This paper focuses on the representation of the ritual of the “five rites” (pañcasāṃskāra) in the fourteenth century Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographical text, the Ārāyirappāṭi Kuruparamparāpirāpāvam. The pañcasāṃskāra, also known as samāśrayana, is an initiation ritual undergone by Śrīvaiṣṇava men and women and endows them with the ritual competence to participate fully in the religious and ritual life of the community. I have written at length elsewhere about the significance of the ritual, its description in the ritual literature and its actual performance today.¹ Theoretically, the pañcasāṃskāra consists of five rites to be undergone by the initiate in the following order: the initiate is first branded with the “weapons” of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa in the rite called the tāpasāṃskāra, the insignia of God are painted on various parts of his body in the puṇḍrasāṃskāra, he receives a new Vaiṣṇava name in the nāmasāṃskāra, is imparted important Vaiṣṇava mantras in the mantrasāṃskāra and, finally, obtains an idol-form of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa in the last rite called the yāga-sāṃskāra. The one early literary evidence we have that at least the branding rite was considered necessary for those who were affiliated in some way to Vaiṣṇavism as early as the ninth century comes from the corpus of Tamil Vaiṣṇavite devotional poetry composed between the seventh and the ninth centuries, Nālāyirattiviappirapantam. There, in Periyālvār’s Tiruppallāṇṭu the poet states that he and his family have through generations served Nārāyaṇa after having been branded by the temple discus and conch.² Further historical or literary evidence is yet to emerge for the prevalence of this practice between this period and the twelfth century, with the composition of

¹ See Raman 2005.
² Tiruppallāṇṭu v.7a-b: tiyirpoligirinaceicūtarālī tikāṭiruuccakkarrattin kōyirporiyālēyurrunṭuninru kuṭikūṭiyāṭceykinrōm.
the hagiographical literature. It is this evidence which is the focus of this paper. In looking at the hagiographical representation of pañca-
samskāra, I suggest that it can be conceived as both an initiatory and a conversion ritual. The paper concentrates on examining how exactly pañcasamskāra enables a person to cross over from Śaivism to Vaiṣṇavism. In doing so it also addresses the issue of what “conversion” could have possibly meant in pre-modern India and, further, what the existence of such a ritual which enables “conversion” of some kind might have to say about the nature of sectarian and religious affiliations in medieval Indian society.

The hagiography, the Ārāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāpirapāvam (henceforth, AK), used as the main source evidence for pañca-
samskāra emerged in the two-hundred-year period of Śrīvaiṣṇavism starting from the mid-twelfth century (just after its most prominent teacher Rāmānuja) which saw the development of new genres of religious literature in that tradition. The two new genres which arose and which were put to extensive use to explicate theology were devotional commentaries and hagiographies, with the earliest commentaries slightly pre-dating the hagiographies. Both genres were new in that their linguistic medium was an admixture of Tamil and Sanskrit called manipravāla and they both reflected the primary concern of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community then, which was to affirm the sacred status both of the Nālāyirattiyappirapantam corpus as well as that of its authors, the semi-historical and semi-mythical Ālvārs. It is likely that the first Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiography was the Divyasūricarita of Garuḍavāhana Paṇḍita dating perhaps to the twelfth century A.D. It was composed in Sanskrit. This was followed by the AK and the Mūvāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāpirapāvam in the fourteenth century as also the Upadeśaratnamālai. These texts, in turn, form the basis for the most comprehensive hagiographical work, the Prapannā-
mṛtam of the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries. The AK, whose authorship is attributed to Piṇḍalākiya Perumāḷ Jiyar, is the first commentary to be composed in manipravāla, in the devotional style characteristic of the new genres.

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3 I have written extensively about this is my monograph RAMAN 2006.

4 There has been a seminal article, exploring the motifs relating to Nammāḷvār in the Divyasūricarita, by HARDY 1979. For the controversy regarding its dating see JAGADEESAN 1977: 76-81.
The text concerns itself with the community of Śrīvaiñava teachers who precede the author and who form the religious teacher-pupil lineage (guruparamparā) of the community. It begins with a description of the splendour of the divine land of Vaikuṇṭha (nityavi-bhūtivaibhavam) and frames the stories of the Ālvārs and Ācāryas within the context of a divine plan of compassion. God, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, troubled by the suffering of ordinary souls in the endless cycle of transmigration decides out of his compassion to rescue them. He wishes actively to help them in attaining highest bliss, a bliss which involves total proximity to him combined with the delights of serving serpent bhūtis, and to bring the world the path to salvation. The hagiography likens Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa’s action in dealing with mortal souls to a hunter who traps animals by using other animals: he sends to earth those who simulate the human species in order to engender the trust of devout humans. The AK tells us that these divine beings became the Ālvārs born in the different varṇas, who composed the Tiviyaiprapantam.5

Having thus set the stage for the unfolding drama of salvation, the AK then starts to narrate the stories of the Ālvārs in the following order: the three early Ālvārs Poykai, Pūttaṭālvār and Pēy come first, then Tirumalici, Kulacēkarālvār, Periyālvār, Anṭāl, Toṇṭarāṭippoti, Tiruppāṇālvār, Tirumaṅkai, Nammālvār and, finally, Maturakavi. After this primary line of preceptors comes to an end.

5 AK 5-7: ivarkalōpāti saṁsārikaḷum nammaiyanubhavittu anubhava-janitaprītiśeṣaśāvasthocitāśeṣaśāatakaratirūpāṇityāvadyaniratisāyānan- darūpamataṁkaṁyamākāra mahāsampattaiperru vālkaṁku prāptiyuṭāyī- rukka, ivarkaḷ ittaiyilantaruppatē enru mikavum vyākulaṁkañcaranāy ... pāṛtu pārvaivittuṁ mṛgām pitippārāippōle manuṣyasañjāyaraṁ ālvākaḷai- yiṭṭuvittu jāgattattā tiruttiyarulavēṇum enru pāṛtaruḷi sṛivatsakaustubhavai- jantarvanamālaikaḷaiyum, sribhūminilaiikaḷaiyum sripāṇcājanyayudhālvāk- kaiyum, anantagarudaviṣvakṣenaprabhṛtiśaṅkalaiyum pāṛtuṁ nīṅkai pōy līlā- vibhūtiyē nānāvarṇaṅkaḷilum avatarittu, akhilaṭmodhharanam paṅkuṅkōḷ enru niyamittaruḷa ... sarvesvaranum avarkalukku mayavararamatimalamaraḷu avarkal mukhena sarvādhiṅkāraṁaṅa draviṇedārūpā tiviyaiprapantāṅkaḷai prakāśippitaruḷiṇān.
The text indicates this break by inserting a section on the sacred authority of the Nālāyirattiviyaprapantam and its didactic value for all Śrīvaishṇavas. The line of Ācāryas begins with Nāthamuni and moves on to his disciples Uyyakkoṇṭār and Maṇakkāl Nampi. We then have the story of Yāmunācārya followed by that of Rāmānuja. The narratives concerning Rāmānuja and his disciples (Kūrattālvān, Mutaliyāntān, Yādavaprakāśa, Govinda Bhaṭṭar and Yajñamūrti) form the bulk of the text. The last sections of the AK comprise of the stories of Empār, Parāśarabhaṭṭar and Naṅciyār and conclude with the Ācārya Nampiḷḷai whose dates could probably be around the mid-thirteenth/mid-fourteenth century A.D. In all of these narratives of the exemplary teachers of the Śrīvaishṇava community I have been able to identify eight episodes where interactions take place involving either the entire ritual of paṅcasamāskāra or some of the rites within it. It is to these episodes, in the chronological order of their occurrence, which I now turn.

**Episode I: Tirumāṅkai Ālvār and the Affirmation of a Vaiṣṇava Identity**

The story of Tirumāṅkai Ālvār, his marriage and domestication, is entwined with the story of a heavenly nymph, an apsaras called Tirumāmakāl. The nymph has descended to earth to bath on the banks of the Poykai river in Tiruvālinātu with her companions. Left behind unwittingly by them when she lingers to pluck kumudā flowers, the abandoned nymph is encountered by a virtuous physician who is also a devotee of Viṣṇu, a Bhāgavata. He questions her and she narrates an episode relating to her life which links her, prophetically, with Tirumāṅkai Ālvār. She had been visiting the sage Kapila’s hermitage in the Himalayan hills when she incurred his displeasure. He cursed her with a birth as a human and also marriage to a lowly person, but seeing her consternation he explains to her how she can alleviate her situation: “Maiden, Parakāḷaṇ who is born as a portion of my bow has incarnated in order to protect the world and is ruling a kingdom; if you decide to become his wife and make him the best among the Bhāgavatas we will destroy your problems.”6

6 AK 71: peṇṇē! jagadrakṣaṇārthamāka ennuṭaiya śārṅgāṃśarāy parakāḷaṇ avatarittu rājyādhipatiyāyvirukkirār, avarukkup patniyāy avarai bhāgavatottamarāyyp paṭṭimensional un kuraiyu arruppōm.
Happy to help her fulfill her destiny, the Bhāgavata physician takes her home. The nymph is adopted by the childless Bhāgavata couple; she is given the name Kumudavalliyr and reared as their daughter.

Parakāla or Tirumāṅkai comes to hear of the girl’s beauty, visits her foster-father on some pretext, and is captivated by the sight of her. He asks for her hand in marriage. Now, to quote from the AK: “The couple agreed to give the girl in marriage to him. But the girl voiced her secret determination (neñcil adhyavasāyattaic colla) [saying]: ‘I shall not have you promise me to anyone other than one who has had the pañcasamśkāra preceded by the divine signs (tiruvilacciṇai) and the name, as in the text: ‘branding, the puṇḍras, so too the name, mantra and the sacrifice being the fifth’.’ Hearing this statement [of hers], he (Tirumāṅkai), as in the adage: ‘One should hasten in an auspicious matter’ went in great haste to Tirunaraiyūr. There, in front of the deity he took on the brand marks as in the texts: ‘They are marked on their shoulder by the discus heated in the fire, [as also with] the discus which is divine.’ [Then] in accordance with the text: ‘All should, according to injunction, wear the ūrdhva-puṇḍra of white mud …’ he came back with the twelve ūrdhva-puṇḍras such as Keśava, etc. Seeing him, Kumudavalliyr said: ‘I shall not take you as a husband unless you feed 1008 Śrīvaisṇavas regularly for an entire year, partake of the water used to wash their feet and eat the remains of the food cooked for them.’”

7 AK 72-73: dampatikālum appenpillaiyai ivarkkuk koṭuppattāka ud-yogikka, appenpillaiyum. tāpah puṇḍras thathā nāma mantra yāgaś ca pañc-camah enru collapaṭṭa trivilaccinai tirunāmam munukkap pañcasamśkāra-mullavarkaloliya marloruvarkennai pēcalottēn enru tan neñcil adhyavasāyattaic colla ivarum avvacanatik kēṭṭu śubhasya śighram enkirapatīyē atit-vairaiyōṭē tirunaiyūrilē cenru ... nampi tirumunpe vantu agnitaptena cakraṇa bāhumule tu laṅciṭṭā enrum tīyiropolikirra cēcūtarāll tikal tiruccakarattin kōyipoyiḷēvorrhunṭu nirru enrum collukirapatīyē tiruvillacinai-yum dharittu sarvais śvetamṛdā dhāryam ārdhuvapuṇḍram yathēvidhi rujuni sāntarālāni hāṅkheṣu dvādāṣṭasvāpi enru collukirapatīyē keśavādi dvāda-śordhvapuṇḍraṅkaḷai uṭaiyarāy vara, kumudavalliyārum ālvāraip pārttu oru samvatsaram niyamāka ayirattēṭtu sṛi vaisṇavarkaḷai amutecevyittu avarkalṭaiya sṛi pādatirthamum talikaipprasādamum svikarittu nirāvēri-nāloliya nāṅ bhartāvāka angikarippattillai.
Tirumāṅkai accepts these conditions and after he happily fulfills them, they are married.

**EPISODE II: THE CHILDHOOD CEREMONIES FOR YĀMUṆA**

The second episode deals with the birth of the Ācārya Yāmuna and is connected with childhood rituals (*samskāras*) for the child: “[Maṅakkāl] Nampi came there after hearing of that [birth], exceedingly happy. Then he had the birth ceremony done by Īṣvaramuni as prescribed in the following texts: ‘When the birth ceremony is not done, Viṣṇu’s discus should be worn. At the time of the tonsure and the sacred thread ceremony or at the [time] of the study of [Viṣṇu’s] mantras, the best among the twice born, wearing according to injunction the discus of Viṣṇu ...’ [and the text]: ‘One should anoint the infant only with the Vaiṣṇava sūktas. One should mutter into its right ear the eight-syllabled mantra and the dvaya and laying one’s hand on its head one should utter the twelve-syllabled mantra. After that, one should give it a Vaiṣṇava name which destroys demerit.’ Later, two days after ten days, according to code of conduct laid down by Nāthamuni, he gave the infant the name Lord Yamuna (yamunattu-raivar) after the marking and rejoiced.”

We see that in this context, once Yāmuna was born, as the grandson of Nāthamuni, Nāthamuni’s disciple Maṅakkāl Nampi, following the wishes of his deceased ācārya, named the child Yamunaitturaivar after first imprinting him with the divine signs (*tiruvillacinai*) twelve days after the birth ceremony (*jātakarman*) was done. The further childhood *samskāras*, such as feeding the first solid food to the child (*annaprāśana*), tonsure (*caula*), and the thread ceremony

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8 AK 128-129: atu kēṭṭu atisamtuṣṭarāy nampiyum aṅkēravantu avarukku jātakarmanyalābhbe tu viśnoś cakrasya dhāraṇam, caulopanayane ca- pi tanmantrādhayayane ’pi vā, vidhīnā vaiṣṇavaṇcakraṃ dhārayitvā dvijottamaḥ enrum vaiṣṇavaīś caiva sūktaś ca kuryāt sammarjanam śīsoḥ, tasya daksīṇakarne tu japeṣ tāśākṣaraṃ dvayaṃ, mūrdhni hastam vinikṣipya japec ca dvādaśākṣaram, nāma kuryāt tataḥ paścāt vaiṣṇavaṃ pāpanāśanam enrum collukirapaṭiye īśvaramunikālayiyum koṇṭu jātakarmaittaiyyum ceyvitu pattunāḷum kaṇṭantaviranṭānāl srimannāthamunikal niyamanaprakārattile tiruvillacinai munāka yamunaturaiyyaṇ enrub tirunāmataiyiyum cāti prīta-raṇy aruḷiṅār.
(upanayana), which marks the end of childhood, follow this initial ritual in this episode.\(^9\)

**EPISODE III: RĀMĀNUJA’S CHILDHOOD**

An identical episode is placed, in the hagiography, in Rāmānuja’s childhood. Here, the person who becomes active in doing the ritual for him is his maternal uncle Periyatirumalai Nampi, a disciple of Yāmunācārya. After Rāmānuja’s birth Āsuri Keśavapperumāl has his birth ceremony, the jātakarman, performed. Then, according to the hagiographical account, Periya Nampi comes to hear of the birth and visits the parents. He suggests to the father, Keśavasomayāgin and a great Vedic sacrificer himself, that the child be named Ilaiyālvār, “The Younger Lord,” which is Tamil for Rāmānuja. Hence, says the AK, “On the twelfth day, during the naming ceremony which was preceded by giving him the divine signs, they gave him the name Ilaiyālvār [after the birth ceremony, as prescribed in the text]: ‘The best among Brahmins should first brand the right shoulder of the infant with the discus and the left after that with the conch.’ Then, in accordance with the sequence laid down in the scriptures, at the appropriate time, they gave the first solid food and did the tonsure and the thread ceremony.”\(^{10}\)

**EPISODE IV: RĀMĀNUJA ANOINTED AS THE PROPAGATOR OF THE TRADITION**

The disciples of Yāmuna go and remind one of his chief disciples, Periya Nampi, that he should bring Rāmānuja over to become the propagator of the doctrine (darśanapravartaka), now that Yāmuna is no more. Periya Nampi consents and sets out to meet Rāmānuja, who is also on his way to him with the same purpose in mind. The

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\(^9\) AK 129: \textit{pinpu iśvaramuniṅkaḷum yamunatūraivarkku annaprāśana-caulopanayanādikālaṅkaḷiyum tattatkālaṅkaḷilē ceytaruḷi ...}

\(^{10}\) AK 141: \textit{panniṟaṇṭam divasattīḷē daḵṣināṃ tu bhujam pūṟvam ca-kreṅa pratapesćiśoḥ, vāṃmśaṁ pratet paścāt śaṅkhenaiwa dvijottamaḥ enkirapiṭyi vavarkku nāmakaranaṭṭīḷē tiruvillacciṅai munṇāka, ilaiyālvār enru trināmaṅcāṭiyarulip \textit{pinpu annaprāśanacaulopanayanādikālaṅkāiyum tat-tat kālaṅkaḷilē śāstroktapraṅкраṛattīḷē ceyvikka ...}
two men meet, joyfully embrace and Rāmānuja says to Periya Nampi: “Respected Lord, you must without delay graciously impart the right teaching to me, your subordinate, and thus protect me.”¹¹ Periya Nampi consents to give the instruction at Hastigiri which is Kāṇcipuram, at the temple of Lord Varadarāja. Rāmānuja, however, begs him to initiate him immediately without delay. Periya Nampi, moved by his eagerness, takes him into the Rāma temple where they have met and, there, the AK says: “[The texts prescribe that] ‘For the sake of the success of the mantrasamskāra, in accordance with the [rules] for the mantra and the initiation, the discus together with mantras or the five weapons should be worn.’ [Further], ‘Man wears the discus, etc., as a remembrance of the Supreme [just] as ornaments such as bangles are the sign of chastity [in a woman].’ [According to these texts] he (Periya Nampi) did the branding. Then, as in the sequence: ‘The guru places on his right [the disciple] with modestly folded hands, places on his head his right hand of wisdom, places the left [hand] on his heart and then should look at him with compassion, uttering the teacher-pupil lineage. After this, surrendering to the Lord of the devas, the ācārya should compassionately teach the jewel among mantras which contains the seers, the metre and the deity.’” Then, the AK continues, “Periya Nampi placed the virtuous Ilaiyālvār (Rāmānuja) on his right, touched his head with his hand and, contemplating the feet of the true Ācārya Ālavantār (Yāmuna), he whispered into Ilaiyālvār’s right ear the jewel among mantras, the dvaya, together with its auxiliaries, preceded by [the recitation of] the teacher-pupil lineage.”¹²

¹¹ AK 169: aṭṭiyeṅukku ippōṭē tēvarī hitopadeśaṅceyataruḷi rakṣittaran-ḷavēṇum.

¹² AK 170: mantrasamskārasiddhyārthaṃ mantradiksāvidhau tathā, cakrasya dhāraṇaṃ proktaṃ mantraiḥ paṇcāyudhāni vā enrum cakrādīdhāraṇaṃ puṃsāṃ parasambandhavanām, pavitrātā nimittām hi valayādi dhāraṇaṃ enrum colliṅgurapatiyī tiruvillaccinai prasādittu niveśya dakṣinē svasya viniṭṭalīsamuyutām, mūrdhīnī haṣṭam viniṅkipya dakṣiṇām jñānada-kṣiṇām, savyaṃ tu hrдi vinyasya kṛpayā vikṣayed guruh, svācāryaṃ hṛdaye dhyātvā japtvā guruparamparāṃ, evaṃ prapady deveśam ācāryaḥ kṛpayā svayaṃ, adhāyapayen mantraratnam sarṣiccandhidhīvadānuṃ enru collu-kīra kramattīlē periya nampiyum savinayaraṇa iraiyālvārītī tammuṭaiya valapurattilē vaittum tam tirukkaikāḷālu avar ṣirasaī sparsītukkoṇṭu sadā-cāryaraṇa ālavantār tiruvatikaḷai smarītukkoṇṭu guruparamparāpūrvvaka-
Once Rāmānuja becomes an ascetic and takes the name Rāmānujamuni two of his disciples Mutaliyāṃṭaṅ and Kūrattāḷvāṅ come to him at the temple and request him to do the pañcasanmśkāra for them. Obtaining the pañcasanmśkāra, says the text, they become “those who have fulfilled their goal” and continue to serve him.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{EPISODE VI: YĀDAVAPRAKĀŚA}

Yādavaprakāśa’s mother develops an ardent faith in Vaiṣṇavism through her contact with Tirukkcāi Nampi and her conversations with Rāmānuja and desires that her son become a Vaiṣṇavite ascetic. Meeting with Rāmānuja’s approval on expressing her wishes, she goes to her son and tells him to change into a Vaiṣṇavite ascetic, identified as such because he would then carry the triple-staff (trīdāṇḍa) and continue to wear his tuft of hair (śikhā) and the sacred thread (yajñopavīta).\textsuperscript{14} Yādavaprakāśa is eventually persuaded by his mother but fears that, since he has already discarded the top-knot and the sacred thread after having become a Śaiva ascetic, he cannot convert into a Vaiṣṇava one without some form of expiation (prāyaścītta). The normal expiation prior to changing his status, the text

\textsuperscript{13} AK 175: atiprītiyōṭē perumāḷ kōyilukku elūntaruḷī rāmānujaṅai sēvittu ātyōṅkalukku pañcasanmśkārādiṅkalai prasaṅittaruḷavēṇum ēnru viṇṇappaṅ ceyya rāmānujaṅum tiruvullamukantarulī avarkal prārtīttapañtiyē ceytarula, avarkalum pañcasanmśkārātiṅkalai labhittu kṛtārtharāy ... svācāryarāṅa rāmānujaṅai orukālum piriyāmal tatkalīṅkaiyakarasarāy sēvittukkonṭittarulār.

\textsuperscript{14} On the difference in the monastic regulations for the trīdāṇḍa versus the ekadaṇḍa ascetic see OLIVELLE 1995.

AK 176: pippu yādavaprakāśaṅtuṭaiyā māṭāvukku ... tirukkaccinampi pārvaṭīyum rāmānujaṅitātu prēmasamāḥṣaṇaṅum naṭakkaṭiyāḷē atuvo nītānamāṅa avalukkuḥ nam daraṅattīlē āṟṟam pirantu it daraṅattīlē nam yādanaṁ iṟaṅkīḷāṅo ēnru ninaittu ... yādavaprakāśaṅ pakkal ciṟṟu ... nīyun rāmānujaṅaiy pōḷē śikhāyajñopavītaṅpūṟvaṅkamāṅa trīdāṇḍattai dhariyāy ēnna ...
informs us, would be a circumambulation of the earth (bhūpradaksīna). Yādavaprakāśa feels that he is too old to do this and despairs. Then, the deity at Śrīraṅgam, God Raṅganātha, appears in his dream and tells him that the only expiation he needs to do is to circumambulate Rāmānuja himself and obtain from him the triple-staff (trīdaṇḍa) and the robes (kāṣāya) of the ascetic. Yādavaprakāśa goes to Rāmānuja and does this. Here, the text says: “Rāmānuja accepted to do this graciously and, in accordance with the śāstras, attended to his (Yādavaprakāśa’s) tonsure and his thread ceremony, preceded by the expiation and bestowed upon him the triple-staff and the robes and gave him the name Govinda Cīyar. Thus, endowing him with the pañcasaṃskāras, he gave him the meaning of that jewel among mantras after [reciting] the teacher-pupil lineage ... and he told him to write the text called Yatidharmasamuccaya ...”

EPISODE VII: GOVINDA BHAṬṬAR

Govinda Bhaṭṭar, who is Rāmānuja’s maternal cousin, is a Śaivite who has taken the sectarian name of Uḻḷaṅkaikoṇarnta Nāyaṉār. Determined to change him, Rāmānuja’s maternal uncle Periyatirumalai Nampi (who lives in Tirumalai) goes to Kālahasti where Govinda Bhaṭṭar is doing service at the Śaiva temple there, carrying water for the ablutions of the God. Periyatirumalai Nampi strategically strews the path he routinely takes with verses of Yāmuna’s Stotraratna copied out on palm-leaves. Reading these verses each morning, Govinda Bhaṭṭar gradually becomes introspective and starts to question his own devotion to Śiva. Periyatirumalai Nampi now decides to reinforce the lesson. He comes once again to Kālahasti

15 AK 176: trīdaṇḍadhāraṇaṁ paṇṇumītattilnaṁ sikhāyajñopavītatyāgam paṇṇukaiyālē atukku prāyaścittamāka bhūpradaksānaṁ paṇṇavēṇīyiruntatu. atu vavy opponents ennāl ceyyamūtiyātu. inī aṣaktaṉaṇa nāṁ ceyya atūppatena enrū colli mucittukkīṭakka ...

16 AK 177: rāmānujaṁ pōrauvakantaruli śāstroktaprakāreṇa prāyaścittapūrvakamākāc caułōpanayanādikālaṇiyum paṇṇuvittu trīdaṇḍakāśāyādkālaṇiyum prasādittu govinda ciyar enra tirunāmamum prasādittaruḷi ippaṭi pañcasaṃskārayuktarākki gurvuparamparaṇaṇaṇprāṣātvakamāka mantraratnāṭtaiyum prasādittaruli ... yatidharmasamuccayam enkira prabandhatai paṇṇum enna ...
and starts to give discourses on Nammāḻyār’s Tiruvāyamoḷi in the nearby groves. Govinda Bhāṭṭar, who has climbed a tree in the grove to pick flowers for Śiva’s worship hears the discourses, is overcome with emotion, jumps down from the tree and flings away the rudrākṣa beads he is wearing as inappropriate. Soon after this, “[Periyatirumalai Nampi] took him to Tirupati and immediately performed the thread ceremony, etc., [in the manner described in the text]: ‘The pañcasāṃskāras have to be done.’ He did the pañcasāṃskāras for him on the shores of the river of Viṣṇu called Svāmipuṣkariṇī, recited to him the poetry of the Ālvārs such as the Tiruppallāṇṭu and took compassion on him by creating in him knowledge of the ‘Five Categories.’”

**EPISODE VIII: YAJṆAMŪRTI**

There was once a great scholar called Yajñamūrti who had become an ascetic in the tradition of māyāvāda (i.e., the non-dualistic monism of Śaṅkara). Hearing of Rāmānuja’s greatness he comes to dispute with him and agrees to become his disciple if he is defeated. After eighteen days of a fierce debate, guided in his dreams by the deity of Śrīraṅgam, Rāmānuja defeats him. Yajñamūrti breaks and throws away his single staff (ekadānta) and requests the triple-staff and the robes, etc., of the Vaiṣṇava ascetic. Rāmānuja tells him that since he had previously removed his top-knot and his sacred thread, he would have to do expiations for this. These expiations include recitation of the gāyatrimantra as well as an expiatory rite such as the krechra. Once they are done he could have the top-knot and sacred thread again. “Then [as in the text]: ‘O best among the twice-born, the seers teach that the Vaiṣṇava branding ceremony is to be borne by those in all the stages of life, by women and Śūdras’ he (Rāmānu-

17 AK 190: ivaraik kūṭikkoṇṭu tiruppattiyēra eluntarulit tatkṣaṇamē upanayanādikālaiyum ceytuvaittu saṃskārāḥ pañcakartavyā enru netumālaruviyāyikā svāmipuṣkariṇikā kalaiyum prasāditṭaruḷi, tiruppallāṇṭu mutalākā ālvāraḷuṭaiyum divyaprānbhandhaṅkaḷaiyum ōtivittu arthapañcakajñānattaiyumunṭṭakki viṣeṣitu kṛpaipaññiyaruļinār.

18 AK 206: ekadāṇḍattai murītterrīntu viṭṭu emperumāṇār tiruvatikāḷi-lē śāstaṅgapraṇāmam paṇṭikkoṇṭu kiṭakka ... atiyēnuku tridadākāsāyādi-kaḷai prasāditṭaruḷavēnum enru viṇṇappānçeeya ...
ja) gave him (Yajñaṃūrti) the *pañcasamśkāras*, foregrounded by the 
branding.”$^{19}$

A new Vaiṣṇava name, Arūḷălapperumāḷ Emperumāṇār, after 
the deity in Kāñci puram, Varadarāja, is also given to Yajñaṃūrti.

In examining these eight episodes for the historical information 
they yield, if any, on the practice of *pañcasamśkāra* among the 
Śrīvaiṣṇavas in the medieval period, the foremost issue to keep in 
mind is that the literature we looked at is not historical but hagi-
ographical. As recent studies have shown, hagiographical literature 
provides us with certain special information about a religious com-
munity. Blending, as such literature does, fact and fiction, archetypal 
and contextually specific conceptions of holy persons and their com-
munity of followers, they cannot be read as a historical record of 
events so much as texts which divulge a particular kind of relation-
ship between holy persons and the institutions which have come to 
be created around them. As PETERSON has suggested, in her article 
on medieval, Śaivite, hagiography: “These – [so-called] – histories of 
individual saints are at the same time archetypal narratives about 
human devotion and divine grace, and constructions of archetypal 
saintly personae ... The intersection of the particular and the paradigmatic aspects of the ideal persona in hagiography allows ... [for the] imaging of the ideal community.”$^{20}$

Hence, at one level, the Śrīvaiṣṇava hagiographies have the 
aim of edification – they wish to present a picture of the ideal com-
munity of devotees. At the same time, they structure a hierarchy 
within this ideal community: at the apex of a pyramid of perfectabil-
ity are those who are furthest away in historical or mythological 
time. These are the Ālvārs, the poet-saints whose devotional hymns 
construct the Tamil part of the edifice of Śrīvaiṣṇava theology. 
Nearer at hand, and in lineal descent from the Ālvārs, are the later 
teachers of the community, the Ācāryas, with Nāthamuni, Yāmunā-
cārya and Rāmānuja himself constituting a triadic apex among these. 
Further, this lineage of ascending perfection also contributes to the 
elevation and abstraction of the Ālvārs and sets them aside from the

$^{19}$ AK 206: *pradhāryas tāpasaṃskāro vaiśnavo munibhis smṛtaḥ, sar-
vāśrameśa vasatāṁ strīśūdrāṇāṁ dvijottama enkirapatīyē tiruvillaccinai 
mutalākap pañcasamśkāraṅkalaiyum prasādittu ...

realm of human imperfection which the rest of the community, in varying degrees, inhabits. At the same time, the hagiographical literature tries constantly also to imitate history, to approximate to it. It therefore projects a mimetic social reality, mirroring a microcosm which should be seen as a hagiographical Śrīvaishṇava social world rather than a historical Śrīvaishṇava social world. More specifically, one could argue, as MCLEOD does, that to search for a strictly historical kernel in hagiography is futile.\footnote{21 It is not sufficient to interpret their many anecdotes as strictly historical but overlaid by subsequent accretions of miraculous material. Although some stories are indeed formed in this way they are very few. The vast majority must be wholly rejected as historical sources ... and stripping away the miraculous overlay will not reveal actual events. The janam-sākhīs do not provide history. What they do provide is rather an interpretation of the Guru’s life, one which reflects the piety of his devout followers belonging to later generations, and which draws extensively upon a fund of the marvellous and the miraculous.” (MCLEOD 1994: 19).} It is much more useful to ask what the episodes about pañcasāmskāra actually tell us about the hagiographer’s and the community’s conception of how Vaiṣṇava identity is constructed in the medieval period.

Certain structures become evident when we analyze and group the episodes according to common features. The situations of pañca-samaṃskāra all, with the exception of the first episode, relate to a ritual performed by men for other men who, with the exception of Tirumaṅkai in the first episode, are predominantly Brahmins. Thus, what we see here is not a ritual which concerns both men and women, a pañcasāmskāra which is open to both genders. Nor in the hagiography is there a depiction of different caste groups undergoing the ritual, though a citation in episode VI does explicitly state that the ritual is also meant for women and Śūdras. The focus, though, is on a small community of males who undergo the ritual, who form part of an elite scholarly group and who, to a great extent, know each other through familial and traditional ties – the ritual is performed for Rāmānuja as a child by his maternal uncle, for Govinda Bhaṭṭar also by an uncle – or those who are already connected through the relationship of teacher and disciple participate in the ritual – Yāmuna is
initiated by his grandfather’s disciple, Rāmānuja initiates his own disciples.

Next, when we consider the life-situations which necessitate pañcasamśkāra we can discern approximately four patterns. The first is that of childhood and the saṃskāras of childhood. Thus, episodes II and III, relating to Yāmuna’s and Rāmānuja’s childhood illustrate a discernable pattern: the male child has to have first undergone the ceremony of jātakarman. Twelve days after this is over the child is subjected to the ritual of tiruvillaccinai, the important Vaiṣṇava mantras are whispered into its ear and it is given a Vaiṣṇava name. In other words, the ritual of pañcasamśkāra here is an integral part of the nāmakarman ceremony. Nevertheless, the description of the ritual in both the episodes does not include a description of all the five sub-rites necessary to constitute it. Emphasis is laid on only three of these sub-rites: that of the branding, the recitation of the Vaiṣṇava mantras into the ear of the infant and giving it a Vaiṣṇava name. Further, it is not even clear if the branding ceremony is really carried out – the term used in the descriptions is not tāpa or tāpasamśkāra but rather tiruvillaccinai (Skt.: śrīlakṣaṇa), meaning, literally, “divine signs.” It may, thus, be plausibly interpreted that the conch and the discus might have been painted onto the arms of the infant rather than branded. In this context, therefore, the child’s entry into the larger community of Śrīvaiṣṇavas is marked by the pañcasamśkāra ceremony.

The absence of one or the other of the sub-rites, nevertheless, does not imply that the ritual of pañcasamśkāra as such has not been performed. As I have argued elsewhere, though the ritual was formally and ideally defined as involving five sub-rites both medieval ritual texts and contemporary practice indicate that it was rare for all the five sub-rites to have ever been done.\footnote{The medieval ritual text authoritative for this ritual, the Parāśara-viṣiṣṭaparamadharmaśāstra, suggests that it is possible to omit the nāma-samśkāra, which could have happened already at birth. In contemporary practice it is ubiquitous to omit both the nāmāsamskāra and the yāgasamskāra. On this evidence see RAMAN 2005.} It appears, rather, that the defining core of the ritual was and remains the branding. The conflation of the Śrīvaiṣṇava initiatory ritual solely with branding was part of an etic understanding of the ritual, seen as defining the community
as far as rival Vaiṣṇava sects such as the Vaikhānasas were concerned.\textsuperscript{23} It was also this perception of branding central to Śrīvaiṣṇava identity and its derogation as non-Vedic, as low-bred tantricism which the Śrīvaiṣṇavas had to combat against, necessitating Yāmunācārya’s defense of the practice in the Āgampāramāṇya.

The second life-situation requiring \textit{paṃcasāmskāra} has a similar significance for sectarian identity, only here the community comprises of the smaller elite male grouping within the larger community which transmits the tradition. It consists of the teacher-pupil lineage, the \textit{guruparamāṇa}. The Śrīvaiṣṇava male’s entrance into the community of his teacher and his submission to the \textit{guruparamāṇa} of his teacher appears to have been signified by the \textit{paṃcasāmskāra}. This is the import of episodes IV and V. The \textit{paṃcasāmskāra} here is necessary also because it is a precondition for initiation into the knowledge of the tradition as episode IV clearly points out. Thus, it was only after obtaining \textit{paṃcasāmskāra} that Rāmānuja could be initiated into the texts of the tradition – the obvious analogy here is between \textit{paṃcasāmskāra} and \textit{upanayana}, where the latter is mandatory for the commencement of Vedic study just as \textit{paṃcasāmskāra} is mandatory for the commencement of the study of the Śrīvaiṣṇava \textit{siddhānta}.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} On this see HÜSKEN 2005.

\textsuperscript{24} I have dealt elsewhere (see RAMAN 2005) with this theological interpretation of \textit{paṃcasāmskāra} as the equivalent of \textit{upanayana} in the context of my analysis of the Parāśaraviśīṣṭaparamadharmaśāstra. The text offers us two main reasons why this ritual is mandatory for all Vaiṣṇavas, women at the time of marriage, men at the time of the sacred thread ceremony, the \textit{upanayana}. It shows that the ritual is a marker of Vaiṣṇava identity, without it one is not a Vaiṣṇava and cannot be instructed in the \textit{mantras} which are necessary for salvation (1:21-22). A male Brahmin cannot be considered a Brahmin without the ritual because it complements or is equivalent to the sacred thread ceremony (1:4-6). It also follows from this that it is only \textit{paṃcasāmskāra} following upon and complementing the sacred thread ceremony that qualifies the Śrīvaiṣṇava for doing any further ritual activity (1:9) and the rituals such as the \textit{śrāddha} ceremony for the dead (1:7). Thus, in the final analysis, it is by drawing an explicit parallel between the ritual and \textit{upanayana} that the text validates this Śrīvaiṣṇava ritual as a \textit{sāmskāra par excellence}. By doing so, the text explicitly draws legitimacy from none less than Pūrva Mīmāṃsā in as much as in the Mīmāṃsā-
The third life-situation is not a community internal one. Rather in the remaining episodes we have the indication that *pañcasamśkāra* is not just an initiatory ritual among and within the Śrīvaiśṇava community but one which inducts others, non-members, into the community. In other words, it functions as some kind of conversion ritual. The first episode to point to this re-signification is the story of Tirumāñkai Ālvār. Here, the condition imposed by the ardent suitor who is Tirumāñkai by the pious Kumudavallī is that he becomes a Vaiśṇava by undergoing the *pañcasamśkāra*. He promptly does this and through doing so becomes eligible to marry her. Three further episodes illustrate this transformation even more graphically by showing that the conversion is sometimes from one ascetic order to another, or in the case of episode VII between Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism.

Let us consider episodes VI and VIII first, which for obvious reasons form a unit. Here we have the conversion of Yādavapraṅkāśa and Yajñāṁurti. Both were ascetics before they came into contact with Rāmānuja and, further, they were ascetics in the “single-staff” *ekadāṇḍa* tradition. The former is persuaded by his mother to abandon his Advaitic tradition and convert to Śrīvaiśṇavism. The latter has a debating duel with Rāmānuja and converts as a condition of his defeat. The case of Yādavapraṅkāśa is particularly interesting because the historical Yādavapraṅkāśa compiled the Yatidharmasamuccaya, a manual on the rules for ascetics, which enumerates the differences between the ascetics of the different orders. In both cases the pattern of events is the same: the *ekadāṇḍa* ascetic who converts to a *trīdaṇḍa* ascetic has to first perform expiations (*prāyaścitta*) and either a divine command or Rāmānuja himself decree what the expiation must be. Once it is done the repentant convert undergoes the first phase of the conversion which involves the restoration of the top-knot and the sacred thread. With these restored the convert is given

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sūtra 6.1.35 the word *saṁskāra* is synonymous with *upanayana*. And by elevating *pañcasamśkāra* to the level of the *upanayana* the Śrīvaiśṇava ritual theorists were, in effect, doing what ALEXIS SANDERSON (1995: 27) has pointed out regarding the legitimation of Tantric ritual in general: that the rituals aim at “achieving parity with the orthodox by providing the system with equivalents of all the essential *smārta* rites which the invested perform or undergo during adult life and, indeed, beyond it.”
the emblems of his new allegiance, the three-poled staff (tridanda) and the ochre robes by his new ācārya. The description of this transformation from being an Advaitic ascetic to a Śrīvaishnavite appears to have some basis in historical reality, for Yādavaprabāsa writes about this in his Yatidharmasamuccaya.\textsuperscript{25} The next stage of this process is the pañcasamskāra, which concludes with the endowment of a new name upon the convert. The seventh episode, relating to Rāmānuja’s maternal cousin Govinda Bhaṭṭar, also mirrors a conversion ceremony which can be categorized along with the above-mentioned ones, even though it is not described in detail. Govinda Bhaṭṭar who had been a Śaivite becomes a Vaiṣṇavite through the pañcasamskāra ceremony done for him by Periyatirumalai Nampi. Yet his conversion is not preceded by the need to do expiations as in the previous cases. Theologically seen, the difference may perhaps lie in the fact that Govinda Bhaṭṭar expresses remorse for his former allegiance. He flings away the rudrākṣa beads after hearing the recitation of verses of the Ālvārs’ poetry, thus explicitly rejecting Śiva for Viṣṇu. This outright repudiation of Śiva might itself have been considered as an act of expiation which preceded the conversion.

Throughout the analysis of these last three episodes I have used the term “conversion” in a seemingly self-evident way to speak of the movement from Śaivism to Vaiṣṇavism in medieval Tamil country. Yet, one cannot use the term “conversion” in this context of this

\textsuperscript{25} Re. Olivelle (1995) who points out that the issue of whether an ascetic should retain his top-knot and sacred thread or not was a disputed issue between the Advaitins and the Śrīvaishnavas. Citing the medieval Śrīvaishnavata theologian Vedāntadeśika on this issue Olivelle shows that Vedāntadeśika, “opposed the practices of abandoning the sacrificial string and shaving the entire head including the topknot, which were common among the renouncers belonging to the Advaita tradition. He cites texts that prescribe penances for ascetics who follow those customs and presents the case of Yādava as an example. ‘When, moreover, the Venerable Yādava Prakāśa, who had abandoned his sacrificial string without considering the repercussions and who, after considering them, became repentent and legitimately questioned the learned men and the inhabitants of various regions who had come to the festival of Vāsudeva, they replied by prescribing for him a penance.’” (1995: 2).
textual material without qualifying what such a term could mean in its historical context as opposed to its meanings in modernity. Thus, in speaking of conversion in the colonial period in her path-breaking book on the issue GAURI VISWANATHAN begins by calling it “one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society.” She further adds that “with the departure of members from the fold, the cohesion of a community is under threat just as forcefully as if its beliefs had been turned into heresies.”

Exploring the legal and social implications of conversion in colonial India VISWANATHAN shows that even while British jurisprudence remained the ultimate legal reference it held little sway when it came to the communal life of the person who had converted. He or she had, through the act of conversion effectively severed themselves from their erstwhile communities and, hence, become the equivalent of a displaced person within a cultural landscape where membership in a community is far more important than personal belief.

The convert had thus, through conversion, transgressed against the community in a manner which, in the case of Hindu traditions, went beyond agnosticism or even blasphemy – he or she had left the parameters of Hinduism and hence the community for an alien religion.

VISWANATHAN’s study focuses,


27 VISWANATHAN (ibid. 79) points out that “Hindu and Muslim religious bodies justified depriving converts of their rights to property by resorting to what legal scholars today term a legal fiction, that is, the fiction of civil death. This construction views the convert as deracinated and, as an outcaste, no longer recognized by scriptural law as a functioning member of his or her former community.”

28 The social alienation which resulted was existential. “For some religions such as Hinduism, neither agnosticism nor blasphemy alone can remove a person from the community in which he or she is born; however, complete adherence to a foreign religion automatically signals excommunication for that individual. A plausible inference drawn from this singular condition is that the community outweighs personal belief: regardless of the extent to which beliefs may undergo transformations or remain subject to individual caprice and variations of mood or disposition, membership in community is not severed even for a blaspheming agnostic. The other, far-reaching inference, following from the first, is that a change of religion is less a change of beliefs than a change of community.” (VISWANATHAN 1998: 89).
among others, on the case of conversion from “Hinduism” to an alien religion such as Christianity or Islam or, as in the famous case of Ambedkar, to Buddhism. Further, the notions of conversion which come to predominate from the colonial period onwards have as their underlying basis conceptions of “Hinduism” and of “religion” linked to the modern nation state.29

Conversion, then, at least from one perspective within the context of colonialism, is a movement from religion to another over “strong boundaries” entailing an abandonment of one community for another and, as far as the emotional impact is concerned, associated both with anguish and alienation from one’s former community as well as the finding of a more “authentic” self. ROBINSON and CLARKE (2003), in their introduction to a collection of essays on religious conversion in India are inclined to argue that such a definition of “conversion,” requiring as it does features such as a conversion or initiation ritual as well as the abandonment of a former set of religious beliefs and practices for another exclusive set of beliefs and practices is based upon Islamic and Christian models of conversion, less applicable to conversion in the context of Hindu traditions. Rather, even while not discarding this model they also make a plea for a second “soft” definition of conversion “a fluid process of changing affiliations of religious beliefs and traditions within a range of possibilities.”30 In other words, conversion here is less associated with a radical religious rupture and the movement between strong religious boundaries then a process of gradual assimilation or transformation across soft, fluid, religious boundaries.

29 Ibid. xxii: “Religion shares features with the analytical categories of race and class in that each assumes certain established criteria for determining rank, position, and membership in a national community. The commuting of religious identity into a subcategory of social composition is facilitated by such instruments of administrative classification as census reports, which, in assigning groups or communities to predetermined categories, often chose to overrule the indeterminate beliefs and practices by which people may chose to live their lives. However, the intransigent nature of such beliefs, reflecting inchoate ways of life and suggesting a different order of relationality, refuses to be made pliable by determined acts of classification.”

This definition, they suggest, does greater justice to movements between sectarian affiliations within Hinduism itself. The work of both Viswanathan and Robinson and Clarke indicates that how conversion is to be defined or even the very possibility of conversion within “Hinduism” hinges upon the issue of strong or weak sectarian boundaries. It throws up additional questions such as to what extent Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism can be called distinct religions as opposed to sects within “Hinduism” as well as if “conversion,” in the strong sense of the term, is at all possible between sects as opposed to distinct religions. In other words, it becomes necessary to ask how strong sectarian boundaries were, or how distinct Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism were as religions in the historical context from which the textual materials I have looked at stem: the medieval Cōla period.

The evidence from pre-modernity, some scholars would argue, appears to defy the rigid conception of religious identity which would be a pre-condition for “conversion” in a strong sense. Rather, it seems to point overwhelmingly to a fluidity of religious practices if not of religious identity, not just within the so-called Hindu fold such as between Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism, but also Jainism and Buddhism. Orr (2000), for instance, argues that one can legitimately speak, when considering medieval Tamil society and the Cōla period, of common modes of worship between all these traditions, common social structures as well as a “common religious idiom.” In an article on the changing nature of religious processions over several centuries of Cōla rule, as understood from an analysis of inscriptions, Orr reiterates this by pointing to the “absence of a strong sectarian spirit” in the Cōla period. Bayly (1989), in her introductory chapter on pre-eighteenth century Tamil religiosity, also stresses the common features of religious affiliation across sectarian divides and the malleability of caste identities.

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31 Re. Orr (2000: 23-25): “a religious idiom was so widely shared in Chola period inscriptions means that there is a blurring of sectarian distinctions; it is frequently difficult to determine, if we look at the text of an inscription, whether the deity to whom donations are being made is Śiva, Viṣṇu – or a Jain Tirthaṅkara.” The evidence points to the fact that, “the boundaries between Hindu and non-Hindu were not definitely demarcated and that people whom we retrospectively classify as Hindus, Jains and Buddhists shared a common religious culture.”

32 Orr 2004b: 457.
The evidence from the fourteenth century hagiographical text which has been the focus of this article presents a contrastive picture to such views of medieval religiosity, depicting as it does strong cases of religious crossing-over. Thus, for instance, episode VI shows us that one went from being a Śaiva ascetic to a Vaiṣṇava ascetic by a very public abandonment of one’s former beliefs and the acquisition of new ones: one participated in a public debate and, in the event of failure, agreed to become a Vaiṣṇava instead of a Śaiva. Sometimes, as episode VII shows, even a change of heart was indicated, as in the manner in which Govinda Bhaṭṭar flings away his rudrākṣa beads to show his rejection of Śiva. Indeed, one could here argue that if “conversion” is about explicitly rejecting one belief system for another then these episodes might well speak for some kind of “conversion” in the Cōla period. Other scholars too have shown how medieval hagiographies are replete with such tropes of conversion with motifs of a public debate, a public recantation of one’s former beliefs, the abandonment of the extraneous symbols and emblems of the old belief and taking on of the new. This last act might also be said to comprise the core acts which precede the conversion or initiation ritual proper. Thus DUNDAS, in his article on conversion in medieval Jainism, refers to the conversion of eleven Brahmins by Mahāvīra, who vanquishes them in debate on a number of ontological and ethical issues. Particularly interesting, in the light of the materials I have examined, is the story of the conversion of the Brahmin Skhandaka Kātyāyana from the Bhagavatīsūtra: “This learned mendicant is portrayed as being unable to answer a series of questions about extra-sensory matters posed by a Jain layman. He therefore travels to the Chatrapalāśaka caitya outside the city of Krtangalā where the omniscient Mahāvīra was staying in order to question him. Delighted by his outward appearance, Skhandaka circumambulates Mahāvīra in worship. The tīrthankara who through his powers knows Skhandaka’s questions without being told, answers them fully. The text describes the process by which Skhandaka changed from mendicant brahman to Jain monk ... Skhandaka then hears Mahāvīra preach in public and after circumambulating him three times in delight, utters a profession of faith in the teachings of Jainism. After paying homage to Mahāvīra again, Skhandaka goes to the northeast and in a solitary spot abandons his brahmanical ascetic accoutrements, including triple-staff, rosary, parasol, sandals and saffron robe. On returning to Mahāvīra and once more circumambu-
lating him three times in homage, Skhandaka makes a declaration about the morally dangerous nature of the world and the need to protect the self.”

It is not just Vaiṣṇava or Jaina hagiographies which attest to the possibilities of such a conversion in the medieval context. Śaivite theological texts for instance, such as the Somaśambhupaddhati, the Sarvajñottaratantra and citations from other Tantras in the Tantrāloka refer to the ritual of lingoddhāra by which a non-Śaiva seeker of salvation is admitted into the Śaiva fold. The ritual removes the aspirant’s former religious affiliation enabling him to be readied for Śaiva initiation (dīkṣā), even while his status as a convert (punarbhū) makes him forever inferior in the Śaiva hierarchy, to which he now belongs. In looking at these source materials there seems to be little doubt that conversion from one sectarian tradition to another, in the strong sense of a radical rupture from another tradition incorporating an exclusivistic stance, did exist in medieval South India.

The deeper issue which needs to be considered here relates to the historiography of medieval South India and the challenge of rec-

\[33\] DUNDA S 2003: 130-133.

\[34\] For details on lingoddhāra and the textual sources in which it is described, I am indebted to the following personal communication from ALEXIS SANDERSON (December 2005): “The liberations aspired to by all the others were seen by the Śaivas as non-definitive. Those who took the ultimate or only true revelation to be either the Veda or the bodies of scripture attributed to Viṣṇu, the Sun (Sūrya), the Buddha or the Jina Mahāvīra, and who were known accordingly as Vaidikas, Vaiṣṇavas, Sauras, Buddhhas and Jainas could reach their goal at death and believe that this goal was the highest possible; but in truth it was only a paradise of temporary reward (bhogāḥ, bhuktiḥ) located in the lower range of a graded path that leads up through ever higher levels of reality unknown in those religions to the ultimate state revealed by and embodied in Śiva. However, the non-Śaiva liberation-seeker (mumukṣuḥ) might be fortunate enough to be touched by Śiva’s favour while still practising his lesser faith. In that case he could undergo a ritual in which he was first released from his non-Śaiva obligations (liṅgoddhārāḥ) and then given the initiation of Śiva. Thereafter he would have all the advantages of any Śaiva initiate (dīkṣitāḥ), except that as a convert (punarbhūḥ) he could never receive consecration (abhiṣekah) as a Śaiva guru, initiating, teaching scriptures and consecrating images and other substrates of worship for the benefit of others.”
onciling non-literary inscriptive evidence from the period with the theological and hagiographical literary materials, which, as we have just seen, in some ways appear to contradict each other. Broadly speaking, seen from the perspective of certain kinds of inscriptive evidence, those which focus on donations to and patronage of different sects and their religious institutions in the medieval period, one would tend to reconstruct fluid boundaries of religious affiliation. A focus on the theological and ritual texts of the sectarian traditions themselves, which often reveal an explicit antagonism between medieval Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Jainism, etc., seems to be strong evidence for sectarian strife and even violence, thus allowing for the kind of tensions which might generate “conversion.”

One plausible scenario to account for the simultaneous existence of both “fluid” and “strong” sectarian boundaries would be one which envisaged the royal and influential patrons of and donors to temples patronizing several religious traditions simultaneously, thus impartially patronizing and sustaining the various religions within their territories even as another group of scholarly elite, the religious specialists of each particular sectarian tradition engaged themselves in writing texts which stressed strong sectarian boundaries. This does not imply, though, that one should regard the theological and hagiographical materials as the fabricated discourses of power of a scholarly elite and, hence, as having a tenuous basis in reality as compared to the epigraphical materials, which deal with, as it were, “facts on the ground.” For such an approach implies, at the very least, a refusal to acknowledge that epigraphical materials too, like theological texts, are a form of self-representation. Rather, it seems clear that the most useful methodological approach would be to cast the net as widely as possible, and use both literary and epigraphical materials to produce “thick descriptions” of specific historical moments which would give us as differentiated a picture as possible on the formation of religious identities and affiliations in the medieval period.

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35 Re. the Śrīvaiṣṇava and Śaiva rivalry in the medieval period, centred around the story of Rāmānuja’s persecution by a Cōḷa king see CARMAN 1974: 45. For the Śaiva-Jaina rivalry as seen through the lens of Śaivite bhakti poetry and medieval hagiographies see PETERSON 1998.
Casting the net widely then, taking both the non-literary and the theological historical sources for medieval South India equally seriously would force us to acknowledge that they both overwhelmingly reflect the religious practices and beliefs of an elite – whether kings, high-ranking nobility or religious figures. Thus, they give us little or no information about the religious practices of the majority of the non-elite. Yet, taken together as a picture of the medieval elite, they seem to indicate that the medieval religious milieu of South India accommodated both “fluid” and “strong” boundaries. Thus at the very least, the evidence from the AK indicates that certain elite Brahmin males in the Tamil country in the fourteenth century did participate, not just theologically but in actual fact, in a Śrīvaisṇava religious milieu of “strong” boundaries which included features of “conversion.” Further, even while arguing that there was “conversion” between sectarian traditions in the medieval context, I would further suggest that this conversion cannot be entirely assimilated to modern understandings of the act. The AK shows that while it incorporated a public repudiation of one’s former beliefs it was most dramatically reflected not in inner but in outer bodily transformation. The medieval convert to Śrīvaisṇavism proclaimed his new allegiance to others primarily through the existence of the brand marks on various parts of his body together with the other visible painted symbols of Viṣṇu.

The important centuries of sectarian identity formation and consolidation for the Śrīvaisṇavas was the period between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries. In this context, it can also be plausibly argued that this was also the period when it might have been necessary to devise and put into practice a conversion initiation ritual such as the pañcasāṃskāra, incorporating older features of self-identification such as the branding, in order to set oneself apart with vehemence, as a religious elite, from the Śaivas.