

Introduction

Rethinking Religious Change in Nineteenth-Century South Asia

For millennia, one of the most consistent characteristics of Hindu traditions has been variation. Scholarly work on contemporary Hinduism and its premodern antecedents ably captures this complexity, paying attention to a wide spectrum of ideologies, practices, and positions of authority. Studies of religion in ancient India stress doctrinal variation in the period, when ideas about personhood, liberation, the efficacy of ritual, and deities were all contested in a variety of texts and contexts. Scholarship on contemporary Hinduism grapples with a vast array of rituals, styles of leadership, institutions, cultural settings, and social formations. However, when one turns to the crucial period of the nineteenth century, this complexity fades, with scholars overwhelmingly focusing their attention on leaders and movements that can be considered under the rubric “reform Hinduism.” The result has been an attenuated nineteenth-century historiography of Hinduism and a unilinear account of the emergence of modern Hinduism.

Narratives about the emergence of modern Hinduism in the nineteenth century are consistent in their presumptions, form, and content. Important aspects of these narratives are familiar to students who have read introductory texts on Hinduism, and to scholars who write and teach those texts. At the risk of presenting a caricature of these narratives, here are their most basic characteristics. The historical backdrop includes discussions of colonialism, Christian missions, and long-standing Hindu traditions. The cast of characters is largely the same in every account, beginning with Rammohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj, moving on to Dayananda Saraswati and the Arya Samaj, and ending with Swami Vivekananda’s “muscular” Hinduism. These narratives focus on expressions of Hindu reform that emerged out of an encounter between Hindu leaders and Western ideas and

models. They assume a narrative that is dominated by colonial, cosmopolitan settings, that is national in scale, that is concerned with elite leaders and movements, and that posits a radical break between this new, modern Hinduism and prior traditions. At their most successful, these studies contribute insightful accounts of cosmopolitan processes within which Hindu leaders transformed their traditions through engagement with diverse actors, institutions, and sensibilities. However, as I will show, these accounts also reinforce dichotomies between Western modernity and Indian tradition, emphasizing the role of the West in Hindu innovation and consigning expressions of Hinduism that were largely untouched by Western ideas to the realm of static tradition.

In this book, I present a narrative of the emergence of modern Hinduism that challenges these conventional accounts. I do this through a close study of the writings, teachings, and innovations of Ramalinga Swami (1823–1874). Ramalinga was a Shaiva leader who spoke and wrote in Tamil in a local setting, was marginal to colonial and Hindu institutional authority, was grounded in Hindu traditions, and did not engage the West in any visible way. I argue that Ramalinga's teachings were modern because they displayed an acute awareness of challenges of the present, innovated in ways that addressed those challenges, were founded on a desire to transform the world in specific ways, and presaged later developments in Hindu traditions. He drew on Shaiva tantric, devotional, and literary traditions in developing creative responses to contemporary challenges such as poverty, famine, and caste discrimination. He attacked social hierarchy, developed rituals of food-giving to the poor, founded a voluntary community, and promised ordinary householders yogic powers and immortality. When he gained popularity among a wide range of caste and class communities, leaders of the established Tamil Shaiva elite attacked his teachings and initiatives. By examining Ramalinga within broader narratives of Hindu modernization, I present a new model for Hindu modernity that emphasizes the capacity of Hindu traditions to provide inspiration for new forms of Hinduism that remain influential today. In a broader context, my findings have important implications for the ways that scholars think about the impact of colonization and Westernization on non-Western religious traditions.

Ramalinga provides a fascinating case study of a Hindu leader who was actively transforming Hindu traditions outside of cosmopolitan colonial centers. The phrase "colonial modernity" does not comprehensively account for the conditions in which he wrote and lived, because his world was much more than a "colonial" one. He carried on his work in the town of Vadalur, near the village of his birthplace and about twenty kilometers from the colonial outpost of Cuddalore. He was also about twenty kilometers from Chidambaram, home of the famous Shiva Nataraja temple, and sixty-five kilometers from Tiruvavadurai, home of one of the most powerful Shaiva institutions in South India. This location suggests a number of important relationships that I will explore in this work. That is, he was close to, but also removed from, colonial centers as well as established centers



MAP 1. India and Sri Lanka. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

of Shaiva devotional and scholarly activity. His relationship with powerful Shaiva monasteries was at times strained, a result of his middling caste status and the critical spirit of his writing. His position on the periphery of colonial activity and Shaiva institutional power provided an ideal space in which he advanced a critical and creative reformulation of Shaiva traditions. In the last years of his life, he attempted to transform Vadalur into a “northern Chidambaram” that would provide an institutional alternative to existing Shaiva centers of power.

Through a close examination of Ramalinga's innovative projects, I present a history of religious change that is not beholden to a dichotomy of Hindu tradition and Western modernity. In doing so, I hope I can begin to articulate answers to questions that have urgent relevance not only to the history and agency of Tamil South Indians, but also colonized people throughout the world. That is, how can we think about religious modernization in ways that do not take colonial processes as the only starting point? How can we discuss creative, South Asian religious expressions without recourse to an opposition between static tradition and dynamic modernity? In raising these questions, I do not overlook the impact of colonialism on religious and literary culture, because this impact was monumental. I will give due emphasis to the ways that European cultures, technologies, and sensibilities influenced religious changes even in settings far from colonial centers. At the same time, I want to focus on other inspirations for change to consider alternatives to thinking about religion in *colonial* India, where the term "colonial" already establishes the grounds for analysis.

Why, if I reject the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, do I insist that Ramalinga was modern, and that his projects helped usher in modern forms of Hinduism? Why not just dispose of the term and concept of "modern" altogether? I employ the concept of modern for at least two reasons. First, it illuminates specific aspects of Ramalinga's project by focusing attention on the ways that his teachings were situated in his historical present. The literary character of his writings has led many scholars to place him in a *longue durée* of Tamil Shaiva devotional literature. Such a history explains much about Ramalinga's sources, and I will trace his Shaiva sources in this way. However, this sort of history can overlook the relevance his writings had for his followers in the time of his rise to fame in the 1860s until his death in 1874. The employment of a concept of "modern," as I define it, helps highlight the salience of his teachings, and it also points to the ways that he anticipated many developments in pan-Indian Hinduism. Second, I use "modern" in order to provoke reflection on the notion of modern Hinduism and its histories. As I will show, scholars continue to examine modern Hinduism through dichotomies of static Hindu traditions and dynamic Western modernity. A close study of the modernity of Ramalinga, a figure who defies this dichotomy, challenges us to expand the histories we tell of modern Hinduism, and reflect on the character of modernity itself.

REFORM HINDUISM, MODERN HINDUISM, AND THE WEST

Scholars usually trace the beginning of modern Hinduism to the emergence of Hindu reform movements in the nineteenth century. Much of this work is outstanding, documenting and analyzing the myriad ways that Hindu leaders reshaped their traditions as a result of colonial encounters. The dominance of these

studies is such that, taken together, they provide an inescapable point of reference for any scholarly study of nineteenth-century Hinduism, including this one. In this section I present some of the major debates and presumptions of this scholarship, necessarily simplifying a large body of varied literature on diverse authors and movements. My primary aim is not to contribute to, nor to comprehensively critique, this literature on reform Hinduism but rather to highlight what it misses. I hope to open up space for a broader consideration of Hindu innovation that goes beyond a focus on reform Hinduism. In subsequent chapters, I show how a close study of Ramalinga suggests a narrative for the emergence of modern Hinduism that differs in crucial ways from cosmopolitan reform accounts.

I use the phrase “reform Hinduism” to refer to the range of novel cosmopolitan expressions of Hinduism in the nineteenth century that were clearly influenced by European ideas and models. I have chosen to use “reform” because it retains the resonances of both the Protestant Reformation and Victorian-era European reform. Both of these European “reform” projects had a significant influence on nineteenth-century cosmopolitan Hindu leaders and their reimagining of Hindu traditions. These European and Hindu projects shared a number of concerns, including debates about the status and accessibility of texts; the efficacy and ethics of ritual practices; priestly mediation of devotion; the centrality of personal faith; the status of women; class relations, often extended to caste; new charitable practices; and the accessibility of education. “Reform Hinduism” has become the most recognizable shorthand to describe these new expressions of Hinduism, and it has attracted the interest of scholars for more than a century.

Hinduism is a contested category, with many scholars arguing that it was only in the nineteenth century that the notion of a single Hindu tradition emerged. The scholarship on the “invention of Hinduism” is large, demonstrating that scholars have taken to heart the hegemony and distortions wrought by Western categories of religion.¹ I am convinced by much of this scholarship but continue to find the term “Hinduism” useful for discussing a range of nineteenth-century traditions. When I use the term “Hindu” or “Hinduism,” I do not posit a single, unified “World Religion,” but a range of traditions and expressions that broadly share ritual and theological orientations.² In the following pages, I describe a variety of ways of being Hindu and of being modern, and I posit diverse genealogies for those expressions of modern Hinduism. If reform Hinduism is one such expression, Ramalinga’s teachings are another. The diversity of modern Hinduism thus includes tendencies toward a Protestant rationality that characterized Hindu reform, but also a range of other features that do not fall into this framework, including apocalypticism, revelation, and miracles. Such features continue to find resonance among Hindus, responding in important ways to contemporary challenges.

Hindu reform leaders and movements were elite, urban, and cosmopolitan, leading Brian Hatcher to characterize such projects as “bourgeois Hinduism.”³

Their teachings resonated most strongly in colonial contexts, and they had little impact beyond them. For example, in the 1881 census, only the Brahmo Samaj was important enough to merit distinct consideration. Of a Hindu population of 187,937,450, only 1,147 Hindus counted themselves as Brahmos.⁴ That is, only one in every 160,000 Hindus identified with the Brahmo Samaj. The authors of an 1883 Report on the Census note that they believe the numbers of Brahmos were higher than reported, but they also cite A. Barth's *Religions of India* (1882) on the group: "it is more than 60 years since the Brahma Samaj was founded; and how many adherents can it reckon up? In Bengal, its cradle, among a population of 67,000,000, some thousands, all in the large towns; in the country districts (and India is an essentially rural country), it is hardly known."⁵ Given that the few who formally declared their affiliation to the Brahmo Samaj were elite figures, it may be that their influence, and that of other reform groups, was greater than these numbers suggest. Outside of those bourgeois circles of educated urban Indians, however, it is doubtful that reform Hinduism had much impact on the traditions of devotion and ritual that most Hindus were practicing in the nineteenth century.

Reform leaders were cosmopolitan not only in their utilization of Indian and Western cultural frameworks, but also in their awareness of pan-Indian and even global social and political processes. Their cosmopolitanism was often implicit, sometimes veiled, and certainly partial and "rooted."⁶ That is to say, they did not see themselves as global citizens but as Indians first and foremost. They were fiercely loyal to Hindu traditions, even if, at the same time, they were highly critical of these traditions. Theirs was a colonial cosmopolitanism that, as Peter van der Veer points out, emerged not as "a liberating alternative to ethnic and nationalist chauvinism," but as part of nationalist, colonial, and anti-colonial projects.⁷ It is not accidental that it was Calcutta, the administrative capital of British India, that was also the most important center of Hindu reform.⁸ Many reform leaders themselves acknowledged their debt to Western models, such as Keshab Chandra Sen, who noted that "Pure English education and pure religious reformation commenced almost at the same time in Bengal and have since gone on parallel lines."⁹ Not all Hindu reformers had an English education, with Dayananda Saraswati being the most prominent reform leader without knowledge of English. Even Saraswati's Arya Samaj, however, incorporated many of the features of Protestant models of religion, emphasizing scriptural authority, conceiving of religions as distinct and unified entities, and attempting to reshape Hinduism according to Protestant notions of rationality.

Scholars have focused on this cosmopolitan character of reform Hinduism, increasingly refining models of interactions between Hindu and Western traditions. J.N. Farquhar's classic study (1915) of nineteenth-century movements describes Christian "seeds" of inspiration, planted in the fertile "soil" of India's "old religions."¹⁰ Farquhar's gendered, biological metaphor assumes Western agency and Indian passivity; Christianity supplies the active, male seed that instigates

change, while India's traditions are female, receptive, and provide continuity. In an essay published in 1978, Paul Hacker argues that the "one common trait" of Neo-Hindus is that "their intellectual formation is primarily or predominantly Western. It is European culture, and in several cases even the Christian religion, which has led them to embrace certain religious, ethical, social, and political values." Neo-Hinduism "presents Western or Christian ideas in a Hindu garb."¹¹ For Hacker, Neo-Hinduism owes more to Western sources than it does to Hindu traditions.

More recently, idioms of exchange have emphasized the agency of Hindu reform leaders, their strategic decisions in reformulating their traditions, and the role of Hindu traditions in instigating religious change. Amiya Sen criticizes "impact-response" models that characterize Hindu reform innovations as reflexive responses to Western challenges. He instead describes the "Indo-British encounter . . . as being quite dialogic and dialectical in nature."¹² Hatcher prefers the idiom of "convergence," in which Western and Indian models, values, and ideas interact in complex ways. Convergence does not ascribe hegemony to either Indian or Western cultural forms, and it recognizes the active role played by Hindu leaders, languages, and traditions.¹³ Elsewhere, Hatcher develops "eclecticism" as an analytical tool to think about the ways that reform authors drew from a range of sources to develop new formulations of Hinduism. He emphasizes that the eclecticism of Hindu reform does not undermine the "authenticity" of these emerging traditions, but rather it indicates the creativity of their authors in fostering pride among Indians. Indeed, Hindu reformers employed Western models and ideas at least in part to resist Western cultural imperialism.¹⁴

I will not weigh in on these debates on the character of the colonial-Indian encounter. Rather, I want to raise two series of questions about this scholarly literature on Hindu reform that have important implications for my study of Ramalinga, and also implications more generally for the study of modern Hinduism.

First, why has there been relatively little scholarship on non-reform Hindu change in the nineteenth century? Given that discussion of the Brahma Samaj was relegated to a footnote and an afterthought in the 1881 census, why has there been a disproportionate amount of scholarly work on the group and others like it? Answers might point to a persistent Eurocentrism or, perhaps, to scholarly inertia. One important reason, certainly, is the relative inaccessibility of rich data. As Hacker noted, "traditional Hinduism . . . has one serious drawback. Unlike Neo-Hinduism, it has scarcely any publicity abroad. It does not produce any remarkable literature, least of all in English."¹⁵ Hacker was wrong about "traditional," non-reform Hinduism not producing important literature in the nineteenth century, but he was right about the high profile of reform writings. Hindu reform figures enjoyed some fame among elite Hindus and Europeans, so the sources for studying their projects have been in front of Western eyes from at least the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Rammohan Roy wrote editorials for English newspapers. These leaders were well known to colonial administrators, and even

if they did not move in the same circles as the British, they occupied overlapping worlds of discourse, debate, and, to some degree, ideology and sensibility. They are attractive figures to study at least partly because of these overlapping worlds.

Evidence that would support detailed, layered studies of non-cosmopolitan forms of Hinduism is harder to find, especially for scholars who work in English. However, Hatcher rightly notes that “there are literally worlds of material in the regional vernaculars awaiting scholarly attention.”¹⁶ Such literature provides extensive resources for the study of Hindu change that does not clearly fit into reform models, even if these are literary expressions that do not represent a sort of “subaltern” Hinduism. Ramalinga, for example, was a celebrated Tamil poet, but he worked largely outside cosmopolitan contexts. There are other Tamil poets like him, such as his contemporaries Minakshisundaram Pillai and Dandapani Swamigal, who were producing religious literature that was not clearly inflected with colonial concerns. I expect that there were similar authors writing in other vernacular languages. Sources for the study of non-reform Hindu change are available: they are in vernacular languages, written by people who worked outside the purview of a cosmopolitan public eye.

To be fair, some scholarly work of this sort has already been done. One important example is the Swaminarayan movement.¹⁷ Also important is work on Mahima Dharma, a group that emerged in Orissa in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. Mahima Dharma emphasized low-caste empowerment but had “no intrinsic, direct Western influence.”¹⁸ Closer to Ramalinga’s Tamil world, there have been a handful of studies on the Ayyavazhi movement.¹⁹ This movement originated at the southern tip of India in the 1840s, its leaders articulating a new and complex theology and critique of caste. Regional experts in other South Asian languages could certainly expand this list. The emergence of these movements cannot be described as a dialogue between Hindu and Western discourses, even if they also did not arise in a vacuum of tradition, sealed off from any Christian or colonial influence. They were highly innovative and popular in their appeal, often centering on a founding, charismatic figure. What is noteworthy is that these studies, and the leaders and movements that they portray, feature neither in accounts of nineteenth-century Hinduism nor in narratives of the emergence of modern Hinduism. They remain marginal histories in that narrative, because they do not fit the model of reform Hinduism, with its links to the West and Protestant notions of rationality. I argue here that the inclusion of these sorts of examples of non-reform Hindu innovation would enrich our accounts of the sources of modern Hinduism. What I offer in this book is an extended study of Ramalinga Swami as one important example of non-reform Hindu innovation and modernization, which I consider in the broader historiography of nineteenth-century Hinduism.

Second, what are the implications of this inordinate attention to reform expressions of religious change? What distortions in the study of Hinduism has

it engendered? There are undoubtedly a number of answers to this question. I want to emphasize just one here: the prevalent tendency among scholars to give a historical account for the emergence of modern Hinduism by referring only to reform Hinduism. Scholars consistently equate three terms that should rather be distinguished: reform Hinduism, modern Hinduism, and Hinduism as a larger rubric. The slippage between these terms may be common among middle-class Hindu apologists who seek to define their tradition in specific ways to fulfill any number of agendas. It is not acceptable, I think, for scholars to engage in similar slippage, which goes at least as far back as Farquhar's 1915 study of "modern" reform movements across several traditions. Farquhar concludes his study with the hopeful assertion that "The most prominent characteristic of the long series of religious movements we have dealt with is *the steady advance of the ancient faiths*. . . . Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism each leaped up into new vigorous activity, every prominent sect experiencing a mysterious awakening."²⁰ Even though Farquhar's focus was only on urban, cosmopolitan reform movements, he takes these to represent the whole of Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. He attributes Christian influence to their advance and modernization, expressing optimism that these reform movements are the vanguard of broader changes in their respective traditions.²¹ What escaped Farquhar's attention were the myriad projects of Hindu modernization, like that of Ramalinga, that were also transforming Hinduism in enduring ways.

Contemporary scholars rightly reject Farquhar's Christian apologetics, but they continue to stress an inevitable and usually exclusive link between Christianity/European culture, reform movements, and modern Hinduism. Wilhelm Halbfass, picking up on Hacker's delineation of "Neo-Hinduism," characterizes the India-Europe encounter as one between "tradition and modernity." Reform leaders produced "modern Hindu thought" by incorporating Western elements.²² Arvind Sharma, with reference to Keshab Chandra Sen, a Brahma Samaj leader, writes that "modern Hinduism has tended to accept Christ, but not Christianity."²³ Hatcher's work is generally sensitive to Indian agency and appreciative of the complexity of Indian-Western interactions, and several of my arguments in the book draw from his excellent work. However, he also insists that the encounter with the West and the development of reform Hinduism mark the origin point of modern Hinduism, positing that "Modern Hinduism is thus best viewed as the product of a rich and extended conversation between India and the West."²⁴ Elsewhere in a discussion of colonial Hinduism, he characterizes Hinduism as a "joint project" of European and South Asian actors.²⁵

A look at titles of important books on Hindu reform further clarifies this assumed link between the West, reform Hinduism, and modern Hinduism, and even modern Indian thought: David Kopf's classic *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (1979); William Radice's edited volume *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism* (1998); Arvind Sharma's collection of writings

by prominent reformers, *Modern Hindu Thought: The Essential Texts* (2002); and Torkel Brekke's work on Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist reform leaders, *Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2002). Scholarly introductions to Hinduism repeat this narrative and introduce it to university students. For example, Gavin Flood's excellent and widely used *An Introduction to Hinduism* (1996) includes a chapter on "Hinduism in the Modern World." There Flood presents an account of Hindu innovation in the nineteenth century that is limited to reform leaders and movements. He cites a genealogy of Hindu modernization—Rammohan Roy to Dayananda Saraswati to Swami Vivekananda—that is followed by nearly every other scholarly overview and sourcebook of Hinduism.²⁶ These works continue to focus on expressions of Hinduism that emerged from colonial urban centers, and they stress the role of the West as an ever-present, necessary, and even equal player in the transformation of Hinduism.

The equation of modern Hinduism and reform Hinduism assumes a dichotomy between modernity, defined as Western in origin and character, and tradition, which in this case includes all expressions of non-reform Hinduism. David Smith exemplifies this position: "Modernity, product of the Enlightenment, is generally brought into sharper focus by the contrast with what are called 'traditional societies.'" Further, "Hinduism and modernity are opposite poles . . ."²⁷ In this case, Smith means "traditional" Hinduism, which he distinguishes from a reform Hinduism or "Neo-Hinduism" that "seeks a national revival through modernization of Hinduism."²⁸ Sudipta Kaviraj likewise contrasts Hindu reform and "traditional Hinduism." He equates reform Hinduism with "indigenous religion," asserting that "the most significant fact was that indigenous religion, on which the entire intellectual life of society depended, did not decline, but rather restructured itself by using the European critique."²⁹ This dichotomy between a static, traditional Hinduism and dynamic, Westernized, innovative reform Hinduism is one that continues to shape the study of modern Hinduism in explicit and subtle ways. By limiting modern Hinduism to those forms that incorporate Protestant and other Western ideas, discourses, and institutions, it reinscribes a dichotomy between tradition and modernity.

I will argue throughout the book that the use of a tradition versus modernity dichotomy in thinking about modern Hinduism makes questionable assumptions and has distorting consequences. It gives us a narrative in which Hindu innovation was one, a response to colonial domination, and two, due to the Westernization of urban elite Indians. This "colonist's-eye view" of religious history assumes that Hinduism outside cosmopolitan discourses was traditional and static. It discounts the possibility that Hindu innovations that were not directly beholden to colonial influence may have contributed to the shape of modern Hinduism. Hatcher has succinctly summarized the issue: "Linking our understanding of Hinduism in this way to the legacy of European colonialism and European self-understanding is one of the best ways to begin wrestling with the question of Hinduism and

modernity.”³⁰ He is certainly right that it is *one* of the best ways, but is it the *only* way? Is it possible to consider a history of the emergence of modern Hinduism that does not begin, and end, with colonialism?

This is precisely what I attempt to do in this book, through a close study of Ramalinga. I highlight the ways that Ramalinga’s teachings and innovations diverged from reform Hinduism, in his sources for inspiration, and also in the ways that he redefined tradition, community, charismatic leadership, and devotion. His articulations of Hinduism cannot be explained by a reform model of cosmopolitan engagement between Hindu and European ideas. At the same time, I argue that his teachings were modern ones, presaging developments that have come to characterize contemporary Hinduism, namely, charismatic leadership, employment of new technologies, new forms of charitable outreach, assertion of miracles, and emphasis on choice in community affiliation, to name just a few. To account for Ramalinga’s creativity, timeliness, and impact, we need to go beyond definitions of modern Hinduism that emphasize Western influence and distinguish it from traditional forms of Hinduism. Ramalinga helps us in the project of provincializing Europe or, in this case, provincializing the most European of Hindu traditions, reform Hinduism, in accounts on nineteenth-century Hinduism.³¹ His case highlights the limits of the equation of modern Hinduism with reform Hinduism, and suggests a much more varied landscape of Hindu change, one that includes miracles, devotional poetry, claims to new revelation, and the transformative potential of tradition.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RAMALINGA SWAMI

Ramalinga Pillai (1824–1873) was later called Ramalinga Swami, Ramalinga Swamigal, Ramalinga Adigal, or simply Vallalar.³² He is renowned for his devotional poetry, his protests against caste, and his mystical experiences. He claimed to have received miraculous powers through his close relationship with Shiva, and legends of his extraordinary abilities circulated among his followers in his lifetime. He wrote thousands of verses in traditional meter, collected together in several volumes under the title *Tiruvaruṭpā*.³³ Those poems remain central to his legacy and have been sung in private and in temples since at least the 1860s. His critiques of ritual orthodoxy, caste, and canon made him a target of attacks by established Shaiva figures. He was highly innovative, founding a religious community with a number of remarkable features, including burying the dead and waiting for Shiva’s physical appearance. He sponsored the construction of a temple where Shiva is worshiped in the form of a flame. He developed a ritualized practice of giving food to the anonymous poor, departing from established Shaiva traditions of giving to esteemed recipients. He drew from a variety of diverse Shaiva traditions in developing his projects, including canonical devotional works as well as tantric and siddha traditions. He used Shaiva ideas, symbols, and idioms in formulating his



FIGURE 1. Ramalinga Swamikal. Credit: From the collection of Layne R. Little and Archana Venkatesan.

teachings, but he did not live in a nostalgic world of tradition. His projects sought to address the social inequality and poverty that characterized his world.

There are many sources that present biographical details of Ramalinga's life. His poems themselves are highly autobiographical, communicating important life events and everyday activities. He wrote letters to his disciples that contain

valuable details about his life. One of his senior followers wrote a short history of events leading up to the first significant publication of Ramalinga's verses, providing a sketch of some details of his life.³⁴ P. Ramasami Mudaliyar published the earliest comprehensive account of Ramalinga's life in a preface to the first full edition of his verses in 1892, eighteen years after Ramalinga's death.³⁵ Since then, there have been many biographies.³⁶ Below I present a composite summary of major events in his life. Subsequent chapters will fill out these details and, especially, will discuss his motivations and concerns.

Ramalinga was born in a village called Marudur, just twenty-five kilometers from the major Shaiva shrine of Chidambaram. His family was of the Karuniga community, a non-brahman caste of scribes and bookkeepers.³⁷ Their caste status was somewhat ambiguous. They were considered *vellalars*, pure castes that enjoy ritual privileges and status, but they were of somewhat lower status than other *vellalar* castes. Ramalinga's father died soon after Ramalinga was born, and the family moved to Chennai, where Ramalinga would live for most of his youth. In 1857 he moved back to his area of birth, where he spent the remainder of his life.

Ramalinga's family appears to have emphasized education. His father was a village accountant, and he served as a teacher in Marudur.³⁸ Ramalinga's older brother, Sabhapati Pillai, studied under the famous Kanchi Sabhapati Mudaliyar, who was a Tamil scholar, pandit of Pacchayappa School in Chennai, and a leading figure in the publication of much of the Tamil devotional canon.³⁹ Sabhapati Pillai himself became a Tamil pandit, and he was Ramalinga's primary teacher. Ramalinga began his studies when he was five years old, learning literary Tamil works from his brother. Ramasami Mudaliyar describes Ramalinga as a keen and capable learner, able to master texts with one reading and appearing to understand works even without instruction. Ramalinga aspired to follow the path taken by his brother, who was initiated into Shaivism and earned his living giving discourses on Shaiva texts. As Ramalinga matured in his learning, he studied works of Vedanta and Siddhanta and tried to find common ground between them.⁴⁰

In his writings, Ramalinga demonstrates detailed knowledge of canonical Shaiva texts, as well as other well-known Tamil works such as the *Tirukkural*. He appears, then, to have received a conventional Tamil Shaiva education. He had no knowledge of English and makes no explicit mention of contact with European peoples or knowledge. Ramalinga did not know Sanskrit, even expressing gratitude that he never had any interest in the "Aryan or other languages," calling them "pompous," "obscure," and "tumultuous."⁴¹ However, it would be a misreading to ascribe to him the sort of anti-brahman, anti-Sanskrit, or anti-Aryan sentiment that would later dominate the ideologies of the Dravidian movement.

Ramalinga is famous today for his verses that vigorously critique caste and ritual orthodoxy, but most of his poems are conventional Shaiva devotional works, proclaiming the power and benevolence of Shiva and Murugan. Many of his poems to Shiva were published in 1867, and poems to Murugan appeared in print in 1880. It was only in 1885 that some followers decided to publish his radical

poems, polemical works that criticized caste and Shaiva elitism.⁴² Further writings appeared in the coming years, including a number of letters and prose works collected by A. Balakrishna Pillai in his edition of Ramalinga's collected writings, published in twelve volumes between 1931 and 1958.⁴³

Ramalinga's efforts to articulate a new vision of religious community went beyond his writings: he established innovative institutions that embodied his ideals. These institutions were novel in his Tamil Shaiva context. The first of these, and the basis for the others, was an association of devotees that would put his ideas into action. He had begun to speak of his path as the *caṅmārkkam*, the "True Path," and in 1865 he formed a society that would advance the goals of this path.⁴⁴ His society set up an almshouse to feed the poor, and they built a temple to worship god in the form of light.

In 1870, Ramalinga moved his residence to a site a few kilometers from the town of Vadalur, the location of his almshouse and temple. Ramalinga's new home provided him some distance from the crowds of the town and his institutions. It became the location of his personal activities and the place where he gave lectures to his followers in the last years of his life. He called this residence "Citti Vaḷākam," the "House of Siddhi." "Siddhi" has a number of meanings, including the extraordinary powers gained through yoga that Ramalinga claimed to have attained. It also refers to final liberation, the term often given to the place of death and liberation of Tamil saints, perhaps most importantly the Tamil siddhas, to whom Ramalinga is often compared. It is in the latter sense that the name for the residence proved prophetic. Ramalinga's followers testify that he entered the "House of Siddhi" on January 30, 1874, and disappeared. He was never seen again.⁴⁵

Ramalinga's writings and projects enjoyed significant popularity and patronage in his lifetime. The *Madras Mail*, in its July 5, 1871 edition, reported that "Ramalinga Pillai, a Tamil Scholar of some repute, it appears has set himself up for a god. . . . Thousands throng there daily; and a Pandal (temple) is being erected at the cost of 15,000 Rs. !!!"⁴⁶ He attracted followers across a range of castes and classes, and his poems addressed the plight of the poor. For example, he expressed his fear, empathy, and distress when he saw "mothers, companions, relatives, those who are dear to me, and others afflicted by hunger and disease . . . the elderly and the young alike suffering because of poverty."⁴⁷ In part because of the success of his populist message, he found himself subject to the critiques of Shaiva leaders who promoted a more elite, caste-based vision for Shaivism. As we will see, the scholar Arumuga Navalar considered Ramalinga's challenge to established Shaivism important enough to warrant a vigorous written attack in 1869. In his polemic, Navalar notes that Ramalinga's verses were being sung in Shaiva temples at the expense of the traditional *Tēvāram* verses that had been sung for centuries.⁴⁸ Ramalinga's fame made him a significant force in the changing character of Tamil Shaivism, and his

influence continues to this day. This influence is most visibly effected through the dozens of groups that work to establish his True Path in their local communities, most importantly through charitable outreach to the poor.

STUCK BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

The dichotomy between tradition and modernity has served as the general problematic for scholarship on Ramalinga. Scholars have tried to place him in one or the other, or to show how he mediates between the two categories. Luba Zubkova recounts that when she and her co-author A. Dubiansky were writing a history of Tamil literature, Ramalinga was the “most controversial in view of a need to draw a border line between tradition and modernity.”⁴⁹ Different commentators have indeed made varying decisions about his place, apparently feeling the need to judge whether Ramalinga was traditional or modern, and often struggling to decide which better characterizes his teachings. I will review some of this scholarship to argue that the “problem” arises because scholars reject the possibility that “tradition” can also be “modern.” I will then detail my own approach, which reconsiders the concepts of modernity and tradition.

Those who place Ramalinga within “tradition” generally emphasize his literary debts to Shaiva bhakti poetry and his miraculous claims. Charles Heimsath writes that Ramalinga, Swaminarayan, and Ramakrishna “were much closer in inspiration, character, and message to the traditional saints of the pre-modern period than to any of the religious leaders of the modern Westernized reform movements.”⁵⁰ For Ramachandra Dikshitar, Ramalinga is not the first in the lineage of modern Tamil authors but the last of the Tamil “Mystic Poets.” Dikshitar begins this lineage with the poets of the canonical *Tēvāram*, which we will return to often in the following chapters. He does not mention Ramalinga’s anti-caste writings but instead focuses on his constant devotion to Shiva and his miraculous disappearance. Dikshitar credits mystic poets like Ramalinga with “Keeping alive the religious life of the masses in this world . . . thanks to these mystics, our religion and our religious faith were saved from extinction during many an hour of peril and crisis.”⁵¹ Kamil Zvelebil largely agrees with this assessment, asserting that “Irāmaḷiṅka Cuvāmiḷaḷ (Ramalinga Svami, 1823–1874), a controversial figure as a religious leader, was unquestionably the greatest Tamil poet of the 19th century. He was also the last great poet in the line of the Śaiva bhakti poet-saints.”⁵² N. Subramanian likewise situates Ramalinga in prior Shaiva traditions: “Saintly persons like Ramalinga Swami were traditionalists who continued the mystic teachings of earlier saints though he occasionally spoke of anti-Brahmanical communal reform.”⁵³ Subramanian equates Ramalinga’s innovations with “reform” but stresses the “traditional” features of his writings. These scholars understand Ramalinga primarily as the inheritor and propagator of prior Shaiva traditions.

They attach specific characteristic to tradition, namely, mysticism, devotion, miracles, saintliness, and the poetic.

Contrary to these depictions of Ramalinga as the last great traditional bhakti poet and saint, other scholars emphasize the novel character of his teachings. For R. Balachandran, Ramalinga is one of the “Pioneers of Tamil Literature” who were responsible for “the transition of Tamil literature into its modern phase.”⁵⁴ C. Jesudasan calls Ramalinga “a powerful force in the revival and strengthening of modern Hinduism.”⁵⁵ Neela Padmanabhan begins his survey of modern Tamil literature with Ramalinga, focusing on his anti-caste writings and charity. According to Padmanabhan, Ramalinga is “a rebel, decrying religious fanaticism and the tyranny of caste. He champions an ideal, egalitarian society breaking the barriers of caste and religion.” Here Ramalinga appears to fare well as modern, but Padmanabhan also notes that “in modern Tamil literature, tradition and modernity necessarily constitute a continuum.” Ramalinga appears at the beginning of the section on “The Nineteenth Century: Sparks of Modernity,” so we are probably justified to conclude that he is one of the more “traditional” of modern Tamil poets.⁵⁶ Sascha Ebeling, in his work on nineteenth-century Tamil literature, suggests that Ramalinga deserves consideration in any reassessment of modern Tamil poetry. Ebeling credits Ramalinga and his primary foil, Arumuga Navalar, with a “transformation of the traditional Tamil Śaivite religious milieu.”⁵⁷ For these authors, Ramalinga’s importance to nineteenth-century literature and society was not that he kept past traditions alive, but that his innovations proved influential to literary, social, and religious changes. They consider him to be modern because he stressed change and transformation, advanced egalitarian ideals, and taught social responsibility to the poor and marginalized.

Other studies place him somewhere between tradition and modernity, or with one foot in each. The *History of Indian Literature* includes an entry on Ramalinga in its volume on nineteenth-century literature, entitled *Western Impact: Indian Response*. Here Sisir Kumar Das calls Ramalinga “a great saint and a man of traditional learning . . . who initiated a new religious movement and created a new body of religious lyrics.”⁵⁸ Das’s discussion of Ramalinga is in a section on “Traditions and Innovations,” suggesting that these are opposing categories, and that Ramalinga embodies both in different ways. Jean-Luc Racine and Josiane Racine refer to Ramalinga’s innovative “reforms” as a rejuvenation of “the siddhar mysticoascetic tradition.”⁵⁹ In Peter Heehs’s *Indian Religions: A Historical Reader of Spiritual Expression and Experience*, Ramalinga appears as the first of the “Mystics of Modern India” in a section titled “Continuity and Innovation (1850–1990).” Heehs understands Ramalinga in the context of “modern religious movements.” Such movements “situate themselves in a line going back untold ages, yet give themselves the freedom to depart from tradition when modern circumstances require it.” Leaders of such movements use scripture and “their own inner experience” to “justify their innovations.”⁶⁰ Heehs characterizes Ramalinga as both

a traditional poet and a modern innovator, attributing his capacity for creation to the accounts of revelation that dominate his poems. For Heehs, innovation comes primary from “modern circumstances,” while tradition legitimates these changes, reminiscent of Hacker’s assertion that Neo-Hinduism “presents Western or Christian ideas in a Hindu garb.”⁶¹ These accounts of Ramalinga complicate his placement in either tradition or modernity, but they maintain the dichotomy itself, positing tradition as continuity and stability, and associating modernity with Western intervention, dynamism, and change.

The difficulties scholars have in placing Ramalinga on the axis between tradition and modernity make him an excellent figure through which to question this dichotomy. He appears to be a “traditional” character, drawing clearly on Shaiva materials, with little apparent influence of Western ideas. At the same time, he innovated in ways that align with conceptions of modernity, for example, stressing the accessibility of ritual and promoting egalitarianism. If we view tradition as static or as incompatible with modernity, his placement is unclear. Some scholars have tried to resolve this dilemma by suggesting an invisible source of Western influence that provided the creative spark for Ramalinga’s innovations. For example, Eugene Irschick describes Ramalinga as a proto-Tamil nationalist, suggesting that this nationalist sentiment, and Ramalinga’s teaching that his followers should bury, not cremate, their dead, are signs of Christian influence.⁶² In a study of Ramalinga’s charitable outreach to the poor, Srilata Raman credits Christianity with providing the inspiration for Ramalinga’s new ideology of food-giving.⁶³ I cannot disprove Christian influence and, indeed, in some cases, I posit that his innovations drew on multiple sources, including Western ones. However, it seems to me that his writings overwhelmingly indicate that the primary inspiration for his innovations were Shaiva traditions. When we acknowledge that Hindu traditions provided rich resources for modernization, the dichotomy between tradition and modernity disappears, as does the impulse to characterize Ramalinga as one or the other.

In suggesting that Shaiva traditions, not Western ones, provided the primary sources for transformation, I follow scholarly literature in Tamil on Ramalinga. These works pay close attention to tensions within Tamil Shaivism and to the ways that Ramalinga’s ideological orientation challenged established Shaivism. Raj Gautaman describes Ramalinga’s position outside established, powerful Shaiva institutions, which was most dramatically demonstrated in the long conflict between Ramalinga and his followers, on the one hand, and Arumuga Navalar and his supporters, on the other.⁶⁴ R. Venkatesan points to the caste tensions between, on the one hand, Ramalinga and his closest disciples, who were from middle-caste groups, and the relatively higher caste *vellalar* communities that dominated established Shaiva institutions and literary production. He also discusses the heated debates between Tamil Nadu scholars and those from Sri Lanka, like Navalar.⁶⁵ Work of P. Saravanan focuses on the conflict between Ramalinga

and powerful, non-brahman Shaiva monasteries, providing important primary resources through which to examine these polemics.⁶⁶ I follow these scholars in considering Ramalinga's principal foils and interlocutors to be other Tamil Shaivas, not European Orientalists or missionaries. I pay particularly close attention to the tensions between Ramalinga's teachings and those more established, caste-based practices that prevailed at the Shaiva monasteries that dominated Tamil temple culture and literary production through much of the nineteenth century.

RAMALINGA, HINDU MODERNITY, AND HINDU TRADITIONS

Throughout this book, I seek to demonstrate a number of connected things. First, I argue that Ramalinga's main source of inspiration came from Shaiva traditions, not from Christianity or the West, although he was certainly not entirely removed from colonial processes. Second, I show that Shaiva traditions did not just provide Ramalinga with stability and continuity, but they also supplied the sources and models for his innovations. Third, I suggest that these changes were just as "modern" as those implemented in Hindu reform movements. By analyzing Ramalinga as a leader who developed modern innovations within Shaiva traditions, I challenge two aspects of the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity. The first is the equation of modernity with the West, and the other is the characterization of tradition as premodern and unchanging. At the same time, I do not dispense with the terms tradition and modernity, because both serve to illuminate the material I present here. Rather, I deliberately define them in ways that foreclose drawing them into a dichotomy. It seems to me that they are not similar sorts of things that can be poles on a single axis.

Dipesh Chakrabarty notes the imperializing effects of the equation between modernity and the West. "If a language, as has been said, is but a dialect backed up by an army, the same could be said of the narratives of 'modernity' that, almost universally today, point to a certain 'Europe' as the primary habitus of the modern." This leads Chakrabarty to propose a project of "provincializing Europe," which begins with "the recognition that Europe's acquisition of the adjective 'modern' for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism within global history."⁶⁷ This equation of modernity and the West has played out in specific ways in narratives of Hindu modernization. Such narratives insist that Hindu modernity began with a dialogue between Hindu and Western ideas, thereby privileging a specific, cosmopolitan brand of Hindu reform. They relegate figures who do not fit into Hindu reform, like Ramalinga or Sahajanand Swami, the founder of the Swaminarayan movement, to the margins, or to past tradition.⁶⁸ Or, when Ramalinga has been considered an innovator, there has been a tendency to equate him with cosmopolitan reformers and assume significant Western influence on his teachings, which misses the most important sources of his inspirations.⁶⁹ In

speaking of the source of modern Hinduism as a dialogue between India and Europe, such narratives continue to posit a Western origin for expressions of Hinduism that are relevant, forward-looking, or novel, opposing these to “traditional” expressions that are survivals of a past.

Rajeev Bhargava urges us to recognize “alternative modernities that lie unnoticed because of the hold on our imagination of a simplistic, dichotomous framework that bifurcates our world into western modernity and indigenous tradition.”⁷⁰ I agree with Bhargava’s critique, but he does not, in my opinion, go far enough, since he still insists on a single, Western source of all modernity. S. N. Eisenstadt, in his important statement on “multiple modernities,” notes that as modernity develops throughout the world, it is shaped in decisive ways by local cultures, traditions, and histories. Thus, he stresses that “modernity and Westernization are not identical; Western patterns of modernity are not the only ‘authentic’ modernities.”⁷¹ However, like Bhargava, Eisenstadt posits a single, “original Western project” as the “common starting point” and “reference point” of all modernities.⁷² But what if we imagine a more radical notion of multiple modernities, one that does not locate the origins of all modernity in Western history? What if Hindu traditions were the starting point of projects of Hindu modernization, in which Western influences were only experienced obliquely or vaguely?

One way to begin to define modernity in ways less reliant on Western discourses is through a model of “convergence.” In his study of “modern monks” such as Rama Tirtha (1873–1906), Timothy Dobe follows Hatcher in proposing that “the modern and the premodern might share enough to overlap or ‘converge,’ raising questions about how different they were in the first place.”⁷³ For example, Dobe notes that Rama Tirtha’s promotion of individuality displays features of Western modernity but also of Hindu ascetic ideals. Dobe proposes that the particular salience and power of Tirtha’s formulation lay in the convergence of Hindu and Western ideas.⁷⁴ Such a notion of convergence enables a position in which modernity is not exclusive to the West, with Hindu traditions providing sources for modern religious expression. However, this model still runs the risk of allowing Western modernity to set the agenda for all modernity, if we consider as modern only those aspects of Hindu traditions that have parallels in Western modernity.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam presents a somewhat different possibility, one that accounts for such convergences not in terms of affinity or accidental parallels, but through historical influence. He seeks to “delink the notion of ‘modernity’ from a particular European trajectory . . . and to argue that it represents a more-or-less global shift, with many different sources and roots, and—inevitably—many different forms and meanings depending on which society we look at it from.”⁷⁵ He argues that “modernity is historically a global and *conjunctural* phenomenon, not a virus that spreads from one place to another.”⁷⁶ By “conjunctural” Subrahmanyam has in mind “supra-local” continuities between ideas that suggest

“that what we are dealing with are not separate and comparable, but connected histories.” If “convergence” stresses synchronic affinities, “conjecture” highlights historical interactions. Convergence is then an instance of conjuncture at a single point of time. Subrahmanyam presents the example of “millenarian conjuncture” in the sixteenth century, in which millenarian ideas took hold across the “Old World,” southern and western Asia, and North Africa, concerning Christians and Muslims alike.⁷⁷ For Subrahmanyam, these parallels in far-flung and apparently unconnected places indicate that ideas traveled more fluidly in the premodern era than we would be led to believe by scholarship that is shaped by national boundaries and Eurocentrism. He posits the far-reaching, global exchange of a number of social, political, and imaginative features that have come to shape modern sensibilities, including “a new sense of the limits of the inhabited world”; conflict between settled and nomadic peoples; “political theology”; and “historical anthropology,” which includes considerations of individuality. He typifies these shifts as “early modern,” and he posits that they are not only, or even primarily, of European origin.⁷⁸

In their volume *Textures of Time*, Subrahmanyam, David Shulman, and Velcheru Narayana Rao pursue these ideas with a close study of narrative literature of South India, arguing that this literature displays “the arrival of a certain kind of ‘modernity’ in the far south” between 1600 and 1800.⁷⁹ In his review of this volume, Sheldon Pollock notes that the implication of such a position is that modernity would not be the same everywhere. He warns against searching for the West in India’s modernity, arguing that “newness” would be experienced differently throughout the world. Pollock concludes that “it seems that modernity across Asia may have shown simultaneity without symmetry.”⁸⁰ In other words, comparative history may demonstrate that the modern world emerged not through a single model that spread from its European source, but through the simultaneous development, in a multitude of places, of a variety of ways of being modern. These authors are generally concerned with early modern India, but their point is relevant for nineteenth-century Hindu innovation and the emergence of modern Hinduism. While the West was probably the most influential “external” source of influence on Hindu traditions in the nineteenth century, to consider it the main source of Hindu change, even in the idiom of dialogue, overlooks the capacity for Hindu agency; ignores the cosmopolitan character of Hindu traditions prior to colonialism; and neglects the “newness” that defined Hindu change in the centuries prior to the nineteenth century.

The notion of modernity that I pursue allows for diverse content, depending on historical context, making it impossible to identify a canon of characteristics that are quintessentially modern. Rather, focusing on certain stylistic features of modernity seems to me a more promising way to begin. Thus, Eisenstadt follows Nilüfer Göle in asserting that “one of the most important characteristics of modernity is simply, but profoundly, its potential for self-correction, its ability to

confront problems not even imagined in its original program.”⁸¹ Following this characterization of modernity, we find that modern Hinduism emerged from a variety of sources and in myriad ways, not just in a single, Western encounter. As Hatcher notes, “The goal, therefore, in thinking through the origin and nature of modern Hinduism is to look for evidence of its continual emergence as a process of ‘reiterative imagining.’ When we do this, we may be better able to appreciate all the times and places it (re-)emerges.”⁸² Here I suggest that Ramalinga’s teachings and projects, though distant from reform Hinduism, nevertheless provide an important case of Hindu modernization. Such a move posits a multiplicity of Hindu modernities and a variety of genealogies that produced them.

I describe as “modern” teachings that one, innovate in strategic ways that respond to contemporary challenges; two, view the present as unique and malleable, that is, as a time of unparalleled opportunity for significant transformation; and three, presage future processes and developments. Accordingly, there are plural configurations of “newness” that characterize the modern in different times and places. These varied formulations of modernity have diverse genealogies, but their trajectories are not unilinear or isolated. They share some of the conditions of other formulations, and they at times interact and compete with other modernities. As Bjorn Thomassen points out, positing diverse origins and histories for multiple modernities does not preclude recognizing cultural contact, the global spread of ideas, and the “frictions” that come with encounters between diverse agendas of modernity.⁸³

According to this definition of modernity, traditions can also be modern when actors reshape their traditions to respond to shifting contexts. I describe Ramalinga’s teachings as modern because they challenged established Shaivism, engaged with current social and economic challenges, articulated a new ethical vision for community, viewed the present as offering a unique opportunity for transformation, and sought to initiate epochal change. In many ways Ramalinga presaged later developments in contemporary Hinduism better than did nineteenth-century Hindu cosmopolitan reformers. One only needs to consider a figure like Sathya Sai Baba to see the importance of personal charisma and authority, and the salience of the miraculous, in the landscape of modern Hinduism. In the chapters that follow, I focus on features of Ramalinga’s teachings that served to make his agenda and vision “modern” in this sense. These include the wielding of a new technology, print; the development of a new ideology of charity, based on compassion to the poor; a call for egalitarianism and a critique of caste and Shaiva elitism; an emphasis on the accessibility of ritual; the founding of a new, voluntary society; the delineation of an audience that cut across class and caste lines; and the promise of supernatural powers and immortality to those who joined him.

Nearly all these “modern” features have precedents in Shaiva traditions. Many of these also match up with Western notions of modernity, suggesting that processes of (synchronic) convergence and (diachronic) conjuncture were at play. In

Ramalinga's case, the mechanism for convergence was not a direct encounter with Western discourses but indirect, filtered through his devotees, Shaiva adversaries, and colonial and Hindu institutions that were themselves "hybrid." Some of the parallels between Western modernity and Ramalinga's teachings can also be explained through longer historical processes of conjuncture in Subrahmanyam's sense. In Ramalinga's case, such instances of conjuncture signal complex and ambiguous histories of institutional and discursive interactions of a sort that Shalini Randeria has described as "entangled histories." Randeria focuses on complex historical exchanges that characterized the colonial experience, arguing that these interactions played an important role in shaping features of Western modernity.⁸⁴ One consequence of her position is that "the idea of a homogenous Western modernity travelling, more or less imperfectly, to the rest of the world must be replaced by a messier and complex picture of . . . uneven and entangled modernities."⁸⁵ Peter van der Veer has argued that histories of cosmopolitanism and modernity should reject "both center-periphery models and the identification of originary movements," and instead should describe "historical entanglements."⁸⁶ Therefore, when we note instances of convergence or conjuncture between Ramalinga's teachings and Western modernity, it may be that Ramalinga was drawing on Shaiva traditions that had already been influenced by Western ideals, but also that Western modernity and its institutional agents in South India were themselves shaped in part by local concerns. I argue that we need to resist the temptation to view such processes in terms of distinctive, "pure" religious or ideological positions that come into contact.

Aside from these points of apparent convergence, important features of Ramalinga's teachings that proved crucial to the success of his agenda do not find a place in a list of features of Western modernity or Protestant rationality. He maintained the efficacy of simple rituals, including mantras; spoke of direct revelation from Shiva; and claimed to have miraculous powers, which he, in turn, promised to those who joined his Society. I maintain that these features are modern because they satisfy my definition of modernity. Ramalinga's articulation of miracles was innovative, breaking from past conceptions; his description of revelation was vital in drawing people to him; his stress on the efficacy of accessible Shaiva rituals found broad resonance and presaged later expressions of Hinduism. We can speak of multiple modernities without requiring that all elements of these modernities originate from the West. In this study I focus on two versions of modernity that were opposed in crucial ways, namely, Ramalinga's modernity and that of Hindu reform. Rather than characterizing this tension as a clash of tradition and modernity, I suggest that we view it as the clash of competing visions of modernity.

My reformulation of modernity also compels us to reconsider tradition. The notion of traditions as premodern, static, unified entities grounded in scripture is itself a discursive and ideological construction that was formed in opposition to ideas of modernity. Frederick Cooper notes "the dangers of modernity's invention

of ‘universal man’ to be the model for the entire world, erasing the colonial origins of that man and the invention of his traditionalist, non-European ‘other’ as his foil.”⁸⁷ Hindu reformers, such as Ramalinga’s adversary Arumuga Navalar, subscribed to many features of this notion of tradition. They idealized a static, systematic Hindu (or Shaiva) tradition, and they described their work as preserving that tradition through a reconstruction based on ancient texts. Their projects were of course innovative, but reformers tended to obscure this innovation by describing their work as returning to a golden age enshrined in a revered canon.

My sense of tradition is not this colonial, reform notion. In my delineation, tradition neither opposes modernity nor persists or “survives” alongside it, nor does it simply “condition” modernity through the stubborn force of its inertia. Tradition affirms continuity, but it is not primarily an orientation to the past or an idealization of stasis. Traditions are in constant flux, responding to a variety of influences and challenges. Importantly, traditions themselves provide resources for change, and sources for inspiration and innovation. With this view of tradition, one not need posit Christian or colonial influence to explain Hindu change. I will discuss traditions primarily in the plural; most important, I will speak of diverse Shaiva traditions upon which Ramalinga drew. This notion of tradition is similar to Ramalinga’s conception of Shaivism as flexible, living, and a source of inspiration and transformation. He demonstrated no consciousness that Shaiva traditions were under threat or imperiled, or in need of preservation, and here he differed crucially from Hindu reform writers. He did not view canon as fixed in the past, but he spoke of devotional poets speaking to him in the present and even sought to add to the Shaiva devotional canon. He deliberately pursued change, but he did not consider his innovations to be departures from Shaiva tradition. For Ramalinga, Shaiva traditions were not obstacles to modernity, but they provided conceptual, ritual, and literary frameworks through which he created new ideologies of food-giving, community, and accessible ritual practices that served to respond to contemporary challenges in his social and historical milieu. He expressed a Shaivism that was already modern, that contributed to current debates, and that addressed local concerns, especially the social and material suffering of his lower caste and poor neighbors.

Saurabh Dube calls modernity an “idea, ideal, and ideology.”⁸⁸ I would argue that the same is true for tradition, and that my delineation of both terms is all of these things. I have tried to articulate notions of tradition and modernity that take into account the historical complexity of cultural interactions. I am critical of analytical models that emphasize Western sources for all Hindu modernization in the nineteenth century. Here my project shares much with Anne Blackburn’s “microhistorical immersion” into the life and projects of the Sri Lankan Buddhist leader Hikkaduve Sumangala. Blackburn convincingly highlights the limitations of a model of “Protestant Buddhism” in explaining Hikkaduve’s work, which drew most strongly from Buddhist traditions. She advances a plea for further

such “human-scale” studies, which will “restore a richer sense of local agency to the record of colonial-period South Asians.”⁸⁹ Like Blackburn, I present here a microhistory that, although highly compressed in its subject matter, asks questions about wide-ranging and crucial processes in colonial India. It is thus less a biography of Ramalinga than a study of processes of religious change, agency, and innovation in nineteenth-century India. Ramalinga presents such a significant case study because his innovative projects exemplify a number of crucial historical shifts. By focusing on Indian enterprise instead of colonial settings, I highlight the creative work of Hindus that has been obscured by investigations that assume that change is driven by Western agency. Where Blackburn emphasizes continuity and stability in Buddhist practice, however, I emphasize Ramalinga’s ingenuity and innovations. Considering my work alongside hers, it is clear that Protestant bias among scholars has not only obscured the continuities of traditions, but it has also distorted the sources of change.

In the chapters that follow, I build on my argument that Ramalinga’s reconfiguration of Shaivism was modern by focusing on a number of his innovations. I highlight the ways that he departed from reform Hinduism, that bearer of Western modernity. I carry out this analysis through the close reading of a corpus of texts written between 1860 and 1874. Most important are Ramalinga’s own writings, including his poems, prose compositions, and letters to his followers. I also examine writings of his followers, including letters, verse compositions, and responses to critiques by their adversaries. Additionally, I analyze Arumuga Navalar’s 1869 polemical attack on Ramalinga, which I argue represents a reform critique of Ramalinga’s teachings. Each chapter focuses on a specific set of primary sources and on a distinct area of religious change. In each case, I have sought to illuminate features of Ramalinga’s work that reflect broader historical processes of colonialism and religious transformation.

Chapter two analyzes Ramalinga’s ideology of ritual food-giving to the hungry poor. His novel ideology of giving marked a radical departure from established South Indian Shaiva ritual processes, which excluded poor, lower-caste participants. A recent study traces his project of food charity to Christian influence. I take a different position, demonstrating that Ramalinga drew primarily from prior Shaiva traditions, especially tantra and siddha, and also from institutions that emerged out of complex interactions between Western and Indian sources. More broadly, the chapter demonstrates the importance of traditional Shaiva precedents and ideas in shaping this modern practice.

Chapter three looks at the impact of print technology on Hinduism in the middle of the nineteenth century, the period when print began to proliferate in South Asia. Hindu reformers, often directly influenced by Christian publishing in India, employed print in order to extend the audiences and influence of established canons through accessible publications in prose. Ramalinga and his followers used

print differently, challenging established Shaiva authority and scripture by publishing a compilation of his poems as a new contribution to canon. Since published books were becoming the physical form and medium of canon, Ramalinga viewed the shift to print as an opportunity to advance at least two claims: that his verses were the equal of revered devotional literature, and that he was worthy of a place in the pantheon of Shaiva saints.

The fourth chapter examines Ramalinga's views of authority and tradition through a close reading of his devotional works. Scholars have noted that Hindu reformers emphasized the authority of the written text, and also that they relegated scripture and revelation to the distant past, expressing nostalgia for a golden age of Hindu tradition. Ramalinga diverged strongly from these views, asserting that Shaivism was a living, oral tradition based on direct experiences of Shiva's revelation that continue into the present. The chapter stresses the autohagiographical character of Ramalinga's writings to argue that new notions of the literary past were emerging in nineteenth-century South Asia outside of reform Hinduism.

Chapter five presents a detailed scholarly account of an important debate between Ramalinga and the Tamil Shaiva reform leader Arumuga Navalar. Like Ramalinga, Navalar worked to transform Tamil Shaivism, but his vision of tradition closely conformed to cosmopolitan expressions of Hinduism. He sought to limit Shaiva canon to a specific corpus of revered texts, and he advanced a rationality that denied the possibility of modern miracles and new scriptural revelations. He strongly criticized Ramalinga's supernatural claims and the use of Ramalinga's verses in Shaiva ritual contexts. His resistance to Ramalinga's influence underscores the disparity between Ramalinga's vision of Hinduism and those of cosmopolitan leaders. This chapter thus highlights the diversity of Hindu approaches to modernization.

Chapter six considers Ramalinga's claim to have acquired extraordinary powers. Most studies of Hindu modernization describe processes of rationalization, with Hindu reformers distancing themselves from miraculous claims. Ramalinga, on the other hand, claimed to possess supernatural powers, and he promised his followers that they, too, could acquire these powers by joining his community. He embraced tantric and siddha expressions of Shaivism to challenge reform models of an increasingly rational Hinduism. The chapter argues that his promotion of the miraculous has endured, leading to the conclusion that his vision of an enchanted Hinduism is as modern as that of a rational, reform Hinduism.

The conclusion challenges the scholarly tendency to locate the origins of modern Hinduism only in cosmopolitan reform Hinduism and, by extension, dialogue with the West. I demonstrate that Ramalinga's innovations aligned with, and contributed to, new trends in Hindu expression, including the extension of ritual to lower castes; the use of new technologies to increase accessibility and challenge established authority; and the sustained "enchantment" of Hinduism and its emphasis on charismatic leadership. I argue that because Ramalinga drew

inspiration from Shaiva traditions in articulating these innovations, any consideration of Hindu modernity must take seriously the role of Hindu traditions in not just forging continuity with the past, but also with providing sources of innovation and change. I call for further studies that examine regional leaders working in vernacular languages, and for frameworks that consider multiple modernities with diverse genealogies.

Through these detailed chapters of Ramalinga's innovations, this study argues that even though his work departs radically from that of Hindu reformers, his project is no less modern than were theirs. Indeed, if one considers his continuing popularity, the sustained emphasis on the miraculous, use of print media, and outreach to the poor, Ramalinga was at the forefront in processes of Hindu modernization. I hope that this work will open up the study of modern Hindu history to the countless projects of religious change that were occurring on the margins of European empire. By including Ramalinga, and figures like him, in this history, we can develop new ways of thinking about modern Hinduism that more accurately reflect its diverse ways of being modern. More broadly, I hope that my study may provide a model that can be instructive in other area contexts, in which a dichotomy between Western modernity and traditional religion continues to shape scholarship on religious modernization in non-European societies.