

SRIVAISNAVA COMMUNITY IN HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The present discussion concentrates upon two significant issues that are fundamental to the Srivaisnava identity today. These are the dual division of the Srivaisnavas as the Vatakalai and Tenkalai that ossified into sub-castes; the catholic and liberal outlook of Ramanuja, the founder-leader of the Srivaisnava community and the persistent idea of the 'Muslim invasions' and the 'sacking of the temple' at Srirangam in Tamil Nadu, the nerve centre of the Srivaisnava community. This essay emphasizes that these identity issues evolved within specific contexts at different points of time and were legitimized through historical projections that were often invented. These have become a part of the Srivaisnava tradition, thus providing a sense of history and cultural continuity to the community bequeathing from an antiquated past, ideas and beliefs, conventions and practices which would give legitimacy and credibility to the tradition. Such a tradition becomes representative of the community ideology and enables the building up of a community identity vis-a-vis the "other".¹ Therefore, the aim of the tradition in Eric Hobsbawm's words is to "structure at least some parts of social life.....as unchanging and invariant within the changing context".² The historical context of such interventions becomes very important as a study of the religious traditions of South India indicates.

Duality: The Vatakalai and Tenkalai–The Schism in Srivaisnavism.

Today, the division into the Vatakalai and Tenkalai sects represents the *duality* within the Srivaisnava community. Vatakalai, meaning north, i.e. the northern part of Tamil region with Kancipuram as the religious center is supposed to be Sanskritic, therefore brahmanical in orientation. Tenkalai, i.e. southern part of Tamil region with Srirangam as the center is projected as adhering to the Prabandhic or the Tamil tradition. The identity of a Vatakalai and Tenkalai has become an enduring one so much so, that even the historical past of the Srivaisnava community is identified along these sectarian lines. For example, several of the hagiographical texts have been referred to as belonging to either of these

sects. For instance, *Ramanujadivyaśuricaritam* is considered a Tenkalai text and *Prapannamrtam* as a Vatakalai text. Similarly, the institutional set ups of the temples and *mathas* have acquired the sectarian affiliations as is evident from the religious centers of both the sects, viz., Kancipuram (Vatakalai) and Srirangam (Tenkalai) respectively. However, none of these texts referred clearly to a Tenkalai or a Vatakalai affiliation. The historiography on the schism attributes the emergence of the Vatakalai and Tenkalai to the religious developments of the thirteenth-fourteenth century A.D. They refer primarily to two issues of conflict and debate. One is the question of the successors of Ramanuja. The question of succession was centred on the identity of the legitimate descendant of Ramanuja. The claim to this legitimacy was laid based on the lineage of Vedanta Desika (1268-1369 AD) the Vatakalai and Manavala Mamuni (1370-1443 AD) the Tenkalai *guru* being in the direct line of descent from Ramanuja onwards. Two, the main theological issues that perpetuated the schism were the concept of *guru, prapatti* and the position of Sri. Therefore, it followed that the teachings of both the acaryic heads, viz., Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamuni particularly on these issues represented the correct interpretations of the teachings of Ramanuja and his *Viśiṣṭadvaitic* philosophy. The historiographical works finally conclude that the differences between the two powerful religious leaders with their large following resulted in the schism in the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries AD.

However, this above view of schism overlooks the historical processes of the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries AD. Within the Srivaisnava tradition, the notion of duality was established in the texts in the philosophy of *ubhaya-vedanta*, i.e. Tamil *Veda* (i.e. the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*) and Sanskrit *Vedas*. This notion of duality crystallized into Tamil tradition and Sanskritic tradition that was reflected in the hagiographical texts which were constructing a lineage for their respective sects. Hence, some of the *acaryas*, their *guruparamparas*, the *mathas* and temple that were the centres of acaryic and community activities acquired a Tamil or a Sanskritic identity as the case may be. Interestingly, the acaryic lineages emerging from Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamuni associated the two *acaryas* with the Sanskritic and Tamil traditions respectively. Therefore, multiple affiliations emerged between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries that did not coalesce around the Sanskritic and Tamil traditions to form a distinct Sanskritic or Tamil

sect. The purpose of these lineages was to assert a sectarian identity for the appropriation of resources in the temples and create spheres of control in them.

The modern works on Srivaisnavism have presented the notion of uniformity, multiplicity and duality as discrete, non-interactive categories. However, the various levels of the Srivaisnava identities were mutually interactive and influencing each other and constantly underwent a transformation. Similarly, the duality of the Vatakali and Tenkalai sects that ossified into sub-castes were not exclusive categories. Several overlapping areas between them made the Srivaisnava identity more complex. Nevertheless, the sense of belonging to one single community was always adhered to and the claim of being the direct descendant of Ramanuja was a major exercise on the part of all the sectarian affiliations of the Srivaisnava community. There were moments when the sectarian affiliations were muted and the single identity was reasserted.

The division into Vatakalai and Tenkalai sects is the most dominant form of identity for the Srivaisnava community today. Temples and *mathas* are affiliated to a distinct Vatakalai or Tenkalai tradition. The attempt to articulate and reiterate these boundaries was made in the colonial context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a new political formation emerged and the temples and the sectarian leaders had no role in the establishment and the a manifestation of the duality of the Sanskrit and the Tamil tradition, which had previously provided the ideological context for various sectarian leaders. Therefore, contradictions were always present in the history of Srivaisnava philosophy and community before the eighteenth century but the forms of articulation were at the level of intellectual and theological disputes.

The basic difference between the Vatakalai and the Tenkalai sects lie in their respective *acaryic* lineage immediately after Ramanuja. For the Vatakalai, Vedanta Desika (1268-1369 A.D.) systematized and interpreted the philosophy of Ramanuja and hence was the *acaryic* head of the Vatakalai lineage. For the Tenkalai lineage, Manavala Mamuni (1370-1443 A.D.) was the *acaryic* head. The importance of these two *acaryic* heads for their respective sects lie in the fact that they were in direct line of descent from Ramanuja onwards and hence claimed to be his legitimate successors. Therefore, it followed that, the interpretations of Ramanuja's teachings by Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamuni were a logical continuation to Ramanuja's teachings and were valid.

Much has been written about the meanings of the terms Vatakalai and Tenkalai. It is in the hymns of Tirumangaiavar that a duality was first indicated in the reference to the Sanskrit and Tamil

language.¹ However, in the context of community identity, the implications go beyond the linguistic affiliations. Vatakalai means north, i.e. northern part of the Tamil country with Kancipuram as its cultural centre and Tenkalai means south of Tamil country with Srirangam and Kaveri delta as the cultural center although in both these centers, the Vedic (i.e. Sanskritic) and Prabandhic (i.e. Tamil) tradition flourished.² Today, the Vatakalai are projected as adhering to the Vedic tradition and are therefore linked to Kancipuram.³ The Tenkalais emphasizing on the Prabandhic tradition is inevitably linked to Srirangam. The historiography on the schism has followed two broad trends. The first reflected the sectarian bias of the historians who belonged to either of the two sects.⁴ According to them, the schism was an unfortunate development in the history of Srivaisnavism. These historians hold *others* responsible for the split, thereby exonerating their own sects of any responsibility. Hence, fixing the onus of the split has always been a major historiographical preoccupation. According to the Tenkalais, since Vedanta Desika was chronologically before Manavala Mamuni, therefore, the Vatakalais generated the schism. The Vatakalais counteracted this by tracing the genesis of the schism not to Manavala Mamuni, but to Pillai Lokacarya (1264-1372 A.D.), who was a Tenkalai leader and a senior contemporary of Vedanta Desika.⁵ There is another interpretation to this chronological difference. Since Vedanta Desika was placed before Manavala Mamuni, the Vatakalais asserted that they were more ancient than the Tenkalais. Hence, it followed that Ramanuja was a Vatakalai and the Tenkalai system

¹N. Jagadeesan, 1977, p. 45. *Kalai* also means language.

²In both the centres, both the Vedas as well as the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* are sung on various occasions with great devotion.

³Since Kancipuram was a multi-temple centre- different religious traditions developed. It has been stated that Kanci emerged as the major centre for various inter-religious theological debates. Consequently, the Srivaisnavas had to rely on the Vedic-Upanisadic tradition to establish their legitimacy. See Patricia Mumme, *The Theology of Manavalamamuni: Toward an Understanding of the Tenkalai-Vatakalai Dispute in the Post-Ramanuja Sri Vaisnavism*. Madras, 1987; idem., *The Sri Vaisnava Theological Dispute: Manavalamamuni and Vedantadesika*. Madras, 1988.

⁴One of the well-known historians is V. Rangachari. See V. Rangachari, 'The Successors of Ramanuja and the Growth of Sectarianism among the Sri-Vaishnavas', *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24, 1914-1915, pp.102-136; idem, 'The Life and Times of Sri Vedanta Desika', *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24, 1914-1915, pp. 277-312; idem, 'The History of Sri Vaishnavism. From the Death of Sri Vedanta Desika to the Present Day', *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* 7,2 (January), 1917, pp.106-118 and 7,2 (April), pp. 197-209; idem., 'Historical Evolution of Sri Vaishnavism in South India', in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, ed. H. Bhattacharya Vol. 4. Calcutta, 1953-1954, 163-185.

⁵This conclusion is based on the belief that since Manavala Mamuni had commented extensively on Pillai Lokacarya's work, the *Srivacanabhusana* being the most important one, hence, the former precede the latter.

being a later development was an aberration.⁶Conversely, Tenkalais feel that since they were always larger in number, the Vatakalais developed as an opposition and until day consolidating themselves.⁷The implication of these interpretations is that both Vatakalai and Tenkalai have always asserted that they are the true representatives of Srivaisnavism.

Another dimension to this sectarian viewpoint is the pride of place given to the respective *acaryas* of both the sects as having made significant contributions towards Srivaisnavism. For instance, V.Rangachari's essay on Vedanta Desika portrayed the latter in eulogistic terms whose achievements even the Tenkalais acknowledged. K.V. Raman's monograph on Varadarajasvami temple at Kancipuram put forth the valuable contributions made by Tenkalais towards the development of the temple as the center of Srivaisnavism.⁸In this context, Raman referred to Alagiyamanavala Jiyar (1420-1468 A.D.) as the most significant religious leader at Kanci Varadarajasvami temple. In Raman's words:

Several inscriptions datable to the latter half of the fifteenth century and the earlier half of the sixteenth century speak of his (i.e. Alagiyamanavala Mamuni's) services to the temple and his eminent position in the temple affairs at Kanci.⁹

The epigraphical evidences from which Raman drew his conclusions however, pointed towards a different situation. Of approximately sixty-two inscription of Varadarajasvami temple, only three belong to Alagiyamanavala Mamuni who was the *koyil-kelvi*, i.e. the 'overseer' of the temple-undoubtedly an important position. However, his contributions appeared to have been just some gifts of land to the temple.¹⁰ Epigraphical evidence refers to the Tatacaryas as the major functionaries involved in the temple activities.¹¹ The forty-five inscriptions in which they appear prominently were ignored by Raman evidently as he wanted to highlight the Tenkalai leaders' importance. The Vatakalai response to Raman's understanding and highlighting the Tenkalais was hostile and alternatively highlighted the contribution of the Tatacaryas.¹²However, it is difficult to conclude whether Tatacaryas were representing the Vatakalais. For epigraphical evidences, do not

⁶V. Rangachari, 1914-1915, p.103.

⁷This view was expressed by Mr. Tiruvengadathan of Chennai, in course of a discussion.

⁸K.V. Raman, 1975 pp 59-94.

⁹Ibid, p. 76.

¹⁰ 433, 447 and 495 of 1919.

¹¹347, 354, 363, 379, 381, 382, 383, 421, 462, 475, 479, 499, 531, 586, 587, 588, 649, 650, 651, 651, 655, and 663 of 1919.

¹²V Varadachari, Two Great Acharyas. Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamuni. Tiruvellikeni, 1983.

refer to this affiliation. Rather, it appears that the Tatakarya emphasized their independent identity.

The second historiographical viewpoint is a simplistic unilinear view where the twentieth century understanding of the Vatakalais and Tenkalais was extrapolated to the historical development of sectarianism in Srivaisnavism from the twelfth to the seventeenth century A.D. According to K.A.Nilkantha Sastri, in the post-Ramanuja period differences in interpretations arose which were instrumental in creating doctrinal differences under Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamunigal.¹³N. Jagadeesan takes the antecedents of the schism further back to Nathamuni.¹⁴According to him, after Nathamuni, schismatic tendencies developed amongst the immediate disciples of Yamuna and then Ramanuja. The philosophies of Pillai Lokacarya and Vedanta Desika, which evolved consequently, were stabilized by Manavala Mamuni and Brahmatantra Svatantra Jiyar (1545 A.D.-1595 A.D.) respectively. Further he says: 'When the schism weakened the Vatakalai developed sub-divisions like the *Munitreyam*, *Ahobilam matha* and *Parakala-matha* and Tenkalai Kandadais, Telugu- Srivaisnavas, the *Soliyar*, the *Sikkiliyar*.'¹⁵However, while referring to the weakening of the schism, Jagadeesan does not explain how and when the process took place, nor has he been able to appreciate the independent developments of some sects (which he has referred to) without any affiliation to the Vatakalai-Tenkalai paradigm. Therefore, both Sastri and Jagadeesan failed to analyze the diachronic history of development of sectarianism.

The present study attempts to understand the concept of schism and its relationship to the community identity from the end of the twelfth century to the seventeenth century A.D. It is stated here that the Srivaisnava commentatorial and theological tradition reflected a notional duality of the Sanskritic and Tamil tradition, which at no point of time aimed to project two distinct communities. However, it is the hagiographical tradition, including the *guruparamparas*, which accepted this duality as the ideological basis of their respective lineages.

It has often been maintained by scholars working on the history of religion in South India that the Srivaisnavas were able to successfully achieve a syntheses of the northern Sanskritic and the Southern Tamil traditions, almost a fusion of the two, especially under Ramanuja.¹⁶However,

¹³K.A.Nilkantha Sastri, 1963. Pp. 82-85.

¹⁴N.Jagadeesan, 1977, Chapter 11, p.182.

¹⁵Ibid, p.182.

¹⁶Even Sankara's *advaita* is an attempt to resolve the duality. Hence, it is resolved by adhering to advaitism, thereby negating the concept of *Saguna Brahman*.

this duality could be discerned even in the hymns of the Alvars that reflected an awareness of these two distinct linguistic traditions. However, this did not prove to be a theological barrier to the Alvars, as they did not attempt to evolve a philosophy for a community construction. Ramanuja's Visistadvaita attempted for the first time to reconcile this duality. The systematization of theology and organization of the community being the major concern, Ramanuja's commentary on the *Brahmasutra* i.e. the *Sribhasya* emphasized "qualified monism" bringing together for the first time the concepts of *karma*, *jnana* and *bhakti*.¹⁷ Reacting against Sankara's monism (*advaita*) and *Nirguna Brahman*, Ramanuja argued that the philosophy of the Veda held that the soul and the world were in a "qualified way" different from the god or *Brahman* and therefore *bhakti* was not a lower form of religion but the true realization of *moksa*. However, the philosophy of Visistadvaitism had several ambiguities, which were open to different interpretations.

By the end of the twelfth century, the emergence of a well-developed Srivaisnava community solved the major concerns of the organization. The theological questions assumed more importance and numerous interpretations evolved. In this context, the philosophy of *ubhaya vedanta* and the development of Manipravalam emerged as another attempt at reconciliation. Therefore, the philosophy of Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamunigal reflected the concerns of the theological issues centering on the ubhaya-vedantic framework. Vedanta Desika's *Rahasyatrayasaram*, Pillai Lokacarya's *Srivacanabhusanam* and Manavala Mamunigal's *Tattvatraya* presented a comprehensive theological treatise which evolved certain concepts for the community: the nature of god and soul, the nature of *bhakti* and the life pattern of *prapanna*, the status of Sri and other minor issues. These conceptual issues as discussed by these *acaryas* emerged as the exegetical framework for the Vatakalai and Tenkalai sects in the post-seventeenth century period. In this section only, only some issues will be taken up as they were of ideological relevance for the community. An analysis of other issues that became the cause of disagreement generating schismatic tendencies is beyond the scope of this research.

Both the sects appropriated the philosophies of both Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamuni, but interpreted them in their own way that generated contradictions and exegetical polarities. The first issue that was interpreted and discussed was the nature of god and soul. According to Vatakalais god is transcendental and coexists with the soul, which was atomic in size and finite. It followed therefore that god's grace, which was essential to attain salvation (*mukti*) was only possible through the efforts of the soul. Hence, divine grace was *sahetukakrpa*, and the

¹⁷John Carman, 1981, pp. 41-43

effort made by the soul was similar to *markata-nyaya*, i.e. monkey rule, where the calf of the monkey clutched the mother with its own efforts. According to the Tenkalai philosophy, god's grace was free-flowing i.e. *nirhetukakrpa* and he was transcendental as well immanent within the sentient and non-sentient objects of the world. Hence, the soul did not need to make any effort like the kitten who was carried by the cat in its mouth; hence *marjala nyaya*.¹⁸ Interestingly the monkey-cat simile does not figure in the works of either of the two *acaryas*.

To the Vatakalais, *bhakti* and *prapatti* were two different goals. Status by birth, knowledge and capability were pre-requisites for *bhakti Prapatti* did not require any qualifications and could be attained by any ordinary human being. It followed that *bhakti yoga* was the main *sadhana* and *prapatti* was just an *anga* (i.e. an auxiliary). According to the Tenkalais, since *bhakti* required individual effort, it was inferior to *prapatti*, which was effortless and depended on total surrender to god. Hence, a devotee seeking salvation and refuge in god should first have the desire to accept god's protection with total faith in him.¹⁹ Therefore, the Vatakalais felt that a devotee should follow either *bhakti* or *prapatti* as an *upaya* with the *angas* and for achieving both human effort was essential. The issue of the life pattern of *prapanna* was related to the notion of *kainkarya* (or service to the god). According to the Vatakalais, *kainkarya* was to be performed according to the *sastric* rules. Steeped in his own world of deeds (i.e. *karma*), man committed many sins. Hence, god's redemption and compassion was needed for the peace of the soul. Further sin was to be avoided as it would incur nullify all efforts and incur god's displeasure. To obtain forgiveness *prapanna* (i.e. the devotee) should follow certain *prayascitta* (atonement) rules. The Tenkalais did not give importance to the *sastric* injunctions for performing the *kainkarya*. In fact, *prasyascitta* was not required at all and it was assumed that god would forgive and protect his devotee from all his sins, even those committed after *prapatti* and *kainkarya*.

Both the sects agreed on the importance of Sri as Visnu's consort who acted as a mediator between the soul and God. She also advised the soul to seek refuge in him instead of withdrawing

¹⁸According to Vedanta Desika: 'The Lord who is unconditional *sesi* of all, unconditionally autonomous and true-willed, withholds this will to punish from the first moment the words of surrender are uttered. He jealously devours the heaps of sins of this devotee without showing any strain. He desires to favour his followers, allow them to expiate their deliberate sins through remorse' *Rahasyatrayasara* of Vedanta Desika, pp 571-2; 'Like a man who looks but doesnot see the faults of his wife and sons, the faults (of the Lord's devotee) donot even enter this mind...like a man who delights in the dirt on the body of his beloved, he takes their sins as delight,' *Tattvatraya of Pillai Lokacarya with Manavala Mamuni's commentary*, pp.178-251.

¹⁹For the one fruit - attainment of the Lord he has taught 1) the path of *bhakti* which is difficult because ... it is accompanied by means of the *angas* of *parma*, jnana etc, ever many births and 2) the path of *prapatti*, which is easy because, it is performed once and for all, upon ceasing all one's own activity.... Thus, the grace of the Lord must be the *upaya* and not *bhakti* or *prapatti*, *Mumuksupati of Pillai Lokacaraya*.

due to the fear of punishment and execution. According to Vatakalais, the status of Sri was equal to that of God. She acted as *upaya* and *upeya*. The devotees could rely on her totally, and she would take care of their emancipation. However, according to the Tenkalais, Sri was finite *jiva* and did not have such powers. She was not equal to god, but was rather subservient to him. Her role as a mediatrix was no doubt important, but was not *upaya* or *upeya*.²⁰ However, it should be remembered that neither Vedanta Desika nor Manavala Mamuni had ever consciously attempted to evolve a distinct community, probably due to their different religious attitudes; they were identified with the Sanskrit school of thought and Tamil school of thought respectively. Nor did the other theological and commentarial works that took inspiration from them, reflected a distinct Vatakalai or a Tenkalai status. Therefore, the duality was only notionally evident in Srivaisnava exegesis.

It were the hagiographic texts including the *guruparamamparas* which evolved their *acaryic* lineage on the basis of the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions in order to project a strong community identity whose articulation became important in the post-Ramanuja period when competition for control over resources intensified. However, it should be noted that the projection of theological precepts was not the concern of these hagiographical writings. At the time of their composition, the notional duality as well as the association of certain religious leaders with this duality was clearly developed. Hence, it became easier for these texts to use their names, especially that of Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamuni to fabricate or construct an *acaryic* lineage that would give legitimacy to the respective communities.

However, while projecting the importance of *guru* for the dissemination of the philosophies, both the Vatakalai and Tenkalai texts referred to Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamunigal as *ubhaya-vedantin* i.e. one who is an expert on both the Vedas (Sanskrit as well as Tamil). In fact, the qualities attributed to Ramanuja came to be replicated in the personalities of these two *acaryas*. Today, the Tenkalais consider *Arayirappati Guruparamparaprabhavam* of Pinbalagiya Jiyar, *Panniyirappati* and *Muayirappati* (authors not known) as their sectarian *guruparamamparas*. The Vatakalais consider *Vatakalai Muayirappati* as their hagiographical text. Significantly, both sets of texts were composed between the thirteenth and the seventeenth century and projected a linear succession from Ramanuja onwards, which is otherwise very difficult to trace.

²⁰Even though he is omniscient and all powerful, by the special (function of) mediation, which he cannot refuse, just as in the case of palace attendants (favoured by the queen), he will forgive all the sins which obstruct gaining access to their, and will remain accessible as if ignorant of those sins', *Rahasyatrayasaram*. 11, pp. 375-6. According to *Mumuksupati* 119, 'While the Lord is the one who grants the desired result and removes (the soul's) *anista*... without her intercession which makes it so that he protects without regarding (the soul's) sins, the Lord will not save.'

However, neither of the texts reflected such a well integrated, all-inclusive and a continuous lineage. The account of Peryavaccanpillai, the Tenkalai *acarya* occurred only in the *Panniyirappati*. Manavala Mamuni's biography is the theme of a separate hagiographical text *Yatindrapravanaprabhavam*. According to this text, Manavala Mamuni appointed eight successors called *astadigga-gajas*, who were attributed with foundation of the Tenkalai *mathas*.²¹ For instance, the *matha parampara* of the Vanamamalai *matha* at Nanguneri, traced its lineage to one of the *astadigga gajas*. Nevertheless, the *mathas* of Melkote and Tirupati traced their lineage to Ramanuja, though they did mention that of one of their *acaryas* became the disciple of Manavala Mamunigal.²²

Similarly, the *Vatakalai Muayirappati* written by the third Brahmatantra Parkala Jiyar (1545-1595 A.D.) of the Parakala *matha* also projected the *matha* lineage. The first *jiyar* was supposed to be the disciple of Vedanta Desika. However, the Ahobila *matha* as well as other Vatakalai *acaryapurusas* like the Tatacaryas did not follow this genealogical pattern. As stated earlier, the Tatacaryas traced their descent from Periya Nambi and later, one of their predecessors was supposed to have become the disciple of Vedanta Desika. The Ahobila *matha* in its *guruparampara* called the *Sat Sampradaya Guruparamaparabrahavam* followed the Tenkalai lineage until Vadakkutiruvidipillai.²³ Similarly, just as the Tenkalai tradition branched off with Pillai Lokacarya as the next in succession after Vadakkutiruvidipillai, the Ahobila *matha* tradition branched off with another disciple of Vadakkutiruvidipillai named Kidambi Rangachari whose successor, Kidambi Srinivasavarya was the founder of the Ahobila *matha* in 1398 A.D. This *acaryic* lineage was observed during the initiation rites of *pancasamskara* and the *Bhagavad Visayaparampara*, in which the rendition of the *Sribhasya* formed a major component. Therefore, the various sectarian affiliations between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries had evolved their individual *acaryic* lineages, thereby reflecting an independent assertion of the respective identities.²⁴ In these apostolic lines of succession, two points were fixed. One, that of Ramanuja. Two, that of Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamunigal. Thus, the ideological context of a well

²¹*Astadiggagajas* also figured in the royal court of Vijayanagar rulers. Probably the borrowing from the court language was with the purpose of imparting legitimacy to the line of succession after Manavala Mamunigal. Further, it also implied the assertion of power.

²²See, for details on the *guruparamparas*, the *Appendix, Section (b)*.

²³*Sat Sampradaya Guruparamaparabrahavam*, p.96.

²⁴For instance, *Vadakalai Muayirappati* does not mention the eight disciples of Nathamuni. However, the *Guruparamparasaram* that forms the first chapter of the *Rahasyatrayasaram* mentions the eight disciples. Another text *Panniyirappati* gives a detailed lineage of Nammalvar and attributes a *ksatriya* status to him. Other texts of the same affiliation do not give such details.

consolidated Vatakalai and Tenkalai lineage in the post-seventeenth century was already laid before this period.

The 'schism' as understood in the colonial period by the historians involved a series of disputes between the Vatakalais and Tenkalais over the temple administration. This feature was also characteristic of the pre-colonial period. Although direct evidence is not available, it can be inferred from the epigraphical as well as textual sources that tensions between various sects and religious leaders existed. The case of Uttamanambis, Sriranganarayana Jiyar and Kandadais at Srirangam has already been discussed. Besides, the presence of several prominent leaders in a temple center would hardly encourage peaceful co-existence. However, over a period, the alignments across Sanskritic and Tamil ones were gradually crystallizing into strong sub-sects. The coming of the British and their interactions with the religious institutions led to the reworking of the entire power relations. In the early years of the colonial rule, the British government decided the temple disputes. Perhaps, then the need arose to establish distinct sectarian identities cutting across the regional frontiers based on common interests. Therefore, the Sanskritic affiliations came to be identified as the Vatakalai and the Tamil ones as the Tenkalai.

According to Arjun Appadorai, in the early part of the colonial rule there was a 'shift from a Hindu political context to a British mercantile environment.'²⁵The British attitude towards the temple was pragmatic, as the latter were very wealthy. Therefore, the temples were economically advantageous to the new rulers. However, the British did not directly deal with any religious group or leader. Rather, they depended on the 'natives' as intermediaries. These natives were usually merchants who themselves played a crucial role in the temple politics.²⁶They, through politics and manipulations assumed the role of 'beneficiaries of active transactional relationship between the king and the deity', a role previously performed by the sectarian leaders in the Vijayanagar period. As Appadorai puts it:

Taken together, these departures from the previous indigenous structure of relationships created tensions and dialectical pressures that altered temple politics in crucial respects ... This 'structural' rise of indigenous merchant-broker types in temple affairs in the eighteenth century Madras was short-lived and starting in the latter part of the eighteenth century, the burgeoning bureaucratic center of English rule placed increasing constraints on these men and their successors in temple control.²⁷

²⁵Arjun Appadorai, 1983, 83

²⁶Ibid, p. 84

²⁷Ibid, p.230.

Today, the Vatakalai-Tenkalai notion of Srivaisnavism has altered the entire identity pattern of the community. The daily practices of both the sub-sects have too much specificity that has the rational for the assertion of Vatakalai-Tenkalai identity. For instance, the external sect marks (like the *namam*) and other rituals of the respective sects reiterate the differences that strengthen the sectarian affiliations for the Srivaisnava psyche. However, a problem arises when direct connections are made with the historical situations. For instance, it is assumed that these sub-sects had existed right from the post-Ramanuja period. Second, the assumption that Tenkalais attached secondary importance to caste and Vatakalai stressed on caste injunctions is not correct. The entire history of Srivaisnavism right from Ramanuja's time indicates the domination of the brahmanical hierarchy, where *varnasramadharm*a was always upheld and readjustments and realignments were made within this framework. Third, Kancipuram as the center of Sanskrit school (hence Vatakalai) and Srirangam as the center of Tamil school (hence Tenkalai) is historically over emphasized. Both Kanci and Srirangam emerged as major centers of Srivaisnavism in the post-Ramanuja period. The traditional presence of the Kandadais at Srirangam, which was the southern center and their subsequent attachment to the Tamil lineage, made Srirangam the center of the Prabandhic School. Similarly, the Tatacaryas migrated to Kanci in the fifteenth century from the north, and through their influence imparted a northern character to the temple. However, the textual references themselves do not clearly account for such associations. Both Vedanta Desika and Manavala Mamuni are shown to be influential in both the centers in the biographical narratives of the hagiographies. Therefore, it becomes narrow to attribute the Prabandhic /Tamil and Vedic/Sanskrit affiliations to Srirangam and Kanci. Rather the characterization of Kanci as the northern center and Srirangam as the Southern center seems more appropriate.

The delineation of the Srivaisnavas in the textual tradition as a homogenous community by its predominantly brahmanical leadership involved the structuring of a cohesive and distinct identity around Visnu as the supreme universal god, with a subordinate position of Sri as the divine consort whose energy (i.e. Sakti) emanated from the god (i.e. Saktiman). The notion of a universal divine couple emerged as the symbol of integration and imparted a stable character to the community. Such a normative projection of homogeneity often deliberately camouflaged the diversity of affiliations and multiplicity of identities that existed. The non-brahmanical elements, possessing distinct identities in the form of caste, occupational groups and regional origins, were not highlighted, although they were an integral part of the community. However, the discourse on a single

universal community structure was never final. The consolidation of religious network implied the development of a broad social base. This required continuous interaction and assimilation of the autochthonous traditions, majority of which were centred on the cult of local goddesses. Although the community hierarchy accommodated all these traditions reflecting the supremacy of the Srivaisnava community, there were tensions in such a structured incorporation. The local cultic identities never were subsumed. Rather, the Srivaisnava identity was added on to them.²⁸ These developments had important ramifications for the notion of a 'community'. Multiple regional identities remained distinct and were acknowledged within the larger uniform Srivaisnava framework.

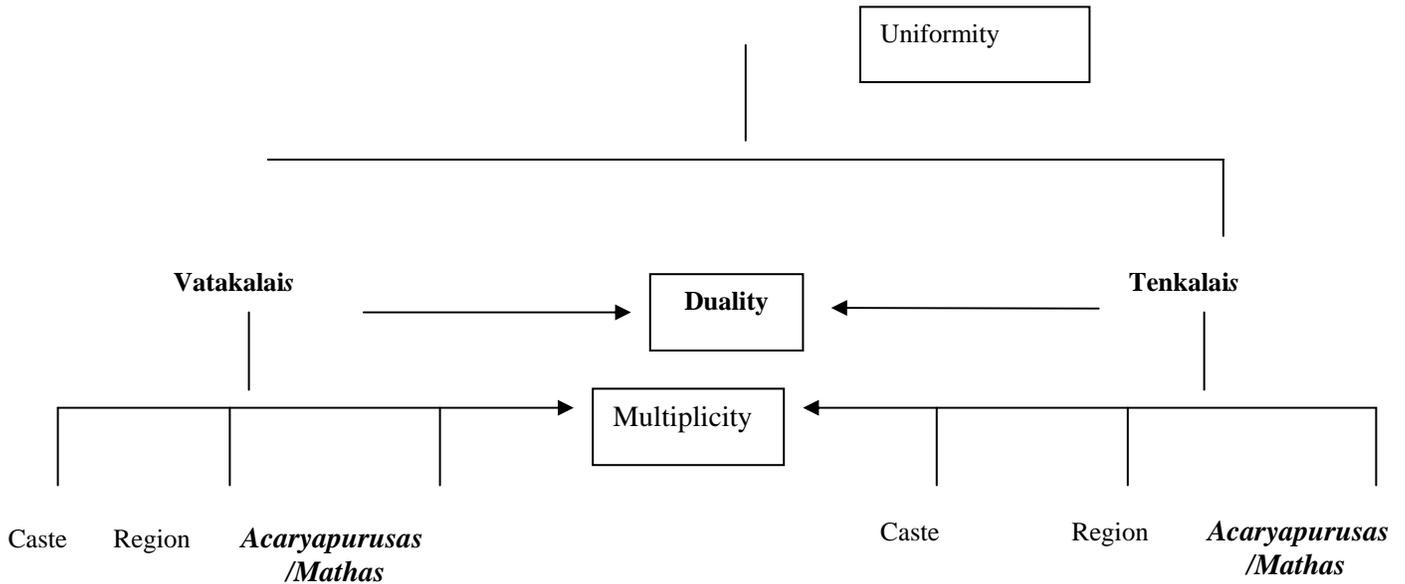
It is difficult to delineate the stages through which multiple affiliations developed. Neither the hagiographical nor the *guruparampara* texts of the post-Ramanuja period clearly reflect upon these developments. By tracing the organizational aspects of the community and the processes through which the multiple affiliations and identities had developed in the Srivaisnava community, an attempt is made here to show that the Srivaisnava community at no point of time could sustain its claim to uniformity and homogeneity. This chapter also attempts to understand the dual identities of the community as the Vatakalai and Tenkalai and locate them in the context of the evolving community consciousness.²⁹

Therefore, the notions of uniformity, multiplicity, and duality have been applied in this study to understand the Srivaisnava identities and their structures. Uniformity implied belonging to one single Srivaisnava community. This was the first important identity of the Srivaisnava believer. The concept of uniformity revolved around the personality of Ramanuja. Various Srivaisnava groups often had distinct traditions but represented uniformity in their hagiographies by tracing their respective descent to Ramanuja. The concept of multiplicity was represented at two levels: the primordial level

²⁸Although direct inscriptional evidence on regional affiliations is not available, the ethnographic details from several field researches and gazetteers reflect the persistence of the village and regional affiliations despite being appropriated to the canonical sects.

²⁹The dualism as represented in the Sanskrit and Tamil tradition became the ideological context for the northern (Sanskritic) and southern (Tamil) divisions, which crystallized later into Vatakalai and Tenkalai sects respectively. Depending on their respective ideology, the *matha* and the *acaryapurusas* came to be regrouped under this dual division.

of caste and regional affiliations and the level of institutions of the temples, individual Srivaisnava leaders and *mathas*, with which the former was associated. The process of community construction evolved certain broad paradigms around which multiple identities coalesced. These paradigms expressed themselves through the dualities into the Sanskritic school and the Prabandhic school, which finally crystallized into the overarching dual affiliations of the Vatakalai (Sanskritic) and Tenkalai (Tamil). Hence, the Srivaisnava identity can be understood as follows: an individual was a Srivaisnava, and belonged to a particular caste and region. These were associated with particular temples, leaders and *mathas*, each of which was a Vatakalai or a Tenkalai .



Uniformity emerged as a dominant theme in the construction of the Srivaisnava identity, Uniformity implied a strong, well-consolidated community wielding a universalistic influence which transcended narrow local boundaries. The projection of this uniformity became a major preoccupation of the various sub-traditions each of which claimed to represent the community. It is in the personality of Ramanuja as the *acarya* of the community that this concept of uniformity was represented. The concept of uniformity can be understood at two levels. One, at the level of actual efforts made by Ramanuja to organize the community. This was indirectly corroborated by epigraphical evidence. For example in the pre-Ramanuja period, the Srivaisnavas were mentioned in the early Cola temples as independent religious groups. Their protection was invoked in a formulaic or stylistic statement at the end of the inscriptions.³⁰ However, from the mid-eleventh century A.D., the inscriptions testify to the increasing dominance of the Srivaisnavas in the temple administration and the increasing network of interaction among the Srivaisnava temple centers. Therefore, by the mid-eleventh century A.D., the Srivaisnavas had emerged as a well consolidated supra local group due to the supposed innovations introduced by Ramanuja (1017-1137 A.D) and others theological and institutional reforms. Two, at the level of Ramanuja's contribution to the development of a uniform Srivaisnava community as reflected in the hagiographical texts. The two main themes that emerge in this context are his early life and his role as the acaryic head of the community, which are discussed below

(i) The Early Life of Ramanuja

According to the Srivaisnava tradition, the appointment of Ramanuja as the *acaryic* head of the community was divinely pre-ordained. The hagiographical texts inform us that he was not born a Srivaisnava. Ramanuja belonged to the *Vadama* sub-caste of *brahmanas* -the followers of the *smarta* tradition. Ramanuja's *guru* was Yadavaprakasa – a famous *Advaitin*.³¹ Ramanuja broke away from his *guru* when he criticized his *guru's*

³⁰ *Srivaisnava Raksai* i.e. “the protection of Srivaisnavas”

³¹ The *smarta brahmanas* usually follow the *Advaitic* tradition of Sankara. They worship five deities – Visnu, Siva, Parvati, Ganesa and Surya. However, the *smartas* are not initiated into either of these religious traditions and therefore, their leanings are not sectarian *vis-a-vis* these religious traditions. Similarly,

interpretation of the *Upanisads*.³²The texts further inform us that his independent thinking and the fact that his *acaryic* position was already pre-ordained attracted Yamuna's attention, who made repeated attempts to meet Ramanuja but failed. Finally, it was at Yamuna's funeral that Ramanuja got the opportunity to know the three last wishes of the *acarya* (i.e. Yamuna) and promised to fulfil them. The three wishes of Yamuna were *viz*, the veneration of Vyasa; the propagation of the *Tiruvaymoli* (i.e. the Tamil tradition) and the composition of a commentary on the *Vedantasutra* of Vyasa (i.e. the Sanskritic tradition). Therefore, the promise made by Ramanuja implied the synthesis of all the three aspects, which became the basis of the consolidation of Srivaisnavism into one community. Particularly significant in this context were the last two wishes. They became the basis of the subsequent *ubhaya-vedantic* tradition. Ramanuja's promise to fulfill Yamuna's wishes established an element of continuity between the two *acaryas* (which is otherwise historically missing) and the position of Ramanuja as the successive *acarya* of the community.

Since a direct *guru-sisya* relationship was missing between Yamuna and Ramanuja, the tradition assigned five spiritual preceptors to Ramanuja who were the direct disciples of Yamuna and could be said to represent him. This idea emerged clearly in hagiographies, when Periya Nambi, one of the *gurus* while initiating Ramanuja stated:

Of old, Sri Ramacandra, being prevented by his promise to his father from reigning in person in Ayodhya, left with Bharata his sandals as his representatives and proceeded to the forest Similarly, my master, being prevented from initiating you himself has placed his sacred feet on my head and deputed me the responsibility. So it is he from you (sic) have received your initiation and not from me.³³

The five preceptors individually imparted the five different tenets of Srivaisnavism to Ramanuja. Tirukottiyur Nambi (i.e. Ghoshtipurna) imparted the *dvaya mantra* as well as the secret interpretations of *Tirumantaram*. Tirumalai Andan (i.e. Maladhar) imparted the

Ramanuja's family despite being the *smartas* had Vaisnava leanings as their family ties with Periya Nambi shows.

³²There are several incidents in the hagiographical texts on the intellectual incompatibility between Ramanuja and Yadavaprakasa. In fact, the rivalry was so intense that Yadavaprakasa conspired to take Ramanuja's life. Consequently, Ramanuja was saved none other than Visnu.

³³*Arayirappati Guruparamparabhavam*, pp.150-154.

text of *Tiruvaymoli* and the traditional commentaries on it. Tiruvaranga Perumal (i.e. Ranga) disseminated the *stotras* and other customary rituals, while Tirumalai Nambi (i.e. Sri Saila Purna) taught the *Ramayana* to Ramanuja at Tirupati. Finally, Periya Nambi (i.e. Mahapurna) performed his *pancasamskara* and initiated him formally into Srivaisnavism.³⁴ Interestingly, Tirukacci Nambi (i.e. Kancipurna) is not included in this list though he exercised tremendous influence on Ramanuja.

This account of Ramanuja's five preceptors had connotations for the community. First, it established the concept of uniformity in Ramanuja's profile, where all the five elements merged as one. Thereby, it followed that Ramanuja was the first to organize the community by bringing the scattered ideas together into one organization and philosophy. Second, the concept of more than one *guru* (Ramanuja officially had five) was a significant deviation from the long established *Oran* tradition, i.e. single preceptor-disciple *parampara*.³⁵ This continued in the post-Ramanuja period, when the Srivaisnava leaders as well as the devotees had more than one *guru*. This multiplicity of *gurus* became the basis of multiple identities within the community. Third, the *guru* was always a *brahmana*.

(ii) Ramanuja as the Acarya of the community

Ramanuja is supposed to have undertaken certain measures for the consolidation and spread of the Visistadvaitic faith. Noteworthy amongst them are his temple reforms and the establishment of a strong organization to carry on the tradition after him. Ramanuja is credited with the institutional organization of the community through a series of temple reforms collectively known as the *Code of Udaiyavar*.³⁶ Introduced at

³⁴*Yatiraja Vaibhava* differs in this context. The text designates Periya Nambi (i.e. Mahapurna) as the only *guru* of Ramanuja: 'At that place, he (Mahapurna) gave to Ramanujacarya the marks with conch and discus, the sectarian mark, the method of worship, the *mantras* together with their meaning, the great *mantra* and also other *mantras*. He (Mahapurna) who was (then) much pleased taught him (Ramanuja) the three thousand hymns (of the *alvars*) and the meaning of *sutras* of Vyasa (*Brahmasutra*). Ramanuja too worshipped the preceptor and his wife by leading a desirable (worthy) way of life. *Yatiraja Vaibhava* of Andhra Purna, *slokas* 44-47.

³⁵The *Oran* tradition comprised of Visnu as the *paramacarya* who passed on his teachings to Sri From Sri, it was disseminated to Visvakasena, then to Nammalvar, to Nathamuni and finally to Yamuna who had five disciples.

³⁶The *Koil Olugu*, pp. 41-112

Srirangam, this code was gradually made mandatory in other temple centers. This had three important implications. First, the Ranganathasvami temple at Srirangam being the base of Ramanuja emerged as the institutional focus of the community.³⁷ Second, the pattern of worship and the temple organization at Srirangam was replicated in other Vaisnava centers, thereby integrating the otherwise dispersed groups into one community organization, with Ramanuja as its spiritual head and the Ranganathasvami temple as its institutional head. Third, the *Code of Udaiyavar* broadened the social base of the community by encouraging non-brahmanical participation in the temple affairs.³⁸ The hagiographical narratives associate this with the catholicity of Ramanuja. The account of Ramanuja publicly proclaiming the previously exclusive *dvaya mantra* from the temple tower at Tirukkottiyur was a favourite theme amongst the hagiographers to project Ramanuja's universalistic approach. Consequently, Ramanuja is said to have had a large following from all sections of the society. For example, Ramanuja's followers comprised of seven hundred *sanyasins*, twelve thousand and three *ekangis* and three hundred *korramai* (i.e. women followers).³⁹

Another factor, which led to the dissemination of the faith, were the peregrinations, of Ramanuja. His tours to various centers within and outside South India established the supremacy of the Visistadvaita faith, and enlarged the limits of the community beyond the geographical boundaries delineated by the Alvars. This endowed the community with a pan-Indian status. During the course of his tours, he is supposed to have impressed upon the people of other faiths to convert to Srivaisnavism voluntarily. The examples of the Hoysala King Visnuvardhana (i.e. the twelfth century A.D.) converting from Jainism and the Muslim princess from Delhi converting from Islam are well known.⁴⁰ Ramanuja

³⁷According to the Srivaisnava tradition, as the *acarya* of the community, Ramanuja at Srirangam gave discourses and performed priestly functions. However, he was not an ordinary priest (*arcaka*). The tradition clearly states that Lord Ranganatha assigned him the control and management of the temple and gave him the title *Udaiyavar*, which meant the possessor or the owner.

³⁸The reforms at Narayanasvami temple at Melkote and Ranganathasvami temple at Srirangam are well known for including as well as increasing the non-brahmanical participation in the community. For further discussions on the non-*brahmanas*, refer to the section on *Multiplicity* of this chapter.

³⁹The numbers of the disciples vary, in various hagiographical texts. However, this variation is minor and is of no consequence.

⁴⁰Hagiographies inform that the *utsavamurti* of the deity at Melkote was with a Muslim princess of the north, who had already started considering the idol as her husband. So strong was her devotion that

achieved further homogenization and uniformity through the introduction of the deification of the Alvars and the introduction of the *adhyayanotsava* festival both of which emerged as important elements in the Srivaisnava community identity.⁴¹

The structuring of the line of descent into a cohesive organization further established the credibility of Ramanuja as the *acarya* of the community.⁴² A list of special disciples called Srivaisnava *Mudalis* are given in these texts. However, this list is different from the *guru-sisya* lineage, which was the major organizational innovation of Ramanuja. He is said to have appointed a group of “seventy four” to spread the teachings of Srivaisnavism. The hagiographical texts give a list of these seventy-four names, some of which are also repeated in the list of Srivaisnava *Mudalis*. According to the *Yatiraja Vaibhavam* of Andhra Purna (i.e. Vaduga Nambi), the disciple and contemporary of Ramanuja:

The great Ramanujacarya, the chief among the ascetics and *acaryas* made some persons as the heads of the religious seats known as seventy four persons.⁴³ Even among them he made four chief persons for the chair of *Sribhasya* and his spiritual son (Pillan) amongst them, as the foremost chief for both the *Vedanta*.⁴⁴

Interestingly, the early preceptors of the Vatakalai and Tenkalai lineage belonged to this group of seventy-four.⁴⁵ Further, the powerful sectarian families in the Vijayanagar period (for instance the Kandadai family and the Tatacarya group) also traced their descent from one of the seventy-four and referred to themselves as the *Acaryapurusas*.⁴⁶ Since this

when Ramanuja recovered the idol and brought it to Melkote, she came along. Later she was deified as Talukka Nacciyar or Bibi Nacciyar and placed next to the deity.

⁴¹The *adhyayanotsava* festival involves the recitation of the Sanskrit Vedas as well as the Nalayira divya Prabandham in the presence of the god, Alvars and *acaryas*, thereby symbolically involving the entire community.

⁴²See *Yatiraja Vaibhavam*, slokas 107-110 and 113. According to the tradition, after Ramanuja became an ascetic he established his own *matha* at Kancipuram, near Varadarajasvami temple. His first disciples were Mudaliandan (Dasarathi), Kurattalvan (Kuresa) and Nadadur Alvan. The name of Nadadur Alvan amongst the initial disciples of Ramanuja figures only in the Vatakalai list.

⁴³These four main persons were Kurattalvan, Nadadur Alvan, Kidambi Accan and Mudaliyandan. All belonged to the Vatakalai lineage.

⁴⁴*Yatiraja Vaibhava*, sloka 108.

⁴⁵It is not possible to give the names of all the seventy-four here. The hagiographical texts provide the list, the contents of which vary from text to text.

⁴⁶Although in the inscriptions, the term *acaryapurusa* is used in a generic sense as a recipient of some honours in the temples along with other Srivaisnava groups.

group of seventy-four was personally chosen by Ramanuja, a claim to their lineage would bestow legitimacy on these sectarian leaders.

According to the Srivaisnavas, these seventy-four were householders, who performed the *pancasamskara* for their respective disciples. Hence, the claim to being their successors empowered the sectarian leaders i.e. the *acaryapurusas* to conduct an initiation that was a privilege. For the *matha* head, being a *sanyasin*, i.e. an ascetic renouncer could not touch the fire, as per Dharmasastric laws.⁴⁷ Interestingly, at Tirukkovalur, after the forty-fifth *jiyar*, the subsequent heads became householders and performed *pancasamskaras*.⁴⁸ The importance of the seventy-four therefore, appears to be tremendous for the Srivaisnava community, and they are referred to as the *simhasanapatis*, an honorific title which however, does not find any mention in the hagiographical and *guruparamapara* texts.⁴⁹

Therefore, the idea of uniformity emphasizing on adherence to one single community (tracing its descent from Ramanuja) was important to Srivaisnava identity despite the presence of multiple traditions within the community. In fact, the multiplicity sought its legitimacy from uniformity. That is, the later Srivaisnavas asserted themselves based on their being the direct descendants of Ramanuja, who personified uniformity. In the post-Ramanuja period, i.e. from the thirteenth century onwards every temple had an Udaiyavar Emperumanar Koil. The deification of Ramanuja indicates that he had emerged as the focus of the community. The hagiographical sources inform us that Ramanuja's deification began during his lifetime. The story goes that the people at Sriperumbudur

⁴⁷In the late nineteenth century, a court case was filed by an *acaryapurusa* against the head of a *matha* at Kanci, for the latter had appropriated the rights of initiation and was performing the *pancasamskara*.

⁴⁸This information was made available to me personally by the present *jiyar* of the *matha* at Tirukkovalur.

⁴⁹Probably, this title of *simhasanapati* was used to enhance the prestige of the institution of the *acaryapurusa*s. Most of the hagiographies composed after the thirteenth century referred to the seventy-four in detail. Probably, such focus emerged to ascribe an impressive network of organisation to either Ramanuja or to one of his successor. In the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, one comes across the seventy-two; i.e. *bahattara-niyoga* in the temples of the Telugu country. According to a legend, when Kumara Kampana, the Vijayanagar chief conquered the southern regions, he or one of the chief *nayakas* established the institution of the seventy-two *nayakas*. This would perhaps be the political proto-type of the seventy-four religious heads in Srivaisnavism. According to N. Jagadeesan, Ramanuja was probably inspired in this move by the examples of the Jainas who had seventy-two religious *samasthanas*. However, Jagadeesan does not provide the reference. According to him, the Saiva canon, which speaks of the sixty-three *nayanars* is a precedent of the sixty-three Jaina *acaryas*. See N. Jagadeesa, 1977, P.47.

requested Ramanuja to consecrate his own *vigraha*. Ramanuja obliged and installed his own image. According to the *Ramanujadivyaśuricaitam*, the god of Srirangam ordered the Srivaisnavas to perform the *Satakalasa Abhisekham* of Ramanuja and take his image in a palanquin around the temple. Thereafter, the god blessed him as the *ubhaya-vibhutinatha*, i.e. the Lord of both Vaikuntha and Srirangam. This practice is followed until day and is a part of festival celebrations. The construction of *Ramanujakutam*, *Ramanuja Tiruvidi*, *udaiyavar Kalvay Pattalai* was outward visible marks of Ramanuja's influence. The epigraphical invocations of the post-thirteenth century A.D. testified that Ramanuja also imparted homogeneity to the community and hence was the most exalted/venerated *acarya*

¹ Here "other" implies other religious communities and sects.

² Eric Hobsbawm, 19, p.