

## Chapter 6

# Creativity and Playfulness in *Kolu*

*“Kolu is all about imagination”*

### Displaying the Play of the Deities

The *kolu* is populated with numerous colorful dolls, depicting gods, goddesses, demons, sages, human beings, and animals (figure 6.1). Durgā on top of her lion kills the buffalo demon, Lakṣmī showers money and Sarasvatī plays her *vīṇā* (figure 6.2). Viṣṇu is resting on his snake, Kāmākṣī embraces the Śivaliṅga under a mango tree, Śiva dances in his wheel of fire and Narasiṃha ferociously emerges out of a pillar. Śiva sits on Mt. Kailāsa with his family and a towering Viṣṇu with 19 colorful heads reveals his true form to a kneeling Arjuna in the *Viśvarūpadarśana* scene from the *Bhagavadgītā* (figure 6.3). Kṛṣṇa sports with his *gopis*, plays the flute, eats butter and dances on a snake’s head. The gods and *asuras* churn the ocean together, with a mountain and a snake as churning stick and rope. Hanumān sits on his coiled-up tail in audience with demon king Rāvaṇa, and the huge demon Ghaṭotkaca eats from bowls of food. The female poet saints Mira Bai and Āṅṅāl sign their praises, orange robed Sai Baba shows the *abhaya mudrā* (Skt. “gesture of fearlessness”) and the Buddha is meditating. There is the head of decapitated Māriyamman, Viṣṇu’s ten incarnations, the eight forms of goddess Lakṣmī, wish-fulfilling cows (Skt. *kāmadhenu*), potbelly Ganeshas, four-headed Brahmās, green Mīnākṣis and blue baby Kṛṣṇas. Mahārājas ride on elephants followed by their entourage, and humans perform various *pūjās* and *homas*. Some engage in processions of deities on *tērs* and *vahanas* (vehicles used for processions of deities), others eat from palm leaves or dance Bharatanāṭyam (classical south Indian dance). There are cricket teams and people playing carrom, cinemas, shops and children studying in schools. The Cēṭṭiyar merchant dolls sell everything from chickpeas and grains to fruits and vegetables, toiletries, pottery, bangles and saris (figure 6.4). Villagers are grinding food, carrying water-pots and vegetables, and women are cooking *idly* (pillowy lentil rice cakes) (figure 6.5). There are smiths, weavers, potters, fishermen and farmers harvesting. The wooden *Marappācci* couple is dressed up yearly in new cloths and ornaments by their owners and stand amidst the dolls (figure 6.6). In joint families, several *Marappācci* dolls can be seen. Alongside huts and wells rise temples with *gopurams* and tanks, and pilgrimage sites

such as Mammalapuram, Sabrimala, Tirupati and Trichy. There are beaches, forests, jungles, villages, cities and roads, as well as various animals. A lion is caught in a net and a mouse stand outside hovering, a crow tries stealing a *vadai* (savory fried doughnut). Amongst the dolls stand porcelain figures, souvenirs from India and abroad and other trinkets, such as paw-waving Japanese cats (*maneki-neko*), and Chinese money toads (*jin chan*), Eiffel Towers and Twin Towers, conches and seashells, plastic insects, fruits, and vegetables. Often kids have arranged their toys, including cartoon figures, Barbie dolls, toy vehicles, plastic animals, stuffed animals, toy furniture and dish sets (figure 6.7).



Figure 6.1: A *kolu*, 2014.



Figure 6.2: Lakṣmī, Durgā and Sarasvatī dolls, 2015.



Figure 6.3: Viśvarūpadarśana scene from the *Bhagavadgītā*, 2015.



Figure 6.4: Cēṭṭiyār merchant dolls, 2015.



Figure 6.5: Village scenes in front of *kolu* steps, 2014.



Figure 6.6. Marappacci dolls, 2015.



Figure 6.7: Toys as *kolu*, 2015.

While a *kolu* ideally should consist of nine steps (Ta. *paṭi*), corresponding to the nine nights of the Navarātri festival, an odd number of at least three steps is the minimum; odd numbers considered auspicious in Indian culture. The *kolu* frequently extends from the steps to the floor and may transform entire rooms into depicting the play or *līlā* of the deities (Narayanan 2016, 341; 2018, 281). The *kolu* forms a miniature world visually unfolding on the steps, unveiling the richness and colors of Hindu mythology mixed with South Indian culture. Stories vividly come alive through the *kolu* display. As an elderly priest of the Kāmākṣī temple said: “We get to know the *pattatikā* (Ta. “scriptures”) through this. Reading is one thing; seeing and hearing are other things. We can *see* it during this time (my emphasis).”

Usually less is *not* more when it comes to *kolu*: there will be gold, glitter, plastic garlands, an overabundance of colorful dolls, and the *kolus* are illuminated with light chains. One of the biggest *kolus* I saw was the one of a silk merchant’s family. Their *kolu* was like a visual explosion: the freshly painted dolls stood so close that there was no room in between, and it was hard to catch the details. But there is much variation, since *kolus* are arranged according to convenience, income, and interest. While some *kolus* are extremely elaborate and cover the space of entire rooms from floor to ceiling, others are more modest and consist of merely a dozen dolls displayed.

The dolls are usually displayed hierarchically on the steps with the gods on top and the inanimate or decorative objects on the bottom. Some say this is to illustrate the idealized order of the universe, a ‘life cycle’ with gods above sages, sages above humans, humans above animals, and animals above insects and plants (Logan 1980, 250; Fuller and Logan 1985, 97; Tanaka 1999, 127). Most of my respondents explained that the steps relate to the figures’ different levels of consciousness or senses (Ta. *aṛivu*). Despite the hierarchical rules regarding what goes on which step, *kolu* arrangements are not strictly fixed. Personal taste, creativity and imagination all play part in displaying the dolls, and no two *kolus* are alike. While some dolls are fashionable and will be found on almost all *kolus*, others are one of a kind: manufactured on demand, or old and rare. People also frequently add to their sets and dolls with creative or personal details, such as cotton ball mountain tops where gods and sages pop up from the “snow” (figure 6.8). Sand or earth is applied for making villages, beaches and cricket fields, sprouts for forests and jungles, and stones for mountains. Thermacol, cardboard or paper and the like may be used for making buildings, streets, cities, and signs, and ice-lollies for fences. Mrs. Srividya explained: “A lot of imagination is involved in keeping the *kolu*. You can do different kinds of set-

tings. For example, you can do the “*Ārupaṭai vīṭu*” (the six abodes of Murugaṅ) on thermacol to give the impression of water. *Kolu* is all about imagination.”



Figure 6.8: Cotton ball Mt. Kailāsa, 2015.

## The Dolls and Their Makers

The three goddesses Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, whom the festival honors, are all but compulsory on a *kolu*, alongside Ganeśa, who should be kept in addition to the goddesses when first starting with *kolu* (Hancock 1999, 248). Ganeśa is the god of beginnings and commonly prayed to before any new undertaking. Apart from innumerable independent deities and figures, sets flourish, depicting scenes of Kṛṣṇa *līlā* (the play of Kṛṣṇa), from the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Ramāyaṇa*, the *purāṇas*, fables from Hitopadeśa, and the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* as well as various cultural and religious scenes such as weddings and processions, and village scenes. Hancock (2001) has shown how *kolu* balance heritage with the modern, with its rural scenes evoking a “glorified past”, blended with judgments of present and future (for instance in themed *kolus* commenting upon societal issues, but also in more modern dolls and toys).

*Kolu* dolls are ideally made from terracotta, but some doll makers also use papier-mâché, which is preferred by some buyers. While clay lasts longer and is said to be infused with divinity (*śakti*),<sup>243</sup> papier-mâché dolls are easier to handle as they are not as heavy (there are also dolls of plastic and plaster of Paris). In Kanchipuram, *kolu* dolls are available in a particular neighborhood known as the Pommaikkāraṅ (Ta. “doll maker”) Street,<sup>244</sup> where several doll makers live and have their workshops (figures 6.9 and 6.10). They mainly belong to the Kulālar (Ta. potter) or Uṭaiyār community, known for pottery, but have started to train other people in the trade as well. This is the livelihood for these doll makers, with the peak season in the months preceding Navarātri. Other occasions during which people buy dolls include Vināyakar Catūrtḥī and Kṛṣṇa Jayantī, celebrated close to Navarātri. The doll makers also supply shops such as religious supermarkets and send dolls abroad. Most dolls are mass-produced from molds and then painted by hand, but the doll makers also take special orders from customers who desire one-of-a-kind dolls. While Pommaikkāraṅ Street is located very close to the Varadarāja temple, people from all over Kanchipuram come here to buy dolls before the festival. Indeed, *everyone* I visited and interviewed in Kanchipuram, without a single exception, had bought some of their dolls directly from the show rooms of the doll makers in Pommaikkāraṅ Street.

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243 Susan S. Bean makes the argument that only “*unfired* clay contains life; [and that] images made from it are supremely suited as vessels to contain divine power.” (2011, 608, my emphasis) Teracotta is fired, but its sanctity, coming from the earth, was emphasized by one of the doll makers as well as by a few respondents.

244 Pommaikkāraṅ Street is a nickname for Astakiri Street, received because of all the doll makers who hereditarily live and work here.





Figure 6.9: Doll maker's workshop, 2015.



Figure 6.10: Doll maker's workshop, 2015.

*Kolu* dolls are traditionally collected from the time a couple gets married, when the bride and groom receive the *Marappācci* dolls. Others take up the practice some time after marriage, and do not necessarily keep this wooden couple. Many *kolu* dolls are inherited through generations in the family from mother to daughter and re-painted to freshen them up as they grow old. Tradition says it is compulsory to buy at least one new doll each Navarātri. In this way, a collection of *kolu* dolls grows steadily along with the effort and money each family puts into it. The three doll makers I interviewed and whose workshops I went to see reported an increasing interest in dolls and a bigger demand from customers over the past few decades. Still, they told me there is no competition between them as they sell their dolls at same standardized rate, and there is market for everyone due to the increasing demand of dolls (in fact, when I returned immediately after Navarātri and wanted to buy dolls to bring home, they were completely sold out!).<sup>245</sup>

But why display dolls, and what is their connection to Navarātri? Many respondents connected the *kolu* to the goddess' fight with the demon and regarded the dolls the army of Durgā helping her in the cosmic battle, or they regarded them sources of empowerment during the nine days of battle, so that the goddess would draw on the doll's powers. According to Tanaka (1999, 124), the *kolu* dolls are said to be the forms assumed by the goddess in her fight. Some respondents explained how the gods had become "mere dolls" to display on the *kolu* while their powers had all gone to Durgā fighting the demon, or that the goddess killed the demon with such ferocity that the world stood still "like dolls." Others held that the goddess converted the rest of the gods to dolls and took their powers to kill the *asura*. Despite these notions, the dolls are not mere shells: they are imbued with powers and divinity. As one respondent phrased it: "these are not dolls, but gods." The dolls are considered to be alive during the festival; hence the need to put them to sleep the final day. A woman explained: "During *kolu* time at night [the dolls] will come alive and talk about our family's good and bad. So, if we look after them well, they will bless us". Importantly, *kolu* dolls are not used for any other occasions, and stored in boxes for the rest of the year.

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<sup>245</sup> Interestingly, contrasting the words of doll makers in Chennai who report that the next generation is wary of continuing the livelihood of making dolls (not because of the demand, but because of profit), one of the doll makers in Kanchipuram who had a huge workshop and several employees told me their occupation was sought after and popular, and that they trained many people into the trade. See <https://www.rediff.com/getahead/report/slide-show-1-specials-dying-a-slow-death-a-peek-into-the-life-of-kolu-doll-makers/20131009.htm> (accessed 30.08.2022).

Another reason for keeping *kolu* during Navarātri was proposed in Fuller and Logan's 1985 article on Navarātri in Madurai. The two scholars point to a complementary plane between the Mīnakṣī temple and homes during Navarātri: in their analysis, a *kolu* represents the ideal Hindu world order which during Navarātri is threatened by Mahiṣāsura; created domestically as a counterpart to the "battlefield" within the Mīnakṣī temple (Fuller and Logan 1985, 97, see also Logan 1980). This, they claim, is for example reflected in the fact that only benevolent deities are displayed on *kolus*.<sup>246</sup> Thus, the domestic *kolu* represents a recreation of the usually pure interior of the temple, which for these nine days is threatened by demons (who do not feature on the *kolu*). However, nowadays demons from mythological stories are frequently found on *kolus*. This might, of course, mean that *purāṇic* sets are a more recent development, Fuller and Logan conducting research in the 1980s.<sup>247</sup> But generally, bloodthirsty deities such as Kālī are not very common on *kolus*, although she, too, will appear. The village deity Māriyamman is on the other hand quite popular. In general, people opt for benevolent and auspicious deities on their *kolu*.

## Fashioning the Goddess

In many homes with elaborate *kolus*, which respondents would label as "good" *kolus*, the *kolu* was an extension of the women's interest in crafts, such as making sand arts, decorated plates, embroidery, crochet and other crafts. The aesthetic agency of women is not only expressed in the arrangements and compositions of the *kolu* dolls, but also in the pots that become goddesses in their hands, decorated and consecrated as the goddess and placed on the *kolu* (figure 6.11). Often elaborately dressed up as the goddess, the pot may draw the attention as the focal point in the *kolu*. Some also keep a metal face on the pot or put a small *bimba* (Skt. "image") of the goddess inside, and it is decorated with flowers. Some pots are totally transformed to resemble dolls themselves, with spare limbs attached to their pot "body", adorned with sari replicas and ornaments, and jewel-filled hair and faces (Ta. *ammaṅ mukham*)

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246 "[T]here are never any models of demons, evil spirits, and ancestors on the *kolus*, even though these are also part of the totality of the world" (Fuller and Logan 1985, 97). In my view, the general lack of malevolence is also connected to the wholly auspicious nature of the *kolu* and its associations with fertility and prosperity (although this might be a chicken-egg-argument, as the *kolu* might be linked to fertility and prosperity exactly because it is a display of and embodiment of auspicious forces).

247 Though unusual, Deeksha Sivakumar (2018, 329) even describes a *kolu* displaying pictures of dead ancestors.

attached to the coconut “head”. As Haberman (2013, 149–152) has argued in his research on tree worship in North India, the application of faces on aniconic forms makes a more intimate connection between the divine and the worshipper, as *darśana* becomes easier within an anthropomorphic form. These decorations of the pot thus enhance the goddess’ presence for the worshipper (much like the *alamkāras* in temples) and brings the goddess forth in a more recognizable form. Another aspect of this practice is that the goddess *should* be adorned beautifully, being a fine woman, enhancing her feminine nature and desires.



Figure 6.11: The goddess in the form of a pot, 2015.

For those who have the practice of installing the goddess in a pot, the pot is said to be the heart of the *kolu*. Importantly, once it is placed among the dolls, they cannot be rearranged, and the *kolu* display is fixed for the duration of the

festival. However, the tradition of installing the goddess in a pot between families and communities. Some also keep the pot in their *pūjā* room during Navarātri, and not on the *kolu*, or only for Sarasvatī Pūjā. But whether or not the pot is kept, the *kolu* is regarded as an object of worship.

In addition to or as an alternative to the pot, an oil lamp (Ta. *viḷakku*) may be fashioned and decorated as the goddess in the same manner as the pot and kept near the *kolu*. The elaborate decorations by women of pots and oil lamps, which transform domestic items into idols, are commonly known as Varalakṣmī *nōṇpu* decorations. Varalakṣmī *nōṇpu* (Ta. “vow to Lakṣmī as the wielder of boons”) is a *pūjā* performed by married (usually Brahmin) women in South India on the Friday before full moon during the month of Āṭi (July-August).<sup>248</sup> This *pūjā* is performed for the well-being and prosperity of the family and therefore it has many similarities with Navarātri. In fact, some women equated them, when asked about the most important time during the year to venerate the goddess. Much like Navarātri, this occasion also fosters the community of women as well as focusing on worship, as mothers and daughters visit each other during the evening viewing the decorated pots, singing songs, and receiving the *tāmpūlam*.<sup>249</sup>

## Competition, Didactics, Sentiments, and Social Commentary

Displaying dolls during Navarātri is not just about having a memorable *kolu* for entertaining and pleasing the guests: competition is made explicit as *kolu* competitions<sup>250</sup> are announced by newspapers and TV channels. Here, innovative and spectacular and often theme-based *kolus* are featured. Still, those which adhere to religious tradition, win.<sup>251</sup> A priestly family of the Ekāmranātha temple once won “best *kolu* of Kanchipuram” in such a competition run by Vijay

248 *Nōṇpus* are mainly performed by Brahmin and other high caste women (Reynolds 1980, 59). For a detailed description of the *pūjā*, see Reynolds (1978, 268-303).

249 <https://bommalattum.com/2012/07/30/vowing-and-showing/> (accessed 22.08. 2022).

250 Similarly, Durgā Pūjā *paṇḍals* win prizes in the north. Indeed, McDermott (2011, 137) says that in 2008 there were so many prize awarders in Kolkata (among companies, media, and charities) that it was difficult to keep count. In Chennai, papers have hosted competitions since the 1980s (Narayanan 2016, 342).

251 When the scholar Hancock partook in judging a *kolu* competition held by the Chennai based newspaper Adyar Times in 1996, she described the criteria for evaluating a good *kolu* as: 1) the theme or message that unified the display, 2) the neatness and artistry in the display, 3) the extent to which the religious basis of the festival is communicated, and 4) originality. However, originality needed not point to a creative display, but rather that a display invoked the “original” form of the festival, with reference to the three goddesses. (Hancock 1999, 249)

TV and received a prize of 10,000 INR. Their winning *kolu* was themed as the *kumbhābhīṣeka* (Skt. “inauguration”) of the Ekāmranatha temple, and they had depicted the temple’s allegedly 3500-year-old mango tree, famous beyond Kanchipuram. When I visited in 2015, they had themed their *kolu* as the Thiruthani *teppocavam* (Ta. “float festival”)<sup>252</sup>, an annual temple festival when the festival image is displayed on a float in the temple tank. They had fashioned a replica of the temple tank on the floor, with a motorized float constantly spinning around in it (figure 6.12), in addition to their 15-step *kolu*, which was lavish with dolls. Originally, they had fish in the tank as well, but released them in the real temple tank afraid that they were going to die, which would bring inauspiciousness. Mrs. Nirmala’s representation of these annual festivals in her *kolu* shows how *kolu* is often used to display memories from travels or pilgrimage as well as religious affiliations.



Figure 6.12: Replica of temple tank with motorized float, 2015.

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252 Tiruthani is one of the six abodes of Lord Murugaṅ, situated in Northern Tamil Nadu, and home to a well-known Murugaṅ temple.



Figure 6.13: Replica of a Kanchipuram preschool, 2015.

Another interesting aspect of the *kolu* celebration is how several families represent their own family lineages in their setup. Among them were several schools with signs representing the educational institutions of children (figure 6.13), and signs with family names of fictive silk shops, restaurants, cinemas, and cricket teams. As with the popular Cēṭṭiyar merchant dolls (a fat couple usually displayed selling fruits and vegetables) may be interpreted as representing a successful agricultural outcome (Logan 1980, 250), some of these personal expressions were probably created to symbolize or to wish for prosperity and successful endeavors. The *kolu* dolls and their history, where they are from, who bought them, episodes connected to them, as well as their affiliated mythological narratives, are all subjects for discussion among the visitors viewing the *kolu*. Thus, as Hüsken (2012, 191) points out, the dolls themselves also form parts of family or individual narratives, as the worldviews of the women and families are creatively on display on the *kolu*.<sup>253</sup>

A lot can be read in a *kolu*, as we saw in the above examples: travels, religious affiliations, and personal narratives. As Bado-Fralick and Norris remind us, toys and play have educational value (2010, 130–131). *Kolu* displays are moreover

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253 Shivakumar (2018) analyzes in more detail how *kolu* preserves and displays life histories and memories (Sivakumar 2018).

infused with mythology and thus serve as a natural arena to teach children about Hindu religion.<sup>254</sup> *Kolus* are very popular with children, who often arrange their own parts, usually the floor or lower steps. Often kids engage with the dolls while receiving guests or while visiting *kolu*. Like Srividya, who is a teacher, explained: “The *kolu* is a good way to teach kids of this generation about our *purāṇas* and *itihāsas*”. In 2015, she had themed her *kolu* with traditional stories, and the floor in front of her *kolu* was filled with scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the right side and from the *Mahābhārata* on the left, interspersed with scenes from *purāṇic* stories and moral tales such as the *Hitopadeśa*. Her son and daughter, aged about 8–10, proudly explained most of the scenes on the floor to me once when I visited in her absence.<sup>255</sup>

For many, there is much sentiment attached to the dolls. Mrs. Kamala, for instance, had a huge collection of very personal and unique dolls, displayed across two floors (figures 6.14, 6.15 and 6.16). It mainly consisted of dolls inherited from her mother: old ones that are no longer available at the market. A lady who was visiting Mrs. Kamala told me that in her previous house they had to regulate the visitors with a que-system because of the crowd of guests and number of dolls. Unlike most others, Kamala had not repainted any of her dolls, and their faded colors added to the beauty of her *kolu*. Her doll collection was a collection of memories. She expressed a sentimental relationship to the dolls, which she regarded as more than just dolls, and addressed in terms of family relations:

“So far, we have never missed a *kolu*. All these 65 years (her age) we have never had to stop for any reason. These [dolls] are like my relatives. I cannot think of them as dolls. I cannot be without seeing them.

I: Through the year we celebrate many festivals, how do you compare Navarātri with those?

K: But this is more than that. I told you, isn’t it? This doll is my *citappa* (Ta. “uncle”). That doll was given by my mother when I was three years old. When I see it, I become a three-year-old child again.”

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254 See also Hancock 2001, 6.

255 I also learned several mythological stories while *kolu* hopping with my assistant Ms. Vaishnavi and benefited substantially from her knowledge.





Figure 6.14: Mrs. Kamala's *kolu*, steps, 2015.



Figure 6.15: Mrs. Kamala's *kolu*, floor scene, 2015.

Through her *kolu*, Mrs. Kamala is brought back to her childhood memories of playing with dolls. In connection with memories of the past, a woman in her 50's explained how she let an old dream be expressed in her *kolu*, as she had arranged an *araṅkēṛram* set<sup>256</sup> of dancers together with a Nātarājā figure on a separate podium (figure 6.17). She said: "As a child I wanted to learn dance. I was not allowed to. Even if I had learnt it on my own, no one would have married me. So, I kept this set instead. I got the cloth specially stitched." Here we see that *kolu* can be used as an arena for expressing and displaying hopes and dreams, and how personal sentiments are manifested not only in the dolls themselves, but also in their display.



Figure 6.16: Old *kolu* doll in Mrs. Kamala's collection, 2015.

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256 *Araṅkēṛram* is the debut performance of a dance or drama student after undertaking years of training.



Figure 6.17: *Araṅkēṛram* set, 2015.

As mentioned previously, *kolus* may also be unified by an overall theme. Most themed *kolus* in Kānchipuram were either based on mythological stories (very often Kṛṣṇa *līlās*), or on temple or cultural events such as weddings and processions. In the big cities such as Chennai, and in newspapers and websites, controversial themes are more common. Some of these themes, such as women's rights or equality rights<sup>257</sup> reminds one of the theme-based *paṇḍals* of the Bengali and Benarsi Durgā Pūjās, which may be quite controversial.<sup>258</sup> As with

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257 One such campaign is Occupy Navaratri, which use Navarātri dolls for “challenging stereotypes and creating awareness”. This web page is also on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and uses the doll display to comment upon issues like gay marriage, menstruating women's prohibition in going to temples, body shapes, skin color and men as primary care takers for children. See <http://www.womensweb.in/2016/10/occupy-navratri-challenging-stereotypes-creating-awareness>. (Accessed 22.08.2022).

258 Themes in Bengali *paṇḍals* span from social issues such as child marriage and bride burning through spaceships and monumental sites to popular media themes such as Harry Potter, Titanic, and Jurassic Park. See McDermott (2011) for a review of *paṇḍals*

the *paṇḍals*, some of these themes may also be interpreted as social commentary, although the scope of *kolu* is not nearly as spectacular as the public circus of the Bengali *pūjā*. Social commentaries may be part of *kolus* intentionally or unintentionally, whether or not they are themed. Not just once would I, for instance, spot white-skinned dolls among the tourist site sets; particularly the Mahabalipuram set had white, scantily clad Barbie-like dolls representing tourists spread across the five *rathas* (*pañcharatha*), the rock-cut stone monuments in this beach town. Mahabalipuram (also known as Mammalapuram) is a place that sees many western (as well as Indian) tourists (figure 6.18).



Figure 6.18: Mahabalipuram set, 2014.

### Mr. Gopinath's Handcrafted *Kolu*<sup>259</sup>

Mr. Gopinath is a retired government official, about 70 years old. He is a Vaiṣṇava Brahmin who lives very close to the Varadarāja temple along with his wife. After he retired, he is continuing the *kolu* tradition after his mother, who used to make small dolls of stuffed cotton with attached faces, as well as of clay, and display as *kolu*.

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from the 1920s until present. See, for example, McDermott (2011), Thakurta (2015), Einarsen (2018), Sen (2018).  
<sup>259</sup> See also Hüsken (2012, 2021).

What is special about Mr. Gopinath's *kolu* is that he handcrafts human-sized *kolu* figures by using old waste materials, such as plastic containers, cardboard cartons, plastic bottles, cans, steel wire, old clothes and thermocole packing materials. Each Navarātri the figures he crafts depict the festival image of Varadarāja Viṣṇu, who is seated on a new *vāhana* (Skt. "vehicle") each Navarātri. The *vāhanas* represent those used for processions during the 10-day Brahmotsava in the Varadarāja temple of Kanchi-puram.<sup>260</sup> Starting in 2009 with fashioning the idol of Varadarāja Viṣṇu, the *vāhana* of 2015 was the Yāli *vāhana*, the 7<sup>th</sup> in line (figure 6.19). Yāli is a mythical creature, frequently seen carved into the pillars of South Indian temples, and looks like a hybrid of a lion, elephant, and horse. Fashioned by Gopinath, Yāli is covered in golden foil, with his characteristic long elephant trunk and tusks, a fierce-looking appearance, wide-open eyes, and his arms in front of him and palms up. The figure is quite a bit taller than Mr. Gopinath himself and has the Vaṭakalai sect mark on his chest.<sup>261</sup> On top sits a garlanded and bejeweled replica of the festival image of Varadarāja and surrounding the *vāhana* are three man-sized figures resembling Vaiṣṇava temple priests, clad in *dhotis* with the Vaṭakalai sect marks drawn on their foreheads, chest and arms. Above the *vāhana* towers a huge umbrella, and in front a small baby elephant, garlanded and covered in silver foil.

Mr. Gopinath takes great pride in fashioning his images and figures so that they closely resemble the temple images they represent. Since he lives across the street from the temple, he knows it very well. His house holds several such handcrafted dolls, all related to Varadarāja Viṣṇu and the festivals and history of the Varadarāja temple. For instance, he has the crafted sanctum image of Perumāḷ (Viṣṇu) and Peruntēvi (Lakṣmī) placed on the stairs leading to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, and Mr. Gopinath joked that I did not need to visit the sanctum of the temple to see these images, now that I had seen his replicas (as a non-Hindu I am forbidden to enter the sanctum of the Varadarāja temple). One *vāhana* takes approximately 3–4 months to finish.

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260 These processional Brahmotsava *vāhanas* are also sold as clay doll sets in Pommaikaran Street and found in several traditional *kolus*.

261 Teṅkalai and Vaṭakalai are the two main sub-sects of Vaiṣṇavism, who strongly disagree on certain theological and ritual issues. The Varadarāja temple of Kanchipuram affiliates to Vaṭakalai and hence their sect mark is seen several places in the temple, such as on walls and the main *goupram*, but a group of Teṅkalai priests also has rights here. See Hüsken (2007a) for more on the dispute.



Figure 6.19: Yāḷi vāhana, 2015.

While Mr. Gopinath's wife does not perform any *pūjās* for the *kolu* in his household, she does present their Navarātri guests with the *tāmpūlam* when they leave. For Sarasvatī Pūjā, the couple keep the *vīṇā* and some books in front of the *vāhana* and the wife prepares a pot which she places near the display, but I am told it is merely decorative, since as orthodox Vaiṣṇavas they do not offer any separate *pūjā* to Sarasvatī, only their daily *pūjā* to the *śāligrāma*.<sup>262</sup>

<sup>262</sup> The *śāligrāma* is a fossilized shell used in the worship of Viṣṇu.

The idea of using waste materials for making God's image is innovative and out of the ordinary. On the one hand, it is eco-friendly to use things and household materials that would otherwise have gone into the garbage, showing concerns for the environment and the future. Parts of his *kolu* are also re-used yearly or occasionally and freshened up, such as the umbrella, Varadarāja's image and the (now three) priests. However, many residents of Kanchipuram found his concept of fashioning God out of waste difficult to accept, and when I asked about its reception, Mr. Gopinath told me that most of his acquaintances were not at all interested in his *kolu*. This was apart from children and some guests from Chennai who are exposed to art and handicrafts.

The *kolu* of Mr. Gopinath is a special and creatively made *kolu*. The yearly images of Varadarāja on different *vāhanas* form a more art-like *kolu* than the standard display, and neither is it worshipped as an altar. He himself terms his Navarātri display "craft".<sup>263</sup> Still, Gopinath regards it a *kolu*, and he and his wife are devoted and practicing Hindus. The *kolu* does however not interrupt their regular *pūjā*. In that it contains only Varadarāja, his *kolu* has strong sectarian affiliations, but it is rejected by orthodox Vaishnavas, because of its material. This *kolu* is thus an example of a male Brahmin who challenges the notion of what a *kolu* is, in that it involves no steps, no traditional dolls, not a single goddess, and finally in the material with its movement from divinity-embedded clay to impure garbage. In the next section I will show how the purity dimensions of *kolu* were stressed by many respondents as a prerequisite for a successful ritual, so it should come as no surprise that using waste for fashioning a *kolu* display is contested and not straightforwardly appreciated. In being eco-friendly and recycled, his *kolu* is a social commentary on the huge garbage crisis India is facing and a step in the direction of creating awareness about recycling. Mr. Gopinath plays with the *kolu* in several ways. He plays with its very notion, and he plays while making it – as it is his hobby.

## Playfulness, Entertainment, and Contemporary Trends

As with the case of Mr. Gopinath, the sometimes-blurred distinctions between play and ritual are particularly evident in *kolu* (see also Hüsken 2012). It is an occasion for fun and leisure, which encourages creativity, playfulness, competition, and entertainment, but it is at the same time serious and demanding.

Some of the dolls themselves are playful by nature and point to the inherent fun of *kolu*. These dolls liven up the displays and are among the conversation

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263 The interview with Mr. Gopinath was one of a very few interviews conducted in English.

pieces for guests and owners. These include sets depicting scenes from *Kṛṣṇa līlā*, and crawling baby Gaṇeśa and Murukaṅ along with the very common doll of crawling baby Kṛṣṇa. But the most amusing forms of deities will include various types of Gaṇeśas, such as Chaplin Gaṇeśas, Gaṇeśas playing cricket (figure 6.20), Gaṇeśas playing various instruments while his rat is dancing, and on one *kolu* I saw Gaṇeśa typing on a laptop, with his mouse transformed to a computer device. As Vasudha Narayanan (2000, 774) points out, while iconographies tend to be dynamic in nature, it is usually Gaṇeśa who takes the playful role and is particularly progressive in his iconography.<sup>264</sup> Perhaps Gaṇeśa has a particularly playful iconography because he is not a sectarian Godhead, but still so beloved by the people, allowing for more freedom in depicting him? Of course, he is also easily identifiable in any situation and any position with his elephant head, as opposed to most other deities.

There are mixed opinions about the prominent aspects of entertainment and commercialization, as well as the increasing popularity of *kolu* in today's Tamil Nadu. Some respondents thought that contemporary society sees more devotion and were pleased that *kolu* is so popular. Others believed devotion is in decline and that *kolu* was practiced more authentically in the past. Mrs. Adhilakshmi, a non-Brahmin devotee I met in the Ādi Kāmākṣī temple, complained:

“Times have changed. Previously it used to be a really grand affair. Now everybody does it (keep *kolu*). Even now in households that have celebrated Navarātri traditionally, they continue to practice it with purity (Ta. *cuttam*), but others do it as it pleases them. But that is not right. If you do it, you have to do it the right way”.

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<sup>264</sup> The progressive iconography of Gaṇeśa is also seen during the annual Vināyakar Caturthi festival. In Chennai during 1999 and 2000 he was depicted as various other deities as well as politicians, but attracting most attention were the “Kargil Vinayakas”, depicting Gaṇeśa sitting on a tank or a field gun, commemorating the Kargil war between India and Pakistan which took place in Kashmir in 1999 (Fuller 2001). One of my respondents, Mrs. Purnima, had around the millennium seen a Kargil Gaṇeśa on a *kolu* as well, holding a gun. When asked about her opinion of the doll, she replied: “it cannot be told as wrong. The children these days will not sit and hear stories regarding Navarātri. To make them listen, we must think in this new way and make them concentrate on these stories and tradition.”.





Figure 6.20: Gaṇeśa cricket set, 2015.

Her words point to the rapid increase in newly started *kolus* by communities other than Brahmin, who are the ones who have kept it hereditarily. Several respondents stressed the purity dimensions of *kolu*. Purity here is probably understood as being able to bring about the appropriate conditions for carrying out worship.<sup>265</sup> My impression is, more specifically, that respondents used the term “purity” to refer to a quality embodied by Brahmins (enabled, for instance, by their diet, behavior, their avoiding of contact with things considered polluting, etc.). However, they were not explicit about the meaning of the word, and although I see in retrospect that I should have, I unfortunately did not enquire further about it. The importance of purity in practicing *kolu* is confirmed also by the findings of Fuller and Logan in Madurai in the 80’s, who state that many of those who did not keep *kolus* near the Mīnākṣī temple explained that they

<sup>265</sup> See Malinar 2012.

“could not guarantee the high state of purity” (Fuller and Logan 1985, 84). When I asked if Mrs. Adhilakshmi kept *kolu*, she replied: “We do not, but we come to the temple regularly. Keeping *kolu* means you must be orthodox; you can’t be slipshod about it”.

Mrs. Adhilakshmi’s notion that *kolu* must be practiced “the right way” can also indicate skepticism towards the commercialization of *kolu*, and/or its entertainment aspects, being increasingly represented in the media and extending from homes to the public. From being a purely domestic festival, *kolu* slowly changes its sphere not only to more and more temples, but also to secular public spaces such as schools and banks and is also facing a media rush in newspapers and on television through *kolu* competitions. In Kanchipuram in 2015, I even found a *kolu* at a petrol station (!). My initial thought was that a petrol station was a rather unexpected location, since *kolus* should be set up at a pure place, being an object of worship. However, as my colleague Guro W. Samuelsen pointed out in a personal conversation: “Why is this strange? Road-side shrines are everywhere.” Still, *kolus* are now emerging in very different spheres, and while they are governed by rules of purity in controlled environments within homes (and to a certain degree also in temples, where devotees must take off their shoes, for instance), it appears to be more “casual” with *kolus* on the street or in shops. Perhaps a legitimate distinction is if, as in a home, if a *kolu* takes the center stage, or if it functions more like a decoration (although it may still be an object of worship) in the public?

Recently the practice of *kolu* also attracts people from outside Hinduism,<sup>266</sup> and the doll makers have started to make Jesus images in addition to the more mainstream *kolu* dolls. Although it was not very common, I have seen nativity scenes, Jesus figures as well as Virgin Marys on some *kolus* (figure 6.21). The doll maker Chinnaraj said:

“Now it is not so that people of one particular caste have to keep [*kolu*]. Now everybody has started keeping it. I know a Christian who had started keeping *kolu*.”

I: does he keep Jesus, or these dolls (pointing to the Hindu deities in his showroom)?

C: They keep Jesus as well as these dolls.”

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266 I also once went *kolu* hopping with my Muslim tailor, who offered to show me *kolus* in her work neighborhood. She took me to three different households, and it was clearly not the first time she visited their *kolus*. This was after I had watched the *āyudha pūjā* in the tailor shop where she works together with a Hindu and a Christian. *Kolu* clearly has appeal across religious boundaries.



Figure 6.21: Christian dolls and nativity set on the *kolu*, 2015.

The doll maker told how he has also started to produce nativity scenes (Ta. “*kuṭil sets*”) for Christmas (and in western culture, nativity scenes are quite similar to *kolu*). In an online article Shobha Warriier (2013) similarly reports that doll makers in Chennai have started preparing biblical characters because the Christian community has adopted the tradition of *kolu* for Christmas.<sup>267</sup> This confirms the tendency of appeal of *kolu* dolls throughout religious communities also in other parts of Tamil Nadu.

An elderly Brahmin lady I visited, lamented that *kolu* has become a kind of exhibition display and how its religious aspect are getting sidelined. She said: “It has become a kind of show, with lights and all. It is more important to build parks and zoos than to give *tāmpūlam*.” Her own *kolu* was small and low-key, and consisted of about a dozen dolls displayed on a small arrangement of steps in the corner of her kitchen. It was surrounded by ritual equipment such as oil lamps, food, holy water and *Rāmāyaṇa* books she recites from during the festival (Mrs. Indumathi is a *śloka* teacher), as well as plates and trays with gifts

<sup>267</sup> <http://www.rediff.com/getahead/report/slide-show-1-specials-dying-a-slow-death-a-peek-into-the-life-of-kolu-doll-makers/20131009.htm> (accessed 22.08.2022).

for visitors. The pot in which Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī were installed was festooned with flowers, leaves and sacred powders. It was clear that her *kolu* was a devotional tool rather than arranged for impressing guests. Mrs. Indumathi's modest *kolu* was however memorable in its humbleness.

Purnima, a female respondent in her 40's, had similar concerns, when she said:

“Now the dolls have all changed. They have started selling everything in sets. Nowadays it is more of fashion and fancy. In some houses they keep *kolu* with science as theme. If asked, they [would] say that someone in their family is a scientist and hence they have set up this way. Now *kolu* and Navarātri is more about innovative thinking and presenting such skills. It is kind of a competition between the houses that have *kolu*. The newspapers and media are one most important factor for this mindset, as they promote this by giving gifts and prizes for the best *kolu*. It has now become Navarātri *kolu* plus a science and innovation exhibition.”

As is evident from these women, some are of the opinion that there is a contradiction between the purity of ritual and the show-off, commercialization, and entertainment aspects of *kolu*. As explained, I understand their concern about purity to concern the proper conditions for worshipping the *kolu*, which again relates to the social standing of people in terms of ritual purity, or that Brahmins are those most fit for keeping *kolu*. But their skepticism also includes the trend of themes and competitions in *kolu*, which they regard as diminishing the devotional aspects. Contrasting the opinions that show overshadows the religious, or that the consequences of the contemporary popularity of *kolu* reduce the purity of the ritual, I argue that devotion and playfulness are by no means mutually exclusive. They can co-exist, and *kolu* is a perfect example of this intermingling of various sentiments and modes attached to ritual. Playfulness here is considered a mode or an attitude that people may have when they delve into the ritual (cf. Bado-Fralick and Norris 2010, 132), as Mr. Gopinath when he fashions his dolls, and others when they employ their creative skills in fashioning the display of dolls and in fashioning the goddesses-as-pots or oil lamps. This mode of playfulness includes creativity, competition, and aesthetic expression, as I outlined in the introduction. Moreover, as Rodrigues (2018, 409) points out, *kolu* represents “a paradigmatic act of girls' play”, namely playing with dolls. Since the goddess is embodied and installed on the display, the devotee can be considered playing with the goddess herself (ibid.).

It should not be underestimated that *kolu* is a ritual practice, although it concerns (also secular, but consecrated) dolls and toys. *Kolu* is a religious ritual,

and its efficacy brings about auspicious results if practiced correctly (which, according to many respondents, is with purity). The people whose *kolu* I visited all appeared pious and sincere about venerating the goddess through keeping *kolu*, while simultaneously many were obviously proud of showing me a good display. There is, importantly, also a “low-key” competition going on apart from the explicit ones in the media: the women who visit each other also judge the different *kolu*.

As explained earlier, people often emphasized how they appreciated having female guests over, that is, they enjoyed the social aspects of an event both religious and joyful. Many also told me how sad they were once they have to part with the dolls. It became clear to me early on that the dolls are considered *more* than just dolls. People would address the dolls in terms of gods or close family relations and consider them to embody powers. As Mrs. Nirmala expressed: “These nine days give me so much joy. For two or three days after keeping back the dolls I will feel very sad, since I will see them only after a year”. The anticipation attached to the festival was even followed by fear for some women. An elderly non-Brahmin lady said “if Navarātri is approaching in 9 or 10 days, we get scared. You must take out the dolls, paint them, set [the *kolu*], pay people, and spend money. So, there is fear (Ta. *payam*). We do it because we have to.” The general notion is that keeping *kolu* is serious business: you cannot discontinue once you have started, and it should be practiced properly. You are either all in, or you should not keep one – there are no half measures.

## Concluding Remarks

A *kolu* displays a *līlā* of the deities: a miniature world played out on a stepped altar, confirming the often-fluid borders between sacred and secular in Hinduism, as secular dolls, like Barbies, are consecrated and become sacred alongside the gods. This is “work done playfully” (Driver 1998, 8, cited in Raj and Dempsey 2010, 5). The ritual of keeping a *kolu* includes a set of “unwritten rules”, such as the hierarchy of the steps; the need to buy doll(s) annually; and certain components should be present for what is considered a “proper” *kolu*. The most important would be the steps, keeping the three goddesses Lakṣmī, Durgā and Sarasvatī, as well as presenting the *tāmpūlam* to visitors. In fact, the ritual of presenting the *tāmpūlam* seems to be the one omnipresent element wherever *kolu* is practiced domestically – I have never once visited a *kolu* without being bestowed with gifts on my departure (but importantly, this practice disappears when *kolus* are set up in temples and other public spaces).

Most respondents also emphasized the importance of giving *tāmpūlam* during *kolu* in interviews.

But the rules may be bent, such as in the case of Gopinath's man-sized figures. He is a Brahmin man who expresses his devotion to Varadarāja Viṣṇu through crafting Varadarāja figures of domestic waste items as *kolu*. Simultaneously, this *kolu* enacts a specific attitude towards environmentalism, and it might even be regarded a failed *kolu*, being largely ignored by orthodox Vaiṣṇavas. Hancock (1999, 252; 2001, 12–13) describes a *kolu* where the dolls and objects were placed on piles of books. Even the dolls may be omitted: for instance, the Tamil newspaper *Dinamalar* featured in 2015 a *kolu* where various cacti were displayed in flowerpots on the steps, and the Chennai paper *Mylapore times* featured in 2011 a *kolu* of only framed pictures and one of only miniature silver toys.<sup>268</sup>

I have shown in this chapter how *kolu* comes with a set of varieties through a specific frame, and how people may creatively “push” the frame and interpret its contents. While some dolls are found in nearly every *kolu*, others display unique dolls and have one-of-a-kind collections. And while some welcome and embrace contemporary changes such as themed *kolus*, spectacle and other commercial aspects, others do not.

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268 <http://www.mylaporetimes.com/2011/10/navaratri-kolu-gallery-2/> (accessed 23.08.22).