In the previous chapter, we saw that *maṭhas* and their leaders performed various economic, political, and social functions for the royal court. Both as freestanding institutions and through their affiliations with temples, *maṭhas* irrigated and developed land, redistributed its produce as *prasād*, engaged in economic transactions with local laborers, and took on courtly emblems and titles. Through such activities, *maṭhas* and their leaders integrated newly conquered and rebellious territories more firmly into the empire while increasing their own social prominence.

But *maṭhas* were also educational and religious facilities, and their leaders cultivated qualities that were valued by their constituents for reasons having little to do with the court and its agenda. These qualities could include knowledge of sacred texts, ritual aptitude, devotional fervor, and intellectual prowess displayed in debates with proponents of rival systems of thought. Certainly Vyāsatīrtha’s fame is rooted not only in his reputation as an advisor to several Vijayanagara kings but also in the intellectual project articulated in his writings. This project was multifaceted. It consisted, in large part, of a revamped presentation of Madhva’s teachings that bolstered the system’s realistic pluralism and distinctive form of Vaiṣṇava devotionalism through new methods of argumentation developed in the *navya-nyāya* or the “new dialectics.” It also consisted of an incisive polemic against the two alternative forms of Vedānta being advanced by other Brahmin sects in Vyāsatīrtha’s milieu and, not coincidentally, of a historical doxography of the arguments internal to those systems. Of the three major works Vyāsatīrtha authored, two are centrally concerned with criticizing the Advaita or nondualist Vedānta advocated by the Śmārta Brahmins and the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta or qualified nondualism advocated by the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. These sects held established...
positions of power at the Vijayanagara court; that of the Śmārtas was particularly long-standing. A central goal of this chapter will be to explore the ways in which Vyāsatīrtha’s polemics against his Vedāntin intellectual rivals, especially the Śmārtas, were related to his increasingly close ties to Vijayanagara royals.

Indeed, royal patronage not only enhanced the regional authority of maṭhādhipatis and the social prominence of their institutions, it also facilitated the spread of their ideas. As we saw in chapter 2, biographies of sectarian leaders assume the importance of strong ties to the court for a sectarian community’s success, even as such texts deny worldly motivation to religious mendicants. This “success” could be measured in part by the spread of a given sect’s teachings into new regions. The digvijaya genre’s emphasis on all-India philosophical conquest attests to the fact that sectarian communities sought to convert others to their systems of thought. Of course, the dominance of this literary motif does not mean that actual “conversion” required radically rejecting one’s former religious identity and intellectual affiliations. As I will show in this and subsequent chapters, Brahmīn sectarian communities shared boundaries that were not only porous, but malleable. However, the digvijaya literature’s glorification of doctrinal debate suggests that convincing others of the unique correctness of one’s own system was important. Indeed, this literature portrays these doctrinal victories as a form of “world conquest,” implying that the spread of a given sect’s ideas also promoted that sect’s worldly stature. While the philosophical literature of the period is much more reticent about the social and political contexts in which its authors operated, its general preoccupation with polemics (and even to some extent with doxography) indicates that sectarian leaders sought to challenge the philosophical standing of other sectarian groups. These leaders were often receiving royal patronage and, in that capacity, acting as state agents, which implies that ties to the royal court encouraged sectarian doctrinal competition. This is suggestive of an intimate relationship between a maṭha’s worldly activities and its intellectual ones.

Thus, while our previous chapter focused on Vyāsatīrtha’s role as an institutional administrator of maṭhas and as an advisor to a series of Vijayanagara kings, this chapter will link those roles to his intellectual activities with respect to other Vedānta sects. In particular, it will examine Vyāsatīrtha’s critique of Advaita Vedānta, especially its doctrine of jīvanmukti or liberation from saṃsāra while still embodied, and how this critique reflects Vyāsatīrtha’s challenge to the Śmārtas’ worldly standing, by implying that some ascetic
Smārta leaders had achieved a special spiritual state that granted them access to otherwise unknowable truths. Vyāsatīrtha’s claim that this traditionally Advaita concept makes more sense in his own system of thought could have been a way of undercutting the authority of the Smārta gurus at court and making a bid for that authority on the part of Mādhva teachers.

The effectiveness of Vyāsatīrtha’s doctrinal criticisms of Advaita is evident in the extensive response they elicited. For the duration of the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth centuries, proponents of Advaita Vedānta composed both direct and indirect responses to Vyāsatīrtha’s works. As far north as Varanasi, the Advaitin intellectual Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (fl. 1550) composed an innovative form of commentary: a line-by-line response opposing the anti-Advaita arguments in Vyāsatīrtha’s magnum opus, the Nyāyāmṛta. In the South, the late sixteenth century witnessed some particularly vituperative criticisms of Dvaita thought, as Advaitin authors like Appayya Dīkṣita composed the Madhvatantramukhamardana or Crushing the Face of Madhva’s System.

While these responses attest to the acuity of Vyāsatīrtha’s anti-Advaita polemics, the intensity and duration of Advaitin responses to Vyāsatīrtha’s philosophical arguments also represent a reaction to the Dvaitin’s social prominence at Vijayanagara. This prominence is substantiated by the inscriptive and monumental records examined in the previous chapter, which indicate that Vyāsatīrtha used courtly patronage to expand the Mādhva sect’s geographical reach and, correspondingly, its social significance. If we consider that some of Vyāsatīrtha’s philosophical arguments against Advaita were made almost verbatim by the earlier Mādhva author Viṣṇudāsācārya (1390–1440?), it seems likely that Vyāsatīrtha’s courtly eminence, insofar as it spread the Dvaita school’s institutional network and, in turn, its doctrines, contributed to his intellectual fame. This fame made his cogent, detailed criticisms of other forms of Vedānta impossible to ignore.

Yet while royal patronage clearly shaped and promoted Vedānta mathas’ intellectual production, the extent to which intersectarian doctrinal debates influenced royal behavior, including royal patronage of sectarian institutions, is less clear. Evidence that the Vijayanagara court was invested in Brahminical intellectual activity can be found in scattered references to royal support in Brahmin texts, a notable example being the Sringeri Smārta Brahmin Sāyaṇa’s claim that Vijayanagara kings patronized his commentary on the Vedas. (This will be discussed in greater depth below.) There are also inscriptive records in which royals praise mathādhipatis for their doctrinal affiliations, knowledge, and erudition, thereby implying there was royal awareness of doctrinal divisions between sectarian communities. That philosophical debates between sectarian groups were witnessed by royals and, to some extent, performed for them is also attested to in many literary sources, such as Somanātha’s biography of Vyāsatīrtha. While such sources have their biases, other less partisan sources, such as debate manuals, indicate that these intellectual
engagements were regulated by established rules. This suggests not only a degree of public scrutiny of these events but also that real stakes could be attached to a given debate’s outcome.

The “real world” implications of these doctrinal debates may be seen in the Vijayanagara court’s eventual shift in patronage away from historically Śmārtā-dominated institutions and toward both Mādhva and Śrīvaiṣṇava ones over the course of the sixteenth century. While the complete exclusion of Śmārtā and Śaiva institutions from royal patronage did not occur until Rāmarāya’s regency (1542–65), the seeds of this process were arguably planted during Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s reign. Vyāsatīrtha’s rivalry with the Śmārtas, manifested in his incisive polemics against their doctrines, as well as his alliance with the Śrīvaiṣṇavas (discussed in the next chapter), may have contributed to this shift. This would help to explain why Vyāsatīrtha’s anti-Advaita arguments received so much more attention than those of his predecessors, such as Viṣṇudāsaśārīra.

That royal patronage responded to inter sectarian doctrinal debates is not so far fetched, if we consider the influence such arguments had on sectarian institutions’ behavior. Insofar as intellectual debates changed people’s minds about which guru’s teachings were superior, they shaped social reality in various ways. The adoption of new religious identities on the part of religious elites could change the power structure and, correspondingly, the ritual activity at temples, whose economic importance in a given area implicated a broad swath of local society. The increased local prominence of a particular intellectual and religious community, organized into an institution such as a sectarian maṭha, was often consolidated through new forms of local patronage that reshaped regional economic, social, and even linguistic networks. Thus, while polemical and doxographic literature certainly served the purely philosophical purposes of mapping the intellectual landscape and identifying the most cogent responses to a range of competing arguments, there were social and political implications to presenting doctrinal positions in particular ways. Because the Vijayanagara court often exercised its authority precisely by affiliating with local institutions with established power, shifts in that power brought about by doctrinal debates could affect how the court would allocate its resources.

One of the reasons it is difficult to discern whether doctrinal debates and other competitive displays of intellectual prowess influenced Vijayanagara statecraft is the court’s famous ecumenism, apparent in its patronage of a variety of religious groups. Recent scholarship on the Vijayanagara Empire has emphasized its religious diversity, presenting it as a tolerant haven for a variety of religious traditions, including Islam, Jainism, and Christianity, and highlighting the ecumenical manner in which its rulers patronized disparate Hindu sects. Such scholarship offers an important corrective to older scholarly depictions of Vijayanagara as a monolithic Hindu bastion against the northern Islamic polities. However, this
emphasis on the court’s religious diversity overlooks the fact that royal patronage did tend to benefit Hindu communities almost exclusively, especially those with an orthodox and Vedanta orientation. It also ignores the period’s Hindu sectarian competition, which manifested itself most conspicuously among those very Brahmin elites who not only held competing interpretations of Vedanta literature, but were recipients of royal patronage.

It may be ironic that Brahminical sectarian tensions heightened precisely in the context of Vijayanagara’s generous and reputedly ecumenical patronage system. The fact that many Brahmin sects came to establish mathas and other institutions within the empire’s capital likely increased the interaction of these groups, which held competing Vedanta views. Indeed, Vijayanagara patronage in the sixteenth century created multisectarian “mega-temples” that encouraged both intersectarian collaboration and competition for prominence. Thus, it is plausible that the ecumenical patronage of the Vijayanagara rulers generated a certain give-and-take across Hindu sectarian lines. But that very familiarity may have also enabled a competitive striving for sectarian eminence. Furthermore, as our survey of inscriptions pertaining to Vyasa-tirtha in the previous chapter demonstrates, Vijayanagara donations of land to religious institutions expanded their geographical reach in ways that dramatically increased their social prominence. This, coupled with the fact that courtly generosity had tremendous implications for local control over basic resources such as land and water, may have engendered a greater sense of bounded sectarian identity and a desire to show one’s sect off to advantage.

Ignoring sectarian competition among Brahmin sects who were receiving royal patronage from the Vijayanagara court has skewed our understanding of Vijayanagara ecumenism. Scholarship on the empire’s ecumenism tends to portray it either as a deliberate policy of conflict avoidance or, in Pollock’s view, as evidence of religion’s lack of importance to Vijayanagara statecraft. I would argue that the Vijayanagara court was careful to avoid playing favorites (at least until the late Tuluva dynasty), but it was not ecumenical in the way scholars have typically conceived it. In fact, Vijayanagara patronage of religious institutions looks ecumenical from our vantage point mainly because we have more records documenting the (mostly) Hindu groups who were patronized by a given king. We have comparatively fewer records of those religious communities who were not recipients of royal patronage. This means that our records leave out the true variety of religious options available, masking the selective aspect of Vijayanagara patronage. While courtly patronage may have been generous and, in some ways, evenhanded, it could not have been infinite. Choices were made about which religious communities would receive royal gifts. These choices likely reflected many practical considerations. But the court’s consistent privileging of Brahmin Vedanta mathas does suggest that something about this particular religious, intellectual, and institutional formation resonated with Vijayanagara royals. Furthermore, precisely because these
maṭhas served many pragmatic imperial purposes, the court certainly would have been aware of their relationships. Because these intersectarian relationships were not merely practical but also doctrinal, doctrinal debate likely affected royal giving.

By examining Vyāsatīrtha’s interactions with Śmārta Brahmin advocates of Advaita Vedānta, through a contextualized study of his polemics against their doctrine of jīvanmukti, this chapter will explore how royal patronage practices influenced sectarian identities, as articulated through doctrinal disputes. But it will also consider how sectarian groups pursued their own distinctive goals through their ties to the court and the role such pursuits played in shaping social and political reality. Through this double-sided approach, I aim to examine both the influence of courtly culture on developments in Vedānta philosophy and the influence of such developments, particularly polemical argumentation, on sectarian sociopolitical positioning throughout the empire.

**Sringeri Śmārtas and the Fourteenth-Century Vijayanagara Court**

Perhaps the Hindu sectarian institution most emblematic of Vijayanagara patronage practices is the Śmārta maṭha at Sringeri. Inscriptional, legendary, and literary sources consistently link the empire’s founding dynasty, the Saṅgamas, to this maṭha.19 Intellectually affiliated with Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta, this Brahmin community is famous for its involvement in the Vedic commentarial project undertaken or, perhaps, overseen by Sāyaṇa. On the basis of several inscriptions and the colophons of Sāyaṇa’s works, many scholars believe that this large-scale, and likely collaborative, project was directly funded by the early Saṅgamas. Indeed, in the introductory passages to various sections of his Vedic commentaries, Sāyaṇa often identifies himself as the king’s minister and implies that Bukka himself, reputed cofounder of the Saṅgama dynasty, supported his commentarial work. Sāyaṇa refers to himself in the preamble to Rgsamhitabhāṣya [RS Bh] 7.3 as “Sāyaṇa, the king’s minister and one of unimpeded understanding,”20 and, in the preamble to RSBh 7.4, as “Sāyaṇa, the minister knowing the true essence of the Śruti.”21 Such claims about an author’s status in religious and literary texts can be problematic sources of historic information in part because they may be later insertions by other authors interested in advancing the text’s agenda. However, Galewicz’s recent study of Sāyaṇa’s commentary argues that inscriptive records in which the early Saṅgama kings gave land grants to several Brahmins in the Sringeri region and in which Sāyaṇa’s name appeared first attest to the court’s support of Sāyaṇa’s intellectual project.22

In terms of the legendary accounts of the Sringeri Śmārtas’ significance, they vary in their specifics.23 But they are nearly unanimous in giving pride of place to Vidyāraṇya,24 eventual head of the Sringeri Śmārta-Advaita maṭha. According to
many of these accounts, a meeting between Vidyāranya and the Saṅgama brothers inspired not only the founding of the empire but the location of its capital in the region of the Virūpākṣa temple in Hampi. Virūpākṣa, a form of Śiva, served as the empire’s tutelary deity for its entire duration.²⁵ Inscriptions indicate that at some point prior to 1515, the Sringeri Smārta community established an offshoot maṭha on the premises of this temple in the empire’s capital.²⁶ This undoubtedly enhanced the Sringeri Smārtas’ prominence at court.²⁷

Of course, the legendary, literary, and inscriptional sources do not always match up in their presentation of events. This is most evident in the role ascribed in these sources to Vidyāraṇya. Vidyāranya is not mentioned in the inscriptional record documenting royal patronage of Sringeri until 1375. The Saṅgama dynasty was clearly patronizing this community as early as 1346, when the five Saṅgama brothers held their vijayotsava or “festival of victory” at Sringeri to inaugurate their reign. The inscription documenting this event also records a royal donation of nine villages to Bhratītīrtha, who is identified in later maṭha records as one of Vidyāranya’s teachers. In 1356, Bukka I made an additional gift of land honoring Vidyātīrtha, who is identified as the head of the Sringeri maṭha and, elsewhere, as one of Vidyāranya’s predecessors.²⁸ However, by the year 1384, there is a lengthy reference to Vidyāranya, and specifically to Harihara II’s²⁹ devotion to him, for his knowledge: “By the glances full of love of Vidyāranya, the chief of ascetics, he acquired the empire of knowledge [jñāna-samrajya] unattainable by other kings.”³⁰

This explicit royal affinity for the intellectual activities of the Sringeri Smārta community is substantiated, as we have seen, by inscriptions recording royal donations of land to Sāyaṇa, his sons, and his Brahminical community.³¹ This royal support for scholarly activities continues in 1381, when Harihara’s son Cikka Rāya gave three other scholars associated with Sāyaṇa even larger land grants.³² In a 1380 inscription, Harihara II confirms all the previous grants; in 1384, he made a donation to the disciples of the sage Vidyāranya.³³ After Vidyāranya’s death, some time in 1386 or 1387, Harihara II made a donation of land near Sringeri in honor of the guru.³⁴ Furthermore, in 1406, Bukka II gave an endowment for the renovation and proper maintenance of a library belonging to the maṭha.³⁵

Thus, it is indisputable that the Saṅgamas placed many resources at the disposal of the Sringeri Smārta Brahmin community and, in doing so, supported that community’s intellectual pursuits as well as its institutionalization. In fact, Kulke argues that it was not the Sringeri Smārta maṭhādhipati, Vidyāranya, who founded the Vijayanagara Empire but the Saṅgama dynasty that founded the Sringeri Smārta maṭha. Kulke bases this argument on early fourteenth-century inscriptions that refer to Sringeri as a tīrtha, or holy pilgrimage place, but do not mention a maṭha; the oldest inscriptional reference to the maṭha’s existence dates from 1356, ten years after the empire’s likely founding.³⁶ Kulke also mentions
references in the Vidyāraṇyapura inscription of 1386 to several *samādhi* shrines
or temples housing the tombs of famous saints in the monastic community’s
lineage. The names of these temples are Vidyāśāṅkara, Bhāratīrāmanātha, and
Vidyāviśveśvara, all of whom were part of the early Vijayanagara-era cohort of
Sringeri Smārtas. That both a *maṭha* and related *guru* shrines were established in
Sringeri within a thirty-year period suggests not only a rapid but a very deliberate
institutionalization of this Brahmin intellectual community into a monastic and
religious order.

While Kulke’s theory is appealing and has enjoyed a general scholarly approval,
the various historical and theoretical implications of the Sringeri Smārtas’ ties to
the court remain unclear. There has been much scholarly speculation regarding
the influence of this community on the political proceedings of the Saṅgama court
but very little consensus. Older scholarly tradition, represented in part by Nilakan-
ta Sastri’s work, has used the legend of Vidyāraṇya’s interactions with the Saṅgama
brothers as evidence of the “Hindu” nature of the Vijayanagara Empire. Nilakanta
Sastri draws primarily on a legend, according to which the five Saṅgama broth-
ers had been captured by the Sultan of Delhi and converted to Islam during their
imprisonment before being dispatched by the sultan back to the Hampi region to
put down a rebellion on his behalf. Upon arriving in the region of the Virūpākṣa
temple in Hampi, future site of the empire’s capital, they witness the miraculous
sight of a hare attacking a dog. Nilakanta Sastri maintains that this sight, combined
with the Saṅgamas’ subsequent encounter with Vidyāraṇya in this location, si-
multaneously inspired the brothers’ reconversion to Hinduism and political break
with Delhi:

Their meeting with Vidyāraṇya (“Forest of Learning”) thus probably furnished them
with the best and perhaps only means of following the promptings of their hearts;
it needed a spiritual leader of his eminence to receive them back from Islam into
Hinduism and to render the act generally acceptable to Hindu society. Thus it hap-
pened that the trusted Muslim agents of the sultan of Delhi, who were sent to restore
his power in the Deccan, turned out to be the founders of one of the greatest Hindu
states of history.48

More recent scholarship has criticized this notion of the empire as a “Hindu
state,” established to resist the further spread of Islam, by citing the multiple sty-
listic borrowings on the part of Vijayanagara rulers from the northern sultanates
of art, architecture, dress, and military tactics. Further evidence contradicting a
Hindu identity to the court can be found in the court’s own religious diversity and
its ecumenical patronage.49 While some scholars maintain that this policy was a
deliberate attempt to avoid religiously motivated conflict, Pollock offers a different
reading. He argues that the Vijayanagara court was in fact indifferent to religion
and that “religious distinctions were simply irrelevant to the exercise of power.”41
Kulke’s study of the Sringeri matha and the early Saṅgamas is an example of the type of analysis with which Pollock takes issue because it assumes the legitimating capacity of religion without explaining it. In doing so, it overstates the role of religion in precolonial Indian politics. Kulke emphasizes the necessity of the newly minted Saṅgama dynasty to gain religious elites’ approval in order to legitimate their reign. But he also acknowledges the court’s pragmatic concerns when discussing why the Sringeri Saṅkṣāra would have been singled out for this purpose. In Kulke’s view, Sringeri’s location near the old Hoysala capital enabled the Saṅgamas to lay claim to a transfer of the mantle of power from this dying kingdom to its successor state. This idea is substantiated by the 1346 inscription in which the Hoysala queen, widow of the last Hoysala king, participates in the Saṅgamas’ inaugural festival of victory held at Sringeri. At the same time, Kulke does assert that the intellectual and religious “reforms” of the Sringeri Saṅkṣāras offered a compelling vision of Hindu “orthodoxy” with which the Vijayanagara court sought to link itself in order to promote its empire as a new seat of orthodoxy. Here, Kulke emphasizes the tradition of Śaṅkara’s having founded the Sringeri Saṅkara, putatively articulated in the Śaṅkaradīvijāva. While this text has often been attributed to the Sringeri Saṅkṣāra Mādhava, its date and authorship are in dispute and there is strong evidence that the Śaṅkara affiliation with the Sringeri matha was not established until the sixteenth century. But for present purposes, the important thing is that Kulke’s reading of events assumes that elite religious activity had real-world implications in its power to attract royal patronage.

Drawing largely on Kulke’s analysis, Galewicz’s study of Sāyaṇa’s commentary on the Veda claims that the empire was concerned with questions of Hindu orthodoxy owing to its practical aim of unifying diverse centers of power that were controlled by religious elites. Galewicz sees Sāyaṇa’s royally funded Vedic commentary as being “in the service of the empire,” insofar as it helped to unite these different centers of elite religious authority throughout the empire’s territories into a common cause of preserving and enacting dharma. Clark argues that the Vijayanagara court privileged orthodox Vaidika Brahminism in a manner that departed from the previous era of South Indian kings, such as the Hoysalas, Kalachuris, and Kākatīyas, who had supported Śaiva and other institutions that were less concerned with Vedic Brahminical orthodoxy. His findings support Galewicz’s argument that something about Vedic orthodoxy seems to have resonated with the Vijayanagara court in a new and potent way. But Clark refrain from theorizing as to why this was so.

Thus, despite the emblematic status of the Sringeri matha to Vijayanagara patronage, the reasons why this Brahminical community was singled out by the state and what this implies about the “religious” sensibilities of the Vijayanagara court remain ambiguous. The possibilities, and their underlying assumptions, identified in the scholarly literature, can be enumerated as follows: 1. Sringeri Saṅkṣāras were
singly out because of Sringeri’s location; 2. the Sringeri Smārtas’ religious reforms impressed the Saṅgamas, who thought aligning themselves with these reforms would legitimize their reign; 3. the court was actually concerned about articulating Hindu orthodoxy either to stand united against Islam or because such presumed sociocultural unity could enable more efficient rule; and 4. the Sringeri Smārtas’ expression of orthodoxy, articulated in their Vedic commentaries and other texts, was somehow more legitimate and more unifying than that of other groups.

Adding to the above list Pollock’s view that Vijayanagara patronage of religious institutions carried no political meaning whatsoever presents an almost untenable array of options for interpreting Saṅgama patronage of the Sringeri Smārtas. While it is beyond the scope of this book to address this issue definitively, concerned as I am with the sixteenth century, I would argue that this very ambiguity surrounding the Vijayanagara court’s patronage of the Sringeri Smārtas suggests that royal patronage took into account a variety of factors. Only some of these factors were under the control of religious elites. The random luck of a religious community’s location in a politically or strategically significant area played as much, if not more, of a role as that community’s literary and religious pursuits. But this is not to say either that royal patronage did not influence Brahmin intellectual and religious activity or that such activity went unacknowledged by the court. Indeed, as Clark and others have argued, royal patronage favored—and, thereby, fomented—a certain type of religious and intellectual institutionalization, one that was Vedic, Brahminical, and often Vedāntin and organized into monastic institutions or maṭhas. In fact, the emblematic status that the Sringeri Smārta maṭha came to have for the court’s religious sensibilities may reflect the court’s privileging not merely of Smārta Advaita intellectualism but also of that community’s institutional structure. It is here that Kulke’s argument about Saṅgama patronage founding the maṭha is most important. Given that many religious communities that were not recipients of royal patronage organized themselves into maṭhas and codified their doctrines, practices, and intellectual lineages during this period, one could argue that Vijayanagara patronage of religious institutions fostered a generic institutionalization process that became standard for a variety of South Indian Hindu communities.47 Because the nature of the Hindu maṭha was sectarian for all of the reasons discussed in chapters 1 and 2, Vijayanagara patronage encouraged religious diversity while formalizing Hindu sectarianism.

While the Sringeri Smārta community of the fourteenth century may have been privileged within the Vijayanagara patronage system, ample evidence in its literary production shows that it was also confronting intellectual and religious pluralism and attempting to reconcile this pluralism in ways advantageous to itself.48 Sāyaṇa’s nearly comprehensive Vedic commentary was not sectarian per se, but its totalizing agenda exhibited a desire both to assert and command a compelling symbol of Brahminical authority.49 Furthermore, fourteenth-century Sringeri Smārta
intellectuals also wrote a doxography of many of the systems of Indian thought called the *Sarvadarśanasaiṅgraha*. As Halbfass argued, this text is unique, not for its efforts to enumerate the arguments of major philosophical systems, but because itdevotes entire chapters to systems that were of relatively recent origin and often prevalent in the Sringeri Śmārtas’ milieu. These would include chapters on Rāmānuja’s thought, Madhva’s thought, and several different systems of Śaivism. The inclusion of these more recent and locally prominent systems deviates from the more conventional format of these doxographies, which typically limit their discussion of āstika systems to what Halbfass called “the classical systems” (i.e., Śāmkhya, Yoga, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Mimāṃsā, and Vedānta). Furthermore, as Halbfass’s survey of these doxographic works also notes, “the Advaita Vedānta doxographic texts are usually based upon a hierarchical classification at whose apex stands the Vedānta.” The *Sarvadarśanasaiṅgraha* does not do this at any length, but it does conclude with the following statement: “The system of Śaṅkara, which comes next in succession (i.e., last), and which is the crest-gem of all systems, has been explained by us elsewhere; it is therefore left untouched here.” Thus, in a more explicit way than the *Vedabhāṣya*, the *Sarvadarśanasaiṅgraha* attempts to privilege the Sringeri school by positioning its doctrinal system at the pinnacle of a philosophical hierarchy.

Finally, the reputed “inspirer” of the founding of the empire, Sringeri Śmārtta Vidyāraṇya, wrote a treatise on the Advaita concept of jīvanmukti called the *Jīvanmuktiviveka* or *The Examination of the Doctrine of Liberation while Living*. This text is a syncretism of Advaita theories of liberation with yogic ascetic and meditation practices. But it is also, as Goodding has argued, an attempt to critique Viśiṣṭādvaita’s rejection of the jīvanmukti doctrine. Goodding maintains that Vidyāraṇya was seeking to establish the authority of his Advaita tradition of thought over that of Viśiṣṭādvaita precisely by emphasizing the special spiritual status of his religious gurus as jīvanmuktas, or those who had been liberated in life. He dates the crafting of Vidyāraṇya’s *Jīvanmuktiviveka* to the period when the Vijayanagara Empire had acquired more territory in regions of South India that were typically dominated by Śrīvaśiṇa groups, the proponents of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. Thus, Goodding theorizes that the *Jīvanmuktiviveka* could have been Vidyāraṇya’s attempt to win over some of these groups to Advaita Vedānta.

Goodding’s argument is significant mainly because many of the fourteenth-century Sringeri Śmārtas’ intellectual projects, such as the *Sarvadarśanasaiṅgraha* and Sāyaṇa’s commentary on the Vedas, have been taken as evidence of a South Indian Hindu response to the challenge posed by sociopolitical incursions of Islam. However, they could just as easily reflect a response to religious diversity within South India. While unifying against Islam or articulating a shared Hindu orthodoxy may have been features of Brahmin religiosity in this period, showing one’s own sect to advantage in a milieu in which the court singled out sectarian
institutions to act as recipients of royal patronage for a variety of reasons was also considered desirable. These reasons may have been religious, utilitarian, or some combination thereof, depending upon the circumstances. Sectarian leaders had limited control over these circumstances. Nevertheless, because the benefits of receiving such patronage were far-reaching, their concerns about positioning themselves advantageously in the court’s patronage system shaped their intellectual production.

At the same time, it is not the case that Brahmin intellectual pursuits were simply a reflection of the court’s agenda and of their desire to excel within it. Rather, these sectarian groups had their own agenda, which alliances with the court could help implement. The empire’s expansion opened up potential new locations for the establishment of sectarian institutions and, correspondingly, for the spread of the sect’s ideas and practices. As mentioned above, the emphasis on debate and polemics among Brahmin Vedānta sects in this period strongly suggests that these groups were looking to convert others to their systems of thought. This means that, while the Vijayanagara court’s patronage practices engendered a more bounded sense of sectarian identity and increased sectarian competition for courtly resources, it also provided new social frameworks for philosophical dialogue, intellectual exchange, and religious conversion. These processes shaped both a shared religious arena and distinct sectarian identities.

SECTARIAN COMPETITION AT THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COURT

Some scholars have argued that the sixteenth century witnessed a renewed interest in the Sringeri maṭha’s historical prominence at the early imperial court. While the aforementioned scholarly theories regarding the role of the Sringeri Śmārtas at the fourteenth-century Vijayanagara court are based to some extent on fourteenth-century sources, that many of the legendary accounts likely date from the sixteenth century is significant. The oldest records of the legendary accounts of the empire’s founding appear in the travel narrative of the Portuguese horse trader Fernão Nunes, whose account was likely written sometime in the 1530s but based on a visit to the city from an earlier decade during Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s rule. It is this account, summarized above in the Nilakanta Sastri quote, that depicts the Saṅgama brothers’ breaking of all political ties with Delhi and the founding of a new empire, subsequent to a dramatic encounter with Vidyāraṇya near Hampi. Subrahmanym has argued that Nunes’s version distills narratives that would have been circulated in regional languages and later recorded in their various forms in the Mackenzie manuscripts. However, while such stories were not likely invented by a visitor to the city, their existence prior to the sixteenth century is not supported by any hard evidence.
Writing in 1929, Henry Heras, a European Jesuit priest and epigrapher living in India, argued that the sixteenth-century head of the Sringeri matha, Rāmacandra Bhārataī (r. 1508?–1560),60 forged copper plate inscriptions that recapitulated the above narrative in a manner that overstates Vidyāraṇya’s and, by extension, Sringeri’s influence, at the fourteenth-century Vijayanagara court.61 The inscriptions that Heras identifies as spurious recount the legends of Vijayanagara’s founding along the lines of what Nunes repeats in his account, except in a longer and more detailed form. These inscriptions also rename the city of Vijayanagara “Vidyānagara” or “City of Knowledge,” linking Vidyāraṇya (“Forest of Knowledge”) more directly to the empire’s founding.62 In Heras’s estimation, Rāmacandra Bhārataī was reacting to the shift in royal patronage practices away from Virūpākṣa and Śaivism and toward the Vaiṣṇava deities Viṭṭhala and Veṅkaṭeśvara. That Rāmacandra Bhārataī’s tenure as head of the Sringeri matha coincided with Vyāsatīrtha’s time at the Vijayanagara court is for our purposes significant:

Hence it may be concluded that the ascetics of the Śringeri matha fabricated the story of Vidyāraṇya as the founder of the city and Empire of Vijayanagara, in the beginning of the XVIth century. And it seems most probably that the fabrication of the whole story and the falsification of a great number, if not of all the spurious grants above referred to, was perpetrated during the rule of Rāmachandra Bhārataī, who directed the Śringeri matha from 1508 to 1560.63

Heras exhibits considerable bias against Hindu religious leaders in his work,64 and his use of the terms “falsification” and “fabrication” to refer to the story of Vidyāraṇya’s role overstates his case. Indeed, such terminology seems to credit Rāmacandra Bhārataī with completely inventing Vidyāraṇya’s significance at the fourteenth-century Saṅgama court. Yet elsewhere, Heras cites as evidence of this fabrication the fact that Rāmacandra Bhārataī recalls an earlier gift of land by Saṅgama king Harihara to Vidyāśaṅkara (also known as Vidyātīrtha), one of Vidyāraṇya’s maṭhādhipati predecessors at Sringeri. Rāmacandra Bhārataī does this in an inscription in which he is regifting this land. Heras maintains that this reminder of early Saṅgama patronage of the Sringeri matha “shows the wish of the Jagad-guru to show the early relations between the math and the Emperors of Vijayanagara. This was perhaps the first step in the campaign of falsification.”65 But falsification is not the same as highlighting the earlier prominence of his matha to the court.66

Heras’s view has penetrated Vijayanagara studies to a significant extent, even the work of those who ostensibly repudiate it. Kulke points out that many studies of Vijayanagara tacitly accept Heras’s argument by ignoring those inscriptions that speak of this meeting between Vidyāraṇya and the Saṅgamas at the Virūpākṣa temple.67 Certainly, the legends of Vidyāraṇya’s role as presented in the copper
plates cited by Heras oversimplify things and, in doing so, contradict other parts of the inscriptive record. Vidyārāṇya was not the head of the matha until at least 1376. Furthermore, the founding of the empire seems to have been a gradual process, as power was transferred from the Hoysalas to the Saṅgamas sometime between 1346 and 1368. It does not seem to have been an event that took place all at once, based on a single inspirational meeting.

Heras also seems to be correct that the status of Śaiva institutions, including the most prominent ones such as the Virūpākṣa mandir, affiliated with the Sringeri Śmārta matha, was changing even in the early sixteenth century. At the time of his coronation, Kṛṣṇadevarāya made his very first construction effort in the capital city by adding a maṇḍapa (a covered porch) and a gopuram (a tower above an entryway) to the Virūpākṣa temple. He continued to patronize Śmārta monasteries throughout his reign. Furthermore, as Verghese has demonstrated, when this king built the first Kṛṣṇa temple in the capital city in 1515, to house the Udayagiri Bālakṛṣṇa icon that he captured after his victorious conquest there, he seems to have sought the protection and blessings of Virūpākṣa for what was to be a new cult in the city. He had an image of a nobleman (possibly himself) worshiping a Śivalingam prominently displayed in the porch outside the shrine's inner sanctum. It is situated just opposite a similar image of a nobleman worshipping Bālakṛṣṇa's image. Verghese argues that Kṛṣṇadevarāya asserted “through these two reliefs, that despite his patronage of Kṛṣṇa and the promotion of this cult in the capital, he had no intention of relinquishing his links with Virūpākṣa.” The fact that Kṛṣṇadevarāya trod lightly around the issue of introducing a Kṛṣṇa cult into the city implies not only that this was a shift in devotional orientation on the part of the court in the early sixteenth century but that that shift might have been considered problematic by Śmārta Śaiva religious leaders.

Yet even if Heras is correct about the sixteenth-century Sringeri pontiff Rāmacandra Bhārati’s role in “falsifying” the historical record in the form of forged copper plate inscriptions, it seems better to interpret this act as an embellishment of Sringeri’s role in the early empire, rather than a complete invention. Rāmacandra Bhārati may have been trying to remind everyone of his matha’s importance, an importance that is substantiated by many fourteenth-century records but that must have been waning at this time. Insofar as Rāmacandra Bhārati’s actions reflected sectarian competition for royal patronage, they attest to the vagaries of Vijayanagara patronage as well as to the value sectarian groups placed on receiving it. As such, his actions problematize Vijayanagara’s vaunted ecumenism. Despite Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s efforts to avoid the appearance of favoritism, sects were concerned about losing their standing. This reflects the reality that shifts in royal patronage privileged some groups over others.

Even more intriguing, perhaps, Rāmacandra Bhārati’s actions imply that historically verifiable claims of privilege affected sixteenth-century courtly standing.
As such, they hint at the role that historical consciousness played in shaping sectarian identity in this period. Like the biographies of sectarian leaders discussed in the previous chapter, inscriptions were understood to be powerful documents that could establish a given sect’s long-standing sociopolitical prominence. This prominence, in addition to conferring various worldly benefits, might have been understood to validate that sect’s intellectual activities and doctrinal positions. Because sectarian concerns about maintaining sociopolitical prominence were linked, inextricably, to the doctrinal and philosophical teachings of that sect, it should not be surprising that doctrinal disputes between such institutions became more pronounced as they also vied for courtly funding. Moreover, these doctrinal disputes, like the historical justification of claims to courtly privilege, also came to bear the imprint of historical thinking in their presentation of opponents’ ideas.

**JĪVANMUKTI OR “LIBERATION WHILE LIVING”**

To judge from Vyāsatīrtha’s life story and his own writings, the Sringeri Advaitins’ long-standing prominence at the Vijayanagara court made them a force to contend with. Of the two intellectual traditions that Vyāsatīrtha identifies as principal rivals, Advaita Vedānta is the one with which he takes greater issue. This is in keeping with Dvaita Vedānta as conceived by its thirteenth-century founder, Madhva (1238–1317), who was a realist and, therefore, espoused a pluralist ontology in which difference was posited as fundamental to being. In stark contrast to the nondualist Vedānta of Śaṅkara (c. eighth century), embraced by the Śmārta Brahmins of Sringeri, in which reality is singular and all experience of difference is illusory, Madhva described reality in terms of a fundamental five-fold difference (*pañcabhedā*) between the following ontological units: 1. God and souls, 2. souls and matter, 3. God and matter, 4. one soul and another, and 5. one form of matter and another. The form of difference with which the sect was primarily preoccupied was that between the individual human soul trapped in *sāṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirth) and the ultimate reality of Brahman, whom Madhva identified with the Hindu god Viṣṇu.

Because of the stark differences between Advaita’s idealistic monism and Dvaita’s realistic pluralism, anti-Advaita arguments in Mādhva Vedānta have been part and parcel of the tradition from its inception. As such, they predate the founding of the Vijayanagara Empire. This means that Vyāsatīrtha’s anti-Advaita polemics cannot be linked entirely to competition over courtly resources and prestige. Vyāsatīrtha was always operating within an established intellectual tradition that played a central role in shaping his arguments. Moreover, insofar as sectarian groups sought out royal patronage, they did so largely to spread their teachings. To a great extent, the teachings themselves were the focus of the sectarian institution’s existence and, as such, were not servants to courtly patronage.
It is also true, in a much more general and obvious way, that philosophical arguments need not be linked to sociopolitical or economic concerns. Arguments may be made against other arguments simply because they are good arguments that need to be reckoned with in order for a philosopher or theologian to make his point. The best example of this, perhaps, is that Buddhist arguments continue to appear in Hindu polemical literature long after Buddhism ceased to exist in India. Thus, one could argue that Vyāsatīrtha’s critical engagement with Advaita philosophy was simply a matter of constructing the most conceptually rigorous support for his own system of thought by trouncing its staunchest intellectual opponent.

But there is a definite historical and comparative consciousness evident in Vyāsatīrtha’s polemical writings against Advaita that may reflect his sociopolitical circumstances. McCrea has discussed Vyāsatīrtha’s historicism in terms of the Dvaitin’s polemics on śravanavidhi or the injunction to listen to the Veda and the relationship of that injunction to the other important Vedānta injunctions, namely thinking about (“manana”) and meditating upon (“nididhyāsana”) the Upaniṣads. McCrea demonstrates that Vyāsatīrtha’s discussion of the relative importance of these injunctions in Advaita Vedānta presents conflicting perspectives internal to that tradition in historical order. As we shall see, Vyāsatīrtha makes a similar presentation of Advaita arguments supporting the concept of jīvanmukti. By referring to each of these arguments in rough chronological order as they were articulated by successive generations of Advaitins, who were responding to and enhancing the arguments of their predecessors, Vyāsatīrtha maps how this Advaita concept evolved. This map reveals both developments and fissures within the Advaita Vedānta intellectual community.

Such a historical approach to the Brahmin intellectual tradition contrasts somewhat with Dvaita’s established view of the history of ideas. In Madhva’s Anuvyākhyāna 2.2, v. 549, a minicommentary on his own commentary on foundational Vedānta scriptures, the Brahma Sūtras, Madhva expresses the idea that all currents of thought are, like streams of water, beginningless. In this view, saying that Śaṅkara is the founder of the Advaita system or that Madhva is the founder of Dvaita is incorrect; they each merely gave voice, at particular moments in time, to doctrines that have always been true. This antihistoricist attitude is articulated widely in the Sanskrit literary tradition, especially regarding the Veda. As Pollock and others have argued, the presentation of the Veda as beginningless and authorless is a means of safeguarding that tradition’s authority by placing it beyond the vagaries of time and personality. That Vyāsatīrtha does not reject Madhva’s notion that the darśanas, or philosophical viewpoints, are eternal in an explicit way, therefore, is not surprising. Yet the goal of his intellectual project, which is to thoroughly critique various basic Advaita concepts, arguably requires providing historical overviews of those concepts. At the same time, the period’s increased emphasis on sects’ historical positioning with respect to the court, evident in the
potentially falsified inscriptions of Rāmacandra Bhāratī, may have influenced Vyāsatīrtha’s mode of philosophical argument to make it more historical. As we have seen, sectarian communities in this period were concerned about documenting the history of their institutions, institutions within which the sect’s ideas and philosophy were formulated. Thus, arguing for the cogency of a sect’s philosophical arguments seems to have become intertwined with arguments supporting that sect’s historical sociopolitical importance.

The sociopolitical implications of Vyāsatīrtha’s critique of Advaita are particularly evident in a section of the fourth book of his Nyāyāmṛta (“The Nectar of Logic”) called “Jīvanmuktibhaṅga,” in which he takes to task the Advaita doctrine of jīvanmukti. By regarding many of their monastic heads as having achieved this state, Śmārta Advaitins implicitly claimed a particularly authoritative spiritual status for their religious leaders. In a paradoxical way, the sect extended its worldly influence through the presumed liberation of their leader from this world. Śaṅkara (c. eighth century) and especially Vimuktātman (c. tenth–eleventh century) each argued for the necessity of a qualified teacher to achieve mokṣa and strongly implied that the most qualified teacher would be one who is in the state of mokṣa himself. We should not then find it surprising that, as proponents of the Advaita tradition became organized into monastic institutions, leading teachers in these communities came to be regarded as jīvanmuktas.

Vyāsatīrtha’s arguments against the Advaïtins’ doctrine of jīvanmukti are particularly interesting because his criticisms aim to show the superior suitability of this Advaita concept to Dvaita or “dualist” Vedānta. Indeed, in this section of the Nyāyāmṛta, Vyāsatīrtha equates the historically Advaita term jīvanmukti with Madhva’s doctrine of aparokṣajñāna or “direct and immediate knowledge [of Brahman].” As noted above, Vidyāraṇya, the fourteenth-century head of the Śmārta matha and reputed inspirer of the founding of the empire, wrote a treatise on jīvanmukti called the Jīvanmuktiviveka or The Examination of the Doctrine of Liberation while Living. Vyāsatīrtha does not directly engage this text, despite his clear familiarity with much of the Advaita literature on this doctrine. But like the author of Jīvanmuktiviveka, Vyāsatīrtha also criticizes the Viśiṣṭādvaita form of Vedānta advocated by the Śrīvaiśṇavas. While he does not address Viśiṣṭādvaita to any great extent in this section of the Nyāyāmṛta (as he will later on in this text, discussed in chapter 5 of this book), Vyāsatīrtha’s statements on jīvanmukti here can be read as articulating a third alternative for understanding the stages of attaining liberation. Vyāsatīrtha intends this alternative to upstage both Advaita Vedānta, whose idealist monism is fundamentally incompatible with its own concept of liberation while alive, and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, which rejects the possibility of jīvanmukti altogether. In Vyāsatīrtha’s formulation, jīvanmukti is most compatible with Dvaita’s realism and in his system, therefore, does this socially and politically attractive doctrine find a home.
Indeed, if jīvanmukti made sense for the social life of Advaita doctrines, it was a challenge to defend philosophically, given Advaita’s monist ontology and idealist epistemology, wherein difference of any kind is an illusion rooted in ignorance. Vyāsatīrtha exploits these difficulties in this section of his Nyāyāmṛta. His presentation goes in rough chronological order, charting the emergence of various Advaita efforts to defend this doctrine against external criticism. But in organizing his presentation this way, Vyāsatīrtha also highlights debates over jīvanmukti internal to the Advaita tradition. His anti-Advaita polemics successfully take advantage of these internal disputes.

In Vyāsatīrtha’s view, the Advaitin’s biggest difficulty is explaining how embodiment on the part of an enlightened being can continue if the content of that enlightenment exposes both the fundamental oneness of all being as well as the illusory nature of one’s corporeal and spiritual individuality. Aware of this difficulty, Advaitin thinkers gradually developed two principal ways to address this problem. Vyāsatīrtha attacks them both.

The older theory that Vyāsatīrtha discusses is that of the śaṁskāra or the notion that the products of ignorance are “impressions” that will continue for a while even after ignorance itself has been destroyed. It was Maṇḍana Miśra (fl. 690 CE), a rough contemporary of Śaṅkara, who first used the idea of śaṁskāra to differentiate between prārabdha karma, or karma that is in the act of bearing fruit and will continue to do so after liberating knowledge has been acquired, and avidyā or ignorance, which ceases to exist. According to Maṇḍana Miśra, the prārabdha karma will manifest itself postranscendence for only a very brief time. But it leaves a śaṁskāra or an impression that is weaker than the karma itself but which explains why the enlightened being continues to bear witness to a world he knows is illusory. Vyāsatīrtha briefly summarizes this Advaita theory as follows:

[The Advaitin] says, “The one who is liberated while embodied is he who has his ignorance destroyed through knowledge of true reality and yet who still sees the manifestation of the body, [the material world, etc.]. And the body, [material world, etc.] do not cease to exist immediately upon the destruction of ignorance through knowledge of true reality. [This is] because the continuation of that [body, material world, etc.] is due to the śaṁskāra of ignorance, which is like the trembling produced by fear [of a snake that one subsequently realizes is a rope] and like a potter’s wheel that continues to spin [even after the potter has stopped spinning it].

The analogies of the potter’s wheel and the rope misapprehended as a snake are found not only in Maṇḍana Miśra’s Brahmasiddhi but also Śaṅkara’s commentary on Brahma Sūtra 4.1.15. They became stock Advaita analogies for the nature of the śaṁskāra’s existence and its relationship to the ignorance that has been destroyed on the part of the jīvanmukta. But opponents met these analogies with
the objection that if a *saṃskāra* is truly analogous to either of these examples, it must have either an action (as in the case of the potter’s wheel) or a cognition (as in the case of a rope) as its cause. Neither *prārabdha karma* nor ignorance can be regarded as either an action or a cognition. Furthermore, in the case of ignorance, it no longer exists because it has been destroyed by liberating knowledge. And in the case of *prārabdha karma*, even Maṇḍana Miśra himself acknowledges that its continued “existence” is necessarily brief because it, too, arises from ignorance, which has been destroyed. Thus, identifying the cause of the *saṃskāra* remains problematic.

As Vyāsatīrtha then points out, the thirteenth-century Advaitin Prakāśātman dealt with this issue by using yet another analogy, in which the *saṃskāra* left by ignorance is likened to the smell of a flower that lingers in a box that once contained the flower. In the same way, according to Prakāśātman, even after ignorance has been destroyed, the *saṃskāra* of ignorance lingers on. Through this analogy, Prakāśātman attempted to maintain that there was neither relationship of material nor efficient causality between ignorance and the *saṃskāra*; rather the relationship was one of invariable concomitance between the destruction of ignorance and the *saṃskāra*. Furthermore, because the *saṃskāra* is not a material product, its eventual demise will not produce any further products. In other words, once the lingering *saṃskāra* (like the removed flower’s smell) ceases to exist, the *jivanmukta* will achieve final liberation.  

But, as Vyāsatīrtha points out in his further synopsis of Prakāśātman’s views, the Advaitin still needed to explain where the *saṃskāra* was located. Invoking established objections to this aspect of the *saṃskāra* theory, Vyāsatīrtha maintains that clearly the *saṃskāra* cannot be located in ignorance because, according to Advaita, ignorance has been destroyed in the state of *jīvanmukti*. Vyāsatīrtha reminds us that Prakāśātman was aware of this objection and, for that reason, maintained that the *saṃskāra* must be located in the pure self, which is in fact the only truly existing reality in Advaita ontology: “Like ignorance, [the *saṃskāra*’s] locus is the pure self. [The *saṃskāra* therefore] need not depend upon ignorance for its locus.” Of course, the question remained regarding how the pure self would then rid itself of this *saṃskāra*. Again resorting to Prakāśātman’s efforts to explain this, Vyāsatīrtha reminds us of that thinker’s claim that it is through some kind of ongoing realization of the true nature of reality that one eventually achieves total liberation from embodiment: “The *saṃskāra* ceases [to exist] through the repeated realization of the nature of reality.”

Having presented his synopsized chronological overview of the evolution of the *saṃskāra* theory of *jīvanmukti* within Advaita, along with the system’s responses to various well-known objections, Vyāsatīrtha analyzes and refutes this theory. As is typical of Vyāsatīrtha’s presentation in the *Nyāyāmṛta*, he employs a reductio ad absurdum technique, in which the opponent’s faulty premises are taken to their
equally faulty but logically unavoidable conclusions. Simultaneously, Vyāsatīrtha contrasts Advaita’s idealist epistemology with Dvaita’s realism and shows his system to great advantage. Vyāsatīrtha begins by arguing against the notion that a *saṃskāra* can be produced in the absence of a material cause:

Now we say that as far as the *saṃskāra* [theory of *jīvanmukti*] goes, that is untenable. Because ignorance would have to continue as a cause for each of the following:

1. the *saṃskāra*, 2. the body, etc., and 3. the *prārabdha karma* [or the karma that is currently being worked off and] that is the cause of [the body, etc.]. All of these are positive products [i.e., produced by material causes] and superimposed realities [onto the ultimate singular reality of Brahman.]^{88}

Vyāsatīrtha is arguing that because all of these things, which the Advaitins themselves see as continuing in the state of *jīvanmukti*, are positive products and superimposed realities, they must have an actual cause. It is illegitimate, in his view, to claim that the *saṃskāra* produced by a mistaken cognition of reality, along the lines of misapprehending a rope for a snake, is real but its immediate cause is not *ajñāna* or ignorance.^{89} In Dvaita thought, for the *saṃskāra* to be real, it must have a material cause and that cause would be the mistaken cognition. When a mistaken cognition occurs in Dvaita, an actual misapprehension has taken place, and thus it might produce some actual results. But in Advaita, that mistaken cognition itself is unreal, and thus, you cannot have a real *saṃskāra* produced from it.

Vyāsatīrtha also argues against Prakāśātman’s idea that the state of *jīvanmukti* is temporary and will eventually come to an end after repeated incidents of awareness of reality’s true nature as nondual. Here, Vyāsatīrtha maintains that, given the singular nature of reality in Advaita, arguing that repeated knowledge of it will reveal new information makes no sense. If ignorance alone was what obstructed insight into the true nature of reality and if ignorance has been removed, there should be the experience of complete liberation and not the halfway measure that is *jīvanmukti*. Furthermore, if the *saṃskāra* is not the same as ignorance, which has been destroyed, and if ignorance was what was blocking full insight into the nature of reality as nondual, the *saṃskāra* cannot now be identified as the factor obstructing complete knowledge of reality:

Furthermore, it is not the case that the cessation of superimposed realities, which did not take place upon the initial realization of the true nature of reality would occur with subsequent knowledge [of that same reality]. [This is because] even though there is on-going perception [of that reality], [such perception] has no additional content. And because of the fact that, since the cover called “ignorance” no longer exists, there should then be instantaneous manifestation of the highest bliss for the *jīvanmukta*. You yourself have said that the *saṃskāra* is not a cover [obscuring knowledge of reality.]^{90}
Vyāsatīrtha also rejects the Advaitin’s argument that, even though intellectually one may be aware that plural reality is an illusion superimposed onto the singular reality of Brahman, one may still perceive that plural reality because there is some lingering defect in one’s cognition. The analogy used for this in Advaita thought, dating back to both Śaṅkara and Maṇḍana Miśra and invoked by many subsequent Advaitins, is that of looking at the moon while applying some pressure to one’s eyelid with one’s finger, thereby creating the illusion of two moons. Just as one knows intellectually there is only one moon and yet sees two, one may know that plural reality is false and yet still perceive its existence. Vyāsatīrtha concedes that the pressure applied to one’s eyelid in the example is not destroyed by the knowledge that there is only one moon; indeed, such pressure may continue to cause the illusion of two moons to coexist with the knowledge that there is only one. However, Vyāsatīrtha also argues that, according to Advaita, once knowledge of Brahman has been attained, all external factors and defects of cognition must cease to exist because they have been revealed to be unreal. Thus, there can be no factor to explain the ongoing cognition of reality as plural once that reality has been revealed to be singular.

Having vanquished to his satisfaction the saṃskāra theory as an attempt to explain how jīvanmukti is possible in a nondualist view of reality, Vyāsatīrtha then tackles a second theory that emerged within Advaita thought. Again, by tracing the various Advaitin attempts to retain this sociopolitically powerful doctrine of jīvanmukti, Vyāsatīrtha points out disputes internal to that tradition. The second theory that Advaitins such as Sarvajñātman (c. ninth–tenth century) and Vimuktātman (c. tenth–eleventh century) offered to explain the state of jīvanmukti in their system was to argue that there was a leśa or a portion of ignorance that remained even after one realizes Brahman’s nondual and featureless nature. This portion temporarily obstructs complete liberation on the part of the jīvanmukta. Vyāsatīrtha finds this idea an equally unacceptable means of explaining how an individual who has grasped the truth of reality’s nondual nature continues to experience plurality:

And as for the notion that [the world, body, etc. persist in jīvanmukti] because there is a leśa, a portion [of ignorance that remains], that too is untenable because ignorance is without parts. For the same reason, it also will not work to say that ignorance remains for some time as according to the analogy of the burnt cloth because you cannot apply the analogy of the burnt cloth to that which is without parts.

Advaitins often used the burnt cloth analogy to explain the state of jīvanmukti. The burnt cloth, while destroyed by fire and subject to imminent disappearance, retains its basic outline and remains visible for some time. But Vyāsatīrtha contests the validity of this analogy on the grounds that ignorance in Advaita thought is not like a cloth; it is both inultimate (and therefore nonreal) and without parts.
Indeed, Vyāsatīrtha goes on to say that the leśa theory is also defective “because whatever persists by virtue of the fact that it is not destroyed by knowledge must be considered as ultimately real.”93 In other words, the leśa of ignorance, because it is not destroyed upon realization of the truth of nondualism would itself have to be an ultimate reality and, clearly, this is something the Advaitin would not accept.

Aware of these difficulties with the leśa concept, some Advaitin thinkers such as Citsukha (thirteenth century) modified the leśa’s definition, presenting it as a “form” of ignorance rather than as a part.94 Vyāsatīrtha paraphrases his understanding of this view as follows:

The leśa is to be thought of as an ākāra or a “form.” According to śruti statements such as “indromāyābhir . . .” etc.,95 ignorance has many forms [and thus,] even though there has been the cessation of the form [of ignorance] that causes the mistaken cognition that the material world is absolutely real, the form [of ignorance] that causes the appearance of the body, etc. continues. And there is the continuation [of the appearance of the body, etc.] even though the knowledge of true reality, which has the capacity to obstruct it, is present because prārabdha karma [karma that is in the process of being worked off] acts as an obstructor of that knowledge. [. . .] The continuation of the form, despite the non-existence of the form-holder is legitimate because it is like the jāti or class that continues even if the individual members [of that jāti] no longer exist.96

Vyāsatīrtha’s criticism of the leśa theory offers three basic alternatives to conceptualizing the leśa as a form of ignorance and then proceeds to show the conceptual flaws inherent in each:

In case [the leśa is thought of as an ākāra, a form of ignorance], is the ākāra of the nature of a peculiar power [of ignorance?] Or is it a specific modification [of ignorance] like an earring that is made of gold [is a modification of gold]? Or is it an additional individual instance of ignorance? [i.e., you have destroyed one manifestation of ignorance, only to have it replaced by a completely new manifestation of ignorance.]97

Vyāsatīrtha then argues that “it is neither the first nor the second option [i.e., that the ākāra of ignorance is a peculiar power or a modified form of ignorance] because if either of those things acts as a material cause of the mistaken cognition of the body, etc. then [you must allow that] there is the continued existence of ignorance [which is supposed to have been destroyed.]”98 The idea here is that to describe the leśa in either of these ways does nothing to circumvent the basic difficulty that ignorance, according to Advaita, has been destroyed in the state of jīvanmukti. In this sense, the samskāra theory works a bit better because the Advaitin can claim that the samskāra is different from ignorance and persists even after ignorance is destroyed. The conception of leśa as a form of ignorance presumes ignorance’s abiding existence. But this cannot be the case because, as Vyāsatīrtha says, “In terms of either of [these ways of understanding the leśa],
which is different from the ātman and which is vulnerable to being destroyed by knowledge [of reality as non-dual] and which [must be regarded] either as ignorance itself or as a product of ignorance, it is not legitimate for the leśa to continue if ignorance has truly ceased to exist.”

Vyāsatīrtha further argues that the leśa can be viewed neither as a property of ignorance nor as a modified form of ignorance. If it were the former, the leśa could not then act as a material cause and if it were the latter, it is not clear how a form of a nonexistent thing could continue to exist: “In the case of viewing the leśa as a property of ignorance, it cannot be a material cause [of the cognition of the body, etc. in jīvanmuktī] and it is also not legitimate for a form of something to continue in the absence of the form’s possessor.”

Vyāsatīrtha also rejects the third option, wherein the leśa is considered to be an additional instance of ignorance that replaces the one that has been destroyed, “because it is not suitable within a perspective which says that ignorance is singular.” He also argues against the idea that there can be multiple instances of that singular ignorance, an idea implicit in Citsukha’s argument that the leśa of ignorance may temporarily disappear for the jīvanmukta in states of meditation, on the following grounds:

Even from the point of view of difference [within ignorance], is it the case that, after that previous ignorance, there is another type of ignorance that has additional objects of the senses? Or not? It’s not the former because, in the case of a nirviśeṣa or attributeless reality, it is not proper to say that [ignorance has additional content]. But it is also not the latter view [that whatever was the content of the previous form of ignorance is going to be the same as this form] because, in an earlier chapter of the Nyāyāmṛta, the falsity of the following idea was established: “even when there is only one object of knowledge, there can be as many false understandings of it as there can be insights into it.”

Continuing with the theme that the leśa of ignorance might be conceptualized as something that manifests itself in discrete multiple instances over time, Vyāsatīrtha goes on to state that the Advaitins cannot maintain that an initial insight into reality as nondual occurs but full insight into it as nondual occurs later because the content of the insight cannot possibly have changed: “And it is not legitimate to say that ignorance is caused by a mistaken cognition of reality’s true nature even in the state of jīvanmuktī because it is not legitimate to argue that, even though previously there was complete knowledge of the object, the final apprehension of [reality’s nature] occurs later.”

Finally, Vyāsatīrtha argues against the idea that prārabdha karma, or karma that is in the process of being worked off by the jīvanmukta, can be used to explain the state of jīvanmuktī because its relationship to the leśa doctrine is one of mutual dependence. By invoking prārabdha karma, Citsukha is attempting to explain the
persistence of the leśa of ignorance with reference to an individual’s karma, but he is also relying on the abiding existence of the leśa as a form of ignorance to account for the continued experience of karma on the part of the jīvanmukta.  

Having criticized to his satisfaction and in historical order the two possible explanations for the continued experience of embodiment and plurality on the part of the jīvanmukta, Vyāsatīrtha comes out and declares that jīvanmukti is simply not an acceptable doctrine within Advaita thought. However, he also argues that jīvanmukti is perfectly consistent with Dvaita:

Therefore, in the opponent’s system of thought, because everything is the product of illusion and because illusion is destroyed by knowledge, jīvanmukti is not possible. But for us, in the case of the individual who has achieved aparokṣajñāna or direct and immediate knowledge of God, jīvanmukti is the continuation of saṁsāra due to the working off of prārabdha karma, absent the grace of God that is bestowed on the liberated one whose goal was [achieving that grace], because devotion to Brahman has not yet reached its highest peak which would enable one to obtain the highest bliss of which one is capable. But when [God’s] grace does transpire, mukti has the nature of the complete cessation of suffering and the manifestation of bliss of a higher or lower caliber, depending upon one’s innate nature.

In fact, the founder of Mādhva Vedānta, Madhva, did not typically use the term jīvanmukti to describe his two-stage view of mokṣa. Instead, Madhva used the term, cited by Vyāsatīrtha in the preceding quote, aparokṣajñāna, which translates to “direct and immediate knowledge” of God or the ultimate reality. However, as both Daniel Sheridan and Roque Mesquita have argued, Madhva’s aparokṣajñāna idea presents liberation as a two-stage process, beginning in embodied saṁsāric existence, when insight into the divine-human relationship is gained, devotion is practiced, and God’s grace is incurred, resulting in a direct and immediate vision of God’s multifaceted nature. Because of prārabdha karma, the jīva remains in saṁsāra until this already manifesting karma is spent, after which final liberation from saṁsāric existence is brought about through God’s grace when the soul is released and achieves final and irreversible liberation from rebirth. B.N.K. Sharma also describes Madhva’s notion of aparokṣajñāna as “the fulfillment and culmination of all the sādhanaś” and as “the penultimate state of final release.”

Thus, liberation in Dvaita Vedānta always was a two-stage process, and Madhva’s aparokṣajñāna or “the direct and immediate knowledge of God is functionally equivalent to Advaita Vedānta’s teaching of jīvanmukti.” Yet while Madhva may have occasionally made this equation himself, Vyāsatīrtha’s Nyāyāmrta advanced the cause of treating the terms aparokṣajñāna and jīvanmukti interchangeably. In doing so, he attested to the dominance of Advaita categories in his context. Simultaneously, what Vyāsatīrtha did, if not with complete finality, then at least with an impressive display of virtuosity, was to problematize the use of the term jīvanmukti in Advaita Vedānta, so as to lay exclusive claim to it on the part of the Dvaita system.
He did this by highlighting all those aspects of Dvaita thought that make it the polar opposite of Advaita: its realism, its hierarchical relationship between the soul and Brahman, its belief that Brahman is qualified by all known attributes, and its emphasis on devotionalism and grace as the essential means to mokṣa. It is in Dvaita rather than Advaita thought that the doctrine of jīvanmukti can have its proper home. In this manner, Vyāsatīrtha coopted a sociopolitically significant doctrine away from a rival school and marshaled it to his sectarian cause.

This cooptation was helpful in establishing not only the conceptual superiority of Dvaita over Advaita but also its social superiority. Vyāsatīrtha’s arguments in favor of jīvanmukti in Dvaita and against its possibility in Advaita imply that Mādhva renunciants could or perhaps had achieved a special state that was not conceptually possible within Advaita thought. Furthermore, Vyāsatīrtha’s arguments implicitly posited Dvaita as superior to Viśiṣṭadvaita, which simply rejects altogether the possibility of liberation while alive.

CONCLUSION

Sources from sixteenth-century Vijayanagara attest to the complex links between sociopolitical realities and the articulation of Brahmin sectarian identities, in which philosophical disputes played a key role. The period’s intense sectarian polemics, its doxographical mapping of alternative systems of thought, and the renewed interest among Śmārta leaders in establishing Vidyāranya’s historic role in the empire’s founding all indicate that a desire to establish strong ties to the court profoundly influenced Brahmin intellectual activity. Furthermore, the court’s favoring of Vedic and Vedāntin mathas over other types of religious institutions and its gradual but ultimately pronounced shift in patronage away from Śaivism and toward Vaiṣṇavism over the course of the sixteenth century imply that royal patronage could be influenced by how Brahmin sectarian groups articulated their identities.

While recent scholarship on the empire emphasizes the “ecumenical” nature of Vijayanagara patronage and while there is evidence that ecumenical patron par excellence Kṛṣṇadevarāya was careful to be evenhanded, royal giving to religious and intellectual groups was certainly not unselective or infinite. Moreover, this selectivity was influenced by a variety of considerations, many of which were outside the control of religious elites. In response to this selectivity—both its predictability and its vagaries—Brahmin sectarian leaders were galvanized to pursue a variety of creative enterprises that influenced philosophical argumentation in important ways. As we have seen, this argumentation demonstrates an increased attentiveness to the history of ideas within rival intellectual traditions. This attentiveness in part reflects the processes of institutionalization that many Vedānta intellectual communities were undergoing in this period. Those communities that were organized into mathas were more readily linked to the political institutions of the court.
and the religious institutions of the temple; historical documentation of their existence helped to assert their claims to entitlements to a range of sociopolitical benefits. However, it was not just the desire to establish links to these established social and political institutions that impelled a historical approach to philosophical literature on the part of a mahādhipati like Vyāsatīrtha. Attentiveness to the history of a rival tradition's arguments often served to reveal the weaknesses of that tradition's ideas; the tradition's internal disputes could be mined to supply the best arguments against it. Precisely for this reason, the polemical literature of the period does not exhibit a simple “us-them” dynamic. There was a coopting of ideas and strategies that resulted in some interesting overlaps and a conceptual repositioning of the sects with respect to each another.

Thus, just as the relationship between royal and religious domains should not be oversimplified, that between different sectarian groups needs to be nuanced. Vyāsatīrtha’s criticisms of Advaita Vedānta exhibit his command of a rich heritage of Vedānta argumentation and his development of that argumentation in subtle ways that are pertinent to his circumstances. His knowledge of Advaita positions exhibits a simultaneously historical and doxographic program that is part of a larger polemical agenda. It is ironic perhaps that his emphasis on doctrinal differences actually blurs some of the boundaries between the two sects. Through coopting his intellectual rivals’ terminology, Vyāsatīrtha makes a case for Dvaita’s unique doctrinal relevance even as he reveals, perhaps inadvertently, that the boundaries between opposing doctrinal traditions could be porous.110

That Vyāsatīrtha in some sense triumphed over not just Advaita Vedānta doctrines but Śmārta religious institutions may be evident in speculations that he, and not the fourteenth-century Sringeri Advaitin, Vidyāraṇya, is the subject of a painting on the ceiling of the mahāraṅgamanḍapa or an elaborate covered pavilion on the Virūpākṣa temple’s premises. This structure was installed by Kṛṣṇadevarāya in 1510, as one of his earliest construction projects. However, the painting is not contemporary with the king. As Dallapiccola has argued, it was likely added in the nineteenth century, when interest in the site was renewed and the temple was refurbished and reopened.111

Many scholars of Vijayanagara art and architecture, as well as of the empire’s literary and religious traditions, have assumed that this painting depicts Vidyāraṇya (fig. 1).

However, Mādhvas have long held that it is in fact a portrait of Vyāsatīrtha, and there is some evidence to support this.113 Elements of the central religious mendicant’s entourage such as the green flags, the camel, and the drum are still today accoutrements of the mahādhipatis of those monasteries established by Vyāsatīrtha. Furthermore, these institutions consider these emblems to have been gifts bestowed upon Vyāsatīrtha during the reign of Śāluva Narasiṃha in return for Vyāsatīrtha’s having filled in for several disgraced priests at Tirupati, who had allegedly stolen temple jewels.114 That Śāluva Narasiṃha possessed these items is
attested to in the Sālavābhuyudaya, a biography of this king. While the historical record connecting Sāluva Narasimha to Vyāsatirtha is tenuous, it is nevertheless possible that these elements were widely recognizable aspects of Vyāsatirtha’s iconography prior to the commission of the painting in the Virūpākṣa mandir’s mahāraṅgamanḍapa. A local grandee from the nineteenth century may have been acting on such information, Vyāsatirtha’s reputation as Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s guru, and popular legends such as the kuhuyoga.

If this image is, in fact, Vyāsatirtha, his apotheosis in an institution historically affiliated with Śringeri Śmaṭa Advaitins attests to his crossover status as the empire’s guardian saint (to use Venkoba Rao and Verghese’s term) as much as to his particular triumph over Advaita Vedānta in his polemics. That Vyāsatirtha’s image could be inserted into a historically Śmaṭa and Šaiva institution would, if true, attest to the fact that he transcended his sectarian identity and became a generic and highly venerated figure, whose appeal cut across sectarian lines. This is certainly how he is viewed by many in Karnataka today.

This might seem ironic given how central his sectarian identity is to his anti-Advaita polemics and, by extension, to his fame. However, Vyāsatirtha did transcend his sectarian identity in large part because of his borrowing from, mimicking, and...
working with other sects; this consolidated his alliances with them in a manner that would lead, ironically but also somewhat inevitably, to a blurring of some boundaries between these intellectual communities. This aspect of his philosophical argumentation becomes apparent only if we are willing to think about the full range of his interaction with the court and with other sects that were active there. While Vijayanagara patronage propelled a process of institutionalization that cultivated sectarian boundaries, these boundaries were also continually renegotiated through ongoing interactions, interactions that were themselves facilitated by Vijayanagara patronage. To understand further the specifics of Vyāsatīrtha’s role in these negotiations, let us now examine his material, social, and ritual exchanges with the Śrīvaiṣṇavas.