Taming the Fever Goddess
Transforming a Tradition in Southern India

❍ **William Harman**

The fever goddess Mariyamman, worshipped by Hindus of the southern Deccan of South Asia, is traditionally reputed to be a formidable, demanding and frequently angry goddess who insists upon regular shows of fervent devotion. Without them, she can become vengeful, vindictive and destructive. In her most frightening guises she will send plagues of fever on those who ignore her. The mythologies associated with her portray her as a 'wronged' woman, seeking rightful recompense for the injustices she has suffered in life. Usually men and the male establishment have been the instruments of these injustices. The most important of her traditional shrines in Tamil Nadu is the temple of Samayapuram, located in the midst of an isolated agricultural tract in a village whose economy is organised today around the worship of this goddess.

But a new generation of upwardly-mobile Hindus have left the rural, agricultural context and have moved to the city to find middle-class employment in an economy that has seen remarkable gains in the past 50 years. A new kind of Mariyamman is thus appearing, one portrayed as much more accessible, less foreboding and less intimidating. Her temples have been organised into social service agencies, and the blood sacrifices and physically demanding forms of worship typical of the rural context have been replaced by moderated forms of devotion that focus on meditation, singing and acts of charity in the community.

It has been common in the study of Hindu goddesses to couch analyses in bifurcated oppositions. These dualities have often proved helpful in the attempt to sort out the bewildering varieties of goddesses found in India. A.K. Ramanujan and Stuart Blackburn have, for instance, suggested a distinction between "goddesses of control" as opposed to "goddesses of release". Goddesses of control are reserved, dependable, unlikely to be depicted as passionate. Goddesses of release are unpredictable, sometimes erotic and sometimes angry, but never conventional.[1]

Goddesses have also been grouped according to whether they form a part of the "great tradition" or the "little tradition". And then there are the meat-eating goddesses as opposed to the well-heeled and less threatening vegetarian ones.[2] Married goddesses, again, tend to be the domesticated Lakshmis, the maternal Parvatis, the cultured Saraswatis, in distinction from the threatening likes of Durga, Chandi and Mariyamman.[3]

These categories can prove helpful as heuristic devices and as organising models, with all their implications for what persons (if any) may serve as priests; for the tenor, format, timing and intentions of worship, for the thematic mythologies attached to the goddesses and for which worshippers present themselves at shrines. But the realities are more subtle and far less neat. The classifications are permeable, in part because the worship, mythologies, and perceived "personalities" of goddesses change from one region to another, from one time period to another and from one community to another. M.N. Srinivas has noted this problem in his attempt to fine-tune his analysis of Hindu deities by proposing three categories: the all-India deities, the regional deities and the strictly local deities, with overlaps occurring between each of the categories. But even with this refinement, goddesses are much too dynamic to stay put in any category forever.

Mariyamman, I have discovered, is one such goddess, for she fits not simply all three of these categories,

but a fourth, which Srinivas might wish to have named "diasporic deities" – goddesses, that is, whose temples have moved beyond the boundaries of India to Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Paris, Port-au-Prince and Detroit. I propose to show how Mariyamman seems to have undergone tremendous mobility among these shifting categories, how her personality and functions have changed in the views of her worshippers and how another bifurcatory scheme (urban middle-class society as opposed to rural, subsistence, agrarian-based culture) might suggest new insights into the dynamics of goddess analysis in South Asia. The change in Mariyamman's nature can be delineated with particular specificity when we look at how the worship of this goddess has changed from the practices of older generations, whose residential roots tend often to be rural, to those of the younger generations, who have moved to the cities to pursue the opportunities a middle-class lifestyle offers.

The traditional Mariyamman of Samayapuram

Tracing Transitions

A year ago I was confident that this insight was exclusively my own. I have since discovered that several others have noticed the same phenomenon and have been writing about it with sophistication. In one case outside India, the rural traditions represented by Mariyamman were not able to make a successful transition to the urban middle-class environment. Elizabeth Collins' book on Hinduism in Malaysia notes an explicit shift of worship and devotion over the past several generations, from agrarian, estate-based, rural Mariyamman temples – patronised by land owners and their bonded labourers – to more middle-class urban religions which these bonded labourers are now adopting as they leave their menial work in the countryside to seek middle-class clerical and managerial work in the cities. Collins observes that instead of adapting Mariyamman's cult to a new environment, worshippers among the newly upwardly-mobile middle-classes are moving toward a worship of Murukan instead.[4] This could well be attributed to the fact that Malaysian Tamils, leaving rural work as indentured labourers, tend to have been devotees of Mariyamman at a shrine built and sponsored by landlord landholders. In leaving their indentured roots behind them, devotees might also be inclined to abandon Mariyamman as a symbol of the servitude perpetrated on them by their erstwhile landlords.

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But such a trend seems to be the exception. In India, at least, the rural worship of Mariyamman is not displaced by the urban worship of another deity. Rather, Mariyamman changes. She develops another, more respectable, middle-class face.

James Preston has noted the growth and subsequent prosperity of goddess temples in the cities of Orissa. He finds that it tends to be those newly arrived immigrants to the cities from the villages who frequent such temples because the goddess, more associated with rural religiosity, provides newly-arrived immigrants with a much-needed sense of continuity and belonging. Joanne Waghorne has written most clearly about this process of what she calls "bourgeoisification" among the devotees of Mariyamman. She notes that, in Chennai, goddess temples, specially those dedicated to Mariyamman, seem to be transforming themselves into major middle-class institutions with middle-class values. These values reflect a concern for cleanliness, a disdain for the slovenly character of the slums in which these temples are often found (traditionally Mariyamman is considered a low-caste deity), a mixing of middle- to upper-middle class worshippers regardless of caste distinctions, a decorum in worship that eschews dramatic blood

sacrifices and ecstatic possession trances, and an architecture that emphasises much less the royal palace model and much more the home-like, domestic environment.

Writes Waghorne of one dramatic re-consecration ceremony of a major Mariyamman Temple in the city: the event, "a *mahakumbabhisekam* marked a key moment for this neighborhood: the articulation of a *consciously* multi-caste activity openly called "middle-class" in English. This Goddess temple further marks a new turn in middle-class religious sensibilities in relation to newer lower castes, new working classes and to shared *rural* roots. This temple and other goddess shrines like it, here and throughout Chennai, are giving shape architecturally and ritually to new religious sensibilities that are, I will contend, a vital part of what British historian Robert Stern calls the "bourgeois revolution" in India: "a momentous event not only in its own history but the world's." (1993, 6), (p. 3)

Both Preston and Waghorne are concerned with the changes in the circumstances of goddess worship from earlier generations to the present one. My concern focuses more directly on the shift in peoples' perceptions of the goddess. How are her mythologies changing? How is her perceived 'personality' – as reflected in the stories about her and in the way people report their devotion to her – undergoing a clear modification?

This article proceeds in three distinct steps. First, I want to talk about the general traits of the more traditional goddess Mariyamman. They are most dramatically represented by her largest and most famous rural temple in the village of Samayapuram in Tamil Nadu, my next area of focus. Last, I move to what I identify as the new form of Mariyamman by inspecting a recent temple, 94 kilometres south of the state's capital Chennai, in the town of Melmaruvattur where, in this terrible *Kali Yuga* – this age of corruption, distress, destruction and the obliteration of tradition – the goddess has chosen incarnation in the form of a living, breathing, married-with-four-children human male, the famous Pankaru Atikalar, known simply as "Amma," the Mother.

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A Goddess to Reckon With

I turn now to my foil: that goddess against which middle-class change shall be measured, the more traditional Mariyamman.[5] There is no way to know how long Mariyamman has been worshipped in southern India. The earliest written documents about her come quite late in her history and date from the 18th century. The earlier, rural Mariyamman is no middle-of-the-road, namby-pamby, love and light, lace and silk goddess. She is much more active than decorative. She is said to cause, prevent and alleviate illnesses characterised by fevers or diseases pertaining to the eyes. She is worshipped primarily in the southern portion of the Indian subcontinent, in Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asia, most frequently among speakers of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam or Tulu. Her most dramatic association is with deadly pestilences that suggest her common, but not entirely accurate, appellation, "The Smallpox Goddess." Thousands of temples, particularly in agricultural and village settings, are dedicated to this goddess, whose name has undergone occasional and specifically localising transformations, such as Karumariyamman, Bhadramariyamman, and Muttumariyamman.

Several etymologies have been offered for the basic forms of her names. "*Muttu*" is a word that means "pearl" but suggests the disfiguring pustules contracted during an onset of smallpox or chickenpox, pustules often referred to as "pearls". Certain iconographic representations depict the goddess aspersing these "pearls" onto humans from the ends of a flywhisk or a feather. The term "*mari*" is associated with pestilence and disease, giving one possible meaning to her literally translated title, "the disease mother". Others have associated the word "*mari*" with her ability to change suddenly, for "*mari*" can also mean, "to change" in Tamil. She is often described as having an unpredictably dangerous capacity for anger and violence. Still others have proposed that "*mari*" has a third meaning: "rain". She has been described, sometimes euphemistically, as a cool goddess or as a goddess whose image likes to be cooled with water. Because she is traditionally most active in the peak of the hot season, when contagious fevers pose great dangers and when rains are

desirable, she is approached by worshippers requesting coolness and rain.

The term "*amman*" means "mother" and is more honorific than descriptive of a mythically attributed biological status. I have encountered no instance in which Mariyamman is a functional mother with actual children. She has been described as a widow who has murdered her husband; as a mistreated (sometimes raped) young girl whose propensity for vengeance must be propitiated; as a woman expelled from her home for the slightest of offences by some vindictive male in the family; even as a deified witch of a woman who developed the unfortunate habit of kidnapping and devouring children. The local stories vary remarkably from one village to another, but tend to paint the picture of a virtuous woman (in most cases, though not all), turned viciously dangerous and ready to wreak havoc on a civilisation that has spurned her, a civilisation dominated by males.

It is likely that in the Dravidian linguistic regions Mariyamman is the most commonly worshipped of all goddesses. Though most widely known in her role as an agent of fevers and diseases such as cholera and smallpox, she has also been credited with causing and relieving tuberculosis and chicken pox. She is frequently homologised to Sitala, a goddess of fevers found in central and northeastern India; others have understood Mariyamman to be a form of Durga or Kali. But the rituals and mythologies involved in the veneration of Mariyamman are quite different from any of these other goddesses.

Mapping Origins

Many of the stories about Mariyamman's origins are concerned with issues of caste. Her beginnings are often portrayed as being once respectable and high-caste, despite the fact that her worshippers and ritual ministrants generally come from the less 'pure' castes. She is pictured often as having once been the virtuous and perfect wife of a great *rishi* or the daughter of a high-caste family. But then she suffers an unfortunate mishap which changes her life forever: inappropriate sexual advances by humans, *rishis* or celestial beings who, rebuffed, angrily curse her to take on the form of a pox-covered and deformed low-caste human. In other cases, she is a high-caste woman whose father and brothers negligently give her in marriage to a low-caste man, condemning her, therefore, to be forever defiled. One round of myths describes how Mariyamman is beheaded by her own son, along with a low-caste companion, but then the two are miraculously revived and the heads are mistakenly transposed. The woman with the Brahmin head and the low-caste body becomes Mariyamman.

Generally in these stories, if Mariyamman has been inappropriately married to a low-caste man, her discovery of it precedes the appearance of her ferocious anger as she burns her husband to ashes, becoming a widow, and assumes the role of a superhuman force characterised by heat, anger and feverish vengeance. However she also expresses concern for justice, piety and proper conduct. Worshipped properly, she will protect; neglected, she will take quick offense.

The Rigours of Worship

Perhaps most compelling in the worship of this goddess is the remarkable enthusiasm displayed during her annual festivals which most commonly occur in the hot season of April and May. Festivals celebrated in her honour will include upwards of ten days of activity during which time devotees will decorate either themselves or the gifts they give to the goddess with *neem* leaves, said to be sacred to her. Frequently a three-pronged post from the *neem* tree will be erected outside her shrine, sometimes understood to be an aniconic image of the husband whom she killed. At other times during the year a rough-hewn stone pillar serves that symbolic function. Because the goddess is believed to become heated during the festival season, certain devotees will vow to measure out multiple pots of water around the foundations or the entrances of her temples, in an effort to cool her. Others will take on the heated state she

Devotees, honouring Mariyamman, carry firepots through the streets of Samayapuram

experiences by carrying firepots in processions throughout the town, ending at the temple. There the pots are offered to the goddess in a communal activity, often involving members of the extended family. The clay pots are filled with oil-soaked wood-chips which are then ignited as the devotee endures the heat of the flaming pot during the journey to the temple.

The use of *neem* leaves as protection from the heat is one of many instances of the alternations between the colours red and green, suggesting the ambivalent nature of a goddess associated with both red heat and green coolness. Fire-walking is also common: large pits filled with glowing coals provide a path over which devotees briskly walk barefoot in fulfillment of vows made. Sacrifices of male animals, most frequently goats and cocks, constitute that portion of the worship reserved for those who wish to offer blood to the goddess. Frequently humans will offer their own blood by piercing their tongues and cheeks; by pulling large wooden carts (attached to sturdy metal hooks embedded in a devotee's flesh) through the streets; or by sliding long metal skewers through the flesh near the ribs.

The practice of hook-swinging (whereby devotees are suspended from a pole and pierced in the flesh as they hang, attached only to the hooks) also occurs.

Traditionally, most temples dedicated to Mariyamman have not been staffed by members of the Brahmin community because the goddess is generally understood to appreciate blood sacrifices. Many of the stories about the goddess specifically associate her with service castes, including barbers and washer-folk.

In the name of the Mother: trance posession at Samayapuram

Mariyamman also has a reputation as a goddess whose spirit is able to possess certain individuals, entering their bodies and assuming control. Her festivals can sometimes turn into events of major ecstatic trance-possession. Generally, when she possesses a devotee she will speak through that person to express concerns about ritual slights she may have suffered during prior years or about particular offerings she wishes to be given. While such possessions tend to be regarded as auspicious, it is generally the case that devotees prefer not to deal with Mariyamman outside the festival or temple context. In the traditional rural context it is considered unwise to have an image of Mariyamman in the home. She is generally not a goddess to whom domestic hospitality is gladly offered.

Her ability to change with the times is a clear testament to the... persistence of the many traditions that coalesce in the image of a gracious, loving but unpredictable mother.

When serious illness attributed to Mariyamman occurs in the home, the afflicted person can be treated as the physical embodiment of the goddess. The home becomes a quasi-temple and it is decorated with *neem* leaves. Nothing foreign is admitted to the presence of the afflicted person lest the goddess (who is averse to the strange) be incited to feverish and potentially deadly anger. The sight of pregnant women is also forbidden, for the goddess is understood to be childless and could fly into a jealous rage at the sight of a mother-to-be.

A Goddess Revised

Because Mariyamman has been chiefly associated with smallpox plagues in the past, observers of Indian religious dynamics have speculated that her popularity and influence might well dissipate with the reported eradication of that disease in the last few decades of the 20th century. Those speculations have not proved accurate. Mariyamman is, true to her name, a changing goddess. Her temples are appearing more frequently in larger cities and her worship has developed an increasingly respectable, high-caste, Sanskritic character, with a de-emphasis on blood sacrifices and an increasing stress on her character as benign, gracious and generous. She continues to cause and cure illnesses involving fever, specially tuberculosis, cholera and typhoid. She also continues to inspire mediums whom she possesses and grants gifts of prophecy and clairvoyance. Her ability to change with the times is a clear testament to the esteem in which her devotees hold her, and to the persistence of the many traditions that coalesce in the image of a gracious, loving but unpredictable mother, worthy of fearful respect but concerned profoundly with the health and welfare of those devoted to her.

The temple of Mariyamman at Samayapuram illustrates both the goddess' traditional character as well as great change. In the past 30 years this temple has seen tremendous growth and development. Today it is one of the richest temples in southern India. Hundreds of buses disgorge thousands of pilgrims each day who come, make quick money offerings to the goddess and then leave quickly. It is not a particularly tranquil or spiritual place to tarry. Thousands of ill people have come to live at the temple, waiting for healing. They line the outer corridors and, as they beg other temple-goers for sustenance, their open sores, disfiguring body rashes, crumbling leprous limbs, screams of feverish delirium and nauseating odours all make it clear that folks concerned with purity or with nursing an appetite for a subsequent good meal would not do well to linger. In addition to this rather dramatic assault on well-heeled sensibilities, hundreds of shrieking, screaming people enter the temple any given day in a frenzied and possessed state, carrying dangerously blazing pots of flame that singe or burn whoever may not be quick enough to avoid them. Others will enter the temple accompanied by intense and deafening drummers, completely "tranced-out", pierced and bleeding, with skewers in their tongues, cheeks, backs or sides. They will have come to make an offering of their own blood to the mother. Often they will shriek out their requests for assistance, healing, grace. A significant proportion of the worshippers are clearly rural, agrarian and living on economic, psychological or physiological margins. I often got the impression that Mariyamman was not their first hope, but their last. Their speech, clothing and manners reveal little sophistication. Religion for them is, first and foremost, concerned with experience and with results. They come to Samayapuram because they expect something very specific.

Worshippers bearing *neem* leaves, sacred to Mariyamman

But things at Samayapuram are changing. It is not unusual to see a more sophisticated clientele as well. Middle-class people will often travel to the temple, arriving in personal cars or taxis, and they almost always will worship quickly, deposit offerings efficiently and be on their way. It is significant to note that the town has no presentable hotels or temple rest houses. Staying at the nicest, the temple guesthouse, is a rat-and-roach infested penance in its own right. It is furnished with stinking, urine-stained mattress pads and no running water. But 11 kilometres away, at the urban bus station closest to Samayapuram in the town of Trichy, a brand new 5-star hotel has recently been completed, and in it I met several well-to-do families who had come to the hotel as a staging-point for trips to Samayapuram. A few had come from Hindi-speaking regions explicitly to visit the famous Samayapuram goddess.

There are other indications that things are changing in Samayapuram. When I visited the temple over 30 years ago, I saw several animal sacrifices occurring at the temple door. If you want to offer animal sacrifices to the goddess these days (and many still do), you cannot do it on temple property. You can give a gift of a live goat or a live chicken, and the gift will be recognised as pleasing to the goddess, but it is sold as consecrated livestock by the temple to anyone willing to make the purchase. Devotion becomes translated directly into profits rather than into decapitated, twitching, bloody carcasses. This official revision in temple procedure is far more pleasing to the genteel and is

less likely to put off the middle-class urbanite who, by the time she reaches the temple door, has already had to run the gauntlet of disfigured and diseased petitioners. But even that is changing. In an effort to remove these unfortunates from the public gaze, the temple *devasthanam* has constructed a hallway adjacent to the temple where only the seriously ill may stay. Their willingness to remain in this hall has not been unwavering, since so many of them depend on begging from healthier temple pilgrims and those visitors under no circumstances may enter this separate hall.

A Flourishing Commerce

Expansion plans are moving in various directions, financed enthusiastically by banks seeking a cut in the spiritual action. A long hallway at the east entrance has effectively tripled the protected floor space of the temple, serving as a place for a very brisk commerce in religious goods during the day and as a somewhat protected dormitory for travellers or long-term supplicants remaining at the temple. A relatively new marriage hall has been constructed, a fact which signals a radical departure from traditions surrounding Mariyamman. She is, even at Samayapuram, unmarried. Tradition associates her with anger toward men, even at this temple where, we are told, her arbitrary expulsion from her original temple home by servants of her big brother ended up with her enshrinement here, because she – both graciously and vindictively – incarnated herself in the form of an infant, about to be killed by her vicious uncle. Rather than permitting this to happen, she transformed herself into the avenging goddess she is now, and condemned the vicious uncle Kamsa to his own just death: a murder which would strike him down one day when he would least expect it.[6]

But times change, and as respectability and visibility become more important, temples must change to accommodate the respectable, social needs of families who wish to celebrate publicly ostentatious and expensive weddings. Thousands of people each week come to the temple to have a ritual tonsure performed – but this isn't done inside the temple, as it was in the earlier days. It occurs well outside the temple, in an assembly-line setting where the temple has hired (and takes a significant cut from the earnings of) an army of barbers.

Samayapuram's drummers in festival season

Priests inside the temple all identify themselves as Brahmins (a claim that is disputed, but which I could not afford to investigate and, at the same time, remain sure of maintaining direct access to temple proceedings). Temple rituals include elaborate *mantras*. Still, anybody, absolutely anybody, can enter the inner sanctum – for a price. Simply entering the sanctum costs money. Indeed, I have never been in a temple where money seemed to be so prominently featured. The large steel offering boxes ("*undiyal*" in Tamil) were 6 to 8 feet tall, and they were everywhere in the temple. Money, gold, silver, jewels – I saw all these things being placed in them. And I observed that from time to time, as the days grew late, the *undiyals* became so stuffed that devotees had to search out those that were less conveniently placed and so less likely to be full. Nightly, I was told, the *undiyals* are emptied under the watchful eye of accompanying armed guards.

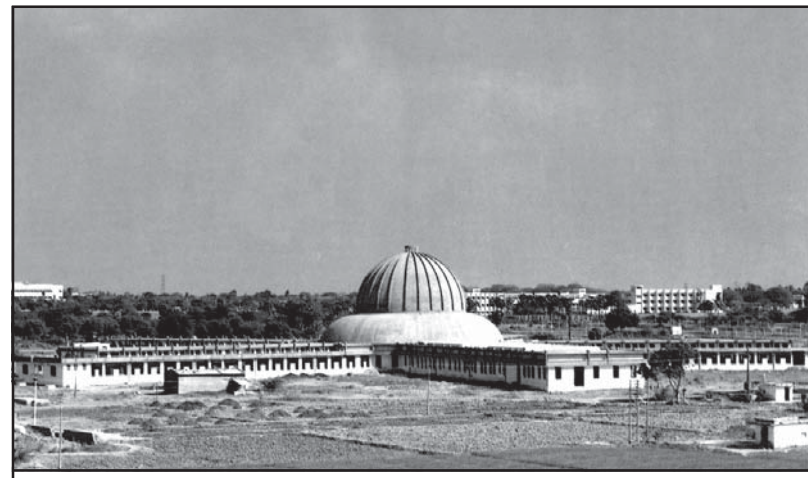
The Ironies of Reversal

Samayapuram, then, represents the more traditional, rural approach to the worship of Mariyamman, but it is changing in noticeable ways. Its fantastic financial success, in fact, has brought about a somewhat embarrassing situation in the more traditional Brahmin Sanskritic culture, centered in the huge, classically famous temple to the deity Vishnu, the architectural masterpiece at Sri Rangam about 7 kilometres away. There the deity Vishnu is kept quite pure – only acceptably clad and respectable-looking Hindus may be considered for admission. No amount of money granted me access. But no one is beating down the doors to get in either. Compared with Samayapuram, Sri Rangam feels eerily abandoned and deathly silent: a veritable refuge from the busy activity of the market place or the average goddess temple. And so, every day, thousands of worshippers ride right by Sri Rangam in the shadows of its enormous imposing towers, on their way to the screaming, suffocating, sweating, bleeding crowds that await them at Samayapuram. And, perhaps most revealing, one of the primary sources of income for support of the Sri Rangam temple is an annual gift from the Samayapuram Temple. I met no priests from Sri Rangam who claimed that this was galling, but I met plenty of people who helped

administer the Samayapuram temple and who pointed out this piece of information with some enthusiasm. Indeed, the financial facts seem an interesting reversal of the mythology regarding how the Mariyamman temple originated in the first place.

There are several mythologies about how the Mariyamman temple was constructed. All of them point to the common theme of royal patronage. Just as landed estate owners in Malaysia were expected to be the primary builders of Mariyamman temples there, so kings often are the ones who are responsible for the village temples in Tamil Nadu. But before the temple was built in Samayapuram, the story goes, Mariyamman had a small place (now an abandoned shrine, to which devotees will point even today) inside the walls of the great Sri Rangam temple. This is because she is understood to be the younger sister of Vishnu – a tradition we find spread over much of Tamil Nadu.[7] However, the worship of Mariyamman inside the walls of the Sri Rangam Temple developed into something that, according to the priests, lacked control, decorum, discipline and propriety. Devotees of the goddess broke out into ecstatic song and dance and this was most inappropriate in the presence of the more disciplined, controlled demeanour of the priests of a decidedly staid, purity-conscious Vishnu. And so, the story goes, the priests of Sri Rangam threw little sister out of the temple. She and her worshippers were an embarrassment.

Interestingly, devotees will mention this story when they are quizzed about one of the temple's main festivals in the month of *Thai*, when Mariyamman is taken in procession to the banks of the Cauvery River, very near the Sri Rangam temple. There, it is said, she receives gifts from her brother Vishnu and, indeed, some of Vishnu's Sri Rangam priests do make a trip through the lower-caste neighbourhood on the island of Sri Rangam to appear with gifts for the Mariyamman temple officials. This occurs on the small spit of land in the Cauvery where the goddess temporarily appears in a pavilion constructed of bamboo and palmyra palms on the night of the *Thai* full moon.



The hospital at Melmaruvattur, constructed with funds donated to the Mariyamman temple

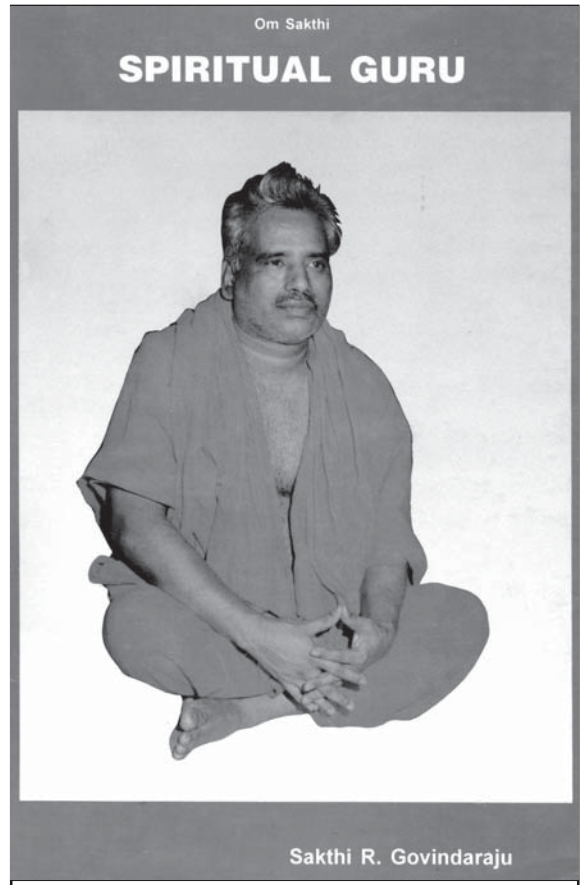
How long this festival has been celebrated I have been unable to determine. It is by no means new. But neither is the fact that the Samayapuram Mariyamman has long been the main source of financial support for her big brother. The respectability which association with him entails seems well worth the trip. In Samayapuram, then, we have a rather traditional Mariyamman temple in the gradual process of change that comes with growth, success and wider appeal to India's growing middle class.

This Mariyamman temple was like no other I had ever seen. It is thoroughly middle class with (as might be appropriate to the traditional goddess) a vengeance.

A Mellowed Mariyamman

I move now, quite abruptly it feels, to a very different Mariyamman temple in a town 90 kilometres south of Chennai, the temple in Melmaruvattur. I first learned about it from a regular Sunday morning television show broadcast in Chennai. Featured on that show each week were the oracular pronouncements of a rather unassuming man to whom they referred as "The Mother". When I investigated the very sophisticated website advertised on the TV show, I became convinced that this Mariyamman temple was like no other I had ever seen. It is thoroughly middle class with (as might be appropriate to the traditional goddess) a vengeance. First of all, there is plenty of information about the temple. In addition to the television shows and web sites, this is one of the first Mariyamman temples I have studied where the literature is abundant and can be purchased in Tamil, English and Hindi. In contrast, I did manage to find a few pamphlets about the Samayapuram temple, but they were all in Tamil, and they were brief.

The Melmaruvattur temple itself is quite impressive: clean, quiet and yet relatively crowded by disciplined followers who conduct themselves with a cultivated decorum and most of whom wear the red *saris* and red *dhotis* typical of the goddess' serious devotees. The temple's grounds are huge and include a training centre for destitute widows who learn marketable skills to support themselves, skills such as sewing. Several educational institutions are attached to the temple and are run by the funds donated. They are all administered by the Adhiparasakthi (another term used to describe Mariyamman) Charitable Medical, Educational and Cultural Trust: a vast organisation, according to the website, with over 2,000 chapters throughout the world. The local institutions near the temple include a secondary school, a polytechnic and engineering college, a college of sciences and colleges of pharmacy and nursing. All are accredited by the Indian government. An enormous medical and research college is in the process of being constructed a few kilometres from the temple. It now has 250 beds, but is slated to have 4,000. Its site is the locus of a rather impressive set of medical services made available for free, 24 hours a day, to the poor.



A postcard, distributed by the Adhiparasakthi Trust, of Pankaru, Mariyamman's modern-day incarnation

Mother of Melmaruvattur

When we ask what all this has to do with Mariyamman, we get the story of "The Mother of Melmaruvattur", Pankaru Atikalar. But there is no vindictive, angry goddess anywhere to be seen. On March 3, 1942 Mariyamman simply decided, out of a sense of grace and compassion, to incarnate herself in human form, that of Pankaru. Nobody really knows why, except that the site of the present temple is said to be an ancient place where a group of great holy men called *cittars* lived and taught. In many ways, the story of the Melmaruvattur tradition is the story of Pankaru, and proof of the site's holiness almost always is associated with the many miracles attributed to him/her. As a child, Pankaru was chosen by the goddess Mariyamman; the parents realised this when they found the child sleeping one day with a cobra caressing him, giving him a mild massage. The child showed no fear and was not bitten. Other miracles followed: he had the habit of thinking about his deceased sister (who had died of chicken pox) by going to the graveyard and sitting near her marker. As he ate peanuts there, one day, the Goddess appeared to him to give him water. Later, during a festival to Mariyamman in the home, Pankaru went into a trance and bent the heavy, brass offering-tray used in the rituals, a superhuman effort. At that point, the Goddess appeared to the whole family, announcing that she would henceforth reveal herself through this young man by making oracular pronouncements. She instructed the parents not to be concerned about his education. His father was so impressed that he asked the Goddess then and there for permission to build a temple. She agreed, and around that structure has grown the present multi-acred complex.

The movement is an interesting combination of modern and traditional. It insists Pankaru is the literal incarnation of the Goddess. Indeed, in much of the literature, Pankaru is referred to as "she" and "her". Twice a week, Pankaru is possessed by the Goddess. Holding a *neem* branch (which almost all traditional possessed worshippers of Mariyamman throughout the South carry during their trance possession states) s/he appears twice a week, Tuesdays and Fridays (with special pronouncements on holidays), to channel communications from the goddess. During these oracular pronouncements, Pankaru's demeanour completely changes. S/he walks like, acts like and talks like a woman. Members of this movement other than Pankaru do not become possessed. Thus, there is no risk of decentralising the power and authority of the leader of the movement. Nobody gets direct

messages from Mariyamman except the Mother. Anarchical losses of decorum on the parts of others don't dilute the Mother's basic message, and yet possession states centering on Mariyamman remain crucial.

Redesigning the Fold

The heart of the teachings can be found in his/her oracular pronouncements which began on a consistent basis in 1968. Some of the most prominent departures from what we find in normal Mariyamman temples are embodied in their articulation and enactment. A consistent theme in the teachings is the need to serve the poor: a message which seems clearly not to be aimed at the poor, rural, subsistence folk. Web sites, television shows, social service projects and building educational institutions are not activities typical of the rural, marginal-subsistence population. A common slogan heard during the oracular pronouncements is "*Ore tay; ore kulam,*" that is, " Only one Mother, only one family." Pankaru insists that caste divisions are absolutely irrelevant because we all have one mother, the Goddess. Anyone can perform rituals before the image of the goddess in the sanctuary. Indeed, there are no designated priests. Everyday in the temple there is a food distribution, and it is done without reference to class or caste. In this temple, women are admitted on a par with men, even women who are experiencing menstruation. They administer most of the rituals to the Goddess. Yet, while the incorporation of women into temple activities is quite evident, the active participation of the poor is not.

This dynamic has been especially documented in the city of Chennai by Waghorne. She observes, "...as willing as the middle classes are to appropriate the power of the Goddess, they do this by cleaning her house and purifying or isolating her coarser elements, including her unrefined devotees."[8] Pankaru has encouraged generosity to the poor, but the poor must constitute themselves as a community quite apart from normal devotees in order to be eligible for this generosity. What defines Pankaru's followers is that they give to the poor. Therefore they cannot be poor. At the same time, the coarser elements are theoretically incorporated but their roles in the movement are rather clearly ascribed and limited. They must be recipients of religious gifts from Pankaru's followers. As recipients rather than givers, they exclude themselves from participating actively in the tradition. Though more subtle, the exclusion of the poor from worship is perhaps more effective here: in Samayapuram you need money to enter the inner sanctum. Here you need to be able to give gifts to the poor; that is, here, you can't be poor. You have to be middle-class.

A Pattern to Prosper By

Pankaru spends quite a bit of time engaged in modeling the kind of social service he advocates in his/her oracular trances. Publications of the temple show him/her working among devotees as they distribute food and clothing to the poor; building low-cost housing; doing relief work during natural disasters; building orphanages; digging wells for village drinking water; arranging for the burial or cremation of deceased orphans; distributing agricultural equipment to the poor; arranging for low-cost loans to weavers, barbers, blacksmiths and washermen; establishing scholarships for students from deprived backgrounds; and much more.

This is a rather different religious activity than what we have seen at Samayapuram. Indeed, there is only one specific ritual activity I have found that is similar. In both places, the practice of *ankappiratakshanam* is considered an appropriate expression of devotion to the Goddess. It consists of lying on the ground and rolling the body the entire distance around the sanctum where the Goddess is housed. In some cases several trips are required. At Samayapuram, hundreds of devotees do it every day as the result of individual vows. At Melmaruvattur, the style is different. It started for the first time in 1973 when Pankaru decided to do

A cost-free marriage for poor couples, performed by Pankaru, seen at right

it on the occasion of a particular festival.[9] Now it occurs only once a year, when thousands of devotees do the activity behind the lead of Pankaru, who does it in order to demonstrate her/his own humility in relation to the Goddess.

One particular oracular pronouncement has been revealing in this regard. Through her medium, the Goddess has declared that she requires nothing of devotees in terms of ritual actions, that devotees can do nothing to earn her grace. She accepts whoever reveres and trusts Pankaru. This, of course, means paying special attention to Pankaru's pronouncements; to take them seriously is to become involved in the myriad social service activities of the temple. It also involves spiritual self-development, which focuses on cultivating certain virtues. For Pankaru, the basic virtues are very much what we might expect among the upwardly mobile, wage-earning, family-centered middle-class. He lists as most important, particularly for, as he says explicitly, "succeeding in the office,"(1) adaptability, (2) self-reliance, (3) patience and perseverance and (4) punctuality and regularity. Negative attributes include: (1) shyness, (2) timidity, (3) pessimism, (4) intolerance, (5) indecision, (6) carelessness, (7) dishonesty, (8) bribery and (9) jealousy.[10] Pankaru also prescribes a daily exercise in meditation, and devotees often come to the temple for group meditation.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the tradition is its claim not to be sectarian Hindu. The Goddess supercedes all distinctions in all religions, and there is some pain taken to include members of a variety of faiths in special activities of the temple. In the literature, Pankaru is frequently pictured conferring with Buddhists, Christians, Muslims,

A worshipper at Melmaruvattur

Hindus and Jews. Indeed, his oracles often incorporate teachings from each of these traditions to support his points. He has made the point that the tradition he promotes is confined to no single geographic area or cultural context. The literature claims that there are over 2000 centers of worship, some of the most active in the United States.[11]

Internalising a New Ethic

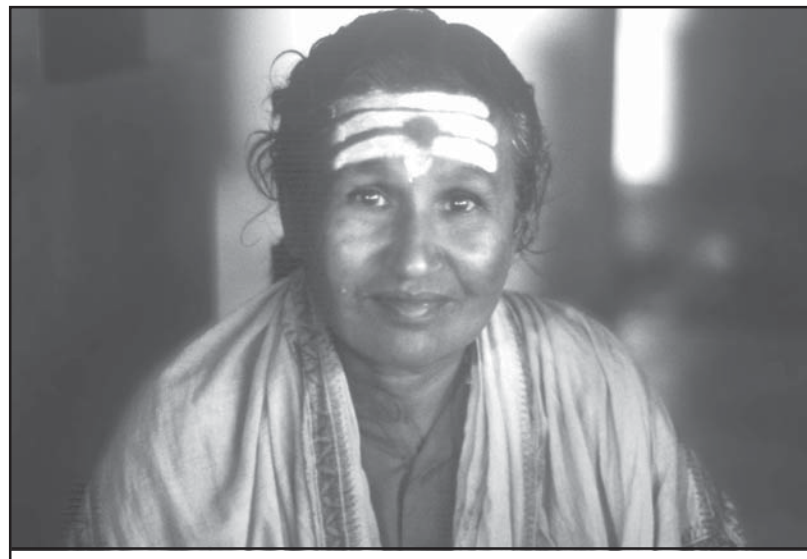
Much more could be said about the teachings of this new tradition. But I will try to reach a few conclusions in terms of what it illustrates about the direction toward which the transformation of the worship of Mariyamman is headed in this new generation of increasingly middle-class Indian values. In southern India, Mariyamman is the paradigmatic expression of the traditional village goddess. She has always been identified with the spatial and emotional turfs that constitute traditional origins. She is the protectress of the locale and, as long as she is honoured and obeyed, she will provide protection. She is, then, a source of security; she is also the one to whom you appeal when misfortune and suffering seem to be prevailing. Her very powers – to heal and to assist devotees in practical matters – reflect her involvement in the world and her immersion in the ambiguities which devotees sometimes experience as a capricious, volatile or whimsical unpredictability and changeability.

As new and aspiring members of the mobile middle class move from secure village contexts into urban centres, they have a particular concern for re-establishing connections with traditional sources of security.[12] The old caste and family categories no longer hold. A new ethic must be internalised, one that emphasises success, relative equality based on performance and efficiency and careful attention to the bottom line, as reflected in identifiable results. The traditional agrarian lifestyle, often based on an exchange of services rather than on a salary, focuses much more on the locality, as do the more traditional Mariyamman temples.

The basic paradigm in traditional Mariyamman temples involves the vow in which a person offers to the goddess blood offerings, physical penance or money, in exchange for a boon sought. In Melmaruvattur, the paradigm is never one that involves approaching the goddess in need. One approaches her by graciously offering gifts of money to be used, in most cases, for the benefit of the poor. What the worshipper receives (and wishes to receive) is much less tangible: wisdom from the guru for making one's way in the mores and structures of a new world and a sense of having fulfilled the guru's will by reaffirming faith in that virtue especially praised in kings and great persons, the virtue of generosity. [13] And, not coincidentally, in giving to the poor, we assure ourselves that we are not

– or are no longer, or perhaps never have been – poor.

The new Mariyamman at Melmaruvattur does all the things the old Mariyamman did: she heals people of fever and disease, she possesses people, she grants success and happiness. But she does it through the examples and teachings of a single person, her human representative, and she does it in order to inspire people to follow the pronouncements of that person. In so doing, they too in their social service activities will become like the goddess. Devotees themselves will become the instruments for the healing, uplift and prosperity of the poor. They will thus distinguish themselves from the poor. In following the Mariyamman of Melmaruvattur one becomes, almost *ipso facto*, a member of the new generation of middle-class devotees.



A devotee at the Samayapuram Mariyamman temple

Endnotes

1. Ramanujan and Blackburn (eds.), *Another Harmony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p.20-21.

2. The distinction was first suggested in Srinivas, M.N., *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952 and later developed by Milton Singer in *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization*, Foreword by M.N. Srinivas, New York: Praeger Publications, 1972. On meat eating deities, see Dumont, Louis, "A Structural Definition of a Folk Deity of Tamilnad: Aiyanar the Lord", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., No. 3 (1959): 75-87

3. Babb, Lawrence A., "Marriage and Malevolence: The Uses of Sexual Opposition in a Hindu Pantheon", *Ethnology*, 9, No. 2 (1970): 137-148.

4. See Collins, Elizabeth Fuller, *Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power, and Moral Redemption Among Malaysian Hindus*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997.

5. One of the earlier works that made Mariyamman visible in the Western world is Henry Whitehead's classic, *The Village Gods of South India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1921.

6. Mythic materials about Mariyamman have been culled from a variety of sources, the most important of which are:

Arulmiku Samayapuram Mariyamman varalaru, Ptts Veliyitu (publication sponsored by the Phone Company). A 30-page insert, with advertisements, in the newspaper *Malai Malar*, April 20, 1993. No author mentioned. I am grateful to the Samayapuram *devasthanam* for permission to duplicate this material.

Arulmiku Mariyamman Tirukkoyil Samayapuram, Ilalkuvi Vacanam, Tirucci Mavattam Taippusat Tiruvila: Tinamalar vanankum Cilappu Malar, a 2-page insert in *Tina Malar* newspaper, February 10, 1998. No author mentioned.

Rajintira, V. (Ed.), *Arulmiku Samayapuram Mariyamman Pumalai Varalarum Carntatu*, Tirucci: Shri Letcumi Puttaka Nilaiyam, no date. *Samayapuram Shri Mariyamman Koyil Varalaru*, Shri Rangam: Shri Rankam Tevastana Veliyitu, 1971. No author.

Tiricirapuram Camayapurattil Evuntarutiya Mariyamman Patikam, Chennai: Periyanayakiyamman Piras, 1915. No author.

Samayapuram (Kannanur) Arulmiku Mariyamman Tirukkoyil, Varalru: Talamum Irup-pitamum. No author. No date. 11-page typescript consulted in *devasthanam* offices of the temple.

7. See my "Kinship Metaphors in the Hindu Pantheon: 'Siva as Brother in Law and Son in Law", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 53, no. 3 (September 1985): 411-430.

8. Waghorne, Joanne Punzo, "Reinventing the Village Goddess. Revisioning the Urban Middle Class", paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asia Studies, San Diego, California, March 11, 2000, p. 20.

9. Govindaraju, Sakti R., *Divine Glory of Melmaurvathur Amma*, Melmaruvathur: Adhiparasakhti Charitable Medical, Educational, and Cultural Trust, 3rd edition, 1999, p. 6.

10. See Govindaraju, op. cit., pp. 70-72.

11. See the following web sites: (1) http://www.parashakthi-temmple.com/index.htm and (2) http://www.adhiparasakthi.org/adigalar.htm

12. James Preston made this point quite deftly in his article, "The Goddess Chandi as an Agent of Change", in Preston, James J. (ed.), *Mother Worship*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982, pp. 210-226.

13. In this sense the Melmaruvattur model is a return to the dynastic royal temples patronised by the Chola and Pandeya royalty. The great temples of Madurai and Tanjavur were centres for redistributing agricultural wealth and employed huge numbers of people to support their grandeur.

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