

## Chapter 3

# Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī Temple

This chapter investigates the Navarātri festival in the Kāmākṣī temple by discussing the festival's ritual procedures.<sup>96</sup> I will emphasize the rituals that are peculiar to Navarātri; namely the daily worship of prepubescent girls and married women, the goddess's Navarātri *alamkāras*, the fight between Kāmākṣī and the demon which is enacted as a big spectacle for altogether eight evenings, and the Vijayadaśamī worship of a *vaṅṅi* tree, carrying a web of symbolic dimensions. Different people visit the Kāmākṣī temple during Navarātri, notably many families, and groups of women and groups of young boys. Some come daily, others come once or for a few evenings, and devotees may visit from outside of Kanchipuram. *Darśana* of the goddess in her special *alamkāras* as well as the enactment of the fight were huge attractions reasons for devotees during Navarātri. The goddess is considered distinctively powerful during these nine nights, and it is considered especially auspicious to visit the temple during this festival.<sup>97</sup>

### Four Navarātris

The Śarada Navarātri (Skt. "autumnal Navarātri") celebrated in the Tamil month of Puraṭṭāci is one of the two major annual festivals in the Kāmākṣī temple, along with Brahmotsava.<sup>98</sup> Four Navarātri periods of nine days each are marked in the temple during the ritual year. Among these, the autumnal Navarātri is by far the most prominent, and referred to simply as "Navarātri" by most participants as well as the priests (and the one I refer to as Navarātri in the following). The autumnal Navarātri encompasses the most elaborate ritual procedures out of the four and attracts crowds of devotees to the temple every year.

Vasanta Navarātri (spring Navarātri) is celebrated in a smaller scale in the month of Paṅkuṇi (March–April), and Varāhī Navarātri (also known as Āṣāḍha

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96 I wish to thank Ute Hüsken, who generously made available the material she had collected on Navarātri during the Kanchipuram research project since 2003.

97 According to the temple's website, Navarātri, Brahmotsava and full moon days are the special occasions during which the goddess is particularly powerful (<http://www.kanchikamakshi.com>, accessed 23.08.2022).

98 The Brahmotsava is celebrated for 11 days in the month of Māci (February–March) and includes grand processions of Kāmākṣī's festival image on the temple's *vāhanas* (vehicles) each morning and evening.

Navarātri) and Śyāmālā Navarātri are marked at the temple's shrines of these two deities<sup>99</sup> with special *pūjās* and *abhiṣekas*. The Varāhī and Śyāmālā Navarātris are celebrated only by the devotees of these two goddesses, Varāhī Navarātri in the month of Āṭi (July-August) and Śyāmālā Navarātri in the month of Tai (January-February).

## The Ritual Manual *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* and Contemporary Performance

As explained in chapter 2, Kāmākṣī's priests represent themselves as carrying out *Śrividya* worship based on the Sanskrit ritual manual *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* (SC), ascribed to sage Durvāsa.<sup>100</sup> Out of altogether 54 chapters,<sup>101</sup> the manual includes two chapters concerning Navarātri. Chapter 38, entitled *mahānavamī-māhātmyam* ("the greatness of the great ninth [day]"), narrates a myth of how the goddess aids the gods in defeating the demon Andhaka.<sup>102</sup> The myth demonstrates the auspiciousness allotted to the nine nights starting from the first day of the fortnight of the bright half of the lunar month Aśvina.<sup>103</sup> This corresponds

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99 Varāhī and Śyāmālā are two major goddesses of the *Śrividya* school. The boar faced Varāhī is Lalitā's commander-in-chief, and Śyāmālā her minister (Wilke 2010, 231).

100 To my knowledge, no critical study has been done on the SC, making it difficult to say anything about when it was written, etc. The date of publication is not mentioned in the printed edition I am in possession of, which is published by the Śaṅkaramaṭha.

101 The SC consists of two parts: *pūrvabhāgaḥ* (54 chapters) and *uttarabhāgaḥ* (2 chapters).

102 The myth of the SC is different from the myth of the KV investigated in chapter 2, which, as explained, is referred to by the priests as the underlying motif of celebrating Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī temple. In the SC myth, the gods are scolded by the demon Andhaka who held the world captive, and Śakti arises from a most excellent light resulting from Brahmā's meditation. Śakti first splits into three forms, and then into many forms, and tells Brahmā that she abides in the hearts of all beings and appears as their *śakti*. She tells Brahmā that the gods are to worship her on the 9<sup>th</sup> lunar day (*mahābhūtatithi*) of Aśvina. Brahmā realizes the superiority of this day and performs the vow known as *mahānavamī* ("the great ninth") for the goddess, after which the gods do the same. The goddess is delighted and grants the gods the boon of succeeding conquering the ill-souled Andhaka (SC 38.1–38). Note that in this myth, Kāmākṣī does not confront the demon in battle, she "takes away his powers", so that the gods can fight him (SC 38.26), and her benevolent nature is maintained throughout.

103 *śṛṇu devi mahābhāge yan māṃ tvam paripṛcchasi | āśvayujyām ayatnena yatphalaṃ labhate dināt || sarvamāsakṛtenāpi tatphalaṃ naiva labhate | tasmīn māse 'pi deveśi pūrvapakṣe 'dhiko mataḥ || śuklapratipadādyās tu navarātryo 'tisobhanāḥ | tatrāpi navamī ślāghyā sarvasiddhipradāyini || SC 38.1–4* — "Listen, goddess, most virtuous one, to what you ask me! On the full moon day of Aśvinā, what fruit one gains during that day without effort, on account of performing [the prescribed worship in] all the [other] months, one does not gain an [equal] fruit. Surely, the fortnight of the waxing moon in this month, O

to the time the festival is celebrated in the temple today. According to the myth, the 9<sup>th</sup> day (*tithi*) of this month, corresponding to today's Sarasvatī Pūjā, is considered particularly auspicious. The following chapter 39 is entitled *navarātryutsavavidhiḥ* ("precepts for the Navarātri festival") and contains in 53 *ślokas* the ritual procedures to be followed in the temple during the nine-night festival.

While the priests' performance of ritual mirrors certain aspects of the text, such as the worship of young girls and auspicious married women, the framing of the festival (beginning with sprouting auspicious seeds and ending with the ablution of Kāmākṣī's weapon), and the invocation of goddesses in *kalaśas* (Skt. "pots"), there are several noteworthy inconsistencies between the *SC* and contemporary performance. For instance, two of the central rituals that provide Navarātri with its special character in contemporary practice are not at all mentioned, namely Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon and the *vanni* tree *pūjā*, which can be interpreted as an atonement ritual for Kāmākṣī after the fight. Moreover, the text prescribes certain rituals that are not followed today, such as processions of the goddess on different vehicles (Skt. *vāhana*),<sup>104</sup> and even the offering of a wild animal in a forest immediately before the ablution of Kāmākṣī's weapon on Vijayadaśamī.<sup>105</sup> There are also inconsistencies between the text and actual performance of certain rituals, such as the number of *kalaśas* to be installed and the ingredients for the *homa*. In addition to describing the ritual procedures of the festival, the *SC* devotes several *ślokas* to the calculation of *tithis*<sup>106</sup> and variations in rituals thereafter (*SC* 39.31–40).

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queen of gods, is regarded superior. But the nine nights [starting] from the first day of the fortnight of the bright [half of the lunar month] are particularly auspicious. Even among them, the ninth [day] is commendable, granting universal success."

104 *Ślokas* 17–24 pertain to the worship of the 8<sup>th</sup> *yāma* (a *yāma* is a night watch of three hours, i.e. an 8<sup>th</sup> part of a day), and prescribe three processions at night of the goddess on the vehicles of sea monster (*mahāmakara*), lion's seat (*siṃhāsana*) and bull (*vṛṣa*).

105 The Kāmākṣī temple is Brahmanical and strictly vegetarian. However, the *SC* says: *tataḥ pūrṇāhutiṃ hutvā balikarma vidhāya ca | turage vā gaje vāpi yāneṣv anyatameṣu vā || āropya pūrvato gacched uttare vā yathārucci | yojanaṃ vā tadardhaṃ vā udyānaṃ ramyam āsthitaḥ || dadyād bhūtabaliṃ tatra vyāghraṃ vā vanamāhiṣam | varāha vānyasatvaṃ vā pradadyād bhūtatṛptaye || SC 39.42–44* — "Then, after offering fire-oblations and distributing tribute to all deities, after mounting [the goddess] onto either a horse, or an elephant, or another vehicle, as before [the chief priest] should go either to the east or to the north according to desire, either one *yojana* (measure of distance) or a half, stopping at a beautiful forest. He should offer *bhūtabali* (offering of food to all beings) there: a tiger, a forest buffalo, a boar, or any other wild animal. He should offer [this] for satisfying all beings."

106 The average length of a *tithi* (lunar day) is slightly less than 24 hours. A *tithi* consists of the time the moon requires for travelling twelve degrees on the ecliptic in its passage around the earth, and this may vary in length from approximately 19–26 hours (De

It might seem puzzling that the ritual manual, supposedly presenting so-called “idealized” ritual, in fact does not correspond with many of the rituals that are performed during the festival today. The priests strongly emphasize that their worship is based on this manual which distinguishes the Kāmākṣī temple from all other temples. However, as Fuller discusses in his two volumes about the Mīnākṣī temple in Madurai (Fuller 1984; 2003), the idea of an authoritative textual manual to be reflected precisely in ritual practice is flawed. Indeed, Fuller, claims that “the idea of strict adherence to *āgamic* instruction, as if the texts provided a theoretical or discursive model to be put into practice, is illusory”. In fact, he argues, it would be *impossible* to strictly follow any *āgama*. First, other texts too, inform temple rituals. Particularly festival rituals are shaped by local and *purāṇic* traditions, as is the case in the Kāmākṣī temple as well. Moreover, the length and complexity of for instance preparatory rites would require that the priests stay up all night and put ruthless demands on them. Further, one cannot *know* from observations if the *āgamas* are precisely followed, since they are as much concerned with immaterial transformations as they are with physical ritual acts. For instance, a priest should according to the *āgamic* texts himself *become* Śiva before worshipping Śiva in his temple form. Likewise, Kāmākṣī’s priests should according to the *SC* fix his mind solely on her and visualize his own body as consisting of the goddess (*SC* 39. 12–14). This is accomplished through a mental process, accompanied by hand gestures and mantras, and the result is, of course, unobservable. Finally, we cannot know how the exact relationship was between the texts and temple practice at the time the *āgamas* were composed. On the one hand, Richard Davis finds it plausible that the 12<sup>th</sup> century Śaiva *patthati Mahotsavavidhi*, which today is considered authoritative throughout Tamil Nadu, played a significant role in institutionalizing and disseminating a shared pattern for temple festivals. On the other hand, the texts present *idealized* ritual practice, and we do not know if any temple festival has ever been performed such as the text prescribes. Indeed, Fuller suggests that from consulting manuscripts of these texts, which exist in more fragmented versions, the meaning of the text mainly was determined by ritual practice, and not the other way around. The priests have for generations learned to perform rituals through practice, and not from formal instruction through canonical works from an ancient past, although these are referred to as the basis of their rituals.

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Fouw and Svoboda 2003, 186). This means that one *tithi* can be current on two Gregorian weekdays, and two *tithis* can be current on one weekday. Astrologers use precise calculations to determine the most auspicious moment in each *tithi*.

The performance of a text is rarely straightforward, neither is the concept of “text” itself.<sup>107</sup> Doniger proposes in her book “other people’s myths” a performative distinction between the interior and the exterior of a text (1991, 32). To use the *inside* is to use the text in a fluid way, such as to write a commentary, discuss it, or perform it creatively. To use the *outside* is to use the text in a more rigid way, such as to read or recite a text without necessarily knowing its meaning or reciting a text from beginning to end so quickly that no one can possibly understand it, in order to gain merit.<sup>108</sup> In these cases, the ritual efficacy of recitation is more important than a text’s contents.<sup>109</sup>

I propose that a similar distinction is applicable when it comes to Kāmākṣī’s priests’ reference to the SC as the authority of their ritual performances: they talk about a fluid text including its embodied and performative dimensions, rather than the physical and printed text, and thus refer to the *outside* of the text rather than its *inside*. In this way, ritual treatises can be seen as forming part of a collective habitus, a tradition transmitted by generations of priests, inherited, and applied. Thus, the role of the SC is centered on the pragmatics of fabricating identity and authority rather than the technical process of conducting the rituals.

## Ritual Procedures during Navarātri

I have divided the rituals performed during Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī temple into 4 ritual cycles, modeled closely on the classification of *Brahmotsava*

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107 We must also keep in mind how scripture in Hinduism has been overwhelmingly spoken rather than written. Indeed, as Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger claims, the application of the oral/written dichotomy to South Asian texts and oral traditions often leads to confusing, sometimes irrelevant, and even erroneous findings in a culture in which written texts have coexisted and interacted with oral traditions for centuries (1991, 44). Leela Prasad, who has worked on *śāstra* literature, has convincingly argued that we should understand the concept of text in Hindu traditions as dynamically constructed, as a fluid text which engages precept and practice (Prasad, 2006).

108 Even *more* rigid is the worship of the physical text which is not necessarily opened.

109 Drawing on Doniger’s terminology, Brian K. Smith has shown in his work on the Veda (1989) how an authoritative canon is not necessarily a set of printed texts, but rather a body of knowledge, incorporated in persons who have mastered it and practiced it from generation to generation, and thus a “personalized” concept of authority. In this way, post-Vedic Hindus use the “outside” of the Vedas for legitimization oblivious to the “inside” (the doctrines and practices). Smith writes that “[t]he great paradox of Hinduism [...] is that although the religion is inextricably tied to the legitimizing authority of the Veda, in post-Vedic times the subject matter of the Veda was and is largely unknown by those who define themselves in relation to it” (Smith 1989, 20).

(*mahotsava*) rituals by Marie-Luce Barazer-Billoret (1999);<sup>110</sup> namely inaugural rites, daily observances, rites of closure<sup>111</sup> and subsequent rituals. The category additional ceremonies includes a small section on Sarasvatī Pūjā.

I use these categories less strictly, so that the heading daily observances includes not only the rituals commonly mentioned in the types of handbooks Barazer-Billoret worked with (processions, *homas* and *pūjās*) but also the worship of young girls and auspicious married women, the *curasaṃhāra*, the cultural program, and the goddess's *alaṃkāras*, all important and everyday parts of the contemporary Navarātri celebrations in the temple.

Although Navarātri lasts nine days, or ten days including Vijayadaśamī, the celebrations go on in the temple for altogether 12 days according to the festival program. Some rites therefore do not form part of Navarātri in the strict sense, and I have labeled these subsequent rituals.

## Inaugural Rites

### *The Sprouting of Auspicious Seeds*

The *SC* suggests two alternative openings for the festival, raising of the flag (*dhvajārohana*) or sprouting of the seeds (*aṅkura[arpaṇa]*).<sup>112</sup> In contemporary practice the flag is only raised during Brahmotsava, whereas Navarātri starts with the rituals of collecting the earth (*mṛtsaṃgrahana*) and the sprouting of auspicious seeds (*aṅkurārpaṇa*). This is done by planting nine kinds of grain (*navadhānyam*) in a lamp-shaped mud pot (Ta. *pālikai*) full of soil. The ritual is done to assure auspicious results of the festival, and if the auspicious

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110 Barazer-Billoret (1999) classified the rituals of Brahmotsava in various Śaiva *āgamas* and *paddhatis* into four major ritual cycles: Inaugural rites (*rites inauguraux*), twice-daily ritual activities (ritual biquotiden; pointing to the processions of the deities' festival images held in the morning and evening, characteristic of the Brahmotsava), the *tīrtha* cycle (*cycle du tīrtha*) and 'rites of closure' (*rites de cloture*). She further identified an additional category, additional ceremonies (*rites additionnels*), consisting of rituals that fall out of the four.

111 Following Schier (2018, 49), I argue that the *tīrtha* cycle (bathing rituals) forms part of the rites of closure which mark the end of the festival and have omitted the heading of "the *tīrtha* circle" so that rites of closure include the ritual of *tīrthasnāna* or *tīrttavari*.

112 *atha vakṣyāmi deveśi mahābhūtatithau vratam | utsavaṃ kāryet tatra dhvajārohaṇa-pūrvakam || athavāṅkurapūrvam vā yāgamaṇḍalasaṃyutam | SC 39.1–2* — "Now I will declare the vow [to be performed] at the great lunar day, O queen of gods! [The chief priest] should perform a festival at that time, either beginning with rising the flag, or beginning with [planting] the seeds, including drawing the *yāgamaṇḍala* (preliminary rite of the *aṅkurārpaṇa*)".

continuation of the festival is disrupted by any polluting events, the sprouts are thrown away and new ones will be planted. The two rituals are performed the night before Navarātri starts. Throughout the festival, the pot is kept in the sacrificial hall (*yāgaśālā*) where *homas* are performed. *Pūjās* are done to it daily, and by the end of the festival the grains will have grown to small green sprouts. The sprouts and the mud will be immersed in the temple tank along with Kāmākṣī's main weapon at the *tīrttavari* ceremony.

### *Tying of Protective Cords*

The tying of protective cords (*rakṣābandhana*, Ta. *kāppu*, lit. protection, caution, defense) is performed on the first day of Navarātri,<sup>113</sup> after a *caṇḍīhoma* and *abhiṣekas* to Vārāhī and Santānagaṇapati (a form of Gaṇeśa). A protective cord is first tied to Kāmākṣī's image in the sanctum, then to Tapaskāmākṣī and Kāmākṣī's procession image (*utsavamūrti*, lit. festival image). Next it is tied to the procession images of Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, who accompany Kāmākṣī's procession image during Navarātri. Finally, a cord is tied to the wrist of the priest who oversees the festival. This priest, who alternates annually according to the temple's system of *murai*,<sup>114</sup> is from this point onwards in charge of the festival, and officiates at all the major rituals, assisted by other priests. He takes an oath (*saṃkalpa*) to adhere to the rules and regulations of the festival, after which he is not allowed to speak for the entire festival period (*maunabali*, tribute of silence).<sup>115</sup>

The cords protect the festival procedures through protecting the festival's main agents, in this case the deities and the priest, and absorb ritual impurities

113 The inaugural ritual of tying protective cords for Navarātri is not mentioned in the *SC*.

114 *Murai* refers to the rights of the priests and their shares in the worship of the temple. See Fuller 1984, 81–84.

115 While the practice of *maunabali* is not prescribed in the *SC*, the priest should, according to the text, perform a supreme *saṃkalpa* and visualize himself as consisting of the goddess before worshipping her: *uṣasy uthāya manasā dhyātvā devīm parātparām || prakṣā-lyā pādāv ācamya kuryāt saṅkalpam uttamam | tadvidhānam ca vakṣyāmi yena śrīḥ sarvatomukhī || stotrais tadīyais tatsūktair dhyānais tadbhābandhanaiḥ | tadekāgramanā bhūtvā svātmanam tanmayam smaret || SC 39.12–14. — “After rising at dawn, after meditating upon the goddess, superior to the best, with his mind, after cleansing the feet and sipping [water from the palm], he should perform the supreme oath. And I shall declare that precept, through which one's prosperity becomes manifold! With praises (*stotra*) relating to her, with her hymns (*sūkta*) and meditations (*dhyāna*) fully tied to her, after becoming one whose mind is fixed solely on her, he should visualize his own body as consisting of her.” — This parallels the non-dualist concept in Śaiva *āgamas* that only Śiva can worship Śiva, and thus Śaiva priests become Śiva before they carry out their worship. For more on *saṃkalpa*, see Michaels (2005).*

(Hüsken 2017, 71). I was told that it is tied to the goddess to “keep her in a safe place”. The goddess is particularly vulnerable during festival times, usually including public processions, when potential pollution may occur and threaten the festival procedures. The goddess’s powers are at their most potent during festivals; so are those of chaotic, negative and malevolent forces, and there is an enhanced possibility for both the deities and the oriests to attract pollution and the evil eye.<sup>116</sup>

### *Invocation and Worship of the Goddesses in kalaśas*

After tying the cords, Kāmākṣī and other goddesses are invoked in twelve *kalaśas* filled with water through chanting the mūlamantra. The pots are kept in the *yāgaśālā* throughout Navarātri and worshipped twice a day. Kāmākṣī is invoked in the main *kalaśa* which is placed in the middle of a triangle of *kalaśas*, and eight *kalaśas* surround these again (figure 3.1). In the three *kalaśas* Kāmeśvarī, Varjeśvarī and Bahamani are invoked, and the eight Vāgdevatās (“deities of speech”), present in the receptacle surrounding the *śrīcakra*, are invoked in surrounding pots.<sup>117</sup>

According to a priest, these are “the most important goddesses”, who all form part of Ampāl.<sup>118</sup> On the Vijayadaśamī evening, these *kalaśas* are taken to the sanctum for *abhiṣeka* of first the *śrīcakra* and then the goddess’s image (*ghatasnāna*).<sup>119</sup> Thus, the goddesses who are honored as separate figures during

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116 Many unforeseen events could happen and disrupt a festival. For instance, devotees could drown in the temple tank during ritual baths, or the deities could encounter a funeral procession during their parading through the streets. Ritual pollutions could also go on unnoticed by the performers of the ritual, such as menstruating women entering the temple. The purity of the temple, its priests and deities is highly important, as it is a precondition for the effective performance of ritual within the South Indian Brahmanical temple (Hüsken 2006, 11).

117 While in contemporary performance twelve *kalaśas* are deposited in the *yāgaśālā* for a total of ten days, the *SC* prescribes the installation of nine *kalaśas* to be worshipped for eight days. In these, the Vāgdevatās should be invoked: *vastraratnādīsamāyuktān nava kumbhāms tu vinyaset / vaśīnyādīsamāyuktāṃ dīneṣv aṣṭasu pūjayet // SC 39.6*. — “[The chief priest] should deposit nine pots endowed with garments, gems and so on, with [the Vāgdevīs] beginning with Vaśīni invoked, and worship [them] for eight days.” — Since the Vāgdevīs number eight, Kāmākṣī is probably invoked the ninth *kalaśa* although this is not mentioned explicitly in the text.

118 The Vāgdevatās are popularly said to have composed the *LSN*.

119 The *SC* prescribes ablutions of the *śrīcakra* on the 9<sup>th</sup> day: *viśeṣeṇa navamyām tu śrīcakraśnapanam caret // SC 39.11* — “[The chief priest] should in particular perform abluion for the *śrīcakra* on the ninth [day]”.



the festival are finally re-absorbed into the fundamental divine source in the temple (Davis 2010, 34).



Figure 3.1: *Kalaśas* and *homa* in the *yāgaśālā*. © Ute Hüsken.

## Daily Observances

### *Pūjās and homas*

As is usual in the Kāmākṣī temple, the *pañcopacāra pūjā* is performed daily for the goddess in the sanctum and this worship continues during festival times. This *pūjā* consists of five objects to please the five senses: sandal (*gandha*), flowers (*puṣpa*), incense (*dhūpa*), the camphor flame (*dīpa*), and food (*naivedya*). Daily around noon, the priests perform a more elaborate *navāvaraṇa pūjā* for the *śrīcakra* behind closed doors in the sanctum. This is a *pūjā* done to the nine enclosures of the *śrīcakra*.<sup>120</sup> I was told that the daily *pūjās* performed in the temple are considered extracts of this more elaborate *navāvaraṇa pūjā*.

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<sup>120</sup> The *navāvaraṇa pūjā* is otherwise performed once a month during full moon day, and during Vasanta Navarātri. When the temple was renovated between 2015 and 2017, this *pūjā* was one of the rituals that continued despite of the festival not being celebrated in

Navarātri moreover includes daily worship of the twelve goddesses invoked in the *kalaśas* and fire rituals in the *yāgaśālā*.<sup>121</sup> The goddesses preside over and protect the fire rituals (cf. Davis 2010, 39), meaning there is a higher concentration of powers (*śakti*) present in the temple during Navarātri. Each morning and evening a *śrīvidyā homa* is performed, during which firewood (*samidh*), rice and ghee is put 28 times each into the fire along with dried cow dung.<sup>122</sup> Along with the oblations, the *pañcadaśī mūlamantra* (“fifteen syllable root mantra”) is chanted 28 times, one for each offering. This *homa* is performed daily during the ritual year in the sanctum. Afterwards, *Lalitāsahasranāma*, or other *stotras* dear to the goddess, is chanted.

### *Worship of Prepubescent Girls and Auspicious Married Women*

The *SC* prescribes the daily worship of girls and women with a (living) husband, or alternatively nine couples, during Navarātri.<sup>123</sup> These *pūjās* are performed

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a grand manner, pointing to its importance. The chapter on Navarātri in the *SC* does not mention the *navāvaraṇa pūjā*, but a closer study of the *SC* would be necessary to find out whether it is described in other chapters.

121 The procedures in the *yāgaśālā* (*homās* and invocation and worship of goddesses in *kalaśas*) during Navarātri are very similar to those of Brahmotsava, but for Brahmotsava a total of eleven *kalaśas* (representing Kāmākṣī, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī and the 8 Vāgdevīs) are deposited, not twelve.

122 These are the normal ingredients for *homās* in the Kāmākṣī temple. When I inquired about the *homa*, Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal said: “Some people put sweets and all into the *homa*, but that is not the right procedure”. The *SC*, however, prescribes a long list of substances to be thrown into the fire 108 times, either one ingredient each day, or all at once, along with the firewood: *apūpais saktupiṇḍaiś ca lājapiṇḍaiḥ guḷānvitaiḥ | panasair nālīkeraīś ca tilapiṇḍaiḥ guḷānvitaiḥ || samadhuśakair āyuktaiḥ mudgapiṇḍair manoharaiḥ | dadhyannaiḥ pāyasaiś caivaṃ sasarpiṣkaiś ca saktubhiḥ || ekaikaṃ kramaśo vṛddhyā dinaṃ pratidināṃ prati | pṛthag aṣṭottaraśataṃ juhuyāt samidhā saha || dinaśo vai kramaikaṃ vā juhuyād vā krameṇa tu | SC 39. 7–10. — “With sweets cooked in ghee accompanied by lumps of wheat powder and water, with puffed rice mixed with jaggery, with jackfruit along with coconut, with lumps of white sesame mixed with jaggery, with lumps of green grinds mixed with honey and sugar, with curd rice and also with *pāyasam* (boiled milk, rice, ghee and sugar), and with flour mixed with ghee, gradually with increasing [the quantity] each and every day, [the chief priest] should offer [these ingredients] 108 times each day along with firewood (*samidh*). Indeed, he should offer one ingredient each day, or all at once.” The 10<sup>th</sup> day, on Vijayadaśamī, the substances should be offered 28 times: *daśamyām atha saṃpūjya viśeṣavidhitā guruḥ | pratidra-vyaṃ ca juhuyād aṣṭāviṃśatisaṃkhyayā || SC 39.41 — “On the 10<sup>th</sup> [day], after worshipping, the guru should by means of special observances offer the substances 28 times.”**

123 *kanyāś ca pūjayen nityaṃ striyo bhartṛsamanvitāḥ || navacakreśvarirūpaṃ navaṃ vā mithunaṃ yajet | ekaikavṛddhyā dinaśo navamyantaṃ samācaret || SC 39.49–50 — “[The chief priest] should necessarily worship young girls [and] women who have a [living] husband. Or he could worship nine couples in the form of the Navacakreśvarīs (the*

around noon each Navarātri day, after the morning rituals to the goddess in the sanctum and to the pots in the *yāgaśāla* are concluded. For eight days, the priests worship a prepubescent girl (figure 3.2) and an auspicious married woman. These *pūjās* are performed behind closed doors in the *Gāyatrī maṇḍapa* in front of the goddess's sanctum. The girls and women are worshipped as manifestations of the goddess who is invoked in them with a *mantra*: Bālā Kāmākṣī is invoked in the girls and Kāmākṣī in the women. The priests recite *mantras*, offer them sacred powders, incense and lamps, new clothes, garlands, flowers, and food. On the ninth day of Sarasvatī Pūjā the procedure changes: this morning, after the demon has been killed by Kāmākṣī on the eight evening of Navarātri, there are altogether nine *kanyās* and nine *sumaṅgalīs* worshipped, along with a *brahmacārin*, a young boy, in whom Bhairava<sup>124</sup> is invoked.

While *kanyā pūjās* are an integral part of Navarātri in many parts of India and Nepal,<sup>125</sup> worship of married women seems to be reserved to the south. In the Kāmākṣī temple these *pūjās* mirror the temple worship of the goddess, but they also share traits with similar *pūjās* held at home during Navarātri *kolu*.<sup>126</sup>

Women and girls will however *only* be worshipped if they are auspiciously married with a living husband (*sumaṅgali*, Ta. *cumaṅkali*) or prepubescent below the age of sexual maturity (*kanyā*, Ta. *kaṇṇi*). This makes them eligible to

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presiding deities of the *srīcakra*'s nine enclosures), day by day ending the ninth [day] he should worship [them], increasing with one and one." — The SC myth of the previous chapter provides the reason for this: *tasmin dine viśeṣeṇa yāḥ kāścicchāktayo bhūvi || tās sarvāsamadhiṣṭāpya pūjāṃ grhṇāti sāñjasā | tasmāt saṃpūjayed etā yāḥ kāscid vā varāṅganāḥ || nāvamānyā viśeṣeṇa dine tasmin śubhārthibhiḥ | tābhyas tasmin dine dattaṃ sadvāsobhūṣaṇādikam || bhaved anantaphaladaṃ parāśaktipriyaṅkaram | mahābhūtatiṭhau ye tu nārcayanti parāmbikām || te tu mūḍhā daridrās ca bhaveyur janmajanmani | SC 38.31–55* — "On this day in particular (the 9<sup>th</sup> lunar day of Āśvina) [the great goddess] abides in all the *śaktis* that are on earth, [and] she receives the *pūjā* instantly. Therefore, one should honor them greatly, those beautiful women, who on this particular day should not be treated with disrespect by those desirous of welfare. On this day, they should be given beautiful clothes, ornaments, etc., yielding infinite fruits [and] causing pleasure to the supreme Śakti. But those who do not worship the supreme mother on the great 9<sup>th</sup> day will become poor and stupefied birth after birth."

124 Bhairava and Hanumān are repeatedly described as protectors of the goddess in Hindu mythology (2018, 302). According to Brigitte Luchesi, in Himachal Pradesh the boy's role is understood as a sort of protector and compared with Bhairava or Hanumān (ibid.).

125 See Luchesi (2018) for similar *pūjās* in Himachal Pradesh, Rodrigues (2005, 2009) for Varanasi, Allen (1975) for Nepal, Hershman (1977) for Punjab and Foulston (2009) for Calcutta. The honoring of young girls during Navarātri is also mentioned in medieval ritual texts and *purāṇas*, (see Einoo 1999, Kane 1974, 170–71).

126 See chapter 5.

represent Kāmākṣī as benevolent goddess and as virgin goddess, which is the form in which she kills the demon.

The girls should be between one and nine years old and are worshipped in increasing order. Their age is conceptually linked to Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon Bandhakāsura which is not only expressed in myth, but also enacted in the temple premises during the first eight Navarātri evenings. The myth of the *Kāmākṣīvilāsa* narrates the fight between goddess Kāmākṣī and the demon Bandhakāsura and was explored in chapter 2. Since the demon was granted a boon that only a young child below the age of nine could kill him, the goddess assumes the form of a young girl, Balā Kāmākṣī, to accomplish the task.<sup>127</sup>

The young girls, worshipped as manifestations of the goddess and increasing in age reaching nine years in the end, can thus be understood as the maturing goddess who is finally killing the demon in the form of Bālā Kāmākṣī. An interpretation drawn easily from knowing the mythological background is therefore to see their worship, along with the worship of Kāmākṣī in her grown-up form represented by the *sumaṅgalis*, as gradually empowering the goddess for her fight with the demon. This idea is supported by the fact that the autumnal Navarātri is the only time during the annual festival cycle that such worship is performed for young girls in the temple.<sup>128</sup> The change of the worship pattern to include nine girls and nine women the ninth morning, including the *brahmacārin*, can be further interpreted as a tribute to the accumulated powers of the victorious goddess. The priest Mr. Prasanna Sastrigal explained the ritual similarly:

“The reason for doing *pūjā* to the *kaṇṇi* is, the demon asked for a boon, saying that he should not be killed by anyone who is above eight years. The *samhāram* (war) takes place on Durgāṣṭamī (the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Navarātri). When she reaches the age of eight, she kills the demon. Daily when his head is chopped, immediately he gets another head [...] Ampāl (Kāmākṣī) on the entire eight days tries to kill him in eight different methods.”

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127 However, as discussed in chapter 2, the demon's boon of being killed by a girl below the age of nine is in fact only explicit in the retelling of the priests, and not in the *KV*. In the *KV* the goddess kills the demon in the fierce form of Mahābhairava and appears before the gods as a maiden of five (*pañcavarṣikakanyakā*) – not nine – after killing him.

128 *Sumaṅgalipūjā* is performed also during *pūrṇimāpūjā* (full moon days) and *vasanta navarātri*.



Figure 3.2: *Kanyā pūjā* in the Kāmākṣī temple. © Ute Hüsken.

It is a widespread belief that *pūjās* to *kanyās* and *sumāṅgalīs* reach the goddess during Navarātri, and that the goddess will come to visit your *kolu*, and in extension your home, in the form of a young girl or married woman. The special connection between females and the goddess through the concept of *śakti*, or female creative power, is particularly pronounced during these nine days. Another priest, Mr. Sudarshan Sastrigal, emphasized this connection when he explained the worship of women:

“[Navarātri] gives importance to *suṅvāsiniīs* because even the [*Lalitā*] *sahasra-nāma* says: *suṅvāsiniī priyāya namaḥ*. So, when *suṅvāsiniīs* are honored, the god-

dess feels happy. When you make them [the *suvāsinīs*] happy by giving clothes and things, it is like Ampāl herself is happy.”<sup>129</sup>

In contrast to the domestic setting, in the Kāmākṣī temple the goddess is ritually invoked in the females with *mantras*. Although their worship clearly recognizes their feminine *śakti*, temporarily identifying them with the goddess and acknowledging them as representing her, this is a more passive kind of agency, and a very different one from that shown by Luchesi (2018) in the corresponding rituals in Himachal Pradesh. There, girls actively seek out devotees in goddess temples during Navarātri in order to be worshipped as self-appointed *kanyās* in the public domain of the temples by visiting devotees, “playing” in the temple courtyard as representatives of the goddess’s virgin aspect. When there is a high demand for girls, particularly the two last days of Navarātri, the girls can switch from one *pūjā* to the next in succession without a break (Luchesi 2018, 305).<sup>130</sup> In the Kāmākṣī temple, the selected females are passively acted upon by Brahmin priests as targets of the *pūjā*, and do not directly act themselves. However, I propose that they still have agency in that they embody the goddess and empower Kāmākṣī for her fight through being worshipped as her stand-ins.

### *Ornamenting the Goddess: Alaṃkāras*

Navarātri is known for showing the goddess in magnificent *alaṃkāras* and many devotees come for *darśana* during the festival for this reason. While *alaṃkāras* form part of everyday temple *pūjās* and are not at all particular to Navarātri, the *alaṃkāras* during the festival are made more elaborate, often with huge canopies of flower garlands, and are among the festival’s highlights and attractions for the audience.<sup>131</sup> This seems to have been the case at least

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129 A more plausible translation of the *śloka* would be “homage to her who is dear to *suvāsinīs*”, and not the way the priest interprets it.

130 Another difference between the two “types” of temple-*kanyā pūjās* is that in Himachal Pradesh they are performed in public by devotees, including locals and visitors from distant places, and not by the priests or near the sanctum. Luchesi (2018, 306) asserts that the “self-appointed” girls very likely are regarded as less appreciated compared to those of the corresponding domestic *pūjās*. In the Kāmākṣī temple it is acquaintances of the priests, as well as members of donor families, who are invited for *kanyā* and *sumāṅgalī pūjās*.

131 In the Kāmākṣī temple, the three priestly families who share the rights to worship alternate weekly throughout the year doing the *alaṃkāras* of the goddess. Each family decorates one deity for one week – if one family decorates the procession image, another decorates the image in the sanctum, and the third decorates Abhiṣeka Kāmākṣī and their turns will shift. There are no fixed donors for Navarātri *alaṃkāras* in the Kāmākṣī

since the 1980's: Fuller and Penelope Logan (1985, 82) portray *alaṃkaras* in the Mīnākṣī temple of Madurai as the “distinctive feature of Navarātri,” which attracts hosts of devotees. Many devotees I spoke to in the temple praised the beauty of Kāmākṣī's *alaṃkāras*. An elderly devotee who visited the temple for Navarātri *darśana* said: “The last ten years they have been doing such lovely *alaṃkāras* [for Navarātri]. Ammaṇ looks so beautiful!”

While smaller *ammaṇ* temples may advertise their Navarātri *alaṃkaras* in the festival program and on posters to attract devotees, the *alaṃkāras* in the Kāmākṣī temple are not planned. This is apart from the Durgā *alaṃkāra* the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Durgāṣṭamī, usually featuring the goddess seated on a tiger or a lion (figure 3.3), and the Sarasvatī *alaṃkāra* the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Sarasvatī Pūjā, when the goddess carries the *vīṇā*, an emblem of Sarasvatī. The themes of these two *alaṃkāras* remain standard each year, although how the decorations are fashioned, will vary.

Such *alaṃkāras* are a ritual in which the priests may creatively and aesthetically play with the goddess in fashioning her various decorations.<sup>132</sup> But contrasting the *alaṃkāras* of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple, which are planned months in advance by the temple's *alaṃkāra* specialist, this creativity is in the case of Kamākṣī attributed to the goddess herself. According to the priests, it is the goddess who decides her own *alaṃkāras*. She is the player who decorates her own image through the hands of the priest. Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal explained:

“It is not like each day there is one [particular] *alaṃkāra*. Whatever comes to our mind. But when I am doing [the *alaṃkāra*] on Durgāṣṭamī Ampaḷ will be sitting on a tiger, and Durgā will be on a lion. And on Sarasvatī Pūjā she will be depicted as goddess Sarasvatī. The other days it is whatever she makes us think after *abhiṣeka* is done that is depicted.”

As a young and more inexperienced priest he once tried to overrun the goddess's idea and create a nice looking Sarasvatī *alaṃkāra* modeled on one which turned out very well the previous year. It did not work out as planned:

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temple (there are donors for the *navāvaraṇa pūja*, and for Brahmotsava). The priests use what is collected and draw on their large repertoire of clothes, spare limbs and jewelry, and order fresh garlands daily.

<sup>132</sup> Archana Venkatesan (2013) captures vividly and beautifully the awe and joy with which devotees experience Srivilliputtur Āṅṭāḷ's *alaṃkāras* and relates *alaṃkāra* to the Śrīvaiṣṇava concept of *anubhāva* (enjoyment).



Figure 3.3: *Durgā alamkāra*, 2014.

“First time when I was doing the *alamkāra*, it was the first time, that day it was Sarasvatī *alamkāra*. Ampāḷ has only four hands, additionally four hands were kept, so [the *alamkāra* had] eight hands [altogether]. A donor made a *viṇā* of Tāḷampū (screw pine, a flower) and gave. It was big, it was good, so the next year I decided we will again do [the *alamkāra*] like last year, with eight hands. It took nearly three to four hours, but the *alamkāra* could not be completed. Last year I had done, but this time I could not do it. So, from that what we understand? It was not done. So, I did it with two hands. It took three hours. That time I went with head weight. She (Ampāḷ) punished me. [...] We are not doing anything; *she* only is doing [the *alamkāra*]. We do what she wants. We do not decide, what she wants only will come to our mind. Not to the mind, to the hand.”



The *alaṃkāras* of Kāmākṣī are fashioned on the spot as the priests go along with their worship, inspired by the goddess's desires through the hands of the priest. As is evident from the quote above, the priests' vision of a good *alaṃkāra* should not interrupt the process of divine inspiration.

During Navarātri the *alaṃkāras* of Kāmākṣī's procession image are on display in the Navarātri *maṇḍapam* where the goddess resides during the nine festival evenings. In 2014, her *alaṃkāras* were:

- Day 1) *Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*
- Day 2) *Piṇ kocuvam alaṃkāra*<sup>133</sup>
- Day 3) *Rājā Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*
- Day 4) *Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*
- Day 5) *Mūlasthāna Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*
- Day 6) *Kāmākṣī puṣpa (flower) alaṃkāra* (figure 3.4)
- Day 7) *Durgā alaṃkāra*
- Day 8) *Durgā alaṃkāra*
- Day 9) *Sarasvatī alaṃkāra*

The majority of these *alaṃkāras* are forms of Kāmākṣī herself and reflect the local history of the Kāmākṣī temple and the cult of Kāmākṣī. Rājā Kāmākṣī is the royal goddess and probably refers to Kāmākṣī as the manifestation of Rājārājeśvarī, another name of Lalitā Tripurasundarī (figure 3.5). Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī is a golden statue of Kāmākṣī in standing posture, which was originally in the Kanchipuram temple but brought to Thanjavur where a temple was inaugurated for her in 1786. Despite the absence of the Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī statue, she is still worshipped in her shrine in the Kāmākṣī temple through a pedestal bearing her two footprints.<sup>134</sup> Mūlasthāna Kāmākṣī is the immovable form of Kāmākṣī in the temple's sanctum.

The theme of Navarātri is represented yearly in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> *alaṃkāras* of Durgāṣṭamī and Sarasvatī Pūjā. In her second Navarātri Durgā *alaṃkāra*, Kāmākṣī was riding on a tiger, bejeweled and draped in a blue sari, with the *triśula* in one hand and a sword in the other (figure 3.6), accompanied by Durgā's festival image. The following day, when no battle was enacted and a peaceful atmosphere prevailed in the *maṇḍapa*, she was decorated as the peaceful Sarasvatī, goddess of music and learning, clad in a white sari with red borders (figure 3.7).

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133 The *kocuvam* is the pleat that is tucked into the sari in front and the *alaṃkāra*'s name refers to a particular way of draping the sari.

134 See Schier 2018.



Figure 3.4: *Kāmākṣī puṣpa (flower) alaṃkāra*, 2014.



Figure 3.5: *Rājā Kāmākṣī alaṃkāra*, 2014.



Figure 3.6: Kāmākṣī in Durgā *alaṃkāra* (right) and Durgā on Durgāṣṭamī, 2014.



Figure 3.7: *Sarasvatī alaṃkāra*, 2014.

The scheme of day 8 and 9 resembles that of the Mīnākṣī temple in Madurai (Fuller and Logan, 1985). Here, Mīnākṣī is dressed as Mahiṣāsūramardīnī on the 8<sup>th</sup>, and as the worshipper of a Śivaliṅga (*śivapūjā*) on the 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>135</sup> According to Fuller and Logan, Mīnākṣī *must* be clad in red on the day of Durgāṣṭamī, when the goddess in addition is represented with 8 arms, indicating her vehemence. Day 9 is the only day she *must* be dressed in white, the color of widows and renouncers. The shift of colors and number of arms symbolize the goddess's transformation from sexual and destructive bride (the form in which she kills the demon) to submissive renouncer negating sexuality altogether (atoning for the killing). A similar conclusion can be drawn in the Kāmākṣī temple: the goddess's change from the fierce Durgā-looking warrior goddess riding forth on her tiger or lion with weapons in her hand to the peaceful *vīṇā* player is very much reflected in her *alaṃkāras*. Still, neither the color symbolism nor the fierceness indicated by the number of the goddess's arms are as pronounced in the Kāmākṣī temple as in the Mīnākṣī temple. Although Kāmākṣī is dressed in white as Sarasvatī, the Durgā *alaṃkāra* had only two arms, and she was clad in blue.<sup>136</sup> Durgā's procession image, which accompanies Kāmākṣī on Durgāṣṭamī, on the other hand, wore red – and her fangs, visible at close hand, further indicate her fierceness.

As I discuss further in chapter 4, in many temples of non-Brahmin goddesses, the goddess assumes different *avatāras* (Skt. “form”) each Navarātri night, expressed through her *alaṃkāra*, leading up to her fight with the demon (usually on Vijayadaśamī). This is not the case with Kāmākṣī, whose *alaṃkāras* correspond to those of the other Brahmanical goddesses in Kanchipuram in that they are mere decorations. The consorts of Varadarāja Viṣṇu and Ekāmranātha Śiva are both adorned in Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, but they are not portraying distinct forms of the goddess. In these temples, the goddess does not kill any demon

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135 In the Aṅṅāmalaiyār temple of Tiruvannamalai these days are switched as the goddess Parāśakti Ammaṅ (one of the mobile forms of goddess Uṅṅāmalai) is Śivapūjā on the 8<sup>th</sup> and Mahiṣāsūramardīnī on the 9<sup>th</sup> (L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 170–171). Hernault and Reiniche propose that this is because the goddess according to mythological narratives is strengthened from the *tapas* of performing *pūjā* to Śiva and completes the killing afterwards.

136 In 2014, the Durgā *alaṃkāra* of the 7<sup>th</sup> day had 4 arms, so did the Mūlasthāna Kāmākṣī *alaṃkāra* on day 5. In contrast, Mahābhairava, the form of Kāmākṣī when she kills the demon in the KV, has 18 arms wielding 18 weapons (KV 12.34). None of Kāmākṣī's *alaṃkāras* were red, but the Rājā Kāmākṣī *alaṃkāra* was also white.

during Navarātri.<sup>137</sup> Therefore, she does not need to assume other forms through her *alaṃkāras*, she remains entirely peaceful during the festival, and the *alaṃkāras*' function is to adorn the goddess as is usual after her *abhiṣeka*. I propose that Kāmākṣī is in a middle position between the Brahmanical goddesses and the village goddesses of Kanchipuram: she does not transform into nine distinct *avatāras* during Navarātri, but splits into Durgā on Durgāṣṭamī. This is represented in her *alaṃkāra* as well as the Durgā image by her side. Following Brooks (1992, 70) and Biardeau (2004, 311), I argue that Kāmākṣī, as do Lalitā and Caṇḍī, rather creates ferocious forms than killing the demon herself.<sup>138</sup>

### *Kāmākṣī's Fight with the Demon*

Following the evening *śrīvidyā homa*, Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon Bandhāsura, known in Tamil as *curasamhāram*, is enacted for the festival's first eight evenings as a large public spectacle.<sup>139</sup> With this, the goddess's *lilā* unravels dramatically in front of her devotee's eyes. The fight is staged in the Navarātri *maṇḍapa* in the southwestern corner of the temple courtyard, which is used only for this festival. This *maṇḍapa* is also known as the *kolu maṇḍapa* because of two *kolus* that are set up for Navarātri.

Kāmākṣī's procession image is brought in procession to the *Navarātri* pavilion each evening, adorned in her *alaṃkāra* of fresh flowers, new clothes, and shining jewelry. She is carried on a palanquin and accompanied by the procession images of Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī on either side. The procession includes

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137 While no battle is enacted in the Ekāmranātha temple, in the Varadarāja temple Viṣṇu fires arrows at the demon in a *vaṇṇi* tree while the goddess undertakes a vow to secure his victory (see Hüsken 2018).

138 Looking to myth and ritual, including explanations from the priests, several interpretations are available:

- 1) Kāmākṣī becomes Durgā and kills the demon.
- 2) Kāmākṣī becomes Balā Kāmākṣī and kills the demon.
- 3) Kāmākṣī becomes Mahābhairava and kills the demon.
- 4) Kāmākṣī kills the demon after Durgā has killed another demon.
- 5) Kāmākṣī kills the demon in the *vaṇṇi* tree.

The final *alaṃkāra* of Kāmākṣī could also be symbolic for Mahiṣāsuramardīnī, acknowledging its association with Navarātri.

139 *Curasamhāram* is used as a generic term signifying a fight between the divine and the demonic. While the Sanskrit word for demon is *asura* (Ta. *acuraṇ*; anti-god), *sura* in fact came to mean God in Sanskrit. It is likely that the term *curasamhāram* comes from the enactments of Murukaṇ slaying the demon Śūrapadma (Ta. *Cūrapaṇmaṇ*), called *curasamhāram* (the destruction of Cūra[paṇmaṇ]). Respondents used this term regardless of which demon was killed.

priests, umbrella carriers, torch and lamp bearers, temple musicians and a temple elephant, as well as a crowd of devotees. First, she stops at the *yāgaśalā* housing the *kalaśas* that are temporarily installed for the festival, where *āratī* is shown for the *kalaśas* and for Kāmākṣī before she is carried in *pradakṣiṇa* (Skt. “clockwise circumambulation”) to the *maṇḍapa*.<sup>140</sup>



Figure 3.8: Boys and the demon, 2014.

140 *Āratī* is also shown near the flagpole and at all the corners of the temple when she passes (also on her way back into the temple).

Reaching the pavilion, Kāmākṣī is placed on a dais, opposing a man-sized effigy of the demon erected at the other end. The dais is situated amidst the two *kolus* and elaborate worship is carried out for Kāmākṣī in front of the gathered audience. The demon, facing the goddess has three interchangeable heads (red, black, and a buffalo head) that are alternated each evening. The priests remain with the goddess, while a group of young boys<sup>141</sup> carry out the actions of the demon (figures 3.8 and 3.9).



Figure 3.9: Boy with the demon's buffalo head, 2014.

A wire is set up between the goddess and the demon, and three sparkling fire-crackers are sent back and forth along the wire to the enthusiastic cheering of

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<sup>141</sup> In conversations with some of the boys, I learnt that they participate in the ritual for fun and in an informal way until they “grow out of it”. They are loosely connected to the temple; some live nearby, and one was the son of the temple photographer. The boys take turns to hold the head of the demon.

the crowd and intense drumming (figure 3.10). The *maṇḍapa* fills with smoke and anticipation. According to one of the firecracker men,<sup>142</sup> the brightness and speed of the cracker is an indication of the goddess's anger. As the demon is "hit," he shakes his head, and when he is beheaded with the third firecracker, the boys who impersonate the demon run up to Kāmākṣī with his weapons and head. In this moment, the music escalates as wind instruments and bells join the drums to indicate the climax. The priests smear the head with red *kuṅkumam* powder, garland it, and place it at Kāmākṣī's feet as a token of his surrender. Next, the group of devotees who have witnessed the fight pushes and rushes to be blessed with *kuṅkumam* and the flame of the ritual lamp (*ārati*).



Figure 3.10: Kāmākṣī sending firecrackers towards the demon, 2014.

The fight is performed in the same manner for seven evenings, but the procedure varies slightly the final day. The eighth day of Navarātri is called *Durgāṣṭamī* (*Durgā's eighth [day]*) and is considered the day the demon dies.<sup>143</sup> On this day, *Durgā's* festival image is carried out along with Kāmākṣī and placed beside her during the fight (figure 3.6). Depending on their *alaṅkāras*, Kāmākṣī

142 The firecrackers are made and burnt by a group of men performing fireworks in the temple hereditarily. They also do fireworks for the *Ekāmranātha* and *Varadarāja* temples.

143 In contrast to the previous days, this day a fireworks man squeezes a lime and lights a camphor flame to remove the *dṛṣṭi* (Skt. "evil eye") before lighting the cracker.



may be seated on a lion and Durgā on a tiger. This evening the battle intensifies: eight firecrackers are sent along the wire between the goddesses and the demon, and the demon changes his head three times before he is beheaded, wearing the head of a buffalo, pointing to the myth of the Devī's destruction of the demon Mahiṣa recounted in the *DM*. All three demon heads are brought up to Kāmākṣī, garlanded, smeared with *kuṅkumam*, and placed at her feet.

According to the priests I spoke with, the ritual enacts Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon Bandha(ka), as expressed in the *KV*. However, Durgā's role in the fight remains unclear: Why is Durgā present when Kāmākṣī succeeds in killing the demon – or is it Durgā who kills the demon on her behalf, contrasting the mythological narratives? The priests offered two different explanations when I inquired about Durgā's presence. One priest, Mr. Chandrasekar Sastrigal, claimed that Kāmākṣī did not manage to kill the demon by herself, and the 8th day she assumes the form of *ugrā* (Skt. "fierce") Durgā and kills him. From this perspective, Kāmākṣī once a year splits in two and reassumes the ferocious form she once possessed before she was appeased and tamed into the Śrīcakra by the Śaṅkarācārya, as local legend has it. This conforms with Brooks's statement that Lalitā in the *LU* prefers to create ferocious images of herself rather than acting ferocious (even though she *can*), in order to remain predominantly benign (1992, 70). It moreover echoes the *KV* in which the goddess takes the ferocious form of Mahābhairava while killing the demon, before she returns as a five-year-old maiden carrying the dead demon. There is a tension between the benign image of Kāmākṣī and the Kāmākṣī we are confronted with not only in the mythology but also in the enactments of killing the demon in the temple during Navarātri. As explored in chapter 2, there is a reluctance of promoting the *ugrā* nature of Kāmākṣī in the *KV* as well as in the priests' recap of the story when compared to both the *LU* and *DM*. This reluctance is transferred to the ritual setting, where Kāmākṣī splits and Durgā performs the final killing. In this way, Kāmākṣī retains her predominantly benign character yet is the cause of the destruction of the demon.

However, Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal told me that Kāmākṣī created Durgā on Durgāṣṭamī as her lieutenant, in order to drink the blood of another frightful demon, since there were in fact several demons being killed at the time. He explained that *curasaṃhāra* is a generic term for the killing of any demon, and in that way the *DM* is seen as a version of the "same story" as the one enacted in the Kāmākṣī temple. In this interpretation, Durgā joins in the battle along with Kāmākṣī to secure the burial of Bandhāsura. He explained:



Figure 3.11: Women admiring the temple *kolu*, 2014.

“Durgā has been created by Ampāl since it is not alone Bandhāsura, there is a big force [of demons]. Durgā is the special lieutenant to the goddess. Opposite to the office of our temple, there is a *jayasthamba* (Skt. “victory post”). The story is that after Bandhāsura was killed, his body was buried over there, when that place was dug, there was a demon called Raktabīja, his specialty was that if one drop of blood falls from his body, then from that a

thousand Raktabījas would emerge. So Ampāḷ asks Durgā to drink all the blood without even one drop falling down. Then only she kills Bandhāsura.”

This recap resembles a myth from the *KV* (13.1–37): While burying Bandhaka, an *asura* by the name Mallaka did penance in the burial pit. Viṣṇu killed him, so that Bandhaka could be buried as the goddess had instructed. Then, many more *asuras* appeared, and two Śivabhūtas (attendants of Śiva) came and killed them. Intoxicated by the blood they drank, they picked a fight with Viṣṇu, who defeated them.<sup>144</sup> According to Kāmākṣī’s priests, Durgā/Kālī takes on the role of the Śivabhūtas and secures the burial of the demon.

### *Cultural Program and Kolu*

Each evening, following the *curasaṃharam*, a musical program is performed in front of the goddess while she resides in the Navarātri pavilion. This usually consists of classical Carnatic music. A few devotees I spoke with in the temple linked the music to cooling the goddess, who is in a ferocious state fighting with the demon these festival evenings. The temple concert is not too formal, and people come and go. During the concert, devotees hang out in the *maṇḍapa* eating their *prasāda*, some proceed to photograph Kāmākṣī in her Navarātri *alaṃkāra* with their mobile phones; others watch and talk about the two *kolus* that surround Kāmākṣī’s dais (figure 3.11). These *kolus* are set up by the priests for the duration of the festival and consist of dolls donated to the temple by devotees who don’t keep *kolu* themselves: wedding sets, “baby shower” sets and baby Kṛṣṇas dominate the lower tiers, while deities of various sizes occupy the higher tiers. Other devotees go for *darśana* of the goddess in the sanctum.<sup>145</sup>

## Additional Ceremonies

### *Sarasvatī Pūjā*

On Sarasvatī Pūjā, the ninth day of Navarātri, Kāmākṣī is brought in procession to the *maṇḍapa* in the same manner as the eight nights before, adorned in a

<sup>144</sup> After killing the Śivabhūtas, Viṣṇu manifested in the three postures of standing, sitting, and reclining. Since he had committed a sin against Śiva (*śivopācara*), the *pañcatīrtha* was created. Viṣṇu was free from the sin through its sanctity and the *bhūtas* appointed as its guardian. (*KV* 14.37–85). The *pañcatīrtha* probably refers to the temple tank in the Kāmākṣī temple, known as Pañcagaṅgatīrtham or Pañca kaṅkai kulam. A Viṣṇu shrine at the back of the Kāmākṣī temple faces the temple tank.

<sup>145</sup> The ritual practices of *kolu*, including temple *kolus* and the practice of donating dolls, will be discussed in detail in chapters 5–7.

Sarasvatī *alamkāra* carrying the *vīṇā*. No fight is enacted this evening, but the musical program is performed as usual. The goddess is brought to peace after fighting the demon, and the atmosphere in the temple courtyard is calmer than the previous days.

Sarasvatī Pūjā is otherwise marked in the Kāmākṣī temple by worshipping the office tools and office records for a prosperous coming year.

## Rites of Closure

### *Ablution of Kāmākṣī's Weapon*

The SC prescribes a *cūrṇotsava* (festival of powder) at a water source and the ablution of the goddess along with the elephant hook (*aṃkuśa*) on the 10th day of Vijayadaśamī.<sup>146</sup> The ablution of Kāmākṣī's main weapon (Ta. *tīrttavāri*, Skt. *tīrthasnāna*, *avabhṛtasnāna*), the elephant hook, is performed in the temple tank around noon this day. Draped in a sari and garlanded, the hook is brought out in front of the *yāgaśālā* in a small palanquin. There, the sprouts from the *aṅkurārpaṇa* are put onto the palanquin and they are carried in procession to the temple tank, which is situated in the middle of the temple premises. Here, the main priest performs *abhiṣeka* to the elephant hook with water from the tank, milk, yoghurt and turmeric water, and the water from the pot with the green plant. The elephant hook is also offered bananas and smeared with lime. Next, the *aṅkurārpaṇa* sprouts are drenched in the tank before they are put at the base of the hook, and *pūjā* is performed. The priest then puts some of the sprouts onto his head, as well as onto the heads of some other priests and throws the rest to the attending audience. The sprouts represent a successful and prosperous festival period. The main priest dips the elephant hook thrice under the water in the temple tank before the priests themselves bathe along with it. The rite is accompanied by a decent number of devotees, some of whom also bathe in the tank themselves, before the elephant hook is carried in procession back into the temple.

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146 *nivartya ca nadīm gatvā hradam vānyanmahāsaraḥ | niveśya ca sarasas tīre kuryāc cūrṇotsavam tataḥ || snapanam kalpayitvā tu kṛtvāpy aṃkuśapūjanam | snāpayitvā tato devīm snāyād astrasamanvitaḥ || SC 39.45–46* — “After returning [from the *bhūtabali* in the forest, see fn. 105], having gone to a river, pool or another pond, and after reaching the shore of the water, [the chief priest] should then perform the festival of powder. After bathing and worshipping the elephant hook, thereupon after bathing the goddess, he should bathe along with the weapon.” — In 2015 the *tīrttavāri* was performed only for the elephant hook while the goddess remained inside the temple.

Modeled on a pilgrimage to a holy bathing place, *tīrttavāri* is performed to remove pollution attracted during the festival, and to induce auspicious results (Davis 2010, 33). Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal further equated the *tīrttavāri* to a *prāyaścitta* (an atonement ritual done as corrective measure), since it is also performed during lunar and solar eclipses, known as times of inauspiciousness.



Figure 3.12. *Vaṇṇimarapūjā*, 2014.

### *Worship of the Vaṇṇi Tree*

The worship of the *vaṇṇi* tree (*vaṇṇimarapūjā*) is performed in the evening of Vijayadaśamī. Prior to the arrival of Kāmākṣī and her procession, a branch of a *vaṇṇi* tree is tied to a grate in the Sannadhi Street, running eastwards from the main temple *gopuram*. The procession again encompasses the musicians, torch bearers, palanquin bearers and her priests. Kāmākṣī is placed about ten meters in front of the branch, and the main priest sprinkles the bush and gives Kāmākṣī a bow and three arrows wrapped in strings of jasmine flowers. He retrieves the arrows and bow from the goddess and shoots the flower arrows at the *vaṇṇi* branch on her behalf (figure 3.12). Then he gives the bow back to the goddess and *ārāti* is shown.

Very few devotees attended this ritual in 2014 compared to the numbers that show up for Kāmākṣī's fight with the demon. Indeed, the temple courtyard was filled to the brim with people eager to watch the goddess's procession in her golden chariot immediately afterward, but the worship of the *vaṇṇi* tree rather had an aura of solitude to it. The *pūjā*, performed at dusk outside of the

temple premises, is not announced in the festival program and is attended mostly by priests and other temple employees. Clearly, the *vaṅṅi* tree *pūjā* is not among the Navarātri rituals contributing to public spectacle.

Interestingly, Kāmākṣī's priests offered different explanations for *why* the *vaṅṅi* tree *pūjā* is performed. One priest, Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal, held that this is an atonement ritual that Kāmākṣī must perform after committing the sin of killing the demon. Then she incurred a sin called *brahmahatidoṣa*.<sup>147</sup> He explained:

“The *vaṅṅi* tree is the one [tree] that relieves one of all the sins<sup>148</sup> that one has done. Once someone is killed, you get a sin called the *brahmahatidoṣa*, Ampāl is not an exception, and so she also gets the sin. For getting relieved of the sin, she does the *vaṅṅimarapūjā*. *Brahmahatidoṣa* is a sin which occurs on killing [...] even animals”.

While it could be plausible to assume that Kāmākṣī must atone because she committed the heinous crime of brahminicide<sup>149</sup> (pointing to the demon as a Brahmin; the revived Kāmā [see chapter 2]), Mr. Satyamurti Sastrigal was very keen on emphasizing that she could get this sin from killing *anyone* – even an animal. In this interpretation, the ritual bears parallels with the *tīrttavāri* at the end of the festival, which also has atonement components.

Two other priests, however, did not mention atonement and told me that the demon did not die on the eighth day, he took the form of a *vaṅṅi* tree.<sup>150</sup>

147 Unlike in the myth of the goddess and the demon in the *Aruṅācalamāhātmya* of Tiruvannamalai, where the goddess must atone for killing a Śiva devotee (see Shulman 1976 and 1980, 179–180), it is not stated explicitly in the *KV* that Kāmākṣī commits a sin. In the *Aruṅācalamāhātmya* a *śivaliṅga* gets stuck to Durgā's hand after the murder, and she cleaves the mountain with a sword and bathes in the water that comes forth for a month to get rid of it. Fuller and Logan (1980) discuss how the *doṣa* the goddess attains from killing a Śiva devotee is removed from the goddess's hair through a hair washing ritual in the Mīnākṣī temple.

148 The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (VI 9.2) connects the *vaṅṅi* (Tamil for *śamī*) tree to sins: “O śamī! Remove from us (destroy) sins and enmities” (*śamī śamayāsmad-aghā dvēṣāmsi*) (cited by Kane 1974, 194).

149 *Brahmahatyā* (*f*) means “the murder (*hatyā*, but also *hati*) of a brahmin” while *doṣa* means “sin” or “crime” (MW). *Brahma* (in comp. for *brahman*) could however also mean a soul in general, as in the absolute spirit, which is the meaning the priest gives the word.

150 Different demons are connected to different deities and to different trees. What types of trees are connected to which gods and demons varied according to my respondents. According to the Tamil *Kantapurāṇam*, Murukaṅ killed the shape shifting *asura* Śūrapadman (Ta. Cūrapaṇmaṅ), who finally assumed the form of a gigantic mango tree, by splitting the tree in two. The two halves became the peacock that he took as his *vāhana* (vehicle) and the cock in his banner. Commemorating this, a *curasaṃhāram* is performed in the Kumarakōṭṭam Murukaṅ temple of Kanchipuram during the six-day long

Therefore, Kāmākṣī must kill the tree on Vijayadaśamī. Only the *vaṇṇi* tree *pūjā* accomplishes killing the demon Bandhāsura. Mr. Sudarshan Satrigal explained:

“Each evening there is *curasaṃhāram* in the *kolu maṇḍapa*. It happens on nine nights [*sic*] and ends on Durgāṣṭamī. Along with Ampāl, Durgā comes out in procession with her. She kills him, but he takes the form of a *vaṇṇi* tree. So, on Vijayadaśamī she will kill the tree.”

In this interpretation, rather than paralleling the *tīrttavāri*, the ritual resembles the cutting of the banana trees (standing for the rarer *vaṇṇi* trees, or, alternatively, banana trees with a branch of *vaṇṇi* within), a ritual that is performed in several other temples on Vijayadaśamī, such as the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple.<sup>151</sup> In these temples, the demon is invoked in a tree and slain by the priest on the goddess’s behalf. Kāmākṣī’s *vaṇṇi pūjā* also closely resembles the ritual performed in the Varadarāja temple on Vijayadaśamī, where a priest shoots ten arrows at the directions in front of a *vaṇṇi* tree on behalf of Varadarāja, in order to kill the demon.<sup>152</sup> As pointed out by Hildebeitel (1991, 94), an interesting inversion has taken place between South India and the North: in North India the *śamī* or *vaṇṇi* tree is worshipped as an abode of Durgā.<sup>153</sup> The tree is associated with Durgā through the *Durgāstava* hymn incorporated into the epic *Mahābhārata*, in the context where the Pāṇḍavas hide their weapons inside a *śamī* tree prior to the war – while in Tamil Nadu it is identified with the demon. The rituals including the *vaṇṇi* tree hint strongly to the royal associations of

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annual festival *skandhaśasti* (Ta. *kanta caṣṭi*), but the enactment does not include a tree. Moreover, in some myths describing how Śiva burnt Kāma to ashes, Kāma’s wrath took the form of a tree (Beck 1981, 121). Knowing that Bandhāsura, according to some myths, was created from the ashes of Kāma (see chapter 2), these associations are intriguing. See Hildebeitel (1991, chapter 5) for connections between trees, posts, and demons.

151 See chapter 4.

152 See Hüsken 2018. Several scholars describe such a ritual. It is performed on Vijayadaśamī in the Aruṇācaleśvara temple of Tiruvannamalai, where the arrows are fired on behalf of Subrahmaṇiya, who is accompanied by Durgā (L’Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 172–173). This ritual is known as *digvijaya* (Skt. “conquering the directions”) or *ambuviḍudal* (Ta. “launch of arrows”) (ibid.). In the Varadarāja temple it is known as *vaṇṇimaram pārivēṭṭai* (Ta. “*vaṇṇi* tree hunting festival”) and as *mrgayotsava* (Skt. “hunting festival”) in the ritual text *Īśvarasaṃhitā*. In Chidambaram, arrows are discharged at crossroads during the Vijayadaśamī procession “to celebrate the goddess’s victory” (Tanaka 1999, 130), but Tanaka gives no mention of a *vaṇṇi* tree or who discharges the arrows. Hildebeitel reports that the ritual is performed at “some Draupadī temples” (1991, 96–96). In the ritual he describes from Muthialpet, Arjuna shoots arrows at a *vaṇṇi* tree “to prove his strength to Draupadī before marrying her”, and the demonic status of the tree is barely hinted at (ibid.). See also Biardeau (2004).

153 See also Rodrigues 2012.

Navarātri: in North India, the worship of *śamī* (*śamī pūjā*) forms part of royal ceremonies of Vijayadaśamī, through its association with victorious Durgā, as a boundary ritual (cf. conquering the directions) or the honoring of weapons. Known from historical sources, the kings of Vijayanagara (Hüsken 2018, 187) and Ramnad (Breckenridge 1977, 88 in Hildebeitel 1991, 95) shot arrows towards directions of their enemies during Vijayadaśamī (these sources are silent about the involvement of a tree). This is possibly a remnant from the royal consecration ceremony of Vedic times (*rājasūya*), where the king mounted a chariot and shot an arrow in the direction of a *kṣatriya* relative substituting for the enemy (Heesterman 1957, 129–132, 138–139, 1985, 119 in Hildebeitel 1991, 94–95). In contemporary South Indian Hinduism, these rituals are blended and the *vaṅṅi* tree has come to represent the enemy himself (Hildebeitel 1991, 95).<sup>154</sup>

Returning to Kāmākṣī, the different interpretations of the worship of the *vaṅṅi* tree, among the priests who are working alongside within the same temple complex, points to the polysemy or multi-vocality of ritual (Turner 1967, Bloch 1974). The tree is considered either an abode of the demon or a reliever of sin. Either, Kāmākṣī must atone, or she fights the demon in two different manners. Along with the different interpretations of the roles of Durgā and Kāmākṣī in the *curasaṃhāra*, we here have an instance of/series of similar looking rituals with different meanings and different looking rituals with similar meanings.

### *Procession in the Golden Chariot*

After the *vaṅṅi* tree *pūjā*, Kāmākṣī is brought back to the temple courtyard, placed in her golden chariot (Skt. *suvarṇa ratha*) and taken in procession within the temple compound. This is a festival highlight for the devotees, and the temple is filled to the brim as Kāmākṣī circumambulates the sanctum in her shiny chariot adorned with light bulbs and led by two golden horses.<sup>155</sup> This event is accompanied by eleven *nādasvarams* (a wind instrument) and culminates the festival as the victorious goddess parades her temple.

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154 See Biardeau (2004, 1984) for other interesting symbolisms of the tree. For instance, the *vaṅṅi* is closely connected to the Vedic sacrificial post, to which the sacrificial animal (buffalo) is tied, and to the Vedic sacrificial fire (*vaṅṅi* means fire in Tamil). *Śamīpūjās* are dealt with in *purāṇas* and other medieval ritual works. See Kane (1974, 190–194).

155 Kāmākṣī journeys in the golden chariot every Friday (unless interrupted by festivals or other special observances), an event that is very popular among her devotees.



## Subsequent Rites

### *Ablutions from a Thousand Pots*

The rituals of day 11 and 12 do not form part of Navarātri but are connected to the festival and mentioned in the festival program. In the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> day, a *śrīvidyā homa* is performed, prior to the *sahasra svarṇa kalacastāpaṇam*. This is the invocation of the thousand names of the goddess, according to the *Lalitāsahasranāma*, into a thousand small golden *kalaśas*. These small pots are placed in four triangle-shaped receptacles, and a similar arrangement of *kalaśas* as the one in the *yāgaśāla* during Navarātri is kept in addition: the main *kalaśa* representing Kāmākṣī in the middle, with three *kalaśas* surrounding it, and the eight *vāgdevatās* surrounding those again. The priests chant the LS and invoke the goddesses, and at last *āratī* is shown for the *kalaśas*.

The next morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> day, there is again a *kanyā pūjā*, a *sumaṅgalī pūjā*, and a *vaduga pūja*, performed in front of the altogether 1012 *kalaśas*. Immediately after, the priests carry the twelve main *kalaśas* which are installed for the duration of the festival in procession around the temple, and finally they perform an *abhiṣeka* for the goddess in the sanctum with the main *kalaśas* and the thousand pots (*sahasrakalaśābhiṣeka*). With these ablutions, the goddess in her manifold temporary manifestations is once more re-absorbed into her own form in the temple. These ablutions are also considered *prāyaścittas*, or corrective atonement rituals.

### *Swing Festival*

In the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup> day a swing festival (Ta. *ūñcal urcava*) is held at the shrine of Kāmākṣī's procession image, during which the wives of the temple priests gently push the goddess while she is seated on her swing.<sup>156</sup> This concludes the Navarātri festival in the Kāmākṣī temple.

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter has explored the rituals that are conducted during contemporary Navarātri in the Kāmākṣī amman temple. Apart from the installation and worship of goddesses in *kalaśas*, the rituals that give this festival its special character in the Kāmākṣī temple are the Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the fight between

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156 Tanaka (1999) observes that in Chidambaram, girls from the priestly families do *āratī* for the goddess on her swing. Taken together this points to the "swing festival" in Brahmin temples during Navarātri as a largely female activity.

Kāmākṣī and the demon and the subsequent worship of the *vaṇṇi* tree, and the worship of prepubescent girls and auspicious married women.

Among these Navarātri rituals, it is particularly the *alaṃkāras* that allow for playfulness in decorating the goddess's image with elaborate flower canopies, additional limbs, cloth, jewelry, and the like. The aesthetic creativity ultimately belongs to the goddess and manifests as divine inspiration through the priests' hands. The Navarātri *alaṃkāras* of this temple give importance to the local form of the goddess Kāmākṣī, in that they display the history of the Kāmākṣī temple and the *Śrīvidyā* cult through decorating Kāmākṣī primarily as various forms of herself. At the end of the festival, she is decorated as warrior Durgā followed by the peaceful Sarasvatī on Sarasvatī Pūjā, alluding to common Navarātri motifs. An important point is that her *alaṃkāras* rather *adorn* than *transform* Kāmākṣī – as opposed to those of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple.

During the festival, and while wearing these special decorations, Kāmākṣī sports with the demon Bandhāsura in a ritual drama enacted as a public spectacle for eight evenings in the Navarātri pavilion. Through this ritual the goddess's *līlā* is played out for her worshippers, and the rush of devotees to receive *ārati* once the demon is decapitated indicates the power of the event. Despite of a dramatic and violent fight there is reluctance towards promoting the fierce nature of Kāmākṣī in myth as well as ritual. Her form as a fierce warrior could be more pronounced in *alaṃkāras*, and the battle scenes are not elaborated on in any of the myths on Kāmākṣī and the demon – they are absent. I have shown that different interpretations prevail in myth, ritual, and explanations of different priests (and the audience)<sup>157</sup> on how and if Kāmākṣī kills the demon and Durgā's role in it. This connects to the ambivalent nature of Kāmākṣī as a Brahmin goddess: according to local legend, her inherently fierce powers were tamed and subdued by the Śaṅkarācārya and confined into the *śrīcakra*, which is now the recipient of *vaidika* worship in the temple. Once a year Kāmākṣī reassumes this ferocious form for the sake of conquering the demon. And succeeding she must atone by means of shooting arrows at the *vaṇṇi* tree. But this *vaṇṇi* tree carries several layers of interpretation and might also stand for the demon and his final killing. In yet another interpretation, Kāmākṣī splits into Durgā, leaves the impure task of killing the demon to her, and remains predominantly benevolent. It is important to note that all these explanations co-exist within the same tradition and environment and are apparently not contested.

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157 Most devotees did not know, or were concerned about, the identity of the demon in the *curasaṃhāra*.

There is more emphasis on women during Navarātri than during the rest of the ritual year in the Kāmākṣī temple. This is despite of their rather passive role; worshipped by the priests as the goddess's representatives. The close connection between females and the goddess through their shared *śakti* is particularly evident during Navarātri and when worship of the goddess in human form reaches the Supreme Śakti. This is emphasized also in the *SC*. However, the prepubescent girl and the auspicious married woman are the two states of womanhood that are preferred to other forms, excluding unmarried and barren women, and widows.<sup>158</sup> As pointed out by Hüsken (2018, 189), *kanyās* and *sumaṅgalīs* are defined in terms of their state in the reproductive cycle: while *sumaṅgalīs* have enacted their fertility and are highly auspicious, *kanyās* as potential *sumaṅgalīs* are ambivalent since they have not yet realized their fertility. Navarātri can therefore be seen as celebrating women's fertile and therefore auspicious aspect. The worship of prepubescent girls points to the mythology of the *KV* as well, in that the girls should be under the age of 9, which is the age of Kāmākṣī when she kills the demon. These *pūjās* can be interpreted as empowering the goddess for her fight. Female agency is also present in the wives of the temple priests pushing the goddess's swing on the final day. Still, the predominantly female scene during Navarātri continues to be the home, where the wives of the temple priests have more clear-cut ritual roles.

Apart from the worship of prepubescent girls and auspicious married women, none of the other rituals that constitute the distinct form of the contemporary festival (Navarātri *alaṅkāras*, the fight between Kāmākṣī and the demon and the subsequent worship of the *vaṅṅi* tree) are mentioned in the ritual handbook *SC*. Although the *SC* contains a myth about the goddess and the demon Andhaka, the priests relate the ritual practices to the mythology of the *KV* and the killing of Bandhāsura. These Navarātri rituals are shaped by prevailing local practices and mythology which are not expressed in the ritual handbook.

In stark contrast to the domestic sphere, and also in contrast to the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple which we turn to next, devotees who come to the Kāmākṣī temple for celebrating Navarātri are a passive audience of ritual performances. Surely, people actively partake in *darśana* as a reciprocal process, but the priests perform the prescribed rituals for the goddess without any active involvement by devotees: in the Kāmākṣī temple, ritual agency belongs almost exclusively to the male Brahmin priests.

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158 See also chapter 5.