

One Who Stays for Good: Perantallu in Northern Coastal Andhra¹

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study undertaken in Northern Coastal region of Andhra Pradesh, of the ritual worship of Goddess 'Perantallu'. Through three case studies and interviews, it constructs an analytical profile of the goddess and the religious tradition associated with it. In doing so it highlights the religious, social imagination of the people.

"Don't worry about all those other Ammavarus. What do we have to do with them (*vaalla godava manak' enduku*)? They are there, Mutyalamma, Bangaramma. One day in the week they bring her, another day they sent her off (*oka vaaram testaru oka varam anupestaru*). They come and go. She is not like that. She is always here. (*ivida eppuduu untadi*). *Perantalu* means *ala undi poyedi*:one who stays for good".

The speaker is Rambha Mutyam, a Velama farmer from Jami, a village in Vizianagaram District in northern coastal Andhra. The discussion took place in the portico of the temple of Ellaramma. The temple sits, quite isolated, in the middle of green paddy fields. It is very hot: close to 40 degrees; humid, too. Powerful hot winds blow through the fields, as happens in mid-May, the height of the hot season in south India. In front of the temple stands an enormous fig tree (*ravi cettu, asvattha*). Were this a usual village goddess temple, we might think the tree was in place of Potu Raju, the younger brother of the goddess, usually present in the form of a wooden spike. But this is not a "usual" *grama-devata* shrine, as Mutyam makes clear in his statement.

People walking through the fields stop to rest in the shade of this great tree. At the same time, they climb the few steps to pay homage to

Ellaramma. Goats graze in large clusters outside the shrine. The place is totally quiet, unlike other Indian villages. The isolation is not incidental. People are not very eager to walk through such exposed spaces, for fear of ghosts and demons. Such beings may lurk in the vicinity of this goddess, like hunters waiting for prey. Children, women, and old people are most vulnerable.

The goddess sits, a molded cement image nearly 10 feet tall, painted in bright colors, behind barred doors. She has huge, penetrating eyes and carries a sword— an impressive presence—not in any way frightening. This goddess, a Perantalu, is, or was, a young (*bala*) Brahmin girl. For some unspecified reason she wanted to enter the fire-pit (*gundam* The young girl (*cinna pilla*) decided to go into the *gundam*, but a place, or space, *jaagaa*, was a problem. Someone had to donate the land.). In those days, during the British period, the village—largely a Brahmin settlement²-- was controlled by a Brahmin and a Velama Nayudu. Above them was the Vizianagaram king. The Brahmin and the Nayudu collected revenue for the king. People, *i.e.* her family, came and asked for a *jaagaa* This land was finally given by the Velama Nayudu. Both the Nayudu and the Brahmin agreed to give her the *gundam* and build a temple for her. They made her a bed—*panpu cesaru*. After she was burnt, they built this temple there. Later, the committee felt there should be a *yatra* too, and a big market as well, with shops, *dukanalu*. Gradually this goddess became popular.³

Mutyam grows vegetable crops on the lands around the temple, and the temple sits on his land. During the annual festival, when many thousands come, he has to clear the fields completely to make room for them. This is important: In most Hindu temples, people come, worship, and leave. They may sit for a minute or two, but soon they go away. But at the temple of a Perantalu or a village goddess, there is a habit of lingering in the place, at least during the festival—of staying with her, as she stays with us.

As Mutyam says, this continuous, reliable, enduring presence is the hallmark of the Perantalu. . Something about the process of deification—through a fiery death—seems to generate this particular quality of being, or staying. In the case of Ellaramma, we know nothing of the precipitating factors—why an unmarried girl suddenly wished to undergo this transformation. What is clear, however, is that once she reached the other side of death, so to speak, she was replete with the power to care for her people. There are no gaps or breaks in her mode of being with her family or with the village community as a whole. She knows what is going on, or what is about to happen; and whenever someone in the village thinks about her, in crisis or need, she will be there to help. She can also offer help in advance, in a predictive manner.

She may come in a dream to warn of some impending danger. You might see her or hear her speaking to you, usually in a reassuring tone. She is incapable of sustained absence. She is as close to you as your own backbone.⁴

Types and Categories

Perantallu (plural of *Perantalu*) belong to several distinct categories. Some confusion exists in the secondary literature about these goddesses.⁵ The root meaning of the term is linked to *perantam*: “a married woman’s visit to another’s house on an auspicious occasion”.⁶ *Perantam* is a family occasion. It could be the celebration of a son’s birthday, daughter’s birthday, votive rites at home, naming, housewarming—anything involving *samskara* rites where one of the neighbors, usually a woman, should come, give blessings and receive an appropriate gift. There is a symbiotic reciprocity about such rites: I—a married woman with children-- will visit tomorrow, the neighbor (also a married woman with children) who visits me today. A widow or a barren woman, or an unmarried girl, cannot be a *Perantalu*. It is a context-specific, time-specific role activated by some auspicious event. A woman is never continuously a *Perantalu* while she is alive. On the other hand, goddesses-*Perantallu* are continuously auspicious, full of blessing even after death. However, there are specific kinds of ‘dying’ that produce this change in state.

For example, an unmarried virgin, *kanya*, like Elamma at Jami, dies prematurely—through illness or accident, a violent and tragic death. She may become a *Perantalu*. It does not happen in all cases of premature death. Something more is needed. There is something of a mystery about the necessary and sufficient conditions. I will try to define certain elements of this process later in this essay. Various features regularly recur. The dead virgin comes in a dream or possesses someone in the neighborhood (or a relative in the family) to announce that she has become a *Perantalu*. The immediate reaction in the family is disbelief, denial, reluctance, resistance, and rejection. Who wants to deal with a live-in goddess who requires a temple, rituals, prayers, offerings, and constant attention? The *Perantalu* thus has to persist, revealing herself again in ways that cannot be pushed aside, overcoming the family’s resistance. The family then, goes through a powerful emotional ambivalence. They have to weigh the potential helpfulness of the *Perantalu*-in-making against the burden of her care and maintenance and the expenditure involved. Their grief at the loss is perhaps somewhat mitigated by the renewed contact with the dead girl; but their memories may be dearer to them than her presence in this new form. In a recent case in Vizianagaram town, the dead girl’s mother and siblings were eventually unable to bear her overpowering

presence as a Perantalu, in a shrine adjacent to their home. They moved away, leaving the Perantalu in the care of her aunt who maintained the original home. This aunt complained bitterly: "These people pay no attention to her, only rarely, reluctantly, come to visit. They have no real affection for her. They are happy to be far away. The responsibility falls entirely on me."

A newly married or young wife can also become a Perantalu if she dies suddenly. Once again, the tragic, early death is crucial; and again, this woman must make her presence, in the altered, divine state, known through dreams or possession. In such a case, her continued existence in or near the house can be a tremendous problem if the husband remarries; the new wife is traumatized by the continuous presence of her predecessor, as if the latter were still alive and still bound to the husband in a controlling, authoritative relationship. Sometimes the second wife becomes possessed by the Perantalu, thus sharing in her power and status. The village "benefits" by the Perantalu's existence as a protective, nurturing mother.

Older women can never become Perantallu. Menopause rules it out: A Perantalu should be capable of bearing children. As the natural world perpetuates itself, an auspicious woman perpetuates a family's life. Her generativity, or potentiality, underlies the whole category of the Perantalu. The closer a woman comes to menopause, the less likely it is that she could graduate into Perantalu status. Moreover, it seems that virginity, *kanyatva*—so often a feature of village Perantallu—expresses intense generative potentiality. There is fullness, unrealized but also unruptured, in the virgin, and death (too early) seals this perfect potentiality into steady, possibly accessible and usable form. We need to look more closely at just how this change takes place, what enables and ensures a successful transition.

Within the overall class of Perantallu, one sub-category stands out as particularly salient, effective, and apparently fascinating for villagers in northern coastal Andhra. (I hope to shed some light on this fascination.) These Perantallu are close, in a formal sense, to the practice of sati. That is, these are women who burnt themselves together with the body of their husband. The terms most frequently used are: *gundam tokkadam*, literally, "stamping/entering in the fire-pit"; "fire-walking"; and *sati-sahagamanam*, "accompanying [the husband] as a virtuous woman." The latter term links this practice with the original Sati, the wife of Siva who burnt herself with mantras in the fire of her father, Daksa—because of the terrible humiliation he caused to her husband and thus to her. Note that Siva also "fire-walks" in his Tandava dance of destruction, driven by grief over losing Sati, with her corpse on his shoulder. In the case of Andhra

this image is reversed—the wife carries the corpse of her husband into the pit. Such a reversal is deeply meaningful, as we will see.

Some informants occasionally relate the practice to Sita's ordeal-by-fire, *agni-pariksa* - an extreme form of public self-certification. When Sita's chastity was called into question after the Lanka war, she chose to enter the fire, which failed to burn her because of her superior, inner fire. Something of the testing and self-authenticating quality of the *Ramayana* episode carries over into the Andhra Perantallu of this type.

This essay will focus primarily on these *sati-sahagamana* Perantallu in Vizianagaram District of northern Andhra. I cannot offer an exhaustive description of the Perantallu types in coastal Andhra. Nonetheless, the examples I bring do suggest a certain analytical profile that deserves to be stated distinctly.

Case 1: Tanavaram, Sri Nari Talli Perantalu

Tanavaram is a particularly lovely village some 20 kilometers northwest of Vizianagaram town. It is dominated by Velama farmers (Koppula Velamas, named after the *koppu* hair-do their women adopt). Around 20% of the village is made up of other castes—Gollas, Yatas, Devangas, Malas, Cakalis, Sharabs, Komatis, Mangalis. There are also, about ten Muslim families (Sayibulu), Relli scavengers, and one Brahmin family. There is a conspicuous absence of Kappus and Kummari potters. Altogether there are some 400 families (about 5000 to 6000 voters). Rice cultivation is the primary occupation.

While we are sitting with a few men on the cement porch of the community hall, a simple question elicits the following response:

Nari Talli is the Perantalu here. Sometimes she is called Nari Talliamma.

Q: Is she the goddess only of this place or of some other places as well?

A: She may exist elsewhere too, but this is her main shrine.

Q: Why?

A: She is the daughter-in-law (*kodalu*) of the village and of this Siriki family, Velama caste. Her natal home (*puttillu*) was Pedda Vemali. There is a shrine for her there. Another temple is found in her maternal grandfather's place, Gajapatinagaram, on the way to Bobbili. For all people in Tanavaram, she is our goddess. We can't do anything without invoking her name. On Amavasya, new moon, or for three days around the new moon, field animals (*sommulu* = *pasuvulu*) are totally exempt from labor. The animals are given complete rest at the command of the goddess. She wants all cattle to be free for one day.

Q: What is the connection between cattle and Ammavaru?

A: When she entered the fire (*gummam tokkadam*), the animals helped her.

Q: How?

A: They brought the wooden logs from the forest. Originally she wanted all animals to be free for two days each month—Amavasya and Purnami—but the villagers said that they couldn't afford to let the animals rest that much as they were farmers and have to work. So they agreed for one day.

Q: What do you mean by *gundam tokkadam*?

A: It means: her husband died. So she thought she should do *sati-sahagamanam*. Before she entered the fire, she said some things.

Q: When did this happen?

A: Hundreds of years ago.

(Someone else says) No, it is not because of the husband dying. There was another reason. One day she took food for her husband to the fields. On the way, she happened to run into her husband's older brother, her *bava*. She requested him to help take the load from her head (*gampa dimpu*). He tried to help her, and while doing this he smiled (*navvadu*). That smile caused the whole trouble. The husband became suspicious of her and his brother. So she entered the *gundam*. She did that to prove her truthfulness (*avida satyam nirupincindi*).

Q: OK, but what happened to the husband?

A: [No answer. After some time:] The husband became suspicious for no reason. Actually, she laughed too.

Q: When did this happen?

A: Who knows? It's like the *Ramayana* when Sita entered the fire to prove she's a *pati-vrata* (*pativrata nirupincadaniki*). Just as Sita proved herself to Rama, so did Nari Talli, to her husband.

But no [says someone else]: Sita was a goddess and emerged unscathed from the fire, whereas Narnamma was *maanavamaaturalu*, she was **only** human. She was burnt to death. She belongs to the Siriki family—if we go to them and ask, they'll tell us more.

Q: Is she Ammavaru?

A: No. Perantalu is not Ammavaru, no way. Because she's not an Ammavaru, *kollu avi koyaru*—they won't sacrifice, cut, chickens etc. The

only thing they offer her is turmeric, *pasupu*, and vermilion, *kunkum*. On Kanuma day, the day after Sankranti, every family in this village will offer a branch of bananas (*gela*), a new sari. On the same day, they'll make a pilgrimage to her temple (*tirtham jaripistaaru*).

Q: Will some devotees do the fire walk?

A: No, nothing like that (*alanti ledu*).

There was no opportunity to install a stone *vighraha* for Perantalu. However, she did not allow it. (*bomma kattadaaniki oppu ko ledu*) But there is a temple.

Q: In some cases the goddess won't even allow a temple, is it not so?

A: No: here she allowed it.

Gajapatinagaram, the maternal grandfather's place; Pedda Vemali, and Tanavaram: these are the three places she has relatives. The Tanavaram shrine is the first. Then Pedda Vemali. Then Gajapatinagaram.

To be more precise: Bananas and *pasupu-kunkum*, are taken on Sankranti day. *Tirtham* is on Kanuma. Every married woman's *mangal-sutra* is brought here to get the blessings of the Perantalu.⁷

It is good to see God (*daivam*). God's blessings are necessary.

Friday is her day. Every Friday in this village, women come to the temple and make offerings.

Q: Are there bards who sing her song?

A: Yes, someone called Yandrapu Suryanarayana in the next village, Vijinigiri. In Tanavaram there are no true bards.

Every school-going child, learning to read and write (*onamalu*)—begins by learning the signs S N T, for Sri Naramma Talli. People write these letters at the top of every document.

We shift from the community hall to Siriki Sannyasiravu's house. Sannyasiravu is a descendent of the Siriki family with a direct relationship to this Perantalu. He is also an active member of the committee in charge of her annual festival. Others join us at the entrance to his house, including Narayana Rao, the *ex-sarpanch* of the village. At some point a notebook containing Nari Talli's song appears—brought out by the women who are overhearing our conversation with avid interest. I show them the Vizagapatnam District Gazetteer of 1907 where other Perantallu from this region are mentioned—to help them understand the nature of this research. Soon another, complementary version of the story emerges from the lips of Sannyasiravu:

Why do you want to know all these things?

We're writing a book.

Srinu: They're trying to bring to life what is missing in the *Gazeteer*.

Narayana Rao: You are the first people from outside to show any interest in this goddess. No one has ever asked us before. It's no wonder Tanavaram is not mentioned in the *Gazeteer*: this is a remote village; the roads are not good even today—imagine what it would have been like 100 years ago.

Sannyasirao: It's a three-generation-old story.

Q: How long is a generation?

A: 100 years. My father and even my grandfather don't know. It is at least a 300-year-old story. We don't know how much further back it goes. What we hear is: she was born in Pedda Vemali. She married into the Siriki family of Tanavaram. Her husband died when she was at her native place. Some misunderstanding took place between wife and husband; she had to stay back at her parents' place. While she was there, her husband died. There were some useless suspicions, and the husband abandoned her (*edo leni poni anumaanaalu vacci bharta odili pettesaaru*). The husband was here when he died. She got the news and came here to see for herself. (*occindi cusindi*).⁸ After she saw, she said, *gundam gundam*. All this is *purvam*, long long ago. She was in the *Sati-sahagamanam* mode. When she announced this, they said, "How can you do this? Your husband died, right? You're a widow." "No," she said, "I'll wake him up" (*nenu atanni leptanu*). She shook him, woke him up, he awoke and sat up (*tatti lepitem leci kurcunnadu*). Then she made them dig a *gundam* (*gundam tavvincindi*). From that *gundam*, water gushed out. So how can there be fire? So she prayed to Gangadevi. Then the water stopped altogether and (*nillu venaki veli poyayi*) the fire was prepared. She entered it and disappeared (*kanpinca ledu*) into the *gundam*. Since then, she is called Perantalu.

Q: Whenever there is a Perantalu in a village, does this mean it's someone who entered a *gundam*?

Narayana Rao: Not necessarily. *She*—Narnamma—has lots of *sakti* (*ivadiki sakti ekkuva*).

Q: So whenever there is a *gundam* for a Perantalu, she'll have more power?



Narayana Rao: Yes. And she will show that *sakti* to the people, *prajalaki*. Because it was in *vecavi*, hot summer; the cattle helped her by bringing the logs and she asked that the cattle would not work two times a month.

We bargained with her: one day is ok, two is too much. She agreed that we do it only on new moon or the day before or the day after. If we ignore this rule, something untoward will happen—the animal will suffer, or the cart will fall, or the driver will get ill.

Q: What is the relation between cattle and Perantalu?

A: Cattle have suffered the brunt of the matter (*sommalu kastapattayi*). In the hot sun, one has to go long distance for wood and you need huge amounts of wood for *gundam*.

Narayana Rao: No one will get up from their bed without mentioning her name. They won't eat without mentioning her name. We won't do any small thing without mentioning her name. We have unlimited faith in her. Early morning when we get up, old people, young people, they direct their minds to her. We do this when we go to bed also.

There are three smells: turmeric, jasmine flowers, and incense. If you smell any one of this, it means the goddess is present.  Should you be able to smell it? All around  temple.

When? 

During all the 3 days at Sankranti time and on some occasions during the year. Every Friday women go there to pay their vows. Tuesdays and Thursdays are important for Ammavaru. For Perantallu, Friday is important.

After she consumed herself in the fire, she said [perhaps in a dream to some relative]: "Go into the fields, see where there's a *putta*, anthill, coming up, and a lump of tumeric (*pasupu mudda*): that's where I am, that is where you will build the temple." And things happened as she said. It was flat land, no place for anthills—but suddenly, they saw an anthill there. The land belonged to a Komati (Shawkar). The Komati said, "How can I give this piece of land for a temple, for free?" He went home and found his people sick. Then he realized it's the act of the Perantalu and said he would give the land. This is how the temple came into existence.

Sri Nari Talli: How to Become a Perantalu

So here we have two relatively complete records of the Tanavaram village tradition about its Perantalu. Let us see if we can extrapolate a conceptual basis for this cult.

How did this particular young woman become a Perantalu? She was clearly unable to be a "normal", living Perantalu, that is, a married woman embedded in the web of neighborhood and family. Her husband

had sent her back to her native village of Pedda Vemali because of his doubts, *anumanalu*, about her faithfulness. How serious were those doubts? Unstinted commitment to her husband is expected of her. Her relationships with her husband's brothers should be modeled after a parent-daughter template: the husband's elder brother is like her father; his young brother is like her son. Any hint of an erotic linkage will destroy the balance in this family. So when Nari Talli asks her brother-in-law to help her lower the basket she is carrying on her head, the very request is a little unusual. Then there is the matter of the smile or smiles. The brother-in-law definitely smiled—everyone agrees about this. Some say she also responded by smiling back. The whole situation—an isolated moment with a man and a woman in the middle of the fields—is rife with erotic tension. The tension explodes in those smiles.


On the other hand, Nari Talli is quite innocent. Were she not, she could never become a Perantalu. A smile is a smile. Her innocence has now become a matter to be litmus-tested. The test will be public and severe. The husband's insinuations cause her intense suffering. People will talk. She is, at this point, relatively helpless, a victim of family and community processes. She inhabits a limbo, belonging neither to her husband's village nor to her natal village. The limbo accentuates the uncertainty built into the situation. This kind of emotional foginess and complexity is a staple feature of most of these stories. Out of the complexity, a clear-cut resolution will be achieved through the willful death and transfiguration of the woman.

It is a short step from limbo to death. Nothing must be wasted. Events move very rapidly. She has to seize the moment and act if she is to prove her innocence. The husband dies suddenly, and Nari Talli immediately wants to enter the fire-pit. At this point, some objections are made. "You are a widow, how can you do *sati-sahagamana*?" Logically, only a widow can perform *sati*. Ideally, a woman should die before her husband. But Nari Talli seeks to elude the logical problem and remain a *saubhagyavati*, an auspiciously married woman—by reviving the dead husband for a brief moment. In other words, on one level, the Perantalu is and remains an intensified embodiment of the *saubhagyavati*, even at the moment of her death. Unlike north-Indian *satis*, these northern-Andhra Perantallu are, by definition, incapable of becoming widows. In this sense, Nari Talli transcends the limitations and obligations of ordinary family relations. She has extended her limbo-like status, her original, almost accidental estrangement from the family towards a certain, elevated type of existence. One could also say, on another level, that the given dichotomy of widow vs. *saubhagyavati* is no longer valid.⁹ She is in some space or category of her own, a space she fashions by her

own volition. She is self-driven, lucid, determined, and already well on the way to becoming a goddess. She has one foot firmly planted in *gaurloka*, the celestial world of the auspicious goddess Gauri, where women who die as *sumangalis* belong.

Notice that in both our accounts of Nari Talli, the woman requires no special permission to go ahead with her decision. No king, no village elders, no British official, no family authorities interfere. Usually, such interference does take place. What we have at Tanavaram is the Komati's reluctance to give up his land for her temple without compensation. Here, as is common, the goddess forces the decision by sending illness. In any case, Nari Talli's decisiveness is critical. From her husband's family she can expect little sympathy, and her own natal family will be confused: is their daughter about to perform a great act? She was sent back to them under a cloud. Who would want her to die?

Within this somewhat murky social configuration, Nari Talli reveals herself as endowed with unusual empathy—not so much for the villagers as for the cattle who will have to drag the heavy logs from the forest at the height of the hot season. The villagers remember this empathic attitude and emphasize it as they tell the story; they don't want to forget it, to reenact the rather callous relation toward the field animals that their ancestors must have had. Even now, Nari Talli is compassionate toward animals. Every month they get a day off because of her. The villagers also feel they can count on her compassion toward them; hence they mention her at the top of every document they write, or when they wake or go to sleep.

Is the fact that all this happens in the hottest time of year incidental? The world is cooking under the fierce blaze of the summer sun. In the midst of that fire, another fire has to be lit. Nari Talli, who is anyway probably burning inside from all the reasons mentioned earlier—the false suspicion, the loss of her husband, her rejection and humiliation, her liminal status—seeks the most intense concentration of flame. We could say she goes through the heat, intensifying it to the highest degree, heaping fire upon fire, in order to reach another, cooler state. Having gone through this fire, she will dispense cool blessings in a continuous manner. As noted earlier,, her steady reliability is a major element in her worship. In a temple where other deities come and go, are brought and sent away, she is now permanently available.  course, village goddesses of the other type are also compassionate, but the fierceness of the Perantalu's compassion reflects the violent nature of the transition she undergoes. Note that fire is itself always continuous, without breaks or gaps, a medium of connectivity, as we know even from the oldest, Vedic texts in which Agni carries the oblations from this world to the

next.¹⁰

“Fierce compassion” is an oxymoron, like an auspiciously married widow. Such paradoxical configurations are integral to the metaphysical and emotional profile of the Perantalu. Unlike the discourse of classical Advaita-Vedanta, where “the son of a barren woman” cannot exist, in the case of our village goddess such states are, in fact, normative.¹¹ This speaks of the depth and complexity of the conceptual matrix that has generated such goddesses.

At this point we can sum up several of the major themes that have emerged naturally from reading or listening of these two texts. A profound emotional ambiguity sets the stage. There is injustice that can only be compensated by a dramatic, even tragic act. A certain space opens up for a brief moment, as if time itself were susceptible to being manipulated by human activity of a certain kind. In this brief moment, the woman, torn away from her social moorings, humiliated and unhappy, is capable of acting as a self-motivated, self-possessed individual. Her individualism is perhaps her most salient feature. In this respect, she differs radically from more familiar prototypes of *sati*. A profoundly subjective being, she is gifted with insight and compassion, is active, aware, prophetic and determined. This kind of awareness will not be lost. The Perantalu, who has gone directly through the heart of fire, like the offering of ghee in the *agnihotra*, remains bound to the life of the village in all its details and needs. She is like a micro-universe, a natural world of her own within which the village lives its self-contained existence. Life in the village can no longer be conceived without her.

Before we leave Nari Talli, let us check our conclusions against another version of her story that suddenly appeared during a visit to Vijinigiri, after the above two versions had already been collected. The new teller is eponymously named Siriki Nari Tallamma, and it is clear that she has preserved a fuller, more “original” version of the tale:

Nari Talli was born in Tanavaram village (!), her mother’s native home. The mother married a man from Peda Vemali. Nari Talli naturally grew up in both villages. She was born as a special blessing from Simhadri Appanna, the god of Simhacalam. As a baby she was engaged to her cross-cousin. At puberty she was sent to live with her husband, Nayudu Atchiya, in Tanavaram. On the day of her arrival, her mother-in-law assigned her heavy tasks, beyond the capacity of a young girl. She nonetheless accomplished all of them. That same day, at noon, she was sent off to bring food to her husband in the fields. It was *dammulu* time, the busiest moment in the agricultural year, after the first rains. On the way she met her husband’s younger brother, Mallu Nayudu. She was

carrying a basket filled with food. He helped her to take the heavy basket off her head. At that moment, a westerly wind lifted the shoulder-piece of her sari, exposing her breasts. Both she and her brother-in-law smiled at one another (*navvaru*).¹² As it happened, the husband caught sight of them just then. He went home and told his mother not to give his wife any tasks to perform, not to allow her to cook food for him—in short, to treat her as an outsider. When Nari Talli returned, she felt the change in atmosphere. She cooked for her husband, but he refused to touch her food; he told his mother to throw it to the dogs. The mother (who was actually Nari Talli's aunt) made no attempt to put matters right; Nari Talli, surprised, decided to leave.

The barber accompanied her to her native place. On the way she passed through the flooded paths. Her parents asked no questions, but they understood some problem had occurred. After some time, one of Nayudu Atchiya's brothers came of age, and the parents tried to arrange a match. Everyone they spoke to said, "If you give us one good reason why Nari Talli was rejected, we'll consider the match." There was no valid explanation, and so there was no bride for the young man. The in-laws asked Nari Talli to help. She somehow smoothed the way and her brother-in-law was married.

After some time, Nayudu Atchiya became ill and died. Nari Talli was not informed, though because of her connection to Simhadri Appanna she had a premonition that something had happened to her husband. She set off for Tanavaram. On the way she heard the news. He died on a Monday. She told her in-laws: "The cremation can take place only on this Friday, and I will enter the *gundam*." The family paid no attention. They tried to cremate the body, but the fire would not ignite. Nari Talli sprinkled the corpse with *pasuppu*, and it was preserved until Friday. Meanwhile, she went to each caste to get consent for her entering the *gundam*. The Brahmins were scornful: "You lived on gruel, you slept outside with the sheep; how can you have such power? Besides, in your caste you can remarry. Get lost." She cursed them. The Rajulu also rejected her. She cursed them, too. She went to the Komati merchants. They welcomed her and gave her *pasuppu*, *kunkum*, and whatever else she needed. She went to the Gollas. They knew her from the days she herded the village sheep; they knew her character. They approved of her intention, and she blessed them. Finally, on Friday, she entered the pit and was burned. The gods in their heaven were reluctant to approve her *sahagamana*, because she was still a virgin. It made no sense to them. She fought with the gods; Simhadri Appanna was on her side, so she won.¹³

Nari Tallamma's account fully and boldly explains the origin of the domestic crisis; the two smiles (note that in this case it is her younger

brother-in-law who is involved) are seen by the husband and cause the conflict. In this respect, Nari Tallamma's telling goes well beyond the somewhat coy, even euphemistic accounts given by the village male narrators and descendents of the goddess's conjugal family. But, very strikingly, Nari Talli remains a virgin, even in her *sahagamana*. Two types of Perantallu, the *kanya* and the widow, have merged. The unconsummated marriage becomes part of the overall picture of a wronged woman who uses her own power, and her sense of injustice, to effect existential change. She breaks into the history of the family as a special, redeeming case. Synchronically and diachronically, she bestows protection and wards off calamities. As a traditional bride, her primary loyalty is to her conjugal family. Despite their rejection she makes it possible for her husband's brother to get married. In the words of the narrator, *attavarni tala daggira pettu kondi kannavallani kalla daggara pettu kondi*, "She put her in-laws at her head and her parents at her feet." But her natal family also benefits from her blessings and constant vigilance. Hence we find a big temple for Narni Talli at Peda Vemali (much more impressive than the Tanavaram shrine). Similarly, the entire society is drawn into Narni Talli's web, either through curse or blessing. She is not cowed down by the Brahmins or the Rajulu, despite their superiority; and she rewards the Gollas and Komatis who accept her. All these castes, says the narrator, are like organs of a single body. It seems as if this body extends even into heaven, where the gods' society also has to come to terms with this new goddess. She claims her right to be there, in the gods' world, in the lineage of the *satis*—thus overcoming the rather logical objection that, as a virgin, she doesn't belong there. Human society created obstacles with false suspicion of infidelity and the divine society is skeptical because of her unconsummated marriage. By virtue of her inner strength, she emerges from the state of limbo to which she had been consigned and becomes the indispensable condition of being for the entire organic universe of these two interconnected (natal and conjugal) villages.

Case 2: Srngavarapukota, Erukamma

At Srngavarapukota, or S-kota as it is usually called for short, Potnuru Suryanarayana is the senior hereditary trustee of Erukamma-gundam, the fire-pit where Erukamma immolated herself with the body of her husband. The shrine occupies a total area of some 300 square yards. Half is used as a (recently-built) community hall, primarily for marriages. Revenue from such occasions supports the worship of Erukamma. The remaining half contains two small shrines, one for Erukamma, the second for devotees to light lamps and cook food. Erukamma exists here in two forms, one above the other. The upper image is of stone with silver eyes and the lower of metal (*panca-loha*, five precious metals). Suryanarayana

had the stone image carved, before which, there was only a plaque with two snakes (*naga-yantram*)—the standard image of Perantallu in this region.

“Some years ago, the donation-box was plundered by a thief who, at that moment, broke the stone arm of the goddess with his crowbar. At that time, the metal image was ordered and installed. While they were waiting to repair the stone image, it disappeared. Some miscreant stole the *vigraham* and threw it into a well in a different village, in Dharmavaram. He was an enemy of mine. What to do? In the course of time, the well dried up and the village elder (a woman) wanted to renovate it and in the process they found the *vigraham*. About 1700 rupees were collected from the devotees on the spot to build a temple for this seemingly new goddess. Then someone noticed that she was Erukamma from S-Kota. When the Komati-merchants heard this, they were scared and wanted to rush her back to her place. [For reasons that will soon become clear, they think of her as hostile towards them.] The man who threw the image in the well also spread a rumor to the effect that I was responsible for the loss of the image and, as a further result, for the drought in S-Kota; he also claimed that I was paralyzed because of the goddess’s curse”.

Suryanarayana is indeed paralyzed on one side because of a stroke. Initially, as the interview begins, he is highly suspicious of the strangers who have come to inquire about his goddess. Slowly he warms up to their interest and speaks proudly of the booklet that he has compiled and published—a text of Erukamma’s story as sung by a local bard, Ambati Lakshmana. He is sure he has done something of value with his life. As a result, the goddess has appeared to him twice—as a massive nimbus, *kanti-punjam laga* (after his cataract operation), and as a young girl (*vayasunna pilla*). What follows is a detailed summary of the text:

Her maiden name is Bavurubilli Erukamma. After marriage, she became Potnuru Erukamma, the eldest daughter-in-law of that family. They belong to the caste called Sanku-dasari.

In Magha-masa in the Prabhava year, on the *pancami-tithi*, a Sunday, at sunset, her husband, Appanna, took a bath, donned his clothes and with a stick, as is proper to a farmer, walked towards the village center, to the Ravi-cettu, to inform the village elders that he was going into the forest to bring *kampa*—thorn-bush for fences. The elders said: “For the last few days we hear of a tiger that has killed some cows in the vicinity. Don’t go alone. Wait till we are ready and we will all go together.”

So Appanna happily went home. That night Dharappa Devudu appeared in Erukamma’s dream. He had turmeric all over the body, the Vaisnava marks on his forehead. He stood before her and touched her

with a silver rod. She woke and saw the god in front of her. God said, "Oh Erukamma, I appeared to you because of your merit (*punya*). I am going with the other gods to Simhadri for a festival, Tirunallu; for 7 days we won't be here. Your luck is not in order. On Monday, in early morning, all the caste people of S-Kota will take their cattle and go to the Punyagiri-lova¹⁴; during that time, your husband will be attacked by a tiger at the water-pond. Since God is absent from the *lova*, don't let your husband go there for these seven days. There is fear of a tiger in that area. If your husband is killed by the tiger, don't blame me and don't reveal this to others." Saying that, God disappeared and took off for Simhadri.

Erukamma awoke, terrified. She went back to sleep and saw a second dream. In front of her house, there were marriage canopies, gateways adorned with green leaves, golden chariots, brass chariots, white umbrellas and white flowers. A white elephant came. Appanna went with his cattle into the fields. A tiger caught him and ate him. His younger brothers came back crying. A relative brought the news. She and her husband were burned in the fire-pit, *agni-gundam*. Both went to Vaikuntham.

Erukamma awoke. "What a horrible dream!" She told her husband about both dreams. "People will laugh if they hear these dreams," he said. "Don't tell my younger brother's wife, or anybody else. The hot season is known for crazy dreams." (*vesavi kalamlo verri kalalu vastavi*, p.24).

She asked her sisters-in-law to come out, and they started spinning thread. They sang songs, invoking the names of Simhadri Appana and Gangadhara Gangamma, Sannyasi devudu and Sannyasi Paidamma in Dharmavaram.

S-Kota is a town of 12 streets. They all went to Punyagirilova to get *kampa*, but they forgot to take Appanna and his brothers along. After some time, Appanna woke up and saw it was early morning. He rushed off with his two younger brothers to the *lova*. As he was leaving, the neighbor woman sneezed. Erukamma heard the sneeze. She said to her sisters-in-law, "I saw two bad dreams, and now there's a bad sign. I'm afraid." Appanna became very angry. "You're very young," he said. "Why are you standing in our way? If Brahma has written it for me, who can escape? Brothers, why do you listen to what women say? Are they not foolish? Don't pay any attention to your sister-in-law (*vadina*)."

He went away.

Erukamma prayed to the gods to save her husband and his

brothers. At the same time, Dharagangamma came in a dream to the pujari, Gadaba Tammanna—the same dream that Erukamma saw. “Make sure these people don’t go to the *lova*,” she said. “Human beings easily blame gods for every failure” (*manavajanmamulo maraci potaru*). With her silver cane, she struck the pujari awake. He looked around and saw nothing. Immediately he set out and met Appanna and his brothers on the way. He told them his dream and tried to dissuade them from going further. Appanna said: “If there is danger, why not come with us to help us?” “No, I have other things to do,” said the pujari.

Appanna proceeded into the *lova*. There were signs of the tiger: animals were trembling. The brothers noticed and started trembling too. They told Appanna. He remained adamant. “Did my wife serve you some substance-less food (*pusti-leni bhojanam*) last night? Is that why you are timid and weak?” Dawn was breaking. Appanna saw the tiger coming, following them. At his command, the brothers ran off in one direction. He went on. The tiger waited for the right moment and jumped 7 times the height of a man. The tiger got him. He thought, “Oh my God. I am in the clutches of the tiger. My brothers are not here to help me, and my wife tried to prevent me from coming, but I didn’t listen.” The tiger heard what he said and thought to itself, “This man should not be left alive.” Angrily, the tiger dragged him to a boulder and sat in front of him.

The brothers cried out, “Annayya, Annayya, where are you?” They saw him lying, bleeding, the tiger on top of him. “What can we tell your wife and your children?” Returning, they saw Uncle Venkanna and told him what had happened.

At home, Erukamma saw clear signs, clear premonitions. She behaved as if nothing had happened. Then she saw Uncle Venkanna running toward them. “What’s happened? How are you?”

“What can I say? Your husband has become a prey to the tiger.”

Erukamma said: “The dreams have come true. Our lands are fully fertile, and we are going away. We’ll mount the chariots to Vaikuntha.” Quickly she went to Kumari Street and brought a new earthen plate (*pramida*), poured water into it from the tank, put in a wick, and lit it. She went to the public assembly place, (*raccabanda*). “Elders,” she said, “my husband has fallen prey to the tiger. His brothers are crying. Will you please bring my husband back, or should I do it myself?”

“We will do it,” they said. All the young men went with their drums, horns, spears, and fire-crackers. They couldn’t find Appanna, for the tiger had dragged him away. Finally they found him. Gadaba Tammanna said, “Let’s attack the tiger.” But everybody said, “No, let’s

not. The tiger may eat some of us.” They tried to scare the tiger off, and the tiger moved aside—after killing Appanna, in anger. They made a lot of noise. The tiger jumped on him again, killed him again, and left.

They made a hammock to carry the body. As they were bringing the body, the tiger followed them. They were scared. They were afraid to bring the body into the village, lest the tiger come too. They wanted to burn the body outside the village. They sent a courier to announce to Erukamma that they couldn’t bring the body in. When she heard this, she said, “If you cremate Appanna in the forest, how will people come to know the *satyalu*, the truthfulness, of Erukamma?” She took turmeric rice, *aksintalu*, into her lap-pocket and rushed to the place of the body and the tiger. She stared at the tiger intensely. With a fistful of *aksintalu*, she saluted the tiger: “You killed my husband. I’m cursing you. I’m also giving you a boon.” She threw three fistfuls of *aksintalu* and said, “On the week of Sivaratri, you must not come to this mountain. You have no place here for those seven days.” The *aksintalu* turned into hornets (*kandirigalu*) that stung the tiger and drove it away.

They brought the body back in the hammock. She bathed in every body of water and had the corpse washed. She said to the goddess, Dharagangamma, “You couldn’t take care of my husband for even one half-hour (*gadiya*). But it’s not your fault. That is my previously cumulated karma. I bow to you. You are the goddess of this area. People come in hundreds of thousands to salute you. All those who worship you should also worship me. The first four watches of the day are your *tirtham*, pilgrimage time; the four watches of the night are mine.”

People were lamenting. She said: “Don’t cry. We all die. It’s only a matter of time.” She ordered them to relieve the cattle that brought the *kampa*. Many people came to see, not only from S-kota but from other villages. She said, “From now on, whatever I say should be as valuable as gold.” Looking at everybody, she spread some perfume on Appanna and covered him with new cloth. Removing the cloth from his head, she addressed him: “Potnuru Appanna, Oh Lord of my life, *prana-natha*, you have gone. What will happen to the children? Who will look after me? In the morning I said, ‘Don’t go,’ but you looked at me with red eyes. Look at my face now.” She cast *aksintalu* on his face. He looked at her face. Then he closed his eyes. People were amazed. “We didn’t know you were such a truthful woman. Let this truthfulness remain here permanently.”

Erukamma looked at the elders and made a request. “Give me a place as big as a pearl, and I will fill your lives with canopies of pearls. I will come and protect you when you are in trouble. If there is a crisis, I

will come and meet you."

They said, "Don't cry, and don't worry about the cost."

She said, "You want me to live like a widow? Can't you give just a tiny bit of land for *gundam*?"

All six elders heard this and said, "Can you get permission of the king, the Mukhi *samsthanam*?" She said, "He may be a master (*dora*) to you, but he is no master of mine." With *aksintalu* in her lap-pocket she went to the Fort. The king looked at her. "Who are you, and why did you come?" She told the story and asked for a pearl-sized piece of land for *gundam*. He said, "You are a young woman, your whole life ahead of you. Why do you want to become dust? Your caste allows remarriage (*maru-manuvu*)." She was very angry. "Do *maru-manuvu* to your daughter or your wife." The king was angry. He had her imprisoned for two watches (*jamus*), made her stand in the hot sun holding her two children on her waist. She suffered, the children cried. After two *jamus*, he let her go.

She said, "I came here only to request a tiny piece of land. You have no compassion for the children, you subject me to suffering. You will lose your vision, your wife will be unable to walk, your horses will get sick, and the fort will become mud." She threw the pearl-like *aksintalu* and left. As soon as she left, all that she said happened, except for the fort becoming mud.

The king realized that this was the effect of her curse. He sent people to bring her back. She wouldn't come. Eventually she came. The king said, "I am ready to give you three acres of land. I will come with two battalions when you perform the *sati*. I will install the *gundam* with a wall around it, I will have a well dug." She asked for this in writing on copper plates. He had it written. As soon as she got permission, she ran on her heels (*madam etti paruguna bayalderi*). She went to the Sharabu goldsmith. She said she would bless him with children. She asked for a new sari and a *mangalsutram*. He gave her 16-cubits of sari and a golden *mangalsutram*, also 30 rupees cash. She was happy and ran on her heels to Duddu Kamayya the Setti and asked for turmeric and vermilion. She promised to bless him with children. He said, "Today is Thursday, and already dusk. I can't give you *pasupu-kunkuma*." She cursed him: "When people get married in your caste, the bridegroom will die immediately after tying the *mangalsutram*." He was scared, he begged forgiveness. She said, "I cannot take back my curse—but at the time of tying the *mangalsutram*, you have to go out from this town." He put a ladder up to the attic and gave three *visha* (= kilos) – two bright yellow, one of red; and another *visha* of *kunkuma* along with 50 rupees in cash. She was happy and ran back.

She set up the pestle and mortar, she pounded the turmeric, singing songs, thinking of her mother-in-law and father-in-law and the three-crore gods. She divided the turmeric into three parts; one she applied to her body, one she distributed to the village, one she took with her. She put on the new sari. She summoned her two brothers-in-law, asked each of them to raise one of her two children. They were all crying. She said, "Don't cry. If you grieve, I will not be at peace in my mind (*miru sokiste na manasu kuduta padat'amma*). I will be as close to you as your own backbone. We have a good king, he gave three acres of land. You can depend on him. Maintain the *gundam* properly." She bathed, addressed the elders, lifted her husband's body, bathed him, put a *bottu* dot on his forehead, brought him to the east of the village. The king came with two companies of soldiers. Many people from many villages came to watch.

The *gundam* was ready, with firewood from many different kinds of wood. Turmeric and ghee were pored in, and the fire blazed. She held her husband in both hands, prayed to the Earth Goddess (Talli-Bhudevi) and to Lord Suryanarayana. "Please give me a place in you," she prayed to Bhudevi and to Dharagangamma. The flames reached the sky. People watched with sorrow and amazement. How can she enter the flames? Right before sunset, she walked into the fire, carrying her husband. "Don't cry, sisters-in-law, children. I will be with you." She was saying these things from on top of the pyre. Suddenly she became ash.

People poured ghee and turmeric on the *gundam*, threw coconuts and bananas. Both wife and husband became ashes. From Vaikuntha, Vasudeva-Krishna sent his gleaming *vimana* to take husband and wife to heaven.

On the fifth day, on Friday, the king came along with a battalion. They wanted to see what remained of the pyre. There were lumps of turmeric, cups of vermilion; also one cubit of the new sari. Every year, from Sivaratri to *astami-tithi*, people come from Calcutta, Srikakulam, Orissa, and other far-away places to celebrate Erukamma *tirtham* with seven nights of vigil, *jagaraalu*.¹⁵

The essentials of this story were also narrated orally by Potnuru Errapa in Srngavarapukota on May 10, 2006.

Erukamma told her husband, "It's dawn, don't go to the woods, you won't come back on time." They left anyway. Erukamma had bad premonitions, so she went toward the woods to look for her husband. She met one of her brothers-in-law. "Why are you coming empty handed?" "What do you want me to say? My brother was killed by a tiger." When he says that, she laughed (*okka navvu navvindi*). "Don't I know that already? My dream came true." She came home, stopping on

the way at the tank, where she picked up a tumbler of water. At home she picked up an earthen plate (*pramida*), poured water in it, put a wick in, and lit it. It started burning. She told her brothers-in-law, "Let's go, it's time to find your brother." So they all went. They showed her the place. The tiger was sitting on the body. She carried rice smeared with turmeric, *aksatalu*, and threw them at the tiger. She said to the tiger, "From now on, for 9 days, no tiger should be seen on that mountain." That was her curse.

The tiger had eaten the heart of Appanna. They gathered the body into a cloth and carried it home. She went to the Maharaja, the ruler of S-Kota in the British time. She told him she wanted to go into the *gundam* (*nenu gundala padutanu*). I want three feet of land (*mudu adugula jaagaa kavali*)." The king made fun of her (*vikatam aadaru*). "Hey, lady, you think you can do that? You are also entitled to remarry (*maarumanuvulu unnay*). Think about the alternative." She was offended. "Send your wife to *maarumanuvu*, send your daughter to that, you rascal."

She took the *aksatalu* which she carried in her waist-pocket and threw them on the king: "I'm cursing you to lose your eyesight. All your cattle and your horses will be sick. Your people at home will be sick." She went home.

The king became blind, the cattle and people ill. His ministers knew the reason—the curse of Erukamma. The king told his ministers to bring her to him and to grant whatever she wanted, unconditionally. She said, "Never believe what kings say. They are liars. I don't trust them." The ministers convinced her to come. "No," she said, "kings say one thing and do another." Finally she agreed.

"Oh king, how are you feeling?"

"Oh mother, please forgive me, I'm blind, I did not realize your powers. I will dig a well in your name. I will build a temple for you. I will grant lands for you. I will create endowments for you."


"No, I won't believe you."



She went to the house of the Shawkar-Komati, asked him to give *pasuppu-kunkuma*. That was a Thursday. He refused. "It's already dusk, I won't give you. But still, mother, why do you want to do this? Can't you change your mind? And in your caste there is *maarumanuvulu*." She said, "You're talking like the king. You seem to be suffering from the same disease. I'm cursing you that as soon as you tie the *pustu-mudi* around the neck of your wives-to-be, you will die." He was horrified. "Oh mother, what are you doing, what is this? Don't do that, take back your curse; I will give you *pasuppu-kunkum*."



“Sorry, I can’t take back my curse. But when the time comes for you to tie the *pustu*, cross the border—go outside from this area (*polimera dati akkada cesukoni*). I promise I will protect you.” So even now, though marriages take place in this temple, the Komatis tie the *tali* elsewhere.

Some features of this story are clearly resonant with the previous Nari Talli materials—so much so that we can begin to discern the outlines of a regional Perantalu-sati complex. Note, for example, the fact that Erukamma revives her dead husband before the cremation: Such northern Andhra widows are not quite widows. They are and will remain auspicious, nurturing women transforming into goddesses. As such, they also have a strong element of empathy or compassion—for both natal and conjugal families as well as for cattle, who are given relief at the behest of the goddess. Erukamma’s very name, derived from *eruka*, “knowledge,” embodies this sense of wise, imaginative empathy and foresight; moreover, the Erukalu tribals, with whom Erukamma must clearly be associated, are sooth-sayers, fortune-tellers, and diviners as well as midwives and basket-weavers.¹⁶ Again as with Nari Talli, there is a somewhat ambivalent, loaded relationship between the would-be Perantalu and the Komati merchants. At S-Kota, this relation is so problematic that the Komatis end up with an enduring curse; to this day, they cannot tie the wedding-string around the bride’s neck inside Erukamma’s temple premises.

Erukamma was a poor woman living a hand-to-mouth existence. Some say that her husband and brothers-in-law were all working, in some menial capacity, for the British.¹⁷ Her husband’s death—which she clearly sees coming in the dreams sent by Dharappa Devudu—precipitates an economic catastrophe as well. In effect, what follows provides restitution for her loss, but on a largert scale that goes beyond her own immediate needs. She produces, out of her own determination and courage, a place of benefice for the community as a whole. Her *gundam*, however, requires maintenance and investment up to the present day. It appears that her successors inherited—and appropriated for their personal use—the land given by the king, thus leaving the *gundam* with only minimal income.


As with Nari Talli, Erukamma makes the rounds of the various communities before her act of self-immolation. This is a communal affair, an attestation of the woman’s true status, through public acceptance. It is **not** classed, in any sense, as a suicide. We have to put aside our modern notions, for the moment, to understand these stories. Erukamma is in clear possession of her faculties. She makes lucid judgments that reflect a powerful inner conviction, and has the best interests of her own people in mind. For their part, the Komati and the king,  optical in their own way, see her plan as both selfish and impracticable, at odds

with the tradition. They fear the whole project will be disastrous, and a dangerous precedent as well. She is a low-caste woman who could, in theory, remarry—and she is trying to make her way into the ranks of goddesses. Such skepticism is an integral feature of nearly all such stories. One might even say that the Perantalu makes herself over as such **because**  and by overcoming, such opposition. She brings out and enacts ~~some~~  potential that exists in her before, thus growing or developing into her full self. In this context of self-manifestation, the Komati and the Raja both pay a price for hindering her. They open themselves up to be cursed. The Komati community still suffers ritually as a consequence of this lack of faith; the Mukhi kings have been entirely erased from the political life of S-Kota.

This is not to say that Erukamma escapes a sense of agony. She has two children to think about. She transfers her responsibility for them to her brothers-in-law. Note that in her case, the conflict between natal and conjugal homes—so pronounced in the Nari Talli story—is not in evidence. Moreover, Erukamma suffers nothing of the humiliation and familial ostracism that are Nari Talli's fate. Erukamma was a happy housewife until the dreams; wife and husband lived amicably, though—like any villager—he underrates her wisdom and resists her advice. He even depicts her, somewhat sardonically, as too emotional. Only at the moment of being swallowed by the tiger does he perceive her insightfulness—too late. But where Nari Talli's course of development reflects severe social and familial tension, even trauma, Erukamma's strength seems to come from a matrix of intimate affection between husband and wife. Both paths lead, with equal certainty, to Perantalu status. Both these women are also endowed, from birth, with special qualities, gifts from the gods. They stand, in a sense, alone, somewhat distant from ordinary womanhood. However, there is one more difference between the two heroines.: Erukamma is aware of her accumulated past karma, which explains, at least in part, the tragic loss of her husband; but Nari Talli is entirely a product of her present circumstances, thus an exemplar of fully autonomous self-possession. She is active, indeed increasingly so, even **before**  her husband dies; and her decision to enter the *gundam* is a further ~~extension~~  of this independent, decisive aspect. Nari Talli's conjugal family tries to stand in her way at this final moment, and she has to draw on her own resources to overcome them.¹⁸ Nothing of the sort happens to Erukamma, whose family supports her. In line with the conflict-ridden course of Nari Talli's entire experience, even her entry into heaven is stalled; she has to fight her way in with the help of her patron deity. In striking contrast, Erukamma is immediately translated to enhanced, divine status after entering the *gundam*, as all the spectators at this event can attest. In short, while both women have to

prove themselves in the face of external skepticism, one trajectory is full of obstacles while the other, relatively smooth.

Non-case 3: Mamidipalli

There  numerous Perantallu in northern coastal Andhra Pradesh. Practically every village has one or more. The two cases discussed above are partly remarkable because they are widely known and rich in detail. People from different castes and families tell the stories, comment upon them, connect them to the ritual praxis, and weave connections between the neighboring Perantallu. A dense web of relations connect these goddesses across different villages. Sometimes, however, the discursive aspect of the Perantallu is extremely meager. The Perantallu exists, but her people hardly seem to know what to say about her. They feel her presence very directly even without detailed knowledge of her history and prowess. Such an ambience is, in fact, far more common in these villages than the highly conscious and elaborate discourse described thus far. This issue is, however, in no way trivial; it tells us who these goddesses are and how they inhabit the village space. To give a better sense of what this less transparent mode actually sounds and feels like, I cite below the transcript of a session in Mammidipalli village (May 19, 2006).

We find the temple by the roadside as described by Suryanarayana. It is far less elegant than the Erukamma temple in S-Kota. There is a *naganyantram* and a tall, rectangular cement structure filled with offerings of *dontulu*—clay pots for carrying ghee—and round, wooden urns (*bharanilu*) meant to keep *kunkum*.

Many people are sitting in the temple. When they see us coming, they run to find out who we are and what we want. Maybe they think we are government officials.

MVK: What is the goddess's name?

She is Gangamma Perantalu.

MVK: Does anyone know her story?

No. The only thing we can say is that she has a Jatra for 3 days during Sankranti.

MVK: Who are you?

I am sweeper in the temple (*seva cestanu*).

Another woman: Generations have gone by. I know nothing.

A man: If we are sick or our cattle are sick, she will grant our wishes if

we make a vow to her. If we don't make milk offerings here every full moon day, our cattle will not give milk. So every full-moon day we offer milk. On every new moon day the cattle are given rest, as a command of the goddess (*ammavari per mida*). Then the cattle will be fine. And we'll be happy too.

MVK: Was she born here? Is there a story?

She is the daughter of Komatis. There used to be a huge pit here. Maybe Ammavaru used to bathe there. I remember my grandfather's narration. I heard that her natal place is Vasi-Timidi. Every day she took a bath here. I only dimly remember.

MVK: So is this place her *attagarillu* (conjugal home)?

She was a virgin, *bala-papa*, she didn't marry. Why are you asking these questions? We also know how to write. There is a woman named Kolla Trinadhamma. Her daughter-in-law's name is Aruna. Gangamma possesses this Aruna from time to time, especially during the annual puja day. Trinadhamma can give you some good information. Go talk to her. They are on the other side of the temple.

We go through a narrow, dirty, smelly lane—to the house of Kolla Trinadhamma. Half a dozen people crowd into the small space, and another 25 women from the neighborhood wait outside, curious.

Trinadhamma: Sankranti is the real festival day. All three days are important, Bhogi, Sankranti, Kanuma, but Sankranti is even more so. Our *gramadevatas* are Mutyalamma, Bangaramma, and others.

MVK: Are you sure she was not married?

T: She wasn't married.

Appala Narasamma (a tall Kapu widow, skeptical and rationalist): People call her a child, *cinna pilla*, but she wasn't such a small girl.

Another woman, Bhulokamma: People who could tell about this goddess have all died. All that we know of are some miracles that have happened because of her. When we are in trouble, we pray to her and she saves us. I run a teashop here on the roadside. The only thing I can tell you is that some time ago a young girl from the village ended up in the temple early in the morning. That seemed to be the act of a *graha* (= demon, *deyyam*, *bhutam*). We don't know why the *graha* brought her here. But Gangamma Perantalu, in human form, took care of the girl and played with her. At dawn Gangamma Perantalu disappeared. The girl looked for the person with whom she played, but she wasn't there. I was getting ready with my tea-shop preparations, I saw the girl crying. I took her to my place. In the distance I saw a family looking for its lost daughter. I yelled at them

and said, "Come collect your daughter, she is here." The girl kept asking for the woman who played with her. Gangamma Perantalu saved this girl. That's all we know about her, accounts like these-- nothing about her life history. The girl said, "Gauri played with me until now and then disappeared." The parents took her back.

What can we say? Three generations have passed.

There used to be a huge pond there, where she bathed—like a well, but it was as big as a pond. The forehead mark, a small smear of turmeric, vermilion, and white rice-- *aksintala bottu*— dropped in the water. There was a barber behind her, she told him to go fetch the *aksintala bottu*. He said, "Mother, how can I fetch it from the water? It has dissolved." She became furious. "Go, get it." He went into the water, dipped his hands, and it came into his hands. He brought it to her. She put it back on her forehead. After that she went to the elders and asked for a place, *jaagaa*

MVK: Can anyone sing a song about her?

No. Most of those who can are dead. I don't think many songs exist. Once they used to sing songs about her. She appeared and said, "Oh, you are singing songs about me." That was a good song, but she was not totally satisfied. She said, "Why are you doing this?" The practice stopped then.

A woman: If you want Ammavaru's story, she will give you a dream.

I show her the booklet on Erukamma from S-Kota. She says: Many people write many things. If she comes in a dream and gives consent, you can write. Otherwise, why are you so anxious to do this without her permission?"

MVK: Is she coming in my dream?

Woman: You have any doubt about it? [This woman is now getting possessed.]

MVK: OK, what is your name, I will acknowledge you.

My name is Ananta [her real name is Saroja]

She laughs hysterically. Drops to the floor. Total silence. Her head is rolling around.

Aruna (Trinadhamma's daughter-in-law): She [Ananta/Saroja] is in the habit of answering questions as a soothsayer. This girl is also part of our family, Saroja, my next-door neighbor.

They are holding Ananta, she is on the ground.

Aruna: What, Talli, tell me what you want to say. These people have

come.

Tirunadhamma: Speak up. You have to say something. You want me to bring some drinking water?

Ananta: Water, water, I need water.

She is crying

Trinadhamma: Wait, water is coming, don't cry.

People are running, looking for *pasupu* and water, mixing the *pasupu* into the water. They give her some water to drink. I stop the tape.

Ananta, complaining: Don't you know how to pour water?

They pour pots of water, apply *pasupu* to her face and arms, put a big forehead mark.

Ananta: Why are you doing this without my permission? What is the urgency? I know it is for my publicity, but you should not do this without my permission. Go home, think about me when you go to bed, don't ask any questions, if you are so curious take a photograph at the temple; I will come in your dream and tell you my story.

MVK: Do you want me to take your photograph as you are here?

Ananta: Can you frame me in a photo?

After some time, she rolls close to me. I move away, prevent her from touching me.

Ananta: Come, I will give you *bottu*.

She puts a *bottu* on my forehead.

MVK: OK, as you want.

They wait for the possession to fall off. Another stage of possession begins. She starts curling into herself, moving like a snake, making sounds of great pain, hissing like 5 or 6 big cobras. Inhales a big breath, exhales a hiss. Her feet curve around, like Yoga acrobatics. It is hard work. People are waiting for it to be over. Then it's over, as if suddenly something were broken

People lift her up. Some speak of her greatness. At some point the girl's father takes her home, very slowly, like walking a patient home from the hospital.

Appala Narasamma, the rationalist skeptic: She's playing hide and seek (*dongadingalata*). It's a fake possession. Who asked her for all this

nonsense? She's full of shit. It's a bloody sham show.

MVK: You're very brave, such a rational woman!

Appala Narasamma: No, I've seen a lot of these things. Earlier there was only an anthill here and a tree. These so-called Komatis are not original residents of this town. They came and found the goddess here. They made a vow to worship her if they prospered. That is how they embraced her worship. They promised to build her temple.

I think this interview speaks for itself. The possessed woman seemed to me to be making a claim for the role of spokeswoman for the goddess, and as such she was both suspicious and resentful of outsiders—including someone with an intellectual interest in Gangamma. She turned on her possession to stall the enquiry, perceived as an intrusion or violation. If the goddess wants us to know her story, she'll come to us in a dream. Truth exists in its own mode and need not be ferreted out. The goddess is even resentful of the songs people sing about her. Note, however, that even in the near-total absence of concrete information about this Perantalu, her ritual presence in the village remains intact. Gangamma, whoever she was or whatever she did, will always protect these people.

Conclusion

The materials we have sampled from this distinctive regional tradition suggest the following analytical profile of the Perantalu. A definite conceptual logic informs these ritual systems and can be articulated in a series of interlocking hypotheses.

First, the Perantalu belongs deeply to the natural world of the village—especially its trees, snakes, and bodies of water. She is almost another embodiment of these local forces. She usually lacks a formalized iconography. The closest she gets to some kind of iconic image is the stone with intertwined snakes, *naga-yantram*. More often, devotees worship her in the form of a living snake. Skeptics exist, of course; occasionally there is even hostility towards such creatures.¹⁹ At Tanavaram, someone tried to kill Nari Talli's snake. But generally speaking, the Perantalu is a living, organic, growing being, mingled with her devotees' very life-breath. She lacks, we might say, the iconographic pretense. She needs no lithographs, paintings, cassettes, songs, advertisements or *murtis*. At times, she positively objects to hearing people sing her songs. Not everyone gets to see her. Those who do (like Potnuru Suryanarayana at S-Kota) are particularly lucky. Many who fail to see her can at least smell her. On every Friday in Tanavaram, a strong fragrance of turmeric, jasmine, and incense, carried by the wind, indicates that Nari Talli is visiting her temple. Our informant, Nari Tallamma of Vijinigiri, asked me

after two hours of narration on a Friday: “Can’t you smell the goddess coming? The turmeric and jasmine?” She maintains a substantial but ethereal presence, especially on her special days.

This fundamental naturalness of the goddess helps explain why the villagers can do quite well without a story about her, as in the case of Gangamma at Mammidipalli. She is integrated into the landscape, the soil, the water, and the growing crops. We can say that, as in the case of the Vedas, an *apauruseyatva*—the quality of not having been created by human beings—applies to each such Perantalu. Such women are, in the deepest sense, self-generating.

Second, following this same principle, she has no “shrine” in the ordinary sense of the word. She leaves behind the *gundam* fire-pit, the site of her transition. Note that this is not a cremation-ground, *smasanam*. It has no inauspicious connotations whatsoever. It is, in a way, not even connected to dying. What happens there is an event of an entirely different order. Very often the *gundam* is located somewhere in the midst of the paddy-fields, where it—or rather she—can help fertilize and sustain growth. Usually, the Perantalu explicitly rejects the idea of a stone structure or shrine Brahmanical deities prefer. Such buildings inevitably remove or distance the deity from the natural setting, the grass roots which are the Perantalu’s proper context. If some kind of “transcendent” aspect is present, it is in no way separate from the ongoing everyday life of the place. I will return to this point.

Third, the Perantalu chooses her *gundam* and her fate. She decides where, when, and what will happen and overrides any opposition. She cancels out caste, ritual and gender hierarchies. She is always self-willed, autonomous, and highly individualistic. Each Perantalu is different—not some incarnation of a generalized goddess, but a subjective person who has charted her own course. She creates her own *axis mundi* at the place of her choice. Indeed, in a sense, she creates her own world, which is also the newly fashioned world of her village. Her self-immolation has a primarily generative character: she is, in Eliade’s phrase, “contemporary with the creation and the Creator.”²⁰

Fourth, other elements that could be designated “shamanic” apply to her modes of being. She can walk on water—before the *gundam*—and she is in close contact with tutelary deities (in her dream-world). She knows the future. She has strong premonitions and also a characteristic empathic awareness. She applies turmeric to her body, much like a practicing shaman, and prepares herself for her onward journey by a ritual reconstruction of her own body. She accomplishes, in advance, and by her own actions, what is usually achieved through the *sraddha*

funerary rites—existential re-embodiment. Like an accomplished shaman, she goes *through* death. The ritual world that continues around her, day by day, preserves this shamanic coloring, for example in the states of possession that fall upon her selected human medium.

Fifth, it is important to specify what actually happens in the *gundam*. The Perantalu continues to speak normally even as the fire burns her. Such ongoing communication testifies to her identification with truth, *satyalu*, which she has already demonstrated in her life. She carries with her, from birth, the special blessing of the gods and the abilities that go with it. She knows that, to be true to herself, she has to exemplify *satyalu* (including the theme of proving her innocence in the face of false accusations of infidelity). In the *gundam*, the end of her audible voice coincides with her dispersal. Fire is in any case an intimate companion of such a woman, not a menacing threat. She spends much of her life close to fire, cooking and providing for her family. She absorbs heat all the time and continues to do so at the moment of her immolation.²¹ Listen to how Srinu from Tanavaram sees this moment in relation to the famous precedent of Sita's trial-by-fire:

Srinu: Sita coming out unscathed is one thing; but here she [Nari Talli] awakened her dead husband, brought him back to life and became one with the fire. There is a difference in power between these two cases. Nari Talli was after all, human.

The point is that the Perantalu's disappearance into the flames in no way diminishes her. Quite the contrary: it propels her into full-fledged divinity. In this sense, being human is a great advantage precisely because it opens up, in such a case, opportunities to attain divine status. Puranic goddesses are born as such, whereas the Perantalu achieves, through her volition, an enhanced form of being.

Moreover, what looks like death is actually transformed into something more like a re-marriage. The husband is inevitably revived, his old *samskaras* effaced and thus in need of being re-enacted; and a new relationship has to be forged and legitimized in the presence of the village elders. Both conjugal and natal families have to endorse the re-marriage. The Perantalu dresses herself like a bride (a new sari from the Komati, a new *tali*, *pasupu* and *kunkum*). It is as if she were sealing this bride-like status into herself—and thus the Perantalu shares, as we have said, something of the auspicious permanence of the Nitya-kalyani, the “permanently (or continuously) married woman.” On the one hand, she “stays for good,” a dependable presence in the village. On the other hand, she ascends to heaven with her mortal body, the one consumed in the flames but thought to survive in a golden, turmeric-coated form.

Clearly, this is no ordinary wedding but a marriage consummated in flame. It leaves behind tangible proof—her red bangles, a piece of her new sari, the *tali* wedding-necklace, the *bharanilu* urns, black beads. All these establish, empirically, her innocence and her continued existence; also her strong marital bond, since most relate directly to the revived husband-bridegroom.

Sixth, once the transition is made, the Perantalu always seeks a human voice or medium, like a Ganacari priestess—usually a permanent, hereditary office. There can be many such mediums, multiple hierophanies, local as well as regional.²² Her communication with the village community continues unbroken. Those who “speak her” or *for* her are normally coordinated with one another; they confirm her unitary existence. In this respect the goddess is dependent upon her human contacts, even more than they depend on her. Such mediums are indifferent to caste or class distinctions. Similarly, the *gundam* itself must be maintained; and this task entails reciprocal, highly interactive relationships between the Perantalu and her devotees, as one sees in the constant votive rites, offerings, ritual visits, and so on. Newly-married women go to see her to have her bless their *talis*. Women who visit her at festival time, in January, offer a new sari, which is returned to them by the goddess. They wear the same sari the goddess wears. This contract between them requires annual renewal. A thick web of reciprocity and mutuality binds her to the village and is actualized from day to day, week to week, year to year.²³ As the villagers care for the *gundam*, the *gundam* cares for them, to paraphrase the *Gita*, *gundam raksitam raksati*.

Seventh, the Perantalu has an agenda. She seeks to actualize her potential being in the idiom of faithfulness to the whole family. Her trajectory involves building and displaying character in bringing out a new psychological being. It is not that she wants the fire-pit, wants to immolate herself and disappear; but, that she is ready to face this eventuality without flinching. Character-building of this type is part and parcel of the culture and specific to the development of a young female. But it is not a generalized femininity that is at stake; rather, the Perantalu embodies a particularly creative aspect of the feminine, maternal and luxuriant, like a natural, tropical, organic growth. Even this statement is too abstract: we are dealing with a woman who embraces the natural world, with all its dissonance and antinomies, its strains and demands, and who makes conjugal life itself a soteriological pursuit. She has not died *before* her husband, as a *Sumangali* should, but she extends and intensifies her role as wife *after* her husband’s death. The role, or more importantly, the set of values and images it entails, continues unimpaired—in fact, it is expanded and enhanced. She is not impure, not a widow. Rather, she

is continuous in self—the virgin, the bride, the wife and mother, all feed into the Perantalu category and crystallize at the moment of immolation.

As a model for other brides, who come to visit her after their wedding, she shows the importance of containing, or living through, the natural strains of conjugal relationship. She integrates herself into this family role and becomes one with it. Note that there is no sublimation, no rationalization: the Perantalu is fully one with the sensory world, recognizes its emotional complexity and its potential for conflict. She does not turn away from it, despite humiliation and insult. We might think of this stereological dimension to the Perantalu's career as a special kind of Kalyana-Yoga, "marital Yoga"—a type not recognized by the classical sources.

Eighth, let us examine again the notion of "transcendence." Clearly, the Perantalu goes beyond normal human limitations. She takes her husband to heaven—the opposite of what Vedic texts (such as the *Satapatha Brahmana*) describe (the husband is responsible for bringing the wife to the other world). Ecstasy and possession-trance regularly feature in her cult. At the same time, the luxuriant village world is *never* negated. On the contrary, this world is rich in "salvific" power. We seem to have here a typically South Indian conceptual scheme which allows for transforming the mundane world but at the same time, remains firmly embedded in one's family, caste, and village. The local reality, far from reducing or limiting divinity, generates it in the acts and decisions of the individual. No bland advaitic abstraction is of any interest here: brothers, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, children, neighbors—all these matter far more than any theoretical construct. A dense world of family connections is fully and ultimately real. Perantalu society is a cosmos of its own, intact and self-sufficient. Within this world, forces such as previous karma and divine providence may very well be at odds with one another; and they are always subordinated to the volition and character of the Perantalu herself, who compels the reality to follow her.

Ninth, we might suggest a certain contrast with the North Indian *sati* as seen in the secondary literature.²⁴ Classically in Rajasthan, for example, the husband is prepared almost from birth for the moment of his heroic finish.²⁵ The woman is prepared for a concomitant self-sacrifice affirming *his* achievement. Our northern Andhra examples have nothing of this theme. The Perantallu are not indoctrinated, not oriented at home toward heroic self-immolation, and even more strikingly, they are not especially idealized. They emerge out of familial and social situations of trauma, conflict, and loss to demonstrate their innate superiority and power, although this existential advantage has to be realized through the individual's act of courageous choice, extraordinary empathy and

awareness. Their suffering and humiliation are remembered and recalled as the conditions for the transition they achieve. Ultimately, men yield to their authority—in contrast to the standard North Indian examples. South Indian Perantallu, such as those discussed above, have remarkable depth—a sign of the human complexity that is never absent from their stories.

Notes

¹ With profound gratitude, I dedicate this paper to Prof. David D. Shulman.

² W. Francis, (1907) *Vizagapatam District Gazetteer*, Madras: Government Press, p.316,

³ As narrated by Rambha Mutyam: May 7, 2006.

⁴ Suryanarayana Potnuru (ed.) (2006) *Sri Erukamma perantalu caritra*, Srngavarapukotap. 53.

⁵ See Henry Whitehead, (1921) *The Village Gods of South India* Calcutta: Association Press, pp. 142-51; Wilber Theodore Elmore, (1915) *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of Southern India*, New York: Hamilton Press.; Bruce Elliot Tapper, (1987) *Rivalry and Tribute: Society and Ritual in a Telugu Village in South India*, Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation pp. 117-119.

⁶ JPL Gwynn (1991) *A Telugu-English Dictionary* Delhi: Oxford University Press

⁷ After the wedding chain is made by the smith, it is brought to the goddess before the wedding ceremony.

⁸ The expression articulates a sense of deep futility. Nothing could be done.

⁹ In this sense, the Perantalu recalls the *nitya-sumangali* courtesan/devadasi, who by definition can never be widowed. See Saskia Kersenboom, (2002) *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

¹⁰ See David Knipe, (1975) *In the Image of Fire: Vedic Experiences of Heat* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 68.

¹¹ Cf. David Shulman, (1993) *The Hungry God: Hindu tales of Filicide and Devotion*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

¹² At that time, says the narrator, women did not wear blouses.

¹³ Nari Tallamma, recorded June 16, 2006.

¹⁴ *lova* = valley (Gwynn, s.v.); here, perhaps, a mountainous area of wilderness.

¹⁵ *Sri Erukamma Perantalu Caritra (Pata)*, 2006.

¹⁶ At Tirupati, an Erukala diviner mediates the marriage between the princess/goddess Padmavati and Venkatesvara; she comes to Padmavati's palace to read her fortune and thus to convince the girl's mother of the necessity for this match.

¹⁷ I am particularly indebted to Nari Tallamma, mentioned earlier, for relating parts of the Erukamma sotry.

¹⁸ Nari Tallamma of Vijinigiri tells a version of the Nari Talli story in which the conjugal family causes a breach of a canal adjacent to their fields in order to flood the *gundam* and prevent the self-immolation. Nari Talli curses the man who made the breach to turn into a stone that is still pointed out in the village.

¹⁹ Such skeptics also inhabit the narratives, as we have seen in both our major examples. On the critical role of doubt and skepticism in the story of the Rajasthani *sati* Godavari, see Lindsay Harlan, "Sati: The Story of Godavari," in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Mary Wulff (ed.), (1996) *Devi: Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 240-43.

²⁰ Mircea Eliade, (1972) *Shamanism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press p. 403.

²¹ On the metaphorical implications of cooking, see Malamoud, Charles. (1998), *Cooking the World* Delhi: Oxford University Press, , pp. 23-47.

²² See Elmore, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

²³ Cf. Don Handelman, "The Guises of the Goddess and the Transformation of the Male: Gangamma's Visit to Tirupati and the Continuum of Gender," in D. Shulman (ed.), (1995) *Syllables of Sky*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.283-337.

²⁴ See, Harlan, *op. cit.*; Paul Courtright, "Sati, Sacrifice, and Marriage: The Modernity of Tradition," in Lindsay Harlan and Paul Courtright (eds.), (1995) *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 184-203; Julia Leslie, "Suttee or Sati: Victim or Victor," in Julia Leslie, (1992) *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, pp. 175-90.

²⁵ Harlan, *op. cit.*, 240.

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