

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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Purposeful Poets and Trickster Gods: The Worlds of the Ālvār Poem

In this paper, I will explore poetic self-construction of the ālvār poets. Focusing on the poetry of three major poets – Tirumaṅkai, Śaṭhakōpaṇ, and Kōtai – I will trace both the ways in which they frame their works – as garlands of song composed in chaste, pure, Sangam-Tamil – and of themselves as god’s own poets. Rather than focus on how these poets adapted Sangam poetics and categories, I will engage with the question of what the ālvār thought made a poet and what they imagined poetry could (or should) accomplish.