Approaching the Divine: Integrating Ālvār Bhakti in Śrīvaiṣṇavism 6th - 14th Centuries CE

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Abstract of Thesis

Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Centre for Historical Studies School of Social Sciences Jawaharlal Nehru University New Delhi

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The 6th to 9th centuries CE in Tamil Nadu saw the emergence and flowering of a deeply devotional form of religion which, as it acquired a distinct character, came to be called bhakti. Bhakti devotionalism which was eventually to become one of the most important aspects of the religious landscape of the subcontinent was focussed primarily on either of the two gods, Śiva and Viṣṇu (or his avatāras), who came to be elevated far above the rest of the fairly extensive contemporary pantheon, and indeed above each other, in the minds of their respective devotees. The Śaiva tradition recognizes sixty three saints called Nāyaṇmārs, while the Vaiṣṇava tradition reveres twelve Ālvārs. While many of the Nāyaṇmārs may have been legendary, since only a few have left behind compositions, the twelve Ālvārs have usually been thought to have been historical figures, as there are hymns attributed to all of them.

The Śrīvaiṣṇava community based largely in Tamil Nadu and in parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh venerates the Ālvārs as saints and devotees par excellence of Viṣṇu. Needless to say, Viṣṇu is the supreme godhead for the Śrīvaiṣṇavas who designate themselves so in order to distinguish themselves from other Vaiṣṇava sects and secondly because of a crucial theological belief in the inseparability of Viṣṇu and Śrī, the latter signifying both the god’s sākti and acting as mediatrix between the god and his devotee. This theological position was elaborated between the 11th and 14th centuries by brahmanical ācāryas.

The Śrīvaiṣṇava corpus of scriptures comprises the following:

1. The hymns of the Ālvārs in Tamil collected as the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham.
2. Philosophical works in Sanskrit, including commentaries such as Rāmānuja’s Śrībhāṣya and Gītābhāṣya expounding authoritative texts and independent treatises such as Vedānta Deśika’s Samkalpasūryodaya.
3. A vast body of commentarial literature on the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham in Tamil and in Maṇipravāḷa developed from the 11th century onwards.
4. Hagiographies of the saint-poets and the early ācāryas of the community composed in Sanskrit and in Maṇipravāla.

5. Stotras (praise-poems) composed by various ācāryas in Tamil, Sanskrit and Prākṛt.

In addition to these, the sihalapurāṇas of about a hundred shrines also constitute the bases of the belief and worship patterns of the community, though they do not have the same kind of canonical status as the above.

The Śrīvaiṣṇavas believe that there is a direct preceptorial line from the lord Viṣṇu through the Āḻvār saints, particularly Nammāḻvār, to Nāṭhamuni, the first of the Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas. Orthodox Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars also, therefore, believe in the continuity of the religious tradition from the Āḻvārs to the ācāryas. This position draws directly from the ācāryas beginning with Nāṭhamuni who saw themselves as direct spiritual descendants of the Āḻvārs. In 1983, Friedhelm Hardy challenged these age-old assumptions in his path-breaking Viraha Bhakti, arguing that the ācāryas of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition reinterpreted the hymns of the Āḻvārs to fit their contents into their own theological positions, in the process more or less erasing the deeply emotional content of the hymns,1 at least some of which draw on the rich erotic-emotional akam genre of Sangam literature. This position thus implies a decisive break between the Āḻvār bhakti tradition and Śrīvaiṣṇavism as a religious system that developed in the early centuries of the last millennium. Other modern scholars have marshalled textual evidence to question Hardy’s argument and reiterate the traditional claim, with qualifications.

This study was begun with the aim of investigating aspects of continuity and change in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition between the period of bhakti devotionalism of the 6th to 9th centuries CE and community consolidation under brahmanical ācāryas approximately from the 10th to the 14th centuries, in the context of the ongoing debate in scholarship on Śrīvaiṣṇavism. I believe that it is incorrect to posit a radical break in the tradition, but the traditional claim that the ācāryas were faithfully following the Āḻvārs in both letter and spirit also needs modification, there being significant departures from the themes of the saint-poets in their writings. At least some of these changes were responses to the changed socio-economic and political conditions of the early second millennium and the demands of an emergent community. I have tried to show this largely through an analysis of the hagiographical accounts and

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1 Hardy, Viraha Bhakti: The Early History of Krṣṇa Devotion in South India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi pp. 46, 480.
comparison of the same with the information available in the hymns of the Ālvars, though other materials such as the commentarial literature, *thalapurānas*, and inscriptions have often illumined an argument or provided critical proof. The picture that emerges from this study is of the *ācāryas* engaging, through the compositions of hagiographies and commentaries, in a creative project to integrate Ālvar *bhakti* into Śrīvaiṣṇavism.

Vasudha Narayanan and John Carman from their examination of the earliest commentary on the *Tiruvāymoli*, Tirukkurukai Pirān Pillān’s *Ārāyirappatti*, Nancy Ann Nayar from her study of the poetry of Kūresa and Parāśara Bhaṭṭar, and Steven Paul Hopkins from that of Vedānta Deśika, concluded that, contrary to Hardy’s belief, emotionalism remained an important aspect of the devotionalism of the *ācāryas* and was by no means whitewashed in the later tradition. Embedded in this concern with emotionalism is the understanding of the entire tradition represented by *bhakti*, and its compatibility with the philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita. I have examined the hagiographical accounts of two of the saints, Āṇḍāl and Tiruppāṇālvar, to see how the life-stories themselves can express the theological vision of Śrīvaiṣṇavism. Important aspects of Viśiṣṭādvaitic philosophy and Śrīvaiṣṇava theology were not merely expounded through the commentaries on the hymns and exegesis of texts like the *Rāmāyana* for lay devotees, but were carefully woven into the life stories of the saints. Besides showing how the hagiographies of Āṇḍāl and Tiruppāṇālvar can be read as expressions of the salvational programme of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, I have tried, throughout the study, to point out other philosophical-theological issues that emerge from the hagiographical accounts.

A significant number of modern studies on the Tamil region have used the *bhakti* material as an important source for studying the social, economic and political structures. However, it appears that a distinction has not always been maintained in such studies between the literary productions of the *bhakti* hymnists and the later productions of the Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas*. Of the vast body of this latter literature (the five earliest commentaries on the *Tiruvāymoli* alone adding up to the size of the *Mahābhārata*), it is essentially the traditions about the saints emerging from the hagiographies which have been extensively used in such studies because

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they appear to situate the saint-poets socially. This study has attempted to show that the hagiographies, being removed by several centuries from the bhakti hymnists, reflect the social realities of the early second millennium rather than the last third of the first which is when the Āḻvārs sang their songs to and about Viṣṇu. In other words, the stories of the lives of the saints, both the Āḻvārs and the Nāyānārars, that enjoy wide popularity among the Tamil people, may not have much relation with the saints themselves. Rather, they may be creations of a later period which portrayed the saints in specific ways for specific purposes. In other words, the picture we have of the bhakti movement in the Tamil land is one that is frequently refracted through the eyes of the hagiographers of the 12th-14th centuries. To use this evidence to speak about the social situation of the 7th to 9th centuries is, therefore, anachronistic.

One of the important premises of this study has been that literary productions must be situated in their historical context. While ideology cannot be considered a mere handmaiden of socio-economic forces, ideas do not take shape in a vacuum either. The hagiographical literature, thus, reflects the preoccupations of the ācāryas which was, in the Śrīvaiṣṇava case, the construction and consolidation of a community of devotees of Viṣṇu. However, while members of the lowest caste could be included within this community on the spiritual plane as bhāgavatas, it was finally within the hierarchical framework of brahmanism; here lay the fundamental tensions which were never satisfactorily resolved. A partial repudiation of orthodox varṇāśramadharma was attempted through emphasis in the commentaries on the equality of all irrespective of caste, and the portrayal by the hagiographies of some of the saint-poets as hailing from the lower castes.

The signature verses in the hymns of several saints do help to situate them socially and geographically. There is, thus, clear evidence of at least some of the saints hailing from non-brahmana castes. It is clear too that the ācāryas subjected the hymns of the Āḻvārs to careful scrutiny and constructed their life-stories by weaving in autobiographical details and other references that could be construed as such scattered in the hymns. Besides, this investigation revealed that the ācāryas’ ‘reconstructions’ of the lives of the saints were often bound by old, well-entrenched local traditions about them. It appears too that there was an equally well-established folk tradition of revering these saint-poets.
The earliest strata of Tamil literature and epigraphs in the Tamil land establish the presence and, indeed, popularity of Jainism and Buddhism. It has been argued that bhakti oriented towards the Puranic deities Śiva and Viṣṇu was a means of countering the challenge of the heterodox faiths to the brahmanical order. The hymns of both the Ālvars and the Nāyakmārs frequently exhibit antipathy towards the Jainas and Buddhists. The trend continues in the hagiographical literature too, but we find the condemnatory statements in the hymns giving way to stories of actual contests. Needless to say, the bhakti saints emerge as the winners in all these, and often inflict violent punishment upon their defeated opponents. Further, it is interesting that the stories in the hagiographies devote far more attention to contests with Jainas than with Buddhists though an examination of the hymns of the saints does not reveal a parallel bias. In fact, a majority of the hymns that refer to the Jainas and Buddhists pour scorn upon them in equal measure; indeed, they usually speak of them almost in the same breath. Thus, even as the hagiographers wove in the motifs of antagonism and condemnation present in the hymns of the saints, they reworked and refashioned them to reflect contemporary concerns. While Buddhism seems to have largely disappeared from the Tamil land after the first millennium, except from port towns where traders from other lands where it was a living faith congregated, Jaina presence was persistent though confined to certain areas. This must have meant a continued diversion of resources—however small a percentage of the total patronage—to Jaina establishments in the period of the composition of the hagiographies, and accounts for the far more bitter tales of rivalry in connection with Jaina monks than with the Buddhists who had more or less ceased to receive patronage.

The pattern of engagement with the Śaivas is characterised by attempts at one-upmanship rather than outright conflict. One finds any number of hymns in the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham which refer to Śiva desiring or receiving the grace of Viṣṇu, worshipping him, or admitting that a particular act such as granting salvation is beyond his powers. The Puranic myth of Ganga’s descent onto Śiva’s matted locks is elaborated further: it is the water with which Brahmā is said to have washed Nārāyaṇa’s feet after His cosmic act of measuring the three worlds that flowed onto Śiva’s head as the Ganga. Similarly, the legend of Brahmā and Viṣṇu trying to find the limits of the cosmic linga and failing is a favourite one with the Tevāram hymnists. In the hagiographies, however, we find several tales of philosophical debates, sometimes with Advaitins and at others with those who deny the superiority of Viṣṇu—though this is often not specified unless the opponents are Jainas or Buddhists. One gets the impression that by the 13th-14th centuries, the Śrīvaishnava ācāryas were more or less
resigned to their lower social and political influence compared with the Śaivas, and
concentrated on emphasizing, to the community of the faithful, the superiority in
philosophical debate of the early Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers—including some Āḻvārs like
Pēriyāḻvār who is portrayed as having successfully established the supremacy of Viṣṇu bhakti
in the Pāṇṭiya royal court. In fact, the story of Rāmānuja’s persecution by the unidentified
Coḷa ruler may also have meant to convey simply the perversity of fate that led to the
Śrīvaiṣṇava community falling upon bad times despite the evident greatness of its ācāryas. I
am not suggesting that the entire story is a fabrication; in fact, this study has consistently
tried to see how the available material was creatively reworked by the Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas
to create patterns of meaning relevant to the age of the composition of the hagiographies.

The heyday for Śrīvaiṣṇavism, so to speak, was from the late 14th century onwards with the
establishment of Vijayanagara rule. Many of the Telugu warriors and the Nāyaka rulers in
the succeeding centuries patronised Vaiṣṇava temples and maṭhas. It was in this period that
the Śrīvaiṣṇava pilgrimage network was elaborated, both with the construction of temples to
Viṣṇu and the composition of sthalapuraṇas glorifying sacred centres. Pilgrimage was an
important motif in the bhakti tradition, in fact, the Tevāram poetry of the three most
important Nāyāṃmārs, Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar, can be considered pilgrimage
poetry. While only Tirumānṟkkai among the Āḻvārs had a strong focus on pilgrimage, many of
the others have described several holy places of the Lord and almost all of them display
temple-oriented bhakti, i.e., their devotion was primarily directed not to a transcendent god
but to a deity enshrined in a temple. This immanent deity was, of course, equated with and
worshipped as the cosmic god as well. The emphasis on pilgrimage which is likely to have
begun towards the later part of the bhakti period was elaborated upon and consolidated in the
subsequent age.

The Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition is a complex product of the appropriation of a Tamil folk
devotional cult by a brahmanical tradition. This Tamil devotionalism, expressed powerfully
in the hymns of the Āḻvārs, was itself deeply influenced by Puranic–Sanskritic conceptions of
the cosmic lord Viṣṇu. It had borrowed too, several aspects of the brahmanical world-view
including that of the sanctity of the Vedas. What it did, however, was to stand this notion
almost on its head by claiming that the Puranic deity Viṣṇu was the essence and embodiment
of the Vedas as also their original giver. Thus, the Tamil songs in praise of Viṣṇu were, to
this Tamil devotional cult, and indeed, in the eyes even of some of the composers of these
songs, a rendering of the Vedas in Tamil, or better still, the very essence of the Vedas themselves. Nathamuni’s claim of Vedic status for the Tamil hymns was, however, revolutionary in brahmanical, Sanskritic terms. Nathamuni is credited with the ‘discovery’ and compilation of the hymns of the Ālvars. What he was clearly also attempting was brahmanical acknowledgement of the centrality of these hymns—which appear from the epigraphic evidence to have been popular from the late ninth century—in temple worship. His grandson Yāmunācārya furthered this process of accommodation through his Āgampriyamāṇya which argues for the Vedic validity of the Pāñcarātra. Yāmunā’s successor in the lineage of preceptors, the ācārya Rāmānuja, formulated a theistic Vedāntic philosophical system, the Viśiṣṭādvaita, that established the Vedic basis for bhakti devotionalism derived from the Ālvars. The ‘integration of Ālvar bhakti in Śrīvaiṣṇavism’—which is the title of this study—generated doctrinal as well as social tensions which the new leaders of the community, the Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas, tried to address through the composition of hagiographies, commentaries on the works of the Ālvars, and philosophical works. It is some of these mechanisms of integration that this study has attempted to examine.