Abstract:
Tamil Saivism has experienced a small crisis and a public shock during the last two years. This was mainly due to the scandals surrounding infamous Swami Nithyananda and his temporary involvement and official role played at the old and renowned religious institution of Madurai Adhinam. The affair had not only led to a media outcry and court activities, but also to manifold forms of protest against the appointment of a dubious figure like Nithyananda as official successor to the head of Madurai Adhinam. Like many lay organizations, Saivite Mutts and Adhinams all over Tamil Nadu published a joint protest note, condemning the developments at Madurai. Traditionally, leading-roles in this action were played by the biggest and most influential Saivite monastic institutions in Tamil Nadu, namely the Dharmapuram Adhinam and the Thiruvavaduthurai Adhinam. The paper will focus on the latter, which, undoubtedly holds a unique position in Tamil Nadu.

Both institutions, however, consider themselves to be centers of Saivism and more specifically, of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy, the “choicest product of Dravidian intellect”. After Saiva Siddhanta being molded into a universal, inclusive and at the same time Tamil/Dravidian religion in the early 20th century, some “orthodox” religious organizations – most prominently the Thiruvavaduthurai Adhinam – have taken up the task of propagation of Saiva Siddhanta outside their own walls. For the last 20 years, the Adhinam has institutionalized a network of popular teaching and organized learning in South India and even beyond. In my paper, I will analyze these (discursive) networks, their influences and interplay with current “heterodox” or popular forms of Tamil Saiva Siddhanta organizations who might have their own particular agendas. Important points of discussion in this field are, for example, questions of language (Tamil, Sanskrit, English etc.), lineage (textual and personal), and religious or cultural identity. The contemporary discourses on Saiva Siddhanta revolve around these issues, which are today discussed in a global arena. By touching on the example of Tamil Saiva Siddhanta, the paper will elaborate on key problems of writing religious history and position the topic within the wider framework of my PhD thesis.

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