

INITIATION AND CONVERSION
IN MEDIEVAL SOUTH INDIA:
PAÑCASAMSKĀRA AS HISTORICAL PRACTICE
IN THE ŚRĪVAIṢṆAVA POST-RĀMĀNUJA
HAGIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE

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This paper focuses on the representation of the ritual of the “five rites” (*pañcasamskāra*) in the fourteenth century Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographical text, the Ārāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāpirapāvam. The *pañcasamskāra*, also known as *samāśrayaṇa*, is an initiation ritual undergone by Śrīvaiṣṇava men and women and endows them with the ritual competence to participate fully in the religious and ritual life of the community. I have written at length elsewhere about the significance of the ritual, its description in the ritual literature and its actual performance today.¹ Theoretically, the *pañcasamskāra* consists of five rites to be undergone by the initiate in the following order: the initiate is first branded with the “weapons” of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa in the rite called the *tāpasamskāra*, the insignia of God are painted on various parts of his body in the *puṇḍrasamskāra*, he receives a new Vaiṣṇava name in the *nāmasamskāra*, is imparted important Vaiṣṇava *mantras* in the *mantrasamskāra* and, finally, obtains an idol-form of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa in the last rite called the *yāgasamskāra*. The one early literary evidence we have that at least the branding rite was considered necessary for those who were affiliated in some way to Vaiṣṇavism as early as the ninth century comes from the corpus of Tamil Vaiṣṇavite devotional poetry composed between the seventh and the ninth centuries, Nālāyirattiviappirapantam. There, in Periyālvār’s Tiruppallāṅṭu the poet states that he and his family have through generations served Nārāyaṇa after having been branded by the temple discus and conch.² Further historical or literary evidence is yet to emerge for the prevalence of this practice between this period and the twelfth century, with the composition of

¹ See RAMAN 2005.

² Tiruppallāṅṭu v.7a-b:
tīyirpoliginraceñcutarāli tikaḷtiruccakkarrattin
kōyirporiyālēyurruṅṭuninru kuṭikuṭiyāṭṭeykinrōm.

the hagiographical literature. It is this evidence which is the focus of this paper. In looking at the hagiographical representation of *pañca-saṃskāra*, I suggest that it can be conceived as both an initiatory and a conversion ritual. The paper concentrates on examining how exactly *pañcasamskāra* enables a person to cross over from Śaivism to Vaiṣṇavism. In doing so it also addresses the issue of what “conversion” could have possibly meant in pre-modern India and, further, what the existence of such a ritual which enables “conversion” of some kind might have to say about the nature of sectarian and religious affiliations in medieval Indian society.

The hagiography, the Ārāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāpirapāvam (henceforth, AK), used as the main source evidence for *pañca-saṃskāra* emerged in the two-hundred-year period of Śrīvaiṣṇavism starting from the mid-twelfth century (just after its most prominent teacher Rāmānuja) which saw the development of new genres of religious literature in that tradition.³ The two new genres which arose and which were put to extensive use to explicate theology were devotional commentaries and hagiographies, with the earliest commentaries slightly pre-dating the hagiographies. Both genres were new in that their linguistic medium was an admixture of Tamil and Sanskrit called *maṇipravāla* and they both reflected the primary concern of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community then, which was to affirm the sacred status both of the Nālāyirattiviappirapantam corpus as well as that of its authors, the semi-historical and semi-mythical Ālvārs. It is likely that the first Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiography was the Divyasūricarita of Garuḍavāhana Paṇḍita dating perhaps to the twelfth century A.D.⁴ It was composed in Sanskrit. This was followed by the AK and the Mūvāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāpirapāvam in the fourteenth century as also the Upadeśaratnamālai. These texts, in turn, form the basis for the most comprehensive hagiographical work, the Prapannāmr̥tam of the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries. The AK, whose authorship is attributed to Piṇṇaḷakiya Perumāḷ Jīyar, is the first commentary to be composed in *maṇipravāla*, in the devotional style characteristic of the new genres.

³ I have written extensively about this in my monograph RAMAN 2006.

⁴ There has been a seminal article, exploring the motifs relating to Nammālvār in the Divyasūricarita, by HARDY 1979. For the controversy regarding its dating see JAGADEESAN 1977: 76-81.

The text concerns itself with the community of Śrīvaiṣṇava teachers who precede the author and who form the religious teacher-pupil lineage (*guruparamparā*) of the community. It begins with a description of the splendour of the divine land of Vaikuṅṭha (*nityavibhūtivaibhavam*) and frames the stories of the Ālvārs and Ācāryas within the context of a divine plan of compassion. God, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, troubled by the suffering of ordinary souls in the endless cycle of transmigration decides out of his compassion to rescue them. He wishes actively to help them in attaining highest bliss, a bliss which involves total proximity to him combined with the delights of serving him as one would serve a royal king. He, therefore, decides to send down to earth his own companions, his consorts Bhūmi and Nīlā, the serpent Ananta, the divine bird Garuḍa, the overseer of the divine hordes, Viṣvakṣena, as well as his conch and discus, his crest-jewel and garland as incarnate beings, to show the world the path to salvation. The hagiography likens Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa's action in dealing with mortal souls to a hunter who traps animals by using other animals: he sends to earth those who simulate the human species in order to engender the trust of devout humans. The AK tells us that these divine beings became the Ālvārs born in the different *varṇas*, who composed the Tiviyapirapantam.⁵

Having thus set the stage for the unfolding drama of salvation, the AK then starts to narrate the stories of the Ālvārs in the following order: the three early Ālvārs Poykai, Pūttatālvār and Pēy come first, then Tirumalīcai, Kulacēkarālvār, Periyālvār, Aṅṅāl, Toṅṅaratiṅṅoṭi, Tiruppāṅālvār, Tirumaṅkai, Nammālvār and, finally, Maturakavi. After this sequence the primary line of preceptors comes to an end.

⁵ AK 5-7: *ivarkaḷōpāti saṃsārikaḷum nammaiyanubhavittu anubhavanitaniprītikāritāśeṣāvasthocitāśeṣaśeṣataikaratirūpanityāvadyaniratisayānandarūpamatkaiṅkaryamākīra mahāsampattaip perru vāḷkaikku prāptiyuṅṅāyirukka, ivarkaḷ ittaiyilantiruppatē enru mikavum vyākulāntahkaraṅarāy ... pārttu pārvaivaittu mrgam piṅṅippāraippōlē manusyasajātīyarāna ālvārkaḷaiyiṅṅuvittu jagattait tiruttīyarulaṅvēṅum enru pārttaruḷi srīvatsakaustubhavaijayantivanamāikaḷaiyum, srībhūminilaikaḷaiyum srīpāñcajanīyāyudhālvārkaḷaiyum, anantagaruḍaviṣvakṣenaprabhṛtikaḷaiyum pārttu nīnkaḷ pōy līlavibhūtiyē nānāvarṇaṅkaḷilum avatarittu, akhilātmoddharaṅam paṅṅuṅkōḷ enru niyamittaruḷa ... sarveśvaraṅum avarkaḷukku mayarvarāmatinalamaruḷi avarkaḷ mukhena sarvādhikāramāṅa draviḍavedaruḷa tiviyaprapantaṅkaḷai prakāṣippitaruḷiṅṅān.*

The text indicates this break by inserting a section on the sacred authority of the Nālāyirattiyaprapantam and its didactic value for all Śrīvaiṣṇavas. The line of Ācāryas begins with Nāthamuni and moves on to his disciples Uyyakkoṅṭār and Maṅakkāl Nampi. We then have the story of Yāmunācārya followed by that of Rāmānuja. The narratives concerning Rāmānuja and his disciples (Kūrattālvān, Mutaliyāṅṭān, Yādavaprakāśa, Govinda Bhaṭṭar and Yajñamūrti) form the bulk of the text. The last sections of the AK comprise of the stories of Empār, Parāśarabhaṭṭar and Nañcīyar and conclude with the Ācārya Nampiḷlai whose dates could probably be around the mid-thirteenth/mid-fourteenth century A.D. In all of these narratives of the exemplary teachers of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community I have been able to identify eight episodes where interactions take place involving either the entire ritual of *pañcasamskāra* or some of the rites within it. It is to these episodes, in the chronological order of their occurrence, which I now turn.

EPISODE I: TIRUMAṅKAI ĀLVĀR AND THE AFFIRMATION OF A VAIṢṆAVA IDENTITY

The story of Tirumaṅkai Ālvār, his marriage and domestication, is entwined with the story of a heavenly nymph, an *apsaras* called Tirumāmakaḷ. The nymph has descended to earth to bath on the banks of the Poykai river in Tiruvālināṭu with her companions. Left behind unwittingly by them when she lingers to pluck *kumudā* flowers, the abandoned nymph is encountered by a virtuous physician who is also a devotee of Viṣṇu, a Bhāgavata. He questions her and she narrates an episode relating to her life which links her, prophetically, with Tirumaṅkai Ālvār. She had been visiting the sage Kapila's hermitage in the Himalayan hills when she incurred his displeasure. He cursed her with a birth as a human and also marriage to a lowly person, but seeing her consternation he explains to her how she can alleviate her situation: "Maiden, Parakālan who is born as a portion of my bow has incarnated in order to protect the world and is ruling a kingdom; if you decide to become his wife and make him the best among the Bhāgavatas we will destroy your problems."⁶

⁶ AK 71: *penṇē! jagadrakṣaṇārthamāka ennuṭaiya śāringāmsarāy parakālan avatarittu rājyādhipatiyāyirukkirār, avarukkup patniyāy avarai bhāgavatottamarāy panniṅal un kuraivu aruppōm.*

Happy to help her fulfill her destiny, the Bhāgavata physician takes her home. The nymph is adopted by the childless Bhāgavata couple; she is given the name Kumudavalliyār and reared as their daughter.

Parakālan or Tirumaṅkai comes to hear of the girl's beauty, visits her foster-father on some pretext, and is captivated by the sight of her. He asks for her hand in marriage. Now, to quote from the AK: "The couple agreed to give the girl in marriage to him. But the girl voiced her secret determination (*neñcil adhyavasāyattaic colla*) [saying]: 'I shall not have you promise me to anyone other than one who has had the *pañcasamskāra* preceded by the divine signs (*tiruvilaccinai*) and the name, as in the text: 'branding, the *puṇḍras*, so too the name, *mantra* and the sacrifice being the fifth'. 'Hearing this statement [of hers], he (Tirumaṅkai), as in the adage: 'One should hasten in an auspicious matter' went in great haste to Tirunaraiyūr. There, in front of the deity he took on the brand marks as in the texts: 'They are marked on their shoulder by the discus heated in the fire' and: 'Imprinted with the seals of the temple, the red, lustrous discus, shining in the fire, [as also with] the discus which is divine.' [Then] in accordance with the text: 'All should, according to injunction, wear the *ūrdhvapuṇḍra* of white mud ...' he came back with the twelve *ūrdhvapuṇḍras* such as Keśava, etc. Seeing him, Kumudavalliyār said: 'I shall not take you as a husband unless you feed 1008 Śrīvaiṣṇavas regularly for an entire year, partake of the water used to wash their feet and eat the remains of the food cooked for them.'"⁷

⁷ AK 72-73: *dampatikalum appenpillaiyai ivarkkuk koṭuppatāka ud-yogikka, appenpillaiyum. tāpaḥ puṇḍras tathā nāma mantrō yāgās ca pañcamah enru collapaṭṭa trivilaccinai tirunāmam munnākap pañcasamskāramullavarkaḷoliya marroruvarkennaip pēcaloṭṭēn enru tan neñcil adhyavasāyattaic colla ivarum avvacanatik kēṭṭu śubhasya śīghram enkirapaṭṭiyē ativaraiyōṭē tirunaraiyūrīlē cenru ... nampi tirumunpē vantu agnitaptena cakreṇa bāhumūle tu lāñcitāḥ enrum tīyirpolikinra ceñcuṭarāl tikal tiruccakarattin kōyirporiyālēyorruntū ninru enrum collukirapaṭṭiyē tiruvillaccinaiyum dharittu sarvaiś śvetamṛdā dhāryam ūrdhvapuṇḍraṃ yathāvidhi rujuni sāntarālāni hyaṅkheśu dvādaśāvapi enru collukirapaṭṭiyē keśavādi dvādaśordhvapuṇḍraṅkaḷai uṭaiyarāy vara, kumudavalliyārum ālvāraip pārttu oru samvatsaram nityamāka āyiratteṭṭu srī vaiṣṇavarkaḷai amutuceyvittu avarkaḷuṭaiya srī pādatirthamum taḷikaipprasādamum svīkarittu niraivēri-nāloḷiya nān bhartāvāka aṅgikarippattillai.*

Tirumaṅkai accepts these conditions and after he happily fulfills them, they are married.

EPISODE II: THE CHILDHOOD CEREMONIES FOR YĀMUNA

The second episode deals with the birth of the Ācārya Yāmuna and is connected with childhood rituals (*samskāras*) for the child: “[Maṅakkāl] Nampī came there after hearing of that [birth], exceedingly happy. Then he had the birth ceremony done by Īśvaramuni as prescribed in the following texts: ‘When the birth ceremony is not done, Viṣṇu’s discus should be worn. At the time of the tonsure and the sacred thread ceremony or at the [time] of the study of [Viṣṇu’s] *mantras*, the best among the twice born, wearing according to injunction the discus of Viṣṇu ...’ [and the text]: ‘One should anoint the infant only with the Vaiṣṇava *sūktas*. One should mutter into its right ear the eight-syllabled *mantra* and the *dvaya* and laying one’s hand on its head one should utter the twelve-syllabled *mantra*. After that, one should give it a Vaiṣṇava name which destroys demerit.’ Later, two days after ten days, according to code of conduct laid down by Nāthamuni, he gave the infant the name Lord Yamuna (*yamunattu-raivar*) after the marking and rejoiced.”⁸

We see that in this context, once Yāmuna was born, as the grandson of Nāthamuni, Nāthamuni’s disciple Maṅakkāl Nampī, following the wishes of his deceased *ācārya*, named the child Yamunaittu-raivar after first imprinting him with the divine signs (*tiruvillacinai*) twelve days after the birth ceremony (*jātakarman*) was done. The further childhood *samskāras*, such as feeding the first solid food to the child (*annaprāśana*), tonsure (*caula*), and the thread ceremony

⁸ AK 128-129: *atu kēṭṭu atisaṃtuṣṭarāy nampiyum aṅkēravantu avarukku jātakarmanyālābhe tu viṣṇoś cakrasya dhāraṇam, caulopanayane cāpi tanmantrādhyayane ’pi vā, vidhinā vaiṣṇavañcakram dhārayitvā dvijottamah enrum vaiṣṇavais caiva sūktais ca kuryāt sammarjanam śiṣoḥ, tasya dakṣiṇakarṇe tu japet aṣṭākṣaram dvayam, mūrdhni hastam vinikṣipya japec ca dvādaśākṣaram, nāma kuryāt tataḥ paścāt vaiṣṇavaṃ pāpanāśanam enrum collukirapaṭiyē īśvaramunikaḷaiyum koṇṭu jātakarmaittaiyum cevyittu pattunāḷum kaṭantaviraṅṅānāl śrīmannāthamunikaḷ niyamanaprakārattilē tiruvillacinai munnāka yamunaturairavar enru tirunāmataiyum cāti pritarāy aruliṅār.*

(*upanayana*), which marks the end of childhood, follow this initial ritual in this episode.⁹

EPISODE III: RĀMĀNUJA'S CHILDHOOD

An identical episode is placed, in the hagiography, in Rāmānuja's childhood. Here, the person who becomes active in doing the ritual for him is his maternal uncle Periyatirumalai Nampi, a disciple of Yāmunācārya. After Rāmānuja's birth Āsuri Keśavapperumāḷ has his birth ceremony, the *jātakarman*, performed. Then, according to the hagiographical account, Periya Nampi comes to hear of the birth and visits the parents. He suggests to the father, Keśavasomayāgin and a great Vedic sacrificer himself, that the child be named ḷaiyālvār, "The Younger Lord," which is Tamil for Rāmānuja. Hence, says the AK, "On the twelfth day, during the naming ceremony which was preceded by giving him the divine signs, they gave him the name ḷaiyālvār [after the birth ceremony, as prescribed in the text]: 'The best among Brahmins should first brand the right shoulder of the infant with the discus and the left after that with the conch.' Then, in accordance with the sequence laid down in the scriptures, at the appropriate time, they gave the first solid food and did the tonsure and the thread ceremony."¹⁰

EPISODE IV: RĀMĀNUJA ANOINTED AS THE PROPAGATOR OF THE TRADITION

The disciples of Yāmuna go and remind one of his chief disciples, Periya Nampi, that he should bring Rāmānuja over to become the propagator of the doctrine (*darśanapravartaka*), now that Yāmuna is no more. Periya Nampi consents and sets out to meet Rāmānuja, who is also on his way to him with the same purpose in mind. The

⁹ AK 129: *piṅpu iśvaramuniḷaḷum yamunatuṛaiṅvarkku annaprāśana-cauloṅpanayanāḍikaḷaiyūm tattatkāḷaṅkaḷilē ceytaruḷi ...*

¹⁰ AK 141: *panṇiraṅṅām divasattilē dākṣiṅṅam tu bhujam pūrvam cakreṅṅa pratapeccīsoḷ, vāmāṅṅam pratapet paścāt śāṅkhenaiṅva dvijottamaḷ eṅkirapaṅṅiyē ivarkku nāmakaraṅṅattilē tiruvillacciṅṅai munṅṅāka, ḷaiyālvār eṅru trināmaṅṅcāṅṅiyaruḷip piṅpu annaprāśanacauloṅpanayanāḍikaḷaiyūm tattatkāḷaṅkaḷilē śāstroktaprakāṅṅattilē ceyvikka ...*

two men meet, joyfully embrace and Rāmānuja says to Periya Nampi: “Respected Lord, you must without delay graciously impart the right teaching to me, your subordinate, and thus protect me.”¹¹ Periya Nampi consents to give the instruction at Hastigiri which is Kāñcīpuram, at the temple of Lord Varadarāja. Rāmānuja, however, begs him to initiate him immediately without delay. Periya Nampi, moved by his eagerness, takes him into the Rāma temple where they have met and, there, the AK says: “[The texts prescribe that] ‘For the sake of the success of the *mantrasaṃskāra*, in accordance with the [rules] for the *mantra* and the initiation, the discus together with *mantras* or the five weapons should be worn.’ [Further], ‘Man wears the discus, etc., as a remembrance of the Supreme [just] as ornaments such as bangles are the sign of chastity [in a woman].’ [According to these texts] he (Periya Nampi) did the branding. Then, as in the sequence: ‘The *guru* places on his right [the disciple] with modestly folded hands, places on his head his right hand of wisdom, places the left [hand] on his heart and then should look at him with compassion, uttering the teacher-pupil lineage. After this, surrendering to the Lord of the *devas*, the *ācārya* should compassionately teach the jewel among *mantras* which contains the seers, the metre and the deity.’” Then, the AK continues, “Periya Nampi placed the virtuous Ṭaiyālvār (Rāmānuja) on his right, touched his head with his hand and, contemplating the feet of the true Ācārya Ālavantār (Yāmuna), he whispered into Ṭaiyālvār’s right ear the jewel among *mantras*, the *dvaya*, together with its auxiliaries, preceded by [the recitation of] the teacher-pupil lineage.”¹²

¹¹ AK 169: *aṭiyēnukku ippōtē tēvarīr hitopadeśaṅceyaruḷi rakṣittaru-lavēnum.*

¹² AK 170: *mantrasaṃskārasiddhyārthaṃ mantradikṣāvidhau tathā, cakrasya dhāraṇaṃ proktaṃ mantraiḥ pañcāyudhāni vā enrum cakraḍidhāraṇaṃ puṃsāṃ parasambandhavedanam, pavitratā nimittam hi valayādi dhāraṇaṃ enrum collukirapaṭiyē tiruvillaccinai prasādittu niveśya dakṣiṇē svasya vinitāñjalisaṃyutaṃ, mūrdhni hastaṃ vinikṣipya dakṣiṇaṃ jñānada-kṣiṇaṃ, savyaṃ tu hr̥di vinyasya kṛpayā vikṣayed guruḥ, svācāryaḥ hr̥daye dhyaṭvā japtvā guruparamparāṃ, evaṃ prapady deveśam ācāryaḥ kṛpayā svayaṃ, adhyāpayen mantraratanam saṛsiccandhodhidaivatam enru collukira kramattilē periya nampiyum savinayaṛaṇa ṭaiyālvārait tammuṭaiya valapurattillē vaittum tam tirukkaikaḷālē avar śirasai sparṣittukkoṇṭu sadācāryarāna ālavantār tiruvaṭikaḷai smaritukkoṇṭu guruparamparāpūrvaka-*

EPISODE V: MUTALIYĀṆṬĀN AND KŪRATTĀLVĀN

Once Rāmānuja becomes an ascetic and takes the name Rāmānujamuni two of his disciples Mutaliyāṇṭān and Kūrattālvān come to him at the temple and request him to do the *pañcasamṣkāra* for them. Obtaining the *pañcasamṣkāra*, says the text, they become “those who have fulfilled their goal” and continue to serve him.¹³

EPISODE VI: YĀDAVAPRAKĀŚA

Yādavaprakāśa’s mother develops an ardent faith in Vaiṣṇavism through her contact with Tirukkaci Nampi and her conversations with Rāmānuja and desires that her son become a Vaiṣṇavite ascetic. Meeting with Rāmānuja’s approval on expressing her wishes, she goes to her son and tells him to change into a Vaiṣṇavite ascetic, identified as such because he would then carry the triple-staff (*tridaṇḍa*) and continue to wear his tuft of hair (*śikhā*) and the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*).¹⁴ Yādavaprakāśa is eventually persuaded by his mother but fears that, since he has already discarded the top-knot and the sacred thread after having become a Śaiva ascetic, he cannot convert into a Vaiṣṇava one without some form of expiation (*prāyaścitta*). The normal expiation prior to changing his status, the text

māka mantraratna-māna dvayattai sāṅgopāṅgamāka ilaiyālvāruṭaiya valattiruceviiḷē upadeśittaruḷi ...

¹³ AK 175: *atipṛītiyōṭē perumāl kōyilukku eḷuntaruḷi rāmānujanai sēvittu aṭiyōṅkaḷukkup pañcasamṣkāradikaḷai prasādittaruḷavēṇum enru viṇṇappañ ceyya rāmānujanum tiruvuḷlamukantarūḷi avarkal prārtittapaṭiyē ceytaruḷa, avarkaḷum pañcasamṣkāratikaḷai labhittu kṛtārtharāy ... svacāryarāṇa rāmānujanai orukālum piriyaṃal tatkainkaryaikarasarāy sēvittukkoṅṭiruntārkaḷ.*

¹⁴ On the difference in the monastic regulations for the *tridaṇḍa* versus the *ekadaṇḍa* ascetic see OLIVELLE 1995.

AK 176: *pinpu yādavaprakāśaṇuṭaiya mātāvukku ... tirukkaccinampi pārvaikum rāmānujanīṭatē premasaṃbhāṣaṇamum naṭakkaiyālē atuvē nitānamāka avalukkum nam darśanattilē ūrram piṇantu it darśanattilē nam yādavanum irāṅkilāṇō enru niṇaittu ... yādavaprakāśaṇ pakkal cenru ... nīyum rāmānujanaiṇ pōlē śikhāyajñopavītapūrvakamāka tridaṇḍattai dhariyāy enna ...*

informs us, would be a circumambulation of the earth (*bhūpradakṣiṇa*). Yādavaprakāśa feels that he is too old to do this and despairs.¹⁵ Then, the deity at Śrīraṅgam, God Raṅganātha, appears in his dream and tells him that the only expiation he needs to do is to circumambulate Rāmānuja himself and obtain from him the triple-staff (*tridaṇḍa*) and the robes (*kāṣāya*) of the ascetic. Yādavaprakāśa goes to Rāmānuja and does this. Here, the text says: “Rāmānuja accepted to do this graciously and, in accordance with the *śāstras*, attended to his (Yādavaprakāśa’s) tonsure and his thread ceremony, preceded by the expiation and bestowed upon him the triple-staff and the robes and gave him the name Govinda Cīyar. Thus, endowing him with the *pañcasamskāras*, he gave him the meaning of that jewel among *mantras* after [reciting] the teacher-pupil lineage ... and he told him to write the text called Yatidharmasamuccaya ...”¹⁶

EPISODE VII: GOVINDA BHATṬAR

Govinda Bhaṭṭar, who is Rāmānuja’s maternal cousin, is a Śaivite who has taken the sectarian name of Uḷḷaṅkaikaṅṅarnta Nāyaṅṅār. Determined to change him, Rāmānuja’s maternal uncle Periyatirumalai Nampi (who lives in Tirumalai) goes to Kālahasti where Govinda Bhaṭṭar is doing service at the Śaiva temple there, carrying water for the ablutions of the God. Periyatirumalai Nampi strategically strews the path he routinely takes with verses of Yāmuna’s Stotraratna copied out on palm-leaves. Reading these verses each morning, Govinda Bhaṭṭar gradually becomes introspective and starts to question his own devotion to Śiva. Periyatirumalai Nampi now decides to reinforce the lesson. He comes once again to Kālahasti

¹⁵ AK 176: *tridaṇḍadhāraṇam paṅṅnumiṭṭilṅṅaṅ śikhāyajiṅṅopavitatyāgam paṅṅṅukaiyālē atukku prāyaścittamāka bhūpradakṣaṅṅam paṅṅṅavēṅṅṅiyiruntatu. atu vayovṅṅṅdhaṅṅāna eṅṅṅāl ceyyamūṅṅṅiyātu. iṅṅi aśaktāṅṅāna nāṅṅ ceyya aṅṅṅuppaten eṅṅṅu colli mucittukkiṅṅakka ...*

¹⁶ AK 177: *rāmānujaṅṅum pōravukantarūḷi śāstroktaprakāreṅṅa prāyaścittapūrvakamākaṅṅ cauḷḷopanayanādikaḷaiyūṅṅum paṅṅṅuvittu tridaṅḍakāśāyādikaḷaiyūṅṅum prasādittu govinda cīyar eṅṅra tirunāmamum prasādittarūḷi ippaṅṅi paṅṅcasamskarayuktarākki guruparamparāpūrvakamāka mantraratnārthattaiyūṅṅum prasādittarūḷi ... yatidharmasamuccayam eṅṅkīra prabandhattai paṅṅṅum eṅṅṅa ...*

and starts to give discourses on Nammālvār's Tiruvāymoḷi in the nearby groves. Govinda Bhaṭṭar, who has climbed a tree in the grove to pick flowers for Śiva's worship hears the discourses, is overcome with emotion, jumps down from the tree and flings away the *rudrākṣa* beads he is wearing as inappropriate. Soon after this, "[Periyatirumalai Nampi] took him to Tirupati and immediately performed the thread ceremony, etc., [in the manner described in the text]: 'The *pañcasamskāras* have to be done.' He did the *pañcasamskāras* for him on the shores of the river of Viṣṇu called Svāmipuṣkariṇī, recited to him the poetry of the Ālvārs such as the Tiruppallāṇṭu and took compassion on him by creating in him knowledge of the 'Five Categories.'"¹⁷

EPISODE VIII: YAJÑAMŪRTI

There was once a great scholar called Yajñamūrti who had become an ascetic in the tradition of *māyāvāda* (i.e., the non-dualistic monism of Śāṅkara). Hearing of Rāmānuja's greatness he comes to dispute with him and agrees to become his disciple if he is defeated. After eighteen days of a fierce debate, guided in his dreams by the deity of Śrīraṅgam, Rāmānuja defeats him. Yajñamūrti breaks and throws away his single staff (*ekadaṇḍa*) and requests the triple-staff and the robes, etc., of the Vaiṣṇava ascetic.¹⁸ Rāmānuja tells him that since he had previously removed his top-knot and his sacred thread, he would have to do expiations for this. These expiations include recitation of the *gāyatrīmantra* as well as an expiatory rite such as the *kṛcchra*. Once they are done he could have the top-knot and sacred thread again. "Then [as in the text]: 'O best among the twice-born, the seers teach that the Vaiṣṇava branding ceremony is to be borne by those in all the stages of life, by women and Śūdras' he (Rāmānu-

¹⁷ AK 190: *ivaraik kūṭikkoṇṭu tiruppatiyēra eluntaruḷit tatkaṣṇamē upanayanādikaḷaiyūm ceytuvaittu saṃskārāḥ pañcakartavyā enru neṭumālaruviyākiya svāmipuṣkariṇik karaiyilē pañcasamskāraṅkaḷaiyūm prasādit-taruḷi, tiruppallāṇṭu mutalāka ālvārkaḷuṭaiya divyaprabandhaṅkaḷaiyūm oṭivittu arthapañcakajñānattaiyumuṇṭākki viśeṣittu kṛpaipañṇiyaruḷinār.*

¹⁸ AK 206: *ekadaṇḍattai muritterintu viṭṭu emperumānār tiruvaṭikaḷilē sāṣṭāṅgapraṇāmam pañnikkoṇṭu kiṭakka ... aṭiyēṇukku tridaṇḍakāṣyādi-kaḷai prasādit-taruḷavēnum enru vinṇappañceyya ...*

ja) gave him (Yajñamūrti) the *pañcasamskāras*, foregrounded by the branding.”¹⁹

A new Vaiṣṇava name, Aruḷāḷapperumāl Emperumāṅṅār, after the deity in Kāñcīpuram, Varadarāja, is also given to Yajñamūrti.

In examining these eight episodes for the historical information they yield, if any, on the practice of *pañcasamskāra* among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas in the medieval period, the foremost issue to keep in mind is that the literature we looked at is not historical but hagiographical. As recent studies have shown, hagiographical literature provides us with certain special information about a religious community. Blending, as such literature does, fact and fiction, archetypal and contextually specific conceptions of holy persons and their community of followers, they cannot be read as a historical record of events so much as texts which divulge a particular kind of relationship between holy persons and the institutions which have come to be created around them. As PETERSON has suggested, in her article on medieval, Śaivite, hagiography: “These – [so-called] – histories of individual saints are at the same time archetypal narratives about human devotion and divine grace, and constructions of archetypal saintly personae ... The intersection of the particular and the paradigmatic aspects of the ideal persona in hagiography allows ... [for the] imaging of the ideal community.”²⁰

Hence, at one level, the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies have the aim of edification – they wish to present a picture of the ideal community of devotees. At the same time, they structure a hierarchy within this ideal community: at the apex of a pyramid of perfectability are those who are furthest away in historical or mythological time. These are the Ālvārs, the poet-saints whose devotional hymns construct the Tamil part of the edifice of Śrīvaiṣṇava theology. Nearer at hand, and in lineal descent from the Ālvārs, are the later teachers of the community, the Ācāryas, with Nāthamuni, Yāmunācārya and Rāmānuja himself constituting a triadic apex among these. Further, this lineage of ascending perfection also contributes to the elevation and abstraction of the Ālvārs and sets them aside from the

¹⁹ AK 206: *pradhāryas tāpasamskāro vaiṣṇavo munibhis smṛtaḥ, sarvāśrameṣu vasatāṃ strīśūdrāṅṅāṃ dvijottama enkirapaṭiyē tiruvillaccinai mutalākap pañcasamskāraṅkaḷaiyūm prasādittu ...*

²⁰ PETERSON 1994: 197-198.

realm of human imperfection which the rest of the community, in varying degrees, inhabits. At the same time, the hagiographical literature tries constantly also to imitate history, to approximate to it. It therefore projects a mimetic social reality, mirroring a microcosm which should be seen as a hagiographical Śrīvaiṣṇava social world rather than a historical Śrīvaiṣṇava social world. More specifically, one could argue, as MCLEOD does, that to search for a strictly historical kernel in hagiography is futile.²¹ It is much more useful to ask what the episodes about *pañcasamskāra* actually tell us about the hagiographer's and the community's conception of how Vaiṣṇava identity is constructed in the medieval period.

Certain structures become evident when we analyze and group the episodes according to common features. The situations of *pañcasamskāra* all, with the exception of the first episode, relate to a ritual performed by men for other men who, with the exception of Tirumaṅkai in the first episode, are predominantly Brahmins. Thus, what we see here is not a ritual which concerns both men and women, a *pañcasamskāra* which is open to both genders. Nor in the hagiography is there a depiction of different caste groups undergoing the ritual, though a citation in episode VI does explicitly state that the ritual is also meant for women and Śūdras. The focus, though, is on a small community of males who undergo the ritual, who form part of an elite scholarly group and who, to a great extent, know each other through familial and traditional ties – the ritual is performed for Rāmānuja as a child by his maternal uncle, for Govinda Bhaṭṭar also by an uncle – or those who are already connected through the relationship of teacher and disciple participate in the ritual – Yāmuna is

²¹ “It is not sufficient to interpret their many anecdotes as strictly historical but overlaid by subsequent accretions of miraculous material. Although some stories are indeed formed in this way they are very few. The vast majority must be wholly rejected as historical sources ... and stripping away the miraculous overlay will not reveal actual events. The janam-sākhīs do not provide history. What they do provide is rather an interpretation of the Guru's life, one which reflects the piety of his devout followers belonging to later generations, and which draws extensively upon a fund of the marvellous and the miraculous.” (MCLEOD 1994: 19).

initiated by his grandfather's disciple, Rāmānuja initiates his own disciples.

Next, when we consider the life-situations which necessitate *pañcasamskāra* we can discern approximately four patterns. The first is that of childhood and the *samskāras* of childhood. Thus, episodes II and III, relating to Yāmuna's and Rāmānuja's childhood illustrate a discernable pattern: the male child has to have first undergone the ceremony of *jātakarman*. Twelve days after this is over the child is subjected to the ritual of *tiruvillaccinai*, the important Vaiṣṇava *mantras* are whispered into its ear and it is given a Vaiṣṇava name. In other words, the ritual of *pañcasamskāra* here is an integral part of the *nāmakarman* ceremony. Nevertheless, the description of the ritual in both the episodes does not include a description of all the five sub-rites necessary to constitute it. Emphasis is laid on only three of these sub-rites: that of the branding, the recitation of the Vaiṣṇava *mantras* into the ear of the infant and giving it a Vaiṣṇava name. Further, it is not even clear if the branding ceremony is really carried out – the term used in the descriptions is not *tāpa* or *tāpasamskāra* but rather *tiruvillaccinai* (Skt.: *śrīlakṣaṇa*), meaning, literally, “divine signs.” It may, thus, be plausibly interpreted that the conch and the discus might have been painted onto the arms of the infant rather than branded. In this context, therefore, the child's entry into the larger community of Śrīvaiṣṇavas is marked by the *pañcasamskāra* ceremony.

The absence of one or the other of the sub-rites, nevertheless, does not imply that the ritual of *pañcasamskāra* as such has not been performed. As I have argued elsewhere, though the ritual was formally and ideally defined as involving five sub-rites both medieval ritual texts and contemporary practice indicate that it was rare for all the five sub-rites to have ever been done.²² It appears, rather, that the defining core of the ritual was and remains the branding. The conflation of the Śrīvaiṣṇava initiatory ritual solely with branding was part of an etic understanding of the ritual, seen as defining the community

²² The medieval ritual text authoritative for this ritual, the Parāśara-viśiṣṭaparamadharmaśāstra, suggests that it is possible to omit the *nāmasamskāra*, which could have happened already at birth. In contemporary practice it is ubiquitous to omit both the *nāmāsamskāra* and the *yāgasamskāra*. On this evidence see RAMAN 2005.

as far as rival Vaiṣṇava sects such as the Vaiṣṇavas were concerned.²³ It was also this perception of branding central to Śrīvaiṣṇava identity and its derogation as non-Vedic, as low-bred tantricism which the Śrīvaiṣṇavas had to combat against, necessitating Yāmunācārya's defense of the practice in the Āgamaprāmānya.

The second life-situation requiring *pañcasamskāra* has a similar significance for sectarian identity, only here the community comprises of the smaller elite male grouping within the larger community which transmits the tradition. It consists of the teacher-pupil lineage, the *guruparamparā*. The Śrīvaiṣṇava male's entrance into the community of his teacher and his submission to the *guruparamparā* of his teacher appears to have been signified by the *pañcasamskāra*. This is the import of episodes IV and V. The *pañcasamskāra* here is necessary also because it is a precondition for initiation into the knowledge of the tradition as episode IV clearly points out. Thus, it was only after obtaining *pañcasamskāra* that Rāmānuja could be initiated into the texts of the tradition – the obvious analogy here is between *pañcasamskāra* and *upanayana*, where the latter is mandatory for the commencement of Vedic study just as *pañcasamskāra* is mandatory for the commencement of the study of the Śrīvaiṣṇava *siddhānta*.²⁴

²³ On this see HÜSKEN 2005.

²⁴ I have dealt elsewhere (see RAMAN 2005) with this theological interpretation of *pañcasamskāra* as the equivalent of *upanayana* in the context of my analysis of the Parāśaraviśiṣṭaparamadharmaśāstra. The text offers us two main reasons why this ritual is mandatory for all Vaiṣṇavas, women at the time of marriage, men at the time of the sacred thread ceremony, the *upanayana*. It shows that the ritual is a marker of Vaiṣṇava identity, without it one is not a Vaiṣṇava and cannot be instructed in the *mantras* which are necessary for salvation (1:21-22). A male Brahmin cannot be considered a Brahmin without the ritual because it complements or is equivalent to the sacred thread ceremony (1:4-6). It also follows from this that it is only *pañcasamskāra* following upon and complementing the sacred thread ceremony that qualifies the Śrīvaiṣṇava for doing any further ritual activity (1:9) and the rituals such as the *śrāddha* ceremony for the dead (1:7). Thus, in the final analysis, it is by drawing an explicit parallel between the ritual and *upanayana* that the text validates this Śrīvaiṣṇava ritual as a *samskāra par excellence*. By doing so, the text explicitly draws legitimacy from none less than Pūrva Mīmāṃsā in as much as in the Mīmāṃsā-

The third life-situation is not a community internal one. Rather in the remaining episodes we have the indication that *pañcasamskāra* is not just an initiatory ritual among and within the Śrīvaiṣṇava community but one which inducts others, non-members, into the community. In other words, it functions as some kind of conversion ritual. The first episode to point to this re-signification is the story of Tirumaṅkai Ālvār. Here, the condition imposed by the ardent suitor who is Tirumaṅkai by the pious Kumudavallī is that he becomes a Vaiṣṇava by undergoing the *pañcasamskāra*. He promptly does this and through doing so becomes eligible to marry her. Three further episodes illustrate this transformation even more graphically by showing that the conversion is sometimes from one ascetic order to another, or in the case of episode VII between Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism.

Let us consider episodes VI and VIII first, which for obvious reasons form a unit. Here we have the conversion of Yādavaprakāśa and Yajñamūrti. Both were ascetics before they came into contact with Rāmānuja and, further, they were ascetics in the “single-staff” *ekadaṇḍa* tradition. The former is persuaded by his mother to abandon his Advaitic tradition and convert to Śrīvaiṣṇavism. The latter has a debating duel with Rāmānuja and converts as a condition of his defeat. The case of Yādavaprakāśa is particularly interesting because the historical Yādavaprakāśa compiled the *Yatidharmasamuccaya*, a manual on the rules for ascetics, which enumerates the differences between the ascetics of the different orders. In both cases the pattern of events is the same: the *ekadaṇḍin* ascetic who converts to a *tri-daṇḍin* ascetic has to first perform expiations (*prāyaścitta*) and either a divine command or Rāmānuja himself decree what the expiation must be. Once it is done the repentant convert undergoes the first phase of the conversion which involves the restoration of the top-knot and the sacred thread. With these restored the convert is given

sūtra 6.1.35 the word *samskāra* is synonymous with *upanayana*. And by elevating *pañcasamskāra* to the level of the *upanayana* the Śrīvaiṣṇava ritual theorists were, in effect, doing what ALEXIS SANDERSON (1995: 27) has pointed out regarding the legitimation of Tantric ritual in general: that the rituals aim at “achieving parity with the orthodox by providing the system with equivalents of all the essential *smārta* rites which the invested perform or undergo during adult life and, indeed, beyond it.”

the emblems of his new allegiance, the three-poled staff (*tridaṇḍa*) and the ochre robes by his new *ācārya*. The description of this transformation from being an Advaitic ascetic to a Śrīvaiṣṇavite appears to have some basis in historical reality, for Yādavaprakāśa writes about this in his *Yatidharmasamuccaya*.²⁵ The next stage of this process is the *pañcasamṣkāra*, which concludes with the endowment of a new name upon the convert. The seventh episode, relating to Rāmānuja's maternal cousin Govinda Bhaṭṭar, also mirrors a conversion ceremony which can be categorized along with the above-mentioned ones, even though it is not described in detail. Govinda Bhaṭṭar who had been a Śaivite becomes a Vaiṣṇavite through the *pañcasamṣkāra* ceremony done for him by Periyatirumalai Nampi. Yet his conversion is not preceded by the need to do expiations as in the previous cases. Theologically seen, the difference may perhaps lie in the fact that Govinda Bhaṭṭar expresses remorse for his former allegiance. He flings away the *rudrākṣa* beads after hearing the recitation of verses of the Ālvārs' poetry, thus explicitly rejecting Śiva for Viṣṇu. This outright repudiation of Śiva might itself have been considered as an act of expiation which preceded the conversion.

Throughout the analysis of these last three episodes I have used the term "conversion" in a seemingly self-evident way to speak of the movement from Śaivism to Vaiṣṇavism in medieval Tamil country. Yet, one cannot use the term "conversion" in this context of this

²⁵ Re. OLIVELLE (1995) who points out that the issue of whether an ascetic should retain his top-knot and sacred thread or not was a disputed issue between the Advaitins and the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. Citing the medieval Śrīvaiṣṇava theologian Vedāntadeśika on this issue OLIVELLE shows that Vedāntadeśika, "opposed the practices of abandoning the sacrificial string and shaving the entire head including the topknot, which were common among the renouncers belonging to the Advaita tradition. He cites texts that prescribe penances for ascetics who follow those customs and presents the case of Yādava as an example. 'When, moreover, the Venerable Yādava Prakāśa, who had abandoned his sacrificial string without considering the repercussions and who, after considering them, became repentant and legitimately questioned the learned men and the inhabitants of various regions who had come to the festival of Vāsudeva, they replied by prescribing for him a penance.'" (1995: 2).

textual material without qualifying what such a term could mean in its historical context as opposed to its meanings in modernity. Thus, in speaking of conversion in the colonial period in her path-breaking book on the issue GAURI VISWANATHAN begins by calling it “one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society.” She further adds that “with the departure of members from the fold, the cohesion of a community is under threat just as forcefully as if its beliefs had been turned into heresies.”²⁶ Exploring the legal and social implications of conversion in colonial India VISWANATHAN shows that even while British jurisprudence remained the ultimate legal reference it held little sway when it came to the communal life of the person who had converted. He or she had, through the act of conversion effectively severed themselves from their erstwhile communities and, hence, become the equivalent of a displaced person within a cultural landscape where membership in a community is far more important than personal belief.²⁷ The convert had thus, through conversion, transgressed against the community in a manner which, in the case of Hindu traditions, went beyond agnosticism or even blasphemy – he or she had left the parameters of Hinduism and hence the community for an alien religion.²⁸ VISWANATHAN’s study focuses,

²⁶ VISWANATHAN 1998: xxi.

²⁷ VISWANATHAN (*ibid.* 79) points out that “Hindu and Muslim religious bodies justified depriving converts of their rights to property by resorting to what legal scholars today term a legal fiction, that is, the fiction of civil death. This construction views the convert as deracinated and, as an outcaste, no longer recognized by scriptural law as a functioning member of his or her former community.”

²⁸ The social alienation which resulted was existential. “For some religions such as Hinduism, neither agnosticism nor blasphemy alone can remove a person from the community in which he or she is born; however, complete adherence to a foreign religion automatically signals excommunication for that individual. A plausible inference drawn from this singular condition is that the community outweighs personal belief: regardless of the extent to which beliefs may undergo transformations or remain subject to individual caprice and variations of mood or disposition, membership in community is not severed even for a blaspheming agnostic. The other, far-reaching inference, following from the first, is that a change of religion is less a change of beliefs than a change of community.” (VISWANATHAN 1998: 89).

among others, on the case of conversion from “Hinduism” to an alien religion such as Christianity or Islam or, as in the famous case of Ambedkar, to Buddhism. Further, the notions of conversion which come to predominate from the colonial period onwards have as their underlying basis conceptions of “Hinduism” and of “religion” linked to the modern nation state.²⁹

Conversion, then, at least from one perspective within the context of colonialism, is a movement from religion to another over “strong boundaries” entailing an abandonment of one community for another and, as far as the emotional impact is concerned, associated both with anguish and alienation from one’s former community as well as the finding of a more “authentic” self. ROBINSON and CLARKE (2003), in their introduction to a collection of essays on religious conversion in India are inclined to argue that such a definition of “conversion,” requiring as it does features such as a conversion or initiation ritual as well as the abandonment of a former set of religious beliefs and practices for another exclusive set of beliefs and practices is based upon Islamic and Christian models of conversion, less applicable to conversion in the context of Hindu traditions. Rather, even while not discarding this model they also make a plea for a second “soft” definition of conversion “a fluid process of changing affiliations of religious beliefs and traditions within a range of possibilities.”³⁰ In other words, conversion here is less associated with a radical religious rupture and the movement between strong religious boundaries than a process of gradual assimilation or transformation across soft, fluid, religious boundaries.

²⁹ Ibid. xxii: “Religion shares features with the analytical categories of race and class in that each assumes certain established criteria for determining rank, position, and membership in a national community. The commuting of religious identity into a subcategory of social composition is facilitated by such instruments of administrative classification as census reports, which, in assigning groups or communities to predetermined categories, often chose to overrule the indeterminate beliefs and practices by which people may chose to live their lives. However, the intransigent nature of such beliefs, reflecting inchoate ways of life and suggesting a different order of relationality, refuses to be made pliable by determined acts of classification.”

³⁰ ROBINSON/CLARKE 2003: 7.

This definition, they suggest, does greater justice to movements between sectarian affiliations within Hinduism itself. The work of both VISWANATHAN and ROBINSON and CLARKE indicates that how conversion is to be defined or even the very possibility of conversion within “Hinduism” hinges upon the issue of strong or weak sectarian boundaries. It throws up additional questions such as to what extent Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism can be called distinct religions as opposed to sects within “Hinduism” as well as if “conversion,” in the strong sense of the term, is at all possible between sects as opposed to distinct religions. In other words, it becomes necessary to ask how strong sectarian boundaries were, or how distinct Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism were as religions in the historical context from which the textual materials I have looked at stem: the medieval Cōla period.

The evidence from pre-modernity, some scholars would argue, appears to defy the rigid conception of religious identity which would be a pre-condition for “conversion” in a strong sense. Rather, it seems to point overwhelmingly to a fluidity of religious practices if not of religious identity, not just within the so-called Hindu fold such as between Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism, but also Jainism and Buddhism. ORR (2000), for instance, argues that one can legitimately speak, when considering medieval Tamil society and the Cōla period, of common modes of worship between all these traditions, common social structures as well as a “common religious idiom.”³¹ In an article on the changing nature of religious processions over several centuries of Cōla rule, as understood from an analysis of inscriptions, ORR reiterates this by pointing to the “absence of a strong sectarian spirit” in the Cōla period.³² BAYLY (1989), in her introductory chapter on pre-eighteenth century Tamil religiosity, also stresses the common features of religious affiliation across sectarian divides and the malleability of caste identities.

³¹ Re. ORR (2000: 23-25): “a religious idiom was so widely shared in Chola period inscriptions means that there is a blurring of sectarian distinctions; it is frequently difficult to determine, if we look at the text of an inscription, whether the deity to whom donations are being made is Śiva, Viṣṇu – or a Jain Tirthaṅkara.” The evidence points to the fact that, “the boundaries between Hindu and non-Hindu were not definitely demarcated and that people whom we retrospectively classify as Hindus, Jains and Buddhists shared a common religious culture.”

³² ORR 2004b: 457.

The evidence from the fourteenth century hagiographical text which has been the focus of this article presents a contrastive picture to such views of medieval religiosity, depicting as it does strong cases of religious crossing-over. Thus, for instance, episode VI shows us that one went from being a Śaiva ascetic to a Vaiṣṇava ascetic by a very public abandonment of one's former beliefs and the acquisition of new ones: one participated in a public debate and, in the event of failure, agreed to become a Vaiṣṇava instead of a Śaiva. Sometimes, as episode VII shows, even a change of heart was indicated, as in the manner in which Govinda Bhaṭṭar flings away his *rudrākṣa* beads to show his rejection of Śiva. Indeed, one could here argue that if "conversion" is about explicitly rejecting one belief system for another then these episodes might well speak for some kind of "conversion" in the Cōḷa period. Other scholars too have shown how medieval hagiographies are replete with such tropes of conversion with motifs of a public debate, a public recantation of one's former beliefs, the abandonment of the extraneous symbols and emblems of the old belief and taking on of the new. This last act might also be said to comprise the core acts which precede the conversion or initiation ritual proper. Thus DUNDAS, in his article on conversion in medieval Jainism, refers to the conversion of eleven Brahmins by Mahāvīra, who vanquishes them in debate on a number of ontological and ethical issues. Particularly interesting, in the light of the materials I have examined, is the story of the conversion of the Brahmin Skhandaka Kātyāyana from the Bhagavatīsūtra: "This learned mendicant is portrayed as being unable to answer a series of questions about extra-sensory matters posed by a Jain layman. He therefore travels to the Chatrapalāśaka caitya outside the city of Krtangalā where the omniscient Mahāvīra was staying in order to question him. Delighted by his outward appearance, Skhandaka circumambulates Mahāvīra in worship. The *tīrthankara* who through his powers knows Skhandaka's questions without being told, answers them fully. The text describes the process by which Skhandaka changed from mendicant brahman to Jain monk ... Skhandaka then hears Mahāvīra preach in public and after circumambulating him three times in delight, utters a profession of faith in the teachings of Jainism. After paying homage to Mahāvīra again, Skhandaka goes to the northeast and in a solitary spot abandons his brahmanical accoutrements, including triple-staff, rosary, parasol, sandals and saffron robe. On returning to Mahāvīra and once more circumambu-

lating him three times in homage, Skhandaka makes a declaration about the morally dangerous nature of the world and the need to protect the self.”³³

It is not just Vaiṣṇava or Jaina hagiographies which attest to the possibilities of such a conversion in the medieval context. Śaivite theological texts for instance, such as the Somaśambhupaddhati, the Sarvajñottaratantra and citations from other Tantras in the Tantrāloka refer to the ritual of *liṅgoddhāra* by which a non-Śaiva seeker of salvation is admitted into the Śaiva fold. The ritual removes the aspirant’s former religious affiliation enabling him to be readied for Śaiva initiation (*dikṣā*), even while his status as a convert (*punarbhū*) makes him forever inferior in the Śaiva hierarchy, to which he now belongs.³⁴ In looking at these source materials there seems to be little doubt that conversion from one sectarian tradition to another, in the strong sense of a radical rupture from another tradition incorporating an exclusivistic stance, did exist in medieval South India.

The deeper issue which needs to be considered here relates to the historiography of medieval South India and the challenge of rec-

³³ DUNDAS 2003: 130-133.

³⁴ For details on *liṅgoddhāra* and the textual sources in which it is described, I am indebted to the following personal communication from ALEXIS SANDERSON (December 2005): “The liberations aspired to by all the others were seen by the Śaivas as non-definitive. Those who took the ultimate or only true revelation to be either the Veda or the bodies of scripture attributed to Viṣṇu, the Sun (Sūrya), the Buddha or the Jina Mahāvīra, and who were known accordingly as Vaidikas, Vaiṣṇavas, Sauras, Bauddhas and Jainas could reach their goal at death and believe that this goal was the highest possible; but in truth it was only a paradise of temporary reward (*bhogaḥ, bhuktiḥ*) located in the lower range of a graded path that leads up through ever higher levels of reality unknown in those religions to the ultimate state revealed by and embodied in Śiva. However, the non-Śaiva liberation-seeker (*mumukṣuḥ*) might be fortunate enough to be touched by Śiva’s favour while still practising his lesser faith. In that case he could undergo a ritual in which he was first released from his non-Śaiva obligations (*liṅgoddhāraḥ*) and then given the initiation of Śiva. Thereafter he would have all the advantages of any Śaiva initiate (*dīkṣitaḥ*), except that as a convert (*punarbhūḥ*) he could never receive consecration (*abhiṣekaḥ*) as a Śaiva guru, initiating, teaching scriptures and consecrating images and other substrates of worship for the benefit of others.”

onciling non-literary inscriptional evidence from the period with the theological and hagiographical literary materials, which, as we have just seen, in some ways appear to contradict each other. Broadly speaking, seen from the perspective of certain kinds of inscriptional evidence, those which focus on donations to and patronage of different sects and their religious institutions in the medieval period, one would tend to reconstruct fluid boundaries of religious affiliation. A focus on the theological and ritual texts of the sectarian traditions themselves, which often reveal an explicit antagonism between medieval Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Jainism, etc., seems to be strong evidence for sectarian strife and even violence, thus allowing for the kind of tensions which might generate “conversion.”³⁵

One plausible scenario to account for the simultaneous existence of both “fluid” and “strong” sectarian boundaries would be one which envisaged the royal and influential patrons of and donors to temples patronizing several religious traditions simultaneously, thus impartially patronizing and sustaining the various religions within their territories even as another group of scholarly elite, the religious specialists of each particular sectarian tradition engaged themselves in writing texts which stressed strong sectarian boundaries. This does not imply, though, that one should regard the theological and hagiographical materials as the fabricated discourses of power of a scholarly elite and, hence, as having a tenuous basis in reality as compared to the epigraphical materials, which deal with, as it were, “facts on the ground.” For such an approach implies, at the very least, a refusal to acknowledge that epigraphical materials too, like theological texts, are a form of self-representation. Rather, it seems clear that the most useful methodological approach would be to cast the net as widely as possible, and use both literary and epigraphical materials to produce “thick descriptions” of specific historical moments which would give us as differentiated a picture as possible on the formation of religious identities and affiliations in the medieval period.

³⁵ Re. the Śrīvaiṣṇava and Śaiva rivalry in the medieval period, centred around the story of Rāmānuja’s persecution by a Cōḷa king see CARMAN 1974: 45. For the Śaiva-Jaina rivalry as seen through the lens of Śaivite *bhakti* poetry and medieval hagiographies see PETERSON 1998.

Casting the net widely then, taking both the non-literary and the theological historical sources for medieval South India equally seriously would force us to acknowledge that they both overwhelmingly reflect the religious practices and beliefs of an elite – whether kings, high-ranking nobility or religious figures. Thus, they give us little or no information about the religious practices of the majority of the non-elite. Yet, taken together as a picture of the medieval elite, they seem to indicate that the medieval religious milieu of South India accommodated both “fluid” and “strong” boundaries. Thus at the very least, the evidence from the AK indicates that certain elite Brahmin males in the Tamil country in the fourteenth century did participate, not just theologically but in actual fact, in a Śrīvaiṣṇava religious milieu of “strong” boundaries which included features of “conversion.” Further, even while arguing that there was “conversion” between sectarian traditions in the medieval context, I would further suggest that this conversion cannot be entirely assimilated to modern understandings of the act. The AK shows that while it incorporated a public repudiation of one’s former beliefs it was most dramatically reflected not in inner but in outer bodily transformation. The medieval convert to Śrīvaiṣṇavism proclaimed his new allegiance to others primarily through the existence of the brand marks on various parts of his body together with the other visible painted symbols of Viṣṇu.

The important centuries of sectarian identity formation and consolidation for the Śrīvaiṣṇavas was the period between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries. In this context, it can also be plausibly argued that this was also the period when it might have been necessary to devise and put into practice a conversion initiation ritual such as the *pañcasamskāra*, incorporating older features of self-identification such as the branding, in order to set oneself apart with vehemence, as a religious elite, from the Śaivas.