
Giving to the Poor

Ramalinga's Transformation of Hindu Charity

Gifts of food to the poor in India are commonplace today, often proceeding under the auspices of organizations that identify themselves in a general way as Hindu.¹ In South India, groups that carry on Ramalinga's legacy consider the distribution of food to the poor to be central to their public mission. These efforts appear to be nothing out of the ordinary in contemporary India, a fact that conceals the novelty of Ramalinga's project to feed the poor in his own time. Ramalinga's outreach to the hungry poor, in acts of ritual giving that disregarded the caste purity of its recipients, was an important instance of modern innovation. I consider it to be modern because it departed from past practices; responded to contemporary challenges, in this case widespread hunger; sought to transform social and ritual practices; and presaged future developments in Hinduism.

It is not that Hindu institutions did not make food gifts prior to the nineteenth century. The distribution of food by temples, monasteries, and other religious institutions has a long history in South Asia. Inscriptional and textual evidence indicates that gifts of food to specific groups—pilgrims, ascetics, eminent people, caste groups, sectarian groups, et cetera—have been central to ritual transactions in South Asia for at least a millennium. This food-gifting enhances the status of the receiver, and at the same time it enables temples to reestablish, consolidate, or extend social, economic, and political networks with specific groups of people. The giving of food in South Asia thus supports social, political, and ritual agendas. Where Ramalinga departed from prior forms of giving was in distributing food to poor, not esteemed, recipients within a Hindu ritual context.

Reform Hindu leaders and organizations did not make charitable outreach to the poor a central part of their projects until after Ramalinga's death. In 1870,

Keshab Chandra Sen, a Brahmo Samaj leader, advocated uplift of the poor through education and moral instruction, rather than through measures of immediate charitable relief.² Dayananda Saraswati stressed the importance of moral character, not poverty, in considerations of giving. In his 1875 work *Satyarth Prakash*, he asserts that a worthy recipient of charity has the refined qualities of “chastity, control over the senses, love to study and teach the Vedas and other systems of knowledge.”³ Reform organizations, including Hindu reform groups, would later engage in charitable relief to the poor, part of a shift from traditional modes of giving to public, associational philanthropy that Carey Watt traces to the 1890s.⁴ The associations that proliferated at the turn of the twentieth century were critical of more traditional forms of Hindu giving, claiming their new, philanthropic giving “to be on the side of modernity and efficiency.”⁵ In this case, however, their projects of modernity, strongly influenced by European notions of philanthropy, came decades after Ramalinga’s innovation, one that he described in Shaiva, not European, idioms. This suggests that we might profitably examine the sources of Ramalinga’s innovation in order to think more clearly about the emergence of this “modern” practice of charity to the poor.

This chapter presents details of Ramalinga Swami’s ideology of food-giving, expressed in his prose work *Jiva Karuṇya Oḷukkam, The Path of Compassion for Living Beings* (hereafter JKO). In particular, I examine his ideology’s continuities and discontinuities with earlier forms of religious giving, or *dāna*. I pay close attention to Ramalinga’s efforts to situate his novel practice in Shaiva traditions. Recently, Srilata Raman has argued that Ramalinga’s gift-giving innovation occupied a “border space” between Tamil literary expressions of hunger and Christian practices of giving.⁶ I reach a somewhat different conclusion here, namely, that his project is best understood in a framework of Shaiva innovation and transformation. I advance this argument through close attention to local material conditions, most importantly a famine that preceded his project of food outreach; Ramalinga’s Shaiva context; and institutions of food distribution that may have influenced him. My broader goal is to examine the range of sources that potentially conditioned and inspired the emergence of modern Hindu practices, in order to argue that scholars must expand the genealogy of modern Hinduism to sources beyond reform Hinduism or Protestant intervention.

PROTESTANTISM AND OTHER SOURCES OF MODERN HINDUISM

The term “Protestant Hinduism” has never enjoyed the popularity of the often used and sometimes maligned “Protestant Buddhism.”⁷ Nevertheless, much scholarly writing on the emergence of modern Hinduism shares a basic assumption of Protestant Buddhism: simply, that Christianity was a central influence in the development of modern Hinduism, providing not only the impetus for change,

but also theologies and institutional models that Hindu modernizers took from Christian interlocutors. While this assumption has merit, especially in describing religious change in cosmopolitan settings, I argue here that scholarship on modern Hinduism has underestimated the degree to which Hindu religious change occurred apart from Christian projects and influences.

J. N. Farquhar's 1915 study provides an important reference point for the scholarly study of religious change in colonial India. He begins the work by acknowledging "two great groups of religious facts" that set the stage for his study: the "old religions of India" and "Christian Missions." He advances a model of religious change in which "the old religions are the soil from which the modern movements spring; while it will be found that the seed has, in the main, been sown by Missions."⁸ Farquhar gives place to "ancient faiths" in the emergence of these new movements, namely, in the force of tradition. However, it is Christianity that is the instigator of change. "While the shaping forces at work in the movements have been many, it is quite clear that *Christianity has ruled the development throughout*. Christianity has been, as it were, a great searchlight flung across the expanse of the religions; and in its blaze all the coarse, unclean and superstitious elements of the old faiths stood out, quite early, in painful vividness."⁹ Farquhar's language is highly gendered: Indian traditions provide the feminine, generative soil, while the missions sow the seed and rule over the emergence of modern Hindu movements. He conceives of cultural engagement in biological, copulative metaphors, understanding the process as a creative if unequal union of traditions.

Because Farquhar defines modern Hindu movements by their engagement with European civilization, the Hindu leaders and groups he discusses are cosmopolitan, most importantly Rammohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj; Dayananda Saraswati and the Arya Samaj; and Swami Vivekananda. This account of Hindu modernization remains the primary genealogy in scholarly narratives of the emergence of modern Hinduism. However, recent scholarship presents a more nuanced account of this vital period of religious change, recognizing greater agency on the part of Hindu leaders. In his discussion of the emergence of "modern Hindu thought," Brian A. Hatcher rejects a model of historical interaction that emphasizes that modern Hinduism arose out of the "impact" of the West on India, "where 'Western' may be taken to mean European Protestantism."¹⁰ His critique is that such models minimize the importance and continuities of prior Indian traditions, and allow little space for Indian creativity. He instead proposes a model based on convergence, on "the basic premise that any number of previously existing ideas, values, and practices from precolonial India converged in the modern period with those ideas, values, and practices that made their way into India as a result of colonial rule."¹¹ Hatcher's model is certainly an improvement over Farquhar's assertion that Christianity has driven the emergence of modern Hinduism, yet it continues to focus on colonial centers, maintaining the West as an ever-present, necessary, and equal player in the transformation of Hinduism. Indeed, Hatcher concludes

that “modern Hinduism is thus best viewed as the product of a rich and extended conversation between India and the West.”¹²

Hatcher’s explanatory model illuminates religious change in the urban centers of colonial cosmopolitanism, where Hindus engaged Christians in well-documented public debates that shaped Hindu reform movements. However, such models are less salient in describing religious innovations of Hindus who had little direct engagement with Christianity and colonial ideologies. There were Hindu leaders like Ramalinga who were not ensconced in the colonial milieu but who nevertheless engaged in projects of religious change that influenced modern Hinduism in important ways. What did “conversation” entail for someone like Ramalinga, who was not in direct dialogue, as far as we know, with colonial or Christian leaders? What does it mean to assert that Indian and colonial ideas, values, and practices “converged,” when one’s focus is on the margins of colonial cosmopolitanism?

In addressing these questions, it will become clear that although Ramalinga was not directly engaging in conversation with Europeans, neither was he working in a context that was untouched by colonialism. How, then, can we account for his new religious vision? What were his sources of inspiration? My argument is somewhat different than Raman’s “border space” characterization of Ramalinga’s sources. I suggest that Ramalinga modeled his almshouse on private and colonial institutions that distributed food to the hungry in times of famine. His primary ideological foils, against which he developed his innovative ideology of food-giving, were not Christian missionaries or colonial authorities, but leaders of a network of non-brahman mathas or monasteries that dominated South Indian Shaivism in the nineteenth century. While Raman analyzes JKO as a literary representation of hunger with Christian theological overtones, I will pay more attention to Ramalinga’s immediate material and religious context, and to the Shaiva sources of his project, which will lead me to different conclusions. Our work might be read together, an exercise that should highlight the way that distinct approaches to context can result in very different interpretations of religious texts.

FOOD-GIVING IN TAMIL SHAIIVISM

The sharing of food has always been complicated in Hindu culture. If, as Katherine Ulrich points out, the boundaries of the body are often analogized to social boundaries, then bodily interactions that cross these boundaries bring bodies, and groups, into particular relationships. The sharing of food between groups is especially important, as food travels from the hand of one person to the plate of another, and then it is taken into that body where it becomes part of the consumer.¹³ The relative purity of the giver and recipient of food are of vital concern, and for this reason the sharing of food among Hindus has often proceeded along the lines of caste. When inter-caste sharing of food does occur, the giving

of food by one group to another brings these groups into some sort of relationship, often based on social, economic, or political concerns. Configurations of food exchange can have a greater impact on social status than the purity of what is actually eaten.¹⁴ Disparate ideologies of food-giving such as those presented below, the well-established South Indian Shaiva view and the radical formulation of Ramalinga, both assume the power of food to bring disparate groups into productive relations.

The major institutions that have engaged in ritualized food-gifting in South India in the past millennium have been temples and mathas. Mathas are institutions that have been established by ascetic lineages of particular caste and sect groupings. Besides fostering religious devotion and learning among initiates, the major roles of Hindu mathas have been temple management, scholarly activities, and ritual giving. I will focus on non-brahman Tamil Shaiva mathas, since these were the institutions that dominated the liturgical, theological, and literary world that shaped Ramalinga's writings and institutional projects. From medieval times to the present day, these mathas have consistently engaged in ritual and economic exchanges with powerful individuals, groups, offices, and institutions.¹⁵

The initiates and leaders of the non-brahman centers are drawn from a few high-caste *vellalar* landholding communities.¹⁶ Most of the lay following that supports the mathas and participates in their ritual activities are drawn from these same *vellalar* groups.¹⁷ These are exclusive institutions that garner prestige for a limited number of high-caste, non-brahman communities that are eligible to associate with them. They have long-standing relationships with a variety of caste groups, such as local ruling families, merchant groups, and brahmins who serve as priests in temples under the administration of the mathas. Their associations with these groups are pragmatic but maintain a certain distance. After initiation, members of the order retain their caste identities, and the rituals they perform aim to benefit their order and the lay following of the matha, that is, their caste communities.¹⁸

One of the most important activities of the mathas from medieval times to the present has been the feeding of pilgrims, ascetics, and the orders' own members at festival and other occasions. It was, and remains, a form of *dāna*, or ritual giving, that has been a common form of exchange among South Asian groups for millennia. In her study of medieval Hindu literature on ritual giving, Maria Heim points out that *dāna* "provides a site for idealizing and formalizing certain social relationships and interactions, and a locus for moral reflection." Gifts "reveal a hierarchical social order, and . . . may be grounded in discourses riddled with power."¹⁹ Heim characterizes giving as reflecting an "ethics of esteem" based on social hierarchy, which she contrasts to an ethics of respect that assumes the equality of human beings.²⁰ Giving in South Asia, according to the material analyzed by Heim, cements social relationships, but these are vertical relationships of reverence and admiration.

Ritual feeding at non-brahman Shaiva mathas in South India reflects this ethics of esteem, with the recipients of gifts occupying varying positions of prestige in the matha and in the broader community. For example, for centuries mathas have distributed food at a ritual called *mahesvara puja*. According to medieval inscriptions, the recipients of food in this ritual setting include *maheswaras* (devotees), *sivayogis* (yogis devoted to the Hindu god Shiva), *tapasvis* (those practicing austerities), and *paradesis* (wandering mendicants).²¹ The various classes of ascetics lend auspiciousness to the occasion, and the benefits of proper ritual performance include prosperity and goodness. Non-ascetics, such as lay supporters of the matha, politicians, and prominent local figures, are also fed, consolidating the matha's ties with these groups.²² The patrons of the ritual are the head and initiates of the matha, but the matha itself is supported through donations by wealthy, influential lay leaders. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these patrons included Sethupati and Tondaiman chiefs who cemented important political and economic allegiances with powerful *vellalar* families via the mathas.²³ Ritual meals such as those at the *mahesvara puja* reflect and affirm these complex relationships.

I have found little evidence of matha efforts to feed the anonymous, non-eminent poor in premodern times or even in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Heim points out that gift-giving to the poor is not proscribed but occupies an uncomfortable place for Hindu, Jain, and Theravada medieval commentators and, indeed, it is rarely mentioned by them. The moral worthiness of the poor cannot be guaranteed and, in fact, by the logic of karma and rebirth, poverty in South Asia is often viewed as a sign of unworthiness.²⁴ *Dharmashastra* texts, when they do refer to charitable giving, distinguish gifts to worthy recipients from gifts to the poor and do not usually classify the latter as *dāna*.²⁵ David Brick, in his study of the *Dānakāṇḍa* and *dānanibandha* literature, more generally, notes that while gifts to the poor were “marginal,” the poor might be legitimate recipients in times of necessity. He cites a line from the *Dānavivekodyota* to affirm that such giving can even have soteriological benefit, a view that we will also see Ramalinga express: “A gift that is given out of compassion to those who are dejected, blind, and indigent—even if they are improper recipients—brings about endless reward.” Such gifts should be limited, however, to those that offer only temporary support, most notably, gifts of food.²⁶

Ritual feeding in non-brahman Shaiva mathas in premodern times appears to conform closely to these shastric ideals, stressing the feeding of recipients who are worthy of esteem in a range of ways: economically, socially, politically, and ritually. When they did feed the poor, it appears to have been a secondary activity. R. Champakalakshmi, discussing the charitable activities of mathas in the medieval and Vijayanagara periods, mentions the feeding of ascetics and pilgrims, and also the “daily feeding of the poor,” though she does not cite her source.²⁷ Koppedrayar makes an offhand comment that “the feeding of Brahmins, sadhus and the poor,

have historically been done in *matas*.”²⁸ Elsewhere she cites an inscription dating to 1162 C.E. that lists a number of activities of a particular *matha*, including providing “a place where food is always given to the poor, the helpless, the lame, the blind, the deaf . . . to the naked and the crippled . . . to mendicants . . . to ascetics . . . and to all other beggars from many countries [*desa*].”²⁹ Michael Linderman notes that a thirteenth-century inscription of the Goḷaki Maṭha in the Andhra region mentions charities that offered food to everyone, “from Brahmanas to Chandalas.”³⁰ It may be, then, that *mathas* of a variety of traditions did at times endeavor to feed the poor. However, the paucity of references to such charitable acts suggests that it was not a primary concern, and it appears that when it was done, it was outside important ritual settings.

Non-brahman *mathas* today certainly make it their concern to feed the poor. K. Nambi Arooran cites a 1972 publication of endowments of the Tiruppanandal *matha* that includes a large sum for “feeding the poor and pilgrims.”³¹ A 1955 publication of the Dharmapuram Adhinam states—probably overstates—that “The Adhinam is trying to be helpful to the town at large . . . So the entire resources of the mutt [*matha*] are being utilized for the general welfare of the public, particularly the poor and the needy.”³² Yocum observed that the Tiruvavadurai Adhinam fed “especially its ascetics and its employees, but also school children who attend Mutt-run schools, the poor.”³³ This stress on outreach to the poor seems to be a modern shift in focus for the *mathas*. Evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the primary concern of *mathas* prior to the twentieth century was to feed the specific caste and sectarian groups that provided their personnel, as well as the various corporate groups with which they maintained social, political, and economic relations. The centrality of Shaiva charity to the poor appears to be a modern development.

RAMALINGA SWAMI AND THE FEEDING OF THE POOR

Ramalinga made feeding the poor one of the primary activities of the society that he founded. His divergence from *dāna* practices at Shaiva *mathas* was consistent with his general rejection of the ritual and caste strictures of Shaivism that prevailed at non-brahman *mathas*. His relationship with these *mathas* was at times strained. After the publication of *Tiruvāruṭpā*, a book of poems, in 1867, Ramalinga was subject to numerous polemical attacks by scholars based at Tiruvavadurai Adhinam, led by the famous Shaiva leader Arumuga Navalar, which I detail in chapter five. Ramalinga claimed a direct relationship with Shiva as the source of his authority, and he drew on this authority to articulate new expressions of Shaiva theology, ritual, and community. These new Shaiva forms, and his ever-increasing popularity from the late 1850s until his death in 1874, posed a critical challenge to the Shaiva non-brahman *mathas*, which was exacerbated by the fact

that Ramalinga took up residence near the influential Tiruvavadudurai matha in the heart of Tamil Shaivism.

Ramalinga sought to establish a religious community through the publication of his poetry and the founding of a number of groups and institutions. In 1865, he assembled the “Camaraca Vēta Caṅmārka Caṅkam” (Society of the True Path that is Common to all Scripture), hereafter the “Society of the True Path.”³⁴ He reflected on his hopes for his Society in a verse sung to the goddess: “Oh, my mother, see my desire! I want to establish a Society of the True Path, that brings together people who are like gold; I want to found a holy temple that is linked to the Society; I want this True Society to achieve great heights and be illustrious for eons; I, a servant in that Society, want to sing and dance to you, my body refreshingly cool.”³⁵

In February 1867, Ramalinga and his followers published the first major volume of his poems as *Tiruvaruṭṭpā*. Three months later they opened a house for the distribution of food, the “Camaraca Vēta Tarumaccālai” (Almshouse of the Unity of Scripture), hereafter the “Almshouse of Unity.” The temple that he spoke of to the goddess, the “Cattiya Nāṇa Capai” (Temple of True Knowledge), was finished in 1872.³⁶

By calling his almshouse a “Tarumaccālai,” he situated this new institution in the pan-Indian tradition of *dharmashala*, rest houses that provide food and accommodation to pilgrims. His use of “Veda” in the title does not specifically refer to works of the Sanskrit Vedic corpus, but it is a general term that invokes established scripture.³⁷ I understand “camaraca” according to the Shaiva usage of one of Ramalinga’s bhakti predecessors, Tayumanavar, who used the term to refer to an ideal reconciliation of diverse scriptures.³⁸ Thus, the name Ramalinga chose for his almshouse indicates that it would embody the ideals of all scripture and doctrine, beyond specifically Shaiva understandings.

Ramalinga established the Almshouse of Unity in 1867, on the heels of a significant famine in South India in 1866. It is clear from some of Ramalinga’s verses that he observed hunger and poverty firsthand. “Whenever I saw plants, withering and dried up, I also withered. I saw poor people, emaciated with hunger and terribly weary, going to every house, yet their hunger was not removed, and my heart suffered intensely. Those who suffer with relentless disease, I saw them in front of me and my heart trembled. I saw those people, poor and of unmatched honor (*iṭil-māṇikal*), their hearts weary, and I grew weak.”³⁹ This verse is extraordinary for Ramalinga’s expression of empathy for the poor, weary, diseased, and hungry whom he encountered. He emphasizes that the poor he sees have “unmatched honor,” a clear departure from the cold logic of karma that we observed at work in longstanding Hindu considerations of food-giving. Ramalinga addressed his concern for these hungry poor in his founding of the Almshouse of Unity.

Ramalinga and his followers opened the Almshouse of Unity in grand fashion on May 23, 1867. The Society of the True Path made all arrangements and bore

all costs for the event, with expectations of three thousand guests. A permanent structure for the almshouse was not yet in place, so a temporary one of mud walls thatched with darba grass was constructed to feed attendees.⁴⁰ In conjunction with the opening of the almshouse, the Society of the True Path distributed an announcement that summarizes the ideas contained in JKO. The announcement outlines the basic principles of “Jiva Karuṇya Oḷukkam,” “The Path of Compassion for Living Beings,” to all “those who have taken a human birth. This is a high birth characterized by wisdom and rationality gained through study and eagerness to learn.” It urges “compassionate people” to make donations to the almshouse and share in the benefits of giving.⁴¹

The book-length text JKO, probably the best known of Ramalinga’s prose compositions, presents in detail the ideology of giving that animated the opening of the almshouse. The work focuses on compassionate action and its benefits, especially the giving of food to the hungry and poor. It was first published in 1879, printed with the subheading “the path of compassion to living beings is the first duty of the Pure True Path.”⁴² The “True Path” is the ethical and soteriological vision that he set out for members of his new Society. Given that the opening of the Almshouse of Unity was orchestrated by the Society of the True Path and considered an important act of outreach, it is clear that Ramalinga meant for this work to be a statement of moral action for members of his association, who were the primary audience for the text. However, the public reading of JKO and the announcement of the work’s message to all those who have “taken a human birth” indicate that he wanted his innovative ideology of giving to be widely publicized.⁴³ The public character of his outreach to the poor became an important feature of Ramalinga’s mission in his day, and it remains central to Ramalinga organizations. In the detailed discussion of the JKO that follows, I consider the relationship of Ramalinga’s ideology of giving to established Shaiva practices of *dāna*, which provided the point of reference for his innovation. I focus particularly on the Shaiva sources that shape Ramalinga’s logic, legitimate his claims, and inspire his innovations. These include bhakti (devotional) poetry, notions of karma and rebirth, mythologies and temple practices, Shaiva Siddhanta doctrinal categories, and siddha/yoga traditions.

Ramalinga begins JKO by stating that the goal of human life is to obtain god’s “full natural bliss.” This bliss can be attained only through god’s grace (*aruḷ*), which, in turn, is achieved by showing compassion to all living beings. This is because grace is god’s natural manifestation, and compassion is the natural manifestation of living beings, so god will only bestow his nature on those who realize their own nature by showing compassion.⁴⁴ He asks: “What is the path of compassion towards living beings? It is to live worshipping god with an attitude of tenderness (*urukkam*) of the soul towards other beings.”⁴⁵ The word Ramalinga uses here to describe the attitude of compassion, *urukkam*, is from the root *uruku*, to melt, which in Shaiva devotional contexts commonly refers to the melting of

the heart in devotion toward god. This word appears frequently in the *Tēvāram*, for example, to describe the melting of the hearts of devotees when they think of Shiva.⁴⁶ Ramalinga also stresses here the worship of the divine, referring to the everyday rituals of worship in temples and homes. Thus, he is defining this ethic of compassion not according to philosophical or doctrinal strands of tradition, but to emotional, devotional ones with roots in bhakti and everyday practice. However, Ramalinga extends the usual object of melting, the divine, to the ordinary beings of this world, and particularly those who are suffering.

This “tenderness” or “melting” of the soul arises when one sees or hears about the suffering of others due to hunger, thirst, disease, unsatisfied desire, poverty, fear, and killing. Ramalinga then asks, “what is the duty (*urimai*) for compassion for all beings?” His answer contrasts markedly to the long history of Hindu gift practices, which emphasize the caste, sectarian, economic, and political bonds between givers and recipients. Ramalinga proposes a very different logic of duty and rights (both terms are designated by *urimai*) based on a universal bond between beings. “Because all beings are created by all-powerful god as parts of true nature which has a singular quality, they are all brothers. When a brother suffers some calamity, another brother will see that his brother is suffering, and he will feel tenderness. This is the bond and duty of brotherhood. Likewise, when seeing the suffering of another, a living being will feel sympathy and will understand the ancient bonds of souls.”⁴⁷ By connecting all beings to god’s creation, Ramalinga asserts the bonds of responsibility and compassion between beings. His use of kinship terminology to describe a universal human connection disposes of caste distinctions and emphasizes responsibility toward all beings. Those who lack compassion toward suffering beings are hard-hearted, their wisdom clouded.

This is not to say that Ramalinga does not share certain assumptions of Hindu gift-giving logic. Considerations of karma and rebirth underlie many of Ramalinga’s ethical assertions. He asks, for example, why some beings suffer from hunger, thirst, et cetera, while others do not, and his answer is precisely that of medieval texts on *dāna*: they suffer because of actions in past lives. For Ramalinga, chief among such actions is the lack of compassion due to hard-heartedness in a past life, which has led to hunger and suffering in the current one.⁴⁸ He interrogates the very notion of rebirth: “Did beings have previous bodies?” He addresses the question with an analogy of a man renting a house: one assumes that he had a house prior to the current one, and if he runs into trouble in the current house, he will move to another. Likewise, living beings had prior bodies and will have bodies in the future. Ramalinga extends the analogy to argue that karma is sustained across births, so karma in past lives is carried into the current one. This is why those who lacked compassion in their previous lives suffer with hunger in their current lives.⁴⁹ By invoking karma and rebirth to explain suffering, Ramalinga seeks to establish his novel ideology of giving within a conventional Hindu doctrinal framework.

Where he differs from shastric traditions on *dāna* is not in the etiology of hunger but in the ethics of giving. Ramalinga asks whether it is against god's mandate to show compassion to the hungry, because their hunger signals the working out of their karmic destiny. He rejects this argument, reasoning that a king employs servants to feed even the worst criminals, and god (*kaṭavu!*) feeds sinners in hell through subordinate deities. Similarly, god will be happy with those who give food to suffering beings, and he will respect such donors as people with compassion. Indeed, without compassion, knowledge and affection will disappear, the character of both the strong and the weak beings will suffer, and uncompassionate beings will have wicked rebirths.⁵⁰ Ramalinga's reference to god feeding the wicked (*pāpikal!*) through subordinate deities refers to hierarchies of Hindu deities that are expressed in Hindu mythologies and in South Indian temple practices. For example, many South Indian temples house a hierarchy of deities, where minor deities fulfill subordinate or even impure duties, such as consuming animal sacrifices.⁵¹ Such practices are especially important in village temples, and roughly reflect relational and purity considerations of caste.

The length and detail of this passage indicate that Ramalinga's argument for feeding the poor was unconventional, even controversial, in South Indian Shaivism in the 1860s. This justification of his novel ideology is interesting in a number of ways. First, he places the poor alongside "the worst criminals" and "sinners in hell," revealing a tension between his regard of the poor as having honor, as we have seen in a verse cited earlier, but also as sinful. Second, he sets kings and god side by side as authoritative figures who approve of compassionate feeding. Third, he cites contemporary temple practice and mythologies as evidence that god sanctions compassionate giving. It is symptomatic of his eclecticism that in this instance he justifies his controversial ideology not through any shastric or literary source, but through popular rituals and narratives that extend across a range of practices, including those of low-caste communities. His willingness to take popular religiosity as a basis for authoritative statements is consistent with his objective to bring together disparate communities into relationships of food-giving.

Ramalinga next returns to the theme of unity between beings. He emphasizes that compassion is a vital aspect of civilized ethics, and he asserts that knowledge, helpfulness, and unity will not be found in a world without compassion. He speaks in broad terms of the unity between different types of beings, but he clearly has in mind social unity, adding that in the absence of compassion, the good treatment of weak beings by the strong will be destroyed by such emotions as envy. As an example, he notes that the forest is uncivilized, full of animals like tigers and lions that lack any compassion for other beings. Places where people lack compassion are similarly devoid of a civilized ethics.⁵² While above we saw Ramalinga uphold the shastric consideration of the hungry as unworthy sinners, here he transforms the relationship between the worthy and unworthy

into one between the strong and the weak. Virtue emerges from compassion and entails the cooperation—indeed, unity—between the weak and poor. Although he does not explicitly mention class and caste at this point, it seems clear that he has in mind social divisions of the sort that were reinforced by established Shaiva practices of giving, and so this passage can be read as a subtle critique of Shaiva orthodoxy.

Ramalinga was concerned not only with the character of the giver and the recipient, but also with the qualities of the gift, emphasizing that food gifts must be vegetarian.⁵³ He asks whether one might feed meat to a carnivorous animal to assuage its hunger, but rejects this notion, as “killing a being to satisfy the hunger of another being with meat is not the path of compassion towards living beings, and god does not approve of this.”⁵⁴ He utilizes Shaiva Siddhanta categories to assert that vegetarianism is an essential aspect of compassion. He expands on the character of the individual being (*cīvan*), a category that is in the title of his work and which has been a focus of Shaiva Siddhanta reflection.⁵⁵ Shaiva Siddhanta works often debate the nature of the relationship between beings and god, and Ramalinga does likewise here, asserting that all beings manifest grace, which is god’s natural form. The production of meat requires the killing of beings suffused with god’s grace, and its consumption clouds the clarity of the soul, because meat has dense, sluggish qualities. With this clouding of the clarity of the soul, the soul becomes bound (*pacu*), characterized by the three impurities of arrogance, illusion, and karma.⁵⁶

Ramalinga’s commitment to compassion for living beings leads him to ask whether the acquisition of vegetarian food also requires killing. He argues against this, as long as food is produced only from the “seeds, vegetables, fruit, flowers, roots, and leaves” of plants, without killing the plant. Showing his concern for Hindu purity considerations, Ramalinga asks whether food that is acquired from the cuttings or products of plants would have the same impurities as the cuttings or products of the human body, such as nails, hair, or semen. He rejects this argument on the basis that such cuttings do not have any vital energy or creative power.⁵⁷ In considering these issues of concern for his co-religionists, he appears to be appealing to a high-caste Shaiva audience. Alternatively, we might view this as a sort of “Sanskritization,” in which a high-caste practice, in this case vegetarianism, is advanced as a universal ideal. What is clear is that in addressing Shaiva concepts and ethics through the work, Ramalinga seeks to give his formulation of food-giving a Shaiva doctrinal basis.

Ramalinga drew on shastric and devotional sources in formulating his ideology of giving, but also from sources with less conventional and widespread acceptance, most importantly siddha, yoga, and tantric traditions. Several times in the text he mentions the *siddhis*, or supernatural powers, that yoga and siddha texts promise as the fruit of intense discipline. For those who ease the hunger of others, Ramalinga offers the incentives of “pleasures of this world, the unlimited pleasures gained

through the *siddhis*, and the pleasure of eternal liberation . . . as god ordained in the Vedas.”⁵⁸ Grace, it seems, is not sufficient enticement for compassion, so he employs a tantric tactic of offering pleasure and powers. It is not entirely clear to me what he means here by “the Vedas,” but his knowledge of Sanskrit was limited, at best. I believe that he uses “Veda” as a synecdoche for ancient, orthodox tradition. Aware that the *siddhis* and pleasures might have questionable status in the view of established Shaivism, it may be that he links these enticements to the Vedas in order to give them more legitimacy.

Elsewhere he presents a detailed list of the material benefits that come with “taking as a vow the practice of appeasing the hunger of the hungry poor.” These include a long lifespan, education, knowledge, wealth, and enjoyment. Householders who feed the hungry will be impervious to the heat of the summer sun, storms, wind, snow, and thunder. They will be free of dangerous diseases like malaria and typhoid, profit in their businesses, and be well respected in their vocations.⁵⁹ The benefits are many and similar to those that *siddha* medical practitioners promise their clientele.⁶⁰ The proposal that feeding the hungry can increase one’s lifespan and prevent disease points to the influence of *siddha* and yoga traditions. Elsewhere in JKO, Ramalinga’s discussion of the transformative effects of bliss highlights his familiarity with traditional medical concepts.⁶¹ This bliss, which is achieved through grace, which is attained through compassion to all living beings, will transform one’s body into high-quality gold. The bodies of compassionate receivers of grace cannot be harmed by mud or stones; when immersed in water, their bodies will not sink; when immersed in fire, they will not burn. Those who feed the poor will acquire certain *siddhis*, such as the ability to see through mountains, and indeed to see everything in the universe, and the ability to hear all spoken words, no matter how far away. They will be free of gray hair, wrinkles, old age, and death, the effects of aging that *siddha* medical practitioners frequently claim to overcome.⁶²

Srilata Raman notes the absence of references to other texts in Ramalinga’s work and convincingly argues that we can detect “literary echoes” that suggest the influence of medical literature and Tamil literary representations of hunger.⁶³ I would add to these the influence of *bhakti* and *shastric* literature, popular mythologies and practices, and *siddha* yoga traditions. Ramalinga consistently draws on these Shaiva elements to situate his new ideology of gift-giving within established Hindu traditions, and his eclecticism allows him to speak to a broad cross-section of people. The text is thus strongly grounded in Shaiva traditions, and indeed it could and should be considered a Shaiva text, despite an absence of any direct mention of Shiva. Instead, he refers to the highest god in the text as “kaṭavuḷ,” a more general term that has considerable ecumenical potential. This is thus a text of a Shaiva leader working to elaborate an ideology of giving that is more inclusive than the established Shaivism of the *mathas*. In the next section, I will examine more closely the basis, shape, and limits of Ramalinga’s inclusivity.

HUNGER, SOCIAL UNITY AND THE LIMITS OF
RAMALINGA'S SHAIVA COMMUNITY

Ramalinga's extension of giving to all social groups, animals, and even plants signals an innovative widening of Shaiva gift-giving traditions. Hunger was central to his unifying project for a number of reasons. First, hunger was a common and vital concern in South India in Ramalinga's lifetime. Second, he considered the effects of hunger to be the same for all beings. Finally, as Shaiva traditions of food-giving affirm, appeasing hunger by sharing food was an important way that disparate groups established links and confirmed social relationships.

For Ramalinga, relieving hunger and saving a being from being killed are the most compassionate types of action, and also the most heavily rewarded. His focus on hunger is pragmatic, because one can practice the alleviation of hunger more easily than preventing the killing of other beings. He considers hunger to be the most debilitating affliction, worse than disease, thirst, or fear.⁶⁴ It also seems clear from vivid descriptions in the text that hunger, and perhaps even famine, was an all-too-common reality in Ramalinga's world. "When beings get hungry, their wisdom becomes confused; knowledge of god is clouded. . . . The eyes become sluggish and sunken, and the ears buzz with the sound 'kum.' The tongue becomes dried and parched . . . the skin becomes weak and loses sensitivity, the arms and legs become languid and limp; the voice changes and falters; the teeth loosen. . . . These sorts of conditions appear because of hunger, and they are common to all beings."⁶⁵ The portrayal of hunger is sympathetic, and the anatomical detail supports Ramalinga's reputation as a *vaidya* or doctor.⁶⁶ It also suggests that Ramalinga encountered hunger, especially in the village setting in which he lived, surrounded by people of a variety of castes and classes. It is perhaps no coincidence that the composition of the text and the establishing of the almshouse came on the heels of a widespread famine in South India in 1866. I will consider more closely the possible effects of this famine on Ramalinga's ideology of giving in the final section of the chapter.

For Ramalinga, hunger destroys the spiritual, intellectual, and physical achievements of all beings, reducing them to beings whose only object is food. It is a leveler, because it affects all living things, regardless of species, gender, caste, and social status. "For all human beings, of both types, men and women, the destruction and suffering brought on by hunger, and the benefits and pleasures that occur by satisfying that hunger, are generally the same."⁶⁷ All people are susceptible to hunger. "Even a king, who rules over the entire world, when hungry, will leave aside his powerful position and, with humble words, will complain to his ministers, 'I'm hungry, what can I do?'" Likewise, a great warrior, when hungry, will become weak and will not be able to fight. Sages, yogis, and siddhas, when hungry, abandon their meditation and move around looking for food. Ramalinga even takes what is perhaps a swipe at orthodox Shaiva leaders, writing that "even the *acharyas* (religious leaders), who adhere to [divisions of] caste (*jāti*), sect

(*camayam*), and orthodoxy (*ācāram*), when they're hungry they forget orthodoxy and wait for food."⁶⁸ His list of eminent persons in this passage—ascetics, kings, warriors, and religious leaders—are the same esteemed figures that medieval shastric texts considered worthy recipients of gifts. Ramalinga, clearly cognizant of such distinctions, seeks to overcome them by emphasizing that hunger afflicts all people equally, regardless of gender or position.

He does make one important distinction between these powerful social figures and the poor, however. Appealing to the reader's sense of compassion, he asks, "if all these [eminent] people suffer in this way, when poor people who are without any support are hungry, how much more will they suffer? When the poor receive food at that time, how much joy will they feel? How much benefit will accrue to those who create such happiness [by providing food]? This can't be expressed in words."⁶⁹ For Ramalinga, altruistic giving is not sufficient motivation for giving, so he follows other South Asian traditions of *dāna* by offering very specific benefits, material and spiritual, to the generous giver. However, he also appeals to the readers' sense of compassion by giving a vivid account of the suffering of the hungry poor. I will quote this moving passage at length.

Compassion towards living beings means removing the panic of the poor, who are despondent, thinking, "that wicked sinner called hunger, that nearly killed us yesterday and last night, has come again today! What can we do?" . . . Compassion towards living beings is removing the anxiety of the poor, who are immersed in worry, thinking "it has become dark. Now where will we go for food? Whom will we ask? What will we do?" Compassion towards living beings is giving food and dispelling the tears of the poor, who cry thinking "after walking endlessly [searching for food], our legs are exhausted. After asking constantly [for food], our mouths too are tired. Thinking incessantly, our minds are tired. What can we do to satisfy this wretched stomach?" There are those who have great dignity, silent but distressed like the dumb who have had a nightmare, their minds and faces expressing their thoughts: "The day has gone, and hunger pains us. Shame prevents us from going elsewhere [to beg for food], pride makes it difficult to beg openly, yet the stomach burns. It isn't clear how we can escape this life—why did we take birth in these bodies?" Compassion for living beings is feeding these people and preserving their dignity. . . . Compassion for living beings is giving food and removing the suffering of the poor, who lament, "How can I go without food today, like I did yesterday? Since I'm young, I can dare to go without food today, but what can we do about the stomach of my poor wife, who can't bear to be without food? Yet her hunger is not a big thing, when our mother and father, exhausted because of their age, will die if they go without food today! What can we do about that? How can we look at the faces of our children, who are weary of constantly crying because of hunger?"⁷⁰

While the poignancy of this passage seems obvious, the novelty of it is perhaps less so. Ramalinga is seeking to evoke the empathy of the reader through an appeal to a shared sense of compassion. The poor, as he presents them here, are not only

helpless and so worthy of pity, but they also have dignity and honor, a criticism of the karmic logic of the immoral poor who are unworthy of gifts.

It is notable that his account is in prose, an emerging Tamil literary form in the nineteenth century. Raman cites the prose form of the JKO as a primary indicator of Christian influence on Ramalinga.⁷¹ This may be right, but it is important to acknowledge that Christian works were neither the only examples of Tamil prose writing in the nineteenth century nor the first. Kamil Zvevibel points out that modern Tamil prose is modeled on medieval Tamil commentaries, and he argues that Christian prose writing had an “impact” on the development of modern Tamil prose rather than a “direct and absolutely decisive influence.”⁷² Ramalinga’s first published work was in prose styled on medieval commentaries in Tamil, underlining Zvevibel’s point. That work, a commentary on the Shaiva philosophical work *Olivil Oṭukkam*, appeared in 1851, about fifteen years before his composition of JKO.⁷³

Ramalinga’s prose in JKO, unlike that of his 1851 commentary, uses common speech, presenting the thoughts and words of the poor in everyday language to evoke the empathy of the reader. JKO is not a poetic or scholastic work, unlike most of Ramalinga’s writing, but an accessible text suited for a broad readership. It may be that Ramalinga deliberately employed an emerging literary form—modern prose—because it suited his innovative message. By the time he wrote JKO, there was a rich Tamil literature in modern prose, including Tamil journalistic writing.⁷⁴ Closer to Ramalinga’s Shaiva world, his primary foil, Arumuga Navalar, had been writing Tamil prose works for at least a decade and a half. Navalar’s works included accessible renderings of Shaiva classics, educational tracts, newspaper editorials, and polemical pamphlets.⁷⁵ He worked with the Jaffna-based missionary Peter Percival for many years and was clearly influenced by Methodist modes of writing and preaching.⁷⁶ After he broke from Percival, he spent his life resisting Christian evangelization, and many of his prose writings were polemics against Christianity. Navalar was certainly in conversation with Europeans, though in this case the conversation usually took the form of acrimonious argument. It is possible that it was contemporary Shaiva works in prose, such as those of Navalar, that inspired Ramalinga’s use of accessible Tamil prose. If this is the case, the influence of Christianity on Ramalinga’s writing was not direct but mediated through more cosmopolitan Shaiva authors. This indicates that the lineages of influence on Ramalinga were complex, and they certainly were not ethnically or religiously pure, exhibiting complex interactions between diverse cultural expressions.

Although hunger is, for Ramalinga, one of the basic sources of suffering of all beings, it also presents an opportunity to practice compassion. Without hunger, beings would not help one another, there would be no compassion toward others, and therefore no occasion to receive god’s grace. Hunger is an instrument provided by god to bring beings into compassionate relationships with one another.⁷⁷ Ramalinga emphasizes that the giving of food must be universal, and so hunger

offers the opportunity to cut across distinctions of caste, religion, gender, status, and species through charity. Those in a position to alleviate hunger should do so without inquiring into the afflicted person's caste (*jāti*), home place (*tēcam*), religion (*camayam*), or deeds (*ceykai*), and should give food to all equally, knowing that god's manifestation to all beings is the same.⁷⁸ The caste of the giver is irrelevant: "Those who practice compassion to all living beings, shielding those beings from the danger of hunger, those generous givers are esteemed people, no matter what caste, religion, or deeds, and they should be honored as gods, sages, siddhas, yogis, etc. One should know that this is true with the all-powerful god as witness."⁷⁹ These comments on caste are perhaps the most radical of the text, and clearly put Ramalinga at odds with established Shaiva traditions of the mathas of his day. He advances the notion that worthiness is based on compassion and not on birth, and he opens the possibility for a community of the worthy that cuts across caste.

The primary audience of JKO appears to have been the members of his Society of the True Path. The compassion he outlines in the work was central to his "True Path," which he insisted all members of his society follow. Who were these members of his society? An 1867 list of members who contributed money to support the Society's new journal indicates a diverse caste membership, including *vellalars* (Pillais, Mudaliyars), Nayakars, a brahman (Rama Iyer), Chettis, Naidus, Nairs, and at least one Muslim (Katar Sahib). The list also includes single names without a caste marker that may indicate people of Dalit caste groups.⁸⁰ Most members would have been householders, even though Ramalinga called them "sadhus." Ramalinga himself was married but lived alone for the entirety of his career as a teacher and leader. His married status would nevertheless have disqualified him from leading a Shaiva matha, and his householder following clearly distinguishes his community from Shaiva ascetic lineages.

Accordingly, JKO is addressed to householders. Married people who practice compassion toward living beings "do not need the aid of the paths of worship (*cariyai*), service (*kiriyai*), yoga (*yōkam*), and wisdom (*nāṇam*)," and they will attain the "house of bliss," where they will live forever as liberated ones.⁸¹ Ramalinga here subordinates the traditional four paths of liberation of South Indian Shaivism to his new path of compassion. He describes the limited efficacy of the four paths: those who lack compassion will not receive salvation even if they follow the paths of worship and service, which include popular practices like going on pilgrimage, bathing in holy rivers, chanting mantras, and worshiping images. Even yogis who control their senses and practice other austerities, siddhas with supernatural powers, sages, and wise people of deep knowledge will not attain liberation without compassion toward living beings. Householders, on the other hand, who practice compassion and enjoy worldly pleasures like eating and sex, are worthy of god's grace.⁸² Echoing the Hindu shastric literature, Ramalinga speaks of the worthiness of the giver, but he defines worthiness by

compassionate action, not by caste, gender, sect, spiritual attainment, adherence to the shastras, ascetic discipline, or status.

Given Ramalinga's insistence on the brotherhood of all beings, and the unity fostered by compassion, we might expect both donor and recipient to be part of an idealized religious community, joined in acts of compassion and in a common experience of truth and of god. However, Ramalinga frequently distinguishes between the giver and receiver, the provider and the poor. Members of his society are the compassionate givers of food, while the poor are the grateful recipients. The hungry poor, because of their past karma, do not have "the wisdom or freedom to avert dangers like hunger and being killed, resulting from destiny and carelessness," and so those who have adequate wisdom should help them.⁸³ When fed, the hungry poor are happy, and "the mind cools, knowledge shines, the radiance of beings and of god glows in their hearts and faces, and unlimited satisfaction and pleasure appears." Here Ramalinga seems to suggest some potential for the poor to participate in his Society of the True Path, which is based on the reception of god's grace. However, in the next line he points out the merits that the giver derives from such benevolent action, overlooking the spiritual qualifications of the hungry poor.⁸⁴ The primary audience of his appeal was householders who had the means to give, and the benefits they received for their compassion were many.⁸⁵ Even for Ramalinga, the unity of beings had its limits.

Indeed, in JKO the unity of beings does not mean the equality of beings. Ramalinga clearly has in mind relationships between the poor and those with wealth to be based on mutual benefit, where the giver gains material and even physical benefits while the receiver gains nourishment. He does not advocate fellowship between these groups, and in other writings he warns his followers in no uncertain terms against too much interaction with the immoral hungry. "Oh god who bestows grace, you said to me: 'Those who kill beings and eat flesh, they are not close to us. They are outcasts. Until they follow your desirable true path, do no more than dispel their hunger. Don't sympathize with them or speak courteously to them. Don't give them friendly assistance. This is my command.'⁸⁶ Ramalinga reaffirms public responsibility to the hungry, but he also highlights the limits of his community of followers. Although he does not speak here in terms of caste, meat-eating is linked to caste differences, and so there are caste implications to his statement. He did not entirely reject the ethics of esteem that shaped established Shaiva *dāna* practices. Ironically, his commitment to compassion to all living beings served as the basis for relationships that transcended caste, but it also drew rigid boundaries that reflected caste distinctions.

ENTANGLED HISTORIES OF INFLUENCE

Ramalinga drew primarily on Shaiva traditions for ideological inspiration for, and legitimation of, his novel project of giving food to the poor. However, we

might ask in a critical spirit, were there other, unspoken, historical processes that inspired his new ideas? Here I trace a genealogy of diverse, “entangled” institutional and ideological sources that potentially exerted an influence on Ramalinga as he developed his ideas of compassion. I hope to show that it is impossible to untangle those influences into pure ethnic or religious lineages. The assumption of distinct cultural influences suggested by terms like conversation, dialogue, and encounter is perhaps legitimate in describing processes of close, direct contact between Europeans and Indians. However, in provincial centers, in the absence of direct engagement with missionaries or colonial authorities, the language of encounter or dialogue is inadequate to account for the emergence of new religious expressions. I argue here that Ramalinga developed his ideology of giving in a context shaped by complex, entangled histories of diverse ideologies and institutions, which were themselves characterized by hybridity, not cultural purity.

Ramalinga’s focus on charity to the poor suggests the possibility of Christian influence. Srilata Raman has proceeded along these lines, arguing that Ramalinga’s emphasis on personal conviction and description of the suffering of the hungry “all point to an unmistakable Christian influence, if not directly on his terminology, then most definitely on his theology in the last phase of his life.”⁸⁷ His poignant account of the suffering of the hungry “leads us also to see that the suffering and dying person becomes a source of grace, the sole means through which one might attain salvation—leaving one to speculate and consider how deeply and intimately the Passion of Christ might have worked its way into the very core of Ramalinga Swamikal’s theology.”⁸⁸ He saw “all around him a religious continuum that could be appropriated in different ways. This enabled the emergence of certain kind of ‘subaltern knowledge’ in the border space between Christianity and Hinduism.”⁸⁹

Raman acknowledges that these claims are speculative, recognizing that Ramalinga was not directly drawing on ideas from Western sources in any obvious way. He did not read English, and although there were English works being translated into Tamil by the middle of the nineteenth century, he never mentions any work in English, as far as I have seen. He also does not make reference to Christianity in JKO, and he is clearly not in “dialogue” with Christian missionaries in the manner of cosmopolitan reformers. There were, as Raman points out, active missions in the vicinity of Vadalur, the base of Ramalinga’s activities.⁹⁰ There do not appear to have been any missions in Vadalur, but in the 1860s there were several Protestant missions within about twenty miles of it, including a Danish mission at Melpattambakkam and, most important, Leipzig mission stations at Cuddalore and Chidambaram.⁹¹

Although we cannot rule out Christian influence, there are other ways to account for Ramalinga’s transformation of Shaiva food-giving practices. Here I will focus on other possible influences, namely, Hindu institutions of charity

and relief houses that distributed food to the poor during the 1866 South Indian famine. I will not address other possibilities, including Islamic charity, Jain and Buddhist approaches to giving, and the long history of representations of hunger in Tamil literature that Raman skillfully discusses.⁹²

While ritualized giving to the poor is largely absent in the non-brahman mathas that dominated Shaivism in the region of Ramalinga's activities, there were other Hindu models for giving that Ramalinga might have encountered. As we have seen, the term he uses for his almshouse, *dharmashala*, refers to pilgrimage houses that distribute food and provide accommodation to pilgrims. More immediate to Ramalinga's geographic and historical context were networks of *chattrams* that served pilgrims and travelers. These institutions, the subject of a fascinating study by Michael Linderman, were established by royal patrons such as the Maratha kings in the Thanjavur region, just south of Ramalinga's almshouse.⁹³ In the early nineteenth century, the most famous of these kings, Raja Serfoji II, built *chattrams* that offered a variety of services, including the distribution of food to a wide range of people including the poor.⁹⁴ Serfoji took the practice of establishing *chattrams* from the Nayaka kings, and he extended their food-distribution practices to include the poor. "By the late Maratha period, the scope of *annadāna*, or 'feeding charity' to a set number of Brahmins and mendicants, the targeted constituencies of the medieval feeding grants, had broadened to include distribution of aid or hospitality to the indigent poor, students of schools, and even European guests."⁹⁵ *Chattrams* were numerous in Ramalinga's district of South Arcot, with the 1885 *Imperial Gazetteer of India* noting that there were 210 "chaultries" there. These, along with 76 Hindu temples and 243 mosques, were the "only institutions worthy of note" in the district.⁹⁶

It is conceivable that Ramalinga's almshouse was inspired by South Indian *chattrams*, not by Christian missions, or perhaps by both. The possibility of multiple sources of inspiration highlights the complexity of questions of causality. Moreover, Serfoji himself was highly cosmopolitan, a king who advanced projects that brought together European and Indian medicine, music, education, and art.⁹⁷ Linderman points out that in letters to British correspondents, Serfoji emphasized his charity to the poor, perhaps influenced by British criticisms that Hindu *dāna* practices ignored the poor in favor of, in their minds, unworthy brahmins.⁹⁸ It may be that his *chattrams* do not present a wholly "indigenous" model from which Ramalinga drew inspiration. This suggests that it is as problematic to posit continuity within a pure Shaiva tradition as it is to assume a clear line of influence from the West to India. On the colonial margins, diverse cultural influences were at play that are not easily captured by a model of distinct cultures coming into conversation or contact.

Are we on stronger grounds in suggesting that Ramalinga's critiques of caste were influenced by Christianity? This is also not clear. Of the missions in South Arcot in the 1860s, the most active was the Leipzig Lutheran mission. M. A.

Sherring and Edward Storrow note that the growth of the Leipzig mission in Cuddalore from the 1850s to the 1880 came at the expense of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, whose numbers decreased over the same period. They attribute the Leipzig mission's success to its acceptance of caste hierarchy, lamenting that the mission's leaders permitted caste distinctions within its congregation.⁹⁹ It appears, therefore, that the missions that were most dominant in South Arcot in the 1860s were not actively protesting against caste. This does not mean that Ramalinga was unaware of critiques of caste advanced by other missions or by British commentators, but it does indicate that Christian missions propagated divergent messages about caste.

Ramalinga mentions caste in three important instances in the text: to emphasize that food should be given to all, with no regard for caste; to state that all those who give with compassion should be held in high esteem, regardless of their caste; and to comment that *acharyas*, or religious leaders, are concerned with caste.¹⁰⁰ The combination of these three highlights that his ideology departed from orthodox concerns and advanced criticism of those concerns. Ramalinga may have been aware of British and missionary critiques of caste, but as with charity to the poor, he also had non-Western sources to draw upon. Most importantly, the writings of the Tamil siddhas express disregard for caste and critique of orthodoxy. In JKO he frequently draws on siddha traditions, as I have pointed out earlier. Ramalinga not only demonstrates familiarity with siddha works, but his medical writings hint that he may have practiced medicine based on siddha texts.¹⁰¹ It appears we have the same conundrum of influence in explaining his views on both caste and charity.

In addition to institutional models and theological ideologies, any historical account of the JKO must also consider the immediate material and social context in which Ramalinga was working. Most importantly, he established his almshouse just months after a severe famine affected a wide swath of South India. His descriptions of hunger in JKO indicate that he had personally encountered debilitating hunger, and his outreach to the poor addressed certain social processes that accompany famine. In particular, famines in colonial India most severely affected poor, low-caste laborers and often engendered social conflict. David Arnold, in his work on the catastrophic Southern Indian famine of 1876–78, points out that the wealthy Indians had the means to overcome famine, and some rich merchants even profited from increases in food prices.¹⁰² Landlords and laborers would sometimes join forces to address famine by patronizing and performing collective rites.¹⁰³ More often, however, *vellalar* landholders, or ryots, would suspend their customary relationships of employment and support of low-caste laborers, increasing the vulnerability of the poor and accentuating caste and class divisions.¹⁰⁴ Laborers perceived this break as a failure of landholders to honor their responsibilities toward their workers, a failure that must have looked especially unjust when storehouses of grain were guarded by British

authorities. Collective action of these disenfranchised communities often took the form of looting in bazaars.¹⁰⁵

Various authorities and organizations worked to provide relief during the 1876 famine. Private measures involved wealthy *zamindars*, who owned much larger tracts of land than ryots; local princes keen to fulfill their royal duties (*rājadharma*); temples and pilgrimage centers; *chattrams* in the Thanjavur region; and religious societies. These disparate groups gave in various ways, some distributing food without regard to caste or religion, while others gave on the basis of caste or just to poor brahmans, or to Hindus or Muslims only. Government efforts included setting up relief centers that would distribute food according to British ideals of a worthy recipient, primarily the hungry poor. The British also established relief camps and employed the poor in government work schemes, dalits composing the largest number of camp residents and laborers.¹⁰⁶

A government report confirms that many of the same social tensions and relief efforts were present in the 1866 famine, which struck South India just months before Ramalinga established his almshouse. The author of the report, R. A. Dalzell, noted that in early 1866 prices began to skyrocket, with the price of raggy, the staple food for working class and low-caste communities, rising much faster than the price for rice, indicating that food stress was especially acute for the poor. Merchants profited from the high prices, but often sold their grain in neighboring districts, “where the excessive prices enabled them to make large profits, rather, than [sic] increase the prices much beyond the present high rates in their own towns and villages. They fear popular indignation and riots ending in attacks on the grain shops.”¹⁰⁷ By February, some poor were living on wild plants and roots, and looting by the “very low castes” became common.¹⁰⁸

Wealthy people from the Muslim community began to purchase food at market rates and resell it at affordable prices, and “the principal Hindu gentlemen” of Madras city also began to raise funds for relief efforts.¹⁰⁹ *Zamindars* gave generously, with a *zamindar* from Madurai establishing four relief houses, each of which fed one thousand people daily “irrespective of caste and creed.” Dalzell notes that these private relief houses ran on the same principles established by a government committee for public relief houses.¹¹⁰ In August 1866, the government began employment projects and opened relief depots in South Arcot, Ramalinga’s district, which provided some aid to the “poorer classes.” There were twenty relief houses in South Arcot operating during the famine, feeding 1,436 people per day in August.¹¹¹ Government camps and employment schemes primarily engaged the lower castes, and the government delivered food directly to the upper-caste poor who refused to eat at relief houses. Thus, government relief efforts were themselves shaped in part by long-standing caste considerations, again undermining any notion of culturally “pure” institutions operating in, and modernizing, a “traditional” context. Dalzell estimates that two hundred thousand people died in

Madras Presidency from the effects of the famine.¹¹² One interesting absence in Dalyell's work is any reference to Christian relief efforts. It could be that the missions were not active in addressing the famine, which seems unlikely, but I am not sure how to explain this omission.

Ramalinga appears to directly address this context in JKO. When he defines compassion to living beings as "satisfying the hunger of those who suffer from hunger, without distinguishing or inquiring into their native place, religion, caste or deeds," we should understand this against the backdrop of the 1866 famine.¹¹³ Faced with local divisions between those with means and the hungry poor, distinctions that were exacerbated by famine, he urges people not to abandon the poor but to feed them with compassion. He addressed *vellalar* landholders who were chief among his followers, affirming the perspective of the poor that the wealthy have a responsibility in times of famine to feed the hungry, basing this responsibility on the shared brotherhood of beings.

Unlike the relief houses that were founded to address the famine, Ramalinga's almshouse was not temporary but would, along with the temple he established, serve as the center of his community for decades. He routinized the temporary empathy and compassion inspired by the famine. We might see his project in terms of Erica Bornstein's distinction between the impulse of philanthropy and regulated giving based on rights and responsibilities. "Although rights-based regimes of social welfare respond to organized attempts to address social need, rights are not always afforded to those whose circumstances warrant immediate, perhaps fleeting, attention. Philanthropy, as an impulse, addresses the relational, affectual, and dynamic aspects of the gift, which is perhaps its enticement."¹¹⁴ Ramalinga announced on April 25, 1867, that the Almshouse of Unity would open less than a month later in a temporary structure of mud walls and a thatched roof, indicating a certain urgency to get his institution working to distribute food to the hungry in the wake of the famine. If this indicates an impulse to ease hunger, his plan to build a brick structure with a well that would serve as a more permanent institution suggests that he wished to turn this impulse into an enduring project for his Society of the True Path.¹¹⁵ When Ramalinga wrote about the responsibilities we have toward other beings and the "right" (*urimai*) to have compassion, he laid the ideological groundwork for an institution that creatively transformed the impulse to give into a Shaiva institution that has endured for almost a century and a half.¹¹⁶ In so doing, he founded a new form of Shaiva giving, one that made giving to the hungry poor a central ritual transaction.

CONCLUSION

Ramalinga's ideology of giving aimed to unify beings in compassionate relationships organized around the giving and receiving of food. His poignant portrayal

of the hungry poor showed empathy for their suffering and aimed to arouse compassion in his audience. He acted on an impulse to ease suffering, but in this he was not alone, as he founded his institutions in a context in which relief houses for the hungry poor were common. His innovation was in making this the enduring and central activity of his religious community, which demanded a convincing ideological framework that would reassure his Shaiva audience and perhaps also himself. The danger to his new Society of the True Path was clear, because their primary group of ritual transaction was to be the hungry poor not the usual eminent recipients of Shaiva *dāna*. He addressed the concerns of his followers by arguing within a Shaiva framework that the donor will be rewarded, not punished, by giving to the poor. He also, one suspects, lessened the potential for negative social repercussions for his followers by maintaining distinctions between the donor and the recipient. The success of his Almshouse of Unity and JKO is clear from the proliferation of institutions that distribute food to the poor in his name today. More generally, he was on the leading edge of modern Hindu institutions that make giving to the poor a central feature of their public outreach.

In trying to account for possible inspirations for his novel ideology, I have pointed to complex, entangled sources of potential influence. While questioning any straightforward assumption of Christian influence on Ramalinga, I hope I have been clear that I am not suggesting that he developed his innovative ideology in some pure Hindu realm untouched by Western influences. I doubt that there was any such realm in his day. Nor have I sought to retrieve Ramalinga's food-giving project from Christian attribution in order to restore its proper Hindu provenance. As Michel Foucault has shown, genealogies of complex phenomena do not reveal pure identities. "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."¹⁷ In this case, there are numerous elements that might contribute to a genealogy of Ramalinga's novel ideology of food-giving, including Tamil literary representations; Christian theologies; colonial and private institutions of famine relief; and Shaiva tantric, siddha, and devotional traditions. Despite this complex lineage, Ramalinga frames his ideology only in Shaiva terms, grounding his innovation in long-standing Shaiva idioms and ideas in order to imbue it with Shaiva authority and then to challenge elite, caste-based Shaivism. It is perhaps this aspect of the work, the crafting of a diverse and eclectic lineage into a unified Shaiva framework, which was his most creative act.

On the margins of colonialism, the influences that inspire religious change are more complex than suggested by models of the meeting of two distinctive, pure cultures. By pointing to multiple historical possibilities, my account allows for a creative process that is not ultimately dependent on any single tradition, whether Christian or Hindu. Admittedly, it gives a less certain explanation for the emergence of modern Hindu expressions, allowing more scope for multiple

and alternative explanations, which may better account for processes of religious innovation. Scholarly accounts of the emergence of modern Hinduism will benefit by going beyond notions of dialogue between Western modernity and Indian tradition, and instead embrace the possibility that a variety of sources with complex histories, including Hindu traditions, inspired the emergence of modern Hinduism.