Local Advaita Vedānta Monastic Tradition in Kerala: Locating, mapping, networking

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Abstract

The article concerns the hitherto unstudied regional variant of the Advaita Vedānta monasticism of the Nampūtiri tradition in Kerala. The main objective of the paper is to present the spatial distribution of the Advaita Vedānta *maṭhas* (skr. *maṭha* – "monastery") in the state of Kerala (South India). Through the cartographic visualisation, I intend to prove that the monastic tradition in question has, in the past, created a network of intricate ritualistic, economic, social and political interrelations spreading across whole Kerala region. The spatial analysis will allow to evaluate the qualities of the maṭhas' geographical distribution.

Keywords: *monasticism, Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara, Nampūtiri brahmins, Kerala, Thrissur*

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1   Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the topic of the hitherto unstudied regional Advaita Vedānta monasticism[1] of Nampūtiri brahmins in Kerala (South India)[2]. My primary objective in the article is to recognise and locate this local tradition on the map of South India. While we have a number of studies concerning such famous monastic centres, aspiring to the title of "thrones of knowledge" (skr. *vidyāpīṭhas*), as Govardhana, Śārada, Dvāraka, Jyotirmaṭha and Kāmakoṭi Pīṭha, there is hardly any concerned with a lesser known place like Thrissur (mal. Tṛśśūr)[3] in central Kerala (mal. Kēraḷam), which constitutes an independent regional variant of the Advaita Vedānta monasticism. The origin of the Keralan Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition is associated with Śaṅkara, and narrated in the local accounts of the philosopher's life. This local literary tradition contrasts with the broadly known, canonical hagiographic tradition of Śaṅkara, which states that during "the conquest of the quarters" (skr. *digvijaya*), the philosopher reached four corners of the Indian Peninsula, where he established four monastic centres (skr. *maṭha* – "monastery") to propagate the Advaita Vedānta doctrine. These were Govardhana (on the East), Śārada (on the South), Dvāraka (in the West) and Jyotirmaṭha Pīṭha (on the North)[4]. Whereas, according to the local accounts

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[1]   This monastic order is directly associated with the great Indian philosopher – Śaṅkara. Śaṅkara was a propagator of the non-dualistic doctrine of Advaita Vedānta. He lived most probably ca. 788–820 and was born in Kalady (mal. Kālaṭi, Kerala, South India). Śaṅkara is considered to be a founder of the pan-Indian monastic order within the Advaita Vedānta doctrine – called Daśanāmī-Sampradāya (skr. *daśanāmī* – "he who has [one of the] ten names", *sampradāya* – "tradition"). After initiation into this order, an ascetic is given a new name – one of the ten names. H. Kulke, D. Rothermund, *A History of India*, pp. 141–142.

[2]   It needs to be highlighted that my study concerns the Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition in Kerala but only within one particular local community, i.e. within the community of Nampūtiri brahmins.

[3]   The geographic naming, including the names of the cities and villages, is a problematic issue in the landscape of Kerala due to its complex past and different foreign influences which were present there across the centuries. Thus, what we witness is a kind of historic palimpsest – the geographic Malayalam (*malayāḷam*) names are influenced by such languages as Tamil, Portuguese, Dutch and English. The modern maps (modelled on English maps) apply usually the simplified description in Latin script, with English name forms. Because of the broad use of maps in this paper I will use the English name forms with Malayalam forms in the in brackets when first mentioned.

[4]   V. Sundaresan, *Conflicting Hagiographies and History: The Place of Śaṅkaravijaya Texts in Advaita Tradition*, p. 110.

from Kerala, Śaṅkara founded all four *maṭhas* (monasteries)[5] in one city only – i.e. in Thrissur[6]. The established institutions were the: Northern Monastery (mal. Vaṭakke Maṭham), Middle Monastery (mal. Naṭuvil Maṭham), In-between Monastery (mal. Iṭayil Maṭham) and Southern Monastery (mal. Tekkē Maṭham). Subsequently, the philosopher allegedly achieved *videha-ñkti* (liberation after death) in the Śaiva Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple, located near to the Thrissur monasteries. As the heads of the monastic institutions in Thrissur, Śaṅkara was said to appoint his four main disciples (Sureśvara, Padmapāda, Hastāmalaka, Toṭaka)[7], who afterwards passed *maṭhas* in charge to the community of Nampūtiri brahmins.

Three monasteries have survived in Thrissur until today, while one was relocated outside the city (Iṭayil Maṭham). Naṭuvil and Tekkē Maṭham are still active monastic centres. Vaṭakke Maṭham was transformed into a school around the time of the 17th century, where Vedas are taught in a traditional system (skr. *vedapāṭhaśālā*), as it is claimed by the Nampūtiri brahmins in charge of the institution. What is peculiar about the monastic tradition in question, is the prescription according to which the *maṭhas* were supposed to be intended only for Nampūtiri brahmins[8]. Furthermore, the embracing of the *saṃnyāsa* ("renunciation of the world") there, is possible only for Nampūtiris from a few specific families – i.e. from Śukapuram, Peruvanam and Iriññālakkuṭa *grāma* ("village"), as I was informed by the current Naṭuvil Maṭham Svāmiyār at the time of my visit (2018) – Maṟavancērry Tekkēṭattu Nīlakaṇṭhan Bhāratīkaḷ[9].

The historic circumstances for the rise of four Advaita Vedānta monastic centres in Thrissur remain still unrecognised and dating uncertain. Due to no veritable historic data, legends still remains in circulation, which when

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[5] Institution of a *maṭha* in the Keralan context is discussed by Cezary Galewicz in: C. Galewicz, *Żyjące Biblioteki Indii. Rygweda braminów Nambudiri*, pp. 73–74.

[6] An alternative variant of this legend circulates in Kerala – it relates that Śaṅkara's disciples founded four monasteries in Thrissur.

[7] The first *Svāmiyār* (head of a *maṭha*) in the *paramparā* of the Vaṭakke Maṭham (from Malayalam: "Northern Maṭha") was said to be Toṭaka, of the Naṭuvil Maṭham ("Middle Maṭha") Sureśvara, of the Tekkē Maṭham ("Southern Maṭha") Padmapāda and of the Iṭayil Maṭham ("In-between Maṭha") Hastāmalaka.

[8] As claim Nampūtiris linked with those institutions.

[9] To this peculiar custom refers one normative text of the Keralan Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition – *Sanyāsakalpam* (first folio, manuscripts M79, M91, 184 available in Vaṭakke Maṭham Brahmasvam Vedic Research Centre, Thrissur). Text is unpublished, remains only in the form of a palm-leaf manuscript. Manuscript consulted by the author.

persistently repeated, obscure history. Thus, following the popular accounts, the establishment of those institutions is ascribed to Śaṅkara and the dating estimated for the 9th century. However, it seems rather doubtful that those centres trace their origin so far in the past, as claim historians Prof. M. G. S. Narayanan and Prof. Kesavan Veluthat (in personal communication).

2   Locating, mapping, networking

In the most of Śaṅkara's hagiographies, philosophers' pilgrimages are a dominant topos of the narrative. Following the canonical accounts of philosopher's life, during a journey throughout the whole of India, Śaṅkara was said to travel along with his disciples to the four corners of the Indian Peninsula and to defeat doctrinal opponents representing other schools of thought in philosophical disputes[10]. During his triumphant tour (skr. *dig-vijaya* – "conquest of the [four] quarters") he was said to establish four *vidyāpīṭhas* ("seats of learning"), meant for propagation of the Advaita Vedānta doctrine, each affiliated with one *dhāman* (skr. *dhāman* – "seat of the gods", "sacred place of pilgrimage")[11].

Similarly, the predominant theme of the local hagiographies of Śaṅkara, originating in Kerala, are the philosopher's peregrinations, i.e. his movement through space, through space where he leaves traces. And thus, according to the local literary tradition, Śaṅkara's pilgrimages culminate in establishing four main *vidyāpīṭhas* in the city of Thrissur. Regional accounts of philosopher's life transpose the ideological concept of the pan-Indian triumphant tour from macrospace (Indian Peninsula) into microspace, i.e. the region of Kerala. Therefore the basic tool to examine the regional Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition, imprinted in the topographies of Keralan hagiographies, appears to be the map. Thus, while discussing the Nampūtiri Advaita Vedānta monasticism, primarily we need to precisely locate it on the map of Kerala.

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[10] W. R. Antarkar, *Śaṅkara-Vijayas. A Comparative and a Critical Study.* Appendix, p. 103.
[11] W. S. Sax, *Conquering the Quarters: Religion and Politics in Hinduism*, p. 47.

3   Thrissur and four vernacular *maṭhas*

The city of Thrissur (mal. Tṛśśūr) is located in central Kerala, in the Thrissur Disctrict (it is the headquarter of the district), ca. 20 kilometres east – in a straight line – off the shore of the Arabian Sea, and west of the mountain range of Western Ghats[12]. The city is situated ca. 300 kilometres southeast of Kasaragod (mal. Kāsargōḍ), ca. 210 kilometres south-east of Kannur (mal. Kaṇṇūr), ca. 120 kilometres south-east of Kozhikode (mal. Kōḻikkōṭuˇ), ca. 85 kilometres north of Kochi (mal. Kocci), ca. 130 kilometres north-west of Kottayam (mal. Kōṭṭayam) and 280 kilometres north-west of Thiruvananthapuram (mal. Tiruvanantapuram)- the capital of the state[13]. Noteworthy is the spatial organisation of the city – it is built around the hillock which seats the complex of the important *śaiva* religious center – Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple[14].


Map 1: Location of Kerala on the map of India (commons.wikimedia.org)

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[12] A. S. Menon, *Kerala District Gazetteers: Trichur*, 1962.

[13] Google Earth, [www 01] (access: 28.01.2019).

[14] There are six inscriptions in the Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple belonging to the 11th and 12th centuries. They refer either to the foundation of structures or about the implementation of certain rules and regulations. The city finds earliest reference in them as "Tiruśivapērūr". Thus inscriptional data points only to the 11th century CE as the possible beginning of the temple – notes Prof. T. R. Venugopalan from Thrissur in personal communication.

The shrine thus marks the centre of the town. Around the temple, outside its bordering walls, there is an open space which is said to have been, in the past, a teak forest – hence comes its name Tēkkinkāṭu˘ (from mal. "teak forest")[15]. The hill is nowadays surrounded by a concrete traffic circle – Svarāj Round – from where other roads diverge in all directions[16].
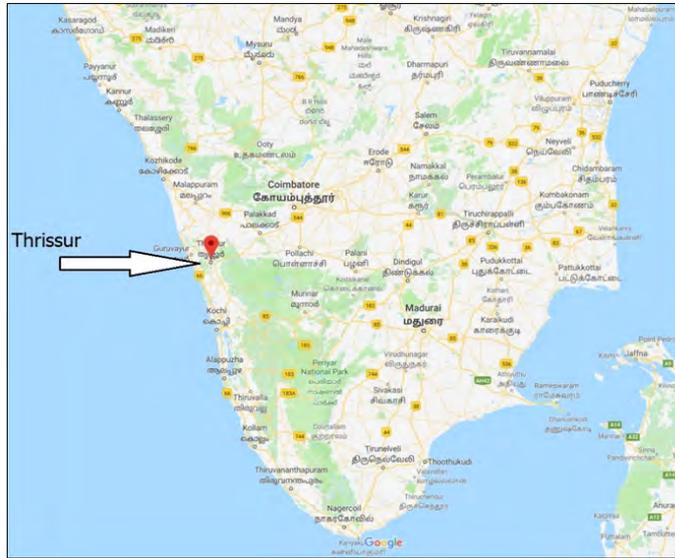
Map 2: Location of Thrissur city in Kerala (map by the author based on Google Maps)

Just less than five hundred meters away from the Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple, three Advaita Vedānta *maṭhas* – allegedly established by Śaṅkara – are located[17]. According to the regional hagiographic tradition of Śaṅkara, the philosopher is believed to have founded all four Advaita monasteries in the city of Thrissur only. These were, as previously mentioned, the Northern Monastery (Vaṭakke Maṭham), Middle Monastery (Naṭuvil Maṭham),

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[15] For developments in the city of Thrissur such as clearing the ground around the Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple from a teak forest, renovation of the Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple, initiating the famous Pūram Festival held annually at this temple until today, laying the roads around the temple – Rājā Rāma Varma popularly known as Śaktan Tampurān is credited (reign: 1790–1805). A. Achyuthan, T. S. Prabhu Balagopal, *An Architectural Guide of Thrissur*, pp. 4–5.

[16] A. Achyuthan, T. S. Prabhu Balagopal, op. cit., p. 1.

[17] Measurements conducted through the platform Google Earth: [www 01] (access 29.01.2019).

In-between Monastery (Iṭayil Maṭham) and Southern Monastery (Tekkē Maṭham). Subsequently, the philosopher is believed to have achieved *samādhi* (liberation after death) in the nearby Śaiva Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple. In the complex of *śaiva* Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple, one can find an erected stone platform commemorating Śaṅkara's *samādhi*. The undated Śaṅkara's platform bears two attributes: *śaṅkha* ("conch-shell") and *cakra* ("discus") – noteworthy, these are in fact typical attributes of Viṣṇu in Hindu iconography[18].

Till today, three maṭhas remain in Thrissur: Vaṭakke Maṭham ("Northern Monastery"), Naṭuvil Maṭham ("Middle Monastery") and Tekkē Maṭham ("Southern Monastery")[19]. Vaṭakke Maṭham functions nowadays as the *vedapāṭhaśālā* run by Nampūtiri brahmins (school where Vedas are taught in a traditional system) and is known under the name Vaṭakke Maṭham Brahmasvam (often shortened to Brahmasvam Maṭham; skr. *brahmasva* – "property of brahmins"). Naṭuvil and Tekkē Maṭhams are still active Nampūtiri Advaita Vedānta monastic institutions.

The map below shows the spatial arrangement of the monasteries and their location in relation to Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple. The *maṭhas* are built in a peculiar line of order which is determined by its names. Vaṭakke Maṭham ("Northern Monastery", currently Brahmasvam Maṭham) is situated in the north, Tekkē Maṭham ("Southern Monastery") is situated in the south, and Naṭuvil Maṭham ("Middle Monastery) is located in the middle of those two *maṭhas*. This orientation agrees with the cardinal directions. *Maṭhas* are built on the bank of Paṭiññāṟŭ Ciṟa ("Western Pond")[20].

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[18] There is one particular feature which differentiates the Keralan Advaita Vedānta monastic tradition of Nampūtiri brahmins from the pan-Indian Daśanāmī Sampradāya – its religious orientation. Nampūtiri *saṃnyāsins* are all declared *vaiṣṇavas*, while the pan-Indian tradition of Daśanāmī-Saṃnyāsins is rather of *śaiva* orientation. As I have observed during my fieldwork, *pūjā-mūrtis* ("worship idols") in all maṭhas of Keralan Advaita renunciant tradition are the avatāras (skr. *avatāra* – incarnation) of the god Viṣṇu. Moreover, one of the Keralan Śaṅkara hagiographies – *Śaṅkarācāryacarita* by Govindanātha, roughly dated to ca. 17th century, composed in Sanskrit – in its final passage features Śaṅkara to attain *paramānanda* in the Vaṭakkunnāthan Temple (from skr. "supreme felicity", "Supreme Spirit", "soul of the universe") only after composing there a hymn in praise of Viṣṇu: *deśikendro mahāyogī stotraṃ kurvan sa vaiṣṇavam | viveśa paramānandaṃ bhānubimbāntarasthitam || 9.64.||*. W. R. Antarkar (ed.), *Śaṅkarācāryacarita (Govindanātha)*, [in:] "Bharatiya Vidya" 52 (1–4), p. 136.

[19] The *pūjā-mūrtis* of the monasteries are as follows: Dakṣiṇāmūrti and Veṇugopāla for Vaṭakke Maṭham, Pārthasārathi for Naṭuvil Maṭham, Narasiṃha for Tekkē Maṭham, Rāma for Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham (Iṭayil Maṭham). The branch *maṭhas* have the same *pūjā-mūrtis* as their "parent" monasteries.

[20] All maps showing the spatial arrangement of the monastic institutions in question are
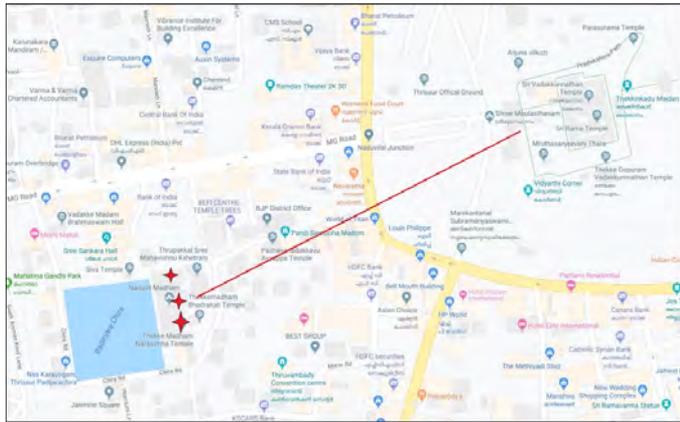
Map 3: Location of *maṭhas* in Thrissur (map by the author based on Google Maps)

In the course of history, Nampūtiri maṭhas were probably deriving benefits like donations and land grants. Some donations are proved by the judgments of the Madras High Court and the Kerala State Court, which relate temple heads' litigations and claims for such proprieties as lands, temples and temples' incomes[21]. They were also managing (and some of them are still managing) a number of temples. Monasteries were also establishing other affiliated *maṭhas* (mal. *kīḻēṭam maṭham*), most probably due to privileges and ordinances obtained from local rulers[22,23]. The practice of founding *kīḻēṭam maṭhams* seems to be a kind of tendency of network building, through an expression of "branching off", in order to establish some sort of dependance.

Thereby, the monastic institutions in question seem to have established a peculiar network of complex religious, ritualistic, economic and social inter-

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prepared by the author. For this purpose I have used the Google Maps platform in combination with graphic programs. Google Maps, [www 02] (access: 27.02.2019).

[21] For example, Madras High Court, Naduvil Madam Parameswara vs T. P. S. Issoop Rowthan And Ors. decided on 16 September, 1924, [www 03] (access: 25.02.2019); Privy Council, Narayana Bharatigal alias Kappiyur Swamiyar Avergal; Rama Bharatigal alias Pallipat Swamiyar Avergal vs. Ittuli Amma, decided on November 02, 1916, [www 05] (access: 25.02.2019).

[22] C. Galewicz, *Żyjące Biblioteki Indii. Rygweda braminów*, p. 74.

[23] For instance, it is related by the local accounts that Tṛkkaikkāṭṭu Maṭham was established in Pariyapuram village on order of Zamorin (mal. Sāmūtiri – title of the king of Kōḻikkōṭu) who is believed to have donated the land and financial sources for that purpose. However, it is not specified which Zamorin. Similar uncertainty applies in case of other monasteries.

relations spreading across whole Kerala region – from North to South. The objective of the following section is to make a spatial visualisation of the network of affiliated Advaita Vedānta monasteries of Nampūtiri tradition in Kerala[24].

4   Northern Monastery (Vaṭakke Maṭham)

Currently, the Vaṭakke Maṭham isn't a monastic institution anymore – it was transformed into *vedapāṭhaśālā* called Brahmasvam Maṭham[25]. However, a continuation of Vaṭakke Maṭham's ascetic tradition is believed to remain in the northern part of Kerala. The institution which is said to continue Vaṭakke's lineage is called Iṭanīr Maṭham ("*maṭham* [which has on] its left [side] a river"[26]) – it is located in a small village Edneer (mal. Iṭanīr), ca. 10 kilometres to the east of the city of Kasaragod, in the Kasaragod district. The *maṭham* is picturesquely situated on the plains, by the side of the river Madhuvahini (the name of the river comes from Sanskrit and means "honey-carrier", "honey river", "river [flowing with] a sweet nectar" – skr. *madhu-vāhinī*), surrounded by the forest and paddy fields. The monastery is said to be of the Toṭaka *paramparā*[27]. The inside temple of the monastery is dedicated to two deities: Dakṣiṇāmūrti and Gopālakṛṣṇa[28] – noteworthily, the only person allowed to perform *pūjā* (the ritual of worshiping the deities) in this temple is the head[29] of the monastery (mal. *svāmiyār*)[30]. The hill

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[24] I enumerate in this section monasteries which have remained. Presented data concerning four primary *maṭhas* in Thrissur and its branches were gathered during my recent fieldwork in Kerala in 2018.

[25] Dating of Vaṭakke Maṭham itself and its transformation into *vedapāṭhaśālā* remains uncertain. However, Brahmasvam Maṭham is discussed on the basis of historical record in the book by Ananda E. Wood *Knowledge before printing and after. The Indian tradition in changing Kerala* – therefore it is certain that it has already existed in the late 19th century. A. E. Wood, *Knowledge Before Printing and After. The Indian Tradition in Changing Kerala*, pp. 26–43.

[26] The name of the village and of the *maṭha* comes from Kannada: *eḍa* – "left side", *nīru* – "water".

[27] As its "parent monastery" – Vaṭakke Maṭham in Thrissur.

[28] The inside temple of the "parent monastery" – Vaṭakke Maṭham in Thrissur – is dedicated to the same pair of deities.

[29] Keśavānanda Bhāratī is the current head of Iṭanīr Maṭham (at the time of my visit in 2018).

[30] It is peculiar custom because, according to the Hindu orthopraxis, after being initiated into *saṃnyāsa* (renunciation) person withdraws oneself from all ritualistic activities. G. Flood, *Hinduizm*, pp. 95–96.

located on the northern side of the monastery[31] seats the Viṣṇumaṅgala Temple. Two main *mūrtis* (idols) of the temple are of Mahāviṣṇu (idol faces east) and Dakṣiṇāmūrti (idol faces south). On the temple premises (on the western side of the temple) there is a *samādhi* of a local ascetic known as Nīramuni. The Viṣṇumaṅgala Temple is managed by Iṭanīr Maṭham[32].

According to the local accounts (which are in circulation in Edneer, as well as in Thrissur), in the past, a Śivaḷḷī brahmin[33] was believed to be the head of Vaṭakke Maṭham in Thrissur. For some reason, he didn't initiate any *saṃnyāsin,* as his successor[34] left the monastery, which then became a *veda-pāṭhaśālā* nowadays known as Brahmasvam Maṭham, and set out for the *yātrā* (pilgrimage) directing to the north – as the popular legend relates[35]. During his pilgrimage, he was believed to reach Edneer in the north of Kerala, and to establish a new *maṭham* (branch of Vaṭakke Maṭham) there, due to the request of the local Yādava community. The local account relates that afterwards, Śivaḷḷī Svāmiyār was granted land and necessary resources by the Yādava community and Rājā of Kuṃbaḷa[36] to build a monastery in Edneer[37]. This is how the local oral tradition explains the origin of the Iṭanīr Maṭham in the Kasaragod district – unfortunately no reliable historic documents concerning the establishment of this institution are known to me at the current stage of my research.

Iṭanīr Maṭham is said to have a branch *maṭham* (mal. *kīḻēṭam maṭham*) in Taliparamba (mal. Taḷippaṟampu˘), in the Kannur district, ca. 80 kilometres south of Edneer. It is situated in close proximity to the famous Tṛccaṃbaram Śrīkṛṣṇa Temple. It is believed that several *samādhis* of previous Iṭanīr Maṭham *Svāmiyārs* are located on the premises of the branch *maṭha*[38].

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[31] The temple is situated just 200 meters away from the maṭham.

[32] Information provided by Keśavānanda Bhāratī – Iṭanīr Maṭham Svāmiyār in 2016.

[33] Hindu community which comes from Tulu Nadu.

[34] There are two versions of the legend which are known to me. One states that the *Svāmiyār* left the *maṭham* because of the conflict with the other heads of the Thrissur monasteries who were Nampūtiris and thus didn't accept the Śivaḷḷī *Svāmiyār*. Second relates that he didn't give *saṃnyāsa* to anyone because he did not want to cause any suffering to a mother of a potential ascetic. [Local accounts gathered by the author during fieldwork in Kerala in 2018].

[35] The narrative apparently forms also an important part of the Brahmasvam Maṭham's foundation myth.

[36] No information which specifies which particular king.

[37] Iṭanīr Maṭham leaflet.

[38] There are twelve *samādhis* on the premises of Iṭanīr Maṭham in Edneer (only two – the most recent – are dated).

Iṭanīr Maṭham Svāmiyār sojourns in this monastery once a year during the annual Tṛccaṃbaram Śrīkṛṣṇa Temple festival held in March[39]. Thus, the *maṭhas* seem today to live a fragmentary life tied to the periodical presence of the *Svāmiyār*.
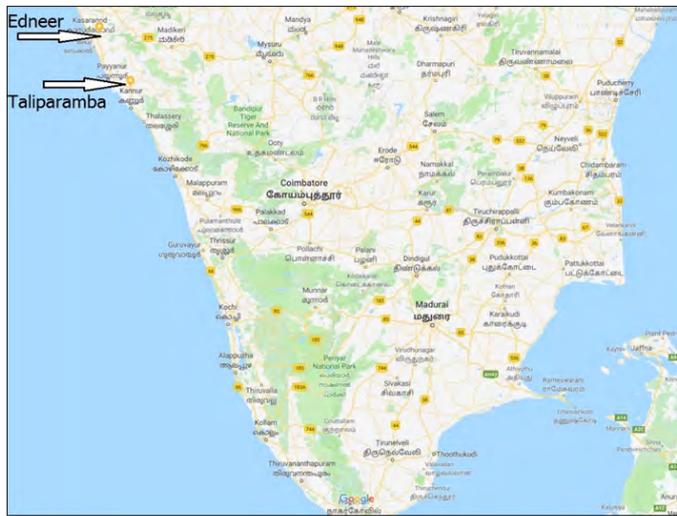
Map 4: Location of Iṭanīr *Maṭhas* (map by the author based on Google Maps)

The peculiar feature of the Iṭanīr Maṭham is certainly the fact that the *Svāmiyārs* of this monastery are Śivaḷḷī brahmins and not Nampūtiris – as claimed by Iṭanīr Maṭham Svāmiyār Keśavānanda Bhāratī. However, despite that, it is considered to be a continuation of the Vaṭakke Maṭham ascetic lineage either by Nampūtiri *Svāmiyārs* from other monasteries (i.e. Naṭuvil, Tṛkkaikkāṭṭu, Muñciṟa and Tekkē Maṭham) and Iṭanīr Maṭham *Svāmiyārs* themselves. This direct affiliation was very recently to be observed during the official ceremony of the unveiling the newly built statue of Śaṅkara in front of Tekkē Maṭham in Thrissur. Iṭanīr Maṭham Svāmiyār was invited there to officiate in the consecration ceremony, while *Svāmiyārs* from Tekkē and Muñciṟa Maṭham were delivering blessing speeches[40].

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[39] Information provided in the interview by Iṭanīr Maṭham Svāmiyār Keśavānanda Bhāratī in 2016.

[40] Information obtained form Tekkē Maṭham manager during fieldwork in 2018.

5   Middle Monastery (mal. Naṭuvil Maṭham)

Naṭuvil Maṭham is one of the four monasteries established – allegedly by Śaṅkara – in Thrissur. It has survived until today, and it remains an active monastic institution. Dating of Naṭuvil Maṭham remains still uncertain. In the inside temple of the monastery – Pārthasārathi Temple – in Thrissur, there is an inscription which was estimated by Prof. Kesavan Veluthat to come from ca. the 18th–19th century (in personal communication: 10.12.2018, Kodungallur). The inscription is in modern Malayalam script, in two languages: Sanskrit and Malayalam. According to Prof. Veluthat, it is possible that the inscription concerns the rebuilding of the *maṭham* – putting down the old structure and building a new one[41]. However, we can certainly trace Thrissur Naṭuvil Maṭham's history back in time until the year 1846, due to the recorded judgment of the Privy Council in the case Naduvil Madan Parameswar Bharatigal vs. Tpsissoop Rowther decided on September 16, 1924. It is clearly stated in the judgement that according to the presented exhibits, one Viṣṇu Bhāratī was the Thrissur Naṭuvil Maṭham *Svāmiyār* in the year 1846[42].

Naṭuvil Maṭham is believed to belong to the Sureśvara *paramparā*[43]. The monastery is said to possesses one branch *maṭham* in the city of Thiruvananthapuram (mal. Tiruvanantapuram) – the capital of Kerala state. Thiruvananthapuram is ca. 280 kilometres south of Thrissur. The branch *maṭham* is located in Mithranandapuram (mal. Mitrānandapuram)[44], West Fort, ca. 0,5 kilometres to the west from the prominent Padmanābhasvāmī Temple – therefore it is also called Paṭiññāṟu̯ Maṭham ("Western Monastery"). The monastery stands by the Mithranandapuram Pond, next to the Vilvamaṅgalam Śrīkṛṣṇa Temple. Mithranandapuram copper-plate inscriptions prove that the *saṃnyāsi-maṭha* in Mithranandapuram was already in existence in ca. 12th century[45]. However, it doesn't confirm that it was the Advaita Vedānta institution at that time. Probably the affiliation with Śaṅkara is posterior[46].

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[41] The information about the inscription I owe to dr Hugo David.

[42] Privy Council, Naduvil Madan Parameswar Bharatigal vs. Tpsissoop Rowther decided on September 16, 1924, [www 07] (access: 18.02.2019).

[43] It is headed by Maṟavancērry Tekkēṭattu Nīlakaṇṭhan Bhāratīkal Svāmiyār (at the time of my visit in 2018).

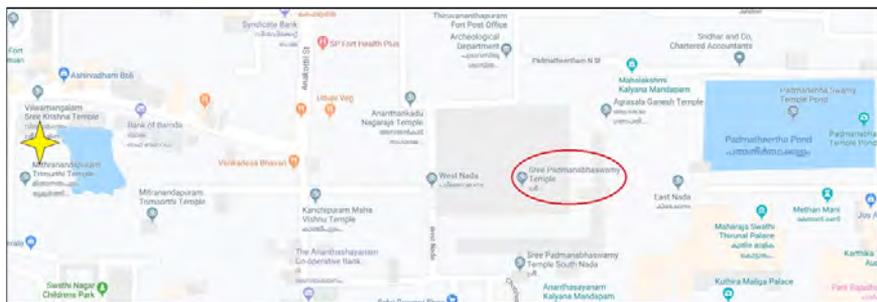[44] Mithranandapuram forms a part of Thiruvananthapuram.

[45] K. V. Subrahmanya Aiyar, *Travancore Archeological Series. Stone and Copper-Plate Inscriptions of Travancore with 26 Plates,* Vol. III, Part I, pp. 1–25.

[46] According to Prof. Kesavan Veluthat (in personal communication).
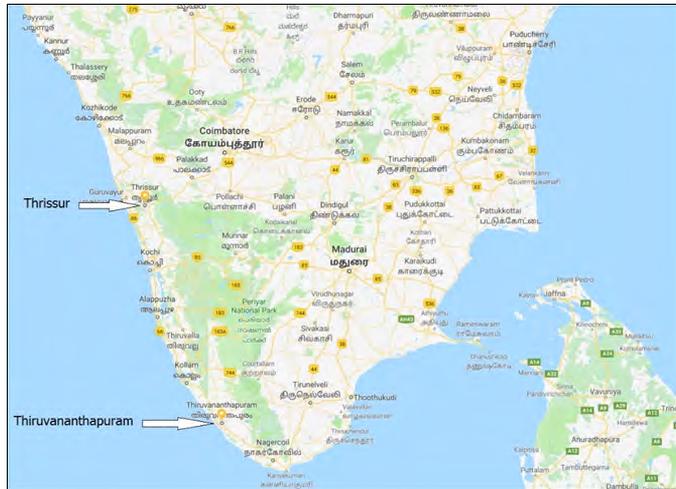
Map 5: Location of Naṭuvil *Maṭhas* (map by the author based on Google Maps)

Map 6: Location of Naṭuvil Maṭham in Mithranandapuram (map by the author based on Google Maps). Yellow star marks the location of Naṭuvil Maṭham branch in Mithranandapuram.

The Śrīkṛṣṇa Temple is believed to have been built on the *samādhi* of the legendary saint Vilvamaṅgalam, who is the protagonist of the founding myth of the Padmanābhasvāmī Temple[47]. The temple belongs to Naṭuvil Maṭham[48]. Inside the temple, in front of the idol of the main deity, stands a small metal statuette, picturing the ascetic, Vilvamaṅgalam. According to the local accounts, Vilvamaṅgalam is believed to be the first Svāmiyār of the Naṭuvil Maṭham who succeeded Śaṅkara's disciple – Sureśvara. He is also said to be the first Puṣpāñjali[49] *Svāmiyār* in the Padmanābhasvāmī Temple. Thus, the personage of Vilvamaṅgalam Svāmiyār links two legends: about the origin of the one of the most important south Indian temples – Padmanābhasvāmī Temple – and the beginnings of Naṭuvil Maṭham[50].

Apart from the *samādhi* of Vilvamaṅgalam, there are two other *samādhis* located next to the Mithranandapuram *maṭham*. One is anonymous and

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[47] The legend states that: at the time of Vilvamaṅgalam Svāmiyār's meditational life in the Anantapuram Temple at Kasaragod, the god Viṣṇu appeared to him in a boy's form. One day, the boy took Svāmiyār's *śālagrāma* (a sacred stone worshipped by the Vaiṣṇavas) and bit it. Seeing this, Svāmiyār became angry and pushed him. The boy then said in sorrow: "If you want to see me again, you should come to Anantavanam ('forest named Ananta')." Saying this, he disappeared. Due to the affection to the boy, a suffering Svāmiyār reached Anantavanam. There, he saw the boy running to a big ilippa tree (*Madhuca longifolia*) and merging with it. The tree fell down and transformed into Anantapadmanābha's form (manifestation of god Viṣṇu, from whose navel sprang the lotus which contained the god Brahmā, reclining on the serpent Ananta). Only then, did Svāmiyār realise that the boy is the god Viṣṇu himself. The lord's head was in Thiruvalla (mal. Tiruvalla), body in Thiruvananthapuram, and feet in Thrippappur. Vilvamaṅgalam then prayed that the god shorten his body to measure three times the length of his *daṇḍa* ("stick of an ascetic"), so that he can circumambulate and pay obedience to the deity. Viṣṇu fulfilled Vilvamaṅgalam's prayer. Thereafter, the ascetic circumambulated the deity and made an offering of tender mangos and flowers. For daily worship, the great temple was constructed in the present day Thiruvananthapuram. From that time onwards, *puṣpāñjali* was conducted daily, and because of that, Svāmiyār stayed premanently in a *parṇaśālā* ("leaf-hut") on the western side of the temple. [Source: private notes of the Naṭuvil Maṭham Svāmiyār – Maṟavancērry Tekkēṭattu Nīlakaṇṭhan Bhāratīkaḷ].

[48] Information provided by the priest officiating in the Vilvamaṅgalam Śrīkṛṣṇa Temple during the interview in 2016.

[49] Ritual offering of the flowers for the temple deity. The title *Puṣpāñjali Svāmiyār* suggests privilege as well as obligation.

[50] The cited legends are available in the extensive collection of the Keralan legends compiled in the book *Aitihyamāla* (*Garland of legends*) by Kottarathil Sankunni (1855-1937). They were first published in the early 20th century in the magazine "Bhāṣāpōṣiṇi". In 2016, an English translation was published in two volumes: K. Sankunni, *Aitihyamaala. The Great Legends of Kerala*, Vol. 1, Vol. 2, S. Ramachandran (trans.), 2016.

undated, the other one is of Sarasvatī Tīrtha Svāmiyār from the year 1143 Kollam Era (1968 year in Gregorian calendar).

By tradition, Naṭuvil Maṭham *Svāmiyārs* are entitled to perform daily *puṣpāñjali* rituals in the Padmanābhasvāmī Temple – which is an exclusive privilege, duty and honour interlinking the two institutions in a service exchange that recurs regularly on a yearly basis. They preside also over the Eṭṭarayōgam – the body of Padmanābhasvāmī Temple trustees. Thus, due to his ritual obligations, Naṭuvil Maṭham *Svāmiyār* resides permanently in the branch *maṭham* in Thiruvananthapuram[51]. He visits occasionally Naṭuvil Maṭham in Thrissur. Nowadays, because no *saṃnyāsin* is staying there, Brahmasvam Maṭham students practice Vedic recitation in the space of Naṭuvil Maṭham.

6   In-between Monastery (mal. Iṭayil Maṭham)

The Iṭayil Maṭham (In-between Monastery), according to the Keralan hagiographic tradition of Śaṅkara, was believed to be one of the four *maṭhas* established by the philosopher in Thrissur. However, today, no such monastic institution remains in this city. Local accounts relate that it was relocated outside the town. It is the monastery which is known currently under the name Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham, which is considered to be the shifted Iṭayil Maṭham. Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham[52] is located in the Pariyapuram (mal. Pariyāpuram) village, near to the city of Tanur (mal. Tānūr) in the Malappuram (mal. Malappuṟam) district. The place is situated ca. 80 kilometres north-west of Thrissur. The monastery is located next the small hill, which seats the Śrī Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Śiva Temple – the temple belongs to Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham. The land for establishing the *maṭha* is believed to be granted by one of the Zamorins, as claimed by the *maṭhas* trustees – although this information, for the time being, is unconfirmed.

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[51] G.L. Bayi, *Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple*, pp. 310-314.

[52] The name of the *maṭha* refers to the founding myth of the monastery. According to legend, one Nampūtiri brahmin had a visualisation of the Śiva's auspicious hand in the forest. The Śiva temple was built in the location where the god's hand was seen by a devotee, and the place took the name Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ – "forest of the auspicious hand". This land is believed to be given to Iṭayil Maṭham by Zamorin, for constructing the *maṭham* there, which was named after the Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Temple (source: *maṭha's* leaflet).

The dating of this institution is uncertain. However, it is possible to trace its history back in time until the year 1854, due to the recorded judgment of Madras High Court in the case: Trikkaikkat Madathil Raman vs. Thiruthiyil Paramal Krishnan decided on 10 November, 1905[53].

On the *maṭha* premises, there are five *samādhis* of previous *Svāmiyārs*. The monastery is said to be of Toṭaka *paramparā*[54,55]. The *maṭha* is an active centre, open to all people – *Svāmiyār* is giving regularly lectures on Vedānta – and functions also as the *yogāśramam* where *Svāmiyār* gives daily yoga and meditation classes for male and female students. Moreover, on each Sunday, *Svāmiyār* usually accepts (numerous as I witnessed) visitors, who come to him in order to discuss their personal problems and ask for his advice.

Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham is said to have a branch *maṭha* located in the city of Kottayam (mal. Kōṭṭayam) (i.e. ca. 210 kilometres south of Pariyapuram)[56]. The monastery is located in Tirunakkara (mal. Tirunakkara)[57], ca. 200 metres from the important *śaiva* temple, situated on the hill – the Tirunakkara Mahādeva Temple. The founding myth of the Tirunakkara Mahādeva Temple makes a link between the temple and Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham in Tirunakkara[58]. There are two *samādhis* of previous *Svāmiyārs* on the premises of the *maṭham*. Inside the monastery, there is the Rāma-Hanumat Temple, next to the *maṭha* there is Śrī Śaṅkara Maṇḍapam (hall) where various cultural programs take place. It is said that few years back, the monastery was in ruin, but ca. six years ago, a local Trust was established to run the *maṭha* – it renovated the building of the monastery together with its surroundings, and constructed

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[53] Madras High Court, Trikkaikkat Madathil Raman vs. Thiruthiyil Paramal Krishnan decided on 10 November, 1905, [www 04] (access: 12.02.2019).

[54] This is a controversial issue because according to the vernacular legend, Hastāmalaka was said to be the first head of Iṭayil Maṭham. Thus, Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham supposed to be a Hastāmalaka *paramparā*.

[55] Kṛṣṇa Brahmānanda Tīrtha Svāmiyār is the current *Svāmiyār* of Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham in Pariyapuram (at the time of my visit in 2018).

[56] It is headed by Vāsudeva Brahmānanda Tīrtha Svāmiyār (at the time of my visit in 2018).

[57] Area name of Kottayam. *Tirunakkara* means "the holy Nakkara [hill]".

[58] The local legend relates that on the grounds of the present Tirunakkara Mahādeva Temple, there was earlier a place to grow vegetables for the branch Tṛkkaikkāṭṭŭ Maṭham. Once upon a time, while people were farming the vegetables there, they heard some noise and suddenly saw a *Śiva-liṅga*. They got afraid and ran to *Svāmiyār*. The ascetic came there and recognised *svayambhū Śiva-liṅga*. *Svāmiyār* then informed the Tekkumkūr Rājā about the miraculous event. The king built the Tirunakkara Mahādeva Temple and the *svayambhū Śiva-liṅga* was installed there (source: *maṭha's* leaflet).

an adjoining *maṇḍapam*. Tṛkkaikkāṭṭuˇ Maṭham in Kottayam appears to be an active cultural center – regular Sanskrit courses are taking place there, Advaita Vedānta lectures are held there each week (given by local scholars, not *Svāmiyār* himself), *kathakaḷi* performances are staged there as well etc[59].

Despite that, Tṛkkaikkāṭṭuˇ institutions seem to be less known than the Naṭuvil and Tekkē Maṭham, they appear nowadays to be well prospering monasteries. In fact, Tṛkkaikkāṭṭuˇ *mathas* seem to be more active than the ossified Naṭuvil Maṭham and Tekkē Maṭham, and the lineage more secure – it is the only monastic institution, of the ascetic tradition in question, which has simultaneously two *Svāmiyārs* (one residing in Pariyapuram, and the second in Kottayam)[60]. Moreover, Tṛkkaikkāṭṭuˇ Maṭham has its sublineage – which I'm going to discuss in the following section – Muñciṟa Maṭham.
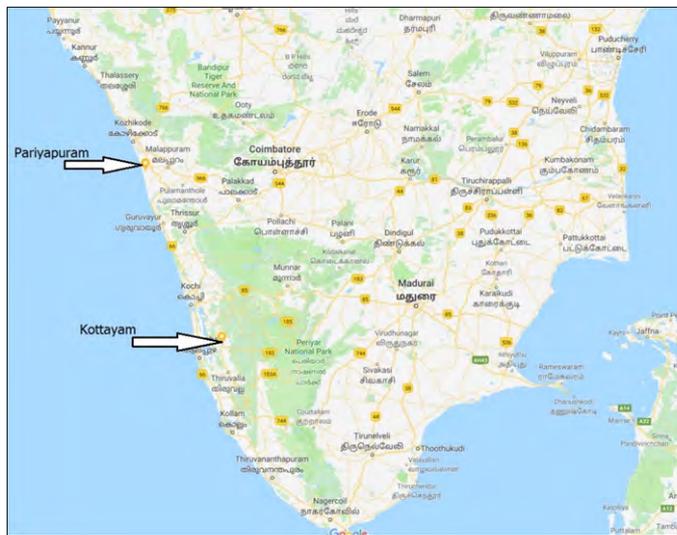
Map 7: Location of Tṛkkaikkāṭṭuˇ Maṭhas (map by the author based on Google Maps)

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[59] Information provided by the *maṭha's* trustees during fieldwork in 2016.

[60] Moreover, on the date 16-18.03.2019 there is planned an initiation ceremony (skr. *dīkṣā*) of a new *saṃnyāsin* in Tṛkkaikkāṭṭuˇ Maṭham in Pariyapuram (as I was informed by the manager of the *maṭha* during fieldwork in 2018).

7   Branch Monastery – Muñciṟa Maṭham

Tṛkkaikkāṭṭuˇ Maṭham is said to have another branch maṭha – Muñciṟa Maṭham – which constitutes a kind of sub-lineage. The ascetic tradition of Muñciṟa Maṭham was recently extinguished for a period of time: since 2004 until 2011; and since 2014 until 2017. The current head of the *maṭha*[61], according to the Muñciṟa Maṭham's *paramparā*, is the 48th *Svāmiyār* of the monastery[62]. He was initiated by the Tṛkkaikkāṭṭuˇ Maṭham *Svāmiyār* from Pariyapuram. The main Muñciṟa Maṭham is located in the small village of Munchirai (mal. Muñciṟai), situated ca. 10 kilometres from the city of Marthandam (mal. Mārttāṇḍam) in the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu (in former Travancore State, mal. Tiruvitāṅkūr) – this is ca. 50 kilometres south from Thiruvananthapuram. Unfortunately the monastery is nowadays abandoned and the building itself is in ruin. There are two copper plate inscriptions belonging to Muñciṟa Maṭham, suggesting the age of this institution. One is dated to ca. the beginning of the 13th century and consists of details of an income set apart for feeding persons on *dvādaśi* days of the 12 months of the year, and of registered gifts made for feeding on other occasions of some of the persons. It is written in Vaṭṭeḻuttuˇ script[63]. The second one records an agreement between Kunnūr Nambūri (Nampūtiri?) and the *Svāmiyār* about the management of the *samudāyam* of the temple at Avittathur (mal. Aviṭṭattūr). It is dated to ca. 1770. It is written in Vaṭṭeḻuttuˇ script, in the Malayalam language[64].

The *maṭha* is situated next to the Bhagavatī/Rāma Temple[65]. There are eight *samādhis* on the temple premises (of which one is dated to 1974). The monastery is said to have its branch in Thiruvananthapuram – Muñciṟa Kiḻakkuˇ[66] Maṭham – which is located in the East Fort, on the east side of the Padmanābhasvāmī Temple. Muñciṟa Maṭham Svāmiyār resides permanently in the branch *maṭham* in Thiruvananthapuram, due to the ritual con-

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[61] Parameśvara Brahmānanda Tīrtha (at the time of my visit in 2018).

[62] Muñciṟa Maṭham Website, [www 06] (access: 15.02.2019).

[63] K. V. Subrahmanya Aiyar, *Travancore Archeological Series. Stone and Copper-Plate Inscriptions of Travancore with 26 Plates.* Vol. III, Part I, pp. 207–211.

[64] T. A. Gopinatha Rao, *Travancore Archeological Series,* No. VII, pp. 301–302.

[65] There are two main *mūrtis* in the temple: of Rāma and Bhagavatī. Originally it was Rāma Temple.

[66] Mal. *kiḻakkuˇ* means "east". The name of the Muñciṟa branch *maṭha* is often shortened to Kiḻakkuˇ Maṭham – "Eastern Monastery".

nection with Padmanābhasvāmī Temple. Muñciṟa Maṭham *Svāmiyārs* – together with Naṭuvil Maṭham *Svāmiyārs* – have a right and privilege within the liturgical life of the Padmanābhasvāmī Temple, they are appointed as Puṣpāñjali *Svāmiyārs* in the temple. Each of the *Svāmiyārs* fulfills his ritual duties in the Padmanābhasvāmī Temple for a half of a year, after that time they switch[67].
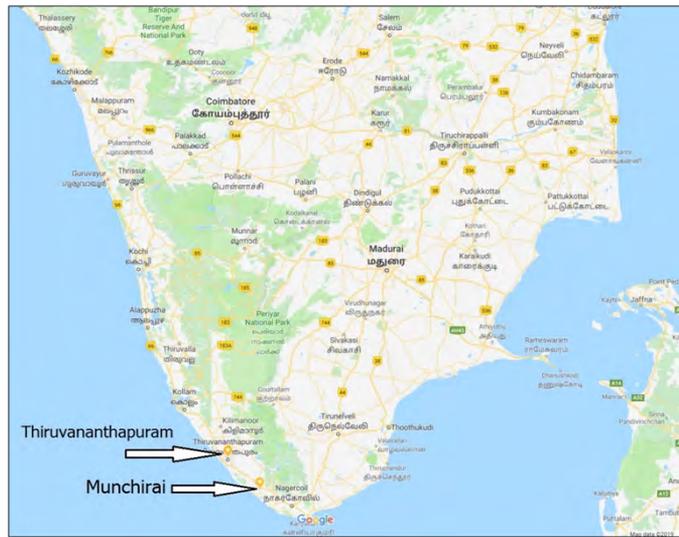
Map 8: Location of Muñciṟa Maṭhas (map by the author based on Google Maps)

Noteworthily, just like the Vaṭakke Maṭham ("Northern Monastery") and Tekkē Maṭham ("Southern Monastery") have the cardinal directions in their names, the branch *maṭhas* of Naṭuvil Maṭham and Muñciṟa Maṭham in Thiruvananthapuram also bear the cardinal directions in their names: Kiḻakkŭ Maṭham ("Eastern Monastery" – branch of Muñciṟa Maṭham) and Paṭiññāṟŭ Maṭham ("Western Monastery" – branch of Naṭuvil Maṭham) – however, these institutions have as a reference point the Padmanābhasvāmī Temple (they are located close to the temple because its *Svāmiyārs* perform *puṣpāñjali* there).

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[67] Information provided by Tekkē Maṭham manager during fieldwork in 2018.

8   Southern Monastery (mal. Tekkē Maṭham)

Tekkē Maṭham is one of the four monasteries established allegedly by Śaṅkara in Thrissur. It has survived until today, and remains an active monastic institution. The dating of Tekkē Maṭham remains uncertain. However, we can trace the history of Tekkē Maṭham in Thrissur back in time until the year 1041 Kollam Era (1866 year of Gregorian calendar). It is possible on the basis of the colophon in the palm-leaf manuscript no. 125, which is kept in Vaṭakke Maṭham Brahmasvam Vedic Research Centre in Thrissur (the manuscript belonged earlier to Tekkē Maṭham). The manuscript contains the text *Yatidharmmasamuccaya,* which ends with the colophon giving inter alia such information as: the year of writing down the text (1041 Kollam Era), the name of the person who ordered writing down the text – i.e. Putumana Ceṟiya Tirumanassa, who is described to be Tekkē Maṭha *Svāmiyār*[68].

Tekkē Maṭham is said to belong to the Padmapāda *paramparā*[69]. The current Tekkē Maṭham *Svāmiyār*[70], according to the monastery's *paramparā* is the 84th *Svāmiyār* of the monastery. On the premises of the *maṭha*, there is one *samādhi-maṇḍapa* of the previous Tekkē *Svāmiyār*[71]. Recently, the institution seems to be quite active due to the vision of its manager – Vadakkumpad Narayanan – who initiates new undertakings in the *maṭha* such as: the building of the statue of Śaṅkara in front of the monastery, constructing the Śrībhadra Maṇḍapam (venue hall) also in front of the monastery, organising the *ācāryasaṃgamam* (meeting of Advaita Vedānta ascetics) in Tekkē Maṭham (28.12.2018) etc. The monastery is said to possess one branch *maṭham* in the village Thiruvarpu (mal. Tiruvārppuˇ), in Kottayam district. Thiruvarpu is located ca. 130 kilometers south of Thrissur. Svāmiyār is said to visit branch *maṭha* in Thiruvarpu once a month and stay there for 10 days to perform *puṣpāñjali* in the Śrī Kṛṣṇa Temple, which is situated close to the monastery. It is believed that there are several *samādhis* on the premises of the Thiruvarpu monastery[72].

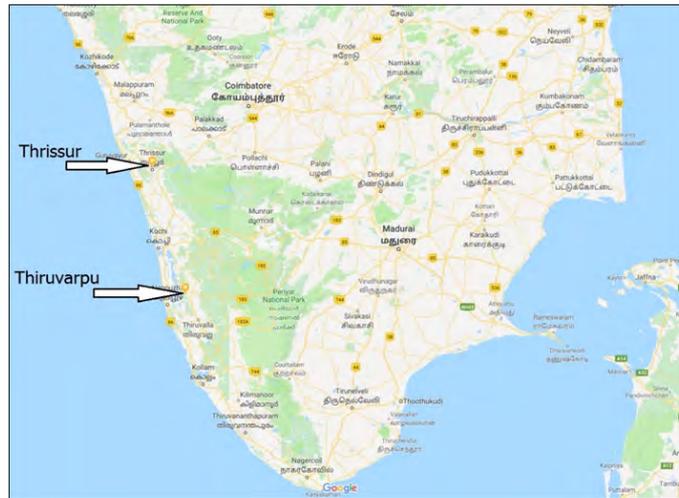[68] Manuscript consulted by the author.

[69] It is headed by Vāsudevānanda Brahmānanda Bhūti Svāmiyār (at the time of my visit in 2018).

[70] At the time of my visit in 2018.

[71] Śaṅkarānanda Brahmānanda Bhūti.

[72] Information provided by Tekkē Maṭham manager during fieldwork in 2018.

Map 9: Location of Tekkē Maṭhas (map by the author based on Google Maps)

9 Conclusion

Though this paper is merely a short introduction to the subject of the Advaita Vedānta monasticisms of Nampūtiri tradition in Kerala, its primary objective was especially to present and focus on the spatial distribution of the discussed institutions. Due to the presented cartographic visualisation, it became apparent that the monastic tradition in question have, in the past, created a network of intricate ritualistic, economic, social and political inter-relations spreading across whole Kerala region. How these institutions have been functioning in a symbolic, cultural and geographic space, still remains uncertain and needs further examination. However, the spatial analysis of the Nampūtiri *maṭhas* can yield some vital clues about the influence and significance of those institutions in the society, as well as about their associations with particular local kingdoms and its rulers etc. in a situation where reliable historical records are very scant. The use of a map as an analytical tool appears to be very revealing while working with such material. Thus, the map helps to determine orientation, spatial arrangement, territorial demarcations, hierarchy, reference points, juxtaposition of spaces, interrelationship of monasteries, subordinate temples and wider landscape. As a result, we realise the spatial qualities of the *maṭhas*' geographical distribution – the central position of clustered "parent" monasteries in Thrissur which radiate

on whole region of Kerala. Visual evaluation of the Nampūtiri *maṭhas*' spatial arrangement in the context (contextual spatiality[73]) of the pan-Indian Advaita monasticism, allows also to recognise ideological content in its spatial expression – the *digvijaya* concept. Therefore, in the final conclusion, instead of words, I'm going to use the map itself (placed below) which presents a whole picture of the elaborate network of Nampūtiri monastic institutions of Advaita Vedānta tradition in Kerala.
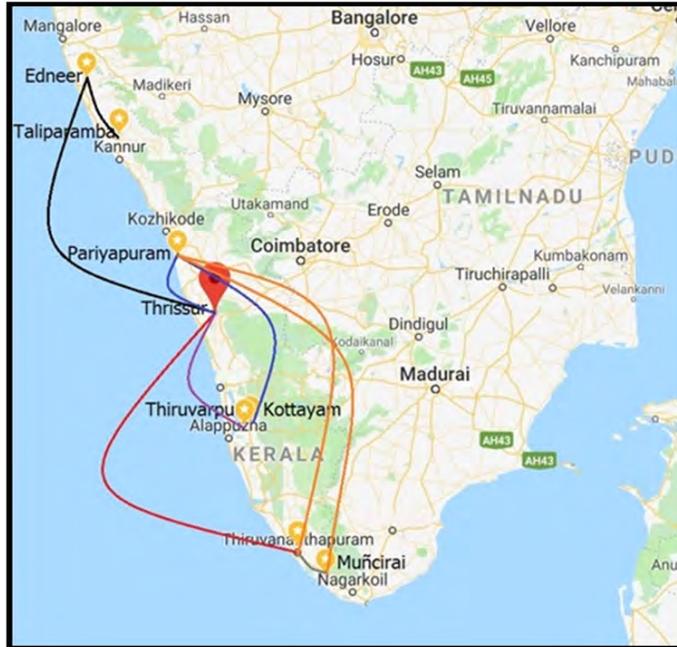
Map 10: Network of Advaita Vedānta Maṭhas of Nampūtiri tradition in Kerala (map by the author based on Google Maps).

Legend:
City of Thrissur is marked with a red pin.
Yellow stars mark cities where branch *maṭhas* are located.
Black line marks the network of Vaṭakke Maṭham (Iṭanīr Maṭham) institutions
Blue line marks the network of Tr̥kkaikkāṭṭu˘ Maṭham (Iṭayil Maṭham) institutions
Orange line marks the network of Tr̥kkaikkāṭṭu˘ Maṭham affiliation
Red line marks the network of Naṭuvil Maṭham institutions
Violet line marks the network of Tekkē Maṭham institutions
Grey line marks the network of Muñcir̠a Maṭham institutions

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[73] Term used by Miki Desai in: M. Desai, *Wooden Architecture of Kerala*, p. 165.

Photo 1: Previous Tekkē Maṭham *Svāmiyār* with the Thrissur *maṭhas* in the background. A piece of the monastery's self-representation policy – *maṭha's* promotional material (a sticker).

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