

## PART ONE

The *Rāmāyaṇa* and Its Readers



# 1

## A New Perspective on the Royal Rāma Cult at Vijayanagara<sup>1</sup>

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Written by Sheldon Pollock (1993) in the wake of the Ayodhyā violence in the early 1990s, “Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India” remains one of his most influential and controversial articles. Covering an extremely wide range of sources, Pollock charts historical antecedents for the use of the epic in contemporary nationalist discourse and documents the late date of cultic worship of Rāma, in effect developing a set of materials for theorizing the early-second-millennium encounter between Indo-Islamic and Sanskritic cultures in South Asia. The article is widely read and has engendered a number of critical appraisals.<sup>2</sup>

“Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination” shaped my own research project and served as a powerful and challenging resource, an article I have read and reread for years. In this essay, I revisit the empirical terrain of “Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination” through a discussion of Pollock’s etiology of Rāma worship. After a brief summary of the article, I present new evidence for a possible alternative causal hypothesis based on the role of the Śrīvaiṣṇava religious order in developing a royal Rāma cult at Vijayanagara.

Pollock’s argument is as follows. The early second millennium (twelfth to fourteenth centuries) witnessed a sudden reevaluation of the Rāmāyaṇa narrative in the public discourse of kingdoms throughout the subcontinent. Whereas the Rāmāyaṇa was previously an important source for the conceptualization of divine kingship, now for the first time historical kings identified themselves with Rāma; kings actually *became* Rāma, as is demonstrable from temple remains, inscriptions, and historical narratives. Texts and ritual practices transformed the Rāmāyaṇa into a vehicle for rhetorical othering through the strategic deployment of imaginative resources in the narrative: just as the king was now identified with Rāma, so, too, demonized Others were identified with the epic antagonist, Rāvaṇa. According to Pollock, this appropriation of the Rāmāyaṇa narrative in political symbology was directed toward Muslims and the historically imminent threat of Indo-Islamic rule.

Pollock directly correlates the new centrality for the Rāmāyaṇa with the dates of Muslim invasions and the rapid expansion of the Delhi Sultanate. This is tantamount to a *causal* argument. By causal I mean an argument that posits an asymmetric relation between prior and subsequent events and ascribes motives to historical agents.<sup>3</sup> Pollock describes how the use of the epic in public discourse and the resulting royal patronage of Rāma temples occurred “in reaction to the transformative encounter with the polities of Central Asia . . . and the resultant new social and political order instituted by the establishment of the Sultanate” (1993: 277). The evidence for this conclusion is the concomitance—both spatial and temporal—between events: the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni in early-eleventh-century Punjab and eastern Rajasthan with the rise of Ayodhyā as a Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage center; ‘Alā al-Dīn’s subjugation of kings in what is now Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra with the construction of temples at Rāmtek by the Yādavas; and the appointment of governors of the Delhi Sultanate in the Deccan with the establishment of Vijayanagara with a Rāma temple at its core.

“Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination” addresses questions of significance for our understanding of communalism in India. Did colonialism construct communalism? Or do communal relations have a history antedating colonialism? Were there in fact protocommunal forms of identification prior to the advent of the British as seen in these narratives of othering? Some have interpreted Pollock’s article as suggesting the latter, insofar as this literature marks the expression of a Hindu identity developed in the face of the challenge posed by the presence of Muslim Others, whose ideology may have represented what Pollock calls an “unprecedented unassimilability” (1993: 264).<sup>4</sup> An alternative analysis may call into question the rigidity of this set of oppositions (presupposing an implicit civilization concept), as well as the isolation of particular institutions (e.g., Islam) over and against others in South Asia during the early second millennium.

Among the temple sites examined by Pollock, the Vijayanagara empire (1336–1565 CE) and its capital in the Deccan warrant special attention for several reasons. Vijayanagara was *the* central locus for Rāma worship on an imperial scale. Based on a variety of data, which I detail in what follows, it appears that members of the Śrīvaiṣṇava order were primary players in institutionalizing Rāma worship at Vijayanagara. If I am correct, this may suggest an alternative causal explanation to the concomitance argument. The question I would like to pose is: to what degree is what occurred at Vijayanagara in part the culmination of developments within this religious order, beginning with the treatment of the Rāma story in temples and esoteric literature as

early as the ninth century? While there is no explicit connection between the Vijayanagara temples and the epigraphic and poetic discourses of othering examined by Pollock, we do have access to a large number of Sanskrit and Maṇipravāḷa (mixed Tamil and Sanskrit) commentaries on the Rāmāyaṇa, from which we may infer the motives of Śrīvaiṣṇavas who appropriated the Rāma cult. This literature presents a theological engagement with the epic narrative totally unrelated to the political demonizing of Muslims.

In the section of “Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination” dealing with temples, Pollock first reviews the absence of evidence of Rāma worship before the twelfth century (excepting some notable tenth-century Coḷa bronzes).<sup>5</sup> Whereas scenes from the Rāmāyaṇa appear in temple wall friezes from at least the fifth century CE, the figure of Rāma was not the object of veneration, the actual installed icon, until the sudden emergence of a number of temples coinciding with the expansion of Muslim political power in South Asia. Pollock examines three sites in detail: Ayodhyā, Rāmtek, and Vijayanagara. But of these it is only at Vijayanagara that we find a Rāma temple as a state sanctuary and the performance of major royal rituals associated with Rāma; none of this is found in Ayodhyā or Rāmtek.

Although Ayodhyā became a Vaiṣṇava center from the eleventh century with the Gāhaḍavālas, it is not clear that a Rāma temple existed there during the period in question (twelfth through the fourteenth centuries). The development of the putative birthplace of Rāma into a place of pilgrimage need not entail a Rāma cult; there is no textual or epigraphic link between these temples and the figure of Rāma. And the complex of four dry masonry temples at Rāmtek is located more than five hundred kilometers from the Yādava capital, with no indication of its centrality to Yādava kingship.<sup>6</sup> Hemādri, the court’s highest religious authority, or *rājaguru*, of the Yādava rulers Mahādeva (1261–71) and Rāmacandra (1271–1312), who oversaw the construction of these temples at Rāmtek, was the first to describe Rāma liturgies in his compendium, the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*, but these appear to be minor domestic rituals, not royal ceremonies.<sup>7</sup>

Only during the Vijayanagara empire, founded in 1336, did the cult of Rāma become significant at the level of an imperial order. Built on a site associated in inscriptions from the eleventh century with the events of the Rāmāyaṇa, the city was oriented toward the private royal shrine, the Rāmacandra temple.<sup>8</sup> On a special platform at the center of the city during the nine-day Mahānavamī festival (today called Daśera), Vijayanagara rulers self-consciously identified themselves with Rāma in his triumphant return to Ayodhyā as described at the end of the epic.

Archaeologists and historians working on Vijayanagara have never previously considered the role of Śrīvaiṣṇavas in developing the Rāma cult. While the large temple at the heart of the royal center of the capital, the Rāmacandra temple, has received a great deal of attention, almost all of this scholarship focuses on the structure of the temple and its significance for Vijayanagara kingship, without any consideration of the character of Rāma worship therein.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I will show that the connection between Śrīvaiṣṇavas and Rāma worship was not an insignificant one but rather the result of a strategic partnership between Vijayanagara kings and members of the Śrīvaiṣṇava order.

Existing studies of Vijayanagara present a static, synchronic picture of Rāma worship that does not take into account the shift in royal dynasties from the Saṅgamas, with their Śaiva Kālāmukha affiliation, to the Śrīvaiṣṇava Sāḷuvas and Tuḷuvas.<sup>10</sup> This essay is therefore dedicated to two phases of Rāma worship: Rāma worship in Vijayanagara as a Śaiva kingdom and Rāma worship in Vijayanagara as a Vaiṣṇava kingdom.

In fact, it would be helpful to distinguish between three relevant blocks of time: (1) 1336 to the reign of Devarāya I (1406–22), a period of eighty to ninety years when no Rāma temple at Vijayanagara existed; (2) the reign of Devarāya I to the reign of Sāḷuva Narasiṃha (1486–91), a period of seventy to eighty years likely witnessing distinctively Śaiva performances of the Mahānavamī festival; and (3) the Sāḷuva, Tuḷuva, and Aravīḍu periods during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Vijayanagara rulers explicitly associated themselves with the Śrīvaiṣṇava order. I focus on the latter two periods, and especially on the last, since this is when the construction of the majority of Rāma temples occurred.

I support my argument with concrete evidence, as well as a diachronic delineation of periods of Vijayanagara rule. The evidence includes: (1) the dating of accounts describing the Mahānavamī, (2) documentable stages of accretion and augmentation to the Rāmacandra temple and the Mahānavamī platform, and (3) the Śrīvaiṣṇava affiliation of Rāma temples located along the so-called axial systems.

I conclude with a discussion of how this analysis establishes the viability of an explanation of the establishment of Rāma worship independent of any possible reaction to Muslim rule.

## Two Phases of Rāma Worship at Vijayanagara

### Rāma Worship in a Śaiva Kingdom

Vijayanagara was a Śaiva (likely Kālāmukha) kingdom during the first dynasty of the Saṅgamas. The ensign of the Vijayanagara rulers remained the local form of Śiva, Virūpākṣa, until it was replaced by the Aravīḍu king Veṅkaṭa II (1586–1614) with Veṅkaṭeśvara, long after the kings Sāluva Narasiṃha, Kṛṣṇadevarāya, and Acyutarāya had replaced Śaivism with Vaiṣṇavism—more specifically Śrīvaiṣṇavism—as the state religion.

The construction of the Rāmacandra temple at the heart of the city, probably during the reign of Devarāya I (1406–1422), marks the first significant step toward the conceptualization of Vijayanagara kingship around the figure of Rāma. It appears clear that Devarāya I and the other Saṅgamas retained the Śaiva form of Virūpākṣa as the dynastic deity for the empire, despite the new association with Rāma. The famous inscription of Devarāya I commemorating the Rāmacandra temple mentions Virūpākṣa's consort, the goddess Pampā: “Just as Vāṇī supported King Bhoja, Tripurāmbā King Vatsa, and Kālī King Vikramāditya, so Pampā now supports King Devarāya” (*śrī vāṇīva bhojarājam tripurāmbā vatsarājam iva kālīva vikramārkaṃ kalayati pampādyā devarāyanṛpam*).<sup>11</sup>

This central place for Rāma in a Śaiva kingdom may be congruent with a peculiarly Śaiva division of labor: while the Śaiva king orients himself soteriologically toward Śiva as the ideal devotee, he represents in his own person Rāma the ideal king on earth. The division is exemplified by the respective locations of the Rāmacandra and Virūpākṣa temples. The restricted space of the inner sanctum of the Rāmacandra temple indicates that only the king and his priests would have been present at ceremonies conducted therein.<sup>12</sup> The relationship between Śaivism and the nascent Rāma cult (corroborated by the presence of the early Rāmāyaṇa friezes in predominantly Śaiva temples) means that Śrīvaiṣṇavas likely appropriated and adapted existing forms of Rāma worship, perhaps in part to stake a claim on the religious affiliation of the empire by transforming a practice that had become critical to the self-understanding of Vijayanagara kingship. The early Rāma cult could be seen in this sense as the merging of an earlier conception of divine kingship with a new definition of royal sovereignty through endowments to temples and, in the case of Vijayanagara, increasingly at the expense of grants to Brahmin communities (*brahmadēyas*) (Appadurai 1981: 63–64).

The most important festival at Vijayanagara, the Mahānavamī, at some point came to be associated with the figure of Rāma. But what is unclear

is *when* exactly this occurred. This festival took place in the month of Śrāvaṇa during the crucial transition from “passive” to “active” periods in the ritual cycle.<sup>13</sup> Our knowledge of the martial and celebratory character of this festival derives almost wholly from the accounts of four foreign visitors: Nicolo Conti, ‘Abdur Razzāk, Domingo Paes, and Fernão Nuniz.<sup>14</sup> The first two, those of the Italian Conti and Persian ‘Abdur Razzāk, are incomplete; in fact, ‘Abdur Razzāk describes a festival spread over only three days, occurring at a different time during the year. The Portuguese visitors who provided more complete accounts visited Vijayanagara only in the sixteenth century, at the height of Śrīvaiṣṇava influence in Vijayanagara. It therefore remains entirely possible that the performance of the Mahānavamī was transformed from the time of the Śaiva Saṅgama dynasty to that of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Sāluva, Tuḷuva, and Araviḍu dynasties. We can note the divergences even in pre-Vijayanagara liturgical descriptions of the Mahānavamī from Śaiva sources to Vaiṣṇava sources, particularly in the addition of a tenth day, Vijayadaśamī, commemorating Rāma’s victory in a celebratory public display of power. While in the *Devibhāgavatapurāṇa*, the Mahānavamī ends after nine days, Hemādri’s *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* adds the tenth day that became so significant in Vijayanagara.<sup>15</sup>

Given the paucity of evidence corroborating the performance of this festival before the sixteenth century, the Rāmāyaṇa association of the Vijayadaśamī, which directly followed the Mahānavamī—the central public festival of the goddess—could itself have been a late development.<sup>16</sup> We know that the Mahānavamī Dibbā, the platform just described, was constructed in four stages, the last in the sixteenth century (again, the period of Śrīvaiṣṇava influence at Vijayanagara).

### **Rāma Worship in a Vaiṣṇava Kingdom**

With the end of the Saṅgama dynasty, a discernible ideological shift favored Śrīvaiṣṇavas and the pilgrimage center of Tirupati, first with Sāluva Narasiṃha (1486–93) and later with the Tuḷuva kings Kṛṣṇadevarāya (1509–30) and Acyutarāya (1530–42). In all periods of Vijayanagara history, kings patronized a wide variety of Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Jaina, and Islamic institutions; in this sense, the shift was not an absolute one. The close relationship between Vijayanagara royal agents and Śrīvaiṣṇavas is already evident in the Saṅgama period in the response to the sacking of Śrīraṅgam in the fourteenth century by armies of the Delhi Sultanate headed by Malik Kāfur, when the Vijayanagara general Gopanaṛya triumphantly reconsecrated the movable icon protected in Tirupati. As the work of Rangachari (1914–15, 1917), Viraraghavacharya



(1977), and Appadurai (1981) has shown, Vijayanagara royal agents played a key role in institutionalizing the divide between the southern (Teṅḡalai) and northern (Vaṭaḡalai) Śrīvaiṣṇava schools. While the emergence of Teṅḡalai institutionalism can be traced to the formation of the Śrīraṅganārāyaṇa Jīyar Ātinam in the fourteenth century at Śrīraṅgam through the partnership between Vijayanagara generals Gopanārya and Sāḷuva Kuṅṭa and Periya Kṛṣṇarāya Uttamanāmbi, Vaṭaḡalai institutionalism began after 1500 with Kaṇḍāḍai Rāmānuja Aiyāṅḡar.

But during the Sāḷuva and Tuḷuva dynasties, the same period in which monumental post-Rāmacandra Rāma temples were built, Śrīvaiṣṇavas (and Mādhvas) attained unprecedented influence at Vijayanagara. Almost all new temples were Śrīvaiṣṇava, often bearing the Teṅḡalai or Vaṭaḡalai insignia, and several were dedicated to Śrīvaiṣṇava deities: Raṅganātha, Venkaṭeśvara, and Varadarāja, along with images of the Āḷvārs, the saintly figures of the tradition. It was also at this time that the temple of Tirupati began to become an important locus of cultural power, beginning with the change in dynasty with Sāḷuva Narasiṃha.<sup>17</sup> The status of Tirupati continued to rise with the Tuḷuva emperors Kṛṣṇadevarāya and Acyutarāya. Anila Verghese points out that “out of the 1250-odd epigraphs published by the [Tirupati] Devasthānam there are fewer than 150 records of the pre-Vijayanagara period, while 59 records are of the Saṅgama period, 168 of the Sāḷuva period, 229 of the reign of Kṛṣṇadevarāya, 251 of Acyutadevarāya’s period, 176 of Sadāśiva’s reign and 192 of Venkaṭa II’s period” (1995: 70–71). Kṛṣṇadevarāya made Venkaṭeśvara his patron deity, visited Tirupati seven times, and composed the *Āmuktamālyada* in Telugu narrating the life of the Tamil saint Āṇḍāl, an important figure in the Śrīvaiṣṇava canon. Acyutarāya’s regard for Tirupati was so great that he had himself crowned emperor first in the presence of Venkaṭeśvara at his temple before doing so again at Kālahasti and Vijayanagara. With the Aravīḍus, Śrīvaiṣṇava influence reached its apogee, with the aforementioned replacement of the ensign of Virūpākṣa with that of Venkaṭeśvara.

The construction of Rāma temples at this time and the simultaneous shift in the religious affiliation of Vijayanagara kings were not merely accidental, concurrent events. My claim that the sudden growth of the royal Rāma cult is related to Śrīvaiṣṇava influence rather than the narratives of othering is based primarily on an understanding of the relationship between these two sets of circumstances.

Key to our understanding of this relationship is the identity of those who held the all-important position of Vijayanagara’s *rājaguru* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. During this crucial period several *rājagurus* belonged



Figure 1: Śrīvaiṣṇava insignia at the Kodaṇḍarāma temple. Photo by the author.

to the Śrīvaiṣṇava Tātācārya family, which descended from Śrīśailapūrṇa, Rāmānuja's maternal uncle who, according to hagiographic accounts, instructed him in the special meanings of the Rāmāyaṇa. These Tātācāryas remained expert redactors and exponents of the Rāmāyaṇa. The *Prapannāmṛta*, authored by Anantācārya (also a Tātācārya), recounts the story of two members of this family from Ettur converting the last Saṅgama king to Vaiṣṇavism through their recitation of the Rāmāyaṇa (Aiyangar 1919: 77–79). If scholars have at all paid attention to this remarkable account, they have done so in order to refute its historical veracity, due to the absence of any corroborating epigraphic evidence (e.g., Saletore 1940: 193–95). But the status of *Prapannāmṛta* as a historical document may be more indirect, and in fact, deeper; this account, whatever its accuracy may be, provides valuable insight into Śrīvaiṣṇava conceptions of the role of the Rāmāyaṇa narrative as a powerful means of promulgating theology and securing the support of Vijayanagara rulers. Influential Tātācāryas at Vijayanagara included Kṛṣṇadevarāya's *rājaguru* Veṅkaṭa Tātācārya and Rāmarāya's (1542–65) *rājaguru* Pañcamatabhañjanam Tātācārya.

Along with the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, members of the Mādhva order were critically involved in the intensified Vaiṣṇava influence at Vijayanagara, and they were likely instrumental in spreading the popularity of Hanumān. The height of Mādhva influence at Vijayanagara is observable in the close relationship between the Mādhva leader Vyāsātīrtha and two of Vijayanagara's most influential kings, Kṛṣṇadevarāya and Acyutarāya (though given the lack of supporting epigraphic evidence it appears that the claim of the *Vyāsayogicaritam* that Vyāsātīrtha was the actual *rājaguru* of Kṛṣṇadevarāya is hyperbolic) (Vergheese 1995: 8–9). Hanumān figures prominently in Mādhva theology, a fact that may be connected to the ubiquity of iconic representations of Hanumān in Vijayanagara; these are carved onto boulders around the city and are neither found in temples nor accompanied by inscriptions (Lutgendorf 2007: 66–73).

Among the Rāma temples of fifteenth and sixteenth century Vijayanagara, four in particular merit consideration: (1) the aforementioned Rāmacandra temple (early fifteenth century); (2) the Kodaṅḍarāma temple (early sixteenth century); (3) the Mālyavanta Raghunātha temple (sixteenth century); and (4)



Figure 2: Śrīvaiṣṇava insignia at the Rāmacandra temple. Photo by the author.

the Paṭṭābhirāma temple (sixteenth century, during the reign of Acutarāya).

While the fifteenth-century Rāmacandra temple almost certainly did not bear the Śrīvaiṣṇava insignia at its inception, I have observed it on pillars of the walls of the sixteenth-century addition to the temple built by Kṛṣṇadevaraya (see fig. 2).

Note the similarity between the insignia in a universally recognized Śrīvaiṣṇava temple (Kodaṇḍarāma) in figure 1 and the Rāmacandra temple itself in figure 2. The Rāmacandra temple was the first temple ornately built in the distinctive Tamil style. If the Rāmacandra temple was not explicitly Śrīvaiṣṇava at its inception, it became so within a mere quarter of a century. Later in the sixteenth century, Āravīḍi Veṅgaḷarāju (likely another name for the younger brother of Rāmarāya, Veṅkaṭādri), strengthened this affiliation by installing icons of the Āḷvārs, as recorded on an undated inscription on the west wall of the north gateway.<sup>18</sup>

What are we to make of this set of facts? Such explicit markers indicate that at some point in time Śrīvaiṣṇavas likely took control of the Rāmacandra temple, which earlier may not have been closely affiliated with a particular order or may even have had a Śaiva orientation given the centrality of Virūpākṣa and the centrality of the goddess to the Mahānavamī festival during the Saṅgama period. This fact in and of itself may have far-reaching implications for our understanding of Rāma worship at Vijayanagara. All of the archaeological research on Rāma worship at Vijayanagara, including Pollock's sources, rests on the Rāmacandra temple alone (ignoring the other temples examined below). That this monumental temple eventually became a Śrīvaiṣṇava temple (corroborated by the Śrīvaiṣṇava insignia in fig. 2) dramatically demonstrates the close association between Śrīvaiṣṇavas and the Rāma cult in what I have called the second phase.

In contrast to the Rāmacandra temple, other Rāma temples at Vijayanagara have never been carefully studied. All bear either Teṅgaḷai or Vaṭagaḷai Śrīvaiṣṇava insignia, and many of them are built on sites bearing associations with events from the Rāmāyaṇa. The sixteenth-century Kodaṇḍarāma temple is a Vaṭagaḷai temple with standing images of Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa carved from a boulder. The temple, which continues to be used today, is said to be the site for the coronation of the monkey king Sugrīva, who secured his throne with the aid of Rāma. The Mālyavanta Raghunātha temple, believed to be situated on the mountain where Rāma stayed before the campaign for Laṅkā, also contains a core built around a large boulder dating to the Saṅgama period, but the temple structure itself is from the sixteenth century. In this large complex, images of the Āḷvārs, Rāmānuja, and the Teṅgaḷai insignia

appear in several places on the pillars. The Paṭṭābhirāma temple, actually the largest extant Rāma temple in the city, was dedicated by Acyutarāya according to an inscription dated 1539!<sup>19</sup>

In total there are eight extant Rāma temples at Vijayanagara. They appear to have been endowed by a variety of groups, including royal agents, subordinate rulers, private citizens, and merchant guilds, indicating that the cult of Rāma had a life of its own in addition to its significance for the ideology of kingship.

One feature of these newly built temples—their location—may provide an especially telling sign of their importance to Vijayanagara kings. Fritz, Michell, and Rao have suggested that the capital was organized into axial systems and circumambulatory routes, establishing “the importance of the Rāmacandra Temple as the nucleus of the royal center,” in effect, transforming the geography of the city itself into an emblem of the identification between king and god (1984: 149). The association between some of the surrounding points—the Tuṅgabhadra river, and the Mālyavanta hill—and Rāma would have been strengthened in the sixteenth century through the construction of these Śrīvaiṣṇava Rāma temples, heightening the mythic associations of these sites dating to pre-Vijayanagara times. Śrīvaiṣṇavas, therefore, would have been participants in the construction of the landscape of the Vijayanagara capital into a virtual theophany of Rāma. The mapping of the identification of Rāma and the Vijayanagara king with the layout of the city was not, therefore, a mere synchronic fact of the Vijayanagara world.

We must be wary of any effort to treat Rāma worship wholly from the perspective of kingship without consideration of the agency of the actual participants in these practices, the composers and redactors of texts, the liturgists, those responsible for establishing and worshipping Rāma icons. This neglect seems to presuppose some version of legitimation theory—naturalizing relationships of domination and subordination through the use of mystifying symbols and practices, as is apparent in the reliance of Fritz, Michell, and Rao on Kulke’s (1980) sequential model for royal empowerment. In his recent book, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, Pollock extends an extremely nuanced critique of legitimation theory.<sup>20</sup> Legitimation theory does not explain why these signifying practices perdure, nor does it provide a plausible account for the way real historical agents think and act. We need to focus on the complex partnership between royal and religious agents, the role of the religious orders as a constitutive component of imperium.

## Conclusion

So what are the implications of all of this for Pollock's causal argument, namely, that the new centrality of Rāma and the Rāma story in the South Asian political imagination is the result of their use for demonizing Muslim Others? If Śrīvaiṣṇavas were, in fact, primary players in establishing the royal Rāma cult at Vijayanagara, perhaps the construction of these new temples was actually related to earlier developments within this religious order.

In South India, the institutional locus for the reception of the Rāmāyaṇa became the temple, a process that began in the ninth century with Kulacekarāḷvār's imaginative association of elements from the Rāma narrative with the iconography of Govindarāja at Cidambaram in the *Perumāḷ Tirumōḷi*.<sup>21</sup> Śrīvaiṣṇavas formulated core theological concepts through the use of stories from the Rāmāyaṇa as parables in Maṇipravāḷa, an oral linguistic register oriented toward the Śrīvaiṣṇava temple.

None of these Maṇipravāḷa texts nor the numerous full-length Sanskrit commentaries on the Rāmāyaṇa by Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars (including at least eight produced in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Vijayanagara) speak of Muslims; they do, however, engage in a sophisticated theological reading of the epic, involving an identification of Rāma with Śrīvaiṣṇava conceptions of the godhead, a generic characterization of the epic as a remembered work of tradition (*smṛiti*), and the use of specific incidents as exemplars of the devotional concept of surrender (*prapatti*). Śrīvaiṣṇavas, more than any other religious order in the South, engaged in a complex hermeneutic project that sought to transform the Rāmāyaṇa into a soteriological work.

To illustrate the character of these approaches to the Rāmāyaṇa, we can turn to the general introduction to the most influential Śrīvaiṣṇava commentary on the Rāmāyaṇa, that of Govindarāja (produced in the Ahobila Maṭha at almost the exact same time in the sixteenth century when the Rāma temples were being constructed). Govindarāja describes the purpose of Viṣṇu's birth as Rāma as an effort to implement Vedic practice, now identified with devotional worship and facilitated by the divine presence in the world:

The lord of Śrī, all his desires fulfilled, endowed with all auspicious qualities, the overlord, sat on his throne with his wives in the divine world of Vaikuṅṭha. Those who were eternally released (*nityamuktas*) always served his lotus feet, but he observed the ignorant beings who also deserved to serve his feet but did not attain him, stuck as they were to primeval matter at the time of dissolution like drops of gold stuck to beeswax. His mind filled with compassion, he gave them senses and bodies so that they could reach him.



But as if diverted by the current of the river into the ocean with rafts meant for crossing the river, they became attached through their bodies to other objects. And even when he promulgated his own command in the form of the Veda so that they could discriminate between the real and the unreal, they did not respect it because of their incomprehension, false understanding, and misinterpretation. Like a king desiring to approach and discipline his subjects transgressing his command, the lord decided to descend in the fourfold form of Rāma, etc., to teach living beings through his own conduct. In the meantime Brahmā and all the gods requested him to take birth. And so, in order to fulfill the desire of his devotee, Daśaratha, as well, he descended in four parts.<sup>22</sup>

For intellectuals such as Govindarāja, Rāma was not merely the ideal king but the all-powerful, omniscient lord on earth as ensouler of the universe, qualified by the characteristics of transcendence (*paratva*) and accessibility (*saulabhya*).

If we factor in the trajectory of Śrīvaiṣṇava engagement with the Rāmāyaṇa, it appears that the Rāma cult involved the confluence of a number of complementary circumstances and agendas, including this heightened conception of the divinity of Rāma and the integration of the Rāmāyaṇa story into Śrīvaiṣṇava temples, the proximity to imperial power of Śrīvaiṣṇavas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the shift toward temple donation as the primary form of royal-gift giving in the post-Coḷa era, the identification of historical kings with Rāma, and the pre-Vijayanagara mythic associations of the site.

Establishing a connection between Śrīvaiṣṇava devotionalism and the Rāma temples at Vijayanagara allows us to look at the political use of the epic in a new light. We can observe the marked difference between the thematics of these commentaries and the inscriptions and historical narratives demonizing Muslims by examining the treatment of what for Śrīvaiṣṇavas is the most politically and theologically charged event in the entire Rāmāyaṇa: the surrender of Rāvaṇa's brother, Vibhīṣaṇa, to Rāma. Rāma's response to the sudden appearance of Vibhīṣaṇa represents one of his more gracious acts in the epic. After telling the skeptical monkeys that one should never abandon someone who approaches in friendship, even if they may have faults, he asks Sugrīva to bring forward whoever is asking for protection, whether he be Vibhīṣaṇa or Rāvaṇa himself (*yadi vā rāvaṇaḥ svayam*) (Rām. 6.18.36). Here, in the Śrīvaiṣṇavas' favorite Rāmāyaṇa episode, the politics of the narrative are diametrically opposed to that found in the narratives of conquest and resistance: the demons—Vibhīṣaṇa (and even Rāvaṇa)—are, according to the

Śrīvaiṣṇava reading, the recipients of theological grace rather than the object of othering.

Let us review the evidence for the alternative etiology of the Rāma cult. Is there a link between the construction of Rāma temples at Vijayanagara and the demonizing of Muslims evident in the *Pr̥thvīrājaviṣaya* corpus or the various inscriptions examined by Pollock? While Pollock has carefully analyzed the mythopoetics of othering in these sources, none of the epigraphic evidence related to the Rāma temples at Vijayanagara speaks of this dynamic nor even mentions Muslims. The two inscriptions examined by Pollock are both from the Northwest: the Dabhoi inscription of 1253 in Gujarat and the praise poem (*praśasti*) of the Cāhamāna king Pr̥thvirāja II of 1168; there does not appear to be any explicit connection between these and Vijayanagara. We do have a set of events occurring in close succession—Muslim invasions and the construction of Rāma temples from the twelfth century—but Pollock himself has elsewhere cited the dictum “concomitance is not causality” (Pollock 2006: 72).

Positing an implicit reaction to the expansion of the Sultanate in the Deccan is also problematic in light of recent study of the “Islamicization” of Hindu culture at Vijayanagara, which casts doubt on nationalist characterizations of the Vijayanagara state’s resistance to Islamic rule. Not only did Vijayanagara kings in fact adopt Islamicizing courtly dress, but from the earliest inscriptions announcing the founding of the empire they called themselves sultans (with the epithet “sultan among Indian kings,” *hindurāyasuratrāṇa*). Examples of elite mobility between northern and southern Deccan also vitiate against such a perspective. These include the marriage of the Bahmani sultan Firoz Shah to the daughter of Devarāya I (who commissioned the construction of the Rāmacandra temple) at the Vijayanagara capital in 1407, the recruitment of ten thousand Turkish cavalymen into Vijayanagara by Devarāya II, and the service under both a Sultanate and Vijayanagara by two generals whose biographies were closely intertwined: the future king Rāmarāya (at Golkonda and Vijayanagara) and ‘Ain al-Mulk Gīlāni (at Bijapur and Vijayanagara).<sup>23</sup> As an explanatory approach, it is more economical to argue from extant evidence, and there does appear to be ample evidence linking the construction of Rāma temples at Vijayanagara to the broader theological use of the epic by Śrīvaiṣṇavas.



## Abbreviations

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <i>CSSH</i>   | <i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i>                |
| <i>EI</i>     | <i>Epigraphia Indica</i>   |
| <i>HR</i>     | <i>History of Religions</i>                                      |
| <i>IJHS</i>   | <i>International Journal of Hindu Studies</i>                    |
| <i>JAS</i>    | <i>Journal of Asian Studies</i>                                  |
| <i>JBBRAS</i> | <i>Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society</i> |
| <i>QJMS</i>   | <i>Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society</i>                   |
| <i>Rām</i>    | <i>Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki</i>                                       |
| <i>SA</i>     | <i>South Asia</i>  |
| <i>SII</i>    | <i>South Indian Inscriptions</i>                                 |
| <i>VPR</i>    | <i>Vijayanagara: Progress of Research</i>                        |

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to John Fritz, George Michell, Jack Hawley, and Rajam Raghunathan for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Most notable are Chattopadhyaya 1998; Ludden 1994; and Lutgendorf 1994.

<sup>3</sup> On asymmetric causal relations, see Lewis 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of such an interpretation include Talbot 1995; and Lorenzen 1999.

<sup>5</sup> These bronzes, which Barrett (1965) and Nagaswamy (1980) have examined, are almost identical in appearance, with bow-bearing Rāma (Kodaṇḍa Rāma) accompanied to the right and left by Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā.

<sup>6</sup> There are strong mythic associations for Rāmtek; it is believed to be both the place where Rāma killed the Śūdra ascetic Śambūka and the Rāmagiri where the semidivine *yakṣa* in the *Meghadūta* is exiled (Cousins 1897: 7ff.). Besides the Rāma temple, the site includes the surrounding Ghaṭeśvara, Śuddheśvara, Kedāra, and Āñjaneya (Hanumān) temples (Verma 1973). Rāmacandra dedicated these temples in a stone inscription datable to the last quarter of the thirteenth century. *EI* 25, 7–20.

<sup>7</sup> Although Hemādri quotes from a Pāñcarātra source, the *Agastyasaṃhita*, it seems (despite misconceptions among scholars, including Bakker [1986]) that this text is likely apocryphal. The *Agastyasaṃhita* describing Rāma rituals is not among the Pāñcarātra manuscripts H. Daniel Smith collected for his descriptive catalog nearly thirty years ago; instead, he includes an altogether different text bearing the same title (Bharati 1978). This rival version of the *Agastyasaṃhita* was probably compiled subsequent to Hemādri's citation. We can therefore say that, in effect, Hemādri invented the Rāma liturgies. *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* describes three separate festivals relevant for our discussion: the Rāmanavamī, the Rāghavadvādaśivrata, and the Mahānavamī. Rāmanavamī, the earliest of the three in the calendar during the month of Caitra, marks the birth of Rāma. Occurring during the ritually inactive

period of the spring, it could not have been a large-scale royal ceremony; Hemādri's description indicates instead a domestic service. Similar is his description of the Rāghavadvādaśīvrata, a fast occurring on the twelfth day of the lunar fortnight of the month of Jyeṣṭha. The martial account of the Mahānavamī and Vijayadaśamī is an important precedent for the Vijayanagara royal festivals, but in the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* they are not explicitly connected to the Rāmāyaṇa.

<sup>8</sup> The geomythic associations of the Vijayanagara site are all from the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, including Lake Pampā (also the name for the consort of Virūpākṣa, the city's Śaiva tutelary deity), the Mālyavanta hill, the Ṛṣyamūka hill, and the Añjanādri mountain, several of which later became the locations of important Rāma temples. While a few pre-Vijayanagara inscriptions refer to these associations from the eleventh century, there is no evidence of preexisting Rāma worship barring an isolated twelfth- or thirteenth-century Hoysala *kodaṇḍa* temple (located in Chikmaṅglūr District, site 91. Padigar 1983: 52).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Dallapiccola et al. 1991; and Fritz, Michell, and Rao 1984.

<sup>10</sup> For a brief discussion of the Kālāmukhas, see the essay by Cox in this volume.

<sup>11</sup> *SII* 9, pt. 2, no. 573.

<sup>12</sup> According to Fritz, Michell, and Rao, “[T]he limited space within the principal shrine suggests a restricted use (for the king, his priests, and perhaps, also his ministers and high officials)” (1984: 149). In addition to the Rāmacandra temple, there are records of grants by Devarāya II (1423–46) to a few other Rāma temples, including the Rāma temple in the Advaita Raghūttama Maṭha at Gokaṛṇa.

<sup>13</sup> “At Vijayanagara periods of rest alternated with periods of movement. For part of each year, the king, court, and army resided at the capital; the other part of the year was set aside for pilgrimage and war” (ibid., 147). See also Inden 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Sewell provides full translations of the accounts of Paes and Nuniz (1962: 228–376).

<sup>15</sup> *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* (*vrata khaṇḍa*, vol. 1, 900–920, 970–73); *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa*, 3.26–27. Also consider the Jaina transformation of the Navarātra under the Caulukya king Kumārapāla of Gujarat (1143–74), who prohibited the sacrificial animal offering (*bali-dāna*) following his conversion from Śaivism to Jainism (Sanderson 2009: 245–46).

<sup>16</sup> The pre-Vijayanagara *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa* does recount the performance of the Mahānavamī by Rāma, but there is no reference in it to a cultic worship of Rāma himself.

<sup>17</sup> Sāluva Narasiṃha had been a patron of Tirupati even before becoming king with endowments through his chosen intermediary, the influential Kaṇḍāḍai Rāmānuja Aiyaṅgār. Through his affiliation with the Vijayanagara king, this Kaṇḍāḍai Rāmānuja Aiyaṅgār was able to take charge of a Rāmānuja Kūṭa established for the benefit of non-Brahmin Śrīvaiṣṇavas and became the guardian of the gold treasury at Tirupati (Appadurai 1981: 89–97).

<sup>18</sup> *VPR*, no. 67.

<sup>19</sup> *SII* 9, pt. 2, no. 595.

<sup>20</sup> Pollock 2006: 511–24. Pollock extends Anthony Giddens’s global critique of functionalism to a critique of legitimation theory (Giddens 1981).

<sup>21</sup> *Perumāḷ Tirumōḷi* 10.1–10.

<sup>22</sup> *śrīyaḥ patir avāptasamastakāmaḥ samastakalyāṇaguṇātmakeḥ sarveśvaraḥ*  
 “*vaikuṇṭhe tu pare loka śrīyā sārddham jagatpatiḥ/ āste viṣṇur acintyātmā bhaktair*  
*bhāgavataiḥ saha//” ity uktarītyā śrīvaikuṇṭhākhye dīvyaloke śrīmahāmaṇimaṇḍape*  
*śrībhūminīlābhīḥ saha ratnasīṃhāsanam adhyāsīno nityair muktaiś ca nirantara-*  
*paricaryamāṇacaraṇanalino pi tadvad eva svacaraṇayugalaparicaraṇārḥhān*  
*api taddhīnān pralaye prakṛtivilīnān madhūcchiṣṭamagnahekanasadrkṣān*  
*kṣīṇajñānān jīvān avalokya “evam saṃsṛticakrasṭhe bhrāmyamāṇe svakarmabhiḥ/*  
*jīve duḥkhākule viṣṇoḥ kṛpā kāpy upajāyate//” ity uktarītyā dayamānamanāḥ “vicitrā*  
*dehasampattir īśvarāya niveditum/ pūrvam eva kṛtā brahman hastapādādīsaṃyutā//”*  
*ity uktaprakāreṇa mahadādīsaṃsṛṣṭikrameṇa teṣāṃ svacaraṇakamalasamāśrayaṇocit-*  
*āni karaṇakalevarāṇi dattvā nadītaraṇāya dattaiḥ plavair nadīrayānusāreṇa sāgaram*  
*avaḡāhamāneṣu iva teṣu tair viṣayāntarapravaneṣu teṣāṃ sadasadvivecanāya “śāsanāc*  
*chāstram” ity uktarītyā svaśāsanarūpaṃ vedākhyam śāstram pravartyāpi tasmīn*  
*apratipattivipratipattyanyathāpratipattibhis tair anādṛte svaśāsanātilaṅghinaṃ*  
*janapadaṃ svayam eva sādhayitum abhiyiyāsur iva vasudhādhipatiḥ svācāramukhena*  
*tān śikṣayitum rāmādirūpeṇa caturdhāvatitṛṣur antarāmaragaṇaiḥ sadruhiṇair*  
*abhyarthitaiḥ svārādhakasya daśarathasya manoratham api pūrayitum*  
*caturdhāvatatāra (Rām., general intro).*

<sup>23</sup> Wagoner (1996, 2000) has presented a persuasive argument for the Islamicization (distinguished from the religious category of Islamization) of Vijayanagara based on material, epigraphic, and narrative sources. On elite mobility in the Deccan, see Eaton 2005; and Wagoner 1999.

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