Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds
Flueckiger, Joyce Burkhalter

Published by State University of New York Press

Flueckiger, Joyce Burkhalter.
Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/112253

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3492535
Chapter 3

Material Abundance and Material Excess

Creating and Serving Two Goddesses

Flowers, fruits, grains, turmeric and vermilion powders, oil lamps, human bodies, and other materialities proliferate across Hindu rituals, including the two rituals that are at the center of this chapter: the South Indian women's domestic vow tradition of Varalakshmi Puja and the community-wide festival of Gangamma in Tirupati. In both contexts, the overflow of ritual “stuff” performs—in a J. L. Austin type of way—the very goddesses to whom the materials are offered: the always auspicious (mangala), wealth-giving Lakshmi and the both protective and potentially destructive Gangamma. Many ritual material items are shared across the two contexts; however, what they create is quite different, depending on their wider material repertoires and assemblages. In the case of Varalakshmi Puja, the proliferation of materiality creates abundance, whereas in Gangamma Jatara it creates excess. Analyzing the two rituals and their materialities in relationship to each other helps us understand the mangala and ugra goddesses who are so created.

1. For descriptions of innovative, outsized, elaborate ritual displays (both abundant and excessive) in contemporary Hindu temples in Bangalore, see Tulasi Srinivas's The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder (2018). In these cases, the creative, unexpected ritual displays are indigenously identified as auspicious, but Srinivas argues that they have the potential to become destructive—of traditional aesthetics, social relations, and the environment.
Gangamma is consistently described as ugra, a term I have translated as “excess” (a further discussion of the term follows below). However, there is no single adjective consistently paired with Lakshmi. She may be saubhagya, she of good fortune or who brings good fortune, or mangala/shubha, auspicious. Ethnographer Leela Prasad reports that when participating in Varalakshmi Puja, she has most often heard the goddess described simply as “kala,” beautiful and radiant (oral communication, May 2019). However, what I heard most consistently was simply “Lakshmi,” without qualification—an unmarked goddess whom everyone understands to be one who is and brings wealth in all of its forms. Girl babies and brides are often called Lakshmi; ripened harvest is Lakshmi; gold is Lakshmi—all without qualifying adjectives. The goddess is on full display—female bodies, gold ornaments, grain, sweets, turmeric and vermilion, flowers, varieties of vegetables, clay pots, coins, new cloth, oil lamps—in her ritual of Varalakshmi Puja.

Varalakshmi Puja: Material Abundance

On the first Friday following the full moon of the month of Shravan (July–August), at the height of the monsoons, married women from a range of upper castes across South India and its diaspora begin to perform Varalakshmi Puja (also called Varalakshmi Vratam), the annual ritual vow (vratam) performed for the goddess. I was first introduced to this vratam when I was conducting fieldwork in Hyderabad in 1999. I had visited a friend, K. Vimala, across town for the day, and as we were walking down her lane, a female neighbor ran out of her house to greet us and asked us to come inside. Knowing that my friend was married, and verifying that I was too, she explained that she needed to give tambulam to nine auspicious married women (sumangalis; auspicious women) to complete her vratam.2

2. The number of requisite married participants should ideally be an uneven number: five, seven, or nine. Odd numbers in Indian traditions suggest the possibility of growth rather than completion. Recently I was counted as one of the requisite nine married women to be given tambulam when I visited the Hindu Temple of Atlanta on the first of the four Fridays of Varalakshmi Puja. As I walked into the relatively empty temple, I noticed a line of women sitting cross-legged on the floor with another woman pacing back and forth in front of them, glancing around as if trying to decide what to do. She quickly spotted me as a potential ritual participant and was visibly relieved when I confirmed that I was married. In the US, many Hindu families do not live in
Tambulam is a ritual gift of “women’s things” given by a female ritual host to other sumangalis. At a minimum, it includes pasupu-kumkum, betel leaf and nuts, and a piece of fruit, but it may also include uncut sari-blouse material, a sari, glass bangles, a mirror, and other “women’s things.” Its gifting both performs the shared auspiciousness between sumangalis and transfers that auspiciousness between them. The neighbor asked us to sit down, brought out a saucer of turmeric paste, and applied this to our feet; she then gifted each of us tambulam to complete her ritual.

Later that evening, Vimala, her mother, and I visited several homes of close friends and relatives celebrating Varalakshmi Puja, where we were again gifted tambulam. During our visits, I noticed that several younger women drew Vimala’s mother aside to relate some of their sorrows and ask for advice. Almost a decade later, in 2007 Vimala invited me to go with her to her in-laws’ home village to celebrate the vratam along with several other female (Velama-caste) relatives living in Hyderabad. She had initiated this city-to-village pilgrimage of sorts, thinking it would be what she called a “feminist act” to create and participate in a “women-only” ritual, and her urban cousin-sisters were game to join her. Creation of female solidarity began days before the ritual as the women who lived in several different neighborhoods phoned back and forth to coordinate who would bring what ritual supplies. While I had initially interpreted one of the vratam’s primary purposes to be strengthening of a community of women, during this village celebration I saw that the requisite number of female bodies is also part of a ritual repertoire of abundance that tangibly creates the presence of the auspicious, wealth-bestowing goddess Lakshmi herself.

Early morning on the day Vimala and I went together to the village, we first stopped at a large urban vegetable market, bustling with women carefully fingering and selecting vegetables. Vimala explained that for this ritual, vratam participants would need to cook nine different kinds of vegetables, and she wanted to bring her fair share. Specifically, she was neighborhoods where there are sufficient numbers of Hindu married women, so the ritual is sometimes performed in the temple, where the primary actor knows she will find the requisite number of women.

3. Many middle-class women keep a pile of saris for gifting situations such as this so that when someone unexpected shows up (such as myself on this evening), an extra sari is available. Women keep careful track of which of their friends and relatives have gifted what kinds of saris and how they themselves have reciprocated over the years.
looking for a particular kind of small wild gourd that can be found in vegetable markets only at this time of year and thus is materially associated with the ritual.\(^4\) When we arrived late in the afternoon at the Telangana village a couple of hours away from Hyderabad, we were served tea, and the conversational chatter quickly turned to the next day’s demanding schedule of cooking: what time the women would need to get up and bathe (5:00 a.m.); who would cook what; whether or not they had the requisite nine different kinds of vegetables (since so many women had brought vegetables from the city, there were more than enough—eleven varieties in all); what nine varieties of sweets (including coconut-filled triangular pastries that are a “must” for this vratam) they would make; and so on.

The center of activity on the morning of the vratam was the traditional kitchen of the family home. It was the only kitchen of the three households of the extended family hosting the vratam that still retained traditional earthen floors and walls, natural skylights providing the only light, and low, wood-burning earthen stoves (requiring women to squat in front of them to cook, although even this kitchen had one two-burner gas stove set up on a wooden table). When I commented on the simplicity and beauty of the kitchen, one of the elder women explained that this was the center of the home, a space restricted to women, whereas the more modern kitchens with tile floors and gas stoves were open to anyone, including men. By the time I came to the kitchen at about 8:00 a.m., after having been served morning tea—in which the other women did not indulge, since the vratam requires strict fasting from food and liquid until the end of the Varalakshmi puja (worship)—the kitchen was bustling with activity and chatter as women cut vegetables and rolled out sweet pastries to fry (figure 3.1). With only four stoves, the cooking had

\(^4\) For a discussion of embodied material memory, such as that carried by this wild gourd, see Seremetakis 1996. Note that the proliferation of “nines” of vegetables and sweets in Varalakshmi Puja is similar to the “tens” of the Odiya Sudasa Vrat, which also invokes and creates Lakshmi (see chapter 1). The South Indian ritual of Bommai Golu, celebrated during the autumn festival of Navaratri (Nine Nights of the Goddess), also creates and displays Lakshmi. Here, abundance is exhibited through a display and proliferation of dolls. Religion scholar Deeksha Sivakumar quotes a Golu celebrant saying, “You know they say, whatever Lakshmi has given, you have to show. This is how [you] make the boons [prosperity] come” (2018, 45).
Figure 3.1. Women cooking for Varalakshmi Puja, Jupally village, Telangana. Photo by the author.
to be well timed to complete everything before the puja would begin at 11:30 a.m.\textsuperscript{5}

In a foyer adjacent to the kitchen, two daughters-in-law to the resident family had been charged to prepare the nonfood ritual items. The elder was decorating nine clay pots with kohl, simple lines creating eyes, nose, and mouth. When the sweet pastries had been fried, one of each kind of the nine varieties would be placed in the pots and subsequently distributed to the celebrants as prasad (food items having been offered to a deity). The younger daughter-in-law prepared a simple wooden cart structure that would hold the goddess (in the form of a small wet turmeric mounded form, along with her similarly created husband), seated on a stack of colorful pieces of uncut cloth to be used for sari blouses, toward which each participant had contributed. She marked the cart with pasupu-kumkum and tied small branches of mango leaves to its exterior, interspersing red oleanders (flowers favored for ritual use). A third woman joined them in the foyer to prepare nine small oil lamps made of a mixture of sugar and lentil dough. The flow of ritual preparations felt seamless, each woman knowing her small part.

Throughout the morning while the vratam participants were busy in their preparations, an elderly woman from outside the family went from woman to woman applying turmeric paste to their feet. As in Gangamma traditions, the application of turmeric on both women and the goddess performs their shared female qualities of auspiciousness and shakti.\textsuperscript{6} In their study of the goddess festival ofPaiditalli in Vizianagaram, coastal Andhra, Don Handelman, M. V. Krishnayya, and David Shulman comment on how application of turmeric on human women and goddesses enlivens and adds depth and texture to both classes of females:

\textsuperscript{5} This household was among the fortunate ones visited near the beginning of the presiding priest’s ritual rounds, so fasting did not last until late afternoon as was required for households he visited much later. I didn’t hear any of the vratam participants discuss the fact that they were not eating; they were fully immersed in the joyful communal cooking.

\textsuperscript{6} For analysis of similar application of turmeric to the faces of the goddess Gangamma and her female devotees, see chapter 2. In this context, turmeric application is identified as a form of guising that reveals the goddess's features, transforms her potentially destructive uthoram to shantam, and performs the identification between women and goddess.
The essences of the goddess, indeed of all females, are said to be pasupu and kunkum [sic]. . . . Turmeric, though applied to the exterior of the female, to her skin, enlivens her interior life, layering her from within, adding depth and texture. She glows more intensely from within. . . . Her self-shining seems also to signal the intensification of coherence and integrity, equalities of selfness, the qualities of depth. . . . Through the essences of turmeric and vermilion, goddess and woman overlap, periodically, momentarily. (2014, 136–37)

So too, here in the context of Varalakshmi Puja, pasupu application on their feet performs women’s auspicious, Lakshmi-like qualities.

The men of the family having conveniently absented themselves, the only male I saw that morning inside the house was a male Brahmin pandit (priest) who, at about 11:30 a.m., rushed into the home, asking whether everything was ready. It was. Each woman first went to the pandit and extended her wrist, around which he tied several long pieces of red and yellow thread, variously interpreted as marking the intention of the participants, binding them to their vows, and protecting them for the duration of the ritual. For close to two hours, seven married women sat in a semicircle in front of the wooden cart in which the goddess was now housed; other women, myself included, sat behind this circle. This year the chief ritual participant was the youngest woman present, who had gotten married only three months earlier; this was the first year she was eligible to participate in the vratam, now a sumangali. She was dressed in a new sequin-sparkling light-aqua sari and adorned in all of her wedding gold ornaments; the elder participants wore much simpler saris and ornaments. The pandit, sitting at the back of the room behind the women’s circle, chanted Sanskrit verses and instructed the women on what to offer and when: water, pasupu-kumkum, coins, fruit, flowers, pinches of uncooked rice kernels, incense, and the dough oil lamps, now lit. The freshly swept and washed stone-tiled floor of the room was soon

7. Many female vratam rituals are conducted without the need for a Brahmin pandit. The presence of a pandit at many celebrations of Varalakshmi Puja indicates the middle- to high-caste status of the families that perform this particular vratam.
8. For discussion of these threads as ornaments, see chapter 1.
a riot of material color, texture, and fragrance. This ritual materiality
displays and creates wealth not just in quantity but also in variety—the
abundance of different kinds of vegetables, sweets, and flowers, and even
all the different kinds of containers holding these ingredients (figure 3.2).

The pandit’s rushed ten-minute recitation of the vrat katha (story
of the vow) concluded the festivities, paling in comparison to the elab-
orate puja aspect of the ritual. He apologized that because he had many
other homes to visit, he would not have time to tell the story in detail.
The katha sings the praises of the virtuous, truth-telling Charumati, who
was devoted to her in-laws and husband. She receives a dream in which
Vishnu instructs her to perform Varalakshmi Puja every year during
the month of Shravan, assuring her that if she does so, she will receive
the blessings of Lakshmi in all of her forms of wealth. While the katha
is a crucial element of every vratam, distinguishing it from other forms
of puja, on this occasion its recitation was mechanistic and the women
seemed to pay it little attention.

Before the pandit left, each ritual participant knelt down in front
of him and placed at his feet a stainless-steel platter of uncooked grain,
packets of lentils and spices, coins, and a banana, covering the platter

Figure 3.2. Beginning of Varalakshmi Puja (ritual ingredients contained), Jupally
village, Telangana. Photo by the author.
with the end of her sari, as he blessed her. The contents of the platters were consolidated by kind (rice with rice, etc.) and put in plastic bags, which the pandit carried home with him. Returning to the goddess, the women cut apart garlands of flattened, turmeric-soaked cotton balls that had earlier been offered to Lakshmi (representing, I was told, clothing for the goddess) and tied one cotton ball to the tali of each participant. These cotton balls, like the threads tied to the participants’ wrists earlier, were to be worn until they naturally broke and fell off the women’s talis. The long ritual sequence concluded when the women went outside to circumambulate the household’s tulsi (basil) plant (another form of the goddess), pour water at her base, and decorate her with colorful flowers. Now, close to 2:00 p.m., the women could begin to relax. A leaf plate was placed in front of each woman, seated on the floor, on which small mounds of each of the nine cooked vegetables and one of each variety of pastry were placed. This distribution of prasad was followed by a full leisurely meal, lots of conversation, and laughter.

Late in the afternoon, the participating women in the extended family assembled to visit two neighboring families who had also celebrated the vratam, to view their Varalakshmi images and to receive prasad from their rituals. In the gathering darkness, we sat out on the back veranda of one of the homes, which gave me the opportunity to ask about the ritual. Several friends in Hyderabad had earlier explained that Varalakshmi Vratam was the South Indian equivalent of the North Indian vratam of Karva Chauth. Women explicitly observe Karva Chauth for the long life of their husbands, and this was a line of questioning I had pursued throughout the day. Some women had vaguely affirmed that, yes, this was for husbands, but one frustrated woman exclaimed, “Why do you keep asking about husbands? This is about Lakshmi!” I knew she thought this should have been obvious to me, if only I would have noticed who and what was “there”—abundant materiality that did not include husbands.

Traditionally, an auspicious home—a home in which Lakshmi is present—is a home with a living husband, so I thought that while husbands may not be as explicitly referred to in Varalakshmi Puja as they are in Karva Chauth, ultimately the vratam must on some level also be about husbands. However, I learned that Lakshmi is a much broader wealth-giver. I remembered the concept of the eight Lakshmis (ashtalakshmis) and thought this would be a good entrée into what it meant to invite Lakshmi home. One woman after another began to list the eight forms of wealth that are Lakshmi, but no one woman came up with the
full list. Putting the listings together, the eight included dhairya/courage Lakshmi, dhana/monetary wealth Lakshmi, vijay/victory Lakshmi, adi/primordial Lakshmi, saubhagya/auspicious Lakshmi, santana/child-giving Lakshmi, vidya/knowledge Lakshmi, and dhanya/grain Lakshmi. One of the elder women commented, “No matter how many Lakshmis we have, what we [women] need, what is ‘compulsory’ is dhairyam. If we lose dhairya Lakshmi, we lose all Lakshmis.” Now I was not quite so sure about the centrality of husbands. Lakshmi was being invited into the home as courage, knowledge, wealth, grain, victory, and ultimate reality. Out of Lakshmi’s eight forms, only one implied a husband (in a traditional Indian context): santana Lakshmi, she who gives and is the wealth of progeny. In her portrayals on many lithographs (and rice bags, sari labels, etc.), Lakshmi appears alone, without a husband (although mythologically she is the wife of Vishnu), standing on a fully opened lotus with gold coins flowing out of her outstretched hands. Visually, she does not seem to “need” a husband.

Several years after I had participated in Varalakshmi Vratam in the village, I joined the matriarch and two daughters-in-law of my Tamil host family in Hyderabad (a family that does not itself celebrate Varalakshmi Puja) in the late afternoon to visit the homes of several relatives and neighbors who had performed the vratam. In one Brahmin home, instead of being given the form of a turmeric mound as she had been in the village, Lakshmi was present as a silver mask that had been passed down between generations (figure 3.3). Other householders had created Lakshmi by attaching to a coconut a beautifully painted papier-mâché face, complemented by a wig and sari (all available for sale at small local stores selling ritual materials). Few of these urban homes or apartments had a discrete room dedicated to the ritual display, as had been the case in the village. Instead, a wall of the kitchen or living room had been cleared for the goddess in all her abundance, displays that spilled into the middle of the room. In one home the vratam participants included grandmother, mother, and granddaughters, all dressed in silks and gold ornaments, looking much like they were attending a wedding—auspicious female bodies fully adorned. The participants’ bodies, as well as ours—as sumangalis—performed Lakshmi’s presence. We came home with fancy plastic bags of auspicious tambulam filled with packets of pasupu-kumkum,

---

9. The listing of the names of the eight Lakshmis varies by context; in Odiya contexts, the number of Lakshmis is ten.
pieces of fruit, sweets, pieces of cloth for sari blouses in a wide array of colors, and a sari for each of us.

Profusion of materiality and female bodies in Varalakshmi Puja performs the very goddess of wealth (in all her forms) whom the ritual invites and serves. However, the abundance is physically and socially constrained. The vratam is traditionally a domestic ritual celebrated in a bounded space, enclosed by walls. Exceptions to the ritual's domesticity can be found in instances where the ritual is performed in urban and diasporic temples, where the space is, nevertheless, still physically bounded. One year I observed the vratam in a Hyderabadi Venkateshvara temple courtyard where lines of individual women (about thirty in all) performed the puja to their individual small brass images of Lakshmi, offering her kumkum and a few food items brought from home. The social atmosphere was constrained and quiet, very different from the excited hubbub and communal cooking of the village celebration described above.

As with other domestic rituals, the vratam is also traditionally socially constrained. The participants with whom I celebrated in the village were multigenerational members of a single extended family, and the homes
they visited at the end of the day were of the same caste or caste level.  

When I was conducting research for this chapter in Hyderabad and was looking for an urban family that performed the vratam, my friend Vimala told me that one of her Brahmin acquaintances would be celebrating and thought I could participate with her. However, when the friend learned I was not Brahmin, she expressed discomfort; she never specifically mentioned caste, but Vimala interpreted that to be the reason for her ill ease. I did not attend. Instead, I visited several homes of vratam participants with my Hyderabadi Mudaliar host family, but these families too shared upper-class and upper-caste levels (if not the same caste).

Another level of constraint is the fact that Lakshmi’s beautifully decorated vratam image to whom offerings are made is singular in each home—in the village ritual I observed, a tiny mound of turmeric, and in Hyderabad, silver heads or decorated coconuts. Both the singularity and (relatively) small, even tiny, size of the image imply that this goddess will not have high ritual demands, that her rituals will be able to be sustained on a daily basis by busy householders, and that abundance will not overflow its boundaries. Once a year, through the materially elaborate vratam that both reflects and (re)creates her presence, Lakshmi is invited to come home—and stay. Whereas the next goddess, Gangamma, is invited to come and leave.

Gangamma Jatara: Material Excess

Gangamma Jatara in Tirupati begins on the fourth Tuesday after the Tamil New Year, when the summer heat has reached its maximum temperatures in mid-May, sometimes as high as 115 degrees Fahrenheit, and fields are bone dry. These are dangerous days that threaten drought and illness. One can almost feel the stirring of the goddess as the days

---

10. Religion scholar Jennifer Ortegren has observed new configurations of vrat communities in the Rajasthani city of Udaipur, where upwardly mobile women who have moved from rural areas may not have family members close by, and so celebrate vrats such as Karva Chauth with neighbors who are of different castes (forthcoming). However, this social mixing is a newly emerging phenomenon when the ritual is performed in domestic contexts.

11. The timing of the jatara is based on the Tamil ritual calendar that governs the Tamil-Telugu cultural region in which the jatara is celebrated.
heat up and hot winds blow, gathering clouds that should release rains on the final morning of the jatara in Tirupati, heralding the approaching monsoons. Whereas Varalakshmi Puja is celebrated at the height of the somewhat cooler monsoon season, when the growing rice fields—a form of Lakshmi herself—are emerald green, watered by auspicious rains, the high temperatures of May are an elemental source of Gangamma's expanding, excessive presence.

Like Varalakshmi Puja, Gangamma Jatara is characterized by a proliferation of materiality, but here the overflow of materials creates excess rather than abundance. The distinction is made, in part, by the very nature of the two goddesses—Lakshmi and Gangamma—but also by the range of ritual bodies (gender, class, and caste), the spatial boundaries of a multitude of distinct rituals performed over a week, and the kinds of materials included in the rituals. Some ritual substances are shared—pasupu-kumkum, fruits, and flowers—but Gangamma Jatara includes bali (animal sacrifice), and this element, perhaps more than any other aspect of the jatara, shifts abundance into excess (ugram).

Ugram has often been translated as “anger/wrath” or “ferocity” and—when applied to deities—even “malevolence.” Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary offers a much wider range of meanings for the adjectival form, ugra, including powerful, violent, mighty, impetuous, strong, huge, formidable, terrible, cruel, and passionate. In the contexts of Gangamma Jatara, uses and connotations of ugram/ugra are both gendered and specific to context. To account for these differences, I have chosen to translate ugram/ugra as “excess”/“excessive.” Ugra is used explicitly in the identification of Gangamma’s large clay heads, called ugra mukhis, built in her two largest temple courtyards on the last day of the jatara. These heads are literally ugra—that is, excessive in size—but they are also the goddess in her fullest, most powerful form, as her ugram has been built up over the weeklong festival. Several male jatara participants told me that the direct gaze of the ugra mukhis is too powerful to be sustained long by her worshipers, except momentarily when the jute curtain hiding the construction of the faces is drawn back before the face is then dismantled. However, a cue to the gendered experience of Gangamma’s ugram was made apparent in the first year we observed the revelation and dismantling of the ugra mukhis when we heard a young mother telling the toddler she was holding on her hip, “Look at her. Look right at her.” Another way to think about ugram is its association with heat: the goddess must be ritually heated (aided by the seasonal heat) in order
to grow into her fullest (ugra) protective power, but if she becomes too hot, she may become illness or drought itself, the calamities against which she is being beseeched to protect. Therefore, once sufficiently heated, she is ritually cooled or brought down from her fullest ugram.

The multiplicity of sites at which Gangamma Jatara rituals are performed helps to create and display the goddess’s ugram. She is, quite literally, expanding and present everywhere in the uru, but is also tied to that specific locality. Gramadevatas are always “of this place, this very place,” with local names and narratives. Each ritual site, each strand in the web of the jatara repertoire, is filled with distinct ritual materials and actors:

1. the Kaikala family home, whose males take on a series of veshams that both enact Gangamma’s story (see chapter 2) and are the goddess

2. the streets of traditional Tirupati, where the Kaikala veshams wander from doorway to doorway and are met and worshiped by female householders; female householders offer passersby ambali (a cooling mixture of yogurt, millet, and onions that both feeds and becomes the goddess); mothers walk with their children to Gangamma’s temple, holding protective clay pots over their heads (another form of the goddess); roving bands of young men sing “abusive,” sexually explicit songs (buthulu) at passersby, accompanied by drummers beating a distinctive rhythm; on the last few days of the jatara, laymen in stri vesham linger in order to be seen on their way to the temple (see chapter 2)

3. domestic kitchens, where the goddess is created in several different forms, fed, and distributed

4. the courtyards of the two primary Gangamma temples—Tatayagunta and Tallapaka—where ritual activity (vegetarian

---

12. Jataras and their goddesses are not transposed to new geographic settings when their celebrants settle in different villages, towns, cities, and countries, such as pan-Indian or pan-Telugu festivals and rituals may be. They do not find their way across the “seven seas” to homes, temples, and high school auditoriums in the United States as do festivals such as Diwali and Ugadi, or as does Varalakshmi Puja.
offerings, cooking *pongal* [a cooked mixture of rice and lentils], animal sacrifice, men in stri vesham presenting themselves to the goddess) builds in intensity until the last day, when the ugra mukhis are built in front of the temples. Many of the ritual actors from across Tirupati come together on the final morning of the jatara to witness the ritual dismantling of the two large clay ugra mukhis.

These spaces and their myriad of seemingly unrelated rituals are held together as a single jatara repertoire through an initiatory ritual called *chakrabandhanam* (lit., tying the circle), performed in the early morning of the first day (a Tuesday) of the jatara, when the boundaries of the uru (village; home place) are sprinkled with rice mixed with the blood of sacrificed animals. (Note that the boundaries of the traditional uru of Tirupati are more restricted than the boundaries of the modern, growing town.) Spatially “tied together,” each ritual site and performance genre enters into a relationship with and provides commentary on the others. With this ritual binding, all who reside in the enclosed space become, in some sense, actors in and beneficiaries of the jatara, whether or not they participate directly in its rituals. During the weeklong jatara, no one is supposed to enter or leave the uru. While the prohibition has been lost these days in the bustling modern pilgrimage town, the idea remains. Just as important, the tied boundary keeps the expanding, restless goddess herself inside the uru during this ritually marked time (Handelman 1995). Finally, the boundaries help to consolidate the goddess’s ugram that is built up through the jataras, keeping it from dissipating.

Gangamma’s ugram grows through the multiplication of her forms within the ritual *chakra* (circle). The assumption would seem to be that the goddess in roadside shrine and temple images of dark stone isn’t sufficiently present, intense, ugra enough for the momentous task at hand of protecting the uru from illness and drought (Handelman 1995, 292). During the jatara, Gangamma’s stone images inside her temples become secondary to her temporary, fluid jatara forms of human-body guises in the streets, yogurt-millet mixture, diminutive wet turmeric mounds in domestic kitchens, and the ugra mukhis. But this pervasive presence and the potential intimacy with the goddess that it creates, as well as the ritual requirements for this ugra goddess, are too much to sustain throughout the year, so a clear temporal frame (the seven days of the jatara) is established, into which Gangamma is invited and then sent away across
the seven seas. Of course, she also stays (in her temple and shrine stone forms), but in her ubiquitous jatara forms she is sent away.

On the first Tuesday morning, Gangamma takes her first jatara-specific form in the Tatayyagunta Gangamma temple courtyard as a turmeric-rubbed, sari-wrapped cement pillar (kodistambham). The pillar stands permanently in the courtyard, unadorned throughout the rest of the year except with periodic applications of dots of pasupu-kumkum, around which many women perform oil lamp offerings (the lamps being inside-out lemon halves) as part of individual vows. “In the old days,” a neem tree was newly cut every jatara and its trunk set up where the cement pillar now stands. A Gangamma devotee whom the goddess regularly possesses in healing rituals told me that Gangamma had come to her one night and complained vociferously about the shift from neem tree trunk to cement pillar, a decision made without asking her permission. The temple priests explained the reason for the cement pillar as being that no one these days has time to go out looking for an appropriate (straight) tree, to cut it down, and to prepare and install it (Flueckiger 2013, 208–9). 13 The cement pillar was simply more convenient.

To transform cement to goddess, Brahmin temple priests (standing atop a temporary platform so that they can reach the top of the pillar) first perform an abhishekam-like ritual, pouring pots of turmeric water and milk over the dry cement pillar (figure 3.4). 14 They then rub the entire rough surface with turmeric paste, marking it with dots of vermillion, before wrapping a multitude of cotton saris around the pillar and adorning it with floral garlands. After the pillar-goddess is fully adorned, a yellow cloth holding vodivalu (lit., waist/lap rice; a mixture of rice and kumkum along with a coconut that is an embodiment of potential fertility) is tied around the figure’s waist, on top of the saris (figure 3.5). 15

13. For what the ritual using a fresh neem tree may have looked like in Gangamma Jatara, see Handelman, Krishnayya, and Shulman (2014, 166–72), who give a detailed description of a cut tree trunk becoming the goddess Paiditalli in a festival of coastal Andhra.

14. The Brahmin priests only began to serve Gangamma in Tatayyagunta temple in 1993, when they replaced a Mudaliar-caste family, which had built up the temple from a tiny open-air shrine and served the goddess since 1913 (see Flueckiger 2013, chapter 8). Presumably, the Mudaliars performed this or a similar ritual before they were evicted.

15. Vodivalu is similarly tied around the waists of brides of some castes, as well as around the waists of the matangi and perantalu jatara veshams.
Figure 3.4. Transformation of cement pillar to goddess. Courtesy of K. Rajendran, K. R. Studio, Tirupati.

Figure 3.5. Wrapping saris on kodistambham. Courtesy of K. Rajendran, K. R. Studio, Tirupati.
Finally, the priests perform *harati* (flame offering) to the pillar-goddess. It is ambiguous whether the turmeric-sari vesham has fully transformed the cement pillar into the goddess (as the Kaikala veshams transform men into goddess; see chapter 2), which the harati acknowledges, or if the harati itself is the final step in calling Gangamma into the pillar. By this time the courtyard is crowded with (mostly) women who, as harati is waved before Gangamma, raise their arms in *namaskaram* (greeting). One woman standing next to me exclaimed, “She's beautiful! She's come!” The goddess is in her interior temple form, but she has now come in the first of her many jatara-specific forms. The temple courtyard activity of the first few jatara days flows back and forth between this pillar-goddess and the goddess’s large cement feet close by, to which piles and piles of food, flowers, and pasupu-kumkum are offered.

Almost simultaneously to the creation of the pillar-goddess, Gangamma comes (through possession) to her other jatara-related temple, Tallapaka Gangamma, where the goddess is served by members of the Kaikala family. For the week of the jatara, the Kaikalas bring out from an interior room of their home a metallic face of Gangamma to live temporarily in their courtyard. Here she is joined by a brightly painted, papier-mâché image of her brother, Potu Raju; but he must be brought from the dusty corner of the temple where he is stored throughout the rest of the year. The ritual sequence begins with the family matriarch preparing a stainless-steel pot, rubbing it with turmeric, applying vermilion lines and dots on it, filling it with curd rice, and placing neem leaves at its opening. Lifting the pot on her head, she walks from her home to the temple, ceremoniously accompanied by Pambala drummers. Her son Venkateshvarlu, a ritual attendant at the temple and key actor in the Kaikala vesham sequence, performs harati to Gangamma’s stone temple form and then offers the curd rice to Gangamma and audience members observing the ritual. He told us that if the curd rice loses its savory flavor (sourness), “We know that Gangamma has come from beyond the seven seas to attend her [own] jatara.” The year I observed this ritual sequence, Gangamma’s presence was intensified through her possession of the Kaikala

---

16. Venkateshvarlu explained that his domestic Gangamma doesn’t require the presence of her brother throughout the year but that during the jatara, “when she is moving around,” quite literally (through her perambulating veshams), she needs Potu Raju’s protection.
matriarch at the very moment Gangamma’s stone image was being fed the curd rice. With confirmation that the goddess had arrived, Venkateshvarulu placed Potu Raju atop his head and made his way from the temple back to the Kaikala home. The next day (Wednesday), Gangamma, through her Kaikala veshams, began her perambulations of Tirupati’s streets, making herself accessible to residents of the uru.

While the Kaikala veshams are perambulating Tirupati’s streets, the courtyards of Gangamma’s two major temples are alive with rituals that would seem to have little to do with the narrative that the Kaikala veshams enact over the first four days of the jatara. In fact, many female celebrants I spoke with did not know the details of Gangamma’s story and often confused the names and identities of the Kaikala veshams; they suggested that if I wanted to know the story, I should ask the Kaikalas. Temple courtyard rituals, in which women are experts, are motivated by another rationale: to satisfy the ugra (excessively hungry) goddess through feeding. During the first several days of the jatara, her ugram is satisfied through profuse feeding of vegetarian items, offered at the base of the kodistambham and at her oversized cement feet. Throughout the week, family groups of women also build individual small fires along the walls of the temple courtyard, over which they cook pongal—which should, according to custom, boil over, creating and reflecting plenty, fullness, and abundance. But pongal and offerings of flowers and fruits would seem not to fully satisfy the expanding, increasingly ugra goddess. As the week progresses, nonvegetarian offerings of sacrificial chicken and goats begin to take the place of vegetarian offerings. One female participant explained that “nonveg” is more satisfying when someone (in this case, the goddess) is “really hungry.”

On the final Tuesday, the penultimate day of the jatara, Tatayyagunta Gangamma’s courtyard is filled with families (men now accompany the women) performing individual chicken (and a few goat) sacrifices, feathers and blood covering the earth, mixed with ritual leftovers of flowers, neem leaves, and pasupu-kumkum. (I was told by several participants that buffalo bali used to be offered—and that surely, somewhere in Tirupati, at least one buffalo would be offered under cover of night—but that these

---

17. Overflowing pongal pots of the festival of the same name perform the abundance of the winter harvest that the festival celebrates.
days, this was against the law.18) The goddess’s hunger—perceived by her worshipers to be literal, not symbolic—has grown to its ugra maximum and can be satisfied only with ugra bali, not vegetarian offerings. Families build small cooking fires right where they have offered the chickens, in order to prepare the meat for their own consumption. The material excess of sacrifice is accompanied by a gentle flow of moving bodies as families spatially negotiate, and small children run between, the products of excess. This temple courtyard bali atmosphere contrasts to the more ugra (in both size and atmosphere) buffalo sacrifice I witnessed during three different jataras in the neighboring village of Avilala (1992, 1993, 2000), where the jatara organizers continually yelled out instructions to the four Madiga-caste male sacrificers, who themselves shouted loud exclamations as they caught hold of the buffalo by its legs and laid its head over the sacrificial pit.

While the media and male commentary on the jatara focus on the drama of male transformation through stri vesham and the Kaikala veshams making their rounds on Tirupati’s streets, women are actively—and intimately—creating Gangamma in their homes. The goddess is too ugra—demanding of too many rituals to be kept satisfied—to keep in domestic shrines throughout the year, but she comes home during the jatara, when women have set aside time to serve her. Many female householders first bring Gangamma into their kitchens or sitting rooms by drawing three simple lines of pasupu, with dots of kumkum between them, on a wall or turmeric-smeared wooden board propped up against the wall. Once here, the goddess needs to be fed. The first ritual feeding is a pot of ambali. A stainless-steel or clay pot sitting on a bed of cooling neem leaves is marked with pasupu-kumkum and filled with ambali before the women of the home perform puja to it (her). This puja suggests that ambali not only feeds the goddess but also is the goddess, another example of

18. The government of Andhra Pradesh outlawed animal sacrifice in 1950; however, it is still performed in some villages throughout the region. For discussion of efforts by animal rights activists, particularly People for Animals (PFA), to stop bali in the Himalayan region of Kumaon, see Govindrajan 2018 (35–36). In response to litigation filed by PFA, the Uttarakhand High Court ruled that animals could no longer be sacrificed for “explicitly religious reasons” but only for human consumption. Specifically, animals may no longer be sacrificed on temple premises and the resulting meat must be consumed by the sacrificers. Govindrajan emphasizes the intimacy between sacrificed goats and the women who offer them in sacrifice. Intimacy and relatedness between animals and humans does not preclude sacrifice.
materiality instantiating the goddess. Before the householders themselves partake of the ambali mixture as prasad, one of the female householders takes a ladle or pitcher of ambali to her home’s front door to distribute to any (male) passerby. And, I was told, there always is someone, or two or three men in a group, waiting. The women explained that these men come to their neighborhoods specifically to receive this blessing. It is a moving sight to witness the small lanes of Tirupati lined by women distributing the goddess. Through this ambali ritual, women both feed and satisfy Gangamma and actively multiply and distribute her.

On Friday, midway between the beginning Tuesday and ending Wednesday morning of the jatara, female householders create Gangamma in three tiny mounds of pasupu. Each mounded goddess is placed on a new piece of cloth atop a fresh green banana leaf, again marked with pasupu-kumkum. Large plates of cooked rice and vegetables are placed in front of the goddess, after which the women of the home in which I observed this ritual went into the next room. On this occasion, after photographing the goddess in her diminutive form, I had remained standing at the doorsill between the kitchen and living room, where the rest of the women had moved. They called me to follow them and gently chastised me for continuing to watch the goddess as she was eating. The goddess should be left alone to eat in privacy. The pasupu forms are subsequently placed in the domestic shrine; they are now no longer the goddess but rather material that has been infused with her blessings, bits of which may be ingested throughout the year for healing purposes. While on the streets, the Kaikala veshams are growing in ugram, in the home, Gangamma is created in a particularly intimate form.19

Later this same Friday, mothers walk their children to the temple, holding small clay pots over their heads. These “thousand-eyed pots” (*vey-yikalladuttas*) with small holes cut into them hold a camphor flame, small black glass bangles, and often a flower and coin. Remembering one name of the goddess to be “the thousand-eyed one,” I asked the women with whom I was walking, holding such pots on the heads of their children, if these pots were themselves the goddess. They paused before answering, “Yes, they could be,” but they were more assured of the outcome of the

19. Women who have a particularly close relationship to the goddess may create Gangamma much more elaborately in their homes for this ritual, by drawing a face with charcoal onto a coconut, placing the coconut in the mouth of a brass pot, and draping a sari around her.
ritual that would protect their children from Gangamma-related illnesses. The belief that Gangamma is both the protectress from these illnesses and, if not satisfied, may become the illnesses themselves, is materialized in this ritual: she is the protectress as she is held over the child's head walking to the temple and her illnesses when mothers smash the pots violently against the ground behind the temple.

Throughout the jatara, women do what they do every day—cook—but their cooking is now intensified and focused on the goddess rather than their families. When I once asked whether Kaikala women take the goddess's veshams, knowing that they did not but seeking an indigenous explanation, a Kaikala male gave as reasons both menstruation and women's lack of the physical stamina to walk the streets as the veshams are required to do. But the elderly Kaikala matriarch who overheard this comment protested that, on the contrary, it was because women are too busy cooking for the goddess. She considered the two activities equally necessary to creating and satisfying the ugra goddess: vesham and cooking.

The perambulating Kaikala veshams connect the multiple sites of the jatara: they are met by female householders at the doorways of their homes; they walk the streets; and, on the final morning of the jatara, the perantalu vesham begins the dismantling of the ugra mukhis that have been

Figure 3.6. Gangamma’s ugra mukhi on final day of jatara, Tatayyagunta temple. Courtesy of K. Rajendran, K. R. Studio, Tirupati.
built in Gangamma’s two temple courtyards (figure 3.6). Venkateshvarlu asserted that anyone other than the goddess who might attempt to tear apart her clay face would be burned to ashes: “Only a shakti can touch shakti.” (His comment recalls that of the guesthouse cleaning woman who asserted, “She [the goddess] is shakti and we are shakti; so we’re not afraid [of the ugra mukhi]”—by which she may have argued that a human woman would have the shakti to dismantle the ugra mukhi.)

At this final moment of the jatara, it is the goddess herself who breaks the cycles of building and satisfying her ugram. The ritual cycles have reached the limit of their productivity: the illnesses have been defeated (in one ritual, literally smashed) and the rains are coming (if not this final morning, then surely in the coming days). Having become sufficiently ugra to fulfill the primary purpose of the jatara—to protect the uru—and with ugram now fully satisfied (culminating with bali), Gangamma returns to her stone forms in temples and shrines and at uru boundaries where her now-diminished needs can be more easily managed. Much as she is already in Tirupati but also arrives at the beginning of the jatara, at the end she both leaves and stays.

Jataras are characterized by material multiplicity, distribution, and intensity as well as expansive spatial and social boundaries. Over the period of a week, an elaborate web of celebrants perform diverse ritual activities at different sites (home, street, temple) that sometimes intersect and at other times are relatively independent—all held together by the temporal limits of the jatara and the chakrabandhanam. Participants span a wide range of castes: Kaikalas who perform Gangamma veshams, Chakalis who accompany Kaikala veshams, potters who make the ugra mukhis, householders from left-hand (non-landowning, primarily artisan) castes who meet Gangamma (the Kaikala veshams) at their doorways and create her in their kitchens, Pambala drummers, some higher-caste men who take stri vesham, and, more recently, Brahmin priests who serve and politicians who attend as chief guests at Tirupati’s largest Gangamma temple. Not all celebrants participate in all rituals, and some may not know much, if anything, about the rituals in which they do not directly participate. Nevertheless, each ritual participant plays a part in creating, managing, and satisfying Gangamma’s ugram.

Jatara ritual sites proliferate throughout the uru, and at each site Gangamma takes different material forms, each requiring unique rituals: cement pillar to goddess, ambali, pasupu-kumkum wall markings and tiny mounds of turmeric, thousand-eyed clay pots, ugra mukhis, Kaikala
Gangamma veshams, and Gangamma's presence through possession of human bodies. (Possession itself can be characterized as ugra, when the possessed human body can become unpredictable.) Gangamma quite literally expands throughout the uru through this proliferation of her forms. Once created through excessive forms at numerous ritual sites, celebrated by excessive numbers of participating human bodies, the increasingly ugra goddess needs to be satisfied, first through vegetarian offerings and finally through bali. However, Gangamma's ugram is not totally dissipated; she is consistently characterized as ugra, too demanding of ritual service, for most householders to keep her at home throughout the year. As one female celebrant told me, “By the last day [of the jatara], we can't bear her anymore. We would have to give her piles of food [kumbham] every day; we wouldn't be able to bear that. So saying, ‘Next year we'll worship you,' we send her off.”

Returning to Abundance and Excess

The shared proliferating materialities—turmeric and vermilion powders, flowers, fruits, grains, oil lamps, and auspicious women's bodies—of Varalakshmi Puja and Gangamma Jatara suggest that there is a material continuum, rather than a dichotomy, between abundance and excess, auspiciousness and ugram, and the respective goddesses, Lakshmi and Gangamma, associated with these ritual traditions. However, they are also distinct. Lakshmi is always auspicious; her abundance is never potentially threatening. Her only threat is to leave if she is not periodically invited into, created, and served in the home. A home without Lakshmi is vulnerable and unstable. Gangamma is more complicated. After having been brought home as a baby by a Reddy family, as one female narrator recounted, “as soon as she entered the home, the milk began to overflow.” That is, her very presence brought fullness and auspiciousness, as indicated by the overflowing milk. Gangamma can be

20. Over my many years of fieldwork, several middle-class women have asked me if I’m not afraid to attend festivals where possession is common. They’ve told me they’re afraid to attend on the chance that they themselves will become possessed, and then they have elaborated: “Who knows what you will do and what will happen: your sari may come loose; you may say something. Who knows?” Varalakshmi Puja carries with it no possibility of possession.
auspicious in certain contexts, but she is not only auspicious; she is also ugra, excessively powerful and with excessive ritual demands, which, if not met, may result in illness and even death. And yet this same ugram is needed to protect the uru against the same, particularly in the dangerous days of the hot season. The aesthetics and rituals of the jatara perform this fine calibration of eliciting and building up the goddess's ugram and satisfying it, keeping it from spinning out of control and becoming dangerous.21

The performance of materialities in Varalakshmi Puja and Gangamma Jatara reveal that abundance and excess are distinguished, in part, by the ways materialities are circumscribed—or not. One might say that in the context of these rituals, excess is abundance unbounded. The materialities of Varalakshmi Puja are abundant but constrained—at least spatially and socially—with no suggestion that they may become dangerous or disruptive. Gangamma's ugram is more volatile. The goddess is called out of her dark stone forms to take residence in a wide range of forms and multiple sites throughout the uru that are served by men and women from a wide range of castes. The only constraint of proliferating materialities and human bodies is, ultimately, the uru boundaries that are marked by the chakrabandhanam ritual. Within this expansive social and physical space, the jatara's materiality is unbounded, augmenting Gangamma's ugram until it grows sufficient to vanquish illness and drought. But this same protective ugram has the potential to become dangerous if not materially managed—if the goddesses' growing hunger (ugram) is not satiated.

Gangamma's ugram disrupts a commonly drawn distinction in Indian studies between auspiciousness and inauspiciousness—shubha/mangala and ashubha/amangala (Madan 1985; Narayanan 2000; Pintchman 2005). While Lakshmi is the epitome of auspiciousness (wealth and prosperity at all levels), Gangamma is both auspicious (associated with auspicious turmeric and boiling-over pots of milk and pongal) and ugra. But her ugram doesn't make her inauspicious; she is the goddess, after all. Rather,

21. An example of this calibration occurs when, on the first days of the jatara, young boys use neem branches to beat the cement feet of the goddess at the entrance to her Tatayyagunta temple while singing sexually explicit songs. The physical beating and songs are said to heat the goddess and call her out of her dark stone temple form, while the neem leaves cool her at the same time. For a discussion of this balance between heating and cooling as performed in Tamil Hindu, see Dennis McGilvray's photo essay, *Symbolic Heat: Gender, Health, and Worship among the Tamils of South India and Sri Lanka* (1998).
she is simply ugra—excessive. A profusion of ritual materiality creates Lakshmi and Gangamma and performs their shared female qualities of shakti and beauty (particularly through pasupu). However, their bounded and unbounded materialities also distinguish them, causing them to act in particular ways and to have particular needs, determining whether householders invite the goddess home to stay—or invite her, feed her, and then ceremoniously send her off.