

The Traditional Repertoire of the Tiruttani Temple Dancers

Saskia C. Kersenboom

Introduction

On Sunday 19 January 1986, Smt. P. Raṅganāyakī, a temple dancer or *devadāsī* of the Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī Temple in Tiruttani (see Plate 10) prepared a wedding necklace (*tāli*) for me in her prayer- (or *pūjā*-) room.¹ She tied the necklace, blessed me, and pronounced me the successor of her

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Tiruttani (in Tamilnadu, South India) in 1985–6 with the generous help of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO).

¹The term *devadāsī* means literally 'slave of god'. This translation led early Christian missionaries to compare her to the Christian nun (the 'bride of Christ'). Since the *devadāsī* was allowed to choose a patron after her dedication and to bear children, this comparison proved to be misleading and even harmful to the Hindu tradition. For the *devadāsī* was neither a vestal virgin or ascetic nun, nor their opposite a public woman or sacred harlot. Her function and identity was a third possibility away from the above-mentioned binary choice: she was primarily a ritual specialist whose professional qualification was rooted in her quality of auspiciousness; her powers were believed to bring good luck and to ward off evil. For further information on this and similar traditions in India, see Kersenboom 1987 and forthcoming (a); Marglin 1985. For the etymological derivation of *tāli*, see Burrow and Emeneau 1961:2594. In traditional Hindu homes, the *pūjā*-room contains the domestic altar.

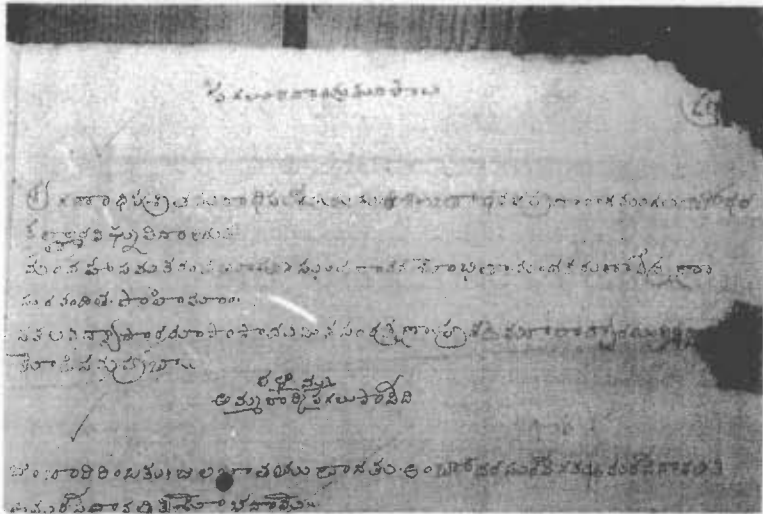


Plate 11: The Subburatnammā manuscript (in Telugu characters). This photograph was taken by Saskia C. Kersenboom in Tiruttani in January 1986.

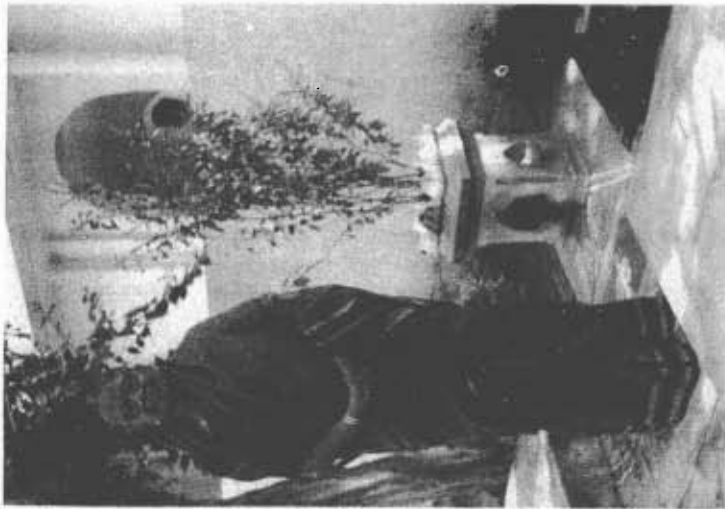


Plate 10: Smt. P. Ranganāyakī stands in the courtyard of her maternal house in Mēlē Tiruttani. This photograph was taken by Saskia C. Kersenboom in January 1986.

family line. She then gave me a manuscript (see Plate 11)² written by her grandmother, Smt. Subburatnammā (1871–1950). Smt. Subburatnammā had served as a *devadāsī* in the same Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī Temple in Tiruttani. In that manuscript, she had noted down her entire repertoire of songs and dances as performed within the context of temple ritual (*arcanā*), rites of passage (*samskāra*), and concert practice.³ In this way, I became the heir to a *devadāsī* family tradition that goes back four generations (see Figure 2).

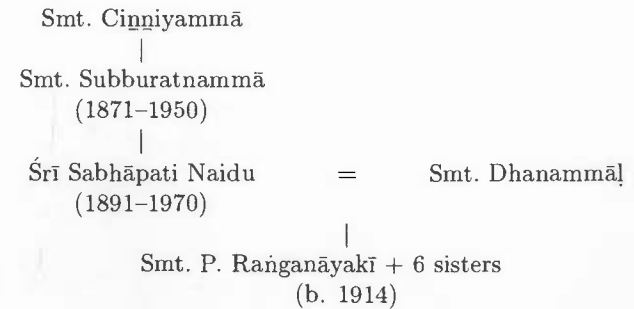


Figure 2: Four generations of *devadāsīs*.

Smt. P. Ranganāyakī was trained by her grandmother, Smt. Subburatnammā. In 1931 she was dedicated to the Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī Temple as a *devadāsī* in the rite called 'branding'.⁴ Her *talī* was tied by her grandmother's sister, Smt. Jayaratnammā. This practice of dedicating women to temples, images and religious objects became illegal with the Devadasi Act of 26 November 1947.⁵

²This manuscript is written in the Telugu script. However, like the terminology of Indian dance in general, it incorporates a complex mixture of languages including Sanskrit, Tamil, Tamilized Sanskrit, Telugu and Urdu. For the purposes of this volume, Indian-language terms are given in Sanskrit (or Tamilized Sanskrit) unless otherwise indicated. Non-Sanskrit terms are identified at their first occurrence.

³I hope to publish this manuscript shortly (see Kersenboom, forthcoming (b)). All references to the songs and dances of the *devadāsī* repertoire are taken from this text unless otherwise indicated. All translations (both from interviews and from this manuscript) are my own. For further information regarding concert practice, see note 11.

⁴For further details of this rite of dedication (*muttirai*, literally 'branding', 'stamp' or 'mark'; Tamil), see below.

⁵The full text of the Act may be found in the Government of Madras Archives (26 January 1948). See also Kersenboom-Story (1987:xxi, note 15).

The Line of Succession

What did it mean, in traditional terms, to succeed in a line (*pāramparā*) of generations of *devadāsīs*? Who were the *devadāsīs*? What was their function within the accepted practice of Hinduism and its meaning? How was succession validated?

The *Devadāsī* Community

The term *devadāsī* is frequently misunderstood. The misuse of the term and the social stigma that became attached to it have caused many misrepresentations. One of the most basic errors is the reference to a *devadāsī* and her family as members of the 'devadāsī caste'. According to several *devadāsī* informants, there is a *devadāsī* 'life' (*vṛtti*), and a *devadāsī* 'order or traditional right' (*murai*, Tamil), but not a *devadāsī* 'caste' (*jāti*). It seems probable that the right to become a *devadāsī* was hereditary, although not exclusively so since girls could be adopted and made eligible for the position. However, whether this right was exercised or not depended on many factors: the explicit wish of her parents, the behaviour of the girl in question, and the consent of the relevant authorities. There was a case in Tiruttani, for example, of a girl who was refused admission to the *devadāsī* initiation ceremony in spite of the fact that she was well trained in song and dance, beautiful to look at, and of a good personal reputation. The authorities justified their decision on the grounds that her mother had gone astray before obtaining admission to the initiation ceremony. Her family was therefore no longer considered respectable and hence was unfit to offer a daughter to the temple. The unfortunate girl finally obtained permission to be dedicated to a shrine in Kancipuram where the rules of ritual purity were less strictly observed.

The Function of the *Devadāsī*

In Tiruttani, the right to be dedicated to the temple was attributed to nine families. The members of these nine families were given nine houses in Mēlē ('Upper') Tiruttani, a small settlement behind the temple inhabited by the families of *devadāsīs* and temple priests (*gurukkal*, Tamil). The nine houses corresponded to a cycle of nine years. Each year, one house was responsible for the most characteristic task of the *devadāsī*: the obligatory performance of waving the pot-lamp (*kumbhādīpa*) in front of the god (*kumbhārati*). This task rotated among the nine families. Smt. P. Raṅganāyākī belonged to the fifth house and thus to the fifth year in the cycle of attendance. During a year of service, the house had to be kept in a ritually pure state (*maṭi*, Telugu). Any individuals who were ritually

unclean had to stay elsewhere during their period of impurity.⁶ These restrictions notwithstanding, the house responsible had to provide a *devadāsī* for the daily performance of waving the pot-lamp.

According to data gathered among *devadāsīs* during the period 1977–83, the task of waving the pot-lamp in front of a god, goddess, king or patron, was the most characteristic feature of the position of *devadāsī*. Although European sources (both travelogues and missionary reports) usually depict *devadāsīs* as 'sacred courtesans' who excel in the various performing arts (including the art of love), none of these artistic skills received much attention in the last decades of this age-old tradition (Kersenboom-Story 1987:207). Few *devadāsīs* who had served in temples before 1947 could remember more than a handful of songs. However, they all remembered clearly the task of waving the pot-lamp during daily rituals and at the conclusion of a procession. For them, being a *devadāsī* was synonymous with waving the pot-lamp. Why?

In the ritual action of waving the pot-lamp, we are confronted with a complex weave of symbols. The aim of the action is to ward off the jealous 'evil eye' (*dṛṣṭi*, literally 'glance') that may have been cast on the object of worship. The method is a triple clock-wise rotation, concluded by a sweeping gesture from the head of the image to its foot. These movements are performed with implements that are considered to be powerful antidotes to the vicious energy of the evil eye. First and foremost among them are lamps (*dīpa*), of which the pot-lamp is held to be the most effective. In addition, the same movements may be performed with plates (*tattu*, Tamil) containing substances believed to absorb or counteract evil influences; substances such as solutions of charcoal powder, red *kumkum* powder, yellow turmeric powder,⁷ or lemons.

This rite should be understood as arising from a notion of the divine as eternally ambivalent and omnipresent, one that expresses itself incessantly in the dynamic tension of creation and destruction, of balance and imbalance, of the auspicious and the inauspicious. In the earliest period of indigenous South Indian literature available to us, we find this divine force referred to as *aṇṇiku* (Tamil), a term that suggests an awe-inspiring, fear-provoking and oppressive power.⁸ In later times, we are confronted with complementary oppositions such as 'auspicious-inauspicious',

⁶Saliva and blood are highly polluting substances in the ritual sphere. Birth, menstruation and death should therefore be isolated from ritually clean places, objects and persons.

⁷*Kumkum* powder (*kumkuma*; *Crocus sativus*) is worn by women whose husbands are alive. Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*; *maṇḍal*, Tamil) is used for protective, auspicious purposes.

⁸For an elaborate discussion of the meaning and importance of this term, see Hart 1973; Zvebil 1979.

'heating-cooling', 'pure-impure', augmentation and merit (*puṇya*) versus the jealous evil eye that consumes everything. The ambivalent tension of the divine has evidently been felt throughout human history; although an exact pattern of dynamic change could not be constructed, the diagnostic features of the two basic forces were distinguished and the attempt was made to regulate their cause and effect for the benefit (*śubham*) of mankind.

The opposition in question is that between the dynamic, creative principle associated with the goddess, and the more abstract, quiescent principle associated with the god. The dynamic principle can be both destructive and protective. An excess of dynamism destroys; properly harmonized, however, it creates, nourishes and protects. A method was devised for controlling this dynamism from within: the creation of a female ritualist whose power (*śakti*) could be ritually merged with that of the great goddess (*Śakti*). As we shall see, the *devadāsī* was such a ritualist. Her waving of the pot-lamp was doubly effective: both her person and the implement of the pot (*kumbha*) were synonymous with the goddess. Only in this way could the removal of the evil eye be ensured.

The Validation of the *Devadāsī*

The transformation of an ordinary girl into a *devadāsī* is marked by three important rites:

1. Initiation (*gajjai pūjā*, literally 'worship of the ankle-bells' worn by the dancer; *gajjai*, Tamil). This rite concludes the dance training (see Kersenboom-Story 1987:185-6).
2. Marriage (*kalyāṇam*). With this rite, the female power (*śakti*) of the *devadāsī* becomes merged with the god's *śakti*, that is, with the goddess (*Śakti*). In the case of Smt. P. Raṅganāyaki, this meant a full-scale wedding ceremony with the spear (*vēl*, Tamil) representing the *śakti* of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī. Consequently, her marriage partner is not a part of the god standing for the whole but a manifestation of the goddess (see Kersenboom-Story 1987:186).
3. Dedication (literally 'branding'; see note 4). This ceremony concludes the first concert given by the girl before the main deity in the temple. On this occasion, she is branded with the sign of the trident (*triśūla*) on her right upper arm. This painful procedure was considered both an ordeal and an ultimate test of the girl's purity: if the application were granted to an undeserving girl, then she would suffer severely from a wound that refused to heal. After the branding, the newly ordained *devadāsī* performs the ritual waving of the pot-lamp for the first time for her husband and patron, Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī (see Kersenboom-Story 1987:188-9).

After this triple validation, the girl is considered 'an ever-auspicious woman' (*nityasumaṅgalī*). This term needs further elucidation.

The traditional view holds that all women, by their very nature, share in the power of the goddess. In the imagined continuum of auspiciousness (*maṅgalam*), individual women are placed at one end of the scale or the other according to their status. At the top is the married woman whose husband is alive and who has borne several children: she is called 'auspicious woman' (*sumaṅgalī*). At the bottom of the scale is the widow for she is considered highly inauspicious. In ritual terms, however, the *devadāsī* exceeds even the *sumaṅgalī* in auspiciousness. Two reasons are given for this. First, her individual female powers are merged with those of the goddess. Second, she is dedicated to a divine husband who can never die. Since she can never lose her (double) auspiciousness, she is called 'ever auspicious' (*nityasumaṅgalī*).

Her Tradition

The quality of 'eternal auspiciousness' that characterizes the *devadāsī* is the key to both her tradition (*saṃpradāya*) and all that that implies: ritual objects, implements, jewellery, costumes, make-up, ritual actions, and the ritual repertoire of songs and dances.

As indicated above, human beings sought to construct a pattern of dynamic change as well as to manipulate it for their own benefit. This was attempted in various ways: by regular communication with the divine through traditional (āgamic) temple worship; by occasional propitiation, as in village sacrifices; by giving nourishment to the living proofs of prosperity and vitality in the form of service to the king; and by the ubiquitous preventive, propitiating and purifying measures taken at every step in daily life as well as during important events. The traditional expertise of the *devadāsī* covered all these spheres of divine influence: the personal, especially during rites of passage; the political, through attendance on the king; and the purely ritual, in the performance of temple worship. In fact, none of these spheres of contact with the divine can be called exclusively social, political or ritual. For the element of manipulating and influencing the divine energies that they all share is strongly reminiscent of the activities of the medieval alchemist. Song and dance are primarily instruments to this end; the aesthetic quality and effect comes second.

Before giving examples of compositions that operate in these three different spheres – the personal, the political and the ritual – it is useful to analyse the character of ritual attendance. Bearing in mind the risks of oversimplification, I should like to suggest two basic categories (see Figure 3).

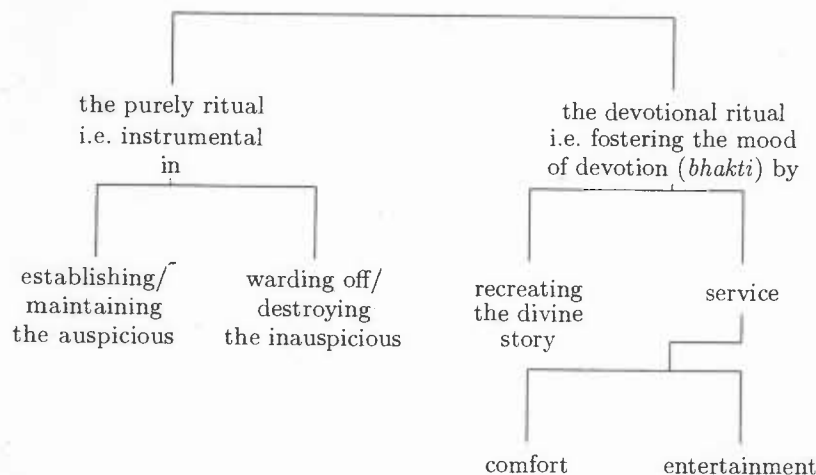


Figure 3: The character of the ritual attendance of the *devadāsī*.

The traditional repertoire of the *devadāsīs* provides songs and dances for both categories and for their subdivisions. The richest offering is to be found in the temple repertoire which includes compositions to serve all these aims. The king's court requires more artistic sophistication and entertainment than is usually found in the temple. In the private, social sphere, however, the emphasis is on the removal of, or protection against, the evil eye.

The Repertoire for Temple Ritual

As indicated above, it is in the temple that the *devadāsī* repertoire is displayed in its full scope. Both the daily ritual and the festival ritual feature a variety of compositions.

The daily ritual

In the days when Smt. P. Raṅganāyakī was an active *devadāsī*, regular attendance began at 11.00 a.m. with the singing of praise-poems (*stotra*) for several gods and goddesses residing in the temple grounds. An alternative name for these compositions is *śobhana* (*cōpanam*, Tamil), meaning 'happy event, auspiciousness, congratulations'. These fall into the category

of ritual songs intended to establish or maintain the auspicious state of the divine.

The next ritual attendance (*pūjā*) which required *devadāsī* participation was that of twilight worship held at sunset.⁹ The 'junction' of 6.00 p.m. is considered extremely dangerous and so, as day slips away into night, the gods need all the support and attendance mankind can give. The ritual waving of the pot-lamp by a *devadāsī* was considered the most effective method of warding off an inauspicious state of the divine. During the year in which the fifth house was responsible for the waving of the pot-lamp, Smt. P. Raṅganāyakī would observe the rules of ritual purity very strictly. At such times, she would wear the long nine-yard sari fastened in the brahmin style (*maṭisār*, Telugu). She would arrange her hair in a loose knot, put an auspicious round red powder mark (*kumkumapottu*, Tamil; see note 7) and sacred ash (*vibhūti*) on her forehead, and wear a necklace of black beads. She would then embark on the ritual programme for the *pūjā*, given here in full (for the locations indicated, see Figure 4):

1. A composite offering of song, dance, (imaginary) flowers, and the waving of the pot-lamp at the main shrine of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī (*svāmīpuṣpāñjali*; locus 10):

- pure dance (*nṛtta*);
- a verse accompanying the offering of imaginary flowers (*puṣpāñjaliśloka*);
- danced mime (*nṛtta*, *nṛtya*);
- an auspicious verse (*maṅgalam*);
- a laudatory verse (*śobhana*);
- cooling the image by waving a fly-whisk (*cāmara*);
- an auspicious verse acclaiming victory (*svāmījayamaṅgalam*), accompanied by the waving of lamps on plates (*tattudīpa*, Tamil and Sanskrit).

2. A verse accompanying the offering of imaginary flowers and an auspicious verse for Śrī Āpatsakāya Vināyaka (*vināyakapuṣpāñjali*; locus 4).
3. As 2, for Śrī Devasenā (*devasenāpuṣpāñjali*; locus 2).
4. As 2, for Śrī Vallīyammā (*vallīyammāpuṣpāñjali*; locus 3).

⁹This ritual of twilight (*sandhi*, literally, 'junction') worship was termed *cāyaraṭcai* ('protection against the decrease of brightness'; Tamil) *pūjā*.

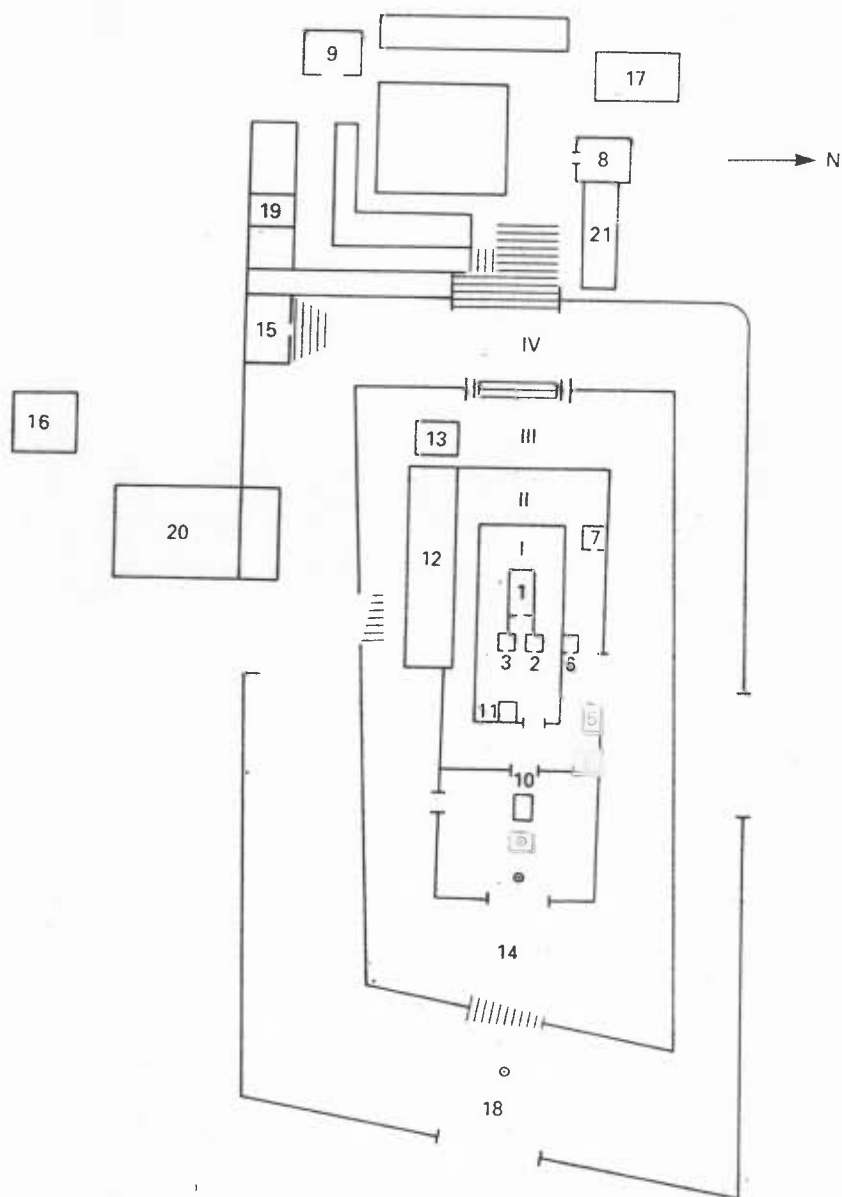


Figure 4: Plan of the Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī Temple, Tiruttani.

1. The main shrine (*mūlavar*, Tamil) of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī
2. The shrine of Śrī Devasenā
3. The shrine of Śrī Valliyammā
4. The shrine of Śrī Āpatsakāya Vināyaka
5. The festival image of Śrī Ṣaṇmukhasvāmī
6. The large processional image of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī
7. The small processional image of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī
8. The shrine of Śrī Brahmanavidhi Vināyaka
9. The shrine of Śrī Sarasvatī
10. The main shrine of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī (*puṣpāñjalimaṇḍapa*)
11. The shrine where the bedroom images are kept (see note 10)
12. The spring pavilion (*vasantamaṇḍapa*)
13. The pavilion in which the instruments are sounded for the entertainment of the god (*sarvavādyamaṇḍapa*)
14. The pavilion by the main gates (*mahādvāramaṇḍapa*)
15. The pavilion of the 'mounts' or 'vehicles' of the deities (*vāhana-maṇḍapa*)
16. Śrī Valliyammā's wedding pavilion
17. Śrī Devasenā's wedding pavilion
18. The pedestal for camphor (*karpūra akāṇṭam*)
19. The houses of the *devadāsīs* (no. V)
20. The king's palace
21. The houses of the priests
- I. The first or inner circuit
- II. The second circuit
- III. The third circuit
- IV. The fourth circuit

Key to Figure 4.

5. An auspicious verse for the small processional image of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī (*cinṇotsavamūrtimaṅgalam*; locus 7).
6. An auspicious verse for the large processional image of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī (*peddotsavamūrtimaṅgalam*; locus 6).

This concludes the sunset ritual.

At 9.00 p.m., the rituals of the early evening hour (*ardhayāma*) and the daily procession (*nityotsava*) were performed. *Devadāsīs* played their part in the daily procession of a small image of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī by accompanying the processional group and singing devotional songs (such as 'daily songs', *praharīlu*; Telugu), or simple songs about the Lord in order to foster the mood of devotion.

Around 10.00 p.m., the divine pair would be seated on a swing in the bedroom. Here the *devadāsīs* took part in the 'service in the bedroom' (*paḷḷiyarai sevā*; Tamil, Sanskrit) by singing lullabies (*lāli*; Tamil etc.) and swing songs (*ūṇcal*; Tamil), while the priests offered a tasty evening snack and rocked god and goddess to sleep.¹⁰ The *devadāsīs* concluded their attendance for the day by singing an auspicious song to ensure that all was safe until the following morning.

The festival ritual

We have seen how the categories of establishing auspiciousness (*maṅgalam*), warding off inauspiciousness (*amaṅgalam*, *dr̥ṣṭi*), creating the mood of devotion (*bhakti*), and offering service (*sevā*) in the form of comfort (see Figure 3) were expressed in the repertoire of songs and dances performed by the *devadāsīs* in the course of the daily ritual. The categories of 'recreating the divine story' and 'entertainment' seem to be more pronounced in the programmes of festival worship.

The most characteristic feature of festival worship is the procession (*pradakṣiṇa*) of the god, the goddess, or both. Such a procession is part of a larger unit called a 'festival' (*utsava*). A festival may last as little as a few hours or as long as twenty-seven days. The power of the god or goddess,

¹⁰The god Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī, alias Murugan, is believed to have married two wives: Śrī Devasenā and Śrī Valliyammā. In South India, Śrī Valliyammā is the clear favourite: her festivals are celebrated with much more pomp and gusto than those of her co-wife. However, the existence of two wives causes problems. In order to avoid confusion regarding whose turn it is to spend the night with the lord, the priests in Tiruttaṇi have arrived at a practical solution. The bedroom images (*mūrti*) are kept in a little shrine in the inner or first circuit (*prakāra*) behind the inner sanctum (or 'womb house', *garbhagrha*; see Figure 4). The two ladies flanking the god are each given a wooden rod. The goddess who can look forward to the company of her lord is allowed to stand free while the other is barred by both rods. Each night this arrangement is adjusted by the priests.

the local version of the divine story, and the time of the year are important criteria for determining the length, elaboration, mood and sophistication of a festival.

Examples of the story-telling part of a festival are the small dance-drama (*Kāmaṇ kūtṭu*, Tamil), and the quarrel-dialogue between the god and his first wife, both found in the manuscript of Smt. Subburatnammā and taught to me by Smt. P. Raṅganāyākī.

In the dance drama, performed on the sixth day of the great festival (*Brahmotsava*) held in January or February (*māci mācam*, Tamil), Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī is depicted as Kāmaṇ, the god of love. First, a *devadāsī* appears dressed as Kāmaṇ, complete with bow and arrows (here in the shape of a fruit). Naturally, the god of love tries to lure young girls into his game; so, after an introductory verse announcing the arrival of some beautiful girls (also played by *devadāsīs*), a dialogue ensues between the god and the girls. The latter complain about his treacherous behaviour while Kāmaṇ expresses his longing for love. This dialogue is conveyed in mime to the accompaniment of a (Telugu) text sung by the *devadāsīs*. The merriment increases with the throwing of turmeric water.

The ninth day of the same festival featured the wedding of Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī and his second wife, Śrī Valliyammā. On that day, the *devadāsīs* were busy from morning till evening recreating the divine love story: the abduction of Śrī Valli (cf. Zvelebil 1977, 1980), the wedding, the quarrel between the god and his first wife, Śrī Devasenā, and their reconciliation. Serving as bridesmaids, the *devadāsīs* carried the wedding presents and sang swing songs and wedding songs (*nalaṇiku*, Tamil) in the wedding pavilion (*kalyāṇamaṇḍapa*). To conclude the festivities, they performed a grand, purificatory waving of lamps (including the powerful pot-lamp) in order to absorb and counteract the cumulative effects of the evil eye accrued during the long day.

An interesting moment during this festival day occurs around 6.00 p.m. when Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī returns with his new wife to the temple only to find the door of the shrine of Śrī Devasenā locked. The goddess is furious with her husband for his unpardonable behaviour. She seems determined not to see him again. Lord Subrahmaṇyasvāmī begs her understanding and forgiveness. Their spicy quarrel was impersonated by *devadāsīs* singing along the following lines (in Telugu):

S: 'Quickly open the door, dear Devasenā!'

D: 'Go away! Do not come here publicly!'

S: 'I have come to your street full of love, Devasenā!'

D: 'Tender love and sweet repentance do not affect me! Go! Go!'

S: 'Are you without softness? Please, Devasenā! Please!'

D: 'Go! Go away! Don't speak fond words!'

S: 'I am your beloved Lord of Tiruttani, dear Devasenā!'

D: 'Let us be happy! Come, O Ceṅkalvarāya!'

On these words, the door is opened from the inside and peace is restored.

Apart from these devotional compositions portraying episodes from the god's life, entertainment was offered on specific occasions, such as when the god was seated in a pavilion and treated like a king, or when he was placed on a raft (*plava*) and floated on the temple tank. Such entertainment might consist of a full-scale dance concert,¹¹ the sounding of all musical instruments and the performance of several types of vocal compositions (*sarvavādyam*), or the performance of group dance compositions to popular songs,¹² with or without sticks.

In addition to devotional songs and dances characterized by their topical and entertainment value, the *devadāsīs* also sang purely ritual songs such as 'eight-verse' praise poems (*aṣṭakam*), heralding songs (*cūrṇikai*, *eccarikai*; Tamil), and songs determined by the hour of the day (*praharīlu*).

The Repertoire for the Royal Court

In many temples, there was a direct link between attendance on the deity and attendance on the king. In Tiruttani, the palace of the king¹³ borders on temple territory. In the days when Smt. P. Raṅganāyākī was a *devadāsī*, however, attendance on the king was limited to a few occasions each year: for example, during the Brahmotsava or great festival (see above); and during the festival for the goddess which lasts nine nights (Navarātrī) and on the concluding tenth day of which the goddess reveals her victorious form (Vijayadaśamī). On both occasions, *devadāsīs* used to perform a full-scale dance concert (see note 11). On the fifth day of the Brahmotsava, the concert was performed in the fourth circuit in front of the palace (Iocus 20). On Vijayadaśamī, a concert was performed in the palace of the king

¹¹The regular suite for a classical dance concert (*catir kaccēri*, Urdu) consisted of: introductory tuning and prayer (*mēlaprāpti*, Tamil and Sanskrit); a warming-up dance (*alārīppū*, from the *alāri* flower, Tamil); an abstract dance composition intended as a greeting; choreographic dance patterns based on musical notes (*jatisvaram*); a mythological anecdote in mime (*śabdham*, 'word'); a composition combining intricate abstract choreographies and mimetic interpretation of a text (*varṇam*, 'colour'); a love-song rendered in mime (*padam*, akin to the courtly love-song or *chanson d'amour* of medieval France); an erotic song rendered in mime (*jāvaḷi*, Telugu); and a grand finale in abstract dance choreography (*tillāna*, 'ending').

¹²Many of these dance compositions (*kōlāṭṭam*, 'stick dance'; Tamil) are set to Western tunes which must have been popular at the turn of the century.

¹³The *rājā* of Karvēṭinagar in Chittoor district belonging to the Śāluva dynasty.

and accompanied by the purificatory 'waving of lamps' (*dīpārāghanā*) on a grand scale. In other places such as Thanjavur where the court culture had received generous patronage and artistic attention, this creative side of the traditional *devadāsī* repertoire was developed to a far greater degree of sophistication. After 1947, this concert suite was further chiselled into what has become known as Bharatanāṭyam, a term previously unknown.

The Repertoire for Rites of Passage

Even in 1986, when I was last in Tiruttani, people came to the house of Smt. P. Raṅganāyākī to ask her to remove the evil eye from a family member who was either temporarily confused or suffering from headaches. When I returned from a long walk through the village, she thought it best to remove the evil eye from me as well. This demonstrates that not all trust and belief in, nor respect for, the power of the *devadāsī* have vanished.

In the days of her grandmother, Smt. Subburatnammā, *devadāsīs* were invited to small and grand social functions for reasons of both prestige and safety. The smaller functions are exemplified by the rites of passage (*saṃskāra*), such as the name-giving ceremony or the ear- and nose-piercing ceremonies. On these occasions, *devadāsīs* sang auspicious songs and performed the ritual waving of lamps. An example of a grand social function is the wedding ceremony. In her day, Smt. Subburatnammā used to prepare the wedding necklace for the bride, decorate her, and prepare the flower garlands and the wedding pavilion. Accompanied by other *devadāsīs*, she would sing auspicious and laudatory compositions as well as typical wedding songs, boat songs, and the swing songs. In addition to these more ritual songs, she composed many Tamil joke songs (*contakavittam*) such as 'We have come from Bengal' (*vaṅkālam pōyivārōm*), 'Tippu Sahib from Triplicane' (*tiruvallikeṇi tippusayāpu*), and songs that mock the bridegroom such as 'The brother-in-law from Thanjavur taluk' (*taṅcāvūr tālukkā attān*):

You spoke about the artistic brother-in-law from Thanjavur taluk, but when one comes to see for oneself in Thanjavur, he only beats a little drum, tra-la! You spoke about the brother-in-law who is a policeman in Pondicherry, but once you get there, he is eating parched rice that he has picked up from the street, tra-la! You spoke about the brother-in-law in Mayuram who is a manager, but looking for oneself one discovers that he grazes cattle, tra-la!

In addition to such joke songs, marriages gave rise to rather obscene songs such as the request for a 'cooked' or 'ripe' woman (*camīṇca poṇṇu*, Tamil) in a rice-pounding song. Smt. P. Raṅganāyākī beamed with delight as she

recalled her grandmother's compositions. All this laughter and obscenity served not only to create a jovial mood but also to ensure the exclusion of the ever-lurking evil eye, jealous of any happiness. This corresponds with the text which one can find over the entrance of Tamil houses even today: 'Looking at me, laugh!' (*ennai pārkka ciri*). To laugh means to break the tension of evil, jealous energy.

The ever-auspicious nature of the *devadāsī* made her a welcome guest at marriages and at other important social functions which exposed the family members to an excess of public attention. Some very aristocratic and rich households even employed their own *devadāsī*. Such a *devadāsī* was called a *māṇikkam* (Tamil; usually translated 'ritual servant'); in this role, she took care both of the auspicious state of the *pūjā*-room (by singing songs and decorating the altar and its gods) and of the inauspicious evil eye that was believed to attach itself to family members returning home from outside. Nowadays, many of these functions have been taken over by secular family women (see *sumāṅgali*, above); however, always with a slight feeling of danger.

The Character of the Repertoire

The repertoire of the *devadāsīs* as it was practised in the temples and during rites of passage has not been witnessed publicly since 1947, the year in which the Devadasi Act was passed. Even before the legal ban on *devadāsī* ritual song, dance and action, the tradition had dwindled into a few, almost symbolic steps, gestures and tunes. Among the remnants of the traditional temple and social repertoire of *devadāsīs* in general, the Tiruttani example stands out as exceptionally rich and, among the *devadāsīs* of the Tiruttani Śrī Subrahmaṇyasvāmī Temple in particular, the heritage of Smt. P. Raṅganāyaki is unique.

However, in all the samples of ritual devotional repertoire once performed by *devadāsīs* in Tamilnadu it is clear that their art was marked by a minimal attempt to achieve aesthetic effect. The songs and dances are extremely straightforward and simple. It is clear that they were considered a ritual task, one which had to be performed for the sake of its occurrence and not for the sake of its artistic form. The ritual songs are set to a rhythm and tempo that sometimes resemble a military quick march. The dances make use of the idiom of the concert repertoire known today as Bharatanāṭyam (*catir*; see note 11) but without either the rhythmical intricacies of its choreographic phrases or the sweep and flourish of the courtly tradition from which the modern dance form was derived.

The *devadāsīs* of Tiruttani performed these dances and songs without self-conscious pride. Their attitude towards the repertoire remains respect-

ful but matter-of-fact. In the words of Smt. P. Raṅganāyaki:

What is there? ... It is all gone; it will never come back.... Nowadays, anyone can do anything on the stage or in the film.... We were God-fearing. After we got our status as *devadāsīs*, we could decide for ourselves. If some of us were deserted by men, we still had our profession which afforded us a living.... We had our own discipline!