

South India and Advaita Vedānta Monastic Networks

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical development of the vernacular Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition of the Nampūtiri Brahmins in Kerala and argues that it formed part of wider transregional monastic networks extending across South India. Drawing on inscriptional evidence, vernacular hagiographic literature, normative texts, and historical records, the study traces the transformation of Keralan monastic institutions from earlier temple-centred ascetic institutions into relatively autonomous monastic centres organized into a network of parent and branch maṭhas.

The paper outlines the institutional structure of Nampūtiri Advaita monasticism and examines the earlier ascetic roles associated with temple functionaries that may have provided the institutional basis for later monastic formations. It also considers the processes through which these local institutions acquired new historical identities and forms of legitimation during periods of socio-political transformation in Kerala.

Situating these developments within the broader South Indian religious landscape, the study argues that the adoption of Śaṅkara affiliation and networked monastic organization in Kerala was likely influenced by already established South Indian monastic systems. The paper proposes that Keralan Advaita monasticism represents a case of local religious institutions becoming integrated into transregional monastic circuits through processes of adaptation and selective institutional borrowing, while remaining deeply rooted in the social and ritual context of Kerala.

Keywords: Monasticism, Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara, Daśanāmī-Saṃnyāsins

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the vernacular Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition of Kerala formed an integral part of the transregional monastic networks of South India. Before addressing this broader context, it is first necessary to introduce the historical and institutional framework of the Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition of the Nampūtiri Brahmins in Kerala.

Nampūtiri Advaita Vedānta monasticism in Kerala is structured around the cluster of four maṭhas established in Trṣṣūr: Vaṭakke Maṭham, Naṭuvil Maṭham, Iṭayil Maṭham and Tekkē Maṭham. According to the vernacular hagiographic tradition these institutions were established by the famous philosopher Śaṅkara himself. In the course of time, the four “parent” monastic centres developed a pan-Keralan network of dependent branch maṭhas and sublineages. Historical records indicate that the said institutions were involved

in power structures and had complex political, economic, and ritualistic interconnections with prominent temples such as the Padmanābhasvāmī temple in Tiruvanantapuram and the Vaṭakkunnāthan temple in Tr̥ṣṣūr. Nampūtiri Advaita Vedānta monasticism is characterized by its hermetic and exclusive character. According to the prescription that can be found in Saṃnyāsakalpam Bhāṣavyākhyā – the normative text of this renunciant order – only Nampūtiris from three grāmas were allowed to embrace saṃnyāsa in the said institutions. These were Śukapuram, Peruvanam and Irīññālakkūṭa grāma, all situated in central Kerala, in the vicinity of Tr̥ṣṣūr. Brahmins belonging to the enumerated villages kept the Vedic sacrificial tradition (i.e. they had the right to perform the śrauta rituals), hence they constituted the Nampūtiri aristocracy. As the records of the British administration prove, the network of Nampūtiri institutions, affiliated with Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, was well established in Kerala by the middle of the 19th century

However, analysis of the historical sources seems to indicate that Nampūtiri Advaita Vedānta monasticism in Kerala probably traces its origins not to the figure of the famous philosopher Śaṅkara but to the local institution of the temple *saṃnyāsin*, referred to in the medieval epigraphs by the honorific title *bhaṭāra-tiruvaṭi* or *paḷāra-tiruvaṭi*. The person in this post was presumably, to some extent, in charge of the temple management and had some ritual obligations such as the *puṣpāñjali* offering. The inscriptional evidence suggests that the Brahmins who held the office of temple *saṃnyāsins* were persons of some consequence and high social standing. The institution of the *bhaṭāra-tiruvaṭi* / *paḷāra-tiruvaṭi* in Kerala is recorded in the inscriptions and temple chronicles (*granthavari*) from the period between ca. 11th - 16th century. We know about at least four prominent temples that had among their functionaries the *bhaṭāra-tiruvaṭi* / *paḷāra-tiruvaṭi*. These were the Paraśurāma temple in Tiruvallam (Tiruvanantapuram district), Śrīvallabha temple in Tiruvalla, Trimūrti temple in Mitrānandapuram, and Padmanābhasvāmī temple in Tiruvanantapuram. In the Padmanābhasvāmī temple in Tiruvanantapuram the post has survived until today and is held by the Naṭuvil Svāmiyārs.

In the course of time, the institutional character of the *bhaṭāra-tiruvaṭi* / *paḷāra-tiruvaṭi* office seems to have evolved and gone through a process of transformation. It seems that the *maṭhas*, which were once residences attached to particular temples *bhaṭāra-tiruvaṭis* / *paḷāra-tiruvaṭis*, started to turn into more independent – separate from the temple – monastic centres. However, the exact time and circumstances of this remodelling, and adopting of the Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta affiliation, remain uncertain. One of the socio-political factors that could have contributed to the transformation of Nampūtiri monasticism seems to have been the pan-Keralan tendency of taking control over the temple management by local rulers in the 18th century. Thus, it seems possible that in response to the developments taking place in the region, the temple *saṃnyāsins* needed a new historical identity that would lend legitimacy to their socio-religious institution. These particular circumstances might have resulted in the adoption of the Advaita Vedānta affiliation and the emergence of the vernacular hagiographic practice in Kerala that evoked the figure of Śaṅkara – who from the 17th century was recognized as the founder of the prominent Śrīṅgeri *vidyāpīṭha* – and linked him with the Nampūtiri *maṭhas*. The said local literary activity must probably have originated post-17th century, as the earliest known inscription that associates the philosopher with the establishing of any monastic centre is dated to 1652, and comes from Śrīṅgeri.

Among the seven texts recognized to date of the vernacular Advaita Vedānta hagiographic tradition – *Govindanātha's Śaṅkarācāryacarita*, *Padmapādācāryacarita*, *Bhagavatpādamahimānuvarṇana*, *Vadakke Madham Brahmaswam ms. B-0059 Śaṅkarācāryacaritam*, *Divākaracarita*, *Śaṅkarabrahmānandavilāsam* and *Kūṣmāṇḍa-Śaṅkaravijaya* – the oldest and the most popular seems to be *Śaṅkarācāryacarita* by Govindanātha that is roughly dated to circa 17th century.

South Indian Advaita Vedānta Monastic Networks

The recent scholarship indicates that the earliest of the Śāṅkara hagiographies were most probably composed in South India during the Vijayanagara period, and they are generally dated as being ca. post-14th century. However, the concept of the Śāṅkara founding four *maṭhas* is a later development; it is only a feature of the later hagiographies. According to Matthew Clark, the concept of the Śāṅkara establishing any *maṭha* was born in the Vijayanagara Empire and it was adopted initially by the Śṛṅgeri and the Kāñcī *maṭhas* as a response to the shift in the Vijayanagara rulers' patronage towards Mādhvas and Śrīvaiṣṇavas in the 16th century : “[...] the earliest of Śāṅkara’s hagiographies was most probably written during the Vijayanagara period. The connection of Śāṅkara to either Kāñcī or Śṛṅgeri in the earlier of the hagiographies precisely fits the region where the Vijayanagaras were operating, endowments being made to both *maṭhas*, particularly Śṛṅgerī. [...] The two southern *maṭhas* were written into the hagiographies to enhance their status as resorts of Śāṅkara, the saviour of the Vedic tradition. This has created the legacy of a continuing dispute, resting on the irony that Śāṅkara probably founded neither *maṭha*.” The earliest of the Śāṅkara hagiographies to mention establishing the four *maṭhas* in the corners of the Indian Peninsula – and installing as their heads four pupils – was most probably Cidvilāsa’s *Śāṅkaravijayavilāsa*. According to the text, the very first *maṭha* was established in Śṛṅgerī. The hagiography was probably composed ca. 16th century. Clark depicts the process of the attribution to Śāṅkara of the founding of a monastic order, and four *maṭhas*, in his hagiographies as a three-stage development: 1) the first stage would be represented by the earliest hagiographies (post-14th century) such as Anantānandagiri’s *Śāṅkaravijaya* and Vyāsācala’s *Śāṅkaravijaya*, both most probably associated with Kāñcī inferring from the texts’ references to this place, which contain no mention of Śāṅkara establishing any *maṭha* at all 2) the second stage of the Śāṅkara’s hagiography development would be the ascription of the four main pupils to the philosopher and the description of the foundation of a *maṭha* either in Kāñcī or Śṛṅgeri 3) while in the final stage Śāṅkara would be attributed as establishing an order of renunciates and four *maṭhas* – transferred to the charge of the philosopher’s four main disciples – in the four corners of the Indian Peninsula . The first known inscription to mention Śāṅkara founding any *maṭha* dates only to the year 1652 – the epigraph records a grant to Śṛṅgeri *dharmapīṭha*. The first reference to Śāṅkara in the Kāñcī epigraphs appears a little later – in 1686 CE . This seems to suggest that the concept of Śāṅkara founding *maṭhas* was not widespread before the 17th century.

This brings us back to Kerala. What appears to be essential for the vernacular hagiographic tradition of Śāṅkara in Kerala is the use of the idea of the philosopher founding four *maṭhas* that subsequently he transfers to the charge of his four main disciples. As observed in the previous paragraph, this concept first appears in Cidvilāsa’s *Śāṅkaravijayavilāsa* in ca. the 16th century and does not seem to be widespread until the 17th century. The biography of the Nampūtiri monasticism, spanning multiple – significantly different – life stages, leads us to infer that the Śāṅkara affiliation was not an indigenous concept but a borrowed one, especially as the Nampūtiri brahmins, being Vedic ritualists, were rather the proponents of the Mīmāṃsā doctrine – most probably from the neighbouring Vijayanagara Empire. Since we date the inception of the idea of Śāṅkara establishing four *maṭhas* to ca. 16th century, then it seems clear that the Nampūtiri *maṭhas* in Kerala most probably could not have adopted the Śāṅkara affiliation before that time. However, as was already mentioned before, the concept does not seem to have been prevalent until the 17th century. This is the time when one of the most important vernacular hagiographies of Śāṅkara in Kerala – *Śāṅkarācāryacarita* of Govindanātha dated to ca. 17th century, was possibly composed. The text seems to be one of the earliest Keralan hagiographies of Śāṅkara and constitutes a foundation of the philosopher’s vernacular legend. Thus, it seems likely that it was ca. 17th century that the Nampūtiri *maṭhas* were assimilated into the Śāṅkara’s affiliation.

Nampūtiri *maṭhas*, being a living social institution, appear to have a life story that goes through different life stages. As already observed, Nampūtiri monasticism seems to have its origin in the institution of the temple *saṃnyāsins* referred to as *bhaṭāra-tiruvaṭi* / *paḷāra-tiruvaṭi*. However, in the course of time, its institutional character seems to have evolved and gone through a process of transformation, perhaps in order to meet the needs of a changing social climate and to gain a new clientele. It seems that the Nampūtiri *maṭhas*, which once had been residences of the *bhaṭāra-tiruvaṭis* / *paḷāra-tiruvaṭis* attached to particular temples, started to be transformed into more independent – separate from the temple – institutions. The circumstances of this remodelling remain uncertain. Perhaps, at some point, the temple *saṃnyāsins* commenced losing their influence in the power structure of the temple? Or just the opposite, creating independent structures and connecting them into a network of religious actors was another development of the brahmanical corporations, which had a vast influence on the society and economy of medieval Kerala. From circa the end of the 8th century, the brahmanical temple-cantered corporations had a vast influence on the social and economic landscape of Kerala. As Kesavan Veluthat states: “[...] since much of the land was under the control of these corporations, the Brāhmaṇas came to enjoy considerable economic privileges. They were naturally able to command a large number of privileges over the rest of the society” .

Nevertheless, the Nampūtiri *maṭhas*, acting as distinct units, appear to have become influential and wealthy brahmanical institutions which were receiving grants and donations from local rulers, magnates etc., and that had under their management not only their branch *maṭhas* (*kīlēṭam maṭham*) but also appurtenant temples and lands that were a source of significant income. However, the said transformation must have demanded the acquisition of a new historical identity conferring a legitimacy rooted in the past . It is under these complex circumstances that seem to have emerged in Kerala – plausibly ca. 16th / 17th century – that the vernacular Advaita Vedānta hagiographic tradition appears to have been designed to bestow legitimacy upon the Nampūtiri *maṭhas*. Adopting the Śāṅkara-paradigm monasticism, modelled after the Advaita Vedānta *maṭhas* of the Vijayanagara Empire, must have entailed appealing new possibilities for institutional development. Thereby, the significance of the brahmanical renunciant tradition in Kerala was reimagined not only in the local but also in the transregional context. Furthermore, it seems that not only was the sole Śāṅkara attribution a borrowed concept from Vijayanagara brahmanical monasticism but also the very idea, together with the pattern, of creating a monastic network. From the 14th century the brahmanical *maṭhas* were becoming thriving institutions in the Vijayanagara due to the generous royal patronage. The Vijayanagara court was encouraging the brahmanical monasteries to establish branch *maṭhas* by means of land grants and munificent donations. As Valerie Stoker notes: “[...] the court clearly relied on these [brahmin sectarian] institutions to implement many features of its statecraft. [...] Maṭhas replicated the court’s power and authority in far-flung locations in both symbolic and practical ways” . “[...] By taking on courtly emblems and titles, the monastery symbolically linked its authority to that of the Vijayanagara court” . Thus, it seems possible that these wealthy brahmanical *maṭhas*, which were growing in influence and were developing monastic networks across the Vijayanagara empire, might have appeared to Nampūtiri *saṃnyāsins* to be an alluring model to follow.

For the most perplexing aspect of the Nampūtiri monasticism’s evolution remains the branching process and the creation of a pan-Keralan monastic network. The idea of Śāṅkara founding four *maṭhas* in Ṭṛṣṣūr shaped the perception of the vernacular monasticism’s structure – in this approach four *maṭhas* in Ṭṛṣṣūr are the main “parent” monasteries that radiate across the whole of Kerala and create a nexus of dependent branch monasteries. This particular conception makes the city of Ṭṛṣṣūr the very centre of Nampūtiri brahmanical monasticism in Kerala.

Nevertheless, what seems noteworthy is the fact that the Śāṅkara affiliation inscribed Nampūtiri *maṭhas* as not only in the local – pan-Keralan – monastic network but also in the transregional religious network. That would explain the sort of relationship of the Śāṅkaric Nampūtiri *maṭhas* with Śṛṅgeri and Kāñcī *vidyāpīṭhas*. The photos of the Śṛṅgeri and Kāñcī Śāṅkarācāryas are hung in the *maṭhas* in Tṛṣṣūr. However, although the Nampūtiri *saṃnyāsins* do not deny the affiliation with Śṛṅgeri and Kāñcī *maṭhas*, the vernacular tradition seems to have been to a large degree independent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the vernacular Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition of the Nampūtiri brahmins in Kerala can be understood as an integral component of wider transregional monastic networks that spread across South India. Although rooted in local institutional developments, particularly the earlier temple-centred ascetic structures, Keralan monasticism gradually became embedded within broader South Indian Advaita religious and institutional circuits. Through the adoption of the Śāṅkara affiliation, the development of clustered parent *maṭhas* and dependent branch institutions, and participation in shared symbolic and intellectual frameworks, the Nampūtiri *maṭhas* not only became part of this wider monastic network but also actively participated in its functioning. At the same time, the structural organization of Keralan monasticism appears, at least to some extent, to have been shaped on the model of established South Indian monastic networks, suggesting a process of institutional adaptation and inscription into an already existing transregional religious landscape.

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