

***Ālvār* or *Nāyaṇār*: The Role of Sound Variation, Hypercorrection and Folk Etymology in Interpreting the Nature of Vaiṣṇava Saint-Poets**

S. Palaniappan

1. Introduction:

Between the sixth and ninth centuries C.E., the Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu produced several Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava poets revered as saints by their respective followers. The Śaiva saints were called *nāyaṇārs* (< Skt. *nāya* “leader”) meaning “lord, master”. The life stories of 63 of these *nāyaṇārs* were sung by the 12th century poet, Cēkkiḷār, in his *Periyapurāṇam* or *Tiruttonṭarapurāṇam*. The songs of three *nāyaṇārs*, Campantar, Appar, and Cuntarar comprise the Tēvāram. The Vaiṣṇava saints are known by the term *ālvārs*. The honorific singular form, *ālvār* (< *āl-* “to sink, dive, be absorbed, immersed” DEDR 396¹), is taken to mean “one who is immersed” referring to the saint being immersed in his/her devotion to Viṣṇu. There are twelve saints who are generally categorized as *ālvārs*. Eleven of them are male and one is a female. More specifically, the female saint is known as Āṇṭāl (< *yāl-* “to rule” DEDR 5157) meaning “one who rules, lady, mistress”. She is also known as Nācciyār (< Nāycciyār) which means “lady” and is ultimately traceable to the same Sanskrit root as that of *nāyaṇār*.

Regarding the position of the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saint-poets in the Bhakti tradition, Vidya Dehejia says:²

The Saiva and Vaishnava saints are not merely figures to be revered and admired. Rather actual ritual worship is offered to them. Vishnu temples usually contain separate shrines with stone or bronze figures of the twelve Alvars. Here they are lustrated, clothed, and ornamented, the daily ritual being similar to that of Vishnu himself. In Siva temples, images of all the sixty-three Nayanmars are aligned in the hall that surrounds the sanctum of Siva. Large wealthy temples such as Tiruvidaimaradur [sic], Tiruvarur and Mayuram, all in the Tanjavur district, contain two complete sets of these sixty-three saints, one of stone and the other of bronze.”

On comparing the semantics of the names of the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints, however, one is left to wonder if the two traditions saw their respective saints in different roles within their respective communities. In fact, on the basis of such a comparison, Friedhelm Hardy (1983: 250-51) says of the *ālvārs*:

The authors of these various works are collectively known as the Ālvār (-kaḷ): this is an honorific title (~Nāyaṇār (-kaḷ)), the meaning of which however became obscured by various attempts to render it pregnantly or metaphorically: “who is immersed in deep meditation”. A number of

¹ DEDR refers to the entry in the Dravidian Etymological Dictionary, Second Edition, by T. Burrow and M. B. Emeneau.

² Dehejia 1988:8-9. Words such as Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, *ālvār*, and *nāyaṇmār* have been transliterated differently by different authors in publications not using diacritic marks. In quoting these authors, their transliterations have been presented as in the originals.

considerations speaks against such an artificial interpretation. In accordance with the general parallelism between Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite material in the South, the term “*nāyaṇār*” (“lord, master”) suggests an equally concrete and straight-forward sense for “*ālṅvār*”. De facto these poets can hardly be described as “immersed in deep meditation” because their Bhakti opposes precisely this religious attitude which implies a “withdrawal of the senses”. While the eleven male authors are all called (x-) *ālṅvār*, the one poetess is called *āṅṅāl* “the lady” (lit.: “she who rules”). The Skt. rendering is *sūri*¹¹ “learned man, sage” (particularly as the title of a Jain teacher).¹² Finally, etymology too appears to suggest a different interpretation.¹³ Originally, we probably had *ālṅvār* ~ *sūri* in Jain and Buddhist names,¹⁴ meaning “sage, saint”. From here, the title acquired a more general meaning outside Jain or Buddhist contexts, like “noble person, lord, master”¹⁵ (to which *āṅṅāl* is a fairly precise semantic parallel in the feminine), until it became used simply as a morpheme expressing “polite speech”, added, e.g., to “Viṣṇu’s discus” or the tree under which Nammālṅvār meditated.¹⁶ “Saintly lord” seems therefore the most appropriate translation, derived from contemporary parlance.

¹¹ For example, in the Divya-*sūri*-caritam or in Prapannāmṛta

¹² Thus MW. We also find *sūri* “lord, master”, but only in the ṚgV.

¹³ One can separate either *ālṅ* “depth” + *ār* = *kuṛippuvai*, or *āl-* “to sink, be absorbed” + *v* (future/present) + *ār* (3rd pl.). Literally this would be “who possesses profundity” or “who is/will be absorbed”.

¹⁴ The MTL mentions names like Avirodhi-ālṅvār, Maitri-ālṅvār. It is a different question, how *ālṅvār* developed semantically ~ *sūri* (had Skt. *sūrya/sūri* “sun” anything to do with *ālṅvār* “sun?”); What is important here is only the fact that *sūri* ~ *ālṅvār*.

¹⁵ South Indian Inscriptions, III, p. 150 (quoted MTL): *ālṅvār Tiruvaraṅka-tēvar* “lord, god of Śrīraṅgam”.

¹⁶ For example, (3000) Guruparamparāprabhāvam (p. 18): *tiru ppuliy ālṅvār aṅṅiyilē* “at the foot of the noble tamarind tree”.

It is obvious that Hardy’s attempt at explaining *ālṅvār* is not very satisfactory. Hardy does not show any evidence that Jain and Buddhist use of *ālṅvār* preceded the Vaiṣṇava usage. Also, he is unable to explain the semantic development of *ālṅvār* ~ *sūri*. He has not explained the basis for the semantic evolution of *ālṅvār* from “sage, saint” to “noble person, lord, master”. His etymology also has not demonstrated why the sense of *ālṅvār* should be a straight-forward equivalent of *nāyaṇār*. After all, “to sink, be absorbed” has no relationship to “lord, master”.

P. S. Sundaram, author of a book containing translations of selected poems of *ālṅvars*, says of the term *ālṅvār*³ (transliterated in popular works as “Azhwar”):

There can be some debate regarding the meaning of this word. Was it “Azhwar” meaning “immersed” or “Alwar” meaning “ruler or born to rule”? If the latter, it is merely a tribute paid to a great devotee of God meant by Him to rule the rest of humanity”

³ Sundaram 1996: x

M. G. S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat say:⁴

The term *ālvār* has been derived from the root *āl* which could imply the act of plunging or immersing oneself and, as such, it has been suggested that the *Ālvārs* were persons who delved deeply into devotion. The change from *l* to *ḷ* is linguistically admissible, and the term *āl* means “to rule” or “to preserve”. In that case the Vaiṣṇava saints may be said to have enjoyed in *bhakti* literature the chief attribute of Viṣṇu whose function is preservation and this is quite different from creation or destruction. A third possibility, which we would support is that *ālvār* is the literal translation of the Sanskrit word *bhakta*. Since *bhakta* is derived from the root *bhaj*, meaning “to divide”, “to apportion”, *bhakta* literally means one who enjoys a share. Thus, since the term *bhakta* was originally employed to denote a servant or retainer who shared the wealth of his master, in the course of time the same word must have been used for a devotee in view of the *dāsyabhāva* or attitude of service. Perhaps the Tamil word may have this meaning since the root *āl* also means “to possess”, “to enjoy”, etc.

The explanations of *ālvār* by M.G.S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat are not satisfactory. With respect to linking *ālvār* (<*āl*-) to Viṣṇu’s function of preservation, Pālūr Kaṇṇappa Mutaliyār has noted earlier that *ālvār* has been used to refer to Śiva, the god of destruction, in temple inscriptions.⁵ As for their preferred explanation of *ālvār* (<*ālvār*) being a literal translation of *bhakta*, the Tamil word *ālvār* does not have the meaning “servant” at all and hence cannot be a literal translation of *bhakta* as interpreted by M. G. S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat.

Attempts to explain the term *ālvār*, such as the above, have focused on Vaiṣṇava texts primarily and secondarily on Vaiṣṇava temple inscriptions. But, let us consider the Tamil form *ālvār* (< *yāl*- “to rule” DEDR 5157) meaning “the ruler/lord”. This is almost synonymous with *nāyaṇār*. If the form *ālvār* is only a variant of an earlier *ālvār*, then we can conclude that Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions essentially shared the same view towards the Bhakti saints. To confirm this hypothesis, I shall look at the diachronic usage of the form *ālvār* and its variants in literary texts and inscriptions in Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava contexts and also compare it with Jaina usage.

2. Linguistic analysis of *ālvār*/*ālvār*

Both *ālvār* and *ālvār* are non-past participial nouns formed from the verb stems *āl*- and *āl*- (<*yāl*-) respectively. Following Rajam (1992: 566-581, 669-71), their formation mechanism can be explained as given below.

ālvār < *āl*+*v*+*ār*, where
āl - verb stem
v - non-past/non-completive marker

⁴ M. G. S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat (1987 : 349). Errors in the diacritic marks in the original text have been corrected on the basis of personal communication from Kesavan Veluthat.

⁵ Mutaliyār (1968 : 12)

ār - 3rd person human plural/honorific suffix

Similarly,

$\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r < \bar{a}l+v+\bar{a}r$, where

$\bar{a}l$ - verb stem

v - non-past/non-completive marker

ār - 3rd person human plural/honorific suffix

We should note that in addition to the form $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r$, we also find the singular masculine form $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$ used to refer to Viṣṇu's devotees as in the case of Kajentira $\bar{A}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$ ⁶. The relevant singular forms, $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$ and $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$, can be explained as shown below.

$\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n} < \bar{a}l+v+\bar{a}\bar{n}$, where

$\bar{a}l$ - verb stem

v - non-past/non-completive marker

$\bar{a}\bar{n}$ - 3rd person masculine singular suffix

$\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n} < \bar{a}l+v+\bar{a}\bar{n}$, where

$\bar{a}l$ - verb stem

v - non-past/non-completive marker

$\bar{a}\bar{n}$ - 3rd person human masculine singular suffix

However, the forms $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r$ and $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$ can also represent finite verbs meaning “will be immersed” and “will rule” respectively. We also know that, as nouns and verbs, the stems $\bar{a}l$ and $\bar{a}l$ also take on the third person suffixes *-ar* and *-an* resulting in the variants, $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r$, $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$, $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$, and $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$.⁷

In order to see which form, $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r$ or $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$, is the correct form, one has to examine which forms are found within the Tamil texts, pre-Bhakti and Bhakti texts.

3. $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r/\bar{n}$ and $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$ in pre-Bhakti Tamil literature

Among the Tamil literary texts, the *Tirukkuraḷ* has the earliest uses of $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r$ and $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$. The use of $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r$ is found in the following verse.

iṭikkum tuṇaiyārai āḷvārai yārē

keṭukkum takaimaiyavar

(*Tirukkuraḷ* 45.7)

“Who has the ability to destroy those (rulers) who possess advisors who criticize them when they are wrong?”

The use of $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}$ is found in the following verse. (Note: $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}+ku > \bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}\bar{n}ku$)

maṇ uyir ṍmṍpi aruḷ āḷvārku il eṇṍpa

taṇ uyir aṅcum viṇṍai

(*Tirukkuraḷ* 25.4)

“For one who possesses mercy and protects living beings, there is no action causing him to fear for his life.”

⁶ *anta kajentirāḷvān* (Ayyaṅkār 1967: 57)

⁷ It should be noted that in many poetic usages, it is hard to identify if a particular occurrence of $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r/\bar{n}$ is a noun or a verb as in the following sentence: *avar āḷvār*. This could be interpreted either as “he will rule” or “he is the lord (one who rules/will rule)”. In the first case, $\bar{a}l\bar{v}\bar{a}r$ is a verb and in the second case, it is a noun.

In the *Cilappatikāram*, we find the use of the term, *āḷvāṇ*, where the Cōḷa king is called *āḷi āḷvāṇ*⁸ “one who rules/possesses the wheel (of dominion)”.

In the above examples cited from pre-Bhakti texts, we find the use of “*x āḷvār/ṇ*” in the sense of “somebody who possesses *x*”. In the Bhakti literature, we find the use of *āḷvār/ṇ* without any qualifier *x* too. The most important point to be noted about the Bhakti texts is that the gods, Śiva and Viṣṇu, are denoted by the variants of *āḷvār/ṇ*.

4. *āḷvālar/ṇ* and *āḷvālar/ṇ* referring to Śiva in texts

The earliest post-Classical Bhakti text using *āḷvāṇ* is the *Arputat Tiruvantāti* of Kāraikkāl Ammaiār (ca. 550 C.E.)⁹, where we find the following.

āyīṇēṇ āḷvāṇukku... (Arputat Tiruvantāti 8.1)¹⁰
 “I became (a slave) to the Lord/Master”

In the *Tēvāram*, we find Tirunāvukkaracar (570-651 C.E. or 580-661 C.E. or 596-677 C.E.)¹¹ referring to Śiva as *āḷvāṇ* in the following lines.

nāḷ vāyumu pattar maṇattu uḷṇai nampaṇai nakkāṇai mukkaṇṇai
āḷvāṇai āruṇil ammāṇṭaṇṇai ariyātu aṭināyēṇ ayardta āre (Tēvāram 6.243.7.3-4)
 “the way I, the lowly dog, forgot the one who is always present in the hearts of devotees, one who is ours, one who is naked, one who has three eyes, one who is the Lord/Master, one who is the Father in Ārtūr”

Tiruṇānacampantar (ca. 650 C.E.)¹² refers to Śiva as “*emai āḷvār*” (*Tēvāram* 1.70.3.3) as well as “*emai āḷvar*” (*Tēvāram* 3.274.4.3) both occurrences meaning “one who rules/possesses us, our Lord”.¹³

Interestingly, the only instance in the whole Tamil Bhakti canon where the form *āḷvar* or *āḷvār* is used in the sense of “lord, master” is given below.

pōlam pala pēcip pōtu cāṇṇit tirivārum
vēlam varum ālavum veyilē turṇit tirivārum
kēlal viṇai pōkak kēṭṭippārum; kēṭ(u) ilā
āḷvar paḷaiyaṇūr ālaṅkāṭṭ(u) em aṭikaḷē (Tēvāram 1.45.11)

“It is the Lord¹⁴ without destruction, our Exalted One in Ālaṅkāṭu adjoining Paḷaiyaṇūr, who makes even those (Buddhists) who praise Buddhism speaking inconsistent words and those (Jains) who stand in the sun till they get the disease that causes insatiable hunger listen (to the Truth) so that their dark karma leaves (them).”

⁸ *āḷi āḷvāṇ pakal veyyōṇ aruḷē vāḷi Kāvēri* (Cilappatikāram 7.27.4)

⁹ Sastri 1987: 368

¹⁰ The text of *Arputat Tiruvantāti* is included in the *Tiruṭṭonṭar Purāṇam Volume 3. Part 2* with Commentary by C. K. Cuppiramaniya Mutaliyār, 1954, p. 900-40.

¹¹ Zvelebil 1975: 138

¹² Zvelebil 1975: 141

¹³ For a name, *eṇṇaiyāṇṭiyāṇ*, comparable to *emai āḷvāṇ*, see *South Indian Inscriptions*, v. 8, no. 280, p. 152. Although today *āṇṭi* means “mendicant” or “poor man”, it is a neuter past participial equivalent of *āḷvār/ṇ* and originally meant “lord”!

¹⁴ For the interpretation of *āḷvar* as “Lord”, see V. M. Subramanya Ayyar’s translation/explanation in the forthcoming *Digital Tēvāram* CD to be published by the French Institute of Pondicherry.

Interestingly, Tirunāvukkaracar sings of the same deity as given below.

*mattanāy malai eṭutta arakkaṇaik karattōṭu olka
ottinār tiruviralāl unṇiyiṭṭu aruḷvar pōlum;
pattar tam pāvam tirkkum paimpoḷil paḷaṇai mēya
attaṇār; nammai āḷvār ālaṅkāṭṭu aṭikalārē.* (Tēvāram 4.68.10)

“Our Father, who resides in the green grove-filled Paḷaṇai that destroys the sins of devotees planted his sacred toe and crushed the demon who, mad with pride, lifted the mountain and caused his arms to weaken. He is our Lord, the Exalted One of Ālaṅkāṭu.”¹⁵

The form *āḷvār* (< *yāl* “to rule”) in *Tēvāram* 4.68.10 would make perfect sense in the meaning “One who rules us (our Lord), the Exalted One of Ālaṅkāṭu”. But the form *āḷvar* in *Tēvāram* 1.45.11 does not make sense etymologically in the line traditionally interpreted as “the Lord without destruction, our Exalted One in Ālaṅkāṭu”, if *āḷvar* is to be derived from the root meaning “to sink, be immersed”. The meaning “Lord” for *āḷvar* can be understood only when *āḷvar* is considered as a variant of the form *āḷvar* with “-ḷ-” having been replaced by “-l-”.

Looking at the whole verse, 1.45.11, one can see why such a replacement could have been effected by the poet. The alliteration pattern found in the verse is called *ācu iṭai iṭṭu vanta iṭai iṇa etukai* where the consonants, *y*, *r*, *l*, and *ḷ* when occurring as the second *eḷuttu* (a letter which is a vowel or vowelised consonant or vowelless consonant) in only one of the several feet participating in an alliteration process, are ignored and the following *eḷuttu* is treated as the second *eḷuttu* of the alliteration pattern with the second *eḷuttu* being one of a set of consonants called *iṭai iṇam* “middle class” which includes *y*, *r*, *l*, *v*, *ḷ*, and *ḷ*.¹⁶ As a result, in this verse, we have the alliteration pattern *-ḷa-*, *-ḷa-*, *-ḷa-*, and *-va-* in the four lines respectively.

According to Tamil prosodic tradition, the letters to be ignored did not include *ḷ* found in *āḷvār*. Also note the second *eḷuttu* of each of the initial feet of the first three lines are *-ḷa-* where the vowel is short *a*. It is probably due to these considerations, the poet had chosen to use the form *āḷvar* with *-l-* and short *-a-*.

While *-ḷ/-ḷ-* variation has been found as early as the Classical Tamil Literature, the specific variation *āḷ-/āḷ-* has been noted to occur in the seventh century A.D., when Campantar lived. We find in the Kūram plates of the Pallava king Parameśvaravarman I both *urāḷcci* “town administration” (< *ūr* “town” + *āḷcci* “administration”) and *nāṭāḷcci* “province administration” (< *nāṭu* “province” + *āḷcci* < *āḷcci* “administration”).¹⁷

Even if there had been a possible variation in the general usage, is there any additional evidence to support the case of the poet using such non-standard forms? Indeed we find it in the following verse by the same poet.

*ēlum mūṇṇum or talaikaḷ uṭaiyavaṇ iṭarpaṭa aṭarttu
vēḷoi ceṇṇatum virumpi viruppu avar palapala uṭaiyār*

¹⁵ *āḷvār* can also be translated as a verb resulting in “He will rule (us).”

¹⁶ Rajam (1992: 40-41 and 193) and *Yāpparuṅkalakkārikai* (p. 157)

¹⁷ *Thirty Pallava Copper Plates*, p. 53

kēlal veṅṅirai anna kēl maṅimiṭaru niṅṅu ilaṅka
vāli cāntamum uṭaiyār vāḷkōḷiputtūr ulārē. (Tēvāram 2.230.8)

“He has many desires such as pressing down (with his toe) so that the ten-headed one suffered as well as destroying the sacrifice (of Dakṣa). He wears the crescent-like tusk of the boar over his sapphire-colored throat and wears sandal paste and is in Vāḷkōḷiputtūr. May he live!”

In this verse, the poet has replaced the correct form *vēḷvi* “sacrifice” with *vēḷvi*, a form with a sound variation, in order to conform to the alliteration pattern of *ācu iṭai iṭṭu vanta iṭai iṇa etukai* formed by *-lu-*, *-vi-*, *-la-*, and *-li-*.

Māṅikkavācakar of the ninth century C.E., the author of the *Tiruvācakam*, also uses the words *āḷvāṅ*¹⁸, and *āḷvār*¹⁹ in the sense of “lord, master”.

It is interesting to note that Tirunāvukkaracar refers to Śiva as the lord of specific temple towns as in “*ārūr āḷvāṅ*”²⁰ “Lord of Ārūr” and “*cāykkāṭu āḷvar*”²¹ “Lord of Cāykkāṭu”. To express the notion of “Lord”, Tirunāvukkaracar also uses the terms *nāyanār* and *uṭaiyār* as in “*cirāppalli mēviya nāyanār*”²² “Lord residing in Cirāppalli” and “*vaṭataḷi uṭaiyār*”²³ “Lord/Possessor of Vaṭataḷi”.

5. *āḷvā/ar/ṅ* and *āḷvā/ar/ṅ* referring to Viṣṇu in texts

In the Nālayirattiviappirapantam (also known as the Nālayira Divya Prabandham)²⁴, the sacred text of the Vaiṣṇavas, Māraṅ or Caṭakōpaṅ or Nammālvār uses *āḷvāṅ* in the sense of “lord” to refer to Viṣṇu in the following verse.

nalkuravum celvum
narakum cuvarkkamumāy
velpakaiyum naṭṭum
viṭamum amutamumāy
paḷvakaiyum paranta
perumāṅ eṅṅai āḷvāṅai
celvoamalku kuṭittiru
viṅṅakark kaṅṅē (Tiruvāymoḷi 6.3.1)

“In Tiruviṅṅakar of wealthy residents, I saw the Great One, my Lord, who permeates in many ways such as poverty and wealth, hell and heaven, winning enmity and friendship, and poison and ambrosia.”

āḷvāṅ in the sense of “Lord” is found in other verses also.²⁵ In another verse, Māraṅ says:

āḷvāṅ āli nīr kōḷvāya aravaṅaiyāṅ
tāḷvāy malariṭṭu nāḷvāy nāṭirē (Tiruvāymoḷi 10.5.4)

¹⁸ *puyāṅkaṅ āḷvāṅ poṅ aṭikkē* (Tiruvācakam 611.8)

¹⁹ *āḷvār ili māṭāvēṅṅō* (Tiruvācakam 384.4)

²⁰ Tēvāram 6.241.9

²¹ Tēvāram 6.231.2

²² Tēvāram 5.199.4

²³ Tēvāram 5.172.4

²⁴ *Nālayira Tiruviyaṅ Pirapantam* (Parts 1 and 2) published by Ti Liṭṭil Pḷavar Kampeṅi has been used as the source for the individual texts by the *āḷvārs*.

²⁵ See also *Tiruvāymoḷi* 5.8.2, and *Tiruvāymoḷi* 6.3.2.

"Daily you sprinkle flowers at the feet and seek the Lord who, in the sea water,
has the bed of snake that has the mouth which seizes (prey)." ²⁶

Another saint-poet, Periyālvār, says:

...aṭicilum unṭilai ālvāy (Periyālvār Tirumōḷi 2.8.3.4)

"...you have not eaten your food too, you Lord"

Here the poet uses the non-past participial noun form *ālvāy* which is the second person equivalent of *ālvāṇ*. The same term is also used by Tirumaḷicai Ālvār as given below.

...ālvāyḱku aṭiyēṇ nāṇ āl (Nāṇmukan Tiruvantāti 59)

"...I, your servant, am your slave, you Lord!"

The form *ālvāy* is comparable to the form *ālvār* (honorific second person equivalent of *ālvār*) we find in the Vaiṣṇava commentaries.²⁷ This usage of Tirumaḷicai Ālvār is important in bringing out the dyadic *ālvāṇ-aṭiyēṇ* relationship.

While all the citations given so far use *ālvār* or *ālvār/ṇ* to refer to Śiva or Viṣṇu, we have not discussed any evidence for the use of *ālvār/ṇ* or *ālvār/ṇ* or their variants to refer to the saint-poets or the devotees.

²⁶ Carman and Narayanan (1989: 250) translate the verse as follows:

"He who reclines on the deep waters
on the serpent which has a fearful mouth:
He shall reign.
Approach him every day;
place flowers at his feet."

In this instance, Carman and Narayanan have translated *ālvāṇ* as a verb and thus get "He shall reign". However, *ālvāṇ* in Tiruvāymōḷi 5.8.2, has been translated by them (1989: 216) as a noun to get "ruler" which is synonymous with "lord". Carman and Narayanan (1989: 250) differ from the interpretation by Tirukkurukaippirāṇ Piḷḷāṇ of *ālvāṇ* (bare stem *āl* + infinitive suffix *vāṇ*) in this verse as an infinitive meaning "in order to protect" as can be seen in the following translation by Carman and Narayanan.

"Obtain my Lord's auspicious feet by worshipping them daily with flowers; say the tirumantra at the sacred flower[like] feet of my Lord who lies half asleep upon the ocean of milk, having come there in order to protect the world."

It should be noted that *ālvāṇ* as a noun is self-sufficient in being meaningful in the verse. But, if one were to treat *ālvāṇ* as a finite verb (as Carman and Narayanan have done) or as an infiniive (as Tirukkurukaippirāṇ Piḷḷāṇ has done), one has to assume an object not found in the verse. Clearly, *ālvāṇ* as a noun is preferable to the other two interpretations. Strictly speaking, to get the meaning "serpent bed in the sea water", according to Tamil morphophonemics, one should have the reading "*ālinīrk koḷvāy aravaṇai-*" with geminate *-k-* after *ālinīr*. Although published texts have only "*ālinīr koḷvāy aravaṇai-*", since the traditional commentators from Tirukkurukaippirāṇ Piḷḷāṇ onwards have treated this as an elliptical compound form, one should probably assume that the correct form is most probably "*ālinīrk koḷvāy aravaṇai-*". Carman and Narayanan also have made the same grammatical interpretation. However, Nārāyaṇacāmi (1977: 252) has strictly followed the reading "*ālinīr koḷvāy aravaṇai-*" and translated the verse as

"Offer flowers daily at the sacred feet and seek the sacred grace of the one who rules the sea water, the one who sleeps on Ādiśeṣa with the strong mouth."

In either case, the meaning of *ālvāṇ* is "one who rules" synonymous with "Lord".

²⁷ Ayyaṅkār (1982: 300). Tirumaṅkai uses *āṇṭāy* (the past participial form of *ālvāy*) in *Periya Tirumōḷi* 6.1.1-9.

To understand the use of *āḷvār* or *āḷvār/ṅ* or their variants to denote saint-poets, one has to note the reverence of the Bhakti cult towards the devotees.

6. *āḷvālar/ṅ* and *āḷvālar/ṅ* referring to devotees in texts

The Śaiva saint-poets considered themselves to be servants of other devotees who were held to be their lords or even gods. The Śaiva saint Cuntarar, in his hagiographical work, the *Tiruttoṅṭattokai*, uses the refrain “*aṭiyārkkum aṭiyēṅ*” meaning that he is the servant of the devotees who are servants of Śiva themselves.²⁸ Another saint-poet, Tirunāvukkaracar, equates the devotees to gods in the following *Tēvāram* verse.

caṅkaniti patumaniti iranṭum tantu taraṇiyōṭu vāṅāḷat taruvarēṅum
maṅkuvāraavar celvam matippōm allōm mātēvarkku ēkāntar allār ākil
aṅkamelām kuṇaintu aḷuku toḷunōyarāy ā urittut tiṅṅru uḷalum pulaiyarēṅum
kaṅkaiṅvār caṭaik karantārkkku aṅparākil avarakaṅṭir nāmvāṅaṅkum kaṭavuḷārē.
 (Tēvāram 6.309.10)

“If non-devotees of the Great Lord (Śiva) give us the two kinds of treasures of Kubera and the dominion over the earth and the heaven, we will not esteem their wealth. But, if the devotees of the one who has hidden the Ganges in his hair locks suffer from leprosy that is eating away their limbs and they skin the cows and eat beef, they are indeed gods whom we worship.”

Given this reverential attitude of saint-poets towards other devotees, it is no surprise that these śaiva saints are called “*nāyaṅṅār*” too in the same way Śiva is called “*nāyaṅṅār*” as we saw earlier.

The same attitude towards devotees can be seen among the Vaiṣṇavas also as shown by the following verses by Toṅṭaraṭippoṭi and Māraṅ.

paḷutu ilā oḷukal āṅṅup
pala catuppētīmārkaḷ
ilīkulattavarkaḷēlum
em aṭiyārkaḷ ākil
toḷumiṅṅir koṭumiṅ koḷmiṅ
eṅṅru niṅṅoṭum okka
vaḷipaṭa aruḷiṅāyṅōṅm
maṭiḷ tiruvaraṅkattāṅṅē (Tirumālai 42)

“O the one who is in high-walled Śrīraṅgam, you said, “O many brahmins of the four Vedas, who follow the blemishless path! if my devotees, even if they are of low caste, worship them, give to them and get from them”, and graciously made them worship the devotees as they do you.”

Similarly, in several verses, Māraṅ praises the devotees of Viṣṇu as his lords/masters as given below:

...emmai
āḷum paramarē (Tiruvāymoli 3.7.1.7-8)

“...divine beings who rule us”

...emmai
āḷuṭai nātarē (Tiruvāymoli 3.7.2.7-8)

“...lords/masters who have lordship over us”

²⁸ Tēvāram 7.39. 1-10. See Peterson (1989: 331-36) for a translation of the hymn.

...emmai
 āḷṭaiyārkaḷē (Tiruvāymoḷi 3.7.3.7-8)
 "...ones who have lordship over us"

...
 maṇivaṇṇaṅkaḷ āḷ eṇṇu uḷ
 kalantār aṭiyār tam aṭi
 yār em aṭikaḷē (Tiruvāymoḷi 3.7.9.6-8)
 "...the servants of servants of those who have internalized that they are the
 slaves of the sapphire-hued One are our lords"

What should be noted in the above verses is the use of *āḷ-* to express the relationship of one devotee, the saint, toward other devotees as between a servant and his master.²⁹ Finally, the following verse by Māraṅ exhibits the reverence the saint-poet had towards other devotes.

...
 aṭiyār aṭiyār tam aṭi
 yār aṭiyār tamak(ku)
 aṭiyār aṭiyār tam aṭi
 yār aṭiyōṅkaḷē (Tiruvāymoḷi 3.7.10.5-8)
 "...we are the servants of the servants of the servants of the servants of the
 servants of the servants of the servants of the servants (of Viṣṇu)"

It is this attitude of the saint-poets considering other devotees as lords/masters who are to be treated in a manner similar to the Lord himself that is the basis for the use of *āḷvār* to refer to the saint-poets by others. This is brought out by the following verse by Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār.

...
 kaṭalmallait talacayaṇam
 āṅ eṇṇum neṅcu uṭaiyār
 avar emmai āḷvārē (Periyatirumoli 2.6.2.5-8)
 "...Those who have the hearts that think of One's sleeping on the ground at
 Mallai by the sea, are indeed our lords (the ones who rule us)"³⁰.

In another verse in the same hymn, the poet praises the devotees of Viṣṇu in the following words:

...kaṭalmallait
 talacayaṇattu uṇaiṅvārai
 koṅṭāṭum neṅcu uṭaiyār
 avar eṅkaḷ kulateyōmē (Periyatirumoli 2.6.4)
 "...Those who have the heart that celebrates the One who slept on the ground
 at Mallai by the sea are indeed our family deities."

The parallel between the last lines of the two verses of Tirumaṅkai Āḷvār given above, makes it obvious that *āḷvār* in *emmai āḷvār* is indeed a noun as has been interpreted also by Periyavāccāṅ Pillai, the famous commentator.³¹

²⁹ See also *Tiruvāymoḷi* 8.10.3 where Māraṅ uses the 3rd person plural past tense form *āṅṭār* in "...avaṅ aṭiyār ciṇṇamā maṅicarāy eṇṇai āṅṭār iṅkē tiriyavē" meaning "His devotees, though short in height became my lords to make me wander (as a devotee)"

³⁰ For the story of Viṣṇu sleeping on the ground, see *Periya Tirumoli*, vol. 1, 1992, p. 350.

³¹ *Periya Tirumoli*, 1992, vol. 1, p. 339. Periyavāccāṅ Pillai interprets *āḷvār* as *aṭimaikoḷḷumavarkaḷ* "ones who possess as slaves".

Tirumaṅkai's use of *āḷvār* to denote Vaiṣṇava devotees is later adopted by Nātamūṇi (Skt. Nāthamuni), the compiler of the Vaiṣṇava canon, in the following verse in praise of Maturakavi (Skt. Madhurakavi) *Āḷvār*.

*vēru onṟum nāṅ aṟiyēṅ vētam tamil ceyta
māraṅ caṭakōpaṅ vaṅkurukūr - ēru eṅkaḷ
vāḷvām eṅru ēttum maturakaviyār emmai
āḷvār avarē araṅ*

(Nātamūṇi's *taṅiyaṅ* on *kaṅṅi nuṅ ciṟuttāmpu*)

"Maturakavi who said in praise, "I do not know anything else. Māraṅ Caṭakōpaṅ who created Vedas in Tamil and is the chief of fertile Kurukūr is our life," is our lord. He is our refuge indeed."³²

This verse is very important in understanding the history of the term *āḷvār*. It is interesting Nātamūṇi has used the same words to refer to the devotees of Viṣṇu as Tirumaṅkaiyāḷvār, i.e., *emmai āḷvār*. One should note that among the 12 Vaiṣṇava saints, Maturakavi alone did not sing the praise of Viṣṇu. He only sang the praise of Nammāḷvār, the saint poet. In other words, for Maturakavi, the *aṟiyāṅ* "servant", Nammāḷvār was the *āḷvār* "lord". Through this verse, Nātamūṇi acknowledges that, in turn, Maturakavi is the *āḷvār* "lord" for Nātamūṇi, the *aṟiyāṅ* "servant". Thus one can see how a chain of Lord-servant/lord-servant/lord-servant reverence chain is established. This verse also gives a clear indication of the form of reference Nātamūṇi wanted to employ to denote the Vaiṣṇava saint-poets, *āḷvār*. Thus while the Śaiva tradition used *nāyaṅār* to refer to Śiva as well as Śaiva saints, the Vaiṣṇava tradition used *āḷvār/ṅ* to refer to both Viṣṇu and Vaiṣṇava saints.

Campanar is said to have lived in the seventh century C.E. Nātamūṇi is said to have lived in the late ninth to the early part of the 10th century C.E.³³ Thus we see that for about two centuries, among the pair, *āḷvār/āḷvār*, the dominant form in literary use seems to have been *āḷvār*. But, within two centuries after Nātamūṇi, by the time of the Vaiṣṇava commentator, Tirukkurucaipparāṅ Piḷḷāṅ in the 12th century C.E., the original form, *āḷvār* has been replaced by *āḷvār*.

To see how this has come about, let us turn to Tamil inscriptions.

7. *āḷvār/ṅ* and *āḷvār/ṅ* in inscriptions

Among the forms *āḷvār/ṅ* and *āḷvār/ṅ* the earliest inscriptional occurrence is that of *āḷvār* in the early seventh century C.E. in the 20th year of the reign of the Pallava king, Mahēndravarman I. Here, we find a person ruling an area called

³² Ayyaṅkār (1993: 5). Piḷḷailōkam Jiyar's commentary reads:

"*eṅṅaiyāṅṅiṭṭum taṅmaiyaṅṅ*" *eṅṅattai* "emmaiyaḷvār" *eṅkiṟatu*. *avarai yāḷukiṟavar āḷvār; nammaiyaḷukiṟavar ivar*.

This can be translated as "(the poem) says "emmaiyaḷvār" referring to "one whose nature is to be the lord of us". The one who rules him (Maturakavi) is *Āḷvār* (Nammāḷvār); the one who rules us is he (Maturakavi)." What is particularly interesting about this commentary is the virtually straight etymological explanation of the term *āḷvār* (<*āḷvār*) as "one who rules" which can be obtained from here.

³³ Hardy (1983: 265)

cirupāl being called *cirupāl āḷvār*.³⁴ In the reign of Parameśvaravarman II, we have an inscription from Tiruvati near Cuddalore circa 731 C.E., with possible evidence of a name, *maṅṭaiyāḷvān/r* with the last letter of the name (*n/r*) lost.³⁵ Later, in the reign of Nandivarman II, circa 759 C.E., we find an inscription in the Muktiśvara temple in Kanchipuram the term *taḷiyāḷvār* possibly referring to the lord (*āḷvār*) of the temple (*taḷi*).³⁶ In any case, an inscription of the second year of one Vayiramegavarman of ninth century C.E. refers to *tirukkūḷiccarattu āḷvār* “Lord of Tirukkūḷiccaram”.³⁷

The earliest occurrence of the non-honorific form, *āḷvān*, seems to be in the Paṭṭattāḷmaṅkalam plates of Nandivarman II issued circa 792 C.E. Here, we find *āḷvān* as part of the name *maṅkalanāṭāḷvān*.³⁸ A hero-stone inscription belonging to the 21st year of Nandivarman III refers to a priest of another temple as *aniyasthānam āḷvān*. An inscription of Nripatungavarman (ca. 894 C.E.) refers to an *ūr āḷvān* “the lord/ruler of the town”.³⁹

Except for the Tiruvati inscription, the Pallavan age inscriptions mentioned above clearly show that the lord of the land and the Lord of the temple were predominantly called *āḷvār/n* up to the end of ninth century in the northern part of Tamilnadu. In the southern Tamil land, the Pāṇṭiya region, the earliest inscriptional attestation of *āḷvār* occurs during the ninth century C.E.⁴⁰ *āḷvār* occurs in two ninth century C.E. Jaina inscriptions in Kaḷugumalai.⁴¹

In the Cōḷa inscriptions, we find that during the early 10th century during the rule of Parāntaka I, *āḷvār/n* is mostly in use. Thus we find the deity in Vetāraṇyam is called Tirumaṅkaikāṭṭu Āḷvār in an inscription of ca. 916-17

³⁴ *Tarumapuri Kalvetṭukkal (Mutal Tokuti)*, no. 89. *cirupāl* in the inscription should be read *cirupāl*.

³⁵ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 8, no. 331, p. 177. See Mahalingam (1981: 215) for the date. For the name *maṅṭai āḷvān pottimenkoṅ āṅṭān* in a 12th century inscription, see *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 173, p. 57. Tamil *maṅṭai* “skull” suggests *maṅṭai āḷvān* signified “one who possesses skull” or “Śiva as Kapāli”

³⁶ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 4, no. 827, p. 286. Mahalingam (1988: 259) gives the date as ca. 759 C.E. even though the inscription is missing a part of the word denoting the number of the regnal year, i.e. “...pattēṭṭāvatu”. It is not clear why Mahalingam takes the regnal year as 28 instead of 38 or 48 or 58.

³⁷ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 12, no. 114, p. 54

³⁸ Aiyer (1983 [1925-26]: 121) and *Thirty Pallava Copper Plates*, p. 242. For the year of the inscription, see Mahalingam, (1988: 314). Note Aiyer (1983 [1925-26]) reads *-āḷvān* in the inscription but uses *-āḷvaṅ* in his discussion of the inscription (p. 116), evidently assuming *āḷvān* to be the correct reading. Mahalingam goes further and changes *āḷvān* into *āḷvān* in his transcription of the text of the inscription too!

³⁹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 12, no. 79, p. 34.

⁴⁰ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 29, p. 25. The inscription is missing the date and all but the last two letters of the king’s name (...yar) and said to be probably that of Māraṅcaṭaiyaṅ (862-880 C.E.) according to *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14. However, according to personal communication from S. Rajagopal of Tamilnadu Department of Archaeology, the inscription belongs to Parāntaka Viranāraṇyaṅ Caṭaiyaṅ, whose rule ended ca. 900 C.E. In either case, the inscription would belong to the ninth century C.E.

⁴¹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 5, no. 361, p. 128. *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 5, no. 357, p. 127 has *āḷvārku* which probably stands for *āḷvārkkku*. There seems to be differing opinions about the date of these inscriptions. Krishnan (1981: 117) assigns them to the ninth century. On the other hand Ekamparanathan (1979:19) assigns them to the eighth century.

C.E.⁴² During the course of the 10th century, we see the use of *ālvār* increasing and overlapping with the use of *āḷvār*. In an inscription of Parāntaka I in Tiruviṭaimarutūr in 944-45 C.E., we find both *āḷvār* and *ālvār* being used.⁴³ By the end of the 10th century, the form *ālvār/ḷ* has virtually triumphed over the use of *āḷvār/ḷ* with only rare occurrences of *āḷvār/ḷ* in the Cōḷa region after that.⁴⁴

7.1 Change of *āḷvār* to *ālvār* over time

While so far we have seen inscriptional use of *āḷvār/ālvār* at different locations, it will be very useful to see the change from *āḷvār/ḷ* to *ālvār/ḷ* over time in inscriptions at the same locations. For this, data from inscriptions in five temples in different parts of the Tamil land are shown below in Table 1.

Tiruvaḷutisvara temple in Peruṅkuḷam near Srīvaikuṅṭam, Pāṇṭiya region	Chitrarathavallabha-perumal temple in Kuruvit-turai near Nilakkōṭṭai, Pāṇṭiya region	Vētāraṇyēsvara temple in Vētāraṇyam, Cōḷa region	Śrīraṅganātha temple in Śrīraṅgam, Cōḷa region	Vīraṭṭānēsvara temple in Kīḷūr, near Tirukkōyilūr, Toṅṭai region
<i>ālvār</i> (9 th century C.E.) ⁴⁵	<i>āḷvār</i> (1121-22 C.E.) ⁴⁶	<i>āḷvār</i> (916-17 C.E.)	<i>āḷvār</i> (991-92 C.E.) ⁴⁷	<i>āḷvār</i> (958-59 C.E.) ⁴⁸
<i>ālvār</i> (901-02 C.E.) ⁴⁹	<i>āḷvār</i> (1126-27 C.E.) ⁵⁰	<i>ālvār</i> (925-26 C.E.) ⁵¹	<i>ālvār</i> (1008-09 C.E.) ⁵²	<i>ālvār</i> (961-62 C.E.) ⁵³
<i>ālvār</i> (910-11 C.E.) ⁵⁴	<i>āḷvār, ālvār</i> (1128-29 C.E.) ⁵⁵	<i>ālvār</i> (927-28 C.E.) ⁵⁶	<i>ālvār</i> (1012-1044 C.E.) ⁵⁷	<i>ālvār</i> (962-63 C.E.) ⁵⁸
<i>āḷvār</i> (911-12 C.E.) ⁵⁹	<i>āḷvār, ālvār</i> (1130-31 C.E.) ⁶⁰	<i>āḷvār</i> (930-31 C.E.) ⁶¹	<i>ālvār</i> (1047-48 C.E.) ⁶²	<i>ālvār</i> (964-65 C.E.) ⁶³

⁴² *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 515, p. 212

⁴³ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 23, no. 1945, p. 149.

⁴⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 19, no. 223, p. 114

⁴⁵ See note 40.

⁴⁶ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 198, p. 113

⁴⁷ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 17, p. 14

⁴⁸ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 859, p. 432. The year is based on Krishna III becoming king in 939 C.E. See Sastri (1987: 178).

⁴⁹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 47, p. 36. The date of the king Caṭaiya Māraṇ also known as Rājasimha III follows Pandarathar 1966: 79 which seems to be based on the highest regnal year for this king being 46 and the beginning of his successor's rule in 946. See *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 78 and 79, p. 50.

⁵⁰ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 215, p. 123

⁵¹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 512, p. 211

⁵² *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 20, p. 15

⁵³ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 894, p. 448

⁵⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 60, p. 42

⁵⁵ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 223, p. 127-28

⁵⁶ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 477, p. 197

⁵⁷ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 21, p. 15

⁵⁸ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 895, p. 448

⁵⁹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 62, p. 43

<i>ālvār</i> (960-61 C.E.) ⁶⁴	<i>ālvār, ālvār</i> (1135-36 C.E.) ⁶⁵	<i>ālvār</i> (934-35 C.E.) ⁶⁶	<i>ālvār</i> (1080 C.E.) ⁶⁷	<i>ālvār</i> ⁶⁸ , <i>ālvār</i> ⁶⁹ (982-85 C.E.)
	<i>ālvār, ālvār</i> (1141-42 C.E.) ⁷⁰	<i>ālvār</i> (999-1000 C.E.) ⁷¹	<i>ālvār</i> (1082-83 C.E.) ⁷²	<i>ālvār</i> (998-99 C.E.) ⁷³
		<i>ālvār</i> (1177-78 or 1180-81 C.E.) ⁷⁴	<i>ālvār</i> (1084-85 C.E.) ⁷⁵	<i>ālvār</i> (1069-70 C.E.) ⁷⁶
		<i>ālvār, ālvār</i> (1218-19 C.E.) ⁷⁷	<i>ālvār</i> (1111 C.E.) ⁷⁸	<i>ālvār</i> (1072-73 C.E.) ⁷⁹

⁶⁰ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 229, p. 132

⁶¹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 478, p. 197

⁶² *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 23, p. 17

⁶³ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 899, p. 449

⁶⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 93, p. 59

⁶⁵ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 236, p. 141-43

⁶⁶ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 507, p. 209

⁶⁷ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 53, p. 54

⁶⁸ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 868, p. 437. This is an inscription which is difficult to date definitely since it refers to the king simply as *kopparakecari*. However, this is assumed to belong to Uttama Cōla's time because of the occurrence of the name of a chieftain, Uttamacōla Milātuṭaiyār, who seems to have been named after the monarch. According to *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 19, no. 16, p. 7-8, Uttama Cōla's regnal years start from 967-68 C.E. while according to no. 58, p. 28, Uttama Cōla's regnal years begin from 969-70 C.E. Since the regnal year is given as 15 for this inscription, the date is estimated to be between 982-985

⁶⁹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 893, p. 448. This is also an inscription of the 15th year of a *kopparakecari* and difficult to date definitely. This is most likely a pre-Rājarāja I inscription since *malāṭu* mentioned in the present inscription comes to be called as *malāṭāṇa jaṇanāta vaḷanāṭu* or *malāṭāṇa rājarāja vaḷanāṭu* in inscriptions in this temple clearly datable to later years of Rājarāja or his successors. Thus the king referred to could have been either Parāntaka I or Uttama Cōla both of whom ruled for 15 years or more. An inscription in the same temple assignable to the 13th regnal year of Parāntaka I refers to him as *matiraikonta kopparakecari* while this inscription simply refers to the king as *kopparakecari*. So, it is assumed to belong to Uttama Cōla also.

⁷⁰ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 254, p. 156-57, *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 14, no. 255, p. 157

⁷¹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 468, p. 192

⁷² *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 54, p. 56

⁷³ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 882, p. 443

⁷⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 540, p. 223. Mentions a *tevaraṭṭiyār* by the name *āluṭai nācci amutāḷvi*.

⁷⁵ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 57, p. 60

⁷⁶ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 884, p. 443. For the date of Adhirājendra, see Sastri (1987: 209)

⁷⁷ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 541, p. 224.

⁷⁸ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 58, p. 61-62

⁷⁹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 875, p. 440. Also, see Subramaniam (1983: 101) for assigning this inscription to Kulottuṅga I.

			<i>ālvān, ālvār</i> (1126 C.E.) ⁸⁰	<i>ālvān</i> (1247-48 C.E.) ⁸¹
			<i>ālvār, ālvāṅ</i> (1143 C.E.) ⁸²	

**Table 1. *ālvār* > *ālvār* sound variation
in five different locations in the Tamil land.**

Table 1 covers a period of more than two centuries lasting up to the time of Rāmānuja (1017-1137 C.E.) and later.⁸³ It reveals some interesting facts. In every one of these locations, *ālvār* is the oldest attested epigraphic form. *ālvār/ālvār* alternation is seen from the beginning of the 10th century in the Pāṇṭiya region. (However, considering the data from Kaḷugumalai and Tiruvati mentioned earlier, one can see that the alternation could have started even earlier with respect to other inscriptions not listed in the table.) However, in the Cōḷa region, in the beginning of the 10th century C.E., we mainly see *ālvār*. *ālvār/ālvār* alternation is seen increasing in the Cōḷa and Toṇṭai regions as the century progresses. The alternation is resolved in favor of the form *ālvār* in the Cōḷa and Toṇṭai regions by the beginning of the 11th century, especially in the case of the Śrīraṅgam temple. However, in the Pāṇṭiya region, the alternation continues well into the 12th century as seen in the data from the temple in Kuruvitturai. A circa 1289-90 C.E. inscription in Tiruppullāṇi in the 22nd year of Māraṅgarman Kulacēkara I mentions the name *Tirumaṅkai Ālvāṅ*.⁸⁴ But, Śrīraṅgam being the most important center for Śrīvaiṣṇavism, the sound variation trend shown by the Śrīraṅgam temple inscriptions is very important to the form that finally gets legitimized.

7.2 *ālvār/ālvār* appellations for the members of the Cōḷa royal family

ālvār/ālvār has been used in referring to members of the Cōḷa royal family. A circa 956-57 C.E. inscription in Tiruppalātturai of Gandarāditya Cōḷa refers to Cōḷa prince Arikulakesari as *ālvār arikulake ridevar*.⁸⁵ But the sister of Rājarāja I is referred to as *ālvār parāntakaṅ kuntavaiyār* in a circa 1013-14 C.E. inscription in the Tanjāvūr temple.⁸⁶ In a circa 1115-16 C.E. inscription in the Chidambaram

⁸⁰ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 113, p. 140

⁸¹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 877, p. 441. See Subramaniam (1983: 43) for assigning this inscription to Rājendra III.

⁸² *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 124, p. 156-57

⁸³ In Śrīraṅgam, the form *ālvār* clearly remains the norm from the beginning of the 11th century. The form *ālvār* appears again in a 1530 C.E. inscription (*South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 401, p. 387) twice while *ālvār* occurs four times in the same inscription.

⁸⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 8, no. 393, p. 207. Also see Pandarathar (1966: 142).

⁸⁵ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 3, no. 112, p. 248. The published Tamil text of the inscription is missing "sa" in *arikulakesari*.

⁸⁶ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 2, no. 6, p. 69

temple, a sister of Kulottuṅga I is referred to as *maturāntakīyālvār*.⁸⁷ In the same temple, another inscription refers to the daughter of Kulottuṅga I as *ammaṅkaiyālvārāna periyānācciyār* “Periya Nācciyār also known as Ammaṅkai Ālvār”.⁸⁸ *ālvān* and *ālvār* have also been used in two inscriptions of 13th century to refer to the Cōla king Kulottuṅga III.⁸⁹ Thus, here also we see an early use of *ālvār* giving way to *ālvār* by the beginning of the 11th century C.E.

7.3 *ālvār* in reference to Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava religious leaders

A 1007 C.E. inscription in Tiruvīlimiḷalai temple uses the term *nammālvār* to refer to Śiva, establishing the fact that the use of *ālvār* to refer to the Vaiṣṇava saint, Māraṅ (also called Nammālvār), has the same conceptual basis as the use of it in relation to the temple deity.⁹⁰ An inscription of the ninth regnal year of Vikrama Cōla (1126-1127 C.E.) in the Aruḷapperumāl (also called Varadarājapperumāl) Temple in Kanchipuram mentions “...*tiruvattiyūrālvāraip pāṭiyaruḷina śrīpūtattālvārum śrīpoykaiyālvārum*...” meaning “...Śrī Pūtattālvār and Śrī Poykaiyālvār who sang of the Lord of Tiruvattiyūr...”.⁹¹ This inscription is important for many reasons. Firstly, it collocates the use of *ālvār* to refer to both the saints and the god in the same sentence providing additional evidence for the common conceptual basis for the use of *ālvār* in the case of the deity as well as the saints, i.e., *ālvār* < *ālvār* “one who rules, Lord”. Secondly, this may be the earliest direct epigraphic reference to the Vaiṣṇava saints as *ālvārs*.⁹² Thirdly, the date of the inscription also coincides with the period when the form *ālvār* enters the literary text of the first Vaiṣṇava commentator, Tirukkurucaippirāṅ Pillān.

While, as we saw earlier, Tirumalīcai used the phrase *ālvāyḱku āṭiyēn*, an inscription of Kulottuṅga I in 1117-18 C.E. in the Vaikuṅṭha Perumal temple in Kanchipuram refers to the Viṣṇu deity of the temple as *Śrīkulottuṅkacōla-viṅṅakarālvān* “the Lord of the Kulottuṅga Cōla Viṣṇu temple” and a devotee as *ālvānāṭiyāl* “Lord’s servant” providing additional evidence for *ālvār* > *ālvār*.⁹³

In the same way as *ālvār* could refer to a devotee as well as a deity, *āṅṅāl* also referred to a deity as seen in a Kulottuṅga III inscription in Uttaramallūr near Maturāntakam in 1203-04 C.E. which refers to a deity as *tiruvāṅṅāl*.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 4, no. 222, p. 28

⁸⁸ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 4, no. 226, p. 35

⁸⁹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 23, no. 387, p. 281 and no. 388, p. 282.

⁹⁰ *Tiruvīlimiḷalaik Kalveṭṭukaḷ*, no. 27, p. 111

⁹¹ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 3, no. 80, p. 187

⁹² There is a ca. 1090-91 C.E. inscription of Kulottuṅga I (*South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 66, p. 73) which mentions a person by the name of Śrītānappiḷlai Maṅkai Ālvān, who was appointed to serve the deity in Śrīraṅgam temple with a fly whisk. This person was possibly named after Tirumaṅkai Ālvār. A later Śrīraṅgam inscription of 1126 C.E. (*South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 24, no. 113, p. 140) mentions one Kantāṭai Tirumaṅkaiyālvān, most probably named after Tirumaṅkai Ālvār.

⁹³ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 4, no. 134, p. 10. *āṭiyēn* is a first person singular form. *āṭiyāl* is a third person feminine singular form.

⁹⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 6, no. 361, p. 167

An inscription in the 15th regnal year of a Parakēcari in the Kāmākṣi Ammaṅ temple in Māṅkāṭu near Śrīperumputūr refers to a possibly Śaiva teacher as *tirukkaṇṇā...tālvār kurutevar*.⁹⁵ Thus we find the form *ālvār* used in connection with religious teachers in the Śaiva context too.

8. Acceptance of Sound Variation and Folk Etymology

According to Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, there has been an unbroken teacher-student line from Nātamuni. Jagadeesan (1977: 41-42) says:

...from the days of Nāthamuni the preceptor-disciple Paramparai had existed. The difference in the preceptor-disciple tradition till the days of Ramanuja and that after him is that the earlier period witnessed what is known as the *ōraṅ* tradition of one preceptor instructing only one disciple and the guru-sishya chain continuing in an unbroken line...It is possible to go one step further and say that even in the Alvar period the preceptor-disciple system was known: Madhurakavi, for example, was a devoted disciple of Nammālvār and the Vaiṣṇava tradition is anxious to make it appear as if there was no gap in this line and says that Nāthamuni was Nammālvār's disciple indirectly through Parāṅkuṣa, a disciple coming in the line of Madhurakavi.

It is well-known that Tirukkurukaippirāṅ Piḷḷāṅ, a disciple and younger cousin of Rāmānuja, wrote the *Ārāyirappaṭi*, the first commentary on *Tiruvāymoḷi* wherein he had used *ālvār* to refer to the saint-poet Māraṅ and calls the discus of Viṣṇu as *Āli Ālvāṅ*.⁹⁶ Beginning with the *Ārāyirappaṭi* (1100-50 C.E.), the Vaiṣṇava texts use the form *ālvār* as the norm.⁹⁷

Notwithstanding the Vaiṣṇava claim of unbroken teacher-student tradition, the fact that Nātamuni has used the form *ālvār* but Piḷḷāṅ ended up using the form *ālvār* suggests that there has been an error in transmission somewhere along the teacher-student chain between the two teachers. This error was obviously due to the influence of the sound variation that has occurred in the Śrīraṅgam area and elsewhere.

The adoption of the form *ālvār* over *ālvār* in the Tamil land north of the Pāṅṭiya region and especially in the Śrīraṅgam area by the end of the 10th century C.E. was probably due to hypercorrection. Discussing *! > l*, Zvelebil says:⁹⁸

In medieval Ta. inscriptions, there is a *! / l* alternation considered sometimes as a case of hypercorrectness: thus *kē!vi* for *kē!vi* "question" occurs in Chola, 1067, *ciṅka!ar* for *ciṅka!ar* "the Sinhalese" in Chola, 1098 and *paramasvāmika!* in Chola, 1096; here, *-!* occurs in the pl. phoneme *-ka!*.

The beginnings of this alternation of *!* with *l* may be found as early as the 7th Cent., cf. *nā!lcci* for *nā! / u* & *ā!* & *ci* "administration of a province" (Pallava).

Once the hypercorrect form *ālvār* was accepted as the standard form, a folk etymology was created to explain it. Some poems by Māraṅ provided a convenient basis to build that folk etymology. Consider the following verse.

⁹⁵ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 19, no. 366, p. 191

⁹⁶ Commentary on *Tiruvāymoḷi* 2.9.11. See Ayyaṅkār (1979: 634).

⁹⁷ Carman and Narayanan (1989: xi).

⁹⁸ Zvelebil (1971: 141).

vaḷḷalē matucūtanā eṇ marakata malaiyē unṇai niṇaint(u)
eḷkal tanta entāy unṇai eṇṇaṇam viṭukēṇ
vellamē purai niṇ pukaḷ kuṭaintu āṭip pāṭikkalittu ukantu ukantu
uḷḷa nōykal ellām turantu uyntu pōntiruntē (Tiruvāymoḷi 2.6.4)

“O benevolent one, destroyer of Madhu, my mountain of emerald, you gave me the nature of thinking of you and deriding other things. Having dived into the flood-like praise of you and singing and dancing and feeling intoxicated and happy and driving away the emotional sufferings, how can I leave you?”

Here the commentators use the Maṇipravāḷa (Tamil-Sanskrit hybrid) word *avaḡāhittu* “going deep into” (< Skt. *avaḡāh-* “to plunge into, bathe in, to go deep into”) to explain Tamil *kuṭaintu* “to dive, bathe, plunge in water”.⁹⁹ We encounter the notion of diving into Viṣṇu’s praises or qualities in other verses also.¹⁰⁰ Consider the following verse:

iruliṇ tiṇivaṇṇam mānīrk kaliyē pōy
maruḷurru irāppakal tuṅcilum nī tuṅcāyāl
uruḷum cakaṭam utaitta perumāṇṇār
aruḷiṇ perunacaiyāl āḷāntu nontāyē? (Tiruvāymoḷi 2.1.8)

“O large backwater with the color of dense darkness, even if night and day get confused and end, you will not sleep. Are you immersed in the great desire for the grace of the Lord who kicked the rolling wheel (-demon) and suffering too?”

In this verse, the saint-poet speaks as a girl in love with the Lord, who sees in the “sleepless suffering” of the backwaters, her own suffering due to her immersion in love for the Lord. The Vaiṣṇava commentator, Aḷakiya Maṇavāḷa Jīyar (13th century), explains *āḷāntu* (past adverbial participle of *āḷā* “to be immersed, absorbed”) as *āḷāṅkāṛpaṭṭu* (past adverbial participle of *āḷāṅkāṛpaṭṭu* “to be immersed in, to become absorbed in”)¹⁰¹

Given such expressions by the saint poet, it would have been very easy to rationalize the folk etymology of *āḷvār* < *āl-*. Indeed, Araṅkarajan (1986:112) explains the nature of *āḷvār* as “*iṇaimai eḷil taṭākattuḷ eṇṇāṇṇrum āḷāṅkāḷpatupavar*” “one who is always immersed in the beautiful pond of divinity”.¹⁰²

9. *āḷvār, āḷvār and sūri* in Jainism

We have seen that in the Pāṇṭiya region, *āḷvār* occurs in 9th century C.E. in reference to Jaina deities. In the Toṇṭai region in northern Tamilnadu, in an inscription in Tirumalai near Pōḷūr, assignable to the fourth regnal year of Parāntaka I (910-11 C.E.), the Jaina deity is called *Palliyāḷvār*.¹⁰³ An inscription of Rājarāja I in (1001-02 C.E.) on a rock at Tirunaṇṅkoṇṭai mentions a

⁹⁹ Ayyaṅkār (1979: 380).

¹⁰⁰ Tiruvāymoḷi 1.7.10, 2.1.8.

¹⁰¹ Ayyaṅkār (1979: 60).

¹⁰² See Ayyaṅkār (1975: 79) for earlier interpretations of the word *āḷvār*. The Vaiṣṇava tradition seems not to have seen the connection between the concept of the devotee being a lord underlying the names, *Uṭṭaiyavar* “lord” (Rāmānuja) and *Āḷavantār* “one who came to rule” (Yamunācārya), and the form *āḷvār* (< *āḷvār*).

¹⁰³ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 19, no. 89, p. vi and 45.

Periyapāliyil Ālvār.¹⁰⁴ Later, in the Cōla region, a 13th century inscription on a rock, Aḷuruṭṭimalai near Pudukkottai, we find a Jain deity called *nāyaṇār*¹⁰⁵ *tirumāṇaimalai ālvār*, a Jain teacher called *tirul[p]paḷḷi.l ālvār* and his student called *...ālvāṇ*.¹⁰⁶ Thus the Jaina usage seems to be similar to Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava usages in having the variants *ālvār/ālvār* and referring to the deity as well as a preceptor.

The history of *ālvār* that has been traced earlier shows that Hardy's suggestion that the original meaning of *ālvār* was "sage, saint" is not correct. Moreover, the earlier usage of *ālvāṇ* in Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava texts eliminates the possibility suggested by Hardy, i.e., the usage of *ālvār* was probably original to Jainas and it was later adopted by others.

As for the Vaiṣṇava use of the Sanskrit *sūri* to refer to *ālvār*, it is *ālvār* meaning "lord, ruler" that provides the link between the Tamil *ālvār* and Sanskrit *sūri* given the nature of relationship between preceptors and disciples in the Jaina monastic orders in the period from 600 C.E. to 1000 C.E. Ramendra Nath Nandi describes the role of preceptors in the Jaina orders in the Deccan in the following words¹⁰⁷:

In the early medieval period the preceptors occupied a place of great importance in the life of the faithful. They were popular not only with the community of monks but also with the lay fraternity...The preceptor exercised considerable authority over the monks and nuns...the monk lives under the control of the preceptor from the day of his initiation... The preceptor who administered the *gaccha* was responsible for the welfare of his followers. He was the sole supporter of the *gaccha* and could excommunicate a member of the *gaccha* or the *guruparivāra*, who in spite of warnings indulged in bad ways. The head of the *gaccha* (*sūri*) was also required to settle disputes among the monks. He could not desert the quarrelsome monks out of disgust; instead he was to continue as **the chief of the sect** and to try to correct the defaulting members...Academic qualifications and discipline of character were no longer considered sufficient for his office; he must also be an able **administrator**...Gradually the adoration of the preceptor developed into a cult. Numerous post-mortem memorial stones were erected in honour of preceptors by lay or spiritual disciples and ritual worship was offered to them. (emphasis mine)

It is clear from the description above that the position of Jaina *sūri* had the necessary attributes to be called a secular as well as religious "lord". It has been shown earlier that the Tamil term *ālvār/ṇ* connoted "lord" in secular as well as religious contexts. So, it was but natural that when the Vaiṣṇavas wanted to use a Sanskrit term to denote *ālvār*, they chose *sūri*.

¹⁰⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 7, no. 1015, p. 481

¹⁰⁵ Read *nāyaṇār*

¹⁰⁶ *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. 17, no. 397, p. 170. The name of the teacher could be Tiruppallivayal Ālvār as the village Tiruppallivayal is mentioned as having the land donated to the Jaina monastery.

¹⁰⁷ Nandi (1973: 69-71)

10. Conclusions

For over eight centuries, the Tamil Vaiṣṇava tradition has called each of its saints as *ālvār* “one who is immersed”. This is to be contrasted with the Tamil Śaiva tradition which called each of its saints as *nāyaṇār* “lord”. At first look, this difference may suggest that the Vaiṣṇava view of its saints was different from that of the Śaivas. However, this difference disappears when the history of the term *ālvār* is investigated with a multi-faceted approach using philology, linguistics, epigraphy, and religion.

ālvār is but a corrupt form of *ālvār* which has been used interchangeably with *nāyaṇār* in secular and religious contexts in the Tamil land. Naturally, the female Vaiṣṇava saint, Kōtai, the author of the Tiruppāvai, is called Nācciyār < Nāycciyār which is the feminine equivalent of *nāyaṇār*. It is also fitting that she is called *āṇṭāḷ* which is a feminine past participial form of *āl-* < *yāl-* while *ālvār* is its equivalent non-past participial form. Any explanation of *ālvār* as “one who is immersed” is based on folk etymology that has not taken into account the real history of the word. What is really interesting is the fact that the sound variation and semantic change of *ālvār* of Nātamūni into *ālvār* of Tirukkurukaippirāṇ Piḷḷāṇ has occurred in the Śrīraṅgam area, the primary locus of Tamil Vaiṣṇava scholarship and transmission of tradition, in about two centuries in spite of the unbroken teacher-student chain claimed by the tradition. Not only did the tradition forget the connection of the name *ālvār* to many occurrences of *ālvān/ālvāy* in the Tivviyappirapantam but it also has developed a folk etymology explaining the nature of the *ālvārs*, which has been accepted by leading scholars.

A.K. Ramanujan, in the introduction to his book, *Hymns for the Drowning*, containing translated poems of Nammālvār, says:¹⁰⁸

The author is an *ālvār*, “[one] immersed in god”; the root verb *āl* means “to immerse, dive; to sink; to be lowered, to be deep.” The title Hymns for the Drowning plays on the meanings of such an immersion for poet and reader.

Ramanujan notes, “To my knowledge, the traditional title *ālvār* does not occur in the poems.”¹⁰⁹ This is not surprising since the poems contain the original form *ālvān* and the scholars have been simply looking for a form with a sound variation that has occurred after the poems were compiled. But, careful philological analysis confirmed by inscriptional data has revealed the original form and its semantics. The history of the form *ālvār* demonstrates that even a millennium old linguistic form and its semantics can be wrong despite their widespread scholarly acceptance.

It should be noted, however, that there is an ironic contrast between the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions. While the Śaivas call their saints *nāyaṇārs* “lords”, when one looks at any book of the Śaiva canon, one does not see any acknowledgement of the “lordship” of the *nāyaṇārs* by the Śaivas. On the other hand, even though the Vaiṣṇavas have not been using *ālvārs* “lords” to refer to their saints after Nātamūni, at the end of every section of the canon containing

¹⁰⁸ Ramanujan (1993: ix)

¹⁰⁹ Ramanujan (1993: ix, n. 4)

the poems of a saint-poet, his/her lordship/ladyship is recognized by paying obeisance to him/her with statements such as “*Tirumaṅkaiyālvār tiruvaṭikaḷē caraṇam*” meaning “the sacred feet of Tirumaṅkaiyālvār are the refuge indeed” or “*Āṇṭāl tiruvaṭikaḷē caraṇam*” meaning “the sacred feet of Āṇṭāl are the refuge indeed”. Thus even though the Vaiṣṇavas forgot the etymological connection with *ālvārs*, they have nevertheless maintained the reverential attitude of Nātamuni toward their saint-poets which the original term *ālvār* “lord” demands from *aṭiyār* “servants”. In other words, *ālvār* is really *ālvār* or *nāyaṇār*.

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