

Divine Enterprise: Hindu Priests and Ritual Change in Neighbourhood Hindu Temples in Bangalore

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing nature of Hindu ritual performed in neighbourhood temples in the Malleswaram 'locality' of Bangalore city against a background of sweeping socio-economic change driven by globalisation. The investigation points to several 'accretions of change' in the embedded and experiential world of popular urban Hinduism. I argue that in the changing, competitive and multi-sectarian field of urban sacred landscapes in India, Hindu Brahmin priests act as 'religious entrepreneurs' and agents of change to create 'dynamic' adapted rituals that enable innovative approaches in order to expand their devotee base. The restructured and revitalised rituals lead to the invention of a 'new cultural grammar' that allows a reinterpretation and contextualisation of the language of traditional Hindu ritual to suit the needs of 'modern' devotees. The paper focuses on the nature, performance and experience of 'dynamic' ritual in an era of 'mass customisation', including three exemplar 'strategies of engagement' brought about by the Hindu priests in Bangalore: the incorporation of technology; the language of international imagery; and modern conceptions of hygiene.

This paper is dedicated to my father Prof. M.N. Srinivas who was unstinting in his support of my study of the sacred landscapes and Hindu priests of Bangalore, and whose enjoyment of my fieldwork stories kept me going back for more.

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The Problem of Dynamic Ritual

Significant economic and social changes have occurred over the past decade in India, due largely to the policy of economic liberalisation pursued by the Government of India. This paper will examine how Hindu priests in urban neighbourhood temples navigate these socio-economic changes, focusing upon the changing nature of neighbourhood Hindu temple ritual.

I will argue that the changing nature of the ritual being performed in neighbourhood temples in the Malleswaram district of Bangalore points to several changes in the embedded and experiential world of popular Hinduism¹—in the priesthood, in its relations with the community, in the ‘function’ of ritual; in the ‘authenticity’ of the ritual form prescribed for devotees, and in the relationship between modern and traditional forms of observance. I document the changes in ritual with respect to the three ‘strategies of competitive engagement’ employed by the ‘entrepreneurial priests’ of Bangalore.

Anthropologists who have studied ritual have mostly focused on the connection between ritual performance and the establishment and maintenance of a social order.² So, when anthropologists look at change in behaviour they see it as a marker of ‘disruption’, a ‘mistake’, a ‘flaw’, a ‘distortion’, an ‘error’, a ‘failure’ etc.³ Standing the question on its head, and asking how and why rituals sometimes change their form, is a much better way to approach the problem.

The following study is set against the background of the far-reaching socio-economic changes in urban India initiated by the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1989 which led, *inter alia*, to the spectacular emergence of Bangalore as the foremost

¹ The changing cultural canvas influences significant symbolic parameters such as choice, values, morality, tradition, and identity, from which the rituals derive symbolic meaning.

² Gregory Bateson, *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1936, rpr. 1958); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1969); Max Gluckman, *Essays on the Rituals of Social Relations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962); Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910, rpr. 1961); E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956, rpr. 1974); and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, pp.96–132; and Ronald L. Grimes, ‘Infelicitous Performances and Ritual Criticism’, in *Semeia*, Vol.43 (1988), pp.103–22. Grimes states: ‘Analyzing ritual failure involves more than defining terms supplying examples of applying labels. But learning to do so is a first step towards useful ritual criticism’ (p.120). Edward Schieffelin suggests that ritual is performance. He emphasises the links between performative failure and ritual performance. He suggests that ritual performance is determined by ‘form’, ‘agenda’, ‘means’, ‘authority’, ‘strategy’, ‘historicity’, ‘embodiment’ and ‘emergence’ (p.64). He states that the ‘articulation of ritual structure within a social reality, insofar as it is actually enacted, is unavoidably a performative process’ (p.82). See Edward L. Schieffelin, ‘On Failure and Performance: Throwing the Medium Out of the Seance’, in Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman (eds), *The Performance of Healing* (New York, London: Routledge Press, 1996), pp.59–89.

'high-tech city' in Asia. As the city changes rapidly and profoundly due to the forces of global capitalism, cultural structures and contemporary situations are in a dynamic duality. On the one hand, ritual practice shapes the consciousness of Bangaloreans and encourages them to adopt certain patterns of praxis; on the other the contemporary existent situation of the city's inhabitants undermines those patterns as it rapidly transforms the world they live in. This is a study, then, of Hindu ritual in Bangalore during a period of intense and far-reaching socio-economic change. It is based on data drawn from a 23-month ethnographic study of four 'neighbourhood' Hindu temples in the Malleswaram district of Bangalore city.⁴

There is a popular perception that ritual in Hindu temples is static and unchanging, and that the Hindu Brahmin priests attached to these temples are the keepers of this unchanging tradition. This perception has been given a certain credibility by the textual bias of 'Indology' that has to some extent 'anchored studies of Hinduism in the West'.⁵ Most of these Western studies of Hinduism emphasise its putative links with the *longue durée* structures of Hindu society,⁶ and the paradigms of caste, purity, and hierarchy. So entrenched has this view become, that changes in rituals at the local level have rarely, if ever, been studied.⁷ Actually, if the Bangalore case is anything to go by, dynamic ritual is far more the norm. One important consequence of this is that it forces the priests to engage in various strategies of competition to expand their devotee base.

⁴ I distinguish 'neighbourhood' urban Hindu temples that devotees visit every day from the large pilgrimage temples that devotees may visit annually or once in a lifetime. I argue that it is in 'neighbourhood' temples that devotees learn how to 'be Hindu' in an everyday sense through interactions with the local priest and other devotees.

⁵ Joanne Punzo-Waghorne, 'The Diaspora of the Gods: Hindu Temples in the New World System 1640–1800', in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.58, no.3 (Aug. 1999), pp.648–89.

⁶ Lawrence A. Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy; Popular Hinduism in Central India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1932, rpr. 1969); F.G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier: A Village in Highland Orissa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957); Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962); M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Johnathan Parry, *Death in Benaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). In the December 2000 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, which focuses on the question 'Who Speaks for Hinduism?', the issue of performance versus text as the basis for defining a religion arises more than once. Vasudha Narayanan, for example, refers to scholars such as Staal and Balangangadhara, among others, who have problematised the question of whether Hinduism is a religion in arguing that 'because the Hindu traditions have been praxis oriented and not belief centered, the word *religion* has been wrongly applied to it'. See Vasudha Narayanan, 'Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils', in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 86 (2000), pp.761–79.

⁷ Scholars deal with religious innovation by arguing that it is part of the 'popular' form of the religion, as opposed to textual sources that are the 'official' form of the religion. This differentiation has led to a devaluing of ritual innovation. Locating a clear textual source for existing ritual, and finding its authentic form, has occupied scholars of anthropology and Indology in India.

Let me elaborate, by way of introduction, on this and two other important theoretical points. In modern India, Hindu Brahmin priests, usually associated with retaining and protecting existing hierarchies,⁸ are being pressured into creatively restructuring 'traditional' ritual in order to cater to the needs of urban modern Hindus. With globalisation, priests find themselves in urban situations where differential knowledge and changing devotional bases can create conflict,⁹ but they have by and large engaged with these situations effectively and strategically to expand their devotee base through restructured and revitalised rituals, and especially through the invention of a 'new cultural grammar' that has enabled them to reinterpret and contextualise the language of traditional Hindu ritual to suit the problems of devotees thrown up by an 'era of capitalism'.¹⁰ This new cultural grammar is structured from the language and symbolism of traditional ritual, but it is tailored to the new lifestyles affected by wealthy devotees. So, not only has religion in India become complicit in mechanisms of market exchange as Moore suggests has happened in America,¹¹ but its professionals have put themselves at the forefront of religious innovation. Moreover this is being done, seemingly, quite effortlessly—in minute ways that possess an apparently seamless continuity of performance. This suggests that meaning and symbolism in Hindu ritual are not linked directly to the form—but are layered severally through it.

My second point is that a study of local Hinduism in an urban setting that configures change as something organic and constant¹² is sorely needed to balance the existing anthropological literature on ritual, much of which is based on studies of temples in villages or temples in urban centres built around structures of kin or caste. The older studies emphasise tradition. This one focuses on recently-established upwardly-mobile urban communities and foregrounds the impact on ritual of modern concepts of competition, recruitment, status, gender, mobility and culture.¹³

⁸ Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule*; Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*; C.J. Fuller, 'Gods, Priests, and Purity: On the Relation Between Hinduism and the Caste System', in *Man*, Vol.14, no.3 (Sept. 1979), pp.459–76; C.J. Fuller, 'Orality, Literacy and Memorization: Priestly Education in Contemporary South India', in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.35 (2001), pp.1–31; Diana Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg PA: Anima Books, 1981); Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*; and Punzo-Waghorne, 'The Diaspora of the Gods', pp.648–89.

⁹ R.S. Khare, *The Changing Brahmins; Associations and Elites among the Kanya Kubja Brahmins of North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and A. Bharathi, *Hindu Views and Ways and the Hindu–Muslim Interface: An Anthropological Assessment* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981).

¹⁰ Frederic Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (eds), *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham NC, London: Duke University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Lawrence R. Moore, *Selling God; American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.117.

¹² Catherine Bell, 'Ritual, Change and Changing Ritual', in *Worship*, Vol.63, no.1 (Jan. 1989), p.37; and Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹³ To extend the argument, one could claim that the essential fluidity of everyday Hinduism provides the matrix within which such changes can be imagined and negotiated.

Thirdly I suggest that the recent theoretical focus on ‘fundamentalist’ Hinduism¹⁴ has muddied the study of religion in India. Important as this development has been, particularly from a political standpoint, it is important that scholars and commentators do not to allow the fundamentalist issue to obscure other narratives. Here I try to argue that a return to an ethnographically-driven understanding of religion is paramount to a proper understanding of the complex role of religion in post-modern India.

Boomtown Bangalore—Neighbourhood Temples and ‘New’ Devotees

Since Manmohan Singh, the then Indian finance minister, took his decision in 1989 to ‘liberalise’ the Indian economy, by design or coincidence India has experienced rapid economic growth—GNP rising by nearly 8 percent a year in the late 1990s. One result of the economic spurt has been the emergence of an expanding Indian middle class now reckoned to number at least 100 million. These are people with access to large reserves of capital. Bangalore, one of the ‘hot zones’¹⁵ of the 1990s take-off, has become perhaps the most popular urban destination for this newly-emergent class. Modern Bangalore symbolises growth, modernity, education and cosmopolitanism; yet its neighbourhoods remain relatively untouched, with local temples at street corners, street markets, and an unbroken sense of community.

According to the ‘inherited structures’ theory of modernity, modernisation leads to society becoming increasingly secular.¹⁶ In Bangalore, though, it appears that the march of capitalism has been met with a corresponding increase in religiosity. The city’s temples are thronged with devotees and their priests have never been busier, such is the demand from clients for Satyanarayana *pujas* (worship) for prosperity, Ganesha *homas* (sacred fire worship) for protection, and Vandi (vehicle) *pujas* to guarantee the safety of vehicles and the passengers who ride in them. Cars have become mobile shrines. And life-cycle rituals such as weddings, sacred thread ceremonies, births, engagements, and so on continue to be performed with great fanfare. What M.N. Srinivas recalled about Rampura, a Karnataka village, still holds good for contemporary Bangalore: ‘Rampurians lived in a theistic universe in the sense that everyone in the village believed that gods existed, or more precisely deities, male and female, and spirits did exist’.¹⁷

¹⁴ T.N. Madan (ed.), *Religion in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Achin Vanaik, *Communalism Contested: Religion, Modernity and Secularization* (Delhi: Vistaar, 1997); and P. Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree—Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2000).

¹⁶ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); and B.R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (London: Watts, 1966).

¹⁷ M.N. Srinivas, *The Remembered Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p.323.

How might one account for this evident paradox? At one level, scholars have argued that the explosion of ritual in Bangalore points to the anxieties of the new middle class, who feel greater pressure to ‘succeed’ than their parents’ generation did. These days a respectable marriage and children are not enough. The goal is to get educated, find a multinational job, build a ‘dream’ home and fill it with consumer durables. And, as noted above, India’s new urban rich now have enough economic power and cultural capital to aspire to a global level of consumption. But then, religion has always performed this function. Making donations to temples as a means of ‘buying’ solace is a venerable Hindu custom. To the extent that Bangalore’s middle-class citizens are resorting to temple services with increasing frequency and extravagance,¹⁸ they are indulging in a behaviour that is, performatively at least, deeply embedded in the culture of Hindu India.

Many of the emergent cosmopolitan middle-class Indians who flocked to Bangalore settled in Malleswaram, a suburb to the north of the city (*petta*) of Bangalore. The nostalgia factor of Malleswaram as the epitome of ‘old Bangalore’ was emphasised in developers’ brochures that depicted photographs of old cool bungalows with big gardens filled with flowering mango trees.¹⁹ Nor was this mere hype. Malleswaram started out in the early 1900s as an upper-caste locality and remained largely unchanged in this respect—something of a backwater in fact—until the 1990s. Then came the economic boom. Within a few years most of the old houses had been broken down and replaced by apartment blocks purpose-built for the new rich. Immigrants poured in. Almost overnight Malleswaram was transformed into an ethnically- and religiously-diverse neighbourhood—much to the chagrin of some of its old residents.

Malleswaram has ten major temples. The present study focused on four of them, all located within a half mile square: the Shri Venugopalaswamy Krishna temple (a Tenkalai Sri Vaishnavite Temple dedicated to Vishnu in the form of the cowherd Krishna playing the flute); the MahaGanapathi temple (a Shaivite temple dedicated to the god Ganesha the son of Shiva and Parvati); the Shirdi Sai Baba temple (dedicated to the popular godman and Muslim fakir Sai Baba from the town of Shirdi in Maharashtra state); and the Kadu Malleswara (Shiva of the forest) temple

¹⁸ Smitri Srinivas, *Landscapes of Urban Memory: The Sacred and the Civic in India’s High-Tech City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

¹⁹ See *ibid.*; James Heitzman, *Network City: Planning the Information Society in Bangalore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Janaki Nair, *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore’s Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Both the Venugopalaswamy Krishna temple and the MahaGanapathi temple were what were popularly called ‘Muzrai’ temples, i.e. they were under government control via the ‘Muzrai’ department officially known as the ‘Hindu Charitable and Religious Endowment Board’ of Karnataka state. All Hindu temples are either ‘Muzrai’ temples or private temples. Muzrai temples that come under state control are part of the state machinery as per the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Act of 1927. As part of the Hindu Religious and Charitable

from which the neighbourhood gets its name. In this essay I concentrate on the first two—the Venugopaldaswamy Krishna and MahaGanapathi temples.²⁰

Crossing Sectarian Divisions

Traditionally Shaivite castes always worshipped at Shaivite shrines; rarely, if ever, did they cross over and worship at Vaishnavite shrines. However since Independence in 1947 these iron-clad systems of patronage have become eroded. Large pilgrimage temples, especially, now attract devotees across sectarian boundaries.²¹ Leading the way in this respect is the middle class. Bourgeois Malleswaram devotees cross sectarian boundaries regularly—on certain days of the week dedicated to specific gods, at difficult times in their lives, and on festive occasions.²² By shopping around, as it were, the middle-class devotees hope to maximise the sacred benefits ritual is designed to bestow, certain temples being renowned for their efficacy in mitigating specific social or psychological problems.²³ Mala, a young software programmer, told me:

On Mondays I go to the Kaadu Malleswara temple to pray to Shiva, on Tuesdays to the Ganesha temple because Tuesday is Ganesha's day, on Wednesday I go to *bhajan* session at the Ramakrishna ashram, on Thursdays to the [Guru] Sai Baba temple because Thursday is the day for the guru, [and] on Friday to the Banashakari Devi shrine at the Ganesha temple, or the Kannika Parmeshwari temple on Eighth Cross in Malleswaram because Friday is Devi's day. And on Saturday, I go to the Krishna temple because Saturday is the day for Vishnu. On Sunday I sometimes go to the Infant Jesus church in Viveknagar.²⁴

And Mala is not alone. Of the 200 devotees I interviewed, 154 claimed to go to more than one temple. Out of the 154, 112 mentioned places of worship with different

Trust Amendment of 1997, priests must pass state-run examinations in order to perform rituals in state-run temples, and the moneys gathered at each temple must be accounted for by the state and redistributed through Hindu religious institutions within the state. This has led to a lot of conflict between temples, between the state and the temples, and between the priests and government officials.

²¹ Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*.

²² For example, one of my chief informants in the Krishna temple was an extremely orthodox Vaishnavite woman named Padma. She knew every single Vaishnavite festival day and pledged her allegiance to Vishnu in his many forms, each day reciting the Vishnu *sahasranama* (1000 names of Vishnu) and the Lakshmi *stotra* (dedication to the goddess Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort). However on Sankashta Chaturthi day (14th day of the new moon dedicated to removing obstacles, and sacred to Ganesha), I found her at the Ganesha temple participating in the festivities. When I asked her about her presence there she at first looked abashed, and then said: 'They are all one god—Brahmin after all. I come here when it is Ganesha puja day'.

²³ T. Srinivas, 'Tradition and Transition; Entrepreneur Priests and Ritual Innovation in Neighbourhood Hindu Temples in Bangalore City', in *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, Vol.5, no.2 (July–Dec. 2004), pp.57–76.

²⁴ Extract from field notes 29 August 1998.

sectarian affiliations. And 120 interviewees said that they chose temples mainly on the basis of what they had heard about their deities and the efficacy of the prayers offered there.²⁵ The efficacy of the deity in responding to one's needs, combined with the look and feel of the temple, seem to be far more important to the new Bangalore middle class than sectarian affiliation.

The phenomenon in south India of multi-sectarianism across the Brahmin *varna* led long ago to some Brahmin castes such as the *Madhwas*, the *Iyers*, the *Iyengars*, and the *Smarthas* acquiring multiple devotional affiliations, something that traditionally would not have occurred if they had always worshipped separately in different temples.²⁶ Temples within Malleswaram and indeed elsewhere in Bangalore have become sacred 'multiplexes', which seek to cater not to the principal sect with which they have been traditionally identified, but to many others besides, including some with a history of 'folk rivalry'.

If the field of devotion was ever static in Hindu temples, it is no longer. Accordingly, the temple priests can no longer assume a guaranteed sectarian or caste-based devotee group.²⁷ Instead, they have to learn to 'market' their temples and their deities to attract a wider clientele. They have found that the best way to do this is to play to the desire of the new class for efficacy. As a result, competition for temple devotees as clientele has become intense in the neighbourhood temples of Malleswaram.

The Entrepreneur Priests of Malleswaram

Both Babu Bhattar, the *pradhana archakar* (chief priest) of the Venugopalaswamy Krishna temple in Malleswaram, and Ghani Shastry of the MahaGanapathi temple in Malleswaram, are what I term 'entrepreneur priests'.²⁸ They excel at the job of marketing their temples and deities. They are pious, care about the devotees, and have instituted many internal changes in ritual and general administration that have enabled worshippers to get better *darshan* (sacred sighting of the deity), more *prasadam* (consecrated food) and other such services.²⁹ Thanks to their efforts, the two

²⁵ T. Srinivas, 'Tradition and Transition', pp.57–76.

²⁶ I thank Prof. G.K. Karanth for bringing this particular aspect of the problem to my attention.

²⁷ Some critics have suggested that the blurring of the sectarian boundaries is nothing new. These boundaries have been disintegrating over the last one hundred years in Karnataka, since Adi Shankara established the Pachayatana *puja* to remove sectarian divisions in Hinduism. While there are historical precedents for the blurring of sectarian boundaries, the numbers of people who now think nothing of worshipping in temples of different sectarian affiliations than those of their birth are increasing.

²⁸ Tulasi Srinivas, "'Divine Enterprise': An Ethnographic Study of Popular Hinduism (India)", PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 2001. Both Ghani Shastry and Babu Bhattar were schooled in the agamas and have passed the certification required by the Muzrai Department which administers the state-owned temples of Karnataka. Babu Bhattar went on to complete a higher level certification that entitled him to the title of *agama ratna* (jewel of the agamas). The priests proudly display their professional certificates on the walls of the temple offices and in their homes.

²⁹ T. Srinivas, 'Tradition and Transition', pp.57–76.

temples are today among the best-known in Bangalore. Fittingly, some would say, Babu and Ghani have become personally very rich and powerful.³⁰

In June 1998 when I interviewed Ghani Shastry, one of the things he was most concerned about was ritual: there was a need, he perceived, to customise the traditional rituals so as to accommodate the accelerating and ever-shifting demands of the devotees. ‘Naavu madilebeku. Illadre yallaru inondu gudi ge kanditha hogubidthare. Athva gudi ne yirolla. Avaaga navu yenu madilike agodilla’ (‘We must do this. Otherwise they will all go to other temples. Or there will not be any temples at all. Then we will not be able to do anything’). Clearly, this was a moment of redefinition for Ghani Shastry; and it called for a strategy. The plan that Ghani Shastry outlined to me had three main strands: recycling the form of traditional ritual to meet contemporary demands; making rituals that were originally for high-caste and wealthy devotees accessible to a wider cross-section of the middle class; and making generic rituals look as if they had been crafted to satisfy the particular wants of individual devotees.³¹ Both Ghani Shastry and Babu Bhattar have been particularly interested in attracting salaried middle-class professionals to their temples. Almost by definition, the above formula implies the capture of ever-increasing segments of the devotional base.³²

More specifically, Ghani and Babu have cultivated the middle class by introducing innovations in worship and reaching out to it by word of mouth and through the media. They have installed new popular deities, folded technology into their ritual performances, added to the visual ‘spectacle’, taken to distributing *prasadam* in restaurant-style plastic take-out containers bearing the name of the temple and a picture of the deity (as opposed to the traditional stitched-leaf plate), incorporated traditional home- and kinship-based women’s rituals such as *Kanu Pandige* (worship of the cow), and sought endorsements from high-visibility devotees such as politicians, cine stars and pop singers. And new strategies are in the pipeline. When I visited I found Ghani Shastry and Babu Bhattar in constant discussion with other priests. As well, I found that the two priests, in talking with devotees, regularly informally ‘polled’ them about their needs and wants.

Both entrepreneurpriests have been very successful in winning new clients, Ghani Shastry especially. In February 1998 when I arrived in Malleswaram the number of people who came on an average day to the MahaGanapathi temple was about 200; by September 1999, when I left, 350 people visited the temple

³⁰ Interview with the chairman of the Temples Muzrai Department, State of Karnataka, 18 July 1999.

³¹ Interview with Ghani Shastry 12 August 1999.

³² Cf. M.N. Srinivas, ‘An Obituary on Caste as a System’, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.38, no.5 (1 Feb. 2003), pp.455–61.

on an average day. Ghani's personal income as head priest (his share of the collection money) increased during the same period from roughly Rs3000 a week (about \$US80) to nearly Rs6000 a week—a hike of 50 percent! This suggests that the innovations itemised above had been a hit with Malleswaram's upwardly-mobile Hindus. To understand why, we need to examine the changes introduced by Ghani and Babu more closely. In the next section I look at what has been done in the area of ritual.

The Technological Deity

In the urban Hindu temples technology now plays an important role in most aspects of temple life, including ritual. The acquisition and use in this way of appropriate technology is seen as 'modern' and hence desirable by both priests and devotees. The MahaGanapathi temple has been a leader in using technology for ritual occasions. In early 1997 Ghani Shastry, its chief priest, invested in a computerised lighting display around the sanctum. The first installation was a series of lights that were controlled digitally and blinked in sequence. Next a digital 'Om' symbol was installed above the doorway of the sanctum that blinked during the *maha aarathi*. Lights were also used to highlight devotional sayings ('Hari Om' or 'Ganesha Namaha') hung around the sanctum. I found them distracting, but my informants thought that they represented the cutting edge of ritual technology. When I returned to the MahaGanapathi temple for a visit in late 2002, I found the temple entirely surrounded by digital lights. Every picture of every deity (of which there are hundreds) on the temple's walls was wreathed in garlands of digital colours blinking in blinding sequences.³³

However the introduction of digital lights changed not only the character and aesthetic of the temple, it changed the ritual format as well. During every performance of the *mangala aarathi* (offering of the camphor flame to the deity) I witnessed in 1997, the electric lights in the sanctum sanctorum were be switched off to enable the devotees to see the deity by the light of the camphor flame. To pious Hindus, this has always been the central moment of the worship, when deity and devotee actually communicate with one another, and the devotee gets *darshan* of the deity. However when I returned in February 1998, things had changed. Now the digital lights glowed day and night. By midsummer 1998 a set of permanent

³³ The use of this digital display has since been imitated by other priests in Malleswaram, as well as in other parts of Bangalore city. The MahaGanapathi temple, through the use of such strategies, is losing its neighbourhood character and moving to becoming a city-wide and region-wide temple. To achieve such a wide devotee base is the hope of all the entrepreneur priests. While the growth of the MahaGanapathi temple is evident, it is still seen by the neighbourhood and those who worship there as a neighbourhood temple. Most of the regular devotees are still from the neighbourhood of Malleswaram, though that is changing rapidly as the temple has become more successful.

perpetually-illuminated digital lights depicting the flame had been placed outside the sanctum, changing both the form and meaning of the *mangala arathi* sequence.

Many older devotees, though, were offended by the new focus on technology in the MahaGanapathi temple, and their opposition led to conflict among the devotees and between the latter and the priests. Younger priests like Kashi, the son of Ghani Shastry, are enamoured of the technology and want to use it everywhere. They dismiss the gainsayers as ‘thumba old fashionedu’ (‘very old fashioned’).³⁴ Shortly after Kashi had installed the digitally-blinking lights, one of the older women devotees was upset. She asked me rhetorically: ‘What is this—a circus or a temple? This fellow is destroying the temple and they (gesturing to the devotees) are letting him’. Her annoyance was greeted with amusement by some of the younger devotees. The use of technology plays a distinctive role in marking generational change; here it demonstrates the intent to attract a new younger, more ‘modern’ devotee base.

Another example of how technology has been used in Malleswaram to elevate ritual into theatre and spectacle was the installation of a Banshankari Devi deity in the MahaGanapathi temple in 1994, which featured a helicopter. The helicopter was used to shower the temple *gopuram* (entrance gateway) with rose petals at the exact moment of consecration.

When Kashi invited me for the *Banashankari Devi* installation he told me that they had got a helicopter to shower the deity with petals after the installation was complete. He seemed very excited by the whole idea. Ghani Shastri added that they had to find the helicopter and they had contacted one service that said that their charges were fifty thousand rupees. The temple department had sanctioned the expenditure and they had sent someone off to confirm the arrival of the helicopter during the ceremony. At noon precisely the *Mahabhishekam* was over and we heard a whirring sound in the air. Kashi got terribly excited and yelled over the microphone ‘helicopter, helicopter’. Everyone looked at the sky. The sun was bright and everyone squinted at the blue sky but there was nothing to be seen. Suddenly in the sky there appeared a lone eagle in front of a rising helicopter. Kashi became incoherent in his excitement: ‘Helicopter has come. Look to the right and Garuda the vehicle of Krishna is here. We are blessed’. Many people dashed out from surrounding houses and streets and peered into the sky murmuring prayers. It was truly a

³⁴ The other side of this ritual innovation by temple priests in Bangalore and the adoption of the dynamic ritual by the community of devotees is the ultra-conservative responses of diasporic Hindu groups.

miraculous sight. The helicopter hovered in the clear blue sky and suddenly we were all drenched in red and yellow petals! I found many of the devotees with tears streaming down their faces. (Extract from Field Diary, 20 February 1999).

The fact that many of the devotees were clearly moved by the appearance of the helicopter overlapping with the Garuda eagle is interesting. Most of them are educated people and the appearance of a helicopter in any other context would not have seemed miraculous. Evidently the new forms of worship are culturally constructed through a 'bricolage', whereby an understructure of Western-derived technology is overlaid and reinterpreted as something essentially 'Hindu'. The helicopter is not a helicopter *per se* but an object seen in conjunction with Garuda, perhaps a 'newer' form of the divine vehicle.

In my 26 months in the field I attended 103 processions with my friends and informants. Traditionally processions are comprised of many different components. The deity (*utsavar*) is carried out on a vehicle (*vahanam*) or in a palanquin (*pallaki*) in a clockwise direction around the temple.³⁵ The length of the circuit depends upon the importance of the festival, and the number of devotees involved. In Karnataka, depending upon the wealth of the temple involved, the procession will normally be led by a horse, or (preferably) an elephant, carrying the sectarian mark of the deity. The temple drums come next, followed by the temple musicians who perform walking backwards, facing the procession.³⁶ Then comes the kernel of the procession with the deity at its centre, the latter raised high above the heads of the crowd on a vehicle carried by six to eight men who have the hereditary right to this job. The deity is surrounded by a tight ring of priests and devotees. Priests carry the *deeparadhana* (camphor lamp) to offer devotees as a blessing. Other temple officials and core devotees carry symbols of the deity—the white silk umbrella of kingship, the flags and banners that indicate his sect and his divinity. Behind them are ranged more religious proponents (musicians or *prabandam* reciters), followed by the rest of the devotees.

In the past five years this standard processional form has undergone substantial change at the hands of entrepreneurial priests. For instance, at the Krishna temple in Malleswaram the walking procession has been replaced on certain festival days such as Krishna Jayanthi (the birthday of Lord Krishna) by a motorised procession

³⁵ Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule*; and Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*.

³⁶ In Vaishnavite processions the musicians are attended by the *veda prabandam*, whom Fuller and Appadurai describe as 'the corps of chanters having the hereditary right to recite devotionalist poetry composed by alvars saints of the medieval period'. See Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule*, p.54. See also Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*, pp.64–9, for a fuller understanding of Hindu rites of daily worship.

that enables the procession to do a wider circuit of the neighbourhood and reach more devotees. What was once an intimate ritual experience performed for an in-group of devotees of a specific caste group has been transformed, as my field notes from 1998 record, into a visual spectacle accessible to virtually everyone in the neighbourhood:

The new float for Krishna Jayanthi was made of wooden cut-outs faced with glitter, flowers and coloured paper and cloth. It looked like a film set, not like any traditional *vahanam* (vehicle) used in Vaishnavite mythology. It towered about 30 feet high covered with tinsel, glitter-paper, and bulbs. The whole thing, top heavy as it was, was mounted on the chassis of an open jeep. The front of the jeep was disguised with flowers and on the back was a huge structure topped by two green peacocks with garlands of jasmine draped over the deity. The deity sat in the middle of the jeep on a platform so it could be seen. On the engine of the jeep were mounted three klieg lights that shone directly into the driver's face as they lit up the image. He kept covering his eyes with his hands so that he did not run over the revellers. All around the jeep hung huge lamps of variegated colours that blinked on and off, and the outline of the structure was lit up with a series of lights. The whole thing was one large explosion of colour and light. The temple musicians were nowhere to be seen, and the float was followed by a small bus carrying stereo equipment with a megaphone, on which a mix of devotional *bhajans* (popular devotional music) and popular Hindi and Kannada film music was played. The *veda prabandam* corps initially tried to out-shout the songs on the public address system, but soon they became hoarse and gave up, muttering the poems of devotion under their breath. They were surrounded by light boys carrying large lights to spotlight the deity and their wires often got tangled up together forcing the procession to halt while they unhooked them. The entire procession was surrounded by generators on metal trolleys, making a thunderous racket, and wheeled along by happy street urchins. (Excerpt from Field Diary, Krishna Temple Procession, Krishna Jayanthi, August 1998).

In the new processional form that has become popular in Malleswaram the vehicle of the deity (*ratham*/chariot, *pallaki*/palanquin) has been replaced by a truck, the temple musicians by recorded *bhajans*. The *veda prabandam* reciters and the core group of devotees have been moved to marginal positions. The experience of the procession has been changed by the incorporation of technology.

As we can see from the above data, a combination of invention and appeal drives technological changes to established rituals. Sometimes the spreading of new technology even leads to the reinvention of certain rituals to accommodate it. However all the invented features appear to adapt familiar and well-known ritual and visual forms as the basic symbolic alphabet of the new forms, changing them to fit new circumstances.

The appeal of new technology in the religious ritual is both aesthetic (flashing lights, disco music, etc.) and ideological. Since Bangalore is a city that has come into its own in the past decade designing and building cutting-edge technologies, to have technology in Bangalore implies progress and power. Conversely to be without it implies a lack of contact with the modern world and a lack of status and power. The priests are sensitive to this difference, and accordingly incorporate technology into ritual to signify their familiarity with the modern. The more modern the technology, the greater its appeal. The difficulty for the priests is to ensure that the synthetic constructedness of the technological experience fades away to the point where the devotee emotionally connects just with the ritual, and the right balance is achieved in the worship between form and structure, meaning and emotion.

Divine Decoration: National and International Imagery

However the innovations introduced by Ghani and Babu in the course of attracting custom go well beyond technology, as the following excerpt from my field notes for 1999 illustrates:

On the morning of 31 December 1998, New Year's Eve, I found Ghani Shastry, the *pradhana archakar* (chief priest) of the MahaGanapathi temple, decorating (*alankara*) the Ganesha deity of the Ganesha temple. For several months prior to the day, Ghani Shastry had urged friends and devotees who travelled frequently on business trips abroad to donate any currency from any country they may have visited. He had set up a box on the upper courtyard with a notice and he would personally accost all the businessmen, software engineers, government officials, and others who he knew travelled out of India, and ask them to empty out their pockets. So the sanctum bristled with Italian lira, the new Euro, German deutschmarks, US dollars, Japanese yen, Singapore dollars, Thai bhat, Indonesian rupiah, and Saudi dinars, all arranged artistically in colour co-ordinated sheaves of notes. The *kiritam* (crown) of the deity was covered in newly-minted gold coins which he had requested a devotee to buy at the gold bourse in Dubai to ensure that they were 22-carat purity. I had

never seen anything like it. I was used to the gold coin *alankara* of Srinivasa at the fabulously wealthy Vaishnavite³⁷ Tirupathi shrine in Andra Pradesh, where the deity was dressed in a traditional *kasu male* (coin necklace). And I was used to cine stars and politicians who wore garlands of Indian rupee notes at film premiers or at successful elections. But I had never seen a deity decorated with currency from so many different nations.

As Ghani Shastry decorated the sanctum he told me that he intended to keep the temple open until two in the morning to enable devotees to get *darshan* (sacred sighting of the deity) on New Year's Eve. He also had in front of him ten sacks of shiny one rupee coins that he was directing the younger priests to put into small paper bags for distribution to the devotees. When I asked him about the different currencies in the sanctum, he was pleased. He saw it as a distinct plus point. 'Yes', he said, 'looks nice, no? It is all Lakshmi (goddess of wealth, Vishnu's consort), Indian rupee, gold, Italian money, US dollar. . .all the same. Only men have made it different. When *bhaktas* (devotees) see it they will say "how nice" and they will come back every year. Everyone wants good wishes on New Year and what is better than seeing God on that day?'

I brought up the inconvenient fact that Ganesha was a Shaivite deity, and that the goddess Lakshmi was part of the Vaishnavite world.³⁸ Also I suggested that decorating the deity with currency may make people equate happiness with wealth. Ghani Shastry looked at me with irritation. 'Yes, Ganesha is Shiva's son. But we all want Ganesha to protect us, and Lakshmi to bless us. Even if some men have all the money they remain unhappy if that is their Karma. Others all desire Lakshmi but they know that she will come to only few. So we give them hope that she will visit them this year by making this *kasu alankara* (money decoration). Also it looks so nice, no?' I then brought up the fact that New Year was a Western

³⁷ The sect of Hindus who worship the god Vishnu, the Protector of the Universe, part of the Hindu triumvirate with Shiva, the Destroyer, and Brahma, the Creator.

³⁸ Ganesha is the son of Shiva and Parvati and in that sense is a Shaivite deity. However he has a prophylactic role as the 'remover of obstacles' and is propitiated before any other ritual. He is now seen as an independent personality and in the north of India is popularly partnered with Lakshmi (goddess of wealth), and the blessing of wealth has become his main function. He is also depicted with a shower of coins coming from his right hand in calendar prints, and this leads to another link with Lakshmi. Decoration with gold and currency is seen as fitting. He is thought to bless new enterprises and beginnings and so his invocation on the Gregorian New Year is logical. So my question to Ghani Shastry may be thought of as misplaced, but I wanted to see what his logic was.

concept based on a Christian Gregorian calendar and was not a Hindu festival. Ghani Shastry said: 'Oh, only you think of those things. So what? In India because of the British we use all calendars. What is wrong in celebrating the New Year? In Bangalore everyone celebrates, they go to pub, restaurant, disco. . .so I am saying yes, do all that, but also remember Ganesha on that day. Then he will protect you all year'.

On 1 January 1999, I visited the Ganesha temple in the morning. The queues to see the deity stretched for a mile or more as they wound down Eighth Cross and on to Sampige Road. I found several khaki-clad policemen patrolling the queue to make sure that children did not run into the traffic and that the queue moved smoothly. I asked the inspector of police identifiable by the stars on his uniform when they had arrived. He hit his head in frustration as he shouted at a young boy to get out of the way of oncoming traffic and said: 'We came in the middle of the night. Ghani Shastry called us because he could not control the crowd. They all wanted to see *Kasu Ganesha* (Coin/Money Ganesha) today only. I had never heard this form of the Ganesha deity mentioned before, but apparently the inspector had identified this *alankara* as a new *avatara* (form) of the deity itself.

My informants found me in the queue and crowded around me excitedly as they all wished me a happy New Year. They were returning after *darshan*, opening the paper bags containing the rupee coins. They all chorused 'yeshtu chanagi alankara madidarai' ('how well they have done *alankara*'), 'neenu hogi nodilebeku' ('you must see it'). They said that the New Year would bring them all prosperity as they had had *darshan* of *Kasu Ganesha*. Nobody commented about what I thought was strange—the fact that they were celebrating the Western calendrical New Year with Hindu forms of ritual. And that the decorations of the deity for New Year's Day were the currencies of countries many of the devotees may never even visit.

I met Ghani Shastry early the following morning on 2 January 1999, as he was cleaning up the sanctum. He looked very pleased and told me that by an unofficial count over 12,000 devotees had visited the temple on that day. He said he had run out of the rupee coins and had had to make two additional runs to banks outside Malleswaram as more and more devotees poured into the temple. He said that the New Year's Day *darshan* was so successful he would repeat it the following New Year's Eve but make it 'even better' since it was

the ‘millennium celebration’. I asked him how it could be made better. ‘You will see’, he said. Gesturing to the Ganesha deity behind him, he said: ‘He will tell us what to do’. (Excerpt from Field Diary, 3 Jan. 1999).

Everyday *puja* of public worship of the deity involves sixteen *upacharas* (*shodashopachari puja*) or parts of worship. Usually the temples in Malleswaram perform four of the critical elements—*abhishekam* (bathing of the deity), *alankara* (dressing of the deity), *naivedyam* (feeding of the deity) and *deeparadhana* (offering of the sacred flame). *Alankara*, or the decorating of the deity, might include dressing it in rich silks and adorning it with jewellery and flower garlands. Thus on Krishna Jayanthi day (the birthday of Krishna), the image in the Venugopalaswamy Krishna temple is typically dressed as a child wearing yellow silk clothes and sporting a peacock feather, reflecting the popular folk imagery of Krishna as a young cowherd. Other deities such as Ganesha and Lakshmi are also dressed to reflect popular mythico-folk imagery that devotees are familiar with.

In 1998 I found that Ghani Shastry and his son Kashi had taken to performing *alankara* for festivals and holidays that are not part of the traditional Hindu calendar of festivals. The ‘international currency’ *alankara* described above was one of these. Others involved incorporating secular, national, and Western holidays into the Hindu calendar. For example, Kashi started celebrating 15 August 1998, Indian Independence Day, by decorating the deity in the three colours of the Indian flag and pinning small paper national flags on the walls of the temple. When I asked Kashi whether it was right to conflate the nation-state of India with Ganesha by dressing the deity in the national colours, he replied laughingly: ‘People liked it. Even Muslims in India pray to Ganesha you know. And anyway India is mostly Hindu, so why not? Ganesha protects us all’.³⁹ His rival Babu Bhattar of the Venugopalaswamy Krishna temple concurred, because he told me that he was considering doing a nationalist *alankara* of his own to draw in additional crowds.⁴⁰

Another *alankara* introduced while I was doing fieldwork in the MahaGanapathi temple was the dressing of Ganesha in seasonal fruits and vegetables. Again, much effort had been put into this innovation. Kashi showed me an album of

³⁹ Kashi denied the influence of the Hindu Right in his choice of decoration. However he clearly tapped into a long-felt need of the devotees.

⁴⁰ Scholars may suggest that this points to an increasing Hindu nationalism in India. However, I suggest that while the priests were not insensitive to the political overtones of the *alankara*, the primary motivation was to bring in a large clientele.

thirty different *alankaras* featuring specialty fruits grown in various parts of India— oranges from Nagpur, pomegranates from Punjab, grapes from Karnataka, coconuts from Kerala, mangoes from Maharashtra, and pineapples from Goa. Later he expanded this repertoire to include an expensive ‘foreign fruit’ *alankara* made up of Kiwi fruit from Australia, dates and other dried fruit from the Middle East, and rambutan and persimmons from Singapore. An ‘international’ *alankara* was a new concept for the devotees of the temple, and took some time to catch on, but lately it has become increasingly popular. In part this may be because it mirrors the socio-economic reality of India today. Indians are more and more connected financially and culturally to the rest of the world, and the *alankara* demonstrates this growing internationalism.

The last new *alankara* arranged by the MahaGanapathi temple during my fieldwork in 1997–98 was the robotic *alankara*. Kashi had long been fascinated by tableaux in which robotic arms move and water is recycled in a cascade, and so on. After watching a videotape which his cousin purchased at a trade fair in Germany, Kashi became convinced that with some basic engineering, the deity could be made to move. He decided to experiment on the Banshankari Devi deity during the Navarathri celebration. His choice was rather apt since, according to the myth, Devi kills the evil demon Mahisha, who has taken the form of a buffalo, by running a trident through him.

For days before the celebration I found Kashi pushing and pulling at a mechanical apparatus in the lower courtyard. He was covered in motor oil and carrying a screwdriver. He had enlisted the help of some of the younger priests and some devotees with engineering qualifications. Together they had contrived to make a working device: or at least one that sometimes worked. On the *puja* day several hours passed, punctuated by thuds and grunts from behind the curtain hiding the deity from the devotees, before the curtain parted and the Devi was finally revealed. But the waiting devotees were not disappointed. The deity was impressive in grape-coloured silk. In one fist, raised to what seemed an alarming height, she clutched a shining aluminium trident. At her feet was a *papier maché* statue of a buffalo (Mahisha) with staring eyes and protruding tongue. As we watched, light bulbs within the sanctum flared, the arm of the deity came down, and the trident struck the buffalo’s body with a dull thud. The devotees were thrilled, and some even clapped. Encouraged, Kashi rigged up a system where the deity’s arm would fall every ten minutes or so for the following nine days of the festival. It was touching to see the devotees, especially children, watching the deity with tremendous concentration and unblinking eyes so as not to miss the moving trident.

Honour and Hygiene: *Prasadam* Distribution in Malleswaram

Prasadam is consecrated material that has been offered to the deity as a vow (*seva*) from a supplicant (*sevakara*), is ‘consumed’ by the deity, and returned to the devotee as a sign of divine benevolence and protection.⁴¹ It usually comprises *kumkumum* (red ochre powder), *thirtha* (holy water), flowers from the decorations adorning the deity (Sanskrit: *pushpam*), fruit that the deity has partaken ritually (Sanskrit: *phallam*), *vibhuti* (sacred ash), leaves and berries that the deity is known to like or have some mythic affiliation with (such as Bilva leaves in the case of Shiva), and cooked food prepared in the temple cookhouse (Tamil: *madapalli*) under strict supervision. But *prasadam* can also comprise substances that have been sanctified by contact with the deity, such as water or honey poured over the image during the *abhishekam* (ritual bathing). The *prasadam* becomes sacred through its contact with the person of the deity. Devotees eat, drink, and consume the *prasadam* in various ways such as by rubbing it on their bodies, entwining the flowers in their hair, and smearing it on the faces of people close to them.

Studies of *prasadam* in India have largely concentrated upon the nature of the ‘food transaction’ where the larger hermeneutic position is that food in India has a ‘core set of cultural assumptions of the nature of the link between human society, food transactions, and divinity’.⁴² These studies emphasise social structure and hierarchy, where the ‘eating and feeding’ chain is an indication of social rank in the society,⁴³ and caste is intimately linked with food preparation and distribution. Studies of how *prasadam* is distributed, on the other hand, emphasise the economic and political nature of the transaction.⁴⁴ Its acceptance is said to bestow ongoing rights (*maryade*) which are seen as ‘both constitutive, and denotative of the complex orchestration of rights in the re-distributive process in the temple’.⁴⁵

⁴¹ For a comprehensive understanding of *prasadam* refer to R.S. Khare (ed.), *Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); and R.S. Khare, *Annam-brahman: Cultural Models, Meanings, and Aesthetics of Hindu Food* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1992).

⁴² Carol A. Breckenridge and Sidney Pollock (eds), *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p.24; McKim Marriott, ‘Caste Ranking and Food Transactions: A Matrix Analysis’, in Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn (eds), *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1968), pp.133–71; McKim Marriott and Ronald B. Inden, ‘Toward an Ethnology of South Asian Caste Systems’, in Kenneth David (ed.), *The New Wind* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), pp.227–38; McKim Marriott (ed.), *India Through Hindu Categories* (New York: Sage Publications, 1990); and N. Yalman, ‘On the Meaning of Food Offerings in Ceylon’, in Robert Spencer (ed.), *Forms of Symbolic Action* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), pp.81–96.

⁴³ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (complete rev. English edition, 1980 Series: (NHS) Nature of Human Society); Marriott, ‘Caste Ranking and Food Transactions’, pp.133–71; and R.S. Khare, *The Hindu Hearth and Home* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1976).

⁴⁴ Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule*; and Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*.

⁴⁵ Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule*, p.37.

Prasadam-making is known to anthropologists to be fraught with tension and conflict. Maintaining the purity of *prasadam* (Sanskrit: *madi*, Kannada: *shuddha*) through the cooking (Sanskrit: *pacam*, Tamil: *samayil*) and offering phases is a central concern for devotees, priests, and cooks alike. Cooking and offering are dangerous acts because of the possibility of accidental pollution. If the purity of the *prasadam* is allowed to slip the gods may become angered.⁴⁶

In keeping with the anthropological literature, *prasadam*-making and distribution was a problematic activity in the Malleswaram temples. Although dominated as one would expect by references to the sacred and ritualistic, conversations about *prasadam* held in my presence often slipped into the pragmatic and the mundane.⁴⁷ The Malleswaram priests and devotees see *prasadam* as a multi-stranded 'text', embodying many ontological positions. The gifting and acceptance of *prasadam* speaks to them of the benevolence of the deity, and the problem of distribution in a hierarchical society, but also of the *dharma*, purity, and (significantly) the skill and experience of the cook, the *karma* of the receiver, and his or her generosity.

Two aspects of the process that cropped up repeatedly in my conversations with devotees in the Malleswaram temples were health and flavour. For example one of my informants, Mr Ramaswamy, told me that though the *shakara pongal* (sweet rice dish) was very tasty in the Venugopaldaswamy Krishna temple, I should prevent him from accepting more than a tablespoon since it was made in *ghee* (clarified butter) to make it *madi* (sacred, pure), and he had had a four-level bypass surgery the previous year and had been warned by his cardiologist that he could not afford to 'indulge' in fatty foods. He explained to me that even though his *maryade* (hereditary rights) entitled him to a bigger portion of the *prasadam*, he could not accept it because his 'HDL and triglyceride levels were high'. Indeed, he was only eating it at all because 'one cannot refuse *prasadam*'. Yet another informant, Andal, said: 'Nowadays we cannot eat all this rich food. . . we are not used to it'.

Ghani Shastry and Kashi used *prasadam* in many innovative and competitive ways to bring in more devotees to the MahaGanapathi temple including, as mentioned before, using innovative materials for the *alankara* which was later distributed as *prasadam*. Nevertheless they felt they could not compete with the Venugopaldaswamy Krishna temple in Malleswaram in terms of quality since they did not have a full-time Brahmin cook on the payroll. Accordingly in August 1998, Ghani hired a secular

⁴⁶ L. Dumont, 'A Structural Definition of a Folk-Deity of Tamilnad: Aiyandar, the Lord', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.3 (1959), pp.75–87.

⁴⁷ Moreno M. Pancamirtam, 'God's Washings as Food', in R.S. Khare (ed.), *Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p.149.

caterer for special festival occasions. He informed interested devotees that the caterer ‘only hired Brahmin cooks’, thereby overcoming potential concerns about purity.

Traditionally *prasadam* is distributed roughly as follows: the priests, cooks and other upper pure (*madi*) males of the temple dole out the food from pails using their hands, or at most a spoon, on to waiting banana leaf plates set in front of the devotees, who are served in order of their hierarchy within the temple for *maryade*. Higher-ranking caste members, priests, donors and well-wishers are attended to first, lower-ranking members next and women and children last. Where a person stands in this ranking indicates his or her importance and value not only within the temple community but also within the wider caste community.⁴⁸

However for the Ganesha Chaturthi festival I witnessed in 1998 the caterer produced *prasadam* in neatly-packaged plastic bags and boxes (rather like those produced by the city’s popular takeaway restaurants) with the temple’s name screen-printed in bright blue or red on each bag. The bags were stacked on a table in the lower courtyard and some lower-level priests were put in charge of overseeing their distribution. After the *darshan* of the deity the devotees filed past the table in no particular order, and each one was handed a plastic packet. Yet distribution went on with little conflict. As I noted in my field diary:

By now our *prasadam* has arrived. It turns out to be neatly packed in plastic containers rather like restaurant packing. There is also some fruit and a couple of *laddos*. Everything is neatly packaged in large yellow carry bags that have a neon ‘Om’ on the face and on which are printed in large red letters ‘MahaGanapathi Temple Prasadam’ with the date. I am suitably impressed by all this and say so to Ghani Shastry. He tells me that this is the first time he is trying *prasadam* distribution this way. The queue files by and people are handed the bags. They all open them and peer in. The priests urge them to keep moving so everyone can get the *prasadam*. (Extract from Field Diary, Ganesh Chaturthi, 18 September 1998).

Ghani Shastry is the first priest in Malleswaram—and possibly in Bangalore—to have professionalised *prasadam* distribution. He told me that when he first raised the proposal with the committee of temple devotees and the government he encountered considerable opposition—but had pushed ahead because he thought it was necessary. Lacking support from the Temple Department he volunteered to pay

⁴⁸ Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule*.

for it out of his own pocket in the first year. When the officials saw what a success the new scheme was with the devotees, they ‘sanctioned the money with no problem’. Why did the new system catch on so quickly?

Possibly more important than the content of the *prasadam* itself in this respect is the perception that the new way is hygienic and efficient. Devotees flocked to the Maha-Ganapathi temple because they saw it as ‘clean’. Being ‘clean’ and ‘neat’ is a significant virtue with the new professional middle classes in Bangalore, especially the women. Hemavathi, a female devotee, told me: ‘You see in the old temples they would wrap the *prasadam* in a leaf and tie it with a thread so by the time you got home to share it with your family it was one big mess (*gajji bijji*). My children never used to eat it. But with this neat packaging (gesturing to Ghani’s ‘take-out boxes’ of *prasadam*) I think they will be happy to eat’.

It was thus apparent that the devotees compared Ghani’s ‘modern’ and apparently hygienic *prasadam* distribution favourably with the ‘traditional’ form of *prasadam* distribution still being followed at the Venugopaldaswamy Krishna temple. Ghani told me proudly that it was not unknown for his staff to distribute over six thousand bags of *prasadam* in one day.⁴⁹ Ghani Shastry seems to have had tapped into a long-felt need among educated devotees for the hygienic distribution of consecrated temple food.

Conclusion: Rituals in an Era of Mass Customisation

Appadurai argues that the temple has essentially not changed as a cultural entity—only as an institution.⁵⁰ Colonialism, he argues, left the notion of the deity as an authoritative figure intact, but re-shaped ‘the rules and actions’ that traditionally governed the management and control of the deity. However as we have seen, through apparently miniscule shifts in the processes and praxis of everyday Hinduism—these very rules and actions—significant changes in social structures are occurring. Peter Berger has observed that ‘the pluralistic situation is above all a market situation. In it religious institutions become consumer commodities... a good deal of religious activity comes to be dominated by the logic of market economies’.⁵¹ It is clear from the anthropological data that when a society undergoes rapid change, rituals become dynamic. An ‘accretion of small changes’,⁵²

⁴⁹ I found that many of the regular devotees brought back the empty plastic containers regularly for many months after and took home their *prasadam* in them.

⁵⁰ Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict Under Colonial Rule*, p.19.

⁵¹ Peter Berger quoted in Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Market Place of Culture*, p.7.

⁵² Geertz, one of the pioneers of studying ritual change, argued a direct relationship between social and ritual change. In analysing the funeral of a young boy in Java during a period of enormous social change, he states: ‘[As the result of

in Geertz's words, take place.⁵³ The 'small changes' discussed in this paper are a case in point. The innovations introduced by the Malleswaram priests will (and I suggest do) lead eventually to large-scale structural changes in the Hindu religion. We are witnessing a slow but sure evolution in what it means to be 'Hindu' among middle-class urban Indians.

Constructing 'dynamic' ritual is in fact a delicate task for the entrepreneur priests. The 'new' reconstituted ritual must appear to take the form of the old to give both parties the pleasure and assurance of the familiar, and yet to qualify as 'modern' must simultaneously incorporate daring new elements to signal its efficacy and cutting-edge legitimacy to devotees. As the data demonstrates, practitioners of ritual in Bangalore tread a very fine line between these two mutable positions.

the death] the complex of beliefs and rituals which had for generations brought countless Javanese through the post-mortem period suddenly failed to work with its accustomed success. This disrupted funeral was in fact a microscopic example of the broader conflict and structural dissolutions which, in one way or another, are characteristic of Indonesian society'. Geertz argued a 'locus of accretions' occur in ritual change where each change appears miniscule but change the form and symbolism of the ritual. These 'loci of accretions' can best be seen in situations where traditional ritual faces the forces of change. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, pp.147–69.

⁵³ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books Classics, 1983).