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BOLD AND FORTHRIGHT: MAPPING THE EVOLUTION OF TIRUMAḶICAI ĀḶVĀR AND HIS IRREVERENT VOICE¹

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The article is dedicated to TirumaḶicai ĀḶvār (ca. 7th c.), who is one of the early ĀḶvārs, Tamil saint-poets devoted to Viṣṇu (ca. 6th–9th c. CE). He was a younger contemporary of Pēy, Poykai, and Pūtam. In contrast to them, TirumaḶicai’s temperament is feisty, as he has little patience for people who differ from his views, and can be utterly provocative towards anyone. He is also very different from most of his successors like PeriyāḶvār or NammāḶvār, in the sense that his poetry is not overly emotional, with no heart-rending or pleading nor excessive joy, since his is a more intellectual kind of bhakti. His two works, namely, the *Nāṇmukaṇ Tiruvantāti* and the *Tiruccantaviruttam*, bear testimony to that fact. His is a unique voice that deserves to be studied in some depth, which this article only begins to do.

The focus of the article is the irreverent verses by TirumaḶicai to understand the poet who produced them. Who was TirumaḶicai, especially in terms of his background and his character? Why were his verses termed “controversial”? Who was the target of his irreverence? And who inspired his poetry? Does he follow the norms and the examples set by his predecessors, e.g. the Caṅkam poets and the other bhakti poets or does he break away from them? In what ways? And how has his voice survived throughout the centuries? Did it undergo a transformation that guaranteed its survival or did it remain intact?

These are some questions dealt with in this article to make sense of the poet and his poetry. In order to gain a better understanding of his poetry, the article first introduces TirumaḶicai based on his own words, supplying historical information whenever possible and/or necessary. Then there is a transition to his irreverent verses that bring out his bold voice loud and clear. And finally, a study of how his voice was transmitted in the centuries following his existence, and how it evolved in order to adapt itself to the needs and ideas of the Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars.

Keywords: TirumaḶicai ĀḶvār, *Nāṇmukaṇ Tiruvantāti*, *Tiruccantaviruttam*, Tamil poetry, bhakti, Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars

Introduction

TirumaḶicai ĀḶvār (ca. 7th c.²) is one of the early ĀḶvārs, Tamil saint-poets devoted to Viṣṇu (ca. 6th–9th c. CE). He was a younger contemporary of Pēy, Poykai, and Pūtam [Kulacēkaran 1988, 58; Aiyangar 1929, 36], whom Nilakantha Śāstri qualifies as “remarkable for their non-sectarian outlook and for the purity and gentleness of their devotion” [Śāstri 2006, 336]. In contrast to them, TirumaḶicai’s temperament is fiery, as he has little patience for people who differ from his views, and can be utterly provocative

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In this article, I am going to focus on the irreverent verses by Tirumaḷicai to understand the poet who produced them. Who was Tirumaḷicai, especially in terms of his background and his character? Why were his verses termed “controversial”? Who was the target of his irreverence? And who inspired his poetry? Does he follow the norms and the examples set by his predecessors, e.g. the Cankam poets and the other bhakti poets or does he break away from them? In what ways? And how has his voice survived throughout the centuries? Did it undergo a transformation that guaranteed its survival or did it remain intact?

These are some questions that I will be addressing in this article to make sense of the poet and his poetry. In order to gain a better understanding of his poetry, I shall first introduce Tirumaḷicai based on his own words, supplying historical information whenever possible and/or necessary. I shall then focus on his irreverent verses that bring out his bold voice loud and clear. And finally, I shall examine how his voice was transmitted in the centuries following his existence, and how it evolved in order to adapt itself to the needs and ideas of the Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars.

1. Tirumaḷicai in his own words

Although the poet does not give his name⁴, he does apparently give more information about himself than the other early Ālvārs. For one thing, he is rather explicit about his birth:

I have not been born in any of the four castes.
 I have not learnt the four good Vedas.
 I, who am a senseless person, have not overcome the five senses.
 O Pure One!
 I have not embraced anything other than Your lustrous feet,
 O our Supreme Being! (TCV 90)⁵

Tirumaḷicai clearly states here that he was not born in any of the four *kulas* (which I understand as *varṇa* and translate as “caste” here for the sake of convenience). As a result of his birth, he was not schooled in the Vedas, whose access is restricted to the initiated males of the first three castes (*traivarnika upanīta*), and therefore, perhaps, he was not able to curb his senses. Thus, in the first three lines, the Ālvār lists all the obstacles that could hinder someone seeking liberation, especially since many means to liberation (like the *karma*-, *jñāna*, or *bhakti*-yogas) require one to be a *traivarnika upanīta*. In the last quarter of the verse, the dynamics change, as Tirumaḷicai claims to have embraced God’s feet as an alternative, which tips the balance in his favour, being the only solution for the likes of himself who are not authorised to adopt other means. In fact, Tirumaḷicai may even be implying here that it is a wonderful thing to be an outcaste, as obtaining liberation is made easier for him, especially since the other means are notoriously difficult to perform.

Although this verse may not sound bold or provocative initially, it may well have to a Vedic Brahmin in the 7th c. who believed in performing fire sacrifices and other such rituals, and certainly not in the worship of God in His iconic form enshrined in a temple and so forth, and who expected liberation as a result. And while the Ālvār may have been using poetic license here to exaggerate his own unworthiness, which should make divine grace more forthcoming, he also uses the occasion to highlight the fact that there was no need to be a Brahmin well-versed in the Vedas to be saved from this *saṃsāra*. He is

neither apparently bitter nor sorry about his birth, nor does he hint that he feels inferior to the upper caste people on account of his birth. However, the later Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographers seek to explain away this detail concerning his birth by stating that he was born to Brahmins, abandoned as a child, and brought up by lower caste people. This may have been done to explain/justify his knowledge of the Vedic ideas despite his claims to the contrary, or perhaps to ensure that he was not all that inferior since he was after all Brahmin-born⁶.

To get back to Tirumaḷicai's background, his dates are not easily determined (as is the case with most premodern poets in the Tamil land). His own words show the influence of a few well-known works, such as the *Tirukkuraḷ*⁷ (dated around the 5th–6th centuries). Also, one of his verses (NTA 93)⁸ uses a key word, *kuṇaparaṇ* (< Skt. *guṇapara*), a title conferred upon the Pallava king Mahendra Varman I (ca. 600–630 CE), for reasons that scholars debate upon⁹, although this practice finds parallels in other Tamil bhakti verses, in which a king's title is used to address God¹⁰.

When it comes to religious affiliations and beliefs, Tirumaḷicai comes across as a staunch Vaiṣṇava, who is very critical of the people who worship other gods:

The Jains do not know [the truth], the Buddhists have forgotten [it],
Śiva's priests [are] insignificant people. To state [the truth],
those who do not praise the fragrant Dark One, Māl-Viṣṇu, Mādhava
are therefore base people now (NTA 6)¹¹.

Characteristically, Tirumaḷicai is blunt when stating what and who he believes in and who he considers as the “others”, which includes not just two non-“Hindu” sects, but also the worshippers of Śiva. And this is interesting in light of later hagiographic texts that suggest that he tested many different belief systems before settling for the worship of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa¹², while other texts identify him with a Śaiva poet called Civavākkīyar¹³. None of this can be proved or disproved. But one thing is for sure: his feistiness is palpable in verses like the above. Before we move on, two comments need to be made here: firstly, knowing God/the truth is important to Tirumaḷicai as we shall see repeatedly¹⁴, and one of the main reproaches that he makes to the Jains and the Buddhists in the first line, is that they do not know the truth through which they could recognize true God. Tirumaḷicai's is more of an intellectual kind of bhakti, not yet tinged with the kind of emotion found in the poetry of the later Āḷvārs such as Kulaśekhara (ca. 9th century¹⁵). Secondly, the Śaivas seem to fare worse than the Jains and the Buddhists in the above verse, a topic that I shall return to. It is worth noting, however, that this sort of “anti-heretical” impulse was common at that time¹⁶.

Now that we have an idea of who Tirumaḷicai was, let us properly focus on his bold, irreverent verses, which make up the core of this article.

2. Tirumaḷicai's irreverent verses

2.1. The poet's criticism of the others

We have already seen Tirumaḷicai stoutly declares that people of other faiths are wrong. In fact, he does not just disapprove of other gods and their devotees, but also of people who do not adhere to his worldview in general, and never hesitates to make his opinion known without mincing words. Here is one such example, in which Tirumaḷicai claims that he will not praise a human being, but only God:

I shall not sing of mankind with [my] tongue.
[My] songs [will] be on the red feet of the Lord of Vaikuṇṭha,
who did not [condescend] to be pleased, as [Śiva] with fire-like red matted locks,
carrying flowers, goes to forever extol [Him] as much as possible (NTA 75)¹⁷.

The humans referred to here are most probably the high and mighty, potential patrons for the poets. The poet expresses his loyalty to Nārāyaṇa but uses the occasion to belittle

Śiva, thereby implying that he would *not* consider praising other gods like Śiva *either* as the latter himself depends on Nārāyaṇa for obtaining what he wants. Tirumaḷicai also implies that despite trying, Nārāyaṇa will not be easily pleased with Śiva, who offers Him flowers, but will be delighted with Tirumaḷicai, who offers Him words instead.

It also seems to me that his categorical statement in line 1 is an oblique way of criticizing other poets, who lived before, during, and after his times, and who depended on a patron to support them financially, and who, therefore, sang in praise of kings and wealthy men. In the Caṅkam period for example, the wandering bards depended on such patrons for their livelihood, as can be seen in a poem by a woman poet called Auvaiyār, who praises the chieftain-cum-patron Atiyamāṇ: she states that however many times she goes to this chieftain, and however many friends she takes along, he always welcomes them all properly. And that whether he gives rewards for their poems immediately or not, they are as good as given. So there is no need to worry that he might turn away poets empty-handed¹⁸. Praising a generous patron and abusing a miserly one were common among such poets. But Tirumaḷicai's exclusive and firm devotion is apparently making him berate a system established centuries ago, and one that will go on existing well into the modern period. But we shall see later on whom he considers as an alternative patron, and what he receives as rewards from him.

To move on, one might think that provocative verses would be reserved for Śiva, or the other gods, and the humans, but Tirumaḷicai actually can be quite cheeky even when dealing with or addressing Nārāyaṇa, to whom he swears absolute devotion, as we shall see.

2.2. Cheeky verses for God

Let us now read an uncommon verse, which is supposed to be in praise of the one God whom Tirumaḷicai is devoted to:

Is there anyone equal to me? Our Lord is
His own equal, but not [mine]! O You with the hue of ironwood-flowers
from the uplands! The others do not know You.
Is the entire sky a suitable price for my mind?¹⁹ (NTA 51).

Instead of swearing undying devotion or pining for a visit to the temple where He is enshrined, Tirumaḷicai actually shows his equality with (if not superiority to) God! Claiming to have no equal, not even in God, he seems to suggest that the reason why this is so is that he knows God, while the others do not, which takes us back to the theme of knowing. And this knowledge of God makes his mind priceless, allowing the poet to claim to be that he is unrivalled even by God²⁰. So this is a verse that brings forth the poet's pride and cheekiness, but it would be a lot more provocative if we read it in the most natural way, i.e., by taking the foremost meaning of the root *ā* which is "to become", "to be" in *āvār* and *āvāṇ*:

Is there anyone for me? Our Lord is
for Himself, but not [for me]!

Of course, this would be profane, but so very like Tirumaḷicai, if he had meant to indulge in producing a blame-praise type of verse²¹. In another verse, the *Ālvār* reinforces his cheekiness by going a step further and claiming that while he did not exist without God, God did not exist without him either:

Whether it comes today, or tomorrow,
or be slightly delayed now, Your grace is mine.
Look, O Nārāyaṇa! I indeed do not exist without You,
[but] You do not exist without me [either] (NTA 7)²².

In the first two lines, we feel an unmissable sense of entitlement. But when he declares that God's grace might take time in coming, but it surely will (and to who else but to

himself!), he also echoes Auvaiyār when she asserts that Atiyamāṇ's gifts will come sooner or later and that they are as good as ours even he has not given them out yet. Here, Tirumaḷicai replaces the king with God and the material gifts with His grace.

In the following two lines, Tirumaḷicai expresses a certain mutual need for their respective existences, because God and devotee are reciprocally relating figures: we cannot speak of a servant when there is no master, and vice versa, so it is correct that God and devotee are mutually dependent. But although he is irreverent, Tirumaḷicai also speaks from a place of what is known as *urimai* in Tamil, “privilege of intimacy, liberty on the ground of friendship” (*Tamil Lexicon*), so he definitely feels so very close to God as to be irreverent²³.

This sense of equality, intimacy, and (over?)confidence seems to push the Ālvār to question God and order Him about too, when he is peeved at not being received by the enshrined Deity Himself in Tirukkuṭantai (modern-day Kumbakonam):

Did the feet that walked hurt (1)? Was the body – which scooped out
The trembling earth, becoming a Boar – shaken (2)? Rise from [Your] reclining posture
in Kuṭantai – on the banks of the Kāveri with extensive channels,
which cross big, obstructing mountains [and] difficult deserts –
and speak! May You prosper, O Keśava! (TCV 61)²⁴

Reference (1) is to Rāma, who walked across the land, and (2), to His manifestation as a boar that saved the earth. After questioning God about the soreness of His feet and the state of His tiredness, Tirumaḷicai orders Him to get up and answer Him. And as we shall see later, the traditional story is that the icon did rise to obey him.

A remark on this Ālvār's cheeky verses before we move on to the next part: they are cheeky, but never fully-fledged rebukes. Nor exactly is this praise in the form of blame (*nindā-stuti*), which is so very common in bhakti literature. His irreverent poetry thus does seem rather rare, especially before Tirumaḷicai's time, although we do find a few after him, like the ones by Cuntarar, a 9th-century Saiva saint-poet²⁵.

Having listened the voice of an overconfident devotee, who feels very secure and is very sure of his intimacy with God and knows that he will not offend (and would not care if he did), we shall now move to the final part, and focus on this Ālvār and his voice's afterlife, and what the later Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas make of them both, for which I will mostly be using the verses that have already been quoted above.

3. The Afterlife of Tirumaḷicai's voice

The Śrīvaiṣṇavas, who were mainly followers of Rāmānuja (12th c.), canonized the Ālvār poetry, and placed it at the core of their philosophy. Thus, they commented upon it and wrote about the life stories of the Ālvārs centuries after they lived. Let us now see how they transmitted Tirumaḷicai's voice and what they made of its inherent cheekiness.

3.1. Śrīvaiṣṇava theological commentaries

To begin with the commentaries: both works attributed to Tirumaḷicai have been commented upon by Periyavāccāṇ Piḷḷai (ca. 13th c.), a prolific commentator, who wrote in a highly Sanskritized Tamil called Manipravalam. And while Tirumaḷicai comes across as proud or even arrogant in some of his verses, Piḷḷai, as a general rule, seems to want to explain it differently, even if it means taming the poet's voice. If we take NTA 51, “Is there anyone equal to me? Our Lord is His own equal, but not [mine]!”²⁶, Piḷḷai writes:

“Is there anyone equal to me, who consider God as [my] protector? Because the Supreme Being does not have a protector for Him, He is not equal to me either!”²⁶

Here, Piḷḷai adds two subclauses (underlined above) to explain why Tirumaḷicai does not have an equal: because his protector is God Himself! And why is even God not equal to him? Because Tirumaḷicai has God as his protector, while God does not have one. We could also understand this as God having a certain lack, in the sense that He does not

have what Tirumaḷicai does, but I am not sure Piḷḷai intended that meaning. It seems to me that Piḷḷai wants to make sure that people do not “mistake” Tirumaḷicai (and take him too literally). As an Ālvār, after all, he is supposed to set a good example.

A modern commentator goes a step further: Prativādibhayaṅkaram Aṅṅaṅkarācārya (20th c.) states that “This ego is not bad. It is acceptable. It is called *sāttvika* (‘virtuous, good’) ego”²⁷. So, he goes out of his way to explain that even if this comes across as arrogance/ego, this is not the kind of pride or arrogance that affects lesser mortals, because being proud about being a devotee is not bad.

Thus, both commentators seem to explain away the perceived arrogance of Tirumaḷicai as they cannot have an Ālvār displaying negative qualities, and thus setting a bad example²⁸. Let us now move on to the next verse, namely, NTA 7 (“Look, O Nārāyaṇa! I indeed do not exist without You, [but] You do not exist without me [either]”), which Piḷḷai interprets in an equally interesting way:

Because I – recognized as being utterly destitute – do not have another recourse but You, You, who are complete, do not have any recourse other than me, an incomplete one. [This bond] cannot disappear, due to Your essential nature as God, and mine as a devotee²⁹.

The commentator once again presumes that the original verse is elliptical and needs much elucidation. Therefore, he supplies extra words (underlined above), and in the process of explaining all this, changes the meanings of Tirumaḷicai’s words to an extent. He thus states that 1) Tirumaḷicai has God as his sole recourse; 2) Therefore, God has no choice but to need Tirumaḷicai in turn (because it is God’s nature to hang on to the devotee, although He technically is fully independent); 3) and although God is complete in every way (and therefore, He does not need anything) and although the individual soul is incomplete, the moment the latter seeks Him, and no one but Him, the Former also needs the latter; 4) this mutual dependence is due to their respective essential natures, and even God cannot break it. So, here too, I have a feeling that Piḷḷai is making sure that Tirumaḷicai comes across as saying the right thing, and therefore, his voice has been tamed in a way.

Let us now turn our attention to TCV 61, “Did the feet that walked hurt? (...) Rise from [Your] reclining posture in Kuṭantai (...) and speak! May You prosper, O Keśava!” A similar process is at work in Piḷḷai’s interpretation of this verse. We saw earlier on that Tirumaḷicai asks a few rhetorical questions to God and orders Him to get up and talk to him. Now, Piḷḷai explains this as the Ālvār being genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of the Deity, which is the reason why he asks those questions (so they are not at all rhetorical to him). Following that, Piḷḷai suggests, Tirumaḷicai asks Him to get up and speak to make sure that He is fine³⁰. Hagiography narrates how the icon began to rise to obey the devotee and Tirumaḷicai stopped the process by pronouncing the blessing *vāḷi*, and that the icon has remained in that half-risen posture ever since in the Tirukkuṭantai temple.

Let us now look at one final verse which will show us how, when not “defending” Tirumaḷicai’s voice and opinions, Piḷḷai at times provides a theological interpretation, where the passage may not need one at all, and seems to make Tirumaḷicai a serious-sounding poet (which he is, in some verses, but not in all):

[Śrī]Raṅgam – with beautiful, cool water
where, as the heron moves away after eating the crab [and] the scabbardfish leaps,
a barbus-fish roams about, securing the help of the blue nelumbo [flower] –
is the town of the Lord who rejoiced at heart
by dispatching thoroughly an earthen ball
at the hump of the hunch-backed woman,
around whose garlanded chignon bees wander (TCV 49)³¹.

Let us now focus on the description of Śrīraṅgam and its natural landscape, which is standard in bhakti verses, especially in the temple verses. Often, they do not have any

special or esoteric meanings (at least from my point of view), although in the Caṅkam poetry, the poets do use the fauna and the flora for the *uḷḷurai uvamam* (“implied simile, a technique that consists in using a natural scene (the fauna and the flora) to describe actions, emotions, characters and so forth” *Tamil Lexicon*). While in the Caṅkam verses the similes are tied to everyday life³², the interpretation of the symbols found in the Āḷvār verses turns theological with the Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators. Thus, he explains the different elements from “as the heron moves away after eating the crab [and] the scabbardfish leaps, a barbus-fish roams about, securing the help of the blue nelumbo” in the following way:

- crab = worldly pleasure
- heron = the soul that has become afflicted with ego (consuming the above)
- scabbardfish = the performer of worship (an *upāsaka* who performs bhakti-yoga)
- the *barbus*-fish = the surrenderer (*prapanna*), who seeks
- the blue flower = the blue God
- and stays free under His protection

So Piḷḷai suggests that the heron, which is the individual soul, becomes afflicted with ego by consuming worldly pleasure, represented here by the crab which lives in the pond of *samsāra*. The scabbardfish, which corresponds to the *upāsaka* (who takes responsibility for his³³ own liberation for example by practising bhaktiyoga), is worried of getting a little ego because he is an actor in his own liberation, even though he has stopped consuming material objects. But the *barbus*-fish, which represents the surrenderer, seeks the refuge of the blue flower, i.e. the blue-hued God, and stays free under His protection.

Of course, when dealing with any text, the reader can offer any interpretation, even one that the author did not have in mind. So, the same goes for Piḷḷai’s theological explanation of what seems to me as just a description of a very fertile land and pleasant place. Having said that, perhaps realising that some people might object to this reading, Piḷḷai states that if you do not take the description of the natural setting as being symbolic, but just a description of the landscape, then the verse would have no use for you. It, therefore, seems that when something passes through the lens of the Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators, that thing becomes something proper and of religious importance. And in this case, by providing interesting interpretations, the commentator seems to create new works altogether. However, I have worked on Piḷḷai’s commentaries on the poetry of other Āḷvārs, and I have not seen him do such a thing, so it must be the cheekiness of Tirumaḷicai that made him try to clarify things and present a “respectable” Āḷvār to the devotee.

Now that we have examined commentary texts, let us explore the more colourful hagiographic texts to check how Tirumaḷicai and his voice fare in them, especially in light of what happens to them in the commentaries.

3.2. Hagiographic works

For this part, I will be using two major (and influential) works, which also happen to be early ones³⁴, namely, Garuḍavāhana Paṇḍita’s *Dīvyasūricaritam* (13th CE?) in Sanskrit and more importantly, Piṅṇaḷakiya Perumāl Jīyar’s *Āṟāyirappaṭi Guruparamparāprabhāvam* (14th CE?; henceforth, GPP) in Maniṇṇavalam. Since the latter is more elaborate, I will use it predominantly³⁵.

3.2.1. Hagiography based on Tirumaḷicai’s words

Some of the stories about Tirumaḷicai narrated in these texts are directly based on the hagiographers’ understanding of his words, often modified into exaggerated versions at times. One example of this, which cannot be elaborated upon here due to lack of space, is an episode from “Tirumaḷicai Āḷvār vaibhavam” in the GPP³⁶. In this, Tirumaḷicai snubs Siva who comes to offer him boons because the former firmly believes that Nārāyaṇa is the sole Supreme Being and thereby, the sole granter of liberation. The inferiority of other gods and the supremacy of Nārāyaṇa, and the accompanying belittlement

(specifically of Śiva) must find their roots in Tirumaḷicai's poetry (see NTA 6 and 75 above). It is almost as if the fiery words of Tirumaḷicai take the form of a literally fiery battle between him and Śiva in the GPP, which he wins, of course.

3.2.2. Hagiography: based on a modified interpretation of his words

At other times, the hagiographers seem to take Tirumaḷicai's words and twist them to suit their own purposes. Let us take a brief example: we have already seen that Tirumaḷicai claims to be an outcaste (See TCV 90 above), but that the Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars make him a brahmin boy by birth who was discarded by his parents and brought up by a low-caste couple. This process of turning the Āḷvār into someone he does not claim to be starts right at the beginning of the narration of Tirumaḷicai's story in the GPP, in the same chapter mentioned above:

As for Lord Tirumaḷicai: the way he graciously descended [on earth] and the way he graciously grew up were like Kṛṣṇa, who "being born as the son of one woman, [with]in a night, grew in hiding as the son of another" (*Tiruppāvai* 25)³⁷.

As we can see, this text establishes a parallel between Tirumaḷicai Āḷvār and Kṛṣṇa, for both grew up with a different set of foster parents from right after birth. The author of the GPP goes back to this parallel whenever he deems it necessary in the text. And we can see that the whole process of "legitimizing" the Āḷvār must have begun with the reading of his verse that reveals his birth details (See TCV 90 above), which the scholars must have felt the need to tweak for reasons that I have already discussed (See fn 7).

3.2.3. Hagiography: based on his spirit

Finally, on other occasions, the hagiographers write stories based not on the words, but rather on Tirumaḷicai's spirit, which I think they understood and captured very well, in fact, much better than the commentators who were more conservative in their views. In such cases, it is still possible to try to trace a story back to the poet's words, and yet, it is not there in any visible form. Let us take the example of Tirumaḷicai and his disciple Kaṇikaṇṇaṇ: The "Tirumaḷicai Āḷvār vaibhavam" in the GPP tells us that while living in Tiruveḷkka near Kāñcipuram along with his disciple Kaṇikkaṇṇaṇ, the Āḷvār turns an old woman who served him into a young woman. The king of the land marries her, and then learning the truth from her, he approaches Kaṇikaṇṇaṇ and tells him to ask his master to turn him young too. As Kaṇikaṇṇaṇ refuses, the king banishes him from Kāñci. As a result, Tirumaḷicai decides to leave along with his disciple. And according to the GPP, he uttered this verse to the main deity in the Tiruveḷkka temple:

Kaṇikaṇṇaṇ is leaving, O sapphire-hued Lord
from beautiful, desirable Kāñci! Do not lie here!
I, a bold poet with a tongue of integrity, am also leaving.
[So] You, too, roll up Your hooded cobra-mat!³⁸

And, God obeys him, and all three leave the city. As a result, the king's city plunges into darkness, so the king begs Kaṇikaṇṇaṇ to return. The disciple dutifully asks his teacher, who now tweaks the original verse a little:

Kaṇikaṇṇaṇ is not leaving, O sapphire-hued Lord
from beautiful, desirable Kāñci! You must lie down [now]!
I, a bold poet with a tongue of integrity, am not leaving either.
[So] You, too, spread out Your hooded cobra-mat!³⁹

And once again, God obeys and they all return to Tiruveḷkka, but in order to mark the event, He lies down in the reverse-reclining position (as Vasudha Narayanan [Narayanan 2017, 246] calls it). But before we proceed, it is worth remembering that we do not really know who composed these verses above: either they were floating verses that were incorporated in the GPP, or else they were composed by its author himself. Whichever way, there is no evidence that they are Tirumaḷicai's original verses. Anyway, we can notice

here that devotee and God are friends, equals even. In fact, Tirumaḷicai is seen giving Him orders, which He obeys. Therefore, it seems to me that this story is based on the spirit of Tirumaḷicai, which is revealed, for example in this case, in the verse in which he is seen giving orders to the Deity in Tirukkuṭantai (see verse TCV 61 above). And this faithful obedience of the Deity could also be due to the fact that Tirumaḷicai calls himself a *cem nā pulavaṇ*, a bold poet with a tongue of integrity, who never told anything but the truth and thereby, never praised another (see verse NTA 75 above).

To get back to the story of the Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa icon moving at the Āḷvār's will: this shows us how much respect the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographers had for Tirumaḷicai, because in this story, the Deity in the form of an icon breaks His *arcāsamādhi* ("the silence of the *arcā* icon"), which the Śrīvaiṣṇavas make much of. For it is believed that God voluntarily resolves to maintain a certain decorum appropriate for the *arcā* form: He chooses not to move, talk and so forth. And yet, in stories related to Tirumaḷicai, the deity breaks the rules that He had imposed upon Himself, so that He could obey him. Therefore, Tirumaḷicai is an extra special devotee.

Concluding thoughts

To recapitulate: we saw that Tirumaḷicai was a staunch Vaiṣṇava who had a particularly condescending attitude towards Siva, devotees of other gods, and apparently anyone who does not share his worldview. We also noticed how cheeky he can be with his own favourite god, who is the Supreme Being in his eyes. But we feel that he feels close to God, which allows him to take liberties with Him. Therefore, being forthright and even irreverent is part of his personality, which is what makes him stand out among the other poets, even though he does show traces of being conversant of Caṅkam poetry and that of the early Āḷvārs, not to mention the Sanskrit literature, something that we could not deal with in this article due to lack of space.

Granted, the Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars saw everything through the lens of their own philosophical system, the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, and therefore, his voice may have been distorted slightly, especially by the commentators, to suit a certain image of him that they wished to project. However, the hagiographers make the most of an Āḷvār who seems larger than life, with a colourful personality, even though they use what I call "hagiographic licence" to give vent to their imagination and magnify and exaggerate everything.

Moreover, these Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars are responsible for preserving this rich poetry for over a millennium, thus ensuring that the poet has an afterlife and that his voice is still alive and heard: thus, his icon is installed in many Śrīvaiṣṇava temples, along the other Āḷvārs or in separate shrines⁴⁰; and with a few differences, he gets worshipped like Nārāyaṇa Himself, with celebrations in the temples that mark his birthday, for example. His verses are still recited during religious festivals, in the streets, in the temples, at home. Commentaries on his works are still being published, and new ones written. Discourses on his works are still being made. And outside the religious field, people still sing his verses in concerts and perform on them. Thus, both Tirumaḷicai and his words (the provocative ones and the others) have lived for over 1,300 years, and continue to live and thrive even now in the 21st century.

¹ This is an improved version of a talk that I gave at the Department of South Asian Studies (Harvard University) as part of the South Asian Studies Lecture Series in April 2021. I thank the editors of this volume who accepted this article, and fellow scholars who helped me with information and suggestions for improvement, such as Elisa Freschi, Ute Huesken, Vasudha Narayanan, Ilanit Loewy Shacham, and Marion Rastelli. All flaws are entirely mine.

² For a detailed discussion on this Ālvār's date, see: [Kulacēkaraṇ 1989, 57–86]. Although some of the conclusions drawn in this work are not necessarily trustworthy, Kulacēkaraṇ does present the major dating suggestions and issues with them.

³ Some scholars do not believe in the single authorship of these works. For a discussion on this topic, see: [Hardy 1983, 439–442].

⁴ This is because he has not composed signature verses, the final verses of a decade or a poem, which often also state the *phalaśruti* (“fruit of listening” to the work) and/or details about the poet. The early Ālvārs do not have that practice, and this could be another sign that Tirumaḷicai belongs to the early stratum. We only know that “Tirumaḷicai Ālvār” (“the Ālvār from Tirumaḷicai”) may have been given to him in the medieval period when his poems were assimilated into the *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham* corpus, which is a collection of the various Ālvārs' poetry. One final thing is that Tirumaḷicai is not a place that is mentioned by any of the Ālvārs. Although the Pallavas seem to have built a temple for Viṣṇu around the 7th c. [Nambiar & Krishnamurthy 1965, 48], which has unclear lithic inscriptions, the oldest, decipherable inscription is from the period of Kulōttuṅga Cōḷa III (1179–1216 CE), and it indicates a gift of land to the “temple of Tirumaḷicai Ālvār”. This does not prove anything except that the link between the Ālvār and the place is as old as the inscription unless we accept the authorship of the two *taṇiyans* (“self-contained verse”), namely, *taru canta poḷil* by Tirukkacci Nampi (10th–11th c.) and *nārāyaṇaṇ paṭaittāṇ* by Cīrāmapillai (ca. 12th c.).

⁵ *kulaṅkaḷ āya īr irāṅṅil onṛilum pīraṅṅ' ilēṅ, / nalaṅkaḷ āya nal kalaikaḷ nālilum naviṅṛilēṅ, / pulāṅkaḷ aintum veṅṛilēṅ poriyilēṅ puṅṅita niṅ / ilaṅku pātam aṅṅri marṛ' or parṛilēṅ em īcaṅē.*

⁶ The motif of the exposed infant is common in many literatures of the world, especially in the ancient world. The child is usually rescued by someone/an animal and brought up by the same or another person, often a social inferior. In India, in the *Mahābhārata*, we have the example of Karṇa, who was abandoned by his young unwed mother. In the Tamil world, too, it recurs often, e.g. poets such as Tiruvaḷḷuvar, Auvaiyār, the Caṅkam poet Kapilar and the chieftain Atiyamān are said to have been abandoned at birth. It is even claimed that they were all siblings, born to a brahmin father. But why is such a motif so prevalent? There might be many theories explaining such a phenomenon, one of which belongs to a non-brahmin Tamil scholar, Somasundara Bharati (20th c.): “The brahmana hagiologists invented brahmana connections and miraculous birth stories of saints and poets of non-brahmin origin in order to strengthen the myth of genetic and intellectual superiority of the brahmana” [quoted by Jaiswal 2000, 17].

This seems plausible in the case of the Tamil poets that I mentioned above, but could that be why the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographers came up with such a story for Tirumaḷicai? It would have been the case had they not gone out of their way to make at least one of the Ālvārs an outcaste without any apparent basis, viz., Tiruppāṇ Ālvār. The latter's ten verses give no hint about his caste, but the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographers claim that he was an outcaste. Moreover, the greatest among the Ālvārs, Nammālvār, was deemed of Śūdra birth, and yet the Śrīvaiṣṇavas give his words the status of Tamil Vedas. And all the Ālvārs are worshipped inside many of the temples run by the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, including Tirumaḷicai. So why attribute a brahmin parentage to Tirumaḷicai when he clearly states that he is an outcaste? Especially since the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas do not particularly worry about an Ālvār being an outcaste? My working theory is that it was all about who gains entry inside a temple: based on the descriptions of the main deities, all the Ālvārs seem to have entered shrines freely, and there is no mention of caste being a barrier to entering a shrine in their poems. So we may presume that the *varṇa* system may not have consolidated itself deeply in the Tamil land yet, whereas it *had* in the later medieval period when the post-Rāmānuja Śrīvaiṣṇavas lived, when an outcaste was not allowed inside a temple for fear of compromising the ritual purity of the temple. Moreover, it is likely that in the 6th–7th centuries, during the times of the early Ālvārs, the shrines were very basic structures, often open-air shrines, or small structures with a few pillars and a roof, like the hundreds of shrines of goddesses, snakes or the village deities that dot the Indian landscape even today. So the deity would have been visible from all sides so that even if someone wanted to keep a person out (which probably one did not at that time), it probably would not have been possible to prevent them from having a good look at the deity. This, the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas many centuries later may not have realized, because in their own times, the temples were progressively becoming imposing structures with high walls. Therefore the Śrīvaiṣṇavas may have projected their own values and realities onto people who lived many centuries

before them and thus felt the need to explain away why and how the Ālvārs supposedly of an inferior caste came to enter sacred shrines. So, that may be why they made Tirumaḷicai brahmin-born, which would make his entry inside shrines tolerable, if not legitimate.

They used similar tactics with Tiruppāṇ and Nammālvār too. Tiruppāṇ is claimed to have entered the Srirangam temple solely through divine will, and even then, he was carried on the shoulders of a brahmin priest, so that his body did not touch the temple premises. As for Nammālvār, the problem was solved by claiming that he sat under a tamarind tree throughout his life and that the deities from all the divine places that he sang about in his poems personally came to give him *darshan*. In other words, he saw them in his mind. So, this issue related to access to the temple may have pushed the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographers to interpret Tirumaḷicai's clear statement on his caste differently. This hypothesis needs further research.

⁷ His is one of the first Tamil bhakti works to show such an influence [Kulacēkaran 1988, 91–92]. Compare his verse: *vittum iṭa vēṇṭum kollō viṭai aṭartta/ pakti ulavan paḷam puṇattu...* “Is there a need to sow seeds in the ancient field of the Ploughman of bhakti who subdued the bulls?” with the *Kuraḷ* verse (85), *vittum iṭa vēṇṭum kollō virunt'ōmpi/ miccīl micaivāṇ pulam* (“Is there a need to sow seeds in the field of the man who entertains the guests and eats the remaining food?”).

⁸ *ākkai koṭutt' aḷitta kōṇē! kuṇaparaṇē!*

⁹ Scholars such as Aiyangar [Aiyangar 1929, 42fn2] believe that Tirumaḷicai may have used the term to address Nārāyaṇa in order to point out that He is the one who truly deserves such an epithet, not an ephemeral, fickle king.

¹⁰ For more information on this topic, see: [Aiyangar 1929, 42fn2].

¹¹ *ariyār camaṇar ayarttār pavuttar/ ciṇṇiyār civappaṭṭār ceppil veriyāya/ māyavaṇai mālavaṇai mātavaṇai ēttār/ iṇavarē ātalāl iṇru.*

¹² A verse attributed to him by the hagiographic text, the *Guruparamparāprabhāvam*, echoes the idea: *cākkīyam kaṇṇōm. camaṇ kaṇṇōm. caṅkaraṇār/ ākkiya ākama nūl ārāyṅtōm. pākkīyattāl/ cem kaṇ kariyāṇai cērntōm. yām tīt' ilamē!/ eṅkaṭk' ariyat' onr' il!* – “We learnt the doctrine of Śākya, we learnt Jainism. We examined the doctrinal treatise that the honourable Śāṅkara created. Out of good fortune, we joined the Dark One with red eyes. We are free from evil! Nothing is hard for us!”

¹³ See, for example: [Kulacēkaran 1988, 64]. The Śaiva retelling of his story believes that the Ālvār later became a Śaiva.

¹⁴ He often uses the verb *ari* “to know” (line 1 here, in the negative) or a synonym.

¹⁵ For more on this Ālvār, see the introduction in: [Anandakichenin 2018].

¹⁶ Here is what Tirumaḷicai's contemporary, Śaiva counterpart Campantar, states in one of the relatively “nicer” verses: *puttarōṭu puṇ camaṇar poy uraiyē uraittu,/ pittar-āka kaṇṭ' ukanta peṇṇimai eṇṇai kol ām?*

matta yāṇai īr urivai pōrttu, vaḷar caṭaimēl/ tutti nākam cūṭiṇāṇē! cōpura(m) mēyavaṇē!

“What is [this] nature [of yours] that enjoys seeing the Buddhists and the lowly Jains speak falsehood and become insane? O you who wear a spotted snake upon the long matted locks, wrapping yourself in the hide stripped off a rutting elephant! O you who reside in Cōpuram!” (*Tēvāram* 1.51.10)

We notice here that the ideas expressed above are similar in spirit to the ones found in Tirumaḷicai's verse. And we need to remember that the Tamil Jain texts also reciprocate this kind of feeling, which cannot be dealt with here due to lack of space. But what is notable is that Campantar does not abuse the Vaiṣṇavas. This is something that I have found generally to be the case with Śaiva poets as opposed to the Ālvārs in general, not just Tirumaḷicai. What I observed here is that in Tirumaḷicai's verses, the wholly others (to use the terms used by Gil Ben Herut [Ben-Herut 2018]), the Jains and the Buddhists, seem to fare better than the “opponent others”, i.e. the Śaivas, who are technically closer to the Vaiṣṇavas. Actually, more than the Śaivas, it is Śiva himself who fares badly, throughout Tirumaḷicai's work, as the poet never misses an occasion to show that he is inferior to Viṣṇu, and to an extent, to himself (as we shall see). Tirumaḷicai's aggressive stance towards Śiva makes me wonder about the 16th–17th c. theory (in Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographic works such the *Prapaṇāmṛtam*) that before being turned into a Vaiṣṇava by Poikai Ālvār, Tirumaḷicai was an ardent Śaiva: do Tirumaḷicai's words betray the zeal of the new convert, who felt the need to prove himself? It is hard to say.

¹⁷ *nāk koṇṭu māṇiṭam pāṭēṇ, nalam-ākat/ tīk koṇṭa cem caṭaiyāṇ cenru, eṇrum – pūk koṇṭu/ vallavār' ētta makilāta, vaikuntac/ celvaṇār cēv aṭimēl pāṭṭu.*

¹⁸ *oru nāl cellalam; iru nāl cellalam; paṇṇāl payinru, palaroṭu celliṇum/ talai nāl poṇra viruppiṇaṇ, mātō!/ aṇi pūṇ aṇinta yāṇai iyal tēr/ atiyamāṇ paricil peṇṇūm kālam/ nīṭṭiṇum, nīṭṭātāyīṇum, yāṇai-taṇ/ kōṭṭ'itai vaitta kavaḷam pōla/ kaiyakattat'atu; poy ākātē;/ arunta ēmānta neṇcam! / varunta vēṇṭā; vāḷka avaṇ tāḷē!*

“He welcomes us still / as on the first of days, / though we go there / not just one day, / or two days, / but many days / with many friends, / does Atiyaman Ani / of the jeweled elephant / and the artful chariot. / Whether the time for gifts / comes right now / or is put off for later, / it's like fodder / left in reserve / on the elephant's tusk, always there / at hand, waiting; / it won't become a lie. / wishful heart, / do not scramble for it, / Bless him, his works” [tr.: Ramanujan 2011, 139].

¹⁹ *eṇakk'āvār ār oruvarē? emperumāṇ/ taṇakk'āvāṇ tāṇē, marr' allāl. puṇam kāyā/ vaṇṇaṇē! uṇṇai pīrar aṇiyār. eṇ matikku/ viṇ ellām uṇṭō vilai?*

²⁰ He probably placed himself and God in two different categories, of which they are the best specimens, according to him.

²¹ The *Tamil Lexicon* gives the meaning of “to be equal” as one of the meanings of *ā*, but cites this very verse as an illustration, so it makes us wonder whether this could be an hapax legomenon. But it does not seem so, since another *Ālvār*, perhaps the earliest of them all, Poykai, uses the same expression, which Tirumaḷicai seems to repeat: *eṇakkāvār ār oruvarē? emperumāṇ/ taṇakk'āvāṇ tāṇē! marr' allāl, puṇa(m) kāyā/ pū mēṇi kāṇa poti aviḷum pūvai pū, / mā mēṇi kāṭṭum varam*. “Is there anyone equal to me? Our Lord is His own equal, but not [mine]! [For, even] the hue of ironwood flower from the uplands [and] the bilberry flowers with buds that open when seen / remind [me of His] most excellent body!” Therefore, we have a parallel for the usage of *ā* as “to be equal”, especially since Poykai is not given to playful bandying with words or irreverence, unlike Tirumaḷicai. It is also possible that Tirumaḷicai's verse above (and this one by Poykai) are elliptical, and the simple supplying of a word like *oppu* “comparison” would easily give us the meaning “who is equal to me?”

²² *iṇr' āka, nāḷaiyē āka, iṇi ciṇitum/ niṇr' āka, niṇ aruḷ eṇ pāl-atē. nanr' āka/ nāṇ uṇṇai aṇri ilēṇ, kaṇṭāy/ nāraṇaṇē! / nī eṇṇai aṇri ilai.*

²³ This verse can also be understood as God being dependent for His existence on a devotee, who defends and establishes Him as God, especially when there are rival gods around. This is not the traditional reading, but mine, which reminds me of this floating verse attributed to Udayana the logician (11th century), who speaks thus to God, when he feels snubbed by the priests of a temple (according to the story): *aiśvāryamadamatto 'si mām avaṇāya vartase | upasthiteṣu bauddheṣu madadhīnā tava sthitiḥ* || “You are drunk with the intoxication of sovereignty, You ignore me! When the Buddhists appear, Your existence will depend upon me!” This sounds like Tirumaḷicai's voice to me.

²⁴ *naṭanta kāḷkaḷ nontavō? naṭuṅku ṇālam ēṇam-āy/ iṭanta mey kuluṅkavō? vīlaṅku māl varai curam/ kaṭanta kāḷ paranta kāviri karai kuṇantaiyul/ kiṭanta ār' eḷunt'iruntu, pēcu! vāḷi, kēcaṇē!*

²⁵ *perra pōḷtum peṇāta pōḷtum, pēṇi uṇ kaḷal ēttuvārkaḷ/ marr' ōr par'ilar eṇru iraṅki, mati uṭaiyavar ceṅkai ceṅyūr;/ arra pōḷtum alanta pōḷtum, āpaṅkālatu, aṭikē! ummai/ orri vaittu iṅku uṇṇalāmō? ōṇakāntiṅṭaḷi uḷīrē!* “At all times, / whether they are rewarded / Or not, your servants worship your anklets / with love. / You know they have no other support, / and still you have no compassion, / you act / without wisdom or reason. / And if, lord, / they become wholly destitute and afflicted, / in a moment of disaster, / can they mortgage you for food, / you who are in Ōṇakāntiṅṭaḷi?” (*Tēvāram* 7.5.3; tr. David Shulman).

In this verse, the poet first tells Śiva that his devotees worship him whether he rewards them or not, but that he is not helping them. And finally, he wonders whether they could mortgage him if they need money to eat. So although it begins like a blame-praise, it ends on a sarcastic note, and although it sounds similar to Tirumaḷicai's voice, it is actually very different as Tirumaḷicai never really expresses reproach or bitterness. For, he is sure about being the recipient of God's grace sooner or later and is content to wait, as per verse NTA 7 that we saw earlier on.

²⁶ *emperumāṇ rakṣakaṇ eṇr' irukkīra eṇakku oruttar etir uṇṭō? iśvaraṇ taṇakku oruvaṇ rakṣakaṇ uṇṭ' eṇru irāmaiṅālē avaṇum eṇakku opp' aṇru.*

²⁷ *i- ahaṅkāram heyam aṇru, upādheyam-ām. sāttvikāhaṅkāram eṇa-p-paṭum.*

²⁸ We can notice here that there is a continuation between the 13th-century Piḷḷai and this 20th-century commentator, and that these two are much closer to each other despite the 700 years that separate them, than Piḷḷai and the 7th-century *Ālvār* are.

²⁹ *akiñcanaṅ-āka sampratipannaṅ āṅa eṅakku unṅnai oḷiya vēṅ' oru apāśrayam illāmaiyaḷē, pūrṅṅā-āṅa unṅakku apūrṅṅā-āṅa eṅṅai oḷiya vēṅ' oru apāśrayam illai. unṅṅuṅaiya śeṣatvasvarūpat-tālum eṅṅuṅaiya śeṣatvasvarūpattālum viṅṅap pōkātu.*

³⁰ Indeed, Piḷḷai uses the term *parivu* (“affection, an emotional kind of affection”) for Tirumaḷicai, which is a word that is usually used for Periyālvār, who is an emotional poet who worries about Kṛṣṇa’s safety and wellbeing. And I really do not think that Tirumaḷicai has much in common with him.

³¹ *koṅṅai koṅṅa kōtai mītu tēṅ ulāvu kūṅi kūṅ/ uṅṅai koṅṅu, araṅka oṅṅi, uḷ makiḷṅta nāṅṅa ūṅ/ naṅṅai uṅṅu, nārai pēra, vāḷai pāya, nīlamē/ aṅṅai-koṅṅu keṅṅai mēyumu am taṅ nīr araṅkamē.*

³² Let us look at an example from Caṅkam poetry: *yārum illai, tāṅē kaḷvaṅ./ tāṅ atu poypṅṅi yāṅ evaṅ ceykō?/ tiṅai tāḷ aṅṅa ciṅru pacumu kāla/ oḷuku nīr āral pārkkumu/ kurukumu uṅṅu, tāṅ maṅanta nāṅṅē.* “There was no one, but the thief himself. If he deceives [me], what shall I do? There was only a small heron with green legs like millet stalks looking for sand-eels in the flowing water when he united [with me]” (*Kuruntokai* 25). In this verse, a young girl is telling her friend that she met a man and that they immediately consummated their mutual attraction. And now she worries about whether he would keep his promise since the lovemaking had no witnesses except for a heron looking for prey. Here, the role of the flora and fauna is very clear: the heron intent upon catching the fish reflects the man intent upon taking her *nalām* (virginity).

³³ I follow Piḷḷai in using the masculine when speaking of people in general terms, or of the individual souls. Moreover, only a *traivarnika upanīta* can perform an *upāsana* in order to obtain liberation, which doubly justifies the usage of the masculine here.

³⁴ There are doubts concerning the dates of these works, but I tend to think that they are both early ones. Or at any rate, they were composed before the 15th c.

³⁵ A word on this kind of literature: in a way reminding us of Mark Twain, the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographers never let the truth get in the way of a good story, especially if they did not have access to facts, as in the case of Tirumaḷicai. However, when they have enough facts to go with, their writing is relatively more trustworthy, e.g. when they write about the Śrīvaiṣṇava Ācāryas, who were closer to them in time than the Ālvārs were.

³⁶ The story occupies more than three pages of vivid description, which unfortunately cannot be given here.

³⁷ *ālvār tirumaḷicai pirāṅ ākiṅār – “orutti makaṅ-āy piṅantu, oṅ iravil orutti makaṅ oḷittu vaḷar” nt’ aruḷiya kṛṣṇaṅnai pōḷē āyṅṅu avataritt’ aruḷiṅa paṅiyumu, vaḷarnt’ aruḷiṅa paṅiyumu.*

³⁸ *kaṅikaṅṅaṅ pōkiṅṅāṅ, kāmaru pūm kacci/ maṅivaṅṅā! nī kiṅṅakka vēṅṅā! tuṅiv’ uṅaiya/ cem nā pulavaṅṅumu pōkiṅṅāṅ. nīyumu unṅṅaṅ/ painṅṅāka pāy curuṅṅi-k-koḷ.*

³⁹ *kaṅikaṅṅaṅ pōkk’ oḷiṅṅāṅ, kāmarumu pūm kacci/ maṅivaṅṅā! nī kiṅṅakka vēṅṅumu. tuṅiv’ uṅaiya/ cem nā pulavaṅṅumu pōkk’ oḷiṅṅāṅ! nīyumu unṅṅaṅ/ painṅṅāka pāy paṅuttu-k-koḷ.*

⁴⁰ For example, in the place where he is supposed to be buried (in Kumbhakonam), his shrine has both a main deity made of stone and a processional icon made of metal(s).

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С. Анандакіченін

Сміливий і прямолінійний: нарис еволюції Тірумалішя Альвара і його язикатості

У статті йдеться про Тірумалішя Альвара (бл. VII ст.), який був одним із ранніх альварів – тамільських поетів-вішнунтів (бл. VI–IX ст.), яких індуїсти вважають святими. Він був молодшим сучасником Пея, Пойгая та Путама. Від них Тірумалішя відрізняється темпераментом: він сміливий, не особливо толерантний до тих, чий світогляд відрізняється від його власного, і може бути непоштивим до когось завгодно. А від більшості таких його наступників, як Періяльвар чи Наммальвар, Тірумалішя відрізняє відсутність екзальтації в його поезії: у ній немає розпачливих благань чи надмірної радості, оскільки характерним для нього

є більш інтелектуальний різновид відданості Богу. Свідченням цього є дві праці Тірумалішя: “Нанмуکان Тірувантаті” й “Тіруччантавіруттам”. Його унікальний голос заслуговує на поглиблене вивчення, і ця стаття є лише початком роботи в цьому напрямку.

Фокус уваги статті спрямований на непоштиві вірші Тірумалішя, для того щоб зрозуміти поета, який їх склав. Ким був Тірумалішяй за походженням, яким характером вирізнявся? Чому його вірші назвали “суперечливими”? На кого була спрямована його язикатість? Хто надихав його на поетичну творчість? Чи дотримувався він норм, встановлених його попередниками, зокрема поетами Санкаму та іншими поетами-бгактами? Брав він з них приклад чи, навпаки, дистанціювався від них? Як це відбувалося? Як його голос дійшов до нас через століття? Зазнав його творчий спадок трансформації, що гарантувала йому виживання, чи залишився незмінним? Це деякі із запитань, поставлених у цій статті, щоб зрозуміти поета та його поезію.

Аби читачі краще зрозуміли поезію Тірумалішя, у статті спочатку надається слово йому самому, а історична інформація додається тоді, коли це можливо та/або необхідно. Далі відбувається перехід до його нешанобливих віршів, у яких виразно й голосно звучить його сміливий голос. І, нарешті, проводиться дослідження того, як Тірумалішяй продовжував жити протягом століть у своєму голосі і як той еволюціонував, щоб адаптуватися до потреб та ідей богословів Шрі-вайшнавизму – однієї з чотирьох головних течій вішнуїзму, прибічниками якої поклоняються Вішну і його дружині Шрі (Лакшмі).

Ключові слова: Тірумалішяй Альвар, “Нанмуکان Тірувантаті”, “Тіруччантавіруттам”, тамільська поезія, бгакті, Шрі-вайшнави

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