

3 Branding for Vaikhānasas in the 19th and 20th centuries

3.1 Conflicts: enforced branding

3.1.1 Evidence in the texts

In some of the Vaikhānasasamhitās the branding ([*tapta*]cakraṅkaṇa) on the upper arms with the two symbols of Viṣṇu (*cakra*: disk, *śaiḅha*: conch) is explicitly forbidden for the Vaikhānasas. In the *Ānandasamhitā* it is argued that only slaves are branded. The Vaikhānasas, by contrast, are Viṣṇu’s sons who bear his mark from before their birth. Therefore Viṣṇu himself forbids that the Vaikhānasas undergo such a branding.³⁷¹ From such prohibitions it may be concluded that at the time of the text’s compilation there were in fact Vaikhānasas who did have their upper arms branded. This is sharply condemned in the *Ānandasamhitā*, on the grounds that it is tantamount to “giving up one’s own vedic branch.”³⁷² Ignorance, greed, infatuation or “compulsion by others” are mentioned as possible motivations for this wrong conduct. In consequence branded Vaikhānasas may no longer carry out worship of Viṣṇu in the temple and—as is also stated in the *Kriyādhikāra*—are forbidden to touch the god (that is, the image in which he is present). Moreover, the *Ānandasamhitā* prescribes an act of expiation (*prāyaścitta*) and a ritual called mahāśānti (“great pacification”) for those Vaikhānasas who take the brand upon themselves.³⁷³ This passage implies that a

371 ĀS 4.50–53: *kṛtamallāṃchanānām ca garbhavaiṣṇavajanmanām / matputrāṅām na cihnāni dāsāś cihnāsamanvitāḥ // vaikhānasā mama sutā garbhavaiṣṇavajātakāḥ / teṣāṃ pṛthaṅ na cihnāni cakraḍīnām gurur na hi // vaikhānasānām sarveṣāṃ madarcāhetujanmanām / śrautasmārtakriyārhāṅām matprasādaikajīvinām // mama vākyabalenaiva te vai cakraṅkitā matāḥ / sālagrāmeṣu sarveṣu garbhe cakrasya dhāraṇam / vaikhānasānām sarveṣāṃ garbhe cakrasya dhāraṇam //*. The commentary on ĀS (p. 56) replaces *kṛtamallāṃchanānām* with *kṛtabhagavallāṃchanānām*.

372 ĀS 4.59–61: *svaśākhām samparityajya paraśākhānusārataḥ / śākhāraṅdas sa vijñeyas sarvakarmabahiṣkṛtaḥ // ajñānād arthalobhād vā mohād vā parapīḍanāt / taptamudrā bhaved yasya prāyaścittam vidhīyate // śrīvaikhānasasūtrasthas taptamudro bhaved yadi / ālayam na viśet paścāt pūjanam naiva kārayet //*

373 ĀS 19.13–14: *ajñānād arthalobhād vā mohād vā parapīḍanāt / taptamudrā bhaved yas tu spraṣṭum nārhati keśavaṃ // vaikhānasakule jātā ajñānād taptadhāriṇaḥ / prāyaścittam mahāśāntim kramād arhanti sāstrataḥ //*; ĀS 19.16: *ajñānād vābalān mohād yadi cakraṅkito bhavet / vaikhānaso 'pi so 'vadyas sa spraṣṭum nārhati keśavaṃ //*; KrA 36.53: *vaikhānasaś caturvedī sarvakarmabahiṣkṛtaḥ / ajñānād vābalān mohāt taptamudro bhaved yadi / vaikhānaso 'pi vadyaḥ syāt spraṣṭum nārhati mām api / (vai-*

Vaikhānasa's branding can be remedied. However, overall the branding of Vaikhānasas seems not to be a prominent issue in the Vaikhānasasamhitās.

As discussed in 2.2.5, Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita deals with branding especially when he distinguishes between "taking refuge in Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa" (*prapattiśaraṇāgati*) "in accordance with the Veda" (*vaidika*) and "following a tantric doctrine" (*tāntrika*). He refers first to a general prohibition on branding for Brahmans according to the Skanda, Viṣṇu, Padma and Bhāgavata purāṇas,³⁷⁴ but assumes that branding is done by Pāñcarātrins. This implies that the Pāñcarātrins are not "true" Brahmans, that they are not entitled to perform all rituals, and that they are "outside the Veda."³⁷⁵ Accordingly, under no circumstances should Vaikhānasas undergo taptacakrāṅkana, which is already evident just from the fact that an act of expiation (*prāyaścitta*) is prescribed for them if they do (DHN^D 110.12–17), says Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita.³⁷⁶ However, at no point does he refer to a case where a Vaikhānasa has in fact taken a branding. This suggests that in Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita's time forced branding of Vaikhānasas was not a prominent problem.³⁷⁷

The situation is quite different around the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th. During this period forcible branding was an important issue for the Vaikhānasas in connection with their entitlement to carry out the worship of Viṣṇu in several South Indian temples. In his *Report on a search for Sanskrit and Tamil manuscripts for the year 1893–94* (No. 2, Madras, 1899, pp. 9f.) Śeṣagiri Śāstri reports that in many Viṣṇu temples Vaikhānasa priests were forced by "the Vaiṣṇavas" to be branded. If the Vaikhānasas did not undergo branding, they did not count as "true" Vaiṣṇavas and their religious status was correspondingly low. For many Śrīvaiṣṇavas, who had themselves received pañcasamskāra, it was apparently out of the question to accept consecrated water (Tamil: *tīrttam*) and sacrificial offerings (*prasāda*/ Tamil: *piracātam*) from them. According to Śeṣagiri Śāstri's report, these conflicts involved serious con-

khānasā mama sutā garbhavaiṣṇavajātakāḥ / teṣāṃ bahir na tāpo na punaḥ karanam āpadī // See also Colas 1996: 177.

374 DHN^D 105.11–106.13. I was not able to verify the verses from these purāṇas cited in the *Daśavidhahetumirūpaṇa*. Chapter 224 of the Uttarabhāga in the *Padmapurāṇa* deals with branding of the upper arms. According to this text, however, only a Brahman with a brand is a true Vaiṣṇava (see PadmaP uttara. 224.42–80).

375 Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita attempts to prove that the Pāñcarātrins are not "true" Brahmans on the basis of a series of quotations from diverse purāṇas (DHN^D 108.13–15, 109.3–4, 16–19).

376 Here he is apparently referring to ĀS 19.13–14.

377 Only in connection with the discussion of devalakas (see 2.1.2) does he state that someone born in a Vaikhānasa family who has received the Pāñcarātra dīkṣā is a devalaka. Branding is not, however, explicitly mentioned here.

sequences: many Vaikhānasas feared that they would lose their right to temple service and with it their source of income.

This fight was also carried out in writing. The controversy produced quite an extensive literature in the years after 1920, in which on the one side the Śrīvaiṣṇavas and on the other the Vaikhānasas debated the question of whether branding of the upper arms was required for Vaikhānasas (see also Varadachari 1982: 343). Thus, for example, in 1928 Brundavan Rangacharyulu circulated among the Vaikhānasas in Kṛṣṇā District (Andhra Pradesh) a small text on this topic. Jagannāthācāryulu from Nallūru published the results of this opinion poll in Sanskrit and Telugu under the title *Vaikhānasadharmajijñāsāvivādapracuramu* (Guṃṭūru 1928). In the same year Vaikhānasas and Śrīvaiṣṇavas together held a conference on the issue in Poonamalli near Madras.³⁷⁸ Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya (see 1.3) presented the position of the Vaikhānasas at this event. Presiding over the conference was a Śrīvaiṣṇava scholar from Tirukoṣṭiyūr near Madurai, where the problem was also topical. This Tirukoṣṭiyūr Saumyanārāyaṇa Svāmi invited the Vaikhānasas to give evidence for their position from their authoritative texts, in order that the question might finally be resolved. The matter was evidently taken to court later and was then decided in 1930 by the Madras Religious Endowment Board (MREB 1930, Court Order No. 6–1). The Vaikhānasa scholar Nācciyārkoṅṅil Kṛṣṇabhāṭṭācārya composed the text *Taptacakrāṅkanakhaṇḍana* in which he presented the Vaikhānasa position in fourteen pages, using quotations from the Vaikhānasasaṃhitās and from the *Vṛddhahārītasṃṛti*, and where he presented his own summary in Tamil.³⁷⁹ For the most part he cited the *Ānandasamhitā* and the *Kriyādhikāra*, but also some verses from the Vaikhānasa texts *Purātantra*,³⁸⁰ the *Yajñādhikāra* and the *Vimānārcanakalpa*. He supplements these with further quotations from the Vaikhānasasaṃhitās which state that other employees of the temple must undergo branding if they do not belong to the Vaikhānasa tradition (YA 51.34–37). In addition he refers to the great vaiṣṇava pilgrim centre in southern Andhra Pradesh, Tirupati/Tirumalai, where the wor-

378 The occasion for this conference is said to have been a conflict on the issue in Tirumaḷicai near Poonamalli.

379 *Taptacakrāṅkanakhaṇḍana* by Kṛṣṇabhāṭṭācārya [niyāya pāṇinīya mīmāṃsātvaya pākavaccāstirapāraṅkata, vitvān nācciyārkoṅṅil kuruṣṇapaṭṭācāriyar viṇayapūrvakamāka yeḷuttikkonṭa viṇṇappam], Madras Religious Endowment Board [Matarās rilijiyas yeṅṭōmenṭu pōṛṭṭār avarkaḷ camukattirkku], 1930 Court order No. 6 [kōṛṭṭu 1930-m varuṣattil O.A. No. 6–1], Advocate [vāti]: T.M. Tāppaṅkār Vakaiyar; Respondent [pratīvāti]: M. K. Raṅkācāriyar Vakaiyar. A copy of this text is in my possession.

380 On page 2 of his *Taptacakrāṅkanakhaṇḍana* Kṛṣṇabhāṭṭācārya also quotes three verses from the *Purātantra*, also given in DHN^D 35.20–24, 36.20–21 and 37.8–9.

ship of Viṣṇu is likewise carried out by Vaikhānasas without branding. Then he cites evidence from the *Vṛddhahārītasṃṛti*, stating that branding is prescribed for all Vaiṣṇavas but Vaikhānasas. The *Taptacakrāṅkanakhaṇḍana* thus is a rather well-balanced account quite in keeping with the spirit of the *Daśavidhahe-tunirūpaṇa* in that it argues that everyone should observe the rules prescribed by his own religious tradition. On the basis of this text it was decided that the Vaikhānasas did not require branding and that for them the saṃskāras prescribed in their sūtra were sufficient.

Evidently this judgement was not unanimously approved. Thus Kumāra Tā-tācārya (Nallūr, Andhra Pradesh) published *Rāmabāṇa*, a Sanskrit text on taptacakrāṅkana in which he attempted to prove that the Vaikhānasa too required branding.³⁸¹ In his work he stated, falsely, that at the conference in Poonamalli Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya had also endorsed this opinion. Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya therefore felt obliged to compose a detailed rebuttal: his Sanskrit text *Paramārtharāmabāṇa* appeared in 1962. In his account Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya refers to various sūtras, purāṇas, the epics, to Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita's works, to the relevant passages in the Vaikhānasasamhitās, and to some authorities from the Śrīvaiṣṇava and Pāñcarātra traditions. He agrees explicitly with Tirukoṣṭiyūr Saumyanārāyaṇa's 1930 decision that the Vaikhānasas did not require branding.

3.1.2 Śrīperumbudūr and Vānamāmalai

Many Vaikhānasas in Andhra Pradesh state that this conflict had never played a large role there. For the contemporary situation in Andhra Pradesh too I was only able to collect sporadic, extremely divergent and rather unspecific data.³⁸² Interviews in Tamil Nadu were more productive. In this state there are some places where Vaikhānasas are even today obliged to undergo branding, otherwise they are not allowed to perform temple services. Two temples, in Śrīperumbudūr and Vānamāmalai, are often mentioned as examples.³⁸³ In summer

381 My copy of this text contains no title page. The text consists of 106 pages and is printed in Telugu script.

382 Some of those I interviewed from Vijayawada, Machilipatnam, Narsapur, Nallūru and Kothalanka stated that there is no temple in Andhra Pradesh in which branding is demanded of the Vaikhānasas. Others said that the branding of Vaikhānasas is quite usual in Andhra Pradesh. I am unable either to confirm or to deny either position.

383 Furthermore, Tirukannapuram (near Tanjore) and Tiruvalli are also sometimes mentioned. I was however not able to follow this up.

2005 I was finally able to speak with arcakas of these two temples. The summaries of these conversations are provided here.³⁸⁴

Śrīperumbudūr³⁸⁵ is situated about 60km west of Chennai. The town is the birthplace of Rāmānuja, who institutionalized pañcasamṣkāra as the initiation into Śrīvaiṣṇavism (see 2.2.5.1), and who is said to have favoured the Pāñcarātra ritual system over that of the Vaikhānasas.³⁸⁶ Despite this, the ritual in the Śrī-Ādikeśava-Perumāḷ temple in Śrīperumbudūr is performed according to the Vai-khānasa tradition, albeit for several generations now only by Vaikhānasa arcakas who have undergone branding. The ritual of branding was first introduced there by the jīyar of the local maṭha³⁸⁷ for the two families of temple priests active in Śrīperumbudūr, in the early twentieth century. The jīyar is said to have reacted to pressure from devotees who demanded that the priests should have pañca-samṣkāra, especially as Rāmānuja is closely linked to this temple. The arcakas at that time did not have a choice. If they wanted to continue worship in this temple, they had to undergo this initiation. First, those Vaikhānasas who had inherited the right to temple service passed this on to other Vaikhānasas, as they were not willing to undergo branding. Although the new arcakas agreed to be branded, they successfully insisted that this ritual be performed in a specific way: the branding should not be performed by the jīyar, but by the eldest acting priest of the Vaikhānasa families doing service in the Ādi-Keśava-Perumāḷ temple.³⁸⁸ Ever since then, whoever wants to perform the rituals in the temple has to receive pañcasamṣkāra by the eldest acting priest there who is then also the concerned person's spiritual teacher (*ācārya*).³⁸⁹

384 The data presented in 3.1.2–3 are based on semi-structured, structured and narrative interviews I conducted with the persons concerned. However, the reader should be aware of the fact that I do not intend to present the concerned persons' views and interpretations of events as 'factual', but rather as (retrospectively) constructed history.

385 I visited the temple in August 2005, and talked with one of the hereditary arcakas there. As this is a controversial issue the names of those involved are changed throughout.

386 See Carman 1974: 42; see Jagannathan 1994: 90 and 124; see also 2.2.5.1.

387 Maṭhas, "monasteries," are centres of sectarian Hindu scholarship, which since at least the time of the Pallavas have also been responsible in many towns for temple administration or oversight of the religious affairs of the temple. A jīyar or maṭhādhīpati is the head of such a monastery; they are usually ascetics (*sannyāsin*) of considerable standing and influence (see Bhattacharyya 1956: 507f.).

388 The acting jīyar told me in 2005 that the *arcakas* should get pañcasamṣkāra from him, but refuse to.

389 Even Vaikhānasas with a branding from other places may not perform worship there. This has evidently not always been so strict: I was told that in the middle of the 20th century two Vaikhānasas from Singhapurumāḷ Koyil (see 3.1.3) were given pañ-

Nowadays the ritual itself is always performed in the parental house of the future priest, after upanayana. It is celebrated in a grand manner: all the hereditary priests of the Śrīperumbudūr temple are invited. It is in their presence that this ritual takes place. After the “presentation of the sprouts” (*āṅkurārpaṇa*) Viṣṇu is invoked in a pot (*kumbha*) full of water, and several fire-offerings (*homa*) are performed. On the next day again a fire-offering takes place, and a new name is given to the young man (*nāmadharāṇa*).³⁹⁰ Afterwards, the branding of his upper arms is performed. Every male member of the families of hereditary Vaikhānasa priests in Śrīperumbudūr receives pañcasamṣkāra, and also the women who are married to them receive it immediately after marriage. Female members of the Vaikhānasa families in Śrīperumbudūr, however, do not undergo this ritual because they will be married to Vaikhānasas from other places, where branding is not required.

Only pañcasamṣkāra performed in Śrīperumbudūr by one of the arcakas there makes a person eligible to perform the rituals in the Ādi-Keśava-Perumāḷ temple. However, the Vaikhānasa arcakas of Śrīperumbudūr have the right to perform worship at certain festival days in the Vaikhānasa Pārthasārathi temple in Chennai, in spite of their branding, which is prohibited by the Vaikhānasasamhitās.³⁹¹ The branding had only been a problem when it came to marital relations: the Vaikhānasas from Chennai did not want to give their daughters in marriage to Śrīperumbudūr, as they would have to undergo pañcasamṣkāra there. I was told, however, that this problem has been sorted out for the past three generations.

Vānamāmalai is also known as Nanguneri.³⁹² The town lies in southern Tamil Nadu, in Tirunelveli District. Here too the branding of the Vaikhānasas in the Aḷakiyanampi temple is attributed to the local jīyar. His monastery was, and remains, responsible for the management of the temple. He insists that only those who have received the initiation from him personally may perform temple services. The story behind this development is told as follows: vaiṣṇava devo-

casamṣkāra in Śrīperumbudūr. This happened at a time when there was a shortage in arcakas. These two were however relatives of one of the hereditary Vaikhānasa families. They did perform worship in Śrīperumbudūr with the local arcakas’ permission.

390 This name is used when he meets and greets elders, in a ritual called abhivādana.

391 I do not know whether or not an expiation ritual (*prāyaścitta*) is performed by the Vaikhānasas in Śrīperumbudūr after their pañcasamṣkāra. While the arcakas in Chennai told me that the arcakas in Śrīperumbudūr were only allowed to carry out rituals in other Vaikhānasa temples after having performed the relevant act of expiation there, this was denied by the arcakas in Śrīperumbudūr.

392 The Interview with Narasiṃha Bhaṭṭācārya (Tirunelveli) was conducted on 5.9.2005; and the interview with Śeṣādri Bhaṭṭācārya (Nanguneri) on 6.9.2005. As this is a controversial issue the names of those involved in the cases have been changed throughout.

tees had for some time tried to enforce that the arcakas should touch the god only after having received pañcasamṣkāra, and that the jīyar should not be forced to receive consecrated water from the hands of an arcaka without branding. After they had not been able to achieve this, they took their chance as soon as it was possible, roughly six generations ago. Once a year the god's festival image (*utsavamūrti*) is brought inside the maṭha, to the shrine called Araṅkar Nakar Appan Caṅṅiti, where a ritual bath (*abhiṣeka*) is performed. As usual, his jewelry was taken off. Among it was a silver "sacred thread" (*yajñopavīta*) with nine strands. The performing priest removed it and—for the time being—put it on the canopy above the place of the ritual bath. Afterwards he however forgot to put the sacred thread back and it remained lying on top of the canopy. Later, somebody came to clean the shrine, found the sacred thread and handed it over to the jīyar. Now the jīyar felt that he was in the position to compel the arcakas to take upon them pañcasamṣkāra. Otherwise he would remove them from temple service because they "neglected their duties."³⁹³ All male members of the arcaka families at that time were thus forced to have pañcasamṣkāra done by the jīyar. They accepted it without further ado because they were under huge economic pressure and felt that they could not fight against the jīyar.³⁹⁴ They did not have any land set aside for their use (*māṇiyam*), and their only income came from the daily ritual in the temple, with some extra income on auspicious days.³⁹⁵ They were—and still are—fully dependent on the jīyar.

Even today the jīyar performs pañcasamṣkāra for the male members of the local Vaikhānasa arcakas. While five families share the right to perform the ritual in this temple, only two do in fact execute this right. One of these two families came to Nanguneri from Tirukkulūr 40 years ago. Śeṣādri Bhaṭṭācārya, who is 30 years old, describes how pañcasamṣkāra was performed on him by the jīyar, two years after his upanayana. The then acting jīyar had one of his subordinates bring the fire-pit (*homakuṇḍa*), had the fire lighted, and had then the two metal

393 Another version of the initial incident is that the arcakas are forced to accept pañcasamṣkāra because they are also responsible for the worship in the Araṅkar Nakar Appan shrine inside the Vānamāmalai maṭha and therefore had to have pañcasakāra, performed by the jīyar heading this maṭha.

394 It is however, noteworthy that also among the Vaikhānasas in Nanguneri there is an explicit awareness that the saṃhitās do not allow a branding. They refer to the fact that only those who do not believe in the efficacy of viṣṇubali would perform this branding, and if one does not believe in it, one should not perform worship at all. Moreover, all persons I talked to in Nanguneri were well aware that in other places the Vaikhānasas had successfully resisted the pressure to undergo pañcasamṣkāra.

395 On such these "busy days" in a temple, see Good 2004: 99ff.

symbols heated in that fire. The white mud (*tiruman*) which is usually applied on the forehead was smeared on a betel leaf. The subordinate handed over the heated metal symbols to the *jīyar*, who then pressed it in the betel leaf first, and afterwards on Śeṣādri's upper arms. While doing so he recited the mantras relating to the disk (*sudarśana* mantra) and conch (*pāñcajanya* mantra). Then the *jīyar* instructed Śeṣādri in the *aṣṭākṣara* mantra, the *caramaśloka* and the *dvayam*. Thus, the "five *saṃskāras*" are reduced to two in Vānamāmalai, as was commented on disapprovingly by several Vaikhānasas. At the same time it was explicitly stated that the Vaikhānasas will not perform any *prāyaścitta* afterwards, because then they would not be allowed to touch the god. The same holds true for other Vaikhānasas without *pañcasamskāra*. Therefore only the two families mentioned above conduct worship in this temple. Apart from them, two Vaikhānasa boys studying in the Nanguneri Veda school (see 4.6.5) evidently also received *pañcasamskāra* by the *jīyar* so that they could be allowed to perform certain services in the temple. However, it seems that the Vaikhānasas from this temple, in spite of their branding, do participate in the performance of larger rituals (*saṃprokṣaṇa*, *bālālayam*) in other Vaikhānasa temples. In contrast to Śrīperumbudūr, the Vaikhānasas in Vānamāmalai do not confer *pañcasamskāra* on others or among themselves. Although also those who want to do other services in this temple are required to have *pañcasamskāra*, they are expected to have it done by an *ācārya* of their choice. At the same time it is emphasised by the Vānamāmalai *arcakas* that they do not recognise the *jīyar* as their spiritual teacher. Another difference to Śrīperumbudūr is that the wives of the *arcakas* who have undergone *pañcasamskāra* by the *jīyar* do not have to undergo this initiation.

The two situations in Nanguneri and Śrīperumbudūr were assessed in a similar way by my Vaikhānasa conversation partners. According to them, the economic dependence of the Vaikhānasas initially was and still is an important factor. As temple priests they depend on the income from the performance of rituals. Therefore they have in any case no choice. Most of them are fully aware that branding is not in accordance with the *saṃhitā* texts. Whether or not they perform the corresponding act of expiation remains unclear. However, the Śrīperumbudūr case suggests that the special tradition developed there also serves to secure the claim of the local Vaikhānasa families that they alone have the right to perform worship there, not only against Pāñcarātrins, but also against other Vaikhānasas, who might try to challenge this right. Thus when I asked whether the local Vaikhānasas confer *pañcasamskāra* on somebody else this was vehemently denied, as this would result in the respective person's right to perform worship in Śrīperumbudūr. The prevalent system seems therefore not so different from

the system in the major Pāñcarātra temples, namely the Varadarājasvāmi temple in Kāñcipuram, the Raṅganātha temple in Śrīraṅgam, and the Śrīnārāyaṇasvāmi temple in Melkote: the arcaka families claim that they alone have the hereditary right to perform the rituals in these temples, but in addition need an initiation (*dīkṣā*), which provides them with the necessary ritual competence (*adhikāra*). This initiation is conferred by the eldest member of the local arcaka families.

3.1.3 Going to court: the Singhaperumāl Kōyil case

The Śrī Paṭalādri Narasiṃhasvāmi temple (Singhaperumāl temple) is located in the village of Singhaperumāl in Chingleput District, about 50km southwest of Chennai. A conflict over the branding of the Vaikhānasa arcakas there has been brought before the courts on several occasions since 1837, and was finally settled out of court in the early 1980s. I present the case here on the basis of the documents given to me by the concerned arcaka families, and occasionally supplement them by information from one person who was involved in the conflict.³⁹⁶

The documented history of this conflict goes back to 1837. One family had apparently long claimed to be the “Sthala Acharya Purushas” of the temple. Their descendants understood this title to involve numerous rights relating to temple ritual. They assumed that their ancestor Śrīnivāsa Svāmi had had the temple built, had consecrated it, appointed arcakas and established the procedures for worship in the temple. Thus his descendants claimed the right to control ritual in the temple, and to ensure that only “qualified” arcakas carried out rituals. From their point of view an arcaka was only appropriately qualified once he had received a branding (“taptasamasrayana”),³⁹⁷ carried out by the “Sthala Acharya Purusha” family. This idea appears to be connected with the fact that members of this family are traditionally the religious leaders (*ācārya*) of a vaiṣṇava school (not named in the documents), where the “taptasamāśrayaṇa” ritual

396 The documents at my disposal are a copy of the indictment which was presented to the Principal District Munsiff P.T. Raman Nayar on 29.10.1942 (Reference: O.S. No. 508 of 1942; abbreviated below as DM 1942), a copy of the judgement and the reasons for the judgement of the District Judge of Chingleput, C. Kunhirama Menon of 26.11.1946 (Reference: A.S. No. 35 of 1944; abbreviated below as DJ 1946), and a copy of the decision of the Deputy Commissioner, Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (Administration) Department, Madras (Reference: O.A. No. 13/1959) of 6.10.1964 (abbreviated below as HRCED 1964). As this is a controversial issue the names of those involved in the cases have been changed throughout.

397 The term used throughout the documents for this branding is “taptasamasrayana” (*taptasamāśrayaṇa*). This term connects the first element of pañcasamṣkāra, the branding (*tāpa*) with the ritual of “taking refuge in Viṣṇu” (*samāśrayaṇa*).

is normal. The claim by the descendants of Śrīnivāsa Svāmi that they had “power of disposal” over the temple had already been successfully challenged in court in 1875 by a great-grandson of one Varada Pillai. He was able to show that his great-grandfather had been the sacrificer and patron (*yajamāna*) at the time of the temple’s foundation. The rights and duties of a so-called “dharmakarta” were therefore inherited within *his* family and the claim by the descendants of Śrīnivāsa Svāmi was unfounded.³⁹⁸ Even though the claim of the descendants of Śrīnivāsa Svāmi to influence the temple’s affairs appears to have had no basis in law, this family seems nevertheless to have been very influential, especially in the 19th century, in relation to the temple’s religious affairs. They, for example, had the hereditary right as so-called “Tirthagar” (Tamil *tīrttakārar*). Among other privileges, this involves the right to be the first persons to receive the divinely-consecrated water (Tamil *tīrttam*) from the arcakas after worship.³⁹⁹ As *tīrttakārar*s they had long asserted the demand that the arcakas must receive *taptasamāśrayaṇa* from their hands. As early as 5.5.1837, Siṃha Mudaliar Svāmi, a descendant of Śrīnivāsa Svāmi, complained to the institution then in charge of the administration of the temple (“government of Peishkar”) that the arcakas worshipped the deity without having received *taptasamāśrayaṇa* from him.⁴⁰⁰

398 The judgement of the District Court (Reference O.S. No. 18 of 1875) is cited in HRECD 1964, p. 18: “Exhibit A to O show to my opinion conclusively that the plaintiff’s [the descendant of Varada Pillai; U.H.] great grandfather was the original founder of the temple and that the plaintiff has the hereditary right to the Dharmakartha ship.” “Dharmakarta” was a term designating the hereditary office of the trustee of a temple. This usually refers to prominent inhabitants of the town who take care to ensure that rituals are performed, that the rent for the temple land is regularly paid and who represent the interests of visitors to the temple. In the documents relating to Singhapuramāḷ, from 1895 the term “Dharmakarta” is no longer used, but the descendants of Varada Pillai are referred to as “hereditary trustees.” This honorary office made them responsible for oversight of the temple’s affairs. In 1917 it was again confirmed by the courts (O.S. 42 of 1917 of the sub-court, Chingleput), that full responsibility for the management and supervision of the temple lay with the trustees, and not with the descendants of Śrīnivāsa Svāmi. After Independence this structure changed again: in addition to the hereditary trustee, the District Court (Chingleput) installed a Brahman and a non-Brahman trustee.

399 Among the mentioned documents is one from 13.7.1856 which also refers to claim by one of the descendants of Śrīnivāsa Svāmi to the status of *tīrttakārar* for themselves. In this document the then arcaka, Tātā Bhaṭṭācārya, confirms that the *tīrttakārar*s are entitled to recite the verses known as “mantrapuṣpa” as worship to the deity.

400 See HRCED 1964, p. 26ff. The documents do not reveal what the reaction to this complaint was.

It appears certain that at least those arcakas in office up to 1895 did in fact receive taptasamāśrayaṇa from the tīrttakārar of the time. This was also regarded as the current practice by the temple's trustee. This is apparent from a letter written by the hereditary trustee on 19.5.1895, in which he seeks to dismiss one of more of the then incumbent arcakas "for misconduct." For this reason he asks the tīrttakārar whether he has any objection to the replacement of these by arcakas who have not received taptasamāśrayaṇa from him. On the same day the tīrttakārar answered that he had nothing against this in principle, but that he would not then be able to receive consecrated water (*tīrttam*) from these arcakas. For this reason he temporarily appointed an acting tīrttakārar, thereby apparently assuming that the arcakas would soon undergo branding.⁴⁰¹

In 1903/04, one of the tīrttakārar's successors again demanded that the arcakas undergo branding by him. However in this case the trustee took the side of the arcakas. As a result the court upheld the arcakas' refusal to be branded. A further consequence of this process was that, for reasons which are not stated, the tīrttakārar was removed from his honorary position.⁴⁰² The honours connected with the office were revived as the result of another court decision in 1908, but the rights mentioned as connected with this position did not include the branding of arcakas.⁴⁰³

Sometime before 1920 Roja Gopāla Bhaṭṭācārya, Gopāla Siṃha Bhaṭṭācārya and Venkaṭa Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭācārya took over the temple service, without having been branded by the tīrttakārar who at the time was engaged on a long pilgrimage. When he returned to Singhaperumāl he lodged a protest with the trustees. The trustees confirmed that in principle it is necessary that the arcakas receive taptasamāśrayaṇa from the tīrttakārar family. As the three arcakas had a credible claim to have received the brand from one Śrīnivāsa Bhaṭṭācārya from Tripliane who in turn had received taptasamāśrayaṇa from the tīrttakārar himself,

401 See DJ 1946, p. 9, and HRCED 1964, p. 27. Whether the *arcakas* concerned were actually relieved of their office is not clear from the documents. It nevertheless appears possible to me that the arcaka Ranganātha (born in 1926) was a descendant of the newly appointed arcakas. According to the documents Ranganātha was in fact not branded, and also had no hereditary connection to the temple. In the years 1932–33 he performed the ritual in the temple, then testified in 1946 that he asserted no right to the performance of the ritual although evidently he then performed rituals in the Paṭāladri temple until 1964.

402 District Court, Chingleput, Reference M.C. Nos. 34 of 1903 and 40 of 1904 (cited in DJ 1946, p. 6).

403 District Court, Chingleput, Reference O.S. 276 of 1907; see DJ 1946, p. 6.

both the tīrttakārars as well as the trustees let the case rest.⁴⁰⁴ The identity of this Śrīnivāsa Bhaṭṭācārya from Triplicane is not clear from the documents. It is however probable, that he was a distant relative of the arcakas who also belonged to the Vaikhānasa tradition. Triplicane, a suburb of Chennai, is the site of the famous Pārthasārathi temple. Ritual in this temple is currently performed by two Vaikhānasa families by turn; one of these families is related to the Vaikhānasas in Singhaperumāl. Today the arcakas from Singhaperumāl at specific occasions exercise the right to perform rituals in the Pārthasārathi temple. Since Śrīnivāsa Bhaṭṭācārya from Triplicane is said to have received the branding from the tīrttakār in Singhaperumāl, it is probable that the present connection was already in place at the beginning of the 20th century.

Although the custom of the arcakas receiving the branding from the family of the tīrttakārars was evidently actually carried out for a long period, since 1921 at the latest this has no longer been the case.⁴⁰⁵ This does not, however, mean that branding of the Vaikhānasa was abandoned: for example in 1925 a child Roja Bhaṭṭācārya is said to have received taptasamāśrayaṇa from his own father Cellappa Rājam Bhaṭṭācārya. Nevertheless the branding itself was evidently not an indispensable prerequisite for the performance of temple ritual, for in the years 1932 and 1933 Ranganātha carried out the temple service without having any branding at all. This did not lead to any complaint on the part of the tīrttakārars.

The documents reveal a considerable loss of authority over the arcakas for the tīrttakār's family from the beginning of the 20th century, which the tīrttakārars clearly express in their indictment of 1944: "The arcakas have, however, been making repeated attempts during the absence of the plaintiffs and their ancestors in their usual pilgrimages to get rid of the tutelage of the plaintiff's family" (DJ 1946, p. 3). In 1942 an incumbent arcaka died while still young—he was the father of three children who were still under age, Perumāl Bhaṭṭācārya, Śeṣādri Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭācārya, and Gopāla Keśava Bhaṭṭācārya. At that time Perumāl Bhaṭṭācārya was just twelve years old and his brothers just six and three. Together with the arcaka Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya (son of Cellappa Rājam Bhaṭṭācārya, then 41 years old) the twelve year-old Perumāl Bhaṭṭācārya took over the hereditary temple service with the agreement of the trustees. For the tīrttakārars this involved considerable additional loss of status from their point of view, for now they would, for example, have to respectfully receive the consecrated water

404 This was explicitly confirmed by the trustee for Venkaṭa Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭācārya in a document from 30.12.1921. Two further documents also confirm this for Roja Gopāla Bhaṭṭācārya, Gopāla Siṃha Bhaṭṭācārya and Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭācārya (see DJ 1946, p. 9).

405 See DJ 1946, p. 9; see HRCED 1964, p. 28.

from a child. Moreover according to the documents the tīrttakārars assumed that neither Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya nor Perumāl Bhaṭṭācārya had undergone taptasamāśrayaṇa. From the point of view of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition, to which the tīrttakārars belonged, the status of the arcakas was therefore considerably lower than their own. Possibly they also expected little resistance especially from the child of the dead man—so now they lodged an indictment with the District Munsiff.⁴⁰⁶ They thereby set in motion the process of a final decision on whether only branded priests could practice temple ritual. As the temple trustees were on the side of the Vaikhānasas, temple service could continue without interruption by the legal dispute.

As mentioned above, the tīrttakārars had various demands. As descendants of the founder of the temple they claimed to have oversight of all the religious affairs of the temple. This included conferring taptasamāśrayaṇa on the arcakas. The District Munsiff denied this central point, while nevertheless at the same time confirming that in fact at this temple the arcakas had long received taptasamāśrayaṇa from each incumbent tīrttakārar. But the Munsiff interpreted this as the honour granted to the tīrttakārar and not as an enforceable right. Moreover, this custom had not been in use since 1920.⁴⁰⁷

As the next step the tīrttakārars applied to the District Court (Chingleput) in 1944. In the first instance their complaint was directed against Perumāl Bhaṭṭācārya and Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya who, they claimed, had not received any branding at all. Perumāl Bhaṭṭācārya and Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya were on the one hand able to show convincingly that they had received taptasamāśrayaṇa from Cinnappa Bhaṭṭācārya, who had in the meantime died.⁴⁰⁸ Cinnappa Bhaṭṭācārya in turn had actually received the branding from the father of the two tīrttakārars. The situation therefore resembled that of 1920, when Veṅkaṭa Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭācārya, Gopāla Simha Bhaṭṭācārya and Roja Gopāla Bhaṭṭācārya took over the temple service: here too the argument was that they had received taptasamā-

406 A Munsif(f) was a low ranking judge under British government; in many cases this post was filled by those considered by the British to be “village headmen.” The area of a Munsif’s jurisdiction was mostly limited to suits not exceeding Rs. 1,000 in value (see Wilson 1855: 356, s.v. Munsif; see also Imperial Gazetteer IV: 150).

407 See HRCEd 1964, pp. 28f.: “... my answer to this issue is that according to the usage of the temple it is necessary for an archaka to undergo TAPTA SMASRAYANAM at the hands of [the tīrttakārar; U.H.]. But I would add that this initiation is not a qualification necessary to render him competent to do effective pooja but an honour rendered to the [tīrttakārar].”

408 In Śrīperumudūr I was told that the two concerned persons received the branding (taptasamāśrayaṇa) from a priest in the Śrīperubudūr temple, because they wanted to serve as priests there.

śrayaṇa from Śrīnivāsa Bhaṭṭācārya of Triplicane, and he in turn from the then tīrttakārars. At that time this was accepted without further ado.

It is clear from the documents that in 1944 the trustees entirely shared the opinion of the arcakas and supported them. This may be connected to the fact that the tīrttakārars now had begun to call into doubt the authority of the trustees in that they again claimed to be the direct descendants of the founder of the temple and therefore also to have authority in relation to the religious interests of the temple. In their deposition the trustees stated that the only necessary qualification of the arcakas is that they should belong to the Vaikhānasa tradition and have undergone samāśrayaṇa. However, as the choice of teacher is an important component of this ritual, they explained: “Samasrayanam at the hands of the plaintiffs could not be insisted on, as nobody could be compelled to choose a particular person as his Guru” (see DJ 1946, p. 3). Thus the trustees only contradicted the tīrttakārars in that they stated that the branding does not necessarily have to be performed by the tīrttakārars, but they confirmed that a branding is required.

In their statement the arcakas themselves insisted that branding is not prescribed for the Vaikhānasas, but rather that for them there is a prenatal ritual called “garbhasamāśrayaṇa.” Their primary argument, however, still is that they too have already undergone a branding, albeit that this was administered by a representative of their own tradition (see DJ 1946, p. 3).

Neither of the parties to the dispute questioned the hereditary nature of the office of arcaka. The District Court Judge assumed that this clear regulation was to be given absolute priority over other, perhaps supplementary, regulations, especially since an irresolvable conflict would ensue if for their part the family of the tīrttakārars lost interest in carrying out this ritual. Moreover, this judge understood the connection between the religious tradition of the arcakas and the tīrttakārars as follows (DJ 1946, p. 7): “There is again the difficulty of the plaintiffs, who happen to be the Acharyas of their cult throughout India, having necessarily to go on long pilgrimages to distant parts of the country. The said Samasrayanam moreover, is not part of a ritual which takes place in the suit temple but one which is performed in the plaintiffs’ mutt or places of his pilgrimage and, as such cannot be said to be a duty connected with the temple in the strict sense.” Moreover it had been shown that the custom of branding the arcakas by the tīrttakārars had not in fact been long established, that it was not introduced with the full agreement of all involved and furthermore was not appropriately justified.⁴⁰⁹ The tīrttakārars’ complaint was therefore only upheld insofar as their

409 For example there were arcakas, who had no hereditary connection to the temple, who had been permitted to carry out rituals there despite not having been branded. Moreover,

status as hereditary *tīrttakārars* was recognized. All further demands were rejected in the decision of the District Court in 1946.

The *tīrttakārars* therefore applied to the High Court on 4.7.1947; however their complaint was also dismissed there.⁴¹⁰ In 1964 the issue was discussed in detail by the Deputy Commission of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (Administration) Department in Madras. In the meantime the demands of the *tīrttakārars* had gone far beyond those they had brought before the District Munsiff and the District Court. They mention many irregularities in worship, in which their rights were often not taken into account,⁴¹¹ and that they have been hindered in overseeing the rituals. Again they stated that the *arcakas* have to receive the branding from them, and that the *arcakas* subsequently have to present a certificate to this effect to the trustees in order to be permitted to carry out temple ritual.

In this instance reference to the texts of the Vaikhānasa tradition played a considerably larger role than before: referring frequently to the Vaikhānasāgamas [= Vaikhānasasamhitās], the trustees now explicitly stated that the *arcakas* were not obliged to undergo a branding. The fundamental precondition for them to be allowed to perform the ritual in this temple was rather that they were male descendants of one of the three houses which inherited the right to the temple service. In principle other Vaikhānasas were also permitted to serve in the temple so long as they had the permission of the trustees (see HRCED 1964, p. 9). As the *tīrttakārars* were not in fact descendants of the founder of the temple, and in addition not familiar with the content of the Vaikhānasasamhitās, the trustees disputed their right to oversee the religious affairs of the temple (see HRCED 1964, p. 14).

Even the *arcaka* defendants (those named are Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭācārya, Ramanā and Gopāla Śrīnivāsa Bhaṭṭācārya) no longer mentioned in their statements that they had undergone branding. Rather, their argument was then entirely based on the Vaikhānasa texts. They even presented three works in Telugu script to the HRCED⁴¹² and explained that they accepted that *samāśrayaṇa* was the precondition for performance of the rituals. Nevertheless, they argued, in the Vaikhānasa tradition this ritual is already carried out before birth, that is, after the *viṣṇubali saṃskāra*. It is for this reason that *taptasamāśrayaṇa* is not prescrib-

in the meantime 22 years had elapsed since the last branding of an *arcaka* by a *tīrttakārar*, without any effect upon the temple ritual (DJ 1946, p. 8).

410 No documents relating to this process are available to me, and I take this information from the detailed statement of the Deputy Commissioner (HRCED 1964).

411 According to this text, the *tīrttakārars* for the first time insisted on receiving honours as *maṭhādhipatis* (see HRCED 1964, p. 5).

412 The titles of these texts are not given in the documents.

ed for the Vaikhānasas, they argued (HRCED 1964, p. 31). The result of the proceedings was that although the tīrtakārars were acknowledged to have all the usual rights pertaining to their honorary office, on all other counts their claim was dismissed. The tīrtakārars applied again to the High Court. Later, however, the case was eventually settled out of court in the early 1980s by an agreement which involved recognition that the branding was in no way necessary for the arcakas.

3.1.4 Sons and slaves

The information at my disposal about the conflicts in Śrīperumbudūr, Vānamāmalai (both 3.1.2), and Singhaperumāḷ (3.1.3) does not allow a seamless reconstruction of the historical events. My primary concern here is therefore not to give an account of the actual historical sequence of events, but rather to depict contemporary and retrospective interpretations of the events that led to the present state of affairs regarding the conflicts. Despite the diversity of the source material, of the personal agendas of those informing me about the events, of diverse assessments of the events, and of the present states of affairs, I argue that certain common patterns emerge.

It is clear that in some towns of South India there was in the 19th and 20th centuries a conflict over the necessity of bearing a brand. While the Vaikhānasa-saṃhitās reject such a branding and present the Vaikhānasas' prenatal marking as the Vaikhānasas' "brand" (2.2.4–5), it was only Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita who established the explicit identification of the "taking refuge in Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa" with the Vaikhānasa saṃskāra viṣṇubali. Here, he was clearly at pains to maintain and protect a distinctive Vaikhānasa identity. One important aspect in this context is Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita's idea that the Vaikhānasas are "Viṣṇu's sons," by contrast to other Vaiṣṇavas, who are equated with slaves. This hierarchical ordering, implying that family descent (sons) is of higher value than initiation (slaves), is also at work in the specific Śrīperumbudūr solution of the conflict. While the Vaikhānasas are forced to adapt to the demands of the socio-religious context in that they undergo a branding, they seek to preserve the distinctive character of their tradition, which is based upon descent (family, caste). Here, this branding is only performed within the Vaikhānasa families.⁴¹³ The pattern of demarcation

413 The statement of the honorary trustee in DJ 1946 (p. 3) that samāśrayaṇa is in principle voluntary, and that therefore a Vaikhānasa may not be forced to recognize a particular person as their spiritual teacher clearly expresses this attitude. While in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition is based on a conscious decision to profess one's faith in the tradition, the Vaikhānasas are assigned to their tradition before birth.

expressed in the pañcasamśkāra initiation is thereby incorporated into the specific Vaikhānasas' code of identity.⁴¹⁴

A much more serious boundary transgression occurs when the Vaikhānasas are forced to draw their legitimation from personalities outside their own tradition, as in Vānamāmalai. This involves subordination to a Śrīvaiṣṇava ācārya (be it the jīyar in Vānamāmalai or the tīrttakārar in Singhaperumāl) and a dependence on representatives of another tradition insofar as the possibility exists for them not to confer this initiation on the Vaikhānasa arcakas. In Singhaperumāl this was only temporarily the case, and attempts were repeatedly (and in the end successfully) made to confine the execution of initiation to the Vaikhānasas' family descent group. However, here as in the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*, open opposition to the demands of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas is avoided, since they are the main sponsors of temple ritual and the Vaikhānasas therefore always economically depend on them. This dependence is explicitly mentioned as a decisive factor for the situation in Vānamāmalai. However, in 1920 and then again in 1942, in Singhaperumāl the Vaikhānasas used the opportunity to carry out initiation only within their own family and thereby to free themselves from the demands of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, without having to come out in open opposition to them.

The several shifts of the basis of the argument in Singhaperumāl are also significant expressions of an overall development. While at first only "custom and usage" were invoked, later the concept of a voluntary choice of one's religious teacher was also brought in. In the earlier documents the general question of whether the arcakas need a branding or not is only of peripheral significance and only as late as 1964 do the arcakas explicitly refer to viṣṇubali in their statement to the HRCED. Only at this point are their arguments based on their authoritative texts, which they even present to the Deputy Commissioner. The change in argument here is closely connected to the modern temple reform in Tamil Nadu (19th/20th centuries). In the early 20th century many complaints were voiced about the "ignorance" of the priests. At the same time books came to be seen as the primary source of knowledge, and thus the āgamas and saṃhitās were transformed into "holy books" of temple ritual. Efforts were made to print and publish these texts and many āgamas and saṃhitās were then also made available to

414 One informant said regarding Śrīperumbudūr that the act of branding itself should not be equated with the Śrīvaiṣṇavas' usual pañcasamśkāra. On the contrary, a ritual similar to the prenatal viṣṇubali saṃskāra should be performed, in the course of which the metal symbols of the disk and conch are heated and pressed on the shoulders of the person concerned. It can be assumed from this statement that an attempt is made to integrate into one's own system the external elements that one is compelled to accept, and at the same time to preserve the difference from other traditions.

temple priests in an effort to “educate” them (see 4.6.5). In the specific case of the Vaikhānasas, these efforts to publish their texts on temple ritual were also promoted from within the tradition, above all by Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya. The rise of the Vaikhānasa temple in Tirumalai as a national and international pilgrimage centre certainly also contributed to this development, as it was accompanied by the organizing of the Vaikhānasas under an umbrella association and the printing and distribution of many Vaikhānasasaṃhitās.⁴¹⁵ The circulation of these texts provided the Vaikhānasas with arguments for the discussion of theological and soteriological questions, as is clearly reflected in the HRCED documents pertaining to Singhaperumāḷ: the arcakas themselves evidently quickly learnt to make use of this development to their advantage. There the controversial questions are for the first time discussed with reference also to viṣṇubali and the “authoritative texts” were produced as evidence before court.

415 On the publishing activities of the Vaikhānasas especially at the start of the 20th century see 1.1; see Colas 1984b and Hüsken 2001b.