

9<sup>th</sup> NETamil Workshop, 26 February to 2 March 2018, EFEO Pondy

### Tracing School Formations and Scholarly Networks

When attempting to understand how traditions function that try to preserve the integrity of their knowledge and beliefs without a reliable material basis – palm-leaves disintegrate quickly, individuals do not last, scholarly and religious institutions dissolve – the question becomes crucial as to how a piece of scholarly knowledge, say, in the form of a poem or a rule, passes from mouth to mouth or, in case it has already been written down, from hand to hand. The Tamil traditions are especially intriguing in this respect because on the one hand they are, with some two thousand years, of fairly long standing and yet, on the other hand, their manuscripts are short-lived, which means we are usually dealing with copies of copies. The sources brought together by the project allow to address such questions of transmission on three distinct levels.

The first level is purely textual: how may we discern different voices and multiple agency in the texts that have come down to us across the abyss of time? Here the most obvious area to look at is the Tamil tradition that created preserved the complex termed *ilakkaṇam-ilakkiyam*, but also long-lasting religious configurations such as the Śrīvaiṣṇava or the Śaivasiddhānta come to mind. For all of them we are faced with multi-layered root texts that attest to deliberate and often thoughtful interference, be it on the part of an individual or on the part of a group. Moreover, commentaries explain, expand and re-interpret the root texts, thus extending their lives often by many centuries. They preserve traces of their own period's discussions, allegiances and disagreements in the form of quotations and references. They may even place themselves deliberately in an intellectual lineage; prefaces (*pāyiram*) are the institutionalised place to do so. In short, what can be observed on the textual may be described as school formation.

The second level is that of the surviving material witnesses, the manuscripts so often despised and neglected, but also cherished, lovingly copied, shared with others, handed on in an attempt of further preserving them and what they stand for. Here we may observe the interaction of written and oral transmission via the paratexts that surround the texts copied in a given manuscript: titles, invocations, colophons, mnemonic stanzas, other types of satellite verses, quoted from elsewhere or created for the occasion.

They all tell us something about the communities that kept alive the various traditions, about their way of working, teaching, interacting, about their anxieties and their ritual habits. Evidence on this level may refer to individuals who are not necessarily scholars but may be mere scribes, although they are often members of institutions – mutts, libraries, palaces –, as well as about locations and times, difficult to interpret though this kind of information tends to be. In some rare cases such evidence may be supported by inscriptions and, vice versa, sometimes epigraphical data entail information as to how local people related to textual traditions.

The third level concerns the actual networking and handing or not handing over material in the phase for which material witnesses still survive, that is, for the most part, the 18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: marginal remarks on manuscripts as to prices, places and sales, working procedures that leave traces in manuscripts, (auto)biographies, exemplified in the famous works of U.Vē. Cāminātaiyar, scholarly papers and letters, publisher's documents, library notes – a veritable explosion of sources demands a variety of approaches in dealing with them. Here it seems reasonable to take into consideration also work on material related to the many other traditions not in the focus of the project. The gradual transition from a handwriting into a print-dominated culture and the colonial interference with older intellectual traditions have attracted quite some scholarly attention in recent years. Our common point of interest may be the “Tamil renaissance” in a wider sense, with its emergence of antiquarian efforts in preserving past Tamil glory which in our perspective amounts to the early history of Tamilistics as an academic discipline.