

How the Śrī Vaiṣṇava Sampradāya Split: Its Implications for ISKCON

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Executive Summary

- **Background of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava schism: 1**
 - The Śrī Vaiṣṇava *sampradāya* formally split into the Vadagalai and Teṅkalai sects 400 years ago (1650 CE).
 - But 700 years ago, the schism itself began to emerge when Vedānta Deśika identified 18 ideological differences with Pillailokācārya, both post-Rāmānujācārya-era *ācāryas*.
 - Vedānta Deśika became recognized as the *ācārya* of the Vaḍagalais, and Maṇavāla Mamuni, who appeared right after Vedānta Deśika, became recognized as *ācārya* of the Teṅkalais.
- **The differences were centered on:..... 1**
 - Does only Lord Nārāyaṇa award liberation or can Mother Lakṣmī award it as well?
 - Is any action required on the part of the *jīva* for attaining liberation?
 - Should the Sanskrit or Tamil Vedas be used as the basis for temple rituals and customs?
 - Vaḍagalais emphasized the Sanskrit Vedas; Teṅkalais emphasized the Tamil Vedas.
 - Both sides agreed and still agree that the two system of Vedas are fully compatible.
- **Conflicts, disunity, and tensions were caused by:..... 1 – 2**
 - Differences in ideologies.
 - Differences on account of which scripture each group used as the basis of temple rituals and *nitya-karmas* (daily prescribed duties).
 - Temple rights, practices, honors, and privileges in each group were based on different ideology and choice of scripture (Sanskrit Veda or Tamil Veda).
 - Vaḍagalai and Teṅkalai *ācāryas* made extensive changes to their social customs, temple rituals, tilak, honoring *mahā-prasādam*, etc., to make their identities explicitly different.
- **Similarities between Vaḍagalai-Teṅkalai schism and ISKCON’s liberal-conservative conflicts: .. 3**
 - ISKCON liberals and conservatives have been creating their own different customs: “Prabhu” instead of “Mata Ji”: use of Western dress in temple programs instead of *dhoti* and *saree*.
 - Different devotional practices and temple rituals are also emerging between the groups.
- **Ideological differences between ISKCON liberals and conservatives:..... 4 – 5**
 - Liberals tend to give more importance to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s prescriptive statements, and conservatives give more importance to his descriptive statements and *śāstra*.
 - Examples of prescriptive and descriptive statements:
 - Prescriptive statement example: “A brāhmaṇa should tell the truth.”
 - Descriptive statement example: “A brāhmaṇa is truthful.”
 - Śrī Baladeva Vidyabhūṣaṇa in his *Govinda Bhāṣya* commentary establishes that descriptive statements in *śāstra* are at least as important as prescriptive statements for understanding what is to be done and not to be done.
- **Schism: can it be avoided? 6**
 - Conflicts between ISKCON liberals and conservatives cannot be resolved without first settling the fundamental ideological differences between them.
 - The historic Vadagalai-Teṅkalai schism suggests that if a liberal-conservative split in ISKCON happens, it will be a parting of ways for good
 - The tensions will not end with the split and will continue to divert time from preaching.
 - If one group in ISKCON is deviating from *śāstra* and the *ācāryas*, schism may be the only alternative to preserve Śrīla Prabhupāda’s *guru-paramparā*.

Introduction

The Śrī Vaiṣṇava Sampradāya has two major sects, one is called Vaḍagalai and the other Teṅkalai, and the two have existed for almost 400 years and arose on account of a bitter schism. The foundation of this schism is based on eighteen ideological differences on the topic of *mokṣa-dharma* propounded by post Rāmānujācārya-era *ācāryas* Pillailokācārya and Vedānta Deśika during the 1200-1300 AD period.¹ During this period Vedānta Deśika was the first one to detect or disagree with certain works of Pillailokācārya. Maṇavāla Mamuni (Mahāmuni), who appeared right after Vedānta Deśika, primarily subscribed to the doctrines of Pillailokācārya.

The eighteen differences between the two groups of these *ācāryas* centered on the questions as to who can ultimately award liberation (Lord Nārāyaṇa alone or Mother Lakṣmī as well?) and whether action on the part of the *jīva* is required in obtaining liberation. Pillailokācārya and his followers maintained the view that liberation can be attained only by the mercy of Lord Nārāyaṇa and not by a *jīva's* actions (*mānjāra-nyāya* – like a kitten relying on a mother cat to lift it and move), whereas, Vedānta Deśika maintained that along with the mercy of Lord Nārāyaṇa, the *jīva* is required to do his bare minimal devotional activities (*markaṭa-nyāya* – like a baby monkey holding onto the mother monkey for conveyance). Pillailokācārya propounded that it is not even up to Mother Lakṣmī to influence Lord Nārāyaṇa in the matter of awarding liberation, whereas Vedānta Deśika categorically states that Mother Lakṣmī being the inseparable consort of the Lord also has equal powers to award shelter and liberation.

Differences in Scriptures

Apart from the ideological differences, there were differences of opinion on what *śāstras* are to be emphasized—Sanskrit Veda or Draviḍa Veda. The Draviḍa Veda (Tamil Veda) is also known as the *Nālayira Divya Prabandha*, composed by the Ālavāras, who were saints devoted to Lord Viṣṇu and widely revered in South India. The followers of Vedānta Deśika, from Kāncīpuram, northern part of Tamil Nadu, placed more importance on the Sanskrit Vedas as compared to the followers of Pillailokācārya and Maṇavāla Mamuni, from Śrī Raṅgam, southern Tamil Nadu, who placed more importance on the Draviḍa Vedas in their respective fights against the Advaitins and the Śaivaites.

Most of the of present day Śrī Vaiṣṇavas acknowledge that the formal distinguishing features of the schism were established only much later in time (after 1650 CE). Nonetheless, it appears that tensions started to build up right from the periods of the manifest presence of both Pillailokācārya and Vedānta Deśika. The Śrī Vaiṣṇavas in Kāncī, or the northern sect, found it necessary to use the Sanskrit Vedas as their primary weapon for overcoming the Advaitins, who were all experts in Sanskrit. The Śrī Vaiṣṇavas from the South found it necessary to use the Tamil Vedas because they had to deal primarily with Śaivaites, who were expert in the Tamil compositions of the Nāyanmārs, who were also widely revered saints like the Ālavāras but devoted to Lord Śiva.

The Schism

The differences in scripture combined with the differences in ideology between the two groups exacerbated the tensions between them and eventually drove a deep wedge into the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community, their daily practices of devotional service, temple services, temple rights, privileges,

¹ These 18 differences have been explained in great detail by various spiritual leaders belonging to both the sects. However, a brief summary or outline is available at: <http://sriramanujar.tripod.com/tVsv.html>

honors, and cultural activities. Śrīman M.A. Venkatakrishnan Swami (Teṅkalai), professor and former head of the department of Vaiṣṇavism, Madras University, Chennai, says that although the ideological differences originated during the 12th and 13th centuries, he believes that the circumstances leading to the formation of the schism were more on superficial issues associated with temple rights, practices, honors, and privileges and were formally established only after 1650 CE. He recollects that around 1650 CE, an incident involving the king of Mysore and the devotees (Teṅkalais) taking care of the Viṣṇu temple at Tirunārāyaṇapuram, Melkoṭe, was the first episode leading to the establishment of the formal schism.

The episode is as follows:

In the 1650's the Melkoṭe temple was originally managed and controlled by Teṅkalais (Professor M.A.V. Swami agrees that the Vaḍagalais would dispute his claim). The King of Mysore, being dissatisfied with the Teṅkalai devotees of that temple, conferred the rights of temple worship on the other group (Vaḍagalais), who supported the King. The Teṅkalais used to recite the *praṇāma mantra* of Maṇavāla Mamuni (*śrī-śaileśa dayā-pātram dhībhaktyādi guṇārṇavam. . .*) as part of their temple worship. However, with the transfer of rights to Vaḍagalais, the Vaḍagalais started to recite the *praṇāma mantra* of Vedānta Deśika (*śrī-rāmānuja-dayā-patram jñāna-vairāgya-bhūṣaṇam. . .*) and stopped the recitation of the *praṇāma mantra* of Maṇavāla Mamuni. This change disturbed the Teṅkalais, and they protested against it.

The King later realized his mistake in interfering with the temple worship and practices, and he then ordered both the *praṇāma mantras* to be recited as part of the worship. But the followers of Maṇavāla Mamuni and Vedānta Deśika became so alarmed over this incident that to ensure such a thing could never happen in the temples each had control over, they institutionalized their own groups with respect to worship processes and rights. Temples controlled by Teṅkalais followed a process that significantly differed from that of temples under Vaḍagalais. Thus, it was this incident at the Melkoṭe temple that triggered the formalization of the schism between Vaḍagalais and Teṅkalais all over South India, especially in Tamil Nadu.

In order to make their respective sects explicitly different from each other, their *ācāryas* introduced several variations and differences in their own practices: in the *tilak* that they wore, the *praṇāma mantras* that they recited, the choice of reciting Sanskrit Veda versus Divya Prabandham in temples, the number of times they would offer obeisances to the Lord and devotees (Vaḍagalais must offer two, or an even number or more to all, but Teṅkalais would offer only once), and even the first item of *mahā-prasādam* that they serve to devotees in a feast (Vaḍagalais will first serve ghee and rice whereas Teṅkalais must serve first a salted item such as a *sabji* followed by ghee and rice). Among such numerous variations between the two sects, it is still common that staunch members do not enter into marriages with each other or visit each other's *āśramas* or temples (certainly not officially).²

² Within each of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava Vaḍagalai and Teṅkalai sects, two significant subdivisions exist, based on whether the devotees follow *āgama śāstra* or *pāñcarātra śāstra*. Those who follow the Āgamas are called Vaikhānasa (The Tirupati Tirumalā temple is Vaikhānasa, the Śrī Raṅgam temple follows Pāñcarātra). The Vaikhānasas do not necessarily follow the Divya Prabandham nor are from the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *guru-paramparā* coming in the line of Śrī Rāmānujācārya but are recognized as Śrī Vaiṣṇavas nonetheless. The Vaikhānasas follow *āgama śāstra* because they are descendants of Vikhānasa Muni (the *founder-ācārya* of the *āgama śāstras* and an incarnation of Lord Brahmā, who received Vedic knowledge directly from Lord Nārāyaṇa). In addition, Vaikhānasa is acknowledged as bona fide by previous Śrī Vaiṣṇava *ācāryas* like Vedānta Deśika in *Śrī Pāñcarātra-raksā*.

ISKCON in Light of the Vaḍagalai-Teṅkalai Schism

Just as there are the Vaḍagalai and Teṅkalai factions among Śrī Vaiṣṇavas, ISKCON has its own factions, the most prominent of which are “liberals” and “conservatives.” As with liberal and conservative factions, or groups, in mainstream society outside of ISKCON, liberals and conservatives in ISKCON often come into conflict with each other on social and religious matters. There are some issues on which they are so divided that a schism could arise from the conflict.

Some tend to think that this tension is confined to small groups of devotees who are uncompromising or “extreme” in their views. And they further think that ISKCON’s leaders just have to somehow manage them. However, the so-called “moderate” views typically fall along a continuum of beliefs and ideas defined by the liberal and conservative positions. And since those at either end have established themselves as “thought leaders”, *yad yad ācarati śreṣṭhas*, the moderates are inevitably drawn toward one side or another, depending on their various dispositions. Thus, the terms “liberal” and “conservative” as used here do not apply merely to activists in either group but also to the moderates.

In this regard, the Vaḍagalai-Teṅkalai schism and its aftermath has some important similarities and differences with the tensions between ISKCON’s liberal and conservative groups. The similarities suggest the necessary conditions for a schism have been accumulating and are gradually approaching a point of sufficiency. The differences suggest that an ISKCON schism would be even more ruinous.

Similarities

Similarities include different groups in ISKCON developing their own distinctive dress, food habits, social customs and religious rituals not unlike how the Vaḍagalais and Teṅkalais did. Some devotees in ISKCON have rejected the traditional Indian *dhoti* and *sāḍī* (saree) as a marker of identity and instead prefer Western dress whereas other say we must dress with the *dhoti* and *sāḍī*. Some insist that women must be addressed as “Prabhu” and others insist on “Mata Ji”; hot debates continue to flare up around this one in particular.

And just as the Vaḍagalai and Teṅkalai split was preceded by differences over daily practices of devotional service, temple services, temple rights, privileges, honors, and cultural activities, ISKCON has been experiencing these as well. As to whether women should be allowed to be temple president, temple *pūjārī* or *dīkṣā-guru* are issues that have been continual flashpoints. More recently devotees have gone to the mainstream media to air their grievances over some of these issues. This suggests tensions are increasing.

Tensions also arise over temple rituals. At an ISKCON temple in India recently, a visiting ISKCON leader from the West changed the community practice of having a single line for offering flowers during *guru-pūjā* where men go first and women go last to two lines for men and women so that each can offer flowers at the same time. The rationale was that this was how Śrīla Prabhupāda engaged his disciples in ISKCON’s early days. Aside from other problems this has caused (like the occasional, accidental touching of renunciates by women), many in the community remain unhappy with the change.

Although such differences may seem trivial, the tensions that arise over them are not. As seen in the history of the Vaḍagalai-Teṅkalai schism, such tensions were at least as significant in driving a wedge between the two communities as those arising over ideological differences.

Differences

An important difference between the Vaḍagalai and Teṅkalai groups on the one hand and the liberal and conservative groups in ISKCON on the other is that the Vaḍagalai and Teṅkalai groups do not

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significantly differ in how they value the relative importance of the various teachings of their Founder-Ācārya, Śrī Rāmānujācārya (which teachings are more important?). But ISKCON's liberals and conservatives value the relative importance of Śrīla Prabhupāda's various teachings very differently. They also differ significantly in the weight they give to scripture itself.

Here are two statements that show how liberals and conservatives read Śrīla Prabhupāda differently.

That is very good proposal, to get Indian Pavilion for our Kirtana program. Please try for it. And we can exhibit some of our paintings, and pictures. When I go to Montreal, I shall take selected pictures from Jadurani and as well as some of the pictures by Gaurasundara and Govinda published in our BTG. Jadurani has now become a nice preacher. I have report from Satsvarupa that she gives lectures very nicely. If we open a pavilion I shall take Jadurani also at that time, so she will deliver nice lectures. I shall probably be coming there to Montreal by first week of June. (Letter to Mahapurusa, San Francisco, 28 March 1968)

Devahūti did not leave her house, because it is never recommended for a woman to leave her home. She is dependent. The very example of Devahūti was that when she was not married, she was under the care of her father, Svāyambhuva Manu, and then Svāyambhuva Manu gave her to Kardama Muni in charity. She was under the care of her husband in her youth, and then her son, Kapila Muni, was born. As soon as her son grew up, her husband left home, and similarly the son, after discharging His duty towards His mother, also left. She could also have left home, but she did not. Rather, she remained at home and began to practice *bhakti-yoga* as it was instructed by her great son, Kapila Muni, and because of her practice of *bhakti-yoga*, the entire home became just like a flower crown on the river Sarasvatī. (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 3.33.13 purport)

The first statement is a letter that illustrates how Śrīla Prabhupāda engaged his female disciples. They could give lectures, they preached, and they did many other things. And Śrīla Prabhupāda praised their expertise. The second statement is from a *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* purport. Therein, he takes the example of Mother Devahūti to illustrate the rule from *Manu-saṁhitā* that a woman should never be independent and always remain at home.

Liberals will say that only the first statement gives guidance to ISKCON's devotees, because it shows how Śrīla Prabhupāda actually engaged his disciples. They say that Śrīla Prabhupāda never engaged his female disciples in the way described by the second statement. Hence, they say it is not meant to be followed in ISKCON. And they say the same thing about the scripture the second statement is based on.

Conservatives however say that the services Śrīla Prabhupāda engaged women in that are not in line with the second statement are temporary adjustments that should be discontinued at some point. They say that just because Śrīla Prabhupāda did not immediately require his disciples to follow something does not mean he did not want them to eventually follow it. They also say that despite whatever standards we are following at present, the standards Śrīla Prabhupāda really wanted us to follow are from the scriptures and his purports to them.

Thus, ISKCON's liberals and conservatives give more emphasis to very different statements of Śrīla Prabhupāda's, and this leads to some very different ideas of what kinds of customs, rights, temple rituals and devotional practices that ISKCON should have. Consequently, much tension and conflict arise from the clashes of these different conceptions of what ISKCON ought to be.

Karma Mīmāṃsā versus Vedānta

Disputes between liberals and conservatives over the relative importance of Śrīla Prabhupāda's various statements closely resemble the historical ideological dispute between followers of Karma-mīmāṃsā and Vedānta on the relative importance of prescriptive statements found in *śāstra* versus descriptive statements. Prescriptive statements explicitly recommend some action—"A *brāhmaṇa*

must tell the truth.” Descriptive statements do not make any such explicit recommendation—“A *brāhmaṇa* is truthful.” Similarly, in the ISKCON context some devotees say that what Śrīla Prabhupāda had his disciples do is more important than anything in his descriptions of Vedic culture or *śāstra* if he did not explicitly engage his disciples according to whatever rules those descriptions might imply.

As to which of these two kinds of statements from *śāstra* have more authority—prescriptive versus descriptive—the followers of Karma-mīmāṃsā teach that only the prescriptive statements of *śāstra* are of value, not the descriptive statements. But the followers of Vedānta, which include all Vaiṣṇava *ācāryas*, refute this and give more importance to the descriptive statements.

Śrī Baladeva Vidyabhūṣaṇa in his *Govinda Bhāṣya* commentary on *Vedānta-sūtra* 1.1.1.3, quoting the sage Jaimini, notes the *karma-mīmāṃsā* position: *āmnāyasya kriyārthatvād anārthākhyam atad-arthanam*, “The scriptures teach us pious duties. Any scriptural passage that does not teach us our duty is a senseless waste of our time” (*Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* 1.2.1). And also: *tad-bhūtānām kriyārthena samāmnāyo 'rthasya tan-nimittatvāt*, “Just as a verb gives meaning to a sentence, in the same way instructions for action give meaning to the statements of the scriptures” (*Pūrva-mīmāṃsā* 1.1.25).³ In other words, prescriptive statements are the only statements in scripture that are of value. Descriptive statements, which do not prescribe action, are unhelpful.

But Baladeva Vidyabhūṣaṇa responds to this objection with the analogy of a description of a hidden treasure in one’s house and a description of its location. He argues that although it is descriptive, one nonetheless derives great benefit from it. Similarly, descriptions of the Supreme Personality of Godhead and *Brahman* in the *Upaniṣads* are useful, as they motivate action and give guidance in attaining them. He gives a further example: “the description ‘this is not a snake, but a rope only partly seen in the darkness’ is useful and a great relief from fear.” Thus, our *ācāryas* have rejected the idea that prescriptive statements of the scriptures are more important than descriptive statements.

Actually, there are very few prescriptive statements in the Vedas for taking up *bhakti*. Instead many prescriptive statements for fruitive activities may be found therein. Therefore, Lord Kṛṣṇa in *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.42 – 43 criticizes the *veda-vāda-ratās*, so-called knowers of the Vedas, for their mistaken belief that the goal of life is in attaining higher birth, wealth, good progeny, elevation to heavenly planets, etc. Thus, two verses later (2.45), Lord Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, *trai-guṇya-viṣayā vedā*, the Vedas deal chiefly with the three modes of nature. However, because the *Upaniṣads* and other Vedic literature are full of descriptions of *Brahman* and the Supreme Lord, the practice of *bhakti-yoga* is derived especially from descriptive statements from the scriptures.

We also see that even in the adjustments Śrīla Prabhupāda made for his Western disciples that he indicated they should eventually follow the standards given in *śāstra*.

For example, in a letter to a disciple, Śrīla Prabhupāda wrote,

That the *brahmacāriṇī āśrama* is a good success is very good news. But the best thing will be if the grown-up *brahmacāriṇīs* get married. According to Vedic culture, woman is never to remain independent. I shall be glad if the *brahmacāriṇīs* can have nice husbands, and live as *grhasthas*. (Letter to Satsvarūpa, August 8, 1968)

Here, Śrīla Prabhupāda contrasts the time, place, and circumstance adjustment (*brahmacāriṇī āśrama*) with the standard from scripture, which is all women should be married. The scriptural

³ Acarya.nfo – Infobase.

reference he alludes to is *Manu-smṛti* 9.3, which is a descriptive statement: *na strī svātantryam-arhati*, “a woman is never entitled to independence.”

In this letter, Śrīla Prabhupāda considers the *brahmacāriṇī āśrama* a temporary measure that should eventually be discontinued in favor of the standard given in scripture. ISKCON’s conservatives thus consider *śāstra* and Śrīla Prabhupāda’s explanations and descriptions of Kṛṣṇa consciousness based on *śāstra* as having more authority than his prescriptive statements.

Moreover, scripture in the conservative view is indispensable—*tasmāc chāstram pramāṇam te karyākarya-vyavasthitau* (BG 16.24). As per Śrīla Prabhupāda, “the *śāstra* is the center of all” (CC Madhya 20.352 purport). Otherwise, if it were believed that Śrīla Prabhupāda gave some standard not found in the *śāstra*, then he would be committing *niyamāgrahaḥ*, or rejecting the rules and regulations of the *śāstras* and acting independently or whimsically (*Nectar of Instruction*, text 2). This is also known as *śāstra-viruddha*, or opposition to the *śāstras*, and all *ācāryas* consider this a great offense.

This discussion suggests that those in ISKCON who give more importance to Śrīla Prabhupāda’s prescriptive statements over his descriptive statements or those of scripture are on a wrong path. And continuing on that path will lead the rest of ISKCON further astray.

Conclusion

The Śrī Sampradāya as a whole has been able to continue with the variety of Vaḍagalai, Teṅkalai and Vaikhānasa only because of the fact that all these differences are nonetheless supported by *śāstra*, *sādhu* and *guru-vākya* (for example, Vedānta Deśika acknowledges Vaikhānasa as a *pramāṇa* in his text in *Pāñcarātra-raksā*). Although the ideological differences between them are non-trivial, these sects have nonetheless survived because of their adherence to *śāstra*.

Nevertheless, if a split is allowed in ISKCON, then it will be a parting of ways for good, as was the case in the Śrī Vaiṣṇava schism. To distinguish themselves from each other, the Vaḍagalai and Teṅkalai communities incorporated differences in their daily practices, social customs, temple rituals, and so forth. Persons born into either community will never agree to have common *tilak* yet do not know why they are Teṅkalai or Vaḍagalai. But they still feel the separatism. So, 400 years from now, when the reasons for ISKCON’s schisms will be all but unknown, what will be the situation of someone who is born into or comes to either of the split communities? The risk is much higher than the benefit.

However, sometimes, regrettably, a schism is the best alternative—especially in cases where one of the groups has in fact deviated from the *sampradāya*. As indicated in the discussion on the relative importance of descriptive versus prescriptive statements, there is reason to believe that one or more sections of ISKCON’s devotees have unwittingly adopted a means of understanding that has been rejected by our *ācāryas*. Surviving spiritually may require that some groups go away.

Unless the underlying ideological differences between liberals and conservatives are addressed now, members of ISKCON can expect that social disturbance in ISKCON will increase. As seen in the Vaḍagalai-Teṅkalai schism, tremendous time and effort that could have been used for preaching continues to be diverted to internal conflicts—even after 400 years, when hardly anyone remembers what the original conflict was about. Yet schism might turn out to be the only way that some of ISKCON’s members can save themselves from deviation and properly carry forward Lord Caitanya’s preaching mission.