



The Structure and Meaning of Daily Worship in a South Indian Temple

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Abstract. – At the core of worship in a large Hindu temple is the complex daily liturgy around which all other temple activities are structured, and upon which the order of the cosmos is said to depend. This article, which combines ethnographic observations with exegeses by local priests and insights from indological studies of Saiva Siddhanta philosophical texts, describes daily worship in the temple of Lord Kalukacalamurti (a local form of Murukan) in the town of Kalugumalai, Tamil Nadu, South India. It goes on to consider the significance of the principal stages – unction, decoration, food offering, and lamp-showing – in the *pūja* rite which forms the basis of worship in Saivite temples. [*South India, Tamil Nadu, Hinduism, Murukan, temples, worship, cosmology*]

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The central challenge for anyone studying a Hindu temple is to account for the complex daily liturgy around which all other temple activities are structured. After all, the ordering and very survival of the cosmos are said to depend crucially upon it. Yet although there is a substantial literature dealing with its scriptural basis, the actual practice of this liturgy has received remarkably little attention from writers on Hinduism. Not a single detailed description has been published for any southern temple, and those still relatively few authors who

have studied temples through ethnographic field research¹ have tended to concentrate on festivals, while at most merely sketching out the timetable of daily worship. This article, together with a related earlier publication (Good 2000), is meant as a small step towards redressing that imbalance. After describing the liturgy in some detail, using a combination of ethnographic observation, exegeses by local priests, and indological commentaries on Sanskrit philosophical and theological texts, it proceeds to consider the significance of the principal stages in the *pūja* rite which forms the basic building block of Hindu worship.

The Layout of the Temple

Kalugumalai lies in the Tuticorin District of Tamil Nadu, a recent subdivision of the old Tirunelveli District. The town is dominated by a 600-foot hill, towering dramatically above the dusty plain of Kovilpatti Taluk. Its southern face is a sheer cliff overlooking the main residential area, at the base of which is the cave-shrine of *Kaḷukācalamūrti*, the local form of Lord *Murukan*, younger son of *Śiva* and a particularly popular deity among Tamils. This cave, which I shall call the main shrine, is man-made or at least artificially enlarged, and is believed by local people to be Jain in

¹ For example, Appadurai (1981), Clothey (1983), Fuller (1984), Moreno (1984), Reiniche (1989).