

## Nīlakaṇṭha and the Vedāntic ‘Scene’ in Banaras

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Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara, the best known commentator on the Mahābhārata, lived in Banaras in the second half of the seventeenth century. At that time Banaras had become the great sub-continental hub in an early modern network of śāstric learning. To know this is not incidental to understanding Nīlakaṇṭha’s work. To the annoyance of many modern readers, his epic commentary was informed by the philosophical standpoint of Advaita Vedānta. Nīlakaṇṭha wrote several independent works on Advaita as well, but what sort of an Advaitin was he? This can be known with some specificity by considering a) his Banaras-based teachers and mentors, most notably Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha and the guru he calls ‘Lakṣmaṇārya;’ b) the principal literary influences in his Vedāntic writings: Madhusūdana Sarasvati, Nṛsiṃhāśrama, and Appayya Dīkṣita; and c) the Vedāntic ‘scene’ in Banaras in the seventeenth century, in which dasnāmī sannyāsīs played a central role. Advaita Vedānta was not the only viewpoint on offer in the period, and there were fierce polemical contests with representatives of other philosophical-social movements. Special attention will be paid in this regard to Appayya Dīkṣita’s impact on the city, since Nīlakaṇṭha took Appayya’s works as the basis for his own independent treatises.