

Funeral for the Living: The Ontology of Goddess Paadaikatiya Mariamman

(Tentative Title)

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Of the sixteen Saṃskāras in Hinduism, the post-mortem rituals (*Antyeṣṭi*) are very elaborate lasting up to one year. This rite of passage evokes a deep sense of pollution and dread and according to some traditions prohibit the chief mourner and his family from accessing any sacred spaces, namely the temples, for a prolonged period of time. Apart from the inauspicious nature of this Saṃskāra which requires major purificatory rites to return to the state of purity, it also comprises of ceremonies to prevent *preta* from haunting the family by guiding it to the *Pitrloka* (ancestral realm). While this may hold true for Valangaiman, a peri-urban town panchayat and my ethnographic fieldsite in the Thiruvarur district of Tamil Nadu, staging funeral rituals within temple ground form an integral part of its religious cosmos. Pāṭai Kāvaṭi Tiruviḷā, the annual temple festival for the guardian deity of the village, Goddess Māriyam'maṇ, witnesses devotees re-enacting post-mortem rituals as a *vēṅṭtal* (an offering to the deity) in exchange for life. When signifiers of death and funeral rituals are actively brought to the foreground of ritual spaces predominantly characterised as sacred spaces, my dissertation seeks to problematise:

1. How the spatial configuration of the temple, its connection to cremation grounds, materialities of living 'corpses' and death beds ultimately lead to deification of death and post-mortem rituals?
2. How vernacular religious traditions such as Pāṭai Kāvaṭi Tiruviḷā critique pure/impure dichotomous conceptualisation of sacred spaces in Hindu religiosity?
3. In order to address the aforementioned inquiries, I intend to focus on the varying subject position of the goddess in oral narratives and memorates in pre and during COVID times. With the goddess at the epicenter of the cosmic and material world, I intend to tease out her intentionality and the inter-subjective relationship between her and the devotees that are often facilitated through a network of ritual agents, both within and outside the temple.