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## The Navarātri Festival in Chidambaram, South India

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## Chapter 4

### The *Navarātri* Festival in Chidambaram, South India

Masakazu TANAKA

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

India, especially the Tamil cultural sphere, has many religious observances centred on women and goddesses. The majority of important village festivals are dedicated to the village goddess, and there are even secret festivals closed to men in which only women may participate. There are also many festivals in which, although men are not excluded, the women participants play the decisive roles or account for the overwhelming majority of participants. If one includes rites of passage associated with menarche and other phases in the life cycle of women, the number of such festivals will be even greater.

The present article has two objectives. One is to consider the character of women's festivals in terms of caste hierarchy, while the other is to examine the character of such festivals in terms of gender hierarchy. I shall first elaborate on these two objectives in a little more detail.

The *Navarātri* ("Nine Nights"), to be considered below, is one of the few festivals that can be observed throughout the Hindu India, and it is known as *Durgā-pūjā* in Bengal and as *Daśarā* in Karnataka. Common to all these is the fact that they are performed almost at the same time and are festivals centred on goddesses, but it would appear that, historically speaking, they cannot necessarily be all reduced to a single traditional element (see S. Einoo's article in this volume). This would suggest, in other words, that one should not attribute to the *Navarātri* any fundamental or universal meaning or character.

Even in regions belonging linguistically to the same cultural sphere there are sometimes marked differences in the character of this festival. Its character will also change depending upon the social roles of those who act as central figures in the festival. Therefore, simplistic generalizations should be eschewed for both historical and sociological reasons. My first objective in the following is to understand from a sociological viewpoint the diversity evidenced by the *Navarātri* in the Tamil society. In order to lend clarity to my arguments, I shall also critically examine the research on the *Navarātri* undertaken in Madurai, also in Tamilnadu, by C.J. Fuller and P. Logan, who point to a complementarity on a symbolic plane between the temple and the home in the celebration of this festival.

Insofar that it is dedicated to a goddess and women account for the

overwhelming majority of participants, the *Navarātri* is a typical women's festival. But in what sense can it actually be said to be a women's festival? Is the independence of women, emphasized in ritual studies focussing on women, realized in the course of this festival? And is it possible to hear voices that might counter official male-centred discourse? To provide answers to these questions through an analysis of the ritual process in the *Navarātri* is my second objective.

Bearing the above questions in mind, I shall now proceed to analyze the *Navarātri* festival that I was able to observe in autumn 1989 at the Naṭarāja Temple in Chidambaram, Tamilnadu and in the homes of the its Brahman priests (Dikshitaras). I shall first give a brief description of Naṭarāja Temple and the Dikshitaras and then proceed to describe the *Navarātri* as performed in the Dikshitaras' homes, at Naṭarāja Temple, and in Madurai.

## 2. NAṬARĀJA TEMPLE AND ITS PRIESTS

South India is known as a land of temples, and between the tenth and thirteenth centuries many enormous temples were constructed.

The form of Śiva enshrined at Chidambaram is properly known as "Naṭarāja," meaning "king of dance," or "Sabhānāyaka" or "Sabhābati," both meaning "lord



Plate 1. The Śivagaṅgā Tank and the North Gopura.



Plate 2. The Natarāja Temple.

of the assembly halls,” with “assembly hall” (*sabhā*) here referring to the five principal buildings of the temple. Hence the temple has come to be known as Natarāja Temple or Sabhānāyaka Temple (TANAKA 1993).<sup>1)</sup>

According to legend, the temple was founded after a king living in about the sixth century bathed here and cured his skin ailment. There are also records of saints who flourished in the seventh and eighth centuries having visited Natarāja Temple. It may thus be assumed that a temple, albeit of a small scale, had been erected by about the eighth century. The main buildings extant today were built between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, and since then the buildings have been repeatedly renovated and further buildings added down to the present day.

As may be seen on the accompanying map (Fig. 1), Chidambaram is situated about 245 kilometres south of Madras (now Chennai), the capital of the state of Tamilnadu, and the 1981 census gave its population as approximately 56,000. Chidambaram is renowned above all for the presence of Natarāja Temple, which more or less occupies the centre of the town and covers an area of about 16 hectares.

The people who play the leading role at Natarāja Temple are the priests (*arcaka*), who are called Dikshitars (an Anglicized form of Sanskrit *dīkṣita* or Tamil *tīkṣitar*). They may be encountered in all parts of the temple complex. They wear a white robe gracefully fastened around the waist, leaving the upper half of the body uncovered, and they wear the sacred cord, characteristic of a Brahman, over the left shoulder and under the right arm.

In their hands they may be carrying a metal vessel for leftover offerings (*prasāda*). Their hair is shaved at the back and front and on both sides of the head,

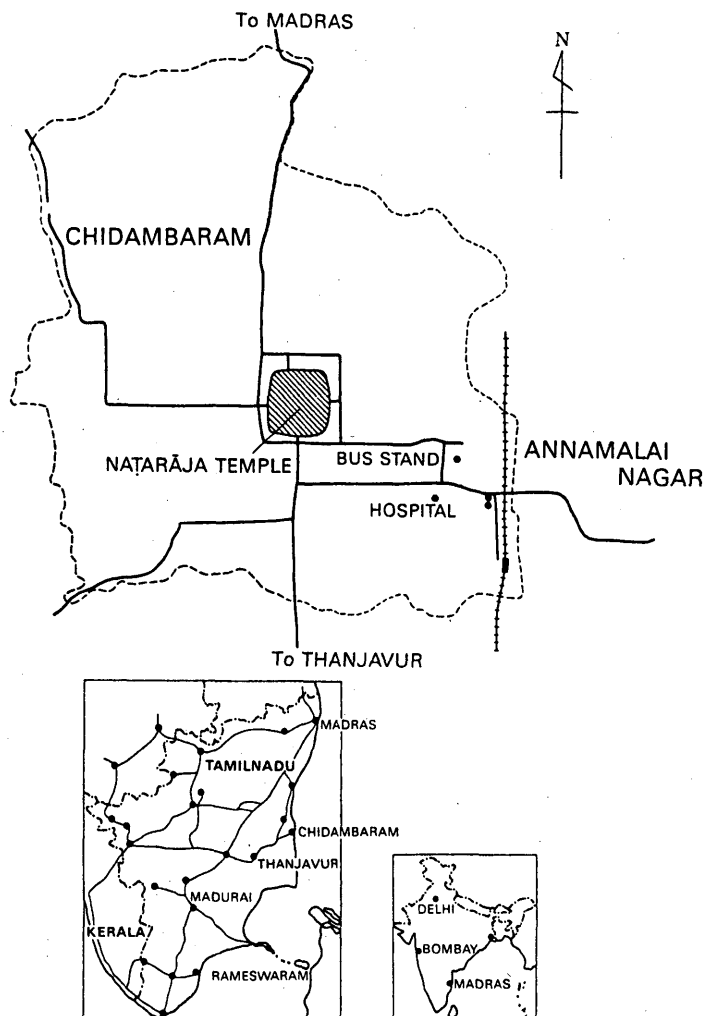
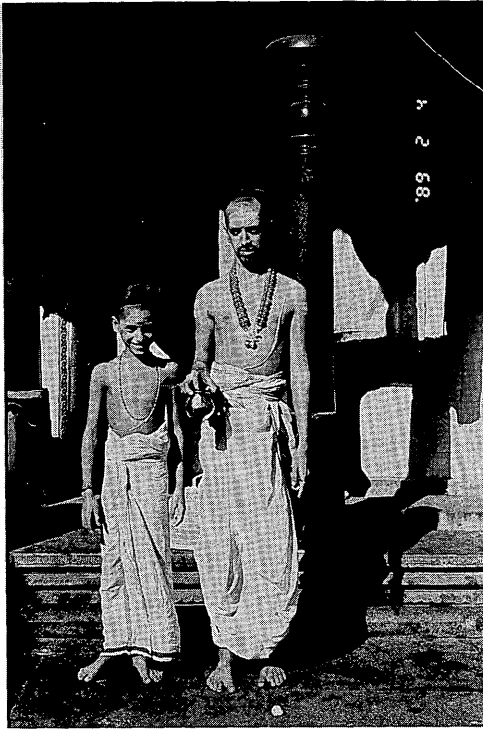


Figure 1. Research area.

with only the hair on the crown of the head being left unshaven. Because this tuft of hair is in principle never cut, it may grow as long as one metre, and it is neatly twisted and knotted towards the front of the head on the left-hand side. It may be noted that although Brahmans elsewhere in Tamilnadu similarly shave the sides of the head and leave the tuft on the crown to grow, they knot it at the back of the head.

In 1988 the Dikshitars constituted a small community of 196 households with a total population of 686. They administer the temple collectively, and the majority of them depend for their livelihood upon the emoluments gained from visitors to the temple. Apart from two or three exceptions, they all live in Chidambaram.



**Plate 3.** Dikshitar priest and his son.

Those with a regular occupation other than that of priest are less than ten in number, but provided that they live in Chidambaram, they too serve as priests. They make frequent pilgrimages to far-off places, but they do not visit temples where animal sacrifices are performed.

Formerly there are said to have been three thousand priests, but today there are 265 married men who qualify as priests. They claim to have the highest status among the inhabitants of Chidambaram, and they are in fact regarded as such by other castes. The following is a legend that has been preserved among the Dikshitaras.

Once an important ritual was to be performed near Varanasi, a great distance from Chidambaram, and three thousand Dikshitaras were invited by the god Brahman. They were reluctant to leave Chidambaram, but finally decided to accept Brahman's invitation. They then hastened back to Chidambaram so as to be in time for the temple rites, only to be thrown into great consternation on discovering that one of their party was missing. A voice was then heard from heaven, informing them that the missing one was none other than Śiva. Śiva is therefore one of them, and the Dikshitaras all maintain that they have no leader because in their society all are equal and Śiva himself is their leader.

As priests who participate in religious services, the Dikshitaras observe

extremely strict rules relating to purity (*maṭi*) and impurity (*tīṭṭu*, *doṣa*). With regard to diet, they are strict vegetarians and also avoid stimulants such as onions and garlic. They do not eat in the company of other people apart from high-ranking Brahmins, and marriage is possible only within their own group.

Worthy of special mention is the Dikshitar's control of women. Once a girl has reached maturity, it is regarded as undesirable for her to go anywhere other than along the streets where the houses of the Dikshitar's are located or inside the temple grounds. Furthermore, once a menstrual period begins, she must neither look at her husband nor speak to him. She will return to her parents' home and spend three days in seclusion in an earth-floored room. During her periods she is the last member of the family to eat at meal times, while her husband is not allowed to perform any religious services.

The period of impurity when there has been a death or a birth in the family is ten days, but in the case of a death a priest is unable to make private offerings (*arcanā*) for forty days and he refrains from performing public worship (*pūjā*) at the temple for one year. In the case of childbirth, he is not allowed to perform *arcanā* for ten days but may perform in public worship after forty days. During her pregnancy the wife does not worship. The Dikshitar's pride themselves in their strict observance of these rules relating to purity and impurity.

Until recently child marriage has been the norm among the Dikshitar's. Once a man marries, not only is he able to serve as a priest, but he also has a say in the management of the temple. In addition, the practice of child marriage may also be considered to be closely connected to traditional Brahmanical values concerning control over women from a young age. The Dikshitar's are divided into four patrilineal exogamous groups (*gotra*), and marriage takes place between these groups. Although the Dikshitar's may eat together with other Brahmins, there is no intermarriage. The *gotras* are all of equal status. Prior to cohabitation the couple are not allowed to speak with one another. It is only after the girl has had her first period and cohabitation has been deemed practicable that she moves to her husband's house and the couple enters into married life. The wife must serve her husband, looking upon him as the equal of a god. If the husband should die, she is not allowed to remarry, even if this should occur prior to the commencement of cohabitation. Only men are permitted to marry again.

But since the marriage networks do not extend beyond Chidambaram, women do not feel particularly isolated even if they do go to live at their husband's home after marriage. The same may be said of the treatment of widows, and they would not appear to be leading especially miserable lives. As was noted above, during her menstrual period the wife must return to her parents' home, and when expecting a child she returns to the parental home in the eighth month of pregnancy and gives birth there. In addition, the dowry (*varadakṣiṇa*), the question of which is frequently brought up in connection with the low status of women, is only 2,000 rupees (approximately US\$ 150.00 in 1988) and has not become a social problem. As for children, there does not appear to be any strong tendency to favour boys

rather than girls. Women are not isolated as sources of impurity, nor are they regarded only as mothers; they are above all looked upon as playing a pivotal role as partner in the husband's religious life, and it may be said that it is for this reason that they are kept under strict control.

### 3. THE *NAVARĀTRI* IN THE HOME OF A DIKSHITAR PRIEST

#### The Myth

As is usual in India, people in Tamilnadu use a lunisolar calendar combining the lunar and solar calendars. The year is divided into twelve solar months, and the *Navarātri* falls on the nine lunar days beginning with the day after the new moon of the month of Puraṭṭāci (September-October in the Gregorian calendar). In regions using the lunar calendar, it is celebrated on the first nine lunar days of the bright fortnight (while the moon waxes) of the lunar month of Āśvina.

The *Navarātri* is a festival dedicated to three Hindu goddesses. The nine days of the festival are divided into three, and it is said that Durgā is worshipped during the first three days, Lakṣmī during the next three days, and Sarasvatī during the final three days. But as is evident from the following myth and the ritual process, it is only Durgā and Sarasvatī that are of importance, and no clear-cut role can be discerned for Lakṣmī.

This nine-day period is also considered to correspond to the period during which the above three goddesses cooperated in subjugating a demon. The story as I heard it was only fragmentary, but it is without question based on the confrontation between the Goddess and the demon Maḥiṣāśura (although some of my informants gave Śumbha and Niśumbha as the names of the demons). It is related that the demon Maḥiṣāśura undertook austerities in order to win Śiva's favour (*varam*). Śiva, moved by his dedication, granted him certain powers, but he immediately took to evil ways and became uncontrollable. Because it was Śiva who had conferred these powers on him, Śiva himself was unable to take any action, and instead he asked the Goddess to deal with the situation. In this manner a desperate struggle began between the Goddess and the demon. Each time the demon was killed, he changed himself into another form and returned to life, while the Goddess too assumed various forms in her attempts to corner the demon. Finally on the eighth day she killed Maḥiṣāśura in his buffalo-form. The Goddess who slew him came to be known as Maḥiṣāsuramardinī, and she is said to have taken the form of Durgā (For further details on the Maḥiṣāsuramardinī myth, see Y. Yokochi's article in this volume).

#### The World of the *Kolu*

In the homes of members of the higher castes, especially Brahmans, various dolls and miniatures are displayed and worshipped on a tiered platform known as a *kolu* during the *Navarātri*.





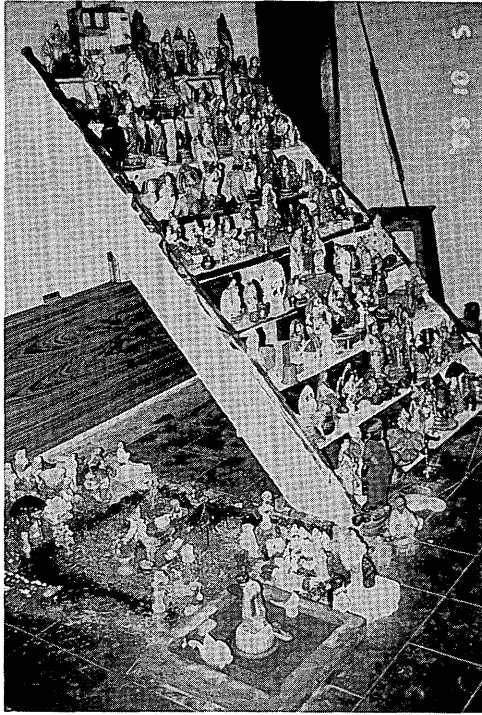
Plate 4. *Kolu* (1).

These are said to represent the different forms assumed by the Goddess in her struggles with the demon. Not only traditional objects, but also miniatures of electrical appliances and motorbikes, symbolic of modern society, are displayed on these platforms. The dolls are stored in wooden boxes and brought out only for the *Navarātri*, and often new dolls are also purchased.

Ideally, the *kolu* will consist of nine tiers, and at least three tiers are necessary in order to worship the three goddesses. Odd numbers of five or seven tiers are also acceptable. The ideal number of nine tiers is obviously related to the “nine nights” of the *Navarātri*. The *kolu* reaches about two metres in height, and sand is strewn on the floor in front of it, with a receptacle holding water being placed on the sand. Since the *kolu* is also an object of worship, it must be erected in a place that is pure. It is accordingly placed in the room where the daily worship is performed or, if this room is too small, near the entrance to this room, and it faces east.

In actual practice, there are subtle differences in the way in which the *kolu* is set up in individual households. The *kolu* in the home of the Sedubadi family that I am about to describe is somewhat more elaborate than is usually the case, and because it is not possible to describe all its decorations, I shall list only the main objects displayed.

Sand is spread on the floor in front of the *kolu*, and a rectangular receptacle for

Plate 5. *Kolu* (2).

water is placed on the sand. The three sides of this receptacle other than that facing the *kolu* have flights of steps. Plastic fish and rabbits, toy ducks, and a male figure float in the water. Horses, monkeys, fowls, cats, elephants and female dolls are arrayed on the steps, while around the rim of the receptacle miniature models of potplants, scooters, lions, deer, cats, parakeets, squirrels, cameras, pumps, umbrellas and chairs jostle with one another. On the sand itself, there are trains, trees, motorbikes, horses, camels, lions, tigers and elephants.

On the first tier, there are cowries, umbrellas, various cooking utensils and vessels (these and the following objects are all miniatures), eating utensils, a fan, mixer, and suitcase. The second tier has vessels used for religious worship and receiving guests (considered to be auspicious), miniature game boards, twenty wooden male and female figures, a doll representing the birth of Rāma, a clay doll depicting the raising of fowls, a miniature *bodhi* tree under which are images of Gaṇeśa and serpent-gods, and various ritual implements and offerings. On the third tier, there are game boards, bottles of perfume, a set of clay dolls showing three men and two women partaking of a banquet, a set of clay dolls representing the celebrations for a newly built house, a set of clay dolls representing a marriage ceremony (with a Brahman priest performing *homa*, four musicians, the bride and bridegroom, their parents, the bride's younger sister, etc.), and a china doll. The



Plate 6. The Second tire of *kolu* (1).

fourth tier has a set of figures portraying an episode relating to the contest between Śiva's sons Gaṇeśa and Murukaṇ (with three gods and Śiva's spouse Pārvatī), an image of Murukaṇ, a set of figures depicting the tale of an elephant that prayed to Viṣṇu for help when about to be pulled underwater by a crocodile, a set of clay dolls showing five women drawing water, and china dolls representing pairs of deer, horses and tigers. On the fifth tier, there are images of Viṣṇu's ten incarnations, a map of India and an image of a goddess a set of figures portraying an episode from Kṛṣṇa's life, the figure of a goddess sitting on a swing, and china dolls of three dogs and a pair of birds. The sixth tier has a set of figures depicting an episode relating to Śiva's devotee Kaṇṇappa, an image of Kṛṣṇa, a set of images of Rāma, Śītā and Hanumān, images of Gaṇeśa and the goddess Māri, stone dolls of snakes, deer, mice, chairs, etc., and china vessels. On the seventh tier, there are a set of figures depicting Paṇani hill, sacred to Murukaṇ (with three male and female devotees performing a dance called *kāvaṭi*), Pāñjamūruti, or the chief gods of the Śivaites (in this case, a set of images of Śiva, Pārvatī and Skanda called Somaskanda), an image of Śiva's consort Śivakāmasundari, a set of images of Śiva's first son Gaṇeśa, his second son Murukaṇ (Skanda) and their female partners, a set of five figures of Sandhikeśvara, an image of Aiyappa, three images of Kṛṣṇa, a pair of china dogs, and a pair of china rabbits. The eighth tier has an image of the infant Kṛṣṇa stealing butter, images of Mīnākṣī, Lakṣmī, Gaṇeśa and Murukaṇ, a model house, a pair of dancers, and a pair of policemen. On the uppermost ninth tier, there are an image of Durgā, two images of Lakṣmī, an image of Sarasvatī, a bronze figurine of a goddess, an image of Śiva, and a pair of policemen.

It is evident that there are no strict rules regarding the arrangement of the displayed objects, but the uppermost tier has images of the three goddesses and the chief male deity, while single deity images and sets of clay dolls depicting mythical scenes predominate on the fourth to eighth tiers. On the second and third tiers one finds auspicious objects related to religious observances and clay dolls representing secular rites (weddings and banquets) and productive activities, and there are models of daily objects on the first tier and the floor. Animals are found on several tiers, but they are found mainly on the sand-covered floor and the lowermost tier, and on the upper tiers they appear in pairs. Although there are some exceptions, such as the image of Rāma on the second tier, it is not impossible to discern a certain pattern in the arrangement of these various objects, with the floor representing the world of things and animals and the natural world as expressed by means of water and sand, the lower tiers representing the world of humans, the middle tiers representing the realm of divine myths (and communion between gods and men), and the upper tiers representing in particular the world of goddesses. It could be said that the *kolu* both reflects the stratified order lying at the root of the Hindu world view centred on goddesses and also represents in its totality a goddess-centred Hindu cosmos (cf. FULLER and LOGAN 1985:97). I was also told that the tiers represent the distance separating the human world from the realms of the gods and that people are taught by this means that, in order to approach the realms of the gods, they must make efforts to climb upwards.

### Ritual Decorations

A separate altar stands near the *kolu*. The image (less than ten centimetres high) of one particular goddess is selected from among the images serving as the objects of the household's daily worship and is placed on this altar, and this goddess is worshipped separately. The image is decorated differently each day so as to portray a different mythical episode (not necessarily related to the *Navarātri* or the goddess in question). The way in which the goddess is decorated is not fixed and varies from year to year, and the same applies to temples where similar arrangements are made.

For example, in the case of the aforementioned Sedubadi family, on the first day the goddess is shown giving food to the seer Durvāsa; on the second day she represents an unspecified goddess praying to Śiva's phallus or *liṅga*; on the third day the decorations relate to the story of the elephant that was saved from a crocodile after praying to Viṣṇu; on the fourth day the goddess represents Viṣṇu's incarnation as a dwarf; on the fifth day she represents Śiva's fanatic devotee Kaṇṇappa who, on seeing blood coming out of a *liṅga*, tried to check the flow of blood by gouging out his own eye and placing it over the wound; on the sixth day she represents Annapūrṇā, a goddess of food; on the seventh day she represents the goddess Durgā; on the eighth day the decorations represent a tale relating to Śiva who, in order to effect a reconciliation between a potter and his wife, manifested as an old man, but then reverted to his real form as Śiva astride a cow when the couple

had settled their dispute; and on the ninth day the goddess represents Sarasvatī. A goddess is thus portrayed on only five of the nine days. As will be seen below, these decorations are similar to the way in which festival images of the goddess are decorated at many temples during the *Navarātri*.

### Ritual Process

During the *Navarātri* festival, worship is performed every morning for the goddesses displayed on the *kolu*. The main focus is on the goddess enshrined in the ancillary altar, but this worship is only performed as part of the domestic worship conducted daily by the men of the household. The main ritual activity, on the other hand, is carried out from about seven o'clock in the evening by the women, who invite female neighbours and relatives (including girls) to their home and sing the hymn to Durgā included in the *Devīmāhātmya*. This means that throughout the *Navarātri* they are worshipping a goddess of destruction. When the guests leave, they are given packs of betel and areca nuts (*tānbūra*), yellow turmeric powder for applying to their foreheads, red powder, flowers, and offerings made of boiled chickpeas.

The goddesses installed on the *kolu* become the object of the women's prayers at night. Night belongs to the goddesses, whereas daytime belongs to men and is suited to worshipping male deities. Night is also the time when evil spirits and demons increase their strength and become active, and they are therefore even more difficult to cope with at night than at other times. In particular, the six-month period starting from the month of Āṭi (July-August) represents nighttime for the gods, for whom one year is equivalent to one day, and therefore the month of Purattāci, corresponding to midnight, is when the demons are at their most powerful (LOGAN 1980:152). It may be for this reason that goddesses, who are in their element at night, are called upon to deal with the demons.

It could be said that the mythical theme underlying the *Navarātri* is the subjugation of demons, but apart from the hymn to Durgā there are no suggestions of fighting or conquest in the rites themselves. It could, however, be considered that the very fact that the rites are performed by women at night is related to the theme of the fear and subjugation of demons. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the offerings to the goddess consist of chickpeas, which are "hot" by nature and serve to increase the goddess's power. Needless to say, the procreative powers of the women who later consume the leftover offerings (*prasāda*) also increase (FULLER and LOGAN 1985: 98).

It is evident from our interpretation of its myth and rites that the underlying theme of the *Navarātri* is the strength of the latent power of women (and goddesses). But this does not represent a simple glorification of women (and goddesses), for it is the dangerous power of women that is described in the myth. Generally speaking, in Hindu thought it is believed that by subordinating themselves to men, women can put their potentially dangerous powers to good use. The power of the invigorated goddess and of the women who sing her praises must

be controlled by some means or another.

### The *Sarasvatī-pūjā*

Here I wish to draw attention to the *Sarasvatī-pūjā*, performed on the final day of the *Navarātri*. In spite of the fact that it bears the name of the goddess *Sarasvatī*, this is the one rite during the *Navarātri* in which the participation of women is kept to a bare minimum. In addition, it is performed not at night but at about eleven o'clock in the morning.

The *Sarasvatī-pūjā* begins on the seventh day. But it is on the ninth day that more refined religious worship, starting with the careful decoration of the area surrounding the *kolu* with palm leaves and flowers and an increase in the number of offerings, is to be observed. On the seventh day a small dais is placed to the left of the *kolu*, and all the books in the house are piled up on top of this dais.

A married male (usually the head of the household) then conducts a religious service addressed to this dais laden with books.

The officiant first makes with kneaded turmeric a "image" for *Gaṇeśa*, whom he invokes and worships. He then sacralizes the water in a jar by means of *mantras* and sprinkles it around the *kolu* and over the ritual implements in order to purify them. In this fashion the ritual space where *Sarasvatī* will be invoked is prepared. The officiant then scatters yellow dyed rice, *bilva* leaves and holy water over the books. Sounding a bell, he arranges the offerings to *Sarasvatī*, which are covered with a cloth so as not to be visible. He then burns incense, lights a camphor lamp, and carries it three times around the *kolu* and the books. The other members of the

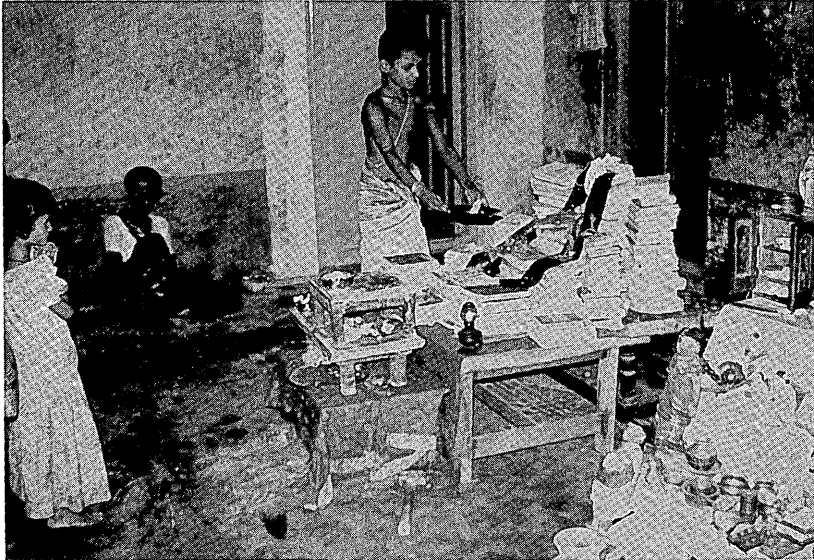


Plate 7. *Sarasvatī-pūjā*.

family, including the women, go around with him. Then the officiant goes to each room in the house to burn incense. The men pay their final respects standing sideways to the *kolu*, while the women go down on their knees. Books here serve as the object of worship because Sarasvatī is revered as the goddess of learning. Since the ninth day of the *Navarātri* is also the day for celebrating the *Āyudha-pūjā*, dedicated to weapons and tools, a hammer is also placed alongside the books.

In this *Sarasvatī-pūjā* one may thus observe a complete domestic rite. This contrasts with the daily ritual activities of the women, centred on their worship and hymn-singing, which are performed in only an incomplete form.

The *Sarasvatī-pūjā* is perhaps a rite that is especially prevalent among Brahmans, who attach great importance to learning. People of other castes perform the *Āyudha-pūjā* on the evening of the ninth night, when they decorate and worship the tools of their trade; carpenter's tools in the case of a carpenter, metalwork tools in the case of a goldsmith, and a car in the case of a driver.

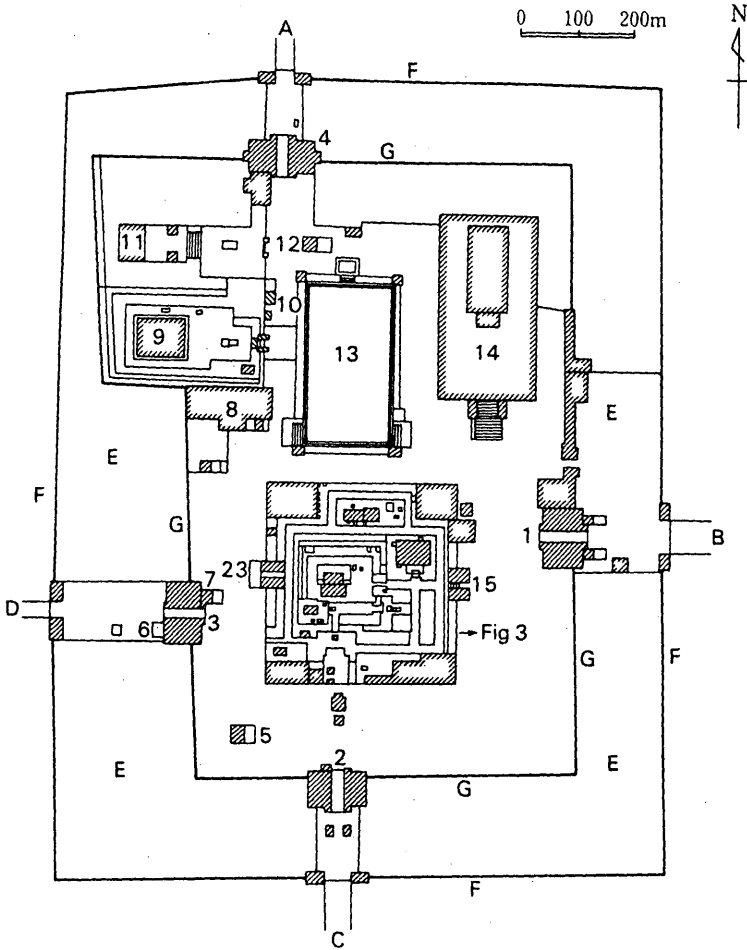
#### 4. THE NAVARĀTRI AT NAṬARĀJA TEMPLE

During the *Navarātri*, special decorations are made and special rites are performed at many goddess temples, and on the tenth day there is a procession to celebrate the goddess's victory, with arrows being discharged at crossroads and other places. Although the chief deity of Naṭarāja Temple is Śiva, there are also several shrines dedicated to goddesses within the temple grounds (see Fig. 2), one of which enshrines Śiva's consort Śivakāmasundari. During the *Navarātri* a portable festival image of this goddess is decorated and carried to a hall called the Devasabhā, where she is placed on a swing and regaled with offerings and so forth. Because she is seated on a swing, the *Navarātri* is also known at Naṭarāja Temple as the "Swing Festival."

This festival image receives apotropaic *āratti* from Dikshitar girls. *Āratti* is a ritual act for warding off by the waving of lamps the various ill feelings (jealousy, etc.) to which the decorated festival image is exposed. Hymns are also sung in front of this image, and the priests on duty perform a simple service. Then chickpeas and so forth are distributed among the girls. This is performed nightly.

The *Sarasvatī-pūjā*, addressed to books, is performed by priests on the ninth night. Women play no part whatsoever in this rite. In addition, no victory procession accompanied by arrow-shooting is held on the tenth day at Naṭarāja Temple.

At Naṭarāja Temple too women, especially girls, play an active role in the rites of the *Navarātri*, and chickpeas form part of the offerings. In addition, the rites are performed not during the day, but at nighttime (with the *Sarasvatī-pūjā* also being performed at night). But the rites conducted at the temple are invariably performed by male priests.



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| A. North Caṅṇati                       | B. East Caṅṇati                        |
| C. South Caṅṇati                       | D. West Caṅṇati                        |
| E. Orchards                            | F. Coconut palm gardens                |
| G. Outer wall                          | H. Inner wall                          |
| 1. East Gopura                         | 10. Durgā temple                       |
| 2. South Gopura                        | 11. Pāṇḍya Nāyaka temple               |
| 3. West Gopura                         | 12. Navaliṅga shrine                   |
| 4. North Gopura                        | 13. Śivagaṅgā (tank)                   |
| 5. Mukkurūṇi Vināyaka temple           | 14. Thousand-pillared hall (Rājasabhā) |
| 6. Kalpaka Vināyaka temple             | 15. East entrance                      |
| 7. Vīra Subrahmaṇya temple             |  |
| 8. Hundred-pillared hall               |  |
| 9. Śivakāmasundari temple (Jñānaśakti) |  |

Figure 2. Naṭarāja Temple.



## 5. THE NAVARĀTRI AT MĪNĀKṢĪ TEMPLE IN MADURAI

Next let us consider the discussion by Fuller and Logan (1985) on the *Navarātri* as it is performed at the Mīnākṣī Temple in Madurai.

At Mīnākṣī Temple, the walls of the central sancta are painted with a yellow paste containing turmeric and sandalpaste shortly before the start of the *Navarātri* festival. On the first day a chanter of Vedic *mantras* ties a sacred cord (*kāppu*) onto the right wrist of the priest, who then ties another sacred cord onto the left wrist of Mīnākṣī's stone image in the inner sanctum. A sacred cord is also tied to the left wrist of her festival image outside the sanctum, and this image is decorated differently each night. Especially important are the decorations on the eighth night, when the image is made to represent Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, the slayer of the demon Mahiṣāsura, and is dressed in a red sari. Then on the ninth night the image is clothed in a white sari and takes the form of the goddess kneeling in worship before a *liṅga* symbolizing her husband Śiva. The next day the priest removes the sacred cords from himself and the images and a "hair-washing" ritual is performed. This ritual washing of the goddess's hair is done in order to remove the sin incurred when she killed Mahiṣāsura. Lastly, on the evening of the first full-moon day following the *Navarātri*, a *śānti* rite is performed to pacify the goddess.

Why should the walls of the sancta be painted yellow? According to Fuller and Logan, the goddess's anger is necessary for killing the demon. But her anger is also dangerous, and so the walls of the sancta are painted yellow in order to prevent the heat of her anger from escaping outside. A procession around the outside of the temple, performed on the occasion of other festivals, is also not held because it is considered too dangerous to take the goddess outside. Only the priest wearing the sacred cord to protect himself from the dangerous power of the goddess is able to approach her. The tying of a sacred cord to the stone image inside the sanctum is also an exceptional measure not to be seen in other festivals at Mīnākṣī Temple. These different actions predicated on the goddess's anger mean that the demon has found his way into the temple, where his confrontation with the goddess is actually taking place.

## 6. CHIDAMBARAM AND MADURAI

On the basis of their investigations at Mīnākṣī Temple in Madurai and the higher castes living in the vicinity of the temple, Fuller and Logan (1985) point out that there exists a complementary relationship between the temple rites and the domestic rites performed in individual homes. In other words, while a desperate struggle is taking place between the goddess and the demon inside Mīnākṣī Temple, the *kolu* is set up in private homes in an attempt to preserve the world order.

In this connection it is also pointed out that the receptacle filled with water and placed in front of the *kolu* bears a close resemblance to the temple tank. The *kolu* represents a temple's entrance tower (*gopura*), and since various deities are

enshrined in the *kolu*, it could also be identified with the temple itself. It is argued, in other words, that during the *Navarātri*, when the temple has fallen into a state of chaos on account of the demon's invasion, the homes with a *kolu* representing a mini-temple perform the functions of the temple (FULLER and LOGAN 1985).

It is true that at the temples there is conspicuous evidence of the goddess's violence. Firstly, at temples with a non-vegetarian priest animal sacrifices are performed during the *Navarātri*. Similarly, when the *Navarātri* was formerly performed at royal courts, there is evidence that the king would preside over animal sacrifices (FULLER 1992: 108–127). At temples where animal sacrifices are banned, however, there is little evidence of ritual actions hinting at the goddess's destructive power, as is also the case in the domestic rites. There is at least no evidence at other temples of the degree of violence hinted at by Fuller and Logan on the basis of their material from Mīnākṣī Temple. During the *Navarātri* people merely take pleasure in making daily changes to the decorations of the goddess's festival image.

However, the theme of the goddess's violence is not totally absent, for during the *Vijayādaśamī* performed on the tenth day the goddess leaves the temple as victress and is paraded through the streets, with arrows being discharged at crossroads. Thus the temples do show some evidence of the goddess's violence in one form or another.

That being so, is it in fact possible to recognize some form of complementarity—for example, the negation and acceptance of violence—between the domestic rites and temple rites performed during the *Navarātri*? As was explained earlier, at Naṭarāja Temple in Chidambaram a festival image of Śivakāmasundari is decorated, carried to the Devasabhā, seated on a swing, and regaled with offerings. There is, moreover, no victorious procession on the tenth day accompanied by volleys of arrows. This is because Brahman temples of high standing such as Naṭarāja Temple reject all rites predicated on the goddess's destructive powers (TANAKA 1993), and the goddess is consistently portrayed as a submissive being. It is reported that in the past women possessed by evil spirits would visit Mīnākṣī Temple during the *Navarātri* in order to be exorcized, but at Naṭarāja Temple every effort is made to dissociate the temple from phenomena such as spirit possession. When one takes into account the fact that spirit possession is a religious phenomenon frequently associated with lower castes and women, here too one may recognize a difference in social standing between Naṭarāja and Mīnākṣī.

In view of the above, it is not necessarily appropriate to posit some form of complementarity between the temple and the home. At least in the case of Chidambaram, insofar that the temple and the domestic rites of its priests both negate the goddess's violence, they could be said to parallel one another. The example of Chidambaram would suggest that any perspective seeking to comprehend the character of the *Navarātri* festival by contrasting the temple with the private home, as do Fuller and Logan, is itself flawed. It is more pertinent to consider the social standing of the temple in question, the latent contrasts between

the higher castes culminating in Brahmans and the lower castes (e.g. the absence of the *kolu* and the acceptance of animal sacrifices at temples among the latter), and the closely associated question of differences in views of women.

## 7. A WOMEN'S FESTIVAL OR A MEN'S FESTIVAL?

Next, let us consider the character of the *Navarātri* festival by focussing on the course of the rites performed during the *Navarātri*.

Returning now to the *Navarātri* as observed in the home, we find that although initially nighttime rites centred on women predominate, the rites during the last three days, and especially the *Sarasvatī-pūjā* on the final day, are daytime rites officiated by men. It is worth noting that the object of worship in the male-centred rites is Sarasvatī, who is dressed in a white sari reminiscent of a widow, as if to negate her sexuality. Durgā worshipped by the women, on the other hand, is a goddess whose sexuality is as yet uncontrolled and who is therefore endowed with the power to slay demons. That men actively participate in the *Sarasvatī-pūjā* is perhaps because Sarasvatī negates the sexuality of women. Her offerings too consist not only of "hot" foodstuffs such as chickpeas, but also of *bilva* leaves and a sweet dish known as *pāyacam*, which have a cooling effect (LOGAN 1980:254).

The structure of the "women's festival" *Navarātri* is such that, notwithstanding the ritual activity in which primarily women extol a goddess of destruction, the male-centred ethics ruling everyday life gradually come to the fore through the men's worship of a goddess of abstinence. It is worth noting that Sarasvatī embodies Brahmanical values (*sattva*) insofar that she is the goddess of learning and also epitomizes abstinence.

It would seem in the final analysis that by associating themselves with the negative period of nighttime and with a goddess embodying demonic values (*tamas* as opposed to *sattva*), the women are reaffirming the danger and negativity inherent in their own existence. Therefore, as well as being a goddess festival and a women's festival, the *Navarātri* is also a festival demonstrating the limitations of women. The women's nighttime festival is predicated on its transformation into a men's daytime festival.

The *Navarātri* in Madurai presents us with a picture of a more patently violent goddess. But here too, as is pointed out by Fuller and Logan (1985, cf. LOGAN 1980: 255-256), one may detect the theme of the goddess's transformation. This transformation is symbolized by the change from red to white. This is expressed through the change from an overabundance of sexuality (Mīnākṣī as a bride wearing a red sari) to the negation of sexuality (Mīnākṣī as a widow wearing a white sari) or the change from a ferocious demon-slaying goddess to a goddess who has become a devotee genuflecting before the male deity Śiva. What is being emphasized here is, as in the domestic *Navarātri*, not the independence of women, but the goddess's subservience to Śiva.

At the same time, this is also an expression of the everyday relationship

between Śiva and his consort Mīnākṣī. Mīnākṣī Temple in Madurai is dedicated to Śiva and Mīnākṣī, who each have their own temple, both of approximately the same size. Śiva and Mīnākṣī are enshrined as independent deities in their respective temples, but they spend each night together in the same room. Moreover, the overall emphasis is on Mīnākṣī's role as Śiva's consort.

At Natarāja Temple too women, especially girls, play an active role in the *Navarātri* rites, and chickpeas are used as offerings. The rites too are performed not during the day, but at night. But these temple rites are invariably conducted by male priests. As was noted earlier, at Natarāja Temple all hints of the goddess's destructive character, associated with women's sexuality, are kept to a bare minimum from the very outset, and there exists no opportunity for the type of transformation to be seen in the domestic rites and at Mīnākṣī Temple in Madurai.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, when we consider the activities carried out at Natarāja Temple in Chidambaram during the *Navarātri* festival, we find in, for instance, the absence of animal sacrifices and a victory procession evidence of a tendency to negate the goddess's destructive powers. This contrasts with the emphasis on the goddess's violence to be observed at other temples. Rather than proposing a symbolic complementarity between the temple and the home, an analysis from a sociological perspective focussing on issues such as the social standing of different temples would seem to have greater validity.

Insofar that the object of worship is a goddess, the participants are primarily women, and the women are not mere spectators but have clear-cut ritual roles, the *Navarātri* festival as performed among the higher castes and centred on the *kolu* may be regarded as a representative women's festival. But when the festival is analyzed in line with the actual ritual process, it is found that as the object of worship changes from Durgā to Sarasvatī—that is to say, from a destructive goddess to an asexual goddess—a structure centred not on women but on men manifests itself. This women's festival does indeed affirm the autonomous sexuality of women, but at the same time it also embodies a moment aiming at the control and negation of this sexuality.

## NOTE

- 1) On the subject of the origins and history of Natarāja Temple, I have referred to Francis 1906, Natarajan 1974, Somasundaram Pillai 1963, and Ramakrishna Ayyar 1946.

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