

Rivalries inside out: Personal history and Possession Ritualism in Coastal Andhra

DAVID M. KNIPE

Abstract: This paper examines the narratives of lay and professional women and men whose vocation is the ritual use of possession by a goddess, god, deceased person, or other divine power. Observation, interviews, still photography, and videography took place in the Godavari River Delta of coastal Andhra between 1980 and 2000 with the majority of interviews occurring through the 1990-2000. The focus here is on ritual rivalries in two dimensions, not only objective competitions observed and readily acknowledged among possession ritualists themselves, but also the subjective rivalries among divine powers described by ritualists as competing possessors. A comprehensive glossary of Telugu terms is appended to this essay.

This essay ¹ examines the narratives of lay and Professional women and men whose vocation is the ritual use of possession by a goddess, god, deceased person, or other divine power. Observation, interviews, still photography, and videography took place in the Godavari River Delta of coastal Andhra between 1980 and 2000 with the majority of interviews occurring through the 1990-2000.² The focus here is on ritual rivalries in two dimensions, not only objective competitions observed and readily acknowledged among possession ritualists themselves, but also the subjective rivalries among divine powers described by ritualists as competing possessors. The latter might be called inner competitions that in certain respects mirror the outer ones. First to be portrayed are outer competitions among lay folk, with Andal, Lila, Raju, and Savitri as illustrations. Then outer competitions among professionals will call upon the intertwined narratives of Bharani and Desamma. Next will be inner

competitions, with Padma's neighbourhood and classical goddesses as one example and Sankar's multiple goddesses and Virabhadras as another.³

“Possession” here is an English translation of Telugu *punakam*. Although Sanskrit appears in much of the religious vocabulary in use by educated and uneducated folk alike, the Sanskrit term *avesa*, possession, is seldom employed.⁴ *Punakam* is the experience an individual undergoes when a goddess, god or spirit of a deceased person descends upon her or him and declares its presence by taking over the body and controlling its behaviour. Every neighbourhood (*peta*) has women, men, sometimes even children known for their abilities in summoning divine beings and spirits or providing containers for uninvited visitations. An essential component of states of possession is speech or word, Telugu *vakku* and *mata*, respectively, with particular rhythmic styles such as *pati* or *sima* being characteristic of those with more experience and reputation. Possession ritualism is the use of routine or ritually controlled performances for mediumship, divination, propitiation, celebration, or other purposes, either by professionals or lay individuals.

Personal histories contributed by selected independent ritualists provide the structure of “narrative” for the purposes of this essay. Their testimonies often reveal the stamp of mythic legitimation. The occupation and preoccupation of these individuals is ritual, and the relationship between personal narrative and ritualism-as-calling discloses intriguing aspects of possession phenomena. One dimension of this intrigue is rivalry. On one hand there is external competition between ritualists striving for recognition, fame, status, clients, and authority in a mode of competition that is as old as the sacrificial rivalry (*srauta kaksa*) documented in the Vedic Samhitas before the middle of the second millennium BCE, one still evident today among ritually active Vaidika Brahmans of coastal Andhra. This possession ritualist interaction could be described as *punakam kaksa*, a rivalry that maintains those contours familiar in studies of other competitive specialists of the sacred in Hinduism and other religions. On the other hand, a less discussed type of rivalry takes place *within* the ritualist whose body may be serving as medium for more than one supernatural power—goddess, god, deified deceased child, or other visitant.

For example, one female ritualist reveals her experience of receiving on her body both the regional goddess Kanaka Durga and a “neighbourhood” goddess with a more restricted local following. (Here “neighbourhood” indicates a goddess known and revered in a defined residential area of a town or city as well as an actual rural village, and therefore supplants the often inapplicable term “village goddess” derived from *gramadevata*). The tension between these two visitants upon one

ritualist, as declared in her personal narration, reveals something about ritualism, about possession, and about the interconnectedness of neighbourhood, regional and pan-Indian *devatas*.

A related topic for consideration concerns authority. Whereas mainstream Hinduism is hierarchic, highly stratified, with more or less learned male Brahman ritualists, Vedic mantras or Sanskrit slokas, formal *devapuja*, and temple traditions, the *bhaktas* of these possession ritualists exist in a milieu that is only loosely hierarchic, vaguely stratified if not casteless, with mostly uneducated ritualists in control, more often female than male, vernacular speech, possession ritual with innovative, sometimes informal *puja*, and family *pitham* (household shrine), neighbourhood *gaddi* (possession-ritualist shrine), or private *gudi* (temple) in lieu of Brahman temple traditions. Again, personal narratives will be explored in order to learn more about the constitution of authority in ritual action and professional or lay expertise.

Possession phenomena occur to individuals in all communities, Brahman and non-Brahman, but professionalization is far more likely to occur among the latter. Out of the many broad categories of individuals vulnerable to possession in the villages, towns, and cities of the Delta three are selected for discussion here. First, there is a widespread tradition of possession by the spirits of deceased infants, children and youth, the untimely dead who have become “Virabhadra”—the god born from Siva’s uncontrollable *raudram* (rage)—and who now inhabit the ethereal community of Virabhadras in the neighbourhoods where they lived. Male Virabhadras are also known as Virudu, Viranna, or Viranna Babu, while female Virabhadras may be known as Virakanyaka, Desammakanyaka, or Jalakanyaka. Boys and girls are both represented iconically as *vibhutipallu*, small vertical “ashfruits” that continue to “ripen” and “grow” as their worship persists, their increase and intensification (from *prabalam avu*, to become strong) a sign not only of their own well-being but also the growing prosperity of the family. If such a Virabhadra possesses an individual in the family—and more frequently that is the mother of the deceased infant, child, or unmarried teenager—the common practice is to establish a small shrine (*pitham*) in the most prominent part of the home, accord daily *puja* to the Virabhadra ashfruits, and undertake a nocturnal procession (*sambaram*), complete with a ritual specialist and his troupe of musicians to take the Virabhadra ashfruits through the village or town (*uregimpu*). This *sambaram* may occur every year, every three years, or prior to auspicious occasions such as marriages and new living quarters. Possessions may occur to one or several of the *sambaram* participants during these all-night celebrations that allow the Virabhadra to declare her/himself. In a village where joint *sambarams* take place it is not uncommon for hundreds of men and women to be possessed by

their Virabhadras during a single night, and on Mahasivaratri throughout the Delta the same holds true. There may also be possessions by Virabhadras at home by the *pitham* during *puja*, or on spontaneous other occasions (see further, Knipe 1989: 123ff; 2001: 352-56; 2003b: 562-65).

It should be observed here that initial intensive research in Virabhadra folklore, rites, and symbols in the 1980s amassed possession data in that direction. Subsequent research in the 1990s revealed the true extent of householder possessions in general, including possessions by pan-Indian or neighbourhood goddesses, with a range of goddesses from *saumya*, gentle, to *ghora*, fierce.⁵ It became apparent that the number of householders subject to possession states is astonishingly high, and the phenomenon occurs within families of all communities as a central component of religious life.

A second, much smaller category of individuals subject to possession involves those individuals who 1) maintain a *pitham*, 2) are routinely possessed by Virabhadras and other divine beings, and 3) have a neighbourhood reputation for speech (*vakku*) out of possession states while remaining lay folk. This second category is predominantly but by no means exclusively female and late middle-aged. Even though no fees or other remunerations are involved, rivalries among such individuals may at times be intense, complicated, and often revelatory of the religious experiences nested within possession states. In brief, four householders will serve as examples for the purposes of this essay, three women and one man.

A third category, also small in number, involves an historic shift from household *pitham* to professional home shrine (*gaddi* or *gadde*) and, in some cases, an additional upward shift to private temple (*gudi*). A *gaddi* becomes known as a place of communication (*pati* or *sima*) with the world of spirits and deities; a *gudi* is such a place expanded to include deities permanently installed and not just on call by the ritualist (further on *gaddi*, Knipe 2004b: 436ff). In other words, there can be, if the possessed individual desires, or feels compelled spiritually to oblige divine beings and/or the pressure of an increasing number of would-be clients, the professionalization of possession ritualism in order to serve routinely with spirit mediumship those who come to a home shrine or private temple. From many case studies that have been compiled, another four individuals have been selected as illustrations for this essay, again three women and one man.

Thus, to summarize essential background information, narratives—in their own words translated from Telugu—appear from eight individuals routinely subject to possession, four non-professionals and four professionals. Omitted here are those professionals or non-

professionals of various castes who are possessed on annual festival days, for example, while carrying the goddess to manifestation in the neighbourhood, or witnessing that dramatic event. Concentration instead will be upon routine personal, familial, household possessions within specific neighbourhoods. Of the four lay or non-professional households selected as illustrations, two are stable family-only *pitham*-s, one family *pitham* is a potential *gaddi*, and the fourth is an extremely elaborate *pitham* actually functioning as *gaddi*, but one without clientele. That is to say, the householder-ritualist reports results of selected mediumship but with no remuneration for his services or public access to his *pitham*. Of the four professional examples chosen here, two are stable *gaddi*-s hosted by householders, two are *gaddis* whose ritualists intended to expand to *gudi*-s (private temples); one of the latter ritualists is a widow, the other was an unmarried child, now deceased.

2. rivalry (kaksa)—lay and professional

There exist in the Godavari Delta region known as Konasima several remnants of a once thriving system of Vaidika Brahman *agraharam*-s. Only a few families survive, and at present writing no *ahitagni* still maintains three fires and performs the twice-daily *agnihotra* (although two qualified individuals intend to set fires soon). Only a half century ago, at the height of *sruta* sacrificial activity in the 1950s and 1960s, there was active competition within and without the Delta, sometimes verging on the age-old, even acrimonious rivalry known as *sruta kaksa*. This agonistic display of ritual one-upmanship, one that Jan Heesterman has cleverly explored in ancient India⁶, is an intense competition to perform sacrifices and necessarily to learn the supporting texts for eligibility. It may occur between residents of an *agraharam* or between neighbouring *agraharam*-s, in which case kinship (brotherly enmity, for one example) may be involved. Vestigial *sruta kaksa* may be an explanation for several features of Vaidika Brahman activity in the Delta, including a remarkable revival in the 1970s of the use of Atharvaveda mantras for *abhicara* incantations and other personal goals.

Of course, there is no dearth of competitive activity in the culture at large. Serious rivalry is one of the driving wheels in the dynamics of South Asian culture, with everything a weapon of combat from diet to dowry, from language to lakhs spent on a ritual. Coastal Andhra is not left out of this picture, as Bruce Tapper's 1987 ethnographic study of village life in western Visakhapatnam District has made clear. But what is invited here is reflection first upon possession ritual rivalry, then upon rivalry *within* the possession ritualist. On the level of popular culture, parallels to the elite level of Vaidika Brahman *sruta kaksa* might be useful

inventions as heuristic devices: *puja kaks*, *sambaram kaks*, and *punakam kaks*. With *puja kaks* a well-known arena is entered, the frequently voiced declaration of competitive edge: this *puja* is larger, more sumptuous, more frequent, more authentic, better received, more fruitful than those others. Or, our family's growth, prosperity, wealth, well-being, intensification is the result of our performance of the most elaborate *puja* in the neighbourhood. In *sambaram kaks* there are public displays of ritual activity, usually family or multifamily day or night processions through the village, town or city, colourful, often noisy parades led by professional ritualists and hired troupes of musicians, sometimes approaching the scale of mobile circuses with dancers, martial arts, acrobats and other performers. Ritual rivalry has now moved out of the house and into the streets with every opportunity to declare spiritual energy, moral propensity and financial capacity undergirding the performance. The frequency with which the family performs a *sambaram* (twice a year, every year, every three years) is a statement, of course, not only of devotional intensity but also of economic well being. In the third term, *punakam kaks*, there surfaces a defining title: *rivalry inside out*. Competition here may involve not just rivalry with other possessed individuals, professional or non-professional, but also competition among those supernatural entities seeking a human body as temporary container and voice for *vakku, mata, pati, or sima*.

3. Outer competitions: four examples of lay folk

Before turning to examine inner competitions, illustrations of this exterior rivalry among lay folk may be useful. A first example involves two middle-aged urban Padmasali (Weaver) women married to two brothers and both possessed by the same deceased younger brother of their respective husbands. This involves the complexities of a joint family in which the mother had 16 children, eight boys and eight girls. Three boys and three girls died in infancy, childhood or youth. One of the males died in 1977 at the age of 20, leaving his widow and little son in care of the joint family. He began to possess some of his surviving siblings, insisting against all objections that he was Virabhadra until, in a highly unusual maneuver (since Virabhadras should arrive only from the collective unmarried deceased), he was installed in the household *pitham* and worshipped. Recourse to astrologers provided explanations that persons born under certain stars are exceptions in the case of untimely death. In any case, the clamorous spirit of this 20-year-old deceased young man enabled him to join the company of family Virabhadras.⁷

The eldest male of the surviving ten children in this family married Andal, who has provided this narrative at great length. She is an attractive,

youthful looking woman in her early forties who never went to school but raised five children and now has a house full of grandchildren. She has worshipped, and been possessed by, this family Virabhadra, her husband's deceased younger brother, for twelve years, and she and her family credit him for their health and prosperity. Daily *puja* is performed at the *pitham* and they routinely take out a street procession (*sambaram*). "If I sit for ten minutes," says Andal, "Virabhadra will come."

The wider family dilemma is revealed by additional information. This household was established only four years earlier in a shift outside the joint family household, a move that left behind the husband's widowed sister, Lila, in the ancestral home. Lila, the same age as Andal, worships and is possessed by the same Virabhadra, her own younger brother who died at 20, and she maintains the original *pitham* where he was installed. She also takes him out of the house for street processions, but because of the bitter enmity between them, the two household *sambarams* are mutually exclusive. Lila complains with a stunning charge that Andal has "divided god in two," first by moving out and—when Lila refused to release her brother's spirit—then by constructing an "illegitimate *pitham*." As a consequence, says Lila, the *vibhutipallu*, the "ash-fruits" as iconic forms of Virabhadra, have become light, weightless in her *pitham*, due to their lack of *sakti* following Andal's withdrawal.

Andal, for her part, insists that correct ritual procedure is to have the *pitham* in the house of the eldest son, namely, her house, and that her sister-in-law, Lila, should give up the original *pitham* and leave its ashfruits in the river or in a temple, thus ceasing her meddling *puja*. Andal and her husband defend their move, and their independent ritualism, with recourse to the authority of important dreams in which this Virabhadra reported his desire to move. "He did not want to stay with her," says Andal, "he wants to be with me. He likes me. My husband and I both had many dreams of him. We were both seeing him in front of our eyes and we decided to establish a *pitham* for him."

Confirmation of the correctness of ritual procedure comes to Andal from two goddesses whom she routinely worships, Durga and Santosima. Both of them told her that she and her independent family would now begin to prosper with a proper *pitham* for their Virabhadra and regular worship. It is Durgamma who has possessed Andal for twelve years, the same length of time as her Virabhadra, and Durgamma whom she credits for giving her the power of possession speech. In fact, for all nine days of Navaratri she becomes Durga, is called Mata, and is, according to her husband, "not one of us." During those nine days people come from the surrounding neighbourhood seeking answers to questions from Durga. Her primary and most powerful possessor, however, is the 20-year-old

Virabhadra, and every Monday when he is “on her body” people seek her out to gain news of their own Virabhadras. She accepts no fee for this service since her household shrine is still a *pitham*. Clearly, however, a *gaddi*, professional shrine, is glimpsed in the future and Andal herself occasionally drops that word.

Lila’s situation would be virtually identical to that of Andal except for the tragic fact that she was widowed 27 years ago when she was a teenager, left to raise a boy and a girl. Her husband was killed, she says, by *cetabadi*, sorcery. Like Subbalaksmi, she has had no schooling and, her children married off, she now lives in her natal home as an “outside” insider. She has been possessed by her brother for 16 years, four years longer than Andal. On Mondays she worships Virabhadra and he comes onto her to sing piercingly. He reveals details on one hand of his birth from the *jata*-s of Siva, the *tandava* dance of destruction, and the defeat of Daksa and, on the other hand, his birth from Mother Earth. In a different voice, when not in his Pauranika mode, Virabhadra describes how his sister (Lila), whom he calls by a special pet name, can predict all future events because he himself has informed her. Like Andal, Lila has elaborate, vivid dreams, and spins them into episodes of mythic proportions. This capacity brings people to Lila with various requests, but again, like her sister-in-law, she accepts no fees. She has a female friend of more than 30 years who acts as intercessor and relays questions to shield Lila from pollution by the public, by a menstruating woman in particular. At times she is possessed not by her own Virabhadra but by those of other families. Yet again, like Andal, for the nine days of Durgapuja she becomes Durgamma and answers questions as the goddess.

This tangled tale has been radically simplified with omission of all details of others of the six long-deceased siblings, female and male, who live a split life with these two; intense rivalry over the minutiae of ritual procedures that lead, depending on their degree of exactitude, either to impoverishment or riches; the consequences of having hired a ritualist with an evil eye; and other fascinating particulars. But in this brief account of an extended family there is a clear instance of two rivalrous women subject to possessions, apparently in a race to see who moves first from *pitham* to *gaddi*, the widow or the auspicious married woman (*punistri*).

The final two illustrations of outer competition among lay folk will be summarized quite briefly. Raju is a Golla, in his fifties, married with grown children, an example of a willful, meticulous, extremely disciplined householder who is not subject to arbitrary possessions, as once was the case early in his life. Insisting that Gollas are Ksatriyas, he is invested with the sacred thread, and through his detailed and lengthy daily rituals, using Sanskrit mantras, it appears to be Raju who is in control of the

family Virabhadra and his chosen personal goddesses, Raju who permits them to be on his body in circumstances that he designs. It is a remarkable instance of tantric control, although he will hear no talk of any tantric lineage behind his ritual repertoire. His *pitham* is one of the most elaborate ones in the district, his annual *sambaram* on the two nights of Sivaratri is the most spectacular in his town, and there is always a waiting list of the faithful who seek him out for healing amulets, news of their Virabhadras, and *panchangam* advice, not to mention scores of *sadhus* who depend upon him as benefactor. But he has absolutely no aspirations of turning his private ritual room into a *gaddi*. The Virabhadra, his deceased older brother, seems virtually to be in his custody and he has established a familial rapport with the Mother and the Father, Amma (classical Durga) and Siva, almost as a mantrika who can respectfully but casually summon these folks he knows so well.

A final example of outer competition among lay folk is Savitri, a Reddi woman in her late fifties who lives with her husband and several of her married sons in a pleasant open suburban compound. Savitri and four of her female neighbours of various castes pool their resources in joint *sambarams* for their personal Virabhadras, since all of these women maintain *pithams* for their children who died 30 to 50 years ago. In Savitri's case, she lost her first son at the age of one year. Nine years later, on the seventh day after the birth of her third child, another boy, she was possessed by that first son. "Everyone told me it was just *dhuli-gali* (dust and wind, evil spirits)," she says of that day nearly four decades ago, "but I learned that it was Virabhadra." All the women in this circle of five extended families tell similar stories, and all employ the same ritualist. They are almost always either in the midst of a *sambaram* or scheduling the next one. Savitri dances heroically in *virangam* throughout the night for each procession, but like most women who routinely do *sambarams* she has an extremely fine possession trigger and has her first son come on to her if she hears distant *sambaram* drums, accidentally smells unlighted *sambrani* incense crystals, or is simply engaged in conversation about her Virabhadra. Recently two of her grown children who had previously scoffed at her frequent melodramatic states have now been possessed by this god, their own elder sibling.

This Virabhadra, her first possessor, continues to be primary, although Savitri has also experienced the descent of Kanaka Durga and Venkatesvara upon her body. She has no desire to expand her private *pitham* beyond its present familial and intimate neighbourhood borders. The nocturnal dance-dramas, these very public displays of contact with the spirit world, comprise a sufficient forum for her ritual catharses. Rivalry occurs only in her vociferous condemnations of other ritualists, a frequent topic of conversation in which her chosen ritualist is happy to join. Savitri

maintains ardent devotion to her male ritualist, and their dialogues, although seemingly innocent of guile, are heavily loaded with sexual overtones. The two of them are a ritual dance team for this long-running performance.

4. Outer competitions: two examples of professionals: Bharani and Desamma

Turning now to examples of outer competitions among professionals there is a brief tracking of the careers of two individuals who have already made the move from *pitham* to *gaddi*. That is to say, the experience of personal possessions have now become for them the basis for professional careers as mediums or diviners, ritual specialists who may be relied upon for *pati*, informational “speech” from the spirit world gained through possession ritualism on designated days of the week or even on demand. Here is *punakam kaksa* in abundance, but these examples are never predictable, never without the drama of surprising tension and resolution.

First, there are two adjacent villages and two females at opposite ends of the life-cycle, Bharani and Desamma, the former a Kapu widow in her fifties, the latter a prepubescent Setibaliya girl perhaps 12 years of age. Comparatively, in terms of possession experience, Bharani is the seasoned adept, with many years in her *gaddi*, Desamma the neophyte, with only a few months of intense possession experience before she suddenly, inexplicably died in March 1997. But both were professionals with every indication that the upstart child-diviner might displace the older woman and draw away a significant portion of her clientele. Bharani is a widow, like Lila, with one son and two married daughters. Many decades ago a son became Virabhadra at the age of six months. She runs a small grocery shop from the porch of her house and invites clients, most of them Kapus, into a *gaddi* she has maintained since the late 1980s. Sometimes it is Durga who comes first onto her, but usually it is her Virabhadra son. Male and female clients’ Virabhadras, Jalakanyakas, and other spirits of the dead (including the timely dead) come on to her and she sings a *sima*-like rhythmic song punctuated by sharp intakes of breath, hiccups and belches. Bharani sits in a bright red sari, incense fuming, a large red *bottu* on a yellow turmeric circle, many red bangles, a baton in one hand. When clients and onlookers realize she is possessed and that a host of the dead has gathered about her, a kind of spirit-*darbar* in session, all press forward saying “Oh! They are here! They have come! Go and ask!” As observed in many *gaddis*, a woman friend accompanies her and serves as medium-for-the-medium, an interlocutor rephrasing questions and answers each way, facilitating, interpreting, and commenting during every session. Clients laying out their various problems at this *gaddi* may be docile, submissive, entirely agreeable to

the dictates of Durga or a Virabhadra via Bharani's mouth, and take leave by declaring their complete faith and trust in Virabhadra and Durgamma Talli (goddess). The male or female Virabhadra seems always to be treated with awe, respect and affection. With the goddess, on the other hand, clients may be fractious and argumentative, even bursting out when hearing a diagnosis believed to be off the mark: "No, you are lying, goddess Durgamma!" Or becoming confrontational: "There has been something in my stomach for some time. Perhaps it is *you*, Durgamma, causing my problem!" To which Durga may reply in fiery anger: "There is an ignorant fool in your family who is speaking ill of me!" and the accuser falls silent to ponder this observation.

Bharani's narrative of possession begins with her middle years, when she herself was a *gaddi* client searching for reasons why her own children had not yet conceived children. For three years this went on until one day when out on the lanes she approached the scene of a goat sacrifice, heard Madiga drums, and suddenly the goddess meant for a woman ritualist at this sacrifice jumped onto her and Bharani took lighted camphor in the palm of her hand and began to spout possession-speech. "For five days that Jaganmata was on me," relates Bharani, "and she placed my body in a sitting posture like a corpse. My real body she took to heaven (*svargam*), to Kailasa, like eternal (*nitya*) Parvati. Everyone came and offered *puja* to my dead body. But every split second I was Parvati off taking a bath in the Krishna and Godavari Rivers." Interestingly enough, on Mount Kailasa "Parvati has a Vira[bhadra] *gaddi*," and it is here during her five-day celestial journey that Bharani received her training, directly from, but also *as* Parvati.

All of this happened about 1989. By 1997 Bharani had many clients, most in the habit of "shopping around" among diviners and *gaddi*-s. Bharani's next-door neighbor, a middle-aged Mangali (Barber) woman, says she goes to all possible *pati*-places within traveling distance, trusts none completely. "Wherever we go some are true, some are not true. There is no one place where everything is absolutely true." She finds Virabhadra and Durga available in all of these places. When asked what Durga will reply to her in any visited *gaddi*, she says happily "Oh, about 30 lies!" But then she softens and confesses she consults her next-door neighbor Bharani about once a week. "Of ten things she says, one will come true. When Durgamma is on her, she speaks very well. She is full of *kanti* (brilliance, light). As long as Amma is on her she is full of *ankaram* [Telugu colloquial form of *ahankaram*, in this context, passionate conviction, a powerful arrogance]. What takes place is *kantiga* (brilliant, glowing) *puja*. But once Durga is out and she becomes awake, then the things she says are untruths."

Bharani contemplated a shift from *gaddi* to *gudi*, from her small household shrine that accommodates only half a dozen clients to a larger private temple, possibly because of pressure from a little girl named Desamma whose sudden popularity in an adjacent village allowed her family to plan precisely such an upward shift. Desamma was a hyperactive Setibalija girl about 12. Her family cultivates five acres of tobacco, cotton and vegetables as well as paddy in the beautiful hill country in the northern part of the district. According to her mother, only a few months before she suddenly died she was sick and was taken to “many” doctors. “Finally the goddess spoke through her, saying: ‘You think I’m sick, but I’m not. From now on *puja* and other rituals must be done. I’m there on her. So far you don’t know the real truth.’ From that time,” continues the mother, “my daughter was already speaking (doing *pati*) and it (possession) was coming. People came from all over. She was answering their questions. People who were sick, in trouble, with problems, all kinds of people.” When asked during a filming session when Desamma was active if there were plans for her to marry, the mother replied: “The rage of Amma is on her. During that time there can be no marriage.”

Every Tuesday and Friday Desamma sat in her *gaddi* doorway and took a series of clients, people who walked from far off villages to see her, each offering incense to her before receiving three or four minutes of attention. She addressed every man or occasional boy as *tammudu* (younger brother), every female as *celli* (younger sister, informal). As in the *gaddi* of Bharani, a woman standing to her right commented and acted as interlocutor, rephrasing statements, adding suggestions and hints regarding the problem of the stolen watch, dreams of biting snakes, a death threat, body weakness, a missing photo being used for sorcery, the Virabhadra who, sadly, has disappeared from someone’s dreams. The tiny girl with the giant red *bottu* was bold as brass, intimidated by no one, glaring ferociously at any bystander’s untoward comments. She had no schooling and her Telugu was rough and irregular, made even more cryptic by her clipped, high-pitched, rapid-fire pattern of speech. But it was extraordinary to see the fawning response of devotees to her rough solutions, or to the unpolished whirling and swaying prior to sitting in the *gaddi*. People attributed high emotion to her every movement, and shouted warnings to one another as she ran and jumped like any twelve-year-old. “Amma! ‘Talli!’ ‘Bhavani!’ ‘Watch out!’ ‘She’ll stamp on you!’ ‘Don’t give us that much *agraham* [meaning *ankaram*]. Reduce it!’ ‘Even three people cannot hold her!’” Fascination for a deity who appears as a child (*bala*) is well known. Most possession ritualists say they have seen a child goddess, often dressed in white, and they have heard her ankle bells when she secretly visited in the night. The erratic, coltish, unstable

behavior of the child Desamma enchanted her village and created a cult following for this new *avatara*.

In the young Desamma no inner rivalry was seen, no mention of goddesses or Virabhadras contending for her body and voice. Nor did this novice express a need to set herself above others. She seemed simply to accept herself as she was, a vessel of the goddess subject to constant visitations. It was the established ritualists who sensed the raw power, the virgin *sakti* of this child goddess who flowered suddenly in their midst. One of the most remarkable features of Desamma's story is her confrontation with the older, established possession ritualist, Bharani. They met outside Bharani's *gaddi* when Desamma came with relatives for shopping in the market. Although the event was only "yesterday," a third-party witness narrated the encounter as a myth from the ancient past, a narrative that reveals much about the inner dynamics of possession ritualism. Here is her account, in which the witness refers to Bharani simply as "the woman" in the story:⁸

This woman asked Desamma 'Who are you?' and Desamma said 'Hey! You are asking who I am? Don't you know who I am?' and the woman said 'You are *bala cellelu* (little baby sister), so come in and be seated.' Desamma went in and sat cross-legged. As soon as Desamma sat in that position, Durga possessed that woman. And Desamma said, sadly: 'Why are you doing this to me, Durga? Don't you see the disruption in my home?' The answer came [to Desamma from Bharani as Durga]: 'Because you are my baby sister, still an infant at your mother's breast. Don't grieve. In years to come I will make your parents proud of you. As for you, you must be on guard, vigilant, careful. I will take care of you, look after you.' Then this woman asked Desamma to sit in *pati*. 'Be part of my *gaddi*!' Desamma said 'No, I came here to do shopping.' And the woman laughed, cajoled, challenged her to do *pati*. Little Desamma backed off. Then the woman gave Desamma a full set of red bangles, told her always to wear red bangles, no others. Desamma took off her white bangles and gave them to the woman. Before leaving, Desamma was given *pasupu-kunkam* (turmeric-vermillion) and was told important things. And at that time some woman appeared. She had been on her way here to Desamma's village, but heard that Desamma happened to be at this woman's house. She wanted *pati* here and now instead of going to Desamma's village. Desamma refused, said 'Come to my place.' The woman said 'I'm in trouble, it's a crisis!' Desamma again refused. Then Durga [Bharani] said to this woman who wanted to hear Desamma's *pati*: 'I know you have come to hear her *cilaka-palukulu* (parrot-talk). But don't worry, I'll make her come back. Next Saturday.' Two or three other people made similar requests, but she refused. When I reported this to my husband he was angry. 'They could as well come to our village!' he said.

This unsolicited account is multilayered. Ammavaru informs Desamma that she has caught her for good reason. Although her parents may be unhappy now, that is temporary and they will soon be proud of her. In fact, that prediction was correct. The narrative also establishes Desamma as an independent, self-standing and fully accredited replica of Durga, in no need of an “elder sister” guru. The witness also reports Bharani’s attempt at co-option, Bharani’s invitation to Desamma to be a part of her well-established *gaddi* and not a rival one in the next village liable to siphon off clients to a younger, more powerful manifestation of *sakti*. Bharani labels Desamma’s speech as *cilaka-palukulu*, parrot-talk, a beautifully triple-sided metaphor. All possession ritualists are parroting the speech of goddesses or Virabhadras, and Desamma is now one of them. *Cilaka-palukulu* is also the sweet and seductive talk of a young girl, and Desamma is incontestably seducing Bharani’s clientele. But third, *cilaka-palukulu* are the half-intelligible words of an infant only beginning to learn the mother tongue. Desamma is wittily labeled here a parrot who as yet, lacking the voice of experience, has no idea of what she is saying.

Bharani’s attempt to force Desamma into *pati* away from her *gaddi* was correctly rejected by the child-goddess, despite the whining of insistent clients. Desamma knew she must be seated in her household shrine for such possession encounters. Failing to seduce Desamma into the role of younger partner, Bharani changed tactics and revealed “important things,” evidently secrets of the trade, such as knowledge of the red bangles. The narrative testifies to goddess-wisdom descending a generation. *Pasupu-kunkam* was exchanged, indicating an acceptance by Bharani of this child in equal standing, thereby legitimating, at least in the eyes of this narrator-witness, Desamma’s high status. As it was reported, the elder woman’s challenging, then nurturing character was touching. Here was the pre-pubertal *sakti*, not yet budding breasts, full potential, no sexual dissipation of power. Durga had caught her, was powerful in her, and for a brief time this parrot-talking child was well on her way to wider fame as living goddess. Unfortunately, her sudden mysterious death brought suspicion of *cetabadi* (sorcery) and—at least in the view of her parents, friends, and many villagers—recognition of a jealous Bharani as the most likely source.

5. Inner competitions: Padma

All but one of the case studies highlighted thus far involve possessions by more than one deity. Only Desamma was possessed by Durga alone. Had she lived longer there would no doubt have been greater versatility in possessing spirits. The goddess Durga possessed Andal and gave her

the gift of sacred speech, but Andal employs that faculty primarily to express the desires of her main god (*devudu*), her Virabhadra. Raju, for his part, enjoys the company of both Mother and Father, Durga and Siva, the family Virabhadra having been subsumed in his own experience into the transcendent being of Mahadeva. For Andal and Raju there is no conflict between Durga and Virabhadra, Ammavaru and Siva.

A declared rivalry among those spirits and deities seeking to possess a given human body is another matter entirely, and that is the subject of a final set of illustrations from the field. They are Padma and Sankar. First is Padma, who is voluble in details of being possessed by eight different goddesses, with many others mentioned by name. She has always lived in the same urban area, her husband's work, contrary to marital custom, having brought him from a village to her urban birthplace. She was in school to 5th class but insists she can write only protective syllables, not her name. A Reddi, now in her fifties and anxious about heart problems, she is no stranger to trauma. Padma has a daughter, mentally disabled and with failing eyesight. Another teenage daughter committed suicide in front of their house following a quarrel. She has no surviving sons. But she maintains contentment living with a devoted husband, surrounded by grandchildren and two married daughters who now seem inclined toward their mother's profession. Some thirty years ago, before these ordeals, she fell into a nine-day state of slumber—a *navaratri*-style shamanic death-and-rebirth experience similar to the five-day journey to heaven narrated by Bharani—and awoke with her *vidya* (knowledge) as a gift from Ammavaru. That initial Ammavaru was Kannamma Talli, the neighbourhood goddess closest to her birthplace, where indeed Padma still lives.⁹

“As child after child is born,” says Padma, “so goddess after goddess follows me,” and thus Durga became the second goddess to come on to her body. For some twenty years Padma put on the Bhavani *mala* (garland) and went to Kanaka Durga's hilltop temple in Vijayawada.¹⁰ As Padma describes it in her fluent narrative, Durga initially negotiated with Kannamma for just a tiny space beside Padma, a space no larger than the head of an ant. Kanaka Durga beguiled Padma, stating that she is the older sister of Kannamma Talli and should be there. “If Kannamma Talli is your right hand,” entreated Durga, “I will be your left.” But Kannamma quickly became jealous, particularly when Padma, during all the days of *Durgapuja*, not only turned her thoughts to Durga but voraciously devoured foul-smelling meat. Realizing that Kannamma was grieving, Durga came up with a solution. “To please her,” Durga recommended to Padma, “on Kannamma's days you should be completely in her custody.” But Padma had doubts, wanted proof of the correctness of this procedure. “I will not go to *pantulu* (Brahman priests),” she insists. So she went to a

goddess temple where a Brahman *pujari* happened to be reciting mantras. Adisakti possessed her, allowed her to hear errors, brazenly shouted “Hey grandson, you are reciting mistakes!” and then gave Padma speech in the form of Vedic mantras, all recited perfectly. This was the confirmation Padma had sought and she now settled for dual goddess cohabitation, secure in the knowledge that this had been approved by a transcendent Adisakti, who is explained by Padma as a triple goddess, all-inclusive of Laksmi, Parvati, and Sarasvati, yet somehow a unity above all three and greater than the sum of her parts.

But the narrative has only begun, and here it must be brief. A fourth goddess entered Padma’s rich life on the occasion of a visit to her husband’s place to the north in forested mountain country. There she was possessed again by Adisakti who revealed stunning news: Padma’s mother-in-law’s mother-in-law had once worshipped a forest goddess (*konda devudu*) by the name of Kattamma Talli. That same Kattamma Talli was still in a corner of the ancestral house, unhappy and rejected. This forest goddess now wanted to go back south to town with Adisakti and Padma. Padma associates Kattamma Talli with the great goddess Kali. Similarly, when visiting Razole near the Bay of Bengal she received the feared goddess Musamma, the “Old Mother” who is old (*musali*) but also a sixteen-year-old girl. “There was no one there to receive her, speak for her,” explained Padma out of her maternal attitude toward neglected goddesses.

Padma also speaks of Musamma’s older sister Sattemma, Asiremma, and many others. A summation of her ongoing narrative involves five pan-Indian goddesses: Durga (melded with regional Kanaka Durga), Kali, and the wives of the *trimurti*, Laksmi, Parvati, and Sarasvati (who are also included within the transcendent Adisakti) plus an expanding assortment of neighbourhood goddesses beginning with Kannamma Talli. They are her helping spirits, guiding her, but some of the fiercer ones also ready to thrash anyone who threatens her. On Padma’s behalf they constantly probe for enemies disguised as clients. “Today,” she says, “if I beckon, Kattamma Talli will respond right away. As you see my grandchildren all around me here, so are the goddesses all around me.” What started out as rivalry, a persistent Kanaka Durga inserting herself into a tiny space beside a Padma already subject to visitations by a resentful Kannamma, has now become a relatively compatible community of feminine powers. Padma conveys the intensity and multiplicity of these powers during Navaratri with striking images of uncontrollable children and lice:

“All these goddesses will be in my house like children on the rampage. Tiny children ...crawling all over us when we are sleeping. All those nine days...

I let my hair down, I run my fingers through my hair [she demonstrates] and lice and goddesses fall to the ground like flower petals. You find them in full bloom on the creeper all of a sudden in the morning, and so do the goddesses come—Somamma, Kannamma, Mutyalamma, Nukamma, Sattamma, Polamma, Prithivisakti. Only in those days do I have lice, never at other times. They filter through my fingers for all nine days. All the goddesses are there, *kurulu tandavam*, dancing violently in my hair. And they swing. They drop continuously from my hair. They should never be crushed! If you try to do that your thumb will swell up”.¹¹

Padma’s professional life is structured upon ritual, and the secret ritual knowledge—*rahasyam* is her word—received in the *vidya* from the goddesses enables her to serve others. *Seva*, service, is her constant self-definition. For one example, on *padayami*, the first of the nine days of *puja* for Durga at Navaratri, she serves some twenty households for the ritual lowering of the goddess and setting up the *kalasam*, the three-in-one goddesses or Ammavarulu, a blouse-piece on a coconut on a metal pot, each goddess the subject of a marriage performance (*kalyanam*) before the three (Lakshmi, Parvati, Sarasvati) become one (Adisakti). She returns to each of these twenty families on the ninth day of lifting the goddess. She performs the same ritual more elaborately in her own house on *amavasya* day. A second example of her ritual outreach to the community is name-giving or *namadheya* as she calls it. She chooses an *aksara* from a goddess’ name so the child is “authentic” and liable to obtain *phala* (fruit) from life. Deceased children’s spirits are incorporated into her *gaddi* for daily attention. She “seals” the bodies of clients from outside interference by giving a *bottu* forehead mark, and “writes” an *aksara* on metal talismans or protective amulets. She consecrates new dwellings by embodying Ammavarulu for first entry, and frequently goes to homes to perform *bagucetalu*, rituals of counter-sorcery.

All of this outside ritual activity is in addition to her routine service in her household *gaddi* equipped with a tray of three *vibhutipallu* and two *garaga* pots topped with mango leaves. She lets her hair down and holds a lime-tipped sword as she goes into highly animated possession speech, not in the *sima*-style singing employed by Bharani, but a flatter speech interrupted by sharp gulps of breath, hiccups, belches and cries. Virabhadra and Venkatesvara may come to her, she says, “but Ammavarulu won’t let other gods take control of my head, won’t let them climb on. Amma herself comes and speaks.”

But outside of her *gaddi* the most significant public office currently held by Padma occurs on goddess festival nights when she supervises blood sacrifices, preserves their mysteries by veiling them from public

view, and reads signs left by the fingers of the goddess who has drunk the blood offering. April 1998 proved to be a turning point in her career with the centenary festival for Kannamma Talli's New Temple (the old seventeenth-century temple had been completely surrounded by railway yards in the 1890s). Resolving a decades-long feud with Madhavi, a widowed devotee of the goddess Mutyalamma and rival possession ritualist in the same neighbourhood, Padma consented to participate in the centenary and share the glory of Kannamma Talli possession. The co-stars, Padma and Madhavi, stunned a crowd of 30,000 by emerging in pure white saris, enormous red *bottus*, and wild-eyed rage as they raced through retreating mobs from one neighbourhood *polimera* (border) to the other. They were joined by other women *ganacaris* in a ferocious *thiasos*-like storm, biting the heads off chickens at the borders and depositing them in the temple, Laksmi, the temple *pujari*, among them.

When four male goats were cut just before midnight, the *pata potu* (certified male victim) first among them, Padma, Madhavi, Laksmi, and Padma's eldest daughter became in the midst of the noise and frenzy a solid white sari-screen to shield Kannamma Talli from the crowd as she hungrily pounced on her desired blood. Devotees scooped blood in their hands to offer at the feet of the goddess and to make *bottus* as drums, flutes, and ululations alerted her to fresh food. Padma's brother and daughter left a brimming terracotta bowl of blood at Kannamma Talli's feet, then closed the doors and backed away. It remained for Padma to diagnose the coagulated blood in the bowl at daybreak, the tiny bubbles called "pearls"¹² and marks of her dragged fingers being a favorable, pleased response and indication of forthcoming prosperity. No pearls and watery blood would have signified stability, nothing prosperous, nothing calamitous. Reflecting on her renewed public role embodying Kannamma Talli, Padma observed immediately after the goat sacrifice: "Life is meaningful only in this experience."

6. Inner competitions: Sankar

A final case study is Sankar, a Reddi caste householder living with a wife and two sons, no daughters, burdened by no child loss and therefore unblest by a live-in Virabhadra or Virakanyaka. With less than two years of school, Sankar is proud to declare he has only "thumb" (for signing) as his entire education is out of "Amma Sastram." When he was five years old his parents moved to the Delta from Visakhapatnam District, bringing with them the family goddess, Mahalaksmamma, a local Mahalaksmi whom Sankar also calls Maridi-Mahalaksmamma. His family was opposed to his childhood fascination with goddess festivals and he was repeatedly beaten and publicly censured for leaving school. He ran

away for as much as ten or more days. “The goddess had an eye for me,” he says, “and dragged me out onto the street. At that time my mind could never stay in one place. I felt that ants and centipedes were crawling all over my body.” He describes Mahalaksmi first coming on him at age 14. “When she descended onto me she aligned herself perfectly with my body.” Possessions continued, most dramatically when he volunteered to carry on his head Mahalaksmi’s pot (*ghata*) in her festival processions. “The experience is trembling, shivering, drowsiness, weeping, ecstasy.” Like Padma, he endured censure, family and neighbors saying he had *unmadam*, dementia, or was just faking it. At an early age he became a goddess ritualist and established the *gaddi* he has now maintained for forty years. “I became captive to her. I did not want to marry, but she insisted. So I got married on my own,” i.e. without parental decision.

All the professional ritualists interviewed for this research claim they never had a guru, their rituals being solely “goddess-instructed.” Padma, however, remarked in an unguarded moment one day after years of conversations that she had worn out her sandals walking the kilometre between her house and the *gaddi* of Satyam, a ritualist approximately her own age, as gregarious and articulate as Padma but with less explosive energy, and with sufficient advantage in experience for Padma to seek his counsel. He remains the only competitor she respects. Just so, Sankar revealed, also after years of discussions in his *gaddi*, that a relative maintained a nearby *gaddi* when he was a teenager. She was about 30 then, a devotee of Mutyalamma, and he saw her frequently. After Sankar became a successful ritualist, *punakam kaksa* emerged and they were never again on speaking terms. Sankar cites a list of goddesses who possess him, including Mahalaksmi, Durgamma, Satteramma, Gangamma, Nukalamma at Sankranti, and others, but he will not mention Mutyalamma.

When his uncle died, young Sankar inherited the family Virabhadra *pitham* with its three ashfruits representing Sankar’s father’s brother, his mother’s brother, and his own younger brother. All three possessed him, and Sankar now had Virabhadras competing for attention with the household goddess Mahalaksmi. This *pitham* was incorporated into his *gaddi*, housing everybody, and Sankar’s clients multiplied, particularly after the death of the most popular *gaddi*-person in town, a tall, striking Kapu man with a devoted following. Shortly thereafter the three male Virabhadras of Sankar’s ancestral *pitham* were demoted by an 18-year-old Kapu girl whose photo now stands prominently on a shelf of his *gaddi*. Upon her death and appearance to her parents as Virakanyaka she was established in their household *pitham*, but soon announced to her family that she wished to move into Sankar’s *gaddi* and be his helping spirit. Although she was no relative, from a different caste, and by no

means the first to possess him, she became regarded by Sankar as his Mahasakti, to share top billing along with Mahalaksmi, ahead of his own family Virabhadras, Durga, Venkatesvara, and all the Virabhadras and Virakanyakas of his clients. There are erotic undercurrents, this astonishingly beautiful unmarried girl having left her parents to enter the warm, glittering, incensed private space of Sankar's *gaddi*, a closet in full regalia, just large enough for Sankar to squeeze in, sit down, and sing his trademark *sima*-style possession-speech, much like that of Bharani a full day's bus journey to the north.

For two reasons, sessions with Sankar are even more difficult than those with Padma. One is frequent unannounced arrivals of clients crowding into the tiny space allotted for them in view of the *gaddi*, itself a size only for Sankar and his ritual paraphernalia. The other problem is that more than with other possession ritualists, any discussion of *punakam* with Sankar triggers hiccups, belches, and a rapid free-fall out of rational discourse. The fidelity and credence demonstrated by his Virabhadra and Virakanyaka clients is manifest. Sankar pulls out a large burlap bag stuffed with little girl's dresses. Once a year to satisfy a Virakanyaka the family should bring to the *gaddi* five or six ready-made dresses, including those with special ribbons perhaps demanded in dreams. If she is not pleased by the sight, the family may face ruin through her wrath. Virakanyakas, says Sankar, quite in agreement with other ritualists, are not only more powerful than Virabhadras, but also more troublesome.

Regarding the rivalries of deities desiring to come upon him, Sankar says "Only those who argued to stay are allowed in here. They fought with me and eventually I allowed some to be with me. If I permitted all to come, my whole room would fill up with ashfruits!" Whereas Padma's life has been the hassles of neighbourhood versus classical goddesses, including those who are *saumya*, gentle, contesting those who are *ghora*, frightful, the distracting frictions Sankar hears about are between an array of both neighbourhood and classical goddesses on one side and all the Virabhadras and Virakanyakas on the other. He attempts to maintain order in his ritual life by announcing a weekly schedule, Mondays and Saturdays for Virabhadra work, Thursdays for Mahalaksmi and Durga. As in Padma's and Desamma's *gaddis*, however, people have problems each day of the week.

A fair amount of turnover takes place in Sankar's *gaddi*. In one Karttik month three ashfruits moved out because their families had completed new living quarters and could therefore take them back. Like Padma, Sankar must deal with jealousy, particularly on the part of the goddesses—Mahalaksmi, the 18-year-old Nagalaksmi (who "creates a lot of mischief in my *gaddi*"), and Durga. He likes to perform firewalking, go

out on **sambaram**-s he conducts twice a year at Durgapuja and in May, and join unannounced in the rituals of others, both Ammavaru and Virabhadra processions, often those for **mokkubadi**, vows made by particular families. In the frenzy of Ammavaru **sambarams** devotees may lie on the ground so that the goddess embodied by Sankar may step on them in the mythic model of corpse-like Siva under her feet. It was precisely in such a **sambaram** at 3 a.m. that a nearly naked Sankar was first seen (before his name was learned) as he wandered in a state of trance, contemplating a ball of burning camphor in the palm of his right hand. He reflects the rage of the goddess by eating lumps of turmeric paste, swallowing burning coals, and later biting into bitter limes to reduce her tension, at which point a dozen women emerge from their houses to douse him with buckets of cold water. He is a singular drama of reduction, the goddess' passage from **raudram** to **santam**. But his goddesses use any means to keep him home unless the occasion is one of their own **sambarams**. "And if I try to leave for more than three days, boils break out all over my body." His different powers must be constantly worshipped and this creates logistical problems. Ammavaru (Durga) wants **guggilam** incense, not the **sambrani** incense demanded by Virabhadras and Virakanyakas. Durga wants chickens, Mahalaksmi wants a goat every May, Virakanyaka wants more and more turmeric paste and **kunkam**, everybody wants something and they all, he complains with obvious pride, "have a terrible crush on me."

Conclusion

The dominant structure and the constant dynamic of these examples of possession in the Godavari Delta is located in the devotional context of South Indian Hinduism. Every life history is a case of the flowering and developing momentum of **bhakti** to a goddess, a god, or the deified dead. Every life practice is a case of evolving expertise in the arts and crafts of **puja** as expression of devotion. And every assessment of the value of life itself is declared in **prabalam avu**, the capacity "to grow strong," to increase in all directions as a concomitant of perseverance in **bhakti** and **puja** and the grace of a deity, including the deceased. Comprehension of these three—**bhakti**, **puja** and **prabalam avu**—is necessary for any rudimentary understanding of the meaning of possession in the Godavari Delta.

Anthropologists and cultural historians have frequently reduced the phenomena of possession to problems, illnesses, neuroses, and psychoses, and persons possessed as victims or objects of illusory attacks, patients in need of treatment or therapy. Certainly demonic or negative possession states are well documented. But a general inability to understand the broader context of possession and its cultural values is

clear. Much of such reductionism derives from failure to grant legitimacy to religious experience and expression. Beyond this, Frederick Smith argues persuasively in the concluding chapter of his forthcoming overview of possession in South Asia that spirit or deity possession defies “the solid boundaries of the individual assumed by Westerners and the scientific rules of the academic trade.” A cultural assumption of “the singularity and inviolability of the individual” has been the impediment. A notion of personal identity is at stake. The individual in India, by contrast, is not “fractured” by possession since it is “recognized as intrinsically vulnerable, permeable, and connected with other independent objects.”

This vulnerability includes the all-important category of the deceased. In the Virabhadra context the deceased child’s spirit should not be demoted to some lesser rank beneath “deity.” The common expression for possession by the family Virabhadra is simply “*devudu* (god) has come” or “*devudu* is on me”. The deceased has become the god, the god has taken over the deceased. For the few who reflect upon and articulate the mythic framework, that god is Mahadeva, Mahesvara, Siva. And whether this powerful household deity is *devudu* or Virabhadra, male Viranna or female Virakanyaka, the human response is regular *puja*, occasional *sambaram*, a proper lifestyle on the part of the entire family matrix for her or his continued growth and, hopefully, one or more bodies among the loved ones willing to serve as temporary vessels of expression.

Similarly, in turning to the context of goddess possessions, neighbourhood or regional goddesses should not be demoted to some lower level beneath classical (pan-Indian, Puranic, Sanskrit) goddesses. These examples declare that the initial, unforgettable, and usually paradigmatic instance of possession, if not by a Virabhadra, is by a neighbourhood goddess such as Kannamma Talli or a regional goddess such as Kanaka Durga, the latter known quite simply as Durga. And Kanaka Durga, according to a Godavari variant of her folklore, is a Virakanyaka, that is, a female Virabhadra, in the guise of great goddess. A village girl, she was unjustly accused by her brothers of improper behavior and threw herself into a well. Her popularity exploded during the 1980s in the form of vows to her as Bhavani, pilgrimages to her temple in Vijayawada, tens of thousands of devotees putting on the Bhavani *mala* and red attire. The fact that she became identified with Durgamma belongs together with accounts from the case studies presented here: people speak of possession by Durgamma, by Kanaka Durgamma, by Ammavaru, easily sliding from one to another. Hierarchy is somewhat more clearly specified when a reference is made to “Adisakti” or “Paramesvari” or “Bhagavantudu” as transcendent beings above the manifold goddesses, gods, and spirits. Even here, given the elasticity of oral traditions, there is no prescription accepted by all. As evidenced in

narratives above, an Adisakti or Mahasakti is fluid and can vary within one person's summation over time. Apart from sporadic avowals of transcendence, any attempt to impose clearcut "classical" / "folk" rankings on the experiences and expressions of those undergoing states of possession may only add to confusion and misperception.

Where inner rivalry is concerned, a significant event in the narratives is the revelation that two or more possessing entities—goddesses, gods, Virabhadras—are competing for space on or next to a person subject to routine possessions. Authority of the right to possession-speech (*vakku, mata, pati, sima*) is doubly confirmed in the mind of the ritualist with such events. And the same kind of legitimation, stamp of approval, occurs to devotees. The range of divine vision, wisdom, articulation is infinitely expanded when one consults Padma with a problem, knowing that she entertains upon her body virtually the entire pantheon of classical goddesses, not to mention a variety of neighbourhood goddesses who perhaps know intimate local things with which their celestial elder sisters could not possibly be bothered. Padma speaks with their authority as well. And when one learns that Sankar speaks not only with the voice of his Virabhadra, but can become the temporary vessel to contain "my" Virabhadra, and sing with her or his voice, one is convinced that something is to be gained from a visit to Sankar's *gaddi*. It is not the case that one sees "my" Virabhadra competing with his Virabhadra for equal time; he has fought the equal-time-and-space fight on his own. Rather, one is assured by his professional multivocality that he is able to tap into the network of neighbourhood Virabhadras and provide a conduit for the appearance of one's own departed but still available relative.

And where outer rivalry is concerned, it should not be surprising, given the ancient context of *srauta kaksa*, to find equivalent ritual competitions that could be labeled *puja-kaksa, sambaram kaksa, punakam kaksa*. The obsession with precision and exactitude (*satya*, truth, ritual precision) in both levels of ritual, *srauta* and *grhya*, and an absolute terror of the consequences of ritual mistakes, undoubtedly stamped the emergence of *devapuja* in a similar mode. The context of possession ritualism therefore is competitive by nature: there are obligatory practices and others are "extras", there are correct procedures and others are incorrect, there are details of indispensable power and others are trivial. The end result is the constant proclamation that here everything is done correctly, everywhere else there is error. It is one of the remarkable features of the history of religions in India: birth, caste, *laukika* education—none of these is of consequence in folk ritualism, and particularly where the concern is a divine calling of possession ritualism.

Notes

1. An early version of this essay was presented to the seminar “Dynamics of Rituals and Narratives in Indian Folk Culture” at the Centre for Folk Culture Studies, University of Hyderabad, 28-30 August 1997. This is a comparative study *within* possession ritualist traditions. Two studies subsequent to the Hyderabad seminar have drawn comparisons in the same territory between possession ritualists and Vaidika Brahman ritualism: “Balancing *raudra* and *santi*: Rage and repose in states of possession,” 2001, with photographs, and “Ritual subversion: Reliable enemies and suspect allies,” 2004. Both are cited in the bibliography here. On the basic features of Vaidika Brahman ritual and textual life in East Godavari see Knipe 1997.
2. Fieldwork behind this essay could not have been accomplished without the dedicated efforts and insights of a long-time research associate, Professor M. V. Krishnayya of Andhra University. He deserves enormous gratitude for his special talents, particularly with regard to rural dialects and different styles of possession speech in his home territory of East Godavari District. T. Viraraju of Rajavommangi performed excellent and highly useful professional videography in difficult field circumstances. A Senior Research Fellowship was awarded by the American Institute of Indian Studies for part of this fieldwork.
3. Due to the sensitive nature of personal details revealed in some interviews, names employed in this essay are substitutes for real names.
4. On *avesa*, other Sanskrit terms, and Indic languages and literatures in general, see Parts I and II of Frederick Smith’s forthcoming book cited in the bibliography.
5. A useful chart of classifications that distinguishes “mild goddesses (*saumya, santa*)” and “wild goddesses (*ugra, raudra*)” appears in Michaels *et al.* 1996: 22-24.
6. See Heesterman 1993: 48ff., B. K. Smith 1996, and Knipe 2004b.
7. Incidences of possession in the framework of Hindu funeral and ancestor rituals are complicated and go well beyond the cult of deified deceased individuals. They may begin with attempted proper identification of the *preta* after death (see further Knipe 2003a, 2004a, 2005, 2006).
8. Portions of 1996-97 interviews regarding Desamma appeared in Knipe 2001: 351-52 and are repeated here.
9. Kannamma Talli is a noteworthy match for Padma who is now contentedly married and living with daughters and six grandchildren in her birthplace, not her husband’s. A fierce goddess who demands blood sacrifice, Kannamma was formerly a human girl with a husband, son, and daughter. According to one variant of her folklore, she suffered endlessly under the treatment of a cruel stepmother who fed her scraps every three days. Cinderella-like, she had no proper clothes. But her naked beauty at the Godavari riverside attracted Brahma, Visnu, and Siva to put her to sleep like a sacrificial animal. People thought she was dead and they buried her. Her cries from the ground went unheeded by children who thought they heard a demon. After three days she regained

consciousness. The goddess Mutyalamma rescued her, took her on a tour of all the heavenly *lokas*, and she became a goddess.

The *vigraham* (image) in each of her two temples features her standing behind a smaller seated husband, his head under her foot in a pose reminiscent of Durgamma and her guardian devotee Potu Raju. Their tiny children stand in front. Narrators emphasize the point that she brought the three into **her *vigraham***. Some variants of Kannamma folklore involve Gandhi Potu Raju of Kesavaram.

¹⁰ Kanaka Durga is also known as Bezwada Talli, employing another name for the town of Vijayawada; cf. Herrenschmidt 1989: 165, 184 and Sree Padma in Pintchman 2001: 132-35 with photo.

¹¹ This excerpt from Padma interviews appeared in Knipe 2001: 351. On a story from Maharashtra connecting lice and Mariyai, the goddess of smallpox, see Masilamani-Meyer in Michaels *et al.* 2001: 465 citing Sontheimer as source.

¹² Reading what are called “pearls” in coagulated blood leftovers from an offering to the goddess is another indication that many fearful goddesses are both bringers and healers of dreaded poxes that rage like wildfires through neighbourhoods, particularly during the hot season of March to May, precisely when their festivals are scheduled. Goddesses may be called Mutyalamma, Pearl Mother, Puspamma, Flower Mother, Nukamma, Broken-rice-grain Mother, all euphemisms for pox sores. Mutyalamma is said to be covered with eyes on her head and body. On pearls and Mariyamman in Tamilnadu see Meyer 1986: 17ff; on Ankalamman and eyes in Tamilnadu see Masilamani-Meyer, “The Eyes of the Goddess,” in Michaels *et al.* 2001: 449-81. On Tirupati Gangamma’s “thousand-eye” pots see Handelman 1995: 312f. with references to Mariyamman in Beck 1969 and 1981. A few smallpox survivors born before eradication in India in 1975 still wear manifold signs of her grace. Today in the Godavari Delta when a mother announces “Amma has come” she means that one or more of her children has contracted chickenpox, mumps, measles, scarlet fever, or some unknown “pox,” far less dangerous than smallpox but still potentially life-threatening to infants.

References

- Assayag, Jackie, 1992. *La Colere de la deesse decapitee. Traditions, cultes et pouvoir dans le Sud de l'Inde*. Paris: CNRS.
- Assayag, Jackie and G. Tarabout, eds. 1999. *La Possession en Asie du Sud. Parole, corps, territoire*. Paris: Collection Purusartha.
- Beck, Brenda E. F., 1981. “The Goddess and the demon: A local South Indian festival and its wider context,” *Purusartha* 5: 83-136.
- Biardeau, Madeleine, 1989. *Histoires de poteaux. Variations vediques autour de la deesse hindoue*. Paris: Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient.
- Brubaker, Richard L., 1978. *The Ambivalent Mistress: A Study of South Indian Village Goddesses and their Religious Meaning*. Ann Arbor: University of Chicago Ph.D. Dissertation.
- Claus, Peter J., 1984. “Medical anthropology and the ethnography of spirit possession,” *Contributions to Asian Studies* 18: 60-72.

- 1979a. "Spirit possession and spirit mediumship from the perspective of Tulu oral traditions," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 3: 29-52.
- 1979b. "Mayndala: A myth and possession cult of Tulunad," *Asian Folklore Studies* 38: 94-129.
- 1975. "The Siri myth and ritual: A mass possession cult in South India," *Ethnology* 14: 47-58.
- Denton, Lynn Teskey, [1991] 1992. "Varieties of Hindu female asceticism," in *Roles and Rituals of Hindu Women*, ed. by Julia Leslie (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), 211-31.
- Erndl, Kathleen M., 1993. *Victory to the Mother. The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual and Symbol*. New York: Oxford.
- Feldhaus, Anne, 1995. *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra*. New York: Oxford University.
- Freeman, John R., 1991. *Purity and Violence: Sacred Power in the Teyyam Worship of Malabar*. 2 vols. Ann Arbor: University of Pennsylvania Ph.D. Dissertation.
- Fuller, Christopher J., 1992. *The Camphor Flame. Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- Good, Anthony, 1985. "The Annual goddess festival in a South Indian village," *South Asian Social Scientist* 1: 119-67.
- Handelman, Don, 1995. "The guises of the goddess and the transformation of the male: Gangamma's visit to Tirupati and the continuum of gender," in *Syllables of Sky*, ed. by David Shulman (Delhi: Oxford), 283-337.
- Heesterman, Jan C., *The Broken World of Sacrifice. An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993.
- Herrenschmidt, Olivier. 1989. *Les Meilleurs Dieux sont Hindous*. Lausanne: l'Aged'Homme.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf., 1988-91. *The Cult of Draupadi*. 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- ed., 1989. *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees. Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Humes, Cynthia Ann, 1996. "Vindhyaivasini: Local goddess yet great goddess," in *Devi. Goddesses of India*, ed. by John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulff (Berkeley: University of California), 49-76.
- Kinsley, David, 1997. *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine. The Ten Mahavidyas*. Berkeley: University of California.

- 1986. *Hindu Goddesses. Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Knipe, David M. 2006. "Hindu eschatology." In *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. by Jerry L. Walls. New York: Oxford University.
- 2005. "Das Konstruieren eines provisorischen Körpers für den Verstorbenen (*preta*) in hinduistischen Bestattungen." In *Der Abschied von den Toten. Trauerrituale im Kulturvergleich*, ed. by Jan Assmann, Franz Maciejewski and Axel Michaels. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2005. Symposium, Heidelberg University, May 24-27 2004. ["Constructing a provisional body for the *preta* in Hindu funerals," in *Departure of the Dead. Rituals of Mourning in Different Cultures*].
- 2004a. "Sowing for the grim reaper: A garden of the *preta*." *Problems in Vedic and Sanskrit Literature. Dr. Ganesh Umakant Thite Felicitation Volume*, ed. by Maitreyee Deshpande. (New Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation 2004), 150-57.
- 2004b. "Ritual subversion: Reliable enemies and suspect allies." In *The Vedas: Texts, Language and Ritual. Proceedings of the Third International Vedic Workshop, Leiden 2002*, ed. by Arlo Griffiths and Jan E. M. Houben. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 433-48.
- 2003a. "When a wife dies first: The *musivayanam* and a female Brahman ritualist in coastal Andhra." In *The Living and the Dead: The Social Dimensions of Death in South Asian Religions*, ed. by Liz Wilson (Albany: State University of New York Press), 51-93.
- 2003b. "Siva." In *South Asian Folklore. An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Margaret A. Mills, Peter J. Claus, and Sarah Diamond (New York: Routledge) 262-65.
- 2001. "Balancing *raudra* and *santi*: Rage and repose in states of possession." In *Vidyarnavavanda-nam. Essays in Honour of Asko Parpola*, ed. by Klaus Karttunen & Petteri Koskikallio. Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society (*Studia Orientalia* 94), 343-57.
- 1997. "Becoming a Veda in the Godavari Delta," in *India and Beyond. Aspects of Literature, Meaning, Ritual and Thought. Essays in Honour of Frits Staal*, ed. by Dick van der Meij (Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies), 306-32.
- 1989. "Night of the growing dead. A Virabhadra cult in coastal Andhra," in Alf Hiltebeitel ed., *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees. Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York), 123-56.

- Lal, S. K. 1980. *Female Divinities in Hindu Mythology and Ritual*. Poona:University of Poona.
- Lewis, I. M. 1989. *Ecstatic Religion. A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. 2d ed.; London-New York: Routledge.
- Meyer, Eveline. 1986. *Ankalaparamecuvvari. A Goddess of Tamilnadu, Her Myths and Cult*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.
- Michaels, Axel, Cornelia Vogelsanger, Annette Wilke eds., 1996. *Wild Goddesses in India and Nepal*. Bern-New York: Peter Lang.
- Narayana Rao, Velcheru. 1989. "Tricking the goddess: Cowherd Katamaraju and the goddess Ganga in the Telugu folk epic," in Hildebeitel 1989: 105-21.
- Obeyesekere, Gananath. 1984. *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- 1981. *Medusa's Hair. An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Pintchman, Tracy. 1994. *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*. Albany: State University of New York.
- ed., 2001. *Seeking Mahadevi. Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Preston, James J., ed., 1982. *Mother Worship. Theme and Variations*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.
- Reddy, K. Viswanadha. 1976. "Ganga jathara — A folk festival in a small city—Tirupati and the neighboring villages in Andhra Pradesh," *Folklore* 17: 237- 42.
- Roghair, Gene H., 1982. *The Epic of Palnadu: A Study and Translation of Palnati Virula Katha, a Telugu Oral Tradition from Andhra Pradesh, India*. N.Y.: Oxford.
- Schoembucher, Elisabeth, 1993. "Gods, ghosts and demons: Possession in South Asia," in *Flags of Fame: Studies in South Asian Folk Culture*, ed. by Heidrun Bruckner et al. (Delhi: Manohar), 239-67.
- Smith, Brian K., 1996. "Ritual perfection and ritual sabotage in the Veda," *History of Religions* 35, 285-306.
- Smith, Frederick M., 2006. *Friendly Acquisitions, Hostile Takeovers: Deity and Spirit Possession in Indian Literature and Civilization*. New York: Columbia University.
- Sontheimer, Gunther-Dietz., 1989. *Pastoral Deities in Western India*. N.Y.: Oxford.
- Tapper, Bruce E., 1979. "Widows and goddesses: Female roles in deity symbolism in a South Indian village," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (NS) 13:1-31.

——— 1987. *Rivalry and Tribute. Society and Ritual in a Telugu Village in South India*. Delhi: Hindustan.

Tarabout, Gilles, 1993. "Ritual rivalry in Kerala," in *Flags of Fame: Studies in South Asian Folk Culture*, ed. by Heidrun Bruckner et al. (Delhi: Manohar), 81-108.

——— 1986. *Sacrifier et donner a voir en pays Malabar*. Paris: École Française d'Extreme Orient.

Thurston, Edgar, 1909. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. 7 vols. Madras: Government Press.

An alphabetical glossary. Most diacritics follow J. P. L. Gwynn, *A Telugu-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Oxford University, 1991):

abhicara, abhicaara, incantations and other rites

Adisakti, AAdi'sakti, primordial goddess, Urgoddess, sometimes meaning Durga

agnihotra, Vaidika Brahman morning and evening milk offering

agraharam, agrahaaram, Vaidika Brahman hamlet

ahankaram, ahankaaram (in Delta dialect, pronounced ankaaram), self-promotion, arrogance

ahitagni, aahitaagni, Vaidika Brahman maintaining fires, offering daily ***agnihotra***

aksara, akSara, syllable

amavasya, amaavaasya, new moon day

Amma, Mother, woman, goddess

Ammavaru, Ammavaaru, goddess, mother goddess

Andal, female name

Ankamma, AnkaaLamman, Tamil goddess

ankaram, ankaaram (see ahankaram) Asiremma or Asiremma, Asiremma or A'siremma, goddess

avatara, avataara, incarnation

avesa, aaveSa, possession

bagucetalu, baaguceetalu, rites of counter-sorcery

bala, baala, child

Bhagavantudu, BhagavantuDu, god

bhakta, devotee

bhakti, devotion

Bharani, BharaNi, female name

Bhavani, Bhavaani, a name of Kanaka Durga and her festival

bottu, boTTu, auspicious forehead mark
celli, younger sister
cetabadi, ceetabaDi, sorcery
cilaka, parrot
cilaka-palukulu, parrot talk, sweets for a baby's first words
 Daksa, DakSa, a god, victim of Virabhadra's wrath
darbar, darbaar, royal audience hall or durbar
 Desamma, Dee'samma, female name
devapuja, devapuuja, god or goddess worship
devata, deevata, goddess; plural deevatulu, deities
devudu, devuDdu, god
dhuli-gali, dhuuLi-gaali, dust and wind, evil spirits
 Durga, goddess
gadde, ***gaddi***, home shrine, seat for possessions
ganacari, gaNacaari, female or male devotee with special ritual status
 Gangamma, river goddess, Godavari or Ganga
garagam, water pot for goddess festivals
ghatam, ghaTam, water pot for goddess festivals
ghora, awful, fierce
 Godavari, Godaavari river
gramadevata graamadeevata, village deity
grhya, g.rhya, domestic
gudi, guDi, temple
guggilam, resin crystals from *Shorea robusta* for incense
 Jaganmata, Jaganmaata, goddess
 Jalakanyaka, river goddess, maiden
jata, jaTaa, matted lock of hair
 Kailasa, Kailaasa, mountain where Siva and Parvati reside
kaksa, kakSa
kalasam, kala'sam, water pot
 Kali, Kaalii, goddess
kalyanam, kaLyaaNam, marriage
 Kanaka Durga, goddess of Vijayawada
 Kannamma, goddess
kanti, kaanti, brilliance, splendor; ***kantiga***, kaantiga, glowing

Kapu, Kaapu, caste
Karttika, Kaarttika, October-November month
Kattamma, goddess
konda, koNDa, hill
Ksatriya, KSatriya, varna
kunkam, vermillion powder
kurulu (tandavam), kurulu taaNDavam, dancing wildly, like Siva
laukika
Laksmi, LakSmi, goddess
Lila, Liila, female name
Madhavi, Maadhavi, female name
Madiga, Maadiga, a Scheduled caste
Mahadeva, Mahaadeva, Siva
Mahalaksmamma, MahalakSmamma, goddess
Mahalaksmi, MahaalakSmi, goddess
Mahasivaratri, Mahaa'sivaraatri, the great night of Siva
Mahesvara, Mahe'svara, Siva
mala, maala
Mangali, barber caste
Mariai, Mariaai, goddess in Maharashtra
Maridi, MariDi, goddess
Mariyamman, Maariyamman, Tamil goddess
mata, maa.ta, word
Mata, Maata, Mother, goddess
mokkubadi, mukkubaDi, vow
murti, muurti, image
Musamma, old woman, goddess
musali, old
Mutyalamma, Pearl Mother, goddess
Nagalaksmi, NaagalakSmi, female name
namadheyam, naamadheeyam, name giving
Navaratri, Navaraatri, nine nights of Durgapuja in September-October
nitya, eternal
Nukamma, Nuukamma, Broken-rice Mother, goddess
Padma, female name

Padmasali, Padma'saali, weaver caste
padyami, paaDyami, first day of a lunar fortnight
panchangam, pancaangam, almanac
pantulu, Brahman, especially a priest
 Paramesvari, Parame'svari, supreme goddess
 Parvati, Paarvati, goddess
pasupu-kunkam, turmeric and vermillion, important in women's rituals
patta potu, patta pootu, certified male sacrificial victim, usually a goat
pati, style of possession chant
peta, peeTa, neighbourhood, ward
phala, fruit
pitham, piiTham, home shrine, seat of possession ritualism
 Polamma, Poolamma, =Pooleeramma, goddess of the polimeera
polimera, polimeera, border
 Potu Raju, Pootu Raaju, brother of 101 goddesses, guardian devotee
prabalam avu, to become strong, grow, increase
preta, spirit of a deceased person
 Prthivisakti, P.rthivi'sakti, goddess
puja, puuja, worship
pujari, puujaari, priest or priestess attending the worship of a deity
punakam, possession
punistri, punistrii, auspicious married woman
 Puspamma, puSpamma, Flower Mother, goddess
rahasyam, secret, mystery
 Raju, Raaju, male name
raudram, rage
 Reddi, caste
sadhu, saadhu, ascetic
sakti, 'sakti, energy, power
sambaram, festive street procession
sambrani, saambraaNi, resin crystals for incense
 Samhita, Sa.mhita, collection of Vedic texts
 Santosima, SantooSima, goddess
 Sattamma, goddess
saumya, benign, gentle

Savitri, Saavitri, goddess, female name

Setibalija, caste

seva, service

sima, style of possession chant

Siva, 'Siva, god

Sivaratri, 'Sivaraatri, night of Siva

sloka, 'sloka, verse

Somamma, Soomamma, goddess

srauta, 'srauta, solemn Vedic ritual or text

Subbalaksmi, SubbalakSmi, female name

svargam, heaven

talli, goddess

tammudu, tammuDu, younger brother

tandava, taaNDava, wild dance and drumming of Siva

thiasos (Greek), frenzied mob of women devotees of Dionysos

trimurti, trimuurti, threefold deity, often Brahma, Visnu, Siva

unmadam, unmaadam, dementia, madness

uregimpu, uureegimpu, procession

vakku, vaakku, speech

Venkatesvara, Venkate'svara, god of Tirupati, patron deity of Andhra

vibhutipallu, vibhuutipaLLu, plural of vibhuutipaNDu, "ashfruit," image for a Virabhadra **vidya**, vidyaa, sacred knowledge

vigraham, image

Virabhadra, Viirabhadra, a fierce, invincible manifestation of Siva; a male or female deceased child installed as guardian deity in the home

Virakanyaka, viirakanyaka, a female Virabhadra

Viranna, viiranna, a male Virabhadra; also Viiranna-baabu

virangam, viiraangam, heroic dance for Virabhadras

virudu, viiruDu, hero

Visnu, ViSNu, god

DAVID M. KNIPE
Professor Emeritus,
University of Wisconsin, Madison
U.S.A.