

A Few Facets of Sri Vaishnava Identity (circa. 2018 CE)

Transcript of a Presentation

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A few facets of Sri Vaishnava Identity c.2018 CE



Sri RT Chari's kindness and generosity to me continues.... Last year, he put me on this stage to help me launch my first published book "*Unusual Essays of an Unknown Sri Vaishnava*". Today, he has dragged me out from behind the writing desk --- which is my zone of comfort --- and put me here behind this public podium at the TAG Centre. Sir, I thank you for giving me a bit of spotlight. In front of an august audience like this, I know I am in a bit of spot too. Ladies & Gentlemen, I confess I feel a sense of trepidation standing here before you and here is the reason why:

I know most of you are already very knowledgeable about the subject of my talk. I see so many accomplished scholars seated here. To you my talk is going to be really nothing but old hat. A few of you not so knowledgeable are here, I know, only out of friendly curiosity. To both of you, I must say clearly: I am not a scholar.... I'm an "*Unknown Sri Vaishnava*" of the laity. And so, nothing you are about to hear from me is anything you cannot yourself access from sources in the public domain... i.e. history books, research-papers and monographs. And all of what I'm going to present is available in good libraries and of course the Internet.

So, under the circumstances, you would be right to ask me, *“What are you then doing here today on stage?”*.

Well, my answer is this: Many months ago, one afternoon, Sri RT Chary called me up on the phone at home just to casually inquire how my published book was doing in the market, especially amongst Sri Vaishnava readers. As we ended our telephone talk, Sri Chary suddenly put a question to me which completely surprised me! *“Tell me, before Ramanuja’s times, did Sri Vaishnavas have any separate identity? Weren’t we all just the same Brahmins in Tamil Nadu? Maybe we all were Smaarthaa-Advaitins only?”*

In response to his question, I managed to stutter out something vague and sketchy drawing from my limited knowledge of Sri Vaishnava history. Sri Chary was not very convinced. So, before ringing off, he told me, *“Why don’t you do a bit of desk-top research on the subject and deliver a talk at the TAG Centre? I’m sure it would be of interest to our members.”*

As all of you know, when Sri Chary makes a request --- and only because he is such a good family-friend to me --- it seems like an elder’s command. It’s difficult to say **No**. In that moment, my goose was cooked. I said **Yes** to him. And that’s how and why you find me here today standing before you to deliver this talk. Ladies and gentlemen, at the end, if you think it was of some interest to you after all, I will take all the credit. If not, Sri Chary will take all the blame.

Long after my telephonic conversation that day with Sri Chary, and while doing his suggested desk-top research, I began to realize that questions like his were also being posed by many people worldwide on the Internet.... Here are a few typical examples I came across:

SLIDE 2 and 3

Questions of Identity

- What is the origin of the name “Ayyangar”?
- Is the term “Ayyangar” and “Sri Vaishnava” synonymous?
 - Pre-Ramanuja’s times, did SVs have any identity?
- How did the name of “Iyer/Ayyar” originate?
- What is common between Ayyangar and Iyer? And what is different?
- Pre-Ramanuja, were Vedic-religionists all one only?

Questions of Identity

- Does being an *Ayyangar* or *Iyer* have anything to do with *Advaita* philosophy? How does an *Advaitin* differ from a *SV*?
- If *Advaitins* reject idol-worship, why do *Iyer-Advaitins*, just like *Ayyangars*, also go to temples to worship idols there?
- Were the *Azhwars*, *acharyas* of *SVs*, known as *SVs* in their own times?
- `Why today's *Tenkalai* and *Vadagalai Ayyangars* still maintain difference? What are their differences? When, where, how and why?

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When I looked at all the above questions, it struck me suddenly that all of them had one remarkable thing in common: they were questions related to ***Sri Vaishnava Identity***. Fundamentally, they were all asking:

***“Who am I?”,
“Where have I come from?”,
“Where am I today?” and
“Where am I headed tomorrow?”***

What is *Identity*? In the new millennium, what is meant by a *Sri Vaishnava Identity* in India?

The word “*identity*” has come to assume a certain assertive, even aggressive meaning in our public discourse today. In our country we see people and communities embroiled in some way or other in the so-called “*politics of identity*”. Expressions like “*the social dynamics of caste identity*”, “*struggles of class-identity*” and very recently, even “*gender-identity*” etc. are part of the common discourse these days. If we believe mass media today, much of contemporary India, day in and day out, is engaged in great exploration and re-discovery of its new-found “*cultural identity*” as a Hindu nation.

Whether one likes the idea or not, the fact is that “*Identity*” and “*History*” are inextricably bound together. As a Sri Vaishnava, if I want to explore and understand my “*identity*” in new India, I must hearken to my own long history. You cannot tell the story of Sri Vaishnava identity without delving into Sri Vaishnava history.

Now, Sri Vaishnava history is such an ancient and long one, it is impossible to compress the entire history of the Sri Vaishnavas into a 90-minute Microsoft PowerPoint presentation and then try to distill from it too --- in all rich and comprehensive detail --- the cultural identity of the community. The best that I can do under the circumstances, is to present to you just a few “*facets*” of Sri Vaishnava identity. Which is why, as you will notice, I have not titled my talk today as “*The Sri Vaishnava Identity*” nor as “*Brief History of Sri Vaishnavism*” ... The title I have chosen for my talk today is a “*Few facets of Sri Vaishnava Identity*” drawn from my own limited reading and understanding of Sri Vaishnava history.

Unlike other ongoing “*identity*” discoveries in India today, Sri Vaishnava identity has nothing to do with “*asserting*” any identity. In seeking to know his identity, a Sri Vaishnava is not agitating for any social space or recognition. He is not advancing any community interests nor is he making any claims to the right to enjoy any secular advantage or benefit. Please remember Sri Vaishnava population worldwide is so infinitesimal, it would be impossible for it to derive its identity from its demography. According to unofficial 2011 census report, Sri Vaishnava numbers today account for no more than **a maximum of c.75,000 in the whole world.**

The prime motive for a Sri Vaishnava’s search for his identity – i.e. in history, roots, heritage and ancestry – I believe is really quite simple: It is a deep spiritual quest for the *ideal of an ethical life*. It is search for a certain way of living, for a certain human behavioral pathway that will lead to personal fulfilment, freedom and salvation in life

But I am afraid I am now getting far too ahead of myself ... Let me pause and take this presentation forward step by step. Let me first share with you the bibliography on Sri Vaishnava history I consulted and relied upon in preparing my talk. My list of academic sources is not meant to be a historian’s tool-box. I constructed it merely to provide myself – being the ordinary *Unknown Sri Vaishnava* that I am – a few contextualized narratives with the help of which I could theorize, or even speculate a bit, about what I believe are some striking “*facets*” of the *Sri Vaishnava* identity.

This long history of Sri Vaishnavas can be pieced together by 4 main sources:

1. **Archaeology**
2. **Epigraphy**
3. **Literature**
4. **Traditional works**

1. **Archaeology:** Unfortunately, in the absence of any systematic survey and descriptions of monuments either by the ASI or by the scholars in the field, archaeology in South India, cannot be considered a very fruitful source of history of Sri Vaishnava identity.
2. **Epigraphy:** Some material is available in the form of stone and cave inscriptions, copper-plates etc. There are some epigraphical accounts, here and there, discovered from the times of later **Pallava** and **Chola** dynasties relating to works of a few *Azhwars* and *Naayanmars* e.g. *Utrararamerur* and *Ennaayiram* inscriptions. But epigraphical sources, generally speaking, are again sparse and not of great help in reconstructing Sri Vaishnava history.

3. **Literature:** As an expression of the aspirations and achievements of the life and culture of the people, literature provides excellent sources. In this regard, in Tamil Nadu we have the *Sangam Period Literature* (2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE) and *Naalaayira Divya Prabhandham* and *Thevaaram* literature (5th-9th century CE) as main sources of history of the Sri Vaishnava community in those respective periods in history.
4. **Traditional Works:** More than even literature, by far the most copious and productive sources for reconstructing a Sri Vaishnava identity from the past are what may be called “*traditional works*” (*sampradaya grantham*) of the community itself. These are “*quasi-historical*” records, texts, treatises, biographies and hagiographies providing wealth of historical information on the Sri Vaishnava community. But they are ingrown, inbred, and out and out, insider perspectives. The most outstanding of such traditional works are known as “*guru-parampara prabhaavams*” and “*grantha-s*” and they give genealogies of saints and acharyas, narratives of life-stories and religious works. By not improperly interpreting these traditional works --- I repeat --- by *not improperly interpreting these traditional works*, it is possible to reconstruct the history and identity of Sri Vaishnavas.

The bibliography I share here with you now is drawn from both Sri Vaishnava **Literature** and **Traditional Works** just described and they belong to the discrete periods of Sri Vaishnava history mentioned. **SLIDE 4, 5 and 6**

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Because the subject of **Sri Vaishnava Identity** is so awfully complex, and I’ve only one hour to deal with it, I propose discussing its various facets in the manner of an amateur pointillist artist. I am going to first identify “dots or points in history” --- i.e. the dots of **WHAT, WHEN, HOW, WHERE, WHO** and **WHY** ... And then as in Pointillism artwork, I am going to try connect all the dots in such a way that, at the end, the connected dots will by themselves hopefully form an image: the overall image of the Sri Vaishnava

Identity. **(Slide 7).** The dots I have identified are *Timeline, Geography, Customs, Language, Rulers, Acharyas and Preceptors*.

Vaishnava Identity: Facets

WHEN	WHERE	WHY	HOW	WHO	WHAT
Historical timeline of development of Vaishnava thought and beliefs.	Geography: <i>Kanchi-Sri Rangam</i>	Language: <i>Sanskrit-Tamil</i>	Temples: <i>dispersion of 106 divya-desams</i>	Rulers: Pallava, Pandya, Chola, Raya, Nayak	Federalization of "achaarya-parampara"
		Overwhelming hermeneutics	Customs: <i>"tirumann", "sattr-marai"</i>	Achaaryas and raja-guru-s	Identity intoxication
		Doctrinaire interpretations			Modern Socio - politico-economic conditions: Court litigation

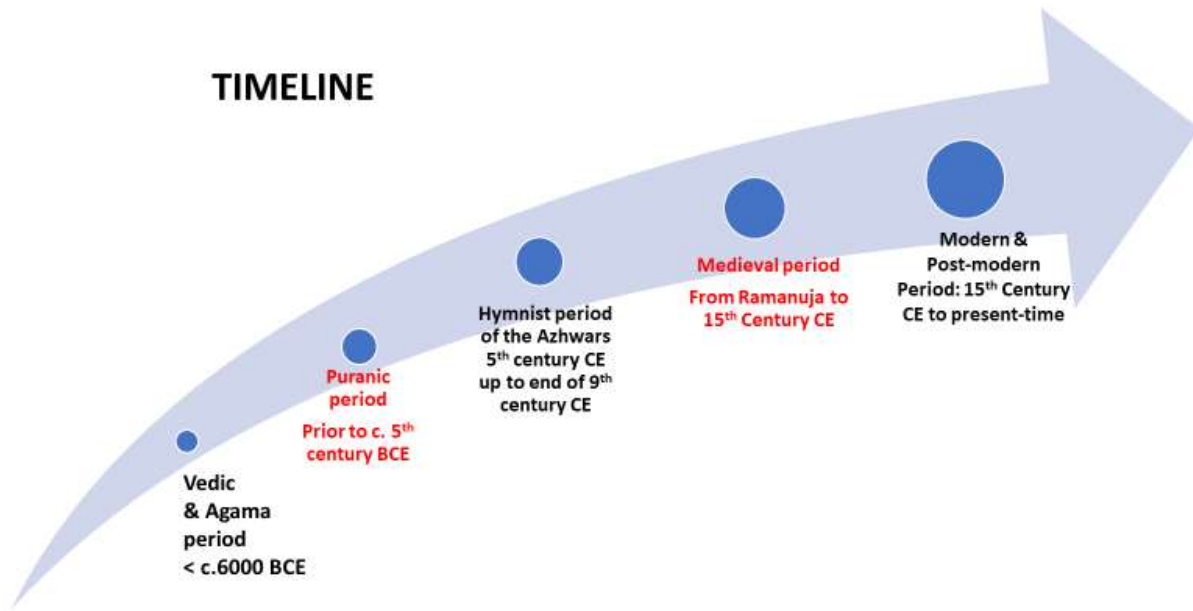
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Slide 8: The dots of history that I seek to join stretches from c.5000 BCE to the present day... with milestones marked as *Vedic* and *Agama period, Puraana period, Hymnist, Medieval, Modern* and *Post-modern periods*. Let us quickly cover this vast ground.

TIMELINE



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SLIDE 9: Ladies and Gentlemen, we are going to spend considerable time now on this one slide dealing with the **WHEN** of Sri Vaishnava identity. I crave your patience and attention please as you follow my narrative:



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We start right at the top. The roots of Sri Vaishnava identity can be traced back to the *Rg Veda*, the oldest religious literature of the world. *Vishnu* is one of the principal gods described in the *Rg Veda*, the other gods being *Mitra*, *Rudra*, *Varuna*, *Agni* etc.

The word *Vishnu* means he who is “all-pervasive” and “protects and sustains” ... Speaking mostly in metaphors, the **Rg Veda** describes *Vishnu* as he who pervades the 3 worlds – (i) *terra firma* (ii) the subterranean worlds of land and sea and (iii) the heavenly spaces above. “*trini pada vichakrame vishnur gopaa adaabhyaha...ato dharmaani dhaarayan...*”..

Vishnu, is also the substrate and immanent spirit of the universe.... *Vishnu* is conceived by the *Rg Veda* as the *Ultimate Reality* who reigns supreme in heaven beyond which nothing can be conceived.... He is *Paramaatma* and his place is in “*parama padam*” --- “*tad vishnoh paramam padam ...and Vishhnor yath paramam padam...*”. The **Vishnu Sahasranamam** confirms this: “*putAma-paramAtma cha muktAnam parama-gatih:*”..... “*ParamAtma*” is “*putAtma*” and “*muktAtma*” meaning “*a Being who is ever-unconditioned; in whom reside eternally an infinitude of perfect and blissful qualities*”.

From this fundamental Vedic conception of *One Supreme Being* as its source, Vaishnavism has arisen.

In later Vedic times, *Vishnu* was also associated with a god called **Bhaga**... who had extraordinary powers to bestow auspicious blessings. *Vishnu* thus became “*bhagavath*” and later in time, during the post-Vedic age of the *Agamaas*, the worship of *Bhaga* became *Bhaagavaatha-Upaasana* in which the conception of *Vishnu* underwent deification and came to be known as *Vishnu Upaasana*. (Box 1 in Slide 9)

In the later *Puraana* period (Box 2 in Slide 9), in the *Mahabharatha* we find a clear reference to *Vishnu-upaasana* being practiced in accordance with the *Paancharaatra Agama* system based on the *Ekaayana* recension of the *Shukla Yajur Veda*. And in the *Vedanta Sutra* or *Brahma Sutra* of Sage *Vyasa* also, we see clear reference to the *Paancharaatra* system of worship.

Later, another *Agama* based on the *Rg Veda Kalpa Sutras* was expounded by Sage *Vaikhana*s and developed by 4 *rshis* *Marichi*, *Bhrugu*, *Atri* and *Kaashyapa*. Their work survives today as treatises and manuals. They are known as *Samhitas* and *Smritis*. The *Paancharaatra Agama* alone has about 225 *samhitas*.

Somewhere around the same time as *Bhagavath-upaasana* as religion was evolving, in parallel, there also grew simultaneously, 2 great and similar offshoots of Vedic religion inspired by 2 other Vedic gods viz. *Rudra* and the goddess *Shakthi*. These developed into 2 well-known *Agamas*--- known today as *Saiva Agamas* and *Sakta agamaas*. To go into the relative comparison of these *Agamas* is not relevant for our talk today. It will suffice to say here that according to the *Vaishnava Agamas*, *Vishnu* known in the *Upanishads*, hailed as *Naaraayana*, is the *One Supreme Brahman*, the one God which the *Rg Veda* was referring to when it said “*ekam sad viprah bahudah vadanti*” There is but only one Truth that is differently spoken about “*naarayana parambrahma tattvam naaraayanah parah*”, says the *Taittiriya Upanishad* too and “*naaraayanaaya vidmahe vaasudevaaya dhimahee, tanno vishnuf prachodayaath*”....

There is thus enough reason to conclude that a cult of worshipping *Vishnu* developed during a period which is later than the *Vedas* and earlier than the *Mahabharatha*. The age of the *Paancharaatra* and

Vaikhāṇasa Āgamas is disputed by scholars to be anywhere between 3000 BCE to 800 CE. But what we can be reasonably certain of is that it was during this same period that formal modes of worshipping the Vaishnava God of “*bhagavath*” or “*Vasudeva*” began to evolve -- side by side with *Saivite* and *Sakta* religions. They evolved from being abstract *tattva*-s and mystical insight into elaborate systems of formal, ritualistic worship involving esoteric consecration idols, construction of temples for this purpose and observance of certain prescribed daily rites and festivals formulated in the *Āgamas*.

(Box 3 in Slide 9) Vedic societies and common people in India by and large faithfully adopted the Agamic modes of worship during the long stretch of history between c. 500 BCE up to 800 CE.

During this period, religious life predominantly meant engaging in Vedic *yagnya* or sacrifice for the priestly classes according to the *smṛiti*; and for the common people, it meant temple-worship according to the *Āgamas* based on *samhita*. It was the general order of the day. Thus, we might say, *Siva* and *Vishnu upaasana* and *Sakta tantra* worship were widespread throughout India. Collectively, the “*samhita*” and “*smṛiti*” texts, “*itihasas*” and “*puraanas*” became sacred scripture of all India.

During this period in history, India also witnessed several parallel and great movements in philosophy and religious faith. First there was *Buddhism*, then the *Meemaamsakas* and then there was *Adi Sankara's Advaita* movement. We need to quickly recapitulate these movements since they are very relevant to our understanding of the evolution of the Sri Vaishnava identity.

1. In the Puranic period, Vedic thought and ideas were making rather slow progress trying to keep up with the ever changing political and social climate of the times when kings fought wars and kingdoms rose, declined and fell. People were treated as mere subjects to be used and sometimes abused. Around this time, *brahminical* and intellectual elites were ruling the roost with rituals, sacerdotalism, prevalence of *yagnya*-s, *homa*-s and rigid regimen of procedures and protocol imposed by ‘*samhita*’ and “*smṛiti*” texts and with whom common people began to feel no bonding at all.

Quote: “... the influence of the priests at one time became so markedly preponderant that the Vedic Gods themselves almost began to disappear from the vision of the sacrificers. And what loomed largely before their eyes was the performance of the sacrifice in accordance with the strict letter of law.... When mere sacrificial details became too much all-absorbing, all considerations regarding who or what the deity is, and what its powers are, why we should worship it, were thrown into the background.... As all thought bearing upon the vital question of godhood in religion disappeared in that manner, what happened to be left behind was nothing more than mere form overloaded with numerous complicated and unattractive details involving much useless expenditure of time, wealth and labour”. (Prof. Rangachar Rao Bahadur- 1909)

2. Mainly as a rejection of such ritualistic Vedic religion, Buddhism and Jainism then arose and spread to large parts of India. **The Kalabhra dynasty** (Tamil: கலப்பிரர் Kalappirar) ruled over the entire ancient Tamil country between the 3rd and the 7th century in an era of South Indian history called the *Kalabhra interregnum*. The *Kalabhras*, possibly Jain, displaced the kingdoms of the early Cholas, early Pandyas and Chera dynasties by a revolt. Anti-Vedic philosophies such as

shoonya-vaada, mayaavada, nassthika-vaada... flourished in large parts of India in the wake of Buddhism during this period. The ancient religion of Vedic sacerdotalism went into defensive mode as even powerful kings of vast empires such as *Kalinga* (King Asoka) and the *Deccan* embraced this new religion of Buddha which seemed to stress the ethical far more than the spiritual aspects of religious life. Buddha started with the proposition that life is ever full of sorrow, pain and misery, and that to get out of such a life of grief and pain and misery once and for all, and to go back to it no more, ought to be the chief purpose of life – the very *summum bonum*.... And there is really nothing beyond that. The Buddha is reported to have told his disciples: “*Look to the ethical life, don’t waste your time in vain metaphysical wrangling regarding the nature of Brahman or the destiny of the soul*”. And “*There is no good in trying to solve problems about God and the soul, and that ceremonial worship and sacrifice as elements of religion and aids to conduct are very much worse than meaningless mockery*”.

3. This philosophy was very attractive to people but only temporarily. Around the 8th century, Buddhism/Jainism too became spent forces in India after the Kalabhrar kings were defeated by a coalition of Pallava, Chera and Pandya kings. Buddhism went about trying to convert people to its fold by aggressively denigrating the ancient Vedic faith. Buddha’s true message got lost in overzealous propaganda. As it grew in reach and popularity, these anti-Vedic religions too gradually became organized religion complete with their own hierarchies, rigid ritualism and eroding standards of ethics. People once again got disillusioned by Buddhism’s utter lack of a solid philosophical core and by its strident atheism which had nothing to offer by way of equal replacement for what was in the Vedas. Buddhism had no convincing answer to the fundamental question: “*Is there a God and if there is one, what is his relationship to the universe*”? This aspect of philosophy Buddhism and Jainism purposely ignored even though the human heart longed to know it. Buddhism could no longer thus serve people’s deep-seated spiritual yearning for devotion to a God, for a conception of a sublime afterlife and for a satisfactory account of the real meaning of human existence.
4. With Buddhism waning, an existential vacuum existed in India. The empire of the old *meemaamsaka*-s and their *saastras of smriti and samhitas* did make a brief come back but they did so with an unseemly vengeance. They tried to vindicate the Vedic religion by establishing its infallible authority as a self-evident, self-existent and timeless body of truth. This they once again tried to do by resuscitating the nearly dead ritualism of the old Vedic religion with its many and multiform sacrifices. If Buddhism could be described as a revolution against the Vedas during this period, you could say a counter-revolution was staged by reactionary *Meemaamsaka* forces in India.

People and History thus became deeply divided and were in utter despair... It was a Hamlet-moment for religious life in general in India: ***To be or not be....*** was the question!

5. Into such a state of deep religious limbo in India, around the 8th century, stepped the giant of a Vedantic guru **Adi Sankara** who revived and rejuvenated “*sanatana dharma*” through a new brand of philosophy called *Advaita*. It was strongly anti- “*purva-meemaamsa*” and rejected the

old-style, decadent ritualism of the Vedas. It also succeeded in establishing the *Upanishads* as the crowning glory of the Vedas. The age of **Vedanta** was born.

Sankara showed people that it was possible to accept the *meemaamsakas* views regarding the eternality and infallibility of the Vedas but without having to accept their exaggeration of faith in its sacerdotal ceremonialism. And on the strength of the same Vedas and Upanishads, Sankara was able to show to people, kings and rulers across India that the agnostic ethics and humanitarianism of Buddhism was far inferior to Vedantic ethics and humanitarianism. The whole edifice of Sankara's system of Vedanta was based on the metaphysics of pantheistic monism.... i.e. the concept of one *Brahman*, a universal super soul with which the human soul is identical, that everything in the universe is but an illusory manifestation of that *Brahman* who is in fact the only reality. And that salvation or *moksha* for man lies in becoming absorbed into that one absolute Reality.

Sankara's Advaita philosophy was that of "*gnyana*". It soon vanquished both *Meemaamsakas* and Buddhists alike in India. But as a theology, Advaita suffered greatly from want of a strong connect with ordinary people. It was too philosophical for the common human mind which could not derive religious satisfaction from it. "*The sense of man's dependence upon God, his instinct of love for God, and his felt need for an always unfailing divine support could not be easily satisfied by the sublimely impersonal God or Brahman of Sankara's monism. ... In the matter of establishing the obligation of pure ethical conduct based on sinlessness and selflessness in life, there was a deep longing in people's hearts for a personal God, and for a more emotional and less intellectual religion than that of Sankara.*" (**Prof. Rangacharya Rao Bahadur -1909**).

6. It was then that another great historical tectonic shift took place in religious life in India... **(Box 4in Slide 9)** between the 6th and 9th century CE. The name of the shift is **Bhakthi**.

A mood of religious ecstasy seemed to have taken over the spirit of the country in these times when Vaishnava and Saiva *bhakthi* movements began to sprout all over India. **A.K.Ramanujam**, the poet, tells the story of this great phase of *Bhakthi* in history very well:

*"Developments in the north during the period of the Guptas (320-540 CE), truly prepared the ground for this mood. The Gupta Kings called themselves devotees of God ... "bhaagavataas". They took the name of the gods, put the figures of Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort and Varaha, his incarnation on their coins, and made mythology a state concern, enlisting particularly Vishnu and his heroic incarnations for their politics. **The Guptas sponsored Vishnu and almost believed that Vishnu sponsored the Gupta empire.** Not only were the first Hindu temples built and the first Hindu icons sculpted during this period, but the official forms of Hindus mythology were set down in great syncretic Sanskrit texts called *puraanaas*. By the 5th century CE, Vishnu, Siva, their families and minions and enemies seem to have become as real as the human dynasties."*

"In South India, by the 6th century, the Pallavas (and later Pandyas) too had arrived. Their inscriptions record the end of one era (the anti-Vedic) in South India history and the beginning of a new one. In the culture of this time, the two "classicisms" of India, that of the Guptas and that of the Tamils seem to have met. From the 6th to the early 9th century (when the Cholas again

made a decisive comeback), the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Pandyas of Madurai made Bhakthi blossom in Tamil Nadu. The imperial presence of Sanskrit, with its brahminical smriti texts of the Vedas and Upanishads, was a presence against which bhakthi in Tamil defined itself, though not always defiantly. Bhakthi thus arose out of the meeting of Sanskritic religions and mythology with Tamil conceptions of the same....”

It was during this period (6th to 9th century CE) that the great Tamil *bhakti* saints of South India were born. They helped spread the Vaishnava and Saiva faith. The Vaishnava saints were 12 in number and known as the *Azhwars* while the Saivite saints numbered 63 and known as *Naayanmaars*.

The *Azhwars* became the pre-eminent precursors of later Sri Vaishnavism in that they were the first to show a path for ordinary people towards religious fulfillment. It was a path that was shorn of too much Upanishad profundity or elaborate “*smaartha*” ritualism. It was instead a new and unique path of love, devotion and ethical conduct. In their mystical works in Tamil, “the *naalayira divya prabhandham*”, a *bhaktha* at last found a new and simple pathway to God.

It was the *Azhwars* who were the first to fully understand the heart of a *bhaktha*: A *bhaktha* was not content to worship a god in word and ritual nor was he content to grasp God in a theology; he *needed to possess God*, and to *be possessed by Him*. He needed to also sing, to dance, to make poetry, painting, shrines, sculpture: to embody and personalize God in every possible way.

In *Bhakthi*, thus all arts of human invention became “*techniques of ecstasy*” and “*incitements to religious possession*”. The common man’s need then was to have a God who would love him, who would rush to help him and render protection unto him whenever he got into difficulties – a God at whose feet he might throw himself unreservedly so that He in his divine wisdom might do with him whatever He chose.

Sri Vaishnava “*sampradayam*”, the tradition of the Sri Vaishnavas, was thus truly born then!

Ladies and Gentlemen, as you all know, two rivers the *Alkananda* and *Bhagirathi* meet at the confluence of *DevaPrayag*. Both rivers have their sources in the *Himalayas*, but one flows from *Badrinath* and the other from *Gangotri*. Gushing forth from *Devapryag* thereafter, the two rivers give up their individual names and identity and flow as one river called the **River Ganga**.

Sri Ramanujacharya’s arrival on the scene in Vaishnava history in 1019-1137 CE, we might say, was in many ways the *Devaprayag* of 2 mighty streams of evolutionary waves! One wave is called *Upanishad* and the other wave is *Bhakthi*. Both waves had a common source in the *Himalayan Gangotri* of the Vedas; they flowed separately for a while but mingled as one in the end. In Ramanujacharya’s time and thereafter, they began flowing as one great river called **Sri Vaishnavism**.

Ramanuja of course had several predecessors who prepared the way for Sri Vaishnavism and he had successors too who carried forward its torch for him, as the history of the Sri Vaishnava religion distinctly shows. **Box (5 in Slide 9)** and **Box (6 in Slide 9)**. But to Ramanuja alone will go the credit for having taken elements from the ancient religious Vedic worship of “*bhaga*” and combining with the

Agamic ways of “*Vishnu-upaasana*” and then infusing it with the Vedantic idea of Sankara’s higher pantheistic monism. It was Ramanuja’s genius that made *Advaita* or absolute non-dualism blossom and fructify into *Visishtadvaita*, or qualified non-dualism.

Ramanuja rejected the idea that realization of *oneness with God* – the idea that the soul of man and the soul of the universe are one – could ever provide a sound basis for man’s moral conduct in this world nor be valid means to attain salvation or *moksha*. He declared instead *Bhakti*, devotion to God, to be the most suitable means for common humanity to achieve purity, sinlessness and selflessness. For him true ethical life lay in a life of *bhakti*... And *bhakti* unfailingly led to *moksha*.

Ladies and Gentlemen, with this high-altitude bird’s eye view Sri Vaishnava history, you may ask me what all this means for the Sri Vaishnava identity. Well, I say it provides at least some answers to the many questions with which we began this presentation about pre-Ramanuja Vaishnava identity, **the first one being about a Sri Vaishnava identity before Ramanujacharya.**

I can say now that Sri Vaishnavas did have an identity long before Ramanujacharya. The “bhaagavata-religion” was practiced for centuries concurrently along with Saivas and Saktas of the country who worshipped their own respective Vedic Gods. While all of them claimed roots in the Vedas, each of them however followed different Agamas or systems of worship. Idol-worship was common to all Agamas and thus to both Sri Vaishnavas and non-Sri Vaishnavas, temples and worship of icons consecrated inside the temple were part of ancient tradition. At no point in the history of India (until Islam came into the country) was iconoclasm ever an active creed in this country.

There are answers too for the other questions raised and we shall come to them in a minute. But before that, let me tell you what lessons I personally have been able to draw from this brief overview of the history of Sri Vaishnava identity:

- I believe that my identity as a Sri Vaishnava is not **history-centric**. My identity is a **timeless one** going back to Vedic times. My identity does not begin with *Ramanujacharya* nor should it ever end with *Ramanujacharya*. The history of Sri Vaishnava identity clearly tells me that it is a great amalgam of age-old traditions, sacred ideals and cultures. It is not so much a system of religion as it is an enlightened religious attitude. Which is the reason why Ramanuja’s *bhakti* movement spread everywhere to India and became the much larger Vaishnava movement and whose various denominations today are estimated to be around c. 550 million --- sects of the *Madhvas*, the *Ramanandis*, *Vallabhaas*, *Nimbarkaas*, *Chaitanyas* and followers of *Kabir*.

Rao Bahadur Prof. Rangacharya in 1909 said it beautifully:

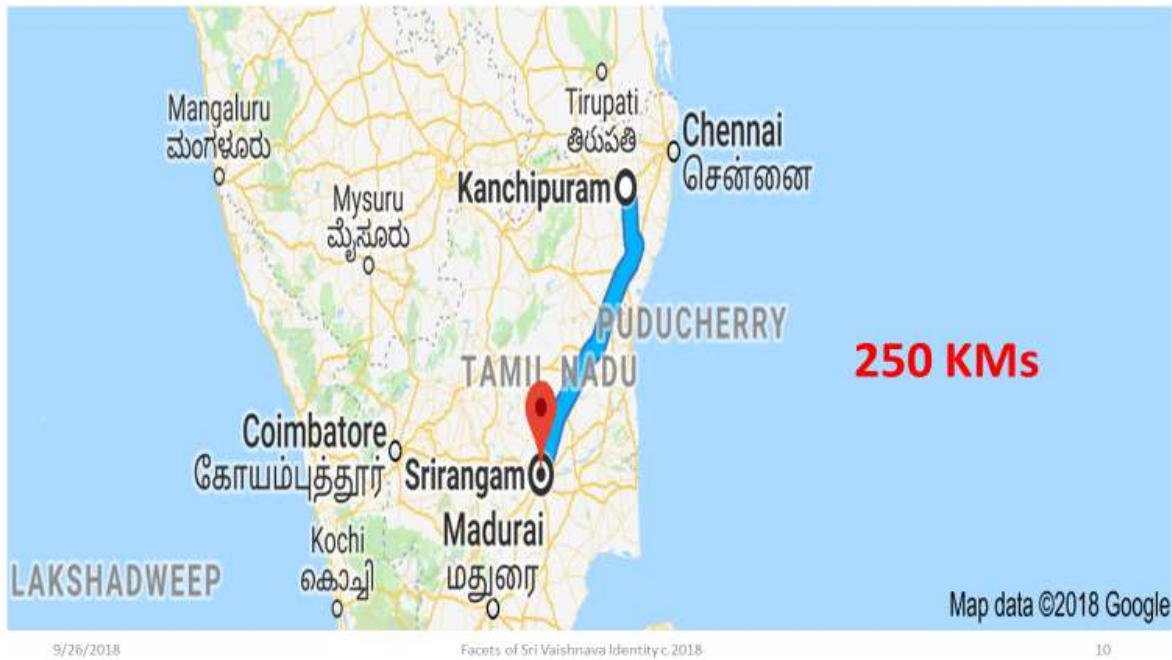
“As soon as we put together our philosophic thoughts into a system, there is a natural tendency for that system to lose its spontaneity and originality and to become lifeless and hidebound. They lose their power to expand, and the germs of originality in them become crushed under the great pressure of the mechanical forces of systematization ... Luckily, the Upanishads were not like modern philosophers; they did not endeavor to build up systems. Their function as teachers was to give free expression to what from

time to time they as seers saw was truth. They left system-making to their later and weaker followers...”

The Sri Vaishnava identity I wish to believe was thus like the **ever-flowing Ganga**. Stream and waves of many influences flowed into it across the centuries. All those influences only helped to broaden its path and enrich its waters ... But whatever flowed into this great river did not however singularly define its larger identity. If this important facet about Sri Vaishnava identity is not appreciated—that it is indeed a large river in evolutionary flow and not some stagnant religious backwater in this country... we will only be turning the mighty River Ganga into a pool.

History tells me that the Sri Vaishnava identity was not the product of a system... It is and will always remain an inspiration.

Let's turn now from History to Sri Vaishnava Geography. (Slide 10)



Ladies and Gentlemen, the fertile land stretching between the two cities Kanchipuram in the north of Tamil Nadu and Sri Rangam in the south, was the cradle in which Sri Vaishnava identity was born, grew and flourished. They were both cultural epicenters for the Sri Vaishnava faith during and after Ramanuja.

The theory of a Post-Vedic Aryan invasion ever happening in South India stands discredited today by scholarly evidence produced by many modern scholars like **Dr A. Nagaswamy**. But we have just seen how broad the sweep of history has been across India in the last 3000 years. So, I believe that it would

not be unreasonable for us to imagine that into Southern India, history must have witnessed several thousands of **internal migrations**, back and forth, from the north, east and west taking place.

These *internal migrations* could've been triggered by any number of causes, both violent and peaceful. There were wars, famine, epidemic and social repression and oppression in this country over the ages. There were also people moving from one part of the country to other parts purely for reasons of occupation, trade, employment, learning, marriage or kinship ties. It is therefore not difficult for us to imagine that there must have been from time to time in history – both in the pre-Christian and post-Christian millennia --- several millions of migrant populations that moved from the northern plains of India to the southern peninsula and *vice versa*.

(The vice versa did happen! There is a very interesting story Sri RT Chari shared with me of recent history. Between 1644 and 1652, there was a family of Sri Vaishnava Ayyangars from Ambasamudram in Tirunelveli who were invited by the King of Kashipur, Panchakot Gournarayan Singh Deo, to become temple priests in the local Vishnu temple in the remote village of Gadibero, Purulia District, West Bengal, and given 1455 acres of land as gift of subsistence! That family of Ayyangars is found even today there! Similarly, if you go today to Pushkar in Rajasthan, you will see naturalized Tamil Sri Vaishnava families living there with very old roots).

These *internally migrating populations*, we can conjecture, could have been of varied, multifarious racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic profiles. There could have been Vedic *ritualists*, *bhaagavatas*, *meemaamsakas*, *advaitins*, *Buddhists*, *Jains*, *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas*, Sanskrit or vernacular speakers, *Vaishnavas*, *Smarthaas*, *Saivitias*, *tantric* worshippers etc. ... For this reason alone, we say even today, that every part of India is indeed an aggregation of *melting pots* and *salad bowls* of all sorts of cultures and identities.

It is my surmise therefore that the lands between Kanchipuram and Sri Rangam were no exception. So, it is here, in this part of Tamil-speaking country, that several generations of Sanskrit-speaking peoples from mostly northern parts of India arrived as **internal migrants** over several centuries and settled down --- some in the southern Kalabhra districts, some in northern Pallavan and later Chola villages; some in Raayar protectorates; and later, some others in the hamlets in deep Tamil countryside of the Nayak kingdoms.

It is indeed in such a melting-pot of history and geography that one can see the **sub-culture of bi-lingual Sanskrit-Tamil -speaking Ayyangars, Iyers, Smarthaas and Advaitins** grew and thrived. This sub-culture had a unique identity of its own.

With this quick survey of both *historical and geographical roots* of *Vaishnava identity as a sub-culture*, I think we are better placed to answer the remaining questions we asked in the beginning:

How and why did the word Ayyangar and Iyer originate? Are all Iyers, Advaitins? What are the differences between the two?

There is more than one etymological explanation for *Ayyangar* and *Iyer*. Both are derived from the word “**Arya**” which in Sanskrit means “*a very learned or noble one*”. Love of learning, mastery of languages, of Vedic sciences, arts and disciplines was found to be very common

amongst these *Sanskrit-speaking Arya communities* in the Tamil country. So, they were called **Arya** by the common folk. In time, the word *Arya* mutated by common usage into **Ayya or Ayyan**, a respectful term to address these men of high learning and wisdom. Further down the line, even *Ayya* or *Ayyan* was deemed to be not quite fully respectful and became suffixed with the Tamil honorific “-aar”.... Thus “*Ayyan*” became “*Ayyanaar*”. The common folk of Tamil Nadu also clearly perceived the sub-cultural differences between *Smartaa-Advaitins* and *Sri Vaishnavas* and probably differentiated them with variants of the word “*Ayyanaar*”. *Sri Vaishnavas* thus came to be called “*Ayyangaar*” and *Smarthaas* came to be addressed as “*Ayyar*”.

I remember also reading a scholarly article by **Late Sri Navalpakkam Ammini Devanatha Tatacharya**, a philologist and a recipient of President of India's award for Sanskrit, about the origin of the word “*Iyengar*”. This word as well as “*Iyer*” has the same origin, he said, in the Tamil word “*Ayyan*” meaning a respectable person. “*Iyengar*”, he wrote, is a Telugu variant of *Aiyan* (*Aiyan* + *Garu*).

Another explanation I have heard is that originally there was a family of devout *Sri Vaishnava* brahmins who were retained as *raja-gurus* in the court of the Vijayanagar Dynasty. These *raja-gurus* were venerated as “*Tathachaaryas*” ... meaning venerable elders. When the *Raya* kings ruled Kanchipuram, they appointed some priestly *Tatacharya* families to oversee these temples. They were then respectfully referred to as “*Iyyangaaru*” (“*gaaru*” being Telugu honorific suffix) the term which later came to be broadly applied to all *Sri Vaishnavas* and not only to *Tatacharyas*. (Like trademark Xerox popularly extended to all copiers). Even now, those who are familiar with Kanchipuram traditions, use “*Iyyangar*” to specifically mean Kanchipuram *Tatacharyas*.

The most orthodox explanation for origin of *Ayyangar* I have heard is this: the word “*ai*” denotes 5 (five) and is also a Tamil word “*aindhu*” (not Sanskrit, Telugu and Kannada). The title *Iyengar* denotes “*A Person who performs the PANCHA or “aindhu” or “ai-SAMASKARAM” or sacraments in their daily routine.*

What are major differences between Iyers and Ayyangars?

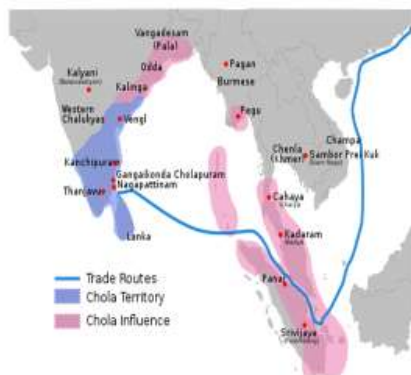
- *Smarthaas* Iyers place more emphasis on the observance of Vedic *Smriti* scriptures, while *Iyengars* place more emphasis on adhering to the precepts of their *Acharyas*. Not all *Iyers* are hard-core *Saivites*; nor are they all hard-core *Advaitins*. The *smaartha* tradition is a liberal one where worship can be offered to one or all the key Vedic deities - *Shiva*, *Vishnu*, *Shakti*, *Surya*, *Ganesha* and *Shanmuga* also. The main point is that *Iyers* draw their identity not from the God they worship; their identity flows from their strict observance of *smriti* texts, *smriti* rules, rituals, *homa-s* and *karma-anushtanam*. It may be mentioned here that *Vadagalai Ayyangars*, to some degree less than *Smarthaas* but to a degree greater than *Tenkalai Ayyangars*, also observe “*karma anushtanam*” especially what is called “*Nithya*” and “*naimittika*” *karma*.
- In the matter of philosophy, *Iyers* do swear by *Advaita* Vedanta. *Adi Shankara* is their primary guru. According to *Advaita* philosophy there is no difference between God and humans. The illusion of *Maya* makes our souls different from that of the Brahman. A *Smarta's* goal is to pierce the screen of *Maya* to reach unity with the Universe. The preferred path is *Jnana* [knowledge].

Iyengars follow the Sri Vaishnava tradition - a more stringent form of Hinduism where their identity primarily pivots around the *Vishnu* pantheon. *Iyengars* embrace Ramanuja's *Vishishtadvaita* as their primary philosophy. Vishishtadvaita philosophy defines 3 realities - *Isvara*, *cit* and *acit*. The goal of the *jivas* [living *cit*] is to attain servitude to Creator [*Isvara* or *Parabrahman*], primarily through the path of *Bhakti* [devotion].

- *Smartas* venerate 275 temples [*Paadal Petra Sthalam*] in the country glorified by *Nayanmar* saints. Sri Vaishnavites glorify 106 temples of Narayana [*Divya Desam*] that have been glorified by the *Azhvars*.
- The daily prayers of *Smartas* consists of the 5 *Sukhtaas* [*Purusha*, *Sri*, *Durga*, *Narayana* and *Rudra*]. Sri Vaishnavas 5 or *pancha-Sukthas* include *Purusha*, *Sri*, *Narayana*, *Bhu*, *Nila* as the five key chapters from Vedas for their *Nithya paraayanam*.
- Language: *Smarthas* include more of Sanskrit in their speech and prayers. Sri Vaishnavas, especially the Tenkalai group include much more of pure Tamil in theirs.
- Besides these, there are noticeable differences in diets, festivals and traditions involving weddings and other *samskaras*.

Ladies and gentlemen, I now would like to briefly cover the role of Kings and Rulers who also played a historic role in shaping the Sri Vaishnava identity and its unique sub-culture in Tamil Nadu. (Slide 11).

WHO: Rulers



850-1279 CE

Pre-dominantly Saivite
sympathy

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1336-1646

Extent of Vijayanagara
Empire, 1446, 1520 CE

Pre-dominantly Vaishnavait
sympathy

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1532-1673

Approximate extent of
the Thanjavur Nayak Kingdom, c.
1572

No marked leaning in
sympathies

11

Today the distance between Kanchipuram and Sri Rangam is only about 250 KMs by road. If you drive down by car you can finish the journey in less than 6 hours. Indeed, whole of Tamil Nadu today, north to south, is just about 500 KMs that one can easily travers in a one day-journey. Yet, these distances which look so small to us today were so great in the 11th century CE that when Ramanuja set out on foot to Sri

Rangam from Kanchipuram, he left behind one sub-culture and arrived in another sub-culture in Sri Rangam.

The land that Ramanuja covered by journey on foot in the Tamil Nadu of his times had been ruled by several successive kingdoms and dynasties throughout the ages. Out of such ruling dynasties, three were outstanding in terms of their longevity, their influence and impact on Sri Vaishnava identity. They are the *Chola*, the *Vijayanagara* and the *Nayak* kingdoms.

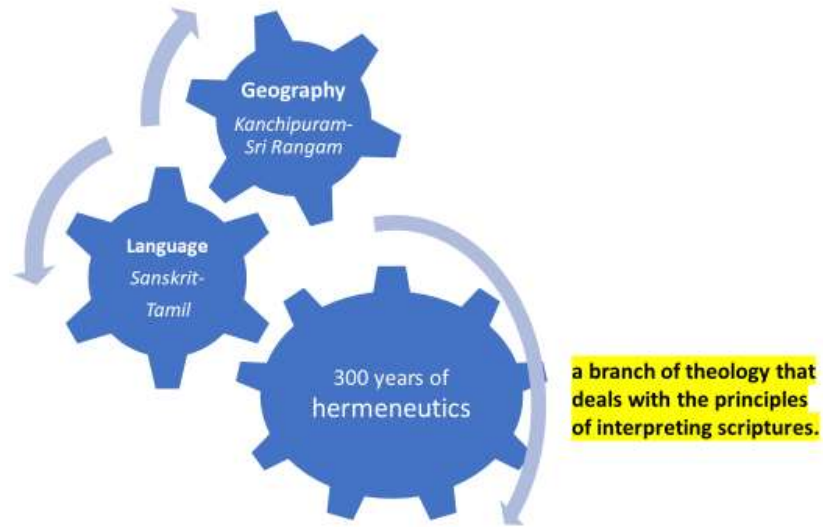
These dynasties and kings were continually at war throughout history. Yet, amid raging battles and shifting boundaries, cultural expression blossomed in these lands. These kings were great patrons of both Sanskrit and Tamil languages which were considered not only the language of the gods, but also the language of royal inscriptions, court poetry, theater, and the sciences. Of the oral and vernacular traditions of the native soil, whatever was deemed worthy of preserving (be it medical, astrological, or astronomical lore, or one of the many cycles of legends and tales), soon acquired a second parallel life. Thus, Sanskrit and Tamil sub-cultures began to feed off and feed into each other.

As A.K.Ramnujan wrote: ***"Sanskrit, brahmins and temples were part of the imperial design (of the Tamil country under these rulers). The Sanskrit language gave dignity and resonance to any upstart king; brahmins blessed and legitimized him, and often gave him a genealogy if he lacked one; and temples assured town and village of his presence, his patronage and his fidelity to a popular god. All the three thus enlisted the gods."***

These kings gave away village lands to temples and tax-free incomes and pensions to brahmins... as *"brahmadeya"*. They thus found many clever ways to join a coalition of brahmins with peasants, royal centers of administration with the rural periphery --- and Sanskrit with Tamil too. Tank irrigation converted dry or forested land to prosperous agriculture. Meanwhile, saints' pilgrimages and celebratory songs about hundreds of holy places mapped the Tamil country much as the king's own other administrative officers did in their own ways. These saints --- whether *Saivite* or *Vaishnava* or *Smartha* or *Advaitin* --- literally *"sang new places into existence"* (A.K.Ramanujam) thanks to the temples the kings built in those places. Music, sculpture, painting, and philosophy were part of this creative upsurge. Such great *"creative upsurge"*, sponsored and patronized by these kings, indeed greatly helped saints, acharyas, theologians, *gurus* and *kavi-s* of the Tamil country to forge and establish **Sri Vaishnava sub-culture** in Tamil Nadu.

Sri Vaishnava gurus and acharyas like Ramanujacharya, those preceding and succeeding him, were no exception. They too on behalf of their own following, their communities, laity and constituency engaged actively with these kings and rulers. And that is precisely how a distinct Sri Vaishnava identity evolved: as an essential component of the overall *"imperial design"* of rulers who held the Tamil kingdoms together, politically and socially. Whenever the kings extended patronage and largesse to their great temples, the Sri Vaishnava community went from strength to strength. Its creative energies peaked in all disciplines of creative endeavor --- teaching and practicing Vedantic philosophy, Tamil literature, the native sciences and arts. But whenever, royalty gave only token or no political patronage, the Sri Vaishnava identity too waned and grew weak. To that extent, it must be said, Sri Vaishnava identity was greatly impacted by royal patronage of the sovereign state.

A cauldron of sub-cultures



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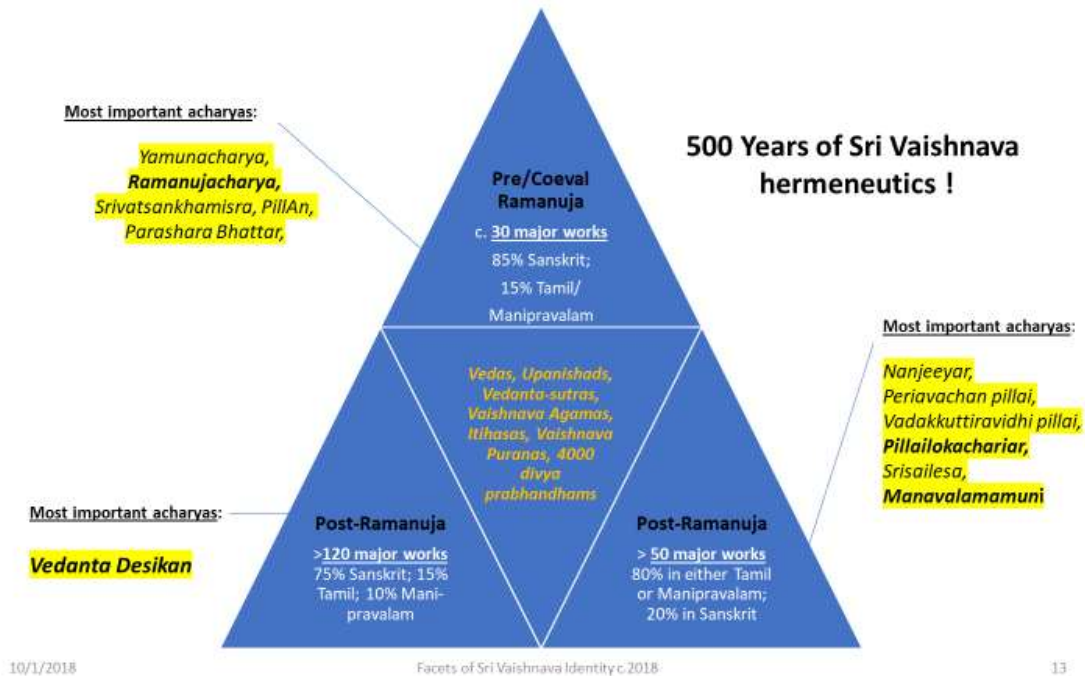
12

Ladies and gentlemen, **(Slide 12)** I now turn my attention to another important facet of Sri Vaishnava identity viz. **Language or languages in which the Sri Vaishnava tradition (*sampradaya*) found expression.**

Sanskrit and Tamil were both great catalyzing agents in the cultural cauldron in which Sri Vaishnava identity got brewed. The identity of Sri Vaishnavas as men of learning in the Vedic tradition was completely shaped by a long lineage of Acharyas and theologians. For about 500 years these Acharyas straddled the era of Ramanuja. They were ceaselessly engaged in two principal vocations: **Hermeneutics and Soteriology.**

- **Hermeneutics:** is a branch of theology that deals with the principles of interpreting scriptures.
- **Soteriology:** is the study of the doctrine of Salvation i.e. how believers secure it through the understanding of the doctrines of redemption, justification, sanctification, propitiation and atonement.

(Slide 13): The core body of Sri Vaishnava scriptures is constituted by the *Vedas*, the *Vaishnava Agamas* and “*samhitas*”, the *Prasthaana-traya*, the *Puraanas* and lastly the 4000 *divya prabhandhams* of the Azhwars.



On this scriptural core, in the period coeval with Ramanuja, about 30 important works of interpretation were written. Most of them were in Sanskrit by a handful of acharyas. After Ramanuja, for over 400 years, more than a dozen stalwart theologians again wrote a formidable number of commentaries and interpretations of these core scriptures which now included Ramanuja's own works.

It was during this period that the **Northern Kanchipuram/Southern Sri Rangam** historical and geographical sub-cultural influences and the **Sanskrit/Tamil vernacular sub-identities** became very pronounced.

In and around SriRangam, a host of Sri Vaishnava theologians wrote at least 50 major brilliant interpretations and "*bhashyas*" of which 85%, one might say, were all in either pure Tamil or *Manipravalam* (Sanskritized Tamil). They were written for the edification of large Tamil speaking populations of the Tamil hinterland.

In the northern Sri Vaishnava capital of Kanchipuram, there was an *acharya* **Sri Vedanta Desikan** who singlehandedly authored about 120 major works of scriptural exegesis of which one might say 75% was in Sanskrit and a handful in Tamil and Manipravalam. These scintillating works of Desikan were written by him keeping only partly in mind the common readership. His main target audience was instead the intellectual adversaries and Vedic disputants inhabiting various Kanchi schools of *Advaita*, *Buddhist*, *Jain* and other Vedantic branches of *Nyaya*, *Vaisesika* and *Meemaamsa* philosophy.

Here you see how between the Kanchi and Sri Rangam Acharyas there was a marked preference for Tamil and Sanskrit. (Slide 14 and 15).

Pre- and Co-eval Ramanujacharya	
Yamunacharya: <i>Siddhitraya, AgamaprAmAnyā, Stotra-ratna, Chattusloki, Gitārtha-sangraha</i>	(all Sanskrit)
Ramanujacharya: <i>Sri-bhashya, Vedānta-deepa, Vedānta-sara, Vedārtha-sangraha, Gīta-bhashya, Gādyā-traya, Nīthyagranha</i>	(all Sanskrit)
Srivatsankha-misra: <i>atīmanusastava, Sri-stava, varadarāja-stava, Vaikūṇṭha-stava, sūndara-bāhu-stava</i>	(all Sanskrit)
Parashara Bhattar: <i>bhagavath-guṇa Darpaṇa, aṣṭa-sloki, sri-guṇa-ratna-kosa, srīrangarāja-stava,</i>	(all Sanskrit)
Pillan: <i>aarāyirapadi (bhagavath-vishayam)</i>	(ManiPrv)
Nanjiyar: <i>Onpattinaayirapadi</i>	(ManiPrv)
Azhagiya manavala jeyar: <i>Panniraayirapadi</i>	(ManiPrv)
Periyavachan pillai: <i>Irupattunaalaayirapadi</i>	(ManiPrv)
Vadukkuuttiraveedi Pillai: <i>Idu Muppattiyaaraayirapadi</i>	(ManiPrv)

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Post-Ramanujacharya -- Vadagalai	Post-Ramanujacharya -- Tenkalai
Vedānta Desika (<i>more than 100 works</i>) <i>Tattva-mukta kalāpa, Sarvartha-siddhi, adīkarāṇa saravali, nyāya-siddhanjana, nyāya-parisuddhi, satadusani, taatparya Chandrika, Isavasyopanishad bhashya, pancharatra Raksha, dramidopanishad sara and ratnavali, sankalpa suryodaya, yadavaabhyudaya, hamsa-sandesha, paduka-sahasra, daya sataka, yatiraja saptati, 28 other stotras etc....</i> (Mostly Sanskrit and a few in ManiPrv, Prakrit and Tamil)	Pillailokachariar: <i>Srivachana Bhushanam, Tattva-trayam, Artha-panchakam, Mummukshupadi,</i> (ManiPrv) Manavalamamuni: <i>several commentaries on Pillailokachariar's works and Peria-Azhwar, Upadesa-ratna malai, Tiruvoimozhi nutrandaadi, Arti-prabhandham –</i> (ManiPrv) <i>yatiraja vimshati –</i> (Sanskrit)

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Over time, the various narratives adopted by the Tenkalai and Vadakalai acharyas for their respective brand of hermeneutics became more and more characteristic and stylized. As Patricia Mumme writes **(Slide 16):**

Tenkalai Sri Rangam Achaaryas	Vadagalai Kanchipuram Achaaryas
In their zeal to inspire the devotional piety of the Azhwars and carry on the tradition of <i>bhakthi</i>, the Srirangam <i>achaaryas</i> expounded their teachings in Tamil with great eloquence and diligence. Addressing themselves to the <u>hearts</u> and religious sensibilities of the Sri Vaishnava community at large, they used the techniques that Sri Ramanujacharya had found effective in promoting religious <u>devotion</u> as embraced by the Azhwars. Thus, they mostly appealed to popular legends and everyday analogies to illustrate Ramanuja's themes, inviting a wide range of <u>doctrinal interpretations</u> and delighting in forceful hyperbole to get his message across to their audience.	These Acharyas (led by Vedanta Desikan) were faced with their main challenge viz. they were sensitive to the attacks of rival schools (<i>Advaita</i>, <i>Buddhist</i> etc.) at Kanchipuram, and sought primarily to articulate Srivaishnava doctrine as a <u>coherent philosophical system</u> whose authority could be defended in debate and polemics by appealing to accepted Sanskrit Vedic and Agamic texts and <u>correct reasoning</u>. By ferreting out and correcting the doctrinal inconsistencies within the Sri Vaishnava tradition itself, they tried to steer it along the straight line and course of Ramanuja's <i>darsana</i> and <i>sampradaya</i>.

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The two characteristic styles of hermeneutics of Tenkalai and Vadagalai ultimately led to 2 very happy outcomes for the Sri Vaishnava faith and laity at large. But it also led to 2 most unfortunate consequences:

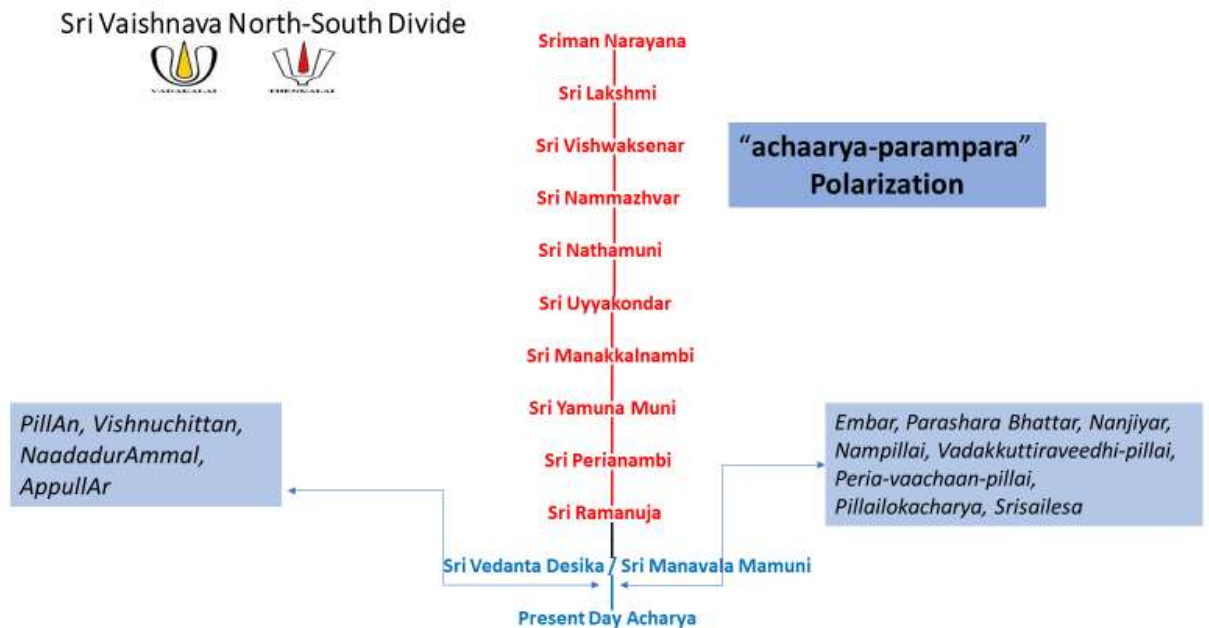
- **The happy outcomes:** Thanks to the Kanchi Acharyas' (led by Vedanta Desikan) doughty hermeneutics, the philosophy of *Visishtadvaita* got even more firmly consolidated than it had ever been during Ramanuja's own times when it was constantly being rivalled by the *Advaita*, *Dvaita* and *Bheda-abheda systems*.
- The other very auspicious result was that Ramanuja's "*darsana*" came to be recognized popularly as "*ubhaya Vedanta*" i.e. *bhakthi* theology of the Tamil Azhwars underpinned by the metaphysics of the Sanskrit Upanishads. A Sri Vaishnava of those times thus had the unique identity of being an excellent bi-linguist with Sanskrit giving him a *pan-India* status and Tamil giving him a *Pan-Peninsular* appeal. **Sri Vaishnava identity in those time thus knew really few borders!**

The two unfortunate consequences of the difference in hermeneutics styles of the Sri Rangam and Kanchipuram *achaaryas* were this:

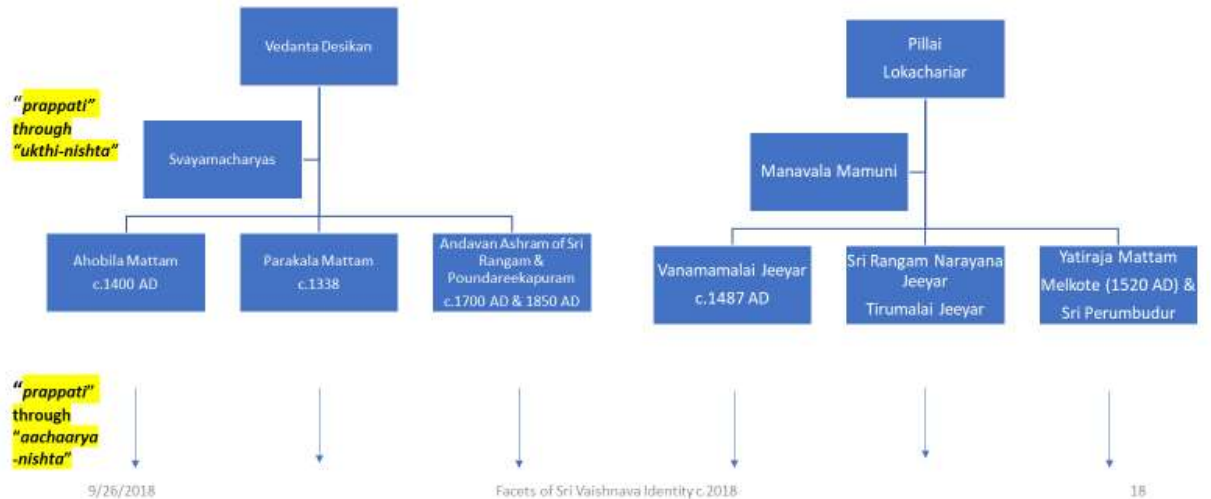
- The Acharyas became more and more **polarized** in terms of doctrinaire interpretations, soteriology and religious observances assuming sectarian overtones. This *polarization* became grew acute by the 17th century CE when the great Mughal Empire expanded, and Hindu kingdoms fell one by one and the entire **Sanskrit-brahmin-temple complex**, that great "*imperial design*" that had given economic sustenance and political coherence to the sub-cultural life of Sri Vaishnavas for centuries in the Tamil country, simply collapsed.

Confronted by economic decline and uncertainty, and social tensions rife everywhere in the country, the Sri Vaishnavas too like other Tamil communities succumbed to intra-communal disunity and sectarian conflicts. Temple commonwealth and temple-lands were the only assets they possessed, and these assets were under constant threat of dispossession. Unable to face the onslaught of the larger enemy outside, they unfortunately took to infighting, to turf-war and feuds.

- The biggest casualty for the Sri Vaishnava community amid all this historical turmoil and meltdown was that its leaders – both in Sri Rangam and Kanchipuram --- became helpless witnesses and powerless to stop the growing sectarian divide. The result was steadily worsening **polarization of acharyas** themselves into a so-called *North-South divide* from the end of the 15th century CE to end of the 18th century CE; and thereafter, increasing but rather loose **federalization of acharyas** into Tenkalai, Vadakalai and many other formal Sri Vaishnava sectarian institutions. (Slides 17 and 18)



"acharya parampara" Federalization"



Ladies and Gentlemen, I now come to the central question that plagues the Sri Vaishnava Identity to this very day: **what are the differences between the sectarian hermeneutics and soteriology of the Sri Rangam and Kanchi acharyas, between Tenkalai and Vadakalai theology?** (Slide 19).

HERMENEUTICS

SOTERIOLOGY

GRACE

ANTINOMIANISM



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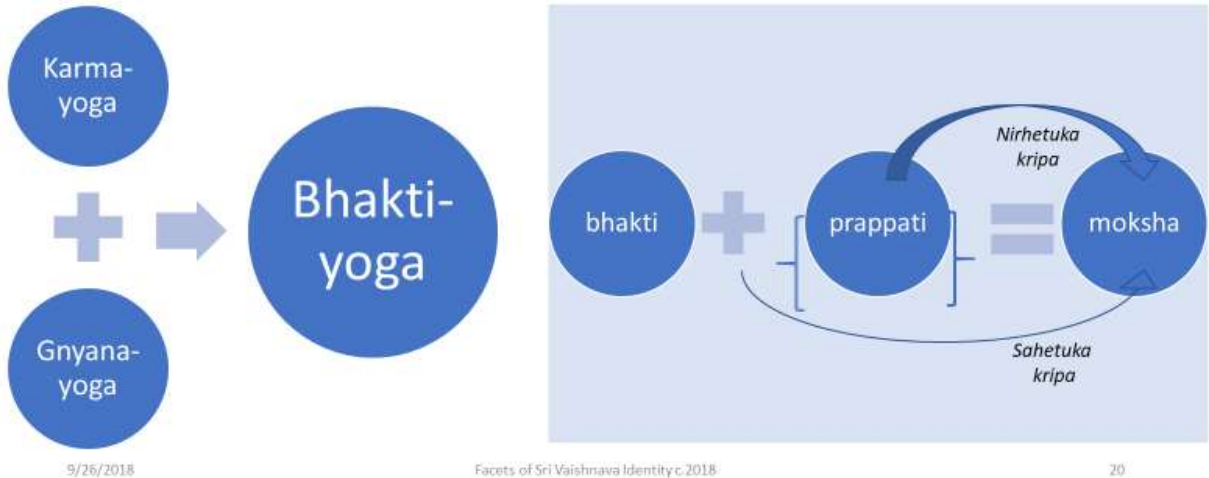
I must be honest and confess that in examining this matter in some detail, I find myself utterly lost. And which is why you see I have put up that little image of a spaghetti-roadway intersection to reflect how I personally feel about this issue.... For your benefit, however, I will do my best to explain the matter as briefly and clearly as I can, but after I have done that, I will simply leave it all of you to figure it out yourself. And that's why the "*Good luck!*" sign you see stuck up there!

Both *Kalais* believe in a fundamental Sri Vaishnava doctrine propounded by Ramanujacharya called "*prappati*" or "*saranangati*". (Slide 20). I do not wish to go into the profundities of this doctrine. So, I created this simple chart just to explain basic postulate of this doctrine.

Sri Vaishnava soteriology

"It is not possible to attain *moksha* without observing *prapaati* in some form or the other. ("vedaartha-sangraha"
Ramanujacharya)

"It is only either by means of intense *bhakthi* or by means of *prappati* that it is possible to attain God"
(Pancharaatra treatise quoted in "*rahasya-traya-sara*" by Vedanta Desika)



It shows that for all Sri Vaishnavas, the way to *moksha* or salvation is through the paths of *gnyaana* and *karma* (what in Latin is called "*via contemplativa*" and "*via activa*") combining in a lifetime to fuse into the path of *bhakti-yoga* which is the ceaseless and meditative adoration of God Almighty as Deity. But then *Bhakti-yoga* is an extremely difficult pathway strewn with pitfalls and perils. It is only adepts such as *gnyanis* and *karma-yogins* who attain the deep state of *bhakthi*. For those of us who are incompetent to tread the path of *Bhakthi*, there is the easier path of self-surrender or *prappati* unto God. Ramanuja, and more emphatically, Vedanta Desika, clearly established the various Vedic "*pramaana*" or scriptural authority for this doctrine. (Slide 21)

The Scriptural basis of the “prappati” doctrine

<i>Rg Veda : I. 189.1</i>	<i>(“agne naya supathaaraaye asmaan....”)</i>
<i>Rg Veda : VIII. 19.5</i>	<i>(“yah samidhaa ya aahuti....”)</i>
<i>Svetaasvatara Up. VI.18</i>	<i>(“yo brahmaanam vidadhaati purvam....”)</i>
<i>Taittiriya Up. 147.8 :</i>	<i>(“tasmaan-nyasaameshaam....”)</i>
<i>Agama samhitas:</i>	<i>Ahirbudhnya and Lakshmi Tantra</i>
<i>Srimad Valmiki Ramayana:</i>	<i>saraNagati saastra – Vibheeshana, Kaakasura</i>
<i>Mahabharatha :</i>	<i>Draupadi</i>
<i>Bhagavath-Gita: XVIII.66</i>	<i>“charama-shloka”</i>
<i>Azhwar “prabhandhams”</i>	<i>Nammazhwar’s prappati to Lord Venkateshwara</i>
<i>Ramanujacharya</i>	<i>“saraNagati gadyam”</i>

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Over 1000 years after Ramanuja and over 750 years after Vedanta Desika, unfortunately, the Tenkalai and Vadakalai schools of hermeneutics are however still unable to resolve 18 principal differences in the way they each respectively interpret this great doctrine of *Prappati*. The 18 differences are the legacy of a long lineage of both SriRangam and Kanchi *acharyas* and were first codified by one *Sri Varavaraguru* in a 19th century work titled “*ashta-dasa-vichaara*”.

Of the 18 differences, only 5 can be said to be disputes relating to philosophy (**Slide 22**). But even they are disputes of a very minor in nature, in my opinion. For e.g. the Vadakalai view gives far more credence to the idea of human Free Will than the Tenkalai is ready to concede. Again, there are very abstruse disputations regarding the ontological status of *Lakshmi*, who is regarded as an absolute and countervailing principle of Compassion equal to *Isvara* who is the supreme universal *tattva* of absolute Justice. Then there are also issues relating to grades in the actual experience of *moksha* and the liminal nature of *kaivalya* experience. So on, so forth



“ashta-bheda-vichaara”: Differences in hermeneutics of soteriology	
1	The essential nature (<i>svarupa</i>) of God’s All-Pervasion (<i>sarva-vyapti/vibhu</i>) and individual free will.
2	The ontological status of <i>Sri</i> : as equal and integral part of <i>Isvara</i>
3	Concerning Grades of Bliss in Liberation (<i>Moksha</i>)
4 & 5	The Nature of “ <i>kaivalya moksha</i> ” The path of Selfless work (<i>karma yoga</i>) and the path of discriminative wisdom (<i>jñāna yoga</i>).

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There are 11 other extremely contentious issues (Slide 23) that relate to what in every religious theology of the world is a very subjective idea. It is called *Divine Grace*.

“ashta-bheda-vichaara”: Differences in the hermeneutics of soteriology	
6	Powers of <i>Sri</i> .
7	Concerning God’s Grace (<i>nirhetuka-kripa</i>).
8	Does <i>Prapatti</i> earn Grace?
9	Concerning God’s “Maternal Love” (<i>vatsalya</i>).
10	Concerning God’s Compassion (<i>daya</i>).
11	Who should resort to <i>Prapatti</i> ?
12	Conditions for taking Refuge — <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> chap 18; 66 : “ <i>sarva dharmam parityajya mamekam saranam vraja / aham tva sarva-papebhyo mokshayishyami ma suca</i> ” ”
13	Qualifications of <i>Prapatti</i> -- Question:— Does the development of qualifications (virtues) required for the other paths of <i>Jñāna</i> , <i>Karma</i> & <i>Bhakti Yogas</i> also apply to <i>Prapatti</i> ?
14	The Components of <i>Prapatti</i> The <i>acharya</i> as mediator
15	Penalty for a lapsed <i>Prapanna</i> .
16	Taking Refuge in God. (<i>Prapatti</i>). Who gains by the act of <i>Prapatti</i> , the <i>Jiva</i> or <i>Narayana</i> ?

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In Sri Vaishnava theology this idea of **Divine Grace** is known as “*nirhetuka kripa*”. Grace is said to be the *unmerited and unconditional divine assistance* given to humans for their regeneration; it is a virtue

coming from God; a state of sanctification enjoyed through divine assistance. The view of the Tenkalai and Vadakalai regarding **Grace** differs widely.

The *Vadakalai* view is that to achieve salvation both *personal effort* and *grace* are necessary (*Sahetuka kripa*). The purpose of pursuing *Gnyana* and *Karma-yoga*, in the first place, is that conscious and deliberate spiritual practice i.e. *saadhana* --- charity (*daana*), prayer (*japa*), various meditative practices like (*smarana*) etc. --- seeks to improve one's spiritual standing before God.

The view of the *Tenkalai* varies from the *Vadakalai*. Their position is technically what is called "*antinomianism*". Their view of the doctrine of "*nirhetuka kripa*" is that Grace is dispensed by God of his own Will, Accord and Pleasure. It is not conditioned by human behavior. Therefore, the moral, scriptural or *socially established (dharmic) laws or other karma-yogic practices such as bhakthi-sadhana are either of no use or they are of lesser obligation* because complete *self-surrender*, in and by itself, is both necessary and sufficient condition for salvation.

The *Vadakalai* sees *prappatti* thus as an *active process* of self-surrender. An unfailing aspiration from within Man and supreme grace that answers from above him are the two powers that come together to lead to *moksha*. Grace can only act in conditions of light and truth, for which one's lower nature must be surrendered. The term "*surrender*" for *Vadaka*lais does not suggest abandonment of responsibilities in the hope that God will do everything. Rather, it is meant to suggest living a life of perfection in the world.

The *Tenkalai* does not see it that way. For them *prappati* is simply a genuine *attitude of passive self-surrender*. For them one cannot earn salvation by any kind of effort or *karma*, whether spiritual discipline (*bhakthi saadhana*), acts of charity (*dharma*) or self-sacrifice (*karma-yoga*). The illusion that one *can earn* *moksha* or *Grace* is one of the great obstacles to spiritual growth since it implies a lack of individual humility (*aakinchinyam*) and proper understanding of God's Grace .. *nirhetuka kripa*.

In their continual disputations over the centuries, the *Vadakalai* and *Tenkalai* concede very little to each other: The *Tenkalai* does not deny the importance of *dharmic* pursuit nor the *karma* of self-sacrifice but he regards them more as the fruit of *prappati* and not as a means of attaining *moksha*. The *Vadakalai* in turn agrees with the *Tenkalai* that *moksha* ultimately is God's gift only to give but believes nonetheless that *dharma* and *karma* must be accepted as preparations to receive God's Grace.

Today in the 21st century, no Sri Vaishnava in either sect is truly all that sensitive to this continual, conflicting interpretation of "*nirhetuka-kripa*" separating the two sects. But then identity is very important these days to Sri Vaishnavas. Why? Because *identity has somehow got all mixed up with status and self-importance...* The reasons for this, we will come to a little later. But today, this hermeneutic conflict is being kept alive because it provides both sects what I call "**identity intoxication**".

The most telling commentary of such identity intoxication is how the fractured Sri Vaishnava identity has been reduced today to **feline** and **simian** metaphors. In this picture is a supine *Tenkalai kitten* and a *clinging Vadakalai baby monkey*. The *Tenkalai* kitten believes it needs to do nothing to earn the mother cat's protection. The *Vadakalai* baby-monkey knows it needs to only grasp its mother tightly for the same protection.

In fanciful Sri Vaishnava "*pari-bhaashai*", the *Tenkalai* sect affirms what is known as as "*maarjaala kishora nyaaya*" and the *Vadakalai* affirms the "*markata kishora gnyaaya*". (Slide 24). People curious

about the doctrine of “*prappati*” often ask if Sri Ramanuja had any stated view on these two *nyaaya*-s? There is no stated view, but scholars give an apocryphal answer that while writing his **Sri-Bhashya** he leaned towards the simian *nyaaya* but in his **Gita-bhaashya** the Acharya seemed to favor the feline *nyaaya*.

Maarjaala Nyaya and Markata Nyaya



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The last 2 differences between the Kanchi and Sri Rangam acharyas that are mentioned in the “*ashtadasa-vichaara*” relate to views about the age-old Vedic institution of “*varna-ashrama*” and the bearing it has upon *prappati* (**Slide 25**).



	"ashta-bheda-vichaara": Differences in the hermeneutics of soteriology
17	Varna-asrama — caste, occupation and social duties
18	Concerning caste status and the <i>Prapanna</i> .

Given the backdrop of social realities in the 21st century in India, when not only Sri Vaishnavism but all religious institutions find themselves often in conflict with the larger secular constitutional order of the day, I would like to say no more than this: The views held in this regard by the Tenkalai or Sri Manavaala mamuni school may appear to some as being rather far too liberal-minded. And the views held by the *Vadakalai* or Vedanta Desikan followers may appear to some others as being rather ultra-conservative and hidebound.

It is not for me — I'm just an *Unknown Sri Vaishnava* --- to make judgements on this matter. All I can however say confidently, is that, here too, the Sri Vaishnava identity appears very badly fractured.

This unresolved and unhealed sectarian fracture is a real pity because the foremost leaders of the *Vadakalai* and *Tenkalai* sects did not even in their wildest imagination ever believe that their camp-followers would end up in the sorry state in which they are today. And no one could have summed up the sorry state better than an American scholar, Patricia Mumme, in her book. (Slide 26)

“In their own ways, both men were above all seeking to promote the integrity of the Sri Vaishnava faith and the closeness of the community of those following tradition of Ramanuja's Ubhaya Vedanta.

Unfortunately, history shows that the extreme loyalty and dedication that each man inspired in his followers worked against that aim.

In their faithfulness to each man and his doctrines, these two groups of followers lost sight of the primary value that both Manavalamamuni and Vedanta Desika gave to the unity and harmony of the Srivaishnava community. The bitter struggle between the Tenkalai and Vadakalai sects that broke out in the 18th century would have certainly dismayed both the men in whose names it was carried out”.

(Prof. Patricia Mumme: “The Śrivaishṇava Theological Dispute: Maṇavālamūni and Vedānta Deśika”

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I now come to the history in India that straddles the British colonial era and the immediate post-Independence period to show how they both impacted the Sri Vaishnava identity.

The Hindu dynasties that once ruled South India generally embraced the pluralism of Vedic society and its diversity of faith, traditions and customs. As mentioned earlier, the temples of the kings were as much political institutions as they were religious and cultural centers As A.K.Ramanujan wrote “temples, brahmins and Sanskrit” were part of the larger “imperial design”... They were also, at the same time, part of a greater cultural commonwealth. So, in administering their empires, the kings always tried their best to maintain and promote social cohesiveness and fine balance if not complete unity amongst their subjects.

Despite the careful social balancing that the Sovereign rulers sought, the North-South divide between Tenkalai and Vadakalai sub-cultures, got aggravated by a combination of history, geography and demography that created some degree of economic disparity between the 2 sects. This is a matter on which I wish some expert historian will produce better research findings than there is available presently,

If we study this map of the way in which Sri Vaishnava temples are dispersed today in Tamil Nadu. It helps us reasonably infer that the Southern ripple-ring around the Sri Rangam epicenter was much larger than the ripple-ring around the Kanchi epicenter. Here is a map to illustrate the point I make....

Slide 27.

The 106 Sri Vaishnava “divya-desa” TEMPLES



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Andhra Pradesh: 2

Kanchipuram: 15

Chennai: 7

Total : 24

(North India: 8

Western India: 1

Mayiladuthurai and Sirkazhi: 17

Thanjavur : 19

Tiruchi : 6

Madurai : 8

Tirunelveli : 10

Kanyakumari : 2

Kerala(malai nadu): 11

Total : 73

The number of Sri Vaishnava temples or “*divya desams*” built by various past Hindu dynasties in the South of India clearly outnumbered those in the north by a margin of 3 to 1 i.e. 73 to 24. It is logical to infer therefore that economic wealth and social influence of the Sri Vaishnavas around the time when the British became the new rulers of India was significantly greater around the Sri Rangam sub-cultural Tamil hinterland than in the Kanchipuram’s Sanskrit-based cultural belt.

Now, when the colonial British came and ruled India, throughout the 250 years of their suzerainty, they made it an effective policy of governance to “***divide and rule***” Indians as the only way to weaken and subjugate them. Sri Vaishnava institutions, mainly these great temples, also fell victim to that British colonial policy.

Having lost the political patronage of Hindu dynasties and after having been marauded by the Mughal rule thereafter, the economic prosperity and viability of Sri Vaishnava temples across Tamil Nadu, north and south, suffered serious decline and at times irreparable damage. However, despite the large-scale Muslim depredations, the temples -- largely thanks to the faith people still reposed in them -- still managed to hang on to remnants of their vast commonwealth in terms of temple jewelry, temple icons, temple treasuries and granaries, temple lands, property in the villages and small towns.

The British were aware of such substantial wealth still possessed by the temples. Rather than openly covet such economic wealth, they used it instead to their political advantage in furtherance of their devious policy of “*divide and rule*”, pitting the *sub-cultures of pan-Indian Sanskrit versus the vernacular Tamil*. They did really care very little really for the long-term viability of temple institutions in the manner of the old Hindu dynasties. (Again, this is a subject on which not much of research has been done by modern historians and I wish it would be be).

Sensing the inherent sectarian tendency and sub-cultural tension within the Sri Vaishnava community, the British only further exacerbated them by pitting one sect against the other. They did this very

subtly... by sowing the seed of *language discord*, by *aggravating geographical North-South divide*, *injecting caste consciousness* and bigotry, *taxing temples* differently and arbitrarily, even *demanding tribute* (i.e. taking huge loans from temples never to be repaid) etc., and inciting *disputes between landowning priestly communities* with *rural peasantry* in the name of social and land-reforms etc.

It is not unreasonable to believe that it was the British who first invented and patented what we all know today is the fine and devious art of political interference in Hindu religious institutions.

How was it done? The British did it by politely offering at first and then eventually **imposing English jurisprudence** on Sri Vaishnavas as though it were the most impartial and equitable mechanism for adjudicating disputes relating to religious belief, worship and customs. The very poisonous idea of resorting to civil litigation in courts of law to resolve an intra-community religious bone of contention was first seeded into the Tenkalai and Vadakalai mindset back in 1792. It was a case relating to elephants in procession as part of temple festival and pageantry in Kanchipuram. ... the famous Privy Council case of whether the elephant should bear Vadakalai or Tenkalai *naamam*. **Slide 28**. The case dragged on bitterly in the court until 1976!



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In the following 200 years, the Tenkalai and Vadakalai went on to also fight numerous court battles over other arcane and obscurantist matters of sectarian significance.... **Slide 29**.

"COURT BATTLES"



Civil Litigation: Control and administration of temples

Constant disputes between Vadakalai and Thengalai sects as regards the nature of the *namam* put on the various places in the temples

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Civil Litigation: Sect symbols on temple processional elephants

The dispute as regards the *namam* in this temple started as early as 1792.

O. S. No. 14 of 1950
O. S. No. 15 of 1950
A. S. No. 13 of 1954
Krishnaswami Thathachariar v. Krishnamachariar ((1952) ILR 5 Mad 313)
Veeraraghava Tatachari Va Srinivasa Tatachari ((1912) 23 Mad LJ 134).
O. A. No. 466 of 1948
Krishnasami Ayyangar v. Samram Singarachariar ((1907) ILR 30 Mad 158)
A. S. No. 175 of 1934
O. A. No. 466 of 1948
O. S. No. 7 of 1945
C. M. A. No. 111 of 1948
T. A. No. 439 of 1968
R. Thathadesika Thathachariar ... vs R. V. Alagis Manavala ... *Arjuna* 9/10/2018
September, 1978



Civil Litigation: Temple shrine sacramental protocols

O.S. No.231/1928 by Vadakalais against Archakas on the ground interfering with reciting of Tamil Pishudham on Vijayadasami day in Desasthswami Temple
O.S. No.228/1952 many quarrels between Vadakalai and Tenkalais with in support of performing Sakthamala on the Sakthi Vignana of Sri Manavala Mahuniga in his shrine
O.S. No.258/1981 Sakthi Vignana at Sri Manavala Mahuniga had disappeared from the very temple itself.
O.S. No.200/1988
High Court in S.A. No.1190/1987
O.S. No.244/1987
A.S. No.190/1980
S.A. No.149/1982.
The method of celebrating Pagaipattu and Repattu Proceedings concluded in O.A. No.352/1945.
A.S. No.249/1946.
O.S. No.130/86 filed by the Vadakalai Sri Vaishnava Sampradaya Sabha
Commissioner of HR & CE in R.P. No.13/87.
Vadakalai Sri Vaishnava ... vs The Commissioner on 15 April, 2022

The cases were agitated in the courts of Tamil Nadu and even the Supreme Court. Even today I believe there are still a few such cases pending between the two sects! Most such cases relate to matters like which *litany* Vadakalai or Tenkalai, i.e. "*saatrumarai*" procedure has the right of precedence over the other (Slide 30 and 31) at various shrines in Sri Rangam, Kanchipuram and other important *divya desam* temples on festive days when *idols of either the Deity or Acharyas are taken out in procession*. To anyone in the world outside the Sri Vaishnava community, it would come as a surprise to know that the Vadakalai and Tenkalai litany called "*saatrumarai*" is really nothing more than singing hallelujahs to their respective "*acharya parampara*".

Vadagalai “saatrumarai” litany	Tenkalai “saatrumarai” litany
rAmAnuja dayApAtram GYAna vairAgya bhUshaNam srimat vEngkatanAthAryam vandE vEdAnta dEsikam pallANdu pallANdu pallAyiraththANdu * pala kOdi nURAyiram mallANda thiN thOL maNivaNNA! * un sEvadi sevvi thirukkAppu adiyOmOdum ninnOdum * pirivinRi Ayiram pallANdu * vadvAy nin vala mArbinil * vAzhginRa mangkaiyum pallANdu * vadvAr sOdhi valaththuRaiyum * sudarAzhiiyum pallANdu * padaI pOr pukku muzhangkum * appAnjchasanniyamum pallANdE sarvadEsa dasAkAle shvavyAhata parAkrama rAmAnujArya divyAnjnA vardhatAm abhivardhatAm rAmAnujArya divyAnjnA prativAsaram ujjvalA digantavyApini! bhUyAt sA hi IOka hitaishini srIman! sriranga sriyam anupadravam anudinam samvardhaya srIman! sriranga sriyam anupadravam anudinam samvardhaya namO rAmAnujAryAya vEdAntArthapradAyinE AtrEya padmanAbhArya sutAya guNashAlinE	srishailEsha dayApAtram dhibhaktyAdi guNArNavam yatIndra pravaNam vandE ramya jAmAtaram munim pallANdu pallANdu pallAyiraththANdu * pala kOdi nURAyiram mallANda thiN thOL maNivaNNA! * un sEvadi sevvi thirukkAppu adiyOmOdum ninnOdum * pirivinRi Ayiram pallANdu * vadvAy nin vala mArbinil * vAzhginRa mangkaiyum pallANdu * vadvAr sOdhi valaththuRaiyum * sudarAzhiiyum pallANdu * padaI pOr pukku muzhangkum * appAnjchasanniyamum pallANdE sarvadEsa dasAkAle shvavyAhata parAkrama rAmAnujArya divyAnjnA vardhatAm abhivardhatAm rAmAnujArya divyAnjnA prativAsaram ujjvalA digantavyApini! bhUyAt sA hi IOka hitaishini srIman! sriranga sriyam anupadravam anudinam samvardhaya srIman! sriranga sriyam anupadravam anudinam samvardhaya nama: srishaila nAthAya kunti nagara janmanE prasAdalabdha parama prApya kainkarya sAlinE
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Vadagalai “saatrumarai” litany	Tenkalai “saatrumarai” litany
rAmAnuja dayApAtram GYAna vairAgya bhUshaNam srimat vEnkatanAthAryam vandE vEdAnta dEsikam vAzhi rAmAnujap piLLan mAthagavAl vAzhum * aNinigamAnthA guru – vAzhiiyavan * mARan maRaiyum rAmAnusan bAshiiyamum * thERumpadi uraikkum slr vanjchap para samayam mARRa vandhOn vAzhiiyE * mannu pugazh pUdhUrAn manam ugappOn vAzhiiyE * kanjchath thirumangkai ugakka vandhOn vAzhiiyE * kaliyan urai kudi koNda karuththudaiyOn vAzhiiyE * senjso! thamizh maRaigAL theLindhuraippOn vAzhiiyE * thirumalai mAl thirumaNiyAy siRakka vandhOn vAzhiiyE * thanjchap paragathiyai thandharuLvOn vAzhiiyE * thaN thamizh thUppul thiruvEngkadavan vAzhiiyE nAnilamum thAn vAzha * nAnmaRaigAL thAm vAzha * mAnagaril mARan maRai vAzha * - GYAniyargaL senni aNi sEr thUppul vEdAnthA dEsikanE * innum oru nURRandirum vAzhi aNi thUppul varu nigamAndhAsiriyan * vAzhiiyavan pAdhAravindhA malar * - vAzhiiyavan kOdhiAtthAN malarai kOnAdik koNdirukkum * thidhiLA nallOr thirAL	vAzhi thiruvAymozhip piLLai * mAthagavAl vAzhum maNavALa mAmuniyan * - vAzhiiyavan mARan thiruvAymozhip poruLai * mAnilaththOr thERumpadi uraikkum slr seyya thAmaraith thALiNai vAzhiiyE * sElai vAzhi thirunAbi vAzhiiyE * thuyya mARbum purinULum vAzhiiyE * sundharath thiruththOLiNai vAzhiiyE * kaiyum Endhiya mukkoLum vAzhiiyE * karuNai pongkiya kaNNiNai vAzhiiyE * poy ilAdha maNavALa mAmuni * pundhi vAzhi pugazh vAzhi vAzhiiyE adiyArgAL vAzha arangka naga vAzha * sadaKOpAn thaNdamiZh nUl vAzha * - kadal sUzhndha mannulagam vAzha * maNavALa mAmuniyE * innum oru nURRandirum
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Behind such ostensibly sectarian disputes is the reality of *power-struggle for absolute control over temple property and temple-influence*. Why? Because control paves the way for pandering to larger and more powerful *political group-interests* and ingratiating patronage from the State. “Temples, brahmins

and Sanskrit”, as AK Ramanujam wrote, are still part of the “imperial design” today ... but then in a totally perverted social context as compared to what prevailed during the time of the Chola, Pallava or Vijayanagara empires.

This 200-year old sectarian squabbling has today resulted in the Sri Vaishnava identity getting even further fractured. Both the Vadakalai and Tenkalai, inebriated as he is by “identity intoxication”, competes to be different and exclusive from the other in many ways.... in customs, weddings, modes of household worship such as *tiruvaaradanam* etc., and even sartorial attire and deportment: **Slide 32.**



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All these differences are too trivial and too well known to all of you to warrant any narration from me here. However, I must also say that it goes to the great credit of both Sri Vaishnava sects, that their differences have never turned self-destructive. They generally maintain admirable mutual tolerance and self-respect of a very high order... quite unlike so many other sectarian conflicts in the world which I summarize in this chart below **(Slide 33).**

Sectarian faith: the difference between Tolerance and Mutual Respect

- **Tolerance** between two groups of the “faithful” implies control by one group over another that does not confirm to the norms of the former; the former allows the latter some, though not all of the rights and privileges it enjoys.
- Tolerance is a patronizing posture, whereas “**mutual respect**” implies that one group considers another group to be equally legitimate.

Faith	Sectarian Groups	Nature of relationship	Group relationship
Christianity	<i>Roman Catholic; Protestant</i>	No respect, no tolerance	Violence; war...
Islam	<i>Sunni; Shia</i>	No respect, no tolerance	Violence; war...
Buddhism	<i>Mahayana; Hinayana</i>	Respectfully tolerant	Indifferent Co-existence
Sikhism	<i>Akali; Nirankari</i>	Intolerantly respectful	Frictional Co-existence
Judaism	<i>Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements</i>	Respectfully tolerant	Easy co-existence
Confucianism	<i>Mencius, Xunzi, Dong Zhongshu, Ming, Korean, Song, Qing, and the Modern sect.</i>	Respectfully tolerant	Extinction; recent revival
Sri Vaishnavism	<i>Vadagalai; Tenkalai</i>	Respectfully intolerant	Easy but “arms-length” co-existence

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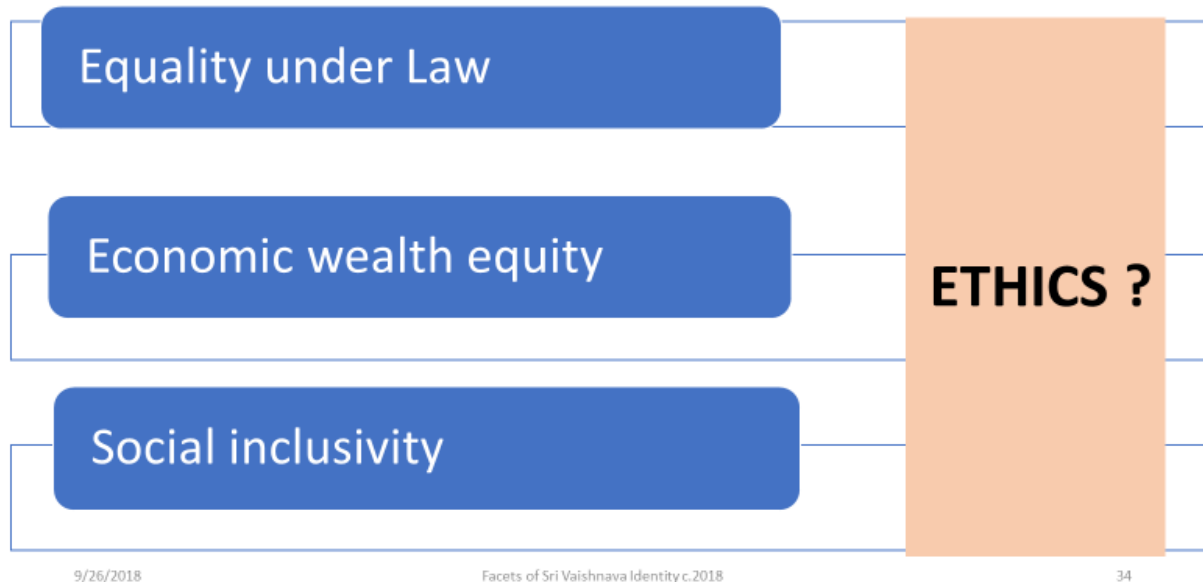
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Ladies and Gentlemen, I now come to the concluding part of my talk, which is going to be a very brief personal and subjective comment on what the Sri Vaishnava identity is today *circa*.2018 ... when viewed against the backdrop of all that I have presented so far.

Today we all are ruled by a democratically enshrined Constitution of India which **We, the People of the Republic of India**, solemnly gave ourselves as a secular country. Living under this great Constitution means all of us can and must aspire for birthrights of which the three most valuable are **(Slide 34): Equality under Law, Economic equity and Social inclusivity.**

I must confess I am neither a student nor an expert in the Indian Constitution. As an *unknown Sri Vaishnava*, I have only an ordinary citizen’s grasp and understanding of the Constitution. Based on that confession, let me state this with humility even if some might mistake it to be temerity.

The Constitutional Order



While the Constitution speaks much about the *Fundamental Rights* of citizenry, and on several matters, great and small, about *Directive Principles, Social Equity and Justice* etc., by deliberate and intentional design, however, it has remained extremely reticent on the question of human Ethics. In fact, in many rulings by the courts of India, I have read, the honorable judges are often quoted as saying that it is not the business of courts of law to adjudicate substantial matters of personal or social Ethics. Ethics is a subject held to be also beyond the pale of legislation in India ... as it is pretty much in every country in the modern world.

The Constitution distancing itself from Personal and Social Ethics is virtue indeed in a vast, pluralistic and socially competitive and, of late, acquisitive republic as India. But Constitutional aloofness also creates very painful crises of identity for many unique sub-cultures of India like the Sri Vaishnavas which, by historical circumstance and cultural choice, have always held true happiness to be “*purusharth*” i.e. the pursuit of an ethical life to reach the goal of spiritual fulfillment. The most poignant testimony to this search for that ethical life was given in eloquent words by the the 14th century CE saint and poet, **Narsi Mehta** who sang the famous song “*vaishnava janato tene kahiye, peed parayai jaane re....*”:

*“He knows the pain of others ..
Pride never enters his mind
He tolerates and praises the entire world
Does not speak ill of others
Keeps his promises, actions and thoughts pure
He sees everything equally, rejecting greed
His tongue may tire but he never utters untruth
He has renounced greed, deceit, lust and anger
The poet Narsi would like to meet such a person
By whose goodness, the entire family get salvation”.*

And so, when a given Constitutional order, imposed by the State from above, is found to be at times unsympathetic towards -- and many a time even deeply distrustful of --- such a deep instinct and aspiration for the ideal ethical life, the entire community's identity as a distinct sub-culture inevitably becomes deeply fractured, weak and socially outdated.

In this last chart **Slide 35**, I wish to paint a rough sketch of such fractured identity as a Sri Vaishnava in circa.2018 today suffers.




A Fractured Identity

+ (function) 	- (dysfunction) 
Upholding the institution of temples	Large-scale emigration – geographical, occupational and cultural.
Preserving and propagating traditional literature – 4000 Divya Prabhandhams	Lack of mastery in Sanskrit, Tamil and Manipravalam “ <i>sampradaaya grantham</i> ”; decline of “ <i>ubhaya-Vedanta</i> ” scriptural traditions
Memorializing Acharya “ <i>paramparai</i> ”	Lacking thought-leadership to defend “ <i>sampradaaya</i> ”. Inability to effectively resist/repulse attacks from foreign religious hegemonies on their own turf and terms
	Inability to internally resolve and permanently reconcile sectarian strife and rivalry. (“ <i>identity intoxication</i> ”)
	Encrusted by short-term historicity. Disconnect with evolutionary process of individual and social identity. (“ <i>post-Ramanuja second millennium obsession</i> ”)
	Formalistic religious practices and customs
	Insularity, Disengagement and Irrelevance

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Ladies and gentlemen, none of you must misunderstand this to be a judgmental summing-up on my part. In truth, it is only a critical self-appraisal of my own self as an *Unknown Sri Vaishnava*.

- On the left column are facets I call the *functioning better half* of a Sri Vaishnava identity.
- On the right column are a list of what in my view are the *dysfunctional facets of today's Sri Vaishnava*.

Functioning better-half of Sri Vaishnava Identity today:

- To be Sri Vaishnavas today is to certainly to be proud that, even in the face of all social and political odds, we have ensured that our great temples survive and all other institutions, large and small, associated and affiliated to temples also survive and thrive. Sri Vaishnavas must be given credit for at least ensuring the physical preservation of the vast commonwealth and religious infrastructure of the “*divya-desams*” and “*abimaana sthalams*” of Tamil Nadu.
- Side by side, the Sri Vaishnavas have also ensured that their great vernacular Tamil scripture, *naalayira divya prabhandhams* of the *Azhwars* has survived and continues to inspire people. Millions of Sri Vaishnava families all over the globe today can and do chant the *Azhwar*

paasurams at home, in temples and at all festive and community occasions. *Pravachanam* and discourses on the Azhwar “*sree-sookthis*” through mass-media and from public platforms are very popular these days.

- The 3rd admirable function of Sri Vaishnava identity today is that we hold our various “*achaarya parampara-s*” in great esteem and veneration. And in turn the *acharyaas* are doing yeoman service to the community in upholding traditional lineage, customs, sacraments and in propagating scriptural knowledge.

Dysfunctional facets of Sri Vaishnava Identity today:

1. The Sri Vaishnava community is a numerically very small population.

According to an unofficial 2011 census report (“*Tamil Brahmins: Making of a Middle Class Caste*” by C.J.Fuller/Haripriya Narasimhan), the global Tamil Brahman population was 1.85 million only of which c.100,000 is resident overseas. Sri Vaishnava numbers in this population, it is my guess, might account for no more than 40% say, **c.75,000. Slide 36.**

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Table 5 Estimated Tamil Brahman population in different locations in 2011

Location	Population	%
Chennai	390,000	21.1
Rest of urban Tamilnadu	920,000	49.7
Tamilnadu villages	80,000	4.3
All Tamilnadu	1,390,000	75.1
Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi	200,000	10.8
Rest of India	160,000	8.6
Overseas	100,000	5.4
Total population	1,850,000	99.9

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In the last 50 years, a lot of Sri Vaishnavas have emigrated out of India. It is my estimate that their diaspora could be around 10,000-12,000. IN this same period, it is estimated that close to 80% of the remaining 65,000 Sri Vaishnavas in India have emigrated out of religious occupations into modern, secular professions. Which means that no more than about 10-12,000 Sri Vaishnavas are today actively engaged in a life that could be said to be grounded in genuine “*sri sampradaaya*”.

The resultant “*fracturing*” effect overall on the cultural ethos and identity of Sri Vaishnavas of the world is there for all to see. Today we have not only *Vadakalai* and *Tenkalai* Sri Vaishnavas but also a third “*kalai*” called “*NRI Kalai*”. There is also a 4th Sri Vaishnava ersatz “*kalai*” that

likes to call itself as “*secular Sri Vaishnava*”, whatever that may mean! And finally, there are also Sri Vaishnavas like me who are an inexplicable mix of the traditional and the secular, for whom I have coined the label “*Unknown Sri Vaishnava*” ... someone who is worse than a religious schizophrenic found to be orthodox Sri Vaishnava on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday, a free-thinking liberal on Monday and Saturdays ... and a confused agnostic on Tuesdays when he starts hearing voices inside his head.

2. Because of this widespread *emigration* that has fractured their ethos, Sri Vaishnavas as a community have completely lost what historically gave them their distinctive identity viz.; mastery of Sanskrit, Tamil and Manipravalam languages as well as mastery in the age-old scriptures of “*ubhaya Vedanta*” written in those languages. In my opinion, this is the single most fatal cause for identity-loss amongst Sri Vaishnavas today.
3. Sri Vaishnava *achaaryas* of the pre- and post-Ramanuja times were intellectual giants... great Vedantic philosophers, theologians, preceptors and active social reformists. Because of their great intellectual stature, they were in the very forefront of defending religious “*siddhaantha*” and “*sampradaya*” against ferocious attacks by rival systems. Sankara with his Advaita took his battle into the Jain/Buddhist camp. Ramanujacharya took his battle into the camps of Saivite bigotry and Advaitic dominance. Later, Vedanta Desika came and decisively established the pre-eminence of Ramanuja’s Vedanta over all other rival schools of religious philosophy. .

However, later Sri Vaishnava Achaaryas, from Vedanta Desika until the present day, failed completely to engage with foreign religious systems such as Islam and Christianity. Here I would like to paraphrase what **Rajiv Malhotra** wrote in his book “*The Battle for Sanskrit*”:

Hindus have always been good at engaging in debates only amongst themselves. Buddhists and Jains essentially arose from within the Hindu culture... Acharyas and thinkers were able to digest elements of Buddhism and Jainism into the Hindu discourse and then succeed in revising, improving and strengthening their point of view, their own “darsana” in the process. Adi Sankara established his great Advaita siddhanta in the same way engaging with the Meemamsa traditions. And in turn Ramanujacharya established his school in the same way over Saiva-Smartha and Advaitin schools in the Chola period ..

But the important question is: Why did those Acharyas and those who have come after them in all these years, fail to wage a similar successful conquest over Islam, Christianity and modern secularism? ... By the 14th century CE, both Christianity and Islam were expanding in India.... Yet, Hindu intellectuals could focus only on inward debates and analysis. They could lay down the groundwork for their own systems relative to other Hindu systems, but they completely ignored, as even modern-day Acharyas continue to do so, the non-Indian, non-Vedantic systems that in fact challenge their mission and following.

Sri Vaishnavas Acharyas also have thus failed to provide thought-leadership in this respect. The long lineage of Sri Vaishnava acharyas today continue to act only as gate-keepers of the “*sampradaya*” and faith... In the 1000 years after Sri Ramanuja , not one of them has proved himself to be an original, path-breaking or pioneering Sri Vaishnava thinker or philosopher with ideas and thought capable of out-classing religious rivals who come attacking us from the West. IN the past, the battle for the soul of India, it was Acharyas like Sankara and Ramanuja who led from the front and showed the rest of society a way out of conflict, despair and spiritual degeneration. Today, Sri Vaishnava Acharyas are quite content to abdicate the responsibility of defending “*siddhaantha*” or “*sanatana dharma*” to career-politicians, quasi-religious NGOs and pseudo-spiritualists against systematic onslaughts from foreign religious hegemonies.

4. Sri Vaishnava sects today suffer from what I have already explained is “*identity intoxication*” which leads to their being engaged in continual squabbles over control of temple and temple-wealth, in needless litigation and petty feuding that brings no credit to the community within the larger social milieu of India.
5. Throughout this presentation, I have sought to present the Sri Vaishnava identity as a timeless one with its origins and evolution within a larger Vedic horizon of time and space. But today’s Sri Vaishnava unfortunately seems to have been dinned into believing that his identity begins in the 11th century from the time of Sri Ramanuja and ends with Sri Manavala Mamuni!

Our identity today stands trapped in a time-warp of our own making. We live today encrusted in historicity... much like Semitic religions -- Jewish, Christian and Muslim -- which are all completely fixated with only the life and personality of their prophets. Unlike *Sanatana Dharma*, they are not founded on eternal ideals and universal principles. Such an unhealthy obsession with mere historicity and personality is what leads to several of today’s Sri Vaishnava sectarian tensions and intolerance.

6. Lastly, our community-identity today is beginning to more and more hearken to formalistic approach to religion redolent of the sacerdotal chapters in our history.

Rituals and ritualism are making a big-comeback in the lives of ordinary Sri Vaishnavas. Because Sri Vaishnavas today are numerically such a miniscule population in the country, there is great danger therefore, of such a formalistic approach to our “*sampradaya*” leading us all into a collective “*ghetto-mentality*”.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I make my very last submission in my presentation today. It is being made by me as an ordinary “*unknown Sri Vaishnava*” who has the utmost respect for our traditions and even greater veneration for my Achaaryas.

I ask myself a serious question: *Does the Sri Vaishnava Identity have a long-term future in Tamil Nadu, in South India and India as well?* I have put down some of my own answers which spring from my deepest

feelings about where the Sri Vaishnava identity and community ought to be headed if it must survive and thrive as an ancient, rich, dynamic and valuable sub-culture of this great land.

I have no doubt in my mind that a Sri Vaishnava will always derive his identity only from his Acharya. Whatever the Acharya does or does not do is bound to define the way forward for us. It is the responsibility of our Acharyas therefore to assume full responsibility of leadership.

What does that responsibility of leadership mean? I am sure it is already well known to all Acharyas. Nonetheless, I conclude my talk today by merely proposing in very broad terms a kind of “high-level strategy” for carrying out such responsibility. To that strategy I give a French name: “*reculer pour mieux sauter*” It means that sometimes “*if one want to advance forward rapidly one must retrace a few paces backwards*”. What do I mean by “*retracing few paces backward*”?

Sri Vaishnava Identity: way forward (circa.2018 CE)

“*reculer
pour mieux
sauter*”

- Embrace “*Ubhaya-Vedanta*”
- De-federalize “*aachaarya-parampara*”
- Create modern “*simhaasanaadhipatis*”
- Develop Sri Vaishnava centers of thought-leadership

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- As a miniscule community, Sri Vaishnavas must bring back into their lives the wonderful unique and inimitable tradition of “**ubhaya-Vedanta**” and embrace it with open arms and loving hearts. The deep fractures within our identity brought about by *creeping* language-chauvinism will then get healed. Our identity will be restored to wholesomeness. Being an excellent bi-linguist, the Sri Vaishnava of the future will have knowledge and fluency in Sanskrit which gives him *pan-India* status and closer connectivity with the larger Vaishnava traditions of India ... nearly half a billion. The same proficiency in Tamil will also give him a *Pan-Peninsular* appeal. The Sri Vaishnava identity will then know no geographical borders nor intellectual North-South barriers anywhere inside the country.
- It is high time Sri Vaishnava “*Acharyas*” of today voluntarily undertake bold and radical institutional reforms. I call it “*de-federalization*” of “*Achaarya parampara*”. The “*federalization*” of “*Acharya*” lineages began happening in a trickle in the late 14th century and snowballed

thereafter in the 18th century CE. This unfortunate federalization must get reversed somehow. If this does not happen, I have no doubt, Sri Vaishnava identity will wither sooner than later.

- Sri Vaishnava acharyas must see themselves as thought-leaders occupying positions at the very cutting-edge of modern philosophical, ethical, socio-spiritual discourse and begin contributing to knowledge-domains in the same exceptional way as our “*purvaachaaryas*” did in their own times. It is time Sri Vaishnava pontiffs, *muttaadhipatis*, theologians, monks, pundits and scholars moved on to intellectual frontiers beyond the narrow confines of Sri Vaishnava hermeneutics and soteriology. Emerging from traditional cloisters they must start straddling cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary and cross-ideological universes. To create a new Sri Vaishnava identity, our Acharyas might want to take a leaf from Ramanuja’s own book: Breed a whole generation of men (and women too) of very superior intellectual caliber in much the same way as Sri Ramanujacharya sought to do when he tried establishing, as we know, a cross-country elite intellectual corps he named as the “*74 simhaasanaadhi-patis*”.

The modern “*Sri Vaishnava “simhaasanaadhi-patis*”, I for one imagine, will be a polymath community with multi-lingual skills and ease in Tamil, Sanskrit and English languages. They would be subject-matter experts and knowledge-exemplars in both research and discourse on advanced systems of philosophy, branches of theology, history, politics, social anthropology etc. defending Vedic civilization and ethos against inimical foreign faiths.

- Our acharyas thus would be striving not merely to revive temples and resurrect “*veda-paatashaalas*” but also be creating or regenerating new-age religious institutions that for want of a better metaphor I can only describe as the premier “*IITs and IIMs of Sanaatana Dharma*” in this great country of ours.

The Sri Vaishnava identity would then truly shine like the brilliant jewel that it truly is.

THANK YOU

END

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October 28th, 2018.
Chennai, INDIA.