

7th NETamil Workshop, February 2017, EFEO Pondicherry

Ālvārs and Divyadeśas – Vaiṣṇava Regional and Vernacular Voices

The first part of the upcoming workshop will be devoted to the voices of the Ālvārs, who, other than composing exquisite poetry in *tīm-tamiḷ* ('sweet Tamil'), also spurred the Bhakti movement that spread throughout the subcontinent fostering the growth of not just devotion but also of sublime vernacular poetry. There are regional and vernacular elements in those voices, but also personal ones. Some work has already been done on the Ālvārs' double heritage, that is, from the classical Tamil poetic tradition on the one hand, and from the epic and theological Sanskrit one on the other. How do these elements blend with the more regional and vernacular ones that are the Ālvārs' own contribution? Scholars willing to explore post-Ālvār traditions, extended to the other South Indian vernaculars, as well as hagiographic, iconographic, epigraphic and other traditions are also welcome.

The personal choices made by the Ālvārs in terms of themes, genres, metres inter alia, the peculiarity of their voices and styles, the depth of their emotions and devotion, are all matters of the greatest interest, especially since no two Ālvārs write similar poetry: while one composes *piḷḷai tamiḷ*, another toys with Vedāntic ideas, and another still paints a portrait of the 'Vaiṣṇava' landscape dotted by the many shrines he lauds, which are what are now referred to as *divyadeśas* (or 'sacred places').

The first exploration of the sacred places will, secondly, lead us to the thirteen shrines located in Kerala-deśa, or *malai-nāṭu* as the Tamil Śrīvaiṣṇavas refer to it, which are sung by Nammālvār, Tirumaṅkai, and possibly Kulacēkaraṅ. How do these shrines stand out—or not—from their Cōḷa or Pāṇḍya counterparts, in the Ālvār poetry, but also in terms of architecture, rituals, and other practices? What do their histories have tell to us about the evolution of the cult of Viṣṇu in the Southern peninsula?