Polemics and Patronage in the City of Victory

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At the outset of this book, I stated that Vijayanagara patronage of religious institutions was selective and flexible and responded in creative ways to the particular circumstances of specific locations. Nevertheless, our detailed study of Vyāsatīrtha’s relationship with the court enables us to generalize about how and why Vijayanagara rulers patronized certain religious institutions and about the impact this patronage had, not only on particular sects, but on South Indian society more broadly.

While Vijayanagara patronage of religious institutions was generally evenhanded, Vijayanagara royals consistently privileged Brahmin sectarian institutions, particularly mathas, with a Vedānta focus. This began with the fourteenth-century Saṅgama dynasty’s patronage of the Smārta Advaita community at Sringeri and continued through the sixteenth-century Tuluvas’ increasing support of Mādhva and Śrīvaisṇava institutions. While the reasons for the empire’s Vedāntin and Brahminical preferences remain debatable, the court clearly relied on these institutions to implement many features of its statecraft. As I argued in chapter 2, mathas replicated the court’s power and authority in far-flung locations in both symbolic and practical ways. In a manner similar to but often more efficient than that of Hindu temples, mathas deployed royal patronage for economic and agrarian development. They thereby integrated recently conquered and rebellious territories more firmly into the empire.

Of course, not all mathas functioned in exactly the same way, and their diverse roles within their respective religious and intellectual communities likely affected the kinds of tasks they could perform for the state. For some religious communities, such as the Śrīvaisṇavas, mathas were but one of several organizational units;
the leaders of *matāhas* in this community often shared religious authority with elite householders. Furthermore, *matāhas* within a given sectarian community could compete with one another in ways that impinged upon the monasteries’ relative power. Finally, *matāhas* and their leaders had to respond to local circumstances in ways that often required negotiation. Particularly in strategically significant areas with large, royally patronized temple complexes, *matāhas* brokered power-sharing arrangements with various local constituents. These arrangements explicitly acknowledged the claims of different interest groups and, in doing so, restricted *matāhas’* agency.

Yet precisely because of their innately complex roles in South Indian society, *matāhas*—and their leaders—came to wield much local political and economic power. This was true even though *matāhas* typically housed ascetics who were pursuing nonworldly religious goals. This apparent contradiction may be explained by the royal notion that detached individuals made ideal courtly agents. At the same time, as sources examined in chapters 2 and 4 reveal, *matāhas* receiving royal support could become alternative seats of power that competed in certain ways with the court’s authority. Both because of their potential royal connections and their self-perpetuating authority, *matāhas* proliferated as a form of religious institution even among those communities, such as the Vīraśaivas, who were not receiving royal support. Thus, Vijayanagara patronage of religious institutions fostered a generic institutionalization process that implicated a variety of South Indian Hindu communities while encouraging religious diversity.

Indeed, although *matāhas* receiving royal patronage were often engaged in a shared project that promoted intersectarian collaboration of various kinds, Vijayanagara patronage also formalized and advanced Hindu sectarianism. As I have argued in chapter 2, the *matāha’s* status as a sectarian institution is evident in both its daily functioning and its intellectual production. Internally, *matāhas’* use of instructional manuals to govern many aspects of daily life for full-time residents and their documentation of intellectual lineages in *guru-paramparā* texts demarcated the boundaries between intellectual and religious communities. Externally, the increasing affiliation of *matāhas* with temples, and the replication of temple practices at freestanding *matāhas*, linked these monastic communities in highly public ways with popular devotional and ritual practices. The literary production, which included polemics against rival systems of thought and biographies of sectarian leaders, of many sixteenth-century Brahmin *matāhas* may have addressed a specialized audience. But *matāhas’* efforts to promote their sectarian distinctiveness among a wider public are evident in their cultivation of *samādhi* shrine worship, their installation of icons and *maṇḍapas* at existing temple complexes, and their selective affiliation with popular vernacular devotional movements.

Despite the court’s clear patronage preference for a specific type of religious institution—the Brahmin Vedānta *matha*—Vijayanagara royals remained fairly
noncommittal when it came to personal religious affiliation. Unlike the kings of Sanderson’s “Śaiva Age”—which he dates from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries and which will be discussed in more detail below—Vijayanagara royals did not routinely or publicly take gurus. They patronized a variety of not only distinct but competing sectarian communities. As we know, Vijayanagara patronage, although granted predominantly to Hindu institutions, was also occasionally extended to Jain and Muslim communities. But the court’s noncommittal religious stance was not completely neutral or indifferent. For instance, as we saw in chapter 4, the court’s deliberate cultivation of a transsectarian Vaiṣṇava alliance between Mādhvas and Śrīvaiṣṇavas manipulated some significant divisions between and within these respective communities. Moreover, as noted in chapter 3, this alliance threatened the Advaitin Śmārtas, who attempted to advocate for their entitlement to royal patronage in the sixteenth century, using inscriptions attesting to their prominence at the fourteenth-century court.

The motivations behind the Vijayanagara court’s selective yet noncommittal patronage of a variety of Brahminical, Vedānta maṭhas were often politically strategic. For example, as discussed in chapters 2 and 4, the court’s support for Śrīvaiṣṇava institutions was motivated to a significant extent by concerns about heavily militarized chieftains and overlords (nāyakas) in the regions of southern Andhra and northern Tamilnadu, as well as by concerns about the Gajapati rulers’ designs on prominent forts in the border zone between the two kingdoms. As Ajay Rao has demonstrated, the Śrīvaiṣṇavas actively pursued close ties to the court through a variety of intellectual, literary, and ritual activities that supported courtly endeavors. Furthermore, the Śrīvaiṣṇavas’ popular vernacular and often mixed-caste devotionalism, together with their established tradition of Vedānta intellectualism, enabled this community to appeal simultaneously to different social groups. This in turn enabled the Tuḷuva court to work with the Śrīvaiṣṇava leadership to forge relationships with a variety of constituents in regions of strategic significance to the empire.

Most important to our purposes, the royal shift toward Vaiṣṇavism, which began during the Sāluva dynasty and accelerated during the Tuḷuva, encompassed within it a new prominence for Mādhva Brahminism. Much of the credit for this goes to Vyāsatīrtha, whose deft management of his relationships with both the court and other sectarian groups—as well as his intellectual virtuosity—established Mādhva Vedānta as a major social and intellectual force. Vyāsatīrtha’s success as a sectarian leader is reflected in large part in his procurement of land from the Vijayanagara court to establish Mādhva institutions such as maṭhas and agrahāras in new locations. Several of these locations were already Śrīvaiṣṇava in orientation; Vyāsatīrtha did the court’s bidding by collaborating with this alternative Vaiṣṇava group to establish a transregional and transsectarian Vaiṣṇavism that was of high political utility. Manifested primarily in temples in the multilingual
zone at the empire’s core, where Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada intersected, this big tent Vaishnavism enabled the court to showcase its generous temple patronage, which was deeply entangled with its military activities, to a variety of publics.

Not only did these Vaishnava megatemples, created through royal patronage, expand Vijayanagara outreach, they also articulated a distinctive Vijayanagara cosmopolitanism. These spaces were de facto multilingual and devotionally pluralistic but unified in an overarching religious purpose and integrated into a shared economic and social network. However, precisely because pluralism was not an accidental reality at these megatemples but one that had been orchestrated by Vijayanagara patronage, they were also highly sectarian spaces. Sects—typically represented by mathas on the premises of these temples—could collaborate with one another and benefit from increased ritual largesse before an expanded and diverse audience. But precisely through these collaborative activities, sects could also promote their distinctive doctrines and practices. Vyāsatīrtha was particularly adept at such promotion, which took the form of added ritual activities, new architectural structures for prasād distribution, the installation of icons associated with his mathas, and possible collaboration with vernacular devotional movements at these large temple complexes.

As we have seen, Vyāsatīrtha was also adept at doctrinal debate, the more elite and intellectual form of sectarian promotion. His polemical texts against alternative forms of Vedānta exhibit a nuanced understanding of those systems that is highly attuned to their internal debates and their historical evolution. His thorough parsing of the various arguments of his Vedāntin rivals exposes a multitude of logical inconsistencies while also providing a doxography of key Vedānta concepts. Through his incisive polemics and his historical doxography, Vyāsatīrtha successfully located Dvaita Vedānta more advantageously in the philosophical landscape and stimulated significant responses from his Vedāntin rivals. Moreover, Vyāsatīrtha’s reframing of some key Mādhva doctrines, such as his reformulation of aparokṣajñāna as jīvanmukti and his emphasis on sādhana or the soul’s agency in the pursuit of mokṣa, reflect a coopting of successful doctrinal positions from other communities to benefit his sectarian cause. However, this coopting also reflects his dialogic context and the intersectarian negotiations that were taking place as a direct result of Vijayanagara patronage of Brahmin Vedānta communities. Indeed, while the word polemics implies outright opposition, these polemics also involved significant intellectual borrowing and exchange. In this way, the competitive collaboration between sects that Vijayanagara patronage inspired in ritual and material exchanges at temples also manifested itself in Vyāsatīrtha’s philosophical arguments.

Indeed a key, if obvious, point of this book has been that intellectual practices and religious doctrines do not unfold in a sociopolitical vacuum. In making this point, however, I want to stress that one of the things we understand better by
contextualizing Vyāsatīrtha’s arguments against alternative forms of Vedānta is the specifics of the arguments themselves. A decontextualized reading of Vyāsatīrtha’s polemics against rival Vedānta systems—one that ignores his on-the-ground interactions with these groups—risks overlooking some of the subtle areas of intellectual overlap that Vyāsatīrtha himself identifies. Speaking of religious claims and their contestation, Clayton has argued that “‘reasons’ are always reasons for someone; they become persuasive when they are regarded as ‘good reasons’ by some audience.” In other words, even the most abstract philosophical arguments make their fullest sense only when the context in which they are put forward is understood. This is true not just for arguments that are aiming to be more cogent than valid, to borrow Griffiths’s distinction, but even for arguments that are trying to be logically airtight. It is therefore only through a historically informed reading of Vyāsatīrtha’s polemics that we can fully clarify his philosophical positions and better understand how those philosophical positions shaped his community’s actions in the world.

For some readers, my historic contextualization of Vyāsatīrtha’s philosophical and religious discourse may remain intellectually problematic. Such contextualization runs the risk of not taking the ideas seriously enough on their own terms, thereby compromising the integrity of both rationality and belief as independent, closed systems. Certainly if they are not done carefully, historical studies of religious philosophy can reduce belief systems and philosophical ideas to shadowy reflections of social and political reality or, worse yet, to utilitarian strategies for worldly gain. At the same time, I suspect that for other readers, the philosophical and doctrinal component of Vyāsatīrtha’s life story will remain largely irrelevant to their understanding, not only of the role of religion in this period, but even of Vyāsatīrtha’s particular significance. Such a reader might argue that, while it is important to know that Vyāsatīrtha was engaged in doctrinal disputes with his sectarian rivals, one does not need to know the precise details of those arguments. Because few of Vyāsatīrtha’s own contemporaries would have been familiar with those details, knowing them does little to enhance our understanding of the period. In this view, Vyāsatīrtha’s roles as a state agent, an economic stimulator, a public works patron, and a temple donor teach us far more about religion’s functionality, its social value, and its historic significance than the precise nuances of Vyāsatīrtha’s polemics ever could.

But while this book could have been written without a study of Vyāsatīrtha’s philosophical works, that omission would have made for a strange testament to Vyāsatīrtha’s life and his own understanding of what he was doing and why. The rationale behind his activities and those of his followers was deeply embedded in a particular reading of the sacred corpus and a particular understanding of its form. Moreover, his actions were prompted by concern about the human individual’s existential situation, the need for correct devotion to God, and the quest
for right knowledge. Other, more evanescent concerns about land, influence, and the spread of Mādhva institutions were important, mainly insofar as they enabled meaningful reflection on the former issues.

Even more significant, perhaps, Vyāsatīrtha’s responses to timeless religious and existential questions do tell us how religion functioned as a lived reality in early sixteenth-century South India. This reality unfolded in a particular time and place and under a specific set of circumstances, even as it engaged timeless canonical teachings and spoke in the language of eternal truth. As demonstrated in chapter 3, Vyāsatīrtha’s arguments gained a hearing in large part because of his activities as a state agent and his implementation of the court’s agenda. However, we have also seen how his role in implementing that agenda was inextricably linked to the shoring up of his own constituency, a constituency that was connected by the doctrinal and intellectual as much as it was by the ritual, social, and political. The manner in which Vyāsatīrtha made his arguments against rival Vedānta systems not only reflected and influenced his negotiations with other sectarian groups, it also shaped, to a significant extent, his own following. The intellectual fame he achieved was partly due to his sociopolitical prominence. Yet it was also due to the incisiveness of his arguments and the magnitude of his engagement with alternative Vedānta traditions. Indeed, the extensive and diverse philosophical responses that Vyāsatīrtha’s works elicited from his intellectual opponents confirmed Vyāsatīrtha’s intellectual virtuosity. In doing so, these responses reinforced the Mādhva sect’s worldly stature. As a result, Vyāsatīrtha’s philosophical works have profoundly influenced the geographic scope, material resources, social functioning, and self-understanding of the Mādhva community in South India, and they continue to do so even today.

By being attentive to these sometimes abstruse and demanding arguments, we do learn something significant about how religion, as a complex social and intellectual system, operated both within and upon its milieu. Rather than reducing the kind of religious questioning and philosophical argumentation that we encounter in Vyāsatīrtha’s works to a reflection of something else that is putatively more “real” (e.g., politics, economics, or military strategy), reading religious and philosophical texts as constitutive features of their historical context helps to preserve religion’s integrity and illuminate its role more brightly in our analysis of the past.

Just as we can only understand Vyāsatīrtha’s life story by examining his philosophical and religious arguments, and just as those arguments make their fullest sense when we read them as part of the historical record, we can only understand Vijayanagara patronage of religious and monastic institutions if we take the literature produced by those institutions seriously. This is true not only of biographies of sectarian leaders and doxographies of various religious and intellectual systems but of polemical and philosophical texts as well. It is not my contention that arcane doctrinal disputes between Brahmin sects espousing different views
of Vedānta canonical literature determined royal behavior in any direct way—for example, how royals patronized religious institutions. Sectarian leaders, however, undeniably did use polemics and debate as key means of articulating their identity. Insofar as such debate had an impact on intersectarian alliances and rivalries, it also affected royal giving. These rivalries and alliances played a direct role in temple management. They therefore had implications for the redistribution of royal wealth and for sectarian institutions’ efficacy as funnels of patronage into strategically significant locales. Thus, the implementation of the court’s agenda, insofar as it depended upon sectarian leaders, also depended to some extent on their relations with one another. These relations were enacted not only through religious rituals and temple management but also through doctrinal debates. In this admittedly indirect way, religious doctrines implicated the Vijayanagara state and its policies. That the court was aware of this is evident in the rhetoric of royal inscriptions discussed in chapters 2 and 4, in which religious leaders are praised for their doctrinal commitments, spiritual endeavors, and intellectual acumen.

Thus, while I would not argue that religious ideology was fundamental to politics or served as a primary impetus to royal behavior, I would also be quite wary of the view that religion played no role whatsoever in Vijayanagara statecraft. Certainly, there was no state religion under Vijayanagara rule, if what we mean by that is a religion imposed by the state on its citizens. In fact, even the extent to which Vijayanagara royals embraced a particular religious ideology is unclear. But, as the work of Fritz, Michell and M. S. Nagaraja Rao; Verghese; Eaton and Wagoner; Ajay Rao; and others has shown, the pageantry of the Vijayanagara state—displays of its power in the abstract—depended upon religious symbols to a significant extent. Because those symbols were selected from a range of possible options, royal use of particular religious iconography to make claims about the state’s authority privileged certain forms of religious expression over others. This, in turn, privileged the sociopolitical position of certain religious institutions throughout the empire’s holdings.

Indeed, this book has demonstrated that the empire’s reliance on religious institutions and their leaders was not merely in the interest of asserting or legitimating Vijayanagara rule in a symbolic way. Rather, as we have seen, Vijayanagara royals’ religious patronage played a critical role in shaping the various practical mechanisms that enabled the empire to function. When sectarian institutions irrigated land and arranged for village produce to be dispatched to (sometimes quite remote) temples, when they filled temple coffers with cash and distributed donations of prasād to various publics, and when they commissioned goods and services for conducting elaborate festivals and celebrations, they shaped a variety of social, political, economic, and logistical networks. These networks, in turn, facilitated the circulation of goods and services throughout the empire’s various regions and promoted different forms of discretionary power among a range of local agents. Such
Structures had a significant impact on people's daily lives, including the kinds of crops they planted, the food they ate, the ways in which they maneuvered through space, how they organized themselves into groups, and the manner in which they paid their taxes. In short, these networks structured South Indian peoples' material and social worlds and their degree of influence upon and status within them.

Sectarian leaders like Vyāsatīrtha played a large role in the shaping of these everyday realities for many people, and their ability to do so was a direct result of Vijayanagara patronage. Thus, the state did use “religion” both as a set of symbols designed to make certain abstract claims and as a practical means of constructing and imposing the state's quotidian apparatus. Of course, as we know from Morrison's work, this apparatus functioned quite differently and with varying degrees of success in different imperial regions. But that variability, too, was often managed by sectarian monastic leaders.

Most important, perhaps, I would argue that Vijayanagara patronage of religious institutions in the early sixteenth century actively encouraged new ways of thinking about religious identity. It is here that Vijayanagara patronage most clearly distinguished itself from earlier Indian polities in ways that reflected the many transformations that were taking place in South Indian society during this period. In recent years, scholars have posited that the period of early modernity in India was inaugurated in the sixteenth century. While the phrase “early modern” is a highly ambiguous one, most scholars of South Asia would agree that some of the changes taking place in South Indian society at this time were unprecedented. As the Vijayanagara Empire took center stage in an emerging global economy, not only did new ways of life come into being, but new ways of thinking about identity also emerged. Increased migration to and within South India, the advent of new technologies, expanding militarism, the infusion of cash into a rapidly changing economy, and growing ethnic and religious diversity all contributed to reformulations of social identity. Royally patronized religious institutions played a significant role in these reformulations. Religious intellectuals actively engaged questions of what was different and what was shared between sectarian groups while the court used its patronage to encourage these conversations. By relocating Brahmin Vedānta mathas to shared temple environments, Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s court promoted intersectarian collaboration at large and popular temples in ways that facilitated doctrinal exchange and religious synthesis, even as it also occasioned the inscribing of sectarian boundaries. That the sixteenth-century court had something at stake in these maneuvers is suggested in its active efforts to create a distinctive Vijayanagara cosmopolitanism that integrated different regions and constituencies of the empire into a shared religious culture at certain strategically located temples. It is also evident in the court’s selective use of religious iconography that showcased the empire’s diversity while also privileging specific religious articulations.
Further evidence that Vijayanagara royals were aware of and actively reflected upon religious and ethnic differences can be seen in their self-referential use of the phrase “sultans among Hindu kings.” This proclamation of identity, found in inscriptions as early as the fourteenth-century Sangama dynasty, casts the Vijayanagara state in terms that are relative to other South Asian polities. This label sought to establish a connection between the Vijayanagara Empire and the northern sultanates, which dominated much of the Indian subcontinent at that time. But while this connection attests to the existence of a shared cultural and political sphere that cut across religious and ethnic distinctions between Vijayanagara and the sultanates, it also asserts the Vijayanagara court’s distinctive identity in an increasingly Turkish, Persianized, and Islamic political environment. In a similar way, the Vijayanagara court’s increasing reliance on sectarian leaders of mathas to implement many features of its statecraft bore a close resemblance to the Deccan sultanates’ use of Sufi shrines to similar ends. The Vijayanagara court’s reliance on mathas, however, was arguably a “Hindu” version of this practice, inflected in ways that helped forge a distinctive imperial religious identity for the empire.

To be sure, ethnic and religious diversity were facts of life in the Indian subcontinent for centuries before the advent of Vijayanagara rule. Finbar Flood’s work on cultural encounters between ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse elites in the regions of what is now Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North India from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries shows how confrontation with various forms of difference came to configure South Asian identities in that period. Moreover, Talbot has argued, in her studies of the Telangana and Andhra Pradesh regions between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, that all instances of identity-formation are responses to broader social change. These responses often involve a deliberate and selective engagement with the past in order to confront the complex realities of the present. She therefore maintains that there is no great rupture between premodern and modern mechanisms of identity formation.  

Talbot is certainly correct that thinking about difference and identity was not something that Vijayanagara royals or religious elites invented. Some of the strategies deployed by Vijayanagara agents to construct their own histories in ways that would improve their status in the present, such as their use of inscriptions to make certain claims, were very similar to what obtained, for example, under Kākatīya rule (c. 1175–1324). Moreover, sixteenth-century Vijayanagara responses to changing conditions reflect an inheritance of deeply rooted symbolic and practical structures. One could argue, in fact, that the empire’s ecumenical tolerance of a diversity of religious institutions and its concurrent privileging of certain religious formations was in line with a lengthy tradition of Indian rulers that extends all the way back to the third century BCE’s Buddhist emperor Aśoka. Aśoka, like many Indian rulers after him, accepted the de facto state of religious pluralism within his empire and did not seek to restrict it. He speaks explicitly, in his widely
distributed rock edicts, about the need to respect the views of all sects, even as these edicts also promote awareness of the Buddha's *dhamma*.

Other pre-Vijayanagara Indian texts that discuss royal attitudes toward religious diversity display a similar mindset. For example, the ninth-century Sanskrit play *Āgamaḍambara* or “Much Ado about Religion,” composed by the Nyāya intellectual and royal advisor Bhaṭṭa Jayanta, in Kashmir, focuses explicitly on the issue of religious diversity. In this text, the actual king of Kashmir, Śaṅkaravarman, seeks advice from logicians and Vedic exegetes on how much tolerance ought to be extended to the “Black Blanket Observance,” a group that seems to have engaged in deviant sexual behaviors as a form of religious rite. The king seeks to suppress this practice “because he kn[ows] that it [i]s unprecedented, but he d[oes] not suppress the religions of Jains and others in the same way.”

The basis of the king’s general tolerance is that religions that are widely practiced but pose no threat to the social order ought to be respected. This pragmatic tolerance, in which nonthreatening religions are allowed to continue even though other religious formations and intellectual commitments are considered superior, seems to have been a shared feature of Śaṅkaravarman’s and Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s respective reigns. However, we can also find differences. One such difference may have been in the two kings’ practical interactions with temples. In his *Rājatarāṅgīṇī*, Kalhana, the twelfth-century chronicler of Kashmir’s kings, has unflattering things to say about Śaṅkaravarman’s treatment of religious institutions. Kalhana describes Śaṅkaravarman as having stripped temples of their wealth in the interest of funding his wars.

If Kalhana’s description is accurate, Śaṅkaravarman seems also to have had a rather antagonistic relationship with temple leadership. This is quite different from Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s reliance on tax revenue to fund his wars and his expansion of temple wealth and of the power of temple leadership in the wake of his military conquests. Clearly, under Śaṅkaravarman, tolerance of religious diversity and interest in questions of religious correctness did not translate into lavish patronage of religious institutions or collaboration with religious leaders to achieve certain social, political, or economic ends.

In contrast, Sears’s study of Kalachuri patronage of the monastic institutions of the Mattamayūra sect of Śaiva Siddhānta at the turn of the first millennium in North India reveals many similarities between the complex dynamics of royal-religious interaction in this period and under later Vijayanagara rule. Sears shows that in the Kalachuri kingdoms, the Mattamayūra monasteries played many practical roles, such as helping to develop urban centers, roads, and trade networks. Moreover, just as *mathādhipatis* receiving Vijayanagara patronage came to play a variety of roles in Vijayanagara society and advocated for themselves and their sects in diverse ways, so, too, according to Sears, were Mattamayūra monks able to expand their social influence significantly through their royal connections. But Sears’s research also reveals important contrasts between royal-religious interactions
under Kalachuri versus Vijayanagara rule. She argues that Kalachuri kings took Mattamayūra ascetics as rājaguruṣ, who not only consecrated the king’s rule but initiated the king into the Śaiva Siddhānta order. This made the king “the head of the social order established by caste and religious discipline” or, as Sanderson has put it, “imbued [the king] with the numinous power of Śivahood in the exercise of his sovereignty.” In these ways, Kalachuri royals apparently displayed an affinity for the doctrines and practices of the Mattamayūra sect and used that affinity to define the social order more explicitly than what obtained under Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s rule. As we have noted, the association of Vijayanagara kings with rājaguruṣ is not firmly established in the historical record; in Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s case this ambiguity is borne out by ongoing competing sectarian claims over who held this position. Furthermore, Vijayanagara royals, especially Kṛṣṇadevarāya, encouraged forms of religious collaboration that deemphasized the doctrinal supremacy of any particular group. It is partly for these reasons that I have characterized the influence of religious doctrine on royal practice at Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s court as having been “indirect.”

Sears’s research does not consider the Kalachuris’ relationship to the other religious traditions that must have coexisted with the Mattamayūras. For such a discussion, we may turn to Sanderson, who argues that royal support for Śaivism throughout the subcontinent between the fifth and thirteenth centuries (a period Sanderson labels the Śaiva age) did not mean that royals refused to tolerate or even actively support other forms of religious practice. However, this royal affinity for Śaivism did exercise a homogenizing influence on other religious traditions, including Buddhism and Jainism. These traditions, Sanderson argues, eventually adopted many of the ritualistic, conceptual, and institutional trappings of court-endorsed Śaivism. We have noted that in a similar way, under Vijayanagara rule, many religious communities came to pattern their institutional structure along the lines of those Brahmin Vedānta mathas that were receiving royal patronage. However, Sanderson’s description of the religious homogeneity that resulted from royal support for Śaivism implies that this was largely due to religious agents’ efforts to remake themselves in an image that was appealing to royalty. In contrast, I would argue that Vijayanagara royals like Kṛṣṇadevarāya used their patronage, in part, to stimulate reconsiderations of religious diversity on the part of religious elites. In doing so, Vijayanagara royals actively encouraged not only certain forms of religious behavior but certain types of intellectual reflection thereupon. Moreover, Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s manner of supporting religious institutions and his proclamations of this support in the praśasti portion of his inscriptions endorsed a particular type of religious diversity as emblematic of the empire itself. This endorsement implicated a variety of royal and religious practical endeavors and contributed to the simultaneous creation of a shared religious sensibility and significant sectarian divisions.

Thus, Vijayanagara royals drew upon a deep well of Indian traditions of tolerance and inclusivism that nevertheless privileged specific religious formations.
This is quite different from European states in the same period, which, for the most part, would have to await the Enlightenment to recognize the political value of religious tolerance. Yet while in some ways, these enlightened Indian attitudes toward religious diversity functioned as cultural _doxa_ and were very much taken for granted, in other ways, the precise mechanisms by which these attitudes were implemented were deliberately constructed. Moreover, this construction took place under particular historical circumstances that were highly contingent.

My concern for this particularity and contingency is why I have focused here on individual agents confronting specific circumstances over the course of a thirty-year period of South Indian history. This might make my analysis seem too micro—and too elite—to be about anything so expansive and complex as religious identity in early modern South India. In the details of individual lives and communities operating under specific, unfolding circumstances, however, is precisely where we see how larger categories were created, sustained, and transformed over time. By extension, this book’s focus on the ideas and activities of individual royal and religious agents locates those agents in their social environments fairly precisely. It thereby maps the contours of their influence in ways that give that influence its due, while acknowledging the inherent interpretive limitations of a study of elite behavior.

An analysis of Vyāsatīrtha’s relations with his sectarian rivals and with the royal court demonstrates that the sectarian leader’s status in sixteenth-century Vijayanagara society could not be taken for granted. The _maṭhādhipati_’s success—and by extension the success of the sect he represented—depended in large part on his management of complex and often-conflicted relationships. In his relations with the court, the _maṭhādhipati_ sought to showcase all the intellectual, ritual, and charitable virtues of himself and his community at the expense of his rivals, in hopes of increasing the royal patronage his sect would receive. However, he also had to do the king’s bidding with the material resources he was given and make sure he neither eclipsed his royal patron’s fame nor allowed partisan differences to interfere with the court’s economic agenda as enacted through gifts to religious institutions. Indeed, in managing his relations with sectarian rivals, the _maṭhādhipati_ had to be careful to clarify what made his sect superior without alienating potential allies in the receipt and management of royal patronage. The successful sectarian leader could not allow doctrinal disputes to get in the way of mutually beneficial intersectarian collaboration. But he also needed to advocate for the doctrines that were at the heart of his own sect’s identity and were often the principal motivation behind his activities.

Thus, for all its reputation as an ecumenical polity, the sixteenth-century Vijayanagara court was sectarian insofar as it contributed to the significant wealth and prestige of particular _maṭhas_ and _maṭhādhipatis_, whose causes were greatly advanced through these gifts. The royal court’s granting of significant local power
to monastic institutions directly supported their sectarian projects by expanding their networks into new territories and creating fresh opportunities to engage with new audiences. Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s patronage of different Hindu monastic communities was ecumenical mainly in the sense that it was religiously noncommittal and benefited a variety of sectarian organizations. Moreover, the empire was sectarian in the sense that its manipulative pluralism fostered an increased sense of sectarian boundaries and competition among religious elites over royal resources. Shifts in patronage practices reflected this, privileging some groups over others and creating competition that had a significant impact on intersectarian relations at various practical and intellectual levels.

But the sixteenth-century Vijayanagara Empire was also Hindu insofar as it helped to articulate a unified religious identity that was bound up with a specific cultural and economic way of life. Through its patronage activities, the sixteenth-century Vijayanagara court actively provided contexts within which shared religious identities were enacted, and it did so, not against, but in awareness of non-Hindu religious others. Its cultivation of a cosmopolitan, transregional form of temple worship strove for a particular version of inclusivism, one that privileged specific religious articulations. In doing so, the Vijayanagara Empire distinguished itself from other religious and political formations of sixteenth-century South Asia. It put a particular form of transregional and transsectarian Hindu identity into practice.