

**Bharati Jagannathan, *Approaching the Divine. The Integration of Ālyār Bhakti in Śrīvaiṣṇavism*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2015, pp. xvii+342.—  
Reviewed by Jacek Woźniak (University of Warsaw)**

Śrīvaiṣṇavism is the most important and influential Vaiṣṇava tradition in South India. The cult of Viṣṇu in Tamil-speaking areas is very old. Tamil classical poetry of the so-called *caṅkam* period (most frequently dated in the first centuries of CE) mentions a god known as Māyōṇ or Māl (‘The Dark One’), who is identified with Kṛṣṇa, one of Viṣṇu’s avatāras described in Sanskrit sources. Vaiṣṇava literature in Tamil flourished from the sixth to the ninth centuries, when *bhakti*, or deeply devotional form of religion and a new social movement based on it, originated in South India. The twelve *ālvārs*, or the poets venerated by the Śrīvaiṣṇavas as saints, composed their lyrical hymns during that time. The *Nālāyirattiviyapirapantam*, or the collection of their Tamil devotional works, is regarded as the fifth Veda, the divine Revelation, and has found its place in religious ritual reserved so far only for the Sanskrit. Śrīvaiṣṇavism is sometimes called the Ubhaya Vedānta (‘double Vedānta’), since its primary and canonical texts are composed in these two languages. Besides the *Nālāyirattiviyapirapantam* in Tamil, they include philosophical works in Sanskrit, commentaries, hagiographies and *stotras* (in Tamil, Sanskrit and in Tamil Maṇipravālam). These subsequent texts were composed by the Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas*, or religious preceptors and scholars in later medieval times.

The actual role of the *ālvārs* in the emergence and further development of the Śrīvaiṣṇavism that matured under the influence of the *ācāryas* is a matter of scholarly debate. As Bharati Jagannathan writes in the *Introduction* to her study (4), the Śrīvaiṣṇavas believe in “direct pre-ceptorial line from Lord Viṣṇu through the *Ālvārs* (...) to Nāthamuni, the first of the Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas*” and they accept “the continuity of the religious tradition from the *Ālvārs* to the *ācāryas*”. As she continues, this traditional view is sometimes challenged by the Western scholars, such as R. Lester and F. Hardy, who argued that the *ācāryas* “reinterpreted the hymns of the *Ālvārs* to fit their contents into their own theological positions, in the process more or less erasing the deeply emotional content of the hymns” (4). As the author explains, this position implies a “decisive break” between the Bhakti tradition as it is expressed in the *Nālāyirattiv viyapirapantam* and the Śrīvaiṣṇavism understood as the religious system constructed by the *ācāryas*. According to Bh. Jagannathan, claiming the existence of such a “radical break in the tradition” is not correct (5). In her view, which is echoed in the title of her work, it was quite otherwise—the Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* did not break with the Bhakti poetry of the *ālvārs* but creatively integrated it into the religious outlook of the Śrīvaiṣṇavism. Thus in her own work she tries to “distinguish elements of continuity between the *Ālvār* and *ācārya* traditions as well as differences between the two” (5). To do so Bharati Jagannathan examines really vast source materials dating from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries, being both literary and archaeological, or rather epigraphical ones (20).

The book is divided into six chapters, followed by the *Appendices*, *Bibliography* and *Index*.

In chapter 1 (*Introduction*; pp. 1–46) the author gives introductory remarks about the subject of her study and presents the reader with its basic components, such as conventional Tamil classical poetry, the figure of Māyōṇ or Māl, Bhakti devotionalism, and the Śrīvaiṣṇava community as such. Thus, Bh. Jagannathan pays attention to the political and religious backgrounds, respectively. Then the description of literary and epigraphic sources follows, introducing briefly the textual canon of Tamil Vaiṣṇava tradition and its saint-poets, the *ālvārs*.

Chapter 2 (*The Hagiographical Accounts*; 47–94) is devoted to the presentation of traditionally recognized narratives of the *ālvārs* and the life of Rāmānuja, the most outstanding Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācārya*. The author refers here to famous hagiographical texts in Sanskrit, Tamil and Maṇipravālam. The chapter ends—rather unexpectedly—with very short accounts of five Śaiva saints from the *Periya purāṇam*. If the mention of Appar and Sambandar is somehow justifiable, as they are counted among the most significant Śaiva Bhakti poets, the choice of the other three saints of the Śaiva creed seems to be rather accidental since it seems they bear no evident relation to Vaiṣṇavism.

Chapter 3 (*The Ardently Loving Lord: A Promise of Salvation*; 95–126) deals with selected aspects of Śrīvaiṣṇava **theology**, **especially** the doctrine of salvation. The author presents the religious considerations of the medieval *ācāryas*, based mainly on the arrangements of the ritualistic Pāñcarātra and philosophical Viśiṣṭādvaita school of thought. The final part of this chapter is a crucial one for the entire work, since it is here that Bh. Jagannathan presents the integration of Tamil mystic poetry into the Śrīvaiṣṇava theological system built so far only in Sanskrit literary works and philosophical treatises. Taking as an example the idea of salvation, the author proves that it was the medieval *ācāryas* who through their commentaries shaped “the understanding of the *Ālvārs*’ hymns” (119), mostly to suit their own purposes of defending the orthodox nature of the Viśiṣṭādvaita. Thus, the ideas of this philosophical school were infrequently used to interpret poetry of the *ālvārs*, who became the ideal *prapannas*, or salvation seekers, for the Śrīvaiṣṇava community, regarded even as the “*avatāras* of different aspects of Viṣṇu” (123). Commentarial tradition of medieval *ācāryas*, as argued by Bh. Jagannathan, “systematized and streamlined” (125) the rather diverse hymns of the *ālvārs*, whose literary vision of God and their devotion towards him differed from the Śrīvaiṣṇava theological ideas. As aptly noted by the author, “The integration of the Tamil tradition was a consistent creative project, carried out largely by the interpretation of the verses of the *Ālvārs* in the light of Viśiṣṭādvaita principles” (125).

Chapter 4 (*Equal Before the Lord: Negotiating Caste*; 127–177) deals with the important question of the Bhakti movement perceived as the egalitarian one vs. the one actually strengthening caste hierarchies. As noticed by the author, “The hymns of the *Ālvārs* do often show evidence of indifference to caste, and of treating all devotees of the lord as one’s superiors” (128). However, later hagiographies and commentarial texts that appeared under the Brāhmaṇa religious leadership of the *ācāryas* seem to express some “tension between a hierarchical society and a limited egalitarian sphere within it” (157).

Chapter 5 (*‘Whose God is the Greatest of All?’ Engaging with Other Faiths*; 178–223) presents Hindu Bhakti in relation with other faiths, i.e. Jainism and Buddhism, which were popular in South India at that time. The author gives general information on the archaeological and inscriptional evidence related to these two religions, and continues with her analysis of Hindu devotional hymns. The texts testify not only to Śaiva-Vaiṣṇava rivalry, but also give some light on the relation of Hindu orthodoxy with other ‘heterodox’ faiths. A short note on Islam and the presence of the ‘Muslim Goddess’ in Śrīvaiṣṇavism (218) is also given.

Chapter 6 (*Bathing in Every Tīrtha: Patterns of Worship, Pilgrimage and the Saint Poets*; 224–278) focuses on sacred sites in Tamil Nadu and the saints who sang their hymns in / about them. The pilgrimages to these places perceived as the “acts of piety” (253) are well grounded in the local tradition and a very important feature of Bhakti devotionalism.

It must be stressed that Bharati Jagannathan’s study is a very important and awaited work in the field of Indian religious tradition(s), dealing extensively with the history and culture of Southern regions. The author is well acquainted not only with Tamil Bhakti poetry and Śrīvaiṣṇava traditional accounts and views, which is her firsthand experience, but she proves her skills also in reading and interpreting inscriptions and other relevant historical source materials, which makes her study a real piece of erudite scholarship being the result of her deep interest and profound knowledge on the complicated subject. Thus,

---

Bharati Jagannathan not only presents in detail the numerous texts of the *Ālvārs*, but clearly shows their significance to the Śrīvaiṣṇava *ācāryas* and the development of Śrīvaiṣṇava theological ideas. She refers to almost all relevant studies done before on this topic (the *Bibliography* covers over 30 pages), and more importantly, she does not simply report the results of studies and interpretations of other scholars, but leads an open dialogue with them, bravely expressing her own views and posing her own questions, which makes her study so interesting and worth reading. Thereby Bharati Jagannathan makes her readers better understand and appreciate the cultural milieu of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas.