In this sense, music becomes theology in sound, carrying meaning beyond literal interpretation (Hardy (1983). [15]).

The collective dimension of *Tiruvācakam* is equally significant. When sung in congregational settings, individual emotions merge into a shared devotional consciousness. The sorrow, longing, and ecstasy articulated by the poet become communal experiences, fostering spiritual solidarity. This collective participation reinforces a shared Śaiva identity, transcending caste, status, and individual difference.

Through the interplay of ritual, music, and community, *Tiruvācakam* demonstrates that theology is not confined to texts or doctrines but enacted through bodies, voices, and shared emotion. It stands as a living tradition where devotion is continually renewed through collective performance, making spiritual experience both personal and profoundly communal.

9. TIRUVĀCĀKAM IN COMPARATIVE MYSTICAL TRADITIONS:

The *Tiruvācakam*, attributed to the Shaiva saint-poet Māṇikkavācakar, occupies a unique and exalted position in the spiritual and literary heritage of Tamil Nadu, standing not merely as a devotional anthology but as a profound document of lived mysticism and experiential theology. Comprising 656 verses of intense emotional and metaphysical depth, the text articulates the journey of the soul toward divine union with Lord Shiva through the language of bhakti, surrender (*śaraṇāgati*), and existential longing. At its core lies an intensely personal relationship between the devotee and the divine, where Shiva is simultaneously intimate and transcendent, immanent and ineffable. Māṇikkavācakar addresses Shiva not as a distant metaphysical abstraction but as a beloved presence—one who overwhelms the devotee with grace even as He eludes intellectual comprehension. This dual vision parallels the essential structure of mystical consciousness across traditions, where God is both “nearer than the nearest” and beyond all categories of speech and thought. The poet’s persistent emphasis on surrender underscores a central mystical conviction: liberation is not achieved through intellectual mastery or ritual proficiency alone, but through the annihilation of ego and the unconditional yielding of the self to divine will. Alongside this devotional intensity runs a deep philosophical reflection on the nature of reality itself. The *Tiruvācakam* repeatedly meditates on the impermanence of worldly attachments, the deceptive pull of sensory existence, and the illusory nature of ego-centered life—ideas resonant with the concept of *māyā* in Hindu philosophy. Yet this negation of the transient is not nihilistic; it culminates in an affirmative vision of unity, where the individual soul (*jīva*) dissolves into universal consciousness, echoing non-dual insights found in Advaita Vedānta while retaining a distinct Shaiva devotional orientation. Thus, the *Tiruvācakam* functions simultaneously as prayer, philosophy, and spiritual autobiography, mapping the inner terrain of a soul consumed by divine love and awakened to metaphysical truth (Flood (1996). [16]).

When examined within the broader framework of comparative mystical traditions, the *Tiruvācakam* reveals striking thematic convergences with spiritual literatures across religious boundaries, underscoring the universality of mystical experience despite doctrinal differences. In Sufism, the mystical current of Islam, one encounters a parallel emphasis on love as the primary mode of knowing the divine. Like Māṇikkavācakar, Sufi poets such as Rumi, Hafiz, and Attar articulate an aching longing for union with God, frequently employing metaphors of separation, intoxication, and annihilation of the self (*fanāʾ*). The Sufi seeker’s journey toward divine intimacy mirrors the Shaiva devotee’s emotional oscillation between despair and ecstasy, absence and presence, anguish and fulfilment. Both traditions affirm that genuine spiritual transformation arises not from external conformity but from an inward burning that consumes the ego and opens the heart to divine reality. Similar resonances appear in Christian mysticism, particularly in the writings of figures such as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Ávila, whose accounts of the soul’s ascent toward God bear remarkable resemblance to Māṇikkavācakar’s emotional landscape. The “dark night of the soul,” characterized by spiritual desolation, longing, and apparent abandonment, finds clear expression in the *Tiruvācakam*, where the poet laments his unworthiness and pleads for divine grace amidst inner turmoil. Yet, as in Christian contemplative theology, this darkness is not a failure but a purifying passage leading toward deeper union. The contemplative silence, interior prayer, and affective devotion emphasized in Christian mysticism parallel the inwardness cultivated through the recitation and meditation of *Tiruvācakam* verses. Through these cross-cultural parallels, the *Tiruvācakam* emerges not as an isolated regional text but as a vital contributor to the global archive of mystical literature, demonstrating how diverse traditions converge upon shared experiential truths while articulating them through culturally distinct idioms.

Equally significant is the role of language, poetry, and cultural accessibility in shaping the enduring impact of the *Tiruvācakam*, both within Tamil civilization and beyond. Māṇikkavācakar’s genius lies not only in spiritual insight but in poetic expression—his masterful use of imagery, metaphor, rhythm, and emotional cadence transforms abstract metaphysical ideas into lived, felt realities. Images of bees seeking nectar, lovers yearning for union, and souls melting in divine fire render complex theological concepts immediately accessible and emotionally compelling. The musicality of the verses enhances their ritual and meditative potency, enabling chanting and recitation to function as spiritual disciplines in their own right. By composing in Tamil rather than Sanskrit, Māṇikkavācakar democratized spiritual knowledge, embedding profound mystical philosophy within the everyday linguistic and cultural world of the Tamil people. Local customs, festivals, and ritual sensibilities woven into the verses fostered a

sense of intimacy and ownership, ensuring that the text resonated deeply across social strata. Over centuries, the *Tiruvācakam* has profoundly shaped Tamil literature, inspiring poets, musicians, and artists, and becoming integral to temple worship, domestic rituals, and collective religious memory. Its verses, frequently set to music, continue to animate Shaiva devotional practice, creating spaces of communal transcendence through sound and rhythm. In the modern era, the text retains striking relevance: contemporary seekers draw upon its themes of surrender and inner transformation to navigate the anxieties of modern life, while scholars engage it as a rich site for interdisciplinary research in comparative mysticism, philosophy, literature, and religious studies (Clooney (1993). [17]).

Translations into multiple languages have further expanded its reach, allowing global audiences to encounter its spiritual vision. Ultimately, the *Tiruvācakam* stands as a luminous testament to the power of devotional poetry to bridge the finite and the infinite, the local and the universal, affirming that the quest for divine union—expressed through love, longing, and surrender—is a shared human inheritance that transcends time, culture, and creed.

Tiruvācakam occupies a distinguished place within the global landscape of mystical literature, resonating deeply with spiritual traditions that emphasize inner transformation, surrender, and experiential knowledge of the divine. Though firmly rooted in Tamil Śaiva bhakti, Māṇikkavācakar's hymns articulate universal mystical themes that transcend cultural, linguistic, and doctrinal boundaries. When viewed comparatively, *Tiruvācakam* reveals striking affinities with Christian, Islamic, and other bhakti mystical traditions, positioning it as a significant text in the study of comparative mysticism.

A central parallel lies in the emphasis on divine love and ego-annihilation. Māṇikkavācakar's repeated expressions of self-negation and longing echo the Christian mystical tradition, particularly in the writings of St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart, where the "dark night" of the soul precedes union with God. Similarly, *Tiruvācakam* portrays suffering and emotional desolation not as spiritual failure but as preparatory stages for grace. The stripping away of selfhood becomes the necessary condition for divine indwelling.

The intense emotional language, metaphors of intoxication, and longing for union found in Sufi poetry closely parallel the affective spirituality of *Tiruvācakam*. In both traditions, music and collective chanting function as vital vehicles for mystical experience.

Within the broader Indian bhakti landscape, *Tiruvācakam* aligns with the devotional intensity of Vaiṣṇava Āḷvārs and later saints like Mīrābāī, who similarly privileged love over doctrine. Yet, *Tiruvācakam* remains distinct in its profound interiority and its integration of Śaiva metaphysics.

Through such comparisons, *Tiruvācakam* emerges as a universal mystical text—one that affirms lived experience, emotional depth, and surrender as shared spiritual pathways across religious traditions.

10. CONCLUSION :

Tiruvācakam endures as one of the most authentic expressions of lived theology in Indian religious literature. Māṇikkavācakar's hymns transcend sectarian boundaries and philosophical abstractions, offering instead a deeply personal account of the soul's encounter with the divine. By privileging experience over exposition, emotion over argument, and surrender over self-assertion, *Tiruvācakam* redefines theology as a transformative journey rather than a system of belief.

The text's theological vision is inseparable from its emotional intensity. Tears, longing, and ecstatic joy are not peripheral sentiments but central means through which divine truth is realized. In this sense, *Tiruvācakam* anticipates modern phenomenological approaches to religion that emphasize lived experience as the foundation of faith. Its emphasis on divine grace aligns seamlessly with Śaiva Siddhānta, while its poetic universality allows it to resonate with mystical traditions across cultures.

In the contemporary world—marked by spiritual alienation and excessive rationalization—*Tiruvācakam* offers a corrective by affirming the legitimacy of vulnerability, devotion, and inner transformation. It reminds humanity that the divine is not merely to be understood but to be loved, suffered for, and ultimately realized within. As a living text sung in temples and concert halls, *Tiruvācakam* continues to shape Tamil spiritual identity, standing as a timeless testament to theology lived, felt, and fulfilled.

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