0.1 When manuscripts began to be systematically collected in the three presidencies of British India in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the majority of manuscripts so collected were from the individual collections of priestly or other Brahmin households. In order to understand the manner of production and distribution of manuscripts in pre-modern South India, it would be useful to know about the nature of such individual collections.

In this paper, I shall discuss a set of palm leaf manuscripts which I saved from my grandfather’s chest of palm leaf books, dwell on the manner how they were preserved, speculate how they may have been collected and narrate the family tradition regarding these palm leaf books.

0.2 The nature of the subject makes it necessary that I say a few words about my family. It was a family of śrotiya or vaidikī Brahmins, who followed the Āpastamba Śūtra of the Taîtirīya Śākhā of the Kṛṣṇa-Yajurveda. According to a legend perpetuated in the Kanyakāpurāṇa, an ancestor named Bhāskarācārya provided leadership to a community of Vaiśyas in their conflict with the local king several centuries ago. Since then the members of the family became the hereditary gurus of this community of Vaiśyas and held the title Bhāskarācārya. Then about twelve generations ago, an ancestor performed a Rāma-yajña and dedicated himself and his future descendants to Śrīrāma. Through this dedication, he replaced the then current surname or

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family name Toṭapalli by Śrīrāmulu, which is genitive plural of Śrīrāma in Telugu, meaning “of / belonging to Śrīrāma.”

The family avidly cultivated this twofold tradition. The first was that of Bhāskarācārya, the preceptor-ship of certain clans of Vaiśyas. As the Vaiśya clans gradually spread across south India, the Bhāskarācārya travelled all over his “territory” to regularly visit his followers and offer spiritual counsel. In the family parlance, this travel is termed samcāram. The second tradition was the annual performance of the Rāma-yajña, which included the recitation of the complete Ārṣa-Rāmāyaṇa, i.e. the Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa by Vālmīkin. Since this was an expensive affair, the Bhāskarācārya utilized his extensive travels to collect contributions from his Vaiśya disciples.

I often thought that the family must have had highly interesting archives, containing the itineraries of the various Bhāskarācāryas, documents about the method of performing the Rāma-yajña, and of course several manuscript copies of the Kanyakāpurāṇa and of the Rāmāyaṇa. Unfortunately, none of these survives save a single copy book in which my grandfather recorded the subscriptions he collected and the expenses he incurred for what I presume to be his last Rāma-yajña. All other documents were lost because the family left the ancestral village and moved to another village.

A year before I was born in 1937, my father abandoned the ancestral house in the village Achchammapeta (16° 38´ N; 80° 7´ E) in Guntur District in what is today the state of Andhra Pradesh and moved to south-east along with his mother and wife to a much smaller village called Ulichi (15° 33´ N; 80° 9´ E)—situated in the same district, but on the cyclone-prone coast of the Bay of Bengal—to look after a childless old couple who were closely related to my grandmother. With this move my father gave up his paternal inheritance and gained the inheritance of his mother’s family, or—to speak from the perspective of this workshop—he lost one set of palm leaf manuscripts to acquire another. This second set is the subject of this paper.

In this new village, my father succeeded his grand uncle as purohita; he had half a share of paurohitya in this village. At some point in

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2 Telugu family names (iṁṭiperu, lit. “house name”) are generally derived from the village from where the family originated. In Telugu culture, the family name constitutes the first element of one’s name. Thus the first initial “S” in my name expands to Sreeramula. Today, however, many Telugu people, as they migrate to other parts of the world, are placing the family names after the given name, in order to conform to the general practice in the US and Europe.