Hindu Sectarianism and the City of Victory

This book explores the ways in which the patronage activities of a major precolonial South Indian polity, the Vijayanagara Empire (c. 1346–1565), influenced the articulation of Hindu sectarian identities. Named after its capital, “the City of Victory,” as a testament to its rulers’ military prowess, this empire eventually encompassed most of the Indian peninsula south of the Krishna River. However, the empire’s historic significance is not limited to India; for a little over two centuries, the empire sat at the center of an emerging global economy. It attracted foreign merchants, dignitaries, and mercenary soldiers who had arrived in India from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. By 1500, the City of Victory had one of the largest, most diverse urban populations in the world, and it engaged in trade, diplomatic, and military relations with polities both within and beyond South Asia. Ultimately, the empire’s military prowess was unable to withstand an alliance to the north of rival states, which sacked the city in 1565, effectively ending Vijayanagara rule in the south. The capital’s ruins, which currently consist of about sixteen hundred identified structures, cover roughly thirty square kilometers along the Tungabhadra River in the Deccan Plateau’s dramatic, boulder-strewn landscape. Impressive enough to be declared a United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage site in 1986, the Vijayanagara capital, and the empire it ruled, loom large in the collective imagining of India’s precolonial past. And religion has featured prominently in that image.

Because of Vijayanagara’s ongoing military engagements with a variety of sultanates to the north, the empire has been presented in older scholarship as a Hindu bulwark against further southern incursions of Islam. More recent scholarship challenges this view by citing the many examples of the Vijayanagara court’s
cultural eclecticism, particularly its stylistic borrowings from the northern sultanates, as well as its ecumenical patronage of a variety of religious institutions. In this view, the Vijayanagara Empire was a tolerant haven for many religious traditions including Islam, Jainism, Christianity, and diverse forms of Hinduism. While this emphasis on religious diversity is refreshing and, to a great extent, warranted, it ignores both the court’s privileging of certain forms of religiosity over others and the impact that this had, not only on religious identity and expression, but also on South Indian society more broadly.

This book argues that, in fact, the Vijayanagara court was selective in its patronage of primarily Hindu religious institutions, but the motivations behind this selectivity were not always religious. Rather, Vijayanagara patronage of Hindu sectarian groups responded creatively to a variety of incentives in ways that reflected the particular circumstances of specific locations. This opportunistic flexibility of Vijayanagara patronage, coupled with its generosity, galvanized Hindu sectarian leaders to pursue certain kinds of intellectual projects as well as to form different intersectarian alliances and rivalries. Because these alliances and rivalries demarcated areas of overlap and distinction in doctrinal and practical matters, they simultaneously articulated a shared religious sensibility and significant sectarian divisions.

Thus, by examining Hindu sectarian responses to Vijayanagara patronage, this book documents important developments in religion and philosophy while locating the proponents of these systems socially and historically. Such location delineates not only how specific sociopolitical factors implicated Hindu religious formations but also how philosophical argumentation and religious practice shaped social and political reality. Certainly, this shaping was subtle and indirect, but it was not nonexistent. In fact, it is essential to our understanding of early modern South India.

To shed light on the dynamic interaction of royal and religious institutions in this period, I focus my analysis on the career of the important Hindu intellectual and religious leader Vyāsatīrtha (1460–1539). Vyāsatīrtha was the monastic head of the Mādhva Brahmin sect under a succession of Vijayanagara rulers, most notably, the great monarch Kṛṣṇadevarāya (r. 1509–29). Prior to Vyāsatīrtha, Mādhva Brahminism was dominant mainly in the coastal South Kanara region around Udupi, where the movement’s eponymous founder, Madhva, lived in the thirteenth century. A Śmārta Brahmin by birth and education, Madhva (1238–1317) eventually rejected nondualist or Advaita Vedānta to put forward a new reading of canonical Vedānta texts like the *Brahma Sūtras* and the *Upaniṣads*. Because this new reading emphasized the abiding reality of difference, particularly that between the ultimate reality Brahman (whom Madhva identified with Viṣṇu) and individual human souls, Madhva’s system is often labeled “Dvaita” or “dualist” Vedānta. But perhaps the more significant feature of Mādhva Vedānta was its realistic pluralism,
which lent eternal significance to many of the structures of everyday life. By authoring manuals for distinctive Mādhva forms of devotionalism, ritual practice, and initiation rites, as well as rules governing daily routines that implicated both monks and laypeople, Madhva inaugurated a new religious movement in South Kanara. While adherents of his pluralistic ontology, realist epistemology, and distinctive form of Vaiṣṇava devotionalism established communities and institutions in other parts of Karnataka as early as the fourteenth century, the sect does not seem to have achieved much prominence. It was not until the sixteenth century that, under Vyāsatīrtha’s direction, Mādhva Brahminism became a major intellectual, social, and political force throughout South India. This was due to a variety of factors, the most notable of which were Vyāsatīrtha’s polemics and Vijayanagara’s patronage.

To be sure, Madhva’s positioning of his system at the opposite pole of Advaita Vedānta’s idealistic monism, in which any experience of difference or plurality was deemed illusory, made his thought polemical from its inception. Philosophical debate was a long-established tradition in India by Madhva’s time, and he was certainly not the first Hindu thinker to criticize the views of his predecessors. But Vyāsatīrtha took Madhva’s polemics against his intellectual and religious rivals to new heights. Drawing upon the “new dialectics” or navya-nyāya that were increasingly embraced by Sanskrit intellectuals of his era, Vyāsatīrtha’s most famous works closely parse a variety of opponents’ arguments to reveal a multitude of logical inconsistencies. Vyāsatīrtha’s discussions, which focus on alternative forms of Vedānta, are marked by what McCrea has identified as a new type of doxography, one that presents the historical evolution of ideas within rival philosophical systems. McCrea rightly argues that, through this historical presentation, Vyāsatīrtha identifies the emergence of significant internal divisions within these intellectual communities. As I will demonstrate, Vyāsatīrtha’s exposure of intrasectarian intellectual fault lines often revealed intrasectarian social divisions as well.

Indeed, Vyāsatīrtha’s concern with critiquing his opponents’ ideas is deeply entangled with the social and political status of those opponents and the relationships they enjoyed with the Vijayanagara court. In his polemical works, Vyāsatīrtha identifies two main intellectual rivals. First are the Smārta Brahmins, proponents of Advaita Vedānta, who managed the court temple of Virūpākṣa—a form of Śiva and the empire’s tutelary deity. Their dominance at court begins with the empire’s founding in the fourteenth century. Second are the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, who advocated Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta or qualified nondualism and who, by the sixteenth century, seem to have controlled many of the royally funded Viṣṇu shrines in the empire. That Vyāsatīrtha’s criticisms of these rival Vedānta systems proved to be incisive is evident in the fact that, for the duration of the sixteenth century (and even into the seventeenth), both direct and indirect responses to his works were
being composed. This was true not only in South India but as far north as Varanasi, where the Advaitin intellectual Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (fl. 1550) composed a line-by-line refutation of one of Vyāsatīrtha’s most polemical texts, the Nyāyāmṛta.

But Vyāsatīrtha was more than just a polemicist. One of the central themes of this book is that Vyāsatīrtha’s arguments elicited such a strong response from his intellectual opponents because he was head of a network of sectarian monasteries that was significantly expanded by Vijayanagara patronage. The inscriptive and monumental records indicate that, throughout the empire’s holdings, Vyāsatīrtha received several land grants for the construction of maṭhas or monasteries and the establishment of related agrahāras or settlements of Brahmin households. Vyāsatīrtha also used royally bequeathed wealth to install icons and subsidiary shrines at prominent Vaishnava temples and patronize large-scale public works, such as irrigation projects, in strategically significant locations. As I will demonstrate, Vyāsatīrtha used such means to spread Mādhva Brahminism’s distinctive doctrines, iconography, and rituals into Tamil- and Telugu-speaking regions while also implementing key features of the royal court’s agenda. Other sources on Vyāsatīrtha considered in this book include sectarian biographies that, while diverse in genre and content, share an emphasis on Vyāsatīrtha’s close relationship with the court. These biographies also attest to the sectarian leader’s interactions with a wide range of other social agents, including tribal peoples, foreign dignitaries, and emissaries from North Indian peer polities. Such interactions are substantiated in other sources, including travel accounts of Portuguese traders.

These diverse multilingual sources documenting Vyāsatīrtha’s life attest to the dynamic pluralism that characterized the early sixteenth-century Vijayanagara capital, a pluralism that shaped the nature of religious identity in this period. The reign of Kṛṣṇadevarāya, which is considered the empire’s apex, is particularly famous for its lavish patronage of a variety of Hindu religious institutions that encouraged new styles of temple art and architecture. While it receives fewer accolades, Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s reign was also a period of intense military activity that both consolidated the empire’s holdings in rebellious areas in the south and expanded the empire northward. Maps 1 and 2 below, which depict the empire’s boundaries in 1500, 1510, and 1520, respectively, document the empire’s growth to its largest size under Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s rule. This territorial expansion occasioned much foreign trade, technological exchange, migration, and other forms of cross-cultural interaction.

For instance, the Vijayanagara army consisted of mercenary soldiers from throughout the subcontinent, as well as recent transplants from Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. The court’s military activities depended on its horse trade with Arabia, trade into which Europeans had effectively inserted themselves as middlemen by the end of the fifteenth century. The Portuguese state of Goa, established in 1511 to protect its economic interests in India, added a new polity to the subcontinent that both competed and collaborated with Vijayanagara. That Kṛṣṇadevarāya received emissaries from Goa at court is well documented.
Moreover, contingents of Portuguese musketeers assisted Kṛṣṇadevarāya in his successful 1520–21 military campaign against the Adil Shahi dynasty of the Bijapur sultanate, with which Vijayanagara shared a border. The Vijayanagara economy depended in part on its textile trade with Southeast Asia; many of its
military campaigns in the Tamil country were undertaken to protect this. Thus, Kṛṣṇadevarāya presided over a cosmopolitan capital of roughly 250,000 people and a region of approximately 140,000 square miles that was marked by geographic and social mobility. At the same time, it maintained an economic and
social network that extended far beyond South India. The story of religion under Vijayanagara rule, as viewed through Vyāsatīrtha’s remarkably well-documented life, reflects these multiple influences and dynamic interactions.

Although there is little direct evidence of this, it is possible that sixteenth-century Vijayanagara royals were influenced by European conceptions of religiosity, which were shifting dramatically in this period and in politically significant ways. Less ambiguous is the influence of the heightened power of Islamic polities in South Asia on Vijayanagara self-understanding. That the Vijayanagara court had begun to think of itself in terms that reflected this broader context as early as the fourteenth century is evident in inscriptions in which Vijayanagara royals refer to themselves as “sultans among Hindu kings.” As Cynthia Talbot and Phillip Wagoner have both argued, this was intended to establish their authority in an increasingly Turkish and Persianized political environment. However, the epithet’s phrasing also established Vijayanagara royals’ distinctive identity within that world.

There has been some scholarly debate about whether this distinct identity was ethnic or religious, in addition to being political. It seems likely that it was some combination of all three, as the Vijayanagara court and its peer polities reconceptualized both the links and boundaries between the categories of religion, ethnicity, and the state. For example, Richard M. Eaton’s study of the Bahmani sultanate’s innovative use of Sufis and the cults that grew up around their dargāhs (tomb-shrines) as a means of political integration shows how this new South Asian Islamic polity sought to “Indianize” its authority. Vijayanagara did not face the same challenges, but its reliance on Hindu sectarian leaders, particularly leaders of monasteries (maṭhādhipatis), embodied new modes of interaction between religious and political institutions. Unlike many of their royal “Hindu” predecessors, such as the Kalachuris and the Kākatīyas, who took on rājagurus and, in doing so, publicly proclaimed personal devotional sentiments, many Vijayanagara royals left their personal religious affiliation open to interpretation. However, it is also true that Vijayanagara royals consistently privileged Brahmin sectarian maṭhas, or monasteries, with a Vedānta focus. This practice, which also departed from their less Vedic-oriented royal predecessors, began with the fourteenth-century Saṅgama dynasty’s patronage of the Smārta Śaiva community at Sringeri, and continued through the sixteenth-century Tuḷuvas’ increasing support of Mādhva and Śrīvaiṣṇava institutions. While the reasons for the empire’s Vedāntin and Brahminical preferences remain debatable, it is clear that the court relied on these institutions to implement many features of its statecraft.

Indeed, the experience of the Smārta Brahmin maṭha at Sringeri shows that much wealth and stature could be gained under Vijayanagara rule, which was generous in its dealings with religious elites and their institutions. Yet—and this is an observation that is generally missing from the literature on Vijayanagara patronage
of religious institutions—it also seems that this very opportunity gave rise to an increased sense of sectarian boundaries and of competition between sects. Courtly patronage may have been generous, but it could not have been infinite. The fact that courtly generosity had tremendous local implications for control over basic resources such as land and water seems to have engendered both a more bounded sense of sectarian identity and intersectarian competition. Furthermore, the ongoing warfare of Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s reign likely raised concerns among religious elites about the royal allocation of resources. Thus, while I argue that Vijayanagara patronage encouraged certain religious formations and thereby contributed, on some level, to a shared religious identity, I also suggest that it fomented inter-sectarian rivalry and competition. In fact, the most intense sectarian rivalry was between those very Vedānta sects that were regular recipients of royal patronage.

Andrew Nicholson has recently argued that Sanskrit intellectuals operating between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries articulated a unified concept of Hinduism in response to the new political significance of Islam. Nicholson traces the development of this idea and its nuances through a study of doxographic literature produced by these intellectuals that delineated areas of overlap and distinction between different systems of philosophical and religious thought. If this shared identity in Nicholson’s articulation was largely a conceptual one, it was also, as this book will show, an institutional and procedural one rooted in collaborative ritual enterprises, material exchanges at temples, and a common model of administrative structure. Indeed, while the emergence of the concept of a unified “Hindu” identity reflects an Islamic—and, possibly, by the sixteenth century a European—Other, it is also true that Vijayanagara patronage of specific Hindu groups contributed to a generic institutionalization process that implicated a variety of Hindu communities. Many communities that were not recipients of royal patronage came to pattern themselves along the lines of those Brahmin Vedānta maṭhas that were. Because these Brahmin Vedānta maṭhas were inherently sectarian, Vijayanagara patronage encouraged the replication of a certain type of religious organization, the very nature of which formalized Hindu sectarianism.

While the prototype of the Hindu monastery patronized by the state and therefore wielding worldly power had existed in India for at least four hundred years prior to Vijayanagara’s founding, the dynamic between Vijayanagara royalties and Hindu sectarian maṭhas was distinctive. The extent of Vijayanagara’s territorial holdings in South India rendered the empire very diverse religiously, but so too did the realities of sixteenth-century economic and political life in the subcontinent. The Vijayanagara court’s militarism, which caused the regular movement of substantial numbers of troops throughout its territories, had direct implications for royal patronage of religious institutions like Hindu temples and monasteries. These institutions came to function as courtly outposts, rest stations, and targeted locations for strategic development efforts. Furthermore, the court’s large
sphere of activity also enabled new kinds of transregional religious interaction. Such interactions, which were often facilitated directly by Vijayanagara patronage, encouraged new articulations of relative religious identity that mapped out varying degrees of affinity and difference between sectarian groups. Finally, the fact that Vijayanagara stood at the center of a global trade network, one that increased the ethnic and religious diversity of its capital city and major towns, reshaped the economy in ways that increased social mobility. This, in turn, stimulated new conceptions of identity that implicated Hindu monastic leaders and their relationships with their constituencies, their rivals, and the state.

There has been almost as much debate over the use of the term Hindu sect as over the use of the term Hinduism. One of the problems with the term sect is that it presumes the existence of a shared set of core religious doctrines and practices that are then interpreted variously by different subgroups. If no such core doctrines defining a Hindu community existed in precolonial India, then it follows that there was also no community to be subdivided into sects. This argument is further supported by the fact that there is no clear indigenous counterpart to this English term. The one most often resorted to is sampradāya or tradition, with its connotations of guru-śiṣya lineages used to transmit specific sets of teachings. But sampradāya arguably does not successfully convey a breaking off from a larger shared tradition and could just as easily refer to an entire religion in its own right.

If we are looking for a term that conveys Indian conceptions of religiosity that coalesce with the English word sect, perhaps the most efficacious for the Vijayanagara period would be the Sanskrit term maṭha. Often translated as “monastery” and used in many vernacular Indian languages, the term maṭha carries a host of connotations (so many, in fact, that one could argue that it lends little clarity to the debate to use it). The term maṭha refers in part to an architectural space that typically housed Hindu ascetics and implicated the surrounding area in significant ways, not unlike the Hindu temple. But the term maṭha also transcended these spaces to refer to conceptual entities, in much the same way that a church is both a building that one goes to and the religious community to which one belongs. Maṭhas of a particular sectarian community constituted a network of interrelated institutions with shared practices and ideals; their residents were typically initiates into an order. Like the monasteries of medieval Europe, they performed many intellectual, religious, social, and political functions and, as such, were engaged both with the state and the local population.

The main virtue of using maṭha for sect is that it is largely in terms of the Vijayanagara court’s relationship to maṭhas that the state fomented both a generic Hindu religious sensibility and Hindu sectarian divisions. Some scholars maintain that maṭhas functioned as universities and taught a variety of students and subjects. While this is true to an extent, there is ample evidence from this period that maṭhas typically endorsed a particular system of thought and a specific devotional
orientation. *Mathas* established and maintained *guru-śiṣya* lineages and codified not only intellectual practices within the community but religious rituals for iconographic worship, rules governing daily routines such as bathing and food consumption, and techniques for marking the body with emblems of sectarian affiliation. To be sure, *mathas* functioned differently within their respective communities. The Śrīvaishnavas, for instance, had monastic institutions but also had prominent householder religious leaders, meaning that *mathas* in that community did not hold exclusive claims to religious authority. Moreover, *mathas* could themselves be the locus of expressing intrasectarian differences and rivalries. Different branches of monastic lineages within a given sectarian community could observe slightly different practices and engage with slightly different doctrinal and textual traditions.

But because *mathas* also performed similar functions in South Indian society, were organized according to similar administrative patterns, and were often placed by the court on the same temple premises, they ended up enacting shared religious identities, even as they promoted their distinctiveness. To be sure, these shared religious identities and their internal divisions do not correspond exactly to today’s formulations of “Hinduism” and “Hindu sects.” But they are important historical antecedents to some of the later developments. Thus, while the semantic overlap between the terms *matha* and *sect* is not exact, studying the various connotations of the word *matha* and the nature and role of these institutions in sixteenth-century South India helps us to delineate a bit more precisely the contours of religious unity and difference.

Vyāsatīrtha’s life story is an ideal vantage point from which to consider the dynamic interactions between the Hindu *matha*, the Vijayanagara court, and broader South Indian society. His relations with the court suggest that the court was increasingly dependent on Hindu *mathas* for implementing certain aspects of its statecraft. As chapter 2 of this book will demonstrate, the inscripational record indicates that, particularly when it came to integrating newly conquered or rebellious territories, the court regularly donated land in these regions to Hindu sectarian leaders to found freestanding monasteries. The construction of a *matha* in a given location was often accompanied by the irrigation of land whose increased harvest benefited both the monks and the local population. A *matha*’s reliance on local laborers to supply other necessities also created new economic opportunities that helped to promote political integration. Furthermore, by taking on courtly emblems and titles, the monastery symbolically linked its authority to that of the Vijayanagara court.

While my study of Vyāsatīrtha’s ties to the Vijayanagara court thereby reveals a symbiotic relationship between the royal court and the sectarian Hindu *matha*, it also provides evidence that the court sometimes felt uneasy about its reliance on these institutions. To rein in the increasing local power of monastic leaders like Vyāsatīrtha, the court fostered competition between sects. One way it did this was by placing rival monastic institutions on the premises of large and popular
temples, a cohabitation that fostered intersectarian competition for prominence at the temple. At the same time, the court's facilitation of multiple sectarian presences at a given temple could expand that temple's appeal across diverse constituencies of the empire. Such expansion not only increased outreach opportunities for the court but also encouraged intersectarian collaboration in the ritually based implementation of imperial gifts. Indeed, despite being famous as a sectarian polemicist, Vyāsatīrtha often collaborated with his intellectual rivals at the practical level of material and honorific exchanges in shared temple environments. Because a broad swath of Vijayanagara society was typically implicated in these exchanges, royal patronage of sectarian leaders had the potential to affect religious identity at many social levels.

The multifaceted role played by maṭhas and their leaders in Vijayanagara society influenced the intellectual production of these religious institutions. Monastic institutions' increasing sociopolitical prominence inspired new genres and modified existing genres of Hindu literature. Much of this literature reflects increased sectarian competition over courtly resources. Biographies of sectarian leaders detailing their exclusively close ties to various kings, doxographic mappings of the philosophical landscape offering a historical yet hierarchical presentation of opponents' ideas, and even the use of inscriptive records on the part of religious leaders to argue for their sect's historical prominence all reflect sectarian concerns about the royal rationing of resources. While I focus primarily on sources pertaining directly to Vyāsatīrtha, I also examine sources relating to other early sixteenth-century communities such as the Smārtas and Śrīvaiśṇavas as a result of Vyāsatīrtha's engagement with these other sectarian groups.

From a doctrinal standpoint, the era's emphasis on debate and polemics strongly suggests that these groups were looking to convert others to their systems of thought. Certainly, “conversion” from one school of Brahminical Vedānta thought (and its related ritual practices) to another did not necessarily require the radical rejection of one's former identity and affiliations that conversion has historically connoted in traditions like Christianity. But the doctrinal and ritual differences between various Brahmin Vedānta sects were often significant and convincing others of the unique correctness of one's own system was undoubtedly a principal motivation behind the period's polemical literature. However, while Vijayanagara patronage fostered a more bounded sense of sectarian identity, evident in intersectarian polemics, it also provided new social frameworks for philosophical dialogue and intellectual exchange. Brahmin intellectuals like Vyāsatīrtha simultaneously criticized and borrowed ideas from their intellectual rivals, reflecting the intersectarian competition and collaboration that Vijayanagara patronage inspired.

Of course, Brahmin intellectual and religious pursuits were not simply a reflection of the court's agenda and of sectarian leaders' desire to excel within it. While sectarian doctrines and practices could be modified in response to political
circumstances and were, therefore, socially located, they were not infinitely malleable. As I show, through a detailed analysis of Vyāsatīrtha's polemics against rival schools, the doctrines themselves provided a framework for sectarian identities that in many ways was nonnegotiable. Religious doctrines and philosophical commitments imposed certain limits on sectarian interactions that took place at temples and at court. In this sense, such commitments blocked incursions of the sociopolitical realm into religious and philosophical activity. Nevertheless, insofar as they exercised an important influence over the sociopolitical behavior of sectarian institutions, religious beliefs and intellectual practices played an active role in shaping the sociopolitical sphere.

My efforts to contextualize Vyāsatīrtha's polemical writings in terms of his quotidian interactions with his sectarian rivals and with the royal court depart from other studies of Vyāsatīrtha that tend to locate their analyses mainly in the Sanskrit intellectual tradition. Recent projects, such as Nicholson's, that examine Hindu philosophical literature in light of broader social and historical realities, do not necessarily examine how the authors of such literature acted upon their environments to shape them in important ways. This book draws on collections edited by Rosalind O’Hanlon and David Washbrook (2012) and Rosalind O’Hanlon, Christopher Minkowski, and Anand Venkatkrisnan (2015), as well as additional work by Christopher Minkowski (2010), Elaine Fisher (2013), and others who have considered the intersection of Indian scholar-intellectuals’ different roles and how these roles affected social reality. By studying Vyāsatīrtha's multiple identities as an intellectual, a monastic administrator, a public works patron, an economic stimulator, a temple donor, and a state agent, I aim to illuminate how this important historic figure contributed to a variety of related social processes.

My argument that Vyāsatīrtha's multifaceted roles both affected and furthered his philosophical program is not intended to undermine the cogency of his arguments or the incisiveness of his polemics. One of this book's main goals is to demonstrate Vyāsatīrtha's thorough familiarity with other systems of thought and his creative use of new argumentation techniques to buttress his school's realistic pluralism and distinctive form of Vaiṣṇava devotionalism. Significant portions of chapters 3 and 5 examine various arguments in Vyāsatīrtha's magnum opus, the Nyāyāmṛta or “Nectar of Logic.” In these chapters, I offer a close reading of certain passages of that text in order to elucidate Vyāsatīrtha's polemics against other forms of Vedānta. But I am also interested in how Vyāsatīrtha's arguments were informed by his context, not merely to demonstrate the obvious point that philosophy is influenced by culture but to show that we can better understand some of the arguments Vyāsatīrtha was making if we know more about how those arguments were related to his daily interactions. For example, Vyāsatīrtha's polemics against Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta read very differently when you know that Vyāsatīrtha was actively collaborating on temple rituals with this alternative Vaiṣṇava group. In
many instances, we can greatly improve our understanding of Vyāsatīrtha’s philosophical position precisely by historically contextualizing it.

In the past decade, there has been some discomfort with biographical accounts of historically important Indians. In cases where the individual in question was a religious leader, contextualizing his life and thought can seem to ascribe worldly motivations to his behavior that contradict his status as a spiritual icon. My study of Vyāsatīrtha’s significant connections to the Vijayanagara court is intended, in part, to clarify why royals entrusted wealth to religious men, as well as to show how such connections to royalty may have abetted religious and spiritual interests. The fact that Vyāsatīrtha, and men of his ilk, received so much royal patronage and, by extension, power, attests to their self-abnegating status. In an analysis of a twentieth-century utopian movement in Bengal, Raphaël Voix argues that its founder, Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, aspired to a world governed by ascetics precisely because they were, in his view, the least self-interested. This attitude has evidently been long held in India, where men like Vyāsatīrtha were considered ideal recipients of royal wealth and political power precisely because they were above exploiting them. Thus, exploring the sociopolitical role and economic power of a māṭhādhipati under Vijayanagara rule does not require arguing that the court cynically used religion to further its interests; rather, such study can show how the court respected religion’s social value and how that respect influenced political decisions.

Furthermore, the extensive sixteenth-century biographical literature focusing on sectarian leaders like Vyāsatīrtha offers its own theories as to why these men were of value to the state. A key theme of the biographies of Vyāsatīrtha is that Vyāsatīrtha interacts with the political realm somewhat reluctantly out of magnanimous concern for its dharmic well-being. By considering this literature in some detail, chapter 2 showcases indigenous sixteenth-century perspectives on the relationship between religion and politics. The proliferation of biographies of sectarian leaders in the sixteenth century indicates that the lives of these figures had become increasingly important, not just to royal courts but to sectarian identities. Part of the goal of this book is to understand more fully which factors in the sixteenth century contributed to this new importance.

A compelling counterargument to criticism of the biographical treatment of a figure like Vyāsatīrtha is that contemporary understandings of precolonial India tend to dismiss the role of individual human agency. This leaves us with a very static account of Indian history that sustains the Orientalist legacy. Colonial-era historians cited Indian culture’s lack of linear progress and social dynamism as evidence of its inferiority and as partial justification for “enlightened” colonial rule.

A great deal of literature on precolonial India (particularly precolonial Indian religion) has failed to examine the role of individual agents operating in specific circumstances marked by historical contingency. This has resulted in a presentation of Indian culture and religion as monolithic; static; beholden to doctrinal
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imperatives; and allowing for almost no social, intellectual, or economic mobility. As Eaton has demonstrated in his book *A Social History of the Deccan (1300–1761): Eight Indian Lives*, biographical studies of precolonial Indian agents can recover the fluidity, dynamism, change, diversity, and mobility that have been constitutive features of Indian society for centuries.

Following Eaton’s approach, I have narrowed my focus to a relatively short period of time and a few main protagonists while also consulting a wide variety of sources from contemporaneous social contexts. By being attentive to the different types of institutional discourse in the extant sources, I hope to create a dynamic portrait of the early sixteenth-century Vijayanagara society in which Vyāsatīrtha lived and worked. Such a portrait would allow for inherited conceptual and structural frameworks, historical contingency, and individual initiative. I show that interactions both among *mathādhipatis* and between them and Vijayanagara kings were not based purely on age-old entitlements or static conceptions of dharma. Rather, the nature of royal and religious interactions depended upon a variety of factors that included personal religious sentiment and respect for established institutions, as well as practical considerations such as warfare, resource management, and strategic innovations in statecraft. The plethora of sources on Vyāsatīrtha and his environment have opened up new possibilities for understanding not just Vyāsatīrtha’s specific life but the lives and interactions of a variety of social groups and agents. They also reveal the underlying patterns of sixteenth-century South Indian society and the significant changes that were taking place.

In addition to this introductory chapter, this book is divided into four main chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 2, entitled “Royal and Religious Authority in Sixteenth-Century Vijayanagara: A *Maṭhādhipati* at Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s Court,” explores the relationship between Vyāsatīrtha and the royal court as documented in a variety of sources. These include the Mādhva biographical tradition, the inscriptive records documenting material and honorific exchanges between Vyāsatīrtha and various agents, the monumental and topographical remains of several structures associated with Vyāsatīrtha, and, finally, Emperor Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s own writings on statecraft. These sources demonstrate that, while kings and sectarian leaders did enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship, there were boundaries between courtly and monastic life. Precisely because these boundaries delimited the relative power of royal and religious leaders, they were occasionally subject to contestation.

Chapter 3, “Sectarian Rivalries at an Ecumenical Court: Vyāsatīrtha, Advaita Vedānta, and the Śmārtas Brahmins,” links Vyāsatīrtha’s role as an institutional administrator of *maṭhas* to his intellectual activities with respect to other Vedānta sects. In particular, it examines how Vyāsatīrtha’s critique of Advaita Vedānta’s doctrine of *jīvanmukti*, or liberation from *samsāra* (the cycle of rebirth) while still embodied, reflects Vyāsatīrtha’s challenge to Śmārta Brahmin dominance at court. The doctrine of *jīvanmukti* implied that some ascetic Śmārta leaders
had achieved a special spiritual state granting them access to otherwise unknowable truths. Vyāsatīrtha’s claim that this traditionally Advaita concept made more sense in his own system of thought could be read as an attempt to undercut the authority of the Advaitin Śmārtas’ gurus at court and make a bid for that authority for Mādhva teachers.

In addition to including a detailed discussion of Vyāsatīrtha’s philosophical arguments against jīvanmukti in Advaita, this chapter considers the historical arc of the Śmārtas’ relationship with the Vijayanagara court by examining the inscriptive, monumental, and literary records that document it. In particular, it considers the claim, widely accepted in Vijayanagara studies, that Rāmacandra Bhārati, Vyāsatīrtha’s exact contemporary as the head of the Sringeri Śmārta maṭha, fabricated inscriptions attesting to the Sringeri maṭha’s role in the empire’s founding. I argue that this act may be interpreted as a response to a marked shift in patronage away from Śmārta-dominated Śaiva institutions and toward Mādhva and Śrīvaishṇava ones during Vyāsatīrtha’s lifetime. It also reflects an increasing historical consciousness, wherein historical claims of courtly prominence were understood to benefit sectarian communities.

Chapter 4, entitled “Allies or Rivals? Vyāsatīrtha’s Material, Social, and Ritual Interactions with the Śrīvaishṇavas,” focuses on Vyāsatīrtha’s interactions with his intellectual rivals, the Śrīvaishṇavas, at three prominent sites of Vijayanagara patronage: the capital itself, especially the Viśṭhala and Kṛṣṇa temples there; the Varadarāja temple in Kanchipuram; and the ritually related Śri Veṅkaṭeśvara and Govindarājasvāmi temples in Tirupati-Tirumala. The inscriptive and monumental records at these sites document Vyāsatīrtha’s efforts to forge a mutually beneficial alliance with the Śrīvaishṇavas even as he used this alliance to import distinctive features of Mādhva Brahminism into new regions. These records also indicate that the Vijayanagara court actively supported this alliance but also, on occasion, stirred up competition between these two communities. In some instances, the inscriptions describe royal gifts made to Vyāsatīrtha at Śrīvaishṇava-dominated temples as punishment for infractions on the part of temple leadership. In other instances, the court used its donations to encourage the ritual collaboration of the two sects at these large temple complexes. In this way, the court strove to cultivate a “big tent” Vaiṣṇavism that would appeal to a variety of regional, linguistic, and devotional publics.

The fifth chapter, “The Social Life of Vedānta Philosophy: Vyāsatīrtha’s Polemics against Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta,” considers Vyāsatīrtha’s polemics against Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, the system of thought advocated by the Śrīvaishṇavas. It focuses on the final section of the Nyāyāmṛta, entitled “The Defense of a Hierarchical Ordering of Brahmā and Other Souls in the State of Mokṣa.” In this section, Vyāsatīrtha argues against Viśiṣṭādvaita’s doctrine of paramasāmya or parity of souls in the state of liberation (mokṣa) from saṃsāra; in contrast to this parity,
Vyāsatīrtha advocates for eternal spiritual hierarchies among souls in the liberated state. This latter doctrine was one of Mādhva Vedānta’s most controversial. I argue that Vyāsatīrtha’s defense of it exhibits an interesting reconstruction of its basic premises that reflects his efforts to reach his contemporary audiences. In some important ways, Vyāsatīrtha’s arguments in this section reflect his ongoing collaboration with the Śrīvaiṣṇavas at royally patronized temples. Vyāsatīrtha consistently maintains that Viśiṣṭādvaita premises are conducive to Dvaita conclusions. He thereby demonstrates what the two sects have in common, even as he argues for the superiority of Dvaita. Yet there is also evidence in this section of Vyāsatīrtha holding the line against too much blurring of sectarian boundaries. Indeed, while Vyāsatīrtha may have been willing to collaborate with Śrīvaiṣṇavas, particularly those of the northern and more Sanskrit-oriented faction, he also makes the case for Dvaita’s unique doctrinal correctness. Thus, while sociopolitical realities influenced the articulation of philosophical doctrines, these doctrines also set limits on incursions of the political into the religious sphere. Doctrinal differences demarcated a boundary between sects even when those sects collaborated ritually at temples and shared in royal wealth.

The book’s concluding chapter, “Hindu, Ecumenical, Sectarian: Religion and the Vijayanagara Court,” highlights key features of our exploration of Vyāsatīrtha’s life and work and analyzes what they tell us about the links between religion, society, politics, and economy under sixteenth-century Vijayanagara rule. It also addresses in a more sustained way those themes, such as the relationships between elite and popular religious formations and between religious doctrine and practice, that received somewhat fragmentary treatment in the individual chapters. But the conclusion primarily explores the implications of taking a more dynamic view of India’s precolonial religious history by focusing on individual agents. It restates the advantages of attempting to locate philosophical and religious practitioners in their social and historical environments, not merely to discern how they were affected by those environments but also how they acted upon them. It also reemphasizes that a historically informed reading of Vyāsatīrtha’s polemics actually highlights the precise contours of his arguments. Finally, while it is perhaps a cliché to speak of Hinduism as a religious system of unity-in-diversity, studying Vijayanagara patronage practices delineates more precisely the social and historical mechanisms by which one version of such unity-in-diversity emerged. Understanding this version as a social and historic phenomenon both clarifies and problematizes scholars’ inherited vocabulary on religion under Vijayanagara rule, especially the terms Hindu, ecumenical, and sectarian.