

6 Perspectives on Participation

In Chapter Four I outlined the rituals performed on the tenth day of the festival with a focus on the schedule of the deities Ēlavārkuḷali and Ekāmranātha. However, from this perspective the events appear very linear and one-dimensional. Two observations during my first festival participation awoke my interest, and I followed them up over the next two years, which resulted in this chapter. First, it should be noted that the festival is highly complex. The movements of the deities and the priests' performance of attendant rituals are not the only rituals on Paṅkuṇi Uttiram. Donors and participants perform their own rituals, some of which run parallel, overlap or come together with those performed by the Ekāmranātha temple priests. Second, participants attend the marriage festival in various ways; few would follow the entire schedule of the deities to observe all rituals relating to them, as I did for research purposes. I changed my perspective to focus not only on the deities and priests as main actors, but also on other participants and their actions during Paṅkuṇi Uttiram. I spoke with people in the streets and at the temple area, with inhabitants of Okkapiranthan Kulam, and with the donors who sponsor the marriage ceremony.¹ My questions were related to their mode of participation and their perspective on the events. Those who were engaged in rituals not performed by the temple's priests, but connected to the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram marriage festival, especially attracted my attention. These include the *kāvaṭi* bearers, who come to offer flower garlands to the goddess, and the donors, who bring their marriage presents in a festive procession to the temple. I accompanied some of them to learn about their rituals and schedule on Paṅkuṇi Uttiram, which only partly intersect with the 'main' rituals performed by the priests for Ekāmranātha and Ēlavārkuḷali. Their schedule and participation are often aligned with their family tradition, and the performance of specific ritual roles is perceived by them as a right and a duty. Another group, participating in a very specific way in the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram festival, is that of couples who come to the temple to be married on the same night as the gods. Participants and priests highlight these (human) marriages as a characteristic feature of the divine marriage at the Ekāmranātha temple in Kanchipuram.

Based on my observations and informal conversations with participants, I will first outline ways to participate and motivations of the diverse festival participants. After briefly reflecting about the priestly roles and issues at work during the festival, I concentrate on families and groups involved in ritual activities. I describe the rituals they perform on Paṅkuṇi Uttiram and address questions of how they perceive their role in the festival, and how they contribute to the complexity of the festival. Their ritual activities and objectives vary, yet all of them emphasize the importance of their role in the divine marriage. The first

1 Anonymous participants who I quote in the following sections were interviewed during the evening procession of the ninth day (*veḷḷi māvaṭi cēvai*, 18.03.2011), and on the marriage day, in the streets and at the temple area in 2010 and 2011. Their responses have been recorded as MP3 files and translated by my research assistant, M. Shanthini Sarah. For convenience I do not mention this in every quote.

example is that of Okkapiranthan Kulam residents, who founded an association to collect money for hosting the three goddesses on the afternoon and evening of the marriage day, and created their own neighborhood festival as part of the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram marriage celebrations. Then, I turn attention to three donors involved in the marriage ceremony. They have their own schedule of community and family based customs and rituals, which at one point meet the ceremonies at the Ekāmrānātha temple. Finally, I deal with the human couples who are married at the Ekāmrānātha temple at the same time as the gods. What are their reasons for performing their own marriage in this context, and what expectations are connected with it?

6.1 Festival participation

The deities' processions through town are *the* characteristic feature and structuring element of the great annual temple festivals (see Chapter Two). The god or goddess leaves the temple to come to the people. This is perceived as a special feature, as one participant, at about fifty-five years of age, explained: 'It is always the people with good health that go to the god in the temple, but during the procession the god himself comes in the street to meet the people. Only on that occasion the god comes out to give *darśan* to the people.' People sit and stand in groups in front of the houses or at relevant points on the processional route, such as the flower market or the Nalli Maṅḍapa near the Kacchapeśvara temple (see map, fig. 2.20). They chat with each other in a relaxed atmosphere while waiting for the procession to arrive. When the beating of the drum signals the approaching procession, people stand to get a first glimpse of the deities and admire their ornaments (*alaṃkāra*). They welcome and worship them with palms together, and many offer plates with camphor, fruits and coins. Then, they take some *vibhūti* and *kumkum* from the priests and let the procession pass by. People often comment on the deities' *alaṃkāra*, saying for example 'see how the garlands are arranged' or 'look how beautiful the goddess is.' Seeing *alaṃkāra* of the deities is for most participants one of the festival's major attractions. Some told us that they do not know the story behind the festival in great detail, but that they like to see the decorated gods. An elderly lady with a group of women even said: 'The whole festival is about the *alaṃkāra* of the goddess, which is so beautiful.' Many participants are also attracted by the fireworks, held at night during the *maṅṭappaṭi* (reception). The donors, who sponsor the *maṅṭappaṭi* of the evening processions, spend huge amounts of money on fireworks to entertain the deities—and the participants. It seemed to me that many people assess a donor's wealth by the splendor and noise level of the nocturnal fireworks.

Many participants come each year with their families to watch specific processions and to partake in specific events. Some meet relatives, who have been married off to nearby villages and who also come to Kanchipuram for the festival. A group of women, sitting and chatting in the streets, explained: 'It is an outing. Our husbands are at home. We are happy to enjoy ourselves in a group with friends.' Socializing is clearly an important aspect of participation in the festival.

However, there are also many devotees who go to the Ekāmrānātha temple to get their first *darśan* of the deities there. They participate in the *dīpārādhana* ceremony (waving of different lamps in front of the deities), which is performed at the Utsava Sannadhi before

the evening processions (see fig. 2.12). Participation in the worshipping ceremony before the starting of the procession is an obligation and honor for the respective donors. They come with their families and get the best places in close proximity to god Ekāmrānātha, whereas the 'average' devotee often has to watch the ceremony from a distance.

During Paṅkuṇi Uttiram, the most spectacular events take place at Okkapiranthan Kulam, where the goddesses meet, and during the actual marriage rituals in the Ekāmrānātha temple complex. Instead of waiting in the streets for the deities' procession to pass by, many participants either go to Okkapiranthan Kulam and accompany the procession of the goddesses from there, or join the procession on the way to the Ekāmrānātha temple to spend some time at the temple before the marriage ceremony begins. The temple area is the meeting place, and many activities take place there at the same time. For example, a fair is temporarily set up near the main entrance of the Ekāmrānātha temple and attracts many people. A woman from Cinna Kanchi told me that her children like to come to the temple because of the giant wheel and the stalls selling plastic toys (fig. 6.1). A cultural program entertains spectators, human couples get married, and many people sit in groups on blankets and chat, wait and rest, while Ēlavārkuḷali performs *tapas* at the Kampā Nadī temple tank and Ekāmrānātha is ornamented for the marriage at the Utsava Sannadhi. People from nearby villages stay overnight and sleep on the temple ground until the beginning of the marriage ceremony. Those living in Kanchipuram usually do not witness the marriage; they go home, sleep and worship the newlywed deities on their 'honeymoon' procession in the early morning of the next day.



Figure 6.1 Fairground with giant wheel, Ekāmrānātha temple

6.2 Priests

Festival time is a very busy one for the priests. Their duties begin in the early morning with fire oblations and also encompass the large evening processions, including fireworks. This means that they often return home from the temple only late at night. At the same time, the priests often take turns, so that no single person is in charge for too many rituals in a row. However, an exception here is certainly the *viśeṣa gurukkaḷ*, the one, main priest for the year's festival. He has to be present for almost all events. He joins each single procession and therefore has a very busy schedule throughout the entire festival.

The flowers are often a matter of great concern for the priests during the festival. Do they arrive in time, so that the *alaṃkāra* of the deity is ready for the festival procession? Are there enough flowers to decorate the deity beautifully? Another, more sensitive issue for the priests is the deities' costly jewelry. With so many people involved, and the considerable movement and contingencies of the processions, the priests have to safeguard the costly jewels worn by the deities during their outings, since this is one of their main responsibilities. If any jewels are missing at the end of the day, they will be the first ones to be accused of theft. Moreover, the priests have to ensure that the main donors are happy, while often guiding them through their ritual roles. Often, they have to suspend the rituals until all donors are present. When they distribute temple honors and the deity's leftovers, they must carefully consider both the correct sequence and amount of distribution.

The priests have a very specific focus during the festival events. For example, for them the *liṅga pūjā* is a central element of the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram marriage rituals (see Chapter Four), though this is hardly noticed by many other participants. Often, the priests distance themselves from the public, dismissing some of the oral narratives as the 'people's belief.' One priest of the Ekāmrānātha temple commented unfavorably that 'the ordinary people only come for the celebration of *bhājī* and *vaṭai* (snack foods), and enjoy buying balloons.'² Clearly, the priests represent the normative side of the festival, at least when talking to a German Sanskritist and researcher. Moreover, they are aware of their status and central roles in the rituals. After all, they are the only ones who are entitled to touch the deities.

Since the ritual descriptions in Chapter Four include the priestly perspective, at least implicitly, I focus in the following sections on other participants who play central roles in the marriage rituals and celebrations.

6.3 The 'Seven Streets' of Okkapiranthan Kulam

As a regular feature of the festival's processions, the deities visit various *maṇḍapas* or other places on the processional route, where they are ceremonially received (Tam. *maṇṭappaṭi*). The donors, who sponsor the *maṇṭappaṭi*, are honored by the deity's stay. They often present costly garments and offerings to the deity and also to the priests involved. The stopovers are often no longer than twenty minutes, but in some instances they are extended, depending on agreements between the temple authorities and the donors. At present, the

² Interview with Kamesvara Gurukkal, Ekāmrānātha temple, 18.04.2009.

most extended stopover during the Ekāmranātha temple festival is goddess Ēlavārkuḷali's visit to the *maṇḍapa* in Okkapiranthan Kulam on the afternoon of the marriage day. There she meets two goddesses, Kāmākṣi and Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāl, and is bathed (*abhiṣeka*) and dressed (*alaṃkāra*) for the bridal procession to the Ekāmranātha temple in the evening (see details in Chapter Four).

This has been tradition since the beginning of the last century, as a reference in the *Kāñcipuram Ṭairekṭari* (1935: 98) indicates. Yet, the mode of going there has changed in recent years. According to the manager of the Ekāmranātha temple, the goddess used to go straight to the *maṇḍapa*, where the *abhiṣeka* and *alaṃkāra* took place.³ Only recently has she begun to process slowly through every street in the neighborhood of Okkapiranthan Kulam. One reason for this change is the 'Seven Streets', as the donors for the *maṇṭappati* are usually named. In 1999, residents of seven streets in Okkapiranthan Kulam formed an association to collect funds and share costs for the rituals on the marriage day. The association provides thatched huts for Kāmākṣī and Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāl, and makes the payment to the respective temple administrations for Ēlavārkuḷali and Kāmākṣī to come to Okkapiranthan Kulam, and for their *maṇṭappati*.⁴ According to the secretary of the association, the total expenditure for that day came to 50,000 INR in 2009.⁵ It is part of the agreement between the 'Seven Streets Association' and the Ekāmranātha temple's administration that Ēlavārkuḷali processes through each of the seven streets and pauses at every house to receive their offerings. Now, the association includes residents of more than seven streets, nevertheless, the designation 'Seven Streets' has remained. Thus, each year the goddess processes through more streets in the neighborhood and some routes are specifically taken to pass by houses of people who donated some extra money to the association. This is a very important aspect, because in larger processions the deities instead move on and only pause at specific stops; they do not halt for each offering in front of the houses. However, not only the residents benefit from the honor of the goddess's stopover; the priests and carriers of the goddess profit from the frequent stops, too. They have the customary right to share the money from the offerings, the total of which obviously increases in relation to the number of offerings the goddess receives during her procession. In 2011, for example, the procession went through fourteen streets (see map, fig. 2.23), and took more than four hours to reach the *maṇḍapa* at Okkapiranthan Kulam.

Additionally, the timing of public *darśan* in the evening hours has been extended in recent years. The main priest of the Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāl temple compared the contemporary mode of going to Okkapiranthan Kulam with how the procedure was undertaken at the time he started his job, about thirty-five years ago. He told me: 'The procedures of the procession and all this are the same, but in those days the goddess (Kāḷikāmpāl) came back in the evening by seven o'clock itself, since there were not many devotees. Now the devotees are more, so to start there it is already ten o'clock.'⁶ In 2002, shortly after the formation of the 'Seven Streets Association', the festival's invitation letter stated that Ēlavārkuḷali goes back to the Ekāmranātha temple at five o'clock in the evening.

3 Interview with Srinivasan, manager of the Ekāmranātha temple, 19.04.2009.

4 However, another donor sponsors Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāl's procession, *abhiṣeka* and *alaṃkāra*.

5 Interview with S. Sengalvarayan, secretary of the 'Seven Streets Association', 22.03.2009.

6 Interview with Dhandapani Gurukkal, Āti Kāmākṣī Kāḷikāmpāl temple, 12.03.2011.

Now, the invitation letter announces that she goes back at night without giving a specific time. In the evening, the residential houses in the main road are decorated with colorful light chains. Traveling salesman offer their goods spread out on cloth on the side of the road and vendors sell various meals and snacks from small handcarts (see fig. 6.2). A festive mood prevails in Okkapiranthan Kulam. The expanded evening hours attract more and more people from other parts of town, who come in the evening for a *darśan* of all three goddesses. Clearly, Okkapiranthan Kulam has become another major attraction for the festival visitors, in addition to the Ekāmranātha temple and the two daily general processions of the gods through town.



Figure 6.2 Vendors at Okkapiranthan Kulam

For most people in Okkapiranthan Kulam, the highlight of the Paṅkuni Uttiram marriage festival is when three goddesses come to their houses and meet them in their village before they process together to the temple in the evening (see Chapter Five). The significance of Okkapiranthan Kulam as Ēlavārkuḷali's mother's place, and the role of the other goddesses (and the village goddess) as conciliating sisters or friends, is frequently emphasized by the inhabitants. The secretary of the association described the role of Okkapiranthan Kulam in a few words: 'Ēlavārkuḷali has come in anger after fighting with Ekāmranātha. She comes to her mother's house, this Kaṅṅiammaṅ, who is like her sister, Kāmākṣī and Kāḷikāmpāḷ, they pacify her, compromise and send her back, and only then the marriage [takes place].'⁷

The inhabitants of Okkapiranthan Kulam are proud of playing an important role in the divine marriage, providing refuge to Ēlavārkuḷali, to whom they feel closely related. The gathering of the goddesses at Okkapiranthan Kulam turned into the inhabitant's neighborhood festival, which they celebrate with great dedication. For them, this

7 Interview with S. Sengalvarayan, secretary of the 'Seven Streets Association', 22.03.2009.

neighborhood festival is of much greater significance than the *mahotsava* and marriage celebration at the Ekāmrānātha temple.

6.4 Donors for the marriage

As explained in Chapter Two, the *mahotsava* appears to be composed of many sub-festivals. Each is sponsored by a donor, mostly merchant or craftsmen associations at the Ekāmrānātha temple. The marriage is the longest and most complex sub-festival of the *mahotsava*. It has one official donor, and in addition, two families, who hereditarily perform a ritual role in the marriage ceremony. Similarly to the inhabitants of Okkapiranthan Kulam, the donors make the sub-festivals into their 'own' festival and the highlight of the entire *mahotsava*.

The official donor for the marriage, named on the festival's invitation letters, is the Vaniya Chettiar merchant community. The community's association "Periya Kāñcipuram Vāṇiyar Tarma Paripālan̄ Caṅkam" collects money from the community members every year to provide the *abhiṣeka* materials and the necklace, which is tied around the goddess during the marriage rituals (*māṅkalyam*), made of one Sovereign (= eight gram) gold. Further they prepare 500 packages of *tāmpulam*, an offering of betel leaves and areca nuts. When this offering is made to wedding guests it also includes auspicious items such as a blouse piece, mirror, comb, bangles, yellow thread (*maṅgalasūtra*), piece of turmeric, *vibhūti*, *kumkum* and sweets. The marriage *tāmpulam* packages are distributed among female community members, at Okkapiranthan Kulam after the *abhiṣeka*, and at the Ekāmrānātha temple after the wedding ceremony. The marriage *tāmpulam* symbolizes marital bliss and is extremely favored by women, who even cause turmoil in attempts to get one package.

The association's head, the secretary and leading members perform the ritual role as donors. In addition, three families of the community, two of which are hereditary and one selected each year, are entrusted with the provision of specific flower garlands, which are brought in a *kāvati*⁸ to the Ekāmrānātha temple to be adorned upon Ekāmrānātha and Ēlavārkuḷali before the marriage ceremony (see details in Chapter Four).

R. Narayanan, head of the association, invited me in 2010 to join them on Paṅkuṇi Uttiram to witness their celebration of the festival. For the Vaniya Chettiars, the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram festival begins in the morning in their community temple, a small Vināyaka temple near the bus stand. Leading members of the association, their families and other community members come together in the temple to perform a *pūjā* for the *māṅkalyam* (fig. 6.3 and fig. 6.4). Then, they process through the streets of their residential quarter towards the Ekāmrānātha temple, bearing the *māṅkalyam* in a palanquin, and the fruits and other ingredients for the *abhiṣeka* on a cart. These offerings are regarded as *varicai* (marriage presents) from the girl's house. On the way to the temple they often pause so that residents may worship and prostrate before the *māṅkalyam*.

8 A (bamboo) stick resting on the shoulder with a bucket on both ends of the stick.

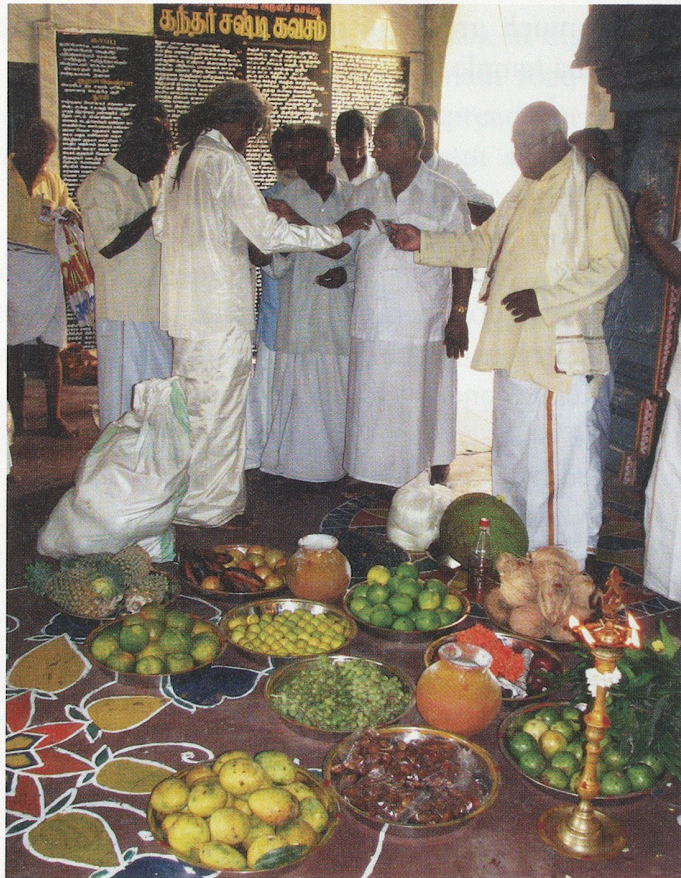


Figure 6.3 Vaniya Chettiars at their community temple with *varicai*



Figure 6.4 Worship of the *māṅkalyam* (tied to the coconut in the palanquin)

In the evening the community members meet again in their community temple to worship the flower garland offerings and to honor those who carry them in a *kāvaṭi* to the Ekāmrānātha temple. When I arrived at the temple it was the turn of the family that hereditarily offers the *tumpai* flower garlands to the deities. The temple's priest performs a *pūjā* for the flower garlands placed in the brass vessels of the *kāvaṭi*. At the same time a community member garlands the bearer of the *kāvaṭi* and ties a piece of cloth around his head and mouth (fig. 6.5). Each bearer fasts on this day and refrains from speaking, which is symbolized by the cloth around the mouth. Drummers play a rhythmic tone and the man begins to sway back and forth, while a woman next to him starts to dance erratically, showing that a deity or ancestor has entered them (fig. 6.6). After some time the bearer lifts the *kāvaṭi* on his shoulders and circumambulates the main shrine in the temple. Family and community members prostrate before him. The woman is still dancing in possession, and both the priest and head of the association put their hands and *vibhūti* on her head, to pacify the deity who possessed her. Led by drummers and two dancers, the *kāvaṭi* bearer with his family and some community members marches at a slow pace to the Ekāmrānātha temple (fig. 6.7). When the procession arrives at the temple, they first go to the Utsava Sannadhi to offer the flower garland from one vessel to the festival statue of Ekāmrānātha. Then they process further to the Kampā Nadī tank, where the garland from the other vessel is adorned upon Ēlavārkuḷali. In a similar manner, the other two families bring the flower offerings from the community temple to the Ekāmrānātha temple.



Figure 6.5 Tying of a piece of cloth around the *kāvaṭi* bearer's mouth and head



Figure 6.6 Dancing in possession



Figure 6.7 Devotee with *kāvati* on his shoulders

Courtesy: Dhivya Murugaiyan

To bring offerings in a *kāvaṭi* is a ritual associated with Murukaṅ temples, and many of the Vaniya Chettians are Murukaṅ devotees, as the head of the association told me. Often, this way of presenting offerings is accompanied with ritual piercing, which is not practiced here, although people of the community said that they practice it on Murukaṅ festivals. Another element known from folk traditions is the possession by a deity or ancestor during a ritual. The community temple's hereditary priest, who is also priest at the Ekāmrānātha temple, told me that it happens regularly that a deity or ancestor enters the bearer or one of his family members on this occasion, often in the homes of the bearers, where they start with a *pūjā* for their family deities before they come to the community temple.⁹ However, the association's head made clear that this would not happen at the Ekāmrānātha temple, because Ekāmrānātha is not a god that possesses people.

The Vaniya Chettiar community performs rituals according to their own traditions and integrates them partly in the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram marriage celebrations. However, a line between the ritual conventions is noticeable. Rituals associated with folk traditions such as piercing or possession are practiced in their community temple at a distance from the 'high' tradition of the Ekāmrānātha temple. Nevertheless, they are practiced (at least possession), though in their ritual space, not in the space of Ekāmrānātha.

The Vaniya Chettiar community does not know when or under which circumstances they received the right to provide the *māṅkalyam*. The association's head, R. Narayanan, aged seventy, knows that his father also performed the ritual role in the marriage, while the families who hereditarily provide the flower garlands assert that they bear the *kāvaṭi* across at least three generations. The community temple's hereditary priest confirms this, since his grandfather performed the *pūjā* for the *kāvaṭi* bearers in the temple.¹⁰ This would imply that the Vaniya Chettiar community has provided the *māṅkalyam* at least since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The provision of the *māṅkalyam* is part of the *kanyādāna* ritual ('giving away one's daughter in marriage'). For *kanyādāna* another person is listed as a donor, namely K. Balasubramanyam. Although his name is not mentioned on the festival's invitation letters, Ekāmrānātha temple priests consider his family as the time-honored donor for the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram marriage. Balasubramanyam takes this family obligation very seriously. He was born and raised in Kanchipuram, but lived mostly in major cities due to his work as banker. When I first met him, he lived in Delhi, but during my last field trip he had moved to Hyderabad. But no matter where he lives, he guarantees that he will return to Kanchipuram for the *mahotsava* at the Ekāmrānātha temple to perform his ritual roles during the Adhikāranandin *vāhana* on the fifth day, and at the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram marriage on the tenth day of the festival.

Balasubramanyam's ancestors donated one hundred acres of land, the 'Adhikāranandin' (a silver plated vehicle modeled on Śiva's bull Nandin, used for the morning procession on the fifth day of the festival), and the 'Vairamudi' (a golden crown studded with precious stones). In return for these endowments they were offered the hereditary right to perform

9 Interview with Prabha Gurukkal, 29.03.2011.

10 Interview with Prabha Gurukkal, 29.03.2011.

the marriage. Balasubramanyam refers to a document, dated to 1857, which stipulates that his family has the right to perform the *kanyādāna*. This means that they represent the family of the bride (i.e. the goddess) and perform ritual roles accordingly. Balasubramanyam recounts that his family had the marriage fully in hand until the beginning of the twentieth century. For financial reasons the right of performing the *kanyādāna* ritual, composed of several elements, has been split. Balasubramanyam tried to recollect details and dates pertaining to the sharing of the right with the help of the Ekāmrānātha temple priest Nagaswamy, but they were not able to do so. According to Balasubramanyam, the right to provide the *māṅkalyam* was given to other family members, who handed it on until it came to the Vaniya Chettiar merchants.¹¹ Clearly, for Balasubramanyam it is very important to be able to trace his family's involvement with donations to the temple, since this is what legitimizes his right to perform the *kanyādāna* ritual.



Figure 6.8 Offering of the *madhuparka* to the bridegroom Ekāmrānātha

Although the rights for the *kanyādāna* ritual have been split, Balasubramanyam's family maintains the rights to provide the materials for the marriage *homa* and to perform the *madhuparka* rite, for which they once donated five silver cups. The *madhuparka* rite is the ceremony of receiving the bridegroom on his arrival at the bride's place, during which the father of the bride offers *pañcāmṛta*—a mixture of five products (milk, curd, honey, banana

11 The Vaniya Chettiars are sure that they have provided the *māṅkalyam* at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, which would, however, imply that it came right away to the Vaniya Chettiar community after the splitting of the *kanyādāna* ritual.

and sugar)—to the groom. Balasubramanyam took over the ritual role from his father in 2005. He and his wife, brother, nephew and other family members, come to the Ekāmranātha temple in the evening after Ēlavārkuḷali returns from Okkapiranthan Kulam. They bring cloth for the bride and groom, materials for the marriage *homa*, and the five silver cups for the *madhuparka* rite. During the marriage rituals, Balasubramanyam stands in front of Ekāmranātha to offer him, in the role of the bride's father, the mixture of the five products out of the silver cups (see fig. 6.8).

Balasubramanyam approaches closer to Ekāmranātha than anyone else (besides the priests) during the marriage ceremony. This close physical proximity to the god indicates a high status, since honor is expressed through relative proximity to the deity. Yet, his name does not appear on the invitation letter and festival poster. When I inquired about this, an influential priest of the Ekāmranātha temple acknowledged that Balasubramanyam should actually be named on the invitation. He explained: 'Mr Balasubramanyam does the *kanyādāna*. The family itself is called as *kanyādāna kuṭumba* (family). He is also of the girl's side. This Chettiar group came in the middle only. (...) Though there are two communities, the right of doing the *kanyādāna* is only Balasubramanyam, secondly only for Balasubramanyam the *kanyādāna saṃkalpa* (declaration to perform a ritual) is done. It is only Balasubramanyam who can go near the god and do the *madhuparka*. It is only Balasubramanyam who is in the next stage to the *arcaka* (priest). So for the Chettiar community it is only the *saṃkalpa* of the *gotra* (lineage) and name, and they bring the *māṅkalyam*, whereas Mr Balasubramanyam is doing the *kanyādāna*, gives the *madhuparka*, and also the *godāna*¹².¹³ The priest regards Balasubramanyam as the original donor for the marriage ceremony, which is expressed by the family's name and by the declaration to perform the *kanyādāna* ritual in their name. Moreover, Balasubramanyam maintains a higher ritual status, because he has the right to come close to the god, next to the priests.

Although the Vaniya Chettiar community is not the original donor, and is from a ritualistic point of view on a lower rank, Balasubramanyam apparently never demanded to be named on the invitation letter. However, he emphasized that his family is the only one (and the only Brahmins) who serve as donors at the Ekāmranātha temple festival. It is possible that, owing to his status as Brahmin, he is allowed to come close to the deity during the *madhuparka* rite. Furthermore, he underlined the importance of his family as the 'history creators of Kanchipuram.' His ancestor Challambhotlu was, according to their family history, actively involved in safeguarding the statue of Baṅgāru Kāmākṣī (see Chapter Five). Balasubramanyam's family is held in high esteem by the Ekāmranātha temple priests, probably due to their role in the marriage rituals. Some priests also pointed out that they are the only family, moreover the only Brahmin family, currently involved in the *mahotsava* as donor.

Another family that traditionally plays a role in the marriage rituals is the Gopalakrishna Mudaliar family. They, too, are not official donors and are not named on the festival program. They donate every year a certain set of marriage presents (*varicai*) called Nāṭṭār

12 *Godāna* – the gift of a cow – is another element of the marriage rituals. In contemporary rituals this is symbolized by the gift of a coconut.

13 Interview with Nagaswamy Gurukkal, Ekāmranātha temple, 05.04.2010.

Varicai after their former honorific title Nāṭṭār, which denotes the head of a village. As a mark of honor a head cloth (*parivaṭṭam*) is tied to an appointed family member during the wedding rituals. They do not know exactly how their family received this honor, but they assume that it reflects good relations between their ancestor Adi Dharmarayan Mudaliar and the British officer Robert Clive in the mid-eighteenth century. However, the first document referring to their role in the marriage rituals is from a law suite, filed in 1890, which regulates the internal family succession to whom the *parivaṭṭam* will be tied. At present it is forty-two-year-old Sridhar Mudaliar, who was been appointed at the age of twelve. He explained the customs when I visited him and his family a view days after Paṅkuṇi Uttiram: ‘For our family the festivities start with a joint meal in this house in the evening. Around ten o’clock a palanquin is sent from the Ekāmranātha temple, in which we place the marriage presents (*varicai*). We serve food to the musicians and light bearers, who will accompany the procession to the Ekāmranātha temple. At around three o’clock at night we leave and the entire family joins the procession to the temple.’¹⁴ At the Ekāmranātha temple the *parivaṭṭam* is tied to Sridhar Mudaliar after the presentation of the wedding gifts (fig. 6.9). Sridhar’s aunt explained to me that the tying of the *parivaṭṭam* is a great honor in society. She said ‘everybody sees it and people, neighbors, etc. know that we get the *parivaṭṭam* during the marriage,’ while another male family member added: ‘Even when spending a crore (ten million Rupees) you would not get the same honor.’¹⁵



Figure 6.9 Head cloth (*parivaṭṭam*) tied as a mark of honor
 Courtesy: Sridhar Mudaliar

14 Interview with Sridhar Mudaliar and other family members, 03.04.2011.

15 Interview with Sridhar Mudaliar and other family members, 03.04.2011.

All donors I spoke with consider the temple honor (*mariyātai*) to be invaluable. Dirks (1987: 289), too, reports that his informants often told him that: “One can buy and sell land but no one can buy the mariyatai of another person; it is not for sale at any price.” However, Dirks adds that many of his informants in fact did attempt to buy honors in government offices and legal courts. Also, Balasubramanyam has had to clarify his rights in a few lawsuits. He told me that he would never miss coming to Kanchipuram to perform his ritual role, because in that case somebody might lay claim to his temple honor. R. Narayanan, the head of the association of the Vaniya Chettiar community, also reported a recent dispute between his community and the Natukottai Chettiar community; the latter sought the right to perform the marriage at the Ekāmranātha temple after the *kumbhābhiṣeka* in 2005.¹⁶ Although the temple honors have no substantial material advantages as in pre-colonial and colonial times, they have great value for the participants and can be perceived as a form of property (Hüsken 2007: 282–3).

However, how does the official donor of the marriage understand his role in relation to the other donors involved? The Vaniya Chettiar community represents the girl’s side in the marriage. They provide the *abhiṣeka* materials, which are considered marriage presents (*varicai*), and the *māṅkalyam* as it is usually done on behalf of the girl’s side. The Gopalakrishna Mudaliar family, too, presents wedding gifts (*varicai*) and Balasubramanyam represents the girl’s side more than anybody else by doing the *saṅkalpa* for the *kanyādāna* ritual.¹⁷

R. Narayanan, the head of the association, explained the role of the Vaniya Chettiar community in the following way: ‘The history is, when the incident took place she (the goddess) was born in a Chettiar family and all these things happened. It is Ēlavārkuḷali who is born in a Chettiar community. That is the history behind it.’¹⁸ When I inquired about the role of Balasubramanyam, who also represents the girl’s side, Narayanan denied it, commenting that Balasubramanyam must represent the boy’s side in the marriage. I received a similar reaction when I mentioned that the people in Okkapiranthan Kulam regard their village as Ēlavārkuḷali’s home place and their local goddess as her sister, and in that way also feel related to the girl’s side. Narayanan argued: ‘They can not say like that. We can say to our wish, that is all. God is available to everybody, so they are also enjoying it by saying so.’¹⁹ Thus, although he does not agree with them and thinks it is not true, he does not interfere in their views and opinions. Priests often took the same attitude when I talked with them about the oral narratives circulating about Paṅkuṇi Uttiram (see Chapter Four). Narayanan did not only stress the community’s importance as representative of the girl’s side and kinship with Ēlavārkuḷali, but also extended the role of the Vaniya Chettiar community in the marriage rituals to other temples dedicated to Ekāmranātha, informing me that ‘wherever there is a *tirukalyāṇa*, it is only our community people to do,’ continuing

16 The marriage rituals for Ekāmranātha and Ēlavārkuḷali are performed after each *kumbhābhiṣeka*, though without the re-enactment of the worshipping of the sand *liṅga*.

17 L’Hernault et al. (1999: 134) reports that also in Tiruvannamalai three groups of different social status sponsor the marriage rituals, and all claim that the goddess is one of them.

18 Interview with R. Narayanan, 18.03.2010.

19 Interview with R. Narayanan, 18.03.2010.

‘whenever Ekāmranātha’s name comes, our community will be there.’ When I asked which temples these are, he referred vaguely to the Ekāmranātha temple in Aminjikarai, Chennai, and to one in south Tamil Nadu. Obviously, he wanted to emphasize the significance of the Vaniya Chettiar merchant community to me, not only the local community in Kanchipuram, but in general Vaniya Chettiars in Tamil Nadu.

In summary, members of non-Brahmin communities, such as the Vaniya Chettiars, play an important role in the marriage rituals, but they perform their community-specific rituals in their space, and when the two ritual schedules overlap, they adapt to the Brahmin demands. For the Brahmin donor Balasubramanyam, the maintenance of this ritual duty is so important that he makes sure to come every year, not matter where he lives. It is also important for him to document the historical role of his family for the temple, which is clearly not important for the Vaniya Chettiars, who maintain their customary ritual right by doing it. Balasubramanyam’s status seems to be, among other things, the result of his caste, which may be why the priests can tolerate his proximity to the deities. Further, for all donors the public nature of the honor reception is important, since it publicly displays their status.

6.5 Human marriages

While Ēlavārkuḷali is brought to the Kampā Nadī temple tank to perform *tapas* in a rather quiet and contemplative atmosphere, the temple area is filled with huge crowds of people. Some come to stroll around, enjoy the fair and the cultural program, but a number of people come to the temple to perform their own marriage rituals at the same time as the deities. Frequently, participants and priests pointed the human marriages out to me as a special feature of the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram festival at the Ekāmranātha temple.

Already at the temple’s entrance area, near the fair, some brides stand out in the crowd. They wear the typical bridal hair ornament—a fake plait cut out in cardboard, embroidered with white jasmine flower buds and colorful trims. Female relatives and friends, who here and there tug the bride’s sari and headdress to bring them into the correct shape, surround them. Many brides look a bit scared and overwhelmed by all the attention they receive. On the fourth *prākāra* more brides can be seen near the columned hall. Here, some of the ceremonies have already started. The bride is seated next to the groom. Family members and relatives, densely packed, sit and stand around them (see fig. 6.10). Some just watch, while others discuss and comment on the next step to be taken in the marriage rituals, since some groups perform the marriage without a priest. This is a characteristic of the ritual, as a priest of the Kāmākṣī temple emphasized: ‘There is no *vāttiyār* (family priest) for the marriage, they just tie the *maṅgalasūtra* at the same time the gods do it.’ I have seen couples without a priest, just taking the advice of family members on how to exchange garlands and tie the *māṅkalyam* (see fig. 6.11). Though, just as many came with a priest, who performed the rituals on their behalf. Obviously, the more affluent wedding parties were attended by a priest and performed the marriage near or in the lighted columned hall, while the more impecunious couples squatted at the dim margins. The wedding parties varied not only in terms of ritual refinement, but also in size. For example, a male relative of the groom’s side of one wedding party informed me that they rented a van to come with

fifty family members from their village about twenty kilometers away from Kanchipuram. He proudly added that they even brought a photographer along with them. Yet, some groups included just a handful of people, almost unnoticeable, had it not been for the prominent flower embroidered headdress of the bride.



Figure 6.10 Wedding party at the Ekāmrānātha temple



Figure 6.11 Exchange of garlands

While conducting my fieldwork I saw each year approximately twenty to thirty couples²⁰ married at the Ekāmranātha temple. The size of the wedding parties and the elaboration of the ceremonies varied, yet, all of them choose to be married at the temple on Paṅkuṇi Uttiram. What are the motives behind this? Clearly, Paṅkuṇi Uttiram is considered an auspicious star for marriages, for deities, as well as for humans. Many Śiva temples (as well as Viṣṇu and Murukan temples) throughout Tamil Nadu celebrate the deities' marriage at this particular time of the year. Yet, according to my knowledge, only the Ekāmranātha temple in Kanchipuram becomes a venue for public weddings of human couples to such an extent.

This phenomenon has also been documented in scholarly literature. Chari (1982: 56), for instance, writes about the marriage festival at the Ekāmranātha temple: "A special feature of this Kalyanotsavam is that many young brides and brides-grooms get married, at a time on the same auspicious occasion in the same Kalyana Mandapam without any distinction of caste, social status etc." Hudson (2003: 37) observes this in a similar way: "Customarily, many couples belonging to various castes marry at the same time in the wedding hall of the temple, as subjects imitating their divine rulers." Both accounts emphasize that this practice—people from all backgrounds coming to marry on this occasion—demonstrates the festival's inclusivity. This argument for inclusivity is also used when people from different communities pull the temple car side by side during the *tēr vāhana* procession.²¹ One must not forget that entry to the temple was restricted for low castes until independency.²² However, whether the celebration of human marriages at the Ekāmranātha temple was customary at that time too, is not known.

People I spoke with, too, described a kind of inclusiveness, saying for instance that 'whoever wishes, will get married here,' or 'the haves and have nots come here and get married.' After a general appreciation of the human weddings, many of them were critical of changes in the numbers and social structure of the wedding parties. A man in the streets of Okkapiranthan Kulam stated: 'Before there were a thousand marriages, now only a few get married, often second and love marriages,' while a woman standing next to him added 'poor people marry in the temple.' It seems that some twenty years ago a public marriage at the Ekāmranātha temple on Paṅkuṇi Uttiram was regarded as very prestigious and thus performed in great numbers by all social ranks. Today, the situation looks somewhat different. Though denied by the temple's priests, many participants indicated that the opportunity to marry in the temple is more and more used by people on a low income and for 'inauspicious' marriages. A marriage is regarded as inauspicious when the bride or

20 Only in 2009 were fewer couples, since Paṅkuṇi Uttiram fell on a Tuesday. This day is regarded as very inauspicious for marriages. However, those couples, which were present, solved the difficulty by getting married on the morning of the next day.

21 Hüsken (2013) is questioning the festival's frequently highlighted inclusivity, drawing on examples from the Varadarāja temple in Kanchipuram.

22 Nevertheless, cases of discrimination against low castes in temples have been reported to this day. See, for example, news reports such as: "Orissa temple purified after low caste minister visit" (<http://in.reuters.com/article/2009/01/16/idINIndia-37481620090116>; accessed 02.02.2018) or "Low caste villager punished for entering a temple" (<http://ishare.rediff.com/video/Entertainment/Low-caste-villager-punished-for-entering-a-temple/393086>; accessed 02.02.2018), and Sivathambika's thesis (<http://www.mgutheses.in/page/?q=T%200064&search=&page=&rad>; accessed 02.02.2018).

groom is born under an unfavorable star for marriages, or when it is a second marriage or love marriage. These marriages take the advantage of the auspicious time (Paṅkuṇi Uttiram) and auspicious place (Ekāmranātha temple) to compensate for the implied inauspiciousness.²³

The groom of one wedding party explained: ‘Even when the boy and girl have a *doṣa* it will get resolved. Even if you do any wrong it will get sorted out, if you marry here.’ *Doṣa* means fault or defect and refers to an unfavorable precondition, such as an inauspicious birth star. The second example alludes to the groom’s own situation. He told me that his bride eloped from her hometown, about 190 km away, to marry him without the approval of their parents. ‘Only friends and a few relatives are helping us to get married,’ he continued, and explained why they decided to get married at this place: ‘This is Śiva’s temple and it is Ekāmbaranātha who is getting married. This girl (Ēlavārkuḷali) likes him so much that she does *pūjā* to get married to Śiva. Finally Śiva accepts that (...) So it is believed that the couples who come here to get married, will not have any problem in their married relationship.’

A male relative of another marriage party specified the following motives for a marriage at the Ekāmranātha temple: ‘If the couple does not have a child, they will pray that when the child is born, they will marry in the temple. If there is delay in marriage, people pray that they come and get married here. And those people, who cannot afford a marriage outside come here. So they make it simple by getting married here and it is good to get married on Paṅkuṇi Uttiram in the temple.’ This comment illustrates another reason for getting married in the temple: a personal vow or promise to the deity, which has to be performed in return when the wish is fulfilled. Further, it points to financial reasons, a factor which seems to become increasingly relevant. The organization of a marriage includes renting a marriage hall, a feast for the marriage party, payment of a priest, etc.—expenses which not everybody can meet. As one female relative of yet another marriage party expressed in plain words: ‘The people who have money rent a marriage hall, but we here do not have. What shall we do? We don’t have, and we get married in the temple.’

In summary, the human marriages at the Ekāmranātha temple form an elementary part of the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram festival. Reasons for choosing this form of marriage are, first of all, the indisputable general auspiciousness of time and place, and besides this, the fulfillment of a vow, ‘inauspicious’ marriages, and/or lower-income backgrounds. The integrative aspects and openness towards all social classes plays an important role for the people. Yet, participants indicated that today less marriages are taking place, and that the social structure of the marriage parties shifts from mixed to mainly low-income groups.²⁴ Further, an increase of love and second marriages has been observed. This might be related to the

23 My research assistant Sarah explained it to me in this way. On issues related to ‘inauspicious’ marriages in contemporary Tamil Nadu, see also <http://www.lesleybranagan.com/love-marriage-and-banana-trees-in-rural-tamil-nadu> (accessed 02.02.2018).

24 The research assistants with whom I interviewed the marriage parties assessed most of them to be below lower middle class.

rising popularity of these forms of marriage in Tamil Nadu, though they are still not fully accepted and therefore require above all extra blessings.²⁵

Another observation worth mentioning is that a few people understood the human marriages as the completion of the divine marriage, which, according to oral legend, has to be stopped due to the bad omen of a cat crossing the marriage (see Chapter Four). A woman from Cinna Kanchi, who comes every year with her husband and sister-in-law's family, explained: 'The marriage does not take place. Because they let a cat in. (...) This stops the marriage. Then so many marriages take place here.' Also the groom, who has been mentioned above, said: 'When the marriage stops for Amman, our marriage here takes place.' A relative of another marriage party said: 'The marriage is happening today, because Ekāmrānātha is getting married. When the marriage stops there, here the marriage takes place.'²⁶ I witnessed the marriages of the latter two. Actually, both took place before the divine marriage began. However, their statements express the idea of contributing to the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram marriage by helping to complete it (although it is in fact not stopped). They stress the important role of the human couples, who associate themselves with the divine couple, Ekāmrānātha and Ēlavārkuḷali.

6.6 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I examined the ways in which diverse participants engage in the Paṅkuṇi Uttiram marriage festival, and how they perceive their own roles. I focused mainly on participants and groups involved in ritual activities and contributing their own rituals and customs to the complexity and variety of the festival. Each group celebrates this day differently, integrating ritual elements from their own, often caste-specific tradition, as for example bringing the flower offerings in a *kāvai*.

Every participating group sees their ritual contribution as the center of the events, and everyone is in some way essential in making the marriage happen: the bride would not go back to the temple to get married without the people at Okkapiranthan Kulam, the bride's side has to give the *māṅkalyam*, give the gifts, and also the *madhuparka* to complete the marriage, and the human couples marry even in the stead of the gods. For all involved, the auspiciousness of the events is a motivating factor, and for those who have public roles (the donors), the public display is important, because it confirms and reaffirms their status among the members of their group and in society at large; the importance of *who* is 'on stage' becomes clear when looking at the number of court cases involved in the establishment of ritual rights. So while making the marriage happen seems to be a community effort, it is at the same time also very fragmented, since many valid, yet differing stories about ritual roles (especially evident in the case of the representation of the

25 The rising popularity and acceptance of second marriages seem to be reflected in online portals such as <http://www.re-marriage.com> (since 2002), <http://www.secondshaadi.com/> (since 2007), or <http://www.thesecondmarriage.com> (since 2009).

26 The term 'here' refers to the area around the front hall of the temple on the fourth *prākāra*, whereas 'there' denotes the open field in front of the Kampā Nadī tank on the fifth *prākāra*, where the divine marriage takes place.

bride's side) coexist, without coming into conflict with each other. This has much to do with the fact that the temple—in general—functions based on a system of redistribution, focused on the center, at which are the gods.

