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### The Small Overlooked Hindu Street Temples of Madurai

Elina Berzins  
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# **The Small Overlooked Hindu Street Temples of Madurai**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2013

Honors Capstone Project in [Your Field]

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## Abstract

When I first walked around downtown Madurai, down its narrow and dusty streets that led into more lanes and alleys, I noticed a trend of small street temples that were usually built outside stores and apartment houses. When I asked an older man who sat next to a one of these temples that was modest in size and consisted of a Ganesha, Hindu elephant god statue, he told me that as a Western woman, I shouldn't waste my time studying these small insignificant temples. He insisted that I focus on the grand and large Meenakshi Temple, which Madurai is famous for in India. This dismissive answer inspired me to find the reason why these temples exist because it was clear that no one else was studying them but due to their popularity in the streets, I understood they had a function of some importance.

Based on my studies abroad in Madurai, I completed research on these temples because they combined my interest in religious studies but also allowed me to explore the daily life of residents of downtown Madurai. Also by focusing my creative eye on the visually engaging small street temples, my research allowed me to incorporate photography into my project. My final Capstone project is a book that I designed that consists of my research and photographs of street temples in Madurai, India.

By turning my ethnographic study about Madurai's small street temples into a book, my expectation is that my research is both visually engaging but more importantly educational for those interested in how popular Hinduism is practiced in Madurai, India.

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## Chapter 1

As I look back on my year in which I worked on my Capstone, I realize a lot has changed from my original plans, and that that final product encompasses all of the phases of my Capstone. My original Capstone proposal planned to compare the differences between Hinduism and Christianity in South India. My plan was to capture these differences and similarities through photographs and design a book to combine both my writing and my photographs. As a Graphic Design major in the Honors program, I struggled to find a way on how find a way in which I could combine my design skills with my passion for photography. I was determined to use these two skill sets to make my research relevant and make it something more than a research paper.

For my study abroad program in South India (South India Term Abroad), a large part of the program is the ethnographic research project each student is required to complete. As a sophomore in Syracuse University, I knew I wanted to study abroad in India. The planned research paper was an opportunity to make my Capstone project in line with my semester in India. I was determined to combine this mandatory research project with my Capstone project and make the two the same topic.

But when I got to India, my plans for Capstone naturally changed. It is one thing to plan a Capstone ambitiously while sitting in a computer lab in Newhouse. For my South Asian Studies class, “India’s Religious Worlds,” sophomore year, I read many academic texts about the differences and overlaps between Hinduism and Christianity. I foolishly believed that these differences would be apparent to

me when I would go abroad to study in Madurai. Soon after arriving to Madurai, I realized that my original plan was overtly ambitious, too academic, and would never be as visually engaging as I had planned.

My topic of small street temples developed in an interesting way. The first stage was learning the ways of Indian traffic. When I began riding my bike down a narrow road in India between cows, buses, goats, and school children, to school everyday, I began observing Indian daily life. After mastering how to ride a bike in Madurai, I began to figure out what I had access to in terms of research subjects. One thing that I noticed on my bike rides was that on many street corners, there were small street temples. This observation became my main interest, especially after I started to ask more questions about them to my host family and my Indian professors. I was intrigued by the popularity of these small street temples and their various locations. As I started documenting many of these temples in my neighborhood, I discovered that a previous SITA student had completed his research on street temples in downtown Madurai. The previous research project was a confirmation that I could also complete my research on these small temples. The best part about my topic was that these street temples were visually engaging.

Ever since I was a freshman in high school, I have been an active photographer. My style varies but I have an overall tendency to see graphic patterns in urban scenery. I see beauty in unexpected places. Ever since I started taking photographs in high school, I have been attracted to scenes of urban decay. Although my graphic design style aims to be minimalistic and I like creating

clean and organized designs, my photography style has evolved to become the opposite. My creative spirits thrive in scenes of chipped paint, peeling posters, rust, and broken glass. I like shooting photos of exterior buildings head on, at the street level, for frontal shots that allow a reader to see the street temple as if they were standing in front of it.

My personal photography motto is that in order to be a great photographer, one needs to find visual patterns in anything they look at. As I explored the narrow alleyways of Madurai, India, I found the many disregarded, overlooked small street temples and the nooks in which they were built in to be beautiful and visually entrancing. In my hometown of Chicago, I have to drive to the west side of Chicago to find rusted crumbling structures that visually engage my creative vision. In downtown Madurai, I was able to simply get out of my auto rickshaw and I would be able to step out and immediately see an old building in a decrepit state that is painted brightly.

In a city that originated back in 3<sup>rd</sup> BCE, seeing a new shiny clean building is a rarity especially in downtown Madurai. The streets are over packed with people, cows, rickshaws, cars, and occasionally an elephant. Due to the narrowness of the streets, everything is very close together in Madurai. Almost off of every main road, I was able to find a narrower lane that took me down to another lane, and usually at almost every intersection, I would find a small street temple. These factors made my decision to focus my research on street temples and amending my Capstone Project an easy task to do.

In terms of my photography inspiration, I feel personally inspired by Stephen Wilkes' work. A very well known editorial photographer and Syracuse University alumnus, Wilkes' series on Ellis Island became a photographic influence on me. His Ellis Island series is a collection of photographs taken of the decrepit and abandoned buildings on Ellis Islands. The series includes some detail shots, but they are mostly shots of abandoned hallways and doorways. A lot of his photographs are slightly creepy. Many of his photographs focus on texture. These traits are things that I aim to include in my own photography.

Another important influence on my photography is Susan Sontag. She frequently wrote about photography, and her book *On Photography* is a huge influencer on my critical view of photography. The quote below written by Susan Sontag was a fundamental truth in what I aimed to capture in my photography in Madurai.

“What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire (*On Photography*).”

My main ambition for my photographs was to capture the scenes of these temples that are located in these gritty, often dirty, and very narrow alleyways of the Jewelry District. Everything in downtown Madurai is covered with a layer of dust, with the exception of the street temple deities. Many of the temples that I found in my exploration of the Jewelry District and I included in my research stood out on the street because they were well kept and clean. I have always been

attracted to urban decay, and the old buildings, range of colors, and this project combined these elements and allowed me to explore the fascinating and winding alleys of the Jewelry District.

An interesting note about my photography of Madurai is that I have received several comments from friends that despite my narrative descriptions of how crowded and narrow the streets are, my photos capture scenes of temples in which there are not very many people in my photographs. As Susan Sontag wrote, “In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe,” I chose to focus my photographs on the temples and the individual patrons and owners of the street temples. I also believe that my influences of Stephen Wilkes and my desire to showcase the temples themselves explain my stylistic decision to take photos that focus on the structures and deities themselves versus the crowds that walk next to them.

While browsing through photography books and coffee table books, I found it hard to find a book that aimed to be both informative and visually engaging. Unless the books included a lot of infographics, photography books consisted mostly of photographs with limited text. My challenge in designing my Capstone book was to find a balance between the photographs and the text. When planning my layout, I knew I wanted to showcase many of my photographs prominently in my book layout, but I wanted to include the text of my research paper with it as well. Because each street temple has interesting and unique descriptions, I knew that my photographs had to include the text. The temple

photos are not as meaningful without the explanation of each temple and the description of each temple's function adds and explains the photo. Although my work is not stunningly original or inventive, my layout that uses both an infographic style (the colorful circles of each temple that connects its location to the overall map) and photographs, makes me believe that I created a concoction of design that is rarely seen in academic and creative projects.

Despite there not being a conscious design theory present in my work, my overall design motto for any project is minimalism. One of my favorite artists is Piet Mondrian. His color blocks, geometric paintings have been a huge influence on my graphic design style. Although my Capstone design includes circles as a continuous graphic element, I believe that Mondrian's simplicity and minimalistic style crafts any work I create.

As my research progressed I knew that design was going to become a central part and challenge in my Capstone creation. Due to the importance of organization, the design of the book is the main element that fosters a cultural and academic understanding of my research for a reader. By offering a minimalistic and clean design that outlines my research and showcases my photography, my intention was to recreate a lengthy ethnographic research paper that was originally formatted in Microsoft Word and bring it to life in a forty-four-page book.

In terms of actually designing my book, I knew I wanted to strive to make a book that was very modern, inviting, and not be text heavy to make it feel like it originally was a research paper. As a graphic designer, I love organizing words and paragraph structure but the worst battle in design is when there is too much

text and not enough white space. By keeping my design goals in mind, I created my Capstone to have a lot of white negative space but I counter the white with the graphic elements of colorful circles.

The most challenging part of this project was placing my research copy with my photographs into a layout that worked and made sense. Although I had written my paper in sections, it was still a challenge to figure out a systematic and aesthetically pleasing way to combine large photographs with a lot of text. As a designer, I feel that the worst client is the one who gives you too much copy and not enough space to give the words enough white space. But in my Capstone, I was my own client because I had written the paper and it was my battle to edit it, organize, and make sure the words balanced out the photographs.

My decision to make the book 12" x 12" and square format stemmed from my intention to make the book readable and also modern. I am drawn to art books that are in interesting shapes, and because I have personally branded my own business cards to be square, and I wanted to continue this theme for my Capstone. A square is one of my favorite shapes and I am drawn to its symmetry. But the square shape did present some difficulties with the overall layout of the photographs. However, I solved this issue by making many of the photographs bleed across the two-page spread, which gave my book layout some dynamic and varied nature to the overall page design.

Another important element in my design was the map and the color circles that identify each street temple. Because I had originally planned to create an interactive tablet version, I wanted the layout and the street temple descriptions to

be identifiable and interesting to read. The circles allowed me to connect the street temples on the map to its description on each page. I hope one day to develop a tablet version, and the circle element will be an interactive button, which a user will be able to tap to get more information about each temple.

The artistic choices I made in the process of creating my project were varied and came together in different phases of my project. My overall decisions were based on my ability to gather enough information and content from my research and photographs in India. I had to keep myself organized in India to plan accordingly to be able to continue this project when I returned to Syracuse and make it a Capstone.

One of the best parts about creating my Capstone in Syracuse this year was my access to the computer labs in Newhouse, my laptop, and printers. I remember the challenges of printing my final paper in Madurai using the South India Term's office printer. Not only was it a very slow printer, but also my photos in the appendix printed in very low quality. I was upset by the final result because of the poor color quality, but because everyone else in my program were Liberal Arts major from a small Liberal Arts college, they did not understand how photo quality and color cartridges mattered to me as a graphic design major. This all changed when I returned to Syracuse University this past fall. I was finally greeted by the technology offered in Newhouse, which was a refreshing and satisfying upgrade from India.

During my time in India, my classmates were focused on finishing their research during the semester, but because I knew I was going to take my research

a step further (create into a Capstone), I had to consciously plan forward by choosing research that was going to be both intellectually and visually stimulating. Even after I had completed my Independent study research paper for my class in Madurai, I was actively visiting each temple site in the mornings and evenings to get more photographs of each temple. Although I had my general plans and a vision for what I wanted my Capstone book to look like, it was challenging to know that after leaving Madurai, I would never have access to my subjects or research sites. Even when I was going through the hundreds of photographs from my months in Madurai, it was hard to understand that the photographs I had taken in Madurai were the only options for my final Capstone book.

What began as a Capstone project as a part of my Honors requirement has evolved additionally to becoming a personal project. Because I was able to combine my ethnographic research that reflects my deep rooted interest in South Asian Studies, my passion for photography, and my graphic design skills to combine the two, my Capstone overall has become a representation of all of my academic interests and talents. Although when I was writing my proposal it seemed too ambitious, I am proud to show off my Capstone and explain how it reflects my dynamic interests and academic pursuits. I started in my research in Madurai because it was a requirement for the study abroad program. Although it was challenging to work with translators and it was sometimes uncomfortable to stand in the hot and dusty streets interviewing owners and trying to get answers from patrons of these temples, I am overall satisfied for my determination. Prior

to this project, I had no idea how challenging it is to work with translators and to get interviews from informants. It requires a lot of patience, an open mind, and even some courage. For instance, when I needed to get photos of the Vinayagar temple on the roof of the jewelry store, I had to climb a ladder to get into the government owned water well structure. I was guided by two of the shop employees, but without a translator our conversation was limited. Although they were very friendly and willing to help me get photographs of the temple, I found myself frequently in precarious and interesting situations that as a sophomore in Syracuse would never imagine myself in. Despite the challenges and the adventures, I am proud of the work, both writing and photography, from my time in Madurai. It was an adventure, and it was worth it.

One of the best parts about doing my research in the Jewelry District was that by the end of my time in Madurai, people recognized me in the area. At first, people were curious why a blonde young woman was walking around with her camera in the narrow lanes photographing street temples. But after I visited each temple with a translator, who in Tamil was able to explain my research project, people would start talking with pride about their Hindu practices and temples. At the Kalamman temple, I was invited into the home of the family who takes care of the temple. They spoke some English, and they wanted to know why I was studying the temples and hear about America. Their own interest in me combined with my own interest in their culture, made the project rewarding. The overall generosity of Indian people in Madurai was overwhelming and made my research a pleasant experience.

The meaning of my Capstone to others ranges from person to person. In terms of my Capstone for Newhouse's Multimedia, Photography, and Design department I hope it shows what a graphic design student can accomplish in four years. I would like my Capstone to be an example that a Newhouse graphic design major can go beyond "making things pretty" but travel abroad to India, conduct research, take photographs, and create something with all of those pieces. For me, my Capstone is an important piece in my portfolio because as I have mentioned, it shows my dynamic interests. It also shows how I can complete a large project and work on it for an entire year.

I think the person who inspired me and motivated me to complete my Capstone was my mother. She was the first person I discussed my Capstone and she was very excited about the idea of creating a book compiling my research and photographs in India. Her support and overstated belief that I could accomplish this feat in my senior year really helped me finish it.

Although it would be ambitious to believe that my Capstone will have an effect on the world, I hope that my Capstone inspires future projects like the previous SITA student project did for me in Madurai. My hope that a future student would be interested in studying small street temples because my Capstone covers an interesting niche in both religious study and South Asian Studies, specifically urban development. I originally was interested in religious study, but this evolved as I found more about the street temples.

In regards to my audience, I hope that after reading my book the reader will understand that when visiting India, specifically Madurai, they should not

assume things in India at a surface level. My overall presumption is that tourists, who visit Tamil Nadu, and Madurai specifically, see small street temples as another religious quirk on the streets of Madurai. Also due to movies like Eat, Pray, Love, many people assume that India is the land of religion and spirituality. Although I have found this generalization to be true at times, my book dissects this stereotype and explores the idea that a religious thing like a small street temple may have a unique and practical function like preventing parking.

Another misconception that I have found when talking to my peers about India and Indians is the belief that they think Hindus are very devout people. Although some of the Hindus that I met and interviewed in Madurai are very devout and active in their Hindu practices, the small street temples that are built for convenience shows how India is changing. The practice of building small street temples originally began in smaller villages. This tradition has been brought to the streets of Madurai and today these temples' purpose and functions are changing. I ultimately hope that someone who reads my book will understand that religious structures, like a small street temple, should not be overlooked for its size or scale, but instead they can lead to interesting findings about how Hinduism is practiced today.

Due to the length and many phases of my project, from collecting research and taking photographs in India, to spending long hours in the Newhouse Computer labs designing the layout of my book to editing the photographs, I have learned a lot about my own capabilities as a student and my work ethic. As a sophomore planning my Capstone, I did not fully understand the worth of a

Capstone. But as a senior graduating, I now understand that a Capstone is an exciting and rewarding project that encompasses everything you have learned in my four years at Syracuse University, and studying abroad in India.

I feel very grateful for Newhouse for teaching me able to write, photograph, and design, making this Capstone possible. I decided to attend Newhouse four years ago because I thought that by getting a well-rounded education was more important than simply focusing on design in an art school. Based on the writing, photo, and design skills I have acquired, always emphasize to people who ask about my education at Newhouse that I could run my own newspaper because I have taken advanced news writing classes, photo classes, and many design courses.

Even though the writing in my book is ethnographic, I believe that my ability to write news articles and other academic writing at Syracuse University prepared me to write my research paper that became the content in my book. It was interesting to learn about ethnography especially about the different methodologies and biases, because I had never taken a class at Syracuse about ethnography. Although I despised the ethnographic writing by the end of my semester when writing my final paper in Madurai, I now feel satisfied knowing that I succeeded in the challenge. I will never be an anthropologist but trying it out for a semester helped me a lot academically and gave me a great experience.

“Last week in retrospect was both productive, challenging and rewarding. By Friday, we had to turn in our rough drafts of our Independent Study papers. As I continue working on this project, I realize that I definitely could not and would

not be anthropology major. Instead of writing history papers, or news articles, anthropology papers are a concoction of both and neither. While I was writing my first draft, I spent majority writing about my methods and biases than the actual substance of my interviews and the information I have discovered. Anthropology papers for me are like elaborate and painful science laboratory papers, which made me ultimately, miss my course work at Newhouse.”

The paragraph above is an excerpt of my blog from India in which I critiqued my ethnographic writing. Reading my blog a year after writing my research, makes me realize how rewarding this process of conducting ethnographic research was to me. Not only did it force me academically in terms of understanding field observation, anthropological thinking, but most importantly allowed me to compare my experience in Madurai to Syracuse.

Based on my India classes from Syracuse, a combination of both Hindi and India’s Religious Worlds, I felt that I had a solid understanding and background in Indian culture and specifically a grasp on Hindu worship and gods. Additionally, my writing classes in Newhouse helped me interview, do field observations, and write my paper.

Another great coincidence in terms of my research and work of others was my connection to Professor Joanne Waghorne, a professor of Religion at Syracuse University. I attended Professor Waghorne’s Religion Today class Fall 2009. We spent a portion of the class learning about her research in India about gurus, which I found interesting because of my interest in India. Last spring, while I was doing my research I came across Professor Waghorne’s books, which I referenced

to in my Background section in my Capstone. I found this happenstance to be rewarding and helpful because I emailed her questions specific to my research.

My general time span of my Capstone project started in Fall 2011 and ended in May 2013. This has been the longest and most in-depth project I have completed in my academic career. I began the proposal in October 2011, and I amended my Capstone proposal in January 2012, when I got to Madurai, India. After completing my research and taking photographs, I left India early May 2012. I began editing my paper and editing my photographs August 2012, after returning to Syracuse University. I spent the most time working on the final layout of my Capstone this past semester. I met frequently with my graphic design professor and Capstone advisor, Sherri Taylor.

My moment of serendipity was when I finished or was very close to finishing my design. The evening before ordering my book on Blurb (the online book publishing site that printed my book), I was determined to fix any last minute errors and design tweaks. I met with my Capstone advisor, Sherri Taylor, and went through the book, page by page, in order to ensure that every edit was made. Even as I was uploading my design to the site, I made minor changes, which ultimately drove me to my over compulsive graphic design nature for five hours. My ultimate moment of serendipity and assurance that I could complete my Capstone was when I clicked the “Confirm” button on the book order. It even felt more satisfying than the moment when I received the order from FedEx.

Another important moment in my Capstone process was actually receiving my book in the mail. It is one thing to plan, layout, and upload the book online to

see the preview in PDF, but it is a whole other experience to hold the physical book. I had to present my Capstone without the actual finished product. Although the presentation went well, it was not the ideal situation to present a project without the final product. After getting it in the mail, and having the ability to flip through the pages and see the photographs 12” x 12”, was ultimately the most rewarding experience. Combined with the presentation, the final stages of my Capstone process were my favorite because it finally felt like all the hard work paid off.

In terms of the future, I do hope one day to take my layout of my Capstone book and make an interactive tablet version that will include more photos of each temple. The limitations of print were that I had to choose the best photographs that illustrated each temple in the best possible way. For example, the Vinayagar temple photograph that served as a barrier for motorcycle parking had to include motorcycles. But I have more photographs of people praying at the temple, and also it being lit at night. These photographs could be featured in a slideshow in the interactive version. These plans show how despite being done with my Capstone, this project is more personal because I hope to continue working on it in the future.

For a graphic designer, a design is never completely done, but unfortunately deadlines are an ultimate dictator that determines when a design is finished. Although my Capstone is done, I hope to one day make it an interactive app and continue with the project’s potential. Ultimately, I hope that my Capstone book will be read and actually teach people about small religious in India.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A : Interview Guide

#### *Owner*

Are you the owner of the temple, or was it inherited?

Why did you decide to build it? Is there a reason or purpose for it?

How old is it?

Who comes to pray here?

Why did you choose the deity that is in your temple?

How often do you do puja?

Do you employ anyone to perform puja?

Have you benefited in any way since you built the temple

Is there anything that you pray for specifically?

Why do you think there are so many small street temples in the Jewelry District?

#### *Patron*

How long have you been coming to this temple?

Why do you come to this temple?

How often do you come to perform puja?

Is there anything specific you pray for when you come to a street temple?

Do you go to other temples to pray?

Do you know the history of this street temple, as in how old it is and who the owner is?

### Appendix B: Interviews

Perumal, 45, Tea Stall Owner; 03/15/12

Laksmi & Sudarta; 03/15/12

Ravi, General Store Owner's son ;03/15/12

Balan, takes care of Vinayagar Temple on Vanara Lane; 03/15/12

Vija, Owner of Scooter Repair Shop; 03/17/12

R. Raja Gopal, Patron of Laksmi temple; 03/17/12

Mathan, 53, Brahmin Sourastrian, keeper of Kaliamman temple; 03/17/12

Anand, Cycle Repairman; 03/17/12

Raja, Jewelry Store owner, co-owner of Vinayagar temple; 03/17/12

Dr. Venkatranam, retired professor of History (Madurai Kamarajar University);  
03/21/12

Thondan, 32, owner of jewelry store; 03/21/12

Seelan, 44, owner of jewelry and Xerox store; 03/21/12

Kanan, 48, owner of jewelry store; 03/21/12

Latha Maleshwari, 44, keeper of family street temple; 03/21/12

Kumar, son of general store's owner; 03/27/12

Paraman, 51, owner of jewelry store; 03/27/12

Raja, 27, jewelry designer; 03/27/12

Balan, Cycle Repairman; 03/27/12

Joanne Punzo Waghorne, scholar and Professor of Religion at Syracuse  
University; 03/29/12

Dr. Narayana, Clinic owner; 03/31/12

Balan, Daily Thandi Sub Editor and Staff Photographer; 03/31/12

### **Summary of Capstone Project**

In summary, my Capstone is about small street temples in Madurai, India. Street Temples are a tradition that transcends caste and community while fusing together village and urban practices to create a unique type of Hindu religious practice visible in the alleys in Madurai. Through my research, I found that street temples in the Jewelry District serve several functions. Some temples serve as a means of improving cleanliness in a certain area, others are built for protection and to insure wealth, while other street temples are built without a clear purpose in mind but show off family wealth and respect to a deity. The aim of my Capstone is to show how street temples fill their own niche in Hindu religious study and urban development in Southern India.

I was surprised to find that street temples are a controversial topic in Madurai. Small street temples are often viewed as illegal because they obstruct traffic due to their locations. Roadside temples invoke eviction and threats of demolition from the local government. The Tamil Nadu government has also at times encouraged these temples and turned a blind eye to the orders of demolition in order to appease urban working class voters. These findings allowed me to understand how street temples play a larger role in Madurai society.

I focused a portion of my research on understanding puja, the core ritual in Hinduism. Throughout India, Hindus perform puja daily in temples, street temples, and their homes. Standing before images or icons of the deities, a priest and temple patrons gather to hear the sound of ringing bells and the chanting of

the sacred prayers in order to make a link between god and man. This connection is a reason why many pray at street temples because it is a much more personal experience to pray at your own temple, compared to doing puja at a larger temple like Meenakshi Temple that has over 15,000 visitors each day.

An important character in my research is Ganesha, Pilliyar, or the deity commonly known as Vinayagar, who is the most common deity seen in street temples in the Jewelry District in Madurai. Known all over India as Ganesha, Vinayagar is commonly referred to as a “first god.” Most patrons, when asked what a “first god” is, did not know how to explain this title, but instead said that Vinayagar is a well-rounded god that protects and removes obstacles. As the son of Shiva and Parvati, Vinayagar is a powerful god who also has the power to relate to non-Brahminical Hindus. Another goddess featured in street temples is Amman, the mother goddess. Surveying over twenty temples, I found that Vinayagar and Amman temples were the most common.

I used several research methods to gather the data about street temples. These methods include nineteen spontaneous and brief interviews of different lengths with owners and patrons of street temples within the Jewelry District, and open-ended longer interviews with owners of the temples. I initially began my research by photographing approximately twenty street temples that are located in the area south of Meenakshi Temple. My informants were patrons and owner of the temples that were willing to talk to me about their temples and puja habits.

Although I used participation observation, my primary research aim was to discover the reasons behind the construction of each street temple. This

information I was able to gather solely from the interviews. My participation in the pujas at street temples and my observations were crucial in understanding street temples.

As I mentioned earlier, my findings on street temples was that they hold many functions in the Jewelry District in Madurai. First, I found that most street temples were solutions to community problems. In order to prevent public urination, crowded parking, and littering, some jewelry storeowners built street temples. In addition to community problems, street temples are also built as a place of convenience to do prayer, a place where Hindu traditions continue, and also a site of modernization.

Although there are many reasons for building small urban street temples, the large number of street temples allows me to question whether there are other underlying reasons for the commonality of constructing temples to Vinayagar and Amman. Preston's anthropological work on the Mother Goddess allows me to hypothesize that the increase in street temples in the latter part of the last century is due to modernization in Madurai, and business owner's reliance on the deity for success. Do middle class working communities in the Jewelry District depend on Amman for success? Because of business worries and stresses that are strained by modernization, I believe that many jewelry owners rely on deities for success in business but also in family in regards to health, education, and marriage. By continuously asking in all of my interviews, "what do you pray for?" to owners and patrons of street temple, I learned that people ask for the same general things: luck, success, and protection. Although I believe that their forefathers prayed for

similar things, the desire for success and money worries are strained when younger generations desire social mobility to increase their wealth.

Street temples, as defined and seen by my informants, are places of prayer but ultimately are distinct symbols of Hindu working class religiosity and culture. Although described as “eyesores” by my Indian Religion professor, Dr. Venkatraman, because of their illegal and dirty locations, street temples nonetheless serve as reminder of the presence of god in the Jewelry District. Their owners and patrons do not see street temples as causing hindrances to traffic or order despite their illegal locations and their duplex functions. Whether the temple was created for preventing trash, urine, or parking, the temples were still viewed as sacred vessels of divine power. Urban working middle class Hindus do not view these temples as sacrilegious, even though they serve a practical function. Instead street temples are places to connect with a deity.

Differing from the almighty God encountered in larger Hindu temples, the gods that are worshipped in street temples are personable. Expressions of devotion differ correspondingly. As mentioned in the definition of street temple, Vinayagar and Amman temples are not built because of love. These temples function as tools to maintain cleanliness and control in their locations, because worshippers respect divine presence. As one of my Indian professors explained, “God is full of love, and in folk tradition it is awe. God is ferocious, but he protects me, he is my father and mother. Awe is not like fear.” Instead, this fear can be described as a mixture of both intimidation and respect. Because patrons of the temples respect the images of Vinayagar, Amman, Kali, and Murugan, these

temples serve as a source of order for the residents of the Jewelry District.

In terms of the origins of the small urban street temples, it seems plausible that the building of these temples is a recent trend in popular Hinduism. As seen by the table above, the average age of a street temple is 23.5 years old. Despite these temples having different reasons for originating, from functional solution, convenience, to tradition, the temples are relatively new to Hindus and are only a few generations old. Based on my interviews, I found that owners of small street temples are Hindus who will continue to safeguard popular Hindu traditions.

By encompassing different functions, deities, and locations, street temples are a versatile symbol of working class religiosity seen throughout the Madurai Jewelry District. Not only do they reveal how lower classes practice Hinduism but they also reveal the different cultures that fuse together rural and urban traits that are evolving with the demands of modern stresses. A street temple is a microcosm of how popular Hindu culture is practiced today.

Street temple functionality is a sign of modernity. When Tamil people migrated to Madurai for work opportunities fifty years ago, their village practices also moved to Madurai. Like the staff photographer at the Daily Thandi said, "Every street in Madurai is like a village." By building temples to Vinayagar and Amman, residents express their respect for God but more importantly they redefine traditional notions of sacred space. Prior to my research, I would never have assumed that a temple could function as a means to control littering and urination. Urban life has presented new problems for the working class, from the amount of trash to the lack of public toilets. Using the

embedded tradition of building Hindu temples and using the fear of God to their advantages, people are finding ways to control chaotic streets. The changing function of a street temple shows how popular Hinduism is evolving.

This study provides an initial understanding how Hinduism is practiced by urban artisan classes in Madurai. These small urban street temples reveal that they are microcosms of culture that should not be dismissed as “low” and insignificant. Further study on street temples in other parts of Madurai and other South Indian cities would reveal whether their construction is a larger trend that is visible on streets elsewhere, proving that religious tradition, function, and modernity are being woven together.

Taking my ethnographic study and visually illustrating each temple with my photography, I designed a book encompassing both of these elements. My Capstone is creative and combines religious studies, ethnography, photojournalism, and graphic design, to explain the multipurpose functions of frequently overlooked street temples in Madurai, India.