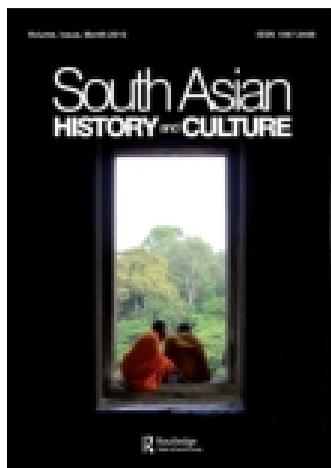


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## Public philology: text criticism and the sectarianization of Hinduism in early modern south India

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By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, south India had witnessed a widespread sectarianization of its religious landscape. We observe a growing polarization among religious institutions, the social and economic networks they mediated, and religious discourse across genres, whether Sanskrit or vernacular, whether devotional poetry or systematic theology. The present article examines the textual culture that emerged from the intersectarian discourse of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Tamil country. In particular, I focus on a definitive but overlooked dimension of this discourse that I refer to as ‘public philology’: text criticism that serves as public theology. During the early modern centuries, sectarian theologians across community boundaries increasingly challenged their rivals specifically on philological grounds, combing the scriptures of their rivals for textual corruptions and unstable recensions. Focusing on one particular case of public philology in practice – the debate concerning the scriptural justification for bearing the sectarian *tilaka* on the forehead – I argue that the philological ventures of these early modern theologians served simultaneously as *public theology*. This trans-sectarian public theology, far from being a strictly academic enterprise, served to solidify the boundaries between sectarian communities. By adjudicating public standards for orthodox religious belonging, ‘public philologists’ left a lasting impression on the religious landscape of south India up to the present day.

**Keywords:** philology; Hinduism; sectarianism; Sanskrit; Śaivism

In 1533, in the course of renewing his endowments to the major religious sites of south India, Acyutadevarāya of Vijayanagara set forth an explicit proclamation that imperial grants to two of Kanchipuram’s most important temple complexes ought to be equalized. Nevertheless, his vassal, Sāḷuva Nāyaka, taking advantage of his administrative control over temple donations in the region, reapportioned a greater percentage of the endowment towards the temple of his choice. When this misappropriation of funds was brought to light, Acyutadevarāya attempted to rectify the situation by inscribing his decree in stone on the temple walls as a visible reminder to all temple officiants and onlookers.<sup>1</sup> What, one might wonder, was the cause of this deep-seated rivalry that prompted the emperor of Vijayanagar to intervene directly on multiple occasions? The conflict, as it turns out, stemmed directly from the polarized sectarian affiliations of the temples in question: dedicated to Varadarāja, in one case, and Ekāmranātha, in the other, the two were regional strongholds of Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva devotionalism, respectively, neighbours and chief rivals in one of south India’s most active and diverse temple towns.

The present article aims to elucidate the centrality of Hindu sectarianism to textual culture and society in early modern south India, as well its discursive parameters – that is, the rules and strategies of sectarian debate. In speaking of ‘Hindu sectarianism’, I mean to suggest that

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the distinct religious traditions we describe collectively as Hinduism operated, during the early modern centuries, with a high degree of mutual independence. This independence can be seen both in the social institutions that govern their practice as well as the religious identities inculcated through participation in these traditions. To be a Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava in early modern south India, to be a Mādhva, Smārta or Śrī Vaiṣṇava, or a member of any other sectarian lineage, constituted the core of one's religious identity with a nuance that inclusivist categories such as *āstika* or *vaidika* failed to capture. And yet, scholarship to date has barely scratched the surface of the historical conditions or theological debates that gave rise to the widespread sectarianization of the Hindu religious landscape, a process that accelerated rapidly during the centuries prior to British colonialism.

In the south Indian context, sectarianization bears a direct relationship to the distinctively southern roles of religious institutions in the politics and economics of the region during the early modern period. During Cōḷa rule some centuries earlier, the Tamil South had already adapted to an economic structure in which the 'politicized temple', as described by Burton Stein,<sup>2</sup> served as a primary node of economic distribution and a focal point for political authority. This socio-economic dynamic attained a new prominence under Vijayanagar and Nāyaka rule, as temples developed into mega-temples and monastic institutions acquired a larger share of both the economic and symbolic capital circulated by temple complexes. Arjun Appadurai<sup>3</sup>, for instance, has documented the pivotal role of Śrī Vaiṣṇava sectarianism in bridging the gap between competing centres of political authority: namely temple complexes and the domains of regional kings. For Appadurai, then, charismatic religious leaders were not merely ecclesiastical figureheads but also political mediators, negotiating the shape of power relations well beyond the walls of the monastery. In short, these traces of competition for material resources and royal sanction indicate a deeper and more pervasive fault line underlying both the social and intellectual dynamics of early modern south India.

When placed in historical context, then, sectarianism cannot be described exclusively as a function of identity, divorced from the socio-religious infrastructure of the subcontinent, which underwent dramatic transformations during the early modern centuries. In south India, in fact, sectarian identity was mediated precisely through the growth of new institutional networks, namely sectarian monasteries, which bridged the gap between emerging publics and regional centres of economic circulation. In the Tamil country, monastic lineages achieved an unprecedented social centrality during the early modern centuries. Monasteries had become omnipresent in the Tamil country by the seventeenth century, whether 'vernacular' traditions such as the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta or multi-regional Sanskritic traditions, such as the Mādhvas and Śrīvaiṣṇavas, as lineages vied to establish branch outposts in Kanchipuram, Kumbakonam and other Tamil temple towns, thus forging broader sectarian networks that spanned the southern half of the subcontinent. Once established, such monasteries, moreover, did not limit their purview to ostensibly 'religious' affairs. In the case of the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta, for instance, by the late nineteenth century, the Tiruvavatuturai Ādhīnam directly owned and maintained 25,000 acres of land and managed the cultivation of thousands of additional acres of land and other endowments under the control of various local temples. In 1841, Tarumapuram controlled property amounting to nearly half of the temple lands in Tanjore district. By at least the early eighteenth century, the Tamil Śaiva *maṭams* also provided centralized repositories of literary manuscripts available for consultation, as testified by European missionaries, who appear to have gained access to these collections.<sup>4</sup>

Succinctly, the institutional foundations of sectarianism in south India extended down to the central nodes of economic circulation, agricultural production and cultural capital. It

was as cultural capital, however, that sectarianization left the most lasting impact on the religiosity of south Indian Hinduism; even as precolonial infrastructure was replaced by Anglicized models of finance and agriculture, the sectarian identities engendered through these early modern social dynamics remain definitive of what it means to be a Hindu, Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava, across much of south India today. It is the mediation, then, between sectarian institutions and sectarian identities that concerns us in the present context: just how, in other words, the emergence of monasteries and temple complexes as the central nodes of circulation led to the broad-based embodiment of new religious identities. To understand how this mediation takes place requires a turn to the strategies of the sectarianizing discourse produced by south India theologians, and the large-scale, polemical ambitions these discourses often entailed.

In fact, the distinctive textual strategies of sectarian polemic, which evolved in conjunction with the institutional rise of Hindu sectarianism, have gone entirely unnoticed in contemporary academic literature on south Indian theology. Rather, research on the theology of the period has drawn attention almost exclusively to scholastic debates about ontology. To be sure, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sectarian lineages often differentiated themselves around a common focal point – the interpretation and exegesis of the Brahmasūtras – leading sectarian lineages to nominally demarcate their identity on the basis of ontological doctrine, whether ‘dualist’, ‘non-dualist’ or some variation thereof. Equally impressive techniques of exegesis were marshalled to defend one interpretation over another; and yet, despite protests to the contrary, no faction managed to achieve even a marginal victory by common consensus. It is perhaps because of this philosophical stalemate that as time progressed sectarian debate began to overflow the boundaries of ontology. In search of some common ground for dialogue, theologians began to question even the most fundamental rules of Sanskrit textual practices, as partisans on all sides of the debate began to approach the very idea of scriptural meaning, and even of textual signification in general, with fresh eyes.

As a result, the very articulation of these sectarian identities – and their scriptural or philological justifications – came to dominate the intellectual projects of leading thinkers across south India, who entered into dialogue across religious lines to interrogate the textual canons of their traditions through what I call *public philology*. Specifically, philological reasoning and text criticism appear to have taken on an unprecedented centrality in the intersectarian debate of the period.<sup>5</sup> In the place of doctrinal and philosophical critique, scholars frequently challenged rival schools on the grounds of textual instabilities in the primary scriptures of their tradition. The result of these ongoing critiques was an increasing fascination with the hermeneutics of textual interpretation, and even the etymology of key terms of sectarian importance – all in the service of demarcating the veracity of one sectarian tradition over another. To be clear, the textual practices typical of this period differ significantly from earlier Sanskrit traditions of interreligious debate – say, for instance, the disputes between the Bauddhas, Mīmāṃsakas and Naiyāyikas in early *śāstric* discourse. From the early centuries of the Common Era onward, debate had been mediated largely through shared standards of veridicality, such as *pramāṇa* theory. In contrast, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century south India, even the analytic tools of text criticism became the property of distinct sectarian traditions. This, in turn, necessitated a serious reconsideration of what precisely constituted the standards of scriptural interpretation, and of textual interpretation in general.

We witness this heightened attention to reading practices among both proponents of Smārta Śaivism, such as Appayya and his grandnephew Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, as well as quite a number of influential scholars of Vaiṣṇava lineages such as the Mādhvas and

Śrīvaiṣṇavas, who mobilized their own communities through parallel currents of polemical sectarian argumentation. While exemplified most eloquently in the works of the region's most influential minds, this wide-ranging fascination with philological reasoning can also be witnessed through a discursive survey of the genres and themes that rose to an unprecedented popularity, now cluttering the manuscript libraries of south India with numerous revisions and reproductions. Among the popular themes of these polemical treatises we find not only abstract considerations of textual meanings, such as analyses of the *tātparya* – or general purport – of the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Bhāgavata and other texts popular across sectarian lines, but also adjudications of the fine points of etymology and hermeneutics. Through ongoing cycles of debate, for example, numerous individual tracts were composed formulating and refuting theories as to why the name Nārāyaṇa contains a retroflex ṇ in its final syllable – and what implications this retroflex may hold with regard to the singularity of Vaiṣṇava orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup>

In the present article, the moment in history I wish to discuss – the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in south India – offers something distinctive to our understanding of the history of philology in India. Its contribution lies not so much in the *content* of what constitutes philology – which, as Pollock<sup>7</sup> has argued, is a global phenomenon – but rather its *extent*, *context* and *disciplinarity*. First, although previous centuries boasted a number of philological giants such as Vedānta Deśika, major thinkers of the sixteenth century achieved what may be an unprecedented public circulation of their works through sectarian networks,<sup>8</sup> prompting an explosion of interest in philological questions across all strata of discourse, from the most elevated to the most banal commentarial essay, a trend that continued even into the colonial era. Second, it was the heightened sectarian tensions of early modern south India that served as the crucible for forging a newly refined sense of philological reason. Where doctrinaire theologians failed to defeat each other on strictly philological grounds, they frequently returned to key questions of scriptural authenticity and meaning to undermine their opponents' very sources of knowledge and veridicality. Through repeated attacks and counterattacks, each side renegotiated the boundaries of valid textual interpretation.

### Sectarian philology: the south Indian case

It is within this very sectarianized public sphere, in fact, that a new generation of public intellectuals began not only to define themselves explicitly by their sectarian identity but to actively contribute to the demarcation of community boundaries, thus exerting a tangible influence on the extra-textual shape of south Indian society. One of the best-known examples on the Śaiva side, for instance, is Appayya Dīkṣita, perhaps the greatest polymath of south India in the second millennium. Appayya was patronized by a number of local southern rulers,<sup>9</sup> most notably Cinna Bomma of Vellur, who sponsored one of his most noteworthy works, the *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā*, a commentary on Śrīkaṇṭha's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, through which he sought actively to revive the legacy of Śaiva Advaita philosophy in the Tamil country (McCrea, [forthcoming](#)). As Yigal Brunner<sup>10</sup> has recently argued, Appayya was sufficiently motivated to promulgate his own interpretation of Śaiva Advaita philosophy that he founded an academy in his home village of Adaiyappalam for that express purpose, and composed numerous didactic *stotras* to circulate among his pupils. Visitors to Adaiyappalam today will find that Appayya immortalized his own desire to propagate the Śaiva Advaita doctrine on the walls of the Kālakaṇṭheśvara temple, a temple he commissioned as a setting for such instruction:

Raṅgarāja Makhin, the instructor to the learned, performer of the Viśvajit sacrifice,  
And son of a performer of the great Sarvatomukha sacrifice,  
Had a son renowned as Appayya Dīkṣita, devotee of the Moon-crested Lord [Śiva].

On account of him the fame of the illustrious king Cinna Bomma,  
breaker of the power of kings, was undefeated (*avyāhata*).  
He excavated Śrīkaṅṭha's commentary to establish the doctrine of Paramaśiva.  
He, Lord Appayya Dīkṣita, son of the illustrious Raṅgarāja, has created  
This most lofty and sublime abode of the Lord of Kālakaṅṭha, resplendent like the white  
mountain.<sup>11</sup>

This opening pair of Sanskrit *praśasti* verses frames Appayya Dīkṣita's life and scholarship in explicitly sectarian terms. Ostensibly the author of 100 works, many of them groundbreaking treatises in Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā (Vedic exegesis) and poetics, including the bestselling textbook on rhetoric, the *Kuvalayānanda*, Appayya is remembered by his community almost exclusively for his Śaiva theology – a reputation he himself appears to have fostered through this auto-eulogistic *praśasti*. Rather than literary theorist, or even 'polymath' (*sarvatantrasvatanttra*), Appayya's public persona is the reviver of the doctrine of Śrīkaṅṭha, foremost among the devotees of Śiva. Likewise, a donative inscription in Maṅḍipravāḷam follows the Sanskrit verses, documenting that Cinna Bomma had agreed to sponsor 500 scholars to study Appayya's theology at the Kālakaṅṭheśvara temple in Adaiyappalam and another 500 in Velur, thus financing Appayya's project of disseminating Śaiva Advaita philosophy to the extended Śaiva scholastic community:

Hail! Beginning in the Śaka year 1504 [i.e. 1582 CE], in the Citrabhānu year, having composed the *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā* so that the *Śrīkaṅṭhabhāṣya* may be taught to five hundred scholars in the temple of Kālakaṅṭheśvara, and after having received an unction of gold from the hand of Cinnabomma Nāyaka, having acquired gold and *agrahāras* from the hand of Cinnabomma Nāyaka so that the *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā* also may be taught to five hundred scholars in Velur – may this abode of Śiva, the creation of Appayya Dīkṣita, who composed one hundred works, beginning with the *Nyāyarakṣāmaṇi* and the *Kalpataruparimala*, be auspicious.<sup>12</sup>

With such an institutional setting in place for propagating his theological vision, it is no wonder that Appayya's primary *birudas* (or 'signature epithets') in academic discourse were Śrīkaṅṭhamatasthāpanācārya<sup>13</sup> – 'the establishing preceptor of Śrīkaṅṭha's doctrine' – and Advaitasthāpanācārya – 'the establishing preceptor of non-dualism'. Appayya's grand-nephew, Nīlakaṅṭha Dīkṣita also remembered his illustrious ancestor primarily for his contribution to Śaiva theology, particularly his *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā*, which some have argued represents a truly unprecedented manoeuvre to revive and authenticate the Śaiva Advaita interpretation of the Brahmasūtras.

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that it was Appayya and his grand-nephew Nīlakaṅṭha who spoke more directly than any other Smārta Śaiva theologians of their age to the theological disputes erupting in south Indian religious discourse across sectarian boundaries. Nīlakaṅṭha Dīkṣita established himself at the Madurai Nāyaka court during the reign of Tirumala Nāyaka (r. 1623–1659), with terms of employment that may have included both literary and sacerdotal activities. Best known as one of early modern India's most gifted poets, Nīlakaṅṭha is famed for his incisive satirical wit and the graceful simplicity of his verse, which contrasts markedly with the heavily ornamentalist style popular in post-Vijayanagar south India. For instance, in his *Kaliviḍambana*, or 'A Travesty of Time', Nīlakaṅṭha dispals a remarkable willingness to publicly lambaste the moral

degenerates of his day who occupied positions of clerical or political authority, often to great comedic effect. Given this portrait, it may come as no surprise that Nīlakaṇṭha has been depicted in Western academic literature as the very image of the secular public intellectual.

And yet, a closer look at Nīlakaṇṭha's writings reveals an entirely different picture. When he was not penning satirical diatribes, Nīlakaṇṭha was composing some of the most heartfelt devotional poetry ever written in the Sanskrit language – a case could even be made to include him in the canon of Indian devotional or *bhakti* poetry, a category typically reserved for vernacular lyric. Likewise, Nīlakaṇṭha's philosophical prose includes a commentarial essay on a popular Sanskrit hymn, the *Śivatattvarahasya* – 'The Secret of the Principle of Śiva'. The introduction to this essay doubles as theological counterpolemic, as Nīlakaṇṭha defends his own religious tradition, Śaivism, against the scathing critiques of his rivals from the Vaiṣṇava sect. But perhaps the most intriguing of Nīlakaṇṭha's works, and certainly the most unexpected based on our assumptions, is a manual for esoteric ritual practice, the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa*, or 'The Moonlight of Auspiciousness'. Virtually unknown to Indological scholarship to date, the 'Moonlight' provides us with an insider's account of the esoteric Śrīvidyā tradition of Śākta, or goddess-oriented, tantric ritual, a tradition of which Nīlakaṇṭha himself was an avid practitioner. Indeed, a number of anecdotes handed down among Nīlakaṇṭha's descendants have preserved memory of his Śākta leanings, including the belief that Appaya Dīkṣita bequeathed to him his personal copy of the *Devīmāhātmya*, and the legend that Nīlakaṇṭha, blinded from an encounter with Tirumalai Nāyaka's soldiers, regained his sight through the grace of the goddess Mīnākṣī, which prompted him spontaneously to compose the *Ānandasāgarastava* in her honour.

That Nīlakaṇṭha considered Appayya an authority on Śaiva ritual practice as well as theology is made clear in the *Saubhāgyacandrātapa* itself, where Nīlakaṇṭha repeatedly refers to Appayya's *Śivārcanacandrīkā* as a primary authority.<sup>14</sup> In public literary circles too, Nīlakaṇṭha commemorated his uncle first and foremost not for his literary theoretical advances or his poetic commentaries, but for his composition of the *Śivārkamaṇḍīpikā*, a feat for which his patron, Cinnabomma, quite literally showered him in gold (*kanakābhīṣeka*):

Bathed in gold on account of his *Śivārkamaṇḍīpikā*, he was praised by Samarapuṅgava Yajvan as follows:

At the time of his unction in gold, on the pretext of heaping up gold all around him, King Cinnabomma made a golden water basin for the wish-fulfilling tree of stainless wisdom, Appayya Dīkṣita.<sup>15</sup>

Nīlakaṇṭha not only honours Appayya for his specifically sectarian theological work, but he does so through the mouth of Samarapuṅgava Dīkṣita, a pupil of Appayya who recorded in his *Yātrāprabandha* his experience studying under the famous 'Establishing Preceptor of the Doctrine of Śrīkaṇṭha'. Evidently, Appayya's *kanakābhīṣeka* attracted the attention not only of his modern-day biographers but also of his contemporaries.<sup>16</sup> On the side of his antagonists, leading Vaiṣṇava theologians of the period were all too well acquainted with Appayya's theological project in the *Śivārkamaṇḍīpikā*, taking special note of their own preceptors' attempts to refute his arguments and minimize his influence. For instance, the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographer Anantācārya recalls the particular rivalry between Appayya Dīkṣita and a scholar of his own lineage, Pañcamatabhañjana Tātācārya, so named for ostensibly 'demolishing five doctrines':

Best of those learned in Śaiva theology, the illustrious Appayya Dīkṣita  
Of great fame, who had defeated his enemies, shone at Cidambaram.  
Appayya Dīkṣita composed the text entitled the *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā*,  
Always devoted to the Śaiva religion, hostile to the Lord [Viṣṇu].<sup>17</sup>

Tāṭayācārya, having set forth the *Pañcamatabhañjanam*,  
Protected the undefeated (*avyāhata*) doctrine of the illustrious Rāmānuja.  
Mahācārya [Doḍḍayācārya], of great splendor, having made the *Caṇḍamāruta*,  
Protected that undefeated doctrine of that best of ascetics.<sup>18</sup>

As Anantācārya tells us, Śrīvaiṣṇava theologians such as Pañcamatabhañjana Tāṭayācārya and Mahācārya spared no energy in rushing to respond to Appayya's *Śivārkamaṇidīpikā*. And through their efforts, the Śrīvaiṣṇava doctrine of Rāmānuja remained 'undefeated' (*avyāhata*), at least according to the hagiography of his lineage. On the Śaiva side, we meet with this same term, *avyāhata*, in the Adaiyappalam inscription as royal imagery for the alliance of Cinnabomma and Appayya Dīkṣita, the crest-jewel of Śaiva theologians who adorned his court. Evidently, being theologically 'undefeated' was a goal that persistently preoccupied the intellectual discourse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in south India. Although the Sanskrit intellectual circles of the Nāyaka courts fostered an impressive display of erudition in all fields of *śāstric* learning, no discipline so preoccupied public discourse as did theology, whether Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava. To be undefeated, then, in such a competitive marketplace of ideas was no small matter, and yet the honour seems to have been claimed equally by all participants.

In short, intellectual life in early modern south India – and indeed public religious life in general – had become polarized to the extreme, on both the institutional and philosophical planes. Sectarian theology, employed polemically in debates between rival sects, became a defining structural pillar of the region's intellectual sphere in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to an even greater degree than was true in preceding centuries. Conversation often became quite heated, judging by the titles of sectarian pamphlets, perhaps best exemplified in the South by Appayya Dīkṣita's *Madhvatantramukhamardana* (Crushing the Face of Madhva's Doctrine). To better understand these rising sectarian tensions – both in terms of their theological influence as well as their social significance – requires a closer look at the origin and development of these debates and the textual strategies through which they were conducted.

### Philology in the public sphere: embodiment and religious identity

On the sidelines of theological debate proper, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars had become increasingly fascinated with the social significance of public sectarian comportment. Markers of membership in a particular sectarian community became the object of new contestation and critical inquiry, and the hermeneutic feats employed to justify the usage of these insignia rose dramatically in creativity. Take, for instance, the practice of applying the *tripuṇḍra* – three stripes of ash – to the forehead to publicly signal one's identity as an orthodox Śaiva. Early modern Smārta-Śaivas, such as Appayya Dīkṣita and Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, had adopted a line of scriptural defence for the practice of applying the *tripuṇḍra* that hinges on a rather striking interpretation of a verse from the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, one that has generated as much controversy among seventeenth-century *śāstrins* as among contemporary scholars:

tapaḥprabhāvād devaprasādāc ca brahma ha śvetāśvataro 'tha vidvān /  
*atyāśramibhyah* paramaṃ pavitraṃ provāca samyagr̥ṣisamghajuṣṭam //

‘By the power of austerity and the grace of God, the learned Śvetāśvatara  
Knew *brahman*, and proclaimed to the *atyāśramins* that pure Supreme,  
enjoyed by the company of sages’.

The key term in this verse is *atyāśramin*. Many contemporary translators adopt a morphological approach to construing this perplexing term, rendering ‘*ati-āśrama*’, as ‘beyond the *āśramas*’ (i.e. having transcended the four stages of life).<sup>19</sup> And indeed, speculation from within the Sanskrit knowledge systems seems to justify this interpretation. Advaitin theologians, beginning with Śaṅkarācārya, have adopted terms such as *atyāśramin* to speak of a class of renunciants, often *jīvanmuktas* (those liberated while alive), who have passed beyond the strictures of the traditional social order.<sup>20</sup> More recently, however, scholars of early Śaivism have discovered that the term *atyāśrama*, in its original usage, in fact bears close association with a group of Atimārgic Pāśupatas.<sup>21</sup> That is, Śaiva scriptures, as early as the Nīśvāsamūlasūtra (ca. fifth century CE) speak of two principal subsets of Śaiva lineages: the Atimārga – in subsequent centuries including such groups as the Pāñcārthika Pāśupatas, Kāpālikas and Kālāmukhas – and the Mantramārga, commonly associated with Āgamic Śaivism (such as the Śaiva Siddhānta). Among the former, initiates are said to adopt a practice known either as the *atyāśramavrata* or the *mahāpāśupatavrata*, an observance which later Śaiva exegetes understood quite rightly to involve smearing the entire body in ash (*bhasmoddhūlana*).

Among Western Indologists, the recovery of this Śaiva sense of *atyāśrama* – and the social realities it illuminates – figures among the more noteworthy discoveries of the past few decades. Nevertheless, equal credit must be granted to the Smārta Śaiva philologists of the early modern period, who themselves had recovered the same historical sense of the term *atyāśramin*, which had fallen into ambiguity for earlier Advaita Vedānta philosophers. Having amassed Upaniṣadic, Purāṇic and Āgamic citations that contained the troubling term, Smārta polemicists ascertained quite correctly that the *atyāśramavrata* and *pāśupatavrata* were synonymous, and involved the practice of smearing the body with ash. By the seventeenth century, however, Nīlakaṇṭha and his colleagues had added a polemical twist to their interpretation of this problematic term, claiming that ‘*atyāśrama*’ refers quite literally not just to the smearing of ash, but more specifically the prescription to apply the *tripuṇḍra* to the forehead, the Śaiva sectarian *tilaka*. By doing so, they had essentially uncovered a Vaidika proof text for a distinctively Śaiva sectarian practice – a practice, in fact, that publicly demarcated one’s identity as an orthodox Śaiva.

Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita explores the matter in some detail in his *Saubhāgyacandrātapa*, his unpublished manual of Śrīvidyā ritual, outlining the scriptural injunctions for the application of the *tripuṇḍra*:

In the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, it is revealed:

‘By the power of austerity and the grace of God, the learned Śvetāśvatara,  
knower of *brahman*, proclaimed to the *atyāśramins* that pure supreme,  
enjoyed by the company of sages.’<sup>22</sup>

On this matter, at the end of the procedure for applying the *tripuṇḍra* is revealed the following statement in the Brahmottarakhaṇḍa:

‘Supreme gnosis, capable of severing transmigration, belongs to those alone  
By whom was practiced long ago this ‘*atyāśrama dharma*.’

The fact that the bearing of the *tripuṇḍra* is established here to be expressed by the term ‘*atyāśrama*’ is corroborated by the following praise of instruction in the knowledge of *brahman* in the Kālāgnirudropaniṣad, which establishes [the bearing of the *tripuṇḍra*] as a prerequisite knowledge of *brahman*:

‘He should make three straight lines: this “*śāmbhava*” vow is described by the knowers of the Veda in all the Vedas. One who desires liberation should practice it for the cessation of rebirth. Whichever learned celibate student, householder, forest dweller, or ascetic makes such a *tripuṇḍra* with ash is purified of all unforgivable sins.’<sup>23</sup>

Vaiṣṇavas, as one might imagine, were by no means satisfied with this line of reasoning, and took great pains to provide alternate explanations. Take, for instance, the celebrated Mādhva scholar Vijayīndra Tīrtha, who, in his *Turīyaśivakhaṇḍanam*, expresses some trepidation regarding the prevalent Śaiva interpretation of the term *atyāśrama*:

Some people, however, accepting the meaning of the term *atyāśrama* as stated in the *smṛtis* on the force of contextualization and so forth, say that it refers to the eligibility for a certain kind of knowledge. We will explain when deliberating on the statement from the Atharvaśiras why smearing with ash, bearing the *tripuṇḍra*, and so forth *do not* constitute a prerequisite for the knowledge of *brahman*.<sup>24</sup>

Vijayīndra Tīrtha, it appears, was well aware of the ground Śaivas sought to gain through their philological endeavours, and had taken steps to counter their claims. By his use of the phrase *prakaraṇādivāśāt* (on the force of contextualization and so forth), Vijayīndra expresses a distrust of Mīmāṃsaka strategies of interpretation, which, as Mādhvas of his generation often maintained, facilitate counterintuitive – and often quite simply unreasonable – construals of scripture.<sup>25</sup> By way of reply, he proposes a much more conservative interpretation, founded not on historical precedent but on the strictures of Pāṇinian grammar. Compounded from the prefix *ati* and a well-known word for the Brahmanical stages of life, a term such as *atyāśrama*, according to Vijayīndra, cannot plausibly be interpreted in a sense so distant from its historical etymological derivation. He sets forth the following case:

In the Kaivalya Upaniṣad, the word *atyāśrama* as well, appearing at the beginning and end of the text, ought reasonably to be construed as referring to the stage of life of the ascetic; it is not reasonable to hope to prove on the strength of even this term that the Kaivalya Upaniṣad is about Śiva. For, Pāṇini’s *sūtras* say: ‘*su* is in the sense of venerability (*pūjāyām*), and *ati*, in the sense of overstepping.’ In these *sūtras*, by the word ‘and,’ we ascertain that the prefix *ati* also possesses the meaning of venerability. ‘*Atyāśrama*’ means the ‘venerable stage of life’; among the stages of life, the stage that produces suitability for worship is precisely the ascetic stage of life. On this matter, the statement ‘O Yudhiṣṭhira, an ascetic is venerable merely due to his saffron garments and staff’ is well established, thus there is nothing there to be debated. Or, take this *ati* in the sense of venerability, as an adjective for the one stationed in that stage of life, rather than as an adjective for the stage of life itself. In that manner, by the capacity of the adjective, the term *atyāśramastha* is ascertained to refer to the practices of *dharma* that are suitable for any certain stage of life.<sup>26</sup>

And yet, Vijayīndra’s words of caution did little to restrain the philological inquiry of his Śaiva opponents; in fact, Śaivas of the next generation take their inquiry a step further, launching a comprehensive inquiry into the historical attestations of the term *atyāśrama* in *śruti* and Purāṇic narrative. Echoing Nīlakaṇṭha’s own position, a remarkably similar argument surfaces perhaps a century later in a lengthy polemical tome entitled the

*Īśavilāsa*, composed by one ‘Appayya Dīkṣita’.<sup>27</sup> The author of the *Īśavilāsa* presents an exhaustive study of the relevant scriptures,<sup>28</sup> establishing from his encyclopedic array of citations that the terms *atyāśramavrata*, *pāśūpatavrata* and *śirovrata* are synonymous, and refer to the practice of applying the *tripuṇḍra* as well as the smearing of the body with ash. Building on this philological apparatus, however, he takes his conclusion a step further. This Appayya Dīkṣita arrives at the conclusion that it is not only scripturally incumbent upon those who wish to know *brahman* to apply the *tripuṇḍra*, but also that one is expressly forbidden from applying any other sectarian insignia, including the *ūrdhvapuṇḍra*, the Vaiṣṇava sectarian *tilaka*. As our author writes:

Thus, because the vow of the *tripuṇḍra* and the smearing with ash implicitly prohibit the bearing of another *puṇḍra*, the numerous other statements prohibiting the *ūrdhvapuṇḍra* based on this, found in the *Vaśiṣṭha* and *Liṅga Purāṇas*, and *Parāśara Upapurāṇa*, the *Mānava[dharmaśāstra]*, the *Sūtasamhitā*, and the *Sāmbapurāṇa* are not written here so as to avoid prolixity.<sup>29</sup>

Among the verses ‘Appayya Dīkṣita’ cites in defence of his argument, he unearths an intriguing narrative episode from the *Kūrma Purāṇa*, in which the sage Śvetāśvatara himself – notorious from the original attestation of *atyāśramin* in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad – instructs King Suśīla in the practice the *atyāśrama* vow:

At that moment, they saw the great sage arriving,  
 Śvetāśvatara by name, the supreme Mahāpāśūpata,<sup>30</sup>  
 Bearing only a loincloth, his entire body smeared with ash...  
 He accepted him, his impurities exhausted from austerity, into studentship.  
 Having granted grace to the king Suśīla, who was endowed with good conduct,  
 The clever one, having engaged him in the entire renunciatory procedure,  
 Bestowed the knowledge of Śiva, the vow enjoined by his Vedic lineage,  
 The entire essence of the Vedas, which release the bondage (*pāśa*) of the beast (*paśu*),  
 Known as ‘*atyāśrama*,’ practiced by Brahmā and the rest.<sup>31</sup>

From the *Kūrma Purāṇa* passage, our author concludes that the ‘Pāśūpata’ and ‘*atyāśrama*’ vow refer commonly to a single practice that involves the bearing of ash, mandated by a veritable constellation of reliable scriptures and incumbent on members of all castes who wish to attain knowledge of *brahman*.<sup>32</sup> While partisan in the extreme, Appayya’s argument speaks to a genuine philological perseverance – a willingness to return straight to the sources to uncover the roots of sectarian practice in his own day and age. This, in fact, is precisely what he discovered. The *Kūrma* passage in question provides us with a remnant of a Vedicized Pāśūpata lineage that derived its own authority from the sage Śvetāśvatara, an ideal figurehead, as the Vaidika scripture named for him provides a genuine defence of Pāśūpata Śaivism.<sup>33</sup> As a member of a much later movement of Vaidika Śaivas, Appayya came to this very same conclusion, marshalling his text-critical analysis in support of the polemical ambitions of his contemporary sectarian community.

But what is really at stake in such pedantic matters of textual hermeneutics? Sectarian communities are not abstract aggregates of people and doctrines, demarcated by artificial boundaries; they are dynamic social systems, comprised of networks of religious actors, institutions – temples, monasteries, lineages – and the religious meanings they engender. As we have seen, major sectarian communities such as the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas or Mādhvas, or the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta, attained virtually complete autonomy on a social as well as doctrinal level by becoming major economic shareholders in the networks of exchange

centred on major temple complexes and monasteries. This is not to say, naturally, that interactions between sectarian communities did not occur on a regular basis. In fact, it is just such interactions – whether polemical exchanges, competition for resources or theological influence and reaction – that allow each sect to maintain its distinctive identity in the face of changing circumstances. That is, we can say in a very real sense that the conceptual labours of prominent intellectuals – or, theologians, as we may call them – mediated the changing boundaries of Hindu sectarian communities in early modern south India, not only within elite circles but also in the sphere of popular religious practice.

In fact, it is precisely during this period of increased sectarian contention that intellectuals concerned themselves more and more with the concrete as well as the abstract – the everyday mechanics of embodied sectarian identity. The *tripuṇḍra*, as it turns out, was by no means the only sectarian marker that had become an issue of broad public contestation. A similar controversy was generated by the practice of bearing of the signs of Viṣṇu branded onto one's body, or *taptamudrādharāṇa*, a practice adopted by Mādhvas that garnered extensive critique from both Śrīvaiṣṇava theologians as well as Smārta Śaivas.<sup>34</sup> One particularly poignant diatribe on the issue was composed by a certain Vijayarāmārya, entitled the *Pākhaṇḍacāpeṭika*, or the 'Slap in the Face to Heretics'. Devoted entirely to eradicating the practice of branding by compiling an encyclopedic array of scriptural citations, the *Pākhaṇḍacāpeṭika* appears to be the work of an author who was either a southerner himself or directly influenced by formative models of sectarian debate developed in south India. His strategies in making his case, in fact, resemble quite closely the encyclopedic philological approach of the *Īśavilāsa*. Thus, in critique of the practice of *taptamudrādharāṇa*, Vijayarāmārya writes:

And thus, through recourse to groundless statements that contradict scripture, fabricated by the Mādhvas and others and having the mere semblance of Vedic orthodoxy, fools practice the bearing of branded insignia, their minds deluded by the impressions produced by great sins amassed in previous births. Thus they attain a low caste status; at the end of the cosmic dissolution they will enjoy all the fruits of hell. And that is precisely why there are a thousand statements that exist in various locations that prohibit those with Vedic eligibility to bear branded insignia and prescribing an expiation for bearing them, indicating that hell, etc., will result when one fails to perform this expiation. Among these, we exemplify only a sampling.

Sectarian insignia, in short, became a pivotal issue for either re-establishing – or refuting – the authentic Vaidika orthodoxy of partisan sectarian lineages. On the Śaiva side, the *tripuṇḍra* came to be so centrally constitutive of the Vedic pedigree of Smārta Śaivism that Śaiva intellectuals openly denounced those who demarcated any other affiliation. Such was argued, for instance, by Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, publicly an orthodox Śaiva, privately an initiate in Śrīvidyā esotericism. In fact, the Dīkṣita family was so thoroughly grounded in the project of an orthodox Smārta Śaivism that Nīlakaṇṭha arrived at something of a hermeneutical impasse when attempting to negotiate his public Śaiva persona with his personal commitments to esoteric tantric practice in the Śrīvidyā tradition. This becomes particularly evident when Nīlakaṇṭha discusses matters of ritual protocol that are socially visible, such as matters of public dress and comportment. Here the issue of the *tripuṇḍra* arises again, which, as we have seen, must necessarily be borne by all orthodox Śaivas on a daily basis. But what mark ought a practitioner of Śrīvidyā to display? Nīlakaṇṭha addresses the issue at some length, taking as his *pūrvapakṣa* a group of Śāktas who evidently felt otherwise than he did:

Now one might object: 'Bearing the *tripuṇḍra* applies to worshippers of Śiva, but devotees of the goddess ought not to apply ashes. And one cannot maintain that it is obligatory insofar as it is enjoined as a component of all rituals by sages such as Bharadvāja, since this is overruled by the particular prescription of sandal paste and so forth in the *Lalitopākhyāna*, in the section on the worship of the goddess ... It is also stated in the *Merutantra*: 'The *tripuṇḍra* with fragrant sandal paste for devotees of Śiva accompanied by the goddess.'

If such is argued, then because the *tripuṇḍra* of ash is prescribed as a component of the worship of Śiva along with the goddess [Sāmba] in the *Kaivalyopaniṣad*, ... and since I myself will establish in the fourth chapter that *Śrīvidyā practitioners are in fact worshippers of Śiva* along with the goddess, it is absolutely necessary for them as well to apply the *tripuṇḍra*.

As for the prescription of sandal paste and so forth in the *Lalitopākhyāna*, that applies to the prescription to anoint the entire body and is not a prohibition of the *tripuṇḍra*. And as for the statement of the *Merutantra*, that as well concerns the prescription of a further stripe and does not prohibit the *tripuṇḍra* of ash. Otherwise, for the sake of the *Merutantra* one may mix fragrant sandal paste in the ash itself, as with this intention the Śaiva Tantras describe: 'With ash alone, or mixed with fragrance.' On this very basis our venerable grandfather has written in the *Śivārcanacandrikā* that the bearing of *tripuṇḍra* can be accomplished with ash alone or mixed with sandal paste.

Or, if were to ask as well whether the restriction to smear one's body with sandal paste ought to be accepted by devotees of the goddess, I say no. For as is well known, one ought to bear whatever signifiers are appropriate to the deity one worships, since the essence of the Tantras enjoins these things: the bearing of garlands of forest flowers and such by Vaiṣṇavas, and the bearing of *rudrākṣas* by Śaivas. This principle is known in worldly affairs also, as among the retinue of the king and so forth. Thus, in this instance, devotees of the goddess, known as the 'Ornamented Queen,' auspicious by her full ornamentation of yellow sandal paste, ought also to generally adopt such ornamental attire; this is the essence of the Śākta Tantras ... And this attire should not be understood as forbidden to Smārtas.

But, as it is stated in the *Kūmapurāṇa*, ... attire that unsettles worldly people is forbidden. Whatever attire upsets worldly people in a particular place or at a particular time ought to be abandoned, accepting [attire] insofar as it serves the welfare of the world. Thus, in a region populated by simpletons, one should evoke all of this only mentally – one need not show anything externally. It is with this very intention that the *Lalitopākhyāna* stated, 'Or, mentally visualized ornamentation.'<sup>35</sup>

Evidently, stakes were high for the preservation of public Śaiva orthodoxy, such that Nīlakaṇṭha outwardly condemned the practice of applying the insignia of a particular sub-community within the Śaiva fold, in this case, the Śrīvidyā Śākta tradition. In the face of overwhelming external pressure from Vaiṣṇava adversaries, the sectarian unity of Smārta Śaivas was paramount: fragmentation within the community would threaten the social standing of Brahminical Śaivism. The same sentiment was expressed, incidentally, in a popular southern hagiography of Śaṅkarācārya, the *Śaṅkaravijayavilāsa* of Cidvilāsa. One of a handful of Śaṅkaradigvijaya chronicles that accepted the primacy of the Kanchipuram Śaṅkarācārya lineage, the *Śaṅkaravijayavilāsa* speaks from the same sectarian location as Nīlakaṇṭha, placing in the mouth of Śaṅkara himself the defence of public Śaiva orthodoxy. Cidvilāsa writes:

The all-knowing preceptor, Śaṅkarācārya, beheld them.  
He asked them as if unworthy of respect, seemingly impassioned:  
'Having abandoned the *tripuṇḍra* on your forehead, why do you bear *kumkum*?  
Why have you cast off your white clothing and put on red garments? ...  
Indeed, you have met with such bad acts as a result of your sin.'

When the best of preceptors had spoken, the ones who had undertaken the Śākta path [replied]:  
 ‘Oh sage, what are you saying today? This arises from ignorance of our doctrine ...  
 Certainly, the supreme Śakti of Śiva is united with the manifest Goddess herself.  
 She is the cause of the world, her essence beyond the [three] qualities.  
 By the power of that Śakti, the great truth in its entirety was created ...  
 Thus, it is service to her lotus feet that bestows liberation.  
 It is purely with delight that we bear her symbols, the *kumkum* and all.  
 Thus we bear her sandal always on our arms and even on our throats.  
 From this we Śrīvidyā *upāsakas* are eternally liberated in this lifetime.’<sup>36</sup>

What can we take away, then, from the Smārta-Śaiva defence of the *tripuṇḍra*, and its significance for understanding the religious commitments of Sanskrit intellectuals? On the one hand, sectarian polemic was not constituted primarily by heated debate and verbal violence, but rather by intense, painstaking philological activity. In fact, the sectarian philology of the early modern period quite often foreshadowed the ‘discoveries’ of our own generation of Indologists. In short, we must take seriously the extent of labour dedicated by major intellectuals to even the most hair-splitting of theological quandaries, as such projects were integral to their understanding of their life’s work. On the other hand, these intellectual projects, abstract as they may be on paper, or palm leaf, hold major implications for our understanding of the public religious culture of Hindu sectarianism. Sectarian insignia, whether branded on the arm or smeared on the forehead with ash, were no small matter for the many southern theologians who were committed to advertising the Vaidika orthodoxy of their chosen sect in public circles. Succinctly, the *tilaka*, borne directly on the forehead of sectarian affiliates, delineates a polarized public space in which dialogical partners move not as equals but as embodied signifiers of their religious identity.

Indeed, this embodiment of religious identity – whether applied to the forehead or branded permanently on the arm – served as a central vector for the demarcation of sectarian communities within the public domain. Individuals could instantly distinguish co-religionists from outsiders on the basis of such insignia, which served as indexical signs of one’s community of affiliation. Naturally, the bodily display of signs – or *liṅgas* – has featured prominently in both Brahminical and non-Brahminical religions from the earliest stages of Indian history. Among noteworthy examples, the bearing of signs was theorized in our earliest surviving instance of systematic Śaiva theology, the Pāśupatasūtra, accompanied by the *Bhāṣya* of Kauṇḍinya.<sup>37</sup> Describing adherents of the Pāśupata community as *liṅgadhārins*, Kauṇḍinya enjoins these individuals to distinguish themselves from non-Pāśupatas precisely by bearing such signs on the body, such as bathing in ash so as to coat the entire body and wearing the *nirmālya*, a garland previously gifted to Śiva in a temple. Extending this prescription to the realm of theory, Kauṇḍinya describes how all religious practitioners, in fact, are *liṅgadhārins*;<sup>38</sup> Vaidika Brahmin householders, for instance, are distinguished by their sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*), and renunciants may be identified by their saffron garments (*kāṣāyavāsa*) and triple staves (*tridaṇḍa*). Certainly, such an act of bodily signification cannot be considered a new (or *navya*) feature of the sectarianization of later Hindu communities.

It is not, then, simply the embodiment of identity that constitutes the sectarianization of Hinduism in the mid-second millennium. Rather, embodied sectarian insignia facilitated a radical polarization of the religious landscape by enacting in public space the strict prescriptions theologians had begun to institute for widening the gulf between their own sectarian community and their competitors. Bodily displays of identity, as a result, served

as a primary point of transference between the realism of theology, as a strictly textual enterprise, and religious culture as enacted by practitioners. As a result, the vast upsurge in interest we witness on *philological* topics, such as the terms *atyāśrama* and *taptamudrā*, confront us with the potential influence of theological debate to shift the terrain of religious community formations. Far from constructing a value-neutral space of public exchange, their philological inquiries served to solidify the boundaries between competing sectarian traditions in an unmistakably visible manner. Echoes of the exchanges between Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava scholars have left an indelible impression on the religious landscape of south India, fostering a tradition of visual demarcation of religious difference.

### Sectarianism and early modernity

A philological problem with deep theological implications, the problematic term *atyāśrama* – and its competing explications – demonstrates the extent to which philological reasoning in early modern India held deep investments in the socio-religious world outside the text. Through value-laden applications of historical text criticism, scholars advanced their theological projects through a sort of *public philology*. Although the larger historiographical and theoretical implications of this public philology cannot be conclusively addressed in the present context, I would like to conclude by pointing toward the larger questions that inquiry into the textual strategies of early modern sectarian philology ultimately aims to address.

Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, to name a prime example, emerges through his polemical philology as a man of profound religious commitments, both in his personal practice and his public agenda. And yet, academic literature on early modern India has scarcely noted the theological investments of scholars such as Nilakaṇṭha; recent studies consistently depict such intellectuals purely as poets, logicians and social theorists, implicitly secular in their public outlook. Most notably, the Sanskrit Knowledge Systems Project and the Oxford Early Modern South Asia Project have considerably advanced our knowledge of early modern thought in India over the past decade. Its contributors have uncovered discursive patterns that invite direct comparison with the European Renaissance and early modernity, including a return to the classics of Sanskrit thought – an Indic neoclassicism – and a fascination with the idea of ‘newness’, giving unprecedented sanction to intellectual innovation. It is in such features that recent scholarship has sought to locate a distinctively Indic ‘modernity’.<sup>39</sup>

In essence, recent research into seventeenth-century India has ambitiously sought to reveal a distinctively Indic early modernity, one that for all intents and purposes developed in almost complete isolation from European early modernity. With such a project in mind, the temptation to compare looms high on the horizon, with all the promises and limitations that comparison typically invokes. It is perhaps due to this implicit comparativist agenda, which would equate the intellectual sphere of early modern India with that of Europe, that not a single scholar to date has remarked on the theological agenda of Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita. Likewise, scholars have barely acknowledged in passing the theology of Nilakaṇṭha’s grand-uncle, Appayya Dīkṣita, who singlehandedly reinvented south Indian Śaivism and its accompanying philosophical discourses a century before. And yet, the *influence* of Nilakaṇṭha’s theology is by no means marginal. Remembered by their descendants as the equivalent of living saints,<sup>40</sup> both Nilakaṇṭha and his grand-uncle Appayya were instrumental in rethinking the theological boundaries between the sectarian Hindu communities of south India, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava alike. Between the two, in fact,

Appayya and Nīlakaṇṭha contributed significantly to the articulation of the fundamental pillars of Smārta Śaivism – in matters of theology, devotion, ritual practice and even the constitution of its religious public.

This trend did *not* reverse in the centuries prior to colonialism but rather accelerated through the development of precolonial Indic early modernity. With regard to religious belief, we can locate no major thinkers of the precolonial period who personally disavow the beliefs and practices of their sectarian community. This is, to put it mildly, a striking counterexample to the European case and cannot be overemphasized. Even though India at the beginning of the Common Era was home to a number of flourishing atheist schools of philosophy, in the early modern centuries, atheism, or even scepticism, played virtually no role in public discourse. In short, we discover quite the opposite of public secularization. In India, sectarian tensions prompted an embrace rather than a rejection of religion in public space. No one religious sect was in a position to advocate universal orthodoxy for its doctrines, but rather, sectarian lineages cultivated separate and parallel public domains, each of which was suffused with the religious signifiers of that sect. Even today, visitors to India observe that religious signs and symbols permeate the landscape, and yet, no narrative of orthodoxy could possibly emerge from them, as each one belongs to a separate community with its own lineage, history and devotional practice. And theologically speaking, the defence of this parallel sectarianism can be traced directly to the religious discourse of Indian early modernity.

To put the matter briefly, India at the dawn of modernity raises doubt that secularization ever was a necessary precondition of modernization across cultures. Instead, the theological debates of early modern India cultivated a heightened public sectarianism that prompted relatively little violence or outright antagonism but greatly accelerated the formation of distinct religious communities across most of the subcontinent. Evidently, ‘secularization’ is the last thing we should expect to uncover in the writings of early modern south India. In fact, the evidence points in quite the opposite direction. The sectarianization of the Hindu religious landscape has dramatically intensified, rather than gradually fading into insignificance, during the early modern centuries. What demands our attention, then, is the very *absence* of a call for the secularization of public life in Indian intellectual circles – an absence that, in this case, is made tangibly evident by its very opposite, namely the wholesale *theologization* of public discourse. Our textual archive demonstrates that the intellectual project of scholars such as Nīlakaṇṭha was thoroughly theological in its public agenda. It is a *public philology* that we discover taking the place of secularization in early modern Indian discourse, demarcating the parallel domains of sectarian communities in a manner that has left a lasting impression on the religious landscape of south India up to the present day.

## Notes

1. See Subrahmaniam, *South Indian Temple Inscriptions*, vol. 4, 393, for the Tamil text of this inscription from the Varadarāja temple in Kanchipuram, recorded as ARE no. 584 of 1919.
2. Stein, “Politicized Temples of Southern India.”
3. Appadurai, “Kings, Sects, and Temples.”
4. On the socio-economic role of the south Indian monastery, see Oddie, “Character, Role and Significance.” Much work remains to be done on the social role of the south India monastery as an institution for the circulation of knowledge and a public site of both literary and religious performance. Inscriptional evidence suggests that by the early modern centuries, monasteries had served for some time as sites of knowledge production and distribution, sponsoring the copying and maintenance of manuscripts. See, for instance, ARE 1961–1962, Nos. 168 and

169 (ca. thirteenth century), which document operations of a Sarasvatī-bhaṇḍāram at a monastery associated with the Chidambaram temple complex; a team of scholars was employed by the bhaṇḍāram for the express purpose of composing and transcribing a number of works in Sanskrit and Tamil. In the early eighteenth century, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg understood such bhaṇḍārams, affiliated with local monasteries, as mediating the circulation of Tamil literary manuscripts (Sweetman, *Bibliotheca Malabarica*).

5. This article does aim to advance the case, further developed in Fisher, *New Public Theology*, that an intriguing transformation in philological modes of argumentation of early modern literati did result from their engagement with intersectorian debate. For a richer account of the history of philology in India, however, one must turn to the forthcoming work of Whitney Cox and Sheldon Pollock, both of whom have made remarkable strides in advancing our awareness of the historical vicissitudes of Sanskrit textual criticism.
6. Manuscripts authored primarily to offer explanations of this retroflex ṇ in ‘Nārāyaṇa’ are numerous. Specialized lexicons are often invoked for the purpose of explaining the syllable ‘ṇa’ as a distinct word endowed with its own denotative capacity. For instance, Govinda Nāyaka (ca. eighteenth century), in his *Nārāyaṇasabdāsādharaṇyam*, invokes a certain Ratnamālā to the effect that ‘the word “ṇa” in the masculine gender is in the sense of a lover, Bhairava, thorn, or a sound’, on which grounds the name Nārāyaṇa can be derived as signifying ‘the lover of the women of Vraja’. See Fisher, *New Public Theology* for a discussion of this passage, and manuscripts concerned with the ṇa-tva, or retroflexion, appearing in the name Nārāyaṇa.
7. Pollock, “New Intellectuals in Seventeenth-Century India.”
8. Our access to textual circulation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is mediated through two primary channels: (1) physical manuscript evidence itself, which reveals an explosion in the production and copying of sectarian ‘pamphlets’ addressing theological issues of widespread concern; and (2) the arguments advanced in these manuscripts, which exhibit a high degree of intertextual influence and response to issues of timely interest. Succinctly, many of the claims advanced in these pamphlets draw support from the innovative arguments advanced by such giants as Vyāsa Tīrtha and Appayya Dīkṣita, publicly engaged intellectuals whose efforts seem to have inspired new generations of polemicists across community boundaries. See Fisher, *New Public Theology* for further details on common threads of debate addressed in these sectarian pamphlets.
9. See Ramesan, for instance, for further details on Appayya’s patrons.
10. Bronner, “Singing to God, Educating the People.”
11. vidvadguror vihitaviśvajadadhvarasya śrīsarvatomukhamahāvratayājīsūnoḥ / śrīraṅgarājamakhinaḥ śritacandramauḷiḥ asty appai dīkṣita iti prathitas tanūjaḥ // yena śrīcinnabommakṣitipabalabhidaḥ kīrtir avyāhatāsīt yaś ca śrīkaṇṭhabhāṣyaṃ paramaśivamatasthāpanāyod-dadhāra / tena śrīraṅgarājādharivaratanayenāppayajivādhi-penākāri prauḍhonnatāgraṃ rajatagirinibhaṃ kālakaṇṭheśadhāma // This inscription is recorded in Reports on South Indian Epigraphy as number 395 of 1991. The text is published in Sastri, “More about the Age and Life,” 148–9; and Ramesan, *Sri Appayya Dikshita*, 25–6. Y. Mahalinga Sastri recommends emending the original ‘yena’, the first word of the second pāda of v. 2, to ‘yaś ca’, a suggestion that does not appear to yield much semantic sense. Sastri also believes this verse to be the original composition of Appayya Dīkṣita himself, as portions of it appear elsewhere in the author’s oeuvre.
12. svasti śrī śakābdam 1504 kku mēl collā niṇṇuru citrabhānu varuṣam svāmi kālakaṇṭheśvararuṭa kōvililē śrīkaṇṭhabhāṣyaṃ aiññūru vidvāmsarukku paṭipikka atukku śivārkamaṇḍipikaiivyākhyānamum paṇṇi vēlūr cinnabomma nāyakkar kayyilē kanakābhiṣekamum paṇṇi vicukkoṇṭu atukkuppiṇ vēlūrilē śivārkamaṇḍipikaiyum aiññūru vidvāmsarukku paṭippikka cinnabomma nāyakkar kayyilē svaṇaṅkaḷum agrahāraṅgaḷum paṭaippiccu prativīrāyaṃ [ie pṛthivīrāyaṃ] paṇṇiviccu nyāyarakṣāmaṇi kalpataruparimala mutalāṇa nūru prabandha paṇṇiṇa appaidīkṣitaruṭa kṛti inta śivālayaṃ śubham astu.  
See above footnote for the published inscription. The Sanskrit verses and Maṇipravāḷa prose are followed by the signatures of a number of scholars who served as witnesses.
13. We also find the variant ‘Śrīkaṇṭhamatapratīṣṭhāpanācārya’. This biruda also appears in the colophon of the first pariccheda of Nīlakaṇṭha’s *Saubhāgyacandrātapa*.
14. For example: ata evāsmaddīkṣitaiḥ śivārcanacandrikāyām uktam – rājānaḥ strībālā rogiṇaḥ pravāsinaś ca śītodakena snānāśaktāv uṣṇodakena snānaṃ kuryuḥ. The *Śivārcanacandrikā* is one of Nīlakaṇṭha’s primary sourcebooks for daily Śaiva ritual practice.

15. Tad api jñāyate yad eṣa śivārkamaṇīdīpikāvasānalabdhakanakasānāḥ praśamsitaḥ samarapuṅgavayajvanā yathā – hemābhiṣekasamaye parito niṣaṅgasauvarṇasamḥatimiṣāc cinabommabhūpaḥ / appayyadīkṣitamāṇer anavadyavidyākālpadrumasya kurute kanakālavālam // Nalacaritranaṭakam, 4–5.
16. Ramesan cites another anonymous poet as having described Appayya as follows, stressing once again the centrality of Śaiva theology to his scholarly work: nānādeśanarendramaṇḍalamahāyatnātidūrībhavatkādācitkapadāravindavinater appayyayajvaprabhoḥ / śaivotkarṣapariṣkrtair aharahaḥ sūktaiḥ sudhālālitaiḥ phullatkarṇapuṭasya bommanṛpateḥ puṇyāny gaṇyāni kim //
17. śaivaśāstravidāṃ śreṣṭhaḥ śrīmān appayyadīkṣitaḥ / citrakūṭe jitārātiraśobhata mahāyaśāḥ // advaitadīpikābhikhyam grantham appayadīkṣitaḥ / cakāra bhagavad[d]veṣī śaivadharmarataḥ sadā //
18. vidhāya tātāyācāryas tatpañcamatabhañjanam / śrīrāmānujasiddhāntam avyāhatam apālayat // mahācāryō mahātejāḥ sa kṛtvā caṇḍamārutam / avyāhatam yatīndrasya taṃ siddhāntam apālayat //
19. For instance, Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* translates the verse in question as follows: ‘By the power of his austerities and by the grace of God, the wise Śvetāśvatara first came to know brahman and then proclaimed it to those who had passed beyond their order of life as the highest means to purification that brings delight to the company of seers’ (265).
20. See Olivelle, *Āśrama System*, 222–34, for a thorough discussion of the concept of transcending the varṇāśrama system in Advaita Vedānta. The term atyāśramin itself rarely occurs in these Advaita Vedānta sources, although a handful of intriguing usages occur in the work of Śaṅkarācārya himself, who does seem to interpret the term as ‘one who has transcended the āśramas’. Other theologians, which Olivelle cites, often use alternate terms such as ativarṇāśramin, a word that itself reveals the exegetical work it has been poised to accomplish in its modification from the original. By the time of Vedānta Deśika, we observe that opponents of Smārta Śaivas begin to return to the original term atyāśramin, even advancing the interpretation of Śaṅkarācārya himself in order to counter his Śaiva interlocutors who have recovered an understanding of the word’s original meaning.
21. On the history of the terms Atimārga and Mantramārga, and on the attested usages of the term atyāśramavrata, see Sanderson, *Summary of Tantric Śaivism*, 156–64.
22. As is noted in the Sanskrit original below, Nīlakaṇṭha’s treatment of this verse preserves a variant reading from that cited above.
23. śvetāśvataropaniṣadi śrūyate – tapaḥprabhāvād devaprasādāc ca brahmavic chvetāśvataro ‘tha vidvān / atyāśramibhyaḥ paramaṃ pavitraṃ provāca samyagṛṣisaṅghajusṭam // iti / tatra tripuṇḍravīdhānānte śrūyamāṇe – ayam atyāśramo dharmo yaīḥ samācaritaḥ purā / eṣāṃ eva param jñānam śaṃsārachedakāraṇam // iti brahmottarakhaṇḍavacanena tyāśramaśabdavācyatayā siddham tripuṇḍradhāraṇam anūdyā brahmavidyopadeśakīrtanena taduktaṃ brahmavidyāṅgatvasiddhau – tiryak tisro rekhāḥ prakurvīta vratam etac chāmbhavaṃ sarvavedeṣu vedavādibhiruktaṃ / tat samācaren mumukṣur apunarbhavāya/ yad etat tripuṇḍraṃ bhasmanā karoti yo vidvān brahmācārī gṛhī vānaprastho yatir vā samastamahāpātakopapātakebhyāḥ pūto bhavānti kālāgnirudropaniṣadvākyena ... /
24. kecīt tu smṛtyuktarītyā atyāśramaśabdārtham aṅgīkṛtya tatsthasya prakaraṇādīvaśād vidyāviśeṣe ‘dhikāram āhuḥ / yathā ca bhasmoddhūlanatripuṇḍradhāraṇādīnām na brahmavidyāmātrāṅgatvam tathā’ tharvaśirovākyavicāre vakṣyāma ity alam / *Turīyaśivakhaṇḍanam*, 53.
25. See Fisher, *New Public Theology* for further discussion, particularly with regard to the *Advaitakālānala* (‘The Armageddon of Advaita’) of Nārāyaṇācārya, who frames his diatribe as a refutation of Appayya Dīkṣita’s reliance on Mīmāṃsā to counter the exegetical manoeuvres of Madhva. In response to Appayya, Nārāyaṇācārya proposes to outlaw Mīmāṃsā entirely from the realm of intersectorial debate, relegating it to the status of a Śaiva partisan discourse.
26. kaivalyaśrutāv upakramopasaṃhāragatātyāśramiśabdo ‘pi yatyaśramapara eva yukta iti na tadbalenāpi kaivalyaśruteḥ prasiddhaśivaparatvāśā yuktā / suḥ pūjāyām atir atikramaṇe ca iti hi pāṇinisūtram / tatra cakārād ateh pūjārthatvam apīti labhyate / atyāśrama pūjyāśramāḥ, āśrameṣv adhikāḥ pūjābhaktvaprayojakāśramo yatyaśrama eva / atrārthe kāṣyādaṇḍamātreṇa yatīḥ pūjyo yudhiṣṭhira ityādi vacanaṃ suprasiddham eveti na tatra vivaditavyam / yadvā pūjārtho ‘yam atīḥ / sa cāśramasthaviśeṣaṇam na tvāśramaviśeṣaṇam / tathā ca viśeṣaṇasāmarthyāt

- tattadāśramocitadharmānuṣṭhānaparo ‘tyāśramasthaśābdārtho labyate / tādrśasyaiva pūjyatvadarśanāt / *Turīyaśivakhaṇḍanam*, 52–3.
27. This work (see Adyar II., 175a) is traditionally ascribed to one ‘Appayya Dīkṣita’, but not generally accepted as one of the works of the sixteenth-century polymath. It is certainly possible that the text was composed by one of his descendants, many of whom adopted the same title as their nom de plume.
  28. Sources cited include the Atharvaśiras, Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, Kālāgnirudropaniṣad, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, Kaivalya Upaniṣad, Kūrma Purāṇa and numerous others.
  29. evaṃ tripuṇḍroddhūlanavratena arthād eva puṇḍrāntarāniṣedhāt tanmūlakāni ca ūrdhvaṇḍranīṣedhakavākyāni vāsiṣṭha-laingaparāśaropapurāṇa-mānava-sūtasamhitā-sāmbapurāṇādiṣu bahutarāṇi vistarabhayān na likhitāni / *Īśavilāsa*, fol. 385.
  30. The term ‘Mahāpāsupata’ in early Śaiva often refers to practitioners of the Kāpālika lineage or, in this instance, may serve to distinguish the Pāsupatas in question from the Lākūṭīśa Pāsupatas. Because of the Vedicized inflection in this passage, it is not likely that this is in fact a Kāpālika source. See for instance Sanderson, *Summary of Tantric Śaivism*, Lectures on Tantric Śaivism, 3. The term appears in Śaiva sources as early as the Nīśvāsamūla.
  31. athāsminn antare ‘paśyan samāyāntaṃ mahāmuniṃ / śvetāśvataranāmānaṃ mahāpāsupatottamaṃ // bhasmasandighasarvāṅgakaupīnācchādanānīvitaṃ / tapasākārṣītātmānaṃ śuddhayajñopavitānaṃ / [emended from ākarṣita] // śiṣyatve pratijagrāha tapasā kṣiṇakalmaṣaṃ / so’ nūgrhya ca rājānaṃ suśīlaṃ śīlasaṃyutaṃ // [emended from śīlaṃ saṃyutaṃ] sānyāsikaṃ vidhiṃ kṛtsnaṃ kārayitvā vicakṣaṇaḥ / dadau tadaiśvaraṃ jñānaṃ svaśākhāvihitaṃ vratam // aśeṣavedasāraṃ tat paśupāśavimocanam / atyāśramam iti khyātaṃ brahmādiḥbhīr anuṣṭhitaṃ // *Īśavilāsa*, 379. I cite here the readings of the author of the *Īśavilāsa*, rather than those of any published edition of the Kūrma Purāṇa. The passage in question is KP 1.13.31ff.
  32. The passage in question is slightly corrupted, but the sense is quite clear: bhasmadhāraṇasya purāṇābhīpretavād atyāśramapāsupatavratayoḥ samānaprayogatvāvagamād ekaphalāvacchinnaikaprayogasambandhinor brahmavidyādhikārī phalayoḥ muṇḍaka-kaivalyavākyābhyāṃ pratyabhijñānānūṇḍa-kaivalyātharvaśiraḥ-śvetāśvatarakālāgnirudropaniṣadvihitānāṃ śirovratapāsupatavrata-atyāśramaratānām ekatvam avagamyate / I suggest emending to: brahmavidyādhikāritvaphalayoḥ, and pratyabhijñānāṃ muṇḍakaivalyātharvaśiraḥ-.
  33. This Kūrma Purāṇa passage has been discussed by Dyczkowski, *Canon of the Saivagama and the Kubjika Tantras*, as evidence for an early Vedic lineage of Pāsupatas who opposed themselves to more antinomian traditions (24).
  34. On the practice of branding, see also the work of Hüsken, *Viṣṇu’s Children*, on Vaikhānasa ritual practice in south India; leading Vaikhānasa intellectuals provided similarly incisive critiques of branding as a social practice in Vaiṣṇava sectarian communities.
  35. nanu bhavet tv etat tripuṇḍradhāraṇaṃ śivopāsakānām / ambikopāsakānām tu nedaṃ bhasmadhāraṇaṃ kartavyam / na ca bhavadvājādibhiḥ sarvakarmāṅgatvena vidhānāt tad āvaśyakam iti vācyam, sāmānyataḥ prāptasya tasya lalitākhyāne ambikopāsanaṃ prakaraṇe viśeṣavihitena candanādividhinā bādhitavāt / yathoktaṃ lalitākhyāne ... merutante ‘py uktam – tripuṇḍraṃ sāmabhaktānām candanena sugandhineti / iti ced ucyate kaivalyopaniṣadi ... iti sāmavidyāṅgatvena bhasmatripuṇḍravidhānāt, śrīvidyopāsakānām ca sāmāśivopāsakatvāyasmābhiḥ eva caturthapāricchede ‘py avasthāpāyīyamānatvena teṣām apy āvaśyakam eva bhasmatripuṇḍradhāraṇaṃ / yat tu lalitākhyāne candanādividhānaṃ, tad aṅgarāgavidhiparam na tripuṇḍrāpavāḍakam / yad api merutantravacanāṃ, tad api adhipuṇḍrāntaravidhānaparaṃ na bhasmatripuṇḍrāpavāḍakam ... yad vā, merutantrānugrahāya bhasmany eva gandhasaṃyojanaṃ kāryam / idam evābhīpretya darsitaṃ śaivatantreṣu – bhasmanā kevalenātha gandhayuktena vā punar iti / ata evāsmatpitāmahacaraṇair api śivārcanacandrikāyām likhitaṃ – idaṃ ca tripuṇḍradhāraṇaṃ kevalabhasmanā candanayuktena vā kāryam iti / nanv evam api kim ambikopāsakānām candanāṅgarāgādinīyama ādaraṇīyaḥ, neti brūmaḥ / tathā hi yo yaddevatopāsanaṃ tena taddevatālāchanavatā bhavitavyam iti hi tantrānām hṛdayaṃ yato vidadhaty etāni – vaiṣṇavānām vanamālādidhāraṇaṃ, śaivānām rudrākṣadhāraṇaṃ ca / rājabhṛtyādiṣu cāyaṃ nyāyo lokānāmapi vidita eva / tad ihaśṛṅgāranāyiketisamākhyādivyāpitasakala-śṛṅgāramaṅgalāyā bhagavatīyā upāsakair api śṛṅgāraṇaprayair bhavitavyam iti śaktatantrānām hṛdayam ... sa ca veṣaḥ smartṛbhiḥ anīśiddha eva grāhyaḥ / kūrmapurāṇe – ... ityādinā lokodvegakaraṃ veṣaṃ niśedhantīti / yasmin deśe yasmin kāle yena veṣeṇa lokā udvijante tatra tatra taṃ parityajya

- lokasaṅgraho yāvatā bhavati tāvad eva grāhyam / ataḥ pāmarabahule loke manasaiva sarvaṃ sambhāvanīyam / na kiñcid bahiḥ prakāśanīyam / idam evābhipretyoktaṃ lalitākhyāne – samkalpabhūṣaṇo vāpīti /
36. Cidvilāsa, *Śaṅkaravijayavilāsa* 30.21–31. sarvavicchaṅkarācāryadeśikas tān alokata // papraccha rājasenaiva nirmatān iva tān asau / phāle tripuṅdraṃ santyajya kuṅkumaṃ dhriyate katham // śucivāśaḥ samutsrīya dhrītaṃ raktāmbaram kutah /... duṣkarmanāṃ hi saṃsargo yuṣmākaṃ pāpahetave / ity ukte deśikendre ‘smin śāktamārgasamuddhrtāḥ // kiṃ yatin kathayasy adya manmatājñānato hi tat / ... sāḥśādbhagavatīyuktā śambhoḥ śaktiḥ parā nanu // kāraṇaṃ jagatām eṣā guṇāṭītasvarūpiṇī / tacchaktyā vaśataḥ srṣṭaṃ mahattatvam aśeṣataḥ // ... atas tadpādapadmasya sevā muktīpradāyini // kuṅkumādīni cihnāni tasyāḥ prītyaiva dadhmahe / atas tadpādūkaḥ bāhau kaṅthe ‘pi dhriyate sadā // jīvanmuktā vayaṃ tasmācchrīvidyopāsakāḥ sadā /
37. See especially the commentary on Pāśupatasūtra 1.6.
38. Kauṇḍinya writes: atra yathānyeṣāṃ api varṇāśramaṇām āśramaprativibhāgakarāṇi liṅgāni bhavanti / By describing sectarian liṅgas as determined primarily by one’s āśrama, or ‘stage of life’, Kauṇḍinya suggests to us that during the days of the early Pāśupatas, the term atyāśrama was in fact meant literally to signify ‘beyond the āśramas’. Pāśupata insignia, then, differed precisely because the traditional norms of the varṇa and āśrama system no longer applied to them.
39. Seminal works on the concept of Indic early modern include Pollock, “New Intellectuals in Seventeenth-Century India”; “Ends of Man at the End”; Pollock, *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern South Asia*; Rao et al., *Textures of Time*; and O’Hanlon and Washbrook, *Religious Cultures in Early*.
40. A particularly poignant example is a volume entitled *Lives of Saints*, composed by Swami Sivananda, himself a descendent of Appayya’s lineage. Here, Sivananda places Appayya and Nilakantha in the same company as Jesus and the Buddha, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and vernacular bhakti saints such as Nāṃdev, Tukārām and Kabir. During my fieldwork at Nīlakaṅṭha Dīkṣita’s ārādhana, on the commemoration of the anniversary of his death, in January of 2011, Dr. Natarajan, descendent of Nīlakaṅṭha, asserted that Appayya Dīkṣita had been an incarnation of Śiva and Nīlakaṅṭha an incarnation of Parāśakti, the latter perhaps in keeping with Nīlakaṅṭha’s devotion to the ritual practice of Śrīvidyā (see Fisher, “Just Like Kalidasa”).

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