

Challenges to a Vaiṣṇava Initiation?

In mid-May 2006 the DMK government¹ of Tamil Nadu decided that “qualified persons of any caste can be priests in any temple run by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments.” Accordingly, since then several schools for Brahmins and non-Brahmins for teaching temple rituals have been set up in Tamil Nadu.² It was announced that young men “of all communities” who passed the eighth standard, aged between fourteen and twenty-four years, can join the training program. The one-year-long training course, accommodation, food, clothing and teaching materials are free in these institutions. Furthermore the students are given a monthly stipend of 500 Indian rupees. Since traditionally in south Indian Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva temples the ritual is performed by specially initiated Brahmin priests alone, as soon as this new training program was announced, protest was voiced by the temple priests and their organisations.³ The objections against this program were concerned with interference of the secular government in religious affairs, especially in trying to influence the performance and language of

1 This party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), was founded 1949 by C.N. Annadurai. From the beginning, it rather stood for the interests of the Tamilians than for those of south India as a whole and especially is opposed to the perceived “foreign” sanskritic-Brahmanic traditions. Thus, this party in 1971 abolished hereditary priesthood (see Presler 1978: 106–9). The priests successfully opposed to this and in 1974 brought to pass a stay order stating that in all temples the rituals should continue “according to tradition”. Thus, the hereditary transmission of the priestly profession in fact continues to be practiced. In 1972 part of the DMK split from the party and formed the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Since then, the government of Tamil Nadu changes basically during every election (every five years) and either DMK or AIADMK (which is much more pro-Brahmanic), form coalitions with smaller parties and rule the state.

2 According to the Tamil Newspaper “Dinamalar” (dated 12.5.2007) training institutions for Vaiṣṇava temple priests (*arcakas*) have been set up in Chennai, near the Vaikhānasa Pārthasārathi temple, and in Śrīraṅgam. For Śaiva priests training institutions have been set up in Tiruvannamalai, at the Arunacaleśvara temple, in Madurai at the Mīnakṣī temple, and in the Palani and Tiruchandur Murugan temples. The author of this essay visited the training center in Śrīraṅgam in early summer 2007.

3 Thus, the Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam, an association of priests from Madurai and Trichi successfully filed a petition: the Supreme Court on the 14th of August 2006 stayed the Tamil Nadu Government Ordinance allowing the appointment of *arcakas* of the temples “without any discrimination of caste and creed,” on the basis of the argument that “TN ordinance amounts to interfering in religious freedom” (see TheHindu.online, 14.8.2006; see also NDTV.com, 14.8.2006). The Tamil Nadu Government responded by proposing a 69% reservation rate for students from all communities (see also “Dinamalar”, dated 27.5.2007). On similar procedures in the early 1970s, see Presler (1978).

temple rituals.⁴ However, apart from these rather sporadic protests, this initiative by the state government failed to cause a major uproar among the Brahmins priests, whose inherited profession seems to be seriously challenged by this legislation. The priests by and large took it rather calmly. Some—albeit few—of the temple priests evidently even volunteered as teachers in these training programs.⁵

Becoming a priest (*arcaka*) in south Indian Brahmin temples⁶ is tied to certain preconditions, only one of which is challenged by this new legislation of opening up the priestly profession to members of all communities. While this legislation is presented and perceived as social reform, other important preconditions for becoming a temple priest are, however, not put into question. This is, I argue, one of the major factors contributing to the Brahmin priests' relative ease when being confronted with this new legislation and its impending practical implementation.

Taking my research on the texts of the Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra tradition and my field research at the Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple in the south Indian town Kāñcipuram as examples, in this essay I will raise questions regarding initiation, learning and ritual competence, its definition in a given context, its transmission and its confirmation. These examples illustrate, I argue, how a ritual tradition is maintained and changed at the same time.

I present here one of the initiation rituals as it is represented in the relevant ritual texts, analyse diverse layers of meaning implicitly conveyed by the text (especially concerning *adhikāra*, the eligibility conferred with the initiation ritual), and proceed then to describe and compare the initiations and other preconditions required for present day priests at the south Indian Varadarāja Perumāḷ temple in Kāñcipuram.⁷ In the

4 Although this issue was according to my knowledge not prominent in the program, the priests' worries about the language of the ritual performances is not at all unfounded, since the DMK government repeatedly tried to enforce temple service to be conducted in Tamil instead of Sanskrit.

5 Thus one main priest from the Śrīraṅgam temple was appointed as principal and teacher of the training centre in Śrīraṅgam. He also was member of the committee selecting the students. One of his motivations was certainly that being involved as a major actor also implies a chance to influence the proceedings. Thus already in February 2007 he wrote in a letter to the Hindu Religious Endowment Board officer insisting that the students, in order to be taught the Vedas, had to have undergone the *upanayana saṃskāra*, and in order to be allowed to touch the god and to perform his worship, they had to undergo the so-called *samāśrayaṇa* initiation and a Pāñcarātra *dīkṣā* (on this, see below).

6 Usually the priests (*arcaka*)—at least in Vaiṣṇava temples—are the only ones who may have bodily contact with the image of the god, in which the god is (made) present.

7 "Initiation" is understood here as comprising both, *saṃskāras* and *dīkṣās*. *Saṃskāras* are life-cycle rituals, the rituals which literally "make a person perfect" in the sense that they realise the potential inherent in a person (see B.K. Smith 1989: 82–6, 91–2). This potential depends on the gender, and the family background (class, or caste), and other circumstances, most of which are determined before birth. These rituals accompany a person's life and mark the transition from one stage in life to another. In contrast, the term *dīkṣā* refers to a (theoretically) optional initiation, which confers a special competence or eligibility (for the performance of rituals, in our case) to the person who undergoes it. However, *dīkṣās* are usually also tied to certain preconditions; they are usually not conferred to just everybody. I refer to both, *saṃskāra* and *dīkṣā*, as initiation rituals in the sense that they serve to demarcate a group's identity, they mark a change of religious status for those who un-

next step, I will take into account what the contemporary performers think about these issues, how they deal with more recent challenges to their right (and obligation) to perform temple rituals, and also look at the issue of how not only the eligibility, but also the ability to perform these rituals is acquired by them. This will lead to more general reflections on the connection of ritual texts, practice, and understanding in these traditions.

Adhikāra for Vaiṣṇava temple priests

The south Indian Vaiṣṇava ritual tradition in question, called Pāñcarātra, has a vast literature on temple rituals, written in Sanskrit, containing rules and regulations on how to perform them.⁸ This literature, the earliest texts of which were already in use before the 10th century CE, is written and transmitted by and for ritual specialists (priests) in Vaiṣṇava temples, called *arcaka* or *ācārya*.⁹ The priests are mediators between god and humans in the context of public temple rituals. These rituals are “for others” (*parārtha*), as opposed to the rituals a householder performs “for himself” (*svārtha*) and his family.¹⁰ The priestly profession is, as mentioned above, traditionally not open to all. The right to perform *parārtha* rituals is in the ritual texts and in present day discourse usually called *adhikāra* (“eligibility”). According to the Sanskrit texts this eligibility to perform rituals “for others” in south Indian Vaiṣṇava temples is acquired through several initiation rituals (*dīkṣā* and *saṃskāra*).¹¹

Text as sole authority?

Asked about ritual norms, members of this Vaiṣṇava group invariably refer to “tradition.” This tradition is nowadays mainly understood as being fixed in and by the above-

dergo them, they make the concerned person a member of a group, they change the relation between individual and former group of not initiated persons, and they mark the fact that the concerned person has acquired a new competence.

8 For an overview over Pāñcarātrasaṃhitās, see Schrader (1916), Smith & Venkatachari (1975 and 1980), and Rastelli (1999a, 1999b, 2006).

9 In the context of temple ritual, the term *ācārya* describes a “master” by contrast with a simple temple priest, who is usually described as an *arcaka* or, though rarely in the Saṃhitā texts, as *pūjaka* (see Colas 1996: 129f., 153). In the temple, an *ācārya* is responsible for the proceedings and leads the rituals while other priests assist him. The *ācārya* takes the highest place in the hierarchy of ritual specialists in the temple (see Colas 1996: 132, 143, 153f.).

10 The life-cycle rituals (*saṃskāra*) a Brahmin householder performs for himself and for his family are for example *svārtha*, whereas temple rituals, which are “for others”, comprise the big yearly temple festivals and all other daily or monthly rituals performed for a god in a temple.

11 A summary of the textual accounts of Pāñcarātra initiations (*dīkṣā*) is given in Gupta (1979). On the life-cycle rituals called *saṃskāra* see Pandey (1949) and Kane (1974).

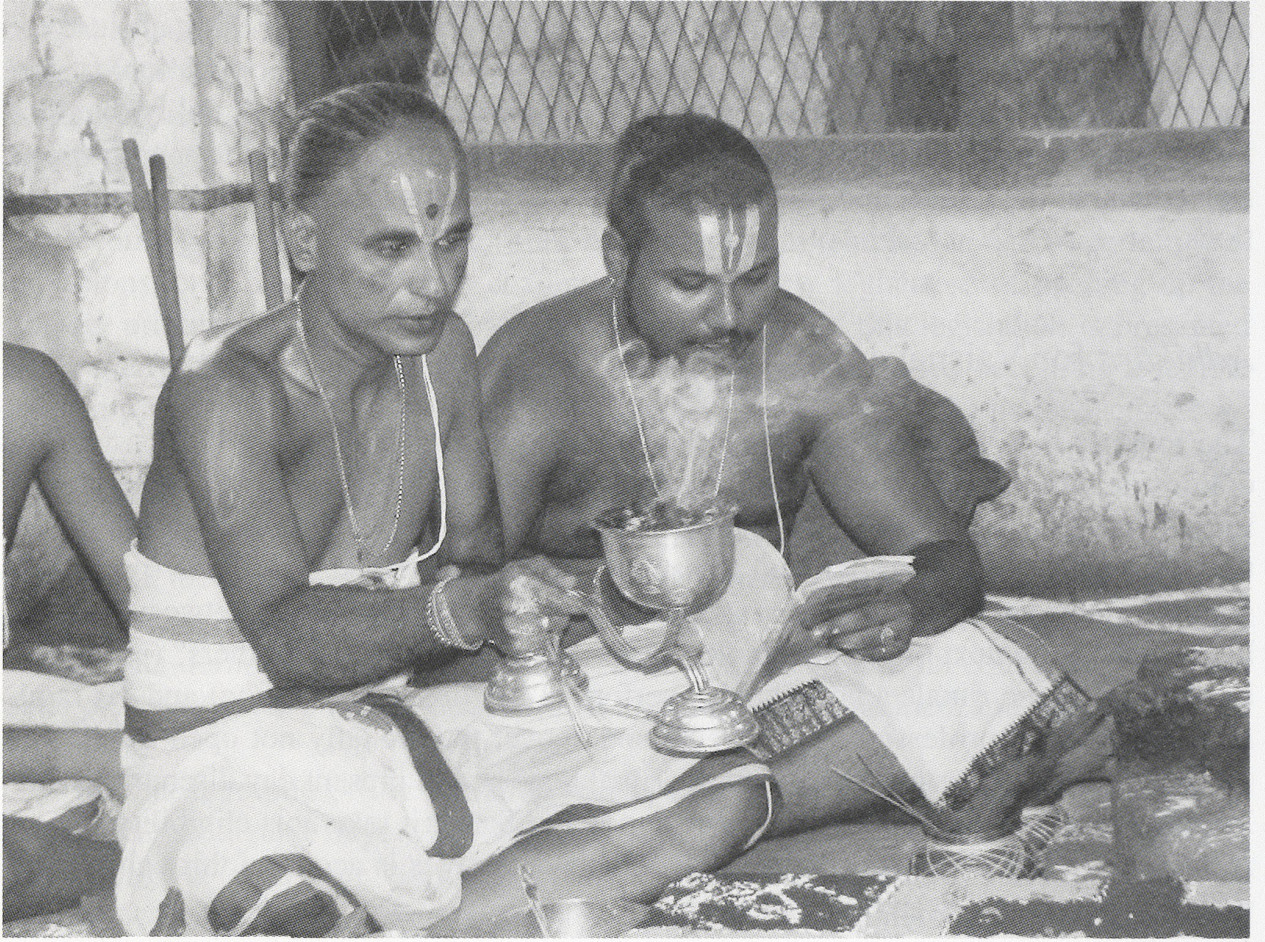


Plate 1: Ritual handbooks are sometimes consulted while performing temple rituals.

mentioned mediaeval Sanskrit texts, the Pāñcarātrasaṃhitās, usually referred to by the term *āgama*.¹² These Sanskrit texts are invoked, cited, and referred to as *the* authority. The authority attributed to them is also expressed by one phrase, frequently used when a ritual practice is subject to criticism: “This is deviating from the Āgama rule.”¹³

The more recent printed ritual handbooks,¹⁴ which are in one way or the other based on these mediaeval Sanskrit texts, in addition include commentaries and explanations in vernacular languages such as Tamil, Kannada or Telugu, in order to make their content comprehensible to those priests who have no or only little knowledge of Sanskrit.

These ritual handbooks are at times even used during the performances (see plate 1). However, in spite of the constant reference to texts as main authority, the physical use of printed texts is actually assessed ambivalently: while on the one hand this use of texts during performances is appreciated as a proof of “following the authentic tradi-

12 See Chaudhari (1995: 406) on the use of the terms *āgama* and *saṃhitā*.

13 This is also one of the objections most frequently brought forward against the institution of the Āgama schools for members of “all communities”, mentioned in the introductory portion of this essay.

14 See, e.g. *Ālayanityārcanapaddhati*, *Bhagavadārāadhanakrama*, *Mahotsavaprayoga*, *Śrībhagavadārāadhanakrama*, and *Śrīpāñcarātra Pātmasaṃhitā Tvajārōhaṇaviti*.

tion”,¹⁵ on the other, it is also evaluated by the ritual specialists themselves as a deficiency, since it reveals that the knowledge of the acting priest is insufficient and that he has to resort to guidelines in the form of a text.¹⁶ Thus, from the latter perspective, in spite of the authority attributed to them, in practice these texts are not conceived as models that should be followed word-for-word (see Welbon 1984: 97; Brunner-Lachaux 1999: 263–8; Fuller 2003: 81, 87).

In fact, a close look at the Sanskrit ritual texts reveals that their prescriptions remain largely incomprehensible without a certain amount of pre-knowledge. Moreover, the rituals prescribed therein have to be constantly adapted to the concrete place and circumstances of their performance. This insight inevitably leads to the question of what is, and what is not stated in these ritual texts? Additional performative knowledge, gained mainly through experience is required to translate text into practice. Thus, knowledge of texts *and* knowledge of how to apply them, including knowledge of how to react creatively and convincingly on contingencies is an essential part of priestly competence. Text and performance are therefore never 100% congruent. Yet the priests’ claim that their rituals are performed “according to the Āgamas” is perfectly valid, too.

The *cakrābjamaṇḍala* initiation procedures according to the *Pādmasaṃhitā*

I will now illustrate this point by taking initiation rituals for the Pāñcarātra priests in the south Indian Varadarāja Perumāl temple (short: Varadarāja temple) as an example, thereby discussing the relation of the “ideal” (that is, textually prescribed) procedures with the actual enactment of the rituals, and at the same time introducing an important initiation that confers *adhikāra* (eligibility) to a priestly candidate within the Pāñcarātra tradition.

While the diverse Pāñcarātrasaṃhitās differ in details regarding the *dīkṣās* described in them, nowadays evidently only one single text is used and referred to in actual practice for the performance of Pāñcarātra initiations, namely the *Pādmasaṃhitā*. This text is said to be based on the older text *Jayakhyāsaṃhitā*¹⁷ which, together with the *Sāt-*

15 Following a text in this view can be equated to following a “frozen rule-bound structure” which permits no variance in the rituals which might endanger the efficacy of the rituals performed.

16 Thus, the scene depicted in plate 1 was strongly criticized by some participants.

17 *Pādmasaṃhitā* is the main text followed in the Varadarāja temple in Kāñcipuram. According to the priests serving in this temple, no ritual handbooks (*prayogas*, *paddhatis*) are used by them. The information given by the *Pādmasaṃhitā* is considered to be sufficient. The *Jayakhyāsaṃhitā*, however, is said to contain more detailed information on the ritual ablutions (Skt. *abhiṣeka* / Tamil *tirumañjana*) and on the big yearly festival Brahmotsava, whereas the *Pādmasaṃhitā* contains more detailed instructions on how to erect for example the *cakrābjamaṇḍala*, used during the yearly Pavitrotsava festival and required for the *cakrābjamaṇḍaladīkṣā* (on Pavitrotsava, see Hüsken 2006).

vatasamhitā and *Pauṣkarasamhitā* constitutes the so-called “three gems”.¹⁸ These “three gems” most probably were already in use in the tenth century CE (see Rastelli 1999: introduction). In contrast, the *Pādmāsamhitā* is considerably younger (ca. 13th/14th century CE). The initiations depicted in the texts differ: while the older *Jaya-khyāsamhitā* knows four different *dīkṣās* which are described as differing in form, content, and result,¹⁹ in the *Pādmāsamhitā* only the so-called *cakrābjamaṇḍaladīkṣā* (the initiation by means of a wheel-shaped lotus *maṇḍala*) is described. This *cakrābjamaṇḍaladīkṣā* is in fact performed today for future temple priests in the Varadarāja temple in Kāñcīpuram.

The *Pādmāsamhitā* gives the following description of the *cakrābjamaṇḍaladīkṣā* (*Pādmāsamhitā*, *caryāpāda* 2.3–84):²⁰

First a pavilion has to be built (2.3) and the fire pit for the sacrificial fire is to be established (2.4). The form and cardinal direction of the fire pit depends on the *varṇa* of the person to be initiated (2.4–6). The length of the sacrificial ladles (*sruc* and *sruva*) likewise is determined by the *varṇa* of the candidate (2.7). The proper time for the preparation and the *dīkṣā* itself are mentioned as the tenth or eleventh day of a fortnight (2.7–8). The initiation starts with an invocation ceremony (*adhivāsana*). In the pavilion a *cakrābjamaṇḍala* has to be established and a “door-jar” (*dvārakumbha*) is to be set up (2.8–9). The guru, after meditating, is to prepare a jar and a water vessel made of gold and other metals (2.9). He fills them with water, with jewels inside, covers the jars completely with thread, places a garland on them and smears sandal paste on them. He covers the jars with new clothes and speaks one hundred times the *astramantra* over them (2.10–11). He pours water around the altar and places the vessels on the north-eastern side of the *maṇḍala* on a base made of grain, reciting the *mūlavidyā-mantra* (2.12–13). Then he invokes and worships Viṣṇu in the jar and in the *maṇḍala* (2.14). He kindles the sacrificial fire and places it in the fire pit, while reciting the *aṣṭākṣaramantra* (2.15). The mash (*caru*) cooked by this fire is afterwards presented to Viṣṇu in the *maṇḍala*, in the jar, and in the fire, and the fourth part is consumed by the preceptor. The offering of 108 wooden sticks (*samidh*) (2.16–17) is followed by the sacrifice of clarified butter while reciting the corresponding mantras. The sacrifice is ended by a “complete oblation” (*pūrṇāhuti*) (2.18). The candidate, adorned and clad in new clothes, is then blind-folded, and made to sit to the right of the preceptor, facing east (2.19–20). The preceptor touches him with *darbha* grass while reciting the *puṇḍarikākṣavidyā*. Then he offers twelve clarified butter offerings and *caru* into the fire (2.21). An offering of *samidh* sticks, flowers and sesame seeds while performing the *prasṛtimudrā* follows. Then the preceptor circumambulates the fire and touches the

18 See Schrader 1916, introduction.

19 These are *dīkṣās* for the *śamayin*, *putraka*, *sādhaka* and *ācārya* (see Gupta 1979).

20 I wish to thank Dr. Johanna Buss, Vienna, for providing me with a draft translation of this section of the *Pādmāsamhitā*, which is paraphrased here (see also Smith & Venkatachari 1975: 225–6).

head of the candidate three times (2.22) and, while reciting the *āṣṭākṣaramantra* and the *ūrdhvapāṇḍraka*, smears white ashes on his forehead (2.23) and ties a thread around his wrist. The candidate is then given *caru* and a mixture of the five cow products to eat (2.24). Then the candidate cleans his teeth with a stick, then throws this stick on the ground (2.26). The direction of the top of this stick indicates the auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of the procedures (2.26). If inauspiciousness is indicated, a *śāntihoma* (pacifying fire offering) should be performed, which requires the preceptor to recite the *narasiṃhamantra* 108 times while offering sesame seeds into the fire (2.27). Then the guru leads the candidate by the hand in front of the god, makes him bow to the god (2.28), and has him recite: “For the sake of release from the fetters of the unreleased souls, which are bound in the fetters of *saṃsāra*, only you, oh God, are the refuge. No other refuge can be found. The cause for release of the fetters consists in the propitiation of you. I know, that you, oh Lord of gods, are able to free these unreleased beings, which are bound through the fetter of (re)births.” (2.29–31). The preceptor then winds a thread, consisting of three strands, twenty-five times around the body of the candidate, from his top-knot to his feet, touching him while reciting the *mūlamantra* (2.32–34). Then follows another sacrifice of clarified butter, while the preceptor recites the *svapnādhīpatimantra* 108 times (2.35). In conclusion then a bean porridge offering (*balī*) to the *bhūtas* is performed (2.36). The thread and the blindfolding are removed and deposited on a dish (2.37) which is covered with another dish, and the candidate should go to sleep (2.38). In the next morning, at dawn, in case the candidate had an inauspicious dream, another *śāntihoma* is to be performed. Both the preceptor and the candidate enter the sacrificial pavilion after having taken a bath (2.39–40). The god is worshipped in the doorways, banners, in the *maṇḍala*, and in the jar [of the pavilion]. The god is fed, and the preceptor bows and circumambulates the sacrificial place (2.41). Again, the candidate is blindfolded, is made to sit, and again *samidh* sticks are offered into the fire (2.42). Then the preceptor recites the *mūlamantra* and meanwhile cuts the thread which had been tied around the candidate’s body (2.43), and instructs the candidate the twenty-five *tattvas* (2.44). Now the preceptor contemplates “on the highest light in the lotus of his own heart and the highest *puruṣa*”. In his heart he also visualizes the soul of the candidate (2.45), mentally destroys the candidate’s body, meditates on the egg that comes from his own heart (2.46), and then lets the candidate’s soul emanate, while offering the pieces of thread into the fire, addressing the *tattvas* in their right order (2.47). He furthermore should reflect upon the “splitting of the egg” and contemplates on the “self that is born through the self.” (2.48). Now the blindfold is removed while the preceptor recites the *mūlamantra*, and the candidate puts on another cloth, washes his feet (2.49), and sips water. He is again blindfolded and mentally purifies himself (2.50–51). The preceptor continues the sacrifice, touches the feet of the candidate (2.52), the candidate’s navel, his heart region and his head, sacrificing various substances into the fire (2.53). Again he

offers clarified butter 108 times while reciting the *mūlamantra*. At the end of the *homa* he then takes the candidate by his right hand (2.54), leads him clockwise around the fire to the jar and the *maṇḍala* (2.55), and fills the candidate's open hands either with jewels, pearls and corals, or with flowers (2.56). Instructed by the preceptor, the student scatters the flowers on the *maṇḍala*. The place where most of the flowers fall determines the first part of the name of the candidate (2.57–58). The second part of his new name is “Bhaṭṭaraka” if it is a Brahmin, if he is a Kṣatriya it is “Deva”, for a Vaiśya it should be “Pāla”, and for someone born in the low castes it should be “Dāsa”. Now the blindfold is removed and the candidate is made to look at the *cakramaṇḍala* (2.59–60). Both the preceptor and the candidate meditate on Nārāyaṇa, and thereafter the preceptor delivers the mantra into the right ear of the candidate, which starts with “oṃ”. The mantras to be delivered are first the twelve-syllabled mantra, then the eight-syllabled mantra (2.61–62), and then the *mūrtimantra*. Afterwards the preceptor makes the candidate meditate (2.63). If the candidate is a woman or a Śūdra, or an *anuloma*, the mantras have to be taught without “oṃ”, “huṃ”, “phaṭ”, and the sacrifice has to be performed without the words “vaṣaṭ”, “svāhā” and without the syllable “oṃ” (2.64). The candidate now worships Viṣṇu in the jar on the *maṇḍala* (2.65) and then stands up, the hands in the *añjali* gesture, while the preceptor visualises the *maṇḍala* on the candidate's head, and deposits Viṣṇu's hand in the hand of the candidate. In front of the fire the preceptor instructs the candidate on the rules of right conduct (2.66–67). [The rules are given in 2.68–80 and are mainly about keeping the secrets of the initiation, respecting his preceptor, and the candidate's daily ritual duties, moral conduct and study, following the *sūtra* he inherited]. The initiation ends with a *śāntihoma* and a “complete oblation” (*pūrṇāhuti*) (2.81). The preceptor then releases the god from the jar and the *maṇḍala* and blesses the candidate (2.82–83), who, according to his capacity, hands over the ritual fee (mentioned are a cow, land, gold, ornaments and a carriage and female and male servants) to the preceptor (2.83). At sunset the newly initiated person, with his ornaments, is taken to his house (2.84).

Here, as well as in a passage preceding this section (*Pādmasaṃhitā caryāpāda* 1.3–9), it becomes clear that not only Brahmins, but members of all *varṇas*, and even women are eligible to be initiated, and thus can become Pāñcarātrikas. However, in *Pādmasaṃhitā caryāpāda* 1.7–9, the eligibility to perform worship for others is restricted to Brahmins who are endowed with the life-cycle rituals (*saṃskāra*).

Thus, although the pattern of the performances is identical, according to this text the competence (*adhikāra*) resulting from this initiation depends on the *varṇa* and gender of the candidate: while the *cakrābjamaṇḍala* initiation can be performed for almost everybody, only for Brahmins it does result in the eligibility to perform temple rituals.

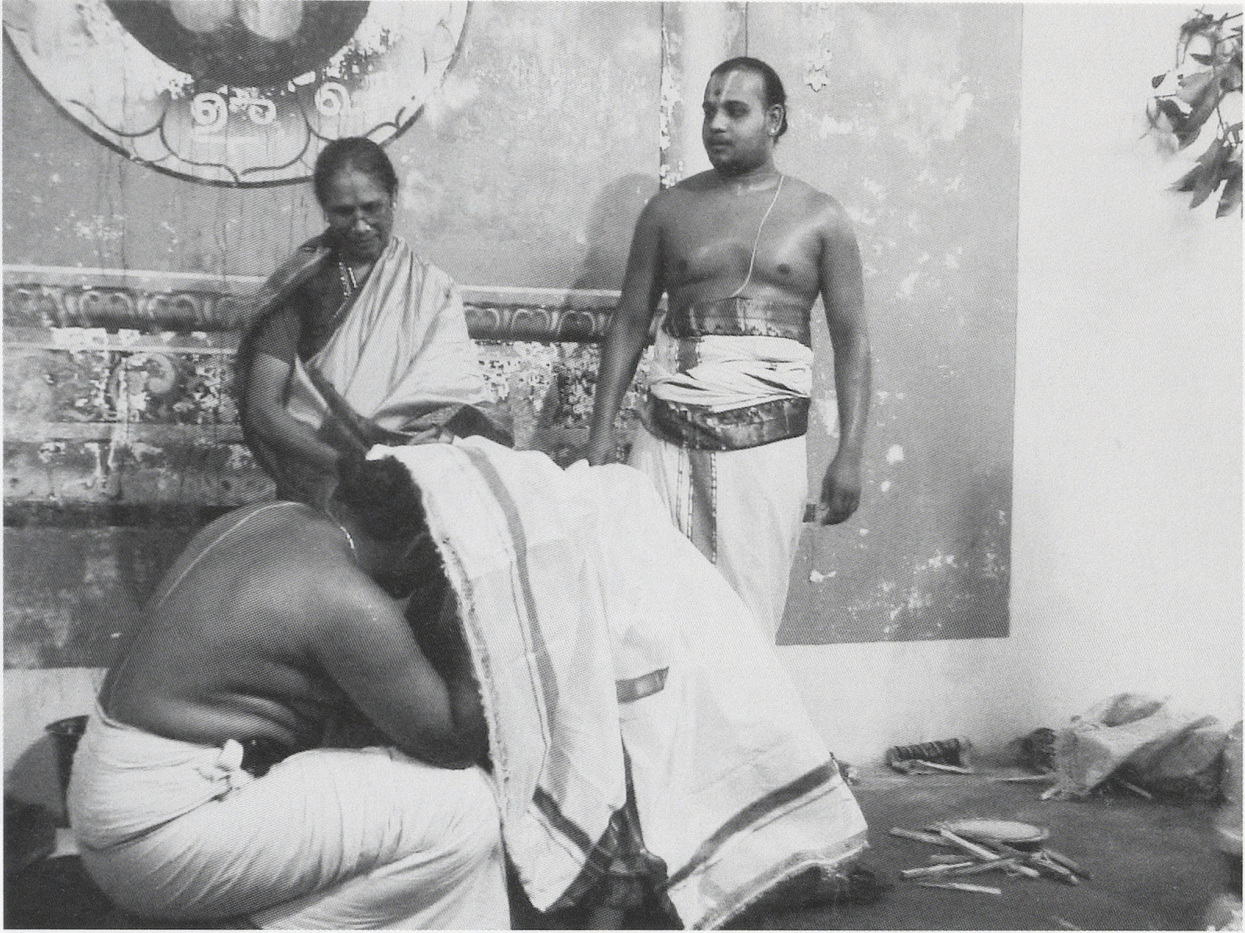


Plate 2: As part of *upanayana* the *gāyatrīmantra* is taught to the boy.

Initiation as a priest in present day practice

Present day practice, however, proves to be more exclusive. The performance is abbreviated and differs slightly, depending on the candidate's family background, his affiliation to one of the two dominant Vaiṣṇava sects (Teṅkalai and Vāṭakalai), among other issues. This shall be explored further below.

In order to be eligible to serve as a priest (*arcaka*) in the Varadarāja temple, several preconditions have to be met. First and foremost, only male candidates from six specified Brahmin families in Kāñcipuram are eligible to serve as *arcakas* in the Varadarāja temple.²¹ They acquire this eligibility through a series of four initiation rituals (*saṃskāras* and *dīkṣās*). These four “ritual components” of their *adhikāra* are the life-cycle cycle rituals *upanayana* and *vivāha*, and the initiation rituals called *pañcasamskāra* (or *samāśrayaṇa*) and the *cakrābjamaṇḍaladīkṣā*.

21 Only four of these six families are “active” in the sense that they in fact perform the rituals in the temple. At present, the other two families “rent” their “shares” (Tamil *muṛai*) in the rituals to members of the other four families. Oral tradition has it that the legal stipulation of these six families took place in colonial times (no written documents are available to the author of this essay).



Plate 3: The metal symbols of disk and conch are heated in the sacrificial fire.

The sequence of the rituals' performance is as follows: for the potential future temple priests (as for other Brahmins), *upanayana* is the initiation into Vedic studentship, ideally performed when a boy is between eight and twelve years old (see plate 2). This life-cycle ritual makes the boy eligible to learn the Veda and to wear the sacred thread—it is his “second birth” as Brahmin. This ritual is the precondition for the other three initiations. The second ritual necessary for any temple priest of this tradition (and in this temple) is called *pañcasamskāra* (also called *samāśrayaṇa*).²² This is an initiation into Vaiṣṇavahood, into being a devotee of the god Viṣṇu, and is, nowadays, performed not long after *upanayana*. It consists of five elements, one of them is the branding of the boy's or young man's upper arms with two heated metal symbols of the god Viṣṇu's weapons, disk (*cakra*) and conch (*śaṅkha*) (see plate 3). Only after this ritual is performed another initiation, the *cakrābhjamaṇḍaladīkṣā* (described after its textual account above), can be performed. This initiation by means of the wheel-shaped Lotus *maṇḍala* is an initiation into Pāñcarātra rituals, the specific Vaiṣṇava tradition followed in the Varadarāja temple. It confers on the candidate the right or eligibility to perform the rituals within the three main shrines of the Varadarāja temple, including the right to touch the main images and to feed the god. This initiation is—as per local tradition—

22 On *pañcasamskāra* see Raman (2005 and 2007), see also Hüsken (2009a: 105ff.).



Plate 4: The Rāmānuja shrine in the Varadarāja temple in January 2006, before renovation.

performed in the Rāmānuja shrine located in the temple precincts (see plate 4). Thus, in contrast to the prescriptions given in the *Pādmasaṃhitā*, it is not necessary to erect a pavilion for the procedures: the Rāmānuja shrine itself serves as *maṇḍapa* in actual practice. Some of the mantras prescribed during the diverse sequences of the ritual are not recited as often as suggested by the text. Moreover, the performance of this initiation takes one to two hours, not two days: the sequences during which the candidate cleans his teeth with a stick and afterwards throws it on the ground, and the investigation of the auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of candidate's dream after he spent the night, are nowadays not performed during initiations at the Varadarāja temple, and the blindfolding of the candidate is therefore performed only once.²³

23 The performers are well aware of these differences and are explicitly unhappy about the fact that they cannot perform the procedures as elaborately as suggested by the text. But, as they argue, since neither time nor resources usually allow for the "long version", they have to be content with performing this *dīkṣā* in an abbreviated way. In some—albeit rare—cases the preceptor even conveys the initiation via telephone.

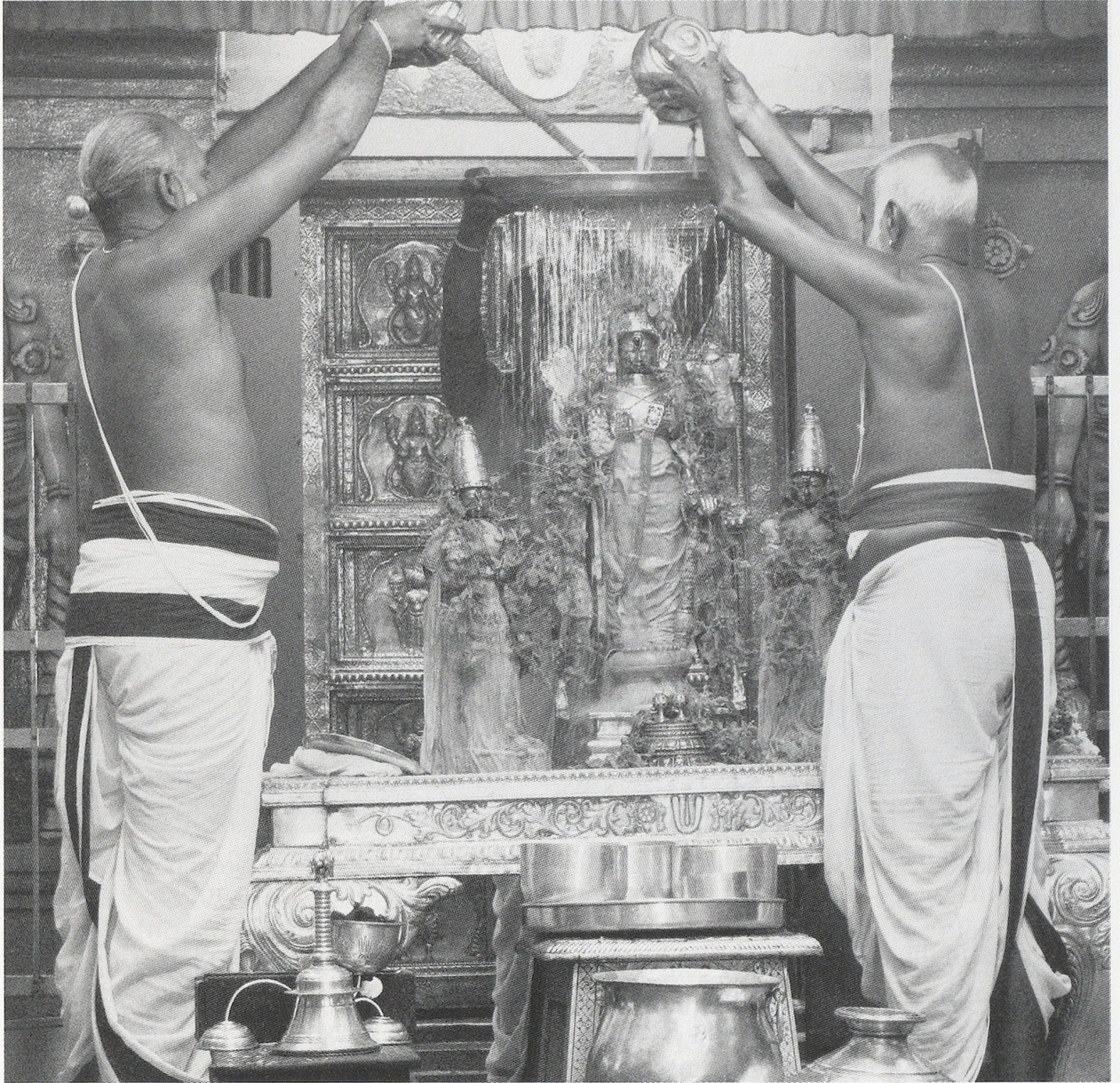


Plate 5: *Abhiṣeka*, the ritual ablution of the god's image.

Another crucial difference between the text and actual practice is that nowadays this initiation is performed only for male Brahmins, not, as the text suggests, for members of all castes or for women.²⁴ Moreover, with regard to the *adhikāra* conferred through this initiation there is nowadays an important difference between the male members of the six above-mentioned families in Kāñcipuram and other Brahmins who want to be-

24 In that respect the new legislation by the DMK government confirms to the *Pādmasaṃhitā* on the one hand, in that it is explicitly for "people from all communities", but not entirely, since it excludes women. However, since the aim of the training programs set up is to "produce" temple priests who perform rituals "for others", it deviates from the prescriptions given in the *Pādmasaṃhitā*, according to which *parārtha* rituals are to be performed by male Brahmins alone.



Plate 6: Offerings into the fire (*homa*) during the major temple festivals.

come Vaiṣṇava temple priests: while members of the six families are initiated inside the temple precincts (in the Rāmānuja shrine) and thereby gain the right to perform the ritual as *arcaka* in the Varadarāja temple, the *cakrābjamaṇḍaladīkṣā* of others takes invariably place in the preceptor's house and confers only the right to perform the ritual in other, "minor" Vaiṣṇava temples, but not in the Varadarāja temple.²⁵

However, even in the case of a descendant of the above-mentioned six Brahmin families in Kāñcīpuram, only later, as a married householder, may he perform certain rituals such as the ritual ablution (Skt. *abhiṣeka* / Tamil *tirumañjana*) of the god (see plate 5), and only then may he attend to the sacrificial fires (*homa*) lit during the major tem-

25 The priests of the major south Indian Pāñcarātra temples, namely those in Śrīraṅgam, in the Kāñcīpuram Varadarāja temple, and in the Viṣṇu temple in Melkote are considered to be the *ācāryas* of other Pāñcarātrikas. They are frequently asked to perform initiations for others, who want to serve in a smaller Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra temple. The Melkote priests, for example, also serve as *ācāryas* for the ISKCON temple in Bangalore. There they acted as the main priests responsible for its inauguration rituals, and act as the leading priests during the major temple festivals.

ple festivals (see plate 6). Therefore, the final ritual which makes a candidate a fully-fledged priest is marriage (*vivāha*), another life-cycle ritual (*saṃskāra*). Only after marriage, can a priest act as main priests (*ācārya*) during the four most important festivals at the Varadarāja temple celebrated every year.²⁶ In addition, only after marriage can the priests of the Varadarāja temple initiate others.²⁷

Although the adept should after his *cakrābjamaṇḍaladīkṣā* be eligible to touch the god in this temple, there are some factors of an entirely different character which could prevent him from doing so. Since the temple is run by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Board (a governmental institution), no priest can perform the rituals inside the temple without a “written order” by the temple administration. This points to the fact that there is one more important literary genre regulating the ritual performed in the Varadarāja temple: court orders and administrative documents. Whether and when a candidate receives this written order depends on various factors, such as his reputation among the local influential Vaiṣṇava communities, on whether the number of already acting priests is sufficient, or whether more acting priests are needed to guarantee uninterrupted worship. It depends on the goodwill of the acting Executive Officer (EO) who issues these written orders, and it depends the candidate’s actual skill in performing the required ritual actions.

Eligibility versus ability

I want to focus especially on this last point for the remaining part of this essay, since the question of the ability, in contrast to the eligibility to perform the rituals “for others” in the temple has been an important issue in south Indian temple politics for more than a century now. This issue is also implicitly taken up in several ways by the legislation mentioned in the beginning of this paper, which aims at opening up the temple priest profession to all strata of society.

Criticism of the priests’ ability to “perform rituals properly” has a long tradition. Priestly competence was generally put into question at the end of the 19th and throughout the 20th century. At that time, in the course of modern temple reform in Tamil Nadu, many complaints were voiced about the mismanagement of temples, and also about the alleged “low performance standards”, “ignorance”, “laxity” and lack of education of the priests (see, e.g. Presler 1978: 115).²⁸ As one consequence, attempts were made

26 These festivals are Brahmotsava, Vasantotsava, Pallavotsava and Pavitrotsava.

27 In practice, however, the initiation of the young priests at this temple is usually done by the eldest acting priest only, or in his name. Initiation to others, who are going to perform rituals in other Vaiṣṇava temples, can be conferred by any married priest of this temple. I am told that others than members of the priestly families in Kāñcīpuram, Śrīraṅgam and Melkote are not supposed to confer initiation on others.

28 On the traditionally low status of temple priests (termed *devalaka*), see also Hüsken (2009a: 54ff.).



Plate 7: Students in the Āgama Pāṭhaśālā in Madurantakam.

to offer a standardised training for temple priests and other ritual specialists. Special training institutions (named Āgama schools, Pāṭhaśālā or Vidyāpīṭha) were established (see plate 7).

In 1964 a new service rule issued by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department stated that every newly appointed priest needs a certificate issued by an Āgama school or its equivalent. Although this service rule has so far not been consistently enforced, priests are well aware of the fact that this might happen. Therefore, many temple priests' families in Kāñcīpuram, who enjoy hereditary rights to perform worship, encourage their male children to subscribe to such courses in an Āgama school and earn a certificate of sorts.

Hand in hand with the demand, from government and the general public, for a "better education" of temple priests went efforts to print and publish texts on temple rituals. Fuller says: "Agamic education as it operates in the modern era is predicated upon the existence of texts that are accessible, and serve as standardized source of authoritative knowledge. In producing such texts, printing and publication have played a crucial role" (Fuller 2003: 86). Many of the Sanskrit ritual texts (Āgamas and Saṃhitās) were then printed for the first time, and distributed among the temple priests. One of the

aims of printing the books in great number was their potential use for educating the young priests in Āgama schools or Pāṭhaśālās.

As Presler (1978: 123f.) reports, in the late 1970 ironically the temple priests' organisation "South India Arcaka Sangham" itself demanded compulsory education for the *arcakas*, establishing learning institutions for them, and not admitting uneducated *arcakas* even if they enjoy hereditary rights. It thus seems that the accusations of "low performance standards" were internalised by the priests themselves. Today, too, many of the elder priests complain about the general lack of education and interest in the younger priestly generations.

This internalisation of the accusation of "low performance standards", together with the concept that "text *is* authority", are formative factors for the present day's priest's reference to the mediaeval ritual texts in Sanskrit as the main authority for the performance of the rituals in their temple.

However, a standardized education for temple priests had never actually existed before (see Good 2004: 134). The traditional mode of transmitting ritual knowledge was rather shaped by the personal relationship between the student and the learning environment created by the teacher, and the concrete performance of the ritual was mainly determined by the specific local traditions, and the relationship of the officiating priest and the commissioner and sponsor of the ritual in question, the *yajamāna*. Establishing institutionalised training centres such as the Pāṭhaśālās thus resulted in the de-individualizing as well as the de-localizing of the training: neither the specific relationship between teacher and student, nor local traditions and customs were supposed to shape ritual performance. This was a radical departure from the then prevalent practice. What was sold as a "return to tradition" did in fact result in a "reinvention of tradition."

In contrast to this learning by participating in the life and ritual practice of the teacher, in many of the present day Āgama schools learning of texts and theoretical knowledge is emphasised. However, the effect of the inclusion of "canonical texts" in the curriculum of the Āgama schools on the quality of education was evidently misjudged. According to a report by a Government Commission, the introduction of uniform reading of certain texts as well as timetables, and also uniformity in the examinations, contributed instead to a decline in learning (see Michaels 2001: 5).

The lack of emphasis on practical training is evidently one of the major disadvantages of many of the Āgama schools. This, however, is already built into the very concept underlying these institutions, namely that knowing the Āgama texts inevitably implies that one is capable of performing the rituals, and that standardised texts alone are perceived and represented as the source of authoritative knowledge (see Fuller 2003: 86). In fact, as indicated above, these ritual texts (Āgama / Saṃhitā) do not contain detailed instructions about how to perform the rituals (see *ibid.*: 82), and evidently they never were meant to be used as "how to do" handbooks: "they are written for functioning priests and serve them as compendious references, sanctions, and models more

than exhaustive procedural guides” (Welbon 1984: 72).²⁹

Interviews among the priests of the Varadarāja temple who attended courses in these Āgama schools, but also among the experienced elder priests clearly indicate that the ability to perform the rituals is not acquired in these institutions. Priestly competence does not only include the adherence to written ritual rules, but also the ability of the main actors to convince the audience and to maintain this conviction. The performers achieve this thorough knowledge in the rituals’ practical performance in the first instance from learning with their fathers, or with other male elders, and through their constant exposure to the temple’s ritual procedures and setting.³⁰ This dimension of rituals is connected with aspects of technique, but also with contextual knowledge, and, as Schieffelin puts it, with the performer’s interactive and improvisational abilities (see Schieffelin 1998: 198; 1996: 62f. and 80).

Conclusion

What does this mean for the initial question, namely the implications of the 2006 legislation by the DMK government to “open up the temple priests’ profession to all communities”, and the—at first sight—surprising lack of concern among the hereditary Brahmin temple priests about the issue? Presler (1978) concluded that the priests’ lack of organized resistance against a similar legislation (issued in the early 1970s) was caused by the priests’ perpetual (economic) dependence on the state, by their lack of an efficient organization to enforce their interests, and by the internal social and sectarian division which prevents common action. However, in the present situation major factors seem rather to be the priests’ awareness of the differences in eligibility (*adhikāra*) that is conferred by one and the same initiation ritual, their experience that these legislations are likely to be abolished as soon as the political wind changes, and their awareness that the skills to perform public rituals convincingly is attained through practice, experience, and by being from childhood onwards constantly exposed to the ritual routine in the temple. It seems that it is mainly this factor that results in the priests’ own conviction that they cannot be easily dismissed. Since they have spent their lives engaged in these ritual activities the recent confrontation with the establishment of Āgama schools for “all communities”, which could be a threat to their inherited professional specialization, leaves them rather undazzled.³¹

29 The large number of ritual texts of the concerned Vaiṣṇava traditions suggests that the officiants of both temple and domestic ritual have never been unanimous regarding the performance of rituals. Evidently there always have been local traditions, personal styles, and even ritual “fashions”, handed down not only in written records, but also by different performative and oral traditions.

30 I pursue this issue further in Hüsken 2009b. There I argue that not only in the context of highly performative rituals, such as possession and healing rituals, but also in text-dominated, predominantly rule-governed ritual traditions such as this Vaiṣṇava tradition, the body and questions concerning the body-mind distinction are important issues.

31 However, slight irritations arose when the priest mentioned in n. 1 of this article was stylised as “new Ambedkar” in an article published in the Tamil magazine “Nakiran”, on 14.5.2008 (pp. 3–4).

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