Public Philology

Constructing Sectarian Identities in
Early Modern South India

THEOLOGY BEYOND THE TEXT

The very idea of theology, in early modern India no less than in Europe, generally connotes a strictly textual enterprise. And yet the written word, in published print or palm-leaf manuscript, when circulated within an extensive community of readers or deployed strategically for political ends, often leaves an indelible impression on the world outside of the text. In the European context, one would scarcely doubt that the manifestos of Martin Luther, although consisting of nothing but the written word, occasioned a seismic shift in the religious landscape of Europe when nailed to the church door.

In much the same way, the theology of early-generation Smārta theologians sought to transcend the scope of its textual medium, intervening in religious disputes that had lasting implications for the embodied and lived religious identities of Śaivas across caste and language communities. The majority of the works discussed in the preceding chapter—ranging from Tantric ritual manuals to devotional poetry charged with esoteric significance—were intended for the eyes and ears of a select group of initiates. When Smārta-Śaiva theologians revealed their personal engagement with Śrīvidyā Śākta Tantrism, they aimed to cultivate—and explicate to their coreligionists—interior modes of religiosity that were transmitted within relatively delimited social boundaries, consolidating the internal dynamics of the fledgling Smārta-Śaiva community. Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, most notably, renowned in professional circles for his satirical wit and literary genius, documents in his Śrīvidyā-inflected writings his devotional relationship with his guru, Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī, and his authoritative command of the intricacies of Tantric ritual worship. One might expect, then, that when Nīlakaṇṭha spoke as

public theologian, addressing the Śaiva community of his day, his public agenda would arise organically from his inner convictions. In fact, quite the opposite turns out to be the case: Nīlakaṇṭha's exoteric theology was designed to cultivate a public religious culture that diverged markedly from his own private devotion.

To place this public theological enterprise in context, Nīlakaṇṭha and his contemporaries were faced with navigating the radical sectarianization of south India's Hindu religious landscape, which in the early seventeenth century was still in the process of unfolding. In the wake of the decline of the Vijayanagara empire, individual sectarian communities, including not only the Smārta-Śaivas but their Vaiṣṇava rivals as well, vied for control of regionwide megatemples. They instituted competing networks of monasteries with vast landholdings that became primary shareholders in the agricultural production and economic circulation at the foundation of south Indian polities. Succinctly, for Smārta-Śaiva theologians, much was at stake in representing themselves as orthodox Hindus with a convincing interpretation of Hindu scripture. Their continuing patronage, on one hand, and their appeal to the broader lay population, on the other, depended to a substantial degree on how suitably they represented themselves as constituting the pinnacle of a unified Hindu religion encompassing the Vedas, Purāṇic mythology, and popular ritual practice such as temple *pūjā*.

As a result, Smārta-Śaivas pursued their public theology with the same intensity they invested in their esoteric worship. Instead of circulating their devotional poetry to a wider public, Smārta-Śaiva theologians engaged in a project we can describe as "public philology"—text criticism that serves as public theology. On one hand, they established normative standards for the interpretation of exoteric Śaiva classics of mythology and liturgy; Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, for instance, composed a commentary on a popular Śaiva hymn, "The Thousand and Eight Names of Śiva," one that, for perhaps the first time, systematically identifies for a wider lay public the mythological tropes in a hymn they recited on a daily basis. Other public theological ventures were thinly veiled attacks on the scriptural canons of a rival sectarian community, designed to discredit that community's claim to scriptural orthodoxy. A particularly appealing target, for instance, was the corpus of sectarian—that is, Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava—Purāṇas, mythology sacred to the Śaivas or Vaiṣṇavas, respectively; because of their prolixity and informal style of composition, Purāṇas were often riddled with internal inconsistencies, making them easy marks for textual critique. In fact, Nīlakaṇṭha appended an entire polemical prologue to his *Śivatattvarahasya*—"The Secret of the Principles of Śiva," ostensibly a commentary on a popular Śaiva hymn—to ward off philological polemic that would undermine the ritual sanctity of the hymn in question.

One may note, in Nīlakaṇṭha's hasty defense of Śaiva orthodoxy, that his method is neither strictly philosophical nor polemical, appealing to a priori rationality or impassioned politics of identity. His method, rather, is text critical: he enters the arena of sectarian debate armed only with the technology of scriptural exegesis.

Indeed, philological reasoning and text criticism appear to have taken on an unprecedented centrality in the intersectarian debate of early modern south India. In the place of doctrinal and philosophical critique, scholars frequently challenged rival schools on the grounds of textual instabilities in the primary scriptures of their tradition.[1] The result of these ongoing critiques was an increasing fascination with the hermeneutics of textual interpretation and even the etymology of key terms of sectarian importance—all in the service of demarcating the jurisdiction of one sectarian tradition from another. Partisans of sectarian communities, even across caste and linguistic boundaries,[2] began to approach the very idea of scriptural meaning, and even of textual signification in general, with fresh eyes.

In this light, the early modern centuries provide ample evidence to make the case for a philological turn in Hindu sectarian theology, which, far from representing the reprobate degeneracy of Brahminical elitism, played a central role in the construction, dissemination, and embodiment of religious identities in the world outside of the text. Actively delimiting the boundaries between Hindu sectarian communities, public philology, I argue, constitutes not only an intriguing chapter in the intellectual history of the subcontinent but also a crucial factor in the rapid sectarianization of the Hindu religious landscape during the early modern centuries. In turn, the philological disputes that emerge, through their legislation of religious embodiment of sectarian identities, speak directly to shifts in the nature of religious publicity—indeed, the very idea of the religious public in early modern south India.

Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita concludes the lengthy polemical interlude in his *Śivatattvarahasya* with the exasperated declaration "Enough with swatting at flies!"[3] And yet this "swatting at flies," as he considered it, was genuine intellectual work, such that it captivated the attention of the majority of scholars of his day. Thus, it is the process of intellectual fly-swatting that concerns us—an ongoing endeavor that proved fundamental to the scholarly activity of the seventeenth century and remained constitutive of sectarian community boundaries for centuries. Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, for example, interrogates a seemingly self-evident category of prolixity (*ativistṛtatva*) as follows:

> For, what indeed is it that we call "prolixity"? Is it simply the fact of containing a large number of verses? Or is it being found to contain a greater number of verses than the preconceived number? If it is the first, you cannot prove your case, because this kind of prolixity applies to all Purāṇas. The second, however, is not established. For, one should ask the very person who censures by saying, "The expected number of verses in their entirety are not found, thus the text has lost its original recension," how could it be possible to maintain prolixity as having those very stated characteristics? [That is, how can a text be overly condensed and prolix simultaneously?][4] Or, let prolixity consist of something else—then, whatever that may be, would it not occur in all manners in the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas as well? Thus, are you bent on deluding others with your useless ablatives ["because's"]? Enough of this.[5]

It is one thing to refer to prolixity in common idiom—"Enough of this pro-
lixity!" (*alam ativistareṇa*)—and quite another thing to pause to interrogate the
category, asking, What indeed is it that constitutes this property we call "prolixity"
(*kim ativistṛtatvaṃ nāma*)? And it is another thing still to apply such philological
acumen to text problematics that threatened the standing of one's religious com-
munity: namely, are the Śaiva Purāṇas, mythology sacred to the god Śiva, noth-
ing but textual forgeries that replaced a previously lost manuscript tradition? It is
this sort of philological reasoning, and its social and discursive dimensions, that
rose to the forefront of theological dialogue in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century
south India.

PHILOLOGY AND PUBLIC RELIGIOUS CULTURE

Public philology, unlike the literature on Śrīvidyā devotionalism, was no internal
Smārta-Śaiva affair. Under the pressure of elevated competition for material re-
sources, brought on by the fragmentation of Vijayanagara into the Nāyaka king-
doms, sectarian leaders of all stripes—both proponents of Smārta-Śaivism, such
as Appayya and his grandnephew Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, and quite a number of influ-
ential scholars of Vaiṣṇava lineages such as the Mādhvas and Śrīvaiṣṇavas—turned
to text criticism to mobilize their own communities through parallel currents of
polemical sectarian argumentation. This wide-ranging fascination with philolog-
ical reasoning can also be witnessed through a discursive survey of the genres
and themes that rose to an unprecedented popularity, and which now clutter the
manuscript libraries of south India with numerous revisions and reproductions.
Among the popular themes of these polemical treatises, we find both abstract con-
siderations of textual meanings, such as analyses of the *tātparya,* or "general pur-
port," of the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and other texts popular
across sectarian lines, as well as adjudications of the fine points of etymology and
hermeneutics. Through ongoing cycles of debate, for example, numerous indi-
vidual tracts were composed to formulate and refute theories as to why the name
Nārāyaṇa contains a retroflex *ṇ* in its final syllable—and what implications this
retroflex *ṇ* may hold with regard to the singularity of Vaiṣṇava orthodoxy.[6]

Such pyrotechnics with phonetics may strike the observer as radically discon-
nected from the embodied practice of south Indian Hinduism. What part could the
retroflex *ṇ* in *Nārāyaṇa* possibly play in the devotional relationship cultivated by
Vaiṣṇava practitioners with their chosen deity? Inquiring into the theology of text
criticism—no less than a study of texts studying texts—would appear anathema
to what theorists have described as the "materialist turn" in the study of religion.
In recent years, the attention in the discipline has turned—and rightly so—away
from what Vasquez (2010) describes as its Protestant roots in "suffocating textual-
ism" toward a salutary emphasis on the material aspects of religious practice, from

the production and circulation of religious goods and material culture to networks of human relationships (Orsi 2006) and translocal flows (Tweed 2008). And yet, in the case of the textual practices of south Indian early modernity, philology was intimately intertwined with the material practices of religion, providing not an escape but an authoritative underpinning for the object-centered, bodily, or spatial religious practices across Hindu sectarian communities. Paradoxically, as we shall see, a study of texts studying texts tells a great deal about the embodied religious identity of the early modern subcontinent.

Strictly speaking, to locate philology—most commonly recognized as a European textual science that flourished in the nineteenth century—in the textual practices of seventeenth-century India presents us with a number of historical and theoretical ambiguities. How precisely do we define the term *philology* in this context, and can such a term possibly correlate with anything in the emic conceptual map of a seventeenth-century south Indian pandit? In his programmatic essay defending the discipline of philology and its future prospects, Sheldon Pollock (2009) defines philology, broadly speaking, as "the discipline of making sense of texts[,] . . . the theory of textuality as well as the history of textualized meaning."[7] By way of this transhistorical definition, Pollock makes the case for philology as a global phenomenon, a critical reflexivity toward textual meaning that surfaces at various occasions and in numerous textual cultures, irrespective of language and location. As such, there is nothing intrinsically European or modern (or even early modern) in this model of philology, a concept that can be applied fruitfully to any number of historical scenarios.

Nevertheless, our historical narratives often portray philology, in its regnant role as queen of the sciences, as a prototypically early modern invention, allied as it was with the Renaissance rediscovery of the Western world's classical past and, in turn, with the rise of Orientalism as colonial-period scholars reconstructed a parallel golden age of India's pre-Islamic antiquity. In social and historical context, a genuine case could be made that Renaissance Europe revolutionized the practice of philology, as exegetes expanded the extant corpus of classical works, moving in a rapidly urbanizing world in which printed books not only were readily available but also circulated fluidly as a commodity of trade. Renaissance humanists, Anthony Grafton (2015) has argued, prefigured the institutionalized philology of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century universities by developing an arsenal of new text-critical techniques—attention to the individuality of an author's voice, for instance—to build on the foundations of the classical and scholastic past. In the domain of early modern India, then, did the philology of Hindu sectarian theologians merely echo or expand the techniques of textual interpretation developed by philosophers and linguists over the preceding two millennia?

When applied to the entire historical field of Indic textuality, the very idea of philology may seem to suffer from a troubling overextension (or *ativyāpti,* as

Sanskrit scholars would call it). Simply put, making sense of texts, or even language, is perhaps the single fundamental building block of Indian systematic thought. Such was argued, for instance, by Frits Staal (1965) in his well-known essay "Euclid and Panini," in which he maintains that the grammatical systematicity of Pāṇini's approach to the Sanskrit language played a crucial structural role in the history of Sanskritic discourse, much as geometrical reasoning proved foundational to philosophy in the Western world. One is not hard pressed to think of examples of both Sanskrit and vernacular discourse that would qualify as philology, ranging from Kumārila's source-critical evaluation of Smṛti literature, Purāṇas, and the Āgamic corpus,[8] to the Marathi poet-saint Eknāth's critical edition of the *Jñāneśvarī*.[9] Although we may be warranted in perceiving an efflorescence in philological reasoning at certain periods in Indian history—the early modern centuries witnessed philological undertakings of the magnitude of Sāyaṇa's Ṛgveda commentary[10] and the hermeneutic acrobatics of Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara[11]—there is nothing new, or *navya,* about philology as so defined for the scholars of the seventeenth century.

On one hand, Hindu sectarian theology in early modern centuries did inherit the legacy of classical Sanskritic thought through reference to a common focal point—namely, the interpretation and exegesis of the Brahmasūtras—leading sectarian lineages to nominally demarcate their identity on the basis of ontological doctrine, whether "dualist," "nondualist," or some variation thereof. Equally impressive techniques of exegesis were marshaled to defend one interpretation over another; and yet, despite protests to the contrary, no faction managed to achieve even a marginal victory by common consensus. It was perhaps because of this philosophical stalemate—and, no doubt, the social and economic stakes of theological marginalization—that, as time progressed, sectarian debate began to overflow the boundaries of ontology as theologians, in search of some common ground for dialogue, began to question even the most fundamental rules of Sanskrit textuality and disciplinarity.

On the other hand, thinking from within traditional Sanskritic categories may tempt us to equate philology, for a Sanskrit-educated audience, with the strict confines of a single *śāstric* discipline: the hermeneutics of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā. Although traditionally viewed by doxographers as a discrete school of thought (*darśana*) in its own right, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā exercised a pervasive influence on the idea of textuality across disciplinary boundaries in India, so that it now seems redundant even to make the observation. For instance, the work of Lawrence McCrea (2009) demonstrates the foundational role played by Mīmāṃsā interpretive techniques in the development of Sanskrit literary theory (Alaṅkāraśāstra) as an academic discipline. Thus, the genuine centrality of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā to Sanskrit hermeneutics often leads to an impasse when the category of philology is applied to Sanskrit intellectual history as an etic theoretical lens. Anterior to the publication of sectarian philology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, prominent sectarian

theologians, including the fourteenth-century Lion among Poets and Logicians (Kavitārkikasiṃha), relied heavily on the theoretical apparatus of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā in his approach to textuality, even when attempting to dismiss the theological presuppositions of classical Mīmāṃsakas themselves.

And yet Vedānta Deśika approached much of his oeuvre with penetrating philological insight, developing an eye for the textual integrity of his tradition's scripture rarely seen in preceding centuries (Cox 2016). As with the case of European philology and its Renaissance humanist legacy, sectarian public philology of the seventeenth century owes a significant debt to a sort of scriptural "renaissance" undertaken by Vedānta Deśika and his contemporaries from various sectarian communities. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it was during this period—between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries—that Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas simultaneously embarked on a large-scale rapprochement of the sectarian scriptures of their lineage with a wider concept of Vedic—or Hindu—orthodoxy. Sectarian scripture in south India witnessed significant "textual drift"—or forgery, rather, depending on one's inclination—during this formative period. Śaiva scriptures such as the Sūtasaṃhitā gradually conformed to the south Indian religious landscape—placing new emphasis on Cidambaram, the center of Cōḻa-period Śaiva temple culture—and adopted a notably Vedānticized inflection to hybridize, perhaps for the first time, Śaiva religiosity with the teachings of the Upaniṣads. It is likely no accident that theologians such as Vedānta Deśika were inspired to develop new tools to think historically about the nature of scriptural authenticity.

What we witness in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, is an upsurge not simply of philology but intersectarian philology—pugnacious critiques of theological rivals on text-critical grounds. It is these moments of encounter that I aim to examine, tailoring to the Indian textual sphere the methods of discourse analysis, in the Foucauldian sense, not individual works but the irruption of philological concerns into the intersectarian circulation of philological polemic. Included in this discourse are the works of major intellectuals, which deserve to be remembered as classics of Indian theology in their own right, as well as the broader sphere of sectarian discourse as such: polemical pamphlets, student essays, and handbooks for debate, most of which lie unpublished in the manuscript libraries of south India. In fact, this circulation of pamphlets, many designed to prepare theologians for public debate, underscores the extent to which philology was not, simply speaking, a matter for the manuscript archive but a subject of increasing social significance. I aim, then, not only to bring unused source materials to light but also to explore the extent to which philological approaches to sectarian debate moved beyond the rarified circles of the intellectual giants to shape the contours of the south Indian religious landscape. In such circumstances, a wider discursive analysis of early modern textuality in India can illuminate substantive shifts in the south Indian religious ecology in a way that fails to emerge from adhering strictly to the scriptural classics.

How, then, did public philology shift the religious ecology of south Indian sectarian communities? Most evidently, major thinkers of the sixteenth century achieved what may be an unprecedented public circulation of their works through sectarian networks, prompting an explosion of interest in philological questions across all strata of discourse, from the most elevated to the most banal commentarial essay, a trend that continued even into the colonial era. Where doctrinaire theologians failed to defeat each other on strictly philological ground, they frequently returned to key questions of scriptural authenticity and meaning to undermine their opponents' foundational sources of knowledge and veridicality; over the course of a handful of generations, philology had become a pillar of the unspoken rules of polemical discourse. That is, sectarian theology came to be a matter not for the temple or literary salon but for public debate, circulating readily across regional and sectarian boundaries. More importantly, however, philology went public in early modern south India by inquiring directly into the role of sectarian identity in public space. Having surveyed the extent and scope of public philology as a discourse of intersectarian polemic, we will turn to its direct engagement with the world outside of the text, to illuminate through a concrete example how sectarian theologians aimed to reshape the boundaries between religious communities.

I begin, then, by highlighting three problematics that occupied the minds of scholars such as Nīlakaṇṭha, on the Smārta-Śaiva side, and his Vaiṣṇava rivals from the Mādhva and Śrīvaiṣṇava lineages. First, exegetes of rival traditions turned their attention to their respective scriptural canons, each negotiating standards of text criticism that might distinguish their own canon from that of their opponents. In particular, a lively debate surfaced regarding the validity of the Śaiva Purāṇas as authoritative scripture, necessitating a collective reconsideration of precisely what textual features of the Purāṇas as they had been transmitted signaled their authenticity as prescriptive revelation. Second, even the tools of interpretation came under fire in the seventeenth century, as disciplinary approaches of reading texts, such as Nyāya (logic) or Mīmāṃsā, were claimed as the exclusive property of one sectarian tradition or another. As a result, we observe an increasing methodological divide between Smārta-Śaivas, whose hermeneutics come to be equated strictly with the field of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, and other lineages such as the Mādhvas, who claimed the school of Navya Nyāya as a distinctive domain of expertise. As a result, participants in these debates were forced to reason afresh about textual validity without the support of the knowledge systems that had sustained Sanskritic thought for centuries. And third, among the disciplinary approaches to textuality called into question during this period, the fields of etymology and lexicography came to occupy something of a contentious place in the domain of scriptural interpretation, and we witness a rise in fascination with etymological acrobatics (including catalogues of hundreds of "valid" Pāṇinian etymologies of the names

of deities) along with a well-deserved skepticism of the utility of such an analytic approach. One issue that proved a hotbed of contention was the proper spelling of the name Nārāyaṇa; the debate generated countless polemical tracts claiming to adjudicate the valid referents of the name on etymological ground.

UNSTABLE RECENSIONS: THE CONTESTED AUTHORITY OF THE ŚAIVA PURĀṆAS

In his commentary Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa's *Padārthadīpikā* (The illumination of categories), an early modern treatise on formal logic, Gīrvāṇendra Dīkṣita, son of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, embarks on an apparently peculiar digression while addressing the *maṅgala* verses of the work.[12] He begins his commentary by explaining,

> By the term "black and white" is meant a thing that consists of both Hari and Hara, because, in the epics and Purāṇas, oftentimes Śiva is described as appearing [white] like a pure crystal, and Viṣṇu as appearing [black] like a dark cloud.
>
> But one might wonder, "How can this be the case? Hari and Hara cannot possibly be nondifferent, as their difference is established by numerous authoritative means of knowledge." In fact, the nondifference of Hari and Hara is understood from numerous Purāṇic statements such as the following:
>
>> Śiva alone is Hari manifest, Hari alone is Śiva himself.
>> The man who sees a difference between the two goes to Hell.[13]
>
> The difference [between them] is understood to be conditional, but the opposite [i.e., their nondifference being conditional] is inconceivable. We understand their difference to be conditional based on the previously exemplified statement "sattva, rajas, and tamas" itself; we do not likewise observe a statement of the conditionality of nondifference. Thus, the nondifference of Hari and Hara is absolutely real.[14]

In the context of a hairsplitting commentary on the niceties of logical syllogisms, it may seem odd that Gīrvāṇendra would foreground such a seemingly irrelevant theological dispute. And yet he seems intent on locating in Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa's *maṅgala* verse a particular theological vision—the nondifference of Śiva and Viṣṇu—that had become a matter of some contention in the south over the preceding generations, even more so than in Kauṇḍa Bhaṭṭa's social circles in Benares.[15] Why, we might wonder, was a descendant of south India's most staunchly Śaiva intellectual families so determined to demonstrate the equality of Śiva and Viṣṇu, even when the matter bore little relevance to the discussion at hand? As it turns out, his motivations were likely much more complex than an irenic vision of religious pluralism. Rather, for a Śaiva Advaitin, inheriting the intellectual legacy of Appayya Dīkṣita, the nonduality of the two sectarian deities was a contentious claim in Gīrvāṇendra's generation, and one that certainly would not have been endorsed by his Mādhva or Śrīvaiṣṇava rivals, who were keen to demonstrate their

ontological difference—and, as a consequence, the status of Viṣṇu as supreme deity. Thus, the appeal to their unity by partisan Śaivas was a deliberate counterattack on Vaiṣṇava sectarian polemics.

The debate Gīrvāṇendra alludes to at the outset of his commentary is treated at much greater length by his own father, Nīlakaṇṭha, in his *Śivatattvarahasya,* or "The Secret of the Principles of Śiva." Primarily structured as a commentary on a popular Śaiva hymn, "The Thousand and Eight Names of Śiva," Nīlakaṇṭha's *Śivatattvarahasya* also contains one of the most sophisticated and philologically sensitive sectarian tracts that have come down to us today. In this extended preface, Nīlakaṇṭha addresses a subject that was causing his Smārta-Śaiva contemporaries a fair amount of consternation—namely, the accusation, most likely leveled by his Śrīvaiṣṇava contemporaries, that the Śaiva Purāṇas were invalid textual authorities because of their intrinsically *tāmasa* character. *Tamas,* indeed, was the lowest of the three "qualities" of matter that the Sāṅkhya school of Indian philosophy proposed as the building blocks of the universe, associated generally with sloth, torpor, and moral degeneracy. And yet this accusation is founded on a serious hermeneutical impasse, one that was recognized equally by both parties with a greater trepidation than most authors of earlier periods—namely, that the Purāṇas contradict themselves. Given the numerous internal inconsistencies and blatant contradictions between Purāṇas that were thought to be equally authoritative, how could they all be salvaged as valid scriptural authorities? In response to this dilemma, the Śrīvaiṣṇava community had arrived at an expedient explanatory device, one that can be traced back to the time of Rāmānuja, but which had, by the seventeenth century, taken on an altogether new systematicity and precision.

Nīlakaṇṭha puts the matter eloquently into the mouth of an unnamed opponent (*pūrvapakṣin*), a traditional strategy of Sanskrit philosophical prose that allows the author to demolish the case of a hypothetical adversary. In Nīlakaṇṭha's words, his opponent lays out the case against the Śaiva Purāṇas as follows:

> Here, some people say that there is no validity to the Names contained in the Skanda Purāṇa, because the Skānda, and so forth, are not valid sources of knowledge given that they are *tāmasa* Purāṇas. After all, Brahmā, the author of the Purāṇas, in some eons was predominated by *sattva,* in some by *rajas,* and in some by *tamas;* when he was predominated by *sattva,* he composed Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas, when he was predominated by *rajas* Brāhma Purāṇas, when predominated by *tamas* Śaiva Purāṇas. And thus, the Śaiva Purāṇas, composed by a Brahmā who was blinded by *tamas,* are completely nonauthoritative like deluded prattle. But the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas, composed by a Brahmā predominated by *sattva,* are authoritative, like the statements of a learned person.[16]

This line of argumentation—which had understandably proven popular in a polarized sectarian environment—can be traced back to the works of Rāmānuja himself, albeit in embryonic form. In the *Vedārthasaṅgraha* (Compilation on the

meaning of the Vedas), his problematic of inquiry is precisely the same: Why do the scriptural passages contradict each other, and what do we do about it? He writes, "If one were to ask, 'How can it be that Vedic statements, which are unauthored, are mutually contradictory?' then, as previously stated, there is actually no contradiction because a unitary purport [*tātparya*] can be determined." In this context, Rāmānuja quotes the same Purāṇic passage above (suggesting a direct influence on Nīlakaṇṭha's own imagined opponent), demarcating the same tripartite division among the Purāṇas based on their eon of composition and the *guṇa* predominating that particular eon. He moves on quickly, however, to proposing his better-known "adjectival" exegesis of the names of Śiva in the Upaniṣads: interpreting Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 3.11, *śāśvataṃ śivam acyutam,* he pointedly maintains that the name Śiva is nothing but a modifier of Viṣṇu—Acyuta—indicating his auspiciousness.[17]

What does not concern Rāmānuja to any significant degree, however, is the strict opposition between Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas. For Nīlakaṇṭha's imagined opponent, operating in a society in which sectarian tensions have reached new heights, it is the antagonism between the two bodies of scripture that is central. Clever as Rāmānuja's interpretation of the name *Śiva* may be, Nīlakaṇṭha's opponent shows no interest in it and, instead, expands upon the Tāmasic nature of the Śaiva Purāṇas at great length, arguing that it is the reliability of the speaker, Brahmā, that determines the relative authority of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas. Evidently the passage cited by Rāmānuja struck him as an ideal battle ground for exposing the relative merits of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava theology—not on philosophical grounds but based on the textual integrity of their respective scriptures.

Expanding on his initial complaint about the speaker's unreliability, Nīlakaṇṭha's opponent compiles a list of seven textual deficiencies that vitiate the scriptural authority of the Śaiva Purāṇas. He summarizes his case as follows:

> Thus, the Śaiva Purāṇas are nonauthoritative (1) because the speaker has the fault of being *tāmasa,* (2) because of contradiction with scripture, (3) because of internal contradiction [*svavyāghātāt*], (4) because the meaning of its own statement is not corroborated by another Purāṇa that is accepted as a valid authority[,] . . . (5) because it is clear that the intention of describing the greatness of the *liṅga* [Liṅgamāhātmya] as stated in the Liṅga Purāṇa has come forth sequentially from a question concerned with a particular topic,[18] (6) because the Kūrma Purāṇa, and so forth, are well known to have lost their original recensions [*naṣṭakośatvāt*], and (7) because of the possibility of interpolation because of their excessive prolixity.[19]

Intriguingly, none of the reasons adduced by the opponent for his distrust of the Śaiva Purāṇas has any bearing on the content, or doctrine, expressed by them. Rather, with each of the reasons Nīlakaṇṭha attempts to supersede doctrinal differences by appealing to an ostensibly shared sense of philological reasoning as to what ought to constitute an authoritative text, and what features of such a text

may show proof of corruption or instability. If our author were a contemporary critical editor, his criteria for textual authenticity would by and large be accepted by academic audiences as eminently plausible, when translated into the idiom of modern philological practice.

In particular, reason six will catch the eye of any contemporary textual scholar: is it truly possible that seventeenth-century intellectuals had developed a sophisticated model of the diachronic fluctuation of texts through circulation and accumulation of variants? By Nīlakaṇṭha's day, commentators had been using terms such as *pāṭha* for centuries to indicate their awareness of variant readings in classic works of poetry. Here, however, Nīlakaṇṭha's opponent employs a rather unusual and striking term, *naṣṭakośa,* which has little in the way of precedent in Sanskrit discourse before the intellectual giants of second-millennium south India.[20] Its resonance, however, is unmistakable: the Śaiva Purāṇas, our unnamed opponent argues, have lost their original recensions—that is, the original "manuscript copies" of their authentic (divinely authored) textualized form have been lost. Succinctly, when first enunciated by their speaker, the Śaiva Purāṇas were known to have contained a vast number of verses, as several putatively original citations attest. The versions accepted as canonical by the opponent's contemporaries possess far fewer verses, which suggests, quite logically, that the remaining verses have been lost over time. Thus the received text can be presumed to bear little resemblance to the original, divinely authored Purāṇa that one might have considered authoritative.

Nīlakaṇṭha's reply illuminates the issue in more detail, illustrating his clear awareness that texts, whether revealed or not, have a history and, as historically bounded entities, are subject to loss and transformation:

> And, as for the argument [that the Śaiva Purāṇas are not authoritative] because it is well known that the Kūrma and so forth have lost their original recensions, this also is insubstantial. For, the Brāhmī Saṃhitā, which consists of six thousand verses, is still available [*pracarati*]—it is not at all lost. If you maintain that the portion over and beyond the Brāhmī Saṃhitā is lost, consisting of eleven thousand verses from within the text of seventeen thousand verses known to have belonged to the Matsya Purāṇa, then let it be, who says it is not? After all, we are not citing any verses from there. But there is no ground for excessive doubt concerning further loss within the Saṃhitā that has come down to us as scripture. If some further portion is said to be "lost," then any other Saṃhitā could also be conceived of as "lost," given that there would be no deciding factor for discriminating what has been lost and what has not.
>
>   If you argue that the portion we have received could have been written by anyone—then, no, because there is no basis for this. For, it is not the case that if some has been destroyed then all of it must be destroyed, nor if some has remained then all must remain; nor, clearly, do either you or I have even a grain of discomfort the size of a sesame seed with regard to the grammar of Pāṇini occasioned by the Aindra Grammar's having been lost. That being the case, even with regard to the Viṣṇu

Purāṇa, it would wind up being very difficult to refute the anxiety about its extant six thousand verses, conjoined with the seventeen thousand verses of it that have been lost from within the twenty-three thousand verses we come to know of from the words of the Matsya Purāṇa.[21]

Here we find Nīlakaṇṭha wrestling with what many would consider to be a cogent objection to the Matsya Purāṇa's textual integrity: the Purāṇa has evidently suffered from poor transmission, which caused nearly two-thirds of the text to be lost, and consequently one might wonder whether the remaining portion has also been inaccurately transmitted. The debate, then, concerns the effect of textual transmission on the viability of scripture as a source of authoritative knowledge. Nīlakaṇṭha argues, as many of us would, that we cannot afford to abandon fragmentary textual traditions even if we can no longer recover a comprehensive picture of their recension histories, much less the form of works as originally enunciated.

Another of the opponent's objections may strike us as odd at first glance—namely, his suspicion of the Liṅgamāhātmya—but in fact a very similar form of reasoning is used by textual scholars even today to track interpolations in classical texts. The Liṅga Purāṇa, Nīlakaṇṭha's opponent argues, fails to conform to the traditional generic constraints of Purāṇic texts because it includes a number of interludes in which the characters raise lines of discussion that are seemingly irrelevant to abstract questions of ultimate truth, such as the nature and function of the *śivaliṅga,* the aniconic image of the god Śiva employed in ritual worship.[22] In his opponent's analysis, these passages seem to concern matters so highly specific and foreign to our expectations as to suggest a particular time and place of interpolation. Nīlakaṇṭha, for his part, agrees that a general internal coherence must exist for us to accept a Purāṇa as free from interpolations, but he maintains that the initial question itself around which the text is structured is not by itself sufficient to determine its unitary intentionality (*tātparya*). Such questions, he argues, often illuminate the bias and limitations of the questioner rather than the ultimate truth promulgated by the Purāṇa. In fact, if seemingly tangential questions were sufficient to overturn the authority of scripture, even the most-prized narratives of Vaiṣṇava devotion would be called into question. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa itself, Nīlakaṇṭha notes, begins with a similar exhortation: "Sūta, you know—we beseech you. By whose will was the Lord, master of the Yādavas, born of Devakī and Vasudeva?"[23]

Although much can be said about Nīlakaṇṭha's argument, two aspects of the debate on both sides are of particular interest in the present context. First, we witness a sustained and philologically sensitive inquiry into a particular textual problematic—that is, which features of textual structure facilitate comprehension of the overall purport (*tātparya*) of a text, and what bearing does this purport have on our assessment of the text's recension history? Such dialogue flourished

in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; we may recall here the Mādhva-Śaiva debate on *upakrama* versus *upasaṃhāra*—the relative priority of the beginning or end of a text for determining its intentionality—a subject that rose considerably in popularity in response to the work of Appayya Dīkṣita. Second, we observe a kind of empiricist leaning in both opponents' readiness to exemplify passages that problematize common assumptions about the Purāṇic genre and how it communicates authoritative knowledge. In both cases, our sectarian intellectuals employ philological reasoning to push the boundaries of normative textual practice—and yet the enunciatory context is not the traditional disciplines of text criticism but the sectarian polemical tracts themselves. It is the new intellectual space opened up through the irruption of sectarian polemics that provided an ideal venue for philology to reach new heights, in many cases moving beyond the language and problematics in which textual interpretation had been posed for centuries through the classical Sanskritic knowledge systems.

In the final analysis, we should be clear that philology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries flourished through the vehicle of sectarian theology, and its applications were by and large theological in their agenda. We would deceive ourselves in expecting to uncover a neutral, "secular" space in which philological reasoning developed free from external commitments. Indeed, the European case would caution us against expecting philology and theology to keep separate company. To name but a single instance, Isaac Casaubon, one of early modern Europe's first groundbreaking philologians—who recognized that the hermetic revelations so foundational to Renaissance thinking were in fact anachronistic apocrypha postdating the biblical texts by several centuries—was both a classicist and a Huguenot theologian by trade, carrying out his intellectual work in the service of an antipapist agenda.[24] In the Indian case, it was the theological offshoots of philology that truly took root in public discourse, moving beyond the most sophisticated of scholarly discourses to affect the motivations and predispositions of Sanskritic culture across the south Indian religious landscape. After all, it was not Nīlakaṇṭha's definition of prolixity that his son Gīrvāṇendra alluded to in his commentary on the *Padārthadīpikā* but, rather, the relevance of the three Sāṃkhya *guṇa*s to casting doubt on the speaker of the Śaiva Purāṇas and, hence, their authority as scripture.

As it is perhaps this critique that troubles Nīlakaṇṭha the most—that the Śaiva Purāṇas are inherently *tāmasa*—he advances a revised theological model of the speakers of the various Purāṇas from the standpoint of his Śaiva Advaita philosophical leanings. Rather than disputing the Purāṇic attestations of a tripartite division in the Purāṇas and the *guṇa*s of their speakers, Nīlakaṇṭha circumvents the entire paradigm by postulating Śiva as the unitary creator of the Trimūrti—Viṣṇu, Brahmā, and Rudra—with Paramaśiva in the purest and most abstract sense being absolutely distinct from the embodied or qualified (*saguṇa*) form, Rudra, who

was delegated to speak the *tāmasa* Purāṇas. By making this case, Nīlakaṇṭha aims not only to secure Śaiva immunity from a hierarchical paradigm that favors the supremacy of Viṣṇu—and one that has significant textual evidence to back it up, at that—but also to salvage the unitary authoritativeness of the Purāṇic corpus as a whole, irrespective of sectarian affiliation. He proposes his *siddhānta* as follows:

> And, as for the argument that the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas are authoritative because they lack the seven previously mentioned faults of the Śaiva Purāṇas—with regard to this, the proposition [*pratijñā*] of the syllogism is valid, but the reason [*hetu*] is not worthy of being investigated. . . . Even if others were to argue that the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas have been situated as mutually opposed and, thus, because of that mutual opposition the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas could be said to be invalid, given that our aim is to inform about the truth, it would not be reasonable for us to do so. For, the fact that others have erred does not mean that one must err oneself. Thus is introduced the established conclusion [*siddhānta*] that sets forth the validity of all Purāṇas.
>
> And as for what was argued—[that the Śaiva Purāṇas are not authoritative] owing to internal contradiction—this is refuted for precisely the same reason. There is not even a whiff of internal contradiction, because the origin of Rudra from Nārāyaṇa concerns the origin of the Rudra endowed with qualities, whereas the Trimūrti originates from Paramaśiva.[25]

Thus, Nīlakaṇṭha effectively deflects the textual evidence marshaled by his Vaiṣṇava rival through a strategy of creative subversion, repositioning the Śiva of the Śaiva religion outside of the hierarchical paradigm Vaiṣṇavas had deduced through close readings of the Purāṇas. A strategy such as this bears not only theological but sociological implications as well, positioning the Brahminical Śaiva community, which had begun to style itself explicitly as "Smārta," to appeal to a transcendent Hindu orthodoxy that conceptually denied the sectarian social structure from which it had arisen. In fact, despite the incisive philological insights of both Nīlakaṇṭha and his opponent, theological models such as these left an indelible impact on the sectarian discourse of subsequent generations. Over the course of the following century, Smārta-Śaivas enthusiastically adopted this conceptual distinction between their chosen deity, Paramaśiva, and the *saguṇa* Rudra of the Trimūrti, and they relegated the latter to the same subordinate plane of existence as Viṣṇu himself. This rhetoric soon attained such popularity that it became purely a matter of convention to assert, at the outset of Śaiva sectarian tracts, the transcendent status of Paramaśiva, the true Śaiva deity. Take for example the following *maṅgala* verses from the *Īśavilāsa* of "Appayya Dīkṣita" and the *Madhvamukhacapeṭikā*,[26] two Śaiva polemical works conspicuously prefaced with this same formula:

> By whose command Brahmā is the creator of the universe and Hari
>   the protector,

And the destroyer is known as Kālarudra, homage to him, who
    bears the Pināka bow.[27]

I bow to the nondual Śiva, *distinct from the Trimūrti,* the cause of
    creation and so forth, who provides all refuge,
Knowable from the Vedānta throughout the entire universe, for the
    pacification of a veritable flood of obstacles.[28]

"TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES" OF DISCIPLINARITY: THE SECTARIANIZATION OF CLASSICAL KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

By the sixteenth century in south India, as with the majority of the subcontinent, the idea of *newness* had thoroughly captivated intellectual discourse—whether novelty of form, substance, or indeed of scholarly methodology. It is no accident, in fact, that schools of thought whose very names proclaimed the virtue of newness had come into sudden vogue across sectarian lines. Such is the case, most notably, with Navya Nyāya, or "New Dialectics," an emergent discipline whose influence reached nearly every corner of Sanskrit intellectual discourse, sectarian theology being no exception. Take, for instance, the following aphorism, cited by the Mādhva theologian Nārāyaṇācārya in his *Advaitakālānala* (The armageddon of Advaita), a systematic diatribe countering the *Madhvatantramukhamardana* (Crushing the face of Madhva's doctrine) of the Smārta-Śaiva polymath Appayya Dīkṣita:

Statements endowed with logical reasoning are admissible even
    from a child.
Anything else should be abandoned like grass, even if spoken by
    Brahmā.[29]

According to Nārāyaṇācārya, what Appayya lacked, succinctly, was logical reasoning. As an outspoken proponent of Madhva's Dvaita (dualist) theology, Nārāyaṇācārya embarked on his polemical project, the *Advaitakālānala,* not merely to defend a dualist model of ontology but also to champion the revolutionary dialectical models of Navya Nyāya philosophy. Navya Nyāya, although perhaps better known for its origin and efflorescence in Bengal following the influential thirteenth-century *Tattvacintāmaṇi* (Crest jewel of principles) of Gaṅgeśa, had made a second home for itself among the prominent logicians of the Mādhva lineage, who were justly renowned by contemporaries for their unsurpassed mastery of the discipline. This trend perhaps reached its zenith under the pioneering dialectical endeavors of Vyāsa Tīrtha, whose metaphysical tracts, with such names as the *Nyāyāmṛta* (The nectar of logic) and the *Tarkatāṇḍava* (The dance of reasoning), began to evoke an invariable concomitance between Navya Nyāya and the

Mādhva tradition itself. In subsequent generations, Vyāsa Tīrtha was succeeded by prolific scholars such as Vijayīndra Tīrtha, who continued the Navya Nyāya legacy with his Nyāya-*mauktikamālā,* Nyāya-*saṅgraha,* Nyāy*ādhvadipikā,*[30] among many others—which, even when not directly concerned with formal logic, relentlessly evoke the semiotic authority of the "New Dialectics."

Even outside of the Vaiṣṇava fold, critics of Mādhva's doctrine gravitated toward the Mādhva predilection for formal logic, seizing every opportunity to impugn the rationality of the school's founder. Among the most memorable critiques of Mādhva's dualism, Appayya Dīkṣita's *Madhvatantramukhamardana* caricatures Mādhva as no less than an intellectual fraud, delusional enough to believe himself an incarnation of the wind god, Vāyu. Appayya further contends that among the scriptural passages Mādhva cites, many were simply fabricated out of thin air (*svakapolakalpita,* or literally, "fashioned from his own cheek"),[31] and the remainder interpreted so tortuously as to defy even the limits of plausibility. He elaborates: "Such Ṛgvedic mantras are demonstrated to refer to the triad of incarnations of Vāyu that he himself has made up, and so forth—thus we witness the wholesale transgression of the boundaries of reasonable authority [*prāmāṇikamaryādollaṅghanam*]."[32] Appayya then continues to adduce a version of the very aphorism Mādhvas themselves cite with pride, censuring not merely the theological doctrine of his Mādhva opponents but equally their attachment to logical reasoning as the cornerstone of academic inquiry.

> Now, on the principle "Speech endowed with *reason* is to be accepted, not [mere] venerability," we would give credit to his doctrine if we could discern in it *anything reasonable.* But such is not the case. For, generally, in his doctrine, statements that are ascertained from his own heart alone are supported, rather than commonly held principles. And those principles that *are* exhibited are extremely carelessly observed, applied here and there at will. Even the boundaries of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā are led astray through interpretations of *disharmon*y [*asāmañjasya*]. Generally speaking, words are used completely inappropriately. His versification cannot possibly be construed syntactically, and more often than not the meters do not exist.[33]

While railing against the methodological preoccupations of his opponents, Appayya reveals his own disciplinary leanings as well. Although considered by all a polymath—a master of all disciplines (*sarvatantrasvatantra*)—Appayya, to the best of our knowledge, never once composed a treatise on formal logic. Rather, he cultivated a particular expertise in the field of Mīmāṃsā, or Vedic exegesis, a discipline that had centuries before attained the status of a general hermeneutics, its principles adopted widely across the Sanskrit knowledge systems. Beyond developing a simple mastery of the field, Appayya also pioneered a sustained inquiry into the status of Mīmāṃsā as a discipline, negotiating the complexity of its relationship with Vedānta philosophy, or Uttara Mīmāṃsā.[34] Despite the discursive prestige accorded to Navya Nyāya terminology by the sixteenth century, his prose

shows few traces of its unmistakable philosophical idiom.[35] And perhaps most tellingly, with his provocatively titled treatise on Mīmāṃsā, the *Vidhirasāyana* (The elixir of injunction), Appayya proclaimed to his contemporaries that the entire discipline of Mīmāṃsā was in need of resuscitation—and that he, specifically, would provide the remedy.[36]

In short, Appayya's primary concern, beyond Madhva's alleged carelessness with source criticism, is that the integrity of the boundaries—or the operative rules—of Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics not be compromised through haphazard textual interpretations. By describing Madhva's reading strategies as "disharmonious" (*asāmañjasyenaiva*), Appayya further demarcates himself as an avowed insider in Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics: the principle of *sāmanjyasya,* or "harmony," is a Mīmāṃsaka axiom that requires interpreters, wherever possible, to understand texts as harmonious intentional communications, free from internal contradiction. Such subtle gestures were by no means lost on his Mādhva contemporaries. Given that their Smārta-Śaiva opponent had so thoroughly identified himself with the inner workings of the Mīmāṃsā system, they began to look for strategies to dismantle not merely Appayya's own arguments but also the very universality of Mīmāṃsā's hermeneutical apparatus.

What precisely was the relationship, then, between Mādhva faith and formal logic, Śaiva scripture and Mīmāṃsā exegesis? Disciplinarity, it seems, was no longer coterminous with the object of inquiry for the Sanskrit knowledge systems in early modern south India. One did not become a Mīmāṃsaka, in this climate, merely to understand the meaning of the Vedas, nor a Naiyāyika to master syllogistic reasoning. Rather, by the sixteenth century, during the floruit of Appayya Dīkṣita, the first stages of a sectarianization of the means of knowledge took place, as discipline-specific approaches to textuality came to be claimed as the property of competing religious traditions. To be a Mādhva theologian in this period, one had little choice but to apply oneself to the study of Navya Nyāya; and over the course of time, Mīmāṃsā acquired an intimate association with the social circles of the Smārta-Śaivas, such that by the following centuries prominent Mādhvas expressed a wholehearted disdain for the interpretive maxims of Mīmāṃsā philosophy.

By the time of Vijayīndra Tīrtha, a genuine skepticism had begun to arise in Mādhva circles concerning the general applicability of Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics. Although Vijayīndra himself had authored works of the Mīmāṃsā school, he evidently felt no compunction, as did Appayya, regarding the "transgressing" of its "boundaries" in the service of Dvaita theology. In his *Turīyaśivakhaṇḍana* (Crushing the transcendent-fourth Śiva), for instance, Vijayīndra even celebrates the virtue of transgressing Mīmāṃsaka boundaries, which, he contends, was in fact a deliberate and strategic decision on the part of the Mādhva school:

> It is unreasonable to say that the boundary of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā is led astray by such improper application. By saying that the statements of our Teacher [Madhva] were

arrived at merely by his own fancy, one acts like a frog in a well. Only the principles shown by our Teacher possess the fortitude of intellect, and not those shown by others. The disharmonious application of the boundaries of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā is in fact precisely our doctrine.[37]

It is Nārāyaṇācārya, however, who finally threw down the gauntlet, in his *Advaitakālānala,* calling for the wholesale rejection of Mīmāṃsaka reading strategies outside of the narrow confines of Vedic ritual exegesis. Structured as a systematic counterattack on Appayya's *Madhvatantramukhamardana,* the *Advaitakālānala* rejects each one of Appayya's allegations in turn, including the notorious issue of Madhva's recovery—or fabrication—of little-known scriptures. As one may predict, Nārāyaṇācārya was prepared with an equally incisive counterattack for each of Appayya's allegations, attempting to renegotiate the limits of what constitutes acceptable scriptural authority and how we can reliably trust the authenticity of an attested source. In making his case, Nārāyaṇācārya exhibits much of the heightened philological sensitivity marshaled by his near contemporary, Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, in his *Śivatattvarahasya,* never hesitating to bring critical scrutiny to fundamental questions of source criticism.

Take, for instance, the question of metrical flaw, still employed today as a key text-critical principle for determining whether a verse or text has been modified or poorly transmitted over the centuries. Madhva's sources, Appayya tells us, are consistently riddled with metrical errors; thus, we are forced to doubt the faithfulness of their transmission and, as a result, their reliability as authoritative scripture. Nārāyaṇācārya takes a firm and principled stand on the matter based on the legacy of classical Sanskrit metrics, claiming that an innumerable array of variant verse forms are in fact metrically permitted, and, hence, a deviant metrical form cannot be reliably accepted as a criterion for the corruption of a verse. In fact, he reminds us quite correctly that the Mahābhārata is full of metrically deviant verses, all of which are accepted equally as authoritative by his contemporaries. He elaborates:

> For instance, the meter known as *jagatī* consists of twelve syllables, and there are 4,096 mutually distinct subtypes because of their derivations based on their sequential formation of heavy and light syllables. Names, such as *vaṃśastha, drutavilambita,* and so forth, have been designated for a few among them. Such is the case for a single meter; as there may be a greater number of syllables in a given meter, an individual meter may exceed a lakh [of subtypes]. And as for those [well-known] meters such as *śārdūlavikrīḍita* and *sragdharā,* these are applied specifically per verse or per foot. It is not that a single specific meter is demanded by all four lines of a verse.[38]

On the question of metrical flaw, Nārāyaṇācārya is by no means timid in attempting to disarm not only Appayya's arguments but even his principal tools of textual interpretation. What engages his attention throughout the majority of the *Advaitakālānala,* however, is not metrics but Mīmāṃsā. Preoccupying himself

with the analytical power of Mīmāṃsā maxims, and the limits of their applicability, Nārāyaṇācārya calls into question the essential nature of disciplinarity in Sanskrit *śāstra* and the extratextual sectarian significance of disciplinary divisions. Appayya, for his part, being an accomplished Mīmāṃsaka with an ingenious sense of the hermeneutic potential of Mīmāṃsā strategies of interpretation, launches his attacks on Madhva by way of highly specific Mīmāṃsaka principles. Take, for instance, the first verse of the *Madhvatantramukhamardana*—quite likely intended both as an intellectual witticism and as a genuine attack on the scriptural foundations of dualist theology. He writes,

> To those who define the subject of the Brahmasūtras as "Śiva or
> Viṣṇu,"
> It is agreed—we who worship *nirguṇa* brahman accept the *saguṇa* as
> well.
> Little contradiction arises for us, who know the *na hi nindā* maxim.
> Nor should any other interpretation of the Sūtras be suppressed by
> you.[39]

The *na hi nindā* maxim is an interpretive principle paraphrased directly from the *Mīmāṃsāsūtrabhāṣya* (2.4.20) of Śabara, who aims to resolve the potential contradictions in ritual procedure resulting from Vedic passages that appear to censure (*nindā*) a particular sequence of actions. Such blame, Śabara contends, does not prohibit what seems to be prohibited, but rather simply allows room for some other possibility. As he writes, "Blame, after all, is not employed to blame the blameworthy, but rather to praise something other than what is blamed (*na hi nindā nindyaṃ nindituṃ prayujyate, kiṃ tarhi ninditād itarat praśaṃsitum*). As such, what is understood is not a prohibition of what is blamed but rather an injunction of something else."[40]

Appayya, for his part, extracts the *na hi nindā* maxim from its Vedic ritual context and adapts it for the resolution of apparent logical contradictions in other scriptures, such as the sectarian Purāṇas and the Brahmasūtras. Any scriptural statement that appears to castigate either Śiva or Viṣṇu—or even to deny the nondualistic nature of the world—may simply be interpreted as an optional, contingent description of the true state of affairs. Individual deities, for example, may be equated with the nondual brahman as *saguṇa* manifestations on the force of this same maxim. Apparently exasperated by this approach, Nārāyaṇācārya not only maintains that Appayya's particular uses of Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics are inapplicable as a critique of Madhva's doctrine of dualism, or as a means to determine the identity of or difference between Śiva and Viṣṇu, but he also goes much further and throws into question the more general validity of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā itself as an approach to textual interpretation outside of the narrow confines of Vedic ritual procedure. As he remarks aphoristically in one of his verses: "Mīmāṃsā, set forth

to resolve the contradiction among statements occupying the peak of scripture, is in this case entirely fruitless."[41]

By reducing the consequences of the *na hi nindā* maxim to absurdity, what Nārāyaṇācārya aims to elucidate is the danger involved in haphazardly applying hermeneutical principles without careful attention to what those principles logically entail. When any critical statement can be explained away as optionality, scripture is rendered unable to negate heretical doctrines in simple, declarative statements. Even genuine philosophical refutation becomes logically impossible. By thus attempting to outlaw Mīmāṃsā reading practices in the arena of sectarian debate, Nārāyaṇācārya reveals the growing division between the very tools of textual interpretation employed by rival sectarian traditions. In fact, rather than agreeing on a single shared medium for debate, the two rival traditions began to demarcate certain textual approaches as essentially their own property, distancing themselves from attack and counterattack by attempting to invalidate their opponents' reading practices. In fact, Nārāyaṇācārya enthusiastically accepts Appayya's allegations that Madhva "transgresses the boundaries" of Mīmāṃsā, construing this transgressive maneuver as the culmination of the Mādhva school's mastery of syllogistic logic. No school of philosophy, even Mīmāṃsā, he argues, ought to be accepted as the arbiter of all intellectual activity. Were this the case, one who failed to accept the primacy of "primordial matter" (*prakṛti*) would "transgress" the precepts of the Sāṅkhya school of philosophy, and one who failed to accept the ontological inherence of properties in objects would "transgress" the principles of Vaiśeṣika.

> And as for the claim that even the boundaries of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā are being led astray by improper argumentation, then our response is that we are not the servants of the Pūrva Mīmāṃsakas. We'll proceed with whatever boundaries we like. But rather—
>
> > Statements endowed with logical reasoning are admissible even from a child.
> > Anything else should be abandoned like grass, even if spoken by Brahmā.
>
> Based on this principle, we accept what is reasonable, and we abandon what is unreasonable. This is an ornament, not a fault, for those who propound independent systems of thought. Otherwise, by failing to accept the ontological category of inherence, one would transgress the boundaries of Kaṇāda's [Vaiśeṣika] system, and by failing to accept the primacy of *prakṛti,* one would transgress the boundaries of Sāṃkhya; thus, we by no means consider this a fault. But rather, how could we not perceive you yourself—who have accepted the singularity of the self, the universal brahman, the falsehood of the world, and the fact that the Veda teaches falsehood— as having transgressed the boundaries of all systems apart from the Buddhists.[42]

In short, Nārāyaṇācārya turns Appayya's allegation on its head—transgressing the hermeneutics of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā is no fault at all but rather a dearly held principle of argumentation and interpretation. Despite—or perhaps even because

of—the vehemence of his argumentation, Nārāyaṇācārya manages both to solidify the boundaries between their respective sectarian communities and, in the process, to draw widespread scrutiny across sectarian boundaries to the very reading practices that had been taken for granted for centuries as the foundations of textual interpretation. As a result, the source material of sectarian debate became the source of a widespread reconsideration of textual interpretation itself, as intellectuals from all camps contributed to an incisive reconsideration of just how the texts they had long taken for granted really do mean what we think they mean.

THE MANY MEANINGS OF *NĀRĀYAṆA:* ETYMOLOGY AND LEXICOGRAPHY IN INTERSECTARIAN DEBATE

As a tradition justly renowned for its rigorous analysis of the form and function of language, Sanskrit textual culture has always made room for etymology. Commentators in all subdisciplines habitually gravitated toward both historical etymology—namely, the morphological derivation of words provided by Pāṇinian grammar—and various techniques of semantic etymology, such as Yāska's Nirukta, a school of thought devoted to deriving the meaning of Vedic texts from the level of the word upward. Both Pāṇinian Vyākaraṇa and Nairuktika etymology continued to flourish throughout the second millennium in south India, particularly as exegetical tools for defending sectarian-specific interpretations of scripture. Among noteworthy sectarian iconoclasts, Madhva in particular initiated a number of new and controversial approaches to Vedic exegesis, demarcating new boundaries for the scope and applicability of etymological analysis. In order to establish Viṣṇu himself as the "great purport," or *mahātātparya,* of Vedic scripture, Madhva proposed new parameters for the very meaning of Vedic words themselves. Viṣṇu, he argued, being the sole entity in possession of all perfect attributes (*guṇaparipūrṇatva*), could literally be denoted by every single word in the Vedic corpus (*sarvaśabdavācyatva*), each of which held the capacity to signify one of his unique properties.[43]

In light of these contentious claims, it is no wonder that Madhva's dialectic strategies sparked centuries of debate across south India as to the limits and proper applications of etymological analysis. As sectarian tensions escalated in subsequent centuries, theologians of all lineages seized upon this new permissiveness to elevate etymological speculation to new heights. Succinctly, we witness two distinctive trends in the approach to word meaning over the early modern centuries, cultivated expressly for the purpose of proving the superiority of one sect over another. First, theologians cultivated a predilection for what we might call "extreme etymology." Reminiscent of the passion for *śleṣa,* or extreme feats of language, that spread like wildfire among the literary circles of south India in particular,[44] sectarian advocates strove to outdo their competitors in the complexity

or even sheer number of etymologies they could defensibly derive from the name of their chosen deity.

One noteworthy example is a remarkable composition by the notable Mādhva theologian Vijayīndra Tīrtha, the *Nārāyaṇaśabdārthanirvacaṇa* (Etymology of the meaning of the word Nārāyaṇa). Circulated as a pamphlet-sized handbook for the possible derivations for this popular name of Viṣṇu, the *Nārāyaṇaśabdārthanirvacaṇa* assembles well over one hundred (126, to be precise) etymological explanations for the name *Nārāyaṇa,* all conforming precisely to the strictures of Pāṇinian grammatical analysis. Through such etymological feats, Vijayīndra effectively unites the supposed legitimacy of Pāṇinian grammatical derivation with a Nirukta-like freedom to derive any semantic meaning demanded by the commentator's theological agenda. Elsewhere, Vijayīndra Tīrtha proves capable of subordinating even the most obvious primary word meanings to his creative etymologies. For instance, in his *Turīyaśivakhaṇḍana*—a treatise aimed explicitly at refuting the existence of a "transcendent fourth" Paramaśiva—Vijayīndra defends his characteristically Mādhva claim that *all* names of deities in the Vedic corpus ought to be interpreted primarily as signifiers of the god Viṣṇu, a principle he extracts from the Ṛgvedic passage "yo devānāṃ nāmadhā eka eva," construed rather problematically by Madhva as "He who is the one single name of all the gods." As he writes, "And moreover, through examination of the scriptural citation 'yo devānāṃ nāmadhā eka eva,' one establishes the conclusion that Nārāyaṇa alone is the single chief purport of the names of all gods. Otherwise, one would be forced to block the primary signification of the restrictive limitation: *one single name.*"[45]

In fact, the names of deities themselves, such as Nārāyaṇa, had become prime objects of contestation for entire generations of sectarian polemicists.[46] Names of individual deities do occur frequently in Vedic and Purāṇic literature, but by the sixteenth century many of these names had long since acquired a conventional association with one of the two principal sectarian deities of Vaidika Hindus. In such a context, given Vedic statements declaring that both "Īśāna" and "Nārāyaṇa" are the supreme deity, the sole source of the universe, it is all but inevitable that commentators should resort to strategic etymology to demonstrate that one or the other does *not* signify Śiva or Viṣṇu, respectively, as custom would hold. As a result, etymological virtuosity soon became a prized commodity among prominent theologians who wished to establish the absolute supremacy of one sectarian deity over the other.

The name *Nārāyaṇa* in particular came to occupy a central strategic position in these debates, as Vaiṣṇava expositors struggled to secure the name exclusively for Viṣṇu, and Śaiva commentators contrived some alternative explanation for why the name referred either to a transcendent Paramaśiva exclusively or to all three deities of the Trimūrti—Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Rudra-Śiva. Moreover, their explanations of

how *Nārāyaṇa* means what they propose it means draw on the heights of grammatical, etymological, and philological reasoning from across disciplines. One has only to survey the *New Catalogus Catalogorum* or any of the major manuscript libraries to observe a proliferation of treatises concerned with *ṇa-tva,* or the grammatical rules prompting retroflection of the nasal *n* in Sanskrit words and compounds, their origins concentrated quite specifically in early modern south India.[47] In essence, this peculiar fascination was no disinterested collective inquiry into morphological grammar; rather, the aim was to establish why *Nārāyaṇa* exhibited its retroflection in the final syllable, and what the implications of this retroflex were for the meaning of this highly contested name.

On the other hand—perhaps in response to such feats of extreme etymology— more circumspect theologians began to direct a critical gaze toward both the very concept of word meaning and the tools traditionally used to ascertain that meaning. If etymology can truly establish that a word signifies any deity or quality desired, what explanatory value does it possess? And, if traditional meanings of words and names can easily be undermined by etymological sleight of hand, of what use is a dictionary that tells us that *Nārāyaṇa* means "Viṣṇu"? It is this critical reflectivity toward disciplinary approaches to word meaning that occupied the attention of many of Appayya's, Vijayīndra's, and Nārāyaṇācārya's near contemporaries. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is a dialogical exchange between a Smārta-Śaiva exegete, Govinda Nāyaka, and a Vaiṣṇava rival whose name remains unknown, in which the two debate the true meaning of the name *Nārāyaṇa* and the disciplinary approaches suitable for arriving at its true meaning.

Both the original Smārta treatise and the Vaiṣṇava response, which replies directly to the Smārta work in question, have been preserved in the same bundle at the Adyar Library and Research Centre in Chennai,[48] providing us with a unique opportunity to witness sectarian polemical exchange in action. What is most fascinating about this exchange, however, is that each opponent integrates a programmatic methodological statement into the substance of his claim, differing not only as to *what* the name *Nārāyaṇa* means but also *how* we can justifiably discern its signification. On the Smārta side, Govinda Nāyaka advocates etymology as the principal authority for determining word meaning, whereas his Vaiṣṇava interlocutor defends lexicography as the deciding factor in adjudicating signification. In the process, we meet with a substantive exchange regarding the relative merits of etymology and lexicography themselves as knowledge systems and tools for sectarian debate.

The first of these works, the *Nārāyaṇaśabdasādhāraṇya* of Govinda Nāyaka, advocates the Smārta position, arguing that the name *Nārāyaṇa* simultaneously signifies each deity of the Trimūrti—Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Rudra-Śiva. He declares his intention plainly at the outset of the pamphlet: "It is well-known in literature such as the Purāṇas that, based on the conventional usage by the learned and etymology,

the term *Nārāyaṇa* is expressive of the Trimūrti—that is, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva." As evidence for this rather bold assertion, Govinda Nāyaka proceeds to exemplify creative etymologies that construe the name *Nārāyaṇa* as referring to each of the three deities, corroborating these etymologies with Purāṇic citations that narrate these same meanings in well-known mythological episodes. Like the clever etymologies of Vijayīndra Tīrtha, Govinda Nāyaka's glosses hinge on pedantic references to such unlikely Sanskrit lexemes as *ṇa,* a "word" that possesses the virtue of simultaneously accounting for the peculiar retroflexion in the compound *Nārāyaṇa.* Drawing on the various attested meanings of *ṇa,* for instance, he explains the name *Nārāyaṇa* as follows: "*Nāra* is the aggregate of individual souls, or *nara*-s. The one from whom liberation [is given] to that [aggregate] [is Nārāyaṇa]. *Ṇa,* in fact, indicates liberation, as attested in the *Ratnamālā:* '*Ṇa* refers to a lotus or knowledge.' The dative case ending is not elided."[49] And subsequently: "Or, *Nārāyaṇa* refers to the *ṇa,* or 'lover,' of the *nāra,* the aggregate of women in Vraja. The dative case ending is not elided, as in the compound 'lover to Ahalyā.'[50] The word ṇa, in the *Ratnamālā,* is said to refer to a lover, Bhairava, a thorn, or a sound."[51]

In the above examples, the name *Nārāyaṇa* is construed in the conventionally accepted sense, as an alternative name for Viṣṇu. The true force of Govinda Nāyaka's argument comes into view, however, when he applies the same etymological strategies to render the name *Nārāyaṇa* capable of signifying Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva equally. Just as the name was construed above to signify "the lover of the women of Vraja," a meaning that unmistakably refers to the Vaiṣṇava theology of Kṛṣṇa, the same name, he argues, can be derived to reveal hidden references to the canonical mythology of Śiva or Brahmā. These references, in turn, once revealed, demonstrate a genuine ontological capacity within the name *Nārāyaṇa* to bring to mind the gods Śiva and Brahmā to the same degree as Viṣṇu. Take, for instance, the following alternative etymologies, which evoke the motifs of Śiva as Gaṅgādhara, bearer of the river Ganges, and Brahmā as originating from the lotus-navel of Viṣṇu:

> Or, [Śiva is so called] because of his being the abode of the water of the Gaṅgā—or *nāra. Nāra*s are clearly defined as "waters" in the Kūrma Purāṇa. In various locations in the Purāṇas, the word *Nārāyaṇa* is revealed as referring to Śiva.[52]

> Now is clarified the fact that the word *Nārāyaṇa* can also refer to the Four-Faced [Brahmā]. . . . He of whom the lotus stalks, or *nāla,* arising from [Viṣṇu's] navel are *ayana*s—that is, they take the form of paths for coming and going. *Ayana* is used in the sense of "refuge" or "path." In the Śiva Purāṇa, [we encounter such a usage of the term *nāla*]: "O sage, having gone on each *nāla* for a hundred years, he mounted the lotus by means of the path of the *nāla,* O sage.[53]

This approach is no mere parlor trick; rather, the author intends to advance a genuine argument about the intrinsic signifying capacity of the name *Nārāyaṇa,*

which, in turn, holds serious implications for the orthodox Vaidika pedigree of non-Vaiṣṇava Hindu sects. Etymology, traditionally, is a fundamental criterion for the signifying capacity (*śakti*) of a word. By attesting valid Pāṇinian etymologies of the sacred name *Nārāyaṇa* that unambiguously evoke Śiva and Brahmā, Govinda Nāyaka implies that the Vedas themselves, when using the name *Nārāyaṇa,* simultaneously inculcate the authority of each of the three deities of the Trimūrti through the signifying capacity (*śakti*) of that single name. On this basis, Śaivas would be able to advance a Vedic exegetical defense of the transcendence of a unitary Paramaśiva, who is beyond name and form, encompassing all three subordinate deities—including Viṣṇu, who is referred to directly by the name *Nārāyaṇa.* Govinda Nāyaka himself hints at just such an implication: "Or, all names may apply to all deities, because the three are reflections of one consciousness."[54] In essence, the project is to undercut the Mādhva concept of *sarvaśabdavācyatva,* "being signified by all names," from the Vedas, so that it refers not to Viṣṇu but to the nondual, absolute Paramaśiva. And furthermore, if all three deities can be proven ontologically equivalent on etymological grounds, there can be no possibility of presuming an inherent difference in the Purāṇas of Śaiva, Brāhma, and Vaiṣṇava origin on the grounds of their respective authorship alone.

In the second of the two tracts, the *Nārāyaṇaśabdanirukti,* an anonymous Vaiṣṇava polemicist attempts to refute these claims, maintaining that the name *Nārāyaṇa* refers exclusively to Viṣṇu in common parlance. Taking refuge in the old maxim "Customary usage supersedes etymology" (*rūḍhir yogam apaharati*), the author contends that etymological sophistry bears no relationship to the actual semantic function of a word, whether in scripture or worldly discourse. To the contrary, if one were free to provide alternative etymological explanations for any scriptural term, including names of deities, chaos would result, especially in the domain of ritual. Given that particular religious observances are prescribed in Purāṇic scriptures as appropriate for the worship of each individual deity, one would be free to substitute any of the ritual instructions or implements at will simply by replacing the name *Śiva* with *Viṣṇu.* As our Vaiṣṇava polemicist warns us:

> Then, the following could be said: a statement that prohibits worshipping Viṣṇu with unhusked barleycorns would signify the prohibition of worshipping Śiva with unhusked barleycorns. A statement prescribing *darśan* of Śiva at dusk would prescribe the *darśan* of Viṣṇu at dusk. A statement that prescribes the observance of a vow for Viṣṇu on the Ekādaśī (the eleventh day of the lunar fortnight) would then prescribe the observance of that vow for Śiva on the Ekādaśī, and so forth. Because the consequence would be entailed that all rituals described in the Purāṇas, and so forth, could be practiced however one desires, the differential arrangements of Vedic practices would be dissolved, and no sin would accrue to those who practiced in whatever manner they wished.[55]

Clearly, for both interlocutors, the etymology of the name *Nārāyaṇa* was by no means a matter restricted to academic pedantry; rather, both sides believed the issue had wide-ranging consequences for the regulation of public religious observances across sectarian lines. Philology, in short, facilitated the adjudication of religious practice. For our present purposes, however, what is most interesting is the conceptual consequences of this polemical interaction—that is, the pressure that exchanges such as this one placed on those who would reflect on core textual practices of textual interpretation within the Sanskrit knowledge systems. In the present scenario, Govinda Nāyaka and his Vaiṣṇava opponent did not rest their cases at the proposal and refutation of individual etymologies; rather, their exchange overflowed the boundaries of pure polemic, sparking deeper theoretical reflections about the utility of etymological modes of interpretation. Govinda Nāyaka, for his part, defends the practice of "extreme etymology" on theoretical grounds, dismissing not only the maxim "Customary usage supersedes etymology" but also the discipline of lexicography itself and its authority with regard to word meaning. On the limitations of the standard Sanskrit lexicon, Govinda Nāyaka writes,

> One might argue that because [the word *Nārāyaṇa*] appears in lexicons as referring to Viṣṇu in such passages as "Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa, Kṛṣṇa," and so forth, it cannot refer commonly to the triad of deities—this is not correct. What is commonly known from a lexicon, after all, serves merely for the education of children. Otherwise, words not included [in the lexicon] could not possibly refer to Viṣṇu. Precisely the same would be true as well for words referring to Brahmā and Śiva. . . .
>
> Therefore, because words such as *Nārāyaṇa* are revealed in the Purāṇas as referring to the triad of deities, it should be understood that such words are construed through a restriction of their signifying power as referring to Viṣṇu [alone]. For that very reason, Kaiyaṭa has explained that a word, which possesses multiple signifying capacities, is applied to a signified entity by means of the delimitation of the word's signifying power. Such is the case with the application of the word *twice-born,* which signifies a member of the three classes, to the Brahmin in particular owing to the currency of this usage among the ignorant—after all, it is revealed in the Nāradīya: "'twice-borns' are Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas." Likewise, when the words *Brahmin* or *Smārta* are employed, although they signify Smārtas, Vaiṣṇavas, Mādhvas, [and] Śaivas, only Smārtas are understood, rather than Vaiṣṇavas and the rest, owing to the currency of such usage among the ignorant. And the same occurs as well with the word *Nārāyaṇa.*[56]

At first glance, Govinda Nāyaka's argument may strike the reader as intuitively plausible. After all, does a word acquire its power to convey meaning simply because its definition appears in a dictionary? To the contrary, authors of lexicons have selected the principal definitions of words so as to meet the needs of a rather restricted audience—namely, those who have no prior acquaintance with a word, and who thus require a straightforward indication of its most frequently attested meaning. Moreover, if a specific idiomatic sense of a word has gained currency in

popular discourse, lexicons will be more likely to point readers toward this specific meaning rather than toward the full range of the word's denotative capacity. This is the case with words such as the term *Smārta,* which, in classical literature signified all individuals learned in the *smṛti*s, but which in early modern south India came to refer exclusively to one particular sectarian community. Theoretically speaking, Govinda Nāyaka refers to this linguistic phenomenon as the "restriction" of a word's signifying capacity (*śakti*). And by restricting the signification of a word for a particular purpose, he argues, one cannot genuinely curtail the word's capacity to denote a wide range of meanings in various contexts.

Where Govinda Nāyaka's opponent differs, however, is on the very nature of lexicography as a discipline. Specifically, he draws our attention to the intensely philological practice of compiling a dictionary, an enterprise that requires a sustained engagement with living speech communities as well as with the extensive canon of texts written in the Sanskrit language. A lexicon is not, ideally speaking, simply a collection of signposts for the ignorant; rather, producers of dictionaries aim to compile the range of meanings attested for a word across all extant genres of textuality, orienting the discerning reader both to the statistically most significant meanings and those specialized senses of words that are restricted to particular contexts. Presented with such a lexicon—that is, one that has been compiled through an exhaustive philological analysis of all major textual genres—no responsible exegete should ascribe a meaning to a Purāṇic name that has never before been attested in the history of Sanskrit textuality. And if a passage attesting an improbable meaning for a term happens to be found, it would more than warrant suspicion of interpolation, particularly in a Purāṇic corpus biased toward the sectarian faction the citation favors. As our Vaiṣṇava polemicist argues,

> For, a lexicon does not of its own accord restrict the signifying power of a word, generally used by prior authors in various senses, to a single object. Nor does it state that a word generally employed by prior authors in a restricted set of senses can in fact be taken in a variety of senses. Rather, it states that a word possesses signifying capacities with regard to precisely those meanings for which it has attained currency, which are not contrary to general usage, and do not provoke the scorn of learned people—because, like grammar, lexicography is subordinate to actual usage. Otherwise, a lexicon would not be usable by all people. Thus, a lexicon of its own accord clearly defines the conventional meaning, which has become current owing to repeated usage by a multitude of people, so that it may be easily understood.[57]

In other words, to explain that words such as *Nārāyaṇa* have one commonly accepted meaning does not require a theoretical appeal to the "restriction" of signifying power. Rather, critical reasoning and extensive reading across genres is sufficient to alert the discerning mind that *Nārāyaṇa* simply does not mean "the one who bears the river Ganges" in any naturally occurring citation. While, conveniently for the Vaiṣṇava case, words such as Śiva (auspicious), Īśāna (Lord),

Maheśvara (Great Lord), and other names of the god Śiva regularly function as descriptive adjectives in the Mahābhārata, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, and other religious texts, "words such as *Nārāyaṇa,*" the Vaiṣṇava polemicist maintains, "despite their intrinsic generalizability, *do not* occur in general usage in such narrative passages as referring to something other than *Nārāyaṇa,* either independently or as qualifying adjectives. . . . The word *Nārāyaṇa* is not observed to be employed in the sense of *Śiva,* and so forth, anywhere *except in the statements you have exemplified.*"[58] Extreme etymology, quite simply, stretches the common sense of philology beyond all reasonable credulity. Our author rests his case, concluding by impugning the textual integrity of the passages from the Śaiva Purāṇas that Govinda Nāyaka cites in defense of his alternative etymologies of *Nārāyaṇa:*

> The employed usages that you have cited as conveying the fact that the word *Nārāyaṇa* refers to Śiva are *not* exemplified in texts such as the *Nīlakaṇṭha Bhāṣya, Śivārkamaṇidīpikā, Śivastutisūktimālikā, Śivatattvaviveka,* and *Śaivakarṇāmṛta,*[59] [which were written] by followers of the Śaiva doctrine who are extremely self-interested, for the purpose of establishing that the word *Nārāyaṇa* refers to Śiva. Nor do we exemplify them when attempting to refute them, a process that involves recording each individual line contained in those texts. Moreover, because in the Mahābhārata, and other works as well, interpolations are observed, it is difficult to avoid the doubt that interpolations may exist in extremely prolix works such as the Śiva Purāṇa and the Skanda Purāṇa, as these works are generally compiled by Śaivas alone. After all, fabricated texts on the greatness of sacred centers, which concern *modern temples* and other sites, are being composed and attributed precisely to the Skanda Purāṇa, the Śiva Purāṇa, and so forth. Thus the passages you cite are not Purāṇic at all.[60]

Indeed, our author's final allegation is genuinely credible: early modern south India had witnessed the emergence of Purāṇic factories, of sorts, fabricating a mythological past (sacred "narratives of place," or *talapurāṇam*s, Skt. *sthalapurāṇa*s) for devotional sites across the Tamil country—Madurai being no exception, as will be discussed in the next chapter. As the Vaiṣṇava counterattack on the *Nārāyaṇaśabdanirukti* reaches its logical conclusion, readers are led to the same state of guarded skepticism that Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita encounters in his *Śivatattvarahasya.* When implausible proof texts surface in debate, sectarian philologians apply a renewed critical gaze to the textual integrity of sectarian scripture itself, warning against the ever-present reality of textual drift and, consequently, the dangers interpolation can pose for responsible scriptural exegesis. Throughout this exchange, Govinda Nāyaka and our anonymous Vaiṣṇava polemicist advance arguments far removed from the doctrinal claims of sectarian theology. In search of common ground for contestation, both opponents have turned instead to the disciplinary tools of textual hermeneutics, generating an informed reconsideration of the limits of two key approaches to semantic analysis. Each of the two,

etymology and lexicography, although supported by centuries of classical learn-
ing, appear to the eyes of early modern polemicists as themselves contingent ana-
lytic devices, subject to application only within the restricted confines of cautious
philological reasoning.

PHILOLOGY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Despite their passing preoccupation with lexicons and retroflexes, sixteenth- and
seventeenth-century scholars had become increasingly fascinated with the social
significance of public sectarian comportment. Markers of membership in a par-
ticular sectarian community became the object of new contestation and critical
inquiry, and creativity in the hermeneutic feats employed to justify the usage of
these insignia rose dramatically. Take, for instance, the practice of applying the
tripuṇḍra—three stripes of ash—to the forehead to publicly signal one's identity
as an orthodox Śaiva. Early modern Smārta-Śaivas, such as Appayya Dīkṣita and
Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, had adopted a line of scriptural defense for the practice of
applying the *tripuṇḍra* that hinges on a striking interpretation of a verse from
the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, one that has generated as much controversy among
seventeenth-century *śāstrin*s as among contemporary scholars:

> By the power of austerity and the grace of god, the learned
>   Śvetāśvatara
> Knew brahman and proclaimed to the *atyāśramin*s that pure
>   Supreme, worshipped by the company of sages.[61]

The key term in this verse is *atyāśramin.* Many contemporary translators adopt
an additive approach to construing this perplexing term, rendering "*ati-āśrama,*"
as "beyond the *āśrama*s," that is, having transcended the four stages of life.[62] And
indeed, speculation from within the Sanskrit knowledge systems seems to justify
this interpretation. Advaitin theologians, beginning with Śaṅkarācārya, adopted
terms such as *atyāśramin* to speak of a class of renunciants, often *jīvanmukta*s
(those liberated while alive), who had passed beyond the strictures of the tradi-
tional social order.[63] More recently, however, leading scholars of early Śaivism have
discovered that the term *atyāśrama,* in its original usage, in fact is closely asso-
ciated with a group of Atimārgic Pāśupatas.[64] That is, Śaiva scriptures, as early
as the Niśvāsamūlasūtra (ca. fifth century C.E.), speak of two principal subsets of
Śaiva lineages: the Atimārga—in subsequent centuries including such groups as
the Pāñcārthika Pāśupatas, Kāpālikas, and Kālāmukhas—and the Mantramārga,
commonly associated with Āgamic Śaivism (such as the Śaiva Siddhānta). Among
the former, initiates are said to adopt a practice known either as the *atyāśrama* vow
(*atyāśramavrata*) or the Great Pāśupata vow (*mahāpāśupatavrata*), an observance

that later Śaiva exegetes understand quite rightly to involve smearing the entire body in ash (*bhasmoddhūlana*).

Among Western Indologists, the recovery of this Śaiva sense of *atyāśrama*—and the religious sensibilities it was intended to evoke—figures among the more noteworthy discoveries of the past decades. Nevertheless, equal credit must be granted to the Smārta-Śaiva philologians of the early modern period, who themselves had recovered the same historical sense of the term *atyāśramin,* which had fallen into ambiguity for earlier Advaita Vedānta philosophers. Having amassed Upaniṣadic, Purāṇic, and Āgamic citations that contained the troubling term, Smārta polemicists ascertained correctly that the *atyāśramavrata* and *pāśupatavrata* were synonymous and involved the practice of smearing the body with ash. By the seventeenth century, however, Nīlakaṇṭha and his colleagues had added a polemical twist to their interpretation of this problematic term, claiming that *atyāśrama* literally referred not to the smearing of ash but, more specifically, to the prescription to apply the *tripuṇḍra* to the forehead, the Śaiva sectarian *tilaka.* By doing so, they had essentially uncovered a Vaidika proof text for a distinctively Śaiva sectarian practice—a practice, in fact, that publicly demarcated one's identity as an orthodox Śaiva.

Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita explores the matter in some detail in his *Saubhāgyacandrātapa,* his unpublished manual of Śrīvidyā ritual, outlining the scriptural injunctions for the application of the *tripuṇḍra:*

> In the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, it is revealed:

> "By the power of austerity and the grace of god, the learned
>   Śvetāśvatara,
> knower of brahman, proclaimed to the *atyāśramin*s that pure Supreme, enjoyed by the company of sages."[65]

> On this matter, at the end of the procedure for applying the *tripuṇḍra* is revealed the following statement in the Brahmottarakhaṇḍa:

> "Supreme gnosis, capable of severing transmigration, belongs to
>   those alone
> By whom was practiced long ago this *atyāśrama dharma.*

> The fact that the bearing of the *tripuṇḍra* is established here to be expressed by the term *atyāśrama* is corroborated by the following praise of instruction in the knowledge of brahman in the Kālāgnirudropaniṣad, which establishes [the bearing of the *tripuṇḍra*] as a prerequisite knowledge of brahman:

> "He should make three straight lines: this *śāmbhava* vow is described by the knowers of the Veda in all the Vedas. One who desires liberation should practice it for the cessation of rebirth. Whichever learned celibate student, householder, forest dweller, or ascetic makes such a *tripuṇḍra* with ash is purified of all unforgivable sins."[66]

Vaiṣṇavas, as one might imagine, were by no means satisfied with this line of reasoning and took great pains to provide alternative explanations. Take, for instance, the celebrated Mādhva scholar Vijayīndra Tīrtha, who, in his *Turīyaśivakhaṇḍana,* expresses some trepidation regarding the prevalent Śaiva interpretation of the term *atyāśrama:* "Some people, however, accepting the meaning of the term *atyāśrama* as stated in the *smṛti*s on the force of contextualization and so forth, say that it refers to the eligibility for a certain kind of knowledge. Suffice it to say that we will explain when deliberating on the statement from the Atharvaśiras why smearing with ash, bearing the *tripuṇḍra,* and so forth *do not* constitute a prerequisite for the knowledge of brahman."[67]

Vijayīndra Tīrtha, it appears, was well aware of the ground Śaivas sought to gain through their philological endeavors, and had taken steps to counter their claims. By his use of the phrase *prakaraṇādivaśāt* (on the force of contextualization and so forth), Vijayīndra again appears to prefigure Nārāyaṇācārya in expressing a distrust of Mīmāṃsaka strategies of interpretation, which, as Nārāyaṇācārya had claimed, facilitate counterintuitive—and often simply unreasonable—construals of scripture. By way of reply, he proposes a much more conservative interpretation, founded not on historical precedent but on the strictures of Pāṇinian grammar. Compounded from the prefix *ati* and a well-known word for the Brahminical stages of life, a term such as *atyāśrama,* according to Vijayīndra, cannot plausibly be interpreted in a sense so distant from its historical etymological derivation. Drawing on Pāṇini's Sūtra 1.04.095 (*atir atikramaṇe*), he maintains that, "in the Kaivalya Upaniṣad, the word *atyāśrama* as well, appearing at the beginning and end of the text, ought reasonably to be construed as referring to the stage of life of the ascetic. It is not reasonable to hope to prove on the strength of even this term that the Kaivalya Upaniṣad is about Śiva."[68]

And yet Vijayīndra's words of caution did little to restrain the philological inquiry of his Śaiva opponents; in fact, Śaivas of the next generation would take their inquiry a step further, launching a comprehensive inquiry into the historical attestations of the term *atyāśrama* in *śruti* and Purāṇic narrative. Echoing Nīlakaṇṭha's own position, a remarkably similar argument surfaces perhaps a century later in a lengthy polemical tome titled the *Īśavilāsa,* composed by one "Appayya Dīkṣita"[69]—most likely not identical with the sixteenth-century polymath of the same name. The author of the *Īśavilāsa* presents an exhaustive study of the relevant scriptures,[70] establishing from his encyclopedic array of citations that the terms *atyāśramavrata, pāśupatavrata,* and *śirovrata* are synonymous, and that they refer to the practice of applying the *tripuṇḍra* as well as to smearing the body with ash. Building on this philological apparatus, however, he takes his conclusion a step further. This Appayya Dīkṣita arrives at the conclusion that those who wish to know brahman are not only enjoined explicitly by scripture to apply the *tripuṇḍra* but also expressly forbidden from applying any other sectarian

insignia, including the *ūrdhvapuṇḍra,* the Vaiṣṇava sectarian *tilaka.* As our author writes, "Thus, because the vow of the *tripuṇḍra* and of the smearing with ash literally prohibits bearing another *puṇḍra,* the numerous other statements prohibiting the *ūrdhvapuṇḍra* based on this, found in the Vaśiṣṭha and Liṅga Purāṇas, the Parāśara Upapurāṇa, the Mānava[dharmaśāstra], the Sūtasaṃhitā, and the Sāmba Purāṇa are not written here so as to avoid prolixity."[71]

Among the verses "Appayya Dīkṣita" cites in defense of his argument is an intriguing narrative episode he unearthed from the Kūrma Purāṇa, in which the sage Śvetāśvatara himself—notorious from the original attestation of *atyāśramin* in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, described here as the "Mahāpāśupata"[72]—arrives wearing only a loincloth, his body smeared with ash, and instructs King Suśīla in the practice of the *atyāśrama* vow, which the texts equate with the "entire essence of the Vedas."[73] From this Kūrma Purāṇa passage, our author concludes the "Pāśupata" and *atyāśrama* vow refer commonly to a single practice that involves the bearing of ash, mandated by a veritable constellation of reliable scriptures and incumbent on members of all castes who wish to attain knowledge of brahman.[74] While partisan in the extreme, Appayya's argument speaks to a genuine philological perseverance—a willingness to return straight to the sources to uncover the roots of sectarian practice in his own day and age. This, in fact, is precisely what he discovered. The Kūrma passage in question provides us with a remnant of a Vedicized Pāśupata lineage that derived its own authority from the sage Śvetāśvatara, an ideal figurehead, as the Vaidika scripture named for him provides a genuine defense of Pāśupata Śaivism.[75] As a member of a much later movement of Vaidika Śaivas, "Appayya" came to this same conclusion, marshaling his text-critical analysis in support of the polemical ambitions of his contemporary sectarian community.

Bearing the *tripuṇḍra,* in other words, was fashioned as a foundational precept of public orthopraxy through the textual inquiries of public philologians. But how would this precept apply to those who had adopted esoteric religious commitments? In other words, among orthoprax Smārta-Śaivas, what mark ought a practitioner of Śrīvidyā to display? Nīlakaṇṭha addresses the issue at some length in his *Saubhāgyacandrātapa:*

> Now one might object: "Bearing the *tripuṇḍra* applies to worshippers of Śiva, but devotees of the goddess ought not to apply ashes. . . . If such is argued, then because the tripuṇḍra of ash is prescribed as a component of the worship of Śiva along with the goddess [Sāmba] in the Kaivalyopaniṣad, . . . and since I myself will establish in the fourth chapter that *Śrīvidyā practitioners are in fact worshippers of Śiva* along with the goddess, it is absolutely necessary for them as well to apply the *tripuṇḍra.*
>
> Or, if one were to ask as well whether the restriction to smear one's body with sandalwood paste ought to be accepted by devotees of the goddess, I say no. For as is well known, one ought to bear whatever signifiers are appropriate to the deity one

worships, since the essence of the Tantras enjoins these things: the bearing of garlands of forest flowers and such by Vaiṣṇavas, and the bearing of *rudrākṣa*s by Śaivas. This principle is known in worldly affairs also, as among the retinue of the king and so forth. Thus, in this instance, devotees of the goddess, known as the "Ornamented Queen," auspicious by her full ornamentation of yellow sandal paste, ought also to generally adopt such ornamental attire; this is the essence of the Śākta Tantras. . . . And this attire should not be understood as forbidden to Smārtas.

But, as it is stated in the Kūrma Purāṇa, . . . attire that unsettles worldly people is forbidden. Whatever attire upsets worldly people in a particular place or at a particular time ought to be abandoned, accepting [attire] insofar as it serves the welfare of the world. Thus, in a region populated by simpletons, one should evoke all of this only mentally—one need not show anything externally. It is with this very intention that the *Lalitopākhyāna* stated, "Or, mentally visualized ornamentation."[76]

Nīlakaṇṭha's concern for public appearances in this passage is striking, and all the more so as he appears to be dialoguing directly with an actual group of Śākta contemporaries who were somewhat more exclusivist in their interpretation of Śākta scripture and, certainly, more overt in their public proclamation of identity. As Nīlakaṇṭha himself, on the other hand, is both a devoted practitioner of Śrīvidyā and a staunchly orthodox Śaiva Brahmin, his aim is to synthesize the two categories to whatever extent possible both in theory and practice. Not only does he believe that Śrīvidyā practitioners ought to comport themselves purely as orthodox Smārta-Śaivas in public, bearing only the *tripuṇḍra* and adopting no other external display of their identity, but he also goes so far as to make the categorical claim that Śrīvidyā practitioners *simply are* Smārta-Śaivas by definition.

The *tripuṇḍra,* as it turns out, was by no means the only sectarian marker that had become an issue of broad public contestation. A similar controversy was generated by the practice of bearing of the signs of Viṣṇu branded on one's body, or *taptamudrādharaṇa,* a practice adopted by the Mādhva Vaiṣṇavas that garnered extensive critique both from other Vaiṣṇava traditions and from Smārta-Śaivas. These branded insignia generated a widespread public controversy, as theologians from each camp returned to their scriptures to interrogate the legitimacy of the practice of branding among orthodox, Vedic Hindus. In fact, even Appayya Dīkṣita himself is reputed to have authored a work titled the *Taptamudrākhaṇḍana,* "The Demolition of Branded Insignia." One particularly poignant diatribe on the issue was composed by a certain Vijayarāmārya, titled the *Pākhaṇḍacapeṭikā* (The slap in the face of heretics). It does not take much perusal to glean something of the vehemence of his stance:

And thus, through recourse to groundless statements that contradict scripture, fabricated by the Mādhvas and others and having the mere semblance of Vedic orthodoxy, fools practice the bearing of branded insignia, their minds deluded by the impressions produced by great sins amassed in previous births. Thus they attain a low caste status; at the end of the cosmic dissolution they will enjoy all the fruits of hell.

> And that is precisely why there are a thousand statements existing in various locations that prohibit those with Vedic eligibility to bear branded insignia and prescribe an expiation for bearing them, indicating that hell, and so forth, will result when one fails to perform this expiation. Among these, we exemplify only a sampling.[77]

In short, abstract as they may be on paper, or palm leaf, these philological projects hold major implications for our understanding of the public religious culture of Hindu sectarianism. Whether branded on the arm or smeared on the forehead with ash, sectarian insignia were no small matter for the many southern theologians who were committed to advertising the Vaidika orthodoxy of their chosen sect in public circles. These *tilaka*s, borne directly on the foreheads of sectarian affiliates, delineate a polarized public space in which dialogical partners move not as equals but as embodied signifiers of their religious identity. Bodily displays of identity—and their associated performances—I suggest, served as a primary point of transference between the realms of theology, as a strictly textual enterprise, and religious culture as enacted by practitioners. As a result, the vast upsurge in interest we witness in *philological* topics, such as the textual foundations of the *tilaka* and branding, confront us with the potential ability of theological debate to shift the terrain of religious community formations. Far from constructing a value-neutral space of public exchange, the philological inquiries of Smārta-Śaivas and their rivals visibly demarcated the boundaries between competing sectarian communities. Individuals could instantly distinguish coreligionists from outsiders on the basis of such insignia, which served as indexical signs of one's community of affiliation. As a result, echoes of the exchanges between Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava scholars have left an indelible impression on the religious landscape of south India, fostering a visual demarcation of religious difference.

What, then, is *new*—or, one might even say, *modern*—about the sectarian marks borne by Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas in the seventeenth century? In fact, such insignia were used to mark the bodies of practitioners of both Brahminical Hinduism and non-Brahminical religions from the earliest stages of Indian history. The *tripuṇḍra,* for instance, as our Smārta-Śaivas came to recognize, descends directly from the practices of early Pāśupata ascetics, Śaiva renunciants whose ash-covered limbs were instantly emblematic of their social identity. And yet a closer look reveals a crucial shift in the function of bearing ash between the height of Pāśupata asceticism in the early first millennium and the seventeenth century. As renunciants, Pāśupata ascetics engaged in a soteriological practice aimed at liberating the individual soul from the chains of human existence, and the bearing of ash itself was among the tools designed to sever those chains. Pāśupatas chose to bathe in ash and, likewise, to feign insanity, engaging in lewd displays in public places, not to inform outsiders of their identity, but to cultivate a particular state of being divorced from social reality, which, they believed, would lead directly to liberation. In fact, more advanced Pāśupata practitioners were instructed to conceal the

signs used to mark the body in order to maintain their internal state without the support of external signifiers. What Pāśupata were engaging in, then, was a process of mimesis—of first imitating, then internalizing the characteristic features of the god Śiva in order to transform the initiate into Śiva himself.

In the Western context, a similar process has been discussed by the theorist Giorgio Agamben, who locates a direct parallel between the outward appearance of early Christian monastics and their spiritual state of being, both represented by the word *habitus.* Agamben writes, "To inhabit together thus meant for the monks to share, not simply a place or a style of dress, but first of all a *habitus.* The monk is in this sense a man who lives in the mode of 'inhabiting,' according to a rule and a form of life. It is certain, nevertheless, that cenoby represents the attempt to make habit and form of life coincide in an absolute and total *habitus,* in which it would not be possible to distinguish between dress and way of life."[78]

Much like the Pāśupatas, early Christian monks, according to Agamben, adopted external signifiers, such as the habit, to integrate their way of life with their external appearance. The result, for both, was a personal transformation predicated upon their embodiment, quite literally, of a system of values. In subsequent traditions, however, such as the Franciscan community, theologians began to distinguish between the rules of monastic life, strictures that were meant to be obeyed, and the way of life or inner disposition cultivated as a component of monastic practice. It is this conceptual distinction, Agamben argues, between one's chosen way of life and the rules one follows in public that laid the foundation for the emergence, in the Western tradition, of the idea of public space. This shared public space, in Enlightenment Europe, came to be governed by a common set of rules, adhered to by all participants regardless of their inner convictions. In the Hindu context, early Pāśupata theologians would have found such a concept completely antithetical to the aims of their soteriological practice. And yet this idea of public space is not so distant from the religious public that seventeenth-century Śaiva theologians aimed to cultivate through their public theology.

In essence, there was something distinctly *new* about the role that sectarian markers, such as the *tilaka,* played in defining the boundaries of public space. Unlike in the European case, however, we can speak most accurately not of a public sphere but of *publics* in the plural, as theologians of each community took initiative in reshaping the rules that governed public engagement of devotees and their interactions with those outside the tradition. With this distinction in mind, we begin to find a resolution to the contrast with which we began the present chapter: namely, the bifurcation of Nīlakaṇṭha's religious commitments, privately a devotee of the goddess, publicly a proponent of Smārta-Śaiva orthodoxy. To be a practitioner of Śrīvidyā had little impact on the public comportment of an orthodox Śaiva Hindu, in the mind of Smārta-Śaiva theologians such as Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita. One could bear the *tripuṇḍra*, the Śaiva *tilaka,* in public while maintaining one's personal devotion to the goddess as foundational to one's sense of religious identity.

But if the public theology of the seventeenth century was in fact something *new,* was it also in any meaningful sense *modern?* The religious publics shaped by Nīlakaṇṭha and his colleagues are just that—religiously inflected public spaces defined almost exclusively by practices most scholars would consider decidedly religious in nature. In the canons of classical theory, however, modernity is habitually associated with a teleological trajectory of secularization, such that the terms *public* and *secular* have become prescriptively equated with each other in Western discourse. Even in more recent years, theorists have attempted to define the singularity of modernity, epitomized by the European Enlightenment, as founded upon the limitation of religion in public space. Take, for instance, the work of Charles Taylor (2007), who contends that "almost everyone" would characterize our moment in time as a fundamentally secular age, regardless of one's geographical and cultural point of reference. The secularity of a society, Taylor argues, may imply a virtual evacuation of religion from public space; or in some cases, it may imply the establishment of a socially sanctioned option to eschew belief in a higher power or participation in religious ritual, an option exercised by a significant percent of the population. And yet in the context of early modern India, as well as India today, the character and function of public space diverges sharply from either of these criteria.

In the post-Enlightenment Western world, an individual is said to engage with the larger social world as an *unmarked citizen,* a position of agency unaltered by the individual's identity, whether social, cultural, or religious. While this concept of the universal individual has rightly come under fire by Western theorists in recent decades, it is safe to say that, in India, one typically engages with society not as an unmarked but as a *marked citizen,* qualified by features of caste, gender, regional, and religious identity. In south India, by wearing a Śaiva *tilaka,* a person visibly marks himself as a participant in a certain religious public, as one who is likely to frequent certain temples, observe certain festivals, and accept the authority of certain sacred texts. It tells us little, however, about other aspects of his religious identity, aspects that may prove more integral to understanding his conception of the world or the experience of the divine he professes. It tells us little about the personal ritual practices he has adopted to structure his daily life, or about the saints or deities with whom he cultivates a particular relationship. In the case of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, his public appearance would tell us nothing about his devotional relationship with his preceptor, Gīrvāṇendra Sarasvatī, or about the Śrīvidyā Tantric ritual he practiced to bring about a union with the divine in the form of the goddess Lalitā Tripurasundarī.

Thus, while themselves cultivating a particular devotional experience, theologians such as Nīlakaṇṭha worked in public circles to constitute the boundaries of a community of marked individuals: Śaivas in public, but very possibly something else in the privacy of their homes. What, then, do scholars of religion have to gain by understanding this layering of public and private religion, a key feature of

Hindu religious identity since the early modern centuries? These religious publics, shaped by sectarian Hindu communities, point to an important qualification for our efforts to define Hinduism as a unitary religion. By examining the emergence of the distinct religious publics of early modern south India, I aim to demonstrate that in a fundamental sense, Hinduism has not been homologized. With its multiple religious publics coexisting in the same geographic space, and with its division between public and private modes of religiosity, Hinduism is a religion structured around diversity and bifurcated identities. In modern Indian society, these multiple religious publics make room for difference not by erasing religion in the public sphere but by publicizing it, so to speak, to facilitate the coexistence of diverse realities. The Smārta-Śaiva tradition, in short, epitomizes a popular adage, circulated for centuries, that encapsulates the multilayered experience of Hindu religious identity: "A Vaiṣṇava in public, a Śaiva in the home, a Śākta in the heart.