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Dolls on Display: A South Indian Festival of Identity and Play

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Deeksha Sivakumar

B.A. (Hons.), Linfield College, 2007
M.A., University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 2010

Advisor: Dr. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

Dolls on Display: A South Indian Festival of Identity and Play
By Deeksha Sivakumar

This dissertation is an ethnography of the festival display of dolls called *Bommai Golu* (literally "court of dolls") to commemorate the south Indian domestic celebration of the nine nights of *Navaratri* concluding with *Vijayadashami*. I describe how participants annually display materials, particularly dolls as deities, alongside mythological and life history narratives in the form of dioramas. Prosperity in the form of antiquity and abundance, continues to be a theme of this festival, a way through which participants honor the goddess' auspicious blessings. Doll-play characterizes *Bommai Golu*'s ritualized style of performance, showcasing these displays as material markers of one's identity. I argue that creating and viewing *Golu*s is a form of *reflexive* doll-play, a way for participants to situate their own identities within their broader social and religious worlds. In this way, the festival remains fluid, inclusive, and appealing to participants from a variety of socio-economic classes, from traditional Brahmins, their adopted kin to Indian immigrant families to the US.

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At Emory University, I owe a great deal to my faculty mentors at the Religion and MESAS department, some who were in present in my committee and others who taught and fostered my thinking through theoretical issues surrounding this dissertation. Dr. Velcheru Naryana Rao, Marko Geslani, Don Seeman, Paul Courtright, Scott Kugle, Sara McClintock, Ruby Lal and Diane Daikete, were all there at various points in my graduate school career. They asked pivotal questions that drove me into hours of research, eventually building the contours of this project. From afar, Vasudha Narayanan, from the University of Florida, is an outside committee member, but, is also a scholar-practitioner in *Navaratri Golu*. Her years of practicing, witnessing, and reflecting upon this festival is fragrant in the authentic voices I share in this dissertation. My Master's advisor, Kristin Bloomer is also vital to my dissertation, since she helped me craft my personal statement to Emory, taught me Tamil, and also read many drafts over many years.

The Practical Matters and Lilly Foundation Theological Initiative at Emory provided funding for much of my dissertation fieldwork travel and for this I will be forever

thankful. Not only that, this Initiative ended up becoming invaluable to my collegiate experience, bringing friends, mentors and colleagues that helped me think through this dissertation in non-traditional ways. They have given me hope that my insights can reach audiences beyond those who read and learn about south-Asian religions.

Emory also provided the scholarly environment required to carry on such a multi-dimensional dissertation with interests in many disciplines. I was able to participate in research funding offered through the graduate school for conferences and language training, I was able to attend a three-day grant writing workshop to sharpen my proposal, and I was able to find every book I needed in the halls of Woodruff Library.

Participants in *Golu*, devotees at temples, priests and ritual specialists, in south India as well as America have also contributed to this dissertation over the many years I spent researching and writing. I want to especially mention the Brahmin women, who are extremely educated, reflexive and articulate in their own right, but who are also audiences for this dissertation's work, eagerly waiting for the production of this manuscript for their own household discussions. They welcomed me into their homes, their kitchens, and fed me their delicious food, helping me think through their lives as a participant. Through their embodied ritual life, I was able to envision how tradition maintains continuity and still adapts to contemporary demands.

The Mylapore Trio were also pivotal members of the Chennai community who shared my enthusiasm for *Golu* but also shared personal narratives of their family life to help me articulate their worldview. They also showed me respect and sincerely thought through my questions and analysis of this festival over its history and evolution.

Some say it takes a village to raise a child, and I say it takes a family to write a dissertation. I couldn't have completed this project without the support and

encouragement of my family. Briggs, my partner and father to our now three-year-old daughter Avighna, was someone I learned about as I wrote my dissertation. He critiqued me, challenged me and consoled me through the many days and nights we spent thinking through my project. Our daughter gives renewed meaning to this dissertation as I imagine her reading and thinking through the ways I balance my religious ritual and academic lives.

As a practitioner of this festival myself, my family has been crucial to my analytic thinking. My father showed his undying commitment when he forced me reapply to graduate school, read my drafts and corrected my Tamil. My mother, a ritual specialist in her own right, cared for me and Avighna while I wrote this dissertation in Chennai, India and Columbus, Ohio, but also surprised me by asking sharp and pointed questions when I seemed to be lackadaisical in my thinking. My older sister, Chhaya, is one of the first people I told when I decided on this topic, because she shares my love and curiosity for dolls and doll-play that influences much of the analysis I employed. Throughout our childhood and until our married life in the same suburb of America (East Bay, California), Chhaya has always devoted time to hearing my theoretical choices, my tangential ramblings about material culture, showing me how an older sister can cradle and amplify the intellectual world of her sibling. This dissertation echoes conversations in our world of play. Briggs' mother was also always there at the most crucial times in this dissertation and in my married life, offering her home, her friends as interlocutors and preparing delicious food while I had to stay up late and write.

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who was never able to be with me in my lived life, but whose energy, thoughts, and embodied knowledge I carry within my heart and mind. I also wish to acknowledge my dear friend and colleague Devika Wasson from my days as a graduate student at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Devika was my friend and she was also one of the most promising scholars in our field, but untimely death took her away at the young age of 27. The news of her passing came to me in the middle of my Ph.D. program. I know she values ethnography in the same ways that I do, and I imagined her reading and supporting my conversations as I wrote this dissertation.

A Note on Transliteration

I have italicized non-English words throughout this dissertation except for proper nouns, names of texts, people, castes, gods/goddesses, and cities. For these, I have not used diacritics and have instead opted for the commonly used spelling for cross-referencing to pan-Indic words. For example: *mūrti* is *murti*; *Śiva* is Shiva; *smartā* is smarta; *Navarātri* is *Navaratri*; and, Devī Māhātmya is Devi Mahatmya. I have retained diacritics in all my sources as they appear within those texts. This is the case with some important analytic terms like *līlā* and *pāvai* that show up in a variety of sources.

Tamil is a language with difficult politics because most of the Hindu religious vocabulary is in Sanskrit. Without engaging in those debates and still giving a voice to my Brahmin interlocutors, I have chosen to go with phonetic Tamil pronunciation throughout this dissertation. I felt this provides readability to the dissertation especially to those who may find the lexical diacritics distancing to the Tamil they have read or heard spoken. For example: *nonbu* is used instead of *nōṉpu* and *Bommai Golu* is used instead of *Pommai Kolu*. In the first mention of these words with Tamil or Sanskrit lexical equivalents, I have mentioned their gloss with diacritics. In most cases, unless specified, the words ending in "-m" (Tamil-ized ending) has roots in Sanskrit. I have used the phonetic Tamil with diacritics in the quotations spoken by my interlocutors and given a brief translation beside it in parentheses. For plural, I have opted for the use of the English addition "-s" rather than the Tamil endings which would require "*kal*."

Participants do not refer to the festival as *Bommai Golu* but rather call the festival just *Golu* or *Navaratri Golu*. I have used the term *Bommai Golu* to refer to the festival as a whole (including the evening celebrations and music, their guests and its reception) and the term *Golu* to describe the entire decorative display or display space.

The vast majority of this fieldwork was conducted in a mixture of Tamil and English along with my Brahmin interlocutors. The Brahmins used a dialect of Tamil that comes from regions like Kumbakonam and Thanjavur where “s” is often pronounced as “sh” and “k” was pronounced as “g” and several of the aspirations from Sanskrit consonants like “bh” or “dh” carried over to their Tamil. The doll makers, whom I met in villages around Andhra Pradesh, had their interviews conducted in Telugu and I later translated them with the help of my fieldwork assistant Thinappa, an M.A. in Sociology candidate from Triupati Venkenteshwara University. There were a few conversations that occurred with non-Tamil speakers such as Sheila in Hindi. I wish to stress that all my interlocutors were multi-lingual in many ways, speaking different dialects as well as more than one language and we repeatedly tried to connect worlds linguistically, they mimicked my Americanized English, Sanskritized Tamil, or Hindi vocabularies and accents as I shared in theirs.

Abbreviations

Skt – Sanskrit

Ta – Tamil

Trio – Mylapore Trio

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO BOMMAI GOLU

Ramani hunched over and took off her glasses to wipe them on her sari. She nibbled on her snack as she started to narrate to me about *Golu* in her childhood. *Bommai Golu* is her family's festival celebration of *Navaratri*, for which she displays her mother's antique doll collection in the form of assemblies and dioramas. Today, Ramani is at least eighty-four-years-old and spends her time between Sunnyvale, California and Chennai, India, where her daughter and son, respectively, live. "The year would be 1948, India was only a year into her freedom and I was fifteen-years-old…," she said in Tamil, beginning her memory of *Bommai Golu* (also called *Navaratri Golu* or simply *Golu* among participants; literally "court of dolls") in her natal home. Her father had just taken up a position with the Indian railways and their family would be accompanying him to his next posting in Calcutta (nowadays called Kolkota). Before that, they had never left their natal village of Pudukkotai, in central Tamilnadu. *Navaratri* was approaching in a few days and plenty had to be done. This was the last time Ramani would get to celebrate *Bommai Golu* with her extended family and close friends, all of whom lived in the same house and Brahmin neighborhood (Skt: *agrahāram*).[1] The entire street would be brightly lit with oil lamps for days before *Bommai Golu*, she told me with her eyes widening and her chest puffing with pride, and "our *agraharam* would be glowing! It is a sight I will never forget." On the eve of *Bommai Golu*, she said they would bring down the chests from their loft

[1] *Agraharam*s are Brahmin-only neighborhoods beside temple complexes. Some smaller towns in Tamilnadu still retain these neighborhoods and individual homes. In Chennai, most *agraharam*s have been replaced by larger building complexes and apartment-style buildings to accommodate more residents. The residents may still only be Brahmin in these areas closer to temples, but they are no longer meant to be exclusive or segregated by caste.

attic (Ta: *paraṇ*). There were two boxes that Ramani especially looked forward to opening. The large 4 X 4 feet brown wooden chest that was her mother's bridal trousseau and another smaller 3 X 3 feet iron chest that belonged to her maternal grandmother. Both of these contained the *Golu* dolls that had been preserved in her family. The whole evening, all the women would abandon their usual chores (cooking, cleaning, even serving the men), Ramani said while giggling with delight, because they would be busy unpacking and wiping large and small dolls to make them look like new. As they opened each cloth-wrapped package to find a doll, a smile would come to their faces as they would excitedly recall who had given them this doll or which god or character this doll represented. Baby Krishna brought a smile to every girl's face. Ramani's favorite doll was her mother's *talai-attu-bommai*, a dancing girl doll from Thanjavur (Ta*: talai-y-āṭṭi-p-pommai*), whose limbs always had to be perfectly stacked and balanced so that it would gently sway when tapped. Each part was packed separately, and everyone would scramble to find a piece, making sure they had collected the base, the skirt, the torso with arms, and finally, the head. When they had found all four, they would immediately assemble it and watch the doll sway. They were enchanted by the technology that allowed the doll to dance without being touched! After they had unpacked most of the dolls and wiped them clean, the children were told to have their evening rinse, put on pretty clothes and come to have their hair combed and *pottu* (Ta: *poṭṭu*) adorned. They had to get dressed because they were going out to invite their neighbors for *Bommai Golu* in their house.

Almost forty years after Ramani's last *Bommai Golu* in Pudukkotai, the year was 1990 and I too excitedly opened packages wrapped in newspaper and jute twine from within an iron chest kept in our *puja* (Skt: *pūja*; Ta: *pūjai*) room loft attic to reveal dolls. My mother and older sister sat beside me unwrapping dolls in our flat in Mylapore,

Chennai as we talked about how this was our last *Bommai Golu* in India because we were moving to Dubai, UAE that December. Our family was nuclear and urban, so we didn't live with our grandparents and my father often traveled for days. I recall him never being around for festival days, especially those rituals celebrated by women. *Bommai Golu*, as I remember from my own childhood, was performed among children and mothers. We had an old Thanjavur *talai-attu-bommai*, just like Ramani's, which my mother had inherited from her mother-in-law. We took special care to assemble her and watch her sway. Our favorite was the two-feet-tall *marappaci* (made of red sandal wood Latin name: *pterocarpus santalinus*) couple dolls my mother had inherited from her grandmother, that we fashioned to look like husband and wife. We spent several hours dressing them up with ornaments and clothing till we thought they looked perfect for their wedding day. Once they were ready, my sister and I dressed ourselves up as Krishna's *gopi*s and my mother pinned silk stoles over our braided hair to cascade downward. We, too, were going out on the eve of *Navaratri* to invite our neighbors and friends to *Golu* in our home.

Another twenty years later in 2017, my two-year old daughter and I celebrated *Bommai Golu* in my mother- in-law's home in an American suburb called Fishers in Indianapolis. We unpacked several cardboard boxes from their store room in the basement and wiped down the dolls with a soft rag and some rubbing alcohol. My mother-in-law doesn't have a Thanjavur *talai-attu bommai* because her natal family is from Vellore district, in northern Tamilnadu. She did, however, have a collection of large papier-mâché and clay dolls to choose from for this year, which she had brought back from Tamilnadu over several trips since 1995. Some were from her mother's *Golu* collection and others she had purchased from shops in Mylapore. We also set up a diorama of a snow-covered Indiana village beside her *Golu*, with skiers, trekkers, and a

bakery (all fashioned from Christmas decorations at American hobby stores). All the guests would love seeing this miniaturized depiction of a wintery landscape, my mother-in-law felt, especially since this year's summer had been especially long. We had sent out invitations over email two weeks in advance and already had forty-six confirmed RSVPs. We had also planned caterers for dinner to be served for all our guests. We didn't have to leave home to invite our guests, but apart from assembling the *Golu*, lots of preparations had to be done to make sure the one evening of our *Bommai Golu* open-house would be successful and run smoothly. We had gift bags for all guests according to their age, kid-friendly toys and activities for young children, and the Detroit Lions game on for football enthusiasts.

Golu are not built in a day or a week. In most homes where it is celebrated over multiple generations, the dolls or *bommai* central to *Bommai Golu* are collected and passed down from mothers to their daughters and come to be displayed in a variety of tiers, themes, and dioramas as a performance of the householder's creativity, enthusiasm, and religious devotion. The tradition of keeping a *Golu* is carried by new brides from their natal homes into their husband's homes.[2] In her bridal trousseau, the new Brahmin bride receives cosmetics, gifts for her forthcoming babies, items for her *puja* and ritual habits, pots and vessels, and her first set of *Golu* dolls. Combining her old identity as a *kanya* (pre-pubescent/ un-married girl; Ta: *kanni*) in her father's home with the rituals, habits, and materials of her new home, the householder keeps her very first *Golu* in her marital

[2] I have not documented among older participants who kept *Golu* an instance where they married into a home where *Golu* was kept but they hadn't kept one in their natal home. This may have been a rare occurrence or just gone unreported as such because the primary narrative that was shared was one where Brahmin families are endogamous and those from a small specific caste-groups only married within their own communities.

home. She purchases new dolls over the years or when the family travels to add to the old ones she inherits and slowly gathers a vast doll collection.

Bommai Golu encompasses all the events during the ten-day period of *Navaratri* in some southern Indian homes commencing with the autumnal equinox new moon. As the days become shorter and the nights become cooler and longer, women and their children commemorate this time by keeping *Bommai Golu* which includes: retrieving and unpacking boxes filled with wrapped figurines, dolls and objects that were put away in storage, assembling them on tiered structures, creating dioramas at the structures' base, inviting guests to see a *Golu* in one's home, visiting neighbors and friends who keep *Golu*, partaking in buying, assembling and viewing one another's dolls and dioramas, eating *sundal* (sprouted toasted savory lentils; Ta: *cuṇṭal*), preparing and collecting the *tambulam* (auspicious gifts; Ta: *tāmpūlam*). In admiration or reverence to a particularly beautiful *Golu* display participants or their children might sing *shloka*s (poetry of praise; Skt: *śloka*) in one another's home to honor the goddess who has visited this home. This is considered auspicious and a blessing and an honor to the householder who kept the *Golu*. All participants strive to perform in another's home and invite at least a few visitors and performances into their own home, and many accomplish this by assembling a playful and enjoyable display of dolls in dioramas. After every *Bommai Golu*, each householder can take apart their *Golu* and pack away their doll collection knowing that their creative efforts paid off. Their *Golu* would be admired or remembered till the next year's *Navaratri.*

In this dissertation, I argue that *Bommai Golu* are characterized by dolls and ritualized doll-play, a way through which participants depict personal and communal narratives and memories to one another. In the following chapters, I analyze the how

Bommai Golu becomes a festival display of one's identity by discussing the various contexts within which *Golu* displays are created and viewed and the various material representations used to narrate those identities. In the next three chapters, I analyze *Bommai Golu* as an inherited, adopted, and preserved tradition respectively which trace the contemporary shift in the festival from domestic to public contexts. In the fifth chapter, I turn towards the ritualized style of performance of *Bommai Golu* and propose how dolls and doll-play articulate the experience of keeping a *Golu*, communicating how this festival can be fluid and thus adopted by a variety of socio-economic classes.

The Evolution of *Bommai Golu* (circa 1950-2018)

Bommai Golu has remained a festival specific to certain south Indian Brahmin families up until the late 1990's. *Bommai Golu* has historically also been a domestic ritual performed within the home primarily by its female householders. *Golu* displays are witnessed by visitors to one's home, but the festival isn't really public because the pool of invited guests are only close family or friends and usually neighbors. Traditionally, cities and villages were organized to accommodate segregated communities, and this meant that Brahmins lived among other Brahmins in their *agraharam*s beside temple complexes. Even though during *Golu* one kept their front doors wide open for all to see, very rarely was a visitor unknown to the community or someone had never kept *Golu* in their home. Housewives expected reciprocity – if I come to your home to see your *Golu*, you would come to see my *Golu* in my home.

The invitation was open-ended but was reserved for only one's neighbors within a secluded caste-specific neighborhood. This suggests that *Bommai Golu* was not a private

ritual just because it was a *pandigai* held at home. The distinction between public/private doesn't fully apply to *Bommai Golu*. I say this because, while the displays were not truly public in the way that I will discuss they are in newly emerging contexts (Trio, non-Brahmin, or virtual), traditional and Brahmin *Golu* displays are not absolutely private either. Anna Guengerich articulates, in her work on pre-historic Peruivan architecture, that identifying the household space as domestic works better than private in order to contrast it with the public. Guengerich says that while scholarly attention has been significantly devoted to the study of public architecture, less interest has been shown towards articulating how spaces in the domestic space influence political and public architecture. For this reason, she says that, "the notion of *public* differs from that of the *community* in denoting an assemblage that subsumes and produces social difference, rather than integration" (Guengerich, 2017, p.265). Similarly, *Bommai Golu* as celebrated in a Brahmin home, whether *agraharam* or urban is not truly public, but part of a community. Once part of a community's space, the domestic is also a contested zone where power dynamics among of discourses surrounding identity, politics, and (in my case) religion can be witnessed. The household *Golu* is created and viewed in this domestic zone, one which can challenge and mark one's identity to their broader social worlds.

Every householder's first *Golu* is usually small with a minimum of three steps, and eventually it grows to the height of seven or nine steps by the time the householder's children are teenagers. Upon these steps, householders keep dolls and dioramas representing their favorite gods and goddesses and their narratives, historical heroes and legends, and depicting their ancestors and their family's quotidian lives, pilgrimages, and ritual experiences. Many of the antique dolls were made of wood and clay and they were

painted using organic plant-based dyes found in the regions where their doll-makers resided. The village scenes and available diorama sets used to be simple in their depictions. Most often there was set of farmers on bullock carts, villagers working in different professions (washerwoman and man, stone mill-grinder, fisherwoman, or basket weaver) or scenes from the Brahmin marriage ceremony. Doll-makers used to draw inspiration from temple carvings at famous pilgrimage sites, famous historical places and events and everyday rural life. Keepers of *Golu* may also choose to tell stories with their dolls, depicting dioramas using the dolls and materials available to them. The dolls are assembled in themes upon some of the tiers, and in settings or landscapes in some others. Upon the lowest level and surrounding floor, dolls are usually depicted in dioramas depicting quotidian reality and personal life events of the participants.

Today doll-makers also depict iconography used in film posters, on television, religious calendar art, and popular culture. The ubiquity of paper, plaster, plastic and synthetic dyes have changed the appearance of these dolls and the types of dioramas depicted as well. These newer *Golu* dolls and diorama sets not only showcase contemporary iconographic styles of deities, but also show off modern scenarios: dolls playing sports like cricket; dolls watching television or playing with laptops and cellphones; dolls wearing western clothing and driving in cars; and, dolls of various ethnicities. Growing to accommodate the new ritual markets dolls are made to suit consumers tastes and come in every size and price-range. The affordability of dolls today, because they are made from a variety of materials that are lightweight, non-corrosive, and portable, enable the scale of individual *Golu* collections to be grander. Instead of waiting ten years to amass a doll collection that could fit five steps, a householder today can easily fill up five tiers in a year.

Most participants, however, still try to balance representations of older artifacts and antique dolls alongside newer toys and diorama sets in their *Golu*, to show the diversity and depth of their social and religious experiences. The creative license given to an individual householder – to playfully depict antique dolls as gods beside modern events and materials of personal importance to her family – showcases the imaginative interplay between the mythic and the real among keepers of *Bommai Golu*. In many cases, participants use some *Golu* dolls and other playthings or crafts utilized by their children. Improvising their children's toys as props in their dioramas, mothers find a way to involve their children in building *Golu* displays – playing but also talking to them about what diorama is being built and the deities and characters that are important to their family. Visitors enjoy and derive inspiration from one another's novel and playful *Golu* displays and thus emerges recognizable patterns or aesthetic trends and themes shared among participants within a particular community or region.

The first public *Golu* competition held in 1992 began to transform the scale of *Bommai Golu*. Since then, *Bommai Golu* have grown, becoming larger, being displayed in numerous public venues, thus available to many more castes and their families than was traditionally the case when *Bommai Golu* was celebrated only in domestic contexts. Anthropologist Mary Hancock observed *Bommai Golu* while conducting fieldwork among smarta Brahmins for her book titled *Womanhood in the Making*. At that time, she did not note that *Golu* was a domestic festival, nor did she discuss the emergence of *Golu* competitions as a phenomenon that would change this festival, especially when more audiences are involved than immediate neighbors. Hancock did, however, discuss that the female judges of the *Golu* competitions seemed very concerned with "originality," a quality which they described as defining "*Golu* kept according to religious tradition"

(1998, p.xxiv). Hancock's research did not show any evidence of why originality was important to traditional upholders of *Golu* primarily because she did not distinguish the domestic or Brahmin history of *Bommai Golu* apart from the public competitive *Golu* scene.

When I visited Chennai in 2010, I observed and documented the various changes in *Bommai Golu*'s contexts, scales, and audiences. I witnessed an eight-sided *Golu* display (Skt: *aśta dikku* or *diśa)* in a local temple, Bank of Baroda's *Golu* competition with cash prizes, and a Christian school keeping *Golu* for their school's annual day with models depicting environmental campaigns. I also attended *puja* and *Bommai Golu* workshops, watched television shows and Youtube videos about how to keep *Golu*, saw CNN reporters covering public *Golu* events, and many more people started telling me that *Bommai Golu* can be kept by anyone as it is a "Tamil" or "Hindu" festival.

Bommai Golu had always been a festive time, but this grandeur and scale seemed quite different. It almost seemed comparable to a city-wide marketing or public campaign. The label "Tamil" or "Hindu" often qualified the festival, making *Bommai Golu* appear public, inclusive, and thus slowly morphing it from its domestic and Brahmin caste-specific celebrations. The competitiveness encouraged by the public *Golu* scene was transforming the kinds of displays I was seeing and the places where they came to be displayed. The question to me was, how did a Brahmin domestic festival become a city-wide celebration creating a regional Hindu identity? Furthermore, how were *Bommai Golu* changing to accommodate the increased scale and new labels? Surely, one cannot build overnight an antique doll collection that tused to take years to collect; so, how do new participants access traditional information and materials surrounding domestic religious rituals with which they did not grow up?

In 2014, while formulating my dissertation proposal, I married into a Tamil Brahmin family settled in America and was to start keeping *Golu* in my marital home in the Bay Area. Through this personal event I was introduced to *Bommai Golu* in America. Till this time, I only thought there were two contexts for *Golu* – one traditional and another competitive and public. I had yet to learn about *Bommai Golu* as a domestic celebration in America. The diaspora offered another lens to view the domestic celebration of a historically Brahmin festival. Among South Asian immigrants, particularly those of Brahmin descent, *Bommai Golu* in America was thriving and rearticulating its identity once more. Recognizing this, I have included in this dissertation analysis of the role played by these migrants in changing the scale and grandeur of *Bommai Golu*. I also analyze the ways in which *Golu* materials and displays reflect and create narratives of global migration.

Bommai Golu exhibit movement and travel – from natal to marital homes, from rural *agraharam*s to urban cities, from India to America. A woman keeps her first *Bommai Golu* as a new wife in a very different context from where she remembers celebrating it as a child. Each time a new participant begins keeping *Bommai Golu*, it is as if she is doing so for the first time. Even if she has participated in *Bommai Golu* before, maintaining and arranging her own *Golu* is quite a different feat – requiring reflexivity, planning, organization, and social networks. *Bommai Golu* don't just celebrate but also memorialize change in the lives of these householders. The material manifestations of *Golu* displays – as playful performances using dolls – also exhibit these narratives of movement and travel. Dolls and material antiques can be collected over the years and passed on within prosperous family lineages. But, the same doll can also be a different character when dressed up and placed in a different landscape depending upon the

imagination and viewpoint of the householder. Ultimately, dolls and their playful malleability depict the ways in which identity can be static in one context while fluid and adaptive in another, modeling and mimicking the world around it.

Locating the Ethnographic Contexts

Mylapore

In the narrow intersecting streets of in Mylapore, a suburb in Chennai, every festival and ritual have one or more materials which are showcased in the bazaar stalls at the right season. For *Ganesh Chathurthi*, clay Ganeshas, colored-paper umbrellas, hay and grass and hibiscus flowers are piled high on large tables; for *Krishna Jayanthi*, wooden cradles, brightly colored *pavadai* (dressing or offering cloth; Ta: *pāvāṭai*) for figurines of Krishna hang like streamers from street shops while butter and rice flour go on sale in supermarkets; for *Varalakshmi Nonbu* (Ta: *nōṉpu*) , bulbs of lotuses are hidden underneath trays of the usual jasmine varieties sold by flower-sellers, and large healthy banana plant stems with leaves attached and tri-folded leaf stalks are gathered for *thoranai* (decorative streamers; Ta: *toranam*) and auctioned for the highest price by vegetable sellers. For *Bommai Golu*, all the usual objects and materials, and even flowers, are cast aside for dolls and crafts. Dolls, large and small, are assembled in rows and heaped in piles in front of every shop, blocking traffic from every intersecting road. Onlookers may gape at a friendly face of a doll they haven't seen before while a traffic policeman prods a biker and a car with his stick to move faster down the lane. During *Bommai Golu* all other materials take a back seat to dolls.

Figure 1. Mylapore Doll Market

Joanne Waghorne identifies Mylapore's landscape among many temple towns in Tamil Nadu as a storehouse of socio-economic relationships (2004, p.2). In this marketplace, you will find any religious good or service for the right price. I returned to these streets during *Bommai Golu* in September 2010 in search of a local doll painter called Paramasivan. I had read about him in the local weekly called, *Mylapore Times*, and I thought he would be able to introduce me to the local *Golu* scene. Among the various contexts I will present in this dissertation, Mylapore is a locus of sorts, for the traditional as well as modern practices surrounding *Bommai Golu*. Much like Mylapore's landscape, *Bommai Golu* within this landscape has taken many forms (Skt: *rūpam*; Ta: *rūpankal*) to thrive and succeed in its local scene (Figure 1). The oldest practitioner of *Bommai Golu*

and the modern new comer are both welcomed into the *Golu* scene, one learning from the other and the other translating their familial practices to a broader audience.

Mylapore's past, as a trading hub, has been documented in accounts of 13-15th century travelers to South India. Even before that time, St. Thomas, the apostle of Jesus is said to have entered India via this influential port city. Mylapore today is home to temples of Kapaleeshwarar and Mundakkaniamman, St.Thomas' cathedral, Luz Roman Catholic Church, the Boat club (a famous country club for Naval officers), Sanskrit College, four foreign consulates (Korean, Russian, Norwegian and Swedish) Vivekanada Ashram, Ramakrishna Mutt, Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, Krishnamacharya Yoga Center, Chennai Music Academy, and hosts the largest southern Indian classical music festival in the temple tank of Kapaleeshwarar temple annually during *marghazi masam* (December; Ta: *mārkaḻi māsam*). Members of the Mylapore community have been influential in Chennai particularly within the Kala Academy and Theosophical Society. Many of these public figures have been vocal about preserving "heritage" in a modernizing world. Mylaporeans claim to straddle rationality and science alongside Vedic and Brahminical philosophical schools claiming the superiority of the traditional schools in providing mechanisms to cope with modernity.

Mylapore also has a rich political and professional heritage for the Brahmins and some non-Brahmins and non-Hindus who have lived here for over a century. The history of this city is written upon its street names and each large street is home to a family, its lineage and professional affiliations. Devanathan is the name of one street where you can find every household male occupied as a lawyer or high court judge, all home to iyer and iyengar Brahmins. Sir T. Muthuswamy Iyer and his family settled in Alwarpet or Abhiramapuram. C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer, a lawyer and later Diwan of

Travancore, lived beside the Abhiramapuram family. Two legal friends, K. Bashyam Iyengar and his Muslim colleague Basheer Ahmed Sayeed together are named in Bashyam-Basheer Street beside the Mylapore marketplace. Ethiraj Kalyanam Nilayam, a local wedding hall, is named after Guruvaya Chettiar's (a reputable businessman and philanthropist) son who passed away young. Sivaswami Iyer, a lawyer and freedom fighter, is remembered in the name of the famous Mylapore school for Brahmin girls called Lady Sivaswami Iyer Academy. The Maharajas of Pithapuram, the couple whose daughter is Sita Devi, renown for her beauty and who ended up marrying one of the richest men in the world at her time (Maharaja of Baroda), are recognized in the two streets called Maharaja Surya Rao and Maharani Chinnama in Venus Colony. S. G. Kittappa, and Mrs.Sundarambal, the famous film actors of the early twentieth century are also remembered on streets respectively named after them. Many reputable families, especially ones of Brahmin or royal descent, in the early 1900's, called Mylapore their home. Furthermore, Mylapore is also home to several key educational institutions, both secular as well as religious. Since the Deccan was not divided into states till 1931, several Brahmins, wealthy merchants and their families sent their most promising children to Chennai, from a variety of linguistic heritages and religious practices, bringing with them their arts, culture, and scholastic teachings.

Harini Rajaraman describes Mylapore as:

> The beauty of the South Indian temple town is not in religious exclusivity, but in the way this religion is delicately interlaced with the urban life that surrounds it. A temple town is not explicitly for one religion, but its core remains rooted in the religious identity of one religious complex. Immediately outside this holy core follows a ring of tightly knit commercial activity, often relating to the needs of temple visitors. Although the goods within these urban marketplaces need not be religious, they often provide devotees with ease of access to daily

> necessities, while also welcoming people of all kinds to this vibrant commercial ring (Rajaraman, 2007, p.20).

Rajaraman emphasizes that culture/education, food, religion, and shopping, are fluid categories that demarcate the boundaries of this patchwork suburb, "allowing the commercial sector to be in a constant cycle of self-evaluation and 'survival of the fittest'," stating that the vendors adapt to the changing needs of the consumers (Rajaraman, 2007, p.39). I selected this suburb to be the major locus of my dissertation project for this exact reason.

When I began research for this dissertation, I was attempting to describe and analyze one community of practitioners in their home town, the smarta Tamil Brahmins and their household *pandigai* (Ta: *paṇṭikai*) or ritual. This research was triggered by Hancock's references to *Golu* and the "smarta-ization" of the Mylapore religious scene during her time of fieldwork (1990 - 91).

The landscape of Mylapore, however, is not the only context for this dissertation. In 2012, Sumathi Iyer, an eighty-year-old life-long resident of Mylapore, wrote an article for *Kumudum*, a popular fortnightly Tamil magazine. In this piece, she speaks to several of the sentiments I heard in my early days of fieldwork on this project. She lamented the westernization of the youth in her suburb and the lack of time and attention spent on religious ritual and "fun" celebrations that cause happiness among people. She argued that *Golu* in America was more "*jaga-jyothi*" (brilliance/ splendor) than in Mylapore, identifying that since people in the diaspora missed home, they celebrated *Bommai Golu* with much more splendor. She also voiced that NRIs (Non-Residential Indians) had much to repent over their "loss of culture" and thus they had wizened up and realized the importance of religion and how to impart it to their children.

Sunnyvale, California

My marriage to a Tamil Brahmin and my mother-in-law's extravagant celebration of *Bommai Golu* in a small American suburb where she invited several groups of visitors, catalyzed new questions about the adaptation of this festival within an American context and its popularity here (Figures 2 & 3). Sumathi and others' conclusions about *Golu*'s popularity in America over Mylapore were inconsistent with my initial analysis, which was presented during my doctoral proposal. I had seen *Bommai Golu* in America as a continuity of tradition that was already thriving in Mylapore. I had to then wonder what those like Sumathi perceived to be "dying" or shifting in a festival that was reasonably popular in both geographical contexts. To pursue this interest, I began to plot the traditional festivities as conducted by its core Brahmin participants, distinguishing them from the modern festivities conducted by local or diasporic communities who didn't necessarily identify their caste.

For the diaspora context, I selected an American suburb to include in this dissertation, one which couldn't mimic the dynamic social, economic, and colonial heritage of Mylapore, but one that could be seen as a socio-economic and religious hub for South-Asians in America. Though I could have chosen other cities and their suburbs, my access was limited by the city I was living in, as well as my decision to choose a suburb filled with more Brahmins than most other American cities. I am certain that a deeper analysis can be conducted on the caste and religious demographics of South Asian residential suburbs in other cities of America, yielding diverse historical ethnologies of practices.

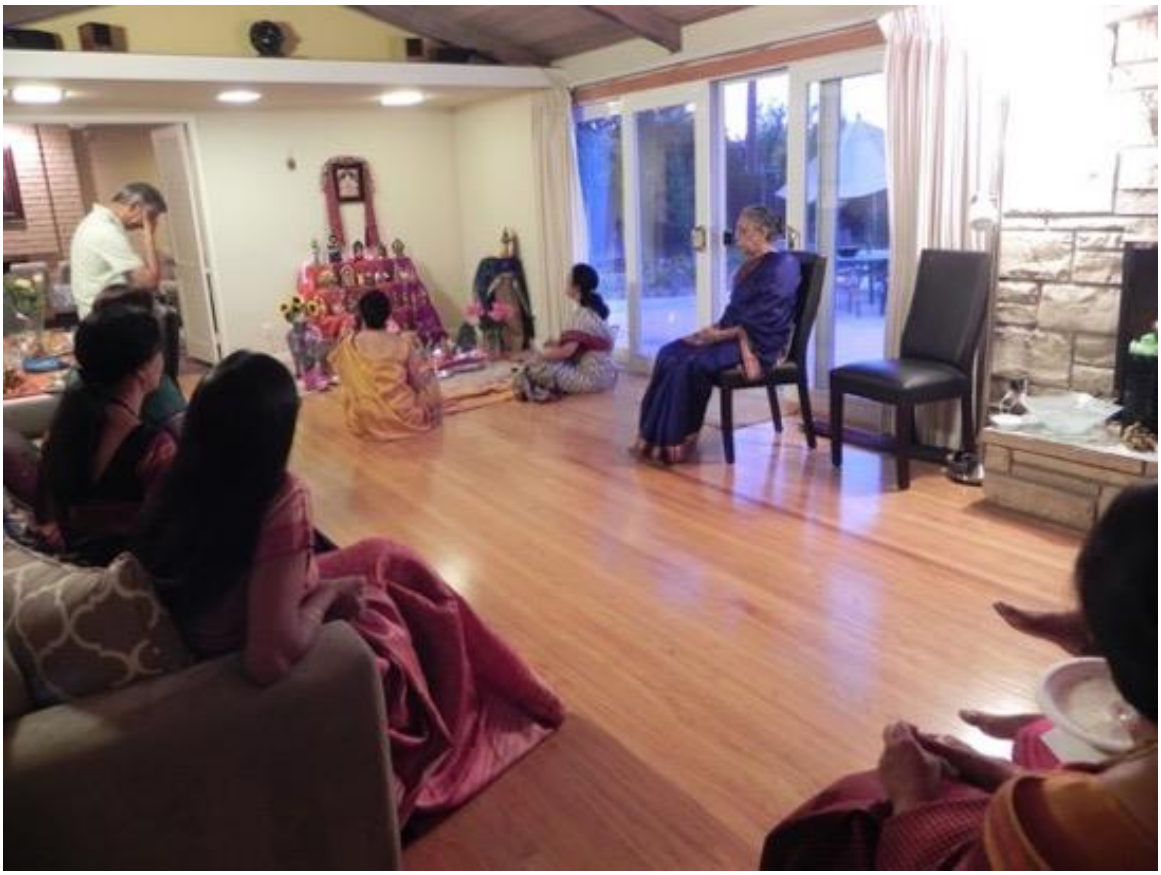

Figure 2. Singing in front of a Golu in Sunnyvale, California

Prema Kurien, in her analysis of Hinduism in America, describes for us the arrival of South-Asian immigrants in waves that affected their income level and occupational choices. Caste communities also seemed to migrate in waves to specific cities within America depending on the industries they trained within. In other words, castes who chose those professional occupations favored by American Immigration laws were influencing and being influenced by the migration to specific American suburbs.

Kurien writes,

> Most Hindu American youth are children of Indian immigrants who arrived after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. The first wave of post 1965 Indian immigrants came under the "special skills" provision of the Act, and thus were mostly highly educated, fluent

> English speakers who entered into professional and managerial careers. The second wave was comprised of relatives of the first wave immigrants who came under the family reunification provision of the Act. Education in graduate schools has been another primary entry route for a significant proportion of Indian Americans. Beginning in the 1990's, there has also been a large influx of computer data programmers and their families to meet the demands of the information technology boom in the United States. (1998, p.2)

In addition to Kurien's generalizations one could also supplement some demographic specificities related to each city's industry focus. For example, steel mining centers and automobile manufacturers located in Pittsburg, PA and Detroit, MI, were among the first to provide visas to engineers from southern India. Gail Sutherland, in her work on the differences in diaspora Hindu weddings in Houston, notes, "Due to a boom in the petrochemical industry in the 1970s, Houston rose to the status of a 'global' or 'transnational' city. Just between 1990 and 2000, the Chinese and Vietnamese populations of Houston quadrupled, while the 'Asian Indian' population increased sevenfold to 49,386 people. In contrast with the Chinese and Vietnamese communities (Chinese population: 46,482, Vietnamese: 62,277) that display more class diversity, the Indian community in Houston is overwhelmingly professional, swelling the ranks of engineers, doctors, scientific researchers, and businesspeople" (2003, p.118). In contrast in, as noted by Ajay Nair and Rasika Chakravarthy, Malayali Indians were among the first to settle in Philadelphia, 40% of Kerala immigrants working in the healthcare sector around the world, and 45% of them having had various levels of college education including doctorates (2010, pp.254-55). Therefore, more nuancing must be given to demographics of South-Asian immigrants, also tracing their migration routes (as some Indians traveled accross various continents in in their journey to America) and distinguishing the diversity in immigrant's economic class, caste, and religious practices.

Many Tamil Brahmin men migrated with their families during both the first and second wave of immigration reforms throughout America (1960's and 1980's respectively). In the Silicon Valley, Tamil Brahmins were among the immigrants of the 1980's, taking up software related jobs in the booming tech industry. Those Tamil and Brahmin engineers who came in the first wave of migration to other American cities also sent their well-educated children to work in these Silicon Valley tech jobs among the second wave of Indian immigrants. Thus, Tamil and Brahmin South-Asian Americans' children, as well as recent Tamil and Brahmin immigrants make up a significant population of the Bay Area population.

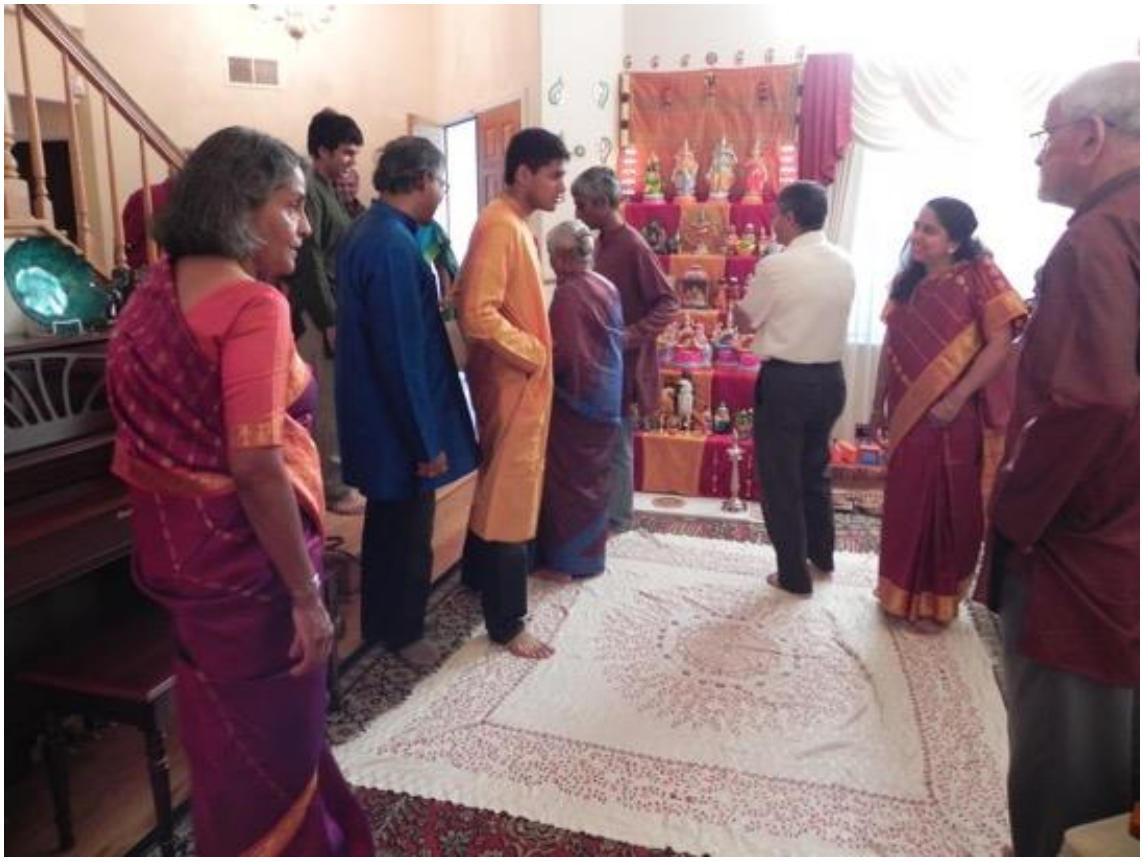

Figure 3. Sunnyvale Tamil Brahmins socializing during Golu

The middle-aged Tamil and Brahmin residents of Sunnyvale, CA whom I interviewed are all employed as computer engineers, marketing managers, or lawyers in

various top grossing tech companies in the Bay Area (Figure 3). The growth of Oracle, Windows, Google, and many such IT corporations in the larger Bay Area, brought an influx of immigrants in the 1980s who brought their computer engineering expertise to the demanding Silicon Valley markets. Tamil Brahmin men also encouraged post-graduate education among their wives, so they too were able to partake in this second wave of migration and many of their households become dual-income and immediately raised them to upper-middle class society within the suburbs where they migrated.

San Francisco Bay's history as a trading hub, its ever-changing immigrant landscape, and its illustrious status – as a marketplace for virtual commodities – makes it a valuable comparison to Mylapore. Like the iyer and iyengar Brahmins who migrated to Chennai and settled in Mylapore to take up various jobs in central stakeholders in the South Indian economic and political realm, Tamil Brahmins who migrated to the Bay Area also took on key positions in the vital economic life of San Francisco, becoming heart, mind and soul of the Silicon Valley and its now giant corporations. Moreover, they have gone on to build several temples and organizations in the area that cater to the variety of Indian and Hindu religious and cultural needs of its community. Prema Kurien has also noted the specific ways in which South-Asian immigrants choose to use their prosperity or wealth in the American context. She argues that though multiculturalism is fostered in the American context, a specific kind of "Diaspora Nationalism" or "long distance nationalism" has evolved, with which South-Asian immigrants seamlessly live (2004, p.363). This has led to a flourishing of building and public demonstrations of ethnic identity that include temple building, social advocacy, and donating towards causes related to Indian and/or Hindu identity.

The concern for the participants, both in India and the diaspora, seemed to do with their ability to maintain and preserve traditional elements of the festival. The rules of engagement in the diaspora and in urban city centers like Chennai becomes starkly different for Brahmins who had traditionally lived in caste-segregated neighborhoods when their families were traditional in rural settings. Since neighborhoods are no longer divided according to castes and families may live several hundred miles away from each other, habits and clothing in modern city life are no longer indicative of one's caste. *Bommai Golu*, especially in America, has been wedded to "Indian" ethnicity rather than Brahmin caste and thrust into the public landscape of South-Asian-Americans. Traditionally a domestic festival, known only among a few neighbors and family, *Bommai Golu* is today kept in many Hindu American temples and its practices are shared among all Hindus and Indians who visit the temple. This fundamentally transforms the questions surrounding what counts as traditional during *Bommai Golu*.

The Chinmaya Mission in Sunnyvale spends a lot of time and effort to promote *Bommai Golu* during *Navaratri* season in the Bay area primarily because of the pedagogical function of the dolls. Dolls can be used to inculcate and teach South-Asian American children, far away from their native lands, about Hindu mythologies, identity and cultural practices. The shift to the public landscape in America has also occured in India, Mylapore, where organizations, like the Mylapore Trio (see Chapter 4), have started keeping *Golu* in temples and public spaces. These organizations and temples spend a lot of time and efforts focusing on the pedagogical importance of dolls and their importance during this festival and feel that hosting these events boosts viewership and participation in public celebrations.

Juxtaposing the American diaspora to Mylapore, I was now able to identify the ways in which *Bommai Golu* has the capacity to innovate and transform itself, to compete with global and local changes in social and economic values. It is a domestic festival that opened its doors to relatives and neighbors and is now celebrated in public spaces such as temples and public competitions. The traditionally domestic *Golu* has become more visible and in that sense its diversity if also made visible. Furthermore, the dolls and their creative malleability enhanced the appeal of this domestic festival, making it enjoyable and accessible.

I returned for fieldwork in India four times during the years of 2013-2016 to Mylapore and Kumbakonam, a rural township in central Tamil Nadu (native to many of these Tamil Brahmin practitioners), while also continuing fieldwork in the American city I called home during that time (Bay Area, CA). I articulated three key questions to bring to each context: who keeps *Bommai Golu*; why do they keep *Bommai Golu*; ultimately informing, how and why does *Bommai Golu* change?

Methodology

I participated in *Bommai Golu* seasons in both Chennai and America, conducting interviews, collecting pictures and observations from a range of first and second-generation participants. I also observed the daily ritual life of the practitioners I interviewed, attempting to situate *Bommai Golu* among their broader caste-based habits. During the time before and after *Golu*, I spent more time with a few women who I felt told me their life history narratives and expressed their personal motivations for keeping *Golu* in a deeper and insightful way which have all helped me in writing this dissertation. In order to trigger memories of *Golu* from their native homes, I would often ask them to

share pictures and fond memories of *Golu* in their parents' homes. For the most part, even in America, most of the homes where *Golu* were kept were all Brahmin. I have documented the few contexts where I encountered non-Brahmin or non-Tamil participants were documented in this dissertation in the third and sixth chapters of the dissertation.

Sometimes, I would invite the women to go *Navaratri* shopping with me, seeing how they made choices regarding their *tambulam* purchases. I also invited myself over to their homes when the men were away at work or busy so as to avoid conversations where their husbands often took over. Since most of our discussions around *Golu* invariably led to the householder's telling me about their religious beliefs, I felt the men in the household very much on guard and ready to step in to share their viewpoints.

I asked the female householders questions about individual dolls that seemed antique or unusual, as well as about the newer dolls in their collection, whether they were purchased or gifted. During these conversations, minutes would turn into hours, food and snacks would be shared, and children would often join in, talking about their favorite dolls and dioramas. I often found that inspirations for *Golu* came from the entire family. Almost everyone got involved, either giving an idea here or a suggestion there. I asked women about specific dolls also to further elicit memories about their natal life histories and memories of pilgrimage or travels.

In *Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman*, Laura Kendall takes to task traditional approaches to presentation of materials on life history. These approaches do not value war, famine, political and personal strife as historical artifacts by which people remember their life histories. Kendall instead uses an approach that shows how "ethnographic narratives impinge upon the business of living and what one woman makes

of them (1988, p.8). In a similar way, I used *Bommai Golu* and its dolls as a visual archive of reference for my study, but my questions developed contextually during my participation in this festival, raised by the personal experiences of the participants themselves. The personal life histories of the individual *Golu* keepers helped to direct this project and my analysis. Once I documented several such personal life experiences among the Brahmin core participants of *Bommai Golu* over five years, I drew patterns and similarities among the various social and political associations held by the families of these practitioners. Through this process, I found that though their life experiences and religious experiences were diverse, many of these families shared a professional history (something I discuss later on in this chapter).

Apart from spending time with householders in domestic contexts, I also participated in many public celebrations of *Bommai Golu* including: workshops conducted by organizations like the Trio and Chinmaya Mission; *Chandi Homam* for *Navaratri* as sponsored by one family; viewing *Golu* displays in Hindu temples in America (Livermore in California, Riverdale in Atlanta, Hindu Temple of Central Indiana (HTCI)); diorama displays in Kumbeshwarar temple in Kumbakonam; doll and diorama displays in Kapaleeshwarar and Parthasarathi temples in Chennai; and attended "secular" *Golu* displays in two Chennai schools and one Bank. All these displays have shown me the public potential of the materiality of this display but also helped me illustrate how and why *Bommai Golu* are changing. It was through this comparison that I could identify the contours of the domestic elements of *Golu* displays while also recognizing the contemporary shifts in the festival's performance.

For this project, I also relied on reading and researching the print and electronic media that *Golu* participants may utilize to learn about religious rituals and practices.

Among these, most popular were the Tamil fortnightly magazines *Kumudam* & *Kunkuvam*, the daily newspaper called *The Hindu*, and the local fortnightly newspapers like *Mylapore Times* and *Adyar Times*. Many of these media sources were responsible for publishing and circulating upcoming events surrounding *Bommai Golu*, such as winners of *Golu* competitions and talks on theological and religious themes. I also researched Indian women's online blogs and forums that provided information on *puja vidhanam* (instructions or methods of *puja*) for various domestic celebrations. Indusladies.com and AskMaami.com are two such forums which provide information to Brahmin and Hindu housewives on how to manage different challenges while balancing religion and modern life. These online forums can be instructional and foster new communities of participants, explaining ritual rules and theological underpinnings to *Golu* practices, such as: how many invitees are enough; what do the displays symbolize; how many steps or dolls are enough; what kinds of gifts and snacks can be provided to guests?

Locating the Players

Many of the Tamil and Brahmin families who have been keeping *Bommai Golu* for multiple generations either migrated from the Mysore area to Chennai in the early 1900s or settled in Bangalore. In those that trace their roots to Mysore a nostalgia can be noted for kings and courtly traditions for *Dasara*.[3] The women in these households are the ones who have been responsible for keeping *Bommai Golu*, assembling and displaying dolls in

[3] Vasudha Narayanan speculates about the origins of *Bommai Golu* in her forthcoming article on this topic reading the festival's royal past. Here, Narayanan says that in comparison to the Tamil displays which value deities as dolls, the Karanataka migrants give, "primacy to dolls of the king and queen" (Narayanan, Forthcoming 2018, p.277).

dioramas and hosting ten-days of female and children guests into their homes. In many cases these Brahmin families are endogamous, but that didn't mean they married any Brahmin. They are endogamous down to their specific sub-castes. In my research, I found that the label Brahmin is too broad and said little about *Golu* participant's specific life histories. Their personal travels, regional settlements, professional affiliations along with their sub-caste labels and family lineages said more about their specific Brahmin-based ancestries. Among the core participants, and those who have been keeping *Bommai Golu* for multiple generations, this is a festival historically celebrated by lineages of prosperous Brahmin families. These Brahmin families became prosperous because of the fact that their ancestors and patriarchs were public intellectuals or have held a variety of advisory posts in the erstwhile Vijayanagara Empire and British colonial government as accountants, lawyers, and literary scholars.

I was also told by my interlocutors that another set of traditional *Bommai Golu* participants, did not migrate from Karnataka, and instead trace their life histories to land-owning patriarchs in the Thanjavur agricultural basin beside the Kaveri river. Since the Thanjavur Brahmins were land-owners and worship Annapurni (goddess of sugarcane), the soil, and its fertile bounty influences their daily habits and rituals. These patriarchs, according to their families, are remembered as wealthy patrons in their maintenance of elite caste culture while also protecting and providing for the laborers who worked their fields. They also patronized many Brahminical rituals in the temples they built while promoting performance of classical music, poetry and drama. It is perhaps from this side that *Golu* participants get their vivid displays of lentils, soil and legumes, all part of Thanjavur and other land-owning Brahmins' annual *pandigai*s.

The core group of *Golu* participants I worked with, though called Tamil and Brahmin, represented several distinct linguistic geographically associated communities. Fuller and Narasimhan observe, "In 1931, just under 2.5 percent of the population in the region corresponding to the modern state of Tamilnadu were Brahmans, of whom three quarters Tamil Brahmans: that is, Brahmans whose mother tongue is Tamil. The rest were mostly Telugu, Kannada, and Maharashtrian Deshastha Brahmans" (2015, p.58). Southern India was not divided into distinct states until after the independence of India and much of the multi-generational participants of *Golu* attested to the festival's roots across linguistic communities prior to Indian independence. The traditional families who keep *Golu* trace their histories to these prosperous professional and land-owning Brahmin ancestors who migrated to various city centers to promote and serve the government and/or work in legal and financial sectors. The *Golu* of many contemporary participants from these families indicate these prosperous life histories and migration narratives in their materiality. These include their travel, professional affiliations, knowledge of diverse linguistic variations of religious texts, movement from rural to urban quotidian life, and antique wealth in the form of artifacts.

Bommai Golu in the diaspora moved where Tamil Brahmins moved, connecting a group of participants who have immigrated from across southern India, the Gulf Countries (UAE, Bahrain, Oman), Australia and Zambia. I observed that organizations and diaspora communities facilitated the spread of *Bommai Golu* to a diverse group of communities that did not necessarily share the specific geographical lineages which had once united the core traditional participants of this festival in Mylapore. I found that the new practitioners identified southern Indian Brahmins as the originators of *Bommai Golu*, but most disassociated the caste-based *pandigai*'s history from its modern

celebrations. *Bommai Golu* are now touted as "for everyone", participants taking my identification of them as keepers of *Golu* to be separate from their caste identities. Furthermore, even among the Brahmin homes where *Golu* is kept, the displays and dolls are no longer so closely associated with the family histrories described above, but have become radically innovative, including Barbies, Legos, toys from local markets, and many figurines of different ethnicities intermingling, all alongside traditional dolls and displays (Figure 4).

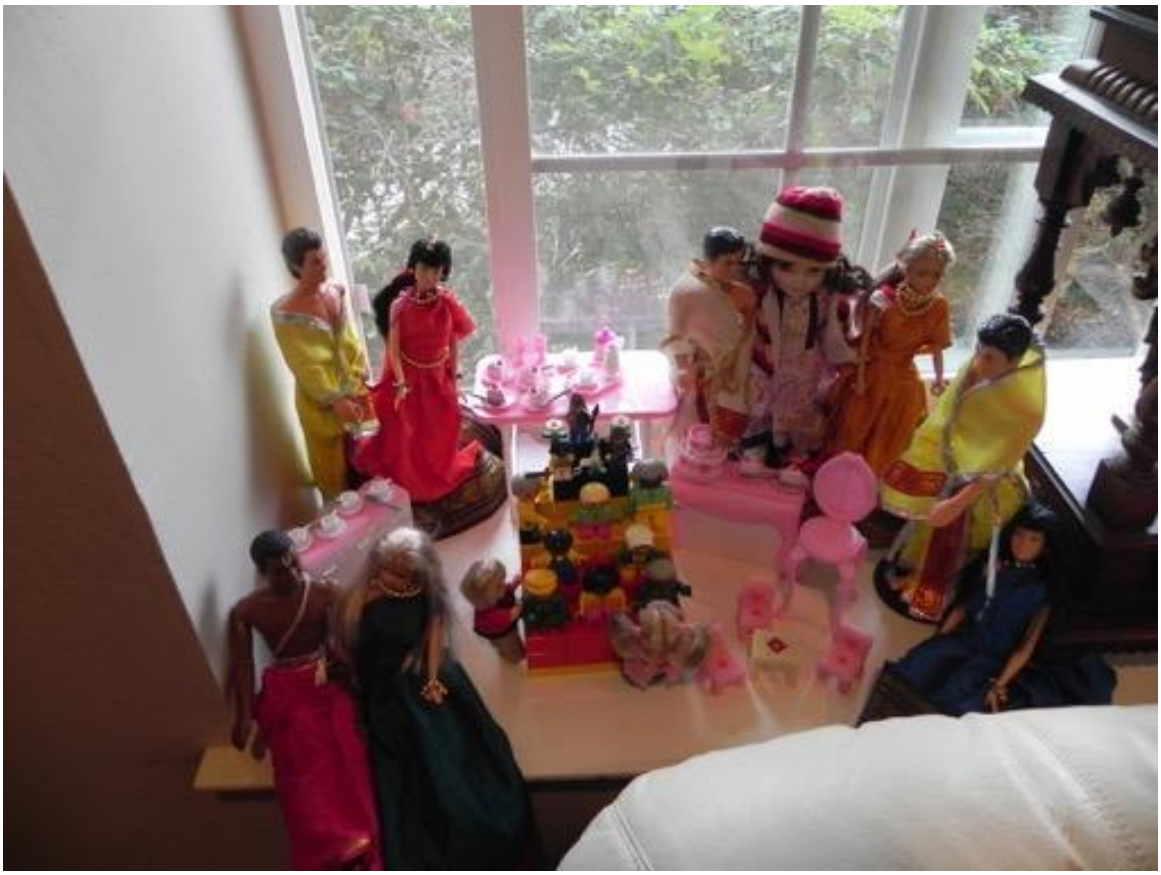

Figure 4. Golu within Golu with Barbies and Lego

Contemporary participants have access to several more avenues, beyond family, to learn about traditional practices, from the internet, to befriending Brahmins, or joining organizations in their neighborhoods. Customs which would have only been accessible by

immediate family members and local elders from one's community are receiving a global platform, requiring translation and innovation to become accessible to their modern audiences. Since antique dolls were only preserved in some families, new consumers have to create large doll collections and rely on modern means and materials to develop their display of dolls. Nowadays, the number or dolls is as important as the size of each doll in marking the grandeur of a display. The vast spread competitions and media coverage of this festival has also garnered several new followers, many of whom worry over having the best display. An audience for a domestic festival, that was often limited to a few core family and friends, now has visibility outside traditional *Golu* keeping families, and this inclusion has resulted innovations and challenges to the traditional materials and themes displayed for *Bommai Golu*.

These contemporary trends have changed the displays and their scale, and now some *Golu* displays are comparable to appeal to the grandiose celebrations of other pan-Indian festivals like *Durga Puja* in Bengal or *Ganesh Chathurthi* in Mumbai. To understand this shift, I located one of the key players who spear headed the move from domestic ritual to a public festival for *Bommai Golu*. The emergence of *Golu* competitions in Chennai arose from the popularity and media coverage of one charitable foundation which provides arts scholarships to needy children in Mylapore. The Sumukhi Rajasekharan Foundation and its key members (the Mylapore Trio) became catalysts for a *Golu* revolution of sorts in 1991. Their personal life history, being adopted and raised by reformist Mylapore Brahmins who wanted to live in a society without caste, also placed them in the unique category of being core participants (aware of the festival's exclusive past) while feeling the need to promulgate the practice (vested in the festival's inclusive

future) to any who may wish to upkeep Hindu festivals. For this reason, the Mylapore Trio have become salient characters in my analysis of *Bommai Golu* and what they create.

Situating this Dissertation

Navaratri and Bommai Golu

Bommai Golu share some similarities with other *Navaratri* goddess celebrations in India. Three key features that warrant interest are: prosperity, display, and image-making. All three have been studied with regards to *Durga puja* (Stein, 1983; Gombrich & Gupta, 1986; Einoo, 1999; Rodrigues, 2003, 2009; Schnepel, 1995; Ghosh, 2000). A fundamental comparison point is the Puranic lore which for some underlies some performances included during the celebration of *Navaratri*. This involves a vow for prosperity as well as a display of image-making.

The Devi Mahatmya, is the Purana that speaks of the gathering of a "royal assembly" for the goddess after her victory over Mahishasura. While people in Bengal and Maharashtra might create clay models of Durga for this ten-day period, festivals are celebrated uniquely in other states as well. In addition to the gathering of a royal assembly for Durga, this text also describes how to create and consecrate an "image" of Durga for worship, although by a man or king. In the text, the goddess herself begins to tell the history of this ritual and the process in which one is to venerate her. Since a "*mahatmya*" is basically a text of praise, this text consists of stories of Devi in her various adventures and hymns of praise to the goddess' attributes. The stories of Durga, or whichever form she takes, are interspersed with hymns or "*saptashatis*"- mantras to be recited to Durga. These hymns of praise usually contain a recitation of the names of the goddess and vivid descriptions of all of nature that is given life by the grace of Shakti, her feminine power.

For my comparison, there have been a few studies done linking the replication of kingship or courtly rituals upon the goddess or her ritual space during *Navaratri*. Hillary Rodrigues observes that

> The autumn *navarātri* was particularly patronized by the warrior (Kṣatriya) class, because war was waged after the rainy season, and the celebration invoked the aid of the Goddess in her persona as protector and supporter in battle against one's enemies… The king forged a relationship with, or identified himself with, the Goddess in her victory over Mahiṣa. Similar ritual identifications are still in practice in Nepal, where the king (recently disenfranchised from power) derived sovereignty through his tutelary deity, Taleju Bhavānī, a form of Durgā" (Rodrigues, 2015, Durga worship section, para. 4).[4]

Importantly, Aya Ikegame (2000) and Vasudha Narayanan (Forthcoming 2018) and their works directly influence *Bommai Golu*'s journey to Tamilnadu, from the times of the Vijaynagara empire (14th -17th Cent) when the four southern states were one large polity, through the ages to its present form. Their works can attest to the ritual connections between king's courts and *Golu*. During the reign of the Vijaynagara empire, the court encouraged and produced architecture that still stands across the southern landscape and literature in the regional languages of Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Sanskrit. Citizens of this empire enjoyed a multi-lingual heritage and shared in Hindu practices from a diversity of traditions, gods, and saints. Apart from literature, the Vijaynagara kings were also patrons of the arts, renowned for their contributions to the burgeoning genre of Carnatic music. Succeeding the Vijaynagara empire, the Mughal Muslim rulers took over, patronizing Persian, Arabic, and Islamic literature and arts. This legacy has also left specifically Islamic religious, literary, and architectural footprints

[4] The Brill Encyclopedia for Hinduism Online has an excellent collection of sources and information on the similarities and qualities of *Navaratri* across India and also connects them to various textual and ritual performances in different parts of India.

across this southern landscape. Some practices of *Bommai Golu*, however, still remained heavily indicative of courtly or Mysore *Dasara* celebrations which can also be verified by Portuguese traveler's accounts (Fernando Nuniz and Domingo Paes), as noted by Robert Sewell (1982, pp.257-259).

The Wodeyars reigned in south India from the 14th Century up until Indian Independence in 1947. In their reign they constructed the important Mysore palace in Karnataka. Though this palace was taken over at one point by Tipu Sultan and burned in an earlier dispute, it has been re-constructed and still remains as magnificent as it was many centuries ago. This palace is possibly the site that Paes and Nuniz are talking about when they are describing the *Dasara* festivities. Learning about the halls or *thothi* in this palace makes interesting bridges to the performance of *Bommai Golu*. The account of Paes describes witnessing the celebration at the palace, but he doesn't make references to the dolls arranged in an audience hall called the 'House of Victory.' However, the Mysore palace houses a large hall that one has to enter through while entering the palace which is called *gombe tothi* (literally "doll-hall" in Kannada). This doll pavilion was constructed in the 14th Century and today remains as a display hall of some of the largest image collections this palace houses. This pavilion is the closest thing to *Golu* displays that exists today. It can be considered as a king's *Golu* display, housing larger than life brass figurines of antique and monetary value. It is a museum of artifacts and local histories, as well since much of the styles of image-making and materials have gone out of usage.

These resonances with texts [the Devi Mahatmya and Devi Purana] and south Indian history suggest, to scholars and practitioners alike, an association of domestic *Golu* displays assembled for *Navaratri* to the royal court and the goddess. This

dissertation expands the focus of earlier scholarship on south Indian *Navaratri* in royal contexts to the festival as a stand-alone celebration.

Bommai Golu has been described by Fuller and Logan (1985, 1988), who distinguish between temple rituals and domestic *Navaratri Golu* in Madurai; Tanaka & Tachikawa (1992) analyze domestic *Golu* in relation to other goddess festivals and Shakti traditions across India; and Hancock (1999) describes a Brahmin elite culture characterized by domestic *Navaratri Golu* in Mylapore, Chennai. All these works provide meaning for *Golu* in the context of the larger Hindu ritual of *Navaratri,* but do not show us how the various contexts of *Bommai Golu* simultaneously exist. Furthermore, Hancock, Fuller and Logan categorize domestic *Golu* as a household version of a ritual celebrated publicly in other forms (such as dressing the *murti* of goddess in temples for *Navaratri*). But none of these works, except Hancock's brief section on the aesthetics of *puja*, address if/how dolls differ from *murti*s or the importance of tactile ritualized play as part of *Golu*.

Studying *Bommai Golu* as exemplary of other *Navaratri* rituals does not bring to the forefront that this is a contemporary phenomenon. As I will identify in the third and fourth chapter, representing *Bommai Golu* as a south Indian *Navaratri*, is a modern impulse triggered both by participants themselves and partly by scholars. Tanaka, Hancock, Fuller and Logan were all looking for patterns and trends that connect *Bommai Golu* to *Navaratri* and their research has yielded diverse answers. Much of my fieldwork has suggested that *Bommai Golu* is not directed towards worshipping the goddess as Durga but rather toward displaying the auspicious material blessings of Lakshmi. *Bommai Golu* also shows similarities to traditional Brahmin *pandigai*, pre-Independence social and professional networks, and other devotional doll-play. While it happens to

occur at the same time as *Navaratri* or *Dasara* in other parts of Hindu India, there are many things that set each geographical region and their *Navaratri* celebration apart from one another and this even includes the particular "goddess" to whom this ritual is directed. For example, in many homes, the goddess is one among all the dolls and materials displayed for this festival; and, in some Brahmin families (those in Andhra Pradesh, particularly in villages surrounding Tirupati), *Bommai Golu* like displays called "*bommalu goluvu*" are commemorated during the three-day celebration of *Makara Sankranthi* (Jan-Feb).

In this dissertation, I introduce prosperity as a mark of distinction in *Bommai Golu* celebrations and emphasize the display and image or, in this case, diorama-making aspects of the festival. My work notes the shift in the ways prosperity is displayed during *Bommai Golu*, primarily because of the rapid contemporary trends that are occurring in landscape of this festival, that signal that antique or valuable dolls and materials are decreasing and being replaced by fashionable and popular dolls and diorama sets, and newer *Golu* displays.

Materiality and Bommai Golu

In this dissertation, I wish to analyze *Bommai Golu* via the materiality of the festival – the *Golu* display. For this purpose, I treat the triangular tiered display, slowly building towards the sky, flanked by dolls in dioramas on either side (also called a "*Golu*") as a material having its own identity apart from the individual images, figurines, materials and dolls that populate this structure. The most comparable visual correlative to this material display is the Tamil temple *goburam* (gateway tower; Ta: *kōpuram*). This structure, iconic of Tamil temples, looks similar to a *Golu* display. A *goburam* is a

triangular structure that builds upward toward the sky and it is populated with figurines depicting popular mythology and deities as well as important humans, sculptors, a gateway in between mundane everyday life. Similarly, the *Golu* display stands tall in between dioramas of quotidian scenes, in the middle of the public living space of the house for a period of ten days.

In his extensive work on the religious and social life of camphor, James McHugh has argued using Marxist theory that changing the mode of production of this substance has significantly transformed its religious significance (2015, p.135). However, this relationship is also dialectical, Hughes argues, because the religious identity of camphor has also affected its mode of production. Hughes's model adopts both the works of Igor Kopytoff (biography of things) and Bruno Latour (things as institutions) to propose a hybrid theory of materiality, one in which camphor is synchronically followed through time as well as analyzed in its shifts or changes wherever it might be used, produced or understood (2015, p.136). The *Golu* display is also a material with a substantive ontology, a social and religious life that extends from the hands of the doll-makers and ends cloth wrapped in Brahmin attic spaces when not in use, being brought out only for the ten days of *Bommai Golu* celebrations. I observe the ways in which *Golu* displays' ontology (in what contexts the display is created) is changing and has been changed by its religious significance. Moreover, in employing Hughes' hybrid approach, I follow *Golu* over time from traditional Brahmin's homes into contemporary diaspora landscapes. Using Latour's "object-institution" approach, I also consider shifts that have occurred in the way *Golu* becomes created, employed and understood by participants who use their own identities to transform *Golu*'s religious significance (1999, p.192). As Latour has argued, neither a subject nor an object can exist without the network of relationships that so

define and create its existence (1999, p.193). Everything that the *Golu* display is, is made possible through the various social engagements this material has undertaken, be it the traditional inherited practices of Brahmin families, or the fashionable brightly painted diorama sets of the non-traditional participants, or the vintage ancestor's photographs prominently displayed upon the Trio's *Golu*. Moreover, the displays were each made possible, and derive their ontology from the variety of relationships, habits, and materials co-opted by each of the participants in each context.

The *Golu* display is also religious. In order to articulate how *Golu* displays are religious, I have theoretically employed the term "play" to understand and analyze the processes that animate it as a *murti*. The term *murti*, physical forms of deities residing in temples, is a verb as well as a noun (Handleman and Shulman, 1994, p.27). I explore this category further in relation to dolls in chapter five, but it suffices to say that the ontology of a doll is also in transition, being and becoming at every moment whether displayed or appreciated. The materiality of *Golu* displays comes alive in a three-step process: one, the *Golu* created in particular contexts; two, the creative and playful construction of the display space; and three, the treatment of the *Golu* space by householders and visitors alike during the ten-day festival.

This dissertation analyzes the *Golu* display's materiality as a whole as well as the materiality of the individual objects that make-up this space. My approach is driven by Latour's discussions which force one to think about the networks of relationships between objects coming together to bring an object into existence. Moreover, his revision of the social also adds a useful dimension to my work, because of the ways in which the self and object bring each other into existence, requiring a grasping of one to read the other (2005, pp.63-68). It is better than to ask what objects perform, as one more actor in the social?

The technologies of *puja* are also vital to understanding how the *Golu* display becomes a divine entity, as they involve fashioning dolls, assembling displays, and religious worship.

Chapter Divisions

I have observed individual *Bommai Golu* participants' movement from natal to marital homes and Indian to diasporic contexts as pivotal points in their life histories of migration. These narratives of migration, I argue, are displayed using dolls and dioramas from memories and imagination of mythological texts and real-life events. Apart from the participants, *Bommai Golu* celebrations undergo visible changes as they evolve to suit the contemporary landscape. In this dissertation, I analyze how the shift from a domestic *pandigai* to a public festival is transforming the scale and scope of *Bommai Golu* affecting the various interest groups who are choosing to perform this festival arrangement of dolls. I also analyze the materiality of the entire *Golu* display as a deity and interpret its creation and existence separate from the rituals and celebrations that accompany *Bommai Golu*. Through this process, I am able to describe a biography of *Golu* displays and study the various shifts over time and relationships that are reflected and created through the *Golu*. From traditional Brahmin participants, to recent lovers of dolls, I propose that dolls and play create a contemporary appeal for the festival, making it appear approachable and translatable to all. Through the various chapters following the introduction, I observe the participants, contexts and media through which *Bommai Golu* thrive: the traditional multi-generational Brahmin participants, the contemporary non-traditional participants; the Mylapore Trio; and, finally, the dolls. In the conclusion, I look at two unique contexts that I could not discuss in this dissertation that further transform *Bommai Golu* such as non-Brahmin *Golu* and online *Golu* that could be construed as eternal.

Chapter Two – This chapter discusses *Golu* as an inherited practice, through an ethnography of the *Bommai Golu* celebrations hosted by two multi-generational Brahmin participants of this festival. Meenakshi, is a wealthy Brahmin housewife in Mylapore and Mrs. Seshadri, is an upper-class retired Sunnyvale resident. Through their narratives, I analyze their accumulation of antique materials and celebration of *Bommai Golu* as one among the many religious *pandigai* conducted in a Brahmin home. Both participants grew up keeping *Golu* in their mothers' homes and also married into Brahmin families where this practice was on-going. Successfully keeping *Golu* for over twenty years in their own homes and memorable in their local communities as spectacular *Bommai Golu* hosts, these two women showcase their personal and family life histories using a range of materials collected over generations of travels, prosperous caste lineages, and powerful professional associations. In this chapter, I argue that inherited *Bommai Golu* is marked by the antique materials housed in those *Golu*, identifiable only by *Golu*-educated viewers, hence maintaining some exclusive features in contrast to the domestic festival that has begun to acquire a public audience. Here, I analyze *Bommai Golu* as playful creations displaying one's ancestral history but also distinct markers of prosperity in the form of wealth and antiquity.

Chapter Three – This chapter presents the contemporary impetuses for keeping a *Golu* among new participants. Keerti, a Software Consultant in Chennai, and Sheila, a Senior Software Engineer in the Bay Area, are both new comers to keeping *Golu*, having full time jobs and families. While both women are non-Brahmin and non-Tamil, Keerti married into a Tamil Brahmin home and wishes display piety to her traditional in-laws using playful *Golu*; Sheila uses *Golu* to network within her religious community as an

immigrant and to ensure her family stays "Hindu" in a Hindu-minority landscape. Both participants had to improvise learning how to keep this festival through social gatherings, organizations, online women's forums and internet research. Adapting *Bommai Golu* to suit their modern lifestyles is one similarity between these two women, and both nurture their *Golu* through their friendship with traditional Brahmin participants of this festival. In many ways, their performance of *Golu* identifies them as Brahmins. I also argue that *Bommai Golu* is an available gateway to their adoption of Brahmin practices, due to its material appeal as well as its unique accessibility when compared to other Brahmin domestic rituals. Here, *Bommai Golu* becomes playful in some ways but materially different. The dolls and their depictions mimic the social worlds around the participants, the doll market trends, and their access to traditional ritual materials or decorations. Prosperity is marked in the form of abundance and size. The dolls become larger, brightly colored, and ubiquitious in non-traditional displays, where size and color signal beauty.

Chapter Four – Documenting the role of one organization, Sumukhi-Rajasekharan Memorial Foundation, founded by two brothers and their sister, this chapter is central to understanding one means through which *Bommai Golu* has been made relevant to the public of Chennai. The Mylapore Trio, as the two brothers and their sister are popularly known, were adopted by a Brahmin couple, who were local freedom fighters and proponents of anti-caste philosophy. Owing the survival of religion in their own lives to their adoptive parents, the members of the Trio seek to spread the knowledge they imbibed from their parents to a "clue-less" modern audience. They inaugurated and play host to the widest spread *Bommai Golu* competition held across Tamilnadu, which today extends globally to *Golu* keepers all over the world. This chapter interprets how the members of the Trio perceive their role as vital to the religious life of Mylapore and

Tamilnadu. By placing the members of the Trio's personal life history within larger discourses of caste/identity politics, I analyze how one family attempts to instill normativity to Hindu religious life and provide an authoritative public face to a previously domestic festival. In performing their Brahmin identity, however, the Trio constrict the festival's playful nature, arguing that "sacred" worlds require careful depiction. Local and individualized narratives, as we will come to see here, are replaced for textually relevant tableaus, emphasizing the importance of pedagogy over play. Prosperity in this context represents the wealth of cultural heritage one can recall and display in the context of this festival.

In the earlier three chapters, I demonstrate the ways through which *Bommai Golu* celebrations reflect and help to create the identities of the *Golu* keeper. Firstly, for the Tamil Brahmin community, *Bommai Golu* display celebrants' specific social and professional identities to their fellow family and Brahmin friends. Secondly, for new consumers, *Bommai Golu* provides an accessible opportunity to learn religious practices from a plethora of avenues, through which they innovate traditional practices to suit modern lifestyles. Thirdly, for the Mylapore Trio, *Bommai Golu* performs and upholds their identity as Brahmins and preservers of traditional rituals. All three chapters help us to understand how identity creation and maintenance is central to this display of dolls. These chapters also use ethnographic evidence to show how modern discourses surrounding caste-identity politics, diasporic migration, and secularism have contributed to shaping contemporary performances of *Bommai Golu*. But, none of these chapters take up the question – how and why does *Bommai Golu* exemplify such fluidity – finding itself in so many contexts at once? Furthermore, why does *Bommai Golu* still retain its basic form in all these contexts, displaying dolls and miniaturized dioramas? Chapter five

analyzes the playfulness and malleability of materials such as dolls during *Bommai Golu* as a necessary element of its evolution and endurance.

Chapter Five – Practitioners have suggested that a *Golu* represents the goddess, particularly Lakshmi holding an audience for *Navaratri* and her numerous worldly creations, usually depicted by an array of objects representing this world and the mythological realm in miniature form. The *Golu* is often understood as a microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe. This is why, practitioners suggest, *Golu* exhibits the beautified and abundant display of deities or materials, which contrasts to the unadorned domestic space, and a miniaturized portrayal of all that makes up this world. In this chapter, I argue that the use of dolls is crucial to the form of religious expression performed for *Bommai Golu*. In my analysis, I employ the term play (Ta: *viḷaiyāṭu*) to interpret how *Bommai Golu* captures a form of devotion familiar to women and children. I discuss the ways in which *bhakti* or devotion expressed by young women can come to be understood as play, facilitating a closer relationship between god and devotee. The dolls and their playful depictions in dioramas, while displaying the historical and religious narratives of its participants, also creatively depict the differences between the real and mythological worlds, separating: divine and human; animate and inanimate; one community and another. The process of animating one's social and religious worlds through doll-play, I argue, enlivens the *Golu* as a *murti* (divine being)– bringing the presence of the gods and goddesses among participants during *Bommai Golu*. Furthermore, I also argue that the playful dioramas and depictions are flexible, allowing a wide variety of personal interpretations of narratives to be created and displayed. This allows *Bommai Golu* to stay fluid and to appeal to new audiences. Play or *vilaiyadal* using

dolls characterizes *Bommai Golu*'s religious devotion as well as provides one hypothesis for its adaptability and survivability in so many contexts at once.

Being and Becoming: Concluding Remarks

One my informants, Meenakshi from Mylapore, told me that by giving Lakshmi *madippu* (respect Ta: *matippu*), *Golu* allows us to represent what is important to us.[5] The term *madippu* is where Meenakshi began and so I will use it, too. *Madippu* usually evokes the meaning "importance," "valence," or "significance." Meenakshi's words tell us of the significance of doll-play during *Bommai Golu*, because after all dioramas are the materials most ubiquitously displayed across various contexts. These dioramas are where the ordinary doll becomes the important character, or object, or god. Once the dolls enter the *Golu* they become the characters, the deities and the people of great importance to us, thus becoming the identities we bestow upon them. Within the *Golu* these dolls are extraordinary and mark key life events, valuable teachings from knowledgeable saints, and all-powerful gods and goddesses.

Whenever something is placed on a pedestal, it is set apart. But even as the placement of the dolls displays distinction, the dolls also display connections or similarities to things that populate quotidian religious life. Tradition means "to transmit" or "hand-over" and what is handed over during *Bommai Golu* are the dolls themselves and thus they become key artifacts in understanding the religious history of the practitioners who keep this festival display of dolls. Dolls can take on numerous identities and their dioramas can be "dressed-up" to narrate a diversity of life histories. Gods are

[5] As quoted in Chapter2

no different in their diversity, they come in so many forms, genders, and with numerous epic battles and teachings. This fluidity, observable through all contexts where *Bommai Golu* emerge, allow the ritual material display to be religious and playful all at once. By placing the divine and human dolls in conversation with one another *Bommai Golu* provides a rare opportunity for domestic devotion to be expressed in a mode familiar to householders while also accessible to new comers. Playful interaction between participants and their dolls invokes their creativity, imagination, and reflexivity, something inherent to the performance of *Bommai Golu*. One cannot create a doll-diorama without reflexivity. In this sense, *Bommai Golu* allows each keeper of the *Golu* to visually and materially tell a story about themselves untold by any other form of religious devotion.

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CHAPTER TWO

BOMMAI GOLU AS AN INHERITED TRADITION IN BRAHMIN HOMES

This chapter presents *Bommai Golu* as an inherited family tradition within south Indian Brahmin homes. During *Bommai Golu*, I argue, Brahmin women exhibit traditional habits and rituals (as dioramas) and valuable antique materials which are inherited from their Brahmin ancestors by displaying them or modeling them in the form of miniaturized dolls in dioramas. Collection of *Golu* materials begins with gifts presented to a new Brahmin bride in her trousseau from her natal and martial homes, and many of these materials will be repeatedly used during other *pandigai*s (festival days) and household ritual duties. Exhibited for *Bommai Golu*, these materials showcase their unique caste identities – displaying the religious, social and professional connections drawn from within these households to the broader world and the inherited Brahmin traditions otherwise performed in the householder's daily lives. Hence, *Bommai Golu*, I aruge, can be understood to narrate and display Brahmin life histories and inherited religious habits.

> How do I keep Golu? I keep Golu according to my traditions (*yen itīham prakāram*). I have no interest in the 'competitions'... this is my family's habit (*paḻakkam* or "way of doing things"). You know they say, whatever Lakshmi has given, you have to show. This is how [you] make the boons come (*varam varavekkiradu*). Upon whatever you keep importance/respect (Ta: *madippu*), 'Lakshmi' will also respect them (-*vum ata madippō*). She alone (*Avaḷtān*) is the mother of everything and everyone.[6]

[6] I have combined three quotes spoken by Meenakshi in Tamil over the course of one evening after *Bommai Golu* in the September of 2015 in her home in Mylapore, Chennai. I had asked her how she kept *Golu*, why she didn't partake in competitions, and what the significance of the festival was in her mind.
Note about Translation: I have only used some Tamil words to supplement my translation of Meenakshi's words as they will be useful for our analysis later in this chapter and throughout the dissertation. Sometimes I have also left the verb (such as *prahāram* and *varavekkiradu)* accompanying the noun as these verbs derive their meaning from the nouns they accompany. Several words used by Brahmin female householders

Meenakshi's words contained many of the phrases I had heard and was going to continue to hear over the next couple of days of *Navaratri*. Mylapore, an older suburb in Chennai, has diversified over the past decade and so has *Bommai Golu*. Local news coverage of the festival since 1990 has heralded a new era of public recognition and competitions for keepers of *Bommai Golu*. But before the competitions – before the broader public gaze took over – *Bommai Golu* was traditionally an assembly of dolls displayed in many Brahmin homes in South India to which neighbors and friends were invited. During this time of *Navaratri*, primarily women and children visited each other's homes to view these doll displays, hear neighborhood gossip over snacks, and sing or dance in one another's homes. Along with doll collections, these displays showed valuable family antiques and curios, and these dance and vocal performances also allowed families to witness each other's daughters and their possible talents.

Among the various stories this dissertation will narrate about *Bommai Golu*, this chapter describes the festival as a family tradition, one among many rituals performed in a Brahmin home by the female householder as a *pandigai*s (religious ritual day). I will first present a description of Meenakshi's *Golu* and then Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu*, both of whose material displays are emblematic of the practices and habits valued in their homes. With the description of each *Golu*, I will analyze the ways in which the identities of these women are embedded within the material objects they chose to display for *Golu*, showing memories of their Brahmin ancestors' life histories and habits. The stories of Meenakshi and Mrs. Seshadri, though unique to their life experiences, are also

include Sanskrit terms that have been Tamil-ized utilizing "am" endings. For example: "*itīham*" is derived from its Sanskrit counterpart "*aitīhya*" and "*varam*" comes from the Sanskrit word "vara."

characteristic of others' stories of *Golu* from Chennai and California communities, respectively. Both women are representative of upper-middle- or upper-class Brahmin families. Both women also grew up in homes where their mothers and grandmothers, though educated, remained at home. [7] Lastly, I argue that when read as in inherited tradition, the *Bommai Golu* celebrations not only display caste-identity, but also display a different notion of prosperity, one rooted in their prosperous families' lineages.

I met Mrs. Seshadri in a San Francisco suburb during *Bommai Golu* 2014, when I had just moved to the Bay Area after getting married, and Meenakshi in Chennai during *Bommai Golu* 2015, when I was now a new mother to a five-month old daughter. Both Chennai and San Francisco have been a home to me, just like for my interlocutors. Mylapore is a famous suburb in Chennai and some say its history as a trading post predates Marco Polo.[8] Today it is home to many of the first Brahmin settlers in Madras as well as being a marketplace, aside from vegetables and fruits, known for religious ritual objects and materials. Sunnyvale, a suburb near San Francisco, is home to many Tamil Brahmin-American families who immigrated to the U.S. beginning in the early 1970's and 80's and is also a shopping destination for ritual wares among South-Asian immigrants, especially Tamil Brahmins from other regions in the USA. These latter often speak fondly of their visits to the Bay Area to see cousins and relatives, eating yummy *dosas* (rice/lentil

[7] Most of the Brahmin women I interviewed, regardless of their income level and even if they or their mothers were college-educated, even if they were successful and working several more hours than their husbands, all self-expressed that their primary cultural expectation remained within the home – mainly childcare, elderly care and cooking. As Meenakshi once jokingly said to me, "now you know why Durga has so many hands?"

[8] "Mylaipūr," as it was noted by Marco Polo in his travel diaries, was a bustling trading post (Book Three, p.56). It is also home to St. Thomas' cathedral. St. Thomas is also buried in Southern India. Mylapore holds witness to historical events for both Christians as well as Tamil Brahmins. A brief history of the relevance of Mylapore is provided in the Introductory Chapter. For the purposes of this Chapter, it is important to note that Mylapore is well known as a trading post due to its proximity to the sea and this assumption is carried on till today making it a vibrant marketplace.

crêpes) at the famous Chennai fast-food chain Saravanaa Bhavan and the 'full-meals' at Komalavilas, a small restaurant that today also sells *Golu* dolls.[9] While immigrants from other Indian states or caste communities may not find it as familiar, Tamil Brahmins love Sunnyvale and find it a 'home-away-from-home.'

Both Meenakshi and Mrs. Seshadri have been keeping *Golu* for at least 25 years. Both women have also participated in the ritual in their natal homes along with their own mothers, grandmothers and siblings. They have seen *Bommai Golu* in two different generations – one as participant and another as chief celebrant. Meenakshi traveled within India to several states during her childhood, since her father worked for the Indian Merchant Navy, but once she got married she has remained settled in Mylapore for most of the period between 1987 until the present day. Her memories of traveling are illustrated in her variety of dolls from different parts of India. Some of her older collections of dolls come from her grandmother with whom she spent a large part of her adolescent years in a town north of Chennai called Vellore. Mrs. Seshadri, on the other hand, spent most of her childhood and pre-marital life traveling between Bangalore and Mumbai where her father often went for business. Once she was married Mrs. Seshadri moved to Sunnyvale, California and remained there; she rarely travels back to India.

The eve of *Navaratri* is spent relatively the same way whether in Mylapore or Sunnyvale. Both householders put aside their weekly chores or attending to the usual household duties to set up the *Golu* display and finish decorations. Though the preparations for the themes, dioramas and doll's costumes may sometimes begin several

[9] 'Bay Area' refers to the collection of suburbs in the four directions surrounding the city of San Francisco including Oakland, Lafayette, Livermore, Sunnyvale, Cupertino, Fremont, San Jose, Santa Clara, Belmont, San Mateo & Redwood City. Sunnyvale, Cupertino, Fremont, San Jose, Santa Clara, Belmont and San Mateo, are popularly called "South Bay," and are home to many Indians and specifically Tamil Brahmins. A brief description of this region and its history among immigrants is provided in the Introductory Chapter.

weeks in advance according to available time, the display area (whether assembled a week before or the night before) must be consecrated and set aside from the rest of the home. The space where the triangular tiers or dolls are gathered will first be purified with water or cleansed thoroughly and the householder will perform this sometimes wearing a *madisar* (nine-yard; Ta: *maṭisāru*) sari or a freshly laundered sari but only after a bath. Meenakshi and Mrs. Seshadri both claimed that they wear the nine-yard sari after performing *madi* (ritual purity by bathing and wearing freshly laundered sari; Ta: *maṭi)* before assembling the display whichever night they decided to set up the space. The *puja* implements that will be displayed or used are all rinsed and adorned with sandal paste and *kumgumam* (vermilion; Ta: *kuṅkumam*). This preparation mimics the householder's habits preceding any other *pandigai*s in their home. The small figurines of deities which are made of auspicious metals like brass, silver or gold are also rinsed and adorned with sandal paste and *kumgumam*. In Meenakshi's home a *kolam* (geometric pattern with rice flour; Ta: *kōlam*) is drawn on the floor and the steps are assembled on top of this design, and another *kolam* is made in front of the *Golu* when the tiers are completely filled. In Mrs. Seshadri's home, no *kolam* is drawn underneath the display tower, but, a flower shaped geometric design using dry beans was assembled this year in front of the tiered display. On other years she has assembled different geometric patterns using dried beans or rice grains. I now turn to a descriptive analysis of their two *Bommai Golu* displays and analyze the individual dolls and objects.

Meenakshi's *Golu*

Of all the homes I visited during *Navaratri*, 2015, in Mylapore, one stood out. Meenakshi, or 'Minnie' as she is known, keeps *Golu* as well as all the other yearly rituals

that begin *Varalakshmi Nonbu* (household vow ritual for Lakshmi) in August and end with *Karadiya Nonnbu* (household vow ritual for Kamakshiamman; Ta: *Kāradiyānoṉpu*) on March 14th, a period filled with celebrations of the equinoxes, harvest festivals, and birthdays of various gods and goddesses. The celebrations that Tamil Brahmins engage in between April-August are fewer than in the period between August-March, which remains the busiest ritual time for Brahmin female householders. Minnie grew up in a traditional Brahmin family near Vellore and today lives her dream in urban Chennai along with her husband, two teenage sons, and her eighty- year-old father-in-law. Though college-educated with a Bachelor's in Education (B.Ed.), Minnie has chosen not to work. Instead she is a stay-at-home mother who is actively involved in the Mylapore Ladies' Club [local women's organization, primarily made up of Brahmins] and volunteers occasionally at her local Montessori kindergarten school.

Minnie is well known among her neighbors for having the "best *Golu*" in Mylapore, and upon entering her living room and witnessing her *Golu*, I could see what the hype was about. Dressed in a parrot green Kanchipuram silk sari with a large dark red border adorned with golden peacocks, Minnie greeted me as soon as I walked in, holding my hand and leading me to her *Golu*. The entry way to her living room had an archway without a door on which she had strung mango leaves entwined with a thick bunch of chrysanthemums. Her 400 square-foot living room was covered with assemblies of dolls and dioramas. All the seating furniture had been rearranged along the walls of the dining area. The first visible display was a triangular tier of seven steps filled with large and small clay dolls, and series of figures of gods and goddesses. While the important deities were upon the top most two steps, the third, fourth and fifth steps held characters from epic texts. Towards the lower steps Minnie displayed important people from society and

prominent aspects of social life, such as dolls from merchant communities and royalty. On the floor, on two sides of the triangular tier, were squared off spaces lined with a border of soil from which grew green sprouts representing each of the *navadhanyam*s (nine grains/lentils mentioned in oral and textual traditions). [10] Within these squared off spaces, Minnie had set up a variety of quotidian scenes and dioramas from village communities, Barbie and Ken getting married in Disneyland, and even a small street in Vancouver, Washington where her brother's family lives. [11]

Minnie's *Golu* represented her marital family's religious and social worlds. Her natal family clan's deity (Ta: *kula deivam*) Hayagreevar (Vishnu with a horse head) stood tall on the topmost step at the center of her triangular tiered display. On this top tier, we see dolls that are important to her family and her religious identity. Her father hails from a South Arcot Brahmin family; Hayagreevar is popular in the Arcot regions of Tamil Nadu. Only "insiders" would know that Hayagreevar is also associated with the smarta (broad sub-caste of Brahmins) and vadama (sub-caste consisting of upper-caste smarta Brahmins) communities of that area. In case anyone viewing the *Golu* was unfamiliar with his story, Hayagreevar's association with Vishnu was made clear by his placement along with the Krishna *avatarams* also on this top step. To each side of Hayagreevar stood Balakrishnar (baby Krishna in crawling position), and *yuvana* Krishna (teenager Krishna

[10] Most women sprouted grains to serve in the *sundal* preparation as well as sprouted grains to decorate around their Golu displays. Sprouted grains importantly preserved their nutritional benefits according to many of these women and were common ingredients in home-made baby food. To most of the women I interviewed the incorporation of sowing and sprouting *navadhanyam* harkens to a story from the Mahabharata wherein Draupadi, in order to feed her husbands, receives a miracle pot in which she harvests and prepares nine different sprouted grains.

[11] Village scenes are common to the grammar of *Bommai Golu* displays and will often be found on the floor space or lower most tiers. In the Introduction I discuss how *Golu* displays order and structure the world as dualisms: god(s)/human(s); rural/urban; animate/inanimate. Since most families do show a migration history – moving from rural to urban, natal to marital homes – depicting the dichotomy is prominent during *Bommai Golu*.

holding a flute with a calf). This top step was framed by a wooden elephant on each side. Each step below was dedicated to a specific theme allowing the viewer to categorize and the householder to organize the objects within the display through association.

The second step was dedicated to the goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati with a *kalasham* (brass/silver pot topped with a coconut and mango leaves on the brim; Ta: *kalacam*) in the center. Women in Minnie's family perform *Varalakshmi Nonbu* that uses a similarly decorated *kalasham* upon which a face of the goddess is affixed. She received many of these objects— the *kalasham* pot, Lakshmi *mugam* (literally face, referring to the silver or brass face plate of the Lakshmi to affix upon pots dressed up to be the goddess; Skt: *mukha*) and smaller silver images – in her trousseau from her natal family. There were three larger clay goddess figurines on this step along with two gold-plated and two real-silver miniature images of the goddess as Sarasvati and Lakshmi on either side of the *kalasham*. The clay image of Lakshmi sat upon a lotus, offering blessings and dripping gold coins towards an over flowing earthen pot. The clay figurine of Durga looked equally demure and not vicious, holding weapons in many arms, smiling and seated upon a kneeling lion. The Sarasvati sat upon a swan holding a *veena* upon her lap and meditation beads and sacred texts in her third and fourth hands. These three clay figurines were in the same iconography as Raja Ravi Verma's calendar art and featured in the same style in photographs upon Minnie's *puja* shelf. [12] Dolls made in this image were popular in the doll markets following the 1970's. These three goddesses are associated

[12] Raja Ravi Verma is a famour Travancore family artist and painter of late 1800's. Philip Lutgendorf discusses the use of Raja Ravi Verma's iconography in calendar art and the proliferation of such styles of visually presenting the three goddesses in the 1970's and 80's. He also added that these visual depictions translated into the significance of each deity, where Lakshmi was said to represent prosperity with gold and abundance; or Sarasvati patronized the arts with her instruments; and Durga vanquished enemies with weapons. These were also echoed by Meenakshi (Lawrence & Wadley, 2001, p.220).

with *Navaratri* and are also personally important to Minnie. She spoke of Sarasvati, Durga and Lakshmi's roles as preserving music and the arts, justice and prosperity, respectively. Meenakshi collected images of the goddess that she found "beautiful," and the aesthetic beauty of these dolls was displayed in their portrayal of the roles they played in her religious world.

The third step had an assortment of Ganeshas and Murugans. The brothers Ganesha and Murugan, deities who are popular in Tamil Nadu, are both a personal choice by Minnie and representative of Tamil identity. Ganesha is loved for his "good-luck" properties, having a "material effect," and collecting Ganeshas is a favorite pastime of many Brahmin women (Pearce, 1995, p.157). [13] One popular saying asserts, "If you gift someone a Ganesha, it will bring them luck." Minnie loves collecting and gifting Ganesha figurines from all her local travels. [14] While she has collected about eighty-seven Ganeshas in total, only thirty were displayed in her *Golu* this year.

The Dashavataram (ten incarnations of Vishnu) on the fourth step was a popular doll set available when Minnie was in her thirties (in the 1990's). The doll set is still available today, but the colors and styles vary slightly. Her set is considered "vintage," as most contemporary Dashavataram sets are painted in bright, non-organic paints. Minnie, who was also responsible for teaching religious stories in the Myalpore Ladies' Club, often centered her discourses around one of the Dashavataram of Vishnu. These performances are comparable to Christian church sermons in that they incorporate discussions of

[13] Pearce is specifically referring to objects that are used as a good-luck charm. The saying asserted by Meenakshi illustrated the material effect produced by the Ganesha, removing obstacles from one's path.
[14] Once in our conversations, Minnie had likened herself to Parvati in her quarrels with Shiva, who is Ganesha's and Murugan's father. Her love for her family life and its comparison to religious narrative could also be a reason for her display of brothers Ganesha and Murugan on the same step. These deities can also be prominently placed alone and/or separated by different steps.

current events and how they relate to Puranic and religious texts. Minnie's family's religious association with Vishnu and devotion to his narratives was another reason for her display on this step. Other families may display Shiva and Parvati, Murugan, or Aiyappa (a South Indian deity, a young boy king), and their various forms or incarnations, displaying inherited sectarian and regional affiliations.

The fifth step in Minnie's *Golu* was dedicated to public rituals in her local area, including festival processions common in her neighborhood. Other families may choose to place similar dolls on other steps or on the surrounding floor. Kapaleeshwar Swami's *utsavar murti* (local Mylaporean Shaiva deity in procession) was accompanied by Brahmin priests, devotees, Hanuman, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita on a stand together, Shakuntala with some fellow *sakhi* (girlfriends), and hermits were also assembled here. Minnie had added characters from the Ramayana to represent a local play that used to be performed in her neighborhood when she was a child. She also loved the stories of Shakuntala and Savitri-Satyavan and alternated dioramas of these two narratives every other year. She had purchased the hermit dolls on her trip to Kashi (Varanasi) in 1994, and the Shakuntala doll is one from her mother's *Golu* collection, made of porcelain with a characteristic side *konda* (head bun to one side), garlanded in flowers upon her neck and wrist, and wearing a loose white sari. The two fellow *sakhi* were incorporated from larger sets of dolls.

The Shakuntala doll is very much of the Raja Ravi Verma style and it is rare to find one made of porcelain. When commissioned by the Travancore family, only twelve pieces were made of each of Ravi Verma's paintings in doll form. I have only seen one other

family in Chennai having most of the collection (about 7-8 paintings in doll form). [15] Minnie loved the Shakuntala doll that was a gift from her mother. When I asked her about this doll, she gushed teary-eyed about her maternal family and their illustrious past. Squabbles among her maternal grandfather's brothers divided the family and their doll collection between the many wives and Minnie's mother was left with only one doll. Some of the dolls were sold to a museum by her grand aunt. Minnie didn't think that family heirlooms belonged in a museum, no matter how rare: "*idha namba kudumbam odaiya vidhi*… (this is *our* family's fate)" her voice trailed off, blaming fate (*vidhi*) for her family's circumstances.

The sixth step had some important figures from Indian national history, including Subashchandra Bose, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. These historical figures were joined by a series of dolls representing a variety of regional caste communities: a traditional *koravan-korati* (gypsy) couple with snake charmer in tow, a Thanjavur *talai-attu bommai* (dancing girl bobbling head and body doll), Rajasthani mirror-studded Raja-Rani (king and queen) dolls, and *chettiar-chettiji bommai* (merchant caste couple dolls) with their lock box, rice and lentils for sale. Two policemen dolls dressed in colonial government style uniforms stood guard at both ends of this step. [16] This step showcased her political affiliations and signaled to Minnie's year of birth. A baby of the 1970's, Minnie proudly spoke of Indian nationalism and the benefits of India being a free and

[15] Some suggest more were made, but I have not been able to locate others as yet.
[16] The uniform of police officers in Madras changed rather late in Indian history, during the 1980's. The older uniforms were distinctly colonial in nature, replicating the kakhi-colored safari suit of British officers with a red and white striped turban. Her dolls were older than 1980's since these dolls are no longer sold in the market. In the 1990's a similar set of constable uniformed dolls emerged in the doll market, this time wearing bright green uniforms mimicking their appearance in real time/life.

independent democracy. She believed India could become a comparable "super-power" just like America, if only some corrupt politicians would move out of the public sphere.

Asking her about the dolls on this step led Minnie to talk about local and national politics. She supported the Indian National Congress and valued Gandhi's and Bose's efforts to bring the country to freedom. She was rather fluent in global current events and responded to my questions about India with poignant and challenging assertions about American politics. She wanted her sons to live in America but was worried about the effect of Obama's immigration reform policies upon their foreseeable futures.[17] I also asked her why she had placed other couple dolls upon the same step which held Indian Nationalist figures. She replied that all these couples represent the variety Indian culture had to offer the world. She added that other countries simply were not as diverse as India with its multiple languages, religions and customs. She had purchased the Raja-Rani mirror-studded doll set from Rajasthan when she visited Jaipur in her summer vacations during tenth grade. The *chettiar-chettiji bommai* set was from her mother's doll collection and a proud reminder of a South Indian wealthy caste community. She had improvised to use some of the measuring cups from her kitchen to serve as holders for the dolls' pulses and had placed a few token coins in their lock box. She added that their wares should never be empty, even if just a doll's display, as this would bring ill-luck to the entire family.

The seventh step was dedicated to the Ashtalakshmi (eight Lakshmis). The Ashtalakshmi set were newer dolls (indicated by their brighter paint colors), and Minnie

[17] While many families applauded the changes to immigration reform proposed by Obama in 2014 for H-1 & L-1 workers and their spouses' statuses, Minnie was worried about the tech companies, particularly those that were Indian based, which helped young boys and girls immigrate on H-1 quotas from India. Obama's reform did nothing, in her mind, to help with the caps and rigid rules enforced on all Indian based tech companies because of a few who maybe be fraudulent. Since her sons had not yet immigrated and were educated in India, the path to reach U.S.A. remained hard since America was promoting US educated STEM graduates and those with a green card already secured.

didn't say much about them. Popular in the doll market since the late 1990's, the Ashtalakshmi set appears in numerous contemporary collections in others' homes. Several temples in India and the diaspora dress Lakshmi in a different costume each night of *Navaratri*, representing her eight forms. [18] Lakshmi's presence in this festival made explicit the connection between materiality, wealth and prosperity. The *Golu* materials and dolls are embodiments of prosperity bestowed by Lakshmi, and displaying those gifts ensured her abundance in the following year. Minnie repeated to me a phrase I had heard before, "Whatever Lakshmi has given, you have to show" adding that Lakshmi represented the mother who produced everything.

One male and another female one-foot-tall *poi-guthirai-attum* (popular folk dancer using a horse costume; Ta: *poi-kuthirai-āttum*) dolls flanked the triangular structure on the floor beneath the lowest step. These Tamil horse dancers were reminders of Tamil folk arts. Minnie has hosted a few charity events on behalf of the Mylapore Ladies' Club, and one year, dancers from Myladudurai performed the *poi-guttarai-attum* dance. Minnie had made it a point to purchase dolls representing them for her *Golu*. Between them upon the floor were a couple *marappaci bommai* (red sandalwood couple dolls) in Brahmin marriage attire. The costume of the *marappaci* dolls differ according to the associations intended to be displayed by the householder. In Meenakshi's case, the *marappaci* dolls were intended to perform the identity of her natal family, a part of her bridal trousseau. They also depicted ideal Brahmin householders and were thus attired to be recognized as smarta and iyer Brahmins.

[18] Refer to Vasudha Narayanan's "Srī: Giver of Fortune, Bestower of Grace" in John Hawley *Devi: Goddesses of India* (1996, p.54). She notes the increase of dressing Lakshmi in different costumes according to the popular *Lakshmistotra* (hymns) since the 1970's in temples. This would coincide with Minnie's childhood years and be part of her recall memory.

Each step was ordered thematically, and the entire colorful assembly stood out on the white cloth that covered each step. Minnie's aesthetic sensibility is also showcased in the ways in which she arranges and displays her collection and dioramas: the balancing of dark and light colors, big and small figurines, the placement of comparable objects on both sides of the display, and growing sprouts around the dioramas to offer a natural enclosure. On the floor in front of this triangular display Minnie had drawn a *kolam* upon which she placed a small lamp which she lit every evening. Also, on the floor, to the right of the triangular display, Minnie had created a farm filled with animals and village workers (from the washer man to the potter), a forest covered with wild animals and trees, a temple nestled in papier-mâché hills with a stream of tonsured devotees coming down the steps, and a wedding scene complete with bride and groom, priest, *homam* (brick altar with fire) and visitors sitting or eating on tiny banana leaves heaped with food. To the left of the triangular tiered display were other dioramas: a cricket scene with popular batsman Kapildev identified by a paper sign perched on a toothpick; a home scene with a family watching television, the father reading a newspaper and a grandmother sitting on a rocking chair and knitting; a modern city identified with a sign as Vancouver, Washington with tall buildings and toy cars and a Starbucks with outdoor seating; Barbie and Ken dressed in American bride and groom costume getting married in a set of Disneyland, which was filled with characters like Buggs Bunny, Winnie the Pooh, other Barbies, Minnie and Mickie, Pluto and Garfield. Similar dioramas could be seen in other homes, too, but each had personal touches. Her collection of Barbies and Kens, her husband's love for Kapil Dev, her grandfather's village with a temple upon the hill, her visits to Starbucks with her brother in Vancouver, her dream to go to Disneyland with her children or grandchildren someday, were all embodied memories and aspirations of her life's

experiences. The dolls embody personal and family histories, but they are also iconic of a region, a style of folk crafts or arts, and a time-period when they were popular. Even though most of the dolls were not materially valuable, they were priceless to Minnie. She emphasized that Lakshmi will give *madippu* towards whatever you display. *Madippu* provides us another way to read all the *Golu*. All the *Golu* dolls and materials kept and the narratives and religious ritual habits they represented were important to the householder and significant to the goddess, inviting her boons upon the family.

As I was getting ready to leave Minnie's flat she asked me to wait, and I was expecting this routine. No woman can ever leave a Brahmin's home unadorned and *Golu* was no exception. Minnie rushed towards her *puja* shelf and assembled a little plate for me containing a "blouse-bit" (uncut material to make a sari blouse), a small mirror, *kumgumam, manjal* (whole pieces of dry turmeric bark), *vethalai* (betel leaves) and *pakku* (areca nuts), as well as a small pair of earrings. She sincerely thanked me for coming. I had grown to accept the exchange of the *tambulam* as the final token of the householder's hospitality. In my own home, we had always assembled the disparate pieces, choosing the blouse-bit to suit the guest's taste before they were to arrive. As I reached to adorn my forehead with *kumgumam* and take the token gifts from the plate, I realized how different this exchange was now that I was a married woman who now also kept *Golu*.[19] I invited Minnie to visit my mother's home to see our *Golu* and rushed back to Block B, where my host Lalitha lives, as it was getting late for dinner time. As I walked

[19] As a *kanya* or an unmarried girl when you receive the *tambulam*, there is no real expectation of reciprocity; girls are just excited to receive personal cosmetics or pocket money. As a married woman receiving the *tambulam* there is a lot of reciprocity built into this exchange. Every householder must invite other married women to their home and return the honor they have received as a guest and pay their respects with these token gifts. I, too, was supposed to invite Meenakshi to my own home. The invitation is open-ended but can be for *Golu*.

back, I noticed other women returning home with little plastic bags in which they had collected auspicious *tambulam* from others' homes. Since it was the weekend, the children were still playing outside and inside their homes, many front doors remained open, and everyone was still relaxing even though it was almost nine p.m.

Minnie's *Golu* is similar to many other Mylapore *Bommai Golu* performances that hold comparable vintage and newer dolls relevant to a particular family's life history, Brahmin ancestors and their religious habits. Minnie presented these dolls according to her aesthetic taste as well as how they are associated in memory. Dolls venerating Minnie's marital family, who are smarta vadama iyer*,* were visibly prominent upon the steps showing their connection to Thanjavur. Her father-in-law worked as a lawyer in the Madras High courts. Her husband, Gopal, is also a lawyer who owns a private practice. Her father-in-law came from Thanjavur, from a village near Myladudurai. His ancestors were priests or scholars, and importance was given in his family to pursuing a professional career like law. Though his mother and father were educated (up to high school in Tamil and Sanskrit), they decided to remain landowners. Their children, however, were sent to pursue work in the legal professional world. One of the reasons Minnie's husband's family had approved her marriage to a husband from a different region, a rarity in the times of endogamous marriages (Thanjavur marrying Thanjavur Brahmins; South Arcot marrying South Arcot Brahmins), was because of her maternal family's rich cultural past. The prosperity bestowed by Lakshmi to her maternal family is visible in the rare traditional dolls she had inherited from her mother.

I quickly learned that most of Minnie's memories are from her natal side, a part of herself which she gives expression to using the festival as a platform. Minnie had inherited several dolls from her natal family, including her mother's *marappaci* doll set, a

Shakuntala from the Raja Ravi Verma style collection, and some deity dolls like Murugan, Ganesha, and the *chettiar-chettiji* merchant couple set. All these dolls are popular in *Bommai Golu* displays of Thanjavur families. Though her father is from South-Arcot, her mother's heritage from Thanjavur (maternal side) played a stronger part in her own marital home because its practices resonated with her in-law's family's traditions. Minnie's father was in the Indian Merchant Navy, but her mother's father had been very close to the Travancore royal family and served for several years with them as an advisor. His memories, she told me, included regularly visiting the Thanjavur palace, seeing 'dancing girls' and religious processions. In his later years, her maternal grandfather had written several poems and literary works published in Tamil magazines. Minnie's husband's father had been very impressed with her family's past lineage and wanted a girl from such a 'good family.' The association with Vishnu also comes from her maternal side. Her maternal grandfather's literary works illuminated teachings from the Bhagavata Purana, and Minnie uses some of his opinions in her own presentations at the Mylapore Ladies' Club.

Both Minnie's natal and marital families' life histories are displayed materially during *Bommai Golu*, representing the diversity of family associations and connections embodied in those homes. Many of their habits are indicated through dolls and specific objects displayed for *Bommai Golu* (such as the *nonbu kalasham*, Shaiva or Vaishanava figurines, costumes of *marappaci* dolls and figurines and objects collected from different pilgrimages or travels), all of which represent an idealized view of what is to be considered their tradition and prosperity with that tradition. Within her Ladies Club (membership to which is restricted to Brahmin women from Mylapore), Meenakshi was identified to me as having the "best" *Golu*, in part because she was considered to be a "traditional" and

Brahmin practitioner of the festival, implying that not all Brahmins are considered "traditional." [20] This important qualifier shows us that even within a community or caste, there are popular understandings of markers of distinction that may place some above others. In Minnie's case, her family's habits mark her as distinctively "traditional" and Brahmin, an identity given to her through her ancestors, their familial connections and their way of life.

I will now move physical spaces to an American suburb in the Bay Area of California. As mentioned earlier, Sunnyvale is as famous among Tamil Brahmins as Mylapore is; its suburb's significance for its Indian inhabitants and visitors comes from housing South Indian restaurant chains and reminding them of home when living as immigrants in a foreign land.

Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu*

Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* is one of the largest private *Golu* displays in the Bay Area.[21] Many of the women I spoke to the weekend before during 2014's *Navaratri* stressed the importance of visiting her *Golu* because of the sheer size and the abundance of dolls and dioramas. We started the evening early, around three p.m., with some chilled juices, tea and chatter. Three women arrived soon after me and four others trickled in by four p.m.

[20] What is traditional can also be considered "original," as noted by Mary Hancock in her analysis of *Bommai Golu* competitions in Chennai in the early 1990's (see Appendix, 1999, p. 220). I have noted that traditional can also imply that their family doesn't have any dilution of practices and family associations with non-Brahmins of their comparable sub-groups. We will see more of this when I describe some of the intra-caste variables between vadama and brhacharanam smarta iyer families later in Mrs. Seshadri's family's narrative.

[21] I refer to Mrs. Seshadri by her last name rather than her first name because of how I encountered her in the Sunnyvale *Golu* scene. Firstly, many of the participants I spoke to called her by her last name, associating her to her husband but also giving her respect as an authentic *Golu*-keeper. Secondly, I too first experienced her through these distanced references until she herself volunteered her first name to me during her *tambulam* exchange.

Four were dressed in silk saris and three were wearing the latest *anarkali* style *salwar-kameez* with ornate embroidering. Once everyone had arrived, we started on some light snacks of cheese, crackers, nuts, and fruit; the only Indian food available was a bowl of *puliyogare* (tamarind rice) topped with salty toasted peanuts. Mrs. Seshadri wore a bright orange, gold-bordered silk sari. She was a quiet host, offering her guests food but not forcing anyone to eat, like hostesses often do in other homes I had visited.

Mrs. Seshadri is one of the oldest residents in this now mainly Indian-American neighborhood of Sunnyvale, California. She had immigrated with her husband, who is now Vice President of Engineering at a famous technology firm, in 1982 and had been keeping *Golu* since her marriage the year before the couple moved to the United States. Mr. & Mrs. Seshadri have one son who is a consulting Software engineer and lives in New York City. The Seshadris' home is a sprawling Spanish style mansion with five bedrooms and bathrooms. The front door opened into a foyer that had sky lights and led towards a large 700 square feet living room with fireplace to the left and Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* display on the right. To the right of the entry foyer is a large kitchen which also opened into a dining area and then led back to the living room space, where the *Golu* was located. The *Golu* display had a lush background created by the large glass windows that opened from the living room into a landscaped stone patio with fountain, shrubs and cacti. Chairs lined the space to the right of the *Golu* for guests to be seated and view the *Golu* while having a conversation.

The triangular tiered *Golu* was five steps tall, covered with a white and gold silk sari. A red and gold runner lay across the center of the tiers leading to the top, as if the steps were welcoming guests to climb up to the heavens above. On each side of the triangular display was a wide array of images of equal detail and value from around the

world. Many of the materials displayed were large, rare, and of high commercial value. Some of her antique brass lamps and figurines are irreplaceable. Her dolls were ordered very carefully and neatly. While deities were placed upon all of the tiered steps or floor spaces, dolls depicting humans and animals were only seen on the floor, to the sides of the triangular tier.[22] Upon each step, Mrs. Seshadri had arranged dolls and figurines that seemed to flow together through association in mythology as well as iconography. Her steps also showed off her knowledge of Indian history and regionally specific artisan crafts. As Meenakshi had also mentioned, most householders celebrate the diversity of Indian traditions using dolls of different clothing styles, craftsmanship styles, or iconic deities from different regions of India. In Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu*, the regions depicted also narrated personal narratives of pilgrimage, travel, and natal or ancestral hometowns.

In the center of the top tier stood a two-feet-tall *marappaci Bommai* set (red sandalwood couple dolls) adorned in royal costumes; they were accompanied by a Murugan with peacock, a Parvathi painted to look like black granite and embellished with painted colored clothing, and two one-foot tall Perumal Vishnu figurines made of rosewood in traditional temple carving style. The large *marappaci Bommai* displayed on the very top step of Mrs. Seshadri's triangular tiers signals her marital family's association to the region of Mysore. These *marappaci* dolls are quite popular in Kannadiga homes, even though many families nowadays may not keep a *Golu*.

Mr. Seshadri, whom I met briefly that afternoon, spoke of the Mysore royal family and their contributions to South Indian heritage. Mr. Seshadri's family was

[22] While the *marappaci dolls* depict humans, the couple dolls are representative of royalty or an idealized family unit. Other humans who maybe placed upon the tiers include famous politicians or celebrities and key saints or devotional composers from history.

relatively famous in Southern India. His ancestors include K. Seshadri Iyer, a Palghat brhacharanam (sub-caste of smarta) Brahmin who served as a Diwan of Mysore while the Vijayanagara empire still reigned. Though he was born in Palghat, K. Seshadri Iyer was educated in the Madras Presidency. Some others in their family migrated to Thanjavur District, but Mr. Seshadri's grandfather remained in Mysore, and his father moved to Bangalore when he was a teenager. Their familial association to the royal family is visually shown by Mrs. Seshadri's adornment of the *marappaci* dolls in royal attire as well as by dioramas of the musician dolls so commonly incorporated in *gombe habba* (Kannada term for *Bommai Golu*) displays. [23]

The top tier also held two rosewood carvings of Vishnu as Perumal, popular in the region of Palghat among Vaishnava communities. These dolls are icons of Vishnu made using materials found in the seven hills surrounding Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh but are found in most South Indian Brahmin homes especially during *Bommai Golu*. Lakshmi and Subramanyar Swamy (Murugan, Skanda, or Ta: Murukaṉ) with his peacock were newer additions to this step, purchased on a recent visit to the Batu caves in Malaysia with her husband. Mrs. Seshadri was struck by these dolls which looked like black granite but were made of clay.

The second step of Mrs. Seshadri's Golu held the ten *avatara*s of Vishnu, a set of Kondapalli dolls with village people about one-foot-tall. [24] This step also held a porcelain

[23] The Mysore royal family and Karnataka government is spending a lot of money to revive the festival and sponsors doll exhibitions, royal *Dasara* celebrations, as well as large scale miniature doll dioramas depicting Mysore history and courtly performances, *puja* and processions in the palace. Refer to Vasudha's Narayanan's forthcoming articule regarding the associations between *Navaratri Golu* and kingship (Forthcoming 2018, p. 282).

[24] Kondapalli is a small town near the hills of Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, a city associated with the goddess and martial history. The balsa wood trees surrounding these hills provide soft, malleable and light-weight wood that is used to make dolls for Bommai Golu. Kondapalli dolls are famous in the doll markets and larger one-foot sets of dolls can cost up to Rs.6000. Kondapallli dolls are painted in vintage style using organic dyes, and each piece is inspected for perfection. Each doll is hand-made using small sharp tools by

set of Lakshmana, Rama and Sita delicately crafted and adorned with painted clothing and matte golden crowns. Encased within a glass box, an intricately detailed Radha and Krishna doll set, also about a foot tall, stood behind the Dashavataram on the left. This ceramic set was relatively fragile and, as Mrs. Seshadri told me, a prized piece from a Maharashtrian artist. Krishna held a flute, while Radha rested her chin on his shoulder. There were two peacock-shaped two-tiered oil lamps, burning with eight flames each, on each end of this step.

A striking addition to this step filled with very traditional dolls was a brightly painted *yuvana* Krishna with a calf. The newer doll was distinguished by brightly colored paints; it was adorned less carefully and had closely set eyes. All of the other dolls kept on Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* had beautiful, detailed and ornate adornments, and proportional faces denoted by well-placed eyes, nose and lips. This particular doll was not very detailed and looked quickly painted in comparison. When I enquired further, Mrs. Seshadri only said that it was a gift from a friend. She later mentioned, in regard to another Ganesha figurine, that dolls given by others must not be thrown away or re-gifted, and *Golu* was a good opportunity to showcase everyone's gifts, making the visitors also happy. Mrs. Seshadri had said that she keeps all her newer dolls upon the second and first tier and that many of these dolls had been purchased or gifted to her in the recent past (except the Perumal figurines, *marappaci* set, and glass-encased Radha and Krishna). She said that placing newer dolls at the top of the display helps bring focus to the new beginnings which happen each year. This was her personal choice, but her sentiments went along with the

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both men and women. The Andhra Pradesh government provides subsidies for training and maintaining this craft, making it a suitable employment choice for villagers in Krishna District and beyond.

popular saying that stressed the importance of showing Lakshmi's gifts or boons, thus inviting good fortune in the coming year.

Upon the third step of Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* were two brass and ornately carved baby Ganeshas, each on a different style of swing set. This step also held another Ganesha and Lakshmi made of similar styles: clay-moulded and affixed upon a plastic and cloth background. The golden *goburam* of Tirumala Tirupati Balaji (Tirupati Vishnu), a miniature Alamelumanga (consort of Tirupati Vishnu) painted black and wearing a red and gold sari, and a small Subramanyar Swamy (Murugan) with peacock and an even smaller, similar-styled Subramanyar Swamy stood on this step, in front of a plate decorated with mirrors and studded with images of Vishnu, Balarama and the icons of conch shell and *sudarshana chakra* (spinning wheel on Krishna/Vishnu's finger). This third step was particularly important to Mrs. Seshadri. It represented the deities whom she visited in order to secure the birth of her baby, who was born only after seven years of trying. The only material indication of the goals of these pilgrimages were the baby Ganeshas in cradles placed on both sides of the step. During these trying years, Mr. and Mrs. Seshadri had made pilgrimages to Murugan as Subramanyar Swamy in Tiruchedur and Vishnu as Tirupati Balaji. [25]

The fourth step held many forms of the goddess. The *mugam* of the Lakshmi from a *Varalakshmi Nonnbu* sat in the center, flanked by stone Lakshmi and Saraswati figurines, and a Gond (western and central Indian tribal communities) depiction of the goddess as Durga slaying Mahisasura and of Durga riding a tiger, made of small thin iron

[25] According to one astrologer, the family had a *doṣam* (ill-luck) from the planet Jupiter (Guru) because he was seated with Ketu in Mr. Seshadri's horoscope, requiring a visit to Tiruchedur where Murugan lives as *jñana guru* in order to minimize the bad fortune. Tirupati Balaji's temple was another destination where the family was sent to seek blessings from Jupiter and Saturn (Shani). The family believed both trips to be successful when they got news of the pregnancy within a few months of their return.

wires twirled together.[26] The numerous images of the goddess indicated her importance in the festival as well as personally to Mrs. Seshadri. Her goddess doll collection spanned different geographical areas. The Gond-style Mahisasuramardini was a unique piece gifted to Mrs. Seshadri by her mother. Her parents had traveled a lot in central India and had spent some time in the *adivasi* Gond villages in the area. I have used the term *adivasi* instead of the word tribal. In the study of South Asian communities, the term "tribal" is fraught with negative associations to "backward," "outcaste," or even "non-literate" or "uncivilized" beings, all so identified from colonial rule and documentation and later fortified within Indians owns imaginations of themselves. Sometimes depicting *adivasi* images in a *Golu* or even Indian household curio shelfs serves the same purpose Golliwog dolls served in the early 1900's in British homes – to be a unique subject of their cultural past, representative of difference and a "cultural icon" (Macgregor, 2011, p.62). Since all the *Golu* show some kind of migration history, the memory of the native or local becomes an idealized other and these *adivasi* images are used to depict those roots by South Asian immigrants.

The *nonbu mugam* was also a gift from her mother and was used by Mrs. Seshadri during her annual celebration of the vowing ritual. An assortment of smaller real-gold and gold-plated images of the goddess and one baby Krishna also sat upon this step. A brass hand bell sat on each side of this step. Many of the objects and figurines on this step also feature in wedding trousseaus and form part of the materials that will be used during other ritual days or *pandigai*s. This step on Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* showcases her inherited Brahmin religious habits through the materials utilized for those rituals and duties.

[26] See Hacker, 2000, p.162 for similar pieces noted in Bastar, Chattisgarh (formerly Madhya Pradesh).

The fifth and lowest step held a clay-mould Ganesha figurine mounted on cloth backing, a Ganesha holding weapons, and another in dancing pose, flanked by a Lakshmi to the left and Sarasvati to the right, all in the same clay-mold design. In the center of the step, a one-foot-tall *warli* (Maharashtrian) folk style black Ganesha sat on a throne, and in front of him sat a row of five miniature, red-clay Ganeshas playing the *mrindangam* drums (the same instrument Mrs. Seshadri's son plays). The two white-and-gold painted elephants on each side of this step were from Lladró's ceramic collection. The Ganesha painted in *warli* style unique to Maharashtra was picked up during a family vacation to India when Mrs. Seshadri's son was about eleven, and he had chosen this doll for this mother's *Golu* that year. The step also held a musician and a warrior Ganesha. Mrs. Seshadri, like many Brahmin householders, loved to collect Ganeshas.

On the floor in front of the triangular display, Mrs. Seshadri had carefully made a *kolam* from five types of dried beans, flanked on each side by three-feet-tall silver lamps, weighing one kilogram each. Also, on the floor on both sides sat five-inch-wide brass floor lamps with a bowl of wax fruit in offering to the display. To the left was an elaborate scene of a rural countryside (later identified to me as Peru), a two-feet-tall porcelain Laurel and Hardy from the Royal Doulton doll collection, a three-feet-tall brass Ganesha adorned with a garland of fresh flowers, a *chettiar-chettiji* (merchant couple dolls) set with wares on display in brass cups and cane woven baskets, a traditional village scene made of Kondapalli wooden dolls, various papier-maché dolls depicting villagers and their professions made to look true to life, and a three-feet-tall peacock adorned *kuttu villakku* (standing floor lamp made of brass/ silver). To the right was a large set of Rajasthani wooden musicians in a band, with a Gond-style set of musicians in front of them and an even smaller set of wooden Rajasthani musicians in the very front. Behind this display

was a circular side table covered with a red and gold silk sari upon which Mrs. Seshadri had placed a two-feet-tall Thanjavur *thalai attu bommai* (dancing girl bobbling head and body doll), a three-piece *kathakali* dancers set in Kondapalli style, a three-piece *sakhi* ("girlfriends") dancing set of cloth dolls, a smaller set of Gond-style musicians, and a miniature silver set of *tabla*s (drums). Beside them on the floor, sat a three-feet-tall, three-tiered lamp adorned with little peacocks, holding five flames on each tier, carried upon a chariot led by two horsemen. This was the only lamp which was not lit.[27]

Mrs. Seshadri displayed objects that materially narrated her marital and natal families' specific ties to different professions, social and religious connections, and travels. Her husband's family, as we saw earlier, was closely associated with the Mysore royal family and these political connections were displayed in her vast collection of Kondapalli dolls, bands of performing musicians and dancers in sets, and her royal attired *marappaci* dolls. These same dolls are visible in public *gombe habba* celebrations, depicting the vibrancy of the former royal reign. Her Perumal figurines made of rosewood, along with the Gond depictions of Durga, however, display ties to her maternal side. Although her family is also smarta iyer, her husband is from the brhacharanam sub-division of the smarta iyer community, while hers is vadama. The vadama denomination is considered hierarchically above brhacharanam. [28] Mrs. Seshadri's family came from Kerala Palghat Brahmins who were musicians having close social ties to the Travancore

[27]During the *Golu* I had not asked Mrs. Seshadri about this lamp as I only noticed after I returned home and re-looked at the pictures I had taken. When I recently asked her about it she mentioned that the lamp had become faulty (implying it did not hold a wick properly) over the years due to a dent in one of the smaller lamp holders. She was unable to get it fixed so kept it un-lit within her *Golu*.

[28] Reasons for this are not recently academically discussed to my knowledge. But anthropologists like Andre Betielle and Louis Dumont have suggested that vadama were more likely to take up the most important priestly positions, leaving the other sub-castes to take on the variety of subordinate roles in temple worship and works (Dumont, 1980, pp.77-89).

royal family. Her Golu had an abundance of *mridingam*s, *tabla*s and the large Thanjavur *thalai-attu bommai* that speaks to their professional ties to music through social and religious connections to the Travancore kingdom which spanned Palghat and Thanjavur and their extravagant palace performances. Her mother and grandmother were singers and she was, too, although she gave up singing professionally when she moved to America; she said that her son's musical talents were something that required more attention. The family's professional travels took them to various Indian states, which is when her mother purchased the Gond-style brass figures of the goddess from Bastar, Chattisgarh. Her and her husband's infertility issues, resolved after making certain pilgrimages and depicted in their veneration of Murugan and Tirupati Balaji, added more details and prosperous connections into the complex family histories.

While much could be said about the memories each doll evoked, Mrs. Seshadri's collection is notable for the antique value of each figurine or material displayed; her collection would be valuable to a museum. Her brass antique three-feet-tall Ganesha, for example, is worth $1,000 in today's Chennai market. Her Royal Doulton doll collection is worth $500 in the American Ebay market, and the Lladró twin elephants are worth around $800. Her three-feet tall Ganesha was handed down to her from her mother-in-law's collection and hails from the early 1900's. Her peacock-studded, three-tiered lamp upon a chariot is invaluable and can probably only be custom made today. [29] Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* contained very rare, large and small figurines that are usually only seen in museums or available in the high-end emporiums of India.

[29] The three-tiered lamp is similar to those found in Keralite temples or palaces. The similar *dīpam* (oil lamps) to Mrs. Seshadri's lamp are still in use at the Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thirvananthapuram, Kerala.

Though Mrs. Seshadri did not explicitly talk about her caste identity, the antiquity and unique *porulgal* (materials) in her *Golu* signal her marital Brahmin family's illustrious past. The materials they acquired in their life time as well as those inherited from earlier generations all refer to their cultural past as wealthy Brahmins who also had ties to colonial or ruling governments. Her marital family's economic class and her natal family's professional associations in the past were influenced by their caste and both caste and class identities now contribute to their current social standing.

The three-tier peacock embellished lamp is usually found in the inner courtyards of temples in Kerala. The three-feet-tall brass Ganesha is reminiscent of an *utsava murti*. The abundance of valuable antique materials in Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* display not only wealth, but also shows the habits of her ancestors. Since some of these objects are found only in temples today, her marital and natal families' possession of these artifacts provides evidence to their social and religious ties to temples contexts as priests or in the role of treasurers. These and other larger and smaller icons, figurines lamps and pots, all of which were inherited by Mrs.Seshadri, display (to those who "know") their families' social and political connections, travels, and migrations.

In contrast to Meenakshi, Mrs. Seshadri didn't voluntarily share much information about her family or her unique *Bommai Golu*. She seemed less interested in the dolls depicting deities (referring to them as family heirlooms) than she did in dolls associated with her own personal memories and in relationship to her son. It was becoming clear to me that though one of the articulated reasons for *Golu* is a display of material prosperity (and it certainly did so), this *Golu* was equally important to Mrs. Seshadri for its material representation of memories of prosperous experiences and important people in her life. For example, her *Golu* contained several dolls that her son

had brought home as souvenirs from his trips abroad. He knew how much his mother enjoyed this festival and every trip he came home with not one, but entire sets of dolls, scenes and dioramas. The year I met Mrs. Seshadri, her son had visited Peru and brought back several dolls from there with which his mother had recreated into the Peruvian countryside, including shops and their wares. When I asked her about the diorama, she described the shops in utmost detail, as if she had visited them herself. Although Mrs. Seshadri had never visited Peru, her memory didn't fail her, and her description was just as her son remembered it. Mrs. Seshadri was reliving not just his experiences, but her memory of hearing her son's experiences.

Another unusual addition to Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* were the two porcelain dolls depicting Laurel and Hardy. Before I could ask about them, her close friend Uma, who was also observing the *Golu* beside me, remarked that Mrs. Seshadri had purchased these Royal Doulton dolls on a trip to London with her son and husband in the early 1990s, and since then, she had displayed them every year. So, while some dolls changed, like the souvenirs Mrs. Seshadri's son brought home each year, some dolls like the Laurel-Hardy set and a fountain Ganesha were displayed each year. Souvenirs also display the relationship between materials and habits, holding memories and identities of being global citizens and migrants.

Raj Mehta and Russell. W Belk have argued that possessions carried by immigrants can function as "anchors of identity," stating, "when possessions are seen as a part of the individual or family identity, they may allow immigrants to "transport" part of their former identities to a new place" (1991, p.399). Souvenirs in the homes of South Asian immigrants to America can have two meanings depending on whether they represent Indian or foreign identity. Firstly, the souvenirs represent the identity of the regions and

countries from where they were collected. Secondly, souvenirs also perform their identities within the homes they are displayed in, rooting and embodying the habits of their collectors while showing the relationship between the householder and the souvenir. As Mehta and Belk have posited, souvenirs from India anchor the ethnic identity of the householder (1991, p.398). Souvenirs from other countries in South Asian American homes, however, display the social and professional life and travels of their immigrant collectors.

As I was leaving Mrs. Seshadri's home, she whispered in my ear her first name and that she knew I was pregnant and that I probably should not share the news with those I had just met. She hugged me tightly as she gave me the *tambulam* filled with the usual turmeric bark, betel leaves, areca nuts, vermilion and a small gift bag. She added that I could always count on her as a friend in the neighborhood if I needed something. While she didn't share the significance of *Golu* in her ritual life as openly as Meenakshi, her hospitality was embodied in her attention to details. She had walked among her ritual guests while everyone was socializing and had spent time chatting with each householder, enquiring about their health, their spouses, and their children. Her attention to detail was also evident in the variety of *kai velaighal* or handiwork she had added to her *Golu* – from the hand-made geometric patterns or the assembling of dried beans, all beautifications added by Mrs. Seshadri to complete the *Golu* display.

As I left Mrs. Seshadri's home, I couldn't help but wonder how many other women's lives she had touched by whispering to them about personal details while they received their *tambulam*, making sure she was truly aware of everyone's concerns. She also displayed on her *Golu* the different gifts she had received every year and had possibly remained silent about the *yuvana* Krishna with mis-matched painting style since the

guest had been among us. It made me realize that even though *Bommai Golu* is about displaying inherited material life histories (and it certainly does), it is also important to take care about what we might convey to an audience, depending on who is visiting, bringing the visual assembly to life in the minds of each guest.

Materials Display Inherited Caste Traditions

> It is clear that the ability to make things and the ability to say things – two closely intertwined facilities – stand in the root of human culture. There are differences between the discourse of language and of material culture and one of the most important of these is that, like ourselves but unlike words, objects have a brutally physical existence, each occupying its own place in time and space (Pearce, 1995, p.14).

Susan Pearce points out that objects and materials hold a very particular existence, one that is constrained by their physical appearance. I argue in this chapter that the *Golu* materials display the inherited identities and religious habits of the householder and their Brhamin ancestral families during ceremonies or rites of passage and on ritual days (*pandigai*s). The clue to understanding the relationship between materials and inherited traditions here is to look to the variety of objects and how they come to become part of a *Golu* displays. Collecting *Golu* materials begins from one of the most important ceremonies in a Brahmin householder's life: marriage. The wedding ceremony, and the engagement preceding it, are pivotal moments in the transformation of the Brahmin female householder from an unmarried girl into a *sumangali* ("auspicious married woman;" Skt: *sumaṅgali*; Ta: *cumaṅkali*). Being a householder is enough to keep and be invited to a *Golu*; however, this transformation to a *sumangali* and auspicious householder is not considered complete until she produces a child (preferably a male

offspring) (Duvvury, 1991, p.137).[30] All of the Brahmin participants I interviewed, whether they agreed with it or not, understood the parameters required to make one into an auspicious married woman. *Sumangali*s are invited for several auspicious rituals to one another's home and partake in important roles within the wedding ceremony as well as the vital *sumangali prathanai* (thanksgiving to auspicious married women) that venerates all female householders in one's marital families' lineage. [31] The daily religious habits of a Brahmin female householder within the home (like maintaining her own *puja* shelf) commence only after marriage, thus marking that ceremony as vital, a moment where she also begins to acquire ritual and household materials related to her upcoming responsibilities.

The bridal trousseau and various materials presented at the engagement ceremony (*Nichyathārtham*) and wedding ceremony (*Kalyānam*) to the newly married couple hold

[30] Nowadays any progeny, male or female, can mark the status of the *sumangali* (Duvvury, 1991, p.137). There are also changes to this trend, as observed by Hancock in an essay in *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage*, where she discusses a Brahmin woman who challenges the role of a *sumangali*, questioning the status of this title within the larger religious cosmos (Harlan & Courtright, 1995, pp.81-83). One of the criteria that Hancock takes for granted is the age of the married woman in regard to their opinions. Hancock's interlocutor is preaching the moral opinions of her current times in her abhorrence of menstrual practices in her community. Both Duvvury and Hancock note that since the 1960's, Brahmin women get married after the age of 18 (largely due to the amendments to the Indian constitution). However, in several of the families I interviewed, householders in the age group of 60-70 often remarked that their mothers were married by the ages of 12 or 13 years. Up until the 1930's Brahmin girls were pre-pubescent on their marriage day, returning to their parent's home after the marriage ceremony and going to their husband's home only after the onset of their first menstrual cycle. The transformation into a *sumangali* can thus mean a lot of things for a young householder, demarcating her from other pre-pubescent or *kanya* in her neighborhood. Prior to the 1940's, there were few studies of *sumangali* women since male researchers did not have access to young married Brahmin women. Even today our social abhorrence of child marriages has avoided the study of rituals in relationship to their real lived histories. If *Bommai Golu* was performed by younger Brahmin women who were between the ages of thirteen to fifteen, the collection and prominence of *Bommai* or doll-related themes surrounding *Golu* may not be much of a stretch of the imagination. Like *Golu*, many of the ceremonies in the Brahmin marriage ceremony (if they occurred when the bride was significantly younger than the groom who was atleast 20 years of age) must also be re-studied under this lens.

[31] Duvvry's book also discusses the roles of *sumangali* women in the wedding ceremony, especially the *ūnjal* or swing ceremony. (1991, p.159)

a key to understanding the usage and life of *Golu* materials.[32] While other significant rites of passage like the *Pūnal* (thread ceremony for males), *Valaikāppu* and *Sīmantham* (pregnancy rituals), and *Punyājanam* (birth and naming ceremonies) are also among those where materials are exchanged and displayed, marriage is when a young female householder starts her own collection of objects, building upon gifts from the natal and marital sides. In this bridal trousseau, one half usually comes from the bride's natal home and the other part comes from her marital or new home. There is a variety of dolls, objects, and cosmetic materials within this trousseau depending on the tastes of the marital and natal families.

The bride is expected to bring *puja* items from her natal home, made of silver or brass, that become part of the ritual objects used for every domestic and public ceremony which will be performed by her in the future. These objects will also be briefly used during many rituals within the marriage ceremony, following the *kanyadhanam* (literally gift of a virgin, whereby the bride is transferred—often quite physically—from her natal family to her marital family), when the bride and groom now perform rituals as their own family unit, separate from their parent's families. Up until then, the same objects will be used individually by the groom and bride's families. The *panchapathram* (tall tumbler), *udarini* (pouring spoon), *tambulam* (offerings plate), *kumgumam* (vermilion) holder,

[32] The entire marriage ritual itself holds a performance of gift giving that is elaborate and valued and expected from both sides involved. The groom's side primarily receives several materials including money, snacks and sweets, rice, fruits and coconut. These materials are then presented to visiting family members through a complex hierarchy of gift giving towards ritual specialists used for the ritual (Brahmins), immediate family members, important kin, and then secondary kin. The groom is given money for his wedding clothes from the bride's parents and the bride's wedding sari is purchased by the groom's side. The ring is also purchased by either side and exchanged with more new clothing during the *Nichyathārtham*. Nowadays, the cost of the expensive *tāli* (gold wedding necklace with unique pendants denoting family traditions) is usually shared between both families. Commercially valuable objects like a plated or branded watch or pen maybe given as a gift to the groom from the bride's Mama (mother's brother). The Mami (mother's brother's wife) presents the bride with some jewelry as well as the important *meṭṭi* (silver toe rings) that are a mark of a married woman.

and hand-held *mani* (bell) will be used repeatedly by the new bride and groom, for every ceremony or *puja* conducted from their new family's side.

Among the *puja* items there will also be large or small valuable figurines made of silver, gold or brass that are used in various rituals during the year to kick start the bride's religious *puja* space or shelf. The new family is also supposed to have one of the gold or silver figurines presented in the trousseau to initiate the various ceremonies. Usually this figurine is a Ganesha, and he will be anointed, cleansed, and have offerings made to him, before each ritual begins in the home. The *marappaci* couple (red sandalwood) dolls or a pair of dolls (male/female) are also gifted at this time by some Brahmin families. A few other dolls may also be presented according to the regional crafts and aesthetic tastes of the gift giver, denoting the social connections of the family. Whether the natal or marital home decides to present the starter couple dolls for *Bommai Golu* within the trousseau is largely dependent on the individual family and their practices, but the *puja* items must come from the natal home of the bride.

Various household vessels to make food preparations for ritual days and everyday use will also be presented by the bride's family. Many *pandigai*s, such as the *shrāddham* (ceremony following death of one's father performed by oldest male heir annually on day of death) or *sumangali prathanai*, require certain dishes to be prepared in vessels of certain materials and these are all to be presented to the bride in her trousseau so that she has access to them in her marital home. All the metal items (ritual and household) are also inscribed with the combined initials of the bride and groom, becoming part of their new family's inherited wealth. While the material make-up (value and size) of these objects can vary dramatically based on the economic status of the families involved, all these objects are expected to be part of the ritual and are displayed

in various parts of the marriage ceremony. The bridal trousseau thus helps to determine the materials that will become displayed in a *Golu*. All the objects presented to the bride contribute to or are used in the daily religious habits of the householder.

These habits are both used and materially performed when these dolls, their dioramas and objects become displayed for *Bommai Golu*. As with other *pandigai*s, householders cleanse and purify the space where the ritual is to be performed, usually placing a small *kolam* either right in front of or under the space where the *Golu* shelves are assembled. Every evening *neivedhyam* or food offerings will be freshly prepared and presented to the *Golu* display and all guests. Any offerings presented to guests will usually be given upon the *tambulam* plate along with vermilion presented in the *kumgumam* pot, all presented among *puja* items in the bridal trousseau.

These traditions were all followed in Meenakshi's and Mrs. Seshadri's homes. They had placed *kolam*s of different materials in front of their display and Meenakshi had even made one under her tiered shelves. Both householders also made fresh food offerings daily to offer the guests, stressing the importance of having visitors during the time of *Navaratri*. Meenakshi used a large ten-inch wide thick hammered brass *tambulam* plate while Mrs. Seshadri used a five-inch-wide dense silver *tambulam* plate embellished with small lotuses. Both their *kumkuvam* holders were four inches high, ornamented with repoussé on silver and embellished with colored enamel paint. Both householders also treated their *Golu* space as a place of worship during the ten days of *Bommai Golu*. They lit a lamp every morning and/or evening in front of the *Golu*, garlanded some deities' figurines within the display with flowers or adorned their foreheads with sandal paste and vermillion, and they invited and/or allowed visitors to sing or chant religious *shlokas* or prayers to their displays. They also performed a water *arati* (Ta: *āraṭṭi*) in front of the

display every evening to cleanse *Golu* from the gaze of numerous visitors. This ritual involves mixing water, *kumgumam*, and a few *tulasi* (basil) leaves on the *tambulam* and swirling it around in front of the display to remove the evil eye.[33] This *arati* is often performed for auspicious places or people during *pandigai*s, ceremonies or rites of passage—where the auspicious item, person, or place is on public display (in contrast, for example the *puja* shelf, which is not for public display or gaze).

The ten-day period of *Navaratri* is a series of *pandigai*s for the householder, including the *Golu* display and its associated hospitality, which demand the female householder's care and mediation. As Arjun Appadurai has argued, the social life of an object implies that objects are not only "possessed" by an owner, but that commodities have a social life, nourished through exchanges of value in many different societies throughout their existence as materials (Appadurai, 1986, pp.7-9). Appadurai's observation is especially useful for the purposes of understanding *Golu* materials, because while each object or doll may be a commodity in the marketplace, it becomes a religious ritual object during a ritual. Moreover, if we deconstructed the materials that came together to form each ritual object or doll, it could lead us to further develop the social life of these objects and their materiality far before their life in the homes of these Brahmin women. I have restricted this chapter to the social life of the materials displayed for *Bommai Golu* within the Brahmin community.

Conclusion

Bommai Golu never advertises itself as a Brahmin festival. In most Brahmin homes, as we saw in this chapter, it is referred to as just their habits or tradition. Neither

[33] Other methods of removing the evil eye also include waving the camphor flame or using salt and red chillies wrapped in newspaper.

Meenakshi nor Mrs. Seshadri explicitly spoke of their caste identities when speaking with me. My host in both the situations may have mentioned my identity. I can presume that Meenakshi at least knew I was a Brahmin, since I invited her to *Golu* at my mother's home and she knew our family is distantly related to my host Lalitha's husband. Even in our lively discussions with many of the women who visited Mrs. Seshadri's *Golu* that afternoon, caste identity of the participants never once came up. Uma, her close friend, had said that she knew *Golu* to be a "Brahmin tradition" and to this all the visitors nodded in approval. In fact, while many of my questions yielded detailed information about the families and ancestors who gifted dolls and their professional, social, and religious habits, caste was never brought up in those contexts either. Ritualized habits were simply identified as traditions.

Both Meenakshi and Mrs. Seshadri may have kept silent about their caste as they did not see it as a valuable category in their verbal exchanges with me; or they may have taken for granted the visibility of their caste identities in their performance of *Bommai Golu*. And their caste identities were, indeed clearly visible in and performed by the materials they chose to display for *Bommai Golu*. The valuable pots, lamps, and *nonbu mugam*s displayed on both women's *Golu*, the *marappaci* dolls acquired from their bridal trousseaus, and the various *tambulam* offerings they made to each guest, all signaled that *Bommai Golu* was another Brahmin *pandigai*. Their inherited *Golu* materials performed their Brahmin identity and the social and professional connections their families experienced. Whether in urban Chennai or suburban Sunnyvale, the identity of their ancestors and their specific life histories and religious habits as Brahmins allowed for their accrual of materials for *Golu* and fostered their celebration of *Bommai Golu*. As Belk and Mehta posited about Indian immigrant's souvenirs, materials can perform the

identities of their possessors. Building upon this, Appadurai's assertion that objects have a 'social life' can bring a new valence to the mere notion that Brahmins possess or own these objects. To possess often denotes a uni-directional possession or take-over of materials by their owners. As seen in this chapter, however, *Golu* materials also possessed their owners, performing their inherited religious habits and social and professional connections, allowing their *Bommai Golu* to come alive with meaning. In their 'social life,' *Golu* materials have also acquired social capital and can narrate the life histories of these Brahmin women, beginning on their wedding day but reaching far beyond into their Brahmin ancestor's habits and their social connections.

What is often described as "traditional" *Golu* by participants is *Bommai Golu* as it is performed by Meenakshi and Mrs. Seshadri. Participant's observations about "traditional" *Golu* depicted as Brahmin *Golu* must not be taken lightly. They illustrate the ways in which tradition is idealized and often caste is not mentioned because it does not go along with modern rhetoric of making *Bommai Golu* an inclusive festival. Caste, however, is inherited, performed in the rituals and materials of these Brahmin householders. To the *Golu*-educated viewer, caste is visible and performed during *Bommai Golu* because such viewers know objects to recognize and what social capital those materials hold. In a contemporary context for *Bommai Golu*, those objects that depict a caste-specific identity are less relevant to the marketing of this festival and hence have become relegated to antique shops or individual families that may collect them. Plastic dolls and dioramas, which can fluidly embody a variety of practices, traditions, and identities, come to replace objects that once displayed inherited habits within traditional Brahmin homes. The new participants, moreover, also ask new questions regarding their religious practices, laying out new sets of meanings for the contemporary

Bommai Golu. The non-traditional participants in this festival are equally important to the success of *Bommai Golu* today and in the next chapter I analyze the festival's versatility as a tradition that can be adopted by "anyone." Unlike the Brahmin participants, who don't necessarily choose to practice *Golu*, non-Brahmin participants who adopted *Bommai Golu*, were new believers, chose Brahmin practices to add to their ritual repertoire.

In this chapter, I have described the way *Bommai Golu* is celebrated in one of its most traditional contexts. The materiality of *Golu* displayed in this chapter forms the comparative example for the way this triangular structure is imagined and created in other contexts. While the next two contexts we will see are contemporary versions of this Brahmin *pandigai*, I will be comparing their material culture to those displayed in Meenaksi and Mrs. Seshadri's home. Their identity as Brahmin householders is embedded in their *Golu* display and the dolls, antique materials, and dioramas and this narrative is organized and conveyed playfully and creatively to express their utmost devotion. Some say that you never know when or in what form the goddess visits you during *Bommai Golu*. She can come as either another *kanya*, or a *sumangali*, or even one of the dolls on your display. It is this anticipation that keeps each householder practicing, creating and making the best possible *Golu* for worship and display annually during the season of *Navaratri.*

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CHAPTER THREE

BOMMAI GOLU AS LEARNED TRADITION AMONG NON-BRAHMINS

Chapter two has shown that the keeping of a *Golu* is an elaborate process involving tiers and tableaus filled with many old dolls and vintage religious objects. It takes several years to establish an awe-inspiring and grand *Golu*. Though every Brahmin householder begins keeping her first *Golu* only in her marital home she also carries memories and experiences of participating in *Golu* as a child that serve as inspiration to her displays. Over the years her *Golu* gets grander as she incorporates new dolls acquired from travels and shopping and also acquires antiquity as she displays hand-me-downs and religious objects given to her from her marital and natal family networks. Some anthropologists studying Tamilnadu tell me that increasingly many non-Brahmins also keep *Golu* (Nicole Wilson; Ute Huesken; Ina Ilakama, S. Palaniappan). This is a contemporary phenomenon. When my fieldwork began, I was curious to understand how participants who didn't receive antique collections differed from traditional multi-generational participants and what sorts of motivations drove them to upkeep a festival they were only recently learning about. They didn't have the repertoire of *Golu* memories, nor did they possess the antique dolls and material collections so cherished by Brahmin householders. In this chapter, I describe and analyze the motivations of two participants who began keeping *Golu* of their own volition, albeit through association with Brahmin women in their family and friend circles. I argue, that Keerti and Sheila adopt practices that make them appear Brahmin through being initiated into *Bommai Golu* (both Keerti and Sheila are pseudonyms). *Bommai Golu*'s materiality (dolls in dioramas) is fluid and accessible to facilitate this adoption; and, unlike other Brahmin *pandigai*s, *Bommai Golu* requires

very minimal specialized knowledge, purity rituals, or pre-requisites making it easy to adopt while minimal experience with Brahmin domestic practice. The new *Golu* participant's experiences satisfy their domestic, social and spiritual quests, translating their *Bommai Golu* into tangible rewards in their daily life.

Tangible rewards for Keerti and Sheila came in the form of social and religious capital. Since both Keerti and Sheila are non-Brahmin and non-Tamil, they first found their adjustment into marital life quite rough. While Keerti married a Tamil Brahmin and moved to Mylapore, Sheila married a non-Brahmin Tamilian settled in Delhi with whom she migrated to America. Both women have also migrated to vibrant Brahmin contexts when they moved to Mylapore and Sunnyvale respectively. Both Keerti and Sheila live upper-middle-class lives in their marital localities. I have already discussed the context of Mylapore and Sunnyvale in the previous two chapters, but it is important to note that both locations have many female Tamil Brahmins in visible social circles. The prominence of this one caste group which performs *Bommai Golu* is important to the adoption of *Golu* into non-Brahmin participants' religious or ritual lives. Interacting with and growing their social and religious networks in their marital localitites involved participation in habits that were once caste-specific. Participation in *Bommai Golu* allows them to fully integrate within their martial social circles, providing them a gateway into domestic *pandigai* that other festivals do not. Brahmin women who are their well-wishers are the ritual experts in these localities, helping them become more Brahmin, and permitting them to become fully accepted into their new social and religious communities.

Prema Kurien has noted among South Asian Americans that, "…migration reinforces patriarchy and elitism within this group. However, the settlement process also leads to women's empowerment because they play a critical role in the economic, social,

and religion-cultural life of the household and local community" (1999, p.650). Even though Keerti hasn't migrated to a new country, she has migrated to a new caste marital household. She is responsible for the economic, social and religious life after marriage. Kurien continues that women are the "cultural custodians" after entering the workforce as immigrants, because they have re-adopted in many ways the role of educating and inculcating religious values in children (1999, p.651). This is invariably the case for Sheila who told me several times that "her duty" was to educate her family on religion. In India she would have had many more avenues to allow them to experience religion, but in America she was solely responsible for educating and teaching her family about their religion. In both the new participants' cases, *Bommai Golu* serves as an avenue to display their empowerment, social, economic and religious contributions to the family unit.

Keerti and Sheila both began to keep *Bommai Golu* for the sake of their marital families. Keerti fell in love with Rangu, a Tamil Brahmin boy, after moving from Mumbai to Chennai for work. Even though she hardly considered herself a religious person while growing up, now as a married woman, she is eager to learn about Brahmin household rituals and her marital family's ways of keeping religious traditions. *Bommai Golu* becomes a podium for displaying Keerti's piety and cultural expertise, winning her mother-in-law's favor. Sheila, on the other hand, married a Tamilian settled in north India. While her husband and she connected in some habits, many other south Indian traditions were largely unfamiliar even to her inlaws. Sheila started keeping a *Golu* only once she came to America, many years after her marriage, when she was intrigued by the *Navaratri* festival arrangement of dolls kept by some of her Indian-American and Brahmin neighbors in Sunnyvale. Sheila's inclusion of *Bommai Golu* among the

repertoire of her family's religious traditions showcases her love of dolls and her belief in the goddess as "Durga-Ma."

Whether this is a responsibility placed upon them due to migration or a lifestyle they have willfully chosen, Keerti and Sheila have adapted to their post-marital life through the aid of Brahmin well-wishers. Through adopting and displaying their neighborhood's caste-specific habits and rituals, they are able to garner social and religious capital for themselves and their families. After an analysis of both their personal motivations to adopt *Bommai Golu*, I will turn to discussing how *Bommai Golu* is a gateway to learning about Hindu religion unlike traditional Brahmin *pandigai*.

Keerti as a "new-comer" to *Bommai Golu*

There are very few local workshops to choose from that talk about religious rituals or show new brides how to keep traditional Brahmin *pandigai*. Most young brides from out of town have to do research on the internet. Among them, the few who are Brahmin have local social networks like their friends and the Mylapore Ladies club.[34] Keerti, however, being a non-Brahmin and non-Mylaporean, found it hard to access these clubs. She did read the local Mylapore newspaper called Mylapore Times and through that found out about the Trio and their workshop for *Bommai Golu*.

The Trio, consisting of two brothers and a sister, is an organization formed through the auspices of the Sri Sumukhi Rajasekharan Foundation and Kalakshetra (Chennai Academy of Arts) that performs arts and provides donations to the local community for disadvantaged art students. After receiving media coverage for a beautiful

[34] Though Keerti could have joined the Ladies club, and they don't explicitly restrict access to non-Brahmins, Keerti in one our conversations declared that she didn't really feel like it was "her scene".

Golu display in 1990, the Trio began conducting workshops to teach about various Hindu rituals and customs to those interested to learn about them. Additionally, they held an annual *Bommai Golu* competition, visiting several homes in Chennai and providing cash prizes and media coverage to the best displays. When I entered the Trio's *Navaratri* workshop in 2015, I sat in the back-left corner to have a full view of the attendees and lecture.[35] The small 100 square foot room seemed cramped with the nine-step triangular tiered *Golu*. The left half of the room was already filled with several cameramen and reporters.[36] The Trio sat to the right of the *Golu* display facing the audience upon chairs. The workshop attendees were seated on the floor in front of the *Golu* display over-flowing out into the entry way of the room. The attendees of the workshop were all women. The only men in the room were the two brothers of the Trio (Surendranath and Amarnath), their accompanying helpers, and the cameramen and reporters. This year, in addition to their lecture about how to keep a good *Golu*, the Trio discussed how to preserve dolls and make decorations using household items.

Keerti, a first-generation participant, sat in the very first row in front of the Trio.[37] She was a heavy-set six-foot-tall-woman in her late thirties. Keerti wore an olive green colored *salwar-kameez* with no earrings or bangles, adorned only with her wedding necklace (*tāli*) and a chiffon white *dupatta* (long neck scarf). On her forehead, she wore

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[35] The Trio and their personal narrative will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. This workshop was held five years after my first meeting with the Trio. For this section it is enough to know that they are a Mylapore-based organization, made up of two brothers and a sister, which provides workshops on how to keep a *Golu*. They are well- known to be judges of the *Golu* competitions held by the local and regional fortnightly gazettes *Mylapore Times*, *Kutcheri Buzz* and *Adyar Times*.

[36] Though Bommai Golu was a week away, the Trio's display was standing tall and well adorned. Since they had five rooms of *Golu* displays, many of the steps and dioramas were already assembled but covered in large white blankets except for this one room where the workshop was held.

[37] I didn't know she was a first-generation participant by looking at her. During the presentation by the Trio, however, Keerti referred to herself as a "newcomer" to the festival and self-proclaimed that the Trio's presentation was so informative. She said, "I didn't know there was so much to it [*Golu*]."

no red *pottu* (black/ red dot or smear worn on forehead) but only a small smear of *vibhuti* (sacred ash). Keerti was the only female attendee at the workshop not wearing a sari, jewelry or a red *pottu*. This was notable since the Trio and their supporters are publically very vocal in their preference for saris. The Trio didn't say anything to her in person.

Keerti's two-squirming toddler aged children sat beside her and all three reacted very eagerly to every question, gasping with "Ah's!" and "Wow's" to most tips provided. At the end when the reporters were asking for feedback Keerti immediately volunteered her comments to the reporters and introduced them to the Trio soon afterwards. I was standing behind Keerti as she started talking to the Trio and when they briefly stepped around her to talk me, Keerti also turned and introduced herself. This year, I had attended the workshop to learn, in particular, about first-time participants of *Bommai Golu*, and asked Keerti if she had always known about the festival. She replied:

> I never knew about *Golu* till I met Rangu, my husband. When our wedding day came close, he told me talk to his mother. I was very nervous… Rangu's mother is a very very scary person, very traditional, you see. I am a *bhayandhānkuli* (fearful person), I can't talk to her! I went to my neighbor's house. That's the great thing about Mylapore, you see. Pattu Mami lives next door, she teaches music, she always has *kozhandel* (kids) over. I went there and learnt about *Golu* from her. She will teach me whatever I need to do for *pandigainālgal* (ritual days). I am still learning how to keep *Golu*… It's not perfect, you see, but Rangu is happy… Adi and Ashna [resting her hands upon the heads of her son and daughter] love it, so we do it every year.

Keerti told me and the Trio that she was referred to the workshop by Pattu Mami, an eighty-five-year-old, long-term Brahmin resident of Mylapore. [38] The Trio already knew Pattu Mami, who had made a guest appearance in their *puja vidhanam* (methods

[38] Pattu Mami is not her real name but an endearing pet name given to her by the residents who knew her. "Pattu" means "dear/soft-one" and "Mami" is slang for "older Brahmin lady".

of *puja*) lecture earlier that year. Pattu Mami was well-known in Mylapore for her forty-plus years of experience hosting *Bommai Golu* in her home. Even the Trio turned and said to everyone present at the workshop that Pattu Mami has a very "traditional *Golu*," recalling some of her iconic clay dolls and the wonderful songs she would perform each evening during *Navaratri*.

None of the other women attending the workshop had brought their husbands with them; however, Keerti's husband arrived after the workshop to introduce himself to the Trio. It was important to both Keerti and her husband to seek the Trio's blessings and invite them home to view their display for this year. When Keerti's husband arrived, he started talking directly to the Trio about his family's lineage and their association with Mylapore and the Kalakshetra. In some ways, we could also read Keerti's husband's actions as reifying the notion that only Brahmins can keep *Bommai Golu*. In introducing himself, he also established the authority of his wife, as a Brahmin *Golu*-keeper. In the meantime, I exchanged contact information with Keerti and promised to meet her again to discuss her adoption of *Bommai Golu* in more detail. Keerti and her family left after speaking with the Trio for a few more minutes.

Keerti grew up in Bombay (Mumbai) and was "hardly religious," she said. In fact, she mentioned that Rangu's lack of religiosity is what drew her to him in the beginning. Rangu's family had been opposed to the 'love-marriage' between the two since they had only met two years before while working at HCL Technologies and Keerti was not a Tamil Brahmin. This opposition had led to Keerti's nervous stance with her mother-in-law. She felt like her marital family had already judged her, saying that she was not a "typical bride" (because she was not Brahmin) and would require "a lot of adjustment" to fit into life in Mylapore. This prejudice, she argued, plagued her assimilation into her in-law's family

from her first day as a new bride. She said that her mother-in-law, who lived with them in their large five-bedroom villa in Mylapore had "traditional expectations" for everything from food to daily habits. She said she must wake up every morning and have a bath before preparing food or even entering the kitchen. Her mother-in-law wakes up and serves breakfast to the family if she is not ready in time. She is also expected to make sure the household *puja* shelf is adorned with fresh flowers and the lamp is lit twice a day, a custom about which her mother-in-law reminds Keerti of as soon as she sees her come out of her bath. Particularly during her menstrual cycle, Keerti is forbidden to enter the kitchen, touch or prepare food, and must steer clear of the men in the household and the *puja* room. She had at first also been told to sleep in a different room during menstruation but, after a huge fight in which Rangu had to argue in her support, this traditional practice is not expected of her any longer.

I did not bring up her caste identity, but, Keerti said she was not "as religious" as her "Brahmin" marital family. In our later conversations, Keerti mentioned that she found Tamil Brahmins very different and "more religious" than her own Maharashtrian Hindu family. They have "so many *pandigai*s (rituals)," she sighed and exhaled loudly, whereas her own family had only performed a few. Marrying a Tamil Brahmin, and now living in Mylapore, she had to quickly adapt to her post-marital self. She still didn't perform many of the rituals expected of her by her mother-in-law but claimed to keep a few *vrtham*s (vows), like *Varalakshmi Nonbu*, *Karvachauth* and celebrated among friends and family major festivals like *Ganesh Chathurti*, *Bommai Golu*, *Deepavali* and the *Varshapirappa* (Tamil New Year). Time was always sparse in Keerti's life. She didn't want to complain much about it, but even with a nanny, two maids, one driver and grand-parents who lived with them, Keerti said that she could not find the time to perform any more rituals due to

her demanding work schedule and occasional travels.

Keerti Mingles with Mylapore Brahmins

Keerti and I had no time to meet during the *Bommai Golu* mostly due to Keerti's rigorous work schedule. She was traveling that week to Hyderabad and returned only after *Golu* had concluded. In the next few weeks after *Golu*, we met a couple of times at a coffee shop close to her workplace, HCL Technologies, near Thoraipakkam, so that I could hear her personal narratives in more detail.[39] Thoraipakkam is quite far away from Mylapore, and the commute during peak hours often took two hours in heavy traffic.

How did she begin keeping *Bommai Golu*, I wondered aloud, asking Keerti how she managed to start keeping a festival she knew nothing about it, especially given her rigorous work schedule? Keerti said that it all started with a recipe for *sundal*. Though she couldn't talk to her mother-in-law about anything religious (because she was "so traditional"), she said she still needed to talk to someone to find a way to navigate this religious terrain, to preempt her marital family's negative expectations of her as a bride. Mylapore is also a "scary place," Keerti added, because she felt like her neighborhood wives were "clique-ish," already knowing what rituals to perform and doing them very well. She said that the other wives would tell her, "*madi oddaiyya koshavathu kattindu archanai ye pannidu ma*," (with *madi* tie your nine-yard sari and perform your offerings, *ma*) and back then she would have no idea what they were talking about.[40] It was during

[39] While some women had allowed me to tape my conversations with them especially in group settings, many refused in one-on-one interviews. I would often have to take notes and recreate conversations from those notes. For this meeting as well, Keerti [name changed] had said she'd rather not have the tape recorder on and I respected her wishes. She ensured me that I could write up whatever she told me while changing her name.

[40] Keerti responded to the neighborhood wives by saying "huh?" not only because she didn't know Tamil very well at the time, but that she also didn't know that the Brahmin and Tamil word for her *madisar* (nine-

those early days as a bride that she encountered Pattu Mami in a neighbor's house while *Golu*-hopping.[41] Pattu Mami seemed very sweet and had invited Keerti to her *Golu* that year.

Keerti and Pattu Mami's friendship blossomed from that *Golu* into a full-fledged relationship of mutual help. After all, they lived very close to each other. Pattu Mami's son had sold their villa (adjacent to Keerti's marital home) to be replaced by a seven-storied apartment complex, and Pattu Mami and her husband live on the first floor (having access to a backyard garden). Such a large ground-floor apartment in the heart of Mylapore was only possessed by a privileged few, signaling that Pattu Mami was quite wealthy. Pattu Mami often calls Keerti over, yelling over the gate when she sees her step out of her car, to help with problems with her iPad, especially when she needed to FaceTime or send something to her grand-daughter who lives in San Francisco. In exchange, Keerti received wonderful *pandigai*s recipes, ritual details, and even the occasional traditional sari (usually gifted in one of Pattu Mami's cleaning sprees after her children visited). Keerti winked and concluded that the *sundal* recipe she made the next year for *Bommai Golu* wowed her father-in-law and reminded him of his own mother's cooking. This had done the trick and helped her to start bargaining privileges to keep the dolls for the next year's *Golu*.

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yard) sari is called "*koshavam*;" she didn't know she had to wear them on some *pandigai*s but not all; she also didn't know what *madi* was – the elaborate purification rite performed by women in the morning of the ritual days and upon some of the vessels used for the *puja* or *pandigai*. Hancock discusses the practice of *madi* in *Womanhood in the Making* in detail (1999, pp.90-91). Keerti once also mentioned that when she asked Brahmin priests at temples, they also told her quickly in this sanskritized Brahmin Tamil (like the householders) what she had to do, but she would have to go home and unpack each of the words and the instructions embedded in them.

[41] *Golu*-hopping is a term that is frequently used by women to depict how the evenings of *Navaratri* will be spent. Hopping implies that you cannot spend too long in each home, because there are so many *Golu* to visit.

Every year, Keerti feels like her mother-in-law trusts her a little more to handle the preparations for *Golu* and other festivals on her own. Thanks to Pattu Mami, Keerti said that she started to have faith in herself (*yennuke yen mele nambikai vanthuthu*).[42] *Bommai Golu* is one festival that her family always finds time to celebrate together. Her mother-in-law and she now have a routine beginning with assembling the steps the night before, to placing the last touches before guests arrive, both women ensuring food, drinks, and *tambulam* offerings are ready for everyone. Keerti often takes time off during the days leading up to *Navaratri* to ensure that all the preparations are done well. She may miss the days of the festival due to work travel, but Keerti is always there to set up the *Golu* and attend some of the evening celebrations. Her relationship with her mother-in-law significantly changed after that first *sundal* recipe. Keerti said that she told her with tears in her eyes one evening two *Golu* seasons ago that Rangu was very lucky to have met Keerti and that she was "relieved" that their marriage had occurred when it did. Keerti stopped for a moment when we spoke about this and looked at her iPhone and showed me her wall paper. It was a picture of her mother-in-law and the kids during *Golu* that year. She beamed and said happily, "I am so relieved too!"

Keerti accessed religious capital by starting to keep *Bommai Golu*. She was able to improve her relationship with her mother-in-law using a *pandigai*s to showcase new recipes and specific ritualized knowledge. Even though keeping a *Golu* doesn't warrant any specific ritual knowledge, her dioramas and her maintenance of the traditional practice of *madi* before making her display impressed her mother-in-law.[43] This

[42] *Nambikai* is used to speak of faith and belief in Tamil.
[43] Keerti's way of keeping *madi* was not the same as those described by Hancock or even Pattu Mami – that is wearning freshly laundered and wet saris and not touching any non-*madi* items after one's bath till the ritual is complete. The term *madi* has also been re-understood due to modern conceptions of purity and bathing. As a *vadiyār* (Brahmin priest) in an American temple told me, "Today *madi* means, what? You

illustrated to me the role *pandigai*s like *Golu* played in the daily lives of married householders. With the approval she got from making the *sundal* that first year, Keerti was able to negotiate small compromises building up to larger ones. Moreover, her friendship with Pattu Mami gave Keerti a sense of support, through which she knew she wasn't doing anything incorrectly. Keerti said that she couldn't always trust her internet research as there was no real information on specific household practices. Instead Keerti said she could rely on Pattu Mami's knowledge and authority as an "expert" in performing *Bommai Golu*. In return for the specialized ritual knowledge, Keerti would bring *gongkura* pickle for Pattu Mami from her Hyderabadi Brahmin friend's home. *Bommai Golu* had thus become the bridge to pacify Keerti's mother-in-law, aiding Keerti in fitting into her Tamil Brahmin marital home.

I will now move geographical locations to South Bay in California, known and cherished by Tamil Brahmins. Here I will present my encounters with Sheila, who is non-Tamil and non-Brahmin, but decided to keep *Bommai Golu* after being introduced to it by her friend from Sunnyvale called Aarti. I will analyze how the goddess provoked Sheila to adopt and learn about *Golu*, thereby improving her family's social and religious life.

Meeting Sheila in Aarti's *Golu*

Sheila was a quiet observer when I visited Aarti's *Bommai Golu* in Sunnyvale, during September 2014. My fieldwork contact, Suchi, had left me to mingle in Aarti's home that evening because it turned out we had common relatives. After socializing and chit-chatting for an hour with many women, I found Sheila among the few visitors who

take a bath and wear freshly laundered clothes. If you do that, it is enough." When I asked Keerti what she meant by *madi*, she told me a similar answer – "it means wear only clean saris and only after taking a bath."

lingered in front of the display of dolls. Sheila was wearing a bright red silk sari with a leaf-motif golden border and her jewelry matched her sari. Her earrings were large peacocks studded with pearls and rubies and they matched her gold and pearl crusted necklace. She also wore alternating gold, pearl studded, and ruby studded bangles in sets of six on each arm. She held a small white rhinestone-embellished clutch under her left arm and greeted me with cheerful smile when I approached her. Sheila introduced herself to me, asking, "how do you know Aarti?" Aarti was closely related to my brother-in-law's family and immediately welcomed me into her life and home, even announcing my visit to several of her friends while taking me around her house that evening. Aarti's immediate warm welcome to me startled several of her friends who seemed rather close-knit and thoroughly aware of her social circle. Sheila's question vocalized many of the other onlooker's thoughts, many of whom wanted to place me within their social network. Almost everyone's first two questions to me during *Golu*-hopping included: How do you know "x" householder, and, what does your husband do? It made sense that Sheila was also curious as to who I was in this social situation.

Our mutual love for figurines and dolls also got us talking about her adoption of *Bommai Golu*. Sheila admitted that though it wasn't her first time celebrating *Bommai Golu*, she still felt like a new comer to this festival. When she moved to the Bay Area, she was invited to Aarti's home for *Bommai Golu*. The first time she saw the performance of the festival she said, "my mind was blown, it is so cool! Dolls for Durga-Ma, what a great thought!" It was difficult to build, however, she added, requiring lots of effort and fantastic doll collections. Sheila's initial curiosity turned into a hope that she would try to keep a *Golu* at least once in her life. She said the hardest thing was to find the right stage or how to set up the steps for the festival. "Do I have to build it myself?" she wondered.

She quickly learned to improvise and today uses an old book shelf to make the steps every year. Everyone else, according to her, had many more large dolls and unique figurines she had never seen before. Sheila then wondered about the doll shops I had visited in my travels and asked me of the places I would recommend she visit to buy dolls in America and India. I could tell that we were both going to benefit from our friendship. She was very "impressed" by my role as "*Golu* researcher" and questioned me about the "meanings" of several things. She asked me about the dolls that she did not recognize, and why Aarti keeps pots upon her *Golu*. I told her that many objects used to represent the goddess are often placed upon Golu steps. She nodded in approval adding that Golu was very important to "Durga-Ma." We remained in front of the *Golu* display for an entire half hour the first time we spoke exchanging our mutual love for dolls.

Over the next few weeks, I met Sheila several times over lunch or tea in a local restaurant in Redwood city, a suburb between both our homes. Sheila worked full time on four days of the week, with very little time to socialize, but she would meet me on her off day (Wednesday) before she had to pick up her children from school. Only after we got to know each other more did Sheila reveal to me that she was not Tamilian and admired Aarti's *Golu* and had come to see her doll display. Sheila was a Delhiite who had rarely mingled with South Indians till she met her husband Murugan at Delhi University where they had attended a common lecture. Murugan and Sheila had spent several hours in coffee shops the rest of the semester till their relationship blossomed into love in her junior year at college. Murugan is a Tamilian non-Brahmin, who had lived in Delhi his whole life. He was eager to travel to America and so worked hard to secure a job at Google in San Francisco. He moved with Sheila to the Bay Area two years after they were married in 1991. Sheila had never left Delhi before she moved to California. Murugan had also

secured Sheila an entry level internship at Google, which turned into a permanent position. After this, they got pregnant. They rarely met her family which still lives in Delhi, and Murugan's now-widowed mother lives with them in a three-bedroom home in a suburb of south Bay called Belmont. Sheila is responsible for starting the tradition of keeping *Bommai Golu* in her marital home. Neither Murugan nor her mother-in-law knew how to keep *Golu*.

Durga-Ma leads Sheila to *Bommai Golu*

Adopting a tradition for the first time requires a lot of motivation and courage, especially when not all members of the household are on your side. When I asked her how she approached keeping *Golu* in her own home when her family members did not perform this festival she responded:

> My hubbie and me always like to talk philosophy. He loves talking about Indian philosophy, we both do… and the Vedas… but he isn't religious or anything at all… I mean he never does *puja* at home or anything and we only visit famous temples… When I first told him about *Golu* he laughed, you know, saying: dolls? you can if you want to. But, he didn't want to be involved. But, you know just the very first time I kept *Golu* I saw a change in him. I think this was because of Durga-Ma. She invites people to see her in the most unexpecting ways. I saw him watching me make the *Golu* the first time. I saw that he was doing his own Internet research on *Golu* and then he started asking me questions about it saying he read this and that. From the next year, he was more helpful in making the *Golu* and we talked more about the doll scenes we set up. We used the mythological stories which he and I liked to read and we talked about it together. Nowadays he is always excited in *Golu*, and I think, a believer in Durga-Ma; '*Sab Durga-Ma ki kripa se* (it is all by the grace of Durga-Ma)! He still doesn't pray to god everyday or anything, but he likes *Golu* with our family.

Sheila had always loved dolls and figurines, but, she also loves the goddess. *Bommai Golu* for Sheila was about Durga-Ma, her name for the goddess. Her words above

cue us into an important sentiment I heard repeatedly expressed among the new participants of *Bommai Golu*: *Golu* causes a transformation, making them or someone close to them (husband or child) act or be more religious. In Sheila's case, Durga-Ma had made her husband Murugan see her point of view. She wanted Murugan to acknowledge the effect of the goddess in their lives. The goddess had "invited" him "to see her," as she said. I wish to take seriously that the goddess Durga-Ma had caused Sheila's husband and family to view things through her and thus Sheila's perspective. No more a novice *Golu* keeper when I met her, Sheila had been keeping her *Golu* for eight years, learning through trial and error, and today has her own large doll collection to pass on to her daughter. Sheila had negotiated a space for *Golu* with her husband, with her children, and with her extended family, inviting them to view the world of Durga-Ma through her eyes. Her adoption of *Bommai Golu* invited the goddess to pervade her home and be seen in the minds of the people around her through the dolls and dioramas which represented her creations.

In our conversations, Sheila often signaled to her relationship with Durga-Ma and the goddess's ways of changing things in her life. Durga-Ma was like a member of her family, a constant thread that Sheila relied upon in her narratives about her life. Most particularly, her *vishwas* or "faith" in the goddess had a way of "improving her life [and thus her family's too]," she said to me.[44] When she first came to America, she said life seemed "*mushkil* (difficult)" because "*mei akeli thi* (I was alone)." She had not yet started to drive, she lived in South San Francisco in a small one-bed room apartment, and all her

[44] The word *vishwas* stands in for both belief and faith in Sheila's vocabulary. It is common to hear the word used interchangeably in colloquial Hindi as well. More formally, *āstha* is also used to say religious belief in formal writing or texts.

neighbors were American. Sheila said she hardly spoke to anyone for the first three or four months. They only went shopping to Walmart and the store didn't stock any Indian groceries. When Sheila began at Google, Aarti was her co-worker in a different department, but their teams often met up for meal times at the Google cafeteria. Aarti had first approached Sheila and started talking to her, asking her about a red thread she was wearing on her wrist. This red thread was from a *mannat* (vow) taken by Sheila at her local Durga-Ma temple in Delhi before she had left for America. Their friendship, Sheila felt, was thus started by Durga-Ma. Aarti was among her first real friends in America. Eventually, Sheila said, "I stopped feeling so sad, and only Durga-Ma helped me see that." Today, not so alone here, she says San Francisco is a lot like "a cleaner Delhi."

Sheila also started finding other friends through attending a goddess *satsang* (singing/chanting group) at the Shiva-Durga Temple in Sunnyvale. Though temples in America specify they are open to all, the Shiva-Durga Temple is preferred among South Asian immigrants from Delhi and Gujarat. This *satsang*, Sheila said, is also through the "*kripa* of Durga-Ma." She added that the goddess knew how lonely she felt among non-Hindi speakers and allowed her to meet several Delhi, Hindi-speaking women through her singing/chanting group. Sheila said she often runs into members of this group in her various trips to South Bay for groceries. Once when her car broke down, one of them even offered her a lift and helped her find a good company to repair her brakes. "How is this possible," she asked me? She concluded with a big all-knowing smile, "Of course, Durga-Ma *par vishwas karoge tho sab kuch milega* (place your faith upon Durga-Ma and you shall receive everything)." Sheila then added, "*ab tumhe bhi vishwas hai, na* (you now

have faith, too, right)?" I responded that I did believe, I did believe that Durga-Ma had improved her life.[45]

Durga-Ma had improved Sheila's life in several ways: she had helped her meet a new friend, she had helped her meet Hindi-speakers, and she had even caused her to be around helpful neighbors who helped her fit into this new country. The goddess had also helped Sheila's family. She had brought *Bommai Golu* into Sheila's life, expanding Sheila's friends' circle and motivating her husband to participate in the family's rituals. Without Aarti's friendship, however, Sheila would not have expanded her social circle in the Bay Area. Aarti also frequented the goddess *satsang*. Though Aarti is a Tamil Brahmin immigrant, and not from Delhi or Gujarat, she started going to the Shiva-Durga Temple because it was right beside her home in Sunnyvale. Most of their friends from the *satsang* were not Tamilian, and so, as both told me, their other friends didn't keep *Golu*. Apart from sharing her expertise about *Bommai Golu* with Sheila, Aarti had also shared her Tamil Brahmin friends, many of whom also frequented Sheila's home as part of their *Golu*-hopping evenings. Sheila relied on Aarti's friends as some of her first *sumangali* friends. Nowadays, Sheila calls all her friends (Tamilian or not) to her *Golu*, more confident in her presentation of the festival arrangement of dolls.

Sheila's *Golu*

I was very curious as to know what elements Sheila chose to uphold during *Bommai Golu* and how she encountered the information on what is to be done or not to

[45] Sheila had asked for my belief in her faith because my question to her may have come off as skepticism. When she initially told me about her faith in the goddess, I had asked her if she had any other examples of the ways in which Durga ma had improved her life. She was relieved to hear that I believed her and continued to tell me another story about the goddess.

be done. Since *Bommai Golu* has very few prescriptions, it is quite easy to take on. Moreover, understanding Sheila's process of keeping *Golu*, would also help me determine what counts as traditional or inherent to the festival according to a non-traditional participant. Since I was not able to watch Sheila in the process of making her *Golu*, I asked her to walk me through a typical week leading up to the festival in her home.

Sheila described to me that she only began keeping her *Golu* display the night before the beginning of *Navaratri*. The preceding *satsang*, about a week before *Navaratri* begins, Aarti and her decide which day they will host *Bommai Golu* in their homes so as not to coincide. Aarti always invites the *satsang* members for *Golu*, but nowadays Sheila also invites her non-Tamil friends. Sheila does not get any help from Murugan or his mother for setting up her *Golu*, so, she would bring the boxes from her garage sometime during the week. She would only start setting up her dolls the night before, after work and the children had gone to bed. There is no elaborate preparation, she says, except to make sure that the dolls are organized according to themes and each step has a theme. Her *Golu* has five steps; it was purchased from an online store based in New Jersey last year, a recommendation from a Tamil Brahmin friend. In the past, when she had just begun keeping *Golu*, she had used an IKEA bookshelf. She covers the frame with fabric and assembles her dolls. Durga-Ma is always at the center on the top. She is a one-foot depiction of the goddess as Durga, four-armed, sitting upon a tiger and one of Sheila's first purchases for her *Golu* display. Beside her on one side is Lakshmi on a lotus and on the other side Sarasvati holding a stringed instrument on either side.

Many of her dolls are brightly painted with synthetic dyes and made of plastic, resin, plaster and papièr-maché. Each following tier is organized according to families of gods or myths, she tells me. This year she has Shiva, Parvathi, Ganesha and Skanda on

the next tier, Vishnu's Dashavataram on the third (the latest set from Komalavilas), her vintage miniature copper kitchen tools set (an inspiration from Aarti) with some more wax and plastic fruits and vegetables, and the lower-most tier has an assortment of plastic and resin figurines showing different gods and goddesses. She tells me that in other years, she has used other gods she has purchased. Most of her collection has come from Komalavilas, some online, and a large set of dolls came recently (in 2009) when Murugan and his mother made a trip to Chennai for a deceased relative's ceremony and surprised her with some new dolls. With the final step, Sheila concludes her *Golu* display; she does not put any dolls on the floor, explaining that "people's feet usually get in the way." Sheila does not light any lamp in front of her *Golu* display but often sings to her display as she has observed in other's homes. She waves a camphor *arati* once a day during her *puja* time and then concludes her ritual. Sheila did not know how to make *sundal* but said she makes *dahi vada* (savory fried dough dumplings soaked in tangy yogurt) and a bean or grain salad to complement the harvest season at this time.

There are no personal narratives handed down from Sheila's ancestors when she received each doll. None of her dolls are antique and their iconography is popular in contemporary doll markets. The iconography of the resin Durga-Ma doll is not like *Bommai Golu* dolls. The Durga is riding a tiger instead of a typical lion (as found in Tamilnadu) and she didn't carry any unique identifier that placed her as one of the south Indian goddesses. Sheila's doll was clearly Durga. The goddess named as Durga is a less popular goddess in the south, and during *Bommai Golu* one can see several different goddesses, each with their own names and iconography. Nowadays, you can purchase *Golu* dolls of many different goddesses from all over India to cater to the new tastes and people's demands.

When I pushed her about its origin, Sheila said she had bought this Durga doll at an Indian store in Chicago while attending a conference there. Her vintage copper kitchen tools set is perhaps her oldest doll set. She received this from her mother when she was six years old. She said that several years ago, Aarti had started displaying her own miniature kitchen tool sets over a few years during *Bommai Golu*. She said Aarti had one in wood, one in silver, one in stone, and one in brass. She had admired them over the different *Golu* displays and finally asked Aarti about them. Aarti had told her that during *Golu* one displays toys that are "gifted" as well as new purchases that are made. Sheila said that hearing this had moved her. She didn't have an old doll collection, but she did have this copper set presented to her from her mother who received it from her mother. Since then, Sheila proudly displays it every year.

In many ways, Sheila's *Golu* also tells her personal narrative. Since she is a non-traditional *Golu* participant, most of her dolls are new. Much of the iconography is also mixed, between northern and southern Indian depicitons of the gods and goddesses. Her Skanda, for example looks very youthful but carries the iconic *vel* and the forehead markings of Murugan. Her Parvathi is green in color, like her Tamil Amman form. The Durga and Radha-Krishna are more north Indian in aesthetic appearance. Krishna is not shown as a child but depicted as a lover beside his cowherder girlfriend. Since many of her *Golu* dolls were purchased from Komalavilas, she was able to access traditional dolls that are currently available in Tamilnadu's *Golu* doll markets. The trip made by Murugan and his mother in 2009 also helped her acquire many *Golu* dolls that would only be popular among south Indians. This is also part of a new trend. Dolls made and sold only for the purpose of *Bommai Golu* are slowly replacing the fluid borrowing of dolls from

playrooms and curio shelves that had once ubiquitously populated traditional *Golu* displays.

Though her dolls represented her personal narrative of travel to America, Sheila didn't personalize her *Golu* in the same ways that traditional participants do. I wondered why it had taken her so long to display her own vintage kitchen tools set or why she didn't have any non-deity dolls or any quotidian dioramas. I quickly remembered her question about the pots in Aarti's *Golu* display. Sheila seemed to see all the dolls or materials showcased for *Golu* as an extension of Durga-Ma and as religious objects. Her *Golu* display was neat and organized, but homogenous to the extent that her dolls didn't represent her personal ancestry but rather contemporary marketplaces for *Golu* dolls. It is also particularly important to note that many of her dolls are representative of her marital Tamil side, except for Durga-Ma while in traditional *Golu* displays one can find a balance between both natal and marital influences. Sheila did not include her childhood memories, her children's toys, other north Indian deities, or much of her upbringing in Delhi. Durga-Ma was the one part of her identity that had come with her to America and the goddess remained the connecting thread to her past. Her new identity was Tamil and Brahmin. If someone saw her *Golu*, they may even mistake her for another traditional Tamil Brahmin participant.

Adopting Brahmin Rituals

In interpreting the two narratives I have presented in this chapter, I see that information about *Bommai Golu* is shared with new or first-generation participants in two fundamental ways. Firstly, the widespread media coverage and the popular marketability of dolls and figurines related to Indian heritage have brought *Bommai Golu*

into the highly mediated public gaze. The fascination with the objects displayed for *Golu* has caused a plethora of global and online networks shared by women and their families in the diaspora where pictures, Pinterest links, blog pages and Flickr or Google albums are all widely distributed and exchanged. Specialized websites and local Mylaporean fortnightly newspapers like Indusladies.com, Mylapore Times, Adyar Times and Kutcheri Buzz are not limited to information on Golu and cater to all Brahmin religious and household rituals.[46] Consumers of all this online and media content are of different types: new participants, traditional participants who need new inspirations, as well as curious onlookers who want to collect or research information on Indian or Hindu festivals. The second avenue for information on *Bommai Golu*, shared by Keerti and Sheila, is Brahmin neighbors or well-wishers. Keerti's neighbor and friend Pattu Mami is a "*Golu* expert" and Aarti, since Sheila had found her through the guidance of Durga-Ma, served as an initial contact, provoking Sheila's adoption and celebration of *Bommai Golu*.

Both Pattu Mami and Aarti love *Bommai Golu* and also helped in promoting this festival to new consumers. While Keerti's "clique-ish" neighbors didn't really help her understand or fit into Mylapore, Pattu Mami had no trouble accepting her Maharashtrian heritage and never once asked her own beliefs regarding the festival or household rituals. She just accepted Keerti as a new student and taught her what she knew. Pattu Mami served a major bridge, translating Tamil and Brahmin cultural and traditional knowledge to Keerti in a way she could understand.

[46] While Sheila had called Indusladies.com, a resource for "Hindu festivals," this website is primarily a listservice for Brahmin women, who ask other Brahmin women how to perform and adapt household rituals correctly.

Women often serve as such “ritual experts,” as Susan Sered, in her study of older America Jewish women, identifies them. She recognizes the specialized knowledge about rituals and food that many of these women share with children and women who visit their Day Center. Sered noted that food prepared on ritual days in Jewish homes served as the primary types of specialized ritual knowledge in largely nuclear families, and almost everyone had a memory of a specific fried dough or wheat pudding even if they didn't remember the religious teachings that went along with those special celebrations (Sered, 1992, pp.91-92). Granted the visitors to this center are restricted to other Jewish community members, this center served as a place to discuss and share their knowledge without any concerns about outsiders (Sered, 1992, p.5).

Pattu Mami accepted Keerti into her neighborhood of Mylapore in this same way, since she knew Keerti as the girl who lives next door, married to Indumathi’s son Rangu. This bond created by living in proximity in Mylapore had helped both Pattu Mami and Keerti put aside all the caste-specific practices and focus on the fun and enjoyment of keeping the dolls and preparing the recipes during *Bommai Golu*. Similarly, When Keerti made the recipe of *sundal* provided by Pattu Mami, she was able to tap into the specialized ritual knowledge that was not shared with her by her mother-in-law. The memory of the food brought her into her father-in-law’s favor, thus also changing her mother-in-law’s perception of Keerti. Once Pattu Mami had given her that recipe, she also received feedback, and this continued to bolster their friendship, leading to many more ritualized tips.

Pattu Mami also shared with Keerti dolls which she considered traditional to the festival and convinced Keerti to buy some new Kondapalli dolls for her mother-in-law. One year, Keerti had gone crying to Pattu Mami because the flame in her lamp kept

blowing out and she had overheard her mother-in-law tell a neighbor that Keerti's "*kai seriya illai* (literally: hand doesn't work properly, but also means "inauspicious hand"). Pattu Mami had advised her on the correct way to light the lamp and once she had learned, Keerti told me that she never had trouble lighting it well. All of these tips were shared in confidence and placed Pattu Mami as a "ritual expert" in translating *Bommai Golu* and other Brahmin household rituals to a newcomer.

Aarti shared much of Pattu Mami's enthusiasm to provide information about *Golu*. She told me that evening in her *Golu* that she always kept Dakshinamurti facing the south side in her *Golu* display because this likened her display to the sanctum shrine within temples. Though she proclaimed she was non-traditional in doing so, she felt a sort of ownership in innovating during *Golu*, and this placed her as different from other ritual experts she knew. Sered notes that due to the vulnerability of women's traditions within a male religious world, women's practices are fluid, changing from home to home and culture to culture, allowing these Jewish women to freely practice their sacred traditions. Sered posits, "It seems likely that because women frequently stand on the fringes and sidelines of institutionalized religion, and because women often lack access to sacred texts, they can easily absorb new rituals and discard old rituals" (Sered, 1992, p.137). Aarti and Sheila's female sources from listservices like Indusladies.com are such ritual experts. They may not have age on their side like Pattu Mami, but they certainly adopt and discard practice as they see fit in their new diaspora contexts. Since these women's traditions, like *Bommai Golu*, are often not included in ritual manuals or religious texts, they are free to adopt, include and morph the practices to suit their modern day.

Considering Sheila, who was neither Brahmin nor Tamil was keeping *Golu* in the diaspora, I wondered aloud to Sheila and asked her what she felt about her own adoption

of an unfamiliar practice for *Navaratri*? To this Sheila answered that she didn't mind because "Durga-Ma only led her to best of things". When I asked Keerti if she considered *Bommai Golu* a Brahmin festival she responded that "Yes, it's true it is a Brahmin *pandigai*, but these things have to change, you see, because everyone is marrying whomever they want these days." In the experiences of both Keerti and Sheila, *Bommai Golu* has a fluid identity; the dolls, in particular, were an appealing facet to adopting this festival. Other festivals would have been harder to pick up so easily, both Sheila and Keerti agreed because their rules and prescriptions are far too many.

While the two Brahmin women who help Keerti and Sheila are "ritual experts," they do differ from the women in the Jewish Day Center because of their quotidian adherence to caste-based rituals. Both Pattu Mami and Aarti keep *mati* before they assemble their *Golu*, create personalized decpitions and dioramas, light lamps in front of their display, and conclude the evening celebrations with a water *arati* to relieve potential evil-eye from the *Golu*. These rituals are not inherent to *Bommai Golu* but do form part of the domestic functions of a Brahmin householder on *pandigai*s and also signal that the display is divine. None of these practices have been passed on to Keerti or Sheila. In fact, Keerti's *Golu* is still mostly her mother-in-law's *Golu* and hence traditionally Brahmin. Sheila's *Golu* is a pastiche of practices and materials from north and south India.

The openness of Pattu Mami and Aarti in welcoming non-Brahmins into their domestic and social circles is a vital marker of the ways in which notions about caste identity are changing. Sociologist Louis Dumont has argued that caste is fixed and concrete – ordering the rest of society. In support of this claim, he quotes Sanskrit texts (Purana and Shastra) verifying that one is "born a Brahmin due to past *karma*." Dumont grounds his facts in ethnographic accounts of caste identity in the villages of Tamil Nadu.

He argues that caste is rooted in the social fabric of Hindu Indian society demarcating the pure from the impure, the chief from the priests (1981, p.71). Moreover, apologists for caste have argued that it is a socio-economic system sustaining the exchange of goods and services in India. Caste identity is unique to familial upbringing, specific rituals and responsibilities, and caste may even be visible through forehead markings, clothing, and jewelry. The underlying assumption is that you are born into caste. But, Pattu Mami, Aarti, Keerti and Sheila all show us that caste identity can be learned and adopted through an adherence to another's ritual practices.

Balamurali Natarajan and Shail Mayaram have instead argued that caste is fluid - interacting with class and prevailing powerful institutions (2005, p.235). Caste can be mobile, and one can climb up the caste hierarchy trading one last name or one occupation for another. Natarajan argues that gendered caste consciousness is formed in an interaction with class-identity among the Chattisgarhi Potter Community (CPC) where the men work the potter's wheel and women perform the marketing (2005, p.230). Mayaram adds by saying, "caste was never independent of the exercise of state power; the upward and downward mobility of castes were an outcome of political processes" (as quoted in Dube, 2008, p.129). Joyce Flueckiger noted that in Chattisgarhi fictive kin and ritual friendships are often established across caste lines, going beyond traditional caste and *jāti* distinctions (1999, p.45). My study of how non-Brahmins come to adopt *Bommai Golu* posits one's religious identity, traditionally inherited within a caste or family, can be learned in the social world through an active interaction between participant and community.

Another important point to consider is that both Pattu Mami and Aarti also choose to discard practices that they don't feel is relevant to modern times. While passing on

specialized knowledge from within an endagomous community, they are also experts who get to choose what habits they wish to translate and what they leave out. Aarti doesn't wear her nine-yard sari to set up her *Golu* display but still performs it while *madi*. Pattu Mami insisted that Brahmin women should wear nine-yard saris and keep *madi* during her workshops, but she did not hold Keerti to that same standard. Neither did the Trio, when they ignored the fact that Keerti was the only non-sari clad female in the *Golu paddathi* workshop of 2015. Why and in what contexts do these same Brahmin "ritual experts" choose to uphold their caste-specific knowledge, and how do they make choices about what to pass down to new comers? Furthermore, is this decision mediated by other factors such as political leanings, social upbringing, and economic class? Since the latter all involve individual choice or experience as well as one's belief. When thinking about how new communities are being organized in Mylapore as well as Sunnyvale, individual belief plays a major role in how migrants choose to represent their religious and social identities.

Caste is not the fundamental social organizing mechanism in either of these cities. Pattu Mami deliberately associates with Keerti and Aarti invited Sheila into her religious world. Both these encounters were made possible through the individual beliefs of Pattu Mami, Aarti, Keerti and Sheila which allowed them to gravitate towards to each other. We can translate the experiences of these non-traditional participants by looking closer at the language they use to describe the effects of *Bommai Golu* in their daily lives. Another meaning for the term *vishwas*, as used by Sheila, or *nambikai*, as used by Keerti is "trust." Both *vishwas* and *nambikai* can also imply placing trust upon something or someone else. As Keerti had used the term, she finally trusted herself when Pattu mami trusted her. Sheila's trust in herself grew out of her trust in Durga-Ma's "unexpecting ways." It is vital

to read the experiences of these new participants in the language they use. Trust and belief are both internal to their individual experiences, but it also conveys a dependence in or upon another's belief. Trust and belief needs reciprocation in order for true progress to be made. Keerti and Sheila had to first win the trust from insiders of the community of practitioners and then they were able to penetrate their local *Golu* scene.

Once, they started keeping *Golu* displays, Keerti and Sheila were able to access and weild more religious and social capital in their communities and families. *Bommai Golu* acted as a gateway ritual, paving the way for Keerti and Sheila to access other domestic Brahmin *pandigai* and habits. With Sheila, I noticed that many of her day-to-day *pandigai* also started to mimic Aarti's. Even though Aarti was one among her many *satsang* friends, who happened to also come from Delhi and Gujarat like her, Sheila preferred Aarti's ways of keeping rituals and maintaining festivals as she felt they brought her closer to Durga-Ma. In fitting in with the Bay Area Tamil and Hindu *Golu*-hoppers, Sheila had completely transformed many of the individual practices she has commenced with when she left Delhi ten years ago. Keerti marries into a Brahmin family and thus is a Brahmin in her marital household. Her previous identity, Maharashtrian and non-religious, has been transformed to a working Brahmin housholder in Mylapore. Through her interactions with Pattu Mami, she had gained the cultural capital and ritual vocabulary to fit-in with the wives in her neighborhood. Keerti also learned the accurate way to light lamps and how to dress the *nonbu mugam*.

Keerti's and Sheila's foray into Brahminhood is made possible because of *Bommai Golu*. What defines the traditional Brahmin *Bommai Golu* as caste-specific is not its emphasis on purity or its depiction of hierarchical social order or even its specialized ritual knowledge. What defines the traditional Brahmin context of *Bommai Golu* is the

inherited domestic materials and practices, preserved by a select group of families with a select professional heritage. What is appealing about *Bommai Golu* to non-Brahmins is that it is easily accessible, easy to learn, and allows participants to come in from a variety of levels of understanding.

Bommai Golu, as both women had identified, initially appeared secluded, daunting and restricted to Tamil Brahmins, just like all Brahmin festivals. *Bommai Golu*, however, offered an accessibility that no other festival did – the *Bommai* or the dolls provided a non-challenging avenue for both Keerti and Sheila to learn about Brahmin and Tamil ways of being and performing religion. Dolls are always meant to be purchased for *Bommai Golu*. Even if someone has a two hundered year old doll, they may not show it every year and they still have to buy more and keep adding to their *Golu* collection. Perhaps the two most important implicit rules of *Bommai Golu*, are that the display showcases dolls, and that a new doll must be purchased every year. In this way *Bommai Golu* is deliberately open-ended and allows for some inclusivity. It can also remain contemporary while at the same time archiving those materials within a life history. Keerti and Sheila's personal narratives are also now archived among the various *Golu* displays of the world. The creative and yet significant simplicity of the dolls beckoned to both women, allowing them to fully discover themselves and their religious beliefs via *Bommai Golu*.

Conclusion

This chapter describes new consumers to *Bommai Golu* who have not solely relied on public temple displays or media campaigns in order to learn about religious rituals. The visibility of this festival in various media is one reason for *Golu*'s adoption by non-

Brahmins in recent years but, as this chapter has shown, adoption of caste-specific rituals can be triggered by personal choices and beliefs and interactions with friends and neighbors. While many of the narratives in this dissertation describe *Bommai Golu* with the authority of the householder or participant who assembles the display, this chapter has been different, because it has showcased some self-proclaimed "non-traditional" *Bommai Golu* celebrations (implying non-Brahmin). Both Sheila and Keerti started keeping *Golu* for different reasons but ended up feeling transformed by the festival and its accompanying practices. Moreover, both of them had faith in something or rather, someone, surrounding the festival. This faith came from a trust in or a belief that this person improved things in their life. As we have seen, their Brahmin well-wishers are also placing their trust in these new participants, hoping they carry forth traditional *pandigai* into new communities. Everyone involved in this exchange benefits and receives tangible rewards for their material contributions.

These non-traditional participants still seem to have access to the broader Hindu religious framework in order to interpret their own beliefs. Unlike conversion from one religion to another that has been studied, the adoption of another's caste practices within the same religion has not be readily discussed. This has been due to the assumptions of the fixity of caste. There are a few scholars who claim that economic upward mobility is one serious factor in the lower castes adopting upper-caste religious practices (Natarajan, 2005; Allocco, 2009; Flueckiger, 2013; Ortegren, 2014). Some others have suggested that eradication of caste is a result of the contemporary homogenizing of Hinduism (Ramey, 2012; Kurien, 2008; Flueckiger, 2015). Adoption of Brahmin practices within the Hindu religion, as I have described in this chapter, goes along with the latter group of scholars who argue Hinduism is being Brahmin-ized through this process of homogenization.

Caste practices are as diverse as religious practices in India, so much so, that looking at one religious festival like *Navaratri* among the Brahmin doll-makers families versus the urban Brahmin doll purchasers yield different practices, rituals, and materiality.

Keerti has something at stake in adopting her husband's existing Brahmin identity. No one questions her caste when she is in the room with her in-laws or husband. Her *Bommai Golu* is a performance of her marital identity to her own family. In the diaspora, *Golu* participants appropriate values of rationalism, and pluralism to articulate and mediate their internal spiritual and religious beliefs. It was important for Sheila, as a working immigrant, to influence her domestic space with the material display of *Golu*. She conveyed many of her personal beliefs along with her marital migration by displaying her specific South-Asian American subjectivity in her enactment of *Bommai Golu*.

The non-traditional participants for *Bommai Golu* still depict equally playful doll displays. Creating and viewing *Golu* displays is part of the festival but also how Keerti and Sheila fit into their local community. For both, this kind of play yields tangible rewards and builds them social capital in their marital households. Sheila, who found *Golu* through the guidance of Durga-Ma, uses an abundance of brightly colored dolls in the absence of a traditional antique doll collection. Sheila adapted by buying new doll sets reflecting the trends of the contemporary doll markets as well as Tamil identity. She at once displays her identity as South-Asian American as well as a contemporary notion of prosperity. Her brightly colored dolls, made of plastic and resin, fill the length and breadth of her *Golu*, displaying the blessings bestowed by Durga upon her.

It is yet to be seen if Keerti and Sheila pass on their traditions or dolls and what aspects of their religious life they will leave out for their children. Even so, as non-traditional participants decide to try out a Brahmin *pandigai*, the label Brahmin is also

being reworked among those who uphold that caste identity. Caste is not fixed, and neither is it completely inherited within a genetic family. This chapter has attempted to show that migration leads individuals to construct and revise their natal identitites. In the absence of traditional social organization patterns, both Keerti and Sheila came out of their comfort zones to form new communities. Pattu Mami and Aarti also show us the ways in which caste-specific habits are revised and shared. They are able to exercise their own discretion as "ritual experts" and provide access to whomever they choose. Traditional Brahmin social and religious networks are thus interdependent with these non-traditional participants and their networks. Caste is lived as a social interdepence and the trust that is fostered between the two women acts as a binder, linking together the members of this new community of *Golu* practitioners. A festival like *Bommai Golu*, which displays the playfulness of identity, is perfectly situated for organic adoption. The dolls invite conversation and the lack of detailed prescriptions to the display allow ritual practice to be accessible.

One can read *Bommai Golu* as showcasing the ways in which *Golu* participants construct their communal identity vis-à-vis their individual or family's life histories. In the second chapter this identity was inherited and passed down in the form of material wealth, teachings and memories. In this chapter, in the absence of inherited caste-based materials and memories, new *Golu* participants relied on experts and their own belief to guide them towards their social and religious identity. In the next chapter, I will be introducing an organization that uses their identity as a commodity. The Trio perform their Brahmin identity but label it as Hindu to suit the politics of the contemporary Tamil landscape. The Tamil Brahmin philathropists who adopted them give authority and

context to their identity, but also fashion their stance towards modernity and the role *Bommai Golu* will play in motivating Hindu religious participation.

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CHAPTER FOUR

BOMMAI GOLU AS A PRESERVED TRADITION BY THE MYLAPORE TRIO

In this chapter, I trace how *Bommai Golu* has entered the public sphere. In 1991, two brothers and their sister, popularly called the 'Mylapore Trio,' (henceforth called the Trio) received media coverage in Chennai Times for their five-room domestic *Golu* display. In 1992, the Trio were the first invited judges for a local *Golu* competition held by the *Mylapore Times*, a fortnightly newspaper. During one of their judging sessions, S. Aparna, the sister in the group, observed that several *Golu* displays showcased popular culture, movies, and non-religious themes. The Trio then expressed that the modern performances of this festival didn't compare to their memories of *Bommai Golu* because they had strayed far from religion. Moreover, they felt that many pre-modern concerns of elitism or caste biases still pervaded much of urban Chennai religious ritual and cultural life. To solve this, the Trio wished to bring back an authentic performance of religious rituals from antiquity as a public service, to prevent the dilution of cultural knowledge and to make religious practices accessible across all Hindu castes and classes. I argue that the Trio treat their identity as a commodity in the marketplace of Mylapore, their Brahmin roots and cultural upbringing grounding their authority for their role as preservers of a traditional domestic festival in a rapidly modernizing landscape. For their cause, the Trio host *Bommai Golu* in new spaces, grander in scale than previously experienced, attempting to generate a public face for this traditionally domestic festival arrangement of dolls.

Who are the Mylapore Trio?

S. Amarnath, the oldest member of the Trio, is a history professor at Madras University. S. Surendranath, the middle of the three siblings, was a dance teacher with the Kalakshetra academy, who today runs an advertising agency. S. Aparna, the youngest of the three and female, is an advisor to the Indian government's treasury department via the ICICI Bank of Chennai, managing portfolios for the central government as well as doing basic accounting for her suburban organization. Each member of the Trio has different professional associations which have allowed this organization to have contacts and well-wishers in many sections of Mylaporean 'high society' including celebrities, artisans and politicians. In 2003, the Trio formed the Sri Sumukhi Rajasekharan Memorial Foundation (hereafter SSRMF), set up to provide cultural services to the broader public. The SSRMF is renowned for "Kalapoksham," an event to recruit new students of all castes and economic classes who wish to learn Indian classical arts. Between 2003-2006, the Trio's comments about religion were restricted to public statements they issued while judging household *Golu* competitions. In 2006, the Trio decide to take center stage and make *Bommai Golu* public, combining their ritual pedagogical efforts with their cultural charitable services. Since then, during each calendar year, they host two workshops: one meant to teach about all religious (Hindu) practices called *puja vidhanam* (the methods of worship/prayer); and the second meant to revive *Golu* among the public, called *Navaratri Golu paddhathi* (procedures of keeping *Golu* for *Navaratri*). Their *Navaratri* workshop is still held within their home, the week before *Bommai Golu* begins, since it holds their five-room *Golu* on display. Their *puja vidhanam* workshop must constantly shift venues to accommodate its growing number of attendees.

Sumukhi and Rajasekharan, a Brahmin couple in Mylapore, circa 1950's first adopted Patti Nagammal, who is the Trio's grandmother, her two daughters and their children. Nagammal Patti was "unable to afford their care" as she was widowed quite young and abandoned by her wealthy family due to "problems," Amarnath, the oldest of the Trio, told me. At that time, Sumukhi and Rajasekharan were raising "many such families without caste or creed," and training them in religious rituals, classical music and dance. They were a "noble force" of philanthropy against caste prejudices in a developing, post-independent Indian society.

Rajasekharan was the son of C. Srinivasa Iyer, a Magistrate in Chittor, originally from Kanchipuram in the North Arcot District of Tamilnadu. In his youth, he often defied the British systems of governance, eand ven his own father and family. In one of his rebellious acts he was claimed by C. Gopalachari or "Rajaji" and joined the freedom struggle. At the age of fourteen, Rajasekharan lost his father and was entrusted the responsibility of raising his three siblings. He didn't agree with his extended Brahmin family and their professional habits or their orthodoxy. Rajasekharan also didn't believe in the double M.A. British education his family had given him. Instead, he moved to Madraspattinam (Chennai's name at the time) and became a Personal Assistant to Allagappa Chettiar and Bhramananda Reddy, prominent philanthropists and businessmen in south India. Gathering a large amount of capital through this work, he bought and became the owner of Vindhya Publications, a publishing house for "value-based" textbooks in local schools and colleges in South India.

In his life time, Rajasekharan gathered far more wealth than his own orthodox Brahmin family, and according to his patrons, proceeded to keep none for himself. He was always found performing charitable services in the name of eradicating caste and

alleviating economic distress. Sumukhi, his young wife, was really his equal in many ways, Amarnath noted, and also his "better-half." She was also a young freedom fighter and later became headmistress to the local Mylaporean school called Lady's Sivaswami Iyer Academy. Very well-known in Mylapore as philanthropists, Sumukhi and Rajasekharan are remembered for their individual efforts and donations to nurturing social and religious causes in this community.

Since the Trio were adopted by iyer Tamil Brahmins, they encountered an orthodox upbringing, performing several habits and rituals only prevalent within that endogamous community. The Trio's love for religion and ritual was born from those experiences. However, they represent Sumukhi and Rajasekharan as a couple who were not elitist or prejudiced by their caste habits. Instead the Trio argued that Sumukhi and Rajasekharan only wished to teach what they knew to the young children whom they adopted. They were like Brahmins in their ritual habits but unlike them in their biases (according to the Trio). Through their personal experiences with Sumukhi and Rajasekharan, the Trio bring to the public (via media, presentations, and workshops) conversations surrounding religion, caste, and classical artistic traditions, translating them for their modern audiences with the authority of tradition and orthodoxy. They not only share a deep love for history and culture, they are also trained in various diverse industries that makes them capable of taking on the duties of the company they run funded by the SSRMF. Amarnath serves as a spokesperson, utilizing his scholarly expertise in Indian history. The second brother, Surendranath, serves as the President of SSRMF, the artistic director who has skills in marketing and advertising. Finally, their sister Aparna serves as a treasurer, prioritizing fund-raising and dissemination of their vast resources among a diverse audience of needy charities and causes.

Their connections with Sumukhi and Rajasekharan is reflected in their *Golu* which appears much like the traditional Brahmin participants we discussed in chapter two – extensive antique and doll collections, their knowledge of rituals from antiquity, and their professional associations to patrons of Indian classical art forms. Their portrayal of Tamilians and Hindus as not concerned about caste identity is much like those in chapter three – represented in their hybrid upbringing, emerging from the philosophical outlook of their freedom fighter adopted parents. Their approach is thus, two-fold – they reify and promote certain orthodox practices (from their traditional upbringing) but do so in the name of democratizing religious practice (towards their own hybrid identity). Uniquely situated they can speak the words and represent the tastes of both the Brahmin elites and those seeking modern religious knowledge. In this way, the Trio is central to understanding how *Bommai Golu* continues to survive as a public festival. They attempt to suture the ruptures between caste, class and religious identity using their personal narrative as a framework for healing differences among its modern audience.

Forming a Sacred Mission

In 1991, the Trio had not yet formed SSRMF and the two brothers and their sister were a group of individuals enthusiastically speaking about their religious beliefs and practices. Converting the first five rooms of the Sumukhi-Rajasekharan residence into a museum of dolls and dioramas showing different mythological and religious narratives, the Trio slowly invited journalists and local residents into their home to talk about *Golu*. Since then, the Trio have spearheaded a city-wide public movement to inspire and educate the masses about religious rituals. The Trio started visiting domestic *Golu* and commenting in local fortnightly newspapers (like *Mylapore Times*, *Adyar Times*, and

Kutcheri Buzz) about proper rules and etiquette during *Golu*. In 2003, around the same time they founded SSRMF, the Trio started holding workshops and small lectures where they spoke about *Bommai Golu* and religious rituals. Since then, they have started organizing and hosting their own *Golu* competitions and are judges or guest speakers for public events where *Golu* are contested or displayed.

In 2009, almost two decades later, they were invited to keep *Golu* in a temple space, the first of its kind in Mylapore, at the Kapaleeshwarar temple. The following year, the Trio repeated the same display, an eight-sided *Golu* (*ashtadikku*), this time at the Parathasarathi temple in Triplicane. This was the first year I met them, when I came to Chennai in search of a local doll painter and to investigate the local *Golu* scene. Several years later, as a Ph.D. candidate doing fieldwork, I sat down with them one evening after the 2015 *Golu paddhati* workshop, to discuss their family's past, their upbringing and their earliest memories of *Golu*. During our conversations I learnt about their family's history, about their memories of Mylapore's history and their religious beliefs. I also heard about their professional and spiritual aspirations, recognizing how they had started to interweave organically, one informing the other.

In the following section, I discuss how the Trio's religious identity was "sculpted" in the home, a term Amarnath used to describe the positive elements of his upbringing in the Sumukhi-Rajasekharan residence. I will also analyze how the Trio's workshop and public messages convey a specific stance around modernity and religion, reflected in the aesthetic and material appearances displayed during religious celebrations. *Bommai Golu*, provides the Trio an ideal podium to honor as well as market their Brahmin roots to the public, while also allowing them to challenge some contemporary values in the religious ritual space in order to reform practices they find unsuitable to *Bommai Golu*.

Dressing the Part

In my very first interaction with them, the Trio emphasized their opinions on femininity, modernity and ritual, using the example of how clothing shows one's piety. I had heard about the group called Trio in the house of one of my fieldwork contacts Lalitha, in 2011, during a conversation with her mother-in-law Vathsala who was also a member of the Mylapore Ladies Club. In a conversation about a neighbor's choice of wearing leggings and a shorter *salwar-kurta*, Vathsala had remarked to me that this was hardly appropriate clothing for a teenage girl, implying it accentuated her bust and hips. Moreover, she had remarked to me about the efforts of the 'Mylapore Trio' in a recent lecture where they had taught women how to wear saris and encouraged local young women to dress up in saris on ordinary days instead of western or "north-Indian" clothes.

A few days later, I decided to call the Trio, after researching their workshops and public messages in the local newspaper *Mylapore Times*. Amarnath picked up my phone after five rings and responded in a hurried tone to my request for a meeting: "What to do, this is a very busy time in the year for us." he remarked in English. "If you wish, you can join us at the Parthasarathi Kovil this evening at 8pm where we have created an eight-dimensional *Golu* display". Even though the temple was located in Triplicane, and it was later in the evening, I had decided to go out that night. I asked my mother to join me and we set off at 6pm to the temple; I had remembered to wear a sari.

When I arrived at the temple, a bright-eyed man, whom I recognized from pictures as Amarnath, stopped the reporters for a moment, so I could introduce myself. He immediately smiled remarking, "How wonderful that young girls like you living in the US are wearing the traditional sari." Amarnath was pleased with my clothing and invited me to join his brother and sister for a more detailed discussion. In one of the first workshops

I attended in 2012, I witnessed first-hand the efforts taken by the Trio to teach young girls how to wear the nine-yard (*madisar*) sari, traditionally worn by married Brahmin women in south India (Figure 5). The clothing worn by visitors and the organizers during their events always stand out vividly. Every woman wears a sari (mostly silk; Ta: *paṭṭu*) and the two male attendees who are Amarnath and his brother Surendranath wear raw silk *kurtas* with *veshti*s (male one cloth sarong; Ta: *veṭṭi*). Many years later too, every time I meet Amarnath, he always remarks with pride and happiness that he enjoys seeing me wear saris. He even recognizes when I wear more traditional *pattu* saris over my usual cotton ones for everyday wear, implying I had taken care to dress well for a festival day.

Figure 5. Puja vidhanam workshop

Towards the end of every *Golu* or *puja* workshop conducted by the Trio, Aparna took a few minutes to talk about attire on festival days. Among the many rules provided by the Trio on how to perform rituals, clothing mattered, and featured prominently on their list of conduct for *pandigai*s. As the event drew to a close, Aparna emphasizes the

importance of dressing in a nine-yard sari while inviting visitors home and making savory and sweet offerings. Not just for women, the Trio also hold workshops where young boys are trained to wear the six-yard *veshti* for ritual days called *panchagajam*. Aparna also adds that "you can invite anyone, make sure to invite people from all over the country and the world." The emphasis was upon making *Golu* visible as *namba* (our) festival to a larger community. *Namba* is used in Tamil colloquially to imply "of one's own" or "native." Finally, Surendranath mentioned the prerequisites for a *tambulam* while Aparna added that this "return gift" must be given to your guests, without fail, to honor the guests. It signaled to me how important it was to 'dress the part', according to the Trio, during festival days while honoring guests to one's *Golu*.

In dressing the part, the Trio conveyed that performing some religious rituals well and wearing *madisar* saris (which are a specifically Brahmin style, discussed below) makes you a better Hindu in the public urban space. Minna Saavala identifies that "firstly, the idea of the West is very closely tied to dressing and secondly, dressing is a question of beauty but most of all, of morality" (2010, p.126). Saavala identified this among middle-class Hyderabadi women and applies well to Chennai too. The Trio's emphasis on dressing like a householder, in a sari, also voices similar concerns of modesty and traditional appearances. Dressing the part, displays piety in the public sphere and religiosity, a stance towards modernity.

It should be noted that most attendees to the workshops of the Mylapore Trio are middle-class. Saavala notes that religion gets appropriated in middle-class contexts to display superiority. "Middle-classes manifest modernity and, simultaneously, they seem to be engaged in many movements and practices, including religious rituals, that could be labelled traditionalist, meaning that they are based on a conscious construction of cultural

difference" (2010, p.153). Saavala also postulates that the key dichotomy lies between differentiating and belonging, both vital to the urban middle-class' religious sentiments. They engage local and global discourses about identity, representation, and class-based consumption. The workshop hosted by the Trio is an example of such phenomena.

When Aparna said that wearing a *madisar* or *panchagajam* is the proper etiquette of a host, she also mentioned that it was *namba* or "our" festival. This particular statement led me to recognize that dressing the part is linked to piety as well as caste-identity. Even if it were unconscious, the efforts made by the Trio to make Brahmin ritual and dressing habits seem commonplace and normative or Hindu cannot be ignored. Traditional attire denotes morality as well as caste identity, another vital identity marker that seemed to be fading in usage among contemporary keepers of *Golu*. The Trio, in their public performances, did not identify *Bommai Golu* as a Brahmin festival and neither did they identify the *madisar*s or *panchagajam*s as a symbol of a Brahmin married woman or man. Instead, they declared both as indicators of traditional Hindu and Indian religious identity.

Sculpting a Religious Identity

The Trio were brought up in a home where religion was central, if not the only means of leisurely engagement. Their home was run like an institution or mission where many destitute families or children were brought together from diverse backgrounds and uniformly raised under the broad basis of Hinduism. The day was broadly structured around meal times, but involved lots of learning, arts, and play. A typical day, as described to me, involved a bath and breakfast with fresh cow's milk at seven, followed by learning music or dance, then lunch around eleven thirty, and a brief play or nap period of a few

hours. During the evenings, time was reserved for lectures, stories, learning about religious texts, visitors, or more dance and music lessons, concluding with dinner at eight and another cup of cow's milk from their home farm and bed by nine thirty. Every day was spent remembering, learning and practicing those activities that were related to god, mythological texts, and rituals. *Pandigai*s, that would be usually spent in a domestic context in a Brahmin home, were spent as grand festivals, involving all the children and families who lived with the SSRMF. During those times, the Trio and their many siblings in the residence would create or build and host grand temple processions, rituals, and *puja*s right in their living room.

Amarnath recounts,

> Just like in the temple, we used to make them [the deity's chariots (*vāhanam*s)] with whatever resources we had [at home]… we would take a cow (*pasumādū*) and insert grass and call it *rishbhavāhanam*… this is how we were brought up, so all our mind, word, thought, deed, everything went into the religious, spiritual thing… all the children will come, we will have feasts, twice a day. Immediately after that we would have Annual Day. We two [implying Amarnath and Surendranath] used to choreograph dance dramas and teach and act in our own dance dramas, in our own style.

The Trio claim to have had a happy childhood, owing the joy and happiness they received to their daily activities. "Appa never allowed us to play outside," said Surendranath.[47] Instead, the children were encouraged to be at home and learn the habits of keeping religious rituals. In the Trio's narration of their memories, religion pervaded their entire domestic life, especially how they spent their leisure time. For play, the young

[47] The Trio called Sumukhi and Rajasekharan as "Amma" and "Appa" (which means mother and father in Tamil) even though they were their foster grandparents. They never said anything about their birth mother or mothers or if there were cousins or brothers in all our conversations. They never spoke of their birth father/s either. They reiterated that they were siblings raised by Sumukhi and Rajasekharan.

Trio imitated rituals and practices conducted in their local neighborhood temple. The *rishbhavahanam* is a celebratory procession which takes place in the Kapaleeshwarar temple. The vehicle or *vahanam* for the procession of Shiva is created, painted and adorned in the temple itself by skilled artisans. Households usually don't make the *vahanam*. These rituals were and still are relegated to temples. The Trio, however, spent their play time mimicking *utsava* rituals from the temple within their home, arguing for the importance of children spending their free time in religious devotion.

The household was filled with children and run like a school. Instead of classes, however, children spent their time learning through practical engagement in household tasks, or in the Trio's case, religious rituals. They were not allowed to play outside and Amarnath even lamented not being able to go biking with his friends from the neighborhood. Sumukhi and Rajasekharan lived close to both the Kapaleeshwarar temple and the Parthasarathi temple. In lieu of typical childhood leisurely activities, added Amarnath, such as TVs or cycling, this is how the children spent their time – "not shopping or even going to beach… going to temple was a big thing". In this way, the children in the household adhered to a strict routine that involved self-discipline and yet encompassed the joys of learning about Hindu religion and ritual. Amaranth explains that,

> As young children, we were never allowed outside the house to play *gilli* or cricket, or *pandiya*, we were made to do everything inside the house. That's how our mind was trained, sculpted, otherwise you won't get such things, [implying religious values] in one year or one decade. Right from our [sic.] childhood you have to sculpted in such a way…

The Trio believe that their childhood is exemplary to others in modern times. They lament and feel saddened by the ways in which children today are taught about "western

culture" or media/ cartoon characters, rather than being taught about Indian culture or religion. Surendranath said, "there is so much here [implying within Indian culture] that can provide hours of entertainment." Childhood is an important time to inculcate religious values, in their eyes, and thus many of their workshops and charitable efforts for SSRMF are directed towards the youth (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Mylapore Trip with Lady Shivaswami Iyer Girls School Students

The Trio are accurate in identifying that they have a "sacred mission" to the extent that people need to be educated and taught about religious rituals and their meanings in modern contexts. I see their childhood experiences as similar to those of priests and nuns in the Catholic tradition. Rebecca Lester, in her ethnography on a Central Mexican Catholic church, discusses how that institution employs a pedagogy wherein certain bodily practices contribute to the formation of a self with an "alternative sense of knowing" vital to the embodiment of religion within a Catholic nun. The institution, in the face of modernity and competing realms of employment, also treats their practices as

a "religious vocation" to recruit entrants. (Lester, 2005, pp.20-21). Lester uses both Talal Asad and Michel Foucault to speak of how subjects are formed within religious settings and secular institutions. Disciplinary techniques and ascetic practices can be ways to form individual subjects within the Catholic church, to serve the goals of their larger institution. Moreover, since modernity itself poses the problem of dissuading youth from joining the mission, re-naming their cause as a "religious vocation" proved vital to the entrants viewing their role in society in relation to the larger institution's mission. I would argue that by intentionally avoiding contemporary leisurely practices (such as biking, and playing outside with their peers), the Trio also underwent a specific technique of subject formation, one that was encouraged within the household run by Sumukhi and Rajasekharan. Their childhood experiences did not include ascetic practices but did require discipline – some habits were disallowed while others were cultivated. Expressing devotion through rituals was emphasized.

The Trio also nurtured an "alternative sense of knowing" through their engagement with ritual practices which would have only been performed by Brahmin priests or ritual experts from their tradition. Mimicking temple processions in their home, they were involved in most aspects of adorning the deities, his throne, and carrying it around while other children recited or sang songs of praise to the gods. Take for example, how Amarnath and Aparna describe the process of making the swing decoration for Krishna during the festival of *Krishna Jayanthi*.

> Krishna's cradle took forever, the cradle would never hang easily, in the *mandapam* (four pillar open altar for rituals but in this case a *puja* or miniature *mandapam*), it would sway to the right and left… without eating or sleeping making sure it was assembled, to make sure it stands. Nowadays you can find swings (*jhūlas*) ready-made, but in those days, we used to hand-make-them, we used to use a bobby tiffin box, tire string,

> and make a *jhūla*, and those are our creative ideas, in those days it was rare to see such people. [Aparna adds] Today you can buy it in Giri [a Mylapore shop for ritual products], it is so simple you can make it at home, they [implying people] don't know. They are not exposed to that.

The skills and bodily techniques (making and hanging the swing) were shared through practice and took time to acquire and learn. Aparna's comment "it was rare to see such people" was meant to be about the Trio. In saying so, she glorifies them and also reflects how utilizing one's skills and body tirelessly (not sleeping or eating), to create the *puja* space for Krishna, reflects truer or more meaningful devotion. Aparna contradicts Amarnath's claim that it would take forever to hang the cradle by saying that it is, however, easier than purchasing it at the store. She is making a statement about the importance of making these ritual objects at home as opposed to consuming them as readily available goods.

The Trio see their work in the world and describe it in ways similar to Lester's assertions. Lester had noted that, in the face of competing employment, "vocation" served as a better term to describe the ongoing spiritual contributions enacted by young Catholic postulates in the Mexican Church. In a recent interview conducted by Scroll.in, the Trio described their acceptance of their disciplined home environment. "Our mother never taught us how to ride cycles, fearing that we would waste our time and lose interest in academics and arts," said Amarnath. "Today, I proudly tell people that I cannot ride a cycle. If I had learnt it, I wouldn't be where I am today" (Govindarajan [12/06/2017]). Their identity is not defined by their roles in the public and private sector during the day, but with their contributions to their community in the evening.

Amarnath describes, "We used to cry, Amma, take us to the temple, at eight or twelve at night, because she inculcated values in such a way… *ūti ūti valakarudhu*…

(spoon-fed)" Amarnath's declares that "spoon-feeding" religion, is as important as ffeeding with ood, an important, positive and core traditional function of the domestic space. Amma or the mother, as Amarnath fondly calls his step grand-mother, had the responsibility of teaching her children about religious values. Many Indians in Amarnath's age-group are vocal of their dissent towards the idealization of religious Hindu identity, aware of the gender, caste and class discriminations practiced in traditional societies. Amarnath's use of the phrase "*uti-uti valakaradhu*" (literally hand-feeding and raising an offspring), however, echoed a nostalgia for the traditional ways in which inculcation of religion began at home.

Mylapore Trio's *Golu*

The Trio spend their *Navaratri* season in recent times being spokespersons for Hindu religion and its rituals in various urban cities around Tamilnadu. Since their popularity has grown over the years, they are now no longer available to judge local Mylapore competitions and spend their *Navaratri* season in various famous temples. In 2017 they set up an elaborate display in Srirangam near Tiruchirappalli while also hosting a two-hour lecture on the subject (Figure 7). The job of keeping temple *Golu* for the Trio begins around three months before the festival. They spend hours debating which narrative and which scene to depict. As Amarnath told me, the ambience of the temple is "sacred" and because of that they have to proceed with great care and caution to depict the deities and their stories in the right way. They also realize the magnitude and the number of devotees who come to visit their temple displays and accordingly feel morally obligated to tell the narrative accurately.

Figure 7. Temple Golu in Srirangam created by The Trio

Their domestic *Golu* is much larger than most, but nowadays they only make small changes to their domestic five-room *Golu*, sparing their creativity for those temple *Golu*. In the five years that I have seen their domestic *Golu* display, little has changed except for the front *kolam* and floral or decorative pieces that get added on in the act of worship or lighting the lamp for the *Golu*. Even so, the Trio's domestic *Golu* is distinct for three reasons. Firstly, most domestic *Golu* cannot physically span so many rooms because of lack of available space. Secondly, the Trio's *Golu* space has pictures of Sumukhi, Rajasekharan and Nagammal Patti displayed upon the middle step in two different rooms (Figure 8). It is uncommon to see pictures of dead relatives upon a *Golu* shelves. Gurus or important Indian leaders may be depicted, and caricatures of famous actors may be represented as dolls in dioramas upon the floor or sides of *Golu*, but human ancestors and their images have not been noted in displays. For example, recently a doll of the late

AIADMK party leader Jayalalitha was released after her death in 2017. Indira Gandhi (former Prime Minister) and Kapil Dev (famous cricketer) dolls have also been purchased and displayed in the past by participants. However, I have not seen pictures of late ancestors or family members displayed within the *Golu*, especially on the tiers which are usually reserved for deities, mythological characters and legends.

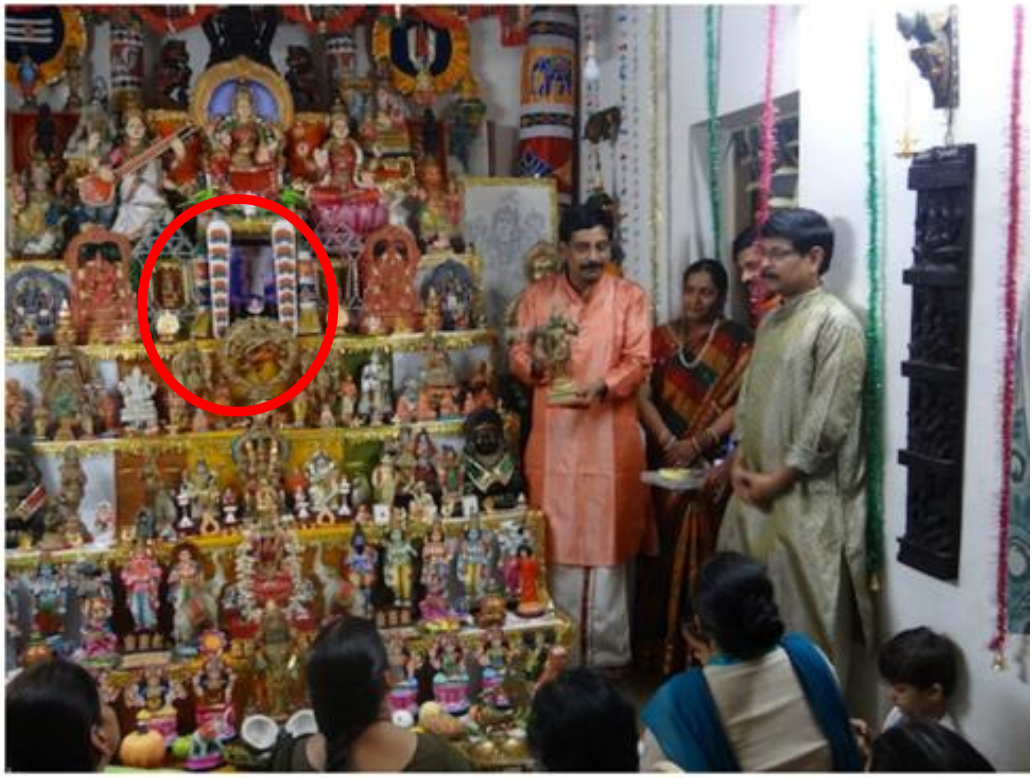

Figure 8. The Trio's domestic Golu featuring their ancestors

The third most important way in which domestic *Bommai Golu* is different in the Trio's home is because both men and women get involved in this festival. Surendranath and Amarnath have shown an active interest in participating and promoting Brahmin women's *pandigai* in their workshops. Amarnath emphasizes what his adopted grandmother told the brothers about participating in women's *pandigai*,

> Amma used to say, there are some people who will say this festival is only for women, or this for men, such things, its nothing like that, you also

> take part, whether it is a ladies' *puja*, you try to know what it is, then only you will do for your child or ask your wife to do it… then only the generations will pass it on. Something somewhere is dead. Even you have a sister, she must do and you must also do [it]…There is no male or female concept there. We [the boys of the household] were equally treated and given importance in the *puja*. When you utter the word *Navaratri* … [people say] it is only for women, that's the words or first statement… So any men in any house you interview, he will say that is "ladies *pūjai;* we don't have anything to do there." … There is a first-hand that is put, he is doing the *puliyar cuyi* [first task], you pray for Ganesha [implying men perform Ganesha *puja*], so husband is the one, he is the one who is packing it [the dolls], and he is the one who is putting it up [the deities]… so there is an involvement. It is a family function, or *puja* I would say.

The emphasis on a family's involvement is true, and men do get involved in the setting up or assembling of the steps for *Bommai Golu*. It is very rare, however, to see men perform *nonbu* or actual rituals pertaining to *Bommai Golu*. As an exception, Ute Hüsken has observed one family in Kanchipuram where the husband keeps the *Golu* from recycled and up-cycled waste (Bornet & Burger, 2012, p.192). And men and women keep *Bommai Golu* in the Trio's household. Men actually set up and assemble most *pandigai*s in their home which in other Brahmin homes would be a task reserved for women. Their innovation is most prominent in the case of *Varalakshmi Nonbu*, which is widely seen as a woman's ritual, performed by married women for their husbands. Amarnath speaks about his inherited *nonbu mukham* in a non-traditional way.

> Appa died in 1979, Amma said, *kozhandel* ah, you do the *nonbu, varalakshmi nonbu,* the *shashtrigal* (priest) would come home, we would do all the *alankāram*, Amma would do the *puja*, and then we would go play jollily [sic.]! After Appa was gone, what do we do with the *mugam*? Amma, we will do it, [they said] and till today we do it…

In more ways than one, the Trio have reformed the practice of *Bommai Golu*. While they do perform Brahmin orthodox *pandigai*, they have added a unique personal touch,

inspired by their very particular upbringing in an institutional home setting. The Trio's identity, much like the rest of the participants I discuss in other chapters, is represented through their *Golu* materials. Many of their dolls are over three feet tall and painted with organic dyes. Since their domestic *Golu* is technically part of the SSRMF they have received several donations, over the years, from Mylapore families who wanted to get rid of their large dolls. Apart from these, Sumukhi and Rajasekahran were also collectors of antique dolls, materials, and ritual objects over the years. Their *Golu* is a museum of Mylaporean cultural and religious history. Their veneration of their ancestors upon the middle step of their main *Golu* also makes a statement about the status of Sumukhi and Rajasekharan, placing them upon a pedestal for their life's achievements. They are also including their ancestors among those cultural and religious artifacts offered by Mylapore to the larger community.

Memorializing Tradition – Nostalgia and Authority

The Trio's outlook about *Golu* is unique. They believe that *Golu* is dying because participants have misunderstood the religious nature of the festival or do not follow the appropriate "guidelines" that dictate proper arrangement, appropriate diorama displays, and finally storage of dolls. They not only feel it has become degraded (implying corrupted from its pure "divine" roots), they also wish to reform the practice of *Bommai Golu*. Nadia Seremetakis has argued in "The Eye of the Other" about how locals experience and see their own culture as a result of colonial and post-colonial transformations.

She writes,

> This [referring to the colonial and post-colonial internalized experience) can result in a newly constructed archaicization of recent and unreconcilable experiences, practices, and narratives. Particular and now

> idiosyncratic cultural experiences are described as having long disappeared, as lost, when in fact they are quite recent and their memory sharp. As one moves deeper into the conversation with people, their intimacy with these distant practices comes out as fairy tales, anecdotes, folklore, and myth…The discourse on loss is an element of public culture, an official ideological stance taken towards the past that aligns the speaker with the normative view of the present, i.e., modern times (Seremetakis, 1984, p.9).

The Trio's nostalgia for revivifying Mylapore echoes Seremetakis' argument. *Bommai Golu* may have been a Brahmin *pandigai*, but in this modern landscape of Chennai, many experiences that once were have disappeared. The marketplaces remain the same, but their wares are different. Some homes remain the same, but the neighbors have changed. Brahmins are no longer the sole caste in the landscape of Mylapore, which is today filled with many more castes. The migration (local and global) of Mylapore residents has also brought with it a change in the ambience, transforming who keeps *Golu* and how it can be kept. Furthermore, as Serementakis states, the discourse of loss is an element of public culture, and thus the Trio see themselves as vital "cultural ambassadors."

Modernity has led to the flourishing of hybrid caste identities, due to non-local marriages, urban and global migration and overall less of a reliance on endogamous systems of kinship organizations. So, systems of knowledge production and distribution (such as those involved in disseminating traditional rituals) have in turn undergone a major shift. Many modern Hindus don't have traditional avenues to learn about their religious beliefs, theology, and ritual practices. Moreover, the systems that pre-modern Indian society had to maintain tradition– those in authority (the Brahmins, the elders, the professional specialists) providing direction on how to perform rituals, why they were

important, and how to innovate in the face of challenges— don't fit within a modern discourse that promotes egalitarian access to knowledge systems over hierarchies.

New leaders preaching the meaning of religious practices and beliefs to an unaware audience, is not a new phenomenon. Historically, saints and religious leaders have stood up to fulfill the role of teacher or *guru*, revolutionizing practices and providing religious authority, commentary, and explanations to theological beliefs. Adi Shankara in the eighth century, *bhakti* saints in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and Shirdi Saibaba of the late nineteenth century are all examples of the variety of authority figures produced within a religious tradition to explain how to negotiate traditional beliefs within their contemporary milieu. In recent times, gurus like Sri Sri Ravishankar and 'the Hugging Saint' are examples of the interactions between traditional theology in the face of innovative circumstances and landscapes. "The global *guru*s who emerge from Indic Hindu traditions are highly adaptive religious leaders who tailor their messages to particular times, circumstances, and populations" (Lucia, 2014, p.221). The Trio are no *guru*s, but they attempt to work like them. With the lack of traditional authoritative figures, "ritual experts," as we saw in chapter three, step in to play the role of community elders who distribute information regarding such matters. Keerti and Sheila are also indicative of new audiences who are hungry for accurate avenues to learn about traditional practices and their meanings.

The Trio's specific relationship to modernity and the means they employ to cope with the change they see happening within their cultural landscape is what is of relevance here. From their perspective, the cultural capital accumulated by particular *puja* methods, and *Golu* practices cannot and must not be retained in one community of practitioners, but must be accessible to the rest of the Hindu population. They don't see

ritual and practice as restricted to one community of practitioners. Rather, they hope that all *puja* is available to everyone for equal selection in the marketplace of religion. Creation of a home where ritual and religion are taught as part and parcel of life is their sole "sacred mission" and aim for Mylaporean society today.

The Trio's adopted Brahmin identity, while it informs the practices they teach, serve as cultural capital, and gives authority to their workshops and lectures. The Trio are not ashamed of their traditional Brahmin past and they have found a way to translate the nostalgia of their caste-based religious upbringing to the modern audience. The Trio are right in observing that many today are unaware of traditional ritual practice but maybe interested to learn more. The phenomenon provides a niche market for the Trio and their skills. The Trio is an organization or company, even though it functions much like an informal group or club. They are foremost a philanthropic organization, hoping to reform problems in society such as caste-discrimination, poverty, and access to education. The Trio's role is, first, public campaigning for funding for charitable services in the arts, and second, bringing together like-minded religious individuals to facilitate religious learning. In this way, the Trio is not necessarily concerned with bringing together *Golu*-lovers to learn about the method of keeping *puja*. Instead, they try to market their own identities via their nostalgia for a forgotten past, a promotional pitch for their organization's philanthropic identity.

When the Trio's messages are about religious pluralism but the practices that they are sharing are Brahmin and orthodox, what should such a service be called? The late MSS Pandian writes that when popular Brahmin writers in the early nineteenth century wrote for modern audiences they often couched their privilege, orthodoxy, and habits in modernity. Pandian says, "annexing their caste" and calling it culture is precisely the error

of writers like R.K. Narayanan and Sivaswami Iyer (the founder of the school that Sumukhi ran throughout her lifetime) (2002, p.1735). In other words, Pandian asks us to be wary of the message of culture when caste is eliminated from it, as it may thus "hide" the biases in one's behaviors. More insidiously, however, with or without the intention of the Trio, Pandian's observations are also true to this *Golu* landscape. Participants like the Trio, who seek to preserve their traditional rituals are eliminating caste labels and replacing it with the language of culture in the public sphere.

In this chapter, I discussed how the Trio, adopted by a wealthy Brahmin family, have started to shape the public culture in Mylapore through their efforts to preserve *Bommai Golu*. Their nostalgia for their cultural heritage is amplified by their "sacred mission" – to revivify and reform the religious rituals celebrated in their hometown. The Trio rigidify the festival of *Bommai Golu* even though they argue for its inclusivity and openness. To them, *Golu* is highly structured and is a pedagogical platform for Hinduism. Today, the Trio have succeeded in increasing and innovating the scale and grandeur of *Bommai Golu* in Mylapore, even including *Golu* in local temples across the state. These temple *Golu* are less playful than domestic *Golu* because of the spaces where they are kept. As Amarnath asserts, temples are considered "sacred" and so the story must be conveyed accurately. In doing so, however, the narrative that is depicted is gentrified and homogenized to suit contemporary public audiences.

The Trio step forward where other Brahmin women do not, into the public sphere, prescribing and upholding the rituals of their cultural past. As a group, of two men and one woman, they have a created a niche for themselves in a female domestic *Golu* landscape. Their Brahmin identity fulfills the expectations of the middle-class workshop attendees who come seeking their wisdom and authority. The Trio are Brahminizing the

public religious sphere by replacing the discourse of caste with their specific cultural heritage. What is more threatening, however, is the way in which cultural identity is placed hierarchically above caste, a theme that continues to play itself out in the public sphere of Tamilnadu. In placing culture above caste, organizations and various stake-holders then get to reform their caste-specific practices as normative Hindu practice.

While I have discussed how *Bommai Golu* and their materials come to represent the shifting identities of its participants, I have yet to analyze the materials or the dolls central to this festival, asking how and why *Bommai Golu* move so fluidly from one context to another and maintain their appeal. In the next chapter, I argue that *Bommai Golu* are enlivened through play and adornment. Play offers the language to understand the materiality, adaptability, and appeal of this festival, while also accounting for how participants create dioramas that mimic real and mythological narratives from their own perspectives.

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CHAPTER FIVE

DISPLAYING DOLLS FOR *BOMMAI GOLU*: ANIMATING THE GODS USING THE INANIMATE

Bommai Golu are characterized by dolls and doll-play, so in this chapter, I return to analyzing this festival and its particular style of ritualized performance. Traditional Brahmin participants usually start keeping *Golu* on *Mahalaya Paksham* (Skt: *Mahālaya Pakśam*), a significant time for the worship of ancestors and untimely deceased spirits in the paternal family's lineage. Even if a householder is unable to set up all her dolls by that evening, she will usually place a pair of dolls, a couple set like the *marapacci bommai* (red sander dolls), upright on one of *Golu*'s steps. This signals that the *Golu* space has been invoked and gods and goddesses are welcome to their abode. This display space is treated as a place of worship during *Bommai Golu*. The householder and visitors will refrain from touching the indivdual dolls, a *kolam* will be drawn each morning and evening in front of the display, a lamp or many lamps will be lit in front of and around the display each evening, and a final water *arati* to remove evil-eye will be performed each night. On the eve of *Vijayadashami*, the conclusion of *Navaratri* and *Bommai Golu*, these same dolls are placed lying down, signaling that the divine has exited the space and the festival will conclude the following day.

Bommai Golu may appear much like a household *puja* shelf, for the non-practicing visitor, except that it is often more expansive and temporary. A *Golu* display, with its triangular tiers leading to the top and a spread of dioramas around its base also looks like a large open curio cabinet. Like a *puja* shelf, it contains an assortment of pictures, dolls, materials and figurines that could be heirlooms as well as newly purchased ones.

Additionally, *Bommai Golu* may contain creatively crafted figurines and images of divinity fashioned from domestically available materials and objects. Visitors are not allowed to touch the *Golu* space, but only gaze on it; and the entire *Golu* space is treated with utmost reverence. It is quite common for visitors and participants to be emotionally moved in looking at someone's *Golu* like they would be at a temple *murti* when a deity is ornamented for a celebration. The experience of a special *Golu* can be related to a *darśan* (seeing and being seen by god), commemorated with prayers, instrumental or vocal musical performances or dances, depending on the scale of the *Bommai Golu* celebrations.[48] It is thus important to note, that unlike a *puja* shelf, where individual objects may be treated as *murti*, the entire Golu display is treated as a *murti*, a divine entity that has been created for the ten days of *Bommai Golu*.

Imagining a village you have never seen, keeping dolls upright or lying down, ornamenting Krishna or Sita, crafting landscapes from sand, brown paper bags and foam, convey different messages, and are all activities involved in the process of keeping a *Golu*. Dolls may mimic and represent the habits, rituals, and family memories of the household, in which the dolls and figurines are dressed in using personal styles of costumes, jewelry and cosmetics. These activities are playful, and participants are much like children playing in their playroom with their dolls, only they are performed by all members of the household, including the adults. These tasks are central to the celebration of *Golu,* because *Bommai* or dolls and their treatment are emblematic of this festival.

[48] Young unmarried girls are often among those who perform in their neighbors and extended families' homes, showcasing their extra-curricular skills such as singing and dancing. Female householders reserve their expressions to their elaborate and creative dolls, dioramas and displays.

The two central arugments governing this chapter are that *Bommai Golu* can be read as doll- play and that we can understand this play to be an act of devotion. In the following sections, I will analyze how viewing *Bommai Golu* as an act of doll-play can help us understand the process by which the entire *Golu* display becomes a *murti,* nurturing a relationship to divinity, thus invoking transactional experiences between gods and devotees. Doll-play also allows us to understand the appeal of *Bommai Golu*, allowing one festival to fluidly change hands among so many different contexts.

Play has been explored in the context of ritual and religion in India, using the term *līlā*, in performance genres and in relation to the play of the gods in creating the universe (Hawley, 1981; Handleman & Shulman, 1997; Bado-Fralik & Norris, 2010; Dempsey & Selva Raj, 2010). Studies on doll-play and human agents who play with materials, however, has been less explored. Therefore, I will also discuss how devotion when expressed through the mode of playing with materials can animate those materials, forming a relationship between humans and gods. I conclude my analysis with two interpretations of *Bommai Golu* as doll-play, one mimicking and another imagining the social and religious worlds of its participants, depicting the tensions between the animate and inanimate spheres of our reality.

Who/What is a doll?

> Dolls have a long history of magic and transformation – tiny plastic beings who, through ritualized play, become the Mother of God, or defeat evil giants by throwing small stones. Dolls are plastic here in more than one sense, as their own identities and roles shift and twist in ritualized play. They are in some sense ontologically empty, wanting only the spark of creative play in order to fill magically with whatever meaning the heart desires, or the psyche needs (Bado-Fralik & Norris, 2010, p.147).

Dolls are almost as old as human civilization itself. In Ancient Greece, dolls were gifted to girls who played with them and then offered them to deities upon their marriage (Bado-Fralik & Norris, 2010, p.33). Among the Ashanti tribes, dolls were said to instill fertility and paternity in newly married couples, who carried them around and treated a doll as child before the birth of their own offspring (Cameron, 1997, p.30). Nikki Bado-Fralik and Rebecca Sachs Norris have written a seminal work regarding the fluidity of toys, games, and dolls in practitioners religious and social lives. "Dolls," they say, "have been sacrificed in place of humans, and have been the instruments of both positive and negative image magic, a practice of using dolls or puppets to heal or hex particular persons" (Bado-Fralik & Norris, 2010, p.33). They assert that it is only modern sensibilities that treat dolls as play things rather than as ritualized and sacred objects. Particularly since remnants of miniature figurines in domestic spaces have been found in several archeological sites of early humans, we can conclude that dolls are central to our existence, as central as pots for storing and cooking food, or tools for working and building objects.

The word doll, as documented by Antonia Frazer, is a "corruption of the *eidolon*, the Greek word for idol" (as cited in Donaldson, 2012, p.23). However, there is a second theory which proposes a Latin root *pupa* or *pupus* meaning new-born child or little child. Frazer observes that the word *pupa* can become *poupée* or "doll" in French meaning 'one that is enclosed in a cocoon, not fully dead or alive'" (as cited in Donaldson, 2012, p.23). This etymological endeavor highlights that even the linguistic inclinations for the word dolls displays an ambiguity on the animation of a doll— an object that is at once animate and inanimate. The Tamil word for doll is *Bommai*, coming from *pāvai*. *Pāvai* is

interchangeably used to talk about women and dolls. *Bommai* then can be representative of a woman, her identifiable habits, behaviors and materials (Madras Online Lexicon).

Dolls Compared to *Murti*s

Though dolls (*bommai*) appear similar to a sacred images of god (*murti*s), Tamil and Sanskrit distinguish them linguistically. Don Handelman and David Shulman postulate that creations by divine entities (often spoken in terms of *līlā*) are playful, implicated by the usage of the verb "*mūrt-ti*" literally "to solidify" in the creation of divine images (1997, p.24). Other scholars have also proposed that many of the practices involved in temple worship, from the installation, *abhishekam (*Skt: *abhiṣeka;* Ta: *apiṣēkam*), to the painting of the eyes transform the image from inanimate object to god (Eck, 1998; Ostor, 1980; Narayanan, 2007; Hawley, 1981). Brahminic temple images undergo a process of awakening, either through the painting of the eyes or incantation of *mantra*s, also called *prana pratiṣṭah,* which imbue the inanimate image with the identity of god. Other means of enlivening the image that I heard from my interlocutors included, the use of secret scrolls, gems and objects buried under temple sanctums, priestly use of sacred gestures and *yantra*s (geometric patterns) or letters carved in stone under the temple *murti*'s place of installment.

One concern over the status of the *murti* is triggered by the worry over the consequences of housing the gods as artistic works (for example, in museums) without proper rituals and adornment, a concern emerging through India's historical encounters with various colonial empires.[49] Many scholarly explanations of how *murti*s become

[49] Richard Davis' *Lives of Indian Images* brings to light the famous court case regarding the identity of the traveling Pathur Natarjar Shiva *murti* impeccably to this regard (1997, p.256).

enlivened seem to do with valuing the "sacred" quality of these images, treading carefully as so as not to tarnish the practitioner's belief that the *murti*is in fact god. A doll is thus not a *murti* according to indigenous understandings of the term. What is similar between the two is their contested identities as inanimate and animate, requiring animation through human agents.

Play and Religious Rituals

The word play is hard to define. Roger Callois analyzes the following characteristics of play relevant to religious life:

1) free, or voluntary
2) unreal, separate from ordinary life, and thus set apart in space and time
3) uncertain: the outcome cannot be known in advance, and there is freedom to improvise
4) unproductive: not creating goods, wealth, or new elements of any kind
5) governed by rules
6) accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life. (as cited in Bado-Fralik & Norris, 2010, p.127).

Different kinds of play display some or more of the above classifications. When play refers to activities, it is contrasted from serious time or work time and categorized as leisure. When play refers to a mode of being, it represents joviality, frivolity, and it can

also refer to pretense or imitation. Play is thus defined as a set apart time and space where one engages in those activities that bring about amusement, satisfaction, or happiness for no other specific goal. The rise of psychology in the early nineteenth century has further transformed our modern sensibilities about play. Today, the use of the term play is often limited to childhood activities of enjoyment, and understood to be pedagogical, warranting experimentation and study, but vital to our brain's development, conceptual processes and socialization (Erikson, 1963; Vygotsky, 1978). Rebecca Sachs Norris postulates that in America we have tended to view a separation between educational toys and games and non-educational ones in order to diversify the marketing of these products to a variety of consumers. Norris maintains that these kinds of separations belie the scholar's task in piecing together how play helps construct and shape religious identity (2011, p.195). Dolls largely fall into the category of educational toys. They are marketed and purchased usually by mothers of daughters for this purpose.[50] Therefore in recent history alone, doll-play has tended to be viewed primarily as an activity restricted to children. Religious dolls and their play, I believe, is however, organically interwoven within the daily ritual lives of my adult practitioners.

While I find the characteristics 1), 2), 5) & 6) of Callois useful for my understanding of doll-play and devotion, I find 4) contradictory to 6). Characteristic 4) states that play is "unproductive" while 6) contends that play is "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life." Particularly, Notermans, Derks

[50] Erik Erickson and Lev Vygotsky are perhaps the key psychologists in this field and their case studies and reflective research has tremendously helped play to be reintegrated into our understanding of childhood and human development. Others such as John Dewey and Maria Montessori advocated for children to learn adult behaviors through imitation substituting props where it was needed for safety. For its pedagogical purpose alone, dolls and play can be found in many different disciplines from human physiology and gynecology as well as in psychology and mental counseling among children.

& Jansen's work on altars to Virgin Mary in Bolivia contradict the theory that displaying religious materials have no material effects. Their work has proposed that altars, and the images, stones, and materials within them, can be personalized and used to gain upward mobility and material wealth in this world. "Interestingly, pilgrims use the objects to remind them of their own goals. By displaying them on the house altar and renewing them year after year, they are again and again confronting their ideals and aspirations, and the need to work toward fulfilling them" (Houtman & Meyer, 2012, p.209).

Play can be engaged in with an awareness of another much "freer unreality," but calling it "unproductive: not creating material elements" doesn't allow us to fully realize the potential of keeping both the real and imaginative alive during play and hence undermines its true value. Just as we observed that dolls aren't limited to childhood, in the field of Indian religions, scholars have noticed that play isn't just restricted to childhood and is an act significant to the gods and ritual life.

According to Corrine Dempsey and Raj Selva, *līlā* and play in the Hindu imaginary can come to refer to many different things including: spontaneity, playfulness, terror/grief, games of a child, role reversal/thievery or deception, erotic/love play, as well as aesthetic modes of responding to drama (2010, pp.7-9). *Līlā* is discussed in philosophical texts as well as oral narratives involving the gods. It is through their playful games that humanity has risen and fallen. Play in this context refers to a mode of being.[51] *Līlā* can be a way in which gods toy with creating and manipulating human as well as mythic reality, without any attachment to the consequences of their actions.

[51] William Sax discusses the meaning of play in a variety of different genres of Sanskrit texts. Primarily, Sax investigates: whether play (*līlā*) is used to delineate human actions apart from divine agency; or, if there is a special relationship between play and childhood; or, if the authors are using conventional imagery/poetics; or, that *līlā* evokes a generic playfulness in all the deities' activities? These questions are tangential to my study, as I am speaking about human agency in generating an ambience of doll-play.

Līlā is also used to describe ritual performances and in the drama traditions of India, where imitation, amusement, and leisure, all become part of divine play before us and among us. In public performances like the *rasa līlā*, Ramayana performances, and *therukuttu*, for example, conducted upon a stage or on television, gods make themselves visible to and come to life for their viewers through ritualized possessions, dawning masks or costumes, singing or chanting certain key mantras or phrases, coming to life for the viewers. In these performances the gods are themselves the agents, who may descend upon and transform the ordinary performer into the deity for the period of the performance. Play in the performance genres helps us understand how ritualized performances, verbal and performative gestures, and the objects used as props, all come together to enliven the deities much in the same way aesthetics function for a work of art. Moreover, drama and performing a particular character's role, including adorning a guise (*vēśam*), is a powerful tool in the hands of these performers, who take very seriously their responsibility in bringing the gods as characters to life through imitation and improvisation. These performer's ritualized habits, often include fasting and meditation, which help them facilitate the practice of being possessed by the gods who enliven their dramatic performances (see Sax, 1995; Nabakov, 2000; Flueckiger 2013).

The processes or rituals by which the *murti* comes alive, is part of the effect or the play in the creation and visibility of the gods in temples.

> The worship of (or should I say "through"?) images and the adoration of the *svarūp*s is hardly credulity. Everyone knows that the images do not actually eat the food that is offered in temples. As I was recently reminded in a Brindavan tea stall, if God ate food such as we eat, there would scarcely be any way to satisfy him! Rather, he allows us the game of feeding him for our benefit: it is symbolic action and would have no value but for the belief, the mood with which it is infused. God dines on our love, not our food. And so it is with plays. People do not believe in the

> *svarūp*s in the way children believe in Santa Claus; they know perfectly well that these are normal children (Hawley, 1981, p.18).

John.S. Hawley's translations and ethnographic study of four *rasa līlā* performances in Brindavan postulates the premise that play, and ritual are often interchangeable in the enactment of Krishna's devotional dance. Particularly among the child actors, the stages of dress-rehearsal up until the performance or display often resemble play acting. Hawley's work reflects the closest possible analogy to my definition of play using dolls. I do, however, disagree with the usage of the term 'symbolic' because it assumes that the given practice does not in fact have meaning or significance by itself.[52] What is of relevance, for my purposes, however, is that a relationship is created between devotee and god in the context of *puja* that is only made possible through an act of play-acting.

Playing with Dolls

When focusing on the the playful performance of the practitioner, the experience is emphasized over the materiality of the object. When the materiality of the object is the focus, its physicality is emphasized over the practices or experiences. For my purposes, doll-play as a mode of devotion involves both performance and materiality. The object is as significant as the user and its usage, and both require each other to be fully engaged. The *bommai* cannot function alone. While they appear silent when stored away, the *bommai* enact pivotal stories when standing upright within a *Golu*, infuse vitality and life back into their inanimate bodies. In *Bommai Golu*, doll-play and diorama building are a

[52] In a critique if the Sausserian approach regarding signification of the material, Brigit Meyer and Dick Houtman state that, "the world is not out there or a point of reference represented through signification; rather, signification itself achieves its own tangible and concrete reality effects" (2012, p.6).

pivotal ritual activity, involving interest, planning, imagination, and creativity, as well as skill.

Player A picks up a doll and imagines it to be a Policeman. Player A adds accessories to make the character more believable, using a blue hat and affixes a stick to the doll to serve as a baton. Now Player A is playing with the policeman doll, making the doll a believable participant in the room. A few minutes later, Player B tries to engage with Player A and picks up another doll and labels it a fireman. Player B proceeds to "dress-up" the doll with a red hat and a large pair of overalls. Player B also finds a thick piece of rope nearby and pretends this is the fireman's hose. Repeatedly, many other players may join in or lose interest and eventually only Player B is left remaining, still playing with the fireman. Player B has also picked up a few other dolls in this time and dressed them as lay people and placed them upon a shelf to be saved by the fireman doll.

The key lessons to be taken from observing doll-play is three-fold: it involves playing with a stand-in or prop for a real thing; it requires a conceptual leap of faith or imagination; and lastly, it can be communal or individual. In the contexts in which doll-play becomes communal or group play, one can observe many of the characteristics other scholars have observed in improv-theatrical or oral performance contexts. When one or more participant engages and plays with the scenario being played, they imagine and manipulate the play world contextually, using new props, new materials, and new plot-lines.

Psychologists have observed that doll-play can involve replicating the real world in significant ways, not just imagining new worlds. In playing with Barbie dolls and baby dolls, the term "reproduction of motherhood" is used to speak of the ways in which children may treat their dolls in ways similar to how their mother treats them (Chodorow,

1999). Miriam Fromanek-Brunell analyzes the history of doll production in America starting from 1830-1930 and traces the feminine roots of this industry. She observes that since many of the dolls were produced in the images of women, they portrayed the context of femininity which included "the context of family, where mothers experienced daily and intimate contact with children" (Fromanek-Brunell, 1993, p.66). Moreover, she notes, that based on Christian values (excerpted from popular sermons) in the formation of the bourgeois family model, mothers encouraged and habituated play especially among their daughters and "educated their maternal instincts" (1991, p.25). Mothers also taught their daughters how to make dolls in the process since it was their current livelihood and craft. We will notice a similar reproduction of motherhood and her maternal values among participants of *Golu* later in this chapter.

Imitation and pretend-playing necessitates an observance of one's environment. Players must pay close attention to behaviors, tools and people around them to gather inspiration for these doll-play contexts. For this reason, the first glance at someone playing with dolls may make them appear to be mimicking the social world. However, when one spends more time listening to the play world, engaging for longer periods of time in this doll-play, much of the play becomes believable and much of the creativity spontaneous. Imitation and imagination seem to go together to ensure a successful session of doll-play. Players sometimes need to borrow from their social and real worlds to establish the boundaries and make-up the characters that populate their play worlds. Players also need to constantly create new worlds based on recognizable scenarios to sustain the doll-play for longer periods of time and to engage more participants or players.

To sum up the discussion above, doll-play has several characteristics. Firstly, it requires a physical or tactical engagement with one's reality. Props, images, figurines,

stand-ins are required for the real and ineffable creations which may or may not look exactly like the real thing. Secondly, the player engaged in doll-play often pretends or imagines that the stand-ins, figurines, images are in place of the real thing or mimics using those images in an alternate freer reality knowing fully well it isn't completely real here. This second step requires a conceptual leap, one that cannot readily be expressed by words, but is visible when one views a player playing with dolls. These two actions when performed together result in amusement or happiness and satisfaction for the player. Thirdly, doll-play can be engaged with alone as well as with others causing multiple people to be involved in seeing the world according to the viewpoint of each player.

The psychological definitions and explanations for doll-play fall largely in the domain of young children or early childhood education. However, this kind of play is significant and can be observed even beyond childhood especially in religious ritual contexts. Actions, such as making dolls, bathing, feeding, and putting them to sleep, are essential to doll-play. They are repetitions of observed behavior in self and others. I would argue that the doll player attempts to cultivate a relationship to the doll/object through their habits and practices. The closeness of the player to the doll is reflected in the actions of attributing to the object feelings and a lived reality common to both human and doll. In *Bringing the Gods to Mind*, Laurie Patton describes the function of *viniyoga*s as metonym-like devices in the usage of Vedic mantras, where manipulations of sacrificial objects, texts, and persons "stands in for or represents larger objects or domains of experience" (2005, p.54). Doll-play functions in very much the same way in the religious and ritual life within the home. The doll-play thus stands-in for an imagined reality and literally brings objects to life through one's actions.

Playful Devotion (*Bhakti*)

In analyzing the occurrence of play in modes of *bhakti*, I will discuss a common literary narrative. *Bhakti* can be understood as "loving devotion" and is a term that also expresses the closeness created between gods and devotees. The repertoire of Krishna's poetry emerging from southern Indian, particularly Tamil texts, discusses this emotion extensively. The movement of *bhakti* thus played a significant role in reorganizing and ritualizing elements and practices of devotion novel in its time and those that challenged the traditional modes of appropriate religious behaviors. Through *bhakti*'s spread, Vidya Dehejia postulates, several bronze images of *bhakti* saints were commissioned in all leading temples of its time, and this led to the beginnings of a cult around the saints themselves (1990, p.1). Among the various *bhakti* saints, I could have chosen, the Vaishnavite Alvars stand out in their depiction of *bhakti* or loving devotion; they are also widely remembered and admired among the participants of *Bommai Golu*.

In this section, I explore a story well known among Vaishnavas but also prolific in Tamil Nadu as a narrative embodying female devotion. Andal (Ta: Āṇṭāḷ) or Kotai as she is also known, was a young girl who became recognized as an Alvar (Ta: Āḻvār) saint through an act of devotion that sets her apart. Although her adornment of Vishnu's garland was misunderstood by her care-taker/father (priest to the deity whom she loved), she was loved and understood by god, himself. She is known for achieving the "closest possible relationship to Lord Vishnu" (Dehejia, 1990, p.2). Through this narrative, I argue, childhood playful acts can have supernatural meaning, conveying far deeper an act of devotion than prayers or rituals. Several scholars have translated Andal 's seminal works and also expounded upon the significance of her style of devotion (See Ramanujan, 1981; Cutler, 1987; Narayanan, 1987; Venkatesan 2007, 2010). Among them, Venkatesan

has emphasized that Andal represents a "female-kind" of devotion, one that is gendered and qualified through its depictions of love and longing (Venkatesan, 2007, p.22). Alexander Dubianski posits that there are two meanings for Alvar, the tradition initially accepting "one who is submerged/plunged in love" and more recently, from the work of S. Palaniappan, "s/he who rules the Lord" which goes along with Andal 's own name (2000, p.3). It is important to investigate this childhood narrative for important clues to Andal's special status as the only female Alvar. A female kind of love is also depicted in the poems of male Alvars, who often picture themselves as the divine consort to Vishnu. Dehejia also notes that brides in south India are often dressed-up as Andal on their wedding days, referencing her exemplary state of a consort. However, I would like to suggest that Andal expresses an explicitly playful mode of devotion, because of her rejection of standardized orthodox rules of purity (as observed by her father, the temple priest), and in her established intimacy with Vishnu by sharing the materials which come to adorn his physical body.

I heard this story for the first time in the summer of 2012 from Lalitha's Perima (mother's older sister), who was a helpful contact in my early days of fieldwork in Kumbakonam. While I didn't end up using *Golu* in Kumbakonam as a central piece of this dissertation, "Mami" as she was called in the *agraharam* beside Kumbeshwarar temple, was responsible for introducing me to their Brahmin neighbors whose relatives live in Sunnyvale, CA. Mami also conducted weekly Gitagovindam recitation classes in which she allowed me to participate. She always had stories to tell me, miraculous narratives about her strong devotion to Krishna and how her god had found ways to communicate with her through several events in her life.

One of the afternoons before her Gitagovindam class began, we were relaxing after lunch in her living room, staring at her wide and open *puja* shelf which was especially decorated for Varalakshminonbu that week.[53] We were talking about the swing she had adorned for Krishna this week and Mami asked me if I knew about Andal. I said I was familiar with her identity as an Alvar saint but that I didn't know much else about her life. Mami was excited to tell me Andal 's story and began by saying that Andal loved Krishna in much in the same way that "a child loves her favorite doll." Unlike the poems of Andal, her hagiographies or the numerous Vaishnava commentaries on her works, Mami narrated the story of Andal to me as she understood it, as a woman and mother.[54]

> A long time ago, Periyalvar famous poet in his time, found a baby girl while he was picking flowers in the temple's garden. He didn't have any family of his own and had devoted his life to Krishna and thus took this baby to be a divine sign (Ta: *āndavan koduthathu*; "given by god") and raised her as his own, calling her Andal. Since he lived in the temple, and all he knew was temple *ācārankal* (behaviors), so he taught her how to make huge *mālai* (garlands) for the gods in the temple, weaving flowers into elaborate decorative crowns for the gods, and to make *kolam* on the temple's entry ways for the visitors each morning and evening. Even though she was a girl, Andal partook in all the tasks of a *vadiyar* (male Brahmin temple attendant). Periyalvar would often leave Andal in the afternoons to finish his chores outside in the town and return only in time for the evening pujas. When Periyalvar wasn't looking, Andal was happy to behave like just any other *chinna ponnu* (little girl). She would *vilaiyadu* (play) in the temple grounds, imagining herself living among

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[53] For the *vrtham*, most families only kept the pot or goddess display three or five days, but Mami kept her adorned *kalasham* for a week in addition to her usually bedecked *puja* space which displayed a miniaturized diorama of Brindavanam. Every morning, no matter what the season or day, Mami bathed her brass *puja* images of Krishna and Radha and adorned them with clothing and flowers and assembled them to depict a scene from the various myths and texts Mami enjoyed reading and reciting including Gitagovindam, a 12th Century text by Jayadeva, is dedicated to Krishna that is recited and sung in temples in devotion. Mami had taught herself the text and proceeded to teach all the young children of her neighborhood and beyond who wished to learn. Many of her students were teenage daughters of local temple priests.

[54] Joyce Flueckiger, in *Everyday Hinduism*'s chapter on "Oral and Visual Narratives and Theologies," aptly captures the myriad of ways practitioners of Indian religions may interact with narratives and stories of their tradition. Flueckiger argues, oral and visual narratives are "*how* Hindus know the stories of their gods and goddesses and their theologies" (2015, p.47). In the same way, I would like to emphasize that Mami's personal rendition of the story of Andal is equally viable as a narrative of theology which aids in constructing the idea devotion or *bhakti* to Krishna.

the wives of Krishna and often spoke to the *murti* (image of Vishnu) as if he was right there (implying he was alive).

In her own world, she would enact poems and dramas where she was in love with Krishna or upset with him depending on her mood. For these dramas, she would often adorn herself using the elaborate flower crowns and garlands she had woven with her father that morning. Before Periyalvar returned, Alvar would always put away the crowns and garlands, just as she had found them and her father would proceed to make the evening offerings at the temple. One day, Andal eyed a beautiful lotus and *tulsi* (basil leaf) garland she had helped her father weave that morning for her drama. As soon as Periyalvar left for his chores, Andal started her play. She wore this *tulsi* garland and danced around the figurine of Krishna. She even happened to glimpse upon her reflections on the shining pots which contained sandalwood paste, milk, honey, and turmeric water for the Lord's *abhishekam* later that day. Today, Periyalvar forgot something and returned to the temple within the hour. He happened to see Andal wearing the *tulsi* garland and playing in the inner sanctum, enjoying her reflection. Immediately he was upset and told her to take off the garland and flower crowns yelling that it was unacceptable for a common person to adorn the garlands of the gods. Periyalvar threw the garlands and crowns away with the garbage. Andal was scared and sad, unsure of what she had done wrong.

Periyalvar made new garlands and that evening proceeded to host the *abhishekam*. After bathing and dressing up the *murti*, when Periyalvar tried to hang up the newly made *tulsi* garlands, but the garlands kept falling off. Andal was watching all this from a corner. Periyalvar looked at her sternly but tried his very best to hang up the garlands. But even before the *puja* was complete the *tulsi* garlands fell off Vishnu's shoulders. Periyalvar was disturbed. He felt that Vishnu did not accept the garland offering that day because of Andal's *vilaiyattuthanum* (inappropriateness/ playfulness). He called Andal and further chided her, telling her that her actions had been observed by Vishnu and that the Lord was displeased. Both Periyalvarand Andal prayed before going to bed that night, asking the Lord to forgive them for her *vilaiyattuthanum* (inappropriateness).

Periyalvar slept restlessly, upset with the events of the day. In his dream, Vishnu came down to earth and woke up him up accusing him of giving *kedutha* (literally "spoiled) offerings. *Periyalvar*, (mistakenly) apologized to the Lord, pleading for forgiveness on behalf of Andal, saying she was only a child who was playing. "*Mūrkah!*" said Vishnu to Periyalvar "It is not the garland that Andal wore which I was displeased with, it was your new *tulsi* garlands that I do not wish to accept!" Periyalvar looked confused while Vishnu continued. "Andal wears my garlands and crowns every afternoon before you offer them to me in the evening," Vishnu remarked. "I only wish to wear those garlands adorned

> by Andal, as she alone is close to me." Periyalvar quickly realized his mistake. The next morning, he explained everything to Andal and she was happy in her heart. From then on, Andal always played with the garlands before the evening *puja* commenced. And so, the story goes, that even today in the temple of Srivilliputtur, Andal 's used garlands are offered to Vishnu every evening.[55]

This narrative showcases Andal 's loving devotion or bhakti to god and Vishnu's response in accepting only her used garland as offering. The hagiographic texts tell us that her divine status was destined from the beginning, even when she was a child. Andal 's emotional classification of *bhakti* is largely drawn from her own poetic works like the Tiruppāvai (henceforth Tiruppavai) and Naciyar Tirumoḻi. In these poems, Andal is portrayed as lovelorn, separated from her true love, Krishna or Vishnu (Narayanan, 2007; Venkatesan, 2007, 2010). She is akin to *gopi*s but unique in her loving devotion. Her recognition as an Alvar saint, the only female Alvar, is a testament to her loving devotion.

The story as told by Mami contained many of the key themes from Andal's hagiographic texts. There were two added portions, however, not mentioned in the textual accounts or commentaries. Firstly, Mami added the part about Periyalvarmaking new garlands which were not accepted by Vishnu. Her narration included that the garlands fell off the *murti* as an indication of the Lord not accepting his offering. While no text mentions this, Mami vocalized a commonly understood *ashubham* or "inauspicious" occurrence during *puja* which can be read as a sign of the deity's agency in accepting one's offerings.[56]

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[55] Mami told me the whole story in one evening but with several interruptions during that time. I have compiled and narrativized it in English with the Tamil expressions where relevant.

[56] I have often heard this from my interlocutors, regarding garlands that fall off while adorning the deity or lamps that keep going off at the beginning of a ritual. A popular movie on Andal also depicts this commonly understood practice. Sometimes, the falling of a flower from the garland or crown of a deity, after the ritual has commenced or towards the end can be perceived as a positive sign, then collected as direct blessings from the god. After the Puri *Rathayatra* in 2009, I observed several participants and onlookers collect fibers and chips off the flag and decorations of the chariots to keep with them as amulets or in their *puja*

Secondly, Mami's narrative was indicative of Andal's playful devotion. This is where I wish to focus my analysis of the kind of devotion conveyed by the story of Andal's childhood. Andal 's child-like devotion resulted from a playful engagement with the *murti* rather than through Periyalvar's ritualized *ācārankal* (behaviors) or *nambikai*s (beliefs). Andal adorning her Lord's *tulsi* garland and flower crowns is more akin to how a child wears her mother's shoes or pearls while playing dress-up. It was interesting that Mami used *vilaiyadu* or "play" in both instances, to speak of Andal 's behavior to Krishna's *murti*; she also spoke of Andal's "playfulness" in adorning the god's garlands and crowns. Play, or *vilaiyadu,* as spoken of in this context, seems to be indigenously associated both with childhood as well as with play-acting, dramatizing or pretending.

While the hagiographic texts claim that Andal 's *rasa* (aesthetic emotion) was that of (erotic) love or *sringara*, Mami's Andal seems to depict playful devotion not love. It is ambiguous whether Andal is a child or a young-lover in this story about the garland.[57] Her

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spaces as direct blessings from the deity. In Tirupati, a common saying goes that if you can get a little chip from the wax seal which holds together the infamous donation *hundi* of Balaji and keep this in your wallet, it will never be empty. Several such actions within the context of temple or ritual worship is construed by practitioners as the deity providing a sign or indication directly to them.

[57] The narrative traditions also seem to show an ambiguity about the status of young girls as lovers unlike with young boys or young gods and their transition from childhood, to adolescence and then to adulthood. See Ram-Prasad Chakravarti's article comparing the childhood of male gods like Rama, Murugan and Krishna where he appropriately concludes saying that a similar study has not been undertaken in the study of women/ goddesses. He is also correct in pointing out that there are sources out there to this effect, but no scholar has undertaken the project. What Ram-Prasad didn't mention, however, is how such a study would occur. It the narratives of male gods, unlike those of female heroines or goddesses, the beginning of adolescence is marked with the onset of religious and ethical duties for Rama, marriage for Murugan and sexual exploits with numerous gopis for Krishna. Rather and more importantly, Chakravarti asks us to focus upon what the three gods teach us about the autonomy of childhood (2002, p.168). One would think that the transition into adolescence is more distinct in females due to the onset of puberty or menstruation. The onset of larger breasts during this transformation is also a vital developmental milestone that characterizes the sexual nature of women, often inviting a different gaze upon her (childhood can be quickly taken away through another's perceptions of one's body). However, in most textual and oral depictions, goddesses and female characters alike "abandon their dolls," or "fall in love" leaving behind their life of play for the life of marriage, partnership, or political power (Ritusamhara; Malavikagnimitra; Vikram-o-rvashi; Kumarasambhava; Gitagovinda). Or so it seems. I cannot undertake the similar project as conducted by Chakravarti here in this dissertation, but I wish to point out that female childhood depictions are equally diverse, but we are left in a liminal state about how exactly young girls make the transition into adulthood (especially given the youthful marriage age of most female heroines). Also, given that childhood for these

mode of devotion is play, expressed by her act of playing dress-up with garlands reserved for the god himself. Furthermore, her title marks her becoming "closest" to Lord Vishnu and rather than using love (which a child may not have been capable to expressing to man), Andal expresses intimacy by dressing up as the consort to the god. In many *bhakti* texts devotees attempt to show intimacy towards their deities by touching or trying to touch things that belong to the gods. Devotees often express their closeness to their god either by making sacrifices or consuming unfavorable offerings like an elephant offering his head for Ganesha's body or Shabari eating bad fruit before offering it to Ram. Devotees may also express their closeness by directly coming into contact with god-like entities, like in Gajendramoksham, Ram stepping on Ahalya as a stone, or Putana breastfeeding Krishna and still achieving *moksha*. These narratives express poetically how touching, engaging and creating closeness to the gods can result in one imbibing the qualities of god. In this way, playing dress-up is what allowed Andal to foster a physical close-ness to her Lord, Vishnu. Her actions challenge traditional notions of purity in the temple offerings made to Vishnu; however, the narrative establishes that the *bhakti*-filled devotee can engage in close-ness to the deity without an awareness of the impurity or inappropriateness of her actions.

Andal also references play in her devotional practice through her popular text, Tiruppavai. Tiruppavai, is titled after *pāvai nonbu*, a practice not as popular today, but quite common to her time. We have already learned that *pāvai* has two meanings in Tamil– doll and woman. There have not been many scholarly descriptions of *pāvai nonbu* but from my practitioners I learned that this celebration involved the creation of an image

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heroines, simply gives way to marriage or becoming consorts, adolescence is completely ignored for women and thus the questions concerning female childhood and its perception are still pivotal and scantly studied.

of a woman/ goddess from clay, worshipping this temporary object or figurine for a fortnight, and then dissolving it back into the river's waters. Some participants said *Varalakshmi Nonbu* may have some early roots in this practice.

> Girls bathe in the water and ask the goddess to provide them with good husbands, progeny and prosperity. What is described by Andal certainly is a typical rite of fertility well known in India from ancient up to our times. Rites of this type are well known in Tamilnadu as *pāvai noṉpu* (*noṉpu* means "suffering, self-restraint, asceticism" and *pāvai* "an image of a woman, a statue, a doll, a picture, also a woman or a goddess"). So, the term can be understood in two ways: austerity actions undertaken by women, or the same performed for the goddess, in front of her image. Caṅkam poetry gives several conspicuous details, showing how *pāvai* representing a goddess was venerated: girls are performing a circular dance *kuravai* around *pāvai* made of clay or sand (AN 269.19: *vaṇṭal pāvai*), decorate it with flowers (PN 11.3 and 243.2–3), put it into the water of a pond (AN 181.19). The girls also bathe in water which was an important part of the rite conducted during the full moon in the months of *mārkaḻi* (December-January) and *tai* (January-February). (Tirrupāvai verses cited in Dubianski, 2000, p.7)

Regardless of the etiology of *pāvai nonbu*, it is revelatory to note that Andal awakens her friends to perform the *nonbu*, chiding and advising them to perform this vow which involves figurines and images as an act of devotion to her Lord Vishnu. This act is significant to her form of devotion and involves playfully crafting an image of god and engaging with it resulting in a closeness between devotee and god.

***Bommai Golu* as Doll-play**

Many of the current studies on dolls, play and ritual, have not been useful for my purposes primarily because they do not showcase if and how doll-play is a different kind of play from dramatic play, or *līlā*. Scholars of Hinduism have also been less concerned with ritual objects in the domestic context than with temple *murti*s or large public displays of deities, which create quite a different presence and thus elicit a different

response from their devotees. As mentioned before, the entire *Golu* becomes a *murti*. For my purposes the process of creating a *Golu,* assembling the court of dolls and ornamenting the ritual space is as playful as the final received product.

The word used for the act of playing in Tamil is *vilaiyāṭṭal* (henceforth *vilaiyadal*) and it came up quite frequently in colloquial usage among Brahmin participants of *Bommai Golu*. *Vilaiyadal* and *bommai* offer the frame for viewing *Bommai Golu* as doll-play because of the context within which the first set of dolls are received and then later displayed. In Chapter Two, I argued that the inclusion of *Bommai* in materials exchanged during the wedding ceremony of a South Indian Brahmin female, helped in starting her collection of dolls and enabled her upkeep of *Bommai Golu*. During the *Nalangu* (sandalwood paste adornment of bride and groom by each other, involving games and play to serve as a 'getting-to-know-you') part of the wedding, a tray of dolls is visibly displayed upon the stage beside the bride and groom. In addition to the most important couple doll dressed as bride and groom, a small *Bommai Golu* starter kit is presented to the bride, containing an assortment of cosmetics, toys, miniature objects, and creatively embellished sugar candy or nuts made to look like human figures. While the practices, materials, and habits of various Brahmin communities may differ, this tray of dolls is quite commonly seen across the various Southern Indian states. Appropriately called *vilaiyadal thattu* (literally "playing plate"), the tray of dolls refers to the playful aspects of the *Nalangu* ceremony during which it is presented and displayed. During the *Nalangu* ceremony, a variety of short rituals (such as breaking savory wafers over one another's head; searching for a ring in the water to see who has the upper hand in married life; singing erotic songs to the bride about her husband likening him to Vishnu or Shiva) occur, meant to be jovial and to "break the ice" between the new bride and groom

(Duvvruy, 1991, p.155). Some participants also told me that this plate of dolls is presented to ensure the fertility of the couple and serve as an early baby shower present to the new bride. The dolls are for both mother and the future baby. They emphasized that the material red sandalwood (not fragrant), used to make the set of couple dolls, was a useful medicinal remedy during the early months of a child's life, an anti-septic, and a safe material to chew on to soothe the baby during teething.

Mimicking Motherhood

The eve of the first night of *Bommai Golu* is a busy time within the home. Even though the themes have been chosen, the dolls have been brought down from attic spaces, and the dais or steps have been erected, the true work of keeping a *Golu* only begins now. The householder usually employs the help of her spouse and other family members to do all the constructive parts of building the foundation for the displays. The dolls and their assemblies or dioramas, however, are a different task and even children are only asked to participate when they are ready (at the right age/ showing the right signs) of artistic doll-play. When a householder's child is very young, they cannot help with arranging the dioramas. Family elders usually baby sit while the householder gets busy with the task of putting up the dolls on the steps. This arrangement, where the major labor of ornamentation usually goes to the lead female householder, is common on other ritual days as well, such as *Ganesh Chathurti*, where the women adorn Ganesha and men may perform the *puja*.

Once they believe their daughters are ready, Brahmin mothers enlist duties for their daughters on many *pandigai*s to transmit religious values and habits in their children. Many of my informants said that daughters start participating in *Krishna*

Jayanthi from birth (dressing up in costumes, making savory teething crackers called *sheedai* (Ta: *cīdai*), or using their little feet to make a trail of footsteps), *Varalakshmi Nonbu* and *Karadiya Nonbu* from the age of two (teaching and tying the ritual yellow thread in practice of one day keeping the *Nonbu* themselves as married women), and about five or six is a more common age for children to start keeping dioramas for *Bommai Golu*. [58] They emphasized that playful imagination as well as coordinated physical movements were more necessary for keeping the assemblies of dolls since some images were valuable antiques. Almost all participants agreed that *Bommai Golu* was the easiest festival to get children involved in because of the presence of dolls.

As mentioned earlier, Fromanek-Brunell observes that dolls were pivotal characters in antebellum America, instructing daughters to be useful in their family matrix, integrating "leisure with instruction in a domestic economy" (1993, p.8). She argues that dolls during this era were essential in coaching young girls on their household duties, and that doll-playing was formalized in mainstream American culture as an essential act of a woman's moral and social upbringing (1993, p.73). Similarly, I would argue that dolls (especially as they are used for *Bommai Golu*) are pivotal characters in the narratives about life in the Brahmin home, a process through which unmarried/ young girls are instructed on how to maintain and upkeep religious rituals. [59]

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[58] In the cases where my informants had sons, they told me about their own history with keeping up family traditions. Almost all the women I spoke to said that it was crucial to begin at a very young age in order to teach the habits and procedures preceding and succeeding any festival.

[59] I contrast this kind of family instruction from public or social, often community-driven activities involving other families/friends as observed in Chennai as well as South Asian American immigrants. The impetus in these gatherings is to normative-ize teachings and discuss commonalities among various Indian rituals, mythological texts and religious habits. I argue, however, within the domestic sphere the practice of instructing younger family members to follow the tradition of elders is more organic and religious values are often conflated with ethical ones, as well as practices unique to one's own community or family histories. In support of this view towards oral instruction, Leela Prasad has discussed how *shastra*s are naturally shared and ossified as teachings within families, along with their more formal transmission in *matha*s (Prasad, 2009).

Dolls are utilized as ritual objects during an important religious festival conducted *by* and *for* the female members of the household, characterizing their identity in the Brahmin home. Moreover, the act of prayer to an object, or worship practices more common to the rest of the ritual life of a Brahmin householder including maintaining a daily *puja* shelf and ornamenting figurines of deities on various ritual days, is also mimicked during *Bommai Golu*, albeit in a playful and less rigid medium. One can ask the question how do children learn to be religious? Through *Golu*, Brahmin households seem to have devised a method of engaging and entertaining young female participants to play and learn how to become religious Brahmin householders.

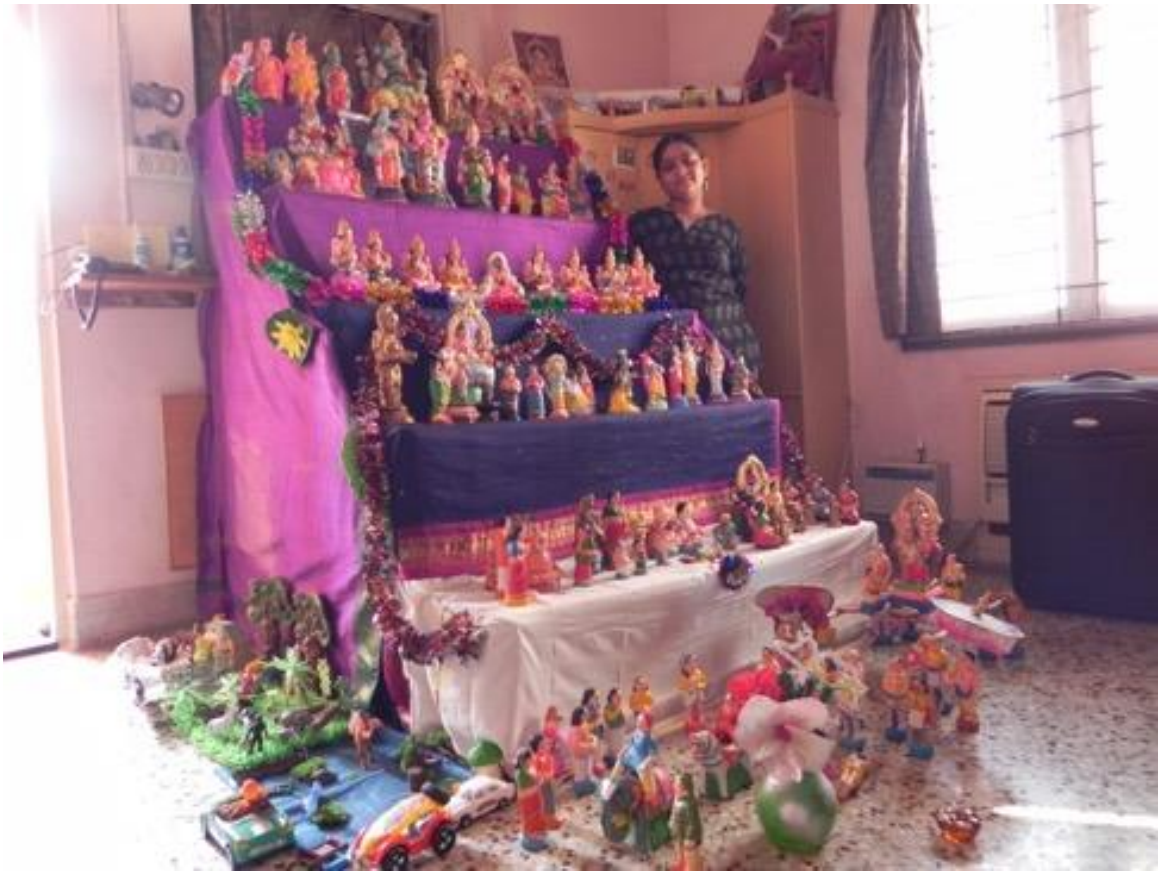

Figure 9. Shriya with Lalitha's Golu

Lalitha believed that her daughter Shriya was ready to help in making dioramas only when she turned six years old (Figure 9). From the age of two itself, Shriya had been

practicing how to keep *madi*, bathing in the morning before touching the *puja* shelf, wearing only new or freshly laundered clothes for ritual days, wiping up with water before and after (making ritually clean and pure; Ta: *cuṭṭam*) the physical spaces where rituals or meals occur (impure, Ta: *tīṭu*), and preparing various sweets and snacks for different ritual days. [60]

When I first met their family in the context of fieldwork, Shriya was ten, by then well prepared with her role of keeping *Bommai Golu* with her mother. Over the next three years, I observed that Shriya was also aware of the religious rituals and the purity practices involved. During repeatd visits to their home, I noticed there was an implicit set of rules which mediated how and when children interacted with the religious materials of their home. Even though religious images, materials and objects were literally everywhere in the home and outside, children had learned to navigate this terrain with intentionality, knowing when, where, and how they could play.

The ambience surrounding the elaborate process of keeping a *Bommai Golu* was quite playful. Unlike other ritual contexts, where I had witnessed Lalitha chide Shriya for doing something incorrectly, here she had let her take the lead. Conceptualizing, gathering, and assembling the *Bommai Golu* had taken an entire day, and the labor of love was apparent in the neat and careful dioramas and shelf organization mother and daughter had made. Rather than being unique, Shriya and Lalitha's *Golu* was special because of its reproduction of habits and life experiences common to their community of practitioners. This *Golu* is beautiful because it is traditional and not meant to innovate,

[60] Mary Hancock discusses the ritual obligations of *mati* and procedures involved in performing *puja* within the Brahmin home. Her informant Purnima didn't speak of how she herself learned these tasks or whether she taught her children, one can consult Hancock's book for these procedures, to see the variety of learned ritual behaviors Shriya's mother Lalitha encouraged her to perform. (Hancock, 1999, pp.87-106).

which does not mean it is not creative. What is new are the dolls sets that were recently purchased, but the narratives expressed display a continuity from the past to the present, with orthodox rituals, deities popular in their community, and life experiences they shared with their immediate generation of family and friends.

Imagining Spaces

Just as we observed above that doll-playing during *Bommai Golu* can serve to mimic habits of one's ancestors and replicate shared narratives among communities, this festival arrangement of dolls can also showcase creative ruptures with shared histories and narratives. Depicting a scene from an oral narrative in the form of visuals or materials is not an uncommon task for keepers of *Bommai Golu*. Householders can become quite involved in reproducing imaginary experiences while infusing them using familiar objects and materials. In addition to gathering dolls with similar themes and perceivable associations upon each step, which itself is unique to the memories of the *Golu* keepers, some, like a director of a movie or play, try to depict certain messages important to them.

What does it entail to make a scene or diorama? Movie and theater directors often begin with a model of some kind, a physical space or diorama where they can enact the possible props, materials and character's blocking to effectively communicate themes from the script. The playwright, however, has a limited script, fixed actors or depictions. The *Golu* keepers, on the other hand, have a never-ending narrative repertoire drawing from their life experiences and their personal, family, and community religious oral/ textual canons. It is this sort of free association that allows *Bommai Golu* to be vastly diverse even while operating from the same caste or religious community of practitioners. Take for example Figure 10. There are two different scenes which have been composed

together to depict the participant's idealized native village. The hill top shrine and its stream of devotees leads to the village where typical day- to-day activities occur. This scene required conceptualization, purchasing or acquiring through heirlooms dolls independently or in sets, and the skills of making hills out of papier-mâché, creating landscapes to mimic village terrain (sandpaper spray painted in green and embellished with plastic flora and stones and pathways), acquiring a mechanical train set with tracks that went around the entire *Golu*, and finally a way of putting them together playfully.

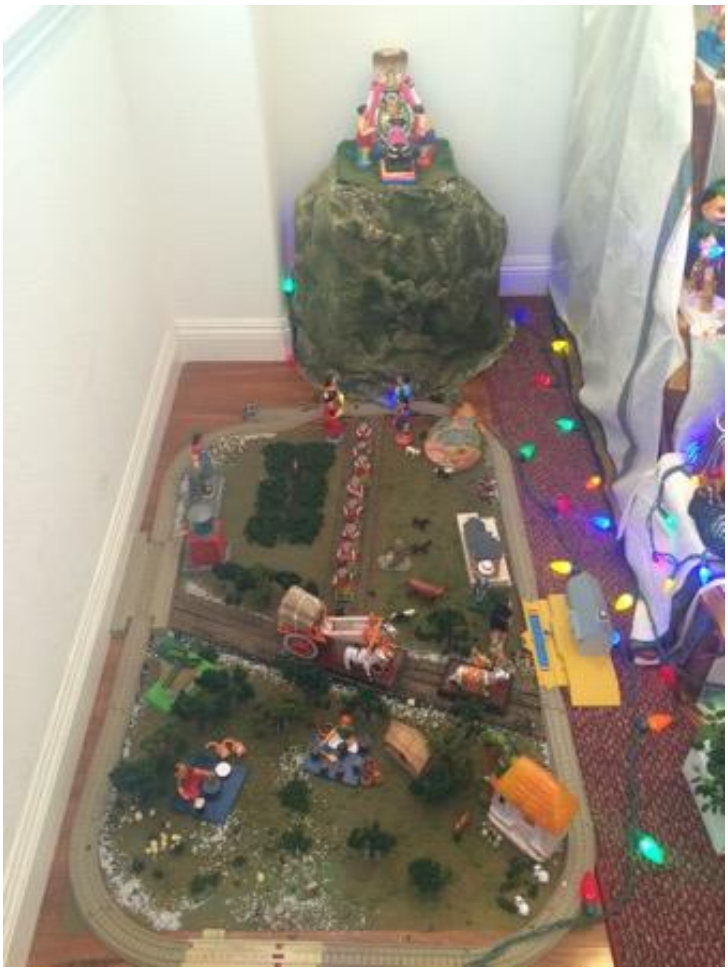

Figure 10. Sumathi's imagined diorama

Sumathi's diorama of her maternal grandfather's village is purely fictitious. It is constructed from her memories of his orally told stories and pictures of the landscape

from the internet. It is a religious pilgrimage destination as well as someone's personal memory and thus can be open to interpretation as well as imagination. *Golu* allows the practitioner to tell a story using dolls and objects as props to construct scenes from events or places in one's memory. In doing so, I argue, that playful art of creating a diorama mimics the act of doll play by children.

Johan Huizinga asserts that play is neither "ordinary" nor "real" (1944, p.8). He goes on to discuss how play is a stepping out of everyday life into another temporary sphere of activity with its own disposition. He asserts that "Every child knows perfectly well that he is 'only pretending,'" and later, links how this "only pretending" quality of play betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with more "serious" activity, a feeling that seems to be something as primary as play itself (1944, p.13). If I compare doll-play to a religious ritual, I can conclude that *Bommai Golu* exhibit a serious engagement with one's reality, expressing a rather innate urge of conceptual expression using objects as props. Witnessing *Bommai Golu* as a serious religious ritual takes the same "leap of faith" required to understand the playful doll scene created in a home by a child at leisure, the serious task of "only pretending" as Huizinga asserted. In this sense, the task of engaging in *Bommai Golu* commands the *Golu* keeper to play along, knowing the materials are more than what they appear.

It is also important to see how the message is conveyed in Sumathi's diorama, because it tells us a lot about the materials that come together to form her *Golu*. Each object was placed here as a prop in the narrative she chose to depict. *Golu* keepers, in this way, are trying to tell a story with their dolls. Every doll depicts a different time-period and region of India, representative of the popular cultural depictions of its time. The temple shrine and devotees are the most recent images, from an assembly available in

Komalavilas (Sunnyvale). The stream of devotees as musicians below are from Vijayawada, and the bull with bullock cart set is from Kondapalli made with lighter balsa wood. The small hut with pond and palm tree was handmade in a mud-working class by the *Golu* keeper as a high schooler in Chennai. The little animals strewn around are available in the farm toys section at Michaels (the American hobby store). The man with his white safari hat standing beside a railway building in front of a lighthouse are all souvenirs from a trip to the Netherlands, and the scare-crow was hand-made this year by the artist using materials from a craft store. The two village workers (the potter and the woman with grinding stone) are available in Poompuhar (Arts and Handicraft Emporium) in Chennai and date from the early 1990's. The thatched roof hut beside the potter is from Cochin in the 1980's, an adaptation by Sumathi of a toy fishing boat. The windmill is from a toy store in Dubai during the 2000's when Sumathi went to visit her cousin.

As you can tell, the elaborateness of the disparate cultural and regional toys and dolls that come together to send this message of a unified native village in the North Arcot district of Tamil Nadu isn't apparent in a first glance. In fact, the diorama works so well together that it seems to seamlessly become part of this imagined village that Sumathi has created. Analyzing the culture of exhibitions and colleting in India, Susan Pearce argues that displays of cultural materials (from one's own culture as well as souvenirs) "serves to underlie cultural distinctions" (Pearce, 1995, p.325) She emphasizes that the Indian and British efforts to show "daily life in a village in India" during the toured exhibit in the 1990s called *Vasna: An Indian Village*, tried to create "an overall effect of a Merrie India, of traditional timelessness" (1995, p.325). Sumathi, however, intended to put together her diorama to depict what her grandfather has recounted within his natal village, carefully

choosing the accessories from her doll collection to portray his narrative. She was aware of the Dutch history in Tamil Nadu. Her scene of the railway building portrays the colonial authority that coexists alongside village life; the windmill and lighthouse also represent the Dutch colonial identity. The railway tracks encircling the diorama identify the village as a lumber center in Southern India, showing how its resources are still contributing to the larger economies of trade. Her knowledge of the history of this location comes from her grandfather. He worked for the Indian Merchant Navy (remnants of the colonial governing system in India). Even if the diorama showcases her dolls as crafts from India (the Kondapalli and Vijayawada dolls etc.), the intended message conveyed is not of a "pure" India but one laden with Western or colonial influence.

What does it mean for Sumathi to convey that her grandfather's native village is a lumber center as well home to a famous local Shiva shrine? What does this diorama say about our notion of Indian villages or our pilgrimage to these sites? In all seriousness, Sumathi was only playing with her dolls. She was putting together a scene that performed her memory and brought the imagined village materially alive. After lunch that day, she told me that she had really made this diorama for herself. She wanted to see what it would look like, but she wasn't expecting that it would entail such an enormous creative feat.

In the above two sections, I have attempted to show two ways in which *Bommai Golu* can be analyzed as doll-play. This kind of play requires mimicking realities (Lalitha and her daughter) and, at the same time, creatively challenging communally understood histories with personal experiences (Sumathi). Both participants showcased their unique aesthetic tastes in creating a *Golu* as a *murti* of their gods and goddesses. This space of doll-play animated divinity within their homes for the ten-days of *Bommai Golu*. Observing and participating in *Bommai Golu* as doll-play has thus permitted me to see

how domestic devotional practices mimic doll-play, requiring sensorial contact with objects, dolls, and materials and also permitting creative human imagining of the worlds of the gods and goddesses.[61] Moreover, by including imagination and creativity, *Bommai Golu* can move from traditional to non-traditional contexts easily, because dolls allow for the malleability of its depictions, no matter which participant wishes to keep a *Golu*.

Golu play

Mary Hancock's book *Womanhood In the Making* is one of the first to discuss *puja* and *Bommai Golu* in the smarta Brahmin homes of Mylapore. In her chapter on the etiquette of everyday Hinduism, Hancock suggests that figurines in the home altar receive "additional attention of the sort that mimicked the patterns of temple ritual" (1999, p.79). Even though the gestures were those that Purnima (her interlocutor) were following according to family habits and using their personal heirlooms, Hancock attributes these practices to temple worship because the images or tableaus thus created are meant to be representative of the inner sanctum *murti* of the Minakshi Temple in Madurai. Rather than see domestic worship as a reflection or replication of temple worship, I would like to propose that practices involving domestic shrines and objects in those shrines are more closely connected with everyday social and lived realities than orthodox ritual manuals or temple rules. Such an outlook will shift away from looking at the male Brahmins worshipping the temple *murti* as a model for devotional practices conducted in the

[61] When speaking about a similar practice in Bengal, in the construction of wildly extravagant and innovative *pandal* displays, Rachel McDermott asserts that Durga *pandals* are playful performances, combining incongruous popular culture visual imagery with the moral and emotional gravitas of the mythology (see Selva Raj & Dempsey, 2010, p.157). Many recent depictions of popular scenes during Bommai Golu showcase the same intent. However, Bommai Golu are hardly just competitive. This might be true for a public grandiose display but less relevant to domestic *Golu* which rarely generates the scales occupied by such *pandals*. Moreover, the *Golu* keeper focuses on displaying several narratives within the larger *murti* of the *Golu* display whereas the *pandal*-maker will specialize in depiciting on scene as a *murti*.

home.[62] Like Shriya learns from Lalitha, Purnima was inspired to do *puja* in the ways she observed her own mother and householders perform the act.

While much has been said about bringing the gods to life in public contexts, less has been explained about how these same gods come to visit and pervade the everyday lives of the practitioners. These gods/goddesses seem to make an appearance in domestic shrines called *puja* shelves usually on a daily basis and during household vows and festivals conducted regularly through the annual ritual calendar. The *puja* spaces within one's home are constantly enlivened, and gods live there every moment of the day within the homes of the practitioners. To this regard, for example, Hancock observes that Purnima shows an affection for the goddess that permeated her ritual performance and explanations for her actions (1999, p.80). Purnima was often concerned with physical materials from which these figurines were composed of, physical properties that affected her actions within the domestic shrine. The *abhishekam*, for example, was meant to cool down the heated deity. In the same way "when a woman gives birth to a child, she wants to feed it well, to keep its skin healthy and clean, and to dress it well" (Hancock, 1999, p.80).

Hancock draws on Lawrence Babb's concern with how "bodily transactions" create sensory transactions of worship to showcase belonging and connectedness (1999, p.82). This hypothesis is one that I wish to further explore in relation to doll-play as devotional.

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[62] In one of my first seminars on ethnography with my advisor, Prof. Flueckiger told our class that Brahmin priests are not the only ones who enliven the gods, especially within the domestic context. Rather, she argued, women – often the ones left out of larger discussions involving agency within the temple contexts – are the ones responsible for everyday religion at the home (especially non-Puranic and different castes). They conduct domestic *puja* during which, in many ways, they enliven the gods and goddesses. It was this proposition that led to my own understanding of the images and figurines that come to be enlivend during *Bommai Golu*. Vasumathi Duvvruy also spends some time in her chapter on *laukika* rites (this-worldly rites of passage) among smarta Brahmins and *iyer*s to discuss the notion that Brahmin women and their rituals in the home can stand in for Brahmin priests and their temple rituals (1991, p.102). She also thus places importance on the presence of *sumangali*s as stand-ins for *brahmana*s.

Transactional exchange gives language to an otherwise unstated closeness shared between devotees and gods as nurtured through doll-play. While Babb's assertions and Hancock's own reasoning supports the fact that *puja* is transactional between devotee and god, the concluding remarks in her chapter belies the observations she makes regarding engaging with materials during *puja*. Hancock concludes her chapter with a section on aesthetics and then states that "beauty was thus an other-directed emanation, an energy beam. In this respect, it was like *darśan*, the meritorious visual transaction between deity and devotee…" (1999, p.107). The notion that beauty is central to how the images are found upon *puja* shelf is also reinforced by the smarta and Puranic habits Hancock observed to be specific to issues of caste, class and concerns of visible cleanliness as purity.

Mimicking bodily habits upon the deities' images during *puja*, heating and cooling or feeding and cleaning, can be seen as one way to perceive doll-play as devotional, bringing the domestic or temple *murti* to life. Another important quality of doll-play visible during *Bommai Golu* is adornment or ornamentation. Ornamentation requires a diverse array of messages that are communicated through materials readily available to the devotee. Cynthia Packert's discussion of ornamentation in the context of Krishna *bhakti* is relevant here, where adorning god is a form of devotion to Krishna (2010, p.12). She cites Ananda Coomarasamy, who argues that god only comes into form once adorned (as cited in Packert, 2010, p.14). Packert also discusses the work of art historian, Molly Emma Aitken, who describes the importance of jeweled ornaments in India and how they offer protection to their wearers. Packert then asserts that, "ornamentation on the body of a Puranic temple *murti* is thus the visual equivalent of poetic imagery" (2010, 15). She suggests that the visual appeal of *darśan* is wholly experienced only once Krishna and his cohorts are adorned. Different materials and styles of ornamentation or costuming can

signify different meanings to the viewers of these adorned gods. Packert concludes that adornment or ornamentation hence brings the god to life to the viewer through a complicated exchange of aesthetic messages shared between devotee and god. Images – be they *murti*s or dolls – come to life only when fully adorned.

In the context of *Golu*, dolls are ornamented with costumes and jewelry, an ornamentation that only makes the dolls beautiful, but, using Packert's argument, brings them to life. Ornamentation is not merely embellishment but is the process of *puja* itself. The variety of gestures of sensory engagement are part and parcel of the aesthetic messages shared between devotee and deities, ultimately allowing the *Bommai Golu* display to come to life. This act of doll-play creates a relationship between deities and persons through the engagement with materials.

Packert's work does much to untangle the theoretical implications of understanding ornamentation as devotion but she mainly reserves her analysis to temple contexts. Another book, however, that discusses extensively the process of *puja* in the domestic context is relevant to my discussion of doll-play as devotion. Flueckiger's approach, in *Everyday Hinduism*, looks at religion in the home as central to how practices occur in Hinduism. Below, she describes the creation of Ganesha by a female householder for *Ganesh Chathurti*.

> From a lump of moistened clay, she [female matriarch] carefully formed a seated Ganesha, with one left crossed over his opposite knee, and created the outline of his trunk. Before beginning Ganesha's adornment, the matriarch ritually anointed him with milk and pieces of softened banana. She then wrapped the image with strips of silk cloth for his clothing and decorated him with carefully selected pieces of her own jewelry and a multitude of flowers. The creativity allowed the householder in both form and adornment creates intimacy between devotee and god that is lost with the purchase of commercially made images. (2015, pp.130-131)

It is this kind of "intimacy" that is reflected in playing with *Golu* dolls as well. Similarly, in domestic *vrat*s (vowing rituals), Flueckiger observes the same kind of physical interaction with materials in *puja* as I have observed in doll-play during *Bommai Golu*. Pots filled with rice, clay feet dedicated to Amman, Lakshmi images made with turmeric, and festival guising (*vēsham*) all involve fashioning the image of the goddess and requires a playful engagement with materials readily available in the domestic sphere (Flueckiger, 2015, pp.154-59).

The labor of engaging with the deities through domestic *puja* has been proposed as "keeping hospitality" (Hancock, 1999, p.88). The devotee offers the deity the hospitality of visiting one's home, providing them food, shelter and fresh clothes to rest from their journey or travels. In the process, *neividhyam* or offerings are made to the *murti*, which are then received and consumed by the devotee. The theory of *puja* as hospitality, however, doesn't fully account for the playfulness of *Golu*. It only states the disposition of honoring the deity. In arguing that *Bommai Golu* is doll-play, I have suggested that playful enactments of hospitality, ornamentation, imitation and imagination are all necessary to successfully animate the dolls within the display and to create the entire *Golu* as a *murti*.

Human agents and their play are required to enliven the *Golu* (and its dolls). Devotion expressed through doll-play is thus representative of a familiar mode of female experience in the domestic sphere. Women and their ritual habits help to maintain order and regularity in the home that are expressions of everyday devotion, unaccounted for in larger festival or religious gatherings. As Flueckiger had rightly observed, "intimacy" is created through domestic *puja*, between women and their gods. Women's *Golu* play

express those habits most familiar to women themselves. *Golu* play also involves an intimate contact between mother and child and places the agency of animation into the hands of the domestic householders. Intimacy is thus created from using one's own materials to fashion, adorn and express devotion to gods. In this sense, the mode of devotion has more in common with doll-playing than with hospitality or imitating temple rituals. *Golu* play also involves an intimate contact as between mother and child and places the agency of animation into the hands of the domestic householders. In Mami's rendition of the Andal story, *vilaiyadal* or playfulness characterizes her engagement with Krishna and her assumed intimacy with her Lord.

Using the examples of Lalitha and Sumathi, I have analyzed another way in which *Bommai Golu* can be read as doll-play. Beyond ornamentation and play-acting, the two examples of *Golu* discussed in this chapter serve to recognize the relationship between the materiality and performance of *Golu*. The two sets of participants performed a reproduction of traditionally ritualized behavior, and innovation in their social and imagined histories. The interplay between reproduction and innovation is also testament to the physicality and the treatment of dolls. A doll can be a play-thing but can also become a *murti*when treated in particular ritual contexts. The process through which this occurs during *Bommai Golu* is one that is highlighted by an emphasis on doll-play. One of my interlocutors, a doll maker once said to me that "Hinduism teaches us about the value of dolls" I would add that dolls can teach us how religion might operate in our daily lives, animating the worlds of the gods and goddesses among us.

In this dissertation, I have analyzed the ways in which *Bommai Golu* come to be performed for a variety of functions, depicting a diversity of identities, using an assortment of materials but most importantly dolls. The divine status given to dolls, once

they enter the *Golu* space, is vital for understanding the process by which *Bommai Golu* retains its form through so many changes and contexts. While traditional Brahmin participants inherit their dolls, they can replicate their childhood celebration by mimicking motherhood and displaying various antiques passed down to them from their family members and ancestors. Among new participants, new dolls, innovative play and creative adornments can all be purchased and created to fully integrate into a traditionally Brahmin *pandigai*. The play allows the new and old participants to communicate with one another, and the dolls invariably can be placed together because they are indeed timeless. In other ritual contexts, the interaction between the new and old participants might be fraught with tension, with older participants prescribing proper conduct, while newer participants cope with conforming to those expectations. Within *Bommai Golu*, however, dolls are new and old to everyone and all participants (new and old) commence their first celebration only once married, making the appeal and performance of this festival arrangement of dolls approachable. The Trio, is an example of the ways in which institutions wish to take part in this communal or organic process of a festival's transformation. But, even the Trio use their Brahmin identity to serve as an authoritative back-drop for their workshops and lessons. Creative play is discouraged by the Trio. In their recent presentations, they spend a lot of time emphasizing that Hindu gods cannot use cellphones or "play cricket" like humans, and that such depictions take away from the religious nature of this festival. Though there are supporters to this viewpoint, the vast majority of *Golu* participants I witnessed enjoyed and played with their materials and yet believed the festival was religious. They wished to bridge the mythological worlds of other realities with this one, fostering intimacy with their gods and goddesses. In this chapter, I have tried to postulate that understanding *Golu* as playful devotion is one of the vital

ways by which we see how it thrives – continuing to function in multiple levels for the player, creative and replicating reality, fostering both learning and challenging pre-conceptions.

Bommai Golu is being thrust into the public landscape in more ways than imagined possible by the Trio. In the following conclusion, I briefly discuss two innovations to *Bommai Golu* that will be useful for further study.

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CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Bommai Golu is literally translated as a festival "court of dolls." *Bommai Golu* is also a festival display of identity and play. To assemble a *Golu*, participants use materials to exhibit memories, family lineages, professional networks, or religious beliefs and playfully arrange dioramas to express their devotion to Lakshmi. The *Golu*s are thus material representations of the participants' social and religious worlds. Identity is both distinct to an individual as well as representative of a larger community, and for *Bommai Golu* doll-play is used to communicate this duality. If a participant's identity changes, so does their *Golu* display, traveling with them to new countries, adopting new fashions, customs or materials, increasing in scale and garnering larger audiences. When placing the same dolls in a variety of assemblies or dioramas, these deities become animated and bring their unique identities into presence during the festival. Thus, *Bommai Golu* appeals to a whole range of participants from a variety of socio-economic classes and castes.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the context in which one is exposed to *Bommai Golu* alters the significance of the festival, the materiality of the *Golu* dolls, and the values it adds to one's social and religious life. The different contexts are currently competing for survival, and it is yet to be seen if one context wins out over another. The endurance of *Bommai Golu* will hinge upon its adaptability, one that values its materiality but also retains its display of identity and play.

Brahmin and non-Brahmin participants in *Bommai Golu* have different motivations for preserving this festival. Brahmin participants enjoyed sustaining their

family's traditions passed down from their mothers, and for many they wished to represent their heritage in a material way, telling the story of their family's past and how it fit in with Indian religion and history. In their *Golu*, I would often find gods, goddesses, saints, and historical legends, alongside dioramas of neighborhood rituals or processions, quotidian activities in their lives, creative use of household substances and materials and a juxtaposition between rural (meant to be their ancestral villages) and urban scenarios. The non-Brahmins who associated with Brahmins in their social circles and who had begun to adopt their friend's caste-specific traditions and rituals and told me that they were looking for ways to show their devotion to the goddess. *Bommai Golu*, among a few other women's rituals, stood out for its playful appeal and lack of rigid procedures. The Brahmin women stood in as "ritual experts," translating, privileging, and discarding certain facets of *Bommai Golu* in their teachings of the tradition to these new participants who wished to accumulate religious capital in the process. Moreover, the doll collections can be acquired and maintained even with minimal resources. In contrast to many Brahmin *Golu*, non-Brahmin *Golu* don't show materially valuable or antique collections for their *Bommai Golu*, but rather, celebrate the plethora and abundance of new dolls and crafts from the market.

The Mylapore Trio showed and told me of how their organization can provide religious ritual guidance as service to their local community. They wished to teach many of the new and old participants, who seem to have many questions about the importance of particular religious practices, about how to keep *Bommai Golu* in a "proper way." Their own *Golu* memorializes antique collections passed down to them from their own adopted parents and community members, as well as modern and pre-made doll sets from the rapidly evolving doll markets around India. They don't restrict themselves to deity dolls

from south India, but display crafts and dolls collected in their pilgrimage travels during the year. Their *Bommai Golu* celebrations are different because they prescribe Hindu ritual as way to cultivate children's religious identity, and only permitting religiously themed doll displays, so as to preserve the original essence of this festival. Similar sentiments are expressed among South-Asian Americans, who feel that in the absence of Hindu culture, they have to teach their immigrant children about religion using festivals like *Bommai Golu*. These diaspora Indians also feel that the original festival was meant to be instructive. All *Golu* displays are somewhat pedagogical because they are playful. Some teach girls to mimic their mothers or her habits and some teach children about mythological stories or legends. The Trio and diaspora Hindus, however, especially value this facet of *Bommai Golu*, placing its pedagogical function as its core value in their contemporary religious life.

Whatever one's motivations for perpetuating *Bommai Golu*, local and global participants have, in recent decades, increased the grandeur and scale of *Bommai Golu*. Today this festival has participants all over the world, and from a diversity of families. It has grown, from a domestic *pandigai* in some Brahmin homes to a south Indian or Tamil version of *Navaratri*. This change in its label conveys the ways in which *Bommai Golu* has become iconic of a regional identity, shifting from a religious ritual of one caste community to become representative of all Tamil Hindus? The growing scale and grandeur of *Bommai Golu* is also indicative of the various political, social, and commercial parties that have an interest in its foreseeable future. The identity of *Bommai Golu* is thus shifting. Caste identity, while still useful for establishing matrimonial relationships among Hindus, remains largely undiscussed in social settings. As they narrated their personal life histories to me, Brahmin participants also remained silent

about caste and chose to project their Hindu religious identities. With this silence, *Bommai Golu* can also be touted as a Hindu festival among other popular celebrations like *Diwali*, *Holi* and *Ganesh Chathurti*.

There have been some dramatic innovations to the *Bommai Golu* landscape in recent years that suggest directions for further research, two of which I will briefly describe here: non-Brahmin celebration of *Golu* and virtual *Golu*. Firstly, I will discuss the phenomena of non-Brahmins adopting *Golu* – those participants who have no associations to Brahmins in their social circles, but who see Brahmins as upholders of *Bommai Golu*. By their definitions, *Bommai Golu* is a traditional festival to honor the goddess and her many creations. These new participants are eager to learn practices and habits unfamiliar to them. They mention that *Bommai Golu* is essential to their ritual calendar today because of the benefits it proffers them in their social and religious lives. Secondly, I turn to an online *Golu* that questions the very notion of ritual calendars by positing an everlasting display of dolls, populated with gods, goddesses and avatars (virtual icon depicting a human on the internet). This example, which began as a marketing campaign, has implications far beyond media as it shows us an extreme potential of this festival arrangement of dolls – where humans can become dolls and *Golu* displays last forever in the internet virtual space.

***Bommai Golu* for Hindus**

I conducted my fieldwork primarily in Brahmin localities, in Mylapore, India, and Sunnyvale, California. I also encountered the Mylapore Trio, who offered teachings about "proper Golu" methods and argue that *Golu* is available to all castes, but, in fact, most attendees in their workshops were Brahmin. However, I did meet two non-Brahmin

women who have begun to keep Golu. Keerti, a Maharashtrian who married a Tamil Brahmin and settled in Mylapore, and Sheila, a Delhiite who married a Tamil non-Brahmin and settled in south Bay, California. Sheila is of particular interest because she had no natal or marital Brahmin connection. I also met two other women, Parvathi and Aparna, who may have been valuable additions to this dissertation. I met Parvathi at a Trio nine-yard sari workshop when I was there on preliminary dissertation research and did not follow up with her since I had not determined the dimensions of this project. Aparna is a fifty-year-old new participant who started keeping *Golu* and other women's festivals after learning about the powerful effects of the goddess (from all cultures) in an ecstatic dance session with "yoga buddies" in Berkeley, California. Aparna is a South-Asian American Hindu who only began keep *Bommai Golu* two years before I met her. She also teaches freelance at local high schools and gives lectures to empower students using lessons on goddesses from around the world. I did not pursue leads with Aparna as I felt her adoption was more the exception than the norm. Both Parvathi and Aparna suggest new directions for future research, asking what new narratives of the goddess and her worship will be woven around the materiality of *Bommai Golu*? In addition to or absence of traditional *Golu* dolls, what sorts of materials do these women display and why?

Among the new Brahmin participants, I found a reverence for the history of the practice of *Bommai Golu*. One of the viewpoints repeatedly expressed to me was that *Bommai Golu* was a Brahmin tradition, but like all brahminical traditions that had to change their access in modern times, today *Bommai Golu* can and must be practiced by anyone. In their views I heard several things. I heard a validation of the traditional identity of this festival, Brahmins as upholders of this tradition and linking that caste

identity to the material and social wealth of Brahmins. I heard participants tell me that antique dolls were part of the Brahmins collection, because only they could afford to collect, store and transport such large dolls. They also expressed that Brahmins lived in joint families and spent more time preserving their festivals since it was their "duty." In their expressions I also heard that only Brahmins knew how to keep *Golu* and that this was something to be learned from them, because they owned the practice (albeit historically). Such views held by new participants who are poor Brahmins makes sense to me, because they glorify their ancestors and co-Brahmins in an attempt to elevate and aggrandize their own identities. To poor Brahmins who weren't part of the few families who traditionally kept *Bommai Golu* (usually lawyers and accountants from erstwhile courts), this festival opened new doors to socialization. They too were Brahmin, so, they could freely interact with other Brahmins and glorify the history of the Brahminical past of *Bommai Golu* while simultaneously espousing its inclusive nature as a festival for everyone. What they mean here is that *Bommai Golu* is for every kind of Brahmin.

On the other hand, such views held by non-Brahmins and non-Tamils who wish to learn and adopt a new practice raise more questions about how religious and ritual practices from the domestic sphere migrate into one another's homes. The sharing of this ritual space is far more playful than imagined before, as caste-specific practices, especially among women. Sheila was led to Aarti by Durga-Ma. Sheila's adoption of this friend's religious festival suggests a natural interplay between religious ritual adoption, contrasted to the explicit teachings of organizations like the Trio or Chinmaya Mission. While the organic sharing of religious practices appears non-threatening, I do wonder what practices do those like Sheila's erase, when they adopt rituals like *Bommai Golu*? In other words, what did her mother do for *Navaratri* and why didn't she display her own

natal family practices? Is it the case in that in quest for portraying a normative Hindu identity in America or India, the diversity within this term Hindu is being homogenized? Furthermore, what identities and habits count as traditional and worthy of preservation and what strategies allow certain practices or rituals to survive over others?

Can *Bommai Golu* be Eternal?

When *Bommai Golu* was a festival only meant to viewed in other's homes, memories of past *Golu* were intangible and fleeting. Traditionally, *Golu* are created only once a year, and when they are dismantled, they exist only in fragmented memory of specific dolls or scenes. Most women's childhood memories of *Golu* focus on special dolls, memories of buying dolls, or some important gods or figurines passed down from parents or grandparents. The introduction of photography and the internet has changed the ways *Golu* are remembered. Today, pictures of *Golu* are collected, stored, shared, blogged and analyzed on the internet. One family documents their family's *Golu* display year after year just to share within the family, while another may collect pictures to post on their blog about Brahmin food and rituals, and a third family may display *Golu* images on various websites hoping to win acclaim or the cash prize in a competition. Since all these images are circulated freely over email and social media, they have also become part of a communal and public memory of the festival.

Following along the lines of a communal or truly public *Golu*, the Britannia Biscuit company, between 2005 and 2012, held an annual *Golu* competition as part of a marketing campaign for over seven years. This competition, shared on popular media and circulated across India, was labeled *Golu Galata* after the Tamil word for "noisy celebrations." The message was to "revive a dying tradition of our ancestors." Parle

received tremendous appreciation and recognition for its cultural efforts from a number of public community members, newspaper articles, Facebook posts, and celebrities for this initiative. The *Golu* campaign was three-fold: firstly, Parle hosted a *Golu* competition with large cash prizes (upto Rs.25,000) for the best *Golu* entries; Parle sponsored Rs.5000 for two students in each of over 500 schools in Tamilnadu to popularize the message of *Golu*; and lastly, Parle entered the Guinness book of World Records for hosting the largest assembly of dolls in 2011, where participants from all over the country were invited to assemble their dolls in a Chennai stadium. Celebrities were called to inaugurate this function which was covered by many local news channels and posted online. On their Facebook page, *Golu Galata* ran monthly competitions in which participants had to guess and match images of figurines to famous deities and their narratives.

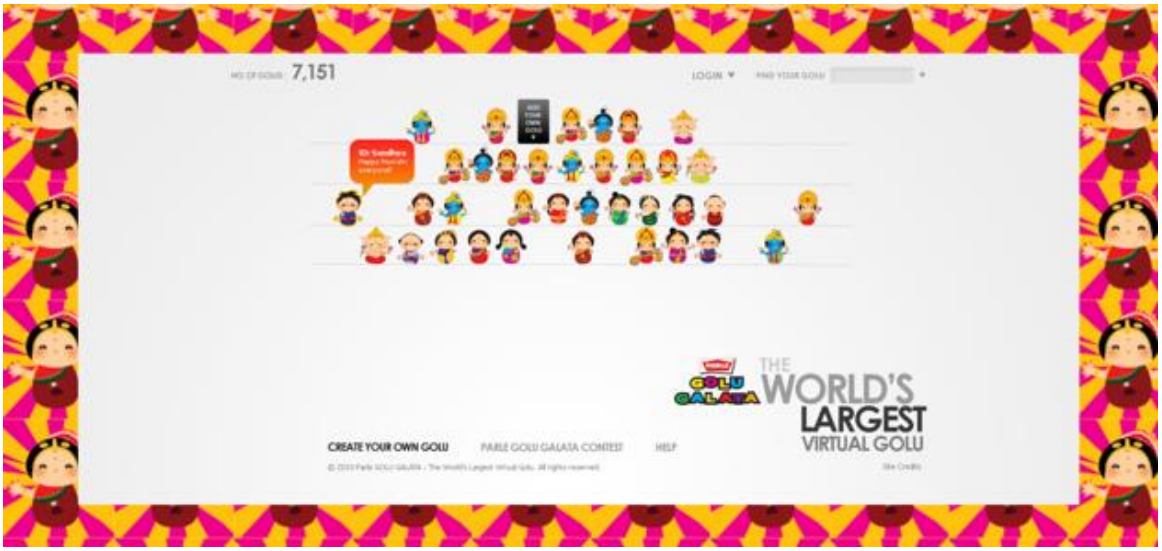

Figure 11. Parle's virtual Golu

Parle also revolutionized the way people interacted with *Golu* dolls by creating an interactive website with four moving *Golu* tiers on www.parlegolugalata.com [Figure 11;

01/20/2015]. This website has since been removed but the steps for participants were as follows.

Step one was to make an avatar. They created friendly and cute online avatars that represented famous deities like Ganesha, Vishnu, Shiva, Sarasvati, and Laksmi. Anyone could choose to depict a doll of one of these famous gods, could choose to be one of the gods themselves, or create non-religious figure using the hair and clothing options. Each god or goddess also came with two clothing choices. Humans came with more options for hair style, clothing, gestures and accessories. *Step two* was to type a message and enter personal information. Through this window, participants could enliven the dolls, make them say things they would have said, essentially making them relevant to contemporary times. While a few participants chose to say a religious or Indian greeting, most players shared instant messages to their friends using popular messaging lingo and short-forms. *Step three* was to view one's characters on screen. This page could be revisited any number of times and players would get to see their avatar on the tiers of a virtual *Golu*, from where they wished their friends or family. The tiers kept moving from right to left, allowing many different avatars to show up. If you hovered over an avatar, an orange box would pop up, giving you the ID reference of the creator and their message to be shared with the site visitors.

Parle's *Golu Galata*, for which they created the world's largest and only virtual *Golu* display, is truly innovative. Not only does this virtual *Golu* provide a platform to view the same *Golu* over and over, it also lasts throughout the year and can be accessed immediately. This *Golu* is also innovative for its direct message about the identity of the dolls. The participants or site visitors are considered one among the avatars or gods. Humans can choose to be gods or humans. The play that is experienced in creating,

adorning, and then staging one's doll of themselves as Vishnu or Shiva is truly unique. Moreover, play is taken to the full extreme where god and human are conflated as one. In my discussions about *Bommai Golu* as doll-play, this sort of playful gesturing was implied but never actually witnessed. While humans depicted gods playfully, no participant told me they were one of the gods or characters within their *Golu*. This is what sets apart the marketing attempts made by Parle's *Golu Galata*. In claiming that the tradition was dying out, they were innovating the very materiality of this festival arrangement of dolls.

Moreover, to gain more biscuit sales, Parle encouraged participation from Indian and global audiences, expanding the domestic and Brahmin history of this festival. The site that was created in 2010 has since been taken down as it was only part of a limited marketing campaign. However, the specific attempt of a commercial company to enter and thrive in the religious ritual marketplace deserves serious consideration. *Golu Galata* evades the questions of ritual authority, caste identity, or religious pedagogy and dives directly into the subject matter – the dolls. The dolls are not literally material figurines, but avatars and their identities are fluid and yet recognizable. Anyone can participate in the festival and the requirements are quite limited. There is no expectation to create an assembly in one's home or invite guests. Participants are invited to send pictures of doll and craft displays for *Navaratri* and were also invited to assemble their doll collections in a larger public place. In the weekly competitions held on Facebook, participants from all over the world competed to guess the identity of the dolls and their narratives. Taking this festival to its true virtual and playful potential, *Golu Galata* seems to leave everything open – form and content.

Parle's *Golu Galata* and its attempt at virtual *Golu* and the rapidly evolving non-Brahmin participation in *Bommai Golu* are part of this festival's future but not of its

present. Dramatic transformations such as these two force us to question what characteristics define *Bommai Golu* and what might be the limits to such innovations? I did not meet non-Brahmins who kept *Bommai Golu* in Mylapore nor did Parle witness a monumental jump in *Golu* participation but perhaps only in biscuit sales. Both cases hint towards the inclusivity possible in a festival arrangement of dolls. Dolls can be for everyone in theory and yet they seem to remain constrained by their physicality. The playful arrangements and dioramas at once reveal the possibilities and constraints of ritual creativity produced by *Bommai Golu*. What is created instead is a podium where everything and everyone is welcome, but where only some materials and people make an appearance.

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