Middle-Class Identity and Hindu Women's Ritual Practice in South India

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation takes up the issue of social change via an exploration of a middle-class, multi-caste Hindu women’s religious group in south India called the Śri Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang Group (SMVS). It utilizes the group members’ narratives about rural-urban difference and modifications to Hindu women’s rituals to explore the continuous construction of middle-class identities in the changing social milieu of contemporary India. In considering the role of ritual in the (re)formation of middle-class identities and communities amongst the SMVS group women of this dissertation, it becomes evident that particular rituals, while earlier indicating a certain caste affiliation (e.g., recitation of Sanskrit verse) have now come to signify class identities as well. The public practicing of particular rituals by a group of middle-class women of multiple castes is therefore an assertion of status that relies on previously defined social distinctions (e.g., caste and gender), but then reinterprets these divisions according to local notions of modern, urban life. By navigating and employing multivalent perceptions of tradition and modernity, urban Tamil women continue to fashion and refashion their own rituals of self-making. From marriage and menstrual pollution to urban religious festivals and community-building, the following dissertation will highlight how rituals are simultaneously being reinvented and reinforced in contemporary south India via an exploration of personal experiences of social change, events key to understanding and appreciating social phenomena and cultural diversity.
MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITY AND HINDU WOMEN’S RITUAL PRACTICE IN SOUTH INDIA

BY

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DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

My fieldwork was predominantly carried out in the Tamil language; however, due to the composition of the group with which I worked, Sanskritized Tamil words and phrases were also used quite frequently. Moreover, dialect and vocabulary varied according to an interlocutor’s caste status. I performed all transcriptions and translations and have done my best to represent the words of my interlocutors. I have transliterated both Sanskritized and non-Sanskritized Tamil words according to the Tamil lexicon scheme provided by the University of Madras (see below). When a Sanskritized form of a word or phrase was used interchangeably by my interlocutors, I included both forms in parentheses (e.g., Tam. poruttam illai, Skt. prāptam illai). Diacritics have been omitted from words, places and people that are commonly known, such as puja. Words that I felt were known to specialists, but not the lay reader, are shown in italics, but without diacritics (e.g., bhakti). Indian, Tamil and Hindu holidays retain diacritics, but are not italicized (e.g., Navarāttiri, Poṇkal). I have omitted diacritics from the formal names of gods and goddesses per their representation in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Several Roman letters do not exist in the Tamil alphabet; for example “b,” “g” and “s.” These letters have been written according to the Tamil alphabet in which “b” is written as “p,” “g” is written as “k” and “s” is written as “c.” The colloquial way of writing the unique Tamil letter ឃ in Roman script (“zh”) is not used and “l” is used instead. Sanskritized words, however, do include letters such as “s” and “k.” In this way, Sanskritized words can be more easily identified.
| ச | ... | ஏ | ... | எ | ... | ஓ | ... | க | ... | ய | ... | ர | ... | ஜ | ... | ப | ... | ஍ | ... | ஃ | ... | கை | ... | ஒ | ... |
| ஐ | ... | ஆ | ... | இ | ... | ஂ | ... | ஓ | ... | க | ... | ம | ... | ப | ... | ர | ... | ஜ | ... | ப | ... | ஍ | ... | கை | ... | ஒ | ... |
INTRODUCTION

*Middle-Class Identity and Hindu Women’s Ritual Practice in South India*

“In India they will not quit their tradition...even though modern* has come” – Latha Narayanan, 2009

Latha describes here a very common sentiment among Indians who are at the helm of fast-paced urbanization and globalization in the subcontinent. While modern goods and lifestyles may be surfacing more and more in urban and even rural areas, many Indians claim to be steadfast in their devotion to tradition and ritual. But Latha also values modern aspects of society and their implications in determining her family’s precarious middle-class status in the city. She maneuvers through her experiences of social change, embracing both modern and traditional elements of Indian society as they suit her needs.

Latha belongs to an urban group of multi-caste, middle-class Tamil Hindu housewives who are all at the middle of their life cycles and perform their Hindu devotion by singing in temples and villages throughout Tamilnadu. They are known as the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang (SMVS) group. Further, Latha and many of her groupmates grew up in social and geographical settings that differ greatly from the sprawling middle-class urban environment in which they now live. Most of the SMVS women were born in rural areas and once married, migrated to an urban living environment. Once accustomed to rural ways of life, this group of women now negotiates Hindu ritual, caste culture and practice, and displays of middle-class status through new urban modes of interaction. But how do these negotiations manifest themselves? What are the SMVS women’s interpretations of these negotiations? How have the women’s social navigations of an

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1 Throughout this dissertation an asterisk (*) will denote the use of an English word by my interlocutors.
2 Approximately forty years of age and older.
urban landscape altered and/or reinforced Hindu ritual structure and practice? What do negotiations of caste, class, gender, tradition and modernity in India indicate about processes of social change more broadly?

This dissertation takes up the issue of social change via an exploration of the SMVS women’s narratives about rural-urban difference and modifications to Hindu women’s rituals in relation to the constant construction of a middle-class identity. Although the SMVS group women’s lives are replete with other illustrations of social change in contemporary India, I have chosen to focus on particular Hindu women’s rituals because I see them as ideal micro-practices that easily illuminate not only common/shared experiences of social change in contemporary India, but particularly, gendered social change. Furthermore, Hindu ritual is currently at the heart of debates concerning social change and modernity in India, as it has become central in a growing Hindu nationalist rhetoric that argues for the superiority of a mythical standardized Hindu religious heritage (Nanda 2009). From marriage and menstrual pollution to urban religious festivals and community-building, this dissertation highlights how rituals are simultaneously being reinvented and reinforced as symbols of “authentic” Hindu identity in contemporary south India via an exploration of personal experiences of social change, events key to understanding and appreciating social phenomena and cultural diversity.

**Defining Ritual**

Historically, ritual has been central to a plethora of theoretical discussions in both anthropology and sociology. Early discussions of ritual often denoted its religious nature (e.g., Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown), while broader and more recent understandings of the
topic (i.e., Max Gluckman) posit that ritual practice is “a more embracing category of social action, with religious activities at one extreme and social etiquette at the other” (Bell 1997:39). In her comprehensive review of theories relating to ritual, Catherine Bell remarks that Gluckman's view of ritual not only broadened what constituted ritual, but also redefined it as a mode through which social relationships and networks could be constantly reformulated (Bell 1997:39). It is this perspective on ritual that I emphasize throughout this discussion of middle-class life and identity in urban south India. Not only do life histories provide a mode through which to understand social networks and change (Buechler and Buechler 1981, 1996 [see Chapter Two]), but explorations of ritual also highlight the dynamism and renewal of social relationships within a community (Turner 1974).

In considering the role of ritual in the (re)formation of middle-class identities and communities amongst the women of the SMVS group, it will become evident that particular rituals, while earlier indicating a certain caste affiliation (e.g., recitation of Sanskrit verse) have now come to signify class identities as well. The public practicing of particular rituals by this group of middle-class women of multiple castes is therefore an assertion of status that relies on previously defined social distinctions (e.g., caste and gender), but then reinterprets these divisions according to local notions of modern, urban life. As I note throughout the dissertation, ritual practice is constantly being redefined by the SMVS women in relation to the intricate and daily balance between tradition and modernity that is so emblematic of middle-class existence in today's India (Arabindoo 2012, Gilbertson 2014a).
Central to this dissertation is the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang (SMVS) group consisting of about thirteen stable members\(^3\) who identify with a variety of castes, but a common middle-class Hindu worldview. Below, I introduce the group and provide some basic information concerning membership and activities. The SMVS women's words and actions are then featured in the subsequent chapters, with a final chapter devoted to a more in-depth exploration of the group as a new type of ritual in itself.

The SMVS group was formed by Uma Sankaran (Uma Amma) in the year 2000. However, the group only became solidified after Uma Amma’s husband became ill and temple classes, previously held in two locations, were reduced to one class held in the guru’s home. Initially, Uma’s husband was quite involved in the running of the group, including instruction in Sanskrit recitation and devotional singing. As his health gradually declined, Uma Amma took on increasing responsibility. She understood her knowledge to be a amalgamation of her husband’s religious knowledge and that of her own Brahmin female guru, a woman who had established her own SMVS-type group when Uma Amma was a newly-married housewife living in urban Madurai. The group to which Uma Amma once belonged was different in that all of its members were of the Brahmin caste and they hardly ever engaged in temple tours or public singing performances. When Uma Amma spoke of her membership in this group, she often noted its singular caste composition and argued that the SMVS group was meant to be more socially inclusive. While this was not

\(^3\) Pseudonyms have been used for some group members in order to protect their identity.
necessarily the case with respect to the class status of group members, Uma Amma did succeed in creating a group that consisted of women from multiple castes.

**Group Membership**

Membership in the SMVS group is open and often facilitated by an initial interaction between an interested woman and a current SMVS group member. In addition to being accessible to a variety of castes, the group is also open to women of a variety of other social standings including those relating to marital status, an aspect that often influences a woman’s ritual status in India.4 In her study of *cumaṅkalikal*, or auspicious married women, Holly Baker Reynolds (1980) presents this cultural hierarchy of female status within Tamil society. At the top sits the *cumaṅkalikal*, “benevolent and most auspicious” women; at the bottom remain the widows (*viṭuvaikaḷ*), whom Reynolds was told are “the most inauspicious of all inauspicious things” (Reynolds 1980:36).5 Here, a primary difference between these women is their marital status, exemplifying that cultural conceptions of Tamil women’s social positions are often (but not always) dependent on the presence of a husband.

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4 For example, in the predominantly Brahmin cultural practice of “*cumaṅkali pratttanai*,” *cumaṅkalikal* play more significant ritual roles in comparison to women who are not married or have been widowed. During the former, a girl who is to be married is bathed and presented with gifts by the other *cumaṅkalikal* in her family. This is done to ensure the bride-to-be’s status as a *cumaṅkali* until the end of her days, implying that the desired scenario is one in which the *cumaṅkali* dies before her husband. If one dies a *cumaṅkali*, she will be worshipped on a particular day devoted to *cumaṅkalikal* among Brahmins and a meal will be served to another *cumaṅkali* in honor of the deceased *cumaṅkali*. Through this practice, the good fortune of the deceased *cumaṅkali* is said to transfer to the current *cumaṅkali*, so that she may die before her husband and avoid the inauspiciousness of being a Tamil widow.

5 Many argue that Tamil Brahmin widows lead even more depressing lives after the death of their husbands, as Brahmins have long maintained a caste restriction against widow remarriage, something that many other castes allow (Kapadia 1995). The negotiations of the inauspiciousness attached to the widows of the SMVS group are discussed in further detail in Chapter Seven.
Both the group’s guru\(^6\) and two regular members of the group, Teacher and Rani, were widows. Occasionally, the event of becoming a widow was discussed as motivation for group membership, not rejection from it as scholars of South Asia might expect (Reynolds 1980, Donner 2008). Teacher recalled her entry into the SMVS group after the death of her husband. She identified a Brahmin neighbor as the person who recommended the SMVS group,

So then I joined Uma Amma’s group for spirituality (ānmikam). Because I would just sit in my house and cry before this...he died...we lost our house...I would cry. So then I saw a māmi and I was crying like this and she encouraged me to join another māmi (Uma Amma) and said, “You need to change your mind (manacu). You need to get rid of the worry.” And then she took me with her.

So then I came to spirituality and my mind changed a little bit. Little by little my worry changed and daily I went to class.* From singing my mind (manacu) was better. For 2 to 3 hours I could get peace (amaiti). If I didn’t have that, craziness/madness would catch me. I really suffered in my life pal.\(^7\)

While marital status was never overtly discussed as a condition for membership, caste identity, on the other hand, was occasionally presented by group members other than the guru as important for SMVS group access. For instance, some non-Brahmin members of the SMVS group mentioned their initial suspicions that group membership was reserved for Brahmin women only. Jayanthi, a non-Brahmin and one of the most active members of the group, described her first interactions in the group this way,

Before, the group Brahmin māmis\(^8\) sat separately in the SMV temple and we sat behind them. It just happened that way. We also strategically sat behind

\(^{6}\)The group’s guru, Uma Amma, had recently become a widow when I returned to Madurai for the dissertation research; this provided interesting insight into death pollution restrictions according to caste as they existed in the context of this middle-class group. See discussion in Chapter Seven.

\(^{7}\)“Pa” in Tamil is used as an affectionate reference to a person younger than yourself.

\(^{8}\)“Māmi” is a suffix often used to identify Brahmin women (specifically women who are married or have been married). Brahmin women will use the designation between themselves, but women of lower castes will also often use the term when speaking about a particular Brahmin woman. Perhaps due to their affiliation with an obvious Hindu religious group, some lower caste women in the SMVS group were also referred to as “māmi” by unknown women in the...
Brahmin *māmis* because we didn’t know the words to lots of songs. Uma Amma said, “everyone should sing! If you make a mistake, it doesn’t matter. I will correct you.” They (Brahmins) could pick up things faster. They (Brahmins) would say, “okay. I’m ready for the next one” and the non-Brahmins wouldn’t be ready to move on. Uma Amma encouraged us to mingle* (Brahmins with non-Brahmins).

At first we (non-Brahmins) thought it (proficiency in recitation) wouldn’t come to us so we didn’t try the lessons, but there was interest. Then Uma Amma just kept telling us to sing. Before this I didn’t have interest in a group, I would just go to the temple and take my mother’s songbook with me. The only ones we would say were the ones on the cassette (e.g., *Caṣṭi Kavacam*). If it was in the book we would sing it. I would hear songs on cassettes, but I didn’t know there were teachers to teach it to me. Uma Amma encouraged me.

Indeed, Uma Amma was active in dispelling Jayanthi’s preconceived idea of the group as circumscribed according to caste and as Jayanthi notes, urged them to mingle.* As Jayanthi also indicates, her initial reluctance to participate in group activities was due to her self-perceived inferiority with respect to religious knowledge. Her mention of the *Caṣṭi Kavacam*, a hymn written in the praise of the god Murukan (Skanda), provides a productive avenue through which to explore how religious knowledge, caste and class converge in local suburban temples of Madurai, as well as possibly wider Hindu devotee communities in Tamilnadu and greater India.

The *Caṣṭi Kavacam* explicitly focuses on the Hindu god Murukan, understood as a local Tamil god by many in the region and considered a deity that is accessible to all Hindus, low caste and high caste, urban and rural. While more Sanskritic deities such as Siva and Vishnu are often revered via the recitation of *culōkanaka* (and not often in rural villages in these forms), on days devoted to Murukan and his ritual anointing (usually twice

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*culōkaṅkaḷ* is the Tamil plural form of *culōkam*, or *sloka* in Sanskrit. *Culōkaṅkaḷ* are “verses that praise a deity” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:244).
per month), a Tamil song is sung as the main mode of praise. Widespread accessibility to this song as a form of Murukan worship is apparent in the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple, as even the lowest caste (and often also class) of devotees, many of them daily migrants from surrounding villages, know the song by heart and sing along with the blaring cassette recording played by the temple on this auspicious day. These same devotees, however, are often silent during rituals for Siva, such as Piratōṣam,¹⁰ as they are less familiar with the practices for this event, as well as the Sanskrit recitations that often accompany them. The memorization of the Caṣṭi Kavacam by lower castes and rural devotees, then, points to a social divide which is rooted in access to education and its effect on modes of Hindu worship. Due to the memorization of the Caṣṭi Kavacam by these devotees, they are able to participate in worship held in a middle-class urban temple. Unlike those lower caste and rural (often lower class) devotees, other middle-class devotees who attended the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple for rituals, such as Caṣṭi¹¹ and Piratōṣam, while also not necessarily familiar with the Sanskrit language, had the ability to read and attempt to pronounce the culōkaṇkaḷ recited as a method of devotion.

During my time in Madurai, many prospective members approached Uma Amma after performances or pujas at the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple. However, many of these women did not end up joining the SMVS group. It later became apparent to me that some of these non-members, while extremely religious and active in local temple activities, did not see themselves as prime candidates for group membership because of their lower socioeconomic class, not caste as was expressed in Jayanthi’s comments above. I

¹⁰ Piratōṣam is an elongated ritual anointing (apiṣēkam) of and puja to the god Siva that is celebrated every fifteen days in urban temples.

¹¹ Caṣṭi is a bi-monthly extended ritual anointing (apiṣēkam) of the god Murukan (Skanda).
questioned one non-Brahmin, but higher caste woman with whom I had become close during my time in the SMV temple about her reluctance to join the SMVS group. She noted that she lived in a small, rented apartment and did not have the financial means to participate in the group’s activities.

In addition to formal group membership, there were some women who only participated when they had spare time. Lakshmi Māmi was one of these women. Initially, she had been a formal member of the SMVS group, but had recently taken on the responsibility of caring for her grandchildren during the week. Due to these added responsibilities, Lakshmi Māmi was not able to fully participate as a member of the group and was not invited to wear a uniform sari. That being said, she remained closely connected to the SMVS group because her father-in-law was the primary trustee of the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple. As a result, it was necessary to maintain a strong connection with Lakshmi Māmi so that the group members could have certain temple privileges during festivals, etc.

**Classes and Activities**

Not only did the SMVS women participate in the local temple festivals and celebrations, but they also attended two-hour instructional classes at least two times per week in Uma.

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12 Although her formal name was not Lakshmi Māmi, she was known by this moniker around the neighborhood. “Māmi” here denotes Lakshmi’s caste identity as Brahmin.

13 Indeed, Lakshmi Māmi looked after her grandchildren because her daughter-in-law was also a working member of the household, something that was not always the case in middle-class households in Krishnapuram Colony (see also Chapter Four). Although their house was very modest, I believe that many in the community would have classified Lakshmi Mami’s family as upper middle class due to their possession of amenities, the occupations of household members (e.g., Lakshmi Mami’s son was a well-known doctor in the area) and their ability to eat out at more formal establishments. While this is certainly not always the case, upper middle-class status in Madurai occasionally implies slightly more freedom to women with respect to education, work, and dress. In addition, I would argue that Lakshmi Mami’s family, while living in a middle-class neighborhood, could have easily moved to an upper middle-class area but did not because of her husband’s affiliation with the local Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple (see below).
Amma’s home, requiring significant time commitments by the group members. The classes were predominately structured around the copying of devotional songs into individual songbooks and later practicing these songs in order to be familiar with the ‘correct’ rāgam, or musical beat, during public singing performances in temples and natal village settings. The group’s particular affiliation with Vināyagar was consistently emphasized, as they began all classes and performances with a stuti (blessing) calling upon Maṅgala Vināyagar,

Your holy image is full of competence in my finishing of actions without obstruction. I praise with belief your golden standing image. Now come auspicious Ganesh. You protect me.

While in many cases classes were reserved for the learning of songs in Tamil, during some classes Uma Amma would also familiarize the group members with particular Sanskrit culōkaṅkaḷ to be recited at functions held at the SMV temple. This instruction in Sanskrit pronunciation, Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) argue, is a political act. In their

\[14 \text{“Rāgam” literally means “variety; kind; strain; sort; or class” (Ramakrishnan 2008:1178). Knowledge of the rāgams and their associations with specific religious songs is highly valued among the SMVS group women, as well as other Satsang groups. ‘Correct’ is placed in quotation marks to denote it as a subjective description. Other group gurus with whom I spent time (and for whom I recited Sanskrit) sometimes argued that I had learned the wrong rāgam and attempted to correct me. There was also an incident during an SMVS group weekly class in which women used a different rāgam in recitation than that desired by Uma Amma. They argued that they knew this rāgam as correct based on the majority of people who recited the same verses in the local temple during event such as Piratōṣam.}\]
description of a women’s *culōkam* class in Chennai, they maintain that this instruction in Sanskrit is “not just a pious initiative to teach women sacred verses” but that “it is also an active assertion...that the deities should be praised in Sanskrit” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:198). Following the work of Meera Nanda (2009), I see this emphasis on Sanskrit as a possible function of what she calls “soft Hindutva” (“soft Hindu-ness”), in which people, “using the language of universalism, tolerance, good health, and peace...very clearly propagate a world view of India as a Hindu nation, Hinduism as a superior religion, and the need to make India (indeed the whole world) more Hindu” (Nanda 2009:99). In this scenario, while not overtly a member of the Hindu Right, a person may underscore the Hindu nationalist rhetoric of superiority via their complacency and practicing of “banal, everyday Hinduism” (Nanda 2009:140), displaying a general acceptance of a growing Hindu nationalist sentiment. While the growth and underlying influence of “soft Hindutva” could certainly be impacting the SMVS women's conceptions of proper worship, including the privileging of Sanskrit, I also argue that Tamil plays a central role in their visions of proper devotion. In other words, while I agree that Sanskrit is privileged and revered (as evidenced in some non-Brahmin group members’ enrollment in Sanskrit courses), the Tamil language is readily featured in the SMVS women’s devotional practices. This is perhaps due to a more pragmatic choice made by Uma Amma since the majority of the SMVS group’s members are affiliated with non-Brahmin castes and have little background in even hearing Sanskrit. It may also reflect the significance of Tamilnadu’s own nationalist political rhetoric, which has historically favored non-Brahmin (read: true Tamil, Dravidian) modes of Hindu worship (see below).
As alluded to above, the instructional classes of the SMVS group are not something invented by Uma Amma. During an extended visit with Latha’s mother in an area of Chennai known as Madipakkam,\(^{15}\) I documented the existence of and activities held during instructional classes of other middle-class Hindu women’s groups. One group, led by a Brahmin female guru called Laksmi Māmi, was the group with which Latha’s mother was associated. Similar to the SMVS group, this group was also known for performing at nearby temples and was occasionally called to people’s homes to recite Sanskrit texts such as the Nārāyaṇīyam\(^{16}\) or the Devī Māhātmyam.\(^{17}\) According to Latha’s mother, as well as my own behavioral observations (i.e., demeanor, speech), all members of this group seemed to be of the Brahmin caste.\(^{18}\) This was also the case with yet another Hindu women’s group I encountered through Latha’s sister-in-law, who had been born into a priestly subsect of the Brahmin caste and considered herself to be ultra-orthodox. This group was also led by a Brahmin female guru and again, speech and demeanor indicated their Brahmin caste identities. While I was not able to overtly ask the members of both of these groups about their socioeconomic class identification, it appeared to me that, in both instances, the majority of members were of the Tamil middle class.

\(^{15}\) Once considered a village at the outskirts of Chennai, Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) have noted Madipakkam as a location that has a predominantly Brahmin population.

\(^{16}\) A hymn written by a Keralan poet in praise of the Hindu deity Krishna (Padmanahan 1987).

\(^{17}\) The Devī Māhātmyam is a Hindu religious text that was written in Sanskrit sometime around the sixth century AD and “tells of the Goddess’s various mythological exploits” (Kinsley 1978:489). This text is described in more detail in Chapter Six.

\(^{18}\) For example, Tamil Brahmins often replace the “a” sound in a command with an “o” sound. The Tamil word for “come” is then said as “vānka” in Brahmin dialect as opposed to “vānka.” As mentioned above, Tamil Brahmin women are also often referred to as “māmi” by both their non-Brahmin and Brahmin peers and this was the case within these groups.
This thread of middle classness could also be observed in a more local Hindu bhajan\textsuperscript{19} group in Madurai. Within walking distance of Krishnapuram Colony was a rather average-looking middle-class house. On one specific day of the month (called Thiruvōnam for the star that appears on this day), a group of Hindu devotees (mostly, but not all women) would meet to recite the Vishnu Sahāstranāmam\textsuperscript{20} and sing a few songs. Again, I was not able to openly question each member of the group about their caste affiliation. However, I do know that the only two members of the SMVS group who also attended this monthly event were Brahmin. In fact, Latha never asked her close non-Brahmin friend in the SMVS group, Jeyalakshmi, to join her even though it was known that she had little else to do at that hour and lived in a house on the way to the meeting. When on one occasion I suggested that we invite another non-Brahmin group member whom we encountered on our way to the meeting, Latha quickly brushed over my invitation. She hurriedly told the woman that we were simply going to the temple and that I did not understand what I was

\textsuperscript{19} According to the Cre-A Tamil Dictionary, a bhajan is a “choral rendering of devotional songs” (Ramakrishnan 2008:927).

\textsuperscript{20} The Vishnu Sahāstranāmam is the recitation of the 1008 names of the god Vishnu.
talking about. In this instance, there appeared to be a more overt element of exclusivity afforded by caste with respect to the meeting and its members.

The descriptions of these groups corresponds with Fuller and Narasimhan’s (2014) findings concerning urban bhajan groups and culōkam classes in the city of Chennai, which they claim are particularly popular amongst Tamil Brahmin women. In particular, Fuller and Narasimhan comment on one culōkam class which is very similar to the SMVS group in that it is led by a Brahmin woman and has around thirty members, some affiliated with a non-Brahmin caste and all considered middle class. Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) state that the leader of the culōkam class attributes the importance of these classes to the threat of “Western influence” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:197), which seems to endanger their cultural practices. Many of this group’s members have stated that their membership is due in part to the “feeling that Brahmans are losing interest in their own traditions” and that “some non-Brahmans, by contrast, are actually becoming more interested” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:198). Reasons for joining the SMVS group do not seem to be this clear cut, and while this sentiment might be felt by group members, it is important to remember that the SMVS group, although led by a Brahmin, was predominantly non-Brahmin in caste composition.

A Middle-Class Lifestyle
The SMVS group members and their families live and perform their urban existence in two separate middle-class suburban areas located on either side of a main suburban road in Madurai. The Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Kōvil (The Auspicious Ganesh Temple), with which the group is most affiliated, is located in Viswanathapuram, just outside of Krishnapuram
Colony. Along with the guru, Uma Amma, several of the more involved SMVS group members live in Krishnapuram Colony. The area was previously called Bank Employees Colony, at which time it was identified as a Brahmin neighborhood. Today, the neighborhood is multi-caste, but most of the residents are of high to middle caste (for an in-depth discussion of caste, see below). Further, Krishnapuram Colony has rapidly developed since my first visit in 2006. Many new three-story complexes have been built in previously empty and overgrown lots (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4).

The rest of the women in the SMVS group reside in LIC (Life Insurance Company of India) Colony, denoting that the area at least previously housed residents who worked for the Life Insurance Company of India. The women in LIC Colony originally met Uma Amma when she visited another Vināyagar temple in this area, Šakti Vināyagar Kōvil (Powerful Ganesh Temple). Before Uma Amma’s husband became bedridden, she would split her time

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21 Fernandes (2000) and Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) have noted the occupational connection between upper castes and bank management as well.
teaching *culokaŋkal* and songs to groups in both the Śakti Vināyagar Temple and the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple. However, when her husband fell ill, she began holding classes in her home and occasional functions at the closer SMV temple (see above).

In contrast to Krishnapuram Colony, LIC Colony maintains a very strong association with Brahminism and up until recently, trustees of the Śakti Vināyagar Temple were required to be of the Brahmin caste. While the neighborhood around the temple is multi-caste, Brahmins continue to hold prominent places in the local neighborhood council (*nalasaṅkam*). Nevertheless, all of the members of the SMVS group who reside in LIC Colony today are non-Brahmin and are of predominantly lower castes (mostly Thevars and Nadars).

With respect to class, Krishnapuram Colony and LIC Colony are on relatively equal footing. In both areas, some roads remain unpaved and often the sewage drainage is open; however, residents in both areas identify their residential locales as middle-class neighborhoods. On the Krishnapuram Colony side, there is a Methodist Church, as well as a recently built mosque. During my time in Krishnapuram Colony, I was never witness to any communal altercations. While there was a concern when the Babri Masjid verdict was announced in September 2010, communal skirmishes did not take place. Due to my residence in Krishnapuram Colony, I remained less familiar with the religious make-up of LIC Colony, as well as the incidence of crime; however, for me personally, I felt less safe there in the evening hours.
Most homes in Krishnapuram Colony and LIC Colony consist of two or three bedrooms, with one of the smaller rooms usually assigned as a puja room²² and dedicated to religious worship. Each house also has a main hall (living area) and a separate kitchen. All houses have indoor latrines (usually one or two, the second often a “western style” toilet to which guests are directed) and bathing facilities equipped with a water heater. Due to the daily scarcity of continuous electricity, most middle-class houses in these neighborhoods own at least one “UPS” (Uninterruptible Power Supply), or battery of the size that can run one ceiling fan, one TV, and a few outlets for approximately two hours. All houses have filtered water available – some have a bottled water service that delivers to the house weekly, others have miniature filters attached to their kitchen faucets.

While an agreed-upon sign of middle classness in the area is ownership of a house, some group members rent their homes in the above-mentioned neighborhoods. At the time of the research, rent in these colonies was approximately Rs. 3,000 per month. Whether rented or owned, all houses come with a built-in “display case” which holds trinkets and gifts (e.g., stuffed animals, porcelain statues, and occasionally, objects bought overseas by relatives). Glass dinnerware and family photos are also common objects displayed, the former being a sign of class status and only used when serving guests, particularly American students.

²² Others have noted that the dedication of an entire room to ritual (puja) practices is somewhat unusual in Tamilnadu; however, in my experiences with the SMVS women, this was a rather common practice.
Group members living in the two colonies bought their own uniform saris (~Rs. 400-500); paid for multiple pujas and arccanaika\textsuperscript{23} to be carried out in their names during festivals (~Rs. 300 annually); donated money to temples where they had been invited to perform, as well as after receiving dar\textsuperscript{24}san; financed the preparation of pirac\textsuperscript{25}atam for the entire local neighborhood temple (~Rs. 200 annually); contributed approximately Rs. 50 – Rs. 100 to a fund for purchasing wedding gifts for group members’ children; and purchased their own tickets for travel to temples and other events within the state of Tamilnadu (ranging from Rs. 10-Rs. 2000). In short, membership in the SMVS group was a rather costly affair in terms of both time and money (totaling approximately Rs. 4,000 annually).

This kind of time and money is hardly available to the lower socio-economic classes of Madurai. Members of lower classes, which often overlap with lower castes, work throughout the day, often doing physical labor and making a meager amount in comparison to the white-collar middle-class workers who spend their day in an air-conditioned office.

\textsuperscript{23} Arccanaika are a form of ritual worship consisting of the recitation of either the 108 or 1008 names of a god or goddess and the simultaneous counting and/or throwing of objects (flowers, pinches of vermillion powder) as gifts.

\textsuperscript{24} Dar\textsuperscript{san} is a visual, spiritual connection with a deity (Eck 1985:3).

\textsuperscript{25} Pirac\textsuperscript{atam} is the term for a food offering (naiv\textsuperscript{e}danam/naiv\textsuperscript{e}diyam) after it has been blessed by a deity during the puja.
Hence, with respect to the upward mobility afforded to the women of the SMVS group and its association with middle-class status-building, these women can be understood to embody middle-class status characteristics.

While specific middle-class status markers are hotly debated in academic circles (see below) and are perhaps not as helpful in studying the middle class in a dynamic global social milieu, the SMVS group women are all able to afford luxuries that they locate as middle-class and modern in nature. For example, they are able to comfortably manage the extra expenses incurred by their group membership, higher education costs for their children, television sets, motorbikes, and, occasionally, computers, digital cameras, and domestic servants. In contrast to the women of lower classes who must participate in the work force (most often manual or wage-work) in order to feed their families, the SMVS group women are able to devote vast amounts of time to the group and altruistic community activities such as reading to the blind and teaching children at orphanages. This indicates that the SMVS women’s household incomes (predominantly earned by their husbands) are sufficient in financing and maintaining a “middle-class” lifestyle.

The SMVS women’s lifestyles also correlate with a widespread tension that exists amongst India’s middle classes, particularly when considering the role of middle-class Indian women. This tension follows from the stereotypical social positioning of women in India as repositories of tradition (Chatterjee 1992) whose femininity relies on their knowledge and performance of proper “Indianness” (Gilbertson 2014a). It situates the

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26 The SMVS women note this as a reason why certain women that only attend some group community functions are not part of the group. There are also women who attend other community temple groups (see above) and functions and also work. These women are demarcated by the SMVS women as different from the women in lower classes, as they hold educational qualifications for working in white-collar jobs and do not work out of necessity, but boredom.

27 Dickey (2000) also notes that the upper and middle-class employers of domestic servants in Madurai participate in “charitable, social service, and religious work” (Dickey 2000:469).

28 See Appendix A for information about the occupations of the SMVS group women’s husbands and children.
formation of middle-class identities in India around the actions and inactions of gendered bodies that are required to delicately balance both traditional Indian culture and acceptable forms of modern life. Although not specific to India, the placement of middle-class Indian women in this social milieu highlights the necessity of investigating middle-class Indian women’s everyday lives and actions, for they are central to middle-class identity construction and performance. One example of how the middle-class SMVS women navigate notions of tradition and modernity is exemplified in their public performances of Hindu ritual and song on what they call tours.*29 On these the tours,* the multi-caste SMVS women perform in the public sphere, a location in which, historically, the movement of respectable Indian women (mainly higher caste women) has been limited (Ramabai Sarasvati 1887, Donner 2008, Gilbertson 2014a).30 However, while in these quite newly-explored public locations and scenarios, the SMVS women have chosen to perform and associate themselves with what most would agree to be orthodox (read: Brahmin) Hindu practice (e.g., the recitation of Sanskrit). Here, we see a relationship between ritual modification/reinvention and a tendency towards ritual standardization as exemplified by orthodox Hinduism. The SMVS women are occupying new public spaces, but at the same time privileging and aspiring to a specific and idealized repertoire of Hindu worship; once again, perhaps inspired by “soft Hindutva.”

This specific repertoire of Hindu worship, as with many other things in Indian society, cannot be separated from the socio-cultural frameworks of caste and socioeconomic class affiliation. As this dissertation will show, the women of the SMVS

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29 As primary activities of the SMVS group women, these tours* will be discussed in some detail in Chapter Seven, a chapter devoted to understanding the SMVS group as a new modern form of ritual in itself.
30 This adjustment in women’s public movements may also be a function of the reduction in gender inequality amongst higher castes in modern south India (see Fuller and Narasimhan 2014) and coincides with Donner’s findings that “what constitutes...women’s engagement with public space [is] continually renegotiated” (Donner 2008:14).
group identify much of their ritual practice, as well as middle-class behavior, with Brahmin culture. Below I address these pertinent social categories in more detail.

**Caste in Modern India**

Contrary to many westerners’ beliefs, caste remains a significant identity category throughout India. However, the term “caste” is not a local word for this element of social organization, as it is a derivative of Portuguese word (Chamba 2011). In India, while the most recent politically correct term for caste is “community,” most often used is the word, “jati.” “Jati means 'birth group’ or broadly, ‘genus.’” (Mines 2009:1). In Hinduism, jatis are the smallest units of a much wider socio-cosmological structure which relies on the concept of a primordial man called Purusha. In Hindu texts, Purusha is divided into four sections, called varnas, in which jatis are hierarchically arranged (Mines 2009:29). The four varnas correspond with particular portions of Purusha’s body, some of which are considered more ritually pure. For example, Purusha’s head is the location of the Brahmin varna and his feet are the location of the Shudra varna. In India, the top of one’s head is considered the most ritually pure, while one’s feet are quite impure. In relation to Purusha’s body, the commonly-known “untouchables” or Dalits, are located below the feet. This, then, makes them the most ritually impure of all the jatis in this classificatory scheme.

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31 In the early stages of writing, I was reluctant to acknowledge the importance of caste in the lives and social interactions of the SMVS group women, as I felt that making it an important theme in my research would reify caste categories and automatically make the caste system central to my interlocutors’ lives when noting my interpretations of my experiences. However, caste was a far more relevant topic of conversation than I had originally hypothesized and was an aspect that I could not ignore. In short, I came to recognize the enormous influence of caste identity and culture on the performance of Hindu women’s rituals among the middle classes in south India. While my interlocutors performed certain rituals with elements of middle-class similarity, they were also quick to highlight the influence of particular caste cultures, however static in their perceptions, on these performances.

32 Jati divisions are not restricted to the Hindu religion (Mines 2009); however, for the purposes of this dissertation, I will only address how the caste system operates among Hindus.

33 This is why, in Indian culture, one should not point their feet at another individual, as it is considered quite demeaning.
Varnas, as well as jatis, have traditionally been associated with particular occupations. In this framework, the ritual purity of one’s occupation directly corresponds to the ritual purity of one’s jati. For example, people in India who work with ritually polluting items such as animal carcasses belong to a “low” jati. People who hold positions as priests and praise God with holy recitations must necessarily be more ritually pure and hence, of a higher jati. Although not completely absent from society, these parallels between one’s jati and one’s occupation are much less salient in today’s India.

This change is predominantly resultant of a classificatory system put into place by federal and state government institutions that essentially ranks jatis in order to hinder discrimination in places of employment, education and worship. This caste classification framework divides castes into a variety of categories including: Forward Castes/Classes, Backward Castes/Classes (BCs), Other Backward Castes/Classes (OBCs), Most Backward Castes/Classes (MBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). According to one’s jati, they are allotted certain benefits according to how “backward” their jati, or caste, is socially considered. Forward Castes/Classes would include the communities that are thought to be higher ranking within a caste-based model of society. So, for example, most Brahmins and Chettiyars in Tamilnadu would be considered Forward Castes/Classes. At the other end of the spectrum are the indigenous tribes of India (STs) and those previously described as “untouchable” (SCs).

With respect to the caste divisions and the reservation system, the state in which the SMVS women reside, Tamilnadu, has a rather unique history.
Tamīlnadu is a southern state with a population of 62,405,679 (http://www.tn.gov.in/2010). Residents speak Tamil, one of the five south Indian Dravidian languages. The Dravidian linguistic group is often associated with a specific Dravidian culture, one which has historically encouraged cross-cousin or mother’s brother marriage patterns and has politically been associated with anti-Hindi and anti-Brahmin rhetoric. Indeed, hardline Dravidian nationalists are known for proclaiming that Dravidian India was gradually influenced by alien Vedic Aryans who introduced the foreign caste system (Ramaswamy 1997, 1998; Kolenda 2003, Pandian 2007). In the 1970s, these arguments gained significant popularity, causing the ruling Tamil political party at the time, the Drāvida Munnētra Kaḷakam (DMK), to pass legislation “to abolish the hereditary priesthood” assumed by certain sects of Tamil Brahmins (Fuller 2003:155).

Owing to its political history, Tamīlnadu is the Indian state with the highest allotment of reservations for lower castes with respect to employment and educational opportunities. It has also maintained the process of reservation for the longest period of time when compared to other states. In 2006, reservations for people who were regarded as BC, SC, ST, and MBC were reported to be 69 percent of all available educational institution and job slots (http://in.rediff.com/news/2006/may/30spec.htm). This reservation policy has been in existence since 1921 and exceeds the established all-India reservation limit of 50 percent (Khandekar and Shah 2007). However, educational and employment reservations not only encourage a level playing field for lower castes and “outcastes,” they also encourage a reification of caste identity and culture (Rao 2009), creating what politicians call “caste blocks,” and emboldening caste divisions as opposed to

34 The other four south Indian Dravidian languages are: Kannada, spoken in Karnataka; Malayalam, spoken in Kerala; Telugu, spoken in Andhra Pradesh; and Tulu, spoken in the southwest part of Karnataka and the northern part of Kerala.
erasing them. This reification is most likely behind some of the caste-specific cultural stereotypes articulated by the middle-class SMVS women, women who, we will see, often associate Brahmin cultural values and ritual practice with “sophisticated” modern identities (see, for example, Kapadia 1995). The example of the urban SMVS women then, takes the idea of caste beyond a simple and static sociological category (e.g. Dumont 1980) that attaches an “algorithmic identity” (Shandhidas 2012) to living, breathing, acting individuals, identifying it “as something emergent, which is regenerated through enactment” (Rao 2009:485, see also Srinivas 1952, Bayly 2001, Dirks 2001 and Mines 2005, 2009) and necessitating “a transactional view of reality” which “shifts our attention from structures to processes and actions, from how human beings are positioned to how they relate, enact, and remake their world” (emphasis in original, Mines 2009:33).

Central to the idea of caste hierarchy throughout the subcontinent are the concepts of ritual purity and pollution. In Tamilnadu, ritual pollution is often expressed through the concept of tīṭṭu. In addition to caste impurity, tīṭṭu also encompasses a variety of other ritual impurities, including those related to birth, death, and a woman’s menstruation. Caste tīṭṭu is considered a part of a person’s essence and is thought to be spread primarily through touch. That said, caste tīṭṭu is also passed through other means, such as sight. For instance, many lower caste people are prohibited from making eye contact with those of higher castes and in earlier times, they were also been forbidden from

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35 Kapadia (2002) goes so far as to argue that “caste hierarchy and caste divisions are much sharper in the south” (Kapadia 2002:144) compared to the north.

36 I acknowledge the much-criticized pervasiveness of strict structural notions of purity/pollution concepts in anthropology; however, I have found that ritual pollution is a prevalent component of both rural and urban life in Tamilnadu and is necessary in any discussion of ritual change in South Asia. Indeed, as will be shown in later chapters, restrictions of purity and pollution were often challenged among my interlocutors.

37 Although some have noted that ritual pollution is perhaps less significant in Tamilnadu in comparison to other parts of India (Ram 1994, Van Holle 2003), the concept seemed prevalent in suburban Madurai. While this might be attributed to my daily living experiences with a Brahmin family, it may also have to do with the SMVS group members’ desire to adhere to higher caste, Sanskritic Hindu directives (see Chapter Seven).
casting their own shadows on higher caste members. While caste tiṭṭu is considered more permanent, other kinds of tiṭṭu (due to menstruation, childbirth, or death of a family member) are temporarily attached to and indicate a level of inauspiciousness for a person during a particular time period, albeit a time period often determined according to caste status. For example, at the death of a Tamil Brahmin woman’s husband, the widow is instructed not to enter a Hindu temple and to refrain from prolonged contact with most people in her social circle for an entire year following the event. A non-Brahmin woman, having experienced the same event, must only heed these social restrictions for approximately six months.

Ritual purity in Tamilnadu is usually identified by the word, maṭi. The concept of “maṭi,” or “keeping maṭi” was most often discussed by Brahmans during my stay in Tamilnadu. Its refers to the concept of keeping a space pure (Ramakrishnan 2008:1063), due to the inherent ritual impurity of women and people of other castes. Keeping maṭi often consists of menstrual segregation, dressing in widow’s white, and if the family is strict, the positioning of women in interior rooms (among many other practices). Some geographical areas are also considered more ritually pure than others. While temples and other religious sites might be an obvious assumption, additional locations, such as the living environments of higher castes, particularly in rural areas, are also deemed less contaminated by inherent caste impurity (see Chapter Three). In order to maintain the ritual purity of these locales, lower (read: impure) castes have traditionally been.

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38 Discussions of ritual pollution and purity, especially as they relate to auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are widespread throughout anthropological literature (see, for example, Douglas 1966, Madan 1991, Nagarajan 2007).
39 In one experience of death during my research, the restriction of contact with the woman’s children (who had a shorter period of tiṭṭu), could be mediated if the woman visited all of her children within a two-week time period after her husband’s death. Having done this, she would be able to stay in the homes of her children without exposing those in her children’s household to a prolonged period of tiṭṭu.
prohibited from entering these areas. However, this issue of access based on caste, while not completely absent, is much less noticeable in both rural and urban locations in contemporary Tamilnadu.

In terms of specific caste make-up, the SMVS group includes primarily Forwards Castes/Classes, as well as BCs and OBCs. There are three Brahmans, one Saiva Pillai, one Chettiyar, one Viswakarma, three Mudaliyars, three Naidus, two Reddiyars, four Thevars, two Nadars, and no scheduled caste or scheduled tribe individuals. These caste divisions and affiliations are certainly relevant and influential in the lives of the SMVS women and residents of Tamilnadu more broadly. For instance, matchmaking and marriages continue to align with rules caste traditions, particularly in the case of Brahmans, and rules concerning caste endogamy as we will see in Chapter Four. Food and kitchens, both highly regulated by caste notions of ritual purity/pollution and the corporeal and gendered boundaries that these concepts reinforce, remain salient to daily life (see Chapter Two). Moreover, as was alluded to above and will be shown in several of the remaining chapters, caste status in urban India also correlates with socioeconomic class status and its performance. In many cases, Brahmin religious practices and the piety attached to them formulate a middle-class lifestyle ideal. This model of middle-class life in India is the subject of the following section.
Defining Middle-Class Identity in India

Scholars of the growing middle-class in India have argued that over the past few decades, the country has experienced a “bourgeois revolution” which has created an influx of middle-class desires, sensibilities, and identifications (Stern 2003[1993]:3). However, the practices signifying these desires and identifications remain a contested subject amongst scholars of South Asia. Still, most maintain that middle-class identity is not merely a function of economics, but is also culturally constructed (Fernandes 2000). A majority of studies indicate that a middle-class Indian family is not only classified as such according to their household income, but also by how they utilize that income to perpetuate certain values and a particular worldview. Subsequently, scholars have come to identify specific objective and categorical “markers” of middle-class identity that articulate both access to and consumption of particular goods (televisions, motorbikes, refrigerators and cellphones [Lakha 1999], domestic servants [Dickey 2000]) which constitute symbolic capital within a community, as well as cultural values (for example, valuation of higher education [Dickey 2000, Donner 2008, Gilbertson 2014a, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014], vegetarianism [Malhotra 2002, Donner 2008], “decency” and neatness in self-presentation [Dickey 2012, Gilbertson 2014a], democracy [Ahmad and Reifeld 2001], altruistic community service work [Waghorne 2004], guru-centered movements [Warrier 2003, 2005] and the current growing Hindu nationalist movement [Hancock 1995, Hansen 1999, Mankekar 1999, Fernandes 2000]).

There is a wide margin with respect to the actual number of “middle class” individuals estimated to live in India. Dickey (2012) comments that the number “varies” from 50 million to 350 million (roughly 5 percent to 35 percent of the population...” (Dickey 2012:567). Most likely, this large gap is a result of the multifarious modes of defining the middle class in India; for example, the use of objective categories and “markers” as opposed to the use of personal identifications and emic definitions of middle classness. See later discussion in this chapter.
Middle-Class Identity and Caste

Most literature pertaining to the formation of the Indian middle classes, or the “representatives of an increasingly globalized India” (Gilbertson 2014a), also addresses the changing relationships between caste and class status affiliations. These discussions usually begin with a distinction between what is known as the “old middle class” and the “new middle class” (Sheth 1999, Fernandes 2000). Scholars describe the “old middle class” as those upper caste individuals (mostly Brahmans) who had, under British colonial rule and immediately after independence, primary access to higher (read: English) education and better employment opportunities41 (Chatterjee 1992, Fernandes 2000, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). This access allowed these higher castes to obtain the income necessary to identify as middle class. The “new middle class” is characterized as a population that is increasingly lower in caste (but also includes those of higher caste communities) and has benefited from education and employment reservations discussed above, products of the Mandal Commission of the 1980s. These reservations, in combination with the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 (Saaval 2003, Nanda 2009), have allowed a “new” set of individuals to attain a middle-class status (Sheth 1999). The caste affiliations that have become politicized through the reservation system are interacting with India’s fast-paced economic growth and the subsequent formation of socio-economic class divisions, to create an environment where class associations often extend beyond caste boundaries. Some scholars take this argument further to suggest that class has now

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41 According to Fernandes (2000), these employment opportunities are associated with work in state banks and the Indian civil service. She compares this type of “old middle class” employment to that of the “new middle class” which is predominantly associated with multinational corporations (Fernandes 2000:92).
replaced caste in the hierarchical ordering of Indian society; however, based on the information gathered during my time in Madurai, this assertion is far too simplistic and the two are hardly mutually exclusive.

Middle-Class Identity and Sociality

Another argument revolving around the identification of the Indian middle classes is more psychologically driven. Varma (1998) has argued that the Indian middle classes are inspired by a sense of alienation felt in urban living environments. Sudhir Kakar (1984[1982]) adds to this statement that these negative effects of urban environments directly correlate to an increase in religious movements, especially those led by Indian gurus. He maintains that because the Indian middle classes feel they cannot control their new fast-paced living environments, they turn to cultural practices that provide a “much-needed social anchor, and a new group identity that can replace village or caste community” – an urban religious movement (Warrier 2003:225). This argument is in direct contrast with the work of van Wessel (2004) which asserts that because religiously's relationship with middle-class conspicuous consumption in India is perceived as tenuous and embedded in a broader global battle between morality and materialism, religious

\[\text{\textsuperscript{42} To consider caste and class affiliations as mutually exclusive is a reductionist and hence, problematic approach. I understand caste and class identifications and associations to be inherently more complex, as people are wont to identify with certain social groups at specific periods in time. However, we must also pay heed to emic associations between caste and class identities, as some middle-class Indians often conflate class and caste status (Gilbertson 2014a:128, see also the section on “Latha's friendships” in Chapter Seven). For elegant discussions of the complexity between caste and class identities in Tamilnadu see Kapadia 1995, Dickey 2000.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{43} While Kakar's (1984[1982]) work might be considered dated to some extent, it still articulates an ongoing academic dilemma as to how the personal sentiments of the urban middle classes in India should be interpreted when studying middle-class identity. Many of my interlocutors expressed a lack of closeness and friendship in urban environments (see Chapter Three), yet they were also members of the urban SMVS group, a group that they often contradictorily defined as a support network in which “everyone is there for each other.”}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{44} Both Varma (1998) and Kakar (1984[1982]) recall for many the influential work of Emile Durkheim (1893,1897) and his sociological theory of anomie that associates dissatisfaction, immorality, and depression with life in industrial societies. Indeed, many of my interlocutors expressed this very association when speaking about social change and comparing their lives in rural and urban settings (see Chapter Three).}\]
practice is often disregarded. In further contradistinction to Kakar’s (1984[1982]) assertions, Maya Warrier (2003), a scholar whose research focuses on a prominent Indian religious movement, argues that her middle-class interlocutors in the Mata Amritanandamayi (Ammachi) Mission, a guru-centered religious organization based in Kerala, did not express either a lack of control over their lives, or a feeling of alienation.

Middle-Class Identity and Gender

More recently, studies of the middle class have begun to explore how gender is implicated in middle-class identity formation (Donner 2008; Gilbertson 2014a, 2014b; Lahiri-Dutt and Sil 2014). One way in which the relationship between gender and class identity is presented relates to the cultural prescriptions of women’s behavior and responsibilities in Indian society. As noted above, Indian women are understood to be the primary keepers and upholders of “tradition” (Chatterjee 1992, Hancock 1999, Sreenivas 2008); however, on the one hand, they are also considered responsible for household and family status. In her study of fashion and respectability in Hyderabad, Amanda Gilbertson (2014a) argues that, in particular, middle-class Indian women are placed in a precarious cultural and social position in which they must intricately balance conceptions of tradition with status-increasing, but “acceptable” forms of modernity. These middle-class women’s social

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45 In my opinion, van Wessel (2004) places too much emphasis on the materialism of the middle classes, depicting them as remarkably superficial and avaricious. The danger in presenting the middle-class as defined by consumerism is that “it provides little understanding of the way [the middle classes] are remaking class relations” (Arabindoo 2012:814).

46 Interestingly, I was told during the research period that Ammachi is not a highly regarded guru in the eyes of many middle-class and upper/middle castes in Madurai. Instead, middle-class and upper/middle caste Hindus in Madurai tend to focus attention on gurus such as Shridi Sai Baba and Satya Sai Baba (Bharathy 2009). In a very rudimentary observation of Hindu saint picture displays, I found Ammachi’s photo to indeed be lacking in a majority of middle-class, upper/middle caste homes, homes in which people also expressed a lack of sociality and intimacy among neighbors. This difference amongst middle-class Hindu devotees is an interesting catalyst for further explorations of middle classness and religiosity in India.

47 This balancing act also occurs with respect to middle-class clothing styles (see Lukose 2009, Gilbertson 2014).
positions are contrasted with those of elite women in Hyderabad who Gilbertson’s interlocutors claim are “overly Westernized...[and] lack proper Indian family values” as well as “...a middle-class concern for the opinion of others” (Gilbertson 2014a:130,141).

The women of the SMVS group, as will be demonstrated throughout this dissertation, certainly experience this tension between maintaining what is perceived to be authentic Indian culture, possibly through an acquiescence to increasing Hindu nationalist rhetoric (see above discussion of “soft Hindutva”) and accepting modern goods and ideas in an effort to attain social mobility and socioeconomic symbols of status and “progress.” Indeed, their valuation of and dedication to Sanskritic (read: authentic) Hindu practices, in combination with their presence as women in public performance spaces and their desire to own particular luxuries or amenities is just one illustration of this fact. The tension between tradition and modernity is further elaborated upon below and throughout the successive discussions of Hindu women’s rituals and social change in this dissertation.

**Middle Classness as Process**

Following the work of Mark Liechty (2003) and Sara Dickey (2012), I argue for an approach to the SMVS group women’s middle classness as a process, and not a particular definable objective or categorization. Liechty (2003) contends that for the middle classes in Nepal, “class culture is always a work-in-progress, a perpetual social construction that is as fundamentally bound to the ‘concrete’ of economic resources as it is to the cultural practices of people who jointly negotiate their social identities” (2003:4). Similarly, in her

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48 Approaching the middle class as “a process” is also indicated in Waghorne’s argument concerning the gentrification of the goddess and her temples (see Waghorne 2001, 2004). Fernandes and Heller use a similar approach as they investigate “class in practice” (2006:495).
most recent Madurai-based work (2012), Dickey argues that studies of the middle class in Madurai should be approached as a process, in contrast to defining the middle class with objective categories and concrete standards. Dickey finds this most necessary in Madurai where, “many of those who claim middle-class identity in Madurai fall below the lower boundaries of objective definitions” (2012:561) and where “the only features that unite middle-class people...are their claim to the identity, the types of indicators they use to substantiate that identity, and the striking behavioral and attitudinal ramifications that attend it” (2012:562). Hence, with specific reference to Madurai (and perhaps other locations as well), the investigation of emic definitions is crucial for understanding middle-class lifestyles and the myriad modes (e.g., Hindu women’s rituals) in which this identity is performed. These local definitions and understandings of socioeconomic class and status are also key to broadening our conceptions of how socioeconomic classes are created, maintained, and modified.

With this in mind, I offer the SMVS group women’s emic definitions of middle classness as they were relayed to me by members of the SMVS group. In concert with Dickey’s (2012) findings discussed above, the women of the SMVS group in Madurai also seem to fall below more pan-Indian expectations of solid middle-class status. As we will see below, most of the SMVS women’s own cultural comparisons indicate that they see themselves as removed from a more secure upper middle-class lifestyle and instead as constantly striving to maintain and acquire indicators of middle-class status. Deuchar (2014) has argued that his lower middle-class interlocutors in Dehradun are considered

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49 However, some members of the SMVS group belong to traditionally successful business-oriented castes, such as Chettiyyars and some Nadars. These SMVS women might consider themselves, or be considered by others, as upper middle class.
“those that do not fit comfortably into the upper fractions of the middle classes or the working and lower classes” (Deuchar 2014:143). According to this model and the description of their lifestyles earlier in the chapter (e.g. owning homes with multiple rooms, refrigerators, water filters), we might place the SMVS women on the border of being lower middle class and average middle class in social status.

According to this model and the description of their lifestyles earlier in the chapter (e.g. owning homes with multiple rooms, refrigerators, water filters), we might place the SMVS women on the border of being lower middle class^50 and average middle class in social status.^51

From the onset, it is appears that the objective markers of middle-class identity that I have previously argued against are simply reinforced in these emic perspectives. However, in providing a variety of emic definitions of middle classness (whether locally perceived as static and circumscribed markers or otherwise) I mean to embolden my argument regarding the complex and diverse perceptions of being middle class in modern India. Based on their other axes of identity and the context in which their views were expressed (including their relationships with me, as a Westerner), my interlocutors presented middle classness using a multitude of social scenarios, personal experiences, and cultural comparisons. For instance, one SMVS group member, Shanti, determined middle-class status according to the size of a television and/or the ability to purchase certain goods. While she chose to highlight middle-class consumption patterns, others in her cohort identified alternative activities and sentiments in their descriptions of middle-class status. These differences in themselves are crucial to any understanding of becoming and being modern and middle class in urban south India and beyond.

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50 In my experiences with my interlocutors, it would not be common practice to distinguish oneself as “lower middle class,” as “lower” was perceived as negative. However, this was not the case with the label of “upper middle class,” in which “upper” denoted something positive.
51 Throughout this dissertation, I have expressed my concern over objective labels in the context of defining identity; however, some categorization is necessary when considering broader arguments presented in the conclusion.
Middle Classness According to the SMVS Group Members

Latha, the 47 year-old Brahmin woman whose words opened this chapter, emphasized a kind of moral and social obligation in her description of the middle class. She commented,

For the middle class they are always the ones to do all activities first. Whatever function* is happening, they are the first to arrive, be there. The upper class* won’t mingle* a lot. They are sophisticated.* So middle-class people only go to the temple, do social service,* they do everything.

Jayanthi, a housewife of the Nadar caste and Latha’s fellow group member,

identified the middle class by describing particular pressures and sentiments,

They have to save.* That only is the middle class.* Because for the middle class* you can’t know when or for what you will need money. This month [income] is here, but next month* you cannot say it will be here. You can get a Dīpāvali (Diwali)* bonus.* That is a savings. But for the festival when people buy things, we have to buy things. You can’t be without buying things...if you are in the middle* it is a little bit difficult.

In addition to the inherent financial instability of the middle classes expressed by Jayanthi, she also suggests the necessity of conspicuous consumption in middle-class identity performance. Jayanthi describes the pressure to be a consumer (especially during holidays like Dīpāvali) and how it is difficult to manage when one’s means of living is so volatile.

Shanti, another group member who lives near Jayanthi and Latha, also identified consumption as a key factor in performing middle-class identity and compared consumption patterns among the socioeconomic divisions in Madurai society. For her, the middle class was best described by comparing its members with high society peoples* and

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52 The English word “function” is often used in Tamilnadu to refer to an event such as a wedding or festival celebration.
53 Dīpāvali is a Hindu festival held in the Fall. It is also called the “festival of lights” and is said to signify the victory of good over evil. At the time of Dīpāvali, people buy themselves new clothing and set off fireworks. The origin of the holiday is linked to Sanskrit scripture.
54 Sara Dickey’s (2012) interlocutors in Madurai also used comparisons between the middle classes and upper/lower classes when defining middle classness.
low class peoples.* She commented on the difference between the middle class and high
class,

**Shanti:** In high society* they have big T.V.s,* right?
**Nicole:** yes...
**S:** middle-class people* have a small T.V.*
**N:** okay...
**S:** They also have a grinder*
**N:** mmm...
**S:** a bureau,* a cot...they put loans* and buy things...

Here, items like an electric grinder, for processing wheat, rice and other foods to make flour
and spice powders and a bureau, which usually serves as storage for clothing are items
that, in Shanti’s opinion, are commonplace in middle-class homes. She also highlights the
taking out of loans, which facilitates proper middle-class consumer habits. Shanti
continued her comparison of consumption patterns, creating social distinctions based on
the quantities of goods,

**N:** you said the lower class* can’t buy snacks.* Can middle class* [people] buy
them?
**S:** Ah! The middle class* can buy them. Middle-class*people ...compared to
high class*...can buy about half [the amount].
**N:** yes...
**S:** These days middle class* can buy [spend] well.
**N:** mmm
**S:** They will buy...all of the fruits*...
**N:** mmm
**S:** [Also] a lot of biscuits* and... chocolate*... they will buy [those kinds of]
items.* They will buy a lot.

The necessity of consumption (“buying”) among members of the middle class, as
overtly described by both Shanti and Jayanthi, is not only limited to the purchase of food or
items related to festivals, but also job opportunities. Shanti later commented that bribes

55 “mmm” is my transcription of my minimal response as my interlocutors spoke with me. It could be considered the
equivalent of “uh-huh” in English parlance.
are necessary for obtaining valued government jobs\textsuperscript{56} and the middle classes struggle to have “that level of money.”

**Modernity**

As was alluded to above, the seeming tension between tradition and modernity held a central place in the narratives of my interlocutors and, hence, my project. While in some scholarly work and lay discussion these terms evoke a classificatory system in which meanings are often conceived as static and imbued with generalizability, I take an alternative approach. As with the above discussions of middle-class identity, I argue that these terms must be approached with an emphasis on the dynamic lives of these notions in the world, as meaningful concepts and reference points in everyday interactions, as axes around which dialogic individual and community identity construction takes place. This is not to say that such terms do not carry with them some semblance of common, habitus-informed ideals, rather that there is also an active refashioning of self and social networks that transcends social structural rules and formations. These acts of re-making navigate a kind of “lived grammar” (Prasad 2007:134), crafting nuanced meanings for pervasive terms and actions observable in social practices. In this sense, this dissertation understands tradition and modernity, as well as meaning-making in general, as intricately connected to the actions of “people going through life agonizing over decisions, making

\textsuperscript{56} Although many scholars of the middle class have recently begun to downplay the importance of “government jobs” to India’s middle classes (see, for example, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014), I still found them to be highly valued amongst my lower middle class interlocutors (see, specifically, Chapter Four). This may be due to an observed difference between the behaviors of the upper middle classes and lower middle classes. For example, Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) argue that Tamilnadu’s upper middle classes are often wont to obtain jobs with multinational corporations, frequently in the IT industry. These types of jobs contrast with “government jobs” which include working for nationalized banks and other state-run offices like the electricity board (EB).
mistakes, trying to make themselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of happiness” (Abu-Lughod 1991:158).

**Why Do Emic Definitions of Modernity Matter?**

When we speak of modernity, the term often becomes inherently caught up in Western epistemological notions of progress and individualism. Here, the individual is necessarily pitted against a super structure that prevents “progress” and is called “tradition” (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006:14). Samira Haj comments on the Western conception of the “modern subject” in saying, “the...subject who inhabits [the] space of the modern is necessarily autonomous, self-constitutive, and [a] tradition-free individual” (Haj 2009:1). Haj goes on to argue that conceiving of modern subjects in this way is far from productive. She encourages an approach to the battle between tradition and modernity whereby a conceptualization of tradition is constituted by “discourses extended through time” and is understood “as a framework of inquiry rather than a set of unchanging doctrines or culturally specific mandates” (Haj 2009:4). Similar to Haj’s (2009) approach to tradition, Carol Gluck (2011) emphasizes a recognition of “embedded real modernities” and argues that the “creative blending” inherent in the production of these modernities “never reaches an end” (Gluck 2011:686).

It is only through a collection of emic explications of terms like tradition and modernity that we can understand the complexities of the so-called battle between and

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57 It is also what Carol Gluck has called a “temporally slippery concept” in that it is at once a label for “a chronological period that began several centuries ago,” as well as a term that carries “the sense of ever-changing up-to-dateness of the contemporary era” (Gluck 2011:678).

58 In his 2011 essay, Arjun Appadurai identifies the formation of two distinct Indian middle-class selves as a consequence of modernity and a foundation for angst-ridden social activism in the Indian public sphere. These selves, he argues, are at
the objectifications of these two concepts, as well as the motives for their continued use in discussions and confrontations across the globe. Indeed, social, political, regional, and religious identities (to name a few) are often formulated on the existence of this battle and corresponding assumptions. Take as an example the hermeneutics involved in approaching Islam’s multifarious interactions with today’s global culture. Many Muslims and non-Muslims consider it to be a static, hyper-traditional set of structural creeds in a never-ending battle with a dynamic modern world. Similarly, many Hindu fundamentalists and other orthodox devotees perceive westernization and modernization as threats to “ancient” (and hence, authoritative) Hindu cultural traditions. The idea of a modern Muslim or Hindu, for many, is unrealistic, a chimera. However, emic definitions reveal the multitude of relationships between tradition and modernity as they exist across Muslim and Hindu worlds, highlighting spaces in which the modern religious subject exists and illuminating the local functions these terms serve in cultural self-definition and meaning-making.

**Modernity and Tradition in Madurai**

Madurai, Tamilnadu is one of the oldest inhabited cities in India (Dickey 2000:464, see also Fuller 1984:2) and is said to have been “the physical center of the Pandyan kingdom,” one of three major kingdoms which divided and ruled south India around the third century B.C. (Lewandowski 1977:187). After the fall of the Pandyas, the Nayakas ruled Madurai (Palaniappan 1970) and surrounding areas until the British Raj gained control of south India and formally made Madurai “the district headquarters of a larger colonial political complex and an industrial town” (Lewandowski 1977:196) in 1801 (Rajayyan 1974).

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*war – a “modern, abstract and impersonal” identity versus a “self-interested, family-oriented and localistic” self – in the lives of many middle-class Indians (Appadurai 2011:2).*
Today, Madurai is “less industrialized than many other Indian metropolises of its size” (Dickey 2000:464; 2012) and is often referred to as “like a big village” (periya kirāmam mātiri) by many of its residents (Bharathy 2007), even though the last census (2011) estimates a total population of approximately three million (Census of India, 2011). The majority of Madurai’s residents associate themselves with the following jati communities: Brahmins (Iyer and Iyengar59); high caste Chettiyars,60 Pillais, Nayars, and Vaitthiyars; mid-level caste Reddiars, Thevars,61 and Mudaliyars; low caste Agamudiyars and Nadars,62 and the scheduled caste Chakkiliyars, Paraiyars, and Pallars (Dickey 2000).

The city of Madurai holds a special position in the eyes of Hindus across the globe and is often associated with a slower pace of life and rather conservative Hindu traditions and conceptions of morality. Most importantly, it is the location of the famous Meenakshi Amman Temple, a temple devoted to the goddess Meenakshi and her husband, Siva. Due to the popularity of the goddess Meenakshi in the city and greater Tamilnadu state, the city often simply goes by the moniker “Temple City” (Reynolds 1987) and for Madurai residents, Meenakshi is considered to be the city’s “the divine protector” (Fuller 1984:6).

While the goddess Meenakshi maintains an important place in the everyday lives Madurai residents, including the SMVS women, her position is further elevated during the

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59 Iyer Brahmins are associated with equal Vaishnava and Saiva worship and Iyengar Brahmins with strictly Vaishnava worship.

60 The Chettiyar caste consists of “many of Madurai’s wealthy social leaders...” (Dickey 2000:484).

61 Thevars/Kallars are also the majority caste in the surrounding areas of Madurai. While the community’s precolonial caste occupations as village guardians and kings constructs a positive image of the Thevars/Kallars (Mines 2005:118), they have also historically been associated with thievery and, due to this, tend to hold a rather negative reputation (Dickey 2000:484) in some parts of the city. Thevars/Kallars also constitute the majority of migrants to the city of Madurai. Indeed, it has been speculated that, due to such a large Thevar/Kallar migration, the actual Madurai dialect of Tamil (considered “standard Tamil” or “centtamiḻ”) has been altered by the Thevar/Kallar way of speaking (Bharathy 2007).

62 There is a strong Tamil cultural association made between the Nadar caste community and Christianity, as early Christian missionaries used the community’s low caste status as incentive to join the church (Bharathy 2007). This association was evident among the SMVS group’s Nadars, Jayanthi and Aishwarya, who both felt they had a stronger connection with and knowledge of the Christian religion in comparison to other group members.
celebration of her sacred marriage to Sundareswarar (Siva) in the Meenakshi Amman Temple. Known as the Chittirai festival, as it occurs during the Tamil month of Chittirai (mid-April to mid-May), this event is said to be “the temple’s greatest annual festival...” (Fuller 2004:190, see also Fuller and Logan 1985). The festival consists of ten days of celebration during which Meenakshi “is crowned as the Pandyan queen of Madurai” and marries Sundareswarar on the final day of the festival (Fuller 2004:190). Meenakshi’s ascension to a complex cumankali status is central to the festival and is exemplified not only in her marriage to Sundareswarar on the final day, but also by the celebration of Siva as her conqueror before the actual marriage ceremony (Fuller 2004:190). Fuller notes of the goddess’s transformation,

...the encounter with Sundaresvara and her marriage to him – first, makes Minakshi wholly female; second, makes her a wife; third, involves her in sharing royal power with the god; and fourth, makes her unambiguously divine as the great goddess and consort of Shiva. Minakshi thereby loses her independence and much of her political power, but exchanges these for the status of a mature and complete female – a wife and later mother – and for the divine power of the goddess (Fuller 1980:344).

In addition to dramatizing Tamil gender relations, the Chittirai festival also highlights the caste dynamics involved in the worship of the goddess Meenakshi. For example, Fuller (2004) notes that on the final day of the festival, Meenakshi and Sundareswarar are rocked back and forth on a swing (uñcal) “immediately before the wedding” (Fuller 2004:194). This practice is generally associated with Tamil Brahmin weddings (Fuller 2004:194) and therefore ascribes a specific caste identification to the

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63 This festival is so important to the city’s residents that the entire ten-day celebration is televised on at least three local television channels. If the SMVS group women and their families are not able to attend the actual ceremonies, they often watch the daily processions on and take darsan from their televisions. The importance of this festival to the SMVS group members and their families became evident to me during one of my previous visits to Madurai. The day that I was to leave Madurai for the United States was also the day of Meenakshi’s holy wedding. My viewing of the marriage scene was so imperative for one SMVS group member that she suggested I take multiple pictures of the television screen on which it was displayed so that I might be able to experience the event on the plane ride home.
regionally important goddess. This caste affiliation is reified at other locally celebrated events such as Navarātri during which Meenakshi’s “double,” Cellattamman, is offered less ritually pure blood sacrifices (Fuller and Logan 1985:103).

Two well-known fables exemplify the power of Madurai as a sacred Hindu center. The first fable combines the city’s religious and royal power and is recounted in Madurai city history books. In this story, Thirulayanthii Naick (king of the Nayaks) is said to be traveling to Madurai for the festival of Chittirai which celebrates the marriage of the goddess Meenakshi and Sundareswarar. On his journey, he becomes ill and is approached by Siva in a dream. Siva demands that Thirumala Naick shift the capital of his kingdom from Tiruchirapalli to Madurai in order to worship the god and goddess there. The second fable articulates the immense religious power of the city and its principal goddess, telling of a British Collector, Rous Peter in 1812. One night during a storm, a little girl walked into his room, led him outside and then quickly vanished. No sooner had the Collector left his room then it was struck by lightning and completely destroyed. The collector attributed this event to the goddess Meenakshi, whom he believed to have taken the form of the little girl. This second fable is often recounted in folk songs within and around the city (Palaniappan 1970:61, 63). From these narratives, one is able to conceive of the immense power of Siva and Meenakshi instilled within the boundaries of the city. In fact, most Hindu devotees consider the city of Madurai to be synonymous with the Meenakshi-Sundareshwara Temple. The SMVS group women are conscious of this power and express pride to live in one of Tamilnadu’s Hindu holy centers. Indeed, the city of Madurai is

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64 Cellattamman is the “independent goddess of the northern gate” of the Meenakshi Amman Temple. She is considered the “double” of Meenakshi in that she is “the goddess of the boundary in complementary opposition to the goddess at the center” of the temple, Meenakshi Amman herself (Fuller and Logan 1985:103).
considered by some to be so holy that pilgrims need not travel to the city, but merely pronounce the name “Madurai” in order to gain spiritual benefits (Reynolds 1987:34).

But while the religious history of Madurai may inform many devotees’ interpretations of traditional Hindu practice, the city is also a contemporary pilgrimage site and modern industrial town. The residents of this city, while not inhabiting a more cosmopolitan city such as Chennai (Madras), are not simply products of Madurai’s Hindu religious heritage, but are also active players in the city’s local project of modernity. I asked the SMVS women about their perceptions of this unwieldy concept.

**Modernity According to the SMVS Women**

“So you are asking if I can dance bharāta natyam65 and “the Twist” at the same time?”

I was sitting face to face with Shanti in a follow-up interview when, in response to my queries about the place of the traditional and the modern in middle-class life, she replied with the above question to me. Shanti had listened patiently as I stumbled over copious Tamil vocabulary words trying to communicate the terms that I and many other academics understand as central to sociological and anthropological theories of society and contemporary life, but these academic and esoteric references were of little use to Shanti. She, like anyone else in her position, replied to this question based on her personal relationship to the topic of conversation and a more familiar hermeneutical system. In her opinion, the battle between tradition and modernity, so heavily theorized in the ivory tower, was best represented by comparing dance styles.

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65 *Bharāta natyam* is a regional dance form in Tamilnadu that, in its more formal variety is associated with groups of female Hindu temple dancers known as *devadasis*. The position of the devadasis is highly controversial and is beyond the scope of this dissertation (see Srinivasan 1985, Soneji 2012); however it is important to note that in this context, Shanti is not referring to this *devadasi* form, but a more popular variation that is often performed at cultural and religious festivities.
After processing her interpretation of my question and replying that yes, in fact, that was what I was asking, Shanti had many personal theories about cultural traditions and social change. Having come from a strict orthodox Brahmin family (one that disowned her after her love marriage to a man of lower caste – see Chapter Two), Shanti was quick to use Brahmin cultural practices concerning ritual pollution (tīṭṭu) as a foundation for her arguments. She commented,

First, Brahmins kept really maṭi.66 If you say “maṭi” [it means]...as soon as they return from school* the dress* that they wore to school* they cannot [continue to] wear.”67 Tsk...now you can’t see something like this...In those days (anda kālattile) the SC people* they say... ‘hārijan'* from a tumbler* from inside our house, natal house...to them you could not give water...if you ask why, [it is because] if they touch it you can’t take it back...so what they used* we had to give them...Now it’s not like that...Now a little the times have developed/advanced...They (hārijans) are coming as equal*...They study...everyone has advanced, thus everyone is thinking...So it doesn’t matter. They are like us, aren’t they? Some people adjust* and go [live their lives]...If you look at culture (kalācāram) [today] there is no friendship*...If you think you need friendship,* there should not be culture...Because when you move closely/are close (paḷaku) with good friends,* if they look at culture [live according to their culture] we cannot move* [be close] with anyone...Now, [to say] “I won’t allow you to go [out] alone, you don’t need to go here and there alone”...[if it’s] like that, your life*...future* will go/waste away...so we should not be like that...but for culture there is a desire (āsai) only...We must keep culture...if you also see, you can also become accustomed...If you look at what we are doing Nicolee [then] you will become accustomed...Then when you become accustomed we will say "it doesn’t matter... for certain we can’t look at her differently...Nicolee is an old Tamil [a Tamil in a previous life]...

In Shanti’s discussion we become privy to a kind of internal debate between the adherence to culture, and the social changes that are required to “move closely” with friends. At the beginning of her discourse, Shanti seems to describe culture as a very restrictive and unwelcome entity in her life. She emphasizes that observing ritual pollution is not

66 See above and also Chapter Five. Padma Viswanathan also provides an eloquent description of “maṭi” and Tamil Brahminism, in her 2008 novel, The Toss of a Lemon.
67 This is a common practice amongst Tamil Brahmins, as noted by Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) as well.
conducive to having friends. But then Shanti makes a case for cultural traditions and how they are valued by many in society. At this moment, she discursively negotiates between the valuation of what is thought to be traditional culture and the valuation of sociality in urban life. It was only much later in the conversation, after navigating my unfamiliar line of questioning, my positionality within her neighborhood, my membership in the SMVS group, and the intimacy she may or may not have felt at the time of the interview, that Shanti was able to advocate for a sharing of cultural values with all people. For Shanti, modernity is not only about microwaves and cellphones, it is also about changes in social interaction and exposure, as well as compromising cultural practices thought to be inherently connected to one’s ethnic, caste, and religious identity.

The navigation of conceptions of tradition and modernity among the SMVS group women was also articulated by Latha who similarly used caste culture to explain tradition, but did not use her own Brahmin caste practices as a foundation (perhaps because it may have caused her to be critical of her own actions, as Shanti was critical of her previous Brahmin caste affiliation). Latha also expressed a connection between tradition and the Hindu Indian nation.68 She commented,

With their tradition*...from the *tali...they will follow their tradition.* All *jatis will follow their tradition.* We went to a Chettiyar house, right? They had a big *tali and in a different way they did *tiristi.69 Like that they do their tradition.* In house puja...you do it like your forefathers,* grandma-grandpa

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68 It is quite possible that Latha’s reference to an Indian nation instead of a Tamil one is due to her caste position as a Brahmin. Historically, Brahmins in Tamil Nadu have been positioned outside of indigenous Tamil/Dravidian (read: non-Brahmin) society, instead associated with a north Indian Aryan/Vedic culture (see below). Hence, Tamil Brahmins’ expressed connections with the evolution of Tamil culture and tradition may differ significantly, not only due to individual variation, but also their unique location in Dravidian political and historical spheres. It is also possible that Latha’s perception of and feelings towards a Hindu nation have been inspired by underlying Hindu nationalist rhetoric (see above).

69 Practice to remove the evil eye. Also called kāntiristi.
(pāṭṭi-tāttā) did it. For Navarātri, Poṅkal,\textsuperscript{70} how to do the puja...like that when there is a festival, party, wedding, THAT is tradition.* Every caste passes it down. Up until now they have done it. In India they will not leave/quit their tradition.* Still India has not given them [traditional practices] up... It is inside them. They won't leave their habits. Hindus say "my grandmother (tāttā) and grandmother (pāṭṭi) did it, we have to do it. We should not give it up." Puja and ritual (caṭāṅku) - if you do it, it is good. It is in your heart/mind (uḷḷam). They won't give it up.

According to Latha, tradition is ingrained in one's very being. This opinion, although possibly expressed by people of other castes, is, I think, intricately connected to Latha's caste positioning as a Tamil Brahmin. In my experiences with Tamil Brahmins, many are quick to point out the inherent intelligence\textsuperscript{71} and ritual knowledge of Brahmin caste members. This was nowhere more apparent than when spending time with the SMVS group when they recited Sanskrit culōkaṁkal such as the Lalithā Sahāstranamam\textsuperscript{72} and the Vishnu Sahāstranamam. I was often (although always privately) told that no matter how hard the non-Brahmin members of the SMVS group tried, they would never be able to pronounce Sanskrit properly because it was not, literally, "in their tongue." A Brahmin tongue and the proper pronunciation that flowed through it were only attainable by birth and then enhanced through childhood socialization and daily exposure to Sanskrit mantras. Tradition, for Latha, was about performing ritual correctness (very often associated with Sanskrit recitation), a quality identified with Brahmin identity and the caste's corporeal essence.

\textsuperscript{70} Both Navarātti and Poṅgal are Hindu festivals, the latter specific to Tamil culture. Chapter Six of this dissertation is devoted entirely to the festival of Navarātti, and so it will not be described in further detail here. Moreover, the festival of Poṅgal is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{71} See also Fuller and Narasimhan 2014.

\textsuperscript{72} The Lalithā Sahāstranamam is the recitation of the 1008 names of the Goddess.
The ongoing and complex process of being middle class in India, in particular, a middle-class woman in India, as well as its manifestations in daily life are closely linked with perceptions of tradition and modernity. As we have seen above, these notions inform interpretations of the ongoing social and socioeconomic changes that were instigated almost thirty years ago via the liberalization of the Indian economy. Shanti expresses a compromise between the two entities, as she finds the negotiation necessary to the creation of friendships between people of differing castes (and most likely, the same class) in her urban multi-caste living environment. Alternatively, Latha holds to a notion of tradition that is exemplified through caste-specific and embodied cultural practice, maintaining caste divisions perhaps in light of equivalent socioeconomic class statuses and possession of modern goods. Finally, both women belong to a social network (the SMVS group) where the conceptions of modernity and higher-class status performance is informed by the practicing of higher caste “traditional” customs.

**Overview of Chapters**

The organization of this dissertation is straightforward. First, I delineate the methodologies undertaken during the dissertation research period and introduce the reader to many of the group members through individual descriptions of my personal relationships with each woman. An understanding of my unique relationships with each of the SMVS group members is crucial for interpreting their life histories and actions which were in constant dialogic interaction with my own for a total of fifteen months. Chapter Three then takes up the experiences of rural/urban difference and continuity. Using descriptions of village and city life from group members, I look at how migration to an urban area has both
interrupted reinvented and reinscribed the SMVS women’s concepts of religiosity and performance of women’s ritual. Descriptions of the rural and the urban are often wrapped up in other discourses about tradition, modernity, caste, and socioeconomic class identifications; hence, this initial investigation of the SMVS group women’s perceptions of village and city life introduces the topics of later chapters. Chapter Four looks at a quintessential life-defining event for Tamil women, marriage. It describes nuances and continuities in Hindu marriage rituals and uses the example of one group member’s daughter’s wedding in a portrait of middle-class urban marriage practice. Chapter Five addresses modern understandings of women’s puberty rites, menstrual pollution, and childbirth. Chapters Six and Seven then turn to how middle classness and urban life have influenced religious practice and community-building, exploring the nine-night Hindu festival of Navarāttiri, as well as the SMVS group in more detail. Finally, in Chapter Eight, I return to the questions about modern, middle-class identity in India with which this chapter began. I then also raise questions about the other ways in which social change correlates with middle classness, religiosity and growing urban communities within India and beyond.
CHAPTER TWO

Of Chicken, T-shirts, and Uniform Saris: Contact With and Methodological Approaches to the SMVS Group

“Anthropologists are the sojourners of ‘the between.’ We go there and absorb a different language, culture and way of being and return here, where we can never fully resume the lives we had previously led” - Paul Stoller (2009:4).

I had been in the field for about a year and was attending the annual celebration of Navarāttrī by going with two neighborhood women to view kolukal.73 As we walked through the dark streets trying to find the house to which one of the women had been invited, Vembu, the Brahmin woman who was leading us to the house asked me if she could set up a peñ pārkka (girl/woman-viewing) for me - her son’s friend in London was looking for a bride. She said that he would let me eat chicken and wear t-shirts if I wanted because he lived a very “modern” lifestyle. She also added that he was not asking for a dowry because he was very progressive.

This was not the first time that someone had tried to discuss the topic of my marriage (I was, after all, 28 and unmarried – just on the cusp of being un-marriageable due to my age), but it was the first time that I had been approached with the idea of someone “viewing” me for the purpose of marriage. I looked at the other woman with us – Jayanthi, an SMVS group member and friend – as if to say, “Help me deal with this situation! How can I make my negative response become culturally acceptable?” Jayanthi, having been a host mother to many American students in Madurai, told Lakshmi that I was planning to wait until after I

73 Kolukal is plural for kolu, which is a tiered display of clay/porcelain/plastic three-dimensional images/dolls (pommaikaḷ) of gods and goddesses, political figures, cultural scenes (such as weddings and temple festivals), and food items. Kolukal are constructed for the nine-night festival of Navarātrī and are viewed by invited neighbors and friends. The majority of kolukal are constructed by people with Brahmin caste affiliation. For an in-depth discussion of kolukal and Navarātrī, see Chapter Six.
had finished my studies. Once Jayanthi had articulated this supposedly culturally appropriate excuse, I reiterated it for emphasis, hoping it would get me off the hook.

But even after this incident, it seemed that Lakshmi would not let the matter go. About a day later I received a phone call from Uma Amma, the SMVS guru/leader and a woman who refers to me as her granddaughter. She said that Lakshmi had called her because she was interested in matching me with her son’s friend. I tried repeating the “studies” excuse, but to no avail – I was repeatedly told that he was very progressive and “modern,” hence he would “let” me study after our marriage. Not wanting to hurt anyone’s feelings or burn any bridges, I told Uma Amma that I would think about it and call her back. Within seconds I was Skyping with my mother in America, telling her the situation. I was frantic and I needed to talk this out with someone who was familiar with my own cultural milieu. Having listened to me talk about Tamil culture repeatedly, my mother suggested that I tell Lakshmi and Uma Amma that my parents wanted to find someone for me and that I couldn’t go against their wishes by setting up a pen parkkka that they had not arranged. I told my mother that while this was a good thought, I had already explained to Uma Amma and other SMVS group members that parents’ involvement in their children’s marriages was very different in America and that it was predominantly one’s own decision, and not that of the parents. I spoke to my mother for 20 minutes; and while I may have been a little more at ease, I was far from having an answer that would satisfy everyone involved.

My next attempt at tackling the situation was to go downstairs to the home of my Brahmin house-owner, friend, and essentially “Indian mother,” Latha. I told her the situation and asked what she thought I should say, since she had also hosted several American students and was familiar with American cultural practices. However, instead of offering me a mode of
escape from the situation, she asked me why I wouldn’t marry him. She said that she had spoken to Lakshmi about it – he was a “good Brahmin boy” from a good family, he was highly educated, and extremely “modern.” I smiled at her and reverted to my back-up explanation of wanting to finish my studies before marriage, hoping I could at least excuse myself from the conversation without offending the woman with whom I had the closest relationship in all of India.

I went back upstairs to my flat and decided that I would just have to say, “I don’t want to.” After all, no one had ever asked me “why?,” I had just automatically offered a reason to them. I called Uma Amma and told her that I had thought about the proposal, but that I just didn’t want to be matched with the boy Lakshmi was helping to arrange. Surprisingly, Uma Amma said to me, “Nicolin (after a year my name had morphed from Nicoleee to Nicolin, and then finally to Nicole on rare occasions), that is okay. You do not have to marry him. Lakshmi māmi thought you would be a good match for him because you were familiar with modern things and you are also such a good Tamil girl (nalla Tamil āṇṇu). Have you seen the way unmarried Tamil girls act these days? They do not attend temple as much as you do and they do not wear traditional dress, but instead wear shirt-pant.* You have proven yourself to be a good Tamil girl and everyone in the neighborhood has noticed this about you. Can you blame them for wanting you to marry people they know? You are the good Tamil girl they are looking for.” At hearing this, I became rather emotional – here I was trying to avoid what I considered an unwelcome cultural enterprise (and feeling somewhat disrespectful because my refusal involved stretching the truth), and all the while I was being applauded for my actions as a “good Tamil girl.”

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*This was an expression commonly used by my interlocutors to describe “western” dress. It was always said in English and the words were almost always used together.
In the end, I told Uma Amma that even though Lakshmi thought so highly of me, I was not interested in marriage at this time. Uma Amma accepted my response and said that she would relay the message to Lakshmi māmi. However, up until an hour before I left my neighborhood in Madurai after fifteen months of research, Lakshmi continued to press me for an opportunity to arrange my peṇ pārkka.

This incident highlights many of the topics that permeated my research in Madurai, and also provides an opportunity to reflect on my positionality within the field. To begin, emic concepts of "modernity" surface by way of descriptions of the potential māpillai, or bridegroom, and also my future life with him. For example, this young man was living in London, or what most of the women in my neighborhood would call “foreign,” which automatically implied a modernity associated with “the West.” He was also not asking for dowry and would allow me to wear t-shirts and eat chicken (as a Brahmin), aspects considered by Lakshmi māmi and others to be progressive and modern. In addition to this more blatant description of a modern lifestyle, there was also a veiled conception of modernity that incorporated my whiteness and education.

I was considered to be a good match for this boy because I embodied an acceptable amount of both modernity and tradition. When Uma Amma described why I was a good match for the boy, she concentrated on my familiarity with and supposed subscription to Tamil (and in this context, specifically Hindu) cultural tradition. There was no outward discussion of why I, such a traditional girl, would match with such a progressive and

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75 This is also a term of endearment used for younger boys.
76 “Foreign,” said in English and used on a daily basis, was used as a noun to describe anywhere outside of India. People usually moved to “foreign” for employment opportunities and the noun was also commonly used when searching for possible marriage matches (e.g., "Oh! That boy lives in ‘foreign.’ He must make a good salary!").
modern māpiḷḷai. My reflections on this quandary have led me to believe that my modern identity revolved around several characteristics including my whiteness, education, nationality and perceived socio-economic class status. I possessed these qualities, so I was automatically modern and hence, there was no dilemma to be resolved. The desired facet of my identity was that I could combine this modern mode of being with Tamil tradition.77

The above episode also speaks to the position and face of the modern Tamil Brahmin. Indeed, the fact that this young man was a Brahmin was highlighted by my Indian mother, Latha, as a primary selling point. In her conversation with me, she made it seem as if she would understand why I would not want an arranged marriage with someone of another caste, but because the boy was Brahmin, I should reconsider my view on the matter. Based on Vembu’s selection of me as a marriage option for this Brahmin boy, it seemed that my modern yet traditional persona was enough to reconcile this potential marriage as appropriate and within caste boundaries.78

The formation of my Brahmin identity was not based on this incident alone. Since I had lived with the same orthodox Brahmin family for two and a half years off and on, I was understood by many of my friends and neighbors to have adopted a “Brahmin lifestyle.” Indeed, there were several times while eating lunch at a non-Brahmin group member’s home when, after eating, I sprinkled water on the table or floor to remove eccil.79 In these situations I was laughed at and told that that was “what Brahmins do.” There were also

77 See Diane Wolf’s introduction to Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork (1996) for more detailed reflections on the precarious positionality of white, Western female researchers.
78 This argument is based on the fact that most of my interlocutors disapproved of inter-caste “love marriages,” hence I assume that the desired bride of this Brahmin boy and his family would be of the Brahmin caste.
79 Literally, “saliva,” eccil refers to a substance that transfers an unseen pollution/ritual impurity between people’s bodies. In the Brahmin household in which I lived, Latha was even concerned about contact with her daughter’s eccil (for example when the daughter would take something from her plate with her eating hand and drop it onto her mother’s plate). Hence, the concept of eccil seems, in addition to maintaining more caste and gender-based delineations, to preserve a more general sense of individual corporeal boundaries.
several times during instructional class at Uma Amma’s house when conversations turned
toward the Indian wedding reception I would hold upon returning to Madurai with my new
husband. Uma Amma stated emphatically that I would have to wear the most beautiful
maṭisār.80 I looked at her quizzically and asked “Am I Brahmin?” in front of all the other
group members (most of them non-Brahmin). She replied, “Well...you live with a Brahmin
mother don’t you? You know all the rules, right?”

There was an obvious, yet unspoken element to this ascription of Brahmin status to
my identity. The women of the group, while hardly trying to move up the caste hierarchy
(what Srinivas would call “Sanskritization”), made every attempt to “Brahminize” (Kapadia
1995)81 themselves by following “Brahmin rules,” such as eccil removal and recognition of
“pāṭtu” and “non-pāṭtu”82 foods. They strove to mimic Uma Amma, the Brahmin guru, in
their daily lives and also knew “all the rules;” yet, Uma Amma would have thought it
inappropriate for any of them to wear a maṭisār or claim Brahmin identity. I often
wondered: What is it about me that attracts the “Brahmin” caste label? Is it my light skin?
Is it the status people ascribe to me because of my Western identity? Is it because I am
knowledgeable with regard to the intricacies of supposed “orthodox” Hindu practice?

In my communications with non-Brahmin group members, I also found myself
trying to escape the Brahmin label, as I felt that it changed the dynamic of our interactions.

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80 Tamil term for a nine-yard sari and traditional dress of Brahmin women. During wedding functions the red maṭisār
marks the passage to auspicious wife-hood.
81 Brahminization refers to the non-Brahmin practice of “imitating certain features of Brahmin lifestyle...to appropriate
a prestigious cultural style that enhances their change in class status” (Kapadia 1995:11, emphasis in original).
82 The division between pāṭtu and non-pāṭtu foods is based on the food’s ability to keep fresh and edible after one meal
(without the use of a refrigerator). For example, curd, or toyir, is considered a non-pāṭtu food item because without
refrigeration, it would spoil. Food items like capāṭṭi, appalam, or pickle will keep without refrigeration and are therefore
classified as pāṭtu foods. During a meal, if one wishes to pick up a dish with pāṭṭu food after touching a dish with a non-
pāṭṭu item, they must pour a few drops of water onto the eating surface (table or floor) and touch their fingers to this
water. If one were to ask a Brahmin why the distinction is necessary, they might associate it with superior caste
knowledge of health and hygiene; however, with the advent of the refrigerator, the practice seems to exist mainly to
reinscribe and perform caste identity.
In one instance Jayanthi, a traditionally lower caste Nadar woman, said that I had transformed into a Brahmin.\textsuperscript{83} I immediately rejected that idea as best I knew how. I said, “But I eat non-veg. food and I have a crush on a dark-skinned non-Brahmin film star!” Jayanthi laughed at this response, but also seemed to take it as a legitimate explanation of my non-Brahminhood.

The above experience concerning my marriage arrangement by Lakshmi māmi illustrates some facets of my positionality in the field. In the following, I describe my initial contact with the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang (SMVS) group, present a number of methodologies that were employed during the research period, and describe my relationships to each of my interlocutors, illuminating how these relationships may have affected the information that I gathered.

\textit{Initial Contact}

My initial contact with the SMVS group members was through my Indian host mother, Latha, during an American Institute of Indian Studies language program in 2006. I had mentioned to her during evening tiffin\textsuperscript{84} that I was interested in Hinduism and the manners in which people worshipped. Latha was eager to share her involvement in a Hindu women’s group, as it seemed her husband and two children were not interested in much of anything she had to say. She later took me to an SMVS group singing performance at the local neighborhood temple, the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple.

\textsuperscript{83} Interestingly, Jayanthi was also accused of “becoming a Brahmin” by her husband because she had given up eating (but not preparing) non-veg. food and had a certain level of Hindu religious knowledge. In their discussions of middle-class non-Brahmins in Chennai, Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) also mention this accusation of transformation.

\textsuperscript{84} In contrast to the main rice-based meal of the day (what Tamils call “cāpāṭu” (lit. “food”) or, in English, “meals”), which is eaten in the afternoon, “tiffin” refers to snacks that accompany coffee and tea, as well as the smaller morning and evening meals which are less likely to contain rice and multiple curries. Examples of “tiffin” items are: tōsai, pūri, or uppuma.
Donning uniform saris, the women of the SMVS group performed for a small neighborhood audience for nearly thirty minutes, singing songs to a multitude of gods and goddesses from their handwritten songbooks. After the performance, I was unable to speak with the guru, both because of time and because my Tamil language skills were far from developed. But I walked away from the temple that day knowing that this phenomenon – Hindu housewives wearing uniform saris and performing in a temple – was something that I wanted to investigate further.

It was during my next stay in Madurai in 2007 and 2008 (for yet another AIIS Tamil language program) that I gained permission from Uma Sankaran (Uma Amma) to observe and participate in her group for the purpose of writing my final essay for my language studies. When I was not in language class, I was spending time with group members as well as attending instructional classes and local performances. I was always hoping for someone to offer me a uniform sari, as I thought I had developed rapport with the group members and considered it a sign of becoming an actual member of the group; however,
this idea was never suggested. My continual unfulfilled hope for a uniform sari was not the only thing that served as discouragement. I later realized that my relationships with some of the group members were nothing but façades of rapport, the women were outwardly lying to me about why they could not give me an interview. I was later told by another scholar of Tamil culture that middle-class Indian women were, in general, a difficult segment of the population to approach, as they were known to be quite guarded in their interactions (Narasimhan 2008). At this point, I began to think the project was not going to come to fruition.

It was not until I returned to Madurai for dissertation research (2009-2010) that I was finally able to establish close relationships with SMVS group members, especially Uma Amma, the guru. In contrast to previous visits, I was able to devote all of my time to group activities and gradually the women began to relax around me. I would often visit Uma Amma for the better part of a day, answering her questions about my culture and my life in America while she instructed me in my embroidery lesson. She once asked me whether I liked American or Indian culture better. I admitted that I preferred American culture, but qualified my answer by stating that I had chosen to live for fifteen months in India and I was grateful for Tamilian hospitality. I continued by saying that I was more comfortable living in the culture into which I had been socialized. I equated it with her visiting me in America (she had talked about this often) and asked her which culture she thought she would prefer. I mentioned to her that while she may like spending time with me in

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85 I realize that this is my interpretation of their actions and while I may have felt that they were opening up to me, they in fact could have been “shining me on,” so to speak. Either way, there was a change in the women’s interactions with me and I did not interpret it as negative.
America, she would most likely be more comfortable in the culture with which she was most familiar. She agreed.

**Participant Observation, Performance Video-Recording, Life (Hi)story Collection**

The research I conducted with the SMVS women and their families was primarily undertaken using three methods: participant observation, life (hi)story collection, and the video recording of the SMVS group’s performances. With respect to participant observation, I attended all group functions, tours and classes, creating my own handwritten songbook out of which I sang. Participant observation allowed me to observe the women’s interactions with each other, as well as their interactions with people outside of the group. These inner and outer relations became of particular interest to me, especially in conjunction with how the women would describe their social networks during interviews. It became evident that the women’s relationships within the SMVS group often ignored caste differences and were instead based on class affiliation. However, outside of group activities, caste difference still seemed to play in important part in their daily social interactions.

**Participant Observation**

My dedication to rigorous participant observation facilitated what I understood to be my immersion into the SMVS women’s cultural context and everyday experiences. Not only do I consider myself to have gained valuable information through my strategic positioning, but

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86 I write “life (hi)story” in this way to emphasize my understanding of life (hi)stories as a type of fiction. See the “Life (Hi)story” section below.
87 This topic is discussed in further detail in Chapter Seven.
I believe that immersing myself in the group members’ ethos was a way for me “to downplay [my] privileges and difference...provid[ing] a less intrusive and obtrusive methodology” (Wolf 1996:9). This is not to say that my position as a privileged, white western researcher was or could ever be completely erased, nor that I could ever understand the women’s experiences as wives and mothers; but I feel my mode of engagement with the SMVS group members was the best possible way in which to investigate and understand their continuous identity (re)formation\textsuperscript{88} in their daily lives.

**Video Recording of Performances**

With respect to the SMVS group’s performances in temples, homes, and villages, I followed Raymond Williams (1973) in conceiving of performances as unique ways through which to illuminate processes of social change and the formulations of “‘emergent culture[s]’ in which ‘new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences are continually being created’” (Williams 1973:11, see also Bauman 1977). Therefore, I videotaped all of the SMVS group’s performances, as well as noted the performance context and the reactions of the performance audience. My second session interviews with the SMVS women (see below) included questions regarding the group members’ feelings about the performances and audiences’ reactions, which facilitated my investigation of group identity-building.

\textsuperscript{88}I use “identity (re)formation” as opposed to “identity formation,” as I consider the former to connote a more truthful understanding of identity construction as a continuously dynamic process; whereas, “formation” implies a more modernist and teleological conception of identity construction.
Life (Hi)stories

During my time with the SMVS group, I considered the narratives of the women to be “life stories” (in contrast to “life histories”), as I was not concerned with the truth of the narrative, but with the selection of life events that structured the narrative at the given time (Peacock and Holland 1993). In this sense, it can be said that I understand life (hi)stories to be a type of fiction. I adhere to Jeff Titon’s argument that,

The life story’s singular achievement is that it affirms the identity of the storyteller in the act of telling. The life story tells who one thinks one is and how one thinks one came to be that way...So life storytelling is a fiction, a making, an ordered past imposed by a present personality upon a disordered life (Titon 1980:290).

The women’s re-construction of life events was often contingent on their personal agenda; my positionality as a white western researcher, student, and adopted Tamil daughter/grandaughter/sister; as well as the historical and political contexts in which our dialogic interactions took place. Due to these multiple and constantly changing influences, it was/is essential that I consider(ed) the women’s life stories as inherently situated, partial, and fragmented (Peacock and Holland 1993, Ochs and Capps 1996, Arnold and Blackburn 2004). I also approached each life (hi)story collection with the understanding that there was a tension embedded in the women’s telling of their life

89 Scholars who use the life history approach have learned from early academically-recorded life history accounts that agendas have profound impacts on the way a life history is selectively recounted (see, for example, Radin 1963[1920], in which the agenda [although not identified by Radin] of a Winnebago Indian is to show the positive effect that the Peyote Cult had on his life). With the postmodern turn, anthropologists became specifically concerned with how the agenda of the ethnographer directs the telling of a life (hi)story (see, for example, Rabinow 1977, Crapanzano 1984). The Buechlers manage both interlocutor and ethnographer agenda by arguing that a life history is produced “by the selective interests” of both parties (1996:xx).

90 My understanding of the SMVS women’s identity construction during the life (hi)story collections was informed by Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) conception of dialogism. He describes this term thus, “The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape in a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (Bakhtin 1981:276).

91 With regard to the temporal variable that influences the life history account, Eleanor Ochs and Lisa Capps note, “...the telling of past events is intricately linked to tellers’ and listeners’ concerns about their present and future lives” (Ochs and Capps 1996:25).
history. As Arnold and Blackburn have noted, during personal narrative collection people often feel “the desire to tell the truth...and an equally intense desire to regulate it” (Arnold and Blackburn 2004:17).

I chose to collect life (hi)stories due to the project’s emphasis on and my interest in social networks and societal change. Ochs and Capps (1996) note the connection between personal narrative and social networks when they comment that narrative comprises “a cultural resource for socializing emotions, attitudes, and identities” which fosters “interpersonal relationships, and constitutes membership in a community” (Ochs and Capps 1996:19). Because explication of social networks is inherently embedded in the telling of life (hi)stories and other personal narratives, the life (hi)story method allowed me to see how people “construct[ed] [their] identity with reference to those who surround [them]” (Buechler and Buechler 1996:xx, see also Arnold and Blackburn 2004:21).

The collection of life (hi)stories was an appropriate approach to studying the societal changes with which the SMVS women were/are engaged as it is “especially suited to the formation of dynamic models of social relations and to the testing of theories of social change...” in that “individuals’ options as well as the constraints on actions” are brought to light (Buechler and Buechler 1981:vi). The wider dynamic social relations (both within and outside the purview of the SMVS group) and urban living contexts that influenced the actions of the SMVS women over time were best understood through the collection of individual, personal (hi)stories and narratives (Buechler and Buechler 1981, 1996; Erzen 2006). These life (hi)stories and personal narratives not only highlighted social change through their descriptions of “options” and “restraints on actions,” but also
provided an “adequate period of social change” (Thompson 1963:11) through which to explore class-based identifications (Rosaldo 1990).

Life (hi)story collections were often carried out in two parts. I would ask the SMVS women if they had time for me to come to their homes and speak with them about their lives, and while some were hesitant in the beginning, in the end they all acquiesced. I was usually served a meal or light tiffin before or after I took the interview and most of the women spoke for at least one and a half hours or more during their first session. I would ask them to talk about their life and to tell me points they thought were important/unforgettable (marakkāmal muṭiyādu vicayaṅkal). My verbal involvement during the first sessions of the life (hi)story collections was minimal, as it consisted of asking a few clarifying questions and/or urging my interlocutors to describe events and opinions in further detail. However, my involvement in the interviews had nonverbal characteristics as well, as my varying axes of identity, or “maps of consciousness” (Haraway 1991:111) (e.g. socioeconomic class, race, gender), influenced the statements of my interlocutors, as well as how I interpreted those statements during our dialogic encounters.

There was often also a second interview session with the women after I had examined their previous interviews and assessed whether or not they answered a few particular questions during our open dialogue. During this second session, I most often asked a number of questions that allowed me to further investigate the women’s personal experiences of societal change and urban living. I then followed this line of inquiry with questions that spoke to emic understandings of middle classness and other socioeconomic class stereotypes. If the women requested, I allowed them to look at the questions before

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92 For examples of the questions asked, see Appendix B.
our second session began. However, due to my interest in identifying endogenous definitions of middle classness, this remained an unmentioned subject in my list of questions for them and my general explanation of my research project. By omitting the middle class label from the description of my research, I was hoping to gain a more subjective sense of how the SMVS women identified themselves without the influence of my categorizations. In the words of Elaine Lawless (1988) as she describes her collection of personal narratives in *Handmaidens of the Lord*, “I need[ed] to learn their markers rather than teach them mine” (Lawless 1988:17).

**Determining Middle Classness**

In trying to identify the emic components of middle-classness, I employed several methodologies of scholars who have undertaken in-depth studies of class formation and characteristics (see, for example, Rodan 1996, Parker, 1998, Lakha 1999, Dickey 2000, 2012). Although it has been shown that more objective categories such as income, education levels, and job descriptions alone cannot serve as the sole identifiers of middle-class identity, I proceeded with the belief that this information was/is useful when combined with other ethnographic material. Indeed, the economic and cultural capital associated with specific income and education levels has much to do with how middle

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93 However, I do recognize that simply translating the term “middle class” does not erase its origination as a western categorical device and hence, also acknowledge the power that is embedded in using western categories to classify people in other cultural contexts. That said, I also recognize the influence of these categorical devices on the more subjective interpretations of my interlocutors, especially as they are influenced by a variety of western cultural discourses that have accompanied global flows. Hence, with respect to the relationship between objective and subjective categorical structures, particularly those that encapsulate the SMVS women, I find myself agreeing with the post-structuralist bent of Pierre Bourdieu when he argues, “On the one hand, the objective structures which the sociologist constructs in the objectivist moment, by setting aside the subjective representations of the agents, are the basis of subjective representations and they constitute the structural constraints which influence interactions; but on the other hand, these representations also have to be remembered if one wants to account above all for the daily individual and collective struggles which aim at transforming or preserving these structures” (Bourdieu 1990:125-126).
classness is performed by the SMVS women, as well as other middle class members. Therefore, I gathered information about the employment of the SMVS women’s husbands and children,\(^94\) as well as the educational qualifications of the SMVS women and their families. This information is listed in a table (Appendix A) along with other possible characteristics of middle classness that were identified through fifteen months of participant observation.

In addition, I employed Parker’s (1998) method of photographing homes (both inside and out), which provided visual information about middle-class possessions, values, consumption patterns, and use of space within suburban Krishnapuram Colony. It also contributed to a more informed understanding of India’s middle-class taste spectrum, as I believe the middle-class SMVS women’s homes differ starkly from the homes of middle-class individuals living in more cosmopolitan centers such as Mumbai.\(^95\) In other words, the economic and cultural capital associated with the middle classes in Madurai, is not necessarily the same as that associated with the middle classes in other cities.\(^96\) When possible, I also took photos of natal village homes that were linked with middle classness during life (hi)story interviews.

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\(^94\) Although some of the SMVS women worked outside of the home previously, all of them identified as housewives during the time of my study. The information about their outside employment generally surfaced during the telling of their life (hi)stories. For example, a large portion of Jeyalakshmi’s life (hi)story focused on her training, employment, and achievements as a nurse in and around Madurai.

\(^95\) This also harkens back to the possible differences between upper and lower middle-class lifestyles (see chapters One and Eight).

\(^96\) For more on middle class “taste,” see Chapter One.
My Relationships With Group Members

In building rapport with the group members, I developed an individual relationship with each of them, some more meaningful than others. These distinctive relationships and the power dynamics imbued within them acutely influenced the way each woman expressed herself during both the life (hi)story interviews and her more day-to-day interactions with me. The following are brief descriptions of my relationships with a majority of the group members, as well as ruminations on how each of these relationships may have affected the information I gathered.

Uma Amma:

While it took me several years to gain the trust of Uma Amma, the Brahmin guru/leader of the SMVS group, we finally developed a close relationship (in fact, one that

Figure 2.2 The inside of an SMVS woman’s middle-class natal village home during a return for a temple festival in July 2010.
many of the other SMVS group members envied). Indeed, Uma Amma now likes to refer to me as her granddaughter and when I left the field she lamented that she was unsure whether the group would be able to take tours without me (since I had turned into their beloved photographer and personal baggage carrier).97

Uma Amma’s husband, referred to simply as “Appa” (or father), had died about six months before I arrived in the field. His death being relatively recent, Uma Amma would often break down during class or other group functions, saying that she was lonely and that she would not be around much longer, for she could not live without her husband. During these episodes, I was frequently one of the only group members to physically comfort her, offering my company whenever she felt lonely. If her son and daughter-in-law who lived downstairs were away for several days, Uma Amma would often call me to stay overnight at her house. We would spend those evenings embroidering and chatting about the cultural differences between India and America.

Probably the most telling incident of our intimacy occurred during the group’s trip to Navabrinidan and Mantralayam on the Tamilnadu/Karnataka border. After five exhausting days of temple sightseeing (which included climbing mountains in ninety-five degree heat), many of the group members were having difficulty walking, let alone carrying the bags they had packed. When we unloaded from the jeeps at the train station, I took on my assigned role and offered to help the women with their bags, telling them to take their time and focus on walking up the busy railway station stairs. I had wanted to move swiftly,

97 When I initially took on the baggage-carrying responsibilities, I felt as though it was a relatively underhanded and “cheap” way to gain the women’s confidence and persuade them to give me an interview (there was an overwhelming atmosphere of passive aggressiveness and guilt among the SMVS women and I was not immune from falling under its spell). However, I now think my subservient actions were a way to show my dedication to the group when oftentimes my language and Tamil cultural skills failed me. Indeed, other anthropologists have noted how performing favors for interlocutors gave them intimate access and increased levels of rapport (see Ahmad 2006).
as I had offered to carry the bags of many of the women and was unsure about the 
departure time of our train. On my second round of baggage carrying, I slipped and fell 
down a set of concrete stairs. I was slow to get onto my feet, but I soon collected myself 
and continued carrying the luggage. After I deposited the bags with their rightful owners, I 
noticed Uma Amma sitting in a corner sobbing. I went to her and asked her what was 
wrong. In a touching moment of friendship laced with maternal affection she said, “You 
would not have fallen if you were not carrying our bags for us. You were helping us and 
look what happened to you. When you fell I was so worried about your being hurt and 
what I was going to say to your mother in America about why you fell. This all happened 
because of our requests.” I reassured Uma Amma that I would be fine, but remained 
shocked at Uma Amma’s reaction to my injury. Indeed, even other group members 
articulated to me later that other people had hurt themselves on previous temple tours, but 
she had not shed a tear for them.

Since my relationship with Uma Amma was most often defined by her 
motherly/grandmotherly affection towards me, the interviews I collected with her had a 
tone of parental authority. Her overall leadership role in the SMVS group was solidified 
through her maternal authority towards all of the SMVS women, as opposed to a more 
guru/chela relationship. However, although I had the potential to be scolded by Uma 
Amma as an SMVS group member, my interactions with her were on a different level due 
to, I believe, my perpetual ‘outsider’ status and what she interpreted as my dedication to 
group activities (tours, classes, embroidery instruction).

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98 For an example of guru/chela relationships, see Reddy 2005.
99 SMVS group members would often comment to me that Uma Amma put me on a pedestal because I never missed a 
group activity. In a guilt-ridden attempt to respond to Uma Amma’s favoritism, they argued that I had not missed any 
activities because I was not married and had no other responsibilities.
Uma Amma spoke with me two separate times for the purpose of life (hi)story collection – September and November 2010. I strategically waited until the end of my stay in Madurai to collect these interviews, as I placed a higher value on her reflections (due to her leadership position and her influence on other SMVS group members) and was hoping to establish a considerable amount of rapport before the interviews.

Jayanthi:

Jayanthi and I had a very unique relationship, as she was not only an SMVS group member, but had also served as a host mother to American students for the SITA (South India Term Abroad) program. This made her more familiar with American cultural practices compared to other group members and so it was most often she who explained parts of American culture to other group members when I was not able to express them in my broken Tamil. Jayanthi was also prone to exhibiting her English-speaking skills by conversing with me and watching other group members curiously try to figure out what we were talking about.

Jayanthi was a prominent character in the group, as she was known for being the group “clown” and also for being the one who had “style” (matching bangles and saris, etc.). Although she was a traditionally low caste Nadar, her natal family had been very successful. However, after marriage she felt that her socioeconomic status had been lowered because her husband only ran a small auto parts shop. Regardless of how Jayanthi viewed her socioeconomic status, most people in the neighborhood considered her to have

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100 The word “style” was almost always said in English. I believe that part of the reason for this stemmed from the English word’s connection to a popular film song “Style” in the Rajini Kanth film “Sivaji;” yet, although Jayanthi was considered stylish in her wearing of saris and bangles, I also sensed that the English word “style” connoted a kind of sophistication associated with a western lifestyle.
more “amenities” (*vacatikal*)\(^{101}\) than other group members, and she was definitely aware and proud of this perception. By engaging in conspicuous consumption\(^{102}\), Jayanthi had also established her family’s status through the “grand” marriage of her daughter to an upper-class family in a very upper-class wedding hall in Madurai.

Jayanthi’s display of wealth affected her interactions with SMVS members and other neighborhood women who were of a higher caste as well. For example, Jayanthi had the expendable wealth to modify certain Hindu traditions that were traditionally reserved for higher castes (who have historically aligned with higher socioeconomic classes in India).\(^ {103}\) Jayanthi’s socioeconomic status also facilitated her interactions with other higher caste women in that she was able to plan and participate more in the SMVS group, providing money for the group’s ‘tour’ van, etc. Due to her involvement in the planning process, higher caste women in the SMVS group took her participation to reflect a dedication to “orthodox” Hindu worship practices, not stereotypically associated with lower caste spirituality (Kapadia 1995). Indeed, it was Jayanthi’s bhakti involvement (*bhakti īṭupātu*) and her expendable wealth that frequently allowed her caste affiliation to be overwritten/ignored.

While Jayanthi was outgoing during most group and neighborhood functions, when it came to my recording of her life (hi)story, she was rather reserved. Her entire interview...

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101 “*Vacatikal*” can be used as a noun, for example to describe things such as a water filter or a washing machine. It can also be modified into an adverb, “*vacatiyāka*” which describes a person’s way of living and connotes socioeconomic class status. For example, the mother and father of a potential bridegroom once came to my house-owner’s house for a *peṇ pārkka* of their daughter. The visitors later rejected the girl, but did not give a straightforward answer. My house-owner stated that it was because her family was “*vacatiyāka illai,*” or, did not have a high enough socioeconomic status (which was represented by the amount of “amenities” in their home) to impress the bridegroom’s mother and father. See Chapter Four for a further discussion of this topic.

102 “Conspicuous consumption” can be defined as a practice in which status and wealth are shown through a display of objects purchased and/or consumed. It can also be shown through the giving of what would be culturally (and hence, mutually) understood as extravagant gifts to others. See Fuller 1996, Van Hollen 2003 for further discussion.

103 See Chapter One.
session lasted approximately one and a half hours, half of that period devoted to the questions that I usually left for the second session. Certainly Jayanthi’s life (hi)story recording was beneficial to the project, but much more of what I know about her came from side conversations in English and observations of her in group settings.

**Shanti:**

From the first time I met her, I found Shanti to be a fascinating character in the group (and her two-part, five-hour-long life (hi)story interview only solidified my interest). Upon arriving to carry out my dissertation research in August 2009, I was quickly informed that the Goddess had come to Shanti (*cāmi vantuccu*) during Thiruvillaku Puja at Uma Amma’s home. While possessed by the Goddess, she had commented that God was “not in” Uma Amma’s house (meaning Uma Amma was not as spiritual as she seemed). This obviously offended Uma Amma and compelled her to establish a new group rule that when people became possessed, they needed to control themselves or they shouldn’t participate in the function at all.105

While my first impression of Shanti was based on inter-group controversy, I also later learned about her involvement in controversy outside of the group- mainly, her love marriage to a man of lower caste. Shanti was raised a Brahmin and she married a Mudaliyar (although she continually emphasized that he was a “Saiva Mudaliyar”, or a vegetarian Mudaliyar and therefore of higher rank). During her interview, Shanti described the hardships that she had undergone as a result of her decision to have a love marriage

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104 Literally, “holy oil lamp.” Thiruvillaku Puja is a worship practice usually undertaken during the Tamil months of Tāy and Āṭi (although it can occur during other major goddess festivals as well). During Thiruvillaku Puja, a *cumānkali* (auspicious married woman) form of the Goddess is worshipped, as she is thought to understand “female concerns” such as widowhood and infertility (Reynolds 1980:50, see also Hancock 1999:126).

105 For an analysis of these events, see Chapter Seven.
and stated that, perhaps not surprisingly, both of her daughters had had arranged marriages.

Yet another controversy/dramatic episode that involved Shanti was the cliquey inter-group friendship (what SMVS group members would call a “thick” friendship) between Jayanthi and Shanti. Not only had Shanti said that God was “not in” Uma Amma’s house that day, but she also said something to that effect about Jayanthi, a member with whom she had a “thick” friendship at the time. Needless to say, this negatively altered their friendship and when I arrived in August of 2009, they were not speaking to each other. This not only affected their interactions with each other, but also the dynamic of the group because next to Jayanthi, Shanti was the other group “clown” - always singing film songs and initiating “I spy” games in the van on temple tours. When Jayanthi and Shanti were getting along, the mood of the group’s trips was much more carefree; however, immediately after Shanti’s “revelation,” the entertainment of the group members alternated between the two women.

As mentioned above, Shanti provided me with a total of five hours worth of tape. She was known to be outspoken (obviously her comments when possessed only encouraged this characterization), and so it did not surprise other group members when they inquired about the length of Shanti’s interview. Near the end of the second session, Shanti surprised me in doing something no other group member (including Uma Amma) had done – she turned the interview around to focus on me, asking me why all of the information I was collecting was important to myself and the wider public. I replied that people in America were curious about the way the SMVS women lived their lives and
needed to know about other cultures so that they could better understand themselves. She seemed to be satisfied with that answer and allowed the interview to continue.

“Teacher”:

“Teacher’s” given name was Sudandaradevi (lit. Independence Devi), as she was born one month after India gained independence from Britain. She acquired the moniker “Teacher” because she came from a family of teachers and worked as a teacher herself for many years. For all of the time I have spent with the group, I have never once heard another group member refer to her as anything but “Teacher.”

Teacher and I developed a close bond from the start of my involvement with the SMVS group. This wasn’t because she knew a lot about American culture like Jayanthi, or because she felt personally responsible for me like Uma Amma; but because by chance we were seated next to each other during the wedding ceremony of Uma Amma’s granddaughter in 2008 (an event attended by the entire SMVS group). During the ceremony, Teacher endured my incessant questions about the meanings of particular rituals (an incident I now consider to be a reflection my naïveté as a budding anthropologist, since I was asking her to explain very complicated “orthodox” Brahmin marriage rituals with which she was likely unfamiliar considering she was of the relatively low Thevar caste). Teacher had the patience (that many other group members did not) to explain to me what was going on over and over again in Tamil until I was at least somewhat satisfied with my comprehension and documentation of events. Although observant of the complicated wedding rituals, I was oblivious to the group members’ monitoring of my actions – from this event forward I was considered to be especially “thick” (close) with Teacher. So, when I returned to Madurai for the actual dissertation research, it was
Teacher who first embraced me (which is a rather abnormal greeting amongst these women) and welcomed me back into the group. Throughout my most recent stay in Madurai, our relationship only got stronger and I spent many a day with her at her home, chatting and eating (she made an amazing chicken fry).

The main drama in Teacher’s life while I was in Madurai revolved around the marriage of her son, Mukesh, a dilemma which occupied many of Teacher’s conversations with not only myself, but Uma Amma and other group members as well. Teacher’s daughter-in-law had decided to move back to her natal home, taking Teacher’s grandchild with her. Teacher blamed herself for Mukesh’s misfortune (having a misbehaved wife) because she had had to arrange his marriage alone and in haste. Her husband had died and left her to support herself and Mukesh with his pension. Figuring that the family income was only going to dwindle from that point onward, she decided Mukesh should marry before they looked like paupers and could not find a respectable wife. There was not a conversation between Teacher and I that did not at least touch on Teacher’s guilt and sorrow.

I interviewed Teacher over two sessions to collect her life (hi)story. At the time of the recording, Teacher and I had exceeded the group members’ expectations of our friendship and hence there is far more giggling and joking as one listens to our conversation. Both interviews were conducted after I had spent most of the day in her home, which was not the case with most of my other interviews (excepting Latha, who was my house-owner).
Latha:

I refer to Latha as my “Indian mother” because it feels as though, after knowing and living with her for so many years, I am at least an honorary member of her family. I think Latha would agree with this statement, for, during the wedding of her daughter Radhika, she would introduce me to guests as her “muttu poṇṇu,” or first/oldest daughter.

Latha and I have had our ups and downs to be sure, but I believe these incidents to be indicative of how close our relationship was and is. There was a time during the field research when I received news about an ex-boyfriend from home, sending me into a bout of depression and feeling sorry for myself. Just when I thought I had no one around me who would understand (since male-female relationships are usually quite different in Indian culture), my “Indian mother” was there to gently rub her hands down the side of my face (in Tamil culture, a way of comforting another person) and tell me that I would find someone better. There was the incidence of my feeling ill during Saraswathi Puja\(^\text{106}\) and hence my absence during the puja. I was scolded for this offense through Latha’s primary mode of empowerment – a passive aggressive guilt trip – and did not speak to her for approximately twenty-four hours. Then there was the death of Latha’s father, a man with whom I had become close at the beginning of my research. Latha, along with her mother, Gomathy, taught me how to comfort and react to death according to Tamil culture. I experienced my own sense of loss at his sudden death. I did not have these kinds of interactions with any of the other group members. Latha saw me develop into the woman and anthropologist that I am today over a span of five years. She was my primary

\(^{106}\)Saraswathi is a form of the Goddess associated with education. The final day (as well as the two days prior) of the festival of Navarātri is dedicated to her and is referred to as “Saraswathi Puja,” during which anything which can be associated with education or success (e.g., books, shop windows, motorcycles, cars) is blessed and demarcated with a dot or splash of sandalwood paste covered with another dot of kuṅkumam (vermilion powder). See Chapter Six.
informant and mediator when group members were weary of my presence and participation in the group. She was my protector when I thought I had done something that would offend Uma Amma. She facilitated an uncountable number of introductions and interviews that have led to my successes as a graduate student.

Latha’s position in the group was unique in that she was the only Brahmin woman besides Uma Amma (Shanti had the precarious position of being born a Brahmin and being associated with that caste by other group members, yet she did not identify herself as belonging to the Brahmin community due to her “love marriage”) in the SMVS group. Latha not only identified as a Brahmin, she felt herself to be a very “orthodox” and “proper” Tamil Brahmin woman. She was forever reprimanding her husband and two children as they broke what they considered to be archaic caste restrictions and while she may not have been as outwardly casteist as her mother, Latha’s conceptions of Brahmin superiority were not completely concealed. She was disgusted with the thought of eating meat and treated the local low caste iron man and her Sourastra servant, Chandra, as sub-human. More than once Latha expressed to me that non-Brahmins would never be able to pronounce Sanskrit culōkaṅkal properly, and was thrown off balance when I drew her attention to the fact that many non-Brahmin women in the SMVS group were, in fact, formally studying Sanskrit to achieve correct pronunciation.

I first collected portions of Latha’s life (hi)story when I was writing my final report for the American Institute of Indian Studies Tamil Language Program in 2008. I then collected another life (hi)story from Latha following the two-session format during 2009-2010. Although Latha and I had/have such a close relationship, I am reluctant to describe her interviews as the most “open” or “in-depth.” True, my relationship with her allowed
me to feel free to ask more challenging questions about caste and gender, but she would often give a shy smile or giggle instead of answering those queries. Having said this, I would still argue that I learned the most about caste and gender in Tamilnadu from Latha, as my general daily routine was to shadow her actions and experiences.

**Kritika:**

Kritika’s actual name was “Uma;” however, because the SMVS group’s guru/leader was also named Uma, her name was changed by the guru to “Kritika.” Kritika and her family occupied the house next to Latha’s on Kurinji Jayanthir Cross Street. It seemed like no matter what the hour, there was always some kind of loud noise coming from Kritika’s home – she and her children spoke extremely loudly in general, but there was also the clamor of banging pots and pans as they fell on the concrete near the outdoor water spicket during their washing. Kritika’s home and outward appearance were almost always disheveled. She had wild wiry hair that would stick out in all directions even after she had combed it and her saris were never ironed and almost always had some kind of stain on them. She was also notoriously late, which often delayed the group’s departure for tours and other functions. Most of the other group members would roll their eyes at Kritika and her antics, as she was exceptionally dramatic in her speech and recollection of events and it was evident that she was prone to exaggeration for the sake of getting attention.

Given her penchant for non-stop talking and dramatic descriptions, I expected Kritika’s interview to be one of my more entertaining meetings, and it was. However, my relationship with Kritika later soured when I, like several other group members before me, became fed up with her dramatic and exploitative behavior. One day, Kritika relayed to me that she would not be attending the SMVS group’s instructional class. At the time that she
notified me of this, I was frantically running up and down the stairs to my flat because I was going to be late for the class myself. As I hurried about, Kritika then asked me if I could inform Uma Amma that she would not be attending (Uma Amma could be very strict when it came to attendance). Normally, this would not have been a problem, but I was evidently busy myself on this day and felt as though she were using me as her personal messenger service. I asked her under my breath why she could not call Uma Amma herself, given that her family owns four cell phones. At this she developed an irritated countenance, and so I finally acquiesced, knowing that I still had to collect a second session life (hi)story account from her in the future. But the further I thought about her actions, the more annoyed I became (I had reached the point in my fieldwork where I was feeling a bit taken advantage of by many of my informants and perhaps she felt the same). I vented my frustration to Latha and her daughter as I quickly ate morning tiffin before setting out. I rhetorically asked Latha and her daughter, “Does she not have a phone? Why is this my responsibility? And further, why does she always ask you to wake her up in the morning before a tour? Does she not have an alarm? Why is that your responsibility?” Little did I know that Kritika was returning from a neighbor’s house and walking past Latha’s doorway at the same moment I was voicing my irritation. I quickly ran outside to allay any more trouble with Kritika, but it was too late. She had by then formulated a new and scornful opinion of me and there was nothing I could do. Kritika, blatantly alerting neighbors to the event, dramatically rejected my incessant apologies as I followed her down the street. I finally managed to convince her to forgive me, but that was the end of any more interviews with Kritika.
Luckily, before this incident I collected a nearly two-hour life (hi)story account from Kritika. As I now reflect on this interaction, I interpret our relationship as one of mutual self-interest in that she wanted to develop a rapport with me so that I would do things for her, and I wanted to develop a rapport with her in order to collect what I felt to be necessary information.

Satya Amma:

Satya Amma, a middle-caste Mudaliyar, was one of the earliest residents of Krishnapuram Colony and hence, had a valuable relationship with the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple priest and trustees. For years, she had visited the temple and would sing/recite *culōkaṅkaḷ* during weekly pujas. This leadership position continued after Satya Amma joined Uma Amma’s SMVS group, as onlookers, as well as myself, considered her to be “second in command” in SMVS hierarchy. For example, she was given most of the organizing responsibilities for group tours and was also requested by Uma Amma to give a speech at the group’s Annual Day event.

Satya Amma was very close to several of the group members, including Latha. Although I am not in a position to evaluate why Latha and Satya Amma had such a close relationship, it often seemed as though Satya Amma palled around with Latha in order to learn what she considered to be “orthodox” Brahmin practices. In particular, if Latha’s mother was in town, Satya Amma would come to Latha’s house without fail so that she

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107 “Annual Day” is an event most often celebrated by school children with games and other playful activities on their school grounds. As is indicated by the name, the event happens once per year and does not seem to be attached to any other local or national holiday. While the SMVS women called the event “Annual Day,” they were actually celebrating the SMVS group’s ten-year anniversary and had not held an “Annual Day” celebration in previous years. The SMVS celebration consisted of several games, at least three speeches, and a “lucky draw” (similar to a raffle). For further discussion of this event, see Chapter Seven.
could learn traditional Brahmin songs and *culōkaṅkal* firsthand. She was also enrolled in formal Sanskrit classes and had just written her third-year exam when I arrived in Madurai.

During my interviews with Satya Amma, she seemed to be overwhelmingly concerned with providing me with the “right” answers. While many anthropologists have noted this type of response in describing interview contexts, I also felt that she engaged with me in this way because she did not want to describe many of her life events – her mother had died when she was young and it was a sensitive topic. I recall leaving her home after the first interview and feeling disheartened with what I had recorded. I expected Satya Amma to speak a great deal on a variety of topics because I had seen her interact with others in the community and she seemed to understand (more than other group members) the purpose of my research. This may have been a misconception on my part.

**Jeyalakshmi:**

In reflecting on my interactions and relationship with Jeyalakshmi, I would consider her the “toughest nut to crack,” so to speak. Her demeanor in general was very shy and quiet and she was often teased for this behavior during group meetings (they also called her “Mona Lisa” because of her shy smile). Yet, Jeyalakshmi also had reason for being reserved and guarded, as she had been through some difficult life events.

Jeyalakshmi’s parents had died when she was very young and so she had been raised by her grandparents. Latha, Jeyalakshmi’s closest/“thickest” friend, often speculated that this was the reason Jeyalakshmi was so hesitant to speak with me about her life (hi)story. Jeyalakshmi’s current living situation was also one characterized by heartache, as her son and only child was quite disrespectful in his actions. He lived rent-free in the top portion of Jeyalakshmi’s home and most of his expenses were financed by his parents, yet
he would hardly speak to them and when they were ill, he showed little concern. These circumstances were not surprising given Jeyalakshmi and her husband's interactions with their son after he secretly married a girl of a lower caste. However, regardless of whether Jeyalakshmi and her husband's reactions were warranted, their son was taking advantage of their generosity and treating them poorly. This situation was a constant worry to Jeyalakshmi, even though she may not have voiced her concerns the way group members like “Teacher” were wont to do.

Jeyalakshmi and I officially bonded after the death of Latha’s father. Latha and the rest of my host family were required to participate in death rituals in Chennai for the duration of two weeks. Before leaving, Latha, thinking that I was not able to cook for myself, asked Jeyalakshmi if she would be willing to feed me in her absence. For two weeks, I ate with Jeyalakshmi, her husband, and her overactive grandson (he was permitted to visit his grandparents, which served as one of Jeyalakshmi’s only joys). Near the end of this bonding period, Jeyalakshmi told me that I was “like her child” (*en kuḻantai mādiri*), but I was still far from persuading her to divulge personal information in an interview.

It wasn’t until a month before I left the field (October 2010), that I finally recorded Jeyalakshmi’s life history. I had prepared myself for a struggle even after over a year of exposure to my presence and furnishing a list of the questions I might ask. Therefore, I was overwhelmingly surprised when Jeyalakshmi talked to me non-stop for one and a half hours, relaying her life as a nurse in Madurai and providing me with fascinating information about the village in which she had grown up. Indeed, this interview solidified a closeness between Jeyalakshmi and myself, one that I think she considered inevitable, as
she was such a close friend to Latha, my “Indian mother.” My last memory of Jeyalakshmi is
she and Latha standing outside the gate of my house, waving and crying as the auto
rickshaw drove me out of Krishnapuram Colony for the last time.

Rani:

Rani was widowed at a young age and had struggled to raise her two sons on her
own. Despite her hardships, she was one of the most jovial group members (her laugh was
contagious). She was also the brunt of group jokes about her sleeping habits, as she was
almost always tired and could sleep anywhere.

Rani’s involvement in the group had dwindled somewhat by the time I arrived in
Madurai. Besides the recurring effects of Chikungunya\footnote{The CDC describes Chikungunya as “a viral disease transmitted to humans by the bite of infected mosquitoes” (http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/chikungunya/) 2011). It was prevalent in Madurai, as well as other parts of Tamilnadu during the research period.} giving her trouble, she was also
preoccupied with searching for a marriage alliance for her eldest son. Nevertheless, I was
not only able to interview Rani, but also given the opportunity to visit some local temples
and the suburban area of Madurai in which she had lived in a joint family after her
marriage.

After she had taken me to visit the area in which she lived after marriage, Rani was
eager for me to stay overnight in her home, as we had returned to our neighborhood rather
late that night. However, I was reluctant to stay with Rani – her home was considered
rather dirty by myself and other group members, and in addition, I lived in close proximity
to her house, so I could have easily walked home without issue. But Rani was insistent that
I stay at her home (it later occurred to me that she was lonely and wanted company) and so
I consented. Next to this incident, the time I spent with Rani consisted of searching for a
bride for her son on Tamilmatrimony.com. She was uncertain of how to match up birth stars (naṭcattiraṇkaj), so she would often come to Latha’s home in order to utilize her horoscope-reading skills (which overlapped with conceptions of her superior Brahmin knowledge) and access to my laptop.

The actual life (hi)story interview I collected from Rani was somewhat disappointing. Including my second session questions, she spoke for not more than forty-five minutes. I am unsure as to how much of this lack of conversation reflected her anxiety and skepticism about my positionality, but I do know that Rani never became accustomed to my English-accented Tamil speech. At times during the interview I felt as though she did not want to speak incessantly for fear that my speaking skills were an indicator of my Tamil comprehension.

Usha:

Usha was one of the two group members who refused to give me an interview during my time in Madurai between 2007 and 2008. Hence, I was especially intimidated to interact with, let alone interview, her. I first felt that I had underestimated Usha’s fondness of me when the SMVS group went on our five-day temple tour in Karnataka. As there is in almost every south Indian temple complex’s vicinity, there was a shopping quarter where devotees could buy anything from porcelain/plastic idols of gods and goddesses, to everyday-use objects like glass bangles and cheap faded hair bands. I was browsing with the other group members when Usha turned to me and asked me to see if a particular set of glass bangles would fit my hand. I had assumed that she was purchasing these bangles for someone who wore the same bangle size (aḷavu) as myself, but it came to pass that she was
actually planning to buy them as a gift for me. While the bangles did not end up fitting my wrist, this episode at least led me to rethink Usha’s feelings towards me.

Part of my interpretation of Usha’s actions/feelings may have been due to her embittered demeanor. An instance during which Usha demonstrated this behavior was during a group visit to a member’s natal village. After lunch, all of the women were sitting outside enjoying the village breeze and scenery. Latha and Jeyalakshmi were sitting next to each other as usual, as they were known to be close friends. It wasn’t long before Usha commented in front of the entire group that Latha and Jeyalakshmi had not invited her on their recent walk to the local temple, even though both of the women knew that Usha would be going to the special temple event. Usha blamed her exclusion on Latha and Jeyalakshmi being “thick” friends who excluded others from their activities. Latha responded that she was “thick” friends with all of the group members, but this did not gain her any ground – Usha was convinced that the women had strategically alluded her. Shanti, being an outspoken member of the group, added to the conversation that she had never been invited to go the temple with either Latha or Jeyalakshmi. She then chastised Usha, saying that she should be more independent instead of relying on others for her contentment with life. Before Usha could respond, Uma Amma had quashed the conversation and was leading us towards the next temple on the tour.

Given Usha’s propensity towards bitterness and my feelings of intimidation attached to it, I went into the interview expecting a rather short and unhelpful session. While I did not hide my intentions to collect an interview, Usha had chosen to consider my visit as

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109 Buying gifts for the white anthropologist guest/daughter/group member/neighbor became a sort of competition with most everyone saying when they gave me a gift, “you need something to remember me by.”

110 This statement is particularly interesting with respect to Shanti’s opinions on friendship and tradition presented in Chapter One.
more of a lunch engagement. This seemed to “break the ice” with Usha, as much as it was possible. She spoke for one and half hours including her answers to my second session questions. Throughout the interview she spoke quietly and hesitantly, constantly referring me to her husband for answers to questions (she was not the only group member to make this suggestion). Reflecting on the interview today, my anxiety about our dialogue no doubt affected the course of the interview. By the end of our session, I felt lucky just to have received the information she had chosen to impart.

**Aishwarya:**

Whereas my relationship with Usha was exceptionally volatile, Aishwarya and I had a far more intimate bond. Perhaps more so than any other group member, Aishwarya understood what it meant to carry out research, as her husband was a biologist who often shared his complicated studies of mosquito behavior with his wife and two sons. Aishwarya also had a respect for education that was reflected in her curiosity about my research along with her early girlhood demand that she be allowed to get a college education before marriage. Coming from a family with six children and being the eldest female, Aishwarya's insistence on a college education put quite a strain on the futures of her siblings. Nevertheless, her father agreed to let her study and the family adjusted marriage tradition to accommodate Aishwarya's wishes.

My relationship with Aishwarya grew immensely after I attended a five-day village temple festival in her father's village. I had previously mentioned to Shanmuglakshmi my desire to visit SMVS group members’ natal villages in order to understand differences between rural and urban living environments. Remembering this, Aishwarya invited me to

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111 As in so many other regions of India, the daughters in a family must be married off (from eldest to youngest) in order for the male siblings to begin searching for marriage alliances.
a celebration for Badra Kali in the village of Martandampatti. As an anthropologist who was studying and living in urban India, this village experience was one that illuminated so many of the ethnographic encounters that I had read/heard about during my training. Aishwarya could sense that I was overwhelmed by some portions of village life and was proud to be the one to introduce me to such a different aspect of Tamilnadu. During the trip, Aishwarya patiently and genuinely answered every question I asked, including some questions that were quite personal. For example, I would incessantly ask questions about her brother who had been chosen to “dance” the goddess (cāmi āṭuvar),112 as well as the village guardian deity (kāval dēvam), during the festival. I was also curious about Aishwarya’s family’s position at the center of village politics, specifically with regard to access to land and temples. The village trip allowed me to build rapport with Aishwarya’s family members and permitted me a unique and visible connection with them. These circumstances created, perhaps, a more affable atmosphere when it came to collecting Aishwarya’s life (hi)story.

Aishwarya’s life (hi)story was collected over two sessions. She spoke for one and a half hours during the first session after I prompted her to speak about her life (hi)story (vālkkai varalāru). The second session was more directed in that she answered my questions about societal change and definitions of middle classness. In addition, because of our familiarity, I was able to spend a great deal of time observing Aishwarya’s day-to-day interactions, noting her multiple social networks, and intimately involving myself in the betrothal of her son.

112 For a full explication of “dancing” the goddess as a form of spirit possession, see Kapadia 1996.
**Divyamma:**

I met Divyamma several months into the research period, as she did not attend many of the SMVS group’s events. This was not due to a lack of interest, but was brought about by her husband’s strict rules pertaining to her whereabouts. During my first session interview with Divyamma she told me of her police officer husband’s sternness, mentioning that all of her friends outside of the SMVS were either right next door or directly across the street because she was not permitted to leave her house. She seemed to acknowledge that her husband’s rules were overbearing, but at the same time laughed off the situation. In order to dilute the severity of the restrictions imposed on her, Divyamma also argued that ever since her husband began attending the Sabari Jayanthi pilgrimage, he was more lenient with both she and her children. Nevertheless, upon her relaying this information to me in the interview, my facial expression was sure to have reflected my disapproval of the gender dynamic in her home.

Divyamma was considered a more knowledgeable devotee of Mariyamman in comparison to other SMVS women. This gave her more group responsibilities during the bi-annual poñgal-making rituals at the local Reserve Line Mariyamman temple. A large part of Divyamma’s knowledge of Mariyamman and poñgal-making (an act considered “traditional”) was attributed to her upbringing in the village. While other SMVS group members (such as Uma Amma and Latha) may have been familiar with Hindu traditions, their knowledge primarily revolved around what has been labeled by some as the “great tradition” of Hinduism (Singer 1972) and the corresponding higher strata of the Hindu pantheon (e.g. Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma). In contrast, Divyamma was considered
knowledgeable of “folk tradition” and “folk” gods and goddesses (e.g. Mariyamman, Muthumadaswamy, Karuppuswamy) due primarily to her life experiences in the village.

Despite the restrictions placed on her movements, Divyamma was known in the SMVS group as the one person who always had a smile on their face. Most of the SMVS group members partially utilized group instructional classes and functions as venues for lamenting their family troubles and worries, but I never witnessed Divyamma outwardly voice her personal frustrations in the group setting. Her perpetual and contagious smile carried over into my interview sessions with her and is reflected on the interview tapes in her incessant laughter. Due to her lack of attendance to SMVS group functions, I felt that I had built far less rapport with Divyamma and would therefore collect less information; however, she seemed to be equally open and comfortable during the interview sessions when compared to many of the other SMVS women. I held two interview sessions with Divyamma, the first being a recording of her life (hi)story (one and a half hours) and the second session revolving around my prepared interview questions (one and a half hours).

Thirumanikkam Jayanthi:

I first met Thirumanikkam Jayanthi on my second visit to south India. At the time, Jayanthi, named “Thirumanikkam Jayanthi” by SMVS group members to reference the name of her natal village, was living on the LIC Colony side of the SMVS group’s home neighborhood. Her cousin and long time member of the SMVS group, Tilakam, introduced her to life in Madurai’s suburbs and she quickly became acquainted with Uma Amma and

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113 For a detailed discussion of the position of Mariyamman in the Tamil Hindu pantheon (with particular reference to caste difference) see Kapadia 1996:159-160 and Waghorne 2004.

114 Thirumanikkam Jayanthi may have been labeled as such because Uma Amma’s daughter was also named Jayanthi and she occasionally joined us on group tours. I am unsure why the name of her natal village, as opposed to maybe a kin relationship or former occupation (e.g., “Divyamma” [lit. Divya’s mother] or “Advocate Usha” [referring to occupation as a lawyer]), was used to specify her identity in the SMVS group. No other group member was given such a moniker and throughout my time in south India, I have not encountered another individual who utilizes the name of their natal village in this way.
the SMVS group. Being one of the younger members of the SMVS group and exceptionally curious about life in the United States, Thirumanikkam Jayanthi and I formed a fast friendship and I visited her rented house in LIC Colony quite often.

By the time I returned for the dissertation research, Thirumanikkam Jayanthi had returned to her natal village with her husband (and maternal uncle) and son to live with her parents, however she still considered herself and was still considered by the group to be an SMVS group member (she even continued to purchase the latest group uniform saris).\(^{115}\) She was invited to all of the SMVS group’s tours and performances and was a regular guest at the weddings of group members’ children. Near the end of my visit and perhaps inspired by my experience in the natal village of Aishwarya, I decided to travel to Thirumanikkam Jayanthi’s village home. Upon my arrival there, I was given a quick tour of the village and then driven by motorcycle to Thirumanikkam Jayanthi’s family paddy fields. She explained with pride her father’s devotion to the management of his land and was eager to show me their family’s recently purchased water pump.

It was also on this visit that I undertook the collection of Thirumanikkam Jayanthi’s life (hi)story. We sat for hours under a sluggish fan in the main hall of her family’s home as she not only told me about her life, but also took the opportunity to share her knowledge of Hinduism and lecture about Hindu-Muslim relations in modern India. Although during my fifteen months in south India Thirumanikkam Jayanthi lived rather far away, my rapport with her was such that we could share our opinions about controversial topics and cross-cultural difference, both of us understanding our interactions as beneficial learning experiences. Due to the travel that was required to undertake a face-to-face interview with

\(^{115}\) See Chapter Seven.
Thirumanikkam Jayanthi, and also because I was only able to interview her near the end of my trip, Thirumanikkam Jayanthi’s life (hi)story was collected in one long interview, albeit interrupted by the curiosity of neighbors and family members. In total, Thirumanikkam Jayanthi and I spoke for a little over two hours and her perspective as the youngest member of the SMVS group was quite unique.

“Advocate” Usha:

If you asked most group members, Advocate Usha was not a true member of the SMVS group, as she spent most of her time running her law office on the top floor of her home and very rarely attended group events. However, because Uma Amma had become friends with her and she was interested in Hindu spirituality (Hindu ānmikam), most of the SMVS group members knew her and welcomed her on the rare occasion when she attended an event or tour. On some occasions group members seemed to value her spiritual knowledge and involvement above other group members and I believe some of this was due in part to her socioeconomic status in the community. Since she and her husband were both successful advocates (lawyers) in Madurai, she was unlike many of the main SMVS group members in a variety of ways. Her family income was much larger than that of the average SMVS group member and this showed in her style of dress, the size of her home, and the extravagant marriage that was put on for her only daughter.

Advocate Usha and her husband were also more cosmopolitan when it came to local customs and Hindu practice and this facilitated the development of a different relationship between Advocate Usha and myself. In her interview with me, she did not hesitate to chastise certain practices in South Asian culture, particularly caste and gender discrimination, as well as narrow interpretations of Hindu thought. She herself had had a
love marriage and allowed her children to do the same. Several times she invoked Gandhian principles in explanation of her life philosophy.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I have elucidated and portrayed my complex relationships with my interlocutors. I have also described the multiple methodologies utilized during the research period, explicating their necessity to the project. It is my intention that this chapter provide a foundation for the passages and experiences discussed in the following, more detailed chapters. This foundation includes a reflexive discussion of my positionality, so that the readers of this dissertation understand my theoretical and methodological inclinations from the outset. It should be clear that the following dissertation is constructed using my interpretation of events, many of these events being formed during dialogic encounters within specific temporal and historical contexts.
CHAPTER THREE

“I cannot forget my ār”

“...the village...is...a locus of memory and nostalgia that is both reinforced and transcended in constructions of identity” – Ishita Banerjee-Dube 2010:156.

During an SMVS group class meeting, I was approached by a group member, Aishwarya, and invited to attend the annual Badra Kali festival in her natal village, Martandampatti. She was eager to show me how spirituality (ānmikam) and religiosity were practiced in a village setting, as she thought this material would be useful for my research project.116 I eagerly accepted the invitation and rushed home to pack my bag, as we were to leave the next day. Upon informing my host mother (and SMVS group member) of my plans for a village excursion, her reaction was contrary to many of her previous descriptions of the village. While in earlier conversations she had described the village as beautiful and serene, she now warned me of the filth and disease that was sure to be rampant in the village and expressed her concern that my falling ill was imminent. This was the first of many incidents in which I noticed the precarious and complex nature of the village in the lives and memories of the urban SMVS women. In conjunction with axes of identity, such as caste, and situational context, the SMVS women adjusted their attitudes towards the lifestyles and behavior associated with rural environments in south India. I would soon learn firsthand how these lifestyles and behaviors manifested themselves in village life.

Aishwarya, myself, and about eight of her family members had a five-hour journey ahead of us. Some other members of Aishwarya’s family would follow, one being her youngest

116 As mentioned in Chapter Two, Aishwarya’s husband held a Ph.D. in Biology and she was college-educated herself. She was familiar with aspects of research that many other SMVS group members were not, since her husband often worked late at the lab or travelled internationally to undertake research projects.
sister-in-law who was just finishing her period of menstruation and hence lacked the ritual purity required to travel with us and enter the village grounds at this auspicious time. Among the family members who were travelling with us, however, was Aishwarya’s younger brother, Palani, who had grown up in the village with his grandparents and who had been designated many years before as the primary “dancer” of the goddess (primary person to be possessed by the goddess) during the annual festival. Aishwarya’s nephew had also joined us on the trip. He had transformed himself to be especially ritually pure for the event, forgoing eating meat and sexual intercourse for several weeks prior to the festival. His ritually pure condition was marked by a bright yellow scrap of cotton tied to his right wrist. This had and would serve as an outward marker to others who could have accidentally polluted him with their inadvertent touch. It was also a social marker of his piety and religious persuasion. His mother, referred to simply as “Anni,” or older sister-in-law, was also making the journey with us. Since the death of Aishwarya’s parents, she was now the matriarch of the family and was responsible for all of the daily rituals in the home, as well as the necessary ancestor rituals that were to be performed on entry to the predominantly unoccupied village family home.

When we reached the entrance to the village, many people were already decorating the main street through which the procession for the goddess would take place. Before we could participate in the preparations, however, we first had to greet Aishwarya’s ancestors and do a small puja for them. It was not more than a few minutes after the puja had ended when I heard a strange kind of grunting coming from the courtyard of the family’s large village house. Upon investigation, I found Aishwarya’s brother, Palani, intermittently producing these noises and jolting with increasing regularity. Finally, Palani jumped up and
ran out the door to the temple – he had felt the presence of the Goddess within him and needed to begin his ritual obligations for the festival.

The three main days of the festival were filled with non-stop activity. One evening, there was a Thiruvillakku Puja\textsuperscript{117} in the temple in which 100-150 women participated. This scene caught me off guard, as I had been told by one SMVS group member that the public temple performance of Thiruvillakku Puja was an urban phenomenon. To add to my surprise, there were also few restrictions for women's participation in the puja, as cumaṅkalikal, unmarried girls and widows were all allowed to perform the ritual. The participants each contributed fifty rupees and at the conclusion of the puja each woman received a piece of off-brand Tupperware, vermillion and turmeric powders, a few bangles, and a “blouse bit.”\textsuperscript{118}

At the culmination of the Thiruvillakku Puja, the main festival procession took place. Palani, as Badra Kali, visited homes, blessed devotees, and answered their questions about the future. The village heads had also hired a traditional dance troupe for entertainment after whose performance the women of the village and their female guests “hit kummi”\textsuperscript{119} in a circle. There were goat sacrifices, bhajans, midnight pujas and huge feasts.

\textsuperscript{117} Thiruvillakku Puja is a practice during which a thiruvillakku (holy lamp) is used to worship a cumaṅkali form of the goddess (most often Lakshmi).

\textsuperscript{118} A “blouse bit” is a usually cotton piece of cloth used to make women’s everyday choli blouses (blouses worn under saris). They are often given at women's participatory temple events and it is also common for Brahmín women to give female guests (of any caste) "blouse bits" (as well as maybe fruit, betel nut, and jasmine flowers) at the end of their visit. Brahmín women also disperse “blouse bits” to female family members on the event of a Brahmín girl's marriage and additionally at her cumaṅkali prarttanaī.

\textsuperscript{119} “Hitting” a kummi is a traditional (and rural according to my interlocutors) style of performance reserved for women. A group of women form a circle and move in a clockwise direction as they sing in call-and-response. While doing this, each woman also hits two sticks together (or claps their hands if there are no sticks) according to the beat of the particular kummi and in unison with the other women in the circle. The women also alternate hitting the sticks/clapping their hands on the interior and exterior sides of the circle. See figure 3.4.
Figure 3.1 Elaborate light decoration placed at the entrance to Aishwarya's natal village, Martandampatti, Tamilnadu, 2010.

Figure 3.2 Aishwarya’s brother, Palani, and his wife, Danalakshmi don their best for the village festival, 2010.

Figure 3.3 Traditional village dancers perform at the annual Badra Kali festival in Aishwarya’s natal village, Martandampatti, Tamilnadu, 2010.

Figure 3.4 Women “hitting” a kummi at the Badra Kali festival in Martandampatti, Tamilnadu, 2010.
While the actual residents of the village were few during the non-festival times, the returning members of families, their guests, and the guests of their guests significantly increased the village population during festival periods. These visitors felt a connection to and happiness regarding village life even though most of them had moved to nearby urban centers several years prior. On many occasions during my stay in the village, Aishwarya’s family members spoke of their year-round anticipation of the festival, as it was a joyful and celebratory time. Indeed, I myself had enjoyed my time there so much that I was quite disappointed when it came time to leave. Although I had been sleeping and bathing outside in the open, eating food that was not completely “sanitary,” and relieving myself in a field full of thorns, the festive environment had completely sold me on village life. I would soon have to return to the hot, dusty, and mosquito-ridden urban sprawl of Madurai.

In reflecting on my own perceptions of rural and urban difference in Tamilnadu, I immediately thought of the above village visit. While not necessarily an “everyday” representation of village life, it did highlight many cruxes of rural/urban difference for me - ritual pollution, spirit possession, ritual practice, amenity availability, and elements of sociality. This chapter is meant as a preface, a general discussion of rural/urban difference that will serve as a foundation for the successive chapters that deal with changes to particular women’s rituals as they relate to urbanization, modernization, and middle classness in contemporary south India.
Village, Town or City?

Among the SMVS group women (and others in Madurai), there was little consensus in defining the geographic entities of village, town and city. Of course, locations such as Chennai and Mumbai were agreed upon as urban centers; however, when it came to towns and villages around Madurai, there was less of an agreement. What some women would refer to as a “big village” (*periya kirāmam*), others would refer to as a “small town” (*cinna ūr*). Due to the constant discrepancy in definition, I often asked the women how they would describe the “big village” or “small town” in both the past and the present. This line of questioning also supplied me with historical details of locations across the state of Tamilnadu. Moreover, I was able to visit several of the locations of which the women spoke, which allowed me to visually understand the minute differences between “village,” “city,” and “town.”

I was also curious as to whether middle classness played a major role in forming contemporary village social distinctions. From previous visits to Madurai, I was quite familiar with middle classness in urban and suburban areas, but how was middle-class status performed in village life? Latha, a Brahmin SMVS group member, identified the village middle classes according to land ownership, an element parallel to urban middle-class status which is often determined by home ownership. Below is an excerpt from my conversation with Latha,

**Nicole:** In the village are there middle-class people?

**Latha:** Yes. In the village certainly (there is)...

**N:** Is there a difference? In the city* and in the village are middle-class people different? Different jobs?

**L:** Yes. Before in the village there was a lot of agriculture. Now little by little agriculture is reducing. They (middle classes) have a lot of lands. There are middle-class people.

**N:** Do the middle-class people do agricultural work?
L: No. They won’t work the land. They have lands* and they have people that work and they oversee them. Those people are laborers only.
N: Are they middle class?
L: Laborers* are not middle class. If you have a little land you are middle class. If you have a lot of lands* you are a rich person (laughs).

Aishwarya, the Nadar SMVS group member introduced at the beginning of this chapter, also offered a description of village middle classness, but argued that it was identical to that of the urban areas. We spoke about this,

N: so, in the village are there middle-class* people?
A: ah...yes...
N: okay...is there a difference? The middle class* in the city, the middle class* in the village...
A: they are the same
N: they are the same?
A: Ah...because there is not a person in the village that does not have a T.V.* In the village* they (people without a T.V.) are not there.
N: yes...
A: because it (the T.V.) is there they learn a lot.
N: yes...
A: they have them study well...
N: yes...
A: the middle class* is the same (in both places).

Aishwarya here implies that the similarity between the urban and rural middle classes can be likened to amenities, specifically, the television. She also locates the valuation of education as an element of middle classness in both locations.120

It should be noted that these differences in opinion are not just reflections of individual opinion or perspective. Latha’s portrayal of the middle class in village life as owners of land reflects her position as a Tamil Brahmin, a subsect of the Tamil population that by the close of the twentieth century had transformed itself “from a traditional, mainly rural caste elite into a modern, urban, middle-class community...” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:3). This almost complete rural to urban migration, as well as an assumed communal

120 For more on the Indian middle class’s valuation of education, see Chapter Four.
association with definitions of middle-class lifestyles (see Chapter One) may have prompted Latha to express rural middle-class identity with respect to social inequalities and previously-circumscribed Brahmin occupations, such as overseeing land. Aishwarya, on the other hand, comes from a much lower caste, but describes the rural middle classes in terms of social equality and material possessions. Indeed, her lower caste family is now quite reputable and wealthy in her father's natal village\footnote{Similar to the Eighteen-Village Vattimas of Narasimhan's research (see, for example Narasimhan 2011, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). Aishwarya’s family also makes monetary contributions to the Martandampatti village temples. However, Latha’s Brahmin family does not maintain this same connection. This may have to do with the differences between Tamil Brahmins and non-Brahmins when it comes to migration and attachment to the land. Excepting some populations, like the Eighteen-Village Vattima, Fuller and Narasimhan have found that compared to urban Tamil Brahmins, “non-Brahman urban migrants are quite likely to retain family land and sell it only if their farms are small and unprofitable (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:53). They argue that this has much to do with an overall “detached, unsentimental attitude to land” held by Tamil Brahmins (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:54). Connections between Tamil non-Brahmins and natal villages will be further discussed in relationship to menstruation rituals in Chapter Five.} where, incidentally, no Brahmins reside.

The particular (and often removed) relationship with village life held by Tamil Brahmins must also be considered when reflecting on specific depictions of village life, both past and present, that are presented later in this chapter. Today many akkīrakāraṇkal, or traditional Brahmin enclaves, are inhabited primarily by non-Brahmin castes who moved in after the mass migration of Tamil Brahmins to urban centers like Chennai (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:38-39). Hence, in many discussions, Tamil Brahmins express nostalgia for the village life of the past during which they held positions as rural elites (see Latha’s description below); however, they tend to stereotype present village life as unclean and indecent (see vignette above). While not overtly communicated to me by my interlocutors, I believe this negative conception of current village life is in some ways influenced by the assumed ritual pollution of lower castes and the uncleanliness of the non-vegetarian food they consume in the once ritually pure akkīrakāram space.
While the subject of class status in the Tamil village is relatively new in scholarly discussions (see Kapadia 1995, Fuller and Narasimhan 2008), caste divisions in Tamil villages and Indian villages more broadly have a long history of being recorded (see, for example, Beteille 1965, Moffatt 1979, Wadley 1994, Mines 2005). For instance, in his 1979 monograph concerning the village of Endavur, Michael Moffatt describes the geographical division of the Tamil village (*kirāmam*) into the ūr and the *cēri.*122 Within the boundaries of the ūr live all castes that are not relegated to the social category “untouchable,” or “harijan.” The *cēri*123 is constituted by the residences of the untouchable castes (Moffatt 1979:64, see also Beteille 1965, Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1975, Levinson 1982, Kolenda 2003). According to Moffatt, this division between untouchable and caste Hindus is also maintained through access to Hindu temples. The people of the ūr worship the goddess at the temple built for her within the boundaries of the ūr, while the people who reside in the *cēri* must worship her in their own temple that is located outside of the ūr (Moffatt 1979:87, see also Mines 2005:18).

Other studies of Tamil villages note a particular geographical distinction known as the *akkirakāram,* or demarcated living area of Tamil Brahmins (Gough 1956, Beteille 1965,

122 There is a significant amount of intricacy involved in parsing out these spatial delineations. Fuller and Narasimhan have noted that “*kirāmam*” is a Tamilized Sanskrit word that is predominantly used by Tamil Brahmins, as it “is a locally understood variant of *agrahāram*” and argue that the term “ūr” is instead used by non-Brahmins (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:47-48). E. Valentine Daniel has argued that *kirāmam,* amongst non-Brahmins often “refers to the ‘revenue village,’ an administrative unit, whereas ūr is used for the village as a social unit that people may identify as their home” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:47, see also Daniel 1984). Amongst the women of the urban multi-caste SMVS group in Madurai, “*kirāmam*” was used to refer to a village visit/tour and also seemed to be the more common term to refer to a village. Notably, “ūr” was predominantly used by the SMVS women in the context of talking about their natal village, their “*contu ūr.*” This variance offers insight into how linguistic references and their attached symbolic meanings are perceived and reformulated in the context of changing identity emphases and urban life in India.

123 In some areas, “*cēri*” is considered derogatory and so the term “colony” is used (see Weiz 2010:136).
Kolenda 2003, Mines 2005, Narasimhan 2006, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). Latha described caste demarcations in her natal *akkirakāram* near Kumbakonam in this way,

> It was strict. Others could not come... Chettiyars were in a different area. In the *akkirakāram*... was fully Brahmans. There were 60 houses and all 60 houses were Brahmans houses. That was when I was young. After, people left their houses, went to another ūr, and then other castes came and bought the houses. When grandmother-grandfather (pāṭṭi-tāṭta) were little it was fully only Brahmans. 60 houses. On that side 30, on that side 30. All of the houses had Brahmans only. Now all the Brahmans have left their houses and have gone to Chennai. They have settled in Chennai. So now there are only 4-5 Brahmans (in the village *akkirakāram*). All the other castes have bought the houses.

Here, Latha not only outlines how the *akkirakāram* was implicit in rural social divisions, but also comments on the changes that have occurred in her natal village over generations, mirroring what Fuller and Narasimhan (2014) found in their research. She references the migration of Tamilnadu’s already few Brahmans to major urban centers such as Chennai and describes the gradual change in social make-up of the traditional *akkirakāram*.

These *akkirakāraṅkaḷ* are also often positioned to be in the direct gaze of temple deities (Mines 2005:13, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:38). Moving outward from a traditional Tamil *akkirakāram* and the village temple(s), are concentric rings of streets, each one associated with and named for a specific caste, each one losing ritual purity as it moves away from the central *akkirakāram*. These streets constitute the ūr, as defined by Moffat above.

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124 Fuller and Narasimhan expound upon the meaning of the word *akkirakāram*, explaining that these enclaves were "village lands donated to Brahmans by Hindu kings between the medieval and late precolonial periods" (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:30). They reveal that the term *akkirakāram* has only come to mean "an exclusively Brahman street or residential quarter" in more recent times (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:31).

125 See discussion of access restriction by caste in Chapter One.

126 In the 1931 Census of Tamilnadu, the last census to record caste affiliation, Brahmans were listed as less than 3% of the population ([www.nationmaster.com](http://www.nationmaster.com), see also Mines 2009).
In addition to rural *akkiraṅkaḷ*, I found that informal *akkiraṅkaḷ* continue to exist in Tamil suburban landscapes as well. For instance, the street on which the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple is located, while not completely occupied by Brahmin houses, is the location of a large majority of Brahmin residences in the area, maintaining the cultural association between Brahmins and ritual purity. It also upholds the caste-embedded meaning of the *akkirakāram* as “not only a physical unit” but also “a community and a way of life” (Beteille 1996:29). Krishnapuram Colony\(^\text{127}\) also once denoted an urban division of the Brahmin caste. As mentioned in Chapter One, the area was originally named the Bank Employees’ Colony and referred to a previously common professional occupation of Brahmins instead of using the formal term, *akkirakāram*. Today, there are few Brahmins left in Krishnapuram Colony,\(^\text{128}\) but those that remain were always quick to remind me of its original name, and covertly, its original ritually pure inhabitants.

**Figure 3.5** View of a contemporary *akkirakāram* from the entrance of a local village temple, 2010.

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\(^{127}\) While above it was mentioned that “colony” is also considered a less derogatory term for “cēri,” or Dalit caste area (see footnote 8), the use of “colony” with respect to Krishnapuram Colony was not employed to signify the area as one occupied by scheduled castes.

\(^{128}\) While this is the case if one were to look at the actual numbers, I once overheard a conversation between Uma Amma and a friend who, when Uma Amma mentioned that I lived on Kurinji Malar Cross Street, responded, “Oh! A Brahmin neighborhood!”
A portion of the women in the SMVS group represent the first generation of their family to inhabit an urban living environment. They have predominantly grown up in rural villages where, as we briefly saw above and will see in more detail below, life differs considerably from the urban lives that they currently experience. For example, while informal *akkirakāraṇkaḷ* continue to exist in their local environment, caste barriers are much less distinct and Brahmins and ritually low caste Nadars (Fuller 1984, Hardgrave 1969) often live across the street from one another. With this proximity to several other castes and the condensed space of an urban living environment, some concerns about purity and pollution become negotiated and mediated. Following the idea that “in many (if not most) parts of India, people believe themselves to be at least partly constituted by the places where they were born, live and die” (Sax 2010:91, see also Daniel 1984), this chapter seeks to thickly describe these negotiations and mediations of identity as they pertain to specific Tamil Hindu women’s rituals.

*A Note on Interlocutor Perceptions*

While I believe that arbitrary lines should not be drawn to create an oppositional binary between the rural and the urban, my interlocutors often did make hard line distinctions.129 Instead of dismissing these comments, I have included them to illuminate the diverse descriptions of the rural and the urban that constitute the SMVS group women’s repertoires of perception. Indeed, because the opinions and hard line distinctions are

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129 I am also succinctly aware of the tendency by some to conflate the terms “village” and “rural,” however, the emphasis of this dissertation is on social change and less concerned with defining the “the village.” For the sake of this work, I use “village” and “rural” interchangeably, fully conscious that this action “risks seeing villages as merely signs of the ‘non-urban’ with little concern about the kind of complex places village actually are” (Mines and Yazgi 2010:9) and hoping that this qualification shows my sensitivity to the fact that “villages as social entities...are always going to be the outcome of multilocal processes and networks” (Mines and Yazgi 2010:10).
somewhat ad hoc and individually-expressed, my argument that the relationship between
the rural and the urban is more than a simple binary still holds true. Based on caste,
religion, class, and many other axes of identity, social networks vary and hence perceptions
of village or city life are differently described in conjunction with a host of social and
temporal contexts.

And yet, while the tendency to variance in interlocutor opinion/perception was
great, a few patterns surfaced during our many conversations on the topic of rural/urban
difference. In the following I address four aspects of life that a majority of the SMVS group
women located as significantly differing with their moves from rural to urban life – (1)
sociality, (2) physical environment, (3) adherence to tradition, and (4) amenities and
luxuries.

Reflections on Sociality

In her article focusing on the urban middle classes in Baroda and their discourses about
moral action, Margit van Wessel (2004) locates a conflation of the village and morality and
sociality amongst her interlocutors. She notes the “common sentiments found among city
dwellers about the love and sense of oneness among people in the village, which they as
urbanites have to do without” (van Wessel 2004:103, see also Donner 2008). The SMVS
group members expressed a similar viewpoint and described their natal villages as loci for
heightened social interaction, both intra and inter caste. While there is much evidence to
suggest that caste distinctions (jati pirivu) continue to be more prevalent in contemporary
rural village settings (Mines 2005), through the eyes of those who have migrated from
rural to urban living environments, “the village” constitutes a place of increased social
intimacy and friendship among neighbors. Teacher, a 67-year-old low caste Thevar/Kallar widow, was the most verbose in her reflections on village sociality and intimacy. Her brothers, sister, and mother all still lived in village settings and she visited them as often as she could. Because her son and caregiver, Mukesh, was working as a hospital manager in Madurai, she could not live in her natal village of Uppukottai near her mother and brothers, as I believe she wished to do. Locating the intensity of affection (pācam) and love (ānbu) as a significant difference between village and city life, Teacher commented,

The village was like a festival. I cannot forget my ār. There was a festival for Veerapandi nearby... For ten days it happened. During this time, before I was married and when we were children...it was a big festival. People from a hundred villages would come and some would come from the city. I have interest130 in the village. It is nice there. In the village, people move about each other with love. It’s not like this in the city. Everyone can come in someone’s house (in the village). All castes are joined together. There are no divisions by caste. But there is an akkirakāram...there are Chettiyars there, but fights do not come. Up to this level the village is nice...People are loving and have affection (pācam). Everything is there. Here (in Madurai), it is not like that. Can we move closely with our neighbors? When my husband died we were in the LIC Colony house and only me, my daughter and my daughter-in-law sat there in the night. No one came to sit and pay respects. At the same time, would village people be like that? Village people would have been in my house. That is a difference between a village and a town. If someone dies everyone comes, not just relatives. They will do all the work (for the people who are grieving). That is the village. Here no one will come and look after someone (who is grieving).131 People move more closely with each other (in the village). They will do things for each other. Here you don't get that...in town...(my emphasis in italics).

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130 “Interest” is a word with many meanings among the SMVS group women and the Tamil population more broadly. In this case, Teacher is expressing her favoritism for the village and possibly, her desire to return to it. “Interest” can also correspond more closely with the English definition in signifying an “interest” or “curiosity” in a particular event or social network. When I questioned the SMVS women about their membership in the group, I used the English word “interest” to ask them about their motivations for joining such a grouping.

131 Unfortunately, I did not formally discuss the issue of social support with the SMVS group members; however, it did come up quite a bit in informal conversations and my general observations. It is interesting to note the levels of support Teacher feels are offered in the village and urban SMVS group environments, particularly when considering the caste diversity of the SMVS group and, most likely, the caste homogeneity of the village to which Teacher refers. For more on social support in the SMVS group, see Chapter Seven.
Teacher’s words highlight what scholars from Durkheim (1893, 1897) to Varma (1998) have identified as a type of alienation and selfishness that exists in city life (see Chapter One). Teacher places great emphasis on her village relationships with people of all castes (even the higher Chettiyars) and laments her lack of social networks and support in the suburbs of Madurai. Her sense of community and closeness is embedded in her perceptions of village life. She comments that “In the village, people move about each other with love” and locates this as an important distinction between rural and urban life. Using the death of her husband as an example, Teacher makes a poignant distinction between village and city communities, arguing that no one came to comfort her as would have been the case in a village environment. She does not, until I bring it up much later, talk about the SMVS group as a social and support network, one that also facilitates inter-caste relationships.

Like many of the other SMVS group members, Divyamma, a lower caste Thevar/Kallar woman, was of the first generation of her family to live in a city. She described her family as a “vivacāya kuṭumpam” (lit. “agriculture family”). After her marriage to her cross-cousin, Divyamma was required to move to a more urban area as her husband held a job as a police officer. Although she overlaps the placement of her village

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132 Teacher’s statements mirror those of some of Fuller and Narasimhan’s interlocutors who spoke of how “life in the village is more peaceful than in the city, people know their neighbors better and give each other support” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:160).

133 This comment has much to do with Teacher’s relationships with the other SMVS group members in the city. For example, when Latha’s father died and her widowed mother (who had spent much time living in Latha’s home and with SMVS group members) returned to lament the death of her husband, many of the SMVS group members came to sit with her. Curiously Teacher, a woman so critical of the lack of urban support during the death of a loved one, did not come to sit with Latha’s mother. While this is most certainly an observation made according to my own bias, I was later asked by Latha if members from LIC Colony came (specifically Teacher who had an abundance of free time), and when I replied that they were not present, Latha was very disappointed and critical of their lack of sensitivity. In general, SMVS group members residing in LIC Colony did not have the closeness of relationship shared by the group members in Krishnapuram Colony. Teacher’s critique of urban support networks may have been a function of the specific area in which she lived.

134 Here, “agriculture family,” does not necessarily imply that the family in question owns the land. Most often, vivacāya kutumpakal, refers to groups of family members who are unskilled “coolie” wage laborers on other people’s farms (Van Hollen 2015).
with the nearby town of Battlagundu, Divyamma expressed explicit differences between her life in the village and her life in the city. Similar to her fellow group members, one of these differences referred to sociality. Beginning with remarks about her joint family (kūṭṭukkuṭumpam) living arrangement in the village, she then mentions the nature of urban social interactions,

We had a big family...our family. Because we lived in a joint family (kūṭṭukkuṭumpam), we didn’t separate the land. When I say family, I don’t just mean my siblings, but three quarters of the people in my extended family. Because it’s all family...there is a lot of pācam (affection), they give you help. In this ur (Madurai) it is not like that. People will scold you. People’s heads will get big, no? We have to adjust*135 to that...

Here, Divyamma not only describes the literal and fictive family relationships that constitute village sociality, she also locates pride and self-absorption as symptoms of urban life in Madurai.

In a different vein, Aishwarya commented on village sociality in connection with her brother’s potential to undergo spirit possession. She felt that because he grew up with their grandparents in her father’s natal village (she and her other siblings grew up in a suburb of Madurai known as Arapalayam) and was exposed more often to spirit possession socially, he was more likely than any of her other siblings to dance the goddess at the annual festival. She remarked,

For 14, 15 years* (he was) in the village* with grandma and grandpa...in the village is a festival*... all of that he would see (over and over again)...(he would) dance like cāmi...to all of this he became accustomed. So that is why the cāmi will come to him I think. It could be like that.... when he was playing with his village friends,* he would play like he was dancing the cāmi (like he

135 The English word “adjust” was used by almost all of my interlocutors with respect to many social scenarios. “Adjusting” was a key mode of self-fashioning amongst middle-class urban women in Madurai and warrants its own separate research project, as the strategic use of English indicates an interesting assemblage of gendered power dynamics.
was possessed). They would play, all the children like that...so to him the cāmi will come...

Aishwarya believes that her brother's involvement in spirit possession was a matter of village socialization. When I asked her if the cāmi came to/was danced by any of her other siblings, all of whom grew up in the Madurai suburb, she said that while many of them had a lot of religious involvement (bhakti īṭupāṭu), none of her urban-raised siblings had personally experienced being possessed by a spirit.136

Thirumanikkam Jayanthi, a Reddiyar woman in her thirties, was eager to share her observations of rural/urban difference with me, as she had recently returned to live in her natal village after spending ten years in Madurai. I had just arrived at her home and was explaining to her the confusion I felt at the village bus stop. I had been unsure of the exact location of her house,

**Nicole:** “are you going to this house?” they asked me.
**Thirumanikkam Jayanthi:** ah...
**N:** I didn’t know your father’s name.
**TJ:** you can say my name can’t you?
**N:** Does that woman know?
**TJ:** ah!
**N:** ah! Really?!
**TJ:** because you are in the village, everyone knows, no?
**N:** oh ho ho ho
**TJ:** There is another bus stop.* Before this stop* there is a stop*
**N:** I didn’t know about that. I was kind of worried about that.
**TJ:** ah!
**N:** (laughs)
**TJ:** the people there (in the village), as soon as they speak well (are friendly), fear will go and they will say the answer
**N:** yes...
**TJ:** in the city* can you hear this? They won’t give you an answer...in the village there aren’t (these) problems...they speak very well (are friendly).

136 I suspect that overt admission of and involvement in spirit possession by her urban siblings would also have identified them as socially lower in status. Members of the urban higher castes seem to identify overt spirit possession (they are more accepting of “light” or “soft” spirit possession, see below, as well as Chapter Seven) with lower caste customs, and so Aishwarya’s siblings may not have wanted to align themselves with lower castes in an urban living environment where they might be able to more easily conceal their low caste status as Nadars.
They won’t be like the people in the city.* Even though there is a difference between people, their minds are the same/are one (in the village). You can’t divide them. They move closely (*paḻakuvānka*)...they move very closely (*nalā paḻakuvānka*).

Again we encounter the theme of friendly village life and its opposition to life in an urban living environment.

![Figure 3.6 Thirumanikkam Jayanthi standing in her father’s fields in her natal village of T. Ramanathapuram, Tamilnadu, 2010.](image)

Notably, none of my interlocutors highlighted the adverse effects surrounding concepts of village sociality. In addition to the many ethnographic works concerning the intensity of caste violence/discrimination that pervades in rural South Asia (Moffatt 1979, Mines 2005, Gross 2010), other studies have commented on issues pertaining to gossip and surveillance (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014), as well as the collapse of moral and social networks (Wadley 1994). For example, Fuller and Narasimhan’s predominantly Brahmin upper middle-class interlocutors spoke of the intense pressure to conform to social rules due to the amplified level of gossip that exists in village locations. As Fuller and

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137 They did, however, speak of other negative characteristics of village life (see below, as well as Chapter Four).
Narasimhan note, this pressure to conform is also gendered and caste-based in nature, as gossiping is attributed more to women’s behavior, and Brahmīn women have historically been much more restricted in their movements outside of the akkīraṅkāram (2014:160). These caste-based restrictions maintain very tight physical and social boundaries within which surveillance by others is constant and easily manageable.

In her extensive research in the village Karimpur in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, Susan Wadley (1994) has also recorded some of the unfavorable social aspects of village life, particularly the breakdown of morality and sense of community. This cessation of traditional social networks and arrangements (e.g., jajmani system) is thought by her interlocutors to be a result of changes in socioeconomic class and technological advancement. Many of her informants remarked that where once all castes were implicated in the building of the community according to their traditional occupations, in more recent times people of the lower castes have gained access to education, challenged their ties with specific trades and sought socioeconomic mobility. In addition, technological advancements in areas such as agriculture have altered and/or eliminated many of the traditional occupations that upheld the social order in the first place. Perhaps due to the mostly non-Brahmin membership of the group, the SMVS women did not overtly identify the challenging of social structure as a negative aspect in village life.\(^{138}\) Moreover, only one of the three Tamil Brahmins in the group (Latha) overtly mentioned alterations to her caste’s social positioning in village life and another more socially progressive Tamil Brahmin (Shanti) even applauded the challenging of caste divisions (see Chapter One). While most certainly a function of the make-up of the group, I also suspect that these

\(^{138}\) This is not to say that non-Brahmins were/are not critical of village life in other ways.
attitudes toward village caste distinctions in particular are directly related to the history of the Dravidian political movement in south India, which has significantly altered perceptions of caste difference and supposed Brahmin superiority (see Chapter One).

**Reflections on Physical Environment**

In a piece on sacred groves in Rajasthan, Ann Gold (2010) has argued that “trees, clean water, and fresh air are all understood to be components of health; or, put another way, health is viewed as a product of good environmental qualities (Gold and Gold 2010:111, see also McNamara 2014). Although not directly connecting the physical environment with health benefits, perhaps this is why many of the SMVS group women indicated that the “nature scenes” and fresh air were some of the most appealing aspects of village life.

Teacher described the benefits of the physical village environment while also commenting on the difference in cost of living,

In the village there are gardens, fields, rivers to go to and bathe in. Vegetables are tasty. In town you don't get any of these things. We have to pay money for water, for cleaning the gutter we have to pay money. In town there are a lot of expenses. Usually if you need to buy vegetables, go to the temple, or go somewhere else you need a lot of money. In the village it's not like this. The cost of vegetables is lower, the breeze...nature...the breeze is really good... Here (Madurai) it is not like that. For festivals we return (to the village) and pray to God and bathe in the river. For two to three days we will bathe in the river, we will go walking in the evening and look at the nature scene*...trees, fields...it will be really beautiful... In Madurai the nature scene* is different. There is no water in the Vaigai (River).

It was shortly after Teacher shared these descriptions of village life that group members went to Teacher’s natal village of Uppukottai on a temple-visiting tour. Interestingly, although the river that she speaks of did indeed have more water than the Vaigai, “nature scenes” were not something one immediately noticed upon arrival in this rather overgrown
village. This is not to say that Teacher was being dishonest about the image of the village, but that perhaps her memory was also influenced by a more collective perception of village life which pervades urban Tamilnadu – that of the romanticized and peaceful village scene, so common in popular Tamil film and television. I suspect this is the case not only due to my observations in the field, but also because of Teacher’s later descriptions of village life and her explanations of why it is favorable to live there (see below).

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139 This description of the Indian village is also thought to have been promulgated by British colonialism. Mines and Yazgi (2010) argue that, “the idea of the harmonious and self-sufficient Indian village...was a story that the British constructed to make sense of what they were already doing, and its function was to allow British officials to understand the nature and legitimacy of their rule, also to shape it” (2010:3).
During my first interview with her in 2008, Latha also focused on the physical environment when describing village life to me. Like Teacher, she too had memories of bathing in a river and lamented that her daughter, Radhika, would not experience the village life that she cherished,

In the village I grew up in a big house in an akkirkāram and I bathed in the Kaveri river...I like that (village) life better, it is peaceful.* Here (Madurai) there is noise. Those (days in the village) were the golden days.* After marriage (and subsequent move to Madurai) we had to adjust.* My daughter will miss* village life and won’t have the same memories as me.

Similar to Teacher’s response above, Latha’s reference to her time spent in the village as “the golden days” highlights a sense of yearning for a peaceful and idyllic village life, again a perception often dialogically constructed in concert with widespread representations of the romanticized village, including Gandhian nationalist portrayals of village life. In the case of Latha, however, it also recalls her social and cultural positioning as a Tamil Brahmin, a group whose visions of village life are constructed according to the rural dominance they once held (see above).

Divyamma, having previously described her membership in a vivacāya kuṭumpam stressed the difference in food quality,

You can get fresh vegetables. The rice, sugarcane, honey...you can get all of it. It is in the gardens (tōttattile)...how good the coconuts are! How sweet they are! Naturally (here: organically), you can eat. Goats...100-150 goats were there at our house...

Indeed, the superiority of food in the village was something that surfaced many times in my experiences with the SMVS group women, including during SMVS group tours to

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140 For more on the construction of the idyllic and authentic (read: traditional) village, see Chakrabarty (2002), and Yagzi (2010:56).
141 It has been brought to my attention that statements about the superiority of village food are interesting in light of the critiques that are made by members of vivacāya kuṭumpaṅkaḷ with respect to the presence of pesticides (Van Hollen 2015). However, these types of critiques were not expressed to me during my time in Tamilnadu.
members’ natal villages where the women were often fed by members’ relatives and many comments were made about the freshness and availability of particular fruits and vegetables.

**Reflections on Bhakti Devotion/Adherence to Tradition**

Besides being associated with close, friendly interactions and fresh air and food, villages were often alluded to during discussions of traditional religious practice. Due to the women’s membership in an urban religious group, I was curious about how they understood their own religious practice, as they were considered, and considered themselves, to be quite pious. Was their piety based on their commitment to traditional religious practice in a modernized, urbanized environment? Did that dichotomy even exist? Or, perhaps, was their dedication to traditional religious practice founded on new urban traditions that either the group’s guru had set in motion or were simply a function of urban life? During my questioning on the topic of rural/urban difference, the women did not often construct their comparisons with respect to their own religious practice, but instead made more general statements about village communities, inadvertently positioning themselves as exceptions in a discussion of a generalized Hindu piety. Below I take up the women’s descriptions of Hindus in village communities, leaving their thoughts on membership in the SMVS group and its place in urban constructions of piety and Hindu ritual for Chapter Seven.

Latha, who perceived dedication to *bhakti* and religious practice as her duty as a Brahmin woman, described the difference between rural and urban *bhakti* devotion and
involvement in Hindu spirituality (ānmikam) with respect to both caste-based rural geography and the influx of what she perceived as elements of a modern lifestyle.

Nowadays the bhakti that was there before has gone down. In the village in the akkirakāram on this side there is a Perumal\textsuperscript{142} temple. Because you are in the akkirakāram, on this side there is a Perumal temple and on that side there is a Sivan temple. At least\textsuperscript{*} if you looked you would see the Perumal temple. From their house sometimes they (Brahmins) would worship Perumal. Daily... daily\textsuperscript{*} they would go to the temple. Certainly they would have gone to the temple daily.* Everyone would have gone. At this time they would go to the fields and come home and in the evening they would go to the temple. There was a lot of bhakti...cāmi bhakti was a lot. Now because (society) is modernized\textsuperscript{*} they go to the office\textsuperscript{*} and they are tired\textsuperscript{*} when they return so they watch T.V.* Bhakti has become reduced, no?

As we saw in earlier segments of my conversation with Aishwarya, her brother’s dancing of the goddess was understood as intricately connected to his socialization into village life. After she made this connection between spirit possession and the village, I asked her about spirit possession in more urban spaces,

\textbf{Nicole:} so in the city\textsuperscript{*} it wouldn’t have happened like this?

\textbf{Aishwarya:} in the city\textsuperscript{*}...here it (possession) will happen. It will happen lightly.* But in the village every year\textsuperscript{*}...there will be a festival, no?

\textbf{N:} mmm

\textbf{A:} Then (in the village) it will come (on more) strongly (atikamāka)

\textbf{N:} What does “lightly”\textsuperscript{*} mean?

\textbf{A:} lightly\textsuperscript{*} means... they will do puja, no?

\textbf{N:} Yes...

\textbf{A:} When they do puja it will come lightly\textsuperscript{*}...the body will shake\textsuperscript{*}...it won’t come a lot, just the body\textsuperscript{*} will shake.*

\textbf{N:} Okay. Strongly\textsuperscript{*} (atikamāka) means?

\textbf{A:} In the village\textsuperscript{*} there is a festival... for four days\textsuperscript{*} the festival will happen...

\textbf{N:} mmm

\textbf{A:} in that four days\textsuperscript{*} it happens strongly (atikamāka)...you have seen it, right? How is it? They put on a (special) dress\textsuperscript{*} (outfit)...they dance the god, no?

\textbf{N:} mmm...God...will speak...through people, no?

\textbf{A:} They speak (through people)...correct.*

\textbf{N:} Is that strongly (atikamāka) or lightly?*

\textbf{A:} That’s strongly.

\textsuperscript{142} Perumal is another name for the god Vishnu.
N: Okay. So in the city* it (spirit possession) isn’t a lot?
A: In the city* there is not a lot (of strong spirit possession)...In the city,* when they are outside (of the house) it (spirit possession) won’t happen. In the house...during a puja when there is a time of praying to God (cāmi kumpitu), lightly* the body* will shake.* Nothing else will happen. In the village at festival time* it happens strongly (atikamāka)...it happens very strongly (payankaramāka).

Perhaps because we had spoken so much about her brother Palani, here Aishwarya locates the annual village festival as a public venue for “strong” spirit possession. In the city, not only does spirit possession occur more “lightly” according to Aishwarya, but it is also restricted to the private space of the home during daily puja. Spirit possession amongst the women in the middle-class SMVS group was often understood as a practice of the lower castes. Due to the correlation between high caste and higher-class identity construction amongst Aishwarya and her peers, she here describes urban spirit possession as minimal in scale and confined to the private sphere.143

Aishwarya also spoke of modifications to traditional (read: rural) practice that urban Tamils often made to suit their city lifestyles. She used the Tamil New Year/harvest festival, Poṅgal,144 as an example,

Aishwarya: on the threshold you make poṅgal. Some people do (celebrate) poṅgal without doing that. Some people say ‘I don’t have a place to cook it outside...there is no place’
Nicole: mmm
A: If they are in flats*...on the threshold they cannot cook then...on the gas* stove they will cook it...Some houses traditionally cook it in the threshold (vācal)...  
N: mmm
A: Without leaving (the tradition) they continue* and keep doing it.

143 Urban spirit possession and its restrained performance hold a distinctive connection to emic understandings of Brahmin behavior and middle-class respectability. See Chapter Seven.
144 Not only is Poṅgal the name for the Tamil New Year/harvest celebration, it is also a type of porridge that is cooked on the threshold of a home to bestow blessings for the new year. There are two varieties of poṅgal, sweet (cakkarai poṅgal) and savory (veq poṅgal) and they are served primarily as tiffin items year round. Poṅgal is also made on auspicious occasions at temples as food offerings (naivedanam/naivediyam) to be returned as piracātam (see description of Divyamma in Chapter Two). It is traditional for Tamil women to make a high-pitched cry when the poṅgal boils over the pot in which it is being cooked.
Aishwarya presents these urban alterations to the cooking of *poṅgal* as almost a rebellion against traditional practice. While some urbanites find a way to continue tradition (e.g., Aishwarya herself, as well as other group members), the “modern generation” (i.e., a generation in which few have experienced a rural Poṅgal celebration firsthand) doesn’t comprehend the value of adhering to tradition.

Notably, the location of *poṅgal*-making is not only a matter relating to present social and cultural shifts, but has long been at issue with respect to the dynamism of cultural traditions and waves of social change. This is exemplified in the invention of something called the *matappalli*. At many urban temples,¹⁴⁵ *poṅkal* is often made at a *matappalli*, or a built-in row of stoves inside a temple that has been constructed by temple trustees. According to some of my interlocutors, the *matappalli* was created due to a conflict over which caste’s homemade food could be offered as formal *naivēdanam/naivēdiyam* (food offering made during temple puja). This conflict was based on the fact that, in the past, only the “pure” kitchen of a Brahmin or other high caste (e.g., Chettiyar) could be the physical site where the food offering for a temple deity was made. As temples became more subject to rules of caste equality and/or the denial of caste, devout, meat-eating (read: impure), lower caste Hindus argued for their right to offer their homemade food as *naivēdanam/naivēdiyam*. To solve this issue, many temples constructed a *matappalli* so

¹⁴⁵ *Matappallikal* may also exist in rural settings, but I have never seen one in a village temple.
that a person of any caste could cook a pure form of a food offering, as they were on “pure”
temple grounds. While the invention of the matapalli still reinforces notions of caste
purity and pollution to some degree, this alteration is an example of how temple space was
altered to accommodate the temporal, physical and social context.

In my experience, the practice of drawing kōlaṅkaḷ is another arena in which
traditional practice is modified according to changes in social and physical environment,
particularly urban living locations. A kōlam (sing. of kōlaṅkaḷ) is a design (often geometric)
drawn with rice flower or chalk on the threshold of a Hindu home. The task of drawing
these designs is usually that of the Hindu housewife and is carried out early in the morning
after washing the threshold with water. On a daily basis, kōlaṅkaḷ are meant as signs of
welcome (to both humans and deities) and protection from evil spirits. Many middle-
aged Tamil housewives continue the practice of washing and decorating the threshold on a
tile floor in an apartment building hallway. In addition, on festive occasions, such as
Kartīkai, the birthday of the god Ganesh (Ganesh/Vināyakar Chathurthi/Jayanti) and the
Tamil month of Markaḷi, elaborate kōlaṅkaḷ are often drawn on thresholds and judged by
peers in urban neighborhood competitions. These competitions can be highly charged
arenas where the auspicious efficacy of the drawing, according to older generations, is
being challenged by a new, modern emphasis on pictoral images and color (Nagarajan

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146 Interestingly, this issue has not come up in the local Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar temple where the Brahmin wives of the
temple trustees make all of the naivēdanam/naivēdiyam and there is little space for a matappalli.
147 For a comprehensive discussion of kōlaṅkaḷ and their symbolism with respect to notions of auspiciousness and ritual
purity in Tamil culture, see Nagarajan 2007).
148 Kartīkai is a Tamil Hindu festival held during the Tamil month of the same name (mid-November to mid-December)
and lasts for nine days. It is often considered an extension of the pan-Indian celebration of Dipāvali (in Hindi, Diwali) and
includes the lighting of oil lamps at the threshold of one’s home.
149 The Tamil month of Markaḷi (mid-December to mid-January) is the month of the winter solstice and is considered to be
"the beginning of the new divine day" in that it is the "month that spans one day in the life cycle of a divinity" (Nagarajan
2007:98). Hence, Markaḷi is a special period for honoring deities because "the doorway between heaven and earth is most
open at this time" (Nagarajan 2007:99).
1998:199-201). \textit{Kôlam} drawing has also taken center stage in middle-class Tamil women’s television programming, with expert \textit{kôlam} artists appearing on arts and crafts television shows aimed at a middle-class female audience.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure3.10.jpg}
\caption{Latha and her mother, Gomathy, draw an elaborate \textit{kôlam} at the entrance to Latha’s home for \textit{Ganesh Chathurthi}. Judges from the suburban neighborhood will circle the area and decide who wins the prize for the “best \textit{kôlam}.” Krishnapuram Colony, Madurai, Tamilnadu. September 2011.}
\end{figure}

Although not blatantly associating urban neglect of tradition with cultural perceptions of modernity as was the case with Latha and Aishwarya, Thirumanikkam Jayanthi also spoke of rural/urban differences in adherence to tradition. She focused on the variance of religious practice and \textit{bhakti involvement} (\textit{bhakti īṭupāṭu}), identifying urban religious practice as more individualized and commenting, “In the city they go to the temple separately. Here (in the village) it’s not like that. The ār joins together...the village people join together...” Later, Thirumanikkam Jayanthi commented on the time required for religious practice and argued that people of the village have less time for worship. This argument is especially interesting in light of Latha’s comments above concerning an urban, modern lifestyle (e.g., office work, television) and its effect on the time available for
religious practice and Hindu spirituality. In my experience, this lack of time for worship was prevalent amongst people working in both urban and rural areas, leaving a small segment of unemployed middle-class housewives (e.g., SMVS group members) with most of the religious responsibilities.\textsuperscript{150}

Thirumanikkam Jayanthi also offered her thoughts on Hindu religious practices that I knew to be prevalent in my suburban neighborhood of Krishnapuram Colony – Piratōṣam and Caṣṭi. The first is a religious event held every two weeks for the god Siva. It entails the ritual bathing (apiṣekam) of the god statue (cilai) with several substances including, rose water, milk, curd (tayir), turmeric powder dissolved in water, and a mixture of fruit, honey, jaggery, ghee, and sugar (pancamrutam) and the singing of songs in praise of Lord Siva. The latter is a religious event held once per month for the god Murukan (Skanda). It also entails ritual bathing and songs of praise.

Nicole: Do they observe Piratōṣam and Caṣṭi here (in the village)?
Thirumanikkam Jayanthi: Ah! They observe Caṣṭi and Piratōṣam. But, they won’t do it like (people do) in the city.*
N: Oh. How will it be?
TJ: In the city* many people will come (to the temple to observe Caṣṭi and Piratōṣam). Here, because you are in the village, the timing* is not there. From morning to evening they are doing work in the garden, or they are doing coolie* work. They become tired* and they must cook for their household. If they (villagers) go to the temple, for only half an hour or 15 minutes they will pray and (then they) return (home).
N: Yes.
TJ: For Caṣṭi and everything, they have to sit. They have to say mantirankal (mantras).
N: mmm
TJ: So for the people of this ār there isn’t time.*

Not only does the recitation of mantras require time, it also requires literacy and at least rudimentary knowledge of Sanskrit pronunciation. There were few Brahmins in

\textsuperscript{150}This is also the case in much of north India (Wadley 2013).
Thirumanikkam Jayanthi’s natal ār and with Brahmins being the traditional and hereditary holders of Sanskritized knowledge, I believe Thirumanikkam Jayanthi was also making (perhaps not consciously) a wider observation about caste, power, and knowledge in modern south India.

**Reflections on the Availability of Amenities/Luxuries**

The issue of amenity availability was another common thread amongst many of my interlocutors; however they didn’t all agree on the prevalence of amenities and luxuries in village settings. Teacher, perhaps due to her unhappiness in her urban life owing in part to financial troubles and her youngest son’s separation from his wife (see Chapter Two), was once again vocal about the benefits of living in a village. She commented on the changes that have occurred in her village and the amenities that are available today,

Twenty years ago there were only small houses (in the village) but everyone has studied and now they build big houses. The village will be good. You can’t find a small house now. Our place is a good place (village). There is a hospital. You can take the bus from my village to Kuchanoor to a temple. People own land and have lots of amenities. Everything is in the village. People from Theni district come to our ār to purchase* (shop)... Little by little they started to use cement* to build houses and if you use cement* there is a neatness.* Before (cement) there wasn’t a formal sewer (cākkaṭai) and it was dirty. Now they have constructed a sewer and now it is clean.

Teacher adds emphasis to the amenities available in her natal village by mentioning that people from a large city, Theni, travel to her village to buy goods. She also describes how her natal village has become more sanitary. I suspect that this overt mention of sanitation and cleanliness is an expression of Teacher’s middle-class social position, as most of my middle-class interlocutors (e.g., Latha in the beginning of this chapter) and many interlocutors of other scholars (e.g., Dickey 2012, Gilbertson 2014a, van Wessel 2004,
Moodie 2014) considered these qualities necessary for upholding a middle-class lifestyle. Neatness and cleanliness also seemed to be socially associated with concepts of the urban, as well as establishments of caste difference. In her 1992 work, Trawick commented on how cleanliness was a way to communicate sophistication and “values of the city” (1992:75). During my own research, Latha’s daughter remarked that in villages, *akkirakārankal* were the only “neat and clean” spaces because “low caste people don’t know about neatness.”

While Teacher stressed the existence of a hospital in her village, Thirumanikkam Jayanthi identified medical services as lacking in her rural living environment. She also noted that, due to this deficiency, villagers had to use the unreliable bus system in the event of a medical emergency. She remarked,

**Thirumanikkam Jayanthi:** A few amenities are not here (in the village).

**Nicole:** mmm

**TJ:** There are few amenities...

**N:** They are here! There is A/C,* no?

**TJ:** It (air conditioning) is here, but still if you suddenly have to go to the hospital*...tsk...you have to get on the bus.

**N:** yes...

**TJ:** There (in the city) you can catch an auto* (auto-rickshaw) or a bus.* In this place, this (a bus) is it.

Thirumanikkam Jayanthi and Teacher describe, as we would expect, differing aspects of village life when commenting on the amenities and luxuries available in a rural living environment. In each individual assessment of village life, my interlocutors weighed the existence of certain amenities and behaviors against the dearth of others, and in doing this reconciled their current urban lives with their desires for and cherished memories of village life. This reconciliation was necessary as the SMVS group women’s male relatives were the individuals who controlled the placement of their permanent residences.
Chapter Summary

The women of the SMVS group had much to say on the topic of rural/urban difference. Indeed, many of them lamented that they could no longer participate in village life and traditions, yet at the same time were reticent to lose the amenities that accompanied their middle-class urban lifestyles. While certainly informative and significant in itself, the above was primarily meant as a foundation for the following chapters of this dissertation, each chapter addressing modifications to a particular Tamil Hindu women’s ritual/cultural practice as the women of the SMVS group continue to navigate their urban lives. For instance, the opinions concerning village sociality and natural environment will be especially poignant when considering the SMVS women’s social networks and ritual performances to be described in Chapter Seven. Moreover, the perspectives expressed concerning an adherence to tradition and a dedication to bhakti involvement (bhakti īṭupāṭu) and Hindu ānmikam (spirituality), while also pertinent when reading Chapter Seven, will prove valuable to the discussions of marriage; puberty, menstruation, and childbirth; and the Hindu celebration of Navarāttiri in the following chapters.
CHAPTER FOUR

Arranging and Performing Marriages in Middle Class South India

“...commodity consumption, individual self-crafting, and romantic love are mutually constitutive...” Wardlow and Hirsch 2006:18.

Radhika’s family and I had spent the entire previous day scrubbing the house from top to bottom in order to prepare for our honored guests. We had seen a picture of the possible groom’s home and were already feeling inadequate about the appearance of our home and its contents. As we sat waiting for the potential groom’s parents to arrive, Radhika, my close friend and SMVS group member Latha’s daughter, privately expressed her anxiety about the looming event and her uncertain future. She commented that she would soon be a “māṭṭuponna,” or a daughter-in-law (Ramakrishnan 2008:1095). Radhika then added that she was glad to have me there to support her, as she was unacquainted with the intricate stages of the matchmaking and marriage processes and this made her uneasy.

Upon reaching our home, the man’s mother and father were seated and offered tiffin and coffee by Radhika. After this, the men proceeded to discuss their social networks and whom they might know in common151 while the women shared embroidery patterns and spoke of their participation in pilgrimages and other Hindu temple activities. The potential bridegroom’s mother was the only woman sitting on the raised sofa, the female members of Radhika’s family sitting below her to show deference and respect (mariyātai).

There had been a great debate between Radhika’s grandmother and father about the dress that Radhika should wear for this particular peṇ pārkka, or “girl/woman-viewing.”

Radhika’s grandmother, a rather assertive woman in her mid-sixties, was insistent on Radhika

151 Similar to many other Brahmin men in Tamilnadu, Radhika’s father worked as a bank manager (see also Fuller and Narasimhan 2014), and it was likely that, even if the man’s father did not work in a bank, one of his Brahmin male relations was employed in one.
wearing a sari, as this was the traditional presentation of a girl/woman at a pen pārkka.

Radhika’s father, a more progressive Brahmin man, thought that Radhika should be able to wear a fancy churidār\textsuperscript{152} set, something that represented a more modern understanding of proper Tamil womanhood and expressed the urban, middle-class (naṭuttara vakuppu)\textsuperscript{153} lifestyle associated with this modernity. In the end, the decision was based on a criterion that had little to do with the traditional or modern aspects of the actual ensemble, but nevertheless, an important component to performing the part of an ideal bride-to-be – whichever style of dress made Radhika look thinner would be the selection.

Radhika’s pen pārkka was also a venue for elaborate gift giving, which was meant to augment the status of each family. In this instance, Radhika’s family gave their visitors a tray filled with fruit and small Hindu god statues. In return, they received fruit and Radhika personally received dress materials. I learned after the guests had departed that the gifting of dress material was an attempt to establish the guests’ identity as upper middle class. Within two days Radhika’s family received a letter from their recent callers stating that there was “no match,” (Skt. prāptam illai, Tam. poruttam illai). Radhika, being reluctant to get married to anyone of any class, was hardly upset about the message, but her mother, Latha, took the rejection much more seriously and understood it as a critique of their lifestyle. When I asked her why she thought Radhika was declined for the match (especially since the horoscopes had a nine-point match),\textsuperscript{154} Latha replied that compared to the man’s family, they had fewer

\textsuperscript{152} A churidār is an outfit similar to the salwaar kameez set common in North India. The former, however, has pants which are more tightly-fitting in comparison to salwaar kameez trousers. Both are worn with a long tunic-like top called a kurta and lightweight scarf called a dupatta.

\textsuperscript{153} While naṭuttara vakuppu is the literal Tamil translation of “middle class,” my interlocutors almost exclusively used the English phrase. This was also the case for the use of the term “modern,” in Tamil, navīnāmāna. I contend that the use of English when describing these facets of their identity was a means of communicating their “modern,” “middle-class” status (see also Dickey 2012).

\textsuperscript{154} In many cases, if one consults a professional astrologer (cōṭṭa), both the man and woman’s horoscopes will be evaluated on a complicated ten-point scale. A ten-point match is the best possible outcome in its prediction of an all-
amenities, or conveniences (vacatikal). In this case, “amenities” referred to items such as: a drinking water filter (now very common in Tamil middle-class households), a car (as opposed to only motorbikes), iPods, and microwaves. According to Latha, the lack of these material articles had outweighed the family’s religious orthodoxy and higher subsect status (see below), qualities that often socially translate to moral integrity.

The countless details entailed in Radhika’s wedding arrangement, and finally marriage, became instrumental in my investigations of urbanization, ritual and social change during my fifteen-month stay in Madurai. Indeed, I realized quite early on that the quintessential life event of marriage, as well as the necessary social procedures that preceded it, would offer productive windows through which to view the dynamic values and desires of Tamilnadu’s growing urban middle-class populations. These values and desires ultimately filter into a dynamic definition of what a variety of scholars have termed “companionate marriage” (e.g. Simmons 1979, Stone 1990, Skolnik 1991, Raychaudhuri 2000, Hirsch and Wardlow 2006), a marital form that is embedded in notions of modernity and often refutes more traditional forms marriage such as those with close kin. Moreover, processes of marriage and matchmaking highlight both the changes and continuities pertaining to particular structures of gendered power, in this case amongst a group of women who have intimately experienced both rural and urban life (see Chapter Three).

around amenable marriage. The astrologer may also provide other information, such as the month during which the marriage will take place. In her most recent study of the middle classes in Madurai, Dickey (2012) also notes the importance of “vacatikal” in the presentation of oneself as middle class. Companionate marriage is discussed in detail at the end of this chapter.
Matchmaking

The office of the astrologer (cōtiṭar) was tucked away and there were already people there at 5:30am! Some of the people in the office got to chatting about why they were there and whether this astrologer was any good. A younger man waiting in line ahead of us said that he had come all the way from Thirunelvelli to see this cōtiṭar. He started conversing with others in the room, which actually led to a pretty interesting conversation about social change. An older man sitting across from the younger man and next to me was talking about how the cōtiṭar had previously predicted a lot about his life and that now one of his sons is in Malaysia (as the cōtiṭar predicted). The younger man then says that if Indians go to foreign\textsuperscript{157} there is no one to watch them like an Amma (mother) or an Appa (father) or a Chitti (aunt) and so there is no one to control* them. That is why his parents said when they were looking for a wife for him that if she lived abroad or was going abroad they didn’t want her because he is their only son. Patti (lit. “grandmother,” but also the nickname for Latha’s mother, Gomathy) now chimes into the conversation and tells the younger man about how we are at the cōtiṭar’s office to find a match for Radhika, her granddaughter who is studying her BSC. The younger man then starts suggesting cities Radhika should work in with that degree and hence they should also look for a husband in one of those cities. Patti and Latha then explain shyly that Radhika is not going to work. The younger man looks puzzled and the Iyengar Brahmin\textsuperscript{158} woman sitting next to Patti (Patti had previously just outright asked her what her caste was) says, “paṭikkallai nā, kēvalam” (“if she doesn’t study it is shameful/bad”). Patti and Latha add that the minimum requirement for women to simply be married off to good households in this day and age is a B.E. (Bachelors of Engineering) and the younger man looks surprised and says, “evvāḷavu kaṣṭam!” (How difficult!).

The above is an excerpt from my fieldnotes during the time period in which Radhika’s family was searching for her match. Not only does it highlight an urban middle-class attention to astrology in matchmaking, but it also gives a glimpse of how female educational qualifications are utilized in the context of marriage arrangement. In this section, I lay out some aspects of middle-class matchmaking in Tamilnadu and address the

\textsuperscript{157} For more on the use of this term in Tamilnadu, see Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{158} Iyengar Brahmins are of the Vaishnavaite sect and are commonly known to be more conservative and strict with respect to Hindu rules and restrictions (see also Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:140).
modifications to and negotiations of matchmaking rituals as they relate to contemporary conceptions of modernity and tradition and the calculated balancing of those entities.

**Education**

As is apparent from the above fieldnote excerpt, education plays a key role in urban matchmaking. At the time of my arrival in Madurai in August 2009, Radhika was completing her final year in college studying for her bachelor’s degree in computer science (BSC). Radhika overtly accepted that she was not a particularly dedicated student (as her mother had been at her age), but similar to many middle-class American teenagers, there was never any doubt that Radhika would obtain an undergraduate degree. However, unlike many middle-class American teenagers, a primary unspoken reason for Radhika’s attendance at college was that it enhanced her status in the context of marriage alliances.

Radhika’s undergraduate degree can be understood, following the work of Max Weber (1947) and Anthony Giddens (1973), as a marketable skill, utilized by the middle classes to establish an identity separate from a society’s lower classes. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has argued that the habitus-informed value placed on this marketable skill of education, and its counterpart, the educational institution, is intricately connected to establishing social status. He reasons,

> The educational institution succeeds in imposing cultural practices that it does not teach and does not even explicitly demand, but which belong to the attributes attached by status to the position it assigns, the qualifications it

159 While Weber’s (1947) conception of marketable skills was oriented around a person’s ability to possess land (property), he coined the phrase that was then taken up by Anthony Giddens (1973) and specifically oriented towards the possession of education. Giddens argued that both the marketable skills and the educational qualifications necessary to make these skills marketable are considered “property” in themselves (Giddens 1973:102-103). This property, or cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1984), factors into the construction of a middle class, of which I argue Radhika’s family is a part.
awards, and the social positions to which the latter give access (Bourdieu 1984:26).

Education and the valuation of it were indeed necessary components to the construction of an urban middle-class identity in Madurai. While most of the SMVS women (a generation older than Radhika) were married off to their husbands by the age of sixteen (indicating an approximately 10th standard level of education), they wanted more for their daughters growing up in middle-class urban south India. In fact, they needed more for their daughters in this competitive living environment, as it had become increasingly difficult to marry off a daughter lacking the perceived marketable skill of higher educational qualifications, a fact articulated during our visit to the astrologer (cōtiṭar).

Familiar with this difficulty, Radhika’s parents encouraged her to complete her college degree. They knew that in the market of middle-class marriage alliance, Radhika’s educational marketable skill would prove a useful bargaining chip in her final marriage negotiations, which, in fact, it did. It was argued by the groom’s parents, as well as several other relatives of the groom, that Radhika was rather plump and even Radhika’s grandmother’s promises that she would force her to diet did not provide satisfactory assurance. However, Radhika’s family felt that the groom was too dark-skinned, even

160 See also Dickey 2012 and for greater Tamilnadu, see Fuller and Narasimhan (2014).
161 Similar to grades in the United States, the Indian educational system uses “standards” to organize phases of learning according to age. A 10th standard education would be similar to a 10th grade education in that the age of the students would be around 15 or 16. I am not qualified to compare curricula; however, in India among the SMVS women’s generation this was a common time for the education of female children to be discontinued, as the onset of puberty would most likely have occurred by this time. It was inappropriate for a girl/woman to be in a mixed gender environment at this age and/or she was considered ritually polluting during her monthly menstruation (see also Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). In both scenarios, increased attraction of the evil eye (kāntiristi) could also have been a factor in the removal of the girl from school. In the more progressive of the SMVS women’s natal families, they might have allowed her to study “plus two,” which is similar to finishing high school in the United States. In some cases, the progressiveness of the SMVS women’s families was due to the influence of the DMK (Drāvida Munnetra Kaḷakam) Tamil nationalist party that, earlier on, more strongly advocated atheism and rejected what they understood as Hindu superstitions, such as evil eye.
162 However, there was a fine balance that had to be maintained, as too much education for a woman on the marriage market could be damaging to her prospects. See below.
163 Initially, Radhika had been considered and assessed as a marriage match for her current husband’s cousin. She was rejected on the basis of her weight and recommended to her now darker-skinned husband because it was understood that their flaws would balance out.
though he was financially successful and his family was actually part of what was considered by Radhika's mother to be the upper middle class. Although Radhika only held a Bachelor's degree in computer science, her educational marketable skill, plus her wheatish\textsuperscript{164} complexion, sufficiently counteracted her plump appearance and compelled the groom's family to agree to the match.

Jayanthi, another member of the SMVS group, echoed the importance of education with respect to her search for martial matches for her children,

Both had to be educated.* My son-in-law had to be educated* because if he only studied until 10\textsuperscript{th}, what would he do? Both had to have graduated.*

While it was important that Jayanthi's son-in-law and daughter-in-law be educated, the education of her daughter-in-law was also bothersome to Jayanthi, as she felt that the woman's educational level, in combination with their residence in the United States, had afforded her daughter-in-law an excessive amount of independence and caused a dismissal of Tamil tradition. Whereas other SMVS group members were eager to show off their children, spouses and grandchildren, especially those in foreign countries, Jayanthi was always reluctant to show photos of her daughter-in-law, as she was often dressed in pant-shirt\textsuperscript{165} and her short hair cut made her look too masculine for her mother-in-law's liking. Moreover, although not overtly articulated, it seemed as though Jayanthi attributed her daughter-in-law's fertility difficulties with these dismissals of tradition.

These portrayals of urban middle-class matchmaking and its emphasis on education were occasionally different from what the SMVS group women knew themselves during the

\textsuperscript{164} The English word "wheatish" is an essential part of the marriage alliance vernacular throughout India, particularly in matrimonial advertisements. It refers to the skin color of the individual resembling the color of wheat, a color often considered lighter and more beautiful in comparison to darker skin tones. The higher valuation of lighter skin tones is pervasive throughout the global South and has led to the production of a plethora of skin bleaching processes and products. See Glenn 2008.

\textsuperscript{165} See Chapter Two.
processes of their own matchmaking. It has already been mentioned that the SMVS group women were often taken out of school at the age of sixteen and therefore their education was cut short in comparison to their own daughters. Based on my collection of life histories, this removal from school was most often undertaken by those SMVS group women’s families that lived in a rural setting and/or were below middle-class status (due to income and/or caste affiliation). In contrast, the SMVS group women who grew up in middle-class urban settings were more likely to have finished “plus two” and even to have continued their studies at a women’s college. Aishwarya, for instance, grew up in a middle-class family in an area of Madurai known as Arapalayam. Although she was one of many siblings and the elder of the females, her fervent insistence to attend college was recognized by her parents and she was afforded the opportunity. As alluded to above, this was also a matter of middle-class status and financial means. Poorer, lower class girls growing up in the same urban environment were often not permitted to attend college due to these issues and perhaps other individualized factors. In a discussion of middle classness and education, Aishwarya noted of her desire to obtain a degree after she had finished “plus two,”

Aishwarya: ...at that time education* was minimal
Nicole: yes...
A: in our time...
N: yes

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166 Being the elder of the female children in a family usually indicates that she will be married before her other younger female siblings. In those days, being a married female was not considered compatible with pursuing education and so she would have to abandon her education to become a wife and mother. Hence, Aishwarya’s insistence on continuing her education delayed her marriage and, in turn, could have delayed the marriage of her younger sister. See also Chapter Two. This was something Aishwarya’s family had to consider but, in the end, Aishwarya’s sister went against the rules of traditional marriage in her own way and had a love marriage.

167 It should be noted here that unless one has no other option than to attend a government school, middle-class Indian children attend private schools which require the payment of fees at the onset. These are often referred to as “English medium schools” as opposed to the government-run schools which instruct in the Tamil language. Middle-class Indian children are also often enrolled in outside tutoring, or tuition* programs, as well as Montessori pre-schools (see Donner 2008).
A: I put (up) a fight in order to study
N: mmm
A: “I must study,” I said.
N: okay
A: so first*...before marriage* I will study (I said)...
N: yes...
A: “I must complete* a degree*” (I said)...
N: yes...
A: in the house I put (up) a fight* and studied
N: yes...
A: ...in my house there were 5 or 6 children...
N: mmm
A: with me (were born) 2 girls, 4 boys*
N: mmm...yes, yes
A: now it’s not like that. In a family* there is one child.* One or two.*
N: yes...
A: that’s it.

Aishwarya recalled her insistence on higher education with pride. She also suggested a factor in the pursuit of and access to education in modern India. Shanmugalakshi believes that family size is intricately connected with educational levels. She attributes her “fight” for her own education to have been necessary because there were so many children in her family to support. She comments that in today’s India, middle-class families often have no more than two children (see also Donner 2008). This reduction in size financially allows middle-class families to educate not just the male, but also the female children. Indeed, this is an important factor in the accumulation of educational qualifications and by association, the middle-class matrimonial market. It is also associated with the changes in age gap between bride and bridegroom as we will see in the following section.

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168 This is also the case with lower-class Tamil families (Van Hollen 2015).
Age and Kinship Patterns

Among earlier generations, Dravidian kinship practices among Tamils were much more common. Dravidian kinship implies a marriage alliance between either cross cousins (MBD and FZS) or an uncle and niece (Trauttmann 1981, Nishimura 1998). These types of alliances often negated the necessity for in-depth matchmaking altogether, as the match was mandated to be between relatively familiar kin. Today, there is a decline in the popularity of consanguineous marriage among many in Tamilnadu. This has been linked to an exposure to western medical discourses about genetic defects, as well as urban cultural associations made between “sophistication,” “modernity,” and non-kin marriage. With respect to the former, several of my urban interlocutors alluded to this reasoning and one woman in her sixties who had lived in the village as a child even commented that if her granddaughter were to marry a relative, the couple's offspring would not be “bright*. The latter issue of “sophistication” has been detailed by Kapadia (1995), as she remarked on the changes occurring in rural Tamilnadu, “Kinship obligations and their moral order are being increasingly viewed as obsolete. It is ‘urban’ norms and the new non-kin marriage patterns that are viewed as ‘nagarikam’ (sophisticated, civilized behavior)” (Kapadia 1995:67). In my experience in Madurai, the Dravidian kinship practice of marriage to one's mother's brother (tāy māma) was more common in villages and/or among lower castes (perhaps because they were less exposed to western medical discourses and/or the urban rules of “sophistication”). On the other hand, the Dravidian kinship practice of cross-cousin marriage was a more common occurrence in both rural and urban areas amongst people of a variety of castes.

169 Although in some communities in Tamilnadu, particularly the lower classes, consanguineous marriage remains relatively common (Van Hollen 2015).
Accompanying the prevalence of Dravidian kinship practice among previous generations in Tamilnadu, as well as the persistence of mother’s brother marriage in rural areas and amongst lower castes, there was also a preference for a significant age gap (around ten years) between the bridegroom and his potential bride. Today the age difference expectation is much smaller, although it still exists predominantly as a mode of reinforcing patriarchal social control. The catalyst for this change becomes evident through an examination of the relationship between more institutionalized forms of marriage alliance and urban Tamil identity construction. As alluded to above, in contemporary Tamilnadu, members of the urban middle-class encourage a two-child maximum in family planning. This is a consequence of many factors, but an important one for this discussion is the sophistication and status accorded to the smaller family, the family that can afford higher education for its children and greater luxuries via surplus income. In conjunction with the promotion of a smaller family are the greater employment and educational opportunities afforded to women, which often delay the commencement of this smaller family. These “modern” ingredients create a larger age gap between perhaps, a more traditionally sanctioned bride and groom in Dravidian culture – a woman and her youngest maternal uncle. This change in the age gap between a bride and bridegroom highlights what has been previously indicated as more feasible modes of current marriage alliance in urban Tamilnadu - Dravidian cross-cousin marriage or marriage with a non-relative. These two avenues determine how the remainder of the matchmaking process is to proceed, for cross-cousins and their parents are occasionally more familiar with each other, thereby possibly altering and/or cancelling many matchmaking interactions. Indeed, due to the

170 See also Fuller and Narasimhan (2014).
change in marriage preference, matchmaking has surfaced as a much more intricate and
time-consuming cultural practice in many ways. With that said, some of the SMVS group
members did undergo complex marriage negotiations even with family members. For
instance Teacher described her marriage arrangement and immediate married life in this way,

First they wanted to marry me to my cross-cousin and I thought it was going
to happen and that was what everyone thought. But then that cross-cousin
asked for a big dowry and my parents had many children and they said 'How
can we give one daughter a big dowry? What will we do about the other
daughters?' So my parents said they didn't want the marriage. They found
another bridegroom (mâpillai) (non-kin) and I cried and said I wouldn't do it.
I said he was too dark (karuppu) and wouldn't do it and I didn't like it
(laughs). I cried for a whole day. Then my father’s younger brother
(cittappa) scolded me, 'Your father and I are both dark. This is how it is. You
are thinking you can get another bridegroom?’ So then I was silent.
After marriage, for two to three years I couldn't speak to him. We were living
separate lives. Then my father and other relatives cried and said I needed to
learn to be with him. 'If you don't and you come back home (to live) your
siblings will live their lives with nothing (oṟum illamā). If the first daughter
does this then what happens to the rest of the children when we need to
marry them off?,’ my father cried. So then I was with him (her husband) and
my children were born.

Here, we see that Teacher’s matrimonial arrangements initially involved Dravidian kinship
practice and also emphasized skin color and filial duty. The two latter elements continue to
hold significance in today's technology-enhanced matchmaking, as we will see below.

**The Matrimonial Advertisement**

While perhaps not experiencing it firsthand in their own marriage arrangements, most of
the SMVS women, now living in urban areas and perceiving knowledge of technology as a
matter of status and prestige, were familiar with matrimonial websites through which they
searched for their children's future husbands and wives. Yet, these matrimonial websites,
while perhaps symbolizing a new, modern era in Tamil matchmaking for the SMVS group women, also followed, or at least acknowledged, certain rules which were conceived of as more traditional. These rules related to descent groups, caste affiliations, and astrological alignments and defects.

Descent and Caste Groups

First and foremost, caste endogamy had to be established.\textsuperscript{171} Today, the internal hierarchy of subsects\textsuperscript{172} is relegated less importance; however, a “higher” subsect status is always attractive.\textsuperscript{173} According to my interlocutors, this was a relatively recent phenomenon and was in part due to the difficulty of finding a suitable match who possessed both respectable socioeconomic credentials \textit{as well as} a matching subsect. With the decreasing influence of caste divisions on the acquisition and maintenance of socioeconomic stability (i.e., via educational and employment reservations, see Chapter One) and social capital, it has now become more important for my interlocutors and many other urban middle-class Tamils to seek out higher salaries as opposed to higher subsects. In addition, among Brahmins, patrilineal descent groups (Skt. \textit{gōtra}, Tam. \textit{kōttiraṅkaḷ})\textsuperscript{174} had to be assessed for compatibility, as a bride and bridegroom were not to hail from the same group (Trautmann 1981:240). While non-Brahmins do not have an association with a particular \textit{gōtra/kōttiram}, they often mirror this alliance restriction in their objection to marriage

\textsuperscript{171} Nishimura (1998) provides an eloquent discussion of caste endogamy and the reasoning behind its practice among a group of non-Brahmin Nagarattars in Tamilnadu. She writes, “Marrying a non-Nagarattar is considered to be detrimental, not because it creates ‘impurity’ in the Brahmanic sense, but because its allows property to flow out of the caste and breaks the reciprocal relationship of marriage alliance...” (Nishimura 1998:53).

\textsuperscript{172} Subsect refers to the hierarchical divisions within the Iyer Brahmin caste, such as Vadamal, Brahacharanam, Ashtasahasram, Vattima, Gurukkal, etc.

\textsuperscript{173} For an in-depth discussion of subsect status and marriage preference among Tamil Brahmins, see Fuller and Narasimhan 2008.

\textsuperscript{174} For an in-depth explanation of the history of Tamil Brahmin patrilineal descent groups (\textit{kōttiraṅkaḷ}), see Gough 1956.
between a bride and bridegroom who worship the same *kula tēyam*, or family deity (Ramakrishnan 2008:447). Therefore, in matchmaking among non-Brahmins the difference in *kula tēyam* must to be assured.\(^{175}\)

Horoscopes

Middle-class matchmaking also concerns the long held practice of comparing astrological charts in suburban Madurai. To determine compatibility, a respected astrologer (*cōtiṭar*) was usually consulted with regard to the matching of birth stars (*naṭcattiraṅkal*) and the alignment of the planets at the time of birth (*irāci* and *āmcam*). Certain alignments indicate the presence of blemishes, or *tōsaṅka*. If a *tōsam* is present in a person’s horoscope (*cātakam*), it must be determined whether the inauspiciousness attached to the *tōsam* can be remedied. (This is usually accomplished with a cancelling out of corresponding *tōsam* in the man and woman’s horoscopes.) Once caste, clan, and astrological categories are scrutinized, details about the potential bride or bridegroom’s education, employment, and salary can be assessed.

Education and Employment

In order to understand how educational and employment qualifications are communicated in a matrimonial advertisement, as well as verbally, an analysis of what I identify as a particular modern matchmaking dialect is useful. This transformed language reflects an interpretation of arranged marriage commensurate with a more fast-paced, globalized

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\(^{175}\) As has been noted by Nishimura (1998), Tamil Brahmins, in addition to identifying with a specific *kōṭtiram*, also align themselves with a particular *kula tēyam*, or lineage god. However, when arranging a Brahmin marriage, the *kula tēyam* does not serve as the “marriage regulator” (Nishimura 1998:76), as it does among non-Brahmins.
world. For example, there is the use of the English word “broadminded” to describe a potential bridegroom. This term indicates that a bridegroom has most likely travelled/lived outside of India and is familiar with “western” culture. As relayed in Chapter Two, in an attempt to arrange my own marriage, one Brahmin interlocutor described the “broadminded” bridegroom by saying that he lived in London and would allow me, as his wife, to eat chicken and wear t-shirts.\(^{176}\) With respect to gender difference, “broadmindedness” is a more acceptable quality for a bridegroom versus a bride.\(^{177}\) The desirability of a middle-class Tamil woman is often assessed according to the balance between her knowledge of “tradition” and her hopefully limited exposure to the immodest actions of “western” women.

The ever-popular acronyms of South Asian culture also reflect social and temporal changes in matchmaking practices. It is common for families engaged in the matchmaking process to weigh the participation of the potential bridegroom or bride in an “MNC,” or “Multinational Corporation;” “BPO,” or “Business Process Outsourcing;” or “BITS,” an indication that the man or woman has studied at the Birla Institute of Technology and Science. Specifically, when “BITS” is listed in the qualifications of a potential bride or bridegroom, it indicates that the man or woman has studied at the prestigious institute. Therefore, the mentioning of “BITS” exhibits a high valuation of education, as is indicative

\(^{176}\) In other studies of the middle-class in India, “broad-mindedness” is referred to as “exposure” (both terms are communicated in English) (see, for example, Gilbertson 2014, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014).

\(^{177}\) It has been suggested by previous reviewers of this chapter as a separately published article that gender difference with respect to comportment, in this case “broadmindedness,” is ultimately male-controlled, with men permitting women to behave in specific ways. While I agree with this statement, I also feel that social restrictions on gendered comportment are a function of social expectations as they relate to class identifications. For example, some middle-class men may favor a “traditional” appearance and comportment, desiring to avoid so-called “broadminded” ideals and behavior, yet their socioeconomic status and its related cultural practices and values, require them to act according to the behavior of a “broadminded” (read: “modern”) individual. Hence, with respect to the case of gendered “broadmindedness,” I believe that it is not solely a product of a patriarchal control valve, but a mechanism of control that is operated according to expectations of class identity as well. That said, the role of Indian women as receptacles of “tradition” has been well documented (see, for example, Hancock 1999 and Sreenivas 2008) and this fact should not be ignored when considering middle-class behavior/identity performance in Tamilnadu.
of middle-class membership, but also shows promise with respect to future salary and augmented class lifestyle. In addition, if while examining a matrimonial advertisement, one came across, say, a man who had “studied BITS,” many other less desirable aspects such as darker skin, having only one living parent or being an only child could be disregarded. Having only one living parent often indicated that the future daughter-in-law (perhaps along with other daughters-in-law) would be responsible for the care of the remaining parent, as they most likely would live with a son and his wife. With respect to the bridegroom being an only child, this indicated that the future daughter-in-law would not have guidance from other elder sisters-in-law concerning childcare and housekeeping. While guidance might be sought from the mother-in-law in this scenario, there was a significant risk that a very stereotypical mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship would ensue and cause friction in the family. Further, one’s husband being an only child in conjunction with a still possible joint family (kūṭṭukkuṭumpam) living arrangement allows for the risk of even more friction in the household.

While there is little question that a bridegroom who works for an “MNC,” or who studied “BITS,” has desired characteristics, participation in a “BPO” is much more contested. Consider a middle-class bridegroom working at an outsourcing center. He is probably making a sufficient salary; however, aligning with him in marriage would most likely not fulfill the promise of socioeconomic hypergamy often aspired to by the middle-class family of the bride. A middle-class potential bride working in a “BPO” is even more concerning. Regardless if the woman has actually worked overnight shifts at an outsourcing location, it is assumed that she has. These actions automatically call into question her reputation (read: chastity) due to her location in a mixed gender environment
at all hours of the night. The selection of a woman who works or has worked at a “BPO” requires additional investigation to assure her purity and respectability. Here, the value of moral integrity is elevated above the material possessions that could be acquired via the additional salary of the potential bride.178

With the pervasiveness of wealth acquired through MNC employment in modern India, one might assume that the traditional high status accorded to a government job has diminished. Indeed, other research suggests that the middle classes in Tamilnadu, particularly the Brahmin upper middle classes, no longer hold public sector employment in such high esteem (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). However, with respect to my interlocutors, Brahmin and non-Brahmin, this was not the case. The SMVS women and their families were well aware that salaries were elevated in MNC positions, but still placed government jobs in a valued category due to job security and their historical association with higher caste status and the formation of the early Indian middle class during colonialism.179 I suspect that a primary reason for this discrepancy is due to the differences between the cultures of the upper and lower middle classes. In contrast to the work of Fuller and Narasimhan (2008, 2014) whose upper middle-class interlocutors primarily held an elevated level of educational and professional qualifications, my work with the SMVS women and their families indicates that they are only just beginning to acquire these attributes and struggling socioeconomically to do so.180 This difference in positioning, I

178 For an in-depth discussion of Indian women’s experiences of BPO employment and their negotiations of tradition and modernity in these settings see Patel 2010, Giri 2011.
179 See Chapter One for a history of caste affiliation, employment and colonialism.
180 While I have made it clear that I am uncomfortable with the labeling and categorization of individuals’ lives and everyday interactions (see Chapters One and Two), I would suggest that there is some kind of pattern of cultural difference when considering the upper and lower middle classes in Tamilnadu. Other scholars of middle-class identity have also noted this difference (see, for example, Dickey 2012, Gilbertson 2014a, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014).
believe, is key to understanding not only the place of public sector employment in modern Indian life, but wider variances concerning the beliefs and values of the Indian middle class.

The issue of job security was also behind opinions about working in “business,” especially for Brahmins who were hunting for a match. Business implied less stability and an association with lower castes whose livelihoods came from small and unstable businesses and whose women were required to work to assure the success of that business. However, proof of a successful business, for example the existence of a factory or the employment of several workers outside of the family, was often enough to overlook historical associations with lower social status groups.

In a sense, job security was not only a factor affecting perceptions of the potential bridegroom, but also the bride. Due to middle-class conceptions of themselves as in between or constantly struggling to keep afloat socioeconomically, it was crucial that the potential bride’s father had not retired until after her marriage was completed. Radhika explained this to me, saying that when her father retires, he will lose power because he will not be the boss of anyone. This lack of power would in turn affect the amount of respect and consideration a groom’s parents would give to the bride’s family. It was imperative that Radhika marry before her father retired, as the masculine social capital acquired via her father’s employment was influential in a decision to settle a match. The adherence to this principle by Radhika’s father caused much controversy in the rest of the family, as Radhika was actually the youngest of her paternal cousins. While Radhika’s uncles were

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181 In one instance with Radhika, a prospective bridegroom was described as working in “business.” Radhika’s grandmother and mother became worried that if Radhika married him, there would be tension* (English word colloquially used to describe “stress”) and the couple would not have time to relax.*
182 From my vantage point as both an outsider and as a regular participant in Radhika’s family, I was confused by this statement, as her father would remain a strong and powerful patriarchal figure in the family whom one might describe as the boss of his wife. Apparently, this domestic and gendered form of power operated in a different manner.
aware of the retirement rule, they understood Radhika’s marriage before her elder female paternal cousins to be an attempt to express higher socioeconomic status (since Radhika’s father was the youngest of his siblings and therefore stereotypically would have had the least amount of time to amass wealth), as well as modern in its disregard for the tradition of age-based chronology in marriage practices.

With respect to my interlocutors, the average monthly salary desired by a potential bride’s family was between Rs. 50,000 and 60,000, or 986 and 1,183 dollars.\textsuperscript{183} If the salary was lower than this figure, say Rs. 20,000 to 30,000 per month, other possessions, specifically ownership of a house, would be considered in lieu of monthly income. Many times, family members, as well as parents of other potential brides were not shy in requesting proof of the man’s work status, usually a letter from his employer confirming his employment and possibly mentioning the longevity of his position. In many instances, the parents of the potential bridegroom will preemptively furnish the letter at the time of the \textit{peñ pārkka}.

\textbf{The Peñ Pārkka}

At the opening of this chapter, I recalled my matchmaking experiences with the daughter of an SMVS group member named Radhika. I would here like to continue my examination of the ritual called “girl/woman-viewing,” as I perceive it to be a fundamental mode through which middle-class identity can and is displayed in modern Tamilnadu. In previous discussions of Tamil middle-class life, the \textit{peñ pārkka} and its significance has not been

\textsuperscript{183} The desire for Radhika to marry up in socioeconomic status was blatantly apparent in this regard as her own father earned about Rs. 35,000, or 650 dollars per month as a bank manager.
adequately addressed and this section of the dissertation is meant to correct this deficiency.

The *Pen Pārkka* Basics

Literally “girl/woman viewing,” the *peṇ pārkka* serves as one of the first impressions that the potential bride and bridegroom’s families have of each other. The *peṇ pārkka* includes the parents of both the possible bride and bridegroom, as well as the extended family of the bride (including the curious and possibly status-generating American anthropologist).

Before the viewing event, there might be pictures\textsuperscript{184} included in the envelope containing the horoscope, but a real sense of the possessions and lifestyle of each family is not known until the first actual meeting. The practice of *peṇ pārkka* is cross-caste, but is uniquely performed according to caste affiliation. For example, while Latha’s daughter, Radhika, was viewed in her home, another SMVS group member, Jayanthi, stated that her *peṇ pārkka*, true to Nadar caste tradition, was held in a temple.\textsuperscript{185}

The Viewing of Radhika

Latha and her family went through about five or six *peṇ pārkkaikal* before an alliance was finally settled for her daughter, Radhika. In addition to the incident described at the opening of this chapter, yet another of Radhika’s viewing experiences exemplifies how

\textsuperscript{184} If one is middle class, these pictures are often taken in a formal studio or in front of a “modern” possession like a laptop or car. The production of the “modern” bride through photography and other images is interesting fodder for another project altogether.

\textsuperscript{185} The factor of generational difference between Brahmin Radhika and Nadar Jayanthi should not and is not being overlooked; however, during my time in Madurai the non-Brahmin marriage practices that I witnessed seemed to be based much more on Dravidian kinship patterns and family intermarriage. Hence, *peṇ pārkkaikal* (plural for *pārkka*) were rare among the non-Brahmins with whom I spent time. I would suspect that the *peṇ pārkkaikal* of non-Brahmin women who do not marry their relations (marriage with a relative is often referred to as a “*conta kalyānam*, literally, “relation marriage”) may have changed over time, but both Radhika and Jayanthi’s *peṇ pārkkaikal* were described to me as “according to caste tradition.” Therefore, I take these examples as representative of individual caste tradition in this context.
middle-class socioeconomic status and lifestyle are performed in marriage alliance processes, as well as illustrates that common characteristic of middle-class, modern life in India – the tension between tradition and modernity.

On the occasion of the third viewing of Radhika, a potential bridegroom’s parents arrived from a remote village where they were prestigious landowners. As soon as they entered the home of Radhika and her family, the mother of the bridegroom went immediately to the kitchen, sat on the floor, and remained there for the entirety of the visit. The potential bridegroom’s father, comfortably seated on a sofa in the main hall,* was to spearhead the discussion of a possible alliance, his wife relegated to a location from where she could not participate in the main conversation. Having experienced a few of these matchmaking encounters already, I was confused by this scenario and asked about it once the guests had left. Latha told me that the woman sat in the kitchen because they kept a very stringent Brahmin household and strictly observed “mati,” or ritual purity\textsuperscript{186} and that her speculations were based on the fact that they still\textsuperscript{187} lived in a rural akkirakāram. She then added that as soon as the woman positioned herself on the kitchen floor, she suspected that this was not the right alliance for Radhika because, although Latha’s family considered themselves orthodox, the potential bridegroom’s family was not progressive (read: modern) enough in their observance of caste and gender restrictions (\textit{kaṭṭupāṭukal}). She argued that, while she wanted her daughter to experience more of traditional village life, if she married into this particular family her movements might be significantly

\textsuperscript{186} For an in-depth description of \textit{mati} see Chapter One.

\textsuperscript{187} A majority of Tamil Brahmins in villages have migrated to urban locations (see Fuller 1999, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014) and hence there is a stereotype of rural Brahmin culture as less modern or progressive when compared to urban Brahmin cultural practice. This is not to say that this stereotype does not also engender a nostalgic sense of rural life as “simple.” While this stereotype might also be implemented by non-Brahmins as well, most have relatives who reside in the village and lead, according to my interlocutors, a middle-class life with modern goods. Their lives are perhaps less understood as lacking modernity and embodying tradition, as earlier generations of their families were cut off from goods and services based on strict maintenance of caste hierarchy (here, tradition). See Chapter Three.
restricted (especially during menstruation) and although Radhika was familiar with ritual pollution and its gendered components, she was not accustomed to strict observance of the practices attached to it and this would make her married life uncomfortable and difficult.

*Contemporary Middle-Class Marriage*

In her brilliant ethnography of contemporary Korean weddings, Laurel Kendall (1996) emphasizes the substantial role that marriage plays in many people’s identity construction, as well as their perceptions of tradition and modernity. She remarks, “How one marries becomes a measure of both self and status. Weddings matter” (Kendall 1996:x). In this section, I demonstrate how middle-class status is not only communicated through and performed during matchmaking practices, but also in marriage (*kalyānam*) preparations and ceremonies in South India. I maintain that Indian marriages are yet another ritual lens through which to view socioeconomic class performance and the ongoing middle-class identity construction process.

*Wedding Invitations*

Wedding preparations in modern Tamilnadu begin with an attention to what, at first, I thought to be a relatively minimal matrimonial detail – the design and dispersal of invitations (*patirikaikal* or *alaippukaal*). Indeed, wedding invitations were a crucial way through which to communicate social status to one’s guests. While in previous generations, people of upper and middle-class standing may have been able convey their status through the dispersal of one rather simple invitation, among today’s Tamil middle classes there are at least two types of wedding invitations produced and dispersed according to the social
distinction of invited guests. The first is less concerned with the communication of status, as it is printed for family members and close friends - people who are already privy to the bride or groom’s family’s financial circumstances and hence, do not need to be convinced that the family is of a high socioeconomic and social station. These invitations are usually printed in Tamil and include no more than four colors, which reduces cost. The invitations are referred to as “maṅcal invitations,” as they are traditionally printed on glossy yellow (maṅcal) paper. The moniker of maṅcal invitation also corresponds to the South Asian belief in the auspiciousness of turmeric (also called maṅcal in Tamil). For example, Tamil women have for centuries washed their faces with yellow turmeric powder, as it is believed to help with their complexion and contains purifying qualities which also are necessary to maintain the appearance of a proper and traditional Tamil woman. Turmeric (maṅcal) also connects to the auspicious appearance of a cumaṅkali, in that the necklace symbolizing her married status (tāli) is rubbed with turmeric so as to utilize the substance’s bright yellow appearance to signal marital status in public.

Although the maṅcal invitations are thought to be better suited for close family members and friends, they also include some status-communicating elements. For one, most modern wedding invitations include a list of family members who will be joined together through the union of the couple. In an inconspicuous demonstration of social status, the degrees and professions of these family members are often listed next to their names. In some cases, the foreign locations of relatives will also be listed, as connections with cultures outside of India lend social distinction to an entire family.
In contrast to the *mañcal* invitations, invited guests who are not as familiar with the family and/or are of higher socioeconomic and social status (e.g., bride's father's boss) receive an embossed invitation on cardstock. While similar to *mañcal* invitations in the listing of degrees and foreign locations of family members, this cardstock invitation communicates status in other ways. First, the cardstock invitation is printed in English and contains abstract representations of gods, goddesses, and “Indian culture.” Due to these differences, cardstock invitations tend to resemble something similar to a western wedding invitation, with more creative and innovative aspects being employed to convey an association with modern culture and its associated lifestyle. In giving these cardstock invitations to specific guests, the bride and/or groom’s parents conspicuously display a correlation between themselves and modernity, and in turn, the social status that is demonstrated by the knowledge and use of this modernity.

**Figure 4.1** An example of a “*mañcal* invitation.”

**Figure 4.2** List of people thanking wedding guests for their attendance. Notice not only the degrees listed next to the names, but also the mention of residence in the U.S.
In addition to communicating their familiarity with modernity, cardstock invitations are also used to highlight a middle-class family’s caste affiliation and its unique culture. This is best exemplified in the now relatively common Brahmin wedding invitation, which explains caste-specific wedding rituals in detail. This invitation is divided into three sections and each ritual description is written in English, as well as accompanied by a color drawing of the caste custom described. This newly popular invitation is an artifact of social change, for in the past, people who were unfamiliar with Brahmin marriages (i.e., non-Brahmins) were not usually welcome at Brahmin functions due to the threat of caste pollution. However, in modern India, contemporary urban neighborhoods are occupied by a multitude of castes, diluting strict caste segregation. This fact, as well as an increasing appreciation for middle class over particular caste values in terms of community-building,
has lessened the threat of caste pollution and inspired intermingling at most marriages.\footnote{This is not to say that caste communities no longer maintain pride for their particular cultural practices. Clearly, the Brahmin wedding invitation makes much of their specific caste customs.} Moreover, like the general cardstock invitations, the sheer cost of producing this lavish type of invitation implies a change in the perceived use of the marriage invitation as a mode of demonstrating status among the Indian middle classes, a body of people that seems to place an increasing social value on consumption and displays of wealth.

Figures 4.5 and 4.6 Example of a cardstock invitation sometimes dispersed by Brahmins to expected non-Brahmin guests. The tri-fold invitation explains the various traditional wedding customs of the Brahmin caste.

Perhaps the most recent nuanced wedding invitation, is one posted on the globally-pervasive website, Facebook. Unlike other types of wedding invitations, the Facebook invitation does not follow any status-communication formula, such as the use of a yellow background or creatively embossed representations of Hindu gods and goddesses, as the mere use of the World Wide Web is indicative of higher educational qualifications and global interconnectedness, characteristics that carry with them a particular upwardly mobile social status.
Dowries and Status-Building

Dowries are presented according to caste tradition. In addition to the gold offered\textsuperscript{189}, Brahmins gave very little because they had covered all of the three-day wedding expenses. Chettiyar dowries, the costs of the wedding split evenly between the bride and bridegroom’s families, were often described as being the most elaborate – rooms upon rooms filled with housewares, clothes, gold, etc. which wedding guests are requested to view before the ceremonies begin.

In some instances, dowries were never labeled as such, and in fact, most print and online wedding advertisements and profiles indicated outright that dowry was not necessary by stating in English “no expectations.” However, in reality the parents of the bridegroom often demand certain items during the alliance process, such as motorbikes, king-size mattresses, and washing machines, but avoid labeling these articles as “dowry.” The formal dowry is then understood as the array of fruits and sweets that are presented

\footnote{For many middle-class Tamils in Madurai this would range from 35-50 sovreigns (pouns).}
during the betrothal ceremony. This outward denial of material and monetary excess in the form of dowry, while also possibly a function of India’s formal outlawing of the practice, is an ingredient in the performance of middle classness. As I was once told by Radhika’s mother, the middle class is the most moral of all socioeconomic classes, the most willing to give food to the poor, for example, because they can afford it and yet are not too “sophisticated” (here: self-absorbed, stuck-up)\textsuperscript{190} to participate in social service like “rich people,” or “panakkaraṅka.” Publicly stating that dowry items were not desired presented these middle-class individuals as moral and virtuous, qualities which were socially valued and coveted qualities in future in-laws.

**Radhika’s Middle-Class Marriage: A Case Study**

For a more personalized examination of marriage’s place in the performance of middle-class status, I again turn to the example of Latha’s daughter, Radhika. Due to her family’s self-identified attachment to Brahmin orthodoxy, Radhika’s marriage was strictly aligned with traditional Brahmin caste prescriptions, and hence should not be understood as typical in any way. Indeed, any in-depth documentation of a marriage ritual would reveal that, while certain ritual patterns are aspired to, these models of proper ritual behavior are also constantly negotiated according to social and cultural change. Therefore, I present the case of middle-class marriage with which I was an intricate part as an individual case study of middle-class marriage practices.

\textsuperscript{190} This definition of “sophisticated” came from an interview with Radhika’s mother, Latha, when I asked her to describe the differences between rich, middle-class, and poor people in Tamil society. “Sophisticated,” like other English words used in the middle-class Tamil vocabulary (e.g. “bold,” “modern”), seem to carry both negative and positive connotations depending on the context. They also seem to be words that only carry a positive connotation when the concepts behind them are embraced in moderation. Incidentally, Kapadia (1995:67) has noted that the term “sophistication,” or “nagarikam,” in rural Tamilnadu is aligned with the gifting of a purposefully small dowry and its association with status augmentation.
In attempting to follow the instructions laid out by Brahmin caste prescriptions, Radhika’s family members were, from the beginning, conscious that they would be expending a substantial amount of funds. Her father’s total cost estimation came to approximately Rs. 7.5 lakhs (~$13,000) and these expenditures were by no means easy for Radhika’s family to absorb. As a bank manager, her father made approximately Rs. 35,000 (~$600) per month and her brother was asked to take out a Rs. 2 lakh (~$3,000) loan to supplement his father’s savings for the occasion. Although funding for marriage expenses was not openly advertised during initial matchmaking interactions, it was clear to both the family of the bridegroom and the several hundred guests who were familiar with Radhika’s family that through the event of Radhika’s matrimony, her family was attempting to perform and possibly raise its social status. Among middle-class Tamils, marriages are talked about for years afterwards and hence, memories of a wedding’s extravagance maintain a family’s social status far into the future. In fact, Radhika’s marriage was not only thought to be an investment in her future, but also in her elder brother’s, whose marriage would hopefully occur soon after. By performing their social status in excess at Radhika’s wedding, her family was also attempting to attract/advertise for potential brides of high socioeconomic and social standing who would not only maintain the family’s class status, but also hopefully be accompanied by a noteworthy amount of dowry items.

The rental of a wedding hall (kalyāna mantapam) was key to putting on a memorable and status-exuding wedding. According to Brahmin custom, the wedding hall for Radhika’s marriage had to be rented for three days and be able to accommodate all out-of-town guests. Hence, most of the wedding halls used by the middle-class are quite massive, equipped with at least three levels, and if the family can afford the cost, air-
conditioned rooms for the bride and bridegroom. Other members of the middle class and non-Brahmin castes, since they only need to rent the hall for the day (according to caste and class convention), often hold their marriage ceremonies in even more elaborate venues. For instance, Jayanthi held her daughter’s wedding in a building that also doubled as a hall for music performances and handicraft exhibitions in Madurai. She bragged to me that many “rich people” (panakkāranāka) in the city had held weddings at that venue and the total for her daughter’s one-day wedding amounted to Rs. 4 lakhs (~$7,304).

Radhika’s wedding hall had to be decorated to the hilt, including huge flexboards (billboards) announcing the event (see Figures 4.8 and 4.9). Moreover, several meals had to be provided to all of the guests and the main stage had to be lavishly decorated so that group photos taken during the reception could be admired later in both the video and wedding album compilations.

Each guest also had to be given a souvenir canvas wedding favor bag, the amount and quality of its contents depending on the positioning of the family within the middle classes. These wedding bags, similar to American “party favor bags,” ranged not only in contents,

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191 For an insightful analysis of wedding videos in South India, see Gerritsen 2006 and Abraham 2010.
but also quality and language use. Similar to the wedding invitations, they also announced status through blatant printing of educational qualifications next to the names of the bride and bridegroom (see Figures 4.10 and 4.11). Generally, they included items such as fruit, turmeric, \textit{kuṇkumam} (vermillion powder), a turmeric-covered rope (on which to put one’s \textit{tali}, see above), \textit{viṭalai-pākku} (areca nut), and occasionally, a small Tupperware container.

These souvenir wedding favor bags served as mobile reminders of a family’s class status, but also served a more utilitarian purpose as containers for fruits and vegetables bought at the local market or, if one was an SMVS group member, a bag in which to carry your song diary and puja supplies.

For Radhika’s marriage, the cost of hall rental was nearly Rs. 3 lakhs (\textasciitilde$5,500) and catering for three days was calculated at about Rs. 2.5 lakhs (\textasciitilde$4,500). According to
Brahmin custom, much of the financial burden fell on the bride’s family. Further, Brahmins host several additional costly rituals such as: the cumaṅkali prarttana192 (which necessitated the gifting of plastic containers, maṅcal, kuṅkumum, and “blouse bits” to all female relatives of Radhika), the swing (uṅcal) ceremony (for which an extra sari was required, as well as the rental of a swing)(see Figure 4.12), the bridegroom’s arrival by convertible (requiring the rental of a convertible car)(see Figure 4.13), the Kāsi Yātirai ceremony193 (which required the purchase of extra sandals, garlands, and umbrellas)(see Figure 4.14), and the nine-priest blessing ritual (which required payments of at least Rs. 100 to each of the nine priests)(see Figure 4.15).

192 A full description of this ritual and its significance with respect to Tamil Brahmin womanhood is offered in Chapter One.
193 Mock pilgrimage/fleeing to Kāsi/Benares/Varanasi by the groom, who is then coaxed back by the bride’s father in order for the marriage ceremony to continue. This ritual is also performed by those non-Brahmins thought to be traditionally “high” in caste hierarchy, such as Mudaliyars and Chettiyars.
Companionate Marriage

Important to any discussion of modernity, matchmaking and marriage in south India, as well as other locations, is the ideal of companionate marriage. According to a variety of sources, companionate marriage, as a marital form which stresses the ideal of companionship between a husband and wife, has a long history in cultures across the globe (Simmons 1979, Stone 1990, Skolnik 1991, Raychaudhuri 2000, Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, Gilbertson 2014b). This centrality of companionship is linked to the privileging of the individual, as well as interpretations of “progress,” characteristics that are said to epitomize the project of modernity (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006:15). However, while this ideal of “companionship as modern” appears to be globally shared and understood (especially through media and technology, see Abraham 2010), as with the notion of modernity itself, the manifestations of the ideal are culturally specific and form “...part of

\footnote{A salient example of the relationship between companionship and modernity can be found in the celebration of Valentine's Day in many parts of the world, including Japan (Creighton 1993), Ghana (Fair 2004), and India (Sahni and Shankar 2006).}
the repertoire of concepts on which people draw when crafting their complicated lives…” (Wardlow and Hirsch 2006:6, see also Gilbertson 2014b).

In India, as well as other locales, this “repertoire of concepts” also includes cultural conceptions of gender identities (Gold 2002) and socioeconomic class status. In her study of middle-class women in Hyderabad, Amanda Gilbertson (2014b) found that notions of respectable behavior (according to middle-class Indians) were intricately tied to how women represented their relationships with their husbands and that, while a generalized definition of companionate marriage portrays marital relations as more influenced by “friendship, equality and...emotional intimacy achieved through the sharing of feelings,” these ideas did not override “the value attached to respect, compromise and durability in marital relations” (Gilbertson 2014b:232). Indeed, the particular cultural framework into which companionate marriage is embedded plays a crucial role in the complex construction of modern, yet traditional, selves.

In the case of Radhika’s marriage, aspects of the companionate marriage ideal can be seen in her own participation in the matchmaking process and the intimacy fostered therein. While in previous generations the selection of a bride or bridegroom (within many classes and castes) might have been made without any verbal communication and a simple glance in each other’s direction, Radhika actively participated in the search for her companion. Indeed, in the end she was the one who made the decision to marry after a nearly forty minute conversation over Skype - she, secluded in a room in her small house in Madurai, India, and her prospect located in an internet café cubicle in Manama, Bahrain where he was then employed.
Recent statistics reflect my observations in Madurai and indicate that while the percentage of arranged marriages among Indians remains the same, the number of arranged alliances that take into account the intimate relationship between and the active participation of the potential bride and bridegroom have increased (Banerjee, Martin, and Desai 2008). These companionate marriages are not considered typical modern “love marriages,” as there is involvement of the bride and bridegroom’s families, a facet of traditional Indian marriage. Here again we see compromises between tradition and modernity surfacing in the exploration of Tamil middle classness.

Chapter Summary

The above discussion has illustrated how elements of middle-class matchmaking and marriage practices are used to demonstrate middle-class status and lifestyle in India. Not unlike many American weddings, conspicuous consumption plays an important role in establishing elevated social status. However, consumption is not the only factor that can be located as a mode of middle-class identity making. Concepts of individual choice in and communication with a marriage partner, as well as concerns about education, morality, virtue and respectability, are just a few lifestyle elements that surfaced in my exploration of middle-class matrimonial life. In addition, from dress choices and restrictions regarding gender difference to dowries, horoscopes and invitation selections, this chapter has illuminated the consistent navigations of tradition and modernity undertaken by middle-class actors in the marriage market.

The rituals of matchmaking and marriage are also lenses through which we can view how gendered power, as an element in the modern project, is both accepted and
avoided according to circumstance. For instance, we saw how girl/woman-viewings, or *peṇ pārkkaikāl*, while continuing a tradition of female objectification, often leads to the private communication between the potential couple and affords the woman a say in her own destiny and future relationships as a Tamil bride and wife. In the following chapter, I continue the conversation concerning the modern, gendered female subject in an exploration of how Tamil puberty and childbirth rituals are practiced and reinvented by the middle-class women of the Madurai suburbs.
CHAPTER FIVE

Periya poṇṇu āccu: Becoming a Woman and Mother in Middle-Class Madurai

“Ritual injunctions are attempts to control the self. But in practice compromises are continually being made”

Approximately a year after the wedding of SMVS group member Latha’s daughter, Radhika, I found myself back in Madurai preparing to observe my friend and her family in a celebration of her first pregnancy. This celebration would be marked by two distinct and formal rituals: the vaḷaikāppu and the cīmantam.195 Radhika, having come home for a short visit from her in-law’s house, would be escorted by many of her close family members (including the returned anthropologist) back to the home of her in-laws where these customary childbirth rituals would take place. The departure date for this event was scheduled, like almost all other Tamil Brahmin Hindu rituals, according to a formal Hindu calendar that listed the auspicious times (nalla nērāṅkal, lit. good times) during which one should set out on such a trip.

On the day of the rituals, I awoke in the home of Radhika’s in-laws to a main hall floor covered in boxes of glass bangles, Tupperware containers, and fruit. Elderly women sang local folk songs about Sita while each woman approached the mother-to-be, placed glass bangles on her wrists and dotted her forehead, wrists and cheeks with kuṅkumam (vermilion) powder and cantaṇam (sandalwood paste). It was just two months until Radhika, at 22 years old, would give birth to her first child in a hospital in her natal city of Madurai. After her ritual adornment with bangles, Radhika would change into the red nine-yard sari that she wore on

195 The vaḷaikāppu and cīmantam rituals are often described as overlapping, if not indistinguishable from each other (see Petitet and Pragathi 2007, Van Hollen 2003); however, my interlocutors, particularly those belonging to the Brahmin caste made a distinction between the two. See below.
her wedding day and a group of Brahmin priests would perform an hōmamceremony. Next to her marriage, the life stage of motherhood was paramount to Radhika’s transformation into a cumaṅkali. And like her marriage, the rituals required for this life-cycle event were inflected with markers of an urban middle-class identity.

In this chapter I examine the rituals associated with menstruation and childbirth. Beyond marriage, the dialectic conversations between modernity and tradition observed in these fertility rituals are central to constructions of Tamil Hindu womanhood. Using my experiences with women from a variety of castes and classes, this chapter will illustrate how women in the SMVS group, as well as other female neighbors with whom they interacted, related to the changes and continuities influencing menstruation and childbirth rituals in contemporary Tamilnadu.

**The Anthropological Study of Menstruation and Childbirth**

Analyses of menstruation and childbirth have long been topics of interest to anthropologists and many other scholars (Balzer 1981, Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, Rassmussen 1991, Van Hollen 2003, Narasimhan 2011). A primary focus of many of these analyses is the consideration of the restrictions that are placed on and reinscribed by women according to local concepts of ritual pollution and taboo (Rasmussen 1991, Maggi 2000). For instance, in her study of the Aīr Tuareg in northeastern Niger, Susan Rassmussen (1991) looks at the social complexities behind menstrual restrictions and

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196 A hōmam is a sacrificial fire (Petitet and Pragathi 2007).
taboos, arguing that these social entities cannot be extrapolated from the wider complex of social roles, historical influences and current economic conditions.

In this chapter I take up similar social complexities in a discussion of contemporary menstruation and childbirth rituals in the context of Tamilnadu. Specifically, I focus on two socio-cultural elements, identity and fertility, that are intricately connected to contemporary menstruation and childbirth, but are also central to the broader themes of social status, modernity and urban living discussed in this dissertation.

Identity and Fertility

As mentioned above, in her study of the Aïr Tuareg, Rasmussen (1991) found that cultural and ritual restrictions/taboos cannot be extricated from the wider particularities surrounding them (see also Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). Indeed, Rassmussen found that ritual restrictions pertaining to menstruation are not necessarily focused on female sexuality, but actually serve a wider purpose - to emphasize the preservation of traditional social roles and the interactions based on these distinctions. She maintains that the menstrual restrictions observed in the Aïr Tuareg are emically understood as an indication of higher-class identity. As a marker of status, these restrictions “enable noble women to gain safe ‘social distance’ from members of other social strata who live in close association with them” (Rassmussen 1991:755). In this cultural context, menstruation does not simply imply gendered social stigma, but reinforces wider social boundaries and connections. Further, these stigmas, boundaries and connections are not static, implying that menstrual practices may change in conjunction with alterations to these elements (Ullrich 2014).
Menstrual and childbirth ritual constraints have also been examined with respect to rural and urban living environments and their inhabitants’ perspectives on modernity and social change. Narasimhan (2011) investigates intergenerational and interlocational perspectives on the maintenance of ritual restrictions for menstruation among a subsect of Tamil Brahmins called the Vattima. She finds that while the Vattima consider the adherence to tradition (particularly that pertaining to womanhood) crucial to emphasizing their group identity and social status, contemporary ritual restrictions pertaining to menstrual pollution are also constantly negotiated according to living environment (rural or urban) and the growing involvement of women in education and work outside the home (Narasimhan 2011). It is these negotiations that I wish to examine with respect to the urban middle-class SMVS women and their families. In the following, I look at how social status, as well as concepts of urbanization and modernity, shape contemporary middle-class Hindu rituals for menstruation and childbirth.

A Note on Ritual Pollution in Tamilnadu

Before I advance further into a discussion of menstruation and childbirth practices in Tamilnadu, it is important to return to a major component to many aspects of life and ritual in Tamilnadu - ritual pollution, or tīṭṭu - which can be considered permanent or temporary. Tīṭṭu that is attached to a woman who is menstruating or has just given birth is thought of as temporary ritual pollution. In these temporary cases, the presence of tīṭṭu usually requires a period of segregation, which is determined by the polluting event as well as the

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197 Temporary tīṭṭu is also attached to those that have recently experienced a death in the family. The practice of recognizing death tīṭṭu and its ritual effects will be discussed later in this chapter as well as in Chapter Seven.
caste of the person observing the period of ritual impurity. For example, I was told by my Tamil Brahmin interlocutors that people of their caste must be in complete segregation after childbirth for eleven days and must follow restrictions pertaining to ritual impurity for thirty days after the birth (e.g., cannot be in the presence of priests or go to Hindu temples). In contrast, my Dalit interlocutors noted a segregation period of approximately sixteen days total (Kumar 2013), a much shorter amount of time. In addition to the many forms of tīṭṭu, Tamil Brahmins may also adhere to another type ritual pollution known as virupu, which describes the ritual pollution one has upon waking from sleep, considered a form of death by some Tamil Brahmins. Virupu is easily removed with a morning bath (Duvvury 1991) and in orthodox Hindu households, this bath is often a prerequisite to cooking and worshipping.

In Madurai, tīṭṭu remains a key factor in organizing space and gendered and religious interactions, but there is often negotiation when it comes to observances of it. For example, the menstruating daughter of a Brahmin SMVS group member was actually allowed to witness the Hindu SMVS group’s anniversary party (see Chapter Seven) where songs devoted to Hindu deities were sung despite her condition. Although she was required by the group’s guru to sit in another room, have no physical contact with others, or touch items that others would be touching during the celebration, the presence of a menstruating, ritually impure girl at a religious group’s event was certainly not what would be socially expected. In fact, it was such an odd occurrence, that many other non-Brahmin group

198 With respect to childbirth, I refer the reader to the work of Ferro-Luzzi (1974), as well as that of Van Hollen, which details the variety of circumstances affecting ritual pollution periods (Van Hollen 2003:194-200).

199 This may be a consequence of the differences in occupation between Brahmins and non-Brahmins historically. Since Brahmins have traditionally been landholders and overseers of field workers, they can afford a longer period of segregation for their women. In contrast, non-Brahmins have traditionally worked in the fields and their livelihoods were more dependent on agricultural productivity. Many could not afford for the women to be segregated for a long period of time, as they required all available hands for agriculture.
members remarked on her attendance. Jayanthi, being the jokester of the SMVS group (see Chapter Two), even made an attempt to poke the daughter with her finger all the while laughing and commenting that she might get polluted if she did so.\textsuperscript{200} This joking mentality by a non-Brahmin woman about a Brahmin girl’s menstruation speaks to the varying perspectives about menstrual pollution across castes and within the middle class in Tamilnadu.\textsuperscript{201} However, while this may have been Jayanthi’s reaction in this particular situation, other forms of ritual pollution (e.g., caste or death \textit{tīṭṭu}) may have inspired a different response from her.

\textit{Menstruation Rituals in Tamilnadu}

Although menstruation and childbirth in Tamilnadu has been a topic of scholarly discussion for quite some time (see, for example, Ferro-Luzzi 1974; Good 1982; Ram 1998; Van Hollen 2002, 2003), there are only a few works that map out the very specific details of these particular life cycle rituals. One such work is that of Vasumathi Duvvury (1991). Although completed in the 1980s, Duvvury’s examinations of ritual and social change remain relevant in the context of a rapidly changing subcontinent. Her research was carried out amongst two groups of Tamil Iyer Brahmins, one in a rural \textit{akkirakāram} and the other group in the urban metropolis of Bangalore. The primary aim of her research was to show that, while marriage is important in the lives of Tamil Brahmin women, other life cycle rituals were also central to the attainment of womanhood. These rituals, which are

\textsuperscript{200} For a touching ethnographic and personal account of menstruation, the act of touching and the building of rapport amongst interlocutors, see Egnor 1980:28.

\textsuperscript{201} These varying perspectives underscore the need “to consult female informants before reaching any conclusions regarding the status of menstruation…” (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:32). Although I did record some observations, menstrual pollution was not the focus of my project while in the field. Further research specifically on these varying perspectives, as well as the dialogic construction of these perspectives amongst middle-class women would be an interestingly topic for further study.
highlighted in this chapter, included *tirantukuli* (first menstruation), *valaikappu* and *cīmantam* (first pregnancy), as well as *cumaṅkali prarttanai* (see discussion in Chapter One).

*Tirantukuli* (First Menstruation)

With respect to menstruation, Duvvury (1991) concentrates on the puberty attainment ritual of Tamil Brahmin girls, formally called *tirantukuli* (lit. “coming out/opening bath”) and colloquially indicated in the saying “*periya poṇṇu āccu*” ([she] has become a big girl). The timing of the ritual is linked to the fourth day after menstruation is first observed. The girl is given a ceremonial oil bath and then dressed in new clothes. She is then taken to her family’s puja room where her fertility, prosperity and auspiciousness are assured through the placement of ritual objects such as cowrie shells and rupee coins on and around her person. Finally, the girl’s close relatives are required to give her gifts of jewelry, clothing and currency. Neighbors, who may attend the ceremony, will also contribute gifts. At this moment, her ritual pollution is nearly extinguished, but she must bathe again the following day in order to be considered completely pure (Duvvury 1991:120-123).

While the above description presents a general formula for *tirantukuli* ceremonies, Duvvury’s interlocutors also exposed her to significant variation in how first puberty ceremonies could transpire. For example, Duvvury comments that many ceremonies she witnessed in the city were rather abbreviated. This, according to her older female interlocutors, was due to the offering of higher education to girls often in conjunction with the lessening popularity of pre-puberty marriage. One of these women remarked,

In the past, *tirandukuli* [*tirantukuli*] would be performed on a grand scale because then, although most girls would be married before
menarche, only about fifteen days after the ritual she would be taken to her husband’s house on an auspicious day when *garbhadhana* would be performed and the marriage consummated. But now because most girls go to school and a few even attend college, they are not married off so early (Duvvury 1991:124, italicized in original).

This erosion of a strong cultural connection between pre-puberty marriage and menstrual rituals is also evident in Duvvury’s documentation of changing dress style during urban first puberty ceremonies in Bangalore. While the girls Duvvury observed most often wore a half sari (*dāvani*) as their ritual dress, she was told that in the past, girls were dressed in their nine-yard marriage sari (*maṭisār*), as they had already undergone the life event of marriage.

Duvvury (1991) also examined observances of menstrual ritual pollution with respect to location of the puberty attainment ceremony. In concert with my observations concerning village sociality in Chapter Three, Duvvury (1991) also locates the social environment as a primary difference in the celebration of Tamil puberty rituals in rural and urban locations. She notes,

Since in a big city like Bangalore, the neighbors do not always belong to the same caste and hence are not as closely knit as in the *agraharam* [akkrirakāram], the celebration of menarche in Bangalore is not such a happy, community affair like in the *agraharam* [akkrirakāram] where all the neighborhood *sumangalis* [*cumaṅkalika*] join together and participate (Duvvury 1991:125, italicized in original).

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202 According to Duvvury (1991), *garbhandhana*, (literally, “gifting the womb,”) refers to the consummation of the marriage.

203 Note that more recently, the half sari, or *dāvani*, has also become an outmoded form of dress for younger girls in urban areas and is usually replaced by a *churidaar set*, or *salwar kameez set* (see discussion of Pooja’s *vaḷaikāppu* below).

204 For Brahmin girls, I suspect that the statement “periya poṇṇu ācca” ([she] has become a big girl), while also implying greater responsibility also holds a connection to the traditional actions of a “big girl” which overlapped significantly with becoming an auspicious married woman (*cumaṅkali* or *kattukkalutti*) in earlier times.
This community involvement in and celebration of menarche, although not within an *akkirakāram*, was made known to me during my visit to the village of Martandampatti at the time of the annual Badra Kali festival (see Chapter Three). Although it was already a festive occasion and the village was busy with celebratory activities, Nadar SMVS member Aishwarya’s family had made the decision to wait and have her niece, Nandini’s, menarche celebration at the family’s village house during festival time. Nandini was not actually menstruating during this religious event, for if she had been, she would not have been allowed to attend the village festival for Badra Kali or, for that matter, come to the village to celebrate.

This delay of ritual illustrated to me that this life cycle event was more than keeping track of days and making sure that bathing occurred at the proper auspicious time. While it was not overtly expressed, it seemed as though the choice to have Nandini’s puberty celebration during the celebratory village visit was also a way to use ritual practice to connect with Aishwarya’s natal (and rural) community (which they seldom visited). This delay in ritual observance also served to advertise family wealth through the public gifting of jewelry and other items to Nandini, as is customary in Tamil girls’ puberty ceremonies.

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205 The Tamil suffix “patti,” when added to a place name, often signifies that it is a small town or village; however, this is not compulsory when naming a small town or village.

206 There are a few temples in Tamilnadu where menstruating women are welcome as devotees, but these are anomalies. In other parts of India, for example, Rajasthan, it seems more common as some forms of the goddess welcome menstruating women in particular (Gold 2015).
Figure 5.1 Nandini, the niece of the SMVS group member Aishwarya, belatedly celebrates her first menstruation at the family’s natal village home in Martandampatti, July 2010.

Social Change and Menstrual Cycles

Apart from first menstruation being celebrated with rural fanfare and community involvement, repetitious menstruation continues to hold significance in women’s everyday lives as well. Conversations, coupled with my lived experience of life with Radhika (age 22), as well as her mother (age 47) and her grandmother (age 65), were key to my understanding the place of menstruation and its associated rituals in their modern middle-class lives. In the following I discuss generational changes in menstruation rituals and restrictions in an effort to highlight how rural and urban living environments, gendered space and wider cultural concepts of tradition and modernity factor into contemporary rituals and restrictions involved in these moments of female Tamil self-fashioning.
SECLUSION

When asked about how menstrual tīṭṭu was perceived both in the past (anta kālatile) and in a rural context, Radhika’s mother and grandmother emphasized that they were relegated to an outdoor porch for their three days of menstrual pollution.207 They were required to use separate utensils that they retained throughout their period of pollution and they had to wash anything they had touched to avoid passing on ritual impurity to others in the household. This scenario was feasible in that Radhika’s mother and grandmother lived in a joint family (kūṭṭukkuṭumpam) household, in which other women in the household could take on the work of menstruating members while they were in seclusion. This type of rural home consisted of a large complex of rooms and a central courtyard, hence family members were usually safe from encountering any ritual impurity caused by menstruation.

Furthermore, in the time of Radhika’s grandmother, girls were often pulled out of school upon reaching puberty in an effort to protect their reputations (see Chapter Four). From this point forward, girls were not permitted to leave the house to attend school. At that time, the event of expected menstruation208 was not considered the central cause of public movement restrictions, as women were not as exposed to much public interaction (i.e., school and inter-caste work environments) in general.

In contemporary Tamilnadu the transfer of menstrual ritual impurity to objects is often still observed within the household (eating utensils, etc.). However, Radhika and her

207 Other researchers have found that menstruating women were placed in a separate hut outside of the house, which led to the euphemism “not in the house,” to refer to a woman who was menstruating (Nagarajan 2007:94). For more on euphemisms and menstruation see below.
208 I avoid assuming a time period for Tamil women’s menstruation (i.e., monthly repetition of menstruation), as much research has indicated that menstrual time periods vary according to cultural context (see Buckley and Gottlieb 1988).
mother’s current living situation in a nuclear family in a smaller urban home renders the complete seclusion of a menstruating woman impracticable. Due to the size of the home in general, the menstruating Radhika was allowed to stay in one corner of the same room in which her family was sitting and was only relegated to another closed off room if a priest was expected to visit the home that day. Radhika, like many other girls of her age and socioeconomic class, was also obtaining her BSC degree at a local college and so her public movement and interactions were seen as necessary and unavoidable. In this respect, conceptions of modern, middle-class Tamil womanhood and the social boundaries surrounding it have certainly altered how menstrual restrictions operate in society.

BATHING

Another notable generational difference in menstrual ritual and restriction refers to the act of bathing. Oftentimes, when a woman is absent due to menstrual pollution in Tamilnadu, their absence will be explained by employing the euphemism “talaikkutatū” (lit. “(she) should not bathe her head”). The history of this phrase reflects the condition of menstruating women in the past, when women like Radhika’s mother and grandmother were isolated on a porch. If segregated to the porch and restricted in movement, bathing for the extent of one’s three-day menstrual pollution was not a viable option. This covert mention of a woman not bathing was considered a socially appropriate way to explain

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209 For example, the use of the latrine in this home requires one to walk through the kitchen, a room that many scholars of India have noted requires increased protection from ritual pollution (Wadley 2013).

210 Euphemisms connecting menstruation with the act of bathing are found in other cultural contexts as well. In Swazi culture the verb for “to wash/purify” is used as a euphemism for menstruation (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:39).

211 While a woman’s menstrual pollution was said to last three days, I did not ascertain whether this was also the length of a woman’s menstrual period. In her studies with Havik Brahmins in Karnataka, Helen Ullrich found that the ritual pollution associated with one’s menstrual period lasted for four days and three nights (Ullrich 2014). In conversations with Dr. S. Bharathy, I became aware that the three days refer to a period of “rest” and the head bath after this period was a ritual to signify the removal of pollution (Bharathy 2015). Again, these time periods and their repetition have been shown to be culturally specific (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988).
someone’s absence. Today, the phrase “talaikku kutatu” is still commonly used in reference to menstruating women, but actually abstaining from bathing for the extent of one’s entire menstrual cycle is no longer practiced. This, I suspect, is due to the more public movement afforded to and required of women, partly due to the lack of other domestically inclined family members (i.e., women) in most modern urban households. Further, in many Tamil households bathing is considered a prerequisite to eating or leaving the house (not to mention cooking and performing puja, which also require complete ritual purity) and so the phrase “talaikku kutatu” seems to exist only in principle.

SOPHISTICATION

A final inter-generational element concerns social perceptions of adherence to cultural traditions and practices. Although I have argued throughout this dissertation that Madurai’s middle-class Hindus adhere to many religious and cultural rules and restrictions (e.g., astrology, caste cultural practices, etc.), they are also embedded in discussions of hygiene and “superstition” that often originate in the Western medical discourses encountered on the internet and through television. Throughout this dissertation we have also seen how even among orthodox Brahmin middle-class families, extreme adherence to restrictions pertaining to gender (usually referred to as kaṭṭupādu in Tamil) is considered backward and undesirable (see Chapter Four) and how the traditional Dravidian practice of uncle-niece/cross-cousin marriage is sometimes seen as unsophisticated and ignorant of possible challenges with offspring.

Western medical discourses have also brought the issue of birth control, and hence control of menstruation and its inherent ritual pollution, to the fore for some middle-class
Hindu families. Due to the threat of ritual impurity and its attached inauspiciousness, events such as betrothals, weddings, and other public (especially religious) celebrations are often planned around the menstrual cycles\textsuperscript{212} of the women involved in these events. However, what is one to do if the date that the astrologer has marked as auspicious for the event falls during a woman’s menstrual period? In the past, my interlocutors told me, it was relatively common to ingest a mixture of herbs that would hopefully delay the onset of one’s menstrual cycle. Today, more and more women are being given birth control or emergency contraception to assure that ritual pollution does not affect one’s schedule of auspicious life events (Wilson 2014).

The above discussion of menstrual pollution and the restrictions pertaining to it has portrayed how changes in society and ritual are implicated in middle-class observances of menstruation, a formative part of being a woman, not only in Tamilnadu, but in other cultures as well (e.g., Delaney 1988). I have used an examination of differences in living environment, caste, class, and generation to illuminate the continuities, changes and context-specific negotiations that are implicit in the contemporary performance of this important female life-cycle event. In the following section, I take up another important female life event in Tamilnadu – childbirth. I explore how traditional understandings of childbirth pollution and ritual are navigated by women living in suburban Madurai using two case studies.

\textsuperscript{212} While I was not overtly told the length of a woman’s menstrual cycle (see above), there was an agreed concept of regularity, as they were able to predict the occurrence of a woman’s menstrual cycle.
Childbirth Rituals in Tamilnadu

Prior to addressing specific case studies of childbirth ritual and restriction in contemporary Tamil society, it is necessary to present a more general picture of how childbirth is marked in Tamil culture. With this generalized background, we can further address modifications of and continuities in rituals surrounding childbirth. While I acknowledge its limits in portraying only the perspectives of Iyer Brahmins, I again refer to Duvvury’s (1991) detailed description of women’s rituals in Tamilnadu. Recall that her work also takes into account both rural and urban derivations of Tamil Hindu women’s ritual.

Duvvury (1991) begins her description of Tamil Brahmin childbirth rituals with a distinction between the Vedic rite of cīmantam and the laukik rite213 of vaḷaikāppu.214 This distinction is important to the present discussion of caste, class, living environment and generational difference as they are reflected in Hindu women’s ritual practice. While some research on Tamil childbirth rituals reduces the distinction to phases of the same rite (Petitet and Pragathi 2007), other studies, particularly those focusing on urban locales, acknowledge the local differentiation made between vaḷaikāppu and cīmantam. For instance, Van Hollen (2003) notes that Tamil Brahmins in the suburbs of Chennai assert that the cīmantam is a separate and caste-specific ritual requiring the presence of a Brahmin priest (Van Hollen 2003:90-91). My Brahmin and non-Brahmin interlocutors in Madurai agreed and added that the vaḷaikāppu ritual is more widespread and is performed by a variety of castes. They also relayed to me that in previous generations, holding the

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213 Duvvury (1987) distinguishes between Vedic and laukik rites by stating that laukik rites are considered by her Brahmin interlocutors to be based on oral tradition and are more vernacular in nature. In addition, she identifies “senior” cumāṅkalikāl (auspicious married women) as “ritualists” during these rites (Duvvury 1987:119). In contrast, she states that Vedic rites are “codified” and “require the recitation of sacred texts” (Duvvury 1987:118). Further, Vedic rites necessitate the presence of Brahmin priests as ritualists (Duvvury 1987:119, see also Fruzzetti 1982).

214 Although drawing some distinctions between the rites, Duvvury (1991) also notes that both the cīmantam and vaḷaikāppu are generally performed during the seventh or eighth month of pregnancy.
Valaikāppu and cīmantam at the same time was thought to be emblematic of a lower class. On the other hand, if a family hosted completely separate events for each of the two rituals, they were seen to be of higher status (see also Van Hollen 2003). However, as I illustrate below, in contemporary Tamil society we observe more upper middle-class Brahmin inhabitants living in cities choosing to hold both ceremonies on the same day.

Valaikāppu

The vaḷaiṅkāppu ritual, literally meaning “surround and protect,”215 is intended to protect the expectant mother and her child from the consequences of evil eye, as they are considered more susceptible to its effects.216 This protection is conferred via bangles, objects that literally “surround” the wrists of the pregnant woman and, hence, offer protection. The details of this ritual vary by caste and location (rural or urban). For those of the upper caste, living in urban locales, the pregnant woman, in her in-law’s house, will first bathe and dress in a silk sari. She is then seated and adorned with bangles in a specific order - first by her mother-in-law, then her mother and close female relatives and finally, other cumañkalikal who are attending the ceremony.

Near the end of the ritual, the bangles placed on the woman’s wrists are rather simple, decorative glass bangles (kaṇṇāti valaiyal). In contrast, a few bangles at the beginning of the ceremony are imbued with further meaning. For instance, the first two

215 In Tamil, valai has many meanings, among them “to surround.” Valaiyal (from the root valai) is the term for bangles. “Kāppu” is the Tamil word for “protection” and stems from the verb “kā,” meaning “to protect.” (Ramakrishnan 2008:388,1220, Van Hollen 2003:90).

216 I noted this emphasis on the protection from the evil eye in my field notes: “There was an overwhelming amount of tiruṣṭi done to Radhika at the vaḷaiṅkāppu and cīmantam. Lots of ārati (see footnote 216 below for definition) was done. Latha and Rajesh (Radhika’s brother) rubbed their hands down her cheeks and then cracked their knuckles to take away the evil eye. Radhika’s father had the driver put lemons under each of the tires of the car so that when we drove away they would be crushed and the car would be protected from the evil eye.”
bangles placed on either wrist of the pregnant woman are made out of twisted margosa (vēppalai) twigs. These bangles in particular are said to provide exceptional protection from evil spirits (Duvvury 1991:175), as well as to “purify the atmosphere,” for margosa is associated with the virgin goddess Mariyamman (Nishimura 1987:220). Next, the pregnant woman’s mother will add gold and silver bangles to her wrists. These specific bangles are applied for protection and also to demonstrate the care the expectant mother’s parents feel for her (Van Hollen 2003:91). Moreover, these bangles are meant as gifts from the bride’s family to the groom’s family as a show of alliance and economic status. This observation reinforces Van Hollen’s (2003) statements regarding the growing importance of economic exchange during the time of the cimantam ritual. She notes of display of fruits, sweets and other gifts called varicai at the cimantam ritual,

...the emphasis on showing varicai in cimantam was a relatively recent phenomenon tied to the fact that the cimantam was increasingly a public event concerned with exchanging goods, particularly gifts flowing from the mother’s house. Accordingly, these items were seen and scrutinized as a calculated exchange (Van Hollen 2003:88).

Once the more traditional bangles had been put on the pregnant woman’s wrists, a parade of other cumāṅkalikāḷ each singly apply a set of colored glass bangles to the girl’s wrists. At the time of bangle placement, the participants typically apply vermillion powder (kuṅkumam) and sandalwood paste (cantaṭam) to the forehead, hands and cheeks of the girl217 as a way to bestow their blessings as cumāṅkalikāḷ, as well as to obtain her blessings as an auspicious pregnant woman with enhanced sakti (feminine power). These cumāṅkalikāḷ receive a small gift box or bag often containing objects of feminine toilette (e.g., comb, mirror, bangles). Last, younger, unmarried girls are offered the chance to adorn

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217 This ritual practice is known as nalāṅku (Van Hollen 2003:91).
the pregnant woman with bangles. This element is not uniform throughout performances of the *vaḷaikāppu*, as unmarried girls are not culturally understood to transfer blessings of wifehood and motherhood.\(^\text{218}\) However, they do not hold the stigma of a widow (*viṭuvai*), a woman whose husband has died before her (an event culturally ascribed to her negligence as a wife), and hence, a very bad omen on this and many other ritual occasions (see Chapter One, also Petitet and Pragathi 2007:120). After the *vaḷaikāppu* has concluded, the pregnant woman is often moved to her natal home where her first child would typically be born and where she is thought to be more comfortable and relaxed.

In the past first pregnancies of lower castes were not celebrated with a *vaḷaikāppu* (Petitet and Pragathi 2007). However, in contemporary Tamilnadu, many mark this life-cycle event with a *vaḷaikāppu*, specifically with an eye to communicate social status. Furthermore, in urban areas, many public mass *vaḷaikāppu* rituals have gained importance as political spectacles during which district officials bestow their blessings and attempt to gain support from lower classes and castes\(^\text{219}\) (The Hindu 2008, The New Indian Express 2009, The Times of India 2013). Cecilia Van Hollen (2003), as well as Petitet and Pragathi (2007) have illustrated how, in the past few decades, lower castes in rural locations have also begun to perform *vaḷaikāppu* rituals, “multiplying the expenses made on the occasion of this event” so as to elevate social status (Petitet and Pragathi 2007:121). As we will see below in the case of Pooja, the *vaḷaikāppu* was certainly an event that required much monetary expenditure and ritual planning by her urban lower caste/lower middle-class family.

\(^\text{218}\) However, in many South Asian locations pre-pubertal girls are thought to be among the most ritually pure (Ullrich 2014).

\(^\text{219}\) One article in The Times of India (2013) stated, “...the district collector...knelt down before the beneficiary mothers-to-be and accomplished the act of wearing the dazzling glass bangles on the wrists of the pregnant women as if it were her own family function.”
Amongst Tamil Brahmins and some other higher castes both in rural and urban settings, there is yet another piece to the *valaikappu* ritual which is known as *pucutal*.\(^{220}\) This ritual event includes the decoration of the pregnant woman’s hair by her married female relatives with several different kinds of flowers. At this time, participants also sing songs as they decorate the pregnant woman’s long braid (caṭai).\(^{221}\) The pregnant woman is then offered ārati\(^{222}\) by her auspicious *cumaṅkali* relatives and a mock baby often constructed using a bundle of *koḷukkaṭṭai*\(^{223}\) (Duvvury 1991:176) is created in the loose end (pallu) of the pregnant woman’s sari.\(^{224}\) This mock baby is then playfully “passed around” between the pregnant woman, her mother-in-law and the pregnant woman’s mother.

### Cīmantam

The *cīmantam* ritual is considered by upper castes, particularly orthodox Brahmins, as separate from the *valaikappu* ceremony in that it requires the presence of a Brahmin priest and is centered around a sacrificial fire (*hōmam*). The term “*cīmantam*” is derived “from the fact that the hair of the pregnant women is parted at the centre of the head” (Petitet and 220 Duvvury (1991) also notes that while the *pucutal* is considered a laukik rite and hence more associated with the *valaikāppu*, it was often performed after the *cīmantam* to coincide with the arrival of the Brahmin priest and/or to assure that specific *culōkankaḷ* (slokams, Sanskrit verses) are recited at a specific astrological time. Further, in Van Hollen’s (2003) work, the term *pucutal* is sometimes used to reference the entire *cīmantam/valaikappu* ritual.\(^{221}\) Van Hollen’s (2003) interlocutors identified the caṭai as an ornament that decorates a woman’s braid during the ritual; however, my interlocutors used the term to refer to the actual braided hair.\(^{222}\) “Ārati” is the Sanskritized version of the Tamil term “ālam,” which is a practice meant to prevent “the pernicious effects of malevolent and jealous looks” and is used on a variety of occasions that ritualize life-cycle events such as puberty and marriage (Petitet and Pragathi 2007:128). First, a large brass plate is filled with a “red liquid mixture of turmeric powder and ...slaked lime added to...a piece of charcoal, one...jasmine flower and one...dry red chilly” (Petitet and Pragathi 2007:128). This plate is then held by two *cumaṅkalikal* standing across from each other and in front of the people/persons/object to be protected. The *cumaṅkalikal* then circle the brass plate three times in one direction and three times in the opposite direction. This action prevents the evil eye from attaching and the liquid in the brass plate is then emptied outside of the house. This is meant to expel the evil eye (Petitet and Pragathi 2007:131).\(^{223}\) *Koḷukkaṭṭai* is a steamed dumpling filled with jaggery and coconut. It is considered South Indian in origin and is thought to be the favorite sweet of the god Pillayar/Vinayagar (Ganesha). It is usually made annually in honor of his birthday celebration, known as Vinayagar Chathurthi in Madurai.\(^{223}\) Others have documented a separate towel being used (Venkitaraman 2013:2).
Due to its Vedic (read: codified) nature, the cīmantam is also more vulnerable to time constraints in comparison to the vaḷaikāppu. In other words, while the vaḷaikāppu ritual “should” be performed at an auspicious time (usually in the morning), the cīmantam “must” occur during an auspicious hour.

In contrast with the vaḷaikāppu, which is “connected with the future of the pregnancy and takes place in the absence of the husband of the pregnant woman” the cīmantam necessitates the presence of men (i.e., pregnant woman’s husband, relatives), including at least one priest and is “principally intended for acts of benediction...” (Petitet and Pragathi 2007:135). During the cīmantam, a sacrificial fire (ḥōmam) is constructed in front of the pregnant woman and her husband. During this time, the ritual of navadāniyam, consisting of the dispersal of nine auspicious grains, is also carried out by the priest who throws the auspicious items into the fire. After this, the priest recites a variety of Sanskrit culōkaṅkal and the father-to-be is required to repeat these recitations. This set of rituals appears very similar to the formal rituals that take place at a Brahmin wedding.

In their study of birth rituals amongst rural lower castes in Tamilnadu, Petitet and Pragathi (2007) describe events such as nīrmutuvu (water-pouring on the back) and mutukupāl (milk-pouring on the back). These rituals, they argue, are the “Dravidian names of a...cimandam” (Petitet and Pragathi 2007:124) and include “a traditional scanning method for foetal sex determination” and a “prognosis of the delivery” (Petitet and Pragathi 2007:129). They also maintain that these rituals span religious barriers, with Tamil Christians and Muslims also performing first pregnancy rites of this type. With the exception of a ritual in which water was poured over a pregnant Brahmin woman (see
below), in my field experiences with both Hindu urban lower and upper castes, there was little evidence of nīrmutuvu and/or mutukupāl.

**Childbirth Rituals in Madurai**

While marriage rituals were quite plentiful during my time in Madurai, those relating to childbirth were much more difficult to witness (most likely due to the age range of the SMVS women’s children). However, I was able to gather data from two very different occasions marking the first pregnancy of two women. One of these events was held for Radhika, the young woman whose marriage was featured in the previous chapter and was of the middle-class and the Brahmin (read: high) caste. I was also a guest at a lower caste and lower class childbirth ritual in Krishnapuram Colony. This latter event was held for Pooja, the daughter-in-law of the woman who sold flowers outside of the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple (known in the neighborhood as Uma pūkkarar, or “Uma the flower person”). In the following I will show how their caste and class identities inflected these two very different markings of the same event in Tamil womanhood.

**Case Study One: Pooja’s Valaikăppu**

Pooja’s valaikăppu occurred about five months into my stay in Madurai during 2009 and 2010. As mentioned above, this valaikăppu was held for the daughter-in-law of the local temple’s lower caste/class flower seller, Uma. Because Uma was such a fixture in the neighborhood (she not only sold flowers outside the temple, she also delivered flowers to most middle-class homes for hair adornment) several middle-class women from Krishnapuram Colony were invited to attend the event. This included several of the
Brahmin women in the community, as well as other higher caste Hindu housewives. As I walked to the event with two SMVS group members, Latha and Jeyalakshmi, I noted the women’s discussion of their expectations for the event. Both women agreed that, according to their knowledge of auspicious time, the vaṭaikāppu was not being held at the “correct” hour and that the overlooking of this point was a function of the lower caste and class of Uma and her family. They also speculated that food would probably be served (hopefully vegetarian, or this event would be considered completely improper), but because of its association with non-Brahmin cooks (i.e., ritual pollution) and lower caste cuisine preferences (Brahmins always argued that non-Brahmin food was more spicy) was not something that they were eager to encounter. In fact, some members of the SMVS group chose not to attend the event because of these issues.

We arrived at Uma’s home, decorated in the typical Tamil ritual style with a pantal (thatched awning, canopy) and were led up to the roof. Pooja, Uma’s pregnant daughter-in-law was wearing a silk-cotton sari and was seated in a chair. The female guests were seated around her on the floor. The higher caste women were wearing higher-quality saris and sitting noticeably closer to the pregnant girl, while the lower caste/class women predominantly wore cheaper synthetic saris (see Chapter Seven) and sat further back. Pooja’s male relatives were either seated under the pantal at the front of the house, or sitting on chairs on the outskirts of the roof. Standing near Pooja, was a younger girl who seemed to be playing the role of “attendant.” Interestingly, she was wearing a synthetic half sari, or dāvani, which is now often considered to be associated with village/rural life.225

225 In contemporary Tamil film, one will very often see dance performances in which younger unmarried girls frolic in the fields in half saris. Inspired by these performances, at the age of twenty-eight and living in the suburbs of Madurai I made the mistake of buying and wearing a designer half-sari to a close friend’s betrothal ceremony. Most of my interlocutors
front of Pooja was a large collection of fruits, *viṭalai-pākku* (betel nut served with a leaf), and sandalwood covered coconuts and glass bangles.

Pooja’s *vaḷaikāppu* commenced with the traditional application of bangles to the pregnant girl’s wrists and then the application of vermilion powder and sandalwood paste to the girl’s forehead, hands and cheeks. Occasionally, women would also squeeze a rupee note into Pooja’s hand and two very prominent middle-class Brahmin guests from the neighborhood even brought their own bangles to apply and also presented her with “blouse bits,” perhaps to communicate their higher social status through conspicuous gifting. After the initial bangles were applied by Pooja’s close relatives, each female guest was offered the opportunity to apply bangles and was then given a plastic bag containing strung jasmine flowers (*mallikai pū*), some snacks and a small metal snack plate.

One by one the women approached Pooja and applied bangles. During this time one could hear a faint singing in the background, a lower caste elderly woman who was singing a song to Pooja as a blessing. As soon as the woman had finished her song, Pooja’s relatives were quick to encourage the higher caste *cumāṅkali* attendees to also sing songs of blessing. As I collected these performances on videotape, I noticed that they predominantly referenced Sanskritized deities such as Parvathi and Parabrahma. This was perhaps a mode through which the higher caste women could strategically express their superior knowledge of “proper” Hindu religiosity to a large neighborhood audience. However, these higher caste women could also have been singing the songs with which they were most familiar (given higher caste traditions of female singing instruction). With

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226 This tune in particular was a well-known song also sung at a variety of castes’ weddings called “Sita Kalyāna Vaibōgame!” (“Behold the celebration of Sita’s wedding!”) ([http://sahityam.net/wiki/Sita_kalyana](http://sahityam.net/wiki/Sita_kalyana)). In general, these songs usually reference feminine power and/or divine union.
the exception of the elderly woman with whom the singing commenced, no other lower caste women chose to sing, perhaps because they felt uncomfortable in front of their higher caste and class neighbors. I suspect that if lower caste women had felt comfortable enough to sing, they may have sung songs about less Sanskritized deities, such as Mariyamman or Karappuswamy. These deities might be better known to the rural, and perhaps also lower caste, guests. Below I include two of the songs sung by the Brahmin women who attended the event. The first song communicates ideas about deities considered “higher” in the Hindu pantheon, albeit using the Tamil language to do so. The second song is more overtly Sanskritized, including a reference to the Vedas and relying on Sanskrit pronunciations.

**Song One: Maṇil Nalla Vaṇam**  
*(One Can Live Well on Earth)*

Maṇil nalla vaṇam  
Vāralām vaikalum  
Ennil nalla kadikku  
Yādumōr kuraivu illai  
Kaṇil nalla urum  
Kaḻumalai vala nagar  
Peṇil nallalōdum  
Perundagai irundāde

If you think daily that  
One can live well on earth  
there is no doubt about the good future

The lord (Siva) is with the best  
Among women (Parvathi) in the rich town  
Of Sirgazhi,²²⁷ where everything  
is pleasing to the eye.

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²²⁷ Sirgazhi is the site of a Hindu temple dedicated to three forms of Siva called the Brahmapureeswarar/Sattainathar Temple. Among other things, this temple is known for being the site where an abandoned Saiva saint, Sambandar, suckled from the breast of the goddess Parvathi on the banks of the temple’s water tank (Anantharaman 2006).
Song Two: *Jaya Vandini Ma*  
*(Victory to the Mother)*

\[
\begin{align*}
Jaya jaya jaya jaga vandini mā  
Jaya parameswari vāsini mā  
Ādi shakti parabrahma swarūpini  
Jagad janani kathirvela vilashini  
Sambha vinōdhini matha bhavani  
Sambhavi shankari moskha pradayini
\end{align*}
\]

Victory to the mother  
Who is worshipped by the universe  
Who is the beloved of Parameswar (Shiva)  
Who is the primeval energy  
Who is the embodiment of Parabrahma (source of all creation)  
Victory to the mother in whom the wisdom of the four Vedas exist  
Victory to her who provides liberation to her devotees

As with any performance, audience reactions and participation are key to the
dialogic, or intertextual,\textsuperscript{228} evolution of an event (Briggs and Bauman 1992). During the
singing of these Sanskritized songs I noticed some lower caste/class women staring at the
higher caste singers as if they had been transported to a location and culture with which
they were not familiar. Others simply stared off into space, perhaps as if they didn’t
consider their participation necessary as long as higher status women with more ritual
knowledge were “running the show.” As these lower caste/class women watched the
singing performances, other higher caste/class women could be heard lightly singing along
in the background. A well-known elderly Brahmin woman of Krishnapuram Colony and
also the singer of the latter song, even started to direct the event, arguing that the pregnant
girl should be wearing a garland (*mālai*).

\textsuperscript{228} The term “intertextuality” (Kristeva 1973, Briggs and Bauman 1992) implies the inherent dialogic nature of “textual”
interactions. Similar to other scholars who have taken up approaches used in the field of literary criticism (Hanks 1987,
Bauman and Briggs 1990), I define the term “text” rather loosely. My use of “intertextuality” therefore, applies to the
interactions, or dialogues (actual or conceptual), which take place between a multitude of “texts” or “textual surfaces”
(Kristeva 1980:65) including performers and audience members.
Apart from the singing performances described above and a small decorated brass lamp (*villakku*), Pooja’s *vaḷaiṅāppu* was noticeably lacking Hindu religious elements. This was especially apparent when compared to what I would later witness in the celebration of Brahmin middle-class Radhika’s first pregnancy. A priest (of any kind, Brahmin or non-Brahmin) did not attend the event and there was no performance of a *hōmam*, a simple puja, or the lower caste rituals involving the pouring of milk or water described by Petitet and Pragathi (2007).

On our way home from Pooja’s *vaḷaiṅāppu*, the middle-class SMVS group members noted that their expectations had been correct. Due to the lower caste/class’s lack of religious knowledge concerning “proper” Hindu ritual, the event had been performed after the period marked as auspicious. Moreover, their general remarks indicated that they found the event to be far from impressive. In addition, the gifts received by those attending the ritual were considered by the middle-class women to be meager and unimpressive. This is even more marked when considering the opportunity these gifts give to communicate social mobility and socioeconomic status.
Figure 5.2 *Vaḷaikāppu* bangles on Radhika’s wrist. Notice the margosa twigs tied with string and the gold bangles at the top of her forearm. September, 2011.

Figure 5.3 Pooja watches her mother-in-law open a bag of glass bangles for the surrounding *cumankalikal* to apply as protection from the evil eye. December, 2009.

Figure 5.4 Along with other common ritual offerings, small plastic boxes with feminine toiletries are arranged at the beginning of the *vaḷaikāppu* ritual and later given to female ritual participants. September, 2011.

Figure 5.5 Radhika’s *(caṭai)* after being decorated with flowers during the *pūcutal* ritual September, 2011.
Case Study Two: Radhika’s Cīmantam and Valaikāppu

As previously mentioned, the cīmantam is often considered by orthodox Tamil Brahmins to be a separate and exclusively Brahmin event that necessitates the presence of a Brahmin priest. For this reason, I did not witness what Brahmins would describe as an official cīmantam until Radhika’s pregnancy was celebrated over a year after I attended the lower caste valaikāppu of Pooja.

Radhika first underwent the vaḷaiṅkāppu ritual as described in the opening to this chapter. This event was reserved for women only and included all of the elements that I had previously witnessed, heard, and read about. The ritual also included the giving of gifts to the women in attendance (~ twenty women in this instance). Similar to the gifts offered at kolu-viewings during Navarātri (see Chapter Six), the objects given were primarily
feminine toiletry products such as small plastic containers of vermillion powder and sandalwood paste, a comb, a mirror and a plastic box in which to hold these items. According to Radhika’s mother-in-law, each of these boxes and its contents came to a cost of Rs. 40, considered exorbitant by Radhika’s mother and status-generating by Radhika’s mother-in-law. In addition and as expected by most Brahmins, Radhika’s family was required to significantly contribute to the event even though the expectant father’s family was the formal host of the celebration. For example, Radhika’s family was asked to provide homemade sweets (ladoos, etc.) as well as the gold bangles to be placed on Radhika’s arms (worth three pouns\textsuperscript{229}). They were also asked to pay half of the catering fees for the event, approximately Rs. 3000. Radhika’s grandmother explained the large investment made by Radhika’s family to me. In so doing, she noted that Radhika’s family would get items in return only if the child was a boy. I documented this conversation in my fieldnotes:

Latha is complaining that māmi (Radhika’s mother-in-law) has asked for too much. Apparently people only ask for 5 items (julebi, ladoo, etc.), but māmi asked for 7 of each. Usually you only have to make 31, but māmi asked for 51 of each. It falls on the girl’s family to make these items. Later I asked (after I had watched Latha and her mother slave away in the kitchen for two days) if māmi had to do anything. Latha’s mother said that if it’s a girl child they don’t have to do anything but if it’s a boy child they have to give sweets, etc. for Dīpāvali.

Following the \textit{vaḷaikāppu}, a Brahmin priest arrived at the home of Radhika’s in-laws and prepared for a \textit{hōmam} and recitation of Sanskrit \textit{cūḷōkaṁkāḷ}. Meanwhile, Radhika changed into a very modest nine-yard cotton sari. About half way through the \textit{hōmam}, the women at the event took Radhika outside. She was placed on a short stool on the ground.

\textsuperscript{229}The term “poun” is derived from the English “pound” and is equivalent to one old English gold sovreign (Krishnan in Tharu and Lalita 1993:209), or approximately 8 grams of gold. The term is commonly used when describing expenses for dowries and life cycle ritual gifts. The value of 8 grams (1 poun) of gold during the research period was approximately Rs. 20,000, hence, Radhika’s gold bangles cost approximately Rs. 60,000, or 930 U.S. dollars.
and a small pot of water was then poured over her.\textsuperscript{230} It was unclear whether this was to divine the sex of the child or a prognosis of the delivery, as noted by Petitet and Pragathi (2007). I did not hear any women discussing predictions at this time. Moreover, when the sex of the baby was later deliberated, the size of the stomach seemed to be the main factor used – a larger stomach implying that a boy would be born.

At the end of the water ritual, Radhika returned to the house and then changed into her red nine-yard wedding sari, a symbol of her Brahmin \textit{cumāṅkali} -hood. The formal \textit{hōmam} ritual continued and much of it seemed very similar to Radhika’s Brahmin marriage one year earlier. That said, I noted a few ritual actions that were very specific to Radhika’s pregnancy,

During the \textit{ćimantam} the priest had the women wrap Radhika’s new sari around her to make a tent-like structure and then Vivek (Radhika’s husband) went inside the tent. He (Vivek) had to repeat mantras that the priest said. After it was over Radhika’s brother went to ask his grandmother what happened in the tent and before she could answer the priest started to explain that he was saying mantras so that the baby would come out easily and he also explained that when Vivek had to take the end of the sari, dip it in milk, and then put it down Radhika’s nose it was supposed to be a direct \textit{apiṣēkam}\textsuperscript{231} of the baby in Radhika’s stomach.

After the \textit{ći mantam} concluded, Radhika then underwent the \textit{pūcutal} ritual during which her braid (\textit{caṭai}) was decorated with flowers and her female relatives sang songs about Sita and Meenakshi. A mock baby made of \textit{koḻukkaṭṭai}, as described above, was also constructed and passed from Radhika to her mother and then to her mother-in-law.

\textsuperscript{230} Although I was not given an explanation of this ritual, some sources argue that the water poured over the pregnant woman is filled with the strength of prayers and blessings, as the water container (usually a copper pot), has been sitting in the room where the \textit{hōmam} ritual is being performed (Venkitaraman 2013:2).

\textsuperscript{231} According to the Cre-A Tamil Dictionary, \textit{apiṣēkam} refers to “The pouring of fluid substances such as water, honey, etc. over a consecrated idol as part of ritual worship” (Ramakrishnan 2008:46). In this instance, the baby inside Radhika’s stomach took the place of a consecrated idol.
Although I had travelled from the United States to attend Radhika's childbirth rituals, I noticed that several of Radhika’s uncles and cousins did not attend and asked Latha, Radhika’s mother, why this was. Latha explained that the cīmantam, in particular, was not a large ceremony and in fact, it is usually done in the home (perhaps alluding to the fact that Radhika’s in-laws were showing off by initially renting a maṇṭapam for the occasion, see below). She also downplayed the vaḷaikāppu, saying that it wasn’t out of the ordinary that Radhika’s cumaṅkali cousins would not attend. However, what was out of the ordinary was the fact that Radhika’s uncle, Ravi, would be attending a wedding in Chennai and was not going to be attending his niece’s childbirth rituals. As with many other rituals in a Tamil woman’s life, the maternal uncle bears a significant amount of ritual responsibility. In particular, during childbirth ritual performances “the mother’s brother is also a symbolic parturient ‘mother’ who protects, enwombs and creates the pregnant woman as a mother” (Petitet and Pragathi 2007:130). Hence, as her mother’s brother, Ravi
carried a significant amount of ritual responsibility when it came to Radhika and his absence was considered an insult by many in the family.

**Negotiating Menstruation and Childbirth Rituals**

As alluded to above with reference to Radhika’s uncle, events do not necessarily go according to expectations. Moreover, changes in the perception of what is to be expected during these events have shifted as tradition and modernity are renegotiated in contemporary menstruation and childbirth rituals. Below, I discuss the negotiation and transformations of the menstruation and childbirth rituals that I witnessed amongst my interlocutors in Tamilnadu. I reflect on how these adjustments might be linked to differences in rural and urban living environments, as well as the increased importance of class identity.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that rural and urban living environments influence the lives and rituals of contemporary Tamil women. Key to the distinction between rural and urban living in India is the proximity within which people live, particularly people of differing caste backgrounds. We see these negotiations take shape when looking at Pooja’s *valaikāppu* ritual and those in attendance (i.e., upper caste neighbors). From the stereotypes proffered by Latha and Jeyalakshmi about the quality of the event, to the performance of Brahmin religious knowledge and reactions to it, we observe that a modern ritual of Tamil womanhood in Madurai necessitates navigations of caste, socioeconomic class and cultural understandings of knowledge and power.232

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232 In her description of the ritual practice of *cīmantam* near Chennai, Van Hollen (2003) notes the overlap of modernity, ritual and socioeconomic class stating that contrary to the conception of modernity as “fundamentally antiritual,” this practice (*cīmantam*) engages both ritual action and the demonstration of socio-economic status amongst the middle class (Van Hollen 2003:78).
Higher caste and upper and middle-class socioeconomic statuses have a unique and socially understood relationship in Tamilnadu wherein some upper and middle-class behaviors are determined by adherence to and emulation of higher caste cultural practices (specifically religious practices and restrictions) and stereotypes (see also Kapadia 1995). One of these cultural elements relates to the possession of religious knowledge, which was, in the past, reserved only for Brahmins and other higher castes. This component of Brahmin identity is one that seems to carry significant weight in terms of social status mobility amongst today's middle and lower classes in urban Madurai233 (see Chapters Six and Seven). In Pooja's valaikāppu, we see a lower caste/class family in an urban living environment that is expending a great deal of time and energy on a ritual event that was not necessarily required in the past and will prove economically costly. Pooja's family also invites higher caste and class neighborhood women to attend and then later encourages them to sing. What might be behind Pooja's family's celebration of her first pregnancy? While I am not qualified to speak to the conscious strategy involved in Pooja's valaikāppu, I do not hesitate to locate the performance of the ritual as intricately connected to wider social feelings and pressures concerning the connection between Hindu religiosity and socioeconomic mobility in Madurai. I believe that while the valaikāppu was certainly meant to protect Pooja and her baby from the evil eye and other malicious spirits, it was just as much a mode through which social identities were communicated and formed in an overwhelmingly middle-class suburban neighborhood.

Urban living, as we saw in Chapter Three, also inspires a type of nostalgia and the need for connectedness with a rural or village “home base” (in Tamil, conta ür). The choice

233 This correlation has also been noted in Hyderabad by Saaval (2001).
of Aishwarya’s brother and sister-in-law to hold Nandini’s first menstruation ceremony in Martandampatti highlights the importance of village connections in the lives of Tamilnadu’s urbanites. The section on cyclical menstruation restrictions also highlights negotiations with respect to activities involved in modern middle-class womanhood (i.e., school and work) and an adherence to proper social etiquette concerning ritual pollution. While “proper” social etiquette is often determined by higher caste cultural observances, we see here the loosening of restrictions according to socioeconomic class values, such as education (see Chapter One). In this instance, “traditional” practices as determined by the caste system (e.g., seclusion of women, menstrual pollution) are pushed to the side in favor of more modern, class-oriented performances of ritual.

Negotiations of ritual performances are also made according to death *tīṭṭu* restrictions. In fact, both the *valaikāppu* and the *cīmantam* of Radhika were supposed to take place in a rented wedding hall (*maṇṭapam*) in a show of upper middle-class status by her in-laws. However, there was an unexpected death in Radhika’s husband’s family and due to the ritual impurity attached to his family through this death and the fact that the venue in question had no other auspicious dates available, Radhika’s childbirth rituals were rerouted to the home of her in-laws on a date by which they were no longer experiencing ritual death pollution.

Death *tīṭṭu* also became an issue with Radhika’s grandmother, who was curiously also a widow and therefore considered inauspicious even without the presence of death pollution. Contrary to this, Radhika’s grandmother was a key orchestrator of the childbirth rituals for Radhika. I suspect that ignoring her inauspiciousness on this occasion was a function of needing an elder with religious ritual knowledge, one who could assure proper
execution of ritual enactment. It was only after Radhika's grandmother had been informed that someone in her family had died that she removed herself from the ritual proceedings and left the house early the next morning. I noted in my fieldnotes:

After everything was over and we were sitting around, Ravi called and said pāṭṭi (grandmother) had to return to Madras right away and wouldn't say why. Finally they got it out of him that someone on pāṭṭi's side of the family had died and so she had death tīṭṭu. Once they found this out pāṭṭi had to go to the room downstairs and sit by herself. She had to have a separate cup and I was volunteered to give her her dinner, book, blanket, etc. (I think because they doubted my belief in ritual pollution). Pāṭṭi left early the next morning and said she would come to Madurai once her tīṭṭu was over in 10 days.

Radhika's grandmother's death tīṭṭu had crossed the line of inauspiciousness after this incident and other female relatives chimed in to finish the childbirth rituals properly. Here, we witness a combination of respect for more traditional restrictions according to death pollution and the logistical necessity of a ritual expert. Throughout the above-described event there is a kind of ebb and flow between ritual correctness and participation, a search for an acceptable middle ground by a middle-class family.

Chapter Summary

There is much divergence, negotiation and compromise when it comes to the modern ritual marking of menstruation and childbirth in Tamilnadu. In the above chapter I have attempted to illustrate how living environment, generation, caste and class are involved in the shaping of contemporary practices signifying the transformation of a Tamil woman into a periya poṇṇu (big girl) and mother. By navigating and employing multivalent perceptions of tradition and modernity, urban Tamil women continue to fashion and refashion their own rituals of self-making. In addition, while a variety of adjustments have been made in
the ritual marking of both menstruation and childbirth, these life events remain crucial in a
girl’s transformation into a Tamil woman and also reproduce a central paradox of being a
woman in Tamilnadu, as well as other regions in India – the simultaneous and embodied
manifestation of both auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. Although concentrating on
menstruation in Tamilnadu, Vijaya Nagarajan’s description of this phenomenon is also
pertinent to a discussion of childbirth in the region. She writes,

...this kind of bodily experience of ritual pollution [menstruation] has its mix
of positive and negative valences in terms of women’s sacredness and ritual
power. The emotional and cultural ambiguity and paradox of women’s ritual
domestic power plays itself out through these kinds of lived experiential and
bodily narratives, a subtle weaving of power and powerlessness, a valorizing
of female auspiciousness, on the borderlines of temporary “untouchability”
and “touchability” (Nagarajan 2007:95).

As Nandini experiences the formal marking of her first menstruation in a village
celebration of her womanhood, her aunt is left at home due to her menstrual ritual
pollution. Moreover, as Pooja and Radhika are revered as symbols of fertility and female
power throughout their valai kappu and cimantam ceremonies, so too will they experience
the ritual pollution and subsequent seclusion, that follow childbirth.

The construction and reconstruction of rituals is not only limited to Tamil life cycle
events such as puberty, marriage and childbirth, but is also identifiable in rituals pertaining
to established Hindu festivals and religious urban community-building. The next two
chapters of this dissertation will address these social phenomena by examining the Hindu
festival of Navarātri, an event that is rooted in domestic (read: female) ritual practice, and
the creation of the urban multi-caste, middle-class Satsang group to which the majority of
my interlocutors belong.
"I Watched Brahmins and Learned": The Hindu Festival of Navarātri as a Site for Ritual and Social Change

"Mahisasura in his arrogance asked for a boon from Brahma asking that no one apart from a lady should be able to kill him. Ultimately, Durga vanquished him. This obviously signifies that without women nothing can be done in this world” – Geeta Sathianathan in Krishna, 2008.

It was the first day of the nine-night Hindu festival known as Navarātri. Along with other SMVS group members, I had been invited to Jayanthi’s house for a celebratory puja/singing event. Later in the evening, Jayanthi and a few other SMVS group members would meet at the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple to decorate for the ensuing evenings of worship. But for the moment, I was happily exploring Jayanthi’s puja room and waiting for the other group members to arrive. In my explorations I was struck by a large decorated altar dedicated to Lakshmi that Jayanthi had fashioned in an adjoining room. In yet another room, Jayanthi had arranged small Dixie cups full of coffee and tea, as well as silk-screened canvas bags packed with items of feminine toilette,234 a banana and betel nut. The altar and gifts were not striking to me because Jayanthi was irreligious or lacked generosity in normal circumstances, but because Jayanthi was of a lower caste, one that is not historically known to mark Navarātri with such décor and gifts. Indeed, in my previous experiences during Navarātri, I found myself only in Brahmin and Chettiyar (higher caste) homes, viewing a traditional kolu display235 and receiving a simple, small packet of cuṇṭal236 as a parting gift.

This event at Jayanthi’s house would not only mark the beginning of Navarātri that year, but it was also the beginning of my reeducation about how Navarātri was celebrated

234 This often includes: mirror, comb, kuṇkumam powder, and sandalwood paste.
235 A kolu is a display of miniatures on a variety of steps. It will be discussed in further detail below.
236 Cuṇṭal is a mixture of cooked beans (e.g. chick peas, butter beans) that are often flavored with red chilies and coconut. It is a signature dish of Navarātri and is usually given with the gifts after someone has viewed a kolu (see below). It is made fresh each evening and some use a different kind of bean for each night of Navarātri.
and how caste and class were negotiated with respect to Hindu ritual and community in contemporary Madurai.

**Religious Festivals, Global Interconnectedness and Urbanization**

In his seminal work, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington argued that globalization was not simply an homogenizing process, but in fact a catalyst for the construction of a “civilizational consciousness” and an assertion of particular cultural identities and imagined communities (2007:36). This argument corresponds with conversations concerning localization or indigenization, processes which while organic in a host of ways, also often reflect a desire to maintain a unique identity in the face of global interconnectedness (Cvetkovich and Kellner 1997, Nanda 2009). The performance of religious festivals, “...defined as organized sets of acts performed to commemorate an event, person, deity, or the common identity of the performers...” (Addo 2009:218), as well as processions, is one local mode through which identity and community can be publicly reinforced, reformulated, as well as highly politicized (see, for example, Guss 2000 Wah 2004, Belghazi 2006, Cohen 2012). However, many of these religious festivals, as significantly powerful, culturally-charged events, do not necessarily bind people together, reduce social difference, and homogenize community identities, as some rituals have been shown to do (see, for example, Gluckman 1955; Turner 1957, 1969, 1974), but instead “create or exhibit boundaries [as well as]...frequently function to display one community to another” (Jacobsen 2008:7). This has been the case throughout India

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237 In his work on Venezuelan community festivals, Guss has argued that many other studies of festival celebration have overemphasized these power relations and “dismissed [festive forms] as mere instruments of social control,” when in fact, festivals should also be thought of as “cultural performances” that should “be recognized as sites of social action where identities and relations are continually being reconfigured (Guss 2000:12).
where communalism and damages to Hindu-Muslim relations are frequently the bi-
products of festival displays and a conflation of Hindu and Indian identities in nationalist politics (Jaffrelot 1996, Assayag 1998, Brosius 2005, Nanda 2009). Religious festivals and processions, as well as the deities to which they are attached, are also conjured up by Hindu nationalist politicians in India who wish to establish their political and cultural authority. For example, in 1990, a local politician named L.K. Advani decided to journey around the country in a chariot, espousing his right-wing political rhetoric. This chariot journey, or rath yatra, was a deliberate reference to Hindu “religious festivals and processions during which [Hindu] deities are said to leave their divine kingdoms to pay a visit to the earth and to make themselves and their laws manifest” (Brosius 2005:146-147).

Fuller (2001) has also documented the utilization of Hindu rituals and festivals by the Hindu Right, particularly in Tamilnadu. He portrays his own experience of this phenomenon in Chennai and argues that Hindu organizations such as the Hindu Munnani ('Hindu Front'), in concert with more powerful Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), employ rituals such as Vinayaka Chathurthi (the God Vinayakar/Ganesh's birthday) "to persuade all Hindus to become conscious of belonging to a single, majority 'community'...” (Fuller 2001:1607). The SMVS women, while not explicitly expressing their attitudes toward Hindu nationalist politics, do often draw correlations between the Indian nation and a Hindu homeland. These expressions could reflect the influence of the Hindu Right on India's middle-class populations.

As devices of identity construction and communication, religious festivals are often used to display wealth and other markers of social status (Welbon and Yocum 1982, Trouillet 2008) such as religious knowledge and authority. The use of religious
celebrations in this way is heightened by their locations in urban environments, locales that frequently imply a mixing of social groupings and the necessary mediation of differences between these social groupings. As discussed in many chapters of this dissertation, many of the women of the SMVS group grew up in rural living environments where caste distinctions were more spatially enacted. They have now moved to urban environments where they are in close proximity to neighbors of differing castes, necessitating a renegotiation of caste barriers and social interaction. This proximity has affected the women's perceptions of community and religious participation in many respects, including the ways that annual Hindu festivals and their associated rituals are celebrated and used in the reconfiguration of social distinctions.

Navarātri, in an urban context, is one religious festival that seems to have undergone several of the modifications discussed above. In focusing on its local manifestation in Madurai, Tamilnadu, I have found that while rituals associated with Navarātri have historically been reserved for particular groups of people (i.e., caste groups), changes in local social structure, particularly those relating to social mobility and socioeconomic status in an urban living environment, have affected how Navarātri rituals are carried out. In the following, I provide a brief discussion of Navarātri as a Hindu festival in India and more specifically in Tamilnadu. I then describe how the mainly domestic, female-oriented rituals associated with Navarātri are practiced and manipulated by the middle-class women of the SMVS group, showing how urban community celebrations of Navarātri are influenced by a broader atmosphere of social change in Madurai.
Navarātri and Durga Puja in India

Navarātri (Skt. Navratri) is a nine-night festival that is specified according to the lunar calendar (Fuller 1980) and falls in the Tamil month of Puraṭṭāci (mid-September to mid-October). The festival marks an astrologically auspicious time to worship the Goddess in several forms and is primarily associated with the Hindu epic, the Devi Māhātmyam from the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, in which the Goddess is embroiled in a great battle with the demon Makisasuran and his army. After the Goddess has defeated his army, she then spears Makisasuran and cuts off his head (Fuller and Logan 1985:79, see also Klostermaier 1994, Tanaka 1999).

The festival of Navarātri is closely related to other festivals across the Indian subcontinent, including the famous Durga Puja of Bengal. Durga Puja is observed between mid-September and mid-October as well, but lasts approximately four days (Ghosh 2000). The primary element of contemporary celebrations of Durga Puja is the pandal, a type of makeshift shelter where representations of the Goddess are housed and worshipped during the four-day period. At the end of the festival, the pandals are carried in a procession and then submerged in a river (Ghosh 2000).

Durga Puja, in particular, has been the focus of much research considering differences between rural and urban ritual performances. Tracing the celebration of Durga Puja back to its pre-colonial history, Anjan Ghosh has shown how Durga Puja was once “a

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238 In Sanskrit, Nav- connotes the number nine, while -Ratri signals “night.”
239 The beginning of Spring and the beginning of Fall are both specified as junctions that necessitate the worship of the Goddess. However, the Navarātri celebration at the beginning of Fall occurs with more fanfare.
240 The Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa is one in a set of eighteen Sanskrit narrative texts. It is well-known due to its description of Durga’s defeat of the demon Mahisasura, the Devi Māhātmyam (Johnson 2009:158).
241 For a discussion of pandals as aesthetic expressions, as well as modes for social commentary, see McDermott 2011, Zeiler 2015.
242 These pandals are similar to the massive constructions of the God Ganesh made in celebration of Ganesh’s birthday (Ganesh Chathurthi). Both pandals and representations of Ganesh are submerged in water at the end of the festival period.
rural institution primarily...observed within the household precincts of the rural gentry,” but after the coming of the British became an “...urban festival...[and] an iconic institution of the Bengalis...[creating] a space for public performances and contestation” (Ghosh 2000:289). Here is yet another example of how religious festivals become instruments of political assertion.

For some scholars (e.g., Ghosh 2000), Durga Puja’s current appeal is theorized according to a main tenant of classic modernization theory – a growth in secularism (Nanda 2009). Anjan Ghosh has argued that,

Durga puja has increasingly become a secular and hybrid entity, incorporating widespread popular participation from disparate castes and classes, and enabling women to emerge from the seclusion of their domestic sphere to inhabit public spaces during the festival period...The popularity of the festival has enhanced its festive aspect while eroding its ritual features. This has to an extent ‘secularized’ the worship of the Hindu goddess into a cosmopolitan festival (Ghosh 2000:294).

As will be shown below, my research on Navarātri in Tamilnadu refutes this assertion. My work, as well as others’ (e.g., McDermott 2011), draws attention to the ritual aspects of the celebration, particularly those that have been modified, not disposed of, according to nuanced perceptions of gender, religious knowledge, caste and class amongst India’s middle classes. However, in accordance with Ghosh’s statements about the growing tendency toward “conspicuous consumption, display and status” (Ghosh 2000:294) during festival periods, I have found that the Navarātri festival amongst the middle classes in urban Tamilnadu is wrought through with concern for these persuasions.

Historically, Navarātri in south India was a ritual relating to kinship; and during the Vijayanagar period (thirteenth-sixteenth centuries C.E.), it was recognized as a time to renew royal sovereignty (Stein 1980, Fuller and Logan 1985). However, it has been argued
that while most temples celebrate the festival in some way, Navarātri in contemporary south India has also become an occasion for heightened domestic ritual (Fuller and Logan 1985) yet often only elaborately celebrated by upper caste Hindus (Hancock 1999:3). In general, the nine nights of Navarātri are organized into three sections, the first three days reserved for Durga, the next three days reserved for Laksmi and the final days reserved for Saraswati (Tanaka 1999). These days are then broken down and assigned to a particular form of the goddess. In some locations, each night is also associated with a particular color, with which women often decorate themselves when going to the temple on the corresponding evening. The forms of the Goddess and the order in which they are worshipped vary according to region and also by temple. Below is the list of days, goddess forms and colors that are used in the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple in Krishnapuram Colony:

- **Day 1:** Rajarajesvari (red)
- **Day 2:** Andal (purple)
- **Day 3:** Meenakshi (green)
- **Day 4:** Kāmākṣi (yellow)

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243 Hancock has noted that for poor and lower caste devotees, Navarātri is thought of as a time to appease deceased ancestors (2001:2). Although I did not spend time with the poorer members of Madurai society, I did have access to lower caste celebrations of Navarātri and deceased ancestors did not seem to be a focus of these occasions.

244 Fuller and Logan (1985:98) argue that domestic ritual during Navarātri in Madurai revolves around the worship of Sakti and not specific forms of the goddess such as Durga or Laksmi. Moreover, Tanaka (1999) found that in Chidambaram, Tamilnadu, Laksmi was left out of Navarātri worship all together. This is interesting in light of the fact that today, Laksmi is portrayed as a model for proper womanhood, particularly in Hindu nationalist rhetoric (Van Hollen 2015). During my experiences of Navarātri in suburban Madurai, the three forms of the Goddess were worshipped and given equal authority and I was not aware of any alternative discourse concerning Hindu nationalism, although this does not mean that it was not present (see my discussion of Meenakshi Amma below).

245 Celebrations in other temples in Tamilnadu, for example the well-known Kamaksi temple in Kanchipuram, do not mark each night of Navarātri with a specific color (Ilkama 2014).

246 Since my return from India, there are now also a plethora of blog websites that list the goddess of the day, the color of the day, and the type of naivētanam/naivētyam (food offering) that should be offered to the Goddess (see, for example, http://aahaaram.wordpress.com/2014/09/23/navratri-naivedyam-colours-to-wear/).

247 This is exemplified in the list of goddesses worshipped at the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple. You will notice that the second to last day is reserved for Laksmi when the final three days according to wider tradition are supposed to be reserved for Saraswati. Also, in the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple, the color purple is specified twice and "Pū Pāvāṭal" (lit. flower skirt) is a form that I have not seen in other temples.

248 Rajarajesvari has a distinct relationship to Tamilnadu and its kingly past in that she is thought to be the consort of Rajarajesvara, or Siva, who was also the protective guardian for the kings of the Cōla empire in Tamilnadu (ninth-twelfth centuries C.E.) (Fuller and Logan 1985:88).
**Day 5:** Annapurni (orange)  
**Day 6:** Bhubaneswari (white)  
**Day 7:** Pū Pāvāṭi (lit. “flower skirt”) (blue)  
**Day 8:** Lakshmi (pink)  
**Day 9:** Saraswati (purple)

The final day of Navarātri in Tamilnadu is known as “Saraswati Puja” or “Vijaya Dasami.” This tenth and last day of the festival period marks a variety of moments depending on the region of India in which it is celebrated. In Gujarat, as well as Tamilnadu, Vijaya Dasami represents the day that Durga slayed the demon Makisasuran after battling with him for nine days and nights. In areas around Uttar Pradesh, the day marks the moment during which Ravana is killed by Rama in the Hindu epic the Ramayana (Krishna 2008). In Tamilnadu, Saraswati Puja is the most popular day for celebration (i.e., all genders and a wider assortment of castes and socioeconomic classes) and is marked across the state through the adornment of anything from books to motorbikes with sandalwood paste and *kuṅkumam* as a mark of the Goddess’s blessing. According to one account, this adornment reflects the idea that Saraswati Puja “is considered to be an auspicious time to worship tools used to earn an income” due to an association with Arjuna’s retrieval of his weapons in the *Mahābhārata* on the last day of Navarātri (Krishna 2008:1). In addition to the decoration of specific items, families often have special meals on this day as well.

Vijaya Dasami also holds a particularly gendered component. While women are seen as the primary ritualists during the first eight days of the festival, the worship of Saraswati

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249 In conversations with other scholars who study Navarātri in its various forms, I have yet to come across the decoration of the Goddess with this “flower skirt.” The most salient connection I can make is with Fuller and Logan’s earlier recording of a “dress made of flowers” (Fuller and Logan 1985:82) that adorned the Goddess statue after its ritual bathing (*apūṣēkam*) in the famous Meenakshi Amman temple in Madurai. With that said, a different decoration adorned by the Goddess for each day of the festival (not necessarily color) seems to be more common (Fuller and Logan 1985:82, Ilkama 2014).

250 Vijaya Dasami (lit. “victorious tenth”) is actually the day following Saraswati Puja (the ninth day), but many of my interlocutors interchangeably used Saraswati Puja and Vijaya Dasami to mark the final day of the Navarātri festival.

251 The *Mahābhārata* is yet another important epic in the Hindu religion.
on the final day is led by the males in the home. Fuller and Logan (1985) surmise that this relates to the chaos and restoration of cosmic order that must be restored during the Navarātri period. They argue,

...the rituals of the first eight days are the concern of married women. They act alone during the festival and do not need to be kept under the constraint of their husbands...On the ninth day of the domestic festival, however, when Saraswathi is worshipped, the rituals are performed by men of the household, suggesting that the normal order, in which they take the leading role, has been restored (Fuller and Logan 1985:98).

This scenario was certainly the case in most of the SMVS women’s households.

Occasionally, and in non-Brahmin members’ homes in particular, the husbands removed themselves from any leadership in ritual worship during this time. I surmise that this might be a function of the ritual knowledge that, specifically, the SMVS women have gained through their association with the group and their husband’s acknowledgement of it.

In general, the other nights of Navarātri are not as overtly observed by Tamil Hindus. One may see more people walking about after dark, visiting homes that display kolukai (plural of kolu) or note a more festive atmosphere in their neighborhood temple, but by in large the other nights of Navarātri in Tamilnadu are far less celebrated unless one is particularly pious. Luckily for the anthropologist, the SMVS group members were just those pious people.

**Navarātri at the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple**

Everyday during the Navarātri festival the women of the SMVS group (mainly from the Krishnapuram Colony side, see Chapter One) congregate at the local Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple at approximately four o’clock in the evening. They complete their usual circumnambulations of the temple then proceed to organize small cardboard place settings
that include two small bowls, one empty and one filled with *kuṅkumam* powder. The bowls are then handed to willing female participants\(^{252}\) (some SMVS group members, some not) who recite the 108 names of the goddess (*nāmavāli*) while counting pinches of the red powder in a practice known as *kuṅkumam arccanai*.\(^{253}\) After the *kuṅkumam arccanai* is complete, the red powder that has been transferred during the name recitation is combined and given to the temple priest. He then places the bowl of *kuṅkumam* powder in front of the goddess statue and will later use it to mark the foreheads of devotees.

**Figure 6.1** Latha preparing the *kuṅkumam arccanai* bowls during Navarātri.

The decorations in the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple were primarily organized by SMVS group members, particularly Jayanthi and Latha. Latha was usually in charge of

\(^{252}\) In my experience of temple celebrations of the Navarātri festival, there were few men in attendance. Indeed, this was also the case on a more general scale, as at nearly every visit to the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple I recorded the gender ratio. Average ratios were about six men for every fifteen women.

\(^{253}\) *Arccanai* is traditionally understood as a form of ritual worship consisting of the recitation of either the 108 or 1008 names of a god or goddess and the simultaneous counting and/or throwing of objects (flowers, pinches of *kuṅkumam* powder) as gifts. The practice described here is also colloquially known as "*arccanai*" and is done on a daily basis for anyone who would like to have a special person blessed. On occasions such as *Piratosam* and *Caṭi* (see Chapter One and Chapter Three), this blessing is performed at the cost of Rs. 10. I was often sent to the temple by Latha on these days and asked to put the names of her two children on the *arccanai* list.

Moreover, according to his research in the Meenakshi-Sundaeswara Temple in Madurai, Fuller maintains that *arccanai* is inherently connected to priestly services (Fuller 1984:21). While the neighborhood temple Brahmin priest does oversee the *kuṅkumam arccanai* process undertaken by the women (as well as keeps them in rhythm during their recitations), the strong correlation between priests and the ritual practice of *arccanai* that Fuller has noticed is much less visible.
drawing an elaborate *kōlam* at the front entrance to the temple and Jayanthi often bought the fabric and props that would adorn each form of the goddess.

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**Figure 6.2** A *kōlam* drawn by Latha at the entrance to the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple during Navarātri., October 2010. **Figure 6.3** The goddess statue decorated by Jayanthi for the third day of Navarātri devoted to Meenakshi. Meenakshi is usually associated with the color green and is commonly pictured with a pet parakeet. October 2010.

**Figure 6.4** The Śrī Maṅgala Temple decorated by Jayanthi for Navarātri. It is the seventh day of the festival, hence, the goddess is wearing a skirt made of flowers (*Pū Pāvātai*). October 2010. **Figure 6.5** SMVS group members don their green uniform saris on day three to correspond with the goddess Meenakshi. October 2010.
One can also purchase special tickets to have a blessing made for a loved one during the time of Navarātri. These cost Rs. 100 (quite expensive if you are not at least middle class) and you are asked for the name of the person you wish to be blessed and their birth star (naṭcattiram). Near the end of the puja, the priest will recite Sanskrit mantras and plug in each person’s name and birth star. He will then crack a coconut and you receive that along with your ritual food offering (piracātam\textsuperscript{254}) at the end of the evening’s event. Occasionally, the devotees (mainly lower caste) in the temple will not know the birth star of the person they wish to have blessed. In these instances, the priest will use a general saying to bless the person.

The community involvement I witnessed during the celebration of Navarātri at the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple was not at all ubiquitous. On several occasions, I visited other neighborhood temples of the same size (e.g., Śakti Vināyagar Temple and the Reserve Line Mariyammaṉ Temple) and the elements of community arccaṉai (i.e., kuṅkumam bowl ritual) and even devotees singing were noticeably absent. Instead, these other temples had constructed very elaborate kolukal, perhaps as a mode through which to communicate a higher form of Hindu religiosity and deter adoption of privileged religious knowledge (that associated with Brahmin religious practices).\textsuperscript{255}

After the formal celebration of the goddess and the dispersal of the day’s piracātam, it was common for some devotees to invite group members and other temple-goers to view

\textsuperscript{254} Piracātam is normally distributed by a priest or temple helper who deposits a scoop of the food (usually a variation of rice) into a small cup or the right hand of the devotee who has waited in line to receive it. At the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple, female devotees would usually come equipped with a plastic container so that they could bring it home to other family members that did not attend the temple’s puja. Injesting piracātam was considered a way to absorb the blessings of a deity.

\textsuperscript{255} This often occurs when dressing deity statues in temples as well. Many temples that wish to demonstrate what they consider to be a higher form of religiosity will dress the female deities in nine-yard saris (matisārkaḷ), a type of sari usually reserved for women of the Brahmin caste. This decoration of female deities acts as a symbol of how temple priests and trustees would like the temple to be perceived.
their *kolu*, a common element of the Navarātri festival. Below I describe the *kolu* in detail and discuss how caste and class are integrated into the construction and viewing of this ritualized component.

*Kolu-viewing at Navarātri*²⁵⁶

A *kolu* is a tiered display of clay/porcelain/plastic three-dimensional images/dolls (*pommaikaḷ*) of gods and goddesses, political figures (e.g., Gandhi and Nehru), cultural scenes (such as weddings and temple festivals), and food items. According to some SMVS group members, the items included in the *kolu* are arranged according to intricate Sanskrit instructions²⁵⁷ and in order to construct a proper *kolu*, the items must also be placed on the steps while reciting specific mantras. There are several interpretations of the *kolu* structure. Some consider the *kolu* to be a representation of “the cosmos, inhabited by beings divine, demonic, human and animal” (Ramnarayan 2013:1). Others maintain that the term “*kolu*” refers to “a sovereign sitting in his royal darbar” and that the arrangement of the dolls recalls the goddess Durga “sitting in her *golu*, prior to the slaying of the demon Mahisasura” (Krishna 2008:1). In her research on Navarātri celebrations in the Tamil town of Chidambaram, Tanaka notes that the *kolu* ideally consists of nine tiers, so as to correspond with the nine nights of the festival.²⁵⁸

In an influential article on Navarātri in the city of Madurai, Fuller and Logan (1985) comment in depth on the religious significance of the *kolu*. Attending to the notion that

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²⁵⁶ *Kolu-viewing* and Navarātri more generally are relatively understudied topics, with the exception of earlier work done by Logan 1980, Fuller and Logan 1985; Hancock 1999, 2001; and Tanaka 1999.

²⁵⁷ For instance, political and historical figures must be placed on a lower step than deities.

²⁵⁸ Tanaka states that, although this is the ideal number of tiers, it may not always be feasible. Instead, one should pay heed to the auspiciousness accorded to odd numbers in Indian culture, as well as the fact that a minimum of three tiers are absolutely necessary for the worship of the Goddess (1999:124).
Navarātri is a time to celebrate the goddess’s defeat of the demon Makisasuran, they argue that *kolukal* “display the harmony that is threatened by Makisasuran, for they represent the world in its creative, beneficient, hierarchically-ordered aspect” (Fuller and Logan 1985:97). Fuller and Logan (1985) also address the significance of ritual time with respect to *kolu* symbolism and construction. They comment, “…the kolus represent the converse of the evil disorder that those agents [demons] bring; they are honoured at night, the time associated with evil forces, but they are illuminated, to suggest perhaps that those forces have been dispelled” (Fuller and Logan 1985:97). The factors of illumination and the dispelling of evil forces is particularly interesting in light of the frequent visiting of homes with *kolukal* by females, members of society who ordinarily are socio-culturally limited in their movements at night.

The display of a *kolu* during Navarātri is predominantly practiced in Brahmin and Chettiyar homes and many non-Brahmins both within and outside the group located the displaying or keeping (*vai*) of a *kolu* as a particularly Brahmin practice. Still, a few non-Brahmins, mostly high to middle in the local caste hierarchy (e.g., Saiva Pillais, Mudaliyars) argued that they did not build and display a *kolu* because they did not have female children who could help them with the work inherent in its construction. *Kolukal*, according to members of these communities, as well as many of their neighbors, were understood as connected with women’s/domestic work. It was also argued that in order for the practice of displaying a *kolu* to be socially respected, it had to be performed every year without fail.

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259 In my collection of SMVS group members’ life histories, Chettiyars (an upper caste) were often equated with Brahmins in their descriptions of village life.

260 Prior to the research period, I had theorized that the location of the *pommai* creation in a *cēri* (location outside of the village occupied by those previously called “untouchables,” as well as their manufacture by lower castes might be an important factor to investigate, as I suspected that ritual pollution (here: caste pollution) would be mobilized through the clay objects, necessitating, for example, Brahmin cleansing rituals. However, having constructed a few *kolukal* with my Brahmin host family, it appears to me that this is not the case. Indeed, the fact that ritual pollution removal is not required is another interesting topic for further research.
(an exception being the presence of death pollution \([t̪i̯tu\) in the home during the time of the festival). Hence, many non-Brahmins, instead of asserting that \(kolu\)-keeping was a caste-specific practice and locating this as the reason for their participatory abstinence, maintained that they either did not have female children to help them and/or they were not prepared to take on the long-term commitment involved in the practice. Brahmins who did not display \(kolukal\) rarely used these justifications, instead simply stating that it was not their habit (\(palakkam illai\)).

Although this section focuses specifically on the place of \(kolu\) construction in shifting perceptions of caste and class, \(kolukal\) are also involved in the changing south Indian socio-cultural landscape in other ways. For example, in a recent Chennai magazine article, Shobha Warrier discusses the making of \(kolu\) dolls and the practicing of \(kolu\) construction by those other faiths, noting that “the artisans say they have also started preparing dolls based on biblical characters because the Christian community has adopted the tradition for Christmas” (Warrier 2013:2). Furthermore, \(kolukal\), as they are interpreted as conversation pieces during viewers’ visits, sometimes reflect changes in Indian history, from the replacement of Saraswati’s \(veena\)\(^{261}\) to the more modern violin under the British Raj, to the more current depictions of women’s rights, child labor and shopping malls (Ramnarayan 2013:1). Here, we might consider \(kolukal\) to be rather personal expressions that also provide social commentary (see also Hancock 2001), similar to the \(pandals\) of Durga Puja and the Mithila art studied by Susan Wadley (2013b).

If the invited women accepted the invitation to view someone’s \(kolu\), they were shown into the house, asked about the quality of the respective \(kolu\), possibly asked to sing

\(^{261}\) The \(veena\) is a stringed instrument used in classical Indian music. It is also often pictured with the goddess Saraswati.
a religious song, or bhajan, at the base of the kolu, and then given gifts such as plastic mirrors and storage containers, as well as bananas and betel nut (vitalai-pākku). This phenomenon is in agreement with the work of Mary Hancock who researched Navarātri in Chennai in the early 1990s. She claimed that the gifts “were considered emblems of feminine beauty and domesticity” (Hancock 1999:3). However, earlier research on Navarātri gifts (see Logan 1980) indicates that the gifting of plastic containers and more elaborate feminine items than vermilion powder (kuṇkumam) and sandalwood paste (cantaṇam) is a more recent occurrence (i.e., past three decades). In all respects, the gift-giving and receiving at domestic kolu viewings were located in the women’s realm. During my own experiences in Madurai, I noticed that (with the exception of myself) the gifts were not presented to the children who accompanied their mothers to the viewing, but only to the auspiciously married female kolu admirers (cumaṅkalikai), themselves the archetype of Tamil beauty and domesticity.263

The gift-giving and kolu-viewing more broadly are also avenues through which to communicate middle-class identity and demonstrate socioeconomic standing. Similar to the conspicuous consumption found in middle-class Tamil Hindu weddings, kolu-viewing in Madurai is also known as a time when upper and middle caste/class families can more overtly highlight their expendable wealth in front of neighbors and friends. This wealth is manifested in the number and quality264 of the figures constructing the kolu, as well as the amount and value of gifts given to each viewer. These gifts are then taken home and shown

262 The combination of these specific gift items is often called tampulam (Hancock 2001:2).
263 Recall that many scholars of the middle class in India argue that there is a connection between performing middle-class identity and a prioritizing of the domestic sphere in daily life (see, for example, Waghrone 2004:233-234, Donner 2008).
264 In addition to assessing the quality of dolls based on their more tangible qualities (i.e., material used), the dolls’ associations with foreign cultures is also a factor. Today, many koluikai include Barbie dolls, which signal higher quality due to their connection with the West. In contrast, dolls that are said to come from China are considered cheap and of lower quality (Ramnarayan 2013:1).
to other family members (especially males) who did not attend the viewing, but can also draw conclusions about a family's class status and wealth.

In a variety of religious communities, gift-giving is perceived as a mode through which to communicate social status. However, gift-giving within a few religions such as Judaism and Hinduism has also been said to imply the possible spread of ritual pollution (Raheja 1988, Shuman 2000). In this vein, through the giving of standard Navarāttiri gifts such as plastic containers and cunto packet, one could potentially be passing on ritual pollution as ascribed by one's caste. Although some higher castes do often accept food gifts made in lower caste homes and then discard them, in today's India there seems to be a change in focus from gift-giving as a status-performing event that emphasizes caste distinctions and ritual pollution to an occasion during which a multitude of castes can express socioeconomic mobility and emphasize class community-building.

It is in the context of gift-giving and urban community-building that I find Jayanthi’s previously described altar and gifts to be particularly interesting in that while traditionally kolu-constructing and viewing has been a higher caste practice, those of the middle class, but of perhaps lower castes, are now locating the festival of Navarātri as a time during which caste stereotypes and practices can be challenged, but class stereotypes can be reaffirmed and class identities can be constructed. In the following sections, I utilize my Navarātri experiences with SMVS group members and their neighbors to show how the Navarātri festival, along with its domestic rituals, is a crucial site of social change in suburban Madurai.
Figure 6.6 A massive *kolu* constructed at the home of a middle-class Chettiyar family near Krishnapuram Colony. October 2010

Figure 6.7 Side scene displays along the other walls of the same Chettiyar home. October 2010.

Figure 6.8 Close-up of the side scene pictured above. Here, you can see the divine family of Shiva, Parvati, Vinayagar, and the six-faced son Murukan (also called Shanmuga (*Shan* = six, *mukam* = face) encased in the ice of Mount Kailasa. October 2010.

Figure 6.9 A *kolu* scene in which both Hinduism and Christianity are represented. On the top tier is a representation of Siva and his family at Mount Kailasa. On the bottom left, a display depicting a typical Hindu wedding. On the bottom right, the nativity (birth of Jesus). September 2008.
Figure 6.10 A *kolu* display in a Brahmin home in Krishnapuram Colony. Here, notice the presence of the Barbie dolls at the bottom, still packaged. October 2010.

Figure 6.11 A representation of village women at a well in a *kolu* side scene. October 2010.

Figure 6.12 Women performing Thiruvillakku Puja (see Chapter Three) in a *kolu* side scene. October 2010.
Navarātri Rituals and Social Change

A Lecture at the SMV Temple

During my second Navarātri at the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple, it was announced that a Brahmin woman had been asked to come from an area that used to be designated as an akkirakāram and give the devotees a lecture about Navarātri and why it is celebrated. She arrived after the formal rituals had taken place and many of the female devotees stayed to listen to her presentation. She began the lecture by introducing herself and then singing a song to Vinayagar (perhaps because he is the main deity of the temple). She then spoke of difficulties one encounters in life and the Goddess’s place in resolving these issues,

Who can say, “for me there are no difficulties I am always content and peaceful?” Who can say that? Certainly no one can say that. But going along with you is Sakti, going along with you is power.* Ampal (the goddess) is there.

In response to this statement, many of the women in the temple nodded their heads in agreement. Meenakshi Amma, the lecturer, continued by speaking about the importance of the Navarātri festival in that it is a time reserved for women in particular. She also spoke of the conflicts and confluences between tradition and modernity, arguing that while “we need modern techniques,* we should not forget tradition.” With respect to this she lamented that many women are no longer taught the specific details of Navarātri puja, and many use the excuses of work and other aspects of modern life in their explanations of why they do not follow the traditions that are deemed their responsibility as Hindu women. Meenakshi Amma responds to her own grief concerning this topic by commenting that today, women must be shown and reminded of the proper ways to follow tradition, and hence her visit to the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple. The lecture is then concluded with a song that Meenakshi encourages the other devotees to sing with her.
While there are often public lectures held in larger temples, this event at the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple was unique in that it took place in a small neighborhood temple and was not focused on the details and history of a particular deity or religious epic, such as the Rāmāyana or the Mahābhārata. In contrast, Meenakshi Amma’s lecture was a kind of social analysis, directed at the middle-class worshippers in the temple, about interpretations of tradition and modernity as they appear in the everyday lives of women in Madurai. The lecture also reinforced social distinctions in that Meenakshi Amma, a middle-class Brahmin housewife living in a part of the city that was once an akkirakāram, was sharing her religious knowledge (supposedly worthy of a public temple lecture) with other female devotees who either conceived of themselves or were conceived by their neighbors as needing enlightenment with respect to proper ritual and religiosity. Meenakshi Amma’s Brahmin identity was communicated through her speech (she used a socially recognized Brahmin dialect of Tamil) and also through her knowledge of Hindu cosmology and astrology, topics that, in the past, were reserved for those of the Brahmin caste.

This scenario recalls the findings of Mary Hancock (1995, 1999) in which a political group of middle-class Brahmin Hindu housewives in Chennai, formally called Jan Kalyan, initially “relied on elite women members and on feminine religious idioms to solicit upper-caste consent to Hindu Nationalism” and “with that ideology...naturalized caste inequalities and attempted to broker alliances between urban elites and the poor”

265 While some scholars have noted a heightened level of discussion of modernity and religion in Indian urban areas (see, for example, Stroope 2012), I attended quite a few public lectures in larger temples in Madurai and these were consistently focused on Hindu religious stories.
266 I am quite sure that Meenakshi Amma was aware that her audience consisted of Brahmin and non-Brahmin women.
267 The use of “consent” here evokes a picture of Hindu women who are not necessarily active in nationalist politics, but who acquiesce to its rhetoric, similar to Nanda’s (2009) conception of “soft Hindutva.”
(Hancock 1995:907). Unfortunately, I was not able to collect much personal information about the lecturer, Meenakshi Amma. In particular, and in light of the previous connections that have been drawn between India’s middle-classes and Hindu nationalism (Hansen 1999, Mankekar 1999, Fernandes 2000), it would have been beneficial to inquire about her political affiliation. This may have illuminated a local application of the Navarātri festival as an instrument in the furthering of Hindu nationalist political rhetoric, similar to that discussed at the opening of this chapter and in previous chapters. Due to this, my analysis of Meenakshi Amma’s lecture below focuses on her treatment of tradition, modernity and gender, topics that remained crucial to the middle-class SMVS women’s performances of Hindu piety.

![Figure 6.13 Meenakshi Amma delivers her lecture at the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple. October 2010.](image)

This phenomenon of a public lecture concerning modern life and the practicing of traditional religious ritual by women was an event that was certainly distinctive in my experiences of middle-class India. Alongside the inventive actions of the SMVS group (see Chapter Seven), this event exposed devotees to a discourse concerning modern religiosity
and the place of women within it. But why was this lecture seen as necessary by temple trustees? I would argue that this moment in India is recognized, specifically by the middle classes, as a time when tradition and modernity are under constant scrutiny and negotiation in a multitude of circumstances, including those in which religiosities and social structures are being reevaluated and reformulated. In her effort to join modernity with tradition with respect to the rituals of Navarātri, Meenakshi Amma combined a more “traditional” understanding of women as ritual practitioners, while also responding to their attraction to the “techniques” of modern life and the daily changes that have arisen from them. There is also the element of education, which I have shown in other chapters to be vital in establishing and communicating a middle-class identity. Perhaps this event with Meenakshi Amma was also seen as a way to reinforce and encourage middle-class values in the local temple community.

**Jayanthi’s Novel Navarātri**

As described at the beginning of this chapter, Jayanthi, a middle-class and lower caste SMVS group member had elaborately decorated an altar for Laksmi and had also prepared gifts for the visitors that would attend her home for the SMVS group singing event on the first day of Navarātri. Once everyone had assembled around the altar to Laksmi, Uma Amma initiated the singing and the event lasted for about two hours. As her fellow group members and friends made their way out of Jayanthi’s house, they were offered a silk-screened bag filled with items one might receive at a *kolu*-viewing, such as *kuṅkumam* powder, a banana, *cuṇṭal* and a one-rupee coin. In addition, Jayanthi included a coconut, a
pair of plastic red bangles and a packet of red *poṭṭukāl*[^268] for the women’s foreheads (totally approximately Rs. 70 per guest). Although Jayanthi’s altar was certainly quite different from a *kolu*, the viewing of the altar, the singing in front of it, and gifts presented afterwards were quite reminiscent of a traditional *kolu*-viewing at a higher caste home.

Curious about the connection to my other *kolu*-viewing experiences, I asked Jayanthi how her Navarātri function came about. She told me that it was something she had created, having been inspired by Brahmin members of her community and the SMVS group. She was also adamant that *kolukāl* were originally caste-specific. She said,

[^268]: *Poṭṭukāl* (plural of *poṭṭu*) are stickers placed on the forehead and between the eyes of Hindu (and sometimes Christian) women. While traditional *poṭṭukāl* take the form of simple round red dots, other, more modern *poṭṭukāl* are a variety of shapes, sizes and colors, so that they can be matched to one’s outfit. For an in-depth analysis of *poṭṭukāl* in Tamil culture, see Nagarajan 2007.
It’s new. I watched Brahmins and learned. I learned in the Satsang group. Without Satsang involvement, the full nine days are not celebrated, only Saraswathi Puja. After my Satsang group involvement I started going to temple all nine days. Uma Amma said that we (group members) should. Only after joining the Satsang group did I see what Brahmins did and thought it was good. Now any jati (caste) will keep a kolu but mainly* they are Brahmins. Other people only do it after seeing Brahmins keep them. The Brahmins know the sastras for how to make the kolu (i.e., what needs to go on what step). Before the group I didn’t celebrate Navarātri a lot.

Although Jayanthi locates the Brahmin kolu as inspiration for her Navarātri altar invention, the physical alterations in marking Navarātri may have also been part of trend that I began to see among other more socioeconomically well-off Hindus in Madurai. For example, a Brahmin woman named Tangam, who by Madurai standards would have been considered upper middle class, also chose not to construct a kolu, but instead held a singing event similar to that which Jayanthi sponsored at her home. In fact, Tangam’s social networks led her to Uma Amma’s SMVS group, which she invited to perform at her event. In addition to the members of the SMVS group, approximately thirty other guests attended the event and were later given gifts that would be considered of higher quality (e.g., plastic items, fresher flowers) compared to others that one might receive over the nine-night period. Tangam’s Navarātri celebration was also an event that encouraged the formation of social networks amongst like-minded (read: middle class) people. At one point the president of the local Ladies Association approached Uma Amma and invited the SMVS group to her home to view her puja shelf and perhaps perform in front of it.

Selvi and the Status-Raising Kolu

Although it was recognized by SMVS group members that Jayanthi, as well as Tangam, were relatively well-off, and hence, able to celebrate Navarātri in an accentuated fashion, this
could not be said for an SMVS group member named Selvi who was also of a lower caste but with much less disposable income than Jayanthi. That said, Selvi seemed to take up the Navarātri festival and the associated kolu-viewing as a time when she might be able to further build her status as middle class.

Selvi had called the SMVS group members to her home to sing for Navarātri and view her kolu. After singing a few songs in her modest living area and paying respects to the gods and goddesses located in her puja room, the group members were led upstairs to a small room on the roof. From top to bottom this room was filled with kolu displays, including both a traditional staircase display, as well as miniature depictions of familiar cultural scenes, such as “the village” and the performance of Thiruvillakku Puja (see Chapter Three). Selvi also drew our attention to a scene depicting the lifestyle of the Chettiyar caste. It was important that we saw how elaborately she had decorated and how cognizant she was of higher caste (here also, class) modes of living.

**Figure 6.16** Selvi’s step-step-display/staircase kolu. October 2010.

**Figure 6.17** Cultural scenes made at the base of the display kolu. At the top of the photo is the scene that Selvi described as “Chettiyar.” October 2010.
The case of Selvi and her kolu display is interesting not only because of her lower positioning in the caste hierarchy, but also because of her socioeconomic position. In contrast to other members of the group, Selvi’s husband runs a tea stall, hardly considered a middle-class occupation. In addition, according to her close friend, Selvi has only a second standard education, which not only indicates lower class status, but also hinders Selvi from fully participating in the SMVS group, as the group’s performances are centered on the recitation of Sanskrit and reading from handwritten song diaries. Through her kolu display and her invitation to view it, Selvi was attempting to engage in the community of her middle-class peers and raise her social status among the group members. The display of conspicuous consumption that kolu construction provided was meant to erase Selvi’s lack of other emically agreed-upon middle-class characteristics, such as literacy and white collar employment. While not overtly expressed to me, I suspect that Selvi and her family spent much more money than their budget allowed in order to construct the kolu and present so many guests with gifts and afternoon snacks.

Knowing the social positioning of Selvi, SMVS group members certainly did not expect this type of Navarātri display in her home. Further, while I did not have the opportunity to actually ask, I believe some SMVS members might have been surprised by the fact that Selvi had constructed a step-display kolu because, if done according to orthodox Hindu custom, which SMVS members usually strive to do, Selvi would have had to read and recite Sanskrit mantras, something they knew was beyond her education level.

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269 Although now working at a tea stall is considered a more respected occupation by some due to its association with the recently-elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
Chapter Summary

This chapter has illustrated, using the event of Navarātri in urban middle-class Madurai, how the performance of holidays and festivals is engaged in wider conversations concerning social change and modernity. These discourses intimately inform the SMVS women’s understandings and practices of their religiosity as they “redefine ritual actions and meanings according to their own emotional needs within changing social and economic circumstances” (Gold 2015:189). The chapter has also alluded to a possible use of the suburban event of the Navarātri festival to encourage Hindu nationalist sentiment, an important topic for further research. In the subsequent chapter, I continue my examination of urban middle-class Hindu ritual and social networks with an in-depth reflection on the activities of the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang group as a nuanced body of rituals in themselves.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Urban Religiosity: the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang Group

“If we sing...then cāmi will correctly* be in our mind” – Latha Narayanan

We had just travelled for five days, over several hundred kilometers and across multiple state lines on our biggest group tour of the year from Madurai to Navabrindavan and Mantralayam. The members of the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang (SMVS) group were, to say the least, exhausted. Having finally loaded our luggage onto the train and located our seats, we all breathed a sigh of relief as the larger part of our strenuous journey had come to an end. We settled into our seats and prepared for a long, relaxing ride back to Madurai.

More than halfway through the trip, we reached the Thiruchy train station, known to the SMVS women as the place to buy the best filter coffee. While most of the women were groggy, having just woken from a sleep induced by the rhythmic sound of the train and its tracks, two of the women (Usha and Kritika) mustered enough energy to descend the compartment stairs and buy coffee for the group members. In fact, they almost raced to do so. What we, as well as many other passengers, were not aware of was that the train had arrived into Thiruchy station one and one half hours past schedule. Due to this delay, the train, which usually stops for at least ten minutes, was scheduled to remain at Thiruchy station for only five minutes. When the train lurched forward, roughly half of the coffee had been bought and dispersed among the group members. The train began to pick up speed, but Usha and Kritika, were still on the platform! Uma Amma, the group’s guru, was frantic and crying as she seamlessly slipped into her motherly role. Relying on my assumed youthful energy, she asked me to run to the end of the train to see if the women had been able to board the train from the

270 Filter coffee refers to coffee made by the dicocation filter process as opposed to the cheaper instant coffee alternative.
back at the last minute. But, as I neared the end of the compartments, the train screeched to a halt - someone had pulled the emergency chain, causing the train to stop.

On returning to our compartment, I saw that both Usha and Kritika had boarded the train upon its emergency stop. Both of the women were in tears. Kritika, a more dramatic and animated member of the group, worked herself into such a frenzy that she fainted in Uma Amma’s arms. She was quickly revived and the train slowly pulled out of the station once again. However, our secondary departure was preceded by a reproachful interaction with the railway police who scolded the women for dismounting the train and causing such a disturbance.

Shortly after we resumed our trip, Uma Amma’s demeanor shifted her attitude from being worried and frightened, to being harsh and full of admonishment. The reason that this entire situation had taken place, she claimed, was because of greed. She argued that while the women thought they would earn merit (puṇṇiyam) in return for doing the good deed of purchasing coffee for all of the group members, they had competed so fiercely and had concentrated so much on a materialistic means of gaining puṇṇiyam, that their abandonment at the train station was a punishment from God. Uma Amma then announced to all of the SMVS members that puṇṇiyam was not simply about using financial resources to gain merit. She emphasized that earning puṇṇiyam was about intent and should be founded on the thought behind the action. According to Uma Amma, both Usha and Kritika, in gifting coffee to the group members, were more focused on showcasing their wealth than performing a virtuous deed and gaining puṇṇiyam.

As seen in previous chapters, the showcasing of wealth described by Uma Amma, is often caught up in the SMVS women’s religiously-inspired conspicuous consumption and their
identity construction as middle-class Hindus. Merit (puṇṇiyam), in a variety of circumstances and to a variety of Hindus, is thought to be attached to a sort of sacrificing of monetary wealth in the name of Hindu religiosity. One practice, instituted by Uma Amma for the SMVS group members, was the requisite “sponsoring” of a temple tour. As an SMVS group member, this obligation extended to myself as well. In fact, the act, according to Uma Amma and other group members, was worth much more in my case because of my age and marital status. My being nearly thirty and unmarried was of major concern to Uma Amma and other group members. The guru’s solution to this worry was that I should ‘sponsor’ a tour for the group, in turn gaining a significant amount of puṇṇiyam which would then facilitate a prompt marital undertaking.\textsuperscript{271} In ‘sponsoring’ a tour, she explained, I would be providing the monetary support for transportation to and from a temple, as well as snacks and beverages to be consumed on the trip.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7.1.jpg}
\caption{The SMVS group at Alagar Kovil, to which I ‘sponsored’ a tour. The garland around my neck was supposed to represent the garland I would soon wear at my puṇṇiyam-induced marriage.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{271} She also added that she knew I would be buying gifts for the SMVS group members upon my departure from India (I had done this on my previous visit) and argued that ‘sponsoring’ a tour for the SMVS members was a much better gift.
From what I understood about puṇṇiyam (as merit) before I arrived in India, it was to be acquired based on an organically-conceived desire to do a good deed. In this situation, I had not thought of ‘sponsoring’ a tour myself, but was told to contribute materially/monetarily by Uma Amma. Given the discrepancy between what I had been taught and what I was experiencing, I began to wonder if I was witnessing the redefining of puṇṇiyam according to contemporary urban, middle-class standards of piety. I had witnessed quite a few religious practices by the SMVS women that I found to be innovative in light of my graduate school training. Further, the SMVS women described their past experiences with Hindu religiosity as occurring in rural rather than urban settings.

This chapter continues the investigation of urban, middle-class religious innovation, paying particular attention to the creation of the SMVS group’s performances of Hindu piety (e.g., sponsoring a tour*). I will illustrate how Hindu women’s religious spaces and communities have been modified with respect to geographic place (i.e., rural or urban) and explore the ways in which these contexts encourage particular kinds of religious practice as a mode of communicating urban Hindu piety. However, in order to get a sense of the alterations to and particular perspectives concerning Hindu piety in urban Madurai, we must first briefly examine the broader context of women in Hindu groups in India, as well as in Tamilnadu.

Ritualists and Mothers: Women in Hindu Religious Groupings

A wide range of scholars, including anthropologists and religionists, have studied a variety of Hindu groupings, including those involving women as both ritualists and renunciates.
One of the well-known examinations of groups of Hindu women as ritualists was
undertaken by Tracy Pintchman (2007), who carried out an in depth study of Banarasi
women as they celebrated Karthik puja. Although these women were not part of a formal
and circumscribed group like the women of SMVS, Pintchman (2007) does hint at the
connection between women’s ritual leadership and Sanskritic ritual performance, the latter
being an element quite central to the identity and activities of the SMVS group in urban
Tamilnadu. Moreover, Pintchman (2007) highlights Hindu women as important ritual
actors and focuses on the daily lives and interactions of the women as they perform their
identities as female Hindu ritualists.

Much more similar to my own research, and alluded to previously, is the work of
Mary Hancock (1999), who worked with a formal grouping of middle-class Hindu
housewives in Chennai, Tamilnadu. Like the SMVS women, Hancock’s informants also
publicly performed their piety by enacting public ritual and Sanskrit recitation. Navarātri
was also pinpointed by Hancock (1999, 2001) as a ritual occasion during which middle
classness, along with Hindu piety, could be expressed by the group members. However,
unlike the women of the SMVS, the women of Hancock’s (1995, 1999) study identified as
members of the Brahmin caste as well as expressed an affiliation with Hindu nationalism
and its strict rhetoric of Hindu superiority. In my own investigations (2008-2010) of
possible connections between the SMVS group women and right-wing Hindu politics I
found very little evidence of overt political association. One or two of the SMVS group
members expressed some relationship to the Congress party, but many of them said that

272 A few of the SMVS women had local Congress party officials as guests at their weddings. In addition, two of the women,
when speaking of their marriages, described them as “DMK marriages” (the local Tamil political party known as the DMK
often was and continues to be in the Congress Party coalition), which implied the minimizing of the Hindu elements at
their weddings, including the presence of Hindu priests.
they had little knowledge of political arguments and topics. This is not to say that discourses of Hindu superiority, as well as their husband’s political persuasions, did not filter into the SMVS women’s ideological frameworks. Further, the husbands of the SMVS women could also have employed Hindu nationalist notions of proper Hindu womanhood in their daily performances of a middle-class lifestyle.

Many of the women who lead Hindu religious groupings have also been found to identify as a mother figure for other group members/followers (Khandelwal 2004, Warrier 2005, DeNapoli 2013). As was evident in the vignette above and will continue to be apparent below, Uma Amma, the guru of the SMVS group, fits this framework of leadership, maternal love and guidance. However, she does not fit the template of renunciation, an identifying factor of the majority of female leaders of formal Hindu groups (Khandelwal 2004, DeNapoli 2013). Uma Amma has never claimed to be a renunciate or ascetic and quite pointedly participates in the material urban world of Madurai, holding Tupperware parties in her home and selling velour handbags to group members and other visitors. As we will see below, Uma Amma is also not seen by her followers as completely “pure in body and spirit” as most gurus and ascetics are thought to be (Pechilis 2004:6). I would argue that much of the disconnect between renunciation/asceticism and the SMVS group is a function of its concern with middle-class status and identification. Certainly materialism and middle-classness are not always so closely linked (see my discussion of van Wessel (2004) in Chapter One), but when specifically examining the features of renunciation, such as the removal of luxuries from one’s life and a focus on liberation from the material world, it is clear that Uma Amma and her followers are quite detached from this ideal.
The women of the SMVS group not only offered me a glimpse into their current group membership and activities (see Chapter One), but also described more local and personal histories of Hindu women's groups, particularly in rural areas. In the following, I present these perspectives.

Hindu Women's Groups and the Past

In my follow-up questions to the SMVS women's life history interviews, I asked several group members about the potential existence of similar groups in their natal villages. Jayanthi graciously offered her ruminations on the subject. She commented that groups similar to the SMVS group did not exist in the past because of the restrictions placed on women, as well as the amount of women's work. She alluded to the fact that changing times have allowed her the freedom to join groups like SMVS. When I asked her about the existence of Satsang groups in the past, she remarked,

This kind of Satsang group didn't exist. Women didn't go out much and spent time gossiping. For entertainment we would go out with husbands on Sundays. There was too much work. We didn't think about Satsang.

I interpret Jayanthi's feelings as being deeply connected to her social position as middle class. First, she has never needed or been required to perform manual labor and is able to afford time-saving household items like the mixie.* Secondly, her position as a middle-class, although lower caste, woman in both the past and the present has provided her with class/caste-specific understandings of gender roles and restrictions. Traditionally in India, higher caste/class women are often more spatially restricted in an effort to communicate their social status (Papanek and Minault 1982). I suspect that if I had spoken to lower class

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* A mixie is essentially a food processor that is often used for grinding spices and making chutney.
women about the relationship between their work schedules, gendered identities and devotional practices, I would have received a much different answer in comparison to that of Jayanthi, one that would emphasize the place of women in manual labor and hence, the lack of time for extracurricular religious activities.

While Jayanthi’s interview spoke more to gendered elements, some of the other SMVS women focused more on caste distinctions. Teacher, affiliated with the lower Thevar caste, explained to me how caste was implicated in the formation and existence of bhajan groups in her natal village,

**Nicole:** In the village was there a Satsang group like this one?

**Teacher:** No.

**N:** Other? Was there a bhajan group?

**T:** There will be bhajan groups. They will go to the temple, no? They go to the Ayyappan temple...now they go to the Ādi Parāśakti temple...for that there is a group.

**N:** But there is no ‘class’ (instructional class).

**T:** Chettiyars hold class inside their house. Like a culōkam (Skt. sloka) class. Like we (SMVS group members) say culōkaṅkal, they will say all the culōkaṅkal and sing songs. For them only (the class) exists. For other castes it does not.

**N:** For the bhajan groups are they only Brahmins?

**T:** Not just Brahmins. Chettiyars. They speak Telugu. They are like Iyers (Brahmins) only. (It’s) like and akkirakāram for them. Mutton and everything they won’t eat. Just like whatever Brahmins do, they will be like that and do exactly like the Brahmins do. They will put a pūṇūl (sacred thread).

This discussion with Teacher confirms the existence of bhajan groups in village settings; however, she makes distinctions in the actions of these groups based on caste affiliation. In her early description of bhajan groups, Teacher mentions less-exclusive Hindu groups such as the Ādi Parāśakti and Ayyappan pilgrimage groups. The Ādi Parāśakti groups are widespread throughout Tamilnradu and use uniforms as a mode of group identification. Amongst my interlocutors, the members of these groups were generally thought to be
associated with lower castes and did not require an education in Sanskrit or forms of “higher” Hindu religious knowledge. Ādi Parāśakti group members tend to travel to temples on Tamil holidays such as Poṅkal, and as a cohesive group, make poṅkal\textsuperscript{274} and offer it during puja. In this vein, they are also thought to be more associated with local Tamil religious practice,\textsuperscript{275} such as augmented Murukan (Skanda) worship and the singing of Tamil religious hymns such as the \textit{Caṣṭi Kavacam}. Teacher’s reference to groups of devotees who go to the Ayyappan temple (at Sabari Malai in Kerala) also suggests a more local yet widespread south Indian Hindu practice.\textsuperscript{276} On this particular pilgrimage, while ritual purity remains a concern, much of the focus is on purity as it relates to gender,\textsuperscript{277} rather than on caste.

Teacher also comments that higher castes in her village held classes in association with their \textit{bhajan} groups. She identifies these song and \textit{culōkam} recitation classes as reserved for Chettiyars and Brahmins, commenting that Chettiyars in these groups mimicked the lifestyle and practices of Brahmin Hindus in the village. In this way, \textit{bhajan} groups that included an instructional class component in the village were thought to be reserved for higher caste devotees.

\textsuperscript{274} See Chapter Three for an in-depth description of the holiday of Poṅkal and the food made for the occasion, which goes by the same name.

\textsuperscript{275} In this instance, local Tamil religious practice can be compared to more Sanskritic religious action, such as recitation of Sanskrit texts. This recalls the problematic, but also occasionally useful dichotomy between what many scholars (Singer 1972; Hildebeitel 1999, 2011) have called “classical” and “folk.” Here, “classical” Hinduism would refer to a more standardized Hinduism based in the language of Sanskrit. Brahmin priests might be an example of practitioners of “classical” Hinduism. “Folk” Hinduism, would refer to less standardized Hindu practice, or what is sometimes called “vernacular” Hinduism (see, for example, Gadon and Ray 2011). These practices are less inspired by formal Sanskrit texts and vary by region and community. In general, I avoid the use of this dichotomy as it presents Sanskritic Hinduism as quite static as well as authoritative (via ascribed authenticity). However, in this instance, I wish to make a distinction between Hindu women’s groups that emphasize more regional Tamil religious practice in contrast to groups like the SMVS that gravitate towards what they interpret as orthodox and status-raising (Sanskritic) religious practice.

\textsuperscript{276} This is not to imply that Hindu devotees who are not of south Indian origin do not participate in the Sabari Malai pilgrimage. By associating Ayyappan pilgrimage groups with south Indian forms of Hinduism, I wish to make a distinction between more caste-reserved Hindu practices and more cross-caste Hindu practices, such as the pilgrimage to the Sabari Malai temple.

\textsuperscript{277} The Ayyappan pilgrimage is reserved for those devotees who are either male, or not capable of producing ritually polluting menstrual blood (e.g., pre-pubescent girls).
Latha, one of the few Brahmin members of the SMVS group, confirmed the association between higher castes, religious learning and bhajan groups in village settings. However, she did not interpret these groups to be as formal as the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar group,

Nicole: When you were a child was there a Satsang group like Uma Amma’s? In the village? In the city?
Latha: In the village there wasn’t a Satsang (group)... Priests would be there, right? The paṇṭit’s wife taught a lot – Lalithā Sahāstranāmam, Vishnu Sahāstranāmam – a lot of stōtiraṇkāḷ she knew. If we had a desire we could go and learn from her. You could go and learn the Lalithā Sahāstranāmam from the paṇṭit’s wife.

N: Was it a class*?
L: There wasn’t a class.* Whoever had a desire to learn, they could go and learn.

N: You didn’t go on tours*?
L: There wasn’t anything like that.

N: Did you wear uniforms?
L: There wasn’t anything like that at all. If there was a desire we could go and learn. Also, next door (in the akkirakāram) a māmi would hold a bhajan on Saturdays. At the bhajans they would sing a lot of songs. Māmi would sing. We could go to the bhajan.

N: But, at that time it was only Brahmans at the bhajans?
L: Yes.

N: For learning culōkaṇkaḷ it was only Brahmans?
L: Yes. Brahmans only.

Here, Latha notes that the formality of going on tours* and wearing uniform saris was not apart of village bhajan groups as she was growing up. In looking at a few descriptions of bhajan groups in rural Tamilnadu, it seems that the combination of uniform saris, tour performances and higher caste-affiliated religious knowledge is a rather innovative element of the urban SMVS group. Below, I discuss in detail the many novel and/or

278 According to the Cre-A Tamil dictionary, a paṇṭit is a "learned person" or "expert" (Ramakrishnan 2008:886).
279 Stōtiraṇkāḷ is the Tamil plural of stōtiram (of Sanskrit origin). A stōtiram is a hymn directed to a deity.
280 Following an assessment of her later statements during this interview, I am quite sure that Latha’s "whoever" in this context carried the meaning of "whoever of those belonging to the Brahmin caste."
nuanced activities, rituals and relationships that the SMVS group has inspired in the suburban environment of middle-class Madurai.

**SMVS Group Activities**

In addition to the instructional element of the SMVS group’s *culōkam* classes (see Chapter One), the group meetings also served a variety of other functions, from occasions to perform group ritual to event to encourage camaraderie. One very special event that I witnessed was the ten-year anniversary of the SMVS group. They planned what they called “Annual Day,” an event that recalls a day celebrated by school children filled with games, singing, and Tamil poetry recitations. They held a “guess that *rāgam*” competition and Uma Amma was presented with a suitcase as “*guru ṭakṣiṇai*,” or a gift of thanks to the guru for teaching the group members without asking anything in return. One group member also wrote a speech to tell Uma Amma how much she appreciated her.

In comparison to other SMVS group events, this “Annual Day” occasion relied much less on formal performance and displays of religious knowledge. Instead, this was a celebration that seemed to reinforce group identity and cohesion through two hours of games and feminine bonding. Not only were the SMVS women celebrating their ten-year commitment to accentuating their Hindu piety, but they were also celebrating friendship and camaraderie in their urban middle-class world.
The guru’s home was also a venue for events such as the *chīttu,*\(^{281}\) or “lucky draw.” Each week one woman participating in the *chīttu* gets her name pulled from a small box and receives the monies collected from the other members of the *chīttu* group. It is a type of savings scheme that facilitated, at least among the middle classes that I work with, the buying of large luxury items and/or the multitude of necessities for south Indian weddings. A *chīttu* has also been referred to as a “kitty party” and is described by other scholars as a form of microfinance scheme (see Waldrop 2012). Mark Liechty (2003) identifies a similar credit scheme amongst his middle-class interlocutors in Kathmandu called “the *dhukuti* system.” This particular system involves “a kind of rotating credit club in which groups of acquaintances agree to each contribute a certain amount of money to a kitty every week or month and then either wait their turn or bid to receive their pooled capital” (Liechty 2003:88). However, participation in the *chīttu* was not a prerequisite for SMVS group membership. Indeed, some group members looked down upon the practice, saying that

\(^{281}\) *Chīttu* literally means “card” in Tamil, but I think the women were actually modifying the Hindi word *chitha* to make a Tamilized version. In Hindi, *chitha* refers to “a voucher for a sum of money owed” (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/chit).
they had enough of their own money and did not need to participate in order to receive a large sum of money later. This was the case with Jayanthi, whose husband said that it was “classless” to participate in the *chīttu* and so she was not permitted to participate.

**Tours**

Events in which all of the women wish to participate are the SMVS group’s tours,* which are performed every few months at temples and events (weddings and rural village visits) across Tamilnadu. The group undertakes tours* to both Saivaite and Vaishnavaite* temples such as Tiruvaṇṇāmalai (Siva Temple) and Tirupati (Vishnu Temple).282 The tours* to these sacred locations are made by train, bus, autorickshaw, or van depending on the temple’s distance from the city of Madurai.

On one occasion, the SMVS group members were called to return to the Golden Temple of Śrī Puram near Vellore, Tamilnadu. The group had performed at the temple the previous year and temple trustees requested that they perform again at the venue. This event was significant in that it confirmed to the group members how important they were in the Tamil Hindu community. It is also significant when considering broader studies of

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282 In general, the distinction between Saivaite and Vaishnavaite affiliation does not appear to be important to the SMVS group members. This may be related to the fact that most modern temples (in contrast to older temples like Meenakshi Amman Temple) “contain prominent images of both great gods…as well as other subsidiary Shaiva and Vaishnava deities” due to the fact that “sectarian’ divisions no longer matter much in the modern, urban, middle-class environment” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:193). Having said this however, some very orthodox Saivaite Brahmin women in Madurai were eager to explain to me the differences in dress between Iyers and Iyengars, specifically the tying of a nine-yard sari. Interestingly, these middle-class Saivaite Brahmin women embraced and accorded status to regional variations in sari tying, specifically what they called the “North Indian” style, but at the same time rejected the adoption of what could be considered a more religiously-inspired Vaishnavaite style of dress. This is in contrast to other academic work which has documented the connection between middle-class identity in other parts of South Asia and Vaishnavaite lifestyle choices, particularly, vegetarianism (Malhotra 2002, Wadley 2004).

283 They have also conducted tours to temples in and around Madurai such as: Paḷaṇi Temple, Reserve Line Mariyamman Temple, Tiṇṭukkai Mariyamman Temple, Tirukōṭiyūr Sivan Temple, and the Alagar Vishnu Temple. With regard to the visits to Mariyamman temples, it is interesting to note the work of Wagherne (2004) who argues that Mariyamman “cuts across caste lines, crosses class distinctions, and bridges the urban-rural divide all under the banner of new middle-class respectability” (Wagherne 2004:133-134). Within the multi-caste group, Mariyamman was central to many temple activities; however some Brahmin relatives of group members were quick to argue that there was (or should be) a distinction in worship, with Brahmins being the only devotees worshipping Siva and Vishnu, and non-Brahmins worshipping “vernacular” forms of these gods and their consorts, such as Mariyamman.
middle-class Hindu religiosity, as it exemplifies how the visiting of temples continues to be at the center of middle-class Tamil religious practices (Waghorne 2004) while also depicting a more novel variation on this theme – the formal performance in a temple setting.

ŚRĪ PURAM TOUR*: A PERFORMANCE CASE STUDY

Packed into a small van with most of the seats removed, the women of the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang group travelled a whole day, approximately 400 miles from their homes in Madurai, to the Golden Temple of Śrī Puram. This temple, dedicated to Mahalaksmi, is part of a recently built temple complex (2007) that includes a park delineated by a star-shaped walkway on which spiritual sayings from the temple’s associated guru, Śrī Śakti Amma, are written. The temple was constructed by the Śrī Nārayani Pīdam, a Hindu religious institution that has also built a hospital in the vicinity and houses for the guru and temple guides.284

The ride to Śrī Puram is full of excitement, the women practicing the songs they have planned to sing during their performance (complete with tambourines and miniature cymbals), sharing gossip, and even calling their husbands on their cellphones to instruct them on how to cook rice for the mid-day meal. We stop at a few temples along the way to obtain darśan and collect kunṟumam and sacred ash (vipūti) for family members back home.

When we finally arrive in Vellore, temple personnel escort us to our lodging quarters (dorm-like rooms accommodating two to three people), then show the way to the

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284 To my knowledge, scholarly study of the Śrī Nārayani Pīdam and Śrī Śakti Amma has not been undertaken. This subject is yet another project that has come from the dissertation research.
Golden Temple entrance. Due to our status as performers, we are given a “VIP” view of Mahalaksmi in her sanctum santorum and the women express to each other how special they feel in receiving this position with respect to the goddess. A short time later we are called to report for our first of two performances in the temple complex.

The large room is decorated on all sides by statues of deities and pictures of the guru, Śakti Amma. Devotees have lined up around the walls to view these articles, as well as to obtain piracātam from a priest standing in one corner of the room. At the center of the room are a few haphazardly arranged microphones and speakers – our stage. Dressed in our newly-purchased butter silk “Jodhika pink” saris we line up in two rows with Uma Amma sitting at the center on one side. All members of the group have brought their personal copies of a specially photocopied handout on which the songs to be sung have been hand-written by the guru.

Without any form of introduction, we begin singing. The devotees waiting for piracātam are initially startled at the sound of such loud music, but gradually, some devotees stop to listen and appreciate our devotional hymns. This kind of unintentional audience is something that has been discussed in great detail by performance analysts. Arguing that genres are context-specific and hence, unstable, Briggs and Bauman have noted that whether or not the act is a performance is contingent on the “the interaction between the organization of the discourse and the organization of the event in which it is employed; the ways and degrees to which a genre is grounded in, or detachable from, events...” (1992:142). In other words, the interaction between discourse, event, and genre

285 “Jodhika pink” was the group-given name to this particular sari that, in other parts of the world, might be called “bubble-gum pink.” Jodhika is a Tamil film star who was very popular at the time of my visits. In her highly-publicized marriage to Tamil actor Surya, Jodhika chose to wear a pink sari similar to the shade of the SMVS women’s uniform.
creates a specific context that may or may not be culturally defined as a space associated with performance. It is not simply the presence or absence of an audience, but the addition of many other contextual facets that signal that a presentation should be considered a performance. Understanding this with respect to the SMVS women’s performance at Śrī Puram, I propose that their uniform saris, in addition to the cordoned-off stage area, offered a specific cue or contextual facet that marked their devotional singing as performative. The significance of the SMVS group’s uniform saris is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 7.3** The SMVS group’s second performance at Śrī Puram. Notice the line of women in the background watching the performance. June 2010.

After another performance the following night, the exhausted group members packed up and headed home in the van. A few months later, each group member received a photocopied certificate of appreciation given to the group by the Śrī Nārayani Pīdam and many expressed the wish to prominently display the official-looking document in their homes. This document, I believe, symbolized for the SMVS women participation in not only a religious group, but also in a wider Hindu community and civil society. This type of

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286 It should also be noted that a performance can alter the context of an event.
connection has been explored by other scholars of middle-class Tamilnadu, who argue that the use of temple space for the performance of devotional music and ritual “mirror[s] the contemporary social, cultural, and civic concerns of the urban middle class alongside their religious ones” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:194).

Matching Uniform Saris

With the exception of Uma Amma, the women of the SMVS group attended some temple functions and undertook the singing tours dressed in matching uniform saris. As was evident with the “Jodhika pink” sari, the color of these saris tended to vary with fashion trends, as opposed to having religious symbolism. Sari colors and fabrics\(^{207}\) were often the

\[^{207}\text{There is a complex hierarchy of sari fabrics, at least among the middle classes with whom I spent time. Extremely stiff cotton is near the bottom and is often called a “teacher’s sari,” as this is what they can afford for everyday wear (∼Rs. 300). Pure silk is located at the top of the hierarchy (∼Rs. 2,000–Rs. 25,000), with elaborate embroidered and/or beaded designs on the pure silk adding to its rank. Unless it had copious beadwork, a synthetic sari (∼Rs. 100) was seen as low class and caste and was never considered when buying uniform saris for the group (synthetic saris are often used as uniforms by low-class and caste street cleaners in cities, as well as nuns). Kalyāni Cotton (a thicker cotton with a sheen to it, ∼Rs. 500) and Butter Silk (a lightweight cotton which often resembles silk, ∼Rs. 400) saris were considered proper attire if leaving the house by the middle-class group members. They were also the most popular fabrics identified for group uniform saris. The women could also assess the mix of cotton and silk in a sari down to percentages. They then might discuss what the sari would cost according to this mix. Some patterns and colors were identified with certain castes. For example, a checkered sari (with a particular combination of colors), as well as a particular shade of Kelly green was associated with Brahmans. The women never purchased a Brahmin checkered sari, but when deciding on which uniform to wear for a particular performance, they would often talk of the Brahmin green (paccai) sari that they had worn for past performances. There is also a well-known uniform sari made of cotton (dyed red) with a yellow border containing} \]
topic of conversation during the purchasing and touring processes.\textsuperscript{288} The wearing of these saris not only displayed a cohesive (performative) group identity to other temple-goers and the wider community, but also erased caste and regional affiliations,\textsuperscript{289} similar to uniforms worn by Indian school children. SMVS group members did not, however, wear uniform saris when collectively attending weddings of group members’ relatives. These events were not understood as affairs that required the presentation of a collective group identity, particularly because the group did not perform at weddings. Instead, weddings were a time when the group members could adorn their very best and show off their personal style to others.

To further explore uniform saris as a socially-recognized signal of performance, I asked the SMVS women’s opinions on the meanings and functions attached to sari uniformity. I received a variety of answers that expanded my understanding of the uniform sari as a social cue. Many of the group members told me that it was a way for them to draw attention to themselves and gain respect during temple visits. This respect was based in the organization and professionalism that the matching saris were understood to communicate. Jayanthi noted, “They called us back to Śrī Puram because we looked organized, because we were wearing uniforms. They wouldn't have noticed us otherwise.” Aishwarya also commented on the group’s organized appearance, but added that the uniforms were a way to instill a sense of community and friendship. She stated, “when everyone puts on the uniform* everyone...is friends...friends (cakōtarika).” Others argued

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\textsuperscript{288} Clothing has been argued as significant in women’s conversations and meetings throughout India. See Gold 1988:13-15 and Tarlo 1996, Wadley 2008.

\textsuperscript{289} The wearing of uniforms by the devotees of many different religions is meant to erase social difference (Gold 2008, see also Daniel 1984).
that if they did not wear matching uniform saris and appear organized and distinctive, the
temple priests would only give them a few seconds to obtain darṣan and would most likely
not allow them to sing near the entrance to the sanctum sanctorum. An extended amount of
time near the sanctum sanctorum, they said, translated into a deeper spiritual connection
with God. Thus, uniform saris were seen as a means through which to obtain this close
relationship within a temple setting. Latha commented,

If we just stand there and look, the câmi won’t stay in our mind (maṇacu). If
we sing...we stand there a long time, right? Then câmi will correctly* be in
our mind (maṇacu). The câmi will see us spending time and singing and will
correctly* come. When you just normally do darṣan you are just there for a
2-minute* arccaṇai and so câmi won’t stay/stand in your mind (maṇacu) like
that. Because we sing a lot of songs and stand there a long time we will be in
câmi’s memory correctly.*

In contrast to the lay members of the SMVS group, the female guru, Uma Amma,
often wore a sari of the same color as the group members’ matching saris; however, it was
adorned with a different border and/or dyed a shade darker (see Figure 7.8). This was a
mode of denoting her distinction within the organized, uniformed SMVS group. When in a
temple setting, questions from the audience and temple priests were usually directed
towards the differently shrouded Uma Amma who was awarded an authoritative position
through public recognition of her difference in appearance.
In Tamilnadu, nuns, nurses, and street cleaners also wear matching uniform saris as semiotic efforts to communicate their professional occupations and institutional affiliations. In my discussions with the SMVS group women about the function of their matching uniform saris, they did not once allude to the communicative similarity with these other groups. This is perhaps due to the voluntary nature of the SMVS group women’s wearing of a uniform sari, as there is a societal perception that the women of other groups are required to wear a uniform by their employer or affiliated institution. Additionally, the uniform material selected by the SMVS women was of higher quality than that of nuns, nurses, and street cleaners (predominantly cheap synthetic fabric). So, perhaps while the latter were simply communicating their occupation, the SMVS women were communicating their group membership/performance and their higher socioeconomic status through the conspicuous consumption of Kalyani Cotton or Butter Silk saris. Finally, the SMVS group members’ matching uniform saris, although not specifically tied to a god or goddess through color and style, also recalled to the members themselves their religiosity and dedication to a pious lifestyle (perhaps more similar to nuns than some wished to think).

Figure 7.5 The SMVS group in their “Jodhika pink” saris at Śrī Puram. Uma Amma (center) dons a pink sari of a darker shade to convey her distinction within the group, as well as her authority, April 2010.
This pious lifestyle, at least with respect to the SMVS middle-class group, was furthered by a certain regulation of the self and an adherence to “proper” etiquette.

**Group Etiquette**

In her observations of middle-class life in Hyderabad, Amanda Gilbertson (2014a) finds that the everyday processes of becoming and maintaining that status in India often revolve around the issue of respectability. This middle-class respectability is maintained, she argues, through

the expression of moral discourses of propriety and restraint, as well as forms of ‘respectable’ behaviour such as the maintenance of a ‘neat’ and ‘decent’ appearance, investment in private English medium education and engagement in certain kinds of consumption (Gilbertson 2014a:126).

Gilbertson also makes the argument that the expression of respectable behavior often falls on middle-class Indian women who have a social and cultural responsibility to uphold the honor of the family (Gilbertson 2014a:135). In the following section, I examine the perceptions and monitoring of what the middle-class SMVS group members felt to be respectable behavior. I found that while they belonged to a multi-caste group, the SMVS members were keen to embrace a middle-class code of conduct that was often associated with Brahmin forms of comportment, particularly with respect to the element of restraint (see also Fuller and Narasimhan 2014). I also explore how the SMVS group women are challenging societal notions of respectable middle-class, upper caste behavior, particularly relating to ritual pollution and widowhood.
“ACCEPTABLE” SPIRIT POSSESSION

The SMVS women’s ideas of respectability and bodily comportment included restrictions pertaining to spirit possession, particularly the controlling of one’s ability to become possessed. As was briefly mentioned in Chapter Two, Shanti’s unwelcome spirit possession had been a topic of contentious group conversation. While I had missed the actual event at which the confrontation had taken place, I was given descriptions of the incident and many group members were still not speaking to each other due to the events of that day. It was reported that Uma Amma had been holding Ādi Villakku Puja at her home and had invited all of the group members to bring their oil lamps (villakku), allowing the group members to perform the rituals together. During the ritual, Shanti was overcome by the spirit of Mariyamma and began to speak to the group. According to group gossip, Mariyamma (through Shanti) had made the statement that there was “no God” in Uma Amma’s house (i.e., Uma Amma was not as devoted to God as she claimed to be). At this, Uma Amma became very upset and told Shanti to leave because she would not have talk like that in her home. Before Shanti was able to leave, Mariyamma also spoke about Shanti’s best friend in the SMVS group at the time, Jayanthi. This time, Mariyamma accused Jayanthi of not “having God” in her home. After Shanti’s (and thus Mariyamma’s) departure, the puja was said to continue as normal. Yet the seamless continuation of the puja certainly did not stop other SMVS group members from reacting to the events at the time of my arrival a month later. Aishwarya spoke about the incident and told me of the strict rules Uma Amma had laid out with respect to spirit possession after the event. She remarked,

290 Āṭi Villakku Puja is a Thiruvillakku Puja (holy lamp puja) that is held during the Tamil month of Āṭi (mid-June to mid-July).
In Amma’s house...cāmi came to Shanti. When Shanti was singing a
song...cāmi came a lot (atikamāka). Then we gave her water and she left.
Then Amma said, “don’t sing that song” and made a big fuss. She said, “Do I
not have a lot of religious devotion?! Does the cāmi come to me? If your body
feels like the cāmi has come to it, sit there silently. Control* it,” she said. Since
then Shanti hasn’t done it....

In Aishwarya’s account of events, Uma Amma makes reference to her own mode of
religious devotion as a model for how the other group members should act – in a restrained
manner. She claims that having sincere religious devotion does not require a display of
uncontrolled spirit possession. This emphasis on restraint and control is something that
filters into the much less common incidents of upper caste spirit possession in Tamilnadu,
where the goddess possessing the women is presented as very gentle and wifely (Kapadia
1995, Hancock 1999, Ram 2013), as opposed to wild and unruly.

Although Uma Amma chose to allude to religious devotion in her admonishment of
such unrestrained behavior, the mere idea that Shanti became possessed in such an
uncontrolled way was also a violation of the middle-class/Brahmin-based code of the SMVS
group. While Shanti’s possession was not accompanied by violent movements or random
yelps as is often the case during spirit possession in south India, any kind of overt spirit
possession is thought be associated with lower castes and classes, and is therefore
discouraged. Indeed, there were several instances during which group members who had
historically been able to channel a deity (e.g., Jayanthi) physically removed themselves
from temples or other spiritual locations when they felt the spirit beginning to take hold of

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291 This theme of restraint and control with respect to Brahmin identity is reflected in a variety of cultural practices (see, for example, Soneji 2012).
292 This incident was the beginning of Shanti’s separation from participation in the group. After a series of other incidents in which either she or another group member felt slighted, she drastically limited her involvement in SMVS group activities. In fact, when I returned a year later in 2011 to attend a Radhika’s cīmantam and valaikkappu, many group members told me that she had not attended a group function for at least six months. This absence from SMVS group activities was also due to health problems she experienced.
293 Margaret Trawick (1992, 2015) has also noted that possession by a deity is particularly associated with lower castes in Tamil society.
them while with the group. Becoming possessed in such a setting was thought to reflect poorly on the middle-class SMVS group and be destructive to the group’s publically commanded respectability.

In addition to spirit possession being associated with lower castes and classes (Trawick 1992, 2015; Ram 2013), there was also the idea that only deities considered “lower” in the Hindu pantheon could possess an individual. In the instance with Shanti, the goddess who spoke through her was Mariyamma, a goddess with significant power, but one that was not directly linked with Sanskritic Hindu sensibilities. I spoke with Latha about this during a conversation over lunch and in response to my question about whether or not group members became possessed in the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar temple, she avidly shook her head “no” and explained that only deities like Mariyamma or other kāval dēvaṅkal (guardian deities) would possess devotees. Vināyagar was not known to possess individuals due to his status in the Hindu hierarchy (son of Siva) and so possession in a temple devoted to him was highly unlikely.

This format for spirit possession in Tamilnadu may be a function of the capacity of particular deities to feel and communicate suffering. Kalpana Ram (2013) notes that the communication of suffering or life trials is often at the crux of spirit possession. In this framework, spirits and minor deities seek out an affective medium through which they express their frustrations and sorrow. Here, we might question whether minor deities,

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294 Due to the wearing of uniform saris, a possessed woman’s connection to the group was communicated regardless of proximity to group members or group performances, hence removal of oneself from the temple was required to maintain the respectability of the SMVS group.

295 However, she may be linked with middle-class sensibilities (see Waghorne 2004). When I speak of Sanskritic Hindu sensibilities I am referring to a religious dichotomy between Brahmins and non-Brahmins that has been reified by scholars such as Srinivas (1952) and Redfield and Singer (1954), as well as social movements such as the continuing Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu. While the divisions in this dichotomy are much less rigid than the aforementioned references would have it, it is important to recognize its ideological significance as “it plays a vital role in sustaining the broader social and cultural differences between Brahmans and non-Brahmans” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014:191).
unlike more “major” deities from the Sanskritic Hindu pantheon (e.g., Siva), experience a higher level of suffering due to their low status in the hierarchy and hence, are more likely to seek out someone to possess. The theory might also be applicable with respect to female forms of the Goddess, who while fierce in a number of circumstances and sometimes quite high-ranking in the hierarchy, are also considered innately affective beings by way of their gendered identity. This topic is certainly a dissertation in itself and requires much more investigation; however, I believe this to be a plausible, working framework through which to discern how social and cultural hierarchies shape and reshape the practice of spirit possession.

RITUAL POLLUTION AND WIDOWHOOD

Rules surrounding ritual pollution were widely respected among group members and were also thought to be significant in shaping proper devotional conduct and respect. However, some group members strategically negotiated these rules so that they could maintain the appearance of devout rule-abiding middle-class Hindu women, whilst continuing their involvement in the sociality of the group and the wider Hindu community of Krishnapuram Colony. In fact, the SMVS guru herself applied this strategy.

As a Brahmin, Uma Amma was thought to be the repository of death pollution (tīṭṭu) for the period of one year after the death of her husband in March 2009. During this time of ritual pollution, she was not supposed to enter Hindu temples, recite certain Sanskrit culōkaṅkal, or be overtly religious. However, not long after I arrived in the field in August 2009 (six months after the death of her husband), Uma Amma was beginning to hold group
pujas in her home, plan group singing tours,* and occasionally visit the local SMV temple. In short, Uma Amma was not obeying the religious and caste-based restrictions that were placed on her. At that time, I was unaware of the intricacies of ritual pollution and caste restrictions, as were several other non-Brahmin members of the group. This was due to the fact that non-Brahmins, in contrast to Brahmin Hindus, are only required to observe ritual pollution restrictions for six months, as opposed to one year.

The spreading of Uma Amma’s ritual pollution and her breaking of Hindu caste restrictions was only made public when the priest at the local SMV temple, who had noted the date of her husband’s death, decided to confront Uma Amma about her violation of caste and religious norms. After this confrontation, Uma Amma called an SMVS group meeting to discuss how the priest had treated her and to defend herself to her followers. Appealing to the non-Brahmin members of the group who were the majority, Uma Amma stated that there should not be caste differences with respect to ritual pollution. She noted that if everyone were equal, she would be able to worship, as it had been six months since the death of her husband. However, regardless of her feelings about Hindu caste edicts, she did not want to ruin her relationship with the temple and its trustees. In the end, Uma Amma decided to continue holding instructional classes and pujas in her home and taking the group on singing tours,* but refrained from entering the local SMV temple until the following March (2010).

This negotiation of ritual pollution and maintenance of community identity is one way through which the urban middle-class SMVS women can be understood as challenging social boundaries, while also upholding conservative ideas of Hindu religiosity and

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296 This violation of ritual pollution restrictions may have been connected to Shanti’s negative comments concerning the absence of God in Uma Amma’s house, however, I was never overtly told that this was the case.
adhering to what they believe to be tradition. With membership in this group comes another method through which middle-class women in India can negotiate urban life, Hindu religiosity, caste restrictions, and maintenance of community.

The negotiation of ritual pollution by the SMVS women can also be seen as challenging gender-specific restrictions. As previously mentioned, three of the group members (including the guru) were widows and one had even joined the group as a widow. The mere existence of these widows in the group, let alone the fact that one is the leader of the group, could be read as a challenge to orthodox (Brahmin) Hindu principles. These doctrines state that Hindu widows are inherently polluted and should remove themselves from public Hindu ritual practices such as Ādi Villakku Puja, singing to deities in a temple, as well as being ritualists in general (Reynolds 1980, Lamb 2000, Donner 2008). I believe that the issue and treatment of Hindu widowhood within this urban middle-class group can be understood as a site for gendered social commentary and change. Perhaps urban environments are not only transforming wider community ideas of caste and ritual pollution, but are also inspiring individual women to rethink their positions in society and the possibilities that those positions might afford.

In addition to Uma Amma’s own personal challenge to her widow status and ritual pollution, she was adamant that others should stop and think about the restrictions placed on Hindu women. On one occasion, this subject was the topic of class discussion. I recorded the event in my fieldnotes,

Uma Amma finds out that Patti (Latha’s mother) is in town and tells Latha to tell her that she can come to Uma Amma’s house whenever she wants. She says this because Patti is SUPPOSED to avoid visiting other people’s (especially Brahmins’) houses until a year has passed since her husband’s death. There then begins a discussion of Brahmin rules regarding widows and females in general. Uma Amma comments, “that’s the problem. We
(widows) don’t know what we cannot do. I asked a priest why I shouldn’t do *japam.* Uma Amma then added, “Women couldn’t do *rudram* (before), but they do it now.” Latha responded, “they have ladies* classes to learn it in Coimbatore, ma!” Uma Amma said, “really?!” Then Rani chimed in, “In the main* people that say the *Sahāstranāmam* now are ladies.*

Here, a discussion about restrictions placed on a widow’s movement leads to a broader group discourse concerning Hindu women’s access to sacred knowledge and their rights as ritual performers.

Functions of the SMVS Group

The SMVS group served a multitude of functions for the individual group members. In addition to my observations, I received a significant amount of information about these personal perspectives during the follow-up interviews that I held with each group member. While some women emphasized the educational aspect of learning Sanskrit recitations and devotional song, other women focused on the sense of community constructed by the group in their urban living environment. Shanti, perhaps due to her social predicaments within the group after her spiritually-inspired revelations, was an SMVS member who emphasized the learning aspect of the group,

Nicole: How did interest* come to you for the group? Shanti: I went to the group to learn to sing songs.  
N: yes, in that how did interest (ārvam) come to you? In *bhakti* and everything...  
S: ahh...*bhakti*...already a few *culōkaňkal* we would say...  
N: mmm  
S: then...Lakshmi Māmi is there, no?  
N: yes...  
S: She said, “Uma Sankaran will teach you. So if you have interest you should come. Will you come?” she asked.  
N: mmm

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297 A particular recitation that is extremely powerful and normally only said by men.  
298 A particular Hindu recitation/ritual directed at Rudra, the god of destruction.
S: I went and I liked it. I said “I shall learn.” We went to Maṅgala Vināyagar Temple. Then when I was going (to learn) she was teaching the Abirāmi. First*...
N: yes, yes...
S: She was teaching the Abirāmi. In that there are 100 songs/verses
N: yes...so from that interest came?
S: yes!

On the other hand, Jayanthi, already described as a very active and social member of the SMVS group, noted the group’s function as a form of time pass.* This is not a surprise considering her previously articulated opinion concerning the free time that women of her status now have. She also located the group as an approach to making friends in the neighborhood,

Jayanthi: From 11am-12pm we are just around (cumma). We might go to each others’ houses and talk and gossip.
Nicole: Before the group, did you have a lot of friends in the area?
J: No. Only Satya Amma (another very social SMVS group member). I didn’t know anyone else. I didn’t have a habit of seeing Latha. Minus Satya Amma, I only knew Lakshmi Māmi.

While Jayanthi certainly utilized the SMVS group to create new friendships, many of these urban feminine bonds were also still determined by a combination of other personal and context-specific associations, particularly those concerning caste and class. The SMVS women, while sharing a common interest in Hindu ānmikam (spirituality), were constantly navigating particular social interactions and stereotypes in their daily lives, either solidifying or partially dissolving their relationships with specific group members.

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299 The Abirāmi is a set of Sanskrit devotional poems directed at the goddess Abirami.
300 See also Jeffrey 2010.
Friendships and Fallouts

Henrike Donner, in her ethnographic examination of middle-class women in a Calcutta suburb, maintains that while local perspectives of modernity have modified the performance of a variety of cultural practices, “the meaning of diets in reproducing communal boundaries cannot be overemphasized” (Donner 2008:163). When considering my own investigations into middle-class life in India, the significance of dietary differences, while certainly brought to the forefront in some interactions, is occasionally disregarded. The women of the SMVS seem to change their emphasis on dietary (and hence, caste) differences in accordance with specific social interactions, caste identifications and evaluations of middle-class status and respectability. These variations inherently affect the SMVS women’s relationships, both within and outside the group, delineating both requirements for desirable friendship and the conditions for the dissolution of those bonds. This exploration of social circles and complexities not only highlights the particularities and patterns of everyday middle-class life, but also heeds the recent call of scholars of the Indian middle classes, such as Minna Saavala (2012) and Pushpa Arabindoo (2012) to more closely consider friendship dynamics as they allow for “a fresh opportunity to draw an image of new middle-class sociality in India” (Saavala 2012:75). Below I offer a detailed example of how this middle-class sociality plays out amongst SMVS group members.

THE DYNAMIC FRIENDSHIPS OF LATHA

In the past, higher castes were not likely to enter or eat in a lower caste home in Tamilnadu and many other parts of India. However, today this phenomenon seems to have transformed into a process that takes both caste and class into consideration. Latha's
friendships with three other group members, Jayanthi, Teacher and myself, exemplify the complexity involved in negotiating caste and class difference in daily life. Latha is not only a Brahmin, but is also considered by many to belong to the highest subsect of Saivaite (Iyer/Smarta) Brahmin castehood – Vadamal. She maintains a fairly strict household when it comes to ritual pollution and lower caste and class people who come to her home often feel the need to remove their shoes before stepping within the confines of her gate (see also Dickey 2000). In addition, she often discouraged my interaction with lower caste neighborhood children who she described as “low class*” because they did not have manners.

Jayanthi is from the Nadar jati, a social segment that is considered rather low caste, but has a history of being socioeconomically successful. While Jayanthi does not eat non-vegetarian food, she prepares it for her husband and other non-vegetarian food-eating guests. This factor alone would, in most social scenarios, cause Latha to at least be reluctant about entering Jayanthi’s home, if not also hesitant to eat anything prepared in Jayanthi’s kitchen. However, this is not the case. Latha frequents Jayanthi’s house and they have developed such a close relationship that Jayanthi drew the mehendi[^301] designs for Latha’s daughter’s bethrothal ceremony (nicchayādārttam). This blatant disregard of caste difference and ritual pollution, I feel, has to do with not only familiarity with group members in general, but also with the relative wealth of lower caste group members such as Jayanthi. This becomes most apparent when exploring Brahmin Latha’s relationships

[^301]: Even the practice of mehendi (henna tattoo art) is circumscribed by the negotiations of caste and class in everyday life. Mehendi is often associated with north India, the location of a foreign culture in many respects. Hence, north Indian mehendi is considered higher class and is a mode through which to communicate class status. South Indians also have a “traditional” form of henna tattoo art called maradani, which consists of large dots of henna stain on the palm of the hand and covering the tips of the fingers. It is less intricate and while I did see middle-class women in Krishnāpuram Colony donning this style of henna art, it was generally considered common, lower class, backward, rural, and associated with the previous generation of women (Latha’s mother only ever allowed henna stains on her own hands if it was in the “traditional” maradani style).
with other lower caste group members, such as Teacher, a Thevar/Kallar *jati* member. In general, Thevar/Kallar *jati* members seem have far less wealth and fewer amenities/resources (*vacatika*). While there are certainly many other factors that affect Latha’s personal relationships with group members, I believe that these factors played a role in Latha’s interactions with Teacher. For example, there was an instance when Teacher and her youngest son were looking for a new home to rent. Since I was returning to the United States, it was known that my house, the top flat (attached) of Latha’s house, would be available. One day at an instructional class, Uma Amma suggested the Teacher move into Latha’s home. Wanting to be polite in the moment, Latha agreed that this was a good idea. It was only later on the walk home that Latha mentioned to me that she hoped Teacher would find another place to live because she cooked and ate non-vegetarian food regularly. When and if Teacher and her son were to move out, the house would have to be purified through several time and money-consuming pujas.

Some time prior to this, I had asked if my boyfriend at the time would be able to cook non-veg. in the flat, as he was very reluctant to become vegetarian. After some hesitation, Latha had agreed that it would be okay provided we had the flat purified after our stay. While I believe her decision also had something to do with the gender of the cook (i.e., she was willing to allow an American man to do much more on her property than an Indian woman) and the possibility of charging Americans more in rent, Latha agreed to the presence of ritual pollutants in her home in this scenario, quite possibly due to my status as

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302 Recall SMVS group member Selvi from the previous chapter. She, too, was of the Thevar/Kallar *jati*. 
an educated American woman aligned by my interlocutors with higher caste status (see Chapter Two).

Latha was able to overlook the cooking impurities in Jayanti’s house and even her own in certain cases, but this was not the case when it came to lower middle-class Teacher of the Thevar/Kallar jati. Hence, the manner in which factors of ritual pollution are negotiated in the building of community and friendships relies on a complex and personal system of class and caste stereotypes and context-specific interactions.

**Chapter Summary**

Although not specifically focusing on women, a variety of scholars have hypothesized about the connection between urbanism, modernity and the building of Hindu religious community and/or groupings (Babb 1987, Giddens 1991, Stroope 2012, Bugg 2014). All argue that urban environments and modernity inspire a need for interaction with other people and sometimes a “moral orienting” (Stroope 2012:499) via these interactions. One scholar, Samuel Stroope goes on to explicate the roles of caste and class in these arenas, and argues that

...religious bonding is fostered by urbanism and that this association is stronger for upper castes...there is little evidence that social class similarly moderates the association between urbanism and religious bonding...religious bonding might be better understood as rooted in the interaction of caste dynamics and changes in the urban environment, rather than as a result of greater affluence (Stroope 2012:499).

It is my hope that this chapter, as well as this dissertation as whole, has elucidated how the above assessment of Hindu religiosity in India requires much modification, for modern,

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303 Donner (2008) alludes to this point in her study of middle-class women in Calcutta. She discusses how her “Western” identity often outweighed other less desirable identity categories (e.g., marital status).
urban Hinduism and its various practitioners cannot be so easily circumscribed by certain social categories (e.g., caste identity and urban living) and the complicated nature of modern religiosity cannot be so easily defined.

The Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang group's combination of multiple castes, middle classness, and Hindu devotional performance offers a valuable perspective on the evolution of modern Hinduism and urban religious identities. As the main focus of my dissertation research, I have chosen my work on the SMVS group as the culminating chapter concerning ritual, social change, and middle-class identity in Madurai because it offers the most comprehensive view of individual and community identity expression amongst middle-class Hindus in modern South India. Through its performative and devotional ritual practices, the SMVS group provides a salient illustration of how urban Hindu women are interacting with the rapid social and economic changes taking place in middle-class India today.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

“The modernization theorists of the past three decades...largely accepted the view of the modern world as a space of shrinking religiosity...but there is something fundamentally wrong with it...there is vast evidence in new religiosities of every sort that religion is not only not dead but that it may be more consequential than ever in today’s highly mobile interconnected global politics” – Arjun Appadurai 1996:6-7.

At the outset of this dissertation, I argued that the only way to fully understand and appreciate social phenomena and cultural diversity was to examine the multifarious and individual experiences of people in their everyday lives. The above is a testament to how this type of exploration can illuminate the underlying motivations and aspirations of these people, how they navigate their social networks, how they negotiate their changing world. The SMVS women, their families, and their neighbors belong to a much larger population in India known as the “Indian middle class.” A variety of scholars debate the definition of this unwieldy social category, as it has an infinite amount of dimensions, each more or less applicable to the people actually living this social category. True, there are some agreed upon Indian middle-class characteristics (Chapter One); however, the majority of middle-class Indians simply live their lives in “the middle,” struggling to gain social and economic ground, performing their identities not according to a classificatory ideal, but their own social circumstances and attitudes. The life (hi)stories of the SMVS women, as well as my observations of their daily lives and gendered rituals, give us some idea of how this plays out. The first-generation urban members of the group often perceive urban life and social change through the lens of village traditions, however desired or undesired they might be (Chapter Three). The members of the group have also chosen to join a new community, engage in a new form of social interaction, the SMVS group itself (Chapter Seven). Here again, individual circumstances and attitudes play a key role in how the SMVS women
present and interpret their social identities alongside their performances of song and ritual. Mediations and reformulations of socially-recognized identifications such as caste, educational level and amount of ritual purity all take place on an individual scale, yet inflect the sociality of the group as a whole and foster a redefinition of what it means of be a modern, middle-class Hindu woman in Tamilnadu.

This dissertation has also presented very specific experiences of more traditional rituals such as matchmaking and marriage (Chapter Four), recognitions of puberty and childbirth (Chapter Five) and Navarāttiri celebrations (Chapter Six). The rituals, which all encompass and help to define Tamil womanhood, also reflect the social changes being experienced by the urban SMVS women, their families and neighbors. Marriages, for example, while remaining events through which social status and material wealth is shown, have also taken on new communicative elements, such as the plethora of invitation styles. Celebrations of Navarāttiri are now much more elaborate, particularly with respect to suburban devotees, and have generated an avenue through which caste distinctions are sometimes challenged and reformulated, albeit with a possible underlying tone of Hindu superiority.

Next to explorations of socioeconomic status and caste identifications in modern India, the dissertation has also taken up the particular position of women in modern life in urban Tamilnadu. In grounding urban Tamil Hindu women’s religious actions and social networks in ritual practice and lived experience, it acknowledges the necessity of such an approach to our understanding of the feminine subject outside of Western feminist discourses (Visweswaran 1994). The women of the SMVS, while also reinscribing patriarchal social norms and religious restrictions, are also parsing out new ways through
which they can explore and interact with the public sphere. The members of the SMVS not
only practice well-known rituals, such as Ādi Villakku Puja, but they are also creating their
own novel way of publically performing devotion - their rehearsed and formal
performances on singing tours and village visits. They have taken up the Tamil Hindu
practice of all-female bhajan groups and culōkam classes, reformulating it into one that
demands heightened respect for their gendered and devotional actions both within and
outside their local community and furthermore establishes a supportive social network in
an increasingly chaotic urban world. While the existence of a gendered assembling like the
Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang group is novel in the eyes of SMVS women, the
reformulation, as well as the popularity, of ritual in the face of social change is certainly not
new. Ann Gold, in a recent article on women’s celebrations of Bari Tij and Karva Chauth, has
pondered “whether the appeal of fasts and accompanying rituals might lie in part in their
ability to sustain an illusion of stability and continuity even while incorporating processes
of change. That is, such rituals may offer participants a comforting contrast to upheavals in
social realities, while in certain ways reflecting them” (Gold 2014:170-171). Yet another
reasoning for the appeal of ritual in the current post-liberalization moment in India, is its
employment by the Hindu Right, a political body which seems to be growing in influence,
especially in the arena of middle-class Hindus.

**Negotiations and Compromises as Members of the Middle Class**

In the first pages of this work, I presented three questions that were central to my research
with the women of the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang group - 1) how do negotiations of
Hindu ritual, caste culture and practice, and displays of middle-class status manifest
themselves in the lives of the women in the group? What are their interpretations of these negotiations? 2) How have the women's social negotiations of an urban landscape altered and/or reinforced Hindu ritual structure and practice? And 3) What do localized and individualized negotiations of tradition and modernity say about wider social changes in South Asia and beyond? I conclude this dissertation with some thoughts on how these queries might be addressed and answered.

With regard to the first query, one of the primary manifestations of the complexity of middle-class life in India is the act of balancing between those entities and actions that are perceived as traditional and those that are understood to be modern, however fuzzy the lines between them might be. This dissertation has used emic definitions of middle-class identity, modernity and tradition to highlight how ritual, often conflated with tradition, is employed and also reformulated to fit the particular needs and social environs of its middle-class practitioners. For instance, Chapter Four took up the rituals of middle-class matchmaking and marriage, both very instructive windows through which to observe how tradition and modernity are negotiated in often ostentatious presentations of middle-class material wealth and virtue. This discussion explored how urban concepts of power, status and identity (as determined by, for example, occupation, education, financial status, caste and gender) are enveloped in the wider body of middle-class beliefs and values which emphasize a concern for outward appearance and the balancing of modern and traditional views of the world.

Chapter Five brought gendered ritual and middle-class identity to the fore, using rites that concern fertility and Tamil womanhood to examine negotiations of caste preference and rural/urban difference. The case studies presented in this chapter show
that while caste continues to play a major role in the performance of these rituals, more modern and urban conceptions of ritual purity and pollution have altered how these practices are perceived and used in identity formation processes. Chapters Six and Seven concern overtly Hindu displays of identity and highlight how the SMVS women utilize ritual to challenge, as well as conform to, social norms, particularly those associated with caste and class identity. Moreover, Chapter Seven makes central the negotiations implicit in the multi-caste relationships between urban group members and portrays how concepts of caste and class are consistently and dialogically redefined according to interactional particularities.

With respect to the SMVS women’s interpretations of their actions, we can turn to the variety of personal narratives presented in this work. A common thread when looking at these accounts is the element of social change, particularly with respect to their physical movements from rural to urban environments. The SMVS women often use their rural experiences as filters for how they interpret urban middle-class life and daily social interactions. In Chapter Three, the SMVS offer a variety of opinions about village life, from those concerning social interaction and natural beauty to those evaluating adherence to tradition and the access to amenities in rural settings. Through their experiential tellings, the SMVS women foreground how they interpret the actions of themselves and others in the urban environment of Madurai. Chapter Seven also specifically addresses the SMVS women’s perspectives with respect to their actions and interactions. In this segment, the women explained how they believe audiences interpret their powerful performances of devotion as an organized group of uniformed middle-class women.
While not overtly stated, perspectives on caste identity and Brahmin superiority run deeply throughout the SMVS women’s performative experiences. With respect to Brahmin religious practices in particular, we find that, while a variety of ritual variations exist in the urban world of the SMVS women (see above), very strict interpretations of “orthodox” Hindu ritual practice are also key to their constructions of a middle-class, pious existence. Throughout this work, non-Brahmin group members have identified, either overtly or covertly, the meaning they attach to Brahmin ritual practices, what they consider to be “authentic” and “traditional.” They aspire to fulfill Brahmin ritual requirements not only because they believe it makes them properly pious, but also because so many notions of middle-class identity in South India overlap with higher caste identity.

**Contributions to Wider Scholarship**

Paying heed to the final question, I turn to a discussion of social change more broadly and what the SMVS women’s performances and balancing acts can add to this discussion. Firstly, I believe that my investigation corroborates other work that presents modernity as a localized project. Scholars of middle classness, modernity, urbanization and globalization may establish abstract categories in defining these terms, but the real conceptions and performances of these terms remain intangible until case studies are presented and actual narratives are heard and respected. Studies of modern ritual practice, in particular, have an important part to play in this discussion, for

ritual action involves an inextricable interaction with its immediate world, often drawing into it the very activity of the rite in multiple ways. Exactly how this is done, how often and with what stylistic features will depend of the specific cultural and social situation with its traditions, conventions and innovations (Bell 1997:266).
This dissertation has delved deeply into the ritual actions of the SMVS women, paying acute attention to their “immediate” urban middle-class world and the ritual continuities and novelties within it.

I also view my research as a necessary investigation into the interplay between class and religiosity, a crucial relationship for understanding cultural difference and power dynamics in today’s world. As has been documented by a variety of scholars (e.g., Das 2009; Li 2010; Heiman, Freeman and Liechty 2012), the global middle classes are and will continue to be a powerful force that has the ability to induce significant future consequences for our global community. This is not only with respect to consumption patterns, but also in the realm of religious tolerance, as it has been documented that middle-class populations across the globe hold unique relationships with religiosity and its performance (see, for example, Caplan 1987, Zehner 1990, Sloane-White 2008, Gordon 2013). In their attempt to balance tradition and modernity, the middle-class SMVS group women have established their own relationship with the Hindu religion. In addition to redesigning a variety of Hindu-inspired women’s rituals according to their middle-class desires and aspirations, as they have also joined Uma Amma’s Satsang group in an effort to engender a more pious middle-class self.

On a much more specific level, my research is one of the very few ethnographic explorations of lower middle-class identity in South Asia.304 In contrast to the upper middle classes of the region, I believe, it is the lower middle-class’s precarious position on the ladder of social mobility that makes them so important to studies of local and global middle-class influence. If we take the balancing of tradition and modernity to be a key facet

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304 Exceptions include: Dickey 2000, 2012; Ganguly-Scrase 2003; and Deuchar 2014.
in our understandings of middle-class life, who better to consider than a socio-cultural grouping that, while continually on the cusp of socioeconomic insecurity is trying to establish a middle-class identity that must correctly balance custom and innovation? In other words, while studies of the upper middle classes do reveal a lot about middle-class life in South Asia (see, for example, Fuller and Narasimhan 2014), they also form a social category, due to its financial and social stability, that is not under as much pressure to maintain a particular appearance and foster an acceptance of its identity. Due to this, I interpret identity formation amongst lower middle-class groups as much more dynamic with respect to their negotiations of tradition and modernity. This, in turn, provides a more salient and current view of South Asian middle-class life and could also do the same with respect other parts of the globe.

This dissertation also adds to several particular bodies of existing scholarship, including that pertaining to Hindu religious narrative, song and ritual practice in anthropology (Reynolds 1980; Hancock 1999; Wadley 2004) and religious studies (Raheja and Gold 1994; McDermott 2001; Fuller 2004; Pintchman 2005, 2007; Dempsey 2006; Prasad 2007), as well as modes of feminine Hindu worship and Hindu religious movements (Babb 1986, Pechilis 2004, Warrier 2005) and socioeconomic class and religious innovation (Lubin 2001; Lutgendorf 2001; Waghorne 2001, 2004).

**The Fashioning of a Middle-Class Self**

An important theme included in this dissertation and one that I would like to underscore is the idea of identity formation and negotiation, particularly with respect to Hindu

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305 For a discussion of the upper middle classes and the lack of social pressure felt by them, see Gilbertson 2014a. Conversely, for a discussion of the lower middle classes and the immense social pressure felt by them, see Dickey 2012.
religiosity, caste and class. In my analysis of this topic, I have followed a particular theory of self-construction, one that is heavily influenced by Bakhtinian dialogism and Wittgenstein’s “language games.” In this mode of thinking, the self is constructed through the actions of and interactions between individuals who use certain notions of the self according to circumstance. As Holstein and Gubrium have asserted, the self is seen as “first and foremost a practical project of everyday life” with “its authenticities…situated and plural—locally articulated, locally recognized, and locally accountable…” This “practical project” is a dynamic, dialogic process, “a living language game” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:84).

The women of the SMVS, along with many others living in the middle-class suburbs of Madurai, Tamilnadu, are certainly implicated in their own “living language game,” one in which caste, class and religiosity are regularly negotiated and in dialectical conversation according to the dialogic parameters of particular circumstances. Whether during an annual Hindu event such as Navarātri or in more frequent religious practices undertaken by the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang group, I have explored how the actions of those involved in middle-class self-fashioning in Tamilnadu remain intricately connected to other modes of social distinction. For instance, in contemporary Tamilnadu it seems that while Brahmins hold a precarious position in terms of politics and population, the religious practices locally associated with them are not necessarily gaining favor in asserting caste culture, but in defining a more relevant identity in today’s India, that of a middle-class Hindu.

**Considerations for Further Research**

While there are a variety of directions that subsequent research on the topic of middle-class life in India could take, I offer here a few avenues that I believe could be of particular
significance. One of these regards middle-class motivations and aspirations, particularly those of middle-class women. Given the varied motivations for group membership expressed by the SMVS women in Chapter One, I would like to put forward the idea of group membership as what several scholars have referred to as “status production work” (Papanek 1979, Dickey 2000, Donner 2008). In her work on middle-class women in Bengal, Donner defines “status production work” as, “any work undertaken in order to reproduce the social standing of a household beyond its mere survival, work which dominates middle-class women’s lives in India as elsewhere” (Donner 2008:59). In considering SMVS group membership as “status production work,” we might interpret it as a rather time-consuming affair and one that is connected to the production of an elevated status in the surrounding neighborhood. Not only do other neighbors feel alienated from the SMVS group due to socioeconomic status, but often the women’s group membership is publicized in other interactions, such as peṇ pārkkaiKal, in order to gain respect and reverence.

At issue in making this argument is the place of religious belief and spiritual feeling. If we argue that SMVS group membership is indeed a form of “status production work,” what does that imply about religious belief and involvement (bhakti iṭūpātu) amongst the urban middle class? Can and should we minimize actual religious sentiment and subsequently map an obsession with status onto middle-class women involved in any kind of devotional group? These issues, I believe, are fodder for an interesting research project that further parses out how class and religiosity are interrelated in South Asia and beyond.

In her recent monograph, *The God Market: How Globalization is Making India More Hindu*, Meera Nanda (2009) describes an emerging social paradigm in which the India’s middle classes, via their conflation of Indian and Hindu identities and complacency with
respect to a Hindu nationalist discourse of cultural and religious superiority, are actually endorsing and encouraging Hindu nationalist politics, what is locally known as Hindutva (Hindu-ness). She argues that explorations of everyday middle-class Hindu lives are important methods of understanding major social shifts, such as this, in modern India, claiming that

Too often these days, it is the radical religious-political or fundamentalist movements that get the bulk of the attention, while the faith of ordinary believers who are not active participants of such movements remains unexamined” and further argues that the middle classes in India “are setting a new tone for the rest of the country when it comes to cultural trends and patterns of consumption. How their relationship with God and organized religion is changing as their socio-economic status is changing can tell us a great deal about the religious landscape of the rest of the country” (Nanda 2009:65).

This dissertation offers a glimpse into the lives of middle-class Hindu women in South India via an exploration of their social networks and performances of religious piety. It has also presented particular ritual avenues through which Hindu nationalist political influence might be gaining ground in middle-class India – from the growing popularity of the Navarātri festival to the recitation of Sanskrit in urban culōkam classes. During the research period, I was not privy to overt discussions of politics amongst the SMVS women and their husbands, but this certainly does not exclude the influence of political rhetoric in the worldviews and ideologies of the SMVS women (Van Hollen 2015). Indeed, a crucial follow-up study to this work would be a much more in-depth inquiry into how Hindu nationalist discourses filter into the daily lives and Hindu ritual practices of the SMVS group members.

Finally, it is my hope that this research inspires further anthropological investigations that place significant value on the collection of personal narratives and
performance. In privileging these elements in my own work, I have become acutely aware of how much these modes of inquiry can add to understandings of, not only the culture within which one is participating and observing, but also oneself as a member of several local and global communities. Although our ages are different, although we grew up in very different places with very different perspectives on women's social positions, although I would never presume to be an authority on their lives, the women of the Śrī Maṅgala Vināyagar Satsang group and myself are forever connected in the dynamic meaning-making experiences we shared as we sang our songs and revealed pieces of our lives to each other.
## APPENDIX A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF MEMBER</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>CASTE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF CHILDREN</th>
<th>EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Latha</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Brahmin, Iyer - Vadapal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B.A., English Literature, unfinished M.A. English Literature</td>
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<td>Uma Amma</td>
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<td>Brahmin, Iyer - Vadapal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10th Standard</td>
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<td>Kritika</td>
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<td>Vishwakarma</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10th Standard</td>
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<td>2nd Standard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latha</td>
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<td>Son - TVS; Daughter - unemployed/housewife</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uma Amma</td>
<td>unknown</td>
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<td>Kritika</td>
<td>Son - B.A; Daughter - B.E; Son - Private Matriculation School</td>
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<td>Satya</td>
<td>Daughter - MBA; Son - unknown</td>
<td>Daughter - Banking; Daughter-in-law - Aircel telecom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gnanam</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joyalakshmi</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rani</td>
<td>Son - M.B.A; Son - B.E.</td>
<td>Son - Railway Station</td>
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<td>unknown</td>
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<td>Usha</td>
<td>unknown</td>
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<td>unknown</td>
<td>Daughter - Employed at a college; Daughter - unknown</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Son - unknown; Daughter - unknown; Son - Degree in Management</td>
<td>Son - unknown; Daughter - unemployed/housewife; Son - Hospital Manager</td>
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<td>unknown</td>
<td>unknown</td>
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<td>unknown</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Daughter - M.Sc; Son - unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kondhanna</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Selvi</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>unknown</td>
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<td>Senior Bank Manager - Retired</td>
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<td>unknown</td>
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<td>unknown</td>
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<td>Satya</td>
<td>Government Auditor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gnaanam</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>unknown</td>
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<td>Jayalakshmi</td>
<td>Retired, Bharathi Nagar Nallasangam Treasurer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rani</td>
<td>Railway Supervisor - Madurai Junction</td>
<td>College Educated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jayanthi</td>
<td>Owns Car Parts Business in Downtown Madurai</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Shanti</td>
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<td>Ph.D.</td>
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<td>Fabric Softener</td>
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<td>Car, Flat Screen T.V.</td>
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<td>Teaching at Orphanage, Reading to Blind, Restation Judge at Rotary School</td>
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<td>Uma Amma</td>
<td>Embroidery Class, Tupperware Parties, Sells Valour Bags Out of Home</td>
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<td>Jayanthi</td>
<td>Host to American Students</td>
<td>Volunteer at Thirupati</td>
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APPENDIX B

Questions focused on societal change and urban living:
1) Were their strict caste restrictions where you grew up?
2) What motivated you to join the group?
3) Can you talk about the group’s performances? How do you feel about them? How do others feel about them?
4) What memories do you have from holidays and functions when you were a child? 5) Does your membership in the SMVS group affect your life in Madurai? If so, how? 6) Were there group’s like the SMVS when you were a child?
7) Were you taught religious narratives and/or devotional songs as a child?

Questions focused on emic interpretations of middle classness and other socioeconomic stereotypes:
1) Can you give examples of things, activities, people that are navīṇamāna (new/modern)?
2) Can you give examples of things, activities, people that are pārampariyāna (traditional)?
3) Can a person be both modern and traditional? If so, how?
4) In Tamilnadu, what kind of people are middle class (naṭuttara vakuppi irukkira makkaḷ)? Is your family like these people?
5) What does a middle-class person do, say, have?
6) In Tamilnadu, can people be considered middle class if they live in a village?
7) What does a modern person do, say, have?
8) If a person has modern things and/or does modern activities, does that make them middle or upper class?
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Belghazi, Taieb.

Bell, Catherine.

Beteille, Andre.


Bharathy, Lakshmana Perumal.


Bourdieu, Pierre.


Briggs, Christopher and Richard Bauman.

Brosius, Christiane.

Buckley, Thomas and Alma Gottlieb.
Buechler, Hans and Judith-Maria Buechler. 


Bugg, Laura Beth. 

Burke, Jason. 

Caplan, Lionel. 

Census of India. 

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 

Chamba, Rampaul. 

Chatterjee, Partha. 

Cohen, Eric. 

Crpanzano, Vincent. 
Creighton, Millie.  

Cvetkovich, Anne and Douglas Kellner.  

Daniel, E. Valentine.  

Das, Dilip.  

Delaney, Carol.  

Dempsey, Corinne.  

DeNapoli, Antoinette.  

Deuchar, Andrew.  

Dickey, Sara.  


Dirks, Nicholas.  

Djurfeldt, Goran and Staffan Lindberg.  

Donner, Henrike.  

Douglas, Mary.  

Dumont, Louis.  

Durkheim, Emile.  

Duvvury, Vasumathi.  

Eck, Diana.  

Erzen, Tanya.  

Fair, Jo Ellen.  

Fernandes, Leela.


Fuller, C.J. and Penelope Logan.

Gadon, Elinor and Rita Ray.

Ganguly-Scrase, Ruchira.

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Ghosh, Anjan.

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Gordon, Doreen.

Gough, Kathleen.

Government of Tamilnadu.

Gross, Victoria.

Guss, David.
Haj, Samira.

Hancock, Mary.


Hanks, William.

Hansen, Thomas Blom.

Haraway, Donna.

Hardgrave, Robert.

Hart, George.

Heiman, Rachel, Carla Freeman and Mark Liechty.

Hiltebeitel, Alf.

Hindu, The

Hirsch, Jennifer and Holly Wardlow.

Holstein, James and Jaber Gubrium.

Huntington, Samuel.

Ilkama, Ina.

Jacobsen, Knut.

Jaffrelot, Christophe.

Jeffrey, Craig.

Johnson, W.J.

Kakar, Sudhir.

Kapadia, Karin.


Kendall, Laurel.

Khandekar, Rashmin and Sunny Shah.

Khandelwal, Meena.

Kinsley, David.

Klostermaier, Klaus.

Kolenda, Pauline.

Krishna, R.

Kristeva, Julia.


Kumar, Senthil.

Lahiri-Dutt, Kuntala and Pallabi Sil.


Maggi, Wynne.  

Malhotra, Anshu.  

Mankekar, Purnima.  

Mathur, Nita.  

McDermott, Rachel Fell  


McNamara, Karen.  

Mines, Diane.  


Mines, Diane and Nicolas Yagzi.  

Moffatt, Michael.  

Moodie, Deonnie.  


Pandian, M.S.S.

Papanek, Hanna.

Papanek, Hanna and Gail Minault.

Parker, D.

Patel, Reena.

Peacock, J. and D. Holland.

Pechilis, Karen.

Petitet, Pascale and Vellore Pragathi.

Pintchman, Tracy.


Prasad, Leela.

Rabinow, Paul.
Radin, Paul.

Raheja, Gloria.

Raheja, Gloria and Ann Grodzins Gold.

Rajayyan, K.

Ram, Kalpana.


Ramabai Sarasvati, Pandita.

Ramakrishnan, S.

Ramaswamy, Sumathi.


Ramnarayan, Gowri


Saavala, Minna.


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Sahni, Rohini and V. Kalyan Shankar.

Saunders, Andrew James.

Sax, William.

Sheth, D.L.

Shuman, Amy.

Simmons, C.

Singer, Milton.

Sloknik, A.
Sloane-White, Patricia.

Smith, H. Daniel.
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Sreenivas, Mytheli.

Srinivas, M.N.

Srinivasan, Amrit.

Stein, Burton.

Stern, Robert.

Stoller, Paul.

Stone, Lawrence.

Stroope, Samuel.
Tanaka, Masakazu.

Tarlo, Emma.

Thara Bhai, L.

Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita.

Thompson, E.B.

Times of India, The

Titon, Jeff.

Tourist Places in India.

Trauttmann, Thomas.

Trawick (Egnor), Margaret.


Trouillet, Pierre-Yves.

Turner, Victor.


Ullrich, Helen.

United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Van Hollen, Cecilia.


van Wessel, Margit.

Varma, Parvan

Venkitaraman, Gauri.
Viswanathan, Padma.

Visweswaran, Kamala.

Vivek, Radhika.

Wadley, Susan Snow.


Waghorne, Joanne.


Wah, Poon Shuk.

Waldrop, Anne.
Wardlow, Holly and Jennifer Hirsch.

Warrier, Maya.


Warrier, Shobha.

Weber, Max.

Weiz, Bettina.

Welbon, Guy and Glenn Yocum.

Williams, Raymond.

Wilson, Nicole.

Wolf, Diane.

Yagzi, Nicolas.
Zehner, Edwin

Zeiler, Xenia.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abirāmi</td>
<td>A set of Sanskrit devotional poems directed at the goddess Abirami.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>akkirarakāram (agrahāram), akkirakāraṅkaḷ</td>
<td>A portion of a village or city in which predominantly Brahmins live.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aḷaippukaḷ</td>
<td>Invitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alavu</td>
<td>Level, amount, size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amaiti</td>
<td>Peace, calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amma</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anta kālattile</td>
<td>In those days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apiṣ̄ekam</td>
<td>Ritual anointing by pouring fluid substances over a consecrated deity statue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appa</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appaḷam</td>
<td>Thin round food item made of fried flour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arccaṅai, arccaṅaṅkaḷ</td>
<td>The ritual practice of reciting a god’s/goddess’s name while simultaneously counting and/or throwing items such flowers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>atikamāka</td>
<td>A lot, strongly, exaggerated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>āmcam</td>
<td>A chart that marks the alignment of the planets at the time of birth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ānbu</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ānmikam</td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ārati, ālam</td>
<td>A ritual practice meant to prevent the effects of the evil eye.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ārvam</td>
<td>Interest (in something)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
āsai  Desire, wish, passion

Āṭi  Tamil month (mid-June to mid-July).

bhajan  A “choral rendering of devotional songs” (Ramakrishnan 2008:927).

bhakti  Form of Hindu worship emphasizing devotion and personal connection with a deity.

bhakti īṭupāṭu  Religious involvement

bharāta natyam  Regional dance of South India. Includes both formal and informal variations.

cakōtarikaḷ  Friends, companions

cantaṇam  Sandalwood (paste)

capāṭṭi  A type of wheat bread

carkkarai poṅgal  A type of sweet porridge that is traditionally cooked on the threshold of a home to bestow blessings for the new year.

Caṣṭi  A ritual anointing done twice per month to honor the God Murukan.

Caṣṭi Kavacam  A song in praise of the God Murukan.

catāi  Braid (of hair)

catāṅku  Ritual

cākkaṭai  Sewer

cāmi  General reference to a god or goddess.

cāmi āṭuvar  To dance the god/goddess, to become possessed.

cāmi bhakti  Devotion to God

cāmi kumpiṭu  To worship God
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cāmi vantuccu</td>
<td>God has come (to someone), to become possessed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cāpāṭu</td>
<td>Food; main rice-based meal of the day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cātakam</td>
<td>Horoscope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cātaranamāna</td>
<td>Normal, usual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>centtamil</td>
<td>“Pure” Tamil language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cēri</td>
<td>A portion of a village or city in which predominantly Dalits live.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choli</td>
<td>The blouse worn under a sari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chīttu</td>
<td>Also called a “kitty party.” A microfinance scheme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>churidār</td>
<td>Similar to the salwar kameez sets of North India; however, with tighter trousers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cilai</td>
<td>Statue, idol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cinna ūr</td>
<td>Small place/town (geographically)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cittappa</td>
<td>Father’s little brother, Father’s little brother’s wife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citti</td>
<td>Aunt, father’s little brother’s wife, Father’s younger sister.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cīmantam</td>
<td>Sometimes another name for the vaḷaikāppu, but also considered a separate ritual that necessitates a Brahmin priest by some (usually Brahmins).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coli</td>
<td>Blouse that is worn under a sari.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contu kalyānām</td>
<td>A marriage with a relative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contu ūr</td>
<td>Native place, natal village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cōtiṭar</td>
<td>Astrologer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**culōkam (sloka), culōkaṇkaḷ**  
Verses said in praise of a deity.

**cumaṇkali, cumaṇkalikaḷ**  
Auspicious married woman

**cumaṇkali prarttanai**  
The worshipping of a deceased *cumaṇkali* before the wedding of Brahmin girl so that she may not die a widow.

**cumma**  
Just (a little), also used as a filler word in colloquial conversation as a pause.

**cuṇṭal**  
A mixture of cooked beans (e.g. chick peas, butter beans) that are often flavored with red chilies and coconut.

**darṣan**  
A visual, spiritual connection with a deity.

**dupatta**  
Scarf worn over a *churidār* or *salwar kameez* set.

**dāvani**  
Half sari, coli blouse and skirt with scarf wrapped around the body like a sari.

**devadasi**  
Female temple dancer.

**Devī Māhātmyam**  
A Hindu religious text that relates the exploits of the Goddess

**eccil**  
Saliva and substance that is capable of transferring ritual pollution.

**en kuḻantai mādiri**  
Like my child, as if you were my child.

**evvaḷavu kaṣṭam!**  
How much difficulty!, How difficult!

**Ganesh Chathurthi/Jayanti**  
The god Ganesh's birthday

**garbhadhana**  
Physical consummation of a marriage.

**guru ṭakṣiṇai**  
A gift of thanks to a guru for teaching without asking anything in return.

**hārijan**  
Term used by Gandhi and others to refer to “untouchables,” or Dalits.

**hōmam**  
Sacrificial fire
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>irāci</td>
<td>A chart that marks the alignment of the planets at the time of birth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jajmani (system)</td>
<td>Social system in which lower castes work for higher castes and in exchange, the higher castes care for the lower castes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>japam</td>
<td>A particular recitation that is extremely powerful and normally only said by men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jati</td>
<td>Local term for “caste.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jati pirivu</td>
<td>Caste division/distinction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kalācāram</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kalyānam</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kalyāna mantapam</td>
<td>Marriage hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaṇṇāṭi vaḷaiyal</td>
<td>Bangles made of glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kartikai</td>
<td>A Tamil Hindu festival held during the Tamil month of the same name (mid-November to mid-December).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaṟuppu</td>
<td>Black; with reference to skin, dark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kattukkalutti</td>
<td>Another term for a cumaṅkali.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaṭṭupādu, kaṭṭupāṭukaḷ</td>
<td>Restrictions, often referring to rules about gender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kā</td>
<td>To protect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kāppu</td>
<td>Protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kāval dēvam, kāval dēvaṅkaḷ</td>
<td>Guardian deit(ies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kirāmam</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kolu, kolukaḷ</td>
<td>A tiered display of clay/porcelain/plastic three-dimensional images/dolls of gods and goddesses, political figures, cultural scenes (such as weddings and temple festivals), and food items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koḷukkaṭṭai</td>
<td>A steamed dumpling filled with jaggery and coconut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kōlam, kōlaṅkaḷ</td>
<td>A design (often geometric) drawn with rice flower or chalk on the threshold of a Hindu home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kōttiram (gōtra), kōttiraṅkaḷ</td>
<td>Descent group(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kula tēyvam</td>
<td>Family deity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kummi, kummikaḷ</td>
<td>A traditional style of performance reserved for women in which they clap their hands, walk in a circle, and sing in call-and-response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuṅkumam</td>
<td>Vermilion powder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuṅkumam arccaṇai</td>
<td>The recitation of the names of god/goddess while simultaneously counting pinches of kuṅkumam (vermilion powder).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kurta</td>
<td>Long tunic top worn over trousers in a salwar kameez or churidār set.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kūṭṭukkuṭumpam</td>
<td>Joint family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalithā Sahāstranamam</td>
<td>Recitation of the 1008 names of the Goddess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lungi</td>
<td>Piece of material wrapped by men around their bottom halves. Considered less formal than the veshti, and occasionally lower class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahābharata</td>
<td>Well-known Hindu epic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mallikai pū</td>
<td>Jasmine flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maṇacu</td>
<td>Mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mantiram, mantirankaḷ</td>
<td>Mantra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mañcaḷ</td>
<td>Yellow; also, turmeric powder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maradani</td>
<td>Henna tattoo (South Indian style)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Markaḷi**
The Tamil month of the winter solstice (mid-December to mid-January) which is thought to be the “month that spans one day in the life cycle of a divinity” (Nagarajan 2007:98).

**marakkāmal muṭiyādu vicayaṅkaḷ**
Events/happenings that one cannot forget; unforgettable experiences.

**mariyātai**
Respect

**matappalli, matapalliṅkaḷ**
A built-in row of stoves inside a temple.

**maṭi**
Ritual purity, often maintained by segregating menstruating women and widows, as well as people of “lower” castes.

**maṭisār, maṭisārkal**
Nine-yard sari

**mālai**
Garland, usually of flowers

**māmi**
A suffix often used to identify Brahmin women; Tamil term for mother’s brother.

**māpiḷḷai**
Bridegroom; term of endearment used for young boys.

**Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa**
One in a set of eighteen Sanskrit narrative texts. Contains the *Devī Māhātmyam*.

**māṭi**
Second floor of home

**māṭṭuponṇu**
Daughter-in-law

**mehendi**
Henna tattoo (North Indian style)

**muttu poṇṇu**
First born girl

**mutukupāl**
A childbirth ritual in which milk is poured down the pregnant woman’s back and the sex of the baby is determined.

**nagarikam**
Sophisticated

**naivēdanam, naivēdiyam**
Food offering
nalaṅku

The ritual application of vermillion powder (kuṅkumam) and sandalwood paste (cantaṉam) to the forehead, hands and cheeks of a person.

nalasaṅkam

Neighborhood association/council

nalla nēraṅkaḷ

Good/auspicious moment or time

nalla Tamiḻ poṉnu

A good Tamil girl, a Tamil girl who acts appropriately/according to Tamil culture.

Nārāyaṉīyam

A hymn written in praise of the Hindu deity Krishna.

naṭcattiraṅkaḷ

Stars

naṭuttara vakuppu

Middle class

navadāniyam

The dispersal of nine auspicious grains.

navīṇamāṇa

Modern

nāmavāli

Recitation of the 108 names of a god or goddess.

nicchayādarattam

Betrothal ceremony

nīrmutuvu

Childbirth ritual in which water is poured down a pregnant woman's back and the sex of the baby is determined.

nonpukaḷ

Cycles of fasting and prayer undertaken by Hindu women.

oṉṟum illamāl

(Being) without anything

paccai

Green

pallu

The end of a sari, usually more decorated with embroidery and beading.

paḷakkam illai

Not being accustomed

paḷaku

To be accustomed
<p>| <strong>palakuvānka, nallā palakuvānka</strong> | People who are accustomed, people who are very accustomed |
| <strong>panakkāraṇka</strong> | Rich people |
| <strong>pancamrutam</strong> | A mixture of fruit, honey, jaggery, ghee, and sugar. |
| <strong>pandal</strong> | A type of makeshift shelter where representations of the Goddess are housed and worshipped during Durga Puja in Bengal. |
| <strong>pantal</strong> | A thatched awning or canopy. |
| <strong>paṇṭit</strong> | A “learned person” or “expert” (Ramakrishnan 2008:886). |
| <strong>paṭikkallai nā, kēvalam</strong> | If one does not study, it is a shame |
| <strong>patirikaikaḷ</strong> | Invitations; magazines |
| <strong>payankaramāka</strong> | A lot |
| <strong>pācam</strong> | Affection |
| <strong>pāṭṭi-tāttā</strong> | Grandmother-Grandfather; a way to refer to one’s grandparents together. |
| <strong>pāttu, non-pāttu</strong> | A way to dividing of food based on its ability to keep fresh after the meal. |
| <strong>peṇ pārkka, peṇ pārkkaikaḷ</strong> | Girl/woman-viewing(s) |
| <strong>periya kirāmam (mātiri)</strong> | Like a big village; has a hometown feel. |
| <strong>periya poṇṇu āccu</strong> | She has become a mature girl. |
| <strong>piracātam</strong> | A food offering after it has been blessed by a deity during the puja. |
| <strong>Piratōṣam</strong> | A ritual anointing done twice for month in honor the God Siva. |
| <strong>pommaikaḷ</strong> | Clay/porcelain/plastic dolls used in kolu displays. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pońkal</td>
<td>Rice porridge that is traditionally cooked on the threshold of a home to bestow blessings for the new year. Comes in two varieties: sweet and savory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poṭṭu, poṭṭukaḷ</td>
<td>Stickers placed on the forehead and between the eyes of Hindu (and sometimes Christian) women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pouns</td>
<td>Sovreigns, equivalent to 8 grams of gold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prāptam illai, poruttam illai</td>
<td>No match (referring to arranging a marriage).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puraṭṭāci</td>
<td>Tamil month. Mid-September to mid-October.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punṇiyam</td>
<td>Spiritual merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pū Pāvātai</td>
<td>“Flower skirt;” also a form of the Goddess recognized during Navarattiri at the SMVT temple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pūcutal</td>
<td>A childbirth ritual during which a pregnant woman’s braided hair is elaborately decorate with flowers by her relatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pūkkarar</td>
<td>A person who sells flowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pūṇūl</td>
<td>Sacred thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pūri</td>
<td>A type of puffed/fried wheat bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rath yatra</td>
<td>Chariot journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramayana</td>
<td>Well-known Hindu epic in which the God Rama defeats the demon king Ravana.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rāgam</td>
<td>Musical beat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rudram</td>
<td>A particular Hindu recitation/ritual directed at Rudra, the god of destruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śakti, sakti</td>
<td>Name for the Goddess, also feminine power.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
salwaar kameez  A type of shirt and pant set traditionally worn in North India.

stōtiram, stōtirāṇkaḷ  A hymn directed to a deity.

stuti  Blessing

talaikku kutātu  (One) should not wash their hair; euphemism for saying a girl/woman is menstruating.

tali  Necklace worn by married women.

tayir  Curd

tāy, Tāy  Mother; Tamil month (mid-January to mid-February).

tāy māma  Mother’s brother

tirantukuli, tirandukuli  First menstruation ceremony

tiriṣṭi, kāntiriṣṭi  Evil eye, also a ritual practice to remove the evil eye.

tiruvillakku  Holy oil lamp

Tiruvōnam  Name of (birth) star

tīṭṭu  Ritual pollution

toḷil  Business

tōsai  Dosa; pancake made of fermented rice flour.

tōṣam, tōṣaṅkaḷ  Blemishes on a person’s horoscope that can cause inauspicious events.

tōttattile  In the garden/agricultural field

uḷḷam  Heart/mind

uṇcaḷ  Swing

uppuma  Food item similar to cream of wheat.
ūr

Referring to a location in which someone lives or has lived. Sometimes used in opposition to cēri, the location of Dalit houses in a traditional Tamil village.

vacatikaḷ

Amenities, luxuries

vacatiyāka (illai)

(Not) having a lot of amenities/luxuries.

vai

To keep (in one’s house)

vaḷaiyāppu

First pregnancy ritual during which bangles are applied to the pregnant woman’s wrists as a form of protection from evil.

vaḷaiyal

Bangles

varicai

A display of fruits, sweets and other gifts.

varna

Referring the four categories into which Purusha, a primordial being, was divided. Found in Hindu scripture.

vācal

Threshold

vāḻkkai varalāṟu

Life history

vānko/vānka

Come!

veena

A stringed instrument used in classical Indian music. It is also often pictured with the goddess Saraswati.

veṇ poṅgal

A type of savory porridge that is traditionally cooked on the threshold of a home to bestow blessings for the new year.

Veshti

A (usually white) piece of material which men wrap around their lower halves. Without a shirt, it is considered appropriate ritual dress for men.

vēppalai

Margosa leaf
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>villakku</td>
<td>Lamp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vipūti</td>
<td>Sacred ash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>virupu</td>
<td>Ritual pollution acquired while sleeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vishnu Sahāstranamam</td>
<td>The recitation of the 1008 names of Vishnu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viṭalai-pākku</td>
<td>Betel nut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viṭuvai, viṭuvaikaḷ</td>
<td>Widow(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vivacāya kuṭumpam</td>
<td>A family that works agricultural land, but does not usually own it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viyapāram</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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In-review  “I Watched Brahmins and Learned”: Religious Practice and Middle-Class Status in Tamilnadu, South India. *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (Special Section)


**OTHER PUBLICATIONS**

In-prep  Navaratri: A Site for Ritual and Social Change in Urban South India. (Chapter in Edited Volume)


**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

**Solano Community College** • Fairfield and Vacaville, CA  
1/2015 – present

*Adjunct Faculty*
- Courses: Introduction to Physical Anthropology and Introduction to Cultural Anthropology
- Developed syllabus, including all reading and writing assignments
- Responsible for all grading and student evaluation
- Supervisor: Dr. Keydron Guinn (keydron.guinn@solano.edu)

**Solano Community College** • Fairfield, CA  
6/2014 – 7/2014

*Adjunct Faculty*
- Course: Introduction to Physical Anthropology (6-week Summer session)
- Developed syllabus, including all reading and writing assignments
- Responsible for all grading and student evaluation
- Supervisor: Salvador Codina (Salvador.Codina@solano.edu)

**Syracuse University - University College** • Syracuse, NY  
1/2014 – 5/2014

*Instructor*
- Course: Rites of Passage: the Familiar and the Strange
- Developed syllabus, including all reading and writing assignments
- Responsible for all grading and student evaluation
- Supervisor: Dr. Susan Wadley (sswadley@syr.edu)
Syracuse University • Syracuse, NY 1/2007 – 5/2007

Teaching Assistant

- Course: Peoples and Cultures of the World (two recitation sessions)
- Responsible for grading and student evaluation
- Supervisor: Dr. William Kelleher (Deceased)

Awards and Honors

External:
2009-2010 Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Award, United States Department of Education
2007-2008 American Institute of Indian Studies Language Fellowship, American Institute of Indian Studies

Internal:
2011 Claudia DeLys Award for Cultural Anthropologists, Syracuse University
2011 Maxwell Dean’s Summer Fellowship, Syracuse University
2009 Bharati Memorial Grant, The South Asia Center, Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University
2008-2009 Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship, The South Asia Center, Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University
2007 Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship, The South Asia Center, Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University
2007 Gordon Bowles Paper Prize, Department of Anthropology, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University
2006 Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (Fall), The South Asia Center, Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University
2006 Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (Summer), The South Asia Center, Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Syracuse University

Conference Papers and Presentations

2012 He’s Too Dark, She’s Too Fat: Middle-Class Matchmaking in Tamil South India. Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference, Toronto
2011 “Pudu Ponnu”: A Tamil Bride’s “Modern” Imaginations of Morality and Ideal Tamil Womanhood. Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wisconsin
2010 Putting Stereotypes in Conversation. Indian Fulbrighters’ Orientation, Chennai, India
“In the Mother’s Presence, There is Happiness and Music”: Performing Hindu Identity in Urban South India. Fulbright Conference, Puducherry, India

2008
The “Good” Tamil Woman: Multifarious Understandings of Societal Ideals. New York Conference on Asian Studies, Hamilton College, New York

2008
Women’s Empowerment Through Nationalist Discourse: A Comparative Study of Sri Lankan and Indian Tamil Nationalism. Third Annual Tamil Studies Conference, Trinity College, University of Toronto

**INVITED TALKS**

2013
“Seeking Wheatish, God-fearing Vegetarian with Clean Habits”: Navigating and Narrating Matchmaking and Marriage Practices in Tamilnadu, South India. Department of Anthropology Colloquium Series, University of North Carolina, Wilmington

2013
Lecture: Marriage Practices in Contemporary Tamilnadu, India, ANT 105: Introduction to Anthropology (Dr. Carolyn Jost Robinson), Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina, Wilmington

2013
Question and Answer Session Regarding Fieldwork, ANT 445/500: Practicing Ethnography (Dr. Patricia Lerch), Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina, Wilmington

2012
Lecture: Marriage Practices in Contemporary Tamilnadu, India, ANTH 1100: Exploring a Non-Western Culture: The Tamils (Dr. Dennis McGilvray), Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado at Boulder

2011
“Everyone Knows the Story of the Greedy Dog”: The Middle Class Moral Dilemma in South India. Syracuse University South Asia Center Speaker Series, Syracuse University

2011
Question and Answer Session Regarding Fieldwork, REL 699: Writing Religions and Cultures (Dr. Ann Grodzins Gold), Department of Religion, Syracuse University

2009
Representations of Native Americans in Anthropological Research. Madurai Kamraj University, Madurai, Tamilnadu, India

**ACADEMIC WORKSHOPS**

On-going
Working Group: The Goddess and the King: Navaratri, Navaratra and Durgapuja in South Asia and Beyond, University of Oslo

2015
American Institute of Indian Studies Dissertation to Book Workshop, Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, Wisconsin

2011
Dissertation Workshop on Gender, Syracuse University

2007
Proposal Writing Workshop, Syracuse University
PANELS ORGANIZED

2012  *Weddings and Worldviews: Marriage in 21st Century South Asia*, Panel #151, Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference, Toronto

SERVICE

*Editorial Work:*

2013, 2015  Peer Reviewer, *Student Anthropologist*

2011-2013  Peer Reviewer, *Journal of Contemporary Anthropology*

2011  Peer Reviewer, *Caribbean Connections*

2007-2009  Associate Editor, *Journal of Development and Social Transformation*

*For the South Asia Center, Syracuse University:*


2008  Volunteer, 2nd Annual Elephant Extravaganza, Gifford Zoo, Syracuse


LANGUAGE SKILLS

Tamil (advanced)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Anthropological Association

American Academy of Religion