

## Chapter 8

### Sarasvatī Pūjā: A Festival within the Festival

The morning of Navarātri's ninth day, Mrs. Srividya places a pile of books with pens on top in front of her home altar, housing pictures of Lakṣmī, Māriyamman and Sarasvatī, and brings a plate filled with puffed rice, nine limes and an apple, since Sarasvatī "should be given white *prasāda*". Soon, the room is filled with incense and "*om namaḥ śivāya*" sounds repeatedly from loudspeakers, as Mrs. Srividya, who works as a teacher, starts reciting Tamil *stotras* while throwing rice on the book pile and pens. After continuing this for a while, she blesses a pair of compasses and a pencil, a vegetable cutter (Ta. *aruvāmaṇai*), and a sewing machine, as well as the door into the *pūjā* room, by marking them with turmeric and vermilion. She then recites a *stotra* to Sarasvatī, while throwing rice on Sarasvatī's picture on the altar. After calling her husband and two children in, her son throws rice at the book pile as well, while uttering a silent prayer. These books must not be opened today, but he should read from them tomorrow, on Vijayadaśamī, when all activities that are started are considered particularly prosperous. Mrs. Srividya explains: "Vijayadaśamī is [the day] when all three Śaktis are together, so things begun that day will grow. Since evil was destroyed that day and good was established, it is very good for education." The family throws rice at the picture of Sarasvatī while Mrs. Srividya rings a bell and waves the *āratī* flame in front of the book pile and the altar, and thereupon in front of their spacious *kolu* in the living room next door, their entrance door, and their motor bike and car which are parked right outside. The family then returns to the *pūjā* room, and they all prostrate before the altar.

This *pūjā*, which occurs during Navarātri's ninth day, is known as Sarasvatī Pūjā (Ta. *Caracuvati pūcai*), or *āyudha pūjā* (Ta. *āyuta pūcai*, "blessing of weapons or instruments").

It includes the worship or veneration of books, musical instruments (figure 8.1), and work equipment – indeed all possible tools and instruments may be worshipped – and signifies and brings forth the prosperity of work and learning in the coming year by the grace of the goddess, in tune with her recent victory over evil. After the worship, the books should not be opened and the instruments not played until the next day of Vijayadaśamī, which is considered a "clean slate" and the most auspicious day to start any new undertaking. This,

however, appears not to be the case of rickshaws and other vehicles, which frequently are used the evening of their worship (figure 8.2).



Figure 8.1: *Vīṇā* in front of the *kolu* for Sarasvatī Pūjā, 2014.

*Āyudha pūjā* and Sarasvatī Pūjā are strictly speaking two different *pūjās* (Diehl 1956), but in contemporary Kanchipuram people may use both terms for this sub-festival. The *āyudha pūjā*, previously a weapon *pūjā* encompassing the worship of the king's weapons, marked the time the king and his armies rode out for war.<sup>292</sup> Today it marks the onset of the fiscal year, and is generally performed in stores and work environments in the evening. Garlanded rickshaws (even “wearing” banana tree trunks) drive through the streets (figure 8.2), and everything from elevators to fire extinguishers, cash registers and sewing machines are painted with *tilakas* (Ta. “marks”) of sacred ashes and vermilion powder. Sarasvatī Pūjā is generally performed at home in the morning, when tools related to learning and music are put in front of the home altar or the *kolu*,

<sup>292</sup> Some also connect the *āyudha pūjā* to Arjuna's retrieval of weapons from a *śamī* tree before the Mahābhārata war (see Biardau 1984 for interesting interpretations in this regard). This link was not made explicit by my respondents, with the exception of one priest of the Āṭi Kāmākṣī temple.

so that Sarasvatī, goddess of knowledge, music, and art, blesses the artifacts. This traditionally marks the beginning of the school year (Skt. *vidyārambha*), and many encourage their children to write their first letters this day.<sup>293</sup> However, as in the home of Mrs. Srividya, objects that could fall into both categories of *pūjā*, may be worshipped simultaneously, despite of the terminology of the *pūjā*.



Figure 8.2: Rickshaw decorated for *āyudha pūjā*, 2014.

293 This day many schools and preschools start their immatriculation, and papers are filled with ads for Vijayadaśamī admissions.

Sarasvatī Pūjā is not limited to *kolu* households. It is tremendously popular, and seems to have been for a long time, and celebrated across class and caste (Sonnerat 1782, Logan 1980, 246, Wilson, 2015, 201).<sup>294</sup> My field interviews too confirm its popularity. A priest explained: “Some people have the habit of keeping *kolu*. It is part of their tradition, and only they keep. But everyone does Sarasvatī Pūjā or *āyudha pūjā*. What they do is, all the tools that are used are kept and worshipped. *Kiyāṇam* (Ta. “wisdom”) is Sarasvatī, and that is also important.”

As alluded to, Fuller and Logan (1985), Tanaka (1999) and Wilson (2015, 202) all write that Sarasvatī Pūjā is commonly performed by men, and with these rituals, the women’s leadership roles in worship during Navarātri is again returned to the hands of men. In my experience from Kanchipuram, domestic Sarasvatī Pūjā is on the contrary more often performed by women or the married couple together, and thus rather prolonging the ritual agency of women than reducing it. *Āyudha pūjā* on the other hand, is more often performed by men, at least this is the case in male dominated work environments.

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294 The ritual has its background as a royal ritual that signaled the onset of war after the rainy season (see Gengnagel 2013, Kane 1974, 190).