

Chapter 5

The *Kolu* as a Feminine Space

“It is a festival that women celebrate together”

An Introduction: Mrs. Gowri’s *Kolu*

The day before new moon in the Tamil month of Purattāci, Mrs. Gowri’s family²¹¹ assembles their dolls from boxes that have been stored for the year. During Navarātri, these dolls will be carefully arranged and displayed on a structure of seven stepped levels known as *kolu* (Ta. “royal presence, *darbār*, holding court” (Tamil Lexicon), also known as *pommaï kolu*, dolls holding court)²¹² during Navarātri. Ranging from about a meter to the size of a finger, the dolls are placed hierarchically on the steps according to size and level of consciousness, with inanimate objects on the bottom and the deities on top. Most of their dolls represent gods and goddesses and other figures from Hindu mythology, but the Gowris’ collection also includes saints, humans, animals, fruits, and vegetables, as well as two procession sets displayed on the floor in front of the *kolu*, with priests, devotees, temple musicians and elephants surrounding one deity carried in a palanquin and another pulled in a golden chariot (Ta. *tēr*). A distinctive feature of Mrs. Gowri’s display is that several cardboard dolls and images relate to the Kāmākṣī temple, such as different forms of goddess Kāmākṣī, are displayed to the right of the steps. This includes a setup of a scene from the *viśvarūpadarśana* (Skt. “viewing of the universal form”), a ritual performed during Brahmotsava, when Kāmākṣī’s stone image and festival image are venerated along with a cow, and a self-manufactured Kāmākṣī figure (figure 5.1). Some of the *kolu* dolls date to the time of Mrs. Gowri’s marriage, twenty-five years ago, and include the *marappācci* (Ta. “prepared from wood”) dolls, a man and a woman carved out of wood, which are traditionally received as wedding gifts.²¹³ Other dolls are even older and inherited through the family, but a few

211 Mrs. Gowri’s family are Brahmins connected to the Kāmākṣī temple of Kanchipuram. Although not ubiquitous, most of the practices described in the recap of her *kolu* are applicable to many households throughout town.

212 See Narayanan (2018) for connections between the *kolu* and the durbar and Ikegame (2013) for more on the Dasara *darbār* and the Mysore *bombe habba* (doll festival).

213 The *Marappācci* dolls are occasionally known as *rājā-rānī* dolls (king and queen), as they are called in the Mysore Dashara celebrations. While in Tamil Nadu these dolls generally are understood to represent the bride and groom, in Karnataka they represent the king

are brand new, as there is an obligation to buy at least one new doll each Navarātri. Accordingly, their collection has grown steadily since their marriage, and the dolls displayed on and surrounding the seven steps, now covers about half of their spacious living room, which for the festival is transformed into displaying a *līlā*.

At an auspicious time during the following new moon day, Mrs. Gowri cleans the floor in front of the *kolu* steps, which are now replete with colorful dolls, and draws a *kōlam* (geometrical drawing of ground rice flour) in front of it. This *kōlam* is made fresh every festival day and signifies and invites auspiciousness while keeping ritual pollution at bay (Nagarajan 2007, 89).



Figure 5.1: *Viśvarūpadarśana* and *Kāmākṣī kolu* setup, 2015.

Next, Mrs. Gowri invokes goddess *Kāmākṣī* in a *kalaśa*, the form through which she will be worshipped for the duration of the festival. Inside the pot, she puts water, rice, *tōr dal* (pigeon peas), five betel nuts, five turmeric pieces, betel leaves, silver and gold.²¹⁴ Mango leaves and a coconut are placed on its mouth,

and queen (Narayanan 2018, 280). See Ikegame (2013) for connections between the *rājā-rānī* dolls and the royal exercises of kingship in Mysore.

²¹⁴ The ingredients in the pot may vary between households.

and she drapes the pot with a blue cloth and decorates it with a jeweled necklace, a jeweled *bindi*, and garlands of fresh jasmine flowers. Once the pot is ornamented, Mrs. Gowri places it in the middle of the *kolu* (figure 5.2) and neither it nor the dolls can be rearranged or moved until Vijayadaśamī, when the *marappācci* dolls are laid flat (Ta. *cayaṇam*, lying down, taking rest) and the pot moved to the north. After the *kolu* is set, she places a brass image of Kāmākṣī at the foot of the *kolu*, flanked by two oil lamps, an offering of sprouts (Ta. *navatāṇiyam*, nine grains) on its side, and prepares an *ārāti* so that the *dr̥ṣṭi* (Ta. *tiruṣṭi*, evil eye) does not fall upon the dolls.



Figure 5.2: Mrs. Gowri placing the *kalāṣa*, 2015.

During each of the Navarātri festival's nine mornings, Mrs. Gowri worships her *kolu* and the image of Kāmākṣī with fresh flowers, specially prepared food, lights and incense, and recites various goddess hymns in Sanskrit (figure 5.3). Afterwards, she eagerly awaits visits from auspicious married women and pre-pubescent girls, whom she has invited. Mrs. Gowri and her husband will worship them as representatives of the goddess. When the female visitors arrive, Mrs. Gowri washes their feet and offers them turmeric, a dress or a sari blouse piece, food, betel nuts, betel leaves, and butter milk. Finally, she waves the camphor flame in front of the females before she and her husband prostrate before them (figure 5.4). It is widely believed that the goddess will come to

one's house in the form of a young girl during Navarātri, so these *pūjās* directly reach the goddess.



Figure 5.3: Mrs. Gowri leading a Sanskrit recitation in front of the *kolu*, 2015.

In the evenings, women neatly dressed in their finest saris and jewelry will come, often along with their children, to view Mrs. Gowri's *kolu*, chant *stotras*, sing devotional songs, and exchange gossip and stories connected to the dolls' history and mythological background. They receive *prasāda*, the food prepared and first offered to the goddess on the *kolu*: a type of pulse (Ta. *cuṅṭal*), one for each Navarātri evening. As they leave, Mrs. Gowri presents the women with gifts on a plate (Ta. *tāmpūlam*):²¹⁵ a sari blouse piece, fresh jasmine, turmeric, vermilion, betel nuts, a coconut, an apple, bangles, a comb, and a mirror (figure 5.5). She explains: "It is like giving to the goddess herself."

²¹⁵ *Tāmpūlaṅkoṭu*, or to give betel, is a signal for the dispersion or dismissal of a company. While it in general is considered good to offer guests the *tāmpūlam* (Skt. *tāmbūla*), it is considered even better during Navarātri.



Figure 5.4: Mrs. Gowri worshipping married women and young girls. © Ute Hüsken.



Figure 5.5: The *tāmpūlam*, 2015.

When the festival is over and the wooden *marappācci* dolls put to sleep, Mrs. Gowri cooks the rice from the pot along with the coconut and makes coconut

pāyacam (a sweet dessert), and offers it to Kāmākṣī.²¹⁶ Finally, this is consumed by her family as *prasāda*. Thus, they partake in the goddess's powers as she is absorbed in them through the consumption of the rice in which she was temporarily installed.

Kolu Rituals

As in the home of Mrs. Gowri, it is the married women of the household who oversee the main ritual proceedings in the homes during Navarātri. They are usually also in charge of what goes where when the *kolu* is set up, and in deciding any themes. The ritual activities following the setup include *pūjās* to the *kolu* and to the pot in which she first invokes the goddess. While Mrs. Gowri invokes Kāmākṣī in her pot, others told me that they invoke the three goddesses Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, corresponding to the general idea that the three first days of the festival are reserved for worshipping Durgā, slayer of the Buffalo Demon, the following three days for Lakṣmī, goddess of wealth and prosperity, and the final three for Sarasvatī, goddess of learning. The women will then worship the *kolu* for the duration of the festival by lighting oil lamps, burning incense, changing the flowers on the *kalaśa*, drawing fresh *kolams*, presenting the *āratī* flame, cooking and offering food, and reciting various *ślokas* (Skt. "verses") and singing devotional *stotras* (Skt. "hymns") and songs. Women are also hosts and guests during evening *kolu* visits, where they meet to admire the displays, chat about the dolls, sing and recite, often accompanied by their children.

Recitations and Songs

Unlike northern India, in Kanchipuram it is the *Lalitāsahasranāma* (*LS*), and not the *Devīmāhātmya* (*DM*), which is the most important Sanskrit text to recite during Navarātri, and many respondents rendered its recitation mandatory. This is at least the case for Brahmins connected to *ammaṇ* and Śaiva traditions, but some Śaivas also recite the *DM*, and in some homes, mainly those belonging to the Vaiṣṇava tradition, the *Sundarakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is recited.²¹⁷ The *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa* is also recited frequently in Brahmin households. Other

216 It is also common to make *poṅkal* (a rice dish, either sweet or salt) with the rice from the pot.

217 Vijayadaśamī is not only commemorating the day Durgā defeated the buffalo demon; it is also commemorating Rāma's defeat of the demon king Rāvaṇa, who had abducted Sītā to Lanka. In the north of India, particularly in Uttar and Madhya Pradesh, *Rām lilās* are enacted simultaneously with and overlaps the Navarātri festival.

chants during the festival include the *Lalitā trīṣatī* (300 names of goddess Lalitā, part of the *LO*), the *Saundaryalaharī* (“the waves of beauty”, a poem dedicated to Lakṣmī ascribed to the Śaṅkarācārya), and the *Khaḍgamālā* (“the garland of the sword”), as well as general *stotras* for Durgā, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and other deities, including, for instance, the *Mahiṣāsūramardini Stotram*. Non-Brahmins, with exceptions, tend to sing devotional songs and not recite Sanskrit *stotras*.

Music, recitations, and songs are important parts of Navarātri celebrations, and the audience is the goddess.²¹⁸ Guests, too, are encouraged to sing or chant in front of the *kolu*. I was told repeatedly that one can sing “anything” since everything is represented on the *kolu* – I have for instance sung Norwegian folk songs, including the national anthem, in front of a few displays. People would frequently say they sing “*cāmi pāṭṭu*” (Ta. “songs to God”, meaning devotional songs in general), although songs for the goddess appeared to be most common. Some also played music from CDs and many people kept booklets with *stotras* and songs and sung from these. Children are often compelled to sing or chant in front of the *kolu*, and some women also join in *bhajan* (Skt. “devotional singing”) groups to chant *stotras* together in homes or temples.

Worship of Auspicious Married Women and Prepubescent Girls

Navarātri celebrates the divine in female form, but also in human form: it is a time for worshipping the goddess, including the goddess as woman. As in the home of Mrs. Gowri, a family who keeps *kolu* may worship girls who have not yet attained puberty (Skt. *kanyā*, Ta. *kaṇṇi*), and married women, whose husband is still alive (Skt. *sumāṅgalī* or *suvasinī*, Ta. *cumaṅkali*) (figure 5.4). A couple of Śaiva families pertaining to the Ekāmrānātha temple also performed a *vadugapūjā* of two *brahmacārin* boys, one before and one after the *kanyā*- and *suvasinīpūjās*. These boys represent Gaṇeśa and Bhairavar, the deities encountered when entering and leaving a temple. Hence, *pūjā* to these represent the beginning and the end of worship and is said to satisfy all the gods.

Mainly Brahmin families perform the *pūjās* for young girls and married women, although they are performed in some non-Brahmin homes as well. Brahmins would tell me they specifically invited Brahmins for these *pūjās*, while “anyone” could come to see the *kolu* in general. The procedure resembles the practice described in chapter 3, and may be more or less elaborate. An elderly Brahmin woman explained:

218 Music and performing arts have formed important parts of this festival for centuries. Travel reports from Vijayanagara Empire give prominence to describing the performing arts during Navarātri (Narayanan 2018, 286, 291).

“They will be made to sit on the *maṇai* (Ta. “a low wooden seat”) and then smeared with turmeric and *kuṅkumam* on their feet. *Āratī* will be done and one will prostrate before them. They are Ampāl themselves. [...] We will give them everything (i.e. cloth, flowers and food), do *āratī* and we will go up to the gate to see them off. We will apply the dust from under their feet on our head.”

To prostrate before the females so that your head touch their feet is a sign of utmost respect and veneration; the feet regarded unclean in Indian culture. Importantly, it is widely believed that the goddess will be present among the women visiting your *kolu* regardless if these *pūjās* are performed, so that the gifts and food presented to the women finally reach the goddess – giving to the women is equaled with giving to the goddess. Like one respondent said: “We believe that among all the guests who come here one will surely be the goddess herself. That is why we offer turmeric and bangles”. Note the two levels implied here: women visit *kolus* for *darśana* of the goddess on the *kolu*, and the guests who come are received as the goddess.²¹⁹

The *kanyā* and the *sumaṅgalī* are the two most powerful female categories in Tamil Nadu, corresponding to the two types of goddesses, the ambivalent *ammaṅ* (village goddess) and the wholly benevolent wifely goddess (such as Pārvaṭī and Lakṣmī). Tamil women are regarded as specific kinds of powerful beings with specific ontological statuses, corresponding and ranging from benevolent goddess to malevolent demon or spirits, depending on marital status and condition of fertility (Reynolds 1980, 36–37).²²⁰ The ideal female status is the *sumaṅgalī*, “the archtype of Tamil beauty and domesticity” (Wilson 2015, 209). Her auspiciousness is dependent on her possessing a husband and children. Nurtured and re-affirmed by the woman’s own ritual actions, such as prayers and fasts, her auspiciousness in turn ensures the husband’s (and children’s) long life.²²¹

Kanyā pūjās are a well-known and widespread devotional practice in honor of the Goddess in many parts of India as well as Nepal, and not confined to

219 Some even considered *me* a form of the goddess. During an interview, while speaking of how the festival is auspicious for married women, Mrs. Adhilakshmi proclaimed: “see now we have met you! We never thought we would meet you! It is like a *tēvatai* (Ta. “deity”) has visited us from another country. So, the goddess will come to the house in somebody’s *rūpa* (i.e. in the form of a person) only”.

220 Apart from the unmarried girl and the auspicious married woman, possibilities in this scheme include unmarried mothers, barren women, women who die during childbirth and widows (see Reynolds 1980, 36).

221 For more on the *sumaṅgalī* see Hancock (2001) and Reynolds (1980).

Navarātri, although they form an important part of this festival. Young girls are considered especially suited to represent goddesses (Luchesi 2018, 308). The virgin form of the goddess is moreover portrayed frequently in myth (Logan 1980, 245), such as Balā Kāmākṣī who is associated with killing the demon Bandhāsura.²²² The worship of married women, however, is distinctive to South India.²²³ While some of my priestly informants connected the worship of *sumāṅgalīs* to the *LSN*,²²⁴ others, including lay people, mentioned *śakti* as an explanation; the power or cosmic energy shared between women and the goddess.

Rodrigues (2005, 90) makes the point that only women are venerated as embodiments of the goddess; there is no comparable ritual or religious festival where males are identified with supreme male deities. However, as explained, some families worship two *brahmacārin* boys as embodiments of Gaṇeśa and Bhairava along with the females (see also Luchesi 2018, 302).²²⁵ Still, there are “no widespread yearly festivals [...] during which ordinary men are unequivocally identified and worshipped as embodiments of a supreme male deity” (Rodrigues 2005, 90) comparable to Navarātri and its identification of females with the goddess.

The domestic worship is characterized by immediacy between the devotee and the goddess’s representation in the females (Colas 2009, 54). The goddess is manifest among the evening guests, and explicitly venerated in *pūjās* (which may also be performed in the morning). The connection between females and goddess is their shared *śakti*. Like a priest of a small neighborhood temple put it: “we invite women home and see them as manifestations of *śakti*”. In the temple, on the other hand, priestly invocation is required to worship the women as images of the goddess. Luchesi (2018, 307) compares the girls, as impermanent images of worship, to the elaborate images of Durgā in the Bengali Durgā Pūjā,

222 See chapters 2 and 3.

223 In Benares, married women are only implicitly identified with the goddess. There, married daughters return to their natal homes for Navarātri, modeled on how Pārvatī returned to her parents Himavat and Menā. While at home they are treated specially, encouraged not to cook and clean, and fed with sweets as if to provide them before their return to a life of austerities with their “Śiva-like husbands” after the festival (Rodrigues 2005, 88).

224 Lalitā’s names include *suvāsinyarcanapritā* (n. 971, pleased with those worshipping *sumāṅgalīs* [as her form]), *sumāṅgalī* (n. 967) and *suvāsini* (n. 970).

225 Possession could also be listed as an exception, as both genders may be possessed by female and male deities and worshipped as such. Rodrigues (2005, 90) also mentions how spiritually elevated males may be identified with the supreme Brahman, who is perceived as transcending gender.

or Gaṇeśa Caturthī images, which are required for limited length of time and for a special occasion. To extend her argument, they may as such be compared also to the goddess's manifestations as pots on *kolu*, increasing her accessibility for worship and her presence in the material world during the festival. Like the images and pots, the girls and *sumāṅgalis* are potential vessels for the goddess, though the actualization of this potential is enacted through rituals at a specific time.



Figure 5.6. Child dressed up as the Vaiṣṇava saint Āṅṅāl for *kolu*, 2015.

Evening Visits

Navarātri evenings are festive occasions during which women bring their children and visit each other's *kolus*, often dressed up in their finest saris and jewelry. Children might be dressed up as gods, blending in among the dolls on the *kolu* as living and breathing deities themselves (figure 6.6).²²⁶ During the

²²⁶ While this reflects a potential for children to be deities, it is different than the identifications of women and goddesses during the Navarātri since both boys and girls are dressed up, and the dressed-up children are not worshipped. Boys are also dressed as female deities or saints, and vice versa.

visit the women receive consecrated food (*prasāda*), and upon their departure they receive the *tāmpūlam*.

Women visiting each other and going from home to home in the evening (what is known in English as “*kolu hopping*”)²²⁷ sets Navarātri apart from other festivals celebrated in Tamil Nadu. The access to a home is often restricted, in contrast to the public sphere of a temple. During Navarātri, homes are opened and on display along with the *kolu*. The *kolu* in this way blurs or transcends the distinction between public and domestic, as rooms “periodically [are] turned into meeting halls” (Hancock 1999, 6),²²⁸ and even transforms the home to a temple-like space during the ten-day festival. In the words of one respondent: “a *kolu* is like a temple within the home” and another woman said: “this is not a home; it is a temple. So, it will look like a temple”. A stepped *kolu* evokes the image of the towering gopurams of South Indian temples, replete with colorful figures, and many *kolus* have a small pool in front, resembling a temple tank (see also Fuller and Logan 1985, 97).

Overwhelmingly many women emphasized in interviews that having guests over was their main pleasure during Navarātri, and a common reason for starting with *kolu* in the first place. During interviews, the topic of receiving guests often came up in two contexts: when I asked respondents if or how the festival was important for them as women; or when comparing Navarātri to other festivals they celebrated. Mrs. Swathi explained:

“We celebrate all kinds of festivals, like Diwali (Ta. *Tipāvaḷi*, a festival of lights). But we celebrate [Diwali] with our family. Similarly, for Poṅkal (a harvest festival) we invite only our relatives. Only during Navarātri we invite everyone. We unite people. Among the crowd present here some are my relatives, and others are friends. As far as Navarātri goes, irrespective of whether you are invited or not, people can come. It is a festival women celebrate together”.

Mrs. Archana reflected upon the topic in a similar manner:

“This festival gives us joy because people come to visit us. We also offer them *cunṭal*. People in our street come home. At other times we rarely see them.

227 This term corresponds to the term “pandal hopping” used in Kolkata. The phrase was, however, not used by my respondents.

228 However, as Harlan (2007) shows in her essay on women’s rituals in Rajasthan, the domestic is never entirely shut off from the public. Women travel (also between homes), get inspiration and impressions, and public rituals, such as rites of passage, are performed in the home.

We meet them only during weddings. But now they come home every year. It gives me special joy. These ladies are our neighbors.”

The social part of *kolu* should not be underestimated when discussing its appeal, a subject returned to in chapter 7: it is an arena for socializing and maintaining and even developing friendships with other women. Female friendships are marginalized in many settings in India, particularly in upper caste families with a history of seclusion (Frøystad 2005, 147). The most important social ties among the married women in North India tend to be female family members and relatives (ibid.). Here I must emphasize that acknowledging the social aspects of *kolu* was something my respondents did regardless of caste, and perhaps even more so by non-Brahmin women. Most of my female respondents were housewives, and for those who lived in nuclear families (a fair amount, although I estimate the majority lived in joint families) there would be no other women to socialize with in the household (cf. Waldrop 2011, 173). Navarātri is embraced by many women as a festive occasion to meet up with other women, chat, enjoy the displays, sing and chant together, and dress up nicely. For many, this is precisely what makes Navarātri special, compared to other festivals. As one respondent put it:

“It is my favorite [festival] actually, because lots of people come home. For other festivals, few people come home, or we wish [them well] over the phone. But for *kolu* a lot of people come home. During this festival [...] we invite even unknown people into the house. We celebrate Navarātri to know new people and encourage friendships.”

As this quote shows, people may also come to a *kolu* unannounced, and even strangers are welcomed. Taking this into account, opening the homes as domestic temples for fellow women, and possibly also strangers, Navarātri may be characterized as even more public than weddings and other “functions”. It should also be pointed out how women, whose movements are usually restricted after darkness, claim the neighborhood streets while *kolu* hopping in the evenings, without their husbands (cf. Wilson 2015, 20, 2018, 246).

Kolu, the Feminine and the Auspicious

Women are often prominent participants in domestic ritual practices. *Kolu*, too, exemplifies the ritual agency of women within the domestic sphere. To make a broad generalization, women’s rituals in India often take place in the private, domestic sphere rather than the public (such as in temples or politics); they are based on *pūjā* and devotional rites rather than the Vedic fire sacrifice, and they

are informal rather than formal, seen, for instance, in the lack of written invitations (Wadley 1995, Hüsken 2013). Women's ritual knowledge has traditionally been transmitted orally and through performance, contrasting the sanctioning of Brahmin men's rituals through Sanskrit scriptures (ibid.).²²⁹ It should be mentioned that we for this reason find no references to *kolu* in Sanskrit texts, or in early modern vernacular literature (Narayanan 2018, 279).²³⁰ Today, women's rituals are appearing in writing including in new media such as web sites, leaflets and magazines, for example outlining Navarātri rituals. These mark a shift in the transmission of tradition and point towards a formalization and standardization of these rituals.²³¹ Such magazines explain everything from which goddess to worship at what day to what bath powder to use. Knowing what food to make, which *kolam* to draw and which songs are to be sung is crucial for the performance of any ritual. Songs, stories, food recipes, as well as female ritual behavior, are all considered specific female knowledge, all of which are expressed in *kolu*. Very often such rituals are performed in the background, alongside and accompanying (Brahmin) men's rituals (such as *saṃ-skāras*, life cycle rituals), but during Navarātri they take center stage.

The *kolu* and its auspicious rituals performed domestically by women emphasize so-called female values such as generosity, hospitality, and fecundity, as well as female domesticity and beauty. However, while *kolu* celebrates femininity and a set of female values is expressed in its relation, the festival gives prominence to and celebrates certain states of womanhood: the *sumaṅgalī* and the *kanyā*, a potential *sumaṅgalī*. The *sumaṅgalī* maintains her auspicious identity through vows and fasts, rituals strongly associated with women.²³² *Kolu* too is particularly linked to the auspiciousness of the *sumaṅgalī* (lit. "she who is auspicious"), who may acknowledge and re-affirm her auspiciousness by keeping *kolu* and through evening visits to other *kolus*. The Tamil woman is considered the power that holds the family together and is regarded "the embodiment of family relation itself" (Egnor 1980, 26). The desired outcomes of women's rituals are therefore frequently revolving around one's family, such as

229 Non-Brahmanical rituals also lack this textual authority provided by the elite Sanskrit tradition and have in scholarly literature suffered the same fate along women's rituals of being overlooked as "lower" and "less important".

230 To date *kolu* as a ritual practice is therefore impossible. Narayanan holds that *kolu* was prevalent in Tamil Nadu at least by the mid-nineteenth century, based on her own childhood experiences of *kolu* and conversations with friends and family (2018, 279).

231 See Hüsken (2013) for interesting discussions on the role of textual media in female ritual agency.

232 See, for instance, McGee 1987; Pearson 1996.

the husband's longevity, getting children, and favorable marriages for your offspring.²³³ This is also the case with *kolu*, which is closely associated with marriage and fertility. As Mrs. Purnima put it: "It is mainly the ladies in the house who are more concerned about the family. It the lady who stands beside the man in the house during times of happiness or sorrow. Śiva is not full without Śakti. So, women are given importance during Navarātri." Many respondents spoke about the connections between *kolu* and *sumāṅgalīs* during interviews. Sivasubramanian Gurukkal, the priest of a small Śiva temple explained: "It is believed that if you keep *kolu*, women will have long life and be a *sumāṅgalī*." Another woman, Bhagyalakshmi, said: "We invite people and give them *mañjal* (turmeric) and *kuṅkumam*. They come home because of *kolu* and we give them things. This will protect our *māṅkaliyam* (marriage necklace; symbolic of marriage)." Some respondents claimed that if an unmarried young woman did *pūjā* to a *kolu* and received *prasāda*, or if she merely saw a *kolu*, she would get married within the next year. As an elderly woman enthusiastically proclaimed during an interview: "Even if unmarried girls were to see the *kolu*, then by the following year they will get married. It is true!" The *pūjās* to the goddess in female human form, the gifts the women receive, and the attendance of mainly women and children during *kolu* visits all point to an emphasis on women's fertility, which is to be realized during marriage and making her a "proper" *sumāṅgalī*. Her auspiciousness depends not only on her possessing a (living) husband but also her ability to bear children, and the *kanyā* is a potential future *sumāṅgalī*. Although none of my respondents mentioned it, Logan (1980, 256) finds that Navarātri is considered a good time to "come of age". Rodrigues (2009) connects the worship of young girls in the tantric *pūjā* to the coming of their menstruation and their transforming into fertile women.²³⁴ The link between *kolus*, fertility and marriage is pronounced even further in non-Brahmin environments, where specific *kolu* dolls are connected to the desire for conception and marriage (see chapter 7).

The gifts women and girls receive during *kolu* visits commonly include flowers, turmeric, *kuṅkumam*, betel nuts, bangles, a sari blouse piece, a coconut, and a plastic utensil, among other things connected to female beauty, auspiciousness, and domesticity (cf. Hancock 1999, 3). While many of these objects point

233 Male oriented outcomes may include maintaining purity (for Brahmins), secure a good wheat crop, rid the village of disease (Wadley 1995, Hüsken 2013), economic success, acquisition of personal power and defeat of rivals (Rodrigues 2005, 75).

234 In the Bengali *pūjā* the worship of young girls (*kumārī pūjā*) coincides with the blood sacrifice (*bali dāna*) performed on day 9 (see Rodrigues 2009, 268, 273–277 and 2005, 98–99), making this connection explicit.

to feminine beauty (including pocket mirrors, mehendi cones and flowers to put in the hair), they are also symbolic of fertility (Narayanan 2012). The blouse piece that is to be sewn for a sari, represent the dress commonly worn after marriage. In accordance, the *tāmpūlam* is commonly presented exclusively to young women and *sumaṅgalīs*, and not to men, children, or widows (children may receive a pencil and a notebook, particularly on the 9th day of Sarasvatī Pūjā).

Some women invited widows (Ta. *amaṅkali*, lit. “inauspicious”) and gave them the *tāmpūlam*, but with certain restrictions, such as without turmeric, *kuṅkumam* and bangles.²³⁵ Mrs. Bhagyalakshmi stated: “I will give [*tāmpūlam*] to everyone. I do not see such differences, because [*amaṅgalīs*] should not feel hurt. We are all women after all.” Another woman said: “Mostly only *sumaṅgalīs* come. Even if *amaṅgalīs* come, we give them [*tāmpūlam*] without turmeric. My *guru* is one, so I will give her. There is nothing wrong. The only thing is that turmeric should not be given [to *amaṅgalīs*].” Other respondents avoided going to households where they knew widows took part in the celebration. I heard a sad story of a widow who once offered *kuṅkumam* to her daughter-in-law’s *kolu* guests. Her neighbor proudly told me that she refused to receive it, and afterwards all others who had received *kuṅkumam* from the widow were plagued by misfortune. The widow’s own son almost lost his life in a traffic accident. After this incident, the woman who told me the anecdote does not visit her neighbors *kolu* anymore, and the distribution of *kuṅkumam* caused a split in their community. Clearly, there are mixed opinions in Kanchipuram on the participation of widows during *kolu*. And importantly, the efficacy which is attributed to certain ritual acts is most explicitly visible when these rituals *go wrong* – or when one does not follow the rules. As in this case, negative events are attributed as negative consequences to these ritual mistakes or wrongdoings.²³⁶

Based on the ritual roles of women during Navarātri and the images of the feminine expressed during *kolu*, I agree with Rodrigues (2005) who in his analysis on women’s roles during the Banarsi celebrations suggests that Navarātri temporarily “elevates the feminine, in all its dimensions, to a high level of purity and auspiciousness” (2005, 98). Clearly, the festival gives primacy to the *kanyā* and *sumaṅgalī*, with its emphasis on fertility and fecundity as outlined

235 *Kuṅkumam* is given to female guests when they leave as a blessing or sign of respect, but it is not presented to widows.

236 For more on the breaking of ritual rules and failed ritual performances, see Hüsken (2007b).

above.²³⁷ But while Rodrigues's argument is that inauspicious states of womanhood are venerated too, through the encompassing image of the Great Goddess,²³⁸ there is simultaneously a contrast when looking at the celebrations, as widows and (in the case of high caste households) outcastes are explicitly excluded or not invited.

Men and *Kolu*

Husbands and other male family members may be present in the home while receiving guests during Navarātri evenings, but they rarely go *kolu* hopping, which is considered a female activity. When I inquired about the different roles of men and women in her family during Navarātri, Purnima, a woman in her 40's explained:

"Men do not have much to do during Navarātri. [...] So as far as the Navarātri period is concerned, it is the ladies who do much work. The role of men is mainly in the initial stage of arrangements, dismantling [the *kolu*] in the end, and some house related stuff like buying things required for *pūjā* etc. If the *sumaṅgalīs* start coming by 5 or 5.30 in the evening, one or the other will be coming till 8 or 8.30. So, women will have continuous work."

Indeed, I recall *no* memory of men showing up during any of my *kolu* visits (that is, of course, apart from those who lived in the households in question). On the contrary, rooms could be filled to the brim with women and children. I did, however, encounter several men with huge interest and pride in their doll collections. In addition, in the homes of male Brahmin priests, the priest, and not their wives, often had the strongest opinions on how to arrange their *kolu*. Generally, the married women of the family arrange or set up the *kolu*, or it is a family activity. However, when I watched the *kolu* being arranged in Mrs. Gowri's family, whose *kolu* was described as introduction to this second part of the book, her husband (who was then the eldest priest in the household) gave instructions on where to place the dolls after the women had unpacked and dusted

237 In Rodrigues's case, the pre-menstrual virgin, the post-menopausal mother, and married woman are the states of womanhood giving primacy during Navarātri (2005, 98). In Tamil Nadu, the two latter categories come together in the auspicious *sumaṅgalī*.

238 Epithets in Durgā hymns that are recited during Navarātri praise the goddess in inauspicious forms, including an outcaste (Mātaṅgī) or a widow (Kātyāyanī and Dhūmavati) (Rodrigues 2005, 96). However, as explained, the *DM* and other Durgā texts do not play important parts in Navarātri in Kanchipuram to the extent they do in North India. Here, the popularly recited *LSN* overshadows the *DM*, which on the contrary is not often recited.

them, and they had hired a workman to place the heavy dolls on the *kolu* and to install the steps. Hüsken (2012, 189) similarly notes that in the homes of the temple priests of the Varadarāja temple the priests arrange the *kolu*, not their wives, or they monitor its arrangement closely. She suggests that this might be due to the priest's expertise and pride in doing the *alamkāras* of the temple deity. Thus, the *kolu* display reflects the priests' skills and field of expertise. Males, or the whole household, often also partake in the worship of pre-pubescent girls and auspicious married women and may partake in recitations. But it is the women who perform the ritual proceedings for the *kolu*, offer *tāmpūlam* to the visitors, and go for evening visits. Despite occasional male interest, *kolu* predominantly remains a scene for female ritual agency and revolves around female values.

Who is the Goddess on the *Kolu*?

The *kolu* praises the feminine aspect of the divine in its benevolent form. Through inviting the goddess home, on the *kolu* and in the form of prepubescent girls and married women, she showers auspiciousness, fecundity, and prosperity to the household. The desire for auspiciousness and blessings over the home was repeatedly given in interviews as one of the main reasons why respondents kept *kolu*. As Jyotika replied when asked why she kept *kolu*: "Because it is good for the house (*vītukku nallatu*) and the house will prosper." Mrs. Srividya outlined in more detail:

"Keeping Navarātri *kolu* gives us peace of mind and makes us feel that all gods are blessing our house. When people see Navarātri *kolu*, their vibrations will be good and that will become part of the house. All their wishes and prayers will reverberate through the house. For this, we celebrate *kolu*."

Although the Navarātri festival is widely associated with Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī, women do not pray specifically to Durgā. Rather, they pray to Ampāl (the Tamil equivalent of the generic Devī, "Goddess", the feminine aspect of the divine). If people were to name the goddess, they would talk of the three *śaktis* whom the festival popularly honors; Lakṣmī, Durgā and Sarasvatī. Logan too, explains how the goddess is worshipped as "*śakti*" during *kolu* (1980, 254, see also Fuller and Logan 1985, 98). It should be stressed here that in Kanchipuram, the *Lalitāsahasranāma*, and not the *Devīmāhātmya*, is by far considered the mandatory text to recite during Navarātri. In accordance with identifying Lalitā with Kāmākṣī, I understood some women to talk about Kāmākṣī (particularly those I recognized as ardent Kāmākṣī worshippers, such as Mrs. Gowri), when they addressed the

goddess as Ampāl. On day 9, the goddess is worshipped as Sarasvatī, goddess of learning and music.

Kolu rituals heavily revolve around female auspiciousness and make up a sacred female space. The goddess on the *kolu* is a Lakṣmī-like goddess, who confers prosperity to the household, fertility, well-being of the family, and particularly ensures women long lives as *sumaṅgalis*. She is not the demon-fighter from the *Devīmāhātmya* and the other myths narrating the demonic fight. Indeed, there is little in the domestic rituals during Navarātri that points to the goddess' violence.

The Symbolism of “Hot” and “Cool” and Women’s Religious Agency

One thing that *does* evoke the theme of fierceness is the distribution of “hot” *cuṅṭal*, dishes of pulses and legumes, to the goddess in the pot and to the visiting women (figure 5.7).²³⁹ This particular food makes the goddess as well as the women, among whom the goddess will be manifest, “hot” for the duration of the festival increasing their *śakti* day by day and regenerating their powers.

This not only enhances the fierceness of the goddess in her fight with the demon, but further strengthens the connection between the devotee and the goddess (Logan 1980, Fuller and Logan 1985, Tanaka 1999.) In response to this increased energy level of the women, the ingredients in the pot are used for making “cool” *pāyacam* or *poṅkal* when the festival is over, not only conferring the goddess's powers to the family who consumes this dish as *prasāda*, but also cooling the women when the battle is over. The *cuṅṭal* offered during Sarasvatī Pūjā is accompanied by sweets or cooling dishes, “signaling the need to balance heating and cooling food” (Fuller and Logan 1985, 98).

Masakazu Tanaka (1999, 134–135), Logan (1980, 254–258) and Fuller and Logan (1985, 98) have all used the symbolism reflected in the food, “hot” food symbolizing independence and cool food symbolizing restraint to argue how the festival re-affirms patriarchal structures and “demonstrates the limitations of women” (Tanaka 1999, 134). After being “hot” and acting alone during the festival, including going for evening visits unaccompanied by their husbands, women are in the end “cooled” and remain under the control of their spouse. This pattern is also reflected in other aspects of Navarātri celebrations such as

239 *Cuṅṭal* is also offered to goddesses in temples during Navarātri, as an energizer for her fights with the demon. See Beck (1969) for typologies of Tamil food, which are divided into the two basic categories of hot and cool.

(in the Mīnākṣī temple) the color of the temple images clothes (red the 8th day and white the 9th day (Fuller and Logan 1985, 89–92), and the sequence of worshipping goddesses beginning with the destructive Durgā and ending with the submissive Sarasvatī on day 9.²⁴⁰ We must remember that the *sumāṅgalī* depends upon her husband for maintaining her status; it is through marriage that she channels her benevolent powers, which would otherwise be considered ambivalent and unpredictable. Within marriage the woman’s *śakti* is used productively and creatively, such as with begetting children. It is therefore no surprise that *kolu*, a ritual which revolves so heavily around the *sumāṅgalī*, confirms these stereotypical social patterns of which she is part.



Figure 5.7: Eating *cuṅṭal* (pulses) as *prasāda*, 2015.

Importantly, this does not mean that women do not or cannot exhibit agency or experience empowerment through the course of Navarātri. Several of my

²⁴⁰ Fuller and Logan (1985, 98) and Tanaka (1999, 134) also stress that it is men who officiate the Sarasvatī Pūjā rituals and thus the “normal order” is restored at the end of Navarātri. However, out of the three Sarasvatī Pūjās I witnessed domestically in Kanchipuram during 2014 and 2015 two were performed by women and one by the husband and wife together. Through interviews I also learnt that many housewives perform the Sarasvatī Pūjā themselves.

respondents perceived the festival as giving importance to women in association with the divine feminine and expressed this in interviews. Mrs. Srividya said:

“Śiva has one night, Śivaratri, but Ampāl has nine nights, that is Navarātri. Ampāl takes *avatār* (descends) to bring glory to womanhood. Only a woman can do anything she wants. Men have muscle power, but women have mental strength. The *asura* mistakes that a woman will not be able to kill him, but the Goddess proves him wrong. She is actually the combination of the power of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. So, women are given importance in this festival.”

While many women expressed this notion in one way or another, it was not uniform, and others, such as Mrs. Gowri, focused solely on her devotion to the goddess and its effects on her:

I: Do you view Navarātri as a time when women are given importance?

G: No, I don't see it that way. I feel happy and content doing it (keeping *kolu*) for the goddess.”

Concluding Remarks

Kolu creates a sacred space where women are intermediaries between the goddess and the worshippers. They perform and embody the divine, appropriate the goddess's powers, and act as ritual specialists, as hosts, and as guests. Navarātri celebrates the feminine aspects of the divine, including woman-as-the goddess. However, not all “types” of women, but rather *sumāṅgalī*-hood, the status of the auspicious and child-bearing married woman, is elevated during the domestic festival. Although some include widows in their celebrations, this is not the general rule. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether the general claim of a “shared *śakti*” among women and goddesses holds true if it only manifests with reference to specific women. However, *śakti* as female power may also manifest in other female forms who are equated with lesser spirit-being and noted for their threats and interference with a family's or individual's well-being (Reynolds 1980, 37).²⁴¹ And while other women have other powers, Navarātri celebrates the goddess's unconditional benevolent powers, embodied in fertility and auspiciousness and the idea of the *sumāṅgalī*.

The goddess on the *kolu* is not the violent demon fighter from the myths associated with Navarātri. Rather, she represents auspiciousness, fertility,

241 Such beings may be known as *pēy*, *pūtam*, *picācu* and *puccaṅṅi*, and can through appropriation change character so that they become more *ammaṅ*-like and more prone to bless (Reynolds 1980, 37).

prosperity of the household, and the well-being of the family. This confirms stereotypical female religiosity, which, as Pintchman (2007, 6) points out, tends to emphasize women's important relationships and the domestic realm; something their everyday life heavily revolves around, and connects to their role as wives and mothers, and the wish to gain and maintain the status of the auspicious married *sumāṅgalī*. By many, Navarātri is regarded a special period for women and girls. One informant explained: "[...] it is like the joy I get in these ten days is the joy of the entire year put together." Many respondents connected the feminine association of Navarātri to women's association with the goddess. As Mrs. Ragi said: "I feel [Navarātri] is a nice way to be connected to the goddess, especially when my daughter is called to sit for [*kanyā*] *pūjā*." To take Rodrigues's argument of how Navarātri elevates the feminine to a temporary "high level of purity and auspiciousness" further, I label Navarātri, and particularly *kolu*, a "power event" in which women ritually renew their auspiciousness and appropriate the powers of the goddess.²⁴²

This concept of feminine power feeds into female religious agency. This agency is understood here as relating to the lives and concerns of the women performing these rituals. Agency thus might even contribute to maintain the status quo by affirming the *sumāṅgalī*'s dependence on her husband. This is no contradiction. *Kolu* not only exemplifies ritual agency with its varied ritual roles of women and girls, but importantly also urges an aesthetic agency, where women display their world views through the set up and fashioning of doll dioramas and scenery (chapter 6); as well as an economic agency, in buying dolls and other requirements, most prominent when deciding to start a *kolu* from scratch (chapter 7).

242 This argument follows Reynolds (1980, 50) who have have termed *nōṅṅpus* "power events".