

Relationships among the Hindu Gods

Consideration of Spatial Structure, Myth, and Religious Practice in Chidambaram, South India

Mayumi IIZUKA

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the relationship among Hindu gods in terms of spatial structure, myth, and religious practice in Chidambaram, South India. Anthropologists have focused on human purity, style of spirit possession, intimacy and hierarchy in the kinship among gods, and variation of avatar to classify Hindu pagan gods. The relationships among gods are reflected in the architecture and spatial structure. However, those researches conducted only in village areas are not enough to analyze temple towns with more complicated structure. This paper tries to see spatial structure of architectures, myths handed down in temples and religious practice, with the assumption in mind that relationship among gods may be more complicated in towns, to discuss the relationship among these factors from a comprehensive perspective. And then the paper also tries to see the relationship among gods in Chidambaram by focusing on the gaps rather than consistency of the above three factors.

Chapter two describes the spatial structure of temples and the town. Gods are methodologically placed from the center to the periphery based on the transcendental perspective. The intimacy of kinship among gods is actualized in the arrangement with Nataraja, the main deity as starting point of the centripetal spatial structure.

Chapter three focuses on the myths related to the spatial structure and examines three myths. The paper shows that the characters and places related to these myths are embodied as individual temple and that the temples lack of ritual relationship because rituals and festivals are performed by respective temples. The spatial structure differs from the myths.

Chapter four makes an analysis of the religious practice observed in Nataraja temple and Goddess temples of Chidambaram by focusing on differences in Diskshitar's religious practice between the temples and illustrates the superiority of Dikshtiar and the hierarchy of gods.

In conclusion, the paper discusses the gaps in the spatial structure, myth and religious

practice. They are not always consistent with each other unlike the case in villages, which shows multilayered nature of a Hindu temple town.

I . Introduction

This paper examines relationships among Hindu gods in terms of the spatial structure, myth, and religious practices in the Hindu temple town of Tamil Nadu in South India. I focus on Chidambaram, where Nataraja temple, an ancient Śiva temple, can be found in the middle of the town.¹

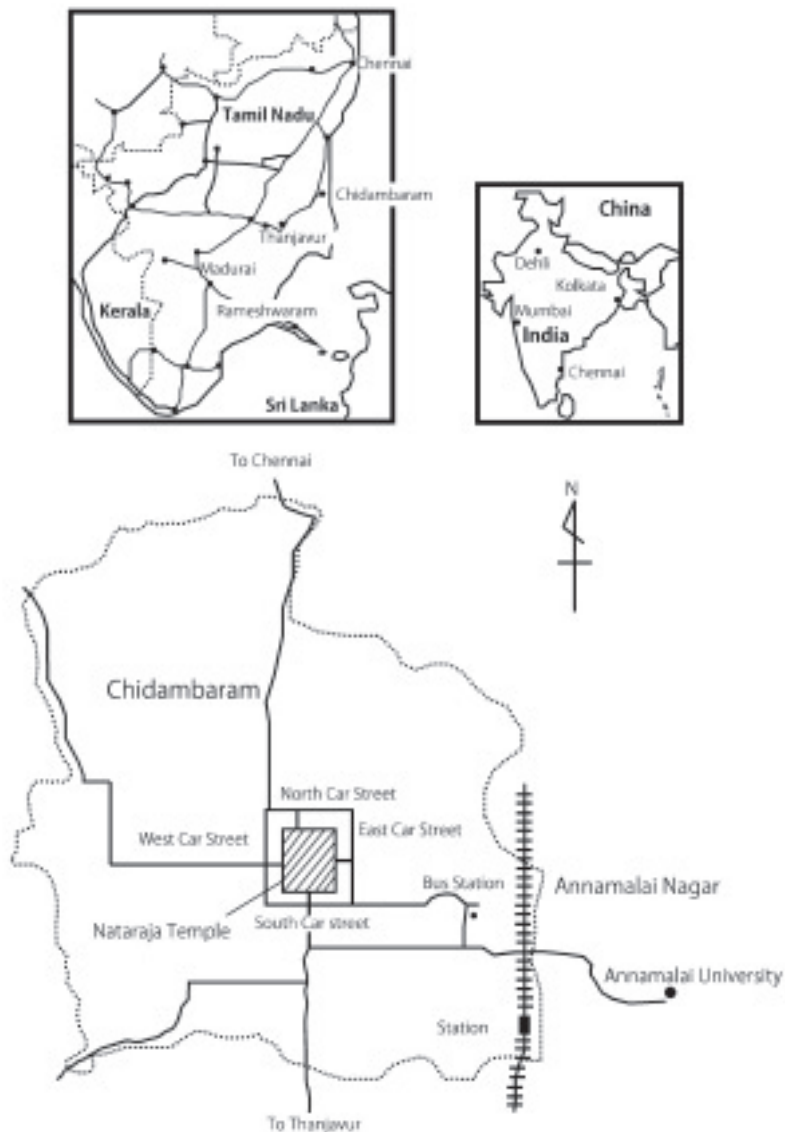


Figure 1. Map [Tanaka 1993: 121]

Hindu gods manifest with various names. The same god is not only called different names in different regions, but also has a different personality depending on its name. For example, though Bhairava is considered the angry face of Śiva, one story says that he is a son of Śiva. Moreover, each god has gender and shows his/her emotions like a human being. Fuller [2004(1992): 30] called this feature of Hinduism “fluidity,” one of the characteristics of Hindu polytheism; there is also “permeability,” which means the absolute distinction between gods and human beings vanishes during rituals.

Anthropologists have tried to classify the seemingly chaotic Hindu pantheon. For example, Harper [1959, 1964] focused on the pureness of human beings who contact the gods and the style of possessions. He divided village gods into three types: *devaru*, Sanskrit-origin gods; *devate*, local and indigenous gods; and *devva*, demonic gods. A *devaru* is a supreme deity who controls the fate of the world and human beings. Human beings worship him only after purification and a vegetarian priest conducts rituals for him. Although a *devate* is a guardian deity who protects not only human beings but also animals, his personality is ambiguous. He causes disasters or plagues, and animal sacrifices are offered to him. A *devva* is an evil spirit who consistently roams around. They are situated in an inferior position and are considered impure.

Dumon [1986: 395, 402] also classified relationships between human beings and gods according to the purity of the clergy and possessions. He pointed out that the ideology of purity and impurity, which informs the caste hierarchy of human beings, also defines the structure of the pantheon. For example, an indigenous god for whom a local non-Brahman priest conducts rituals is always ranked lower than a supreme god for whom a Brahman priest does, and remains in a subordinate position as a protector. The worship of gods represents the social order and was thus informed by India’s caste society. Also, possessions by gods take place only in the lower temple where local gods are worshiped. Moreover, he argued that the intimacy and hierarchy among gods is informed by kinship, including couple, sibling, and parent-child relationships. He indicated that male-female pair gods are enshrined as couples in the vegetarian pantheon (offered only fruits and vegetables) where the higher-caste Brahman perform *pūjā*, whereas non-vegetarian gods (offered animal sacrifices) are interrelated as siblings.

In addition, Tanaka [1990] focused on the avatars of gods. He explored the participation and inclusion of Hindu ideology by looking at its variations. For example, male gods with a fierce character are all avatars of Śiva, and all goddesses individually manifest as Śiva’s spouses. The other gods are interrelated based on the afferent power of a central deity.

Such relationships among gods are reflected in spatial and architectural structures. Dumont [1986: 403] focused on azimuth orientations. He noted that the high deity is a guest from the

north, while lower gods are always located in the south and are devoted to serving guests from the north. Harper [1959] pointed out that ritual sites differ depending on the deity, such as *dēvasthāna* for *devaru*, *gudi* for *devate*, and no shrine for evil spirits. Tanaka [1990: 106] described spatial cognition, considering an exorcism ceremony as being performed on the boundary between the sacred and mundane worlds.

However, since the previous studies targeted village areas with simple structures, the above explanations are insufficient for a temple town, which has a more complicated one. So, I will bear in mind that relationships among gods are more complicated in towns and examine not only the spatial layout of the architectural structure, but also god myths and religious practices from a more comprehensive viewpoint. I will refer to Tanaka's argument that the character of gods is context-dependent and varies based on the ritual condition and social status. Also, I will focus on both consistency in the above triangular relationships and misalignment.

First, I will describe how the ancient architectural texts influenced the layout and arrangement of shrines inside temple precincts and explore the outline of the spatial structures of towns and temples in architectural terms. Then, I will examine temple myths related to the spatial structure. Moreover, I will consider the relationships among gods from the perspective of the different religious practices of Dikshitar priests related to a goddess festival held in Chidambaram. Finally, I will clarify how purity/impurity in Hinduism and the gender differences among gods are represented in spatial structures and religious practices.

II. Spatial structures of towns and temples in terms of the Vāstu Śāstra

Some of the Silpa Śāstra, which describe the basic idea of figurative art, deal with architecture and city planning; they are called the Vāstu Śāstra. Typical examples are "*Mayamata*" and "*Mānasāra*," written in the 6th to 7th centuries in South India. Temples are constructed in order to project the macrocosms where gods govern onto the microcosms where humans live. The Vāstu Śāstra are a kind of manual for that. I will clarify the special structure of Nataraja temple and Chidambaram by referencing these architectural books.

(1) Main shrine

First, I will describe Ciṭṣabhā, the main shrine of Nataraja temple where the influence of the Vāstu Śāstra is observed most clearly. According to the lore, Ciṭṣabhā was built for Ānanda Tāṇḍava, Śiva's cosmic dance, by Vismakarma, a sacred architect, under the instruction of Indra. It corresponds to the heart if one compares the main shrine to the body diagram of a primitive

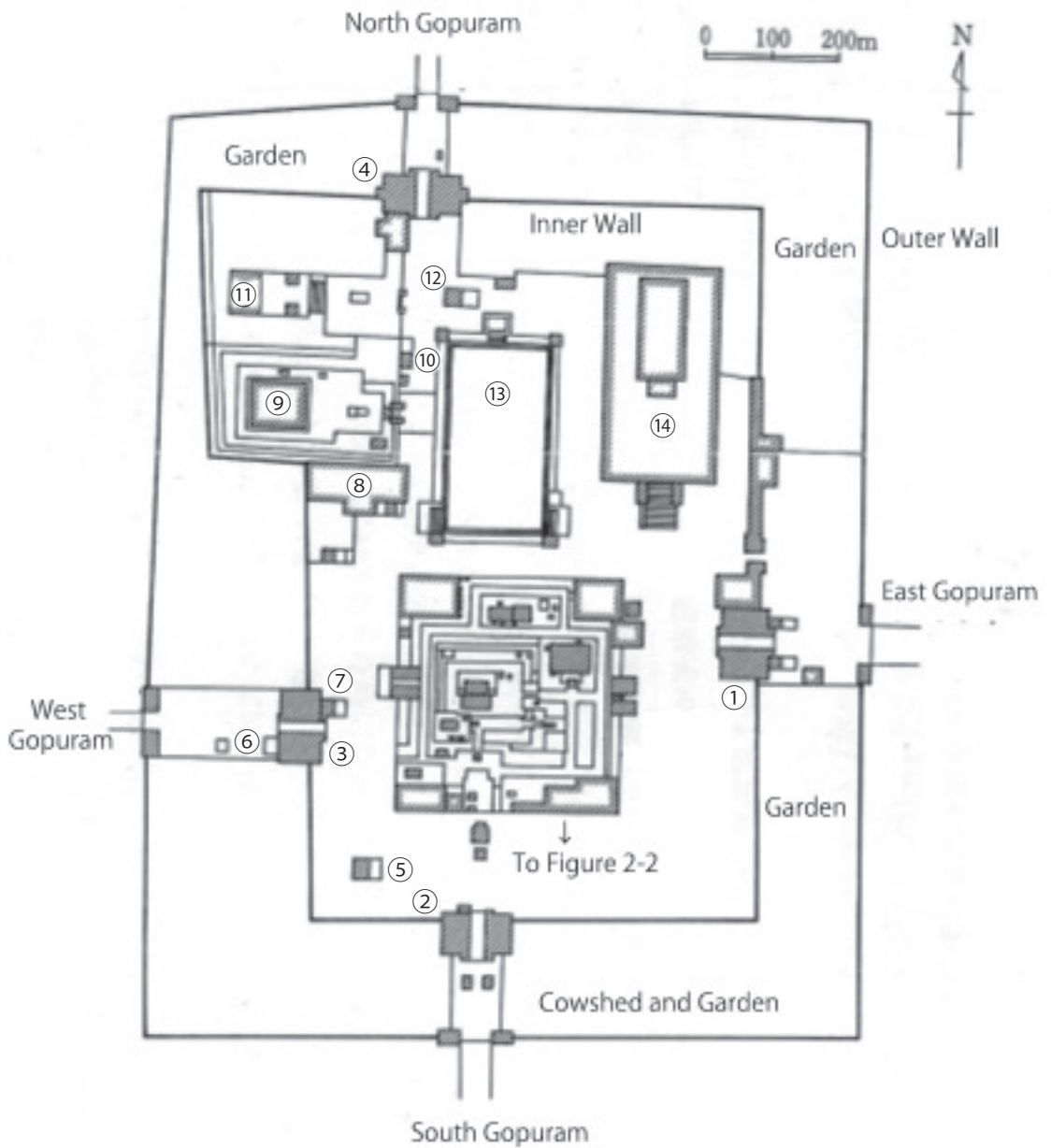


Figure 2-1. Nataraja Temple [Tanaka 1993: 122]

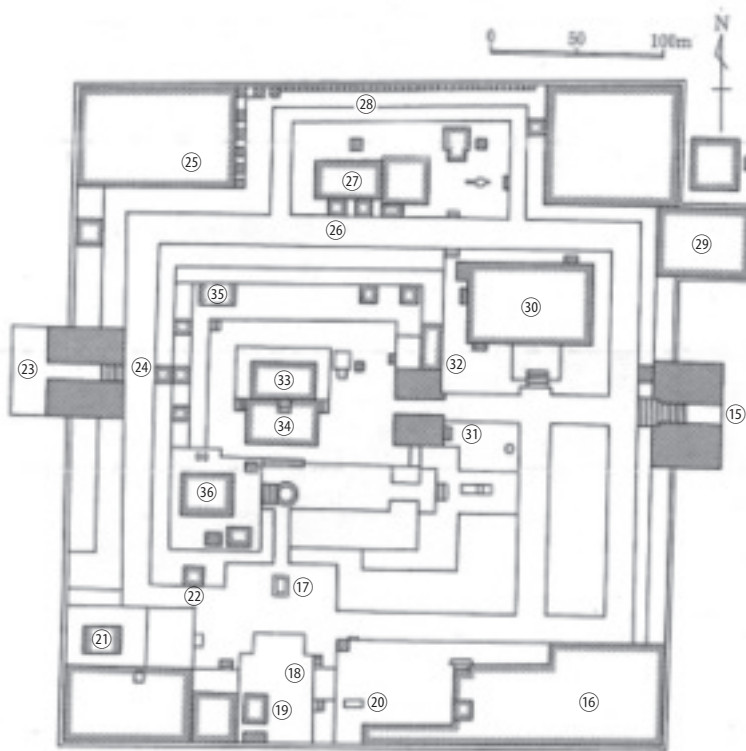


Figure 2-2. Architectures around Main Shrine [Tanaka 1993: 123]

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. East Gopuram | 19. Urdhuva Tandava Murti |
| 2. South Gopuram | 20. Prasadam shop |
| 3. West Gopuram | 21. Lakshmi Amman Temple |
| 4. North Gopuram | 22. Dandayudapani Shrine |
| 5. Mukkuruni Vinayaka Temple | 23. Western Entrance |
| 6. Karpaka Vinayaka Temple | 24. Akash Vinayaka shrine |
| 7. Vira Suburamania Temple | 25. Vahana Mandapa |
| 8. Hundred Pillar Hall | 26. Dakshinamurti shrine |
| 9. Sivakamasundari Temple | 27. Murastana Temple |
| 10. Durga Amman Temple | 28. Namanyar |
| 11. Pandiya Nayaka Temple | 29. Yaga sala |
| 12. Navalingam Temple | 30. Deva Sabha |
| 13. Sivaganga Tank | 31. Manbara Vinayaka shrine |
| 14. Thousand Pillar Hall (Raja Sabha) | 32. Navagraha shrine |
| 15. Eastern Entrance | 33. Citsabha |
| 16. Kitchen | 34. Kanaka Sabha |
| 17. Flag Stand | 35. Sleeping Chamber |
| 18. Nritta Sabha | 36. Govindaraja Temple |

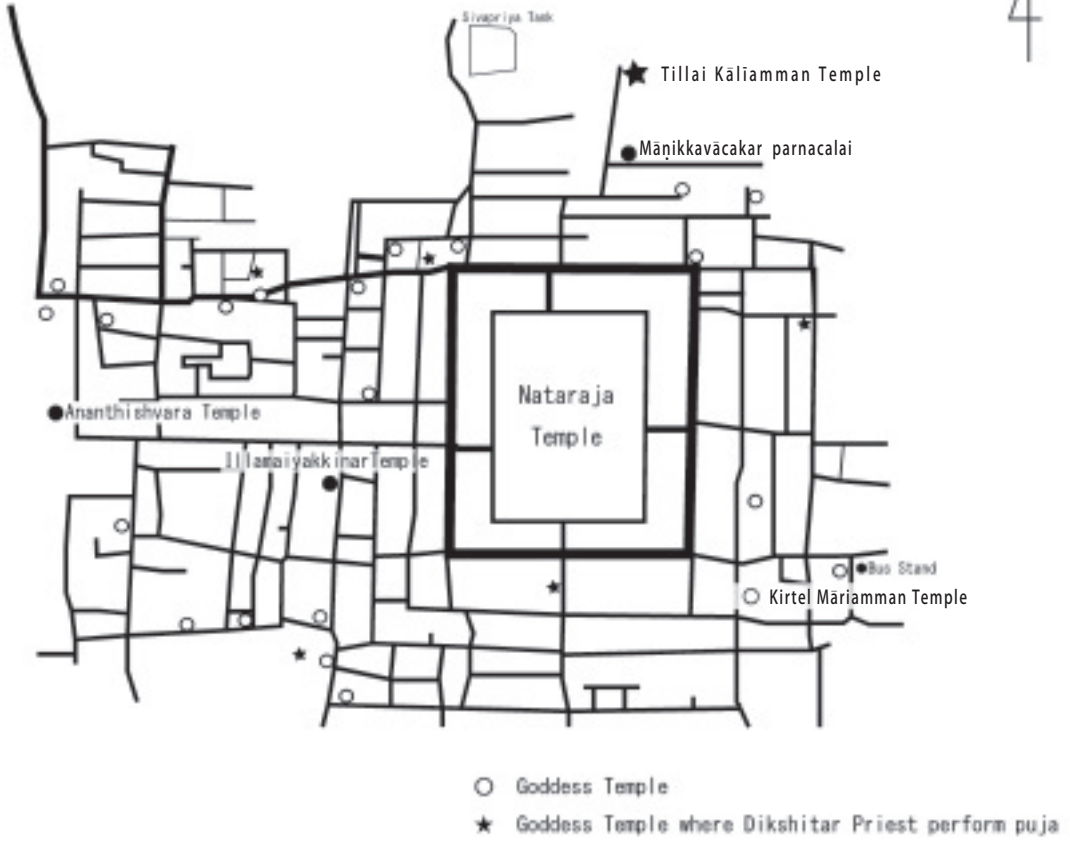


Figure.3 Chidambaram Street Map

man called Puruṣa, found in the Vāstu puruṣa Mandala. The Nataraja statue is situated at the center, his consort, Pārvatī, to his left, and an empty seat called Chidambaram Rahasya to the right, inside the main shrine. In addition, the number of roof tiles (21,600) matches the number of breaths per day for a human being and the number of hooks (72,000) to hold the roof tiles represents the number of *nāḍi*. The number of kumpam, pinnacles on the roof, represent the nine holes of the human body, and the 98 lattices on the wall between the main shrine and the hall of worship represent the number of *tattva* or human functions. Moreover, the five silver steps between them signify the Mūla Mantra, “Na Ma Si Va Ya,” and simultaneously correspond to the five *pīṭha*, the seats of Brahma, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Mahēśvara, and Sadaśiva. Then, the 64 balks indicate the 64 arts such as dance and music, and the 28 pillars the number of sacred texts called Āgama. Since the sacred texts and sūtras are considered symbols of ancient Hindu history and wisdom, in this way, the Cīṭṣabhā can be considered a hall of wisdom. Though these features



Figure 4. Nataraja

were not based on the Vāstu Śāstra, every detail of the architectural structure of Cīṭsabhā creates a sacred space by utilizing numbers of sacred derivation.

(2) Structures inside the temple grounds

Next, I will describe the architecture around the main shrine. The worship hall, called Kanakasabhā, is located directly south of Cīṭsabhā. Besides various daily rituals, Mahā abhiṣeka is performed here six times a year, facing the main deity. Gods like Sūrya (a sun god), Chandra (a moon god), and Ganeśa and Subramaṇya (sons of Śiva) line up around Cīṭsabhā and Kanakasabhā in the first cloister. After passing the Navagraha (the nine planetary gods) and Dēva Sabhā (an enshrined festival deity), there are a kitchen, where various offerings are cooked, to the east, Nṛttasabhā, and a goddess temple for Lakshmi along the second cloister. Mulastana temple, which enshrines Śiva *lingam*, is located to the north and 63 nāyaṇmar, Śiva saint poets, and one of Śiva's incarnations, Dakṣinamūrti, surround it. Then there is Yāgaśālā, a room for performing the fire ritual (*homa*) during the annual festival. In the outer precincts, one can see not only Rājasabhā, a hall which has 1,000 pillars and artificial water tanks called Śivagangā, but also

various Śiva's family gods enshrined in independent temples, such as Śivakamasundarī temple for Śiva's wife and Pāṇḍya Nāyaka temple for Śiva's second son.² However, it is difficult to find a consistent rule for the layout of the precincts, except for the concentric structure of the cloisters focusing on Ciṭṣabhā. As the architectural historian Fergusson [1891] pointed out, it is appropriate that this temple has expanded its scale with the support of kings and authorities since the tenth century.

(3) Town structure

The concentric street formation and plotting are characteristic of the town structure in Chidambaram. The architecture and streets are arranged in a concentric pattern around the main shrine of Nataraja temple. This is a typical structure observed in relatively large Hindu temple towns.³ It embodies the ancient Indian concentric cosmology of Melu mountain. The town development process written about in the Vāstu Śāstra indicates that the habitation area gradually spreads out from the temple. In the case of Chidambaram, the space surrounding the second cloister is located in the main architecture of Nataraja temple, the third cloister is its outer precinct, and the fourth cloister corresponds to a fruit garden between the inside and outside walls. Moreover, the four big streets (*vīti*) around the temple can be considered as the fifth cloister. These four cloisters and the temple precinct are connected by four *cannati*, which are short streets that extend from the four temple entrance towers (*gopuram*).

Next, I will describe the street formation. Though there are some basic patterns for temple towns, Nandyavarta's pattern corresponds to Chidambaram. Nandyavarta means a frog. This structure is also concentric and consists of four hierarchically segregated areas. The innermost area represents *brahma*, *dēva* (gods), and *manusya* (humans), and the outermost *piśāca* (devils). Regarding the residential pattern, the habitat's segregation is based on the social hierarchy and is connected with not just each azimuth's direction but also with the zone structure. The residential zone of the higher caste is located around the temple and the other is located concentrically according to hierarchy. The residential pattern in Chidambaram also follows the above pattern. The area around Nataraja temple and the four streets are allotted for the residences of the temple priests, the Dikshitar. In the next outer zone, Śiva or Vishnu devotees such as the other Brahmin, Chettiyar, Pillai, and Naidu reside separately.⁴

III. Myths

This chapter deals with three myths related to Chidambaram.

(1) Dance competition between Śiva and Kālī

The goddess Kālī's temple was surrounded by a jungle of Tillai trees⁵ before the establishment of Nataraja temple in Chidambaram. Two saints, Patanjali, who had snake legs, and Vyāghravāda, who had a tiger's foot, performed ascetic practices (*tapas*) and prayed to watch Śiva's dance in Tillai forest. Their sincere *tapas* moved Śiva's heart and he came himself to the forest to perform his cosmic dance. Then, the goddess Kālī proposed a dance competition. Śiva and Kālī danced in front of Patanjali, Vyāghravāda, and Vishnu. Their dance techniques were almost equal, so it was difficult to decide a winner. Finally, Śiva defeated Kālī. He raised his right leg high toward the sky (*ūrdhvatāndava*) on Vishnu's advice. Kālī could not perform this pose because of her sense of feminine shame. She admitted defeat. Then she gave her temple to Śiva and left for the boundary of Tillai forest. After bathing in a Śivapriya tank located along the northern boundary and praying for Śiva, the goddess Camundisvari, who has a gentle disposition, left the furious Kālī. According to oral tradition, Kālī sat with anger in the northern tank because she had to leave her own temple. The god Brahmā moderated her anger by chanting four sacred Vēdas. In tribute to this story, the goddess Camundisvari is depicted in a four-faced form called Brahmacamundisvari. Then, she started to perform ascetic practices in the hope of being united with Śiva [Shulman 1980].

Now, I will explain how the above myth is connected with the temple and town layouts. First, the main shrine, Citsabhā, is the stage where Śiva performed the cosmic dance. Nataraja temple is very unique because the main deity is enshrined as a statute of the dancing Śiva, Nataraja. Usually, the Śiva *lingam*, which illustrates the power of Śiva, is enshrined in the center of a Śiva temple. Moreover, Govindaraja Perumal temple was built just to the southwest of the main shrine. Ranganathan, a statue of the god Vishnu sleeping while lying down, is usually enshrined with his head located in the north looking south; but here, he is enshrined with his head located to the south and his face toward Nataraja in the north because he watches Śiva's cosmic dance as a part of the audience. It is uncommon for two temples belonging to different Śiva and Vishnu cults to be built so close together. Then there is the stage called Nritta Sabhā, where the dance contest between Śiva and Kālī was held. It was called *etirambaram* in Tamil, according to the temple epigraphy, because it is located directly to the south of the main shrine. The image of Śiva trampling Kālī with his left foot and raising his right leg high (*ūrdhvatāndava*) is enshrined in the mid-west in the Nrittasabhā.

Outside of the temple's premises, the Śivapriya tank where Kālī took her ritual bath is located on the northern boundary of the town. Tillai Kālī temple was built next to this tank. Kālī, ousted from the center of Tillai after her defeat, was enshrined in the east as Bhadrakālī with her red angry

face facing east. On the other hand, Camundisvari, with a gentle face created by Brahmā's chanting, is enshrined in the center with her face toward the west.

Now I will discuss two saints. Vyākrapāda is said to have built Illamaiyakkinar temple with the big tank and performed a ritual there. It is located one kilometer west of Nataraja temple. Local devotees worshipped this temple and still remain active. The other saint, Patanjali, is enshrined at Ananthishvara temple. It is located on the west boundary of the town. Carvings of these saints can be found on the doors of the worship halls and so on. It is said that Śiva performed a cosmic dance on Pūsam Nakshatra in the month of Tai. The statues of Patanjali, Vyāghrapāda, and another saint called Jaimini are loaded onto palanquins and taken on a procession through the second cloister for nine days. Three silver sticks, which possess the power of the three saints, are used to perform *abhiṣēka* (pouring of libations) and a special ritual on the tenth day.

(2) Hymn of Māṇikkavācakar

Māṇikkavācakar was one of the famous Tamil bhakti⁶ poets in the ninth century. Chidambaram is known as his final residence. He built Śiva lingam on the crow's nest in the forest and sang Tiruvāsakam, a devotional song for Śiva. Śiva heard this rumor and came to listen to his song disguised as a human. Then Śiva vanished into thin air.

There is a temple where Māṇikkavācakar sang devotional songs.⁷ It is located behind Vengaiyan street between Natararaja temple and Tillai Kālī temple. The temple enshrines the *ātomanāda lingam* worshipped by Māṇikkavācakar.⁸

(3) The myth of the goddess Pārvatī

Śiva's wife, Pārvatī, was born on Earth as daughter to the childless Pāṇḍiya king Parvadarājā. She yearned only for Śiva and performed ascetic practices from childhood in the hope of uniting with him. Śiva confirmed her mind was without deceit and married her. One day, Pārvatī was called by her father because he planned to perform a fire ritual (*homa*) in his palace. However, Śiva was not invited. He fought in anger with Pārvatī and commanded her not to go to her father's palace, because her father did not show him respect. She was burned by the fire of Śiva's anger. Then she was born again on the Earth as a daughter of a fisherman and reunited with Śiva.

Pārvatī is independently enshrined in Śivakāmasundarī temple on the premises of Nataraja temple. This temple's name means "goddess who hopes of uniting with Śiva." On the other hand, it is said that Pārvatī, who was reborn as a fisherman's daughter, grew up in a fishing village called Killai, about 10 km northeast of Chidambaram.

I have explained the spatial structure of Chidambaram in terms of a certain myth. The characters

related to Śiva's dance, such as Vishnu, saints, and Kālī, are embodied in the temple and town. Śiva's victory is reinforced by Kālī's location on the border of the town. Moreover, a gender difference can be seen between the male god in the center and the female goddess on the border. Though Śivakāmasundarī temple is located on the premises of Nataraja temple and the same Dikshitar priests perform *pūjā*, its architecture is independent.

IV. Religious practices

This chapter focuses on the religious practices of the Dikshitar, the exclusive priest community of Nataraja temple. It is said that the Dikshitar came to Chidambaram from northern India with Śiva to perform holy rituals. Even now they have the privilege of managing the temple rituals based on their unique traditions and customs. They formed an idiosyncratic community in Chidambaram. In this section, I will deal with three religious practices: first are the daily worship activities and grand festival in the main shrine of Nataraja temple; second is the festival of Śivakāmasundarī temple on the same temple premises; and third is a festival of the goddess temple in the town. While considering these examples, I will clarify the differences in the Dikshitar's attitude toward the gods, especially between Nataraja temple and the other temples.

(1) Worship at Nataraja temple

First, this chapter will explain the daily ceremonies in the main shrine, Citsabhā. Every day *kala pūjā*⁹ is performed six times to pray for the development and peace of the world. Though there are no profound differences among these ceremonies, the most important one is the *Rahasya pūjā*, which is performed at the second ceremony in the evening. It is said that 360,000,000 gods gather from all over the world at this time. The *Rajashya pūjā* aim to express our appreciation and welcome them. Then, Śiva is carried to the bed chamber where the goddess waits for him and they spend a night after the last ceremony [Tanaka 2007]. In the case of the other temples on the premises of Nataraja temple, *pūjā* are performed two times each morning and evening at the Śivakāmasundarī, Pāṇḍinayaka, and Mūlastāna temples, and one time each at the other temples.

Here I will mention the boundary of the worship space around Citsabhā. Entry to Citsabhā is limited to Dikshitar priests. Moreover, the priest who performs *pūjā* for the main deity, Nataraja, has to pay special attention to his purity.¹⁰ The lay devotees are permitted to enter Kanakasabhā under the condition that male devotees remove all clothes from their upper body. Since a menstruating woman is taken as impure, she cannot enter the temple's premises.

(2) Main festival at Nataraja temple

Brahmastova, held in the month of Mārkaṭi (mid-December to mid-January), is the grandest festival at Nataraja temple. It begins with a flag hoisting ceremony, kotiyerram, to Mahā abhiṣeka and Ādrā Darśana¹¹ on the 10th day; it is held in the thousand-pillar hall. Brahmastova is held in the month of Āṇi (mid-June to mid-July). However, the former seems to be the more important festival. This is for the following two reasons. First, a ceremony related to Māṇikkavācakar is performed. The statue of Māṇikkavācakar is carried to the front of the main shrine and a special singer called an ordubar sings 21 ritual songs composed by Māṇikkavācakar at 6 o'clock every evening. The procession of the god statue is held twice a day during Brahmastova. The Māṇikkavācakar statue is taken around four streets every morning while he leads from the front of *panca mūrti*¹² and get his eyes on Śiva. All festival floats and decorations for the god are changed every evening, so the evening procession is more splendid. Second, fishermen from Killai village offer special wedding gifts called *cītanam* to Nataraja on the ninth day during the procession along the north street. Processions along the four streets can be observed during the

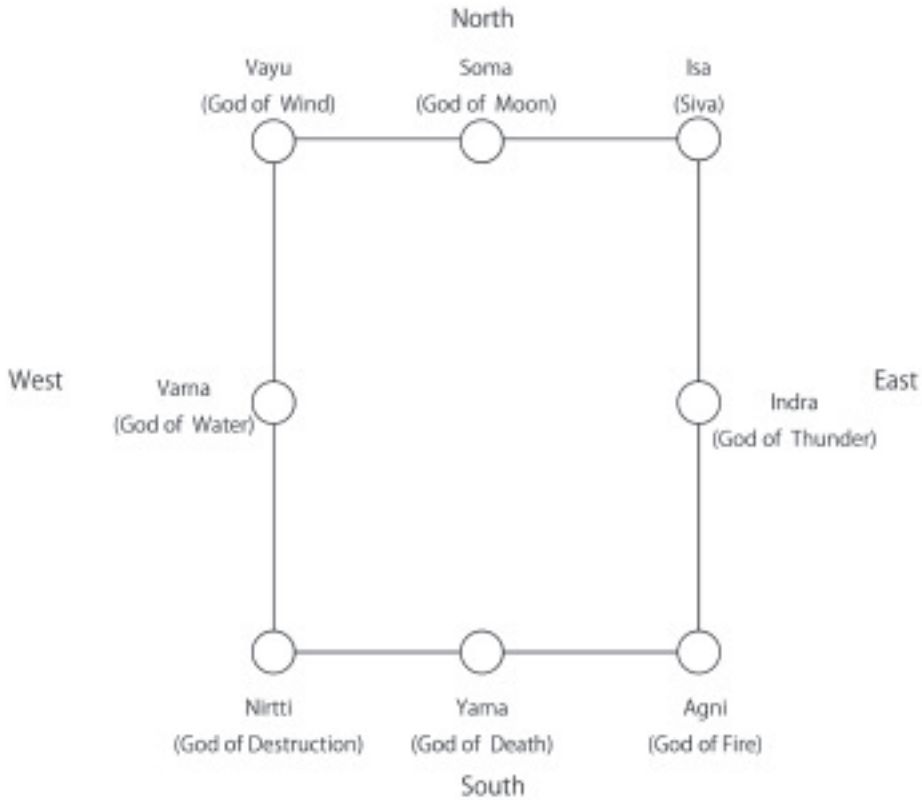


Figure 5. Digmandala

festival of not only Nataraja temple but also smaller goddess temples in the town. (Dedicated devotees walk the four streets with god statues during the festival term. This religious practice is called *pradakshina*, which means going around the temple's sacred area clockwise.) During the procession, the Nataraja statue never leaves the streets. These streets can correspond to the boundary of the above-mentioned *dēva* and *manusya*. On the day prior to Brahmastova, Cavuṇṭi Brahman set fire to a 15-cm-diameter rope knitted with palm leaves and walk around the four streets with it. This is a ritual to purify the passageway of the gods [Tanaka 1998]. Moreover, Digmandala, which is a ritual for the god of the eight directions, is performed on the first day of the festival. It refers to the *vāstu mandala*, in which a god is arranged in a square grid. *Bali*, small rice balls, are offered to the gods who control the main eight directions. A *mandala* is a pattern diagram of the macrocosm where the gods live. To project it onto the town structure as a microcosm where human beings live is to translate a chaotic place into an orderly cosmos for peace in the architecture of a town.

(3) Festival in Śivakāmasundarī temple

Śivakāmasundarī temple is a so-called *Amman kōil*, which means goddess temple. This temple independently celebrates the first menstruation, ascetic practices, and marriage of the goddess in the month of Aippasi (mid-October to mid-November). The structure of the festival is not so different from the above-mentioned Brahmastova. It is thought that the goddess began her first menstrual period on the tenth day, so on this day a beautifully decorated goddess statue has an audience with Śiva in the main shrine. Next, she is carried through the second cloister and the four streets. She is offered many gifts and votive candles by Dikshitar family members and *sundal*, a snack made of beans, is distributed as *prasāda* during her procession [Tanaka 1998]. The wedding ceremony called Tirumāla Utsavam is conducted on the eleventh day. The goddess is taken around the four streets in the morning after abhiṣēka in her temple and takes rest in a *madam* (pilgrim hostel) located in the northeast of the town. It is said that she performs her ascetic practice there. Her procession starts from the *madam* in the evening and meets with Śiva, who comes from the main shrine via the eastern street. They exchange flower garlands in the east *cannati* between the east temple gate and east street. The eastern *caṇṇati* is overwhelmed by many Dikshitar couples. Musicians stand in the center. Dikshitar males line up on Śiva's side and females on the goddess' side to watch the garland exchange ceremony. Then both are carried to the premises of Nataraja temple to ride a swing (*unca*). Festival priests twiddle red balls, *pacca* *pati*, which are made of rice and beans, on the heads of the god and goddess then throw them behind the swing. This ritual prevents evil eyes from attacking the bride and groom during

the wedding.¹³ Then they are carried to a special stage in front of Dēvasabhā. The goddess offers many fruits, vegetables, and clothes to Śiva as wedding gifts. The goddess receives a necklace called a *tāli* as proof of the marriage.

(4) Festival in the town

There are less than 30 goddess temples, which vary in scale, in Chidambaram. Most of them enshrine a local Tamil goddess called Māriamman. The goddess is strongly connected with the local land and territory. This stands in contrast to a male Hindu god like Śiva, who is related to the cosmos and heaven. Therefore, she manages the fertility of the land and plays the role of guardian god of the town. It is clear that many goddess temples are located around the border of the town. These temples usually contain a statue of a snake god (*nākam*) and a big tree or anthill. These kinds of natural object are targets of worship, too [Shulman 1980]. The festival held in Kirutelmāriamman temple, which is the biggest goddess festival in Chidambaram, will be examined next. A flag hoisting ceremony is performed on the first Friday evening of the month of Āti.¹⁴ The festival starts on this day and continues for 13 days. A beautifully decorated god statue is taken in procession on a float around the temple after *pūjā*. The route of the procession differs day by day. A specially decorated float—such as a *tērvataiccan*¹⁵ (*gopuram* shape) on the fifth day, *palak* (vehicle of an ancient king) on the ninth day, and *tēr* (large float) on the tenth day—goes around the four street in the center of the town. The *tēr* stops in the middle of the eastern street on the tenth day and the goddess receives *neivedya*¹⁶ from Nataraja temple and a Dikshitar priest performs *ārati* for Māriamman. The main event of this festival is a fire-walking ritual called



Photo 1. Festival Procession of Kirtelmāriamman in East Car Street

tīmiti. Many devotees circumambulate around the temple to express their faith from the early morning; this is called *pradakshina*. While they participate in this ritual, they forgo non-vegetarian foods, keep their bodies clean, and wear clothes that have been dipped in turmeric water (*mancaḷ tannīr*). Then, ritual sacrifices take place, including *padai* (carrying devotees on a board like a stretcher), *angapradakshina* (circumambulating by rolling on the floor), *alaku* (sticking small pins in the body), *cedal* (hook hanging), and carrying *kāvaṭi* (burdens) and an *ural* (grindstone). Not only human beings but also domestic animals like cows and goats have yellow turmeric powder put on their foreheads and circumambulate with their owners. Many ceramic dolls (*kanikai*) are sold around the temple. These are offered to the goddess in the hope she will cure diseases and injuries. Women dancing in a trancelike state can be seen in the evening. Devotees perform fire-walking while looking at the goddess statue one after another. Devotees pour turmeric water over each other on the last day. In the end, a ritual pot (*kalacam*) is carried to the temple and the festival flag is hauled down. Some devotees dance *pūkuratti*¹⁷ and form a circle on the street late into the night.

I will now discuss the differences between the religious practices of the Dikshitar and those of the lay people. Differentiation, involvement, and superiority are discussed in terms of the relationship between the Dikshitar and the other temples.

First, I will explain the differentiation. Basically, Dikshitars deny any ritual relationship with the other temples because of the differences in the ritual method. They perform rituals following the sacred Vēda, but the priests at other temples follow Āgama, and both are considered to be mutually exclusive. For example, as mentioned in chapter 2, Kālī is connected with the myth of Nataraja temple and the dancing stage constitutes one of the main architectural features of the temple structure. However, the dance contest between Śiva and Kālī is not expressed as a religious ceremony. On the other hand, the saints, as the audience, have the opportunity to be celebrated during the Tai Pūsam festival. The festival of Tillai Kālī temple is held in the month of Vaikāci (mid-May to mid-June), but Śiva and Kālī never meet during it, and it is ritually independent from Nataraja temple's. It is independent even though the Māṇikkavācakar statue used during Brahmastava also belongs to Nataraja temple.

Second, I will explain the Dikshitar's participation alongside other temples. It is to be noted that their participation is limited as long as they can ritually dominate the festivities. There are some goddess temples whose processions wind around the streets. There are goddess temples where the Dikshitar are asked to perform *pūjā*. Nataraja temple devotes offerings to Kirtelmāriamman and *mandakappadi* to show respect to the gods during its festival. Though ritual sacrifices such as hook-hanging and fire-walking can be observed at many goddess temples, the Dikshitar can

rarely be found there. In exceptional cases, one can find some Dikshitar who perform *pradakshina* or fire-walking during the Kirtelmāriamman temple festival. Then, the families of the Dikshitar perform *madi piccai* there before their domestic rituals. This is a pre-ritual to pray for a ritual without any mishaps. They visit this temple when they have the chickenpox. In this way, the superiority of Kirutelmāriamman temple can be seen.

Third, I will consider the ritual superiority of the Dikshitar. Non-Brahman priests manage Kirtelmāriamman temple by heredity. As mentioned above, *mandakappadi*¹⁸ is performed not by the priest of Kirtelmāriamman temple but a Dikshitar priest on the tenth day of the festival. The higher position of the priest is noticeable here.

Moreover, Śivakāmasundarī temple is treated as a special goddess temple. Only the goddess of this temple can be ritually united with Śiva. Also, many Dikshitar weddings are performed on the premises of Śivakāmasundarī temple. *Vilakku pūjā* (worship of the lamp) is performed on the evening of Āti Velli (Friday in the month of Āti) by a Dikshitar's wife to pray for the health and long life of her husband and family.



Photo 2. Villaku Pūjā

V. Discussion

The purpose of this article was to examine the relationships among Hindu gods in terms of the spatial structure, myths, and religious practices in Chidambaram, South India. I tried to understand their relationships in the town's context by focusing on the gaps between them rather than the consistencies. This was because I think such stratified relationships among gods are characteristics of towns.

First, the concentric structure of the temple cloisters and streets embodies the ideal of the ancient architectural text the Vāstu Śāstra. The gods are ordered from the center to the periphery from a transcendental perspective. A marital partner is placed in the temple grounds, while dangerous single goddesses are segregated to the border. The intimacy of kinship among gods [Dumont 1986] actualizes the arrangement, with Nataraja as its starting point in the centripetal spatial structure.

Next, the characters and places connected with these myths materialize as individualized temples. On the other hand, the lack of ritual relationships can be seen by the separate festivals at each temple. Here, a gap between spatial structure and myth appears.

In the relationship among the temples on the premises of Nataraja temple, the largest number of daily rituals is performed at the main shrine, and votive candles for the goddess are certainly delivered after the main shrine, at 8 o'clock. Such a temporal gap shows the obvious hierarchy among the temples, centering on Citsabhā, on the premises. However, ritual performances there are limited to Dikshitar priests and are completed by them.

Regarding the relationship with goddesses, Śivakāmasundarī is identified with Pārvatī, a goddess who married Śiva. However, she has her own independent temple on the premises of Nataraja temple. Kālī, a goddess with a dangerous and offensive character, is located on the northern border. These cases show differentiation based on gender, which is used to control the power of the goddesses and focus it in the proper direction. Lots of Māriamman temples are also located on the periphery and have no ritual ties with the Dikshitar, except for Kirtelmāriamman temple.

A Dikshitar once said "Nataraja is a so-called king among gods in Chidambaram and Mariamman is just a guardian. So, it is no doubt that Dikshitar who serve Nataraja have the right to perform *pūjā* in every temple in Chidambaram¹⁹." From this statement, it is apparent that a hierarchy exists among the gods.

Moreover, there are cases where Dikshitar visit Māriamman temple for worldly prayers, such as prayers to cure diseases and injuries and for success in rituals (*madi piccai*). This differs from the *pūjā* at Nataraja temple. These are transcendent prayers and are performed to show appreciation for gods all over the world. The dual ritual relationship exists because of the difference in worship methods, which shows their tendency to differentiate from the other temples as priests of a key temple in the town. Therefore, the relationship between Nataraja temple and the other temples is hierarchical. Religious practices by the Dikshitar intended to deny such a relationship can be observed. On the other hand, the Dikshitar can worship at Māriamman temple if they have worldly motivations. People belonging to other castes can also

participate in Brahmastova, like fishermen from Killai village. Though not mentioned in this article, the other caste, the Segunda mudaliyar, participate in the Kanta Saṣṭi festival at Vira Subramania temple on the premises of Nataraja temple. However, this participation does not change the superiority of the Dikshitar and Nataraja temple. This is because of the hierarchical division where Nataraja temple deals with the peace of the cosmos and society, while Māriamman temple deals with personal interests.

VI. Conclusion

Based on the Vāstu Śāstra, the temple and Chidambaram itself are ordered from the center to the periphery from a transcendent viewpoint. However, the myth is narrative even if Hindu gods are the main characters. So, its structure takes a chronological order. For example, devotees relive the myth while they exit the northern gate of Nataraja temple and move to Tillai Kālī temple. Though the characters in the myth are spatially arranged in the town, its structure takes a chronological order, rather than a transcendental one. Both the transcendental tendency and the embodiment can be seen in the religious practices. Digmandala and the festival procession can be said to confirm this transcendental order. On the other hand, the rituals, such as the fire-walking observed as part of the Māriamman festival, are embodied practices that indicate direct communication with the gods. This article examined relationships among the Hindu gods in terms of spatial structure, myths, and religious practices in the case of the Hindu temple town Chidambaram. It differs from a village in that a town does not always show consistency among the above three elements. They can be unique features of a Hindu town's society. Superficially simple village gods may appear in more complex relationships if one considers not only religious practices but also myths and spatial structures in a comprehensive way.

(いづか まゆみ・高崎経済大学地域科学研究所特定研究員)

Postscript

This is the revised version of a paper titled 'Kūkankouzou, Shinwa, Shūkyouzissen kara miru Hindu kamigami no kankeisei: Minami-Indo Chidambaram no zirei wo megutte' published in *Ronshu* No.37 (2010: 116-138). This study was partly supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 11 J03564 and Sumitomo Life "MIRAI wo TSUYOKUSURU KOSODATE PROJECT".

Note

¹ This paper is based on field research conducted in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, between February 2007 and January 2008, as well as between July and November 2010. Tamil words written in Roman characters are derived from the *Tamil Lexicon* by Madras University.

- 2 Dikshitar priests perform *pūjā* at all temples enshrined in the precincts except Govindaraja temple and Lakshmi Goddess temple, which are managed by Vaishnavi Brahman.
- 3 Similar patterns can be found in Thirvannamalai, Madurai, and Srirangam in Tamil Nadu.
- 4 In the present town structure, there informally exists a residential compartmentalization according to caste community, especially among the Brahmin caste. However, the town structure is shifting away from religious compartmentalization, and mixed settlements have increased as a result of higher education, improved economic power, and remittance from diaspora family members settled in foreign countries. More details in Iizuka [2015].
- 5 A tillai tree is a mangrove tree.
- 6 Bhakti means devotion to God, piety, and intimacy.
- 7 It is said that he sang 650 Tiruvācakam and 400 Tirukkovaiyār.
- 8 This temple is called Māṇikkavācakar parnacālai, which means Māṇikkavācakar's hut.
- 9 A kala pūjā consists six pūjās, as follows: Kālācanti (6:30 am), Īrāntamkālam (10:30 am), Uccikālam (12:00 am), Cāyaratcai (6:00 pm), and Īrāntamkāla (8:00 pm). Refer to Tanaka [2007] for more details on the altarage offered during each worship period.
- 10 Even a family member of the Dikshitar cannot touch him directly as that would violate his purity and could negatively affect the holy ritual.
- 11 Ādrā Darśana means worshiping Nataraja on the special day called Ādrā nakshatra.
- 12 This indicates five statues of gods: Śiva, Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa, Subramanya, and Candra.
- 13 The same ritual can be seen at a Dikshitar's wedding.
- 14 Evening and night hours after 6 o'clock are considered as the time of a goddess named Sayaraksha.
- 15 *Tērvataiccan* means big size—as wide as a road in Tamil and as tall as a three-story building.
- 16 Food offered to a Hindu deity.
- 17 Both women and men wear revealing clothes and dance in pairs. This dance is called *pūkuratti* after the ethnic clothes of the Kuravar tribe.
- 18 Mandakappadi is performed on the last day of the Tillai Kāli temple festival during the month of Vaikāci on the same eastern street.
- 19 This is the answer to my question about why Dikshitar perform *ārati* in *mandakappadi* for Mariamman.

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