

Chapter 4

Navarātri in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ Temple

Despite being small and modest, the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple celebrates Navarātri grandly, and is known in Kanchipuram for its magnificent and elaborate themed Navarātri *alaṃkāras*. Vijayadaśamī culminates the festival when Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ possesses her priest and kills the demon which is invoked in a banana tree. Through describing and discussing the temple's festival procedures, I will show how the ritual agency of women is expressed in this temple during Navarātri; explore the nature of the divine feminine; and point to how creativity and playfulness manifests in the celebrations.

The Festival Area and the Crowd

This modest roadside temple and the small road it occupies are transformed into a festive area for Navarātri. Devotional songs continually boom from huge loudspeakers, there are light bulbs and floodlights, flags saying *om śakti* decorate the side of the road, and huge banners and posters announce the festival's entertainment and *alaṃkāra* programs. A stage is erected with rows of plastic chairs in front, where the evening entertainment program is held while devotees have *darśana* of the goddess in her Navarātri *alaṃkāra*. Fences are put up for regulating the *darśana* queues, and there is a provisional shoe shed to keep the footwear. When trucks or buses occasionally pass by, it takes some work to thread them through the crowd. In 2014 a bouncing castle and a small merry-go-round was set up for children along with a small stall selling sweets.

The crowd attending Navarātri celebrations in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple grows visibly from year to year. Many come every evening, and many tie protective cords (Ta. *kāppu*, Skt. *rakṣabandhana*), signifying their vows to Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ. A smaller group among the devotees who tie the *kāppu* belongs to the temple trust.¹⁵⁹ During Navarātri they are dressed uniformly in saffron colored clothes, and all wear a *śaktimāla* (necklace symbolizing goddess devotion) around their necks and are allotted special tasks in the temple. The tasks

159 The trustees who do temple service during Navarātri belong to the dance class of the priest's son, Mr. Sanjay, who in addition to making Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ's *alaṃkāras* works as a disco dance teacher and a headmaster at a children's school. According to the *pūjā-ri*'s calculations, the trust consists of approximately 30–40 people out of the couple of hundred people who altogether tie the *kāppu*.

include distributing flowers or *prasāda*, serving food, helping with ritual preparations, and handling the huge crowd of devotees. Because of the tying of protective cords, it is mainly the same people who attend the Navarātri celebrations here daily, and for those who tie it, Navarātri is a temple celebration. In contrast to the Kāmākṣī temple, I was only able to locate one single devotee in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple who kept *kolu*: a Brahmin teacher and her family who lived very close by. She did not tie *kāppu* but attended *darśana* of the goddess in her Navarātri *alaṃkāras* every evening.

While the devotees are of both genders and include families, elders and children, women outnumber the men on many ritual occasions, and several rituals are also reserved to women. The temples of village goddesses are often differently gendered than those of Brahmanical goddesses. Here, women participate in many rituals and have a more prominent and active role. The number of women was also emphasized by the *pūjāri* Mr. Mahesh, who made the sweeping statement that “anything related to the temple, only ladies mostly participate”.

One reason why this small Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple is able to celebrate grandly is that donors, among them companies as well as individuals, sponsor each festival event.¹⁶⁰ These include the morning and evening *abhiṣekas* of the goddess, her *alaṃkāras*, the *prasāda*, and the food provided for guests (Ta. *aṅṅatāṅam*). In interviews the *pūjāri* as well as his son Mr. Sanjay, who fashions the *alaṃkāras*, played down the importance of the donors. The son rather stressed that their grand Navarātri celebration is a consequence of their temple being private, whereas the dependency of donors would be stronger in public temples.¹⁶¹

Navarātri and Āṭi

Along with the Āṭi festival (mid July-mid August), Navarātri is considered a main festival in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple. Āṭi is a festive season devoted to the worship and celebration of the goddess.¹⁶² Navarātri is the only festival going on for a prolonged period of altogether 12 days, which makes it a

160 While some donors have sponsored Navarātri rituals for several years, others are new. The sponsors of each festival event are given in the festival program, along with the duration of their sponsoring.

161 Implied here is that since it is *their* temple, Mr. Sanjay’s ideas for *alaṃkāras* come first, and then the donors come into the picture financing them without a say in Mr. Sanjay’s artistic expression.

162 See Allocco (2009).

highlight of the ritual year. Moreover, many of the rituals often associated with Āṭi are performed during Navarātri in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple. These include the tying of protective cords, carrying milk pots in procession and collective piercings. The temples' Navarātri celebrations start on the day before Navarātri usually does and extend to the day after Vijayadaśamī.¹⁶³

Ritual Procedures during Navarātri

I categorize the rituals in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple similar to those of the Kāmākṣī temple, namely inaugural rites, daily observances, additional ceremonies and subsequent rites.¹⁶⁴ I have, however, left out the rites of closure, as there is no *tīrtha* circle in this temple.¹⁶⁵ The daily Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the goddess's fight with the demon, and the two processions beginning and ending the festival are discussed and analysed in detail because these rituals provide Navarātri with its special character in this temple.

Inaugural Rites

Homa and Preparation of the Kalaśa

The festival is initiated with a *Kaṇapatihōmam* (Ta. "fire oblations for Gaṇeśa", remover of obstacles) in the morning of the first day. Following the *homa*, a pot is prepared and kept near the temple's Durgā shrine during Navarātri.¹⁶⁶ The water from this pot will be sprinkled over the devotees after their procession on the day after Vijayadaśamī.

163 This is on *amāvācai*, new moon day. The priest explained in an interview that the day after new moon (Skt. *prathama tithi*, the first lunar day) is considered inauspicious, and therefore they start the festival the day before.

164 By applying this subdivision which derives from a Brahmanical temple festival to the celebrations of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple I do not mean to imply that the Brahmanical way of celebrating is the "standard".

165 The milk pot procession with its ablutions could fit into the category of rites of closure in that it cools down the goddess after her fight with the demon. Since it is held the day after Vijayadaśamī I label it a "subsequent ritual".

166 The worship of Vaṇaturkkaiyamman's image has its own daily sponsor during Navarātri. Occasionally Durgā had special *alaṃkāras* too: one evening during Navarātri 2015 she was decorated entirely with bangles, another evening she was decorated with banknotes.

Bringing Gifts for the Mother

In the evening of the first day, the *tāy cīr koṇḍu varutal* (Ta. “bringing gifts for the mother”) procession marks Navarātri’s beginning for the devotees. Here, Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ’s female devotees, some along with their children, carry gifts (Ta. *cīr*, lit. prosperity, wealth) in procession and offer them to their mother (Ta. *tāy*) Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ when reaching her temple. This is the first in a series of three rituals during these 12 days which are reserved to female participants, and the procession frames the festival along with the milk pot and piercing procession, which also has a strong female character to it, since only women carry milk pots. In contrast to the milk pot procession, this ritual is purely devotional, and is not related to any vow. For the *tāy cīr* procession, women dress in their best saris, while in the milk pot procession, they are uniformly clad in yellow and red.

The women present items connected to femininity and auspiciousness to the goddess on a plate (figure 4.1). This is modeled on bringing gifts to the husband’s family in the context of weddings: *cīr varicai* is the dowry presented and ritually displayed on the couple’s wedding day (cf. Allocco 2009b, 289). In 2015, most women carried plates filled with saris, bangles, flowers, garlands, coconuts, betel leaves, *kuṅkumam* and turmeric powders and various fruits, but two women had filled their plates with sugar; and another carried a homemade sewing kit including fabrics, ribbons, and scissors. The gifts are taken by the temple and may subsequently be distributed to other devotees.¹⁶⁷

The procession starts from a nearby Kaṅṅiyammaṅ temple¹⁶⁸ and ends at the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple. The ritual is a recent addition to the Navarātri programs of the two involved temples, as it had only been practiced for 5 years in 2015. While the women gather at the Kaṅṅiyammaṅ temple with their gifts in the early evening, some of the ritual musicians (Ta. *pampaikkārar*) who preside over several rituals during the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple’s Navarātri celebrations prepare a *kalaśa* in which goddess Kaṅṅiyammaṅ is invoked.¹⁶⁹ This pot

167 The plates are returned to the devotees. The priest estimated that up to 70 plates were offered yearly in this ritual during the past five years.

168 The Kaṅṅiyammaṅ temple is situated about a 10-minute walk from along the Vandavasi Road towards Kanchipuram. The preparations for the *tāy cīr* procession happen while the procession image of Kaṅṅiyammaṅ is adorned in her Navarātri *alamkāra* prior to her swing festival (Skt. *uñjal sevā*, Ta. *uñcal cēvai*) which is performed daily during Navarātri there.

169 On the role of the *pampaikkārar* in these rituals, see Allocco (2009, 386–187).

has a metal face fitted to a bundle of *nīm* leaves¹⁷⁰ sticking up from its mouth and is clad in a sari. The Kaṇṇiyammaṇ temple priest's wife will carry the pot in the procession of women bearing gifts to Paḍavēṭṭammaṇ (figure 4.2).

After the preparations, in 2015 a performing arts group performed a tiger dance (Ta. *puliyāṭṭam*)¹⁷¹ in front of Kaṇṇiyammaṇ's procession image, which by now was adorned with flowers and seated on a swing right outside the temple. Four men in tiger costumes and tiger masks mimicked the ferocious movements of tigers, accompanied by intense drumming. The tigers, the women carrying their plates, the goddess in the *kalaśa*, other devotees and the group of musicians then joined in the procession.

Reaching the Paḍavēṭṭammaṇ temple after about half an hour, the pot embodying the goddess receives *ārātī* from Paḍavēṭṭammaṇ's *pūjāri* before he carries it into the sanctum where it is kept for the duration of the festival. The women, one after another, place their plates with gifts outside the goddess's sanctum.

Tying of Protective Cords

In the early evening, the *pūjāri* ties the protective cord to the wrist of the *mūla-mūrti* of Paḍavēṭṭammaṇ.¹⁷² This *kāppu* has a piece of turmeric tied to it and is rubbed in turmeric. He thereupon ties one to the *triśula*, one to the Durgā image in the right corner of the temple, and one to the procession image (figure 4.3). After the women have presented their gifts to Paḍavēṭṭammaṇ, he ties the *kāppu* to a group of devotees, before one of his sons finally ties it to him.

170 The *nīm* tree is considered the sacred tree of the goddess. With their cooling qualities, *nīm* leaves are prevalent in rituals related to curing chickenpox in Mariyamman temples. The soothing juice from the *nīm* leaves is also used in Ayurvedic medicine.

171 The South Indian folk art of tiger dance is strongly associated with Navarātri (Dasara) in Andhra Pradesh (known there as *puli vēśam*), but is vanishing from contemporary celebrations (see <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-andhrapradesh/lsquoPuli-veshamrsquo-a-vanishing-art/article16523511.ece>, accessed 25.08.22).

172 See Allocco (2009b, 398–401), Beck (1981, 110–111), Diehl (1956, 252–253), Foulston (2002, 160–162) and Hildebeitel (1991, 82–91) for other scholarly discussions on the *kāppu*. Diehl (1956, 253) explains the *kāppu* as a three-dimensional *yantra* which “draws a circle around the person or the thing protecting it from outside disturbances and preventing power from leaking out”.



Figure 4.1: Gifts to the goddess, 2015.



Figure 4.2: Woman carrying the *kalaśa* in which the goddess is invoked, 2015.



Figure 4.3: Priest tying the *kāppu* to the *trīśula*, 2015.

The tying of protective cords (Ta. *kāppu kaṭṭi*) around the wrist functions on several levels: it sets Navarātri off as an important festival, offers protection during the festival period when the distinctions between sacred and profane realms are then at their most fluid and constantly changing (Foulston 2002, 161), and symbolizes the vows (Ta. *viratam*, Skt. *vrata*) of the participants.¹⁷³ While on vow, the devotee is under certain restrictions, such as bathing twice a day, walking barefoot, sleeping on the floor,¹⁷⁴ eating vegetarian food, abstaining from intoxication and sexual intercourse, and not uttering any bad words. The devotee should fast on the day of the milk pot procession, and ideally not cross the borders of the *ūr* (Ta. “village, neighborhood”), meaning Kanchipuram. Since this may be difficult in practice, the rule has been relaxed not to stay overnight. The tying literally means safeguarding and protection and involves a reciprocal protection between the devotee and the goddess. The devotee is protected by adhering to the imposed restrictions of the vow, and the

173 Harman (2006), Younger (2001 [1980]), and Allocco (2008) have written about vows in the Māriyamman tradition.

174 This means avoiding contact with anything that may be polluted with sexual and menstrual fluids (Allocco 2009, 400).

goddess is safeguarded from contact with polluted elements (Allocco 2009b, 399). Women who have tied the *kāppu* are allowed to enter the sanctum on the day of the milk pot procession. According to the *pūjāri*, the goddess, too, is considered taking up a vow during Navarātri, to “kill evil mentality”.

Daily Observances

Worship Routines

During the total of twelve Navarātri days Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ receives a daily morning *abhiṣeka*, and the priest chants Tamil *ślokas* and mantras to bring forth the goddess, praying for the prosperity of the devotees and donors. Then Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ receives food offerings around noon, and about two o'clock in the afternoon a second *abhiṣeka* is performed for her. After this, the preparations for the evening *alaṃkāra* will start. The ornamentation of the goddess will be complete around 7–8 PM, and by then devotees have started to gather in front of the temple. Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ receives *pūjā* behind a curtain before the *alaṃkāra* is shown to an eager audience as is the climax of the *pūjā*, exposing the goddess luminous with power, transformed from a simple black stone statue to a colorful display. *Darśana* of the goddess in her *alaṃkāra* goes on for hours, after which the devotees receive the goddess's *prasāda*.

Entertainment Program

Each evening an entertainment program is performed on the stage across the street from the temple. The entertainment ranges from various dance forms to classical and contemporary music, street theatre (Ta. *kuttu*) and fancy-dress competitions for children, who will wear different costumes of gods, mythological characters or religious/political leaders and recite dialogues. In 2015 the entertainments were:

- 1) Tiger dance and drumbeats (*puliyāṭṭam*)
- 2) Tiger dance and drumbeats (*puliyāṭṭam*)
- 3) Confluence of arts (*kalaicaṅkamam*, that is various entertainments of music, dance etc.)
- 4) Ancient drama (*purartāna nāṭakam*)
- 5) Puppet show of Valli's wedding to Murukaṅ (*vallitirumana pommalāṭṭam*)
- 6) Music performance (*iṅṅicai kaccēri*)
- 7) Debate (*ciṟappu paṭṭimanṅam*)
- 8) Fancy dress competition (*māruvēṭappōṭṭi*)

- 9) “Nine moods” dance (*navaraca nāṭṭiyam*)
- 10) Competition (*taṇittiraṇ pōṭṭi*, competition where emerging artists may perform their skills)
- 11) *Urīyaṭi viḷā* (a competition where a pot is hung high up and should be broken)
- 12) Folk drumming and “water pot” dance (*naiyāṇḍi mēlam* and *karakāṭ-ṭam*)
- 13) Dance program

The stage is inaugurated on the 1st evening after tying the *kāppu*. The atmosphere is informal, as the entertainment happens simultaneously as the *darśana* of the goddess. People come and go and may watch the entertainment while standing in line for *darśana*.

Two days after Vijayadaśamī a dance show with *alaṃkāra* maker Mr. Sanjay’s dance class brings the vibrant festivities to an end.

Providing Food

For the past five years, the temple has provided food for the donors and invited guests, increasing from about 50 people in the beginning to about 200 people in 2014. This is served in a back room behind the temple, in front of an image of goddess Parvatavarttiṇi seated on a lion.¹⁷⁵ She receives worship from the donor of the *alaṃkāra* of the evening before the food is served.

Transforming the Goddess through Alaṃkāras

Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ represents different forms of the divine each day through her evening *alaṃkāras*. The Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple has its own *alaṃkāra* maker, Mr. Sanjay, the son of the *pūjāri*. As explained, *alaṃkāras* form part of *pūjā* in temples and are not particular to Navarātri, but the more elaborate and themed series of *alaṃkāras* depicting the goddess in various forms each day, are especially made for this occasion.¹⁷⁶ Revealing the *alaṃkāra* for the devotees each evening by unveiling the curtain covering the goddess’s sanctum is a spectacle, and devotees pine for receiving Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ’s *ārati* once it is shown.

As outlined in chapter 3, the *alaṃkāras* in the famous Brahmin temples of Kanchipuram during Navarātri adorn the goddess rather than transform her

¹⁷⁵ Parvatavarttiṇi is the consort of Irāmanātasvāmi of Rameshwaram.

¹⁷⁶ The other occasions during the ritual year which require special *alaṃkāras* in the temple of Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ are January 1st, Cittirai (April–May) 1st, Cittirai kattiri viḷā (peak summer) and the Āṭi festival.

through the process. That is, they do not necessarily depict or imitate forms of other goddesses, and they are not planned or themed.¹⁷⁷ Village goddesses on the other hand more often have themed *alaṃkāras* that may be announced and advertised beforehand in the temples' festival program and on posters or banners near the temples. These *alaṃkāras* are more innovative and creatively made compared to the more traditional *alaṃkāras* in Brahmin temples.¹⁷⁸ They can take hours to finish, as they are elaborately made with a variety of ingredients. Mr. Sanjay usually uses sandal paste as a base, which is applied onto the stone images. He paints upon the sandal paste to change the color and contour the goddess's eyebrows, eyes, mouth, fingers, toes, and nails. Eyebrows, eyes, and mouth are finished with a thread for accuracy. Mr. Sanjay considers the face very important, as it should express the age or gender of the manifestation which is depicted. The face should look as good when viewed from up close as from a distance, and succeeding in this is, according to Mr. Sanjay, what distinguishes him from other *alaṃkāra* makers. Other ingredients that are applied to the *alaṃkāra* include flowers, buds, garlands, (*nīm*) leaves, silver and golden foil, paper, beads, bricks, clay, ornaments and jewelry, spare limbs, saris, cloth, headgear, additional images/effigies and attributes, fruits, vegetables, food, and banknotes.

In the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple the Navarātri *alaṃkāras* are the result of months of preparations and are among the highlights (if not the highlight) of the ritual year. Importantly, they also require quite substantial funds, and people sponsor them. According to the *pūjāri*, the *alaṃkāras* of Navarātri in 2014 each cost about 20,000 INR (ca. US\$300; approximately an average monthly salary), and the most expensive one 50,000 INR (ca. US\$780).¹⁷⁹ While some donors are individual people, others are silk businesses in Kanchipuram who get their brands advertised in the festival program, and have done so for

177 In the Kāmākṣī temple this is except for the Durgā *alaṃkāra* on the 8th day and the Sarasvatī *alaṃkāra* on the 9th day.

178 By "traditional," I mean that the *alaṃkāras* of Brahmin goddesses look more like *alaṃkāras* you will find in several other temples and for other occasions than Navarātri: they are not themed or planned in advance, they ornament only the goddess and not her surroundings, and fewer ingredients are used (mainly flowers, spare limbs, clothes, and jewelry). This being said, Brahmin priests take great pride in fashioning the *alaṃkāras* beautifully, and Kāmākṣī's *alaṃkāras* are equally appreciated by her devotees.

179 This was the *poṇṇiyammaṇ alaṃkāra*, a form of the goddess who is "fond of children." She was surrounded by effigies of children that were manufactured on demand by a *sthapati* (Ta. *tapati*, a temple architect/sculptor).

years.¹⁸⁰ The donors are also honored by the temple priest before the *alaṃkāra* is revealed.

A priest of the Varadarāja temple connected the difference in *alaṃkāra* styles and practices to the fact that independent goddesses assume ferocious forms to slay the demon, while the Brahmin goddesses, who are represented as consorts of male gods, do not. In other Brahmin temples in Tamil Nadu the ritual of conquering the demon may be enacted with either the husband or the son of the goddess shooting arrows at a *vaṇṇi* tree.¹⁸¹ In contrast to the Brahmin goddesses, independent goddesses are transformed through the *alaṃkāras*; here they are not considered mere decorations. Accordingly, Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ, who has manifested in her temple as a peaceful goddess, is considered ferocious during the Navarātri period, until she has killed the demon. The *pūjāri* explained: “Day by day, one *śakti* after another is getting formed in her”.

An independent goddess can be depicted as various distinct goddesses (such as Mīnākṣī, Kāmākṣī, Annapūrṇā, or the female saint Āṇṭāl), as different forms of herself (various Māriyamman̄s, such as *muttumāriyamman̄*,¹⁸² “pearl” Māriyamman̄, figure 4.4), or as attributes of the divine (such as the *Paṇiḷṅka* (ice liṅga) *mūrti*, where an ice phallus is constructed around the image, or the *Tiriculanāyaki* (lady of the trident) *alaṃkāra* (figure 4.5), where the image is depicting a trident, a main weapon of the goddess). She may also be depicted as male gods. For a period of several years, Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ was transformed into one of Viṣṇu’s ten *avatāras* (Ta. *tacāvatāram*, Skt. *daśavatāra*) each Navarātri Saturday.¹⁸³

Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ was during Navarātri 2014 ornamented in altogether 12 different *alaṃkāras*:

- 1) *Taṅka kavaca* (golden armor) *alaṃkāra*
- 2) *Cantaṇamāri* (sandal Māri[yammaṇ]) *alaṃkāra*
- 3) *Tīppāñciyamman̄* (goddess jumping into the fire) *alaṃkāra*
- 4) *Poṇṇiyammaṇ* *alaṃkāra*
- 5) *Śrī purrumāriyamman̄* (anthill Māriyamman̄) *alaṃkāra*
- 6) *Tiriculanāyaki* (lady of the trident) *alaṃkāra*

180 The eldest *alaṃkāra* donor is a Sah family who runs a well-known silk emporium in Kanchipuram. They have sponsored the Vijayadaśamī *alaṃkāra* since the beginning of the temple’s Navarātri celebrations nearly 40 years ago.

181 See Hüsken 2018 and L’Hernault and Reiniche 1999.

182 Muttu or “pearls” refer to the various poxes Māriyamman̄ is believed to inflict on her devotees. She is seen as simutanously the cause and the cure of pox diseases.

183 Deities are associated with the various weekdays, and Saturdays are for Viṣṇu.

- 7) *Piḷḷaikaḷai kāttaruḷum pēraraci* (great queen who protects and blesses the children) *alaṃkāra*
- 8) *Śrī periyāyi paṭavēṭṭammaṅ* (bigger Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ) *alaṃkāra*
- 9) *Muttu* (pearl) *alaṃkāra*
- 10) *Śrī maḷaimāri* (rain-Māri[yammaṅ]) *alaṃkāra*
- 11) *Kalkattā kāḷi visvarūpa taricaṇam* (Calcutta Kāḷi viewing of the universal form) *alaṃkāra*
- 12) *Cānta corūpiṇi* (peaceful embodiment) *alaṃkāra*



Figure 4.4. *Muttu* (pearl) *alaṃkāra*, 2014. © V. Krishna.



Figure 4.5. *Tiriculanāyaki* (lady of the trident) *alaṃkāra*, 2014. © V. Krishna.



Figure 4.6: Tippāñciyamman (goddess jumping into the fire) alaṅkāra, 2014.
© V. Krishna.



Figure 4.7: Śrī puṛu (anthill) Māriyamman alaṅkāra, 2014. © V. Krishna.

The *Tippāñciyamman* (goddess jumping into the fire) *alaṅkāra* (figure 4.6)¹⁸⁴ was a new creation of 2014. Here, the goddess descends into a pot filled with what gives the impression of live, sparkling flames: the pot is filled with yellow and red paper along with a fan and a zero-watt bulb. Some of the *alaṅkāras* not only transformed the goddess, but the entire sanctum or even the temple. These included the *Śrī purru* (anthill) *Māriyamman alaṅkāra*, in which the goddess is clad into a huge *kunkumam* dotted termite hill, with eggs and small pots of milk placed on it, under a *nīm* branch (figure 4.7).¹⁸⁵ The idea for this *alaṅkāra* was created 15 years back and is often used for Navarātri. It is made from about 500 bricks and hard work to construct. Mr. Sanjay said about this *alaṅkāra*: “Of all the *alaṅkāras*, this is my backbone”. For the *Maḷaimāri* (rain-Māri[yammaṅ]) *alaṅkāra* the temple is turned into the scene of a rainstorm with sprinklers and thunder and lightning devices installed on the ceiling.¹⁸⁶ In the *Śrī periyāyi paṭavēṭṭammaṅ* (bigger Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ) *alaṅkāra*, the stone image in the sanctum is clad into a huge head, and in addition a bigger than live-size goddess is constructed out of clay, lying on a bed of *nīm* leaves and limes on the floor in between the sanctum and the *triśula* (figures 4.8 and 4.9).

184 The term *Tippāñciyamman* refers to deified women who committed *satī* (self immolation on their husbands’ funeral pyre). Many such women are commemorated in South India with *satī* stones. According to the *sthalapurāṇa* of the Padaivedu Reṇukāmpāl temple from which Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ’s name is derived, Reṇukā performed *satī* following her husband Jamadagni on the funeral pyre, but rain clouds prevented her from burning and she became a goddess (see Craddock 1994, 120–143).

185 Anthills are considered manifestations of the goddess as well as the dwelling place of the goddess in her snake (Skt. *nāga*) form. Milk and eggs are common offerings to snakes in temples. See Allocco (2009b, 2013b, 2013a) for discussions on snake goddess traditions in Tamil Nāḍu.

186 Rain, disease (including removal of black magic) and fertility are among the main attributes of Māriyamman (Ilkama 2012, 25).



Figure 4.8: Śrī periyāyi paṭavēṭṭamman (bigger Paṭavēṭṭamman) alaṃkāra, sanctum, 2014. © V. Krishna.



Figure 4.9: Śrī periyāyi paṭavēṭṭamman (bigger Paṭavēṭṭamman) alaṃkāra, temple floor, 2014. © V. Krishna.



Figure 4.10: *Cānta corūpiṇi* (peaceful embodiment) *alaṃkāra*, 2015.

The two final Navarātri *alaṃkāras* neatly depict the goddess's transformation from ferocious to benevolent, which is expressed in ritual too. These two *alaṃkāras* are the only two that stay the same each year (the actual artistic expression, however, is subject to change). On Vijayadaśamī Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ is the fierce (*ugrā*) Kalkatta Kālī, slayer of the Buffalo Demon, depicted with ten arms and pointing her trident towards a figure of the demon (*visvarupa taricaṇam alaṃkāram*); the following evening she is again the peaceful Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ (*cānta corūpiṇi alaṃkāram*) after she has received the milk pot ablutions. In this form, the festival image of Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ is adorned with flowers and placed on a swing inside the temple, with leaves, pineapples, grapes, bananas, pomegranates, and oranges hanging from the ceiling and walls to resemble the peaceful atmosphere of a soothing forest (figure 4.10).

While this kind of fancy and creative *alaṃkāras* are done also in other temples in Kanchipuram, and, as seen in newspapers and online, across Tamil Nadu, Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ's *alaṃkāra* maker Mr. Sanjay claims to be the pioneer in

Kanchipuram when it comes to fashioning innovative *alaṃkāras*.¹⁸⁷ He started creating *alaṃkāras* for Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ as a 10-year-old boy in the 1990's. First, he made traditional “*kāppu alaṃkāras*” decorating the idol with sandal paste, turmeric or *kuṅkumam*. His father, the *pūjāri*, supervised him, but gradually he was allowed to let his creativity unfold while experimenting with decorating the image. Some experiments also went wrong, such as when the image was decorated with fresh jasmine buds for the *muttu* (pearl) *Māriyamman alaṃkāra*, to make it look like pox pearls. The buds started to blossom in the evening and gave a different look than intended.¹⁸⁸

As a kid Mr. Sanjay started out with little money, and experimented with golden and silver foil, creating the golden and silver *kavaca* (armor) *alaṃkāras*, to the cost of 10 rupees, compared to maybe 10 lacks if it were to be done with real gold and silver. For his first *visvarūpa taricaṇam alaṃkāra*, he used round-shaped incense boxes to produce the additional hands of Kālī and her feet in standing posture. Gradually his various *alaṃkāras* were well received by the devotees of the temple:

“All devotees were happy and appreciated the efforts [of making the *alaṃkāra*]. Then I stood with the name Sanjay. Only then I realized that people always wanted some changes. Stereotypic *alaṃkāras* will not be entertaining. Then I started doing different *alaṃkāras*. [...] Whatever *alaṃkāra* I imagine, the Goddess herself changes to that form. Then, I got the confidence I can do any *alaṃkāra*, whatever it may be.”

Mr. Sanjay creatively responds to the desires of the audience, who wants to be entertained by the *alaṃkāras* and demands artistic changes. The devotees I met in the temple in turn praised and clearly appreciated the beauty (Ta. *aḷaku*) of Sanjay's *alaṃkāras*. He aesthetically plays with the goddess's image, turning her into an embodied display (Rodrigues 2018, 324). She should be beautiful and attractive, but importantly, recognizable. Once, he was met with the suspicion that he placed another idol in the sanctum, since the goddess was totally transformed from her usual appearance. To avoid such questioning, Mr. Sanjay tries to leave the snake on her forehead visible. He estimates: “I have about 200 different *alaṃkāras*. On seeing them, people will be spellbound. All are grand.”

187 Mr. Sanjay is also hired by other temples across Tamil Nadu to fashion *alaṃkāras*, and trains people in their making. For creative *alaṃkāras* in Bangalore, including a robot Navarātri *alaṃkāra* where the goddess's arm moved as to strike a papier maché buffalo with her trident, see Srinivas (2006).

188 Today he uses buds from the creep jasmine (*nantiyārvaṭṭai*) for this *alaṃkāra*, which do not blossom after they are plucked (figure 5.9).

The temple's avant-garde *alaṃkāras* points to the importance of ritual display, which, as pointed out by Allocco (2009, 2018), characterizes much of the contemporary religious sphere in Tamil Nadu.¹⁸⁹ This is salient also in the *kolu* displays discussed in chapters 5–7. In her examination of the Āṭi festival in temples of snake goddesses in Chennai, Allocco recounts an “increasing incorporation of aesthetic novelties” in the celebrations (2009, 380).¹⁹⁰ Echoing Mr. Sanjay, the priests would express to her that devotees want “something new every year” (ibid.). Mr. Sanjay claims that the entertainment factors of his *alaṃkāras* might even overshadow the devotion of the devotees:

“If there are a thousand people coming to this temple, only about a hundred persons come for worshipping the Goddess. The other people come to see what is the *alaṃkāra*, how we are doing it, what are the ingredients we are using. [...] the major crowd in this temple is for the *alaṃkāras*. I eagerly wait for Navarātri each year, and think of how I can decorate the Goddess differently each year”

The *alaṃkāra* donors too, according to Mr. Sanjay, might have another agenda than expressing their devotion: “the donors do it for pride also. This year they have done. Next year they want to do it. It is not the matter of just devotion. It is also about their pride.” However, my argument is that while fancy *alaṃkāras* unquestionably are an entertaining spectacle, they are also more: they serve to make the goddess appear at her most powerful. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, *darśana* of the goddess in her various *alaṃkāras* was emphasized by priests and laypeople alike as a primary reason for devotees to come to the temple during the festival. Similar to facemasks applied to pots (see chapter 6), the *alaṃkāras* enhance the goddess' presence for the worshippers and make her more prominent in her various forms and appearances. While divinity is present in the goddess's *mūrti* (Skt. “image”), awareness of this presence is generated through her *alaṃkāra*. As an elderly woman said to me about Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ's *alaṃkāras*: “It is like the goddess herself is walking in front of us.” The goddess's change from a black stone statue to the extravaganza of Mr. Sanjay's Navarātri *alaṃkāras* is striking. As a climax of her *pūjā*, she appears to be blazing with power. This enhancement of the goddess's presence holds true

189 This relates to the visual gentrification described by Waghorne (2001, 2004), seen for instance in frequent renovations of ammaṇ temples and shrines by middle class sponsors, expressing middle class aesthetic values.

190 These include colorful light bulb displays depicting the goddess, various entertainers, speakers, tents, professional invitation cards and temple decorations (see Allocco 2009, 378–380). Apart from the light bulb goddess, such novelties have emerged at the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple, too.

for traditional *alaṃkāras* but maybe even more so in the more avant-garde and transformative *alaṃkāras* of the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple. These special decorations place form on top of form, and presence upon presence, as layers of form and presence, leading up to the Vijayadaśamī battle and the conquest of the demon.

Additional Ceremonies

Oil Lamp Pūjā

On Navarātri Fridays, women perform an oil lamp *pūjā* (Ta. *tiruviḷakku pūjai*, Skt. *dīpapūjā*) in the temple prior to the uncovering of the *alaṃkāra*.¹⁹¹ This *pūjā* is performed for the prosperity and auspiciousness of the household and well being of the women's families. It is usually performed in groups and always by women, who chant Tamil mantras to Gāyatrī and Lakṣmī while worshipping Lakṣmī in the form of their lamps.

The *pūjā* is heavy with gestures which the women perform while offering the goddess food and other auspicious items. Following Mary Elizabeth Hancock (1999, 130–131) I see this ritual as a way of reaffirming and marking one's own *cumaṅkali*hood: the women worship goddess Lakṣmī, the auspicious married form of the goddess associated with prosperity and the domestic, and *cumaṅkali*hood inscribed on their bodily habitus through the *pūjā*'s many gestures (ibid.).¹⁹²

Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ's Fight with the Demon

Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ's fight with the demon Makiṣasuraṅ is enacted ritually on the evening of Vijayadaśamī, as a public spectacle attracting a huge crowd. In the temple program the ritual is called *Makiṣācurasaṃhāram* ("the destruction of Mahiṣāsura"), but it is referred to colloquially as *vatam* (Ta. "murder"). The *mūlamūrti* of Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ is for the occasion decorated with the *visvarūpa*-

191 The lamp *pūjā* is performed on *citrā nakṣatra* (lunar mansion). As such it is not tied to Navarātri but falls within the Navarātri period and is often performed during the months of Tāy and Āṭi. The *pūjāri* explained that they used to perform different *pūjās* each day of Navarātri in the temple up to the 1990's, including *kanyā pūjā* and *samnyāsi pūjā*, "to please the goddess". With their more and more extensive Navarātri program and the huge emphasis on *alaṃkāras* they do not have the time, and only the lamp *pūjā* has continued until present.

192 The oil lamp *pūjā* is in this manner very similar to, as I argue in chapter 5, functions of the *kolu*.

taricanam alaṃkāra, portraying the goddess as ten-armed Kalkattā Kālī, or Maḥiṣāsuramardīnī, pointing her trident towards a demon effigy.

As is common in smaller *ammaṅ* temples, the ritual is carried out by the ritualized slaying of a banana tree, which substitutes for the rarer *vanni* tree. First, the *pūjāri* performs *pūjā* to the tree, which for the occasion is set up in a dug hole in line with the sanctum just outside the temple, with a *kolam* drawn around its trunk. The *pūjāri* dresses the tree in a *dhoti*, the traditional clothing for men, and offers it an oil lamp, incense, puffed rice, a cigar, a banana, a garland, and coconuts. He performs ablutions to it, and a group of women on temple service smear the trunk and the banana flower with turmeric and dots of *kuṅkumam* powder. All the while, the musicians drum and play, while the crowd eagerly follows each step. Next, the *pūjāri* installs Makiṣa in the tree by reciting a mantra while circumambulating the tree with the *āratī* chandelier and a bell (figure 4.11). His feet are washed by his son and painted with turmeric and *kuṅkumam* dots before he enters the sanctum. Inside, to a mounting crescendo of drums, the blowing of conches and a trumpet, and the barely restrained anticipation of the crowd outside, he performs *āratī* for Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ, while the devotees join their palms. As the *pūjāri* holds a large straight-bladed knife (*katti*)¹⁹³ in front of the goddess, he silently recites another mantra, which makes him fierce and possessed by Paṭavēṭṭamaṅ. He then runs out of the sanctum wielding the sword and cuts the banana tree in two (figure 4.12) before he collapses and is carried back into the sanctum along with the cut off flower from the banana tree. The anticipation lingering in the air as the priest goes into the sanctum and until the tree is cut in two is hard to put into words, as the crowd is ecstatic and shouts repeatedly “*oṃ śakti, oṃ śakti*” and firecrackers burst, marking the ritual climax. In just a few seconds, the goddess, playing in the body of the *pūjāri*, kills the demon, in the form of the banana tree. Thereafter the *āratī* flame is distributed to an eager audience, and the festival goes on with *darśana* of the goddess’s *alaṃkāra*, and entertainment on the stage.

193 The *katti* is one of the attributes of Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ.



Figure 4.11: Worshipping the banana tree, 2009.



Figure 4.12: Slaying the banana tree, 2009.

With this ritual, the myth of Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ as Kalkattā (Kolkata) Kālī¹⁹⁴ is dramatized, ritualized, and actualized as the *pūjāri* embodies Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ and ferociously kills the tree. The goddess's *līlā* powerfully manifests in the presence of her worshippers. The *pūjāri* explains the ritual in this way:

“The tree represents Makiṣāsuraṅ, Makiṣāsuramartinī is Ampāl (Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ). Instead of Makiṣāsuraṅ, *pūjā* is performed to the tree. A Tamil *śloka* is chanted and the demon is invoked in the tree. Simultaneously a goddess *śloka* is chanted to Ampāl and she comes and cuts the tree. [...] Since there is no *vaṅṅimaram* [available], we keep a banana tree. [...] As you keep chanting the *śloka*, you will get the ferociousness.”

Subsequent Rites

Milk Pot Procession and Ritual Piercings: “On Tying the kāppu I Get Peace of Mind”

The morning following Vijayadaśamī a milk pot (Ta. *pāl kuṭam*) procession is performed along with ritual piercings (Ta. *vēltarital, alaku*).¹⁹⁵ While men and women can take part in the piercing ceremony, carrying milk pots is reserved to women.¹⁹⁶ From 7–8 o'clock in the morning, woman clad in yellow or red, colors commonly worn by goddess devotees for ritual occasions, gather in a nearby Aiyaṅār temple for the ritual preparations of milk pots.

This small temple is situated about 200 meters down the road from the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple. There, the women fill their pots (*kuṭa*) with milk (*pāl*), apply turmeric and *kuṅkumam* onto them, and tie *nīm*, banana and mango leaves and flowers outside the pot.¹⁹⁷ The *pampaikkārar* prepare a *prathama kalaśa* (main pot) filled with holy water, dressed in a sari with a golden face attached onto a bundle of *nīm* leaves (figure 4.13). Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ will be

194 See chapter 2.

195 For other discussion on *pāl kuṭam* see Allocco (2009, 415–423) and Mines (2005); for piercing and possession rituals Allocco (2009, 401–408), Harman (2011), Kapadia (2000) and Younger (2001 [1980], chapter 8).

196 From what William Harman observed, with few exceptions, men are the ones participating in rituals where blood is shed, such as sacrifice or piercing rituals (2011, 193). Karin Kapadia reports that at her fieldwork site in Trichy district piercings are always done to the male body (2000, 184), and all benign possessions (excluding possessions by *pēy* [Ta. “evil spirits”]), too, occurred solely of men (ibid., 196). In contrast possession rituals documented by Allocco by far included most women (Allocco 2008, 267). In my case, as a broad estimate, an equal share of men and women participated in the piercing ritual, which included possession.

197 In 2015 the pots had coconuts on their mouths as well.

installed in this *kalaśa*, which is carried in the procession by one of the pierced devotees. Other men associated with the temple prepare the various piercings that are soon to be used in the piercing ritual.



Figure 4.13: Prathama (main) *kalaśa*, 2015.

Soon, for hours in the midday heat, there is a palpable tension as the devotees are pierced in front of the temples Camayapuram Māriyamman shrine.¹⁹⁸ This goes on for hours, people stand close in the intense heat and the drumming is

¹⁹⁸ In the context of Navarātri, it is tempting to read piercings as a kind of symbolic blood offering, substituting the buffalo sacrifice. A pumpkin substitute is cut in two and smeared with *kuṅkumam* on Vijayadaśamī outside of the temple.

deafening. Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ's priest functions as the lead singer and piercer, along with the group of musicians who sing and play *pampai* (a pair of cylindrical drums) and *cilampu* (ring shaped brass rattles). The most common piercing is a spear (Ta. *vēl*) or a trident (Ta. *culam*) through the cheeks (figure 4.14). These may be short or long, the long ones piercing both cheeks and with the ends almost touching the ground on each side. A handful devotees have more elaborate piercings such as limes sewn onto their face and upper body (figure 4.15), hooks inserted into their backs to pull a small cart housing an image of the goddess, or a "porcupine-like" (cf. Kapadia 2000, 189) structure of altogether 108 spears pierced into their upper body (figure 4.16).¹⁹⁹ Each person is smeared with *vibhūti* (Skt. "white ash") where the piercing is to enter, sprinkled with *vibhūti* afterwards, and a lime is put at the end of each *vēl*.



Figure 4.14: Devotee getting pierced with a *vēl*, 2011.

¹⁹⁹ The three times I observed this ritual (2011, 2014 and 2015) women only got pierced with spears or tridents, while men had all kinds of piercings. This might have a natural explanation in that the other piercings all required a naked upper body.



Figure 4.15: Devotee getting pierced with limes, 2011.



Figure 4.16: Devotee getting pierced with 108 *vél* (spears), 2015.

With the various Tamil devotional *stotras* sung by the priest to the accompaniment of intense music and drumming, the goddess and other deities are invited to possess the people who are being pierced. Urged by the music, some devotees start to dance ecstatically prior to being pierced; a sign of a deity entering their body. It is however not only Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ who possesses her devotees this day, as this depends on the devotee. The *pūjāri* explained: “[The possession] depends on the person who is taking the piercing. If he is a person who gets the *aruḷ* (blessing, grace) of Murukaṅ, I sing a Murukaṅ song, if it is the goddess, I sing about the goddess.”²⁰⁰ Once possessed, the *pūjāri* engages the present deity in a short conversation, determining who has come. While possessions enable direct communication between the human and the divine, piercings are closely associated with speaking *aruḷ vāḱku* (Ta. “oracular speech”). Being pierced while possessed make the *aruḷ vāḱku* authentic, effective, and powerful. When I asked why not *all* people became possessed, as some clearly show no outer signs of being possessed, the *pūjāri* explained that his intention is to get the *aruḷ* of the god on everyone (make the deity possess them), but it does not happen to all people.²⁰¹ The *pampai* drum, common in the worship of *ammaṅs*, is connected to possessions, too: according to the *pūjāri* the goddess’s favorite instrument *pampai* lures her as a snake is drawn to a flute, and she is more prone to possess people when it is played.²⁰²

Possessions are dramatic manifestations of the goddess, performances with the goddess herself as actor (Erndl 1993, 133). While my respondents commonly used the verb *vā* (Ta. “to come”, for instance *cāmi vantutu*, the goddess comes) when talking about possessions, in other parts of India the word “play” actively forms part of the possession vocabulary.²⁰³ This articulates posses-

200 Ritual piercings are associated with the cult of Murukaṅ. According to the *pūjāri* the ritual is modeled on how two demons offered their blood to Murukaṅ when they were defeated in war.

201 This does not conform to Kapadia’s case, where possession was a precondition for being pierced. Not being possessed was interpreted as the votary did not keep his purity restrictions, or that a family member had sinned “in a big way” (Kapadia 2000, 185).

202 The *pampai* was, according to myth, created by the goddess, who stretched the skin of a female demon across a wooden cylinder and the skin of a male demon across a thinner tube of brass, and made a double drum for humans to use for dispelling demons (Nabokov 2000, 79, see also Meyer 1986, 3). The *pampaikkārar* can, by using these drums, contact any supernatural being of the Tamil pantheon (deity, demon, *pēy*). Importantly, they are not possessed themselves.

203 In Hindi, Panjabi and Kangri “playing” refers to the “creative, dynamic, and awesome activity” of the goddess *and* the woman possessed by her (Erndl 2007, 150). Hence, the woman is simultaneously the agent and the instrument of playing (ibid.): the woman plays, and the goddess/*śakti* plays in her. The word “play” also refers to the wild and

sions as expressions of divine play, the deity “playing” in the body of her human host. In Kathleen M. Erndl’s words, “possession is [devī’s] divine *līlā* (play) brought down to the human level” (Erndl 1993, 133). The piercings, too, increase the *śakti* of the devotee, since they are considered embodiments of goddess’s *śakti* (Allocco 2009b, 404). Thus, getting pierced further strengthens the connection between goddess and devotee and the petitioners fall under her influence.

While some devotees get pierced yearly in this procession, others do it only once.²⁰⁴ The vows signified by the piercing can be taken up for one’s own sake, or on behalf of others, and some are also pierced as thanksgiving for a vow that has already been fulfilled. Often these vows concern disease, marriage, and childbirth. While some told me that one’s vows should not be revealed to the outside, Rahul, a young man who had his body pierced with the porcupine-like spear structure in 2014, said:

“My mother was not well and suffering from jaundice. It was severe, and the doctors could not do anything. For [her] getting cured of it, I had the piercing for the first time and my mother became all right. [...] I have done it for the past five years. I prayed for my mother and on behalf of that I am getting the piercing done”.

The goddess healed his mother who is well today, and helps Rahul in other matters, too: “I tie [the *kāppu*] every year. On tying [the *kāppu*] I get peace of mind, any problem I had during the year has been solved”. Since Rahul never becomes possessed while he gets the piercing, he told me that it hurts, but that he does not give the pain any focus since it is done for the sake of prayer and getting his problems solved. Notably, not a single drop of blood is shed from any devotee during the ritual. The lack of blood is interpreted as the grace and powers of the Goddess.²⁰⁵ I was also told that it takes longer time to heal the wound of the piercing if the person commits any wrongdoings during Navarātri, such as not upholding the requirements of tying the *kāppu*.

After the participants are pierced, the *pūjāri* invokes Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ in the *prathama kalaśa* with a mantra and performs *pūjā* for it. The musicians, the pierced devotees, the devotee carrying the pot housing the goddess, and the

playful head and body movements of the possessed (Erndl 1993, 108). In Tamil, too, the word *cāmiyaṭṭam* (“god dance”) refers to possessions because of the movements of the body (Mines 2005).

204 Although this collective piercing ritual happens once a year in this temple, devotees can come to get pierced with a *vēl* also on other occasions, such as if they need to drive away evil spirits or renew their vow.

205 See also Allocco 2009b and Kapadia 2000, 189.

women balancing milk pots on their heads join in the procession in the streets surrounding the temple (figure 4.17). Some women carry milk pots as well as piercings. The *cilampu* players dance as they move along. The procession is a dramatic element of penance on display, and some clearly have difficulties moving around with their piercings. The procession displays the powers and grace of the goddess, as well as the claims of moral status of those who are pierced (Kapadia 2000, 186).



Figure 4.17: Milk pot procession (*pāl kuṭam*), 2011.

Reaching the Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ temple, the atmosphere is ecstatic with drumming and singing, and the women line up outside the temple waiting to pour their milk over Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ repeatedly shouting “*oṃ śakti, oṃ śakti.*” Meanwhile the piercings are removed, and the possessing deities are called off the devotees who collapse on the ground and are carried into the temple.

The women’s feet are painted with turmeric and *kuṅkumam* before they enter the sanctum one after another and perform ablutions for Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ’s stone image with the milk in their pots (*pāl apiṣēkam*). Conforming to what Allocco (2009, 419) observed in Chennai, the ablutions are done with great concentration and awe. This is a rare occasion during which devotees may interact directly with the goddess’s temple image without an intermediary priest.

Following the milk ablutions, the goddess receives a *śantābhiṣeka* with water from 108 conches, performed by all the men who have tied the *kāppu*. At last, she receives a final *abhiṣeka* with the water from the *prathama kalaśa* in which she was installed, and finally the water from the *kalaśa* that was kept near the Durgā shrine during Navarātri is sprinkled over the devotees. *Prasāda* is distributed to the devotees, who should fast on this day until the procession is over. This marks the end of the devotees' *vrata* period, and the *kāppu* is removed the same evening.

According to Allocco (2009, 422), two recurring motifs underlie milk pot processions: *bhakti*, devotion to the goddess, and efficacy, of the devotees' *vrata*. These *vratas* are performed privately by following the purity restrictions but recognized publicly in the piercing and milk pot rituals.²⁰⁶ A third motif is how these ablutions cool the goddess and bring her back to her peaceful form. When I asked the *pūjāri* if there is any ritual for Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ after killing the demon, like Kāmākṣī's *vaṇṇimarapūjā*, he replied: "That is why the next day the piercing takes place and the *śānti abhiṣekams* are performed". In this way, he explicitly links the milk pot procession to Navarātri.²⁰⁷ In contrast to Kāmākṣī, who needs to atone for killing the demon, the non-Brahmin goddess Paṭavēṭṭammaṅ must be cooled down. In this manner, she is appeased to her calm year-round state, preventing the unpredictability of the hot and fierce village goddess who was temporarily manifest during Navarātri.

We note here an interesting parallel between the goddess and her devotees: piercings are extremely heating, and the preconditions for getting pierced are tying the *kāppu* and the following restrictions, which can be considered a kind of temporary asceticism. Harman (2011) proposes that ascetic heat generated by austerities is one of the things the goddess receives in return for a *vrata*. Carrying milk pots on the head also make the devotee in contact with the heat of the goddess, which is why cooling *nīm* leaves are often placed between the pot and the head (McGilvray 1998, 61). As the goddess is cooled with her ablutions when Navarātri is over, so are the devotees: they are sprinkled with

206 As Allocco (2008, 268–270) points out, vows also have a collaborative side to them, particularly in the case of women's vows, which may include negotiations within the household to obtain money for ritual items and how cooking should be done within the dietary restrictions of the vow, negotiations with the husbands because of the sexual restrictions of the vow, and negotiations with musicians, and with other devotees.

207 The milk pot ablutions performed during Āṭi are also done to cool the heat generated by the goddess during this hot season (Narayanan 2000, 771). The goddess is considered particularly hot during Āṭi and prone to inflict people with pox.

water from a Navarātri *kalaśa* and allowed to eat cooling *prasāda* only at this point, after fasting this day.

Swing Festival

In the evening of the day after Vijayadaśamī, after the milk pot ablutions have cooled Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ, a swing festival (Ta. *ūñcal seva*) is held. The goddess's festival image is placed on a swing in front of the sanctum and the devotees who pass for *darśana* gently push her on the swing. This is considered pleasing and delighting for the goddess. The temple is, as part of the evening's *alaṃkāra* (*cānta corūpi*, peaceful embodiment) decorated as a soothing garden with fruits and leaves hanging from the ceiling, walls, and pillars, creating a relaxing scenery in stark contrast to the violence played out the previous evening. The swing festival is the ritual conclusion of Navarātri in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple, after which the protective cords are removed from the goddess's images, from Durgā, the trident, the priest and devotees, and put in a tank nearby the *pūjāri*'s home.

Concluding Remarks

The nine (or, in practice, twelve) nights of the goddess in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple are a vibrant and dynamic celebration of the goddess's powers. Devotees take part in these powers through their vows and honor them with *pūjās*, ablutions and gifts. The goddess's powers are also on display during the festival; on Vijayadaśamī as Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ ferociously kills the demon while playing in the body of her *pūjāri*, and these powers are boosted in the goddess's *alaṃkāras*.

Each Navarātri evening the devotional music booming from loudspeakers, the staged entertainment, and the huge crowds attending the festivities turn the temple area into a vivid and manifold cultural performance. Mr. Sanjay's avant-garde Navarātri *alaṃkāras* are a spectacle of their own. Through her grand and themed ornamentations, Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ transforms into various manifestations of the divine each of the twelve evenings, and sometimes the temple or sanctum is transformed with her. Fierceness is temporarily projected onto the goddess as she assumes different forms (*śakti*) each night, leading up to her battle with the demon on Vijayadaśamī. Finally, she is brought back to her calm year-round state through the final *alaṃkāra* and by means of milk pot ablutions.

Apart from transforming the goddess, the *alaṃkāras* function on several levels: they are part of the goddess's worship, they enhance the goddess's presence for the worshipper, they entertain and engage, and on a didactical level

they educate the audience about various forms of the divine.²⁰⁸ In the words of the *alaṃkāra* maker, “stereotypic *alaṃkāras* are not entertaining”: the devotees desire constant changes. Mr. Sanjay meets these wishes with creatively decorating the goddess’s image, fashioning ideas he has planned for months.

While there is no doubt that these famed *alaṃkāras* are one of the reasons for the temple’s huge attendance during Navarātri, another is very likely the active involvement of the devotees, and in particular of women. During Navarātri, devotees partake in vows, *pūjās* and processions, and some also do temple service. With the ablutions following the milk pot procession, devotees are able to interact directly with the goddess; not only as her representatives or as recipients of worship, such as the prepubescent girls and auspicious married women who are worshipped in the Kāmākṣī temple. For devotees, the Navarātri festival of Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ provides a wider scope of ritual actions for expressing devotion to the goddess than that of Brahmanical Kāmākṣī. Indeed, a triad of rituals centered on *bhakti* and efficacy is reserved too women: the *tāy cir* and milk pot processions, and the lamp *pūjā*. The *pūjāri* points to traditional gender stereotypes when trying to explain the attendance of women:

“The women will have more expectations and worries. Only a mother can understand the problem of their children. Men go out for work, at that time only the women pray for their safety. There are pluses and minuses for everybody, even for the women, but when they tie the *kāppu* and bring the milk pot, they will do it with full devotion. That is why there are more ladies.”

Navarātri celebrations in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṇ temple demonstrate how the festival blends entertainment, play, fun, devotion, and efficacy, mainly centered on the goddess’s powers. Taking the very entertaining *alaṃkāras* as an example, the anticipation of what will be the next captivating *alaṃkāra* is closely connected to *darśana* and the devotees’ experiencing the goddess in her most spectacular form. The reverence is indicated in the huge rush to receive the goddess’s *āratī* once the *alaṃkāra* is revealed. With the dramatic enactment of the Mahiṣasuramardinī narrative, the goddess fulfills her Navarātri vow and kills evil mentality, to the relief of an awe-struck audience.

While the ritual system stems from the temple’s beginning in the mid 1970’s,²⁰⁹ the staged entertainment, distribution of food and the merry go rounds and bouncing castles of the contemporary festival are more recent

208 The latter point was stressed by Mr. Sanjay in an interview: “Each goddess has a specialty. [...] It is being educated to the public through the *alaṃkāra*.”

209 This includes the *curasamhāra* (performed for 37 years in 2015) and milk pot procession/piercing rituals (performed for 31 years in 2015).

additions. Their inclusion, as well as the incorporation of a second procession (*tāy cir*) displaying plates with gifts, conforms to the growing tendency of aesthetic novelties and ritual display, including entertainment, in religious festivals as described by Waghorne (2001, 2004) and Allocco (2009, 2018).²¹⁰ Navarātri posters and banners, printed festival programs and various temple decorations also play a part here. Some rituals have been omitted from the celebrations, including *kanyā pūjās*, widely associated with Navarātri, to incorporate these changes and to promote the emphasis on grand *alaṅkāras*.

In the temple celebrations investigated until now, it is mainly the goddess who “plays” (e.g. in terms of *līlā*; in possessing people), as well as her priests/ the *alaṅkāra* makers, who “play” with decorating her image. Still, devotees clearly *enjoy* this play. Turning to domestic Navarātri celebrations, women too get to play quite a bit themselves: the *kolu* displays of dolls will be the focus in the following section on Navarātri at home.

210 For similar tendencies in Bangalore temples, see Srinivas (2006, 2018).