

## “Just Like Kālidāsa”

### *The Making of the Smārta-Śaiva Community of South India*

Every May in the city of Madurai, devotees from across south India gather to celebrate the wedding of the god Śiva and the goddess Mīnākṣī in Madurai’s annual Cittirai Festival. The god and goddess leave the temple to greet the public in the city square as the streets become inundated with crowds, music, and impromptu dancing. In the seventeenth century, not far from the city center, one could also witness the performance of Sanskrit dramas, newly composed for the occasion and staged by south India’s most talented poets in honor of the festivities.<sup>1</sup> In May of 1650, just such a play, called the *Marriage of Kuśa and Kumudvatī*, was debuted in a temple pavilion by court poet Atirātra Yajvan. For literati across the region, this was an occasion both for devotional pilgrimage and for the convention of a regionwide literary society, over which his elder brother, Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita himself, Atirātra tells us, presided as “master of ceremonies” (*sabhāpati*). While traditionally Sanskrit dramas opened by praising a patron and offering stage directions, Atirātra chose instead to present his audience with a remarkable autobiographical declaration: “This poet, being himself a devotee of the goddess—just like Kālidāsa—does not even take a breath without her command, much less compose such a literary work.”<sup>2</sup>

In light of the fervent sincerity of Atirātra’s confession, we might expect the *Marriage of Kuśa and Kumudvatī* to read as a tale charged with theological import, perhaps carrying resonances of the mythology and worship of the goddess who is at the center of this festival occasion. In reality, however, despite its considerable aesthetic charms, the narrative of the work is an entirely conventional—one might even say secular—account of love, loss, and reconciliation. But if the great goddess herself is apparently far from germane to the occasion at hand, how are we to make

sense of Atirātra Yajvan’s earnest confession that his heartfelt devotion not only is foundational to his experience of the world but also forms the cornerstone of his work as a poet and scholar? And why does Atirātra compare himself to Kālidāsa, the most renowned Sanskrit poet of literary antiquity, whose writings scarcely contain the slightest trace of goddess devotion?

Kālidāsa, a fourth-century poet who dwelt in the Gupta and Vākāṭaka courts of central India, is remembered by scholarship and the Indian poetic tradition alike as the greatest celebrity of Sanskrit literary history, famed for his graceful command of the Sanskrit language. In Kālidāsa’s world, literature was an elite courtly enterprise segregated from the religious experiences of those who composed it. Like the majority of poets of Sanskrit classical antiquity, Kālidāsa participated in the erudite idiom of what Sheldon Pollock has called the Sanskrit Cosmopolis, a literary aesthetic that served the needs of royal power rather than those of the temple or monastery. Indeed, as Pollock has argued, the defining feature of classical Sanskrit literary culture was precisely its elision of particularities, whether in reference to place, time, or the personal devotional commitments of individual composers. For this reason, subsequent poets writing not only in Sanskrit but also in Telugu, Marathi, and other vernacular languages could be hailed by their contemporaries as Abhinava-Kālidāsa—the *new* Kālidāsa—simply by virtue of their literary virtuosity. To be just like Kālidāsa, for most of Indian history, had little to do with devotion and everything to do with laying claim to credentials that transcended time, space, and sectarian identity.

In the present context, however, Atirātra Yajvan’s confession is far from timeless. To the contrary, Atirātra released his statement into the public space of Madurai’s most cherished public festival at a crucial moment in the history of Hindu sectarian communities in south India, at a moment in which Kālidāsa was being reinvented as not only a scholastic but also a spiritual figurehead of the emerging Smārta-Śaiva community. Known today in popular parlance as “Tamil Brahminism”—although by no means are all Brahmins in Tamil Nadu either Smārta or Śaiva—the Smārta-Śaiva community itself was only in the process of being imagined in the early seventeenth century as a self-contained social entity. While the very idea of a community being imagined into existence may evoke the legacy of Benedict Anderson and the origins of nationalism, nations and sectarian communities do have one thing in common: both must rest upon an imagined collectivity founded upon shared features of identity, from language to devotional practice to the imagined legacy of a sacred past. Just as history is reinvented in the service of nation-building, a nascent sectarian community, though unattested in past centuries, requires a hagiography with an illustrious patrimony of the likes of Kālidāsa, widely celebrated as the greatest poet of Sanskrit literary history.

Self-consciously crafting the identity of their emerging community, the Smārta-Śaivas lay claim to the legacy of Kālidāsa as well as that of Śaṅkārācārya, India’s

most iconic philosopher, as the exclusive intellectual property of the Smārta-Śaiva community. At first glance, such a claim appears superficially plausible: the community produces elegant works of Sanskrit poetry and rigorous philosophical tracts founded on Śaṅkara’s Advaita philosophy. But recall again the words of Atirātra Yajvan: when he tells us he is just like Kālidāsa, his intent is not simply to express that he has composed timeless poetry. Indeed, the comparison he draws is founded on an altogether different commonality: namely, that both he and his illustrious predecessor do not draw a single breath that is not inspired by the goddess’s grace. By crafting a new hagiography for history’s greatest Sanskrit poet, Atirātra Yajvan and his community reinscribed the Sanskrit literary tradition with new and unprecedented meanings scarcely imaginable within the classical past.

Atirātra Yajvan, in fact, is not the only poet to forge a conceptual alliance between the Sanskrit intellectual enterprise and the devotional worship of the goddess. Rather, his confession exemplifies a pervasive transformation of the religious ecology of the early modern Tamil country, one that began to crystallize perhaps a number of decades before the *Kuśakumudvatīyanāṭaka* was first performed in Madurai. Among the noteworthy intellectuals employed in the seventeenth-century Nāyaka courts of Madurai and Tanjavur, a remarkable number were affiliated not merely by familial ties but also by a shared participation in sectarian religious networks.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, on the Śaiva side, within the space of a single generation, Atirātra, Nilakaṇṭha, and their colleagues across the Tamil country began to evoke their personal sectarian identities through remarkably similar textual and devotional practices. South Indian Vaiṣṇavism, for instance, whether Mādhva, Śrīvaiṣṇava, or otherwise, already had a history by the seventeenth century—a history that had been entextualized by poets and theologians and instituted in practice through religious centers such as temple complexes and monasteries. It was only in the early seventeenth century, in contrast, that Smārta-Śaivism first laid claim to a shared hagiography, began to profess devotional relationships with ecclesiastical authorities, and perhaps most strikingly, began to cultivate a shared esoteric ritual practice.

Indeed, for the Smārta-Śaiva theologians of seventeenth-century Madurai, the goddess in question was not simply Mīnākṣī, juridical figurehead of the Nāyaka state and divine embodiment of the Madurai region, whose sacred marriage the city was commemorating in a public festival at the very moment Atirātra compared himself to the great Kālidāsa. His allusion, to the contrary, was intended to invoke the worship of Lalitā Tripurasundarī, the lineage deity of the Śrīvidyā school of Śākta Tantrism. Śrīvidyā is a goddess-centered (Śākta) esoteric ritual tradition that, while guarded carefully in the initiatory lineage, has become something of an open secret in Tamil Brahmin society, forming a cornerstone of the collective culture of Smārta-Śaiva religiosity. Śrīvidyā, in its mature form, first flourished on the opposite side of the subcontinent some centuries earlier, in early

second-millennium Kashmir,<sup>4</sup> where it acquired the unmistakable stamp of the region's sophisticated Śaiva and Śākta philosophical and ritual idiom. That Śrīvidyā was exported to the far South soon after its initial zenith in Kashmir is revealed unmistakably in the *Tirumantiram*,<sup>5</sup> a work of the Tamil Śaiva canon heavily inflected with Śrīvidyā imagery. Its systematic ritual practice is best known to contemporary scholars and practitioners alike through the works of Bhāskararāya, an eighteenth-century resident of the Maratha court of Tanjavur, whose pathbreaking works have yet to be definitively situated in cultural context.<sup>6</sup> And yet, that an entire generation of seventeenth-century literati professes to have actively engaged with the Śrīvidyā tradition puts us in a position to reconstruct a crucial moment in its efflorescence the Tamil South—and, more importantly, its role in shaping the contours of Smārta-Śaiva religious culture.

Indeed, Śrīvidyā initiation began to spread like wildfire, virtually without precedent, through the intellectual circles of Nāyaka south India in the early seventeenth century, and with it came the institutional apparatus of the preceptors who provided this initiation: the Śaṅkarācārya lineages of south India.<sup>7</sup> The renunciants of the Śaṅkarācārya, or Daśanāmī, order trace their heritage through their hagiographies to the eighth-century theologian Śaṅkarācārya, who wrote the pioneering Advaita, or nondual commentary on the Brahmasūtras, the core scripture of Advaita Vedānta philosophy. So named for their hagiographical forebear, the "Śaṅkarācāryas," or Jagadgurus—literally "world teachers"—of these lineages serve in succession as the abbots, or preceptors, of independent regional monasteries, each of which maintains branch outposts across the Indian subcontinent. Two of the five principal Śaṅkarācārya monasteries, or *maṭhas*, that exist today speak to the Smārta-Śaiva constituents of south India—one in Sringeri, on the western coast of Karnataka, and one in Kanchipuram, in northern Tamil Nadu. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, the charismatic saints of the Śaṅkarācārya tradition began to attract a substantial lay following across the Tamil region. Included in their ranks were many of the most influential theologians and intellectuals who belonged to the first generation of the emergent Smārta-Śaiva community.

Cementing their ties to their new institutional homes, the Śaṅkarācārya Jagadgurus of the Tamil country initiated leading Smārta-Śaiva theologians as their disciples<sup>8</sup> and, at the same time, into the esoteric ritual practice of Śrīvidyā, which remains the personal cult of the Śaṅkarācāryas of Sringeri and Kanchipuram to this day.<sup>9</sup> In fact, despite the purportedly covert nature of Śrīvidyā ritual, a substantial body of textual evidence survives in which various intellectuals acknowledge firsthand their devotional relationships with Śaṅkarācārya preceptors and attempt to negotiate a place for Śrīvidyā practice within a wider Śaiva orthodox culture. It is this master-disciple relationship that secured a connection between the Śaṅkarācārya monasteries themselves and the wider lay population, who came to participate in what I refer to as the Smārta-Śaiva community. Thus for

the first time in South Asian history—in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—we encounter lay householders professing devotion for a Śaṅkarācārya preceptor and receiving from that preceptor an initiation that would formally grant them access to a community of devotees. In contrast, Appayya Dikṣita himself, despite his systematic engagement with Vedānta philosophy, mentions the name of no Śaṅkarācārya preceptor in his entire oeuvre. In essence, rather than fragmentary accounts of personal devotional practice, we discover an active discursive network—and one that had begun to radically alter the social fabric of sectarian identity in early modern south India.

Addressing a substantively different social context, the original Śaṅkarācārya, we may recall, went so far as to expressly forbid the study and practice of Vedānta among nonrenunciants. As a role model, then, Śaṅkarācārya fits somewhat ambiguously with the social and religious values of seventeenth-century south Indian intellectuals. As a result, it may come as no surprise that Smārta-Śaiva theologians of the seventeenth-century promulgated a radically revised hagiography of the original (Ādi) Śaṅkara. While the eighth-century philosopher himself was an avowed Vaiṣṇava and adamant critic of both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Tantric practice, the Śaṅkarācārya of seventeenth-century hagiography emerged—just like Kālidāsa—as a Śākta devotional poet and pioneer of Śrīvidyā esoteric ritual, whose life culminated in pilgrimage to the seat of the goddess Kāmākṣī in Kanchipuram and rapture with the vision of the god and goddess as Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī, the sixteen-year-old divine couple in sexual union.

Likewise, the Smārta-Śaivas of the seventeenth century envisioned a radically different Kālidāsa, one who scarcely resembled his historical namesake of the fourth or fifth century. Inspired perhaps by a creative misconstrual of the meaning of the poet's name, as the *dāsa*, or “servant,” of the goddess Kālī, they recast him as an ardent devotee of the goddess whose literary craft was the direct expression of divine grace. In fact, the identities of these two hagiographical figureheads of Smārta-Śaivism were often deliberately blurred, which produced a single—or at least monochrome—ecclesiastical history of the Smārta-Śaiva community. The theologian Lakṣmīdhara, for instance, in commenting on the *Saundaryalaharī*, or “Waves of Beauty,” a devotional goddess hymn anachronistically attributed to Śaṅkara, extols the virtues of Kālidāsa in terms that had previously been reserved solely for the eighth-century Advaita philosopher: the “Blessed Feet [Bhagavatpāda]” of Kālidāsa. And then, in violation of our expectations, he tells a story that explains why Kālidāsa has been granted this lofty status, attributing Kālidāsa's poetic genius solely to the divine intervention of the goddess in his life: “The Blessed Feet of Kālidāsa, being deaf and dumb, spoke the pair of hymns, the *Laghustotra* and *Carcāstotra*, through the power of the contact of [the goddess's] hand with his forehead. By that power, the goddess placed the water used for bathing Her lotus feet in his mouth.”<sup>10</sup> The Kālidāsa of the Smārta-Śaiva community,

then, was born not only without poetic talent but also without the capacity for speech; the goddess, by her grace, saw fit to elevate his status by placing in his mouth the water used to bathe her feet, a widespread symbol in Hindu traditions for the grace-bestowing power of a particular deity or saint. More specifically, in the Tantric discourses where the trope originated, this substance is equated with an alchemical nectar that flows in the subtle body of a human being. Transmuted through the practices of Kuṇḍalinī yoga, this nectar divinizes the body of the adept. Dripped into the mouth of the young Kālidāsa, it transformed an impotent voice into the most sublime vehicle of poetic speech known to Indian history. Emulating the transformation they accorded to the young Kālidāsa, Smārta-Śaiva theologians, then, represented their worldly profession as an externalization of their inner devotional experiences. For many of these poets, Śākta devotionism and literary genius were fundamentally inextricable from each other.

By tracing this newfound prominence of Śaṅkarācārya and Kālidāsa in Smārta-Śaiva religious culture, I aim, in this chapter, to tell the story of the emergence of Smārta-Śaivism as a distinct sectarian community. As a fledgling sect of Hinduism competing for social prestige and patronage with the better established institutions of the Śrīvaiṣṇava, Mādhva, and Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta lineages, Smārta-Śaivism, like its rivals, was founded first and foremost on networks of religious agents. In this case, we can trace the coalescence of Smārta-Śaivism as a religious community to the first inroads of the Śaṅkarācārya lineages in the Tamil country, which soon began to build connections with the lay populace and, in particular, with local theologians who gave voice to the devotional commitments, doctrines, and values of the community at large. Through these foundational forays into shaping a public religious culture for the Smārta-Śaiva community, theologians such as Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, Atirātra Yajvan, and many of their contemporaries first made room for the practice and embodiment of a new sectarian identity. Whether produced in the guise of devotional poetry, commentarial treatises, or ritual manuals, these works served, succinctly, to consolidate the religious culture of Smārta-Śaivism. Circulating strictly within the confines of a delimited religious public, their compositions readily evoked the authors' shared commitment to Śrīvidyā ritual and devotion to Śaṅkarācārya preceptors, an omnipresent feature of this sphere of intellectual production and circulation. These writings, in other words, formed a field of discourse that actively consolidated the networks of temples, monasteries, and religious publics that came to constitute the Smārta-Śaiva community.

#### ŚAṅKARĀCĀRYAS AND SMĀRTA BRAHMINS

Let us rejoin the scene at Madurai's Cittirai Festival at the debut of Atirātra Yajvan's Sanskrit drama. Among the author's relatives and colleagues likely in attendance that day, a number were responsible for poetic, didactic, and devotional

compositions in Sanskrit that refer directly, in no uncertain terms, to their personal relationships with Śaṅkarācārya preceptors and their knowledge of esoteric Śākta ritual and theology. Take, for instance, the celebrated poet Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita himself, honored on that day by his younger brother as master of the court’s elite literary society, who opens his Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, the *Śivalīlārṇava*, with the following benedictory verse:

What good is Śiva, proud that the Daughter of the Mountain is half  
his body?

I worship him who in his entire being consists of the Daughter of  
the Mountain—Gīrvāṇa, the best of *yogins*.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Nilakaṇṭha includes in his traditional set of benedictory verses an homage to the preceptor he elsewhere acknowledges as guru, Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī—who is superior even to Śiva himself, Nilakaṇṭha opines with a trope of rhetorical censure, as Śiva’s traditional iconography (Ardhanārīśvara) depicts Pārvatī as half of his body, while his own is in essence a full incarnation of the goddess herself. Very little, unfortunately, is known about Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī as a historical figure, best known for his single surviving composition, the *Prapañcasārasaṅgraha*, an extensive textbook of practical mantra applications modeled directly on the *Prapañcasāra* attributed to Śaṅkara, with a number of chapters devoted to Śrīvidyā. As for the history of his lineage, Gīrvāṇendra himself, by way of conclusion to the *Prapañcasārasaṅgraha*, acknowledges the three previous preceptors of his tradition: he is a disciple of one Viśveśvara, disciple of Amarendra or Amareśvara,<sup>12</sup> disciple in turn of a previous Gīrvāṇendra.<sup>13</sup> Given his occasional invocations of Malayalam vocabulary, or “Keralabhāṣā,” in addition to the local Tamil vernacular, it is plausible that Gīrvāṇendra himself relocated his lineage to Kanchipuram from Kerala in the late sixteenth century.

While little is known about these predecessors, his successors, on the other hand, include a number of the most noteworthy scholars of Advaita Vedānta of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> Among these noteworthy disciples, the most widely recognized is Nṛsiṃhāśramin, a prolific and respected scholar of Advaita.<sup>15</sup> Family history remembers him as a close friend and advisor to Appayya Dīkṣita, Nilakaṇṭha’s granduncle, and he is reputed to have directly influenced Appayya’s works of Advaita.<sup>16</sup> At the outset of his *Advaitadīpikā*, Nṛsiṃhāśramin refers to Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī by name, even declaring that it was at his behest that he undertook to compose the work.<sup>17</sup> Svayamprakāśayati, another of the period’s leading Advaita scholars, also accepted Gīrvāṇendra as his preceptor. But perhaps more intriguing still, yet another of Gīrvāṇendra’s noteworthy students was one Bodhendra Sarasvatī, understood by tradition to be the same individual revered as the fifty-ninth Jagadguru of the Kāñci Kāmakoti Pīṭha, Bhagavannāma Bodhendra Sarasvatī. Whatever his actual monastic affiliation



may have been, Bodhendra Sarasvatī recognizes Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī as his guru in his *Hariharādvaitabhūṣaṇa*, as well as in his *Ātmabodhaṭīkā*, in which he describes him as follows:

The preceptor installed at the seat of the Advaita lineage  
 [*advaitapīṭhasthita*], his inner form luminous with the delightful  
 knowledge of the Self,  
 I worship him always inside my heart, Gīrvāṇendra, the best of  
*yogins*, pure of heart.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to his esteem for his guru, Bodhendra conveys to us that Gīrvāṇendra was considered the head of a certain lineage by his use of the phrase *advaitapīṭha*, suggesting an established monastery or institutional center for the propagation of Advaita thought. Beyond the association with Advaita, we are given no further information as to this lineage’s self-portrayal or the location of its center of operation. Nevertheless, the memory of Bodhendra Sarasvatī as equivalent to one of the pontiffs of the Kanchipuram Śaṅkarācārya lineage is highly suggestive, particularly in light of the rather distinctive initiatory title borne by nearly all of Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī’s gurus and disciples: “-Indra Sarasvatī,” an appellation attested only among the preceptors of two Kanchipuram orders, that of the Kāmakoti Pīṭha Śaṅkarācāryas and the lineage of Rāmacandrendra Sarasvatī, better known as Upaniṣad Brahmendra, a late seventeenth-century ascetic so named for his feat of commenting on 108 Upaniṣads. In short, Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī was a highly celebrated and influential figure among renunciant scholars of Advaita and most likely the pontiff of a monastic order centered in Kanchipuram, one that bears some historical relationship to the lineages now most commonly associated with the city.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī’s importance extended beyond the confines of the monastery walls, attracting the attention of a number of court intellectuals, including Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita—who went so far as to name his son, Gīrvāṇendra Dīkṣita, after his preceptor. Nīlakaṇṭha’s sentiment is best captured from his own words, expressed eloquently in one of his versified hymns, the *Gurutattvamālikā*,<sup>20</sup> a garland of twenty-eight stanzas (*nakṣatramālā*) devoted entirely to his guru and rich with devotional sentiment:

A few people, here and there, have been saved by ancient gurus,  
 through the  
 Purification of all six Śaiva *adhvans*—*tattva*, *sthāna*, *kalā*, *pada*,  
*akṣara*, and *mantra*.<sup>21</sup>

But, with the single *mantra adhvān*, made manifest in his work the  
*Sārasaṅgraha*, Gīrvāṇendra Guru unchains the entire world, from  
 the proudest to the humblest.



My thirst to accept the water of your feet and smear their purifying  
dust,  
To bear on my forehead at length those feet resembling two golden  
lotuses,  
O master, even a hundred lifetimes cannot fulfill! And yet,  
You will never obtain even a single rebirth, except in the minds of  
your devotees.

Pointing the way to austerities [*kṛcchra*], it removes all hardships  
[*kṛcchra*] of its own accord;  
It swallows our karma by the roots, bringing our actions [karma] to  
fulfillment;  
Bestowing liberation to all who hear it, may this four-syllable mantra,  
Gīr-vā-ṇe-ndra, be my comfort so long as I draw breath.  
If the descent of power [*śaktipāta*] is certainly the fruit of fortune  
from an  
Array of meritorious action conditioning this lifetime, amassed  
through the bondage of endless mortal bodies,  
It is still conveyed through contact with the compassionate glance of  
the preceptor.  
Thus, proclaim, you who are freed from error, that there is no reality  
[*tattva*] higher than the Guru!<sup>22</sup>

Nilakaṇṭha makes it abundantly clear over the course of the hymn that the preceptor he honors is none other than the author of the *Prapañcasārasaṅgraha*, a composition “adept at manifesting the heart of the great sayings of Śaṅkara.”<sup>23</sup> He proceeds to honor Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī variously as *kulaguru*—preceptor of one’s family, clan, or lineage—or as “mantra guru,” the bestower of a sectarian or esoteric initiation by means of the revelation of a mantra, which Nilakaṇṭha implicitly claims to have received through the process of *śaktipāta*, the descent of power or grace at the hand of the initiatory guru, affirmed to be the sole source of liberation in many schools of Śaiva thought.<sup>24</sup> Such initiation also carried with it ritual obligations designed to cultivate a devotional experience directly linking the devotee with his chosen preceptor; indeed, the visualized worship of the preceptor was an essential part of the daily enactment of Smārta-Śaiva liturgy. As with all Śaiva traditions from the middle of the first millennium, in fact, the initiating guru or teacher was equated for all intents and purposes with the god Śiva himself. The preceptor, as a result, was seen as possessing the capacity to bestow the liberating power of Śiva’s grace through ritual initiation, severing the bonds that tied the individual soul to the cycle of transmigration. An initiate, therefore, who wished to attain liberation himself, could cultivate a devotional bond with his personal

teacher, which, when inculcated through a regimen of ritual practice, facilitated the union of the disciple with Śiva himself.

Taken as a whole, the evidence strongly suggests that it is this Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī who provided Nīlakaṇṭha with the initiation required to pursue knowledge of Śrīvidyā ritual, the procedure for which the renowned poet-theologian sets forth at length in his unpublished ritual manual, a previously unknown work (*pad-dhati*), the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* (Moonlight of auspiciousness). In the context of adjudicating ritual procedure, Nīlakaṇṭha cites the *Prapañcasārasaṅgraha* on a number of occasions, referring to its author by the honorific *asmadārādhyacaranāḥ*, “the one whose feet are fit to be worshipped by me.” Interestingly enough, Nīlakaṇṭha is not the only one of his immediate circle to refer in such laudatory terms to Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī. In fact, a similar claim is made by another of the most prominent intellectuals of his day, Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dikṣita, best known as the author of the *Kāvyadarpaṇa*, one of the most celebrated treatises of aesthetic theory written in later centuries. For our present purposes, however, Rājacūḍāmaṇi was also the author of a highly refined narrative chronicle of the life of Śaṅkara titled the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* (The ascension of Śaṅkara),<sup>25</sup> a reworking of the traditional “universal conquest” narrative that concludes with Śaṅkara ending his life in Kanchipuram and establishing the Śrīcakra, the Śrīvidyā icon or ritual diagram at the heart of the Kāmākṣī Temple.

Rājacūḍāmaṇi prefaces his work, in addition to an impressive resume of his academic achievements, with a number of benedictory verses addressed to Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī, in which he confides that this same preceptor came to him in a dream and instructed him to write the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya*. Rājacūḍāmaṇi refers to his preceptor as “a veritable Śaṅkarācārya, situated at the far shore of speech, the creator of the compilation on the essence of the *Prapañcasāra*.”<sup>26</sup> The term “a veritable Śaṅkarācārya” (*paryāyaśaṅkarācārya*) prompts close attention but leaves us with more questions than answers. Does Rājacūḍāmaṇi mean to say that he considers Gīrvāṇendra to be an incarnation of the original Śaṅkarācārya, or that he was one among a lineage of successive preceptors who adopted the title Śaṅkarācārya, as do the present-day lineages of Jagadgurus? The text of the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* leaves no doubt, however, that Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dikṣita himself envisioned an intimate connection between Śaṅkarācārya and Kanchipuram, best exemplified by the work’s seventh chapter, in which Śaṅkara completes his pilgrimage and his life by establishing in Kanchipuram (rather than Kashmir) the Sarvajñapīṭha, the “Seat of the Omniscient” and the heart of the Śaṅkarācārya lineages—a claim supported today, quite naturally, only by the Kanchipuram Śaṅkarācārya lineage.

Given the testimony of Nīlakaṇṭha Dikṣita and Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dikṣita, two of seventeenth-century south India’s most prominent intellectual figures, Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī’s fame seems to have circulated well beyond his immediate lineage, serving as a pivotal link in the nascent social alliance between Smārta

Brahmins and the lineages of Śaṅkarācārya preceptors. Before the generation of Nīlakaṇṭha and Rājacūḍamaṇi, not a single nonrenunciant Sanskrit intellectual professed a personal or family allegiance to a Śaṅkarācārya order. Even Appayya Dīkṣita, Nīlakaṇṭha’s granduncle, who devoted much of his intellectual energy to reviving the Śaiva Advaita philosophy of Śrīkaṇṭha and transmitting it liberally to his students, to our knowledge makes no such claim.<sup>27</sup> That Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī was not an isolated charismatic figure but a participant in a larger social configuration becomes clear in the following generation: among Nīlakaṇṭha’s pupils, Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita,<sup>28</sup> one of the leading lights among the first generation of scholars at the Maratha court of Tanjavur, adopted a similar relationship with the ascetic and scholar of Advaita Kṛṣṇānanda Sarasvatī. In fact, Rāmabhadra honors his own preceptor and lineage with a unique hymn, one reminiscent of Nīlakaṇṭha’s *Guruttattvamālikā*, titled the *Ācāryastavarājabhūṣaṇa*, commemorating (and even addressing in the vocative!) a similar devotional hymn written by Brahmānanda Sarasvatī in honor of their mutual preceptor, Kṛṣṇānanda, the *Ācāryastavarāja*.<sup>29</sup>

Your birth from Brahmānanda himself, your brilliant golden form,  
The three worlds made subject to you, your familiarity with all the  
sciences;  
The insightful praise refuge to you, which even for a moment gives  
birth to happiness,  
*Ācāryastavarāja!* What poet would be bold enough to praise your  
virtues?

Surely the feet of Kṛṣṇānanda, on occasions of worship bearing a  
double multitude  
Of tender blooming lotuses, with heaps of buds, strewn by assem-  
blies of learned men,  
Become even more radiant when you are attached to them. And yet,  
I declare that it is you who are indeed the most charming,  
*Ācāryastavarāja*.

The elixir of life of the entire world, a cloud serves mostly to please  
the young *cāṭaka* bird;<sup>30</sup>  
Bringing joy to all, the moon awakens at will for the pleasure of the  
night-blooming lotus.  
*Ācāryastavarāja*, you bring bliss to the learned of the world, and  
now,  
You bedeck yourself most particularly for the delight of  
Rāmabhadra’s heart.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to Rāmabhadra’s evident devotion to his lineage—manifested in his celebration of its textual incarnation in the form of the *Ācāryastavarāja*—his mode

of address, compelling all learned scholars to take delight in his composition, makes it unambiguously clear that Rāmabhadra intended his hymn not for the confines of a monastery but for a more public consumption among connoisseurs of sophisticated Sanskrit verse. Moreover, that the audience he invokes is at once impeccably educated in Sanskrit poetics and philosophy and sympathetic toward Rāmabhadra’s devotion to his chosen lineage suggests that, by the late seventeenth century, affiliation with Śaṅkarācārya preceptors had become an unproblematic, or even commonplace, feature of Smārta Brahmin identity.

Such an implication, in fact, is fully supported by the sheer evidence of numbers: a staggering number of south Indian intellectuals, beginning around the seventeenth century, came to be involved one way or another with Śaṅkarācāryas, Śāktism, Advaita philosophy, and if we extrapolate from the emerging pattern, most likely all three at once. Reference might be made to Kālahasti Kavi, an acquaintance of Nīlakaṇṭha, who composed the *Bhedadhikkāravivṛti*, a commentary on Nṛsiṃhāśramin’s treatise. One might mention a certain resident of Kanchipuram who referred to himself as “Kāmākṣidāsa” (servant of the goddess Kāmākṣī) and, by his own admission, received Śaiva *dikṣā* at the hand of Appayya Dīkṣita himself. Or, one might take the case of Rāmabhadra’s pupil Nalla Adhvarin, who refers to himself in his *Advaitarasamañjarī* as a disciple of Sadāśiva Brahmendra, the latter himself the author of a popular compendium, the *Siddhāntakalpavallī*, based on Appayya’s *Siddhāntaleśasaṅgraha*. Taken together, these figures exemplify the emergence of a network of theologians, who over the course of several decades, participated actively in the reimagination of the institutional boundaries and the religious culture of the Smārta-Śaiva sectarian community.

As it turns out, the most intriguing works of the this formative period of Smārta-Śaiva religious culture have yet to be studied, remaining untranslated and largely inaccessible to academics and modern-day practitioners alike. Perhaps the most revelatory of these documents is the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita. A manual for the daily ritual obligations of the Śrīvidyā initiates, the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* is a far cry from the insipid cookbook-like procedural manuals that often go by the name *paddhati*. After all, Nīlakaṇṭha was one of the greatest stylists of the Sanskrit language in the precolonial period, in his prose as well as his poetry. What we discover, instead, is an instructive (to us as well as his pupils) intertwining of ritual and social commentary, through which Nīlakaṇṭha actively negotiates a place for Śrīvidyā ritual practitioners (*upāsakas*) within the broader orthodox climate of south Indian Śaiva Siddhānta.<sup>32</sup>

The second work to be addressed is a little-known commentary on a Sanskrit hymn popular in south India, the *Ambāstava*, attributed at the time to Kālidāsa.<sup>33</sup> The author of the *Ambāstavavyākhyā*, Ardhanārīśvara Dīkṣita, was the elder brother of Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dīkṣita and, like his brother, was extensively well-read in the classics of Śrīvidyā scripture. As a didactic treatment of what was likely a popular

work of poetry in his day, Ardhanārīśvara’s commentary consistently strives to establish a canon for the interpretation of Śākta verse, ranging from the earliest-known Śrīvidyā scriptures to the personalities construed by his contemporaries as the archetypal Śākta devotees: Śaṅkara and Kālidāsa. In doing so, this commentary casts Śaṅkara and Kālidāsa as the forerunners and champions of a sanitized model of Śrīvidyā *upāsanā* suited to the social demands of orthodox Smārta Brahmins.

The final work under discussion is the aforementioned *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* of Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dikṣita, by far the most aesthetically refined example of the Śaṅkaradigvijaya genre and, perhaps for that reason, one of the least studied.<sup>34</sup> One of the few such narratives to situate the final destination of Śaṅkara’s journey in Kanchipuram, the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* forges an intrinsic connection between the lineage of Śaṅkarācārya, Kanchipuram, its resident goddess Kāmākṣī, and Śrīvidyā ritual practice. In particular, the final two cantos of the work contain an array of astoundingly precise references to the esoteric vocabulary of Śrīvidyā, including a sixteen-verse hymn to Kāmākṣī that embeds each of the syllables of the Śrīvidyā mantra, leaving the reader with no doubt that the author was intimately familiar with Śrīvidyā ritual and viewed this practice as inextricably connected to the lineage of Śaṅkara.

To be clear about what is at stake in these rhetorical strategies, Nilakaṇṭha and his colleagues did not promulgate Śākta ritual and theology purely through their own social capital. Rather, they substantiated the authority of their lineage by invoking two of Indian history’s most celebrated cultural figures: Kālidāsa, the most celebrated poet of Sanskrit literary history (or perhaps of any Indian literary tradition), and Śaṅkarācārya, the figurehead of the Advaita school of Vedānta philosophy, which had become the language of intersectorian debate in south India for much of the second millennium. Through this process, Śrīvidyā came to be understood unequivocally by seventeenth-century Smārta Brahmins as the teachings of Śaṅkara and Kālidāsa themselves. Within the Western tradition this phenomenon evokes the Renaissance European defense of the Hermetic tradition, in which the walls of the Vatican immortalized portraits of Hermes Trismegistus, who was understood by prominent intellectuals to have disseminated the esoteric truth of the Christian doctrine many centuries before Christ. For Nilakaṇṭha Dikṣita to cite Śaṅkarācārya as the forefather of Śrīvidyā *upāsanā* is strikingly reminiscent of the claim of a poet-intellectual in the court of Queen Elizabeth, Sir Philip Sidney, stating that

Mercurius Trimegestius, who (if the bookes which are fathered vppon him bee his in déede, as in trueth they bee very auncient) is the founder of them all, teacheth euerywhere, That there is but one God: That one is the roote of all things, and that without that one, nothing hath bene of all things that are: That the same one is called the onely good and the goodnesse it selfe, which hath vniuersall power of creating all things. . . . That vnto him alone belongeth the name of Father and of Good.<sup>35</sup>

Śrīvidyā, for Nīlakaṇṭha and his contemporaries, was not a novel fashion in Smārta-Śaiva circles but the central insight of India’s greatest intellectual luminaries. In recasting the hagiographies of Śaṅkarācārya and Kālidāsa, then, the Smārta-Śaiva theologians of seventeenth-century south India aimed, not only to rewrite the “ecclesiastical history” of the Śaṅkarācārya monastic lineages, but also to provide a model for religious belonging in their own day and age. Their ecstatic devotion, couched in the garb of the sophisticated poet and intellectual, was no abstract ideal but, rather, served as a model for the self-fashioning of the Smārta-Śaiva theologian. Spared the rigors of an ascetic lifestyle of renunciation, these householder theologians found themselves saddled with the unique obligation of constructing a new religious public, one that cohered around a unified religious culture and shared sites of public memory. When the Smārta-Śaiva theologian spoke of his sectarian identity, he was, simply, *just like Kālidāsa*, the consummate literary genius who received his talents through the grace of the goddess herself, whom he held dearer than his own life breath. Just like Kālidāsa, these theologians portrayed themselves in their poetry and scholastic ventures as the paragons of the poetic talent of their generation and the ideal devotees of Śaṅkarācārya and of the goddess.<sup>36</sup>

#### ŚRĪVIDYĀ AND SOCIETY IN NĪLAKAṆṬHA DĪKṢITA’S SAUBHĀGYACANDRĀTAPA

Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita—poet, satirist, iconoclast, and one of early-modern India’s sharpest literary minds—is well-known and celebrated by connoisseurs of Sanskrit verse even today for his uniquely bold personality and incisive satirical wit.<sup>37</sup> Many Indian and Western scholars alike are well-acquainted with his *mahākāvyas* (epics), *stotras* (hymns), *śatakas* (centuries), and other works, including his piercing *Kalivīḍambana* (A travesty of time), which lambastes with equal facility the many degenerate characters frequenting the royal courts of his day, from poets to priests and mantra-sorcerers. His views on literary theory are conservative in the extreme, calling for artists to rein in their obsessions with puns and linguistic feats and return to the straightforward beauty of the Sanskrit language. Given this picture, perhaps it is no wonder at all that few scholars in the Indian or Western academy are aware that this same Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita composed a rather different sort of work as well: a ritual manual for the Tantric worship of the goddess Lalitā Tripurasundarī: the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa*, or “The Moonlight of Auspiciousness.”<sup>38</sup>

To our knowledge, the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* survives only in a single Grantha-script palm-leaf manuscript, now housed at the Oriental Research Institute at the University of Kerala, Kariavattom. The manuscript itself is incomplete: only the first two chapters (*paricchadas*) survive from a work that most likely comprised at least five chapters.<sup>39</sup> Although it is always a tragedy to lose access to a fragment of

intellectual history, what does survive of this work provides a wealth of information concerning Nilakaṇṭha Dikṣita’s authorship of the work, his canon of textual sources, and even allusions to the interactions and tensions between sectarian communities. The colophon included at the end of the first *pariccheda* includes the same formulas adopted regularly by the Dikṣita family in self-description,<sup>40</sup> suggesting that the manuscript was transmitted within the family. Still more convincing is the internal evidence of citation: on matters of ritual procedure, Nilakaṇṭha often acknowledges the authority of the *Śivārcanacandrikā* of Appayya,<sup>41</sup> whom he describes as “our grandfather” (*asmatpitāmahacaraṇāḥ*) or, somewhat eccentrically, with the proud but affectionate “Our Dikṣita” (*asmaddikṣitaḥ*). In addition, the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* is referred to by name in yet another Śrīvidyā manual composed by his younger brother Atirātra Yajvan, whom we have already encountered as the featured playwright of Madurai’s Cittirai Festival. This work, titled the *Śrīpadārthadīpikā* or *Śrīpadārthavyavasthā*, may now be entirely lost, but had been recovered before 1942 by P. P. S. Sastri, who managed to reproduce the following excerpt:

This is examined at great length by our venerable grandfather in the *Śivānandalaharī*, thus there is no need to expound it here. . . . The adjudication is described according to the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa*, a text difficult to fathom by numerous techniques of exegesis, written for the upliftment of students by our elder brother, the honorable Nilakaṇṭha Dikṣita, the polymath capable of summarizing all systems of thought, an incarnation of our central deity.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, it would appear that the authorship of Śrīvidyā manuals became something of a family tradition in Nilakaṇṭha’s generation, as he further discloses in his own *paddhati* that *his* elder brother, Āccān Dikṣita, also authored such a text: “This position was articulated by our venerable grandfather in the *Śivārcanacandrikā*, and our venerable elder brother accepted the very same position in the *Saubhāgyapaddhati*.”<sup>43</sup> No trace has yet been located of this *Saubhāgyapaddhati*, but the combined evidence does call for a revision of the narrative put forth by the descendants of the Dikṣitas,<sup>44</sup> which states that Nilakaṇṭha himself acted independently, and somewhat eccentrically, in pursuing initiation under Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī. Rather, at least three of five brothers were intimately familiar with the Śrīvidyā system and composed interreferential treatises on the subject—far less a coincidence than what one would call a sectarian tradition. No reference seems available to suggest definitively that earlier generations of the family were involved in any form of Śākta ritual practice; and yet in his devotional hymn to the goddess Mīnākṣī, the *Ānandasāgarastava*, Nilakaṇṭha provides us with an intriguing but ambiguous biographical anecdote concerning his granduncle:

It was Appayya Dikṣita himself who first offered to you his very self,  
dedicating to you his entire family.



Who are you, great goddess, to overlook me, your ancestral servant?  
And who am I to fail to worship you, my family deity?<sup>45</sup>

Here, Nīlakaṇṭha appears to offer a plaintive reminder to Mīnākṣī, the resident goddess of Madurai, that Appayya Dīkṣita had brought the family into a contractual relationship of sorts with her, their *kuladevatā* (family deity). While Appayya himself is silent on the issue, Nīlakaṇṭha appears to endorse the veracity of this event; and in fact Nīlakaṇṭha’s descendants today continue to revere Mīnākṣī as their *kuladevatā*.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the deity addressed in the *Ānandasāgarastava* is not Mīnākṣī as such but rather the local goddess understood as a manifestation of the transregional goddess Lalitā Tripurasundarī, the deity of the Śrīvidyā tradition, a fact that Nīlakaṇṭha reveals to the careful reader by embedding her traditional visualization in the hymn, rather than that of Mīnākṣī. Specifically, Nīlakaṇṭha describes the deity as holding in her four hands the noose, goad, sugarcane bow, and arrows, and describes her row of teeth as consisting of the *vidyā* (*vidyātmanah*)—in other words, each tooth corresponds to a syllable of the Śrīvidyā mantra.<sup>47</sup>

Although publicly Appayya was the devout Śaiva par excellence, was he secretly a worshipper of the goddess? Sadly, we have no evidence to confirm or refute Nīlakaṇṭha’s audacious claim beyond a reasonable doubt. And yet the theological proclivities Nīlakaṇṭha did inherit from his granduncle inflect his Śrīvidyā-centric writings with a flavor unattested elsewhere in the textual history of Śrīvidyā. Specifically, the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* undertakes the project of bridging the gap between the Śrīvidyā textual canon and the orthodox Śaiva perspectives of the Sanskritic Śaiva Siddhānta tradition, a school of thought far removed from Śrīvidyā’s earlier ritual and philosophical influences. As the Śrīvidyā exegetical tradition grew to maturity in Kashmir between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, its earliest engagement with philosophically rigorous models of ontology and cosmology took place in the context of the Śākta-Śaiva traditions of the Kashmiri renaissance.<sup>48</sup> As a result, early Śrīvidyā shows the marked influence of a number of nondual Śākta-Śaiva Tantric traditions—the Trika and Pratyabhijñā schools in particular—popular in Kashmir at the time. It was only significantly later that Śrīvidyā came to play a foundational role in the Smārta religious culture of the Tamil South. Today Śrīvidyā in south India is practiced primarily in accordance with the writings of Bhāskaraṛāya, resident scholar at the eighteenth-century Maratha court of Tanjavur, who eschewed engagement with traditional Śaiva schools of thought in favor of a more modernizing, Vedicizing agenda.<sup>49</sup> The interstitial period, to which Nīlakaṇṭha belongs, is largely uncharted territory.

What we discover in Nīlakaṇṭha’s work is a deliberate alliance between Śrīvidyā Śāktism and south Indian Śaiva Siddhānta. At first glance, this alliance of disparate perspectives may seem implausible. Originally a pan-Indian tradition of the

Śaiva Mantramārga dating back as early as the fifth century of the Common Era,<sup>50</sup> Śaiva Siddhānta maintained a staunchly dualist cosmology for the majority of its history,<sup>51</sup> showing only minor or negligible engagement with Śākta-centric theologies. Beginning in the mid-seventh century, Śaiva Siddhānta had become the royal cult of the south Indian Pallava and Cōḷa dynasties, providing the liturgy and protocol for nearly all major Śaiva temples in the region. By the early second millennium, the Sanskrit-based Śaiva Siddhānta became the dominant Śaiva sect in the Tamil region, alongside of which developed a distinctively Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta school with its own lineage and Tamil language scriptures. And from Nilakaṇṭha's vantage point in the mid-seventeenth century, south Indian Śaiva Siddhānta had undergone yet another phase change over the previous century, in which the orthodox currents of Śaiva Siddhānta had increasingly accommodated nondualist influences. Examples of such hybrid works include the *Śaivaparibhāṣā* of Śivāgrayogin and, of course, the numerous Śaiva works of Appayya Dīkṣita, who inherited the doctrinal stance he calls “Śivādvaita” from the Sanskritic Virāśaivas of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the vicinity of Srisaīlam in northern Andhra Pradesh.<sup>52</sup>

It was this emergent nondualist Śaiva Siddhānta climate that fostered Nilakaṇṭha's Śrīvidyā-Siddhānta synthesis, a model for the thoroughgoing compatibility he perceived between the “Vaidika” orthodoxy of the Śaiva Siddhānta and its esoteric counterpart, Śrīvidyā. Nowhere does Nilakaṇṭha acknowledge the authority of any particular Saiddhāntika lineage or preceptor, and in fact he refers only sparingly to the works of known human authors, aside from those of Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī and his granduncle Appayya, preferring to engage directly with a wide range of Śaiva and Śākta scriptures. However, his knowledge of the Āgamas,<sup>53</sup> classical Saiddhāntika scripture, is encyclopedic, as citations are sprinkled liberally throughout the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa*, as well as in his *Śivatattvarahasya*, an erudite commentary on the popular *Śivāṣṭottarasahasranāmastotra* (The thousand and eight names of Śiva) clearly intended for an educated but exoteric audience. Nevertheless, that Nilakaṇṭha viewed Śrīvidyā and Saiddhāntika orthodoxy as intertwined is made explicit in the *Śivatattvarahasya* as well. For instance, on one occasion he maintains that a form of Śiva prevalent in Śrīvidyā, Kāmeśvara, is in fact a “highly esoteric” (*atirahasya*) manifestation of the Saiddhāntika Maheśvara—an ontologically subordinate, qualified (*saguṇa*) form of Śiva—whose visualization can only be learned directly from the mouth of one's initiatory preceptor.<sup>54</sup>

As eccentric and creative as Nilakaṇṭha's synthesis may seem to an outside observer, Nilakaṇṭha himself goes to great lengths to demonstrate not only that his views are entirely orthodox and grounded in the Vedas but also that the esoteric teachings of Śrīvidyā are no less than the entire purport (*tātparya*) of the Vedic corpus. Take, for instance, the structure of Nilakaṇṭha's first chapter (*pariccheda*), a conceptual introduction to the ritual material treated thereafter. He begins from a foundation agreeable to members of any Vaidika sect, stating that the highest aim

of human existence is liberation from the cycle of rebirth, and that the means to achieving this is to be found in the scriptures, primarily the Upaniṣads. Nīlakaṇṭha adduces a number of Upaniṣadic passages and, with some creative exegesis and grammatical maneuvering, arrives at the desired conclusion:<sup>55</sup> "Thus, that the knowledge of Śiva, qualified by Cicchakti as so described, is the means of achieving liberation is ascertained to be the purport of all scriptures, having come forth from the same mouth."<sup>56</sup>

Here, Nīlakaṇṭha's strategy is at once eminently traditional (the idea of the *tātparya*, or "purport," being a mainstay of the Mīmāṃsā tradition of Vedic hermeneutics) and iconoclastic, in that he manages to superimpose on the authority of the Vedas an entire cosmological system foreign to their original context. "Cit-śakti," as Nīlakaṇṭha refers to her here, is a conceptual model of the female divinity as the "power of consciousness," herself the means by which her consort Śiva acts in the world and, in fact, the material cause of the world itself; this concept is best known from the Pratyabhijñā school of Kashmiri Śaivism, later fundamental to much of Śrīvidyā thought as well. As Nīlakaṇṭha himself puts it, "Thus so far has been established: that Śiva is not a material cause, and that Śakti is the material cause of the universe, consists of consciousness, and is nondifferent from Śiva."<sup>57</sup> In essence, tracing the core cosmological and soteriological precepts of his lineage of practice to the secure foundations of the Vedas, Nīlakaṇṭha sets the tone for his approach to problems of ritual legitimacy as well. Never deviating from the orthodoxy of Vaidika culture or from the precepts of Śrīvidyā practice, his adjudication of socially sensitive issues is at once entirely "Smārta" and entirely "Tāntrika." To do any less would be to fall short of the demands of scripture, "because," as he tells us, "the Tantras themselves explicitly teach a combination of the Vaidika and Tāntrika systems."<sup>58</sup>

This being the case, if one accepts that the knowledge of Śiva qualified by Cicchakti is conducive to liberation, then how exactly does one go about achieving such knowledge? First, Nīlakaṇṭha replies, we must understand what does *not* work: the method typically recommended by Advaita Vedānta—that is, the study and contemplation of Upaniṣadic teachings. The alternative he reaches for, however, is more subtle than it appears at first glance. What is called for is the path of devotion, or bhakti—but with a twist that sets Nīlakaṇṭha's argument distinctly apart from what the word *bhakti* typically calls to mind: *bhakti*, he tells us, is a synonym of *upāsanā*, the esoteric ritual worship of a particular deity. As a result, devotional sentiment alone does not suffice but must be accompanied by the ritual techniques prescribed by the Āgamas—that is, the scriptures of particular sectarian traditions—which Nīlakaṇṭha declares unambiguously to be equally as authoritative as the Vedas on matters of ritual procedure:

The word *devotion* signifies a form of votive worship that is synonymous with "internal worship" [*upāsanā*] in so far as it evokes a particular mode of being—the words

*upāsanā*, meditation, and contemplation [*nididhyāsana*] being synonyms. One who is intent on that achieves liberation in a single lifetime. Such is revealed by the exemplified statement. Nevertheless, ritual practice, although not revealed in scripture, is established to be a necessary component of *upāsanā* on the maxim “How much more?”<sup>59</sup> . . .

One might argue, given the revelation of the Āgamas as nonauthoritative: how can one learn from them the procedure of worship? No—this statement does not mean that the general class of Āgamas is nonauthoritative, . . . because, since it is adjudicated in the Mahābhārata itself that the Āgamas of the Pāsupatas, etcetera, are authoritative,<sup>60</sup> they are also equivalent to the Vedas in matters associated with modes of offering that are dependent on Vaidika worship. But, those [texts] among them that teach left-handed practice opposed to the Vedas are nonauthoritative.<sup>61</sup>

In essence, Nilakaṇṭha has subsumed the entire soteriological function of *nididhyāsana*—and with it, the entire injunctive apparatus of Vedānta—under the umbrella of Śrīvidyā ritual worship, or *upāsanā*. The very term *upāsanā*, in Nilakaṇṭha’s creative exegesis, provides a particularly apt locus for the fusing of key concepts in Advaita Vedānta and Śrīvidyā. Etymologically translating as “service,” the concept of *upāsanā* has a rich history in the theology of Advaita Vedānta; the term is often equated specifically with *nididhyāsana* not simply as “repeated concentration” but as a ritualized series of *dhāraṇās*, or meditative procedures, intended to facilitate direct awareness of the absolute brahman. These *dhāraṇās* are traditionally known in the corpus of Advaita Vedānta philosophy as the Brahnavidyās, which modern commentators have enumerated in a fixed list of thirty-two.<sup>62</sup> While the compound *brahnavidyā* in the singular may translate literally as “the knowledge of brahman,” the plural form generally alludes to an esoteric meditative regimen rarely discussed in its full systematicity. Among early modern Smārta-Śaivas, the most popular of the Brahnavidyās was unquestionably the Daharākāśavidyā,<sup>63</sup> the meditation on brahman in the cave of the heart, to which Appayya himself accorded pride of place in the Śivādvaitya of Śrīkaṇṭha. Nilakaṇṭha, for his part, reveals his acquaintance with the Brahnavidyās through an allusion in his hymn of lament, the *Śāntivilāsa*:

From boyhood, that skill that I amassed having established myself  
In the Brahnavidyās through obedience to the feet my guru,  
Now has somehow been transformed into a means for entertaining  
Kings who listen nightly to my stories as a means of falling asleep.<sup>64</sup>

It is unfortunate, though not surprising, that Nilakaṇṭha never fully elaborates on his understanding of the Brahnavidyās of Advaita Vedānta. He does return to the subject, however, at regular intervals throughout his second *pariccheda*, to emphasize that certain ritual preparations, such as applying the Śaiva *tilaka*, the *tripuṇḍra*, and smearing the body with ash, must regularly be done as a subsidiary component of Brahnavidyā practice. The only *vidyā* referred to by name, unsurprisingly, is the

Daharavidyā, frequently favored by the Śivādvaita philosophical tradition in particular,<sup>65</sup> even before the work of Nilakaṇṭha’s granduncle Appayya.

By equating their practice, however—under the term *nīdīdhyāsana*—with *upāsana*, Nilakaṇṭha’s claim evokes a double entendre that rhetorically equates Advaita Vedānta with Śrīvidyā itself. Some care should be taken to distinguish between the term *upāsana* in the neuter,<sup>66</sup> employed by Śaṅkarācārya to denote meditative practice ancillary and subordinate to the realization of *brahmajñāna*, and the feminine *upāsana* that Nilakaṇṭha invokes. In south India Śrīvidyā, *upāsana* is not merely meditative visualization but is also the term of choice for referring to the entire Śrīvidyā ritual system; a practitioner of Śrīvidyā is generally known as a Śrīvidyā *upāsaka*. Through this maneuver, Nilakaṇṭha not only gives Śrīvidyā a Vedic stamp of approval but also argues, via creative exegesis, that the injunction to perform Śrīvidyā ritual is sanctioned by the Vedas—and in fact is the essential purport, or *tātparya*, of the entire Vedic corpus.

Having established the validity of his sources and the conceptual foundation of his mode of practice, Nilakaṇṭha proceeds with his treatment of the daily ritual duties of the Śrīvidyā practitioner on the basis of the Āgamic prescriptions—of both Śaiva and Śākta origin. Although all sectarian Āgamas, ostensibly, partake of equal veridicality, the procedure (*itikartavyatā*) for the worship of Mahātripurasundarī, the central deity of the Śrīvidyā tradition, ought to be procured both from the Śaiva Siddhānta Āgamas—to which he refers as the “Divyāgamas” and the “Kāmikāgama and other Śaiva Tantras”<sup>67</sup>—and from the Śākta Tantras such as the “Vāmakeśvarītantra,” widely accepted as the foremost scripture of Śrīvidyā. On the other hand, the same Saiddhāntika Āgamas Nilakaṇṭha invokes as authorities for esoteric Śākta practice had a much broader currency in the religious economy of seventeenth-century Tamil Nadu, being at once the purview of Siddhānta monastic lineages and the repository of procedural guidelines for nearly all of Śaiva temple worship in the Tamil region. Given the context, the approach of citing purely Śaiva scriptures to justify procedural injunctions on Śākta worship strikes the reader as less pragmatic than socially expedient, anchoring the practice of a socially marginal lineage in the broader culture of Śaiva orthodoxy.

This is not to say, of course, that Nilakaṇṭha is not completely sincere in claiming that Śrīvidyā is at the heart of both Vedic and Śaiva orthodoxy. Nor is his adoption of Śaiva orthodoxy in any way artificial; Nilakaṇṭha’s own *Śivatattvarahasya* and Appayya’s *Śivārcanacandrikā* demonstrate beyond doubt that the family’s practice and cultural self-understanding was thoroughly grounded in the heritage of south Indian Śaivism. Nevertheless, the synthesis between these two modes of self-understanding, on one hand, and pragmatic codes of ritual and social action, on the other, had evidently become a conceptual problematic for Nilakaṇṭha that required a careful and deliberate negotiation. Take, for instance, Nilakaṇṭha’s extended discussion of daily (*āhnikā*) ritual duties and life-cycle rituals (*samskāra*)

prescribed separately in the Vaidika Dharmaśāstras and in the Tantras: are practitioners of a particular sectarian *upāsana*, who are also Smārta Brahmins, required to undergo Tantric *saṃskāras* as well as the Vaidika *saṃskāras*? Nilakaṇṭha concludes, with the support of his elder brother, Appayya, and Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī that Tāntrika *saṃskāras* are intended only for Śūdras, whereas additional daily rituals may need to be adopted according to the variety of *upāsana* in question. This issue, contemplated at length by Nilakaṇṭha’s contemporaries as well,<sup>68</sup> held significant consequences for the social constitution of Śaiva communities across the subcontinent: the position advocated here by Nilakaṇṭha permitted Vaidika intellectuals to constitute sectarian Tantric practice as integral to their immediate social network while maintaining the social signifiers of inclusion in a transregional elite Brahminical orthodoxy.

The same may be said of other, more visible issues of sectarian comportment, such as the marking of one’s sectarian identity through embodied insignia such as the *tilaka*, a sectarian marker borne on the forehead. Nilakaṇṭha interrupts his discussion, interspersed with ostensibly esoteric ritual matters, to adjudicate the public comportment of Śrīvidyā initiates. Taking issue with the Śākta-centric practice of more transgressive, or Kaula, lineages in the region, he maintains that Śrīvidyā initiates ought to display only the Śaiva sectarian *tilaka*, the tripuṇḍra, thus representing themselves not simply as Śrīvidyā practitioners but as members of the broader Smārta-Śaiva public.<sup>69</sup> In short, Nilakaṇṭha situates his *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* at the forefront of a sectarian community at a key moment of transition. Engaging systematically with external players from the mainstream Śaiva Siddhānta to the more transgressive south Indian Kaula Śāktas,<sup>70</sup> Nilakaṇṭha’s intellectual work negotiates the boundaries of the early modern south Indian Smārta community. By introducing into this discursive sphere a sustained and detailed treatment of Śrīvidyā ritual practice, Nilakaṇṭha’s voice directly contributed to the fact that Śrīvidyā ritual and theology constitute a cultural pillar of Smārta practice to this day.

#### WHEN TANTRA BECOMES ORTHODOXY: ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA DĪKṢITA AND THE BIRTH OF SAMAYIN ŚRĪVIDYĀ

Among the various compositions attributed to Śaṅkarācārya over the years, by far the most numerous are his assortment of *stotras*, or hymns, widely recognized and recited today by Smārta Brahmins in all regions of India. For many, Śaṅkara’s corpus of hymns includes a set of *stotras* to the goddess known as the *Pañcastavi* (Five hymns), which in the seventeenth century were attributed instead to the genius of Kālidāsa, understood then as now as one of the fountainheads of the Sanskrit literary tradition. Śaṅkara’s most widely recognized Śākta hymn, however, is

the *Saundaryalaharī*, or “Waves of Beauty,” a work of high *kāvya* popular enough to have accrued over the centuries several commentaries and an abundance of variant readings. Among such attested variants, one in particular caught the eye of early modern Smārta readers and is preserved today in the commentary on a hymn of the *Pañcastavī*: the *Ambāstava* (Hymn to the mother)<sup>71</sup> by Ardhanārīśvara Dikṣita,<sup>72</sup> brother of the celebrated literary theorist Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dikṣita of the court of Tanjavur, and son of Ratnakheṭa Dikṣita of the court of the Cenji Nāyakas.

In his critical edition of the *Saundaryalaharī*, Norman Brown reconstructs verse 102 as follows:

Your chest bearing the weighty breasts arisen from it, your gentle smile,  
The love in your sidelong glance, figure resplendent like the blossomed kadamba flower:  
Intoxicating Cupid has created [*janayām āsa madano*] an impression of you in the mind of Śiva.  
Such is the highest fulfillment, O Umā, of those who are your devotees.<sup>73</sup>

Ardhanārīśvara Dikṣita’s rendering, on the other hand, preserves a crucial variant in the second half of this verse, one that has proven foundational to a certain school of interpretation, not only of the *Saundaryalaharī* itself, but also of Śaṅkarācārya’s oeuvre as a cohesive theological enterprise:

*Samayins meditate in the mind* [*janayantaḥ samayino*] on your deception of Śiva.  
Such is the highest fulfillment, O Umā, of those who are your devotees.<sup>74</sup>

Although this variant may result in a rather less plausible or aesthetically satisfying verse, it provides our commentator with an ideal textual foundation for his exegetical project: a defense of a particular subschool of south Indian Śrīvidyā exegesis typically referred to as the “Samaya” school, of which the locus classicus is the sixteenth-century *Saundaryalaharī* commentary of Lolli Lakṣmīdhara.<sup>75</sup> A term that defies succinct English translation, *samaya* most literally denotes a mode of conventional behavior or a contractual agreement, from which usage it came to signify a set of social conventions adopted by initiates in many Śaiva traditions.<sup>76</sup> In Lakṣmīdhara’s idiosyncratic appropriation, however, the term becomes meaningful only when paired with its antithesis, *Kaula*: whereas Kaula Śrīvidyā, in theory, accepts without reservation the use of objectionable ritual elements such as the notorious *pañcamakāras*, or five impure substances,<sup>77</sup> Samaya Śrīvidyā constrains its ritual observances in accordance with the strictures of Vaidika orthodoxy. In fact, Lakṣmīdhara even suggests that ideal Samayins must eschew any external



ritual worship altogether in favor of strictly mental observance. Hence, the reading “Samayins visualize in the mind.”

Although one might expect Lakṣmīdhara’s Samaya school to have attracted a fair following among the ranks of Brahminical orthodoxy, to date scholarship has discovered negligible textual attestation that such a “school” in fact ever arose in response to his programmatic essay. In fact, the Samaya doctrine is often depicted as confined exclusively to Lakṣmīdhara’s *Saundaryalaharī* commentary itself. South Indian Śrīvidyā today leans heavily in favor of a reformed version of the Kaula *mata* as expounded by Bhāskararāya, whose popularity among contemporary initiates has all but eclipsed Lakṣmīdhara’s legacy. In this light, Ardhanārīśvara Dikṣita’s *Ambāstavavyākhyā* is a particularly intriguing textual artifact, one of the few surviving texts known to systematically advocate the Samaya position.<sup>78</sup> And yet, not only does Ardhanārīśvara accept the category of Samaya as expounded by Lakṣmīdhara, but he also stages his commentary as an explicit defense of the Samaya doctrine, signaled with little ambiguity in the title chosen for his commentarial essay: “Enlivening the Doctrine of the Samayins” (*Samayimatajīvana*). Evidently for Ardhanārīśvara, the Samaya doctrine was indeed a real entity and one of imminent relevance to his contemporaries, thus calling for a certain commentarial “enlivening.”

By enlivening the school promulgated by his predecessor Lakṣmīdhara, who himself “enlivened” the sixteenth-century court of Vijayanagara, Ardhanārīśvara is not engaged in a mere scholastic mimesis of a forgotten work of scholarship. His *Samayimatajīvana* does, in fact, deliberately invoke Lakṣmīdhara’s Samayācāra commentary, down to the very details of commentarial mechanics. It is the gap between Ardhanārīśvara’s work and its prototype, however, that reveals the hidden seams of the sectarian community that Ardhanārīśvara and his contemporaries were in the process of constituting. In the intervening generation or two, we observe a vast gulf in the self-constitution of Samaya Śrīvidyā both through a conscious redaction of its scriptural corpus and through its public image as an esoteric wing of orthodox Smārta-Śaivism. As we have seen, Ardhanārīśvara’s generation witnessed the emergence of an unprecedented alliance between Smārta intellectuals and ascetics of the Śaṅkarācārya monastic orders, a trend in which his family is known to have participated. Lakṣmīdhara’s Samaya doctrine, then, initiates an equally unprecedented doxographical revisioning of the lineage’s purported founder, Śaṅkarācārya, here understood as the original exponent of a domesticated, Vedicized form of esoteric Śākta ritual practice. At the same time, by attributing the Ambāstava itself to Kālidāsa, Ardhanārīśvara advances this project a step further, claiming Kālidāsa, as well, as a foundational figurehead in the emerging hagiography of Smārta-Śaivism. In essence, the *Ambāstavavyākhyā* lays an intellectual foundation for the self-understanding of Smārta Śrīvidyā initiates as active participants in the ongoing legacy of both Śaṅkarācārya and Kālidāsa, a sectarian community at once entirely Vaidika and entirely Śākta.

First, let us consider the evidence that Ardhanārīśvara’s *Samayimatajīvana* does indeed systematically recapitulate the doctrinal position of Lakṣmīdhara. Not once during his commentary does Ardhanārīśvara quote Lakṣmīdhara or refer to him or his work by name. And yet, from the nuts and bolts of commentarial practice to the social values, doctrines, and works cited, the *Samayimatajīvana* is unmistakably a direct imitation of Lakṣmīdhara. Take, for instance, his commentarial mechanics: Ardhanārīśvara co-opts piece by piece the structure of Lakṣmīdhara’s verse analysis, beginning with a painstakingly literal gloss of each word (for example, the rather rudimentary gloss *amba! mātah!* occurs often in both), and ending with a prose restructuring of the word order (both authors introduce this section with the phrase *atra itthaṃ padayojanā* rather than with a more common term such as *anvaya*) and a brief diagnosis of literary ornaments in the verse.<sup>79</sup> Stylistics aside, however, the most striking point of comparison is the authors’ shared canon of textual sources. Ardhanārīśvara, for his part, makes no secret of the authority underlying his work. After showcasing his family credentials with the traditional benedictory verses, he declares that two Śrīvidyā treatises in particular constitute the doctrinal foundation of his commentary:

Having reflected again and again, with discrimination, on the two  
treatises written by Śaṅkarācārya,  
Known as the *Saubhāgyavidyā* and *Subhagodaya*, may I compose  
this text according to their path.<sup>80</sup>

In this succinct encapsulation of his tradition’s theological heritage, Ardhanārīśvara confidently attributes to Śaṅkarācārya himself a pair of Śākta theological tracts claimed to defend the reformed Vaidika Śrīvidyā popular among seventeenth-century Smārta intellectuals. No manuscripts have yet been located matching the description of the *Saubhāgyavidyā* or *Subhagodaya*,<sup>81</sup> although both Ardhanārīśvara and Lakṣmīdhara provide substantial quotations, suggesting that the pair of works were readily accessible in the seventeenth century. That these two Śrīvidyā treatises had come to be routinely acknowledged as the works of Śaṅkarācārya is confirmed by Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dikṣita in his *Śaṅkarābhyudaya*. While depicting Śaṅkarācārya’s completion of his education, he provides a resume of the young prodigy’s scholastic endeavors, including the two works in question:

At the command of Guru Govindapāda, who was a treasury of  
virtue,  
He first set forth the commentary on the thousand names of Viṣṇu.  
Having churned the great ocean of Mantra and Āgama with the  
churning stick of his intellect,  
He extracted the nectar that was the treatises beginning with the  
*Prapañcasāra*.

He measured out the *Saubhāgyavidyā* as well as the ritual handbook,  
the *Subhagodaya*:

Two jewel boxes for depositing the meaning of the science of  
mantra.

To those of lesser eligibility, singularly attached to awareness of  
brahman with qualities,

He granted favor, bestowing hymns to Hari and Hara.

He granted treatises based on the nondual nature of the self,

As well as hundreds of further hymns, foremost being the  
*Saundaryalaharī*.

He drew out the commentary on the Upaniṣads, which, arrayed  
with recurring floods of virtues,

Made manifest the nondual truth of the Self in the palm of one’s  
hand dispelling primordial, infinite delusion. . . .

At the age of twelve, having reflected there upon the essence of the  
scriptures with the Brahminical sages absorbed in meditation,

He effortlessly composed the auspicious commentary, deep and mel-  
lifuos, on the collection of *sūtras* of Śrī Vyāsa, crest jewel among  
preceptors.<sup>82</sup>

While these two works, the *Saubhāgyavidyā* and *Subhagodaya*, do not typically figure in hagiographies or popular memory of Śaṅkara’s legacy, the *Subhagodaya* in particular is the foremost authority cited by Lakṣmīdhara and Ardhanārīśvara in defense of the very notion of a Samaya school of Śrīvidyā. Indeed, for Lakṣmīdhara, the Samayamata is no less than the central theological project of Śaṅkarācārya, “the knower of the truth of the Samaya doctrine” (*samayamatatattvavedināḥ*), who, he claims,<sup>83</sup> crafted the entire *Saundaryalaharī* as a covert but systematic exposition of the doctrine. Thus, it is unsurprising that both commentators accept his attributed theological works as a central pillar of their analysis, including the *Saundaryalaharī*, the *Saubhāgyavidyā* and *Subhagodaya*, and even the *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi*, a third Śrīvidyā treatise attributed by Ardhanārīśvara to the pen of Śaṅkara.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to Śaṅkara’s Śrīvidyā oeuvre, Lakṣmīdhara invokes a second group of source texts as a mainstay of his exegetical project, one that Ardhanārīśvara in turn implements enthusiastically in service of the Samaya doctrine. Known collectively as the *Śubhāgamapañcaka* (The five pure scriptures), these five Śrīvidyā “*Samhitās*”—undoubtedly referred to as such to evoke a Vedic resonance—bear the names of the mythological Vedic sages to whom their authorship is attributed: Vasiṣṭha, Sanaka, Śuka, Sanandana, and Sanatkumāra.<sup>85</sup> According to Lakṣmīdhara, Śākta *upāsakas* have often strayed from the Vedic fold by accepting

the more transgressive Tantras without proper reservation, failing to discriminate between those intended for orthodox Vaidikas and those appropriate only for Śūdras.<sup>86</sup> After providing a systematic inventory of the sixty-four Tantras listed in the Vāmakeśvarimata, delimiting those eligible to adopt their teachings, he concludes that with few exceptions, Vaidika practitioners of Śrīvidyā should restrict themselves to the precepts of the Śubhāgamapañcaka, which he considers the foundational scriptural authority for Samaya practice:

In the Śubhāgamapañcaka, the array of ritual practices is examined in accordance with the Vedic path alone. This path, examined by the Śubhāgamapañcaka, was set forth by the five sages Vasiṣṭha, Sanaka, Śuka, Sanandana, and Sanatkumāra. This alone is what is conventionally referred to as “Samaya conduct.” In just the same way, I also have composed this commentary according to the views of Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda precisely by taking the support of the Samaya doctrine in accordance with the Śubhāgamapañcaka.<sup>87</sup>

In this extended digression, Lakṣmīdhara constructs an impeccable claim to Vedic orthodoxy, one that offered a considerable appeal to a new generation of Śākta intellectuals who held a vested interest in maintaining the orthodox reputation of their families and literary societies.<sup>88</sup> Breaking from the textual sources of the earlier Kashmiri Śrīvidyā tradition, he promotes in its place an entirely Vedicized scriptural canon that seems to have gained little currency in south India before his influence. Decentering the Kashmiri exegetes and all early Śākta Tantras aside from the Vāmakeśvarimata, he supplements his core canon with liberal citations from the R̥gveda, texts of the Taittirīya Śākhā of the Kṛṣṇayajurveda, early Upaniṣads, the classics of Sanskrit court literature from the *Mālatīmādhava* to the *Naiṣadhiyacarita*, and, of course, the Śākta hymns attributed to Kālidāsa. Ardhanārīśvara Dikṣita, in turn, follows closely in Lakṣmīdhara’s footsteps, adopting as his core canon the *Saubhāgyavidyā*, *Subhagodaya*, *Saundaryalaharī*, *Śubhāgamapañcaka*, the hymns of Kālidāsa, and the Vāmakeśvarimata, interspersed with the best sellers of courtly literary theory such as the *Kāvyaḍarśa*, *Kāvyaṇṣa*, *Alaṅkārasarvasva*, and *Candrāloka*.

In short, Ardhanārīśvara Dikṣita’s *Ambāstavavyākhyā* not only mimetically replicates the textual practices of Lakṣmīdhara’s commentary but also expands upon its larger project of repackaging Śrīvidyā *upāsanā* to suit the needs of a more Vedicized and Vedicizing audience.<sup>89</sup> When it comes to the doctrinal innovations of the Samaya school, however, Ardhanārīśvara proves himself an even more meticulous advocate of its principles than Lakṣmīdhara himself. Where Lakṣmīdhara makes bold and seemingly unfounded assertions about Samaya doctrine, Ardhanārīśvara painstakingly documents the textual support underlying Lakṣmīdhara’s claims, demonstrating their fidelity to the position taken by Śaṅkarācārya in the *Subhagodaya*. After all, for Ardhanārīśvara, the Samaya school is by no means the invention of Lakṣmīdhara, seeing as he nowhere credits him as the source on which his

commentary was modeled. Rather, his ambition is to communicate unambiguously that the Samaya is nothing less than the central teaching of Śaṅkarācārya—through the words of Śaṅkarācārya himself.

Take, for instance, the two central contentions of the Samaya doctrine: first, that Samayins ought to perform worship of the Śrīcakra through interior visualization rather than with external implements; and second, that whereas Kaulas typically perform such worship by concentrating on the lower two *cakras*, or subtle yogic centers, of the body, Samayins worship only in the *brahmarandhra* at the crown of the head. Both of these points are fervently championed by Lakṣmīdhara, who is able to inform us—with remarkable clarity on the material culture of Śākta worship—that Kaula practitioners of Śrīvidyā worship a Śrīcakra inscribed on birch bark, cloth, gold, silver, or some similar surface.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, during his extended digression on the Samaya-Kaula division, which spans several pages of the printed edition, nowhere does he adduce a single piece of unambiguous evidence in support of his views from the works of Śaṅkara. In fact, his lack of evidence often leads him to a precarious position. In one instance, instead of supporting his own argument, he remarkably selects a verse from the *Subhagodaya* that seems to state precisely the opposite, necessitating a series of replies to his anticipated objections:

As it is stated in the *Subhagodaya*: “The qualified adept should meditate on the goddess Tripurasundarī, seated in the middle of the orb of the sun, bearing in her hands the noose, goad, bow, and arrows. He may quickly infatuate the three worlds, along with flocks of the best of women.” . . .

Now, some may argue that because external worship is prohibited to Samayins, it is prohibited to worship [the goddess] as seated in the orb of the sun. That is not correct.<sup>91</sup>

Rather than convincingly establishing the intended thesis, the remainder of the passage takes on something of an apologetic tone, engendering a sharp divide between scripture and commentary. The tenor of the verse he cites bears no particular resemblance to the literary aesthetic or values of the sixteenth-century Samaya school, evoking instead the archaic language of early Śrīvidyā scripture, such as the Vāmakeśvarīmata, which contains numerous such references to the efficacy of Śrīvidyā as essentially a sex-magic technology (“He may quickly infatuate the three worlds, along with flocks of the best of women”). Lakṣmīdhara seems, moreover, to have intentionally misread the phrase “the orb of the sun” (*sūryamaṇḍala*) in his *Subhagodaya* citation, as the phrase more often refers to a location in the subtle body around the region of the navel—a sense that would certainly do no service to his argument. It is no wonder that, throughout the argument, he prefers to cite one of his own works, a certain *Karṇāvatāṃsastuti* (Hymn to the earrings [of the goddess]),<sup>92</sup> which proves much more amenable to his desired conclusion.<sup>93</sup> Succinctly, on the basis of his thoroughgoing hesitancy, one is tempted to

suspect that Lakṣmīdhara did not have access to a citation that would unambiguously ground the Samaya doctrine in the words of Śaṅkara; his only clear evidence for the connection of the Samaya to Śaṅkarācārya is his creative exegesis of the *Saundaryalahari* itself.

Ardhanārīśvara, on the other hand, suffers from no lack of textual exempla. Unlike Lakṣmīdhara in his abortive attempt to attribute his thesis to Śaṅkara, Ardhanārīśvara assembles a number of lengthy and detailed passages from the *Subhagodaya* that bear an astounding, and in fact rather suspicious, resemblance to the core doctrines of the Samaya school:

Because external worship is prohibited to Samayins, they are to perform worship only internally. . . . As is stated in the *Subhagodaya*, in the chapter on the instruction of Kaulas:

Some heretics, chiefly Kaulas and Kāpālikas, devoted to external worship,  
Are scorned by the Vedas, because their precepts are not supported by scripture.  
My doctrine is that they are fallen due to practicing what is prohibited.  
Therefore, the worship of the throne [*pīṭha*] and so forth does not apply to Vaidikas.  
The sages Vasiṣṭha, Sanaka and others, being devoted to internal worship,  
Obtained their desired attainment. Thus, internal worship is superior.  
Now, if one objects that rituals for ground preparation, installation of deities,  
And so forth, as described by the Āgamas and Atharvaṇas, would be prohibited—  
This is true. Those are stated in accordance with individual eligibility.  
Those desiring liberation have no eligibility for such worship.  
Thus, Samayins perform worship and so forth only in the inner *cakras*.<sup>94</sup>

Intriguingly, Ardhanārīśvara’s *Subhagodaya* seems to say precisely what a Samayin intellectual would like to hear. By the time of Ardhanārīśvara’s *Ambāstavavyākhyā*, the ambiguity of source material and argument we witness in Lakṣmīdhara’s commentary has given way to perfect symmetry between source text and conventional theological wisdom. Further still, Ardhanārīśvara’s *Subhagodaya* establishes its own authority by appealing to the Śubhāgamapañcaka by describing the sages Vasiṣṭha, Sanaka, and the others as the prototypical practitioners of Samaya Śrīvidyā. Had Lakṣmīdhara inherited a version of the *Subhagodaya* so faithful to his own views, it seems highly unlikely that he would have resisted supplying the citations. The fact that he did not—and that Ardhanārīśvara had access to such passages in abundance—strongly suggests that in the intervening decades, the *Subhagodaya* itself was heavily redacted to conform to newly emerging understandings of the social role of Śrīvidyā and of Śaṅkarācārya’s legacy.<sup>95</sup>

In short, Ardhanārīśvara’s generation had witnessed, in a surprisingly short time frame, a thorough redaction of the core scriptures of Samaya Śrīvidyā—suggesting not only a shift in religious values but also, more importantly, a community of initiates responsible for the redaction. It was during the decades between Lakṣmīdhara and Ardhanārīśvara, then, that the foundation was laid for the acceptance of Samaya Śrīvidyā as a cornerstone of Smārta-Śaiva religiosity.

Indeed, Ardhanārīśvara introduces two substantial modifications to our previous knowledge of the Samaya school, as attested by Lakṣmīdhara’s work alone, both of which illustrate the diffusion of Samaya values across a wider community of Smārta Brahmin practitioners. First, Ardhanārīśvara expands Lakṣmīdhara’s efforts to categorize the religious ecology of Śrīvidyā practitioners in south India. Where Lakṣmīdhara adopts an analytic distinction between “Former” and “Latter” Kaulas<sup>96</sup> in order to reconcile the apparent doctrinal inconsistencies between two verses of the *Saundaryalaharī*,<sup>97</sup> Ardhanārīśvara proposes an expanded typology of three types of “former” and four types of “Latter” Kaulas, along with a delineation of multiple categories of Samayin initiates. And yet, that Ardhanārīśvara is able to produce a precise and definitive list of seven types of Kaulas illustrates a process of conceptual reification, whereby Lakṣmīdhara’s speculation has been elevated to the level of a scripturally authenticated model for navigating the sectarian landscape of seventeenth-century south India. In fact, the non-Samayin Śāktas he enumerates—worshippers of the transgressive and ferocious goddesses Mātāṅgī, Vārāhī, Bagalamukhī, and Bhairavī—were genuine participants in the religious economy of Ardhanārīśvara’s day, from whom Samayin Smārta Brahmins wished to strictly demarcate themselves.

Second, and by no means less consequential, is the Vedicization of types of worship previously forbidden to Smārta Brahmins under Lakṣmīdhara’s strictures.

Samayins, for their part, are fourfold: (1) those intent on worship according to Vedic procedures of external images of the Śrīcakra fashioned out of gold, etc., (2) those intent on both internal and external worship, (3) those intent on external worship only, and (4) those lacking in any worship. Among these, those adepts who have not acquired experience in yoga worship the goddess in images of the Śrīcakra according to Vedic precepts. Those who have become somewhat established in yoga worship externally and internally, those who are established in yoga worship the goddess only internally, and as for those who have obtained purity of mind, their manner of worship has been expounded previously.<sup>98</sup>

While Lakṣmīdhara forbids the external worship of any Śrīcakra image to Samayins, Ardhanārīśvara clearly accepts the worship of gold Śrīcakra icons as socially normative within Smārta religious culture. Based on historical evidence, in fact, Ardhanārīśvara’s pronouncement appears to accurately capture the devotional practice of seventeenth-century Samayins: Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita’s lineage descendants, most notably, proudly display in his *samādhi* shrine an image of the Śrīcakra they believe to have been his personal object of worship.<sup>99</sup>

But while speaking volumes about ritual practice and scriptural redaction among Śrīvidyā initiates, Ardhanārīśvara’s work, by virtue of its commentarial project, joins that of Atirātra and his contemporaries, who crafted a hagiographical past for the Smārta-Śaiva community. By selecting Lakṣmīdhara’s template as the structural principle for an entirely different commentary, Ardhanārīśvara





FIGURE 3. The three *pūjā* images pictured in fig. 2 have been handed down in Nilakaṇṭha's family and are believed to have been worshipped personally by Nilakaṇṭha Dikṣita. As the Tamil caption clarifies, the image on the right is Nilakaṇṭha's personal *śrīcakra*, the Śrīvidyā *yantra*. This black-and-white photograph is mounted in Nilakaṇṭha Dikṣita's *samādhi* shrine in Palamadai, near Tirunelveli in southern Tamil Nadu. All three *pūjā* images are now in the possession of Jagadguru Bhārati Tirtha Svāmigaḷ of Sringeri. I have personally seen two of them on his public *pūjā*; unfortunately, the Jagadguru's attendants deny any knowledge of the *śrīcakra*'s location.

transposes the authority behind the Samaya doctrine from the purported author of the *Saundaryalaharī*, Śaṅkarācārya, to the perceived author of the *Ambāstava*, Kālidāsa. Echoing the sentiment of Atirātra Yajvan expressed at Madurai's Cittirai Festival, Ardhanārīśvara reshapes Kālidāsa's identity into a fusion of celebrated *mahākavi* and loyal servant of the goddess Kālī ("Kālī-dāsa"),<sup>100</sup> merging both of these attributes in the author of the *Ambāstava*, an orthodox Samayin's expression of personal devotion. With no less a figure than Kālidāsa representing the power of orthodox Śāktism, it is little surprise that Śrīvidyā offered seventeenth-century Smārta intellectuals a meaningful paradigm for integrating various facets of their ideal personas: Smārta Brahmin, devotee of the Śaṅkarācārya lineage, and not least, poet-celebrity. Śākta devotionism and literary genius were, for many of these poets, causally interrelated and functionally inextricable from each other. This is expressed perhaps most eloquently by Nilakaṇṭha Dikṣita himself in the

benediction to his *Śivalilārṇava* (The sacred games of Śiva), evoking a pair of commonly cited legends linking the poetic aptitude of two south Indian poets—the Tamil bhakti saint Nānacampantar and the Sanskrit poet Mūkakavi—to their unmediated contact with the goddess’s grace. In his own words:

One became a poet through the breast milk of the Mother, another  
through her *tāmbūla* spittle.  
Desiring to achieve even greater elevation [*unnati*], I served the  
more elevated [*unnata*] corner of Her eyes.<sup>101</sup>

#### ŚAṆKARĀCĀRYA WORSHIPS THE GODDESS: ŚRĪVIDYĀ’S NEW SACRED GEOGRAPHY

“Just like Kālidāsa,” the Śaṅkarācārya of seventeenth-century south India was not only a devout worshipper of the goddess but also a consummate poet, fusing ecstatic devotion and literary virtuosity in impromptu hymns of praise. While Ardhanaṛīśvara’s project reframed Kālidāsa as the prototypical cosmopolitan poet and Śākta devotee, another Smārta theologian—who happened to be his own younger brother—crafted a similar identity for Śaṅkarācārya through his daring and innovative biographical account of the eighth-century Advaita Vedāntin. The *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* (The ascension of Śaṅkara) of Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dikṣita, a work of refined courtly poetry (*kāvya*), is counted among several works in the genre of Śaṅkaradigvijaya (Śaṅkara’s conquest of the directions) chronicles, hagiographies that recount the traditional narrative exploits in the life of Śaṅkara, from boyhood to liberation.

Rājacūḍāmaṇi’s treatment of the material, however, differs significantly from the standard conventions of the genre in two crucial respects, both of which are rarely observed in the extensive body of secondary literature on the Śaṅkara hagiographical tradition. As we have seen, Śaṅkara’s early childhood and renunciation was, for Rājacūḍāmaṇi, the zenith of his textual production, conspicuous for the authorship attributed to him of the two Samayin Śrīvidyā treatises, the *Saubhāgyavidyā* and *Subhagodaya*. It is the end of Śaṅkara’s life, however, that occupies the entire latter half of Rājacūḍāmaṇi’s work: these chapters consist entirely of a poetic travelogue of Śaṅkara’s final pilgrimage, culminating in his beatific vision of Kāmākṣī in the Kanchipuram Temple. In the process, the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* situates itself securely within the orbit of devotional poetry, evoking this legacy through a series of ornate and impassioned lyric hymns placed directly in the mouth of Śaṅkara himself. But perhaps more strikingly, Śaṅkara’s poetic craft, for Rājacūḍāmaṇi, is unabashedly esoteric in its imagery, directly embedding the fifteen-syllable Śrīvidyā mantra in its verse and providing an extended ritual visualization of the Śricakra and the abode of the goddess and her attendants. In short, no other Śaṅkaradigvijaya chronicle colorfully ascribes to Śaṅkara an intimate

acquaintance with the intricacies of Śrīvidyā *upāsanā*. By fusing this celebration of the esoteric with courtly literary practice, Rājacūḍāmaṇi crafts Śaṅkara—just like Kālidāsa—as a literary genius whose verse flowed spontaneously from his devotion to the goddess, homologizing in the process the social roles of poet and *tāntrika* in the Smārta religious imaginary.

Despite its unique features, however, the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* has garnered less attention than competing hagiographies, largely owing to the institutional politics of the Śaṅkarācārya monastic lineages. According to the narrative most commonly accepted by Smārtas today across the subcontinent, Śaṅkara bequeathed the legacy of Advaita philosophy to subsequent generations by establishing four monasteries in each of the four cardinal directions—the southern direction being accounted for by Sringeri in western Karnataka—and culminated his life of pilgrimage and adventure by defeating his rivals and ascending to the Sarvajñapīṭha (“the Seat of the Omniscient”) located in Kashmir. Rājacūḍāmaṇi’s *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* is one of a few such narratives that redirect the course of Śaṅkara’s journey toward the South, situating Śaṅkara’s final ascent and liberation in the Tamil city of Kanchipuram rather than Kashmir. This shift is widely interpreted by the Tamil Smārta community to indicate that Śaṅkara in fact established five monasteries, the four traditional monasteries being branches of a single overarching institution, the Kāñcī Kāmakoṭi Pīṭha of Kanchipuram. As a result, scholarly considerations of Śaṅkara’s life story are often overshadowed by polemic, and supporters of the Sringeri lineage are often eager to discredit the authenticity and manuscript transmission of any text associating Śaṅkara with Kanchipuram.

Among other commonly circulating Śaṅkaradigvijaya narratives, two such works, Anantānandagiri’s *Śaṅkaravijaya* and Cidvilāsa’s *Śaṅkaravijayavilāsa*, both name Kanchipuram as the site of Śaṅkara’s final ascent. Likewise, both chronicles bear the outward signifiers of affiliation with a lineage of Śrīvidyā practice, as both conclude that Śaṅkara’s chief accomplishment in Kanchipuram was to establish the Śrīcakra that currently lies at the heart of the Kāmākṣī Temple. In fact, the recurrent patterns of citation and phrasing in the two chronicles suggest strongly that both emerge from roughly the same cultural milieu. We possess no reliable indications of their dates or places of composition, save that both must have existed before the *terminus ante quem* of the Mādhavīya *Śaṅkaravijaya* in the mid-eighteenth century, as this somewhat notorious narration of Śaṅkara’s life story borrows liberally from all previously extant versions.<sup>102</sup> Given their emphasis on Kanchipuram, one expects that both texts originated in the South; and indeed, a close reading of their Śrīvidyā allusions reveals that both place themselves within the cultural orbit of the Lalitopākhyāna, a narrative and liturgical excerpt from the Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa that has remained a constitutive part of the south Indian Śrīvidyā heritage for centuries—so prototypically Tamil in its rhetoric, in fact, that it frames itself around Agastya, the southern sage, and his journey south toward the abode of Kāmākṣī in Kanchipuram.<sup>103</sup>

As a result, dubious voices are in no short supply, claiming either that Rājacūḍāmaṇi Dikṣita, the celebrated court poet of seventeenth-century Tanjavur, did not write the text we have received as the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya*, or that the crucial chapters—the seventh and eighth *sargas*, in which Śaṅkara arrives in Kanchipuram and worships Kāmākṣī with Śrīvidyā-inflected hymns and meditation—were interpolated directly by representatives of the Kāmakoti Pīṭha. Such a position was advanced by, for instance, one R. Krishnaswami Aiyer in his critique of the Kāmakoti Pīṭha and its claims to historical antiquity, in which he paints the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* as a modern forgery: “It is quite patent that this Kavya was published years after the Madhaviya just to discredit the authenticity of the latter.”<sup>104</sup> Aiyer is correct about the limited discussion of manuscript evidence in the published editions. Two editions have been published to date, one in the Sanskrit serial journal *Saḥṛdaya* in 1914–1915, and the second in 1986 by S. V. Radhakrishna Sastri. Both include all eight *sargas* of the work, with a number of variants in the somewhat fragmentary eighth *sarga* to suggest either independent transcriptions of a common manuscript or distinct manuscript sources for this chapter. Unfortunately, neither editor is forthcoming about the manuscripts used to compile the edition or the editorial practices involved.

Among several manuscripts available in libraries across the subcontinent, most are duplicates of a paper transcript of the first six *sargas*, transmitted in either Grantha or Devanāgarī script, accompanied by the commentary of a certain Rāmakṛṣṇa Sūri.<sup>105</sup> I have also located a distinct transcript of the entire eight chapters (*sargas*) at the K. V. Sharma Research Institute in Chennai with no commentary, which shows minor variants from both published editions. Two further manuscripts appear to be housed at the library of the Śāradā Pīṭha in Sringeri and at the Punjab University Library in Lahore, neither of which I have been able to access.<sup>106</sup> Based on manuscript evidence alone, given that the six-*sarga* version circulates exclusively with the commentary of Rāmakṛṣṇa Sūri, the original was most likely abridged by the commentator himself, who may have been affiliated with a competing monastic lineage that did not consider the ending of the text acceptable to orthodox wisdom—either for its emphasis on Kanchipuram or its elaborate visualization of the divine union of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvari.<sup>107</sup>

Stylistic evidence, on the other hand, demonstrates beyond a reasonable doubt that the entire eight chapters were authored by Rājacūḍāmaṇi himself. The fourth through seventh *sargas* of the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* are framed around Śaṅkara’s tour of the prominent pilgrimage centers of south India, progressing in tenor by the fifth chapter to a garland of successive hymns to the presiding deities written in highly ornate verse, comparable in literary style to Rājacūḍāmaṇi’s other works of courtly poetry. Providing a direct continuation of the pilgrimage narrative, the seventh chapter emerges seamlessly from the end of the preceding narrative, contributing to a sense of intensification as the poetic register of Śaṅkara’s hymns heightens with heavier meters and richer phonic textures. Throughout the hymns,

the distinctive features of Nāyaka-period south Indian verse are unmistakable: with techniques ranging from rich alliteration to *yamaka* (paronomasia) and Dravidian front rhyme (the rhyming of the first syllables of each foot of a verse), the poet executes the baroque aesthetic of the period with a skill paralleled by few of his contemporaries. Similarly, our author delights in interspersing more obscure grammatical forms among the verses at regular intervals, showing a particular preference for the *-tāt* form of the imperative (e.g., *bhavatāt*) and feminine perfect participles. Take, for instance, the following verses from the hymn to Kāmākṣī in the seventh *sarga*, which aptly exemplify the idealized aesthetic of the age:

kanaka-kanattanuvallī-janaka-samacchāyatuṅgavakṣajā |  
sanaka-sanandadhyeyā ghanakabarī bhātu śailarajasutā ||

May daughter of the mountain shine, with her cloud-black braid,  
contemplated by the Sages Sanaka and Sananda,  
The peaks of whose breast cast a shadow like to that of the father of  
the creeper-figured girl glistening like gold.

lavatām aghaṁ nayantī nava-tāmarasaśriyā dṛśā bhajatām |  
bhava-vāmatanur mama sā bhava-tāpavimuktaye bhavatāt ||

Leading sin to minuteness with her eyes equal in splendor to fresh  
lotuses,  
May she, who is the left half of Śiva's body, release me from the  
agony of existence.<sup>108</sup>

In short, to successfully forge a missing seventh *sarga* of the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* would have proven exceptionally challenging for the leading poets of the seventeenth century, let alone for modern polemicists.<sup>109</sup> In register and phonic texture, then, Rājacūḍāmaṇi's hagiography of Śaṅkara diverges sharply from the versions promulgated by his near contemporaries, even those affiliated with the Śaṅkarācārya lineages of the Kanchipuram region. Undoubtedly, all Śaṅkara chronicles whose narratives culminate in Kanchipuram participated in promulgating a new religious imaginary, forging a connection between Śaṅkarācārya, Kanchipuram, and Śrīvidyā esotericism. And yet on a theological level as well, Rājacūḍāmaṇi proves himself an innovative iconoclast, sprinkling his narrative and devotional verse with esoteric allusions rarely found in cosmopolitan courtly literature.

Take, for instance, the case of Anantānandagiri, who describes Śaṅkara's installation briefly, with no salient ritual detail and only a cursory allusion to the philosophical significance of the Śrīcakra:

Because the Śrīcakra is the very form of the unity of Śiva and Śakti, its unity with the *vidyā* [i.e., the Śrīvidyā mantra] and the self is consequentially established because of their complete nondifference. Thus the indication is that the worship of the Śrīcakra

is to be performed by all who desire liberation. Therefore, the Śrīcakra was installed by your honor so that the fruit of liberation might be obtained merely by seeing it.<sup>110</sup>

The author then proceeds to quote a somewhat extended passage, without attributing any source, concerning the physical characteristics of the Śrīcakra. Interestingly enough, the same passage occurs in the Cidvilāsiya *Śaṅkaravijaya* as well, with minor variants in transmission, but merged seamlessly into the text so as to betray no hint that the passage was interpolated from an outside source:

The triangle, octagon, and the pairs of decagons likewise,  
And the fourteen-sided *cakra*: these are the five Śakti *cakras*.  
The seed, the eight-petaled and likewise sixteen-petaled lotus,  
The square, and the four gates: these are the Śiva *cakras*, in order. . . .  
He who knows the invariable connection of the Śaiva  
And also Śākta *cakras*, respectively, is a knower of the *cakras*.<sup>111</sup>

This is the extent of Śaṅkara’s installation of the Śrīcakra in Anantānandagiri’s account. Although neither of our authors acknowledges its source, we are fortunate that Bhāskaraśāstra, writing from eighteenth-century Tanjavur, quotes this same passage in his Lalitāsahasranāma commentary, crediting it to the Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa and thus situating it unmistakably within the Lalitopākhyāna tradition.<sup>112</sup> In short, we can fairly definitively contextualize both the Anantānandagiri and Cidvilāsiya chronicles within the same south Indian Śrīvidyā tradition, one with a center of gravity in Kanchipuram and the Kāmākṣī Temple, taking the Lalitopākhyāna as a primary pillar of its scriptural canon. That Śaṅkara’s association with Kanchipuram had been deeply integrated into cultural memory by the late seventeenth century is confirmed as well by the *Patañjalicaritra* of Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita, pupil of Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, whose brief summary of the Śaṅkara narrative includes as a matter of course a mention of Kanchipuram as Śaṅkara’s final destination: “Having served his preceptor Govinda at length with devotion, when his [Govinda’s] own greatness was established through liberation beyond the body, having fashioned the Advaita commentary, having conquered the directions, the noble Śaṅkara took up residence in Kanchipuram.”<sup>113</sup>

Narratologically speaking, Rājacūḍāmaṇi’s *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* outlines a trajectory remarkably similar to that of the final chapter of Śaṅkara’s earthly life. And yet its textual register could hardly be more divergent. While all three texts emerge from the same extended cultural sphere, the Anantānandagiri *Śaṅkaravijaya*, as can be seen from the above quotations, is rather rudimentary in prose style and in the specificity of its content. Cidvilāsa’s treatment of the same event, while presented at greater length in a more polished *anuṣṭubh* verse, differs little in content, even incorporating the exact same passage from the Lalitopākhyāna as his competitor, Anantānandagiri. Both authors are also familiar with Kanchipuram, referring by name to its Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava resident deities, Ekāmraṇātha and



Varadarāja. No further esoteric content, however, appears in either chronicle. In fact, we meet with quite the opposite later on in Cidvilāsa's *Śaṅkaravijayavilāsa*. Although the Śrīcakra is typically closely associated with the initiatory tradition of Śrīvidyā and its more esoteric regimen of ritual practice, this need not always be the case, particularly in the Tamil country, where the Śrīcakra is regularly installed in major Śaiva temples across the region at the base of the image of Śiva's consort, even in the absence of any Śrīvidyā-based liturgical worship.<sup>114</sup> It need not come as a great surprise, then, when, a few chapters after Śaṅkara's installation of the Śrīcakra, Cidvilāsa describes him vehemently denouncing the heresy of a group of Śrīvidyā *upāsakas* he encounters during his travels:

The all-knowing preceptor, Śaṅkarācārya, beheld them.  
 He asked them as if unworthy of respect, seemingly impassioned:  
 "Having abandoned the *tripuṇḍra* on your forehead, why do you  
 bear *kumkum*?  
 Why have you cast off your white clothing and put on red  
 garments? . . .  
 Indeed, you have met with such bad acts as a result of your sin."  
 When the best of preceptors had spoken, the ones who had under-  
 taken the Śākta path [replied]:  
 "O sage, what are you saying today? This arises from ignorance of  
 our doctrine. . . .  
 Certainly, the supreme Śakti of Śiva is united with the manifest  
 goddess herself.  
 She is the cause of the world, her essence beyond the [three]  
 qualities.  
 By the power of that Śakti, the great truth in its entirety was  
 created. . . .  
 Thus, it is service to her lotus feet that bestows liberation.  
 It is purely with delight that we bear her symbols, the *kumkum* and all.  
 Thus we bear her sandal always on our arms and even on our throats.  
 From this we Śrīvidyā *upāsakas* are eternally liberated in this  
 lifetime."<sup>115</sup>

As one might expect, Śaṅkara responds by refuting their heresy, instructing them in the philosophical orthodoxy of Advaita Vedānta. In short, we can discern in Cidvilāsa's treatment of this event a desire to distance himself from the more esoteric content of Śrīvidyā ritual practice, or from lineages of Śāktas he viewed as too transgressive to take part in normative Śaiva society. After all, the Śāktas he describes had taken steps to visibly demarcate themselves from orthodox Brahmins, abandoning the Śaiva *tripuṇḍra*, wearing red clothing and *kumkum*—a color with long-standing Śākta resonances—and even branding themselves with the Devī's sandals on their arms and throat. Intriguingly, as we will see in the next chapter,



Cidvilāsa’s opinion on the subject is closely in line with that of Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita concerning the necessity of orthodox Śaivas wearing the *tripuṇḍra* rather than Śākta sectarian insignia.

Rājacūḍāmaṇi, on the other hand, makes no effort to conceal his detailed and intimate acquaintance with the intricacies of Śrīvidyā *upāsana*. To the contrary, the seventh and eighth chapters of the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* contain an astonishing number of references to particular elements of Śrīvidyā practice. These esoteric elements, far from being obscure allusions discernible only by a handful of initiates, provide the primary structuring device for the climax of the work, mediating the narration of Śaṅkara’s beatific vision of Kāmākṣī’s abode and his ascension to the state of enlightenment. As Śaṅkarācārya approaches Kanchipuram in the middle of the seventh *sarga*, he enters the temple of Kāmākṣī and summarily dismisses a host of opponents, ascending to the Seat of the Omniscient, which Rājacūḍāmaṇi here refers to as the *vidyābhadraśana* (“the throne of wisdom”). While Śaṅkara’s philosophical battles with heretical sects form the backbone of most Śaṅkaradigvijaya chronicles, the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* addresses the matter with a handful of verses, leaving behind Śaṅkara’s propagation of Advaita philosophy in favor of a more fundamental task: his worship of Kāmākṣī, the goddess who wears the Vedānta as her girdle belt. As he sings, bursting into a spontaneous hymn of praise, he recites a series of fifteen verses that spell out, through the first syllable of each verse, the fifteen-syllable Śrīvidyā initiatory mantra:

KA-ruṇārasasārasudhāvaruṇālayaviharamāṇadṛkkoṇam |  
aruṇādharam avalambe taruṇāruṇakānti kim api tāruṇyam ||

I take support in that indescribable youthfulness with red lower lip,  
radiant like the fresh sunrise,  
The corner of whose eyes conveys an ocean of nectar that is the  
essence of compassion.

E-ṇīdṛśam aiśānīm śoṇīkṛtadaśadiśam śarīrarucā |  
vāṇīmadhuripuramaṇīveṇīkusumāṅghrinakharuciṃ vande ||

I bow to the doelike northeastern direction, which reddens the ten  
directions with the splendor of her body,  
Whose toenails have the luster of the flowers in the braids of the  
beloved of Madhu’s enemy, Lakṣmī, and Sarasvatī.

Ī-ḍāmahe maheśīm cuḍāvinyāsabhūṣitasudhāmśum |  
vṛḍānurāgaśabalakṛīḍāvīkṣāvaśaṃvadamaheśām ||

I worship the great goddess, whose array of tresses is ornamented by  
the moon,  
Whose numerous bashfully impassioned games and glances have  
made Śiva subservient.

LA-valīlatāmatalīnāvalīlāgandhīlālitatanuṣṭau |  
bhava līlābhṛti ca mano lavalīḍhajapāruṇimni taruṇimni ||

May my mind always rest on that youthfulness, which has licked a  
portion of the  
Redness of the *japā* flower, the stalk of whose body is made lovely by  
a charm and fragrance like that of the best of Lavalī creepers.<sup>116</sup>

The hymn continues, over its fifteen verses, to commence each verse with a syllable of the Śrīvidyā root mantra (*mūlamantra*): “ka e ī la hrīm—ha sa ka ha la hrīm—sa ka la hrīm.”<sup>117</sup> And just in case any of his readers fail to notice this structuring device, he calls attention to it explicitly at the conclusion of the hymn, ensuring that his “esoteric” reference will not go unnoticed: “Thus propitiating Kāmākṣī, who dwells on the bank of the Kampā River, established in her external abode, in verse with syllables laid out in sequence according to the fifteen-syllable mantra, moving to bow down into the familiar interior of the cave, he praised Bhagavati Śyāmalā, who was seated at the entry.”<sup>118</sup>

And so Śaṅkara proceeds to sing a similar hymn of praise to Śyāmalā, understood in the Lalitopākhyāna tradition as the *mantriṇī* (chief minister) of Lalitā, here seen guarding the entryway to the cave on the bank of the Kampā River traditionally believed to be the true abode of Kāmākṣī. True to form, Rājacūḍāmaṇi embeds his six-verse hymn to Śyāmalā as well with mantric syllables, comprising the two subordinate mantras “aiṃ hrīm śrīm” and “aiṃ klīm sauḥ.”<sup>119</sup> At this point, following the hymn to Śyāmalā, the narrative reaches its climax: seemingly pleased with his richly ornamented *stotras*, Kāmākṣī grants Śaṅkara a visionary experience of her true abode, the city of Śrīpura on the central peak of Mount Meru, which Rājacūḍāmaṇi documents in painstaking detail through the 111 verses of the eighth *sarga*:

Thus having praised her, the mother of the universe, entering inside  
[the cave]

On the bank of the Kampā River, favored by rows of groves of wish-  
fulfilling trees,

He rejoiced, seeing before him, immediately, in an instant, a certain  
mountain peak,

Leader of the clan of golden mountains, purified by the lotus feet of  
Kāmākṣī.<sup>120</sup>

If anything, the linguistic register and imagery of the eighth *sarga* present us with an even more intriguing fusion. Shifting from high *kāvya* meters to a steady *anuṣṭubh* throughout the entire chapter, Rājacūḍāmaṇi evokes the rhythm and cadence of liturgical recitation even while retaining the rich phonetic texture and ornaments of language (*śabdālankāra*) so characteristic of his style: “I meditate on

a certain [*kāñcana*] city of Kāmākṣī, known as Śrīpura, with nīpa palm, mango, and ebony [*kāñcanāra*] trees with golden [*kāñcana*] sap.”<sup>121</sup> And yet the emphasis in this chapter shifts from poetics to the particulars of the visualization, as the author spares no opportunity to match the imagery of his verse to the scripturally sanctioned map of Śrīpura, down to the proper lists of attendant deities in every enclosure of the city. As with Anantānandagiri and Cidvilāsa, Rājacūḍāmaṇi’s source for the geography of Kāmākṣī’s abode is the Lalitopākhyāna, which appends to the core narrative of the slaying of Bhaṇḍāsura an iconographically elaborate description of Śrīpura, including its eight outer enclosures with walls made of various metals, and its seventeen nested palaces composed of different gemstones, inside of which exists the Cintāmaṇigṛha, the home of the Śrīcakra. Rājacūḍāmaṇi describes each of these levels with precision, continuing up the mountain peak, where the various geometric enclosures (*āvaraṇa*) of the Śrīcakra lead inward toward the central *bindu*, the abode of the esoteric forms of the divine couple, Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī.

A sample of Śaṅkara’s extended visualization, compared with its source material in the Lalitopākhyāna, will suffice to illuminate both the elegance and phonetic texture of Rājacūḍāmaṇi’s verses and the precision with which he seeks to capture the authentic iconography of Śrīpura and the Śrīcakra, even embracing descriptors that might offend the sensibilities of the more conservative voices in Smārta Brahmin society:

From the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya*:

I visualize here Mahākāla, radiant like the sun [*kapiśābham*],  
Ardently attached to liquor [*kapiśāyana*], eagerly embracing the  
neck of Mahākālī.

May his seat, known as the Kālacakra, with the radiant *bindu*, tri-  
angle, and pentagon,  
And eight- and sixteen-petaled lotuses, confer upon me long life.<sup>122</sup>

From the Lalitopākhyāna:

Mahākālī and Mahākāla, proceeding at the command of Lalitā,  
Create the entire universe, dwelling on the first path.  
The Kālacakra has become the seat of him, Mataṅga,  
Surrounded by four enclosures, delightful with the *bindu* in the  
center.

The triangle and pentagon, the sixteen-petaled lotus,  
And also the eight-petaled lotus. Mahākāla is in the center.<sup>123</sup>

Such parallels are numerous and, taken as a whole, leave little doubt that Rājacūḍāmaṇi has reworked what he believes to be the salient elements from the Lalitopākhyāna into a smoothly polished sequence. Further up the mountain, de-

scribing the nine enclosures of the Śrīcakra, Rājacūḍāmaṇi exercises similar care to refer by name to the particular attendant *śaktis* residing at each level, details that may seem insignificant from a narrative or even aesthetic point of view but which would be integral to a systematic visualization or installation (*nyāsa*) of the respective enclosures in the context of ritual practice:

From the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya*:

May the Śakti of the Triple City protect me, surrounded by those  
known as Prakaṭā,  
Superintending over the triple *cakra*, the Deluder of the Three  
Worlds [Trailokyamohana].

And above, may those shining Śaktis, in rows on the golden seat,  
Beginning with Kāmākarṣiṇikā be our wish-fulfilling cows.<sup>124</sup>

From the Lalitopākhyāna:

And inside is that triple *cakra*, the Deluder of the Three Worlds.  
In this are the Śaktis, among whom are those known as Prakaṭā.<sup>125</sup>

From the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya*:

The goddess of the triple city, Samayā dwells, holding a rosary,  
In the Cakra that Fulfills All Desires [Sarvāśāpūṛaka], with the  
Guptayoginīs in order.

We worship the goddesses beginning with Anaṅgakusumā,  
Situating above that, on the lines of the golden seat.<sup>126</sup>

From the Lalitopākhyāna:

These are the Guptayoginīs, and Tripureśī is the mistress of the *cakra*,  
The superintendent deity of the *cakra* is known as Sarvāśāpūṛikā.<sup>127</sup>

After ascending to the peak of the Śrīcakra, Śaṅkara embarks on an extended panegyric of the esoteric form of divinity he witnesses there, Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī, Śiva and his consort in the form of a sixteen-year-old amorous couple. And it was through these elaborate hymns of praise to Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī, Rājacūḍāmaṇi tells us, rather than through contemplation or philosophical insight, that Śaṅkara reached the end of his journey and attained direct knowledge of brahman, the formless absolute: “In this manner, he bowed with humility to the great *yantra* of the imperishable Kāma with garlands of language. . . . Silently worshipping Kāmeśvarī, who dwells on the bank of the Kampā River, Śaṅkara, the refuge of the triple worlds, realized the bliss of brahman.”<sup>128</sup>

For Rājacūḍāmaṇi, evidently, Śaṅkara was not only a member of the Sanskrit literary elite but also a passionate, well-trained adept in what he considered the

highest mysteries of the Śrīvidyā tradition. Writing from a cultural milieu that regarded the *Saundaryalaharī* as an authentic work of the eighth-century Vedāntin, Rājacūḍāmaṇi and his contemporaries venerated Śaṅkara as a Śākta poet of high Sanskrit verse as well as an ardent personal devotee of Kāmākṣī, two identities that were intimately intertwined both for Śaṅkara himself and the seventeenth-century poet-theologians who adopted this image as a model for their own self-fashioning. It is no accident that fully half of the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* consists of these devotional “garlands of language,” culminating in a series of esoteric hymns showcasing some of the more ornate and sophisticated poetic devices on offer by the Sanskrit language. Evidently, for Rājacūḍāmaṇi, much as for his brother, to be a cultured, orthodox Śākta is by definition to be a first-class poet as well—and Śaṅkara, just like Kālidāsa, was a Śākta poet par excellence. Indeed, in Rājacūḍāmaṇi’s vision, it is as a poet, rather than as a philosopher, that Śaṅkara ascended to the throne of wisdom in Kanchipuram. The following verse, in particular, alludes to Śaṅkara’s poetic conquest in the language of *śṛṅgāra rasa*—the erotic sentiment—evoking the divine lovemaking of Kāmeśvara and Kāmeśvarī:

“Alas, don’t force me so suddenly, without having defeated me  
On the path of poetry, dripping with erotic sentiment.”  
It was as if Brahmā himself, having conquered Sarasvatī,  
Who had spoken thus, ascended to the throne of wisdom.<sup>129</sup>

#### ŚAṅKARĀCĀRYA, ŚRĪVIDYĀ, AND THE MAKING OF A SECTARIAN COMMUNITY

Just like Kālidāsa—the historical Kālidāsa as well as his seventeenth-century counterpart—the Smārta-Śaiva theologians of early modern south India were accomplished wordsmiths, crafting their public personae as well as their personal devotionism in Sanskrit verse. But how do hymns of praise or ritual manuals manufacture a community, a sectarian tradition unprecedented in Indian history?

Niklas Luhmann, as we have seen, defines a social system, such as a sectarian community, as a “meaning-constituting system,”<sup>130</sup> an operationally closed set of social institutions that maintains—and in fact reconstitutes—its own boundaries internally through the structures of meaning it generates. That is to say, Hindu sects function autonomously from one another as meaning-constituting systems, each individually reproducing the religious institutions that endow participation in that community with sectarian-inflected religious identity. Luhmann illustrates the functional independence of such systems through analogical appeal to the models of biology, on both a microscopic and a macroscopic level. An individual cell, for instance, exhibits metabolic functions that both perpetuate the cell itself and maintain the boundary that separates it from its immediate environment. That is, although cell walls are permeable, a cell functions as an organism unto

itself, maintaining itself independently from its immediate neighbors. To extend this analogy to the study of religion, a self-constituting sectarian community generates its own meaning-creating institutions—monasteries, lineages (*paramparā*), temple complexes, sites of performance, and so on. When viewed macroscopically, the aggregate of such mutually independent systems, whether sects or cells, facilitates the balance of an entire ecosystem—or, as the case may be, an entire society.

Sectarian social systems, within the larger religious ecosystem that is Hinduism, we find, maintain an internal coherence and mutual independence comparable to those of discrete biological systems, or of the functional social systems that Luhmann describes as comprising modern society, such as the political or legal systems. We can describe early modern Hinduism as a Sectarian Age in that discrete sectarian communities came to thrive in remarkable social and doctrinal independence from one other. In south India, for instance, major sectarian communities such as the Śrīvaiṣṇava or Mādhva Vaiṣṇava lineages, or the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta, attain virtually complete autonomy on a social as well as doctrinal level by becoming major economic shareholders in the networks of exchange centered at major temple complexes and monasteries. This is not to say, naturally, that interactions between sectarian communities do not occur on a regular basis. In fact, it is just such interactions—whether polemical exchanges, competition for resources, or theological influence and reaction—that allow each sect to maintain its distinctive identity in the face of changing circumstances.