

BALANCING *RAUDRA* AND *ŚĀNTI*: RAGE AND REPOSE IN STATES OF POSSESSION

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1. POSSESSION RITUALISM IN THE GODAVARI DELTA

When Macbeth learns that his queen is dead he delivers his “out, out brief candle!” speech and informs us that life ...

is a tale told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury,
signifying nothing. (Macbeth V.v.17)

Myths, rituals and symbols of various South Asian traditions are frequently full of sound and fury, probably signifying *something*. Signification perhaps awaits discovery. Goddesses and gods, heroines and heroes, demonesses and demons, and of course, ordinary folk as well, may be consumed with wrath, enraged, out of control. Their condition is the subject of this essay with focus on manifestations of rage in the context of possession ritualism in regional Hinduism. The antonym of rage, that is, repose, will also enter into discussion. Fieldwork behind this essay has been conducted in the Godavari River Delta of coastal Andhra in various research periods 1980–2000.¹ Dialects of Telugu in East and West Godavari Districts have

¹ With special thanks I acknowledge the assistance and open-heartedness of many ritualists, both professional and lay folk, some of them patient and articulate friends over two decades. Due to the sometimes sensitive nature of details revealed in possession, substitute names occur in this essay. This work could not proceed without the help of research associates, chief among them Professor M. V. Krishnayya of Andhra University, Waltair. A native of East Godavari District, he has contributed many laborious weeks to our task of translating recorded possession speech, *vakku*, perhaps the most demanding of all translation efforts. I am grateful also to T. Viraraju for his excellent videocamera work in creating tapes used for study of body language and gestures of possession ritualists.

In this essay terms are in Sanskrit forms as used in Telugu unless specifically marked “Tel.” only. Note that where Sanskrit has long final vowels Telugu frequently has short

employed Sanskrit *raudra* to indicate ‘rage, anger, fury’. The affective states contrasting with and generally replacing *raudram* are usually referred to under the rubric of another Sanskrit term extended into Telugu, *śānti*, ‘tranquility, quietude, peace, calmness’, or its variant, *śāntam*, which may carry an additional sense in Telugu of “gentleness” in relation to others.

Illustrated here will be two contrasting and quite common ritual situations in which *raudra* becomes dramatically manifest, only to be succeeded by *śānti*. One situation is goddess possession, the other possession by the deified dead, children in particular. The first concerns possession ritualists who have one or more neighborhood goddesses “come to” or “come on” them, to employ common Telugu verbal parlance for “possession”, an event also known substantively by the word *pūnakam*. By “possession ritualism” I mean the use of routine or ritually controlled performances for divination, propitiation, celebration or other purposes, either by professionals or lay individuals. By “neighborhood goddess” I mean a local goddess important to a village or urban neighborhood, one who, in the minds of devotees, may sometimes be only vaguely related to regional or classical pan-Indian goddesses. Mutyāmma, Gangāmma, Satyāmma, Sōmalamma, Nūkālamma, Kānāmmatalli, Gandi Pōsamma and many others serve as examples, with particular goddesses celebrated by ritualists for their ferocity and blazing anger. A few devotees with more than passing exposure to the Devī Māhātmyam or other puranic mythologies may connect classical Kālī to her wrathful emanation from Durgā in order to dispense with demonic powers such as Śumbha and Niśumbha, or the widely celebrated Durgapūja conquest of Mahiṣāsura.

The second staging area for *raudra* concerns a widespread tradition in the Delta of ritually establishing deceased children as household deities. Possession ritualism in our second illustration means possession of both professionals and non-professionals (i.e. family members) by a deceased child who continues to live in the home as center of routine worship and occasional nocturnal festivals. In this tradition a deified girl child is known as *vīrakanyaka*, a boy is known as *vīranna* or *vīruḍu*, and *vīrabhadra* serves as appellation for all deceased children. The heroic nature of these deified dead is conveyed by the Sanskrit/Telugu word *vīra* incorporated in their names. Ritualized rage in this tradition is multiform. There is the transparent rage of the deceased child deprived of a normal life-span and a timely death; the rage of the bereaved family, and the parents in particular; even the rage of the majority non-Brahman communities deprived of Brahmanic funerary symbols, some of which symbols are mirrored in outsiderhood fashion in the Vīrabhadra cult. There is not space here to elaborate on all these dimensions of *raudra*, but

(*kanya, pūja, Durga, Sati*) and long vowels e and o (*vēdam, sōmam, purōhitam*) are here printed with a macron; as illustrated in *raudram* and the last three nouns, Telugu may have a final nasal.

there is occasion briefly to contrast a village with an urban situation, as well as gender distinctions in manifestations of the enraged and the controlled.

The important consideration here is that in both of these situations of rage converted to repose, whether it is the ritualist becoming a fierce neighborhood goddess or a ritualist or layperson harboring a deified guardian child, the event itself is a positive one. It is encouraged and sought after by professionals and clients or ordinary householders alike. Although sometimes dangerous, even terrifying engagements with the divine or spirit world, they nonetheless involve invitations to states of possession in ritual contexts, neither of them to be confused with healing traditions (see e.g. Pakaslahti 1998), exorcisms or other ritual attempts to eliminate demons and evil powers. In both cases raging powers are invited precisely because their wrath is a necessary conduit of spiritual energy, information, illumination, a channel that hopefully may be employed in reverse with devotion, affection, reassurance so that rage is converted to repose. Such transformation has mythic models.

2. GODDESSES

We begin with possessions by neighborhood goddesses. Possession ritualists frequently report that there are 101 goddesses and there are 101 different types of possession. The form (*rūpam*) of each goddess may be fierce (*raudra*, *ugra*) or gentle (*saumya*) when she comes, but it is generally believed there are different *rūpas* for each and every goddess. This statement carries the implication that no two states of possession are alike. Since ritualists may claim to be possessed by numerous deities, including many different goddesses, opportunities are ripe for multiple personalities, voices, and emotional states to appear in ritualism. One female ritualist provides vivid details of eight successive goddesses who have competed to be on her over a period of 23 years, and a male ritualist reports 18 different goddesses, with paintings or lithograph posters of each on the walls of his shrine room (figs. 1 & 2). As to the appearance of the *raudra* form of those goddesses who choose to come to them, descend upon them, speak through them, the personal histories of possession ritualists reveal a number of occasions and explanations.

All ritualists have highly nuanced personal narratives to relate, and most go back to the existential moment of transformation in the initial grasp of possession. It is the unforgettable first moment when the first goddess caught this individual. For that person the world is transformed, life has begun anew, a career has sprouted from the initiatory event. But all around are the unbelievers, relatives in another village, the next-door neighbors, even members of the household. Aggressive resistance to the scoffers and the contemptuous may call for manifestations of superhuman rage. Nandini is a widow, a grandmother in her sixties, and a popular



Fig. 1. Satyam in his *gaddi* (shrine room) where he receives clients while possessed by one or more of 18 different neighborhood goddesses depicted in garlanded framed posters on the wall to his left. Male and female *vīrabhadras* (deceased children), represented by striped “ashfruits” on the floor, also possess him. Portraits of classical Durga and Kālī face clients; a powerful *mantrabettam* (baton) and fresh lime are in his right hand.



Fig. 2. On the wall immediately to Satyam’s left is this portrait of his mightiest neighborhood goddess, Satteramma (variant of Sati Mother), who may turn from rage to repose while possessing him. Dominating the wall to Satyam’s right is a two-meter high painting of Satteramma with the protruding fangs of her *raudra* demeanor.



Fig. 3. In her *gaddi* Nandini is engaged in one of several styles of *vakku* (possession speech) granted to her (as to other possession ritualists) by a special goddess, in the form of *nōru* ('mouth'), *kanthan* ('throat') and *māṭa* ('word').

possession ritualist. From a Scheduled Caste community, educated to eighth class, she has a fair range of Telugu/Sanskrit vocabulary. In her dreams she is constantly guided by Amma ('Mother', meaning Durgamma), the increasingly popular Andhra heroine-goddess Kanaka Durga, who first possessed her 28 years ago and still arrives on her every Friday when she sits in her *gaddi* (household shrine) (fig. 3). Nandini refers to another powerful goddess, less intimate, seemingly more remote in both space and affection, as her Ādiśakti,² one who possesses her on Tuesdays. While Fridays are open to anyone, Tuesdays are limited to select clients only. It is Durgamma who protects her like a child, comes onto her and renders her worthy of worship (*ārādhaṇa*) by devotees (*bhaktas*). And when Nandini and Durga are one, the *raudra* demeanor may surface. "One bad man," she relates,

ridiculed me and my state of possession (*pūnakam*). The goddess [and here she is describing her own actions as Durga] rushed to him, held him by the collar, confronted

² There is ambiguity in this Sanskrit appellation. For a few ritualists it is a personal designation for her/his original or first goddess, while for most an *Ur-śakti*, a primordial or transcendent goddess, is indicated. A ritualist may designate the most powerful *current* goddess as Mahāśakti, whether she is Ādiśakti or another.

him, shouted at him: "How dare you say such things against my devotee!" Amma revealed to me in my sleep that she had caught all those who spoke against me. She showed me three people [in particular]. When he was alive my own husband ridiculed me at first. Amma then appeared before him, *looking exactly like me* with a big *boṭṭu* (forehead mark) and a big nose ring. She said "*agu rā*"! ['Hey! Stop!', like a boss to a servant]. He was so scared! He was a *nāstika*. He shivered in fear. So Amma came to him in my own *rūpam*. I saw him totally confused. But with that proof from Amma herself, from that day on he did not bother me about her.

Nandini slides easily between first and third person narration because in that event she and Amma had become one.

A second common manifestation of *raudra* accompanies opposition to establishment authorities, and Brahmins in particular in their occupations as temple priests, *purōhitas*, domestic ritualists. Like most possession ritualists, Nandini insists that Amma chose her. She had no guru, and the rituals she performs are goddess-instructed. She confesses that subsequent to early possessions when she was a young mother, she sought out a Brahmin *purōhita* in order to perform *Rudrābhisekham* with 125 coconuts on Śivarātri. But Amma's fierce objections put an end to that. "Stop doing this!" bellowed the goddess, "I don't want that Brahmin fellow reciting! I get no satisfaction from that. Every syllable (*akṣara*) must come from you!" Such manifestations can make for lively scenes.

Padma, another grandmotherly ritualist, in her fifties, with husband fully supportive of her career, once entered a prominent temple of Durga on a crowded Friday and rudely shouted down the Brahmin *pūjāri* in the midst of his recitations: "Hey grandson, you are reciting mistakes!" Ādiśakti had possessed her, allowed her to hear errors, and then had given Padma the capacity to recite Vedic mantras to perfection. Knowing the fierce goddesses' demand for blood, she participates in the annual festivals in her neighborhood, roaming madly between the specific borders (*polimēras*), terrorizing the lanes in a state of rage as the goddess, biting the heads off cocks and sucking the blood from the bodies as furious Kālī did from Raktabīja.³

A third expression of *raudra* derives from the fierce possessiveness of goddesses, rage as a backup of jealousy. Satyam, a Reddi-caste house-owner, dairy farmer and possession ritualist in his late forties, married with seven living children, is filled with tension (Tel. *bigutu*) and *raudra* when certain goddesses come on him, but he has conceded to such bodily and emotional transformations as his

³ As climax to the festival male goats, with one special black one designated as initial food, are beheaded in the goddess' temple under Padma's supervision. But she does not bite out its throat and drink in *gāvu*, as it is known in Andhra, with certain male ritualists, possessed by the goddess, clasping a large goat stretched full length face to face for the extremely bloody dispatch. The goddess, says Padma, will not leave the temple and neighborhood until she has received her surfeit of blood. On drinking blood directly from the throat of a large animal victim, see Toffin 1996: 238.

vocation since boyhood. They are the hazards of his trade. His reproach is directed rather at their possessiveness, rivalrous jealousies, and mistrust of him, and the way they mistreat his body although he constantly relinquishes it to their intentions. His different goddesses must all receive constant *pūjas*. Each has special needs and each employs subterfuge to keep him at home in his *gaddi*. “If I try to leave for more than three days, he complains, ‘boils break out all over my body’.”

Padma has similar problems. “As child after child is born,” says Padma contentedly, “so goddess after goddess follows me.” But her world reverts to discontent when goddesses cannot live in her space with harmony. If Durgamma demands meat and Padma must satisfy her, then vegetarian Kannāmmatalli flies off the handle and rants about this foul-smelling substance entering the body of Padma, a body divided up like a house for multiple tenants. And anger becomes contagious.

A fourth expression of *raudra* ...well, alright, fourth, fifth, sixth. But this may be going about things entirely in the wrong way, providing explanations for wrath, pretexts for aggressive and violent behavior. Most if not quite all the neighborhood goddesses of the Delta are fierce (*ugra*) by nature. They do not require explanations for either *raudra* or *śānta*. *They are goddesses*. The most violent manifestation is the true form of such goddesses (Meyer 1986: 221, 261). Frequently they are described as instillers of fear in the community at large. When Gangamma hangs in her great covered basket from the rafters of the granary far from the house, the householders say they have no need to lock their doors and windows. No one would deliberately invoke *raudra* by intruding when this terrifying goddess is swaying up there. Even the house owners themselves, her worshippers, walk cautiously in her sight. She has no terrible swift sword in her hand. In fact she has no hands. In her elevated basket home she is a thick mass of aging jute ropes, each with a knot at the end, a hood, a cobra hood. She is Gangamma!

The rage of the goddess is followed – if she is pleased with her festival and its proper offerings, worship, vows and dedications – by repose, as indeed the hot season is followed by her cooling rains, and attendant epidemic diseases (still including various poxes and fevers if not the scourge of smallpox) are withdrawn by her retreating ferocity (see Beck 1981: 130).

Individuals chosen by such neighborhood goddesses to *embody* goddesses and *speak* as goddesses are seen as figures of awesome and dangerous power. They may suddenly crackle and blaze like fire when possessed, eyes flashing, mouths demanding to be fed burning camphor balls, charcoal embers, lumps of turmeric paste, *nīm* tree leaves. All of these go down the hatch. Fire in fact is a major symbol of transformation for these ritualists whose bodies are liminal containers poised between two worlds. They handle fire, walk on fire, eat fire, and when they are brought down to the state of *śānti* it is through eating fresh limes and being deluged repeatedly with tubs of cold water. For the moment these efforts

diminish their fires and render them marginally sociable beings. Water is said to reduce their interior heat (*tapas*, Tel. *tapam* or *tapassu*).

Brilliant light is another interior manifestation. One quite skeptical, articulate woman who travels about the Delta in search of possession ritualists whose goddesses tell her “the truth” rather than lies, reports on a particular ritualist whose name is Bharani:

When Durgamma is on her she speaks very well. She is full of *kānti* [‘brilliance, light’]. As long as Amma is on her she is full of *ankāram* [Telugu colloquial form of *ahankāram*, which in the context of possession would mean a powerful arrogance, even *raudram*]. What takes place is *kāntiga* [‘brilliant, glowing’] *pūja*. But once Durga is out and she becomes awake, then the things she says are untruths.

The seven, eight or 16 *mātṛkās* of the epic and later periods are examples of the often fierce, malevolent bringers of disease and death to infants and small children (Kinsley 1986: 151ff.). Other collectivities of wrathful “mothers” include the ten Mahāvidyās, an important group consisting of Kālī, first of all, followed by Tārā, Tripura-sundarī, Bhuvaneśvarī, the famous self-decapitating Chinnamastā, Bhairavī, Dhūmāvātī, Bagalāmukhī, Mātāṅgī and Kamalā. They are found in tantric texts, *śākta* purānas, and various folk lores, particularly in North India. All but one of the ten are fierce in behavior and iconographic portrayals, Kamalā, a variant of Śrī or Lakṣmī being the benign exception. Bearing bloody swords and other weapons of destruction in the mode of classical Kālī, clothed in human arms and skull necklaces, sitting on / standing on / carrying / or having sexual intercourse with corpses, frequenting the burning and burial grounds, displaying unlimited erotic force, paralyzing the unwary and bestowing magical powers to devotees, these goddesses are terrifying paradigms of feminine energy. As Kinsley remarks of the common scene of the cremation ground as their home, this liminal place is one of “spirit traffic”. “It is where all human beings eventually and inevitably make contact with the spirit world as they pass from life to death” (Kinsley 1997: 237).

Few of the stories and iconographies of the Mahāvidyās are commonly known as such in the lore of our Andhra possession ritualists and their mountain, forest and neighborhood goddesses. But the trajectories of goddess collectivities would appear to be parallel in many ways, and in the direction of more-or-less accredited Śiva, Durgā, Kālī and the violence of transformation. Their locus is neither in esoteric communities of left-hand tantrism nor in renunciant Hinduism. All of the representative possession ritualists described thus far are householders in villages or towns, with householder associates and clients. They come from both the so-called “right hand” and “left hand” castes (see Narayana Rao 1986: 142ff.; Beck 1972) and resist classification by caste or gender stereotypes revealed in folk epics.

The generalizations and tables of oppositions and classifications of “wild goddesses” versus “mild goddesses” assembled by the editors of *Wild Goddesses*

in India and Nepal (Michaels, Vogelsanger & Wilke 1996: 22–25) are thought provoking and revealing. Most neighborhood goddesses of the Godavari Delta are illustrations of mobility between poles of the *ugra* (wild) and *saumya* (mild), transformation being their *modus operandi*. And therefore they contest ready classification by nature, worship and function according to the editors' tables.

The personal narratives of those possessed by neighborhood goddesses are instructive and often riveting. Padma, our ritualist who attracts new goddesses wherever she goes, employs images of uncontrollable children and lice (Tel. *pēlu*):

All these goddesses will be in my house like children on the rampage. Tiny children ... crawling all over us when we are sleeping. All those nine days [of Navarātri] ... I let my hair down, I run my fingers through my hair [she demonstrates] and lice and goddesses fall to the ground like *vippa*-flower petals. You find them in full bloom on the creeper all of a sudden in the morning, and so do the goddesses come [Sōmalamma, Kannāmmatalli, Mutyāamma, Nūkāamma, Pōamma, Pṛthivīśakti, etc.]. Only in those days do I have lice, never at other times. They filter through my fingers for all nine days. All the goddesses are there, *kurulu tāṇḍavam*, dancing violently in my hair. And they swing. They drop continuously from my hair. They should never be crushed! If you try to do that your thumb will swell up.

Padma's professional life is structured upon ritual, and the secret ritual knowledge – *rahasyam* is her word – received in the *vidyā* from the goddesses enables her to serve others. Since goddesses are fierce and aggressive by nature, there is an expectation of manifestations of *raudra*, followed after a proper interval, by *śānti*. To the outsider, unequipped with such cultural expectations, possessions may at times appear theatrical and unconvincing. An example is Dēśamma, a prepubescent village girl, probably about twelve years old, suddenly possessed, then established in a *gaddi* on Tuesdays and Fridays to “speak” (Tel. do *pati*) for the benefit of clients who sought advice from the goddess on a full range of problems, the lost watch or photo that might be employed in sorcery, dreams of biting snakes, a death threat, or that universal ailment known as body weakness. Indeed it was extraordinary to see, in the brief span of her meteoric career – less than a year – blazing anger flash from eyes in a twelve-year-old face. When the goddess was on her she addressed all male clients, teenage boys or men the age of her grandfather, as younger brother (Tel. *tammuḍu*), and all females as younger sister (Tel. *celli*, informal). Sometimes she confronted devotees with insolence, always with aggressive, unquestionable superiority. When her mother was asked if there were plans for Dēśamma to marry, the mother replied: “The rage of Amma is on her. During that time there can be no marriage.”

But when going into *pūnakam*, before being doused with turmeric water that would reduce her to a state of mediation and accessibility to humans, the community support was at times almost comic in its preparation for *raudra*. Devotees attributed strong emotions to her unpolished whirlings and swayings prior to her sitting in the

gaddi, and they shouted warnings to one another when she ran and leaped like any playful little girl. “Amma!” “Talli!” “Bhavāni!” “Watch out!” “She’ll stamp on you!” “Don’t give us that much *agrāham* [meaning *ankāram*]. Reduce it!” “Even three people cannot hold her!” There is a well-known enchantment for the goddess who appears as a child, *bala*, and many people report they have seen her in this guise or at least heard her ankle bells as she glided by in the night. The childish, coltish, unstable behavior of Dēśamma beguiled her village devotees into total fascination with a new avatāra, a raw power, virgin *śakti* of an aggressive child goddess who flowered suddenly in their midst. I have referred to Dēśamma in the past tense because she died without explanation in March 1997. Her parents, neighbors, devotees all believe she fell victim to the sorcery (*cētabaḍi*) of another possession ritualist in an adjacent village, a widow in her early fifties who saw her clientele – built up during an eight-year history of possessions – lured away to this prepubertal and more powerful manifestation of *śakti*. Here surely there is a glimpse of a darker side of *raudra* in popular belief.

3. THE RAGING DEAD

We turn now to our second illustration of *raudra* in possession ritualism, one that concerns the widespread tradition of possession by the spirits of deceased infants, children and youth, those untimely dead who are said to have become Vīrabhadra, the god born from Śiva’s uncontrollable *raudra* (see Knipe 1989). They now inhabit an ethereal community of *vīrabhadras* in the neighborhoods where they once lived. Puranic Vīrabhadra is well known for his destructive rage, marching off with his furious army (*gaṇas*) to destroy the Vedic sacrifice of Dakṣa in cosmic vengeance for the self-immolation of Śiva’s wife, Satī. In the Godavari Delta families of many communities, including Brahmans and high caste Vaiśya communities, establish deceased children as household deities and the focus of familial worship and annual nocturnal processions (Tel. *sambarams*).

Possession ritualism in this second illustration means Vīrabhadra possession of two groups. There are the professionals, including all of the above-mentioned goddess-possession ritualists except twelve-year-old Dēśamma. Satyam, for example, although he suffered the loss of only one of his own children, is possessed by *vīrabhadras* who were his father’s brother, his mother’s brother, and his own younger brother. But more powerful than any of them, or any of his goddesses except Sattemma, is a beautiful unmarried 18-year-old girl from a different caste who, having been installed as *vīrakanyaka* after her tragic death, announced to her family that she wished to move from the family shrine into Satyam’s *gaddi* and be his helping spirit when he sings his haunting *sima*-style possession-speech. She has become his Mahāśakti.

But far more frequently it is the case that *vīrabhadras* possess a second group, the non-professional members of their own families, either at the home shrine (*pīṭham*) or in nocturnal processions. Out on the empty lanes of the village or the town in the frightening hours between one and four a.m. these noisy ritual assemblies deliberately invite *vīrabhadras* to appear and speak through their parents, siblings or other kin. It is understood that the *vīrabhadras* may surface in anger, the *raudra* expressions of the untimely dead deprived of marriage, sexuality, and continuity in a lineage. Since the night performances are ritualized, with a beginning and an end, the often violent cathartic experiences are contained, and supervisory ritualists with their skilled musicians are prepared to calm down and resuscitate those who, overcome by their *vīrabhadras*, fall unconscious or try to cause harm to themselves or others.⁴

It is perhaps even more demanding and exhausting for an ordinary lay householder to harbor the *raudra* form of a deceased child than it is for a professional possession ritualist to embody a fierce goddess. The professional, after all, does this for a living and anticipates what will happen to the body in an altered state of consciousness. Some lay householders observed for two decades admit to wearing out. Sāvītri is one of them, a Reddi woman in her late fifties who lives with her husband and several of her married sons. She lost her first son at the age of one year. Nine years later, on the seventh day after the birth of her third child, another boy, she was possessed by that first son. He had become a Vīrabhadra. Sāvītri is one of a circle of five or six female neighbors of various castes who pool their resources in joint processions for their personal *vīrabhadras*, since all of these women maintain *pīṭhams* for their children who died between ten to forty years ago. Recently two of Sāvītri's grown children who had previously scoffed at her frequent melodramatic states have now been possessed by this god, their own elder sibling. But Sāvītri is increasingly worn down by the undiminished rage of her first-born. "I confessed to him", says Sāvītri, "that my age is advancing. What else can we do when we are old and weak?" And her long-time ritualist, who has known her for decades and witnesses her struggle to deal with *raudra*, chimes in: "We argue with that *vīrabhadra*, 'Don't you see she is getting old? What are you doing to her?'" In such cases of enduring *raudra* it is not uncommon for the

⁴ "Spirit possession" and "spirit mediumship" are two categories employed by Claus (1979) and Schoembucher (1993), the former denoting "possession of a ritual specialist by an entity, such as a deity, a demon, a ghost or ancestor" and the latter denoting possession of a person "by an undesired, harmful and malevolent deity" (Schoembucher 1993: 242–243). Neither of these is satisfactory when it comes to a lay person who *invites* possession by the powerful, potentially benevolent child guardian deity and then speaks as that deity. The above "spirit mediumship" definition only perpetuates the mistaken notion that all states of possession are negative and in need of some procedure of exorcism.

worship of, and ritual embodiment of the deceased child to pass down to the next generation of more durable bodies.

At times there is a thin line between lay and professional possession ritualism. Andal is a Weaver caste woman in her early forties, married with five children, possessed by Durga and the “new” goddess from the North, Santōṣī Mā. Her primary and most powerful possessor, however, is a twenty-year-old *vīrabhadra* who was/is her husband’s younger brother. She has worshipped him for twelve years and every Monday when he is on her body people come to ask questions in general, with particular concern for the well-being of their own *vīrabhadras*. Since she charges no fees for this service, her household shrine remains a *pīṭham*, although clearly one that is upwardly mobile in the direction of *gaddi*, professional shrine, a term that Andal herself occasionally lets slip into conversation.

There are a striking contrasts to be noted between possession styles in towns and villages, on one hand, and between men and women on the other. In towns one rarely sees a man in possession. Men do participate in the night-long processions for their *vīrabhadras*, although they are outnumbered by women and children as much as four to one. But they resist possession states because – or so one is told – it is unseemly for a man to exhibit emotions in public (cf. Caldwell 1996: 204). In rituals within or just outside the home there is no such reticence. Many women, on the other hand, whether in their homes or out on the streets, make no attempt to curb their emotions, and frequently it is women, suddenly possessed by their own *vīrabhadras*, who rush from their houses to respond to the drums, flutes and screams of a passing *sambaram* for a family not even known to them. Women’s styles of pumping arms, leaping, dancing *vīraṅgam* style as cobras, or just flailing and wailing, are sometimes individualistic and non-programmatic.

By contrast, in certain smaller villages where the night processions for *vīrabhadras* are celebrated by virtually all families, and all are acquainted with one another in caste and occupational homogeneity, gender lines between possession styles are as clearly marked as in the urban scene, but are reversed. Here *raudra* becomes a mass riot on the part of the village men, as many as a hundred simultaneously roaring, leaping, striking out as if to kill, the more uncontrollable of them held down by three or four sets of restraining arms and yet still they spring with inhuman fury into the air until finally falling to the ground in exhaustion. No concern here for public image. While these men rage outwardly with blazing eyes against all the forces surrounding them, powers only they can see, women’s *raudra* is markedly interiorized. Eyes closed, heads lolling, feet immobilized and useless, they sag silently between two children or relatives who forcefully drag them along in circuits round the temple of *Vīrabhadra* (fig. 4). It happens in simultaneity, this remarkable contrast between outward male aggression and interior female agony.

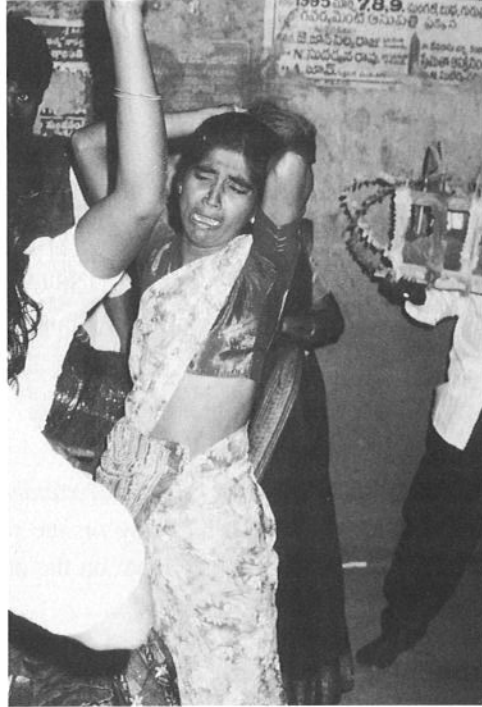


Fig. 4. Young woman screaming in agony in the voice of her child *vīrabhadra*. She is one of six householder mothers of deceased children who have joined in a night-long procession (*sambaram*) through the streets to invite the dead to possess them and speak.

Eventually, subsequent to firewalking, the tranquility of *śānti* pervades the village and the night of the raging *Vīrabhadra* and manifold *vīrabhadras* comes to a close.

Perhaps the most telling clues to gender variation come from the observations of supervisory ritualists and from iconography. Ritualists who routinely relate to those possessed by their *vīrabhadras* say there is far more *raudra* in those possessed by female children than those possessed by males. “As ritualists,” says one,

we find difficulties in convincing and pacifying the possessions by *virakanyakas*. It is easy to deal with male *vīrabhadras*. They give in easily, whereas *virakanyakas* are tough. In a family where there are both a male and a female, always the *virakanyaka* dominates the scene of possessions. She will push the male *vīrabhadra* (her brother) behind the screen every time.

And the other clue comes from iconographic statements. All *vīrabhadras* are represented in *pīṭhams* by “ashfruits”, Tel. *vibhūtipaḷḷu* (Knipe 1989: 132ff.). But sometimes anthropomorphic figures accompany them, small painted figurines of a female and a male, the latter always without weapons or ornamentation, the female always holding a raised sword or stick in her right hand. And so we return by way of the deceased girl child to the *śakti* of the fierce goddess.

One local narration of the myth of Dakṣa's sacrifice brings themes together with an intriguing twist. A condensed summary is this: Vīrabhadra destroys Dakṣa's *yajña*, Viṣṇu as Nārasimha enables Dakṣa to complete it, Vīrabhadra captures Nārasimha. Then Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahma all appeal to Durga for Nārasimha's release. But even in her *raudra* form she is no match for Vīrabhadra. She then jumps into the Godavari River and emerges from the sacred water as an enchantingly beautiful girl. At the sight of her Vīrabhadra is rendered helpless (like the otherwise invincible Irish hero Cu' Chulainn), and Nārasimha escapes. Durga's *raudra* cooled, her *śānta* form overcomes the uncontrollable Vīrabhadra.

4. CONCLUSION

There is much more to be said of *raudra* and *śānti* in possession ritualism, but as conclusion to this brief essay on the roles of possessing entities on one hand and ritualists who embody them on the other hand, we are compelled back to two mythic paradigms:

- Puranic Vīrabhadra is an uncontrollable rage born out of the anger of Śiva.
- Puranic Kālī is an uncontrollable rage born out of the anger of Durgā.

Since both divine creations are *raudra* out of control, both are invincible and therefore successful in their respective rampages of destruction, the elimination of Dakṣa's sacrifice by Vīrabhadra and the elimination of Śumba and Niśumba by Kālī. The *vīrabhadras* and the neighborhood goddesses are respective manifestations of the same uncontrollable rage.

And yet they are controlled. How does this happen? There are two significant factors: First, *raudra* becomes manifest in human containers, not divine bodies, and thus there are temporal limits to states of possession in both of our illustrations. And second, ritualization effectively brackets occurrences of *raudra* in both cases. Ritual preparations such as the lighting of incense, beating of drums, even the arrival of ritualists become triggers for entrance. The use of cooling water and fresh limes are examples of media for exit. Such ritualization is the means of bordering that which proved in the divine realm to be uncontrollable. Only briefly, and with deep consequences, can those in the human world withstand true appearances of the sound and the fury.

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