Hindu Sectarianism

Difference in Unity

He, the Lord [Śiva], is my God—I remember no other even by name.
—NĪLAKAṆṬHA DĪKṢITA, *ŚIVOTKARṢAMAÑJARĪ*

VAIDIKA AND ŚAIVA

Hinduism, in its own words, is a religion thoroughly permeated by difference. Even on the eve of V. D. Savarkar's coining of the term *Hindutva*—the specter of a unified and hegemonic Hindu nation underlying the Hindu nationalist movement—many of Hinduism's own spokesmen prided their religion for what they saw as an innate propensity for internal pluralism.

And yet, whereas Balagangadhar "Lokamanya" Tilak, as we have seen, centers his definition of Hinduism explicitly on its "multiplicity of ways of worship / and lack of restriction on the divinity that one may worship," nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship advocated a different model of Hindu difference, one that threatened to fragment the ostensive original unity of India's golden age. It was this fractious and divisive form of Hinduism that Oxford's own Sir Monier Monier-Williams described, perhaps for the first time, as Hindu sectarianism—that is, the worship of Śiva or Viṣṇu as supreme deity.

Scholarship on Hinduism to this day has exponentially expanded our corpus of knowledge on the history of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism but, perhaps not unpredictably, has left Monier-Williams's definition virtually intact. Indeed, the word *sectarian,* in the vast majority of monographs, serves as a virtual stand-in for the conjunction of "Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism." Our historical archive, however, tells a very different story: sectarianism, as it emerged in the late-medieval and early modern period, was not a fragmentation of original unity but a synthesis of originally discrete religions that gradually came to be situated under the umbrella of a unified Hindu religion in the early second millennium. To be a Hindu, at the earliest moments of the religion's internal coherence, was

by definition to be a "sectarian"—that is, to be a Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava adherent of a particular lineage and community. Indeed, at those very moments in history when the shadow of a unified Hinduism can be glimpsed in the writings of pioneering intellectuals, Hindu religious communities on the ground took great pains to signal their fundamental independence from one another. Take the following verse, for instance, extracted from a hymn of praise, inscribed in 1380 C.E. on the walls of the Cenna Keśava Temple, a Vaiṣṇava center of worship in Belur, Karnataka:

> The one whom Śaivas worship as "Śiva," Vedāntins as "brahman,"
> The Buddhists, skilled in the means of valid knowledge, as "Buddha,"
>   the Logicians as "Creator,"
> Those with a mind for the Jaina teachings as "Arhat," Mīmāṃsakas
>   as "Ritual"—
> May he, Śrī Keśava, always grant you the results you desire.[1]

Although we may not know its exact circumstances of composition, this verse captures a pervasive motif of Hindu religious thought: one particular God, revered by a community of devotees, encapsulates in his—or her—very being the entire scope of divinity. Although in situ the inscription also served the purpose of *praśasti,* or "royal encomium," of a local ruler by the name of Keśava, this verse circulated widely, accruing variants here and there, as a fixture of devotional liturgy across communities. Nevertheless, the standard of comparison (the *viṣṇupakṣa* of the *śleṣa*) of the pun sends an unambiguous message: in the eyes of his fourteenth-century Vaiṣṇava worshippers, it was Śrī Keśava who came to subsume the deities of competing traditions, both those that were generally understood as heterodox, or *nāstika*—Buddhists and Jains—and those we would consider "Hindu," or *āstika*—such as Śaivas or Vedāntins. Implicit in this verse is an argument not for irenic tolerance or universalist pantheism, nor for the essential unity of all Hindu traditions, but for, literally, the supremacy of Vaiṣṇavism and of the god Viṣṇu as the telos of all religious practice.

This phenomenon is of course not unique to Vaiṣṇava theology. In fact, we find its mirror image in one of the most celebrated of Śaiva hymns, which to this day remains a cornerstone of Śaiva liturgy across the subcontinent, the *Śivamahimnaḥ Stotram.*[2] In this case, the *Śivamahimnaḥ* enshrines Śiva himself as the ultimate goal, objectively speaking, of practitioners of all religious systems, irrespective of the personal sentiments of the devotees who follow those diverse paths. From the mouth of its ostensible author, Puṣpadanta, a *gandharva* seeking to regain favor with Śiva, we hear the following:

> The Vedas, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, the Pāśupata doctrine, and the Vaiṣṇava:
> Where authorities are divided, one says, "This is highest," another,
>   "That is beneficial,"

> Due to such variegation of the tastes of men, who enjoy straight or
>   crooked paths.
> *You alone* are the destination, as the ocean is the destination of the
>   waters.[3]

By describing Śiva *alone* as the destination of all religious practitioners, the *Śivamahimnaḥ* elevates the deity of one "sectarian" tradition—that of the Śaivas—above the otherwise level playing field that encompasses all other branches of what we typically categorize within Vaidika "Hinduism." The very category of "Hinduism," however, when applied indiscriminately to Puṣpadanta's proclamation, allows the most obvious import of the above verse to escape our grasp. Certainly, followers of all the traditions mentioned by name in this verse have habitually been circumscribed within the overarching category of Hinduism, on the grounds that each one of them, to some degree, subordinates itself to the canonical authority of an overarching Brahminical religion.[4] Such an argument has been phrased perhaps most eloquently by Brian K. Smith, in his *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion* (1989). Adopting the Vedas themselves as the iconic authority to which all of Hinduism must adhere, even if only in name, Smith proposes the following definition for Hinduism as a unitary religion: "Having reviewed the analytically separable (but in actuality usually conflated) types of definitions Indologists have constructed for the construct called Hinduism—the inchoate, the thematic, and the social and/or canonical—I now wish to offer my own working definition, locating myself firmly within the camp of the canonical authority as constitutive of the religion: *Hinduism is the religion of those humans who create, perpetuate, and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda.*"[5]

On the basis of Smith's definition, one would be hard pressed to defend the case that the Śaivism espoused by the *Śivamahimnaḥ* is, strictly speaking, a branch of Hinduism. To argue, as Smith does, that Hinduism consists primarily of those traditions that invoke the authority of the Vedas suggests that individual Hindu communities, or philosophical schools, subordinate themselves to a set of Vaidika values, which serves as a linchpin for theological legitimacy, or at least seek to legitimate themselves through seeking out a Vaidika semiotic stamp of approval. And yet the *Śivamahimnaḥ* reverses this polarity entirely, subordinating the Vedas themselves (*trayī*) to yet another overarching category, a canonical authority in and of itself—the category of Śaivism. Much of what survives of early Śaiva literature corroborates Puṣpadanta's declaration that Śiva—and Śaivism—transcend the Vedas themselves, rather than falling within their purview. Sociologically speaking, in fact, this is no hollow rhetorical gesture. By the middle of the first millennium of the Common Era, Śaivism, rather than Hinduism or Brahminism, could justifiably be described as the dominant religion of the Indian subcontinent.

Such is the case that has been made by Alexis Sanderson in his monograph-length study, *"The Śaiva Age"* (2009). Sanderson argues, in essence, that during the medieval period—roughly from the fifth century to the thirteenth century—Tantric Śaiva knowledge systems both replaced their Brahminical counterparts as the primary ritual technology of ruling kings and served as the model par excellence for religious practice in public temple worship and in elite soteriological paths. Other major religious communities, such as the Buddhists and Pāñcarātrika Vaiṣṇavas, began to make bids for royal patronage through a wholesale adoption of Śaiva models of ritual and textuality, thus becoming colonized, so to speak, by the cultural idiom of Tantric Śaivism. Śaiva theologians, as a result, approached the traditional knowledge systems of Vaidika Brahminism with a thoroughgoing skepticism, either rejecting outright the validity of the Vedas or relegating Vaidika theology to the status of a stepping-stone for reaching the higher truths of Śaivism.

It is the latter group of Śaivas, naturally—those who creatively co-opted the models of Brahminical religious practice in service of a transcendent Śaiva religion—who attained the highest visibility, not to mention political clout, within the social order of medieval South Asia. In the domain of ritual in particular, Brahminical models were often recycled wholesale, laminated with a Śaiva inflection that marked them as belonging to the new soteriological systems of Śaivism. Śrāddha rituals, or oblations for the deceased ancestors, for instance, remained a standard observance for Śaiva initiates, and Śaiva ascetics adopted many of the daily protocols of their Brahminical counterparts, down to the minutiae of prescriptions for brushing one's teeth.[6] Likewise, in the domain of theology, Śaiva exegetes regularly subordinated entire Vaidika philosophical traditions to their commentarial agendas. One has only to consider the example of the Śaiva *tattva* systems, the hierarchical mapping of "levels of reality" known best from the Sāṅkhya and Yoga schools of Brahminical theology. Śaiva theologians, quite simply, recycled the entire paradigm of the twenty-five Sāṅkhya *tattva*s, adding an additional, superior, set of eleven *tattva*s by a process of philosophical agglutination.

And yet we would lose something fundamental to our knowledge of the history of South Asian religion were we to simply reduce the early period of Śaivism to a theme and variation on early Brahminical religion. Despite their careful co-option of the classical Indic past, Śaiva exegetes rarely lost sight of the fundamental paradigm shift they perceived as separating themselves from their Brahminical predecessors. Our earliest extant Śaiva literature exhibits a remarkably ambivalent stance toward Vedic revelation, paying outward respect to the institutions of Vedic learning while elevating the Śaiva community to a hierarchical plane above the baseline of the Brahminical tradition. In essence, in these early strata of Śaiva textual culture, Śaivism was something fundamentally distinct from, and ultimately

superior to, Vaidika "orthodoxy." It was Śaivism that subsumed Vedicism under its overarching umbrella of authority, rather than Vedicism subsuming Śaivism as one "sect" within an ostensive "Hindu" whole.

Take, for instance, the Śivadharma,[7] our earliest surviving example of Śaiva Dharmaśāstra literature. While its generic conventions are modeled on the classical tradition of Brahminical Dharmaśāstra, the Śivadharma lays out a code of conduct distinctive to Śaiva initiates, and great pains have been taken to emphasize the vast gulf separating Śaiva religious practice from analogous Vaidika observances:

> Therefore, a hundred times the merit is accrued from giving a clay
>   vessel to Śiva
> Than would be accrued from giving a gold vessel to one who has
>   mastered the Vedas.
>
> Fire oblations, the Vedas, sacrifices, and abundant gifts to the
>   teacher:
> All of these, even by the crore, are not equivalent to the worship of
>   the *śivaliṅga*.[8]

In the minds of its exegetes, then, early Śaivism condoned Vedicism while superseding its confines by orders of magnitude. In very much the same manner, an existing Vaidika ritual technology became thoroughly subordinated to Śaivism over the course of this paradigm shift that Sanderson has called the Śaiva Age. Such can be observed, for instance, in one of our earliest accounts of Śaiva-specific ritual procedures: the installation of the *liṅga,* or the *liṅgapratiṣṭhānavidhi.* Our textual exemplars for this procedure date back to the earliest surviving Śaiva Siddhānta scriptural corpus—specifically, the Niśvāsaguyhasūtra.[9] In this account, much of the process of installing and consecrating a *śivaliṅga* is pervaded by a self-conscious Vedicization. Specific Vedic mantras are prescribed for Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda priests, each of which is conceptually equated with one of the four directions. And yet we must not lose sight of the fact that the very goal of this procedure is, after all, the installation of a *śivaliṅga,* an aniconic representation of the god Śiva, without whom the ritual would be meaningless.

Other passages, in contrast, exhibit an even more hostile stance toward Vedicism, completely rejecting the authority of the Vedas themselves, let alone Śrauta ritual and its auxiliaries. The more ostensibly antinomian traditions, inhabiting the fringes of the Śaiva cosmopolis, were particularly likely to incorporate an outwardly anti-Vedic rhetoric. Among scriptures of the Kaula Mārga, the Kulasāra (c. seventh century C.E.), for instance, essentially classifies those learned in the Vedas as *nāstika*s, equal to Jains and Buddhists in their fundamental inability to grasp the true state of affairs.[10] In other instances, Śaiva partisans have been known to advocate the wholesale abandonment of the Vaidika cultural heritage.

The following passage from the circa-seventh-century Śivadharmottara illustrates with characteristic vehemence just how pointed the anti-Vaidika strains within the Śaiva fold had become: "Purāṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Veda, and the great *śāstras:* all of these, expansive tomes meager in dharma, surely waste one's life."[11]

The Śaivism of the Śaiva Age, in short, defies any attempts to classify it as a sect of Hinduism or Brahminism. Indeed, the most wildly influential Śaiva traditions—those of the Śaiva Mantramārga, or Āgamic Śaivism, generally speaking—diverged so thoroughly from the Brahminical past in theology, ritual, and scriptural canon that whatever one may describe as the substantively "religious" building blocks of the new Śaiva world order were for all intents and purposes transformed beyond recognition. To cite a singularly poignant example, the traditions we refer to broadly as Tantric Śaivism—or the Śaiva Mantramārga, in the words of Alexis Sanderson—structured their soteriology around a single provocative claim: Śaiva initiation (*dīkṣā*) is the effective cause of liberation. And the implications of this assertion—that a mere *ritual,* in and of itself, possesses the means to sever the bonds that tie the individual soul to transmigratory existence—radically recast the sociological implications of elite Indic religion. In fact, Śaiva initiation in many traditions offered the promise of completely eradicating one's intrinsic caste identity, transforming all initiates into Brahmins without the need for renunciation. As a result, even the more socially normative branches of early Śaivism effectively circumvented the strictures of *varṇāśramadharma,* providing both kings and Śūdras with access to liberation. The following rhetoric, for instance, reappears frequently in early Śaiva literature, subordinating caste difference to the inclusivity of Śaiva initiation, a theme that would emerge centuries later as a cornerstone of bhakti religiosity, best known for its appearance in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa:

> I am not partial to either a Caturvedī or a Dog-cooker, if he is my
>   devotee.
> One may give to him and take from him; he should be worshiped as
>   I myself.[12]

That such caste-blindness was enforced in practice in Śaiva circles, moreover, is expressed eloquently in the following passage from the Svacchanda Tantra, modeled after an earlier exemplar from the Niśvāsa corpus. Here, Śaiva initiates are said to accrue impurity not from mixing castes, as the strictures of *varṇāśramadharma* would suggest, but rather for failing to be caste-blind—that is, for importing Brahminical normativity where it does not belong:

> Those who have been initiated by this very procedure, O Beautiful-
>   Faced One,
>
> Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, Śūdras, and others likewise, O Dear
>   One,

All of these have the same dharma—they have been enjoined in the
    dharma of Śiva.

They are all said to bear matted locks, their bodies smeared with ash.
All Samayins should eat in one line, O Beautiful-Faced One.

There should be one [line] for Putrakas, one for Sādhakas likewise,
And one for Cumbakas—not according to one's prior caste.

They are remembered in the *smṛti*s as having only one caste: that of
    Bhairava, imperishable and pure.
Having had recourse to this Tantra, one should not mention some-
    one's previous caste.

Should a man mention the prior caste of a Putraka, Sādhaka,
Or of a Samayin, he would require expiation, O Goddess.

He burns in hell for three of Rudra's days, five of Keśava's days,
And a fortnight of Brahmā's days.

Therefore, one must not discriminate, if he wishes to obtain the
    supreme goal.[13]

Speaking of the soteriological as well as the social, Śaiva religious practice was no mere translation of Brahminism, preserving the religious paradigm of an earlier age under the auspices of an alternative social order. After all, Śaiva initiates kept no sacred fires in their homes, rarely pursuing training in Śrauta ritual officiation—in short, entirely spurning the ritual duties incumbent on elite members of Brahminical society. The Vedas themselves faded into the background, as Śaiva extracted their essence in the form of the Śatarudryīya, the hymn to Rudra found in the Taittirīya Saṃhitā of the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda, and the Gāyatrī mantra, abandoning large-scale Vedic recitation as such. In its place, a new ritual technology emerged with the Śaiva Mantramārga, irreducible to its historical antecedents in the Brahminical period, that fundamentally transformed the face of elite religious practice across religious boundaries. An entirely new corpus of scriptures emerged over the centuries, establishing new canons for public temple worship as well as the individual soteriological practice of householders and ascetics. The individual practitioner, for instance, adopted elaborate disciplines of the body, ritually purifying the constituents of his being (*ātmaśuddhi* and *bhūtaśuddhi*) and investing his hands—the instruments of ritual—and the remainder of his body with elements of the divine in the form of mantras (*sakalīkaraṇa, nyāsa*).[14] The goal of such bodily disciplines is, quite simply, to achieve liberation or supernormal powers by transforming the initiate into Śiva himself. It is this soteriological goal—the transformation of the adept into Śiva, a Śiva on earth, or his deity of

choice, through Tantric ritual practice—that most definitively shifted the paradigms of Indic religious practice and theology for centuries to come.[15]

Early Śaivas, in essence, (1) rejected the authority of Vedic scripture, (2) disregarded the social hierarchies of *varṇāśramadharma,* often dismissing them as mere "custom" with no divine sanction, and (3) engaged in core religious practices that bore minimal resemblance to Brahminical custom. As a result, the Śaivism of the Śaiva Age can scarcely be described as a sect of Brahminism. Nor can the Vaiṣṇava or Buddhist communities that rapidly conformed to the fashions of the Śaiva Mantramārga. Śaivism, during this formative period, was functionally independent from any parent religion we may wish to describe as "Hinduism," charting its own course in defiance of the religious norms that preceded it. It was the centuries following the Śaiva Age, however, that witnessed the incorporation of Śaiva traditions under the umbrella of a new Vaidika orthodoxy, which, arguably, we may for the first time describe as Hinduism, as Śaiva theologians hastened to justify their long-standing traditions according to the standards of Vedic normativity.

THE SECTARIANIZATION OF HINDUISM: ŚAIVISM AND BRAHMINICAL ORTHODOXY

In spite of the wide-ranging transformations of the Śaiva Age, Hinduism as we know it did in fact emerge, and a number of scholars have argued that it emerged quite a bit earlier than previously suspected, independent of the meddling gaze of European colonial regimes. For instance, in his book *Unifying Hinduism,* Andrew Nicholson marks the years between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries as the interstitial period in which the notion of Hinduism as a unitary religion began to crystallize in the minds of Indian thinkers. During these centuries, Nicholson argues, scholars begin to compose doxographical compendia that, by virtue of their very scope, implicitly assert the unity of the *āstika* or Vaidika discourses they group together. Only after these centuries, which Nicholson refers to as the late-medieval period, did the unity of Hinduism become irrevocably naturalized in Indic theological discourse. Perhaps it is no coincidence, in fact, that this late-medieval period followed immediately on the tail end of the Śaiva Age, suggesting another system-wide shift in the paradigms of religious practice, stretching well beyond the boundaries of doxographical treatises.

Within Śaiva circles as well, the unimpeded independence of Śaivism began to give way to a circumspect deference to Vaidika normativity as the Śaiva Age drew to a close. In fact, the Śaivism of the late-medieval period began to position itself less as an independent religious system than as an orthodox exemplar—or, one might even say, a *sect*—of Brahminical Hinduism. In south India, for instance, theologians of the Sanskritic Śaiva Siddhānta tradition launched a truly unprecedented campaign to align the social constituency of the Śaiva fold with the norms of

varṇāśramadharma, violating centuries of precedent that excluded Śaiva initiates from caste regulations. Such a position was advocated, for instance, by the twelfth-century Śaiva Siddhānta theologian Trilocanaśiva in his *Prāyaścittasamuccaya,*[16] a handbook on the expiation of sins for Śaiva initiates who have lapsed in their observance of Brahminical purity codes:

> When eating, one must always avoid forming a single line with
>   members of different castes.
>
> Should a Brahmin eat in such a way out of ignorance, with
>   Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, or Śūdras,
> Having realized it in the midst [of eating], he must stop, and then,
>   having sipped water many times,
>
> He should recite [the Aghora mantra] ten times, twenty times, or
>   thirty times, respectively,
> [Or, likewise,] should he realize it at the end of the meal, one, two,
>   or three hundred times, respectively.
>
> Having eaten in a line with members of unknown castes, he should
>   repeat it three hundred times.
> Or with others who may not form a line, unknowns, or others born
>   against the grain. . . .
>
> Having eaten something that was touched by the leavings of Śūdras
>   and the others, or by Antyajas,
>
> Having eaten something that is by nature impure, or made impure
>   by touch or action,
> He should bathe, going without food, and should also drink the five
>   cow substances.[17]

Judging from the *Prāyascittasamuccaya,* scant difference can be discerned between the Śaiva and Brahminical views on intercaste purity rules. Had Trilocanaśiva not ceaselessly advocated use of the Aghora mantra, one of the five *aṅga* mantras of the Śaiva Siddhānta, as a virtual cure-all for expiable sins,[18] one would scarcely realize that the above passage belonged to a Śaiva-specific handbook rather than a treatise on Brahminical Dharmaśāstra. In fact, in Trilocanaśiva's stance, we find a mirror image of the early Śaiva rejection of caste difference, which had elevated one's status as a Śaiva initiate above any markers of social standing, which were considered extrinsic to one's true identity. Instead, by Trilocanaśiva's day in the twelfth century, Śaivas defended the orthodoxy of their lineages not on strictly Śaiva theological grounds but rather by citing their conformity to the social mores of the classical Vaidika tradition. In terms of social conduct, Śaiva Saiddhāntikas, for Trilocanaśiva, were by definition Vaidika Hindus.

In the domain of theology as well, Trilocanaśiva's contemporaries and successors adopted a surprisingly accommodationist strategy with regard to currents of Vaidika theology that were soaring in popularity in the early centuries of the second millennium—most notably among these, Advaita Vedānta. Historically, the Śaiva Siddhānta tradition had maintained a staunchly dualist cosmology, asserting the immutable difference between Śiva and his creation, and between individual souls, or *jīva*s, who maintained their discrete identities even after liberation. Such a theology blends poorly, on strictly logical grounds, with the nondualist precepts of Advaita Vedānta philosophy. Nevertheless, by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Saiddhāntika exegetes had so thoroughly assimilated the conventions of an Advaita-inflected theology that Saiddhāntika treatises in both Sanskrit and Tamil—and even redactions of Saiddhāntika scriptures[19]—were habitually sprinkled with the idioms of Vedānta. Scholars spared no opportunity, moreover, to genuflect to the authority of the Vedic corpus, defending Śaiva-specific scriptures and practice on the grounds of their ostensibly Vaidika pedigree.

One particularly striking example of this trend is the commentary of a certain Kumārasvāmin (circa fifteenth century) on the *Tattvaprakāśa* of Bhojadeva,[20] a succinct encapsulation on Śaiva Siddhānta theology. Unlike previous commentators, such as Aghoraśiva, who scrupulously adhere to the canon of Saiddhāntika doctrine, Kumārasvāmin repeatedly launches into extended digressions about the Vedic roots of the Śaiva Āgamas and Tantras, never hesitating to intersperse his discourses with references to Mīmāṃsā categories of ritual, even going so far as to assert that Śiva himself consists of the Vedas. He writes, "'He is victorious' means that he exists on a level above everything else. Why? Because his body, unlike other bodies, lacks the qualities of arising and destruction, and so forth. And that is because he consists of the Vedas, because the Vedas are eternal [*nitya*]."[21] Having thoroughly accepted the Mīmāṃsaka principle of the *apauruṣeyatva*—the authorless eternality—of Vedic scripture, Kumārasvāmin apparently felt it natural to equate Śiva, being similarly eternal, with the very substance of Vedic revelation. The remainder of Kumārasvāmin's commentary, in fact, proceeds in a similar vein, never straying far from his veritable obsession with the Vedas themselves.

To illustrate just how far Kumārasvāmin's exegetical agenda has wandered away from the mainstream of his own tradition, we can contrast the tenor of his commentary with that of an earlier commentator, the twelfth-century theologian Aghoraśiva, one of the most celebrated theologians of the south Indian Śaiva Siddhānta, head of the southern branch of the Āmardaka Maṭha at Cidambaram.[22] Aghoraśiva, quite logically, approaches the *Tattvaprakāśa* as a primer on the foundational theological concepts of Śaiva Siddhānta, highlighting the disagreements of his own system with those of his philosophical rivals. Take, for instance, Aghoraśiva's analysis of the first verse of the *Tattvaprakāśa,* a *maṅgala* verse in praise of Śiva:

The one mass of consciousness, pervasive, eternal, always liberated,
    powerful, tranquil—
He, Śambhu, excels all, the one seed syllable of the world, who
    grants everyone his grace.[23]

Unpacking the theological significance of each of these seemingly inconse-quential adjectives, Aghoraśiva elaborates on this verse in the following com-mentarial passage. The prototypically Śaiva terminology that inflects his prose has been italicized for emphasis below:

Here, the teacher, for the sake of completing the work he has begun without ob-stacles, with this first verse in the Ārya meter, praises Paramaśiva, who is *without kalās, transcending all of the tattvas,* who is the efficient cause of the undertaking of the treatises of the Siddhānta: "The one mass of consciousness," and so forth. Here, by the word "consciousness," *the powers of knowledge and action* are intended. As it is stated in the *Śrīman Mṛgendra Āgama: "Consciousness consists of the [goddesses] Dṛk and Kriyā."* The compound "a mass of consciousness" means he of whom the body is an aggregate of consciousness alone. It is not the case that he is inert, as held by those who believe Īśvara to consist of time, action, and so forth, because it would be impossible for something that is not conscious to undertake action without the support of something conscious. Nor is it reasonable that he is facilitated by a *body consisting of bindu,* because that would entail the consequence that he would not be the Lord, and, because he himself would then require another creator, one would ar-rive at an infinite regress with regard to his having another creator or having himself as a creator. . . .

    "Pervasive" means that he exists everywhere; he is not confined by a body, as the Jains and others believe, nor does he have the property of expansion and contraction, because such a one would necessarily be flawed with properties such as nonsentience and impermanence. "Eternal" means that he lacks any beginning or end; he is not momentary, as Buddhists and others believe, because, being destroyed at the very moment of his coming into existence, he could not possibly be the creator of the world. Now, if one says that the liberated souls as well have just such characteristics, he says, *"Always liberated."* He is eternally liberated; *it is not that he, like the liberated souls, is liberated by the grace of another Lord,* because this would result in infinite regress. . . .

    "Grants everyone his grace": grace, here, is a subsidiary property to creation and the others. And thus, he bestows enjoyment and liberation to all souls by means of the *five acts: creation, preservation, destruction, concealment, and grace.*[24]

Here, Aghoraśiva adheres faithfully to the canonical theological models of the Śaiva Siddhānta, seizing the opportunity to compile the classic refutations of non-Śaiva explanations for the creation of the world. His proof texts, likewise, are drawn exclusively from the Saiddhāntika Āgamas, such as the Mṛgendra Āgama and the Mataṅgapārameśvara. Throughout, his commentary is sprinkled with

technical terminology that virtually never appears in non-Śaiva Brahminical the-
ology, such as his reference to Dṛk and Kriyā as the two powers (śaktis) of Śiva,
a stock trope that preceded the more familiar three śakti model—jñāna, icchā,
and kriyā. Perhaps best known is the category of the five acts of Śiva—sṛṣṭi (cre-
ation), sthiti (preservation), saṃhāra (destruction), tirobhāva (concealment), and
anugraha (grace)—the latter of which, the grace that uplifts individual souls from
bondage, provides Aghoraśiva with the most natural, and certainly the historically
correct, explanation for the term sarvānugrāhaka, "granting everyone his grace,"
in the root text.

Kumārasvāmin, for his part, takes little interest in the obvious explanation for
sarvānugrāhaka, preferring to import a model for how Śiva liberates individual
souls that is entirely foreign to classical Śaiva theology, one that instead suspi-
ciously resembles the core theology of Advaita Vedānta:

> For, unmediated [aparokṣabhūta] knowledge [jñāna], in fact, is the cause of su-
> preme beatitude [apavarga]. And its unmediated quality arises when the traces
> [saṃskāra] of ignorance [avidyā] have been concealed through intensive meditation
> [nididhyāsana]. And intensive meditation becomes possible when the knowledge of
> Śiva arises through listening to scripture [śravaṇa] and contemplation [manana].
> And those arise because of the purification of the inner organ [antaḥkaraṇa]. That
> [purification] occurs through the practice of daily [nitya] and occasional [naimi-
> ttika] ritual observance, with the abandoning of the forbidden volitional [kāmya]
> rituals. Volitional scriptures, resulting in worldly fruits, such as: "One who desires
> animals should sacrifice with Citrā sacrifice" [Taittirīya Saṃhitā 2.4.6.1], have come
> forth to cause Brahmins whose minds are preoccupied with worldly results to set
> forth on the Vedic path; those that result in heaven, [likewise, do so for] those who
> are eager for heaven; and scriptures such as the Śyena, which prescribe the procedure
> for ritual murder, to cause those who are eager to destroy their enemies to proceed
> on the Vedic path.
>
>   Thus, in sequence, through practicing daily and occasional rituals, from main-
> taining the sacred fires, from performing the Agnihotra oblation, and so forth, and
> through practicing those rituals that destroy sin, such as the enjoined bathing pro-
> cedure, when the purification of the mind becomes possible, when one turns away
> from volitional activity, when the purification of the inner organ arises, which takes
> the form of the desire to know the self [ātman] through the practice of daily and oc-
> casional rituals, when the knowledge of Śiva has arisen through listening to scripture
> and contemplation, after the destruction of ignorance and its traces through repeat-
> ed practice at intensive meditation, when unmediated knowledge of the essence of
> Śiva arises, liberation [mokṣa] occurs. Such is stated in the Mokṣadharma and other
> scriptures: "Dharma is enjoined everywhere; heaven is the arising of its true fruit.
> The ritual practice of dharma, which has many doors, is indeed not fruitless here." In
> this passage, those who engage in ritual prescribed by Śruti and Smṛti, as enjoined by
> Maheśvara, are liberated; those who do not do so continue to transmigrate.[25]

The textual register of Kumārasvāmin's commentary could scarcely be more direct-
ly opposed to that of his predecessor. The neo-Brahminical exegete not only imported
the entirety of his philosophical apparatus from the most quintessentially orthodox
of the Brahminical darśanas—namely, Vedānta and Mīmāṃsā—but also effectively
subordinated the goals of Śaiva religious practice to an Advaitin soteriology. In place
of the Saiddhāntika Āgamas, Kumārasvāmin quotes the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, and the
Mahābhārata in support of his unconventional claims. Most strikingly, the knowledge
of Śiva, for Kumārasvāmin, bears no relationship to Śaiva initiation, ritual practice, or
Śiva's grace-bestowing power, but arises strictly as a result of constant meditation on
the truths of Upaniṣadic scripture, serving as the direct cause of liberation, here re-
ferred to as *mokṣa.* By equating Śiva himself with the goal of Vedāntic contemplation,
Kumārasvāmin overturned a centuries-long precedent of not merely indifference but
active hostility to the philosophical precepts of the Vedānta school of thought. Śaivas,
in fact, had traditionally expressed a thoroughgoing disdain for the term *mokṣa* for
the Vedāntin assumptions it imported into discussions of liberation. Such a sentiment
was perhaps best captured by the lion's roar of the Saiddhāntika theologian Bhaṭṭa
Rāmakaṇṭha II in his provocatively titled *Paramokṣanirāsakārikā* (Stanzas on the refu-
tation of the mokṣa doctrines of others), and his autocommentary (*Vṛtti*) on these
aphorisms.[26] As Rāmakaṇṭha opines, scathingly: "To aim for the annihilation of the
self is the ultimate in foolishness: 'The greatest heavyweights among the fools are those
for whom the Self is destroyed [in liberation].'"[27]

Writing from Kashmir in the tenth century, Rāmakaṇṭha II spared no effort in
demolishing the edifice of Vedāntin soteriology, approaching the tradition with
hostility equal to the scorn which he showed other *āstika* and *nāstika* perspec-
tives. And yet the vehemence of his arguments was lost on his successors in the
south, who—beginning around the twelfth century or thirteenth century with our
earliest Śaiva commentaries on the Brahmasūtras, Śrīkaṇṭha's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*
and Śrīpati's *Śrīkarabhāṣya*—began to approach the Vedānta tradition not merely
as a cogent analytical system, worthy of incorporation within the Śaiva fold, but
as a fundamental cornerstone of Śaiva sectarianism. In other words, for Śrīkaṇṭha
and Śrīpati, it was Vedānta that secured the status of Śaivism as a full-fledged
representative of Vaidika, or Hindu orthodoxy. Our earliest known examples of
a Vedānta-inflected Śaivism,[28] which include the *Śrīkaṇṭhabhāṣya, Śrīkarabhāṣya,*
and Haradatta's *Śrutisūktimālā,* proved enormously influential first on the fledg-
ling Sanskritic Vīraśaiva lineages of the greater Vijayanagara region—which had
gradually incorporated local communities of Kālāmukhas and reformed Pāśupatas,
who appear to have been particularly amenable to Śaiva Advaita theology. Śaiva
Saiddhāntikas from both Tamil and Sanskrit lineages were increasingly swayed by
the popularity of Advaita across the region, increasingly abandoning their com-
mitment to a philosophical dualism. Subsequently, the Smārta-Śaiva community of
the Tamil country generated an enormous output of Advaita Vedānta speculation,

particularly following the community's introduction to Śrīkaṇṭha's *Bhāṣya* through the pioneering efforts of Appayya Dīkṣita, who allegedly "reinvented" Śrīkaṇṭha's philosophy in the Tamil South.[29]

Indeed, by the time of Appayya Dīkṣita in the sixteenth century, south Indian Śaivism had so thoroughly assimilated itself to the demands of a monistic Advaita Vedānta that Appayya himself, much like Kumārasvāmin, found it natural to equate knowledge of Śiva with the central mysteries of Advaita Vedānta. In a particularly telling interlude at the outset of his *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā,* his commentary on Śrīkaṇṭha's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya,* Appayya narrates Śrīkaṇṭha's fondness for the *daharākāśavidyā,* the Upaniṣadic meditation on the subtle void at the center of the heart,[30] which, for Śaivas, had become the dwelling place of Śiva himself. Seamlessly integrating Śaiva and Vaidika worldviews, Appayya aims to dispel all doubts in the minds of his readers that the *ātman,* or Self, revealed in the Upaniṣads is none other than Śiva himself:

> This Teacher is devoted to the *daharavidyā.* For precisely this reason, to give it form, he will repeatedly gloss the passage "the supreme brahman, the divine law, the truth" throughout his commentary, owing to his inordinate respect. And because he himself is particularly fond of the *daharavidyā,* he will explain in the Kāmādhikaraṇa that the *daharavidyā* is the highest among all the other *vidyā*s. Thus, he indicates the reference he intends to offer by the word "to the supreme Self," which indicates a qualified noun, referring specifically to the *daharavidyā* as received in his own *śākhā.* For, it is revealed in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad: "In the middle of that top knot is established the supreme Self."
>
> Some people, saying that the supreme Self is different from Śiva, delude others. As a result, with the intention that virtuous people might not go astray, he qualifies [the supreme Self] as follows: "to Śiva." The Teacher will quite skillfully prove in the Śārīrādhikaraṇa that the supreme Self is, quite simply, Śiva himself.[31]

For the Śaivas of early modern south India, then, Śiva was none other than the *ātman,* or brahman, the highest truth of Vedic revelation, and consequently, Śaivism was none other than the epitome of Hinduism. Unlike the Śaivism of the Śaiva Age, Appayya Dīkṣita's Śaivism could no longer stand alone, outside the purview of a preestablished Hindu orthodoxy. What defines early modern Śaivism unmistakably as a sectarian community, a unit within a larger whole, is at once its deference to the norms and canonical beliefs of a Hinduism grounded in Vedic revelation, and its stubborn insistence that Śaivism itself—the traditions of interpretation set forth by worshippers of Śiva—constituted the whole, and indeed the very essence, of the Vedas themselves. The following aphorism, which circulated freely among Appayya's generation, encapsulates this contention:

> Among the disciplines of knowledge, Scripture is best; within Scripture, the Śrīrudram;
> Within that, the five-syllable mantra; and within that, the two syllables: *Śiva.*[32]

HINDUISM IN THE SECTARIAN AGE: POLEMICS, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ORTHODOXY

By the time that Appayya Dīkṣita composed his magnum opus—his commentary on the Śrīkaṇṭha Bhāṣya, the *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā*—the Śaiva Age had come and gone in south India. Indeed, over the preceding centuries, the religious landscape of south India had already shifted dramatically under the rising pressures of sectarian rivalry. Mādhvas, Śrīvaiṣṇavas, and other religious communities rubbed elbows in search of patronage, jostling together in a socioreligious space that was being rapidly parceled out to competing sectarian lineages. And while many of south India's prominent Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava lineages trace their origin to pioneering theologians of the late-medieval period (the twelfth or thirteenth century), by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Hindu sectarianism had become not only a doctrinal but also an institutional cornerstone of the south Indian religious landscape. Monasteries and megatemples emerged as regional power centers in their own right, their pontiffs negotiating alliances with kings and emperors and disseminating the values of their community through transregional monastic networks.[33] Early modern Śaivas, in short, were not the only community to appoint themselves as the pinnacle of Hinduism—or to secure the social and political clout necessarily to make a case for their exclusive claim to orthodoxy.

To compete in the marketplace of proliferating sectarian identities, an emerging community required, first and foremost, a "Hindu theology"—that is, a doctrinal justification of Śiva or Viṣṇu as supreme deity based strictly upon a shared canon of Hindu sources. It is no accident that Śaiva theologians, as we have seen, undertook a self-conscious rapprochement between the Śaiva Āgamas and Vaidika custom and philosophy, most notably with the philosophical exegesis of the Upaniṣads promulgated as Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. Succinctly, sectarian communities on the cusp of early modernity sectarian communities in south India—both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava—structured their theology as a matter of course around competing interpretations of the Brahmasūtras, resulting in the proliferation of Vedāntas in the plural, a philosophical phenomenon that Lawrence McCrea and Ajay Rao have referred to as the "Age of Vedānta."[34] As a result, sectarian communities in south India were now forced to speak a common conceptual language and to affiliate themselves with one particular branch of Vedāntic exegesis. Śrīvaiṣṇavism, for instance, became increasingly synonymous with Viśiṣṭādvaita, nondualism of the "qualified" absolute; to be a Mādhva, by and large, implied affiliation with Dvaita, or dualist, Vedānta. And over the course of the early modern centuries, Śaivas in south India gradually cemented an alliance with the nondualist Advaita Vedānta, both in the form of faithful reproductions of Śaṅkara's Advaita and in the form of the Śaiva-Advaita synthesis that Appayya had adopted from his Vīraśaiva predecessors. In other words, a community's stance on Vedāntic ontology—the nature

of the world according to the Upaniṣads—became the philosophical foundation of intersectarian polemic.

While Vedāntic speculation was largely practiced in the formalized idiom of Sanskrit systematic or *śāstric* thought, early sectarian commentators on the Brahmasūtras regularly dabbled in a genre that more closely resembled polemics than philosophy. Indeed, the very project of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism's becoming Hindu necessitated the emergence of a creative hermeneutics,[35] as theologians across sectarian lines sought to locate the distinctiveness of their devotional practice in the very text of the Vedas and Upaniṣads. The best known among these influential reinventions of tradition, perhaps, was undertaken by Madhva, a thirteenth-century Vaiṣṇava theologian and progenitor of the Mādhva sectarian community, which to this day attracts a substantial following across Karnataka and beyond. While Madhva achieved notoriety among subsequent generations of Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas alike for allegedly inventing Vedic scriptures that none of his competitors could access, it was his Vedic exegesis that more directly contributed to the consolidation of Vaiṣṇava sectarianism in south India. That is, Madhva staked the Vaidika pedigree of his teachings on what philologians would most likely describe as creative misreadings, insisting, for instance, on reading the well-known "great statement," or *mahāvākya,* of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad *tat tvam asi*—"thou art that"—as *a-tat tvam asi,* "thou art *not* that," thus sanctioning his Dvaita, or dualist, interpretation of the Brahmasūtras, the ultimate incommensurability of the individual soul and universal godhead.

But above all, Vaiṣṇavas from distinct sectarian communities during these pivotal centuries took particular care to scour the Vedic and Upaniṣaic corpus for explicit mentions of Viṣṇu himself. After all, to claim that Mādhva Vaiṣṇavism or Śrīvaiṣṇavism, as the case may be, spoke for the true veracity of Vedic speech required that the Vedas distinctly and unambiguously affirm that Viṣṇu alone is the supreme God. Rāmānuja, for instance, and other theologian giants of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, spilled a substantial volume of ink in the hopes of establishing that the very mention of the word *Śiva* or *Rudra* in Vedic revelation must be construed adjectivally—the word *Śiva* literally meaning "auspicious"—and not as a reference to a particular Hindu God. Acyuta, on the contrary, a well-known name of Viṣṇu that literally translates as "unwavering" or "imperishable," could under no circumstances be read as an adjective modifying another deity such as Śiva. Many of these hermeneutic maneuvers would have a lasting impact on theological practice for centuries to come—as the proliferation of sectarian polemic prompted a critical revisioning of acceptable reading practices for Hindu scripture, a phenomenon I return to in chapter 3. But perhaps the most fertile ground for sectarian polemic proved to be the corpus of sectarian Purāṇas. Although Purāṇa itself was universally accepted among Hindu sectarian communities as a legitimate textual authority, the vast majority of these Purāṇas were originally written to invoke the

sole authority of Śiva, Viṣṇu, or some other particular deity. As a result, certain criteria had to be derived to adjudicate on the grounds of relative authority between Purāṇas that seemed to support competing sectarian communities.

Take, for instance, Rāmānuja's (twelfth-century) seminal statement on the sectarian Purāṇas, found in his *Vedārthasaṅgraha* (Compendium on the meaning of the Vedas), a trope that would surface repeatedly in the polemical writings of theologians for generations:

> Some ages of Brahmā were mixed, some were predominated by Sattva, others predominated by Rajas, and others predominated by Tamas. Brahmā, having articulated this division of eons, described the greatness of their essences, articulated in various Purāṇas, insofar as he consisted of the *guṇas* Sattva and so forth, respectively. As is stated in the Matsya Purāṇa:
>
>> That Purāṇa which was stated long ago by Brahmā in each eon,
>> Its greatness is described according to its own form.
>
> And furthermore, in particular:
>
>> The greatness of Agni and Śiva is praised in the Tāmasa [Eons]
>> In the Rājasa [Eons], they know the highest greatness of Brahmā.
>> And in the Sāttvika Eons, Hari has the highest greatness.[36]

In Rāmānuja's understanding, then, the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas could be accorded a higher degree of veracity than the remainder of the Purāṇic corpus owing to the authoritative status of their speaker: because Brahmā had not been intoxicated by the adverse affects of the *guṇa*s (qualities) of *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (torpor), the two less desirable ontological substrates of Sāṅkhya cosmology, he was able to articulate the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas with full cognizance of the ultimate truth they contain. Tropes such as this marked the battleground between sectarian traditions in both north and south India—indeed, Rāmānuja's linking of sectarian Purāṇas with the Sāṅkhya *guṇa*s would soon be repeated well outside his institutional home in the far South of the subcontinent. Perhaps the most intriguing example, in fact, is the sixteenth-century Bhedābhedin philosopher Vijñānabhikṣu, himself an avowed Vaiṣṇava, who strategically replicates Rāmānuja's paradigm in the process of commenting on a scripture that was unmistakable to all readers of his generation as a Pāśupata Śaiva work: the Īśvara Gītā (The Lord's song). Here we find Vijñānabhikṣu evoking the tried and true argument that Śiva's scriptures are *tāmasa śāstra,* delusory because they were composed under the influence of ontological degradation. The very text of the Īśvara Gītā, he contends, can be trusted as authoritative scripture only because Viṣṇu himself had enjoined Śiva—face to face—to speak only the truth.[37]

It is ironic that in his more overtly sectarian moments, Vijñānabhikṣu himself—whom Andrew Nicholson represents as spokesman for the *unification*

of Hinduism—advocates the genuine incommensurability of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava revelation. Certainly, an overarching concept of unity does exist in Vijñānabhikṣu's practice of doxography, as Nicholson has argued, given that theologies are grouped together in a system only for a particular exegetic purpose. But that purpose, more often than not, is founded more securely on difference—that is, on the hierarchy of forms of knowledge—than on unity. In fact, upon comparing doxographic compendia by rival authors, we find that, by and large, doxographies are composed by theologians who have an overt sectarian agenda and a sectarian identity that informs the core of the author's own devotional practice. Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, for instance, author of the *Prasthānabheda,* made his life's work the synthesis between the philosophical apparatus of Advaita Vedānta and the devotional world of Kṛṣṇa bhakti. Evidently, for Madhusūdana, the unity of Hinduism was predicated upon a particular interpretation of its theology and practice—one rooted securely in Vaiṣṇavism. Vijñānabhikṣu, for his part as well, belies in his own words the very unity of Hinduism that his doxography would purportedly establish: elsewhere in commenting on the Īśvara Gītā, Vijñānabhikṣu declares decidedly that Advaita Vedāntins, or *māyāvādin*s—card-carrying members of the six orthodox "Hindu" schools of philosophy (*ṣaḍdarśana*s)—are in essence not Hindus at all but heretics (*pākhaṇḍa*s): "Many heretical *śāstra*s, from the Purāṇas through Advaita Vedānta, are known to have been composed by Śiva. But, it is not at all natural that Viṣṇu intentionally composed such heretical *śāstra*s; rather, Keśava composed the delusory *śāstra*s at the behest of Śiva alone."[38]

For early modern Hindu theologians of south India and beyond, then, Hinduism was a unity qualified at its core by plurality. While recognizing their rivals, ostensibly, as coreligionists engaging in polemical dialogue under the assumption of a shared scriptural canon and philosophical language, sectarian theologians from the late-medieval period onward were thoroughly preoccupied not with unity but with difference—with advocating the truth of one Hindu community above all others. Indeed, Vijñānabhikṣu himself astutely recognized that the Advaita Vedānta of the sixteenth century was no neutral philosophical undertaking but, rather, a project that in many cases served to consciously underwrite the authority of Brahminical Śaivism. It is this Sectarian Age that is the starting point of the present inquiry into the Hindu religious landscape of the early modern Tamil country—and, more specifically, what precisely it meant to be a Hindu in early modern south India. In turn, what we learn about Hindu identity at the cusp of early modernity tells a story of a Hindu pluralism that not only survived the colonial encounter but also continues to be evoked by many who call themselves Hindu across the Indian subcontinent and the diaspora to this day.

SMĀRTA-ŚAIVISM IN CONTEXT: THE PUBLIC
THEOLOGIANS OF EARLY MODERN SOUTH INDIA

Hindu sectarian communities, crystallizing in the late-medieval or early modern centuries, invoked the legacy of the past while promulgating radically new modes of religious identity. This was the south India in which the Smārta-Śaiva tradition as we know it first began to come into view and began to distinguish itself from contemporary communities of Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas alike. Also known today as Tamil Brahminism, the Smārta-Śaiva community of the modern age has recently featured in the work of C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan, who investigate the sociality of being Brahmin in twentieth-century Tamil Nadu; and its contemporary religious lifeworld has best been captured by Douglas Renfrew Brooks, particularly its seamless intertwining of Śaiva orthodoxy and Śrīvidyā Śākta esotericism. The history of its origins, or of how Smārta-Śaiva theologians came to speak for an emerging religious community, is a story that remains to be told. Smārta-Śaivism, it turns out, first acquired its distinctive religious culture during the generation of Appayya Dīkṣita's grandnephew, a poet-intellectual of no small repute: Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, court poet and minister to Tirumalai Nāyaka of Madurai, devout Śaiva and ardent devotee of the goddess Mīnākṣī, and one of history's first Smārta-Śaiva theologians.

Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita is best known as one of early modern India's most gifted poets, famed for his incisive wit and the graceful simplicity of his verse, which contrasts markedly with the heavily ornamentalist style popular in post-Vijayanagara south India. And yet, despite his considerable gifts as a poet, Nīlakaṇṭha left his lasting mark on south Indian society not as a poet but as a theologian. We know that Nīlakaṇṭha had established himself at the Madurai court during Tirumalai Nāyaka's reign, with terms of employment that may have included both literary and sacerdotal activities.[39] On the literary side, he composed a number of works of courtly poetry, or *kāvya,* ranging from epic poems to hymns of praise venerating his chosen deities, Śiva and Mīnākṣī, the local goddess of Madurai.[40] He authored fewer works of systematic thought (*śāstra*), which include a commentary (*Prakāśa*) on Kaiyaṭa's *Mahābhāṣyapradīpa,*[41] as well as two works of theology: the *Śivatattvarahasya* (The secret of the principle of Śiva), a discursive commentary on the popular Śaiva hymn the *Śivāṣṭottarasahasranāmastotra* (The thousand and eight names of Śiva); and the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* (The moonlight of auspiciousness), a *paddhati,* or ritual manual of the Śrīvidyā Śākta Tantric tradition, in which Nīlakaṇṭha was initiated by the Śaṅkarācārya ascetic he names as his guru, a certain Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī.[42] Indeed, a number of anecdotes handed down among Nīlakaṇṭha's descendants have preserved memory of his Śākta leanings, including the belief that Appayya Dīkṣita bequeathed to him his personal copy of the Devīmāhātmya.

Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is a legend that circulates freely among Nīlakaṇṭha's descendants, purported to explain the passion that moved him to compose his hymn to the goddess Mīnākṣī, the *Ānandasāgarastava* (Hymn to the ocean of bliss). Nīlakaṇṭha, rumor has it, was employed to oversee the construction of Tirumalai Nāyaka's New Hall, the Putu Maṇṭapam, directly outside the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple in the center of Madurai in honor of the city's new and revised celebration of the divine couple's sacred marriage—a curious set of circumstances we will have the opportunity explore further in chapter 4. Among the statues commissioned to grace the pillars of the New Hall was a true-to-life figure of Tirumalai Nāyaka's chief queen.[43] When artisans had nearly completed chiseling the final lifelike features of Madurai's queen, a stone chanced to fall suddenly upon the statue, leaving a noticeable indentation upon the statue's thigh. Nīlakaṇṭha, out of reverence for the divine plan of Śiva and Mīnākṣī, instructed the artisans not to correct the indentation, with full faith that such an occurrence was not possible save for Śiva's grace, which allowed the queen to be represented as she truly was, down to the last detail. When Tirumalai Nāyaka learned of Nīlakaṇṭha's decree, he exploded with rage at the thought that Nīlakaṇṭha could have possessed intimate knowledge of the queen's body, as a birthmark in fact graced the queen's upper thigh at precisely the place where the stone fell. As a result, he promptly sent his soldiers to have his minister blinded for the offense. Engrossed in meditation on the goddess at the time, Nīlakaṇṭha foresaw his fate and, in a fit of despair, seized two coals from his ritual fire and fearlessly gouged out his own eyes. Mīnākṣī, pleased with Nīlakaṇṭha's unwavering devotion, immediately restored his sight, and Nīlakaṇṭha responded by spontaneously composing the *Ānandasāgarastava* in heartfelt gratitude for the goddess's grace.

Nīlakaṇṭha's memory, then—the legacy he left among his nineteenth- and twentieth-century descendants—centered not on his poetic prowess and famed satirical wit but on his unparalleled devotion for the goddess. But what about his own contemporaries? Was he best known in his immediate circles as poet and grammarian or as public theologian? As a member of the Dīkṣita family, early modern south India's most noteworthy clan of scholars, Nīlakaṇṭha was situated directly at the center of textual circulation across the southern half of the subcontinent. Beyond the South, Nīlakaṇṭha maintained direct contact with outspoken representatives of the *paṇḍit* communities of Varanasi,[44] possibly India's most vibrant outpost of intellectual activity during the early modern period. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Nīlakaṇṭha was in a position to speak more directly than any other Smārta-Śaiva of his generation to the theological disputes that irrupted in south Indian religious discourse during his lifetime and the preceding century.

On one hand, local memory preserved a keen awareness of Nīlakaṇṭha's centrality to the intellectual networks of the period. In works of poetry authored shortly after Nīlakaṇṭha's lifetime, we discover allusions to his influence on subsequent

generations appended to transcripts of his students' and grand-students' compositions. Take, for instance, the following verse recorded in a manuscript of a commentary (*vyākhyā*), written by one Veṅkaṭeśvara Kavi, on the *Patañjalicarita* of Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita:

> In which [commentary] he, Veṅkaṭeśvara Kavi, his qualified student,
>   textualized the glory
> Of Rāmabhadra Makhin, whom he describes as the Indra of the
>   earth,
> Whom Nīlakaṇṭha Makhin instructed to compose the
>   *Rāmabāṇastava,*
> Who, in turn, the sage Śrī Cokkanāthādhvarin made to write the
>   great commentary.[45]

What is particularly noteworthy about this verse, among numerous others like it that refer directly to Nīlakaṇṭha and his contemporaries, is the awareness it preserves of the process of intellectual influence. Nīlakaṇṭha, as Veṅkaṭeśvara tells us, was made to compose the "great commentary" by one of his instructors in *śāstra,*[46] the grammarian Cokkanātha Makhin; and Nīlakaṇṭha himself in turn exerted a direct influence on the poetry of his own pupil, Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita, who, as we will see, shared many of Nīlakaṇṭha's own religious predilections, an ideal representative of the Smārta-Śaivas of the seventeenth century.[47] It is by no means difficult, when studying early modern India, to underestimate the immediacy of the intellectual exchange taking place between scholars, comrades and antagonists alike. And yet we have ample evidence to indicate that exchange among scholars of the period had begun to take place with unprecedented rapidity; theologians setting forth provocative works of polemic, for instance, could expect a vituperative reply from an opponent within a mere handful of years. This puts us, as scholars, in a particularly advantageous position to understand just how concretely intellectual dialogue—theology being no exception—influenced the shape of extratextual society, even in the absence of the types of documentary data historians typically employ. The context, quite often, is visible in the texts themselves.

We do, on the other hand, have access to one particularly fruitful body of material evidence that speaks to the idea of Nīlakaṇṭha as an active scholar, as a portion of Nīlakaṇṭha's personal library has in fact been preserved among the collections of the Tanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvati Mahal Library. These six manuscripts were certainly owned by Nīlakaṇṭha himself, as each bears what may very well be the original signature of the seventeenth-century scholar: the phrase "Nīlakaṇṭhadīkṣitasya" or "Nīlakaṇṭhadīkṣitasya prakṛti" (the copy of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita) inscribed in identical handwriting in Grantha script. On those manuscripts that were evidently handed down to Nīlakaṇṭha's sons, we find that distinct Grantha hands have inscribed "Āccā Dīkṣitasya" or "Gīrvāṇendra Dīkṣitasya" on
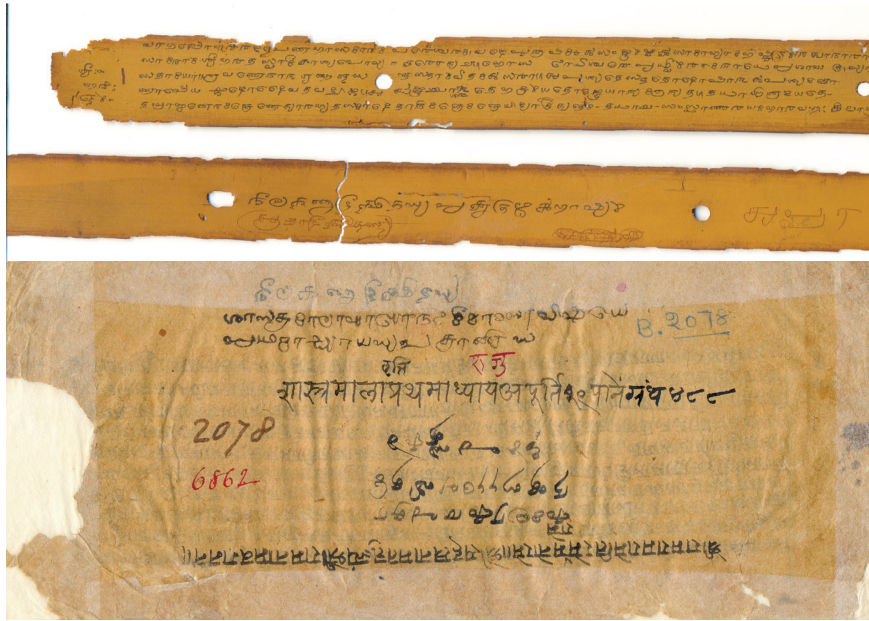
FIGURE 2. Reproductions of two manuscripts bearing what appears to be the signature of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, currently held at the Tanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvati Mahal Library. First manuscript: Palm-leaf cover of a *Ṛgbhāṣya* manuscript in Nīlakaṇṭha's possession (D 6924). On the left we see in Grantha script the inked inscription "Nīlakaṇṭhadīkṣitasya prakṛti ṛkbhāṣyam," and below it the uninked "āccādīkṣitasya," suggesting that this manuscript was passed down into the possession of Nīlakaṇṭha's eldest son, Āccān Dīkṣita. The uninked "āccā," to the right, may be the handwriting of Āccān Dīkṣita. Second manuscript: From the *Śāstramālāvyākhyāna* sent to Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita by its author, Ananta Bhaṭṭa (D 6862). Nīlakaṇṭha's name is written in Grantha at the bottom in the same hand as in the first manuscript. In the center, in Grantha script, we read, "kamalākaraputrānantabhaṭṭapreṣitam idaṁ pustakam," or "This book was sent by Kamalākara's son Ananta Bhaṭṭa."

the very same cover folios. By far the most noteworthy of the six, however, are two Devanāgarī paper manuscripts evidently copied by scribes in north India during the seventeenth century, both the products of leading Varanasi intellectuals: select chapters of the *Dinakarabhaṭṭīya,* or the *Śāstradīpikāvyākhyā,* of Dinakara Bhaṭṭa and the *Śāstramālāvyākhyāna,* a work of Mīmāṃsā, of Ananta Bhaṭṭa.[48] On the latter, the *Śāstramālāvyākhyāna,* is written the following remarkable memorandum in yet another Grantha hand: "Kamalākaraputrānantabhaṭṭapreṣitam idaṁ pustakam." (This book was sent by Ananta Bhaṭṭa, son of Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa.) In short, we have physical evidence to document the direct intellectual exchange between Nīlakaṇṭha and his contemporaries in Varanasi, who appear to have sent him offprints of their Mīmāṃsā works in progress for review.

Our evidence, succinctly, provides us with ample opportunity for resituating Nīlakaṇṭha in time and space, as a theologian with active networks both in his immediate locale in Madurai and across the Indian subcontinent. Historically speaking, however, our archive presents us with certain challenges in ascertaining the precise terms of Nīlakaṇṭha's courtly employment.[49] Intriguingly, some scholars, such as A. V. Jeyechandrun, have put forth the bold assertion that Nīlakaṇṭha himself was directly involved in the ritual and logistical implementation of affairs in the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple, including the "Sacred Games of Śiva"—entextualized in his own Sanskrit epic, the *Śivalīlārṇava* (The ocean of the games of Śiva). Jeyechandrun justifies this hypothesis on the basis of the excerpt from the *Stāṉikarvaralāṟu,* a Tamil record of the temple's priestly families, in which we learn that a certain Ayya Dīkṣita provided direct counsel to Tirumalai Nāyaka regarding the establishment of these festivals: "Lord Tirumalai Nāyaka . . . established an endowment under the arbitration of Ayya Dīkṣita, instructing that the Sacred Games be conducted in the manner established by the Purāṇas." Unfortunately, a careful reading of this passage in context renders Jeyechandrun's conclusion unlikely, as the Ayya Dīkṣita in question most likely refers to a certain Keśava Dīkṣita, mentioned explicitly in the paragraphs immediately preceding and following this passage, whom Tirumalai Nāyaka accepted as *kulaguru* and assigned to the post of *maṭhādhipatya* in the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple.[50] Leaving aside the issue of this particular passage, however, evidence suggests that Nīlakaṇṭha's jurisdiction did extend far enough to include adjudicating sectarian affairs outside of the strictly literary sphere. For instance, a direct reference to Nīlakaṇṭha's role in moderating public intellectual debate has come down to us through Vādīndra Tīrtha, the disciple of the Mādhva preceptor Rāghavendra Tīrtha,[51] whose *Guruguṇastava* informs us that Nīlakaṇṭha granted an official accolade to Rāghavendra's treatise on Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā by mounting it on an elephant and processing it publicly around the city:

> Just as when your treatise on the Bhāṭṭa system was mounted on an elephant
>   To honor you by the jewel among sacrificers [Makhin] Nīlakaṇṭha, whose doctrine was his wealth,
> Your fame, O Rāghavendra, jewel among discriminating ascetics, desirous of mounting the eight elephants of the directions, has indeed of its own accord
> Sped away suddenly to the end of the directions with unprecedented speed.[52]

A further record somewhat indirectly lends credence to Jeyechandrun's hypothesis, confirming that during the reign of Tirumalai Nāyaka, Vaidika Brahmins were authorized to arbitrate temple disputes on the basis of their scriptural expertise.

This Tamil document, preserved and translated by William Taylor in this *Oriental Historical Manuscripts,* records an incident in which Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava arbitrators, "Appa Dīkṣita" and "Ayya Dīkṣita," respectively, were assigned to present opposing viewpoints regarding the scriptural sanctions for temple iconography:

> Having thus arranged the plan, the whole was begun to be carried into execution at once, in the tenth day of *Vyasi* month of *Acheya* year, during the increase of the moon. From that time forwards, as the master [Tirumalai Nāyaka] came daily to inspect the work, it was carried on with great care. As they were proceeding first in excavating the *Terpa-kulam,* they dug up from the middle a *Ganapathi,* (or image of Ganesa,) and caused the same to be condensed to dwell in a temple built for the purpose. As they were placing the sculptured pillars of the *Vasanta-Mandabam,* and were about to fix the one which bore the representation of *Yega-patha-murti* [Ekapādamūrti] (or the one-legged deity), they were opposed by the *Vaishnavas.* Hence a dispute arose between them and the *Saivas,* which lasted during six months, and was carried on in the presence of the sovereign. Two arbitrators were appointed, *Appa-tidshadar* on the part of the *Saivas,* and *Ayya-tidshader-ayyen* on the part of the *Vaishnavas:* these consulted Sanscrit authorities, and made the *Sastras* agree; after which the pillar of *Yega-patha-murti* was fixed in place.[53]

The remainder of this passage provides no further clues as to the identities of either of the state-sanctioned arbitrators, referred to here only by honorifics commonly employed to address Vaidika Brahmins, "Ayya" and "Appa."[54] Historically grounded anecdotes such as these, however, provide us with invaluable information concerning the roles that court-sponsored Brahmin intellectuals such as Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita were appointed to fulfill under the rule of Tirumalai Nāyaka. Much of the secondary literature somewhat uncritically proposes potential titles of employment for Nīlakaṇṭha—ranging from the English "chief minister" or "prime minister" to the Sanskrit *rājaguru*—without considering that such positions may not have been operative in the seventeenth-century Nāyaka states or may not have been typically assigned to Brahmin scholar-poets. While some neighboring regimes in the seventeenth-century permitted enterprising Brahmins to rise to high positions in public administration and statecraft,[55] many of these states had adopted Persianate models of governance that had made minimal inroads to the far south of the subcontinent even by the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, no evidence exists to confirm the appointment of a Brahmin minister under a title such as *mantrin* in the Madurai Nāyaka kingdom; the nearest equivalent, the post of *pradhāni,* was typically granted to members of the Mutaliyār caste rather than Vaidika Brahmins. Similarly, the strictly sacerdotal functions of a *rājaguru* seem to have remained in the hands of distinct lineages; the nearest equivalents under the reign of Tirumalai Nāyaka appear to have been Keśava Dīkṣita, belonging to a Brahmin family traditionally responsible for conducting the ritual affairs of the Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Temple, and a Śaiva lineage based in Tiruvanaikkal near

Srirangam known as the Ākāśavāsīs,[56] whom numerous inscriptions describe as having received direct patronage from Tirumalai Nāyaka, and with whom the Nāyaka is alleged to have maintained a personal devotional relationship.

Strictly speaking, our textual archive remembers Nīlakaṇṭha as engaging with the world outside of the court and *agrahāra* through primarily intellectual means. Contemporary references confirm unambiguously that Nīlakaṇṭha presided over the city's literary society, which sponsored the public performance of Sanskrit dramas at major regional festivals,[57] and that he was granted the authority to award official recognition to scholarly works he deemed worthy of approval, such as Rāghavendra Tīrtha's work on Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā. The precedent of the anonymous Appa Dīkṣita would suggest that Nīlakaṇṭha, as with other Smārta Brahmins under royal patronage, may well have exercised his extensive command of the Śaiva textual canon in the service of temple arbitration. In fact, citations from his *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* and *Śivatattvarahasya* indicate that Nīlakaṇṭha was uncommonly well acquainted with scriptures such as the Kāmika Āgama and Kāraṇa Āgama, principal authorities for south Indian Saiddhāntika temple ritual, and the Vātulaśuddhottara Āgama, one of the chief sourcebooks for Saiddhāntika temple iconography. While Nīlakaṇṭha may also have been regularly or occasionally commissioned to perform Vedic sacrifices, and although his intimate knowledge of Śrīvidyā was likely prized by Tirumalai Nāyaka owing to its centrality in the royal esoteric cult of south Indian kingship at the time,[58] little evidence survives to confirm these possibilities.

And yet, other mentions of Nīlakaṇṭha during his own lifetime aimed to articulate not his intellectual standing but his spiritual authority, representing him as no less than an incarnation of Śiva himself. For instance, Nīlakaṇṭha's younger brother, Atirātra Yajvan, whom we will have occasion to meet again shortly, offers an homage to his brother's public influence in Madurai that is less an homage to his intellectual talents than a veritable deification, as "the beloved of Dākṣāyaṇī manifest before our eyes" (*sākṣād dākṣāyaṇīvallabhaḥ*). It is no wonder that, within the tradition, Smārta-Śaiva theologians such as Appayya Dīkṣita and Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita are recognized in the work of Appayya's descendant Śivānanda in his *Lives of Indian Saints* as living divinities and honored in their villages of residents with *samādhi* shrines—typically the burial places of liberated saints. Such memory is echoed by many of Nīlakaṇṭha's latter-day descendants as well, who remember the pioneering theological duo of Appayya and Nīlakaṇṭha as incarnations of Śiva and the goddess, respectively.[59] When visiting the ancestral *agrahāra* of Nīlakaṇṭha's family, Palamadai, which was said to have been granted to him by Tirumalai Nāyaka himself, a member of Nīlakaṇṭha's family, P. Subrahmanyam, stated the following:

> We are descendants of the great sage Bharadvāja. In his dynasty was born Appayya Dīkṣita, who is called the Kalpataru of Learning. He was one of the greatest men who

lived in the seventeenth-century *[sic]*, so more than three hundred years ago. And he is claimed by great people as an *aṃśāvatāra* [partial incarnation] of Lord Śiva himself. And then Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita was his brother's grandson—brother's son's son. And he is also one of the greatest people who lived later in the seventeenth century. And he's acclaimed to be an *aṃśāvatāra* of Parāśakti. So we have descended from these great people.[60]

While we need not make any affirmations of Nīlakaṇṭha's divine origin, history bears out the memory of his descendants that Nīlakaṇṭha was intimately involved in laying the groundwork of an emerging religious community, and that he became one of the first to embody a distinctively Smārta-Śaiva religious identity. As a result, I narrate the social and conceptual origins of the Smārta-Śaiva community largely through the perspective of Nīlakaṇṭha and his close acquaintances, who wrote from the focal point of an emerging sectarian community. Although Nīlakaṇṭha is remembered primarily in the Western academy as a secular poet, modern-day Smārtas in Tamil Nadu remember an altogether different Nīlakaṇṭha, one whose primary contribution to Sanskrit textual history was as a Śaiva theologian. To cite a final example, when I first discussed my research with the scholars at the Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute in Chennai, I had scarcely mentioned Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita's name when I was met with a resounding chorus of the refrain from one of Nīlakaṇṭha's Śaiva hymns, the *Śivotkarṣamañjarī* (Bouquet of the supremacy of Śiva): "He, the Lord, is my God—I remember no other even by name."[61] Nīlakaṇṭha, as they informed me, was no less than Sanskrit literary history's most iconic and eloquent Śaiva devotee.