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The Priests and the Minakshi Temple's Renovation Ritual

IN SEPTEMBER 1976, when I had just begun research in Madurai, two young men accompanied by their wives were consecrated as new priests in the Minakshi (Mīnākṣī) Temple. Ugrapandya Bhattar was then twenty-eight and Manikkasundara Bhattar was twenty-three; Ugrapandya had just married Madhuravani, Manikkasundara's sister, and Manikkasundara had married Umarani, daughter of one of the Temple's chief priests. Manikkasundara had also recently graduated from a religious school in which he had spent six years learning the Sanskrit ritual texts known as the Agamas (*Āgama*), and he was now the first priest in the Minakshi Temple to possess this qualification.

Nearly twenty-five years later, in April 2001, I visited Manikkasundara and Umarani at the Minakshi temple in Pearland, Texas, one of Houston's sprawling southern suburbs.¹ As I drove down a long straight road leading from yet another shopping mall, past new housing developments for the well-off and prefabricated "trailer" homes for the poor, the towers of a temple in the distinctive South Indian style incongruously appeared through the trees. In the car park, a young man who was playing basketball introduced himself to me as Praveen Kumar, Manikkasundara's twenty-two-year-old son. Manikkasundara and his family had been in America for nearly six years, and as I soon found out, they were eagerly looking forward to going back to Madurai in May for their first return visit. Only recently had they acquired their green cards, which would allow them to reenter the United States freely. For Manikkasundara and Umarani in particular, settling down in Pearland had been difficult, and after six years they were still ambivalent about America and often homesick for India. Their children, however, had few qualms, and Praveen Kumar, studying for a degree in computer engineering, and his nineteen-year-old sister, Vijaya Shri, starting her training as a doctor, had thrived in American schools and adapted fairly easily to American life. To Manikkasundara and his wife, it was their children's educational achievements that had made all their struggles worthwhile, and they were determined to stay in America at least until Vijaya Shri had qualified as a doctor. Praveen Kumar's principal ambition was to work in America as a computer engineer specializing in software, just like the son of Rajarathna

Bhatar, also from Madurai, who had been replaced by Manikkasundara when he retired, as well as the son of another priest from India also working in the Pearland temple. Praveen Kumar will probably succeed and Vijaya Shri will probably become a doctor, and in a few years' time they will become two more members of the highly successful Non-Resident Indian (NRI) population in America, exactly the kind of professional people who prosper in Houston and drive out to worship in Pearland.² In many respects, the transnational social mobility exemplified by Manikkasundara's family is now a very familiar feature of globalization, but because he is a priest it has its distinctive features.

In 1976, Thangam Bhatar, then in his late forties, who had briefly visited Malaysia three years earlier, became the first Minakshi Temple priest to work overseas when he went to a Singapore temple for a few months. In 1982–83, Thangam worked in Pearland for nearly a year when its Minakshi temple was first opened, and he was then replaced by his younger brother Rajarathna; Thangam also returned for over a year in 1986–88, when the temple was extended in size, but Rajarathna stayed on permanently in Pearland until retirement and now lives there with his wife. Thangam and Rajarathna both acquired green cards in the mid-1980s. Back in 1976, though, nobody in Madurai would have predicted that Thangam, Rajarathna, and then Manikkasundara would work in Texas, and that the latter's graduation from an Agamic school would be so important for his career in Madurai and his eventual move to America. Indeed, although it may be a very small element in the history of latter-day globalization, the emergence of "traditional" education in Sanskrit scripture as a valuable asset in the United States is a striking sign of how the world changed during the twentieth century's last quarter, for it was not only unpredictable in the mid-1970s, it was virtually unimaginable. This book's principal objective is to describe and explain how events unforeseen in Madurai and the Minakshi Temple twenty-five years ago came about, and what they have meant for its priesthood during the intervening years.

The Minakshi Temple Priests and Change since the 1970s

My previous monograph about the Minakshi Temple priests, *Servants of the Goddess (SG)*, was based on fieldwork carried out in 1976–77 and 1980, and those years provide the main baseline with which the contemporary position will be compared.³ As explained in *SG* (ch. 5), a crucial date in the Minakshi Temple's modern history is 1937, when its management was taken over by the provincial government of Madras through its agency, the Hindu Religious Endowments (HRE) Board. Two years later,

the Temple was opened to untouchable Harijans (Dalits) and low-caste Nadars, who had always been excluded from it, and virtually all the priests then began a “strike,” which lasted until 1945. During the six years when the priests were absent, they became much poorer and the Executive Officer in charge of the Temple since 1937 imposed a series of changes that greatly undermined their rights and privileges; in the years after 1945, the priests’ position mostly continued to deteriorate, notably when their tax-free lands were confiscated in the 1950s following land reform legislation. In 1970, when the anti-Brahman Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party was in power, the government of Tamilnadu brought in legislation to abolish the hereditary temple priesthood throughout the state. The abolition act was challenged in the courts, and in the end its impact was minimal, but in 1976, when I first worked in Madurai, the Minakshi Temple priests had witnessed forty years of continual decline, including a recent threat to their very existence.

For understandable reasons, demoralization was widespread among the priests, most of whom said that they hoped their sons would find better jobs outside the Temple. The constant pressure exerted on the priests by the Temple administration (Devasthanam) and, at one remove, by the Tamilnadu government and its Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Department (which had replaced the old Board) was further increased by continual criticism of their incompetence and ignorance of the Agamas, the Sanskrit texts that are believed to contain the instructions of Shiva (Śiva) himself for his proper worship. The priests themselves had internalized this criticism, and in concluding SG (166), I said that they could only respond to it by insisting on their devotion to Minakshi—the devotion (*bhakti*) of “a compelling love which overcomes all rational barriers” (O’Flaherty 1973: 38–9).

Social scientists have a poor record in foretelling the future, and my implied prediction has turned out to be wrong. The priests’ position in the Temple, and their demoralization as I saw it in 1976–77 and 1980, did not continue to worsen. On visits to Madurai in 1984 and 1988, some improvement was already apparent, especially in their economic position and in their more relaxed attitude toward the government, and this continued during the 1990s and until the present day.⁴ Just as importantly, the priests’ growing commitment to Agamic education for their sons and themselves, which is both product and cause of their generally improving morale, has meant that they have been able to respond to reformist criticism much more effectively than earlier seemed likely. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that by the end of the 1970s, the worst was actually over for the priests. But it was not obvious either to them (or me) at the time, mainly because they had been suffering forty years of actual or threatened losses to their rights and privileges, so that it was only reason-

able to assume that the decline would continue. Furthermore, because the most senior priests could remember the better days before the temple-entry dispute, there was a persistent tendency to hark back to them, which only served to exacerbate pessimistic comment about the future.

Since the late 1970s, the Minakshi Temple administration and its superior authority, the HR&CE Department, have been no more favorable to the priests than they were in earlier years, and there are still constant complaints about them. On the other hand, anti-Brahmanism as a political ideology has greatly weakened over the last two decades. Moreover, in almost all directions, the religious policy of the Tamilnadu government has become considerably more favorable to the priests' interests, especially since 1991 when the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party came to power under the leadership of Ms. J. Jayalalitha. Her government further encouraged religious revivalism, and started to support and promote Brahmanical Sanskritic Hinduism almost as if it were the state religion, a development linked to the rise of Hindu nationalism—most evident in northern and western India—since the late 1980s. For the priests, although the state still has a negative side represented in particular by the Temple administration and the HR&CE Department, it has acquired a more positive, supportive side as well, especially since the early 1990s.

The administration's control over the priests has also been diluted inasmuch as they now do far more work outside the Temple than they used to before the early 1980s, and this—together with the introduction of more expensive forms of private worship inside it—has significantly raised their income. The priests' autonomy and standard of living have therefore both improved. These changes have mainly come about as a result of rising middle-class affluence produced by India's economic liberalization—which began in the mid-1980s and accelerated from 1991—assisted by the Tamilnadu government's religious policy, especially its support for temple renovation rituals, which also provide many priests with extra sources of income. A significant minority of priests, following in Thangam Bhattar's footsteps, has been working abroad as well, and this has been made possible by the growing prosperity and strengthening ethnic identity among overseas Hindu communities, whether in older regions of settlement such as Malaysia and Singapore or newer ones such as Britain and especially the United States, where the wealthy NRI population has rapidly expanded.

At the root of the priests' changed circumstances, therefore, both in their relationship with the state and their economic standing, is the particular conjuncture of declining anti-Brahmanism plus religious revivalism in Tamilnadu combined with resurgent Hindu nationalism and economic liberalization in India as a whole; the development of the Indian diaspora

has also had an effect. The particular case of the Minakshi Temple priests and their changing lives has to be placed in a much wider context—social, religious, political, and economic—which also has local, regional, national, and even global dimensions. A large part of this book is about the wider, multidimensional context and hence about how the priests, despite their unusual characteristics, are caught up in much the same flow of rapid, radical change as millions of their fellow Indian citizens.

One sign of change in the Temple in 1976, whose full significance would only become clear ten or fifteen years later, was Manikkasundara Bhattar's consecration as the first priest to have graduated from an Agamic school. Agamic education, as I explain in chapter 4, has played a crucial role in how the Minakshi Temple priesthood has changed during the last two decades. The growing commitment to Agamic education has been stimulated by the general improvement in the priests' position, especially by better opportunities for educated priests, but it has also contributed to that improvement and to restoring the priests' morale. In these respects, too, the state has been influential, because priestly ignorance was first criticized as part of the early nationalist movement for socioreligious reform, and subsequently the HRE Board, followed by the HR&CE Department, has pursued policies intended to improve priestly education and training. Even though priests have persistently resented government interference in their working lives, they have accepted that the criticism of their ignorance is justified, and their growing commitment to Agamic education since the 1970s is partly a recognition that the HR&CE Department's policy is right. This commitment has also actively reinforced the priests' insistence on the rightfulness of traditional authority and its absolute expression in the texts containing Shiva's words. Agamic education has indeed helped to strengthen the priests' traditionalism, so that compared with twenty years ago, they more forcefully express their ideological commitment to the authority and legitimacy of tradition, as embodied in Agamic texts but also as vested in the Temple's ancient customs and their own hereditary rights.

Yet priestly traditionalism also goes hand-in-hand with the growing adoption of a range of modern attitudes and values about the importance of education, training, and professionalism, as well as about money-making and economic rationality, or, less consistently, about the dispensability of old-fashioned rules about purity and pollution or caste and marriage. The priests have become better informed about the wider world and less provincial in their outlook; albeit implicitly, they have recognized that their lives have been "disembedded" from their local roots, because they can now be shaped—especially by men who have worked outside Madurai—through supralocal and even transnational networks. Priests with an Agamic education, especially if they are well educated in the secular

system, too, also tend to display a positivist attitude toward book-based knowledge, and in their eyes both types of education are about acquiring rational knowledge that may be used reflexively to examine and reform religious and social practices. For the priests, however, a better knowledge of the Agamas should also enhance devotion to god because it (ideally) leads to an improved understanding of what Shiva's words mean and how they are to be put into practice.

Among the priests, tradition is always positively valued, whereas modern change is not, so that the relationship between them is asymmetrical; roughly, the traditional is the positive, marked pole and the modern is the negative or residual pole. Nonetheless, from the observer's sociological point of view, the priests have become both more traditionalist and more modernist; although this may look contradictory, it does so only through the lens of a predominantly Western misconception about modernity driving out tradition. Consequently, a crucial part of the argument throughout this book, to which I particularly return in conclusion, has to do with a critical reexamination of the relationship between modernity and tradition or traditionalism in the Indian context.

All the changes just itemized are more evident among younger educated men, who are sometimes more vocally traditionalist than their older uneducated colleagues, as well as more self-confident about their status as Brahman priests and more modernist in many of their attitudes. Indeed, Agamic education has been the principal cause of a growing educational and generational division within the priesthood: the mainly younger educated priests can perform rituals better because they can recite the Sanskrit texts that they have memorized, and they can lay claim to an expertise that mainly older uneducated priests lack. Educated priests are also in a better position to improve their income, especially by working outside the Minakshi Temple and going overseas. This new division has not eliminated older cleavages among the priests, but it has significantly modified relationships between them. Furthermore, the entire priesthood has been affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by the emergence of a cohort of educated men, because every priest recognizes the veracity and authority of the Agamas, even if he has not had an Agamic education himself. Deference must therefore be paid to educated priests with more Agamic knowledge, and despite grumbling and complaints, there can be no serious opposition to their superior status and leadership. The educated men, who form an elite reference group within the Temple, have therefore had a disproportionate influence on the changing position of the priesthood as a whole. That this is so became most dramatically apparent at the Minakshi Temple's 1995 renovation ritual.

The Minakshi Temple's Renovation Ritual in 1995

Before turning to the renovation ritual, a little background information is required. Madurai, in southern Tamilnadu, is an ancient city, although it is also a modern industrial, commercial, and administrative center with a population in 2001 of 1.2 million, many of them living in new suburban housing colonies encircling the central area.⁵ At the very heart of the old city stands the Aruṃmiku (“grace-bestowing”) Mīnākṣī-Sundareśvara Tirukkoyil (“holy temple”), which is dedicated to the goddess Minakshi and her husband, Sundareshwara, a form of the great god Shiva. Minakshi, rather than her consort, is regarded as the preeminent deity, and the Temple is usually known simply as “Mīnākṣī *koyil*,” the Minakshi Temple.⁶

The Minakshi Temple is one of the largest in India, and its most famous architectural features are the twelve towers (*gopura*) over its gateways; the four highest, each about 150 feet tall, straddle its outer gateways and dominate the city's skyline. Most of the Temple as seen today was built when the Hindu Nayaka dynasty ruled Madurai between the early sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries. Like all Shiva's South Indian temples, the Minakshi Temple is a double structure, incorporating separate temples for the two presiding deities, which I refer to as Minakshi's and Sundareshwara's “temples” (lowercase *t*) to distinguish them from the entire complex, the Minakshi Temple. In the main shrine at the heart of Minakshi's temple is a standing stone image of the goddess; in the main shrine in the god's temple there is a stone *linga*, the phallic emblem of Shiva. In numerous other shrines throughout the Temple are subsidiary images of forms of the goddess and Shiva, as well as of Shiva's two sons, Vināyaka (Gaṇeśa, Gaṇapati) and Subrahmaṇya (Murukan, Skanda), and a host of other deities. Performing the rituals of worship (*pūjā*) for Minakshi, Sundareshwara, and the other deities, both during the daily worship and at the periodic festivals (*utsava*), when bronze images of the deities are often taken in procession on Madurai's streets, is the Minakshi Temple priests' primary responsibility, as we see in more detail in chapter 2.⁷

In principle, a temple should have a renovation ritual (*kumbhābhiṣeka*) in every twelfth year (counting inclusively). Throughout Tamilnadu from the early 1990s, after Jayalalitha's AIADMK government came to power, the number of temple renovation rituals started to rise steadily (see chapter 5). Among these events was the Minakshi Temple's *mahākumbhābhiṣeka*—literally “great water-pot bathing ritual”—which was celebrated on a spectacular scale over twelve days from June 26 to July 7, 1995. Even the grandest festivals celebrated in the Temple never need as much manpower and resources as the renovation ritual, and during its last five

days, which were the most important, around 250 priests had to work together, so that the Minakshi Temple's own complement of nearly 100 men were joined by over 150 from other temples. The climax of the ritual on July 7 (and the reason for its name), when priests poured vessels of water from the top of the Temple's twelve high towers, was watched by an estimated five hundred thousand people standing on the roofs of the Temple and every other tall building across the city.⁸ Even by the standards common in Madurai at major religious festivals, the crowd of spectators was immense.

The renovation ritual was also the occasion for extensive refurbishment of the Temple, including repainting its twelve towers and many inner halls, which had started several years earlier. In the modern era, renovation rituals had previously been held in 1878, 1923, 1963, and 1974. The 1963 *kumbhabhisheka* was the first large-scale renovation of the entire Temple and cost about Rs 2 million, which—allowing for inflation—is very close to the cost of the 1995 event, around 20 million rupees. The renovation in 1974 was less extensive. Because renovation rituals should occur in every twelfth year, the one in 1995 was late by a decade, mainly because the Tamilnadu government repeatedly postponed approval.

Despite the grandeur of the Minakshi Temple's renovation ritual, its basic underlying structure can be described quite simply.⁹ The main arena for the most important *kumbhabhisheka* rituals was the eastern end of North Adi Street, which runs beside the Temple's outer wall. In this street, four temporary pavilions were constructed, each made out of bamboo poles and thatch, decorated with paint and colored paper. The main pavilion was built at the easternmost end of the street and it contained two "fire-sacrifice halls" (*yāgasālā*), one on the northern side for Sundareshwara and the other on the southern side for Minakshi. In the center of each hall was an altar (*vedī*), surrounded by twenty-five fire pits (*kunḍa*), made in various specified shapes by building low, enclosing brick walls. Along the northern and southern sides of North Adi Street, west of the main pavilion, were two other smaller ones, less elaborately decorated. Each of these pavilions was divided into six small fire-sacrifice halls, each with its own altar surrounded by five fire pits. Farther along the street was a fourth pavilion, simply decorated, which housed twenty-nine small altars, each with a single fire pit. The total number of fire pits was therefore 139.

After a series of preparatory rites on the first seven days, the *kumbhabhisheka* proper began when the priests ritually moved the deities' power (*śakti*) from their images inside the Temple into water pots (*kumbha*), which were then carried to their respective altars in the fire-sacrifice halls. The images inside the Temple were now "empty" artifacts, and Minakshi, Sundareshwara, and the other, subsidiary deities were now installed in North Adi Street. In 1990, before repair work on them began, the divine

power was ritually removed from the Temple's towers, and vessels containing this power were also placed in the halls. After the water pots of Minakshi and Sundareshwara had been placed on their respective altars in the evening of July 3, the first of a series of eight rituals of "sacrifice-worship" (*yāgapūjā*) began (although only four were done for minor deities in the fourth hall). On the following three days, this ritual (lasting about one and one-half to two hours) was performed in the morning and evening and then for the last time in the early morning of July 7. Each sacrificial fire—one in each pit—was the responsibility of a single priest, although two men, the *pradhāna ācāryas* or "principal priests" of Minakshi and Sundareshwara, had particularly important roles.

During the course of the fire sacrifice, each priest spent most of his time spooning ghee into the fire, periodically adding more wood and dropping in different items (grains, legumes, cooked rice, fruits, etc.) as oblations. These priests, the *acharyas* physically performing the rituals, were directed by other priests, *sādhakas*, who also chanted the mantras that must accompany the ritual action.¹⁰ Toward the end of the sacrifice, the *pradhana acharyas* lowered silk saris and waistcloths (*vesti*) offered to Minakshi and Sundareshwara into their fires, before all the priests made the final oblation. Flowers from some fire pits were then carried to the *pradhana acharyas*, who threw them over the altars to unite and transfer to the water pots all the power generated in the fires. The ritual concluded with the display of lamps that ends any act of worship in the Temple. Compared with even the Temple's grandest festivals, the *kumbhabhisheka* saw sacrificial destruction by fire practiced on an awesome scale, and in the series of fire sacrifices, the divine power in the water pots was progressively augmented; this process—compared with recharging a battery by practically minded priests—is crucial in the renovation ritual.

After the deities' power had been moved into the water pots, worship inside the Temple stopped. The "empty" images could then be repaired by artisans and refastened to their bases with special cement. This work was regarded by Temple officiants as an equally crucial part of the renovation ritual, even though it was carried out quietly and unobserved in the now closed Temple buildings.

After the last sacrifice-worship on July 7, groups of priests wearing their finery carried the water pots in procession into the Temple and up to the narrow roofs of the twelve gateway towers. For about an hour, important guests arrived on the roof of Minakshi's temple to watch from near the gilded tower (*vimāna*) over her main shrine. Around 9 A.M., at an auspicious time, a priest poured the first pot of water over this tower. A green flag was waved to tell the other priests to pour their pots over Sundareshwara's shrine tower and the finials on the roofs of all the gateway towers; at the same time, the priests inside the Temple poured their pots over the

images. This vast simultaneous affusion, the concluding climax of the renovation ritual, was greeted by excited cheering from the crowds in the Temple and on the surrounding buildings, and those lucky enough to be near the towers tried to douse themselves in the water flowing down. By emptying the pots, all the increased power in the water was made to flow back into the Temple as a whole, both to the towers and the newly secured images housed within it. Inside the main shrines, worship then started. The *kumbhabhisheka* had come to an end; the deities and their Temple had been restored to normal, but the divine power contained within its restored fabric had been enhanced.¹¹

Authority and Control over the Ritual

Although not comparable with the huge numbers watching its climax, all the *kumbhabhisheka* rituals, which had not been seen in the Minakshi Temple for twenty-one years, attracted fairly large crowds of devotees. Most popular were the evening sacrifice-worship rituals, which were also the most dramatic and spectacular, as the flames and lamps lit up the gaudy colors and glittering decorations in the sacrifice halls, as well as the bright silk cloths and elaborate jewelry worn by the priests tending the fires. As always in major temple rituals, the sound of music and chanting, and the heavy odor of flowers, oils, and camphor (now of course mixed with copious smoke), reinforced the sensory impact on everyone who came to watch. At the end of the ritual, the elaborate performance of worship, especially the display of lamps and waving of the camphor flame, invariably attracted as many devotees as the limited space would permit.

Every fire sacrifice is extremely hazardous. From time to time, inside the wood and paper pavilions, priests would feed their fires too enthusiastically, so that flames shot high into the air; few things, incidentally, burn more ferociously than silk saris smeared in ghee. To me it was little short of miraculous that only one priest was badly burned during the renovation ritual, and the fire engine parked in North Adi Street did not inspire much confidence, although nobody else seemed even slightly worried about the danger, which was horrifically demonstrated in June 1997, at the great temple in Thanjavur, when about forty people were killed in a blaze in a fire-sacrifice hall.¹²

Apart from the danger, however, all priests had to put up with the billowing smoke and roasting heat generated by so many fires burning close together when the ambient temperature was already around 100° Fahrenheit. Most of them frequently deserted their fires to wander out for some fresher air and cooling water, as well as to gossip with each other and

anyone else who was standing around. For the many sports fans among the priests, the Wimbledon tennis tournament, watched live each night on Star TV, was a favorite conversational topic, and several of them certainly seemed more interested in the fate of Pete Sampras and Steffi Graf (the champions that year) than in the conduct of the *kumbhabhisheka*. Priests, it may be worth mentioning, are not necessarily in a particularly devoted or religious frame of mind when carrying out rituals, and like many other workers around the world, they quite often take a break to talk about sports, television, or any other topic of interest. Nonetheless, even when priests were concentrating on their tasks, none of the rituals proceeded impeccably, so that confused discussion about what to do next was common. Throughout the renovation ritual, too, as had been the case for months before, one preoccupying topic of conversation and intermittent argument was priestly politics. Most contentious was the issue of supervisory control over the ritual, which particularly came to the fore when confusion arose because it so sharply raised the question of authority and professional expertise: who really knows what should be done and who is entitled to issue instructions to others?

As already mentioned, there was a division of labor among the priests between *acharyas* performing the rituals and *sadhakas* who directed them. On the whole, the *sadhakas*—in principle, learned experts—were priests from the Minakshi Temple or elsewhere who had had an Agamic education and were competent in pronouncing mantras, whereas many, though not all, *acharyas* were ordinary, uneducated priests. (Despite his greater authority, a *sadhaka*—unlike an *acharya*—may be an unmarried man who has not yet been consecrated as a priest.) The *pradhana acharyas* were, by hereditary right, two young priests, Kumar Bhattar (for Sundareshwara) and Ramesh Bhattar (for Minakshi), and accompanying them were two *pradhana sadhakas*. Kumar's was Sivaraj, a young bachelor from a Minakshi Temple priestly family, who had graduated from an Agamic school, but Ramesh's principal *sadhaka* was a learned priest and guru of Vazhuvur Agamic school in Nagapattinam District in the Kaveri delta region of eastern Tamilnadu; the *pradhana bodhaka*, "principal instructor" in charge of all the *sadhakas*, was the guru of the Agamic school attached to the famous Dharmapuram monastery, also in Nagapattinam District. Overall responsibility for the *kumbhabhisheka* belonged in theory to the *sarva sadhaka*, the "supreme *sadhaka*," although this position was jointly held by Kumar Bhattar and another priest, Swaminatha Bhattar. To complicate the issue of supervisory control still further, there was also a separate organizing committee of Thangam Bhattar, Swaminatha Bhattar, and a third priest, Muthu Bhattar. Table 1 lists the leading priests in the ritual, and figure 3 shows the genealogical connections among some of them.

Table 1
Leading Priests at the 1995 Renovation Ritual

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1. Kumar Bhattar: *pradhana acharya* for Sundareshwara; joint *sarva sadhaka*
 2. Ramesh Bhattar: *pradhana acharya* for Minakshi
 3. Sivaraaj: *pradhana sadhaka* for Sundareshwara
 4. Guru from Vazhuvur Agamic school: *pradhana sadhaka* for Minakshi
 5. Guru from Dharmapuram Agamic school: *pradhana bodhaka*
 6. Swaminatha Bhattar: joint *sarva sadhaka*; member of organizing committee
 7. Thangam Bhattar: member of organizing committee
 8. Muthu Bhattar: member of organizing committee
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Because the renovation ritual, unlike any other Minakshi Temple ritual, required a very large complement of priests, both insiders and outsiders, it was a collective demonstration of Brahman priestly power of a kind never otherwise seen. Priests with leading roles in this event therefore acquired unusual public prominence. More significantly, though, most of the Minakshi Temple priests were determined to show—to themselves and to the Temple’s trustees and officials, visiting dignitaries, sponsors of the ritual, devotees, and everyone else—that they could run the renovation ritual without having to rely on supervision by more expert outsiders, as had happened in 1963 and 1974, when the *sarva sadhaka* was a learned priest from Tiruvaduturai (Thanjavur District). The main reason for the priests’ determination was that the overall standard of Agamic education and their commitment to it had risen markedly since the mid-1970s, so that at the 1995 *kumbhabhisheka*, the Minakshi Temple priests had a real opportunity to prove themselves.

The priests’ collective interests were, however, cross-cut by divisions between them, as well as by individual ambitions. The primary and oldest division in the Minakshi Temple priesthood—to which I return in chapter 2—is between the Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras. The Vikkira Pantiya group comprises six separate patrilineal clans, that of the chief priest (*stānikar*) and five others, and the Kulacekara group consists of one large clan divided into two branches, each with its own chief priest. Within the Temple, the Vikkira Pantiyas have superior rights, notably because they alone can perform the daily worship, and between them and the Kulacekaras, there has been rivalry for at least four hundred years. In addition to the Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras, there is also a separate Tirucculi clan, which acquired some of the Kulacekara priests’ rights in the Temple in the 1930s, and friction has always existed between Kulacekara and Tirucculi priests.¹³

The single Vikkira Pantiya chief priest is C.M.S. Shanmugasundara Bhattar, father of Kumar and Umarani, Manikkasundara’s wife. By 1995, he was infirm and rarely worked in the Temple, so that Kumar assumed

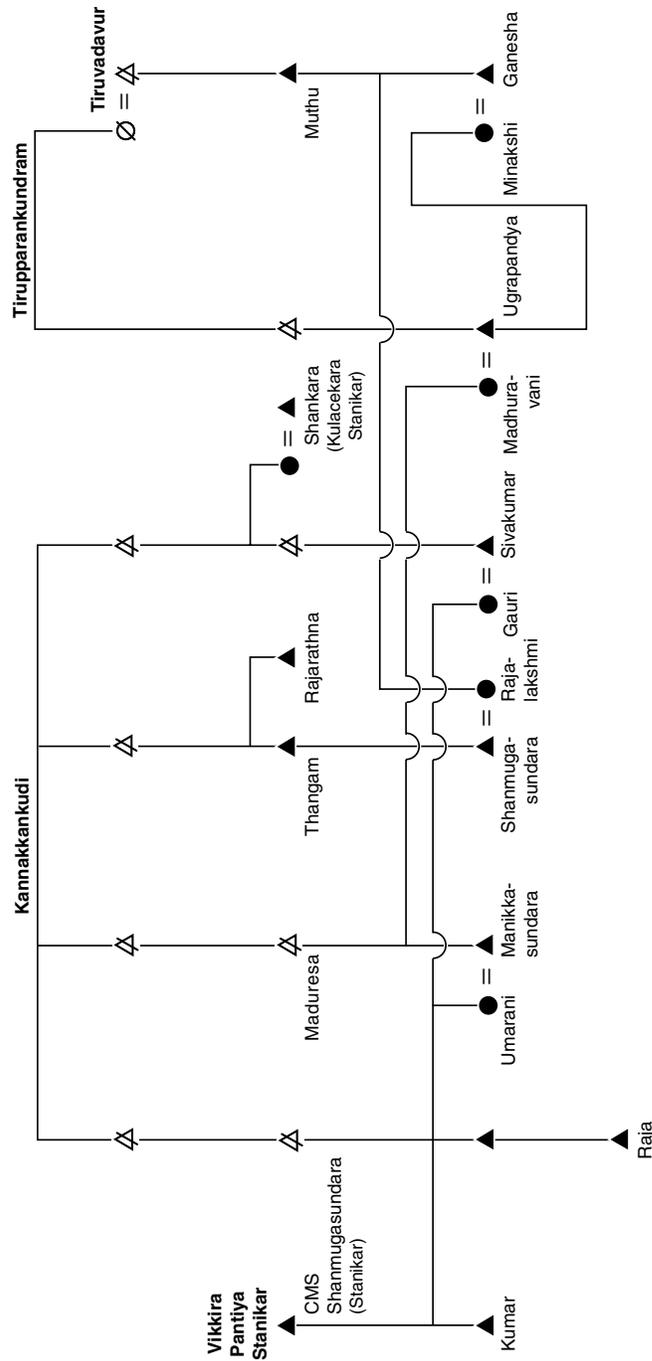


FIGURE 3. Partial Genealogy of Leading Priests in the 1995 Renovation Ritual

his duties, including the role of Sundareshwara's "principal priest," the *pradhana acharya*, which belongs by right to the Vikkira Pantiya chief priest. Ramesh, who had returned from the temple in London where he had been working for a few years, took the role of Minakshi's principal priest because it belongs to another Vikkira Pantiya family in which he is the sole adult male. Only these two positions, however, are filled by hereditary incumbents, and the crucial question was always about appointment of the *sarva sadhaka*.

In February 1995, after Thangam Bhattar had returned from another long stay in America, a meeting was held in the Temple to discuss the renovation ritual, which was attended by a senior administrative official, several of the Temple's trustees (who are political appointees), and about fifteen priests.¹⁴ By 1994–95, as I had been able to observe over several months, Manikkasundara Bhattar—mainly owing to his education and experience, as well as his self-confidence and ability to deal with the Temple's officials and important visitors—had established himself as the leading priest in the Minakshi Temple, whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, before he started to spend so much time abroad, Thangam had been preeminent. Manikkasundara took a prominent role at the meeting and persuaded everyone else to agree on a date in July for the renovation ritual. However, the meeting broke up in public quarreling among some of the priests, which was ostensibly about how the renovation ritual should be conducted, although everyone knew that the real bone of contention was the choice of the *sarva sadhaka*, the priest with overall responsibility for the ritual.

Everyone agreed that if an outsider had been invited to be the *sarva sadhaka*, as in 1963 and 1974, it would have prevented disputes among the Minakshi Temple priests about appointing one of their own number. (The *sarva sadhaka* in 1963 and 1974 was dead by 1995.) But this possibility was rejected, even though the *pradhana bodhaka* and one of the *pradhana sadhakas* were outsiders, precisely because the priests wanted to demonstrate that they could now conduct a large-scale renovation ritual without ceding overall control to a more learned outsider.

In the end, the outcome of four fractious meetings of the Minakshi Temple priests' association (the Adishaiva Shivacharya Sangam) was the appointment of two *sarva sadhakas*, Kumar and Swaminatha, a Kulacekara priest and opponent of Thangam. Neither Kumar nor Swaminatha have had any significant Agamic education, however, and they were ostensibly selected because they were the acting chief priests of the Vikkira Pantiya and Kulacekara groups. On this basis, Kumar's appointment was not controversial, but Swaminatha's was. In 1995, the two Kulacekara chief priests were Shankara Bhattar and Swaminatha's old and infirm father. Swaminatha's appointment excluded Shankara, but it also provoked

opposition from others because it looked inconsistent with the rule that the office of Kulacekara chief priest devolves to the eldest man in the clan branch, so that if Swaminatha's father could not take on the position, it was not Swaminatha but his older cousin, next in the line of succession, who should have been appointed. All the same, Swaminatha got his way and he was also appointed to the organizing committee alongside Thangam and Muthu Bhattar, then president of the Minakshi Temple priests' association. The main reason for setting up an otherwise redundant organizing committee was that Kumar and Swaminatha were unqualified to act as learned *sarva sadhakas*, so that in the end, Thangam, through his membership in the organizing committee, emerged as the man who really presided over the ritual; in fact, but not in name, he was the supreme *sarva sadhaka*, and he also took the leading role in negotiating with officials and dealing with press conferences in the Temple.

The priestly politics that were played out in the appointment of the *sarva sadhakas* and the organizing committee in the months before the renovation ritual, and then provoked backbiting comments and occasional public rows during its course, had a lot to do with animosity among individuals. Much of the politicking, however, was plainly related to the division between the Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras. No Kulacekara priest could claim the right to be a *pradhana acharya*, but Kumar and Swaminatha's appointment as joint *sarva sadhakas* in overall charge reflected Swaminatha's success in ensuring that acting chief priests from both groups, notwithstanding the Vikkira Pantiyas' superiority, would in principle have parity in leading the renovation ritual. Swaminatha's appointment did provoke hostility from some Kulacekara priests, especially Shankara, the other Kulacekara chief priest, who ostentatiously absented himself from most of the renovation ritual; when he did come, he was openly critical about how the ritual was being conducted. For the majority of Kulacekara priests, who supported Swaminatha, however, his appointment as a *sarva sadhaka* was a notable achievement, given the fact that in all other major rituals in the Minakshi Temple, they occupy a subordinate position.

More significantly, Shankara's negative attitude to the renovation ritual, which was shared by some other elderly priests noticeable by their absence from it, also highlighted the schism within the Minakshi Temple priesthood that was most critical throughout. Thangam and the late Maduresa Bhattar, Manikkasundara's father, were widely regarded as the most knowledgeable priests of their generation, whereas Shankara was seen as one of the least expert. Shankara, though, has never disguised his scorn for colleagues who pretend that education, religious or secular, can substitute for long practical experience in making a good priest. Twenty years earlier, Shankara had usually expressed his opinion by cracking

jokes while also showing how good he was at dexterously performing rituals. By the 1990s, he could no longer do this. Thus, for example, in 1994, at an elaborate ritual known as the *śaṅkhābhiseka* (“conch-shell bathing ritual”), Kumar—as acting Vikkira Pantiya chief priest—was leading the ritual, but Shankara—as Kulacekara chief priest—was also required to participate. During a long preparatory ritual, Kumar and Shankara were accompanied by Manikkasundara, seven other young men who had some Agamic education but were not yet all consecrated as priests, and two *sāstris* or chanters (Brahmans who utter mantras and recite other texts in the Temple).¹⁵ All these men were reciting in Sanskrit continuously, except for Kumar, who looked hesitant, and Shankara, who periodically mouthed a few words but mostly looked embarrassed and uncomfortable. For Shankara (much more than for younger Kumar), as well as for other older, uneducated priests obliged to attend major rituals of this kind, something close to public humiliation at the hands of educated junior men has become more and more common. By the 1990s, quite understandably, Shankara had become bitter about the growing influence of educated priests, although he was most openly resentful about those who spent much of their time overseas.

Within the senior generation, Thangam (the overseas pioneer) and Shankara exemplified most plainly the cleavage between priests with the knowledge needed to exercise authority over the *kumbhabhiseka* and those without it. Yet among the former group, there was also a division between Thangam, as representative of the older generation, and Manikkasundara and other middle-aged or young men who have graduated from Agamic schools, achieved relatively high standards of secular education, or both. During the 1980s, Thangam’s reputation for religious knowledge—at least in his critics’ eyes—was progressively undermined by the emergence of younger priests who had had an Agamic education. Maduresa was in the same position, but he was more diffident than Thangam and did not exercise the same leadership role in the Temple. Before his death in 1994, Maduresa also became semiretired, and from the mid-1980s, Manikkasundara took over much of his work in the Temple. The Agamic school graduates have made it obvious to everyone that Thangam, despite his eloquence and intelligence, has not learned much Sanskrit material by heart, so that he became more vulnerable to his rivals’ criticism. Somewhat surprisingly, given his position in the Temple and his leading role in the meeting in February 1995, Manikkasundara was allocated no formal responsibility in the renovation ritual. Nonetheless, Manikkasundara and several other young men who had all graduated from religious schools—including Ramesh, Sivaraj, Raja Bhattar (a priest who founded his own Agamic school near Madurai), and Sivakumar Bhattar (the second Agamic school graduate, who had returned from his post in

a Kuala Lumpur temple)—were still able to display their credentials and reinforce their claim to superior professional expertise. They could do so because operational control of much of the ritual action was in their hands. Thus Manikkasundara and his educated colleagues, some of whom had been appointed as *sadhakas*, mostly wandered around throughout the ritual to show that they were in charge. Apart from Ramesh, serving as Minakshi's principal priest, they did not take part in any of the work of the ordinary priests acting as *acharyas*, except when they intervened, as they quite frequently did, to underline their mastery by reciting Sanskrit texts, directing other priests, and taking over the performance of particularly important or spectacular rituals.

In practice, too, although he could give general directions, Thangam had to delegate considerable responsibility to the educated priests, because only they actually knew in any detail what had to be done. Normally, therefore, whenever confusion arose because priests were carrying out some of the rituals incorrectly or did not know exactly what to do, men from the group of educated priests intervened with corrective instructions. This does not mean that muddles were always sorted out; often they were unnoticed or ignored (as was periodically pointed out to me), and sometimes the experts disagreed among themselves about what ought to be done. For example, on the day before the fire sacrifices were due to begin, Thangam and Manikkasundara inspected the fire pits in the side pavilions and decided that some of them were the wrong shape for their respective deities. This was said to be because the workers making them had taken their instructions from ignorant officials in the Temple administration, not from priests. But Thangam was then joined by Raja, and it took them quite a long time to decide which deities' and towers' water pots were in fact meant to be located on which altars in the two pavilions, and their final list was not identical to that given to me earlier by another well-educated priest. Moreover, in the renovation ritual, as in every other ritual in the Minakshi Temple (even though the majority of devotees never notice), there were plenty of mistakes and shortcuts, and numerous people blamed each other for incompetence.

Nevertheless, despite the muddles and mistakes, the priests who had had an Agamic education were repeatedly able to intervene to display their expertise, especially in pronouncing mantras and reciting texts, and they could often give orders to the rest of the priests who were actually carrying out most of the work at the fire sacrifices and other rituals. Because no other ritual in the Minakshi Temple requires so many priests to participate in such a complex event, the conduct of the renovation ritual highlighted to an unprecedented extent the distinction between the minority of mostly younger educated priests with "professional" expertise and the rest of the uneducated priests. It was this educational and generational

divide that was played out so sharply and publicly during the ritual, even though the ancient division between Vikkira Pantiyas and Kulacekaras as well as dissension between individuals were significant features as well. By the end of the renovation ritual, whatever antipathy may have been raised among their fellow priests, the men who had had an Agamic education had been able to assert their expertise, professionalism, and authority over the rest more effectively than ever before. The 1995 *kumbhabhisheka*, in the way that major public events often are, was a “social drama” confirming the change in the structure of relationships among the priests that had been developing since the previous renovation in 1974. For Manikkasundara in particular, it also marked the start of a new life, because as soon as the ritual had finished, he and his family set off for America, where Thangam was also going, so that they could both take part a few days later in the Pearland temple’s own *kumbhabhisheka*.

Yet it is also important that because all the priests in the Minakshi Temple acknowledge the ultimate authority of the Agamas as Shiva’s words, all of them, including uneducated men, recognize that those who have had an Agamic education are more expert and are entitled to a position of leadership, which they should indeed assume. Moreover, the vast majority of the priests did take an active part in the ritual, and leaving rivalry and animosity to one side, they were collectively able to congratulate themselves on the conduct of the 1995 renovation ritual. In more than a merely rhetorical sense, this grand event also marked the renewal of the Minakshi Temple priesthood that had been under way during the previous two decades.