

Tamil Nadu's Influence on Srivaishnava Literature and Devotional Heritage

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## Tamil Nadu's Influence on Srivaishnava Literature and Devotional Heritage

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### Abstract

Tamil Nadu played a pivotal role in shaping Śrīvaiṣṇava thought by fostering a rich theological and literary tradition. The region became the cradle of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, spearheaded by Rāmānuja and further refined by later scholars. The fusion of Tamil devotional hymns (Divya Prabandham) with Sanskrit philosophical treatises created a unique blend of regional devotion and classical theology. The development of Maṇipravāḷa literature, a hybrid of Tamil and Sanskrit, made Śrīvaiṣṇava doctrines accessible to a broader audience. Tamil Nadu also witnessed the rise of two major sects, the Vaḍakalai and Teṅkalai, with distinct interpretations of Śrīvaiṣṇava philosophy. This period saw prolific Sanskrit compositions by figures like Vedāntadeśika, Pillai Lokācārya, and Paravastu Vedāntācārya, whose works defended and expanded the Viśiṣṭādvaita doctrines, shaping the theological and ritualistic landscape of the tradition.

**Keywords:** Tamil Nadu, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Śrīvaiṣṇavism, Rāmānuja, Maṇipravāḷa, prapatti, bhakti, Sanskrit theology, Vaḍakalai, Teṅkalai.

### Introduction

Tamil Nadu has been instrumental in shaping Sanskrit Śrīvaiṣṇava thought, serving as the epicenter of the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition. Rooted in the teachings of Rāmānuja (1017–1137 CE), this school of thought merged the metaphysical framework of Vedānta with the devotional fervor of Āḷvārs. The region's contribution is evident in its dual linguistic heritage—where Tamil devotional literature enriched Sanskrit theological discourse.

The emergence of *Maṇipravāḷa*—a hybrid language of Tamil and Sanskrit—facilitated the spread of Viśiṣṭādvaita principles across linguistic boundaries. The theologians of Tamil Nadu composed commentaries, polemical treatises, and devotional hymns that defined the school's philosophical and practical aspects. The region also became the battleground for doctrinal debates, especially in the defense of Viśiṣṭādvaita against rival schools like Advaita and Dvaita. Furthermore, the post-Rāmānuja period witnessed the rise of the Vaḍakalai and

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Teṅkalai sects, each interpreting the tradition differently. Tamil Nadu's religious, philosophical, and literary contributions profoundly influenced the evolution of Sanskrit Śrīvaiṣṇava theology.

### Śrī Vaiṣṇavism

Śrī Vaiṣṇavism is the religious school that regards Viṣṇu as the supreme and primary deity. In this tradition, the Upaniṣadic reality is identified with the personal deity Lord Viṣṇu. The philosophical doctrines and religious principles are so closely intertwined that it is nearly impossible to explain the tenets of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta without referring to the religious practices of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. This school is based on the Vedas, Itihāsas, Purāṇas, Āgamas, Smṛtis, and the Tamil compositions called Nālāyira Divya Prabandham. The earliest exponents of this tradition are believed to have been Taṅka, Drāmiḍa, Bodhāyana, and others. Their works are lost and are known only through citations in the writings of later authors.

The language predominantly used in this school was Sanskrit. However, from the 12th century CE, the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham of the Ālvārs began to be commented upon in Tamil with a mixture of Sanskrit expressions. This hybrid form of language came to be known as Maṇipravāla. In Maṇipravāla, not only were the commentaries on the Ālvār compositions written, but also smaller independent works on Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. Over time, the Tamil compositions were translated into Sanskrit for the benefit of non-Tamil speakers.

After Rāmānuja's period, the school experienced a schism regarding the interpretation of its religious doctrines. This divide intensified in the 16th century, giving rise to two sub-sects: the Vaḍakalai and the Teṅkalai. The former placed equal importance on both the Sanskrit and Tamil sources, while the latter gave greater prominence to the Tamil compositions of the Ālvārs.

Throughout the development of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism, the philosophical foundation and traditional religious practices (sampradāya) evolved in parallel. The practical aspects of religious discipline often influenced the philosophical treatment of the school, while the philosophical background shaped the practical expressions of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. This evolution occurred under the influence of the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas, the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Viṣṇupurāṇa, and the Tiruvāymōli.

### Two Significant Periods

The contribution of the Tamil region to Sanskrit Śrī Vaiṣṇavism can be divided into two significant periods. The first began with Nāthamuni and ended with Rāmānuja. The second period started after Rāmānuja and continues into the present times.

Nāthamuni (b. 823 CE), whose full name was Raṅga-nāthamuni, hailed from Vīranārāyaṇapuram in the South Arcot district of Tamil Nadu. He became a disciple of Śaṭhakopa, also known as Nammālvār, and is said to have received the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham from him. Nāthamuni was one of the earliest exponents of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism to address the system's philosophical problems in his *Nyāyatattva*, now lost. The content of this work is known through citations in the writings of Vedāntadeśika. The *Nyāyatattva* refuted the conclusions of Gautama and other Nyāya philosophers. It was a substantial work, divided into at least five sections: Jñānapāda, Prameyapāda, Pramāṭṛ, Karma, and Nyāya, with sub-sections called adhikaraṇas. Nāthamuni's other lost work, *Yogarahasya*, is also known only through references.

Pundarikākṣācārya (826–931 CE), the foremost disciple of Nāthamuni, was a highly skilled dialectician, as evidenced by the citations linked to his name in the seventh chapter of Vedāntadeśika's *Śatadūṣaṇi*. Śrīrāmamiśra (832–937 CE), a pupil of Pundarikākṣācārya,

advocated *yathārthakhyāti* (the theory of true cognition). Vedāntadeśika mentions Rāmārya and his work *Trayyantārtha*, which is now lost.

Yāmunācārya (916–1041 CE), the grandson of Nāthamuni, was a prominent exponent of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. His *Āgamapramāṇya* defends the validity of the Pāñcarātra Āgama. His *Siddhitraya*, consisting of three sections—*Ātmasiddhi*, *Īśvara*, and *Samvit*—deals with the nature of the soul, God, and cognition, respectively. Yāmunācārya proposed that Pūrvamīmāṃsā and Vedānta formed parts of a single śāstra. He argued that Jaimini, in his sūtras, addressed karma to guide people in performing their duties with faith and sincerity. Yāmuna was the earliest writer to advocate the validity of the Pāñcarātra doctrines and interpreted the *Utpattayasambhavādhikaraṇa* (Brahmasūtras II. 2. 39–42) accordingly. His *Gītārthasaṃgraha* is a concise summary of the *Bhagavadgītā*, with each chapter summarized in a single śloka, explaining its purport and significance. The *Gītā* is presented as prescribing an integrated path of karma, jñāna, and bhakti.

Yāmuna also wrote the *Puruṣanirṇaya*, which is now lost; it discussed the *Atharvaśira* Upaniṣad, the *Śvetāśvatara* Upaniṣad, and other texts, including the Purāṇas. His *Catuśślokī* and *Stotraratna* glorify Lakṣmī in four ślokas and Viṣṇu in sixty-five ślokas, respectively.

Rāmānuja (1017–1137 CE) was the most renowned proponent of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, making invaluable contributions. Building upon the works of Nāthamuni and Yāmuna, he refined concepts that became distinctive traits of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. His emphasis on an integrated course of karma, jñāna, and bhakti, his treatment of the entire Veda (including the karmakāṇḍa) as authoritative, and his concept of Brahman as possessing infinite qualities were significant aspects of his teachings. He stressed the self-body relationship between God and the world of sentient and insentient beings. He is also credited with incorporating the Ālvār compositions into the Vaiṣṇava canon.

Rāmānuja's first work, the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, was delivered as a discourse in the Tirumalai hills. It summarizes the content of the Vedas, not merely the Vedānta (Upaniṣads), and refutes the views of Śāṅkara, Bhāskara, and Yādavaprakāśa. His magnum opus, the *Śrībhāṣya*, is a detailed commentary on the *Brahmasūtras*, where he refutes the Advaitic concept of attributeless Brahman and the theory of Māyā. His *Vedāntasāra* and *Vedāntadīpa* are shorter commentaries on the *Brahmasūtras*. He also wrote a commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* in line with Yāmuna's *Gītārthasaṃgraha*.

Rāmānuja's *Gadyatraya* consists of three works: the *Śaraṇāgatigadya*, *Śrīraṅgagadya*, and *Śrīvaikuṇṭhagadyam*, conveying his surrender to Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu. His *Nitya* discusses the daily worship of the Lord. An unpublished work, the *Brahmasūtravetti*, attributed to Rāmānuja, exists in manuscript form at the Adyar Library.

Following Rāmānuja, his direct disciples carried on his legacy. Śrīvatsāṅkamiśra (Kūrat-tālvān) assisted Rāmānuja with the *Śrībhāṣya*. Pranatārtihara (Kidambi Accān) was conferred the title *Vedāntaudayana* by Rāmānuja. Varadaviṣṇuśra, Rāmānuja's nephew, helped with the *Śrībhāṣya*. Tirukkurukaippirān Piḷḷān wrote the first Maṇipravāḷa commentary on the *Tiruvāymoḷi* (essence of the Vedas).

Further, Paraśarabhaṭṭa, the son of Śrīvatsāṅkamiśra, was a grand-disciple of Rāmānuja, known for his expertise in dialectics and poetry. Nāḷijīyar (1113–1213 CE), originally an Advaitin named Mādhava, was converted to Viśiṣṭādvaita. A disciple of both Pranatārtihara and Paraśarabhaṭṭa, he authored the *Nine Thousand*, a commentary on the *Tiruvāymoḷi* of Nammālvār. Śrī Viṣṇucitta (1106–1206 CE), also called Eṅgaḷālvān, was the disciple of Piḷḷān and wrote several Sanskrit works on Vedānta.

The next generation witnessed significant literary and śāstraic activity. Nārāyaṅyāra composed independent works on Vedānta, while Varadanārāyaṅabhaṭṭāraka, also known as Vakulabhṛtkinkara, influenced Vedāntadeśika through his writings. Vātsya Varadācārya (1165–1275 CE) became a renowned authority on Rāmānuja's *Śrībhāṣya* and attracted scholars to Kañci. Seveśvarācārya, serving directly at Śrīraṅgam, wrote extensively on Vedānta. Nāmpillai (1147–1252 CE), a disciple of Nālijīyār, was a leading interpreter of Nammālvār's works. His disciples included Periyavāccān Piḷḷai (1167–1262 CE), also called Kṛṣṇapāda, who authored several *manipravāla* works, and Vadakkuṭṭiruvitippillai, whose works are lost.

The following generation produced four eminent scholars. Piḷḷai Lōkācārya (1205–1310 CE), son of Vaḍakkutiruvitippillai, wrote several *manipravāla* texts on Śrī Vaiṣṇava philosophy. Ātreya Rāmānuja (1220–1310 CE), a disciple of Vātsya Varadācārya and uncle of Vedāntadeśika, was a dialectician known for his *Nyāyakuliśa*. Meghanādāri, a descendant of Rāmamiśra, authored significant Viśiṣṭādvaita works and was a contemporary of Piḷḷai Lōkācārya. Sudarśanasūri, the grandson of Śrī Rāma and a disciple of Vātsya Varadācārya, wrote the *Śrutaparakāśikā* on the *Śrībhāṣya*.

The next generation featured Vedāntadeśika (1268–1369 CE), the most brilliant Viśiṣṭādvaita scholar after Rāmānuja. A prolific writer and dialectician, he authored 114 works in Sanskrit, Tamil, and *manipravāla*. His elder contemporary, Nāinārāccān Piḷḷai, also known as Raṅgarājajavan, authored some *manipravāla* works. Vādikeśari Alagiyamaṅavāḷa Jīyār, a disciple of Periyavāccān Piḷḷai and Nāinārāccān Piḷḷai, composed a few works in Sanskrit and *manipravāla*. Alagiyamaṅavāḷapperumāl Nāyaṅār, the younger brother of Piḷḷai Lōkācārya (1208–1303 or 1236–1331 CE), authored the *Ācāryahṛdaya* in *manipravāla*.

After this period, original works became rare, with scholars focusing on preserving and defending traditional doctrines. Varadācārya, also called Kumāra Vedāntācārya (1316–1401 CE), the son of Vedāntadeśika, wrote smaller treatises on Vedānta. Varavaramuni, also known as Maṅavāḷa Mahāmuni (1370–1444 CE), was a religious leader and author of Tamil and *manipravāla* works. In the 16th century, Tātadeśika Śrīnivāsa (1509–1591 CE), also called Mahācārya, and Raṅgarāmānujamuni were prominent exponents of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Several scholars followed, making significant contributions to the tradition.

### **Contributions made after Rāmānuja to Śrīvaiṣṇavism (Seven Categories)**

The contributions made after Rāmānuja to Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta and Śrīvaiṣṇavism can be classified into seven categories. The first is on the Vedic texts. During the early development of Śrīvaiṣṇavism, scholars did not find it necessary to comment on the Saṁhitās, Brāhmaṅas, and Upaniṣads, as works such as the Vākya and Bhāṣya on the Chāndogya Upaniṣad were already available. However, in the post-Rāmānuja period, while defending their philosophy against other Vedāntic schools, Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars began offering their interpretations on the Upaniṣads. Śrī Viṣṇucitta and Kūra Nārāyaṅa wrote commentaries on the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, while Sudarśanasūri commented on the Subalopaniṣad. Suddhasattvam Rāmānujācārya, in his Atharvaśikhāvilāsa, interpreted the Atharvaśikhā Upaniṣad, affirming the supremacy of Viṣṇu. The Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad was commented upon by Vedāntadeśika and Kūra Nārāyaṅa. Rāṅgarāmānujamuni (c. 1600 CE) wrote on the principal Upaniṣads, and Śrībhāṣyam Rāmānujācārya provided word-for-word interpretations in his Upaniṣadbhāṣya. The Puruṣasūkta and Śrīsūkta were interpreted by Prativādhayaṅkaram Anantārya of Kañci.

The second category includes commentaries on Rāmānuja's *Śrībhāṣya*. Several commentaries were written on this foundational text, though some are now lost. The earliest, *Śrībhāṣyavivarāṅa* by Śrī Rāmamiśra, a direct disciple of Rāmānuja, is known only through references by Vedāntadeśika. The *Nyāyasudarśana* of Varadanārāyaṅabhaṭṭāraka offers a clear

exposition, while Meghanādāri's Nayaprakāśikā is more extensive. Sudarśanasūri's Śrutaprakāśikā, a learned and thorough commentary, is based on the teachings of his preceptor, Vātsya Varadācārya. The Tattvaṭīkā of Vedāntadeśika is an extensive yet incomplete commentary. Rāṅgarāmānujamuni's Mūlabhāvaprakāśikā and Śrīvatsānka Śrīmanāthayāmuṇamuni's Jijñāsā-sūtra-bhāṣya-bhāvaprakāśikā are other notable works. Vīgraham Deśikācārya, in his Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya-tippaṇi, offers a brief gloss on the Śrībhāṣya.

The third category focuses on commentaries on the Śrutaprakāśikā. Rāṅgarāmānujamuni wrote the voluminous Bhāvaprakāśikā, a commentary on the Śrutaprakāśikā. Vadhūla Śrīnivāsācārya, father of Mahācārya, composed the Tūlika on part of the first chapter. Lakṣmaṇācārya, son of Suddhasattvācārya and the 18th descendant of Embar (1026–1131 CE), wrote the incomplete Gurubhāvaprakāśikā. The Tātparyadīpikā is an anonymous commentary, while Śrīnivāsasūri summarized the contents of the Śrutaprakāśikā in the Śrutaprakāśikā-saṅgraha.

The fourth category includes interpretations of the Brahmasūtras in light of the Śrībhāṣya. Appayadīkṣita's Nayamāyūkhamālika and Rāṅgarāmānujamuni's Śārīrakaśāstrārtha-dīpikā reflect attempts to defend Rāmānuja's interpretation. Srinivāsācārya wrote the Śrībhāṣyaprakāśikā, while Śaṭhakopamuni authored the Brahmasūtrārtha-saṅgraha. Other brief glosses include the Brahmasūtravṛtti and Brahmasūtrārtha-tippaṇi by Varadārya. Several critical evaluations of the Śrībhāṣya emerged, including Bhāṣyabhāvabodhaprabodhana by Meghanādāri and Brahmasūtrabhāṣyārtha-pūrvapakṣa-saṅgrahakarikā by Venkaṭārya.

The fifth category consists of commentaries on the Bhagavadgītā. Apart from Rāmānuja's Bhagavadgītābhāṣya, there are several notable works. These include Gītārthasaṅgrahavibhāga by Nārāyaṇamuni, Śrīnivāsakṛpā by Tirumalayārya, and Gītārthasaṅgrahaṭīkā by Yāmunācārya, father of Periyavāccān Piḷḷai. Vādikesari Alakiyamaṇavālaḷaiyār wrote the Gītāsāra, while Varavaramuni (also known as Maṇavālamahamuni) authored the Balabodhinī. Vedāntadeśika's Tātparyacandrikā is a voluminous and insightful commentary on Rāmānuja's Gītābhāṣya.

The sixth category involves contributions to the Āgama literature, which influenced temple worship and household rituals. Though the Āgamas likely originated in North India, they developed significantly in South India. Their content, architectural designs, and temple practices reflect this southern influence. The Pāñcarātra Āgamas contain references to the Ālvārs, Vedāntadeśika, and Āṇḍāl, along with descriptions of temple festivals, including the floating festivals and those held during the Mārgaśīrṣa month. The Parameśvara Saṁhitā focuses on worship practices at the Śrīraṅgam temple. Vedāntadeśika's Pāñcarātrarakṣā defends the validity of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas, while Varadācārya's Pāñcarātrakaṣṭhakodhāra refutes criticisms.

The seventh category pertains to Tamil Prabandhams. The recitation of 4000 Divya prabandhams became an integral part of temple worship and festivals. These works, deeply rooted in the Tamil region, contain expressions and practices specific to Tamil Nadu, further enriching Śrīvaiṣṇava devotional traditions.

## Other Significant Contributions

The post-Rāmānuja period witnessed a significant expansion of Viśiṣṭādvaita and Śrīvaiṣṇavism through extensive commentaries, theological defenses, and literary contributions, shaping the tradition's doctrinal and ritualistic landscape.

The post-Rāmānuja period of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta saw the emergence of numerous independent treatises, critiques, and smaller tracts on key doctrines. The name *Viśiṣṭādvaita* was explained in the anonymous *Viśiṣṭādvaitaśabdārthavicāra* and *Viśiṣṭādvaitasamarthana*. Key works expounding the school's principles include Dharmapurīṣa's *Rāmānujanavaratnamālikā*, Śrīnivāsa Rāghava's *Rāmānujasiddhāntasaṅgraha*, and Raghavācārya's *Śārīrakārthasaṅkṣepa*. Śrīnivāsācārya's *Yatīndramatadīpikā* summarizes the school's core tenets, while the now-lost *Ṣaḍarthasaṅkṣepa* by Śrīrāmamiśra addressed topics like Brahman, soul, ignorance, and liberation.

Works on Viśiṣṭādvaita categories include the anonymous *Padārthasaṅgraha*, the *Tattvatrayāvalī* by an unknown author, and *Cidacidīśvaratattvanirūpaṇa* by Varadanāyaka Sūri. Other treatises like *Tattvaviveka* by Lokācārya and *Tattvasaṅgraha* by Raṅgarāja analyze the school's metaphysics. The supremacy of Viṣṇu over other deities is asserted in texts such as *Tattvanirṇaya* by Vātsya Varadācārya, *Trimśacchlokī* by Śrīrāma Śarma, and *Viṣṇupāramyanirṇaya* by anonymous authors. Samarapungava's *Pañcamnāyasāra* and Paravastu Vedāntācārya's *Mahābhārata-tātparyarakṣā* cite the *Mahābhārata* to affirm Viṣṇu's supremacy.

Several tracts refute Advaita views, including *Vāditrayakhaṇḍana* by Kumāra Varadācārya (attributed to Vedāntadeśika) and the *Śatadūṣaṇi* by Vedāntadeśika himself. Critiques of Mīmāṃsā are found in *Mīmāṃsāpādukā* and *Seśvaramīmāṃsā*. The Nyāya tradition's inference-based proofs of God's existence are rejected in the anonymous *Īśvaramīmāṃsāvicāra*.

Vedāntadeśika's *Nyāyasiddhāñjana* interprets Vaiśeṣika doctrines in a Vedāntic light, while his *Tattvamuktākalāpa* with its commentary *Sarvārthasiddhi* is considered his magnum opus, critiquing all major philosophical schools.

The Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition emphasizes *prapatti* (self-surrender) over bhakti as the easier path to liberation. The *Rahasya-granthas* of Periyavāccan Pillai, Raṅgarāja, Pillai Lokācārya, and Vedāntadeśika discuss the significance of *prapatti*. Major texts on this theme include Vedāntadeśika's *Nyāsavimśati*, Vātsya Varadācārya's *Prapannapārijāta*, and Gopāladeśika's *Nikṣepacintāmaṇi*.

The three mantras (*mūlamantra*, *dvaya*, and *caramaśloka*), known as *Rahasya-traya*, are central to the tradition. Vedāntadeśika's *Rahasya-traya-sāra* offers a detailed exposition of their significance. Variations in interpreting the *Caramaśloka* highlight differences between the Vadakalai and Thenkalai sub-sects, particularly regarding the role of Lakṣmī in salvation.

Rāmānuja's *Nityagrantha* influenced later Śrīvaiṣṇava ritual practices. Works like Śrīvatsānkamiśra's *Pañcarātrarakṣā* and *Abhigamanasāra*, and Parāśarabhaṭṭa's *Nitya*, offer guidelines on daily worship. Despite sectarian differences, Viśiṣṭādvaita literature of this period enriched the school's philosophical, theological, and devotional foundations.

## Conclusion

Tamil Nadu's role in shaping Śrīvaiṣṇava thought was profound and enduring. The region not only preserved but also innovated the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition by blending Tamil devotionalism with Sanskrit philosophical rigor. The *Maṇipravāḷa* literature emerged as a powerful medium, making complex theological ideas accessible to a wider audience.

The theological contributions of Tamil scholars like Vedāntadeśika and Pillai Lokācārya strengthened the tradition's doctrinal foundation while fostering sectarian diversity through the Vaḍakalai and Teṅkalai divisions. The synthesis of Tamil and Sanskrit traditions ensured the continuity and expansion of Śrīvaiṣṇava philosophy, making Tamil Nadu a cornerstone of the school's intellectual and devotional heritage.

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