Water Reservoirs in South India
An anthropological approach

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1.   Introduction

1.1   Water in the spotlight of international concern

Water has arrived into the limelight of international concern in the past decade. Horrible figures are reiterated like mantras: "At the beginning of 2000 one-sixth (1.1 billion people) of the world's population was without access to improved water supply (...) Approximately 4 billion cases of diarrhoea each year cause 2.2 million deaths, mostly among children under the age of five. This is equivalent to one child dying every 15 seconds, or 20 jumbo jets crashing every day. These deaths represent approximately 15% of all child deaths under the age of five in developing countries. Water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions reduce diarrhoeal disease on average by between one-quarter and one-third."[1] This is connected with a call for action.[2]

There have always been droughts and shortages of water; perhaps the first to shock on an international level was that in South India in 1876 – 1878.[3] The recently soaring international concern for water coincides with the move to include the fluid in the global market.[4] In most countries of the earth, the supply of fresh water is – or has been until lately – the task of the state or of institutions, be they profit or nonprofit, that are rather localised. This nexus started crumbling at about the time when former socialist countries, entering into the global market economy, opened their doors (more precisely their mains and sewers) for international corporations. These identified water supply as a new market.[5] Companies that are based in France, Germany and the USA have gained a say in the supply of water to people on the other side of the globe.[6]

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[1] WHO 2000.

[2] In the frame of the goal of sustainable development formulated during the Earth Summit at Rio in 1992, the UN Millennium Declaration of 2000 set down targets in which the international community pledged, firstly, to halve by 2015 the proportion of people who are unable to reach, or to afford, safe drinking water; and, secondly, to stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources, by developing water management strategies at the regional, national and local levels, which promote both equitable access and adequate supplies. UNESCO 2003. The documents of the Earth Summit at Rio are available at http://www.ecouncil.ac.cr/about/ftp/riodoc.htm. The latest call for action is based on the Resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations 58 /217 launching an "International Decade for Action 'Water for Life' 2005 – 2015".

[3] Photographs taken during that drought, for example, by Willoughby Wallace Hooper, were among the first pictures of almost-starved disaster-afflicted people that reached Europe and North America, and they helped to create the generic image of poor India or generally the poor South. See Mesenhöller 1996.

[4] Mirrored in the debates whether water is an economic good or a common good or a basic human right (there is no world wide legally binding document; according to the General Comment No. 15 on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 26,11,2002, water should be treated as a public good, a social and cultural good, and not primarily as an economic good or a commodity: CESCR 2002) and whether its supply shall be considered to be a public service (in the sense of the French *service publique*), a "general interest service" or plainly a business. See Hall 2001.

[5] For example, Werner Böttcher, of RWE Aqua GmbH (the world's third largest water supplier), expects investments on a scale of up to Euro 300 milliard in his sector to be made in the next years. Interview 15,5,2002. For the activities of Suez (now Ondeo) and Vivendi (now Veolia Water), the largest private water supply corporations, see http://www.suez.com and http://www.veoliawater.com and also http://www.publicintegrity.org/water/db.aspx?sID=db&par=6 for a third party assessment.

[6] Various international conferences and associations (e.g., the second World Water Forum at Den Haag /The Netherlands in March, 2000 and the first Freshwater Conference in Bonn / Germany in December 2001 or the Global Water Partnership, see http://www.gwpforum.org) have served to level the ground for corporate business

Resistance against this liberalisation and globalisation of the water supply emerged quickly, fostering the upsurge of interest in water and riding on its wave. Proponents of that resistance are no less international people than their corporate counterparts (though they are lacking the latters' financial potential), yet they present themselves as activists for decentralised "traditions", upheld by "communities" or "the people" who take care of "their" local resources. This is thought to be equitable and just.[7] Having authority over water resources becomes emblematic for enjoying political independence and authority over one's life.

This thesis examines modes of supplying water which, in this context, have been cited as examples for "local traditions".[8] In fact, they are local in various respects, including that

- they make use of water which precipitates on the spot,
- they are used, operated and maintained by people who live nearby,
- they consist of materials that are available locally,
- they are designed to fit in local climatic and soil conditions and in the local geological relief, in contrast to pipes, pumps and valves that are standardised to fit to a certain extent everywhere in the world.[9]

This thesis will touch the discussion of notions such as "locality", "tradition" and "community" or "the people". It will explore the tricky interface of individuals, the state and other collectivities. This implies a deliberation of the changing significance of "public" [*potu*, in Tamil]. The thesis will examine categories like "inside" and "outside", "cultivated" and "non cultivated", "clean" and "unclean", "pure" and "polluted" and "sacred" and "profane". All this contributes to reaching the thesis' main aim, to understand the meaning of water reservoirs in South India.

1.2   Water reservoirs in South India

Peeking out of the window of a plane that is flying over coastal Tamil Nadu, say on a December day after a plentiful monsoon, one discovers a landscape that is more water than land. Large lakes are covering the area. One edge of each lake is more distinct than the others, often in the shape of a half moon. This is because these lakes are reservoirs. They come in chains, one below the other, with channels connecting them. The surplus water of the reservoirs above spills into those below, and so

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in the water supply. The World Bank promotes private participation in water supply ("It is not a perfect alternative, but it is a good alternative. So today if you look about water and sanitation [of] what we lend to utilities, about 30 percent is to private [bodies]. I mean we always lend to governments, we do not lend to the private sector, but to governments where there are the private operators involved. [...] Now in my personal opinion, I would like that to be higher" John Briscoe, Senior Advisor , Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development Network, The World Bank, interview 4,12,2001).

[7] E.g., Barlow and Clarke 2002, Shiva 2002, McCully 1996. Their contributions are to be distinguished from the quite pragmatic approach of trade unions. They focus on battling against corruption in awarding the contracts, for accountability of the suppliers to the consumers and, ultimately, for the employees of the water suppliers (see http://www.psiru.org).

[8] E.g., Shiva 2002, Agarwal and Narain 1999.

[9] This does not at all mean that the society in which these modes of water supply can be found would exist somehow yonder the international economy; it is, of course, intensely connected with the world as people and products from it are exported to places all over the globe, as well as, products and ideas from elsewhere are dealt with or consumed locally.

on, down to the ocean. The presence of these reservoirs is so overwhelming that, viewed from above, it is their presence that forms the landscape, lending it its characteristic face.

Down on earth in the same area, in everyday life in which I took part doing fieldwork for this thesis, these reservoirs have none of that prominence. In my study area, which will be presented in detail in the next chapter, the majority of the inhabitants rarely go to them, especially not as long as the reservoirs are full of water. At most they glance at them over their shoulders or out of bus windows when they are passing by, which happens more often than not because many foot paths and roads lead alongside those big lakes. Of much more importance on the ground (in terms of frequency of use, of involvement in social, political and religious affairs and of valuation by the people around) are reservoirs, most of which are woven into the fabric of the settlements and which are so small that they can hardly be discerned from above out of a jet.

The literature on reservoirs in South India reflects more the view from above than that from below. It mainly focuses on the big reservoirs, and that too, on the aspect of irrigation, especially its management. The pivotal study is by Adiceam.[10] His geographical account of irrigation in Tamil Nadu is already of historical value; many of the practices he described have vanished today – at least in the study area, sway-poles[11], garden land, songs rendered while lifting water etc. are, at most, topics of nostalgic memories. In the 1970s, the "Green Revolution" was introduced in India with new varieties of paddy and other grains that promise high yields but demand much water and at exact timings. This spurred the output of literature on irrigation, including on what came to be called "development alternatives" and related also to sources or methods of irrigation that could be traced to the time before the onset of the "Green Revolution", such as the water reservoirs of South India.[12]

However, there are only hints at the meaning and value that accrues to these spatially enormous entities in the perception of the people around.[13] Most gravely, the smaller reservoirs, that are usually attached to settlements, have hardly received any scholarly scrutiny. An exception is Hegewald's (2002) thorough study of water architecture. She covers entire South Asia. For Tamil Nadu, the CPRI Foundation in Chennai published a survey on certain small reservoirs (2002). Jutta Jain-Neubauer (1981) and Morna Livingston (2002) have researched a very specific type of reservoirs within (or close to) Indian settlements: the elaborate stepwells of Gujarat. These books also probe into the meaning of the reservoirs. However, they concentrate on a few architecturally remarkable reservoirs, leaving out both their more mundane counterparts and the aforementioned large reservoirs. I have not come across a study that takes into account all reservoirs, big and small, of one particular place and exposes how they interrelate. Yet I argue that exactly this is necessary to understand their meaning and way of functioning. It will also elucidate why certain reservoirs are higher valued than others or why some are neatly kept whereas others are what is sometimes perceived of as dilapidated.

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[10] Adiceam 1966.

[11] Tamil: *ēṟṟam*. A see-saw like water lifting device. Also called picottah in South India, a word with Portuguese origin according to Hobson-Jobson's dictionary.

[12] E.g., Venkatamarani 1974, Chambers 1977, Farmer 1980, Singh 1981, Malhotra 1982, Meinzen-Dick 1984, Pant 1984, Engelhardt 1984 and 1985, von Oppen and Rao 1987, Dhawan 1988 and 1993, Wade 1988, Mohanakrishnan 1990, Janakarajan 1991, Sengupta 1991 and 1993, Maloney and Raju 1994, Sivasubramaniyan 1995, Palanisami et al. 1997, Mosse 1999. Vaidyanathan 1999a and 1999b. On legal aspects see Vani 1992. In historical perspective: Ludden 1979 and 1994, Dikshit 1990 and 1993; Srinivasan 1991,

[13] Reddy 1990. For Sri Lanka, see Leach 1961: 151.

What I do in this thesis is exactly this – I focus on a small region in north Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state of the Indian Union, which is suffused by reservoirs, large and small. Part of my study area is one of those semi-urban settlements of the type which is sprawling throughout Tamil Nadu yet whose dynamics have so far not earned much attention in anthropological texts that rather deal with cities or with villages but hardly focus on the betwixt and between. These reservoirs, I argue, are interrelated and their meaning can only sensibly be considered if this fact is taken into account. Furthermore, they are not on par. They fall into different categories which are opposed to each other and they also differ in how they are valued.

The basic distinction is that between the large reservoirs [*ēri*, in local parlance], which are usually attached to fields, and small ones [*kuḷam*], that are, more often than not, parts of settlements. It is always clear which one is a *ēri* and which one a *kuḷam*. They do not only differ by name and by proximity to the inhabited area, but also by their size, shape and sophistication of design, by their usage, management and ownership, by the deities and rituals associated with them and according to the class, gender, caste and profession of people who usually use them. Most importantly, they differ in their capacity to contain the water and how they themselves, in turn, are contained in social, cultural and cosmic orders. This, I argue, is crucial for the value and the importance they are accorded with in their localities. Generally speaking, the firmer the containment, the higher is the valuation both of the reservoir and of its water.

Secondly, within the categories of *ēri* and *kuḷam*, there are in turn sub-categories. They are, likewise, opposed to each other and mutually exclusive. In the case of the less valued *ēri*s, this categorisation is less clearly cut than in the more distinct *kuḷam*s; it ensues on the line of their size and of their position in a row of *ēri*s. In the study area, minor *ēri*s are called *tāṅkal*, *kuṭṭai* or *cittēri* whereas the large ones are invariably "*ēri*s".[14] The bigger *ēri*s and the higher ones (in geological level) in a chain of *ēri*s are usually those which have a higher capacity to contain water in terms of amount and duration. Hence, among *ēri*s, this type is generally valued higher.[15]

*Kuḷam*s are not only, in many respects, attributed to more value; their sub-categorisation is also more elaborate. The basic distinction among them is between *tīrttam*s and other *kuḷam*s. *tīrttam* implies that the reservoir is especially thought to be a ford to divinity, in contrast to others that do not, in the first place, enjoy such a reputation; the latter are only used to perform certain rituals if no *tīrttam* is available. This does not mean that a *tīrttam* is always in a better shape than other *kuḷam*s, but among the fairly well kept *kuḷam*s of the study area, most are *tīrttam*s. Among *tīrttam*s, in turn, the neatest ones are those on which float festivals [*teppa*(*m*) *tiruviḻā*] are conducted. In some parts of Tamil Nadu (but not in my study area), the generic term "*teppakuḷam*" is used for them.

Among *kuḷam*s that are not *tīrttam*s, those that are used to water animals (and that are mostly somewhat distanced from settlements, be it towards forests or on hilltops) can be set off from those that mainly serve human needs. The latter are distinguished into those that mainly supply potable

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[14] Caṉmukaṉ 1995: 146 – 149 lists names of different water places.

[15] As all three localities of my study are situated on top of chains of *ēri*s, I logically could not go very deeply into the topic of valuation of one *ēri* versus another one – I often overheard remarks, especially of visitors from lower lying places, about my study area's good *ēri*s, but I did not follow that up systematically as it would have demanded too much digression out of my study area. Within the study area, smaller *ēri*s are usually called *tāṅkal* whereas the biggest ones are named *ēri*s. The former are the first to disappear in the onset of the hot season, being turned into series of brick kilns or covered with paddy fields.

water and others that are primarily used for bathing. Among these, in turn, there is an opposition between those which are for day to day usages and others that are, in the first place, used for special purposes. Finally, these differ according to the usage – mainly for washerpeople [*vaṇṇāṉ kuḷam*] or to take a bath for those who have attended cremations.

Of course, like everything in life, these categories are never unequivocal and uninfringed; for example, a *kuḷam* that was, by some consultants, definitely designated as a "*tīrttam*" (in contrast to an "ordinary" *kuḷam*) was, by others, not acknowledged to be a *tīrttam* any longer on the grounds that it had become too dirty. Not only in what informants said, also in what they did there happened to be inconsistencies. Several allowed water buffaloes to quench their thirst in *tīrttam*s, sometimes a man takes his bath in a *kuḷam* that is meant to provide drinking water or now and then even rituals take place in *ēri*s although they are meant to be performed at *kuḷam*s. There are three reasons for such occurrences. Firstly, lacking a more high profile reservoir at hand, one will downsize one's expectations – resorting, for example, to an *ēri* to perform one's ritual if no *kuḷam* is nearby. Secondly, seeming inconsistencies with the general pattern can be explained by recurrence to local particularities which, however, do not counter the sketched principle of differentiation – as, for example, in a case (which will be dealt with in more detail later), in which a *kuḷam*, though set off for providing drinking water, is, by unanimous consent of all neighbours, still open for the local Brahmin to take a bath, as he is obviously not understood to be polluting the reservoir. Thirdly, of course, there is always trespass; it happens astonishingly rarely out of protest and usually due to laziness: why walk long distances with one's water buffaloes or one's laundry if one can water, respectively launder it, in the nearest *tīrttam*?! When I remarked about such transgressions to people of the neighbourhood, the reaction was usually either to chase the trespasser away or to sigh helplessly and make a miserable grimace.

Table 1: types of water reservoirs

water reservoirs

kuḷam — *ēri*

tīrttam — "normal" *k.*

periyēri   *tāṅkal*

t. for float festivals   "normal" t.

kuḷam for humans   k. for animals

k. for drinking water
(often: "*veḷḷai kuḷam*")

k. for bathing and
other purposes

k. for day to day purposes

k. primarily for special purposes

k. for washerpeople   k. at cremation grounds

high profile /in principle pure   low profile /on the verge to impurity
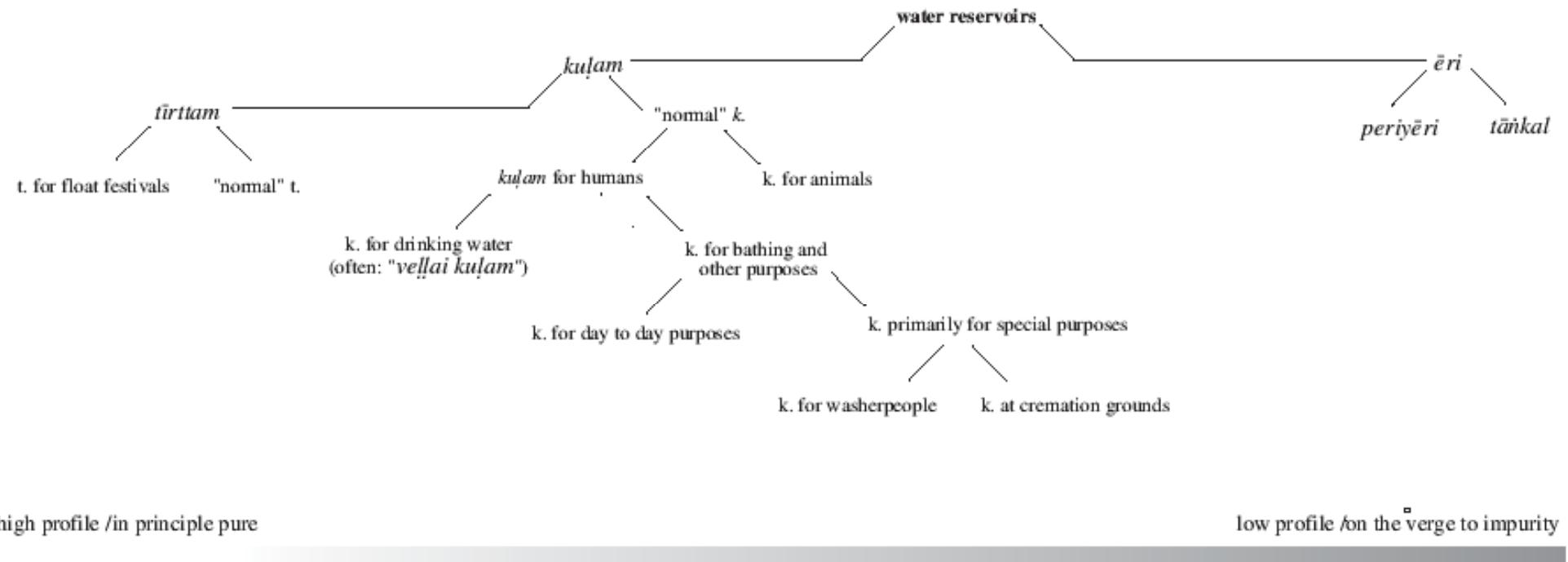
The sketched categorisation cannot only be drawn from verbal statements of my consultants on water reservoirs. It is, notwithstanding the mentioned deviations and exceptions, also fairly consistently enacted in my study area. This differentiation serves, as I will show in this thesis, to keep many water bodies clean, and a few, adding to that, (ritually) pure. Some reservoirs can be physically more or less clean and ritually pure just because other reservoirs in the same locality aren't. Exactly because the latter serve for the more polluting usages, they make it possible to keep others free from them. In that sense, they are interrelated. This is why only considering the array of water reservoirs, big and small, in one locality as a whole can lead to the proper understanding of their meaning and functioning.

If water reservoirs can be properly understood only in relation to each other and to the "whole" locality they belong to, then it must be clear what this "whole" locality is. From the beginning, the discourse on India and its society has been replete of "wholes" – be it in the affirmative or deploring their loss or negating their existence. A first type of authors conceived of villages as wholes, in the sense of being rather isolated, self-sufficient and self-governing entities.[16] Temples and sacred towns were taken to be miniature representations of the cosmos (and thus of the wholeness *per se*). Socio-economical relations in the exchange of goods and services in villages (jajmani),[17] as well as, the aspect of caste[18] were interpreted as systems; and in common understanding, a system implies wholeness. Also Sanskrit texts conceive of mankind in organic metaphors of a body and its members, hence somehow as a "whole".[19] A second type of authors – which includes colonial administrators, present day official circles and "activists" in "people's movements" – deplored the loss of what they perceived to once have been functioning wholes, thus endorsing their existence: village communities that governed the local resources in an equitable way and traditions that safeguarded the ecosystem.[20] The third type of authors challenged such understandings of wholeness altogether, pointing to the historicity of villages, temples, exchange relations and castes.[21] Towards the end of the last century, notions of wholeness became more and more subject to the critique of orientalism, and it was shown how deemed "wholes" were imaginations or constructions by scholars and administrators, sometimes turned into "reality" by the help of politics that modelled its categories on the lines of those putative "wholes".[22]

As this thesis will demonstrate, ideas of "wholes" are in fact functional, yet not only as carcasses of mind in orientalists' perception, but as notions (if not ideologies) which are actively promulgated by people in the study area and which are acted upon. Water reservoirs serve both as arenas and as resources in the enactment of these conceptions of "wholes" – by the ways in which (and by whom) they are managed, utilised and maintained, in symbolical discourses and in the rituals performed in them or at them. An important point in that context is that one and the same reservoir may be made to relate to different "wholes" according to the social, political, possibly also religious stance of the actor.

One conception of the "whole" that water reservoirs belong to and help to constitute is what I will term "neighbourhood". This refers, in the first place, to the space that immediately surrounds them, to the houses at their flanks and their inhabitants. Who belongs to the neighbourhood shows whenever it

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[16] Maine 1861, Baden-Powell 1899, Wade 1980.

[17] First depicted in detail by Wiser 1936. See also Gould 1958 and Beidelman 1959.

[18] Dumont 1999 [1970].

[19] Manu 1991: xxxv, 6 - 7.

[20] E. g., Mukundan 1992, Agarwal and Narain 1999, Shiva 2002.

[21] E. g., Beals 1962, Marriott 1955, Bailey 1963, Epstein 1973, Bēteille 1966

[22] E. g., Washbrook 1989, Fuller 1989, Ludden 1994, Inden 1990, Dube 1998 , Mosse 1999, Dirks 2001.

comes to joint action towards them (e.g., who picks up his spade and helps to prevent the neighbourhood's water reservoir from breaking or to clear its inlets from silt and refuse or who signs a petition to relevant state institutions that demands better maintenance) or simply in who uses the reservoirs. It becomes conspicuous whenever people who are deemed "outsiders" are evicted from the reservoir. "Neighbourhood" may imply that its inhabitants are kin or belong to the same caste, but it does not have to. Actually, in my study area, in most neighbourhoods live people of diverse backgrounds, within the category of tenants even more so than among house owners. Neighbourhoods are likely to have proper names. In some of them, certain men act as headmen and inhabitants assemble irregularly in councils to solve specific problems. These are purely informal institutions, they are not elected or otherwise officially designated. Though a neighbourhood may "share" an *ēri* with other neighbourhoods, it normally encompasses at least three *kuḷam*s: one for animals and two for humans, among the latter one for drinking water and the other one for bathing etc. But usually there are more, and in case the *ēri* is nearby, animals may be taken there instead of to a *kuḷam* of their own. Generally speaking, the more active people are towards "their" neighbourhoods, the better kept are usually "their" *kuḷam*s.

A second "whole" that may form the frame of reference for the sketched categorisation of water reservoirs is the municipality or the "village", overriding the subdivision into different neighbourhoods. More than the latters', their way to manage and maintain water reservoirs involves formal and professional institutions: councils and mayors that are elected, as well as, officials for whom the management is part of their profession, be it in the frame of the municipal administration or of the administration of the state temples. This notion of a "whole" is more centralised in contrast to the conception of the "whole" as neighbourhood. It entails that people do not become active towards the reservoir that is spatially the most proximate to their residences, but towards reservoirs that are at some distance, yet still of importance to them as both, the reservoir and the person, belong to the same "whole", that is, their municipality or their village. Practically speaking, those who identify with the locality as a whole rather than with their respective neighbourhoods will not use (or perform functions at or maintain) the reservoirs nearest to their houses but walk all the way to other reservoirs which may be farther away but pertaining to the locality as a whole. These more "central" reservoirs are likely to be bigger and more elaborately designed than their decentral counterparts. Hence, in a way, this notion of a "whole" entails the centralisation of the water reservoirs within its ambit. In turn, the water reservoirs help to further that "whole" municipality or "village" as they serve as repertories of symbols and as reasons for action towards that "whole", for example, when a group claims to do good to the locality as a whole by doing good to a particular water reservoir that has attained a central role in that locality (chapter twelve depicts such a "central" reservoir).

One tangible result of this centralisation is that a smaller number of (well kept) reservoirs is needed than in the case of the "whole" they relate to are neighbourhoods. According to the above sketched principle of how water reservoirs are kept clean, each "whole" needs more than one water reservoir, so that at least one unclean one enables the cleanliness of at least one other. If a number of, say, three neighbourhoods conflate in one "whole" municipality or village, logically, the number of reservoirs that are needed to fulfil the principle of differentiation is reduced to a third. The bigger and more populated a "whole" to which the water reservoirs are made to relate is, the smaller is the absolute number of reservoirs per capita needed. In everyday life, this may cause the inconvenience that people have to walk longer distances to do their laundry, bathe or catch fish. Tellingly, those who are active in spurring the notion of the "whole" as pertaining to the municipality, rather than to the neighbourhood, are usually those who belong to what I will term "mainstream society" and who rarely

use reservoirs for everyday purposes themselves because they avail of other, more particularised, sources of water (such as, well water, tap water or bottled water).

I would like to emphasise that I do not describe these varying frames of reference as a process over time (such as, "earlier" people used to identify with their neighbourhoods and "today" they rely on the municipality). Firstly, I simply have no data of what might have been the pertinent frame of reference for inhabitants of the study area, say, half a century ago. Secondly, the "central" reservoirs are not new; they seem to be at least of the same antiquity as their "decentral" counterparts. Thirdly, *kuḷam*s' decay is a topos that can be found already in earliest Tamil novels; obviously this notion tells more about its proponents' expectations of the water reservoirs' wholeness and completeness than about their actual shape and functionality. Finally, there is no homogeneity at this point of history either; some of my consultants in the study area take the municipality as the pertinent "whole" for the water reservoirs whereas others relate to their neighbourhood, and even they might not be all the time consistent in doing so.

Regarding *ēri*s, the question which "whole" they relate to is no less contentious, however at a different level. Whereas within the study area, *ēri*s are accorded much less importance than *kuḷam*s and nobody vies with others for being their caretaker, this question has been fraught with much importance by officials, scientists and "activists" who are based outside my study area. The legal owner of *ēri*s is the state; responsible for their maintenance is either the Block Development Office or the Public Works Department (PWD). This has been the case at least since the establishment of the PWD in 1819. However, since the same time, there have been suggestions (by state officials, as well as, in discourses on "development aid" and on the outcome of colonialism) to divulge the task of the *ēri*s' upkeep to the "(local) communities" or "the villages". These are understood to be self-governing wholes; some authors assume a functioning like "little republics", that are able to muster local workforce for the repair of *ēri*s [*kuṭimarāmattu*]. This is supposed to happen by "traditional irrigation institutions" which are based on definite sets of rules and regulations. These communities are contrasted, firstly, to "the government" with its "gilded bureaucracies", and secondly, as "Indian" to British influences.[23] This thesis will explore, with the example of the study area, whether we can speak of a "whole" community (or village) that governs "its" *ēri*s independently of "the government" or "the state".

An interesting aspect of wholeness in the discourse on *ēri*s is that the same authors who tend to expect a "whole" local community that manages them, also expect the wholeness or completeness of *ēri*s as physical entities. This shows in their deploring the loss of that same orderliness;[24] there is a topical assumption that *ēri*s are dilapidating and that their importance is on the wane. It is the basis for demands and activities to "revive", "modernise" or "restore" them to their presumed earlier grandeur. In this thesis, I will examine such notions. This will lead to a different picture of *ēri*s. I will argue for an understanding of them and their way of functioning and being operated – also in context with other reservoirs – that defies such notions.

Same as water reservoirs in South India are differentiated into various types, which is the principle to maintain their cleanliness, purity and, hence, their functionality, the same reservoirs serve to lay bare, to foster and to reproduce differentiations among the people who relate to them. Reservoirs help to communicate and transmit meanings and qualities from a person to the "whole" that the reservoir is

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[23] E.g., Agarwal and Narain 1999: 311 (chapter three with further references).
[24] Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1975; Sivasubramanian 1995, Mosse 1999 with further references.

associated with and vice versa. In explaining how this happens, it makes sense to clarify the role and meaning of water, the medium itself for this communication. Various authors who have written on Indian ways of thinking have shown the importance of physical contiguousness and the role of substances in influencing definitions of self and understandings of a person's position in society and cosmos. This figures in notions of purity and pollution as detected by Louis Dumont, as well as, in the transactional theory as proposed by McKim Marriott.[25] This thesis will depict the role of water as transmitter of qualities. In this vein, it will also discuss understandings of water as being downright good, auspicious and bestowing of life. It will emphasise the relatedness of water to its container, that is – in a region without permanent rivers, creeks and "natural" lakes – to water reservoirs. The input of energy to lift or transport water challenges this containment.

Though water reservoirs are, as a group, internally differentiated and though they serve to reproduce the differentiation of the society they are placed in, ultimately they come in between antitheses, such as, between cultivated and noncultivated spaces [*nāṭu* and *kāṭu*], Man and gods, dry and wet seasons, inner and outer spheres of Tamil life, the dwellings of "Untouchables" and others, particularistic and public realms, purity and pollution, life and afterlife. As will be shown, this is true on the levels of space, time and practical usage, as well as, in symbolical and religious respects. Thus, reservoirs come between oppositions, at times mitigating their mutual exclusivity to gradual difference, alliance or even complicity.

1.3   Method

I chose my study area mainly because it has many water reservoirs of all sizes. Though they are not the only source of its water supply, they form its mainstay. Furthermore, the study area offers the possibility to compare. It comprises Tirukkalukundram, a small town (or big village if you like), Oragadam, a village, and Irumbuli, a hamlet. The three places are separated administratively (they belong to different revenue villages and /or taluks), hydrologically (they form separate watersheds and their water reservoirs are not connected), optically by a series of hills and a forest and by self-definition of its inhabitants. Yet they are close enough for me to reach with my old TVS 50, a slow two-wheeler.

When I began my fieldwork,[26] I did not know anybody in the study area. As there are no hotels or lodges, I stayed overnight in Tirukkalukundram's temple's guest house. I had tea in every tea stall in the bazaar and took part in a procession. I chatted with several priests and shopkeepers, with families who lived nearby the temple guest house, as well as, with the milkman, the postman, an ironing-man and a vegetable seller, all of whom usually go from house to house for their business, and I told everyone that I had come to do research on water reservoirs and that I was looking for a room to rent. Word of mouth passed quickly. After two days, I was offered various rooms and chose one in Tirukkalukundram.

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[25] E. g., Dumont 1999 [1970], Marriott 1976; though all the contrariety of both authors, they do not differ on the role of water as an agent of differentiation.

I also was no longer a complete stranger. Most people I met later had already seen me or heard of me and they knew with which house they could associate me. They had also understood that I had moved there by chance, which was important because had I been too closely identified with my neighbourhood, the access to other groups would surely not have been so easy. I soon found friends and consultants all over the study area and I took care as well to eventually change my dwelling place so as not to become too lopsided towards one group. Yet it was inevitable that I did become part of the respective neighbourhoods. This also allowed for many important insights and a proximity which would have been complicated to establish with people who were spatially removed. Visitors dropped in freely, especially the children of the adjacent houses were almost always around. In the evenings, I sat on my neighbours' verandah and we discussed everything – from the latest political development in Pakistan to the family feud of another neighbour; sometimes we just made fun and had a good time. We often ate together and jointly participated in functions. Along with other women, I queued at public water places and I learnt a lot simply by observing. Both lodgements were built on the roofs of one-storey houses and offered good views. From my second dwelling, I had a good view of a much frequented water reservoir.

My first residence was in a house of Tuluve Vēḷāḷar Mutaliyārs who lived in a neighbourhood of cattle rearing Iṭaiyars. The landlord was the retired headmaster of the major local elementary school. His wife worked as a teacher in another public elementary school of Tirukkalukundram which was also visited by some children of Oragadam and Irumbuli. It helped to introduce myself in the study area that they knew almost everybody (and vice versa), either because they had taught them or their sons and daughters. Now and then my landlady reported to me with chuckles what the children had told her about me. My second residence was in a house and neighbourhood of Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyārs. My landlord had abandoned weaving, the characteristic profession of his caste, and worked as teacher in another village. His wife took care of the household and of their three children. Both landlords also were farmers. These families were important consultants on all kinds of questions and we soon became very close.

I did not work with a research assistant but always ventured out all alone. I had learnt Tamil when I had spent an academic year in Chennai in 1991 /1992 so I needed no interpreter. This caused confusion. Foreigners who speak Tamil were unheard of, and so were foreigners who were neither tourists nor charitable workers. Okay, I was a researcher or a student; especially in Tirukkalukundram, whose many schools make it a centre of learning in its surrounding, this was an accepted status. But do researchers dawdle at water reservoirs and threshing grounds, talking not only to respected elder high caste men but likewise consulting women, children and people at the periphery? What troubled my interlocutors most was that I, as a woman, ventured out without any escort, including riding on my two-wheeler across forests to distant villages, and that too in the middle of the night. More than men, women reacted sharply. Some told me harshly to go home and return with a husband at my side or they strongly warned me not to frequent certain places at certain times. The discussions about such restrictions could be exhausting. Yet they helped me a lot to understand gender roles, as well as, the Tamil concept of a person. Various women, if only behind the backs of their families, said that they approved of my activities and dreamily elaborated on how their lives would be if they could move so freely.

Working alone also proved to be useful in many ways. My presence was less imposing, more casual than if I had come with helpers. I was not bound to any working hours and could always interact freely and react flexibly. Furthermore, my being a woman offered many opportunities to escape formalities.

All this provided for very confidential and, at times, cordial situations (and worthy insights) which would have been impossible with an assistant as intermediary.

I started with an inventory of water reservoirs and an account of temples and shrines in the study area. I also engaged in surveying households in terms of their size, source of income, caste, religion, place of origin and, most importantly, from where they obtained their water. Irumbuli is small enough for one person to make a full house to house survey. In Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam, I selected certain water reservoirs for closer scrutiny and went from house to house in their ambit. The data obtained by house to house surveys was quite superficial and often wrong: some interlocutors presented themselves more favourably than they actually were, others depicted their situation as more miserable, perhaps hoping to solicit help from me. A few said what they guessed I wished to hear. Still others lied purposely or answered vaguely because they had an interest to hide conflicts – often enough, water is a delicate issue and it can be a dangerous one, too.

Nevertheless, by surveying I got a glimpse of different lifestyles and it prevented me from overlooking less conspicuous people. It proved to be a way to get in touch. It also helped to establish my image as a student or researcher, which obviously concurred in the local perception with somebody who incessantly asks questions, takes notes, draws sketches and records statements with an impressive microphone and a shining little minidisc recorder. This was, apart from writing utensils, my major technical tool. I used different microphones, fine-tuned to the situation, including almost invisible ones, to cope with more or less performative behaviour (but, of course, I always informed the people involved of the recording). I recorded whatever I considered important to know word by word afterwards, as well as, sounds that have stories to tell. Thus, I ended up with more than 70 hours of recordings which I had later transcribed and translated into English.

The rhythm of reality soon outwitted surveying. How could I proceed with it when I was invited to a wedding on that day or when a rare ritual took place at a water reservoir or when I unexpectedly came upon a person whom I would otherwise desperately try to meet or when an important part of a certain reservoir was collectively repaired... Occasions like these set the programme of my day, and I continued the observations at water reservoirs and the surveys in the time that was left. After all, the most elucidating information was rarely passed on in a first-time encounter but with extended acquaintance. Or it happened by chance – a gesture, pun or casual remark that would divulge more than many answers to questionnaires.

Fieldwork for this thesis started in January 1999 and ensued in intervals until 2003. This allowed me to grasp developments and to reflect on my findings away from the study area. I also have the impression that the fact that I returned and that we kept in touch across continents for years (by mail and – usually brokered by adolescent family members – by e-mail) deepened many relationships more than if I had stayed on without a break. I enjoyed fieldwork and I think that I was enough entertainment for my consultants to bear with me with good humour. Perhaps my informants and friends in Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli also hoped for more insights on water, which is indeed, in the perception of most of my interlocutors and in my own, a major problem in the study area.

1.4   The plan of this thesis

Chapter 2 introduces the study area and points to mobility and the caste conflict as its most prominent features. The following two vast sections on *ēri*s and *kuḷam*s respectively are structured in a parallel way: chapters 3 and 8 describe the shape and physical way of functioning of the study area's reservoirs. Chapters 4 and 9 show how they are used and managed. Chapters 5 and 10 treat their role in rituals and the religious beliefs connected with them. Chapters 6 and 11 ask how the bodies of water are perceived. Chapters 7 and 12 provide case studies on the *ēri*s and *kuḷam*s in local politics. Chapter 7 deconstructs notions of "community" and "tradition" relating to the management of *ēri*s and delineates their entanglement in local politics, considerations of power and caste conflict. Chapter 12 examines the role of the biggest *kuḷam* of the study area in construing a "whole" locality that overrides subdivisions into neighbourhoods. Chapter 13 discusses the meaning of water and its role as transmitter of qualities. Chapter 14, in the place of a prospect, muses on water reservoirs and energy because readily available electricity, helping to make water flow, runs against the principle of containment that will be shown to be constitutive of water reservoirs. The last chapter is a conclusion.

Note on diacritics

In this thesis, concepts of special interest, as well as, names of gods and water reservoirs are given with diacritics. Their spelling is according to the usage in the study area. Proper names of people and places are written in normal script according to common usage. Therefore, whenever, for example, the title of a caste appears in a name of a person (e. g., Sundaresa Gurukkal), it is written as the person would write it in English script, whereas whenever the caste is referred to generically, it comes with diacritics, Kurukkaḷ.

Panoramic view of the western part of the study area

2.   Setting

2.1   The region in general

Geography

Every year again, water is a thrilling issue for the inhabitants of the study area. As there are neither perennial rivers nor dependable subsurface streams, the main source of water is the rain that falls on the spot. On an average, the annual rainfall in the study area is 1,413.2 mm.[27] This is more than the world-wide average which ranges around 1,000 mm. But the area is situated in a hot climate, between 12° and 13° north in northern Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state of the Indian Union. Only in very exceptional cases in January and February, the temperature drops below 20°C. It is bound to rise up to 37°C in May and June.[28] This contributes to an evapotranspiration of 8.5 to 12 mm of water per day, amounting to 3,477 mm per year.[29] The evaporation exceeds the rainfall and the area belongs to the arid tracts of the Indian subcontinent.

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[27] Census of India 1991.
[28] Indian Meteorological Department New Delhi 2004.
[29] Crole 1879: 18.

In summer, ochre is the colour that dominates the scenery. The South West monsoon very rarely brings substantial rainfall to the area. Some scattered showers may occur from April to September, so that large tracts of agricultural fields are left fallow, their sun baked soil – mostly red ferrunginous loam and white clay [*kaḷimaṇ*] – is hard as stone and cracked. There is almost no difference to the large sandy or rocky stretches in between that are never tilled and that are covered by nothing more than patches of grass and thorny scrub, a vegetation that hardly conserves the moisture of the soil. 251.28 hectares of the study area are covered by Oragadam Reserved Forest. It has recently been systematically planted in order to minimise evaporation,[30] but the trees are still small and airy and provide little shade.

There are a few private gardens mostly at the fringes of the settlements or adjacent to houses. Whereas in bigger towns (in India and elsewhere) the neighbourhoods of well-to-do people tend to be those with greenery, in the study area it is vice versa. Especially the unpaved streets of poor people's areas are lined with trees, their foliage protecting the lowly huts from the sun. This contributes to a feeling of more humidity in the microclimates. The other parts of the settlements are dry and dusty. The richer a person is, the higher tends to be his or her house, rising way above the shade of trees.

However, there are years and seasons in a year in which one could have a very different impression than that of aridity. Rain can be abundant, especially from end-October through mid December when the winds of the northeast monsoon carry clouds from the nearby Bay of Bengal. The northwest monsoon accounts for about 60 percent of the annual precipitation in coastal Tamil Nadu. It may fail – in 1995, 1999, 2000 and 2003, for example, the northeast monsoon brought much less water than the long-time average.[31] But it can also be massive. Devastating cyclones frequently hit the area in this season. Crole reports 521 mm of rain in a single day during a monsoon in the region.[32] In those instances, the entire land is flooded and it is the excess of water that rules life.

Rain is always a core topic of village talk, either because it is dearly needed or because there is too much. In the weeks preceding the onset of monsoon, it suffices to glance at the sky to spark off lengthy discussions about rain. On every Tamil New Year's Eve, a function takes place in Tirukkalukundram's Paktavaccalēsvarar temple in which a prominent priest of the town interprets the

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[30] Parts of Oragadam Reserved Forest underwent a programme of Eucalyptus-planting. Others, along with neighbouring areas, altogether 290 hectares, were selected to form part of the Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme between 1997 and 2002. A budget of Rs. two million was available for a wide range of measurements including the planting of trees in various zones identified according to their capacity to retain water (Mr. Debasisjana, IFS Chengalpattu, personal communication, 11.11.1999). The Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme, implemented by the Environment and Forest Department of Tamil Nadu according to Government Order No. 342 of 8.8.1997, worked with a loan of altogether 324 million Yen, about 115 Million Euro, by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC 2004).

[31] Data of the nearest (40 km) weather-observatory at Meenambakkam airport: Indian Meteorological Department Chennai 2004a.

[32] Crole 1879: 19.

prospects of the coming year and focuses on the rains. Various proverbs and sayings try to divine the likelihood of good rains.[33]

It is commonplace among my informants that wherever there is a hill, there is water. In that sense, the study area is quite favourably located, because it surrounds a ridge. When arriving from the Bay of Bengal, it is the first elevation met with, a series of hillocks with several peaks, the highest of which towers 152 metres above sea level. Thus each of the three localities is heading a watershed. The water of Tirukkalukundram and Irumbuli drains ultimately into the Palar River, so the researchers of the Public Works Department[34] count the area as belonging to the basin of the Palar. Since the 1960s, Tirukkalukundram has also been receiving water from that river in the form of drinking water through a pipeline. Oragadam is not connected to the Palar at all.

Agriculture

For its direct use[35] of water, the economy of the region depends on the resources that are available in situ. The sector of economy that stands first in water consumption is surely agriculture. This is one reason why I dedicate an entire subchapter to it. Another reason is that the modes of production, the types of cultivators etc. play a consequential role for certain categories of water reservoirs, so that the information provided here will be of use at various instances later on in this thesis. It is provided at this point because the conditions prevailing throughout the study region are much alike and their description can be clubbed together before starting to differenciate between Tirukkalukundram, Irumbuli and Oragadam.

Farmers in the study region grow rice and, to a very small extent, sugarcane and irrigate both with surface and groundwater. While sugarcane takes an entire year until it can be harvested, rice is grown up to three times per annum. The most important harvest takes place in January and February. It is predominantly the fine Ponni variety which was introduced in the late 1960s, and farmers quantify the yield as generally about 15 to 20 bags [*mūṭṭai*] per acre, about 4,500 kg per hectare. However, in the

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[33] For more on rain divination, see Vasavi 1999: 56 – 9.

[34] Mr. Pasumalaitevan, Centre for Water Resources, PWD, Chennai-Taramani, 28.12.1998.

[35] At this point, I leave aside indirect usages as, for example, the water used in the generation of electric power for industrial purposes or virtual water (see Neubert 2001: 14 f.).

years of fieldwork, the yield did not exceed eleven to 15 bags. "In other regions of Tamil Nadu they get twice as much!", comment some farmers with sad eyes. A harvest of 25 bags of paddy is supposed to be a good one under the conditions of Tamil Nadu. Only well-to-do farmers or those with a special pride in their profession eat their own rice. Most of them consume the cheap variety which they buy in ration shops and sell their produce, for which they get roughly Rs. 450 per bag.

Usually in the time of the *poṅkal* festival in mid January, modern peasants of the region start to pay keen attention to relevant newspapers, magazines, television and radio programmes and most of all to other farmers: it is then that the government releases new varieties of rice. These have either names with a patriotic tinge like Annadurai 37[36] or purely technical ones like IR 50, IR 35[37], and many farmers are very ready to experiment with them, especially to maximise their income from the second paddy crop of the agricultural year (seeds are mostly used for two seasons, then they are bought afresh). While Ponni takes 180 days and 5 months of full irrigation, the newer varieties require only about 100 days and accordingly less water. This is a decisive feature, because the growth period extends into the driest season of the year. Most of my informants say that the yield of the short term varieties is higher (up to 30 percent more than that of Ponni), but the prices paid for it are less (about 20 to 25 percent).

A few farmers cultivate a third crop of rice in summer, *cittirai corṇavāri*. Others switch (or have already done so for the second season) to groundnuts, sesame, millet or to vegetables like okra, cucumbers and chillies. However, it is a common sight that fields lie at least partly fallow in the hot summer after the first or second harvest until they are ploughed again for the next agricultural year.

There is a particularly wide variety of ways to appropriate agricultural land. It makes itself felt especially in the case of water reservoirs dealt with in chapters 3 to 7. Furthermore, the variety is an indicator for the high flexibility and adaptability of agriculture in the study region. As this will be of importance for various observations in the following chapters, I elaborate on the topic in some detail here. The ways to appropriate land can be clubbed under the following categories:

- **Owner-cultivators**[38]. An example of this category is N. Perumal of Oragadam, belonging to the Vaṉṉiyār caste[39]. He tills his land himself. He and his wife stand in the kneedeep water and sow and weed. They transplant the saplings, do the harvest and the threshing. They get help from neighbours and /or relatives to whom they will extend help in turn. At the same time, N. Perumal cultivates another plot of land as tenant and goes to work on *kūli* or daily wage (proudly mentioning that his wife does not have to do so). Other farmers of this category pursue jobs outside of agriculture as well.
- **Owner-managers**. A case in point is Viraragavan of Kottimangalam, an Aiyeṅkar, that is Brahmin of the Vaiṣṇavite tradition. He cultivates five of his ten acres of rice fields himself, yet he would never touch a plough nor bend down to transplant a sapling. He organises the work, making sure that there are enough workers on daily wage in time to complete the necessary works. He also visits the fields to control the workers and makes them thresh the grains in front of his house so that he

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[36] In fact, named after the research institute that bred it, but a constant reminder of the co-founder of the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu, C. N. Annadurai.

[37] These seeds were developed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Los Baños, Philippines, and named accordingly.

[38] The term has been used widely in literature on Indian agriculture. Yet I find it often blurs the contrast to what I call owner-managers which is important for the social position and self-esteem of the farmer.

[39] For more on castes, see the following subchapter.

can observe them from his shady porch where he sits and reads Sanskrit verses in an old black book. His wife prepares the midday meal for the labourers, the catering of which forms part of the work-contract. Male workers earn Rs. 60 per day in cash (providing the oxen, plough and other tools for their work themselves) and women Rs. 30.[40] In Oragadam, the daily wage during harvest is at times paid in kind.

In rice and groundnut cultivation, the groups of daily wagers are gathered ad hoc and vary in composition. In crops of even more commercial character like casuarina or sugarcane, teams come into play.

> S. Palanivelan of Tirukkalukundram, for example, grows sugarcane on more than two hectares next to Desamukipettai. On March 4th, 2000 he had it harvested by a team of 18 workers from Taccur, a village beyond Palar river. They earned Rs. 125 per ton, one hectare yielding 120 – 130 tons. In addition, they got Rs. 5 per day for vegetables and one kilogram rice per man which they prepared themselves at noon. They cut and bundled the canes at a breathtaking speed and piled them onto the lorry in such a way that it carried 22 to 24 tons at a time. Palanivelan used to contract the lorry of the sugar factory in Padalam where his raw material was processed.

In rare cases landlords engage stewards [*aṭiyāḷ*] who take care of the cultivation, hire daily wagers etc. and enjoy varying degrees of freedom to make necessary decisions. They are paid either regularly in cash and /or in kind after harvest. However, the risk remains with the landlord.

- **Tenants per *vāram*.** As Viraragavan considers it strenuous to always find enough workers in time and to monitor them properly, he has rented out half of his fields as *vāram*. In harvest time, he gets 50 percent of the paddy while his tenant keeps the remaining 50 percent and the straw. Viraragavan, who monitors the cultivation process closely, explains that if he has the impression that the tenant does not work well, he can dismiss him and switch to another one. He has a word to say in decisions on the application of fertilisers and other agrochemicals or relating to the timing of ploughing, irrigation and harvest. The contract is made orally thus it does not entail administrative ado. Viraragavan considers *vāram* as better for him than *kuttakai* (see below), because there is the chance to get more income in case the harvest is a very good one. Relatives of Viraragavan who live now in Chennai have also rented out their fields as *vāram*. During the period of cultivation, Viraragavan has an eye on them. In harvest time, the owners come to the village. In the shadows of black umbrellas, they sit under trees next to the fields and control what is going on.

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40 For men, this exceeds the current (April 1999) minimum wages of Rs. 54. In the case of women it is much below. Officially, they are supposed to earn as much as men for the same work (The Hindu 06.04.1999). However, as the chores are clearly divided into men's and women's, women never do exactly the same work as men. They also usually do not have to provide tools such as winnowing fans, ploughs or hoes. The distinction is made throughout the study area, and the tariffs Viraragavan pays are quite common. Some landlords pay only Rs. 20. for women. If they pay more (Rs. 70 to 75 for men; Rs. 25 to 35 for women), they do not provide the meal. A labourer who ploughs with the help of a tractor gets Rs. 450 for one acre. Yet it is a general notion that tractors plough too superficially to eliminate bugs and weeds. Therefore, most of the fields are tilled an additional three or four times with the help of oxen.

vāram is a highly flexible mode of tenancy; it exists frequently[41] and in innumerable variations – from very close collaboration of tenants and owners, as in Viraragavan's case, to a very loose one as in the case of his relatives. Some owners find different tenants for their lands in every season. Others work over many years with the same tenants. The details of the contract are decisive for the income of tenant and owner respectively, but they have to be renegotiated at the start of every season. Some owners pay for inputs like seeds, fertilisers and sprays and still get 50 percent of the harvest; others demand up to two bags more of the harvest in such cases. Several owners lend their tenants the money for the material inputs and get it back after harvest – with or without interest. In many cases the costs for the inputs are divided equally between owner and tenant. A further question to be negotiated is whether the tenants have to share only the produce of the first harvest, or of both or all three they effect in a year. In principle, *vāram* entails the sharing of the risk between tenant and owner.[42]

- **Tenants per *kuttakai*.** "The rights of the land will be with him [the tenant], he will be totally in charge of what is being cultivated and only give a fixed part of the produce to us [the owners].", explains Ramalingam of Tirukkalukundram the practice which he has adopted for a part of his seven acre landholding that is situated in a remote village. As he does not want to go there too often, he chose *kuttakai* for it, yet manages the cultivation of his nearby fields himself. *kuttakai* contracts are usually written documents and can cover either an entire year or just a season. If they run for a year, it is at the will of the tenant whether he cultivates one, two or three times and which crops. The tenant pays for the inputs. The rent, which in *kuttakai* is measured mostly in cash, is fixed beforehand and paid after harvest. Hence, the tenant undertakes the full risk. Particularly peasants of marginal fields tend to say that *kuttakai* contracts are only made for fields with good soil. But even in less fertile soil, *kuttakai* is used if it comes to expensive crops other than rice: fields for okra, beans and chillies are invariably let in *kuttakai*.[43]

- Temples that own lands usually have them cultivated by tenants who bid highest in **auctions** [*ēlam*] which are – at least in theory – held regularly once a year or once in five or ten years. Hence, as in *kuttakai*, the rate of the tenancy is fixed beforehand and the risk remains with the tenant. Po. Kasi of Oragadam, for example, pays Rs. 500 per annum to the temple of Muttumāriyamman̲ for 0.14 hectares of dry land [*puñcai*] without well. The irrigated land of the local Vāṭāmallīcuvarar-temple costs Rs. 1,200 per year for 0.16 hectares.

- **Encroachment** is another way to get hold of land. It is illegal, but widely practised. T. Mohandass, the surveyor of Tirukkalukundram, estimates that in every village 25 percent of the land is encroached. The cultivators appropriate either fields that belong to other farmers or public land.

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[41] Sundari 1991: 50 writes in his study of Chingleput District, "The situation today is that tenancies today are an extremely infrequent form of tenure. Land is leased out usually to a relative, because the owner is unable to take care of his land for various reasons, including employment outside the village". On the contrary, my observations in Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli show that tenancy appears to be a widespread affair and the tenants can be relatives, but I know numerous examples where they are not. This differs also from the situation near Tiruchchirappalli reported by Kapadia 1995: 185 where " *vāram* is nonexistent in the Aruloor area today ... However, *vāram* did exist in Aruloor some decades ago".
[42] Already Crole 1879: 51 f. describes practices of *vāram* which are quite similar to those of nowadays.
[43] According to Muttu, advocate in Tirukkalukundram, " *vāram* is just the colloquial term for *kuttakai*". There is indeed little consistency in the usage of these terms. An example in point is Manickam of Irumbuli, who in 1998 /99 cultivated an acre of land of Sammanda and declared that they agreed at the time of sowing on a " *vāram* " of 15 bags.

They are usually made to pay fines regularly, but these are cheaper than the current tenancy rates. After having encroached the land for 12 subsequent years, encroachers may claim property rights.

- Landowners in the region who need cash urgently tend to **mortgage** their fields [*aṭamāṇam*] to people who either cultivate them themselves, manage their cultivation or in turn let them as *vāram* or *kuttakai*. The contracts are usually written. The field serves as pledge [*aṭaku*], the money is either given at once or in instalments of roughly Rs. 15,000 per acre every year or in sub-instalments twice a year. At the end of the mortgage period, money and field are returned. The higher the total sum of money (and of mortgaged acreage) and time, the weaker is the surety, so that one field can be equalled to only Rs. 10,000. There are even fewer common practices in *aṭamāṇam* than in *kuttakai* or *vāram*, so that much depends on the two parties' aptitude to negotiate. In Oragadam, there are contracts in which Rs. 65,000 are given per acre for six years, as well as, deals in which Rs. 75,000 are paid for three acres, including motor pump set over four years.

Mortgages of this kind mirror the financial and entrepreneurial potential among cultivators and in the agricultural sector of the area. They resemble very much the observations of M. Atchi Reddy in Nellore District,[44] and like this, my study region is heavily influenced by the the nearby urban centre, Chennai. The capital of Tamil Nadu and of the former Madras Presidency is only about 70 kms away, that means a 3,5 hour ride in a public bus. Cars are still out of the reach of even most of the well-to-do inhabitants of the area. In 1879, Charles Stewart Crole, collector of Chingleput[45] District to which the study area belonged at that time, wrote:

> "The neighbourhood of the Presidency town which the people have not yet learned to turn to their real advantage, is at the bottom of most of the unsatisfactory conditions, which have caused the district to be described with too much truth as the 'most backward in the whole Presidency'".

He deplored what would nowadays probably be called brain drain: the well-to-do, apt people of the district, move to Madras and exploit the region from the distance not bothering about the state of its agriculture.

> "If there is a tract in the Presidency where high farming is a necessity, it is in Chingleput. Yet it is the worst in this respect, and the out-turn of the crops is lower than anywhere else."[46]

More than one century later, new dimensions have been added to this picture. Emigration of skilled people continues. But the inhabitants of the study region have learned to turn the neighbourhood of Chennai to their real advantage. The local economy has been enriched by a wide variety of businesses other than agriculture; from brick kilns for the local market to quarries of black granite which is exported to Japan, not to mention computer experts who commute to their offices in Chennai every day and puzzle over solutions for software problems in Europe and the US.

David Ludden, in his "Agrarian History of South Asia", explains painstakingly how South Asian agriculture intensified in its modes of production and grew in terms of lands covered, a development

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[44] Atchi Reddy 1996: 166; 171 – 5.
[45] Earlier way of writing "Chengalpattu".
[46] Crole 1879: 65.

that culminated in the "land hunger" of the 20th century. However, in the very end of his volume, he hints at a trend which reverses this century-old tendency.

> "Agricultural growth has now decelerated in northern Tamil Nadu with economic liberalisation, pushing landed families to accumulate capital in urban match factories, gem cutting, textile plants, leather tanning, metal working, and tool and dye making – all in response to state policies geared to increasing Indian exports for world markets. At the same time, urban agroindustrial investors are pursuing strategies of backward linkage to secure their raw materials from the village. The result is that capital is moving up from villages into towns and down from cities into towns and villages, creating a more intricate web of connections between the village economy and the world economy."[47]

It is of special interest to examine the role of water and water reservoirs in a geographical setting that is potentially a trend setter in the Indian context. On the other hand, the enhanced mobility of capital (and of substances, people and ideas) in the local society is an important backdrop for the interpretation of the meaning of the resource water.

Politics

The public transportation system – the main basis for the mobility in the study area – serves frequently as an arena of politics. In Tirukkalukundram, political parties use to hold their public functions in the bus stand. The dominant political parties in the study area are DMK [*tirāvita muṇṇērra kazakam*] and ADMK [*aṇṇā tirāvita muṇṇērra kazakam*]. Both have developed out of the Dravidian movement[48], and although they are present at the centre of the Indian Union as well, they are primarily regional forces. In spite of their rather similar political programme, both parties are pitted against each other in the study area; more than in Oragadam and Irumbuli, in Tirukkalukundram party affiliation is an important issue in the formation of identities.[49]

The recently erected sheds at the bus stops in Oragadam serve as meeting points for the men in the evenings where political issues are discussed. Even what could be weighed as the most striking feature of politics in the study area is often made visible in the context of the public transportation system: the conflict between people who belong to the broad category of Untouchables[50] and the mainstream society, especially with Vaṇṇiyārs, i.e., members of a caste that figures as "Backward Caste" in the logic of the Indian system of reservations.

> For example, on 24,2,1999, the portraits of leaders of a Dalit movement, painted on a wall in

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[47] Ludden 1999: 227.

[48] For more on the Dravidian Movement, see Barnett 1976, Irschick 1986, Washbrook 1989 and Dirks 2001.

[49] See chapter twelve for more on that topic.

[50] In the study area, nobody would call them "Untouchables" openly. After all, this would be unconstitutional. The common term is "SC" or "SC people", the abbreviation of the administrative category "Scheduled Castes", introduced by the Government of India Act 1936. Yet it is exactly the question of exclusion or inclusion of that group which is at stake in this conflict – as this is meant by "Untouchability", I use the term here. As Robert Deliège 1995: 304 puts it: «les intouchables ... ētaient exclus d'une sociētē dans laquelle ils jouaient un rôle important, ils ētaient ā la fois rejetēs et indispensables.» He insists: «L'intouchabilitē persiste et nous pourrions mēme dire que, d'un certain point de vue, elle est plus vivace que jamais» (p. 302).

one of the principal streets of Tirukkalukundram, were found to be smeared with a cow-pat. It happened to be the birthday of the then ex-Chief Minister Jeyalalitha, whose party is locally dominated by Vanniyārs. In consequence, members of the inflicted organisation blocked the streets including the bus stand. Severe turmoil emerged, stones were thrown and the shops closed with their shutters locked until the evening. Several vans and jeeps brought policepeople with lathis to bludgeon whomever they considered a damage to law and order.

Scenes like these are frequent. Similar ones happened in April, 1999 when Untouchables of the neighbouring village, Amanambakkam, clashed with Vanniyārs because of a plot of land on which they wished to construct a temple. Three years before, two men were shot in quarrels about *pañcamar* lands.[51] In the weeks during the elections for the national Parliament in September, 1999, 46 Untouchables were arrested for having attacked public buses. In the surrounding villages Pulikundram, Manamadi, Kirapakkam, Nerambur, Echchur and Matai Attur, buses had been stoned and some of them also burnt. A Dalit movement called *viṭutalai ciruttaikaḷ iyakkam* was said to be responsible. It was supposed to be a reaction to the treatment of party members who were caught because they allegedly committed fraud in the elections. As a result, the bus service after sunset broke down for at least three weeks in the entire area.

At times the conflict produces heroic narratives. T. Anbuchezhiyan, for example, an industrious Vanniyār of Tirukkalukundram, is proud to present the scar on his forearm which he received in a fight with the "*cēri*-people", i.e., the Paraiyars. In general, the Vanniyārs' means to try to further their status are more conform with the mainstream society[52], as will be shown below, yet not less dire. In principle, the most disadvantaged and potentially most conflicting groups of the area could be designated as those with the least chances of profiting from mobility.

History

The Pallava and Cōḻa dynasties are invariably mentioned when people of the study area want to indicate its historic significance. Even illiterate young girls point to certain water reservoirs or temples explaining that they were built by this or that Cōḻa king. In the scope of the Dravidian movement, which shaped regional politics in Tamil Nadu the latter half of the 20th century, these old regional powers have gained much publicity.

Pallavas, who adhered to Jainism and Buddhism, are said to have reigned in the area during the 5th to 9th centuries, the Cōḻas the 10th to 14th centuries.[53] The Pallava kingdom consisted of various subdivisions or *kōṭṭam*s, a tradition which the succeeding Cōḻas continued.[54] Tirukkalukundram is

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[51] Erstwhile *puṟampōkku* lands that had been allotted to Paraiyars already during the British Period in order to expand the cultivated area and to counter famines. Chief Minister M. Karunanidi renewed this General Order in 1989. In theory, these lands must not be sold, and if they were, the contract should be null. In practice, many Paraiyars sold the lands. In the struggle in the late 1990s, Paraiyars tried to get these lands back.

[52] This apparently makes them less suspicious for the police. It is a pervading feature of the police's response to the outbreaks of violence between Paraiyars and Vanniyārs, that only very few of the latter are taken in custody and often released on bail very soon, whereas buses full of Paraiyars are deterred, mostly in distant Cuddalore, sometimes for weeks together.

[53] Shastri 1975: 175.

[54] Shastri 1975: 166.

mentioned in a culvert of A. D. 1012 – 1044, when the place was given as a grant [*tēvatāṉam*] to Kalattur *kōṭṭam*.[55] This might correspond to the location of the village *Poṉ Viḷainta* Kalattur (called P. V. Kalattur) west of Tirukkalukundram.

In the course of the centuries, the study area had various labels, the subsequence of which sheds light on its history. Whereas the name Kalattur *kōṭṭam* no longer plays any role in public discourse, two other historical names of the region still do so; Coromandel and Tondaimandalam. They serve, for instance, as locality markers of caste names[56], to add romanticism to advertisements for tourist spots or as names of banks or brands of cement. Coromandel is the transmogrified version of *cōḻamaṇṭalam*, i.e., "region of the Cholas".

Manuscripts collected by the Scottish Colonel Colin Mackenzie trace the name Tondaimandalam to King Kulottunga[57] who, together with his illegitimate son Adondai, is said to have conquered the land and installed himself in the town of Kanchipuram. He must have ravaged horribly, for after his conquest the land was so depopulated that he had to have settlers imported from other areas of South India. Regarding them as lowly people, his councillor advised Kulottunga Cōḻa to name the country "that of lowly people", *toṇṭamaṇṭalam*.[58] Vested with property rights, these settlers later on came to form an important group of landowners and farmers in the area, Vēḷāḷar.[59] However, nowadays Vēḷāḷars in the study area are far from playing an equally important role as those in the Cauvery delta.

Beginning with the 14th century, the area was frequently conquered, ravaged and raided by dynasties such as the Bellala, Kesari, Bahmani, the troops of the emperors of Vijayanagar and of the Muslim kings of Golconda, the present-day Hyderabad. For four decades after 1744, the colonial war of the British against the French combined with local conflicts to torture the people of the area. In 1760, the local Nawab Mahommed Alli granted the region to the British East India Company as a result of its tactics in his battle with French colonialists. Since then, it was known as "the Jaghire" (which means "administrative subdivision") or "the Estate". Later it was called "Madras District", then "Chingleput District". In the course of the subdivisions of districts in the 20th century, the study area came to lie in the "Chengai-MGR-District" and finally in "Kanchipuram District" of Tamil Nadu.[60]

Just as the formation of the local society does not have clear cut limits in space (its range augmenting with increased mobility and links to villages in the vicinity, Chennai and other national and international centres), the terminus "study area" does not bear such. It centres around Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli, but if necessary for the argument of the thesis, localities outside their spatial ambit are covered as well.

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[55] Mā. Irācamāṇikkanār (n. d.): 17.

[56] For example, Toṇṭamaṇṭala Koṇṭaikaṭṭi Vēḷḷāḷar Mutaliyār. For a discussion of the meaning in this context, see Barnett 1976: 136.

[57] An 11th century prince of Eastern Chalukya descent, Rajendra II, who captured the throne of the Chola-dynasty and was called Kulottunga afterwards, according to Shastri 1975: 189.

[58] "*tāḻttippōṭuvō meṉru niṉaittiruntapaṭiyiṉālē … yitaṟkup pēr toṇṭamaṇṭalantāṉē yeṉru pōṭuvittāṉ.*" (*tāḻttu* = lowly) cf. Manuscript D. 3088, paragraphs III /64 ff. of Colonel Colin Mackenzie, in: Cauntirapāṇṭiyaṉ 1997: 115 f.

[59] See Crole 1879: 35; Barnett 1976: 134, 136.

[60] Crole 1879: 1; 138 ff., Sundari 1991.

2.2 Tirukkalukundram

Size and setting

> "Tirukkalukundram may look like a village, but it is neither a village nor a town – it comes in between."

This is how S. Marimuttu of Tirukkalukundram characterises his locality. To become a lawyer, he has lived elsewhere for a while, thus he knows villages, as well as, towns thoroughly enough to be able to tell the difference, and he is one of the few inhabitants who is able to converse in English. Tamil is the common language and script in public life. Numerous people speak Telugu at home, few of whom know how to write it as well.

The lawyer's appraisal is echoed widely. "P. V. Kalattur is very rural [*rompa kirāmam*]", says a lady who was raised in that place in the vicinity of Tirukkalukundram. Meanwhile she settled in the latter and shudders a bit as she imagines how it would be to live in P. V. Kalattur again. She prefers Tirukkalukundram because it provides all the amenities she needs: a big variety of shops that sell everything she usually needs, a daily and a weekly market, cinemas, medical practitioners, five banks, pawn brokers, and whenever she wants to leave the place, there is the bus stand which connects it to many villages in its surrounding and to Chengalpattu (20 km) and Chennai (70 km).

On the other hand, the lady has almost never been to Chennai, the neighbouring urban centre [*nakaram*], and she fears the life there as being too hectic and stressful. She points out that Tirukkalukundram is still small enough that people know each other and that everything is within walking distance. Many informants confirm the view that Tirukkalukundram is neither *kirāmam* nor *nakaram*, i.e., neither village nor city.

According to the statistics of its Town *pañcāyattu* office, Tirukkalukundram had 34,000 inhabitants in 1999. It stretches out over 15.63 square kilometres and comprises five revenue villages. One of them is Tirukkalukundram itself, centering around the temple of Paktavaccalēsvarar and Tiripuracuntari (henceforth called Big Temple) and its procession streets.

Tirukkalukundram

Source:
map of Chingleput Taluk No. 224, sheet 3 and sheet 4,
re-printed 1943

- not to scale -

Reference:

🔹 *kuḷam*

　 ēri

▯ temple

● round well

▣ square well

▬ bazaar

ward
/neighbourhood

Road to Chengalpattu

Teacher's Nagar

Madulankuppam

Desanukipettai

Annaisathyanagar

Big *ēri*

hill with temple of
Śiva Vētakirīsvarar

Ayarbadi

Nalvarkoyilpettai

Ramakkoyilpettai

irrigated area

Velliaiyar Street

Big Street

temple

Road to
Mamallapuram

Rajapalayam

śaṅku tīrttam

Navalur

Mettuteru

Masudi Street (mosque area)

Rudrankoyil

Paramecuvari and
Paramacivā Nagars

M. N. Kuppam
(Mutikainallankuppam)

Road to
P. V. Kalattur
and to the Palar

Road to Kalpakkam

Castes

Castes[61] are one of many categories an inhabitant of Tirukkalukundram can identify him- or herself with, yet it is a fairly unequivocal one: whereas one and the same person or household can be tenant and landlord, employer and employee, farmer and industrial or white collar worker or devotee of more than one god, he, respectively she, usually belongs to one caste exclusively. This is last but not least an effect of an administration which issues caste certificates and classifies pupils in school according to caste.[62] In conversations on caste, especially with civil servants or parents of college students, my interlocutors went to their cupboards and fetched leaflets with the official enumeration of castes in Tamil Nadu to show me that they were correct in positioning certain groups of the study area in this or that category.

Caste is a pervading issue in public discourse in Tirukkalukundram as in the study area as a whole. People of certain castes use their caste's name or title as suffix to their personal name (e.g., Kasivasi V. Sundaresan Gurukkal, Mahadeva Mudaliyar). But even without that, people who interact are usually aware of each other's caste – at least within their broad religious group. Those who frequent the Big Temple of Tirukkalukundram know which caste the people whom they meet there belong to (except for visitors from outside, of course); whereas they might not know the intricacies of the caste differences among the worshippers at the local mosque or church. It is common to refer to a person by his or her caste's name or title ("Yesterday, I met that Mutaliyār and he told me..."). Especially men even call each other by the caste name or title ("Ceṭṭiyā, come here!"). Often the abbreviated denominations of broad administrative caste-categories are used instead of the terms for particular castes: "In this street, we are all OBC" (OBC are "other backward castes"). Or: "There live the BC, we do not go there". (BC means "backward castes"). Many jokes and sayings cement stereotypical notions of attitudes and peculiarities ascribed to different castes.

Furthermore, castes are commonly associated with professions. True, this is a rather loose relationship: it pertains usually only to the men. Only in poor agricultural castes do women also work in the caste's profession, i.e., in the fields. Secondly, by far not all men of a particular caste will work in the profession that is characteristic for their caste. Thirdly, members of other castes can work in the field of a certain professional caste as well, without assuming membership of that caste (for example, Vaṉṉiyārs, deemed agriculturalists, work as carpenters or merchants). Yet people still refer to their profession to explain which caste it is that they belong to and what kind of people they are. They are also identified by others with the characteristic profession of their caste. All these features make caste a handy tool to muster the dramatis personae of the study area.

According, e.g., to Louis Dumont[63], the issue of purity and pollution is at the core of distinction of castes. Therefore, it is of particular importance to know the inventory of castes in the study area if it

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[61] Caste, understood as a group that is putatively endogamous and competes with other such groups for social status and privileges. Some authors tend to replace the word "castes" with "communities", e.g., Singh 1999. However, as "community" in the Indian context has come to be used to label different religious groups such as Hindus, Moslems and Christians, I find it too confusing to use it here. In Tamil, there is no equivalent term for caste. The word *jāti* is used in that sense. But it has a broader meaning: signifying "category", it can be applied to a whole array of phenomena, including various types of rhythmical patterns.

[62] The influence of the administration – nowadays and when it was established in colonial times with the help of orientalist scholars – has been widely discussed. See, e.g., Washbrook 1989, Deliēge 1995, Dirks 2001.

[63] Dumont 1999 (1970): 46 – 60.

comes to study the attitudes towards something that is crucial for purification: water and water
reservoirs.

Asked which are the majority castes of Tirukkalukundram, all informants unanimously say[64]:
Vanniyārs and Paraiyars[65]. Traditionally, the occupation of both of them is to work in the fields,
mostly on a daily wage basis: to plough, level, saw, transplant, weed, apply fertilisers and sprays,
harvest, thresh, winnow and transport the crop. This distinguishes them from other agricultural castes
in Tirukkalukundram like Vēḷāḷars or Reṭiyars who might have substantial landholdings yet
conventionally see themselves more as managers of the production process than as actual labourers.
However agricultural the Vanniyārs' and Paraiyars' outlook may be, contrary to the tradition in other
parts of the world, this does not include animal rearing. Sheep, goats, and to a certain degree, cattle are
the specialities of the Iṭaiyar caste which settled in Ayarbadi, a cluster of streets to the north of
Tirukkalukundram's centre. Following the introduction of the *ryotwari*-settlement in the 19th century
and the overall changes in property of land in the 20th, many Vanniyārs and Paraiyars acquired land or
took to professions other than farming, as will be shown later in this thesis. However, still plenty of
them survive on daily wages.

Whereas Vanniyārs are counted as members of the broad administrative category of "Backward
Castes", Paraiyars belong to "Scheduled Castes" in that logic. As mentioned before, the boundary
between these two is most critical. The word "Paraiyar" is not politically correct. Others call them
"SC" or despisingly "*cēri*-people". Paraiyars themselves do not usually refer to the names of their
communities; they say "*āti tirāvitar*" ("the first Dravidians"), euphemistically "*tāḻttu peravai*" ("the
lower section"), "*uyir jāti*" ("group of life") or, provokingly, "Untouchable". "Dalit" ("oppressed") is
the term used by mostly urban activists who are committed to struggle for their improvement; it is
hardly known in the study area. All of these terms gloss over differences that exist among, e.g., the
Dalits. Thus for the sake of distinctness, in this study the term Paraiyar will be used.[66]

Only few Paraiyars of Tirukkalukundram reside outside the Paramecuvari and Paramaciva Nagars
which are located south of the centre beyond a cremation place.[67] In this area, most houses have
thatched roofs. Like the Vanniyār, the Paraiyars conventionally drink alcohol and eat meat. They even
relish pork, beef and snails which Vanniyārs usually avoid. Instead of in caste associations, they
organise themselves jointly with other members of Scheduled Castes in political parties such as the
DPI (Dalit Panthers) or Puratchi Bhavatam Party (former APLF) or the Dr. Ambedkar-Manram,
founded locally in 1986. These vary in the degree of their radicalism and tend to cooperate loosely ad
hoc.

Traditionally, the Vanniyārs of Tirukkalukundram called themselves – and were called by others –
"Nāyakkar"[68]. This is a honorific title which seems to refer to an erstwhile aristocratic status and was

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[64] This and the obvious situation in Tirukkalukundram contradict the findings of the Census of India 1991 which
lists only 1,975 people in the SC category (8.5 % of the total population). Furthermore, the census does not
provide any information on the share of different communities of the total population. Several informants
estimated the proportion of Vanniyārs as 60 percent. However, I could not count them myself.
[65] See K. S. Singh 1998, vol. III: 3598 f. and pp. 2763.
[66] See Deliège 1995: 22 – 33 on how to designate Untouchables.
[67] This corroborates the observations of Reiniche 1979: 18, that the South is the dwelling place of the
untouchables whereas the North is esteemed highly. According to Daniel 1984: 75 villages are especially
vulnerable at their southern borders, sites of the cremation and burial grounds.
[68] Locally, this is written as "Naicker". I use this in this thesis whenever I write proper names of persons.

used as a suffix to the name. Nowadays, "Nāyakkar", although still widely used in Tirukkalukundram, as well as, in Oragadam, has a smack of antiquity and backwardness. "Vaṉṉiyār" comes into play, a term that has been politicised in recent years with the emergence of effective caste organisations on the state level.[69] They try to establish a common identity with resembling Tamil castes such as Kavuṇṭar, Tēvar and Paṭaiyācci. However, this refers to politics only; in Tirukkalukundram I met no Vaṉṉiyār who would dream of marrying a Kaḷḷar or a Tēvar, for example, and some of them delimitate themselves sharply from the proverbial belligerency of those castes.

Various Vaṉṉiyārs of Tirukkalukundram say they belong to Jampu Maharishi or to Vishnu *kōttiram*s. Yet the concept does not seem to be very elaborate, and many did not even know the term when asked for it. Amaravathi – as leader of the local women's wing of the ADMK party she is conscious of the political intricacies of factions, group and sub-group-politics – maintained that if she had to decide, her fellow Vaṉṉiyārs would only marry within the *kōttiram*.[70] Vaṉṉiyārs settle in all parts of Tirukkalukundram, but they are concentrated in Rudrankoyil, in Mutikainalankuppam and in the streets that connect main Tirukkalukundram with it. In the street that has the official name "Vanniyar Street", many members of other castes live as well.

Vaṉṉiyārs have acquired some political influence. On the wall of the room in which the councillors of Tirukkalukundram meet are three portraits: one of E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, the so-called "Periyar" and founder of the Dravidian Movement and one painting of its poet Bharatidasan. Next to it, there is a photograph of a man in an ivory-coloured coat with a shawl around the neck, big earrings and a contemptuous grin: Ku. Mu. Manikka Naicker[71], village council [*pañcāyattu*] president in the 1940s to 1960s. Also the present day mayor of Tirukkalukundram is a Vaṉṉiyār: Kannimuttu of the DMK-party. Some Vaṉṉiyārs of Tirukkalukundram tell proudly of Punnamai Thyagaraya Naicker who, as they say, was a landlord in the nearby village Pudur and in 1850 donated a middle school to Tirukkalukundram. It is now called the Vaṉṉiyā Sangam Higher Secondary School.

In Tirukkalukundram, the Vaṉṉiyārs' influence is being contested by the Ceṅkuntar. The present Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the region belongs to this caste. However, there are no frictions as in the case of the Paṟaiyars and the Vaṉṉiyārs. The delimitation occurs in more subtle ways. "Did you notice how they speak?", whispered a 12-year-old Ceṅkuntar boy after we, on a stroll through Tirukkalukundram, had met a group of Vaṉṉiyārs and had had an amicable small talk with them. "That is how the Vaṉṉiyārs speak! We are very different". When I asked him what he thought was so different in their Tamil, he stumbled. "Just different. I don't like it. Somehow unfriendly /uncultured." Ceṅkuntars use to add the honorific title "Mutaliyār" to their name; in fact they are referred to as Mutaliyār in local terminology without mentioning the proper name of their caste. Nowadays there is a trend among the Ceṅkuntars to adopt vegetarianism, another way to express superiority.

An alternative name for Ceṅkuntar (which Ceṅkuntar consider as depreciating nowadays) is Kaikkōlar. Many Kaikkōlars who want to explain the meaning of this term trample with a foot and gesticulate, alluding at the movements required to weave by hand, their traditional profession. The rattle of the looms can be heard in Desamukipettai (northwest of the centre), in Nalvarkoyilpettai and

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[69] E.g., Vanniya Kula Kshatriya Sangam, founded by Ramadoss, or his PMK party that is dominated by Vaṉṉiyārs.

[70] Contrary to the situation, e.g., in Brahmin families where *kōttiram* is defined as an exogamous group.

[71] "Nāyakkar" in local transcription is "Naicker".

Kanakkoyilpettai (northeast of the centre). The unpaved streets of these settlements are used to expand, arrange and comb the warps with the help of some rough wooden bars. Women and children spool up the yarn onto special bobbins. A few families specialise in silk saris; the predominant product is the cotton loincloth [*luṅki*], mostly in white with skyblue, sepia-brown and black stripes and ikat-designs.

If a weaver owns a loom, he can either be a member of a weavers' society to get the yarn and have his produce sold. Or he can work for a contractor who provides him with these services. Most weavers are proud of their profession and love to talk shop. Yet if possible they do not do it themselves. One senior weaver commented that only the poorest of the weavers actually sit in the pit of the loom and weave. They either engage daily wagers who do the job for them, or they make their wives or children weave and supervise them while working in other professions in the meantime, or they are contractors who just see to the management. Others give up their family-profession completely and just romantically talk about weaving.

Many weavers lament that handloom weaving has become an obsolete profession [*nacivu toḻil*]. The income is as little as for agricultural daily-wagers: about Rs. 50 per loincloth, according to its quality and size. Per day they finish one to two loincloth. For one day of spooling, women and children earn Rs. 5 to 10. A senior weaver (who still works as such) explains, that if one buys a loincloth locally, one will get it for Rs. 95, 110 or 135, according to its quality. If one goes to an elegant showroom in Chennai that is nicely air conditioned, the same loincloth will cost Rs. 90, 60 or 150. But if one goes for a powerloom loincloth, it will cost only Rs. 40, 60 or 90. Of course the weaver points out that the quality of handloom loincloths is much superior to that of powerloom loincloths. But he hastens to add that it is not only the attitude of his countrymen who buy powerloom- loincloths or loincloths made from polyester that threatens his profession. He clarifies that the loincloths are exported to Malaysia and Singapore and they can stand the world market only if the governments in Chennai and in New Delhi protect them. But neither do so. Like many other weavers in Tirukkalukundram, he suspects the powerloom lobby of bribing the handloom ministers.

The market for handloom loincloths diminished sharply during the period of fieldwork, probably due to the discussion about the abolition of privileges for the handloom industry.[72] Yet it is an overall trend.[73] The weavers' society of Nalvarkoyilpettai, for example, had 200 members a decade ago. In 2000, only 25 were left.

The Ceṅkuntars have an active caste organisation on local and state levels. Their flag shows a cock and a tiger. According to a legend, nine Ceṅkuntars once helped god Murukaṉ to destroy an *acuraṉ*. Since then, Murukaṉ has been important for the caste. Its members enact the legend annually on the occasion of *kanta caṣṭi* in mid November. It is the only Hindu caste that publicly and grandly celebrates a festival of its own with a procession in the centre of Tirukkalukundram. This is another indication of their pretensions.

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[72] As a measurement to protect the handloom sector, until March 2000, 50 percent of the yarn that a spinning mill produced had to be spooled on hanks, the rest could be delivered on tightly-packed spools for the purpose of powerlooms. This was important for handloom weavers because it ensured their provision with raw material. They use only hank-yarn. Secondly, handloom-weavers had the monopoly on eleven loom-products such as certain rugs and towels. Although this privilege was often violated, it extended some kind of protection to the handloom weavers.

[73] Already Crole 1879: 56 noted that the handloom weavers "cannot compete with machinery".

Other traditional artisan castes in Tirukkalukundram include

- goldsmiths, silversmiths, blacksmiths and carpenters [Ācāri] who live in various streets in the centre of Tirukkalukundram,
- potters [Uṭaiyār] who settle adjacent to the big water reservoir, yet close to the centre,
- stone cutters [Oṭṭar] who live somewhat separately in Rajapalayam Southeast of the hill,
- producers of shoes, bags, drums or other leatherware and cobblers [Cakkiḷiyār] whose mother tongue is Telugu. They live in Arundhatipalayam, a hamlet about two kilometres away, yet they go to work to the centre of Tirukkalukundram.

Tirukkalukundram is famous as a place to celebrate marriages.[74] When the season starts in February, on every evening that is considered auspicious, there is a long queue of wedding parties in front of the Big Temple. Many have their own music bands. Relatives carry baskets full of betel leaves, coconuts, flowers, and fruits. Guests, in their best saris and white loincloths (dhoties), climb down from the loading spaces of lorries that brought them from distant villages, same as they transport sand or wood in daytime. Every couple awaits its turn for the betrothal [*niccayatārttam*]. This takes place in a pillared hall in the outer circle of the temple. Whenever the party can afford it, it is followed by a reception in the same marriage hall [*kalyāṇa maṇtpam*] where the wedding is bound to take place next morning. Sometimes there are up to 60 couples that marry on the same Friday or Sunday morning (these days being considered auspicious for weddings by most of the castes).

Consequently, services connected to marriages abound in Tirukkalukundram: 34 marriage halls, numerous photo- and video-studios, tailors, beauty parlours, washermen, barbers, musicians and priests. Among the latter, Tēcikars carry out subaltern services, while Kurukkaḷs dominate the scene. Those among them who have not taken to profane jobs (such as bus driving or white collar jobs) but do temple service, use to suffix "Gurukkal" [Kurukkaḷ] to their names, tonsure their heads and tie their hair in buns. Members of other castes refer to them as Aiyar, which is not caste specific but has the broad meaning of someone who does unction [*apiṣēkam*] to Śiva gods and goddesses (whereas Aiyeṅkar refers exclusively to Vaiṣṇavite Brahmins, of whom a few reside in Tirukkalukundram).[75] Although the government maintains the Big Temple, the priests are not employed but live mostly on what the visitors donate and on shares of the produce of the temple lands. In addition to that, the more industrious Kurukkaḷs have developed wide business networks. They are hired to officiate over ceremonies for private parties such as weddings or to perform *apiṣēkam* in other temples – the farer away, the more prestigious. The star among the Kurukkaḷs has worked in Hindu-temples in Canada and Australia.

Whereas members of the other service castes settle in the periphery, Kurukkaḷs are clustered in Big Street directly adjacent to the Big Temple and Southwest of it. About 55 families of the Kaṇakkupiḷḷai live there caste as well. They are administrators by tradition, some have landholdings, many are business people (run marriage halls, tea stalls etc.).

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[74] See Civappirakāca 1987: 13 f. for one version of the mythological background.

[75] Cf. K. S. Singh 1998, vol. I, Kurukkaḷs are inferior to Brahmins who do not intermarry with them. They have three subdivisions: Conjeevaram (i.e., Kanchipuram), Tiruvalangad and Tirukkalukundram. Cf. Staal 1995, Kurukkaḷs form the major part of Hindu priests in Bali. PA. Civarāmakiruṣṇacarmā 1968: 11 notes that Kurukkaḷs do *pūjai* in the Śiva-temple in the district of Kandy which is considered to be among the four most important ones of Sri Lanka. Fuller 1984: 186 mentions Kurukkaḷ as synonymous with Ādiśaivas.

A number of flower sellers, merchants of betel leaves, fruits, coconuts, bangles and jewellery also profit by the marriages. Representing traditional trading castes, the Ceṭṭiyars stand out. There is, for example, T. M. Pattabiraman, a Kōmitti Ceṭṭiyar.

> The logo of Tirukkalukundram's hill with a priest feeding the vultures that lend the city its name and his first initial, T., point to the fact that Pattabiraman identifies strongly with Tirukkalukundram. He has been sponsoring the celebration of the Tamil New Year for many years, the *pañcāmirtam* (a mixture of bananas, raisins, ghee, honey and sugar for Kurukkaḷs), as well as, annually three processions of god Vināyakar and parts of the *navarāttiri* ceremony, all of which are connected to the temple of Tiripuracuntari. He has temple land as *kuttakai* but emphasises that his relatives own fields.

> "There are many Ceṭṭiyar castes: Pēri, Kavarai, Vānikai, Nāttukōṭṭai and so on", explains Pattabiraman's wife Padmavathi, conversing Tamil in public although at home she speaks Telugu, "but we are the only vaisyas among them". She proves it with the legend of Kannikaparamecuvari, a beautiful girl and member of her caste. The king of Kanyakumari wanted to marry her, but her caste opposed his plans. The king was mighty and wanted to marry her nevertheless. Hence, the Ceṭṭiyars decided to commit collective suicide. They constructed a huge sacrifical fire [*yākam*] and all 108 of them jumped into it. Only one Ceṭṭiyar came out without harm: he thus proved that he (a member of Padmavathi's caste) was a Vaisya – and at the same time proved the superior status of it. Its vegetarianism underlines it. "We come second to Brahmins", says Pattabiraman proudly and shows his *pūṇūl*, the sacred thread he wears around his upper body.

> Pattabiraman's family is numerous: his grandfather had ten children in three marriages, he himself has seven brothers. All of them reside in Tirukkalukundram. "In those times, many children signified wealth [*cottu*]", he comments. The family runs eleven shops in Tirukkalukundram, selling vegetables, as well as, telephone calls. A cousin works as siddha practitioner and deals in herbs and essences, another relative became stapati and builds temples.

Other castes of Tirukkalukundram whose traditional occupation is trade are Labbai and Syed. Both are Moslem and some members speak Urdu. They are concentrated in Masudi and Zakir Husain Streets, in Rudrankoyil, and their settlements crawl up the crow hill [*kākkākunṟu*]. 650 households use to contribute to the festivals of the 110-year-old mosque. According to the mosque's spokesman, it is attended by families from 10 outlying villages that do not have mosques of their own. The Muslim's speciality is trade in trash. All kinds of old metals, garments, glasses, paper and plastics are stored in this area awaiting their recycling.

> Another characteristic occupation of Muslims in Tirukkalukundram is the production of beedis. Sitting at home, men, women and children roll, stuff, close, label, bundle and pack the little cigarettes. The agent of the trademark "lungi beedis" (owned by a Hindu) supplies the workers (mostly Muslims) with the raw materials and collects the produce, paying 65 Paisa for 24 beedis. This amounts to a daily income of Rs. 27 if 1,000 beedis are rolled. The packages are sold for Rs. 2.40 each to shops which in turn sell them for Rs. 3.75.

Certain castes live on the fringes of Tirukkalukundram, in tents often made from plastic bags and palm leaves or in miserable huts:

- Kuruvikkārars who by the help of archaic rifles hunt birds and squirrels, stuff them and sell them to tourists along with chains of glass beads and plastic toys. They also catch monkeys and transport them to the forest at Vandalur for which the *pañcāyattu* pays them Rs. 50 each.[76]
- Irulars who are called Viḷḷis by others. They are known to be servants of rich families and are called whenever snakes must be caught or antidotes given following snake bites. They also catch rabbits and rats. The Irular Tribal Welfare Society in nearby Thandarai claims the status of a Scheduled Tribe for them.
- Kāṭṭunāyakkaṉ, a Telugu speaking group classified as Scheduled Tribe that lives of pig rearing and government jobs.
- itinerant people such as salt merchants from southern Tamil Nadu or traditional healers from Andhra Pradesh.

Mobility

The population of Tirukkalukundram grew considerably during the past century.[77]

year	Inhabitants	Growth in percent
1901	5,728	
1911	6,838	19.38
1921	7,957	16.36
1931	8,623	8.37
1941	9,505	10.23
1951	11,407	20.01
1961	12,881	12.92
1971	16,593	28.82
1981	19,804	19.35
1991	23,333	17.82

Table 2: Source: statistics of Tirukkalukundram's
Town *pañcāyattu* and Census of India.

There has been a constant influx of people from other parts of the state and the country. As **traders and business people** they usually settle in the centre of Tirukkalukundram and run shops in the two main bazaar streets adjacent to the western entrance of the temple of Śiva Paktavaccalēsvarar. They include about 20 Marvari (also called Cēṭṭu or Rajastani) families. According to oral history, their forefathers came from Rajasthan about a generation ago. Marvaris are typically jewellers and pawn brokers. About 50 families of the Nair caste immigrated from Kerala; most of them run restaurants and tea stalls. Nāṭars from Tirunelveli are wholesalers and retailers in basic products such as rice, wheat, fire wood, coal and wires, plaited palmleaves and other materials to construct houses.

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[76] On Kuruvikkārars, also called Narikuṟavaṉs, see Werth 1996. According to Moffatt 1979: 144 – 6, they are the lowest untouchable caste in the village Endavur studied by him in Chingleput District.

[77] Census of India 1999.

The intensity of their ties with their homeplaces, respectively their integration, in the local society varies greatly.

> Abdullah, a Muslim timber merchant from Kannur District in Kerala, for example, says he travels home every two weeks. His wife, four daughters and four grandchildren live there. They consider Tirukkalukundram not good enough to live in, he explains. Abdullah stays in a rented room in Vanniyar Street and hardly engages in public life of Tirukkalukundram nor does he talk much to his neighbours.

> On the other hand, there are immigrants like M. Ramalingam Nadar. He arrived from his native place, Cettikulam near Tirunelveli, in 1947, following his elder brother Sivanantaperumal. Both have been living in Tirukkalukundram ever since and so do their wives. The brothers bought a house in which the families live jointly. Ramalingam and his family use to travel to Cettikulam every year in the tamil month *cittirai* (mid April till mid May) in order to meet the relatives who are still living there and to make *apiṣēkam* and offer goats to their family goddess [*kulatēvatai*], Tirupiḷḷai Āḻvār. They still own parts of the family-house far south. However, Ramalingam and his family use to visit the local Brahminic temples as well. They pay a contribution to Tirukkalukundram's procession-[*uṟcavam*]-festival, the last day of which is sponsored jointly by the merchants of the place. They interact a lot with their neighbours, especially with the Ceṭṭiyar-family next door. Altogether they have eight children who attended school in Tirukkalukundram where they continue to live.

An everlasting reason for the displacement of people in India is **marriage**. There exists a very localised pattern with a number of alliances within Tirukkalukundram, including cross-cousin couples. But one frequently meets women who came as brides from Chengalpattu, Kanchipuram, Dindivanam, Uttiramerur, Chennai or other places in the range of 100 km at most.

There are many **civil servants** who are transferred to Tirukkalukundram by the state. On 1.1.1997, Tirukkalukundram was declared the headquarter of a taluk. It is the sede of the deputy tahsildar, the Block Development office, the *pañcāyattu* office, a Traveler's Bungalow, a court, a post office with a branch, a police station, a section of the Public Works Department, a hospital, an outlet of the statal shop for homespun wares (Khadi Gramayog Bhavan) and a Khadi Kraft soap factory with 20 employees. There are seven primary schools, middle schools and a boys' and a girls' high school.

Apart from the government schools, there are a number of private institutions of education in Tirukkalukundram, including an English-medium school with a fairly good reputation in the area and a polytechnic three kilometres away. They, too, draw teachers to the place. Altogether all these institutions make Tirukkalukundram a vantage ground for parents who want to have their children educated. Many families move to Tirukkalukundram because of that, or they send their offspring there.

> An example is S. Marimuttu. He is a Paṟaiyar and hales from the nearby village Suradimangalam. His parents worked on daily wages in agriculture, and Marimuttu emphasises that he was born and raised in a hut. He attended school in his village until he was admitted to the ninth standard in Tirukkalukundram. There he lodged in the hostel run by an Adi Dravida welfare organisation in Big Street. He concluded his studies with degrees in history and law in Chennai. At the time of the fieldwork, he worked as lawyer in the courts of

Tirukkalukundram and Chengalpattu. He claims to be co-founder of the local Ambedkar-Manram, was regularly consulted by Paṟaiyars after riots and took pride in being asked by members of all castes as a consultant, including the MLA and the mayor to whom he claimed to be a friend. He had married a woman from Chennai and lived in a spatious flat in one of the streets of Tirukkalukundram which had come into existence in the 1980s. His son and daughter shuttle to an expensive private school about seven kilometres outside of Tirukkalukundram. At the age of 37 ("This is the right age to build a house"), he was in the process of constructing his own house – not in Tirukkalukundram, but in Chengalpattu. His desires for his career and that of his children had outgrown the possibilities of Tirukkalukundram.

Like Marimuttu, many people leave Tirukkalukundram. Yet it is rare that immigration and emigration take place in the same generation; usually it expands over two. The parents come for the sake of their children's education and they leave to more promising places. Also the children of people with long standing relations to Tirukkalukundram emigrate.

A case in point is that of K. Sundaram Mudaliyar, an 84-year-old Ceṅkuntar, whose face is dominated by enormous black eyeglasses. In a white dhoti with a towel over his shoulders he reclines crosslegged on the swing in the airy house which his grandfather erected in the traditional style – with an inner courtyard, high ceilings, first floor and two verandahs in front – and recalls his life history. It includes the abandonment of the traditional profession of his caste, cotton weaving, and the acquisition of land. He owns 5 acres of irrigated land with a well which he leases out. One son works locally as a cloth merchant and stays with Sundaram together with his family. One daughter lives 50 kms away in Tambaram, another one in Chennai and the third one in the USA. Another son went there in 1971. Once a month, Sundaram talks to each of them over the telephone that is enthroned on a small table in the hall. Yet he says he prefers to communicate via e-mail. He has to ride to the next internet shop in Chengalpattu to make use of this facility, yet he finds it convenient and cheap and loves to chat about different providers and new services on the internet.

Nowadays' emigration is a replication of what Tirukkalukundram's elites did half a century ago. Countering the population growth by emigration, an exodus of people with education and wealth has been taking place over the decades.[78]

The turnover of the local society is well visible, for instance, in the house of the mentioned Ramalinga Nadar. It formerly belonged to a Brahmin family. The typical pedestal in which they grew basil for ritual purpose [*tuḷacimāṭam*] is decaying in the garden. The ample verandah seems to have been representative at a time when it probably served the Brahmins to receive guests and still keep them outside. The Nāṭars to beckon guests right away into their living-cum-tv-cum-sleeping room and use the veranda as godown for bags of rice and pulses.

In addition to people moving permanently or for longer periods to and from Tirukkalukundram, there is a considerable amount of **commuters**, both inbound and outbound. Barring the hot midday hours, the bus stand is populated from five o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night. In the evenings, hawkers add to the three permanent hotels and tea stalls and turn the place into an enormous snack bar,

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[78] See Ludden 1999: 220 with references.

catering to tired commuters. Their journeys can be long. S. Palanivelan, for example, the aforementioned owner of the sugar cane field, works with the Meteorological Department in Tambaram. Its airport and the industrial development zone nearby is the target of many other commuters of Tirukkalukundram. While it takes about five to six hours per day to go to and from Tambaram, rides to Chennai and back in public buses and suburban trains consume up to seven or eight hours. Nevertheless, there are people who commute daily to Chennai. Some of them work with IT-companies or in other high-profile jobs in the south of the capital, others in shoe factories or in the chemical industry in low-profile jobs. Those with jobs in Chennai's industrial north tend to rent rooms there and return only once a week and in their vacation to Tirukkalukundram. However, it seems that most commuters work in the industrial, administrative and commercial town Chengalpattu, with the atomic power plant in Kalpakkam, or at the tourist spot Mamallapuram. Each of these places requires about an hour and a half travelling time per day in public buses.

At the same time, there is inbound commutation. People from surrounding villages come to Tirukkalukundram on a daily basis, mainly to work in trade, commerce and public administration. Many petty businesses such as tailor's and barber's shops, laundries and especially modern trades such as small soda manufacture, a radio mechanic or the shop for agrochemicals and gas are run by people of nearby villages. Apart from that, numerous children of the surrounding area commute to Tirukkalukundram to attend school.

Religion

Asked to draw maps of Tirukkalukundram, inhabitants usually start with the mountain and its temple. The hill dominates their pictures, as well as, the scenery of the locality. Some metres below the peak, there is a cave temple of *rauttirarkaḷ* which is listed as a protected monument and ascribed to the time of Mahendra Varma I Pallava, AD 610 – 640[79]. In 2000, metal bars were set in its entrance to close it for the public. Bats inhabit it; few people pay attention to it.

The temple which figures so prominently in the drawings is the one on top of the hill. The ridge is supposed to be a manifestation of[80] (or to have been fused with[81]) four vedas, holy scriptures of Hinduism and, hence, derives its Sanskrit name Vētakiri, "hill of the vedas". The presiding deity is *rauttirarkaḷ*, its Lord: Vētakirīsvarar. In practice, a greater attraction than the vedas are two vultures that used to land on a rocky platform below the temple every day at midday in order to receive food from the hand of a priest. The Tamil name Tirukkalukundram means "holy hill of the vultures (or kites)".[82]

The birds secured a considerable attendance of pilgrims and domestic tourists to the place – and thus income for restaurants, gift shops, the temple fund, flower sellers, telephone booths, cool-drink-bars

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[79] According to a plate of the Archaelogical Survey on the spot. Shastri 1975: 150 dates the Pallava-king Mahendravarman I's lifetime AD 590 – 630.

[80] *tiṇattanti kuṭumpa malar o. d.: 4* – "*ittalattil ātci puripavar srivētakirīsvarar (vētācalam eṉavum aḻaikkappaṭukṟār) nāṉku vētaṅkaḷāṉa rik, yajūr, cāma, atarvaṇa vētaṅkaḷ 4 malaikaḷāka aikyamāki, civaperumāṉai iṅku pūjippatāka aitīkam*". See also Jayacentilnātaṉ 1999: 1: *vētamē malaiyāka viḷaṅkuvatāl vētakiri, vētaverpu eṉṉum peyarkaḷaip peṟṟatu.*

[81] Civappirakāca 1987: 3 f.

[82] For the different *purāṇam*s that explain this phenomenon, see chapter six.

and others. In the 1870s, the temple of Vētakirīsvarar had the third highest income of all temples in the Chingleput District.[83] In his manual, the collector mentions the birds and writes about Tirukkalukundram "[P]ilgrims ... flock to it from all parts in one unbroken stream all the year round"[84]. However, in 1996 or 1997[85], the stream dried into a rivulet when the birds stopped coming. The damage to the local economy is felt. The reasons given for the absence of the vultures are manifold and will be discussed later.

Apart from the abode of Vētakirīsvarar on top of the mountain, there are two more major Śiva-temples in Tirukkalukundram. One is a vast temple compound in the centre of Tirukkalukundram. It was allegedly built to the order of King Jatavarman Sundara[86] around remnants of the Pallava's time. The presiding deities are Śiva Paktavaccalēsvarar and Tiripuracuntari. In addition, there are shrines of many other gods such as, Māṇikkavācakar, Sōmāskantar, Atmanātar, Vaṇtuvaṉavināyakar, Jampukēsvarar, Aruṇacalīśvarar, Vīrapattiraṉ, and the much worshipped Murukaṉ as Āṟumukam. In colloquial language, this temple-complex is just called *periyakōyil*, Big Temple, and that is how it will be called in this thesis.

The third major temple of god Śiva in Tirukkalukundram is situated east of Tirukkalukundram's center, an impressive complex with a characteristic tower above the entrance [*kōpuram*]. It is dedicated to Śiva Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar and his wife Apirāmi Nāyakki. The temple lends its name, Rudrankoyil, to the surrounding settlement. Associated with the Śiva-temples is also the much smaller shrine of the *nālvar* east of Vētakirīsvarar's hill and with a good view of it (the idols, as well as, their vehicle are facing west). The *nālvar* are four Śaivite saints who are said[87] to have come to Tirukkalukundram in order to sing their praise to the presiding deity. They are Appar[88], Cuṇtarar[89], Tiruñāṉacampaṇtar and Māṇikkavācakar.[90] People of Tirukkalukundram who take a certain interest in history like Sammanda Piḷḷai or P. V. Ramachandran emphasise that the *nālvar* never climbed on top of the holy hill but stayed at its foot and prayed there. The settlement that has developed around that presumed place is called Nalvarkoyilpettai.

There are two Navakirāka temples which form part of little temple complexes but are well known by the public and fairly intensively worshipped on Saturday evenings. Shrines of Nantikīcuvarar, such as that near Cokkammaṉ-temple or in the complex of Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar- and Tiripuracuntari temples, are activated only two days before full moon [*piratōṣam* days]. In Tirukkalukundram, there at least five Temples of Murukaṉ including one on top of an outlying hillock nearby Tirukkalukundram-Mutikainalankuppam [*muttu kumaraṉ malai*]. In various *ammaṉ*-temples, he can be found in a niche. Yet public attention concentrates on the Murukaṉ-shrine in the premises of Tiripuracuntari temple.

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[83] Crole 1879: 30.
[84] Crole 1879: 107.
[85] There are various accounts in oral history. Tourists from Chennai and from abroad told me that they saw the vultures in the course of the 1990s.
[86] Jatavarman Sundara ascended the throne of the Pandya-dynasty in 1251 and waged wars throughout his reign. See Shastri 1975: 215 – 7.
[87] At least by consultants in the study area.
[88] Literally, "Father", the way Tiruñāṉacampantar addressed him. It is his most popular appellation. Another title of his is Tirunāvukkaracu, a widespread men's name in Tirukkalukundram. Originally, Appar's parents had called him Marulneekkiyar.
[89] Or Cuṇtaramūrtti Cuvāmikal.
[90] Vanmikanathan 1983 (rpt. 1996): 81 – 83.

Among the protecting deities [*kāval*], the most prominent is Vīrapattiraṉ. He has two temples of his own in Tirukkalukundram. While Vīrapattiraṉ has his own standing and is taken as a guardian of entire Tirukkalukundram, other deities in this category are more like body guards of certain deities, such as Potturājaṉ and Dharmarāja (for Draupadī in Tirukalukundram-Rudrankoyil and M. N. Kuppam respectively), Aṉṉamār and Ciṉṉacāmi (for Celliyammaṉ and Ōcūrammaṉ), Ruttirāṇṭavaṉ (for Cokkammaṉ), Cantikēcuvarar and Maturai Vīraṉ.

Tirukkalukundram's public religious life is dominated by saivaite gods and goddesses. However, there is also one idol of Viṣṇu as Lord Perumāḷ which – along with his wife Laṭcumi, his vehicle Karuṭāḷvar and Viṣṇu's incarnation [*avatar*] Kirusṉaṉ – stands almost hidden in a temple of Kaṅkaiyammaṉ. Apart from that, there are six Kirusṉaṉ (or Vēṉukōpāl) temples in Tirukkalukundram. On Saturday evenings, four of them are visited by groups of mostly aged men who sing, play and dance bhajans in praise of the god who is represented by delicate glass paintings. A third god of the Vaiṣṇavite ambit is the monkey shaped Hanuman. Tirukkalukundram has three temples of him, one of which was almost out of use in 1999 /2000, the idol being covered with a cloth. Another one is situated in a remote settlement of Iṟular and visited by them exclusively. Worshippers recollect that it was erected after a monkey had been found dead at that site. The story seems to be commonplace for Hanuman temples; it is also told referring to the third Hanuman temple. This was recently built opposite the southern entrance of the Big Temple. People of various castes frequent this one a lot.

Temples for Gaṇēśa (the elephant-headed god who is locally called Piḷḷaiyār or Lord Vināyakar) sprout at every corner. Well-to-do people erect small shrines of Piḷḷaiyār in their gardens and appoint priests to do the regular *pūjai*. Some Piḷḷaiyārs are considered special, such as Aṉṉakkāvaṭippiḷḷaiyār near the ritual northern boundary of Tirukkalukundram on the road to Chengalpattu, the double-faced Piḷḷaiyār opposite the main entrance of the Tiripuracuntari temple, or the Vaṉṉiyaṭivināyakar and Vilvavināyakar in Nalvarkoyilpettai.

Vināyakar's power (and thus the authority of the gods of the Brahmin tradition) does not go uncontested. "Vināyakar appears so be big. By appearance, Vināyakar has the form of an elephant, but even a small ant can kill it. It is this ammaṉ who has power.[91] We will perform any *pūjai* first to this ammaṉ." Say worshippers of Celliyammaṉ and her "younger sister" Ōcūrammaṉ. They are unanimously identified as village goddesses [*kirāma tēvatai*] of Tirukkalukkundram, that is they protect, jointly with Kaṅkaiyammaṉ and Ōṭai-Kaṅkaiyammaṉ the village and its boundaries. A family belonging to the Uvaccār caste performs the puja there (the songs and prayers exclusively in Tamil) and also organises the festivals. Elango, who like his brothers Shekar and Selvam follows in the position of his father Natesan Mudaliyar as priest of the two ammaṉs, claims that the temples of Celliyammaṉ and Ōcūrammaṉ are more ancient than those of Tiripuracuntari and Vētakirīsvarar. He holds that even if Brahmins openly despise Celliyammaṉ because she accepts animal sacrifices, they come to worship her if calamities like chickenpox or smallpox have struck them.

The shrines of the village goddesses are located East of the Big Temple. Celliyammaṉ is represented by seven small black idols. Ōcūrammaṉ is depicted as a life size sitting woman with a head lying in front of her. A second temple of Celliyammaṉ was erected in the middle of the fields to the Northeast of Tirukkalukundram after an idol of that goddess had ostensibly been carried to the spot by a flood. In all these shrines, the deities face north. A second temple of Ōcūrammaṉ stands in Paramecuvari-

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[91] "*Power* [English word] *inta ammaṉukkutāṉ*."

Nagar, the place where the biggest part of the Paṟaiyar-population lives. mirroring the situation in the centre of Tirukkalukundram, the people of the place consider her their village goddess [*kirāma tēvatai*]. Many informants say that Celliyamman̲ and Ōcūramman̲ are but forms of Māriyamman̲ , the smallpox lady[92]. Ōcūramman̲ is said to stem from the Tamil town Hosur [Ōcūr] on the border to Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. There she allegedly overpowered the worst demon [*acuran̲*] of the world, without fear, just emitting a strong wind [*kāṟṟu*] that blew him away.

The *kirāma tēvatai* and the gods of the Brahminical tradition are linked in multifarious ways. Formally, the temples of Celliyamman̲ and Ōcūramman̲ were administrated by the officer of the Tiripuracuntari temple, just like seven other temples in Tirukkalukundram and that of Ñān̲apurīcuvarar in Tiruvadicculam near Chengalpattu. A Kurukkaḷ took part in the *kumpapiṣēkam* for Celliyamman̲'s temple on March 16th, 2000, and B. Ramachandran, a relative of the officiating priests, recited the slokas in Sanskrit. The day after, three Kurukkaḷs came to show fire (on separate plates) in front of the deity. T. V. Nagan, a relative of the officiating priests, vaunted that the Kurukkaḷs had not come for the previous *kumpapiṣēkam*, that he had scolded them and that it was a sign of the amman's power that they came that day. The procession idols [*urcavamūrtti*] are kept in the Tiripuracuntari-temple. Celliyamman̲ is said to be the incarnation of Īcuvarī, Śiva's wife. Every year in the Tamil month *cittirai*, the goddesses are invoked in a dramatic procession in the dead of night to the nine border stones of Tirukkalukundram to protect the place during the grand car festival of Tiripuracuntari and Vētakirīsvarar. It is the only ceremony in Tirukkalukundram in which Paṟaiyars play a more substantial role than merely beating the drums.

Other publicly accessible amman̲-Temples in Tirukkalukundram include Kaṅkaiyamman̲ (7 temples), Muttumāriyamman̲ (4 temples), Karumāriyamman̲ (3 temples), Taṇṭumāriyamman̲, Śakti, Draupadī, Ellaiyamman̲ (2 temples each), Paccaiyamman̲, Tān̲atōn̲riyamman̲, Van̲n̲iyamman̲, Malayāḷa Pakavāti, Karia Alaki, Piṭārikuṇṇamman̲, Mahāmāriyamman̲, Māriyamman̲, Cokkamman̲ (1 temple or shrine each), various shrines of Kan̲n̲iyamman̲, and Kāḷiyamman̲. The latter's abode in Rudrankoyil was recently renovated and is thronged by worshippers every Friday.

Most of these *amman̲*s are visited in processions that take place in July/August (*āṭi* month) when a kind of sesame beer [*kūḻ*] is served. For some of them, this is the only time of the year that they are made visible. Others have permanent structures in which priests perform regular *pūjai*s. A minor role play *nāka*s, idols of cobras that tend to be near *amman̲*-shrines or that are called *amman̲*s themselves (as, for example, Nakēṇṭiramman̲ in Desamukipettai).[93] Apart from Tiripuracuntari, the only female god[94] inside the procession streets that surround the Big Temple is Pōlēriyamman̲. She has her great day on the festival of *māṭṭu poṅkal* in January, when the bullock carts pay her a visit.

Tirukkalukundram grows steadily. Senior citizens remember that nowadays sprawling neighbourhoods like Ayarbadi consisted of just a few thatched huts in the 1960s. Streets like Kodumaikollu Street or neighbourhoods, such as, Teachers' Nagar did not exist then. The multitude and growth in number of *amman̲*s seems to reflect that development.[95]

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[92] Dumont 1959: 78 f.
[93] For more details on Mun̲īcuvaran and Kāṭṭēri, see chapter 3.3.
[94] Informants of Tirukkalukundram are positive about the fact that *amman̲*s are always female.
[95] For more on the neighbourhoods, see chapter 5: *kuḷam*.

Furthermore, Tirukkalukundram has the above mentioned mosque and an outpost of the Roman catholic church of Oragadam, looked after by a tiny community of nuns. There is a parish of the Protestant Church of South India and four prayer rooms of Pentecost groups. Insiders estimate the numbers of Christian families at about 200 in Tirukkalukundram, most of whom live in Paramecuvari Nagar.

2.3   Oragadam

Size and setting

Oragadam, a village in Chengalpattu taluk, consists of 1,578 inhabitants in 333 households.[96] Other than Tirukkalukundram that stretches out in all directions, swallowing other villages and creating new neighbourhoods, Oragadam's shape is compact. It covers 506 hectares. Arriving on the jolty road from Tirukkalukundram, one passes the almost uninhabited Oragadam Reserved Forest for about five kilometres. Oragadam is situated at the northern foot of a ridge. That contributes to the impression of a certain seclusion. To the north, east and west sides, ample fields separate Oragadam from neighbouring villages. Most of the houses are low, very few have a first floor. The majority have thatched roofs. Inhabitants who show visitors around use to take pride in presenting the scenery and pointing out that it is so beautiful that even Rajni Kant (a famous actor in Tamil movies) did shootings there.

Oragadam has two primary schools, a co-operative bank, two small rice mills, three petty kiosks, a ration shop and three tea stalls. Two bus lines connect it to Tirukkalukundram and to surrounding villages. Vedatchalam, the mayor [*talaivar*], non party member, who is the son of the previous mayor and the owner of one of the rice mills, recently had the bus stops furnished with cement sheds. Since then they have turned into meeting points for men in the afternoons and evenings. At times, a post office opens. A tower telephone can be used in cases of emergency.

Castes

In Oragadam, Paraiyars and Vanniyārs dominate. The village is bifurcated. According to the Vanniyārs, they themselves live in the main village [*ūr*] whereas the Paraiyars live in what Vanniyārs use to call *colony* or *cēri* or they refrain from naming it at all, tacitly pointing in that direction (east of the *ūr*), sniffing at it. According to some of the politically articulate Paraiyars, there is Oragadam I and Oragadam II, theirs (the eastern part) being Oragadam I. Others call their dwelling place "*kirāmam*". Apart from Paraiyar, in the four long shady streets to the east reside some Veṭṭiyāṇ families, and Vaṇṇāṉs who traditionally laundered the clothes of the Paraiyars.[97]

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[96] Census of India 1991.

[97] According to the Census of India 1991, 456 persons belong to Scheduled Castes in Oragadam.

Apart from Vaṉṉiyārs, in the five streets of Oragadam's western part live several Ampattaṉ and Pantitar (barber and musician) families and a few Ceṅkuntars, Iṭaiyars / Nāyuṭus, Kaṇakkuppiḷḷais and Brahmins. Towards the northern fringe dwell about 15 Uṭaiyar families who produce all kinds of earthen pots, lamps, bowls and stoves.

Mobility

On the slope of the hill to Oragadam's south – thus outside the distinction of Ur and colony, Oragadam I or II – several Iṛular-families settled who are said to have arrived just a decade back. They are the only immigrants. Decaying houses in all parts of Oragadam are an indicator of emigration. As there are very few employment opportunities outside agriculture in Oragadam, people who want to work in other branches leave the place completely.

> "I am happy when I am here", says 20 year old Mitra with a strong American accent in her English. She says that she enjoys the idyllic countryside and that "my people live here". Yet Mitra has very rarely visited Oragadam, just a few times in her childhood, and the day when we met is probably the last time. She has come to mourn the death of C. Nanamuttu, her grandfather who died at the age of 90. Mitra depicts him as an important person in the Eastern part of Oragadam, the first in the family to convert to Christianity and the co-founder of the first CSI church in his place. The entire family sits on chairs on the verandah of the deserted grandparental house. Sweating in their western style clothes, they sip tea out of thin plastic cups. Nanamuttu was the last family member who stayed in Oragadam. Mitra's mother, Nanamuttu's daughter, works as head nurse in the Christian hospital of Vellore. Mitra's brother is still in school, her sister is a doctor and she herself does postgraduate studies. "We could not live here", says her father, "there are no basic amenities, no doctors, no proper education for the children."

Many inhabitants of Oragadam commute. In almost every house in the western part of the village, at least one member of the younger generation leaves the place for the day. They work as bus drivers in the area, as tailors in Tirukkalukundram, as mechanics in Chengalpattu or as watchmen in the atomic power plant of Kalpakkam. They get used to it already in their very early days, because from middle school level onwards, they attend schools in Tirukkalukundram or elsewhere. Inbound commutation is restricted to farmhands from Vippedu, Pulikundram or Kattakkazani in the vicinity.

The central street of Oragadam is called "Brahmin Street". It is lined by the ruined houses of Aiyeṅkars who left to urban centres several decades ago. Yet two families have stayed on and there is a beginning trend of Brahmins returning to the village and re-establishing themselves there after their retirement.

Religion

On top of a rocky hill on the northern boundary of Oragadam, there is a temple of Śiva Vāṭāmalli Īcuvarar. The apsidal form of its sanctum sanctorum suggests that the temple was built in the 13th

century, allegedly on the remnants of an older structure of late pallava or early Cōḻa period (850 –
1100 AD). Oragadam is said to have been known as Pallavamalla Chaturvedimangalam in those
days.[98]

Today the era of the saivaites seems to be over in Oragadam. Śaivism does not play a role worth
mentioning. A Kurukkaḷ boy from Tirukkalukundram pedals there daily on his bicycle and performs a
simple *apiṣēkam*. Otherwise the temple remains locked.

The temple of Kotaṇṭarāmacuvāmi, a form of Viṣṇu as Rākunāta Perumāḷ, receives more attention. It
is situated in Brahmin Street, was built to the order of Nandivarman II, the greatgrandson of
Narasimha Pallava and is said to have belonged to Ahobila Math in Srirangam for a long time.[99]
Nowadays, it is administratively linked to the office of Kotaṇṭarāmacuvāmi in Madurantakam. It
houses idols of Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, Hanuman, Riṣyasriṅka, Narasimha, of sages and of Kambar, the
author of the epos Ramayana. A Bhattacharyar who dwells next door performs regular *apiṣēkam*
which is attended by Brahmin ladies of the vicinity and, on special festivals four times a year[100], by
Aiyeṅkars who have emigrated to other places but still preserve their family ties to Oragadam.

In the western part of Oragadam, small shrines of Piḷḷaiyār are being constructed at the junctions of the
streets. On the occasion of Vināyakar catūrtti in late September, the idol is taken around in a
procession.

As the village goddess [*kirāma tēvatai*] of Oragadam ranks Kuḷatiyamman̠ along with
Muttumāriyamman̠ and Kaṅkaiyamman̠. They are celebrated in *āṭi* month with processions, sacrifices
of chicken and goats and the serving of sesame beer [*kūz*]. Other than on festival days, there is very
little to do about them. There is also a recently built temple of Aṅkāḷamman̠. Like Muttumāriyamman̠,
Kan̠n̠iyamman̠ has two shrines in Oragadam: one in the eastern part, one in the center.
Seṅkaḷān̠iyamman̠ is considered to be the elder sister of Muttumāriyamman̠. Suṭalaiyamman̠,
Tampirān̠ and Periyāṇṭavar are further deities of importance in Oragadam.

The Eastern part of Oragadam is a stronghold of Christianity. The Church of South India had a new
church erected and grandly opened it on November 18th, 1999 in the presence of Deva Sahayan, the
Protestant Bishop of Chennai. Samuel and Salomi, members of the community, explain that the
number of CSI follwers has risen to 45; this has outgrown the extant structure. There is also a huge
Roman Catholic church, seat of a parish. Father Anthony, its priest, keeps shuttling between
Oragadam and Chennai where he has his office as head of the missionary work of the diocese. He has
travelled widely including to Germany and to other European countries and has a man-of-the-world
air. Money from abroad (predominantly from donors in Skandinavia) flows into the projects of the
convent that is adjacent to the Roman Catholic church. It belongs to the French Vincentine order and
is maintained by nuns who stem mostly from Kerala. They run an orphanage for children from
surrounding villages, cultivate a lush garden, organise tailoring classes and maintain a dispensary in
which they also distribute medicines at very low cost. Mother Anne, the superior, and Father Anthony
estimate that there are 65 Roman Catholic families in Oragadam and about 20 Protestant. None of
them live in the Western part of the village.

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[98] Census of India 1961: 535.
[99] The Hindu 24.05.1996: 33.
[100] Such as Rāma's birthday [*rāma navami*] in the end of March.

2.4 Irumbuli

Size and setting

Irumbuli is a hamlet of 266 inhabitants in 58 households. It extends over 110 hectares[101]. Administratively, it became part of Kottimangalam. Except for one ration shop there are no facilities whatsoever. To the chagrin of various inhabitants, there is no connection to the public transport system; the walking distance to the next bus stop is about half an hour. The connection via road is fairly good because the bypass road of Tirukkalukundram is just about 100 metres away. It leads towards the atomic power plant of Kalpakkam, hence, it is accorded importance and repaired sooner than most other streets after it was damaged, e. g., by rains. Recently, two private telephone lines were installed in Irumbuli.

There are thatched houses, as well as, brick-and-mortar structures. Irumbuli consists of one street that is surrounded by fields. Moreover a little cluster of huts is developing at a certain distance to the West which officially also falls under Irumbuli. To the north, Irumbuli's area is demarcated by a ridge of mountains.

Whereas the British colonial government settled Tirukkalukundram (except for its revenue village Mangalam) and Oragadam in the ryotwari system, Irumbuli as a whole belonged to a merchant of the Ceṭṭiyar caste until he sold it after India's Independence.

Castes

The inhabitants of Irumbuli maintain that they are all relatives [contakArar). In fact all but one house in the core part belong to Mutaliyārs, whereas people of various castes, including several Naidus, Muslims and weavers, settle in the cluster nearby Cokkammaṉ temple.

"There are Koṇṭaikaṭṭi Mutaliyārs, Vēḷāḷar Mutaliyārs, Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyārs, Tōttakkārar Mutaliyārs, Kattiri [brinjal] Mutaliyārs, Takkāḷi [tomato] Mutaliyārs…" joked a man of the Nair caste who had come from Kerala to Tirukkalukundram and took his time to understand the differences. [102] Even people who themselves use to add the title "Mutaliyār" to their names differ in their explanations of which castes can be associated to it. The majority population calls themselves (and is called by others) Tōttakkārar. Yet they claim to belong to the broad Vēḷāḷar group of agricultural castes. Some of them contribute to the procession on the day of the *cittirai uṛcavam* festival in Tirukkalukundram which is considered to be that of Vēḷāḷars. Yet other than, for example, the members of Tondaimandala Tuḷuva Vēḷāḷar Mutaliyārs, the Tōttakkārar eat fish and meat of chicken and goats, and the two groups usually do not intermarry.

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[101] Census of India 1991.

[102] Barnett 1976: 136 mentions a similar proverb interpreting it as indicating that Mutaliyār, like brinjal, mixes palatably with everything. I have the impression that Mutaliyārs as well as non-Mutaliyārs use it to refer mockingly to the confusing multitude of castes that are referred to (and want to be referred to) as Mutaliyārs.

The Tōttakkārars of Irumbuli hold not to be related to the inhabitants of Madulankuppan, a remote hamlet of Tirukkalukundram, who call themselves "Tōttakkārar" as well. Whereas the latter engage in the construction of houses, the Tōttakkārars of Irumbuli are proud to be farmers [*vivacāyi*]. This pertains to all types of landholders. Yet as in the case of the Ceṅkuntars and weaving, only the poorest members of the caste actually wade in the mud of the paddy fields, plough, transplant, and harvest. Whoever can afford it becomes an owner manager or rents out his land, closely supervising the cultivation. Many Tōttakkārars eat the produce of their fields themselves instead of selling it as cash crop.

Whereas some Tōttakkārars survive on daily wages and odd jobs, relatives and neighbours of them have become men (or women) of means. Bearing an astonishing resemblance, their households show a special fondness of things. They invariably display a sofa, even though its owners (especially the women) prefer to sit on the floor. On the walls, there are photographs of family members in flashy frames, pictures of waterfalls and fancy clocks, preferably those that periodically bang like Big Ben. Typically, a jumble of plastic dolls, thumbed issues of Tamil periodicals, pill boxes, oinment tubes, the latest coffee filter system, cameras, packages of a new brand of washing powder and bouquets of artificial roses will cover the table, shelves, and floor. "We are rich. We had the first radio, the first washing machine and the first fridge in the area", a Tōttakkārar-lady declared proudly. At the same time, the fear of thieves has driven her family to have the windows walled up and a mighty system of locks installed. In daytime, she has to switch the lights on, and of course the fan. Her house resembles a vault.

Mobility

There is a general notion that the inhabitants of Irumbuli have come from Mangalam in the course of the past half century. Mangalam is a village, three kilometres away, which nowadays forms part of Tirukkalukundram. For the past 20 years, immigrants from places like Dindivanam or Villupuram have settled in the erstwhile flower-garden north of the temple of Cokkamma̱n.

Same as in Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam, commutation plays an important role in Irumbuli. Farmhands from neighbouring Ayarbadi and Pulikundram could be clubbed as inbound commuters, yet those outbound are more important. In almost every family, somebody commutes to another place to work, either daily or for several days in a row.

> An extreme case is that of Sammanda Mudaliyar. He recalls that he, along with his relatives, shifted to Irumbuli in 1956 and started to buy fields. Now he owns almost three hectares. He constructed a cement house in Irumbuli, yet he lived in central Chennai for many years where he worked until his retirement with the society that catered for the milk of the metropolitan area (the precursor of nowaday's Aavin). His daughter and his sons were raised and married in Chennai and stay there with his grandchildren. Sammanda is content to describe his present pastime as shuttling between Irumbuli (to oversee his fields) and Chennai (to see his family and collect the rent on his house).

Religion

The village goddesses [*kirāma tēvatai*] of Irumbuli are Vēmpuḷiyamman̲ and Kun̲ratamman̲. While the temple of the latter is surrounded by fields and stands in the middle of a sacred grove, Vēmpuḷiyamman̲ dwells in the scrub beyond the fields, at a walking distance of about 15 minutes from the settlement. Other than Kuḷatiyamman̲ in Oragadam, both goddesses are visited daily by a priest [*pūjāri*], Vedagiri of Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil. He is constantly on his way with his big black bicycle because he does *apiṣēkam* for a number of other *amman̲*-temples between Manamadi and Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil as well. Believers crowd Kun̲ratamman̲ (and to a lesser degree Vēmpuḷiyamman̲) on Fridays and Tuesdays. In July /August, the goddesses are taken round in processions and get sacrifices of goats and chicken.

In addition, Kaṅkaiyamman̲ and Van̲n̲iyamman̲ are said to dwell in Irumbuli. At its farthest western boundary, there is a temple of Cokkamman̲ which, however, plays a very subordinate role in the religious life of the village as it is oriented more towards Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai. As in Tirukkalukundram, Aṇṇamār is the guardian of the village goddess. There is also a temple of Murukan̲ which the villagers have recently renovated and enlarged. Murukan̲ is considered special for Mutaliyārs. This festival was attended by Mutaliyārs only.

This chapter provided a sketch of the study area. Two topics ranged prominently and will be of importance later: the troublesome relationship of "Backward Castes" and "Scheduled Castes", i.e., Untouchables, along with the emphasis on caste in general, and secondly, the high mobility.

Tirukkalukundram's Big ēri

3.   *ēri*: Shape

Le tank est des tous les systēmes d'irrigation le plus caractēristique de l'Inde.[103]

In this statement, the French geographer Emmanuel Adiceam speaks of water reservoirs which can be grouped in the Tamil category *ēri*. They have received a great deal of scholarly attention, especially in the last two decades.[104] However, there are only hints at what their meaning and role could be in local society, as well as, in Tamil culture as a whole.[105] This part of the thesis aims at filling this gap. In this scope, chapters three to six show in a systematic way how *ēri*s work, beginning with the delineation of the *ēri*s' salient features in terms of physical appearance, utilisation and management and rituals connected to them. Based on that information, chapter seven explores the role that *ēri*s are made to play in the formation of the local society.

The term *ēri* is used here as is common in the local speech of Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli.

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[103] Adiceam 1966: 301.

[104] Adiceam 1966; Venkatamarani 1974; Chambers 1977; Ludden 1979; Singh 1981; Malhotra 1982; Wade 1982; Meinzen-Dick 1984; Engelhardt 1984, 1985; Pant 1984; von Oppen and Rao 1987, Dhawan 1988; Mukundan 1988; Wade 1988; Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1990; Bharatwaj 1990; Bangalore Birdwatcher's Club 1990; Dikshit 1990; Govinda Rao 1990; Mohanakrishnan 1990; Somashekara Reddy 1990; Bredero 1991; Janakarajan 1991; Sengupta 1991, 1993; Srinivasan 1991; Asokan 1992; Chiranjeevulu 1992; Vani 1992; Dikshit 1993; Shankari and Shah 1993; Sivasubramanian 1995, 1997; Agarwal and Narain 1997; Sharma 1997; Palanisami 1997; Weber 1997; Perry and Narayanamurthy 1998; Mosse 1998, 1999; Vaidyanathan 1999b, Hebbar n. d.; Centre for Water Resources and Ocean Management, Anna University (various years).

[105] Shankari and Shah 1993: 35 f.

- There is no corresponding word in English. In English language literature (and in French as well, as Adiceam's example shows), it is very common to use the term "tank". A well introduced, though minimalist description reads, for example: "Small water reservoirs behind earthen dams are called tanks in India".[106] However, "tank" glosses over various phenomena which should be distinguished as will be discussed later. At times it is also overtly misleading because it is arbitrarily applied to only one or the other of the sub-categories of water reservoirs without any notice. Furthermore, the word "tank" itself has to be explained if used outside India. Although it sounds English, it is not indisputably so. Indianists trace "tank" to indigenous sources.[107] Finally, taking "tank" for a closed cistern, a plastic can or even an armed car – the standard uses of the term in English outside the subcontinent – is wrong in this context.
- The term represents a concept which is markedly distinct from that of other types of water reservoirs. Dravidian languages distinguish between various types of water reservoirs. For a Tamil native speaker of Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli, it is clear which water reservoir is an *ēri* and which one is a *kuḷam* or a *kuṭṭai* (categories which will be dwelt on later in the second main part of this thesis). The distinction seems to be the same across the regions, but the terms differ. In Tamil Nadu's Ramanathapuram District, for example, people say *kamvāy* or *kaṇmāy* and in Tirunelveli *kuḷam* (instead of *ēri*), both in opposition to *teppakuḷam* or *tirukkuḷam* (instead of just *kuḷam*). In Telugu, the language of the state Andhra Pradesh, it is "cheruvu" instead of *ēri*.[108]

Usually only authors who are Tamil native speakers tend to pay attention to this difference.[109] T. M. Mukundan provides one of the few definitions available in English that distinguish *ēri* from other types of water reservoirs.

> "'Tank' is actually a misnomer for the reservoir known as *Ery* in Tamil. Tank normally refers to a dug-out reservoir which has steps on all sides reaching down to the water. The best examples of such tanks are the temple tanks (*kuḷam*) of South India. An *Ery*, on the other hand, is a reservoir of water contained behind earthen bunds or embankments. Here the bund surrounds the water on three sides. The fourth side is open to the catchment from which water flows down to collect in the *Ery*. Normally the middle of the bund is the deepest portion of the *Ery* and the depth decreases as we go away from the middle of the bund to the sides or flanks of the bund."[110]

T. M. Mukundan depicts the *ēri* in a rather well-meaning way. In fact, many *ēri*s are far from being surrounded by embankments (usually called "bunds") on three sides. In Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli, the dams of the *ēri*s are just slightly bent and contain the water only on one side. The area is sufficiently uneven to provide natural depressions that hold the water.

These natural basins are so shallow that once the *ēri* has dried up, it is difficult to recognise the direction of drainage with the naked eye. The dams are so low that one can climb on them with a few steps – the dam of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, for example, has a height of maximum four metres,

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[106] Von Oppen and Rao 1987: 5.

[107] "This is one of the perplexing words which seem to have a double origin, in this case one Indian, the other European", says HOBSON-JOBSON: 683 – 685 and traces it to Gujerati *Tānk'h* or *Tānki*. LAPING 1982: 83 assumes a connection to Sanskrit *taṭāka* or *taḍāga*. Brohier 1975: 6 takes "tank" to stem from Portuguese "tanque", small lake.

[108] Kanēcan 1995 provides a long list of Tamil terms for water reservoirs with explanations.

[109] E.g., caNmukan 1995, SHANKARI and SHAH 1993.

[110] MUKUNDAN 1988: 2.

that is a hand's breadth higher than the water table at full tank level.[111] Consequently, the extension of flooded surface is enormous in relation to the quantity of water stored.[112]

The biggest *ēri* of Tamil Nadu, Veeranam in Chidambaram taluk, is so vast that from one shore the opposite one can hardly be seen; its embankment measures more than ten miles. In comparison to that, the *ēri*s of the study area are tiny. Yet – as can be seen in the rainy season – they cover at least as much space as the surrounding settlements. The largest and deepest ones in Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam are called such: *pēriyēri*, that is Big *ēri*. Smaller ones have even less specific names. They usually receive their denominations from the hamlets to which they are considered to belong, e.g., "Muthikainallankuppam *peria eri*" means "the Big *ēri* of Muthikainallankuppam", "Ruthiran kottai" means "the small reservoir of Rudrankoyil" and "Mangalam vadakku thangal" means "the small northern reservoir of Mangalam".[113] The names of one and the same *ēri* can vary. The latter, for example, is also known as "Mangalam north citt*ēri*" (*tāṅkal, cittēri* and *kuṭṭai* in local speech mean small reservoirs).[114]

It is impossible to tell the size of an *ēri* exactly.
- Farmers do not tell because they are usually not interested in this question.
- Official sources assess *ēri*s only in terms of the area that is irrigated by them (*āyakkattu* in the language of the Public Works Department[115]), leaving out, among others, the size of the storage basin.

Name of the *ēri*	Ayakkattu[116] in acres
Tirukkalukundram tank	272
Muthikaianallakuppam periya Eri	203
Mangalam vadakku thangal (north citteri)	64
Tirukalikundram madukan kuppam tank	62
Tirukalikundram Sokkiyar thangal	61
Irumbuli Eri	60
Ruthiran koil – Ruthiran kottai	46
Tirukalikundram Melapattu tank	44
Tirukalikundram Navaloor tank	43

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[111] 12.8.75 foot maximal height, full tank level 0.3.75 foot below that. According to the Tank Memoir, "Standard to be maintained" by the local office of the Public Works Department, PWD, the government agency in charge.

[112] On the Tamil-Nadu average, for every hectare of irrigated area 0.77 hectares are submerged within the *ēri* (Adiceam 1966: 338. See also Vaidyanathan 1998: 33). Von Oppen and Rao 1987: 25 found that "[t]he ration of settled command area per unit of submerged area increases with increase in tank size. On an average, the ratio is 0.9 for small tanks of up to 40 ha command area and 1.5 for tanks of above 400 ha command area." Command area means the area irrigated by the *ēri*.

[113] This neither means that all or most owners of the land under the *ēri* dwell in the respective hamlets nor that the hamlet is the nearest settlement to the *ēri*. The hamlet Rudrankoyil, for example, is located as near to the end of the area irrigated by Rudrankoyil's *ēri* as to the end of the acreage irrigated by Mangalam's Big *ēri*. Tirukkalukundram's Kodumaikollu Street and Rajapalayam are situated much nearer to Rudrankoyil-*ēri* itself, yet they have no influence on the naming.

[114] Mohanakrishnan 1990: 324 argues that the term *tāṅkal* stands for a subsidiary reservoir "which mainly receives the return flows from the irrigated areas and this serves as resource reuse." However, there is a reservoir called *tāṅkal* in Tirukkalukundram which seems to be the first in a row, i.e. not receiving the surplus of another one above, but just the runoff from the catchment area, an adjacent hill.

[115] For an etymology see Canmukam 1995: 104.

[116] Area officially irrigated by the *ēri*.

Name of the *ēri*	Ayakkattu[116] in acres
Mangalam South thangal	42
Tirukalikundram Odai kuttai	28

Table 3: *ēri*s of the study area cf. sources of the PWD and *pañcāyattu* Union

- These data should be read with caution as they tend to be outdated.[117] The description of the Big *ēri* of rapidly developing Tirukkalukundram, for example, has not been revised since 1913.[118]

- The land registers allot a certain area to each *ēri* as *ēri puṟampōkku*. Oragadam's Big *ēri,* for example, consists of 70.8 hectares, Oragadam's *maṇṭai ēri* of 15.60.5 hectares.[119] In practice, many of these *ēri-puṟampōkku* lands were turned into settlements or brick kilns, casuarina groves, streets, fields of paddy and vegetables, that is: according to official terminology, they are encroached. All this is diminishing the actual extent of the reservoirs. On the other hand, after a monsoon, a much larger area may be flooded than just that which is declared *ēri* in the village maps. Furthermore, the system of land tax makes it attractive to cultivate irrigated crops in areas that are not designated for them which actually augments the *ēri*s' irrigated area.[120] So the registers hardly mirror the actual size of *ēri*s.

- *ēri*s keep shifting in size. Heavy monsoon rains fill them in breathtakingly short time. Two or three days can suffice to turn them into lakes. This usually happens in October to December. When the rainy season ceases, the water is successively let out for irrigation. In this period (December to March), *ēri*s can easily be recognised by the stored water above the dams and the lush green paddy fields in their *āyakkattu*s. The contrast to nonirrigated lands is conspicuous. But the visible parts of *ēri*s diminish gradually. In April, only shallow puddles may be left next to the bunds or – as in Tirukkalukundram – in a shallow rectangular reservoir that is dug at some distance above the bund. The *ēri* bed is converted into fields for crops that make use of the soil moisture. In May of most of the years, *ēri*s virtually disappear. During the hot season before the rains set in again, *ēri*s consist of little more than elevations (the bunds) in an otherwise flat landscape which is of a steppe like brown and yellow in all directions, except for fields that are cultivated by the help of wells.

- An *ēri* includes more than its storage basin, the bund and the area irrigated by it. The catchment area is an integral part as well.[121] Like nerves, feeder channels reach out far into the surroundings of *ēri*s and convey water to them – and sometimes also dirt and refuse. If it is unblocked, one of the feeder channels of the Big *ēri* in Oragadam transports water over a distance of 2.7 kilometers, collecting it from innumerable small rills and rivulets at the base of the ridge to Oragadam's north and in a valley in between. At certain spots, this feeder channel is enhanced by brickwork and therefore well visible. In other places, its branches are so feeble that they come into existence only for some days or hours in years of heavy monsoons.[122] The entire catchment area for Oragadam's Big *ēri* could be estimated around 300 hectares. Lest the catchment area be blocked, settlements should not exist there. There are none in Oragadam Big *ēri*'s catchment area and few in Irumbuli's.

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[117] Vaidyanathan 1998: 26 points to blatant inconsistencies.

[118] Tank memoir of the PWD.

[119] According to Oragadam's A-Register. In it, the name *maṇṭai-ēri* is corrected in handwriting that is not legible.

[120] See also Mencher 1978: 60; 62; 115 f.

[121] Geiser 1993: 210, citing Pieris 1956: 42, remarks, relating reservoir-irrigation in Sri Lanka: "Low land and high land were [...] considered as complementary and inseparable elements of a village holding".

[122] How vast the catchment area of a tank can be in extreme cases shows Adiceam 1966: 317: "Dans les zones cristallines de l'intérieur ou semi-arides du sud, des surfaces de drainages immenses n'alimentent que des tanks de capacité assez réduite. Ainsi le tank de Srivilliputtur, … draine un bassin de plusieurs dizaines de kilomètres carrés pour collecter une quantité d'eau dérisoire."

In the case of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, settlements are expanding into big parts of the catchment area. Tellingly, the colloquial name of the notorious ward [*pēṭṭai*] is Eripettai [*ērippēṭṭai*]. Yet the ample drainage of the surrounding mountains to Tirukkalukundram Big *ēri* seems to allow the responsible persons to overlook the damage caused by the the semi-urban sprawl. The most severe cases of settlement in catchment areas of *ēri*s can be found in the smallest *ēri*s of Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam.

Thus, the water actualises the *ēri*s every rainy season anew. *ēri*s are intimately linked to their natural environment and cannot be seen independently of it. Nor do they have clear cut boundaries towards each other. In the official classification, invented during colonial time in the old Madras Presidency, the *ēri*s of the study area figure as "non-system tanks". This means that there are no feeder channels that would link them to rivers; the reservoirs rely on rainwater only.[123] Nevertheless, they are interconnected.[124]

- The Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram, for example, receives the water from Madulankuppam-*ēri* which is situated on top of it, irrigating about 40 acres;
- its feeder channel is at the same time the spill over of Madulankuppam-*ēri*, and
- after having irrigated the fields below Madulankuppam-*ēri*, the remaining water seeps into Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*.
- Likewise, excess water from Tirukkalukundram *ēri* flows to the *ēri* of Mutikai Nalan Kuppam (M. N. Kuppam). Part of it proceeds to M. N. Kuppam's small *ēri* [*cittēri*]. The remainder gushes into Amanampakkam *ēri*, from there to Perumbedu, Kolamedu maduvu and Kudiperambakkam maduvu from where the surplus water (if any) discharges into the Palar river. Eight *ēri*s are connected in that strand.[125]

Yet the *ēri*s do not merely form a row. The Big *ēri* of M. N. Kuppam, for example, receives water from altogether three other *ēri*s in the area, and the Big *ēri* of Amanampakkam gets the influx of six. The spill channels connect various *ēri*s to each other, spinning an intricate web across the area.

There is no village in the area without at least a small *ēri*. Most have more: Oragadam has two, Tirukkalukundram ten. In Tirukkalukundram *pañcāyattu* Union, official sources list 165.[126] The landscape is pervaded (or formed, according to the point of view) by a network of streams and *ēri*s.

This is true for vast stretches of South India, especially for the red soil regions,[127] the river basins (except the Cauvery Basin) and the coastal plains. The states Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu account for nearly 60 percent of the area under *ēri* irrigation in entire India. Out of nation-wide

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[123] Adiceam 1966: 314 ff. describes exhaustively how the different types work; Vaidyanathan 1998: 29 ff. presents the pertinent statistics of their distribution, irrigated area etc.

[124] They fall into category (2) of Vaidyanathan 1998: 29 "those which form part of a chain of tanks drawing supplies from the stream draining the watershed, with the surplus of upstream tanks feeding tanks those downstream".

[125] The extent of a chain of *ēri*s can be disputed. For example, farmers of Nerumbur, a village beneath Kolambedu, claim that their *ēri* (as well as those of lower lying Suradimangalam and Lattur) should also get water from Kolambedu *ēri*. But they have not received any since the break of the dam in 1996. They claim that the water went wasted into the Palar and 150 acres of their ayakkattu fell dry. They have been staging protests, including a complaint to the Collector in the beginning of 2000.

[126] Information of the local *pancāyattu* Union office and the Public Works Department.

[127] Agarwal and Narain 1999: 255.

208,000 *ēri*s, they have about 120,000 that irrigate altogether 1.8 million hectares.[128] The density of *ēri*s is especially high in the study area. Adiceam showed this in regard of

- the number of *ēri*s per square kilometre (3,97) and
- the percentage of irrigated area accounted for by them (76,36%)

in the old Chingleput District.[129] Within that, in the erstwhile taluk of Chingleput (to which the study area belongs) most of the *ēri*-irrigated area is concentrated.[130] There is reason for its epithet, "*ēri māvaṭṭam*", that is "Lake District".

Given this high density of *ēri*s, their interconnectedness and the fact that they are situated in such a way that the flow of water ensues through gravity alone, without any need for pumping, some authors assume a preconceived design behind the array of *ēri*s in an entire region.[131] Yet they have very little evidence to prove their contentions. Arguing that the construction and maintenance of *ēri*s posed a financial burden which inhibited the reshaping of entire landscapes at once, David Ludden concludes that over the centuries, "even in the best of times, growth in tank irrigation has proceeded in fits and spurts".[132] The *ēri* complexes developed as time went by, responding to the contingencies of nature and to economical, cultural and social constraints. There is no creative genius behind them who plotted to contain and order the water of an entire region at one time.

Unfortunately, for Oragadam, Tirukkalukundram and Irumbuli, I found no data which disclosed the *ēri*s' age and development over time. In South India as a whole, there have been no activities worth mentioning to build *ēri*s since the end of the 18th century.[133] Contrariwise, the number of *ēri*s has declined.[134] It can be inferred that the reservoirs of Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli are older than two centuries. The earliest news of *ēri*s of the study area[135] stem from the time of Mandravarman I Pallava (c. A. D. 600 – 630) during whose reign the *ēri* of Mahendravadi is said to have been dug. The *ēri* of Uttiramerur was supposedly built during the reign of Dantivarman Pallava (c. 796 – 847). The *ēri* of Kaveripakkam, the largest *ēri* of northern Tamil Nadu, is ascribed to Nandivarman III Pallava (c. A. D. 846 – 869).[136] It is not known whether these *ēri*s have been working ever since or whether they were abandoned and reinstalled in the course of time.

In an inscription of 1369 at Porumamilla in present-day Karnataka, Bhaskara Bhavadura, a prince of the first Vijayanagar dynasty, lists the dos and don'ts in the construction of a good tank. Among the

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[128] Vaidyanathan 1998: 13 – 17.

[129] Adiceam 1966: 304.

[130] Adiceam 1966: 309: "Le taluk le plus favorisṛ est celui de Chengleput qui concentre 19,56% des surfaces que les tanks irriguent dans le district."

[131] E.g., Mukundan 1992: 46.

[132] Ludden 1979: 352 and 1978. Corroborated by Srinivasan 1991: chapter 4; pp. 211 – 218; Agarwal and Narain 1999: chapters 2.14 and 3; Dikshit et al. 1993: 138. For a history of reservoirs in Sri Lanka, see Geiser 1993: chapter 12.

[133] Ludden 1999: 136 f.

[134] According to Adiceam 1966: 341, during the 79 years after a survey of the Public Works Department of 1852, 33,000 tanks were abandoned in "Tamilnad" (whatever this may have meant before the establishment of Tamil Nadu state). Agarwal and Narain 1997: 259 (citing the unpublished M. Phil. Dissertation of S. Ramanathan at Jawaharlal Nehru University 1985, Tank Irrigation in Tamil Nadu: A Case Study with Reference to the Productivity Gains and the Maintenance of the System) state an increase of *ēri*s with an ayakkattu below 40 hectares in Chengalpattu District in the 1970s. However, this was in the life span of most of my consultants and they remembered the *ēri*s to have already existed in their childhood.

[135] Ancient Tondaimandalam, see chapter 2.

[136] Srinivasan 1991: 20 – 22, 87 f. See also Sivasubramaniyam 1995: 56.

requirements is a "Brahmana learned in hydrology (pathas sastra)" and "a gang of men (skilled in the art of its construction)".[137] These seem to have been artisans who settled locally. Specially skilled engineers are mentioned only in relation to the construction of large works such as the diversion of rivers.[138]

Big dams such as the Grand Anicut that divides the Cauvery river were built of elaborate materials and with the help of experts. Yet there are no evidences of such in the small *ēri*s which dominate the picture.[139] The *ēri*s of the study area belong to this category. To identify the best location for them seems to be rather a question of trial and error than one of expert divination. Stories tell of *ēri*s that broke and had to be re-erected or strengthened.[140] This gave scope to improve them and to adjust them to their surroundings. In Tirukkalukundram, one of the small *ēri*s (the *tāṅkal* on the way to Navaloor) has to be repaired almost every year and seems to change its shape a bit each time.[141] Visible testimonies of shifting bunds are the stone structures of old sluices [*mataku*, see below]. They remain in place even though the earthen bunds are gone, so that they can be found standing somewhat forlorn inside the *ēri* beds at some metres distance to the actual bunds as, for example, in the Big *ēri*s of Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam. As Caṉmukaṉ points out, they are used to assess the depth of the water inside the *ēri*.[142]

However elaborate or simple the method to ascertain a proper location may be, the materials out of which the *ēri* is built are usually not elaborate. Most of them are available locally. The dams are amassed earth. They are strengthened with big stones of the nearby hills and with the roots of trees and bushes that are grown on their slopes. The inlet and outlet channels are dug out of the soil, the former are in some places reinforced by stones. Whoever irrigates a field does not need a caterpillar or other heavy machinery, an arm long hoe [*maṇveṭṭi*] is enough. With this he hacks an opening into the slight earthen bund that separates the channel from the field. He stores the lump of mud on an adjacent bund to avail of it again after having finished the irrigation for that turn. There are no fixed shutters to direct the flow in the channels; the water is diverted by the help of temporary embankments [*koṇṭam*]. They are dug with a hoe and sometimes strengthened with twigs and stones if at hand.

The most elaborate parts of an *ēri* are its sluices and the spillovers [*kaliṅku*]. The latter can be found in the higher ends of the bunds of almost all *ēri*s in the study region. The Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram, for example, has two. *kaliṅku* are outlets whose edges are often formed like stairs. Some *kaliṅku* are

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[137] Srinivasan 1991: 83 f.; 89 – 91.

[138] Dikshit 1993: 139 – 143.

[139] The ayakkattu per *ēri* averages 22 hectares in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu taken together. In Tamil Nadu, 77 % of the *ēri*s serve ayakkattus less than 40 hectares. Tirukkalukundram's and Oragadam's Big *ēri*s belong to the fifth of the tanks in Tamil Nadu that irrigate between 40 and 200 hectares. Vaidyanathan 1998: 21 f.

[140] E.g., Crole 1879: 523.

[141] In his survey of the Chingleput district in 1875, counting "1,435 tanks of all sorts", the then collector observes "small tanks often badly situated, whose supply is precarious" (Crole 1879: 412). This reflects the desperate attempt to get hold of the precious water, best as they can, even risking to build a dam just for one year of abundant rain without the pretension that it lasts forever.

[142] See also Canmukam 1995: 118. Sivasubramaniyan 1995: Annex, page 20 cites the rule in *ēri* of Dusi Mamandur and mentions a structure that seems to be similar. It is called "*piḷḷaiyār tumpikkai*", literally "elephant's trunk", or "tunk of Piḷḷaiyār" (the people of Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam have no name for it): "When Dusi Mamandur Tank is full, the *high level sluice* of Mamandur should be opened first, and the water shall be released up to the mark touching the *Pillaiyar Thumbikkai*. At that time *Kondam* should be built…" (italics in original. A *Kondam* is a temporary diversion).

plain. Others have pillars like teeth. They serve to collect refuse and give irrigators the opportunity to shut them. Of these *kaliṅku* both the next *ēri* in the row profits because it gets water, and the *ēri* in question because, in case of excess water, the *kaliṅku* prevents its bund from breaking.

More than the spillovers, the sluices [*mataku*] require a certain degree of craftsmanship. Generally, they consist of channels across the dam that are covered with broad stones and loam up to the level of the top of the dam. That they are not drilled into the earthwork and possibly strengthened by pipes makes them easy to repair – they can just be dug open and the damage fixed. This is a task which villagers can exert with simple spades and sticks. Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri,* for example, has three sluices. In the past few years, they have been replaced by cement sluices – a widespread practice. Building and repairing cement sluices is a job confined to specialists.

Irrigators regulate the flow through the sluices by the help of small outlets at two or three different levels inside the sluice.[143] They take a deep breath, dive into the water and clog the outlets with stones, wood, straw or whatever else they have at hand. It would be much more comfortable to operate the sluice without having to dive, for example, with the help of a wooden plug attached to a long metal rod that reaches from the top dam level down to the outlets – a device that is used in other *ēri*s, including the one of Irumbuli.[144] In theory, it exists in Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* as well; what happens with it in practice is an altogether different story which will be told in chapter seven.

Through the sluices, the water runs into the main channels which are also called distributaries [*kālvāy*]. They are so broad that one man can walk in them and so deep that he can still get in and out easily. In the case of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, three of these main distributaries wind through the fields and irrigate them. Fields which do not border the distributaries get their water from an intricate complex of branch channels, the smallest of which are of a hand's width. In addition, a field receives the runoff of the field above.

Hence, the layout of the *ēri*s in the study area neither involves high tech constructions and materials nor does it follow a preconceived design. Each *ēri* is different; it is a means to react precisely to the environment. That this is done with locally available materials and skills makes *ēri*s extremely economical undertakings – provided that the cost of labour can be neglected.

They are also very robust. This can be seen in the following examples:
- In Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, two sluices were abandoned, one of them seemingly almost a century ago; in its ambit, a settlement has evolved out of what appears to have been single houses of potters. The channel under the disappeared sluice, filled with earth and garbage, is used as a path and is waterlogged for months after the monsoon. The other sluice was abandoned recently, obviously following an unsuccessful repair by a contractor (the sluice was made of concrete which the farmers could not repair themselves). In due course, the farmers did not desilt the channels. Today they are filled and overgrown, some of them have disappeared completely; farmers of adjacent fields incorporated them into their belongings. The only surface water that fields beyond still receive is the spillover from field to field. Affected farmers had to find other means to get

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[143] Called *ūci muṇi*, *cēraṭi*, *paḷḷam* cf. Varadan, the common irrigator of Irumbuli.

[144] Various experiments have been done with the mechanism of the sluices' shutters. There are, for example, some with screw-gauges instead of wooden plugs. However, according to my informants, they have proved to be worse than the plug-type. See Vaidyanathan 1998: 275.

water to their fields. Several gave them up; five houses are being built on what were flourishing paddy fields just a few years ago.

• The main sluice of Oragadam's Big *ēri* broke in 1998. It has not been repaired, the adjacent fields are inundated.

However, in both cases, the *ēri* still exists. This defies notions of wholeness that have been throughout underlying the discussion on *ēri*s. Since its inception, it has taken place with an air of wistfulness and an outspoken regret of lost chances. As will be shown later in more detail, this is a reflection of *ēri*s being understood as clear cut means of production to generate surplus. In a letter of 1875, Charles Steward Crole, then Sub-Collector of the Chingleput District deplores that "[t]he general condition of all these works is one of neglect and ruin."[145] More than a century later, a similar lament is still being reiterated. Vaidyanathan enumerates

> "[t]he cumulative effect of long neglect of repair and maintenance. Siltation of tanks has reduced their storage capacity; degradation of catchment areas and interference of natural drainage channels by urbanisation and other development works have reduced inflow of water; inlet channels, bunds, surplus weirs and other tank structures are in a derelict condition."[146]

It is the siltation of *ēri* beds that most scholars worry about.[147] Obviously, the ancient method to flush the alluvial soil away through the sluices does not work anymore (if it ever has). In the study area, I did not come across anybody who would have practised it.[148] Devices to collect the alluvial soil – little basins in front of the sluices – are described in literature,[149] but I could not find them in the *ēri*s of the study area. Some *ēri*s are reported to have altogether vanished, being fully silted up.

Given this topos of dilapidation, the astonishing fact seems to be that most *ēri*s still work;[150] in the study area, every *ēri* is being intensively used. Yet it is not astonishing in the light of the very principle of how they function. *ēri*s are based on their flexibility and complicity with nature. This means that they can tolerate distortions of their parts to a high degree and respond elastically to climate, geology, hydrology and other factors they are faced with. A motor pumpset or any other high tech device would be immediately destroyed by these factors. Yet *ēri*s aren't because they do not function on the same notion of wholeness. Likewise, they are not completely useless if they are periodically not being utilised in part or in their entirety. *ēri*s cannot sensibly be measured in terms of returns on investment because as they are no wholes with clear cut boundaries, what is an investments to them is hard to be defined. *ēri*s are reservoirs for more than just water: they are reservoirs for the possibility to produce. In many senses, *ēri*s are potentials.

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[145] Crole 1879: 412.
[146] Vaidyanathan 1998: 3.
[147] E.g., Adiceam 1966: 339 – 351; von Oppen and Rao 1987: 27, 29; Vaidyanathan 1998: 266, 277.
[148] Dikshit 1993: 151.
[149] For example, Caṉmukaṉ 1995: 123.
[150] Vaidyanathan 1998: 265 about the result of field studies conducted by researchers of the Madras Institute of Development Studies in 36 *ēri*s in the Periya-Vaigai-basin: "They do not support the belief that prolonged neglect of maintenance, failure to repair major damage caused by floods and conversion of tank beds into housing sites in and near growing urban centres, have led to a significant reduction in the number of tanks in effective use."

V. Rajan herding the ducks of his father in the area irrigated by Tirukkalukundram's Big ēri

4.   *ēri*: Utilisation and management

The bulk of the literature on water reservoirs in South India pertains to managerial aspects of *ēri*s. The focus lies on the rules of how to use and maintain them. In the course of the past two centuries, this has been discussed in the context of *kuṭimarāmattu*,[151] often understood as "community management", and of development aid projects. This chapter provides a short outline of these discourses and confronts them with the findings from the study area before it deals with the utilisation of *ēri*s.

ēri management as *kuṭimarāmattu*

Evidence for the search for rules how to use and maintain *ēri*s can be traced back to colonial times.[152] Administrators of the British Empire, urged to communicate their achievements and failures in a form that even their bosses in far away London could understand, produced a plethora of reports, most of which are nowadays, for various reasons, more easily available than older Tamil sources on *ēri*s. From the beginning of the 19th century onwards, these documents mirror the struggle that the subjects of Her Majesty experienced in introducing into South India what they called ryotwari settlement.[153] The

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[151] Also written as "*kutimaramath*", "*kudimaramath*", "*kudimaramat*" or the like.

[152] It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to engage in the debate on whether and in which way the British colonialists followed the footsteps of earlier rulers, and this question is also of little relevance to the present argument. On that topic, see, for example, Ludden 1979; Meinzen-Dick 1984: chapter 2; Sengupta 1991: 71; Mosse 1999: 314 with further references; Morrison 2000: 27 – 30.

[153] Ludden 1994: 3.

ryotwari settlement aspired to levy the taxes directly from the ryots[154] instead of using the services of locally or regionally important Indians who collected the dues on behalf of the colonial government. In Chingleput District, to which the study area belonged at that time, the ryotwari settlement was not enforced before 1859.[155] The new settlement made it necessary to measure the land, to assess single plots and to assign them to individual owners. It took time until the colonial surveyors with their chains and other measuring devices travelled to places such as Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam. They never reached Irumbuli – it remained under the purview of a middleman [*jamīntār*], and so did Mangalam and M. N. Kuppam.[156] The relevance of the ryotwari settlement for the *ēri*s lies in the fact that after measuring and allocating the private land, *ēri*s and other common areas remained undistributed. They came under the administration of the government, classified in various types of "*purampōkku*", including "*ēri-purampōkku*".[157] Statistics of 1876 /77 list 2,420 tanks (obviously meaning *ēri*s) in Chingleput District. All but 43 of them belonged to the government and these 43 were mostly small ones irrigating less than 20 hectares of land.[158]

The same statistics show the problem which the government had "acquired" along with the *ēri*s: the bigger part of them (1,310, including particularly the lager works) were considered to be in bad shape. In the official nomenclature this reads "in repair", but that seems to be a wish rather than reality. In order to shoulder the new responsibilities for the local infrastructure, the government had created the Public Works Department (PWD) in 1819. Its "Imperial section" had to take care of, among other things, the irrigation works.[159] But there was never the political will to allot enough resources to it to repair all *ēri*s supposedly in need of it. "The paltry budget sanctioned was barely sufficient", writes Nirmal Sengupta in his analysis of the Government policies at that time.[160]

This echoes the complaints of British colonial administrators themselves. In a letter of 1875, Charles Steward Crole, then Subcollector of the Chingleput District, attributes the dilapidated state of the *ēri*s in his section, that includes the study area, to the "totally insufficient sum annually devoted to repair" and to the "impracticable constitution of the Public Works Department". As a remedy, he proposes to "set apart a certain percentage of the revenue of each village to be devoted exclusively to the repair and renewal of its irrigation works" which should be approved by the Collector and finally executed by the local representative of the Revenue Department: "[T]his is a simple scheme which would be intelligible to the people, and remove a great reproach". The perceived reproach obviously arose from the notion that the government should take care of its belongings. To underscore his proposal to vest the local authorities with the responsibility and the financial potential to care for the local infrastructure, Crole argued that the bemoaned state of the irrigation facilities led to drastic underexploitation of the agricultural potential and, hence, incurred heavy losses in the expected tax revenue.[161] The government turned down its subcollector's proposals.[162] Till today, the PWD is

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[154] Conventionally understood as cultivators, although they actually might have more likely been owners or owner-managers given the fact that substantial landholdings belonged to castes whose members would never want to work with a plough.
[155] Crole 1879: 88.
[156] They were classified as inam-villages, enfranchised and unenfranchised respectively. Crole 1879: 347 f. Nowadays both are parts of Tirukkalukundram.
[157] *purampōkku* is usually translated as "wasteland". See Siva 1991: 169 for a discussion of the colonial background of that category. Crole 1879: 399 has it as "village grazing ground, firewood, jungle".
[158] Crole 1879: appendix A 4.
[159] Crole 1879: 327.
[160] Sengupta 1991: 73.
[161] Crole 1879: 412 f. The allegedly earliest report on the deterioration of irrigation sources in the country in general stems from Captain Arthur Cotton, Superintending Engineer Central Division of Tank Department in

responsible for the most visible parts of the *ēri*s, that is, for the dams with the sluices and spill overs – at least for those *ēri*s that irrigate more than 40 hectares[163]. The care for all others was handed over to the *pañcāyattu* Unions when the latter were established in 1958.[164] Thus of the *ēri*s in the study area, only the Big *ēri*s of Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam come under the purview of the PWD whereas the *pañcāyattu* Union has to maintain the rest.

Subcollector Crole was not alone with his idea to spell out rules for *ēri*s, be it to relieve the PWD as their sole caretaker, to solicit unpaid labour or to control and order irrigation, which is such an important sphere of life in the countryside. For example, in the first half of the 19th century, the British administration produced "books of rules" [*māmūlnama*] which listed in detail the regulations for irrigation with *ēri*s.[165] For that purpose they gathered the biggest landlords of places that they found relevant (mostly the biggest structures that include *ēri*s which tap river water) and asked them to pin down the rules. In 1858, the Government passed the Madras Compulsory Labour Act. This gave revenue officials legal authority to summon unpaid labour for irrigation works. In 1861, "the government imposed a special favourable rate of assessment of Rs. 2 1/2 on all lands lying under ruined government tanks made over to private individuals for repair and capable of being irrigated by those tanks."[166] However, despite this carrot-and-stick policy the administrators did not reach their goal of organising the enforced labour.[167] The derelict state of *ēri*s was found to have been one of the reasons for the devastating famine of 1877 – 78.[168] One year later, Charles Steward Crole again proposed that the government should spell out rules for contributions of the local people to their infrastructure. He writes, for example:

> "The ryots of the tract lying between Tirukaleikunram [Tirukkalukundram] and Tiruporur came forward, and voluntarily proposed to supply labour equal in value to half the cost of a road between these two places, which would be about 14 miles in length. The above facts speak for themselves, and besides, proving that public spirit is far from nonexistent, show what benefit might accrue to the country, if only the slightest trouble is taken in awakening and taking advantage of the better nature of the population."[169]

1837, cited in Ramanathan 1989: 251. On Cotton, see also Mohanakrishnan 1990: 121 – 4. Crole was not alone with his sorrow over the work of the PWD. Take, for example, J. H. Garstin, Collector of the South Arcot District. He deplored that the general rule that each officer should be responsible of not more than about 760 reservoirs could not be fulfilled and that one officer had more than 1,100 tanks under his purview: "The district is much under-handed." This resulted in the negligence of tanks (Garstin 1878: 459).

[162] H. E. Stokes, cited in Crole 1879: 419.

[163] And that are not linked to a river system.

[164] Meinzen-Dick 1986: 24 f. singles out the responsibilities ascribed to the various government institutions.

[165] Sivasubramaniyan 1995: appendix 4.1.

[166] Garstin 1878: 310.

[167] Sengupta 1991: 74.

[168] Interestingly, this assumption again bears quite an ideological content. In the 1940s, Harold Mann, former director of the Bombay Agricultural Department, conducted an investigation in which he correlated daily rainfall records from 1865 to 1938 with measures of agricultural productivity and periods of famine. He discovered that during the famine 1876, fields watered by rainfed *ēri*s fared worse than dry-farmed fields. Obviously the latter were able to use the little rain that did fall while the more complex water routing technology of *ēri*s let the scant precipitation and runoff dry up before ever reaching a field. Thus *ēri*-irrigated fields, while guaranteeing higher productivity in the main, do not necessarily give the best results in cases of severe drought. See Morrison 2000: 23.

[169] Crole 1879: 325.

The important point here is that in order to substantiate their claims for rules and unpaid work by "the population", the British government of Madras Presidency resorted to the idiom of history and to what it declared to have been a long-standing, "traditional"[170] rule rooted in the local population or community: "The government tried to bring back 'KUDIMARAMATH', a traditional obligation of users in maintenance of irrigation systems."[171] As David Mosse notes, the term appeared in the records from the 1860s onwards.[172] Already before that, a Report to the House of Commons by the Colonel and later Governor of Madras, Thomas Munroe (1812), had described Indian villages as a "kind of republic" with its head (or *potail*) being "the collector and magistrate, and the head farmer." In another report, the Lieutenant Governor General of northwest provinces, Charles Metcalfe (1830), brought the term "community" into play.[173] These communities were thought of as caretakers of their irrigation facilities and other infrastructure.[174]

The issue of recovering the *ēri*s by making use of *kuṭimarāmattu*, viz. "the population" as a cheap labour force has never really disappeared from the minds of irrigation administrators. Nirmal Sengupta,[175] A. Vaidyanathan, M. S. Vani[176], K. Palanisami[177] and Dikshit[178] outline the long history of government projects to improve *ēri*s. Its contemporary state of affairs is echoed by the statement of Tamilmani, the local member of Tamil Nadu's Legislative Assembly (MLA):

> **MLA**: In the past, we had a system called *marāmattu*. One member in a family owning land volunteered to take up the task and we all undertook the task of cleaning up and maintaining the channels [*kalvāy*] collectively. Today this has been given up.
> **Bettina**: Why?
> **MLA**: This system of *kuṭimarāmattu* is no longer popular with the people. The people have lost interest.
> **Bettina**: Why?
> **MLA**: There is no unity among the people. The people are more concerned about themselves.[179]

Such complaints typically arise in the context of the discussion of *kuṭimarāmattu*. One aspect is the regret of a lost "unity" or lost "whole" because of overriding individual, particular interests. Another aspect is that, from its inception, that form of voluntary community labour was understood as something that was on the verge of disappearing, if not already one step beyond that – the eternal "yesterday". This sparked off lengthy debates on how to revive *kuṭimarāmattu* rules in places where

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[170] For a discussion of "tradition" see chapter four.
[171] Centre for Water Resources 1999: 4, to cite an official source.
[172] Mosse 1999: 309. See also Ramanathan 1999, Maloney 1994: chapter 3 and Sengupta 1991: 72 f.
[173] Agarwal and Narain 1999: 274 f.
[174] Likewise, in Sri Lanka, a service duty towards local infrastructure (called rajakariya) was postulated to exist. But it was abolished by the Colebrooke-Cameron-Commission in 1832, connected with the order that any headman who called out the working men of his district for the purpose of repairing dams or keeping up the banks of the irrigation canals would be dismissed. In turn, the Departments of Public Works and Irrigation were granted more weight. See Geiser 1993: 248.
[175] Sengupta 1991: 77 – 80.
[176] Vani 1992.
[177] Palanisami 1997
[178] Dikshit et al 1993.
[179] In the same vein, Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi deplored that the "age-old system of kudimaramath is no longer in vogue" (The Hindu 6.4.1999).

they had supposedly become defunct. Such places actually seemed to abound given the perceived dilapidation of their *ēri*s.[180]

Writers of the late 20th century, reviewing the colonial discussion on *kuṭimarāmattu*, argue that it could not have worked, either because the way in which the British had understood *kuṭimarāmattu* was wrong, or because it was an invention altogether. T. M. Mukundan calls it "a myth" that was built to obtain voluntary labour and argues: "Before the British period, cultivators did not voluntarily donate their labour for the maintenance of *ēri*s. Their work was paid for from funds mobilised at the village level"; the whole affair was a "process of village level disintegration due to state intervention".[181] Nirmal Sengupta writes, "their [the collectors'] intervention towards organising *kudimaramath* works was not communal labour proper but a caricature of that."[182] David Mosse states:

> "The colonial government did not, as is often supposed, take over and undermine an institution (*kudimaramat*) belonging to the people. Rather the PWD [Public Works Department] and the Madras government defined, ordered, generalised, in short, invented a village tradition in the image of the state's planned irrigation administration."[183]

However, even these authors tend to assume that – apart from the government that invents new traditions, and mainly unnoticed by it – there is a set of rules that govern *ēri*s, a "continuing operation of village-level systems of tank management today",[184] as David Mosse puts it, and Nirmal Sengupta observes: "Hundreds of these units … continue to exist because of the care taken by the beneficiaries".[185] He and Ruth-Suseela Meinzen-Dick point to the fact that due to the neglect on the part of the government, communities had to maintain their irrigation structures anyway. Meinzen-Dick, who studied a nonformal irrigation association in Tirunelveli District of Tamil Nadu, writes: "While local communities may not have the responsibility for tanks that they once had, effective use of tank irrigation systems still depends to a large extent on the involvement of cultivators in the management of tanks at the local level."[186] Nirmal Sengupta, who has dedicated a study on an all Indian level to the socio-economical arrangements in question, calls them "user friendly irrigation designs".[187] S. Janakarajan[188] coined the term "traditional irrigation institutions" for them. He acknowledges that there is a "complex interaction" among a village's socio-economic structure and several physical factors.[189] However, this flexibility is rather seen as a sign of decadence than of principle. Authors in this strand of the discussion tend to concentrate on Big *ēri*s with very permanent structures, with elaborate irrigation-institutions, with a capacity to hold water almost the entire year round and which are thus almost continuously present; they emphasise the stable features or try to spell out generalisable rules. K. Sivasubramaniyan has undertaken a detailed study of two large, riverfed *ēri* agglomerates in northern Tamil Nadu. He explains:

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[180] See Meinzen-Dick 1984: 21 – 24; Ramanathan 1999.
[181] Mukundan 1999: 246.
[182] Sengupta 1991: 73.
[183] Mosse 1999: 310.
[184] Mosse 1999: 321 with references.
[185] Sengupta 1993: 79.
[186] Meinzen-Dick 1984: 29.
[187] Sengupta 1993.
[188] Janakarajan 1991: 9.
[189] Janakarajan 1993: 9. See also Vaidyanathan 1998: 35 – 37; Sivasubramaniyan 1995: 12 – 16, 255 f.; Chambers 1977.

"The general pattern observed in Tamil Nadu … is that the village leaders (called *Nattanmaikars*), who are drawn from the large landholders of the dominant, usually upper, castes take active part in tank management. In some villages, the tank is entrusted to a special functionary (called *Kavaimaniyam*) experienced and knowledgeable about tank matters. Decisions made by them are implemented by irrigation workers (called *Neerkatties* [*Kampukutties* and *Thotties* /p. 115]) mostly from the Scheduled Castes by rotation. They are expected to monitor water flows to the tank, watching the bunds and other tank structures, open and close sluices and regulate water flow in the ayacut when required by the *Nattanmai* /*Kavaimaniyam*. The *Neerkatties* /*Kampukutties* are paid by the ayacutdars, usually in kind, on per acre basis."[190]

Hence, in colonial discourse on *ēri*s, as well as, in the latest scholarly publications, there is a pervading notion of a rather clear-cut set of rules and regulations – if not of veritable systems – to manage *ēri*s. These are understood to be "traditional" or "continuing" and belonging to "the people" or "the village" in opposition to the state that appears as somehow distant.

Rules for *ēri* management in development aid projects

Another aspect of the preoccupation with such rules can be found in the context of development aid projects. Whereas in discussions on *kuṭimarāmattu* and community management *ēri* management systems are understood to be existing and need to somehow be (re-)discovered, in those projects it is the other way round. They usually start with structures of brick-and-mortar or cement and proceed to establish concomitant management structures, consisting of clearly spelt ut sets of rules and regulations. From the 1970s onwards, in the frame of the so-called green revolution, high yielding varieties of rice were introduced in rural South India. They need lots of water exactly on time. Just like high tech laboratories in far away cities and countries developed the new brands of rice, technologies to irrigate them were designed far away from actual paddy fields. These projects usually depend heavily on the input of know-how from agencies outside the localities and the regular service of the PWD: university departments, NGOs, consultancy firms. In the Center for Water Resources in Chennai-Taramani, linked to the PWD but independent of its day to day tasks, internationally trained specialists are spending decades (and sums of money a kuli worker in Tirukkalukundram could not even dream of) in a huge, cool computer section modelling the water needs and irrigation potentials of entire river basins of Tamil Nadu. High profile consultants from abroad are trying to apply their ideas of rules and regulations to Tamil irrigation systems.

A specialised consultancy company from Israel is co-operating with the Public Works Department and setting the pace for the development. They work in an international ambit. "This is my lunch", says one of the employees, presenting a banana which he has kept in the drawer of his desk in the Chennai office. He neither eats nor drinks water outside his international hotel and office – just the banana seems to be safe enough. Hopping from continent to continent in his mission to improve irrigation, he must not adjust himself to the respective country. After three or four days in India, his itinerary leads him to Mexico, China or to the USA where he took his doctor's degree in irrigation engineering. Similarly, he does not adjust his solutions to irrigation issues to the circumstances of the respective country – that

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[190] Sivasubramaniyan 1995: 13.

is a question of principle. He is convinced that ultimately people have to pay a price in money for the water they consume. Accordingly, the conditions of water allocation have to be such that the exact consumption can be measured and steered as precisely as possible. These goals are universally valid. At most the methods to reach them can be adapted to the country. The consultant perceives the situation in South India as especially chaotic, that is, deviant from his preconceived system. He complains that people "in the field" do not even understand what he means with "water theft". His perspectives for the irrigation in South India are desperate.

The procedures to apply such internationally valid rules and regulations in the localities have become more and more elaborate in recent years. They involve memoranda of understanding, dozens of meetings, manuals, farmers' payments of more or less symbolic sums, creation of funds, the registration of local governance bodies with the election of representatives etc. Cultivators are faced with WUAs, WMAs, FOTs, PIMs, IMTs[191] and many visits of men clad in polyester shirts and trousers who drive around in jeeps of a kind hardly any farmer can afford. Many of these newly created institutions are ultimately accountable to the PWD, not to the farmers.[192] Some approaches combine modern administrative institutions with the revival of what is perceived to have been long-standing customs. Matthias von Oppen and Rao, for example, recommend that a Tank Irrigation Authority should be established, and in that scope "Tank-water controllers could be *re*introduced at the village level" (emphasis mine). The Authority would also be responsible "for training and supervising the water controllers and for being responsible for revenue collection, as well as, repair and overall tank management". Von Oppen and Rao assume that the farmers would more easily accept a village level authority if it was apparent that the ensuing benefits would be higher.[193] However, though contemporary irrigation modernisation programmes tend to include postings for social organisers of one form or the other, these people usually play a minor role.[194]

> The PWD-project on the Gomukhi river west of the town Kallakkurichchi, for example, envisaged one social organiser – along with eleven engineers and irrigation officials and eleven farmers; he was thought to be contracted from a NGO. His tasks included the collection of a service maintenance fund of Rs. 250 from the farmers. He should also study the local power structure: "In short, the social organiser, by his behaviour, will get merged with the community and the Farmers' Council will see him as their vision and mission." However, when the farmers' irrigation association, "*kōmuki aṇai nōṭi pācaṉa mataku eṉ 5ṉ vivacāyiṉ pācaṉa cañkam mātatūr*", was registered on 22,12,1998, no social organiser had been appointed and no inventory of existing farmers' organisations had been done (although according to a 20-step-programme this should have been done before).[195] It was mainly the staff of the local PWD office who facilitated the information, and they in turn had greater access to the more articulate and more powerful sections of local society, as I could witness

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[191] Abbreviations of "Water User's Association", "Water Management Organization", "Farmer's Organization and Turnover", "Participatory Irrigation Management" and "Irrigation Management Turnover".

[192] See Meinzen-Dick 1984: 89 for the importance of that distinction.

[193] Von Oppen and Rao 1987: 30 – 36

[194] With the exception of the well-documented social science part in the project, funded by the EEC, which proves the rule – see Centre for Water Resources of Anna University 1996.

[195] More than one and a half decade before, Meinzen-Dick 1984: 93 had warned "Before assuming a vacuum and creating a new association, there should be a thorough attempt to identify any local organization and water management practices. Conversely, if such an effort is not made, the superimposition of a government-sponsored water management organization may undermine the existing local institutions that have been functioning".

during a field visit in early 1999. It is through their eyes that they perceive the area and the issues to be tackled.[196]

The study of Marcellinus Put corroborates this; he found that mostly forward caste farmers are engaging in Water Users' Associations and are benefiting from them. NGO people who were supposed to establish contacts with the farmers neither used to co-operate with them nor to listen to them.[197] Hannah Büttner, who studied rainfed reservoirs in West Bengal, points to the top-down aspect of the National Watershed Development Programme, even though she welcomes its approach to consider not only the economics of water storage, but also of the catchment area and its vegetation and quality of soil.[198]

The projects of "tank modernisation" always depend heavily on financial input from outside the reservoirs' location. The most important funds that serve to promote the principle of locality – that is the involvement of the local population with their local *ēri*s – are stemming from places on the other side of the globe; they are provided by European and Japanese tax payers and by wellwishers in the USA.[199] Perhaps the high costs involved are one reason why programmes for "tank modernisation" cover only a negligible portion of the high number of *ēri*s in South India. My study area has also not been touched by them.

To sum up, it has become clear that both the discourse on *kuṭimarāmattu* and that on development aid projects presuppose that there is wholeness in the institutional setup and of in the rules that govern *ēri*s. In this sense, it is ideally one clear cut institution or one book of definite rules that determines what happens with the *ēri*s. In case this does not exist, it is perceived as a lapse that has to be corrected by introducing such an institution or by having such a book written. This kind of wholeness (or lack thereof) in the management complements the perceived wholeness (or lack thereof) in the physical appearance of *ēri*s.

Evidence from the study area

In my study area, I inquired about the rules and regulations which I had read about in literature from the people whom I met below the *ēri*, inside it or in its vicinity. For example, I asked them how the channels (feeder channels, as well as, field channels) are maintained – an important issue given the above mentioned concern of many authors about siltation. The answers differed substantially. There are three broad types that I found in one and the same place.

- Respondents of type one say that yes, there are rules, and they recount them in detail. For example, R. Kumar of Oragadam explains, that from mid September till mid November [*puraṭṭāci* and *aippaci* months], before the onset of the monsoon, the farmers clean the feeder channels so that the irrigation will go smoothly. From mid November till mid January [*kārttikai* and *mārkaḻi* months], the farmers clean the field channels. T. J. Jagannathan, who has inherited his pre-eminent leading

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[196] I am grateful to Tahal Consulting Engineers Ltd. for allowing me to accompany one of their staff members on his three-day field trip to the Gomukhi Nadi project.

[197] Put 1998: 394 f.

[198] Büttner 2001: 105 f. For a list of several "Experiments in Management of Minor Irrigation", as he calls it, see Maloney 1994: 83 ff.

[199] A grant of 50 million Ecu of the then European Economic Community from 1984 onwards for a Tank Modernisation project of the Centre for Water Resources at Anna University in Chennai (Centre for Water Resources 1999: 6f.). Ford Foundation…

position [*nāṭṭār*] in Oragadam from his father, and the President of the village assembly [*kirāma pañcāyattu*] meet in the temple of Perumāḷ or in the President's house together with the village assembly and decide on a date. In the morning of the particular day, the village drummer [*veṭṭiyāṉ*] goes round with his drum and calls one man from each house (one man from each house – this is a stock phrase). Everybody has to come with a spade [*maṇveṭṭi*]. The village drummers of Oragadam confirm that they do this job and that they are paid for it by the President of the *pañcāyattu*: they receive Rs. 10 for the task (drumming in marriages earns them 50 times as much; the reward is so low for the service to the *ēri* because they use only small drums [*tamakku*] and beat them sparingly, they explain).

In Irumbuli, informants as, for example, Varadan who works as the common irrigator,[200] say that every farmer who owns land adjacent to a channel has to participate in the cleaning work. Those who do not want to do it themselves have to pay a labourer. Farmers who stay away can be fined[201]. R. Mangaiyakaraci of Irumbuli says that Vadivel and Vajravel (her neighbours and relatives, all inhabitants of Irumbuli) call between mid November and mid January [*kārttikai* or *mārkaḻi* months] to clean the channels.

- Respondents of type two say that there are no rules. Several deplore the lack of co-operation in their place, that there is no unity and that the channels will sooner or later disappear. Some of them hold that a number (mostly five or ten) years ago, the practice of jointly cleaning the channels was abandoned – if they know at all of it. A few of them argue that the government should clean the channels because it receives farmers' taxes. This category includes, for example, old or well-to-do farmers like D. Selvaraj or Sammanda of Irumbuli, as well as, very young and absentee owners and farmers with many side businesses.
- Respondents of type three say that there are no rules. Yet they confirm that channels are being cleaned and remember in detail which ones, when and enumerate names of people who participated last time in the common endeavour. Farmers of this category are usually very much involved in cultivation, such as D. Vadivel of Irumbuli (who credibly recounts details that happened two years back), Sanjivirayan of Irumbuli (who explains how the cultivators get together in times of scarcity and decide collectively how they will share the remaining water in the *ēri*), or who depends more than others on *ēri* water for irrigation because they do not have alternative sources of water as, for example, D. Govindaraj of Irumbuli.

I obtained similarly divergent types of answers when I asked "How is the water of the *ēri* distributed?".

So how can one interpret this divergence in answers? One could assume that two of these types of respondents tell tales. But even if that is true, what are their motivations to do so? Another interpretation of this difference in answers given is that the perceptions of respondents vary. For a person like the common irrigator who is used to coping with rules, they may be more evident and he will be more able to spell them out. Yet also for him, this job is one among many that he carries out in a year and not the most prominent one. For others the rules will be less so, for example, for those landholders who are less involved in farming than in other businesses and who contribute not more than a day's work or so per year to the maintenance of channels or who employ farm hands to do the

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[200] *Kampukkutti*, see chapter four.
[201] The rate is Rs. 50 in Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, these penalties amounted to Rs. 5 a generation back and have risen to Rs. 70 in the meanwhile according to Kuppusamy Naicker, an influential farmer of the place.

digging. For them the repair of the channels will be but one of manifold activities in the agricultural year not worth mentioning in a grand manner.

A third reason for the divergence in answers lies in the nature of the rules and institutions governing *ēri*s. In Tirukkalukundram, Irumbuli and Oragadam, I have neither witnessed meetings of cultivators in which, for example, irrigation matters would have been discussed, nor did I hear reports or mentions of such gatherings. Likewise, there are no officially registered irrigation institutions, no formal farmers' associations with offices and regulated working hours, no memoranda of understanding. I did not come across any mention of written guidelines, let alone rules engraved in stone as, for example, in ancient Uttiramerur[202]. Cultivators discuss issues relating to *ēri* management on the way to their fields or when they meet anyway in a tea stall or somewhere in the streets, shops or temples. There is no drum signal. In Irumbuli, the common irrigator, walking slowly across the fields with his spade flung over his shoulder, whistles shortly in a characteristic way to tell the farmers in the surrounding fields that they shall come and help to clean the channels.

Just like the *ēri*s of the study area do not involve high tech materials, their upkeep does not necessitate specialists with highly formalised training. *ēri*s require the collective effort and know-how of hundreds of people – however seemingly negligible their respective contributions may be – sensitively reacting to the environment in order to maintain the *ēri* up to its ephemeral tissues. A big part of these efforts will go tacitly most of the times. They are contributions as minute as, for example, the farm workers' preparing the fields in the proper way. That is, they must not be on the same level but arranged in an hierarchical way, one below the other, two fields may never be on the same level. Those who plough and smoothen the fields have to create a slight slope in each one so that the water remains, yet does not stagnate – which is a matter of a few centimetres in difference of height, a tricky affair with just a *parampu* at hand, a wooden board that is towed by an ox. Likewise, farm workers who are busy on private fields repair in passing common property. For example, in fall 1999, Jeyaraman of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai ordered his laborer Kosumu to properly block the main sluice of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* as he found that it was leaking. Thanks to the simple technology of *ēri*s, this kind of direct action is possible. "The owners collaborate a bit [*koñcam kūṭa* work *paṇṇuvāṅka*]", says Dayaalan, a relatively large landholder in the area irrigated by Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, perhaps not grasping how much this "bit" can be. The farmers do more to benefit *ēri*s than they say – or probably realise themselves.

Emmanuel Adiceam observes that, influenced by analogous natural conditions which determine the feeding of *ēri*s and by similar customs that set the modalities of its usage, everywhere the same crops are established on the same soils, the same agricultural practices, the same habits and the same arrangements of work. "Il s'est ainsi crēe un type de civilisation qui se dēveloppe dans le cadre d'un paysage de campagnes ouvertes dominē par le tank, … C'est la civilisation des tanks."[203] Same needs make same ends meet – this aspect of " *ēri*-civilisation" (as it can be observed in present day Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli) reminds one of Edmund Leach's findings when he studied Pul Eliya, a village with *ēri*-irrigated agriculture in Sri Lanka. "Pul Eliya is an ordered society, but the order is of a statistical not a legal kind. … the individual facts are chaotic and taken *en masse*, they have a pattern."[204] In the case of *ēri*s, this holds for a substantial part of the practices towards it.

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[202] Uttiramerur near Chengalpattu. Srinivasan 1991: 22; 207.
[203] Adiceam 1966: 356.
[204] Leach 1961: 146. See also the restudy of Pul Eliya by Houseman and White 1998.

Yet as indicated by respondents of type one, there exists, in addition to that, a set of rules that can be spelled out.

This leads to a fourth way to understand the divergence in answers to the question of channel maintenance. It pertains to the way the rules are implemented or working: this happens in a flexible way. Hence, the management of the *ēri*s mirrors the flexibility of their physical layout. For example, there are no fixed dates when certain duties must be carried out. They can be interrupted for years altogether in case there is too much or too little rain. Just like the rain fills the channels and the reservoirs after a long, parching summer and thus reconstructs the *ēri* every rainy season anew, so it actualises the institutions of *ēri* management.

On January 19th, 1999, most of the field channels of Oragadam's Big *ēri* were still stuck with weeds and earth. According to the Tamil calendar, *tai* month had already begun. Thus the period (*kārttikai* and *mārkaḻi* months) designated for channel clearance by the rule which R. Kumar cited was over. Yet a group of owner-cultivators explained that it was too early to do the work. There was still so much water in the *ēri*. They said they would deepen the channels maybe the following week at short notice, so that the water could flow even if the water table in the *ēri* had diminished.

When I told him of this conversation, R. Kumar did not feel challenged by this observation. He admitted that the rules are not always kept as he had said. For example, the feeder channels, which should be desilted every year, have not been cared for since 1997 (information of April 1999), and only 20 to 30 people turned up then. More than that, R. Kumar emphasises that the rules are only valid under one important condition, namely: if rains have brought sufficient water. Farmers of Tirukkalukundram, Irumbuli and Oragadam corroborate this view. It is the general notion that nobody would work on the public channels before rains have set in. Similarly, S. Sivasubramaniyan,[205] in his detailed study of two large *ēri*s in northern Tamil Nadu found that only those farmers participate in maintenance works of channels who profit directly from them. If there is no rain, the channels are not desilted. If there is so little water that tailenders cannot expect it to reach their holdings, tailenders do not participate. Yet as soon as there are sufficient rains, the channels are dug again.

To create them from scratch again entails great efforts, but there are reasons for this practice. It is extremely strenuous to dig the soil as long as it is not soaked by the first rains. It is hardly possible (but necessary for the success of the operation) to predict the exact flow of water. Furthermore, there are many farmers who tend to lease different plots every year. For them it seems uneconomical to invest labour in cleaning a channel as long as they run the risk of a drought and do not know whether they will benefit from their work in the consecutive year.

In summary, farmers do not invest in the irrigation facilities unless there is a clear chance that they will obtain water, i.e. that they gain a benefit out of it.[206] T. M. Kadirvel, a farmer in the area irrigated by Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, specifies: "We do not clean the channels every year, just when and if it is needed. … For example, when there is a lot of water we do not do anything because the water will find its way through the channel without a problem. We undertake the work only if there is not adequate water. We are here anyway to supervise the flow of water to the fields, so we meet and talk

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[205] Sivasubramaniyan 1995: 150.

[206] Waltraud Wightman 1990 studied the management of *ēri*s in a watershed near Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh. Taking into account a multiplicity of factors that contribute to the management of available resources, she concludes that "optimal cropping and water decisions depend heavily on the expected state of nature." (168).

about what has to be done. … We decide collectively [*cērntu*] on a date to clean the channels, maybe three days in advance. There is no leader."

This high degree of decentrality and autonomy of the agents does not concur with the notion of an "hydraulic society" that Karl Wittfogel (1957) introduced into the discussion of societies with irrigated agriculture. In contrast to that, for example, Robert Chambers, in his study of Sri Lankan and South Indian irrigation systems, shows "what variations in organisation there may be over a wider range of examples than is usually available … It presents alternatives to the authoritarian, disciplinary and totalitarian organisations postulated by Wittfogel".[207] Johannes Laping confirms this in historico-literary perspective of Indian irrigation: he shows that the Arthaśāstra does not provide any clue to a centralised administration that would control irrigation and allocation of water.[208] Yet Wittfogel obviously wanted to make an entirely different point. His focus is on power, not on water. The work is an historic document of a survivor of "Hitler's concentration camps, ... who [had been] passing through that inferno of total terror" and who was in search "for a deeper understanding of the nature of total power", having it out with Marxism which he dreaded as a new form of totalitarianism after those of fascist backgrounds.[209] Wittfogel merely explores a type of farming economy "that involves large-scale and government managed works of irrigation and flood control (hydraulic agriculture). ... By underlining the prominent role of the government, the term 'hydraulic', as I define it, draws attention to the agromanagerial and agrobureaucratic character of these civilizations." He by definition does not deal with what he calls "a farming economy that involves small-scale irrigation (hydroagriculture)"[210] – a description that would be applicable to south Indian *ēris*[211] (it could be debated whether his notion of Oriental despotism or hydraulic society respectively is tautological in the sense that those farming economies which are not covered by the explanation are left out beforehand, but that is quite another story).

The argument here is not that there are no rules that govern *ēri*s. There are indeed rules and institutions, but contrary to what the above mentioned discourse suggests, they are neither systematic nor by any means clear cut and constituting a whole. They are very low-key or scarcely marked, highly adaptive and responsive. They are embedded in social practices to the point of being hardly perceptible. This has helped them to perform economically and to reduce the risk of the entire undertaking. They vary according to the concerned cultivators' understanding of the vagaries of the climate, their sense of self and intensity of involvement in agriculture, the economic outlook and

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[207] Chambers 1977: 360. Witzens 2002 offers a critique of Wittfogel's theory relating to written sources on Sri Lankan history. In the same vein, Butzer 1976 denies the validity of Wittfogel's thoughts for ancient Egyptian irrigation systems.

[208] Laping 1982: 87. Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra is one of the most important textbooks of ancient Indian economical practices. Leach 1959 discusses Wittfogel's thoughts on the basis of his own findings in Sri Lanka and criticises his methodology of cross cultural comparisons and generalisations. For general critiques of Wittfogel see Ulmen 1978.

[209] Wittfogel 1957: vi. Because of this impetus, some critics found him non-scientific, see, for example, Toynbee's influential review of 1958.

[210] Wittfogel 1957: 3.

[211] For example, the first and foremost criterion, "Hydraulic agriculture involves a specific type of division of labor" does not hold for the *ēri*s of Tirukkalukundram, Irumbuli and Oragadam – see also Wittfogel 1957: 22 f. In one place, Wittfogel himself mentions "The many reservoirs (tanks) of Southern India" (p. 31) and places them in the context of hydraulic societies; yet judging from his rather vague description (that focuses on the tank's role of providing drinking water) it is unclear if he had a clear understanding of these tanks. See also p. 123 where Wittfogel dwells on the role of "informal assemblies (panchāyat) of village elders or all villagers" in Indian villages, conceding that "they were indeed rural islands, enjoying partial autonomy".

considerations of power. In spite of their immensity, *ēri*s are but feeble attempts of culture to control something which is ultimately beyond control: water. This attempt implies a high degree of complicity of culture with nature to benefit from the water and to prevent damage as much as possible – in a sense a "humoral"[212] agronomy. This should not be viewed as a deviation from a system and generalisable rules but as the core principle of how it works. Same as the *ēri*s, in their physical appearance, are potentialities that can be tapped in various ways, the rules and institutions that govern them are potentialities that can be made use of by various people in different ways, and that is exactly how as much people as possible are motivated to perpetuate the *ēri*s. Their character as potentialities is further highlighted by the way they are utilised.

Utilisation

Regarding the utilisation of *ēri*s, the existing literature tends to focus on irrigation, be it directly via channels or with the help of wells that tap the groundwater which is recharged by *ēri*s. Furthermore, the emphasis is on paddy as the most important commercial crop grown in fields that are irrigated by *ēri*. If writers mention other ways to use *ēri*s than for irrigation at all, they mostly do it selectively and in passing, setting them off against costs such as flooded land in the tank bed, salinity, seepage and evaporation losses, deploring that "these secondary benefits and costs cannot even be accurately measured".[213] Just Nirmal Sengupta and T. M. Mukundan point decidedly to the existence of various other possibilities.[214] In a systematic way, the multi-purpose character of *ēri*s has not been described so far. Perhaps it counters economists' wish to reduce the number of factors in a calculation to as few as possible so that they obtain operable theses. Yet the multi-purpose character of *ēri*s is an important aspect of the *ēri* civilisation and its embeddedness in local practices. As an example may serve the picture that the small *ēri* of Oragadam presented shortly before midday on March 25th, 1999 – just another day after the harvest of the second crop.

> The filling of the *ēri* has diminished to a puddle full of *Ipomea fistulosa* plants near the sluice. 33 ducks are wading in it. A flock of 18 water buffaloes is approaching them. The remainder of the *ēri* bed is converted to a brick factory with eight kilns. At a distance, boys are playing cricket. On another patch of the *ēri* bed, a gang of labourers is threshing paddy. A bullock cart comes to carry the produce away. It has lots of space to operate. Somebody has deposited bundles of wood along the bund. The area irrigated by the *ēri* is an array of stubble fields. Five young men and women are scattered across them dawdling with their single cows or bunches of cattle. Two boys accompany goat herds. Several old women are collecting left over grains in the lappets of their saris. In the lower end of the rows of fields, water buffaloes are grazing. A gang of workers is sowing cucumbers and watering the place with the help of earthen pots which they are filling at the next well and carrying to the spots.

More systematically put, the following uses or purposes can be found in the *ēri*s of Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli – in some with more frequency, regulations and intensity than in others.

During monsoons with abundant rains, the role of *ēri*s in the water regime becomes clearly visible: Emmanuel Adiceam emphasises the role of *ēri*s in flood prevention: "Il faut noter ēgalement le rôle

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[212] Gupta 1998: 208 – 10.
[213] Engelhard 1984: 41. See also Vaidyanathan 1998: 1.
[214] Sengupta 1993; Mukundan 1992: 43 – 46.

que jouent les tanks comme modērateurs des crues. … Ce rôle … apparaīt des plus en plus aux ingenieurs modernes aussi essentiel que celui qui leur est assignē dans l'irrigation."[215] This important role that *ēri*s play is illustrated by an example from Tirukkalukundram.

> In case of heavy rains, the freshet does not stop in front of the adjoining settlement (Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai) and inundates its low lying parts. The area is inhabited predominantly by cotton weavers. Their looms are constructed so that the workers are sitting in a pit which is dug into the earth. This is impossible whenever it is filled with water. The weavers complain that in many years the water keeps them from doing their work from *tīpāvaḷi* until *poṅkal* festivals (i.e., from October to mid January).

> The settlement is situated in the catchment area of the *ēri*, diminishing it. Feeder channels [*varavukkāl*] lead through it. They have silted up over the years. Somasundaram, retired irrigation worker (laskar), an administrative term, not Tamil] of the local branch of the Public Works Department, remembers that they were more than a metre deep at the time when he took up his service, i.e., in the early 1960s. Today they are hardly visible. This and the siltation of the *ēri* bed has contributed to a decline in the drainage capacity of the complex.

The Land Reclamation Service that has been working since the early 1960s has emphasised the role of *ēri*s to check erosion.[216] This is, of course, the reverse side of the medal when it comes to siltation. Bad enough that the soil of the catchment areas is washed away – yet it is at least not lost for the locality as a whole. Recently a wide array of soil conservation programmes have been designed and sometimes realised. Their core constituent is the construction of checkdams across streams of drainage, imitating the principle of *ēri*s in minute scale.

Another aspect of the *ēri*s' role in the water rēgime is their capacity to recharge the groundwater. It is widely acknowledged by farmers that there is only water in their wells as long as there is water in the *ēri* above the well.

For two to six months following the monsoon, the *ēri*s of the study region keep water. There is no *ēri* in Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli which I have seen filled with water all year round. The water is used to raise fish. In none of the *ēri*s are fish bred systematically; still they are abundant. In the case of Big *ēri*s, the *pañcāyattu* auctions the right to catch them shortly before the reservoir dries up. In the past few years, various people won the right to fish, including merchants from Chengalpattu and local farmers. They usually engage professional fishermen who dig a ditch in the muddy soil across a major line of drainage, wait until the fish have gathered there and take them out. In Oragadam, according to the *pañcāyattu* President, the income from the auction ranges between Rs. 1,000 and 1,500 per annum. The money helps to finance the village festival in July/ August [*āṭi* month]. Adiceam calculates that the fishery is a profitable venture.[217] The District Manuals of the 19th century already found the income of fisheries worth mentioning.[218] Reiniche has an example that indicates the embeddedness of the *ēri* in local customs. The youth who carry the huge temple car in the annual car festival of the village were rewarded the right to fish and to use the silt of the village's

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[215] Adiceam 1966: 335 f.
[216] Adiceam 1966: 336.
[217] Adiceam 1966: 362.
[218] Garstin 1878: 176.

ēri[219] (if such a custom ever existed in Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli, it is unknown nowadays). The fish below the bund is exempted from the auctioned right and free for all. Especially from mid March onwards, people who catch fish in the field channels and in the small ponds below the sluices are a common sight. In the water near the field channels live all kinds of animals, among others, crabs and snails which poor people can collect for free and eat.

The water is important for all kinds of land based domestic animals as well. Villagers take their water buffaloes to the *ēri*s to let them drink and have a bath. Likewise, other cattle, sheep and goats are watered there. Flocks of ducks are herded into *ēri*s.

> In Oragadam, K. Kannippa who belongs to the Iṟular community, usually takes his ducks to the *ēri*. He reports that in autumn 1999, he bought 500 fecund eggs and 42 chicken to hatch them. 100 eggs burst during monsoon thunderstorms. 300 chicks hatched out. He sold the fowls (at a loss) and reared the ducklings. When they were old enough to lay eggs, he sold these for Rs. 1.25 to 1.50 each, mostly to a Muslim merchant in Chengalpattu who in turn vended them to Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. This egg tourism is due to the fact that people in Tamil Nadu do not like duck eggs. They say that they smell explains K. Kannippa. If he he sells ducks to those who relish their meat, this means quick money for him. In the beginning of November 1999, his flock had already diminished to 200 birds. As soon as the summer comes, K. Kannippa sells all his ducks. He has taken to the duck business quite recently and has no expertise in breeding. Moreover, he does not know-how to feed the birds once the *ēri*s have gone dry. As many people sell their ducks at that time, the price he gets is low, explains K. Kannippa, whereas he had to pay the high rate of Rs. 2 in autumn for each fecund egg when there was a run on them.

> Another family in Oragadam owns ducks: the former washermen [Vaṇṇāṉ] who reside in the eastern part of the village. In 1999, they owned 62 ducks and sold 10 to 20 eggs per day to the small shop in their street. They explain that their ancestors started to rear ducks forty years ago. Now they try to multiply the flock and not to sell the ducks in summer. For this they depend on the water in the local *ēri*s because the couple (husband and wife take turns to herd the ducks) does not leave Oragadam. In various years, dryness of the *ēri*s forced them to sell their ducks. Both they and the Iṟular use the *ēri* for free. As soon as the paddy is harvested, they take the ducks to the stubble fields below the bund where the birds feed on left over grains and contribute in their way to fertilise the soil.

> The situation is different in the case of Mu. Vedagiri of Kolamedu in Tirukkalukundram *pañcāyattu* Union. He owns about 240 ducks, including 10 drakes and engages at times his three sons, at times helpers to herd them. They do not confine themselves to Kolamedu where the *ēri* is not deep enough. Mu. Vedagiri's herdsmen make a wide round with the ducks to *ēri*s in the entire region.

These different types of duck herdsmen have in common that they do not engage in agriculture, do not desilt the channels and *ēri* beds, and though they depend very much on the *ēri*s, they have almost no say in *ēri* affairs. Vedagiri recalls that he insisted that the people in his place deepen their *ēri* so that it would be easier for his ducks to pass the summer, but without success. At the same time, he holds that

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[219] Reiniche 1979: 86.

he pays a fee for the usage of the *ēri* to the temples of the localities into which he has his ducks herded. He explains that the headmen of the respective places meet the headman of their village and negotiate the payment which commonly takes place in mid July, i.e., in the beginning of *āṭi* month. The amount is usually one Rupah per duck (irrespective of the time they are spending in the *ēri*) and is used for temple festivals. However, it was impossible to find out when the last payment was actually made.

While duck breeders behave indifferently towards cultivators, cultivators frequently belittle them – obviously they feel provoked by the formers' lifestyle that opposes their own and what they perceive to be "in order". In Oragadam, a farmer's graduate son, whom joblessness forces to toil as a cultivator, once broke into a tirade about duck rearers. These people were so incredibly poor, he said despisingly, that most of them could not even afford their own ducks but had to hire them. Well-to-do people would never engage in that business, he stated, because the ducks do not look impressive and make a lot of dirt and work. The owners have to get up in the middle of the night to search for the eggs and have to be out in the scorching sun herding the birds all day long. To sum up, he said, the business is obscene or rude [*aciṅkamā*].

The water of *ēri*s is also used for cleaning. People wash their cattle in *ēri*s, especially in the wake of *poṅkal* festival in January. Following after it, lorry drivers wash their vehicles in *ēri*s. For example, there will always be one or two lorries in the *ēri* of Teacher's Nagar in Tirukkalukundram as long as it has water. The reservoir is conveniently accessible from the nearby highway. In the same *ēri*, women use to do the laundry. Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar is a recent settlement, founded in the late 1980s. Although people of means live there, it does not have a good water infrastructure. Private wells are shallow and there is no other public reservoir in which women could wash clothes. Comparable conditions prevail in many villages where *ēri*s are used to do the laundry.

After the monsoon when the water of the *ēri* is slowly let out to irrigate the fields below, the soil where the water has receded still keeps some moisture. Thanks to its loamy consistence, it can be made use of in various ways. Economically the most interesting one is brick making. Thus most of the houses of the area originate from *ēri*s. The mud is formed to bricks. They are dried and burnt on the spot and used for all kinds of buildings. Brick kilns [*cūlai*] are elaborate constructions of the bricks to be burnt and fire wood. This is usually casuarina which is mostly brought in lorries from the area of Kalpakkam over a distance of up to 20 kilometres, or rarely, grown locally. Per kiln, 25,000 to 50,000 bricks are burnt. The women and men who form the bricks in the scorching sun are either daily wagers at Rs. 35 a day or they are paid by the piece and earn roughly Rs. 130 per 1,000 bricks. If a bullock cart is employed to carry the mud from the place of its extraction to the spot on a more elevated part of the *ēri* bed where the kiln is erected, it costs Rs. 50 to 60 per load; if it is a tractor, the charge is Rs. 180 per trip. This extra expense can be worth making because it diminishes the risk considerably. Many brick producers in the area had to witness how, in an untimely rain, the water collected in the *ēri* bed and converted all their efforts to make bricks to mud. Accordingly, the price for a brick varies between 80 Paisa in hot dry summers to Rs. 1.20 in rainy seasons. Deliēge considers brick making a precarious business due to losses during the burning process, immobilisation of capital, high cost of firewood and hard working conditions.[220] However, it is a welcomed alternative to agriculture. The demand for building material is immense. Brick making is much more profitable than agriculture,

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[220] Deliēge 1988: 92 – 4.

especially for those entrepreneurs who do not own land but who have enough cash at hand to start a kiln.

Brick kilns are usually side businesses. Typical brick entrepreneurs are newcomers in commerce and marginal landowners or tenants who supplement their income from agriculture with that of jobs in other sectors, have cash at hand and an industrious mind that enables them to organise the work. They usually do not have much to do with the *ēri*s in other contexts. Many even stem from other villages.

Apart from bricks, pots, plates, stoves and many other ceramic gadgets are made of *ēri* soil. The mud is the raw material for potters (Uṭaiyar community). In Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam their dwellings are closest to the Big *ēri*s, on the way to the markets. This diminishes the costs of transportation. A bullock cart's load of mud, costing about Rs. 100, does for 50 small pots [*palla*], 20 bigger pots [*caṭṭi*], 50 little oil lamps [*akal*], 20 stoves [*aṭuppu*] and 20 plates [*taṭṭu*].

Streets and public places consist of materials that stem from *ēri*s. The *pañcāyattu* uses the mud for constructions and repairs. In Oragadam's two *ēri*s, lorries are a common sight. They belong to contractors and take away the mud to other villages as well. A rather rare use of *ēri*s is for medical purposes. Dr. S. N. Shanmugam, practitioner of siddha and homeopatic medicine in Tirukkalukundram, uses water and mud of *ēri*s e.g. for treatments of rheumatism and massages [*maṇ vaittiyam* or *nīr vaittiyam*].

The alluvial soil in the *ēri* bed is highly valued as a natural fertiliser. People who indulge in gardening are using it for their vegetables – such as A. K. Kannan of Irumbuli who proudly presents 27 precious pumpkins, boosted by mud from the *ēri*. He avers that he was using the mud also for his paddy field, but now he does not want to pay the cost to have bigger plots covered with *ēri* mud. The general notion is that only rich farmers can afford it or those who have bullock carts or lorries. Yet, for various reasons, which will be dwelt on later, the number of bullock carts has gone down. I have met only one farmer in Tirukkalukundram who says that he applies *ēri* mud to his field: he owns a lorry. Others resort to chemical fertilisers which they purchase at subsidised prices at co-operative societies or from merchants. However, thanks to the irrigation from field to field, the fertiliser is spread across the irrigated area anyway.

The opinions on the extraction of mud from the *ēri* bed differ. In the times of Emmanuel Adiceam[221], it was generally forbidden. Even nowadays high ranking PWD functionaries express their sorrow over it because they fear that if the farmers dig too near to the bund they could destabilise it. Furthermore, the farmers do not desilt the area evenly which could disturb the smooth functioning of the *ēri*. In practice, in all *ēri*s of Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli mud is extracted for one purpose or the other; in part with the outspoken consent of the *pañcāyattu*, in part by encroachers who pay a token amount as penalty every year, in part without any regulation. Farmers who approve of it argue that this reduces the siltation a bit.

As soon as they are dried up with the advent of summer, the *ēri* beds serve as playgrounds for cricket, a sophisticated version of tag [*kapaṭi*] or other games predominantly by boys of the vicinity. This usage becomes more and more important as spreading settlements and increasing traffic leave less

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[221] Adiceam 1966: 348.

space to play elsewhere. During harvest, the hard, dry *ēri* beds serve as convenient threshing floors, especially in Oragadam where they are easily accessible with tractors and bullock carts.

The edges of the field channels demarcate the boundaries between the fields and contain the water in them. Both they and the bunds serve as paths for the farmers to the fields and for herds of cattle to their pastures. In the case of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, it is the only way to reach Tirukkalukundram-Madulankuppam (about 50 houses) and the neighbouring Irular settlement Tirukkalukundram-Annaisathyanagar in the rainy season. Wherever alternative paths exist as, for example, in Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar *ēri* and the Big *ēri* of Oragadam, people use the bunds as public toilets.

On the fertile *ēri* colluvia, grass and herbs sprout quickly after the water has receded. This makes them in no time pastures for the cattle of local farmers and of pigs. In addition, after harvest, the fields irrigated by the *ēri*s lose their private exclusivity and are turned into commonly used grazing grounds. Senior informants of Oragadam and Tirukkalukundram remember that there used to be communal herdsmen as, for example, Ellapillai of Tirukkalukundram who gathered the cows of the locality in the common pasture [*mantaiveḷi*] in the mornings, took them round for the day and returned them to their owners in the evenings. This custom seems to have been abandoned. The *mantaiveḷi* of Tirukkalukundram has been turned into a settlement.

Professional herdsmen use *ēri*s as pastures and as travel routes. They usually belong to the Iṭaiyar community and own big flocks of cattle, sheep and goats[222] which cannot be fed by the locally available resources alone.

> K. Subramani of Ayarbadi in Tirukkalukundram is the proprietor of 200 animals which he lets graze in Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam from the onset of the monsoon until about March. Then he, an uncle and a nephew set out on a big journey. The itinerary has been the same since K. Subramani can remember: it leads from one *ēri* to the next towards the northeast. The march takes four days and good nerves because the flock has to cross the Great Trunk Road south of Chennai with its ever increasing traffic. In the vicinity of Porur, the three men camp for about six months. Even though relatives live nearby, the three of them sleep in the pastures and cook for themselves. They prefer to stay with their flocks because many other herdsmen bring theirs there and K. Subramani wants to prevent confusion. The pastures are nothing but *ēri*s. K. Subramani is taken aback by the question whether he has to pay for the pasture or for the water his flock drinks in Porur: "Why? It is just water! The sheep do not feed on the field crops."[223]

Like the duck breeders, K. Subramani since he is a pastoralist does not have any say in the management of the *ēri*s he utilises.

By cultivating the *ēri* beds as soon as the water has left them bare, farmers make use of the soil moisture and of the high fertility the alluvial mud above the bunds. Whereas in many places throughout Tamil Nadu trees like casuarina are planted inside the reservoirs, often promoted by

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[222] There is a tendency to give up sheep in favour of goats for various reasons.

[223] Already the district manuals of the colonial government mention the function of *ēri*s as central pastures. For example, one in Trinomalai taluk, South Arcot, to which herds came from as far as Thanjavur: Garstin 1878: 176-7.

various government departments such as the Department of Social Forestry, there are none in the *ēri*s of the study area. Crops such as vegetables and short term varieties of rice prevail.[224]

Even without proper cultivation, plants grow in and around *ēri*s that people make use of. Scrub, thorny bushes and trees that grow on the *ēri* bunds serve as firewood. In theory, the *pañcāyattu* auctions the right to fell and sell them. This was done, e.g., in the case of Madulankuppam's *ēri*. Yet the rule is often violated. In Oragadam, one or two years before my arrival (accounts differ), villagers felled the trees before the auction took place – including neem trees which are never supposed to be felled. A skirmish ensued. Since then, new trees have not had the chance to grow, as the bund is overgrown with thorny scrub that villagers harvest annually for firewood. On the *ēri* bunds, palmyra palms are being grown which locals tap to get the raw material for toddy, an alcoholic drink. The fans of fan palms, as well as, the wood of palmyra palms and of various other kinds of trees that grow alongside the *ēri* bunds is used to construct houses or for scaffolds. The ligneous stalks of *Ipomea fistulosa* plant, that tends to grow in stagnant water, can at least be used for fencing. Even in cases in which entire *ēri* bunds are denuded of their arboreal cover, neem trees [*Azadirachta indica* /*vēppamaram*] usually survive. Obviously, they are considered as especially valuable. In Oragadam, the right to pluck their leaves is sold in an annual auction at rates of Rs. 100 to 200.

Furthermore, *ēri*s are reservoirs of genes. They create seasonal wetlands and elevations in otherwise dry and flat surroundings, thus providing homes for many varieties of plants and animals. The bunds which are at the borderlines between different ecotypes are especially productive. The bund of Irumbuli-*ēri* bears species of trees and bushes which can hardly be found elsewhere in the area. Vedanthangal, famous for its bird life, is nothing but an *ēri*. According to C. B. S. R. Sharma, all *ēri*s deserve to be declared bird sanctuaries and protected as such. In his pilot study of five *ēri*s and a coastal wetland, the ecologist writes: "[T]he waterbody functions as a *'cornerstone'* component of the region … the villages depending on this 'epicentre' appear as a part of the tank ecosystems and not vice versa."[225]

To sum up, the types of uses of *ēri*s differ widely in terms of
- frequency: it varies from the herdsman's single visit per year or from the many years that trees take to grow tall enough so that they are worthwhile to be auctioned, to day to day usage as paths, even in the dry season;
- persons concerned: people of different social standing, professions and proximity to the village make use of the *ēri*s. The range covers farmers who live close by and use their *ēri* in many ways (for example, to irrigate their fields, to cut firewood and pluck neem leaves, to catch fish in the distributaries, to let their cows graze on the stubble fields after harvest, to thresh their paddy on the dried *ēri* bed etc.). It also includes people from other villages and towns who have only one job to do in a given *ēri* such as exerting their fishing rights or running a brick kiln. And there are people who are not cultivators but use the *ēri* to herd their ducks or wash their lorries;
- effect on the *ēri*s: while doing the laundry, playing cricket or herding ducks are not prone to affect *ēri*s in a great way, the influences of *ēri* bed cultivation, cattle herding, lorry washing, brick making, mud extraction and tree felling can be felt. For example, the bund of Madulankuppam-*ēri*,

[224] The practice of *ēri* bed cultivation was already known in the 19th century. "4 kinds of long-stemmed rice which can be grown in marshes or in the beds of tanks" are enumerated by Garstin 1878: 176: "These are Madu, Muringi, Tiruvarangam, Adukamprikēr and Kurumba".

[225] Sharma 1997: 77, emphasis his. See also Gaussen, Legris and Viart 1963: 37 f.; Birdwatcher's Field Club of Bangalore 1990.

a simple earthen construction devoid of a ramp to cross it, is regularly tramped down by cattle on their way to pastures. Likewise, conflicts between cultivators and pastoralists abound because the former suspect the cattle of the latter to feed on the standing crops. There is a continuous feud on that topic, for example, between the inhabitants of Irumbuli (cultivators) and neighbouring Tirukkalukundram-Ayarbadi (pastoral people) that has even led to brawls. *ēri* bed cultivators tend to damage the bunds or the sluices of *ēri*s in order to prevent their fields from being flooded.[226] Some of my consultants think that extraction of mud is a good thing because it augments the storage capacity of the reservoir. Others fear that it might destabilise the bund and destroy the evenness of the *ēri* beds.

This chapter has shown that there are no outspoken rules or institutions that govern all mentioned uses of *ēri*s and that cover all concerned people and that would thus be somehow "wholes".[227] *pañcāyattus*, for example, do not interfere in water distribution. Common irrigators do not have power to evict encroachers or to interfere in brick making. The Public Works Department pays no attention to duck herding. Tellingly, I came across very different opinions (among farmers, as well as, among scientists and administrators) on crucial issues like irrigation, extraction of mud, cultivation of *ēri* beds etc. when I brought up the topic. Most of the management of *ēri*s is hardly talked about locally and occurs in the normal course of things that do not have anything to do with *ēri*s in the first place. Same as *ēri*s, in their physical appearance, are permeating landscapes so thoroughly that they are at times invisible, so does their utilisation and the rules governing it suffuse all strands of life to the point of being hardly discernible. The rules and institutions are, like *ēri*s in their physical appearance, potentialities to be actualised if social and climatic condition make it feasible.

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[226] This happens, e.g., in the Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram and in Irumbuli. Govindanayakam, retired Chief Engineer of the Public Works Department, recalled many instances (interview, February 1999).
[227] Geiser 1993: 218 in his study on water reservoirs in Sri Lanka finds that the rules and regulations of "traditional" irrigation differed from place to place and used to be variable before they were laid down in writing by the colonial government.

Goddess Aṛkāḷaparamēcuvari actualised in Oragadam's Big ēri

5.   *ēri*: Religious aspects

In the following, I explore role that *ēri*s play in religion. While literature on *ēri* management abounds, there is hardly any on their religious aspects. Uma Shankari points to the image of seven females that is usually associated with *ēri*s. She calls them *saptamater*, seven mothers.[228] Reiniche mentions the cult of seven virgins in relation to *ēri*s.[229] The imagery appears also in other parts of India. Anne Feldhaus, studying Maharashtrian river goddesses, found Sātī Āsarā or Māvalayā who are represented by seven similar figurines of women with saris. They dwell at rivers, in deep perennial river pools, at ravines and wells (Maharashtra is not a country of *ēri*s). Feldhaus interprets them as female ghosts that sometimes inflict women.[230] Shulman designates the Seven Sisters [*kaṉṉimār*] as allotropes of the Seven Mothers [*saptamātṛkās*].[231]

The image of seven female figurines in a row, sometimes also in form of a frieze or just as a row of bricks adorned with vermilion and turmeric, is widespread in Tamil Nadu. As far north as Tiruttani and as far south as in Dindigul District, its name is Kaṉṉiyammaṉ ("virgin *ammaṉ*"). Kaveripakkam *ēri*, the biggest *ēri* in north east Tamil Nadu, is dotted with shrines of her. They are built into and adjacent to the immense bund, obviously at least tolerated by engineers of the Public Works Department who are in charge of the building's upkeep. Kaveripakkam *ēri* gets water from the Palar. Alongside this river, there are various *ēri*s that bear shrines of Kaṉṉiyammaṉ.

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[228] Shankari 1993.
[229] According to Reiniche 1979: 114 the cult of seven Kaṉṉi "semble parfois oubliē. Elles pourraient … avoir anciennement ētē associēs au rēservoir".
[230] I.e., *bhūt* or *piśāca*s: Feldhaus 1995: 48.
[231] Shulman 1980: 124 with further references.

At the banks of the Palar near the tiny village called Manapakkam in the vicinity of Chengalpattu, there is a very popular temple of Kanniyamman. According to her founding story, she stems from Kerala, the country of Malayalees, hence, her epithet Malayāḷa Pakavāti. As Kerala is to the west, the idols of Kanniyamman look west instead of east or north as *amman*s usually do. She resides jointly with another seven fold female goddess called Veṅkaiyamman. In Tirukkalukundram, Kanniyamman is the family goddess [*kulateivam*] of many inhabitants. They belong to an astonishingly wide variety of communities – Irulars, as well as, Tuluve Vēḷāḷars, barbers, Nāyakkars and Ceṅkuntars, i.e., weavers. That is, members of castes who would usually not dream of sitting down to eat together mingle in the immense flocks that visit Manapakkam Kanniyamman's shrine. Even people who usually abstain from eating meat have the regular habit of sacrificing chicken or goats to Kanniyamman. Especially on Fridays and during the festival month *āṭi* (July /August), masses visit Manapakkam Kanniyamman and turn the grove in which she is situated into a slaughter place. In villages nearby Manapakkam such as Anur and Vazuvadur, replica of the impressive tigresses that belong to Kanniyamman's and vengaiyamman's iconography can be found, some of them in *ēri* beds.

My study area is about 15 kilometres away from the Palar and Manapakkam, yet still within reach through bus connections via P. V. Kalattur. Also in Tirukkalukundram, there are at least nine publicly accessible shrines that people of the neighbourhood or worshippers attribute to Kanniyamman. They are very plain, usually belonging to the seven-brick or seven-black-stones variant. Most of them form subsidiary shrines to others that draw major attention. In just three cases, Kanniyamman is the presiding deity or the only one on the spot. None of her shrines boasts of a house as the one in Manapakkam does. The maximal "comfort" for her are pedestals on which the stones are rested. The most prominent of Tirukkalukundram's Kanniyammans is placed in a little compound that is waist-high and fenced with stones. Informants of the neighbourhood claimed that a Nāyakkar woman of a nearby street held regular *pūjai*s there on Friday mornings and evenings, but whenever I went there at these times, there was no *pūjai* nor could I find remnants of *pūjai*s on Saturday mornings. Other informants said that a priest [*pūjāri*] comes only if he is called and paid for by interested parties.

Obviously the enormous popularity of Manapakkam Kanniyamman rubs off on her surrounding. This has two results: firstly, there is a wish to intensify the worship for her, reflected in the construction of copies of the Manapakkam idols in surrounding villages and in the ambition to conduct regular *pūjai*s. A neighbour of the mentioned shrine of Kanniyamman in Tirukkalukundram even hastened to declare that they had formed a group which planned to improve and renovate the goddesses' compound. Secondly, Manapakkam Kanniyamman's fame seems to catch hold of deities that had been local phenomena so far without any connection to Kerala.

In this context it is noteworthy that there are no visible proofs that the shrines were built with the relationship to Manapakkam Kanniyamman in mind. None of them has iconographical attributes such as the eye-catching tigresses. None of them faces west, the direction that is so crucial for Malayāḷa Pakavāti. Only in two cases (of the type in which Kanniyamman is the sole deity, not accompanying others), the association to Manapakkam Kanniyamman is elaborate. Standing in front of her compound, V. Ethiraj Naicker of Tirukkalukundram, a regular worshipper, explained:

"We perform [*pūjai*] to whichever deity is nearby, but the more powerful deity is the deity at

Manapakkam. I normally go there. Only that is the *head office* and this here is the *branch*."[232]

At the other shrines, informants mentioned the name "Kanniyamman" in the first place, while more intense enquiries showed that they used other names as well: Kannikaparamēcuvari and saptakannikal (seven virgins) – it was just that "Kanniyamman" seemed to have been more familiar. Śaptakannikal and Kannikaparamēcuvari are deities that are thought of as having no relation to Manapakkam Kanniyamman, nevertheless they are readily subsumed. In Madulankuppam's temple complex, Malayāḷa Pakavāti and Kanniyamman exist in separate shrines side by side.

T. N. Kannan, who works as an exorcist and spirit healer in a hut at Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, has put up an image of that seven fold goddess and calls it saptamatarkal, as he learnt it from his spiritual teacher in south Tamil Nadu. The goddess which is most important to him is Cāmuṇṭi, also called Cāmuṇṭīcuvarī. According to the *pūjāri* of Madulankuppam, a man who loves to get information out of books, Kanniyamman is the seventh of the saptakannikal while Cāmuṇṭi is the second. However, his list of goddesses' names that are subsumed under Kanniyamman differs from that which can be obtained in the Manapakkam Kanniyamman-temple.[233] Other than in the cases of the deities of the Brahminic pantheon[234] or of the village goddesses Ōcūramman and Celliyamman, no founding history for the seven fold deity could be obtained locally. Members of the Iṟular community in the area who usually identify Kanniyamman as their most important goddess, emphasise that they do not speak of Manapakkam Kanniyamman but of another one of that name whom they worship during full moon in *māci* month (February /March) in a grand manner in Mamallapuram.

Thus the concept of the seven-fold goddess seems to be multiform, to shift and to be wide open for redefinitions. Influences from outside, such as the popular cult of Manapakkam Kanniyamman, are readily incorporated. However, although there are various hints at the propensity of Kanniyamman to water, she does not occur exclusively in the context of *ēri*s. Of the shrines in Tirukkalukundram, only two are situated adjacent to or inside a *ēri*. The others are at other types of reservoirs and in settlements. One is in a forest. Manapakkam Kanniyamman is situated at the banks of a river. It seems that the concept of the seven virgins or mothers is so open that it can be easily expanded to cover many places as her dwellings, and *ēri*s as well. In Tirukkalukundram, it is in no way specific to *ēri*s, nor is there a Kanniyamman in Oragadam that could be related to an *ēri*.[235] In Irumbuli, there is no account of Kanniyamman at all.

In order to find out whether there are deities that are specific as protectors of *ēri*s, initially I tried to

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[232] Words in italics were English in the original

[233] The priest's [*pūjāri*'s] list: Brahmi, Cāmuṇṭi, Kumāri (also written as Kaumāri], Makālakṣmi (= Makālatcumi), Varāki, Kumāri, Kanni. The list of Manapakkam is: Andhra-Kanni, Ākāya-Kanni, Mantira-Kanni, Malaiyāḷa-Kanni, Ucci-Kanni, Urumam-Kanni and Jāma-Kanni.

[234] I use the term for those gods of the study region which Brahmins do not abstain from sponsoring and for which chiefly Kurukkaḷs or Bhattacharyas do *pūjai*. However, this is but an approximation which permits exceptions. People of the study region do not use a comparable term. However, in conversations and actions, they distinguish clearly between them and what they call *kirāma tēvatai*, i.e., village goddesses. For a discussion of the term "Brahmanic" [*brahmanisch*] as it is has been used in Western literature see Fuchs 1999: 332 f.

[235] Some informants claimed that a frieze which can be found in Oragadam's holy precinct next to the temple of the village goddess [*kirāma tēvatai*] Kuḷatiyamman depicts Kanniyamman. Yet I had the impression that these informants said that mainly to reply smartly. They did not seem to be too much interested in that question. Furthermore, the frieze does not picture seven, but twelve figures, of which six are said to be male. Apart from that, there is a shrine Kanniyamman next to the Māriyamman-temple in the eastern part of Oragadam, in the middle of the settlement of the scheduled castes.

locate temples, shrines or traces of *pūjai*s within the reservoirs or at the *ēri* bunds, such as the structures for Kaṉṉiyammaṉ at Kaveripakkam. Yet it was all in vain. I found shrines of Kaṉṉiyammaṉ and termite hills smeared with vermilion and turmeric that were worshipped as abodes of holy snakes. But everybody convinced me that these could appear at many other places as well. Whenever I asked which deity was there specifically to protect the *ēri*, people told me that there is none. Just the village goddesses [*kirāma tēvatai*] protect the entire place. Some farmers in Oragadam said that they pray to the sun god [*cūriya pakavāṉ*] before they start to irrigate their fields.

There are certain exceptions. Especially well known is the one of Madurantakam. It was a Briton who installed a guardian deity for the *ēri* there.

> According to legends[236], the dam used to break every year. Yet in one year it was protected by Rāma. That dispelled the doubts of the then Collector of the district, Lionel Place, in the powers of the local deity. Thereupon, the Collector built the shrine for Kōtaṇṭarāmacuvāmi's consort [*tāyār caṉṉiti*] in the Kōtaṇṭarāmacuvāmi temple during 1798. The Rāma temple is now known as Ērikāttaperumāḷ (the God Perumāḷ who strengthened the tank bund).

Kōtaṇṭarāmacuvāmi is the presiding god of Oragadam's Vaiṣṇavite temple as well. It comes directly under the auspices of the religious congregation in Madurantakam. Yet there is not the faintest notion that also the Kotaṇṭarāmacuvāmi in Oragadam would be specifically the protector of the local *ēri*. The concept is not transferred.

Another example for a guardian deity that is specific to an *ēri* stems from the aforementioned P. V. Kalattur (about 10 kms from the study area). There farmers worship Mallicciyammaṉ prior to the opening of the sluices in *tai* month (January /February). Usually a chicken is sacrificed to her, lest she does not protect the region from epidemics and contagious diseases. At the bund of P. V. Kalattur *ēri*, there is also a shrine of Kaṉṉiyammaṉ. Doesn't she also have to be worshipped before the sluices are opened? K. Sellamuttu, farmer and PWD-contractor of P. V. Kalattur, answered that question:

> „She is not as important as the other *ammaṉ* [i.e., Mallicciyammaṉ]. She is also an *ammaṉ* but does not require a *pūjai* during the opening. The functions for her take place in July /August [*āṭi* month]. There is no other function before or after that. To be frank with you, there are only two deities which protect the *ēri*. One is in P. V. Kalattur, Mallicciyammaṉ, the other one is in Madurantakam, Kotaṇṭarāmacuvāmi. You should note that not in all *ēri*s will you find protecting gods. Only in these big lakes have our ancestors considered and believed that there are protectors and there is a tradition to perform *pūjai*s for them."

Both the *ēri* of Madurantakam and the one of P. V. Kalattur are special due to their enormous size and depth. They contain water for many months if not all year round and are permanently visible. According to PWD statistics, Madurantakam's *ēri*, which is fed by a river, covers three square miles and irrigates about 2,900 acres. P. V. Kalattur's *ēri* commands 1,224 acres. This is 4.5 times as much as in the case of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*.

In my search for specific gods of *ēri*s, I succeeded when I finally reformulated my question to "Does the *ēri* have a god of its own?" and posed it to Kulappa Naicker of Oragadam. He is in his eighties and

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[236] Census of India 1961: 523.

well versed in all aspects of village life. He answered: "Yes. But it has no form." Its name is Tampirāṉ. Worshippers normally go to the *ēri*, form Tampirāṉ's image out of mud, tie a sacred thread round it and pray to it. Some even make vows [*pirārttaṉai*]. In cases of important vows, they engage musicians who sing, dance and play various kinds of drums, including *uṭukku*s[237] which are said to be played with special fondness by ghosts [*pēy*]. The *pūjāri*s belong to the Nāyakkar community. Their caste comrades of Oragadam engage them from other villages. In recent years, they came from Cheyyur and Otteri. Such ceremonies usually take place in the third week of *āṭi* month (beginning of August), at the same time when the major *ammaṉ* festivals are celebrated and when the *ēri* has gone dry.

Apart from the described occasions, the most important role Tampirāṉ plays is connected to the first tonsure of children, to their first ritual bath and to the ear-piercing ceremony [*kātukuttu*]. Chinnakannan Naicker, another village elder of Oragadam, explains that as soon as a child is born, its parents start to rear a pig. They wait until four or five children among the relatives [*paṅkāḷi*] are born and old enough for the mentioned ceremonies. Then they pool resources with the respective parents to conduct the ceremony for Tampirāṉ in as grand a manner as possible. It starts with a quadrangle being dug into the mud inside the *ēri* near the cremation place. Earth or cattle dung is rolled into little balls and posted around the quadrangle. Some interpret them as representations of the elephant headed god Piḷḷaiyār. Bananas, boiled chick peas, betel leaves, areca nuts and 108 sweet dumplings made of rice and coconuts [*koḻukaṭṭai*] are offered on an banana leaf inside the square. Drummers, singers and a *pūjāri* are engaged. The sacrificer breaks coconuts, makes offerings of goats, cocks and stabs the pigs that have been raised along with the children. Their blood is mixed with rice [*utiramcōṟu* or *rattam cōṟu*] which the family members scatter on the bed of the *ēri* and on the cremation ground next to it. The childrens' earlobes are pierced, they are tonsured and the ceremony is concluded with all family members jointly eating the cooked meat of the sacrificed animals. Other than at this festival, his family does not eat pork at all, Chinnakannan Naicker says. But it is a part of the festival. Asked what kind of god Tampirāṉ is, he tells the following story [*purāṇam*]:[238]

> Īcuvari or Śakti washes Śivas feet and adorns them with flowers [*pātapūjai*] when he sets out to provide subsistence to all living beings [*paṭiyaḷakkaṟatu*]. During his absence, Piramā, who has four heads like Śiva, comes to visit Śiva. Śakti thinks that Śiva himself has returned and pays her usual respects, such as folding her stretched out legs, standing up and welcoming him. Later when Śiva himself comes back, she remains in her relaxed position. Śiva is infuriated by this and scolds her. She replies that because both, Śiva and Piramā, have got four heads, she got confused and confounded them. She suggests that one of them should do away with a head. Śiva chops off Piramā's fourth head right away. However, the hand that cut the head catches fire and Śiva gets on to a mad spree wandering in cremation grounds with a skull or skeleton [*kapālam*] in his hand.
>
> Śakti runs to Kiruṣṇaṉ and Latcumi for help. Kiruṣṇaṉ suggests that Śiva who goes from door to door with the skeleton and begs for food, should drop the skeleton first to get better. Therefore, Latcumi should wait in a house where Śiva would beg and scatter blood rice on the floor instead of putting it in his bowl. She does that. The skeleton leaves Śiva to gather the strewn food. Śiva escapes and gets back to the abode of the gods [*tēvalōka*]. However, having

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[237] Double felt drums that are about 30 cm long and have the shape of an hour glass.
[238] This is an abbreviated re-narration.

let Śiva loose, the skeleton immediately rushes at sakti. Now Śakti goes mad and there arises the need to save her from the skeleton.

The story, as Chinnakannan Naicker tells it, does not explicitly mention Tampirāṉ at all. It neither explains why it is important to stab a pig along with cocks and goats nor does it elucidate why the pig is the vehicle of Tampirāṉ (which it is said to be). The story gives no clue why the ritual should be performed in connection with the first tonsuring and the ear-piercing of children nor why the image of the god has to be formed out of mud instead of constructing a permanent image that would last for many years. Only the blood rice can be identified in the story, as well as, in the ritual. And referring to the location, in the story, Śiva goes with the skeleton to the houses of people to visit them. In the ritual, it is the people who go to the cremation place at the *ēri* to visit Tampirāṉ. Thus, the story relates only in points to the ritual. It is a patchwork of elements that can be found elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Eveline Meyer recorded a version of it in which

- Pārvati plays the role of the goddess which, in Chinnakannan Naicker's rendition, is simply called Śakti,
- the number of Śiva's and Piramā's heads does not play any role,
- Piramā is depicted as perfidious,
- Pārvati curses him instead of leaving the choice to take revenge to Śiva,
- Kiruṣṇaṉ does not play any role, instead Vināyakar is there as guardian. An *ammaṉ* (other than Latcumi) takes in the skull,
- the skull is not duped with blood rice, but with rice dumplings soaked in blood [*koḻukaṭṭai*],
- Śakti experiences a happy end. [239]

Nonetheless, in principle the plots of the stories presented by Meyer and Chinnakannan Naicker are the same. In this way, other parts of the purāṇam told by him in the context of Tampirāṉ can be found elsewhere:

- The story of Śakti trying to fool Śiva when he went out to feed all living beings. She hides seven ants in an air tight box which is used to store pounded rice so that they are presumably out of his reach. When Śiva returns, she asks him whether he really fed every creature, from the ant to the elephant. She quizzes him also about the ants in the box but has to discover that he did not spare even these: each of them is dead, but with a piece of pounded rice in its mouth.[240]
- The story of Kāttavarāyaṉ whom Śiva tells to take care of a flower garden with a pool. He observes six virgins [*kaṇṇikaḷ*] who take baths in the nude and steals the sari of one of them, ostensibly as a penalty because they plucked flowers in the garden.[241]

Yet Chinnakannan Naicker is convinced that the purāṇam he has told is specific to Oragadam, and so is the god.

Furthermore, on the level of ritual, too, the worship of Tampirāṉ is not unique to this god. Elements that are crucial in the ritual towards him, such as the huge effigy dug into the mud, appear also in other rituals, for example, in that for Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari.

    In 1996, M. Vadivel and his wife Sarata erected a temple of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari next to the

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[239] Meyer 1986: 36 f.
[240] See Meyer 1986: 9 – 12, 66.
[241] See Carr 1984.

shrine of Muttumāriyamman̠ in Oragadam. The pious couple runs a profitable paddy business in Kanchipuram. In the shining light violet of her delicate sari and with her jingling golden bangles, Sarada stands out among the village women with their worn-out cotton clothes. Yet her speech shows no difference to theirs. Oragadam is the home of her family; relatives of her husband still reside there. According to Sarada, it was Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari herself who told her husband to build the temple in Oragadam. He had vowed to do so after he had almost lost a leg in an accident and could not walk. He prayed to the goddess for help and recuperated.

The couple visits the temple regularly and performs a ceremony for the goddess every year in *māci* month (February /March). It centres on the cremation ground at the *ēri* where a female figure is carved out of mud. It is gigantic, measuring approximately eight to ten metres. A yellow sari covers it and people garnish it with fruits and vegetables: tamarind in pods, limes, and other sour and astringent varieties.

M. Vadivel wears a skirt made of golden threads and multicoloured ribbons, a huge triangular pinafore in sunny yellow over his bare breast and a citrin, pointed high hat with peacock feathers. Possessed by the goddess, he jumps over her earthen idol, digs the ground, finds remnants of human corpses who have not been fully cremated and eats them. A crowd of people from Oragadam and other villages of the area gather around him. Many of them are not related to him, but avail of the opportunity to make offerings to the goddess and ask Vadivel, who acts as her medium for her prophecies: Will my son marry this year? Will I find a job? There does not seem to be a restriction to questions nor to who may participate. At sunset, black fowl are sacrificed and Vadivel, accompanied by the entire party with drummers and singers, returns in a procession to the temple which he has built inside Oragadam. There, *piracātam* is distributed to all.

In many ways, the ceremonies for Tampirān̠ and for Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari are different. Each has its own characteristic ritual elements, appropriate time, circle of participants, interval at and reason for which it is conducted. One was introduced to Oragadam in recent years by clearly identifiable persons, the other one appears to have been existing since Kullappa Naicker's and Chinnakannan Naicker's childhood, that is for eight decades at least. Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari exists (and is known to exist by my consultants) also elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, an important shrine of her being that of Mel Maraiyanur.[242]

Whenever we discuss expressly about Tampirān̠ and his sister Sudalaiyamman̠, village elders such as Chinnakannan Naicker make clear that they are definitely not the same as Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari [*itu vēre, atu vēre*]. Yet under certain circumstances, the deities lose their distinctness and various concepts seem to merge. This happens, for example, whenever the conversation is more generally on "the deity of the *ēri*" as opposed to other kinds of beings such as village deities [*kirāma tēvatai*] or gods like Śiva or Viṣṇu. It also occurs in talks with teenagers, including of the Nāyakkar caste, who do not have offspring of their own for whom they would have already conducted the ear-piercing ceremony or who have not had much exposure to that ritual, which is not held very frequently. The concepts of Tampirān̠ and other numinous beings also tend to merge whenever the latter have left fresher imprints in the awareness of my interlocutors.

On March 5th, 2000, when I strolled in one of the streets inhabited mainly by Nāyakkars in

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[242] Described by Meyer 1986.

> Oragadam, a distant relative of Chinnakannan Naicker stopped me and said: "Last time you asked about the *pūjai* for Tampirāṉ, is it not? It is conducted today. Inside the *ēri*. Just go there and have a look!". This was confusing: it was the day when the feast for Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari was conducted in a grand manner, not the one for Tampirāṉ. When I voiced that concern, my informant told me that this was all the same.

Thus at the levels of ritual, mythology and perception, the concept of Tampirāṉ in Oragadam is not clear cut, standardised and permanent. It differs according to the way he is actualised, when and by whom. He gets his form only whenever the social constellation requires it, especially when the time is ripe to perform the tonsuring and ear-piercing ceremony among a group of relatives [*paṅkāḷi*]. Most of the time, Tampirāṉ exists as potentiality – just like the *ēri* itself is not clear cut, standardised and permanent but exists as potentiality that has to be actualised after a hot long summer by the rain and the effort of men who need it.

Likewise, in Tirukkalukundram, the god in the Big *ēri* lacks permanency and most of the time distinctness. At the *ēri*'s lowest (and therefore most important) sluice there is a shrine that consists of seven bricks. Many passers-by, asked for the name of the presiding deity, had a glance at it and said with conviction that this is Kaṉṉiyammaṉ. However, a few other people denied that sharply. These were mostly senior farmers who could furnish a host of other information as well. They used to point into the direction of the shrine with the low compound wall which is situated in the middle of the irrigated area. They explained that only that one was a shrine of Kaṉṉiyammaṉ while the one at the sluice was dedicated to Kaṉṉiyammaṉ's protector. When it came to the question of this male being's name, the answers differed even more widely than in the case of their female counterpart. Names mentioned include Ciṉṉa tōṭṭattār, Periyāṇṭavaṉ and Muṉīcuvaraṉ while other informants maintain that the protector of Kaṉṉiyammaṉ in Tirukkalukundram is not Muṉīcuvaraṉ himself but his younger brother. The deity has similarities to Tampirāṉ in Oragadam. In both places, the cult centres around the first tonsure and the ear-piercing ceremony of children and their first ritual baths and seems to be especially important to Nāyakkars.[243] There, like in Oragadam, people form the idols out of mud. However, asked whether the god exists elsewhere, the same people of Tirukkalukundram who dwelt on the connection of the local Kaṉṉiyammaṉ to that of Manapakkam deny it or say that they do not know. Chinnakannan Naicker of Oragadam said: "To our knowledge, this god [*cuvāmi*] is here only. He may be elsewhere, but of that we are not aware".

Eveline Meyer states in her study of Aṅkāḷammaṉ: "[She] cannot claim a unique form of worship; no deity in India probably can."[244] However, there are differences between the deities in their worshipper's propensity to design characteristic cults with unique forms of worship, to give them permanency and to connect them to the supra-local deities or gods.

- This tendency is especially strong in the case of gods of the Brahminical pantheon with their elaborate temples, rituals and myths that are even displayed on TV and in comic strips.
- The tendency is less strong, but nevertheless existent in the case of village goddesses [*kirāma tēvatai*] such as Kuḷatiyammaṉ in Oragadam. Villagers in Tirukkalukundram and Irumbuli acknowledge that Ōcūrammaṉ, Celliyammaṉ and Vēmpuḷiyammaṉ respectively are but different forms of Māriyammaṉ. Several informants who told these goddesses' myths [*purāṇam*s]

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[243] In Oragadam, the above mentioned names do not play a role, except for Muṉīcuvaraṉ. He is perceived of being distinct from Tampirāṉ.
[244] Meyer 1986: 229.

themselves pointed to the fact that they are actually myths of Renuka.[245] In a noteworthy encounter in Tirukkalukundram, the priest [*pūjāri*] of Celliyamman̠ and Ōcūramman̠ and an itinerant healer from a far away place in Andhra Pradesh jointly explained to me the concept of village gods [*kirāma tēvatai*], repeatedly insisting that "this is the same in every village in India."

- In the case of Tampirān̠ and other deities connected more specifically with *ēri*s, the inclination to confer perennial features on them and to connect them to supra-local variants is especially weak.

So the case of Tampirān̠ is the reverse of that of Kan̠n̠iyamman̠ in Tirukkalukundram. Whereas in the latter, the relatedness of local customs and deities to supra-local cults is emphasised, in the case of the god whom locals consider to be specific for *ēri*s, his singularity is assumed and connections to other places are not sought (even though, in other places, ceremonies do exist that remind one of Tampirān̠'s). On the contrary, their individuality or particularity is emphasised, not only as belonging to a certain locality, but also to a certain lineage. The gods and goddesses that are associated with *ēri*s are the most frequent family deities [*kulatēvatai* and *kulateyvam*] in the study area (at least among non-Brahmin castes): Kan̠n̠iyamman̠, Tampirān̠, Mun̠īcuvaran̠, An̄kāḷaparamēcuvari. The most important rite in which Tampirān̠ is involved, the tonsuring and ear-piercing ceremony, is confined to the lineage [*pan̄kāḷi*]. Outsiders are not invited to participate; Chinnakannan Naicker stresses the point that not a bit of the sacrificial meat that is eaten in the end of the ceremony must be given to them: "Even if we have it in large quantities – two goats, two cocks and many pigs – we have to cook and eat it all by ourselves". Kullappa Naicker notes that for this ritual, women go to the cremation place [*mayān̠a koḷḷai*] as well, which they usually do not do. Hence, the ear-piercing ceremony does not only actualise Tampirān̠, but also the lineage in various ways. Practically, to begin with, they all gather, including the women; they all pool money and they all have to come to terms on how to organise the event. The tonsuring and ear-piercing imprints the agency of the lineage on the children's bodies, more specifically on the very locations of their personalities: the heads. The venue, on the graves of the ancestors, establishes the link between the living and the death. The fact that their deity's effigy is formed out of mud connects the lineage to the place – and to its *ēri*, which consists of the same stuff.

The localised and family related character of deities that are associated with *ēri*s is corroborated by a finding of Reiniche: "Un document de la fin du 19e siècle concernant le village donne une idēe de l'ētroite association de Sasta au rēservoir d'eau (kuḷam) et de la multiplication de ses sanctuaires". Every *ēri* had a Sasta ("dieu descendu sur tierre") of its own. Reiniche plays with the homonymy of *kulateyvam* [family god] and *kuḷam teyvam* [*ēri* god] and explains that often this Sasta was intimately linked to the families of the place and known only to them. When these families emigrated, the recollection of the Sastas moved out as well. "Ajoutons ā cela que les villageois semblent avoir oubliē que leur dieu ētait divinitē du rēservoir".[246]

In the logic of the Brahmin ideology, the deities connected with *ēri*s belong to a category which is considered as lowly. Their control over the givens of nature is precarious and they belong to a world that is hardly ordered and contained. The appearance of the gods themselves is contingent. They depend on being actualised by families in which a number of healthy children happen to have been born. What a contrast to a sage [*riṣi*] who controls the contingencies of nature to a point that he himself determines the time of his death – and what a contrast to a god of the Brahminical pantheon like Śiva who is thought of as having the well being of the entire universe at his will. Nabokov, who

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[245] Pfleiderer 1989; Meyer 1986: 2 provides literary evidences.
[246] Reiniche 1979: 125 – 7. Reiniche worked on Tirunelveli in southern Tamil Nadu where the word *kuḷam* is used instead of *ēri*, see chapter 3.1.

reports a ritual for god Periyāṇṭavar in South Arcot district that bears many similarities with that for the deities in the *ēri*s in the study area, argues against the negative valuation of these rituals. They have "nothing to do with propitiation of a 'fearsome' or 'inferior' god. It has everything to do with a transformed identity, or more accurately, with a loss of identity. [The ritual] effects deep 'inner' changes, dispossessing participants of their former sense of self".[247] She writes that "the festivities [are] intended to 'thank' Periyāṇṭavar for the birth of children"[248] implying that, after all, the deity does exert control over its own appearance because it helps the lineage to reproduce itself and, hence, to be in a position to perform the ear-piercing ritual during which the deity surfaces again. However, this is rather complicity than control – just like the *ēri*s themselves are based on the complicity of Man and nature. In my study area, I have not come across positive feelings such as gratitude towards deities in the *ēri*s. True, in Oragadam, men whose *kulateyvam* is Tampirāṉ are often named after him. In Tamil Nadu, children are commonly named after gods to whom their parents had made vows in order to get offspring and who had putatively helped. But none of my consultants said the motivation to conduct the ear-piercing ceremony for the numinous beings in the *ēri*s is gratitude. Even if the sacrificer's sense of self is transformed during the ritual, this does not make the ceremony and the deities concerned less fearsome. As Chinnakannan Naicker explains, they perform the ear-piercing rite for Tampirāṉ "because if we stay away from it, it is dangerous for all." Just like staying away from the repair of an *ēri* that is about to break is perceived of as dangerous for all, whereas I have never met anybody who would have taken care to thank the *ēri* for having granted water for fields or animals.

The dubious valuation of the deities that are associated with *ēri*s is underscored by the character of other beings that are believed to populate these reservoirs: all kinds of ghosts and spirits who are malevolent. Even Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari has traits of them, but she has benevolent aspects as well.[249] As for Muṉīcuvaraṉ, the case is complex and will be covered later. It suffices here to know that various phenomena seem to be clubbed together under his name, some of which are benign.

The case of Kāṭṭēri seems to be different. I met only one person who believed that this female being is ambivalent: the *tōṭṭi* of Tirukkalukundram. He held that there is a benevolent and a malevolent Kāṭṭēri and that there are ways to appease the latter, for example, by offering chicken to her. Yet especially people of middle and upper castes consider her invariably as evil [*tuṣṭa tēvatai*]. Some were even reluctant to talk about her, and a Kurukkaḷ priest made propitiating gestures when I mentioned Kāṭṭēri's name in his presence. Combining the accounts of various informants, the following picture of Kāṭṭēri emerges: she has the size of a big monkey and is clad in black with a black face.[250] As soon as somebody looks at her, she grows into the immense. She comes out only at night. Muṉīcuvaraṉ with his shining white loincloth [*vēṭṭi*] walks behind her and takes care that nobody touches her. She is said to reside in the bunds of *ēri*s, but not exclusively there.[251]

In comparison to Kāṭṭēri, it is comparatively easier to talk about other beings that can be found in *ēri*s: ghosts and devils [*pēy*s and *picācu*s]. Stories about them pop up frequently when neighbours meet on

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[247] Nabokov 2000: 162.

[248] Nabokov 2000: 155.

[249] Meyer 1986 even conjectures whether Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari developed out of a *pēy* and concludes: "The goddess' presence is experienced as ambivalent and (…) her destructive aspect is expressed in images clearly relating to the *pēy*." (pp. 209; 220).

[250] Meyer 1986: 13 f. calls Kāṭṭēri a bloodthirsty ghost and has a photograph of her on p. 334.

[251] Nabokov 2000: 51 and 192 (see also 61 and 66) explains her as "the ghost of a woman who had died in pregnancy (or childbirth) and now vented her frustrated instincts by attacking other childbearing women, snatching their unborn babies and small children." In my study area, nobody told me this background of Kāṭṭēri.

their porches in the evenings. *pēy*s and *picācu*s usually take forms like those in the following example by Venkatachalapathy, a senior weaver of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai:

> **Venkatachalapathy:** Many, many years ago, it might have been 1959 – I was about 11 years old – I met a ghost who spit fire [*koḷḷivāyp picācu*]. It was late at night, after eleven o'clock, in Anakkapattur, two kilometres past Pallavaram. Today that entire area has become urban (or civilised: *nakarikam āyiccu*), many houses were built there. In that time, all these were fields. The *koḷḷivāyp picācu* stood on the *ēri*-bund. You surely know those people who spit fire in festivals. They take a gulp of kerosene and then they spew forth a huge flame onto a burning torch and far beyond. Like this the *koḷḷivāyp picācu* spit fire, just without torch.
> **Bettina**: Weren´t you frightened?
> **Venkatachalapathy:** No, I was not frightened. Four or five adults were with me, they could shield me [*tuṇai ātu*].
> **Bettina**: Did they also witness the *koḷḷivāyp picācu*?
> **Venkatachalapathy:** Yes.[252]

In a chat with various people of Irumbuli, one mentioned a stretch of the local *ēri*'s bund that is especially thickly overgrown: nobody dared to cut trees there as snakes lived in that spot, he declared. This was astonishing. Why should snakes be more dangerous there than in other parts of the bund? Snakes are looming all over the place. I assumed that the real reason was that some deity [*cāmi*] might dwell there. The group denied that outrightly. Yet when I suggested that they indeed meant *pēy*s, they smiled and agreed.

The credibility of these stories depends on the talent of those who tell them – which in some cases is considerable. Apart from that, there are frequent warnings not to do this or that or not to go to particular places because otherwise a *pēy* could catch hold of one. However, people who are strong and pure enough are thought to repugnate *pēy*s.

*pēy*s are associated with pollution. There is a general notion that *pēy*s possess especially those people who are considered as impure, for example, because they have done black magic, menstruate, have recently born a child, have suffered the death of a close relative or endure other such turmoils of mind.[253] Finally, *pēy*s are inclined to inflict people of unstable character, those who are malicious or sneering.

Some of them become *pēy*s themselves after their demise. There are examples in which a *pēy* is individualised, known as the restless soul [*āvi*] of a particular dead person who continues to plague the living. When it possesses someone, he or she attains that person's character. In general, sudden changes of attitude and behaviour are seen as signs of being possessed by a *pēy*. To get rid of it, exorcists offer their services. They have developed a sector of the economy of their own in the study region.

One of the most prominent exorcists of the study area, T. N. Kannan, built his practice at the Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram. He and his assistant S. Siva enumerated the reasons for that choice: firstly, the hut

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[252] Story retold, no word-for-word rendition. As the story came up spontaneously, I could not record it, but I took notes of it immediately afterwards.

[253] Deliēge 1988: 282 observes: "[L]es villageois sont principalement possédés pour des atteintes aux règles de puretē."

and especially its adjacent temple of Cāmuṇṭīcuvarī had to be built on *rauttiram pūmi* [literally: angry soil]. The stretch at the edge of the *ēri* qualified for that because it used to be a cremation place [*cūṭukāṭu*]. Secondly, water has to be available. Thirdly, the place should be lonely [*taṉimai*], yet easily accessible – which it is. It is situated outside the settlement yet in walking distance to the bus stand of Tirukkaḻukundram.

However, exorcists work even outside of *ēri*s, and although *pēy* and *picācu* seem to have a special liking for *ēri*s, they are not confined to them.[254] They can lurk in any place, especially in areas which are uninhabited, in cremation grounds and forests and at crossings of streets or paths.

Sometimes extremely threatening beings dwell inside an *ēri*. In the one of Varanjaram village at the tailend of the Gomukhi river, for example, Vīraṉār (also called Vīrappaṉ) and Vīrammāḷ reside. They are vegetarians, so their eyes are covered while animals are sacrificed for their guardian's sake. Still they are considered to be extraordinarily dangerous. Jai Shankar, a young man of the neighbouring settlement of Dalits, explains:

> Some time ago people did not dare to come to this area, especially at night nobody would come to this temple. If they ever did, they normally faced death. Then some robbers or bandits chopped off the head of Vīraṉar's idol, and since then it has been peaceful here and people can come and worship comfortably without any fear either day or night.

When I asked Jai Shankar whether the people also bore the well-being of the *ēri* in their mind when they prayed to Vīraṉār and Vīrammāḷ, Jai Shankar answered like most people to whom I posed this question: he laughed. Then he added: "No, no. We never think of the *ēri* while worshipping!".

In this chapter, it has been shown that the concepts of the deities which are associated with *ēri*s have characteristics that mirror those of the *ēri*s' physical features and of their management. Other than the gods of the Brahminic tradition with their impressive temple complexes or the village deities with their often picturesque representations, they are temporary and scarcely marked. They are not clear cut but keep shifting and adapting to the givens of society. Like *ēri*s rely on the complicity of Man and water to be actualised, these deities depend on their conspiracy with Man to emerge as distinct, visible and tangible beings. They are not standardised but highly localised, even pertaining to certain families or lineages. Plus they are fierce. They demand expensive ceremonies and sacrifices of chicken, goats, pigs and rice soaked in blood. Their being bound to the locality, its earth and particular lineages (instead of being, like Śiva, for example, pertinent for the whole universe), their contingency and lack of control of themselves reduces their valuation. That too, the reputation of spirits that are not exclusively related to *ēri*s still frequently happen to dwell there, such as *pēy*, *picācu*, Kāṭṭēri, is unequivocally bad. However, like *ēri*s, their deities represent potentialities. Tampirāṉ, Ciṉṉa tōṭṭattār, Periyāṇṭavaṉ and the like help to further one's lineage as the rituals dedicated to them offer opportunities to link the living members of the lineage to each other, to the ancestors and to incorporate new members. Hence, for the concerned lineage at the time of the respective ritual is held, the deities in the *ēri*s attain much more importance than Śiva, Viṣṇu and all village deities taken together (and so do the spirits deemed malign for everybody "onto" whom they have come). This observation leads to the question how *ēri*s themselves are perceived and valued.

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[254] Likewise, Deliēge 1988: 279 associates water places with malign spirits: "Il es dangereux de quitter les endroits habitēs et de s'aventurer prēs des pouts, des riviēres, rēservoirs et ooranies oū se regroupent souvent les mauvais esprits".

With the critique of the tendency towards large scale projects, *ēri*s have gained more prominence in literature.[255]

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[255] Maloney 1994; Sengupta 2000; Agarwal and Narain 1999 with further references.

tōṭṭi Bala discharging sewage in Tirukkalukundram's Big ēri

6.   *ēri*: Perception

In what follows, I seek to elucidate how *ēri*s are perceived, both within the study area and outside –
outside meaning in the eyes of scientists and administrators who are usually based in cities and who
put down their perceptions in writing.

Perceptions from outside the study area

In general, scientific literature attests *ēri*s to be principally useful. That might be in part due to
the fact that *ēri*s are so low-key that they do not seem to be worth criticising in a grand
manner. They do not polarise the society. Struggles against *ēri*s comparable to movements
against big dams, such as the Tehri or Narmada projects, are unheard of. Politicians or
scientists who do not approve of *ēri*s just turn their backs on them. The *ēri*s are not actively
questioned – at most they are tacitly buried. In the perception of decision makers, large scale
projects[256] range more prominently. This is mirrored in the amount of money they allocate to
them[257] in comparison to the sums dedicated to the development of rainfed areas. In total, a
special committee identified 75 million hectares to be classified as such, including the study

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[256] Under the Planning process, all irrigation projects above 10,000 hectares culturable command area (CCA)
range as major and projects between 2,000 and 10,000 hectares CCA as medium irrigation projects. See
Sengupta 2000: 8.

[257] "The amount of money allotted for tank repairs and maintenance is assumed to be an indication of the level of
the condition of the tanks and it also represents the importance given to tank irrigation at government level. …
The tanks require large amount of money than what is provided now" writes Chiranjeevulu 1992: 250.

region. The 9th Five-Year-Plan (1997 – 2002) contends that it may be only possible to develop 30 million hectares of it during the following ten years. "The amount required for completion of the ongoing major irrigation projects benefiting about a tenth of the area is about the same", comments Nirmal Sengupta.[258] Thus the mention of *ēri*s itself – especially of *ēri*s as viable alternatives to big dams – is counter-hegemonic.

There are various perspectives with which *ēri*s are dealt.

Political perspective

The appropriation of natural resources is a cornerstone in the discussion on colonialism and its impact on the post-Independence period. One side of this lacklustre medal is the exploitation of assets, the provision of raw materials for consumers and profiteers who are far away. The reverse of that medal is the control of modes of production and the promulgation of those among them which serve the colonialists' aims. As will be shown in more detail later, contemporary Indian authors reproach the British colonial government for having utterly neglected the *ēri*s. "The British destroyed the village-based water management systems" conclude Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain.[259] In the same vein, they extol the effectiveness of what they explain to have been systematic approaches to cope with water: "It would not be inappropriate to say that Indians have historically been the world's greatest water harvesters."[260]

In this strand of thought, *ēri*s are perceived as representing the greatness of indigenous engineers. A. Mohanakrishnan, top-level irrigation functionary in Tamil Nadu[261] writes "The layout, the structure and the construction of these tank systems bring out the ingenuity of out forefathers". P. Gomathinayagam, who works as intermediary at the borderline of science and administration in irrigation management,[262] adds:

> "The building of this highly interconnected system would have also required civil Engineering skills of a high order. Maintaining such an extensive system and sharing the waters need extra-ordinary social and Managerial skills."[263]

Representing the stance of Non Government Organisations, such as Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, T. M. Mukundan[264] singles out the art of locating an appropriate spot to construct an *ēri* and continues

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[258] Sengupta 2000: 19.

[259] Agarwal and Narain 1999: 268.

[260] Agarwal and Narain 1999: 25.

[261] Starting his career as Professor and Head of Department of Hydraulics and Water Resources Engineering in the College of Engineering in Guindy (Chennai), he became Chief Engineer (Irrigation) of the PWD in Tamil Nadu and held various honorary and consulting posts.

[262] E.g. as researcher in the governmental Irrigation Management and Training Institute (IMTI) in Thuvakudy /Tiruchirappalli and as coordinator of the EEC-funded Tank Modernisation project of the Centre for Water Resources, Anna University, Chennai.

[263] Gomathinayagam n. d.: 3.

[264] He did the study in connection with the *Patriotic and People Oriented Science and Technology Foundation* (*PPST*) and the *C. P. R. Environmental Education Centre* in Chennai. Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain stand for the *Centre for Science and Environment* (*CSE*) in New Delhi, publisher of the magazine *Down to Earth*.

"[t]he design of the bund and sluices and their actual construction is another formidable engineering task."[265]

As an exponent of the scientific community, M. S. Vani of the Indian Law Institute in New Delhi underscores the how inherent *ēri*s are:

> "These tanks were constructed centuries before the British "expertise" in construction and management reached India. Under indigenous management, the tanks were functioning at optimum efficiency and according to a survey in 1780 in Chengalpattu area, the average fields around Uttarmallur used to yield as much paddy per hectare as can now be grown in districts like Kurukshetra and Ludhiana with the latest green revolution technology. Now, however, modern management systems have resulted in their decline."[266]

Thus, the topos of community management of *ēri*s is a variation of the laud of engineering skills. In this context, the state-wide PWD, rooting in the British period, is viewed as alien to the village.[267] As has been shown before, there are even suggestions to relieve the PWD of its role to take care of the *ēri* bunds. Here it suffices to delineate the perception of (mostly urban) writers who ennoble *ēri*s as constituting an unique Indian way to make use of land and water.

Ecological perspective

The discourse in which *ēri*s are perceived as critical issues in the process of decolonisation is intimately intertwined with the ecological approach. Authors of that perspective suggest that *ēri*s, being "indigenous" Indian constructions, are therefore the most appropriate ones for the country. Social, political and ecological feasibility go hand in hand when Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain explain why they took up the study of "traditional"[268] water harvesting systems: "The first [reason] was the growing anti-dam movement in India which was demanding less socially and ecologically destructive systems of water development." They also speak of the role of Tamil Nadu's *ēri*s in "maintaining ecological harmony"[269]. Gomathinayagam writes: "The Tamils had perfected their Technology to follow the ways of nature".[270] C. B. S. R. Sharma calls for the need to "evolve an ecologically sound management strategy for the waterbody" for which "[t]raditional water management bodies should be rejuvenated and modernised for better results."[271] The mention of harmony alludes to what has been shown to be deeply rooted in the Tamil way of thinking.[272]

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[265] Mukundan 1992: 47.

[266] Kurukshetra is a mythological topos with highly emotional connotations; Vani 1999: 302. On the phantastic yields obtained in the erstwhile Chengalpattu district (to which the study area belongs) see also Dharampal 1990.

[267] See, for example, Mukundan 1992: 59.

[268] See next chapter for a discussion of the notion of "tradition".

[269] Agarwal and Narain 1999: iv; 24. See also p. 401: "Social and economic conditions over large parts of India are such that only traditional systems are appropriate". In the eighties, the Silent Valley Project in Kerala was denied approval by the Government for environmental reasons: it would have submerged the only remnant or primary rain forest in India. See Sengupta 2000: 10. Also in the Narmada Bachao Andolan social as well as ecological reasons form part of the struggle against the dam.

[270] Gomathinayagam n. d.: 3;

[271] Sharma 1997: 82.

[272] Daniel 1984.

The option for ways that are said to be "traditional" to appropriate land and nature is an aspect of environmentalists' critique of the unjust globalised economy. Movements fighting for these "traditional" ways are "different forms of contemporary expressions of ecology as justice... They do not merely face the explicit and formal dispossession of basic rights by colonial powers, but also the tacit and hidden dispossession resulting from the privileged use of capital and technology by some sections of society.", writes Vandana Shiva, one of India's most prominent critics of globalisation.[273]

Economical perspective

Nirmal Sengupta, examining the benefits of major and medium dams discovers: "Almost all the benefits, including flood moderation, fish production and water supply for domestic uses, are obtained from small tanks, too." At the same time, *ēri*s do not bear the disadvantages of large dams such as displacement of people, exporting floods outside the areas that are known to be flood prone, high and ever rising costs or the creation of interstate problems. Nirmal Sengupta observes that the major and medium irrigation projects contributed less than expected to hydropower generation and foodgrain production. Nevertheless, he deplores the lack of governmental development activities directed towards water control devices as an alternative to major and medium dams and canals: "No effort has been made to develop expertise capable of designing spatially integrated decentralised water management designs for vast areas." Like this, their impact remains localised.[274]

In the perspective of profitability for farmers, economists give *ēri*s good marks. Von Oppen and Rao calculate the costs and benefits of *ēri* irrigation in a sample of 32 *ēri*s in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. They figure out that "[i]n a normal year, tank irrigation is a highly profitable proposition for the farmer".[275] However, they identify many ways to improve the handling of the *ēri*s. Chiranjeevulu voices the opinion:

> "Tank irrigation, basically an economically productive and profitable undertaking, thus began to be neglected and was only half-heartedly supported by policy makers and planners. The resulting decreases in efficiency and in reliability of the performance of irrigation tanks tended to support the erroneous notion of tank irrigation being notoriously inferior to other types of irrigation."[276]

He calls for the rehabilitation of *ēri*s and development of concepts to combine surface irrigation with groundwater use. Likewise, programmes for "Tank Modernisation"[277], "Tank Rehabilitation",[278] or "longterm restoration of tanks"[279] aim at restoring what is supposed to have been the erstwhile significance of *ēri*s.

As a result, the perception of *ēri*s, as it can be distilled out of most publications by people outside the study area, could be paraphrased as the "if-only!" approach: if only the locals took proper care and if only the government would instigate them to do so, *ēri*s could fully play out their advantages as

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[273] Shiva 1991: 335.
[274] Sengupta 2000: 45, 65 and 74. See also 78 f.
[275] Von Oppen and Rao 1987: 23. However, they counted neither the labour nor the costs for the kampukutti as they were non-monetary.
[276] Chiranjeevulu 1992: 251.
[277] See Centre for Water Resources 1999.
[278] See Centre for Water Resources and Ocean Management 1996.
[279] Sharma 1997: 81.

socially and ecologically appropriate, low risk, profitable, in short: good ways to control water and soil. *ēri*s become emblematic for a deemed "Indian" and politically correct way to cope with nature in India, offering alternatives to that which has been introduced by the colonial government and continued by the modern Indian state in the name of "development". Possibly aspiring to establish the notion of the *ēri*s' usefulness in the public discourse and to prove that they are on a par with modern high-tech constructions like large dams, the mentioned authors are focusing onto something the raison d'être of which has so far been to stand in the shade.

In this "if-only-approach", the argument of the critics of colonialism is, in crucial points, in line with that of the colonialists. Both are informed by expectations of surplus production and they are based on the assumption that calculations of efficiency, profitability and short-term return on investment are applicable to *ēri*s, that is, that *ēri* irrigation can aspire to perfection. Only in the light of such expectations are the deficiencies and the degradation of *ēri*s coming to the fore that have been determining the discussion on *ēri*s in the past one and a half centuries. An alternative perspective would regard *ēri*s as reservoirs – not only of water, but also of productive potential that can be tapped if necessary, but that is not meant to (and, hence, should not always) be completely made use of; they are like that extra put aside for a rainy day or an insurance for bad times.

Perceptions of *ēri*s prevalent within the study area

The most striking characteristic of the perception of *ēri*s within the study area is that they are a non-issue. Small talk is about the weather, politics, new varieties of rice seeds, gods, their relatives, their neighbours, and the favourite topic, at least among women, seems to be food. People even speak freely about malign ghosts [*pēy*, *picācu*] and money. But nobody seems to talk about *ēri*s unless asked to do so by the nosy anthropologist. It is no taboo. Just most of the times obviously quite uninteresting for those who set the tone of village talk.

People in the study area do not experience a high valuation of *ēri*s by the part of the state, as it could perhaps be effected by the establishment of a specialised *ēri* department; an institution whose presence locally would be marked by a proper building and that would offer the widely sought after government jobs and that would focus its activities on *ēri*s. None of that, on the contrary: people in the study area perceive that administratively, an *ēri* as a whole does not exist. It is split among a confusing multiplicity of departments. The local PWD office is in charge of the bunds of the Big *ēri*s. But that is just one among its many tasks, and by far not the most prominent one. The PWD does not interfere in the distribution of water in the areas irrigated by the *ēri*s in Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli nor does it desilt the *ēri* beds or the inlet channels. The irrigation workers (laskars) say that the latter is the responsibility of the farmers. The farmers hold that it is the responsibility of the PWD.

Likewise, there is much confusion about other part of *ēri*s. In the case of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, several farmers believe that the Agricultural Department has to take care of the fields and the Highways Department of the feeder channels. Others presume that this would be the task of the *pañcāyattu* Board or the Block Development Office (the building of which is situated adjacent to the Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram). Again others are positive that the Revenue Department is the appropriate authority because that is where they have to pay their dues. Many of my informants know that a big portion of the catchment area comes under the jurisdiction of yet another department, some

identifying it as the Forest Department, others as the Department of Social Forestry. Yet hardly any farmer has ever witnessed any activity of the mentioned agencies towards the *ēri*.

Edmund Leach observed in Sri Lankan Pul Eliya that "the Sinhalese think of a village tank and its associated lands as constituting a single unified estate."[280] In Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli, of course, people do know that there are *ēri*s uphill, but they rarely associate the fields with them. More current is the classification in smaller units:[281] in day-to-day speak, fields are sometimes called by their proper names. This is the case in Tirukkalukundram, where clusters of irrigated fields are known, for example, as "Kaṇakkuppiḷḷai's grant" [Kaṇakkuppiḷḷai *māṉiyam*], "temple grant" [*kōyil māṉiyam*], "monkey grant" [*kuraṅku māṉiyam*], etc.[282] Another way to locate fields is used in Oragadam, where they are identified according to which of the eight channels feeds them.[283] Usually, cultivators know exactly who has fields at the same channel. They meet when they visit their fields in the mornings and use that opportunity to come to terms regarding activities such as cleaning the channels. The shapes of the channels differ widely, pointing to varying degrees of efficiency in organising the upkeep. So there seems to be a certain particularisation of the perception of the Big *ēri* in Oragadam.

In general, farmers tend to be preoccupied in the first place with their own fields. Irrigation is merely one aspect of their manifold concerns. The next important focus is the feeder channel, then the distributary, then the sluice and only finally the *ēri*. In a farmer's perspective, an *ēri* appears but as an elevation on the horizon.[284] What happens beyond the bund is often out of their reach. Maybe their wives go there to wash clothes, or their sons and daughters herd the cattle there. Thus farmers think bottom-up, whereas scientists or politicians concerned with *ēri*s think top-down, beginning with the reservoir and the bund to the sluices, continuing to the distributaries and the feeder channels until they finally – if at all – regard the fields.

Ancient Tamil literature suggests the classification of life in "inner" [*akam*] and "outer" [*puṟam*] spheres, and many authors think that this classification is also pertinent in contemporary Tamil Nadu.[285] In many respects, *ēri*s rather belong to the "outer" than to the "inner world": they are out of reach of the day-to-day activities of most inhabitants. They are also not "covered" by the annual procession of village deities [*kirāma tēvatai*] in the festival month *āṭi* (July /August). At most, as in Irumbuli or in Agadeeswaramangalam south west of Tirukkalukundram, the procession of the local ammaṉ uses the path on top of the *ēri* bund. Yet this does not have any significance for the *ēri*, assure the inhabitants of Irumbuli; it is just that the path is convenient to reach the temple of Vēmpuḷiyammaṉ which is situated in the forest at the opposite side of the village, reportedly in the place of a former settlement.

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[280] Leach 1961: 151.

[281] The word ayakkattu itself is not in use locally; instead, farmers use the very untechnical phrase "irrigated by that *ēri*" [inta *ēri pācanam*] when asked how they express the relationship of their plots to a particular *ēri*.

[282] As *māṉiyam* means "endowment", this naming may have historical reasons, indicating fields that may once have been presented to the temple or the village accountant. Yet also a field that was cleared only recently and is still considered to be an encroachment of common land [*puṟampōkku*] is likewise labelled as "*māṉiyam*". Its proper name derives from the proximity of the hill and the monkeys that live there, explained a farmer.

[283] *mōṭṭukālvāy, koḷaikālvāy, mañcitakālvāy, mūṉākālvāy, tāmrakālvāy, iliṅkālvāy, naṭukālvāy* and *kaṭṭappukālvāy* (also called *kāṭṭappiṭikkāl*) in local parlance.

[284] Adiceam 1966: 315 traces the term "*ēri*" to "that which is raised": "C'est d'ailleurs le sens du terme tamoul *ēri* (eri = elevē) qui dēsigne les tanks." However, this seems to be an equivocation (Tamil r with ṟ) as according to the Cre-A dictionary, *ēṟutal* or *ēṟṟutal* (climb or tie up) would be the words corresponding to "ēlever".

[285] See, e.g., Zvelebil 1973; Hart 1979 and Nabokov 2000: 7 f. with many more references.

Furhermore, *ēri*s are either uninhabited or places of outsiders. Obviously they belong to the few grounds that are still free to pitch a camp, and they provide water as a basic amenity within reach.

> Near Tirukkalukundam's ward Rudrankoyil, itinerant salt merchants constructed their temporary hutments in an ēri bed. After they had left, a group of six families, altogether 20 adults and a crowd of children, came to the place. They called Ulundurpettai in South Arcot District their hometown, even though they stay there only two months a year. In the remaining time, they keep travelling throughout the northern part of Tamil Nadu. They are fortune tellers, working on the basis of horoscopes and palmistry. From 10 o'clock to sunset, they were going from door to door of non-Brahmin houses in Tirukkalukundram, offering their services. As they used to return every year, they could establish already long-standing business relationships. This, and the fact that they stayed for an entire month, seemed to justify a certain feeling of having older rights to the place. This is expressed by the somewhat condescending statement of Kumar, one of the group members, about their neighbours whose tents stood a bit apart: "They do not belong to us. They are only from [nearby] Kalpakkam. They rear pigs! And they are staying only for ten days". Notwithstanding these subtleties of self-perception, other inhabitants of Tirukkalukundram count neither the fortune tellers nor the pig rearers as belonging to the local society. They remain outsiders, just like the Iṟular, and just like the purely male group of itinerant healers from the area of Chittoor in Andhra Pradesh that arrived after the others had left.

What these groups also have in common is that they stand outside, appear to be extremely poor and depend on the rent-free place that is provided by the *ēri*.

In Oragadam, a group of Iṟular used to live adjacent to the Big *ēri* until the *pañcāyattu*tu resettled them at another fringe of the village. In Tirukkalukundram, too, Iṟulars are dwelling adjacent to *ēri*s. At the bund of Rudrankoyil-*ēri*, 15 families built their huts after they had been evicted from their previous home at the *śaṅku tīrttam*[286]. At the Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram, there is an Iṟular settlement that they call Annaisathyanagar. It comprises about 100 families and is located at the upper spill channel. On several instances when I wanted to go there, people held me back. One day when I wanted to proceed to the Iṟular settlement after having visited a family of Nāṭṭukottai Ceṭṭiyars, a teenage member of the family strongly warned me not to go there: "There are our adversaries [*etiri*]".[287]

Also several farmers warned me not to go in the direction of that Iṟular settlement after sunset, and whenever I did visit the Iṟular, they themselves caringly saw me off before it got dark. Iṟulars are not only outsiders per se, they are also engaged in activities that, for the mainstream society, are epitomes of being outside. Obviously alcohol – arrack [*cārāyam* or *taṇṇi*] or toddy [*kaḷ*] – is sold in that place. It attracts men from Tirukkalukundram like a magnet. In Oragadam, toddy is at times sold at the small *ēri*. In general, places where alcohol is consumed are no-go areas for women. One aspect of their bad image might be the physical threat posed by scuffles that crop up frequently. Many severe injuries and even deaths of men in Oragadam and Tirukkalukundram are said to have occurred in fights, and telling about it, the survivors use to make gestures of drinking alcohol. Also the paths which the intoxicated men use at night on their way home are associated with terror and brutality. Another aspect of the bad

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[286] See chapter 6.

[287] On the other hand, as will be shown below, in several respects, Iṟular are enjoying a much better reputation than untouchables in the eyes of castes that are deemed to be higher.

image of places in which alcohol is consumed is that they are localities which men obviously visit to escape the binding order of the village or town.

Much more often than men, women warned me not to go to *ēri*s. It even happened that women who were working in gangs on adjacent fields interrupted their weeding, transplanting or harvesting to come and tell me not to stroll alone in the fields, let alone at the *ēri*. Many of these warnings were voiced in very concerned, some in aggressive tones. When asked for a reason for this interdiction, some mentioned the existence of snakes nearby *ēri*s. Others warned me of thieves. Yet most of the women did not waste any time on explanations. *ēri*s simply do not seem to be places to go to for an unaccompanied woman.

Even accompanied by their husbands, women do not frequent *ēri*s if they can afford to do so, that is if they do not have to do their laundry there, form bricks, herd cattle or engage in other usages of the reservoirs. This pertains especially to middle and upper class women whose abstinence from work for wages is esteemed as status symbol, or who work in white collar jobs. Many field owners I talked to held that their wives knew where their plots are, but they hardly ever visited them. In cases of cultivators who lease different plots every season, wives are usually ignorant of their exact location. Only in exceptional cases feels a women apt enough to answer questions relating to *ēri* management. To order nature, as to control the flux of water, is obviously a task for which men are held responsible.

In that sense, too, *ēri*s rather belong to the outside world [*puṟam*] than to *akam*, the interior in the logic of ancient Tamil poetry, as this genre deals mainly with heroic deeds of men. Women figure in it, at most, as mothers of valiant sons or as languishing wives whose husbands are off to glorious battlefields.

Consequently, when women go to *ēri*s (which they frequently do, for example, to work), this has a tinge of a transgression and can nurture a certain lascivious atmosphere. *ēri*s often connote loose morals – similar to threshing floors which are nearby or inside *ēri*s. When gangs of working women sit down at *ēri* bunds, for example, to have their meals, they mingle freely with men and chat. Slippery allusions and remarks are galore; the double play with the frequently used term *pōkam* (meaning "harvest", as well as, "lust") does not seem to be coincidental. The lush green bund of an *ēri* was the only place in the study area where I encountered lovers, an obviously unmarried couple, too. That *ēri*s are places for secret rendezvous is another aspect of them as representing a concept countering that of the ordered interior world.

Furthermore, *ēri*s are associated with dirt.

> A Kurukkaḷ woman of Tirukkalukundram who contracted typhoid fever gives the following explanation for it: she travelled in a bus that broke down. All the passengers had to wait for a long time. She got so thirsty that she deigned to drink water that was sold in small plastic packets. This water must have been the transmitter of the disease because "they" [avaṅka] are tapping it directly from an ēri and filling it into the packets. The patient's sister elaborates on the pollution of the ēri water and on the flies that brood in it. Likewise, several people warn me to be careful with bottled water because crooked (or "duplicate") companies are drawing it directly from ēris.

> When I fell ill with a diarrhoea with vomiting, my worried landlady was quick with her

conjecture that this was due to my frequent visits of ēris. Asked for an explanation, she said that the ēris were used as toilets and inferred that they were dirty. As she knew that I abstained from drinking ēri water, she must have felt that simply by being present at ēris I contracted the gastroenterical problems. Hence, the place itself can be considered as polluting.

In Tirukkalukundram, the local authorities allow the sewage to be taken to the Big *ēri*. The local sewerman [*tōṭṭi*], Bala of the Kāṭṭunāyakkar community, goes on his rounds with a bullock cart onto which a big metal barrel is tied. He fills it with the sewage both of private homes and companies and of government institutions such as schools and kindergardens [*pālvāṭi*]. With a certain pride, he emphasises that he attends to every type of house and even clears deep cesspits. He drives the oxen to the Big *ēri* and empties the barrel into it. Asked why he chose that place he answered: "The officer and even the *pañcāyattu* leader have asked me to do it. It is already dirty there". Bala does not corroborate the rumour which is widespread in Tirukkalukundram that he catches dogs without collars, kills them and takes the corpses to the *ēri*.

One feeder channel of the same *ēri* leads alongside the bus stand of Tirukkalukundram. This is an area with a high turnover of people and substances which is not taking place in an organised manner. Other than in private houses or factories, there are no rules where to deposit refuse, used oil, or where to defecate.[288] As a consequence, a mixture of everything covers the place and finally collects in the feeder channel. Pigs do their best to reduce the organic part of the compound. Everybody knows that heavy rains will wash it off to the *ēri*.

Apart from that, the local *pañcāyattu* organises a refuse disposal. In irregular intervals, a gang of about ten men and women with rakes, sickles, hoes and picks passes through residential areas and the bazaar and gathers the rubbish that people use to throw onto the streets in front of their houses. With the help of huge aluminium pots, the dustpeople shovel it onto an accompanying refuse lorry which in turn transports it to the Big *ēri*. The rubbish heap which has formed at its eastern edge is enormous. Every now and then it is set on fire. It smoulders for weeks altogether, resulting in a stinking pile of half burnt plastic, cloth, pieces of wood and whatever. In the meanwhile, new refuse is dumped onto it. Private parties dispose of their refuse – especially whenever they have bigger loads of it – at the *ēri*, too, carrying it along with tricycles and bullock carts.

Sometimes the rubbish heap at the *ēri* becomes an issue in conversations of locals. As for the official side, when questioned about it, Inspector P. Natarajan, Head of Tirukkalukundram's Sanitary Department, hastened to explain that "starting from tomorrow"[289] the rubbish would no longer be taken to the *ēri* but to a place below a rock in Ambedkar Street (a place predominantly inhabited by Untouchables). The concern of P. Natarajan and of others who talked about the rubbish heap, even without the anthropologist introducing that topic, was that it does not look nice and leaves a bad impression on visitors as it is situated at the street entering Tirukkalukundram. They especially dislike the smoke and stench of the smouldering fire. This sorrow must be understood in the context that many shops of Tirukkalukundram have pilgrims as an important customer base who surely come to worship, but also to enjoy the scenery.

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[288] The public toilet which the *pancāyattu* has erected nearby Tirukkalukundram's most interesting tourist spot, the entrance to the hill temple, is out of sight and often unusable.
[289] Information of 16.03.2000. However, even afterwards, disposals of refuse took place at the *ēri*.

None of the informants in Tirukkalukundram worried on the grounds that the refuse might pose a threat to the quality of the *ēri* water or to the *ēri* itself. They assured me that the rubbish would be burnt, and once the water had dried up, nothing would happen. They are positive that something that has been burnt cannot pollute, so what should there be to worry about.

However, the fact remains that there are places in which refuse is tolerated and others where it is not. This is particularly important as the refuse in question includes used sanitary towels and rubbish of the local hospital: syringes and bandages soaked with blood and pus. Menstrual blood and other body fluids are considered as highly polluting – not only in the physical sense as substances in the wrong place but also in a metaphysical sense as ritually polluting.[290] Usually nobody is ready to tolerate this kind of substance inside the home. At the *ēri*, it is tolerated, plainly without any expression of regret which regularly ensues, for example, when it comes to questions such as "why are the reservoirs and channels silted up?" or "why is the catchment area encroached?"; thus, there does not seem to be a feeling of wrong. This seems to suggest that *ēri*s are not merely associated with dirt, but also with ritual pollution. They are places in which substances of all kinds are washed ashore and deliberately deposited. Efforts to distinguish clean from polluted ones are neither effective nor even sought. This is but another indication of the *ēri*'s exteriority. As Reiniche puts it, [l]e village est le lieu oū se opēre la sēparation du pur et de l'impur, tandis que l'espace extērieur est celui du mēlange ou d'un au-delā de la distinction du pur et de l'impur."[291]

In that context it should be remembered[292] that *ēri*s are thought of as spooky places, haunted by all kinds of ghosts and demons [*pēy*s, *picācu*s]. Just like a weak and ritually polluted person is seen as more prone to be afflicted than a person considered to be strong and ritually pure, it could be understood that *ēri*s are not considered as pure enough to withstand these malign beings. Moreover, cremation grounds, even though not necessarily located at *ēri*s, can be found there frequently as, for example, at the Big *ēri*s of Oragadam and Tirukkalukundram. Cremation grounds are visited by family members of recently deceased, that is by people who are extremely ritually impure, and they are said to be inhabited by ghosts as well – so heavily that women are not allowed to go there.

Leaving aside the cults of Tampirāṉ and Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari, informants of all castes agree that water of *ēri*s does not qualify to be used for ritual purposes – at least as long as alternative sources exist, which in the study area is the case. Particularly people of non-Brahmin castes argue that *ēri* water is not clean enough to be poured on gods. Whereas most people I talked to took this for granted, especially pensive minds provided reasons as, for example, T. Anbucheziyan of Tirukkalukundram.

> "The ēri is wide and big, it covers a vast stretch. As a result, the stored water is a mixture of everything. It is not clean enough, not pure."[293]

Likewise, other informants say that *ēri* water is dirty because it is *cēr* (the verb *cēr* means "mix"), and it causes malaria. Others refer rather to the *ēri*s' social set up, like K. Sellamuttu of P. V. Kalattur:

> "The ēri does not have a watchman. You can find people taking a bath on one of the banks, and in the other end there are people doing the laundry or defecating, polluting the ēri. Such

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[290] Dumont 1999: 139.
[291] Reiniche 1979: 18.
[292] Dumont 1999: 48.
[293] Words in italics are English in the original.

things are allowed, they are not really matters of concern…"

The prevalent justification of the assumed disqualification of *ēri*s for ritual purposes is based on their physical characteristics. Informants of all kinds of backgrounds (including various Brahmins and Kurukkaḷs) provide the following reasons:

- *ēri*s do not make sure that water is available throughout the year because they depend on rains and dry up soon;
- *ēri*s are of uneven depth, so it would be difficult to move floats (which are used in a certain type of festival related to water);
- *ēri*s do not have clear cut and uniform edges;
- *ēri*s do not provide comfortable paths to reach the water such as flights of stairs. As a result, it might be dangerous for worshippers to go there as they risk drowning.
- *ēri*s have neither ramps, by the help of which floats could be lowered onto them, nor places where the idols could be safely mounted and dismounted onto the floats.

A senior Kurukkaḷ added a reason that pertains to the managerial ambit: *ēri*s are not reserved for ritual purposes. Hence, a situation of competition might arise. Other usages could dominate, not leaving enough scope to carry out the necessary rites. For example, too much water might be withdrawn for irrigation and none left for the gods. "An *ēri* is not considered a holy place.", concludes Sampath, a Brahmin of Tirukkalukundram.

Thus the perception of *ēri*s as improper for rituals strikes at their core characteristics: their seasonality, their being scarcely marked, their functioning as accomplices rather than as controllers of nature.

In that sense, the above mentioned notion of *ēri*s as associated with pollution is but a complement to this essential feature. Pollution in that sense entails a state which is out of control, which counters the established concepts of order or in which the ordering forces of civilisation and human volition have not succeeded to overcome the vagaries of nature. A *riṣi* is considered to be pure; he can decide voluntarily on the time of his own death. But a person who is ritually polluted is overwhelmed by uncertainties, by the power of nature. This thought pattern seems to be applicable to a nonhuman entity like *ēri*s as well. *ēri*s are not "pukkah" – a Hindi word the meaning of which Morna Livingston defines as following:

> "'hard,' and by inference 'pure'. *Pukkah* is the adjective for something durable and able to be cleaned, and these permanent materials are reserved for only the high castes. Stone is *pukkah* and mud is its opposite, *cutcha*, meaning 'soft', 'makeshift,' or 'half-baked.'"[294]

*ēri*s are located at the brittle borderline between civilisation and nature, and they run a high risk to be overwhelmed by natural forces. Their very existence depends on the climate. No perennial source of water can ease their fate in case the monsoon winds fail to bring water. No permanent barrage guarantees that they withstand deluges. Yet this is where their usefulness for multiple purposes and their efficiency as low-cost infrastructure are founded.

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[294] Livingston 2002: 9.

Eveline Meyer observes that malevolent spirits tend to dwell in uncultivated areas or in unfamiliar, rarely frequented places.[295] This goes well with a remark of Venkatachalapathy of Tirukkalukundram who earned many nods of his neighbours when he said that nowadays the number of *pēy*s and *picācu*s has drastically decreased. The reason is the expansion of settlements, of overhead wires and electric lights. This seems to have chased away the old ghosts.[296] Thus, since *ēri*s are feared as dwelling places of *pēy*s, *picācu*s and Kāṭṭēris, they have clear aspects of the uncivilised world. "Crocodiles are still to be found in the village tanks and constitute a real, though minor, hazard to life" observed Edmund Leach in Pul Eliya and interpreted it as a reflection of the active hostility between Man and nature.[297]

However, *ēri*s are used in many ways and they form part of the village economy, and though they are outside the settlements, they cannot be counted as pertaining wholly to nature, understood as the uncivilised part of the world, to the outer world or *puṟam*. They come in between. Their catchment areas lie in what people in the study area call *kāṭu*. They use this term generally to designate the forest, especially the vast Reserved Forest that stretches out between Oragadam, Irumbuli and Tirukkalukundram. Owners of cattle know that they may herd it within the *ēri* bed once it is dry and on the stubblefields in the erstwhile irrigated area, but as soon as they enter the Reserved Forest, they have to purchase a permission called (by the English word) *pass*.[298] The border is very clearly cut north of Tirukkalukundram where the Forest Department had its realm fenced. *kāṭu* is an area where people assume wild animals to roam. Stories about jackals, deer or peacocks play typically in the *kāṭu*. Very often people locate them in the *kāṭu* that stretches out between Manapakkam and Tirupporur, a wood of scrub that appears to be pristine in comparison to the Reserved Forest with its columns of newly afforested eucalyptus trees. The group of people who calls themselves Iṟular are named Viḷḷis by others or "Kāṭṭukkārar", forest people, as a more politically correct expression. The activists of the Iṟular Tribal Women's Welfare Society (ITWWS), which is active in the study area as well, try to establish an image of Iṟular as living in, of and jointly with the forest.

In extension, *kāṭu* means more than just a certain forest. It denotes wilderness, uncivilised area, just like in early medieval times as demonstrated by David Ludden.[299] The area below a *ēri* with its paddy fields does definitely not belong to the *kāṭu* – at least as long as it is irrigated. In these times, the *ēri* bed up to the bund forms the interface. Whenever it is filled with water it is recognised as a part of the appropriated nature. However, when it has dried up, people call this stretch *kāṭu* – especially in Oragadam and Irumbuli where the *ēri* beds are not or only marginally cultivated. In summer when also the area below *ēri*s has dried up, this is in turn called *kāṭu*.

David Ludden shows that as agriculture became more and more intensive and widespread in the course of the centuries, as areas that had been left fallow so far were cultivated or used as grazing grounds,

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[295] Meyer 1986: 208, with further references.

[296] Similar opinions are reported by Uma Shankari in Andhra Pradesh, personal communication, 29,9,1999.

[297] Leach 1961: 34.

[298] Goat owners (like Mallika who lives in the Brahmin Street of Oragadam and who herds about 20 animals either in the fields or in the Forest) said they paid Rs. 2 per animal a month to the warden of the Forest Department who comes to the village. R. Govindarajan, forester of the Chengalpattu Forest Range Office to which the study area belongs, said that it had never been allowed to take goats to the Reserved Forest and that since 1995, no passes have been issued for other animals as well.

[299] "By early medieval times, the Tamil landscape had been simplified textually into a stark dichotomy between *nadu* and *kadu*, where *kadu* meant the untamed, rugged forest without cultivation or civility, while *nadu* denoted agrarian territory… The *kadu* was wild, inhabited by unruly folk who needed to be brought into the orbit of royal authority." Ludden 1999: 148 – 9.

the term *kāṭu* "travelled from the periphery to the centre of farming" and took on the meaning of "dry land, whether cultivated, fallow, or waste, and by 1800 this meaning was prominent"[300] until finally *kāṭu* attained considerable property value with the spread of commercial animal husbandry and cotton cultivation.

It seems that the designation of *ēri* beds as *kāṭu* follows that trend. But for the inhabitants of the study region, the term has still retained its sense of a concept distinct from that of profitable, cultivated lands. Few people draw riches from the business with cattle and milk. Cotton is not grown and other dryland crops such as millets are certainly not regarded as sources of wealth. Groundnut cultivation may be an economically rewarding undertaking. Yet I met nobody who conceived of his groundnut field as *kāṭu* – several farmers were even piqued when I addressed their fields as *kāṭu*; one knelt down and dug out a groundnut to prove that he had indeed sown the plot. Thus as soon as a plot is cultivated or controlled in the sense that it is given a shape, it looses its character of *kāṭu*, even if it might be situated in an area which is generally called *kāṭu*.

It can be concluded that both are shifting, the linguistic concept *kāṭu* (which has taken on a variety of meanings mirroring more complex relations of Man and nature than that of active hostility), as well as, the actual extent of *kāṭu* in a given locality in the course of a year. *ēri*s are at the interface of cultivated and uncultivated areas, mediating between them as they control the untamed streams that run off from the *kāṭu* and convert them into the most valuable asset for agriculture: water for irrigation. In a way, the meaning and significance of *ēri*s is constituted by this mediating role. Consequently it can be deduced that *ēri*s loose their significance as soon as the contrariety of cultivated area and *kāṭu* ceases to exist (which happens when, due to sprawling settlements and extending cultivation, hardly any space for *kāṭu* is left).

Robert Deliēge shows that it is the role of the Untouchables to mediate between both spheres. They dwell at the borderline between nature and culture and prevent the higher castes from suffering from evil spirits: "L'espace des intouchables se situe bien ā la limite entre la sociētē des hommes et la nature, entre le monde cultivē et la sauvagerie. ... En les maintenant ā l'ēcart, les hautes castes ont le sentiment de protēger le village de cette sauvagerie".[301] In that context, it is not astonishing that it is known to be the task of untouchables to guarantee the functioning of *ēri*s. It is a chestnut that they were duped to do so. The following story is told in many variations in the study area, as well as, in other parts of Tamil Nadu:

> "One day when it rained cats and dogs, the bund of the local ēri threatened to break. The local deity (or Śiva, or a member of a higher caste according to the version) stemmed himself against the wobbly bund. But when he realised that he would not be able to keep it out of his own strength, he called a labourer who was working nearby, an untouchable. He told the man to take his place while he would go and fetch helpers from the village. The Untouchable agreed and filled the break. The other disappeared never to be seen again. Since then, it has been the untouchables' task to guard the ēri."

Till this day, the common irrigators and the drummers in the study region belong to communities which are classified as untouchables. They even seem to belong to an especially "low" community

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[300] Ludden 1999: 149; 153.
[301] Deliēge 1995: 154.

among untouchables.[302] When I announced to a group of Paṟaiyars who are related to the local policeman, talaiyari, in Oragadam that I would go and see the Veṭṭiyāṉ, the women giggled stealthily; a young male relative of them was curious (and bold) enough to accompany me and witness the conversation. Yet by the way he moved, he communicated that he felt he belonged to a superior group. Before entering the compound, he lowered his loincloth [*luṅki*], buttoned up his shirt and put a towel over his shoulder (thus by Tamil standards he looked much more decent than the hosts who had their chests bare and their loincloths tucked up). On top of it, he covered his mouth and nose with a handkerchief all the time. There was in no way a peculiar smell. Obviously the handkerchief served the Paṟaiyar to distinguish himself from the Veṭṭiyāṉ family.

Making oneself independent from *ēri*s means, at the same time, to emancipate oneself from the rules and regulations that govern *ēri*s which, for example, entail collaboration with people like the Veṭṭiyāṉ. R. Ramalingam of Tirukkalukundram explained:

> "Nobody *likes ēri* water [like *paṇṇe kitaiyātu*] because it means one has to take pains [*kaṣṭapaṭuttu*]. You have to do this and take care of that and hack the channel, and if you fail to do so, the channel is not in order and there is no crop. Because of all that, nobody *thinks* of it."[303]

R. Ramalingam, apart from owning land and managing it, works as manager of a benefit fund in Tirukkalukundram, i.e., in a white collar job. A person like him usually does not step into the pit to clear the channel himself; he engages workers for that. Thus the pains he would have to take to make full use of the *ēri* would consist of taking more active part in the proceedings of *ēri* management.

As chapter seven tries to elucidate the motivations of various people towards *ēri*s, it is enough to state here that cultivators who have also other sources of income at hand use to belittle *ēri*s: "You are going to do research on *ēri*s?!" asked a teacher who owns land in Tirukkalukundram when I had explained the reason of my fieldwork. He laughed unbelievingly and said that *ēri*s were (in English, to underscore the importance of his words) "silly things". Farmers with substantial landholdings tended to agree, yet some of them pointed to the fact that *ēri*s were important to recharge the groundwater.

I met two kinds of people in the study area who underscored that *ēri*s were important: firstly, poor people such as a duck herdsman. He said:

> "*ēri*s are much more important [than wells] because many people depend on them and most of the agriculture needs the *ēri* and the water of the *ēri*. It is the poor people who are more dependent on the *ēri* than those who are well-off."

Thus, they are people who do not have the means to make themselves independent of the various benefits offered by *ēri*s.[304]

Secondly, politicians said that *ēri*s are important. The local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), S. Tamilmani, proudly extolled the number of *ēri*s in the district and continued:

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[302] This is in principle congruent with the findings of Moffatt 1979, esp. p. 197. Moffatt's fieldwork site Endavur must be in the vicinity of my study area (Moffatt does not disclose the village's real name and site).

[303] Words in italics (apart from those in brackets) are English in the original.

[304] See also Centre for Water Resources 1999: 6.

> **MLA:** With the help of these *ēri*s we have turned the lands into wetlands.[305] (…)
> **Bettina:** Is that your objective [to extend the irrigated area]?
> **MLA:** To be true, yes, that is my objective. After Thanjavur district, Kanchipuram district is top in the cultivation of paddy. Thanjavur is often referred to as the granary of Southern India. After Thanjavur, it is Kanchipuram which has got the second most important cultivation. So many areas are under paddy cultivation here, the reason for which are the *ēri*s.

Between pride and prejudice – the perceptions of *ēri*s are as manifold as their uses; they differ according to the economical, political, educational and caste background of my informants. This section of the thesis has shown that *ēri*s, albeit gigantic in size and serving crucial needs of the people in the study region, are of a low profile. Physically, organisationally, technologically and ritually, they are scarcely marked and defy all-to readily supposed notions of wholeness. They are multipurpose entities that draw their efficacy, as well as, their efficiency from their complicity with nature and from their being embedded in society to the point of being hardly visible. In many senses, they are potentials.

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[305] *nañcai-nilam*, considered to be more profitable than *puñcai*, dryland.

Well maintained channel of Irumbuli ēri

7.   *ēris* in local politics – case study

This chapter explores how the rules that govern *ēri*s, low-key as they have been shown to be, are performing in the reality in the study area. It will go more deeply into the aforementioned discussion in which *ēri*s are understood to be examples for "traditional" community management; it will examine the notions of "community" and "tradition".

Generally, in the cited studies, there is a striking distinction between, on one hand, "traditional", "continuing", "user-friendly", "village organisations", "community" and, on the other hand, "external" or "modern" agencies. As Mukundan puts it:

> "Village irrigation organisations manage and distribute water according to traditionally established rights and claims. They consider this to be fair and equitable. Attempts by an external agency, such as the PWD, to impose a new system in the name of equity was not welcomed by the cultivators."[306]

Mukundan's censure pertains to both the work of the PWD in general (Public Works Department, the state's institution pertinent for the maintenance of the most visible structures of big *ēri*s), and specifically, to a program of *ēri* modernisation (financed by the European Economic Community and applied in Tamil Nadu through the PWD and Anna University) in which equity is, in fact, an issue. In the interim evaluation of 1999 it reads:

> "In any impact analysis, the equity impact is considered relevant and important. The equity is a measure of the ratio of net income of a head reach farmer to net income of a tail reach

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[306] Mukundan 1999: 247.

farmer. … The inequity is minimum in all the tanks [covered by the programme] which may be attributed to tank modernisation, …"[307]

In contrast, for Mukundan the compliance with "traditionally established rights and claims" per se warrants equity.[308] Hence, equity is understood as the outcome of structures that are deemed to be equitable because they are "traditional" and thus appropriate, long standing and local – which the PWD is understood not to be. The criticism of the PWD is topical. K. Sivasubramaniyan has meticulously researched two large PWD *ēri*s in north Tamil Nadu. He presents striking examples for the negligence and inability of the PWD to maintain and supervise the *ēri*s and for the misappropriation of public funds by PWD officials.[309] He details that both the funds allotted for *ēri* repair and the staff are inadequate, especially as many vacancies are not filled. The latter holds less for the higher echelons of the Department than for its actual labourers (*laskar*s): "The number of persons employed in this category in the system as a whole is barely half the sanctioned strength."[310] "The allocations have been inadequate to ensure proper maintenance of irrigation facilities" – that is how A. Vaidyanathan concludes his analysis of money spent by the Government in the past decades.[311] He remarks that the PWD does not even maintain an up-to-date inventory of tanks and the areas irrigated by them.[312] Robert Wade notes that in general, PWD officials are not trained to take care of irrigation works.[313] Nirmal Sengupta, in a study of various *ēri*s in India, observes that "the irrigation administration considers the users rivals rather than partners in development".[314]

As a consequence, various authors propose to relieve the State from its pertinence for *ēri*s and hand it back to "the people" or "the communities". Mukundan speaks of a "complete failure of the pilot projects" financed by the European Economic Community to modernise *ēri*s and create farmer committees and postulates: "*Ēri*s should once again become the property of village communities".[315] Vani states: "What is needed today … is the reapplication of the scientific and legal principles laid

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[307] Centre for Water Resources 1999: 88.

[308] See also Vani 1992: 173: "The very fact of the physical continuance of the tank system in South India establishes the appropriateness of the technology, even in modern times, where 'sustainability', 'equity' (i.e., decentralisation) and 'eco-friendliness' are the watchwords of the progress."; Sengupta 1991: 98: "In their characteristic way of functioning, these farmer-managed systems meet many different objectives … and even equitable benefit distribution." Hence, equity is an outcome of equitable structures. Relating to the distribution of water in the acreage irrigated by an *ēri*, Meinzen-Dick 1984: 109 operates with two definitions of equity: firstly, "Equity refers to access to water by all ayacut [area irrigated by the *ēri*] cultivators" and secondly, "equity … is based on delivery of water to those who pay the management costs. This form of equity is less readily apparent to outside observers of an irrigation system because it requires knowledge of the various costs involved in water management". In addition to that, she states: "A somewhat even distribution of landholdings may be a precondition for effective local cooperation in water distribution." Logically it cannot be a precondition as well as an outcome.

[309] Sivasubramaniyan 1995: 124 – 6, see also pp. 145 f., 245 f. Vani 1992: 167.

[310] Sivasubramaniyan 1995: 100.

[311] Vaidyanathan 1998: 35. For example, according to Agarwal and Narain 1999: 261, the Sivaganga Block in Pasumpon Muthuramalingam district got only Rs. 20,000 a year for the maintenance of about 400 *ēri*s under the control of the *pancāyattu* Unions. See also p. 324 and von Oppen and Rao 1987: 28.

[312] Vaidyanathan 1998: 26, see also 274, where he hints at corruption.

[313] Wade 1982: 55

[314] Sengupta 1991: 150. Interestingly, the mentioned authors' argument is in line with observations and a proposal a representative of the Raj had made himself over a century ago: in a letter of 1875, Charles Steward Crole, then Sub-Collector of the Chingleput District to which the study area belonged at that time, criticises the "impracticable constitution of the Public Works Department" and the "totally insufficient sum annually devoted to repair." As a remedy, he proposes finding alternatives for the PWD's administration of *ēri*s – see chapter 3.2.

[315] Mukundan 1999: 247.

down by our forefathers in medieval times, to the physical systems that they have ensured that we would inherit."[316] Meinzen-Dick[317] and Vaidyanthan suggest that the government should act as facilitator and counsellor in the management and maintenance of *ēri*s and aim at the improvement of the "traditional systems". Vaidyanathan writes: "Ideally, the local communities should be given an active role in construction of works … The state agencies must therefore concentrate on creating an ambience and a framework in which the affected communities can explore, in an informed and transparent way with the support by expertise from the government and the NGOs, the nature of the improvements needed and evolve a package which is generally acceptable."[318] Sengupta pleads for an holistic approach overcoming the distinction between modern and "traditional" by suggesting the notion of "user friendliness" instead: "User friendly irrigation systems are not necessarily distinct units. They are designs which may as well be incorporated in the existing 'modern' systems to make them user-friendly. … Without such advanced technological aids facilitating better supply, the small localised systems will not rise much above what they were in their heydays."[319] However, he still implies a dichotomy between "modern" and "other" ways to manage *ēri*s, whereby the "other" ways are understood to have had heydays in the past.

In the study area, the local branch of the Public Works Department is situated in Tirukkalukundram. It is headed by Dhanashekar, a civil engineer in his fifties. His native place is Chidambaram where he also did his studies. Since this is located in the delta of the Cauvery river, it is the area of Tamil Nadu where rainfed *ēri*s such as those in Tirukkalukundram play an absolutely minor role. Dhanashekar got his placement in Tirukkalukundam in 1998, shortly before my fieldwork started. He does not live in the place but commutes daily from Chengalpattu. However, most of the day-to-day work lies in the hands of his staff who are deeply rooted in the locality: one peon and two irrigation workers (laskars), Somasundaram and Vamanam. They have been working for decades in their jobs. Somasundaram hails from Tirukkalukundram, Vamanam from nearby Sohandi. They explain that they have arranged their work so that none of them is responsible for his own place in order to avoid partiality. Each of them is responsible for the *ēri*s of 22 villages. Like Sivasubramaniyan, they complain about lack of funds.

> The Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram is covered by 1.5 metres of silt, they say, and desilting work was carried out in 1998 by means of an extra grant of Rs. one million. However, the effect was piecemeal, explains Somasundaram: the contractor did earthwork on the bund for five lakhs, had gravel shovelled on the bund and repaired two weirs. He also removed 60 centimetres of silt of a patch of 400 square metres, which is tiny in relation to the size of the entire *ēri* bed. Somasundaram estimates that desilting the entire *ēri* would cost Rs. 10 million. Year after year, the foreshore area silts up two to three more inches, adds Somasundaram.

Every year in the first week of April, an assembly [*jamāpanti*] is held in the taluk office during which farmers can petition concerning the maintenance of the irrigation structures, explain the PWD officers. The tahsildar[320] and the local MLA take part in these sessions so that they are informed of the flaws and issue directives.

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[316] Vani 1992: 173.
[317] Meinzen-Dick 1984.
[318] Vaidyanathan 1998: 287.
[319] Sengupta 1993: 125.
[320] *tāciltār*; revenue official in charge of a sub-division of a district (taluk /*tālukkā*).

To all appearances and to judge from the statements of farmers, there is no difference in the level of upkeep between *ēri*s taken care of by the PWD and the *pañcāyattu* Union that has to care for *ēri*s that irrigate less than 40 hectares, such as Irumbuli *ēri*. Both government institutions provide a certain kind of basic service for them. Yet they do it little by little. Recent actions include the mentioned desilting of a part of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, the repair of broken sluices in the Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram, in the small *ēri* of Oragadam, in the *ēri* of Irumbuli and Madulankuppam. Every year, gunny bags are piled up in Tirukkalukundram's *tāṅkal*, as well as, in Oragadam, Mangalam, Teacher's Nagar and other reservoirs of the area (fixing the gaps with stones and earth would be more stable; piling gunny bags is always a provisional arrangement as the fabric of the bags is easily ripped and the sand washed away).

> In P. V. Kalattur, repair work has been going on for three decades and is still far from being completed, reports K. Sellamuttu, resident of that place and himself a contractor. The repair is on a channel that had connected the tremendous *ēri* of that place with the Palar river at a distance of about 10 kilometres, helping it to a rather dependable water supply, until it broke.

Turai of Tirukkalukundram, another contractor, adds that even if repairs are carried out completely, they might not keep for long. His answer to the question why *ēri*s break is as follows:

> "Because they are not constructed properly. If supposing we take a tender [of Rs. 100] and undertake the work, one can make a nominal profit of just one Rupah or one can make an exorbitant profit of Rs. 90. One can normally complete the work at half the charge and take away the remaining [as profit]. But nowadays the trend is for a Rs. 100 work, the contractor bribes the officer with Rs. 25, completes the work at Rs. 25 and takes away the remaining 50 for his own pocket. When a person undertakes such kind of work, there are bound to be breakes. If you do the work for Rs. 50, bribe the officer with Rs. 25 and take the remaining Rs. 25 as earning, such constructions would last longer than the aforementioned."

Other informants estimate the cost of bribery as high as 60 percent of the tender's total sum. Thus to fix the dams once and for all would not only surmount the financial possibilities of the respective departments. It would also deprive a number of local contractors of a reliable source of income, and it would block smoothly running streams of money in local society. Finally, it would deprive political leaders of a way to solicit voters.

As often in the context of big sums of money, the conversation quickly sidetracks to politics. Obviously it is considered to be the personal aptitude of the local MLA to secure this kind of extra grant. The shady PWD bungalow in Tirukkalukundram is the hangout of several sturdy men with polyester shirts and the modern type of loose trousers. They are contractors keeping company with the officials and hoping to be considered for contracts for small repairs. Yet they are unlikely to be awarded contracts of bigger scale. It is general knowledge that only proteges[321] of the MLA get those.

The role of the MLA in patronising the irrigation is generally acknowledged in his locality.[322] "Only those who have political influence [*araciyal celvākku*] will take up this job. Whoever is ruling at a

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[321] The word used is *piṉāmi*, which means the registration of property in the name of somebody else.
[322] Mollinga 1998 also alludes to the importance of local MLAs in irrigation matters. Von Oppen and Rao 1987: 27 observe that "Tank construction today is regarded as a welfare activity". Akhil Gupta 1998: 138 describes a

particular time will use their power and take the contract", say M. Palani Mudaliyar and Tulaci Naicker, farmers of Mangalam. Their colleagues who had gathered for the interview nod in agreement. In addition to personal contacts, the adherence to a party seems to be a decisive factor for the eligibility for a contract. In Irumbuli, farmers do not use the term "contractor", but "party follower" [*katcikkārar*] to designate those who fix the *ēri*s on behalf of the Government. The aforementioned Turai says about repairs in Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*: "I belong to a different party, they will not give the contract to me." He states this without wrath, just as a matter of fact. He has desilted many *ēri*s, strengthened their bunds and constructed sluices in localities that are dominated by his party (ADMK, whereas the MLA belongs to DMK). There are no restraints in talking about this topic in public, as the following news item features:

> In June 2001, the AIADMK government of Tamil Nadu approved of a tank modernisation scheme mooted by the previous DMK regime. In its frame the World Bank gave a loan of Rs. 1,060,000,000. A newspaper reporter wrote: "Early this year, tenders were invited and about two months ago, the lowest and qualified bidders tentatively chosen." Yet in the next paragraph he continues: "Immediately after the change of government last month, doubts were raised in PWD circles whether this scheme would survive or not, because of the perception of some newly elected AIADMK MLAs that only those contractors, well disposed towards the DMK, would get the contracts. However, the administration, realising that the time was running out for the implementation of the scheme, cleared it."[323]

Hence, in Tirukkalukundram, just like the *ēri*s are physically interwoven in the local landscape, their management is embedded in the local society. The PWD office is located quite nearby the centre of the agglomerate and receives frequent visits by the people of the area, last but not least to visit the god Ārumukam whose idol somebody discovered in the garden of the PWD office and which stands there now to be worshipped. Both irrigation workers (laskars) live in the area and have been working there for decades. The contractors are people of the region as well. The MLA is himself a local person. He resides in Tirukkalukundram and owns a wide array of resources and manufactures in the area. His numerous family is deeply rooted in the local society, working as teachers, running businesses etc. By means of the so-called "finance" business, family members of MLA Tamilmani have extended petty loans to a vast number of local people, many of them shopowners. Last but not least, the MLA is directly involved in *ēri* affairs as his family owns many fields below the Big *ēri*s of Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam.

Likewise, the Block Development Office, that has to take care of small *ēri*s such as that of Irumbuli, is situated at walking distance from that *ēri*. The way the official maintenance of *ēri*s functions, from the point of view of a farmer, is reflected in a passage of an interview with Sammanda Mudaliyar of Irumbuli.

> **Sammanda Mudaliyar**: Irumbuli *ēri* is maintained by the *pañcāyattu* Union.
> **Bettina:** Do they maintain it well?
> **Sammanda Mudaliyar**: Yes.
> **Bettina:** How often do they come here?
> **Sammanda Mudaliyar**: Not always, because the members are not so active. If you put

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case in which labourers deliberately let go of the opportunity of profitable work with the government sponsored program of widening the village pond in order not to become entangled in partisan politics.
[323] T. Ramakrishan, in: The Hindu, online-edition 25.06.2001.

pressure on them, they would oblige. They would say that they would visit, but they do not turn up. But if we force them, they would come and carry out the work. At times during the rainy season, the *ēri* overflows. Then they undertake the task of buying gunny bags and try to prevent the *ēri* from braking. This measure would last for about five to six months.

Sammanda Mudaliyar worked for decades with the state's milk cooperative, is more familiar with submitting representations to the pertinent government office than with picking up spades and clearing an *ēri*'s channel himself. Likewise, for today's generation of farmers, submitting petitions towards the repair of the *ēri*'s structures has become as normal an activity as visiting the "English doctor" (term for an Indian trained in western allopathic medicine) or sending their children to school. Several of them are government employees themselves or businesspeople who have to deal with "Government" (in its local avatars, called by the English term or *aracu*) in various other respects as well and, hence, are used to it.

> The memory of D. Elumalai Mudaliyar, son of Dharmaraja, is still alive today among the inhabitants of Irumbuli. E. Maharani, his widow, continues to live in one of the well-to-do houses of the hamlet. Elumalai "died too early", says his grandson and former neighbour B. Damotharan (Elumalai suffered from a heart attack in 1992 at the age of 52), otherwise he would surely have done more good for Irumbuli. Elumalai worked with the Union Office and had the means to get things done. For example, he saw to it that a breakage in the *ēri* was repaired on time and that government workers cleaned the local *kuḷam*.

Thus often heard sentences like "I pay land tax, so why should I work for the *ēri*? The government shall do it!"[324] on one hand, testify to the passivity of cultivators towards common property resources. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that this kind of assertion stems mostly from people who have the means to get things done through government agencies because they belong to the local establishment. By the way, the long history of *ēri*s is replete with instances in which local farmers or groups thereof, interacted with the various avatars of the state and the government. David Ludden, in his study of reservoirs in the southern Tamil region Tirunelveli in the past two millennia, found:

> "Schematically speaking, rich peasants dug wells, chiefs built tanks, and kings built large dams, while local landowners dug channels, village distributaries, paddy fields, and other relatively small works like temporary dams."[325]

The important divide in *ēri* management does not lie between the "external" government and "the people" of a putative coherent local community. The point is that the important divide lies within the local society, between those who have access to power, capital and government institutions and those who have not. The local state is no more or less "external" than many of the farmers themselves.

In theory, there are ways to counter the described practices which some may find corruptive, at least those of sub-standard repairs. Sampath of Tirukkalukundram maintains that the case of the sluice in

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[324] To instigate the willingness of people to co-operate in constructing their own infrastructure, the Government under M. Karunanidhi has started the "Namakku Naame" programme, explains MLA Tamilmani. In its frame, schools, streets, *ēri*-bunds etc. shall be built with 75 % contribution of the Government of Tamil Nadu and 25 % of the local populace. In Tirukkalukundram, parts of the Girls' High School were financed in this way, but apart from that the people's willingness to pay seems to be quite limited.

[325] Ludden 1979: 349. See also Srinivasan 1991: 68 ff.

Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, which broke right after it was constructed, would fall under the Consumer's Protection Act. This was established by the Administration of Rajiv Gandhi in 1986 and taken care of by a special court for consumers' issues in nearby Chengalpattu. Yet in practice nobody has taken the case to that court so far. Another informant says that one could hold the officials of a concerned department responsible for defective repairs and constructions. But he adds that hardly anybody does so – because people just care for their own homes and because they fear they would be threatened in case they take massive action.

The striking differences in access to power and capital by inhabitants of one and the same locality belie the assumption of (mostly urbanite) authors, like Mukundan, that communities in the countryside are, per se, a guarantee for equitable management of their resources. In the following, I shall test the supposition that the rules governing *ēri*s (however conspicuous they may be) are of long standing and "traditional". At first sight, of the three localities in the study area, the "traditional" management system of the *ēri* appears to be strongest in Irumbuli.

Irumbuli – at first sight

In Irumbuli, a common irrigator exists who answers well K. Sivasubramaniyan's definition of a *kampukutti*, as quoted before. There are frequent mentions of common irrigators in Tamil Nadu – termed *kampukutti* (or *kammukkutti*), *nīrkaṭṭi*, *nīrpaicci*, *nīrkunti*, *taṇṇipaccaravar* and *tōṭṭi*[326] – in literature, yet they are limited to point to the existence of that institution and enumerate its duties in a normative way. The actual work and effect of these men in service is usually not described.

In Irumbuli, the common irrigator's name is Varadan. He was 55 years old in 1999, but his nimbleness and his sinewy body, which does not seem to have an ounce of fat in excess, make him look younger. His face is extremely skinny. His eyes lie in deep sockets and look peculiarly effaced. If he looks at me, though directly and en face, I always have the impression that his glance does not really reach me, but somehow gets stuck in the space between us. Varadan is constantly on the move. Our conversations usually take place in small pieces of a puzzle whenever we happen to meet, standing or walking across the fields, and Varadan interrupts himself now and then to fix a leaking field bund, to chase goats away that are treading into a field or to chat with somebody we meet on the way.

Varadan tallies with the description of a *kampukutti* by Sivasubramaniyan, firstly, because he belongs to a Scheduled Caste. Though he does not play the drum, he lives up to the "traditional" custom of his caste in that he sings. He is quite famous for that throughout the study area: families in which a person has died, and who are ready to invest in a somewhat elaborate mourning ceremony, make use of Varadan's service. He knows by heart a considerable range of standard mourning songs which he renders in front of the house of the deceased for a night and a day, accompanied by drummers. In the festival month *āṭi* from mid July to mid August, he sings and performs in street theatre performances [*terukkūttu*] and tours the area in the guise of a woman, clad in a sari, with bangles, make-up and an artificial braid bedecked with flowers; jointly with a colleague – they form a "couple" – he sings and collects money for it afterwards.[327] The singing is better remunerated than drumming would be[328] and

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[326] For example, Mencher 1978: 26; Harriss 1982: 130; Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1990: 147; Janakarajan 1991: 11; Sivasubramaniyan 1995: 13 and 115; Kapadia 1995: 221; Sengupta 1991, Vaidyanathan 1999b.

[327] Including Tirukkalukundram and other places in the surrounding ("up to Chengalpattu", he says), but rarely reaching as far north as Oragadam and never in Irumbuli.

is likely to form a substantial source of Varadan's household income (about which he would not talk freely). Furthermore, Varadan was the only one who could recount in detail the *purāṇam* of the local goddess of Irumbuli to me.

Secondly, Varadan answers Sivasubramaniyan's description as he watches the bunds and other *ēri* structures. He frequently works on daily wages in the area irrigated by Irumbuli's *ēri* anyway, and he cultivates a plot of 30 cents land there himself, so he is quite well aware of what is going on with the irrigation facilities without having to spend much extra time for inspection. Regarding the opening and closure of sluices and the regulation of the water flow in the area irrigated by the *ēri*, he says:

> "I am around here at about six o'clock in the morning. I have my tea in the tea shop [in a nearby hamlet. There is no tea shop in Irumbuli]. I come here in the bitter cold and take charge of the flow of water. A little bit later people who have fields in this area join me, and as I allow the water from the lake into the channels, they take charge of letting it [from the channels] into their fields by cutting [a gap in] the path, and once the task is completed, they close the channel and proceed home."

In another instance, he explains: "It is myself who comes here in the evenings, opens the sluice and closes it in the mornings." Regarding the decisions and requirements of the *nāṭṭāṇmai /kavaimāṉiyam* mentioned by Sivasubramaniyan, Varadan explains:

> "It is I who decide, but I take instructions from the villagers [*ūrār*, quite an anonymous expression – Varadan does not use the terms *nāṭṭāṇmai* or *kavaimāṉiyam*]. … They usually allow me the freedom to decide. The level and the flow of water is determined according to the level in the tank."

He shows three openings in each of both sluices (*ucci muṉai*, *cēraṭi* and *paḷḷam*) with which he regulates the flow of water out of the *ēri* by the help of a wooden plug that is fixed on a rod [*kampi*], to make operations easier. He says, "the Government" provided for these contraptions when it built the sluice 15 years ago. In addition to that, he demonstrates how he takes efforts to cram twigs and leaves in the openings of the sluice to fine-tune the outflow. In mid March when the water level in the *ēri* had diminished, I found a lock attached to the rod. Varadan claimed to have purchased it for Rs. 60 (an exorbitant price for such a simple lock) of his own money. He explained that he asked the villagers to reimburse him but that they refused to do so. Varadan considered the lock necessary as it served to keep off farmers who might want to open the sluice behind his back to steal water.

Varadan also takes the lead in convening the farmers to do maintenance work towards the four distributaries and the field channels, and he participates in the work as well. He does that by walking across the fields, his spade flung over his shoulder, and whistling in a characteristic way.

Varadan learned the necessary skills for his job it from his father. The latter had already regulated the flow of water under an *ēri*, though not in Irumbuli but in nearby Pulikundram.

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[328] For example, on March 3rd 1999, Varadan sang one night and one day until noon in memory of a deceased woman. While each of the four drummers got Rs. 60 for the first day and Rs. 80 for the second day, Varadan earned Rs. 150; in farming, he would have earned about Rs. 65, without a meal, for a day.

Last but not least, Varadan matches the description of the "traditional" institution of a *kampukutti*, as outlined by Sivasubramaniyan, as he is supposed to be paid in kind on per acre basis by the farmers whose fields are irrigated by the *ēri*. The tariff is one *kaṭṭi* (a bundle of paddy with straw)[329] or two to three *marakkāl*[330] (a shovelful of threshed paddy) per acre. Both amounts to roughly 20 kg paddy or 10 kg rice. The remainder is spelt and, in case of the bundle, also straw. Generous owner-cultivators are supposed to give the *kampukutti* a shawl and a loincloth [*vēṭṭi*] on the festivals *poṅkal*, *āyuta pūjai* or *tīpāvaḷi*. There is also a common village fund that one senior farmer informally takes care of and out of which the inhabitants of Irumbuli pay for gunny bags or locks at the sluice, if needed, as well as for the service of the *pūjāri* of the village temple and for festivals.

In summary, at a glance one could get the impression that the example of Irumbuli corroborates the view that "the general pattern observed in Tamil Nadu" applies there as well and one could assume the "continuing operation of village-level systems of tank management today".[331]

Irumbuli – a second look

Looked at more closely, it becomes evident that the organisation of *ēri* irrigation in Irumbuli is not a village level system. The bigger part of the owner-managers, as well as, owner-cultivators of fields in the area irrigated by Irumbuli's *ēri* do not live in that village. Some keep shuttling between Irumbuli and Chennai, as one of the most influential persons does, the already portrayed Sammanda Mudaliyar. Many of them live in Tirukkalukundram. Even though that is too near to allow for calling them "absentee landlords", they are out of the reach of decisions or sanctions by the *ūrār*, the local people as Varadan calls them. However, they receive irrigation water and participate in maintenance activities under certain circumstances.

Also Varadan himself does not live in Irumbuli. He resides in Pulikundram. On the main road, this is five kilometres away. On a shortcut across a forest, it is a little less than four kilometres, but this leads across another *ēri*, hence, Varadan can use it only during part of the season and hardly with his bicycle. Consequently, I found him to be in Irumbuli particularly on days on which he was hired for daily wage there anyway – to bund, plough, level, thresh, transport paddy or to carry out other tasks which allowed him to have an eye on the *ēri*. This was quite frequent, but still most hours per day he had no chance to monitor the flow of the water.

Moreover, the organisation of irrigation, with Varadan as common irrigator, is not older than a generation. Elder owners of fields in Irumbuli *ēri*'s irrigated acreage such as K. Sundaram Mudaliyar or Sammanda Mudaliyar (see chapter two) or the former hereditary accountant [*muncīp* or *kirāma māṇiyam*] of the place, C. R. Varakacharya Aiyeṅkar of Kottimangalam, remember that Pungavanam and Virakali did the service before Varadan for several years. But before that there was no specialist for irrigation matters and conflict resolution (or prevention), because there was no need for it, explain

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[329] Say farmers-cultivators as well as landowners who monitor the cultivation very closely, such as Chandrachekar, K. Dakshinamurthy, E. D. Manickavasakam, Sanjivirayan, D. Vadivel. The latter reports that he also gives some money because he is a field owner, not only tenant, whereas Sammanda, on the other hand, says that he does not care for the kampukutti's remuneration but has "no objections" if his tenant gives a bundle [*kaṭṭi*] to him.

[330] P. Sundaram, E. Maharani and other landowners who do not cultivate themselves.

[331] Mosse 1999: 321.

C. R. Varakacharya of Kottimangalam and elders of Irumbuli such as A. K. Kannan. Quarrels over water did not occur, because almost all fields in the acreage irrigated by Irumbuli's *ēri* belonged to a single person, Gopatinarayana, a merchant of the Nāṭṭukottai Ceṭṭiyar caste hailing from Pudukkottai. He owned four or five villages, remembers P. Sundaram, and had earned a fortune as money lender during wars in Rangoon and Singapore. He would only come rarely, recalls the erstwhile munisiff and points to the still existing house made of stone where the landlord used to stay overnight. For the day-to-day business, he had his "agents" or "middlemen" (C. R. Varakacharya and elders from Irumbuli use the English terms) who in turn employed labourers to do the actual work – not on a daily wage basis, but as a sort of permanent staff [*paṇṇaiyāḷ*]. Sammanda Mudaliyar and S. Baghiratan, the Village Administrative Officer of Irumbuli remember that Varadan's father had been employed by a Mutaliyār middleman, for a monthly wage of eight to ten *marekkāl* paddy. Looking after the irrigation facilities was only one among his duties, but obviously by far not the predominant one. There was no irrigation specialist like a *nīrkaṭṭi* or *kampukutti* as such. Kapadia describes water irrigators [*tannipaccaravar*] as individually employed workers who walk around their landlords' irrigated fields every day to see that the water is flowing in the irrigation channels and build them up or dam them as necessary, and may even function as recruiters for work on their landowner's fields. She interprets this as loosening of the patriarchal relations of erstwhile bonded labourers [*paṇṇaiyāḷ*] towards a casualisation of labour: "Even those jobs that replicate the *paṇṇaiyāḷ*'s job are now paid by the month and offer little job security."[332] In a way, this happened in Varadan's family as well: Varadan is not permanently bonded, but contracted.[333] Yet, other than in Kapadia's case, Varadan receives his share only at harvest, not monthly, and he is – in his role as a common irrigator – not employed by a single landowner, but by the collectivity of them.[334]

In the wake of Independence, the merchant sold his belongings in Irumbuli for about Rs. 23,000, remembers K. Sundaram Mudaliyar.[335] Initially, five people of his own caste, that is Ceṅkuntars (weavers), bought it in shares. Yet soon they in turn sold their new acquisitions, and in October 1946, K. Sundaram Mudaliyar bought the first one and a half acres of the five that he owns now. It was only by this time that the necessity arose to cope with various claims for irrigation water. Thus the institution of a "kammukkutti" is non-traditional (if "tradition" is understood in the sense of the mentioned authors), a new arrangement. The payment, the conditions of work, the employers and the duties differ essentially from those of the Ceṭṭiyar's times. The irrigator of today has to grapple with dozens of cultivators of diverse backgrounds who compete for water, who might not want to pay him, who do not harmonise the cropping pattern and grow a wide range of different vegetables and varieties of paddy, many of which are high yielding varieties that have strict water requirements which are not even congruent.

Finally, not only the institution of a common irrigator is new, the entire hamlet is new. The settlement that is Irumbuli came into being in the latter half of the 20th century by adding houses to both sides of the mansion of the erstwhile Ceṭṭiyar landlord. Tuluve Vēḷāḷars, agriculturalists from the village Mangalam, at a distance of about three kilometres, bought the fields from the Ceṅkuntars and settled

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[332] Kapadia 1995: 221 f.. See also p. 189 and Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1990: 144.

[333] *paṇṇaiyāḷ* relations were legally forbidden in the 1940s: Moffatt 1979: 79.

[334] According to Harriss, common irrigators are elected for a year at a time (1986: 130); Janakarajan (1991: 11) and Sivasubramanian (1995: 13) explain that the irrigation workers rotated among Harijan households. Thus in such services, the work contract was as casual elsewhere, too, even before the process of casualisation described by Kapadia.

[335] Chapter 2 portrays him.

adjacent to it – according to their own, uncontested, account. A village "Irumbilichcheri" figures in a list of *jamīntāri* villages in Chingleput Taluk compiled in the second half of the 19ᵗʰ century[336], but it is not exactly located. There is a vague notion that the village had existed already before the houses which form the actual Irumbuli were erected around the old mansion, but at a different site: across the acreage irrigated by the *ēri* at the bottom of the hillock that forms the north eastern border of the place. Today, there is scrub with no traces of an earlier settlement. Yet it is not wholly improbable since wooden constructions and brick structures decay quickly in Tamil climate. The site would be a better one than actual Irumbuli (because it does not expand on /eat away irrigated area), and finally, Irumbuli's village deity Vēmpuḷiyamman̠ has her temple right there.

Hence, I did not find a continuing operation of village level systems of tank management today in Irumbuli. There are no customs and regulations that would have been handed down over generations, viz. no "traditions", just contemporary modes of operation by people who somehow have to come to terms with their respective interests and resources. Now one could assume that at least these would ensure the smooth functioning of the irrigation arrangements and equity in the above cited sense of Mukundan, et al.

Irumbuli : a yet closer look

Scrutinising the irrigation arrangements in Irumbuli, I shall start with the role of Varadan. His position in the village is precarious in many ways. This is because of his caste status and because he has to cope with conflicting material interests, which is exacerbated by the nature of the rules that govern *ēri*s. Let alone a place to dwell, Varadan does not even have a place to stay while he is in Irumbuli. "Varadan does not enter the village", explains Sammanda Mudaliar of Irumbuli and hastens to add: "It is not because there would be any discrimination, nobody discriminates against him, but…" – Sammanda Mudaliyar pauses and nestles on his shining white dhoti – "…he has other works to look after." I have not mentioned discrimination, but obviously he has understood my question, whether Varadan visits the village's temple of god Murukan̠, as an enquiry pertaining to issues of caste and untouchability.

In everyday social intercourse, I have never observed anybody of the villagers paying Varadan the slightest form of respect. In village functions, he is an onlooker, if he is present at all. The villagers are addressing him in the most impolite grammatical forms Tamil language has to offer.

> I have never lost the impression that it was me who introduced the word "*kampukutti*" into the active vocabulary of the people of Irumbuli.[337] One fine day I dropped it in a conversation in the common threshing ground of Irumbuli. "What is *kampukutti*?" asked an elderly woman with surprise, and when I – somewhat irritated that they did not know the word – set out to explain its meaning, another woman interrupted me, exclaiming: "*kan̠n̠ukkuṭṭi*!" Everybody

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[336] Crole 1879: 347.

[337] Moffatt 1979: 197 traces "*kambu kuṭiyan̠*" to "one who carries the *kambu kuṭṭi* stick", which is obviously something decent. Also I had already heard the word "kampukutti" mentioned in conversations in the area, but not so the other cited terms. So I chose "*kampukutti*". – Moffatt's fieldwork site "Endavur" is located in southern Chingleput District, hence, not far from Irumbuli, so the terminology is likely to be the same; elsewhere in Tamil Nadu it may differ more. However, Varadan is neither acting as night watchman, nor does he carry any stick.

laughed. " *kaṉṉukkuṭṭi*"[338] means calf. Since this incidence, whenever I arrived in Irumbuli's fields and the women, as well as Varadan, happened to be there, they have shouted "*kammukkutti*" and have pointed out to him.

Moffatt describes the operation of the village reservoir's sluice as part of the work of the village's night watchman, one of four caste specific works of Paṟaiyars (or Harijans, to use his terminology). He maintains that the work itself is lowering because it entails contact with malign spirits that haunt the villages' boundaries, especially at night.[339] Even though it has been shown that in Irumbuli, the dam of the water reservoir, this strong boundary between the cultivated fields and the untamed nature, is also believed to be infested by malign spirits [*pēy*], nobody tells me that Varadan is low because of his contact with malign spirits of deceased people. Perhaps this is so clear that it literally goes without saying. Yet I do not have the impression that the opening and closing of the sluice proper and being present at the dam at night is deemed lowering – even more so as cultivators who reside in Irumbuli, and are not Paṟaiyars, do themselves sneak out at night to guard their fields or to stealthily operate the sluice. When I overhear cultivators talking about those incidences among themselves, they scorn the water theft but do not ponder about the thief having lowered himself in encounters with malign spirits.

If Varadan's service as operator of the sluices is thought of as lowering by his patrons, this is mainly because it is a service that is known to be rendered by Paṟaiyars; especially as Varadan lives up to all those other things Paṟaiyars are known for, including his lifestyle and his service for death inflicted families. His very name reminds one of the job of a *varayaṉ*, announcer. Performances, like his rendering mourning songs in front of deceased's houses along with drummers, are regarded as utterly abject by inhabitants of Irumbuli. Various women there and in adjacent locales suggest that I should take a bath, launder my clothes and put on new ones after accompanying Varadan on such assignments – or better to stay away completely from such ventures. They generally shake their heads at that curious foreign woman who ventures all alone out into the fields and to the water reservoirs and converses with Varadan, but they are usually never as worried about my well-being as when I visit occasions related to mourning.

Secondly, Varadan's position is precarious because he (who has no backing in the village) has to grapple with a clash of solid material interests: his own versus the farmers'; the various demands for water among the farmers; the need to maintain the system in spite of all kinds of violations. Very often I overheard vile gossip about Varadan by farmers below the *ēri*. They complain that he has never taken proper care of the channels, that he engages in too much other work, that a scolding goes in one ear and out the other, that he is an alcohol addict and so on and so forth. A. K. Kannan, for example, says that he has not paid Varadan for the past two years because it happened that he did not close a sluice properly and much water got lost; "Varadan does free service",[340] he concluded. For Varadan, who depends on this income, this means a blow. Whenever I met him, he was short of money and told me that this or that patron refused to pay him his due wage. His complaints are as topical as those of Irumbuli's farmers, and both create an ambience of permanent subliminal tensions and confrontation.

At times, Varadan is overtly threatened:

       On my arrival in Irumbuli one morning in mid April 1999, a young woman tells me with a

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[338] Dialect pronounciation of *kaṉrukkuṭṭi*.
[339] Moffatt 1979: 116 – 20.
[340] Kannan used the English term to emphasise his statement.

wide grin, that it was unlikely that I will meet Varadan again. She explains that he was caught the previous night stealing a bundle of firewood which a man of the adjacent settlement of Tirukkalukundram (who also owns fields below Irumbuli's *ēri*) had stored along the path to Irumbuli. Instantly a "*pañcāyattu*" was convened. It confirmed Varadan's guilt, had him beaten up and confiscated his bicycle. Except for the woman, everybody handles the issue as a secret, including Varadan. He says that he is staying at home these days "because there is no more water in the *ēri* anyway". That is, however, not quite the case: the water still goes up to sluice level. The filling of the *ēri* has reached its critical phase – that is when conflicts over distribution are most likely to arise as the water might not be enough to meet all demands. Somebody has taken advantage of Varadan's absence and has opened the sluice. Whenever I visit the sluice in the following two weeks, the water is flowing out continuously. Much of it appears to have gone to waste, spilling on fields that have been left fallow and inundating others too deeply. Consequently, several farmers (including Varadan) do not have enough *ēri* water for their paddy in the final phase of the crop.

Physical threats of that kind do not seem to be uncommon in the farmer's management of Irumbuli's *ēri*. A constant source of conflict is, for instance, the relationship between the inhabitants of Irumbuli and of neighbouring Tirukkalukundram-Ayarbadi, a hamlet which forms part of Tirukkalukundram and is chiefly inhabited by herdsmen of the Iṭaiyar caste. They use to take their cattle, sheep and goats to graze on the harvested fields below Irumbuli's *ēri* and on the higher lying areas beyond it. The cultivators reproach them because they suspect that their animals feed on their paddy. The conflict has repeatedly culminated in fistfights. Given that several itayars recently acquired fields below Irumbuli's *ēri*, this is not likely to improve the communication and make the water management by the farmers run smoother.

Concerning the water distribution, quarrels are not unheard of – in spite of Varadan's services. Damotaran of Irumbuli explains:

> "If there is enough water, the owners of the fields stay at home. They know for sure that water will be supplied. When there is a shortage of water, all the owners come to their respective fields and stay there till sufficient water is allowed into their fields. […] Once this person leaves, the water is let into the field of the next party. But a problem arises when one of them feels that he has not got enough water. Then he will have an argument with the others."

Generally, only those fields that are adjacent to the sluice will receive water in these cases, explains A. K. Kannan of Irumbuli. Bad luck for those farmers whose fields are located at the "tailend" of the irrigated area and which – at least in theory – would also be entitled to regular issues of irrigation water.

Furthermore, Varadan has no power to prevent encroachments of the *ēri*. For example, in its foreshore area, a man of Tirukkalukundram has established a series of brick kilns. This not only blocks the inflow to the *ēri*. There is also a frequent rumour that in the beginning of the monsoon, the workers of the brick kiln stealthily demolish the bund of the *ēri* in order to prevent their produce from being inundated. Finally, the hamlet Irumbuli itself is developing alongside a distributary of the *ēri*, thereby blocking it and rendering several fields that are deemed irrigated into dry vland. Neither Varadan nor anybody else in the village seems to have the power to defend the *ēri*.

Adding to that, the smooth functioning of *ēri* irrigation in Irumbuli is burdened by mobility in many ways. In common language, the sale of the erstwhile *jamīṇtār*'s lands is also called "issuing shares" [*paṅku pōṭṭu*]: compared to the former landlord, the new settlers are having only petty landholdings, and they use to divide them even further in every case of succession. This makes it less and less likely that the plot can feed a family. Consequently, in almost every household of Irumbuli, at least one person has a job outside agriculture: one, for instance, works as a conductor in a private bus line in the area. Another one cooks the midday meal in a school several kilometres away. One tries to maintain a general store in Tirukkalukundram. There is also a teacher and an electrician.

> As an especially industrious man, 56-year-old A. K. Kannan has had several jobs, including fitter, welder, moulder, printer and typesetter, worker in a flour mill and with the Madras Fort Trust. Currently he is working as a messenger in a bank. Asked which is his favourite activity, his answer comes like a shot: farming. He was born and raised in Irumbuli to where his father, A. Kanniyappan, had moved from Mangalam. A. K. Kannan still holds land there: 32 cents of dry land [*puñcai*] which he shares with seven family members. It is now used as a building site. Like this, he is one among seven shareholders of a 33 cent plot in Irumbuli, in addition to that, he owns half of one and a half acres of dry land.

For his son, Indiran, this does not seem to be promising at all. "I do not know anything of farming", he says in English and moves his rimless glasses into place. He would love to shift to Chennai – his two sisters are married there and his job is there. He is an economist with a company that is located in the far north of Chennai, entailing a commutation time of eight hours per day. Indiran's newly wed wife Aruna, a medical transcriber, was born in Madras and grew up in Bangalore. All her relatives are living in Chennai – including a brother who is a software-specialist with a multinational company, as she proudly mentions. Now Aruna finds herself in a village and does not even have a telephone to connect her to the city. "If my parents agree, I move to Chennai", says Indiran. It is unlikely that they do; being the only son he is supposed to take care of them. In view of his wedding, they demolished their old-fashioned house with an inner courtyard and reconstructed it in the fashionable way, with a second floor. However, it seems to be just a question of time until they give up the farm.

As a consequence of this mobility in space and profession, many plots are sold and resold and are now in the third or fourth hand since the sale of Irumbuli's lands at the time of Independence. The landholdings are highly fragmented and organising the farmers would mean bringing together more and more people every year. It happens frequently that newcomers to the place buy fields.

> In 1998, Kovindacami Naidu of Dindivanam, his wife and three children moved to Cokkammankoyil, the outlying, yet ever growing part of Irumbuli. They recount that back home there was no water to cultivate their fields (*puñcai*, i.e., for dry land crops), so they sold them as building sites, and bought three new, irrigated ones in Irumbuli along with a well. They tend not to establish intensive contact with the owners of the fields around theirs. Although they are well conversant in Tamil, they complain that "nobody in this place speaks Telugu", i.e., their mother tongue. Abstaining from participation in common irrigation practices, they cultivate their land mostly by the help of their well and their motor pump set. Husband, wife and children put their shoulders to the wheel if it comes to practical work. They weed, transplant and do the harvest themselves, but they do also engage daily wagers – usually women from Pulikundram, as is usual in Irumbuli. Yet when I want to talk to them about Varadan, they find it a thoroughly curious matter. They do not even know of the service

Varadan has to offer.

This example hints to the fact that the depicted situation of *ēri* irrigation is confounded by the introduction of motor pump sets to operate wells. They offer a handy individualistic escape from the need to engage in common resource management (more on that in chapter 14).

Given the involvement of many farmers in jobs outside agriculture, every cultivator goes to the field at a different time. It is not agriculture that sets the pace of the day, but agriculture is subordinated to timetables of other spheres: of the school day, of the bus timetables, of bank timings etc. Just on special occasions, like harvest, agriculture might come to the fore. This reduces the chances to meet and discuss en route problems regarding irrigation, that is to organise it without much ado and extra time. As has been shown previously, this is crucial for the smooth functioning of *ēri* institutions.

Another consequence of the high mobility of people, ideas and substances in the context of Irumbuli is the varied cropping pattern. Almost every year, international and national breeding stations develop new varieties of paddy the knowledge of which is easily disseminated through radio, television, newspapers and a network of merchants and co-operative societies. Farmers can choose according to their individual preferences. In addition to that, during the second and third seasons of the year, farmers cultivate a multitude of crops – e.g., groundnuts, vegetables, once again rice, or they convert their fields into groves of casuarina trees. Each of these different crops and varieties requires different timings of irrigation. This causes problems because a substantial part of *ēri* irrigation ensues qua flow from one field to the next, a principle which makes it virtually impossible to leave single fields out. Furthermore, supposed only a tailender would want to irrigate his field at a given time, he would have to open the sluice and let the stream go over hundreds of metres just for the sake of one remote piece of land – this would entail high losses of water. Hence, efficient *ēri* irrigation is easier with a certain degree of uniformity in cropping patterns, cultivation habits and timings; a high level of mobility is detrimental to this.

In conclusion, the operation of Irumbuli's *ēri* is a brittle affair. It is not of long standing, but those who participate constantly have to come to terms under changing conditions. Its rules are not laid down or published anywhere and are thus open for constant redefinitions and new interpretations to the point of possibly being dismissed as nonexisting. There are never public meetings. Occurrences that would be important to know for every farmer in the ambit of Irumbuli's *ēri* (such as Varadan's dismissal at the critical phase of irrigation) are dealt with on the quiet. Subliminal conflicts of caste, material interests and considerations of power influence Varadan's work. Ruth Suseela Meinzen-Dick's observation that "water management practices are unlikely to be embedded in the institutions of village, caste or religions" and that therefore "efficient maintenance… requires a special-purpose organisation"[341] is not congruent with my findings in Irumbuli. Perhaps, in the name of equity and efficiency in the understanding of the above cited tank modernisation program, it would be desirable if such a special purpose organisation existed. But then, among other problems, there would be no possibility to sanction those field owners and cultivators who are not willing to participate. Hence, the very flexibility and adaptability of the operations regarding *ēri* irrigation at present is their way to endure and to ensure participation by as many people as possible. The existing elements and traces of efficient *ēri* maintenance and management are facilitated by their being embedded in the institutions of village, local state, caste or religion, or because they result from them. These elements include:

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[341] Meinzen-Dick 1984: 46.

- the fact that members of the Tuluve Vēḷāḷar caste and Ceṅkuntars, who cultivate considerable portions of the land irrigated by the *ēri*, are entangled with one another in many kinds of moral and economical obligations which prevent them from standing apart in questions pertaining to the *ēri* as, for example, newcomers such as the mentioned Kovintasami Naidu do;

- the possibility for members of the Tuluve Vēḷāḷar caste to earn respect and a positive image by committing themselves for *ēri* management and maintenance. Letting Varadan work for them means they are emulating the erstwhile *jamīntār*. Elders of Irumbuli are storing the shutter mechanism of the sluice and its lock in seasons in which they are not used, and they are reportedly asked to mediate in case of quarrel over water, at least if it arises between their own caste people, which in turn underscores their good standing among the neighbours;

- the necessity to maintain the *ēri* bund and the path on top of it so that the temple of village goddess Vēmpuḷiyamman beyond the area irrigated by Irumbuli's *ēri* can be safely reached and her festival conducted with a procession around the fields;

- the necessity to maintain the bund to a degree so that Irumbuli, which is located below the bund, faces no threat in times of heavy rains; several inhabitants remember cases of emergency in which able men of every house picked up their spades and hurried to fix breakages of the bund. Inhabitants of Irumbuli also said that they collectively made representations to the Union Office to have the bund repaired;[342]

- the fact that Varadan has no reputation to lose in Irumbuli. Hence, he can act as an intermediary. If the channels are in bad shape or the sluice left open too long, the farmers can jointly scorn Varadan instead of each other;

- the ways in which Varadan behaves, including his methods to counter the distancing and depreciation he has been shown to be facing all along:

first of all, he himself creates a distance to the others by his distinct style of moving and by his demeanour. His studied avoidance of direct eye contact – though he seems to look at his interlocutors boldly and en face – is one way. He is also constantly on the move. Contrary to the above cited statement of Sammanda Mutaliyār, Varadan does actually enter the village – for example, to solicit work, to carry headloads of paddy to the houses, or to fulfil other tasks. Yet I have never come across him sitting down anywhere in Irumbuli. Only when I visited him at home, would he sit down, but even then he would always find a reason to get up, move and return. As Varadan has no established working hours, his patrons who want to engage him (or to scold him) can deem themselves lucky to meet him; his mobility serves to make him scarce. Furthermore, Varadan's being constantly on the move makes it very difficult to pin him down to a thing – if trouble brews, he is quick to withdraw. It is little wonder that in the mentioned incident concerning the firewood, the villagers confiscated his bicycle – not only is it the sole object of considerable worth that Varadan carries along, it is also the material basis of his mobility. Trawick, analysing the life story of a Paraiyar woman, observes that "attachments to places and people are tenuous, so that wandering lost, coming and going continuously with no clear sense of where or with whom one is really supposed to be, seem to be the main activities

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[342] Similarly in many other places in cases of emergency, the villagers work in unity – yet usually only in their own neighbourhood. In Adikesapuram, for example, a village north west of Oragadam, in many monsoons the stream of water from overflowing Big *ēri* of Oragadam approached at such a speed that it broke a bridge, houses, bunds, trees and devastated the harvest of all adjacent fields. The inhabitants of Adikesapuram jointly reinforced the bunds with gunny bags. They accuse the people of Oragadam of purposely diverting the water towards Adikesapuram in order to prevent their own place from being flooded. On the whole, the self-help activities seem to be rather spontaneous.

that people engage in." and interprets that as a fundamental deficit.[343] In Varadan's case, mobility is a means to make himself more sought after and to withdraw if necessary.[344]

Adding to that, Varadan adopts the air of a wag. He knows everybody who lives in Irumbuli or who comes by, many of them since their childhood. He loves to tease people, to tell fantastic stories and to crack dirty jokes.

> When we, on a tour around the fields, meet a girl of the neighbourhood, he says "this is Amul", and adds, blinking to her: "She just turned 17. She has to marry in two weeks, but there is a quarrel going on. Do you perhaps know a good husband for her?" – "Don't tell lies!", hisses Amul, and she and her neighbour giggle loudly, but amicably. Soon afterwards we encounter another woman. Varadan, with a twinkle: "She is quarrelling with her husband. Ai! Three years married and no baby so far!" Behind his back, the woman laughs and gesticulates to indicate that he was talking nonsense. Nevertheless she readily takes the opportunity to accompany us a bit on our way and to engage in a chat.

At times it is difficult to judge whether Varadan is serious or whether he jokes. For instance, when I ask him who paid for the lock that emerged on the sluice's locker when the water level in the reservoir receded, he asseverates that it was himself who bought it for Rs. 60 (quite a high price for a simple lock). – "When did you buy it?" – "Just now", Varadan answers lightly and goes on to explain that the water would be drained in no time if the lock were not there. After a short while, I return to the topic of the payment, asking whether anybody would reimburse him. Varadan takes on the dramatic face he usually adopts when reproaching landlords for not paying him and declares: "No, nobody pays for it". – "You could ask those people to finance the lock" – "I can, but I do not do it. I believe that nobody would pay for it". – "Did you ask for it?" – "Yes". – "When?" – "Yesterday... No it is about three days back that I asked for it." In contrast, various senior cultivators of Irumbuli explain that the farmers of the village have provided the lock, and they give details about who keeps it if it is not used and who has access to the keys. Probably then ,Varadan's statement is an invention to impress the anthropologist who showed such a keen interest in these odd things? Or the senior farmers just say what they believe (or wish) to be the case?

Another example is the termite hill on the reservoir's dam. We come across it on the very first time I accompany Varadan to his work place at the sluice. Varadan alleges that a cobra is inhabiting it and tells the following story: "Somebody came from Tambaram[345], between four to eight months he performed regular services, he got a good opportunity, he said, now it is enough, god has granted me a boon, then he went off. A very rich person. When he came by, he asked me to stay here and said I should not go to work. He would pay for it. I would fetch water for him. Then he left me with the plate and the bowel. He also gave rice porridge as sacred gift. So every week he would give Rs. 50, or whatever he had in his hands he would give. Because I have left all my work and stood here. For eight months he stayed here, in the end of it he gave me Rs. 200 and left." – "A very rich person!", I interject, and Varadan, with a broad grin: "Yes. Ai, I did not take his address." On one hand, it is possible that such a thing happened – the termite hill does show traces of worship: matches strewn

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[343] Trawick 1991: 250, see also Trawick 1996.

[344] Irschick 1986: 21 and Gupta 1998: 290 f. point to withdrawal as a strategy to evade conflicts in Indian villages.

[345] Urban agglomeration, about one and a half hour by bus to the next bus stand which is in turn about half hour walk from Irumbuli.

around, dashes of vermilion, a ribbon. On the other hand, apart from Varadan, nobody has witnessed a man from Tambaram at the termite hill, and many priests of village temples can only dream of Rs. 50 bills on the plate that they pass during worship. They usually have to be content with a few coins. I conclude that one of the main messages of the story is to tell me that I, too, should pay Varadan for his service of showing me the village and its fields.

The point is that humour and fantastic stories in this case serve to create uncertainty and an ambit of benevolence[346] in which Varadan can more easily word his claims – and does not lose face if these claims happen to be rejected. Notably, these ways draw on resources that Varadan avails of due to the main reason why he is depreciated: his identity as a Paṟaiyar. Egnor, exploring performances of Paṟaiyar crying songs in the same region as Irumbuli, sees them "as vehicles for the individual singer's origination of new image-meaning associations and the propagation upward of these associations as potential new conventions".[347] Yet Varadan's creativity, performances and humour do not change hierarchy, they only make his precarious position bearable. Seizer examines the role of humour in Tamil popular stage plays and concludes: "One becomes only free enough ... to see the trap in which one is caught ... the performer manages to slip out of some of the constraints on discursive propriety – but he does not alter them." After all, the performance serves the performer to make a living.[348] In Varadan's case, this observation can be transferred from stage to life. His humour and performances serve to carve out his niche in the village. Just in one not very immediate aspect does Varadan perhaps help to alter the existing social setup: with his earnings from jobs such as the common irrigator, he is sustaining his family, including the wife of one of his two sons; in case the son is in jail. This happens from time to time because one of Varadan's sons is committed to the struggle that is going on in the region, of Dalit groups against their discrimination.

The benefits that Varadan draws from doing service as common irrigator are of various sorts. He and his family could not live solely on the paddy he earns out of it. Yet it provides a welcome supplement to his total income. The work of an irrigator in Irumbuli is part time. Firstly, it takes place only as long as there is water in the water reservoir, hence, from October to April at most. Secondly, it does not consume the entire working hours of a day but only a few, depending on the weather and the availability of water. Most of the time he can work on daily wage in Irumbuli's fields and still oversee the flow of water. He knows what is going on with the irrigation facilities without having to spend much extra time for inspection. Irumbuli is also an established job market for him. It is not far away from his home and on the way to Tirukkalukundram, the nearest little town where Varadan has always things to do. In the village where Varadan dwells, the job of a common irrigator is already taken by somebody else. Adding to the paddy paid by the cultivators, Varadan generates income from the 30 cent plot he has access to because he is a village servant – in Irumbuli, no other Paṟaiyar has the opportunity to lease land, even if he does not own oxen to plough the ground. Furthermore, for that field's irrigation he does not need a well but can make use of the water from the reservoir. This means that Varadan is not a neutral official, as a common irrigator is supposed to be by Harriss,[349] but does have self-interests. Significantly, of the channels in Irumbuli, that which leads to Varadan's field is usually the best kept one, especially to the portion up to Varadan's field (which is situated in the

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[346] If the definition of a joking relationship, according to Radcliffe-Brown 1965 [1940], is "a pretence of hostility and a real friendliness", in Varadan's case just the reverse happens: a pretence that everything is all right and a real hostility.
[347] Egnor 1986: 340.
[348] Seizer 1997: 83.
[349] Harriss 1986: 130.

middle range of the acreage). Hence, there are various material benefits that Varadan draws from his being a village servant.

Moreover, Varadan repeatedly – and proudly – emphasises that he has been doing the job as a village servant for Irumbuli for the past 13 years. Moffatt observes that pride is a form of cultural compensation for Harijan work.[350] However, more than of the job itself, Varadan appears to be proud of some of the entailing circumstances: for example, that he can also become a cultivator himself and is not only a landless labourer, thanks to the plot that he has access to due to his service. He is proud that he can make use of his skills. This includes instructing Mutaliyārs in matters relating to channel maintenance etc.

Moffatt writes that Harijans tend to accentuate, from the four works which are emblematic for them (and their lowliness), that which is among these yet the least lowering; hence, as the contact with the malign spirits of deceased is what he supposes to be lowering in the work of watchmen and irrigators,[351] one would expect that Varadan might try to evade that topic. Nevertheless, it seems that Varadan himself plays on connotations of Paṟaiyars as tamers of *pēy*s with his handling of snakes that infest the reservoir's dam (remember the association of talk about snakes and of malign spirits). One example is the mentioned story of his helping the rich man from Tambaram worshipping the cobra. He also alleges that he has no fear of the snakes as he knows how to handle them. Before he climbs down to the sluice, he bangs with his spade on the ground. Thus he warns the cobras to stay away, he explains. At the critical times of irrigation, I often not only find a lock attached to the sluice's locking mechanism, but also sloughs of cobras lying exactly in the inlets of the sluices, at first sight looking like live snakes. In the beginning, I have taken it as a coincidence; yet when this happened frequently, I started doubting that the snakes had themselves chosen to cast their sloughs there of all places and suspected Varadan to have positioned the hides there, possibly to shun away people who might try to open the sluices on their own. When I ask Varadan about it, he emphasises the danger of the place due to those creatures and grins.

Thus in Irumbuli, contrary to the impression at first sight, instead of a "continuing operation of village level systems of tank management today" and "units … [that] continue to exist because of the care taken by the beneficiaries"[352], I found beneficiaries taking care of *ēri*s, but not systematically, not unanimously, and not in the sense of a continuation of certain inherited or "traditional" customs. The management happens erratically, it is as inconsistent as the different interests involved, it involves institutions of the state and rests on social cleavages (like caste specific jobs) that betray most notions of equity. It is, by nature, a brittle affair – and just because of this it can work.

The situation in Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam

The example of Irumbuli shows that it is impossible to speak of a "tradition" of irrigation management with a long standing if only because of the fact that the hamlet itself came into being quite recently. One could argue that Irumbuli is an exception. Hence, in the following, I shall examine the situation in the remainder of the study area.

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[350] Moffatt 1979: 201.
[351] Moffatt 1979: 116, 113.
[352] See above: Mosse 1999: 321 and Sengupta 1993: 79.

In Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam, like in Irumbuli, most of the fields have changed owners once or more often during the past half century.

> K. S. Gopalaswamy is a Brahmin belonging to the Vaiṣṇavite sect prevalent in Oragadam. His father was schoolteacher at Tirukkalukundram's boy's High School. Gopalaswamy started his life in Oragadam, but as soon as he reached the 4th standard, his parents shifted with him, his two brothers and his sister to Chengalpattu and he attended St. Joseph's High School. He came to Oragadam only on the weekends to visit his grandparents. He explains: "In Oragadam, facilities are not there for us to have higher studies, good education, so what we did was, we disposed of the lands, disposed of the house, go to where the facilities were available, [… Our] lands were disposed of, for token throwaway prices, because in those days, the lands were not getting good money, education was most important, my father thought keeping lands here without getting education is of no use, zero, so he disposed of. In the interest of the children." Gopalaswamy worked with Indian Railways for 39 years. His sons and his daughter received good education, one son is working as a software engineer in USA. Gopalaswamy concludes: "In those days, what my father did was a good thing for us. Otherwise we would not have become so much of educated [= well educated], we would not have been able to bring forth [= to bring up] our children in the same way what [= that] they did for us." After his retirement, K. S. Gopalaswamy returned to the village of his ancestors. He bought almost one hectare of irrigated land and a well and has it cultivated by the help of a steward whom he is paying regularly.

K. S. Gopalaswamy's case is probably exceptional as few Brahmins ever return to settle in their ancestral places. But that fields are changing hands is a pervading feature in Tamil Nadu. In the course of the past few decades, erstwhile large estates were been broken down to a multitude of petty holdings. Most landowners use to withdraw slowly.[353] They prefer to pledge their land for years before selling it once and for all. In Oragadam, the majority of the field owners are residing outside the village, out of the reach of calls for collective action. Of those who could hear them, many are likely to ignore them: the bigger part of the cultivators pursues other professions as main sources of income, many of them outside Oragadam. They have to spend time commuting, subordinating their agricultural duties under the time requirements of other spheres of life.

Janakarajan[354] points to the effect of the mentioned land transfers and the concomitant changes in the social fabric: "Due to changes in the caste-class relations, the traditional irrigation institutions which were hitherto managed effectively by the old landlords, broke down." Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg interpret the common irrigator as "partly a relic of an earlier collective economy"[355] and trace what they note as bad shape of irrigation reservoirs to the disintegration of the village community and the dearth of a common village consensus.[356] In a like manner, informants of my study area trace what they perceive as decline of *ēri* management to changes in the social setup. This observation often takes the form of a complaint and is informed by the informants' perception of how the world should be.

> In Tirukkalukundram, late Sammanda Pillai, owner of lands below the place's Big *ēri*, contemptuously declared that nowadays, everybody may operate the sluices at

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[353] See also Ludden 1999: 220.
[354] Janakarajan 1991: 23.
[355] Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1990: 147.
[356] Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1975.

Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*. He sighed. Then he recalled that earlier, the water of the Big *ēri* used to be distributed in turns to the farmers. Certain farmers, mostly Brahmins, he added, claimed preferential and double irrigation issues [*paṅku*] on the grounds that they contributed to the infrastructure of the *ēri* as, for example, a Brahmin landowner who had a path built in the centre of the area irrigated by the Big *ēri* to facilitate the transportation of goods. In cases of conflicts, three senior farmers including himself used to mediate. However, with the introduction of the new legislature on village administration, in 1974, he lost his say in the local water management and it started to decline.

Sammanda Pillai never fully overcame the fact that the Indian Government introduced a new system of Village Administrative Officers in 1974. This kicked him out of his job as village accountant of Tirukkalukundram in which he followed his father and which is the emblematic profession of his caste, Kaṇakkuppiḷḷai. Until his death in April 1999, the late Sammanda Pillai used to sit on the broad pillared porch of his house (built in 1903) in Big Street every afternoon and receive people who sought his advice in administrative matters. His wife served tea and coffee and engaged self-consciously in the talk.

Interestingly, the erstwhile village accountant still stored the closing mechanism [*kampi*] of the main sluice of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* in his house; he attached it like a trophy to a wall in the inner courtyard. After his death, it remained in its place. When I asked his daughter Mallikeswari why it hung there, whereas the farmers had to take the trouble to dive and use stones and sticks to close the sluice, and when I asked where the remaining two closing mechanisms were, she shrugged and shed an eloquent view to the sky.

There is a topical complaint voiced by various informants of Tirukkalukundram and Oragadam, namely that there is "no unity". C. Turai is one of them. He is a merchant and resides in Mamallapuram but his family stems from Tirukkalukundram and he continues to own fields in the tailend of its Big *ēri*'s irrigated acreage. He recounts that in 1997, he planned to assemble farmers of fields along the upper channel [*mēṭṭukkāl*] in order to clean it. The channel has a length of two kilometres and 200 adjoining owners. Hardly ten percent of them turned up, that is 18 plus four paid daily wagers. Those who contributed time and money were, without exception, residents of Vellaiyar and Pudumettu Streets – places chiefly inhabited by Nāyakkars, the caste to which he belongs himself.[357] C. Turai's example (which I found to be typical for the participation in collective action in the fields irrigated by Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*) shows that caste can be a basis for mobilisation towards the end of *ēri* maintenance. Yet at the same time, it precludes the participation of cultivators of other castes, thus enforcing the lack of unity felt.

As for the reasons of the lack of unity, different opinions prevail. K. Chittibabu Naidu, farmer in the ambit irrigated by Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, puts the blame on the population growth. "[This has] become a city /cultured [*nākarikam āyiccu*]", argues K. Govindasami, another farmer. Vasudevan, a former land owner from Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai says:

"There is no unity. This is the worst of all eras [*kāḷiyūkam*]. The influence of television, movies, in which one comes across a lot of violence and aggression – they instigate similar

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[357] Discontent with the collaboration of the farmers of the locality, he keeps writing petitions to the government asking for help in channel maintenance and has even approached staff of the World Bank who were visiting the area because he knows that foreign countries donate money for *ēris* in Tamil Nadu.

tendencies among the people."

V. Vasudevan is in line with many others who have come out of agriculture more or less recently and tend to apply clichṛs of other spheres of life to *ēri*s. With the romantic air typical for urbanites talking of the countryside, land owner T. M. Kadirvel of Tirukkalukundram explains:

> "In villages, people are very strict about the fact that one member from the families who own lands in the area irrigated by the *ēri* have to be present on the day when collective work is to be done. It is compulsory and they face sanctions if they do not turn up. But this being a town, they are not that strict. Most of the inhabitants are not just occupied with agriculture, they have other things to do as well. This town has a population of 30,000, out of whom only 300 are in agriculture. So the farmer community becomes a minority, and this is why people do not really bother much about it."

Many informants emphasise the need to keep peace and not to get involved in arguments. Manickam of Irumbuli says, for example:

> "People are bothered about their own work. They do not really mind others. They are not interested in intervening because it would lead to problems and fight, that is what people avoid."

In the same vein, the aforementioned T. M. Kadirvel adds (concerning those cultivators who have not participated in channel clearing):

> "[They] would certainly demand a share of water. They would argue that they have a right to their share of water and demand that they get it even without participating. We do not really take it up seriously because it is a government *ēri* and the water belongs to everyone, so we just let the issue go and allow the water into their fields."

"Eris are not worth quarrelling about"; this rhetoric can be found especially among well-to-do farmers such as by the businessman T. M. Kadirvel or Manickam, who gets his main income from his job as a teacher.

However, this rhetoric is countered by the fact that *ēri*s obviously are in use, people do collaborate and do mind the common irrigation structures. Irumbuli is an example that even under conditions of mobility and a social setup that emerged only a generation ago, institutions come into being that organise irrigation and that, by appearance, even live up to descriptions of "traditional" irrigation institutions. In Oragadam, the sense of unity among farmers pertains more to certain distributaries of the Big *ēri* than to its irrigated area as a whole. Alagesan of Oragadam and various farmers of Adikesapuram who have their fields in Oragadam explain that several cultivators on the same distributary are taking turns in irrigating their fields even without the help of a kampukutti. Likewise, in Tirukkalukundram, it goes without saying that *ēri* water is being used.

The calculation is easy, says S. Prabhapati of Irumbuli whose husband Sanjivirayan took part in the common cleaning of irrigation channels in spring 1999 in Irumbuli – the only Mutaliyār, standing in knee-deep water along with Cakkiliyar and Paṟaiyar men and following Varadan's instructions. Sitting on the cement floor that the family afforded the year before for their thatched little two room house,

Prabhapati reckons up the cost of water to cultivate: to partake in *ēri* irrigation, her husband helps with cleaning the channel and pays the common irrigator. That means a day's labour (at current prices Rs. 60) and a bundle paddy with straw. In comparison, in the case of diesel pump sets, with diesel costing Rs. 15 per litre and a requirement of, say, 60 consecutive days of irrigation, the cost would amount to Rs. 900, plus the price for a pump and its maintenance. Electrical pump sets cost between Rs. 8,000 (a three horsepower motor) and about Rs. 10,000 (a five horsepower motor) plus incalculable costs for the connection to the grid and bribes to obtain such a connection. Thus even though the current may be gratis, the prices are forbidding for the family. Prabhapati is a cook in a kindergarten of a village to which she has to travel ten kilometres by bus. Her income is spent to pay for the school of their two little daughters. To make a living, the family depends mainly on the income of the paddy field that they cultivate as tenants, on daily wage, and on little extras like their share of two tamarind trees and a brick kiln that they own together with Sanjivirayan' four brothers plus a cow, several chicken. To be able to be tenants, they own two buffaloes that can pull a plough or a cart. The collective solution is in any case more economical – and the only one Prabhapati and Sanjivirayan can afford without getting into debt. Furthermore, while it would be shameful to ask other farmers for financial assistance to meet the costs of irrigation with the help of a pump set, they can rightfully expect others to participate in the common endeavour of irrigation with the help of the reservoir and the channels. Prabhapati even says that they have the right to demand Rs. 50 fine from those who do not turn up and to deny them their due issues of irrigation water. Even though I did not come across a case when this rule was actually enforced in Irumbuli, morally those who do participate can feel superior and righteous and not like petitioners.

The rhetoric of lacking unity and the worthlessness of *ēri*s is also countered by the fact that there are frequent quarrels about *ēri* water. They are considered so important that none of them is taken to court, explains Muttu, lawyer of Tirukkalukundram.

> "Nobody would take this matter of distribution of water as a problem to the court. What they will do is sort it among themselves. They will pick up the spade and quarrel over the issue of water in the fields. What happens is, as the fight intensifies, the matter would be taken up by the police and one of them remains in custody for a few days and after three or four days the matter gets sorted out automatically and this fellow gets released on bail or comes out on his own. […] The matter would not be the issue of irrigation or dispute over water managing. The matter would be more one of fist fights or street brawl."

S. Marimuttu, another lawyer of Tirukkalukundram, explains why there are no cases over irrigation voiced in the local court, even though the laws would provide the institution of "mandatory irrigation": "Irrigation is essential. In court, it is a long process. You go to the court and there it will pend. In the meantime, you could lose two harvests, the fields will dry." Contrary to irrigation issues, in the case of theft of an *ēri*'s fish there are court cases almost every year.

The rhetoric that *ēri*s are not worth quarrelling about ridicules and thus undermines the legitimate claims of poorer people who have no motor pump set at hand to otherwise overcome the shortage of water and, hence, have to quarrel. This, in turn, cements the lack of unity felt. I argue here that two main factors are contributing to the rhetoric of lack of unity and that *ēri*s are not worth quarrelling about. One of these factors is the adverse image of agriculture as a profession among the mainstream society in the study area, a second one is the caste conflict.

Members of the mainstream society in the study area typically do not consider agriculture to be a promising venture. Contrary to the practice in much of Europe, banks or benefit funds accept fields only very reluctantly as sureties for loans, if at all – "*atukku* reward *illai*" – they are not profitable, explains a bank clerk in Tirukkalukundram whose desk is dominated by a gold scale, the main instrument to assess the customers' credit worthiness.

"It is a curse to be born as farmers", say V. Diran and V. Arumukam, farmers in the ambit of the Gomukhi Nadi dam. They concede that nowadays, there are three harvests instead of one or two as it was before the invention of new varieties of seeds and of motor pump sets. But they feel that the total yield has not increased, just the work. R. Ramalinga, farmer of Tirukkalukundram says: "Agriculture is a noble profession but in the prevailing circumstances, it is not a profitable venture. Firstly, it is highly labour intensive. Secondly, it is not a profitable venture." – and he asks the Government for subsidies so that the farmers will continue in their profession. C. Turai, cultivator of six and a half acres of land in Tirukkalukundram, reckons up the costs and the benefits that accrue of the cultivation and ends with a loss of about Rs. 4,000 per acre.

> "We do the cultivation early in the mornings and late in the evenings, that is, in our free time – or the elders do it", explains a mechanic from Oragadam who commutes to his work in Chengalpattu Mondays through Fridays. Thanks to the work outside, a novelty has entered his life: the notion of free time which is also closely linked with being in Oragadam. On Sunday mornings, he puts on new chappals, a clean white shirt and trousers and enjoys the shade in front of his house and the good meal that his mother prepares. In such a context, labouring in the field attains an air of an hobby, a pastime – if bothersome or not depends on the personal taste. One brother of his is a tailor, another one works with an air-condition factory in Mumbai. Arumukam, their father, remembers that 30 years ago, every man just walked behind the plough but in the generation of the now 30-year-olds, every able man has learnt a profession. In ten years time, "everybody will have left Oragadam", says his son, but Arumukam contradicts: "Then the factories will have reached us; Kalpakkam [the nuclear power plant] is already there." None of them sees a future for agriculture in Oragadam.

T. M. Kadirvel, resident of Pudumettu Street in Tirukkalukundram, comments:

> "You know who actually takes up agriculture? Only those who are unemployed and who have passed the age of getting employed. Someone who does not know any other skill. Someone who does not have other ways to earn money."

His son, as well as, the children of most other landowners, has learnt a different profession other than agriculture and it is very unlikely that he will continue farming. This holds for full-time farmers. Yet there are many people who are involved in cultivation as a side business. It forms part of a portfolio of other businesses and jobs that very often do not have any connection to agriculture. There is, for example, a general merchant with two big shops and godowns in Tirukkalukundram who also runs a school, has a posting as Village Administrative Officer (VAO) in an outlying village and has several acres of paddy fields cultivated.[358] Another farmer is, at the same time, the owner of a rice mill and

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[358] Frequently the posting of a VAO is regarded like a sinecure to certain well-to-do people. The VAO of Oragadam is an example. "He is a big landlord in Sriperumpudur", say locals with open admiration. Once or twice a week, he halts his heavy motorbike with an elegant swing in front of the little VAO office of Oragadam and descends: a stately man in his thirties, with clothes of the latest fashion and flashy sunglasses. Even though

provider of television slots. Yet another one is contractor to various Government departments, runs a forwarding agency and a construction business. Most of them are big shots in the local society and also hold postings in political parties. For them, the landholding is a status symbol which imparts an outlook of being rooted to the soil and of gentility to their multifarious business activities. Members of castes that were unlikely to hold land before the latter half of the 20th century emulate – on an admittedly petty scale – people like the erstwhile Ceṭṭiyar landlords of Irumbuli. Sometimes this attains even a patronising overtone, such as the following statement of T. R. Murali, businessmen and party members of Tirukkalukundram: "If I would leave my lands fallow, then my family would take me to task and say, you being quite well off, why don't you take care of your lands, and as I want to prevent this, I cultivate my land." However, as agriculture for people like him seems to be a rather unrewarding element of the portfolio, they shy back from the involvement in organisational ado connected with it and prefer well irrigation to *ēri* irrigation. Furthermore, their extra agrarian activities enable them to afford motor pump sets.

The unprofitability of agriculture, as it is felt by industrious members of the local society, has led to the latest development in the fields below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*[359]: people convert their erstwhile paddy fields into building sites. Six houses have appeared at the fringes of Tirukkalukundram Big *ēri*'s tailend. They finally block the eastern distributary. In the centre of the irrigated acreage, a huge building emerges – it will become a welding shop. A Chenaiite constructs it, a relative of an inhabitant of Nāyakkar dominated Pudumettu Street. This blocks the flow of water in the fields, preventing tailenders from their shares. It is likely that a problem of water pollution will emerge, rendering the surrounding fields unusable. For those farmers in whose portfolio there is nothing but agriculture and who do not own wells with pump sets, hard times are ahead.[360] "It is those who own neither motorised pump sets nor a well who depend on the *ēri* and who suffer a lot.", explains Somasundaram, an irrigation worker (retired PWD *laskar*) of Tirukkalukundram.

The second factor which contributes heavily to the rhetoric of lack of unity and that *ēri*s are not worth quarrelling about is that apparently farmers fear of getting involved in struggles over *ēri* management because it would lead them directly into the lion's den: to the smouldering conflict of Untouchables versus the mainstream population. When I try to find out whether common irrigators are at work in Oragadam and Tirukkalukundram, I frequently hear that yes, there was a person like that, but "he has died" (and obviously nobody had taken care to appoint a new common irrigator).[361] Some informants grumble that the common irrigators only appear at the threshing ground and demand bundles of the harvest, nothing else. Shekar, a rich rice mill owner, states that he has his fields irrigated by electrical pump sets only, that he does not need common irrigators and concludes that those irrigators are but a "*formality*" nowadays. A cultivator belonging to the Nāyakkar caste, who is standing knee-deep in the water of the channel next to his field below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, recalls vividly that until

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his peons are older than him, he treats them in an avuncular style – but they obviously admire him. He acts with the coolness of somebody who does not rely on a little job but who does it nevertheless because it has to be done properly.

[359] In other places, landlords substitute paddy by casuarina trees which require only minimum labour.

[360] The "Tamil Nadu Farmers' Assembly" [*Tamil Nadu vivacāyagkaḷ caṅkam*] that understands itself as an organisation for small farmers, canvasses support to carry out marAmattu, i.e., communal work towards *ēri*s and other water places with slogans such as "*ēri – kuḷam – kālvāy / marāmattu ceytu / cīramaikkak kōri*".

[361] Names were given as Murugan, Vedagiri, Perumal, Kanniyappan, Murugesan, Kattuvarayan, Balaraman, Mari and Jagannathan. This multitude of names could hint at the fact that up to four *kampukutti*s were active in the Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram – or at the unimportant role that kampukuttis played, because names of important persons hardly get confused.

about a decade back, drummers called for collective work, and whenever the common irrigator had allowed water into a channel, he posted a coloured flag next to it . K. Chittibabu Naidu, his colleague, remembers that they used to clear the inlet channels even up to the peak of the hill adjacent to the *ēri*).

Asked why these practices were abandoned and why no new common irrigators have been appointed, the cultivator answers: "Things have changed. Those people have become prosperous and are no involved in things like drumming. They have become more cultured /mature." This leads – especially among forward castes and well-to-do people – to the standard complaint about the lack of workforce. A farmer of Vellaiyar Street complains that he had to leave half an acre fallow because of the shortage of farmhands, and that the workers did not come, so that he could not mow his remaining one and a half acres and lost the entire harvest. A. Shankaralingam, landholder of Tirukkalukundram, argues that even though his tenant has increased the wage for male workers to Rs. 75 per day (from 60, the usual tariff), he cannot find any. The "labour problem", respectively, "nobody will come to work [*āḷ varavillai*]" is the complaint of the day. R. Ramalingam, who owns four acres in Tirukkalukundram, specifies:

> **R. Ramalingam:** It is *cultural*. There is a *cultural* change [cultural *māri*] … The *kampukutti* is *SC*[362]. Now the *SC* are the *first preference in the world*. … It [the sluice] has to be fixed. The kampukutti does not come and fix it. […] It is not that it would not be good work. It is very hard work.
> **Bettina:** One has to dip in the water…
> **R. Ramalingam:** Dip in, come out, secondly one has to guard the distributary, to take the water to the crop, and it is likely [that a farmer will come and ask]: "Why have you irrigated this field and that not?!". Little complications [*cikkal*] will emerge.
> **Bettina:** The *SC* people do not do this work…
> **R. Ramalingam:** They do not do the work, they don't have a mind to do it [*ācai kiṭaiyātu*]. You ask why, the are all in offices. They are all officers. In general, people from that range go there, and there is wage from the *Government*. […] Suppose the education is okay, the marks are *liberal*. Even if they have 30 or 35 *percent*, it is enough [to get the job], whereas we people have to have 60 *percent*.[363]

While we speak, the early morning sun is glossing over the surrounding over with its especially clean and fresh shine, the paddy fields are lying in the calm before the gangs of daily wagers arrive. Ramalingam is wearing a white shirt with starched collar, has fashioned his hair with fragrant oil and carefully powdered his face. After completing his task in the field, he will proceed to his office. Ramalingam is the manager of a benefit fund. He would not dream of diving in the *ēri* to close or open the sluice. He belongs to a caste that Brahmins consider definitely "higher" than Paṟaiyars, but still very low: he is an Iṭaiyar, or Yadav, in his own terminology.[364] According to the "typical" profession of this caste, his grandfather ran a dairy business, reports Ramalingam, and he managed to buy seven acres, scattered in various villages, including wells. Thus the family itself transformed within one generation from cowherds to landed farmers cum professionals. This is indeed a cultural change and not an unprofitable one. Yet Ramalingam speaks of "cultural change" (cultural *māri*) and that "the

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[362] Scheduled Caste, i.e., Untouchable. Words in italics are English in the original.
[363] This refers to the reservation of places in universities and in the civil service for members of various categories of "backward", "scheduled", "most backward" etc. castes.
[364] "Iṭaiyar" is widely used locally by members of the caste as well as by others. "Yadav" is a politicised term that is used on an all-Indian level.

society has changed" [*camutāyam mār̠r̠iatu kāran̠am*] only in negative terms: in regard to the stance of Scheduled Caste people; regretting that the government does not do enough for farmers; complaining about the high percentage of reserved government jobs for Scheduled Caste candidates; hinting at a lack of joint action among farmers. He contrasts that to an unspecified "earlier":

> "The irrigator came *perfectly*, it was cultivated nearby there, the sluice was guarded and offenders reprimanded, the water was not wasted. Nowadays all this does not exist."

Nowadays everything "has become social [social *āyi pōccu*]", the "SC" do not want to drum anymore but do all kinds of other work, grumble members of castes that are classified as "backward" when they are sitting on the verandah of the gagkai-amman̠-temple in Tirukkalukundram's Vellaiyar Street – fully aware of the three SC drummers who are standing "well-behavedly" outside and overheard the conversation.

In fact, many Untouchables in the region have got into other businesses than drumming and caring for the *ēri*s. In Oragadam, the Roman catholic church has expanded the cultivation by 9.5 acres that it hires out to Untouchables so that they get fields independently of farmers of other castes.[365] The convent next door conducts classes in tailoring and typewriting to make their clientele (mainly Untouchables) fit to earn their money independently. Several Untouchables run brick kilns, engage in construction, are employed in the soap factory, in shops, or go to work outside, including groups who commute as far as to a shoe factory in Chennai every day. All these jobs have no caste bias. They are also more reliable: the work of a *kampukutti* lasts for only about four months out of a year; this means that the person would have to find a job during the remaining eight months. The work is usually remunerated in kind,[366] not in cash which is impractical in a thoroughly monetarised society. And as has been shown at the example of Varadan, certain farmers refrain from paying.

In line with Christian priests, leaders of Dalit parties tell their followers not to work for other castes, particularly not to engage in the work of *kampukutti* because of its caste bias. S. Marimuttu, Dalit party member of Tirukkalukundram, holds forth:[367]

> "Can the other community do the profession of scheduled caste? No. … Why are they [people of other castes] not learning beating the drum, digging the pit for the dead body, opening and closing the sluices? So much slavery is still existing. This is torturing, this is an harassment towards the scheduled caste people. The harassment should not continue as per Indian constitution. See why Dr. Ambedkar wants to liberate people is, you need not do the particular profession. Particular things by basis community. *kampukutti* – he is only by scheduled caste!"

S. Marimuttu, who has been portrayed in chapter two, is earning his living as a lawyer. He does not depend on incomes such as from *kampukutti* work to maintain his lifestyle with his own house, motorcycle, and his children attending the best English medium schools of the area. Yet for Varadan the income from his work as *kampukutti* is crucial. As has been shown, he even takes pride in his job. Likewise does P. Tampiran.

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[365] Following a century old trend, see Ludden 1999: 201.

[366] 6 *marakkāl* paddy = 35 kg, say Brahmins and Dayaalan, and kampukuttis had their own plot to cultivate.

[367] He recalls that in nearby Meleripakkam, for instance, they passed a resolution in 1997 which envisaged punishment for all Dalits who were caught working, especially for people belonging to "backward castes".

I met P. Tampiran on a stroll at the bund of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* after I had been as good as convinced by other informants that the *kampukutti* has died. So it was rather a matter of routine that I asked the resilient looking man whether he knew of a *kampukutti* in Tirukkalukundram's *ēri*. To my surprise Tampiran nodded. "That is me", he affirmed, "I am the *kampukutti*". He went on to explain in detail how he and his five colleagues took turns in opening and closing the sluices so as never to leave them without vigil. He detailed the timings, the rules of irrigation, the technical skills involved in it and that he gets two *marakkāl* (about 13 kg) paddy per acre by the cultivators at harvest. He recounted how he and the other irrigators of the two sluice solve conflicts among cultivators and that he preferred the smaller landholdings in times of scarcity. He even admitted that he sometimes accepts bribes by some cultivators to allow extra water to their fields in times of scarcity: "Big people take bribes, so why should we not do it?!". He was obviously proud of his service assignment and not at all feeling lowered or ashamed of it.

Only after long conversations and repeated meetings P. Tampiran makes it understood that they, as common irrigators, were no longer as active as they would like to be because farmers have failed to pay them their dues. "The result is suffering", he concludes. He is working mainly as daily wager in the construction of houses and regrets the loss of the opportunity to earn as a village servant. Also the lowering attitude of other castes towards him has not changed. P. Tampiran is, typically for the service of common irrigator, a Paṟaiyar, and he lives in Tirukkalukundram's hamlet of Scheduled Caste people. He does not take the direct way to the sluices but a deviation across the fields (where there are no good paths, a tiresome walk): "We cannot come along the short cut, this is the street where the Brahmins [*pāppar*] live".

In Oragadam, I come across a similar constellation: on one hand, landed farmers who deplore the lack of unity and that the common irrigator is but a formality. On the other hand, a Paṟaiyar /Veṭṭiyāṉ who declares himself kampukutti. Hence, despite all croaking, there would be people who are willing to do the job of a common irrigator if only they were paid properly.[368]

This chapter has shown that there are a few pervading features in *ēri* management – for example, that the work of the common irrigator is usually carried out by Untouchables. But otherwise it is hard to find common practices or irrigation communities that would have been handed down for generations – and the common irrigators' job has been shown to be of recent origin, even in Irumbuli, which appeared most "traditional" at first sight. "Tradition" emerges as a construct by contemporaries, used to establish their claims. The image of a timeless, stable "traditional" way to manage *ēri*s is as much a chimera as the image of a timeless, stable "traditional" India itself.[369]

Likewise, in the study area it is hard to define "peoples'" management of *ēri*s as opposed to activities of a state that would be experienced, in a stark dichotomy, as distant. Just as the *ēri*s themselves are not clear-cut and stable, the institutions ruling them are, to a high degree, implicit and wrought in the

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[368] Northern Indian farmers' leader Sharad Joshi asks: "Attempts to restore traditional systems must be based on a clear understanding of whether the conditions for their restoration are today present or not and whether it is or it is not possible to adapt these. […] In several parts of India, certain castes were traditionally assigned the duty to distribute water within an hierarchical caste system. Can such systems be revived today? Are viable management alternatives, which are relatively equitous and participatory, possible?" cited in Agarwal and Narain 1999: 318.
[369] See Fuller 1989, especially pp. 56 f.

fabric of the local society; they hardly ever assume visible forms (such as for instance assemblies, public functions with people being garlanded, common rituals). *ēri* management is deeply entrenched within an hierarchical caste system and the existing power relations. On one hand, the low profile of the rules makes it possible for interested parties to ignore them or even to deny their existence without being immediately sanctioned – with the consequence that (to formulate it in the words of the above mentioned K. S. Gopalaswamy) might is right.

On the other hand, due to the low profile of the rules, the management of the *ēri*s does not preclude anybody. Nobody has to actively declare his participation, for example, by signing contracts or by becoming a member of an institution. Thanks to the fact that the management of *ēri*s is embedded in the fabric of the local society, people of different backgrounds can pursue their particular interests by which, in the end, they contribute to the functioning of the whole – if for the MLA, *ēri*s are interesting to enhance his power by having maintenance contracts granted to his followers, for Varadan they are interesting to generate income, for the owners of wells they serve to recharge the groundwater and for elders they are a means to enhance their public image by mediating in disputes over water etc.

The functioning of *ēri*s rests, then, on a dilemma: being embedded and wrought in the social fabric of the locality, it is subject to power relations and hierarchical cleavages with the ensuing inequities. But this in turn is essential so that *ēri*s, those physically all-encompassing giants of water and earth, can subsist.

Big Temple of Tirukkalukundram with uḷkuḷam

8.   *kuḷam*: Shape

In the study area, the following test will generate clear results: stand in front of a water reservoir that is roughly quadrangular in shape and refer to it as an *ēri*. The people around will inevitably look astonished, giggle or shake their heads and someone will more or less politely point to the fact that *this* waterbody is called *kuḷam*.[370] So far not much has been written about *kuḷam*s, and if at all, their religious or architectural aspects have been the focus.[371] The next five chapters examine the concept of "*kuḷam*" and try to find out why the distinction between different kinds of water reservoirs is so momentous. They systematically takes account of the *kuḷam*s in the study area, explore how *kuḷam*s are involved in local discourses and what role they play in the social production of a locality.

*kuḷam*s are a familiar sight throughout South India. They can even be found in places where no *ēri*s are around. For example, a village like Punalvasal near Tiruvaiyaru boasts two *kuḷam*s but no *ēri*. The place is most favourably located between the rivers Kaveri and Koleroon in the middle of the fertile delta – a place where there is no space for a vast *ēri*, where the fields are irrigated by water from the river and where other functions of *ēri*s are likewise delegated to other sources of water. The appearance of *kuḷam*s in my study area is similar to other places of the region. An example is the reservoir inside the precinct of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple.

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[370] South of the Cauvery the corresponding terms are *ūruṇi* or *teppakuḷam*. In Telugu it is *kunta* or *dona* (Munirathanam 1999: 243), in Kannada *kunte*, *kola* /*belagola* or *sarovara* and in certain cases *kalyani*, *tirtha or pushkarani* (Nagaraja and Chandrakanth 1999: 204. Transcription according to the sources). Yet the concept that there are distinct types of water bodies exists even there. For clarity's sake, I will stick to the terms "*ēri*" and "*kuḷam*".

[371] For example *caṇmukan* 1995, C. P. R. Environmental Education Centre 2002; Hegewald 2002. As side-subject mentioned in Jain-Neubauer 1981, Livingston 2002.

The reservoir inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple is dug out. Its shape is quadrangular with roughly right angled corners. Flights of stairs [*tuṟai*], made of granite slabs on a foundation of bricks, lead into the water, clearly marking the *kuḷam*'s four sides.

Like this – and different than *ēri*s – *kuḷam*s are, as a rule, dug out. Ganesan and Krishnamoorthy write that their average depth is 15 to 20 metres.[372] They may be located at natural confluence points of lines of drainage, but the artificial character clearly dominates. Unlike *ēri*s, they are usually quadrangular. Exceptional ones have the shape of swastikas, crosses or octogons. Several *kuḷam*s, however, have corroded to a point that they have lost their contours. This has happened, for example, with *vaṟaṭṭukkuḷam* and *puḷiccākuḷam* in Oragadam – their very names tell that they have become dry (and, by implication, meaningless) or sour (*puḷi*), respectively. "They have become *kuṭṭai*s [*kuṭṭai āyi pōccu (pōyiṟṟu)*]", says Jagannathan, resident of the place, with a shrug.[373]

Many *kuḷam*s in the study area are much less shapely than the one in the precincts of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple. Their flanks are usually strengthened with nothing but coarse stones the size of a human head or with bricks. If there are neat stairs at all, they do not reach from corner to corner, but form belts in the middle of the flanks. Some *kuḷam*s, like that in Oragadam Reserved Forest or *cēraṉ kuḷam* in the area irrigated by Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, do not even have these; they have little bunds lined with cacti, thorny bushes and trees. Yet it is still visible that they were once designed to be quadrangular reservoirs. Only one other *kuḷam* in the study area matches that inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple. It is square and consists of meticulously hewn, gigantic slabs of granite that fit into one another without mortar and lead like stairs into the water. This *kuḷam* is situated adjacent to the northeast corner of Urūttirakōṭīcuvarar-temple in Tirukkalukundram.

Adding to the markedness of their constructive features and in sharp contrast to *ēri*s, many *kuḷam*s are embellished.

At the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple rises a massive statue – tall as a man – of the bull Nanti, Śiva*'s* vehicle. It looks across the body of water towards the temple of god Vētakirīsvarar on top of the mountain.

In the study area, one *kuḷam* (*śaṅku tīrttam*) is even more embellished: it has a pillared hall [*maṇṭapam*] at its side, a temple with another pillared hall and two smaller temple structures. At two flanks, there is a low parapet painted with red and white stripes (as for temples). Out of the water at the *kuḷam*'s centre, towers a miniature version of a pillared hall [*nīrāḻimaṇṭapam*]. These are typical features which can be found at *kuḷam*s throughout the country.[374] Especially in cities with grand and ancient temples of Śiva or Viṣṇu, much more lavishly decorated *kuḷam*s can be found. Niches, shrines, sculptures and little pyramid like flights of stairs on landings embellish, for example, the *kuḷam* of Kamatchiyammaṉ's temple in Kanchipuram. The carvings do not only depict Nanti as at the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple, but a wide array of gods, goddesses and heavenly nymphs. At *ēri*s, this is unthinkable.

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[372] Ganesan and Krishnamoorthy 2002: 50.

[373] A species of bodies of water which are even less distinct and marked is called *maṭu* or *maṭuku*, or (the most popular term in the study area) *paḷḷam*; this denotes a little depression filled with water. These water places are too small to be degradation products of *kuḷam*s.

[374] Hegewald 2002 provides an overview.

These structures lend *kuḷam*s a certain permanency. Even in summer, when *ēri*s have almost disappeared, *kuḷam*s remain visible. They remain stable in their places and do not shift as *ēri*s have been shown to do over the years. *kuḷam*s do not have to be actualised by the monsoon but retain their shape throughout. They are not as contingent and subject to the vagaries of nature as *ēri*s are. Built-in special features make them easier to maintain, for example, before the water gushes into *kōṭivināyakarkuḷam*, it collects in a little pool. The silt which it might carry on settles in there, is comparatively easy to remove and does not obstruct the *kuḷam* itself. Furthermore, some *kuḷam*s retain water all year round.

> In the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple, there is usually water far into the hot and dry season, much longer than in the surrounding *ēri*s. Inside the *kuḷam* beneath Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, a well [*ūṟṟu*] provides water throughout the year. Likewise there are wells inside other kuḷams of the study area.

In some instances, small *kuḷam*s were built inside big ones, such as (outside my study area) in Tiruvallur, west of Chennai. Inside the precincts of the local Viṣṇu-temple, there is a 9 acre *kuḷam* with nine corners which has been dry for the past 40 years due to settlements on the channels and the *ēri*s that were designed to lead the water from the Cooum river into the *kuḷam*. In its bed, a smaller *kuḷam* with a little pillared hall in its centre was dug in order to maintain the functions of a *kuḷam* in the temple. The temple authority pumps water from a well into it and exchanges the water whenever it has become too dirty. The remainder of the big *kuḷam* was partly converted into a park. Other parts are wasteland, used by goats to graze and by passers-by as path.[375]

In general, *kuḷam*s are smaller than *ēri*s, even though there are colossal ones, mostly in big cities like Kanchipuram, Chennai, Tanjavur, Tiruchchirappalli and Madurai. Also the famous *makāmaka kuḷam* of Kumbakonam[376] covers 15 acres. In the study area, *śaṅku tīrttam* is the biggest *kuḷam*, measuring about 170 by 220 metres. A *kuḷam* of average size in the study area is *veḷḷi kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai (ca. 80 x 90 metres). The mentioned *kuḷam* next to Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar-temple is the smallest one in the study area with 27 by 27 metres.[377] Smaller *kuḷam*s are not common in Tamil Nadu.

Like *ēri*s, *kuḷam*s have outlets. Yet while in *ēri*s these are the focal points of interest, they play but a subordinate role in *kuḷam*s.

> Regarding the outlet of the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple, opinions of local people differ. Some say it is in the eastern corner of the *kuḷam*; others locate it at the west flank, same as the inlet; a third group of informants maintains that there is no outlet at all. I could not verify any of those assumptions because, during the period of my fieldwork, it never rained so abundantly that the water in the *kuḷam* would have overflowed.

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[375] Personal communication (21.2.1999) by R. Hemavathy who gathered data on the *kuḷam* in the precincts of Tiruvallur's Viṣṇu-temple for her unpublished M. Engineering thesis (Anna University, Chennai).

[376] Every 12 years, as it is miraculously filled with water from the Ganges, thousands of pilgrims flock to it. CPRI-Foundation 2002: 217.

[377] The smallest *kuḷam* is that of Irumbuli. It measures ca. 13,5 x 27 metres, but old inhabitants say that it is corroded and formerly was twice its present size.

The main role of the outlets is to prevent the *kuḷam*s from overflowing or from breaking in case the water gushes raucously. As spillways, the outlets are usually smaller than the inlets. They can consist of holes that open at a certain height in the walls of the *kuḷam* or they are gaps in the flanks like open channels. Astonishingly, in several *kuḷam*s of the study area they are in the same flanks as the inlets. In the *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai, for instance, the main inlet channel serves also as outlet in times of overabundance of water. The spillway forks off about twenty metres above the point at which the channel reaches the *kuḷam*. In theory, its ground should be considerably higher than that of the inlet channel to make sure that the water does not flow off without filling the *kuḷam*. It is difficult to find out whether this works because the channels are filled with refuse and are overgrown with thorny scrub. To forestall heavy losses of water, the outlet will be blocked with big stones and twigs as soon as the monsoon sets in.

Even though *kuḷam*s are usually clearly quadrangular, not all four flanks may be equally accessible.

> The *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple has a main entrance: it is at the side which is most conveniently accessible from the Big Temple's main gate and next to the sculpture of Nanti. The north and west sides of the *kuḷam* are practically not accessible; they adjoin the northern wall of the temple complex, respectively a narrow enclosure with greenery at the eastern wall.

While the foremost *kuḷam*s like those of Mylapore, Kanchipuram or Tiruchchirappalli, (as well as *śaṅku tīrttam* of Tirukkalukundram) can be entered from all four sides, several of the lesser ones bear steps to reach the water only on one or two sides. For example, the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, that lies at the border of the town and the paddy fields, is frequented from the side of the settlement, whereas the flank towards the fields (from where it is unlikely that many persons wish to enter the *kuḷam*) is overgrown with a thicket of thorny bushes and weeds. The *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai lies on the southern end of the neighbourhood. Its south flank faces erstwhile open land and is used predominantly as a latrine. Although there is a narrow beaten track, people rarely use this shortcut and prefer to take the much longer way encircling the *kuḷam*.

Obviously, wherever there are few practical reasons to enter a *kuḷam* from all four sides, their forms are indeed somehow maintained, but not the flights of steps, if any, and the entrances. This points to the next topic – the location of *kuḷam*s: it is rarely one of centrality. Many of them are built on borders.

> The *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple is situated on the border between the sacred and the profane spaces. It lies in the outermost quadrangle of the concentric temple. In that area, people may still leave their sandals on, and many do that whenever they do not visit the gods but simply use the area as a shortcut to walk from Big Street to the bazaar. In the same zone as the *kuḷam* there are various sheds and pillared halls, including one which houses the temple office. It is built directly adjacent to the *kuḷam* and, as a place where temple businesses of all kinds are handled, it represents the merger of worldly concerns and the sacred.

Other borders on which *kuḷam*s are often built are those of one neighbourhood to another neighbourhood, or, more specifically, of the place of the Untouchables to the Streets inhabited by other castes. This is the case, for instance, in Oragadam and Pulikundram, a village of the study area's vicinity, where huge *kuḷam*s fill the space between the so-called "village" [*ūr*] and the "colony" of the

Untouchables. *kuḷam*s are also frequently situated at the borders of settled areas vis ā vis fields or roads as has been shown for the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* and the *kuḷam* south of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai. Consequently there is no need for all flanks to be equally accessible.

Yet despite their decentrality, *kuḷam*s, unlike *ēri*s, are only rarely situated completely outside of settlements. A *kuḷam* in the middle of nowhere is very often an indication of a settlement that once existed there. One example of this is *cokkiyār kuḷam* west of Oragadam next to which one can still trace foundations of erstwhile houses. Many *kuḷam*s transport the imagery of natural places into settlements, especially if they are lined by trees the foliage of which, in several layers, grants shadow to the body of water and helps to check the evaporation. If the surplus water from the kuḷams flows into an *ēri* or beyond (for instance, the excess water of the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's hill flows into the *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil), they also establish physical links between settlements and their surroundings.

To sum up the visible differences between *kuḷam*s and *ēri*s, it follows that the former are much more marked structures than the latter. However, both types of reservoirs also have various things in common – to the point of being physically connected, when, for example, the water of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* flows or seeps into two kuḷams in its command area. Like *ēri*s, *kuḷam*s form part of a more or less elaborate drainage system.

> The inlet of the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple is to the west. Gutters of a hand's breadth and a finger's depth crisscross the compound. They are carved in the pavement of the temple's inner rectangles or consist of flat stones laid out across the ground and are designed to lead the water from the innermost sections of the temple complex into the *kuḷam*. Rain water, as well as the fluid that stems from *pūjai*s, collects in basins or shallow pits. Through holes in the walls the fluid trickles towards the outermost quadrangle and ideally into the *kuḷam*. However, most of these little waterways are obstructed, full of algae and stink.

That the channels leading to the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple are carved out of stones and form part of an architectural whole makes it particularly visible that *kuḷam*s form part of drainage systems. Outside the ideally ordered sphere of a temple important feature, this is usually less conspicuous. In Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai, for example, the unpaved streets serve as channels to direct the water to the adjacent *kuḷam*. As the neighbourhood has not yet been included in the *pañcāyattu*'s attempts to have Tirukkalukundram's Streets lined with cement gullies, the channels are but dug into the soil. After every monsoon they are silted up and have to be dug again in the following year. The farther away these gullies are from the *kuḷam*, the shallower they will be, probably half a metre wide and 15 centimetres deep – just enough to make it possible to walk on the Street in a heavy rain without having to wade knee-deep in puddles. The nearer the water gets to the *kuḷam*, the more of it collects; the channels grow broader and deeper until they no longer are parts of the Streets but form recognisable waterways in their own right. Finally the water gushes into the *kuḷam* at six points: five minor inlets and one channel of approximately one metre width and two metres depth.

Thus like in the case of *ēri*s, *kuḷam*s reach out far beyond their visible forms. And as in *ēri*s, this fabric of rills and rivulets is mainly actualised by the rain during the monsoon season. Yet it tends to be more laboured than in *ēri*s: in some cases – as, for example, *śaṅku tīrttam* – it even includes culverts. It

serves to catch hold of the precious water and to replenish the *kuḷam*. At the same time, it checks the flow of water in times of heavy rains, preventing damage to the streets and houses.

The high number of *kuḷam*s in a given locality serves this end: there are 15 in Tirukkalukundram and seven in Oragadam.[378] With just one big *kuḷam,* for example, for entire Tirukkalukundram, the provisions to drain the water there would be more complicated (and probably costlier) than with the present, decentralised solution. As Tirukkalukundram is built on uneven ground, most likely the water would have to be pumped to such a central reservoir. Centrality is just the reverse of the almost all-encompassing system of water harvesting and drainage in South India. Both, *ēri*s and *kuḷam*s are integral parts thereof.

Similar to *ēri*s, *kuḷam*s require sufficiently large catchment areas. There must be the possibility for the water to get into the ground if it shall seep into the *kuḷam*. Yet by way of paving the Streets that surround the *kuḷam*, of building houses encircling it and of allowing the settlement to be increasingly cramped (for example, by erecting houses in erstwhile backyards and in gaps between houses), more and more of the ground is becoming impenetrable

> At the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple lives K. Vasantha. She moved into the house at the *kuḷam*'s south flank in 1938 when she was married. At that time, she maintains, the water of the *kuḷam* was clear. From her porch she had a nice view across the *kuḷam* because there was a broad free stretch between her house and the water, like on all four sides. To the east and north were two of Tirukkalukundram's most luxurious houses, some of which had walls embellished with precious glass paintings. Each house was equipped with one or two spacious, square inner courtyards and a garden in the back. This and the broad free stretch between the houses and the *kuḷam* allowed the rainwater to seep into the ground and flow into the *kuḷam*. The streets were not paved at that time.

> Today, K. Vasantha cannot see the *kuḷam* from her porch anymore. The *kuḷam* is almost hidden behind rows of buildings that have been erected alongside three and a half of its four flanks. Houses stand in many of the erstwhile gardens. The free spaces in front of them, as well as, the streets, are paved. Most houses that had existed already in 1938 were enlarged, supplemented and free lots between them were covered with new buildings. All this results in a smaller area in which water can seep into the ground. Furthermore, the inlets to the *kuḷam* are cut off. The *pañcāyattu* had open gutters constructed that are meant to collect the water of the *kuḷam*'s surrounding and lead it away – however, not into the *kuḷam*, but somewhere else. In practice, the water hardly flows at all. This is because of heaps of stinking garbage. They obstruct the channels and turn them into breeding places for mosquitoes. As a consequence, the water in the *kuḷam* is scarce; a shallow, filthy puddle even after a plentiful monsoon.

Likewise, most other *kuḷam*s in those zones of the study area that are sought after as commercial or residential places suffer from the lack of catchment area. They develop from areas at borders to more or less central locations. This is the case even in Oragadam which does not have a bazaar but a zone of more centrality, a point at which the settlement approaches the *kuḷam*, too. Kulappa Naicker, one of my most senior informants of Oragadam, remembers the *kuḷam* without houses at its side.

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[378] In Irumbuli, there is only one *kuḷam*. As the entire village cropped up along an erstwhile distributary of the *ēri*, it is in a special situation. Moreover, Irumbuli is small; it consists practically of only one neighbourhood.

As the settlements are becoming more homogeneous, certain types of borders and spaces vanish. For instance, the common village pasture [*mantaiveḷi*]. As in many other cities and villages of Tamil Nadu, it was an open ground on which the communal herdsman used to gather the cattle of the locality in order to lead it into surrounding forests, dried *ēri*s or harvested fields to graze and then returned the animals to their owners in the evenings. In Tirukkalukundram, the common pasture was located between Nalvarkoyilpettai and Ayarbadi. According to informants who live next to the *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai, the inflow to it used to come all the way from the neighbouring Ayarbadi and across the pasture. About three decades ago, both neighbourhoods consisted of but a few houses and the pasture was an open ground. Today the entire area is residential.

Another feature that was frequently connected with *kuḷam*s were flower gardens [*pūntōṭṭam*]. For example, K. Chandrashekaran, venerated *pūjāri* and astrologer of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai, remembers that when he was a child, in his neighbourhood [*pēṭṭai*], there were two flower gardens next to *veḷḷai kuḷam*, one next to *kōṭivināyakar kuḷam* and one behind the temple of goddess Cokkammaṉ. Today they have been converted into residential areas or are overgrown with trees and weeds. In the study area, only two flower gardens subside: one inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple, a second one east of Kodumaikollu Street in Tirukkalukundram. The latter, a five acre plot, belongs to the merchant Gopi Narayansamy Ceṭṭiyar of Chennai-Mylapore. He has it tended by P. Kuppan, a bachelor in his fifties who lives in a little hut on the compound together with his sister Kasturi, a widow of 42 with her three children. Following his father and grandfather in this profession, it is Kuppan's duty every day to pick his quiver full of flowers and offer them to god Vētakirīsvarar in the hill temple. On patches which he does not need for flowers, he cultivates vegetables and some paddy for his own use. For the *kuḷam*s, these flower gardens served as catchment areas, and they might also have contributed to a certain atmosphere of aloofness around the *kuḷam*s which many have lost. In one case, land hunger in attractive areas has reached the point that a *kuḷam* was filled up and a temple was built in its place – leaving more space for the bazaar in its surrounding.

At the same rate as certain *kuḷam*s suffer from too many people claiming places around them, the *kuḷam*s in the villages, where many of these newcomers stem from, seem to be ailing because of the lack of people around them. *puliccāṉ kuḷam* in Oragadam's east part or the *kuḷam*s of Mangalam and Kulipantandalam (where several shopkeepers around the *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram's commercial zone stem from) are examples for this development. Thicket overgrows them, they tend to lose their clear contours and decay sets in.

As for the quality of *kuḷam* water, it has to be taken into account that the water is usually stagnant. In various *kuḷam*s there is a certain exchange of water as they are connected to the groundwater stream through wells in their beds. The quality of the water in *kuḷam*s (same as in *ēri*s) differs widely:

> The water of the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple is of an opaque brownish green. Rubbish floats in one corner. The *kuḷam* is full of fish. Many people consider the water fit for bathing and doing the laundry.

Some *kuḷam*s are covered with lotuses [*Nelumbo nucifera*] which are indicators of a quite clean surrounding and the water of a few is used for drinking by certain people. Other *kuḷam*s are completely filthy. An extreme case is the *kuḷam* in the very centre of Tirukkalukundram's busiest shopping district.

"Notice the stench?", K. Vasantha asks me every time when I drop in her house at the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple. She refers both to the *kuḷam* and to the gutters that the municipality has built alongside her street. These breeding places for mosquitoes are filled with debris so the waste water either stagnates in the few open stretches, or it runs off into the *kuḷam* adding to the dirt of its water. The street at the *kuḷam*'s south flank has become one out of two main market streets of Tirukkalukundram, connecting *śaṅku tīrttam* to the crowded main entrance of the Big Temple. Shops and street hawkers offer incense sticks, flowers, coconuts, bananas and other items for *pūjai*. There are also greengrocers, general merchants, hardware stores, a restaurant, vendors of small wares, mattresses, vessels, ice cream and juices, traders in paper items, cassettes, banana leaves, one benefit fund, pharmacies, doctors, a clinical laboratory, a screen printer, a marriage hall and several tea stalls. The refuse of these stores – putrid potatoes, waste paper, plastic bags, used bandages from the doctor's and other rubbish – heaps up and spills through the single gap in the row of shops into the *kuḷam*. It forms a huge stinking pile on the decaying steps and in the fetid greenish ooze that covers the ground of the reservoir. It is a constant delight for stray pigs that love to wallow in the mess.[379] The Hindu mainstream despises pigs. Nor are the shops connected to the public water supply or sewage disposal. For example, P. Muniyan, the employee of the "Udhayam" haircutter's saloon, every morning dredges a bucket of water from the house at the corner of the street, a marriage hall with an own well. This bucket will have to do for the whole day, for washing and drinking. They asseverate that they take the hair which they cut during the day to the fields, as they are not supposed to dispose of this ritually highly unclean refuse in the *kuḷam*. Yet their waste water – like that of their neighbours – is poured uncleaned into the *kuḷam*. On the roof of the temple car shed at the *kuḷam*'s west flank, somebody has dumped broken bicycles, scooters and heaps of human hair. The shed of the temple cars [*vākaṉa maṇṭapam*] is used as a toilet.

This leads to the question of the utilisation and management of *kuḷam*s. It will be answered in the following chapter. This passage has outlined the differences in the physical appearance of *ēri*s versus *kuḷam*s. It has shown that a *kuḷam* has a far more elaborate shape, that it is much more marked than an *ēri*. *kuḷam*s depend much less than *ēri*s on the "complicity" with nature to subsist. Hence, while in *ēri*s, the flow is accentuated, in *kuḷam*s it is the stagnation of water and its being safely contained in one place that is important. However, both *kuḷam*s and *ēri*s are parts of the overall network of drainage that is spun across the region, and they are basically local entities.

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[379] Some people – with a mixture of mock and disgust – call it *paṉri tīrttam* = "holy water of pigs".

Barber Manokaran working at a kuḷam in Tirukkalukundram

9.   *kuḷam*: Utilisation and management

After the previous chapter has shown that there are hydrological reasons for the multitude of *kuḷam*s in a given locality, this chapter examines whether and how social factors contribute to this amazing fact. It sets out to explore what *kuḷam*s are used for and how they are managed.

Whereas in the case of *ēri*s, a group of specialists has emerged who open and close the outlets to regulate the flow of water, in the case of *kuḷam*s, such a job would be unthinkable. True, for example, the people who live around the *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai usually block the outlet channel with coarse stones. But these are safety procedures, meant to protect *kuḷam*s from damages and to ensure sufficient supply. The activity is never directed to making the water flow. There are no fields whatsoever that would be connected with *kuḷam*s, they have no irrigated acreage such as *ēri*s do. Yet, like *ēri*s, *kuḷam*s serve a wide variety of purposes.

> Visiting, for example, the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* early in the morning, one will witness groups of women bathing in it. As soon as they are gone and busy preparing the breakfast for their families, several men bathe in it. Around nine o'clock, the clattering starts of the women doing the laundry – and their chatting; doing the laundry is one of the few opportunities for many women to leave their houses and get in touch with others. Special slabs are laid out to facilitate the job. They look like polished pebbles next to stones that are overgrown with plants. At the same time (but at different flanks), people of the vicinity take their cows, goats and water buffaloes into the *kuḷam* to water and to wash them. Children of the adjacent streets use the *kuḷam* as playground and as swimming pool. The people of the neighbourhood catch the fish of the *kuḷam*, either with nets at the ends of the season, or with rods, hooks and worms after good rains.

The water of many *kuḷam*s in the study area is used for similar purposes. Typically the timings of women and men using the water differ so that they will not meet in intimate situations. As there are no bathing cabins, women, while scrubbing themselves, normally fix their petticoats under their armpits to shield their upper bodies from being seen. Sometimes basketmakers soak their canes in a *kuḷam*'s water, ducks are herded in them and people wash their bicycles in *kuḷam*s. Others clean lorries in their waters. Certain *kuḷam*s are used to grow flowers.

Not only the water but also the surroundings of the *kuḷam* are used intensively.

> On the banks of the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* grow neem trees [*vēppamaram /
> Azadirachta indica*], the leaves, twigs and blossoms of which are used for various purposes
> including medical applications. The thorny bushes on the flanks serve as firewood. Some
> people of the vicinity use the little rods and roots that stick up from the earth to tie their cows,
> water buffaloes and goats that feed on the bushes and weeds that grow on the *kuḷam*'s flanks.
> Various farmers, such as Parasurama Naicker who owns an adjacent field, are storing heaps of
> straw at the *kuḷam* and protect them by laying thorny twigs on top. At the *kuḷam*'s west flank
> there is a threshing floor, made of sun baked mud, on which teams of farm hands let the paddy
> dry, thresh and winnow it. The owners, clad in pure white, sit in the shadow of the trees on the
> *kuḷam*'s flank and monitor the work which is done in the scorching sun. There is also enough
> room to operate the cart that carries the produce and for the oxen that tow it to stand and relax.
> At the south flank, somebody has dug holes and filled them with all kinds of refuse. Others
> use the place to store material for building houses – leaves of the palmyrah palm, stones, sand,
> bricks. Boys play cricket in the open space around the *kuḷam*. An aged man cultivates chillies
> on the east flank of the reservoir. Iṟular families who split with their relatives in the settlement
> west of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* have erected several low huts. There are also various little
> temples and shrines.

Likewise are the uses of other *kuḷam*'s surroundings. In addition, at the banks of several *kuḷam*s that are more easily accessible than the one below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, there are constructions consisting of a pair of roughly hewn granite pillars thrust into the earth at a distance of about one metre which are connected by a third such stone. Covered with inscriptions that are mostly half withered away, these *cumaitāṅki*s are said to have been erected by kings of some bygone days as a charity to travellers. Some are so low that they can be used as benches. Others are one and a half meters high or more and serve to put head carried loads on. Many *cumaitāṅki*s can be found on the banks of the northeastern *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai, and usually there are groups of old people who sit on them and chat. There and on the banks of Tirukkalukundram's big *śaṅku tīrttam* are also troughs for the fodder of cattle, some of them newly built. A rather extravagant use, the *kuḷam* in the irrigated area of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* serves as production and rehearsal site for fireworks to Sempakkammal, the area's foremost pyrotechnician.

*kuḷam*s are basically multipurpose entities. I found none in the study area that would have been set aside for one purpose exclusively. However, certain *kuḷam*s tend to be used for special ends more than others; a certain functional separation of *kuḷam*s can be observed.

*kuḷam*s at cremation grounds

As a rule, witnesses of a cremation should take a bath and launder and change their clothes before resuming their routine and before talking to anybody at home. Otherwise the ritual pollution caused by the death would afflict the interlocutors, too. For this purpose, distinct *kuḷam*s are located next to cremation places [*cūṭukāṭu*]. In Tirukkalukundram and Irumbuli, there are three examples for *kuḷam*s near cremation places: one lies next to the Big *ēri* on the main road that leads to Chengalpattu. It is about as small as half a tennis court. On all four sides, stone steps lead into the water. They are in rather good shape. Next to it is a tomb [*camāti*] with a mausoleum like structure, the sooty entrance of which yawns towards passers-by. The municipal waste is dumped next to it, dried for some time and finally burnt. There is also the cremation place for several communities on which almost every night a fire can be seen glowing in the dark. A cloud of bad smell hovers over that place. The *kuḷam* is overgrown with *Ipomea fistulosa*, a ligneous, waist-high plant,[380] and various kinds of weeds. It bears water even in times when many other bodies of water have fallen dry, but I have never seen anybody using it – even though it is allowed and Sampath, teacher of Tirukkalukundram, cites a rule that after attending a funeral, one should dip in that *kuḷam* first before proceeding perhaps to *śaṅku tīrttam*.

At the southwestern tip of the area irrigated by Irumbuli's *ēri*, there is a small cremation place used exclusively by the Cakkiliyars who live in nearby Kottimangalam-Arundatipalayam. This *kuḷam* is hardly visible and has practically become a *kuṭṭai*. If it does not serve to take a bath after a funeral, it serves to water herds of goats or sheep or the oxen that tow the carts with the produce of the adjoining fields.

Irumbuli's cremation place is situated next to the premises of the Boys' High School. Inhabitants of nearby Tirukkalukundram-Ayarbadi use it as well, but there are separate burning sites for each caste. Roofs of corrugated sheet iron cover them. Many families of the study area have the habit of not burning their deceased but burying them, which is done in the surrounding of the *kuḷam*. Well-to-do families erect gravestones at the burial sites. The *kuḷam* is in rather bad shape but some people still do take bath in it after a cremation ceremony. This *kuḷam* is used for other purposes as well: now and then, women do their laundry there. As soon as the *kuḷam* has almost dried up in April, men catch its fish by the help of old loincloths [*vēṭṭi*s] or saris employed like drag nets. Some also collect snails to eat them. Another fishing season is autumn. Usually after a good rain men can be seen with simple, self-made fishing rods. They say that anyone may come and fish, there are no restrictions to that. They call the fish *kaṇṭa mīṇ* – just any fish. They are only about five centimetres long and give a good yield, but only when eaten in huge quantities. Apart from fish, snails [*nattai*] can be collected there. Otherwise, the *kuḷam* serves mainly to make bricks. In the dry season, up to four kilns burn in it. At the time of my fieldwork, they belonged to an inhabitant of Irumbuli, whereas women from the neighbouring Chakkilyar settlement do the actual work. They form about 600 bricks per day. Since bullock carts have to enter to take the bricks away, the *kuḷam*'s banks are destroyed on one side. But as the water reservoir is used intensively, it is still much more distinct in shape than a *ēri*. To sum up, *kuḷam*s that are associated with cremation places are usually not really neatly maintained, but they are fit to serve their purpose.

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[380] According to seasoned agricultural consultants, *Ipomea fistulosa* is connected with a sad story of agricultural consultation. The growth of the plant was pointedly promoted – until it became clear that the stalks grew so abundantly that they rendered unusable many reservoirs. For more on *Ipomea fistulosa* see Cook 1996: 93.

*Kuḷam*s for certain animals

Elder informants hold that cattle is not allowed into certain *kuḷam*s, and if cows and buffaloes can be found inside them (as, for example, happens frequently in the *kuḷam* south of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai) this is wrong [*tappu*]. They maintain that to wash and to water animals, there were separate *kuḷam*s: for example, varattu *kuḷam* in the forest north of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai or a *kuḷam* south of Tirukkalukundram-Navalur. Groups of water buffaloes would bathe in them, shepherds and goatherds camp at their sides supervising their animals and farmers take the oxen there to relax from ploughing or towing carts.

Special cases are *paṭci tīrttam* and *nari kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram. They are meant to provide water for drinking, cooling and bathing for the two vultures [*paṭci*] that, according to the legend, get their daily meals in Tirukkalukundram, and for jackals [*nari*] respectively that live on the hill.

*Kuḷam*s for washerpeople

The above drawn picture of a *kuḷam*, set to the beat of women doing the laundry, is far from having a long standing. In many *kuḷam*s washing was forbidden until recently (or in theory still is).

> In the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, the women are supposed to wash their clothes at the public well that is located at the reservoir's southeastern tip. Yet this well fell dry in the early 1990s. When it was repaired in 1997, the women had already accustomed themselves to doing the laundry right inside the *kuḷam*. This is more comfortable: they can float the saris and loincloths on the water. This makes it easier to rinse them. Neither do they have to carry a rope and a bucket from home nor to take pains to draw the water out of the deep well. They do not have to queue and wait for their turns at the well as the washing place is large enough to accommodate several women at the same time. Apart from that, the new washing place is in the pleasant shadow of trees whereas the well lies in the harsh sunlight. Some elderly men observe that the laundering inside the *kuḷam* has already had an effect: the lotuses have disappeared. Formerly they are said to have covered the entire reservoir, lending it its colloquial name, *tāmarai kuḷam*, that is "lotus *kuḷam*". Nowadays, just a few robust water lilies grow there.

Also, according to senior informants, it was forbidden to do the laundry in other *kuḷam*s, including those in Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai, Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai, inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple or the big *kuḷam* of Oragadam. The housewives could either scoop the necessary water with the help of bowls and pots and do the washing in them. Or they could entrust their dirty saris, *luṅki*s and other textiles to the Vaṇṇāṉs. The Vaṇṇāṉ caste's hereditary profession is to do the laundry. In Oragadam, for instance, Anthony and his wife Kitteriyammal did the job.

> At regular intervals, they collected the laundry from every household. With the help of their donkeys, they transported it to the *kuḷam* to the south of the village. This *kuḷam* was set apart mainly for the purpose of doing the laundry: the *vaṇṇāṉ kuḷam*, as it is called. It fills with the runoff of the hills south of it and it is situated next to the inlet channel [*varavukkāl*] of Oragadam's Big *ēri*. It is fairly well kept and one of the *kuḷam*s around with the steepest and deepest stairs.

The Vaṇṇāṉs used to boil the clothes in huge vessels [*veḷḷāvi*] and soak and rinse them in the *kuḷam*. Even from Pulikundram, a Vaṇṇāṉ family came to do the laundry in that *kuḷam*. Instead of soap or washing powder they used a special kind of white sand that they scraped off the surface soil in certain parts of the forest. It did not harm the vegetation in the *kuḷam*, they say. After drying, bleaching and ironing the laundry, they returned it house to house. The customers paid the washermen annually, recalls Anthony. Parasuraman, Vaṇṇāṉ of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai, says that when he was still doing the laundry, he got his wage in paddy twice a year, in *āṭi* month (July /August) and for the *poṅkal* festival in January, five marakkāl each (about 20 kg rice).

Likewise, Tirukkalukundram used to have at least two *kuḷam*s that were preferentially used by Vaṇṇāṉs: one is located on a plateau of the hill of Vētakirīsvarar. A. Sankaralingam, of the vicinity, remembers that during rainy seasons of earlier days the water was abundant as in a waterfall and washermen used to do the laundry there. The second one even bears the name *vaṇṇāṉ kuḷam*. It is a special case: the only seasonal *kuḷam* of the study area. It lies in the bed of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* and materialises as soon as the water in the *ēri* starts to withdraw. Nowadays, it serves as toilet and stinks awfully in summer. Only very few people recollect the official name as, for example, the *pañcāyattu* clerk. Even many Vaṇṇāṉs do not. When the rain comes after a long and dry season in which the dirt assembled in the *kuḷam*, the stream of fresh water dissolves it and carries it away.

*Kuḷam*s for drinking water

Before municipal water supply schemes were set up and, till today, for those people whose homes are not reached by the pipes and who do not have access to wells, *kuḷam*s are critical for the supply of drinking water.[381] There is a special type of *kuḷam*s which is mainly used to bail drinking water from. A characteristic name for them is "white *kuḷam*" [*veḷḷai kuḷam*][382] as, for example, in Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai. In Tirukkalukudram, Irumbuli and Oragadam, the *kuḷam*s designated for drinking water are dirty (for various reasons which will be discussed later), but elsewhere in the area, the institution exists.

In Nenmeli on the main road to Chengalpattu, there is a body of water densely bedecked with lotus flowers. Residents of the neighbourhood affirm that they take turns guarding the *kuḷam* to make sure that nobody steps into it. Myths abound concerning that *kuḷam*. It is said to have been dug by a Pallava king as part of a row of drinking water *kuḷam*s on the way from his port city Mamallapuram to his residence in Kanchipuram. When I visited the place in 1996, a woman was doing her laundry right inside the *kuḷam*. On my remarking about this, they drove her away and explained that she was a visitor from outside who had come to see relatives and, hence, did not know the rule.

Other examples of *kuḷam*s dedicated mainly to providing drinking water near the study area can be found in P. V. Kalattur, Vallipuram and in Kottimangalam. This village stretches out to the east of Tirukkalukundram, intersected by the roaring main road that connects the Bay of Bengal with

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[381] For the role of *kuḷam*s in the drinking water supply in Chennai, see Ganesan, Ambujan and Anuthaman 1994.
[382] "Belagola" in Kannada language. For more on this concept, see Agarwal and Narain 1999: 204.

Chengalpattu and its hinterland and by the dusty bypass road of Tirukkalukundram. It has several *kuḷam*s. All are dirty, weedy or even dilapidated, in any case uninviting to quell one's thirst – except for one.

> A huge banyan tree grows on its southwest bank. It is said to have collapsed in parts in the 1970s, but the remainder is still enormous. Its branches with their dense foliage reach out far over the *kuḷam*, shielding it from the parching sunlight. Trees, bushes and shrub surround the *kuḷam*, contributing to a pleasant and cool climate. The water is free of refuse and detergent. The women of the adjacent street, who draw water from the *kuḷam* for their families, respect the lush serenity of the place that makes it stand out against its dry, noisy and hectic surrounding. I have never seen any woman doing the laundry inside the *kuḷam*. They take the water in containers and do the washing somewhere else.

In places with only one *kuḷam* and, hence, no possibility to distinguish between drinking water and other *kuḷam*, the habit of separate sides reportedly prevails: one flank of the reservoir is used to wash and to do the laundry, the other flank serves to bail potable water from. Or the flanks are reserved to inhabitants of certain streets or to certain families. In Malaalinattam, a village on the way from Tirukkalukundram to Chengalpattu, boards that restrict the use of the local *kuḷam* to bailing drinking water are installed in times of scarcity. In several *kuḷam*s, men take baths on different flanks than women or they come at different times – this custom is less directed towards the cleanliness of the *kuḷam* than to considerations of decency, yet it is the same logic of separation that motivates it.

The examples of the separation or differentiation of *kuḷam*s, according to the different purposes that they mainly serve, demonstrate that this arrangement helps to keep the bulk of them physically clean – sometimes to the point that they provide potable water. Hence, considerations of hygiene are a first answer to the above posed question for social factors that contribute to the high number of *kuḷam*s in a given place.

Adding to that, the same logic of separation helps to maintain *kuḷam*s ritually pure. The concept of ritual purity and pollution has been elaborated by Louis Dumont.[383] He sets it off against notions of physical dirt and hygiene: "Even though the notion may be found to contain hygienic associations, these cannot account for it, as it is a religious notion". In the study area, the distinction between "pure" [*cuttam*] and "clean" [*tūymai*] is common, even though it is usually circumscribed. If somebody wants to express that a particular *kuḷam* is highly impure, he or she will rather not say that it is "impure" [*acuttam*], but cite examples of which kind of ritually highly polluting agent [*tīṭṭu*] can be found there. For instance, if a person hints at used sanitary napkins being deposited in a certain *kuḷam*, this is enough to make clear that the person considers that *kuḷam* to be too impure to do the laundry there. Likewise, all materials connected with menstruation, birth or death are used in the lexicon of everyday speech in a formulaic way as symbols of ritual impurity without having to mention that term itself.

Not only materials are ritually polluting, people can be so as well. This is at the bottom of castewise restrictions of the access to *kuḷam*s. For this, too, the high number of *kuḷam*s in a given town or village is a prerequisite, as each neighbourhood has at least one *kuḷam* of its own. I use the term "neighbourhood" firstly in a spatial sense, denoting a hamlet or a cluster of streets that forms part of a bigger settlement and usually has a proper name (like *pēṭṭai* or, in modern times, *nakar*). It is by these

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[383] Dumont 1999 (1970): 47 – 61.

names that Tamil speakers of the study area refer to what I use the etic term "neighbourhood" for. If they use a generic term at all, it would be *ūr*, which has, however, many more aspects than "neighbourhood". As Daniel has explained, an *ūr* is an emotionally charged place with a sensed centre and fluid thresholds.[384] Who belongs to which neighbourhood shows, for example, when it comes to collections of money for the festival of the neighbourhood's goddess [*amman*] and by her procession route that encircles the neighbourhood. *kuḷam*s are often situated between two neighbourhoods, but it is always clear which neighbourhood a particular *kuḷam* belongs to. I found many cases in which they are the markers of the boundaries.

Secondly, I use "neighbourhood" in a social sense. Belonging to a neighbourhood does not necessarily mean to be member of a particular caste. But in general parlance, people of the study area do associate neighbourhoods with castes. "A person from M. N. Kuppam" will be synonymous with "a Nāyakkar", "someone from Desamukipettai" will be tantamount to "a Mutaliyār" or "a man from Ayarbadi" will be understood as referring to an Iṭaiyar. Reports of people of castes other than that of the respective neighbourhood being banned from its *kuḷam* are commonplace.[385] This pertains particularly to Paṟaiyars and to other 'SC-people' being kept out of *kuḷam*s in Mutaliyār, Nāyakkar or Brahmin neighbourhoods. Older informants remember that such scenes happened in Tirukkalukundram as well, even though I have not witnessed one myself. 22-year-old teacher Ezechiel, of Oragadam's eastern part, says that in the times of his grandfather there were conflicts because of the access to the *kuḷam* south of the hillock, but nowadays everything is all right. Obviously in the wake of the Untouchables' assertion of their constitutional rights the separation becomes more intricate.

In Oragadam, with its described sharp separation of the Untouchables' streets from the remaining village, several informants of the latter admit, only under the seal of secrecy, that they do not want Untouchables to bathe in the *kuḷam* next to the hillock of the Śiva-temple. The body of water between the two parts of Oragadam would be equally easy to reach from both sides. Yet its flank that faces the Untouchables' side is obviously much less used than the opposite flank: there are no slabs put orderly in rows to make the access to the *kuḷam* easier and no stones that are shining because generations of women have polished them doing the laundry. No beaten tracks lead towards it across thorny scrub. In short, this side offers none of the amenities that can be found at the opposite flank. Several other informants of the Untouchables' settlement reacted like Ravi and Indira when I asked whether they used that particular *kuḷam*:

> Prima facie Ravi and Indira make a point of declaring that they do not use the *kuḷam* because they are not keen on doing so. The water is not good enough for him, he argues and that he would surely get the sniffles upon bathing in it, let alone upon drinking from it. Indira says that she sometimes takes a bath in that *kuḷam*, but she does not like the water as it does not taste good. Only those backward people of the ulterior part of Oragadam use it (the non-Untouchables, "BC people" abbreviation of "Backward Caste"), both of them say emphatically. In their part of Oragadam, they have their own *kuḷam*s if they ever want to use one. In general, Ravi remarks, they prefer to make use of forms of water supply which they consider more up to date: the wells or the taps of the municipal supply. Thus modernisation

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[384] Daniel 1984: chapter 2.

[385] This pertains not only to Tamil Nadu, but to other regions of India as well, see e. g. "The Hindu", Internet edition, 08.04.2002: "Two killed in clash. Lucknow April 7. Two persons were killed and several injured in a clash between people of two communities over a pond in Ishaqpur village under Bardah police station in Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh today." The "pond" is most likely a *kuḷam*.

shines up as a way out of old separations.

> However, the municipal supply has its own shortcomings (see below), and Ravi concedes that the other *kuḷam*s of their part of Oragadam are far less reliable in their provision of water; the large, centrally located *kuḷam* being the only one that hardly ever runs dry. Especially to do the laundry, it is the handiest. After some time into the conversation and more questions, it becomes clear that it is not just out of their free will that they do not use that *kuḷam*. Says Indira: "We are Paṟaiyars. They [she points to the western part of Oragadam] scold us [*tittuvāṅka*] if we take the water [from the *kuḷam*]."

The logic of separation of *kuḷam*s is functional not only between castes that are classified as "Scheduled" versus "Backward" or "Forward". The Untouchables apply it themselves – for example, to keep members of Scheduled Tribes away from the *kuḷam*s of their neighbourhood (I have not witnessed any instance in which other kinds of people claimed access to the Untouchables' *kuḷam*s).

> K. Kannippa, Iṟular of Oragadam, has lately taken to rearing ducks. It would be easiest for him if he herded them in the *kuḷam* that lies next to the Iṟulars' houses and separates it from the settlement of the Untouchables beyond. The *kuḷam* is near, in rather good shape and it holds water well into the summer. Yet Kannippa reports that he may not use it and has to walk considerable lengths to the *ēri* or to water-logged ditches to let his ducks drink and bathe. He says the member of the *pañcāyattu* Board who represents the east part of Oragadam (which is inhabited by "SC people") prohibited his usage of the *kuḷam* on the grounds that the water would turn dirty and then her people would have to bathe in it. Shaking his head, he adds that they will only be able to bathe during the monsoon, and, on top of that, their cows and pigs are freely plunging in the *kuḷam* (three pigs were actually present in the *kuḷam* at the time of the interview). Furthermore, their prohibiting him from herding his ducks into the *kuḷam* does not prevent them from purchasing and relishing his ducks.

Another example pertains to washermen. Doing the laundry means that Vaṇṇāns have to cope with clothes that are not only physically dirty but also considered to be ritually extremely polluting because they contain all kinds of body secretions. Keeping the Vaṇṇāns and their workplaces apart from *kuḷam*s used by other castes for different purposes is an efficient way to safeguard the ritual purity and the physical cleanliness of the remaining *kuḷam*s.

Cultural convictions are at the base of another aspect of the multitude of *kuḷam*s in Oragadam and Tirukkalukundram: in each locality, there is not only one *kuḷam* which is reserved for washerpeople, but at least two. In Tirukkalukundram, there are even three as soon as the water in Big *ēri* dries up in the course of the year and the *vaṇṇāṉ kuḷam*, a square shape in its bed, comes to the fore. Among washerpeople – who in general rank quite lowly in the local caste hierarchy – there are some who enjoy higher esteem than others. This depends on whose clothes they get in touch with. The above mentioned Anthony, for example, used to wash only the dirty clothes of Oragadam's Untouchables. With these people's laundry, members of other castes would not allow theirs to be mixed. Hence, the west part of the village had its own washermen and the east part was served by another one. The two groups of Vaṇṇāns usually carried out their work in different *kuḷam*s, Anthony explains. Whenever water scarcity forced both groups of colleagues to use the same *kuḷam*, they would use different sides or resort to an *ēri*.

Most Paṟaiyars of Oragadam I talked to consider their washerpeople to rank lower than themselves. Anthony's wife Kitteriyammal remembers that her clients would never allow her into their houses. They would throw the dirty clothes out to them who waited in front of the doors with their donkey. Moffatt observed similar distinctions among the service castes when he did fieldwork in the same district.[386] He interpreted it as a replication of the high-caste people's hierarchy among the Untouchables. This would supplement the finding of Deliēge in his study area, Valghira Manickam: «[L]es Paṟaiyar … ne sont pas traversēs par la hiērarchie qui characterise l'ensemble de la sociētē indienne. … ils se contentent de prēserver en leur propre sein une ēgalitē entre les individus».[387] Even if this sense of equality exists among Paṟaiyar, it certainly does not include Vaṇṇāṉs or Iṟulars, notwithstanding the fact that these groups are deemed, by people such as Mutaliyārs or Brahmins, as Untouchable as well. Therefore, there is more than one *kuḷam* for washermen.

To sum up, the separation of castes and usages of *kuḷam*s is a way to keep the reservoirs not only physically clean but also ritually pure. In times in which the majority of the population depends mainly on *kuḷam*s for its water supply, this means that there has to be a sufficiently high number of *kuḷam*s to ensure sufficient supply to all. Now there is no evidence of how the *kuḷam*s of Tirukkalukundram, Oragadam and Irumbuli came into being. But it is clear that deeply rooted notions of purity and pollution helped to perpetuate their high number. In the following, I will take a look at how this works.

*Kuḷam*s are focal points of various activities in the neighbourhoods. The people of the vicinity have to take care of the bodies of water– examples are the biggest *kuḷam* of Oragadam or in Tirukkalukundram, the *kuḷam* of Paramecuvari-Nagar (which is ascribed to the adjacent temple of Ōcurammaṉ) and the *kuḷam* below the Big *ēri* (presumably this was the case in other *kuḷam*s as well before the establishment of the *pañcāyatti rāj* in 1974). Within this framework, it is the task of the neighbourhood's nonelected headman to organise the work towards the *kuḷam*. For example, at the *kuḷam* beneath Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, people usually call him "*inta ūru nāṭṭār*", "*ūrukku nāṭṭār*", "*potu nāṭṭār*" and "*inta terukku nāṭṭār*".

> **Bettina:** … So you clean the *kuḷam* yourself?
> **Several people:** Ah! Yes!
> **Bettina:** When?
> **1. Woman:** In *āṭi* month. They do this in *āṭi* month (mid July till mid August).
> **2. Woman:** When the *kuḷam* is empty.
> **Man:** You ask whether this will be cleaned when the water comes? When the water does not flow, we have to clean it. The drum[388] will call us and we will all come and do it [*ellām kūṭu cērntu ceyvōm*].
> **Bettina:** Do they pay wages for this work?
> **Man:** They do. Some private people give money.
> **Bettina:** How does the *nāṭṭār* call you?
> **2. Woman:** Just like that: [shouts to demonstrate] "Hey, come to work!" Like this he calls [others laugh]. "Come on, pa, come to clean the *kuḷam*!" They go together with the *nāṭṭār* and clean [*cuttam paṇṇuvāṅka*] the *kuḷam*.
> **Bettina:** Every year?

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[386] Moffatt 1979: 131 – 9.

[387] Deliēge 1988: 287.

[388] He says *mōlam*. Probably he means *mēlam*.

Every year.[389]

I have never actually witnessed people of that neighbourhood cleaning their *kuḷam* (either this was deemed to be superfluous as the *kuḷam* looked nice anyway or it was still filled with water etc.), but somehow the *kuḷam* is being kept in a manageable state. In some neighbourhoods, the *nāṭṭār*s organise auctions of the goods that the *kuḷam*s offer, particularly fish and firewood. Usually the auctions take place among the people of the neighbourhood but the highest bidder may pass the usufructuary right on to an outsider. In case of the biggest *kuḷam* of Oragadam, the income of the auction of firewood was Rs. 500 in 1999, payable at the occasion of the festival for the local goddess [Kuḷatiyamman] in *āṭi* month. In Tirukkalukundram's Paramecuvari-Nagar, the turnout of auctions of firewood has already reached sums as high as Rs. 9,000. In that case, the bidder needed the wood for his brick kiln. Whereas several informants told me that the desilting [*tūrvāratu*] of the *kuḷam* was the task of the *pañcāyattu* Board, the two neighbourhoods [*pakuti*] in Paramecuvari-Nagar would share the income of the auctions under the auspices of their local goddess [Ōcurammaṉ].

The money is spent for the benefit of the neighbourhood. During the time of my fieldwork, it was chiefly used for the upkeep of the neighbourhood's ammaṉ's temple, for her festival and procession. It was not used for the maintenance of the *kuḷam* due to the general opinion that the *pañcāyattu* Union or the administration of the Big Temple ought to take care of that. They are the official owners of the ground. However, informants at various *kuḷam*s vividly recall cases of emergency in which the entire neighbourhood contributed labour toward the *kuḷam* without the mediation or support of the *pañcāyattu*. Men equipped with hoes and sticks [*maṉveṭṭi* and *kaṭapāṟai*] came from every house and helped, for example, to strengthen the bund of the *kuḷam* with gunny bags to prevent it from breaking or to clear the channel to ward off a flood. This is what my informants say, I have never had the chance to personally witness such a collective activity. The value of the contribution of the workforce should not be underestimated vis ā vis the contribution of money. As most *kuḷam*s are not fully fortified with stone slabs that might require specialists for repairs (people of the Oṭṭar caste are renowned to be able to carry out that kind of work), the men of the neighbourhood are able to see to the upkeep themselves.

> In the case of the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, a house is built at the *kuḷam* itself occupying much of its eastern flank. People of the neighbourhood tend to direct every question of mine that is somehow complicated either to the *nāṭṭār* of the area or to the inhabitants of that house. Being the family that lives right adjacent to the *kuḷam* and that performs *pūjai* for the deities of the temples at the *kuḷam*, it has gained some kind of authority over the water body. However, if joint action towards it is needed, the *nāṭṭār* of this street comes into play.

The agency of the people in the neighbourhood makes itself felt also in the issue of access to *kuḷam*s. Various *kuḷam*s of Tirukkalukundram are said to have had wardens in the past. They had to make sure that no outsider stepped into the *kuḷam*. In some places in the vicinity, such wardens exist. In Vallipuram on the Palar river, for example, one of the local *kuḷam*s is guarded by an elderly man with an impressive bat. Anyway, in *kuḷam*s that locals frequently use it is impossible to enter unnoticeably. In daytime, there is always someone around to ask questions and to get help if intruders have to be

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[389] Excerpts from a conversation with people in the neighbourhood of the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, recorded on 21.01.1999.

chased away. *Kuḷam*s that provide drinking water range among the best guarded ones. The above mentioned *kuḷam* in Kottimangalam is an example for how dominance can work in such a case.

> As a rule, everybody of the neighbourhood may bail water from the *kuḷam*, but only Brahmins are allowed to take a bath in it, explain the women who fill luminous, lemon-yellow and grass-green plastic vessels at the *kuḷam* and carry them to their homes in the adjacent streets. The women explain that "traditionally" [*paramparai*], only people of the Nāyakkar community settled in the row of houses that connects the *kuḷam* to the main road. Recently, a second street has come up in the area. Their inhabitants seem to obey the code of conduct towards the *kuḷam*, too. There is no refuse in the *kuḷam*. Lilies grow in it. It is apparently one of the cleanest and purest in the study area.

When I tried to find out what makes people adhere to the mentioned rules, I first of all suspected that there were no other good sources to get water from, which made people turn to the *kuḷam* and respect it. In fact, they were discontent with the supply from the overhead tank that the municipality had built at their street: it is intermittent, scarce and cannot be scheduled. That means it is as bad as in many other places of the study area. Yet whereas there people are ready to put up with such drawbacks, the residents in the vicinity of Kottimangalam's drinking water *kuḷam* are not. Then I noticed that the *kuḷam* enjoys a certain fame, which might be another factor that makes people of the vicinity follow the mentioned rules. They call it reverentially "*kuḷam* next to the Brahmins' houses" (*aiyarvīṭṭu kuḷam*]. However, who might expect grand buildings at the *kuḷam* will be disappointed. The designation is rather an evocation of bygone times than a contemporary description. On the *kuḷam*'s southeastern and the southwestern flanks is nothing but coppice. Just one small temple like structure, euphemistically called "holy palace" [*tirumāḷikai*] points to the fact that the *kuḷam* was once situated in a neighbourhood of Brahmins [*akrakāram*]. It is dedicated to the memory of T. R. C. Viraraghavacharya Mahadesikan who presumably lived in Kottimangalam between 1895 and 1977.[390] At the *kuḷam*'s northwestern and northeastern flanks, are dreary remnants of nine houses: some have broken-down roofs or big cracks in their walls. Others are reduced to little heaps of bricks overgrown with thorny weeds. Their inhabitants are said to have disappeared one after the other; they shifted to Chennai, Northern India or abroad. Even their god has left: the idol of Lakṣminaracimmaṉ was reportedly transferred to a private temple in Chennai-Alwarpet, financed by the erstwhile inhabitants of Kottimangalam.

Regarding the observance of the rules of Kottimangalam's drinking water *kuḷam*, the presence of K. R. Varakacchariyar and his family makes itself felt. They reside in the easternmost house in the row of ruins at the northeastern flank of the *kuḷam*, the only one in a fairly manageable state. It can be reached via a footpath. K. R. Varakacchariyar is the sole Aiyeṅkar man who has stayed on in Kottimangalam. He likes to sit on the shadowy verandah of his house and read Sanskrit verses in an old black book. Simultaneously, he surveys the *kuḷam* and if something escapes his notice, his dog will alert him. Whenever he discovers someone who does not behave properly towards the reservoir or the trees in its vicinity, he shouts to him or her and tries to chase the intruder away.

K. R. Varakacchariyar has a hulking presence, he is massive and by a head taller than his neighbours. This alone would demand respect. He does not move much. I have neither seen him catching an offender of the rules nor could I imagine him ever doing it. More than his physical enormousness, it is

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[390] In other contexts, the dates are given as 1887 – 1954.

his relaxed, authoritative demeanour that commands respect. Throughout the study area, K. R. Varakacchariyar is known for his stern observance of the religious rules. For example, various consultants of Tirukkalukundram and Irumbuli recount that whenever he had to go to a district assembly [*jamāpanti*] as a village official [*muṉcīp*], he did not drink a drop of water outside of Kottimangalam and rather rushed back too early than to accept water from a stranger. Anecdotes like these are told with a curious mixture of admiration and mockery, as is often the case with stories by non-Brahmins about Brahmins. But in their behaviour, people accept K. R. Varakacchariyar's authority over the *kuḷam*.

Furthermore, K. R. Varakacchariyar enjoys respect because of his seniority and because he knows in detail many family matters of the people in the area. This knowledge derives in part from his father who acted as *muṉcīp* of Kottimangalam, in part from his own tenure as munisiff, following his father in this profession at the age of 35. Every former *muṉcīp* or village accountant whom I have met in Tamil Nadu ranges as a very important person in his locality. Even since the introduction of *pañcāyatti rāj*, K. R. Varakacchariyar has been staying in close touch with the other residents of Kottimangalam. The messengers are mainly the children who are around whenever I visit K. R. Varakacchariyar on his verandah. Sometimes he is sought after as advisor. Likewise, K. R. Varakacchariyar's wife is proud of her knowledge of medicinal plants and that people of the neighbourhood come to consult her in case of ailments. Thus the couple seems to make itself useful for the other residents of the place and earns respect for that.

Besides, K. R. Varakachariyar still owns some lands and manages the cultivation of many more on behalf of his erstwhile neighbours. Many of them have retained their lands and return for harvest or on important dates, such as on 27.05.1987 when they conducted a function in honour of T. R. C. Viraraghavacharya Mahadesikan. This makes K. R. Varakachariyar an important patron for agricultural labourers. They will not wilfully risk losing his benevolence.

K. R. Varakacchariyar holds that anybody may bail drinking water out of the *kuḷam*. But asked whether SC people do it as well, he says that they usually do not do it. Their settlements are more than two kilometres away, he argues, that is where they have their own water sources. So what would be the point of coming all the way to the *kuḷam* in front of his house. However, they pass the *kuḷam* when they go to work in K. R. Varakacchariyar's fields or thresh the grains in front of his house; then they could draw water from the *kuḷam*. In practice, I have only seen them asking K. R. Varakacchariyar's wife for water but not themselves bailing water from the *kuḷam*. They say that they quench their thirst from the water of a well in the fields – which reminds one of the mentioned strategy of their equals in Oragadam.

Finally, the observance of the rules on how to use Kottimangalam's drinking water *kuḷam* is supported by the fact that the pressure on the *kuḷam* is comparatively low. Though not far from Tirukkalukundram's bypass road, it has retained a certain seclusion. Hardly any stranger happens to come there by chance. The streets leading to it are unpaved. It is situated at a dead end, almost untouched by traffic. Hence, the situation differs much from that at another *kuḷam* of Kottimangalam that lies directly at the country road and is used by passers-by to dump all kinds of refuse or to let water buffaloes bathe. There are few opportunities en route to challenge the Brahmin's authority, lest somebody would come to do it on purpose. However, the fact that encroachment has been effectively warded off and the serenity preserved is likely to be a reflex of the *kuḷam*'s being subject to strong control.

The example of the drinking water *kuḷam* in Kottimangalam has shown that the observance of the rules of how to use the reservoir cannot be reduced to one factor only. The array and the interplay of various cultural, historical, political, social, economical, religious and geographical factors that account for the separation of the relatively clean drinking water *kuḷam* of Kottimangalam versus its comparatively polluted surrounding.

The agency of the neighbourhood can be instrumental for the prevention of encroachment of *kuḷam*s. This is shown in an example from Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai.

> On the flank of one of the neighbourhood's two *kuḷam*s, C. S. Rajaganapathy, a 75-year old man dwelled in a little house made of stone and mortar. This house was obviously an encroachment, even though he claims to have bought it for Rs. 2,700 in 1996. He complains that boys of the neighbourhood had been harassing him from the beginning and recounts that it all culminated on a Sunday in mid September 1997. 100 persons of the neighbourhood came, he exclaims and says in English to emphasise his point, "they made a hell". He describes how they knocked at his door and hammered at his house until he gave them the keys and fled to a relatives' house for three days. His brother's son retrieved the keys from the house from the most powerful man in the neighbourhood, he says. After that the old man moved into the house again, but only for the short period, until he finally found a new place to live nearby.

When I asked one of the leading persons of Desamukipettai – a nephew of the mentioned powerful man – how he would call the group that chased Rajaganapathy away, after some pondering he finally came forth with "gram sabha". He explained that it met in the local school and decided not to tolerate the encroachment by the old man mainly because he did not belong to their neighbourhood. Rajaganapathy's relatives live in a place called Mangalam, which is but five kilometres away, but that is already too far to count. C. S. Rajaganapathy embodies the mirror image of the highly localised neighbourhood. He proudly tells that he was born in Burma when his parents – as many Tamilians of that era – worked there, and that he travelled widely across the subcontinent when he did his service in the Indian Army. With shining eyes, he presents a group photograph taken in 1954 in a military academy in Poona that shows himself along with Jawaharlal Nehru. C. S. Rajaganapathy is a follower of the Congress party while the neighbourhood is forcefully dominated by the ADMK party. His style of living solitarily, only with a dog at his side, must appear unusual, if not silly, to the people of the neighbourhood. He is a stranger and they wanted to get him out, so they did it.

Control over *kuḷam*s is one means for a neighbourhood to assert its identity. Keeping people out who would like to use the *kuḷam* is one way to distinguish itself vis ā vis other neighbourhoods. Who belongs to which neighbourhood becomes obvious also whenever collective action is called for, for instance, to repair the water supply. The few neighbourhoods in the study area in which the social control is strong enough to beware the *kuḷam* from trespassers or whose *nāṭṭār*s sell by auction the produce of the *kuḷam* are usually in remote places and /or castewise rather homogenous. They are either mainly inhabited by one caste alone (as in Irumbuli, Paramecuvari Nagar, Desamukipettai vis ā vis *kōṭivināyakar kuḷam*) or exclusively by castes that are not deemed Untouchable (central *kuḷam* of Oragadam, *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*).

Vice versa, very often a dilapidated and /or highly encroached upon *kuḷam* points to a neighbourhood with weak control of its resources. Whenever I talk to informants who live at decaying *kuḷam*s, I usually inquire about the reasons for the obvious lack of management.

Concerning the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's hill and next to the Nalvar-temple, two septuagenarian inhabitants of Kanakkoyilpettai remember that they used to fetch their drinking water from it. An informant in his fifties, who lives right at the *kuḷam*, recalls that in the times of his grandfather it was a guarded source of drinking water but, in his childhood, the families used the water but once a year to drink and cook with: on the occasion of the poṅkal festival. The *kuḷam* was situated at the edge of the settlement at that time. In the past few decades, the settlement has crept around it. To the erstwhile neighbourhood of Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyārs, people of an array of other castes have been added. Nowadays, I have not seen any local person using the *kuḷam*'s water for drinking. At most people take a bath in it or do the laundry. The surrounding settlement blocks the inlets and the outlet of the *kuḷam*. A weaver complains that the south flank of the *kuḷam* is overgrown with thorny bushes and that people use it as a toilet, so that it can no longer be used to commute.

When I inquired into what people took as reasons of the decay, people of the neighbourhood at first answered offhandedly with "because of the population growth", or "this is kali yuga", bad times. After many visits and with growing acquaintance, they became more outspoken. They told me that they do not use the *kuḷam*s because all kinds of people have access to them nowadays. In one instance, an informant (a Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyār whose father had already lived in the neighbourhood) lowered his voice and confided that he has not been using the *kuḷam* anymore since even a Paṟaiyar family moved in a house at the *kuḷam*'s flank. Obviously the "old inhabitants" of the neighbourhood have not been able to prevent this deemed intrusion and prefer stopping the use of local resources instead of mingling with Paṟaiyars and other people whom they consider lower. This means, at the same time, that they are letting go of their control of these resources and do not care for them anymore. The less *kuḷam*s are used by the people of the vicinity for a variety of purposes, the heavier is their decay.

> The filthiest *kuḷam* in the study area has been described above – the *kuḷam* of pigs. The only person I have witnessed taking his bath in that *kuḷam* was a Kuruvikkārar, member of a group that most other inhabitants of Tirukkalukundram despise. Obviously this was the nearest *kuḷam* to his encampment where nobody would tell him to leave. Of the persons who dwell in the houses of the neighbourhood, nobody uses the *kuḷam* to do the laundry, to wash etc. So little is the interest that they do not mind that the *kuḷam*, as described, has become almost inaccessible. This, in turn, diminishes the chance of making use of it.

The decentralisation of the water supply in the form of a multitude of *kuḷam*s is mirrored in the decentralisation of the concomitant form of domination and control, that is, in the importance of the neighbourhood for the reservoirs. In that sense, *kuḷam*s appear like typical common goods.[391] However, there is one important difference to common goods *strictu sensu*: the property rights of *kuḷam*s usually do not lie with the neighbourhood or the beneficiaries of the *kuḷam*s. The official owner of the *kuḷam*s is the state, either in the form of the Big Temple or of the *pañcāyattu*. Their way to manage a *kuḷam* has to follow principles that are diametrically opposed to those that underlie much of the management as it has been sketched so far in this chapter:

- It is not spontaneous, but bureaucratic and mediated.

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[391] Ostrom 1990: 211.

- It does not endorse differentiation on the line of purity and pollution; on the contrary, it has to counter them.
- It is not led by an interest to maintain the cohesion of the neighbourhood.
- It is centralised in the sense that it is oriented more towards Tirukkalukundram as a whole than towards neighbourhoods.

Concerning the first point, instead of the direct action taken by people of the neighbourhood in form of their contribution of labour, the state employs contractors to do the work and the transactions are monetarised. Whereas working jointly towards the improvement of their neighbourhood would perhaps enrich a neighbourhood's identity, having the work completed by contractors gives scope for professional companies to improve their business and, in a way, it is also more comfortable for the inhabitants. They do not have to be aware of how the water flows in their vicinity, they need not know how to fix their *kuḷam*'s outlet nor do they have to provide the degree of organisation that would enable them to register enough workforce at short notice. Many of my consultants take issues related to *kuḷam*s so easy that they have lost interest (and presumably also the capacity to organise works towards their *kuḷam*s).

> On 16,3,2000, G. Anandan, one of the municipal drummers of Tirukkalukundram toured the neighbourhood of the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's Hill. While walking, he beat a few times his small hourglass shaped double headed drum [*tamakku*]. He entered a house, conveyed his message, had an adult of each household sign a list to document that he or she has received the news, pocketed some coins as tip and knocked at the next door. A seasoned drummer, Anandan covered the entire neighbourhood in no time and was off before I could get hold of him. I questioned a woman who had just signed the drummer's list what the news had been. She had already forgotten. Must be the auction of the fruits of the tamarind trees at Tirukkalukundram's hill she conjectured. Two of her neighbours knew that the right to cut the bushes that grow around the *kuḷam* was to be sold, by auction, but neither of them had paid attention to the venue and the timing. They advised me to go and ask the Executive Officer; he would know. It seems that they did not pay attention at all and signed the drummer's list without considering the common property that might have been at stake.

> When I arrived at the *pañcāyattu* building, the Executive Officer was, as usual, beleaguered by several inhabitants of Tirukkalukundram who wanted to bring forth their matters, among them a councillor who used to be around whenever I visit the office. The Executive Officer was strongly annoyed when I inquired about the dates of the auction. Jointly with the councillor, he told me to visit a different auction because the announced one at the *kuḷam* would not be interesting for me. Superfluous to waste my time visiting it. Finally he, along with the councillor, averred that he did not know when and where the auction would take place; could be that day, could be the next. Then he asked me, rather bluntly, why I was still in Tirukkalukundram and why I had not yet left the place.

> About two hours after that conversation, the Sanitary Inspector of Tirukkalukundram and one of the *pañcāyattu*'s two Sanitary Supervisors arrived at the *kuḷam* in question. Two men in their twenties who had been waiting for them, welcomed them politely. They had come on behalf of their father; the councillor whom I had met before at the EO's had told them about the venue, they explained, he is one of their neighbours. The *pañcāyattu* clerks asked two passers-by to sign in a book that the Sanitary Supervisor carried with him and added the name

of a fourth person himself. Nobody paid the deposit of Rs. 50 that would, as per rule, be required to take part in the auction. The Sanitary Inspector asked the two young men what they were willing to pay for the right to cut the thorny bushes at the *kuḷam*. "Rs. 75", they said, and the *pañcāyattu* clerk agreed. The passers-by left good-humouredly, obviously without knowing what the scene had meant. The Sanitary Supervisor painstakingly filled in the blanks of the official file and documented a correct auction that went like "500 – 400 – 300 – 100 – 50".

The two young men who were awarded the rights to fell the bushes which grow on the flanks of the *kuḷam*, explained at length that their activity would improve the water as no leaves would fall into it anymore and they held that it is a kind of social service to the public what they were up to. However, it was also not an unprofitable venture. Firewood of the variety that grows at the *kuḷam* sells at Rs. 30 per bundle [*kuṇṭu*, 25 kg] the current retail price in the market. The wholesale price is Rs. 700 per ton. Therefore, with only two bundles sold, the two buyers will have covered the expenses for the right to the wood.

Sometimes people approach me with their complaints about the bad state of *kuḷam*s. Obviously they hope that the foreigner with the habit of taking down notes on everything and everybody can help the neighbourhood in a matter that they find hard to solve from within the system.

However, bureaucratisation does not rule out a neighbourhood's becoming active towards the benefit of its *kuḷam*. Instead of spontaneous action with spades and sticks, neighbours work with pens, paper and persuasion: they can – through their representative – petition the *pañcāyattu* for the repair of the *kuḷam* in question. Comments a woman in the neighbourhood of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai's *kuḷam*, pointing to the other neighbours: "They should take action, they should really make a representation, write a letter, collect the signatures from other people and then write to the officers concerned and then make the representation." Consequently, she theoretically knows what to do, but does not become active herself: "I am illiterate, I find it difficult to relate to the educated people, but others can take up the matter. But nobody is willing to take up the matter. That's all."[392] Usually the respective councillor is allotted the sum and organises the work in his or her ward, if the Executive Officer of the municipality does not entrust the work to a contractor. For more substantial work e.g., in the frame of the above mentioned "*namakku nāme*" scheme, the Revenue Department sanctions about half the sum of the undertaking and the other half has to be borne by the users.

It is a standard issue in everyday conversations in Tirukkalukundram to compare wards – and complaining that this or that ward is much better equipped than one's own ward, be it with street lights, water supply, tarmac on the streets, refuse disposal services and whatever else comes under the purview of the *pañcāyattu*. Likewise, it is a topos that the government does not do its job. Says, for example, T. R. Murali of Tirukkalukundram:

Maintenance is undertaken by the government itself. Normally it is the responsibility of the town *pañcāyattu* leader, but that fellow is ineffective. Cleaning the *kuḷam* would come under him, like building roads and all those things. It is his responsibility, but he is proving to be ineffective.

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[392] April 1999.

T. R. Murali is one of Tirukkalukundram's portfolio capitalists, he owns a lorry and seven acres of fields. He contested in the elections as he would have loved to become *pañcāyattu* leader himself, but was defeated. More often, there is a general mistrust vis ā vis the *pañcāyattu*.

> On 8,10,1999, before monsoon rains set in, Rajavelu of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai took a hoe and a stick and cleared the rainwater drainage in front of his plot so that the water would not flow into his house but into the nearby *kuḷam*. He complained heftily about the *pañcāyattu* arguing that it has promised to do that work, that it has allotted funds to the councillor of the ward and that it even had Rs. 5 to 10 per household collected for that purpose, but that it had failed to do anything. He fumed that "they" [*avaṅka*] put all the money in their own pockets and if "they" carried out the task at all, they engaged daily wagers who worked only from 8 a. m. to 3 p. m., and badly so, at that.

> About two weeks later, on 26,10, the councillor of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai engaged six young men, who, with the help of short-handled hoes, cleared the weeds and dug a trench of about a half metre in width and 15 centimetres depth. The councillor, wearing a white shirt, stood at the side and monitored them. As far as I could see, they never made it through to the *kuḷam*. But that was hard to judge, as several people of the neighbourhood had already taken action themselves and, same as Rajavelu, had cleared the ditches in front of their houses.

Adding to the feeling of things going wrong may be the lack of public relations on the part of the *pañcāyattu*. There is no black board, no radio, no newspaper or other medium to publish information about decisions taken (except for the public drummer, see below). The information is mainly passed on by word of mouth. This exposes it to distortions, interpretations and flaws, especially in wards whose inhabitants do not communicate much anyway. Furthermore, the wards do not have budgets of their own. The decision whether or not a required sum is conceded is not felled within the neighbourhood, but on the level of Tirukkalukundram as a whole, if not on higher echelons of the revenue administration. The ways how this happen are not always clear.

> In Tirukkalukundram, the Executive Officer has his bureau on the ground floor of the local *pañcāyattu* building. Its door stands open whenever the EO (as he is called locally) is in, a curtain with flower design shields the room from eyesight. There are usually two small groups of people around: one outside the office, one inside. Some people would stand in submissive postures as they face the EO and extend their applications to him. Others would sit down leisurely on one of the chairs that form a row in front of the EO's huge, tidy desk and meddle freely with every conversation that they find interesting. Evidently they have not only come to get certain administrative acts executed. They attain the air of being closely acquainted with the EO, and whenever I happen to visit the EO's office, one of them is around. Some introduced themselves as councillors of certain wards. At the same time, they are contractors of sorts or patrons of various kinds of businesses. Obviously it depends to a great deal on their talent and insistence whether a ward gets its *kuḷam* (or other public amenity) repaired.

On one hand, the *pañcāyattu* has to set aside funds for the repair of *kuḷam*s. On the other hand, it also has the right to collect the income from the auctions of the *kuḷam*'s produce. When time comes and the firewood or fish of a certain *kuḷam* is due to be sold again, clerks of the *pañcāyattu* conduct auctions. The person with the best bid gets the right to use the good in question and pays an amount for that to

the *pañcāyattu*. The money "disappears" in the general budget of the town or village; there is no account of the gains and investments of specific *kuḷam*s, no self-sufficiency of the neighbourhoods. In practice, it usually takes a long time until the *kuḷam*s are repaired or otherwise seen to. The repair of *kuḷam*s (especially as means to provide drinking water) is not a top priority of the state, as will be shown below. This may have various effects. One is, in several neighbourhoods, as has been shown above, inhabitants take care of their *kuḷam*s themselves. They circumvent the state and act as if they were the righteous owners. As the *pañcāyattu* and the administration of the Big Temple are lacking the funds and the ability to see to all *kuḷam*s anyway, neighbourhoods have a chance to fill in this gap, even though unofficially. Otherwise the state's negligence of *kuḷam*s contributes to prolonged periods of their dilapidation which nurtures the impression of *kuḷam*s being useless.

Furthermore, constitutional right forbids the *pañcāyattu* and the authority of the Big Temple to endorse notions of ritual purity and pollution; they must not prevent people of particular caste backgrounds to use certain *kuḷam*s. On the contrary, as state institutions, their task is to ensure that everybody has free and equal access to public goods. This approach is not confined to government offices; it also forms part of a certain strand of public discourse, usually in the form of normative statements which take the guise of descriptions of reality: I came across it especially in conversations with informants who talked to me as private persons, not as functionaries, but who earn their living in government jobs, such as teachers or as S. Tamilaracu, Tirukkalukundram's postmaster:

> **S. Tamilaracu**: It is the task of the temple administration [*nirvākam*] and of the *pañcāyattu* authorities [*aluvalakam*] … All the *kuḷam*s can be used by everyone … Everyone can take a bath [in the *kuḷam*]. There is no board written and kept there saying 'no one from outside should drink water from this', anyone can use it.
> **Bettina:** Also people from the 'colony'?
> **S. Tamilaracu** *interrupts*: Once upon a time, this problem was there. But now the people here believe that everyone is a human being.

This is, of course, the opposite of the logic of separation that has helped to maintain *kuḷam*s clean and ritually pure.[393]

Inconsequently, the means to put the rule of equality through lacks equality. For example, Tirukkalukundram's public drummer who is instrumental in letting people know the dates of the relevant auctions, G. Anandan, is a Paṟaiyar, a petite inhabitant of Paramecuvari-Nagar. He follows his father in this profession and attains the typical mythical decorum: his drum, he asseverates, is many hundred thousands [*laṭcam* /lakh] rupees worth. Whenever he is hungry, he scrapes off a bit of its saffron-yellow surface and eats it, this saturates his hunger, he explains. Obviously no member of any other caste was ready and apt to do the drummer's job, which in turn nourishes notions of separation.

Whereas it has been shown that the differentiation of *kuḷam*s according to usage and user groups is a core principle of their functioning and leads to eviction of encroachers, the *pañcāyattu* has no interest in maintaining the cohesiveness of neighbourhoods. Even if it tries to evict encroachers, in practice it hardly fights it through. Of course encroachers are trespassing on public ground, yet their potential to

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[393] Common goods do not necessarily imply notions of purity and pollution. But being in accordance with local values and beliefs certainly improves their efficiency.

disturb the administration is rather small. Conversely, the *pañcāyattu* might even earn money from them if it is able to collect fines.

> At the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple, various stages of encroachment can be studied. It starts tiny, with a pile of palmyra leaves or some firewood stored at the flank of the *kuḷam* by people living next door. A somewhat bigger affair is the usage of public space for commercial activities, such as, by an itinerant washerman. First he developed the habit of carrying out his ironing orders next to the *kuḷam* on his wooden board that is fixed to a bicycle. Then he left his equipment there at night. After a while he erected a little shed to protect his tools. Yet some months later this mutated into a workshop with thatched roof, and he is planning to stabilise the building further, perhaps with a corrugated iron sheet. Other business people have already reached the "stage" of full-fledged cement buildings, up to three stories high, that turn their rough back sides to the *kuḷam* and hardly a passage is left to enter the *kuḷam*.

The official owner of that particular *kuḷam* and the plots surrounding it is the Big Temple.[394] Most shopkeepers pay money to people who collect it on behalf of the Big Temple. Some of these payments are obviously on a regular basis, like a rent, explains K. P. Mani, auditor of Tamil Nadu's HR&C Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department. However, when he examines the Temple's files in an impressive four-day effort in mid October 1999, he cannot identify any corresponding influx of money in the Temple's cash register. The money has obviously disappeared in a network of vested interests. K. P. Mani declares that he will enlist the flaws he found, point for point, and send them to the pertinent office in Chennai. Asked for the possible consequences he shrugs and says, there are many people working in that department, but the complaints about temples throughout Tamil Nadu are even more, so he cannot say whether his findings will be considered. K. P. Mani leaves, and a little later – as a first step – a new Executive Officer of the Big Temple is appointed. This is very much a centralised affair: Sundaresan, the new Executive Officer, does not stay in Tirukkalukundram, but travels all the way from Chennai to Tirukkalukundram, Tirupporur and other temples he has to monitor. As father of three children, all of whom have either settled as computer specialists in the USA or are preparing to do so, his focus is naturally more on the world than on petty conflicts of the countryside – and on his retirement which is due within four months.

I have not found any evidence of officials taking steps to evict the trespassers from the *kuḷam*s. There are reportedly cases pending at the High Court in Chennai in which the temple's administration tries to get its plots back or to get at least rent from it. But so far little has happened.[395] The encroachment is massive. Houses of Temple priests are involved as well, and even Tirukkalukundram's police station is said to be an encroachment. It is built on a plot that belongs to the Big Temple and blocks the access to the west flank of the described *kuḷam*.

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[394] Although several informants, including people who are active in Tirukkalukundram's politics and generally interested in such matters (such as a councillor and a *pancāyattu* clerk) hold that this *kuḷam* somehow belongs to Mamallapuram.

[395] During the time of my fieldwork, the only action against encroachers I came across took place at the procession street round Tirukkalukundram's hill from where an encampment of Kuruvikkārars was evicted. A shopkeeper of the market street alongside the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple, remembers an action by the Collector that took place on March 7th, 1998 and consisted of the broadening of the market street by demolishing the shops or the parts thereof that protruded more than a metre into the street in order to help the traffic get through better. Yet this was only a gradual relief and did not help the *kuḷam*.

Finally, from the perspective of an observer outside the study area, from centres like Chennai, Delhi or from great distances abroad, the *pañcāyattu* and the Big Temple's administration may appear like highly decentralised, basic institutions. Adding to this impression of decentrality, the municipality is in turn subdivided in wards – Tirukkalukundram has 18 – each of which is represented in the *pañcāyattu* by an elected councillor. Furthermore, like in the case of *ēri*s, the responsible persons are no strangers; they live in the respective localities or even in the neighbourhood. However, in the eyes of a neighbourhood, both institutions are centralised. A ward is – unlike a neighbourhood – an administrative unit that is defined by the state; usually neither the headman [*nāṭṭār*] of a neighbourhood is identical with the locally elected councillor or mayor [*talaivar*], nor are the wards geographically congruent with the neighbourhoods.[396] The administration of the Big Temple and that of the *pañcāyattu* are functional on the level of Tirukkalukundram or Oragadam as a whole, and this is the level that they tend to emphasise with what they do. In addition, both institutions are controlled by higher echelons of the State. This can sustain the notion that nothing can be decided at the local level anyway. As the elected mayor [*talaivar*] of Attur, a village north of Chennai, puts it: "We do not have the power for *policy making*. We are *agents* of the state, *agents*, that is all!"[397]

This chapter has shown that the control of *kuḷam*s in neighbourhoods rests upon various factors:
- The standing of certain families (for example, the father of the present *nāṭṭār* of Oragadam was *nāṭṭār*, too),
- considerations of caste, purity and pollution,
- spatial proximity of important actors to the *kuḷam*,
- allegiance to political parties,
- economic and social potential of individuals, for example, to provide jobs for others, to be consultants for medical questions,
- cohesion of the neighbourhood,
- intensity of its utilisation,
- and the talent, age, commitment and charisma of the locally important men.

It seems impossible to reduce the question of how and by whom a neighbourhood's *kuḷam* is dominated to one or two of these factors alone. The control is based on an ever changing and further developing interplay of the mentioned factors rather than on abstract administrative norms. Various levels of neighbourhood and state intermingle.

A basic principle by which *kuḷam*s – and water reservoirs in general – are being managed to stay physically clean and ritually pure (and which relies on their high number in a given locality) is separation or differentiation: on one hand, though *kuḷam*s are basically multipurpose entities, some of them are mainly reserved for specific uses. On the other hand, severe restrictions of access imposed by neighbourhoods for the common good are meant to ensure its cleanliness and ritual purity. Furthermore, the management by the neighbourhoods relies on the contribution of labour by its members, a mode which is non-monetary, non-bureaucratic, but rather spontaneous. This mode of utilisation and management is as highly decentralised as the physical layout of the *kuḷam*s themselves. Yet these principles conflict with the character of public goods that *kuḷam*s attain in the frame of the state being their official owner and operator in form of the Big Temple or the *pañcāyattu*.

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[396] For more on the *pancāyattu*i *rāj* system and its introduction in the 1970s, see Kantowsky 1986.
[397] Interview with R. Murukan, 10,01,2003. Words in italics are English in the original.

Steps to water, to the ancestors, to the gods and to the public. Tirukkalukundram, *śaṅku tīrttam*, *māḷai amāvācai*

10.   *kuḷam*: Religious aspects

Before Viṣṇu created the universe, he dug a *kuḷam*. He filled it with his sweat during 50,000 years of cosmogonic austerities. Till today, there is a *kuḷam* at the Manikarnika ghat in Varanasi where the scene is said to have taken place.[398] If a *kuḷam* was instrumental in a ritual that created the world, is there also an enduring relevance? This chapter describes the rituals that take place at *kuḷam*s in the study area and tests various classifications for them: public versus particularistic,[399] Brahmin versus non-Brahmin,[400] specific for *kuḷam*s versus unspecific for them and according to their content. So a conclusion can be drawn which helps to answer the question of the role that *kuḷam*s play in rituals.

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[398] Parry 1982: 339.

[399] I.e., rather pertaining to individuals or families than to the public. I hesitate to use the term "private" as this is too narrow.

[400] I do not mean to draw a strict separating line between Brahmins versus non-Brahmins rituals, gods and goddesses; both are strongly interlinked (see also, e.g., Fuller 1992: 54 – 6, Shulman 1980: 131). An informant in my study area said that Viṣṇu and Śiva are like the Collector of an area, they reside only in cities or important villages, whereas the numerous *ammaṉ*s are meant for villages, like the local mayors [talaivars]. A resident of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai clarified: "To safeguard a country, there is a prime minister, the president is above him, there are MPs [Members of Parliament] below him [...]. When you come down to the state, it is the Chief Minister, the MLAs [Members of the Legislative Assembly]and so on. So likewise in the religious field, Vīrapattiraṉ is the chief and the rest of them are his subordinates." A lady intervened: "Vētakirīsvarar is the head and the rest of them are subordinates"; a third interlocutor added "[he is] the school headmaster, the teachers and so on". Obviously they are used to thinking in hierarchies. – I use the terms "Brahmin" versus "non-Brahmin" more like leitmotifs that undergo modulations and variations in the course of an opera. In that sense, a ritual that includes features such as animal sacrifices or possession and that is very unlikely to be

"In places without tanks, gods are not present. A temple therefore should be built, where there is a pond on the left, or in the front, not otherwise", writes Stella Kramrisch quoting the Viṣṇu dharmottara.[401] In fact, most grand temples of Tamil Nadu and beyond in India include a *kuḷam* within their precincts, and so does the Big Temple in Tirukkalukundram. In Oragadam, the Vaiṣṇavite temple has none and neither has the saivaite temple. But the biggest *kuḷam* of the place is right adjacent to the little hill, on which towers the ancient temple of Śiva, and it is alo next to the abode of the local *amman* (Kuḷatiyammaṉ) and other gods. So a link can be assumed even though there are no walls with red and white stripes that encircle the *kuḷam*. The Vaiṣṇavite temple is not far off either, and a pillared hall [*maṇṭapam*] in the central axis between *kuḷam* and temple helps to establish an imagined line between both. The sacred grove of Irumbuli with the temples of the local *amman* (Kuṉṟatammaṉ) and of Murukaṉ at its entrance has a *kuḷam* at its side. Thus in the study area, the cited requirement of the *kuḷam*s can be said to be fulfilled, at least for the Brahminic temples and to some extent also for others.

Water is omnipresent in Hindu rituals. It is the main liquid used in the unction ceremonies [*apiṣēkam*], for blessings, to transmit divinity etc. (see chapter thirteen). *kuḷam*s within easy reach of the shrines offer the possibility from which to draw the necessary water. They are furthermore important for the supply of water for the needs of devotees. P. V. Ramachandran, a Brahmin interlocutor of Tirukkalukundram-Kanakkoyilpettai, goes as far as saying that the *kuḷam*'s duty [*muṟai*[402]] is to provide water to wash hands and feet before worshipping.[403] This action, in Tamil called alliteratively "*kai kaḷ kaḻuvi*", is supposed to be taken in the secular sphere of life as well, for example, preceding every meal and concluding it. It is a very particularistic gesture. Even members of the same family do it separately. In the Big Temple of Tirukkalukundram, there is no common timing such as in the local mosque in which Muslims, before their prayers, jointly do their ritual washing in a row of small cubicle like bathrooms. To attend the standard *pūjai*s in the Big Temple, everybody arrives at a slightly different time and probably meets friends and relatives at the *kuḷam* or inside the temple, but there is no fixed appointment. Thus in a very particularistic way, the visit to the *kuḷam* is thought to mark the beginning of each ritual and every individual worship.[404] Though being very particularistic, it takes place in the public sphere of the *kuḷam*.

Similarly, from the perspective of the gods, a dip in a *kuḷam*s stands at the beginning and end of festivals.[405] The grand procession festival of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple (and in like ways of most other such temples) starts and is concluded with a bronze trident [*āṣṭanayar* in local parlance,

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performed by local Brahmins would come under the leitmotif "non-Brahmin". People of the study area hardly use the term "Brahmin" in day to day conversations; they say "Aiyar" instead. "Aiyar" refers honorifically to anybody who does *pūjai* in an "Brahminic" way; in Tirukkalukundram, an "Aiyar" is epitomised by a Kurukkaḷ (whom other Brahmins do not acknowledge as "real Brahmins" and would not marry their daughters to), but also members of the Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyār or Nāyakkar caste who attain "Aiyar" like lifestyle and professionally perform *pūjai* are called thus, see below.

[401] Kramrisch 1977, vol. 1: 5, quoting the Viṣṇu dharmottara II, cap. XLIII, 25 – 31.

[402] *muṟai* basically means one's "turn" or "duty" or "shift". It is used in *ēri* irrigation practices as well as in Temple service (see Fuller: 1984, Good 2001: 501).

[403] Various interviews, e. g. on 11.10.99.

[404] Müller 1992: 38 writes on this ritual bath, *snāṉa*: "dieses *snāṉa* [hat] zumindestens bei orthodoxen Brahminen nichts mit einem Bad im westlichen Sinn, das mit der Vorstellung von Körperreinigung und Hygiene verbunden ist, zu tun [.]. Die Reinheit, die durch ein *snāṉa* erlangt wird, ist nicht sichtbar und läßt sich nicht an der wirklichen Verschmutzung, z. B. des Kleids, messen."

[405] See also Meyer 1986: 110.

otherwise also *aṣṭira tēvar*][406] being submerged in the *kuḷam* within the Temple's walls. The trident is "recharged" before every outing of the gods by a priest in the temple on top of the hill and it takes part in every procession, being carried in a little palanquin in front of the sculptured idols of gods.[407] Whereas Kurukkaḷ priests point it out as the most important part of the procession, the real sede of the god's power, the worshippers hardly bother about it and concentrate on the lavishly decorated idols. Especially the ceremony at the end of the ten days is spectacular.[408]

> On the last day of the procession festival, the procession images of Śiva in his form as Nāṭarājā and of his wife Ambal are anointed [*apiṣēkam*] and decorated [*alaṅkāram*]. Then Śiva Nāṭarājā's statue is placed on a bullock cart and taken out of the temple precinct through the southern gate into the adjacent South Car Street. Accompanied by musicians [*nātasvaram* and *tavil*] it goes on some dozen metres, then its face is covered with a mince white cloth[409], the entire procession makes a U-turn and swiftly recedes into the Big Temple. Along with nadeswaram, tavil and a band of musicians, Śiva Nāṭarājā is taken to the *kuḷam* and put down there. The trident is brought as well and posted on the steps that lead into the *kuḷam*. Karttikayan, the Kurukkaḷ priest who had directed all ceremonies of the entire car festival, awaits it there, nourishing a fire. He waits until helpers get the trident out of the palanquin and hand it over to him. Carrying it, he steps into the water and submerges three times. About 50 people do the same. Then Kartikkayan erects the trident on the steps, pours water over it and washes it as vigorously as a experienced mother rubs her toddler clean. Finally he waves fire in front of the trident [*tīpārātaṉai*] and smears a pinch of the ashes resulting from the fire on the forehead of Śiva Nāṭarājā's idol, removing the white cloth. A rather quick procession of the god around the Big Temple ensues. In the afternoon, a similar water ritual [*tīrttavāri*] is repeated at Tirukkalukundram's biggest *kuḷam*, for Śiva in his form as Vēṭakirīsvarar and his wife Tiripuracuntari.

Usually my questions about the meanings of certain rituals let eyebrows rise. This is the case with the *tīrttavāri* ritual as well. Several priests of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple advise me to ask T. C. Theyagarajan Carvacatakam Gurukkal about that matter. They say he is one of the most senior priests of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple and particularly well versed in all the rituals. In fact, he loves to rapidly recount prescriptions of rituals, in a mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil. Effortlessly and in great detail he enumerates which substances have to be used in which rites and he knows by heart the sophisticated sequences of rituals within big festivals. Yet enquiring of him about the meaning of a ritual like the *tīrttavāri* resembles asking a plumber and fitter to explain the laws of gravity. In the twilight of the Big Temple's pillared hall in which we were sitting when I broached that topic, T. C. Theyagarajan looked askance at the foreigner, obviously wondering how one can ask such a silly question and answered that people bathe, so the gods have to bathe as well. – "But we take a bath twice a day, the gods bathe only once in ten days!" – "We also anoint it [*apiṣēkam cey*] every morning and every evening", said T. C. Theyagarajan and explained that the gods have to relax after the stress of the festival and the rituals serve to put them at ease.

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[406] Clothey 1983: 122 writes: "This icon, which generally serves as the surrogate for Skanda and the two consorts, is a three-pronged sakti or lance [...] This icon, known as the Aṣṭardēva, clearly fulfills the triadic symbolism also found in the god [Murukaṉ] and the two consorts". Contrary to that, in Tirukkalukundram, the lance is clearly connected with Śiva, not with Murukaṉ.

[407] The priest who carries the trident himself has brought up the simile with a battery that has to be recharged".

[408] Śivakāmicampiraṭāya for the *pañcapūtam*.

[409] Called *maṟaittal*, a word that connotes concealing, disappearing, going out of sight, as well as, dying.

The *tīrttavāri* rites are public. Everybody can witness the ritual bath of Śiva Vētakirīsvarar and his wife in the publicly accessible *śaṅku tīrttam* . Similarly public are special baths that take place on new moon days. On these occasions devotees dive into the water even without a god having done so before them. In some places, these ceremonies ensue on a particularly grand scale, for example, in Tiruvallur west of Chennai. Devotees take their bath in the *kuḷam* of the local Vīrarākavaṉ-temple and, standing in the water, they greet the rising sun with verses [*mantiram*]. People from as far as Tirukkalukundram[410] travel there especially on the new moon day in February /March [*māci* month]. The festival is known to be very auspicious [*rompa vicēṣam*] and attracts huge crowds that mingle freely in the *kuḷam*. One of the biggest festivals in Tamil Nadu takes place in the great *kuḷam* of Kumbakonam [*makāmakam*], which is said to be filled with water from the Ganges every 12th year. Devotees from all over the country throng the *kuḷam* to have a dip at that auspicious moment.

This shows that there are eminently public bathing rituals connected to *kuḷam*s, as well as, very particularistic ones such as the above mentioned washing of hands and feet before and after any ritual. Between these extremes ranges a series of other bathing rites on a scale of being particular and being public; that is, what I will call particularity and publicity. By "bathing ritual" I refer to a ritual in which at least one of the participants dips partly or completely into the water in the *kuḷam*.

Among the bathing rituals performed at *kuḷam*s, the ritual conducted about a fortnight after the death of a family member is one of the most important ones in terms of frequency. It is a common sight. I came across it in Brahmin families, as well as, in Paṟaiyar families and in most of the fairly well-kept *kuḷam*s of the study area. The fortnightly ritual is also one of the most important ones considering its elaboration and intensity, as well as, its public character. As in comparable rituals, this public character does not show at first sight; therefore, I will dwell in some detail on the fortnightly ritual and associated ones.

At first sight, the fortnightly ritual is very particularistic. Participation is usually restricted to men – only in rare cases did I see women taking part in it. Informants trace this variation to caste based differences in customs [*jāti paḻakkam*]. The same happens with variations in its name: there is not one single, generally approved name for it, but local informants call the ritual *niṉaivu nāḷ*, *titi nāḷ*, *kāriyam*, *karumāti* or *karumakāriyam* interchangeably. Furthermore, the exact date on which it is to be carried out depends on particularistic customs of castes: families conduct it on the 10th, 12th, 14th or, most commonly, on the 16th day after the demise. A weaver explains that the ritual has to be carried out on the same lunar constellation [*titi*] as that on which the person has died, just on the reverse phase of the moon's trajectory.

The fortnightly ritual is basically a family affair. The atmosphere is open enough to allow passers-by to stop for a chat, but it is solemn. Obviously people of the neighbourhood are less inclined than in other ceremonies that take place at *kuḷam*s (see below) to mingle with those who have come specifically to participate in the ritual. Party politics is absent. There are no VIPs visiting the scene, extending greetings, fondling babies, distributing visiting cards as they do in auspicious festivals like weddings.

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[410] As, for instance, Subramani of Vellaiyar Street and his family whose family god [*kulateivam*] is Tiruvallur Vīrarākavaṉ.

On 5,11,1999, the ritual was performed for the deceased mother of A. Gunasekar of Nalvarkoyilpettai. The protagonists of the ritual, apart from Gunasekar, were his elder brother, a brother of his father and a more distant paternal relative (his great-great-cousin). Gunasekar is the younger of the two brothers, so there was a short discussion whether he should really take the lead in the ritual, but the relatives concluded that this would be the best thing to do since his elder brother had performed the ritual at the death of their father.[411]

At the outset of the rite, all of them are shaved and their moustaches removed. They are supposed to shave both, head and beard, explains Ramalingam of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai, but most men nowadays restrict it to the symbolic act of having their moustaches removed, he says. The fortnightly ritual marks the end of the period of deep mourning that the family undergoes after the death of a member. During this period, the deceased's close relatives are subject to a strict code of conduct. Men are to stop shaving themselves. Women should not apply oil on their hair, not use turmeric powder after bathing, groom their hair with flowers or wear jewels. Everybody has to restrict one's diet, especially non-vegetarian food must not be touched. The mourners should light a lamp for the dead person. They do *pūjai* for her or him, but they must not do *pūjai* to any god.

After the shave, A. Gunasekar and the three other protagonists of the fortnightly ritual took a bath, put on new clothes and got their foreheads smeared with ash to be fit for the ritual. Soon the priest gave them thin straps of cloth and rings of grass, some gingelly seeds and a Rs. 1 coin each to hold in their hands. While they pronounced the name of their mothers, grandmothers and the name of their lineage [*kōttiram*], the priest poured water from a vessel over the ensemble. In a shower of rice, the four turned around their own axes.

This rite, performed as one of the first steps of the fortnightly ritual, should be repeated every month at least for the year to come. It is locally called *tarppaṉam* and consists basically of water being poured over grass and seeds (usually sesame) held in one's hand. Müller, having studied literary prescriptions of that rite, explains that the water in this case is not a sacrificial good but is "water of separation" [„Trennungswasser"] and interprets it as the visualisation of the change of property from the giver to the receiver, so as to say: "This is no longer mine".[412]

The rite can be carried out by one person alone, without the service of a priest. This makes *tarppaṉam* one of the more particularistic and least public rites at *kuḷam*s. Yet I have never witnessed the fortnightly ritual as a whole being performed without a priest. He is usually an "Aiyar".

In the case of the fortnightly ritual for A. Gunasekar's mother, the Aiyar was Chandrashekar, one of the most popular priests in the study area. He is, like Gunasekar, a Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyār, who styles himself like Kurukkaḷs do. He has his forehead shaven and the remaining long hair tied into a knot at the neck. In his earlobes glitter brilliants. A sacred thread winds across his upper body. The white loincloth around his legs is tied in the priestly way etc. Chandrashekar started the ritual with *pūjai*s, which are very general in use, such as, the Vigneshwara *pūjai* to make sure that the elephant-headed god cleared all obstacles, the

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[411] According to literary prescriptions, the man who lighted the funeral pyre has to perform the fortnightly ritual: Müller 1992.

[412] Müller 1992: 46.

Maheswara *pūjai* in which the sacrificial fire [*hōmam*] was lit in a square pit [*kuṇṭam*][413] and the *navakirāka pūjai* for the nine important stars. How standardised the rituals are shows the incident in which Chandrashekar, well into the ceremony, hesitated and asked A. Gunasekar for whom it was performed, for the dead person's name. A short discussion arose as the son, for whom addressing his mother other than with "*ammā*" or an abbreviation thereof would have been indecent, did not know her real name for sure.

The ritual can be performed as elaborately as is typical for those in which Aiyars are involved. It may last between roughly one and three hours. Depending on the family's customs and on its financial means, some parts of it can be omitted or telescoped into a very short version. It culminates in the preparation of a special rice porridge that is formed into little dumplings the size of plums [*piṇṭam*].

In front of Gunashekar and the other protagonists of the family's fortnightly ritual, the Aiyar placed sixteen dumplings in two rows on a grass sheath that lies on a banana leaf. Facing it, there was another banana leaf with a heap of rice. On top of that there were three stones, decorated with flowers. A basket, plaited for the occasion by the local barber, covered it like a cheese cover. The protagonists of the ritual paid their respect to the arrangement by lying down on their bellies in front of the banana leaves and by waving a plate with fire in front of it. Then they tore the grass sheaths out, kneaded the dumplings into a big lump and placed it on a banana leaf on the roof of the next pillared hall or another exposed spot and called the crows to munch it as lunch. At this point, the Aiyar got a symbolic remuneration of Rs. 7 and the ritual gift of betel leaves cum areca nut.

The dumplings are an important part of the fortnightly ritual. This is mirrored in one of its names, "gift of rice porridge dumplings" [*piṇṭatāṉ*]. It is, however, not actively used in the study area. Nor is its Sanskrit name [*śraddha*] known.[414] Then follows what is obviously perceived as the climax of the ritual.

While the protagonists were sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the sacrificial fire and facing the *kuḷam*, one guest after the other took the earthen pot that contained the ashes of the deceased, touched it gently down on the laps of every protagonist and whispered words of consolation in their left and right ears [*aṉutāpam*]. Led by the barber, Gunashekar took the earthen pot with the ashes of his mother in his arms, stepped into the *kuḷam*, submerged thrice, turned around his own axis and submerged the ashes in the *kuḷam*. Also the three stones that had been resting on the rice heap under the basket were deposited in the water.

The fortnightly ritual is not confined to the nuclear family, but usually relatives come from other cities and villages to take part. Most of the time their role is that of spectators. They become active but in two or three instances: they pass the earthen pot around, they bathe, and in the end they offer gifts, mostly men's clothes, to the protagonists. In some cases that I have observed, all the guests took baths in the *kuḷam* like the chief mourner. Families that do not deposit the ashes of their deceased in the *kuḷam* carry them to the nearby ocean on the day after the cremation. Still, they perform the fortnightly ritual and submerge only the three black stones that were posited on the rice heap under the basket. In

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[413] Visitors explain that for the sacrificial fire [hōmam], nine different kinds of wood should be employed: *atticuḷḷi* [fig], *ālaccuḷḷi* [banyan], *erukkaccuḷḷi* [yercum], *muruṅkai cuḷḷi* [horse radish], *vaṉṉic cuḷḷi*, *māccuḷḷi* [mango], *vilvaccuḷḷi* [bael], *nāyuruviculḷi* [from a hedge], *koṉraiccuḷḷi* [*Indian laburnum*], *aracaccuḷḷi* [pipal].
[414] See Nicholas 1985; Müller 1992; Feldhaus 1995: 74.

the remaining time they withdraw to the shadow of the next tree or pillared hall, sit down and chat, debate new marriage arrangements or communicate the latest news of cousins and aunts. In some cases they are served tea and juice during the ritual and meals at their end. At times these meals can be as lavish as wedding meals. Rich families engage cooks for it and hire marriage halls. From the perspective of the relatives, the fortnightly ritual is a chance to meet whom they not usually meet, thereby reaffirming the sense of belonging together. This means that the ritual establishes contacts or creates publicity among relatives.

During the long hours of the ritual, the guests also have much leisure to answer my questions. It turns out that their knowledge of the fortnightly ritual and its meaning is, as a rule, quite incomplete and often contradictory. Some guests interpret the sixteen little pots [*kalacam*] that the Aiyar places on top of a heap of rice on a banana leaf at the inception of the ritual as representing the sixteen days that have passed since the death and guiltily say that they should have offered one such pot per day to the soul of the deceased. But as they failed to do so, the Aiyar makes good for that. However, the Aiyar himself does not know about such a reason for a bad conscience and explains that the pots represent eleven manifestations of *rauttirarkaḷ* [Rudras /*rauttirarkaḷ*] and five elements [*pañcapūta*]. Likewise there are different interpretations regarding the three black stones that are submerged in the *kuḷam*. Some informants hold that they represent Piḷḷaiyār, as similar black stones represent that elephant-headed god in other rituals. Other informants believe that they stand for the mother and the grandmother of the main protagonist of the ritual as well as the deceased person. Yet others explain that one stone represents death god Yāma, another one Piramā, and the third stone depicts the deceased person.[415]

I obtained the most diverging answers when I asked for the meaning of the fortnightly ritual. I identified two broad clusters of reasons. Number one is brought forth predominantly by men and especially by Brahmins or by members of castes that try to emulate Brahmins in many aspects of life, such as Kaṇakkuppiḷḷais or certain Mutaliyārs. Cluster number one refers mainly to the fate of the deceased's soul [*āvi*].

> **Bettina:** What is this ritual performed for?
> **T. Natarajan:**[416] It is for the peace of the soul. It is like doing the great unction [*kumpapiṣēkam*] for the temple. They make them [the protagonists of the ritual with the ashes in their hands] stand, the Aiyar chants some mantras for our (sic!) satisfaction and for the soul to rest in peace.
> **Other guest**: It is for the soul to rest in peace.
> **Four to five guests simultaneously**: It is for the deceased's soul to rest in peace!

Ramachandran, a Kaṇakkuppiḷḷai, explains that the soul is believed to rest a full year in the *kuḷam* before it is with the gods – because for the gods, a year is like a day, he adds. That means the *kuḷam* is the ford to the gods. The ritual serves to provide them with the food they need while being in the *kuḷam*. For the same reason, the *tarppaṉam* ritual is carried out every month for one year on the date of the death. In all, the ritual serves to comfort the souls in order to prevent their return to the house.

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[415] Edgar Thurston 1975: 166 – 169 observed various mortuary rituals in which effigies of the expired persons were formed at "tanks" (most likely in this case *kuḷam*s are referred to), to the point that human figurines bigger than men were formed out of mud and dissolved in the water.

[416] Recorded in 1999 on the occasion of the fortnightly ritual of T. Natarajan's aunt [*citti*] on the banks of *śaṅku tīrttam* in Tirukkalukundram.

Within the same cluster of answers that were concerned with the soul of the deceased, but pointing into a completely different direction, range other informants as, for example, Sampath, a Brahmin of Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar. They hold that with the help of the food offerings and especially the monthly *tarppaṉam* ritual to be performed on the new moon day, the souls are attracted to be around to communicate with. Even more outspoken in that sense is a relative of A. Gunasekar. He conjectures that the soul will be captured by the fire and the water. A pot [*kalacam*] full of water is brought home from the *kuḷam* after the fortnightly ritual and its content sprinkled in the deceased's house. It transports the soul of the dead mother back to the house to be with its family, he explains.[417]

The aspect of feeding in the fortnightly ritual is emphasised also by Anne Feldhaus in her book on rivers in Maharashtra where similar rituals are being performed: "Because such rivers are important sources of food, they are appropriate sites to conduct such rites of feeding. More abstractly, rivers embody the natural world's generosity to humans, and thus inspire humans to perform rites of generosity of their own. Furthermore, the association also suggests that generosity on the part of humans gives rise to generosity on the part of the natural world."[418] It follows, firstly, that the fortnightly ritual is by no means specific to *kuḷam*s. Secondly, either the situation in my study area differs substantially from that in Maharashtra, or the association of nature's and humans' generosity is less strong than Feldhaus argues or probably much more abstract. *kuḷam*s are predominantly meant for reproductive needs, less for productive ones as *ēri*s are. At most, the fish in them can count as their generous produce. *ēri*s, in contrast, serve to irrigate fields in order to grow paddy, sorghum, sugar and vegetables. *ēri*s are used to water goats, sheep and cows that can be milked. *ēri*s provide the material to build houses and streets and to make pots and stoves. Thus in Feldhaus' sense, *ēri*s would be the ideal sites to perform feeding rituals. Yet this never happens, at least not in my study area. Obviously there must be more reasons to perform the fortnightly ritual than that of feeding.

This leads to the second cluster of answers to my enquiries for the meaning of the fortnightly ritual among the informants of the study area. It centres on purification. Mainly women mention it; women usually know very few details about the ritual as they generally do not participate in it. They most of all sense its outcome: that they can resume life as usual because the period of mourning is over. "It is like a purification [*cāgiyam*]. If it is done, it is good for the family" explains 21-year-old I. Malar of Tirukkalukundram.

> Ilangovan, Malar's husband, was reportedly bitten by a cobra in January, 1999 and died at the age of 32. His father performed the fortnightly ritual for him on February 3rd. As soon as the news of the first of the three little black stones having been submerged in the *kuḷam* reached the house, the women of the family took a bath and put on new clothes. Ilangovan's father finished the ritual at the nearest *kuḷam* to their house and led the procession that brought home a pot [*kalacam*] filled with a mixture of water from the *kuḷam*, cow's urine, and camphor – all three "pure things" [*cuttamāṉa poruḷ*], clarified S. Mahalakshmi, Malar's sister-in-law. Only after this pot had been placed in the *pūjai* room, after *pūjai* had been done for it and after its content had been sprinkled around the house and on its inhabitants, all of them were purified. To be sprinkled with that liquid implies that they also had a bath in the *kuḷam*, explain S. Mahalakshmi and added: "Death is considered as a hot /polluted atmosphere [*cūtakam*][419]." Malar illustrated that during the past 16 days their rooms had not been considered to be pure

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[417] Nabokov 2000: 203.
[418] Feldhaus 1995: 79.
[419] This word can also signify a very strong menstruation.

[*cuttam*], even though they had been swept and cleaned. "If you perform this ritual on the 16ᵗʰ day, you restore the hygiene", stated Mahalakshmi, "Everything has come to an end" [*ellāme muṭiñci pōccu*].

Again it becomes clear in the context of considerations of purity and pollution that the fortnightly ritual is not confined to *kuḷam*s alone. "It could be performed anywhere", says P. Shanti, another sister-in-law of widow I. Malar. The *kuḷam*'s water itself does not seem to be the most important part of it; it can be replaced or complemented with other water, if at hand.

> After A. Gunasekar had stepped into the *kuḷam* and had discharged the ashes of his mother in the water, the barber officiating the ritual along with the Aiyar sent him to the nearest public bore well to take a thorough bath there. He was followed by the other three protagonists, one of whom had contrived not to take a dip in the brownish water. Obviously the second bath at the bore well was to make sure that they were really clean and pure. It could not be meant to rinse off the dirt that they might have contracted in the *kuḷam* because they took another dip in the *kuḷam* later during the ritual without bathing again at the bore well afterwards.

Many women I talked to speak of restoring purity very much in the sense of restoring the order that the death has disrupted. The importance of the order is reflected also in the reason why women usually do not participate in the fortnightly ritual: according to various informants women would be too emotional for the scene.[420]

> **I. Malar** *(widow of snake-bitten Ilangovan)*: Ladies are not allowed.
> **Bettina**: Why?
> **I. Malar**: It is the convention by our elders. In our country it is like this.
> **Bettina**: What if you had gone there?
> **I. Malar**: Womenfolk would feel miserable, they would normally be overcome with grief and start crying. That is why ladies do not go there, they have much *feeling*.[421]
> [...]
> **Bettina**: Does that mean that men do not grieve?
> **P. Shant**i: Yes. They grieve, but they do not show it, which ladies cannot do. Would you not weep?
> **I. Malar**: Men [...] keep it to themselves [*maṉacukkuḷḷe vaiccuppāṅka*]. They also cry, but not in front of others. If womenfolk cry, men will become upset.
> **S. Mahalakshmi**: [...] If women cry [during the fortnightly ritual], even the men would follow suit. Then everybody would cry and the rites could not be performed.

Too hefty emotional outbursts are obviously likely to spoil the ritual, so they must be avoided. Nothing that would threaten the resocialisation and the establishment of a newly ordered life should interfere in the ritual.

To conclude, the two clusters of reasons given to my question about the meaning of the fortnightly ritual are not contradictory but complementary. After all, both hint to the creation of some kind of order in public. The gift of food and the deposition in the *kuḷam* gives the soul's existence a certain

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[420] Clark-Decēs 2005 describes and analyses the feelings of women who cry in graveyards.
[421] She uses the English term.

structure. Likewise, the purification, the cooling of the "*cūtakam*" serves to restore the usual order of the family's life and, in extension, also of the life of the entire neighbourhood or locality. During the period of mourning, neither do outsiders visit the house nor do the family members go out unnecessarily. They withdraw from social life as much as possible. The ritual re-socialises them. It relieves the family to a certain extent from their responsibility towards the deceased's soul as it shares it with the others in the locality. That makes for its deeply public character. Therefore, it is consequential that the ritual, though first of all being a family affair, is performed in a public place like the *kuḷam*. It not only reinforces the sense of belonging to a certain family, but also to one's neighbourhood or locality.

> When Markapantu Gurukkal of Tirukkalukundram died, his family had his body cremated. According to his granddaughter, his remnants were divided into three parts. One was submerged in the ocean. Another part was sent in a parcel to Varanasi to be handed over to the Ganges. A third part remained in Tirukkalukundram and was immersed in the locality's biggest *kuḷam*. This can be understood as an homage to Tirukkalukundram.

In contrast to other bathing rituals (see below), the fortnightly ritual takes place at a time when *kuḷam*s are less crowded than during the morning routines, but when they are still well populated so that there are many onlookers. I have never witnessed it being performed after dark, only in daytime. It usually starts early enough to be concluded at noon or shortly after. People of the neighbourhood know what is going on. Sometimes the ritual is even publicised throughout the neighbourhood with drums and temple clarinets [tavil and nadeswaram], as more well-to-do people carry the ashes and the necessary utensils in processions to the *kuḷam* and they have important steps of the ritual acoustically marked.

> A. Gunasekar of Nalvarkoyilpettai carried the ashes of his dead mother in a procession with two musicians, a priest and about 15 men, all clad in white, following them. Instead of taking the direct way to the *kuḷam*, which is just some steps away from Gunasekar's home, they turned into the foremost procession route of Tirukkalukundram [*pirataṭṣiṉappāṭṭai /malaivaḷaivīti*], the path around the hill with the big *rauttirarkaḷ*-temple on top. Yet they did something completely unusual: they turned their left shoulders to the shrine. In general in Tamil Nadu, the important shrines are circled in a clockwise direction, with the right shoulders towards them. In this case, the procession's point of reference was not the most important temple of Tirukkalukundram as a whole, but Gunashekar's neighbourhood with its own small temple and *kuḷam* on the southern border. To reach it, the procession soon left the *pirataṭṣiṉappāṭṭai* and walked in a half circle around the place. Beforehand, Gunasekar's family had seen to it that the grass on the site of the ritual on the banks of the *kuḷam* had been mown and a little multicoloured pavilion erected where the ritual is to take place. Hence, they obviously have the right to temporarily appropriate a little patch of public space. The musicians also played when A. Gunasekar immersed the ashes of his mother in the *kuḷam* so that everybody in the vicinity heared that the big moment has come.

Underlining the public aspect of the fortnightly ritual, people from other castes than the family concerned play crucial roles in it as well. Washermen [Vaṇṇāṉ] customarily [*paḷakkamāṉa*] have their role to play as handymen in many rituals connected to *kuḷam*s, and they do so in fortnightly rituals. Also the Aiyar and the barber [Ampaṭṭaṉ] who are like the first and the second master of the ceremony, furthermore the musicians, the suppliers of the temporary pavillon, the flowers and the other goods used in the ritual. Thus a variety of people of the neighbourhood are involved in the

fortnightly ritual, as well as, in several others that are performed at *kuḷam*s. The fact that many participants of the fortnightly ritual are rather uninformed about its details and their meaning may lead to the assumption that for them the most important part is the social aspect of gathering.

However, the aspect of publicity in fortnightly rituals is rarely rationalised by the participants. Asked why they perform the fortnightly ritual at *kuḷam*s, and if it could be done anywhere, they first of all tell me that this is the way it has to be done because that has always been the way how it was done. Then they emphasise practical reasons to perform it at *kuḷam*s. They are convenient places since they provide water all year round. There is enough space for everybody to bathe at the same time. Probably also a pillared hall at their banks serves as protection against the sun and every specialist needed is around – in Tirukkalukundram, the musicians and the barber who is usually called for rituals live right on the banks of the biggest *kuḷam*. Some people say that certain *kuḷam*s contain "auspicious water" or that they are "auspicious, sacred sites" [*puṇṇiya tīrttam*]. This perception will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Other bathing rituals at *kuḷam*s are more particularistic in character, such as the *kaṅka snāṉam* and the *tula snāṉam*. They are in line with Viṣṇu's example cited at the outset, in that *kuḷam*s are sometimes used as places to do austerities. Both rituals take place in Tamil Nadu's chilly season, the *tula snāṉam* on the first and the *kaṅka snāṉam* on the last day of the Tamil month *aippaci* (October /November).

> Before dawn on the 16,11,1999, seven women arrived at the biggest *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram to perform the *kaṅka snāṉam* ritual. They bathed thoroughly, dove merrily and washed their hair. In the end, greeting the rising sun, they let little offerings of flowers and cloth float on banana leaves, adorned with a little camphor flame. Some tied their petticoats around their upper bodies, but others bathed topless. They covered only when one of them hinted at a corner at which a man appeared – a bit grudgingly because of his bad manners; obviously they considered the *kuḷam* to be theirs at this time of the day.

This rite is rather particularistic because it is confined to women mostly of the Kurukkaḷ caste and of castes that tend to associate themselves with Brahminic lifestyle, such as Kanakkuppillais and certain Ceṭṭiyars: "Only those who wear the sacred thread [*pūṇūl*] perform it", explains a weaver whose wife does not observe that ritual. Most members of other castes do not even know that it takes place in the *kuḷam*s of their vicinity while they are just getting out of their beds and preparing their first tea. This exclusivity in turn is likely to enhance the feeling of community among the women who hurry home with wet hair through the streets that are still half asleep and empty. Again the *kuḷam* offers the opportunity to take a bath together and for people of different castes to mingle. However, the same ritual could as well be performed on the banks of a river, as a well-known Tamil story documents, in which a numb man bathes in the Cauvery in October and November until he beholds of god and is able to walk well again.

In another reading of particularistic, the way *kuḷam*s serve the needs of pilgrims to bathe. Many informants point to this role, the knowledge of which stems, on one hand, from their own experience of pilgrimages.

> An aged weaver of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai recounts his pilgrimages to procession festivals (like *caṣṭi nāḷ*) in the Murukaṉ-temple of Tirupporur. Instead of using one of the frequent buses, he and his lot used to walk the 21 miles. The path led them through a

dense forest where they met deer, peacocks and jackals. Judging from how he tells that story (little about the festival, much about the way), the sense of commonality seems to have weighed heavily. It was reinforced by the adventures in the wilderness and topped only by the experience of bathing together in *kuḷam*s and sleeping side by side in a choultry.

Many stories of people in the study area about pilgrimages to Tirupati and especially to Aiyappaṉ's abode on Sabarimalai, two foremost centres of pilgrimage in South India, unfold in a like way. Also in literature, the aspect of community created by joint pilgrimages has been widely treated.[422] Whereas in prayers and the actual worship, the groups stick mainly to themselves, the accompanying practices, predominantly the prescribed bath at the *kuḷam*s, are chances to get in touch with other pilgrims and to develop a sense of belonging to the community of Aiyappaṉ *cāmi*s. On the other hand, the informants of Tirukkalukundram, a pilgrimage place itself, know the situation from the part of the host, too. Modern pilgrims come in buses. As soon as one such vehicle has arrived, the nearest *kuḷam* is flooded by them. The association of *kuḷam*s with pilgrimages is so intimate that the Tamil expression for going on pilgrimage is to go to a "temple and a tank" [*kōyil kuḷam*].[423] However, the examples of Varanasi and the bath in the Ganges or – near to the study area – the bath in the Palar river in connection with the worship of Manapakkam Kaṉṉiyammaṉ show that pilgrims are not confined to washing in *kuḷam*s; they could very well bathe in rivers, if only they were available.

*kuḷam*s are not only good for bathing rituals. In a broader sense of purification, they serve as safe receptacles for substances that are no longer needed or wanted to be around. On occasions like the *tīpāvaḷi* festival, many people observe a fast [*nōṉpu*] for one or more days. During that time, women wear thin vermilion red cords like chains around their necks. Each has a wisp of fluffy fibres or a little ribbon at the end [*nōṉpu kayiṟu*]. The women either knit them themselves or buy them for 75 Paisa in shops. For men the string is a bit broader and sometimes embellished with gold lace, and they tie it around their wrists or upper arms. Similarly, worshippers tie ribbons soaked in turmeric paste around their wrists or upper arms [*kaṅkaṇam*] whenever they vow to a goddess to observe certain rules (mostly sexual abstinence and dietary restrictions) in order to reach a certain goal.[424] The ribbon is believed to protect them, but it also publicises the special condition the believer is in; during big rituals, like Tirukkalukundram's procession festival that theoretically encompasses the entire locality, it allows one to see at a glance who participates in the common exercise and who withdraws. After the fast or when the time for which the believers have bound themselves to obey these rules is over, he or she deposits the ribbon in water – be it a deep well, an *ēri* or, most commonly, in a *kuḷam*. Several informants argue that if they fling it on the nearest rubbish dump, they will run the risk of somebody else finding it with the effect that the effort of fasting would have been in vain. One consultant says, the devil [*picācu*] must not find the ribbon.

Likewise, the sacred threads that men of castes like Brahmins use to tie around their upper bodies [*pūṇūl*] should be tossed into the *kuḷam* as soon as they are no longer used. According to a prescription by Manu, the "twice born" shall throw his stick, sacred thread, felt, girdle and water pot into the water when they are "worn out".[425] These rituals are very particularistic, as they are either performed individually or with other members of one's caste in the neighbourhood.

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[422] E.g., by Turner 1974: 166 – 206, applying his concept of "comunitas" to pilgrimages; a critique thereof with further references by Fuller 1992: 210 – 14. See also Clothey 1983: 83 – 92.

[423] Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1996: 357.

[424] See also Meyer 1986: 234 f. and Diehl 1956: 252 f. on *kāppu* and *kaṅkaṇam*.

[425] Manu 1991: cap. II /64.

*kuḷam*s play the role of receptacles also in a rite that is complementary to a wide variety of events, including all somehow elaborate temple rituals, the first bestowal of a sacred thread, marriages, or the fortnightly ritual: seven to nine different types of seeds ["nine gifts", *navatāṉiyam*] are left to sprout [*muḷaikku*] for an uneven number of days. They serve as sacrifices [*palikai*]. Each grain or pulse represents a different planet god.[426] If they grow well it is perceived as a good omen. At the end of the festivities, the protagonist, accompanied by other guests, walks down the steps of a *kuḷam* and hands the sprouts over to the water, which is again a chance to try fate.[427] In wedding ceremonies, the bridal couple jointly steps into the water and lets the sprouts float.

> P. Shanti, sister-in-law of deceased Ilangovan, explains: "If the sprouts go on in a forward direction, it is considered auspicious. If they return, it is inauspicious." Her sister-in-law S. Mahalakshmi adds: "This ritual is more or less considered as an indication of the departed soul whether he or she is happy with the rites. If [the sprouts] return, the soul says to them 'I left this abode without having some desires fulfilled.' [...] And these desires have to be met."

Several informants interpret this ritual [*paliyam viṭaratu*] as a symbolic act of agriculture: "This ritual means that they [the newly wed couple] have undertaken the task of cultivation and preparing the meal [*vivacāyam ceñci kañci eṭutittu pōṟā mātiri*]." says, for example, S. Shekar of Chengalpattu.

*kuḷam*s serve furthermore for rituals that are neither directed towards purification nor to the deposition of worn-out goods as, for example, coming-of-age rituals of girls [*mañcaḷ nīrāṭṭu viḻā*] or the bestowal of the sacred thread [*pūṇūl*]. When this is performed to a teenage boy, water plays a crucial role – male relatives pour vessels full of specially prepared water over the head of the initiate. Among the most important festivals that take place at *kuḷam*s are marriages.

> When a couple of the washerpeople caste [Vaṇṇāṉ] married in the morning of 7,3,1999, their parents had a temporary pavillon [*pantal*], dirty but in bright colours, erected at the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* to protect the couple from the sun. They chose the corner next to the temples of Kaṅkaiyammaṉ and Paccaiyammaṉ which, even though the goddesses were grandly decorated, did not play any role in the ritual itself. Nor did the water of the

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[426] The seeds are either mixed and the mixture is evenly distributed on five (for family ceremonies) to twelve (for *kumpapiṣēkam*s) little earthen pots [*coppu*], or they are filled in small pots that are marked with straps of coloured cloth and posted in heaps of rice on banana leaves: "Humans sit on sand, gods sit on rice", says B. Ramachandran, an Uvaccār who works as a professional Aiyar. He explains that the seedlings in the central pot with red cloth are wheat [*kōtumai*] and represent the sun [*cūriyaṉ*]. The surrounding ones are:
Moon [*cantiraṉ*] (white cloth) – raw rice [*paccarici*]
Mars [*cevvāy /aṅkārakaṉ*] (red cloth) – pigeon pea [*tuvarai paruppu*]
Mercury [*putaṉ*](green cloth) – broken green gram [*paccai paruppu*]
Jupiter [*viyāḻaṉ /kuru*] (yellow cloth) – chickpeas [*mūkkukaṭalai*]
Venus [*cukkiraṉ*] (white cloth) – hyacinth bean [*moccai*]
Saturn [*caṉīśvaraṉ*] (black cloth) – sesame [*eḷ*]
Ascending node of the moon [*rāku*] (blue cloth) – black gram [*uḷuntu paruppu*]
Descending node of the moon [*kētu*] (beige cloth) – gram [*koḷḷu*]
On top of each little heap, a whole areca nut [*koṭṭaipākku*] has to be put. However, the composition of grains varies according to informant. A. Vasudevan of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai enumerates sorghum [*cōḷam*], paddy [*nel*], chowlee bean [*kārāmaṇi*], hyacinth bean [*moccai*], green gram [*paccaippayaṟu*], black gram [*uḷuntu paruppu*], wheat [*kōtumai*], bulrush /millet rice [*kampu*]. Again different items are included in the list given by Good 1999: 79. See also Feldhaus 1995: 80.
[427] For more on the sprout rite, see Shulman 1980: 117; Clothey 1983: 122.

kuḷam. The entire ceremony, which can last for many hours in the case of wealthy families, was over within half an hour. Yet all the neighbours seemed to have gathered sinc they knew, even without formal invitation, what was happening – being conducted in the open ground of the *kuḷam*'s surrounding, it was thoroughly a neighbourhood affair. Three big shots of the AIADMK party dropped routinely by and congratulated (each slightly too early or too late, but they were in a bit of a hurry because 42 weddings took place that day in Tirukkalukundram and they wanted to cover as many as possible). The couple, in the meanwhile a small family, lives at a stone's throw from the same *kuḷam*.

Festivals like these make use of the *kuḷam*s, their place and water, as they are available free of cost. Though these events matter primarily only to the family concerned, *kuḷam*s serve to publicise them so that they become relevant to the entire neighbourhood.

By all means the least particularistic and most public of all rituals performed at *kuḷam*s is the float festival [*teppa(m) tiruviḻā*]. In the study area, it is part of the festivities for the taipucam festival in the evening of the first day of the Tamil month *tai* (mid January). In nearby Mamallapuram, the float festival is conducted on the occasion of the festivities on the new moon of *māci* month [*māci makam*, in February /March]. Tirumala Nayaka, ruler of Madurai, prolonged the festival for the temple of Minakshi in Madurai in February /March [*tai* month] from an earlier ten to then twelve days "in order to conclude it with the 'float festival'."[428] In other *kuḷam*s, it is done in the course of the procession festival in April /May [*cittirai month*] or other dates, but of course, it has to be in a season in which there is enough water in the *kuḷam*.[429]

The procession images of *rauttirarkaḷ* Vētakirīsvarar and his wife Tiripuracuntari are anointed [*apiṣēkam*], lavishly decorated [*alaṅkāram*] and fire is shown in front of them [*tīpārātaṉai*] inside the Big Temple. Then they are taken to the biggest *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram, accompanied by dancers, musicians and a big crowd of worshippers many of whom come for the occasion from the outlying villages. Fireworks are cracked. The idols are installed on floats that consist of long planks which are tied together and rest on an array of 50 empty barrels. Sets of lamps and ornamental arches complete the scene. Two men with long poles on board the float, six to ten men with long ropes on the banks of the *kuḷam* and a small guiding boat push and drag the float in a circuit of three immense rounds on the *kuḷam*. The faces of the gods always face the crowds of spectators that gather at the banks of the *kuḷam*. A band of musicians, a group of locally important men and several priests [Kurukkaḷ] sit along with the gods on the float, altogether about 60 men and two women. An array of neon tube lights on the float shrilly illuminates the gods but blinds the sight of the personage on board; the noise of the generator that feeds the lights mutes the sound of the music. When the float approaches, several spectators set fire to small pieces of camphor, put them on little pieces of paper and let them float on the water – apart from this and an occasional spunky, adolescent man plunging into the water nearby the float, there is no interaction among spectators and float. A similar ritual is performed, albeit with a lesser number of spectators and seven rounds (it has to be an uneven number) for god Śiva Paktavaccalēsvarar and his wife Tiripuracuntari one day later on the smaller *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple.

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[428] Fuller 1984: 144.
[429] See Welbon and Yocum 1982: 7 for the timing of the Plavotsava festival, as they call it. Also Praveen 1967: 27.

When I enquire about the reasons for conducting the float festival, an answer off the cuff would be that it pleases the gods, they enjoy being taken on a little cruise, and water is, after all, cooling.[430] This is, however, not quite specific for the float festival. It is one of the most general motivations for the observances towards gods. Kalikiri Visvananda Reddy quotes other reasons:

> "It aims at worshiping the water-goddess. This elaborate ceremony is undertaken mainly to appease and persuade the water-goddess to stop floods that might cause breakings of tanks and similar calamities as also to make her bless the peasant community with sufficient water. It is organized at the village level with the contributions from the families using the water of the tank for irrigational purposes. [...] The float festival is conducted not only to evoke piety but also to provide an opportunity for the people of all strata to mingle freely and breath the air of divinity together."[431]

In my study area, a water goddess is unheard of (as for Kaṅkaiyammaṉ, see below). All informants agree that the float festivals clearly have nothing to do with her. She is neither referred to in any way during the festival nor is it her who is taken around on the float. However, one Kurukkaḷ consultant states that the god's and goddesses' presence blesses the creatures that inhabit the *kuḷam*: "[O]nly the human beings have six senses, the other creatures have five. God is not only for the human beings but for all creatures. [...] Human beings have the desire to seek god and search for him and attain him, the other creatures do not have it. So in order to bless these creatures who have only five senses, the Lord himself comes to their abode, meets them and offers his blessings".[432] He likens the ceremony to those in which a god is ritually made to go hunting which appeases the wild animals of the woods.[433] In short, the float festival is an act of publicising the god's presence, of making it felt even for those who do not normally enjoy it.

This is consistent with the second aim mentioned by Reddy, and it points into a direction which is taken by many of my consultants in the study area who are either Brahmins or think in their way. To quote K. S. Gopalaswamy, Aiyeṅkar in Oragadam: "[The float festival is conducted] Because you see the god in one particular form only in the temple. So in order to have the disciples to see the god, from wherever they are, so the Lord is being taken in the float [*teppam*] [...] So that the people can worship from wherever place they are. So if he comes to the southern side, even the south can see him. If you go on western side, even the west. The people need not converge at a particular place to see the god.".[434] Some informants even emphasise that this is the only opportunity for people of all castes to see the god which they usually do not have any chance to do.

Theyagaraja Gurukkal, who has been introduced above as one of the most senior priests of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple, does not perform the rites of the float festival himself. He leaves that job to his son or to other younger priests. He says he concentrates more on festivals like

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[430] See also Meyer 1986: 247.

[431] K. V. Reddy 1989: 167.

[432] Recorded on 4,4,1999 in Tirukkalukundram.

[433] Sontheimer 1997 describes such a ritually enacted hunt of god Khandoba in Jejurī, Pune district, Maharashtra. One of the multifarious interpretations that he offers alludes to the expansion of the boundaries of routine life: "The festival also reflects the need for the periodical, dynamic interaction between 'inside' *and* 'outside'; the static *and* the mobile; the settlement *and* the forest, or the *kṣetra and* the *vana* [...]; the daily temple ritual routine *and* the dramatic, playful performance of the ritual; the hierarchized, vertical cosmos *and* the earthbound, horizontal cosmos of the cult." (p. 318 f.; emphasis by Sontheimer).

[434] Recorded in English on 20,03,1999 in Oragadam.

*kumpapiṣēkam*s or bestowals of the sacred thread, that is, on rituals in which holy verses [*mantiram*] have to be spelled out.[435] These rituals are obviously considered to be more important or prestigious because they stand for existential passages or substantial changes whereas the float festival is predominantly an act to create publicity.

The role of *kuḷam*s for the float festival is crucial. In my study area and wherever else I mentioned that topic, the informants dismissed the implication in Reddy's quote that the float festivals are performed in *ēri*s ("a tank for irrigational purposes"). Several went on to illustrate that *ēri*s do not provide the necessary facilities. They would be dangerous to enter as the banks are not uniform and lack appropriate steps. This does not allow the men with the ropes to steer the float. They do not contain water all year round. They have no provisions for the float to be let safely into the water, and they are withdrawn from the settlements. "Therefore, the *kuḷam* is an ideal location, it is man-made and set apart for this purpose.", concludes a senior Kurukkaḷ of Tirukkalukundram.

Among Tirukkalukundram's *kuḷam*s, only those are used for float festivals that are supposed to be *tīrttam*s (or fords to divinity; this Sanskrit word and its meaning will be dwelt on in more detail in the next chapter). Generally, in the study area, the float festival is clearly associated with Brahmins.[436] To quote from a conversation with Kulappa Naicker on money collections for certain festivities in Oragadam:

> **Kulappa Naicker**: It [the float festival] belongs to the Brahmins, they are the ones who are in charge of the festival and they do not ask any money from us. Our temple is a Tamil temple and the money which is collected goes towards our temple and for arranging the functions. Whereas their rituals like the float festival [are different] – the float belongs to the Viṣṇu [Perumāḷ] temple, in these temples it is the Brahmins who undertake these tasks, they do not ask us.
> **Bettina:** Does Māriyamman̠ here have a float of her own?
> **K. N.:** Māriyamman̠ has a chariot [*tēr*], she does not have a float [...]
> **Bettina:** Does Māriyamman̠ not like to be taken around on a float?
> **K. N.:** Yes, she does like it. Only in some places is the festival conducted for her. Māriyamman̠ likes it, Kaṅkaiyamman̠ likes it. It is all a question whether it [the float] is available or whether such a function could be organised. The float festival is usually a Brahmins' festival.

During the time of my fieldwork, the float festival did not take place in Oragadam. Octogenarian Kulappa Naicker, my most aged consultant, is among the few who faintly remember the festival to have taken place in their childhood; he still knows that the float was being let into the water at the *kuḷam*'s south side, the easiest one to reach from Oragadam's Viṣṇu temple whose authorities were responsible for the ritual. "In those days they had grand festivals. Nowadays not. It was observed by the Vaiṣṇavite Brahmins [Aiyeṅkar]. Nowadays there is none of them around, so there is no [float] festival". Almost all families of Oragadam's erstwhile Vaiṣṇavite Brahmin population emigrated in the past half century, the remaining family is that of the temple cook and the officiating priest [Bhattachariyar /*pattacāriyar*], recently complemented by re-migrants. They struggle to run the day to day service and cannot dream of performing a huge float festival. As for the temples of Kun̠ratamman̠

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[435] Various conversations, e.g., on the last day of the *cittirai ur̠savam* festival 2000.

[436] Corroborating this view, Welbon and Yocum 1982: 60 f. present the foundation of the *teppam tiruviḻā* in Sanskrit sources (*Īśvara saṃhitā, Puruṣottama saṃhitā, Śrīpraśna saṃhitā*).

in Irumbuli, its *pūjāri*, Vedagiri, who also takes care of Kāḷiyamman's temple in Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil, says he does not know whether the goddesses would like to be floated. It just is not being done, neither now nor in his father's or his grandfather's time. In the time of the fieldwork, the float festival was performed only in Tirukkalukundram, organised by the authorities of the Brahminical Big Temple.

Outside the study area, the float festival is occasionally conducted for ammans that do not belong to the Brahmin pantheon.

> In Kadumbadi near Mamallapuram, there is such a grand festival annually for "the small *amman*" [Cinnamman] midway into *māci* month (beginning of March) that attracts huge crowds from a radius of approximately 25 kilometres. People in the study area like Varadan, the *kampukutti* of Irumbuli and other agricultural workers, start talking about it weeks in advance, which is rare for religious festivals, especially those away from home. A series of extra buses are engaged, but still each bus is full the bursting. The place is famous for its weekly healing ceremonies during which Cinnamman "comes upon" the priest, and this is an element of the float festival as well. Lots of goats and chicken are sacrificed; according to the distinction made at the outset, both rather identify festivals that are not usually associated with Brahmins.
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> However, even though the building in which Cinnamman and her fellows Karumāriyamman and Piḷḷayār are anointed and decorated has the charm of a garage and not the veneration of the pillared halls in the Big Temples in Mamallapuram and Tirukkalukundram, the ritual is very much in line with how it is conducted in those places. Munusami, the officiating priest, is called Gurukkal, even though other Kurukkaḷs do not acknowledge him to be one of them. Possession is only an ephemeral feature and the animal sacrifices take place out of sight of the amman: chicken are slaughtered on the roof of her temple, goats behind her temple, and the meat is not consumed on the spot but sold and eaten at home. The festival seems to emulate the Brahminical way to perform it. It also looks like it is becoming more and more popular: in 1990, the crowds surrounding the *kuḷam* had become so huge that the old, smallish idol had to be replaced by a bigger one in order to be better visible on the float.

Likewise, but on a smaller scale, is the float festival for Cēcamman (said to be a form of Draupadī) in a *kuḷam* between Naduvakkarai and Kunavaakkam on the road from Tirukkalukundram to Kalpakkam. Another huge float festival for the non-Brahmin Ellaiyamman takes place in Uttukkaadu near Walajabad west of Kanchipuram. Among inhabitants of the study area, it is common to drive as far as that to participate in these festivals. Meyer mentions float festivals being carried out for non-Brahmin Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari. She reports that the goddess orders her worshippers to dig *kuḷam*s for her sake. However, in my study area I did not come across a temple of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari that would boast a *kuḷam*.[437] Obviously these bodies of water are a status symbol of gods and goddesses on the lines of the Brahminic model, employed by worshippers who want to heighten the prestige of their goddess.

My informants obviously do not consider a float festival like that for cinnamman in Kadumbadi to live up to the events that take place in temples more strongly associated with Brahmins. When they came

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[437] Meyer 1986: 74.

to know that I planned to visit it, they told me that it would not be appropriate to do so without being duly accompanied.

> Despite the above depicted attempts to shape the float festival in Kadumpadi according to the Brahminical model, many people echo the judgement of a middle-aged Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyār of Tirukkalukundram: "It is a *nasty*[438] place". Although the festival in Kadumbadi is basically meant for families, more men than women take part in it, and as the night proceeds, the scenery becomes increasingly raucous. Many interlocutors of my study area, particularly Brahmins and members of other castes who tend to vegetarianism, consider themselves to be too decent to go there. The mentioned informant holds that the place is not suited for such a festival as the *kuḷam* and the space that surrounds it are too tiny, people stand on each other's feet, and besides, a lot of drinking goes on.

In all rituals mentioned so far, somehow Brahmins are involved – in that they are administered by Aiyars and /or in that they are modelled on the lines of the Brahminical canons (not necessarily on the written religious prescriptions [*ākamam*], but on what people of the study area witness Kurukkaḷ or Bhattacharya priests doing). Likewise, many of the gods mentioned so far belong to the Brahminical pantheon. Therefore, *kuḷam*s may appear as Brahminical entities.

However, also a variety of non-Brahminical deities can be found at *kuḷam*s. There does not seem to be a restriction as to which god's temple may be built next to a *kuḷam*. In the study area, there are temples or shrines of

- Piḷḷaiyār (*kōṭivināyakar kuḷam*, *veḷḷai kuḷam*, *intira tīrttam*, 2 at *śaṅku tīrttam* , *tāmarai kuḷam*, *akkiṇi tīrttam*),
- *rauttirarkaḷ* (Rudrankoyil, *śaṅku tīrttam* , *nari kuḷam*) ,
- Nanti (*uḷ kuḷam*),
- Hanuman (*śaṅku tīrttam*),
- Sanīśvarar /*navakirāka* (*kōṭivināyakar kuḷam*),
- Murukaṉ (Irumbuli),
- Nine sisters (Oragadam),
- Snake goddesses [*nāka*] (*kōṭivināyakar kuḷam*) ,
- various *ammaṉ*s (*tāmarai kuḷam*, Irumbuli, Oragadam, *intira tīrttam*, Paramecuvari-Nagar, *cēraṉ kuḷam*, Madulankuppam *kuḷam*, 2 at Kanakkoyilpettai; *piramā tīrttam*).

If there is an ammaṉ at a *kuḷam*, it is mostly Kaṉṉiyammaṉ [the "virgin *ammaṉ*"] and Kaṅkaiyammaṉ or Paccaiyammaṉ. Paccaiyammaṉ [the "green *ammaṉ*"] is said to be identical with Kaṅkaiyammaṉ. At the *kuḷam* beneath Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, Paccaiyammaṉ has her own temple next to Kaṅkaiyammaṉ and is deemed to be the latter's younger sister [*taṅkaci*]. Whenever Elumalai, the priest [*pūjāri*]*,* worships her [*apiṣēkam*], he does it for Kaṅkaiyammaṉ firstly and foremostly: on an "ordinary" Friday (Friday being the *ammaṉ*'s day of the week), she is anointed with gingelly oil, soapnut powder [*cīyakkāytūḷ*] and a paste made of turmeric powder and water. On special days, the *apiṣēkam* will also include the juice of tender coconuts, honey, milk, curd and a mixture of fruits. Then Elumalai adorns Kaṅkaiyammaṉ with golden glittering ornaments that form a face, clad in a sari with bright colours [*alaṅkāram*] whereas Paccaiyammaṉ is just thoroughly cleaned with the help of soapnut powder and covered with a little sari. Accordingly, there are more worshippers catching a

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[438] He uses the English term.

glimpse of the fire [*tīpārātaṉai*] and something of its ashes in Kaṅkaiyammaṉ's temple than in Paccaiyammaṉ's, and they do not do it at Paccaiyammaṉ's again. At various *kuḷam*s, shrines of Kaṅkaiyammaṉ as well as Kaṉṉiyammaṉ are present.

In order to understand the relationship of Kaṅkaiyammaṉ to the other ammaṉs, I inquired why it is mainly she who has her temples at *kuḷam*s. But I have not been especially successful.

> The following scene of 21,01,1999 is typical. My interlocutors were neighbours of the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* with the shrines of Paccaiyammaṉ and Kaṅkaiyammaṉ. They presented themselves as staunch believers and regular worshippers of the goddesses. One woman held that there are three sisters: Kaṅkaiyammaṉ, Ōcūrammaṉ and Celliyammaṉ. The two last ones, the "elder sisters" [*akkā*] are Tirukalukundram's village goddesses [*kirāma tēvatai*], located on the street between the Big Temple and the biggest *kuḷam* of the place, as they explained. A man intervened; she forgot Paccaiyammaṉ, he remarked. – "O.k., so they are four sisters", the woman gave in. But the argument continued. An elderly lady contended that there are five sisters [*māriyattai*], not four. She was challenged to enumerate them and she did so: "Kaṅkaiyammaṉ, Paccaiyammaṉ, Aṅkāḷammaṉ, Celliyammaṉ and Ōcūrammaṉ". Another woman stated that there is only one Māri, the others are the seven virgins [Śaptakaṉṉi]. When a man insisted that there are indeed various Māris, like Tantumāri, Muttumāri, Karumāri and so on, the conversation is on the verge of dissipating into utter confusion.[439] My question why Kaṅkaiyammaṉ can so often be found next to a *kuḷam* stirred up an even louder discussion.
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> **Man:** Kaṅkaiyammaṉ is water [*nīr*]. That's why this ammaṉ, Kaṅkaiyammaṉ, has water, a *kuḷam*, so there are facilities where she can be bathed [*kuḷitti paṉrattukkāka vaciti*].
>
> However, the unction of Kaṅkaiyammaṉ in the study area does not differ from that of other *ammaṉ*s in that the consumption of water would be more.
>
> **Bettina:** So Paccaiyammaṉ will be bathed in especially chilled water?[440]
>
> **Woman**: No! It is only a name because of the water (from the Ganges – *kaṅkā*). Just as we have names, they call her Paccaiyammaṉ. Kaṅkaiyammaṉ is also a name.
>
> In the end, they just shake their heads and make it clear to me that they find all the inquiries about the interrelationship of *ammaṉ*s and their favourite places absolutely unimportant and silly. Even the local priest (the *pūjāri* whom a woman tells me it is better to ask) cannot tell me more.

There is a general understanding that Kaṅkaiyammaṉ is related to water, yet in a rather broad way. In a sense, every drop of water is *kaṅkā*.[441] Kaṅkaiyammaṉ has no specific character, not even a special vehicle – just that wherever she has a shrine, there is likely to be some occurence of water, even if only in historical perspective as, for example, in Tirukkalukundram's core bazaar area. Her comparably grand temple there was erected at the site of an erstwhile *kuḷam* which was filled and levelled to meet the requirements of modern road traffic. "Nowadays a well is there", says S. Chandrashekaran Stapathi, the sculptor who participated in the construction of the temple. Kaṅkaiyammaṉ is not specific for *kuḷam*s – there is, for instance, a shrine for her nearby the vast

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[439] Meyer 1986: 52 concludes, obviously from similar discussions: "We see that the lists are arbitrary arrangements of goddesses known to the informant" and writes (p. 53) that the names of the goddesses are interchangeable when they are based on the same idea.
[440] *paccainīr* means "cold (or chilled) water".
[441] See Meyer 1986: 235.

temple complex in Manapakkam on the Palar river and the name itself points to the holy river in North India. Rarely can one even come across a Kaṅkaiyamman-temple at an *ēri*, as, for example, in Mangalam east of Tirukkalukundram, where she is the village goddess [*kirāma tēvatai*].

Kaṅkaiyamman's position is ambiguous.[442] On one hand, informants point to her association with the holy river Ganges in North India, with the mythological character, goddess Ganga, and thus with the pan Indian religious traditions usually promulgated by Brahmins. In fact, there is one Kaṅkaiyamman-temple in Tirukkalukundram which is under the auspices of Brahmins who do *pūjai* there. Interestingly, it is the home of the one and only publicly accessible idol of Viṣṇu in Tirukkalukundram – though due to the myth of goddess Ganga she is popularly more linked to *rauttirarkaḷ* who is said to have caught her in his dreadlock.[443] On the other hand, she ranges as one of the village *amman*s like the *kirāma tēvatai* of Tirukkalukundram, Celliyamman and Ōcūramman. The festivals conducted for Kaṅkaiyamman in July /August [*āṭi* month] are similar to those that are held for other ammans, full-fledged with processions and the distribution of porridge (or sesame beer: [*kūḻ*]). Sometimes they include musical or theatrical performances [*terukkūttu*, *nāṭakam*] and fire walking. These festivals attract huge crowds. On the scale between public and particularistic, they tend strongly to the former. Occasionally they also include sacrifice of chicken and goats, and in Oragadam, she "comes down upon" [*mēl* /possesses] Sattar, a man of the village's western part. As mentioned at the outset, both bloody sacrifices and possession mark non-Brahmin rituals. How unimportant water for this festival is shows that it is performed in the second hottest months of the year after May /June, a season in which hardly any water is around. "This is not a festival [*tiruviḻā*] for water. *āṭi* is an important month for the amman. They do it for the amman. Water is not important. Water is essential only for farming [*vivacāyam*]" – that is how a farmer of Mangalam puts it. Thus, in this respect, nothing makes Kaṅkaiyamman stand out among other ammans. Probably it is her ambiguity – to be a local as well as a nationwide goddess – that helps to popularise her. Whereas Ōcūramman, for example, is not common farther south in Tamil Nadu (she is mythologically connected with the town Hosur on Tamil Nadu's border with Karnataka), shrines for Kaṅkaiyamman are widespread.

Among the non-Brahmin deities worshipped at *kuḷam*s, Muṉīcuvaran seems to be the most important one. He is more shapely than Tampirāṉ who is worshiped at *ēri*s: whereas Tampirāṉ "materialises" only in times of special *pūjai*s for him, Muṉīcuvaran has, in many instances, a permanent shrine, if only a modest one. It consists usually of three, in rare cases also of five, seven or nine stones or bricks put into a row, besmeared with vermilion and turmeric powder. Beyond the eastern border of Tirukkalukundram in Kottimangalam, there is a *kuḷam* named after him. And one evening, when I talked about Muṉīcuvaran with my neighbours, one recalled that he had seen a sand lorry with the inscription M u n i s w a r a n. He laughed: that is unusual; usually lorries bear *amman*'s names.

When I ask my informants about Muṉīcuvaran, they would sometimes react with apprehension. "These are bad deities" [*tuṣṭa tēvarkaḷ*], says, for example, Turai "Gurusamy" of Tirukkalukundram-M. N. Kuppam and makes a point of it that he does not worship him. Some classify Muṉīcuvaran as an evil demon [*pēy*] and liken him to Tampirāṉ.

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[442] The literature on this *amman* is rather scanty; Handelman 1995 describes a cult and myth of Kaṅkaiyamman in Tirupati and depicts her as "intimately and even prosaically domestic being[s]" (p. 287) with "'middle' qualities" (p. 286) who is neither typical for a Brahminical goddess nor for a non-Brahminical.

[443] Meyer 1986: 21 retells a Tamil story of the coming into existence of Kaṅkā from a pot being placed on Īśvara's head by his wife Īśvarī. Yet it is not clear who Īśvara and Īśvarī exactly are.

Venkatachalapathy of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai, a great story teller, describes his encounter with Muṉīcuvaraṉ: "He stood here, in the centre of *intira tīrttam*[444]. It is several years ago. How tall are you? [...] O, he was longer than you, more than six feet, and he stood in the centre of the *kuḷam*. It was past midnight. My attention was drawn to him because his loincloth [*vēṭṭi*] was all white and shining. It was remarkably bright. Otherwise he did not have any upper cloth, not even a towel [on his shoulders]. His colour was red like your people's. There was also another man at the *kuḷam* and it was only he who told me afterwards that what I had seen was Muṉīcuvaraṉ; I had not been aware of it. I called Muṉīcuvaraṉ. He was about as far as these houses [*points out*] are now [from us]. So I could not see him in detail. But he did not react. And all of a sudden, he stood on the banks of the *kuḷam*! As fast as the wind [*he holds his hand horizontally in front of his mouth and blows over it as if he wanted to blow away a fly*]. Nobody in the world can run so fast. And suddenly and as quickly, he was on the main road over there."

Muṉīcuvaraṉ is said to make his appearance together with Kāṭṭēri (see chapter five). He walks behind her to protect her so that nobody dares touching her. Bala, the scavenger [*tōṭṭi*] of Tirukkalukundram, says he sacrifices chicken for Muṉīcuvaraṉ and Kāṭṭēri; and when he notices my interest in Muṉīcuvaraṉ, he calls Muniyammal, a shyly giggling woman in her early twenties from Chennai who was married not long ago to a man of his neighbourhood. Now the local Muṉīcuvaraṉ "comes upon" her every Tuesday and Saturday, Bala explains.

The name Muniyammal points to the other aspect of Muṉīcuvaraṉ – which is so different from the one so far described that a good number of informants says that there are two altogether different Muṉīcuvaraṉ: a blood and a milk Muṉīcuvaraṉ [irattam-Muṉīcuvaraṉ and pāl-Muṉīcuvaraṉ]. If propitiated, milk-Muṉīcuvaraṉ helps childless couples to get children; they are usually named in his honour – hence, "Muni ammal". Milk Muṉīcuvaraṉ is generally associated with families' welfare. A few of my consultants in the study area mention him as their family god [*kulateyvam*]. Many worship milk Muṉīcuvaraṉ also during wedding ceremonies and in the fifth month of a pregnancy. Apart from that, he is generally esteemed as protector of children's well-being. He is always around, but if he is worshipped, the children can play peacefully outside the house, explains a Brahmin woman of Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar. In the study area, it is common to perform a ritual for him once in a year. Usually it is done within the family. Even in Brahmin families it is conducted, but they do not officiate over it; they hire the service of non-Brahmin priests for that purpose. "It must be a non-Brahmin, non SC", explains the mentioned Brahmin woman, in line with several other Brahmin informants, "but it can very well be a ST".[445]

The ritual mainly consists of offerings of food, especially sweet rice porridge and clothes to the god and of waving a lamp in front of the slabs or bricks that represent him. Then the worshippers bathe, wash their clothes and dry them separately. In the ritual, the carefully established substantial difference between milk Muṉīcuvaraṉ and blood Muṉīcuvaraṉ becomes obfuscated by the fact that some families (for example, those of the musician caste and barber caste) offer small cigarettes [*curuṭṭu*] and alcohol to milk-Muṉīcuvaraṉ. This is absolutely unusual for vegetarian deities. In Brahmin households he gets curd instead and the more mainstream offerings of a coconut, betel leaves, camphor and a pair of bananas. A feature common to all such ceremonies is that they must take

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[444] The *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's hill.
[445] In local parlance, this means: no Paṟaiyar, no Pallars, but anybody else, including Iṟulars, a group that others call Viḷḷis and that tries to attain the administrative status of Scheduled Tribe (ST).

place on unpaved soil [*maṇtarai*]. This is an exigency because the ritual entails the forming of a mini compound out of mud, about one square metre in size, in which the offerings take place. This little earthen structure remains until it is treaded to dust by pedestrians; it is the reminder for all passers-by of the god's presence and of their neighbours' devotion. This is the only public aspect of the ritual; otherwise it is quite particularistic and confined to the family.

Thus Muṉīcuvaraṉ resembles the deity that is shown above to dwell in *ēri*s (Tampirāṉ) in many ways: his connection to the well-being of the family, his temporary earthen imprint, his evil aspects. Yet he appears to be more "civilised", more urbane, more entangled in the rules and order of man and less in those of the nonhuman nature. Kalikiri Viswanadha Reddy mentions a Telugu deity called "Munēswarudu" which has many similarities to Muṉīcuvaraṉ, also in the context of the first tonsure of children which would liken it even more to Tampirāṉ; however, I have never found this connection to be established in my study area. Manuvel cites the rules of a ceremony for Muṉīcuvaraṉ from southern Andhra Pradesh in which the local washerman [Vaṇṇāṉ] forms an idol out of the type of soil which is also used for washing [*kaḷimaṇ*] in front of the shrine; this resembles the idol made for Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari and Tampirāṉ, but I did not come across it in my study area. Furthermore, Reddy, as well as, Manuvel describe Munēswarudu as exclusively non-vegetarian, also relishing pigs which cannot even be found among pig rearers in my study area.[446] Meyer recounts the story of Murukaṉ being frustrated in his search for water to do *pūjai* for *ammaṉ*. Finally he rams his spear into the Javadi Hills near Velur. At once six *muṉi* emerge – six robbers that were converted into the six hills but released by Murukaṉ's poke. In order to threaten them so that they would not harm his sister, Mahāviṣṇu brings a chain of deep fried rolls [*vaṭai*] and presents it to her so as to impress the *muṉi*. Thereupon she makes him Muṉīcuvarar.[447] This story suggests that there is a difference between Muṉīcuvaraṉ and the manifold spirits [*muṉi*] that are believed to populate all kinds of trees and street corners and that are usually believed to be of evil character. In the same vein, Sampath, teacher of Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar, explains that Muṉīcuvaraṉ stands halfway between men and god, he is a middleman, not as base as Kāṭṭēri or other beings like her. My consultants were unanimous about the fact that at *kuḷam*s, Muṉīcuvaraṉ is usually present. However, he is in no way specific to *kuḷam*s, it is one of his many typical abodes. For example, he is said to reside also at a certain palm tree next to the Ōcūrammaṉ-temple in Tirukkalukundram's bazaar area and on the northern entrance tower [*kōpuram*] of the Big Temple.

There are also rituals carried out at *kuḷam*s in which I have never seen one of the local Brahmins participating. The most important such ritual is the request [*vēṇṭutal*]. Requests can be made throughout the year, but there is a concentration in the Tamil month *āṭi* [mid July till mid August]. This is generally understood to be the special month for the worship of *ammaṉ*s, and usually the vows are made to *ammaṉ*s.

> On 17,1,1999, M. Saravanan of Tirukkalukundram and his family conducted a request making ceremony at the biggest *kuḷam* of the study area. The reason was that recently his brother was killed by a snake that had somehow fallen from the ceiling of his bedroom at midnight and bitten him.[448] His aged mother had undergone various calamities since then and the deceased's

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[446] K. V. Reddy 1989: 160; Maṉuvēl 1993: 134 – 137.

[447] Meyer 1986: 22 – 25.

[448] This seems to be a topos, I heard it various times, for example, the above mentioned I. Malar's husband Ilangovan reportedly died in the same way. However, in his case the snake was named as such, whereas in the

seven-year-old daughter refused to speak and to mingle freely with people. The family suspected that she was too frightened of snakes. Also other family member felt bad. The ceremony started in the morning at home and lasted far into the afternoon. At the *kuḷam*, after taking a bath, two pots filled with water were decorated with garlands of flowers, yellow and red clothes respectively, betel leaves, areca nut and a parrot made of paper. The vessels were placed in the pillared hall at the bank of the *kuḷam*, facing it. Then a band started drumming and singing in front of them. Two singers ardently invoked Aṅkāḷamman̠:[449] "Good girl – come quickly! – Aṅkāḷammā, come here! – *māyācakti* come!" The verses alternated with drumbeats and got constantly faster and more intense: "Sit down here! [You have] no place? Come, stand and dance!". The crescendo went on; a minute later, M. Saravanan's surviving brother started shaking and walking vigorously two steps forward and two steps backward. His eyeballs turned upwards so that only the whites could be seen. The bystanders held him, one sprinkled him with water. The singer enquired which god had "come upon" him. "I am Aṅkāḷamman̠ and all my 18 hands have different kinds of weapons to do justice and to demand my rights," answered the man (or rather the voice of the being that "came upon" him) – "Where do you come from?" – "I come from Mel Malaiyanur"[450]. "We are happy that you are here. We have brought you new clothes, put them on!" replied the singer. The crescendo still went on. Two minutes later, the second brother started spinning, uttering cries, his mouth foaming. The being that had "come upon" him was identified as *pūvāṭai*. The singer asked it why it does not leave the mother of the family alone and the old lady herself asked the possessed persons how long they would haunt her. The answer was: "I will be there throughout. I will not come upon the daughters, as long as the elderly lady is alive, I will grace her. After that, I would possess the daughter-in-law who has just entered the household after marriage. I do not possess the daughters because after marriage they will go to another house and won't be available. I will remain in the family through the mother or any other member, particularly the daughter-in-law." The mother lamented that she was already suffering from so many ailments. Then she pointed to another young man who stood nearby and fiercely shouted: "Come upon him!". The priest asked: "Will he [the recently expired son] re-enter [the family] or would you come in his place?", and the numinous being has her medium answer: "No. The death occurred as a result of a snake bite. The spirit will enter as a snake and relieve the panic from the family." The girl that refused to speak was made to stand facing the decorated pots, but at a distance of about three metres. M. Saravanan and his brother, i.e., *pūvāṭai* and Aṅkāḷamman̠, rushed towards her over and over again, uttering coarse cries, waving fire in front of her face, dripping water on it and lemon juice from freshly cut lemons. The little one started to weep silently and heartbreakingly of fear. But she stood stiff and still and did not utter a word. Then the *pūjāri* went on to interrogate Aṅkāḷamman̠ while *pūvāṭai* (or rather Saravanan "upon" whom she rested) stood aside and sometimes assisted the *pūjāri*.

After the ceremony at the *kuḷam*, Saravanan and his brother walked home. Still the numinous beings were "upon" them. The former balanced the yellow pot initially on his head, then he took it in his arms. Following suit, a female relative and neighbour carried home a bigger pot with an emulsion of oil in water. A small lamp floated on the liquid and several women

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case illustrated now, it was called by the name of a fierce Tamil god, Kāttuvarāyan̠. But see Meyer 1986: 15 and Shulman 1980 who point to Kattuviriyarjunan, a celestial being /Gandharva.

[449] Aṅkāḷamma is the goddess of the family [*kulatēvatai*]. In the study area, she is a frequent family goddess, yet by far not as common as Manapakkam Kan̠n̠iyamman̠.

[450] Mel Malaiyanur shelters an important temple of Aṅkāḷaparamēcuvari. See Meyer 1986: 3.

nourished it carefully. Their entrance, especially that of Saravanan with the *pūvāṭai* "upon" him, into the house was the climax of this part of the ceremony. Already at the gate of the compound, Saravanan held a long conversation with the joking and luring *pūjāri* before he entered in a blast. An even bigger effort was taken at the main door of the house. Many pots full of water were poured onto Saravanan while he had his conversation with the *pūjāri*. First his brother (still with Aṅkāḷamman̲ "upon" him) rushed in, then the *pūjāri* pulled in Saravanan's mother with a jerk, afterwards a male relative who has carried a plate of ash from the *kuḷam*. Finally Saravanan takes a run and violently thrusts himself through the open door as if it were closed and bolted. In a sophisticated ritual and with more interrogations of the two brothers, the pots representing Aṅkāḷamman̲ and *pūvāṭai* were installed in the family's *pūjai* room where they would be worshipped for a year.

pūvāṭai means the soul of either one ancestor or of the collectivity of the ancestors; in the described case, the pot representing it was placed in front of the lavishly decorated photograph of Saravanan's dead father, but the discourse had all the time been on his brother who had recently died of a snake bite. The reason given for performing this ritual next to a *kuḷam* is that it is a handy place: there is enough space free of cost, a hall as a sunshield, and enough water to bathe in, to fill the pots with and to douse the mediums with. This way of cooling is essential.

S. Kumar, who lives in the vicinity of M. Saravanan and his family and who is the son of the lady who carried the pot from the *kuḷam* to Saravanan's home, explains that the protagonists have to be cooled. Only if they are in a cool state, will the goddess come onto them. He turns his eyeballs upwards and puts his tongue out to mimic the state of being possessed by a deity. To cool the protagonist down, they need lots of water to sprinkle on him.
Bettina: Then you could use A/c [Air condition] and perform your rites everywhere.
Uncle of the girl: This is what rich people can do.
Laughter
Kumar: The water is also important for bathing.
Bettina: Could you not take your bath at home?
Uncle of the girl: Many women do that!
Kumar: In the houses, there is no place for all of them to take a bath. Sometimes there are 30 to 40 people, all relatives [*paṅkāḷi*], who come for the rituals. [...]
Bettina: Could they not bathe individually before attending the ritual?
Kumar: No, they take a bath before and after the ritual, twice.
Bettina: But that they could do at home as well...
Finally we come to the point that the important thing is that the entire group of relatives takes the bath jointly [*cērntu*], not each one separately.

Numerous other informants confirm that it is crucial for such a bath to be taken jointly and that this is an important reason for the usage of a public *kuḷam*. A man of the neighbourhood of the western *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai emphasises: "It has to be a public place [*potu iṭam*], water should be available there." When I argue that an *ēri* would be a public place, too, he retorts that in want of a *kuḷam*, the rituals could also be performed at an *ēri*; but obviously that is not desirable. Apart from *ēri*s being generally considered as inappropriate for certain rituals, he remarks: "Only the *kuḷam* is the foremost place [for it] [*kuḷam tān̲ mutal iṭam*]. [...] Irrespective whether there is water or not, people use the *kuḷam*. Even if there is no water, they will at last fetch four to five pots, pour it into the *kuḷam* and perform. [...] They will perform these rites at the same places where their ancestors did

it. They will not go anywhere else. [...]" He, too, mentions the difficulties a group of people would face if they wanted to take a joint bath privately and concludes: "So in the public place [*potu iṭam*] it is *free*[451]. Only such places are convenient."

Again it seems to be the issue of publicity and particularity that is at stake. The requests lay intimate relations among certain family members bare to the rest of the family. Uncles and aunts get to know about the emotional state of certain family members and they are involved since they can become the protagonists of the ritual themselves. In a second step, the affair is being publicised to the neighbours.

> In the case of the above sketched request making ritual, some neighbours of the protagonists' family were present at the *kuḷam*. As the procession from the *kuḷam* approached home, the remaining neighbours already waited for the party, greeted and blessed it and performed various rituals to prevent the evil eye [*tiruṣṭi*]. In the end, the neighbours were invited for lunch. The area is inhabited chiefly by people of the same caste (Kaṇakkuppiḷḷai), thus there are more bonds than that of spatial vicinity.

Finally, the family problem is publicised to the entire locality. At a stone's throw of the ceremony, women are busy doing the laundry. Onlookers gather at the *kuḷam*, mingle with the participants of the ceremony, follow its progress and comment on it. When the moment has arrived in which the goddess "comes upon" the protagonist, children of the neighbourhood frolic and scream "*amman* has come" [*amman vantāccu*], spreading the news quickly. Gaining publicity is clearly an essential point of the ritual as music, dance and professional performance is involved.

> For the described request making ritual, the family hired Annamalai, a professional singer and performer hailing from Narasimhakuppam, a village near Kalpakkam. Along with him came his troupe of four young dancers and musicians. They were clad in white with tinsel belts around their waists, and each had one patch of purple on him – be it the *luṅki*, a scarf or a shining polyester shirt. All had adorned themselves with rings and glittering watches. Just Annamalai wore a ragged shirt that once must have been poisonous green. He is a skinny, twisty man in his fifties with his hair combed back and his moustache trimmed like a Spanish torero. Annamalai has the talent to create glamour out of almost nothing. His instrument is a small, hourglass shaped drum with transparent heads that he holds in one hand and raises up to his mouth every now and then while singing. He is the one to interpret the stanzas, while the couplets are rendered by his four boys, either in a chorus or alternatingly, two-by-two. Their instruments are bells, knit together in little bundles, a drum of about half a metre in diameter with a leather head and a pair of messing rattles. Furthermore, Annamalai sports a stick that looks like the wand of a cartoon magician. It is about 30 centimetres long, black, with a thread winding around it and a metal capsule in the end. He passes it on to the mother of the snake bitten man whenever she poses a question. When the goddess and the *pūvāṭai* have "come upon" the brothers, Annamalai behaves like a brilliant host of a talkshow: he interrogates them sharply, but he also charms and entertains them like dear guests. Sometimes he even cracks jokes with the numinous beings – much to the amusement of the growing audience. Whenever the situation threatens to heat up too much, the drumbeats catch hold of it again. He is the master of the ceremony, firmly controlling it in an easygoing way.

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[451] He uses the English word.

The professional coolness of the masters of the ceremony contrasts sharply with the total involvement of the protagonists and their emotional outbursts. It gives it a frame, a sort of reliability and the hope that everything will come to a good end after all – a bit like the stage and the setting in theatres imbue the audience with the appeasing certainty that there will be an intermission and a curtain in the end and then the drama will be over. I have never come across any ritual like this done without the involvement of professional performers.

> Apart from drumming, playing cymbals and singing, Annamalai's troupe also knows artistry. When they led the little procession to the family home, they played music, danced gaily and did acrobatic exercises such as somersaults. One stood on his feet and bent backwards so that he could pick up a Rs. 10 bill from the floor with his eyelid. The procession did not take the shortest possible way, but added deviations, stopping at the temples of the village goddesses [*kirāma tēvatai*] It publicised itself as much as possible. There were no crowds assembling at the sides of the streets, but people did look on. From many conversations (that I held afterwards) with people who live en route, I took it that they knew exactly what was happening.

The little procession attracts all the attention when it winds through the market. In July /August [*āṭi* month], however, in the eyes of the public the single request loses is exclusivity, blending with the big number of requests made simultaneously in the same place. On certain days, the *kuḷam*s of the study area resound with the beat of dozens of drums and cymbals, with conjuring songs and outraged cries as the places are replete with musicians, artists, women with open hair who gyrate like dervishes, men who violently rock back and forth, trembling and shivering, and with concerned relatives who splash them with water, feed them or grip them in case they run danger of falling into the water or of harming themselves. On these days, the *kuḷam*s become the public stages of the most personal troubles and concerns of the people in the study area; their family lives are on display for every passer-by to watch and to comment on. General reasons for the request making ceremony are given as family members' untimely death, accidents, diseases, permanent quarrels in the family or shortage of money.[452]

As people entrust their innermost feelings to the public realm, they contribute to this public realm's reproduction and to the furtherance of a sense of belonging to a certain locality. Usually, even when "the goddess has come upon" the protagonists, they behave in astonishingly conventional manners – for example, I have never seen anybody in the study area imitating a snake which Nabokov reports happening, for example, with people "onto" whom goddess Aracāttā descends.[453] The repertoire of their movements is quite restricted and it suffices for S. Kumar, as above cited, to turn his eyeballs up and put his tongue out that everybody knows what he refers to. Similarly conventional is the entire form of the ritual. For the protagonists it is an opportunity to press the hot iron of their private troubles in preconceived, ready-to-use moulds, to de-particularise their lives and to find a form to come to terms with their problems. *kuḷam*s are ready stages for them.

At the same time – and as in the case of the fortnightly ritual after a person's death – the vows are a vehicle to publicly communicate that the order as it is supposed to be is (being) restored. Notably the performance of the ritual seems to be as much the cure as the solution of the problem.

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[452] In contrast, Nabokov 2000, who describes, in chapters 9 and 10, in detail what she calls "*pūvāṭaikkāri pūjā*", writes that it usually precedes auspicious rituals, especially marriages in order to invite the ancestors to them (esp. 127).
[453] Nabokov 2000: 147.

About a year after the family of the snake bitten girl had performed the request taking ritual, I visited them again and asked for the outcome of the ritual – thinking that the lapse of time might allow finding out whether the daughter has started to behave more appropriately in the eyes of their relatives, whether the fear of snakes has diminished etc., in short: whether the ritual has proved to be efficacious. I met with big question marks in the faces of the family. It seemed to be more a friendly gesture towards me than because of their burning interest to know that they pondered a while about whether the girl had changed and they came to no real conclusion. Obviously nobody until then had cared to think about it that way.

The performance per se is important, its efficacy needs not be proved. Adding to the vow's character of restoring the order in private and public life is the notion that it is not shameful to perform it and thus to publicly admit one's troubles (at most it is a financial burden as the professional performers demand hardly less than professional psychologists; their service may cost several thousand rupees). On the contrary: a female participant of a request making ritual explains that the problem in her family might have arisen because they have not made a ceremonial request in the past years. Thus the family should not isolate itself by not going public with the particularities of their private life.

Just like in the context of requests where the worshippers take the water of the *kuḷam* home in pots [*kalacam*, *karakātam*], there is another rite connected with *kuḷam*s in which water is carried in pots, thereby gaining publicity. It is part of a wide range of unctions in *amman̠*-temples of the study area.

In the hot and dry Tamil month *cittirai* [mid April till mid May], in the little temple of Ellaiyamman̠ between Tirukkalukundram-Ayarbadi and Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai, the *kattari apiṣēkam* takes place. For seven days before and seven days after the fire star [*akkiṇi naṭcattiram*] is said to be present in the sky, the holy number of 108 pots of water are poured on the idol. 107 pots are filled with the water drawn from a nearby well. One heavy brass vessel is filled solemnly at the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's hill. The priest of the *amman̠* performs *pūjai* in front of the pot and equips it with dots of turmeric and vermilion paste, mango leaves and a coconut in its aperture so as to represent the goddess. Then he places it on the head of a devotee on whom the goddess "has come upon". This man, rocking, trembling, his pupils turned inwards, carries the pot past the Nalvar-Temple, a part of Procession Street[454], circling the western temple of Ellamman̠ in the neighbourhood and finally arriving at the site of the *apiṣēkam*, her new, eastern temple. He is assisted by a little crew of helpers and accompanied by a band of musicians playing percussion instruments [the drums *uṭukku*, *pampai* and the tinkling aklets *cilampu*] that are not (or in this form hardly ever) used inside Brahminical temples as they are usually mastered only by Par̠aiyars.

In the *kattari apiṣēkam* at the Kaṅkaiyamman̠-Temple in Tirukkalukundram-Kanakkoyilpettai, the entire water used in the unction is brought from the biggest *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram; festivals like these start with long queues of worshippers balancing water pots on their heads. When the first one in the line reaches the temple, the last person[455] has not yet left. This makes for a human chain that winds through the lanes and along the main road and conspicuously establishing an otherwise invisible

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[454] In the same direction in which Gunasekar carried the ashes of his mother during the fortnightly ritual, that is "wrong" in the sense of the big procession festivals of Tirukkalukundram as a whole, but correct as the point of reference is the neighbourhood alone.

[455] According to the participants, there are 108 persons carrying the water; 108 is a number that is sacred to Śiva.

relationship between *kuḷam* and temple. Furthermore, they reconfirm the identity of the neighbourhood. Feldhaus describes a water carrying ritual in connection with men anointing Śivaligkam,[456] Clothey one in which the water carried along from a river is poured over Murukaṉ. In my study area, I could find no such thing; here, the water-carrying ritual is done for ammaṉs and in purely non-Brahmin contexts. However, I can corroborate her interpretation that the water carrying ritual, in principle, "dramatises that the river serves to unite the scattered villages and to make them into a region, a discrete area defined by the river that runs through it, [... it] makes the region itself imaginatively visible" – in the case of my study region, the *kuḷam* helps to visualise the neighbourhood.[457] Clothey points to the publicising effect of the ritual: "[T]he bath, in addition to its purificatory and sacralising intent is also, as one devotee put it, a way of dispensing the god's blessings (by way of the river) to all the world."[458]

To sum up, all mentioned rituals and festivals take place at *kuḷam*s, but none of them is specific happenings for it. Each could be performed at rivers as well. For example, the Ganges at Gaya is a famous place to perform the fortnightly ritual.[459] Feldhaus describes the water carrying ritual being performed at the Godāvarī in Maharashtra[460]. Goddess Aṅkāḷammaṉ is floated in a little boat on the river in Orraikalmantapam.[461] Probably float festivals in rivers do not reach the grandeur of those in *kuḷam*s. Floats cannot be manoeuvred as safely in a river as in a *kuḷam* with well prepared banks. *kuḷam*s offer conditions that are more under control, more orderly than rivers. Thus the float festival is fairly specific for them, as suggests their name in South Tamil Nadu: "*teppakuḷam*", that is "float *kuḷam*". Yet there is no river in the study area. The nearest one is the Palar which is, however, unreliable as it resembles a desert most of the time; water flows only below the sandy surface. Not even the staunchest believers in the study area would travel to other rivers to make a request or perform the fortnightly ritual. This has to be done nearby home. It is an affair of one's locality.

Perhaps the only role of *kuḷam*s in rituals that is absolutely specific for them is the provision of lotus. The sensitive flowers grow neither in rivers nor in *ēri*s, let alone in wells. The lotuses that blossom on the surface of certain *kuḷam*s are plucked and wound into garlands for gods and goddesses. K. V. Krishnamurthy points to the importance of lotus flowers for "Hindu, Buddhist and Jain temples"; lotuses have high symbolical and decorative value. Gods and goddesses like Piramā, Laṭcumi or Carasvati are often depicted with lotuses in their hands or as their seats. The flowers are also heavily used in all kinds of rituals in their temples. In the past, kings donated land to temples in order to have *kuḷam*s dug or maintained that exclusively served to cultivate lotuses and water lilies. Decorating one's house with flowers from *kuḷam*s which were attached to certain temples became a prestige issue among temple servants and devotees and finally a tax was levied on such blossoms.[462] The founding history [*talapurāṇam*] of Śiva as Vāṭāmalli Īcuvarar in Oragadam links his ancient temple to the *kuḷam* below as it provides the lotus [*mallikaip pū*] dearly needed in its *apiṣēkam*. However, in the study area, there are only romantic memories of the *kuḷam* having been covered with lotus. At most, water lilies [*alli /castalia Nymphaea*] are there. Yet many informants have stories to tell of certain *kuḷam*s that are bedecked with lotus, such as the *jampu kuḷam* northeast of Vazuvadur and others, even if they are as

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[456] Feldhaus 1995: 29.
[457] Feldhaus 1995: 34.
[458] Clothey 1983: 130.
[459] See, for example, Vidyarthi 1961: 33 f.
[460] Feldhaus 1995: chapter one.
[461] Meyer 1986: 247.
[462] K. V. Krishnamurthy 2002: 45 – 49.

far as 15 kilometres away; so obviously lotus on water does arouse interest. In non-Brahminical rituals, I found lotus rarely (if at all) being used. The lotus pond ranges predominantly in the Brahminical canones. Secondly, as has been shown, most informants associate the float festival with Brahminical gods and goddesses. Hence, the only two ritual usages of *kuḷam*s that are fairly specific for them are closely linked with the Brahminical milieu. Probably one could classify them as particularistic because of that.

The following table sums up the rituals and it suggests a ranking of them on the scale between publicity and particularity. This can refer only to broad tendencies, because firstly, as has been shown in the discussion of the rituals, each has multifarious aspects and even though publicity is not the principally spelt out aim, it might be an important outcome. Secondly, the actual performance of each ritual varies according to the family, the goddess or god or the neighbourhood who does it. In certain temples, the bath on the new moon day is a grand celebration with hundreds of devotees taking a bath whereas in other temples hardly anybody can be seen around.

Public	**open to be attended by**
float festival	everybody
ritual bath [*tīrttavāri*] of Vētakirīsvarar in Tirukkalukundram's biggest temple	everybody
bath on new moon days	everybody
water carrying ritual	everybody
wearing a ribbon during a fast [*nōṉpu kayiṟu*] or certain observances [*kaṅkaṇam*, *kāppu*] and its disposal in *kuḷam*s	everybody
ritual bath [*tīrttavāri*] of Nataraja in the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple	those who enter the Big Temple
16th day ceremony	(usually male) relatives, plus neighbours and occasional friends of the deceased
request making [*vēṇṭutal*]	family, neighbours
pilgrims bathing	pilgrims
collective *tarppaṇam* on the day of *kārttikai tīpam*	families
tula snāṉam /kaṅka snāṉam	women of Brahmin caste and affiliated ones
renewal /bestowal of sacred thread	Brahmin families
floating of nine sprouts [*navatāṉiyam /paliyam viṭaṟatu*]	family /group that celebrates
wedding	families of the couple, neighbours
propitiation of Muṉīcuvaraṉ	family of the couple /pregnant women /children to be protected
tarppaṇam (remembrance of ancestors)	family of the deceased
washing one's hands and feet before worship	individual
particularistic	

Table 4: rituals at *kuḷam*s and their public character

It seems that the more public a ritual's character is, the more often or the more lavishly does it take place at a *kuḷam* nowadays. For example, concomitant with the profusion of *kumpapiṣēkam*s to be

witnessed in the past decade in Tamil Nadu, in general and in the study area in particular (every year, at least three old or newly erected temples or just renovated undergo that procedure), there are also numerous float festivals being celebrated, sometimes after lapses of decades. In Tirukkalukundram, the first float festival after eight years took place in 2000, in the year after the *kumpapiṣēkam*. Even the car festival [*cittirai uṟcavam*] had not taken place in that period. The official reason was that the biggest of the Big Temple's cars [*tēr*] was turned to ashes in an accident.[463] In nearby Mamallapuram, a dilapidating temple entrance tower [*kōpuram*] was given as reason for an 18 year pause in the performance of the float festival. The first one after that was held in March, 1999 as part of the *māci makam* festival. Both the festivals in Mamallapuram and Tirukkalukundram attracted huge crowds and gave great publicity to the temple and its gods and goddesses.

Vice versa, the less public the ritual's character, the rarer does it take place at *kuḷam*s nowadays. Instead it takes place in private rooms or not at all, or sometimes only in a very abbreviated or huddled manner. For example, in spite of many informants emphasising the importance of taking a bath before and after a visit to the Big Temple, hardly anybody can actually be seen washing his or her hands, let alone the feet or the whole body, in the *kuḷam* before worshipping. However, whenever I accompanied people to somehow important functions in the Big Temple, I noticed that they would invariably take a bath and put on clean clothes – they just do not do it at the *kuḷam*, but at home. Thus the aspect of establishing sense of community by means of as intimate an act as joint bathing is mostly abandoned. Only in highly conventionalised contexts, such as pilgrimages or special bathing rituals, do people still jointly take a bath in *kuḷam*s. I have no means to find out whether the common bathing has ever been widespread; judging from oral history, it was.

The floating of nine types of sprouts [*navatāṉiyam*] is usually adhered to religiously in the context of grand unction ceremonies [*apiṣēkam*s]. Yet in the more particularistic or private context, it is often done rather carelessly.

> On 4,4,1999 and the following day, the bestowal of the sacred thread to Venkat Subramanian, a Kurukkaḷ boy of Tirukkalukundram took place – not at a *kuḷam*, but in a marriage hall rented for that occasion. It was conducted in a grand manner with about 70 to 80 relatives who travelled from as far as Tanjavur and Velur. At the end of the ritual's last day, when most of them had already left, a small party consisting of the 10-year-old, his parents, an uncle with a cousin and seven aunts headed for the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple. They walked quickly and without much ado and did not use the grand main entrance to the temple precinct but scrambled through the small inlet that opens in the southern entrance. The mother carried a tray with the five pots on which the seedlings were placed. I enquired whether the grains had sprouted well – several consultants had explained to me that the germination is the gist of the rite, a way to predict the future fate of the person in the focus of the ritual. To my astonishment, only then did they pay attention to the germination: the mother stopped shortly, had a close look on the pots and stated: "It is quite good, is it not?!" She said that they had prepared the grains only the day before at noon and that they should have done it earlier. Nevertheless, they proceeded to the *kuḷam*. On its steps, an aunt formed with great routine a little figurine of the elephant-headed god out of turmeric powder and vermilion, placed it on a

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[463] There are many different stories of how this happened. One is about a firecracker that hit it during a procession in a festival for Māriyammaṉ in 1985 that had nothing to do with the chariot (reason put forth by a Brahmin lady). Or a man threw his cigarette away and hit the chariot. Or the stove of a restaurant exploded when the car went by.

banana leaf and adorned it with flowers. The uncle broke a coconut and showed fire in front of both, the deity and the boy [*tīpārātaṉai*]. Then the mother and an aunt jointly placed the content of one pot after the other in the water. Immediately after the last pot, the mother said "that's it" and the party left – nobody paid attention to the direction in which the seedlings floated (which would be the possibility for divination, a second reason for performing that rite).

Less traditionally minded families omit the sprout floating rite entirely. In contemporary marriages it is usually left out. Only senior people like the octogenarian Kulappa Naicker of Oragadam recount that it was observed as a rule during wedding ceremonies of his generation. Since that time, too, the ritual has undergone a shift from publicity to particularity in the way it is performed. The oldest informants of the study area recount that they used to sow the grains on the steps of the *kuḷam* and sprinkle it with its water. Thus it was open for everybody in the neighbourhood to witness the progress of the germination. They also were free to foster the germination (and therewith the symbolic well-being of the family that set it up) by sprinkling some water on the grains. In the time of my fieldwork, I never came across grains being sown on the steps of a *kuḷam*. They were made to grow only in little pots that were kept in private places withdrawn from onlookers. The ritual was particularised and withdrawn from *kuḷam*s.

In a similar direction points the observation of a fortnightly ritual by Edgar Thurston.[464] He describes how, after the death and the cremation of a Brahmin, his or her family erects two stones along with a piece of cloth, a lamp and a coin in commemoration of him, one each at home and at the *kuḷam* as a representation of the soul. Every day during the first two weeks after the death of a person, the family sacrifices a mixture of sesame and water and rice balls in front of both stones and sprinkles them with water. The public act, as described by Edgar Thurston, of erecting a stone for the dead person at a *kuḷam* for a fortnight seems to have waned in the course of the past century since Thurston's explorations. The 16 little pots are probably some reminiscences to it – they would be a clue to the above cited differential interpretation of the Aiyar and the guests concerning the 16 little pots put up on the occasion of the fortnightly ritual.

Sometimes, the publicising aspect of a particularistic family ritual being conducted with the participation of people of other castes is at stake. This includes servicing castes. Whereas Aiyars' participation usually goes unchallenged, the service of the other ritual specialists is quietly forgotten or openly challenged.

> In the fortnightly ritual for A. Gunasekars mother, a skinny, rather impoverished looking man with a sparse, greying beard participates in the ritual: he is Parasuraman, the neighbourhood's washerman [Vaṇṇāṉ]. He kindles a fire of dried cattle dung and prepares the rice porridge to be offered to the soul of the ancestor [*piṇṭam*]. He is at hand whenever something has to be brought or taken away. He pours the water for the protagonists to wash their hands etc. Yet no matter what he does, the guests of the ritual seem to feel disturbed by him. They blame him because the smoke of the fire bites their eyes or because he is not quick enough filling pots. Vice versa, he scolds everyone who dares to meddle in his business, for example, with good advises on how to nourish the fire. There is obviously a subliminal struggle about authority and the right to participate going on. In the end, the protagonists hand a coconut, a banana and

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[464] Thurston 1975: 166.

betel leaves to Parasuraman. He upbraids them until they hand him a thin bundle of Rs. 10 notes wrapped in a betel leave. Dissatisfied, he remains seated on the site of the ritual for long after the party has left. From his perspective, it had obviously not been worth the effort. In turn, a guest, a young man from Chennai, felt so disturbed by his presence that he enquired why the skinny man did the job at all. "That is the way how it has to be done" muted him one of the elders.

The decline of the institution of washerpeople in rituals seems to be linked to their waning importance in doing the laundry (see next chapter).[465] People tend to more particularistic solutions to this kind of problems – more and more women do the laundry themselves and the washing machine is slowly being introduced in Tirukkalukundram, too.

Other rituals deemed rather particularistic[466] such as weddings, bestowals of the sacred thread [*pūṇūl*], coming of age ceremonies [*mañcaḷ nīrāṭṭu viḻā*] are held at home or in marriage halls [*kalyāṇa maṇṭapam*] that are hired for the day. These are either privately run or connected with certain caste associations or religious congregations [matam] and their entry is restricted. So they are less public than *kuḷam*s. It seems that they have developed out of pilgrims' hostels [*cattiram*s], as the older marriage halls (most of which are located at *kuḷam*s) are called cattiram, even though nowadays pilgrims use them only very occasionally. Some of the newer "marriage halls" are among the flashiest buildings in Tirukkalukundram. This is in line with a trend observable throughout Tamil Nadu: enormous constructions, some in the shape of elephants, dream ships or palaces have been mushrooming at the outskirts of towns during the past decade, taking over the role of the most splendid building of town which previously was reserved for the cinema. One dream machine outdoes the other.

In Tirukkalukundram, only two out of 43 marriage halls have direct access to a *kuḷam*. It has become common among the emerging mainstream society to issue fancily printed invitation cards. They are, however, not to be posted (what cards usually are meant for) but to be dispatched personally in a short and formal visit to the invitee's house. Without such a card, it is not appropriate to enter the marriage hall – except for beggars who are spontaneously invited for dinner at the end of affluent marriages. Aged consultants recount their marriages having been performed at the temple complexes next to *kuḷam*s, in hostels for pilgrims [*cattiram*] or in the so-called "marriage hall" [*kalyāṇa maṇṭapam*] which forms part of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple (this is still the cheapest hall to rent for a marriage, yet I have never witnessed any wedding taking place there during the period of my fieldwork). All these places were more public than the privately run marriage halls, and usually situated not far from *kuḷam*s. In short, there has been a shift in these practices, as well, towards particularisation.

The same happens with the ritual connected with the renewal of the sacred thread by Brahmin men. An aged Brahmin lady remembers that it was performed as a common affair at the *kuḷam* in the days when all the Brahmins lived together in the Brahmins' neighbourhood [*akrakāram*]. Only now that

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[465] Interestingly, Maṇuvēl 1993: 136, in his description of village *pūjai*s, uses the term "Vaṇṇāṉ" for the washerman; yet he does not apply the word Ampattaṉ, which would be of the same calibre as "Vaṇṇāṉ", to the barber, but writes "*salūṉ toḻilāḷi*" [worker in a (hairdresser's) saloon] instead. Obviously barbers, whose role during rituals is considered to be more prestigious than that of washermen, have successfully put through the usage of this expression which is felt to be less compromising.

[466] In Nabokov's (2000: 10 – 13) terminology it would be "performative".

everybody lives apart and so many different people mingle, do the men withdraw into their homes and perform it privately, she explains.

This might be a key to understanding the fate of the *kuḷam*s nowadays. It will be discussed in the next chapter and, with an specific example, in chapter twelve. For here, it suffices to state that the main role of *kuḷam*s in all sorts of rituals is to provide place and water in an orderly, reliable way and to create publicity, thereby contributing to the social construction the neighbourhood.[467]

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[467] For that concept, see Low 2000: 127 f. and the next chapters.

The kuḷam east of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple

11. *kuḷam*: Perception

This chapter tries to find out how *kuḷam*s are perceived – both within the study area and in other sources – and in contrast to *ēri*s. It will show that there are conflicting perceptions and it will offer a path to clarify that apparent inconsistency by recurring to the question of publicity and particularity. This has already been broached in the previous chapter and will now be discussed in more detail.

Kuḷams are clean and good

First of all, most informants in the study area perceive *kuḷam*s as clean [*tūymai*] – in contrast to *ēri*s. They unanimously classify *kuḷam*s as appropriate places to take a bath in. Once in a while, an informant praises the idyllic appearance of certain *kuḷam*s (especially those that are covered with lotus). For women it is decent to go there, even without being accompanied by a family member. *kuḷam*s are thought to be safe places. Even the crocodiles that in several myths populate them, threatening the bathers, are outwitted by the reservoirs' own means.

> In the founding story [*talapurāṇam*] of Mamallapuram, an alligator lingers in a *kuḷam* and attacks the *riṣi* Puṇṭarīka when he is plucking lotus to worship gods. Yet the predator mistakes a lotus stalk for the holy man's leg. Thorns pierce his tongue and, from the loss of blood, it lies as dead on the water.[468]

Several *kuḷam*s are said to shelter great riches. According to Ramesh, a cloth merchant of Tirukkalukundram, 100 kg silver are buried underneath the *kuḷam* in the precincts of Tiruvallur's Big

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[468] Chambers 1984: 177.

Temple. Buried in the carefully built *kuḷam* east of Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar's temple is a bounty of gold, narrates Vi. Tamilalakan of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai. Feldhaus reports a story of gold to be found on the bottom of deep water pools.[469]

More than that, informants of all backgrounds say that the water of several *kuḷam*s bears medicinal values, mostly to cure skin disorders. For example, according to some informants, bathing for 48 consecutive days in the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple is thought to heal leprosy. A well-meaning family in Chennai advised me to take regular baths in a certain *kuḷam* nearby Kanchipuram to get rid of my freckles – it had already helped their uncle, they asseverated. Crole describes various *kuḷam*s in which one should take a bath to get one's wishes granted, to get rid of one's sins, to attain a golden colour or to become clever.[470] The water of some *kuḷam*s is believed to instil wisdom. For instance, people in the study area tell the story of a *kuḷam* nearby Chidambaram where a boy, already an ardent devotee of god, dived so long in the water that his father became scared he might have drowned. But the boy reappeared not only healthy, but wise like an adult. Plus he knew by heart thousands of songs in praise of the gods. The boy became known later on as Tirunana Sambandar, one of the four Alvars who are believed to have stayed in Tirukkalukundram as well.

Furthermore, certain *kuḷam*s are considered to be capable of washing all sins away. For example, the mentioned founding story of Mamallapuram makes it clear that a bath in the locality's foremost *kuḷam* would eliminate sins more efficiently than bathing either in the Cauvery or in the Ganges. It describes how envious Ganga was when she heard of that and how she, Ganga, herself had to take a dip in Mamallapuram's *kuḷam* to get out of the clutches of jealousy.[471] A similar belief exists regarding the biggest *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram. The following rendition stems from N. Ilangovan, told while we sat at Tirukkalukundram's foremost *kuḷam*, *śaṅku tīrttam*.

> "Once there lived an demon [*ācuraṉ*] in this hill, I am not sure whether this is true, but I will narrate to you that incidence. It is believed that this demon was creating a lot of problems, and in order to kill it, a lot of Rudras /*rauttiram*s[472] were born who were measured not more than an inch in height, they were dwarfs, and the *rauttiram*s are an angrier kind of being, there were hundred millions (ten crores) of them, they were all born to kill this demon, they rose against this demon and killed him. This is what the local history tells us. After killing this demon, all these ten crores of *rauttiram*s approached the god and said they wanted to get rid of the sins that they had committed and asked him for a solution. The god replied that the sins could be got rid of if they took a bath in the *śaṅku tīrttam*. So the *rauttiram*s came here, had their bath and god rid them of their sins."

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[469] Feldhaus 1995: 70.

[470] Crole 1879: 117 f.

[471] Chambers 1984: 182.

[472] On *rūttira* /Rudras, see Sontheimer 1997: 87 – 109 and Shulman 1980: 127, both with further references. In contrast to Ilangovan who describes them as a mass phenomenon, they depict him as a rather single handed deity that is only connected with the world of demons. Shulman (p. 127) portrays him thus: "The terrifying butcher who, though excluded by the other gods, must appear at the last moment to slay the victim and to claim his unique share of the sacrifice, the [...] impure first cut". Whereas Sontheimer establishes Rudra as a folk deity that has been existing from the late Harappan period on, parallely to the Rudra /Śiva of the purāṇams and of the Śaivite sects. Shulman compares him with Viṣṇu as both "represent the totality which both transcends and embraces the created, mutually dependent polarities of life and death." (ibid.).

The water of *kuḷam*s (other than that of *ēri*s) is, in principle, thought to be fit for use in temples and to perform *pūjai*s. According to the Sanskrit scripture Somaśambhupaddhati, the water best suited for the ritual bath of an idol [*tirumañcaṉam*] stems from rivers, which is ten times better than water from *kuḷam*s and only after that (a hundred times worse than river water, if the river flows towards the east) comes the water from wells.[473] There is a belief which links the construction of temples with *kuḷam*s – they are seen as "*ātukai*" as a Brahmin informant puts it. " *rauttiram*" means something belonging together like, for instance, a man and his shadow. This link can be in a very materialistic sense – that the sand and the clay needed for the construction of the entrance towers [*kōpuram*] is the earth which is removed to build *kuḷam*s. However, the size of *kuḷam*s only occasionally corresponds with the size of the possibly related temple towers. Many *kuḷam*s, especially the bigger ones, are dammed rather than dug out, making use of natural depressions. In a second explanation of a material link of *kuḷam*s and temples, the former are thought to have been instrumental for the provision of water during the long construction period of the temples. As *kuḷam*s were the mainstay of the water supply anyway, this is very likely.

Yet *kuḷam* and temple also relate to each other in more sublime ways. Notably, most *kuḷam*s in Tirukkalukundram are designated as *tīrttaṅkaḷ* [singular: *tīrttam*]. This word means "ford, crossing place" and derives from a Sanskrit root signifying the idea of crossing over.[474] This can be the crossing of the fetid river Vaitarani that flows between the earth and the underworld that is ruled by Yama, the god of death; writes Fuller: "If the *tirtha* is a crossing place between worlds for human beings after death, it is also a link between the divine and human worlds, and thus a place in which the deities appear on earth."[475] In that sense, *tīrttam* can also mean "pilgrimage centre".[476] People of the study area who go on a pilgrimage sometimes use the Sanskrit term "*tīrtta yāttirai*", tour to holy sites, almost as if the water reservoirs were more important than the temples. They explain it as visiting temples and the nearby places of water, correlating to "*kōyil kuḷam*" in Tamil (see previous chapter). Water seems to be part and parcel of the concept *tīrttam*. One of India's foremost pilgrimage centres is Varanasi [Kashi, Benares], a place intimately linked to water. Müller points to the duty of taking a ritual bath [*snāna*] upon reaching a *tīrttam*, so there has to be enough water.[477] The meaning of holiness obviously permeates from the container to the contained, from the place to the water. Frits Staal translates *tīrttam* first of all with "water".[478] In the study area, *tīrttam* is often used both as a word for water and as a word for *kuḷam* – only in the latter the meaning of a "site" is included.

> In a tea stall of Tirukkalukundram, I brought up the issue of the meaning of "*tīrttam*". My interlocutors – all men, all locals, all rather interested in local affairs – differed in their interpretations:
> **Respondent 1**: "*tīrttam*" is an old word for water.
> **Respondent 2**: No, it is in pure Tamil [*ceṉtamiḻ*] that water is called "*tīrttam*". In colloquial Tamil it is "*taṇṇir*" or whatever. *tīrttam* is a sacred word.[479]
> **Respondent 3**: "*tīrttam*" is Sanskrit.
> **Respondent 1** *sipping his tea*: If they do pilgrimages, they say "*tīrtta yāttirai*", they visit

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[473] Brunner-Lachaux 1963: 14 f. See also Diehl 1956: 110.
[474] Parry 1982: 345.
[475] Fuller 1992: 207.
[476] See also Nabokov 2000: 8 with further references.
[477] Müller 1992: 145.
[478] Staal 1995: 12 f.
[479] Among the very different varieties of colloquial and "pure" Tamil, the latter enjoys the much higher prestige.

temples and *kuḷam* [*kōyil kuḷam*]. But it is important that they visit the Ganges.
Bettina: What about *śaṅku tīrttam* [the biggest *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram]: Could I call it ” *śaṅku kuḷam*” as well?
Respondent 3: No, no, it is “*śaṅku tīrttam*”, we would never call it ” *śaṅku kuḷam*”.
Respondent 1: To be very correct, it would be ” *śaṅku tīrtta kuḷam*”.
Bettina: What about an *ēri*?
Respondent 3: We call an *ēri* an *ēri* and not a *kuḷam*. An *ēri* is never a *tīrttam*.

The specially prepared water that is used for unctions in Vaiṣṇavite Temples of the study area (for example, in that of Kōtaṇṭarāmacuvāmi in Oragadam) is called *tīrttam*, as well. In short, *kuḷam*s and their water do not only seem to be thought of as purifying, healing and potentially bestowing of riches, but also as a means to attain transcendence.

The close interlinkage of container and contained comes to the fore in the case of the *kuḷam* under Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*. It receives not only receives the water indirectly from the *ēri* in the form of seepage as it is situated at a stone's throw from it, but also directly through a little subterranean spill over channel. This channel lies beneath a path and the northern bund of the *kuḷam* on which the temples of Kaṅkaiyammaṉ and Paccaiyammaṉ are built. It is hidden but the people of the neighbourhood aver that it exists. Thus the water in the *kuḷam* mixes with that of the *ēri*. Still, as soon as it is in the *kuḷam*, it is considered to be, in principle, pure whereas the water of the *ēri* is not.

So why is it that some reservoirs (*ēri*) are considered to be impure, even dangerous at times, whereas other reservoirs (*kuḷam*s) enjoy such a high reputation (though they may be physically linked)? The reasons given for the mentioned qualities of *kuḷam*s are of various types: "Scientific", mythological, due to human activity, due to the layout and the containment capacity of the *kuḷam*s and because of their being contained in particular ways. "Scientific" explanations are topical with various religious phenomena in South India (I chose the term because the informants themselves use it to acerbate the validity of their statements).

> A 22-year-old Christian student of commerce in a correspondence course argues that water of *kuḷam*s washes away sickening alpha and beta rays that emanate from the sky certain from planetary constellations [*navakirāka*, see previous chapter]. Other informants such as a local postmaster, a screen printer, priests, merchants etc. argue that before reaching the *kuḷam*, the water runs over a great variety of medicinal herbs. It absorbs their healing capacities and transmits them to the *kuḷam*. However, the catchment area of *kuḷam*s is usually within or nearby settlements, that is in places where there are rather less medicinal herbs than in catchment areas of *ēri*s. Still, the latter do not enjoy as good a reputation by far as *kuḷam*s.

Another type of reasons given for the supposed good quality of *kuḷam* water is mythological. Sometimes gods or goddesses are said to have a finger in the pie. In the above cited case where Tiruñāṉasampantar almost drowned, goddess Parvati is believed to have appeared in the sky and given the child a special beverage: the milk of wisdom [*ñāṉa pāl*]. In other cases, pixies are thought to have taken a bath in *kuḷam*s.

> North of the Tiruttani hill, there is a vast compound dedicated to seven virgins and nine angels which bears seven tiny *kuḷam*s. They are meant for people who dearly want a spouse or offspring. The nine angels, being heavenly creatures, do not dip into the water, but the seven

virgins are believed to. Each of them has a *kuḷam* of her own, called *tirumañcana* , *alli* , *śapta* , *nāka* , *kumāri*[480], *catārcaṉa* and *cakkaravartti tīrttam*. In order to get their wishes fulfilled (mostly for offspring), the worshippers are required to take a bath in each one of the seven *kuḷam*s and circumambulate the trees and the little temple in the complex eleven times with their clothes still wet. When the children desired are born and have completed three years, the parents return in order to pierce their earlobes and have them ceremonially tonsured.[481]

Furthermore, sages or ardent devotees of gods [*riṣi*, *muṉivar*] are understood to have visited *kuḷam*s and sanctified them by their presence, as is the case with the biggest *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram. Local lore has it that Mārkkaṇṭēya, a sage or saint [*muṉivar*] created it. It was also visited by Kāmatēṉu, a miraculous cow, recounts N. Ilangovan, the son of the priest of Tirukkalukundram's village goddess [*kirāma tēvatai*].

> "Kāmatēṉu[482] is a divine cow, it has a human face but the body of a cow. Her character is such that you can approach it and it would fulfil every wish. Ordinary cows give milk, but Kāmatēṉu will give you anything you want – even coffee or tea."

This leads to the next type of reasoning why *kuḷam*'s water is to be preferred to *ēri*'s water: it is believed to be due to human activity, for instance, in the form of priests performing rituals to purify (and thereby to sanctify) the *kuḷam*. The inaugurating ceremony for a *kuḷam* is likened to that of a housewarming, a *vāstu cānti*.[483] K. Chandrashekar, who belongs to the weaving caste Ceṅkuntar but works as an Aiyar, explains that it involves the forming of a little effigy of god Piḷḷaiyār out of turmeric powder, the utterance of mantras, the smashing of a pumpkin, the usage of coloured powder, lemons, mango leaves etc. An Aiyeṅkar and Sanskrit scholar who stems from Kottimangalam nearby Tirukkalukundram says that *kuḷam*s can be purified by the help of the following rite [*puṇṇiyāvācaṉam*]: for fifteen minutes, a priest chants vedic verses in front of a pot filled with water. Then he pours its content into the *kuḷam* in question so that its entire water is considered to be pure. In practice, I have never witnessed either of these two ceremonies. There are virtually no *kuḷam*s newly constructed and probably I did not happen to be around when an existing *kuḷam* was thus purified. However, as a theoretical possibility the rituals exist and contribute to the image of *kuḷam*s as pure and sacred entities.

Furthermore, human activity makes itself felt in the layout of *kuḷam*s that distinguishes them from *ēri*s in the eyes of the people in the study area. Crole describes an array of subterranean channels that was designed to provide the *kuḷam*s of the town Kanchipuram with fresh water.[484] As Sampanth, teacher of Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar, points out, *kuḷam*s are well planned. For that reason people prefer to take their baths there and not in *ēri*s. Steps make them safe places to enter, there are certainly no whirls or patches of unknown depth. As *kuḷam*s are situated within settlements or at their edges, there are, at least in daytime, people always around to take note and action in case somebody is about to drown. *kuḷam*s are thought of as reliable because they are constructed so that they provide water all

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[480] Alternatively written as *kaumāri*.
[481] For introducing me to the place, I thank T. U. Poornanatndam, S. Vadivel and Ravi Kumar of Tiruttani.
[482] Feldhaus 1995: 47 hints at the connection of places of water and the miraculous cow Kāmatēṉu; rivers are expressis verbis equated with that creature: "The Kṛṣṇavenī is the Kāmadhenu that does away with the faults of all sinners" or "Blessed is Mother Godāvarī, the Kāmadhenu herself". But see Shulman 1980: 101 who points to the double character of Kāmatēṉu which includes her bloodthirsty variant.
[483] For *vāstu cānti* see Good 1999: 82 f.
[484] Crole 1879: 119.

year round, not like *ēri*s that virtually disappear in summer because they run dry. This advantage of *kuḷam*s is emphasised by almost all consultants whom I asked to distinguish *kuḷam*s from *ēri*s.

The most distinctive feature of *kuḷam*s seems to be their strong containment capacity. This does not refer to the amount of water they store: *ēri*s' potential to store water is absolutely bigger and rivers' anyway. Yet *kuḷam*s contain the water in a more orderly way and for longer periods of time. For that they rely much less on the conspiracy with nature than *ēri*s. They tame the water by setting limits to it on all sides. Hence, to use a term of Egnor, they are unbroken enclosures, like bangles, pots, wedding halls, wedding pendants [*tāli*], or doorstep designs [*kōlam*] which enjoy in themselves a high valuation: "[I]n the context of conventional Tamil symbolism, [.] unbroken enclosures [...] are preeminent signs of auspiciousness, health, and plenty."[485] Shulman argues that isolation (and thus control) go with the Brahminical ideas of independence and freedom of evil.[486] Egnor also points to the perception in Tamil culture that small is beautiful and more powerful in certain ways.[487] Now small *kuḷam*s are not necessarily thought of as being superior to big *kuḷam*s, but *kuḷam*s are generically smaller than *ēri*s, their minute size making it cheaper to fortify them more which in turn enhances their image. Notably various informants who translate the term "*ēri*" into English use the word "river", emphasising the aspect of unsteadiness, which they never do in case of *kuḷam*s with stagnant water.

*kuḷam*s do not only hold water more strongly than *ēri*s. They are themselves much more contained and bound to the ordered world of humans. They are built inside settlements or on their edges. The life in the locality unfolds around them. As shown in the previous chapter, *kuḷam*s offer space for all kinds of rituals, as well as, performances which, in turn, serve to reinforce the order in neighbourhoods. In Tirukkalukundram, the streets around the biggest *kuḷam* are regularly turned into stages for concerts and street theatre plays [*terukkūttu, nātakam*] on certain festival days. While *ēri*s may simply be built wherever the natural conditions are favourable, prescriptions regulate the construction of *kuḷam*s. Ancient South Indian texts on architecture such as the Māyamāta or the Mānasāra, conceive of any building site as a huge idealistic rectangle.[488] In case of a sacred place, it is divided into 64 square sections, in case of profane houses into 81 such segments. Each of them belongs to a different god. Within this order, the body of water should be placed in the quarter of Īśa (or Īśāna), the northeastern direction.[489] Īśāna is also associated with the idea of movement or flow, remarks Beck, and concludes: "In a functional sense, then, the face of Īśāna can be thought to somehow involve movement between heaven and earth".[490] This underlines some *kuḷam*s' character as *tīrttam*s, as fords between the human and the celestial world, strongly contained by both.

> The location of the *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple happens to concur with those prescriptions: The reservoir occupies the northeast angle of the temple complex. Also the *kuḷam* next to Tirukkalukundram's Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar-temple lies at the latter's northeast corner.

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[485] Egnor 1986: 331.
[486] Shulman 1980: 88.
[487] Egnor 1986: 308. To prove that, she cites a poem attributed to the saint Auvvaiyār: "The *tālam* [screwpine flower] has great breadth, the *makiḻam* has sweet scent /The sea is great, its water muddy; near it in the small spring /Is water to drink."
[488] Jain-Neubauer 1981: 12 – 18.
[489] Brunner-Lachaux 1983: 333.
[490] Beck 1976: 221.

However, other texts such as the Samarāṅgaṇa-Sūtradhāra locate the body of water in the southwest of the imaginary rectangle.[491] In the study area, it is impossible to establish a rule as to what direction a *kuḷam* was built in and relating to which point.

- The biggest *kuḷam*, *śaṅku tīrttam* is related to the Big Temple on top of Tirukkalukundram's hill, but it lies southeast of it and also slightly southeast of the Big Temple inside town;
- the *kuḷam* that is related to Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai is south of it;
- *veḷḷai kuḷam* and the *kuḷam*s below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* and in the centre of its irrigated area are west of the settlements;
- the foremost *kuḷam* of Oragadam is at some distance northeast of the old temple dedicated to Viṣṇu and to the settlement, but directly to the south of the ancient temple of Śiva and the village's *ammaṉ* – and so on.

In Chennai, the two *kuḷam*s related to Kapalīśwarar-temple lie west and southeast of it. Consequently, trying to explain the location of *kuḷam*s by the help of textual sources leads into a thicket of possible interpretations. Yet the important thing is that *kuḷam*s are thought to be constructed according to venerated rules and regulations and to be contained in the cardinal directions.

Another feature emphasises this distinctness of the *kuḷam*s' appearance and their entanglement in human or even divine affairs: other than *ēri*s, they usually have proper names. These names can be related to the physical appearance, situation and usage of the *kuḷam* in question.

> *veḷḷaikuḷam* (like that in Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai) denotes a *kuḷam* with water which is so white [*veḷḷai*] that it is safe to drink. Many inhabitants of Kottimangalam call the *kuḷam* next to the Brahmin's house *aiyarvīṭṭu kuḷam* [*kuḷam* at the Aiyars' /Brahmins' houses]. The *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* and the biggest *kuḷam* of Oragadam are called *tāmarai kuḷam* because of the water lilies that grow there. Several *kuḷam* for washerpeople [*vaṇṇāṉkuḷam*] were already mentioned. One *kuḷam* is colloquially called cave *kuḷam* [*kukaiyāṉkuḷam*]. It is located on a plateau of the hill of Vētakirīsvarar several meters below a group of caves [*kukai*] that, as it is told, were once in history hermitages of some sadhus or holy men. According to A. Sankaralingam of the vicinity, during rainy seasons of earlier days, the water was abundant there like in a waterfall and washermen used to do the laundry there.

More particular are *kuḷam*'s names that relate to gods and goddesses. In Tirukkalukundram, they especially include names that belong to the Brahminic tradition:
- Akkiṉi, the god of fire,
- Vināyakar, the elephant-headed god,
- Latcumi, Viṣṇu's consort,
- Piramā, usually termed "the creator",
- Intiraṉ and Varuṇaṉ, both of whom are sometimes accentuated as gods of rains.[492]

Many *kuḷam*s have several appellations, and the knowledge of them is not evenly distributed. Probably the variance in names reflects a historical development and change of names. In some cases, it might be due to different levels of knowledge of the various consultants.

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[491] Jain-Neubauer 1981: 14, citing the Samarāṅgaṇa-Sūtradhāra chapter XV, verse 31.
[492] Fuller 1992: 51.

The *kuḷam* inside Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple is colloquially called "*uḷ kuḷam*". This designation is quite self-evident as *uḷḷē* means "inside" and *uḷ kuḷam* is the reservoir inside the precincts of the Big Temple. M. Ramalinga Nadar, for instance, knows no other name. He is comparatively new to the place as he has shifted to Tirukkalukundram from distant Tirunelveli district and minds primarily his business. People who are more interested in local religious affairs know more erudite names. For example, Shanti Kumari or V. Vasudevan call it *nanti tīrttam*, "Nanti's reservoir", alluding to the sculpture of the bull, Śiva's vehicle, next to it. Saravanan Gurukkal, one of the officiating priests, says that the true name is *riṣapa tīrttam* because Nanti's real name is Riṣapam. Another name that comes into play is *carva tīrttam*; *carva* meaning "complete".

Another factor that contributes to the multitude of names of a given *kuḷam* are conflicting religious stances.

As for the name of the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's police station, a couple of senior residents call it "*tēraṭivāram tīrttam*"[493] or "*piramā tīrttam*"[494]. Several informants, for example, M. V. Ramesh, a religious teacher and priest [*purōkitar*] who lives next to the *kuḷam*, call it "*akkiṇi tīrttam*"[495]. While these names are used by Śaivites, staunch followers of Vaiṣṇavism call the *kuḷam* "*nārāyaṇa tīrttam*" or "*laṭcumi tīrttam*". In other words, they attribute it to Viṣṇu or to Laṭcumi, his consort. There is a rumour that the idol of the couple stood in a temple next to the *kuḷam*. It was taken to Kulipantandalam, about eight kilometres to the west.[496] Another version has it that the idol was taken on an excursion to Mamallapuram every *māṭṭu poṅkal* day. One day it was not returned.

The example shows that believers consider *kuḷam*s worth taking the effort to see through conflicting viewpoints. It also demonstrates that there are many stories about *kuḷam*s that serve to engrave them more distinctly in people's minds. Finally, the fact that one *kuḷam* can have many names reminds one of the propensity in Tamil culture to attribute a lot of different names and titles (and thus forms of existence) to a human being, place or god in order to ennoble him /her /it. Just as believers praise Śiva by calling him Vētakirīsvarar, Paktavaccalēsvarar, Lord with Lotus Feet etc., a multitude of names eulogises the *kuḷam*s – especially if these are names of gods or goddesses.

*kuḷam*s are not only related to gods and goddesses, but also to each other, to the locality and to the cardinal directions. It hardly matters whom one asks the question "how many *kuḷam*s are there in your place [*ūr*]?" – people of all castes (even Christians or newcomers who usually rather stand aside) will answer "twelve" in Tirukkalukundram, and, in Oragadam, "nine"[497] or "seven"[498]. These three numbers play roles in other aspects of Hindu society as well.

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[493] = the *kuḷam* next to the entrance of the way to the hill temples.

[494] = the *kuḷam* of god Piramā. Others identify *piramā tīrttam* with the *kuḷam* beyond the guesthouse of the Big Temple.

[495] = the *kuḷam* of fire god Akkiṇi. Others identify *akkiṇi tīrttam* with the *kuḷam* at the Uruttirakōṭīśvarar-temple.

[496] My Brahmin consultants of Kulipantandalam, however, doubt this version and say that they have no idea where the idol could be. But in any case they are Vaiṣṇavites.

[497] For example, T. J. Nathan, Mr. Palani who works as director of the canteen in Kalpakkam or V. Alphonse, the local policeman.

[498] For example, Ravi who resides near the CSI church and Muttu, the advocate who was born and raised in Oragadam but lives now in Tirukkalukundram.

Charles Steward Crole, in his description of Kanchipuram, mentions a system of seven "tanks" that relate to the seven days of a week.[499] Tiruttani is said to have seven *kuḷam*s: The vast *nallāṅkuḷam* on the eastern foot of the hill (of Murukaṉ) in the old Brahmins' quarter [*akrakāram*], *caravaṇā tīrttam* on the opposite side, *piramā tīrttam* next to a Piḷḷaiyār- and Kaṇṇikaparamēcuvari-temple on the steps leading from the town to the shrine of Murukaṉ, *viṣṇu tīrttam*, *ramañca kuḷam*, *ceṭṭiyarkuḷam* and *nārāta tīrttam*.[500]

In Oragadam, when I asked my informants to enumerate their seven, respectively, nine *kuḷam*s, they invariably started with the "big *kuḷam*" [*periya kuḷam*] south of Śiva Vāṭāmalli Īcuvarar's hill. Then they usually went on naming the *kuḷam* near the *cūṭukāṭu* in Oragadam's east as *vaṇṇāṉ kuḷam* etc. Nobody was able to designate nine *kuḷam*s and only very few people from Oragadam like Muttu, the advocate, were able to name seven *kuḷam*s:

- *varattu kuḷam* on the way from Desamukipettai,
- *periya kuḷam* in the centre of the village,
- *tāmarai kuḷam* next to the catholic church, also called *alli kuḷam* (= *kuḷam* of water lilies),
- *vaṇṇāṉ kuḷam* (ibid.),
- *veḷḷiccāṉ kuḷam* on the road to Kattakkazani,
- *caṅkaram*[501] *kuḷam* west of the area irrigated by Oragadam's Big *ēri* and
- *puḷiccā kkuḷam* on the eastern fringe of the village.

Likewise in Tirukkalukundram, even the very learned people or those who are interested in local history like Turai Guruswamy, Shanti Kumari or V. Vasudevan of Desamukipettai can hardly enumerate the twelve *kuḷam*s exhaustively. When I asked V. Vasudevan, he did not want to give up so easily. He walked to his chest full of papers and fetched a book on the history of Tirukkalukundram.[502] It gave the names of the place's twelve *kuḷam*s and the directions in which they could be found – but no map. Hence, V. Vasudevan had to interpret the text and apply it to reality.

1. Intira *tīrttam*: Vasudevan interpreted this as the *kuḷam* near nalvar-temple in Nalvarkoyilpettai. Other informants, however, call it "*mūvar kuḷam*". They either argue that this is the *kuḷam* of three [*mūṉṟu*] wards [*pēṭṭai*] of Tirukkalukundram or that this is the place where three of the four *nālvar* who sang in praise of god Śiva on top of the mountain.
In the southeastern direction, according to V. Vasudevan's book, there are
2. *campu tīrttam*,[503] which V. Vasudevan had difficulty to locate, and
3. *uruttira tīrttam*, which he interpreted as the *kuḷam* next to Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar-temple. Others called it *akkini tīrttam*, that is "*kuḷam* of god Akkiṉi".
4. In the northern direction, V. Vasudevan's book locates *vaciṭṭa*[504] *tīrttam*, obviously a *kuḷam*

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[499] Crole 1879: 117 f.
[500] For this information I thank T. U. Poornanandam of Tiruttani.
[501] This word, which is derived from Sanskrit, means "destruction". None of my informants could give me a reason for this name. One said that the *kuḷam* is in fact called "*caṅkeḷaṉkuḷam*" but did not know the meaning of that word, either.
[502] Vetacalam 1999: 28 f. An identical list of *kuḷam*s, but without giving their directions, can be found in Caminataiyer 1938: 12 f. Other informants, too, advised me to refer to books to find out the exact names of the *kuḷam*s.
[503] Probably named after Jambu, a sage [*riṣi*].
[504] *vāci* = reside, live; *vaciyam* = magic spell, bewitchment.

near Kāḻiyamman̠-temple in Rudrankoyil that is nowadays very unclean.

5. – 8. For the southwest, the book names

5. *meyññāna(m) tīrttam*, cf. V. Vasudevan the *kuḷam* near Cokkamman̠-temple on the path circling the hill,

6. *akattiya(m)*[505] *tīrttam*, the *kuḷam* below the bund of the Big *ēri*. Others called it *tāmarai kuḷam* or *anderson tīrttam*,

7. *mārkkaṇṭa(m) tīrttam*, a *kuḷam* that has now vanished and used to be in Ayarbadi,[506] and

8. *kōcika(m) tīrttam*, the above mentioned cave *kuḷam* on the eastern slope of Vētakirīsvarar's hill. In a map of Tirukkalukundram that obviously dates back to colonial times, a body of water situated roughly at this spot is called "*piramā tīrttam*".

In the western direction, V. Vasudevan's book lists

9. the aforementioned *nanti tīrttam*[507] and

10. *varuṇa(n̠) tīrttam*. V. Vasudevan interpreted it as the *kuḷam* northeast of Desamukipettai. However, it is commonly called *kōṭivināyakar kuḷam*.

11. In the northwestern direction, the text mentions *akalikai tīrttam*. V. Vasudevan identified it as the *kuḷam* on the western border of Desamukipettai. Usually it is called *veḷḷaikuḷam*.

12. On top of the hill of Vētakirīsvarar, V. Vasudevan's book lists *campāti tīrttam* oder *paṭci tīrttam*. Others call it *nari kuḷam* and hold that *paṭci tīrttam* is the little pool adjacent to the spot where the priest would daily feed the *paṭci*, the eagles (if only they would come).

This shows that V. Vasudevan's interpretations do not go uncontested. Other informants differ about which *kuḷam* they ascribe to which name. Some even present entirely different arrays of *kuḷam*s including the following:

- The vast *śaṅku tīrttam*,
- the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's police station,
- *pon̠n̠iṭṭanātar tīrttam* next to the pillared hall [*maṇṭapam*] of the Kaṇakkuppiḷḷais on the road leading towards Madurantakam,
- *ōcūramman̠ kuḷam* in Paramesuvarinagar,
- *cēran̠ kuḷam* in the middle of the area irrigated by Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*,
- the *kuḷam* next to the cremation ground [*cūṭukāṭu*] east of the Big *ēri*,
- the *vaṇṇān̠ kuḷam*s in the bed of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* and east of Ayarbadi respectively,
- the *kuḷam* behind the kindergarten [*pālvāṭi*] on the way to M. N. Kuppam and
- the *kuḷam* behind the *pajan̠a*-temple[508] in Kanakkoyilpettai.

There exists a notion of a certain order underlying the *kuḷam*s of a given locality. The importance of integrating the phenomenon of *kuḷam*s into a system that tallies with the system prevailing in other spheres of life (*vāstu* – stars – marriages etc.) is felt. This system even exists independently to a point that informants find it difficult to subsume actual *kuḷam*s under it. If I had not asked my informants to do so, they would hardly have felt the necessity to do it. It seems more important (if not sufficient) to know that there is a certain order and amount of *kuḷam*s in a given locality than to be able to name them individually. In the same pattern that has been shown for Tirukkalukundram, *kuḷam*s are also contained in other places in the cityscape, as for example, in Srirangam near Tiruchchirappalli. Pieper

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[505] This name reminds one of Saint Agastiya (who is called Akattiya in Tamil).

[506] Others maintain that this is *śaṅku tīrttam* as the *kuḷam* of Saint Mārkkaṇṭēya: Vetacalam 1999: 65.

[507] Named after Śiva's vehicle, the bull Nanti. It is situated inside the precincts of the Big Temple downhill.

[508] Temple in which songs [*pajan̠ai*] for Kiruṣṇan̠ are sung every Saturday.

argues that its space is defined by nine reservoirs (obviously *kuḷam*s are meant here) and two big flights of steps (ghats) down to the river, meant for bathing.[509] However, this order seems rather secondary to the fact that the *kuḷam*s as well as the entire temple-town is thought to be built in reference to the cardinal directions.[510] Morna Livingston notes that the wells she has researched in Rajasthan and Gujarat seem always to be built according to the cardinal directions, albeit never exactly so, and she concludes: "Wells acknowledge the cosmos in each case, but in a way that is more reverential than referential".[511] What seems to be important is the consciousness that the sacred water places are securely tied to the cosmic order.

In summary, *kuḷam*s appear to be much more marked than *ēri*s, they have a stronger capacity to contain, and they themselves are more strongly contained in the habits and beliefs of the area. They are not perceived as half wild entities that rely on the conspiracy with nature as *ēri*s do, but the natural force of water is seen as scaled down to a cultivated pettiness.[512] People of the study area perceive *kuḷam*s as parts of the ordered, human and divine cosmos. This is the basis for their positive image. Apart from that, they are vital sources of water to drink, for the cattle and for household purposes for thousands of inhabitants in the study area. Just because *ēri*s take over the dirty tasks, *kuḷam*s can remain clean and pure.

*Kuḷam*s are dirty and bad

Cut-piece merchant C. Ramesh of Tirukkalukundram, one among many informants who attributes medicinal qualities to the *kuḷam*s surrounding the locality's hill, shakes his head in utter despise when I ask him whether he, too, drinks the water from these *kuḷam*s: "I am not crazy! People wash their clothes in there, even the clothes from the hospital!" he explains and declares, referring to the *kuḷam* south of Tirukkalukundram's hill: "Nowadays you won't be cured of leprosy when you drink the water – you will contract the disease!". Only tourists indulge in bathing there and sipping the water, he adds.[513]

Likewise, many informants perceive the *kuḷam*s of the study area as deteriorating, their water as contaminated. K. Subramaniam, who lives in the neighbourhood of the *kuḷam* beneath Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, remembers that he saw it bedecked with lotus flowers in his childhood but points out that "nowadays", there are no such flowers due to the "poison" which people use, i.e., the detergents for doing the laundry. A 16-year-old girl who resides in Vanniyar Street says that earlier her family used that *kuḷam* to do the laundry, but not anymore: "The water has become unclean" – "Why?" – "There are unclean people living alongside it". In the past decade, a group of Iṟular has built a row of lowly huts at the north side of the *kuḷam*. S. Tamilaracu of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai explains that the *kuḷam*s are full of harmful bacteria. Therefore, he refuses to drink the water: "Middle and upper middle class people do not utilise the *kuḷam*s or *ēri*s anymore". As postmaster of Tirukkalukundram, S. Tamilaracu obviously counts himself as belonging to that strata as

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[509] Pieper 1977.

[510] Narasimhan Praveen 1967 gives an exhaustive list of the nine *kuḷam*s or "places of holy water" [*tīrtta stāna*] and places them in villages in eight different directions, with the "lotus pond of the moon" or "silver lotos pond" [Chandra Pushkarini] centrally located in the main temple.

[511] Livingston 2002: 37.

[512] An expression used in another context by novelist Shashi Deshpande 1996: 4.

[513] See also Alley 1998 on the conflicting notions on the Ganges river, having to cope with its physical pollution and its spiritual purity.

well. He adds that if people like him use *kuḷam*s at all, it is on purely religious occasions such as the fortnightly ritual described in the previous chapter.

Outside the study area, *kuḷam*s have hardly gained any attention so far. It is only since the beginning of the new millennium that Non Governmental Organisations, like the Chennai based C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer Foundation have put *kuḷam*s on their agenda. This is usually in the context of their assumed sacredness, which resembles the stance of postmaster S. Tamilaracu.
They tend to emphasise the *kuḷam*s' sacredness at the expense of their being useful in a plethora of everyday contexts.[514] In fact, as has been argued, *kuḷam*s are often strongly linked with temples, but their role has been shown to be not very specific. *kuḷam*s could be substituted by any other source of water; their most specific role (apart from making it easy to manoeuvre floats and grow lotus) is to create publicity for the sake of the neighbourhood. Some *kuḷam*s are situated in the precincts of big temple complexes; yet in the vast majority of cases, it is the other way round: temples, usually small shrines, are built at the banks of *kuḷam*s. In the study area, many of them are square platforms made of stone, mud or cement on which one, three, seven or nine bricks or small pieces of rock are placed. Other such shrines are typically stone or cement huts which are big enough so that a person can step in, but only with deeply bent head. Usually only the priest [*pūjāri*] enters while the worshippers remain outside. There is a fashion to build cement platforms in front of these shrines for the worshippers to sit on, and in a next step they are often covered with roofs of corrugated iron on long poles. This makes them suddenly look very massive. In general, none of these shrines dominates the *kuḷam*; they coexist at its side.

> At the northernmost *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram in Desamukipettai, there is a little temple for the elephant-headed god Vināyakar, a sacred anthill [*puṟṟu*] beneath a massive tree, a shrine for the snake goddess, a pavillon to meditate [*ñāna maṇṭapam*], a venerated shrine of the divine nine planets[515] [*navakirāka*] and a newly built shrine for holy footprints [*tiruvaṭippūṅkōyil /tēṉippu maṇṭapam*]. Furthermore, there is a flat black stone that gleams in the sun because generations of worshippers have smeared it with clarified butter. The stone has two convex footprints on it which some people of the vicinity say stem from saint Māṇikkavācakar, whereas others ascribe them to Vētakirīsvarar (the local form of Śiva on top of the hill). In front of the stone stands a smaller stone that is said to be Śiva's vehicle, Nanti.
> At the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's hill stands one temple for the four saintly singers [*nālvar*] who are said to have camped there. There is also a temple for Piḷḷaiyār and one for Paccaiammaṉ.
> At the biggest *kuḷam* of Oragadam, there are shrines for Kuḷatiyammaṉ, Kaṅkaiyammaṉ, and nine sisters, and the temples of Śiva Vāṭāmalli Īcuvarar and Viṣṇu are not far.

On one hand, *kuḷam*s serve to provide water for the needs of the temples, for the unctions, the water sprinkling etc. On the other hand, the multitude of shrines serves to create a public sphere at the *kuḷam*s. Even people from outside the neighbourhood may visit the place if they want to worship the deities.

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[514] C. P. R. Environmental Education Centre 2002
[515] The sun [*cūriyaṉ*], the moon [*cantiraṉ*], the five planets and the ascending and descending nodes of the moon [*rāku* and *kētu*] are depicted as anthropomorphic figurines.

The perception of *kuḷam*s by government agencies is even less favourable than of *ēri*s. Whereas the Public Works Department and the *pañcāyattu* Union are aware of their duty to maintain the latter even though they might in practice lack the means to fulfil it, the multitude of *kuḷam*s commands very little interest on the part of the departments. Only a few *kuḷam*s receive some attention and care; mostly the government clerks hardly do more than auctioneering the trees, fish or other produce of the *kuḷam*s. Tirukkalukundram's Executive Officer is probably aware of all *kuḷam*s in the locality, but he

Source: homepage of the Tamil Nadu Water Supply and Drainage Board, http://www.twadboard.com/safedr.htm

Borewells with hand pump came into existence and people started adopted this method for the requirements of water

Govermental agencies like TWAD BOARD started excuting water supply schemes to provide protected and potable water supply through overhead tanks with stand posts.

With the advancement of civilization, people started taking water from the well as they felt it to be safe. But that was not so.

does not know their names, Hence, he obviously does not have to do with them very often. Most officials perceive *kuḷam*s as signs of backwardness, especially if the bodies of water have to be used to serve daily needs such as supplying drinking water. The backwardness of certain castes is measured in the distance of taps and wells to their homes; *kuḷam*s do not count.

An example for the way of thinking is a tableau on the website of the Tamil Nadu Water Supply and Drainage Board (TWAD), the agency responsible for the supply of drinking water in Tamil Nadu. It identifies the usage of *kuḷam*s ("ponds") as a practice before "the advancement of civilisation". The TWAD Board it is clearly in favour of "civilised" methods of water supply, which means in this context those imported from Europe and North America. Development aid institutions foster that view. For example, a news release of the Japan Bank for International Cooperation on "Water Supply and Sewerage" reads:

> "In many provincial towns and cities in India, the wave of urbanization accompanying economic development has resulted not only in water supply inadequacy, but also in seriously insufficient access to safe drinking water. People must obtain water from wells and ponds for drinking, where there are no proper water supply and sewerage facilities."[516]

Indian officials perceive *kuḷam*s not only as a danger for those who drink their water or who take a bath in them. They consider them also a threat for the groundwater. K. R. Srinivasan, former Director of the Central Ground Water Board, Ministry of Water Resources, explains that *kuḷam*s are bad because they lay the groundwater open and allow the influx of numerous polluting substances, starting with garbage.[517]

The concept of public place [*potu iṭam*]

Searching for a clue to the blatant contradictions in the above sketched perceptions of *kuḷam*s, I will start at a point that they have in common. A notion that underlies both perceptions is that *kuḷam*s are "public places" [*potu iṭaṅkaḷ*]. Nobody of my informants denies that; on the contrary, several of them seem to be quite relieved to have such a convenient term at hand to capture the complex reality of their neighbourhood's life unfolding around a *kuḷam*. When I ask them to delineate the concept by telling me the opposite of "public" place [*potu iṭam*], they always say it is "place of one's own" [*taṉi iṭam* / *taṉi paṭṭā*[518] *cottu*]; there is never any doubt to that. The usage of "*potu*" is not confined to the context of "place". For example, if a rumour spreads in an entire village, people say that it is known "publicly" [*potuvāka*]. Cre-A's dictionary lists 21 composita with "*potu*", including meanings as different as "*potuppaṇit tuṟai*" [Public Works Department, PWD], "*potuniṟam*" [a complexion that is neither dark nor fair] or "*potunalam*" [common good].

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[516] http://www.jbic.go.jp/english/base/release/oecf/1997/A21/0225-e1.php
[517] Srinivasan 2002: 18 – 25.
[518] *paṭṭā* means "a settlement record which shows who, as the owner of a specified land, is obliged to pay the tax" (according to Cre-A's dictionary). In colloquial speech, this obligation to pay tax becomes synonymous with (or the marker for) ownership.

At first sight, the term "public place" [*potu iṭam*] seems to be clear. The following definition stems from a conversation at the *kuḷam* northwest of Tirukkalukundram's hill.[519] My interlocutors were men and women who happened to be around to do the laundry or who were curious and came when they discovered my microphone. All of them belonged to the neighbourhood (Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai and Kottimangalam-Cokkammankoyil) and to the Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyār caste. A smart looking young man took my pen and wrote the words "*potu kuḷam*" in my notebook, explaining their meaning thus:

> "Anybody can make use of this *kuḷam* for whatever purpose. Nobody will object to it. We have not dug it. It was dug during the reign of the kings [*rājā kālam*]."

This definition is typical, and so is the reference to the era of kings. Some informants say that with an air of pride that there were such benign kings in their country. Several informants exhaustively describe the stone benches [*cumaitāṅki*] to sit upon or to rest one's headloads on which these kings erected nearby *kuḷam*s and which are a frequent sight nowadays. Thus, in the analytical framework for defining "publicness" of spaces offered by Stephan Carr and others,[520] the *kuḷam* seems to qualify as "public", at least for the categories "access" and "freedom of action". The story of C. Rajaganapathy, (told in chapter nine) being evicted from the patch of the public space that he occupied, points to the inapplicability of the category of "claim" in Carr's et. al.'s classification. The ability to modify the environment is given to a certain extent as documented by the bundles of privately owned firewood, fodder for goat or heaps of sand that the people of the vicinity have dumped at various points of the *kuḷam*, partly obstructing the access.

However, the conversation at the *kuḷam* northwest of Tirukkalukundram's hill did not come to an end with the above cited definition; it continued and ended with the introduction of a second meaning of "*potu*". This was when I went on and asked whether people belonging to the "Scheduled Castes" were allowed to use the *kuḷam*. An irritation arose shortly. Then the following discussion ensued:

> **Smart looking man**: Yes, they may use this *kuḷam*. Err – would you like to go to the colony[521]?
> (...)
> **Bettina:** How far is the colony from here?
> **Man:** Not so far – it is a little far, just about two kilometres off the bus stand.
> **Bettina:** But the bus stand is already at a distance of one kilometre – how will people from the colony be able to come here?
> **Woman 1**: Generally they do not come here at all. It is too far off. But if they do come here at all, possibly people here do not allow them. People do not allow them to wash clothes or to take a bath because they belong to a different caste.
> **Bettina:** But just now you said it is a public *kuḷam* [*potu kuḷam*]!
> **Woman 2**: Yes, it is a public *kuḷam* [*potu kuḷam*].
> **Woman 1**: It is a *potu kuḷam* for this particular area [*inta ūr*] alone, not for those people in the

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[519] Recorded 11,1,1999 in Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai.
[520] Carr et al. 1992 develop a five-fold classification: "Access" – the right to enter and remain in a public space; "freedom of action" – the ability to keep up activities in the public space; "claim" – the ability to take over the space and its resources; "change" – the ability to modify the environment; "ownership" – the ultimate form of control.
[521] Colloquial designation for the place of the Dalits.

colony.

Bettina: And if they come?

Girls 1 + 2: They will quarrel.

Woman: They will beat them! They should not come. They will ask "Why did you come here? You are different, I am different! Go away!"

Bettina: Who?

Man and women at once: The people of this area [*ūrukkāraṅka*]

Girl: They will beat them and drive them away.

Given that my informants know that Untouchability is unconstitutional, it did not come as a surprise that there was an uneasiness and that they initially answered quite reluctantly to the question about it. What should be noted is the usage of "*potu*" in the limited sense as pertaining only to the people of that particular area, that is, of the neighbourhood. Thus it attains more the character of particularity or privacy. This runs counter to the classification offered by Carr et al. Therefore, James Buchanan's systematisation of the broad scale between "purely private" and "purely public" in his "Theory of Clubs" appears to be fruitful.[522] In that second understanding, the perception of the *kuḷam* in question as a "public" [*potu*] asset is that of a "club-good", open only for the members of a delineated amount of people, a supposed "club". This limitation of what is the "public" [*potu*] can be due to spatial considerations, encompassing the inhabitants of the respective place.

> When Varadan, the servicing man of Irumbuli portrayed in chapter seven, introduces himself as "public person" [*potu āḷ*], it is clear that he is not everybody's worker, but just of Irumbuli. The headman of the neighbourhood nearby the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* is called "public headman" [*potu nāṭṭar*], he is not, at the same time, the headman of any other neighbourhood.

Furthermore, the meaning of "public" can also be defined by membership of a certain caste. For example, when the Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyārs of my study area were building a new marriage hall, the manager said that the "public people" [*potu makkaḷ*] were doing it. That meant, in his eyes, the members of the caste who reside in Tirukkalukundram. Another possibility to delimitate the meaning of "*potu*" is that it refers to people of shared political convictions or religious beliefs and practices, overriding distinctions of caste and space. This happens, for example, with those who participate in the pilgrimage to the shrine of Aiyappaṉ in Sabaraimalai (as groups of *potu makkaḷ* they enter mini buses or trains for their southwestbound journey). Likewise, Turai Guruswamy (who will be portrayed in the next chapter) uses the term "*potu makkaḷ*" to label his followers in worshipping Śiva Vētakirīsvarar.[523]

The concept "*potu*" proves to be quite elastic and, at times, contentious. Firstly, in certain contexts, a "public" entity may tolerate the participation of people outside one's "club" as well. This happens especially if the participation of outsiders is likely to add value to the public entity.

> Before C. Rajaganapathy moved, in 1996, into the little house at the *kuḷam* northwest of Tirukkalukundram's hill, Meenakshi, an aged woman had stayed there. She led a religious

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[522] Buchanan 1965.

[523] Diane Mines translates "*potumakkaḷ*" as "temple association" and "common people" and finds that they "cut across such categories of person and place to combine jātis, lineages, and residential units of varying power and rank in what prove to be sometimes quite surprising combinations", in contrast to the more conventional understanding of temple associations relating to caste and kin; Mines 2002: 61 with further references.

life, sang religious songs [*pajaṉai*] and subsisted on alms that she collected from pious passers-by. Finally she left, some said (and that would be appropriate to her name) to Madurai. Obviously the people of the neighbourhood had tolerated her, presumably because of her religious attitude. They could draw a certain profit from her presence: in the form of blessings. Similarly, Vedagiri, the priest of Kuṉṟatammaṉ in Irumbuli, explains that the goddess belongs to the people of the place, but that she can be worshipped by outsiders as well: "In that sense, she is public [*potu*]." This way the goddess gains more fame and the priest gets more coins on the plate which he passes on to the devotees.

Secondly, the term "*potu*" is frequently used in aspiration of a larger retinue for various kinds of public ends. The organisers of temple festivals, who often sign as "public people" [*potu makkaḷ*] of the respective places, are usually no corporate group. Just the core of them is organised and actively working for the festival; others restrict their contribution to monetary donations or just to lending their presence to the festival by attending it. But by using the label "public people", the responsible persons pretend to also include many others into their lot, hence, increasing their retinue and their importance.

S. Shekar, who does *pūjai* for Kaṉṉiyammaṉ next to the *kuḷam* in the command area of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, one day informed me that they (the "public people") plan to collect money in order to renovate the *kuḷam*. The *kuḷam* is rather out of the way of most other inhabitants of Tirukkalukundram and does not enshrine anything of importance, so the renovation will most likely be an affair of the inhabitants of the four or five houses in the immediate neighbourhood. Yet S. Shekar's utilising the word "public people" [*potu makkaḷ*] illustrates his faint hope that inhabitants of far off streets might contribute money as well; at least they are potentially included.

Thirdly, activists for the betterment of the Untouchables' situation use the term *potu* self-consciously to include all groups of the society, and this is how the word becomes a pugnacious term. I shall call that the "open access perception". Muttu, advocate and himself a Paṟaiyar, defines "public place" [*potu iṭam*] as a place "to which everyone has free access. [...] the general public without any discrimination have access and can make use without anybody else interfering". He describes in detail the advantages of public *kuḷam*s even for travellers from other areas. S. Marimuttu, who is, like Muttu a lawyer and a Paṟaiyar, explains that temples, restaurants, sports grounds, speaker's platforms and stages, festival sites and streets are – apart from *kuḷam*s – considered to be public places and that there should not be any restriction to their usage. However, he enlists many examples from Tirukkalukundram and from outlying villages in which this public accessibility is no reality. He argues (in English) that encroachment diminishes the public place: "The *potu iṭam* is day by day converted, so the benefit of the public is diminished if not lost". In vivid colours he describes how encroachers bribe the officers or threaten them not to evict them. He demands that the state should take care of evicting the encroachers so that everybody will benefit from the "public place". Thus in their mouths, "*potu iṭam*" becomes combative. It derives its understanding from the understanding of "*potu*" in the discourse of national politics and in official statements. After all, this is the constitutional perception of places like *kuḷam*s.

V. Tamilmani, as the local Member of the Legislative Assembly one of the main representatives of the state, says: "'Public place' [*potu iṭam*] means it is a place like a *ēri*, *kuḷam*, anything that is owned by the government and meant for the public [...] There is no restriction which says only these people can go and take a bath and these people cannot. There

is no discrimination in terms of the ruler and the ruled or discrimination on the basis of caste – such things do not exist here. You can find people from the lower caste also taking a bath and fetching water to drink and also people of the higher caste bail water and take a bath."

Chapter nine has shown that the management of *kuḷam*s is oscillating between the neighbourhood and state officials. Only the "open access perception" grasps that fully, but both types of management can be labelled "*potu*", glossing over the differences and allowing the indulgence in the illusion that there is no discrimination, which especially politicians do most readily. Yet in the reality of the study area, this peaceful notion of "public place" appears more like a sweet dream. Since one of the crucial issues in the study area is the conflict on caste lines, anything "public" [*potu*] in the sense of overriding the divisions of caste will be contentious.

One of the first times I visited the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's hill and made enquiries about the understanding of "public" [*potu*], my informants – V. Janarthanam and R. Selvam, two weavers who live directly at the bund of the *kuḷam* – took on the rhetoric of "*potu*" in the sense of "open access". They emphasised how friendly and co-operative the people who live around the *kuḷam* are. Others, who gathered quickly around the three of us, underlined that. Without my having mentioned the topic, they started talking about caste. One man pointed to a particular house at the northern bund and said that a Muslim lives there; another one said that Nāyakkars live in the neighbourhood as well (all my interlocutors are Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyārs). After frequent visits, a conversation about the assumed bad shape of the *kuḷam* unfolded. The topos of the government's doing nothing came up and lingered a while in the air above the *kuḷam*. Then an interlocutor said:

Man 1: The people of the neighbourhood can represent the matter to the Collector and petition him to take the necessary steps and deepen the *kuḷam*.
[...]
Bettina: Nobody has done that so far?
Woman: Nobody has taken such a step at all. If we make a representation, the government will certainly initiate steps.
[...]
Man 2: Such a step could be initiated, but who will volunteer?
[...]
Man 3: If I said that this or that has to be taken up, the people around will ask me "Why are you so bothered? This is a public place [*potu iṭam*], if it gets dirty, what does it matter to you? Go and mind your own business!". This is the kind of attitude we encounter. We also keep a distance because we do not want to get into unnecessary fights and we do not want to raise this issue and pick up quarrels on account of that.
Man 3: This area is divided on caste lines and it is very difficult to get all the people together.

Obviously the public *kuḷam*s – concomitantly with the shift in the meaning of public [*potu*] to include the meaning "free access" – have lost their value for people who would subscribe to the meaning of "*potu*" in the sense of a rather restricted "club-good". They perceive them as less contained and controlled and thus less good than in the past, as they imagine it. As a consequence, they withdraw and prefer residing next to a *kuḷam* which they detest, to taking direct action themselves.

In addition to that, the principle of separation to keep *kuḷam*s clean and pure is not only done away with in the sense of their containment within certain neighbourhoods that are putatively homogeneous

in their caste population, but also of the functional separation (see chapter nine). Nowadays, the setting apart of *kuḷam*s especially for washerpeople is being denigrated along with the institution per se. Chapter ten has shown how the washerman's role in a fortnightly ritual was contested. This is not an isolated case. For washerpeople, it becomes more and more difficult, if not impossible, to make their living bydoing the laundry.

> Nowadays, neither Parasuraman nor Anthony and his family, who were introduced in chapter nine, have clients anymore for whom they do the laundry. Both Vaṇṇāṉs say that they gradually stopped when their clients did not pay as per agreement or because the payment was not high enough. Very often they had to go from house to house begging for rice. Anthony used to do all kinds of daily wage labour, in agriculture, in brick kilns or for the upkeep of the *ēri*. As mentioned above, already Anthony's grandfather and his two brothers had started to rear ducks as a side business. His father – the only son of his grandfather – continued with the ducks and so does Anthony. His four elder brothers have died when they were between 40 and 50 years old because of some ailments. His children have completely given up the washing business and the ducks. One son has settled in Pondicherry and works as watchman. Another son works in a cement trading company in Chennai. His daughter is married to a driver in Chennai. His second daughter died immediately after her marriage in her in-laws' place at the age of 18.

As a reason for not employing the service of Vaṇṇāṉs anymore, many erstwhile clients argue that the Vaṇṇāṉs did not do the laundry properly or that they spoilt the clothes. However, it is unlikely that the washerpeople should have lost their proficiency all of a sudden. Their own perception of that development is that of a mishap which caught them without their being at fault. Each family of washerpeople tends to view its fate as an individual case of injustice or bad luck, although something similar happened to all Vaṇṇāṉ families of the study area: of the ca. 50 Vaṇṇāṉ families that live in Tirukkalukundram, the majority does ironing nowadays at the rate of Rs. 1.20 to 2 per piece; no Vaṇṇāṉ family can be seen doing the laundry. Instead of donkeys loaded with bedsheets, blankets and blouses, nowadays, they take only their ducks to *kuḷam*s, which are still known as *vaṇṇāṉkuḷam*s.

> The story of a Vaṇṇāṉ family of Tirukkalukundram illustrates the interpretation of a severe mishap. It all started with a silk sari a customer had given to him to wash, the father recalls. Somebody stole the sari. In order to pay back the amount for the precious cloth, the Vaṇṇāṉ family had to take a loan. They got into trouble with its redemption, so much so, that they had to leave their family home and settled in a hut near the bus stand, adjacent to the cremation place. The plot forms part of the *ēri*, they have encroached it. They say that after that experience, they fear doing the laundry and restrict themselves to ironing which is more easily manageable than taking the clothes to wash.

Another factor that might have contributed to the disappearance of the institution of the washerman is the increasing mobility in society. "When we still lived in Mangalam, we had our family dhobi who used to do the laundry" says E. Varalakshmi from Tirukkalukundram-Ayarbadi. When they shifted to their new place because she and her husband had got jobs as teachers there, local Vaṇṇāṉs came and offered their service. "But they will wash the laundry in the *cūṭukāṭu kuḷam* [next to the cremation ground] which is full of filth. All kinds of communities wash their clothes there and take a bath there! I have even seen women wash their menstrual napkins", explain E. Varalakshmi and her daughter. They do not trust the Vaṇṇāṉs whom they do not know. That is why they undertook the onerous work

to carry their entire laundry to the well the family owns in a field, far away between Irumbuli and Pulikundram, and did the laundry there. Now the situation is solved the modern way: they have a well at home and also a washing machine.

Likewise, older people like K. Subramaniyan of Tirukkalukundram-Kanakkoyilpettai told me that when they were children or adolescents, nobody used to let his cattle drink in the *kuḷam*s within settlements. The cows were gathered every morning on the village's pasture [*mantaiveḷi*] from where a professional herdsman led them into the forest, into dried *ēri*s or harvested fields to graze and returned them in the evening – a practice that resembles the "Heimweide" in Alpine regions. They quenched their thirst in *kuḷam*s that were set aside for that purpose. This system was abandoned about twenty years ago according to various informants. Since then, the cows stray about the settlements and guzzle in whatever *kuḷam* they find and from which nobody chases them away, or each household has to provide a person who takes care of the cattle. In Oragadam, one day I counted on the harvested fields below the village's Big *ēri* 39 people, mostly jobless teenagers, each of whom took care of one to four cows.

There are no written accounts, neither of the practice of common herdsmen nor of common washerpeople. It is impossible to reconstruct the extent of their functioning from oral history alone. However, there seems to have been a time in which this kind of division of labour existed more widely than now. Its decline can be seen as paradigmatic for an ongoing development of the order that contains the water reservoirs of a locality, keeping some of them clean, and a few even pure, by separating them from others that serve as receptacles for unclean substances.

The changes that occur in the wake of this development are interpreted in interesting ways within the study area itself. For instance, what is perceived of as decay of *kuḷam*s is taken, by some informants, as a sign for a general decay of discipline in their society. This is often linked to the emigration of Brahmins from the study area to cities and abroad during the past decades.

> V. Vasudevan of Tirukkalukundram-Desamukipettai says: "The Brahmins were very good because they maintained discipline [*kaṭṭuppāṭu*] in the village. Did you see the *tāmarai kuḷam* [the Big *kuḷam* of Oragadam]? Those people maintained it very clean /pure [*tūymay*]. They had employed two strong guards to maintain its purity." In great detail, he describes the number of dos and don'ts at the *kuḷam* and that there were guards with sticks to beat up every trespasser. "So much was the care. After the Brahmins [Aiyeṅkars] left, the village became completely bad." Nowadays, says Vasudevan, people do not obey if they were reprimanded for taking a bath in the *kuḷam*. "They would say 'This is a free country, I do as I please' and do it on purpose." According to Vasudevan, democracy [*makkaḷācci*] is the reason why everything is getting worse in India nowadays. "Formerly, it worked. When the kings were there [*rājākālattil*] everything was in very good shape. When the foreigners, the British, came, the standards deteriorated. But it got really bad after Independence. You know Gandhi, the Mahatma, he was in fact a very bad man. And Nehru and all. Everything degraded since then."

However, more than eighty years of anti-Brahminic agitation and politics in Tamil Nadu[524] have not failed to leave their marks on the way of thinking of even staunch romanticisers of the olden days and of the rule of kings. The difference of Brahmins and non-Brahmins is thwarted as various non-

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[524] On the anti-Brahmin (or Dravidian) movement, see Barnett 1976 and Kruse 1975.

Brahmins, like members of the weaver caste [Ceṅkuntar Mutaliyār], the traditional priests of village temples [Uvaccār] and agricultural castes [Nāyakkars], take on the comportment of Kurukkaḷs, learn Sanskrit verses and the intricacies of astrology and work as Aiyars. The word "Brahmin" [*pirāmaṇaṉ*] itself is not in much use in the study area, "Aiyar" takes its place, colloquially even for the Vaiṣṇavite Brahmins [Aiyeṅkars], even though, traditionally, it seems to have been reserved for Śivaite Brahmins.

> Typical for people in his societal position, V. Vasudevan's opinion on Brahmins oscillates between utter respect and deep grudge against many of them who, as he says, are fat and nasty [*koḷuppu*] and have no good comportment [*oḷukkam illai*]. That is why he (who belongs to the weaver caste) takes pains to learn Sanskrit verses, is a strict vegetarian and does *pūjai* in temples, trying to become an Aiyar himself. Already several neighbours call him thus.

Whether or not the actual Brahmins have cared about the maintenance of the multitude of *kuḷam*s – it is interesting that non-Brahmins identify them with it. Already the previous chapter has alluded to the perception that *kuḷam*s are somehow linked with Brahmins – for example, by way of the floating festivals which are so important for *kuḷam*s that in Southern Tamil Nadu, they are generically called "float *kuḷam*s" [*teppa kuḷam*].

In this context, it is noteworthy that the most deteriorated, heavily polluted and nasty *kuḷam* of the study area, the "*tīrttam* of pigs" [*paṉri tīrttam*], forms the heart of Tirukkalukundram's erstwhile *akrakāram*, the neighbourhood of Brahmins. Of the people in the study area, the Brahmins were obviously those who gave up their *kuḷam* firstly and more thoroughly than people of other neighbourhoods. This is in part due to physical absence – many of them have shifted to cities and simply have no means of taking care of the *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram.

> P. Krishnamurthy, who resides on the north flank of the "*tīrttam* of pigs", is an example of this high mobility of many Brahmins. His house is the ancestral home of his mother's family, yet already his parents had shifted to Madras where his father worked in the Registration Office and where P. Krishnamurthy was born in 1914. After a while, the family returned to Tirukkalukundram where P. Krishnamurthy spent his childhood. In order to get a proper education, however, he left and settled in Madras-Mylapore. He got his law degree in 1936 and worked in Madras and Chidambaram as a lawyer. Upon his retirement in 1983, he returned to Tirukkalukundram. It seems that he will be the last one of his family to stay in Akrakaram Street. His son is the principal of Madras School of Social Work, one daughter is married to a high official in Western Railways far north in Ahmadabad and another daughter is married in Sirkazi. P. Krishnamurthy interacts cordially with his immediate neighbours but otherwise he leads a rather withdrawn life and does not bother about the *kuḷam*.

However, at least eight Brahmin families stay on in Akrakaram Street around the *kuḷam*. Among those who bought the houses of the emigrants are four Jain families; they immigrated from Rajasthan to work as moneylenders and deal with jewellery and with gold from South Africa. Jains have the reputation of being no less fussy about purity than Brahmins. Yet instead of cleaning the *kuḷam* or working towards the eviction of its encroachers, both Brahmins and Jains (along with the other families who moved in such as Nāṭārs) obviously have lost any interest in its maintenance. They withdraw completely from it, into a form of privacy that had so far been unknown in the vicinity of the *kuḷam*.

The houses surrounding the _kuḷam_ may be broadly distinguished as two types: the old ones, according to oral history erected between the turn of the 20th century and 1920, are quite open towards the _kuḷam_. They are one-floor houses with tiled roofs, one or two inner courtyards and backyards. The private space permeates invisibly into the public space; of course, there is a threshold that clearly marks off the interior, but each house has a broad verandah that opens towards the _kuḷam_ and which is a place where the private goes public and vice versa. This is even more so on the broad patches between verandah and _kuḷam_. As many of its residents live in quite crammed conditions (in some cases, three or four families share one house which means that each has one or two chambers), the courtyards and, especially from afternoon onwards, the verandahs attain the character of living rooms.

Interspersed between these old houses, on the plots of knocked down old dwellings, are the new houses that range among the richest in town, owned by Jains. Spacious parking lots and small gardens put the houses at a distance to the _kuḷam_ and the gutters so that their foul stench cannot reach them. High walls with intricately forged iron gates shield the entire ensembles from the street. They draw a sharp dividing line between public space and what is newly constructed as the private space. Following them, their neighbours in the old houses have also started to demarcate their privacy. Several house owners have built low compound walls some metres in front of their verandahs. Two have closed their verandahs with metal bars so that they look a bit like lions' cages in a zoo. These families do not use the space as verandahs anymore but as a godowns.

Given that trend towards extreme particularisation, it is not surprising that the "_kuḷam_ of pigs" no longer serves for any ritual to establish publicity. Its access has become difficult, as only on the north flank a small passage is left. Otherwise the body of water is immured.

Obviously, public places such as _kuḷam_s do not decay slowly and steadily. They are given up rapidly once they have reached a critical point of pollution or defilement and once their neighbourhood has come to a critical point of heterogeneity – probably the more quickly and massively the stronger the people of the neighbourhood are concerned with purity and pollution. It requires a critical mass of participants and organisation to maintain a common property system.

This chapter has shown that, on one hand, _kuḷam_s are generally perceived much more favourably than _ēri_s – as clean, safe and good for a number of purposes, and some of them (which are then often called _tīrttam_s) are even seen as fords to the realm of the gods. It has been argued that this is because _kuḷam_s contain the water more strongly and because they are themselves more contained in the human and cosmic order. They also have a chance to stay free from pollution as _ēri_s take over that part (or, within the category of _kuḷam_s, some can be cleaner because others are less clean). On the other hand, _kuḷam_s are thought of as dirty and hazardous to health. A clue to this contradiction lies in the understanding of "public" [_potu_], as _kuḷam_s are unanimously perceived to be "public places" [_potu iṭam /potu kuḷam_]. In one reading of the term, it is based on the principle of separation ("club-good", i.e., public for a certain group of people) whereas in another reading, it attains the all-inclusive meaning of "open access". With open access, the principle of separation that is instrumental in the upkeep of the multitude of _kuḷam_s in the study area, becomes obsolete and the _kuḷam_s deteriorate. To the same extent as "public" [_potu_] has become a pugnacious term in an era and area of severe caste conflicts, those who can afford it withdraw from it, to the point of tolerating the total decay of the erstwhile commonly owned and

utilised good. Yet there is one important exception to that development which will be presented in the next chapter.
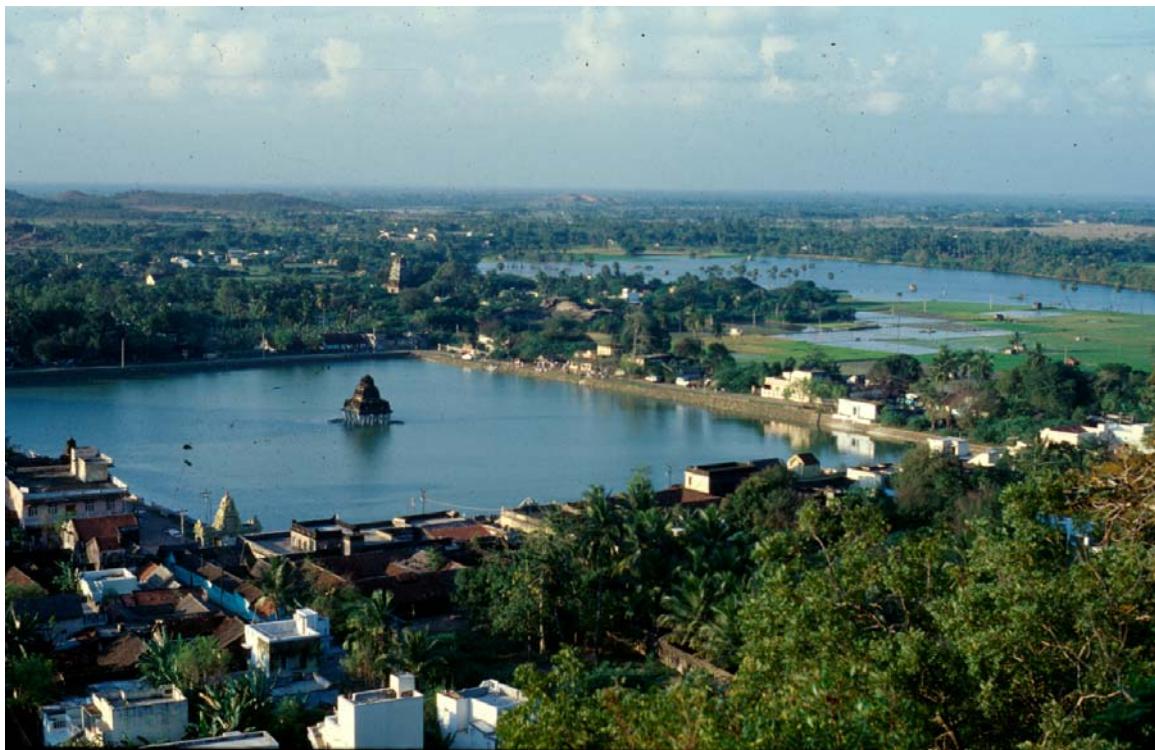
śaṅku tīrttam, Tirukkalukundram

12.   *kuḷams* in local politics – case study

This chapter is on centralisation – a principle so averse to what has been identified as the basic mode of functioning of water reservoirs. The previous chapters have shown that in the study area, water reservoirs are differentiated according to levels of their containment. It was argued that this ensues by means of separation (of usage, of users, of neighbourhoods, etc.). When some reservoirs receive pollution, they protect others of being polluted; thus, a number of them have been kept clean if not ritually pure. If water reservoirs are to form the backbone of the water supply of the population, there has to be a large number of them to enable this separation, at least two or three in each neighbourhood. I have also highlighted that in turn, reservoirs (especially those of the category *kuḷam*, which are spatially attached to settlements) play their roles in the social construction[525] of their respective neighbourhood – offering its inhabitants stages to enact their issues and concerns in a wide repertoire of rituals and daily practices.

Under the conditions of caste conflict and mobility – the two most striking features of the study area as singled out in chapter two – the multitude of water reservoirs have shown to be on the wane. This chapter introduces the reverse of this lacklustre side of the medal: it presents *śaṅku tīrttam*, a *kuḷam* that absorbs many of the functions of the erstwhile multitude of *kuḷams* in Tirukkalukundram. At the same time, this *kuḷam* is shown to be instrumental in the formation of Tirukkalukundram as a locality. It surpasses the divisions of neighbourhoods and is positioned in the regional and wider supra-local

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[525] Low 2000: 128 defines the concept "social construction" as follows: "The term *social construction* may then be conveniently reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control. Thus, the *social construction of space* is the actual transformation of space – through people's social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting – into scenes and actions that convey meaning." (emphasis by Low).

context in a process of centralisation. Farfetched concepts ooze into the study area, including those from the all-Indian political field such as communalism, mainstream Hinduism or Dalit upsurge. This chapter explores how that happens on the micro level.

The usage pattern of *śaṅku tīrttam* shows a peak on weekdays and before noon. At sunrise the first bathers arrive, more women than men on the north and west flanks, more men than women on the east and south flanks, but on the whole the distribution of sexes is even. After about eight thirty, the female visitors of *śaṅku tīrttam* tend to outnumber men by a ratio of roughly four to one. That is because the dominating occupation carried out from that time on is doing the laundry which is, in Tirukkalukundram, women's chore. However, whenever one of the frequent functions is held in the pillared hall, the sex ratio tends to be on par as the male participants usually exceed, especially in commemorative functions. As the day grows older and the laundry activities in other *kuḷam*s of Tirukkalukundram come to an end, they still go on in *śaṅku tīrttam*; slowing down at noon but increasing again towards the afternoon, with an average of 27 persons using it every full hour from 11 o'clock onwards when I counted them as a sample in a week in November, 1999.

It is important for my point here that the *kuḷam* is not only used by people of the neighbourhood – especially by the inhabitants of the huts at the *kuḷam*'s west flank, but also by inhabitants of areas up to two kilometres away. Women from parts of Tirukkalukundram as far as the "crow's hill" [*kākkākkunṟu*], Rudrankoyil, Kanakkoyilpettai, Paramaciva-Nagar, the bazaar area and beyond come to the *kuḷam* and do the laundry.

> N. Haziri, who lives at the end of the path above the communal overhead tank, places a huge aluminium vessel full of dirty clothes on her hip every two or three days and carries it carefully to the *śaṅku tīrttam* where she does the laundry and takes a bath at the same time. She does not have a well near her house, the next municipal water tap is down the hill. This is by far not as distant as *śaṅku tīrttam*, but the water comes only irregularly and it is not available in as big quantities as in *śaṅku tīrttam*. So she prefers the latter despite the longer way.

Women from distant neighbourhoods use *śaṅku tīrttam* because they lack alternatives nearer their homes. I have not met women from neighbourhoods with fairly well kept *kuḷam*s (such as the vicinity of the *kuḷam* below Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri* or Nalvarkoyilpettai) doing their laundry at *śaṅku tīrttam*. Nevertheless, that people visit *śaṅku tīrttam* does not only have to be due to the lack of other possibilities of freely obtaining water.

> Prema Elumalai, Santi Kanniappa and some school age girls of their vicinity in Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil come regularly to do the laundry and to take a bath. Although they have wells at home, they prefer to take a bath in the *kuḷam* as a group, because they say it is *jolly* there [they use the English word]. They frequent the stairs beneath the temple of Hanuman on the *kuḷam*'s northeast corner as they consider the south flank to be too ugly [*aciṅkam*] and they take their time. They do the laundry, let bedsheets float on the water and put them to dry in the sun on the steps. At the same time they plunge into the water, frolic and splash each other. Thus they combine the usefulness of doing the laundry with the pleasures of a swimming pool.

Likewise, I saw women and men dipping completely into the water and luxuriously rubbing and cleaning themselves, something for which, for want of bathtubs in south Indian homes, *kuḷam*s offer an unique opportunity. Theoretically, the mentioned clique of ladies could use the *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil itself. But that one is rather small, full of algae and uninviting to do the laundry or to take a bath. Many women tell me that they do not do the laundry every day, but only one to three times a week. Others explain that they do not take their entire laundry to *śaṅku tīrttam*, but only those pieces which are difficult to do in a bucket at home, such as bedsheets, blankets or towels. They come only once in one or two months to relish what *śaṅku tīrttam* has to offer.

Another service that is not available at other *kuḷam*s in Tirukkalukundram[526] is that of Manokaran, the local barber who cuts mostly men's hair and shaves men's upper bodies. Though he does house visits on appointment and assists in a variety of ceremonies, including at other *kuḷam*s, his main workplace is the pillared hall at *śaṅku tīrttam*'s west side. He says he got the right to use it in an auction of the Big Temple's administration and paid Rs. 1,000 for it. In previous years he remembered to have paid Rs. 1,500 or even Rs. 5,000. He says he has been doing the job for the past 22 years, since he has come to Tirukkalukundram upon his marriage. His father and grandfather used to work in the same business and many of his relatives do so too. There are about 60 barbers in Tirukkalukundram. They even form an association, but Manokaran does not tend to mingle with them too much. His role is different from those who work in "salons": he is specialised in tonsuring, that is in cutting hair for religious purposes. For this job he does not need a salon; the stone steps of the pillared hall and the water of the *śaṅku tīrttam* are enough. Whereas the manicured fingers of his colleagues in the "salons" smell of pomade, Manokaran's hands, when they cut my hair, emanated the earthy odour of *śaṅku tīrttam*.

Manokaran inherited his profession from his father and grandfather. This family tradition could come to an end after him. He declares that he will not interfere in the job decisions of his two sons who are attending elementary school; they might become car drivers or office workers and need not take to the scissors. In the classical combination of jobs, Manokaran's wife, Selvi, works as midwife, taking care of mothers and infants months before and months after the birth. As his and her income from the inherited profession does not feed the family of four daughters and two sons, she and the elder daughters have to earn extra money by daily labour on construction sites.

Manokaran is more than just the barber at *śaṅku tīrttam*. "He is the *kuḷam*'s security person" [*kāval*] say his neighbours. Manokaran lives at a stone's throw away from the *kuḷam*. In the mornings, he is among the first ones to have his bath in it and he keeps an eye on it all day long. He participates in all kinds of actions towards the *kuḷam* – as, for example, when staff of the Big Temple's administration cleans the steps in front of the pillared hall on the day before important festivals.

The *kuḷam* furthermore serves practical needs of tourists, pilgrims or other people who lodge in Tirukkalukundram. Occasionally visitors who stay overnight in pilgrims' hostels [choultry /*cattiram*], without bathroom facilities, can be seen in the mornings taking their baths in *śaṅku tīrttam* as the *kuḷam* nearer to the Temple or to the hostels (the *kuḷam* east of the Big Temple) is too dirty and inaccessible for that purpose.

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[526] At the *kuḷam* east of the Big Temple, there is a haircutter's salon; yet its relationship with the *kuḷam* is rather accidental. It is a salon as it could be anywhere else and turns its back to the *kuḷam*.

A typical case is K. Gangadharan, a tailor from Pulikundram who runs his shop at the *kuḷam* east of the Big Temple. He usually commutes home in the evenings; however, in the season of the *poṅkal* festival he sometimes has so much work that he stays on to work in Tirukkalukundram. In such cases, he sleeps in his shop and uses *śaṅku tīrttam* instead of the *kuḷam* nearest his shop to wash in the mornings.

The street that meets *śaṅku tīrttam* at its northwest corner is broad enough to allow a stage being erected for festivals. For example, when the main unction [*kumpapiṣēkam*] of the village goddess [*kirāma tēvatai*] Celliyamman̠ took place in March 2000, a concert of "light music" (that is, of movie songs etc.) was arranged for the public to enjoy which took place at the *kuḷam*. Inhabitants of the surrounding narrow streets revert to the broad open space alongside the west flank of *śaṅku tīrttam* to stage street theatre performances for which they engage troupes from as far as Igai village on the Palar, for example, on the occasion of the birthday of the elephant-headed god Piḷḷaiyār [Vināyakar *catūrtti*].

śaṅku tīrttam also serves various people from neighbourhoods that (no longer) have *kuḷams* of their own to perform rituals. Whereas people of neighbourhoods with their own *kuḷams* tend to perform, for example, the obsequies for their deceased family members there, those with no nearby *kuḷam* resort to *śaṅku tīrttam*. The same holds for request making ceremonies [*vēn̠tutal*] for which parties come from as far as Big Street or Vellaiyar Street (that is, from the westernmost streets to the easternmost spot of Tirukkalukundram). One of the most important functions to be held on the *śaṅku tīrttam* is the commemorative ritual on the new moon of *purattāci* month (September /October) called "*māḷai amāvācai*".

On October, 9th, 1999, 21 Aiyars (but none of the Kurukkaḷs who do service in Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple) assemble on the steps of *śaṅku tīrttam*'s east flank to offer their services. Some of them are busy from seven o'clock till noon with queues of people waiting to be attended by them. Others have to wait for customers once in a while. They basically perform the rite that is locally called *tarppan̠am* and consists of pouring sanctified water over grass [kaus; *tarppai*] and sesame seeds or certain lentils while muttering holy verses in front of a man of the concerned family.[527] Some men get rid of their sacred threads and obtain new ones at that occasion. Several, but by far not all, men dip in the *kuḷam* after the ritual. Some bathe extensively in the water. The setting is completed by a couple of itinerant vendors who have positioned their baskets or carts at the west side of the *kuḷam* and sell flowers, bananas, pieces of camphor, sesame seeds, coconuts, grass and other items necessary for the ritual. Usually those who admit that they forgot the exact date of a certain ancestor's death, come to the *māḷai amāvācai* ceremony on *śaṅku tīrttam*.

People of neighbourhoods without their own *kuḷams* or with *kuḷams* that they deem to be too dirty, perform the ritual a fortnight after the death of a family member (see chapter ten) at the *śaṅku tīrttam*. Thus, the souls of the ancestors are put to rest in a central place of Tirukkalukundram nowadays, instead of decentrally, near their families.

Furthermore, male Kurukkaḷs are reported to perform the ritual of the renewal of their sacred thread on the *śaṅku tīrttam* in August /September [*āvan̠i* month]; their wives use that *kuḷam* to perform the

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[527] See Müller 1992 for more on that ritual.

kaṅkasnāṉam and the *tula snāṉam* [or *tulakāviri snāṉam*] ritual in mid November. Hence, they resort to *śaṅku tīrttam* instead of to the *kuḷam* in the erstwhile Brahminical neighbourhood as this water reservoir is unbearably nasty.

śaṅku tīrttam itself has stinking patches full of faeces; but it is stable and enclosed and usable for a variety of ends. A low parapet protects it on two flanks. A pillared hall offers shade to worshippers, to those who just want to sit and relax, or to those who want to work, such as occasional basket makers who soak their canes in *śaṅku tīrttam*'s water. Neatly hewn stone steps lead into the water on one entire flank and on big parts of two others. The remainder of the *kuḷam* is fortified with coarse stones. There might be broken parts, the broad entrance at the southwest flank is stuck with refuse, and the four rows of palm trees that once surrounded the *kuḷam* are gone. Yet on the whole, the shape is intact.

The previous chapters have shown that a *kuḷam*s is usually in better shape the bigger the cohesion of the related neighbourhood is, the more control it exerts over its resources, if there are committed residents who take care of the *kuḷam* etc. It has also been shown that high mobility and turnover of people are rather detrimental to the *kuḷam*. Hence, as *śaṅku tīrttam* is in rather workable condition, one could presume that all or most of these factors hold for *śaṅku tīrttam*. However, when I enquire about which neighbourhood the *kuḷam* belongs to, I run into contradictions. More erudite informants told me that half of it belongs to Tirukkalukundram proper and the other half to Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil. Like many *kuḷam*s, *śaṅku tīrttam* lies on the border of both, and even though Rudrankoyil is by now a part of Tirukkalukundram, it has retained a distinct identity. Inhabitants of Rudrankoyil who use *śaṅku tīrttam* generally stick to "their" side of it. Some informants suggest by their answers that they perceive each flank to be a neighbourhood in its own right, thus disproving the existence of one common neighbourhood. The people on the west flank have erected their own little temple of the elephant-headed god Vināyakar and organise festivals for him, collecting the money for the occasion among themselves, not including the residents on the other sides. There is only a very faint sense of belonging together as residents of *śaṅku tīrttam* as a whole, and that is more often than not expressed ex negativo, when certain residents complain about others whom they suspect of polluting the *kuḷam*. Thus there is no one cohesive neighbourhood that would be responsible for *śaṅku tīrttam*; rather the area seems to socially disintegrate into pieces defined by the long flanks of the *kuḷam*.

Secondly, the mobility and the turnover of the people appears to be quite high along the flanks of *śaṅku tīrttam*. On the north and south sides, there are a couple of houses in the old style, with pillared verandahs, one or two inner courtyards and more or less lush gardens in the back. Some of them flourish stucco embellishments, elegantly carved stone banks on their verandahs or ornamental towers. One house was inhabited by a religious congregation [*matam*]. Other owners were said to be people usually perceived as privileged such as merchants [Ceṭṭiyars] or Aiyars. Colloquially the houses are still called those of the priests [Aiyar *vīṭu*].

> Sampath, a Brahmin of Tirukkalukundram, remembers his childhood in a house at the north bank of *śaṅku tīrttam* and how he relished the cool breeze that blew in from the water. His father was the headmaster of a local school, his mother stemmed from a landed family, so they could afford the house. However, the couple had 15 children, the upbringing and marriages of whom strained their budget so much that finally the house was sold and the brothers and sisters moved elsewhere. He says: "Generally in those days [his childhood] they were Brahmins in all houses. But nowadays, [...] people from all walks of life and different castes

have come and the mingling of different cultures has taken place, both vegetarians and non-vegetarians have mingled there, all these things have happened. They are unavoidable [...] In those days, only those people [vegetarians] were there. They could maintain sanctity."

Today some of the old houses are in ruins; their owners have moved away. Four of the buildings have been converted to professional use: a typewriting institute, a branch post office, a private school have moved in. One is occasionally used as a pilgrims' hostel. For the new purposes, they were altered in parts which adds to a somewhat uneven appearance of the north flank. Some houses have been refurbished to shelter more people; new wings have been added, attracting people from other places who look for a decent place to rent, such as, for example, a teacher who was shifted to Tirukkalukundram and who lives jointly with her mother-in-law and her child. On the north side, new and old inhabitants are on par.[528] On the south side, the ratio is seven new to one old established household.

Some of the old houses are encroached, either by poor people who put up with the many missing tiles on their roofs because what remains is at least better than nothing. Others actively appropriate the alien property. They renovate ramshackled rooms or try at least to save the remainder from finally collapsing.

> M. Manickam emphasises that he has been living for 40 years in the house on the north side of *śaṅku tīrttam*. The owners, Vēḷāḷar Mutaliyārs from Kanchipuram, obviously did not take much care; the house is so neglected that parts of it broke down. He shows a photograph of his big eyed 13-year-old daughter in a dance sari on the occasion of a school festivity and states that she died three weeks after that, buried by a toppling wall in their house. The family then decided to take the fate of the house in their own hands and is busy renovating it, calling it "open-access-good" [*puṟampōkku*].

Those who stay on in the houses in which they were born and who participate in the daily life of the locality are predominantly ritual specialists: the priest [*tēcikaṉ*] who has the task of feeding the eagles or vultures that are the vignettes of Tirukkalukundram (if only they would return!) and five families of musicians. Colloquially their row of low stone houses, one built adjacent to the next, is called "houses of the dancing girls" [*tāci vīṭu*, sometimes even *tēvatāci vīṭu*], insinuating the clandestine custom of temple prostitution. The caste combines the profession of hair dressing with that of making music: playing a long clarinet [*nātasvaram*], a double headed drum [*tavil*] and cymbals [*naṭṭuvāṅkam*; *tāḷam*] in rituals of the Big Temple and the hill temple or as contractors on more particularised occasions like marriages or fortnightly ceremonies. Therefore, the musicians use to have impeccable haircuts. There does not seem to have been much change in their rather modest dwellings in the course of the past generation; the row is already marked on a map of Tirukkalukundram, the basis of which stems from colonial times.

Yet many of those who continue to dwell in their ancestral houses do not quite live up to the former splendour.

> On the south flank of *śaṅku tīrttam* lives G. Velan with his wife in a house built by his grandfather. Family lore has it that the ancestor ventured in the soda business. He produced

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[528] I counted them as new if the party moved in during the lifetime of the present head of the household.

various sorts of lemonade and rose water and invented his own soft drink, called "honeymoon" [*tēṉṉilavu*]. He supplied shops in the entire region with it, raves his grandson; the concoction was obviously so successful that he could afford to construct a spacious house with an airy den and high ceilings at the *śaṅku tīrttam*. The vast luscious garden alone demonstrates their comparative wealth. Yet the grandfather died in an accident in 1972 without having disclosed the formula for the beverage to his heirs. Although they continue the soda business and also run a bakery in Tirukkalukundram's bazaar area, they remember and regret the incidence so vividly that it is obvious that they still perceive it as a big loss. The house and the garden show the habitual unkemptness of life; it is obviously a well-to-do household, but with forgone aspirations to more.

Other people in the vicinity of *śaṅku tīrttam*, though they continue to reside in their ancestral homes, have somehow grown out of Tirukkalukundram. They are not interested in local issues such as the upkeep of *śaṅku tīrttam* as they orient themselves towards other places.

One of the most opulent houses on *śaṅku tīrttam* is called "hall of Viṣṇu" [*hari maṇṭapam*] and was allegedly built as a recreation place by Rao Sahib Purushotha, an affluent ship owner and supplier for ships. At the time of independence, a farmer's son (Tuluve Vēḷāḷar) of nearby Mangalam bought it. He was one of those Indians who migrated to Burma in the early 1930s, and he got rich as the country's leading manufacturer of shoes, by appointment of the president of Burma. For decades, the family stayed in the land of the Irawaddy and returned only when political unrest rose in Burma. Now two of the sons live in the house together with their families and servants. They are academically trained – lawyer, physician – and work outside Tirukkalukundram. The youngest generation has taken to computer science and speaks English with a north American accent. They study in Europe and the USA, orient themselves towards other destinations than Tirukkalukundram and do not display much interest towards the *kuḷam* at their doorsteps.

Apart from these changes in the existing set of houses, new houses have been added to the *śaṅku tīrttam* in the time of the present generation. Several were built in the free spaces between existing houses or – after tearing those down – on their places, usually much more densely packed than the erstwhile buildings. Others claimed land that had been greenery before: the court at the east flank of *śaṅku tīrttam*, the marriage halls on the south and west flanks and the private matriculation school next to the pillared hall were built on erstwhile gardens or pastures.

The same holds true for the huts of about 65 families at the *kuḷam*'s west side.[529] The ground is said to still belong to a family of Nāṭṭukoṭṭai Ceṭṭiyars. However, it seems that they never turn up nor collect rent from the people who erected huts on their plot. I could neither verify nor falsify the rumour that Tirukkalukundram's public hospital, which is built next to the mentioned settlement, is an encroachment as well. Various of my consultants above 45 years of age remember the entire area to have been a flower garden [*pūntōṭṭam*] like many others of the type formerly in Tirukkalukundram (see chapter fourteen). Gardeners paid by the Ceṭṭiyar proprietors cared for it, cut the blossoms and took them to the Big Temples in praise of the gods and goddesses. A group of Iṟulars (whom others

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[529] It is somewhat deliberate to draw a border between which house actually stands at the *kuḷam* or not; it is an agglomeration of huts on a slight slope. The entire area has developed in the past generation; Abdul Jalil remembered about ten houses in the area in 1959 when he moved there from Chennai-St. Thomas Mount. Now there are about 300.

call "Viḷḷi") settled in the gardens. They were obviously pushed out by other people who started to encroach the place a generation ago and erected a temple for the elephant-headed god Vināyakar in 1986. Behind the back of the righteous proprietor, two kinds of people started struggling for his asset. Says R. Vasanta, an 28-year-old Iṟular who has withdrawn from the stretch west of *śaṅku tīrttam* and now lives at the bund of the nearest *ēri* together with her husband, two children and a couple of relatives:

> "Iṟulars were the original residents. The other castes came later. Since we begun to depend on them for work and money, because of our hunger, they started to cheat us saying we had borrowed more than we actually did and drove us out."

The trouble was likely to occur with the growing density of the settlement. Whereas regular work and dependence on those who value regular work highly seems to be the root cause of all evil in the opinion of the Iṟulars, for the neighbours who edged the Iṟulars out, this attitude is incomprehensible and a constant source of disgust as they value regular work contracts highly. Yet they themselves usually lack capital and depend on irregular work contracts; they work as painters, on construction sites and as bangle makers. Also a group of stonecutters from Pulikundram (a village about five kilometres away) has settled there, the men of which sell their workforce as far as in Andhra Pradesh. About a third of *śaṅku tīrttam*'s west flank inhabitants does not have regular work contracts and works on day-to-day-basis in odd jobs as, for example, in tourism in Mamallapuram, in tea stalls, and some knit bags out of plastic threads, do embroideries, carry bags in rice mills etc. The Muslim families typically live on cigarette (beedi) rolling, stuffing and packing, or they deal in old metals. The caste composition is diverse, with Nāyakkars and Telugu speaking Naidus dominating, occasional Sudamanis, barbers and various Muslim castes.

Of the well-to-do residents, nobody wants to take up the task of working towards the improvement of the *kuḷam*, and others lack the social standing. Though Manokaran, the barber, has some say in the pillared hall, his authority is far from covering the entire area surrounding *śaṅku tīrttam*. Probably the holy man [*cāmiyār*], who is said to have dwelled next to the temple of the monkey-god Hanumaṉ at the *kuḷam*'s east side and tended a flower garden there, might have had a say, but he is no longer there and the hut is in ruins. Aged informants describe the watchman who took care of the *kuḷam* and prevented unwanted people from using it, but he is only a faint memory nowadays.

To sum up, there is no homogeneous or cohesive neighbourhood at the *śaṅku tīrttam*, let alone an active *nāṭṭār* or other person of the vicinity who would take care of the area. The population has changed drastically in the course of one generation, and many people of diverse backgrounds came in. If the place has ever radiated that serene upper caste flair that some people nostalgically remember it to once have done, it is lost now. In other words, crucial factors that have been identified above as important for the upkeep of a *kuḷam*, as part of the multitude of them, cannot be found at work in case of the *śaṅku tīrttam*. Yet it is still in a condition that allows people to use it for their day to day purposes and even permits its usage for rituals. Has it, then, been wrong to highlight the principle of separation (of *kuḷam*s per neighbourhoods, of usages etc.) as instrumental in maintaining the cleanliness, if not the purity, of water reservoirs? And don't *kuḷam*s serve as a means to publicise, by an array of rituals, etc., the concerns of the people living in the vicinity, thus socially constructing the neighbourhood in which they are placed?

I argue that the case of *śaṅku tīrttam* is different than the multitude of other *kuḷam*s that I have dealt with so far. *śaṅku tīrttam* taps resources that lie beyond those of the neighbourhood. These are resources of Tirukkalukundram as a whole. Probably the social life of a reservoir the size of *śaṅku tīrttam* has always surpassed the confines of a neighbourhood (same as Big Temples, universities or big factories have implications that widely reach beyond the neighbourhoods they happen to be placed in); there are no reliable records to know that for sure. Yet in Tirukkalukundram, the attention that *śaṅku tīrttam* receives nowadays from people all over the locality coincides with the increasing disinterest in and the dilapidation of other reservoirs in the same locality. Same as the utilisation of water is centralised from the depicted erstwhile decentrality, the discourse about the *kuḷam*s centres on *śaṅku tīrttam* and involves groups of people who neither live nor use that particular *kuḷam*.

Officially the administration of the Big Temple is in charge of the *kuḷam*'s upkeep. That a government agency takes care of it is obviously not a new development; historical sources tell of private persons who donated money to the administrators [*amil* or *vari vacūl atikāri*] for various public works, including a certain Vadukanata Mudaliyar who gave money to desilt Tirukkalukundram's *śaṅku tīrttam*.[530] Yet there is no evidence who Vadukanata Mudaliyar was, what amount he spent and what actually happened with the money. On the level of Tirukkalukundram, the administration of the Big Temple is a centralised agency as there is only one such office in the locality that has to take care of a dozen temples in Tirukkalukundram. As the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department lacks the money to fill all posts of Executive Officers, the pertinent one for Tirukkalukundram also has to take care of ten other temples, including important ones such as in Mamallapuram, Tirupporur and Singapperumalkoyil. On the day before special occasions, such as the described *māḷai amāvācai* ritual, the procession in which the gods take a dip in the water or the float festival, Temple staff clean the steps of the particular patch of the *kuḷam* which will be needed for the ceremony, pulling out weeds and removing faeces and rubbish.

Roughly every twelfth year, the grand festival of "100,000 lights" [*laṭsatīpam*] is celebrated, illuminating the inner part of Tirukkalukundram and especially the *śaṅku tīrttam* with thousands of small oil lamps. During the time of my fieldwork, the celebration was not held, but it was frequently mentioned as one of the place's most important festivals, and the Executive Officer, who was in charge of the last *laṭsatīpam* festival, is still being lauded for undertaking that task. Apart from that and from the auctioning of the barber's right to cut hair at that water reservoir, there are no visible activities of the Big Temple's administration towards *śaṅku tīrttam*.

The Big Temple is under the control of and financed by the HR&C Department, yet the officers are constantly complaining about the lack of money to maintain the structures properly and they try to solicit donations. Sundaresa Gurukkal, one of the leading priests, likes to extol the donations of wealthy people from outside – not only for *śaṅku tīrttam* but also for the staircase to the hill temple, for special *pūjai*s etc. This is both a pedagogic twist to confront the locals with their own shortcomings in donating properly and an emphasis of the importance of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple and its priests even far beyond the locality (if even people from distant Coimbatore or Salem come and donate huge sums to it, it really must be something). The priests are constantly on the move to officiate in ceremonies in other temples of the Brahminic gods and goddesses, the further away, the more prestigious. Vice versa, for certain ceremonies in Tirukkalukundram, priests from other places are contracted.

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[530] Cauntirapāṇṭiyaṉ 1997: 286.

The ceremonial lowering of the flag in the early morning of the last day of the foremost procession festival of the year [*cittirai uṟcavam*] in the hill temple is carried out by T. V. Ganesh Sivacharya. He travels all the way from Chennai-Tiruvanmiyur where he does morning and evening service [*pūjai*] in the Maruntīcuvarar-temple. As his mother hails from Tirukkalukundram, he has about fourty relatives in its Big Street and also the house of his maternal ancestors. Likewise, for the decoration of the gods, Kurukkaḷs [called *alaṅkāra kurukkaḷ*] come from as far as Tirupati, Kanchipuram and Chennai. They are otherwise teacher, forwarder or auditor.

These arrangements may, in some cases, reflect the historical dispersal of the Kurukkaḷ caste as the priests' families hold the job hereditarily [*paramparai*]. But the alignment to supra-local networks is a means to counter the contestation of the Kurukkaḷ's authority on the local level.[531]

This happens on symbolical as well as practical levels. The connection of *śaṅku tīrttam* and the Big Temple is not a spatial one as both are at about half a kilometre away from each other; it has to be symbolically constructed. This is done in processions that lead Śiva Vētakirīsvarar to take a dip in the *śaṅku tīrttam*, e.g., as a final rite of the important annual procession festival (the "normal" procession routes do not include the *kuḷam*). The symbolical connection of *śaṅku tīrttam* and god Śiva is also established in the founding stories [*talapurāṇam*] of Tirukkalukundram. There are interesting differences in the versions promulgated, on one hand, by adherents to the Brahminic gods and goddesses and, on the other hand, by people for whom the village deities [*kirāma tēvatai*] are of foremost importance. The first deals with the saint Markandeya [Mārkkaṇṭēya *muṉivar*]. The following rendition stems from Sampath, a Brahmin of Tirukkalukundram. He gave it in the concentrated and undisturbed atmosphere of his cosy house, attaining the classical composure of a teacher.[532]

> **Sampath:** Once Mārkkaṇṭēya was on tour to all Śiva temples. That way he came to Tirukkalukundram. As a routine, he wanted to perform Śiva *pūjai*. He searched this *śaṅku tīrttam* for performing that *pūjai*.
> **Bettina:** So he did not go to the temple?
> **Sampath:** Because the temple was far away, first he wanted to have a bath. As soon as he had a bath, immediately he had to perform that Śiva *pūjai*, because there was a small temple at the bank of the reservoir [...] For [the *pūjai*] he needed a container to fetch water for the Śivaligka [idol of Śiva], for *apiṣēkam* [the unction]. He searched and searched, there was not any vessel. Then came naturally one cagku from inside the water. And with the help of that cagku, he performed the *pūjai* successfully and got the blessings of Lord Śiva. And that is why the tank is named after *śaṅku tīrttam*. So coming of the cagku is always spontaneous. Nobody puts cagku there. It comes of its own accord. Once in twelve years. That is one legend behind Mārkkaṇṭēya. And there is another legend also. When Mārkkaṇṭēya was performing Śiva *pūjai*, Yāma [the god of death] was present there, in his vehicle [*vākaṉam*], that is buffalo. He wanted to interrupt the Śiva *pūjai*. Because if Mārkkaṇṭēya finishes the Śiva *pūjai*, he will

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[531] Fuller 1984: 165 observes the contemporary political weakness of priests at the example of the Ādiśaivas in Madurai's Mīṉākṣi-temple. For Tirukkalukundram, I have no evidence that the priests of the Big Temple ever were politically stronger; their role might be contested in various ways, but they are still very much in the (political) game.
[532] Recording in English.

immediately attain liberation from the bonds of the world [*mukti*]. So in order to prevent this, Yāma presented himself in his buffalo chariot. At that time, Śiva was pleased to present himself there. And stop yama from putting his *pācakkayiru*[533], putting the rope and taking them away. And this is the place where Śiva gave *darśan* [presented himself] to Mārkkaṇṭēya.

In other renditions by people who visit the Big Temple rather than those of local deities [ammaṉs],[534] it is Śiva on top of the hill [Vētakirīsvarar] himself for whom Mārkkaṇṭēya wants to perform *apiṣēkam*, thus the link is even more intensive. Some informants even said that it was Mārkkaṇṭēya himself who created the *kuḷam*. In contrast to that, N. Ilangovan, the *pūjāri* of the village's deity Celliyammaṉ, who is usually very knowledgeable about local history, does not have a special story to tell about the conch; he just states what everybody in Tirukkalukundram knows that a new conch emerges every 12th year. The conches' appearance is allegedly accompanied by frothing water and a hum that sounds like the sacred syllable "om".

> However, when the conch emerged last time in 2000, for a hair's breadth it would have gone unnoticed; a small boy reportedly found it, took it home and kept it in a box among other oddities until his parents became aware of what might have happened and informed the authorities of the Big Temple. Thereupon, the conch was grandly displayed in public at the *kuḷam* and taken in a procession to the Big Temple.

The conches that have emerged so far are kept in the Big Temple in a room along with some procession idols; the room is normally locked but opened for curious visitors and on the last Monday in *kārttikai* month for the annual worship of the conch [*śaṅkapiṣēkam*]. This consists of the unction of Śiva on top of the hill [Śiva Vētakirīsvarar] with the help of the conch. Instead of details relating to the conch, N. Ilangovan has another story to tell. It explains why Tirukkalukundram is alternatively called "holy water of the eagles /vultures" [*paṭci tīrttam /pakṣi tīrttam* in the Sanskrit version].[535] I recorded it in the tea stall of N. Ilangovan's family that at that time still faced the *śaṅku tīrttam*. It was a hot early afternoon and almost no customers came for whom Ilangovan would have had to interrupt his story and prepare tea.

> "There is a god, Piramā, he had four sons. These sons of Piramā, who were in the heaven, came down to see the earth. They were just going on a tour to this place and they happened to stop at Tirukkalukundram. Here at Tirukkalukundam they came across Kāmatēṉu.[536] [...] This Kāmatēṉu was the property of one of the sages [*muṉivar*]. This muṉivar was staying with his wife, so they came to know that Kāmatēṉu was his property, they approached the sage's wife and said that they have a desire to take this Kāmatēṉu to heaven. So he tries to catch this Kāmatēṉu, but as he is in the process of catching it, the holy man [*riṣi*] comes there, spots him and asks him why he does that. He says "I am interested in catching the cow and I want to take it to heaven", upon which [the sage] says "you may take the cow if it is her desire to come with you". The son [of Piramā] tries his best to drag it with him but the cow refuses to leave the place. One son after the other fails in his attempt to drag it, but this act enrages the sage and he curses them. The curse is that all these sons of Piramā will be born as eagles [or

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[533] Rope with a noose, said to be in the hands of Yama.

[534] For example, that of the *tarmaccakkaram naRpaNi iyakkam*, see below.

[535] It sounds rather poetical. However, an official source such as the Census of India 1961: 535 also knows that Tirukkalukundram is "also known as Pakshitirtham".

[536] On Kāmatēṉu, see the previous and the next chapters.

vultures – *kaḻuku*], and he says "each of you will [...] come in a particular era [*yūkam*] and come to Tirukkalukundram and take the food that is being offered and take a bath in the *kuḷam*. And only then, at the end of the era, will the curse get remedied and you will attain your human form." This is how the story of the vultures came into being, and in every era, two vultures have come to take food and a bath, left and returned. Even during this era there were two vultures, but for the past three years, they have not been coming. This is the founding story [*talapurāṇam*] of this place."

Some elements of this legend also occur elsewhere in Tirukkalukundram: Kāmatēṉu is the vehicle of goddess Tiripuracuntari, Śiva's wife, on the 10th and the 13th days of the local procession festival in cittirai month. Its figure is snow white with silver wings, two tails and a human face that is pinkish like that of most Europeans and has a thick braid. The woodcarver placed her udder between her front legs where the human chest would be and modelled two leopards beneath it, feeding on it. Nothing points to a connection with *śaṅku tīrttam*; of the god's and goddesses' vehicles during the procession festival, only one (a depiction of Tirukkalukundram's holy hill) is specific to the place; all others represent motives that can be found outside the study area as well. Kāmatēṉu appears also in a story [*purāṇam varalāṟu*] that is locally distributed by a Śaivite congregation.[537] In that case, her story is linked with pan-Indian Brahminical places (a pilgrimage to Varanasi), but is not connected with the eagles as in N. Ilangovan's version. Yet the birds are constitutive of Tirukkalukundram as the place's names suggest: Tirukkalukundram means "holy hill of eagles /vultures", the alternative – rather poetical – name "*paṭci tīrttam*" [or, in the Sanskrit version: *pakṣi tīrttam*] means "holy water of the eagles /vultures". In renditions of local Kurukkaḷs which concur with those promulgated by magazines or what people remember to have listened to in All-India Radio's 8 a. m. programme of founding stories [*talapurāṇam*], persons get cursed to be eagles because they do not worship god Śiva Vētakirīsvarar properly. Śiva does not appear at all in Ilangovan's version.

The more erudite the appeal of the medium or the person conveying the story, the more the story is linked to a pan-Indian understanding of space: in those readings the birds are interwoven into the sacred geography of India as a whole, in that they are said to take their morning bath (often called *kaṅkāstāṉam*) at Varanasi in the Ganges, eat and drink, and in some versions take a second bath in Tirukkalukundram, then proceed to Rameshwaram in the afternoon and for the night to Chidambaram /*citamparam*, all of which are important pilgrimage sites on a national scale.[538] In Ilangovan's interpretation, by contrast, the eagles /vultures just come and go without a clear destination, and more than the gift of food, it is the bathing in the water of *śaṅku tīrttam* that he emphasises: "It is believed that they will be seated in the pillared structure [*maṇṭapam*] in the centre of the *kuḷam* – that one over there [he points it out with the tea sieve that he happens to hold in his hand]. They say that the vultures would be there spending some time in the pillared structure and then fly back." On the whole, the local legends [*purāṇam*] concerning *śaṅku tīrttam* offer a wide array of motives that can be arranged either to underline the connection of *śaṅku tīrttam* with Śiva and with pan-Indian beliefs or with more localised sages and occurrences. It depends on the storyteller's allegiance and makes clear that the connection of *śaṅku tīrttam* and the Kurukkaḷ dominated Big Temple is one among many.

Secondly, also in a symbolical way, the domination of saivaism is being questioned by adherents of vaisnavism. Basically, Tirukkalukundram appears as a saivaite locality, like most cities and villages in

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[537] Civappirakāca 1987: 10 – 12.
[538] See Livingston 2002: 28 (with further references) on the importance of the sacred geography in Hinduism.

Tamil Nadu. Śiva is the tutelary god of the Big Temple as well as of the hill temple. Also the manifold village deities [*ammaṉs*] tend to be in his realm. There are four temples for god Kiruṣṇaṉ, three for Hanuman (all of which are supposed to be related to Viṣṇu) and one idol of Viṣṇu as Perumāḷ inside a temple of Kaṅkaiyammaṉ. Yet these temples and shrines are relatively small and some of them are in outlying villages and hardly visited by people outside their respective neighbourhoods. Crole hints at a battle that must have taken place between followers of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism in a not clearly defined past out of which Śaivites are said to have come out victoriously and, hence, dominate the place. In early British documents, Tirukkalukundram figures as Vedanarayanapuram,[539] and many of my consultants in that place know that this was the earlier designation of the locality. Nārāyaṉa is another name for Viṣṇu. The name takes up the notion that the little ridge of Tirukkalukundram is made up of four hills each of which represents a *vēta* [holy scripture] and is also called "*vētamalai*" [hill of the *vēta*], hence, Vētakirīsvarar ["Lord of the mountain of holy scriptures", *giri* is a Sanskrit term for hill]. In South Asia, it is quite common that a locality or even a country changes names according to political allegiances. Consequently, this is not improbable for the case of Tirukkalukundram as well.[540]

Followers of vaisnavism argue that the Big Temple of Tirukkalukundram had once been a Vaiṣṇavite temple. The same holds for the hill temple. They point to the name "*śaṅku tīrttam*" [holy water of the shell] and explain that the conch is one of Viṣṇu's main paraphernalia. Like in the above mentioned *śaṅkapiṣēkam* as an exceptional case in Śaivism, conches are regularly used in Vaiṣṇavite unctions. It serves to tenderly sprinkle the idol with water, its impact often additionally mitigated by a kind of sieve [*callaṭai*] that the priest holds above the idol. Many Vaiṣṇavites shake their heads because of what they perceive as rudeness of Śaivites who use to vigorously pour water on the *śivaliṅkam* from big vessels; said one sceptic: "The conch is actually not an item liked or used by Śiva. It is meant for lord Viṣṇu". Likewise, they interpret the eagles, the vignette of Tirukkalukundram, as deeply Vaiṣṇavite symbols, embodiment of Karuṭa, the vehicle of Viṣṇu. At *śaṅku tīrttam* itself, there is one Śaivite temple as opposed to two Vaiṣṇavite temples: one belongs to Hanumaṉ, the monkey-god who helps Viṣṇu's incarnation Rāma to get his wife Sītā back from the clutches of the demon Rāvaṉa. This temple has been under repair since the first time I saw it, the idol is covered with a curtain; yet sometimes it is visited by worshippers. Furthermore, there is a Piḷḷaiyār with two elephant-heads at the northwest corner of *śaṅku tīrttam*. One face is directed towards the Big Temple and bears the sacred ash of Śaivites. The other face, at its back side, has a Vaiṣṇavite "V"-shaped sign [*nāmam*] painted above the trunk. While the Śaivite shrine turns its back towards the *kuḻam*, both Vaiṣṇavite idols face the water.

It has been shown that there is a widespread belief that *śaṅku tīrttam* "originally" belonged to a Vaiṣṇavite temple and was only "later" (which has an air of illegitimacy) converted to Śaivism. Some say this happened in the times of the late Pallava kings who were Śaivites. There is also a belief that the erstwhile inhabitants of the area, cowherds [Iṭaiyar],[541] were shifted to a place about five kilometres to the west. To console them, some benevolent king had a temple built for them there, the entrance

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[539] Crole 1879: 417.

[540] In compendia of local stories, Tirukkalukundram bears even more names, e.g., in Civappirakāca 1987: p. 5 – uruttirakōṭittalam; p. 7 – intirapuri; p. 9 – nārāyaṇapuri; p. 10 – piramapuri; p. 12 – vacuvapuram; p. 13 – paritipuri and muṉikaṇappuri. Residents who are interested in history cite even other names such as Tirikōṇam.

[541] One of Viṣṇu's many names is "Iṭaiyaṉ", hence, it is tempting to associate the Iṭaiyar group with him, especially given the Viṣṇu avatar Kiruṣṇaṉ's association with cowherds from his early childhood. However, *iṭai* means also "middle, centre" and could point to Viṣṇu / Iṭaiyaṉ as he who comes between creation and destruction.

tower of which is as high as that of the Big Temple in Tirukkalukundram. In fact, there is a village called Idayur at the mentioned distance from Tirukkalukundram. It bears a temple of Viṣṇu and it is probable that its tower is as high as that of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple, however, it lacks splendour because it is not an artificial structure: it is a tiny temple that hunkers on top of a hill.

As has been mentioned above, the contestation of the Kurukkaḷs' authority over *śaṅku tīrttam* takes place not merely on the symbolical level, but also on the practical level. It takes place, for example, by a religious group that borrows heavily from modern Hindu sects, like the extremely popular cults of Aiyappan̲ or Āti Parācakti in South India. It was founded by T. K. Turai, a civil engineering contractor of the agricultural neighbourhood M. N. Kuppam. He says that upon his 51ˢᵗ birthday, he renounced his family and took to the religious path. He invented the custom of jointly undergoing austerities [*viratam*]. Since 1993, every year on the 12ᵗʰ day of the month of *kārttikai*, in a special ritual, Turai has handed out chains of dried berries [*ruttirāṭcamālai*] and soft shoulder bags to men and women who want to participate in the common exercise. According to Turai Guruswamy, their number ranges between 250 and 1,000.

> They are people like A. Ganapathy: he is 24-years-old and works as helper in the regional branch of the Hong Kong Bank. He has been a devotee of the local Śiva [*vētakiri paktan̲*] for the past six years. Before that, he went on pilgrimage to the Aiyappan̲-shrine in Sabarimalai. He says he does the religious exercise in hope of staying healthy further on and because he feels attached to the local god. He does the austerities along with his father, but his mother A. Kannika, who runs a kiosk near the local bus stand, stays back – as obviously many women do.

The bag is internally bisected into two compartments and, therefore, called "double lid" [*irumuṭi*]. It is meant to keep everything that the devotee needs. For 48 days, he wears both the chain and the bag, hence, he can be made out as one of the participants. There is no commonly recognised name for them; sometimes they call themselves "*namacivāya kūḻ*" which takes up the always repeated slogan "*ōm namaśivāya*" and means roughly "group of our *rauttirarkaḷ*". Other people usually refer to them as "those with the chain". For specific purposes, Turai and his son run two groups with separate names: "*vētamalai valamperuviḻā kūḻu*" and "*tarmaccakkaram nar̲paṇi iyakkam*" (see below). Its members have to take a bath with cold water at six o'clock in the evening and in the morning when it is still chilly and pray. Their diet is strictly vegetarian, nonalcoholic and restricted to a snack in the morning and a meal at noon. They must abstain from sexual intercourse. Many of them do not shave nor have their hair cut. They clad themselves in coffee brown and if they do not wear trousers, they tie *vēṭṭi*s, instead of the more informal *luṅki*s, to cover their legs. After the bath in the morning they are supposed to walk around Tirukkalukundram's hill. On the first day, they light an oil lamp at home and spend the night singing and praying. The 22ⁿᵈ day sees the lamp ceremony [*viḷakku pūjai*] in which the procession idol of god Vētakirīsvarar is taken on a bullock cart around Tirukkalukundram, the streets lined with children holding oil lamps. Turai, called the "teacher among the holy men" [*kurucuvāmi*], like those who take the lead in organising groups of Aiyappan̲ pilgrimage tours, assembles everybody for joint singing and praying in the pillared hall at the basis of the staircase that leads towards the hill temple. According to Turai Guruswamy, women are pious anyway; for them it is enough to do austerities for one to five days. On the last day, the devotees carry pots full of milk up to the temple on top of the hill and perform a grand unction [*apiṣēkam*].

Turai Guruswamy, as he is generally called in Tirukkalukundram, answers as follows my question about what he would like Tirukkalukundram to be in another decade:

> "I have a great desire, I would call it an ambition, that there should be a steady stream of devotees carrying the double compartment bag [*irumuṭi*] and climbing up to the hill of Vētakirīsvarar to visit that lord 24 hours a day. There are devotees thronging Tirupati, they stream in large numbers 24 hours a day to the shrine of the lord [Veṅkaṭīcuvara]. Similarly, you also have devotees flocking to Maruvattur [the shrine of goddess Ati parasakti] 24 hours a day. And there are devotees going up to Palani to visit that lord, and this is how I visualise the situation to be in Tirukkalukundram. This is my burning desire [...] And no matter if it takes 10 years of 15 years, this is the greatest dream of mine. Without this dream getting fulfilled I would not breathe my last breath."

Tirukkalukundram's hill is the "Mount Kailash of the south" [*teṉkailai*; Mount Kailash is the mythical abode of god Śiva in the Himalayas], says Turai Guruswamy. It is noteworthy that he tries to underline the greatness of Tirukkalukundram by a symbolism that is completely nonspecific for the place: the title Guruswamy, the restrictions in food, clothing and behaviour, the lamp ceremony, the shoulder bag, the circling of a mountain, the chain, the joint prayers – all these elements can be found in other present day Hindu movements of South India as well. Just the coffee brown colour of clothes is special (followers of Āti Parācakti are clad in red, Aiyappaṉ *cāmi*s in black, saffron or occasionally in blue), and the texts of the joint songs and prayers. They praise the greatness of Tirukkalukundram and its specific gods and goddesses, yet in turn in a rather conventional and highly stylised manner.

Turai Guruswamy and his group contest the authority of the Kurukkaḷs and the Big Temple in various ways. One is that they take over tasks and the comportment of the priests of the Big Temple. For example, in the processions for the tutelary god of Tirukkalukundram, it is Turai and his associates who sit cross-legged on the cart beneath the adorned idol, break the coconuts and hand over the blessed substances to the people in the streets. When I asked an "official" priest of the Big Temple who stood by and watched the scene, about his opinion on it, he shrugged in exasperation and said he disliked it, but that he could not help it. Likewise, the group of Turai Guruswamy started to take care of the Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar-temple, which had until then been unused and was left to dilapidation. The group reportedly broke the lock at the door, went in, swept the precincts and started to conduct regular *pūjai*s in it, for example, every second day before full moon and every second day before new moon [*piratōṣam*], and they also celebrate the annual big festival of Śiva's night [*śivarāttiri*] in the beginning of March there. Anbuchezhian, the son of Turai Guruswamy, acts as priest and does the decoration [*alaṅkāram*] and the unction [*apiṣēkam*] for Śiva's idol [*śivaliṅkam*] and waves light in front of it [*tīpārātaṉai*]. The ritual resembles in important points the ceremonies carried out by Kurukkaḷs, only that, in this case, the accent is more on the community. What is unheard of in the Big Temple, takes place in Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar-temple: *pūjai*s are organised jointly with the air of spontaneous, collective acts, very different to the administrative way in which it is conducted in the Big Temple; such as in many churches, a lot more women than men come to the regular services; and like in a church, they chant songs in a chorus, squatting on the floor, one peeping into the songbook in her neighbour's lap, and the joint singing of the community is more important than the solo rendition of a professional singer, which is typical for the Big Temple.

Kurukkaḷs express their dislike for the arrangement, but say that they have no way to avoid it. One argued that Anbuchezhian has a predilection for it because he married a woman who does not stem

from his agrarian caste, but is a Brahmin. Of late, the administration of the Big Temple has started to send a Kurukkaḷ to Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar-temple to perform some basic ceremonies [*pūjai*] there, so as to demonstrate that they have not relinquished their task.

At the festivals, the group competes with the Big Temple for the most opulent decoration. The more sumptuous it is, the more donors and thus the more backing the respective temple has.

> For the ŚivarAttiri festival, the ceiling of Śiva-temples are garnished with cucumbers, tomatoes, pumpkins, banana buds and other varieties of vegetables. The organisers of the rituals in Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar's temple declare proudly that their decoration is at least as lavish as that in the Big Temple. It was impossible for me to count the vegetables, unction items and metres of strings made by flowers displayed in all three temples of the localities in which Śiva's night was grandly celebrated. Thus it is impossible to prove quantitatively which temple could celebrate more lavishly, because in the course of the night, vegetables and other items were constantly added and taken away. I could not be in the three relevant places at the same time. Yet the arrangement in Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar's temple looked indeed very impressive.

The group of Turai Guruswamy also emphasises that this or that Very Important Person from as far as Chennai (for example, the owner of a television company) visits their festivals and supports their activities, thus they play with the same symbolism of supra-local alignments as the challenged Kurukkaḷs do. Furthermore, Turai Guruswamy's son Anbucheziyan has acquired fame as a scholar of Tirukkalukundram's history – also tapping the imagery of the erudite Brahmin. Once, he even was Śiva himself – in a theatre play [*nāṭakam*] that his group performed at the occasion of the principal unction [*kumpapiṣēkam*] of a pillared hall [*āmai maṇṭapam*] below the hill temple.

The example of Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar's temple points as well into the second direction in which Turai Guruswamys group contests the authority of the Kurukkaḷs. In taking responsibility for institutions that the Big Temple administration had so far left untended, they lay bare exposes its carelessness. Says Turai: "The people from the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department who have to maintain the temples, might do it, but they say that they lack the money and other resources to do the job. They do not even have money to pay the salary to their staff. We do not approach them for anything; even though the temple is under their control, we do it on our own." In the case of Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar's temple, this is confounded by the claim that it is more ancient than the Big Temple and thus the original temple of the place. T. Anbucheziyan states:

> "No temple is as old and historically significant as this temple here. The others are of recent origin. This temple dates back for about 1,600 years and there have been three major dynasties who have spent a lot of time and money and effort in building this temple, like the Chola and the Vijayanagar dynasty. So many people. We need not take as much effort, but at least we can maintain it. [...] If I do not take initiative now, whatever is left will get demolished and destroyed. [...] This temple belongs to the Big Temple and it is supposedly managed by the Big Temple, but unfortunately the temple authorities have neglected this temple and have not been able to give an inch of support."

Of late, Anbucheziyan is planning to conduct the major unction ceremony for it [*kumpapiṣēkam*].

Likewise, the group around Turai Guruswamy claims to do good to *kuḷam*s. They say that they have taken up spades and cleaned a *kuḷam* on top of Tirukkalukundram's hill – something which Kurukkaḷs would never do themselves. The *kuḷam* is special because it is not meant for human use. It provides to water wild animals that are thought to live on the hill, hence, it is called "*kuḷam* of jackals" [*nari kuḷam*]. This is generally taken to accentuate the generosity of Turai Guruswamy's group towards god's creatures and its nonprofit orientation. On my visit to the spot two years after the reported activity, I could not make out much of a renovation. However, the fame of it has spread throughout the Hindu part of the locality, and as hardly anyone visits that remote area of Tirukkalukundram, the credence of the fame is bordering belief. Turai Guruswamy explains that he had planned to create a little park around the *kuḷam*, invest it with an idol of Śiva [*Śivaligkam*], but interrupted the work in order to develop the activities focusing on the holy chains. He will continue the work on the *kuḷam* on top of the hill, he promises. This would cost between Rs. 40,000 and 50,000, he estimates; a considerable cost in comparison to the Rs. 60 to 75 usually earned as a daily wage.

As a second activity towards *kuḷam*s, Turai Guruswamy's retinue started to take care of *śaṅku tīrttam*. In that case, they did not undertake alterations on the physical structure, but they found different ways to lay claims on it. Firstly, they shouldered the task of enlightening their fellow residents about *śaṅku tīrttam*. As head of the "wheel of duty welfare movement" [*tarmaccakkaram naṟpaṇi iyakkam*], Turai's son Anbucheziyan had a leaflet printed that presents the part of Tirukkalukundram's founding story [*tala purāṇa ceytikaḷ*] which involves the role of *śaṅku tīrttam*. Furthermore, he formulates six reasons why the *kuḷam* is great ["*caṅku-tīrtta kuḷattiṉ perumaikaḷ*"]. From that he deduces the rule that one should not spoil its purity, e.g., by doing the laundry or depositing things in it.[542] He financed the leaflets' printing and distribution partly out of his own purse, partly through the advertisement of a local marriage hall that is also imprinted on the brochure. Turai Guruswamy's group tried to restrict the usage of *śaṅku tīrttam* not only by educating and appealing to the co-operation of the people, but also by reviving the bygone institution of a warden of the *kuḷam* – not as a paid watchman, but in an act of private policing. However, they met with too much resistance and had to discontinue the project. Turai Guruswamy recounts:

> "My son organised a team of twenty to thirty volunteers who were patrolling [*śaṅku tīrttam*] in the nights to ensure that nobody spoils the *kuḷam*. [...] They kept this vigil for three months, but could not sustain it because the pressure was endless and people continued to misuse it, largely those who were renting the marriage halls [...]; they were polluting the *kuḷam* even after being persuaded not to do that. So this lead to a misunderstanding between us and those people and somehow we had to give up. Night vigil was entirely voluntary and we did not pay anything to those people. They did not charge anything. We tried for three months but we did not succeed in it."

Neither for the activities concerning *śaṅku tīrttam* nor for the renovation of Uruttirakōṭīcuvarar's temple did the group co-operate with the local neighbourhoods, even though Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil (which would be responsible at least for half of *śaṅku tīrttam*'s compounds) has an active headman [*nāṭṭār*] whom it would be easy to approach; he just tolerates it but does not become active; the money is contributed by residents of other parts of Tirukkalukundram that appear to be richer than Rudrankoyil with its predominantly agrarian outlook. Apart from *śaṅku tīrttam* and the special case of

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[542] "[...] *caṅku tīrtta kuḷattai acuttap paṭuttāmalum, atil tuṇi tuvaittal pōnra kāriyaṅkaḷēḷil īṭupaṭāmal ataṉ puṉit taṉmaiyai kākkumpaṭi vēṇṭukiṟōm*."

jackal *kuḻam*, Turai Guruswamy's group did not pay attention to any other *kuḻam* of the locality. This underlines their claim to work for Tirukkalukundram as a whole and is another aspect of centralisation.

Another initiative, a private body like that of Turai Guruswamy, that lays claims on *śaṅku tīrttam* is the "group to do good for the locality" [*ūr nala pēravai*] which was founded in July, 1999 by ten senior residents of Tirukkalukundram. Many of them are academically trained: teachers, advocates or veterinarians. They are professional people, mostly in their fifties, who do not seem to have to worry too much about their families' welfare but find time to be concerned about their locality. The "group to do good for the locality" acts more in the background than that of Turai Guruswamy. Its members do not put on specific clothes and some of them make a point of wearing trousers in public (even though at home, they wear loincloths) which is a sign of modernity in the context of Tirukkalukundram. They meet regularly and quite informally in the office of one of the members in a central place of Tirukkalukundram and exchange observations on what is currently going on – that the pump set which pushes the water to the hill temple is broken, that a procession will be postponed because the HR&C Department did not sanction the necessary expenditures etc. In the beginning, these late evening meetings had a bit of the tingling air of a conspiracy, but after a while the group went more and more public. Apart from letting their manifold connections work behind the scenes, they have developed their own method of work. Whenever an important transaction, *pūjai* or preparation for a festival goes on in the Big Temple or the associated places, the members of the "group to do good for the locality" [*ūr nala pēravai*] take turns standing by – with the casualty of dignitaries, nonintrusive, but keenly observing.

The "group to do good for the locality" pursues general ideas on the eradication of corruption and the promulgation of justice in their society. Many of their aims have to do with the Big Temples, thereby also shedding doubts on its management. First of all, they want to obtain more revenue for them by making the owners of private choultries pay taxes, by drawing rent from the shops on temple ground and by obtaining paddy from those farmers who cultivate temple land without payment. With the money, they plan to conduct the major unction [*kumpapiṣēkam*] for -temple (this makes them competitors of Turai Guruswamy's group), make sure that daily service [*pūjai*] is provided, raise the salaries of the Big Temple's attendants, publish a book on Tirukkalukundram's history – and they also plan to clean *śaṅku tīrttam*.

So far it has been shown how *śaṅku tīrttam* presents a stage for various local actors to display themselves with their concern for Tirukkalukundram as a whole, transcending the distinct neighbourhoods and helping to socially construct the locality. In autumn of 1999, the scene received a major input by an even more centrally positioned actor – by Jayanthi Natarajan. She is a Member of Parliament (MP) and ex-Minister of State, thus her involvement establishes a direct link between *śaṅku tīrttam* and the Central Government in New Delhi. Furthermore, Jayanthi Natarajan connects it to the Government of Tamil Nadu which in day to day affairs dominates the perception of people in Tirukkalukundram much more than the remote national capital. Her grandfather, M. Bhaktavatsalam Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for four years and, before that, 15 years Public Works Minister. Her father-in-law, Karttikeyan, former Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu Government, enjoys fame in Tirukkalukundram because he donated the guesthouse of the Big Temple. The entire family has a good reputation throughout Tamil Nadu, probably comparable to that of the Gandhi family in India as a whole.

Jayanthi Natarajan's input consists of the allotment of money for *śaṅku tīrttam* from the personal fund of 20 million rupees [two crores] per annum that every MP has to his or her avail in a scheme introduced during the tenure of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in the early nineties. One million Rupees is the maximum to be spent for one project.

When I visit Jayanthi Natarajan in her private house-cum-office in Chennai's noble area Alwarpet, the shady street was already renamed from "Warren's Road" to "Bhaktavatsalam Road" in honour of her grandfather. She mentioned proudly that many colleague-Members of Parliament do not even spend their personal funds, but she does so. The list of projects supported by her is long. It includes several gifts for the repair of streets and bridges, but mostly grants for the construction of schools and hostels for *āti tirāvita* children (the deemed "first Dravidians", Scheduled Castes according to the official categorisation), especially for girls. Also the girl's high school of Tirukkalukundram received Rs. 500,000 from her in 1997 for its enlargement. In general, she tries to fund educational activities, explains Jayanthi Natarajan. Religious institutions are not eligible for support by the MP's personal funds, and the politician herself declared: "Of course, I am a Hindu – but I believe in secularism". So why did she support *śaṅku tīrttam*?

She admitted that, at first, she had had a "little reservation", but the locals obviously made many presentations and even visited her at home until she was convinced that "*śaṅku tīrttam* for me is not a religious place". Firstly, it has tremendous historical significance, she argued – it is centuries old, has legendary significance. As she stems from that District[543], she used to go there as a child and see the eagles: "I've almost felt emotional", the *kuḷam* is connected with her family. She said she felt that it is a valuable part of civilisation; she saw that it is falling to decay and would be lost. So, she made an exception and allotted the money. Secondly, *śaṅku tīrttam* is a centre of life in Tirukkalukundram, she argued, and the Collector, "a dynamic man", explained how it could be remodelled as a playground for children, as a recreational area for the aged and as a park. When I asked about details, she did a helter-skelter sketch on a piece of paper that presupposed that there is a lot of open space to be remodelled surrounding the *kuḷam* and (curiously enough) inside it. She said she did not remember exactly the amount that she allotted, but it was likely to be five lakhs, i.e., Rs. 500,000.

The news of Jayanthi Natarajan's deed spread fast in Tirukkalukundram. Yet the knowledge of the allotted amount was somehow incomplete – some said, it was one lakh, others held it was up to 35 lakhs, that is Rs. 100,000 or Rs. three and a half million respectively. The administrators of the Big Temple spoke consistently of Rs. 10 lakhs, that is Rs. one million. Various people credited themselves with having been instrumental in prŌcūring the funds, including x. Tamilmani, the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (who tends to speak of "we" and include every centralised institution with it, thus also Members of Parliament) and Sundaresha Gurukkal, one of the leading priests of the Big Temple. Over a cup of coffee, he disclosed proudly to me that it was – ironically enough – his plot to put aside the religious value of *śaṅku tīrttam,* as he knew that it would not qualify for financial support, and emphasise the aspect of public health [*potucukatāram*] instead.

The reactions to Jayanthi Natarajan's proposal range from relief to severe doubts whether the money would actually reach its goal. "The prominent people here use only half the money and swallow the rest of the money", says, for example, Ramalingam, a farmer of Desamukipettai, voicing an opinion I

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[543] She grew up in Chennai, but her ancestral home is in Cheyyur near Madurantakam about 20 kilometres from Tirukkalukundram.

heard in manifold conversations. Turai Guruswamy does not see his activities towards the *kuḷam* crossed by the MP's donation – he argues:

> "In my opinion, it is certainly not sufficient. It [*śaṅku tīrttam*'s renovation] will not cost less than 50 lakhs [five million rupees] because it requires a lot of strengthening, putting up cement, constructing platforms all around the place and building up metal fortified walls with barbed wire – given the size of *śaṅku tīrttam* this really involves a lot of money."

This hints at the fact that the destiny of Jayanthi Natarajan's contribution has undergone fundamental changes on its way from the MP's air-conditioned office to the realities of Tirukkalukundram. Members of the Big Temple's administration explain that the money would serve not only to clean *śaṅku tīrttam* from stinking debris but to construct high walls with barbed wire surrounding the *kuḷam* and preventing unwanted people from using it. Various people who are associated with the Big Temple and the Brahminical ways, along with certain residents of *śaṅku tīrttam*, even assert that the *kuḷam* will be locked and covered with a metal grid.

> T. Krishnaveni, for example, an Ācāri who is a tenant of a house in the old style with an inner courtyard at the *śaṅku tīrttam*, complains that nobody cares about the *kuḷam* and says it should be enclosed with a wall on all four sides. A metal grill should cover the water and that a warden with a bat (lathi) should take care of the *kuḷam*.

In other words, the concerned people – all of them belonging to the above mentioned groups in Tirukkalukundram, i.e., the administration of the Big Temple, the clout of Turai Guruswamy, the "group to do good for the locality" along with politicians of the "Dravidian" parties AIADMK, DMK and occasional followers of one of South India's Congress-party fractions – strip *śaṅku tīrttam* of the very role of an open-for-all recreational facility or park ascribed to it by Jayanthi Natarajan, the donor, and want to reduce it to a heavily policed, high security zone.[544] The mentioned parties have various things in common:

- They usually belong to the local middle or upper classes,
- many of them have wells at home,
- some can afford drinking water in bottles or cans or private connections to the municipal water supply. A typical statement would be "Why do I need the *kuḷam*? I get the water from the tap."

> A stone inscription in Tirukkalukundram's *pañcāyattu* Office reminds one of the opening of the first tank of Tirukkalukundram's water supply in 1956. It was filled with water from a local well. Ten years later, the first pipeline was inaugurated. In it, water is pumped ten kilometres cross country from the Palar river to a tank that holds 275,000 litres on the "crow's hill" and is filled twice a day. On January 6th, 1997, the keystone for an enlargement of the existing supply system was laid that comprised two new overhead tanks of 150,000 and 200,000 litres respectively. From there it is distributed through a system of mains. Whoever can pay for the installation charges and the monthly fee of Rs. 35 gets a private connection to the plot. Others have to draw the water from the public connections on street corners. These

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[544] Some informants conjecture that pay-and-use toilets might be built at the side of the *kuḷam* to alleviate it of its role as public toilet, but that is the only thought spent towards the role of the *kuḷam* for "public health", and everybody who has seen this kind of toilet (which are built throughout Tamil Nadu as they are obviously popular among certain circles of the administration) knows that the cement structures soon become the most abominable spots in town.

are mere pipes that protrude between 30 centimetres and a metre from the soil and bear a valve in the end; usually they are completely unprotected against accidents.

- Several of their members have privies with septic tanks. As most of these were installed in the 1990s, they are new enough to not need to be emptied so far – thus, contributing to the impression that the problem is cleanly solved.
- They almost invariably consist of men. Men are customarily not in charge of doing the laundry or supplying water to the household. Thus, the vast majority of those who actively take part in the contest over the responsibility for *śaṅku tīrttam* hardly ever use it for day to day purposes.
- Many of them are former classmates.
- They send their children to the same schools.
- They meet in the Big Temple, celebrating its major festivals.
- They have television sets at home and mostly watch the same programme: Rupert Murdoch's Sun TV.
- They have the habit to circumambulate Tirukkalukundram's hill in devotion for Śiva Vētakirīsvarar.
- They have enough resources and free time to be able to engage in local politics.
- Their caste background may be diverse: they belong predominantly either to merchants' [Ceṭṭiyar], the administrative (Kaṇakkupiḷḷai), and the priestly (Brahmin, Kurukkaḷ) castes which enjoy high esteem in vast parts of the population. Or they are members of a farmers' (Vaṉṉiyār /Nāyakkar, Vēḷāḷar) or the weavers' (Ceṅkuntar) castes which are showing a strong upward mobility in Tirukkalukundram.

Those people form what could be called the mainstream society of Tirukkalukundram. Even though they do not numerically make up the majority of Tirukkalukundram's population, they are the men who have the means to make things happen in Tirukkalukundram. Hence, in a way, it is they who socially construct Tirukkalukundram as a "whole" locality. They promote *śaṅku tīrttam* and the equally centralised municipal water supply and the incipient municipal gutter scheme. It is also they who withdraw their support from the multitude of *kuḷam*s (because the requirement that one locality should have at least one clean and pure *kuḷam* is fulfilled by *śaṅku tīrttam*) so that it becomes difficult or impossible to maintain them.

For this, the members of the mainstream society have, firstly, financial interests. Denying any direct responsibility (or agency) both for the *kuḷam* at their doorstep and for other elements of the public water supply, such as the recently dug ditches and the pipes of the municipal supply, they argue that they pay their taxes and expect the *pañcāyattu* Union or the administrators of the Big Temple to see to the repair and maintenance. Most of them will prefer to suffer for years together from stinking *kuḷam*s or leaking valves, loudly complaining about the passivity of the *pañcāyattu* or the Big Temple, to taking action themselves; that is, to picking up a spade and cleaning the *kuḷam* or fixing the valve. In their perspective, this is neither fatalism nor lack of agency, on the contrary: they are the ones who after all profit greatly from the situation. Working towards the local *kuḷam* means nothing but extra money or – even more likely – time to be spend in addition one's profession. Yet whenever the *pañcāyattu* Union does something towards the upkeep of the municipal water supply, money from higher echelons of the state pours into the local economy. The technical contraptions and constructions involved in pumping, storing and distributing water, in lining of wastewater channels with concrete etc. devours enormous sums. For example, the extension of the system during my fieldwork cost Rs. 174.58 lakh. New jobs are created, too.

For example, due to the obstruction of entries to the *kuḷam*s and to the construction of municipal gutters, most of which are full of refuse and block the flow of water instead of enabling the water to flow, many patches in Tirukkalukundram are waterlogged and breeding places for mosquitoes. "Before the gutters were built in 1999, we did not have mosquitoes" says Zaina Begam of Mosque Street, echoed by almost all her neighbours. Filaria, the "elephant foot disease" that is transmitted by mosquitoes, is rampant, and the *pañcāyattu*'s Health Department pays a team to tour Tirukkalukundram and spray poison. They also carry small spades to scratch the soil. Given the persistence of the water-logging problem, the battle against the disease does not seem to be very hopeful, yet the team plus the filaria health inspector, provide four "government jobs" (two men doing the job and one woman supervising them and the health inspector), as this comparatively secure and much coveted source of income is generally called. In addition to that, they receive some coins from every household they visit.

The local contractors and administrators who share these jobs and this money among themselves, belong to the mainstream society. Unlike a metropolis like Chennai, Tirukkalukundram is small enough that it is comparatively easy to meet the Executive Officer who is in charge of the minor public works in Tirukkalukundram, the responsible persons of the Public Works Department, the ward members, the mayor or the administrators of the Big Temple. Their offices are constantly flocked by people who make presentations and want to stay in touch with the decision makers. The distances are short, the relevant people well known. They belong to the local mainstream society themselves. Hence, giving up one's control over the resources, such as the *kuḷam* in one's neighbourhood, does not necessarily mean disposing of every access to control over resources, on the contrary; there will be many members of the mainstream society for whom new possibilities emerge and on a bigger scale than in less urban contexts. Those who are not part of the mainstream society find themselves devoid of their agency in the more centralised context.

A poor weaver shows me around the construction site of a new water main of the emerging municipal water supply in his neighbourhood, Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai. His weaving pit is regularly inundated because water stagnated in the entire area during the monsoon rains. Until the opening of the construction site, he says, he and some neighbours would have picked up spades and dug channels to lead the water away. Probably not everybody of the neighbourhood would have come, but surely sufficient men to finish the work reasonably soon. Yet now the new water supply pipes were being laid in shallow ditches that on many spots cross the lines of drainage, obstructing them rather than helping the water to find its way. If they dug there now, they would damage the pipes and cause trouble with the locally powerful. Furthermore, the weaver spots hundreds of metres of expensive tubes that are completely superfluous. As the relevant decisions are not taken on the level of the neighbourhood anymore, but of Tirukkalukundram as a whole, in circles to which the weaver does not have access, he can neither stop this waste of money nor drain his weaving pit and continue to work and earn his living.

People from outside who settle in Tirukkalukundram tend to go to *śaṅku tīrttam* (and sometimes the *kuḷam* inside the walls of the Big Temple) instead of using the *kuḷam* in their neighbourhoods, let alone of reviving them and therewith meddling in the neighbourhood's affairs. For life cycle rituals, they usually revert to their ancestral villages anyway. "When the conch is born in *śaṅku tīrttam*, we go

there, have a dip and return home." – "Or if the 1000 lights festival takes place once in 12 years", explains a Nāṭār family of Tirunelveli. As well-to-do wholesale merchants who have their standing in the community, they can be counted as members of the mainstream society. Perhaps they use the *kuḷam* inside the Big Temple but no other *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram. Due to the high mobility, more and more people are new to the place; so the percentage of those rooted in the context of local *kuḷam*s and ammaṉs decreases.

Another motivation for the members of the mainstream society to let go of the responsibility for the *kuḷam*s at their doorsteps has been elaborated on in the previous chapter: they do not find these reservoirs' purity guaranteed, so they prefer to revert to other means to supply themselves with water. However, as chapter ten has demonstrated, they need a place with sufficient water for their religious purposes. As this need is now being centralised to *śaṅku tīrttam*, the reason for their effort to fence it in, wall it, lock it away and have it guarded becomes obvious: this serves to maintain its purity.[545] If they cannot maintain purity in their respective neighbourhoods, they have at least to retain one area of purity for the locality as a whole. This in turn correlates with the high walls, fences and heavy gates with which many members of the mainstream society nowadays use to surround their own homes, letting go of the pleasures of the open verandahs of older Tamil houses.

Yet the members of the mainstream society do not consider it important to maintain (or restore) *śaṅku tīrttam*'s purity just for their own sake, that is, to use its water and place in rituals, but also for the benefit of Tirukkalukundram as a whole. It is another aspect of the central role of that *kuḷam* that it is intensely connected with the well-being of the locality. There is, for example, a widespread notion (expressed by followers of Turai Guruswamy, as well as, of those who frequent the Big Temple) that the dirt of *śaṅku tīrttam* is the reason why the vultures have ceased to frequent Tirukkalukundram. As mentioned in chapter two, the birds, the vignettes of the place, used to arrive in Tirukkalukundram every day at noon. They received food from the hands of a priest (a Tēcikan who resides at the north flank of *śaṅku tīrttam*) and took a bath. This has made Tirukkalukundram famous far beyond its district and a tourist attraction. However, since the vultures ceased to come, many tourists and pilgrims have stayed away as well. Interestingly, nobody took into consideration that the vultures might have grown too old to come or that they might have died and that other such carnivorous birds, which are not used to the place, possibly are not keen on the purely vegetarian diet that the priest serves them. Every explanation that I heard for their absence has, in one way or the other, to do with notions of purity that are no longer fulfilled in Tirukkalukundram: one blames everything on unclean or impure people who live near the hill (in 1999, a group of itinerant Narikuṟavaṉs, who camped beneath the hill, was evicted in a move to put away with presumed offences for the birds). Another version has it that the birds cannot stand the smell of the grilled meat from the food stalls which are encroaching the lower section of the hill, or that they detest the liquor stalls in the bus stand near the hill. So the dirt of *śaṅku tīrttam* fits well into this line of argument that constructs a link between the purity of certain spots of Tirukkalukundram and the fate of the locality as a whole. The local teacher, Varalakshmi Elumalai and her daughter explain:

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[545] This concern over purity corresponds to the findings of Setha Low 2000: 135 f. She describes the great value accorded to cleaning and policing of a remodelled public place in San Jose, Costa Rica. Also the personage seems to be comparable: "[T]he citizens who are attempting to reconstitute Parque Central in its elite turn-of-the-century image are not the daily users or the municipal designers, but are professional and middle class Josefinos who yearn for an idealized past". However, in Tirukkalukundram, purity has a more intricate meaning and the yearnings for it are only secondarily expressed in images of the past.

"For two years, the vultures have not been coming. People would have realised that it is because of the sins that are being committed [...] Nowadays, there is no purity of thought and no purity of physique. People are no longer paying attention to the spiritual and physical purity. People are indulging in many misdeeds: they lie, they commit frauds and so on. This really shows in such events [the bird's absence]. It is said that the priest himself is not perfect. He does not bathe, he does not follow the rituals and that could be the reason of it as well. It is said that the birds are just not able to tolerate it and, therefore, do not come here."

In the same vein, S. N. Shanmukam of Tirukkalukundram explains that the Brahmins have taken to bad habits: whereas half a century ago, they were remunerated in grains and other agricultural produce,[546] now they expect money to be put on the plate full of ash that they pass around. They have become accustomed to money – and they eat meat, even in "military hotels" in public. The birds cannot stand that and refuse to come. The tailor K. Gangadharan remarks that it is due to a special unction with milk [*pālapiṣēkam*] for Śiva Vētakirīsvarar that the eagles have started to return (but so far they have not descended to take the food of the priest or a bath); so it is by ritual means that they could be attracted. Others maintain that only one eagle has turned up; in every case, the eagles are an important issue in everyday conversations in Tirukkalukundram.

Similarly, the conch [*śaṅku* or *caṅku*] that is believed to be born in *śaṅku tīrttam* every 12th year, was overdue in 1999 and this was, in turn, perceived to be a problem for Tirukkalukundram as a whole. Argues S. N. Sanmugam, a Mutaliyār who lives in one of the Procession (or Car) Streets:

"With all this pollution and such abuses happening around the *śaṅku tīrttam*, it is quite common that the *caṅku* is not coming in its proper sense as it should and as it did in the past. It is not born properly. People are desecrating its greatness, its sanctity. People do not know whether the Big Temple's administration actually exists."

The pollution that in the eyes of members of the mainstream society threatens *śaṅku tīrttam* stems from various sources: the reason singled out most frequently is that all kinds of people do their laundry in *śaṅku tīrttam*. Furthermore, many of my consultants complain that the visitors of the marriage halls [*kalyāṇa* or *tirumaṇa maṇṭapam*] at the banks of the *kuḷam* throw the remainder of their meals into the *kuḷam*. Astonishingly few informants point to the fact that the *kuḷam* is used as a toilet by the people of the area – probably because they feel too shy to mention that topic, maybe because they do not consider it so important or perhaps because defecating outside one's house is common among members of the mainstream society as well. The prevalent term for defecating is "to go out" [*veḷiyē pō*].

The houses of members of the mainstream society might be equipped with privies, but these are mainly used only by the women of the households. After dark and especially after 10 p. m., men of Tirukkalukundram (even those of houses with septic tanks) use the patches of green that surround the hill, the gutters in front of their neighbour's houses or dry fields as toilets. As I found it difficult to discuss the topic openly, I am left to conjectures why they do that; I have the impression that they want to keep the excrement outside their well mopped houses.

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[546] See Fuller 1989 for a strong argument that remuneration in money has been common even before the 20th century. Does, then, S. N. Shanmukam perceive the latest changes in Indian agriculture in the same way as Western orientalists?

At least as important as the activity that is considered polluting, seems to be the kind of persons involved. These are, first of all, people who do not belong to the mainstream society or are perceived to be poorer than oneself.

> For example, Tamilselvi, a Naidu who lives with her husband as tenants in an old-fashioned house with a tiled roof and inner courtyard and on *śaṅku tīrttam*'s south bank, sniffs at those people (Tamilselvi makes a hostile gesture towards the west flank of *śaṅku tīrttam*) who use the *kuḷam* and the paths surrounding it to defecate because they do not have the basic amenities at home; she underlines that she does have a toilet in her house.

The rich Tuluve Vēḷāḷars of *śaṅku tīrttam*'s north flank remark sourly that there are even people who raise pigs at the west side.[547] Secondly, there are frequent complaints about outsiders, especially tourists from north India, who desecrate the *kuḷam* because they stay overnight and have no other place to take a bath. Thirdly, I heard communal overtones, as, for example, in the argument of an Iṭaiyar who works as cloth merchant in Tirukkalukundram's bazaar: "Next to *śaṅku tīrttam* live Muslims. They piss in the *kuḷam* and misuse it!" Fourthly, groups classified as "tribal", such as Iṟular and Kuruvikkārars, are considered polluting, and they are evicted for that reason. Last but not least, the inhabitants of Tirukkalukundram-Paramaciva-Nagar – mostly Untouchables – are thought to cause the pollution. In an interview on his activities regarding *kuḷam*s, T. Anbuchezhiyan, son of Turai Guruswamy, says:

> **Anbuchezhiyan:** Very recently, we have done something for the benefit of the vultures [*paṭci / pakṣi*, he uses the Sanskrit term] and the other sparrows and crows, [that is] we dug a *kuḷam* full of water which these birds can drink [i.e., jackal *kuḷam* on top of the hill]. But the mentality of the people in Paramaciva-Nagar is to catch the birds and eat them. [...] They have that mentality: kill and eat. That is one reason why we keep them at a distance [*taḷḷi vecc̣irukkiṟōm*].
> **Bettina:** So they are not supposed to be near the hill?
> **Anbuchezhiyan:** Yes.
> **Bettina:** What about the Kuruvikkārars?
> **Anbuchezhiyan:** For them, too, this applies.
> **Bettina:** They have been living there for ten or twelve years...
> **Anbuchezhiyan:** That was a big mistake [*periya tappu*].
> **Bettina:** What do the Kuruvikkārar do towards *śaṅku tīrttam*?
> **Anbuchezhiyan:** You know what they do? They kill the crows, they cook on the banks of *śaṅku tīrttam*, they eat it and throw the remnants into *śaṅku tīrttam* itself. The intention of *śaṅku tīrttam* was to preserve the medicinal qualities received from the hill. By allowing the Kuruvikkārars to spoil it, the purpose is lost. That is why we had to evict them.

Obviously the members of the mainstream society tend to set aside the caste differences that exist among them when it comes to distinguishing themselves vis ā vis the Untouchables and other "outsiders". Once again it is by separation that purity is to be attained; the principle as established in chapter nine is functional in the context of *śaṅku tīrttam* as it is in the multitude of *kuḷam*s, just on a different level – it is concentrated on (or centralised to) one *kuḷam* in Tirukkalukundram as a whole.

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[547] On the image of pigs in India see Bellwinkel-Schempp 2004.

One of the reasons for this shifting frame of reference has been identified as the caste conflict and the Untouchables' assertion of their rights. Marimuttu, a Paṟaiyar who was born in an adjacent village and came to Tirukkalukundram as a schoolboy, remembers:

> "Nowadays, *śaṅku tīrttam* is called public place [*potu iṭam*] because everyone has access to it, but some years ago when I was a student, the SC people were not allowed access to this *śaṅku tīrttam*."

Today Marimuttu is a lawyer and an activist with local Dalit groups. The outward appearance of the 38-year-old could not be more different from that of 57-year-old Turai: whereas the Guruswamy likes to spend much time sitting in the verandah of a religious congregation's [*tiruvāvaṭuturai āṭiṉam maṭam*] venerated building in a busy area of Tirukkalukundram, Marimuttu is constantly on the move. On his heavy motorcycle he keeps shuttling between his office, the courts and his spacious house in a withdrawn, green area of Tirukkalukundram on the way to a myriad of assignments in and out of town. Turai usually clads himself in a saffron coloured loincloth [*vēṭṭi*] and presents his brawny upper body bare, covered only with layers of sacred ash and hallowed chains. His forehead and strong upper arms likewise display the three parallel stripes of white ash, the sign of Śiva. Marimuttu, who is shorter than Turai and has a comparatively fine figure, wears businesslike clothes; earlier he used to go out only in suits, he says, but recently he relaxed that strict dress code a bit. Yet both Turai and Marimuttu are protagonists of modern movements in India.

The aim of groups such as that which Marimuttu represents is the uplift of Untouchables by eradicating caste discriminations. Therefore, they blame, for example, Turai Guruswamy because he ostracised his own son when the latter married against his will and out of caste. In a general move for open access to public places and amenities (see previous chapter), S. Marimuttu and likewise minded people work towards putting *śaṅku tīrttam* in a position that it can be safely used by people of all strata for their daily needs.

These needs are not met by the municipal supply. The Executive Officer of Tirukkalukundram told me that in the year 2000, 1,800 connections remained to be built to reach the goal of providing one public tap per 30 households – for which the money was not available. At the existing connections, the water is supplied only every second or third day in varying quantities and at varying times. Usually children or women stand vigil for hours at the taps and inform the others when "the water has come" [*taṇṇi vantāccu*], whereupon many other women hasten to come along with all kinds of vessels to draw the water and carry it home. In times of scarce supply, queues of women waste their time waiting for hours together in front of the taps and quarrelling for the last drop. Streets in which active members of the mainstream society live, who can make powerful presentations at the office of Tirukkalukundram's Executive Officer, can count on sooner connections to the municipal water supply, on better maintenance and quicker repair of damages. In times of abundant supply, I often came across water pouring out of taps that were left open or water trickling out of leaking valves, creating deep puddles around the tap. In any case, the municipal water hardly covers the needs for drinking water, let alone for water to wash or to do the laundry for everybody in Tirukkalukundram.

Marimuttu's claim for the open access of *śaṅku tīrttam* to those who need to use it, is in diametrical opposition to the aims of the local mainstream society, but it concurs with the aims expressed by

Jayanthi Natarajan. Both are grounded in the discourse on the "modern" state. However, he detests her contribution:

> "It does not require Jayanthi Natarajan's fund for all that; to create an infrastructure, strengthening the *kuḷam*'s banks, putting up the walls to protect it, cleaning of the *kuḷam*. It is the interest of the people which should be taken care of by the local authorities. This has to be taken up by the local MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu] [...] it has to be taken up by the well-off people of Tirukkalukundram and the public [*potu makkaḷ*], everyone can contribute in their might and generate enough funds and do what is necessary. It is not necessary for her to come all the way, it is not her constituency but she came all the way to see the place and initiate this. This is not necessary. It has to come from these people here, not from people who do not have any connections here."[548]

Likewise, S. Marimuttu questions the activities of Turai Guruswamy and his lot: "He is making a living out of god" he nags and reproaches him for charging Rs. 500 per shoulder bag [irumuti]: "When I see how he looks like, I feel like falling at his feet, but what he does is all false". Doubting a person's religious fervour is as topical in India as these religious activities themselves. Turai Guruswamy – even without being questioned – emphasises that his commitment does not entail any financial interests: "I am certainly not worried about the monetary aspect. One has money or not, god cannot be changed. God will not allow to be changed." He tries to authenticate that by enumerating his personal contributions to public ends: Rs. 50,000 for a shed in the bus stand, Rs. 24,000 to install boards on which the founding story of Tirukkalukundram will be chiselled, 2,000 stones to fix the jackal *kuḷam* etc. Yet S. Marimuttu says he would have preferred him to do more for practical rather than for religious usage: "If, at all, he has undertaken the task of cleaning up the *kuḷam* on top of the hill, he should also undertake the task of cleaning *śaṅku tīrttam* and the streets of Tirukkalukundram which are dirty." He argues that only if Turai took up a spade in his own hands and cleaned *śaṅku tīrttam* would he believe that he is not merely talking but doing social service, doing away with differences of caste (working with spades in the dirt is clearly a marker of lowliness).

Yet neither do Marimuttu and the people for whom he stands take spades in their own hands to clean the *kuḷam*; they prefer the way of suing the authorities of the Big Temple, to make representations with the Government or to write articles in newspapers and magazines about *śaṅku tīrttam*. As there is no local newspaper for Tirukkukalukundram, they make *śaṅku tīrttam* an issue on the supra-local level.

> In December, 2002, an article by S. Marimuttu on the *kuḷam* appeared in the fortnightly Tamil language publication "Police" that is distributed in newspaper shops all over Tamil Nadu. Several days later, *śaṅku tīrttam* was cleared from bushes. Whereas Marimuttu claimed that the action was taken due to his article and that he was the one to pay for the workers' lunches, the administration of the Big Temple presented it as a mere coincidence, the works had been overdue anyway.

Thus in their own way, groups of Untouchables (for whom, in this case, stands Marimuttu) make use of *śaṅku tīrttam* to mark their participation in local politics, which is new and nourishes the caste conflicts that have been pointed out to be notorious in the study area. At the same time, this underlines

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[548] Direct quote in English from the speaker.

the *kuḷam*s' role in creating publicity, to socially construct the locality in which it happens to be placed.

Notably, the interest which the *kuḷam* receives exceeds by far the actual benefits done to it – if all that is announced or claimed about *śaṅku tīrttam* were actually carried out, the reservoir would surely be the best kept one in entire Tamil Nadu. Yet the ado about *śaṅku tīrttam* stands in marked contrast to the silence kept on other *kuḷam*s. Hence, I argue that *śaṅku tīrttam* attains a wider meaning: it becomes a symbol of Tirukkalukundram as a town-in-the-making which transcends the compartmentalisation of the whole in many neighbourhoods. *śaṅku tīrttam* offers a stage on which the different agents and lobbies of the mainstream-society that emerges concomitantly, fostered by caste conflict and mobility, can present themselves; thereby, in turn,
 helping to constitute Tirukkalukundram as a "whole" locality.

śaṅku tīrttam has also a role to play as Tirukkalukundram positions itself on the supra-local level. For example, the authority of the Big Temple had multicoloured leaflets printed to advertise Tirukkalukundram and to solicit donations among pilgrims who frequent the place. In these brochures, *śaṅku tīrttam* ranges prominently as a tourist spot. Apart from tourists from North India (who, in my observation, were much less frequently seen at *śaṅku tīrttam* than the recurrent blame on them would make one believe), I met visitors from as far away as Vedanthangal and many villages from a range of 20 kilometres who were using *śaṅku tīrttam* for fortnightly rituals or on the *māḷai amāvācai* day. Furthermore, *śaṅku tīrttam* serves as the gauge for other *kuḷam*s when, for example, P. Sundaram, headman [*talaivar*] of Periyavippedu, a village north of Oragadam, revels about the big *kuḷam* of his place, explaining that it is as grand as *śaṅku tīrttam*.

On the other hand, by the little care that is being done, *śaṅku tīrttam*, tapping resources of the entire locality and much beyond, has been faring reasonably well so far and can even serve the needs of people from far away neighbourhoods whose *kuḷam*s have fallen into decay. This means that the users – especially women with heavy pots full of laundry – have to cover longer distances to fulfil their duties. Yet at least, they have an opportunity to do so at *śaṅku tīrttam* till now. At first sight it may appear that the *kuḷam* is saved from dilapidation if it is locked away and policed. But it is unlikely that the envisaged role as a withdrawn area of purity that is confined to religious usages will do good to *śaṅku tīrttam* on the long run. As has been shown in chapter nine, *kuḷam*s, despite all separation, are basically multipurpose entities. The sacred is but one aspect out of many related to these water reservoirs. Their vital role is to service the locality in multifarious ways. What happens to *kuḷam*s that are withdrawn from public use and confined to religious use can be examined in cities like Chennai, Kanchipuram or Madurai – and also in the *kuḷam* east of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple: the less used they are for a variety of purposes, the more nasty and filthy do they become, to the point of being unusable.[549]

After what has been written in this chapter one question inevitably arises: why is it that the described role of centralisation and doing away with the decentral multitude of *kuḷam*s accrues to *śaṅku tīrttam* and not to any other *kuḷam* as, for example, that within the precincts of the Big Temple? I argue that the reason is the high containment and visibility of that reservoir.

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[549] This reminds one of the observations of William Whyte 1980 regarding public places; he argues that well-placed benches and more food vendors increase the public security in (and thus the usability of) plazas and parks.

Viewed from above, *śaṅku tīrttam* structures Tirukkalukundram as it provides the biggest open space among houses and streets. Also observed from the surface level, it offers sight lines, a vastness and serenity that cannot be found elsewhere in the packed settlement with its heavy traffic. In that way, it attains functions that in cities of the western hemisphere are fulfilled by places /plazas or parks. However, whereas activities on these kind of sites tend to be evenly distributed or to increase towards the centre,[550] in *kuḻam*s this is the other way round – because, of course, there is the authoritative presence of the water. Human activity at *śaṅku tīrttam* is strongest at its fringes and decreases towards the centre. Only a few bold boys might venture there when they want to have a good swim, but I have never witnessed one setting foot on the pillared structure [*nīrāḻimaṇṭapam*] in the middle of *śaṅku tīrttam*. This roughly resembles the behavioural pattern in typical Tamil temple complexes and cities for which Madurai and Srirangam are outstanding examples: there, human activity tends to decrease from the fringes, from the hustle and bustle of the market streets, to the centre where the tutelary god or goddess resides and on which no human being can set foot. While this is true for all *kuḻam*s, in *śaṅku tīrttam* it becomes particularly conspicuous because of its sheer size: 3.75 hectares. This makes it, in the layout of Tirukkalukundram as a whole, a feasible counterweight to the Big Temple, placing it on par with this venerated structure as the most significant built landmark of the settlement.

Furthermore, *śaṅku tīrttam* is invested with more myths, beliefs, and practical possibilities than every other reservoir in my study area. It also has a much larger capacity to contain water. "It never runs dry," is a frequent statement. Only aged informants remember that they could walk in its bed without wetting their feet, that was in the mid fifties, and even then *śaṅku tīrttam* offered a recourse: people sunk wells in its ground and it was from there that they could draw at least a bit of water in a joint effort.[551] As *śaṅku tīrttam* was always filled with water whenever I saw it, I myself could not inspect the wells that are said to be located on the ground of the *kuḻam*; information on them differs and my question pertaining to them has led to vigorous discussions: whereas some interlocutors hold that there are up to eight wells in the bed of the *kuḻam*, others (who are usually no less knowledgeable) maintain that there is only one big well. I follow from this kind of discussion that the *kuḻam* indeed dries up rarely, so that people cannot remember well how it looks. Last but not least, the water of *śaṅku tīrttam* is considered to be sacred or holy. The next chapter explores such notions.

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[550] For example, Low 2000: 169 – 178 for behavioural maps of two plazas in San Jose, Puerto Rico.
[551] Various sources, e. g. Amaravathi, local leader of AIADMK-women's wing, on 27.10.1999.

Kaṅkā

13.   Notes on water

This chapter probes into the meaning of water and its relation to reservoirs. Various authors who write on water in India underline its sanctity. "Water's sacredness and sweet ability to quench thirst and cool bodies is so inseparable that Hindus call the water 'mother'"[552] observes Morna Livingston and emphasises the significance of water for fertility. In the same vein, Margaret T. Egnor writes: "[W]ater [.] is a symbol in Tamil thought for love, unity, and flourishing life".[553] Anne Feldhaus underlines the aspect of water granting wetness and thus fertility "[i]n a dry area like the Deccan Plateau..."[554], thus linking it to environmental conditions. She cites many examples for water that heals leprosy, skin diseases and other illnesses (many of which are thought to be acquired by committing sins), that makes ugly people beautiful, that imparts wealth or that helps women to find the husbands of their dreams.[555] Finally, she identifies a "transforming wetness" of rivers that bestows fertility, i.e., fecundity as "the central meaning of rivers in India in general" and assumes that this (more than the purifying agency of water) equates to "the powers of rivers to remove sin".[556]

Male authors usually dwell less on the aspect of fecundity than on protective or miraculous powers of water. Peter J. Claus writes: "She [Parvati] sprinkled water around them [the newly born babies] to protect them...".[557] Likewise, the first gesture after sitting down for a meal and having been served the banana leaf as a plate for it is to wipe the banana leaf and sprinkle some water around it to protect it from ants crawling into the rice and the sauces. In a study on the history of the south Indian town

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[552] Livingston 2002: 29, see also p. 7.
[553] Egnor 1986: 306.
[554] Feldhaus 1995: 184.
[555] Feldhaus 1995: 67.
[556] Feldhaus 1995: 186.
[557] Claus 1986: 286.

Chidambaram, Hermann Kulke presents the story of an unhappy man called Hiranyavarman who had turned into a lion. He took a bath in the Śivakaṅkā [*kuḷam*] upon which he got a golden body and beamed like the sun that rises from the sea.[558] Eveline Meyer mentions that all water or water sources are often simply called *kaṇkā*, thus hinting that all water is basically the same and divine.[559]

If water were holy, all water places would be holy places. But some are holier than others, and several are not holy at all. My consultants in the study area are positive that not every water place is a ford to transcendence [*tīrttam*, see chapter eleven]. Whereas in connection with rituals, all sorts of water might be called "*kaṅkā*", alluding to the sacred river in north India, I have heard no farmer speaking of letting "*kaṅkā*" flow onto his fields when he irrigated them. In this case, it is just water – *taṇṇīr*. This holds for the *kuḷam*s which are not called "*tīrttam*" in local parlance – and even for those among them that are said to have lost their sanctity. Wells, especially those used for the cultivation of paddy, are not believed to be sacred (although they are directly linked to fertility), and neither are overhead tanks nor the taps or the bores of the municipal water supply. *ēri*s have been shown to be considered neutral, if not rather dangerous places, that are not decent to be visited by a woman without a guard. They are typical places to commit suicide by drowning oneself.

> The mother of a young divorcee tells the story of that day when she came home in the afternoon and her daughter, who had recently returned to her parent's house, was not there. "I was out of my senses for fear and searched for her all over the place [...]. In the end, I passed by that *ēri* in Irumbuli. Suddenly I heard a dog barking, wow – wow, wow – wow, and I thought, is this not our dog? We had bought it from those Kuruvikkārars when it was still a baby, and she [the daughter] had nourished it. Hence, it was very attached to her. I went and looked for it and there she was. The dog saved her life. She had gone to the *ēri* in order to throw herself into the water and drown. She cannot swim, you know."

Swimming seems to be a wondrous faculty for the majority of South Indians. Newspapers keep reporting about people whose attempts to commit suicide in "tanks" were successful.[560] Apart from suicides, it is a recurrent theme that water also serves for murders. Firstly, in the popular habit of trying to influence others by the help of afflicting practices [*viṭa tōḻil*], water is believed to be a powerful agent. A senior physician of Tirukkalukundram details that the most efficient way to kill somebody without traces is to stand in knee-deep water and utter certain evil verses, thinking of the victim. Vice versa, water plays an important role in getting rid of afflictions incurred by others. T. N. Kannan, who runs a practice for exorcisms north of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, for example, uses it to help his customers get rid of all kinds of curses and of the numinous beings whom he diagnosed caught hold of his clients. Secondly, bodies of water are known to be places of violent crimes.

> People of Vattalagundu, in Dindigul Anna District, tell the story of the last local chief's [*jamīṇtār*'s] daughter who took a bath on the roof of their house. A stranger saw her. Both fell in love with each other. The local chief noticed it and next time his daughter climbed down the ladder in the deep cistern of their house to bail water, he pulled out the ladder. Thus he buried his daughter alive. Today, she is worshipped as a goddess. The palace is in ruins and the last

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[558] Kulke 1970: 21.
[559] Meyer 1986: 235.
[560] English language newspapers usually do not distinguish between *kuḷam* and *ēri*; see, for example, The Hindu, 21.09.1999: "Banda, Nov. 20. Six members, including four minors, of a family allegedly committed suicide yesterday by jumping into a tank near Kalinjar fort, [...] the historic Budda Buddi tank".

scion of the noble family is reported to do menial labour in a local tea stall.[561]

It is difficult to assess the occurrence of this kind of criminal acts in reality; nobody would tell me about such a case in my study area. In contrast, I met several families that were without mothers because these women had fallen accidentally into wells while drawing water and had drowned. Upon that, the wells usually go out of use; rumour has it that malign spirits [*pēy*] haunt them. Feldhaus retells the myth of a man who dies in a pool inhabited by alligators and dryads.[562] Newspapers repeatedly report of lethal accidents in *kuḷam*s.[563] Especially those that are bedecked with lotus are feared because the weeds are thought to draw people down. Stories of drowned people are favourite topics to be chatted about in the local tea stalls.

> On 27,2,2000, after weeks of untimely rain, one of the regulars of a local tea stall told the others how a man he knew almost drowned when he slipped backwards into roaring water. "He was a handsome, strong man," the storyteller remarked, "yet he was drunk". As the others looked rather unimpressed into the surrounding puddles that reflected no sun but stone-grey sky, another man recounted a news item from Kerala: a lunatic stumbled into a watercourse. A priest [*pūjāri*] followed to rescue him. In the end, the lunatic survived and the priest died. The others grinned and before a third one went on to tell yet another mean trick of the water, one of the men sighs and comments that there has been enough rain by now.

Although rain is happily welcomed after a long and parching summer, untimely rains are dreaded. When it rained unexpectedly in March, 2000, many farmers deplored the loss of the paddy that they had not managed to harvest until then. The tamarind crop turned black and unusable. The inundation caused by monsoon downpours which are considered to be "normal" are heavy enough to bring active life to a standstill. The streets are submerged and partly washed away, making it difficult to transport milk, vegetables and to cater for other basic needs, let alone to travel as far as to the next corner. Frequent power cuts darken private homes, shops and offices unless they avail of noisy and costly generators. Books swell up so that it becomes impossible to read them. Likewise, wooden doors and furniture widen to the point of being unusable. Even the handloom weavers are forced to idleness because, though they are independent from the supply of electricity, they cannot sit down in their looms' deep pits whenever water stagnates in them. Whereas this is known to happen in any good monsoon time and is outweighed by the joy of possible new beginnings, severe floods incur heavy losses of crops,[564] houses and lives. With settlements spreading on sites that are not suited for building as they are too low lying, floods are likely to become more and more destructive until reaching catastrophic dimensions, such as the deluge in Orissa in 2000 exemplified. Yet floods are no new phenomenon; the fear of them is deeply rooted in Tamil cultural memory: Shulman sheds light on the topic by presenting evidence from temple myths of Tamil Nadu.[565]

As unwelcomed as untimely rains is excessive dew [*paṉi*], for which the months between *mārkaḻi* till *paṅkuṉi* [mid December till mid April] are notorious. The paddy harvest of January /February 1999,

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[561] Recorded by Rajamani of Kombaipatti on 02.04.2000.
[562] Feldhaus 1995: 127.
[563] For example, "News Today", 22,12,1998 (vol. XVII, No. 16, p. 8) about Pillayarpatti in Sivaganga District: "[...] According to police, the boy, son of one of the [Sabarimalai] pilgrims, while bathing in the pond got entangled in the weeds. His father and two others rushed to the pond to rescue the boy. But, they also met the same fate and drowned. [...]"
[564] See, for example, "The Hindu", 13,3,2000, reporting on the farmers' losses due to floods in November 1997.
[565] Shulman 1980: 55 – 69.

according to various farmers such as M. Sankaralingam or T. J. Nathan of Oragadam, could have been better if there had not been so much dew. In general, dew is feared as a source of all kinds of diseases, including tooth ache and especially a variety of flu that can rob one of one's voice for some days. This is why people of my study area wear thick knitted woollen caps that cover their heads, ears, necks and throats in the evenings and early mornings even at temperatures far above 20 degrees Celsius. Whoever can afford it bathes in heated water.

Not only dew, also drinking water is held responsible for causing illnesses. Seven-year-old Aravindan of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai, for instance, suffers from severe asthma, which, according to his parents and relatives, he acquired by drinking the wrong water. To be safe in the future, he must not drink any water unheated. Whenever I came home from a journey with sniffles or sickness and blamed it on the wind in the train, on the exhausting bus ride or on a meal in a shabby roadside food stall, my landlady or host (in fact, during my many stays in Tamil Nadu every landlady and every host) energetically turned down such seemingly unqualified diagnoses and declared that the sole reason for my calamity was the water that I had drunken away from home and that was different to that I am used to. Usually Indian travellers are very particular about carrying along bottles with their own water.

In various myths, water serves as a deceptive medium, such as in the widely related story of a celestial being [*kantarvar*] who tempts a woman to commit adultery.

> In a version told by S. Marimuttu of Tirukkalukundram, Māriyamman̠ is about to put a pot on the plane surface of the water to scoop up some of it for her family when she suddenly perceives the reflection of a celestial being [*kantarvar*] in the water. He is very beautiful; she likes him and he likes her. When her guardian Parasuraman notices what happens, he chops her head off and flings it far away onto the fields. From then on, the head is worshipped (in many shrines, the goddess is represented just by her head).

> In a rendition by J. Minakshi (an aged lady who dwells near *śaṅku tīrttam*) of the myth of Tirukkalukundram's village deity [*kirāma tēvatai*] Celliyamman̠, the theme of adultery is not mentioned. The reason for chopping off the goddesses' head is that she lets go of her pot and breaks it. In this case, the theme of confused heads comes in: instead of her real head, that of a Par̠aiyar [she says despisingly *paicci*] is placed on her decapitated body.[566]

Water is not always regarded as cooling. My consultants were unanimous that water is not subject to humoral considerations of warmth and coldness but has (and transmits), in principle, its actual temperature – other than ice-cream, for example, which is considered to heat the body up even though its measurable temperature is below zero, or lemon juice that is commonly held to cool one's body down even if it is swallowed hot. However, sometimes water, even though its measurable temperature is at most lukewarm, is understood to be hot in the sense of polluting. This is the case with bodily fluids (mostly termed with composita that include *nīr*, water) as in the cases of tears [*kaṇṇīr* – literally meaning "water of the eyes"], blood [*cennīr*], lymph [*niṇanīr*], urine [*cir̠unīr* – literally "little water"], saliva [*umil̠nīr* or *vīṇīr*], or sweat. A deity that is said to have been born from Śiva's tears (or his sweat, depending on the rendition) is the terrifying deity Vīrapattiran̠. In the study area, he is widely

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[566] The story echoes the founding history of Irumbuli's goddess Vēmpul̠iyamman̠ as told by Varadan (who was portrayed in chapter seven); however, being a Par̠aiyar himself, Varadan says that a Cakkiliyar woman's head is used. On the widespread motive of the changed heads, see Nabokov 2000: 110 f. with further references.

worshipped. The most frequented shrine is opposite Tirukkalukundram's fire station. It presents the god as a shining black idol the size of a man with scary protruding eyes, fierce fangs and four arms carrying a sword, a bow and a sceptre. In his high head gear, towers a representation of Śiva [*śivaliṅkam*]. Reiniche interprets the very name as *vērvai puttiraṉ*, "son (born of) sweat" (of Śiva). It could also be traced to "heroic guardian"[567], which hints more at the deity's martial character. Reiniche cites stories in which he has to destroy a grand sacrifice for which King Daksha or King Takkan has not invited Śiva.[568] In my study area, Vīrapattiraṉ is either interpreted to be the northern form of Iyenar, the guardian of boundaries who is, in southern parts of Tamil Nadu, called Aiyeṉār,[569] or as the angrier or heroic form of Śiva. However, this does not quite tally with the information that there are exorcisms in the big temples of his in Hanumantapuram near Singaperumalkoyil; this is rather uncommon for Śiva. Since the popular actor Sivaji Ganesan played Vīrapattiraṉ in the movie "tiruviḷaiyāṭal", "Kandan Karunilai", the deity seems to have been even more widely revered, and several informants tell the story-line of this movie when asked for the myth of Vīrapattiraṉ.

Furthermore, if water were equally sacred in all places, the water carrying rituals described in chapter ten would be superfluous. In Tirukkalukundram, water of *śaṅku tīrttam*, for example, is transported for various festivals such as the anointment of Kaṅkaiyammaṉ for *kattari apiṣēkam*, of Kāḷiyammaṉ in Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil in January, of the fierce Cāmuṇṭīcuvarī, whose shrine the exorcist T. N. Kannan erected north of Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, of the village goddess Celliyammaṉ for her principal unction and of the "small" Celliyammaṉ. The latter's idol is said to have been carried by a flood to the fields beneath Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*, upon which the farmers erected a small temple for her. There are other incidents of water being carried for ritual purposes: the fluid that collects after an idol has been anointed [*apiṣēkam*] is sometimes tapped at the outlet (locally called *kōmukam*, "cow's face"), filled in little bottles and taken home. It is a popular custom to keep water from the Ganges in sealed phials for all kinds of purposes. In pilgrimage places such as Rameswaram, bottles that allegedly contain Ganges water are sold at breathtaking rates of Rs. 101 per litre. In November, 1999, a little ampulla containing Ganges water was attached as a gimmick to the joint *tīpāvaḷi* festival edition of three popular Tamil monthly magazines Bhakti, Gokulam and Ñanasindhamani. It was thought to sprinkle one's head with. "Ritual circulation of water [.] takes place, it seems, all over India" writes Feldhaus who has many more examples.[570] This would be senseless if all water were automatically the same and similarly sacred.

The holy water cannot always be carried to the people, so people go to the holy water; that is, they go on pilgrimage [*tīrtta yāttirai* or visiting *kōyil kuḷam*, the very names hint to the water places]. Especially the pilgrimage to the Ganges at Varanasi or Allahabad is famous. If water were considered to be invariably sacred, there would be no point to undertake such troublesome journeys. Whereas today, tour operators help to facilitate the trip, in earlier times pilgrimages to Varanasi were adventures. If a pilgrim really happened to return alive, he was celebrated by all neighbours and sometimes suffixed "Kasivasi" to his or her name: "The one who was in Varanasi".

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[567]According to Cre-A's dictionary, *vīram* means heroism, bravery, courageousness and *pattiram* stands for safety, security.

[568] Reiniche 1979: 131. In one story, he decapitates the king and places a bovine head on his neck instead. Feldhaus narrates a similar story, yet in hers the king's head is replaced by that of a goat: Feldhaus 1995: 79.

[569] Iyenar, whose shrines are usually populated by terracotta horses, some of them surpassing life size, is absent in my study area; I found the first shrine of him near Madurantakam, about 20 kms away from the study area. On Iyenar, see Dumont 1959.

[570] Feldhaus 1995: 31.

Finally, if water were always and everywhere sacred, there would be no need for purification ceremonies of water. During the festival of the nine nights [*navarāttiri*], for instance, married women whose husbands are still alive erect cradles in the form of steps in their homes. They usually depict scenes of a life in a deemed "good old time" with the help of little painted figurines. According to the wealth of the households, they are more or less lavish, but they always contain an idol of a goddess [*amman̠*] or a little pot [*kalacam*] in her place. During the festival, the pot is daily anointed. At the end, its water is poured into the household well: "It purifies", explains a Kurukkaḷ girl of Tirukkalukundram in English, and earns the nods of those who understood it.[571]

If water is not always and everywhere good, there must be reasons why it is good in some instances and neutral or even pernicious in others. The previous chapters have shown that the water of *kuḷam*s is better reputed than that of *ēri*s because it is more contained, less subject to the vagaries of nature in various ways. Among the *kuḷam*s, certain stand out as fords to transcendence [*tīrttaṅkaḷ*]. Among them in turn, some are considered special. In Tirukkalukundram, for example, *śaṅku tīrttam* is generally renowned for its sacredness and as the previous chapter has shown, increasingly so. "The water of *śaṅku tīrttam* alone is considered as sacred", says, for instance, Vedagiri who does *pūjai* in the temple of Kāḷiyamman̠ in Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil and of Vēmpuḷiyamman̠n̠ in Irumbuli. T. N. Kannan, the exorcist, corroborates that and adds that "the water of this *śaṅku tīrttam* is several times more powerful than the holy water of the Ganges".

The Ganges, usually considered the holiest river of India, is often used to gauge water places: They are either said to be on par with it – or to outdo it. The founding history of Mamallapuram [*Mallāpurīmāhātmya*] provides an example:

> "All the Rishis [sages] assembled on the Himavat mountains and discussed the relative merits of the holy waters (tīrthas). They praised the Gaṅgā and Kāverī, but agreed that the Pundarīka pond [in Mamallapuram] was the most excellent of all, and that Gaṅgā and the other rivers should be its slaves! [...] Gaṅgā, wandering sorrowfully, met Shanmukha, [Murugan as the "Six-faced"] [...] and told him the cause of her grief. He, in reply, said that she had no ground for complaint, as, great those she was, the Pundarīka pond was yet far superior. [...] He then told Gaṅgā that all would approve of her putting aside her jealousy and self-love, and that she would be freed from slavery by bathing in those waters."[572]

Sometimes a *kuḷam*'s power to do away with sins is thought to even surpass that of many other eminent water places taken together. A sign attached to the *kuḷam* called kodi theertham /*koṭi tīrttam* in the temple of Irāmanātacuvāmi in the pilgrimage town Rameswaram reads:

> "The merit of residing in Kasi for 10 months, in Chidambaram for 100 months and the holy places like Kumbakonam, Madurai, Tiruvidaimaruthur, Mayiladuturai, Thiruvenkadu, Thiruvanaikkaval, Thirumaraikkadu, Thiruvarengam, Thirupparakundram, Thiruvarur, Seerkali, and Vaideeswarar Temple for one year is derived by bathing in the kodi theertham."

This can be taken as yet another indication that water is not thought to be always and everywhere similarly sacred.

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[571] Burghart 1996 describes various efforts of cleaning the well of a cobbler neighbourhood.
[572] Mallāpurīmāhātmya: 182.

Asked for the reason why he thinks *śaṅku tīrttam* is the only sacred water place of Tirukkalukundram, T. N. Kannan (as many other informants) refers to the miracle that a conch, a creature that usually occurs only in salty water, appears in the reservoir. Notably, no attention is paid to the animal itself – most of my consultants do not even know whether a "worm" [*pūcci*], as they call it, was inside the shell found at the *kuḷam* or not. During the birth of the conch, the divine sound "om" is reported to come forth from the *kuḷam*. Especially pious people, such as T. Anbucheziyan of Tirukkalukundram, argue that this sound lends additional shape to the water and contributes to its healing properties. Furthermore, T. N. Kannan points out: "Deities, sages, saints and several hundred devotees of the Lord [Īcuvaraṉ] took a bath in the *śaṅku tīrttam* and got rid of their sins." Other informants say that saint Mārkkaṇṭēya worshipped at the *kuḷam*'s flanks or – in other renditions – that he created it (see previous chapter).

Another reason for *śaṅku tīrttam*'s deemed greatness is its connection to the mountain and the temple of Śiva Vētakirīsvarar on top of it. Whereas the relation of the Big Temple in the plain to the reservoir is established with myth and ritual practices, there is a physical connection between *śaṅku tīrttam* and the hill temple: the water that runs over the mountain is dammed in such a way that it does not run off, for example, into the *ēri* of Irumbuli or into the *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai (both of which would be nearest to the hill).

An earthen dike of varying height (roughly one metre) diverts it to the southern tip of the hill until it reaches the main road. To prevent it from spilling over and spoiling the tarmac, it is led through a wide pipe underneath the street and between houses towards the *kuḷam*. There, the ditch is partly open and filled with debris. In its latter part, it is covered with broad slabs and earth and thus hidden. It leads beneath an untended plot that is said to once have housed a religious congregation with monks who bred cows. The inlet to *śaṅku tīrttam* is rather unspectacular, but all evidence points to it as the main way to provide *śaṅku tīrttam* with water.

Hence, the water that collects in *śaṅku tīrttam* can ultimately be held to be the *apiṣēkam* fluid that rinsed Śiva on top of the mountain and has thereby acquired special qualities. Anne Feldhaus, in her study of rivers in Maharashtra, shows that mountains "are often, explicitly or implicitly, identified with Śiva, a Śivaliṅga, or a Śiva deity"[573] and introduces the idea "that rivers originate on mountaintops, in the vicinity of Śivaliṅgas."[574]. The identity of the mountain and Śiva is expressed in the practice of circumambulating it. This is done for shrines in general, and in Tamil Nadu the hill of Tiruvannamalai is famous for it. Even in Tirukkalukundram, the circumambulation of the hill has become a frequent practice and is gaining increasing popularity.

> At ten o'clock in the night of 1,1,1999 I joined a group of about 40 men and women from Tirukkalukundram who gathered in front of a Vināyakar-temple east of the hill. After a short initial service, the group started on a barefoot walk round the hill, led by Shanti Kumari, a locally eminent singer of religious songs [*pajaṉai*]. She sang in praise of the local gods, and each verse was repeated in a murmur by her pious suite. It was a venture into the moonlit silence. We had to thread our way through cows that were deeply asleep on the warm tar of the main road. On an especially solitary spot north of the hill, everybody sat down, left to his

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[573] Feldhaus 1995: 26.
[574] Feldhaus 1995: 21.

or her own musings in the bright light of the full moon. During those few minutes, only occasional croaks of frogs interrupted the quietude of the night. The group completed its circle round the hill with a final service in the same temple from which it had started and a rather improvised gift of food [*piracātam*].

In the following years, the movement gather momentum. Every full moon night, more devotees came to circumambulate the mountain, to the point that, in fall 1999, the group got so big that it split into many groups. By mid 2000, the circumambulation of the mountain had become a popular event. Many devotees started already at sunset, one group following the previous one on its heels; when one group was sitting down to meditate at the hill's north side, the following groups was already queuing, impatiently waiting for their turn. The singers were equipped with megaphones that acoustically trampled down each other. Pious people distributed tea or juice for free to the devotees, and vendors of *pūjai* items and food stalls lined the holy pathway. A new meditation hall was built at about half of the way and turned to a focal point of services. Also the services at the Vināyakar-temple and the final gift of food became and more elaborate.

Every morning, starting as early as sunrise, some believers circumambulate Tirukkalukundram's hill. On special dates, such as the full moon days, Tuesdays, the winter months and certain festival days, especially many devotees circumambulate the mountain, mostly in little groups of friends, families or neighbours. Many take a bath at home prior to the walk although they admit that they should bathe in *śaṅku tīrttam* and do the circumambulation in wet clothes. Various people commit themselves to make the exercise for 48 consecutive days, believing that this will heal or prevent diseases as diverse as mental problems, leprosy and stomach ache. As illnesses in Tamil Nadu are often believed to be caused by sins, the healing effect of *śaṅku tīrttam* water is another aspect of its faculty to wash away sins and the effect of curses.

Some explain that the cancIvi plant, the mythical source of everlasting youth, grows on the hill. They tell the story of Hanuman̲ who was sent out to bring it to god Rāma. Yet the plant is invisible and the monkey-god could not find it. So he grabbed the entire hill on which it was believed to grow and carried it to Rāma. Devotees of Tirukkalukundram prefer to leave the hill in its place and to breathe the air that blows from the hill and to drink or to bathe in the water that runs over it and that collects in *śaṅku tīrttam*. Informants who tend to explain things in a way that they call "scientific" (a recurrent theme in Tamil conversations) explain that the healing quality of the water is due to a wide range of medicinal herbs [*mūlikai*] or a rare variety of the margosa tree with yellow blossoms over which it gushes on its way down from the hill. The aforementioned T. Anbuchezhiyan holds that the copper, sodium and calcium content of *śaṅku tīrttam*'s water is extraordinarily high which helps in curing diseases.

After all, when more visitors come to *śaṅku tīrttam*, more fame accumulates for it. Finally, the number of visitors itself functions as an argument for the sanctity of *śaṅku tīrttam*. Says Vedagiri, the priest of Kāḷiyamman̲-temple in Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil: "The water in this *kuḷam* is supposed to be auspicious water [*puṇṇiya tīrttam*] [...] I have even seen people from your country and abroad coming to the *kuḷam*. They take water from the *kuḷam* and they sprinkle it on themselves." The most spectacular visitors of *śaṅku tīrttam* were elephants. Turai Guruswamy and other elders remember having seen them decades back. They allegedly came all the way from Kanchipuram. At *śaṅku*

tīrttam's southwest corner, there is a ramp that is said to have served for the elephants to comfortably access the reservoir.

śaṅku tīrttam is no exception; the same pattern can be found in many other *kuḷam*s that are believed to be special: something extraordinary must be said to have happened with them; they are contained in one unusual way or the other. Shulman tells the following story: "[A]t Puṣpagiri ("Flower-Hill") a drop of *amṛta* fell from Garuda's pot into the temple tank, whose waters then granted everyone immortality. Piramā was alarmed and Narada told Hanumat to drop a hill on the tank, but the hill simply floated on the water like a flower (hence, the name of the shrine)."[575] The *kuḷam* of Strimushnam, one of the main Vaiṣṇavite temples in Tamil Nadu, is said to have been founded by drops of water that spilled off Viṣṇu's body on his return from the depth of the ocean from where he – in his form of a boar – had saved the world from being drowned by the demon Hiranyaksha.[576] In other *kuḷam*s, like in *śaṅku tīrttam* of Tirukkalukundram, sages or saints are believed to have taken a bath or demons were killed.[577]

In the same way, the ocean is dreaded by many Indians unless it is made safe. Whereas on ordinary days they would hardly step deeper than up to the knees into the ocean at Mamallapuram, the picture changes drastically during the annual mahamakam festival.

> Before sunrise of the full moon day in *māci* month 1999, Viṣṇu in its local form as Aṭivārakaperumāḷ is taken in a procession to the beach, along with his wife, two Karuṭas as his vehicle and Murukaṉ with his two wives. There a procession of Viṣṇu as Yōkarāmaccantiracuvāmi from nearby Padavedu joins them and all of them are placed some metres in front of the water, facing it. A palanquin with a sacred disk [*cakkarattāḷvar*] that fulfils similar functions as the trident in Śaivaite rituals (see chapter ten) is swiftly taken to the water and returned to the beach. As soon as the young men carrying the palanquin touch the water, the enormous clout of devotees follows suit: they dive, men and women bathe gaily in the water, assured that nothing will happen to them. After a while, the gods take a short dip in the sea as well and take leave. As soon as they are gone, the beach empties instantly. Only much later in the day it is populated again – by tourists from abroad who bathe without fear.

In Puri and in Rameswaram, bathing is believed to be safe all the time. This can be accounted for by the sacred disk that is present there throughout. Consultants, such as the "scholar of the holy water" [*tīrtta paṇṭitar*] Kedur Raman Shastri and his colleague S. Subramaniyam of Rameswaram, argue that the island of Rameswaram is itself the disc that pacifies the water. They are full of stories to prove why the eleven wells and *kuḷam*s inside the temple of Rāmanātacuvāmi and the eleven wells and *kuḷam*s surrounding it are holy. They guide worshippers to them, murmuring holy verses over the water and sprinkling their customers with it. In fact, the sea bordering Rameswaram is so shallow that one can easily wade far into it without even wetting one's belly. In Tirucentur as well, bathing in the ocean is believed to be safe as god Murukaṉ is understood to contain the water. Tirucentur is one of this god's six major shrines in Tamil Nadu.[578] Kulke relates the story of the ocean having gone wild to

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[575] Shulman 1980: 55.
[576] Garstin 1878: 432. On the story of the boar, see Carr 1984: 84.
[577] Shulman 1980: 181 on the buffalo-headed demon Mahiṣa whom Devī conquered in the cakratīrtha at Rameswaram; afterwards she filled the *kuḷam* with nectar.
[578] Reiniche 1979: 38.

the point of murdering a Brahmin. In a rage to tame the sea, Śiva burns it, drying out the ocean and releasing it only after all the gods have assembled at the beach to take a bath.[579]

For medical treatment [abhyanga], according to the AyurvEta, the water has to be made fit. This can be achieved, e.g., by storing it in a copper vessel for one night.[580] As a safety measure, many people prefer drinking "hot water" [*vennīr*]. This does not mean water that is boiled for several minutes so that it could be considered as rather sterile. Only energy is added so that the water is heated to be little more than lukewarm. To make a salty well taste sweet, five to six little bunches of leaves from the emblic myrobalan tree should be put into the jar [Tamil: *nellikkaṭṭai maram* /Latin: *Emblica officinalis*], according to the wife of Viraragavaccariya Aiyeṅkar of Kottimangalam.

Likewise, rivers are not regarded as bountiful unless they are ritually contained or enriched by adding something to them. This does not have to be nectar or demon's blood. Just another variety of water is enough: one of the most important pilgrimage places at the Ganges,[581] Allahabad, is marked by the confluence of the Ganges with the Yamuna river and the mythical stream Saraswathi. Similarly, the confluence of the water of the Bay of Bengal and the Pacific Ocean at Rameswaram is seen to be bountiful, as is the mixture of an odd number of different waters in general. For certain ceremonies*,* "*muṉṉīr*" is used. Literally, this means "three waters" and denotes a mixture of well water, the water from the sea and water from the river (along with cow urine and then turmeric). A Kaṇakkupiḷḷai family of Tirukkalukundram that has just completed a *vēṇṭutal* ceremony explains:

> "Usually the water from the river is believed to be feminine, it symbolises women. The sea is considered to be male. None of them can be used in isolation, yet at the same time a combination of these is also not ideal. So we mix it with [water from] a third [source: the well]. In our Hindu custom, any of these rituals will revolve around odd numbers: 1, 3, 5, 7 and so on, these are very significant and have an important function. Hence, when we have a mixture of sea and river water, to make it powerful we add a small quantity of well water so that there are three waters contained in it. This process of purification gives the water more power and strengthens its efficacy."

The three water sources may also be a *kuḷam*, a river and the ocean, or a *kuḷam*, the ocean and a well; however, *ēri* water is normally not used. The well-known myth of goddess Ganga [*kaṅkā*] coming down onto the earth is basically a story of her wildness being contained. She is swallowed by the sage Jahnu and, most importantly, Śiva catches her and tethers her safely in his dreadlocks.[582] The venerated pilgrimage places in the upper part of the river's 2,700 kilometres are "safeguarded" by Śiva (Gangadhīśwarar in Gangotri) and Viṣṇu (Bhadrinarayanan in Bhadrinath). The Kaveri river is contained by god Vināyakar who sniffs some water of her in his trunk and blows it out again before she, who made the worlds tremble when she poured down on them, is in a position to revive Indra's Garden in Cikazi.[583] Furthermore, she is married to the saint Agastya /Akattiya.[584] The nine waterfalls

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[579] Kulke 1970: 29.

[580] Current Anthropology vol 40, 1999 (special issue): 43 – 66.

[581] Site of the Kumbh Mela which takes place once in twelve years. Last time, in January 2001, 27.5 million devotees took part (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 27/ 28,01,2001 and 24 /25,02,2001).

[582] A different reading would be that goddess Kaṅkā "comes upon" Śiva very much like a malign spirit [*pēy*] "comes upon" a human being, as has been described above. Nabokov 2000: 74 writes that malign spirits typically catch their victims by their locks.

[583] Shulman 1980: 66.

[584] Shulman 1980: 271.

in Courtallam, Tirunelveli District, also famed for the healing qualities of their water, are presided over by Śiva as Tirukkuṟṟālanātar whose temple is believed to have been founded by the sage Agastya /Akattiya.[585]

Feldhaus cites examples of rituals that are performed on the banks of rivers and argues: "[They] imply a desire to appease the river and to urge it to cause no harm. In these contexts, rivers are seen as dangerous, another important aspect of their femininity."[586] Underlining the above cited statement of the priest, Feldhaus argues that rivers are believed to be female whereas the ocean is thought of as male.[587] Likewise, Frēdērique Apffel-Marglin observes: "Water is associated with women".[588] Jutta Jain-Neubauer notes that inside stepwells of Gujarat there are especially many and heavily frequented shrines for goddesses.[589]

Many representations of water are indeed female: whereas Varuṇa, the male "Lord of water", seems to pertain more to rain and the ocean, almost all Indian rivers have female names and they are sometimes depicted as women in statues or on pictures. In some myths, water takes over the task of a womb, for example, in the birth of god Murukaṉ or in the myth of Manu who offers ghee, sour milk, whey and curds into the water, and, in a year, a woman is born with whom he begets the human race.[590]

Furthermore, women usually cater for their families' water. They bail it from the nearest *kuḷam*, well or tap and carry it home on their hips. Since the decline of the institution of washermen (see chapter eleven), housewives have gathered at *kuḷam*s and wells to do the laundry. They soak the clothes, scrub the heaviest dirt out, beat them on stone slabs, rinse them, beat them again, rinse them and spread them out on the grass to dry. This takes at least one hour and a half as each piece of cloth should be soaked at least for one hour, explain various housewives. It is a time that, though not spare or free, is an opportunity to enjoy the companionship with other women. "[W]ells offer women a social connectedness not readily available in their homes. [...] At a well, a young woman can let off steam, express joy, and show her jewelry – which in India represents wealth – and laugh out of earshot of her mother-in-law", writes Morna Livingston.[591] The wells and *kuḷam*s of my study area do not play minor roles.

Many rituals performed at water places are restricted to women. Male informants usually have no idea which rituals their wives are performing there and why. Some of them are linked to fertility, such as the depicted visit at the nymphs' pools in Tiruttani. As for the aforementioned *tula snāṉam /kaṅka snāṉam* ritual in late autumn, I discussed the meaning with a group of Kurukkaḷ women of Tirukkalukundram. One of them explains that if they stand in water and greet the rising sun with holy verses [*mantiram*], the power [*cakti*] of the sun will come upon them. Another woman said thanks to performing this particular ritual, Kaṅkai will grant her liberation [*mōṭcam*]. A third women argues that her requests [*vēṇṭi*] will be fulfilled. Obviously the ritual is thought to be auspicious in every respect.

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[585] See also Reiniche 1979: 38 with further examples.
[586] Feldhaus 1995: 44.
[587] Feldhaus 1995, e.g., pp. 59, 41.
[588] Apffel-Marglin 1977: 56.
[589] Jain-Neubauer 1981.
[590] Shulman 1980: 57.
[591] Livingston 2002: 177.

A rather widespread ritual links wells, water, women and cows: married women whose husbands are still alive wash their cows and themselves, including their hair, and smear turmeric and dots of vermilion on the cow, the well and themselves. Some women also apply turmeric and vermilion on a margosa tree [Tamil: *vēppamaram* / Hindi: *neem* /Latin: *Azadirachta indica*] if one happens to be at hand near the well. As a rule, they should do that every Friday. "The presence of a cow makes the water sacred" writes Jain-Neubauer, quoting the Paraskara-grhya-sutra.[592]

Morna Livingston remarks in her study on Rajasthan and Gujarat: "In their connection to water and fertility, stepwells lay at the far edge of Brahmin jurisdiction, contradicting the Brahmin's male-oriented world."[593] In practice in my study area, that scope of contradicting and eluding is strictly limited. Firstly, the rituals seem to be on the wane. In my study area, only about a third of the wells I visited displayed the big spot of turmeric with three parallel lines and dots of vermilion that are characteristic for that ritual; hence, only a few women follow the rule that they should worship at the wells on Fridays. Among those who observe it, not everybody by far does it regularly or has an idea of the ritual's meaning.

> When I visit the compound which has developed behind the antique building of the Karunanandasami congregation in Tirukkalukundram on 13,10,1999, its round well bears unmistakably the marks of a Friday *pūjai*. On one of the lines of turmeric, sticks a fresh jasmine blossom. Chandra, who lives in the compound together with her son and her blind mother, claims to have made the marks and the concomitant worship. As a widow, she would theoretically not be eligible to perform such a ritual. Obviously she does not ascribe too much significance to it; when I ask her which god it is meant for, she ponders a while and finally comes forth with "Kaṅkaiyammaṉ". Her neighbour, Sujatha Ravi, disagrees and holds that it is meant for Laṭcumi who is thought to bestow benefits on them.

Several of my consultants observe the ritual only on special days: P. Parvati of Irumbuli and her neighbours, for example, say they observe it only in cittirai month, on full moon days, during the *poṅkal* festival and at the lunar constellation [*titi*] called *kārittikai*. Chinnammal Gurukkal of Tirukkalukundram states that she follows it but in October /November [*aippaci* month]. She explains that she murmurs holy verses called *lalītā cācaṉam* while doing it and that only women who own cows perform that *pūjai*. Now fewer and fewer households of the area own cows, she gave up her own cows because the family has nobody [*āḷ illai*] to take care of them.

Secondly, women have to do with water for reproductive purposes only. Their connectedness with the wet element comes to an end when fertility in the productive sense is at stake: women neither interfere in the irrigation of paddy fields nor in the management of *ēri*s.

Thirdly, the pattern of thought that appears to be pertinent in the case of water reminds one of the concept of "energy" or "sacred power" [*cakti* or *śakti*] with which various authors have dealt.[594] In ancient Tamil texts, a (sacred) energy called *aṇaṅku* can be identified. Like water, this energy is believed to be formless and associated with women. It must be contained to become a positive force. If

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[592] Jain-Neubauer 1981: 8. Feldhaus 1995: 46 mentions a ritual in which devotees sacrifice little cow shaped figurines at the source of the river Godāvarī. Also Reiniche 1979: 19 and Jain-Neubauer 1981: 5 point to the role that cows play in the iconography and in rituals that are connected with bodies of water.
[593] Livingston 2002: 31.
[594] E.g., Egnor 1980, Wadley 1980, Fuller 1992.

uncontained, it is said to be capable of leading to disaster: uncontrolled energy confers diseases, especially small pox, and it can burn cities to ashes, such as the energy of chaste kannaki ignited the city Madurai in the Tamil epic Manimekalai. One way of containing or controlling the energy of an unmarried woman, for example, is to arrange her marriage. That is, to have a husband control her and offer her the possibility to channel her powers by bearing children.[595] According to Marriott, power [*śakti*] is needed to make transformations between what he calls grosser and subtler substance-codes, hence, to alter the valuation of a thing or a person – just as a person may become polluted by contact with polluted water.[596]

Yet there are two important differences between this concept of "(sacred) energy" and water: first of all, "(sacred) energy" is a concept of an invisible, intangible, not measurable force, whereas water is concrete and palpable. Secondly, water is not hot, which *śakti* is understood to be. It has no specific temperature, just as it has no form, no colour, no smell, no distinct sound. Manu, in an effort to classify the qualities of the five elements of Hinduism [*pañcapūtam*], of which water is one, holds that water is the element that bears the quality of taste.[597] Yet my consultants in the study area were clear that water changes its taste according to its container. Thus it does have a taste, but no taste of its own. Water is, consequently, a substance without a quality. Only at first sight, does this seem to contradict Daniel's observation that "a qualityless substance is an impossibility in the Tamil world view".[598] Because water acquires as easily as no other substance the qualities of its container, in practice, it always has some quality, it just has no intrinsic one. Water (at least in the conditions of South India where it never freezes to ice) immediately adjusts to any form, and it attains every other quality of its container, such as temperature, taste, colour or sometimes even smell.[599] This makes water the best and most easily available transmitter possible.

Firstly, water is believed to differ from place to place and to take over the nature of the soil –Sampath of Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar calls this faculty *icaivu*, that means "harmony", "eligibility" or "appropriation". In turn, water confers its acquired character or quality [*kuṇam*] to the person who lives there and drinks the water.[600] M. Sankaralingam of Tirukkalukundram-Nalvarkoyilpettai explains that the more good water you drink, the better your character becomes. In areas in which there is plentiful and sweet water, the residents are more creative than in dry places with brackish water; his example is the deltaic region of the Kaveri from which stem as many celebrated musicians as from no other region. Ramachandran, a Brahmin of Tirukkalukundram-Kanakkoyilpettai, says that the quality of water depends on the ecotype – the five *tiṇai* introduced in classical Tamil literature – and on the type of soil:[601]

- In the vicinity of mountains [*kuṟiñci*, *mullai*], the water is known to be plentiful and good; pepper grows well there.

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[595] Dubianski 2000: xiv and 6 – 17 discusses the contributions of Brenda Beck, T. Burrow, George Hart, V. S. Rajam and Kamil Zvelebil to the understanding of *aṇaṅku*.

[596] Marriott 1976: 128.

[597] Manu 1991: cap. I, 76 – 78. According to him, ether has the quality of sound, light that of form, earth that of smell and wind that of touch, besides it is the vehicle of all odours.

[598] Daniel 1984: 104.

[599] Feldhaus 1995: 180 retells the Narmadā Māhātmya. In this context, water is described as a boon because it "can take on the characteristics [svarūp] of whatever substance it is mixed with".

[600] Daniel 1984: 62 hints at that. Fuller 1992: 128 writes: "There should always be harmony between the deities and the population and territory that they protect and rule over, as well as, compatibility between the people and their land, whose qualities are ingested by eating food grown in village fields and drinking water drawn from village wells."

[601] Zvelebil 1973: 15.

- In agricultural tracts [*marutam*] the water would be clayey,
- at the seashore [*neytal*] the water is salty and the soil allows sledges to grow and bulrush that are used for weaving mats and bamboo.
- About the quality of water in the desert [*pālai*], Ramachandran keeps quiet.

Even in a place as small as Tirukkalukundram, the quality of water differs, he declares. It is best near the hill where it tastes sweet, clayey in Desamukipettai, and salty in Kanakkoyilpettai where he lives. In general, water can either be sweet [*iṉippu*], salty [*uppu*] or tasteless [*cavuru*]. Water thus helps to physically establish a relationship between people who live in a particular locality.

Secondly, water can serve to transmit the qualities of the family. This happens, for example, in a ritual that is believed to transmit the properties of a lineage [*kōttiram*] from one generation to the next. It is performed in the eighth month of pregnancy of a woman for her first child. The husband wraps crushed seeds of banyan tree [*ālamaram*] and pipal tree [*aracamaram*] in a small piece of a silk sari like a baby's comforter, dips it in water or milk (in non-Brahmin contexts, the fluid is called *mutunīr*, literally "water of the back", in Brahminical contexts, *cīmantam*) and drips it into the nose or onto the spine of the pregnant woman.[602]

Thirdly, water that has rinsed idols of gods and goddesses is said to transmit their grace. Therefore, water that results from unctions [*apiṣēkam*] can be collected and brought to the dear ones at home as a gift from the gods [*piracātam*]. In Vaiṣṇavite temples, a specially prepared water is used for that purpose. It is mixed with crushed cloves, green camphor and basil leaves [*tuḷaci*] (other recipes include green camphor, rose water, cloves and cardamom). The priest sprinkles the holy water over the devotees and distributes spoonfuls of it to them, usually in a refined gesture that resembles the *kaṭakā mukha* gesture of the dance Bharatanatyam. They receive it in their hands (many cup them as a dancer in the *puṣpapuṭa* gesture), murmur words of thanks, swallow the water and smear the last drops onto their heads and necks in order to take in the divinity.

Informants like T. Anbucheziyan, who tend to a worldview that they call "scientific," offer a materialistic explanation of the unction water's efficacy: they clarify that the idols of the gods are magnets or that beneath them is gold. The water takes up their vibrations and transmits them further. N. Ilangovan, son of the priest of Tirukkalukundram's Celliyammaṉ-temple, explains, along with P. Govindarajan, an itinerant healer from Andhra Pradesh, that the idols of *ammaṉ*s are not made of stone but that they consist of a mixture of nine different poisons or medicinal herbs [*mūlikai*] that binds the minerals. Whenever the priest pours water over the idol, some of its ingredients dissolve. The water transmits them, so it is thought to cure sore eyes, as well as, small pox. It is a panacea. It helps both the *ammaṉ* and the worshippers to be immune against diseases, says Govindarajan and concludes: "That is one reason why, in Hindu temples, you would come across the holy water [*tīrttam*]. That is why the unction [*apiṣēkam*] is considered very important."[603]

Fourthly, water's qualification to be an ideal transmitter is made use of in the study area, as well as, presumably in South India as a whole, in a wide variety of rituals in which pots [*kalacam*; in certain

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[602] This ritual varies widely between families but it seems to be observed most religiously in Brahmin families; usually it is the women who pour the water on their pregnant relative and sometimes milk is used instead of water. In one instance, the women told me it was the milk of a female relative.

[603] On unction see Good 2001: 501 – 2 with further references.

contexts also called *karakam, kumpam*] are involved.[604] The water that the pot contains may stem from different sources so as to enhance its markedness. It may also just be scooped from the nearest *kuḷam* or well. It may be mixed with camphor, basil leaves, sacred ash, turmeric, limes or other ingredients. It may be fetched from a particular source and, in a water carrying ritual, transported over long distances. The mound of the pot is often closed with a coconut (as "head") that sits on mango leaves (as "hair"), girdled with a fine web of threads (as "nerves") and adorned with dots and stripes of turmeric and vermilion paste, reminiscing a complete human body. The pot itself, which is always of the round bottomed variety that is esteemed for its stability, may consist of ceramic, brass, copper, aluminium or other metals or alloys thereof. Just plastic seems to be inappropriate, at least I have never seen the ritual performed with such a device, and glass or porcelain pots are not usually offered on the market. The important part is that a priest sits or stands in front of the arrangement of the pot and some form of fire and chants holy verses that are thought to lend the water a special, acoustic form, thereby consecrating it.

Depending on the priest, the verses and the occasion, the kind of consecration differs. As described in chapter ten, in request making ceremonies, a devotee can serve as receptacle for a wide variety of deities that "come down upon" him, yet it is clear that it will be a deity that is connected with the family and mostly that which was invoked. Similarly, all kinds of deities and beings can be invoked into the water in the pot: in some instances, Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada or Krishna, Sindhu and Kaveri, the seven rivers that are deemed holy in India are called into the water in the receptacle. S. N. Shanmukam of Tirukkalukundram remarks:

> **S. N. Shanmukam:** Physically it is not possible to bring the water from Kaveri or Ganges at that point of time, but through these mantras it is believed that we invoke the presence of those sacred rivers in the pot and get the blessings of the god. When this water is sprinkled over you, it is believed that you will get rid of all kind of ailments and disorders that you are suffering from.
> **Bettina:** Do you believe in that?
> **S. N. Shanmukam:** Yes, I do believe in that! Even if that water is just sprinkled onto us, even if it falls on us, it need not be consumed, even if it touches us, I feel it is very, very important. We believe in that!

On other occasions, local gods or goddesses are thought to reside in the vessels. They are used in almost all festivals, irrespective of whether they pertain to the Big Temple or take place outside permanent temple structures at all, such as in request making ceremonies or in the case of the above described ritual for Aṅkāḷamman̠ in Oragadam's *ēri*. Says, for example, Vedagiri, the priest of Kāḷiyamman̠ in Tirukkalukundram-Rudrankoyil about her procession: "When we fetch water in such a way [in a pot /*kalacam* decorated with coconut etc.], it is believed that we are fetching the goddess herself and not water. So the *amman̠* is carried around in the form of water and is taken to her temple and poured on the deity in an unction [*apiṣēkam*]." Obviously the pot filled with water is on par with the deity, and it is easier to carry than her stone effigy. The very practical reasons for instigating the gods in containers come to the fore in the following newspaper item:

> "Rameswaram, 30.3.2000. 'Balasthabanam' (the power of various deities within the temple

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[604] In South Indian rituals, pots may not only contain water, but also lamps made of rice flower, fire or other items. On ceremonial pots, see Meyer 1986 with further references.

premises was being brought in to small 'kalasams' [pots] before starting the renovation work) to 26 vimanams [divine vehicles] of Ramanathaswamy temple at Rameswaram was performed with religious fervour and piety on Thursday.[605]"

The powers of 26 divine vehicles contained in two small pots – this was, in sheer numbers, even outdone by the uncles of Venkat Gurukkal during the ceremony that incorporated the teenager into the community of priests and conferred him a sacred thread [*pūṇūl*]. His father, along with nine of his uncles, sat down an entire evening and chanted vedic verses in front of a pot [*utakacāntijepam*]. By this, they said, they invoked the three main gods Piramā, Viṣṇu and *rauttirarkaḷ*, seven stars and two lunar constellations and 300 million [30 crores] deities [*teivarkaḷ*] into the water.

The evening culminated in emptying the pot over Venkat and transferring the powers of the deities to him.[606] Then he and his parents took a gulp of the residual water from the vessel. "Now he is 50 percent Brahmin", commented his uncle, Sundaresa Gurukkal. Then everybody went to rest. A few hours later, the ceremony continued to complete Venkat's latter Brahmin half. As the uncles and their families had travelled from far away places all over Tamil Nadu, the ritual served also to assemble the family and the active participation in singing vedic verses was welcomed: the more Brahmins gather to sing and the more devoted they are, the more powerful the water becomes. The same logic can be discerned in the high number of priests who participate in special temple festivals, such as the principal unction [*kumpapiṣēkam*] of temples. In that of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple in summer 1999, on three consecutive days, 151 Brahmins were reportedly participating. They took turns in chanting; each "shift" comprised of three to four hours in the morning and three to four hours in the evening. Each one of the 108 pots required its specific verses. At the end, the water from the pots was poured in an illustrious ceremony onto the entrance tower of the Big Temple. In contrast, during the principal unction of god Murukaṉ's temple in Irumbuli on 31,1,1999, only six pots, one priest and the presence of a raucous holy man from Chennai [called "*cuvāmiji*"] had to suffice. Accordingly, Irumbuli's Murukaṉ is believed to be less powerful than the gods of Tirukkalukundram's Big Temple. That one is contained in a much wider social context: it includes numerous pious people from Tirukkalukundram who donate money for the pot ceremony, as well as, well-wishers from other parts of Tamil Nadu; thus, if the "whole" that a temple refers to (or the public that it creates), is understood to be delineated by those who spend money for it (as *potumakkaḷ*), this "whole", in the case of the Big Temple, claims to comprise large parts of Tamil Nadu if not the entire world. It also connects the locality with the state-level government since the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department also has its role to play.

On the occasion of the car festival in April [*cittirai uṟcavam*], 32 water pots are kept in the temple on Tirukkalukundram's hill. Also in the nine-day festival in autumn [*navarāttiri*], nine big containers full of water are stored in a separate room. They are worshipped daily, and on the last day of the festival, their water is used to anoint the gods' permanent statues. During the festival days, the water is believed to change its quality and accumulate divinity. Again in this case, explanations apply that their proponents call "scientific", such as that of Sampath, a Brahmin of Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar, who explains that during the days of the festivals, the content of minerals and ozone in the water improves. This kind of reasoning reduces the consecration to purely materialist processes, yet it tallies with the understanding of water as an ideal transmitter. I have not come across any unction that

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[605] The Hindu, 31,03,2000.
[606] Fuller 1984: 29 describes a similar use of water in the consecration of new priests for the Mīṉākṣi-temple in Madurai.

would have taken place without water that has been consecrated in a pot – humans do not anoint gods with running water.[607] My innocent question why the priests, instead of dredging heavy pots, do not facilitate their work by rinsing the gods with the help of water from a hose, let eyebrows rise in disgust. Not the water or the pot are important, I was made to understand, but the combination thereof, the consecrated water. Anthony Good notes that even in very sophisticated unction ceremonies, gods always receive the last rinse with consecrated water.[608]

Theoretically, the chants and invocations would not need to be performed in front of water pots; the priests could sit down directly in front of the temple to be consecrated or the neophyte to be initiated and sing. Thus they could do away with the medium water. But in practice, water is always part of the ceremony. Especially Brahmin informants explain that whenever rituals are carried out, fire, water, earth, air and ether have to be present, that is, the ceremony has to be contained in the five elements [*pañcapūtam*].

Yet this alone does not make for the use of water as transmitter. One reason could be the value of water for the performance of ceremonies. It has a palpable reach and helps to mark the event better. After a lengthy cycle of preparations (in principal unctions [*kumpapiṣēkam*], this lasts up to 48 consecutive days) in which the water is consecrated, its being poured over the temple's entrance tower is a clearly defined next step, a grand event that attracts people from within and without the locality. Hardly anyone of them could spend his or her time sitting for 48 days next to chanting priests if the consecration were not concentrated or contained on one single date. Furthermore, more than verses merely murmured into the direction of the stones of the temple, the water can be sprinkled on the attendants of the ceremony. This tangibly involves them and links them both to the divinity and to each other in the public of believers.

> In the principal unction of Tirukkalukundram's village goddess Celliyamman, on March, 16th, 2000, the priests at first carried about 200 small water pots onto the roof of the temple and poured the content on it. Pious people of the locality had donated them at the cost of 101 rupees each. The water inside them had been consecrated during the previous days along with that in 27 bigger pots, each of which represents a different deity. Then the priests placed those pots, which were decorated to also outwardly represent the goddess, onto their heads. Accompanied by the thrilling music first of a band of Paṟaiyars who stood outside the temple precincts, then by a temple-clarinet and drum [*nātasvaram* and *tavil*] inside the temple, they walked around the shrine, staggering under the weight of the pots. Twice they stumbled – the goddess had "come upon" them. Immediately dozens of helpful hands darted out to hold them and keep the pots safe in their places. Naresan, the most eminent priest, dipped bunches of leaves in the water and sprinkled the crowd with it. A girl who is known to be receptive for the goddess started quivering and crying, then she fainted. The sun had arrived at its peak of the day. When the priests finally emptied the last and most voluminous pot onto the temple entrance, the ceremony culminated. A considerable portion of the water was splashed on the crowd who had assembled for the ceremony. As in other principal unctions, the believers avidly reached out for the water. Some tried to catch it in small containers to carry it home. Along with the water, the goddess "came onto" several women who would have collapsed had

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[607] In some cases, "natural" unction may occur in the form of idols that are posited beneath little streams of water; one such arrangement can be found at the east side of Tirukkalukundram's hilltop, an area that is accessible only with guts and a predilection to climb. Yet these are rare special cases.
[608] Good 2001: 502.

they not been held by the densely packed throng and by helpful bystanders.

Furthermore, the medium water might be used in ceremonies (instead of consecrating the idol by merely chanting directly in front of it) as it attracts, contains and controls the divinity better than any other agent. Manoharan, the barber of Tirukkalukundram holds that newly carved idols of village goddesses [ammaṉs] are soaked for 48 days in water. K. K. C. Lakshmi Narasimhan, Brahminical priest of Kulipantandalam, a village between Tirukkalukundram and the seashore, reports of wooden idols that are kept at the bottom of kuḷams (such as in that of Varatarājāperumāḷ's temple in Kanchipuram). This, on one hand, preserves and controls them. On the other hand, it enhances the divine qualities of the kuḷam's water; only every 42nd year is the water said to be let out of the kuḷam, making the wooden images visible. Brahmin informants and those of their entourage usually emphasise the cooling aspect of the unction. This may be a side effect: "cool" is normally another expression of "contained", maintaining a proper form and order. It pertains especially to setting limits to the above mentioned energy "śakti". Hence, a "cooled" village goddess is unlikely to cause harm by her exceeding heat. The pot visualises this containment.

If the pot can at all be likened to a womb (which several authors suggest[609]), this might be due to the similar function for which both serve, that is to contain something which can be imbued with many meanings and which is thus further developed before set free. Until recently, the pot as it is used in the mentioned rituals was surely the most widespread article in Tamil households. Only with the advance of plastic vessels (which often have the form of ceramic pots although the round bottom does not make sense in that case) and the advent of the municipal water supply in pipes has it attained a tinge of antiquity, of something out of the ordinary and, thus, special. The physical container of the water is important, yet the containment through other factors is equally so.

Water is considered such a good transmitter that it is thought to receive not only gods who are usually sheltered in temples and adored in the hope of benefits, but also beings that are dreaded as purely malevolent. T. N. Kannan, one of Tirukkalukundram's exorcists, uses it regularly in his work.

> T. N. Kannan is usually clad in a saffron coloured loincloth, has two yellow ribbons at his wrists and a bunch of holy chains covering his waist and sits cross-legged on a tiger's skin. A highway of ants passes beneath him and diagonally across the dark hut, his practice, at the northern edge of Tirukkalukundram's Big ēri. He does his work while other customers wait inside and outside and look on. For example, Gomathi, a schoolgirl, sits facing him and answers his questions, detailing her problems. Kannan takes notes in a large book, writes verses on a tiny brass sheet, folds it and puts it into a capsule that is attached to a long ribbon which is reddened with vermilion. It is to be a talisman [tāyattu]. He ties it to a little effigy of goddess Cāmuṇṭīcuvarī. Then his helper hands him a tumbler full of water. He sips a mouthful and places the container in front of himself. Resting his arm on a post and fingering a rosary-like chain of beads, he meditates a while, yawning heartily. Gomathi watches him with awe and keeps silent. After a while, Kannan lights two pieces of camphor, places one in front of the effigy with the talisman and the second one on the water between himself and the girl and continues to mutter his verses. After a while, Kannan leads Gomatha out of the hut to a stone opposite of some holy pictures and pours the water of the tumbler over her. She giggles, which the other customers comment. She is made to sit still and asked not to wipe the water out of

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[609] For example, Shulman 1980: 65; Meyer 1986: 235.

her eyes. Kannan sprinkles some water in front of her and gives her the remainder to drink. Then he makes the gesture of taking something out of her head. He murmurs names of gods and various verses and touches her repeatedly. She gets up, stretches like after a good nap and looks jolly. Kannan ties the talisman around her neck, hands her the final gift of the gods [*piracātam*] along with many prescriptions. Finally her parents pay and walk to the bus stand.

T. N. Kannan explains: "Water is one of the components of the five great powers, the *pañcapūta*. It absorbs all the evil things which are present above the earth or in the sky." He points to the camphor flame on the water: "This is the flame [*jōti*]. [...] It is put in water because it attracts all the evil spirits. And once it is in the water, we perform a rite [*pirāṉa piratiṣṭai*], that is we do away with the spirit [*āvi*] [which afflicts the customer]. Then it will not harm anyone. The person will recover." The talisman is, like the camphor, placed in the tumbler with water: "It is just like charging a battery, when the talisman is weak, we have to charge it." The belief that water can attract malign beings as well is reflected in the practical advise for those who suffer from nightmares: place a tumbler of water next to your bed so the evil spirits will go in there instead of coming upon yourself.

If water is understood to be the ideal transmitter, it becomes clear why it is such a powerful marker of divisions: same as water can easily attain and transmit divinity, it can also acquire and transmit pollution and bad or dangerous qualities. This is why it is feared as harbinger of diseases or why some shun it as transmitter of other people's sins[610] and why many Indians refrain from water that the wrong person has touched – to the point of the abject gesture of pouring water from some height into the other's opened hands, so as to safely avoid any contact. Water is the medium that makes caste hierarchy and Untouchability visible in many ways.[611] To a certain degree, this is true of many substances, but for water it is extremely so. The previous chapters have shown how water reservoirs are kept clean by separating them in terms of usages and people who have access to them. Safeguarding purity by separation is topical in South Indian culture. Shulman notes about the shrine of goddess Mīṉākṣi in Madurai: "[T]the sacred power is controlled, and in this way made auspicious and accessible to the pilgrim, while its separation from the outside world creates a zone of purity."[612] Schematically, this holds for water, as well: control or containment is important to make water auspicious, and separating it bewares of unwanted contact. So some water places remain pure at the expense of others that receive the pollution.

This may have contributed to the shape of settlements: wherever in India water is abundant, such as in Kerala, deltaic Bengal or on the Himalaya foothills, houses tend to be built separately from each other, spread quite evenly across the landscape.[613] The same holds true for newly developing middle-class neighbourhoods in towns that are individually supplied with water by pipes. In contrast, wherever water is scarce, settlements are prone to be nucleated, assembling at reservoirs or wells. Yet still they are usually not big and compact but dispersed; they form numerous hamlets. Each of these hamlets avails of its own water sources.

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[610] Perhaps they follow the recommendation of Manu 1991: cap. 4, 201: "He should never bathe in tanks of water that belong to someone else, for by so bathing he is smeared by a portion of the bad deeds of the one who made the tank."

[611] On water as particularising agent see Marriott 1976: 111 – 12.

[612] Shulman 1980: 193.

[613] Fuller 1992: 129.

The caste distinctions laid bare in the usage of water permeate the entire social setup of the study area and are of utmost complexity. Not only are Untouchables kept afar from the water sources of castes whose members consider themselves to be higher; also the water use among those others discloses deep differences.

> A Vaiṣṇavite Brahmin of Oragadam states that he accepts water from the priest [Bhattacāriyar] of the local temple of god Rāma as a divine gift [*piracātam*] after an unction. But he would never take even a tumbler full of water from the same priest in profane contexts. Though members of castes like Iṭaiyar or Nāyakkar consider the priest to be a Brahmin, as well, the Vaiṣṇavite Brahmin wavers a bit when I ask him for his opinion: "Yes, yes, the Bhattacāriyar... Yes, they are real Brahmins..." Nevertheless, he says he would never have dreamt of marrying one of his four daughters to a man of the Bhattacāriyar group, nor even of taking food in one of their houses. The same holds for Kurukkaḷs [the Bhattacāriyars' equivalent in Śaivism]. One could even judge from their outward appearance that they are some steps lower, he argues, and when I suggest "because they are darker?" he smiles approvingly.

A senior Brahmin lady of Tirukkalukundram-Teacher's Nagar recalls the demeanour of a group of Brahmins related to the Big Temple of Chidambaram. She met them when she was visiting that place on a tour and needed a cup of water: at first, they just shrugged at her demand. Then they wanted to pour the water in the above mentioned gesture into her cupped hands. When she asked for a tumbler, they put a ceramic cup [*compu*; considered to be more lowly than modern metal cups] on the floor in front of her, avoiding any possible touch. After she had drunken, they cleaned the cup thoroughly and put it aside, obviously considering it no longer fit for their own use. Even after many years, the lady is embarrassed and enraged about that behaviour towards her, who is herself a Brahmin. Chapter nine has shown how contentious the biggest *kuḷam* in Oragadam is between Paṟaiyars and Otaiyars, Nāyakkars and Iṭaiyars.

In that sense, water is structurally opposed to gold. Whereas water is maximally qualityless, adapts to its container and transmits its character; gold is maximally inert. Water is always good or bad *for* something, but gold has an intrinsic value. So unimportant is its form or the value of the forging work, in comparison to that of the material, that many jewellers in Tamil Nadu do not even charge for giving it a shape. Water is the marker of differences in caste status, almost irrespective of the wealth of the respective person. Gold, by contrast, is always acceptable and by everybody, caste no bar. Yet it marks differences in class.

Jutta Jain-Neubauer mentions the consecration ceremony as described in the Agnipurana and concludes: "The pond or well being the receptacle for water receives through this ceremony the same sacredness as the water itself".[614] I have argued in this chapter that it is the other way round: it is the strong containment of *kuḷam*s, their enhanced containment that bestows sacredness on its water. Water itself is neither holy nor bad; as it is maximally free of qualities, it is an ideal transmitter of good, as well as, of bad qualities.

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[614] Jain-Neubauer 1982: 8.

14. Water reservoirs and energy

Power or (sacred) energy has, in the previous chapter, been shown to bear conceptual similarities to water as it is understood in my study area. I will argue in this chapter that today, the input of energy is the greatest challenge to water reservoirs. However, I do not refer here to energy as a numinous power but to a very profane form of it, that is, to electricity and oil. This chapter sketches what happens with water reservoirs under the conditions of readily available electrical energy and fuel.

overhead tank – part of Tirukkalukundram's expanding municipal water supply

14.1 *ēri*

As for the reservoirs that fall under the category of *ēri*, various authors have held that the increase in the number of wells in recent decades in South India[615] leads to the *ēri*s' abandonment.[616] However, wells seem to have been coexisting for a long time with *ēri*s. Ludden traces them to the medieval and early modern periods.[617] In the study area, the stone frames of many wells bear inscriptions of the dates of their drilling or renovation. These reach back to the early 1900s. Across the study area, I found more wells that have been abandoned than newly built ones. I will argue here that the decisive factor is

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[615] See Black 1990. Ludden 1999: 137 links the spread of wells to the spread of commercial (as opposed to subsistence) agriculture and writes that whereas "few tanks were built after 1800 [...], [w]ells continued to be dug at a steady pace and remained the major source of new irrigation in dry regions, right down to the present day".

[616] Harriss-White and Janakarajan 1997; Sivasubramaniyan 1995.

[617] Ludden 1999: 136.

not the well but the way of lifting the water, more precisely: the input of energy involved that stems from outside the locality.

Around the time from which most wells in the study area date, the standard way to extract water from them was by the help of a seesaw like contraption called *pañcapūtam*. This demanded a lot of organisation and workforce. Two to three men and at least one ox had to be on the spot. One man stood inside the well, sometimes waist-deep in water, and filled a ceramic pot [*cāl*] with the precious liquid. The pot could be as tall as himself. It was fixed to a long plank that was operated from surface level where the oxen were attached to it. To swerve the plank and lift the pot, the oxen had to trudge some metres away from the well. The men on ground level spurred the oxen, directed the pot upwards, emptied it into one of the nearby channels and led the water to the fields. Then they hauled the oxen back, lowering the pot again towards the man down in the well. The operation was so strenuous that it could not be carried out in the heat of the day, only late at night. Pushpavanam Kuppusami Naicker of Pattikadu village near Tirukkalukundram remembers that he started working as soon as the planet Venus had risen on the nocturnal western sky and finished before the first cock crowed. The cultivators worked to the rhythm of special songs [*ērram pāṭṭu*]. Judging from the few recordings I could make of them (albeit out of context as throughout the study area no *ērram* is operable anymore), these consisted of rather coarse, breathlessly uttered but very rhythmic verses. They also served to inform the men who operated in the dark at which point a field had received enough water as it was known how many stanzas (and, hence, issues of water) each plot required.[618]

These plots were not as frequently cultivated with paddy as today, recall aged informants of the study area – such as, Somasundaram, formerly an irrigation worker (laskar) at the local branch of the PWD in Tirukkalukundram. He explains that until two to three decades ago, a substantial portion of the area irrigated by the local *ēri*s consisted of an array of gardens [*tōṭṭam*].[619] They were lined with plantain, palm or arecanut trees that lent their shadows to the crops beneath, preventing the soil moisture from evaporating quickly in the hot sun. The main crops were vegetables and fruits that did not require flooding for weeks together, such as paddy. They were sprinkled in a very precise and parsimonious way.[620] Paddy was cultivated at most once a year (instead of two to three times as today) and to a minimal extent. For such a garden, up to ten cultivators pooled fields that they had rented for four to five years, paying an annual sum to the owners. Otherwise perennials like bananas or areca palms could not have viably been cultivated. Furthermore, much of the area below the *ēri* (and outside the gardens) was cultivated with crops, such as, millet, gingelly and pulses that require only one or very few turns of irrigation.

With motor pump sets, the connection between water, Venus, song and soil becomes obsolete. Those who avail of these contraptions neither have to work in the dead of night nor to take pains to muster labourers in seasons in which everybody needs them. There are also fundamental differences in the cost structure. Whereas the cost of lifting water by *ērram* rises with increasing extraction of water (i.e., wages to pay and workers to organise), the expenditures to lift water with an electric engine diminish with more and more consumption of water. The initial investment for the machine is high – minimum Rs. 10,000, some farmers add Rs. 25,000 for more or less official "fees" to obtain the connection to the grid ("otherwise you have to wait for nine years", says R. Raghavan of Oragadam). But then – and this is the decisive factor – the current is provided free of cost. "Subsidy of private use of a scarce

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[618] On *ērram* and the associated songs see also Adiceam 1966: 259 ff. and 455 f.

[619] Not to be confused with the "garden-land" near settlements ("Totakāl"), see Crole 1879: 36, 45.

[620] Adiceam 1966: 285 ff. describes a typical garden.

common property resource – a perilous policy," as Staffan Lindberg calls this decision of the Tamil Nadu State Government.[621] It reaches back to 1968 but was finally agreed upon in 1989.

> "Like a Pongal gift, given by a benevolent landlord to his farm servants, in 1989 the farmers were finally granted free electricity by the DMK, one of the Tamil nationalist parties competing for the voter's favour. This was the real tragedy. It meant that farmers were free to pump, free electricity added to the ecological crisis now evident in many dry areas of Tamil Nadu and other southern states of India."[622]

Along with the power came the paddy. Today, in the study area, one has a free vista across the fields to the *ēri*s' bunds. There are no gardens in the main areas irrigated by *ēri*s, just a few on their margins. Some farmers do cultivate vegetables in the middle of the irrigated area, but these are short-term activities that do not follow the sophisticated patterns of the gardens described above. Almost no trees or bushes check the evaporation; the only shade on the open field is provided by little huts which were built to protect the motor pump sets. On most of the fields, at least two out of three crops are paddy.

The cultivation of paddy was extended at the expense of millets, pulses, vegetables and fruits. Even farmers who would have preferred to stick to the latter crops could not stand back in a surrounding of paddy growers: they explain that it is difficult, if not impossible, to cultivate dry crops, such as millet, on fields next to irrigated crops or below them because every field bund leaks and ultimately the plant that needs only little water is drowned. Young farmers even doubt that the soil of the study area is suited to the cultivation of dry crops at all. Older informants tend to romanticise millet and maize ("*rāki* is good for the body" [*uṭampukku nallatu*] or "it gives strength" are frequent statements), but they are unlikely to eat any at home. In one instance, a senior farmer of Irumbuli extolled the virtues of *rāki* – but only a few sentences later, he remarked smugly about another farmer: "Outside, he appears to be a rich man, but at home, his wife serves him ragi".

Using increasing amounts of water, farmers alter the water regime of the watershed and, hence, of the *ēri*. For instance, Pushpavanam Kuppusami Naicker of Tirukkalukundram installed his electrical pump set in 1976. Already three years later, he had to have his well deepened. In many places, farmers compete as to who can afford the deepest well and the most horsepower in the engine to drill the water out – to the point of digging deeper than the ground level of the *ēri*s which logically leads to sucking them dry. With the help of pump sets and easily extractable water, fields emerge even above *ēri*s.

> The fields of M. Elumalai of Tirukkalukundram Aiyarbadi, for example, are situated above the *ēri* of Pulikundram. He cultivates paddy, groundnuts, coconuts and various vegetables on them, irrigating them with pump sets in three wells. The first well was built 30 years ago, he recounts. M. Elumalai is a social climber. He was the first in his family to study and become a teacher. Over the years, he earned enough to buy fields to which he now, as a retiree, dedicates most of his time, proud to be a farmer with land of his own. However, these fields lie at a marginal stretch; it had to be cleared from trees and bushes and made arable.

The official classification of land as "dry" or "irrigated" is based on whether water from the *ēri* reaches the plot or not; and for "irrigated" land, taxes are higher. However, "dry" fields that are

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[621] Lindberg 1999: 279.
[622] Lindberg 1999: 290.

irrigated by the help of electrical pump sets yield no less than fields that receive their water from an *ēri*. Hence, thanks to the lower taxes they are more profitable – much more profitable, at that, than a field that is officially classified as "irrigated" and costs higher tax even though, in the course of the years, the channels that lead to it are obstructed and the "irrigated" field has virtually become dryland. This is also likely to have contributed to the expansion of irrigated paddy on former dry land.[623] In other words, firstly, the input of energy from outside the locality, altering the local water regime including the drilling of water from below the level of the water reservoir, challenges the physical containment of *ēri*s.

Secondly, it challenges the social containment of *ēri*s. Their operation, which has been shown to be low-key and embedded in local habitual behaviour, is at stake with changes in the cropping pattern such as the expansion of paddy cultivation and with the concurrent alterations of the organisational setup.[624] T. J. Nathan of Oragadam explains that when they had no pump sets yet, he and the other farmers used to consult about who cultivates what at which time. Nowadays everybody does as he pleases. At most four or five people of neighbouring fields look what the others do and act accordingly [*pārtta ceñcippāṅka*].

The availability of alternative ways to irrigate makes free-riding easy. Farmers who have electrical pump sets[625] at hand tend to withdraw from their obligations to maintain the *ēri*, for example, by not participating (neither in person nor in the form of sending a hired farm hand) in the common exercises to clear the field channels of weeds and sediments; even though they might, at times, indeed do use water that runs in channels from the *ēri* to them. They certainly profit at least from the seepage from neighbouring fields whenever they are flooded with water directly from the *ēri*. K. R. Varakacchariyar, who owns, as well as, oversees a substantial part of Kottimangalam's fields, alleges that he pays the due share of his harvest to both the caretaker of the sluices and the "wiring man helper". The latter is the local electrician who repairs motor pump sets and the cables that connect them to the grid. Yet others do not give anything to the man who opens and closes the sluices of the *ēri* as soon as they start irrigating with the help of electrical power. As Sengupta has pointed out,[626] user-friendly irrigation systems (as he calls, for example, *ēri* management) can be very tolerant to impairments of all sorts. But if a certain critical mass of people, of workforce or of resources spent is no longer mustered, the entire arrangement breaks down. "In those days when there were no pump sets, people used to clear the channels of the *ēri* [...] ever since pump sets came into being, nobody has bothered about the canal", observes, for example, the farmer Kuppusami Naicker of Tirukkalukundram. His colleague V. Kannan of Irumbuli says that before the current was provided free of cost, there was "cooperation" and the channels of the *ēri* were maintained. Yet since electricity has been provided for free, people are "careless."[627] If farmers in the middle or upper reach of an acreage that is irrigated by an *ēri* do not clear the channels in their ranges but rather resort to irrigate with the help of pump sets, farmers below them will find it difficult to get *ēri* water.

> 88-year-old Sellappa Naicker owns one and a half acres of fields at the tailend of Oragadam's Big *ēri*. Until seven years ago, he received water from the *ēri* at least for the first crop, he

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[623] A process also described by Mencher 1978: 60, 62, 115 f.

[624] Geiser 1993: 269 and 295 f. describes the segmentation of cultivation in an irrigated area of Sri Lanka.

[625] More than those few who operate pump sets fuelled with diesel: diesel is expensive so in an impetus to save money, they rather irrigate directly via channels of the *ēri*s.

[626] Sengupta 1993: 121.

[627] He uses, embedded in his Tamil speach, the English words "cooperation" and "careless".

recalls. Now the latter part of the channel is dysfunctional – "What shall I do!? [*enna panrate*]", he comments with a sad shrug. He does not want to quarrel with the cultivators of the neighbouring fields. Instead he uses his two pump sets all year round which he previously had used only for the second or third crops. The well itself bears the inscription "1911".[628]

Farmers who do not receive *ēri* water any longer and do not avail of pump sets leave their fields fallow at least for some seasons or buy water from neighbours who own wells. The price is paid in money or in shares of the harvest. When electricity was still a costly affair, the crop was usually divided in thirds (one for the field owner, one for the owner of the pump set and one third for the cultivator). Now the cost for water can be less, subject to the number of irrigation days required and to the involved persons' talent to bargain. Thus at this point, a new form of capitalism emerges.[629]

Irrigation with the help of electricity is for mobile people, especially for those who have non-agricultural occupations as well. Like the teacher M. Elumalai, they invest money from their non-agricultural incomes in pump sets. These have more than the sheer material value: in my study area, the pride of a cultivator in his strong pump set resembles the pride farmersin other parts of the world take in their big tractors. Farmers below the same *ēri* usually know very well the number of horsepower of their neighbours' pump sets, and it is a constant topic in the villages' gossip.

Cultivators who have no income other than from agriculture, particularly if their landholdings are small, tend to stick to *ēri* irrigation.

> Mathaian of Arunthatipalayam, who takes part in the cleaning of the *ēri*'s channel in Irumbuli in January 1999, provides the following calculation: he owns a field and a well, but no motor pump set. Lifting water by *ērram* seems to be out of question nowadays, nobody practices it anymore. An electrical pump set seems to be equally out of his reach. At most, he considers buying a diesel pump set, which is readily available second hand and cheaper in its initial investment than electrical engines. But other than electricity, the cost of the fuel has to be borne by the cultivator. Operating a diesel pump would cost him at least Rs. 600 per season plus two hours of work per day, amounting to about 120 man-hours. In contrast, cleaning the channel takes approximately one day of work in the entire season (seven man-hours) and no monetary expense. He can delegate the daily irrigation work to Varadan, the caretaker of the sluice, who of course has to get his share of the crop, but obviously Mathaiyan considers that expense negligible, it also does not involve money. Otherwise *ēri* water comes for free.

For farmers who have to be mobile, (electrical) pump sets bear many practical advantages. They are easy to handle. They are prestigious. Nobody depends on daily wagers with whom the relationship may be strained, for example, due to caste conflict. There is no need to organise two to three people plus oxen at the same time on the same spot. One person suffices to see to the extraction of water. He presses the button to switch on his pump set, sits down in the shade of the little hut that is usually there to protect the engine and waits until enough water is poured into the channels – perhaps goes to his neighbour to chat a bit and observe the daily wagers who are toiling in the sun. Usually cultivators do that in the mornings and / or evenings, some of them in trousers and white shirts as they are on their way to or from other jobs in offices or shops. Even commuters easily integrate it into their daily

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[628] Oragadam, *tāmarai-kāl* below the Big *ēri*, 1,3,1999.
[629] Janakarajan 1996.

routine. With electricity in irrigation, water and cultivators become mobile and the agrarian needs can (and do) yield to the non-agrarian time schedule of the day. This challenges the social containment of reservoirs.

In a more far-fetched sense (but more conspicuously), the use of fuel and increasing traffic eats away substantial parts of the reservoirs: modern roads tend to be built in their command area or blocking the inlets and outlets. For centuries, in a country that changes its face with every monsoon, paths have changed concurrently. Pedestrians, herds of cattle, sheep, goats and bullock carts have found their tracks according to the season and the soil conditions.

> Until today day in the study area, the village Madulankuppam, which lies beyond the Big *ēri* of Tirukkalukundram, can only be reached using the footpath along the *ēri*'s bund during and right after monsoon rains. Only when the water in the reservoir recedes, paths on the *ēri*'s bed are formed and increasingly used. With the rains of the next monsoons they are again submerged.

Making up for the lack of stable roads and street signs, there was the institution of local guides who helped travellers to reach their destinations.[630] In the 20th century, catering for the needs of motor vehicles, attempts abounded throughout the subcontinent to make roads permanent. In the study area, all but two *ēri*s are in one way or another dissected by roads. Either the track leads right across the reservoir, it cuts it off from its catchment area or it separates substantial parts of its irrigated area from the rest. In case of the main road connecting Tirukkalukundram with Chengalpattu, settlements have developed along the road which assist in dissecting the catchment area. One *kuḷam* of Tirukkalukundram had to completely give way to a road crossing. It was filled with earth; today a temple of Kaṅkaiyamman̠ reminds of the erstwhile water place. Furthermore, new settlements – most of them housing recent immigrants to the area – are designed inside the catchment areas of *ēri*s, making the soil impervious and polluting the surface run-off.

> In a very physical sense, mobility impairs Irumbuli's *ēri* in the form of two roads. One connects Tirukkalukundram with Oragadam and cuts through the *ēri*'s foreshore area and blocks it. It has some culverts to let water through, but they are far from sufficient as one can observe time again at every monsoon. Then the water overflows it, washes its tar away and turns it into an almost impassable helter-skelter track. The second road eats away a considerable portion of the acreage irrigated by the *ēri* and renders one of its distributaries senseless. This broad, tarred route is frequently inundated, too, but authorities are quick to have it repaired. It is much less frequented than the aforementioned street – I counted hardly five cars per hour and little other traffic – but it obviously has political significance as it leads to the atomic power plant in Kalpakkam. That these roads could be built at their respective positions reflects the esteem and regard enjoyed by *ēri*s.

However, the paradigma of permanent roads is still difficult to realise in a landscape like that of the study area. The new settlements (such as, e.g., the lower parts of Tirukkalukunrdam-Desamukipettai) are regularly flooded in times of heavy rains. The roads that were built cutting across *ēri*s or their inlet channels (as, for instance, Tirukkalukundram's bypass across the irrigated area of Irumbuli *ēri* or the road from Tirukkalukundram to Oragadam that cuts off Irumbuli *ēri* from its catchment area) are

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[630] Livingston 2002: 133.

either washed away in the onset of the monsoons or left in such a poor state that it becomes a staggering task to even drive on it with a two-wheeler. Ironically, the needs of road fortification itself and of other building activities are at times detrimental to roads. This is the case with the connection between Tirukkalukundram and Madurantakam which dissects the area irrigated by Tirukkalukundram's Big *ēri*: lorries that are heavily loaded with sand from the Palar river use it to an extent that after the rainy season, only arrays of knee-deep holes are left of it.

14.2 *kuḷam*

Like *ēri*s' physical and social containment is challenged by electricity that makes water flow up from deep beneath the earth, also water for needs that could otherwise be met at *kuḷam*s is being pumped to the surface with the help of electricity. This happens in wells that are attached to houses. Again it is not these that are new, but the water lifting mechanism: whoever can afford it employs an electric engine instead of the former bucket that is operated with a rope.[631] The pumps lift the water into cemented troughs. Well-to-do people have them built on the roofs of their houses. From there the water is led through pipes into taps of bathrooms with which their houses are, of late, equipped. This makes it easily possible to amass sufficient water for bathing, so that for this purpose, owners of electrical pump sets usually do no longer frequent *kuḷam*s.

Adding to that, electricity makes water flow from one locality to another, even against the slope. This happens on a big scale in the case of municipal water supply systems that are operated with mains, valves, overhead tanks, pipes and pumps. The water is typically used for drinking, only certain people (usually newcomers of modest financial means who neither avail of pump sets and wells of their own, nor have the custom to frequent local *kuḷam*s) use it for bathing, doing the laundry and other household purposes. In the study area, such arrangements are operable in Oragadam and Tirukkalukundram. In Irumbuli, the matter is still being discussed, with some inhabitants welcoming it, others declaring it superfluous and a third party seriously doubting whether their mayor [*talaivar*] will ever manage to let it come true.

Technical contraptions necessary to operate a municipal supply system were originally developed on the other side of the globe. They are produced outside the locality. The money for them has to come mainly from outside as well, that is, from higher echelons of the state. The water often enough is tapped elsewhere. Thus the locality is linked to the wider political and societal context, the "whole" the water users relate to, overrides the petty neighbourhood. It has been shown that people who use the more centralised modes of water supply (and, hence, who refer to the "whole" locality which is catered for by the system instead of relating to smaller neighbourhoods) are the first to withdraw from the common exercise of maintaining neighbourhoods' *kuḷam*s. The lack of their contribution weighs heavily as these are often people of means. Without their contribution, or at least without their political backing, it is difficult to maintain *kuḷam*s.

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[631] Helpers for such tasks are, in the study area, typically Iṟulars. They used to dwell in lowly huts behind the houses of their masters and catered, among other things, for the water; for that, they were even allowed to enter their masters' kitchen. In two cases of Kurukkal families, I found that arrangement existing. In most other cases it was said to have been abandoned a decade ago.

A note on the promise of equality which comes along with the municipal water supply systems. Their approach is to do away with the differential water use which is constitutive of *kuḷam*s. No longer is water and its use distinguished according to the caste and occupational background of the users. Everybody is served the same water to drink. However, in reality this works in some instances better than in others. First of all, instead of restrictions based on caste there are restrictions based on the economic means of the consumers. A private connection to the municipal water supply costs, in Tirukkalukundram, Rs. 500, plus the monthly fee of Rs. 30. Only a small minority of households has so far been ready to afford that.

Secondly, even though for those who do not avail of taps of their own there are public taps at street corners, these are of unequal reliability. I heard most complaints about broken valves and taps and failing maintenance in Tirukkalukundram-Paramaciva-Nagar, a neighbourhood that is chiefly inhabited by Untouchables. Above all, these complaints reflect the subjective feeling of being neglected by the municipality, mirroring their minor role in local political institutions. In fact, many taps had run dry at the time of my inspections. However, due to the general intermittency of supply it was impossible to prove for how long this situation had persisted and if the contentions were true. On the whole, the targeted coverage of one tap per 30 households is far from being reached.

Thirdly, in Oragadam, quarrels arose because the water from the municipal supply allegedly did not suffice, even though people could complement it with water from open draw-wells that the local Government had built in the eighties. Therefore, in 1999, a second overhead tank was built with funds of the Japanese development aid agency. That revived the old separation: one overhead tank is used to supply water to the west part of Oragadam where castes such as Nāyakkar, Oṭaiyar or Brahmins live, whereas a separate water source and overhead tank caters for the needs of the Paṟaiyars and other castes that are deemed as Untouchable in Oragadam's east side. Fourthly, envy on a regional frame emerges if consultants in Oragadam keep complaining that the inhabitants of Tirukkalukundram drink water from the river whereas they have to digest water from the cremation place (the water for the municipal supply is pumped from the municipal well which is located adjacent to the cremation place of the Christian Paṟaiyars).

Moreover, the arrangement that comes about with the pretension of overcoming differentiation on the basis of caste does deepen them on the regional level. This can be demonstrated in the case of the municipal water supply of Tirukkalukundram. The source from which the water is pumped is situated in Vallipuram, a village that is chiefly inhabited by Untouchables. Its standing in regional politics is obviously weak enough that water tapping can be enforced on it.

> The pipeline in which water flows from Vallipuram to Tirukkalukundram can be easily located as it is visible in most of the places. It follows the road that leads fairly directly to the Palar river. Yet when the river is but a few metres off, astonishingly it turns sharply to the right and goes on for about two kilometres (costly pipeline kilometres) upstream to Vallipuram. There the water is pumped from three wells that are placed in the bed of Palar river which most of the time resembles more a desert of sand than a river of water.

> It flows into a tank from which it is in turn pumped to Tirukkalukundram. The pumping has become a political issue. V. K. Thamilmani, the *pañcāyattu* President of Vallipuram, complains that until 20 years ago, the water did not have to be pumped as it came naturally to the surface, and the well was located only at the edge of the river. The wells that were built in

1997 and 1998 are placed further inside the river. The mayor has the impression that the groundwater table has receded because the water consumption of Tirukkalukundram has risen and since many farmers of Vallipuram's vicinity have drilled deep bore wells to irrigate their fields. He says he has severe objections[632] against the water tapping, but he could do nothing. The decisions to extend the tapping were taken during a period when there was no elected mayor, but when a special officer was placed in control of Vallipuram. He argues, as a member of the communist party CPI(M) that has regionally no standing, he has no power to prevent the exploitation of the water. Informants of Tirukkalukundram whom I told about the visit to V. K. Thamilmani, identified him rather curtly as the "man from the Untouchable's settlement" [*colony āḷ*]. V. K. Thamilmani says if he had tried to speak up against those who propagated the water tapping there would be menaces, intimidation and threats [*accuṟuttal*, *payamuṟututal* and *tollai koṭuppāṅkaḷ*].

V. K. Thamilmani's contentions are impossible to prove. Yet the issue shows the heated rhetoric and the emotions that accompany the seemingly purely technical procedure of the introduction and expansion of a water supply system – they turn it into a politically and culturally significant process. It also demonstrates in which way the fissures on caste lines continue to play their important roles, even in the context of a technology that is deemed "modern" and will do away with the same differentiation.

Finally, energy input in the supply of water offers a new possibility to distinguish one's water use from that of other people: even in the study area, bottled water or water in half litre bags is being sold. Apart from shops at the bus stand that mainly sell water to travellers, in 2002, S. S. Ganesh and P. Sureshan, freshly graduated from college, started dealing with water in re-usable canisters in Tirukkalukundram. With the advent of big soft drink corporations from the USA in India in the late 1990s, the market for bottled water started to boom. This has mostly touched the urban middle classes but spreads to affluent people in the countryside as well, fostered by a growing mistrust towards the quality of the municipal water. Bottled water is well marketed with the promise of being especially pure – however, not because of its precedence from holy sites, its mixture with special substances or because of holy verses chanted over it, but due to "double reverse osmosis", "ultraviolet rays" and other technical procedures according to national and international standards of certification like certification according to IS 14543; their names may sound as strange as Sanskrit verses in the ears of many Indians. Bottled water is, in price relations of the study area, extremely expensive – for example, the mentioned agents sell 25 litres of water for Rs. 30, which is half the income of the current income of a female daily wager. Hence, bottled water is a means of differentiation. Just that it is now money and not caste status that makes it possible to avail of water which comes with the promise of being especially pure.

To sum up, this chapter has shown that the input of energy to make water mobile challenges *ēri*s and *kuḷam*s. It offers alternatives to them; it makes the water flow, which contests the physical and social containment that has, in previous chapters, shown to be constitutive of water reservoirs in South India. With the spread of electrical pump sets, water and energy become closely linked. In everyday experience, water is only available if there is electricity. This makes itself acutely felt in cases of power cuts when even rich houses' overhead tanks run dry and fields cannot be irrigated.[633]

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[632] He uses the English term to emphasise his point.
[633] Sant and Dixit 2000: 112.

Thanks to energy, the "whole" that people have been shown to be relating to by using water is successively widened. In Tirukkalukundram, to which water is transported from Vallipuram at the Palar river, this is the regional level. Once the mega project to link India's rivers is completed,[634] this will be the nation as a whole. Ganges water, which is now invoked in all day long rituals, carried in flasks throughout the country and festively received in *kuḷam*s such as Kumbakonams Mahamakam once in many years, will be pumped on a regular day to day basis throughout the country. Along with the pumps and pipes, India will be welded together.

Notably, the link of water and energy is not asymmetrical. While the availability of energy becomes more and more coextensive to for the availability of water, this is true the other way round, too. Power cuts correlate with lack of water. In India in general, hydropower is widely in use.[635] In the study area, the biggest single consumer of water is the very institution that produces electrical power for the region: the nuclear power plant of Kalpakkam.[636] It is built on the Palar river and needs its fresh water for cooling (a bit like human beings and their gods do).

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[634] Iyer 2003: 309 – 318.

[635] Sengupta 2000: 13 – 15.

[636] It needs 3,5 million gallons per day (information of N. Pasumalaidevan, Public Works Department, Chennai-Tharamani), December 1998.

Tirukkalukundram's "holy water of pigs" (panri tīrttam)

15.   Conclusion

This thesis has explored water reservoirs, that pervading feature of the South Indian landscape, by way of focusing on their interplay in the study area. The latter is located in Kanchipuram district in the northern part of the state Tamil Nadu and its epithet "lake district" bespeaks the profusion of water reservoirs it houses. These can be distinguished in different types, each of which is characterised by its specific physical layout, location, usage and containment in the local society, as well as, in religious beliefs. Some serve for productive uses whereas other types of water reservoirs are more for reproductive ends. Most importantly, they also differ in degrees of cleanliness and filthiness, of (ritual) purity and pollution (which can go hand in hand but does not have to). Certain reservoirs can be clean and pure just because other reservoirs aren't, since they, for example, serve for people to bathe with whom other people do not want to mingle or for "polluting" usages. Hence, the differentiation helps to maintain the functionality of the array of water reservoirs in a locality as a whole. It is also a reason why each locality has so many reservoirs, at least two to three, so that the requirement of the most basic differentiation can be met.

Regarding the definition of that locality as a whole, this thesis has shown that it is subject to individual identification and local politics. Depending on the social position and personal attitudes of the people involved, it can refer to different social congregations. For example, it can be the neighbourhood, which is based mainly on spatial immediacy, often compounded by ties of family, caste and religious affiliation. The congregation can, as well, be the municipality that overrides the subdivision into various neighbourhoods. For example, it has been shown that people who can be characterised as belonging to the mainstream society of one municipality of the study area tend to identify with that municipality as a whole and rather neglect the water reservoirs of their neighbourhood (in terms of

usage or participation in maintenance). However, they do become active towards water reservoirs that may be more distant to their residences yet bear importance for the municipality as a whole. Logically, the latter, more centralised understanding of one's locality, implies that only a fewer number of water reservoirs are needed, that is, if that locality consists, for instance, of seven neighbourhoods, only the seventh part.

The activity that is based on (and shows) the identification with one's locality as a social congregation can consist, firstly, of the eviction of outsiders. Secondly, of the active usage (for day to day purposes, as well as, for rituals) and participation in the reservoirs' repair and maintenance – be it with a spade and sweat, by writing petitions or by symbolically guarding a particular reservoir. Thirdly, the politics of the locality, which water reservoirs are made to relate to, involves withdrawal. This is an unobtrusive, yet a very important and powerful manner because it entails the respective reservoir's loss of political backing and of important resources for its upkeep. It can result in the impossibility for the remaining people to maintain the reservoir and, therefore, to its decay.

Notwithstanding the fact that water reservoirs rely on differentiation, they are phenomena that come between antitheses and help mitigating them. They link the seasons of a year, providing water (helping to reminisce wetness and fecundity) far into the months of dryness, sometimes even until the next rainy season. They also help to order and contain the deluge that monsoon rains may bring about. Water reservoirs connect the uncultivated land [*kāṭu*] with the cultivated sphere of Tamil life [*nāṭu*], themselves spatially and temporarily shifting just as these spheres do in the course of a year or a life.

Within sacred temple complexes, water reservoirs tend to be placed in rather profane quarters. Beyond the red-and-white-striped walls, the serenity and quietude of the spread out water, along with the surrounding shrines, offers a glimpse of sacredness in the hustle and bustle of profane life. Likewise, water reservoirs connect the sacred and the profane whenever they are turned temporarily into stages for divinity to materialise, as in the form of a conch that hums the divine syllable "om" or as huge effigies of goddesses that are formed in certain rituals out of mud. It is no coincidence that *tīrttam*, the generic name of one type of water reservoirs, means "ford". In various strands of life, people in Tamil Nadu resort to water reservoirs whenever they pass from one state of being to another. This includes states of mind – water reservoirs are foremost places to conduct rituals during which numinous beings "come upon" humans. They also connect life with afterlife, since water reservoirs are believed to shelter the souls of the ancestors for one year after the demises of their bodies.

Water reservoirs link the private or particularistic sphere of families to the public realm when they serve to perform life cycle rituals. For example, the end of the period of deep mourning after a family member's death is marked by a ritual at a water reservoir – afterwards, the family members are freed from restrictions in their diet, movement and body care and, vice versa, people of the vicinity know what is happening with them. Likewise, important temple festivals start and end with the gods' bathing in water reservoirs, publicising throughout the locality the begin of the special state, as well as, the return to normalcy. Moreover, water reservoirs bring together the public and particularistic realms whenever families turn them to stages on which they publicise their innermost troubles and concerns, for instance, in request making rituals. The thesis has discussed in detail the different understandings of "public" [*potu*], oscillating between a particularistic "open for the people of the neighbourhood" versus "open for people of this municipality" or "open for all human beings", perhaps even "open also for animals". In the frame of the caste conflict, that has, along with mobility, found at the outset to be a characteristic trait of the study area, "*potu*" can become a pugnacious term. In many

respects, the discourse of "*potu*" is the reverse side of the medal of the discourse of the locality and the congregation to which the reservoirs are related.

In addition to their role in offering places, tools and reasons for profane and sacred usages, water reservoirs are in a position to mitigate antitheses because water is an ideal transmitter. Devoid of qualities of its own, the fluid attains instantaneously the qualities of its container and conveys them to anybody with whom it gets in touch. Consequently, water from a container that is highly valued enjoys a better reputation than water from a container that is considered less precious. It is thought to pass on these qualities to the users. The container, in turn, receives much of its valuation from how it itself is contained physically, socially, ritually, even cosmically. Reservoirs of the type which are temporary, which disappear after a few months to be reshaped again only half a year later by the next monsoon are less highly valued than those which are permanent, have sophisticated and embellished structures, contain water all year round, are laid out in a logic of numbers and cardinal directions and have been visited by gods, sages or miraculous cows. Interestingly, there have been various attempts to improve the image of water reservoirs by way of enhancing their physical containment. This is the case with reservoirs that were, in the course of the past one or two decades, withdrawn from day to day usage by locking them away behind high fences and iron gates that were opened only for pious people to follow their religious purposes. It is also the case with water reservoirs that have, usually in the frame of development aid projects, been fortified, their channels lined with cement, etc. Both attempts have had their drawbacks: the immured reservoirs tend to be forgotten; soon shops mushroom around them, obstructing the sight of them. The reservoirs start decaying and stinking because their main use is as toilets. As for the reservoirs fortified with the help of cement, in South India's climatic conditions, they soon lost their containment again. Now cement blocs are withering away as hazardous waste in the middle of paddy fields, as, for instance, in Vazuvadur adjacent to the study area.

In both cases, the principles of how the respective types of water reservoirs are functioning have been disregarded. They were indeed better contained physically. But firstly, the social containment is important, too. An unused water reservoir is doomed. Secondly, it follows from the principle of differentiation that each type of water reservoir requires its own standard of wholeness or neatness. Water reservoirs can be efficacious, as well as, efficient in the long run just because they neither contain the water perfectly but have the potential to react flexibly to the rain, the soil and the amount of workforce available. Cementing them and their channels is tantamount to reifying something, the rationale of which is to be shifting and makeshift (like, vice versa, the input of energy to supply water frees the water from its containment and is, hence, also running against the principle of water reservoirs).

This has been overlooked by writers on this type of reservoirs who have bewailed their "decay", and called for their "rehabilitation" or "modernisation" (the decaying water reservoir in South India has been a recurrent theme since the British colonised the area, deplored by administrators of her Majesty as well as by post colonial activists). This usually went along with a call to revive the "community management" that is believed to once have been instrumental in governing the water reservoirs, or to still be somehow beyond the activities of the formal owner of the reservoir, the state. In my study area, instead of with a marked divide between "the state" versus "the community" or "the people", I met with people who reside in the localities and at the same time partake in "the state" in various ways, constituting or furthering its local avatar or tapping resources from its more distant echelons. Instead of a "community" that would utilise and manage these reservoirs in mutual consent, I came across a wide variety of individuals who make use of them for disparate purposes, who never meet to sit and

discuss the maintenance, who often hardly know each other and who even disagree on my question about a set of rules. Yet the reservoirs work and they do, I argue, just because they neither preclude anybody nor demand much extra time and effort to be kept working. The rationale of this type of water reservoir is to stand in the shade, to be low-key and flexible, just as it is the rationale of other types of reservoirs to boast stable features, shadowy halls and water throughout the year to attract humans and gods alike.

To sum up, water reservoirs in South India can be distinguished as various types that differ according to their physical appearance, usual location, usage, cleanliness, purity, the gods and the rituals associated with them and also to how they are valued. Within a locality, these types are interrelated in the sense that some reservoirs can stay clean and pure because others serve for dirty and polluting usages. This contributes to the large number of reservoirs. The locality or social congregation as the frame of reference differs; it may, for example, relate to a neighbourhood or extend to the municipality as a whole. It is a matter of local politics and the social standing and convictions of the people concerned. However, water reservoirs also serve to mitigate oppositions. They come between dry and wet seasons, the cultivated and the uncultivated spheres, family and public, private persons and the state, sacred and profane realms, life and afterlife, Man and gods. Same as these spheres are shifting, so do the reservoirs. They have the potential to react flexibly to rain, soil, availability of workforce and other factors; some types more than others. They are reservoirs not only for water, but for many possibilities in life.

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Summary in German /Zusammenfassung

Die Vereinten Nationen haben sich im Jahr 2000 als „Jahrtausend-Ziel" gesetzt, bis 2015 die Zahl der Menschen auf der Erde, die keinen Zugang zu erschwinglichem und sicheren Trinkwasser haben, zu halbieren sowie Wassernutzungen, die nicht nachhaltig sind, zu beenden. Die vorliegende Dissertation zeigt, dass das nicht nur eine technische und politische Aufgabe ist, sondern wie wichtig kulturelle und gesellschaftliche Aspekte dabei sind. Die Arbeit ist eine Ethnographie von Wasser-Reservoiren im Süden Indiens. Diese dienen in der weltweiten Diskussion um Wasserversorgung immer wieder als Beispiele für lokales und gemeinschaftliches Ressourcenmanagement.

Die Diskussion um das Wasser ist zugleich ein Diskurs um den Anteil, den der Staat an der Versorgung mit der kostbaren Ressource haben sollte. Bislang liegt die Wasserversorgung weltweit zu rund 95 Prozent in öffentlichen Händen und /oder ist stark lokalisiert (wie etwa im Fall von Brunnen). Es fiel zeitlich mit dem Ende der sozialistischen Regierungen zusammen, daß sich dieser Nexus lockerte und die Wasserversorgung verstärkt zum Markt für private Firmen, meist internationale Konzerne, wurde. Globalisierungskritiker/innen haben das aufgegriffen: sie wenden sich gegen die Ökonomisierung des Wassers in diesem Rahmen. Zugleich setzen auch sie sich dafür ein, die Wasserversorgung aus der staatlichen Verantwortung zu lösen. Sie soll in die Obhut der sogenannten lokalen Gemeinschaften, oft auch umschrieben als „die Leute" oder „das Volk" ("the people"), übergehen. Dabei fließen häufig Vorstellungen von „traditionellen" oder „einheimischen" Management-Methoden ein. Die Bestimmungsmacht über das Wasser koinzidiert mit der politischen und kulturellen Selbstbestimmung.

Im Diskurs speziell über Südindien fällt auf, daß die Wasser-Reservoire zum Emblem der in der Kolonialzeit vernichteten Größe Indiens werden. So heben die Autoren einerseits die Kunstfertigkeit ihrer Anlage und das Raffinement ihres Managements hervor; zugleich beklagen sie den Niedergang der Reservoire, seit sie der staatlichen Verwaltung anheimgestellt sind – ihr Verfall ist einer der stärksten Topoi und Antriebsfeder der Diskussion. Das geht einher mit dem Aufruf zur „Wiederinstandsetzung" ["rehabilitation"] oder der Modernisierung der Wasser-Reservoire, häufig mit dem Vorschlag, den Staat der Verantwortung dafür zu entbinden und sie „den Menschen" oder „den Gemeinschaften" zu übergeben. Im Fokus stehen dabei die größeren Wasser-Reservoire außerhalb der Ortschaften, die unter anderem der Bewässerung dienen. Die kleineren Reservoire innerhalb der Siedlungen sind in der wasserwirtschaftlichen Debatte praktisch unbeachtet; einzelne, architektonisch herausgehobene Exemplare sind kunstgeschichtlich untersucht worden. Eine anthropologische Betrachtung fehlte bisher. Dasselbe gilt für einen Ansatz, der die Wasser-Reservoire nicht als jeweils einzelne, herausgelöst aus ihrer Umgebung betrachtet, sondern in ihrem Zusammenhang mit den anderen Wasser-Reservoiren eines Ortes und mit der Gesellschaft, die sie konstituiert.

Die Arbeit zeigt, wie die Wasser-Reservoire einer aufeinander bezogen sind in einer Logik der Differenzierung, die die Basis für ihre Funktionalität ist. Demnach sind einzelne Wasser-Reservoire sauber und rituell rein, weil andere den Dreck und die rituelle Verunreinigung aufnehmen. Diese Differenzierung oder Separierung erfolgt auf der Basis der Nutzung (Reservoire jeweils für Trinkwasser, Wäscher, das Bad nach der Teilnahme an Kremationsritualen, Floß-Feste, zur Tränke von Tieren etc.) und der Nutzer und Nutzerinnen (Reservoire sind nur Angehörigen bestimmter Kasten

oder Orte zugänglich). Sie wird realisiert erstens durch Vertreibung von unerwünschten Personen oder Unterbindung unerlaubter Nutzungen und zweitens durch absichtliches Fernbleiben oder Unterlassen von Nutzung sowie Mithilfe beim Management und der Instandsetzung. Dabei kann Ausschluss (etwa von „Unberührbaren") durch Angehörige anderer Kasten umgemünzt werden in „freiwilliges" Fernbleiben. Kapitel 14 zeigt, was passiert, wenn wohlfeile Energie das Wasser zum Fließen bringt (im Untersuchungsgebiet vor allem Elektrizität, die Pumpen betreibt): Es lässt es weniger wichtig erscheinen, dass das Wasser in Reservoiren eine Form bekommt. Dadurch erhält vor allem die zweite Strategie, also also die des freiwilligen Fernbleibens von gemeinschaftlichen Verpflichtungen, große Tragweite.

Um im Rahmen des Prinzips der Differenzierung oder Separierung die Funktionstüchtigkeit der Wasser-Reservoire zu gewährleisten, braucht jeder Ort mehrere Wasser-Reservoire: mindestens eines für Trinkwasser, eines für die Bewässerung und eines für haushaltsnahe Zwecke. Die meisten haben mehr. Sowohl in der kleinen Stadt Tirukkalukundram, wie auch dem Dorf Oragadam und dem Weiler Irumbuli, in dem die Feldforschung zu dieser Arbeit in Intervallen zwischen 1999 und 2003 stattfand, werden jeweils mehrere, bis zu zwanzig, Wasser-Reservoire benutzt. Der Kanchipuram-Distrikt, in dem das Untersuchungsgebiet dieser Arbeit liegt, ist bekannt als "Distrikt der Wasser-Reservoire" [ēri māvaṭṭam]. Insgesamt weist das Bundesland Tamil Nadu, das südlichste der Indischen Union, allein 39.000 größere Wasser-Reservoire auf. Je mehr Menschen ein Ort umfaßt, desto kleiner ist die Zahl von Wasser-Reservoiren pro Kopf. Je kleiner ein Ort ist, desto größer ist die Zahl von Wasser-Reservoiren, die pro Einwohner/in vorgehalten werden muss, damit das Prinzip der Differenzierung funktionieren kann. Wenn beispielsweise eine Stadt aus fünf Ortsteilen zusammenwächst, die jeweils ein Set von Wasser-Reservoiren haben, wird die Stadt „als ganze" nur ein Fünftel der Anzahl von Reservoiren bereithalten müssen (und die Bewohner zum Teil längere Wege dorthin zurücklegen müssen). Folglich ist die Frage von größter Bedeutung, welches der „Ort als ganzer" ist, auf den sich das Arrangement der Wasser-Reservoire bezieht. In der ethnologischen Indien-Forschung hat die Frage nach solchen „Gesamtheiten" eine lange Geschichte – von der Annahme, daß Dörfer, Kasten etc. solche „Gesamtheiten" sind bis hin zu deren Dekonstruktion im Licht der Orientalismus-Debatte. Die Arbeit zeigt, daß die Antwort auf die Frage, welches der „Ort als ganzer" ist, auf die die Reservoire sich beziehen, hauptsächlich abhängig ist von der wirtschaftlichen und politischen Position der Akteure. Zur selben Zeit in derselben Siedlung können verschiedene Vorstellungen davon existieren, handlungsleitend sein und miteinander in Konflikt geraten. Praktisch äußert sich das darin, wer welche Wasser-Reservoire benutzt und wer welche Wasser-Reservoire aktiv meidet.

Nach der Art ihrer Nutzung lassen sich die Wasser-Reservoire eines Ortes in verschiedene Typen einteilen, die sich begrifflich, in ihrem Aussehen, ihrer Fähigkeit, das Wasser aufzuhalten und ihm eine Form zu geben, ihrer Zentralität im Ort und in ihrer Wertschätzung stark unterscheiden.

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                                    Wasser-Reservoire
                         /                                    \
                     kuḷam                                              ēri
                 /           \                                      /        \
            tīrttam                    "normaler" k.          periyēri        tāṅkaḷ
          /     \                    /        \
für Floß-Feste        "normale" t.    für Menschen   für Tiere
                                    /         \
k. für Trinkwasser (often: "veḷḷai kuḷam")   k. zum Baden und für andere Zwecke
                                        /              \
                      für alltägliche Zwecke       hauptsächlich für bestimmte Zwecke
                                                        /        \
                                                 für Wäscher        an Verbrennungsplätzen


klare, beständige Form /im Prinzip rein        >            unbeständig, formlos
                                                            /an der Schwelle zur Unreinheit
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Je sauberer und rituell reiner ein Typus von Wasser-Reservoiren ist,

- desto näher ist er am kultivierten Land und den Siedlungen,
- desto stärker hält er das Wasser auf und gibt ihm eine Form,
- desto markanter und im Jahreslauf dauerhafter ist seine eigene Form,
- desto mehr ist er in die lokalen Mythen, Riten und Vorstellungen von Kosmos und Göttern eingebunden;
- desto hervorgehobener ist er auch im gesellschaftlichen und rituellen Kontext und
- desto stärker wird er von den Nutzern und Nutzerinnen wertgeschätzt.

Wasser-Reservoire des Typs *ēri*, vorgestellt in den Kapiteln drei bis sieben, liegen in der Regel außerhalb der Siedlungen. Sie können von beträchtlicher Ausdehnung sein – die größten Reservoire dieser Art sind so gewaltig, daß von einem Ufer aus betrachtet das gegenüberliegende nicht zu sehen ist. Durch Schleusen im Damm fließt das Wasser in sich weiter und weiter verästelnde Kanäle bis auf die Felder und nährt Reis, Gemüse und Zuckerrohr. Oft sind die *ēri*s in Ketten angeordnet, wobei das überschüssige Wasser der höher gelegenen Reservoire in die weiter unten liegenden läuft und diese füllt. So bilden sie ein fein verästeltes Netzwerk, das die Landschaft überzieht und ihr ein charakteristisches Gesicht gibt. Dennoch ist die Form der *ēri*s wenig markant: nur eine Seite, ein meist sanft geschwungener Damm, mannshoch oder höher, ist eine sichtbare Begrenzung. An den übrigen Seiten fluktuiert der Übergang zum umgebenden Land je nach Wasserstand und ist nicht bestimmbar. In der heißen und trockenen Jahreszeit verwandeln sich Reservoire des Typs *ēri* in Weiden für Kühe, Ziegen, Schafe und Enten, in brunnenbewässerte Felder, Spielplätze, Wege, Ziegelöfen etc. Erst der nächste Monsunregen aktualisiert die *ēri*s wieder als Wasser-Reservoire. Die Dämme der *ēri* sind häufig mit groben Steinklötzen bewehrt, selten auch mit Beton. Aber zum größten Teil bestehen die *ēri*s, ihre Dämme und Kanäle, aus dem Lehm des Ortes, so dass das wichtigste Werkzeug für ihren laufenden Betrieb und die Instandhaltung eine billige Hacke mit kurzem Stiel ist, wie sie praktisch in allen Bauernhaushalten zu finden ist. *ēri*s verändern ihre Lage, ihre Ausdehnung und ihr Aussehen je nachdem wie stark es regnet und wie das Wasser abläuft. So sind es nicht sie, die dem Wasser ihre Form aufoktroyieren, sondern sie funktionieren in Komplizenschaft mit dem Wasser und dem Boden. Außerdem passen sie sich wechselndem Arbeitskräfteangebot an und bestehen weiter, auch wenn in einzelnen Jahren nur Teile von ihnen genutzt werden. Dieses schwache Profil, die Flexibilität und Anpassungsfähigkeit macht sie wirksam und wirtschaftlich.

Diese Eigenschaften spiegeln sich in der Weise ihrer Bewirtschaftung. Auf die Frage nach Regeln der Instandhaltung, Wasserverteilung etc. gab es drei Arten von Antworten. Die erste bekräftigt die Existenz von Regeln und benennt sie. Die zweite stellt die Existenz von Regeln in Abrede. Die dritte verneint die Existenz von Regeln, zählt aber im Detail auf, was die Nutzer tun bzw. in naher Vergangenheit getan haben, um die *ēri*s instand zu halten. Diese Unterschiedlichkeit oder gar Aporie begründet sich unter anderem in der schwachen Sichtbarkeit der Regeln, in der Unbestimmtheit, wer sie wie befolgen muß und in politischen und ökonomischen Interessen der Auskunftgeber. Das Managemet der *ēri* geschieht hauptsächlich im alltäglichen Vollzug der Nutzung (zum Beispiel in der Art, wie Felder angelegt und gepflügt werden, also in die vom *ēri* bewässerte Fläche eingeordnet werden), ohne formelle Versammlungen und administrativen Aufwand. Das macht einerseits politische Einflußnahmen und Trittbrettfahren [*free riding*] leicht. Zugleich schließt diese Niedrigschwelligkeit im Management von *ēri*s niemanden aus und verbreitet so die Basis der Teilnehmenden. Wie Kapitel sieben zeigt, ist selbst das von allen im Untersuchungsgebiet am "traditionellsten" erscheinende Arrangement zum Management des *ēri* mit einem „Wassermann"

[*kampukutti*] aus der "unberührbaren" Pa<u>r</u>aiyar-Kaste eine Erfindung der gegenwärtigen Generation, ausgehandelt zwischen Akteuren mit ihren spezifischen aktuellen Interessen und weit von nostalgischen Annahmen eines gemeinschaftlichen Wirtschaftens entfernt – gar eines staats-fernen, denn Geld von staatlichen Stellen und seine Verteilung wie auch politischer Einfluß spielen eine wichtige Rolle . Damit spiegeln sich das schwache Profil, die Flexibilität und die Anpassungsfähigkeit der physischen Struktur von *ēri*s in ihrem Management wieder und sind Gründe für ihre Wirksamkeit.

Zugleich aber schmälern genau diese Eigenschaften das Ansehen der *ēri*s vor Ort. Räumlich und konzeptionell an der Schwelle von kultiviertem Land [*nāṭu*] und Wildnis [*kāṭu*] und der inneren und äußeren Sphäre der tamilischen Weltauffassung gelegen, bilden sie die Furt zwischen diesen Bereichen, die im Lauf der Jahreszeiten – und auch der Besiedelungsgeschichte und in der Wahrnehmung einzelner Akteure – schwanken und sich gegeneinander verschieben (wenn etwa Felder im Sommer brach fallen und zur „Wildnis" werden oder auf einstiger „Wildnis" Siedlungen emporwachsen). In ihrer Ungeordnetheit und Nähe zur Wildnis gelten *ēri*s als Plätze, an die Frauen, die etwas von sich halten, nicht unbegleitet gehen. Die Götter und numinosen Wesen, die in ihnen zu finden sind, sind meistens furchterregend und die Opfer, mit denen sie gütig gestimmt werden, sind blutig. Ihr Wasser, obgleich Basis für die Produktion und die Fruchtbarkeit der Felder, gilt als nicht besonders segensreich [*pu<u>n</u>itam*]. Außer Politikern (die sich in den erwähnten Diskurs der *ēri*s als verlorene Beispiele für die Größe indischen Wasserbaus einklinken und die zugleich die Wasserreservoire im System gegenseitiger Vorteilnahme als Instrumente des Aufbaus von Gefolgschaft nutzen) und armen Bauern ohne Brunnen mit Elektropumpe als Alternative zur Bewässerung ihrer Felder durch Wasser aus dem *ēri* bewertet kaum jemand im Untersuchungsgebiet diesen Typ von Wasser-Reservoiren hoch. Versuche, wie sie im letzten Jahrzehnt mit Entwicklungshilfemitteln unternommen wurden, *ēri*s mit Hilfe von „stabilen" Beton-Mauern und -Kanälen „wiederherzustellen" und zu „modernisieren" mögen kurzzeitig (im tropischen Klima verwittert der Beton rasch und verteilt sich dann in Brocken über die Äcker) das Ansehen dieser Wasser-Reservoire bei der örtlichen Bevölkerung steigern. Sie laufen allerdings, wie auch die eingangs erwähnten Annahmen vom Verlust der Perfektion und Größe Indischer Wasserbaukunst, die sich im nationalen und internationalen Diskurs über die (süd)indischen Wasser-Reservoire finden, dem Funktionsprinzip der *ēri*s entgegen, das auf ihrem schwachen Profil, ihrer Flexibilität und Anpassungsfähigkeit beruht und auf ihrem Potential, zu funktionieren auch wenn sie eben nicht völlig genutzt und perfekt sind.

Wasser-Reservoire des Typs, der im Untersuchungsgebiet "*kuḷam*" genannt wird und der im Mittelpunkt der Kapitel acht bis zwölf steht, sind zwar wesentlich kleiner als *ēri*s, aber in ihrer Form klarer erkennbar und das ganze Jahr über als Wasser-Reservoire vorhanden. Sie sind in der Regel viereckig. In den ausgefeiltesten *kuḷam*s, wie sie in Pilgerzentren und zentralen Tempelstädten zu finden sind, führen von allen Seiten Treppen zum Wasser, die zum Teil kunstvoll in Kaskadenform angelegt sind. Nischen, Schreine und Säulenhallen schmücken die Ufer. In der Mitte der Wasserfläche thront eine turmförmige Säulenkonstruktion [*nīrā<u>l</u>imaṇṭapam*]. Die meisten *kuḷam*s des Untersuchungsgebietes sind schlichter. Nur eines weist ein *nīrā<u>l</u>imaṇṭapam* auf, nur vier sind auf allen vier Seiten befestigt. Die meisten anderen bieten wenigstens von einer oder zwei Seiten befestigte Zugänge zum Wasser. Während bei *ēri*s der Kulminationspunkt von technisch-materiellen Raffinement und dem Management-Interesse die Schleuse ist, durch die das Wasser zum Fließen gebracht wird, sieht der Typus der *kuḷam*s keine Schleusen vor. Sie sind darauf angelegt, das Wasser festzuhalten und ihm eine Form zu geben. Wie *ēri*s sind sie randständige Phänomene, aber dennoch wesentlich weiter „innen". So finden sie sich etwa innerhalb größerer Tempelanlagen, dort aber in den

äußeren Bereichen. Sie liegen in Siedlungen, aber an deren Rändern. Oft bilden sie die Grenze zwischen zwei Nachbarschaften, wobei stets klar ist, zu welcher davon der jeweilige *kuḷam* gehört. Ihre Anzahl pro Ort und ihre relative Lage zueinander ist in Ordnungssysteme von Zahlen und Himmelsrichtungen gefaßt, und um viele von ihnen ranken sich lokale Mythen. Anders als *ēri*s haben *kuḷam*s Namen, die sie mit Göttern, Göttinnen und Weisen, die auch von Brahmanen verehrt werden, in Verbindung bringen. Feste für diese Götter beginnen und enden an ihnen, und im Fall der Floß-Feste [*teppam tiruviḻā*] finden sie dort auch ihren Höhepunkt. Nicht nur die physische Form der *kuḷam*s, auch ihre gesellschaftliche ist also bedeutend klarer und fester als die der *ēri*s und folglich ihre Wertschätzung größer. Umgekehrt dienen die *kuḷam*s als Bühnen für die Inszenierung der Gesellschaften, die sie konstituieren. Sie bieten außer dem Wasser auch die Anlässe und den notwendigen Raum dafür – bis hin zur Ausstattung mit Sonnenschutz für stundenlange Zeremonien. Kapitel zehn schildert, wie Rituale privateste Begebenheiten und Zusammenhänge öffentlich machen, so die Familien in der Gesellschaft des Ortes positionieren und diese damit perpetuieren.

*kuḷam*s sind öffentliche Räume [*potu iṭaṅkaḷ*]. Das haben sie mit *ēri*s gemeinsam; nur sind in ihrem Fall die Folgen komplexer, weil sie stärker in den Alltag der Anwohner eingebunden sind. Die Frage, auf welche Öffentlichkeit [*potumakkaḷ*] sie sich beziehen ist eine Variante der oben aufgeworfenen Frage, was der „Ort als ganzer" ist, auf den sich die Wasser-Reservoire jeweils beziehen. Im Sprachgebrauch des Untersuchungsgebietes finden sich mindestens drei Interpretationen des Begriffs *potu*: erstens bezogen auf die Anwohner/innen der Straße, des Ortsteils oder der Nachbarschaft einer Person. Das wird häufig mit der Mitgliedschaft in einer bestimmten Kaste assoziiert, auch wenn tatsächlich der Kasten-Hintergrund der Bewohner und Bewohnerinnen stets gemischt ist. Eine weitere Interpretation des Begriffes bezieht sich auf die politische Gemeinde oder Stadt, die sich aus zahlreichen Ortsteilen zusammensetzen kann. Ein drittes Verständnis von *potu* bezieht sich auf alle Bürger und Bügerinnen Indiens oder gar der Erde, im Sinne des egalisierenden nationalen Diskurses von Indien als Demokratie. In diesem Zusammenhang gerät *potu* zum Kampfbegriff: diejenigen, die im Sinn des erstgenannten Verständnisses des Begriffs keinen Zugang zu Wasser-Reservoiren hatten, fordern diesen ein, auf ihr Recht pochend, einen öffentlichen Ort [*potu iṭam*] benutzen zu dürfen. Setzt sich diese Auffassung von *potu* durch, ist eine typische Antwort der Rückzug von Akteuren mit engerem Verständnis des Begriffs – etwa wenn an einem *kuḷam*, weil *potu*, eine Familie von Paṟaiyars ein Haus bezieht und die benachbarten Mitglieder anderer Kasten sich von der Nutzung des *kuḷam*s zurückziehen, was die Instandhaltung des Wasser-Reservoirs in Frage stellt.

Während diese zentralisierende Dynamik nach der oben beschriebenen Logik zur Aufgabe von Wasser-Reservoiren führt, legt Kapitel zwölf dar, wie ein Wasser-Reservoir durch Zentralisierung Aufmerksamkeit und Zuwendung auf sich zieht – als Kehrseite der Erosion der Vielzahl von dezentralen Wasser-Reservoiren. Die Konzentration auf wenige zentrale Wasser-Reservoire statt auf viele dezentrale Wasser-Reservoire in einem Ort geht häufig einher mit einer Sakralisierung der (oder wenigstens eines der) verbleibenden Wasser-Reservoire, bis dahin, daß sie durch hohe Zäune etc. der allgemeinen Benutzung entzogen werden und ausschließlich rituellen Zwecken dienen sollen. Unternutzung führt allerdings, der Abschottung zum Trotz, zu Verschmutzung und Zerfall. Bei aller Differenzierung und Separierung sind Wasser-Reservoire in Südindien Vielzweck-Einrichtungen. Ein bestimmter Verwendungszweck mag im Rahmen der Unterscheidung zu anderen Reservoiren im Vordergrund stehen, schließt aber andere Nutzungen nicht systematisch aus. Wasser-Reservoire sind in vielfältiger Weise Furte – nicht allein weil das Wasser, wie Kapitel 13 zeigt, der ideale Vermittler von Bedeutungen ist. Sie verbinden die Jahreszeiten, indem sie die Erinnerung an Regen und Fruchtbarkeit in die heiße und trockene Saison hineintragen. Sie vermitteln zwischen kultiviertem

Land und Wildnis. Sie verbinden die Privatsphäre mit der Öffentlichkeit. Sie können nicht als Teil eines Wasser-Managements verstanden werden, das örtliche Gemeinschaften oder „die Leute" irgendwie unterhalb des Staates betreiben, sondern in ihrer Nutzung sind Privatpersonen und der Staat eng miteinander verwoben. Sie verknüpfen die Welt der Lebenden mit den Ahnen, als Orte, an denen deren Seelen ruhen oder an denen sie leicht heraufbeschworen werden können. Als *tīrttam*s, Orte heiligen Wassers (oder heilige Wasserstellen) verbinden sie die profane Welt mit der Welt der Götter.

Lebenslauf

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