Concluding Remarks: The Play of the Feminine

The Navarātri festival is a manifold and complex cultural performance, viewed here as a celebration of feminine powers in association with the goddess, and as a festival intimately connected to female religious agency. I have focused on three broader themes which intersect and play into each other: first, the goddess's *līlā* in mythological narratives and ritual performance; second, roles, agency, and images of the feminine as expressed during the festival; and third, playfulness of Navarātri rituals, as articulated in competition, creativity, and aesthetic and dramatic expressions. In the following, I link my main findings to some final reflections.

This book offers only a snapshot of a tremendously diverse festival at a particular space and time. Many themes which are mentioned only briefly in here would benefit from closer investigation and analysis, including, for instance, the transformation of *kolu* from domestic to public spaces and the *kolu* doll makers' livelihood and production. Also, a bigger project on transformations in *alaṃkāra*, a topic which along with *kolu* is under-researched, would be fruitful and inspiring. Moreover, the texts pertaining to Kāmākṣī temple, the *KV* and the *SC*, yields full translations into English.

While Navarātri is celebrated wherever Hindus settle in the diaspora, research on Tamil Navarātri in the South Asian diaspora is scarce.[295] Festivals play important parts in establishing an identity in a new country, and it seems to be a strong demand for an "authentic" Tamil festival (Jacobsen 2008, 197–200). Still, Navarātri transforms rapidly both in India and abroad, and calls for future research.

The Nature of the Divine Feminine

We encounter several manifestations of the goddess in Navarātri myths and rituals. She is a warrior and conqueror of demons, but she is also the goddess of domestic concerns and fertility. *Kolu* rituals revolve around the goddess's auspicious powers, particularly concerning fertility, *sumaṅgalī*-hood, and domestic wellbeing. Navarātri is popularly said to honor Lakṣmī, goddess of wealth and fortune, Sarasvatī, goddess of learning, and the warrior goddess Durgā as

295 The examples I am aware of are Logan 1988 and Sivakumar 2018.

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Mahiṣasuramardinī. The goddess is encountered in all these forms during the festival, at different times and in different contexts. The goddess's fierce powers are not very pronounced in the domestic celebrations yet reflected in the offering of "hot" *cuṇṭal* to women (and the goddess) as to increase their *śakti* and identify them with the divine feminine. In temples where the fight between the goddess and the demon is enacted ritually, as in the Kāmākṣī and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temples, the benevolent goddess is destined to fight.

Slaying demons is the purpose of the goddess's manifestation in myth after myth; and a necessity for restoring the world order.[296] The goddess's inclination for violence is treated in different ways in the two temples, where Kāmākṣī and Pāṭavēṭṭammaṉ are manifest in peaceful forms. In the Brahmin Kāmākṣī Ammaṉ temple an anxiety over the goddess's destructive purpose lingers, and it seems important for the priests to maintain Kāmākṣī's benign nature. Here, even though Kāmākṣī fights the demon on Navarātri evenings as a public spectacle in the temple courtyard, the goddess's fierceness is not made too pronounced. For instance, the battle scenes are absent in Kāmākṣī's myths, and myth and ritual offer varied interpretations as to if and how Kāmākṣī kills the demon. For this deed she must atone, and one role of the *vaṉṉi* tree, which also serves as the demon's vegetable double, is to relieve the goddess from sin. The ritual handbook *Saubhāgyacintāmaṇi* mentions no ritual killing of the demon or any *vaṉṉi* tree. This handbook does, however, prescribe a Vijayadaśamī ritual sacrifice in a forest outside the city borders.[297] This reflects how violence encroaches upon civilized life and belongs to the *araṇya* (wilderness).

The more ambivalent Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ on the other hand, manifests in her non-Brahmin priest and undeniably kills the demon as a ritually infused banana tree in front of everyone's eyes. Suitably, the ritual is colloquially referred to as *vatam* (Ta. "murder"). The following day, the goddess's heat and wrath is cooled and appeased and she re-assumes her calm year-round state; no atonement is needed. The two temples therefore deal with the goddess's violence quite differently.

While the goddess's violence is baffling in the context of the temples, in the Brahmanical Kāmākṣi temple more so than in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple,

296 I wish to thank Raj Balkaran for bringing to my attention the Brahmin versus non-Brahmin treatments of violence in his response to my presentation during a Navarātri workshop in Paris, August 20–22, 2015. Some reflections in this paragraph and the next are modeled on his response.

297 This parallells the scene at the end of the *DM* where King Suratha worships the goddess in the forest and sacrifices the blood of his own limbs to receive the goddess's grace (*DM* 13.10–11).

ultimately, the goddess assuming fierce forms for accomplishing the task of killing demons does not contradict her manifestations as peaceful. The goddess's identity is strong precisely because she has infinitely diverse forms (see Michaels 2004, 224) and this is both an expression and a consequence of her powers. The goddess, as the supreme creator, transcends the boundaries of forms and characteristics.[298] Thus in myth and ritual we meet Kāmākṣī as Lalitātripurasundarī, Mahābhairava, as maiden (Balā), and even as the warrior goddess Durgā, and Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ as the fierce Kāḷi, dancing on the corpse of Śiva. Furthermore, through her varied Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the supreme *śakti* is distinguished as one Great Goddess and a myriad of forms (L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 170). Through this ritual, the goddess, like the buffalo demon of the *Devīmāhātmya*, is shapeshifting during the nine-day battle.

After sketching an impression of domestic Navarātri rituals as accomodating an auspicious goddess and temple rituals accomodating a (temporarily) fierce goddess, I discuss here the distinction proposed by Fuller and Logan in their influential article on Navarātri in Madurai (1985): the Mīnākṣī temple and the surrounding homes form complimentary spheres during the Navarātri festival. While goddess Mīnākṣī battles demons within the temple premises, the world order is maintained at home with the entirely auspicious *kolu*. While their theory at first sight also seems to fit the instances of Navarātri in Kanchipuram, a closer look at contemporary practices does not allow us to draw such clear-cut boundaries. First, because the fertility, auspicious and creative powers of goddesses and women are hinted at also in temple rituals: the priests of the Kāmākṣī temple worship potentially fertile prepubescent girls, along with child-bearing auspicious married women, and lamp *pūjās* to Lakṣmī are held in many temples during Navarātri time. Fertility is also an issue in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, where the women, in order cool down the goddess offer her milk, the signifier of motherhood.[299] It should also be mentioned that the installation of goddess in pots, or "wombs", which is so important during this festival (while this is by no means exclusive to Navarātri) carry strong associations with fertility and fecundity in earth, soil, and women (Rodrigues 2005,

298 The characteristics of *ugra* and *śānta* are also imposed onto the goddesses by the priests. However, even though Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ is peaceful, devotees take care not to offend her and act cautiously in her presence to avert her harm. This suggests that the dichotomy of *ugra-śānta* is too simplistic and fails to recognize the much wider repertoire of actions a single goddess is capable of.

299 This argument is following Hüsken (2018), who argues similarly regarding the *viśvarūpadarśaṇa* in the Varadarāja temple. There a cow, a calf and the goddess are venerated together during the Navarātri celebrations.

98). Secondly, most temples in Kanchipuram do not enact the goddess's fight with the demon and hence have no particular emphasis on battle. Instead, the immensely popular *alaṃkāras* are the main attraction in nearly *all* temples that celebrate Navarātri. Furthermore, many households which are connected to temples where the fight *is* enacted do not keep *kolu* (this is for instance the case in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple). The contrast drawn by Fuller and Logan between harmony and order in homes and battle and subjugation of demons in temples is therefore too sharp when it comes to contemporary Kanchipuram.

The Religious Agency of Women and Feminine Power

Many respondents in Kanchipuram stressed the connections between women and Navarātri. Values and concerns commonly attributed to women are emphasized and expressed throughout the festival. Girls and women are identified with and treated as the goddess, and in the context of the *kolu*, women act as ritual specialists and as guests and hosts. These culturally dubbed female concerns include the well-being of the family and the prosperity of the household, women's roles as wives and mothers, the wish to gain and maintain the status of the auspicious and fertile *sumaṅgalī*, and feminine beauty. This all confirms a stereotype of female religiosity, emphasizing women's important relationships and the domestic realm, around which their everyday life revolves. While particularly the *kolu* and its auspicious rituals are performed on the household-level promoting these female values, they are also expressed in the context of vows manifested in the milk pot and piercing rituals of the Paḍavēṭṭammaṉ temple, and in the *pūjās* performed to women in the Kāmākṣī temple.

Accordingly, women exercise religious agency in many ways during Navarātri: they are recipients of *pūjās*, they are performers, they are consumers and audience, and they are authors of tradition. I have called attention to a ritual agency in the varied ritual roles of women, an economic agency in adhering to the requirements for keeping or starting *kolu*, and an aesthetic agency in creatively fashioning doll displays and other forms of the goddess. Women's agency is here considered as reaching beyond free will and resistance. Women maneuver for power within existing social structures and life circumstances, and their agency may even be present in conformity and the ability to maintain things, with active, transformative, and creative aspects. My view here thus contrasts with Tanaka's that the festival "demonstrates the limitation of women" (1999, 134) in that it does not openly challenge patriarchy. *Kolu* may

be said to reaffirm stereotypical patterns[300] but women gain and enact power as *sumaṅgalīs* as they appropriate the goddess's powers.

Kolu also reveals the dynamics at play between higher and lower castes and classes. Once restricted to Brahmins and higher castes, *kolu* has for the past few decades been taken up by families of various social standings on the initiative of women and seems only to be increasing in popularity. Its appeal lies, I have argued, in its social dimensions as an arena where women meet, chat, dress up nicely, enjoy the displays and sing together, in the sentimental love many women cultivate for the dolls, and in the desire to appropriate the auspicious powers of the goddess with a prosperous display. This, too, is agency. Several women also appropriate this ritual to accumulate cultural capital in their performance of a middle-class identiy. In that *kolu* is associated with higher castes, it may be said to form part of a Brahminization process. However, *kolu* is often re-invented by these women to include caste-specific practices includeing possession and non-vegetarian offerings. I have therefore suggested that we have here a multi-dimensional change beyond, but including, the one-way process of upward caste mobility.

While it is not surprising that women are ritual specialists at homes, Navarātri also exemplifies agency of women in the male dominated context of a Hindu temple. While in the Kāmākṣī temple ritual agency almost exclusively belongs to male Brahmanic priests, their worship of *sumaṅgalīs* and prepubescent girls shows more emphasis on women than during the rest of the ritual year. In the temple of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, devotees are actively involved in ritual activities, and women have own rituals reserved to them. Through the ethnographic data we thus catch a glimpse of a sliding scale of female agency from Brahmin temples to non-Brahmin temples and homes: in the Kāmākṣī temple, daily *pūjās* are performed to women, whereas in the Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ temple, several rituals, including an elaborate milk *abhiṣeka*, are performed entirely *by* women. In the female sphere of the home, we have the rituals of the *kolu*, performed entirely *by* and *for* women.

In that this festival has long and continuous associations with power and venerates a goddess who is strongly associated with empowerment,[301] I extend

300 *Kolu* can, of course, be interpreted or used differently, see for instance the Occupy Navarātri campaign mentioned previously: https://www.occupynavratri.com/ (accessed 30.08.2022).

301 For example, see the conclusion of Rodrigues (2018) and several of the articles in the volume "Nine Nights of the Goddess. The Navarātri festival in South Asia" (2018). From medieval kingdoms to contemporary polititians, buisnesses, neighborhood communities, and the very recent Mahiṣa Pūjā, where Dalit groups seek empowerment through

this connotation to female power: with the temple-like *kolu*, homes, too, become centers of power, and through these rituals, women establish order in their homes as goddesses or as queens of the home (Ta. *illattaraci*). I have termed Navarātri a "power event" (Reynolds 1980, 50), in which women do not only worship the goddess, but ritually *become* the goddess, and appropriate her powers. Although such identification and appropriation also happen in temple contexts, it is most visible in *kolu*, which is one ritual with which women re-affirm their nature as auspicious female beings. For many married women, *kolu* and thus Navarātri is among the most significant of annual rituals (socially and ritually); it is celebrated for a prolonged period with emphasis on friendships, dolls and connecting women with the goddess, distinguishing it from other festivals.

The myriad activities of women out and about during Navarātri can moreover be seen as paralleling the goddess's emergence to fight evil demons. While women who are not at work are not commonly seen in the streets when it is dark, during this festival there is an emergence of the goddess as women in a host of locations and forms: an "external display" of the feminine. Women dress up in their finest and claim the streets in the evening as they visit illuminated *kolus*[302] and temples. This, too, can be seen as cyclically and symbolically defeating evil and darkness during the inauspicious autumn months.[303] Knowing that the myth of the goddess and the demon often is internalized as an allegory of defeating ego and how women would identify with the theme of subjugation of darkness and inauspicious forces, as shown in chapter 2, such a parallel is not far-fetched.

reversing the narrative of the goddess and Mahiṣa, the festival and its associated myths have been utilized for power.

302 *Kolus* are often illuminated with light chains. Usually, oil lamps are also lit.

303 Although Navarātri is considered an auspicious time for worshipping the goddess, the festival falls on an inauspicious time of the year. The solar year is divided in two and corresponds to a day of a deity where the bright half is considered the daytime and the dark half the nighttime. Navarātri occurs close to autumn equinox, corresponding to the gods' midnight, a highly inauspicious time of potential danger when demons may thrive in the dark and the gods are vulnerable (Fuller 1992, 110, see also Balkaran 2018, 23–24). The festival is moreover celebrated immediately after the *pitṛpakṣa* (fortnight of the ancestors), considered highly inauspicious due to the rituals performed to dead ancestors (see Narayanan 2018).

The Festive Play

In Navarātri display and play are brought together (Rodrigues 2018, 324). With the concept of *līlā* the world becomes the goddess's stage, and creation, manifestation, and dissolution her play. Likewise, play is an important expression of rituals, and therefore of religious agency. The playful or creative potential inherent in ritual is particularly visible in religious festivals, maybe because they contain many various rituals – or because of their liminal frame as a time set apart. Play and ritual are viewed here as open and inclusive categories, overlapping with for example festival, performance, celebration, spectacle.

Playfulness is however more evident in some rituals than others. While I in the following focus on *kolu* and *alaṃkāra*, ritual fields of imagination which particularly express an aesthetic playfulness, Navarātri also encompasses dramatic displays and dramatic playfulness. This includes fights as public spectacles and vows on exhibition through ritual piercings. It should also be emphasized how Navarātri is filled with music, chanting, singing and dance. This goes on in homes in front of the *kolu* where even field researchers are expected to sing, and in temples and other public venues. Performing arts are a significant part in domestic and public Navarātri celebrations, and the festival glorifies the goddess of music and arts with an own commemoration on the ninth day.

In *kolu* mythological narratives unfold visually, family narratives are imagined, and worldviews, hopes and dreams are expressed. *Kolus* are not just displays of a *līlā* but may be statements and provide opportunities to reflect on contemporary matters. Despite the many unwritten rules of this ritual, includeing the hierarchy of the display and its purity connotations, the ritual is flexible with room for improvisation and subversion in its performance. *Kolu* includes implicit and explicit competition, and women creatively fashion themes and add on to their dolls in their search for a good display. This playfulness engages people and draws people to action. Therefore, we can see play as an expression of agency. While play is usually characterized as joyful and even seemingly purposeless, it is not trivial, and can even be empowering. However, while there beyond any doubt is much joy and anticipation surrounding the ritual of *kolu*, my respondents simultaneously considered it demanding to keep one. *Kolu* thus neatly exemplify the blend of efficacy, *bhakti*, and entertainment within a ritual – as work done playfully.

With Navarātri *alaṃkāras*, the goddess's statue is adorned excessively in new clothes, fresh flowers, and jewelry, offering for devotees a new and creative look at their beloved deity. These ritual decorations may be stereotypic, as

those of Kāmākṣī, or avant-garde, as those of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, which are themed and sometimes decorate the sanctum along with the goddess. In any case, *alaṃkāras* attract devotees to the temples during festival times. These *alaṃkāras* do not only seek to entertain, but project layers of presence onto the image of the goddess and enhance her presence in the devotees' experience of *darśana*.

In the case of Paṭavēṭṭammaṉ, fierceness is temporarily projected onto the goddess as she transforms to different *śaktis*, leading up to her fight with the demon as the ferocious Kāḷi. Kāmākṣī's decorations on the other hand give prominence to forms of herself which pertain to local mythology and history, but also include Durgā and Sarasvatī. I have argued that the difference in *alaṃkāra* styles and practices apparent between Brahmin and non-Brahmin temples lies in how independent goddesses kills the demon themselves whereas Brahmanical married goddesses do not. Kāmākṣī is in this regard in a middle position, because of her independence and her origin as a fierce deity.

Kolu and *alaṃkāra* both conform to the emphasis on ritual display and conspicuous devotion emerging in contemporary Tamil Nadu. *Kolu* plays part in constructing and communicating middle class identities, and temples incorporate for example huge posters, temple decorations, printed programs, staged entertainment, and, for entertaining children, bouncing castles and merry-go-rounds in their Navarātri celebrations. These are signs of temples receiving extensive donations and families' desires for a display to reflect one's financial possibilities, but simultaneously point to the significance of display and the playful dimensions of this festival.

Līlā is commonly understood as the play of the divine, akin to the purposeless play of children. However, as alluded to by Rodrigues (2018, 324–325), we can also understand *līlā* as actual child's play. Human beings are the Goddess's children in the context of goddess worship, and our activities could be construed as child's play in the presence of the Goddess. Thus Navarātri, with its accentuation on creative *alaṃkāra* designs and *kolu* displays, dramatic enactments, and performing arts can be seen as honoring and celebrating, even paralleling, the goddess's cosmic *līlā*. And metaphysically speaking, if the goddess is the ultimate creator of the universe, we can all be considered her puppets, and all our activities are essentially her *līlā*.