13 Held in Amma's light

The enchantment and political efficacy of *gopurams* in Tamilnadu

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An enduring and central tenet of material culture studies (MCS) is the necessity to critically engage with objects, images, and other (im)material forms frequently dismissed or rendered invisible by their omnipresent, prosaic, or marginal positioning. This study similarly endeavours to bring into focus a specific form of Tamil spectacle, *gopurams*, or light structures, locally defined by their peripherality to the main events of religious festivals and *vizhaas* – annual celebrations such as those recognising the birthday or death anniversary of a venerated political leader. Gopurams are large-scale towers made of bamboo, curved to form the outline of a figure or symbol that is decorated with strings of lights. They are temporarily installed for use at night to serve as illuminants to attract devotees or participants toward the centre of the *vizhaa* through their affective enchantment. They capture beholders and draw them into the broader spectacle.

This chapter is situated within the particular ethnographic context of the then state chief minister's birthday celebrations and draws upon empirical research in urban Tamilnadu, India, with politicians and artists. It is informed by learning how to make a gopuram, by observing viewers' interactions with towers at numerous festivals and events and, of course, by examining the aesthetic and material qualities of gopurams themselves. The chapter examines the enchantment of gopurams in a discussion that extends material culture articulations of agency, iconicity, and corporeal vision to meet the comparatively nascent 'anthropology of luminosity' (Bille 2019; Bille and Sorenson 2007) by considering the material qualities of light within politically charged a/effective 'atmospheres' (Böhme 2017). I argue that the enchantment of gopurams rests upon a constellation of material affordances, processes of making, image-based semiotics, and local sacro-civic notions of vision and corporeality. Further, when operating within a broader image regime carefully constructed to appeal to constituents as devotees, such as that by Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram¹ and her political party, gopurams are not only enchanting and affective but also politically efficacious.

Figure 13.1 Jayalalithaa as *gopuram* to celebrate her birthday (*pirandanaal*). Madurai 2014.

Source: Photo by author.

Political lineage as luminance

In Madurai, Tamilnadu, three celestial figures tower above the playing fields at Thamukkam Grounds, a public events and sports arena. The figures bathe hundreds of spectators in multi-coloured light as they watch multiple *kabadi*²

matches taking place simultaneously. These towering figures are incarnations of a powerful political lineage that begins with C.N. Annadurai, founder of the Dravidian Nationalist party,³ the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam). In 1967, the DMK was the first party in the country to oust the Indian National Congress⁴ from governmental power at a state level. The second gopuram figure is that of M.G. Ramachandran, affectionately known as MGR, the former film star-turned-politician who rebelled against M. Karunanidhi, the successor to DMK leadership after Annadurai's death. MGR founded the AIADMK (All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and by incorporating 'Anna'⁵ into the name, claimed himself a direct political descendant of Annadurai. The final figure whose radiant light most prominently manifests above the fields, and whose image is iterated in various print and painted forms across Thamukkam Grounds, is MGR's former co-star and political heir, Chief Minister Jayalalithaa (Figure 13.1). It is the 23rd of February 2014, and the event is a celebration of her 66th birthday (*pirandanaal*) the following day, although she is present only through her multivalent imagery, and most spectacularly through her towering figure of light.

The many gopurams are impossible *not* to see – each was a beacon of light extending across the civic landscape to grab the attention of those far away and draw them forth into the action. They are typically placed at or near the entrance to an event, such as the 'pendant' gopurams of MGR and Jayalalithaa above the entrance to the kabadi arena (Figure 13.2) under which spectators must pass. This is in similarity to their namesake – the vibrant and colourful gopurams, or entrance towers, of South Indian Hindu temples that rise many storeys above their temple complexes. Those specifically surrounding the kabadi fields are distinct in that they enclose the field of action rather than attract those outside toward it, and their frontal directionality means that they are illuminated for the eyes of those within, rather than approaching, Thamukkam Grounds.

I begin with this scene to foreground the aesthetic and material dimensions that make gopurams enchanting, affective, and efficacious within a particular political context to inform the sections that follow on in the processes of making the material affordances of gopurams and the anticipated ways viewers see them, all from the perspectives of their creators. The chapter will then return to gopurams in the field – or rather, above it – as they cultivate an affective atmosphere enclosed within the multiple gopurams operating within the AIADMK's image regime seeking to legitimise Jayalalithaa as an amman – a mother, a goddess or a mother goddess.

Making, aesthetics, and affect

In the course of conducting fieldwork, I was drawn to gopurams due to their near ubiquitous instantiations at the major political, civic, and religious events held throughout Madurai and its surrounding villages. During a walk to document daily changes in streetside political imagery, I came across the

Figure 13.2 MGR and Jayalalithaa as *gopurams* at entrance to sports arena. Madurai 2014.

Source: Photo by author.

outdoor workspace of Alagupandy, the man widely considered to be the best gopuram maker in Madurai, if not all of Tamilnadu. He and those in his team refer to themselves as ‘electricians’ rather than ‘artists,’ in contrast to those who make other kinds of political imagery. Alagupandy was expected to become a general labourer like his father, but after a primary school teacher deemed him a talented artist, he went on to make a living painting signboards and gradually taught himself to make gopurams. Over the years, he has built a stellar reputation within the city and beyond, and his works are displayed as far away as the neighbouring states of Kerala and Karnataka. Alagupandy trained his son, Srinivasan, in the craft and anticipates Srinivasan will take over the business in the years to come. Alagupandy also created his own competition through apprenticing others. He claims that his work is nonetheless distinguished because his gopurams are ‘clean’ (*suttam*) – the outlines of the figure are clearly demarcated and fluid, and the lights do not muddle together. It was through conversations about what differentiates his work from others that elicited Alagupandy’s reflections on the aesthetic and material decisions he makes, in addition to his perceptions about what it is that gopurams ‘do,’ and what he anticipates their beholders experience – all of which are inextricable from their enchantment and efficacy.

Gopurams are comprised of a series of panels decorated with thin strips of bamboo. The strips are carefully bent and secured with small nails to a wooden grid and adorned with strings of lights. Each bulb is wrapped in coloured cellophane secured with a rubber band. Placement of the strings of lights along the wooden strips creates the illuminated outline figure of a deity, politician, filmstar, or symbol. A gopuram begins with an image – usually a photograph or print – of the person or deity whose form will be manifested in the tower. Sometimes a client provides the image, but usually it is Alagupandy who selects it. He stressed that the image must be immediately recognisable to its audience, even when the person or deity's form is reduced to an outline. For deities, Alagupandy chooses prints in which the deity's associated iconography is evident and clear, and he incorporates colours and items easily recognisable to their audience. For all large-scale gopurams, whether political or religious, the frontality of the deity or figure must be accessible, that is, the full body of the god, goddess, or politician directly faces the beholder.

The images he chooses of politicians in particular tend to be photographs continuously circulated in multiple media formats, such as murals, party posters, vinyl banners, and newspapers. As seen in Figures 13.1 and 13.3,⁶ Jayalalithaa raises a hand with two fingers in the shape of a 'V.' This is in reference to the two-leaf symbol of the AIADMK's flag, also appearing as gopurams in Figure 13.1, and is a gesture she and other party leaders frequently make when appearing in public, especially before large audiences. The two-leaf symbol is iterated in numerous party posters, appears in car decals and stickers, and is embroidered into many garments and even pieces of jewellery worn by party members.

Alagupandy also explained that he often chooses pink cellophane wrapping for Jayalalithaa's face and hands because she is often complimented for having a pinkish hue to her skin (Figure 13.3). Gold, or rather yellow, is essential to accurately evoke MGR, who was popularly praised for having a golden skin tone. Such aesthetic choices appear to be common among those creating political imagery. Preminda Jacob (2009) shares similar comments and design choices for these figures when painted by artists as large-scale hoardings installed in Chennai. A mural painter in Madurai also provided me with a similar explanation for his selection of hues when painting Jayalalithaa, adding that he uses more red tones in her cheeks than those visible in her photographs in order to attract the attention of people as they pass his murals.

Alagupandy selects images from the popular archive that are either iconic, or in the process of reaching an iconic fixedness, to the degree to which such a state is attainable. In following Roland Barthes (1972 [1957]) these specific kinds of images of a person or deity have already accrued heavy symbolic density within their narrative, even to become to a large extent 'sedimented' (Ghosh 2011). This level of iconic stability is crucial because it enables their immediate recognition without active cognition on the part of the beholder. As Bishnupriya Ghosh (2011) suggests, icons operate as a mediatory apparatus

Figure 13.3 Jayalalithaa as *gopuram* along street outside Thamukkam Grounds, Madurai 2014.

Source: Photo by author.

between subject and image object, allowing the beholder to 'enter' a then and there, or place and time, that is projected or contained by the icon.⁷

The mechanics of such human–thing relationships are predicated upon the ability of images to work upon the body through affect – a corporeally based zone of intensities, a resonance experienced at a pre-social level, as described by Brian Massumi (1995, see also Mazzarella 2009). Thus, the image that Alagupandy chooses is one rife with affective potential. For Tamil audiences, it is immediately recognisable and is thus intended to stir, at least at a pre-conscious level, a resonance within the beholder of the embodied experiences of their countless interactions with the icon – as either a person or deity *and* of that particular visual representation. However, it is not only through resonance with the iconic image that gopurams are efficacious, as the following sections will demonstrate.

The materiality and affordances of light

When discussing gopurams, the electricians focus heavily on the qualities of light and very little about the difficult process of translating an image to a chalk outline on their asphalt workspace, on the surface of which they will create the panels. Nor do the men elaborate on the skilful technique of curving and securing bamboo strips onto this frame. Instead they emphasise the brightness and clarity of light in the creation and reception of the figure, as well as the distances at which gopurams can be perceived. Their considerable attention to the efficacy and affects of illumination on those who behold them resonates with Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen's (2007; see also Bille 2019) appeal for an 'anthropology of luminosity' to analyse the materiality of light and the impact it has on social relations. The authors herald Tim Ingold's observation – one that on its surface seems obvious but unfolds to reveal greater complexity and implications – that 'light is the experience of inhabiting the world of the visible, and that its qualities – of brilliance and shade, tint and colour, and saturation – are variations, upon this experience'⁸ (Ingold, cited in Bille and Sørensen 2007: 264). The authors extend Ingold's insights by advocating that the agency of light 'works as a significant constituent of experience' by examining 'how light is used socially to illuminate places, people and things [...] in different cultural settings' (265). Bille (2019) later articulates the multivalent ways in which light impacts emotions and senses of being, of place, and of nostalgia – all this despite the seeming, if not paradoxical, invisibility of light due to its omnipresence in human and non-human life and experience.

It is not just that gopurams are luminous – the aesthetic qualities of the light as afforded by the materials used to create them can enable or hinder their efficacy for enchantment. Alagupandy and his team lament the rise in popularity of LED (light emitting diode) bulbs over traditional incandescent bulbs for several reasons, including their higher upfront cost despite the fact that LEDs are less expensive over time because they consume less electricity

Figure 13.4 Comparison of LED and incandescent bulbs. Madurai 2013.
Source: Photo by author.

and operate far longer than incandescent lights.⁹ As the electricians explained, LEDs are not as bright, in part due to the sizes available in the area at the time, as demonstrated in Figure 13.4. Further, LEDs are unidirectional and most often project light up to 180 degrees, in contrast to the omnidirectionality of incandescent bulbs that can emit light 360 degrees. Gopurams with LED lights are, therefore, visible from shorter distances and from a narrower range of perspectives in relation to a viewer's position. The level of brightness and the more limited directionality of light from LEDs also tend to create a blurring of a figure's lines, which is further exaggerated with distance.

The 'electricians' consider LEDs inferior in quality and assume customers think they are better because the technology is newer and more expensive. Unfortunately, customers attribute the comparative loss of brightness, clarity, and perspective, not to the LEDs, but to the makers' craftsmanship, a complaint to which Alagupandy is particularly sensitive given the reputation for his skill creating clear and clean outlines. This criticism of the kind of bulbs used more broadly reveals an understanding, from the perspective of their makers, about how the affordances (Gibson 2014 [1979]) of materials affect the gopuram's reception and efficacy. Even more so, the kind of light used impacts the extent to which the beholder can identify the deity or politician

whose figure is an iteration of an image that is popularly circulated, or whose particular iconography must be clearly discernible to be recognised.

Corporeal vision and the technology of enchantment

The electrician's emphasis on the qualities of light signals a primacy of the visual in that these are, of course, material objects meant to be consumed through sight. A foundational and long-standing tenet of material and visual culture is that 'seeing,' 'looking,' 'gazing' – vision itself – are embodied, synaesthetic activities (Pinney 2004; Babb 1981; Eck 1981) in contrast to a Cartesian perspective that posits a separation of the mind – and its perception through vision – from the body. As demonstrated through innumerable ethnographies, beholders are never disengaged from their corporeal bodies as fields of power, nor detached from affective sensations activated through human–image interactions. We perceive through our bodies, and knowledge, experience, and impressions are transmitted and mutually shared through the interactions between people and things.

In what may initially seem like an unlikely link to gopurams, Eva Hayward (2010) refers to haptic vision between humans, cup corals, and other marine species as 'fingeryeyes' – an evocative term referring to the transmission and reception of impressions through the finger-like tentacles of Pacific cup corals, as they touch and 'sense,' as if the tentacles are eyes. Hayward's term resonates here with the interactions between people and light, particularly with the luminous emissions of gopurams. Gopurams touch and impress upon the beholder through the transmission of light that moves away from the gopuram and reaches out toward the beholder to impress upon their eyes.

Luminous brightness, and in some cases dazzling animation, are at the heart of the mechanisms by which gopurams enchant. Christopher Pinney proposes a somatic approach to the visual combined with the efficacy of design with his term 'corpothetics,' a neologism for 'embodied, corporeal aesthetics' (2004: 8). Corpothetics stresses the efficacy of an image over what it 'looks' like to a viewer within Indian visual practices, particularly with regard to a *murthi* – an image, statue, or other manifestation of the divine in which a deity is embodied or present, and with which a devotee can take *darshan*, the reciprocal interaction between deity and devotee of simultaneously seeing and being seen. Thus, a *murthi*'s efficacy is predicated upon its aesthetics, which must be designed such that it not only allows for recognition of the deity, but also facilitates devotion through vision. Although gopurams are often images of deities created by light, they are rarely objects of veneration in the same regard as a *murthi*. This instead speaks to the material and visual dimensions of the design and overall aesthetics of gopurams that attract the beholder, as well as the beholder's corporeal vision.

Similar to the Hindu temple towers for which they are named, gopurams are positioned on the periphery of an event, often at its entrance, rather than being the central focus. They play a significant role during *vizhaas*, however,

by performing the crucial function of drawing people in by beckoning with their warm light. They are bright, colourful, large-scale and can be seen from great distances. They are attractive *and* they attract. In Alfred Gell's terms, light towers are a 'technology of enchantment' (1988, 1992) through which their seductive qualities of luminosity and, in some cases animation, pull their beholders toward and abduct them, like a trap, and prime them for the engagement at the event's centre, whether it is to venerate a deity on procession, to gather for the performance of politics at a rally, or to demonstrate their patronage, respect, and collective identity, as is the case during Thevar Jayanthi, an annual caste celebration in recognition of freedom fighter Muthuramalinga Thevar, a hero of the Thevar caste who opposed British rule. Every year, Alagupandy and his team build an immense gopuram, often depicting a throne or *mahal* (palace) with regal iconography, placed behind the freedom fighter's statue and the two levels of stairs people climb to reach a platform at the statue's head (Figure 13.5). The gopuram not only guides celebrants travelling from the districts south of the city, who can see the unnatural brightness at a great distance, but also illuminates their actions of pouring milk, garlanding with flowers, or offering *prasadam*¹⁰ to the Thevar hero.

It is not simply that there is light, but that there are specific material aspects to the light, which, in combination with the aesthetics of their designs, makes them enchanting. Other than the fact that they are bright and colourful, the more dazzling and revered gopurams include animation effects created through the timing of individual light circuits. Even while speaking in Tamil, Alagupandy and Srinivasan use the English word 'blink' to describe the sequential changes in imagery created by multiple electric circuits. A simple example is the animation of an arm to create the impression that a politician is waving. In more complex gopurams, there are multiple layers of panels, each with its own lights, whose figures will be shifted every few seconds. A relatively common gopuram for amman (goddess) *vizhaas* is of the Tridevi containing the goddesses Lakshmi, Parvati, and Saraswati, who individually and sequentially appear with each cycle of the alternating electric currents, recognised by their unique iconography during each transition, but who share the same outlined face and body. When Srinivasan explained to me how this kind of gopuram works, he said the name of the goddess and then 'Blink!' using both his hands and eyes to punctuate the change in image, or blinking, before saying the name of the next goddess in the cycle followed by 'Blink!' again. The lights blink, but so do our eyes during these transitions.

Even more dazzling is the effect of movement across space through binary animation. When I asked Alagupandy about which gopuram he was most proud, he described a twenty-meter wide train with multiple railcars that appeared to move across a horizontal landscape as the light circuits shifted from panel to panel. Not only did he create the impression of linear movement, but also the railcars' wheels and animal occupants each moved or changed position from frame to frame. He detailed the joy and excitement he saw on the faces of the crowds drawn to the gopuram, with children pulling parents by the hand to get closer.

Figure 13.5 Large-scale *gopuram* installed for Thevar Jayanthi. Madurai 2014.
Source: Photo by author.

Luminosity, then, becomes an entry point into an understanding of the material, aesthetic, and iconographic dimensions through which gopurams affect and enchant beholders, as well as the work they do within a broader event, such as a temple festival or political rally. The efforts, intentions, and anticipation of the electricians who guided the previous sections now inform an examination of the gopurams situated in the ethnographic setting that opened this chapter.

Image regimes, morality, and ‘Amma’

Chief Minister Jayalalithaa’s *pirandanaal* is a particularly significant date for the AIADMK party, given that the birthdays of leaders are always marked occasions, before and after their deaths. However, in Tamilnadu, a chief minister’s birthday is recognised through a variety of events in cities throughout the state, organised by the party and local civic leaders. Most commonly, these include public gatherings at the statues of the chief minister or of the party founder, as in Jayalalithaa’s case, since no statues of her had been installed in Madurai at the time. Party members extol her for the many accomplishments they attribute to their leader, and then they express their loyalty – first to the top of leadership and then to those above themselves in the party’s hierarchy. Such events also include forms of giving to poorer communities, usually food but also items of clothing such as *saris* for women and *lungis* or *dhotis*¹¹ for men, often decorated with party iconography or colours. There are often small exhibitions, held in railway stations or at major municipal buildings, of photographs and posters depicting the initiatives introduced or completed under the chief minister’s direction. Such events were similarly held in Madurai to mark Jayalalithaa’s birthday but, unlike previous years or under the other party’s administrations, there was also a kabadi tournament that drew a far more diverse crowd than would normally attend a political event.

The kabadi tournament around which the many gopurams were placed is part of what I have previously glossed as Jayalalithaa’s ‘nutrition schemes’ (Reese 2017). Expanded here as ‘sustenance schemes’ to better capture the breadth of ways her political persona and image regime sought political efficacy, they are a means to understand her electoral promises of a broad range of material goods if the party were to be elected – what her critics understandably denigrated as ‘freebies’ equivalent to bribes for votes. The dozens of material goods included household fans, food grinders, bicycles, rice, milk, flour, goats, and even laptops for every university student. The sustenance schemes grew out of her carefully crafted transformation through public imagery from a female filmstar to a respectable politician, beginning as her political predecessor’s divine consort in the early 1990s and eventually to that of ‘Amma’ (mother), an amman or mother goddess for the Tamil polity in the 2000s.

When Jayalalithaa first contested a general election¹² in opposition to the DMK – the only other party with viable political authority in the state – her claim to ascendancy was visually conveyed through specific choices of

images depicting her with MGR, as well as through a particular use of juxtaposition, scale, rhetoric, and framing which, in combination, constitutes an image regime.¹³ As proposed by MSS Pandian and V. Geetha (1989), the campaign imagery played upon the popular assumption that the unmarried and childless Jayalalithaa was MGR's mistress. The image regime repackaged the relationship as that of Jayalalithaa as divine consort to MGR as god, an effective positioning given MGR's continued popularity and even widespread veneration of him as a deity in Tamilnadu. Campaign posters presented the pair standing side by side and facing the viewer, or included a photograph of MGR appearing to bestow a blessing upon a younger Jayalalithaa by bending towards her with his hands in supplication. Jayalalithaa, wearing a white *sari* with accents in party colours, gazes up at him with a coquettish smile and slightly bowed head, her hands likewise pressed together. Even more evocative were posters with a photograph in which MGR appears to be giving Jayalalithaa an ornamental sceptre to visually convey MGR's handing of the throne onto Jayalalithaa, which was paired with the campaign slogan that she would 'bring back MGR's rule' (Jacob 1997: 143). Such framing of their relationship was her claim to power, but it also provided Jayalalithaa a method of assuaging concerns regarding her morality as a woman in the public sphere by providing an alternative and benign persona.

As an actress-turned-politician, Jayalalithaa was morally problematic first as an actress who, by virtue of her profession, performed in front of a camera or before a live audience for whom she 'willingly expose[d] herself to the gaze of many unfamiliar men' (Seizer 2002: 120). Her 'publicness' was exacerbated by multiple on-screen romances with men, including MGR (Chinniah 2008). Historically, many actresses became mistresses given that such stigma diminished their prospects of marriage since they were, and still are, generally considered not meeting the criterion of a 'good' wife,¹⁴ and therefore are eliminated as a potential bride for arranged marriages, which remain overwhelmingly the norm in Tamilnadu.

The traditional Tamil ideal for womanhood is that of a *cumankali*, an auspicious and morally chaste married mother of at least one son (Reynolds 1980; Lakshmi 1990). She is a nurturing upholder of Tamil culture and mostly relegated to the domestic sphere, where she is submissive to her husband. Despite being an ideal, it remains one that continues to be valourised in contemporary Tamilnadu, and to which women are frequently measured, even if it is achieved only to varying degrees. A common refrain repeated by both men and women at the women's college where I lived and worked was that 'a woman must first obey her father, and then her husband.'¹⁵

Jayalalithaa asserted herself as MGR's political successor but, as a woman, she faced multiple stigmas of being an unmarried actress who was now in politics – a very public position counter to the morally appropriate married woman safely protected in the private sphere of the home. Such a stigma was addressed by an inversion or rebranding of the assumed romantic relationship between Jayalalithaa and MGR, in that she became MGR's divine consort appointed to continue his vision.

For a woman without children (like Jayalalithaa), as long as she remains an unmarried virgin upholding chaste womanly virtues in all aspects of her life, she could eventually be considered an amman, which literally means 'mother,' but in this context it refers to a type of unmarried and childless goddess whose *sakti* (power) is unrestrained by a male partner (Egnor 1980; Reynolds 1980; Ganesh 1990). In traditional Tamil society, the amman was the only auspicious option for women who never married. Thus, the next incarnation of Jayalalithaa's image regime began after she achieved electoral power as chief minister in 1991. Jacob (2009) documents the marked change in aesthetics of Jayalalithaa's political posters in which she claims a majority of the image space rather than sharing equally with MGR. Jayalalithaa's forward-facing figure is solid, with arms close to the body, with a sari usually wrapped about her shoulders, her hair pulled into a tight knot at the nape of her neck. She named herself 'Amma,' aesthetically and semantically adopting the identity of an amman – the mother goddess whose children are her devotees.¹⁶

Jacob (2008) proposes that Jayalalithaa had solidified her amman status in imagery to reach a fixed state of iconicity, with her body in the static and rigid frontal position of a religious idol, a half smile on her otherwise vacant face. I argue (2017), instead, that the initial presentation of 'Amma' by the AIADMK's campaign offered the traditional aesthetics of an amman, but failed to resonate with the public because there was not a sincere, corporeal, and devotional link between Jayalalithaa as Amma and the constituents to whom she sought to transform into electoral devotees. Amma was present in image and form but had not also demonstrated loving care for her people and their needs – an exchange of support for devotion expected in Hindu devotional practice. The sustenance schemes were later introduced in an effort to address that failure.

Jayalalithaa's packaging as Amma therefore evolved to become an image regime that pursued a material politics that would resonate within Tamil society. It sought to engage idioms of popular devotion to establish, maintain and reify corporeal and affective registers created through the consumption of items provided through the sustenance schemes. The electoral promises of the impressive range of items were largely kept once she took office, albeit with varying criticisms about their qualities and durability. Despite their purchase through public funds, Amma 'gave' thousands of items through highly publicised ceremonies, the photographs of which were included in scores of large posters pasted along the streets of Tamilnadu's urban centres, including Madurai. Every item given through the schemes was branded with her official portrait, even the desktop image on the laptops the university students received. The desired affect of the simultaneous consumption of her image alongside promised items sought to sediment her persona in the public imagination as the benevolent Amma providing various kinds of sustenance to her devotees.

Amma in light: the political efficacy of gopurams

'Amma All-India Kabadi Tournament,' as the posters with her portrait advertised, was an unprecedented event organised to celebrate her birthday, although it was held in addition to the more quotidian forms of commemoration, such as the garlanding of political portraits or statues during lengthy speeches by local party leadership to valorise her character. A tournament for an Indian sport featuring teams from across the region, most of which were from universities, reflects her broader project to demonstrate divine and maternal care for the bodies of her constituents – in exchange, of course, for political support. In similarity with the material goods branded with her official portrait, the tournament was branded with her iconography in posters, murals, and *as light* through the numerous gopurams. Despite the multitude of forms in which her image manifested throughout the city's sports arena and the streets surrounding it, the most luminous, large-scale, and imposing were those of the light structures that towered above the players and spectators.

At the tournament, the affective enchantment of gopurams operated within an image regime that sought to simultaneously affect the public visually, corporeally, and semiotically by combining the persona of Amma, as mother goddess to the Tamil public, with her portrait and branding, to be consumed along with the material goods she 'gave' to the populace. The intended triggering of devotional and veneration practices of exchange were manifested within the tournament by creating a spectacle of bodies in sporting competition, as well as a spectacle of political luminance as gopurams in the forms of multiple Amma's and her (singular) male predecessors.

In this specific ethnographic context, then, the smaller pendant gopurams were placed in areas to attract and draw people in, as would be the case with nearly all civic or religious *vizhaas*. Of significance here are the far larger gopurams surrounding the fields of play so that spectators were continuously bathed in the light of the oversized figures positioned to face one another while also towering above the comparatively miniature figures in kabadi battle below. Observing people in the crowds during the event reminded me of Alagupandy and Srinivasan, who also taught me about what gopurams *do* by correcting how I saw them. During one of the first days I spent at their workspace, Srinivasan brought out a recently completed gopuram of a colourful mandala that could either be statically illuminated or, with a switch on the electricity circuit box, appear to rotate due to the placement and alternation of the light circuits affixed to the bamboo frame.¹⁷ Before encountering the animated mandala, I immediately approached the gopuram as I would a painting on display by standing about a meter away to take in the entire image, and then stepping in closer to inspect its finer elements. Srinivasan stopped me and directed me to mimic his act of looking. He opened his eyes widely and then quickly squinted. This movement reminded me of the fine adjustments of a camera lens to gain focus on its intended subject. The effect

was first a brief blurring of the gopuram's lights, which slightly obscured the figure's form, and then through the quick adjustment of squinting, the lines of light were refined, and the figure of the form was clarified. It was as if, through this directed practice of viewing, the gopuram came into focus. This focus continued as eye muscles relaxed into a gaze before slowly becoming blurred again. This moment of teaching me how to look was my first glimpse of the visual exchanges between gopurams and their beholders, as imagined by Alagupandy, Srinivasan, and the other makers working with them.

During the kabadi tournament, I observed spectators gaze upward at the gopurams and make similar adjustments with their eyes – starting wide and then slightly squinting. Such adjustment was followed, however, by a relaxing of the muscles around the eyes as people continued to gaze, look at another gopuram, and then another, especially during breaks held within or between kabadi matches. It made me consider how people look at illuminated objects but do not usually stare so directly at lights, let alone gaze. Their actions and the luminous glow reflecting on their faces are reminiscent of Hayward's (2010) notion of 'fingeryeyes,' in that the light seemed to touch the eyes of the receptive bodies down below.

Thus, it is not just that gopurams as looming light towers hover at the edges and above the grounds of an event. They are a materialisation of political spectacle implicated in a wider image regime that seeks to operate within a field of relations that resonates with the affective, devotional, and corporeal registers of a Tamil public. Gopurams are not only enchanting and affective but also politically efficacious when they create a radiant atmosphere through the combination of evocation of locally resonant idioms strategically implicated within Jayalalithaa's image regime with their idiosyncratic placement surrounding the central event and in addition to their more traditional places at the periphery and entrances. Spectators at the kabadi tournament beheld, and were held, in Amma's light.

This study draws upon several theoretical and methodological threads within MCS eloquently articulated in this book's introduction that include materiality, agency, relationality, aesthetics, and much more that question and complexify presumed dichotomies between subject and object, human and thing. The case study also resonates with a variety of provocations and concerns expressed throughout the volume and within this section in particular. Gopurams are instantiations of images – whether photographic, iconic, or print – that circulate or 'move' (Spyer and Steedly 2013) to materialise in various media where they have the propensity to become place-objects¹⁸ through which beholders access place, as articulated by Walton, Chapter 16. This is productive along multiple lines of inquiry, but particularly for its assertion that digital photographs can offer a space (broadly conceived), and more specifically a 'place' for ethnographic encounters. This does not mean that such digital photographs become fixed in conceptual or temporal terms, but rather they connect to other evocations within this volume, such as that

proposed by Pinney on the image as an 'index of the future' – a potentiality to anticipate and reveal that which is to come.

Thus, an implicit relationship is linked across several chapters between an image, image-object, or object and its possible future as artefact or object of study in museums, archives, exhibits, and collections. Such trajectories of image/object movement may enable discernible individual object biographies, as considered by Drazin, as well as raise both challenges and potential productivity in identifying and connecting provenance, social, and technical practices of making, and materials when there is a slippage or omission of social context and biography for objects in becoming collection artefacts, as examined by Mercier. Gopurams are unlikely candidates for inclusion within collections and exhibits due to their size, however, both the continuing materialisations of their imagery and of the images on which they are based, as well as the numerous political icon-imbued objects 'given' by Amma, have moved (and will continue to move) into exhibit and collection spaces – an example of which is an Amma-branded backpack for the similarly Amma-branded laptop that it once carried. This everyday object-turned-artefact is now used in teaching, but is nonetheless imbued with political claims and the social relations through and across which it materialised. In different but complementary ways, Schacter and Jeevendrampillai and Parkhurst address related complexities in curatorial practices and positionings arising from individual objects and through relationships and juxtapositions between them, as they variously attest, contest or complicate political assertions, values and subjectivities.

As is illustrated across this volume, and in this chapter's case study examining the making, materialisation, and implication of gopurams within Tamil politics, the shifts between lineages and advances nonetheless begins with the premise, as well as promise, of MCS to enable and enrich an understanding of the role of the material in the social (to paraphrase this volume's editors) – not as a myopic enthusiasm for objects, but as an ethnographically grounded approach that generates a greater apprehension and appreciation of humanity. This is the thread carried through the 'undisciplined' legacies of MCS that will extend into future articulations and preoccupations, as well as emerging and alternative object forms, practices, and understandings of the self, the world, and everything in between.

Notes

- 1 Jayalalithaa Jayaram died on 5 December 2016, while serving her third, non-consecutive, term as state chief minister and leader of the AIADMK.
- 2 *Kabadi* is a team sport played in India consisting of two sides of four players that alternate attempts to run toward and break through the opposing team's defences in order to eliminate one of the opposing team's players.
- 3 See Hardgrave (1973), Pandian (1992), and Ramaswamy (1997) for histories of the Dravidian Nationalist political movement.

- 4 The Indian National Congress, or simply the Congress party, was the dominant national party before and after India gained independence in 1947.
- 5 *Anna* is the Tamil word for 'elder brother' as well as Annadurai's nickname.
- 6 To provide a sense of scale, it should be noted that the *gopuram* is taller than the building with four levels at the left side of the photograph.
- 7 On the relationships between images and/as 'place' using complementary analytical frameworks, see Walton, Chapter 16 for a compelling consideration of images, in this case digital photographs, as 'place-objects.'
- 8 This resonates with Böhme's (2017) expansive reflections on light, darkness, brilliance and shadow within and in the making of atmospheres – variously conceived and articulated in physical, social, and philosophical terms.
- 9 The electricians also expressed frustration with the bluer colour temperature of the LEDs that were available in the area at that time. As they did for incandescent bulbs, they selected spherical LED bulbs in order to wrap them in coloured cellophane, which was more economical and offered a greater variety of hues than purchasing a wide range of coloured bulbs to individually place along the strings of lights. They had to make adjustments to achieve their desired shade of 'white' light, however, by wrapping LED bulbs in cellophane to mitigate the bluer temperature, whereas they would simply leave incandescent bulbs bare.
- 10 Material offering to a deity such as food, flowers, or money.
- 11 A *lungi* is a traditional garment for men: a long piece of fabric sewn with the ends joined together is wrapped around the torso and secured with careful folds. It is most often made of cotton or cotton blends. It can also be folded up so that the lower legs have greater mobility. A *dhoti*, also known as a *veshti*, is similar in that it is also formed by a lengthy piece of cotton fabric with an embroidered edge, but the ends are not sewn together. It is more formal attire in part because it is not to be folded upward to expose the legs. Over the decades, the *dhoti* has become part of a male politician's uniform when paired with a crisp, white button-up shirt. The result in appearance for both garments is similar to a long sarong or skirt.
- 12 Jayalalithaa entered politics while MGR was still alive and the party leader in the 1980s. After his death in 1987, Jayalalithaa asserted her claim to AIADMK leadership in opposition to MGR's wife, Janaki. The result was an acrimonious contest between two factions within the party, with Jayalalithaa as the successor. Some of the AIADMK members with whom I conducted research remained reticent to recognise her authority, even decades later. Others who were drawn to the party because of MGR's charisma claimed to support Jayalalithaa *only* because they believed MGR designated her as his successor, but that she had not earned the role by moving up through the party or even by inspiring others to join by believing in her abilities to lead. For similar discussions see Dickey (2008).
- 13 Building on Martin Jay's (1988) extension of Christian Metz's 'scopic regime.'
- 14 There are historical associations of actresses with prostitution in the courtly life of medieval kingdoms throughout South India. Such associations have long-standing linguistic ties in the denotations and connotations for the words 'actress' and 'whore' within spoken Tamil (Seizer 2002).
- 15 Variations of this by Christian colleagues especially emphasised the position of the father and husband in relation to god: 'A woman's god is first her father, then her husband.'

- 16 See C.S. Lakshmi (1997) on how women in the 1920s Self-Respect Movement in Tamilnadu reconceptualised male party members as family members (brother, father) in an effort to assuage prejudices about their activities in the public sphere and thus justify political involvement.
- 17 The word 'blink' was also used to describe the appearance of a *mandala* rotating counter-clockwise through a sequence of three different light circuits.
- 18 See also Sarah Pink (2011a) on photographs as 'place-events' for a different framing as well as attendant applications and implications.