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Bus-Stop Sami: Transient Temples in Urban South India

Eliza F. Kent

Introduction

- 1 In the interstitial spaces of virtually any city in Tamil Nadu, one can find small, temporary shrines to unnamed deities.¹ They appear at the ends of alleys, at the base of trees in leafy compounds, along the edges of shady lanes and in the center of the Madurai city bus stand. Lacking a definite mythology, a permanent physical-structure, or an established circle of devotees, the supernatural beings here honored or propitiated by gifts of small coins, flowers, incense or brightly-colored powder are not so much gods as gods-in-the-making. In designating them as such, I am deliberately distinguishing wayside or roadside shrines at the earliest stages of their development from shrines that have attained greater permanence and a more clearly projected identity. The lay founders who create them may well know the resident deity and His or Her history, but that identity has not yet been clarified for the passing public. Unless shrine patrons are successful at doing this, they may well disappear. Some urban residents worry about the capacity of wayside shrines to develop quickly, appearing overnight and suddenly morphing into a full-fledged shrine that takes up valuable public space, or encroaches on private property. From another perspective, however, shrine builders and patrons must navigate a tricky sequence of stages in order to achieve permanency, a process that ultimately entails broadcasting a new vision of space onto the terrain.
- 2 The spontaneous appearance of the sacred in everyday life is a widely accepted feature of vernacular Hinduism, where the sacred and the mundane are mutually constitutive and deeply entangled. But in the cramped spaces of Indian cities such an appearance can signal an occasion for conflict as much as celebration. In response to a surge in the construction of unauthorized shrines in the 1990s and beyond, India has seen numerous campaigns seeking to regulate, and where possible, demolish them (Elison 2014; Sekine 2006). Sparked by middle-class activists animated by aspirations to beautify and

modernize Indian cities such movements aim to redefine as “encroachments” and “unauthorized shrines” what others regard as miraculous divine manifestations. But as countless media reports testify, efforts to demolish or remove wayside shrines that have attained a following can arouse intense, sometimes violent, opposition. Opponents of wayside shrines won a major victory in 2009 when the Supreme Court issued an order stipulating that “henceforth no unauthorized construction shall be carried out or permitted in the name of Temple, Church, Gurudwara, etc. on public streets, public parks, or other public places, etc.” (*Union of India v. The State of Gujarat and Ors* [2009]). The Supreme Court also directed states to begin the process of reviewing existing unauthorized religious structures on public land, on a case-by-case basis, and removing them where possible. In an interesting rhetorical move that at once affirmed the reality of the divine and yet announced the paramount status of the states’ obligation to preserve civic order, Supreme Court Justices Gopal Gowda and Arun Misra lambasted state authorities who delayed action upon the court’s order: “Everyone has the right to walk. God never intended to obstruct the path meant for the people” (Sinha 2016). The Indian state too walks a delicate path here, so to speak, as in so many matters having to do with religion. While it is politically treacherous to declare such manifestations of the divine in a particular place false or the product of opportunistic entrepreneurs, the state must nevertheless somehow assert its sovereignty as paramount, even above that of the (putative) divine. Here the justices underscored the state’s responsibility for ensuring civic order (the “right to walk”), ascribing to God their own concerns about equal access to public space.

- 3 What I offer in this article is a preliminary set of thoughts and suggestions about the rhetorical and ritual mechanisms of Hindu shrine growth.² I argue that for the community of worshippers bound together by their common devotion, these diminutive structures function as sites for the creation and promotion of alternative constructions of public space. Through a comparison of two shrines, one that was successful at attracting a group of followers and one that was not, I analyze the rhetorical and ritual means that the human representatives of a deity employ to transform ordinary, homogenous public space into sacred space, where a deity may take Her seat and be honored. Such a transformation of the way that space is experienced and understood can have a catalytic effect on the people who move through it, bringing to prominence previously submerged lines of identification and loyalty. Specifically, where individuals experience split loyalties—for example, between their caste- and class-based community and their employers, or between natal and affinal kin—the identity that is less salient in a particular context may become more so in response to a shared experience of the sacred (or, more skeptically, in response to social pressure to publically assent to claims regarding the presence of the divine).
- 4 Brahmanical ideology tends to represent temples as instruments of social integration, but precisely because they encode and enable particular concepts of the cosmic and social order, temples can also become sites of intense conflict (Dirks 1988:358–83; Ludden 1996; Mines 2005; Shobanan 1985). In the examples discussed here, temples become sites for generating rituals and histories that promote constructions of public space which may conflict with those of municipal authorities or property owners. As Smriti Srinivas argues, the rituals and sacred histories centered on urban shrines present a view of time and space that “breaks up the map of the city constructed by technology, planning models, caste and neighborhood” (Srinivas 2001:24). The key difference between

established temples and the transient shrines that I examine in this article is that the latter's capacity to organize alternative constructions of public space is fragile and often fleeting. For a temple to endure over time, its supporters need to mobilize the material and rhetorical means of broadcasting these alternative visions on a regular basis. One aspect of this is the skillful use of cultural codes that mark the manifestation of the divine in an affectively and aesthetically plausible way, and another is obtaining some kind of legal or quasi-legal title to the physical space they occupy. While the latter secures the legitimacy of the shrine in a legal way, the former anchors its emotional, aesthetic and cultural authenticity. I begin by briefly laying out the distinctions between shrines and temples in order to introduce a model that describes the development of shrines to temples from their earliest beginnings. After applying this model to my two case studies, I conclude with an explanation of why one temple was able to endure for several years, whereas the other disappeared within a matter of months.

From Shrine to Temple

- 5 Granting their value largely as exogenous, scholarly categories, rather than descriptions of fixed architectural or institutional forms, one way to distinguish between shrines and temples is to say that whereas shrines (from the Latin, *scrinium*, or "box" or "container") are places that mark or recall the presence of individual divine beings (ancestors, gods, saints, deified ghosts, and *kami* [divine beings in Japanese Shinto], etc.), temples provide shelter for the images that focus worship of those beings (Courtright 2005; Meister 2005). With their particular shape and form, "shrines give particular density to complex sets of religious associations, memories, moods, expectations, and communities. Shrines may be seen as sites of condensation of more dispersed religious realities, places where meanings take on specific, tangible, and tactile presence" (Courtright 2005:8376). Courtright here refers to the way shrines work to condense and materialize more disparate and inchoate feelings and associations—channeling those through culturally specific codes of representation. What begins as a spooky lane or a shady grove where at least one person experiences something she interprets as the presence of supernatural beings, then leads to the creation or installation of material objects that give shape and form to those experiences, which invite others to feel the same in that place. What distinguishes a temple, according to Meister's art historical understanding, is the need to shelter those things necessary for worship: icons bearing in some fashion the essence or spark of the divine, above all, but also paraphernalia used in worship. Though Hindu temples' function as physical shelter is important, anthropological research has highlighted the complex social dynamics that are equally constitutive of Hindu temples. In their pioneering study, Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai emphasize a temple's function as a nexus of sharers in a redistributive network (1976). These sharers include devotees and donors who offer prayers, songs, and physical articles of worship, priests who transmit these to the deities, the deity Him or Herself who provides boons, grace, solace, etc. to devotees, and a host of temple servants who provide a range of services and support to the temple and its presiding deity. Breckenridge and Appadurai's model of the temple emphasizes its capacity to instantiate a certain kind of sovereignty, one in which power lies in overseeing complex transactions among differentiated groups of people and adjudicating disputes that may arise between them. Arguably, a small roadside shrine might provide the context for such a community of sharers, but this is not a necessary characteristic.

Indeed, a shrine might very well come into existence because of the reciprocal interactions of just two beings—the founder and the deity—whereas a temple, involving a larger group of participants, emerges around the redistributive pooling and sharing of resources.

- 6 Having distinguished between shrines and temples, we can turn to consideration of how shrines become temples, especially in India's crowded urban spaces. While no model can fully capture the variety of ways in which shrines or temples arise and develop, anthropologist of urban religiosity Yasumasa Sekine and geographer S. Subbiah (2006), have identified important patterns in shrine development based on their survey of 1600 wayside shrines, which was conducted in Chennai in 2000:

First a demarcation with a few photographs of god with flower garlands on them is made in a place of prominence in the pavements. Promoter/s of this shrine may wait for a few days or months to find out whether there are any objections from people around or pedestrians or from the municipal authority or whether there is support from the local residents; this is a breeding period; the construction of shrine in a small scale proceeds further, when there are no objections from any quarter. In the next stage, a firm hold is established; plants of neem and pupil [sic, *pīpal*] may be planted in the demarcated area, and the area around gets cleaned with water and cow-dung every day. Then a permanent idol of god may be erected and a good concrete structure with roof may be built up. Now a collection box for collecting donations may appear in front of the shrine, and the promoters may start celebrating religious festivals with some elaborate arrangements by collecting money from pedestrians and on-lookers and nearby houses and shopkeepers. If needed, shrine may further be expanded and the structure may have more decorations; this may be the final stage where it becomes a fully-developed shrine; Brahmin priests may get appointed to carry out daily rituals; and it may draw a large crowd and there may be regular visitors now. A "little tradition" gets elevated to a "great tradition." (Subbiah 2006:84, cited in Sekine 2006:81)

Eschewing the familiar but outworn binary of "great" and "little" traditions, one could condense Subbiah's description of an ideal-typical process of shrine development into five stages: 1) demarcation, 2) waiting period to gauge opposition or support, 3) initial development, followed by another waiting period, 4) fostering a community of co-sharers to celebrate festivals and sponsor, promote and protect further development, 5) physical and social permanency. I would also add that at every stage, success depends on the shrine patrons' effective use of local codes to ensure that the shrine is intelligible and persuasive to passersby as authentic. The initial phase of demarcation means that someone has to mark the presence of the divine, ideally in such a way that the appearance of agency on the part of the human founders is minimized. In South Asia, the close association of the Hindu divine with elements of the natural world—from *liṅga*-shaped stones and ice formations, to sacred trees such as the *pīpal* (*Aradirachta indica*) and the *nīm* (*Ficus religiosa*)—makes it somewhat easier to represent the initial marking of a place as a human response to the prior agency of the deity (Owens 1995:210–12; Shulman 1980). Sekine and Subbiah also astutely note that a quiet waiting period often succeeds the initial moment of demarcation, the purpose of which is to gauge the level of acceptance or objections in the surrounding community. If objections are not encountered, in stage three shrine founders may enlarge the shrine or mark the shrine in a more elaborate fashion: adorning the site with bright red *kuṅkumam* powder and leaving flower garlands to indicate that worship has taken place, or leaving *sāmi patams* (inexpensive lithographic reproductions of deities) or religious calendar art. Again, if no opposition is encountered, more energetic promotion of the temple may ensue,

particularly around days special to the deity (Tuesdays and Fridays, or holidays dedicated to the particular deity) when *pūjā* may be conducted in a more elaborate fashion. The donation box or appeals to local shop-keepers to finance these festivals and events helps to create a community of sharers, the identifying feature of stage four, who are bound together by their common worship of a deity and their participation in the circulation of valued substances in worship. A key source of both material and rhetorical support comes from devotees seeking to fulfill vows enacted for favors granted by and/or anticipated from the deity. In grateful acknowledgement for some anticipated or experienced divine intervention in their lives, and to strengthen their relationship with the deity, they may endow some element of the shrine's physical structure or ritual calendar (Raj and Harman 2007). In these ways, a community of devotees, even if it is small, can mobilize the resources to create a physical structure to shelter whatever images or icons have thus far embodied and marked the presence of the divine at a particular site. Of equal importance to a sturdy physical structure, such a community of sharers is necessary for a south Indian temple to exist and persist over time.

- 7 Building on Appadurai and Breckenridge's pioneering model of Hindu temples, anthropologist Mary Hancock (2008) argues that temples are much more than physical shelters for an icon; they are socio-spatial phenomena created and sustained by ritual praxis. She writes,

Whether taking the form of a multi-block complex or a tiny shrine at the base of a tree, temples are complex socio-spatial worlds, shaped by ongoing interactions among deities, temple servants, administrators, and worshippers, overseen and, to varying degrees, regulated and appropriated by the state. These are the relations by which a temple is made as a social space and its sacrality constituted and regenerated. These spatial practices operate simultaneously as the means by which priests and other temple servants earn their livings, by which donors build their reputations, by which devotees seek blessings, jobs, children and health, and in which state and non-state actors monitor and regulate flows of labor, knowledge and resources. Temples, in short, form the anchor and dynamic hub of a "public" that includes laborers, administrators, worshippers and deities themselves. (Hancock 2008:91)

But what if the interests of a "public" instantiated by a temple are in tension with those of a secular "public" envisioned by urban beautification activists and the state? Hancock's quote highlights an aspect of shrine development not mentioned in Subbiah's ideal typical development of a shrine into a temple (though present in Breckenridge and Appadurai's early work)—the encompassing role of the state in regulating the interactions among participants in a temple. Though considerations of space prevent a fuller discussion of this relationship, it bears mentioning that in south India, the roles of human sovereigns and divine ones have typically been complementary and mutually supportive (Appadurai 1981; Price 1996). Under colonial rule, that relationship continued, with British officers stepping up, sometimes reluctantly, to serve as the chief patrons and protectors of temples (Irschick 1994:93–98). In post-colonial Tamil Nadu, a special branch of the state government, the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department (HRCE), has assumed responsibility for regulating Hindu temples. However, the on-the-ground reality is that temples only catch the attention of the HRCE when they become large enough that their constituency and income warrant state involvement (e.g., to equip them with trained priests capable of serving the Hindu public "properly," redistribute the income of wealthy temples to less well-resourced temples, etc.). Family temples, village deity temples and other smaller temples in Tamil Nadu typically have

little involvement with the HRCE, though neighborhood and municipal authorities may play an important role as representatives of the state, providing official sanction and legal (or quasi-legal) protection.

- 8 This was so, anyway, until very recently, when, as mentioned, a new dynamic was introduced in part because of the activism of middle-class educated urban residents who pushed for the state to intervene more forcefully to control what they saw as unregulated proliferation of shrines on public land, particularly roadsides and sidewalks. Bhagwanji Raiyani, the former owner of a construction firm based in Mumbai, is one such activist. Between 1990 and 2010, he or the NGO he founded, Janhit Manch, filed 93 Public Interest Litigation (PIL) briefs on a range of issues from the illegal hoardings erected by politicians to the restoration of heritage sites. Commenting on the motivations behind an early campaign against roadside shrines in Mumbai in 2002, when he successfully petitioned the High Court to demolish 800 unauthorized roadside shrines, Raiyani said,

I feel satisfied because I am serving ordinary people. Suppose, I am a Hindu and construct an illegal temple then this will affect other passers-by from different religions. The same is true with other co-religionists, if they construct an illegal mosque or church it creates problems for people from other religions. One more point is that they create unhygienic conditions around that area. They go on to build communication centres or sometimes people play cards near those places. So to clean all these things from society, I took this step. This is to help the society. (Rediff 2003)

Like many such activists, Raiyani is an avowed rationalist with a vision of public space that is hygienic, orderly and free from religion (cf. Elison 2014:183–85). And though, as we shall see, this vision of public space is heavily contested, it has won the support of the highest courts in the land. Since the 2009 Supreme Court ruling referenced in the introduction banning the construction on public land “in the name of Temple, Church, Gurudwara, etc.,” the Indian states, including Tamil Nadu, have embarked on the enumeration of such shrines, and have begun regularizing, moving or demolishing them. The process is likely to be long and drawn out. In 2010, the Tamil Nadu government reported to the Supreme Court that there were 77,453 unauthorized structures on public land. (Shivam 2013)

Bus Stop Sami, Madurai 1996

- 9 The first shrine I want to analyze was located in the midst of a busy bus stand and was dedicated to a supernatural deity, the identity of which I never learned. It might have been a *teyvam* (god), or it might have been a *pēy* (malevolent spirit of an individual who died prematurely or tragically; fierce god)—the Tamil word *sāmi*, which many people used to refer to it, has a semantic range broad enough to encompass both of these meanings.³ In 1996–97, as a young graduate student living in India for the first time, I was struck by the seemingly random profusion of sites marked by someone as possessing sacred value: roadside shrines at this hairpin turn (and not the next), a lone female figure standing out in a crowded temple frieze, covered with oil and adorned with the vermillion dots that signify active worship. What they had in common was that they were “unofficial” in the sense that an individual or group acting independently of an authorizing institution such as a temple or church had created them, and had marked the site using locally intelligible codes to invite worship: saffron- or red-colored powder, images of sacred beings, flowers, especially jasmine, stones of a particular shape. The most fascinating one of these

appeared at a bus stop I frequented while doing fieldwork in Madurai in 1996 and 1997. During this time, I often found myself waiting for the 11B at the Periyar bus stand, one of the two main bus terminals in Madurai at the time. The stand was located about one-quarter mile from the famous Meenaskhi-Sunderesvarar temple, a colossal medieval stone temple complete with brightly colored *kōpuram* (temple tower) and shining tank. In late October 1996, I first noticed that a small shrine had been erected on a sloping rectangular section that rose about a foot off the ground in the center of the bus stand. This raised rectangular section functioned in a sense as the hub around which the buses circled, while a ring of small shops formed the circumference. One end of the platform was occupied by a half dozen tradeswomen selling peanuts, flowers and plastic combs, while the other half provided space for an enclosed cement urinal. Roughly in the middle, someone had built the shrine, a short tower-shaped cylindrical structure made from bricks and clay.⁴ Although buses customarily stopped at a particular quadrant of the circle, waiting passengers could never be sure that the bus would stop *exactly* there. As a result, the area was periodically animated by crowds of men and women with children in tow surging from one section of the bus stand to another to get seats, precious commodities indeed on long, hot overcrowded bus rides. The raised rectangular section in the middle where the shrine was located thus served as a relatively still center in the midst of a frenetic storm of activity.

- 10 On the morning of October 29, 1996, when I first noticed the shrine, a man I assumed was the *pūjāri* (priest) sat next to the shrine with a plate holding flowers and sticks of incense. That evening, the *pūjāri* was gone, but the stones were adorned with more flowers and incense. I saw an elderly woman put some coins in the crack between two of the bricks, and stand with her folded hands raised in front of her concentrating silently for about thirty seconds. When she left she took a pinch of red *kuṅkumam* powder from the pile on top of the shrine and applied it to her forehead. As she stood, two women approximately in their thirties walked by. I heard one of them exclaim as she turned her head to look, “*Sāmiyā?*” (lit. “A god?”). In the middle of a crowded and noisy bus stand, at the end of a long hot day, it was indeed astonishing how little it took for a claim to the presence of the sacred to gain assent.
- 11 In January of 1997, I visited the bus stand again in the early morning to see if the shrine was still there. It had become a little more substantial—the bricks were packed more tightly and more thickly covered with mud. In my field notes I remarked that it was hard to tell whether or not the shrine was serving as a garbage dump for unsaleable puja items, for I was struck by how the offerings, though abundant, were not in top condition.⁵ Based on my conversations with people in the area and my own observations, it seemed that this small shrine (or *cinna kōyil* [small temple] as people around the bus-stand called it) was at the very beginning stages of development: the identity of the resident deity was not communicated visually since the image was aniconic; the simple physical structure that constituted the visible sign of the deity’s manifestation had not yet been given the shelter necessary to outlast the next heavy rain; and, so far as I could tell, there was no fixed community of sharers who contributed to its maintenance or regularly benefited from the deity’s protection. When I asked people in the bazaar bus stand for the identity of the being worshipped here, no one, neither the women who sold their wares next to the shrine, nor the men who ran the shops around the edges of the bazaar, seemed to know. Some of them had never even noticed the shrine. Others guessed it may have been built in response to a dream, or perhaps to propitiate a *pēy*—the spirit of a deceased

individual, whose violent or premature death kept them in a state of perpetual unease and unfulfilled desire, until placated by a *pūjā*-like ritual in which, among other things, they were offered the substances they desired (cf. Blackburn 1985; Clark-Decès 2008b). The presence of offerings suggest that the shrine did function as the fulcrum of a *reciprocal* circuit of giving in which material offerings were exchanged for immaterial boons of protection or solace, but the transactions that I observed were all very simple, and, were carried out in the absence of the *pūjāri*—self-serve. And yet, the shrine had endured for at least two months, from late October to early January. I left India in February of 1997, so I do not know the exact fate of the shrine; but after more than two decades of visits to Madurai, I can testify that nothing like it continues to exist in that place.

- 12 A very cynical view of this temple would be that it was no more than a site for collecting money. Like religious institutions everywhere temples in India have an entrepreneurial aspect. They function like a business, in which money is exchanged for some good, whether material or immaterial. In the absence of the noise and color of a more substantial temple, this aspect of the shrine in the bus-stand came to the fore for many onlookers, though the sums of money involved were very small indeed (50 paisa to 5 rupees). When I asked people at the bus stop what function was served by such a shrine, several referred to *maṇatirupti* (mental satisfaction), a word that I elsewhere heard used colloquially to refer to things like the satisfaction of vanity one might get from using a—not particularly effective—skin lightener. Perhaps that is what worshippers take away from their transactions—a kind of mild mental satisfaction that comes from doing something that may do some good, and almost certainly does no harm.
- 13 And yet, it is also possible to read the temple as an effort to propose and promote an alternative construction of public space. When someone paused and performed the familiar gestures of worship in that busy, dusty bus stand, they evoked momentarily a different landscape and mode of being—not the dry homogenous surface of secular public space, but a differentiated landscape in which contact with suprahuman forces was possible. I would venture that they did this not only for themselves, but also importantly for those around them who happened to notice, like the woman who asked incredulously, “*Sāmiyā? A god?*” While prayer at such sites is often a personal affair of a single individual stopping to conduct his or her quick transaction with the deity, there is also a performative aspect as well, for these gestures take place in public space, with people all around. As such, when an individual engages in the familiar choreography of worship (bowing, lighting incense, dropping coins, etc.), he or she enacts a cultural performance that is legible to those around and that recasts the site as a domain of sacred beings, that is, a sacred space.
- 14 The shrine in the Madurai bus stand made only a very modest claim on public space or the attention of the people around it. However, as property owners and municipal authorities in cities around south India are discovering to their dismay, wayside shrines like this can develop very quickly into something quite extensive, popular, and permanent. Over time, stories of miracles experienced and boons won accumulate and are attached to the physical site of the temple, embedding it ever more firmly in space and time. In the process, structures can cause a great deal of anxiety, especially to the extent that they develop outside the sphere of authority of the state, the office of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments. In addition, the surge in urbanization that has taken place over the last sixty years has placed incredible pressure on land in Indian

cities. In this context, claims about the sanctity of particular spaces can be seen, at least in part, as a strategy to establish or maintain control over it, for the appearance of a shrine can dramatically alter the way public space is used and experienced.

The Snake Goddess of Fourth Cross Lane: Chennai 2001–2017

- 15 According to the 2011 census, Chennai is the fourth largest city in India, with a population of 4.6 million spread over 174 square kilometers (Census 2011 2018). 28. 5% of Chennai's residents live in slums on the banks of rivers and on public or unoccupied land (Dupont 2015:40). Since WWII, the area of the city south of the Adyar River, which includes Adyar, Besant Nagar and Tiruvanmiyur, was one epicenter of this population explosion (Thirumurthy 1992:50). Long-time residents testify that Adyar had been a relatively quiet part of the city, with enough open land to support a small-scale dairy industry. But between 1984 and 2004, preexisting villages were one by one engulfed by the expansion of grid-like housing developments (Muthiah 1992:19–20).⁶ A densely populated area, Adyar was one of the first neighborhoods in the 1990s to acquire the appurtenances of global cosmopolitan culture such as supermarkets, global fast food restaurants and internet connectivity, though such conveniences are now found throughout the city.
- 16 A significant landowner in Adyar is the Theosophical Society, headquartered in Adyar since 1882. By 1909, this eccentric group of British and European esotericists had accumulated over 100 acres of land along the shore of the Adyar River and the Bay of Bengal (Muthiah 1992:190). With their patronage, the area became a center of Brahmanical culture and learning, and it remains so to this day, with the extensive library of Sanskrit manuscripts at the Theosophical Society library and the Bharatya Natyam dance school Kalakshetra in neighboring Besant Nagar. Much of Adyar today is dedicated to middle-class apartments built on grid-like lots, many of whose residents are well-educated Brahmans. But in and around these planned housing developments are dense slums and the remains of older villages occupied by poor and working-class people from a wide variety of caste and religious backgrounds. Control over the definition of public space by very different kinds of residents with very different styles of religiosity is at the root of the conflict aroused by the appearance of a shrine in 2000–2001 along the fence dividing the compound of an English-medium independent K-12 school in Adyar from a public lane.
- 17 The school is associated with the Krishnamurthy Foundation of India, a sort of schismatic offshoot of the Theosophical Society, from whom it rents the land on which the school sits.⁷ Its entrance is just off of one of the main thoroughfares through Adyar on a shady tree-lined lane that runs parallel to the school's property for about 200 yards. Like the Theosophical Society, the KFI school is nestled within a lush, wooded campus—the site of the old Damodar Gardens purchased by Annie Besant in 1909. My main source of information about the shrine was a teacher in the school. Though some regard the site as having been sacred since time immemorial, according to her, the shrine began in 2001 with the worship of an anthill that emerged at the side of a fence separating the school's property from the dark, shaded lane.⁸ Anthills (or, more accurately, termite mounds) with their uncanny tendency to appear out of nowhere and their complex tunneled interiors,

are a powerful symbol in the south Indian religious imagination (Allocco 2013; Irwin 1982; Shulman 1978). They are associated with *nāgas*, supernatural beings that take the form of a snake when they appear to human beings. The teacher said that the anthill had already grown to a large size before someone placed a statue there, probably a *nāgakkaḷ* (a stone image used to mark the presence of a *nāga*), which is often given in conjunction with a vow. Indian folklore and mythology represent *nāgas* as magical, chthonic beings with control over fertility, thus people offer *nāgakkaḷs* to solicit the *nāga*'s assistance in producing a child or to offer thanks for their intervention after the fact.⁹

- 18 Shortly after the appearance of this stone image, a woman who lived in one of the adjacent slums testified that she had learned in a dream that her daughter had been healed by the Amman mother goddess, Nāgāttammaṇ, who dwelled near the anthill. Under her leadership as *pūjāri*, the small shrine began to develop. People brought more stone images and colorful pictures of gods, extending the space occupied by the shrine down the lane. On new moon days, especially in the Tamil month of *Āṭi* (July-August), pedestrians and motorists navigated around the offerings of *ponkal* (pots of boiled rice) and *kōlams* (intricate geometric auspicious drawings made of chalk) that spread out into traffic. The leaders of the school noticed this for several weeks but chose not to act. As progressive residents of the city, they recognized that wealthy people encroached on public land with impunity, and questioned why poor people shouldn't do so too. But then, reports began to circulate that the Goddess had come to her devotees in trance, conveying through their voices her desire for sacrifices. For the devotees, such a demand might have been viewed as a sign of the deepening of the relationship between the Goddess and her followers, but for the school's leadership, it was unacceptable. While the sacrifice of animals is an established feature of the worship of deities close to many non-Brahman Hindus in south India, it is anathema for many Brahmans, and many families associated with the school as teachers and students were Brahmans. The school personnel were appalled at the chicken feathers and pools of blood now seen in the lane. The teacher I spoke with expressed the concern that children would have to step around chicken heads and other remains of sacrifice on the way to the school.
- 19 Shortly before my visit to the school in July of 2001, the principal decided to remove the shrine. The memories of the drama surrounding that decision were fresh in everyone's minds. When the school's groundskeepers, who were local residents of similar class and caste background to the shrine's *pūjāri* and devotees, refused to undertake the job, the principal agreed to move the first stone himself and thus shoulder the responsibility for disrupting the site. When the principal lifted the stone representing the Amman Goddess, a by-stander went into trance and conveyed loudly and in no uncertain terms the Goddess' displeasure. People from the area who had gathered around the shrine angrily began urging the principal to listen to the Goddess' threats of retaliation. He became alarmed and set down the stone to avoid a bigger confrontation.
- 20 After the showdown in the lane, the school entered into negotiations with the main sponsors of the shrine, the *pūjāri* and her family. My main informant, the teacher from the school, reported that in answer to the school's objection that the temple encroached on their land, the *pūjāri*'s family brought up an ancient property dispute, the details of which I could not follow. The family testified to the beneficence of the Goddess and the salutary effects of the shrine by stating that whereas previously the lane had been regarded as a frightening place because of the threat of *pēy-picācu* (ghosts and demons), now local people felt confident taking that path knowing that they had the Goddess'

protection. In the end, after filing a formal letter of complaint with the Municipal Corporation, the principal decided not to remove the shrine but to bring all the stones representing the different attendant deities closer together and to erect a wire fence around it. In this way, they could contain its growth while also, perhaps, giving nominal support to the *pūjāri* by protecting the shrine. As the teacher related, however, this solution did not satisfy the Goddesses' devotees: they were already coming to her to say they could not sleep at night thinking of Her getting rained on through the mesh enclosure.¹⁰

Figure 1

Nāgattamman shrine, Adyar, July 2004
(photo by Eliza Kent)

- 21 Unlike the bus-stop *sāmi* shrine in Madurai, I was able to track the fate of the Nāgāttamman shrine for several years. In 2004, another hot July found me in Chennai where I was able to photograph the shrine. As the photographs show, the school's efforts to contain the growth of the shrine were unsuccessful. A well-built, "pukka" concrete temple had been built around the original images, complete with platform for holding articles needed for worship, and a blackboard for writing down the "prophecies" (*aruḷ vāḱku* [graced speech]) granted by the Goddess (Figure 1). In the manner of most south Indian temples, the outside of the shrine was ornamented so as to signal the identity of the deity within. Here, the top of the original anthill, with sculptured stone cobras emerging from the holes, was placed on the flat roof of the structure as a kind of striking naturalistic *vimāna* (temple gate tower) (Figure 2). As the photographs show, evidence of active worship abounds, suggesting not only a proactive *pūjāri* but a circle of dedicated devotees and patrons: the green *nīm* branches (a "cooling" substance often given to "hot" goddesses like Nāgāttamman), the small clay lamps blackened with soot, the upright bricks adorned with red and yellow *kuṅkumam* powder, the images themselves draped with jasmine flower garlands, and green, yellow and magenta cloths serving as diminutive saris (Figure 3). Moreover, it appears that the temple had become a valuable

site for the circulation of substances, labor, money, and so on through the performance of pūjā, and perhaps the source of decent revenue for its managers, as suggested by the steel padlock attached to the gate.

Figure 2

Detail of Nāgatamman shrine, anthill and nāgas (sacred serpents), July 2004
(photo by Eliza Kent)

Figure 3

Detail of Nāgatamma shrine, image of the Goddess, July 2004
(photo by Eliza Kent)

- 22 In preparation for writing this article in the summer of 2017, I asked an Indian collaborator, M. Thavamani, to check the status of the Nāgāttammaṇ shrine. The story of what happened between 2004 and 2017 demonstrates that in addition to the work of founders, patrons and devotees, and the tolerance (or indifference) of neighbors, a shrine's success or failure, disappearance or development, depends on the state, which ultimately regulates the process. According to Thavamani's interview with a watchman with 15 years of experience working for the KFI school, by 2004–2005, worship activities organized around the temple built by “the old lady *pūjāri*” (as she was now known in the neighborhood) regularly extended out into the lane and obstructed traffic day and night, especially on Fridays and Tuesdays. As the watchman reported, influential people like Indian Administrative Service officials often used the road and felt the temple was becoming “a big headache.” The watchman reported that several people complained to the Municipal Corporation and then, one night sometime in 2005, all of a sudden, officials came and broke down the temple, taking away the bricks (personal communication, M. Thavamani, August 15, 2017).

Figure 4

Detail of Nāgattamman shrine, August 2017
(photo by M. Thavamani)

- 23 That would seem to be the end of the story. And yet, even in the summer of 2017, twelve years after the demolition of the elderly *pūjārī*'s temple, one finds clear evidence of ongoing worship of Nāgāttamman along the lane (Figures 4 and 5). Though the timing of its emergence is uncertain, a smaller shrine has developed around an anthill, and is expanding along the length of the lane as more god pictures are placed to one side or another of the anthill, supported by a wire mesh fence between the compound wall and the road. The persistence of the shrine in 2017 points to the complexity of the situation, with neither state, neighbors, patrons, nor devotees having absolute control over the space: while municipal authorities are unable to quash the temple, Nāgāttamman's devotees are unable to erect a more permanent "seat" of worship for the Goddess. A 56-year old temple official of a nearby Amman temple, dedicated to Poṇṇiyamman, explained Nāgāttamman's persistent presence in a variety of ways. First, he testified that the Goddess had always been here, since he was a child, indeed, even as far back as the British era. Drawing on a familiar trope in south Indian Amman worship, he then linked Nāgāttamman's presence to his own temple's goddess, asserting her connection with, but inferiority to Poṇṇiyamman: "she is the younger sister, she is the older sister, so they must be close." Significantly, he also observed that the soil is good for anthills. Because it is "soft," termites keep building nests here, and when they do, people recognize them as a mark of the presence of an Amman goddess, specifically the Amman goddess most closely linked with anthills, Nāgāttamman (personal communication, M. Thavamani, August 15, 2017).

Figure 5

Reappearance of Nāgatamman shrine, August 2017
(photo by M. Thavamani)

- 24 In the new legal environment ushered in by the 2009 Supreme Court ruling banning the construction of religious structures on public land, the cycle of development for this shrine may never get past the demarcation and initial building stage. The waiting period to assess tolerance is met nowadays more swiftly with opposition rather than support, tacit approval, grudging tolerance, or indifference. And yet, so long as the anthills keep appearing, providing a visible sign of the deity's presence, there will likely be someone to respond to them.

Conclusion

- 25 Through this comparison, we can see several factors at work that made the Nāgāttamman shrine in Adyar capable of attracting a body of worshippers and broadcasting a new understanding of public space, while the shrine in Madurai failed to do so: 1) the presence of an active patron, 2) the nature of the built structure, and 3) the location. Whoever the *pūjāri* or other supporters of the shrine in Madurai may have been, as far as I could see, they were not very active in promoting the site. They had not even successfully propagated the identity of the deity among the people who worked in the immediate vicinity. In Adyar, on the other hand, the *pūjāri* was very active in integrating the shrine into pre-existing concepts of sacred space and time, and thus meeting people's expectations of how a temple should function and appear. She celebrated the days considered auspicious according to the Hindu calendar, adorning the temple with special care on Tuesdays, Fridays and new moon days, as is appropriate for worship of goddesses.

She also made offerings and encouraged offerings that signaled clearly the identity of the goddess—*nīm* leaves (regarded as a cooling substance that moderates the extreme heat of Amman goddesses), turmeric powder (also cooling), animal sacrifices and red *kunkumam* powder (a vegetarian substitute for blood). In this way, an amorphous apprehension of the divine—initially understood as the uncanny perception of malevolent, threatening ghosts and later marked by the placing of a *nāgakkaḷ* (divine snake stone)—was channeled into pre-existing cultural codes, domesticated and made recognizable, thereby attracting further worship and closer assimilation to a familiar model of the divine—the Amman goddess.

- 26 The built structure of the two shrines is another significant factor in their capacity to endure over time. The shrine in the Periyar bus stand in Madurai was obviously built by human hands out of bricks and clay, whereas the shrine in Adyar was built adjacent to an anthill, whose emergence was apparently spontaneous (although certainly we do not want to overlook the arduous work of the thousands of insects who actually did build it). Such spontaneous emergence helped to efface the evidence of human labor and intention in its construction and made it easier to represent the acts of worship that have transformed the lane as *responses* to a divine mandate, rather than active, willful intervention. Like the “act first, talk later” strategies of slum dwellers in Mumbai for gaining access to structures, water, or electricity, wayside shrines often entail making a bold effort to “claim refine and define ... spaces they already control” (if not legally have title to) (Appadurai 2001:33). For poor residents of India’s crowded urban centers making claims on public space, the plausible deniability inherent in the appearance of *svayambhū* (“self-born”) shrines helps mitigate the dangers inherent in a risky gambit.
- 27 Finally, the locations of the two shrines were also key factors in their growth. The Madurai shrine at the bus stand was at the intersection of many highways and byways. Such a heavily trafficked location might be an advantage in that the temple was thus exposed to a great many potential worshippers. But I would argue that there were just too many people, and too high a level of anonymity, to elicit high levels of identification among them. In Adyar, the shrine was located in a less trafficked area, but one that was a prime location for launching a campaign to contest the significance and use of its space. It is hard not to view the construction and support of the shrine as, at least in part, an effort by local residents to appropriate a tiny section of the school’s large campus, and perhaps by association, the vast undeveloped land holdings of the Society. By “appropriate” here, I do not mean that usufructory rights or legal ownership were necessarily at stake in these cases. Naturally, the legal, economic and religious dimensions of space cannot be easily differentiated; indeed, that is what accounts, in large part, for the anxiety aroused by wayside shrines. But here, I would argue, the residents’ “appropriation” of the lane adjoining the KFI took place on more a symbolic and psychological level. I refer to the effort to re-orient the area according to the constructions of sacred space of the non-Brahman, working class residents. William Ellison writes of wayside shrines in Mumbai that they function as “signposts from an alternate geography, windows that open on an imaginary at variance with the logic of abstraction that dictates the straight lines and clean demarcations of the city blocks” (Ellison 2014:160). The beliefs and rituals centered around the Adyar shrine helped to transform the space, not only from a dark, forested lane potentially infested with ghosts and demons to the abode of a powerful *amman*, but also from an intimidating corridor between extensive properties owned by Brahmans to a more comfortable place marked with signs and symbols that centered the Amman’s non-

Brahman devotees and their concerns. As such, the shrine also served as a catalyst to make submerged lines of identity among the residents of the area come to prominence. One sees in the confrontation over the shrine indications that its appearance made it necessary for some people with divided loyalties to proclaim which side they stood on—as when the groundskeepers refused to be the first ones to remove the stone. A refusal, or willingness, to recognize the shrine as a legitimate and authentic seat of the Goddess entails aligning oneself with one “public” or another—the public of clear, clean thoroughfares efficiently transporting people hither and thither, affirmed by the Supreme Court in its 2009 ruling, or the seemingly indomitable community of sharers organized through worship of Nāgattamman.

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NOTES

1. This article has had an unusually long gestation. The fieldwork upon which it is based was conducted during several sojourns in India, in 1996–97, 2001, 2004 and 2017, funded by several institutions whose support is here gratefully acknowledged: the American Institute for Indian Studies, Fulbright IIE, Colgate University and Skidmore College. During each period of fieldwork, roadside shrines were not my main focus; however, as fascinating and visually striking aspects of vernacular Tamil Hinduism, they caught my attention, prompting me to observe, photograph and engage people in conversation about them. This article, thus, is based on a return to decades-old field notes, with fresh eyes and new questions, somewhat in the manner of the late Isabelle Clark-Decès, *The Encounter Never Ends: A Return to the Field of Tamil Rituals* (2007). Many thanks to fellow panelists and audience members at the 2001 American Anthropological Association Conference in Washington, D. C. and the 2004 American Academy of Religion conference in San Antonio, who critiqued two early versions of this paper. For their support, patience and critical input, special thanks are due to the late Selva J. Raj, Smriti Srinivas, Mary Hancock, Lukas Rueda, Raphael Voix, Boyarin Larios and four anonymous reviewers. For his invaluable assistance with fieldwork, I offer heartfelt gratitude to my long-time collaborator and friend M. Thavamani.
2. I develop this model of roadside shrine growth on the basis of my observations of Hindu shrines in Tamil Nadu. It would be interesting to consider the applicability of this model to Roman Catholic or Muslim roadside shrines in Tamil Nadu, and India more broadly, where they are found in abundance.
3. On the nature and typologies, both indigenous and exogenous, of the deities of vernacular south Indian Hinduism see Blackburn (1985), Clark-Decès (2008), Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1998), Fuller (2004:29–56), Masilamani-Meyer (2004), Mines (2005) and Reiniche (1989).

4. Many years ago, I had a slide of this shrine, which I frequently used in classrooms in the course of my peripatetic life as a pre-tenured faculty. With use it became dusty, smudged with fingerprints, and faded. As fewer classrooms were equipped with slide projectors, it fell out of use and eventually got lost. So, regrettably, my verbal description of the site will have to substitute for a photographic image.
5. Many Hindus are reluctant to dispose of puja items in a careless way; one of the side effects of a rich ritual culture of image worship, therefore, is a continual accumulation of spent sacred stuff that needs to be managed—cracked and faded chromolithographs of deities, spent flowers, spoiled milk and other offerings.
6. Adyar was incorporated around WWII, and Tiruvanmiyur, an “ancient village” was incorporated sometime between 1951–1975 (Muthiah 1992:19–20).
7. At the time of writing in 2018, the KFI school was in the process of moving to a new location in Thazhampur, a village south of Chennai that has morphed into a modern suburb with the expansion of Chennai’s IT corridor along the Old Mahabalipuram Road. Motivated by a desire to use the site for its own purposes, the Theosophical Society did not renew the school’s lease (The School, Krishnamurti Foundation India 2018; Thomas 2010).
8. Interview conducted by the author, July 16, 2001.
9. Though *nāgas* have been features of Indian mythology and worship going back to the Atharva Veda, the rituals and narratives that surround the anthill shrines that one sees abundantly in Chennai today show remarkable continuity over several hundred years, embodying a nexus of associations between *nāgas*, mother goddesses (*ammans*) and fertility (Allocco 2013). Amy Allocco has described the importance of such shrines especially to women, in anchoring intimate devotional relationships with mother goddesses that are created and sustained by the seeking and granting of boons for children, successful marriage, educational achievement and so forth.
10. These events predate by two years the controversies over animal sacrifice that erupted in 2003–2004 in the wake of Chief Minister Jayalalitha’s bid to enforce a decades-old law prohibiting the practice, but they touch on some of the same issues. Opposition to animal sacrifice, particularly among reformist high-caste Hindus, has a long history in modern India (Good 2017; Fuller 2004:83–105). The impulse to assert the superiority of vegetarian, non-violent modes of worship found sufficient support to win the passage of the Madras Animals and Birds Sacrifices Prevention Act of 1950. But, as Anthony Good argues, the law was never enforced, suggesting the campaign may have sought more to delegitimize this form of worship than actually stop it. In August of 2003, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha ordered state police to enforce the rule, only to backtrack six months later and repeal the original 1950 law altogether in the face of widespread popular resistance. A similar dynamic of disapproval and opposition giving way to grudging tolerance can be seen in the stance of the school’s upper-caste leadership towards the *Nāgatammaṇ* shrine and its patrons’ non-vegetarian, non-Brahmanical forms of worship.

ABSTRACTS

Wayside shrines are a ubiquitous feature of urban India. A site for community building and income-generation for their mostly poor and working class patrons, they are increasingly a source of anxiety for middle class residents who fear their capacity to morph quickly into full-fledged temples. Through a comparison of two roadside shrines, one that was successful at attracting a group of followers and one that was not, the paper analyzes the rhetorical and ritual

means that the human representatives of a deity employ to transform ordinary, homogenous public space into sacred space, where a deity may take Her seat and be honored. Such a transformation of the way that space is experienced and understood can have a catalytic effect on the people who move through it, creating new publics who exist in tension with an increasingly influential vision of public space as hygienic, orderly and free from religion.

INDEX

Keywords: roadside shrines, wayside shrines, nāgas, amman goddesses, urban religion, public space

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