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Hindu Deities on 'World Tour': Unbounded Efficacies

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Abstract

Much of the literature on migration and religion is anthropocentric, focusing on the movement of individuals and communities across national boundaries. A great deal of festival Hinduism sees *utsava murti* (literally, 'processional deities') temporality venturing beyond their secular abodes, which 'please' the deity and benefit devotees who imbibe the deity´s divine power. Here I highlight a *different variant of the phenomenon of gods on the move*, focusing on the actual physical movement of *utsava murtis* (and religious personnel, expertise and materials) from temples in India to diasporic locales, including Singapore. This paper examines the phenomenon of globally sojourning Hindu deities through a focus on the phenomenon of 'divine visits' across transnational borders – as a phenomenon consciously and deliberately planned to achieve particular outcomes – both spiritual and economic/commercial – themselves entangled in complex modes. The paper also abstracts the inspiration for organizing such divine visits, given especially the considerable secular and ritual labour that is required to execute these moves efficiently. The transportation of icons, ritual objects and religious personnel is framed by challenges imposed by given Hindu practices and conventions as well as the logistics of global travel, as well as the religious, legal, economic, political conditions that govern these movements. The paper argues that in these mobilities, Hindu deities participate in the creation of the topographies of national and religious belonging. The ethnography demonstrates how devotes negotiate the complex relationships between notions of *darsan* (sighting), *bhakti* (devotion) and *shakti* (energy/efficacy) of Hindu deities in these divine visitations.

Keywords

Diaspora Hinduism, transnational migration, mobile deities, *utsava murti, bhakti, shakti* and *darsan*

Opening Frames

Much of the literature on migration and religion is anthropocentric, focusing on the movement of individuals and communities across national boundaries. The research has documented how these enable the flows of religious practices, institutions, ideologies and sentiments (Vertovec and Peach 1997: Vertovec and van der Veer 1997). The scholarship on diaspora and Hinduism has certainly documented the transplantation of Hindu elements from South Asia regions to Europe and North America. In particular the phenomenon of 'traveling deities' to diasporic locales has been well documented (Arumugam 2020; Dempsey 2006; Maunaguru 2020, 2021; Sinha 2005; Waghorne 2004). In the Indian context, travelling goddesses in Maharashtra

(Feldhaus 1995) and moving territorial deities in the Kulu Valley (Mahajan 2022) have been well theorized. Admittedly, there are several other phenomena that can be encapsulated under the banner of 'traveling deities'. For example, as I researched the phenomenon of mobile deities, I learnt about the 1.65 m tall statue of the Hindu deity Visnu, weighing in at 500 kg and dated to 9th century AD, from the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. This was recently moved from the collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Dahlem) into the Humboldt Forum in Berlin**,** where the 'statue is presented in a room that is dedicated to the characteristic visual creations and motifs of Hindu temple art. Here, the central deities of Hinduism in their various guises are featured, as are the ritual uses of images of deities.'[1]

The idea of mobile deities is far from alien to Hindus. A great deal of festival and popular Hinduism sees *utsava murtis* (Sanskrit, 'festival or processional icons') – representations of Hindu divinities, which function as a substitute/alternative/replica for *mulavar/mula murtis* (Sanskrit, 'main, principal image') – venturing beyond their secular abodes, astride chariots or carried by devotees (Luchesi 2008; Sinha 2008). These outings serve to 'please' deities as well as benefit devotees who imbibe the latter's blessings while also 'catching sight' (receive *darsan*) of divinities and express their devotion (*bhakti*) towards their gods. However, shifting the lens from processional, ceremonial deities, here I highlight a *different variant of the phenomenon of gods on the move,* focusing on the actual physical movement of visual representations of deities (and the retinue of religious personnel, expertise and materials) from temples in India to diasporic locales, including Singapore. This paper deals with images of Hindu deities and their agency/authenticity/power that they represent, their mobility and their participation in the creation of topographies of national and religious belonging – in the context of diasporic community and migration. Drawing on ethnographic research from Hindu domains in Singapore, this paper examines the phenomenon of globally sojourning Hindu deities through a focus on the phenomenon of 'divine visits' across transnational borders – as a phenomenon, consciously and deliberately planned to achieve particular outcomes – both spiritual and economic/commercial ones – themselves entangled in complex modes. Additionally, I argue that devotees negotiate the complex relationships between notions of *darsan* (sighting), *bhakti* (devotion) and *shakti* (energy/efficacy) in enactment of religious piety in the context of these divine visitations. I argue that the transportation of images/icons of Hindu deities – in the form of *utsava murtis* – from temples and organisations in India to Hindu diasporic locales is a fascinating phenomenon, adding to the complex religious landscape therein.

The paper also abstracts the inspiration for organizing such divine visits, given especially the considerable secular and ritual labour that is required to execute these moves efficiently. It also seeks to document the religious, legal, economic and political conditions that govern the movements of traveling (representations of) deities. The transportation of icons, ritual objects and religious personnel is also framed by challenges imposed by given Hindu practices and conventions as well as the logistics of global travel. A core theoretical interest lies in interrogating some of the modalities of 'displacement' and the complexities of partaking in the charisma and divinities of the deities as they travel. Interestingly, the latter is achieved against the background of some prohibitions and restrictions on leaving Indian Hindu shores. The key guiding questions in this paper are as follows: why do deities travel; what does this say about their [divine] efficacies and what happens to deities and their sacrality (and thus divinity) when they leave their dominion and encounter secular and profane elements; if/how are deities' energies reconfigured through moments of transnational mobility? My research in Singapore's Hindu domains enables me to offer ethnographically informed responses to these queries.

[1] https://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/travelling-deities-vishnu-moves-into-the-humboldt-forum/

Ethnographic Grounding[2]

In 2015, the 'first ever Singapore visit' of *utsava murtis* (processional deities) of the Thiruchendur Sri Murugan, Sri Valli and Sri Dheivaanai (his two wives) from the Chendur Murugan Seva Trust, Thiruchendur in India[3] (Figure 1) was organised by Singapore's Arulmigu Velmurugan Gnanamuneeswarar Temple (AVGMT).[4] A week-long festival, held between 29 May and 7 June of this year enabled Singapore's Hindus to receive *darsan* of these deities and to partake in rituals to express their *bhakti.* The event was hosted by AVGMT – a 'combined', 'merged' temple that I have a long-term research familiarity with (Sinha 2005, 97-99). The coming of the three deities from Thiruchendur to Singapore's shores was presented in a publicity poster as 'a visit to our nation, which celebrates its 50th birthday this year...We welcome all devotees to be part of this memorable event to mark SG50 and receive blessings of the Lord and pray for Singapore's continued progress and prosperity and your family's well-being' – suggesting that the event was momentous for Singapore, as well as her Hindu community. These observations piqued my intellectual curiosity, and I conducted some fieldwork and interviews with devotees and event organizers after the event in 2015. At the time, I also knew of another temple in Singapore – Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple (SSPT) – which had organized the travel of deities from TTD to Singapore back in 2008. I had done some preliminary fieldwork and interviews with organizers of both these events and shared early reflections in a conference paper I presented in 2015.

More recently between 2019 and 2023, in the course of my on-going fieldwork on Hinduism in Singapore, I heard of several more instances of such 'divine visits' to the island nation-state, going back to 2008. These fascinating ethnographic vignettes inspired me to delve into this phenomenon and led me to conduct fieldwork in Singapore between August 2022 to-date. In addition to the two temples mentioned, I learnt of two cultural and religious associations – Singapore Malayalee Hindu Samajam[5] and Singapore Telugu Samajam – that have also organized visits of deities from prominent Hindu temples in India to Singapore. For obvious reasons, these Hindu temples and Indian cultural, regional organizations have sought to bring deities from prominent, established and popular Hindu temples in India. In this context, it is not just these temples, but even the regions (towns, cities) where these temples are located that are deemed to be sacred by devotees – diasporic and otherwise.

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[2] The phenomenon of mobile deities or divinities is not unique to Hinduism. Coincidentally, Singapore has hosted divine and saintly figures from other religious traditions as well Hindu deities. In a high profile 7-day visit in 2017, the Archdiocese of Singapore hosted a pilgrim image of 'Our Lady of Fatima', blessed by Pope Francis (https://catholicnews.sg/2017/09/03/fatima-pilgrim-image-coming-to-singapore-in-september/).

[3] The Arulmigu Subramaniya Swamy Temple, in the town of Tiruchendur in Tamil Nadu, India is famous as an ancient temple dedicated to the deity Murukan. The temple is maintained and administered by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu. Notably, the Thiruchendur temple is one of the 6 most prominent Murugan temples in South India.

[4] The Arulmigu Velmurugan Gnanamuneeswaran Temple (AVGMT), located in Sengkang Housing Estate (SHE), brings together three temples – Velmurugan Temple (Silat Road), Sri Mariamman Muneeswaran Temple (Lorong Kesum, Jalan Kayu) and Sri Krishna Bhagvan Durga Temple (Lorong Kesum, Jalan Kayu.

[5] The Singapore Malayalee Hindu Samajam (SMHS) was founded in March 1926 for the welfare of Malayalees in Singapore. Early members were drawn from the workforce of the Public Works Deaprtment, Singapore Harbour Board and labourers (including from the estates) from Malaysia. Today the membership includes Singapore citizens, Permanent residents as well as a strong cluster of Malayalees who are non-Singaporeans. Under the auspices of the Singapore Malayalee Hindu Samajam (SMHS), remarkably, the goddess from the Chakkulathukavu Sree Bhagvathy Amman Temple in Kerala has visited Singapore about 8 times by now, the most recent one being in April 2023 (Figure 8). The visit has become a regular, event in the annual ritual calendar of the SMHS in Singapore. Chakkulathukavu is a temple dedicated to the mother goddess, in the form of Durga, located near Thiruvilla, in the Indian state of Kerala. It is a prominent temple and a popular pilgrimage site for devotees.

Figure 1: *Utsava murtis* of Sri Murugan, Sri Valli and Sri Dheivaanai (from the Chendur Murugan Seva Trust) in Singapore, from Facebook

During my fieldwork in Singapore 2022-2023, as I described my interest in understanding these 'divine visits' to the island, in a light-hearted mode my research interlocutors suggested the descriptors, 'traveling deities', 'overseas deities' and 'deities on world tour'. While initially, these terms were mentioned half-jokingly, they ultimately became conceptual centrepieces in this research – shaping my ethnography, which I approach simultaneously as a mode of seeing, doing, thinking and writing. Methodologically, this paper is grounded in interviews I had undertaken in 2015 with organizers of the AVGMT and SSPT festivals and devotees who had participated in these. While I am currently actively doing ethnographic work – fieldwork and interviews – with all 4 entities that have organized 'divine visits' between 2008 and 2023, this paper focuses on the AGVMT and SSPT events. My earlier research focus on the latter events had led me to embark on specific research inquiries which have over the course of the years (and especially in the last 12 months), grown considerably in scope and scale. I find myself facing a rich empirical and substantive domain and an intriguing research project intellectually. Plus, the realization that the execution of this project requires me to undertake fieldwork in a number of inter-connected locales globally.[6]

Grounding 'Hinduism' in India's mythological, cultural and physical landscape means that India as the 'home of Hinduism,' has a looming presence in Hindu diasporic consciousness, even if the 'myth of eventual return' is absent. Efforts to reproduce elements of Hinduism outside India reveal a continuous orientation to India, which is approached as an authentic, legitimate religious-cultural reservoir for nourishing the religion beyond Indian shores. The idea of 'coming home' to India for everything to do with Hinduism no doubt carries a symbolic

[6] Singapore, Malaysia, India, United Arab Emirates and the United States have surfaced *so far* as research sites, with other possible sites depending on the unfolding ethnography.

dimension; 'Hinduism' is tied to, and historically, embedded in the geographical and socio-cultural space known as 'India.' It is striking that Hindus who have left India continue their orientation to India as the birthplace of Hinduism and consider this to be crucial in all matters pertaining to this religious tradition. India remains central in the Hindu imagination and consciousness as the most legitimate and preferred site for all things Hindu.

To my knowledge, the Venkateshwara deity from Tirupati has visited the island twice, the first being in 2008 (Figure 2) and most recent one in 2019 (Figure 3). The first visit was spearheaded by the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple – the only Singapore dedicated to Perumal (Visnu) – and supported strongly by the Singapore Telugu Samajam (STS)[7]. Indeed, the latter has been a key driving force in subsequent visits of the deity to the island, but has worked closely with local temples and Indian, Hindu who have been more than willing supporters and partners. The 2019 festival that brought the *utsava murti* of Sri Perumal from the Tirumala Tirupathi Devasthanams was organized independently by STS, but with strong background support from local Hindu temples. Lord Venkatashevara from Tirupati is a favoured deity for Telugus everywhere, including in Singapore. Telugu Hindus express a unique and special connection with the deity, and it is not surprising that the STS was at the forefront of efforts to bring the deity to Singapore.

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) is a trust board that manages the welfare of the Tirumala Venkateshwara Temple, where the presiding deity is Venkateshwara (also known as Perumal and Balaji), a form of Vishnu. The temple is located in the town of Tirupati in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh and under the supervision of the state government. This ancient temple is an exceedingly popular site of worship and a pilgrimage site, receiving 75,000 devotees a day. It is billed as one of the richest temples in the world and its revenue is generated from donations made by devotees and under the oversight of the state government. The TTD provides food, accommodation and transport services to pilgrims visiting Tirupati and helps with the enactment of the popular hair-tonsure ritual (where devotees and pilgrims make offerings of hair as part of votive Hinduism) and the distribution of the famous Tirupati laddus (Indian sweet). The TTD also manages various charitable trusts, whose funds are derived from the budget of the temple and donations from the devotees. Interestingly, already in 1969, the TTD had established an entity called 'Hindu Dharma Pratisthanam' in order to 'spread Sri Venkateswara Bhakti cult across the country and to preserve, propagate and promote Hindu Sanatana Dharma' (Figure 4). In 2007, this entity was refreshed under the name 'Hindu Dharma Prachara Parishad' (HDPP).

The website of the HDPP lists several activities it has initiated to achieve its mission of spreading the 'Sri Venkateshwara Bhakti cult'. Amongst these was the unique initiative labelled 'Sri Srinivasa Kalyanam', which is described as follows:

> HDPP launched a unique program of performing the celestial wedding of the replicas of processional deities in all the rural and urban areas across the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and also the country. This program has gained immense popularity as the devotees are provided with an opportunity to witness the celestial wedding of the Lord at their home towns. Emboldened by the response, *TTD launched an exclusive Kalyanotsavam project to perform these celestial weddings across the country and abroad* (emphasis added).[8]

[7] The Singapore Telugu Samajam was founded in 1975, and serves the linguistic and literary, educational, socio-cultural, and religious needs of the Telugu community in Singapore (https://mail.sts.org.sg/). This is a non-profit organisation and registered as a society under Singapore's *Societies Act*.

[8] https://www.tirumala.org/hdpp.aspx, retrieved 21 April 2023.

Figure 2: Publicity brochure announcing the 2008 visit of Tirumala-Tirupathi Sri Srinivasa Perumal to Singapore, courtesy SSPT.

Figure 3: Publicity brochure announcing the 2019 visit of Tirumala-Tirupathi Sri Srinivasa Perumal to Singapore, courtesy STS.

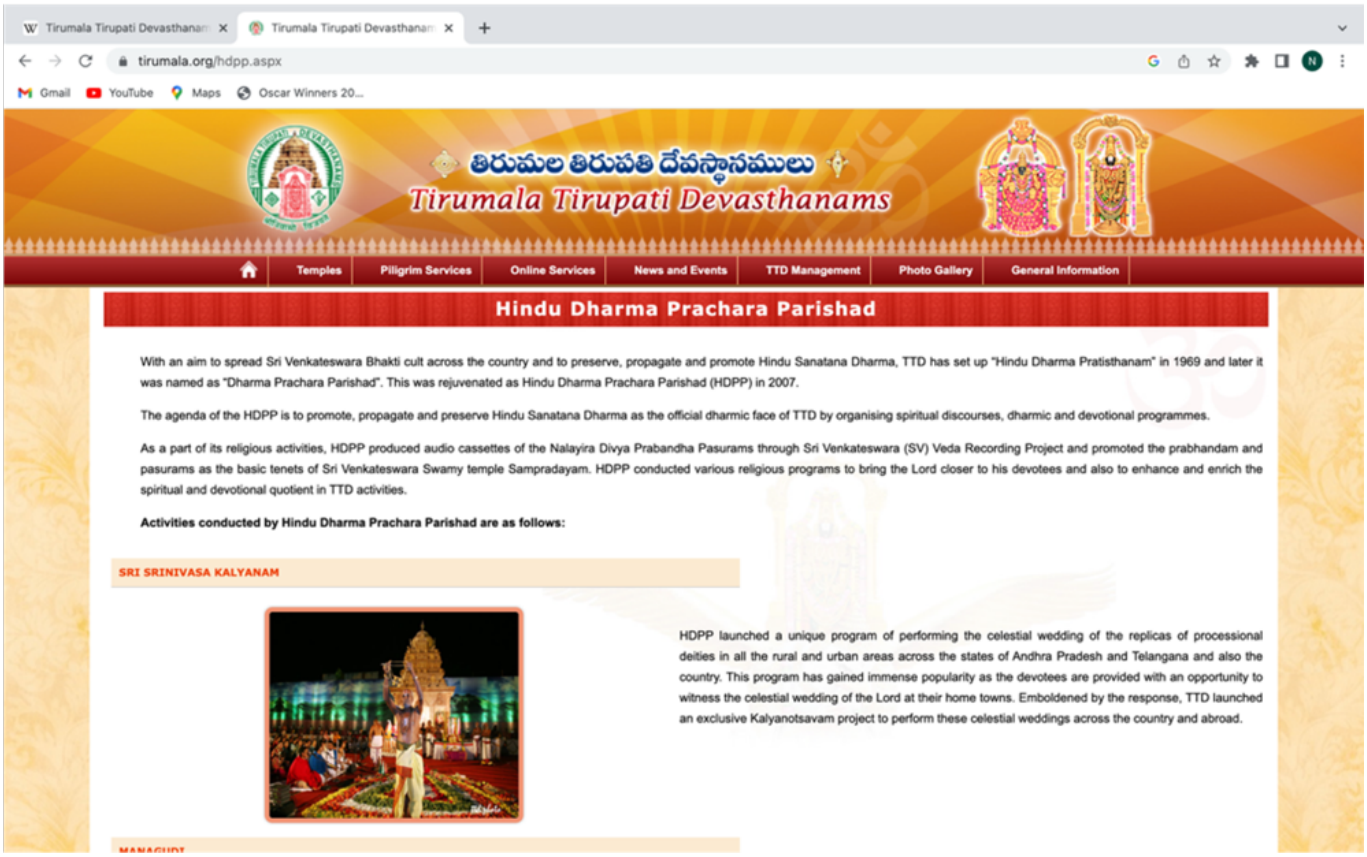

Figure 4: Screenshot from the Tirumala Tirupati Devastahanams, with details of the Hindu Dharma Prachara Parishad.

Interestingly, the organizers of the 2008 SSPT event shared that the TTD had commissioned the construction of a special set of idols – specifically for travel – either to India or beyond. In the same conversation, I learnt that the TTD had already begun the practice of sending its idols to Indian cities of Pune, Delhi and Ahmedabad before venturing beyond India. In light of these pieces of information, it is striking indeed that already in July 2008, the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Singapore held an event, marked as 'a divine first' – in organizing the 'Tirupati Lord Sri Venkateswara Thiru Kalyanaa Mahotsavam in Singapore' (Fig. 6). The publicity poster for the festival announced that the SSPT had organized this event, in conjunction with the 'Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam, the Singapore Telugu Samajam and various Hindu Temples and Organisations'.

Bringing this to Singapore, it would seem, was aligned with the desire to perform 'exclusive Kalyanaotsavam project to perform these celestial weddings across the country and abroad.' Given the timing of the festival in Singapore 2008, it might be reasonable to surmise that this exclusive event was *first* celebrated on the island nation-state. The celestial wedding is described as follows:

> Kalyanotsavam Seva Tirumala marks the hour-long celestial wedding ritual performed according to *Vaikasa Agama Sastra* for the *Utsava Murthis* of the Lord along with His consorts Sri Devi and Bhu Devi in the Kalyana Mandapam. The priest conducts the marriage and an *archaka* is consecrated to perform other rituals on behalf of the bridegroom. (https://gotirupati.com/kalyanotsavam-seva-tirumala/, retrieved 21 April 2023)

Mr. Chandra Mohan attributed the phenomenon of deities from Tirupati 'touring India and the world' to the vision of an individual politician:

> But the Tirupati deity has travelled to other parts of the world. US, I think. Pittsburgh – I think once and to Middle East and London. And of course to Singapore – that was their first trip outside. In India also they went to Chennai, Ahmedabad and some places in North India. They take the *utsava murti* out and only do the *kalyanotsavam*, which is so popular in Tirupati itself – big event – up to 100000 people come – you have to book tickets in advance. The foreign trips are because of Karunakar Reddy. He was the MLA for Tirupati constituency. He was very devoted to the Lord and his vision was to take deity across to his devotees. So in his time, he added foreign trips for the deity.

Notwithstanding this impetus, there has been a firm local interest in 'bringing' Tirupati deities (and from other temples in India) to Singapore – for a variety of reasons. For example, the organizers of the AVGMT 7-day festival shared that one motivation for bringing the Thiruchendur deities was to enable devotees to access them. Indeed, one motivation for this unique initiative was precisely to enable devotees who could not visit these Indian temples for lack of resources and opportunities to 'reach the deities'. Numerous devotees I spoke to emphasized that it was 'convenient', 'practical', 'easy' and 'cheaper' to participate in and perform these rituals with visiting deities in Singapore. They listed the challenges they would face in accessing these deities in the popular temples in India, prime amongst these being the larger crowds of devotees. The latter would mean longer queues and waiting times to seek *darsan* or offer *puja*(s) or conduct *seva* (s). My interlocutors highlighted that these challenges could be circumvented by resorting to 'VIP and VVIP routes' as 'short cuts' – for a payment – to see and access the deity for worship – something that many I spoke to found distasteful. There was also the view that the kind of rituals devotees were able to enact in the Singapore festivals would not be possible in the Indian counterparts. For instance, devotees at the AVGMT event had the opportunity to perform milk *abishegam* (Tamil, 'ritual bathing of the deity') directly, without mediation from the priests – something they would not have a chance to do at the Thiruchendur temple, or at any other Murukan temple in Singapore for that matter. As one of the organizers said, 'We are making it easier for devotees to reach out to the deity – you can do it here but not there. We want you to reach the god and feel the energy and vibration and feel a direct connection with god.'

The Enigma of 'Authenticity'

Within the frames of Hindu iconography, different categories of images are recognised. In its most generic form, the visual representation of a Hindu deity in an image is the condensed, essence of an otherwise formless, unbounded, omnipresent, transcendent divinity – made accessible and available to devotees for worship. In Hindu temples, a visual representation (typically constructed out of stone or granite) of the presiding deity is literally grounded in the *garbhagraha* (Sanskrit, literally 'womb chamber'), marked as the most sacred space within the temple and the image enshrined here is known as the *mulavar* or *mula murti* (Sanskrit, 'central, main deity'). A consecrated image is known as *arca* (Sanskrit, literally 'that which is worshipped') which has been rendered sacred for ritualistic invocation. In addition to the central consecrated deity, another representation of the deity (constructed typically in specific metals or metallic alloys) is also placed within the *garbhagraha*. These latter sets of deities, which have also been consecrated and are ambulant, are ritually attended to during daily and calendrical temple ceremonies. Temple consecration ceremonies literally ground deities (typically built in stone, granite) (Fuller and Logan 1985) in the temple's *garbhagraha* and confer divine energies upon the icon (Hikita 2005). While this material manifestation of the deity is fixed, the deity's powers are not confined to either this enclosure or to the temple's physical boundaries.

The rituals of *prāṇa pratiṣṭhā*, (Sanskrit, 'establishment of life force, energy, breath') and the *nayanumilana* (Sanskrit, 'opening of the eyes, granting vision') are performed by

Brahmin priests, rendering the image an embodiment of divinity. These public rituals are achieved through the chanting of specific *mantras* and treating the icon/representation with an attitude of reverence and affection – all designed to invite the relevant goddesses and gods to inhabit the material form. Through these rituals, the materiality and appearance of the image remain the same, but these are believed to lead to the production of deified substance called *śuddha sattva (Sanskrit,* 'state of purity and goodness'*)*. The latter completes the process of consecrating an image and renders it ready for worship. A reverse ceremony can be performed to deconsecrate an image when necessary and then to reinfuse life force into the same as required. But how do devotees think about the relationship between images/icons and the deities they represent? Even as the distinction between deities and their representations is uncontroversial for Hindus, clearly, icons are vested with agentive powers only under certain conditions. What about the powers/divinities of the deities – is this universal and transcendent? Is it the deities that are sojourning or merely their representations? If it is the latter, how does divine energy follow the physical displacement of the icons across national borders?

Hindu devotees have a familiarity with these details and know well that while icons in temples are grounded during consecration ceremonies and thus physically immobile, other icons, known as the *utsava murti* (processional deities) can move and in fact do on occasion, venture beyond temple boundaries. This happens largely in the form of chariot processions – either within the immediate neighbourhood, or over longer distances (between temples and between cities and regions). The concept of *utsava murti* (festival/processional/movable image) in Hindu religion is dated to the 7th century AD and their material manifestations in the form of bronze sculptures from this period. The *utsava murti* is a mobile embodiment/personification/incarnation of the grounded, consecrated deity and has the freedom of movement – within temple grounds and beyond –during daily and calendrical rituals in festival processions. The movement of the deities – typically in processions – through designated territories is integral to Hindu religious life both in India and amongst Hindu communities in the Diaspora (Jacobsen 2006). These processions potentially serve a multitude of functions: spread divine power, mark territory, enhance unity and solidarity within the community, register religious distinction and difference, to mention just a few. Furthermore, their analysis reveals complex socio-cultural and political dynamics at work which I have demonstrated on my research with chariot processions in Singapore. The processional cart, *ter*/*ratham* is a temple-like structure, a virtual mobile sacred space, which carries the *utsava murti* on its public rounds within and beyond the site of the temple. Like parades, carnivals and festivals, processions can be spectacular public rituals which have a performative dimension, in addition to their spiritual significance for devotees as well as for the pleasure of the deity.

In the logic of theistic, devotional Hinduism, deities are anthropomorphized – treated as no less than royalty – and deemed to have needs, desires, and preferences, similar to humans. These needs are actualised in the routinized, daily elaborate rituals performed in temples: deities are ceremonially awakened, bathed, adorned, fed, put to bed and also pampered, including being taken out on rides – for their entertainment and pleasure (Fuller 1992). Certainly, the journey into profane spaces is for the benefit of spectators who imbibe the sacred and divine power emanating from the deity upon sighting her/him. But it is as much for the deity. These temporary passages out of secular abodes serve to entertain the deity who derives pleasure from being 'out and about' and being 'sighted' by devotees (Sinha 2008). A conversation I had with the head priest of the Sri Vadapathira Kaliamman Temple in 2015, encapsulates the strong religious motive for organizing a chariot procession:

> It is important for every temple to have a *ratham*…The annual temple procession is done to secure the well-being of all beings in the world. We pray that they must live happily. When the purpose of the festival is to bless and pray for all the beings in the world, we have to think about those who, for whatever reason, may not be able to come

> to the temple and receive sight from the deity. Some people may be physically unable to come to the temple because they are unwell. Others may belong to different religions and thus not come to our temple. And then there are other living beings, animals and birds, which are also not able to come to the temple.

The universal inclusiveness expressed in this statement incorporates in its religious worldview, all living beings, human and non-human and asserts the importance of facilitating contact with divinity and spreading sacred divine power to all. In such a discourse, the fact that the processions occur in a largely non-Indian, non-Hindu context and are viewed by non-Hindus would not be a problem. I find the concept of the *utsava murti* inspiring. This is conceptualized typically as a replica but a proxy, a substitute with the likeness of the consecrated, empowered image. The concept of the *utsava murti,* then expresses not just the *possibility* of deities' mobility but also legitimates their *desire* for movement.[9] It further normalizes the idea of an ambulatory, wandering deity (and his or her powers/energies) during outings within temple grounds, outside the temple in the larger neighbourhood, city (Sivaraman 2011) and even across national boundaries. The phenomenon of *utsava murti* being taken out of their temples to spaces outside India is arguably a very recent phenomenon. The idea of wandering, roaming, nomadic, deities has been well documented and is deemed perfectly legitimate in folk Hinduism (Feldhaus 1995; Sinha 2005).

Against this background, it was interesting that during the 2015 leg of my fieldwork in Singapore, I heard murmurs that the Thiruchendur and Tirupati 'divine visits' were both mired in controversies. These surrounded the issue of 'authenticity' of the deities that were brought to Singapore and whether they were 'genuine'. While the name 'Thiruchendur' was invoked and listed in the public brochures and announcements about the Singapore visit of the deity Murukan, midway through the elaborate and convoluted arrangements, there were some complaints from a cluster of Singapore's Hindu leaders that the visiting deities were not 'real'. The concern was that these deities were not from the main Thiruchendur Murugan Temple – but from the Seva trust that only *invoked* the name of Thiruchendur. This led to the critique that since monies were being collected from devotees to participate in the rituals, the public should not be misled about the *source* of the deities. Likewise, some observed that the deities from Tirupati in 2008 that had been transported to Singapore were also not from the main temple. These concerns were expressed on behalf of Singapore's Hindu devotees who might be unhappy in being 'misled' that they are not getting the 'real deal'.

However, as I spoke to devotees (who had participated in the rituals at the 2015 AVGMT and 2008 SPT events), I learnt that the issue of 'authenticity' of deities did not concern them. As Mrs. Malar Jothi, a 50-year-old Tamil Hindu and a staunch devotee of Murukan said to me, 'God is God right? If I believe it's God then it's God. What does it matter where the statue comes from. Coming from India, it is already so powerful. We are so lucky that God has come to us.' This was a view I heard repeatedly in 2015 and certainly in my recent interviews as well. Indeed despite the cautionary and qualifying remarks expressed by critics and sceptics, it seemed that for devotees, paying homage, expressing devotion and offering *puja* to the divine visitors was not contingent on whether the deities were 'genuine' – in terms of *where* they were sourced from. Unsurprisingly, this issue seemed to be irrelevant for devotees. In numerous conversations, what was key for devotees is the knowledge know that the deities had come *from India and sacred places within* (the towns of Thiruchendur or Tirupati). What rendered the visit special was that it was the *deities who had made the journey to devotees*, and not the other way around. Indeed, for the organizers and even the cynics, the uncompromising view was that once

[9] As deities temporarily leave their earthly dominions, those who see the deity en route are blessed but Brahmin priests shared that the deities are deemed to be 'polluted' through contact with profane features of the landscape. Thus, a series of cleansing and purification rituals are observed to deities to their 'original', pure state.

the deities had arrived in Singapore, they had to be treated with utmost care and reverence (Figure 5). In the words of Mrs. Malar Jothi:

> Once the deity is here you have to give respect and do the welcome and rituals properly. Otherwise, you say don't come here. But once you have invited, even if a stranger comes, we have to treat them as a guest – like god.

Mr. Chandra Mohan, a long-standing member of the SSPT management team and also part of the 2008 event's organizing committee, whom I had the benefit of speaking to in 2015, weighed in on the deities from the Thiruchendur Seva Trust:

> It doesn't matter to people whether the deities are from the Seva trust or the temple. At the end of the day, it is the perception and the belief. Because it is the devotion. On an individual basis, we all thought it is not wrong. And people don't bother where the deity comes from. Any deity that comes from old temples, for hundreds of years prayers are done to it and they become powerful with the devotion of lakhs of people. That's what devotees believe. And you can feel the power when you see the deity – here or there – you can feel the energy.

Further, devotees consistently emphasized two related points in our conversations: one, that the visiting deities from Thiruchendur were the *utsava murti* and two, that they were not from the main sanctum. In the words of Mr. Ramesh Subra*,* a 40-year-old teacher, and a Tamil Hindu, the deities that came 'were *not* the *utsava murti* which is in front of the Lord in the *garbhagraha*. The ones that were brought were actually the *outside utsava murti*' (original emphasis). In this context, it is instructive to unpack what images and icons of Hindu deities are seen to embody; and to ask how their proxies or replicas, i.e., the *utsava murtis* are perceived to transmit efficacy. That is, how do these represent, substitute, depute divine power. Mr. Sanjeev, a Brahmin priest in Singapore, explained the relationship between the powers/energies of the *mulavar* and that of the *utsava murti*:

> Even there the p*uja* is not performed for/to the *mulavar*, it is done only to the *utsava murti* only. How do they do this? So you take the power from the main deity (*mulavar*) and put it in the *utsava murti* placed in front of it. At the end of the day before you take out the ornaments etc. from the *utsava murti*, again you do the *puja* and you carry the power back to the main deity. This is the process.

Hindus are indeed used to, and accept, representations of divinity in a multitude of forms, media and materials. So, the question of authentic versus inauthentic representations does not affect their interaction with deities' personalities or power connoted by the image/icon/visualization. Hindus do not mistake the image for the deity; for them, there is no ambiguity that the visualization is *merely* representative of divine power and energy, but they avoid the reductionism carried in the discourse on polytheism. Indeed, here there were clear differences between official, elite notions about 'authenticity' of deities and popular perceptions of the same and reflects broader power contestations at work. Ultimately, for diasporic devotees the production of charisma and appeal of traveling deities was not dependent on claims of the latter being authentic or genuine. Large crowds turned up at these overseas festivals (Figure 6) and devotees I spoke to shared that they 'felt' and 'experienced' the energies of the deities during the rituals and festivals in Singapore.

Ms. Malathi, a Singaporean Tamil Hindu woman in her early 40s, who participated in the 2008 TTD event explained why she thought the festival was unique and appealed to devotees:

> Another thing why the temple did this is because many people cannot travel, they don't have the money, the means, the opportunity to actually go to Tirupathi. And there's the stigma – they always tell you that He [Perumal] must call you otherwise you don't get to go. He must call. Many people believe that right? They say, 'I've always wanted to go and see Perumal, but I can't go. It hasn't happened for me.' When the deity was going to be brought here, everybody here was so excited because you didn't have to go – *and he's actually coming here!* And that kind of-that momentum built very quickly. And we didn't have to really advertise. We didn't have to put the word out because this is like before social media, right? One poster and it was enough (emphasis added).

Figure 5: Thiruchendur Festival in Singapore, held in a makeshift tented area in the Sengkang neighbourhood, 2015.

What happens during moments of *human and divine interface* when devotees interact with images that have arrived from India? In response to this question, I suggest that it is helpful to unpack the logic of *darsan, bhakti and shakti* which form the conceptual pivot for theorizing the relationship between authenticity of deities and their efficacy. Diana Eck's famous work, *Darsan; Seeing the Divine Image in India* (1981), conceptualizes the notion of *darsan* and the two-way interaction between devotee and deity in the act of *puja.* Lawrence Babb's (1981) detailed analysis of 'glancing' as a mode of visual interaction in Hinduism adds to scholarly works which highlight the contact with the deity and the possibility of communicating with divinity. Eck translates the idea of *'darsan'* as 'seeing,' 'religious seeing' or 'auspicious sight of the divine,' (1981: 7) – when the deity is richly adorned in the best jewels, silks and flowers as well as especially the deity's face beautifully made up and decorated. Drawing on Eck's original formulation, Dwyer and Patel (2002:33) offer their interpretation of *darsan*:

> [the] term is used for a structuration of spectation found in Hindu religious practice (and also in some social and political practices), in which the image authorizes the look (rather than merely being its object), thereby benefiting the beholder. In other words, *darshan* is a two-way look, the beholder takes *darshan* (*darshan lena*) and the object gives *darshan* (*darshan dena*), in which the image rather than the person looking has power.

The elements of reciprocity and mutual exchange of vision follow from these observations, with the recognition that the act of *darsan* cannot be reduced to 'our common-sense understandings of vision as a passive reception of images on the retina' (Mines 2008:140). There is certainly an exchange at work here, and not just visual, but mediated instead by devotional gestures and material objects, something that devotees are implicitly aware of even though these are seldom if at all, articulated. Narratives from devotees suggest that while the image is certainly deemed to be powerful, its spiritual energy remains implicit and 'contained' unless it is activated by appropriate and authentic ritual attention through devotees' act of *darsan*, hence complicating the power relationship between divinity and devotee considerably. The practice of *darsan* in the act of worship rests on the specific meanings that an image carries for devotees.

Bhakti has been conceptualized as 'devotion' in contemporary expressions of Hindu religiosity and as a mode of interacting with divinity (Prentiss 1999: 20-21). Certainly, the mood and tone at the festivals organized around visiting deities, reflected the enormous affection and adoration devotees carry for their favoured deities. As Mr. Thiru, a member of the team who organized the 2019 STS TTD event, shared:

> Yes, the work was tough, but it was satisfying. People enjoyed it. I think it was one of the most memorable events we have organized. Very successful. People were, what you call, rejuvenated. They really felt, and... the vibrations, we could feel that Tirupati himself has come. That, one could feel. And this is also created by people's *bhakti*. Devotion. When people have so much devotion, the vibrations automatically come.

The effect of such devotion was interpreted by devotees as having energized the deity too. Devotees I spoke to observed that collective, accumulated devotion expressed towards an image/icon amplifies and intensifies the deity's efficacies and powers, which then radiate back to the devotee during worship. At the Pongala ritual during the 2023 visit of Sri Bhagvathy Amman to the island, devotees shared with me that they were privileged to have 'Devi *darsan*'. Many expressed that they could feel not only her love, but in fact felt her *presence* next to their cooking stoves as they cooked *Pongal* as a form of offering, some claiming that this even tasted unique. Devotees' sensorial and visceral experiences added complexity to their *darsan* (sighting of the deity), while their affection and piety towards the deity (*bhakti)* were believed to empower and energize the deity.The power of divinity, denoted as *shakti*, is a complex notion within Hindu frames. *Shakti* connotes energy, power and force – the active aspect of divinity and reflects a deity's capacity to express herself and act purposefully – to create, destroy and recreate. Mythologically, shakti is typically personified as feminine (Chitgopekar 2022). As much as the deity embodies power, the expression of devotion can is believed to compel the deity act in certain ways or motivate her to act/perform. The relationship between devotee and deity on the modality of power/influence is thus complex and layered and needs careful unpacking.

Figure 6: Devotees in Singapore queuing up to catch darsan of visiting deities from Thiruchendur, 2015.

India continues to be seen as the locus of all things sacred and powerful for Hindus. Deities from sacred sites in India are seen as 'more' powerful, energized and effective. In particular, deities from ancient, established temples are believed by devotees to carry accumulated, stored energies and thus deemed to be more efficacious. In the case of the travelling deities, as far as I could establish neither devotees' expression of *bhakti* nor the opportunity for *darsan* of deities, were affected by claims of 'inauthenticity' of the visiting deities. The intensity of devotion did not vary/weaken even in the face of knowledge that the representation of the deity is not from the 'actual/real/original' temple in India and thus declared to be inauthentic – according to what appeared to devotees to be technical, mechanical, and above all irrelevant criteria (Pinney 2003). Even the most cynical Hindu devotees and organizers of these visits I spoke to, admitted that 'once the deities were here, we could not do anything to stop devotees from honouring them' and the 'devotees were rightly unconcerned about the fact that the deities were not from the main temple.' Two exciting questions that have emerged from this strand of my ethnographic research are: Who cares about the authenticity of icons and why? And how does this affect the efficacy of deities, if at all, and for whom? I anticipate that responses to these queries will drive my research efforts going forward. For now, I turn next to the question of what is entailed in actually transporting deities from India to Singapore and how the deities are ritually attended to once they arrive on the island.

The Logistics of Divine Visits

While Peggy Levitt is right that *God Needs no Passport* (2007) to travel, my data reveal that a tremendous amount of 'secular labour' – organizational, financial, administrative – is

nonetheless required to enable deities to move (be moved) across national borders. This is seen in the administrative and bureaucratic formalities that involve the energies and commitment of a large group of individuals on both sides. Deities too have to negotiate the world of permits, approvals, clearances before they have permission to cross national boundaries. Their successful and unproblematic movement rests on tremendous financial investment and as well as effective negotiation of bureaucratic and administrative terrains, not unlike the movement of humans. In addition to this colossal amount of non-ritual work that makes it possible for deities to arrive on diasporic shores, they also need to be ritually cared for thereafter, which involves a different kind of labour, that invested by religious specialists, both from India and Singapore. It would not be an exaggeration to describe these efforts as gargantuan– seen in the considerable funds that need to be raised and knowledge, expertise, planning, co-ordination that are required, not to mention investment of ritual and secular labour and hard work. Despite this, my research demonstrates that diasporans are driven by complex religious inspiration, and sometimes by more pragmatic considerations, to 'bring the deities' to Singapore.

By now, 'divine visits' in the form of transported movable icons from temples in India to Singapore are familiar to the diasporic Hindu community here, the phenomenon having been a part of the Hindu landscape since 2008. A prominent member of the Singapore's Hindu leadership, Mr. Kailash said to me, 'even the Customs and Immigration in Singapore know what to do when deities from India come – they are familiar with this – they have seen this for so long.' These efforts require support from a number of parties, including Immigration and Customs personnel, airline crew and staff, members of the Police Force, government bodies, not to mention politicians. As all the temples and cultural organizations (in India and Singapore) involved in moving deities, are established entities, access to these personnel and their support was possible and relatively straightforward. But of course, lay Hindus who were driving these efforts needed to learn how the world of permits, licenses and approvals operates and frames what is permissible and how these can be achieved. For example, in response to my question about why the Tirupati *utsava murtis* would be sent to Singapore, Mr. Chandra Mohan, a long standing member of the SSPT management team and also part of the 2008 TTD event's organizing committee replied thus:

> I think the Chairman of the TTD at that time, he was a politician. He was very interested because of a lot of devotees of Tirupati are spread everywhere, particularly in the US and then here also there a lot of Telugus. So that is why he thought he should take the deity out of the temple. And it was a good idea because… people who cannot visit…Because it is very troublesome there, even to get a glimpse it takes a lot of effort. So that's why I think they decided… but people here were also very keen.

He also shared that the groundwork for organizing the festival took 4 months, adding 'because it is totally bureaucratic, their side. Every permission had to be taken'. I learnt that permissions had to be secured from the state government authorities as well as clearances from customs and immigration. My interviews with organizers of the Bhagvathy Amman and the Thiruchendur events surfaced that approvals had to be secured from the Archaeological Survey of India in order to transport icons out of India, in addition to a letter of invitation/intent from the Singapore hosts. Mr. Manoj, a current member of the STS management team, said 'Indian authorities are very strict and concerned about smuggling of statues and other cultural artefacts. So, we have to get their approval.'

Clearly, personal connections and trust between parties in Singapore and the various Indian temples were key to materializing these events across two countries. The Hindu landscape of Singapore is familiar to temples and organizations in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. For example, there have been deep interactions between Singapore's Hindu Endowment Board (HEB) and the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department of the Tamil Nadu

government. During my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu in 2003-4, I had heard of the high regard that members of the latter have for the HEB. The Tamil Nadu counterparts have visited Singapore and exchanged best practices about administration and management of Hindu endowments.

From the perspective of the hosts, another inspiration driving this initiative was to raise funds for the temple even as the management committees and temple community willingly invested temple funds to pay for the initial costs of organizing the divine visits. The latter included paying 'the Indian side' a 'fees' of sorts for 'releasing' their deities for an overseas event. Then there were costs involved in transporting the deity and its custodians as well as organizing and paying for the deity's stay in Singapore – all borne by the local hosts. Arguably, all these are ultimately paid for by the Singapore devotees – in the form of sponsorship of rituals – *puja(*s) and *seva(*s). Mr. Chandra Mohan shared that the total cost of organizing and enacting the 2008 festival was about SGD 600,000. This, he said, included 'tentage cost, air travel and freight cost, feeding 35,000 people daily for 3 days'. He described the business model as follows:

> This was mainly covered by donors, quite big donors and small donors plus form the seva 'fees' paid by devotees. I mean – devotees had to pay small sums like SGD 21 or SGD 51 to perform different rituals – we call it *seva* (service). That also raised a lot of funds.

Despite the key role of devotees, all of temple representatives I spoke to admitted that raising funds from *seva* 'fees' was not sufficient. Considerable energy was expended in sourcing large sponsors and donors. The organizers of the AVGMT festival noted that they did not raise funds to bring deities to Singapore but for the consecration ceremony of the temple. The initial capital outlay then came from AVGMT funds with the hope that the sponsorship and donations would ultimately cover these. Indeed, the temple reports the event to have been successful – certainly for devotees, but also profitable for the temple community as a whole. The organiser of the 2015 AGVMT festival, Mr. Kalai shared that Singapore's Hindus supported the event wholeheartedly:

> Donations poured in. People wanted to be a part of it. And they wanted to be right in front, near the deity. So those people of course, who, who could afford ensures that they paid the price for the prayers where right in front. What's wrong with that?

While a majority of my interlocutors were supportive of the festivals organized around 'divine visits,' some were cynical. For the latter, these events were driven primarily by the desire to raise funds. According to one such interlocutor, Mr. Mahesh, a key player in Singapore's temple landscape, 'this is just a money-making trick. What is so special about bringing Gods from India? Now it is so easy to travel. If you want, you can just take a flight and go to Tirupati and wherever and just see the God.' Indeed, some of the organizers I spoke to admitted that these events were conceptualized as fund raising initiatives. However, they did not see anything wrong with charging devotees for the rituals organized to revere visiting deities and using the funds for temple rebuilding efforts or for its consecration ceremony, for example. They highlighted that it is common for devotees to pay for rituals and *puja(*s) they conduct in temples in any case and did not see how charging them for seeking *darsan* or conducting *puja*(s) or *seva*(s) before the visiting deities was wrong or unethical.

Depending on the size of the icons that are being moved: the large ones are packed in crates and transported as air freight, while smaller images are packed carefully in a backpack and hand carried by priests – who are both flown into Singapore (Figure 7). The former was the case with the three icons for the 2019 STS festival, while the 2023 Bhagvathy Amman icon was hand carried by a priest who was barefoot as he arrived at Changi airport. Either way, the transportation of the deities entails the complex intermingling of sacred and profane elements. Ms.

Rathi, one of the organisers of the 2008 SSPT festival shared these details about the logistics of coordinating an event like this across transnational borders:

> The first response is everybody was super excited, because something like this had never happened before. So, there was a lot, a lot of planning, like, how to make it as auspicious as it is, yes, like in Tirupathi. Yeah, everything from the laddus to the customs to everything was coordinated with the people in Tirupathi. We wrote to like Singapore Airlines and the airport staff and told them that we were flying in the very auspicious deities. So, all of these we had already done, temple management had planned everything. Gotten in touch with the airline staff and airport managers and so on. But the delegation from HEB and Perumal temple was at the airport to receive the deity and take care if anything happened.

Not surprisingly, the deity does not travel alone, but with escorts, religious custodians and other team members. According to Ms. Rathi:

> There was a group of priests that came with the deity. From the start they were telling everyone how you know, things have to be done during the journey and after they came to Singapore – how to do the decorations and the puja – our priests were taught everything. They worked as a team to do daily prayers, and like what flowers to put for the deity and what *alangaram*s (decorations) and so on.

Mr. Chandra Mohan who was familiar with the 2015 AGVMT festival corroborated this as follows:

> Because they will not send the deity just like that. They sent a lot of people – the priest, the musicians, temple officials and the temple Chairman himself. Yeah, he himself came, and gave a speech also. Then also one Sanskrit scholar.

In addition to religious personnel and administrators who travel with the deity, the accompanying baggage includes a range of materials and ritual objects. For instance, in the SSPT events, a big draw is the 'Tirupati laddu' which is distributed to devotees as *prasad*. Ms. Rathi who had been involved with organising the 2008 SSPT festival shared:

> Then because the deity is coming from Tirupati, also we thought we should distribute the Tirupati laddu itself. We brought a specialist cook from Tirupati, who prepares laddus in Tirupati – we did exactly the same here Then Tirupati also decided to send laddus. They packed it very nicely you know, air-packed (sic. vacuum packed) you know, individual laddus. About 1000 laddus were brought. People sponsored an entire batch of laddus that came directly from Tirupathi. People were willing to do that.

Transporting objects and materials like laddus, flowers, trays and decorative items for the deity are crucial for recreating a sense of 'Tirupati in Singapore'. The intention being to make devotees 'feel' that they are in India, by replicating the same rituals and experiences and convey the sense that the deity from Tirupati is himself *present* in Singapore. Ms. Rathi elaborated:

> So when the deity was here it felt like Tirupathi, right, the whole shebang was actually happening. The hype was so much. We didn't expect to see that many people descend on Perumal temple on that day. Honestly. Even the committee which prepared everything, which did the *kalyana utsavam*. They did a lot of things they tried to do all the different *puja*(s) that they had in Tirupathi. They tried to replicate it here. Very

beautifully done. The *alangaaram*(s) were beautiful. The deity, and I mean the structure that they built to house it was also very beautifully done, everything looked so majestic. And it gave the population you know this this very nice, elated feeling that the Tirupathi Perumal was here.

Figure 7: Hand carried *Utsava Murti* of Chakkalathuavu Bhagvaty Amman being welcomed at Singapore's Changi Airport, 2012.

During the process of transporting physical/material icons to transnational shores, consecration, de-consecration and re-consecration rituals were performed. Several key ritual moments in the transportation of deities beyond Indian shores were enacted both in India and in the host countries. One set of rituals has to do with preparing the deity for travel and then readying it for worship. The first of these is performed in India as the deity is prepared for overseas travel, when its powers are ritually removed, and the deity is 'deactivated' so to speak. The second moment is when the deity is received in the host country where the icon is reinfused with energies and *prana* (life force) and empowered – readied for worship by devotees. As Ms. Rathi, a key organizer of the 2008 SSPT festival explained to me:

> You cannot bring a 'live' deity overseas. You cannot pack a deity with power inside a box. You have to remove the power from the *vigraham* and put it in the vessel. Then after arriving there, you have to put the power back – through the *pranapratishtha* ceremony. You have to follow the procedures.

The other set of rituals are performed in public by religious specialists who have accompanied the deity, during the festival, with the involvement of devotees. These collaborations and co-operations were highlighted to me by all 4 organizers I spoke to. For instance, during the visit of the Thiruchendur deities, rituals were enacted both in the AVGMT and the Sri Mariamman Temple, in addition to religious processions in the streets of urban Singapore – where the

Figure 8: Publicity brochure of the 2023 Singapore visit of Chakkulathukavu Sree Bhagvathy Amman Temple, courtesy SMHS.

visitors were taken to three prominent Hindu temples[10] in Singapore where they were welcomed and honoured. The AVGMT also invited all Hindu temples in Singapore to participate in the rituals and offer respect to the visiting deities. I was told that a majority of those who were invited attended the events and came with *varisai thattu* (Tamil, 'ritual gifts') for the deity. The key event at the here was the *Thirukalyanam* (Tamil, 'celestial/divine wedding) between Murukan and his two wives, and devotees had the opportunity to carry *paal kudam* and *kavadis* (Lee 1989) – key rituals for honouring the deity – and also received special *prasad* from Thiruchendur. In the Singapore TTD festival too, Venkatashwara's wedding with his two consorts, was accorded central importance. In this re-enactment, devotees are given an opportunity to witness and participate, first- hand, in the celestial wedding – a rare privilege – according to devotees. In addition to the performance of rituals and *puja*(s) by Brahmin priests, the involvement of local lay Hindus from temples and cultural organizations in specific rituals is striking (Figure 9 and Figure 10). The ritual labour required to perform rituals and guide devotees through the *puja(*s) and *seva*(s) was provided by visiting priests and religious experts as well as by their local counterparts.

Moving Shakti: Unbounded Efficacies

My ethnography suggests that devotees do meaningfully negotiate the complex notions of *darsan*, *bhakti* and *shakti* in the context of these divine visitations. I turn to a discussion of the deity's *shakti* and efficacies through moments of transnational mobility. Coming full circle, key questions I ask in closing are – what happens to the deity's efficacies during travels, what happens to the transported images at the end of the 'divine visit'? Do they return to India? Is this a possibility? In each of the four instances that I have thus far researched, I have noticed different outcomes: In the case of the 2019 STS and TTD event, the deities did not return to India but had stopped in Singapore en route to a temple in Seattle to be installed there; the Thiruchendur deities too did not return to India; the Sri Bhagvathy Amman did return home, while in the event of the 2008 SSPT and TTD event, the deities remained at the temple for some time before returning to India.

It was not surprising that discussions with interlocutors about traveling deities and their powers led to conversations about the various injunctions and restrictions on deities and individuals crossing the oceans, *kala pani* (Hindi, 'Black waters'). The concept of *Samudrolanghana*/*Sagarollanghana* (Sanskrit, 'offence of crossing the seas' has been invoked and interpreted to mean the loss of social respectability and one's *varna* identity. Mr. Palani, a 70-year-old Murukan devotee from Singapore, who attended the Thiruchendur festival explained this to me:

> In the old days, there were all kinds of restrictions against traveling and crossing the oceans, because the water has magnetic powers and energies. So, gods and people also can be weakened when they cross the waters.

Notably, these notions continue to have some traction in the present. My Singapore-based interlocutors were aware that the Tirupati temple does not allow a priest who has travelled overseas to either enter or worship at its main sanctum. For this reason, I was told, these priests who attend to the presiding deity have not accompanied the Tirupati deities to the Singapore outings. My interlocutors and I were also aware of the case involving Sri Sugunendra Tirtha Swamiji of Puttige Math in the Indian State of Karnataka. In 2013, he was mired in controversies over his overseas travels, which he first undertook in 1997. His travels took him to New Jersey, Phoenix

[10] The three temples were – Sri Mariamman Temple, Sri Sivan Temple and the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple.

Figure 9: Priests from India conducting rituals for Thiruchendur deities in Singapore, 2015.

Figure 10: Priests from India and Singapore performing rituals for utsava murtis from Tirupathi, in Singapore 2008.

and Los Angeles in the United States, where he helped to establish and consecrate Hindu temples. He faced scathing criticism from his peers for his travels beyond Indian shores, and there was a movement to deny him the right to enter the *sanctum sanctorum*, and to touch the deity or perform prayers for the main deity Krishna, at the Sri Krishna Mutt in Karnataka. Sri Sugunendra Tirtha Swamiji rejected this rationale and offered a global perspective with the following counter argument:

> They consider only India as a holy land, while I consider the whole world as holy. I do not believe people living in foreign countries are sinners. They say foreign travel is a sin. But where is the definition of a foreign country in the *Dharmashastras*? If one goes by what is said in the religious scriptures, there is a ban on travel to West Bengal and some portions of Kerala. They should tell us if Andaman and Nicobar Islands are a part of India going by the *Dharmashastras*.[11]

The dispute was finally resolved through a court verdict in 2013 that allowed Sri Sugunendra Tirtha Swamiji the right to worship the deity at the named temple. Typically, the religious remedy would have been for a priestly Brahmin who had travelled overseas to undergo cleansing, purification and penance rituals in order to be restored to a previous state of purity and reconnect with one's *varna*, family and social networks. Historically of course, as Mehta notes, '*kala pani* crossings were initially identified with the expatriation of convicts, 'low' castes, prisoners and 'untouchables' (2010: 1). From an idealized Hindu perspective, these constituencies would not have much to lose by way of caste and class status or religious and cultural tradition as compared to upper caste Hindus and especially Brahmins. Even then, as is well known Indians who crossed the dark oceans came from a diverse class, caste and regional backgrounds. In these long sea voyages, travellers on ships were forced into close proximity, even if they did not wish to interact and intermingle – with the possibility of loss of caste/varna. However, without glamourizing these movements, as various boundaries of *varna*, class, region, gender were crossed (and transgressed) – there were opportunities for *reinventing* selves afresh – including *varna* and *jati* identities, even as theoretically this was a moment to erase caste identities entirely.

My ethnography suggests that a modified version of these restrictions seems to apply to icons that travel beyond Indian shores as well, but with interesting variations. For example, in a contemporary twist to the ancient injunction against venturing beyond India, during my fieldwork in Singapore, I heard that the crossing the seas would negatively affect the power of the deities and that they would be contaminated and defiled. Additionally, some religious experts had expressed concerns about the scanning of statues at airports as deities boarded flights:

> Some priests did not want the statues to go through the scanning machine – because that can take away all the god's powers. They had to get special permission for that.

However, many Hindus argued that these were old-fashioned ideas which were not aligned with the exigencies of modern living and especially the centrality of movement. My interlocutors also noted that deities are 'de-energized' before travel and then 're-energized' for worship and explained that for devotees these were as powerful as 'gods back home'.

[11] https://web.archive.org/web/20080116090728/http://www.hindu.com/2008/01/15/stories/2008011556610400.htm

Concluding Notes

Drawing ethnographic insights from the phenomenon of 'divine visitations' to Singapore, I have argued that devotees interact with these traveling Hindu deities with delight, religious intensity and fervor, reporting that these overseas festivals are unique and special opportunities for expressions of devotion. A key driver for this research rests on the question of what happens to these deities' efficacies and energies through moments of mobility, as they travel across national boundaries and come into contact with profane and secular processes. In the phenomenon of traveling deities, as mentioned, for devotees the divinity of deities is unquestioned and held to be transcendent, even as the materiality of the deity (in the form of *utsava murti* icons) is transformed in being de-energised and re-energised. In addition, for devotees their powers are perceived to emanate from their mythological and material connections with, and embeddedness in India. Indeed, this is key to the argument being made in this paper: the charisma and power of the deity emanates not only from the 'corpothetics' (Pinney 2003) of spiritual practices but also from the telluric connection to the Hindu homeland. Interpreting the phenomenon of traveling *utsava murtis* (complete with their group and accompanying ritual paraphernalia) as diasporans is intriguing in connecting places, peoples and deities into a network of complex relationships, while reconfiguring scared terrains and geographies in these moves. The power of traveling divinities is attributed by devotees to their connection with and embeddedness in temples and sacred sites India. As I have argued in this paper, these 'divine visits' and the complex practices and processes associated with them are manifestations of globalizing forces impacting on the realm of religion. I argue that for devotees, these voyages across national boundaries register several critical moves: they attempt to spread divine power and mark divine territory, enhance unity and solidarity amongst devotees, lead to the formation of new communities and demonstrate not only cosmic but transnational efficacy of deities.

My data and analysis confirm that deities are perceived by devotees as self-determining and self-governing entities, and their influence and blessings are perceived to be expansive and inclusive – extending to Hindus, non-Hindus, non-Indians, governments and nations as well. As a nod to this universalism, I suggest that even as trans-global Hindu communities are necessarily embedded within discrete boundaries of nation-states and specific socio-cultural and political contexts, their sense of religious sensibilities, sentiments, solidarities and ideologies are by no means contained within these frames. Of course for believers, Hindu deities do not need to travel to demonstrate their powers but the fact that they end up in Singapore, Dubai, USA, Malaysia etc., reinforces the belief in the enduring and universal efficacies of traveling Hindu divinities. Devotees are convinced that the powers of these deities are limitless in any case –they are defined as transcendent deities with universal, cosmic impact. In the context of this research, it is evident to my interlocutors that deities' capacities to traverse vast distances marks them further as trans-national and trans-sovereign deities who radiate powers beyond given territorial, geographical limits.

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