

Sivavakkiyar as a Radical Śaiva Mystic: Protest, Paradox, and Spiritual Subversion

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Sivavakkiyar as a Radical Śaiva Mystic: Protest, Paradox, and Spiritual Subversion

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *Sivavakkiyar holds a special, even radical, place in the Tamil traditions of Śaiva mysticism. Commonly linked to the Siddha lineage, his verses serve as a potent counter to ritualism, caste, and religion as an institution. This paper considers Siddha Sivavakkiyar as a radical Śaiva mystic and considers his poetry to be both a form of spiritual teaching and social critique. Sivavakkiyar's poems advocate for inner, experiential realization of Śiva (uḷḷe śivam) devotion as opposed to scripture-based practice, and external showings of faith, temple attendance, ritual purity, and the many other practices of devotion to the temples. He uses decisive, iconoclastic, and paradoxical poetry. He references the body, communal decay, the impermanent, and the illusory in order to remove false certainty.*

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.*

Result/ analysis: *This paper also incorporates and acknowledges other work to assert that Sivavakkiyar mysticism is also a form of activism in which the critique of an order is fundamental to the attainment of enlightenment.*

Originality/ Values: *Sivavakkiyar is described as a mystic in other works; however, the author of this paper is especially interested in placing Sivavakkiyar outside of the conventions of wider Śaiva Siddha and Tamil Bhakti mysticism. His critique of the caste system and the priest as an agent of mediation in the religious system is a forerunner to other social movements in this part of India and illustrates the social ethics of his mysticism. This study's primary focus is on arguing that the radical mysticism of Sivavakkiyar redefines devotion as an awakening that is more internal as opposed to an external phenomenon. Such an interpretation of his work is particularly pertinent to the present concerns of spirituality, social justice, and the reformation of religion.*

Type of Paper: *Exploratory Research.*

Keywords: Sivavakkiyar, Śaiva Mysticism, Siddha Tradition, Religious Protest, Tamil Bhakti

1. INTRODUCTION :

Tamil Śaiva literature displays a considerable variety of devotional expressions from temple-centered bhakti to mystic traditions of a more inward nature. Within this scope, one of the more uncompromising radical mystic poets is Sivavakkiyar. Contrary to the more orthodoxy, ritual, and temple devotion of the canonical Nāyaṅmār saints, devotional Sivavakkiyar takes a more aggressive position towards religious orthodoxy. His poetry critiques religious ritual, the caste system, priestly dominance, and popular piety. Sivavakkiyar is, in a general sense, a mystic of the Siddha tradition, and Śaiva mysticism of an unmediated Śaiva worship sort. The poetry of Sivavakkiyar, most of all, emphasizes the bodily, impermanence, the uselessness of external observance, and the vanity of societal rank (Anand & Ganapathy (2014). [1]; Srinivasan & Aithal (2026). [2]).

Using bright, sharp irony, and with a variety of religious critiques, he critiques the established religious norms by urging the seeker to discover Śiva in one's own consciousness, an inward orientation of mysticism and a mode of spiritual, social, and intellectual resistance (Sanderson (2004). [3]).

Sivavakkiyar's contributions are noteworthy even outside of the religious sphere. His challenges to caste and the power of the ritual entail that authorities place him among the first dissenters of the Tamil intelligentsia. Long before the arrival of modern reform movements, Sivavakkiyar uncovered the ethical paradox of a religion that prioritized birth and ritual over true compassion. In this sense, his poetry is a striking example of the fusion of mysticism and social critique (Sanderson (2014). [4]). Sivavakkiyar is seen as a mystic of radical Śaivism. Paradoxical language and spiritual subversion are directed at both the religious and social structures and the injustices that underpin them. The paper attempts to place the relevance of his work within the contemporary discourse on the intersection of spirituality, social equality, and genuine religious experience.

2. OBJECTIVES :

- (1) To analyze Sivavakkiyar's critique of ritualism and religious orthodoxy in his poetry.
- (2) To examine how paradox and iconoclasm function as tools of spiritual awakening.
- (3) To assess Sivavakkiyar's contribution to social critique, particularly regarding caste and authority.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

- (1) U. V. Swaminatha Iyer highlighted Sivavakkiyar's linguistic force and uncompromising rejection of ritual authority, identifying him as a marginal yet powerful voice in Tamil devotional literature [5].
- (2) Kamil Zvelebil situated Sivavakkiyar within the Siddha tradition, emphasizing his antinomian tendencies and his emphasis on inner realization over external worship [6-7].
- (3) M. Varadarajan interpreted Sivavakkiyar as a social critic whose poetry exposes the moral contradictions of caste-based religion and institutionalized piety [8].
- (4) Mani, B. R. noted the philosophical depth of Sivavakkiyar's paradoxes, arguing that his mysticism dissolves dualities between sacred and profane, body and spirit [9].

4. SIVAVAKKIYAR, A QUINTESSENTIAL SIDDHA—COURAGEOUS, NON-CONFORMIST:

The positioning of Sivavakkiyar is both unique and radical within the Tamil Śaiva–Siddha tradition. Although he is often dated to the 10th to 12th centuries CE, he is associated with the Siddha movement, which was both contemporaneous and at times antagonistic to the classical Śaiva Siddhānta. While Śaiva Siddhānta, for the most part, emphasized temple ritual, Agamic orthodoxy, and the philosophical systematization of temple practices, the Siddhas, including Sivavakkiyar, relied upon direct experience (anubhava), bodily practices, and radical spiritual immanence [1-3].

Sivavakkiyar's poems display fierce radicalism. He critiques the caste system, the formality of ritual worship, the worship of religious idols, and religion itself, claiming that liberation cannot be attained through the medium of an idol, repeated mantras, or social caste. His poems emphasize that Śiva is not in the temple, but within the self, in the breath, awareness, and ethical action. This self-inwardness resonates with Siddha practices of kuṇḍalinī, nāḍī, and integrated psycho-somatic alchemy.

Sivavakkiyar seems to embody a critical counterpoint within the Śaiva–Siddha framework. Most Śaiva Siddhānta theologians subscribe to a metaphysical dualism between the three constituents—pati (the Lord)/ paśu (the soul)/ pāśa (the bond). From this perspective, doctrine and experience align. In contrast, Sivavakkiyar's experiential system is non-systematic. He employs sharp, colloquial language that is meant to be disconcerting; and aimed at dismantling spiritual complacency. For him, salvation is not just posthumous grace, but the realization of truth through self-knowledge and detachment.

Sivavakkiyar is not anti-Śaiva. From a radical perspective, he is Śaiva, in a profoundly interiorized manner. He is a complement to the devotional fervor of Tamil bhakti, but in a dissenting manner to its institutionalized form at the periphery. He thus stands out as an exemplary Siddha — courageous, non-conformist, and deeply spiritual, to the point of being critical of the religion in which he found himself.

5. REJECTION OF RITUALISM AND TEMPLE-CENTRED DEVOTION: A RESEARCH NOTE:

The rejection of ritualism and the move away from temple-centred devotion represent one of the most significant shifts in the evolution of Indian religious thought. This transition, visible across multiple traditions—Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and later Bhakti and Sufi movements—reflects a deeper philosophical critique of externalism in spiritual practice. Ritualism, often associated with elaborate sacrificial rites, priestly mediation, and rigid orthopraxy, came to be seen by reformers as an obstacle to genuine inner transformation.

Early Upanishadic thinkers were among the first to challenge the supremacy of ritual. They argued that liberation (*moksha*) arises not from external acts but from self-knowledge, ethical living, and contemplative insight. This intellectual turn laid the foundation for later movements that emphasized personal experience over institutional authority.

The Buddha's rejection of Vedic sacrifice further accelerated this trend. He critiqued ritual as ineffective for ending suffering and instead proposed an ethical-psychological path grounded in mindfulness, compassion, and disciplined conduct. Jainism similarly privileged asceticism and moral purity over ceremonial worship.

The Bhakti movement (6th–17th century CE) marked a major cultural expression of anti-ritualism. Poet-saints such as Appar, Kabir, Akka Mahadevi, and Tukaram denounced empty temple formalism and caste-mediated worship. They advocated direct, emotional devotion to the divine, accessible to all regardless of birth or learning. Their compositions democratized spirituality, shifting the locus of the sacred from temple to heart, from ritual to remembrance, from priest to devotee.

This critique did not eliminate temples or rituals; rather, it redefined their purpose. Temples became spaces of community and inspiration rather than exclusive gateways to salvation. Rituals, when retained, were reframed as symbolic aids rather than ends in themselves.

In essence, the rejection of ritualism and temple-centred devotion reflects a recurring Indian insight: that spiritual authenticity arises from inner awakening, ethical integrity, and direct personal engagement with the divine [10-14].

6. PARADOX AND ICONOCLASM AS MYSTICAL STRATEGY :

Mystical traditions across cultures frequently employ paradox and iconoclasm not as acts of rebellion for their own sake, but as deliberate strategies to rupture habitual patterns of thought. Mystics seek to point toward realities that transcend conceptual language, and paradox becomes a linguistic tool that destabilizes the rational mind. By presenting statements that appear contradictory—“form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” or the Zen master's “the sound of one hand”—mystics force the seeker into a cognitive impasse. This impasse is not a failure but an opening: when logic collapses, intuitive insight can emerge. Paradox thus functions as a gateway to non-dual awareness, where binary distinctions dissolve and a more expansive mode of perception becomes possible.

Iconoclasm, in the mystical sense, extends this strategy from language to symbols, institutions, and even the self. It is not merely the destruction of images but the dismantling of mental idols—rigid beliefs, inherited dogmas, and the ego's attachment to fixed identities.

Both paradox and iconoclasm share a common purpose: they interrupt the mind's tendency to cling. Mystical insight requires a radical unlearning, a loosening of conceptual frameworks that ordinarily mediate experience. These strategies cultivate humility, openness, and a willingness to dwell in uncertainty—conditions essential for transformative realization. In this sense, paradox and iconoclasm are not peripheral eccentricities but central pedagogical tools. They guide the seeker beyond intellectual comprehension toward experiential knowledge, where truth is not grasped but lived.

7. EMBODIMENT, IMPERMANENCE AND THE NON-EXISTENCE OF PURITY IN SIVAVAKKIYAR'S POEMS :

In the Siddha poetry of Sivavakkiyar, the human body becomes the primary medium to expose illusions, impermanence, and the falsehood of socially constructed purity. In contrast to orthodox Saiva traditions, which often treat the body as something to be ritually disciplined or transcended via the performance of external observances, Sivavakkiyar confronts the body head-on and strips the body of any sanctity, pride, and false moral elevation. In the poetry of Sivavakkiyar, the body is portrayed in disturbing imagery of flesh and breath that decay and vanish and bones that would crumble. This realism in the depiction of the body is meant to shatter the illusion that corporeality, progeny, or ritual purity has any enduring value.

The concept of illusory purity dominates the critique of the work of Sivavakkiyar. He alludes to the shame of caste, the ritual defilements of bathing, the taboo of consumption, and the shame of dying and decaying with rotten flesh and bones that unify the so-called pure with the so-called impure. It is precisely the defilement and decaying of the body with sweat, blood, mucus, urine, and rotting flesh that defies the shame of dying. It is the assertion of bodily impermanence that, in exposing the codes of purity, removes the identification of these codes with the transcendental claim of the purity of the body that is constructed by fear, ignorance, and the spiritual ego. For Sivavakkiyar, the greatest spiritual hypocrisy is to be obsessed with the external sanctity of the body while being internally defiled by anger, desire, greed, and delusion.

However, Sivavakkiyar does not seem to refute the body completely. True to the Siddhar tradition, he considers the body a prison, but perhaps also, a tool for liberation. The body, when coupled with a desire and pride, binds the soul to suffering. However, through the right discipline, body and soul are able to realize the divine self of Śiva. Hence, the body, in all its suffering, is not just for the purpose of renunciation, but also for the awakening. The body's impermanence, in all its suffering, is a call for awakening, honesty, and a genuine search within.

8. CRITIQUE OF CASTE AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY :

The critique of caste and religious authority has been a recurring and transformative theme in South Asian intellectual and spiritual history. Across centuries, thinkers, poets, and reformers have challenged the hierarchical structures that legitimized social inequality through sacred sanction. Their critiques emerged not only as social protest but as profound theological and philosophical interventions that redefined the meaning of religion itself [17].

Early Buddhist and Jain traditions mounted some of the earliest systematic challenges. The Buddha rejected the Brahmanical claim that ritual purity or birth determined spiritual worth, asserting instead that ethical conduct and mental discipline were the true markers of nobility. Jainism similarly emphasized personal austerity and non-violence over inherited status, undermining caste-based privilege.

The Bhakti movement intensified this critique through emotionally charged, vernacular poetry. Saints such as Nandanar, Ravidas, Kabir, and Tukaram denounced caste exclusivity and priestly mediation, insisting that divine grace was universally accessible. Their compositions democratized devotion, shifting spiritual authority from scriptural gatekeepers to the lived experience of the devotee. Many Bhakti figures also challenged temple-centred control, arguing that God could be encountered in song, labour, and inner remembrance rather than through caste-regulated rituals.

Sufi traditions added another layer by foregrounding interiority and love over formal religious hierarchy. Their *khanqahs* often became spaces where caste distinctions softened, and spiritual authority was grounded in personal realization rather than institutional rank.

In the modern period, figures like Jyotirao Phule, Periyar, and B.R. Ambedkar reframed the critique in explicitly political terms. They exposed how caste and religious authority functioned as instruments of social domination, calling for structural reform, education, and constitutional safeguards. Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhism exemplified a move toward egalitarian religious identity grounded in dignity and rational ethics.

Across these diverse movements, a common thread emerges: the insistence that spiritual truth cannot be monopolized by birth, ritual, or institutional power. The critique of caste and religious authority thus represents a sustained quest for equality, moral autonomy, and a more inclusive vision of the sacred.

9. INNER REALIZATION (UḷḷE ŚIVAM) AND ETHICAL AWAKENING :

The concept of Uḷḷe Śivam—“Śiva is within”—occupies a central place in Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta and related mystical traditions. It reframes divinity not as an external, temple-bound presence but as the luminous core of consciousness itself. This inward turn has profound ethical implications: when the sacred is recognized as immanent in one's own being, moral responsibility becomes an expression of self-realization rather than obedience to external authority.

Inner realization begins with the insight that the human self is not separate from the divine ground. Texts such as the *Tirumantiram* emphasize that the true temple is the body, the true worship is disciplined awareness, and the true liberation arises from recognizing the divine pulse within. This inwardness does not promote isolation; instead, it dissolves egoic boundaries and awakens a sense of

interconnectedness with all life. When the divine is encountered as one's own essence, compassion becomes natural rather than prescribed.

Ethical awakening emerges as the lived consequence of this realization. In Śaiva Siddhānta, virtues such as non-violence, truthfulness, humility, and service are not external commandments but spontaneous expressions of a purified consciousness. The devotee who perceives Śiva within also perceives Śiva in others, making exploitation, caste discrimination, and cruelty fundamentally incompatible with spiritual maturity. This aligns with broader Indian mystical currents—Bhakti, Advaita, and Sufi traditions—where inner illumination translates into ethical clarity.

Uḷḷe Śivam thus functions as both a metaphysical insight and a social ethic. It challenges ritualism, priestly mediation, and hierarchical authority by asserting that the divine is immediately accessible. At the same time, it anchors moral life in experiential knowledge rather than fear, reward, or conformity. Ethical awakening becomes the outward radiance of inner realization, a transformation that unites spiritual depth with social responsibility.

10. SIVAVAKKIYAR AND THE ŚAIVA–SIDDHA MILIEU :

Sivavakkiyar stands as one of the most provocative and philosophically incisive voices within the Tamil Siddha tradition. His verses, preserved in the *Sivavakkiyam*, exemplify the radical interiority, anti-ritualism, and social critique that characterize the broader Śaiva–Siddha milieu. Emerging between the 10th and 14th centuries, this milieu brought together ascetics, alchemists, yogins, and poet-mystics who challenged orthodox Śaiva Siddhānta while remaining deeply rooted in its metaphysical vocabulary [1].

At the heart of Sivavakkiyar's thought is the insistence that truth is experiential, not institutional. He rejects temple-centred worship, caste-based authority, and priestly mediation, arguing that the divine is encountered through inner realization rather than external ritual. His famous assertion that “the body itself is the temple” encapsulates the Siddha emphasis on the human body as the locus of liberation, a site where breath, consciousness, and subtle energies converge.

The Śaiva–Siddha milieu provided fertile ground for such ideas. Siddhas combined yogic practice, tantric symbolism, and alchemical experimentation to pursue immortality, enlightenment, and embodied transformation. Their teachings often circulated outside orthodox institutions, transmitted orally or through cryptic poetry. Within this environment, Sivavakkiyar's iconoclastic voice resonated strongly: he condemned empty ritualism, critiqued caste hierarchies, and exposed the contradictions of religious hypocrisy. His verses frequently employ paradox, satire, and earthy imagery to destabilize conventional piety and redirect attention toward inner awakening.

Philosophically, Sivavakkiyar aligns with the Siddha emphasis on Uḷḷe Śivam—the immanence of Śiva within the self. Ethical clarity, for him, arises from this inner recognition: when the divine is seen in all beings, discrimination and dogma lose their legitimacy. His work thus bridges metaphysics and social ethics, offering a vision of spirituality grounded in direct experience, egalitarianism, and embodied practice.

Sivavakkiyar's legacy endures as a powerful reminder that the Siddha tradition is not merely esoteric but profoundly humanistic, challenging structures of power while affirming the transformative potential of inner realization.

11. THE HIDDEN TRUTH ABOUT BODY PARTS: ANCIENT WISDOM OF SIVAVAKKIYAR REVEALS ALL :

Body parts name discussions often center around scientific terminology, but ancient traditions offer profound insights that transcend mere labels. Sivavakkiyar, a revolutionary Tamil Siddha poet-saint, viewed the human body not simply as an anatomical structure but as a gateway to spiritual enlightenment.

Beyond the conventional understanding of physical anatomy, Sivavakkiyar's teachings reveal a deeper truth about our bodies. His radical perspective challenged the social hierarchies of his time while simultaneously offering a path to liberation through proper understanding of our physical form. Interestingly, despite living centuries ago, his message remains remarkably relevant today.

The enigmatic figure Sivavakkiyar emerges from ancient Tamil literary traditions as one of history's most profound voices on spirituality and social reform. This Tamil Siddha poet, who lived around the

10th century CE, left an indelible mark on spiritual philosophy through his radical teachings about the human body and its relationship to divine consciousness

The Siddha tradition, dating back to at least 500 BCE, represents one of Tamil culture's most mystical spiritual lineages. Siddhas—a term meaning "perfected beings"—were considered divine entities reincarnated in human form with the purpose of spreading sacred knowledge. These mystic gurus developed distinctive approaches to spirituality, focusing on inner transformation through yoga, breath control, and specialized meditation techniques.

Siddhas like Sivavakkiyar belonged to the Saiva Siddhanta philosophical tradition, recognizing Lord Shiva as the supreme deity. Nevertheless, they stood apart from mainstream religious practices by emphasizing direct spiritual experience over ritualistic worship. Moreover, they developed the renowned Siddha medicine system, which viewed the human body as a microcosm of cosmic reality—a perspective central to Sivavakkiyar's teachings about body parts and their spiritual significance.

Sivavakkiyar earned his reputation as a "spiritual rebel" through his fearless rejection of orthodox practices during an era when such dissent carried serious consequences. He vehemently opposed the caste system, challenging the very notion that physical bodies could be categorized as "pure" or "impure" based on birth¹. In one notable verse, he pointedly asks whether the bones, flesh, and skin of different caste women are distinguishable or "numbered by caste"—a revolutionary question in his social context².

Furthermore, he scorned temple rituals and idol worship, questioning why people would "go round a piece of installed stone" when the divine dwells within each person². His critique extended to ritualistic purity obsessions, famously remarking that those who bathed for cleanliness remained "unclean at heart"³.

His rebellious nature manifested through deliberately using crude, colloquial language accessible to common people rather than the refined vocabulary of religious scholars. This unfiltered approach, particularly when discussing biological realities of the human body, shocked his contemporaries yet effectively communicated his message that spiritual truth transcends physical appearances.

Ironically, for someone so outspoken about truth, Sivavakkiyar's own biographical details remain shrouded in mystery. Historical records offer conflicting accounts of his origins—some suggest he came from a family of goldsmiths who created divine idols essentially crafting the very objects his teachings later criticized. Others indicate his name itself might be an honorific title rather than his birth name, possibly derived from his frequent references to "Sivāyam" in his works.

Even the number of poems attributed to him varies across collections, with different compilations containing anywhere from 500 to 533 verses. This uncertainty extends to basic facts about his birthplace, caste background, and even his actual name—leaving scholars to focus primarily on his philosophical contributions rather than biographical details.

Sivavakkiyar's revolutionary perspective on the human body formed the cornerstone of his powerful social critique. He boldly dismantled prevailing notions about physical existence in ways that continue to challenge contemporary thinking about our bodies and their significance.

12. CASTE AND GENDER: QUESTIONING THE BODY'S LABELS :

In medieval Tamil society, one's body determined social status through elaborate caste hierarchies and gender distinctions. Sivavakkiyar fiercely attacked these artificial categorizations through pointed questions about bodily reality [10], [17]. In one striking verse, he asks:

"Is a Brahmin formed differently in the womb? Does he have an extra mouth or pair of hands? And how are body parts name designations Marked by caste at birth?"

His provocative inquiries exposed the absurdity of claiming inherent physical differences between castes. Instead, he emphasized our common biological origins and functions, highlighting that everyone's body experiences the same processes—birth, hunger, desire, illness, and death.

Sivavakkiyar extended this critique to gender discrimination as well. He questioned how society could justify differential treatment based on bodily differences alone when all bodies share fundamental qualities. His radical stance challenged the entire structure of social organization in his time, insisting that respect should transcend physical form.

At the heart of Sivavakkiyar's teachings lay his uncompromising discussion of biological reality. Unlike contemporaries who avoided "impure" subjects, he deliberately described bodily functions and origins in graphic detail:

"This body—an assemblage of blood, flesh and bone, Semen, urine, and excrement— How can anyone claim superiority Based on this same collection of substances?"

Through such frank descriptions, Sivavakkiyar shattered illusions about bodily purity maintained by upper castes. He repeatedly emphasized that all human bodies originate from identical biological processes and contain the same physical elements. This biological universality formed the scientific foundation for his ethical argument against discrimination.

Additionally, he employed stark imagery of decay and death to illustrate the temporary nature of physical existence. By reminding listeners that even the "purest" body eventually decomposes into the same elements, he undermined claims of inherent bodily superiority.

Perhaps most courageously, Sivavakkiyar directly confronted practices of untouchability and ritual purity. He mocked elaborate cleansing rituals that focused exclusively on external purity:

"What use is bathing the body six times daily If the mind remains polluted with hatred? External washing cannot cleanse the internal stains of prejudice."

He systematically dismantled the logic behind physical untouchability by pointing out that touch itself has no inherent quality of purity or impurity. In one famous verse, he challenged priests who claimed physical contact with certain castes caused pollution, asking whether this "pollution" could be weighed, measured, or otherwise detected.

His philosophical position maintained that true purity resided in ethical conduct and spiritual awareness—not in bodily characteristics or ritualistic cleansing. Throughout his poems, he contrasted the false purity of ritual with the genuine purity of compassion and spiritual insight.

Sivavakkiyar's body-centered social critique ultimately transcended physical form entirely. By showing how meaningless bodily distinctions became the basis for harmful social practices, he established a foundation for seeing beyond physical appearance to recognize our common humanity.

Beyond social critique, Sivavakkiyar's philosophy penetrated deeper into understanding the human body as fundamentally illusory. His teachings reveal that our physical form—with all its named body parts and functions—represents merely a temporary vessel rather than our true essence [10-14].

13. THE IMPERMANENCE OF THE BODY :

At the core of Sivavakkiyar's teachings lies his unwavering emphasis on the body's transient nature. He repeatedly reminds us that physical existence is fleeting—a temporary arrangement destined to change and eventually dissolve. This understanding aligns with broader philosophical traditions that recognize the impermanence of physical form as a universal truth.

Sivavakkiyar illustrates this concept through a striking analogy: he explains the transformation of the physical body into a divine body "on the analogy of a worm turning itself into a butterfly." This metamorphosis represents how we must transcend our attachment to temporary physical existence. In essence, Sivavakkiyar teaches that fixation on our mortal form—its appearance, pleasures, and distinctions—keeps us trapped in spiritual ignorance.

Why external rituals fail without inner transformation:

According to Sivavakkiyar, religious practices focusing solely on external actions miss the essential purpose of spiritual development. He speaks "strongly against the practice of mindless recitation of scriptures," noting that "reciting the four Vedas faultlessly" while "smearing the sacred ash on one's forehead will not reveal the Divine."

His critique extends to ritual bathing; a practice often associated with purification. Sivavakkiyar pointedly asks what use there is in "cleaning the bell" when internal transformation remains absent. For him, true spiritual progress requires the "heart to melt with true devotion and merge with the truth within." This internal surrender—not external performance—creates genuine spiritual connection.

Notably, Sivavakkiyar advises people to protect and preserve the body through yoga, treating it as a mystical threshold between worlds. This seemingly contradictory position actually reflects his nuanced understanding that although impermanent, the body serves as an important vehicle for spiritual realization when properly utilized.

Sivavakkiyar reserves his most forceful criticism for idol worship, which he "condemns tooth and nail." He chides people for "cleaning the bell, taking the oral secretion from bees and pouring it over a broken stone" and mockingly describes how "the whole town is getting together and pulling with a rope, a piece of copper placed on a chariot."

In one particularly incisive verse, he points out the absurdity of splitting a stone into two pieces—placing one half as a stepping stone at the temple entrance and worshiping the other inside as divine. He asks rhetorically whether there is any difference between these two pieces of the same stone.

Through such pointed observations, Sivavakkiyar consistently directs attention away from external objects toward the divine presence within. He questions people about why they run to another place thinking God is "there" and not "here." As one translator summarizes his message: "Though tasty food is cooked in a cooking pot, it does not know the taste of that food. So are the idols we worship."

Consequently, Sivavakkiyar's teachings about the body's illusory nature direct us toward recognizing divine presence beyond physical form—both within ourselves and throughout existence.

Pati, Pasu, Pasam: The Hidden Framework

At the core of Sivavakkiyar's teachings lies a profound philosophical framework from Saiva Siddhanta that explains our relationship with bodily existence. This three-part structure—Pati, Pasu, and Pasam—provides the foundation for understanding how we become attached to our physical form and ultimately how we might transcend it.

What is Pati (the Divine)?

Pati, meaning "Lord" or "husband," represents Siva—the supreme, independent reality. Fundamentally, Pati exists as a single super-conscious being with unlimited wisdom, beyond the reach of our senses and mind. Yet despite this transcendence, Pati remains immanent, residing within everything.

Pati possesses eight traditional attributes: self-existence, purity, absolute intelligence, omniscience, independence, boundless grace, omnipotence, and infinite bliss. These qualities can be summarized as Sat-Cit-Ananda (Being-Consciousness-Bliss). As the supreme reality, Pati encompasses and controls both souls and their bondage.

What is Pasu (the soul)?

Pasu—literally meaning "animal" or "being in animal state"—refers to souls with limited wisdom suppressed by Pasam. The term reflects how souls exist in a state of spiritual ignorance, unaware of their true divine nature. Firstly, these souls are numerous yet share a common essence with limited consciousness.

Pasu differs from bodies with specific "parts" and "names"; it represents the conscious entity that inhabits physical forms throughout cycles of rebirth. Under the influence of ignorance, souls identify with their temporary bodies instead of recognizing their connection to Pati. Importantly, Pasu cannot know God without overcoming this ignorance.

What is Pasam (the bondage)?

Pasam constitutes the bonds that keep individual souls ignorant of their true Siva nature. These bondages manifest as three fundamental impurities or malas:

- (1) Anava (egoism): Makes souls believe they are limited, atomic beings separate from divine consciousness, generating negative emotions like envy, greed, and pride
- (2) Karma: Binds souls to their actions through consequences, creating cycles of pleasure and pain
- (3) Maya: Attaches souls to objects of enjoyment through desire, involving them in phenomenal experience

These three impurities—though eternal like Pati and Pasu—can ultimately be overcome through spiritual practice.

How the body is entangled in Pasam

Our physical bodies, including all named parts, exist primarily as manifestations of Maya—the material cause of physical existence. Hence, obsession with body parts' names and identities represents a fundamental spiritual misunderstanding.

The body serves as both prison and potential temple. On one hand, it perpetuates bondage through identification with fleeting physical form. Yet paradoxically, as Sivavakkiyar teaches, this same body can become the site of liberation when understood as a temporary vehicle for spiritual awakening.

Through yogic practices focusing on the "inner body," practitioners can transform ordinary physical existence into divine consciousness—"burning the seed" responsible for repeated births. This transformation happens "on the analogy of a worm turning itself into a butterfly," completely changing our relationship with bodily existence.

Yoga and the Inner Body: Sivavakkiyar's Path to Liberation

Throughout his teachings, Sivavakkiyar revealed a systematic approach to spiritual liberation focused on the subtle inner body rather than the physical form with named parts. This inner pathway utilized yoga as a transformative practice that turns the ordinary body into a divine vessel.

Kundalini and the chakras

Sivavakkiyar described the human body as containing a dormant spiritual energy—kundalini—coiled at the base of the spine. This vital force, when awakened through yogic practice, rises through seven energy centers or chakras along the central channel (sushumna). As this energy ascends, it progressively transforms consciousness until reaching the crown chakra where complete liberation occurs.

The role of breath and mantra

Breath control (pranayama) serves as the fundamental tool in Sivavakkiyar's yogic system. By mastering specific breathing patterns, practitioners redirect vital energy throughout the body. Paired with this breath work, sacred sound vibrations in the form of mantras activate dormant spiritual potentials within. These techniques create internal alchemical reactions far more powerful than external rituals.

The body as a temple for inner worship

In place of temple worship, Sivavakkiyar taught that each body part represents a sacred zone for inner communion. The physical form becomes a living temple where true worship occurs through meditation and energy cultivation rather than external offerings. This approach transforms ordinary body parts into vehicles for spiritual awakening.

The five-letter mantra and its embodiment

Central to Sivavakkiyar's practice was the five-letter mantra "Na-Ma-Si-Va-Ya," representing the essence of divine consciousness. Beyond mere recitation, practitioners were instructed to embody this mantra physically, distributing its five syllables throughout the body's energy centers, ultimately transcending physical form altogether [15-17].

Comparative Table 1: Sivavakkiyar, Pattinathar, and Thirumoolar

Dimension	Sivavakkiyar	Pattinathar	Thirumoolar
Historical Milieu	Tamil Siddha tradition; iconoclastic, anti-ritual, socially critical	Late medieval Tamil renunciant tradition; intense personal transformation	Early Śaiva Siddhānta—Tantric milieu; synthesizer of yoga, tantra, and devotion
Core Spiritual Focus	<i>Uḷḷe Śivam</i> — inner divinity; experiential truth	Renunciation and inner detachment; discovery of the deathless Self	Yogic realization; disciplined inner transformation through body-mind practices
View of Ritualism	Strong rejection; mocks rituals, caste purity, priestly authority	Rejects ritual indirectly by rejecting worldly life and social expectations	Reinterprets ritual; gives it meaning only when grounded in ethics and yogic insight
Attitude to Social Hierarchy	Fierce critique of caste and religious hypocrisy	Critiques social bondage through impermanence and detachment	Advocates ethical equality; less confrontational but still reformist
Ethical Emphasis	Ethics arises from seeing Śiva in all beings; anti-discrimination	Ethics through detachment from ego, greed, and social entanglement	Systematic ethics: non-violence, truth, moderation, compassion, service
View of the Body	Body as temple; locus of realization	Body as transient; focus on transcending bodily attachments	Body as sacred instrument: yogic purification leads to realization
Literary Style	Paradox, satire, irreverence, earthy imagery	Autobiographical intensity; emotional immediacy	Aphoristic, philosophical, structured; blends tantra, yoga, and devotion

Dimension	Sivavakkiyar	Pattinathar	Thirumoolar
Pedagogical Strategy	Shock, destabilize, provoke insight	Dramatize renunciation; use personal crisis as teaching	Systematize and codify; offer a disciplined path
Contribution to Tamil Spirituality	Radical critique; democratization of spiritual authority	Model of renunciant mysticism; existential clarity	Foundational yogic-tantric synthesis; bridges Siddha and Śaiva Siddhānta

The concept-map style diagram is shown in Figure 1.

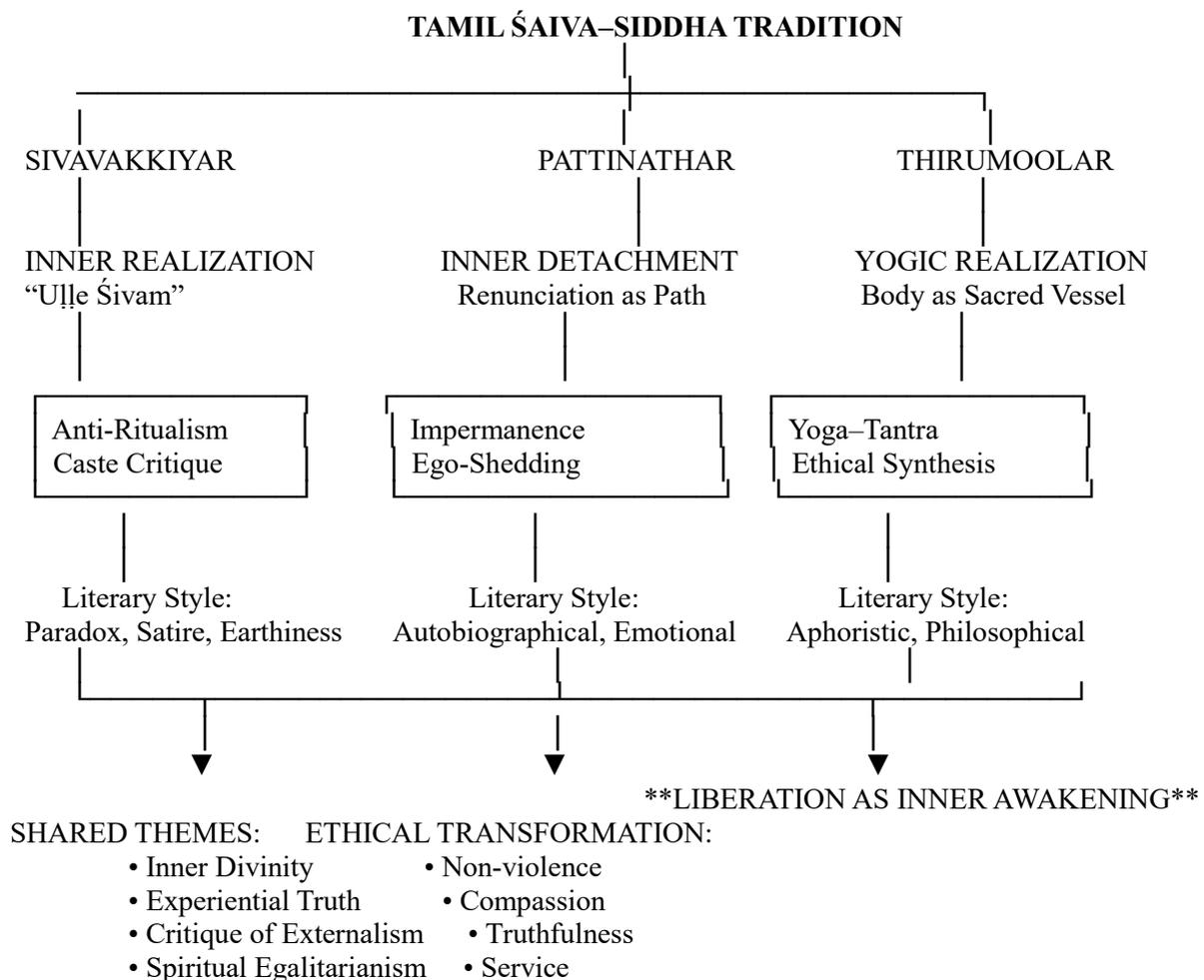


Fig 1: Concept Map: Sivavakkiyar • Pattinathar • Thirumoolar

The body of work indicating Sivavakkiyar as a radical Śaiva mystic poet reveals how he challenges spiritual complacency and social inequality, breaking down the phenomenon at multiple levels. His critique of ritualism and the caste system as part of the Śaiva structures is transcendental, suggesting that true realization is precluded by the mediation of structures, be it some physical institutionalized system, hierarchies, birth, or external observance. By emphasizing impermanence and the venal social hierarchy as a mere superficial covering, he redirects the devotional focus to the experiential reality of Śiva.

Sivavakkiyar uses paradox and other logically contradictory devices to elicit a reaction, which momentarily diverts a person from the focus of the regular thinking patterns. In this regard, he paradoxically uses religious language primarily to probe the rational system to question the root meanings of divinely inspired or genuine spirituality. His work serves the dual purpose of social critique, deeply spiritual at the same time, as it threatens to dismantle the social scaffolding built to support exclusion and inequality. The contemporary relevance of Sivavakkiyar is indicative of the possibilities of thinking of religion without dogma and hierarchy. With the debates on social justice and the

authenticity of the spirit being revived in the contemporary world, Sivavakkiyar's concept of *uḷḷe śivam*—Śiva in the Self—paves the way for thinking beyond religion. Sivavakkiyar is primarily regarded as a mystic poet.

However, he is also appreciated as a monumental subversive mind whose spirituality is a tool of provocation for the seekers of critical consciousness and inner transformation.

14. CONCLUSION :

The insights of Sivavakkiyar are a perennial example of ancient wisdom. His radical way of thinking calls for recognition of deeper spiritual truths beyond the superficial classification of body parts. Although the ancient world is a distant past, its ideas remain relevant to the contemporary world.

By boldly exposing the unjust social divisions of caste as based on bodily differences, Sivavakkiyar radicalized the entire social order. He highlighted the body as a universal biological reality that all humans possess, irrespective of their social classification, thus providing a rational and spiritual justification to counter unjust discrimination.

The other pillar of his philosophy relates to the impermanence of our physical bodies. He argued that our attachments to temporary bodies create spiritual ignorance, which blinds us to the fact that we are divine. Purely external practices that aim for the purification of the body are missing the point of the spiritual practice that is intended to transform the mind.

The model of Pati (Divine), Pasu (Soul), and Pasam (Bondage) provides valuable insights into the ways we become trapped and fixated on the physical and how we can possibly transcend that. The body, therefore, is also the greatest paradox: it is our greatest limitation and also the greatest potential for liberation.

Most importantly, Sivavakkiyar offered the practical path to spiritual liberation through the use of yogic techniques that are inner body-oriented. He taught that instead of worshipping external deities, one can attain oneness with the Divine by transforming the physical body into a temple through the use of inner body techniques, form control, and the raising of spiritual energies by the use of a mantra.

The ancient Tamil Siddha poet-saint teaches that beyond the names attributed to the bodily constituents, there is a reality of a different order. He teaches that we must probe beyond the superficial appearances of things and recognize the controlling, divine consciousness of all things. Thus, the Siddha's teaching would mean that there is an intimate relationship between the collection of a person's bodily constituents and the possibility of attaining the ultimate truth—a truth that is as valid today as it was in the time of Sivavakkiyar.

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