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Source: *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1/3 (Jan., 2004), pp. 137-156

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20106886>

Accessed: 12-05-2016 18:45 UTC

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A Muslim Princess in the Temples of Viṣṇu

Richard H. Davis

I begin this essay with a story.¹ It tells of the daughter of the Muslim Sulṭān of Delhi who falls in love with an icon of the Hindu god Viṣṇu and follows it all the way to southern India, where she dies and gains posthumous beatitude within the Hindu temple. The tale is preserved, in slightly differing versions, in several pre-British South Indian Vaiṣṇava texts and primarily relates to two major Śrīvaiṣṇava temples, the temple of Viṣṇu Raḍḡanātha at Srirangam near Trichi and the Nārāyaṇasvāmi temple at Melkote in Karnataka.² The Delhi princess also turns up in other South Indian temples, as we will see. Viewing the Sulṭān's daughter in her medieval setting, I would like to show how this narrative offers reflections on the problematic relations of contending Hindu and Muslim elites, the incorporative possibilities of *bhakti*, and the space accorded to Islam within the established Hindu temples of late medieval South India.

THE TULUKKA NĀCCİYĀR'S STORY

In the Srirangam temple chronicles, the *Kōyil Oḷuku*, the story opens during the fourteenth-century invasion of South India by the forces of the Delhi Sultanate. The Turkic army plunders the Srirangam treasury and takes away among the booty the main processional idol of the temple, known as Aḷakiyamaṇavāḷa Perumāḷ, Viṣṇu as the "Handsome Bridegroom." As the troops head back north, a woman from a nearby village disguises herself and follows their camp. She has taken a vow never to eat before the image is fed, so she has a personal stake in the fate of the icon. Back in Delhi, the Sulṭān locks up all the looted idols in his palace storeroom. The village woman observes what has happened to Handsome Bridegroom and returns to Srirangam to tell the temple authorities.

The elders of Srirangam close up the temple, suspend all festivals, and travel

International Journal of Hindu Studies 8, 1–3 (2004): 137–56

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to Delhi to seek their divine image. Meanwhile the Sultān's daughter discovers the handsome image of Viṣṇu lying in the storeroom and takes it to her room as a plaything. While the temple elders negotiate with the Sultān, the village woman gains entry to the women's quarters and discovers that Viṣṇu is "playing with the princess during the day in the form of an icon, and at night in his full splendor as a human incarnation" (Hari Rao 1961: 26). The chronicles are too discrete to describe just what they do at night.

The temple singers and dancers of Srirangam put on a performance for the Sultān and so please him that he offers them a treasure. Of course they ask for their icon, and the king orders it brought from the storeroom. It is not there. The visitors inform him that it is now kept in the princess' bedroom. The Sultān will not allow them to enter the harem and instead challenges them: "You yourselves will have to call back your god." The Sultān is putting to the test the Hindu claim that their idols are in fact living divinities. The temple reciter sings an invocation of Viṣṇu. From the harem Handsome Bridegroom hears the call, puts the princess to sleep, and comes out to rejoin his devotees. The Sultān is so amazed that he allows the Vaiṣṇavas to depart with their treasured icon.

The Melkote version related in the *Prapannāmṛta* likewise features a confrontation in the Sultān's court. Here it is Rāmānuja, founder of the Nārāyaṇa-svāmi temple, who goes to Delhi in search of the processional image known as Rāmapriya. The Sultān shows Rāmānuja his treasure room filled with looted icons, but Rāmapriya is not among them. The Sultān taunts Rāmānuja, "If this Viṣṇu Rāmapriya is your god, and you have summoned him, why has he not come back to you?" (Ramananarayanacarya 1966: 96). That night Viṣṇu appears to Rāmānuja in a dream and informs the despondent ascetic that he is staying in the bed-chamber of the princess. The next morning the Sultān escorts Rāmānuja into the women's quarters, and there indeed stands Rāmapriya, dressed in yellow with musk on its forehead and adorned with beautiful jewelry. The princess has lavished her royal attention on the statue and unknowingly mimicked the services of Hindu image worship. Overcome with love, Rāmānuja exclaims, "Beloved Son," and the image jumps into his lap. They embrace. The Sultān is so impressed with the miraculous leap of the idol that he immediately gives it to Rāmānuja.

The next morning, in the *Kōyil Oḷuku* recounting, the princess learns that the object of her affections has been taken away. She is heartbroken. Her father observes her state and decides to send troops to capture the Vaiṣṇavas. The princess accompanies them. The Srirangam temple servants learn that they are being pursued and manage to elude the troops. They send the Handsome Bridegroom image, along with three Brāhmaṇ servants, into hiding in the hills around Tirupati. Finally the princess reaches Srirangam, but when she finds the

gates locked and her beloved Handsome Bridegroom absent, she dies from the acute pain of separation.

The Melkote version allows the princess a more congenial end. Here she actually accompanies the Vaiṣṇavas on their journey south. The Sultān honors the icon and Rāmānuja and permits his daughter and son to accompany the Vaiṣṇavas on their journey back to Melkote. Along the way, the Beloved Son icon mysteriously appears in the palanquin of the princess, and then the princess is seen no more. She has become one with Viṣṇu, explains the text, and the entire party is astonished by her devotional apotheosis. When the Vaiṣṇavas reach Melkote and consecrate the processional image, Rāmānuja decides that an image should be made of the Sultān's daughter so she could continue to worship at the god's feet. He sends the brother back to Delhi to inform the Sultān, who is saddened but also amazed by the news of his daughter's devotional demise.

Temple authorities at both Srirangam and Melkote established shrines in the temple precincts to commemorate the devotion of the princess from Delhi. In Srirangam, the shrine of the Tulukka Nācciyār ("Turkic queen") occupies one of the inner enclosures of the temple complex. According to local tradition, the Sultān himself was supposed to have donated a large land-grant of fifty-seven villages to maintain the shrine (Somasundaram Pillai 1965: 34). There is no image of the princess but rather a painting depicting her modestly covered with a shawl. A divan stands before the painting. When the portable image of Handsome Bridegroom visits the shrine, he is treated to a Muslim-inflected form of *pūjā*, much as he might have been during his sojourn with the princess in Delhi. Viṣṇu wears a *luḍgī*, and he is served the *roṭī*, *capātī*, cold milk, and green gram *dāl* typical of a North Indian breakfast. His betel leaf is smeared on the front side of the leaf, in the manner typical of local Muslims.³

In Melkote the shrine of the Turkic princess was located in a less central position. In the early nineteenth century the British official Francis Buchanan observed it during his survey of Tīpū Sultān's former territories:

She [Tulukka Nācciyār] no sooner came near the idol than she disappeared, and is supposed to have been taken into its immediate substance; which, in this country, is a common way of the gods disposing of their favourites. A monument was built for the princess; but as she was a *Turc*, it would have been improper to place this building within the walls of the holy place; it has therefore been erected at the foot of the hill, under the most abrupt part of the rock (1807, 2: 71; emphasis in original).

The shrine, such as it is, is some distance from the main sanctum. However, the Nācciyār also resides much closer to her lover, in the form of a small metal

image that is located at the feet of the main temple icons.⁴

The love of the princess from Delhi for Viṣṇu is also remembered around Melkote in folk songs. According to these retellings, Viṣṇu in the form of Beloved Son heard of the princess' great beauty and traveled to Delhi to see for himself. Disguising himself as a mendicant, he went to her palace and fell in love with her (named Varanandi in the folk versions) and she with him. Beloved Son would pose as a beggar during the day, while at night he would revert to his real form to enjoy the princess' company. Finally, Beloved Son returned to Melkote with his lover and invited his relatives—the other main Hindu deities at Tirupati, Srirangapattana, Nanjangud, and Channagiri—to attend the wedding ceremonies. They refused, saying he had brought disgrace to the family. Not dissuaded, Beloved Son celebrated his marriage to the Tulukka Nācciyār anyway, and great numbers of his devotees attended the festivities.⁵ Similar folk narratives are maintained at Tirupati.

Though these are the best-known South Indian incarnations of the princess from Delhi, she appears in the traditions of other temples as well. Our heroine turns up again in the Cittirai festival of Madurai, the great double festival involving both the Śaiva temple of Śiva Sundarēśvara and the goddess Mīṇākṣī in the center of the city and the Viṣṇu Aḷakar temple twelve miles north of town. According to Dennis Hudson (1977), the Cittirai festival took on its current shape primarily during the time of Tirumalai Nāyakkar, ruler of Madurai in the seventeenth century. During the celebrations Viṣṇu Aḷakar (the “beautiful one”) in his processional form journeys from his own temple to attend the marriage of Śiva to his sister Mīṇākṣī. Unfortunately he has been misinformed about the time of the wedding, and just as he is about to cross the Vaikai River into town he learns that the ceremony has already taken place. Angrily he turns around, heads upriver to the nearby hamlet of Vandiyur, and there spends the night in the local Viṣṇu temple known as Vīrarāghava Perumāḷ. During the night he enjoys the company of his consort, the Tulukka Nācciyār, before starting back towards his own home temple. At the Vīrarāghava Perumāḷ temple there is no permanent shrine of the princess or any physical sign of her presence at all.

The story of the princess from Delhi rests upon some real historical events. In the early part of the fourteenth century, the Delhi Sultanate ruler ‘Alā al-Dīn Khaljī attempted to bring the entire subcontinent under Delhi's control, and his armies led by Malik Khān invaded southern India in 1310. The Sultanate forces made camp in Kannanu, near Srirangam, and they evidently plundered the Rāḍganātha temple. Certain eminent icons from Srirangam did go into hiding or exile, and it is likely that the main processional deity of the temple did take refuge in the hills of Tirupati during the disruptions of the fourteenth century. For several decades Muslim regimes controlled the main centers of southern

India, but in the latter part of the fourteenth century the expanding Vijayanagara Empire based in upland Karnataka extended its dominion over Tamilnad. An inscription on the inner courtyard wall in Raḍganātha temple, dated 1371, records how one Gopaṇa brought an image of Raḍganātha from Tirupati back to Srirangam and had it reconsecrated in the temple sanctum (Hultzsch 1900–1901).⁶ Other details in the Tulukka Nācciyār's story may seem historically implausible to us, but it is clear from her multiple appearances in the traditions of major South Indian Vaiṣṇava temples that the apocryphal story touched on themes and concerns important to devout Vaiṣṇava audiences in South India following the Turkic invasions of the fourteenth century.⁷

TWO THEMES

I was initially interested in the story of the Tulukka Nācciyār because it concerns a religious image that is looted and returned. I had been working for several years on biographies of images that have been dislocated and relocated in various ways, and in this story I particularly admired the image's own initiative in making his way back to Srirangam. But this is not just the tale of the image. The *Kōyil Oluku* ends its account with the Handsome Bridegroom image reinstalled on his throne at Srirangam distributing titles and honors to all who have served him during his exile: the village woman who followed him to Delhi, the temple musicians who charmed the Sulṭān, the old Brāhmaṇ who watched over the image while it was a fugitive in the Tirupati hills, and the deceased princess from Delhi. I take this final scene as the interpretive key. The narrative centers on the Viṣṇu image, but its primary purpose is to celebrate a series of devotional relationships between human devotees and the iconic god. What makes this scene striking is that a Muslim princess is included in the select group of Vaiṣṇava devotees.

In one sense, the story of the Tulukka Nācciyār and her Handsome Bridegroom fits neatly into the thematic frame of Indian devotional hagiography. Divine seduction and human infatuation with the deity considered as a particularly beguiling and often capricious person is one of the most common tropes of "emotional *bhakti*." Male devotional poets like the Tamil Vaiṣṇava saints Nammālvār and Tirumaḍkai Ālvār choose oftentimes to sing in a female voice to express their feelings of passionate affection for their god. And for female saints, love, marriage, and final union with the deity by merging with his iconic form is a spiritual path frequently traveled (Ramanujan 1982). The best-known South Indian female devotee of Viṣṇu, Āṇṭāl, fell adamantly in love with

Raḍganātha of Srirangam as a young girl and refused all human suitors. Her story is related in numerous hagiographical accounts. As her father became anxious about her marriage prospects, the story goes, Viṣṇu appeared to him in a dream and informed him that he would accept Āṇṭāl as his bride at Srirangam. Her father dressed Āṇṭāl in wedding clothes and escorted her from Villiputtur to Srirangam, where she entered the sanctum, climbed up onto the altar, grasped the feet of the icon, and disappeared into the image of Viṣṇu. Āṇṭāl's shrine in the fifth enclosure of the Raḍganātha temple is now one of the most popular in the temple complex.

When the infant Āṇṭāl babbled, the story goes, she intoned the names of Viṣṇu. Just as Āṇṭāl loves Raḍganātha from a tender age, so the princess in Delhi falls in love as soon as she sees the image of Viṣṇu. The Tulukka Nācciyār tradition is not explicitly a story of conversion. There are no direct references to Islam as a distinct religious formation, and the princess is not shown abandoning any other form of worship or love. Unlike Āṇṭāl, the Tulukka Nācciyār need not reject any human suitors to pursue her passion for god. Nevertheless, while Āṇṭāl's innocent infatuation with Viṣṇu Raḍganātha finds successful consummation, Viṣṇu's seduction of the princess leads to more ambiguous results. There the heroine's desperate attempt to recapture her wayward lover ends with her anguished demise outside the locked gates of the temple, but she achieves in death—through Viṣṇu's regular visits to her shrine within the temple precincts—the continuing recognition and loving attention she sought from him in life.

Āṇṭāl's preference for Viṣṇu Raḍganātha "over all the other Viṣṇus of India" is no accident, nor is it a coincidence that the appellation of Raḍganātha's portable icon is "Handsome Bridegroom." Of all South Indian image-incarnations, Viṣṇu Raḍganātha of Srirangam was a particularly enchanting lover. In addition to Āṇṭāl, the daughters of two rulers, Cōḷa and Cēra princesses, also married Viṣṇu at Srirangam, and both have shrines within the vicinity. The Cēra princess resides in the second enclosure of the Raḍganātha temple, right next to the Tulukka Nācciyār, while the Cōḷa princess Lakṣmī occupies her own shrine on the other side of the Kāvērī River, at the old site of Uraiyyur (now in Trichi), the ancient Cōḷa capital.⁸ And Raḍganātha does not only recline and wait; he actively goes out from the temple, in the form of his processional icon, and pursues his affairs. As Paul Younger (1982: 633–34) shows, much of the Paḍkūṇi festival, the preeminent calendrical celebration of the temple, revolves around Viṣṇu's pursuit of romance, and one of the visits he pays during the festival is to the shrine of the Cōḷa Nācciyār in Uraiyyur, where the lovers sit together in the marriage pavilion. During the Vaikuṇṭha Ekādaśī festival, the processional image (and the Brāhmaṇs carrying its palanquin) break into a gallop as they approach the Tulukka Nācciyār shrine, so excited is the Handsome

Bridegroom to see her (Subrahmanian 1996). Raḍganātha even sent a love letter declaring his desire to Āṇṭāl in Villiputtur, which is now inscribed on the pavilion in front of Āṇṭāl's temple there (Dehejia 1990: 161–63).

Viṣṇu Raḍganātha is so profligate, in fact, that according to one local tradition he has twelve wives in all. In addition to the ones we would expect, such as his “formidable wife” Raḍkanāyakī and Viṣṇu's pan-Indian wives Lakṣmī and Bhūdevī, we find in this list some more surprising wives, such as the Kāvērī River figured (as Indian rivers always are) as a beautiful woman and the female poetic personae of the male devotional poets Nammālvār and Tirumaḍkai Ālvār. There are four daughters of rulers listed as well: the Cōla and Cēra princesses, Āṇṭāl identified as the daughter of the Pāṇḍiyaṇ ruler, and the Delhi Sultān's daughter.⁹ The Tulukka Nācciyār might seem to us an outsider in this Hindu harem, but South Indian devotional hagiography often validates the devotion of those otherwise excluded from proper society. Just as in the story of Tiruppāṇ, an outcaste of Uraiyur whose devotion to Raḍganātha earns him final acceptance from Viṣṇu, here the Turkic girl, member of another excluded community, receives Viṣṇu's final recognition through her love for him. *Bhakti* is a force that overcomes exclusions based on social identity. Relationships that would be improper under conventional standards of *dharma* may be justified, and indeed rarefied, by the counter-vailing standard of *bhakti*.

The story of the Tulukka Nācciyār connects to another common theme in late medieval Indian literature, in which the agonistic relations of Hindu and Muslim ruling elites during the period are portrayed figuratively as problematic, often doomed, romance. In his 1963 essay on “Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India,” Aziz Ahmad describes the Indo-Muslim genre of cross-cultural romance, exemplified by Amīr Khusraw's courtly tale of ‘Alā al-Dīn Khaljī's son Khizr Khān and the Hindu princess of Gujarat, Deval Rānī, where the Muslim hero pursues the Hindu heroine, “asserting the conqueror's right not only to love but to be loved” in the new homeland (1963: 471). Hindu narratives often reverse the protagonists' gender but maintain the notion of Muslim sexual pursuit. The Muslim heroine falls in love with the Hindu hero, who steadfastly rejects her advances. In Padmanābha's *Kānhaḍade Prabandha*, for instance, Sultān ‘Alā al-Dīn Khaljī's daughter (called Sitā in the text) becomes infatuated with the young prince Vīramade, son of Kānhaḍade, a recalcitrant Rājput ruler in Jalor, southern Rajasthan (Bhatnagar 1991; Vyas 1953).¹⁰ The Sultān offers to end his war on Kānhaḍade through an alliance of marriage, but Vīramade deems such a union shameful. The princess then travels herself on a diplomatic mission to see Kānhaḍade and Vīramade in Jalor and tells the prince that in six previous lifetimes they have already been married. Vīramade accepts her version of the past but refuses her proposal: “What you say is true, Princess, but I will not

look at your face, nor will I marry you: this is my resentment against you!’ (Bhatnagar 1991: 67). Rebuffed, the princess returns to Delhi and the forces of the Sultanate renew their attacks on Jalor. The princess asks her maid to accompany the army and bring Viramade to her alive, but the young hero dies valiantly in battle, and the maid can only bring his head back to Delhi in a jeweled basket. As the handsome head is brought to her, the princess reflects, “Earlier, the Chauhana had vowed that he would never look at my face. Now, today at least, he will have to break his word” (Bhatnagar 1991: 101–2). But as soon as the head is placed before her it turns away. The princess is disconsolate at this ultimate rejection, and after cremating Viramade’s head on the banks of the Yamunā River, she commits suicide in Yamunā’s swirling waters.

Still closer thematically and geographically to the story of the Tulukka Nācciyār is an episode related in the *Paradāra Sōdara Rāmana Kathe* of Nanjuṇḍa, a sixteenth-century Kannada historical account of the Kampili dynasty, which preceded the Vijayanagara Empire in the southern Deccan.¹¹ Here the Sulṭān of Delhi sends out officers throughout India in search of a suitable husband for his beautiful daughter. Some of the officers visit Kummata, capital of King Kampila, see the king’s son Rāmacandra, and decide that this is the man for the princess. They have his portrait drawn and take it back to Delhi. Here, as in the story of the Tulukka Nācciyār, it is a visual image that travels to the Muslim capital and enchants the princess. When she sees the painting, she immediately falls deeply in love with Rāmacandra. The Sulṭān writes a proposal to Kampila and offers territory as part of his daughter’s dowry, but Kampila rejects his offer. Soon after, the armies of the Sulṭān attack, seeking to capture Rāmacandra for the princess, but Kampila and his forces manage to fend them off. A second campaign ensues, and this time Rāmacandra dies in battle. The text breaks off before we can learn what became of the Sulṭān’s daughter.

In all these stories, a daughter of the Sulṭān of Delhi, the dominant political and military power of fourteenth-century India, falls in love with Hindu males, either royal or divine. (The line between the two is deliberately occluded: the *Kānhaḍade Prabandha* portrays Kānhaḍade as an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa and the *Paradāra Sōdara Rāmana Kathe* clearly intends its audience to identify Rāmacandra with his divine namesake, while in the Tulukka Nācciyār narratives Viṣṇu takes on human incarnation for his nightly enjoyments with the princess.) In dynastic narratives proposals of marriage also propose political affiliation. By accepting a marriage alliance the Hindu ruler would gain territory and status as a subordinate ruler within the overarching Delhi imperial formation. The poets celebrate the rulers’ refusals as upholding Hindu values of *punya* and *dharma* in the face of great temptation and opposition.¹² But they also recognize that the offer is one the heroes cannot refuse without consequence. The armies of Delhi

attack, the Hindu little kingdoms are defeated, and the heroes die on the battlefield. In Aziz Ahmad's terms, such dynastic accounts serve as "epics of resistance" or Hindu "counter-epics" in opposition to Indo-Muslim "epics of conquest." They depict the attempts of indigenous Hindu royalty to maintain autonomy during the expansion of the Delhi Sultanate's control in a heroic, chivalric, and ultimately tragic light.

The story of the Tulukka Nācciyār, recounted in South Indian temple texts more concerned to celebrate *bhakti* than Kṣatriya *dharma*, revises this standardized plot. Viṣṇu is not simply the passive object of the princess' passion. Though the icon is forcibly looted and then selected by the young woman from a store-room presumably full of handsome Hindu deities, Handsome Bridegroom clearly participates in a mutual seduction. (Folk recountings from the Melkote area take Viṣṇu's initiative in the affair a step further, with Beloved Son going off to Delhi to meet the beautiful princess and then publicly celebrating his marriage to her despite opposition from other, more conventional, Viṣṇus.) And though he chooses to return to Srirangam with his longstanding temple servants rather than stay in Delhi with his new lover, he ultimately acknowledges and accepts the princess' love, in permanent ritual form. If *dharma* figures in the dynastic epics as a value that reinforces distinctions to maintain social order, *bhakti* appears here as a means by which those distinctions may be transcended.

The outcome here is not meant to evoke sadness. In the religious sphere, temples and their primary icons maintain or regain their autonomy in the face of Islamic iconoclasm, and what is more, they manage even to seduce away a part of the opposition. The story reasserts the power of Viṣṇu and his icons in the face of the challenge posed by Islamic aniconism. We might even see it as offering a covert critique of Muslim devotion to an unrepresented and unrepresentable divinity. One cannot imagine the princess playing dolls with Allāh, but in the vision of these South Indian temple texts Viṣṇu does meet human emotional needs for a loving personal relationship with an embodied God, even for the daughter of a Muslim ruler. Raḍganātha's sway extends not only over the three traditional polities of the south, represented by the daughters of Cōḷa, Cēra, and Pāṇḍiyaṅ rulers as his wives, but also over the preeminent polity of late medieval North India, as signified by the incorporation of the Sulṭān's daughter as still another of his consorts.

MUSLIM SPACE IN HINDU RITUAL

In contrast to the one-sided romances in political narratives such as *Kānhaḍade*

Prabandha, the story of the Tulukka Nācciyār envisions the possibility of mutuality. While acknowledging conflict, it points to other less antagonistic modes of interaction across religious and cultural boundaries. The Sulṭān can be charmed by the arts of temple musicians and dancers, and his daughter can become infatuated with a Hindu icon. A Turkic princess can even become a consort of the god Viṣṇu, and a Muslim ruler may patronize Hindu shrines. Emphasizing the incorporative value of *bhakti*, the Tulukka Nācciyār story seems to propose a way for even the Muslim elite to enter into relations with a Hindu deity—on Hindu terms.

Should we then view the story of the princess-bride from Delhi, and the temple shrines where she continues her relationship with Viṣṇu, as aimed at creating and articulating a space for Muslims to enter and participate in South Indian Hindu temples? There is a lengthy historiography dating back to the colonial period that stresses the incompatibility of Muslims and Hindus, conceived as continuous religious communities. We may have become accustomed as well by events in India over the past two decades to think of Hindu temples as sites of provocation and resistance, not of interfaith dialogue. This leads to a broader question: just what were the possibilities for accommodation of Muslim persons and practices within the religious sphere of established Hindu temples in medieval South India?

On Trichi Rock, across the Kāvērī from Srirangam, there are two indentations that local residents identify as footprints. One is revered as the footprint of Viṣṇu, while the other is said to belong to Nathar Wālī, the legendary Ṣūfī saint supposed to have brought Muslim teachings to Tamilnad. According to hagiographical traditions, Hazarat Nathar Wālī was a Turkish nobleman of the thirteenth century who was prompted by a dream to spread the word of Allāh into distant lands. After an arduous journey by way of Mecca and many important Ṣūfī shrines in western Asia and India, he finally established himself in the distant land of Trichi, where his *dargāh* is now one of the most important Muslim shrines in South India and an important part of the local sacred landscape. Devotees come from all over the region, from every social and ethnic group, to share in the *baraka* or sacred power of the saint's shrine.

Just as Nathar Wālī shares Trichi Rock with Viṣṇu, Muslims share the geographical and cultural space of Tamilnad and have for many centuries. Though Tamilnad is usually considered one of the most thoroughly Hindu areas of the subcontinent, Muslim communities have formed a distinct, substantial, and internally complex minority within the region for many centuries, as Susan Bayly's 1989 study convincingly demonstrates. Throughout the late medieval period Turkic elites adhering to Islam played significant roles in southern politics. Islamicate regimes in northern India repeatedly tried to establish

hegemony over the south, such as the Khaljī campaign in the early fourteenth century and the Mughal one in the late seventeenth century, and ambitious regional governors sometimes broke off to form autonomous Muslim polities, like the Madurai Sultanate of the fourteenth century and the Carnatic Nawābs of the eighteenth.

We do not know the precise historical circumstances during which the Tulukka Nācciyār story and her shrines were institutionalized in the temples of Srirangam and Melkote. The texts recording her story date mostly from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but may well retell earlier traditions. Whatever its origins, I would propose that the Tulukka Nācciyār traditions were most pertinent during periods of settled Islamicate political rule in South India, when Hindu temples and Muslim sovereigns needed to accommodate one another in a variety of ways. To get an idea of such arrangements, let us consider briefly just two examples among many possibilities. The Walajah Nawābs of Arcot and the Mysore rulers Haidar 'Alī and Tīpū Sulṭān were Muslim rulers of the eighteenth century who gained sovereignty in the wake of Mughal attempts to extend their control over the south. These regional potentates styled themselves as subordinates within a distant Mughal overlordship based in Delhi, but they acted as rulers who were effectively autonomous, and therefore they struggled to establish their legitimacy primarily within the cultural environment of South Indian society.

In 1749 Muḥammad 'Alī Walajah I declared himself Nawāb of the Carnatic at Trichi and went on to rule for forty-six years. With its fortified Rock and its position at the head of the Kāvērī delta, Trichi was probably the most fought-over site in all of Tamilnad. As Bayly puts it, Muḥammad 'Alī's early claim to authority seemed to emanate directly from his control of this place, not only due to its fortifications, but also due to the fame and sanctity of Trichi's sacred topography (1989: 162). While Muḥammad 'Alī brought in many eminent Muslim scholars from the north, he also lavishly patronized numerous Islamic holy sites in his realm, especially the Trichi *dargāh* of Nathar Wālī, which became under Walajah support one of the two principal Ṣūfī *dargāhs* in Tamilnad. The other great shrine, Shāh Ḥamīd Shāh's *dargāh* at Nagore, also benefited substantially from Walajah generosity.

Operating in a largely Hindu society, Muḥammad 'Alī was careful also to fulfill the traditional Indian royal obligation to protect and endow Hindu holy places. Srirangam had suffered from occupation and plundering by the French during the Carnatic Wars, and both Muḥammad 'Alī and his successor Umdatul'Umara assisted in restoring the shrine. They made donations and adjudicated in disputes over temple honors. Muḥammad 'Alī also coordinated the timing of annual festivals held by the Nathar Wālī shrine and the Srirangam temple, so

there would be no conflicts between them, and shared his royal accouterments with both religious institutions. The Walajah rulers also patronized other major Hindu temples in their dominion, including Tirupati. At the Śaiva temple in Citamparam the Nawāb intervened when Śaiva priests had obstructed worship at the shrine of Viṣṇu Govindarāja and forced them to restore Viṣṇu's shrine and recommence offerings to him (Swaminathan 1975).

In Mysore, Tipū Sulṭān operated according to many of the same principles. The Hindu Wodeyar dynasty that his father Haidar 'Alī had supplanted considered the Nārāyaṇasvāmi temple at Melkote as one of the most sacred sites in their realm. One Wodeyar king even made an annual pilgrimage to the temple, as the Jesuit missionary Joachim Dias observed (Subrahmanyam 1989: 223fn). Tipū kept up the tradition of royal patronage at Melkote, donating elephants and silver vessels to the Viṣṇu temple.¹³ When two sects became involved in a dispute at the temple, Tipū assumed the royal duty of maintaining order and acted as mediator in resolving the conflict. At the Śiva temple of Nanjangud, Tipū even set up a greenish jadite icon, afterwards known as the Pādshāh Liḍga. As Kate Brittlebank (1993: 49–53) has argued, Tipū had good reason to exercise “conspicuous piety” at the most esteemed Hindu sites in his domain as a means of gaining legitimacy within South Indian conventions of proper royal conduct.

Muslims ruling in the predominantly Hindu areas of medieval South India, then, found it expedient, at the least, to extend their patronage towards important Hindu sites. To find occasions of broader Muslim participation in Hindu temple life, though, we need to consider those moments when the iconic deity goes outside the temple walls, during festival processions. The significance of these processions in South Indian temples is most often explained in terms of god's extensive grace. By leaving the precincts of the temple to tour the larger sphere of the town, the deity may grant his grace to those ordinarily unable to enter the inner sanctum (Davis 1991: 71–72). Many have observed that festivals offer settings in which normal community boundaries become less rigid. As James Prinsep commented on the festivals of Benares in the 1830s, “On most occasions of festive and multitudinous assemblage, the distinctions of religion give way, and the scene bears more the character of a fair than of a religious meeting” (cited in Freitag 1989: 206). Prinsep misleads us, however, if we imagine from his observation a kind of amorphous *communitas* where markers of identity and status are dispensed with entirely. More commonly, in South India at least, participation is broadened but still imbricated with hierarchies of community identity.

Participation by important Hindu communities might be structured into Ṣūfi public ceremonial. Under Walajah rule the *kantūri viḷā* took shape as the main event in the sacred calendar of the Nathar Wālī *dargāh*. This festival commemo-

rates the death of the Šūfī saint entombed in the shrine and represents the saint's death as a joyful marriage with God. During the festival, vessels of sandalwood paste are carried to the saint's tomb on decorated wooden chariots, much as images are carried out from temples in Hindu processions. While many groups are allowed to bring the sandalwood chariots to the tomb, there are clear (and no doubt highly contested) rules of priority. First comes the contribution of the elite Muslim Pirzādā families who preside over the site. Next, however, from the main *bāzār* comes the sandalwood chariot of the leading Hindu Ceṭṭiyār merchant families of Trichi. As Bayly (1989: 145–46) notes, the guardians of the *dargāh* insist that the preparation and offering of sandalwood to Nathar Wālī is a ceremonial privilege that Muslims and Hindus alike share. Yet they also, not surprisingly, reserve first priority to Muslim devotees.

We find a parallel concern to establish ritual interactions across religious lines, here involving local Muslim residents in a Hindu procession, in the annual festival of the sixteenth-century Vaiṣṇava temple of Śrī Mushnam, near Citamparam.¹⁴ As the icon of Viṣṇu Bhūvarāha (the “Boar incarnation”) travels in procession to the sea, it stops at the Šūfī *dargāh* of Hazarat Rahamatulla Walliulla Suthari in the town of Killai. The Muslim residents greet Viṣṇu with band music. The *qāzī* recites from the Qurān, the locals present food and other offerings of *pūjā* to the Viṣṇu icon, and the Vaiṣṇava priests redistribute the leftover *prasāda* to the descendants of the Nawāb who patronized the site. One of Viṣṇu's garlands is placed on the tomb of the Šūfī saint and camphor is lit. That night Hindus and Muslims together enjoy the fireworks show. Here we find a close ritual reflection of the Tulukka Nācciyār tradition: a Viṣṇu icon visits the home of a Muslim saint, Viṣṇu is worshiped with the best cultural products his hosts can offer (like readings from the Qurān), and through ritual exchange the saint is recognized and honored as a true devotee of Viṣṇu. According to local tradition, a Muslim ruler of the area long ago endowed land to celebrate the Viṣṇu festival and first established the pattern of annual ritual interactions between temple and *dargāh*, Hindu god and Muslim *pīr*.

The pattern of royal patronage, the festival interactions at Śrī Mushnam, and the traditions of the Tulukka Nācciyār at Srirangam and Melkote all represent efforts in late medieval South India to articulate space within which Muslims could participate in the liturgical and devotional life of Hindu gods and their temples. For Muslim rulers in the south seeking to establish stable regimes, this interactive space represented a crucial area in which to gain credibility as legitimate ruler among important groups within a predominantly Hindu social order. For the keepers of Hindu temples they served an important role as well. If a great temple like that of Viṣṇu Raḍganātha at Srirangam claimed to be a complete Viṣṇu-ruled cosmos, then it was necessary to provide space within it

for Muslims. As universal sovereign, Viṣṇu could not entirely ignore the Turkic polities governing northern India or the important Muslim communities closer to home. As the stories of the Tulukka Nācciyār indicate, though, they were not portrayed as a distinct religious community. Rather, they appeared as an ethnic group with its own distinct cultural practices, which could nevertheless be incorporated within the encompassing dominion of Viṣṇu.

THE NĀCCİYĀR'S RETURN?

The situation nowadays is much different, of course. The British defeated Tipū Sulṭān in 1799 and supplanted the Walajahs in the early nineteenth century. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century India, religious identities of "Hindu" and "Muslim" were solidified, in part through British administrative practices. Indigenous reform movements as well aimed to purify Hinduism and Islam of "extraneous" elements. More recently Hindu nationalist mobilizations have attempted to reinforce boundaries separating these religiously based identities. All this has reduced the scope and relevance of interaction within the religious sphere. At the Cittirai festival in Madurai, Viṣṇu Aḷakar continues to enjoy his annual rendezvous with his Muslim consort, but since 1947 local Muslims do not attend. At the Srirangam temple, a new dress code policy several years ago prohibited temple entry by persons wearing *luḍḡs*, the male lower garment worn publicly in Tamilnad mainly by non-Hindus. Viṣṇu may wear a *luḍḡ* when he visits the Tulukka Nācciyār, but no *luḍḡ*-wearing non-Hindu male will get near the princess' shrine.

Recently temple complexes and rituals accommodating Muslims as well as Hindus have come under new pressure. In Tirupparankundram near Madurai is a large Murukaṅ temple, and on the twin-peaked hill behind the temple stand a small temple of Gaṇeśa and a Muslim shrine containing the tomb of Sikandar. Hindus as well as Muslims have long visited Sikandar's tomb, and it has been a part of the annual Kārttikai festival. Starting in 1994, however, the Hindu Munnani, a regional Hindu nationalist group, has agitated to exclude the Muslim shrine from its role in the festival. While the courts have decided against Munnani claims, the festival itself has lost considerable popularity as a result of the disturbances and the resulting police presence. Throughout India, Hindu nationalist groups have sought to "purify" shrine and festivals that are religiously shared.¹⁵

Still, though, the Tulukka Nācciyār continues to receive her Hindu lover inside Srirangam, and her stories remain as both residue of late medieval mutu-

ality and its future possibility. At least into the 1970s, folk songs at Melkote continued to proclaim a Hindu deity of notably ecumenical vision, who went all the way to Delhi to marry the daughter of a Muslim ruler against the objections of his divine kinsmen. As one professor of Vaiṣṇava studies observed in *India Today*, the Tulukka Nācciyār “is an instance of the flexibility of Hinduism” (Subrahmanian 1996). There is always the possibility that the Tulukka Nācciyār may find new life and new significance in response to the contemporary religious climate in India.

Notes

1. I presented earlier versions of this paper in 1995 at the University of Pennsylvania South Asia Seminar and at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in Philadelphia. I am grateful to Allison Mackenzie, Margaret Mills, and Sandhya Purohit for their initial encouragement of this project and to audiences at both meetings for their questions and comments. The written draft was completed in 1996, for a volume on “Islamic Space in South Asia,” which did not reach publication. This essay expands on a brief section of chapter 4 in my book, *Lives of Indian Images* (1997), which discusses Srirangam and late medieval narratives of displaced images. I want also to thank those who corresponded with me about various topics in this essay: Kate Brittlebank, Andrew Cohen, Rich Freeman, William Jackson, George Michell, Vasudha Narayanan, Leslie Orr, David Shulman, Cynthia Talbot, and Phillip Wagoner.

Since this paper was initially composed, a number of important studies have appeared dealing with Hindu and Muslim identities and interactions in late medieval South India. Particularly noteworthy are: Gilmartin and Lawrence (2000); Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (2003); and Wagoner (1999). Wagoner (2000) deals with two of the narratives discussed in this essay. Finally, Dutta (2003) analyzes the narratives of the Tulukka Nācciyār in considerable detail and locates them in terms of the construction of a network of Śrīvaiṣṇava religious centers in later medieval South India. I am grateful to Ranjeeta Dutta for giving me a copy of this essay.

2. The primary source for the Srirangam version of the story is the *Kōyil Oḷuku*, temple chronicles maintained by local priests and temple servants (Hari Rao 1961; Kirusnasvami Ayyankar Svami 1976). The version available to us results from the attempts of Joseph Wallace, British collector in Trichi in 1801, to establish a single authoritative text from the multiple versions in order to mediate conflicting claims of competing temple officials over rights and honors (Parthasarathy 1954). For Melkote, the primary version is the seventeenth-

century Sanskrit text, *Prapannāmṛta* of Anantasūri (Ramanarayanacarya 1966). Govindacharya (1906: 189–90) retells the story from the local temple hagiography, the *Yādavagiri Māhātmya*. The story is also related in the *Kuruparamparā-prapāvam* (Narayanan 1985: 56–57) and in the *Yavanīpariṇaya* of Prabhākara (Govindacharya 1906: 190fn). Somasundaram Pillai (1965: 10fn) refers to Piḷḷailōkañ Cīyar’s *Yatīntirapravaṇaprapāvam* as still another source for the story. Dutta (2003) cites still more sources, which I have not been able to view.

3. For accounts of Srirangam temple and its topography, see Auboyer (1969); Somasundaram Pillai (1965); *Ikṣvāku Kulataṇam* (1996). As a non-Hindu I was not allowed to enter the Raḍganātha temple as far as the Tulukka Nācciyār shrine, so I am grateful to Prema Nandakumar and Vasudha Narayanan for their descriptions of it.

4. I am grateful to Leslie Orr for her inquiries at the Melkote temple concerning the location of Tulukka Nācciyār. The narrative of Rāmānuja bringing the icon back to Melkote is also remembered in a special ritual. According to Vasantha (1991) the temple annually celebrates a “Delhi-utsava,” in which the Viṣṇu processional icon and an icon of Rāmānuja process together.

5. Vasantha (1991: 39–40), based on Krishnaswami (1974), a collection of Kannada folksongs about Melkote Nārāyaṇasvāmi as Beloved Son. Vasantha also reports an older literary account, the *Varanandi Kalyāṇa* of poetess Chaluvāmbē (ca. 1725) describing the marriage of Beloved Son with the Muslim princess Varanandi.

6. The verses are repeated in *Prapannāmṛta* (Krishnaswami Ayyangar 1919: 40), where they are identified as the composition of Vedāntadeśika, the Śrīvaiṣṇava theologian. Local tradition at Tirupati holds that the Handsome Bridegroom was kept in the Raḍgamaṇḍapa during his sojourn there (Subrahmanya Sastry 1981: 85), while the *Kōyil Oḷuku* describes a much more inaccessible bivouac in the Tirupati hills. According to the Srirangam temple chronicles, one of the image’s Brāhmaṇ attendants “tied himself to Visnu with the help of roots and herbs and asked the other two attendants to lower him down into the declivity by means of a creeper fastened to a promontory of the mountain, jutting out like the hood of a serpent” (Hari Rao 1961: 27). The image spent fifty years suspended like this.

7. It is striking that no similar traditions developed among Śaiva establishments in South India, as far as I am aware. Dutta (2003) observes that the Vaiṣṇava narratives cluster around institutions associated with the Teḍkalai school of Śrīvaiṣṇavism.

8. The story of Cōḷa princess Vasalakṣmī who chose Viṣṇu Raḍganāthan at a *svayamvara* attended by all the forms of Śiva and Viṣṇu is related in the

Divyasūricarita, the *Nisulapuri Māhātmya*, and the fifteenth-century Sanskrit poem, *Lakṣmīkāvyā* (Hari Rao 1976: 9, 16; Somasundaram Pillai 1965: 34).

9. The temple reciter at Srirangam, S. R. Sampath Thathachariar, related this list of wives to me in 1995. Younger (1982: 645–46) observes that local worshipers tend to conflate Cōla Nācciyār with Āṇṭāl, with Tulukka Nācciyār, and with the female devotional persona in whose voice Nammālvār often speaks.

10. Padmanābha was a Brāhmaṇ poet in the court of Akhairāja, a direct descendent of Kānhaḍade ruling Jalor in the mid-fifteenth century. For a longer account of this text, see Davis (1997: Chapter 6). Indo-Muslim chronicles also recount the campaigns against Kānhaḍade of Jalor (if not the love of the Sultān's daughter for Kānhaḍade's son). For a brief summary, see Lal (1967: 116–19).

11. As far as I know the manuscript is unpublished. A detailed summary of the text may be found in the *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of Mysore for the Year 1929* (Krishna 1931: 36–47). I am indebted to Phillip Wagoner for bringing this account to my attention. A similar story relating to the Kākatiya ruler Pratāparudra, defeated during the Delhi campaigns of the early fourteenth century, is recounted in the *Rāyavācakamu* and the *Pratāparudracaritamū*, where the Hindu prince is actually captured, like the Viṣṇu image, and taken to Delhi (Wagoner 1993: 122–23, 206n18; 2000: 305–15).

12. In an interesting reversal of this motif, the *Kōyil Oluku* (Hari Rao 1961) and Namburi Keśavācārya's *Ācāryasūktimuktāvali* (Krishnaswami Ayaangar 1919: 40–45) related how, to save the Radganātha temple and its primary icon during the occupation, a temple *devadāsī* seduces the Turkic general and dissuades him from further destruction. Finally she has him pushed off one of the temple towers. Here the texts celebrate the temple woman's sexual crossing, since it serves the higher purposes of maintaining the temple, and Handsome Bridegroom later recognizes her devoted service.

13. *Epigraphia Carnatica* (1977, 6) no. 171 records Tipū Sultān's inscription on two silver round cups and no. 197 records Tipū's gift of twelve elephants to the gods Nārāyaṇasvāmi and Narasiṃha in the temple. See also Subbaraya Chetty (1944) and Hasan Khan (1951: 354–63) on Tipū's policy towards non-Muslim religious institutions within his realm.

14. Information on Śrī Mushnam comes from a local publication, the *Śrīmuṣṇa Māhātmya*, by Śrīnivāsarāghavācāriar, as related in Narayanan (1995: 32–33). I am grateful to Vasudha Narayanan for sharing her unpublished essay with me.

15. Fuller (2003: 140–41) briefly relates the Tirupparankundram dispute. In a footnote Fuller also refers to a similar campaign conducted by the Visva Hindu

Parisad in southern Karanataka. For another similar campaign carried out by the Shiv Sena near Mumbai in Maharashtra, see Hansen (2001: 107–8).

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