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RELIGIOUS TEXTS, PRIESTLY EDUCATION AND RITUAL ACTION IN SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLE HINDUISM

C.J. Fuller

This article, mainly based on research among the priests of the Minaksi temple in Madurai, Tamilnadu, is a continuation of earlier work on the relation between religious texts and ritual action which was presented in a monograph about the priests and a recent article in *Contributions* (Fuller 1984; 1993). It contains new data about education in the religious schools attended by the priests and their sons, which show that my previous analysis of the relation between the texts and ritual performance was flawed in some significant respects. My doubts about whether the priests' performance of ritual could be improved through education were also overstated, because educated priests have the crucial ability to recite texts when carrying out rituals, whereas their uneducated colleagues can perform only the physical ritual acts. This article also looks at the priests' 'techniques of the body' and shows that education nevertheless has virtually no impact on how priests carry out physical ritual. The article concludes with some further reflections on the analysis of ritual and the problem of its misperformance.

I

The Minaksi temple priests and the Agamic texts

The Great Temple at Madurai, formally known as the Arulmiku ('grace-bestowing') Minaksi-Sundaresvara Tirukkoyil ('temple'), is dedicated to the goddess Minaksi and her husband the

god Sundaresvara, who is a form of Siva. In Madurai, the goddess rather than the god is pre-eminent, and their temple is popularly called the 'Minaksi temple'. The priests who serve in the Minaksi temple, like all Saiva temple priests in Tamilnadu, are Adisaivas (or Sivacaryas), members of an endogamous subcaste which is generally regarded as Brahman, but is ranked below other, non-priestly Smarta Brahman subcastes. The priests' right to work in the Minaksi temple is hereditary, but before they can perform worship there they must marry and undergo the rituals of initiation and consecration (*acaryabhiseka*).¹

In the Minaksi temple, as in all other Saiva temples in Tamilnadu, the rituals should in theory be performed according to the prescriptions of the Agamas, the texts believed to contain Siva's own directions for his proper worship. There are twenty-eight fundamental Agamas (*mulagama*) and some 200 secondary Agamas (*upagama*). The texts of most of the fundamental Agamas are known to exist and the oldest ones are believed to date from the 3rd to 7th centuries A.D. In principle, each Agama contains four parts (*pada*), including the *kriyapada* which covers the ritual procedures. It is generally asserted, probably correctly, that the *Kamikagama* is regarded as authoritative in most Saiva temples in Tamilnadu, including the Minaksi temple in Madurai, although reference may also be made to the *Karanagama*; the *Kamikagama's kriyapada*, the only part existing in complete form, contains some 12,000 verses in its two portions. In addition to the Agamas themselves, there also exist commentaries (*vrtti*, *dipika*) on them, as well as several manuals (*paddhati*), which deal especially with the rituals. The most important manual is Aghorasiva's (12th century), which is regarded as the main authority in the temples. The principal difference between the manuals, especially Aghorasiva's, and the Agamas themselves, is that the former give more detailed and explicit directions for ritual performance; they also supply all the mantras that

must be chanted during the rituals, whereas the Agamas do not reproduce them fully. All the Agamic texts - and of course the Vedic and Puranic verses also forming part of Agamic ritual - were composed in Sanskrit.²

In previous publications, I have discussed the relation between the Agamas and ritual performance, as well as the impact of reformist campaigns to improve the standard of ritual by providing Agamic education and training for temple priests. These campaigns have been powerfully promoted by the Tamilnadu government's Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Department (Presler 1987: 46-7, 112-13, 145), although support for them has also come from other influential figures, notably the Sankaracaryas of Kanchipuram. The reformist premise is simple and at first sight entirely reasonable; if priests learn the Agamic texts properly, they will know how to carry out rituals according to Siva's own directions and will thus perform them accurately, whereas at present they rarely do, because so many of them are ignorant of the texts. As I have shown before, however, the idea of exact adherence to Agamic prescription is illusory and the reformist demand that all rituals should be performed according to Siva's instructions could never be fully and verifiably met (Fuller 1984: 139-42; 1993: 181-2; cf. Brunner 1994: 456-8; Reiniche 1989: 82).

Although temple priests are the targets of reformist criticism, they too fully subscribe to the doctrine that all ritual should be performed according to Agamic rules. Moreover, the priests have largely internalised the criticisms directed at them and mostly agree that the best solution to the problem of ritual misperformance is Agamic religious education. The priests, as I shall show, are in an important sense right about this matter, and my earlier discussion of the inconsistencies in reformist thinking needs modification.

II

The religious education of the priests

In July 1980, fifty-six priests were working more or less regularly in the temple. Only one of them had had a full, six-year education in an Agamic religious school (*pathasala*), which he had completed in 1976, although one other priest's son was then studying at the same school.

By July 1995, eighty-seven men were entitled to work as priests in the Minaksi temple (because they had undergone the consecration ritual and had living wives), but six were working in overseas temples, nine mainly worked in other nearby temples, and three with other full-time employment did not work as priests at all. A total of sixty-nine men therefore worked regularly in the temple, although now as in the past, some of them had other jobs and were part-time priests and some old priests were virtually retired. Of these sixty-nine, four studied at religious schools for four or more years, and two did so for less than four years. In addition, three of the priests working overseas and one who mainly works at the Subrahmanya temple in the nearby village of Tirupparankundram (where he has founded a new school) have completed four or more years' study in a religious school.³

A further nineteen priests (plus one who also studied at a religious school) completed a one-year 'refresher' course in the Minaksi temple's own school in 1992-3 or 1993-4, making a total of twenty-five out of sixty-nine priests with at least one year's religious education. The principal teacher on this course was the priest who, in 1976, had been the first to complete an Agamic education. These refresher courses, primarily designed for working priests without any religious education, were started by the HR&CE Department in 1992 and

they form part of the campaign led by Ms Jayalalitha, the present Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, to improve the condition of the state's temples and their priests (Fuller n.d.). Shorter, 45-day refresher courses have been intermittently organised under the auspices of the HR&CE Department for many years, but the one-year courses are an innovation and the priests who take them do learn a significant amount, albeit far less than on a full-time course over several years in a school.

Among the thirty-four priests' sons (aged 16 or over) who are as yet unmarried and therefore have not been consecrated, four have studied for four or more years in a religious school, seven have studied for less than four years or are currently students at one, and two have completed a one-year refresher course.

Several priests and their sons have also had some form of religious education about which I lack accurate details. Excluding these men introduces an indeterminate error into my figures for educated priests; nevertheless, these show that, by 1995, six out of the sixty-nine priests had studied in the established schools (as had four more who are entitled to work in the temple), compared with only one out of fifty-six in 1980, and another nineteen had had one year's education in the temple school. A similarly large expansion in the number of priests' sons attending religious schools has also occurred, so that the proportion of educated priests will probably be sustained into the foreseeable future. The rising standard of their religious education has contributed a great deal to the overall improvement in the morale of the Minaksi temple priests since the late 1970s, and they have clearly responded to reformist criticism of their alleged incompetence (Fuller n.d.; cf. 1984: 139; 1993: 184).

The Agamic religious schools and their teaching system

The full Sanskrit title of an Agamic religious school is *veda sivagama pathasala*, because they teach the Vedas as well as the Saiva Agamas (as opposed to the Vaisnava ones).

Admission to these schools is restricted to male Adisaivas who have had their *upanayana*, the 'sacred-thread' ceremony which makes them *brahmacaris*, Brahman students. In all schools, the students are resident boarders and all their food and basic living expenses are found for them. The overwhelming majority of Minaksi temple priests and their sons who have studied in religious schools have been to either Allur or Pillaiyarpatti. Allur is a Brahman village on the banks of the Kaveri near Tiruchirappalli and its school was founded in 1963 by a priest in the local temple. The school's funding mainly comes from the Kanchipuram Sankaracarya's monastery. The total number of students is consistently maintained at around thirty and all of them enter the school when they are 12 or 13. Pillaiyarpatti is a village near Karaikkudi and is the site of an important Vinayaka (Ganesa) temple, one of the Natukkottai Chettiyars' family temples. The guru, a priest in the temple, started his school in 1978 with five students and by January 1995 it had 186, as well as two assistant teachers, which makes it far the biggest Agamic school in Tamilnadu today. As in Allur, many students come when aged around 12, but many others arrive after completing their ordinary schooling (when they may be about 16) or even after finishing a university degree. The land and money for the Pillaiyarpatti school's buildings have been donated by wealthy Hindus; its running expenses are mainly met from the income earned by the guru and his students at special rituals, such as *kumbabhisekas* (temple renovation and consecration rituals), which are held throughout Tamilnadu and further afield, and Ganapati *homas*, rituals focused on oblations into a

sacrificial fire usually performed for Ganapati as part of an inauguration ceremony and held in the local temple or in devotees' homes or business premises.

There are two principal differences between Allur and Pillaiyarpatti. The first is that the course of teaching at Allur stretches over the full six years and not until near the end (and during an extra seventh year) do the students receive 'practical' training in ritual by performing worship in the local temple and by assisting their guru at temple renovations and other special rituals. At Pillaiyarpatti, the course is completed in four years and students take part in rituals, especially in the local temple, from early on in their studies; in the fifth and sixth years, they are mainly involved in assisting their guru at special rituals. At Allur therefore, in comparison with Pillaiyarpatti, learning texts is given greater relative importance than practical ritual training. In indirect criticism of Pillaiyarpatti, the guru at Allur told me that he regarded accurate memorisation and understanding of texts as the most important objective for an Agamic religious school, but the emphasis on practical training at Pillaiyarpatti is applauded by many priests and has helped to make the school very popular. The second difference between the two schools is that Allur is more 'orthodox', which is partly why it accepts only younger students who can be more easily moulded into its institutional framework. Allur's guru is a stricter disciplinarian, who insists that all students have long hair tied in a knot (Tamil *kutumi*) and forbids them to eat outside the school without permission, whereas the guru at Pillaiyarpatti is relaxed about these matters (and also lets his young students play games every evening). As already mentioned, a priest who is entitled to work in the Minaksi temple but mainly works at Tirupparankundram started a new school there in 1992. It is in principle modelled after Allur, where the priest was a student, but in some respects it is more like Pillaiyarpatti, because it is financed in much the same

way, all its students receive practical ritual training, and the guru is rather less traditionally-minded than his own teacher; for example, he does not insist on the *kutumi*.⁴ By 1995, the Tirupparankundram school already had forty students, including two from Minaksi temple priests' families.

In each of the three schools, the daily timetable is similar, and Pillaiyarpatti's is presented in Table 1. Although the school day is very long, the teaching routine is not as intensive as the timetable suggests in any of the schools. Classes often start late and are shorter than the scheduled hours, and quite frequently they are postponed or cancelled, because their teachers are otherwise occupied. As a matter of course, students regularly spend a lot of time waiting for their teachers or listening to them while they are talking to visitors to the schools, but in a sense this is part of their tuition. The schools are based on the *gurukula* system in which the pupil (*sisya*) lives in his guru's house as his disciple and servant, and it is important that students learn absolute obedience to their guru, even if this means that they must just sit and wait until he tells them what to do. The gurus also require the students to carry out all sorts of miscellaneous tasks for them, and they often tell the senior students to teach and supervise the junior ones. All in all, it is hard to estimate the average amount of time actually spent in lessons, but it is certainly less than the seven or eight hours scheduled in each school. On six to eight lunar days per month, no teaching takes place, at least of Agamic and Vedic texts, and there are also three ten-day holidays each year. The school year begins on Vijayadasami, which is also the day of Sarasvati Puja, the festival for the goddess of learning in September-October.⁵

Except for a small amount of Tamil material, all the texts taught in the schools are in Sanskrit. The schools' gurus always teach the Agamic texts and sometimes the Vedic texts as

well, but the latter are mostly taught by Brahman sastris (Tamil *castiri*) who have studied in a Vedic school (*veda pathasala*) of the kind described by Subramaniam (1974: 52-67). The division of work between teachers reflects the traditional demarcation between Adisaivas who are knowledgeable in the Agamas and Brahmans who monopolise knowledge of the Vedas. Today, however, the Adisaiva gurus deflect the implication that they cannot teach the Vedas because they are not true Brahmans; instead, they say pragmatically that Brahman sastris, who have been educated solely in the Vedas, can teach them more effectively. Most sastris who teach in schools also work as domestic priests or as chanters in the temples, where their main responsibility is reciting the Veda (Fuller 1984: 37-9).

Two methods known in Tamil as *cantai* and *tiruvai* are used in the religious schools for learning all types of texts. *Cantai* is teaching by the guru, in which he chants a passage and the students as a group repeat it after him twice. When the *cantai* is done for a new text for the first time, the guru breaks each line down into three or more segments of only a few syllables; at each subsequent *cantai* he lengthens the segments until on the sixth occasion (or thereabouts) he enunciates each line or verse in its entirety, and he continues to do it like this until the *cantai* has been completed about ten times. In any one lesson, sections of one or two texts are usually taught. Most texts are too long to be recited and repeated in their entirety within one lesson, and they are therefore taught in a series of sections over an extended period.

The second method of learning, complementary to the first, is the *tiruvai*, repetition of texts by the students, in which they repeat together what they were taught in the *cantai* the day before or on earlier occasions. Periods are set aside in the timetable for students to do the *tiruvai* alone, but at the beginning and end of a lesson, before and after the *cantai*, the

guru normally listens to the *tiruvai*, sometimes telling the students to repeat verses up to five or even ten times, and occasionally interrupting or joining in if they are making too many mistakes. To check how well students have memorised texts, the guru may ask them to recite any passage they have learnt, starting anywhere within it and not necessarily at the beginning. Describing Vedic schools, Subramaniam writes that: 'The trained ears of the guru are so sharp that he never misses any omission or false note' (1974: 60). Whether this is entirely true of the teachers I have observed is hard to say, but it is noticeable that they sometimes correct very minor errors of pronunciation and equally that they often merely grimace at a mistake, while allowing the students to continue so that their rhythm is not lost too frequently. Like the *cantai*, the *tiruvai* for any one text should be fully repeated about ten times. In practice the number of repetitions does vary; nonetheless, it is conventionally said that after ten *cantais* and ten *tiruvais* any text sticks in the mind forever, but if it does not, a student must continue *tiruvai* by himself until he has mastered it. Sheer repetition is the key and it is noteworthy that students do not rely on mnemonic devices to help them memorise texts.

In principle, the teaching method is entirely oral, as it always has been for Hindu religious texts, and during the *cantai*, the students should repeat after the guru exactly what they hear. The justification for oral teaching, of course, is that every student must learn precisely how to pronounce the text - with correct articulation, aspiration, accentuation and so on. None of these critical features can be reproduced from reading alone. Kane (1974: 347) refers to 'the great prejudice against learning from books' in ancient India, but in today's religious schools it is more simply seen as something that just cannot be done. Nevertheless, students do have to copy most of the texts they are learning into notebooks; their notebooks

or printed books are an important support for the teaching and their use clearly facilitates verbatim memorisation of the spoken word. During the *cantai* students sometimes have books or notebooks open in front of them and, at least initially, the *tiruvai* is regularly done with each student following the text. Even a guru may have a book open, at least to remind him of exceptionally difficult passages. Hence although it is correct to describe the *pathasala* education system as fundamentally based on orality and rote memory, the students - rather like actors learning their lines - often refer to the words on paper to help them memorise them.

All students therefore have to be able to read and write Sanskrit, not in the sense that they know the language properly, but in the restricted sense that they know the *grantha* (or *devanagari*) script and can follow and copy materials set out in it. The books used in the schools, especially in the earlier years of the course, are in the *grantha* script, traditionally employed in Tamilnadu for writing Sanskrit, and all students have to learn *grantha* at or before the start of their course, although the *devanagari* script is also used, especially in Allur. In the one-year refresher courses, only *grantha* is used. Certainly, the majority of priests in the Minaksi temple - and probably in Tamilnadu as a whole - who can read Sanskrit (in the restricted sense) know only the *grantha* script. Today, incidentally, printing in *grantha* has ended, apparently because there are no compositors still alive who can set the fonts, and the most recent publications are reproductions of hand-written sheets. The script is not an entirely trivial issue, because it means that important Agamic texts published solely in *devanagari* cannot be read by many priests, although only the most advanced students and graduates of the religious schools, who can all read *devanagari*, would actually be likely to consult such texts.⁶ A considerable proportion of the texts learnt in the religious schools

have also been published in Tamil transliteration, but the peculiarities of Tamil orthography (even when specially modified) make it impossible to reproduce accurately all the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. These Tamil transliterations are not used in the schools, but they are used by some priests (and lay devotees) as an aid to memorising texts.

Each school has a set curriculum itemising the material to be learnt in each year; I have a copy of the curriculum for the first four years from Pillaiyarpatti, and abbreviated versions of the Allur and Tirupparankundram curricula. In each curriculum, the most vital sections are those devoted to the Agamas and Vedas. The Agamic section starts with the verses for meditation (*dhyana*) for different deities and a short series of specific rituals - such as Vighnesvara *puja* and the preparatory purification ritual of *punyahavacana* - for which particular texts have to be learnt. These meditation verses and rituals are regarded as basic to a priest's Agamic knowledge, and they also made up the core of the curriculum for the one-year refresher course held in the Minaksi temple's school during 1992-3.⁷ In its Agamic section, the Pillaiyarpatti curriculum then lists at length the separate rituals which constitute the public worship in Saiva temples, both daily worship and festivals; at Allur and Tirupparankundram, essentially the same material is covered. For each ritual, the students learn the relevant textual passage, which describes the ritual and the manner of its performance, together with the mantras which must be chanted. These passages derive from a variety of Agamas and manuals, although according to my informants Aghorasiva's manual is the principal source.⁸ As Davis notes (1991: 17), it is to manuals such as Aghorasiva's, rather than the Agamas themselves, 'that later Saiva practitioners have most often turned for ritual guidance'.

In the Vedic section of each curriculum, the most important texts are a series of

mantras from the Krsna (Black) Yajur Veda required for the Agamic worship of Siva; the *Ganapati Upanisad*; the principal hymns (*sukta*) (for Purusa, Sri, Brahma, Visnu, Rudra, Durga and Bhū); and two famous litanies from the Krsna Yajur Veda known as the *Srirudra* (often simply *Rutram* in Tamil) and *Camaka*.⁹

In addition to the Agamic and Vedic sections, there is also a Puranic section which includes the lists of 108 names (*astottara sata namavali*) for the main gods and goddesses worshipped in Saiva temples, as well as other similar texts for a variety of deities, such as the celebrated *Lalita sahasranama* (1000 names of goddess Lalita). These texts all derive from the Puranas (or Epics).¹⁰ The lists of names have to be recited during various types of worship, notably private worship conducted on behalf of individual devotees by temple priests. By far the commonest type of private worship is the *arcana*, in which a priest chants the deity's 108 names, and every priest (whether educated or not) should know these names for the main deities in order to make a living in the temple. The 108-name lists are taught at Pillaiyarpatti in the first year, but at Allur the guru deliberately teaches them only at the end of the course, lest his students imagine prematurely that they could work as qualified priests.

Another section of the curriculum - *sastra* at Pillaiyarpatti and *kavya* at Allur and Tirupparankundram - consists of basic texts of classical Sanskrit literature and some instruction in grammar. Smaller sections are devoted to instruction on the calendar and astrology, and to study of Tamil devotional and classical literature. Only the Agamic, Vedic and Puranic sections, however, are directly relevant to the performance of temple worship by priests, so that the rest of the curriculum is in a sense supplementary. Mainly in the fifth and sixth years, students study Agamic Saiva Siddhanta theology, and attend lectures and symposia addressed by visiting teachers on the subject. Oral and written examinations are

conducted annually; the final examination is held at the end of the fourth year at Pillaiyarpatti and the sixth at Allur. Students who pass it are awarded the titles of `Sivagama Ratnam' at Pillaiyarpatti and `Sivagama Sironmani' at Allur, which epithetically describe them as `jewels' (Tamil *rattinam, cironmani*).

IV

Memorisation, understanding and knowledge

Above all else, verbatim memorisation of Sanskrit texts is the principal objective of the Agamic religious schools' teaching system and all the gurus insist that memorisation is far more important than understanding. All the same, especially at Allur and Tirupparankundram, students are normally taught the meaning of the Agamic texts memorised by them, and they are able to explain them and translate or paraphrase them into Tamil. At Pillaiyarpatti, less explicit attention is given to the meaning and greater reliance is placed on contextual understanding as acquired through practical performance of ritual. The meaning of Vedic texts, however, is hardly ever explained to the students and only some passages - such as those listing deities' names - are understood by them. The tuition in Sanskrit grammar and literature is very elementary and learning the language is not a primary aim, so that the majority of students do not acquire real competence in Sanskrit, let alone in the archaic language of the Vedas. Clearly, successful verbatim memorisation is not dependent on competence in the language, because the students in the schools do manage to learn by rote a large quantity of Agamic, Vedic and Puranic texts. Indeed, they do so even on the one-year refresher courses, in which no Sanskrit is taught at all, except for the *grantha*

script. None of this, of course, is at all peculiar, because there are many obvious parallels from other societies, such as Muslims without Arabic memorising the Quran, or even English children memorising Latin verse, which used to be a fairly common schoolroom task.

It is important too that in the religious schools, students are learning a selection of Agamic, Vedic and Puranic textual passages, but they are not learning any of the Agamas themselves, such as the 12,000 verses of the authoritative *Kamikagama*; nor are they learning more than a series of extracts from Aghorasiva's manual. Hence the reformist idea that temple priests must be educated so that they have a sound knowledge of Agamic texts rests on a misconception about what is taught in the religious schools, which I have partly reproduced in my previous writing on the subject (cf. Fuller 1984: ch. 6). Thus although I argued that the idea of exact adherence to Agamic prescription is misconceived, I still wrote as if religious education was in principle about mastering *the* Agamas or the manuals based on them, so that priests would know how to conduct rituals by drawing on their knowledge of the authoritative texts. In the light of recent research, it is now clear that my earlier discussion was flawed in some important respects.

As we have seen, students in the religious schools are mainly concentrating on memorising texts that should be recited as part of the rituals. Many Agamic texts include a description of what is being done in the rituals, but a large proportion of the memorised material comprises sets of mantras, meditation verses, hymns, praises, deities' names and so on. In any case, though, the students are primarily learning the spoken component of the rituals, and only secondarily directions for them; moreover, although many students have an understanding of the meaning of the Agamic texts, that is seen as much less important than their ability to recite these and other texts properly during rituals. Only in an indirect sense,

therefore, does education produce priests who could in principle draw from the texts they have memorised a body of knowledge about correct ritual. In other words, learning what to chant does not primarily teach a priest *how* to perform a ritual; rather, it enables him to make complete a ritual whose spoken component would otherwise be omitted, unless he were assisted by someone else, such as a temple chanter, who was responsible for it. In practice, many rituals or sections of them are always conducted without any accompanying recitation; further, especially in important rituals, even educated priests are normally assisted by a chanter or another priest who can recite, so that there is a division of labour between the priest performing the physical ritual action, who may remain silent, and the man who recites the texts. This, though, does not affect the crucial point that a priest able to perform both tasks has a competency lacking in a priest who does not know the texts. Indeed, one striking change in the Minaksi temple since the early 1980s, most noticeable in very elaborate rituals, is the way in which the chanters' near-monopoly over both Agamic and Vedic recitation has been encroached upon by educated priests able to recite as well as to perform the rituals (cf. Fuller 1984: 37-9).

The schools, more so at Pillaiyarpatti (and Tirupparankundram) than Allur, also provide some instruction on how to perform physical ritual through practical training. In this training, students learn specific techniques, such as how to make the *mudras*, the prescribed hand gestures which should be performed during rituals, and they also acquire considerable knowledge about the myriad details of ritual enactment; for example, how pots of water should be prepared so that the deities can be invoked within them, which materials are needed for oblations into a sacrificial fire, or what is the correct sequence in complex rituals made up of many sections. Such knowledge is no doubt easier to acquire and retain for

students who also understand the meaning of the relevant Agamic texts. Nonetheless, practical training is mostly practice rather than training, and there is no real difference between how students in the schools learn the basic skills of physical ritual performance and how priests who start working in temples without attending schools do so. As I shall explain further below, the competent performance of the great majority of physical ritual action, which does not involve any esoteric complexities, is dependent on techniques of the body. These are not primarily acquired through formal instruction and there is actually no consistent difference between educated and uneducated priests in respect of their ability to carry out most physical ritual.

Hence the key distinction between educated and uneducated priests is not that the former can physically *do* rituals better than the latter, but that they know what to *say* as well. Educated priests, of course, constitute a broad category, and obviously how much or how well they can recite depends on the length of their education, their commitment to their studies, and other personal factors. Moreover, their competence at recitation, which distinguishes them from uneducated priests, does not indicate that educated priests with some understanding of Agamic texts are drawing upon a discursive knowledge about how to conduct ritual in conformity with Agamic prescription, because they are not in fact recalling those texts in order to guide their action when they recite them verbatim from memory.

In this context, the belief that the words of the Vedas and Agamas were divinely uttered, and that mantras in particular embody and transmit divine power is also germane. Thus in Agamic thought: 'all rites are accomplished with mantras. In consequence, since mantras are intended for ritual, [an action] is not ritual without mantras' (Davis 1991: 33; cf. Brunner-Lachaux 1963: xxx-xxxvi). The special properties of mantras (which often contain

literally meaningless syllables) are not fully shared by other kinds of verses, even if they are attributed a divine authorship, and many passages memorised by students come from manuals with human authors. Nonetheless, the texts as a whole have, so to speak, acquired some of the aura of the mantras, and their recitation tends to be regarded by priests as the more vital component of a ritual, even though the physical action is important and should be performed correctly as well. In this respect, the priests' attitude reflects the fact that, as Padoux (1989: 297) observes, speech has always remained at the very centre of Indian culture and ideas about the power of speech, especially mantras, have always been pervasively present. Priests unable to recite the texts are therefore mere technicians doing only the less important and less powerful parts of rituals, which they cannot complete properly unless others chant for them.

Because educated priests know what to say in ritual, as well as what to do, Agamic religious education does produce men who are more proficient than their uneducated colleagues who know only what to do. It still remains true that education cannot overcome the obstacles to strict and verifiable adherence with Agamic prescription, which I have previously discussed and outlined near the beginning of this article. Furthermore, even if we acknowledge that 'a real transformation' is hard to assess, Brunner is probably right to say that 'the ritual [temple priests] perform, even when they do it as well as possible, does not answer the requirements of the "orthodox" Agamas, which insist that no cult can have any fruit without a real transformation of the worshipper', who must 'become Siva' (1994: 457). On the other hand, graduates of the religious schools certainly can perform rituals to a higher standard by accepted criteria than their uneducated colleagues, not least because the Agamas themselves insist that ritual cannot be accomplished without mantras. To that extent anyway, the reformist argument, advanced by the priests as well, that priests must be educated so that

they can perform ritual `correctly' is vindicated, and my earlier writing on the subject exaggerated reformist misconceptions.

In reformist discourse, schools are commonly said to provide a `professional' training for the priesthood. Indeed, priests and the schools' gurus often compare it with medical or legal training. The comparison, however, is a loose one, because education in the religious schools is not primarily about acquiring the kind of formal, substantive knowledge that doctors or lawyers have to apply to a range of different cases. It is true that students, especially at Allur and Tirupparankundram, learn the meaning of Agamic texts, and that the gurus and their best graduates can expound on and argue about the structure of complex rituals and Agamic theology in a more or less academic way. Nonetheless, the fact remains that students in the schools are primarily there to learn by heart texts whose recitation forms part of the rituals, rather than to study texts as sources of formal knowledge about the rituals. Memorising large quantities of Sanskrit verse is undoubtedly mentally demanding, but it is a very different task from that undertaken by medical or law students, who do not (or should not) memorise their textbooks as a worthwhile end in itself. At least among the priests and gurus, the idea of professional training is clearly connected with their own ambition to `professionalise' the temple priesthood in order to raise its public standing and to improve the Adisaivas' relatively low status vis-a-vis Smarta Brahmins.¹¹

As I have described elsewhere (Fuller 1996: 5-7, 14-15), there is now, in the mid-1990s, a deepening divide between educated and uneducated priests in the Minaksi temple. The former, who mostly belong to the younger generation, generally enjoy better economic opportunities than the uneducated, but they also possess an important form of `cultural capital', because they can more or less automatically claim a professionalism and expertise

largely denied to their uneducated colleagues. Moreover, some of the men who have completed a full course of study at Allur or Pillaiyarpatti are widely esteemed as learned in the Agamas; owing to their reputation, they are, for instance, invited to conduct *kumbabhisekas* all over Tamilnadu and further afield. On the other hand, these same men are particularly commonly criticised for not practising what they preach - for misperforming rituals in relation to the Agamic rules which they claim to know - and such criticisms are voiced by both their educated and uneducated colleagues. Many uneducated Minaksi temple priests, however, have become noticeably more defensive about their lack of education over the last decade or so, which reflects the fact that in the priesthood - like other occupations which have been 'professionalised' - education has progressively come to be regarded as more valuable than experience. Yet although educated priests can perform rituals better in so far as they can recite texts, the emphasis on the merits of education obscures the extent to which competent performance of physical ritual is mainly a function of acquired techniques of the body. It is to these techniques that I now turn.

V

Ritual performance and techniques of the body

Discussing the priests in Tamil Vaisnava temples, Colas (1995: 125) makes some observations relevant here. Defending them against the charge of 'generalised ignorance', he writes: 'The apprenticeship of the future officiant is above all practical: the memorisation of *mantras* and ritual gestures transmitted by generations of priests, not those which are inscribed in the canonical works of an ancient past but those which have been inherited and

applied. It is not a matter of knowing the ancient sources, but of having a pragmatic and quasi-technical knowledge adapted to current usage in the temples. Would we expect a modern general practitioner to know ancient Greek medical treatises?' Colas's rhetorical question is misplaced, since nobody imagines that a modern doctor should be conversant with ancient works, whereas priests are ideally supposed to know the Agamic texts. Moreover, in the Minaksi temple anyway, most uneducated priests have negligible memorised knowledge of mantras. Nonetheless, Colas's defence of the priests tellingly addresses the question of what contemporary priests do know and how they learn it, rather than what they do not know, by focusing on the memorisation of gestures (as well as words) and on their practical knowledge.

It is an important, albeit self-evident, feature of temple ritual that the vast majority of it consists of a limited repertoire of acts which are perpetually repeated with more or less elaboration. In particular, priests pour liquids over the images, dress and decorate them, offer plates of food before them and wave lamps, ending with a camphor flame, in front of them; these are the four basic rites (*abhiseka*, *alankara*, *naivedya*, *diparadhana*) which constitute worship (*puja*), the core ritual of the public worship in the Minaksi temple, although it is frequently reduced to only a simple food-offering and display of lamps (Fuller 1992: 63-9). In the commonest form of private worship (*arcana*), the food-offering is a coconut and some plantains, and it is completed by waving lighted camphor on the offering plate; this *arcana* ritual is often done in the course of public worship as well, especially during festivals. After any type of worship is over, the priests normally distribute *prasada*, usually of white ash (*vibhuti*) and red powder (*kunkuma*), to the devotees and they (or the temple servants assisting them) take the camphor flame to the devotees so that they can place their hands over

it. Of course, there are other things that priests have to do as well, but the rites constituting *puja* and *arcana* certainly make up the majority of their ritual work in the temple. Even at a festival held only once a year, most of what has to be done is a combination of more frequently held rituals, so that it is actually uncommon for a priest to have to carry out an unfamiliar ritual act. As a form of physical labour, temple ritual work is extremely routinised.

When a priest starts to work in the temple, he obviously has to learn the repertoire of ritual acts, but all of them will be completely familiar inasmuch as he has been watching them being done by his father and others since childhood. Of course, novice priests sometimes nervously blunder and find that they cannot coordinate their physical movements; one priest, who did not start working in the temple until he was relatively old, told me that when he first had to perform worship in Sundaresvara's main shrine, he was so overawed by his closeness to the god's power that he became almost paralysed. Nevertheless, most ritual gestures and manoeuvres are quite easy to learn, even if some need a bit of practice: for example, waving a heavy lamp held in the right hand with the arm outstretched while continuously ringing a bell held in the left hand, or cracking a coconut on a stone wall so that it breaks into even halves before it is presented as a food-offering. (If a coconut does not break properly and fragments into several pieces, it is said to be an inauspicious omen for the success of the ritual.) As already stated, priests who attend religious schools can practise their ritual skills before coming to work in the temple, and it is also common nowadays (though less so in the past) for young men to serve as priests in small temples, gaining some experience, before they come to the vast and crowded Minaksi temple. But whether they first go to schools or work in small temples, or start straightaway in the Minaksi temple, all priests

mainly learn how to carry out ritual gestures and manoeuvres through practice, not formal instruction. Once learnt, they possess a set of habitual skills, which are 'techniques of the body' in Mauss's phrase, and these techniques form part of the collective 'habitus' of the priests (1950: 368). As habitus, the techniques are a function of habit memory rather than cognitive memory (Connerton 1989: 22-3), because a priest does not need to deliberate about how to perform a ritual act in order to do it, any more than I have to think about how to use a pen or keyboard to write these words. Moreover, this habit memory is, so to speak, 'sedimented' in a priest's body (ibid.: 72), because the memory of the ritual action and how to perform it are retained, as something just taken for granted, in the bodily techniques themselves. Discussing Jain worship performed by lay people, although it equally applies to our Hindu priestly case, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 136) make much the same point when they say that 'people enacting *puja* ... have "apprehended" with their bodies the acts they feel to be required', so that they "'know" without thinking' what they must do in the ritual.

Humphrey and Laidlaw also note that with few exceptions 'the physical actions in *puja* are not different from similar acts performed in other rituals and in everyday life' (ibid.: 134). Once stated, this point may be obvious but it is nonetheless important; the bodily movements required to pour vessels of water over an image or to present a plate of food before it closely resemble those made by a priest when he bathes his own body or serves a guest, so that there is no hard and fast distinction between ritual and mundane bodily techniques. The clearest exception is probably displaying the lamps, which is particularly distinctive of temple worship, although it still resembles the lamp-waving done regularly on a smaller scale at the priests' own domestic shrines, and it too is built out of the elementary

gestures of lifting an object and circling it in the air. Ritual bodily techniques are therefore mostly continuous with mundane techniques of daily life, even if they are elaborated in particular specialised ways, and they all form part of a collective priestly habitus that is reproduced when each new priest, through practice, acquires the techniques of his more experienced seniors. Priests, even those who go to religious schools, have (in Colas's phrase) a practical apprenticeship in physical ritual performance. Indeed, once they have left school, the educated priests' ability to chant texts becomes akin to a bodily technique as well, since the performative skill of recitation, dependent on rote memory, is almost as 'automatic' as the performative skill of physical enactment, dependent on habit memory.

Although temple ritual is extremely routinised, so that the vast majority of physical acts of ritual are performed over and over again by the priests without any hesitation or deliberation, there are nonetheless significant variations in the style of performance, which are mainly related to the importance of the ritual. Thus at one extreme, the priests - like good actors commanding their audience - sometimes perform rituals in a dramatic style which expresses their superior status within the temple, as well as their self-conscious knowledge that nothing significant can happen there without them. Particularly at key rituals during major festivals attended by large numbers of devotees, the priest in charge usually dresses impeccably in new clothes and he may wear his best gold jewellery. He typically moves with an unhurried and confident authority, allowing others to scurry around to make everything ready, and he normally performs the rituals carefully and impressively, as is particularly apparent when displaying the lamps at the concluding climax of each ritual. The lamps - especially the large 'decorated' lamp and the final camphor candelabra of seven flames - are lifted high in the air and circled through it slowly and elegantly, usually three times in all, to

maximise their visual impact. On each occasion, if the priest is being particularly meticulous, he describes in the air the almost circular shape of the mystic syllable *om* (as written in Tamil) separately in front of the head, body and feet of the image, and he ends by raising the lamp aloft in his outstretched arm. The impressiveness of the lamp display, which most completely captures the devotees' attention, and indeed of virtually every other component of the rituals, depends entirely on the priest's coordinated bodily movements; that is, on his ability to deploy the priestly techniques of the body with maximal competence and artistry. There are slight individual variations among the priests and some tend to be more stylish than others, but on the whole the most important rituals are performed skilfully and elegantly. By their performance, the priests are able to display a mastery of physical ritual in which many of them take conscious pride. At these major rituals, textual recitation is almost always done by chanters or other priests, not by the man carrying out the physical ritual action.

At the other extreme are the many minor, day-to-day rituals watched by only a handful of passing devotees. On these occasions, ritual actions, including the display of lamps, are often done fairly quickly and unimpressively, without any chanting, and sometimes priests are plainly paying little attention to what they are doing. Between the dramatic enactment of important rituals and the casual performance of the most minor ones, there is of course a complete scale of variation, and the majority of ritual action falls along a continuum somewhere in-between the two extremes. In every case, however, the physical performance of ritual is a product of the same priestly techniques of the body, and the priests' skill is actually demonstrated as much by their ability to conduct rituals rapidly and effortlessly while thinking about something else, as it is by their virtuosity on grand festival

occasions.

Yet the variation is important, partly because it is directly commented on by the priests themselves. In general, they tend to assert that the careful, stylish performance of ritual seen on great occasions is the right way to do it and is therefore consistent with Agamic prescription, whereas they admit that the hasty performance of routine ritual actions is not. It is not really as simple as this, because Agamic rules themselves permit the abbreviation of ritual, and mistakes are made in stylishly performed, grand rituals, as priests have often pointed out to me. Nevertheless, the visible evidence of how a ritual is being done is crucial to the priests' own assessment of its correctness, and a ritual carried out sloppily is almost invariably assumed to be incorrectly performed. All priests know, of course, that a large proportion of temple ritual is done badly and they have several explanations and excuses for it. But some ritual is done well and it is then that a priest, by his stylish performance of physical ritual action, can show his colleagues - and indeed himself - that he knows what to do. In other words, how well a priest uses his body is seen as an index of how correctly he can perform ritual.

My own observations, however, have convinced me that there is no consistent correlation between the standard of performance and the level of a priest's education. All priests, educated or not, often carry out rituals perfunctorily and all priests - or at least most of them - can put on a dramatic and elegant performance when the occasion demands. The best educated priests possibly produce the most elegant performances of all, but if this is so, it is probably because they are most self-confident about their professionalism. It does not alter the fact that the ability to perform the great majority of physical ritual is not dependent on instruction received in the schools, despite the tendency of the priests, especially educated

ones, to suggest that it is, or at least that it should be. Rather, that ability is a function of techniques of the body which all priests acquire in the same way through practice, and by and large all of them are equally capable of deploying those techniques stylishly or casually according to the occasion. Religious education produces priests who can perform ritual better because they can chant texts as well as carry out the physical gestures and manoeuvres, but it does not have any significant impact on how well they do the latter.

VI

The analysis of ritual and the problem of misperformance

The material discussed in this article is pertinent to some central arguments in the recent, impressive treatise on the theory of ritual by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994). Since their principal case-study is Jain *puja*, which closely resembles its Hindu equivalent, much of Humphrey and Laidlaw's analysis is immediately relevant to Hindu ritual, and I shall briefly discuss it in this conclusion.

Humphrey and Laidlaw focus on ritual as action, specifically on 'the transformation of action by ritualization' (ibid.: 3). Ritualisation, they argue, is 'a qualitative departure from the normal intentional character of human action' for several inter-related reasons. In particular: 'Ritualized action is non-intentional, in the sense that while people performing rituals do have intentions (thus the actions are not unintentional), the *identity* of a ritualized act does not depend, as is the case with normal action, on the agent's intention in acting'. Ritualised action, which is stipulated by particular constitutive rules, must be carried out 'with an intention that means that it will be in the above sense non-intentional'; thus a 'person

performing ritual "aims" at the realization of a pre-existing ritual act', which appears `as "external", as not of their own making' (ibid.: 89). Applying this argument to the Minaksi temple priests, we can say that they are, in their own eyes, ideally re-enacting rituals with an `external' existence given by Siva's directions in the Agamas, which are `not of their own making'. Hence in principle, a priest assents to what Humphrey and Laidlaw describe as the `ritual commitment', wherein he `accepts ... that in a very important sense, [he] will not be the author of [his] acts' (ibid.: 98), because Siva is the true author, as is confirmed in Agamic theology by the priest's transformation into a form of the god.

Yet for understanding what is going on in the Minaksi temple, Humphrey and Laidlaw's approach is flawed. Although they recognise that the performance of ritual action is not dependent on discursive knowledge about ritual, they effectively dismiss the problem of error. Thus reflecting on their own inept performance of Jain worship under instruction from a tutor, they conclude that: `The crucial level at which ritual action is prescribed ... is the level of the ritual *act*. While people can perform the same act in different ways, their doing so nevertheless counts as instances of the same act, and their performance therefore counts as correct' (ibid.: 116). And again: `Ritual is prescribed action, you have to get it right, and yet sometimes it seems that so long as you try, so long as you accept the ritual commitment, it is almost impossible to get it wrong' (ibid.: 128).

From an outside observer's point of view, poorly-performed rituals certainly are just as much rituals as well-performed ones, and no doubt any priest would accept that a *puja* done badly still counted as an `instance' of *puja*. What exercises the Minaksi temple priests, however, is not the identification of rituals, but the appraisal of their quality, and had any of them performed *puja* as incompetently as Humphrey and Laidlaw, they would not have

hesitated to say that it was incorrectly carried out. Humphrey and Laidlaw, concerned to define ritualised action analytically, simply sidestep the problem of misperformance, which is crucial from the actors' point of view, not only when they are Minaksi temple priests, but also more generally in the Hindu ritual world (Smith 1989: 45, 107-8; cf. Fuller 1993). Moreover, as we have seen, the quality of ritual is evaluated in relation to the priests who actually perform it and particularly, in our case, to whether they are educated, so that appraisal necessarily depends on the assumption that a priest is fully the 'author of his acts'.

Paradoxically, therefore, ritual as conceptualised by priests preoccupied with the fact that they and their colleagues are all too likely 'to get it wrong' does not conform to Humphrey and Laidlaw's definition of ritualised action. Furthermore, the problem of misperformance is built into the priests' conceptualisation of ritual itself, because ritual without any mistakes can be performed by no-one except Siva. To argue, following Humphrey and Laidlaw, that the priests' preoccupation with error is only part of how they 'think about themselves performing' ritual, as opposed to how they think about the action itself (*ibid.*: 159), would therefore be sophistical, because the priests rarely talk about ritual without raising the question of how well or 'correctly' it is performed.

Criticism apart, however, Humphrey and Laidlaw's work - together with Bell's (1992), although it develops a different argument - makes a powerful contribution to the recent shift in anthropology towards the treatment of ritual as action that is not interpretatively devalued in relation to thought or text. Important in this treatment is avoiding the assumption that the meaning of ritual is to be found in a corresponding text (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 208), let alone that ritual should be read as 'text' (Bell 1992: 54). Thus, for example, students in the Agamic religious schools primarily memorise texts in order to be able to perform

linguistic acts as part of ritualised action (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 2, 194), not to gain a textual knowledge that would reveal the meaning of their rituals, even though priests do take it for granted that such a revelation can be found in the Agamas. In that respect, the Minaksi temple priests are under an ideological misapprehension; on the other hand, unlike possibly over-charitable anthropologists, they realistically recognise that human ritual action is perennially strewn with error, and their effort to improve it through education is a central concern.

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Table 1

Pillaiyarpatti school daily timetable

5.00-5.30 am	Rising
5.30-6.30	<i>Tiruvai</i> (repetition of texts by students)
6.30-8.00	Bathing, morning prayer (<i>sandhya</i>) and personal worship of Siva
8.00-8.15	Prayers in school
8.15-8.30	Guru announces day's programme of study
8.30-9.30	Breakfast
9.30-11.30	<i>Cantai</i> (teaching of texts by guru), usually from Vedas
11.30-1.00 pm	Midday prayer and free time for personal study
1.00-2.00	Lunch
2.00-4.00	<i>Cantai</i> , usually from Agamas
4.00-6.00	Bathing, free time for senior students and games for junior students
6.00-8.00	<i>Tiruvai</i> or <i>cantai</i>
8.00-8.30	Discussion with guru
8.30-9.30	Evening meal and free time for personal study
9.30	Bedtime

NOTES

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1. In referring to themselves, the priests use the name Sivacarya ('Siva priest'), which also implies learning, more than they did a decade ago, when Adisaiva ('first Saiva') was more common. This shift from a name that traditionally designates their subcaste to one that more plainly describes their occupational status reflects the priests' 'professionalisation', as described below. For more data on the Minaksi temple's structure and priesthood, see Fuller (1984).

2. For general description and analysis of the Agamic literature, see especially Brunner (1975-6; 1990) and Davis (1991).

3. For three priests, I have no educational data, but I am fairly certain that none of them has studied at a religious school.

4. My references to the *kutumi* may sound trite, but in fact the wearing of long hair tied in a knot has become a critical symbolic marker distinguishing 'traditional' from 'modern' priests, and it is the object of much comment among them, especially scathing remarks by 'traditional' priests about those who cut their hair. Strictly, the *kutumi* (Skt. *sikha*) is the tuft

of hair left on the head after the rest is shaved off; priests, however, never shave more than a small area above the forehead.

5. No teaching of the Vedas and Agamas is normally done in Agamic schools on the first, eighth and fourteenth lunar days, and full-moon and new-moon days, although this rule is sometimes relaxed, especially at Pillaiyarpatti. Students have three ten-day holidays per year, at the festivals of Pongal (January), Avani Avittam (August-September) and Divali (October-November).

6. Thus, for example, although the *Kamikagama purvabhaga* - the first portion of the *kriyapada* - was published in *devanagari* by the South Indian Archakas Association in Madras in 1975, only about half of it was published in *grantha* (with a paraphrase in Tamil) by the Association in 1977. A *devanagari* edition of the *Kamikagama uttarabhaga* - the second portion of the *kriyapada* - is now being completed by the guru of the Allur school, A. Viswanatha Sivacharyar, with financial support from the HR&CE Department.

7. In 1993-4, the course actually included less Agamic and more Vedic material because of problems over the availability of appropriate teachers. In 1994-5 and 1995-6, no courses were held.

8. Some of the Agamic material, but by no means all of it, has been published in *grantha* textbooks for the students. The meditation verses (*dhyana*) for the main deities are included in a booklet, *Civakama tiyanankal astotrangkal* (Saiva Agama prayers and 108-name lists), published for the one-year refresher courses by the Allur school in 1992. These verses,

together with some other key texts such as the *pancasana pancavarana puja* for the invocation of the main Saiva deities, are also contained in a textbook, *Civakama prayoka mala* (Collection on the practice of Saiva Agamas), published by the Pillaiyarpatti school in 1994. A larger selection of Agamic material is contained in *Civakama prayoka cantrika* (Pre-eminent treatise [?] on the practice of Saiva Agamas), edited by A. Viswanatha Sivacharyar and published by Samskrita Seva-Ratna (Madras, 1981); this book is in *devanagari* and is used as a textbook in the Allur school. (Somewhat confusingly, the titles of these Sanskrit books are normally printed in Tamil.)

9. The Yajur Veda mantras are in a *grantha* booklet, *Civapuja veta mantirankal* (Vedic mantras for worship of Siva), published by the Allur school in 1977. The *Ganapati Upanisad* (or *Sri Ganapati Atharvasirsa*) is probably not currently in print in *grantha*; for this text, which claims to derive from the Atharva Veda, see Courtright (1985: 252-4). All the principal *suktas*, together with the *Srirudra(prasnah)* - which is the *Satarudriya* hymn and is also called *Namaka* - and the *Camaka(prasnah)*, are included in *grantha* in *Yajusa mandra ratnagaram* (Ocean of Yajur Veda mantras), published by Vaidika Vardhini Press (Kumbakonam, no date); several *suktas* and the other two texts are also in a *grantha* booklet, *Srirutrapracnam*, published by the South Indian Archakas Association (Madras, 1976). The same text often appears in slightly different versions in different publications. Most of these texts have also been published in Tamil transliterations, which are more widely available for sale than any of the *grantha* editions. For example, all the principal *suktas*, the *Srirudra* and the *Camaka* are included, printed in specially modified Tamil script, in *Taittiriya*

mantrakocam (Book of Taittiriya [Black Yajur Veda] mantras), published by the Ramakrishna Math (Madras, 1994); the two Yajur Veda texts, similarly printed but with a parallel *devanagari* version, are also in *Sri Rutram*, published by the Math (Madras, 1962). The core of the *Srirudra* and the *Camaka* are the Black Yajur Veda 4.5 and 4.7, vv. 1-11 respectively; they are translated by Keith (1914: 353-62, 380-3) and very differently by Aiyar (1991) in his exegesis, and the *Srirudra* is also translated and discussed by Long (1983).

10. The lists of 108 names for the main deities are contained in the 1992 Allur booklet cited in n.

11. The longer lists are mostly unavailable in *grantha* publications, but almost all the lists of names are published in Tamil transliterations: for example, in the popular series of *Sahasranama stotram* (1000-name praises) for different deities published by the Little Flower Company of Madras.

12. The idea of a 'professional' priesthood recruited on the basis of educational qualifications plainly contradicts the hereditary principle, and places priests calling for educational improvement in a potentially inconsistent position that may align them with those advocating abolition of the hereditary priesthood (Presler 1987: 145). The Minaksi temple priests simply insist that educational qualifications cannot override hereditary rights and take comfort from the fact that, unlike in the 1970s, the present Tamilnadu government has no plans for abolition. The guru of the Allur school, A. Viswanatha Sivacharyar, however, does support abolition so that well-qualified priests could be appointed in all the major temples, and he is a member of the state's Temple Administration Board.