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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Casting Selves: Tradition, Practice, and Ethics in an Artisan Community in India

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Sowparnika Balaswaminathan

Committee in charge:

Professor Thomas Evan Levy, Chair
Professor Richard Cohen
Professor David Pedersen
Professor Saiba Varma
Professor Kamala Visweswaran

2018

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2018

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My parents tell me that when I was a year old, they took me to Swamimalai to tonsure my head. This is a Tamil tradition, where you take your new baby, irregardless of the density of its hair follicles, to the ancestral temple and shave off all of its hair. I do not remember this, for obvious reasons, but I do remember seeing my brother getting his turn, and fearlessly enjoying the experience, turning his little head one way and the other. The tonsurer chuckled at my brother's hedonism, while my parents expressed surprise, because they had had a very different experience with me. That was the beginning of my relationship with Swamimalai, a day I do not remember, when I left my locks behind. Since then, I have been back innumerable times, initially for religious pilgrimages with my family, and then for research, which is arguably another kind of religious experience, peppered with both inspiration and disillusionment.

The generosity and thoughtfulness of the Swamimalai sculptors and residents made this dissertation possible. Many of them have been named in this dissertation, but many have not been named, sometimes because their voices have been echoed by others, and other times, because their voices have been represented by pseudonyms. I need to particularly thank Srikandan Sthapati, Radhakrishnan Sthapati, Swaminathan Sthapati, Mohanraj Sthapati, Veera Ragavan Sthapati, Venkatesan Sthapati, Masilamani Sthapati, Shankar Sthapati and his family and Vidyashankar Sthapati for the many hours they spent on me, talking and showing. I have the deepest regard for Satishkumar Shilpi and Shankar Shilpi, whose heartfelt testimonies about their craft and life illustrated the contradictions of

hardship and optimism that represents the outlook of many of the sculptors. The staff and workers at Poompuhar were always welcoming when I made my intrusions into their work space, including Mr. Iyappan, and the smiling countenances and cheerful enthusiasm of the students at the Poompuhar Training Center makes me hopeful for the future of the craft of bronzecasting. I am also very grateful to Mr. Balasubramanian and the staff at the Government Museum for helping me with my research at the Government Museum, Chennai, and Dr. Santosh Babu and Mr. Premkumar at Poompuhar, Chennai.

Ravi Sthapati and Rajeshwari started off as sculptors that I interviewed and ended up my friends. They not only supported my work by communicating with earnestness what sculpting meant to them, they also stood as models of the “good sculptors”, that I write about in this dissertation. It was always difficult to explain the value of my research to the sculptors in Swamimalai – what worth is in words like those in this manuscript, that in the most optimistic future might bring attention and interest from far flung readers to Swamimalai. What about the now, many sculptors asked me, and I could not say much because I agreed with them. Ravi and Rajeshwari would argue with me that my work had worth, that a view from afar and atop mattered, and that the future should always be considered as a path towards the sublime. Their very many stories about the past made me wish I could have been there, almost as much as they did. I hope that my words work in some small way to bring them the future that they desire.

The neighbors and residents of Swamimalai were in turn amused, bemused, accepting, and well wishing of my work, mostly because of the comforting presence of my mother, Girija Balaswaminathan, who stayed with me in Swamimalai, and supported my

work, as she has supported my existence forever. My father, Balaswaminathan Krishnamurthy, deprived himself off the company of my mother and I, to take care of my brother, Shiva Balaswaminathan, so that I could do my fieldwork, without worrying about safety and succor. My father dreamt of pursuing a PhD in his youth, but had to set the dream aside to take care of his aging parents; this is a work born out of generations of hope. My mother was stalwart in her support for my pursuit of scholarship even as the society around us criticized and lamented my eschewal of the traditional life that an Indian woman should accept; this work is also born out of the rage and fear I felt thinking of the multitudes of women who did not have my mother's support. My brother stands evidence for the Tamil saying that a person with a brother has no need to fear an army. My grandmother passed away a month before I left to the US to start my PhD – her spirit in life was independent and fearless and it has sustained me after her death.

Professor Thomas Evan Levy has not only been a kind and generous advisor who was consistent in his confidence in me as a scholar, but also a mentor who challenged me to experience the breadth of scholarship, from archaeological field schools to census surveys to photogrammetry to digital humanities. His own diverse interests and range of experiences have been a model for me to aspire towards, and I am grateful for him taking a chance on me, even before he met me personally. Tom's support, financial, academic, and otherwise, has been instrumental in making me into the scholar I am today, and his acumen for developing interesting, important, and successful projects inspires me immensely. Alina Levy, his wife and work partner, and Tom paved the way for this project through their meticulous research of Swamimalai bronzecasting workshop, and their generosity in

sharing the authorship of their work with their interlocutor-sculptors is a high point of collaboratory scholarship. In 2008, Tom sent his recent PhD student, Dr. Adolfo Muniz to Swamimalai to collect quantitative data concerning the different bronze casting specialists in the village. At that time, I had the opportunity to work with Adolfo as translator. I am grateful to Adolfo for suggesting that I apply to UC San Diego and work with Tom. Thus, the work presented here brings my Swamimalai journey full circle. I would also like to thank Professor Bruce Philips of the Hebrew Union College (Los Angeles) for help with the statistical analyses of the quantitative data collected during the course of this project.

Although Professor Kamala Visweswaran became a member of my committee after I had done my fieldwork, her mentorship has been instrumental in my intellectual development, and direction taken by my dissertation. I had never encountered advice before that both told me that I had to revise the very foundation of my work, but also made it seem like it was possible, and feel like it was enjoyable. Kamala's unflinching support of my scholarship and career has provided me with a blueprint of what compassionate mentorship should look like, which I hope to emulate if I ever get the chance.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Casting Selves: Tradition, Practice, and Ethics in an Artisan Community in India

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

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As a medium of nationalism in colonial and postcolonial contexts, heritage has been explored by many scholars (Guha-Thakurta 1992; Mathur 2007; McGowan 2009; Mitter 1994), and yet, the impact of such discourses on the lives of living art practitioners and artisans has been rarely examined. This dissertation concerns a pan-Indian artisan caste called Vishwakarma, who practice a traditional art and straddle global markets, national ideologies, and rural lives. Exploring hegemonic discourses that circulate through

nationalistic ideology, neoliberal markets, and caste politics, and based on two years of ethnographic research in Swamimalai and Chennai in South India, archival research at government and museum archives, and a detailed survey of Hindu aesthetic philosophy, this project contributes an interdisciplinary and vernacular reframing of the politics of heritage.

Following the efforts of the Indian national movement during the rule of the British Raj, the Government of India constructed a discourse on the state's heritage based upon the traditional arts and crafts of South Asia. Handicrafts have, since then, been a neoliberal expression of nationalism, and artisans are the living repositories of such knowledge and practice. Vishwakarma sculptors in the Tamil town of Swamimalai have historically made bronze Hindu idols for temples, but now also produce these icons for the handicrafts market. While government bureaucracy discourages caste identity, governmental museums and the handicrafts market valorize "authenticity" defined through religious traditions. Furthermore, the smuggling of temple antiques has attracted unfavorable attention from the police and media, and brought increased scrutiny to the sculptors, who are suspected of complicity. This dissertation examines how Vishwakarma and other caste sculptors navigate what they see as contradictory discourses from the government and society, which spotlight them alternatively as "authentic" but also untrustworthy. I argue that while the state's use of hegemonic discourse parallels Foucault's theories, Vishwakarma sculptors themselves use mythmaking and historical story telling, as theorized by Ricoeur, to push back against what they feel are unfair characterizations of their caste and professions.

Additionally, I demonstrate that these sculptors respond to their perceived marginalization by asserting an artisan identity and ethical personhood rooted in Hindu aesthetic theory.

Introduction

In the renowned Tamil epic, *Silappatikaram*, the unreliable husband-protagonist leaves his loyal and chaste wife, Kannagi, for a cosmopolitan courtesan only to realize that his conjugal needs are only met through loyalty, not knowledge. Returning as a financially ruined man to his wife, he is welcomed and rescued by her. She gives him a pair of anklets to sell so that they can start a new life in a new city, but when he goes to the royal goldsmith to sell the jewelry, the crafty goldsmith sees an opportunity. Having stolen the Queen's anklets, which look exactly the same as the one brought to him by the hapless protagonist, the goldsmith realizes he has a scapegoat and calls the guards. The recalcitrant husband-scapegoat-protagonist is beheaded for his alleged crime after a brief trial. When she hears of this atrocity, Kannagi rises in anger, goes to the royal court and proves her husband's innocence. The shock and shame of their mistake causes the erstwhile just king and queen to die, but that is not enough to quench the fury of Kannagi, who burns the city to the ground with the power of her anger and purity.

Considered a classic articulation of Tamil morality and dated to approximately the 4th century, the *Silappatikaram* showcases the fallibility of persons who are swayed by crafty speech and the speech of the craftsman. Simultaneously, the craftsman's speech and his object (the anklet) also become the agents of his own moral failure. This dissertation examines such parallel structures in discourse, subjects, and practices surrounding the artistic tradition of South Indian bronzecasting, in which discourses and bronzes turn out to be dangerous to the ethical lives of artisans.

South Indian Bronzes

It might be impossible for someone who grew up in India to remember the first time they ever saw a bronze. They are ubiquitous and before you age into self awareness, you have been seeing them everywhere. One of the challenges of this project was to convey this ubiquitous iconicity that makes it easier to just not notice them at all. They adorn hotel receptions, airport corridors, mall entrances, dance classes, music classes, any house of a movie character that needs to be portrayed as elite and/or traditional, and of course, museums and temples. Although obviously Hindu, South Indian bronzes are one of the historical art objects that have transcended their source context, and this is partly on account of the effort put into secularizing them through connoisseurship by art historians and museum professionals. South Indian bronzes are an artistic tradition that can be archaeologically traced back to the 8th century (Srinivasan 2004), although the practice was probably much older than that. The term is used to refer to a specific genre of metal sculptures made in South India through the lost wax method (*madhuchistavidhana* in Sanskrit and *cire perdue* in French), with stylized and standardized iconography. Although called bronzes, these sculptures are mostly copper with negligible amounts of tin. They are also called *panchaloha* (five metal) sculptures in Sanskrit, which is also a misnomer since they often contain fewer or more than five metals. In Tamil, they are called *seppu thirumeni* (copper idol), which might be the closest to an accurate appellation. In this dissertation, I will refer to them as South Indian bronzes, or Swamimalai bronzes, or simply, bronzes. The iconography and iconometry of these bronzes are supposed to follow

the strictures as laid out in the *Shilpashastras*, the Sanskrit technical manuals that describe traditional arts.

Historically, these bronzes were made for Hindu temples in South India as religious idols to be taken on processions on special occasions and festivals (Guy 2006). Called *urchava moorthi*, these images were specifically made as movable, processional icons, as against the *moolava moorthi*, the immovable idol usually made of stone and installed in the *garba griha* or sanctum sanctorum of the temple. Most scholars who have studied and written about bronzes agree that the acme of this art form was during the period of the Imperial Cholas from 9-13th century (Dehejia 2007; Eskenazi 2006; Nagaswamy 2000). The Imperial Cholas ruled parts of Southern India and had their political capital in Thanjavur, although some of the kings shifted it around. The kingdoms of the Deccan and Southern parts of the subcontinent including Ceylon, had tumultuous political relations, with the Chalukyas, the Cholas, the Paramaras, and the Sinhala vying for political and symbolic dominance in the region (Ali 2000:193). While this was done through outright warfare at times, it was also demonstrated through colossal temple building projects. Under the Cholas, the artistic and economic production became directly related to the vitality and centrality of these temples, which became the nuclei of the state economy, and which scholars have called temple urbanism (Heitzman 1987). Thousands of bronzes were made by artisans, their production sponsored for particular temples by Chola kings, queens, and the elites, sometimes with details about the image and the donor noted in the temple inscriptions. While the Chola bronzes are the most well known, bronzes were also produced in the earlier Pallava era (4-8th century), with Sharada Srinivasan (2004)

ascribing the creation of the dancing Shiva, or Nataraja bronze to that period. Srinivasan also claims that such images were first made in wood and stone and were eventually produced in metal at this time. The Pallava period is renowned for its experimental stone architecture and sculpture, the remnants of which can be seen all over their cities, Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram. Thus, it is not inconceivable that such dynamic experimentation also followed through in other materials. The Vijayanagar period (1336-1565 CE), which followed not immediately after the Imperial Cholas, also saw the production of many bronzes, since that was also a time when religious ideology was an important component of the state's identity (Karashima 1993).

During the tumultuous 16th century after the fall of the Vijayanagar empire and its tribute states, there were no strong political actors in South India, and the surviving weak states were facing violent incursions from the north, which often took the form of temples being desecrated, bronze idols and other valuables being looted, and stone figures being disfigured. To protect the precious sculptures and treasures in temples, priests and officials of various temples hid them under the ground and behind walls (Nagaswamy 2000) as per the strictures of the *Vimanarchanakalpa* (Davis 2009). However, the unrest lasted too long and resulted in the deaths of generations of the secret keepers, resulting in the loss and eventual forgetting of the existence of these bronzes. Thousands of bronzes hidden for their safety had been forgotten. In the late 19th century, when the colonial government initiated large scale construction projects, workers were constantly hitting their shovels on misshapen metal masses caked with dust and grime (Davis 1999). Cleaned up, these were found to be the hidden bronzes, their skin now oxidized from a luminescent gold to green

and blue patinas with shades of red. Since then, hundreds of bronzes have been found, and we still do not know how many more remain buried. Those that could be traced to specific temples through inscriptions or other kinds of evidence were returned to their source, but many became orphaned, ending up in museums and being sold in auctions. During the early twentieth century, when calls for freedom were growing amongst South Asians, art and craft became an important instrument for building nationalism, and creating a political identity that also had historical, cultural, and economic values, separate from the British colonial regime. South Indian bronzes were one of these indices of freedom.

The transformation of these very religious bronzes into a secular symbol was not just done through the efforts of the agents of the South Asian independence movements. The dancing Shiva bronze (Nataraja) has always been one of the most famous art objects, especially having been analysed by Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, the Sri-Lankan British art historian and scholar who was eventually best known as the curator of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in *The Dance of Shiva*, where he wrote about the religious and artistic interpretation of the cosmic dance depicted in the bronze. Fritjof Capra (1975), the Austrian-American physicist, built upon Coomaraswamy's analysis, writing that the dance of Shiva for the physicist is the "dance of the subatomic matter" and of the universe. He writes,

Hundreds of years ago, Indian artists created visual images of dancing Shivas in a beautiful series of bronzes. In our time, physicists have used the most advanced technology to portray the patterns of the cosmic dance. The bubble-chamber photographs of interacting particles, which bear testimony to the continual rhythm of creation and destruction in the universe, are visual images of the dance of Shiva equalling those of the Indian artists in beauty and profound significance. The metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art, and modern physics. It is indeed, as

Coomaraswamy has said, ‘poetry, but none the less science’. (Capra 1975:245)

So struck was the world of physics by this proclamation that currently, at the entrance of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), which confirmed the existence of antimatter with the help of the particle accelerator, stands a two-meter Nataraja bronze sculpture. Gifted by the Government of India, this Nataraja was made in Swamimalai by Rajan, a bronze sculptor who has since removed himself from Swamimalai although not from bronzecasting (more on him in Chapter 4). The plaque beneath the statue at this research facility in Geneva, Switzerland, quotes the above-mentioned lines from Capra’s book. This adaptation of a very religious icon to a very scientific theory (where science is discursively constructed as objective and often in opposition to religion), demonstrates the acceptance of Hindu bronze iconography as benign representations of religious at the least, and secular imaginings of the cosmic at the most. Even Auguste Rodin , the sculptor, was impressed so deeply by photographs of a couple of Pallava period Nataraja bronzes, that he wrote an essay in *Sculpture çivaites* (1921) called “La Danse de çiva”, waxing poetically in French about its aesthetic attributes. Other essays in the volume are by Ananda Coomaraswamy, E.B. Havell, and Victor Goloubew. Thus, these bronzes have been received with widespread aesthetic enthusiasm and acclaim internationally for over a hundred years. Their story of loss and discovery indubitably added to their romantic charm.

After its independence, India adopted the developmental strategy that had been used by the Soviet Union, instituted by Joseph Stalin, the Five Year Plans. Centered around planning, as the name indicates, Five Year Plans were executed with growth targets

in mind for the economy, employment, and production for various sectors. The first Five Year Plan was rolled out between 1951 and 1956 and focused on the primary sector (agriculture and industry), but it also instituted several Boards for engendering handicrafts and artisans in the country. These were the Khadi and Village Industries Board, the All-India Handicrafts Board, the All India Handloom Board, the Central Silk Board, the Coir Board, and the Small Industries Board (Mitra 1964:v). To ensure the efficient operation of these Board to focus their efforts on those aspects of the handicrafts industries that needed support, the 1961 Census of India was planned to branch out into inquiries about the various artisan communities and cottage industries all over the country. Asok Mitra, the then Registrar General of India, describes the efforts of the various agencies in planning and executing these surveys, rationalizing their purpose as the twin objectives of improving the livelihoods of artisans and village communities, as advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, and investigating the transfer potential of certain handicrafts and skilled artisans to capitalistic markets. Towards the latter, Mitra (1964:v) explains, “It was important to make an assessment of the limits of rigidity within which traditional skill operates,” which was to be measured by acquiring information on caste, occupational and economic categories, availability of finance and credit, as well as “the dominance of custom over contract, the persistence of traditional tools and design forms,” and “the inability to adopt new lines or adapt to changing circumstances,” amongst others. Similar limits to the flexibility of artisans and their skills to adapt to industry contexts were also to be measured, to evaluate whether it would be better to just start teaching industry skills from scratch instead of promoting skill transfer. These sentiments of the Registrar General reveal several

assumptions about traditional arts, artisans, and the concept of tradition: that they were situated in rural areas, that tradition was more rigid than flexible, that adaptation to a market economy was a necessary precondition to improving artisan livelihoods, and that tradition was in opposition to, or more generously, adjacent to progress. This last point was also reiterated in Mitra's contention that the artisan had to "pierce his own caste-tribe socio-economic cocoon" in order to receive the benefits planned for him under the Five Year Plans (Mitra 1964:vi). While the procurement of such information was linked to the achievement of economic and infrastructural objects, their impact on the social and the cultural was also considered, albeit imagined in neat categories and narratives. P.K. Nambiar, the architect of the Census of 1961, encapsulates this perspective in his Preface, where he explains the logic of the "mixed economy" that had been adopted by India, which required both the preservation of traditional occupations and the advancement of industrialization. As this dissertation will elaborate, this imagination of the coexistence of traditional arts alongside development, but in an either-on configuration has led to a crisis of identity and livelihood for artisan communities.

Swamimalai and Sculptors

Swamimalai is a town of 7289 persons according to the *Census of 2011*¹, in the district of Thanjavur in Tamilnadu. It is ruled by a panchayat, a local system of governance. In the center-east of the state, Swamimalai is 8 kms from Kumbakonam, a town renowned for its temples and coffee, and 36 kms from the city of Thanjavur (not to

¹ <http://censusindia.gov.in/pca/SearchDetails.aspx?Id=737153>

be confused with its district, which has the same name), which was on and off again the capital of the Imperial Cholas. Thus, Swamimalai is right in the middle of the historical Chola territory (Figure 1). Bounded on one side by a river called Kaveri, which nowadays mostly runs dry except for the monsoon season, the town is home to an important temple, the Swaminatha Swamy temple, dedicated to the worship of the Dravidian god, Murugan. As one of the six abodes of Murugan (*arupadai veedu*), the Swaminatha Swamy temple is an important pilgrimage destination, and because of this, Swamimalai always looks crowded and busy, even though its own population is quite small. Older towns and cities in India are often built around large temples (See Madurai and Thanjavur), and Swamimalai is no different. The temple has four entrances and exits, and streets run around its four sides, branching into more chaotic channels. The temple and the river go hand in hand in making Swamimalai the town of bronzecasters.

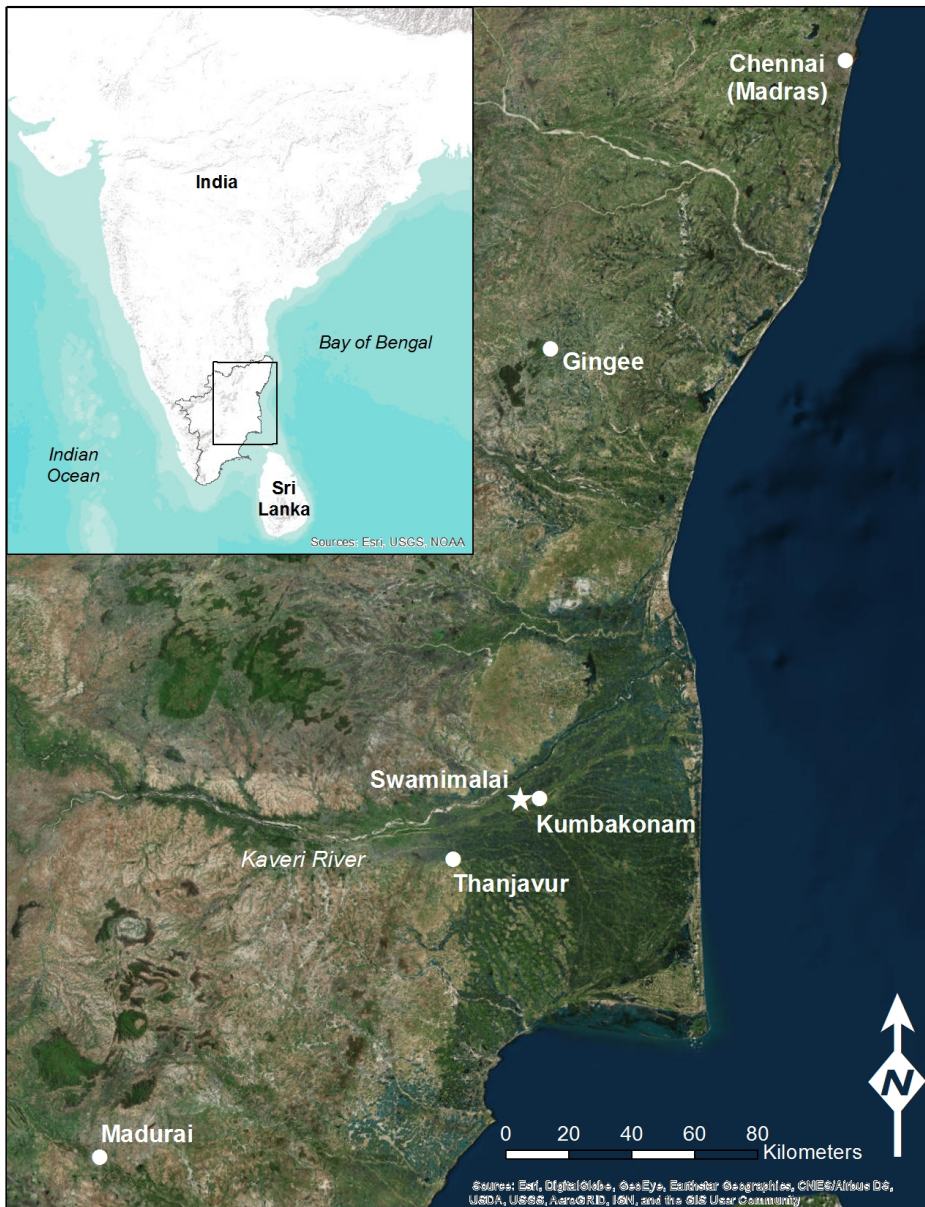


Figure 1. Map of Swamimalai and surrounding areas. Courtesy Ian W. Jones.

It is unclear when exactly bronzecasters settled in Swamimalai, but it is today renowned as a sculptor town. The sculptors in Swamimalai today ascribe their presence to the building of the Swaminatha Swamy temple and the general temple-centric economy of the medieval period, which encouraged a cluster of artisan communities to settle in the

region. That the Thanjavur district is the rice bowl of the state of Tamilnadu also facilitated an ever-present economy and sustenance. When asked why specifically Swamimalai, the bronzecasters point to the very high quality clay that is found in the banks of the Kaveri river; clay is the foundation of the lost wax method of bronzecasting. To make a bronze in this method, first a wax model should be made of the figure, which is then covered with clay to make a mould. A drain is shaped in the mould, and sometimes, metal wires are also wrapped around it to maintain its integrity. The mould is then placed in the furnace for the wax to melt (through the drain) and the clay to harden, lending this process its name. Once the wax has melted, the mould is laid out in the sun for a few days to rest, after which it is buried at an angle in the ground, with the drain outlet facing up. Now, molten metals are poured into the mould carefully, and it is allowed to cool overnight or more. The clay mould is then hammered apart and the metal image emerges, usually black and brown, having retained some of the heated clay. The sculptor then has to scrape the metallurgical epidermis and chisel decorative embellishments. Finally, the surface of the sculpture is smoothed either to a dull glow or to a bright shine, depending on the finish desired. Every material used in this process requires some preparation, although there are no standard recipes. The wax is usually a mixture of beeswax and softer wax, along with *kungiliyam* (Sal tree resin) and oil. As for the clay, I have heard variously that it is a mixture of clay and cow dung, pure clay of good quality found only in the banks of the Kaveri in Swamimalai, clay mixed with the sand from anthills, clay that had been sieved several times through special sieves, and so on and so forth. The fine clay is called *vandal*

mann in Tamil, and most sculptors attribute their continued presence in Swamimalai to its abundance in the Kaveri banks.

Since Swamimalai has usually been associated with bronzecasters, the *Census of India 1961* aimed at investigating icon making was conducted in Swamimalai, where it was discovered that only twenty two families were involved in metalcasting, with only twenty-six individual members actually taking part in the activities of the workshop (Nambiar 1964:6). There were additional workers who helped with the casting process, but the Census does not consider them to be bronzecasters since they were not involved in any of the sculpting activities. The *Census* also emphasizes that these are “Sthapathi families”, while the workers belonged to various other castes. The history of artisan castes in India, and especially in bronzecasting is long and convoluted and is explored elaborately in Chapter 2. Here, I will describe it briefly. According to the *Census* and other sources, bronzecasting is practiced as a hereditary occupation by a caste called the *Vishwakarma* (not in italics, henceforth). The Vishwakarma is a pan-Indian artisan caste which has a varied set of cultural practices because of its spread. Its history is difficult to trace because the term Vishwakarma does not seem to have been used during the medieval times, and the *Shilpashastras*, which dictate the rules of artisanship do not mention any caste categories. The members of the Vishwakarma caste themselves, however, are strongly aware of their caste identity and have worked towards building a caste history (more in Chapter 2). Vijaya Ramaswamy (2004, 1985, 2008) has traced the historical nomenclature and social mobility of South Indian artisans from the early medieval until the pre-colonial period, in which the variety of occupational and caste names used by traditional bronze sculptors is

detailed. These range from Sanskritic to Tamil terms such as *Silpi*, *Rathakarar*, *Vishwakarma*, *Kammalar*, and many others. *Kammalar* (henceforth, not in italics) is specific to South Indian artisans and continues to be used, while contemporary Vishwakarma reject the inclusion of *Rathakarar* in their caste, claiming that they were a hierarchically lower caste involved in making temple chariots². Ramaswamy is ultimately noncommittal of whether the medieval artisans thought of themselves as a caste community, a guild, or something else. The Vishwakarma caste artisans of today trace their spiritual lineage to the five sons of the god, Vishwakarma, who was the architect of the world. The sons specialized in working with iron, wood, metal alloys, stone, and gold, respectively, and contemporary Vishwakarma in Swamimalai espouse a parallel subcaste classification based on labor – Kollar (ironsmiths), Achari (carpenters), Kannarapathar (brass workers), Athapati (architects and sculptors), and Pathar (goldsmiths). Sthapatis are supposed to be temple architects, but sculpture, stone and metal, are considered to be subsumed under architecture, and so, sculptors also call themselves Sthapatis. However, the term Sthapati is found in the *Shilpashastras* but is used to refer to the temple builder rather than a member of any caste. Additionally, P. K. Nambiar (1964:5) in his Introduction to the *Census of India 1961: Handicrafts and Artisans of the Madras State* explains that Sthapati is probably an occupational term adapted from *Sthepanam* or *Sthapithem* (establishment or foundation) and not a caste category, although Vishwakarma

² I will be using Vishwakarma and Kammalar interchangeably in this dissertation, since Swamimalai Vishwakarma refer to themselves using both terms. I will also not be italicizing these terms because they feature extensively.

disagree. Vijaya Ramaswamy (2004:569) does mention one inscription in Thiruvarur that uses the term Sthapati, but again, it is not clear if it is used as a caste category.

Nowadays, Swamimalai Vishwakarma append Sthapati to their name to index their caste and work, irrespective of their subcaste. That is, although in Swamimalai, Sthapati is the subcaste that specializes in architecture and sculpture, there are more Vishwakarma sculptors from the goldsmith (*pathar*) and other subcastes. Irrespective of these subcaste affiliations, if a sculptor has the last name Sthapati, they are declaring their Vishwakarma caste affiliation. This demonstration has become necessary for the Vishwakarma sculptors because of the recent history of governmental intervention in Swamimalai in promoting bronzecasting and the resultant changes in the nature of sculptor population.

In 1958, the All India Handicrafts Board started a sculpture school in Swamimalai, called ArtMetal Training Center. This was eventually taken over by the Tamilnadu State Handicrafts Corporation Private Limited (Poompuhar, Chennai), which expanded the school to also include a workshop which focused on production, and many decades later, a sales outlet, which featured a gallery of wares. The ArtMetal Training Center was renamed Poompuhar ArtMetal Training Center (PTC, henceforth). Poompuhar, Chennai is a governmental corporation under the Tamilnadu state, which is supported by the government, but is also supposed to operate as a profit-oriented organization. However, since all of its employees are government employees, their remuneration and career progress are not dependent on the profit margins of the corporation, and the corporation itself considers the promotion of artisan training and development as important as selling local handicrafts. Poompuhar has production centers in various parts of Tamilnadu, each

specializing in the craft that is considered a specialty of that region. For example, much like the Swamimalai Poompuhar that manufactures bronze icons, the nearby Nachiar Koil Poompuhar makes metal lamps, and the Thanjavur Poompuhar makes artistic brass plates. All these production centers send their wares to the various Poompuhar sales outlets that are spread out all over the country. Additionally, Poompuhar also purchases wares directly from artisans on a commission basis. The ArtMetal Training Center was operated physically and administratively by this organization, but it was started by a renowned artisan from the largest and oldest artisan families in Swamimalai, Vishwakarma sculptor Ramaswamy Sthapati.

Ramaswamy Sthapati created a syllabus that used a combination of theory and practical training, where the theory came from the *Shilpashastras* as well as other Hindu moral texts. The predication of training on these technical manuals that are distinctly Hindu was less about the religious aspects of bronzecasting than the need to demonstrate its traditional nature. As a governmental school, the Training Institute is a very different animal than the historical method of knowledge transfer in sculptor families – the *gurukula* system of apprenticeship, where children are slowly trained in practical arts, through observation, assistance, and practice, over a long period of time. This is possible when the students live in the same household as the teachers, which works with Vishwakarma families where the older generation teach the younger generation. The Training Institute does not provide accommodation to its students, and training is structured around classes, much like any regular school. Thus, the *Shilpashastras* provide the foundation of history

and tradition to the arts practice, which determined who was to be admitted into the Training Institute, and what kinds of bronzes were to be made.

The rationale behind the *Census of India 1961* and its focus on handicraft industries was also behind the formation of this sculpture school. Thus, its goals were to achieve economic progress and cultural preservation of artisans, but categories of personhood such as caste had to be expended to achieve the goals. Paralleling the Registrar General Mitra's comment that caste impedes progress (in the *Census*), the Training Institute eschewed the historical hereditary exclusivity of bronzecasting to the Vishwakarma caste, and admitted students from all backgrounds. Furthermore, the presence of the Poompuhar production center emphasized the mercantile possibilities of learning the art of bronzecasting. Thus, students were expected to learn the craft, not only to engender its knowledge and practice, and thus promote its preservation, but also to use it for their own economic progress. The recognition that historical forms of art patronage could no longer work in a democratic, secular nation state also encouraged this approach. The medieval artisans who built temples and made bronzes subsisted on a patronage system in which the elites supported arts by providing land and stipends to their favorites, and since religion was an integral part of state strategy, artisans received financial support and state patronage (Kramrisch 1958:229). This was no longer possible in the newly independent, secular India. As the Five Year Plans made clear, the government considered guaranteeing that artisans earn a livelihood and preserving traditional arts and crafts as its responsibility. But it also recognized that this required the building of a capitalistic handicrafts market and preparing artisans for it. This is where museums and handicrafts organizations were able to work

together to build a discourse around arts and crafts, and transvalue their worth into economic terms. Thus, the bronzes that the new generation of bronzecasters were to produce in Swamimalai were not just going to go to temples anymore. They had to be made for a secular market made of tourists and art aficionados.

Thus, two paradigmatic changes occurred as a consequence of bronzecasting being supported by the government: One, bronzes became a handicraft commodity, retaining their religious context by being produced for temples, but also standing as secular art objects. While previously, there were bronzes sold as decorative objects, mostly to non-Indians, they were still primarily seen as religious icons to be made for the temple. However, the increased presence of medieval bronzes in museums, tourist promotions, handicraft pamphlets, and even stamps has emphasized their aesthetic beauty over their sacred purpose. Decorative bronzes that are produced in Swamimalai today are either replicas of particular antique bronzes or replicate a stylistic pastiche of antique bronzes. Ultimately, their value is linked to the iconic representation of an antique bronzes that already exists. In fact, many of the antique-style bronzes made in Swamimalai are even chemically treated to look like an excavated bronze, with green and red tints, to imitate an oxidized surface. The second change that has occurred has been the expansion of sculptor category to include people of all castes. In Swamimalai today, bronzecasters number around 800-1000, but Vishwakarma sculptors are a minority (although since the Census does not collect caste information, there is no hard data on this; Chandramouli 2004). It is against this perceived threat to caste identity that Vishwakarma sculptors use Sthapati as their last name; a sculptor who was not from a Vishwakarma background would invite

much opposition by calling themselves Sthapati. Moreover, considering the association between Sthapati and the Vishwakarma caste (although historically it might have been just an occupational title), a sculptor from another caste might not want to use the term, mis-casteing themselves, and erasing their own caste. Swamimalai sculptors from other castes call themselves *Shilpi*, meaning sculptor.

The commercial aspect of bronzecasting has come to dominate, and has determined the organization of the workshops and the nature of the arts practice itself. Levy and coauthors (2008) have studied in detail the technological changes that have occurred in recent times, including the everyday operations of bronzecasting workshops, and the various types of workshops one can find today in Swamimalai. These workshops, called *pattarai* in Tamil, were historically around the Swaminatha Swamy temple in Swamimalai, as such temple-related artisans have tended to be since medieval times (Ramaswamy 2004:557). But business has developed, and now workshops can be found all over the town and farther into the neighboring villages too.

A bronzecasting workshop is a place of chaos and cacophony. Metals are being hammered and chiseled, and the men working on them are shouting over that noise to talk to each other while working. It is always hotter than it should be because somewhere there is a furnace melting metals. And it is already hot and humid because this is the central region of Tamilnadu in the Thanjavur district, the land of the Imperial Cholas, paddy cultivation, and thousands of granite temples. It has also become common for the lost wax method to be divided into tasks assigned to different workers, especially in larger workshops. These places employ from 10 to 20 workers, of whom one to three are

generally wax modelers, and four to six chisel metal details after casting. The rest work on sculpting the wax, making the mould, casting, cleaning the sculptures after casting, and polishing the final product. Workshops that have a diverse clientele might also have specialists who make “natural pieces”, that is, realistic sculptures usually commissioned by politicians, god-men cults³, or memorial statues by loved ones. There are also artisans who specialize in relief metal work (*thagudu velai*), which involves incising designs on a flat sheet of metal, often brass but sometimes also silver, that is fitted onto architectural elements of a temple. Some workshops have understandings with tourist agencies in the nearby larger towns and cities, and receive tourists, conducting tours around the workshop. These might also employ showroom assistants to help conduct the tours and also facilitate sales. Increasingly, all kinds of workshops have websites and email addresses since many of the orders in recent times have come from abroad (both temple orders and otherwise), and email has been a convenient way to send images of works in progress.

Recently, in 2013, the Government of India, with the help of an Intellectual Properties lawyer, Sanjay Gandhi, applied for a Geographical Indications tag for Swamimalai bronzes. Although the GI tag has origins dated to the fifteenth century, it was in the early twentieth century that France began to crystallize laws that would regulate the production of wine by associating the quality of wines to the *terroir* (the natural

³ God-men are charismatic spiritual leaders in India, who demonstrate their exceptionalism through miracles, oration, and/or charity work. They usually reside in an *ashram* (or spiritual enclave) with their devotees, and practice modes of living that they preach to be beneficial. Osho’s Rajneesh movement is a god-man cult that has received increased attention recently in the US because of the *Wild, Wild West* documentary on Netflix. Other famous god-men include Shirdi Sai Baba, Satya Sai Baba, and Ramakrishna Paramahansa. There are also god-women, such as Amritananda Mai, and the cult, Brahmakumaris. Recently god-men cults such as Isha Foundation (led by Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev), and Patanjali (Baba Ramdev) have been able to acquire an international following, and have commoditized their philosophy in the form of yoga retreats, health care and food products.

environment) of their production. Known as ‘appellations of control’ (AOC), these laws eventually became Geographical Indications (GI) and were internationalized through the World Trade Organizations to be used by other countries. In Europe, GIs are used to index food materials and agricultural products to particular territories or towns. In India, however, the logic of anchoring a food and its unique qualities to the land that produced it has been transplanted to handicrafts. Thus, for a sculpture to be called a Swamimalai Bronze, it has to be made in Swamimalai, using the lost wax method. An art tradition that began regionally in South India, has become a national symbol and is now an international product. But its qualities are still perceived as rooted in the soil that has historically produced them, the soil of Swamimalai. This dissertation is an examination of these deep rooted links across space and time. It reaches for the medieval past and the unknowable future, cutting a swath through the neoliberal handicrafts market and the nationalistic heritage narratives of the country that is India.

Once, when presenting a paper at a conference, I was asked by one of the other presenters, a PhD student from another university, what my research was about. When I told her that it was about a community of sculptors in Swamimalai, she commented, “Wow, old school!” My instinctive response was both to defend my project from the accusation of it being old school, and also simultaneously to defend “old school” anthropology. I ultimately did neither and smiled noncommittally. But later, I critically examined my defensive reaction. What were the things that made my dissertation seem “old school”? It centers on a small town; it examines a bounded community; and, one of its central questions is about caste. “Old school” anthropology of South Asia, represented in

the likes of Bêteille (1965, 1969), Dumont (1970, 1986), Ghurye (1932), Marriott (1979, 1986), Srinivas (1962, 1980), amongst others did study small communities, often in villages and towns, and focused on caste relations. However, it is important to remember that the communities and concepts they were studying were not bounded by the limits of their places and times, and “old school” anthropology reached for expansive narratives that framed humanistic values. While categories such as “caste” and “village” might have been reified or calcified during this period, these studies raised questions that were about the nature of the “Indian mind”, and about Hindu epistemologies – broad inquiries that interrogated the realities of the postcolonial context with an eye to the future.

A key point explored in this dissertation is the in-betweenness of these bronzes and the bronzecasting tradition, and how it constructs the Swamimalai sculptors into a position where they need to straddle between the past, present, tradition, modernity, local, national, and global. I present these terms together because I do not believe that they are holistically distinctive from one another and in opposition, although they are considered so by governmental institutions. This dissertation too straddles the local, the national, and the international, as well as the past, the present, and the future. It interrogates what counts as discourse and how narratives can construct and transform values. I question the primacy of virtue in the anthropology of ethics and recommend considering vernacular and aesthetic practices, which predicate process over being. The theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation are explored in the next section.

Discourses and Narratives

Much of this dissertation deals with discourses, institutional and societal, that consolidate and disseminate knowledge in order to create particular subjects. The concept of discourse that mediated and was driven by a non-singular or subjective power, orchestrated through a network of institutions is the master thesis of Foucault. Imagining it as an instrument of power, Foucault (1981:52) explains that, “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.” Foucault is speaking here of the quotidian “talks” of people in society, and the ways in which relationships of domination are entrenched by limiting what people can and cannot talk about, which takes the form of taboos, predicated on the object, the context, and the speaking subject. Discourse, Foucault (1981:53) claims, “is the power which is to be seized,” and always involves struggle, not only through its mechanics, but also as its *raison d’être*; in this way, discourse becomes the object, susceptible to desire. Secondly, the context of the discourse contains divisions, which Foucault illustrates with the classifications of normalcy and insanity. The speech of the insane was discounted and erased, considered of no value. Only those individuals of reason mattered. Even after insanity was recognized as an illness to be treated, Foucault argues that the system that evaluates it continues the classification between insanity and normalcy, only instead of imprisoning or killing those diagnosed as insane, they are instead treated until they can be classified as normal. These kinds of classifications limit the discourse to binaries and dichotomies. The last taboo considers the participants in discourse and their relative

positions of power and subjectivity. Foucault (1981: 54) considers this to be the will or right to truth. What counts as knowledge and who determines its rightness and constituency is often institutionally managed, through universities, the government, and so on. I propose in this dissertation that discourses on heritage, caste, and ethics are managed and orchestrated by competing institutions and participating individuals. These are tied to the postcolonial history of the Indian nation state, the structure and politics embedded in the system of caste, as well as the mercurial notions of ethical being and practice.

Furthermore, while Foucault centers discourse in the influence and pursuit of power, I ask what happens when power is removed from the equation. This is not to say that power does not exist, but that the institution and individuals engaging in discourse do not consider themselves to be powerful, and in fact, characterize their positions as marginalized subjects. Power, in this case, is of course still an object of desire and discourse, a tool that embodies it, but the subjects recognize that such an achievement of a dominant position would subvert their very narratives positioned as if from a place of marginalization. I experiment using the concept of narrative discourse developed by Paul Ricoeur to scrutinize caste discourse posing as historical and mythic narratives.

While Foucault situated discourse in historical practice, Mikhail Bakhtin took measure of the novel and interrogated the voices within it. The authoritative discourse, the voice of literally the author does not allow anyone, least of all the reader, to respond to it, at least in a way that could be incorporated into the novel itself (Bakhtin 1981:342). The authoritative discourse is incapable of negotiating and renders its subjects with no alternative recourse to making meaning. Furthermore, it also does not allow modifications

in frames or context, or the coexistence of any other discourse that disagrees with it (Bakhtin 1981:343). Consequently, an authoritative discourse has to be absorbed in its entirety; it cannot be split into parts, with subjects choosing their preference. Baumann & Briggs (1990:96) imagined it more processually, as “negotiations between participants in social interactions”, a purely external discourse that is enforced upon individuals through different means, ideological or repressive. In this view, authoritative discourse is a continuously reproduced attempt at framing negotiated by elites. I believe that outside of the novel, discourses are more negotiable, at least because subjects populating institutions change over time, as do the contexts and divisions of discourse, following Foucault’s historical approach.

In this dissertation, national museums and craft organizations are examined as institutions that produce, regulate and disseminate a hegemonic discourse on heritage. The heterotopic function of the museum in displaying objects as knowledge to be consumed, and the fact that it often displays things from elsewhere, are both contained in the ideas of Foucault as drawn out by other scholars. Hooper-Greenhill (1989) argues that the public museum is an apparatus of disciplinary society, where visitors are the surveilled subjects, passively receiving the knowledge produced and displayed by the museum. Even in the *Census of India 1961*, a document that helped shape heritage and handicraft policies, Mitra (1964:v) writes that they wanted to “obtain a picture as much of the artisan himself as of his craft, [...] a perspective of the artisan and his craft in his social and economic setting, the extent to which tradition bound him and the winds of change ruffled him,” and so on. These technologies of collection and curation go hand in hand with establishing the

disciplinary discourse in museums and craft organization. The notion of the museum as a governmental tool for civilizing the public and developing its taste to match the standards imagined as acceptable by ruling elites has been well explored (Alpers 1991; Bennett 1995; Preziosi 2006). Yet, the objects displayed in the museum and the peoples they represent could also be viewed as subjects of the disciplinary discourse of the museum. After all, stories are constructed *on* and *about* them. Indian national museums, being governmental institutions, are controlled directly and indirectly by the ruling political party but also the historical formations that have set certain frameworks in place. The discourse on heritage and culture in Indian national museums have been shaped by the historical dialogues that developed around South Asian art and craft by the nationalist movement, in opposition to and negotiation with those created by the colonial British government, as well as the critical discourse that shaped the tastes and preferences of the elites and the public.

Partha Mitter has criticized studies of South Asian art and Western reception to them for their prioritization of colonial voices as well as their continued use of frameworks established by colonial art history discourse. “Colonial and post colonial art criticism,” writes Mitter (1994:6), “is unable to detach itself from the values of imperialism, anchored in power relations.” Thus, not only were the Orientalist supporters of South Asian art using the frames of Western art traditions to support and glorify indigenous arts, even many of the art historians who studied it later continued to make pronouncements based on existing norms of connoisseurship, which too had been built from a Western modernist perspective. In all of these perspectives, Partha Mitter accuses scholars of ignoring the voices of the

colonial subjects, especially in their reactions to the dominant discourse. This trend continued even with the nationalist movement's adoption of South Asian arts and crafts as its central theme in arguing for self-government. One of the developments that helped the Indian national movement see the potential for using arts and crafts and the status of the Indian artisan was the Raj's recognition of the economic potential of South Asian applied arts.

Operating in cycles of protective and contemptuous reactions, the colonial discourse on South Asian art during the colonial period followed patterns of support and censure. Although initial British attitudes towards South Asian art had been of benign interest, the intensifying colonial project and conservative religious developments in England during the early 19th century resulted in the emergence of a supercilious perception of these same arts, which discouraged patronage. The precolonial forms of indigenous artistic patronage had started to wane, and colonial scholars were not interested in South Asian art, decrying it either as monstrous (Sundar 1996:22) or as a pale imitation of Greek forms (Guha-Thakurta 1992:121). However, the tides turned once more and the mid-nineteenth century saw the defense of South Asian art and craft gathering steam. During this period, Sir George Birdwood identified the deterioration of vernacular arts practices in India as a result of negligent governmental policy, and William Morris led the Art and Craft movement to encourage the British public to perceive Indian art as having design applications such as in home furnishings and furniture (Sundar 1996: 27). The idea that Indian art and craft have value, aesthetically and economically, was in vogue again, although these early British activists still did not think Indian art was equal to that from the

West. Birdwood's book, *The Industrial Arts of India* (1880) was influential in spreading the notion that the most valuable genre of art in India was craft that was made by handwork by the village artisan, which was at risk of deterioration and destruction from the dark forces of industrialization introduced by the Raj. Saloni Mathur (2007:30) also writes that for Birdwood, Indian art was inexorably linked to Hinduism as well as the *Dharmashastras*, moral codes consolidated around the 2-3rd century CE in the Gupta period in South Asia, the most prominent of which is the *Manusmriti*. Thus, Birdwood created these oppositional categories, where artisans were rural, Hindu, and ethical, as against the urban, Western industrialization, which was unethical for its ill-treatment of the artisans. Not only do these follow the divisions in discourse that Foucault claimed were one of the ways to prohibit extraneous talk in society, and to control its content and direction, these are also the standard colonial structural frameworks that go on to dictate how South Asian art and craft is talked about for the next century, by Orientalists, postcolonialists, and even contemporary art historians. Birdwood's eventual fall on account of his paternalistic attitude towards South Asian art reveals the pitfall of his categories; in a conference in 1910, Birdwood decried that South Asian art could ever be "fine" art or even equal to art produced in Europe, inviting the criticism and condemnation of other scholars, Indian and colonialists. His binary division of Indian art (which he recognized as rural, religious craft) and Western modernization did not allow for another kinds of Indian art to exist – high, urban, modern arts.

Thus, during this same period, Indian-ness also becomes reified as Hindu and Buddhist even amongst South Asian scholars. As Rajendralal Mitra's 1880 book, *The*

Antiquities of Orissa exemplifies, authenticity was being equated to pre-Islamic South Asian traditions (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 120). This is in line with the discourse of the Orientalist Indologists whose influence was strong and was intensifying during this period. E.B. Havell (1861-1934), a colonial arts administrator, who became an art historian and critic, not only considered handicrafts and decorative arts as the only artistic tradition still ‘alive’ in India, he also wrote of Indian art as having a spiritual core that was central to understanding it, over any technical knowledge (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 159). These ideas were further elaborated upon by Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, whose initial work in Ceylon advocated bringing back the artisan guild of the precolonial, and especially medieval period, resonating with the ideals of the earlier Arts and Crafts movement, which valorized artisans, craftsmanship, and in India specifically, ‘the pre-industrial village community’ (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 149). For Coomaraswamy (1977:5), art could be ‘constant and normal’, or ‘variable and individualistic’, and Asiatic arts were of the former category. Not only were physical and spiritual values intertwined in such arts, their practice was founded on the ideal of ‘vocation’, where knowledge and skill was passed on hereditarily. Furthermore, historical Indian society is described based on Hindu texts on social order, and aesthetic principles are assumed to be Hindu. The work of these Orientalists to protect, defend, and promote Indian art did three things that are relevant to the post-independent history of India: they constructed art and craft as Indian; they reified Indian art and craft as spiritual at the least, but also arguably Hindu; and they strongly articulated the economic value of arts and crafts as historical and organic. Thus, the Indologist critics elevated the need to support arts and the Indian artisan to a plane above

politics, to that of spirituality and ethics (Mathur 2007:46). This connection between art, artisan, Hinduism, and ethics will be further explored later and in Chapter 5 in this dissertation.

The increasing entrepreneurial interest in Indian craft from the British colonial government resulted in high-quality, traditional-looking products and replicas of antiques being made in England to be sold as ‘Indian’ craft objects in departmental stores (Sundar 1996:131). Saloni Mathur has traced the journey of one such store, Liberty’s, which had a contradictory mission statement identifying commercialization as both the enemy of good art and the inexplicable goal of its own enterprise. The owner, Arthur Liberty, however, distinguished between the kind of commerce that “deteriorated, cheapened, and vulgarized imports” and that which could “conserve [...] the beautiful and unique in the art of the Eastern world” (Mathur 2007:35). Once again, a dichotomy was being created, this time in terms of authenticity and aesthetics, although Liberty also seemed to extend it to ethics: he claimed that “by encouraging the ‘right things’ Liberty [...] was doing ‘good work’”, which would also go hand in hand with commercial success (Mathur 2007:35). The store even brought a group of Indian artisans and performers to England during a winter season as a performative advertisement, that became a horrifying parallel to the Raj government’s atrocities in India: the performers were starved, housed poorly, not paid what they were due, and harassed. Eventually, Liberty’s started using the motifs of South Asian art and craft but using products manufactured locally, further enabling the deterioration of South Asian industries. The general economic strategy of the Raj during this period was to make India export raw materials and import finished commodities from England, thus putting it

more and more in debt, and also stagnating and destroying local industries. This intersection of the deteriorating Indian arts and the economy was personified in the image of the South Asian artisan, which was used extensively by the Indian national movement.

The Indian nationalist movement that was gaining momentum in the nineteenth century positioned itself in opposition to the British who promoted Western-influenced art education while supporting Indian art and craft only to exploit the labor of local artisans and fill the coffers of the regime (Sundar 1996:135). In many respects, both the British regime and the nationalists recognized the economic and political power of arts and crafts, but the latter also endorsed them as synonymous with a national identity of a nation that deserved to be independent. Tapati Guha-Thakurta traces the infusion of the Japanese nationalism model from Kakuzo Okakura (1862-1913), an arts scholar who was a proponent of pan-Asianism, as well as the politico-spiritual discourses of the Scots-Irish supporter of the Indian nationalist movement, Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), who proclaimed that art was ‘the most important vehicle of nationality’ (Guha-Thakurta 1992: 168,173). The discourse of ‘khadi’, or hand-spun, hand-woven cotton fabric, popularized by Mahatma Gandhi, resonated with the colonial subjects not only because it made a rational economic argument against purchasing inflated British textile imports, but also because it was built upon the premise of resuscitating an ‘Indian’ tradition. Partha Mitter (1994:8) has theorized that this easy transfer of ideas was made possible because the nationalists’ adoption of indigenous arts and crafts, artisans, and centering the plight of the artisan as the pitiable extension of the apathetic economic and political policies of the Raj, was merely a political maneuver. This is in contrast to the socioeconomic revolutions of

Latin America where the protestors of the colonial governments wanted a change in the socioeconomic hierarchy as much as in the political institutions. The leaders of the Indian nationalist movement, were however, mostly Western educated individuals from elite backgrounds, and thus, eventually, independence merely orchestrated a transfer of power from Western elites to Indian elites⁴. Furthermore, these elite Indians adopted the colonial discourse of nostalgia for the rural and the Hindu, echoing Birdwood and Morris' simplified, paternalistic appreciations. Symbolically, this meant that the products that were promoted and supported by the *swadeshi* campaign, which extolled the economic and moral virtues of buying local over imported British goods, were not so much the handcrafted commodities of the precolonial South Asian artisan, as they were a product representing "a new, modern political community that was overcoming the limitations of both traditional and colonial India" (Mathur 2007:43).

It is in this context that after India's independence in 1947, the conservation and revival of handicrafts was one of the most important dictates for the new government, which saw artisans living in deplorable conditions and traditional craft dying quietly. Commingled with the developmental projects to energize the local industries, several governmental projects were initiated to promote production and employment. Spearheaded by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, the handicrafts and handloom revival projects in the 1950s

⁴ Rupa Viswanath (2016) has described how the independent Indian state even today adopts the same priorities of the British Raj by choosing maintenance of law and order over hearing the grievances of historically disenfranchised classes. The laws imposed by the British colonial government to "protect religious sentiment" of the ruled in order to avoid any religiously motivated protests or rebellions, could be seen as the forebear to the post-independence laws such as Section 195A which offers protection against offense against religious sentiments. The latter laws are usually used by the dominant Hindu groups to protest anything considered an attack on their religion as was recently witnessed in the case filed against scholar Wendy Doniger for her book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*.

were facilitated by a series of institutions that were established for this very purpose. From the All India Handicrafts Board to the Central Cottage Industries Emporium, as well as several craft museums, Chattopadhyay had a strong vision for the position and trajectory of traditional arts and crafts. Associating crafts with the rural, Chattopadhyay championed the notion of the master craftsman, who had an affective and spiritual relationship with the craft that is supposed to be born out of divine inspiration (Chattopadhyay 2000:2,4,13,16). Her establishment of the National Award for Craftsmen in 1965, which continues today, facilitates this discourse. The installation of the National Craft Museum in New Delhi, and other craft promotion organizations set up during this period was to assist in the commercial viability of handicrafts. Thus, one result of this work is that in India, crafts occupy a position of symbolic and economic significance endorsing an Indian nationalism rooted in a nostalgic past dominated by Hindu and Buddhist spirituality. In this construction, artisans are not only the repositories of this tradition, but also the vehicle for an economically hopeful future in which crafts are a viable livelihood and a profitable export for the nation. Ultimately, this is a framework that is built upon the colonial discourse that conceives of the artisan and traditional crafts as belonging to the past, the rural, the religious, and the ethical.

Until now, these have been examinations of the colonizers and the colonized, but only in terms of institutions and elites. Following Partha Mitter, it behooves us to ask, what about the discourse of the artisan? Have they been allowed one? What are the divisions and frames constructed by their discourse? Who has the right to truth and knowledge? And lastly, what are the ways in which artisans react to the hegemonic discourse set up by the

Indian state? I believe that instead of Foucault's conceptualization of discourse, the words and talks of artisans needs to be understood in terms of Ricoeur's narrative discourse, because while there is an aspirational struggle for the authoritative voice (and power) in the historical narratives constructed and disseminated by the artisan community featured in this dissertation, their self-positioning as subjects of dominant forces complicates their relationship with power. While the narratives of a community that considers itself marginalized could be theorized through Foucault in terms of its relationship with dominant forces, there is also the fact that this community's self perception does not leave room for the subjects that they themselves marginalize. Additionally, studies of caste have historically focused on hierarchy and power relations, while this dissertation examines caste in terms of its historical narratives and mythmaking. Ricoeur provides an avenue to examine caste history as historical, truthful, and as mythmaking.

For Paul Ricoeur, narrative is inseparable from time, and to engage with narrative, one has to always be conscious of their place in the world and time. In fact, for Ricoeur, narrative is subservient to time (Nankov 2014). This is because Ricoeur always considers the human experience before he looks onto discourse. Mimesis, his elaboration of Aristotle's *muthos* or plot, is a three-stage process which includes the lived experience and its assumed (inherent) cultural emplacement (prefiguration); followed by the construction of the narrative that is based on that lived experience and the knowledge of culture (configuration); and lastly, the intervention between the narrative and the world in which it was created (refiguration). While Ricoeur (1984:74) explains the stage of prefiguration as "potential" and "untold story", making it seem as if the story should matter more, he still

prioritizes time and the experience of it, without which the potential for the story just would not be there. Similarly, after configuration, Ricoeur considers the dissemination of the narrative into the world and how individuals and communities might engage with it to also be part of emplotment. Plot is important for Ricoeur because it is the narrative device that allows individuals and communities to construct history and fiction. In fact, even identity, according to Ricoeur (1992) is constructed as a narrative, as is membership within a community. Ricoeur thus does not believe that the narrative begins and ends with the text – it includes all of the experience and the intention that went into creating it, as well as the critical reception that follows its dissemination. In terms of historical narrative, this is a discourse saturated with awareness – awareness of the self, of time, of past-present-and-future, of culture and context, and of the reader. When Ricoeur (1986:131) says “We thus learn to become narrators of our stories without necessarily becoming the authors of our life,” he is simultaneously acknowledging the reality of time, which is outside of human control, but also affirming that time could be brought into control through the construction of a historical narrative.

The caste archives of the Vishwakarma caste community, which is detailed in Chapter 2, are attempts to narrate the history of the caste through myths, stories, sociological descriptions, and historical narratives. Following the stages of Ricoeur’s mimesis, we have the lived experience of Vishwakarma, which are written into narratives that also include ancestral memories, legends and myths. The contemporary Vishwakarma community’s mobilization across state lines to build caste archives and circulate newsletters and books as educational materials for the younger generation is the stage of

refiguration, when these narratives are received back by the community. Engaging with time is important for the Vishwakarma community because they consider their history as ignored by the larger society, and their achievements to have been made invisible. As a marginalized group, the Vishwakarma feel that their discourse on caste is excluded, their history categorized as untrue, and their right to truth denied. This is in part because of contemporary understandings of what counts as historical sources and the necessity of factual evidence as corroboration of historical narratives.

With respect to South Asian and caste history, narrative and myth often work together in comfortable companionship. Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam (2001) argue against the notion that South Asia does not have a historical tradition, claiming that in South India literary sources, no matter how lacking in “facts,” should still be considered as historical sources. While hard evidence such as inscriptions, coin, and other artifacts are considered as reliable sources for historical information, myths, folklore, poetry and other forms are perceived as embellishments at the most generous, and fictional at the most miserly. However, according to Daud Ali (2000:166), even inscriptions were not really considered to be texts, but merely “documentary sources” that existed as is. Ali quotes Hegel, who attributed India’s perceived lack of historical writing to the Hindu belief in fate and the primacy of a sensuous imagination. Much like the colonial frameworks that adjudicated South Asian art as inferior, or did not think “fine art” was a category that could be ascribed to it, historians also thought of South Asia as incapable of thinking rationally, writing in time of time, and keeping historical records. Rao and coauthors propose that the past was engaged with differently in South India. Moreover, they argue, “the choice of

genre or mode for historiographical purposes frequently changes over time, as a community changes its preferred modes of literary production,” and thus, as patronage preferences change, the earlier genre becomes less “historical” (Rao et al. 2001:3). Ali (2000:179) too argues for an intertextual reading of historical sources from South Asia, and reframing puranic discourse as “universal histories [...] that were hegemonic in medieval India” because “they set the teleological terms to which other historical practices submitted or from which they dissented.” By puranic discourse, Ali is speaking of the mythic Hindu texts called the *Puranas* (meaning “old”) that date from the classical period (3rd century CE) to the medieval period (11th century). These scholars are interrogating the historiography of South Asia and the ways in which non-traditional sources get elided in the process of truth-telling. Ricoeur, of course, would have a more expansive understanding of such historical sources. A distinction that needs to be drawn between the arguments made by these scholars and my proposal is that historians consider historical texts in the context of their own time. As Partha Mitter said, the past is an “other”, and examining historical sources as they would have been imagined in the time of their creation is an emic exercise in translation. My dissertation contends with texts produced in the more recent past and present, when Western ideas of history are prevalent in South Asia. Thus, my argument is that caste histories must be perceived through the prism of Ricoeur’s emplotment and as historical narratives, and should be studied not in terms of power or truth, but in terms of rhetorics.

Ethics and Aesthetics

The relationship between ethics and aesthetics has mostly been considered in terms of their philosophical weight, and such studies have also been dominated by the works of Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Immanuel Kant predicates ethics on rationality and aesthetics on feelings of pleasure. Superficially, this gives the impression of ethics and aesthetics being diametrically opposite in terms of how humans could achieve them. Kant argues that experiencing beauty should involve a sense of satisfaction that is not tied to any purpose, that is, something not based on reason. However, aesthetics is not entirely divorced from ethics, because Kant (1792:248) also states that beauty is a symbol of the moral good. Ted Cohen (1985:235) understands this as beauty being “*the* symbol of morality”, meaning it is only aesthetics that can encapsulate the feeling of moral perfection. Morality is achieved through reason and purpose, but they also need to be accompanied by feelings, and these can be cultivated through aesthetics. Wittgenstein has a similar analogy about the relation between these two concepts. In his analysis of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which Wittgenstein claims that aesthetics and ethics are one, Tilghman (1991:65) concludes that “ethics and aesthetics are intimately related in that art is one of the most important ways in which ethical value can be shown and a solution to the problem of life made manifest.” For Wittgenstein, both ethics and aesthetics belong to the realm of the “unsayable”, because he believes that the propositions are value-free concatenations of word-objects, and neither ethics nor aesthetics can be value-free. As Tilghman (1991:64) describes Wittgenstein’s idea, “only through art can the sense and value of a life and of the world be shown.”

Aesthetics in these theories is conceived in terms of sight and experience, that is, from the position of the viewing subject or society. The object of art itself, or the experience of spectatorship is interrogated in terms of their contribution and connection to ethics. Is art good? Can it make the world a better place? Is the feeling of goodness in a person equivalent or related to the judgment of an art object as good? Even in asking these questions, Elmer Duncan (1967:427) believes that the subjects are in different positions, since while art is judged in terms of viewing, morality is judged from the perspective of a fellow moral agent. Thus, moral discourse is always prescriptive, while art appreciation need not be an imperative to others, unless the judgment comes from other artists. The Vishwakarma and other caste artisans of this dissertation occupy this unique position of being moral agents in society, as well as artisans. Thus, their experience of aesthetics is not only as spectators but also as doers – similar to the ways in which individuals experience ethics.

In anthropology, ethics has been explored in innumerable ways, from particular culturally mediated norms (Robbins 2004) to universalist philosophies (Lambek 2010), in terms of its relation with freedom and justice (Laidlaw 2002, 2013), incommensurability (Mair and Evans 2015), religion (Mahmood 2005), the quotidian (Das 2012), the humanitarian and political (Fassin 2011), and tragedy (Mattingly 2014), amongst many, many others. Didier Fassin (2014) detailed the various trajectories of the ethical turn, although plentiful publications have followed since then. In the anthropology of South Asia, ethical values have been predicated on the lived practice of the ethnographic subject, but theorized mostly through Western theories, be it the Tamil Kallar community and their

understanding of *aram* explicated through Aristotelean virtue ethics (Pandian 2009), the ordinary violence faced by the survivors of state or state adjacent violence in South Asia argued through Wittgenstein (Das 2007), the emergence and contestation for queer identity, rights and funds, imagined through Povinelli's theories of commensurability (Dave 2012), or the contradictions of Jain life which valorizes asceticism but is shaped by materiality, debated through Foucault's poststructural ethics and Aristotelean virtue ethics (Laidlaw 1995). This work, alternatively, applies a vernacular ethical theory rooted in Hinduism and aesthetics.

Most straightforward explorations of ethics in ethnographic practice situate them either in the deontological ethics of Kant, which centers duty, and identifies goodness in intention; virtue ethics according to which moral goodness is to be cultivated within a person through qualities and character; and poststructural ethics usually attributed to Foucault, in which an individual explores the various ethical systems available to them and exercises freedom by choosing to be subject to one of them. The concept of what Shyam Ranganathan calls *Bhakti/Yoga* (explored in Chapter 5), is not a precept that is explored in any of these works. Each of these explores the labor and intentions behind the pursuit of the good, which is alternatively seen as purposeful action, moral character, or freedom. *Bhakti/Yoga* according to Ranganathan is the pursuit of right action, which is done through perfecting practice. The goal for the individual is not goodness, but rightness, and the continuous, unrelenting pursuit of it is considered to be the good. This is unlike both deontology, which predicates the good on the will to perform duty, and virtue ethics, in which goodness is cultivated within a person over time. Swamimalai sculptors situate their

ethical practice in their craft and arts practice – their *murai*. Their pursuit of *murai* is what will ultimately make them a good sculptor; this stands for the good.

Swamimalai sculptors have to contend with multiple systems of ethics that have been created by society. The government demands an ethical representation of themselves as artisans; the handicrafts organizations want them to be ethical entrepreneurs; society wants them to be trustworthy and responsible. While they perform these attributes in various ways, ultimately they seek to center ethical practice on their labor, knowledge and arts practice. Let me illustrate this with the experience of Ravi Sthapati, who will be featured much in this dissertation. Ravi's friend, who was not a sculptor, had met with a temple officer who was looking to get some relief plate work done for two old wooden doors at his temple. The friend thought Ravi would be a good fit, but told the officer that Ravi would want a thousand rupees for an initial consultation. The client agrees, and the friend comes to Ravi, telling him about the job, but does not tell him about asking for the consultation fees. He does tell Ravi that the client wanted good work; he says this is why he is putting him in touch with Ravi. So Ravi went with the friend to meet the client, a little nervous because he thought he would have to do very good work. The client, who had visited Swamimalai, Kumbakonam and a few other places where bronzecasters lived had gotten tenders from many craftsmen, and thus had educated himself on the work involved. He asked Ravi about the process he planned to use. Ravi, not knowing that the client was by then well-versed in the process, explained in detail what he was going to do – take measurements of the doors, make a mould of the doors so that they could remain at the temple, and use the mould at his workshop to create the relief plate. The client then asked

for details about the sculpting work itself. Ravi responded that since the door had very intricate carvings with deeper cuts in some places, he would do it in multiple pieces and then carefully join the pieces together through hammering. But the client was not happy and told Ravi “No, you need to do this as a single piece, it is possible.” Ravi was surprised and asked, “Did you talk with any artisan who told you that this could be done as a single piece?” The client said that he had. Ravi inquired, “How many told you that?” and the client said that many of them did. Ravi thought and then said, “Okay, you do this. It does not matter if that guy is 10 or 20 years younger than me, you call him and give him this work, and then throw a big festival after he is done with the work and you are ready to unveil it. You call everyone for that festival and it does not matter if that guy is 10 or 20 years younger than me; let everyone watch. You make a clearing and I will fall at that man’s feet. It is impossible to do this door in a single piece and anyone who told you otherwise does not have any idea about sculpting.” This impressed the client terribly and he told Ravi that he would like him to do the job, but Ravi had had enough. “No, I will not take up this job, because you doubted me. I am sorry, but we are done,” he declared and started to leave. The client’s further entreaties did not move Ravi, and so his friend made a move to exit, when the client took out a thousand-rupee note and gave it to the friend. Incentivized, Ravi asked what the money was for, surprising the client. The friend hushed Ravi and rushed him out. Later, the friend confessed that he had asked for a thousand rupees for the consult and Ravi could have half of it. Ravi declined, saying that he would have never come if he had known that money was involved for the consult. The friend

responded, “Yes, I knew that, which is why I did not tell you but got you to come, because now I have thousand rupees.”

The sculptor, Ravi, faced two instances of dishonesty in this story. He was used by his non-sculptor friend to make some money, which Ravi considers unethical, and more strikingly, Ravi was disgusted with the sculptors who had lied to the client about the techniques involved in sculpting. Ravi later told me that it was possible that some sculptors, who did not have much experience with this kind of metal work, might have not known better and lied about their abilities, but others had known that a single plate would not work and had outright lied to get the job. This was not a matter of just entrepreneurial practice for Ravi, but an ignorance or misrepresentation of the arts practice involved. Because of the close links between the identity of the sculptor, and bronzecasting (and his caste, if Vishwakarma), unethical dealings in the practice reflect on the sculptor himself. Bad work and bad practice make a bad sculptor. Good work and proper practice are the traits of a good sculptor. This attribute of being a good sculptor is the ethical framework that has been adopted by Swamimalai sculptors, who would admit to unvirtuous character traits like alcoholism, laziness, greed, pride, and even criminal acts. However, it is those aspects that directly reflect on the arts practice that invite ethical introspection.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized around themes of discourse, narratives, and ethics. As a narrative itself, it flows from one topic to another, and while certain chapters might

reflect on one theme predominantly, all of these themes are inexorably connected and are difficult to untangle.

The first chapter examines the national and state museums in India, specifically, the National Museum in New Delhi and the Government Museum in Chennai, and analyzes them as institutions constructing and disseminating disciplinary discourses on heritage. The politics of the ruling political party often interferes with the operations of these museums, in addition to the bureaucracy rendering them to be stagnant organizations. Because of this, the exhibits and their accompanying texts have not changed in a while and replicate the benign Hindu framing of South Asian art. However, these museums also tend to obviate the existence of contemporary sculptors, and the link between medieval bronzes and Swamimalai sculptors is constructed by the governmental craft organization, Poompuhar. Poompuhar uses the heritage discourse from the museums to create the bronzecaster as a traditional subject and the bronzes as commercial objects. However, such framing creates problems of representation for Swamimalai sculptors who have to contend with how tradition is defined and how their entrepreneurship is expected.

The second chapter is a detailed analysis of the history of the Vishwakarma caste, and how the contemporary pan-Indian Vishwakarma community is constructing their own history. I review colonial documents in which Vishwakarma are described as deceitful and overreaching their social position. I also trace their contemporary reaction, which is a mobilization through and of historical narratives. I look at the recent writings of Vishwakarma authors, as well as pamphlets from Vishwakarma caste organizations circulated by Vishwakarma caste organizations. I argue that these caste archives are a way

for Vishwakarma to establish connections with their past while constructing it, and creating “traces” for the future. This is especially necessary for them because of the dwindling number of Vishwakarma who are actually working as artisans.

The third chapter describes how Swamimalai sculptors respond to the problems created by the governmental handicraft organization by having to perform tradition through their caste, and appearance. I use the practices of two Vishwakarma sculptor families, and examine the ways in which they attempt to define and demonstrate tradition and authenticity, often as a proxy for caste. This is done through the appearance of sculptors, the style and purpose of bronzes made, and also by emphasizing the importance of *Shilpashastras*, and the familial histories of Vishwakarma families thereby establishing a past when only they were making bronzes. However, I also bring up the contemporary discourse around antiquities smuggling, in which sculptors have been historically implicated, which has caused a continuation of the historical characterization of artisans as untrustworthy. Performing tradition in their entrepreneurial position does not help assuage these accusations.

The fourth chapter examines the small town life in Swamimalai and the ways in which gossip acts as a discourse, framing artisans as untrustworthy. I argue that gossip is impossible to contain and the only recourse sculptors have is to appropriate it, which they do through agreeing with the characterization, but declaring that moral character is not as important as being a skilled artisan. Thus, trustworthiness and goodness are reframed in terms of skill and arts practice, rather than appropriate personal behaviour. However, the Vishwakarma artisans who use such discourse marginalize sculptors who do not conform

to their membership criteria. I illustrate this with the stories of an atheist sculptor and a woman sculptor.

The fifth chapter details *murai*, the arts practice that is proper and makes a good sculptor, and underlines how Swamimalai sculptors redefine the good. *Murai* is the Tamil term for the right arts practice, which also indexes a high level of skill and knowledge. Making a bronze according to *murai* will not only ensure a beautiful sculpture, it also marks a good sculptor. I enumerate how aesthetic rules are differently established over time and even *murai* in Swamimalai is variably understood. I also problematize the association of tradition with *murai* and describe the governmental sculpture school and its own attempts to establish proper arts practice to create good sculptor subjects, most of whom are not Vishwakarma.

Other Things

There are many important themes that I am not handling in this dissertation. Gender is a dominant factor since all but one sculptor in Swamimalai are men, and the ways in which the art is practiced, the business is conducted, and the iconographies are adopted are saturated with patriarchal overtones. That these sculptors predominantly make female statues with exaggerated feminine attributes; that the word used for the mould which is considered the most important object in the lost wax process is *karu* (womb or embryo), and that sculptors repeatedly used the metaphor of giving birth to describe bronzecasting; that the only woman sculptor, Rajeshwari, had been intentionally ostracized from the community; that my presence in workshops was often a source of disturbance and

discomfort to many of the workers – all of this tells a story, which this dissertation is, unfortunately, not handling. Sculptor wives, mothers, and sisters often help with the work, primarily the labor-intensive aspects or with the upkeep of the workshop. Vishwakarma sculptors also maintain networks with each other by marrying into other subcastes, and these women who come from other places and subcastes bring with them their own stories and practices, which influence the family and the work, but are invisible because of their lack of voice within the workshop.

Religion is handled somewhat in this dissertation, but I have not delved into how the sculptors think of god and religion. There is some curious disjuncture in this because while one would expect the makers of religious idols to be religious, their expression of religion is often vague and spiritual rather than specific. Several sculptors make bronzes of Jesus Christ, relief plates with Islamic symbols, decorative and religious Buddhas, and idols for various god-men cults. Several Vishwakarma sculptors, who consider themselves to have a Sanskrit-based identity, are members of the Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) party, a Tamilnadu political party known for being anti-Sanskrit, anti-caste, and anti-religion. This membership could be explained by the fact that while the DMK party historically had stringent views, it has softened somewhat in recent years, adopting an ambiguous stance towards religion. Furthermore, as a Dravida party, the DMK has always been very involved in engendering the local arts, crafts, and traditions of Tamilnadu. Dravida or Dravidian refers to the linguistic cultural category of Tamil people specifically, and southern India more generally. Bronzecastings counts as Dravida because of its connection to the Imperial Cholas. There has also been a recent upsurge in the number of

sculptors being recruited to work for some of the growing god-men cults, who are perceived as profitable, but scandalous customers by the sculptors.

The body of the sculptor is wrecked well before the ends of their lives. The strain of metalwork cannot be understated. Wax work is intricate and the eyes go first. Sculpting requires a bent body posture that strains the back. Casting always causes injuries, both small and catastrophic. The unreliable income often sends sculptors to drink, as does the feelings of inadequacy, both as a sculptor and as the provider for a family. The constant inhalations of metal bits, of melting wax, the continuous exposure to the noise of the hammers and chisels, and the indescribable, perpetual heat in the workshop leave indelible marks within the sculptor's body. Often sculptors call their profession "terrible work", and it is no surprise why those who can, ensure that their children seek other professions.

The reality of the capitalistic handicrafts market was also something that was on the minds of many sculptors. Not only was there a lot of competition between Vishwakarma and other caste sculptors, Poompohar, the government handicrafts corporation, has its own production center also in Swamimalai, which caused confusion and disgruntlement. Why was the government causing more competition, the sculptors would ask me rhetorically. Was it not supposed to help them? Sure it created some jobs in the workshop, but they were government positions, which meant that once they were given to a sculptor, the sculptor could remain there until they retired. Government positions are still considered valuable, especially in smaller towns, because they provide reliable income and excellent retirement benefits. So, Poompohar competed with other sculptors for orders, when it was a governmental institution that did not really need to make much profit and had a

contradictory mission to promote sales for sculptors who did not work for it. The Swamimalai Icon Manufacturer's Co-operative Cottage Industrial Society Ltd. is another organization that is supposed to help sculptors with marketing their wares, standardizing their rates, and providing stability. But that too had been used politically by sculptors belonging to opposing parties, occasionally causing the Society to be shut down for improper use of resources. There has also been a thriving brass kitchen utensil industry in the nearby town of Kumbakonam, perceptible via the dozens of shops known colloquially as "*paathara kadai*" or utensil shops, that causes significant competition to Swamimalai sculptors. These shops predominantly sell vessels, but they also store a large quantity of bronzes from Swamimalai. These bronzes are considered to be of exceptionally inferior quality, usually done by students and apprentices, often rudely carved with incorrect iconography and iconometrics. But they are ready to sell bronzes, unlike the ones in Swamimalai, which need to be commissioned and could take anytime from a month to a year to be delivered. Customers in a hurry, who do not care about quality or ritual correctness, prefer to purchase these idols, which also tend to be much cheaper. Furthermore, there is also the distant threat of the Muradabad and Aligarh bronzes, which are mass-produced brass replicas of Swamimalai bronzes that an amateur customer could easily mistake for Swamimalai bronzes. One of the reasons for the application for the Geographical Indications tag for Swamimalai bronzes was this threat. The makers of these brass replicas tend to visit Swamimalai as customers, purchase bronzes of good quality and aesthetic feel, and take them back to their factories. There, they create industrial moulds of them and mass produce brass sculptures in the thousands. Swamimalai sculptors are

perpetually on the lookout for such customers, who they fear would steal the likeness of their work and later, their earnings. The rapid advancement of 3D printing and mould making is also a cause for concern amongst the sculptors.

A single anecdote recounted below demonstrates the range of themes that can be discussed and underlines the difficulty of including everything. Veera Ragavan Sthapati, a sculptor and teacher, was describing all the ways in which the industry had changed since his father's time. "People always think that grass is greener," he started, "They think that people can earn more in this field and so train here [Poompuhar Training Centre] to do sculptures." He chuckled, "But we think agriculture earns more money, and want to get into that field." Ragavan thought that as an insider, he knew that sculpting was not as profitable as it used to be. "There are some 40 Vishwakarma families now in Swamimalai. Sthapatis are still on the top of the field. But things are changing. If a temple needs an idol, some temple officer would have to find a Sthapati to order it. But they will forget about it and then they will hear from the temple that the *kumbabishekam* [consecration ceremony] is the next day. So they call up a Sthapati and ask if they can get an idol tomorrow. The Sthapati will say that it will take a month. So, they will turn to vessel shops and buy a ready-made idol. The priests and temple officials are not going to know the difference. They get an idol that they will worship, but we will lose the business." Ragavan continued on about the Vishwakarma sculptors: "A Sthapati is always in a position of poverty. If you feed someone until they are full, they will not be able to work well. But if you only feed them sixty percent, then they will toil hard. For the Sthapati, poverty is a sibling." It is the work ethic, according to Ragavan, that brings the poverty. A sculptor needs to be kept

hungry to keep on working, as complacency would ruin their arts practice. “We are always thinking about how to finish one project and once that project is completed, we are thinking about the next one.” But the sculptor also needs to earn a living, explained Ragavan, and for this, they might need to find a middleman who will sell their wares for them. “What does a Sthapati need?” asked Ragavan. “He needs five hundred rupees a day to conduct his family. The businessman will give him that money if he is willing to work for him. The wife would then want that guaranteed money rather than doing their own business. So he is caught by the businessman.”

In this meandering, fascinating narrative, Ragavan talks about the problems with the bronzecasting industry, the competition offered by other sculptors, the fickle and undiscerning nature of the customer, the irreligiosity of the contemporary temple, the constant press of time, the pride of the Vishwakarma that excludes other caste sculptors, the threat of poverty, the importance of the work ethic and its relation to poverty, the ethics of work, and the wife who is both pragmatic and an obstacle in the pursuit of good artistic work. One of the challenges of this dissertation has, thus, been having to deal with these multifarious aspects of the rich and vibrant lives and labor of the Swamimalai sculptors, and presenting a representation that respects the complexities and tensions, instead of flattening it.

Going back to the opening narrative of the *Silappatikaram*, in one of the versions of this story, after the burning of the city, and further politicking between neighboring kings, one of them offers a sacrifice a day of the life of a goldsmith for a thousand days. A thousand goldsmiths are sacrificed as offerings to Kannagi to balance the injustice that had

occurred to her, but also as a mark of her righteous value. The Tamil scholar, M.P. Sivagnanam, once called this epic “*nenjai allum Silappatikaram*”, meaning “Heart capturing *Silappatikaram*”, eventually also writing a book with that title. A Vishwakarma scholar and professor, much disgruntled, responded, declaring the epic “*nenjai killum Silappatikaram*”, that is, “Heart pinching *Silappatikaram*,” creating much furor. Most who know the epic have not heard of the massacre of a thousand goldsmiths that takes place at the end of the story, but every Vishwakarma has. The Marina Beach in Chennai has a large statue of Kannagi, multiple movies have been made based on the story, and several ruling political parties have emphasized this epic as an integral aspect of Tamil identity and ethics. It must be heart pinchingly galling then, to be represented by the greedy, lying, unscrupulous villain in this epic.

Lastly, a note on diacritics. In this dissertation, I have not used any diacritics unless quoted sections contain them.

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Chapter 1: An Economy of Discourse: The Museum, Nationalism, and Handicrafts

In 2018, with great fanfare, a tremendous exhibit was curated by the British Museum (London), the National Museum (New Delhi), and the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS; Mumbai). Titled “India and the World: A History in Nine Stories”, the exhibition displayed around 200 objects borrowed from over 20 institutions from all over India. Furthermore, in a landmark effort at collaboration, the exhibit traveled to all three major institutions in a logistical superheroic feat. Telling the story of the interactions between the region now known as India and the world through over a million years, the exhibit was designed to initiate conversation on cultural connections, shared meanings, and comparative differences between cultures and times. Widely praised and critically acclaimed in its iterations in London and Mumbai, the exhibit was eagerly awaited by the citizens of New Delhi, when its opening was marred. At least five of the display objects were not part of the National Museum show. How come, asked some of the visitors who had already seen photographs of the installations in the other two cities, and had noted the absences. The Director General of the National Museum, B. R. Mani, explained the reason: logistics. The objects that stayed back in Mumbai were too large to be installed at the National Museum. Furthermore, he said that the works excluded “did not add much to the narration of the exhibition” (Menezes 2018) and that one of them was even derogatory. Soon there were challenges to this narrative, especially when a newspaper article revealed that in 2014, the previous Director General of the National Museum, Venu Vasudevan, had managed to install a marble tombstone that weighed over a tonne as part of “The Body in Indian Art” exhibit. The objects excluded from the

National Museum included the *Townley Discobolus*, the *Discobolus in Zhongshan Suit* by Jianguo Sui, *Unicode* by L.N. Tallur, and two Japanese scroll illustrations. One of these objects is the one considered “derogatory” by B. R. Mani.

L. N. Tallur’s *Unicode*⁵ is an 800 kilogram sculpture that is a commentary on the state of Hinduism, traditional Indian art, and/or South Indian bronzes – take your pick. At first glance, *Unicode* is a great ball of dirt surrounded by an embellished bronze ring supported by a traditional rectangular foundation. A closer look reveals that it is a South Indian bronze of a Nataraja (Dancing Shiva) where the Shiva has been encrusted with layers and layers of concrete and coins. Almost two meters high and one and a half meters wide, the sculpture is impressive. L. N. Tallur is a Karnataka-born Indian artist whose work intersects India’s traditions with the contemporary, juxtaposing aspects that could be perceived as contradictory or complementary. The works can also be easily interpolated as social or political commentary, often on critical lines. *Unicode* is a sculpture that says many things. Nataraja has been widely appreciated as a dynamic figure that stands for the cosmic time in Hinduism. Shiva, the god of destruction, dances surrounded by a ring of fire, vanquishing the demon of ignorance and granting submission to the devout. One of his four hands holds a drum, which echoes the sounds of the creation and destruction of the universe. In Hindu mythology, time is cyclical; Shiva creates, then destroys; time passes and circulates. *Unicode* can be read as the visualization of the passage of time, time so ruthless that even the dancing Shiva becomes caught up in its passing, becoming

⁵ <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/tallur-ln-unicode>

“entombed in a ball of concrete and money” (Anon). But it can also be read in another way.

South Indian bronzes of the medieval period are often found under the ground, having been buried during the precolonial period by temple officials out of fear of attacks from invaders. A Nataraja enveloped in what looks like dirt is pretty much what these buried bronzes are. It is also this historical narrative of the lost and found bronzes that makes them desirable in the antiques market (apart from their innate beauty), and also makes replica bronzes that are made today a sought-after handicraft commodity. So the dirt surrounding the bronze also has money in it, because the buried, hidden bronze is a fetishistic commodity traded on the market. There have also been recent developments in the investigations into the smuggling of antique bronzes from temples; sold in the black market, these bronzes end up in private collections and international museums. Thus, it is not only the replica bronzes that are a commodity, but also the antique bronzes. The concrete now invites a more sinister interpretation. Is it referring to the petrifying effect of the black market where these bronzes are hidden away by collectors never to see the light of the day, much like their counterparts that were buried? Does Tallur think we need to rebury these bronzes so that we can protect them once more from marauders who steal them from temples? Or is it making a statement on religion instead? Gods are obscured by concrete and money, great installations and conspicuous consumption obscuring the real gods in the current neoliberalized Hinduism.

However *Unicode* might be interpreted, it was perceived as offensive by B. R. Mani and excluded from the National Museum when the “India and the World” exhibit

took residence there. While Mani says that the curators who originated the exhibition were consulted about the labels of the exhibits before they went on, he has not explicitly said whether they were told about his decision to remove the above-mentioned artifacts.

Expanding on why he found the sculpture problematic, Mani is quoted in *The Wire* (Menezes 2018) as saying, “We, the professional heritage lovers, should not trivialise the ‘ananda-tandava’ of Lord Shiva who is the embodiment of the cosmic underpinning having creation arising from his drum, protection from the hand of hope, destruction from the hand holding fire and the foot held aloft giving release. It may be a significant art work by the artist but in the context of history and culture, it is against the depiction of Nataraja.” It is the religious aspect of the sculpture that has given pause to Mani, although the question of whether this is a sentiment that should be raised in the museum should be given consideration. What is the purpose of the Indian Museum and what are the boundaries of discourse that the museum is allowed to disseminate? In the same article, Kavita Singh challenges this decision, saying, “That kind of attitude that turns something into a fetish object, where the artist has no right to layer it, to be in dialogue with an object from the past, to make some kind of comment about it is not only regrettable but it is also not self reflexive. If you think about the bronze gallery downstairs, that itself is taking objects of worship – which normally would have been garlanded and clothed – and doesn’t have a problem with putting those up for display in a way that would not be considered appropriate by worshipers. Yet we understand that it is a legitimate thing to do.”

Thus, the crux of the conflict of the Tallur piece and the National Museum can be summarized thusly: the National Museum, recognized as an important governmental

institution with a public facing purpose, deemed a sculpture as derogatory to the Hindu religion, and refused to include it in an exhibit curated through collaboratory efforts between Indian and British scholars and curators. That is, the National Museum did not want the kind of discourse that would arise from a sculpture like *Unicode*, which questions and challenges the state of art, craft, the handicrafts industry, and religion, in contemporary times. Governmental museums in India largely peddle standard narratives about Indian art and history that can also be found in school textbooks and tourism brochures. The inclusion of contemporary realities, either in the form of contemporary art or source communities⁶, would disrupt these narratives. In this chapter, I examine how governmental museums in India disseminate nationalistic discourse, which results in the exclusion of artisan communities. I argue that this is because of the nature of the economy in these museums, which is one of discourse and not objects. These museums are invested in promoting the circulation of discourse and stopping the circulation of objects. For these two processes to occur, these museums cannot open themselves up to disruptions and interruptions in the form of source communities or political challenges. However, I also reflect on the uneasy alliance between museums and governmental handicraft corporations that do promote the commodification of crafts, many of which have long histories, thus having artifact-brethren in museums. Thus, these handicraft organizations use the art historical discourse of the museums to contextualize contemporary crafts and sell them.

⁶ Source communities is a term used to refer to communities who have had objects and stories taken from them, sometimes forcibly, during the colonial period (and after), to be installed in museums in colonial nations. Historically, these objects have been used to represent these communities alongside narratives created by curators from the colonizer countries. Recent effort from activists and museum anthropologists have focused on decolonizing museum spaces by establishing substantive links between these museum objects and their source communities, and through repatriation efforts. For more on the politics of museums and source communities, see Brown and Peers (2003).

This chapter starts broadly by looking at the history of museums and their evolution into public museums with a state-serving purpose. It then narrows to look at the history of Indian museums, alongside examining the kinds of nationalistic narratives that become entrenched in their institutional spaces and how the museum in India has stagnated because of its commitment to circulating this discourse. Then, the specific case of the Government Museum in Chennai is examined as well as its Bronze Gallery, and we look at how bronzes are contextualized within a nationalistic history, and how they are decontextualized from the bronzecasters who continue to make them in Swamimalai. The nature of the Government Museum as a bureaucracy and the attitudes of its curators assists in this process. Finally, I explore the commercial world of handicrafts, and how the museums' discourses facilitate the commodification of bronzes.

Museums and Postcolonial Nations

While describing an exhibit in the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, Lawrence Weschler (1995:16) notes that the recorded audio accompanying the display is "the reassuringly measured voice of unassailable institutional authority". The role of museums as governmental apparatuses of discipline and discourse has been well discussed by many scholars. Museums have acted as authoritative institutions as the keepers of objects whose ownership could be contested and in constructing stories about "others". These tendencies can be traced to the beginnings of the museum in Europe and in the US. Tony Bennett (1995) has narrated how modern Western museums began as cabinets of curiosities owned by private collectors, evolving into the spaces and tools of science.

Michael Ames describes these “glass boxes” of classification as both physical and epistemological colonizations in which Western knowledge systems frame and “freeze” indigenous objects and stories (Ames 1995:140). Eventually, European museums became state-owned around the eighteenth century, and the cultural knowledge housed in them and produced out of them became essential in the State’s tasks of educating the public on what constituted “their” culture, and what (and who) constituted “others” (Knell 2007; Pomian 1991). Foucault (1986:24) had defined such places where "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" as heterotopias⁷. This was also in line with the rise of nationalism and the nation-state in the nineteenth century, and the consequent desire of the state to be “idealized and presented [...] to the public” (Duncan 1995:22). These “public” museums had a duty towards the citizenry and became spaces for political discourse. Carol Duncan (1995:24) describes the transformation of the Louvre museum from a princely gallery to a public museum in 1793 as lending itself to be a “public space accessible to everyone” thus becoming a demonstration of “the state’s commitment to the principle of equality.” After all, the narrative that the public museum wants to tell, and the discourse it proliferates is tied to the kind of state in which it operates. Furthermore, by ordering the objects in the museum according to art historical categories, the Louvre was also signaling the artistic, intellectual, and cultural progress of the culture. This, Duncan (1995:26) points out, was

⁷ Interestingly, Souhmya Venkatesan (2009a), also defines the world of craft, especially in India, as a heterotopia, in which privileged elites construct an utopian vision of the cultural heritage and diversity of India, represented through carefully curated works of art whose makers are accorded a moderated visibility. This fractal repetition of purpose and practice between museums and the Indian craft industry will be further explored in the later section.

also to “promote the growth of state power and national identity.”

Postcolonial nations who inherit museums constructed by their colonizers have to deal with another kind of discourse, one that was invested in framing the colonized country in ways that would make it easier to govern. However, in many postcolonial states, the independent government has often used the same apparatuses of colonialism to continue governing its subjects (Viswanath 2016). Illustrating this trend is the case of several African museums, described by Agbenyega Adedze (1995), where colonial collections, often underrepresentative of the diverse communities in a nation, were not corrected or improved upon by African curators who took over after independence. Adedze (1995:60) admits that there could be several reasons for this, including “profound lack of interest and concern or by the economic difficulties facing most African countries” or “an uncritical adoption of colonial museum practice or from the absence of ongoing fieldwork.” Adedze, however, seems more inclined to believe that it is the continuation of colonial practices that could be to blame, quoting a former museum director who said, “The colonial museum is a piece of history and must be preserved.” This is very much a feature of Indian museums too.

James Clifford (1997) has described museums as “contact zones” in which asymmetrical power relations dictate interactions between historically or geographically separated subjects. However, Clifford recognized that the museum had potential, because it could be the space where tense contacts could begin, relations could be negotiated, and discourse could be established between parties that have different value systems. The inclusion of indigenous people in American anthropological and art museums is a critical

component of this decolonization process, according to Clifford. There is a tendency among countries that consider themselves to be postcolonial to ignore the concept of decolonization, which is considered a settler colonialist category. That postcolonial countries could also contain historically disenfranchised populations who need to be included in the discourse of the nation is a point often elided by the post-independence governments. This is also the reason why museums inherited from colonizers in postcolonial nations have not adopted decolonizing strategies such as forming connections with source communities or bringing non-traditional museum-goers into the fold. These participants are crucial for interrogating established narratives in the museum and deconstructing histories. However, governmental museums in India seldom include source communities into their spaces, partly because there have rarely been prior instances of such practices, and partly because as state apparatuses for disseminating nationalistic narratives on art and culture, they do not want any disruption of the discourse within them.

Museums in post-independence nation states, in any case, have become the apparatus of state projects involving the construction of the national identity. Museums, consequently, became essential for disseminating narratives on nationalism, cultural heritage, and selfhood, and establishing the acceptable discourse on these themes. The next section examines the specific case of museums in India and the nationalist discourse they espouse.

The Indian Museum & the Economy of Disciplinary Discourse

Most museums in India, with rare exceptions, fall within the control and

management of the Central or State governments. Originally begun as colonial institutions to assist the British Raj in its political and economic activities, the independence of India in 1947 saw these governmental museums transform into ideological state apparatuses disseminating nationalistic narratives (Althusser 1971; Guha-Thakurta 1997; Singh 2002). Thus, the Indian Museum in Kolkatta opened in 1814 with the intention to "promote deep and wide knowledge of country's history, culture, religions, geography and natural resources among the new rulers of the land with a view to equipping them properly for their new role" (Banerjee 1990:17). Even the organization and structure of these museums supported the surveillance and control of Indian subjects for the British regime (Foucault 1995). However, it is important to remember that colonial power came not just from political control, but also economic. As described earlier, the British view of Indian art had evolved from an Anglican disapproval of idolatry during the 18th century to a capitalist and classist promotion of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the mid 19th century (Sundar 1996:114–121). Pushpa Sundar (1996:131) claims that with the increasing entrepreneurial interest in Indian craft, the British government decided that these museums could also play a role in the "encouragement of good design and workmanship, prevention of degradation, and extension of the market abroad". Museums, then were to provide a standard of reference for the contemporary craft industry to make high-quality, traditional products and replicas of antiques that could be sold as "Indian" craft objects.

Predictably, these efforts of the British Raj to install benevolent museums, exhibitions, and art educational policies were critiqued by Indian nationalists for not only exploiting the labor of Indian artisans to fill the coffers of the regime, but also causing the

deterioration in the quality of labor and indigenous creativity of artisans because of the fast and furious demand for “traditional” Indian craft (Sundar 1996:135). Supported by British aficionados of Indian art, there was a "demand for the preservation of a 'traditional India', a romanticized ideal of a pre-industrial, non- materialistic society, which it was believed, had been lost by the British rule itself" (Sundar 1996:136). As Abigail McGowan’s (2009) study of the reappropriation and development of craft by the Indian nationalist parties protesting the British regime shows, both the cultural and economic value of craft had to be indigenized to function as a symbol of the idealized independent nation that stood in contrast to the enslaved colonial India. This ideological core of a traditional India and the sentiment of nostalgia can be found in the still continuing governmental museums in the post-independence India, although their association with the craft industry has been slowly obfuscated and severed.

The independent Government of India maintained the bureaucracy and organization of the colonial museums but their objective now was educational, targeting the public, specifically the "illiterate masses" and children (Banerjee 1990:8). The nationalist function of the governmental museums to propagate a particular vision of the country and its past cannot be understated. In his 1951 address during the centenary celebration of the Government Museum in Madras (now Chennai) in Tamilnadu, the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, declared his desire that children should be the chief target of the museum since theirs are the minds that are formative and capable of learning (Bannerjee 1990:120). The website of the National Museum of India in New Delhi lists its mottos, the

fourth of which is "To serve as epitome of national identity"⁸. In a letter written in honor of the above-mentioned 1951 centenary celebration of the Madras Museum, K. M. Panikkar, the Indian Ambassador to China, described the institution as "a monument to the continuity of civilization in South India" and "a shrine which gives inspiration to continued cultural activity" (Madras Government Museum 1999). Kavita Singh (2002:177–8), in her study of the National Museum in Delhi describes how the museum uses its space and objects to construct India's nationhood through the display of art history, the demonstration of the antiquity of the history, and the consequent thesis that India is a great country. Interestingly, Singh (2002:194) concludes that while the contents of the museum and their curation do not explicitly articulate nationalism per se, "[i]t is not what the museum does, but the fact that it exists that makes [it] national."

Thus, although conceived as an institution that was supposed to assist in the development of art and craft in the subcontinent, the post-independence Indian museum has focused its efforts solely on the construction and display of India's cultural patrimony. Unfortunately, the bureaucratic structure of the governmental museum, its subordination to the executive branch of the government, and its alienation from living artisan communities and contemporary art practices have resulted in an infrastructure of stagnation. Whenever an Indian museum does try to innovate its methods and include alternative political perspectives into its fold, it has been met with strong resistance from the Indian government, as seen in the case of the National Museum and its erstwhile curator, Venu Vasudevan.

⁸ <http://www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/about-vision-mission.asp?lk=ab1a>

Indian museums are spaces of stagnant objects and circulating discourse. The discourse, however, is strictly controlled and narrowly focused on a nationalistic art history. When museums become the arbiters of nationalistic discourse, they become prey to the particular motivations of the political party in power. In such circumstances, when a museum professional does not submit to the demands of the State, their position becomes precarious. This was clearly illustrated by a recent series of events at the National Museum, New Delhi. That Indian museums are largely stagnant has been a point of commiseration amongst many South Asian scholars and museum professionals for a long time. Recognizing the many failure, of infrastructure and beyond, the Ministry of Culture in India released a 14 point museum reform document in 2009, which was supposed to pave the way for the rejuvenation of the 10 museums under its purview (National Museum, New Delhi; Indian Museum, Kolkata; Allahabad Museum, Allahabad; National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru; Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata; Archaeological Survey of India, Goa & Nagarjunakonda; and the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad). However, newspaper articles soon began to call out the lack of progress in these museums, especially when a UNESCO-funded report described the conditions of several of these museums as sub-standard (Gahilote 2010; M. Srinivasan 2015). Still, these articles noted that the only way from rock-bottom was up, and were especially heartened by the recent recruitment of Mr. Venu Vasudevan, an enthusiastic Indian Administrative Services Officer, as the curator of the National Museum in Delhi. However, things did not go as planned.

In the 2014 general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party won the majority seats and

Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of the country. The BJP and Modi ran their election campaigns on promises of neoliberal progress alongside a return to an India from the past, constructed from Hindutva nostalgia (Gopalakrishnan 2006; Kaur 2015). Art objects, especially those with a religious history, have become one of the paraphernalia of the Hindutva combination of capitalism and culture. Thus, museums have been one of the apparatuses in the drive to disseminate particular kinds of discourses onto the public.

On March 13, 2015, *OPEN Magazine* published an article titled “Culture Shock” about the titular unexpected rehabilitation of the National Museum in Delhi attributed to the tireless efforts of Venu Vasudevan, the Indian Administrative Services Officer from Kerala, who had been appointed as the Director General in 2013. With a background in theatre and arts, Vasudevan focused his efforts on creating an optimal visitor experience, reinvigorating the infrastructure, crystallizing curator responsibilities, increasing the number of exhibits organized every year, and opening up the museum to international collaborations, something which the museum had been reluctant to do in the past. The laudatory article describes how little like a senior bureaucrat Vasudevan is: “Comfortably dressed in smart casuals,” the author Sneha Bhura (2015) writes, “the 50-year-old bespectacled man, a 1990-batch IAS officer of the Kerala cadre, is articulate, watchful, patient and—most importantly—receptive. While his predecessors were primarily concerned with keeping things the way they were, Vasudevan has approached the management of the National Museum like a passion project, drawing on his rich pool of relevant experience.” Bhura reiterates, “Venu Vasudevan does not betray any of the self-satisfied nonchalance usually associated with senior bureaucrats.” The desire to set

apart Vasudevan makes sense when one considers the stereotypical impression the Indian citizen has of government bureaucrats (explained later in this Chapter).

The turnaround of the National Museum was not merely a pleasant surprise; it was perceived as the necessary clarion call for sea changes in the governmental policies and operations of museums all over the country. It was also very much situated on the individual efforts of its curator. This narrative was facilitated by the then recent transformation of the erstwhile Prince of Wales Museum of Western India in Mumbai, rechristened Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) in 1998, which owing to its Director Sabayasachi Mukherjee's modernization drive, had racked up its visitor counts and organized a series of well received and respected exhibits in collaboration with international museums. There too, the motivated personality of Mukherjee received much of the praise.

A month after the *OPEN Magazine* article was published, Venu Vasudevan was transferred from the National Museum to another post in the Sports department. Art historian, academic and curator, Naman Ahuja (2015), who had collaborated with Vasudevan to curate the highly successful *The Body in Indian Art and Thought* exhibit in 2014 at the National Museum, generously wondered if this was a matter of unwitting routine in which government officials get transferred willy-nilly without any attention paid to works in progress. In the article, "Who appoints the keeper of memories?" published in *The Hindu* newspaper, Ahuja laments the casual disregard for "the nation's apex cultural institution" and describes the particular difficulties of finding a qualified person to lead it. Criticizing the previously "moribund staff", Ahuja characterizes Vasudevan's reign to have

signaled the takeover by younger curators and the beginnings of interesting debates on the “conservation of heritage” and the “meaning and diversity of cultural heritage”. Both of these are particularly fraught terms in contemporary India, as we shall see soon. Ahuja concludes his critique by pointing out the untenable position of museums in India at present. He writes, “In a country where perceived ideas of “tradition” outweigh the “facts” of history, museums are often the only places which can maintain evidence of times past. This onerous responsibility requires a considered and substantial knowledge of the interface of aesthetics and history with politics and media. With such a significant role to play, why are archaeology and the museums not looked upon as serious enough portfolios?” This contradictory set of sentences lays bare one of the potentially mistaken assumptions on which Ahuja builds his final question. Who are the people or institutions who prioritize “perceived ideas of ‘tradition’” over “facts”? Isn’t it conceivable that some of these include governmental officials and departments too? Allowing for that possibility, how could the government not seriously consider an institution like the museum, that can challenge established chauvinistic constructions of history and reach the lay public, especially children?

In a decidedly more politically charged article, Girish Shahane also criticizes the transfer of Vasudevan, but hints at a more petty and nefarious reason for it. Shahane (2015) alleges that it was Vasudevan’s refusal to lend or donate certain Buddhist relics for a Buddha Purnima ceremony associated with the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, that resulted in the transfer. Citing logistical reasons for Vasudevan’s refusal, Shahane points out that museum policies would disallow such lending when the artifacts are old and

fragile and need the maintenance of very specific climatic and environmental conditions.

“For doing his job, and denying Modi a photo op in the process, Vasudevan’s been shown the door,” he concludes. Laying the blame at the feet of Narendra Modi, he opines, “While Narendra Modi talks a lot about good governance, his record shows that he, like all who foster personality cults, values complete compliance above everything else.” With his characterization as an independent thinker and a fast worker, Venu Vasudevan was not like the other government employees. Echoing Ahuja’s experience, Shahane was also struck by Vasudevan’s efficiency and work ethic, and writes “In a land where administrators appear to measure their self-worth by the amount of time they can keep people waiting, it was unthinkable for a senior bureaucrat to respond promptly to a letter like the one I’d sent, and to do so personally rather than through an assistant.” Thus, Vasudevan refusing to lend a museum artifact ran counter to what PM Modi desires in government employees, resulting in his dismissal. However, considering the weight accorded to ritual and religious demonstrations, it is important to consider that it was for a religious ceremony that the artifact was requested. Denial of the artifact was not merely a defiance of a powerful person; it was also a refusal to allow a museum artifact to perform in a religious capacity. As Ahuja pointed out, in a country where tradition is more valid than “fact”, a religious relic cannot be a mere museum artifact. Thus, Vasudevan was establishing the categorical boundaries of the National Museum and its artifacts, and insisting on certain (secular) museum policies taking precedence over governmental authority. This combination of processes, wherein the museum rejected the expected behavior of submitting to the discourses that the government wanted established, and also denied the significance of

religion over the more mundane (and secular) museum policy, caused the dismissal of Vasudevan. The museum, which was supposed to be the apparatus of the state, subordinated the demands of the State to its own policies, which are decidedly scientific and utilitarian. As Kavita Singh had pointed out, the very existence of the National Museum in New Delhi makes it a nationalistic project. Thus, the National Museum not following the directives of the elected leader of the state was perceived as an act of rebellion, and was immediately dealt with. The result of these affairs was the return to stagnation, but also the reification of the purpose of the museum: to disseminate nationalistic discourse on heritage, as defined by the Government of India.

Another point of note is how the nature of the museum itself contributes to its economy, which is of discourse and not objects. The museum is filled with objects of immeasurable value, but they will never leave the museum (for the most part). Lending and borrowing artifacts can be such logistical nightmares that many museums have policies in place to restrict such transfers. While artifacts might enter the Indian museum, they rarely leave it. This is because the museum enshrines these objects as of the past, symbolically supporting a utopian vision of history.

"Semiophores", Pomian (1991:10) says, are objects that have no utility value but are important because of what they mean, which are invisible elsewhere. A museum object indexes other places and times (which are invisible) and this infuses it with meaning, giving it value. As meaning increases, the utility of an object "dwindles to mere potentiality" (Pomian 1991:30). Where the object is situated plays a significant role in its meaning, though. Daniel Miller (2007:169) argues that "life is conducted by orienting

oneself to spaces, objects and other" and therefore, the meaning of objects depends on what they are brought into contact with. He explains that "If the meaning of objects derives from the orders into which they are incorporated, then the same artefact may change its implications simply by being introduced into some new order" (Miller 2007:170). The museum object in the Indian museum does not circulate and its value is tied to its purpose of supporting the discourse established by the museum. Its relationship might be with unseen things, if the accompanying text in the museum indexes them. Otherwise, its relationship is with the other objects in the gallery and the museum itself. Thus, the museum object in this case is not a commodity anymore, even if it once was.

It is an interesting parallel that in South Asian cultures (and in Melanesian ones), an object in use contains value derived from the quality of its users and the nature of the transactions involving the object. McKim Marriott (1979:109) has used the concept of "substance codes" to explicate the rules of transaction between individuals from different classes in South Asia. Substance-codes being composed of both material and quality, exist in people, things, and as Diane Mines has argued, even in time (1997:177). Marriott found in his study of Hindu social practices, that transactions between people were important to maintain relationships, and the rules for such transactions were dictated around maintaining the values of substance-codes. A similar phenomenon has been found in Tamil culture by Valentine Daniel. The Tamil way of acquiring knowledge about the self and world can be categorized into two methods: one, synthetic knowledge, where the object is consumed within the self in order to know; and two, analytical knowledge, where the object is separated from the self, and is known through difference (Daniel 1987:234). In

his ethnography in a Tamil village, Daniel observed that synthetic methods of acquiring knowledge are much preferred to analytical ways, because substances are considered as valuable by Tamils, not to mention, everyone is constantly interacting with substances anyway. This is reiterated in A. K. Ramanujan's (1990:45) essay, "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?" in which he distinguishes the way Indians relate to the outside world from how people in the West do it. Objects in the outside world are not separate from a person's inside world, Ramanujan argues, confirming Daniel's observation. Thus, what happens when the object stops being used? What happens when the object goes into a museum? The removal of the object from its associated peoples and the stoppage of its circulation as a transactional object severs it from those entities that constitute it with substance-codes, or in this case, cultural value. Thus, even in the world of symbolic transactions, a museum object stops being a commodity.

With these particular histories and theories in mind, I turn to the case of the Government Museum in Chennai. Although this museum houses the largest collection of South Indian bronzes in the world, it functions independently from the governmental handicrafts departments, which actively promote the production and marketing of contemporary bronzes. In the next section, I will explore how the Government Museum in Chennai forecloses these bronzes to living sculptors in Swamimalai.

The Government Museum, Chennai

The Government Museum in Chennai is one of the oldest museums in India, started by the British in 1851. With 11 galleries dedicated to various categories (Art,

Anthropology, Archaeology, Children's, and so on), housed in six buildings over a 16 acre property in Egmore, the Museum advertises itself as “multipurpose” and holds millions of artifacts, most of which are, understandably, not on display (Kannan 2004). Currently under the control of the Tamilnadu State Government, it is administrated as its own independent Department, namely the Department of Museums, under the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, and is headed by a Principal Commissioner, also known as the Commissioner of Museums. The enormous complex in which the museum resides lends itself to a lot of casual visitors, and the rich greenery encourages redolent walks. However, the presence of police officials everywhere and their surveillance is a strong reminder of the museum’s role as a state apparatus. This was further reiterated on a pleasant autumn day when I accompanied a male friend visiting India from Colombia to the museum. As my mother and a couple of Swamimalai sculptors were also with us, we were a diverse group of visitors. The Bronze Gallery has a strict no-camera policy, and since my friend did not want to leave his camera at the entrance with the guards, he decided not to go in, and I decided to stay back to give him company. My mother and the sculptors ventured into the Bronze Gallery and took around an hour to look over the objects. Passing time, my friend and I sat on one of the benches installed near the Bronze Gallery overlooking the sculpture garden with statuesque trees providing a green canopy. Ten minutes into our conversation, we were interrupted by one of the police officers patrolling the museum. “You cannot talk here,” he said, shoos us away. My friend was discombobulated; I was weary. “Why can we talk not here?”, I asked the officer. “What are these benches for if not for sitting?”. “No, no,” the officer reiterated, “you cannot loiter in this area; it is the rule.”

Having interned at the museum for the past month, and having visited it repeatedly for the past year, I had never heard of such rule and said so. The officer refused to elaborate and said, pointing to the benches that were across from the guards at the Bronze Gallery entrance, “You need to sit over there if you are waiting, not here.” As subjects of the state, we acquiesced.

Why were we interrupted, and made to move? Several explanations came to me and in all of them the surveilling feature of the state was central. Perhaps there was a rule I did not know of where that section (which had visitor benches) was verboten for visitors. An arbitrary at the least and unexplained at the most rule in a museum, which is a place meant for leisure and social interaction. Another explanation was that the police consider maintenance of order more important than anything else, and individuals loitering were perceived as threatening. Yet another explanation was on account of it being an Indian woman and a non-Indian man engaging in a private conversation, which was seen by the State as threatening in a different way. The state of Tamilnadu has had many instances where the government has intervened in the issues or statements of private citizens when it seemed like there was a moral issue at play, and the police have usually been the executors of such unofficial policies. Thus, perhaps this instance of a man and a woman conversing seemed dangerous to the police officer, who thought a supervisory eye was necessary. In all of these cases, it is striking that the state considers the museum to be an area within its jurisdiction, and that it is vigilant about enforcing its power.

That the Chennai Government Museum is a governmental institution burdened with the qualities of Indian bureaucracy, and that it is populated with government employees is

something to remember. For instance, since the Bronze Gallery was renovated in 2001, not much has been changed with regard to the arrangements and display. Simple maintenance has been conducted to conserve bronzes, but the curatorial aspects have been the same.

Why is this so? Firstly, according to the Information Handbook of the Museums Department, any proposal towards making a change or initiating a project at the museum has to be initiated by the Principal Secretary and Commissioner of Museums (PC) and the final approval comes from the Government of Tamilnadu. While routine activities such as exhibitions, and lectures could be approved by the PC themselves, most proposals need to be ratified by an elected official. The PC could consult with Curators and ask for their opinions and the Curators could possibly bring up an idea and request the PC to initiate a proposal, but ultimately, any significant change, especially in regard to updating curation of a gallery rests with the PC. To highlight the thankless nature of this job, I have often been told this joke by staff at various governmental positions: The position of the PC is one that requires an officer with an I.A.S. (Indian Administrative Service) qualification, which can only be obtained after passing the Civil Service Exam and attending a special I.A.S. school. For those seeking employment in governmental organizations, the I.A.S. degree is a coveted qualification since it automatically sets one up to a higher ranking position and has a better pay scale. Passing the exam is no small feat though, and candidate study for a year or two to qualify. The exam-takers who pass are ranked, with the highest ranks being offered the Indian Foreign Service, the next set of rankers offered the Administrative Service, and so on. I.A.S. officers are nominated by elected officials and answer to politicians, and it is a transferrable job. So it is not uncommon for I.A.S. officers

to seek to be in the good graces of their superiors. The oft-repeated joke I was told was that the PC position for the museum is considered to be a "punishment" posting. Any I.A.S. officer who has angered an elected politician can expect to be transferred to this job. Thus, the assumption is that every PC who has managed the museum in recent times has obtained that position as a punishment for past deeds, and one can infer the nature of initiative and interest such a person could have for the museum sector then. At a larger scale, if managing a museum is considered to be a punishment, that in itself is a revelation for why the Chennai Government Museum rarely gets any improvements projects initiated.

The second point to remember is how this bureaucracy impacts people who work for the government. One of the things that made Venu Vasudevan, the erstwhile Director of the National Museum unique was that he did not behave like a typical government bureaucrat. The following incident at the Chennai Museum illustrates further the stagnation at such institutions caused by the tendency of government employees to be passive. When I was interning at the Government Museum in Chennai in 2014, I was being taught by several of the curators from the museum, as well as emeriti staff. Considering my acquaintance with one of the curators had been for over a year at this point, I asked them a favor. I wanted to acquire a library membership from the Theosophical Society of Chennai, which required a notarized certificate from a government official. Since this curator was a government official, I asked them if they would notarize my library application. The curator became frazzled. "I only got this stamp two weeks ago," they said. "If I use it immediately, what will they say?" they questioned, implying that it would be considered an overreach of their authority, even though it was exactly within their authority, and the

stamp had been given for the very purpose of notarizing various documents. What the curator was afraid of, was that they were being asked to leave a physical impression of their self in a document that did not have to do with their work, and will be leaving the premises of the museum. As Matthew Hull (2003) has explored in the governmental institutions of another South Asian country, Pakistan, a signature from a government official can have a lasting effect and be a material presence. Thus, care is always taken to ensure that the appropriate signatures in the appropriate documents are obtained. Government officials fear such reprisals and consequently, curators and staff of government museums in India adopt the practices of caution and passivity. This seeps into the operational processes of the museum too.

One of the conservators at the Chennai museum was lamenting the state of the conservation lab and practices to me, even though they receive a 6,000,000 INR allowance every year, assigning blame on the stifling audit system and the inaction of the curator. "The Curator has to accept the money, see, and make use of it", he explained. "But they will not buy anything that costs more than 50,000 rupees because any large expenditure will require an audit and that is a headache. We need lots of equipment for this lab, and even though we have the money sanctioned, and it has been sanctioned for those very tools that we need, the Curator is too scared to make the actual purchase." But why is the Curator scared, I asked. If the expenses are approved, and a receipt indicating the purchase can be obtained easily, what is the problem? He shook his head and shrugged, "They do not want to take a risk. An audit is a risk. If the auditor is unsatisfied with something, that is it! You're done for. So no one wants to take a risk and *do something*." An audit involves

a lot of paperwork, and credible answers from the supervisory official. No official wanted to deal with this bureaucratic headache, and they were especially concerned about what would happen if there were some slight irregularities in the account. There were many objects that need upkeep, the conservator, told me, and they could not keep up with it because they were not only understaffed, but they also do not have the supplies and equipment. Passivity underscores the operations of the Chennai museum and thus, discourses of the past continue to circulate without any interruption.

The Bronze Gallery, which was constructed in 1963 as a separate building is one of the featured star performers attracting many tourists and is under the Archaeology wing. Its significance to the museum is further illustrated in the millions of rupees invested in its renovation in 2001 as part of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the museum ⁹. Considering the reluctance of the museum officials to undertake big projects or make changes as illustrated in the previous anecdote, it is a testament to how valuable the bronzes are considered that such an infrastructural project was undertaken. A two-storied plain structure, the Bronze Gallery stands in contrast to most of the other buildings which hail from the time of the colonial origin of the institution. Possessing climate controlled glass cases that maintain optimum temperature for the preservation of the bronze icons, the gallery houses dozens of bronzes in three floors separated by religious themes. As Jeyaraj (2005:81), an ex-Curator of the Chennai Museum explains, "The museum is not a place for the architect to show off his capabilities." Thus, the gallery itself is sparse in design except

⁹ <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2014/stories/20030718000106600.htm>

for informational panels. The walls are a neutral shade of cream, the display cases of wood and glass.

There are two introductory panels at the entrance corridor of the Bronze Gallery: one explains the lost wax process through which bronzes are made as solid or hollow sculptures, and has images illustrating each step; the other describes the use of the lost wax process by the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) to manufacture parts for aerospace technology. Further in, within the gallery space itself, the history of the Chola Empire and the use of bronzes as processional deities is described. Thus, while these bronzes are contextualized in the past and the future, their material connection to a community of sculptors who continue to make them in the present (in Swamimalai) is strikingly ignored. Bronzes in the museum do not have a context beyond their history and historical purpose. This pattern is repeated throughout the gallery, where passages from the famous Indologist, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and art historian C. Sivaramamurti further situate these objects as embedded in the past.

The contextualization of the bronzes as historical also frames them as religious objects. The bronzes in the ground floor are an assortment of icons from all sects and time periods. The first floor gallery highlights Shaivism (worship of Shiva) in South India and showcases various Nataraja (Dancing Shiva) bronzes on one side, and Buddhas on the other side. The labels next to each bronze list the name of the deity, the century the bronze can be attributed to, and the place where it was found. These bronzes have ended up in the museum because they could not be matched to their source temple, which is why only their place of discovery is mentioned in the labels. But the effect this has is to once again erase

these bronzes' potential as objects in the present. The second floor gallery contains Vaishnavite (worship of Vishnu) icons of Vishnu (one of the three main gods in mainstream Hinduism; Krishna and Rama are avatars of Vishnu), his consorts and his incarnations. It also has an architectural feature resembling a temple shrine with a Vishnu and Lakshmi (most commonly depicted consort of Vishnu) bronze. The label reads, "Bronze in Religious Context," and provides the visitor with the "original context" for all the bronzes in the gallery. Clearly an attempt has been made to highlight the relationship between these displayed bronzes, their counterparts in temples, and their own past as religious objects. However, the only contemporary link made by the museum for the visitor that is not about religion is in the introductory panel and is about scientific innovation – literally, rocket science. These bronzes have been effectively disconnected from the present, from their contemporary makers, and from their contemporary iconic counterparts that are sold as handicrafts.

The Chennai Government Museum's disavowal of contemporary sculptors and bronzecasters is partly on account of the geological and archaeological roots of the museum. Antique bronzes are firmly in the Archaeology department, which is separate from the Anthropology department that is mostly concerned with dioramas of tribal populations from South Asia. In the *Catalogue of South Indian Bronzes*, F. H. Gravely (2002[1932]:3), the Superintendent of the Chennai Government Museum in the 1920s comments on how difficult it is to find information about the iconography, history, and process of these archaeological bronzes, since the only information available is from Indological scholars who have analyzed inscriptional evidence and the Sanskrit aesthetic

texts (*Shilpashastras*). “The existence of South Indian portrait statues in metal first became known in 1915,” writes Gravely (2002[1932]:3), “when several were figured in Gangoly’s ‘South Indian Bronzes’ and H. Krishna Sastri described and figured some from a temple in Tirupati.” Gravely does not appear to consider the still living artisans in Swamimalai as a credible source to understand the medieval bronzes. For an archaeologist and an Indologist, acceptable sources of information would be the artifacts themselves and historical texts. When Gravely does talk about artists, he refers only to Western artists, either by birth or training. Gravely articulates a desire for artists to consider the artistry of these bronzes seriously, hoping that “the attention thus drawn to them will encourage qualified artists to treat others of the finest examples as Rodin has already treated two of the Natarajas,” referring to the French sculptor’s detailed study of the dancing Shiva bronzes (mentioned in the Introduction). Thus, a combination of disciplinary inclination and Western priorities erased the consideration of Indian sculptors from the Museum’s imagination right from the beginning. One could argue that high-powered English officials in the British Raj might not have known about the existence of the Swamimalai sculptors, if not for the memories of a 95-year-old Vishwakarma woman in Swamimalai, Rajamani Amma, whom I interviewed. She reminisced with me about playing as a child in her father’s bronzecasting workshop in Swamimalai while English men and women would come around to purchase bronzes. Swamimalai bronzes were being purchased as handicrafts even during the colonial regime, which fits the goals of the Arts and Crafts movement. While their erasure from the Chennai Government Museum was a case of disciplinary exclusion in the beginning, they continue to be obfuscated as a matter of policy. While interviewing Mr.

Balasubramaniam, the now retired Curator of the Bronze Gallery, I had asked if any sculptor from Swamimalai had ever been invited for a collaborative project, and was answered with an emphatic no. "This is an Archaeology department," emphasizes Mr. Balasubramaniam, "No sculptor has ever been or ever will be invited as there is no connection between what they do and what we have here. They are two entirely different things. This is Archaeology. They belong in Anthropology." Thus, the contemporary sculptors in Swamimalai who claim to be of the lineage of the medieval sculptors who made the museum bronzes are not considered relevant by the museum institution.

An instance of an ex-curator, Sakthivel, of one of the departments of the Chennai Government Museum relating an incident during his employment is also a striking illustration of the lackadaisical attitude of the Museum towards source communities. This happened many years ago, he said, and involved an antique painting, perhaps dating to the 18th century or so from a little village in Southern Tamilnadu. This painting belonged to a temple in the village and the temple was administered by a Board of Trustees consisting of six members from the village. While visiting the temple, Sakthivel came across the painting, which was beautiful but in disrepair and needed to be restored immediately. So Sakthivel approached the Board and since only five of the six members were in town, he secured permission from the five. He took the painting to Chennai and began working on it at the Museum, when several days later, he was visited by the sixth member. The sixth member was angry and insulted because he had not been consulted about the decision to give the painting to the Museum and so, he wanted the painting back. He refused to budge on the matter even though Sakthivel made several entreaties, and demanded the painting.

Sakthivel was in a quandary, but got an idea. He asked one of his assistants to go to the nearby shop and photocopy the painting on good quality paper. When the photocopy arrived, Sakthivel inserted it in the original frame and gave it back to the Board member from the village, and the man, satisfied with his victory, returned home with the photocopied painting. Sakthivel laughed uproariously and used this story as an illustration of how little the general public know about art objects, even if it is the religious ones that they see everyday and consider extremely valuable. But this story also illustrates the general disregard museum officials in India can have for source communities, and their disinterest in establishing relations base on mutual respect and trust with them. This lack of concern is born not only out of the belief that the museum has prior rights over historical objects, but also that living communities cannot be trusted with valuable objects. Another government officer told me the story of how he found a set of antique bamboo cups with an old man in a village. When he was a young boy, British officers had served him ice cream in the cup along with butter sandwiches, and the now old man thought of those times fondly. “I snatched it and came back immediately, did I not?” said the officer, gleefully. There is an implicit assumption amongst many of these officers that common people do not have the knowledge or understanding about art and culture, and this makes them ineligible to hold on to artistic and cultural artifacts, irrespective of their articulation of attachment or even the fact of their ownership.

The museum in these cases has actively worked to remove objects from their environment and the institution becomes a black hole, where things enter and never leave. These objects, which were operating in various cultural and economic environs stopped

being whatever they were to become museum objects – semiophores – filled with potential, but potential that is as buried as the medieval bronze. Even the unearthed bronzes that are under the control of the Archaeological Survey of India and the Government Museum in Chennai never see the light of day after they see it briefly while being excavated.

The process through which buried bronzes end up coming to the Government Museum is a bureaucratic process unclear to everyone, except presumably those directly involved in the transfer. The Treasure Trove Act of 1878 lays the criteria that decide which objects, found under what circumstances, qualify as historical objects that need to be repatriated towards the control of the Government of India. An object needs to be buried, valued at more than ten rupees, and be at least 100 years old to qualify as an object worthy of historical and cultural importance. The finder of the Treasure has the duty to report the finding in writing to a Collector¹⁰, presumably of the district where the treasure was found along with information on where and when it was found and under what circumstances. The finder might be asked to present the treasure by themselves to the Collector at a specified date and time. Following this, the Collector is duty-bound to investigate the circumstances of the treasure and whether it qualifies as such, and also if there is an owner to be found. In the case of bronze sculptures, it is at this juncture when temples can make claims on found bronzes. This is easy enough when the temple can establish that the bronze belongs to it, as in the case of the Brihadesvara temple hoard, which was found within the temple itself and which matched the descriptions of donated bronzes inscribed

¹⁰ An I.A.S. position.

on the 11th century temple walls. Temple claims become much more convoluted when such matches cannot be made through physical evidence. If the Collector declares that the treasure is ownerless, they have the right to declare the treasure as a property of the Government of India. The finder of the treasure and the owner of the property on which the treasure was found are eligible for a reward that is equal to its value plus one fifth more. This is to encourage individuals to report such findings and to abstain from the temptation to sell them in illegal markets or disassemble them (like melting bronzes) to get other kinds of value from them (metals).

In the case of bronze sculptures, once the Collector declares them to be ownerless, the Principal Commissioner (PC) of the closest Government Museum, which is usually the museum in Chennai since bronzes are almost always found in the Tamilnadu area, is asked if they would take ownership over the found bronzes. If the PC says yes, the bronzes are moved to the museum and join the Reserve collection. If the PC does not want the bronzes, the Collector makes the same offer to other governmental museums all over the country, and if they all refuse the bronzes, they can go on auction. Thus, all bronzes on display and in the Reserve Collection at the Chennai Government Museum are treasures that were unearthed by unsuspecting individuals and repatriated to the control of the Government through a bureaucratic process that relies on speed rather than accuracy.

Ram¹¹ was an older man who has served as a conservator at the Department of Conservation in the Madras museum for over two decades. He was the most experienced of the staff and had a casual manner of showing his expertise with all the objects that come

¹¹ Many names of respondents have been changed to protect their identity.

into his department for maintenance or restoration. The Conservation Department is supposed to service all the departments but was unfortunately only staffed by two employees when I was visiting the museum in 2013. When he was showing me around the Bronze Gallery, I asked Ram many questions about where the bronzes came from and Ram could not answer for many of them. "You should ask the Curator," he advised me, "They do not ever tell us where the bronze comes from when we get it fresh from the excavation." But what about the evidence, I ask. Should someone not collect a sample of the dirt and soil attached to the bronze? Would that not help with knowing more about it? "Of course it will," nods Ram, "but here is how it is; the Archaeology department is called only as a formality when the bronzes are found. The Collector is called since he has to do the paperwork and he makes the final decisions. The Collector wants to get the bronze to the museum as soon as possible. No one wants the bronze to get stranded somewhere because everyone is afraid that it would be stolen, or that someone will make an accusation that the Collector replaced the old bronze with a counterfeit one." Thus, the expediency with which bronzes are shuttled from one place to another erases a lot of their context. Even if certain individuals have information about the excavation, this data is not passed around and there are no rules established for how the information is supposed to flow or be recorded. Not even the Conservation staff are informed about the context of finding the bronze, and while the Curator might eventually be informed about it for the records, that makes the dissemination of such information the sole responsibility of the Curator who is also the only one with the capacity to do so. Even the Curator of the Archaeology wing once told me that he was against advertising information about the presence of any bronze in his

collection. “We do not want to show the bronzes,” he explained to me, “Not even to the general public.” Visibility is seen as a danger to the bronzes, and the added responsibility of protecting them from smuggling hands falls on the museum institution and the curators. Thus, keeping the bronzes on the down-low is understood as the best method of protection. That Swamimalai sculptors have sometimes been implicated in the bronze smuggling rings is another point against their favor, causing the museum to consider them with suspicion. This aspect of the governmental surveillance over the sculptors and its lack of trust in them is further explored in Chapters 2 and 4.

Thus, museum objects are not only separated from their source communities, they are held in the museum to speak a discourse strictly controlled by the museum’s nationalistic purpose. As Pomian said, the utility of the bronze as a functioning religious idol is a buried potentiality, which will never come to reality because of the nature of the museum. Although begun as an institution that was supposed to assist the craft industry during the British colonial period, the postcolonial Indian museum is very much an apparatus of nationalistic narratives. It is a conservative institution that suspends objects in glass cases and a constructed historical context. These objects are not available to be accessed by source communities, nor are they put into a contemporary context. Its economy is one of discourse because the one thing that the museum does circulate are ideological narratives about India’s cultural past. What is interesting are the ways in which these narratives about bronzes are adopted by the governmental handicrafts department, as well as the unstructured handicraft industry to create iconic links between medieval bronzes and their contemporary counterparts. Although the museum itself stands still, its

discourses travel outside of its boundaries and facilitates the capitalistic economy of the handicrafts industry.

Crafting Commodities

I was waiting at a bronze sculpture workshop in Swamimalai, Tamilnadu, to meet its master craftsman when I saw a couple of junior artisans working on three bronzes - a Shiva, Parvati and a Vishnu, each about four feet in height. The artisans were brushing them with a piece of cloth soaked in Ammonium chloride and Copper sulfate solution. After a few minutes, the artisans poured water over the sculptures. Satish Sthapati, who owns a workshop of his own and had accompanied me to make introductions to this workshop's master, tutored me on what would happen next. "It is like magic," he told me. "The bronzes will change color, first to purple, then to green, and then when they wash it again, they become a greenish-yellow." It happened exactly as he called it, a marvelous chemical reaction right in front of our eyes. Instead of looking like shiny, brand new bronze sculptures, the bronzes looked old and oxidized. Three newly made bronze sculptures had been transformed into antiques, as if they had been lost for hundreds of years, buried away, corroding in the soil. Only of course, they were neither old, nor hidden, and they existed because they had been commissioned for money. Customers of the handicraft industry often want a bronze that looks exactly like the ones that has been accidentally excavated. Bronze enthusiasts want a buried bronze and thus even new bronzes that are made for the handicraft market are made to look like they have been exposed to the salts of the soil causing the copper to oxidize and corrode. The romance of the unearthed bronze and the cultural history discourse of organizations such as the

Chennai Government Museum have helped make replica bronzes into a popular commodity.

While the museum might relegate antique bronzes only to the past, it is all the more striking when one observes who does call attention to existing artisans: politicians and Poompuhar, the handicraft corporation under the Tamilnadu government. In the *Centenary Souvenir*, published in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Chennai Government Museum which took place in 1951, diplomats, administrators, the then Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, and even the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, comment on the role the museum can play in promoting the status and education of Indian artisans. A museum should not just display “oddities of a distant unconnected past,” Prime Minister Nehru said in his speech at the Centenary celebration, but enable connections between the past and the present (Madras Government Museum 1999:xiv). “It is not the normal antiquarian’s view of things,” he acknowledged, when making the case for museums to connect with the everyday lives of people (Madras Government Museum 1999[1951]:ix). The Chief Minister, P.S. Kumaraswamy Raja, addressed the crowds, praising the quality of performing arts in the state but admitting that fine arts had fallen far behind. Even in everyday life, common people were not valuing aesthetics, cleanliness, and orderliness, he claimed, and said “It is in this context, that museums, art galleries, and art curricula in educational institutions, become especially significant.” Raja expressed hope also for the artisans, because although “the descendants of the architects and sculptors, who built the great temples [...], are languishing in our villages,” he thought that institutions such as the museum could play a role in inspiring and promoting their resurgence (Madras

Government Museum 1999:v). It is not surprising that political perspectives see museums going hand in hand with artisan development, because from its nascent period, the Indian independence movement of India had linked economic self-sufficiency with supporting local artisans and craftspeople. Mahatma Gandhi's *swadeshi* movement, was such an attempt to erase the economic dependence of the colonized subjects on British products and means of production, by financially supporting indigenously produced commodities, especially from villages. These artisan communities stood as cultural and economic symbols to be supported during the independence struggle and that continued through the post-independence developmental plans.

The only times that the Chennai Government Museum had hosted sculptors as part of any event had been when political actors had been involved. The centenary mentioned above was one such event when sculptors from Swamimalai had been invited to demonstrate the lost wax method of casting. Another event was during the 1992 exhibition on South Indian bronzes, which was done in collaboration with the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts. Then too, Swamimalai sculptors performed a demonstration of the same lost wax method. Srikanda Sthapati, a sculptor in Swamimalai, remembers the occasion fondly, as he had to help his father plan for the show. "They never called us after that," he told me wistfully, "just that one time." The bifurcation I mentioned earlier is striking in this case. It is noteworthy that both these events required only a demonstration of technique, and did not facilitate any interaction between the sculptors and the antique bronzes. It is also striking that it is only the political and economic institutions

such as the handicraft organizations that recognize the contemporary sculptors as the successors of medieval artisans.

Handicrafts are a valuable component of the Indian economy although the unorganized state of the handicraft industry has discouraged comprehensive studies of its constitution and impact. A Madras School of Economics study found that governmental estimates of individuals engaged in handicrafts range from 9.2 to 31 million (Viswanathan 2013:48). Confusingly, the Craft Council of India, a non-profit organization that works with governmental institutions and collaborated in that study, argues in another publication that this number should be closer to 200 million (Craft Council of India 2011:17). The Central Government of India has estimated that handicraft export for the year ending 2015 was 4.3 billion USD (Development Commissioner [Handicrafts] 2016).¹² Understandably then, the government is invested in ensuring their marketability. The Tamilnadu Handicrafts Development Corporation, or Poompuhar, has been the primary governmental institution in Tamilnadu fostering the training of artisans and the production and marketing of handicrafts. Poompuhar also occupies a strange position as it is both a corporation and a governmental organization. Thus, it is expected to earn a profit, but is headed by a civil servant who reports to an elected political official, and can be transferred periodically. The previous Chief Managing Director had been unexpectedly transferred out of the job in 2013 and the new Director, Dr. Santosh Babu, although trained in business and marketing, had no familiarity with the handicraft market. Its employees are considered government workers and receive the associated benefits and job security. Yet, it is still expected to turn

¹² The export growth in handicrafts for the year 2016-2017 is anticipated to be minimal because of the impact of demonetization policies and General Sales Tax policies of the BJP-led Central government.

a profit, which it has done so negligibly. The Annual report from Poompuhar accounts for a profit of 8 million rupees (The Tamilnadu Handicrafts Development Corporation Limited 2014:11), which, considering the scale and reach of the organization, is shockingly trifling.

A perusal of any current marketing literature or advertisements from Poompuhar about the Swamimalai bronzes will show ample references to the history and the present. Along with claiming that “[...] the bronzes of Tamilnadu testify to the grandeur of an art form that reaches the peak of perfection a thousand years ago” (Poompuhar 1999), Poompuhar also promotes contemporary sculptors as “[...] the master craftsmen [who] follow the age old process and canons of iconometry and iconography as enshrined in the Shilpa Shastras and Aagamas”. This art, Poompuhar claims, has “continued uninterrupted till today [...]” (Crafts of Tamilnadu 2000:12). On its website, Poompuhar tells its customers on the pages featuring bronzes, “Most of these pieces are replicas of the bronzes of Chola, Hoysala and Pallava periods.” In all of these proclamations, Poompuhar relies on the discourse of nostalgia already disseminated by the governmental museums. The reference to the history of the art, and the claim that antique bronzes were the “peak of perfection” reiterate the claims made by the museum about an ideal Indian past. The museum bronzes are a crucial foundation for the craft organization’s marketing even though they are relegated to remain within the museum space. While the material objects might not circulate out of the museum, the discourse of nostalgia does, and the latter supports the capitalist intentions behind craft promotion. Poompuhar’s claim of an “uninterrupted” arts practice makes an explicit link between the medieval bronzes and the living sculptors. It further elaborates on this link by citing the historical styles that

sculptors can replicate. One of the museum curators I interviewed (quoted in the next chapter in the section on antiquities smuggling) had made a similar claim about the ability of living sculptors to replicate antique bronzes, but in a conspicuously different context. The curator had used this as his rationale for why the museum can never create links with sculptors: their ability makes them a threat, because they could create replica bronzes that might be used in the smuggling operations. Contrastingly, the use of this claim by Poompuhar situates the sculptors' ability to make replicas in the context of inheritance and legitimacy. This, I believe, is closely tied to the economy that Poompuhar operates under, a capitalist economy of commodities.

The commingling of these economies is even more apparent at the newest venture of Poompuhar, a museum. The Poompuhar Sales Showroom in Chennai is on one of the busiest roads in the city, Anna Salai. The cacophony of honking horns, yelling taxi drivers, gossiping college students, chiding parents and children, require a calm mind and a nonchalant ear. Housing handicrafts from all parts of Tamilnadu, the red building has two stories with a newly built annex. Filled to overflowing capacity with craft objects of all kinds, one feels it is only a matter time before a hand or a leg would knock a fragile thing to the floor. Craft objects sold at Poompuhar include Thanjavur brass plates and paintings, shell art, brass sculptures, silver inlaid boxes, cane baskets, wood and stone carvings and so on, but it is clear that Swamimalai bronzes hold the pride of place. Not content with one large room dedicated solely towards Swamimalai bronzes, they have proliferated to pepper the rest of the areas, including the uncovered parkings and loading area adjacent to the building. The Bronze room is stacked with bronzes, matte and shiny, ranging from tiny six

inch pieces to those over four feet tall, all sporting prominent price tags. Even larger bronzes rest outside, some sitting inside half-packed crates. Still others exist unseen within fully packed crates ready to be shipped to national and international addresses. The first floor of the showroom is glaringly religious – it contains bronzes, and idols made of other materials, lamps, brass relief sculptures of Hindu gods, as well as decorative woodwork. At the entrance rests a bronze Ganesha (the elephant headed god, who is the son of Shiva and Parvati) and a Durga (the warrior-aspect of Parvati, Ganesha’s mother), distinctively dressed as gods. With vermillion paste (*kungumam*) on their foreheads, flowers around their necks, surrounded by brass vessels filled with water and fresh flowers, and clothed in *veshti*¹³ and *anguvastiram*¹⁴, and a *sari*¹⁵ respectively. Bronzes, when taken on processions, are dressed in such clothes and accessories. Thus, this was Poompuhar attempting to showcase their religious bronzes to temple customers.

The most curious aspect of the Poompuhar Sales Showroom, however, is the annex, which boasts a “Craft Museum”. Started in 2013, the Craft Museum contains exceptional art objects representing the various crafts sold in Poompuhar. With an investment of five million rupees, the Craft Museum is part of a larger mission adopted in 2011 to invigorate the commercial activities of the corporation. The wood paneled brightly lit room has several bronzes and some wooden and stone sculptures. While these are three feet and up, they are interspersed with smaller artifacts such as a fan, a cane vase, a stone Ganesha

¹³ A sarong-like traditional garment worn by men in South India. It is a long unstitched cloth, usually cotton or silk, white or off-white in color, sometimes with a gold or colored border. While gods are dressed in it, men too wear it if they are of a religious or traditional background or for such occasions.

¹⁴ A scarf worn down one shoulder by men, usually folded. It is supposed to match the *veshti* and is thus, usually white or off-white, with gold or colored borders.

¹⁵ Traditional garment worn by South Asian women. It is a long, unstitched cloth.

working on a laptop, and other such curios. Descriptive labels explain the history of various crafts featured and the techniques and styles involved. Most importantly, the name of the artisans who made each object are displayed prominently alongside the name of the object itself. The Poompuhar website also claims that only the works of National and State Awardees for Handicrafts are featured. Immediately, the difference between this museum and the Chennai Museum is striking. The bronzes in the Craft Museum are explicitly and prominently linked to the sculptors who made them. Customers who take a liking to any of the bronzes could also ask a shop assistant for the communication details of the artisan responsible for the bronze if they desired to make direct contact. Although called a museum, this space houses objects that are meant to leave it. These objects are not semiophores, but commodities. While one could argue if this institution could really be called a museum, it is nevertheless interesting that Poompuhar decided to call it one because of its function as a disseminator of information about craft and artisans and a space for displaying beautiful objects. Putting this in context with the other efforts undertaken by Poompuhar recently makes things clearer.

The newly adopted mission of Poompuhar includes the statement, “Apart from the marketing activities, the Corporation is developing the standard of living of artisans [...]”. The corporation does this through giving out cash awards to exceptional artisans, young artisans, and those who have contributed a significant amount of their life towards making craft. Poompuhar has also initiated training projects for several crafts in various towns including a three-year traditional sculpture training scheme in Swamimalai (other than the Poompuhar Training Centre). In its 2013-2014 Annual Report (2014:12), the organization

explains that it “felt the need to increase the number of artisans with an aim to preserve the traditional crafts”. The combination of its profit-oriented administration and its developmental activities makes Poompuhar a unique institution that straddles the line between capitalism and welfare. In this context, the Craft Museum becomes a bridge between an economy of discourse and one of commodities.

According to Marx (1977[1861]), the elastic nature of human labor allows for subterfuge when it comes to equating exchange values of commodities. Instead of paying the actual exchange value for labor, capitalists hide behind a misrepresentation of time and pay less, pocketing the surplus as their own profit (Marx 1977[1861]:301). This is possible because there is a fetishization of commodities, where commodities by virtue of having exchange values are treated as possessing an inherent value in themselves. What actually provides value to a commodity is the labor that contributed towards its creation, but fetishization makes it seem as if commodities have inherent value. This alienation results in the distortion of the economic value of labor, and also the cultural ownership that a laborer, especially an artisan, have over the object they create. The handicraft industry is an economic purgatory because, while it operates under capitalist motivations, it sells its commodities by highlighting artisanal labor. So, while alienation of labor does occur in economic terms, cultural ownership by artisans is allowed. I contend that this is because there is a confluence of economies at play: the economy of discourse led by institutions such as the Chennai Government Museum, and the capitalist economy of commodities that allows referential, iconic material reproduction. The circulation of the museums’ cultural

history discourse and its appropriation by the handcraft industry facilitates the link between the antique bronzes and the replicas.

Yet, there are still problems that arise from the seemingly supportive discourses of the handicrafts corporation, which will be explored in the third chapter.

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Chapter 2: The Vishwakarma History/ Myth/ Narrative

In the Puranic Hindu story of Indra and the Ants, the titular Indra, an older Vedic god of the elements, has vanquished a terrible demon, and to celebrate his victory, commissions Vishwakarma, the god of crafts, to build a great palace. Vishwakarma strenuously works and builds, but Indra is never satisfied and keeps adding more features, much to Vishwakarma's chagrin. Vishwakarma appeals to Brahma the Creator (in some versions of this story, it is Vishnu), who visits Indra in the form of a boy, praising his palace and claiming to know of all the former Indras. Indra's amusement turns to horror when he realizes the truth about time and his place in it: there have been innumerable worlds that have been created and destroyed and innumerable Indras who have cycled through these worlds. The boy points to a series of ants walking by and laughingly explains how each of those ants used to be an Indra in their past life. Greatly humbled, Indra thanks and rewards Vishwakarma, stopping the work on his palace, but so struck is he by his own insignificance that he withdraws from worldly life entirely. His troubled wife appeals to the advisor-sage Brihaspati, who convinces Indra that living in the present and fulfilling his duties as a king has value. Mircea Eliade (1957:177) argues that Indra is made to realize through the narration of a myth that his victory over the demon was "without transcendent significance," revealing the "illusory veil created by profane time," which Eliade equates to "history". However, there is also danger in withdrawing from this profane time (or history), since the ultimate goal is to "keep constantly in mind the perspectives of the Great Time, while continuing to fulfill one's duty in historical time" (Eliade 1957:182).

There are two points in this myth that are important to this chapter: one is the long-suffering character of Vishwakarma; the other is the nature of time and history. The Vishwakarma community in India consider themselves to be a historically marginalized caste. From folktales to Tamil epics, from institutional misrepresentation to suspicion of criminal activities, the Vishwakarma community has adopted a position of the subaltern. In this chapter, I argue that members of the larger Vishwakarma community in India, are adopting an identity based on narrative discourse as explained in the hermeneutic anthropology of Paul Ricoeur. These narratives take the form of mythic interventions that reify the historicity of the Vishwakarma caste in order to construct a future in which the members can occupy their rightful position in the caste hierarchy. This chapter, thus, will first examine the theoretical interventions of Paul Ricoeur that allow for an analysis of historical narratives that are both truthful and mythic. This will be followed by an examination of the various colonial writings on the pan-Indian Vishwakarma caste, mostly researched and written by privileged caste South Asians working for the colonial government. I, then explore the reaction of the larger Vishwakarma community who live all over the country to this perceived marginalization, which includes a caste mobilization. In the last section, I will detail what happens when the global and the local meet as in the case of the black market smuggling of bronzes.

Ricoeur, History, and Narrative

Paul Ricoeur conceives of history as a narrative, stories told by conscious beings about a past they feel connected to, or in other words, involving emplotment. For Ricoeur,

emplotment or *muthos* is a three step process which he titles *mimesis*₁, *mimesis*₂, and *mimesis*₃. *Mimesis*₁ is “to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality” (Ricoeur 1984:54). This is the lived experience, where an individual gains an understanding of the culture they live in in terms of the systems of meaning and courses of action. Ricoeur (1984:56) sees action as paradigmatic and narrative as syntagmatic, but a narrative understanding of the practical life confers “integration and actuality” to action. This is because narrative involves emplotment that makes diverse elements work together and more importantly, establishes them in relationships to one another. That is, many things happen in life, but narration makes choices about representation, and contains an “irreducibly diachronic character.” Even an individual’s preunderstanding of their culture and their subject position entails a level of narration. This is followed by the second step in defining plot, *mimesis*₂, which is the actual construction of the narrative based on the experiences from *mimesis*₁. Ricoeur calls this the kingdom of “as if,” but warns against conflating it with mere fiction or reifying it as in opposition to history. For Ricoeur, history is also a narrative. In *mimesis*₂, plot mediates between “individual events or incidents and a story taken as a whole,” and “factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results” all of which can be likened to Aristotle’s concept of a “concordant discordance,” and finally, “temporal characteristics” (Ricoeur 1984:65–66). This is the act of constructing a narrative, with intention and care. The third stage is *mimesis*₃, which is when the text constructed in *mimesis*₂ meets the world of lived experience. Ricoeur (1984:71) points out that for Aristotle, poetry needs to be heard and it is pedagogical, and

thus, plot ultimately requires an “intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader”, and their respective temporalities. In these stages then, we have the lived experience, the historical narrative, and the historiography or archive.

When it comes to historical narrative, Ricoeur brings up the concept of *totum simul*, originally used by Boethius to imagine what God’s perspective would be like in terms of comprehending time. To be outside of human time so as to acquire a complete understanding of everything there was, is and will be. Narrative in history, says Ricoeur incorporates the *totum simul* and this results in what William Dowling has called “a double temporality,” since every story is told forward and backward (Dowling 2011:10; Ricoeur 1984:160). The story as narrated moves forward with one event happening after another, but because its narrator knows how it is going to end, it is also being told backwards by them. What becomes inevitable for Ricoeur because of this *totum simul* is ethical judgment. If you know where the story must end up, you are in a position to judge the actions of the actors and the circumstances of the world that causes things to happen to them. The points raised by Ricoeur resonate closely with the case of the Vishwakarma caste sculptors and the ways in which they attempt to engage with, construct, and disseminate their caste history. A later section of this chapter describes the historical interventions attempted by Vishwakarma writers as well as the caste archive that the community is building. These texts are narrative devices used by the community to make sense of the world, of the time they are living in, and a future they are not entirely sure of. Their sense of marginalization, which is also described in this chapter, interpellates them as wronged subjects of history, and thus, their texts contain ethical arguments in their

stead. Ricoeur's conceptualization of historical narrative is an etic apparatus to make sense of Vishwakarma historical discourse but it has some parallels with Hindu myths.

Eliade's explanation of the function of the myth in Hindu philosophy includes the argument that the functions of the myth are not only to make the value propositions clear, but also to provide a time of narration that can take the listener away from their lived time, to truly understand the cosmic reality of the world. The Story of the Ants as told by Brahma in the guise of a boy to Indra, takes the prideful god out of his lived experience and jolts him into the cosmic time, making him understand his insignificance. But at the level of the metanarrative, the puranic story itself when told to listeners transports them from their own lived time into the narrative time of the myth. Ricoeur's historical narrative is a device of similar aptitude, in which the narrative exists in its own time (narrative time), although this is because of the nature of storytelling and time itself (explained below). Nevertheless, the narrative's impact in the world of lived experience is very much because of its capacity to be in its own time and the judgments it can bring to the plot.

At the beginning of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur remarks on Augustine's question in *Confessions*, "What, then, is time?", explaining that it renders time without being, because the past is gone, the present is impermanent, and the future is not actual. But for Ricoeur, language accords time with weight, but this also poses a paradox between phenomenological time and cosmological time, that is, time as conceived by human consciousness and time that exists objectively in the universe. Ricoeur's argument in his three volumes on *Time and Narrative* explore this conundrum, arguing that this irreconcilable gap can only be resolved through "narrated time". Time, according to

Ricoeur (1988:107), cannot be understood or measured or considered, without a sense of now. The present and consciousness of it is necessary to think of or speak of the past and the future. However, considering the three stages of mimesis and Ricoeur's understanding of the world as involving experience and text, and their interaction, it is also necessary for a consciousness to pronounce a certain time as the present. Thus, Ricoeur (1988: 109) states, "The present is then indicated by the coincidence between an event and the discourse that states it" and this sets the foundation for "narrated time". In the myth from the beginning of this chapter, the nature of time is questioned, with Indra being put in place by the magnitude of cosmic time. However, Ricoeur would point out that this is only possible because of the presence of the historical time and the idea of the present. As Eliade stated, the myth does its job of reminding people to focus on the now by describing the vastness of time. Yet, it is through the telling of the myth itself that this work is done. Thus, while the myth might point to the cosmic time and historical time, it itself exists in the narrated time.

Related to this sense of the present, is also the consciousness of death and what Ricoeur (1988:115) calls "trace". People think of themselves as connected to people in the past, either as biological or symbolic descendants. But this indicates a generational replacement, which is aided by death. In history, this is an "anonymous death" which is "only dealt with by allusion, to the profit of those entities that outlast the cadavers – a people, nation, state, class, civilization". Trace is something left behind, which according to Ricoeur (1988: 119) is a paradox, because on the one hand, it is a mark that exists, but on the other it indexes a past that does not exist anymore. Trace allows people to connect

with the passed past, and it is what historians track and write around. The texts, temples, and bronzes that Vishwakarma use to connect to the past are traces that allow them to construct their history, and their own subject positions. Their identity as Vishwakarma is linked to their awareness of the anonymously dead ancestors, and thus, their narratives are willful links created to those in the past. The archival project of the Vishwakarma is the consciously constructed “trace” for future generations, which is especially important because of the gradually increasing distance between the Vishwakarma caste and the artisan occupation observed in the younger generations.

Artisans and Distrust

The perception that artisans are not to be trusted has a long history and a wide geographical spread (Herzfeld 2003). The 19th century Sanskrit scholar and judge, Rám Ráz (Rama Raja), attempting the first ever translation of the *Shilpashastra* known as the *Manasara*, which was only available in fragments at that time and thus, incomplete. In his book, the *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus*, he describes the qualities necessary in an Indian artisan according to the *Manasara*, which are many and daunting. He also casually remarks at the end of the list, “[...] that among other moral qualities enumerated in the texts [...] as requisite in the Hindú architect, is included ‘sincerity,’ a virtue, the want of which in the artists of India is proverbial” (Ráz 1834:15). Writing to his patron, Richard Clarke, Rám Ráz (1834:x) also bemoans about his difficulties in finding reliable helpers, saying, “As to our Silpis themselves, you know they are generally men of very limited acquirements, and totally unacquainted with the science”, and complains further

about how their jealousy and ignorance of Sanskrit has led to the loss of much knowledge of the *Shilpashastras* that he had been working towards translating. In such works, an imaginary, ideal artisan is described as possessing many virtues and talents on the one hand, and on the other, the living artisan is derided for not possessing these qualities, specifically, trustworthiness.

In *A Manual of the District of Tanjore in the Madras Presidency*¹⁶, T. Venkasami Row (1883:189), the First Uncovenanted Assistant at the Revenue Secretariat of the British Raj writes about the Tamil Vishwakarma,

Kammalars are as a class untruthful and unreliable. Punctuality is a virtue absolutely foreign to their nature. From unwillingness to let work go to others, each undertakes a great deal more than he can do within anything like the time agreed on, and so his customers are one and all equally disappointed and disgusted. As to honesty, no one counts upon absolute security from adulteration in the materials entrusted to gold and silver smiths. To tamper with them is regarded a privilege; an accusation give no offense and discovery causes no blushing. They are as callous to imputations of dishonesty in their trade, as they are sensitive to attacks on their caste privileges. Expressions of suspicion or distrust are received merely as a compliment to their skill in their craft. It must, however, I think, be in justice stated, that wholesale swindling is no part of the general character of Kammálars, as indeed of native craftsmen generally. Their pilfering is restricted generally to a percentage, varying of course according to degree of the vigilance exercised over them, but ordinarily not exceeding 5 percent.

While I have not been able to track down the author, the last name Row, which is also spelt Rao, is usually used by members of a privileged caste from the Maharashtra and Karnataka region. There has been a historical conflict between the Brahmin castes and

¹⁶ The Madras District Manuals were one of the various forms of surveillance and controls exerted by the colonial British government during the Raj. These were compiled for various districts under the Madras state by scholars both indigenous and British. They included details information about the perceived cultural, demographic, and economic status of the locality.

Vishwakarma, which has been studied in depth by Jan Brouwer (1995) in Karnataka and it might be important to keep that in mind while considering the biases of the author. The same author later, however, commends the Kammalar (the Tamil term for Vishwakarma) community by stating that “carving in metal is done perhaps nowhere in India so tastefully as in Tanjore,” giving the artisans their due in terms of their work, but not in terms of their moral character (Row 1883:293). Under the head, “Use of alcohol,” Row (1883:214) writes “the only classes habitually addicted to it [alcohol] are,” and names “Artisans” and explains, “ie, those who work metals,” alongside other communities such as weavers, “pareiyas,” musicians, and surprisingly, “Certain exceptional communities of Bráhmans.” Anand Pandian (2009) has examined the impact of colonial documentation of caste characters and consequent laws implemented on their basis on the Kallar community in Tamilnadu. While a similar criminalization does not result for the Kammalar, an official British document that characterizes them as untrustworthy must leave a bureaucratic and long-lasting archival mark. That Row’s document will be used by many other surveyors and scholars to build records of the colonized subjects illuminates the reach of such texts.

Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari researched and compiled the expansive *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, a seven volume work detailing the history, qualities, and contemporary status of every caste in the region. They list several proverbs pertaining to Kammalar, most of which are not complimentary. These include: “The goldsmith who has a thousand persons to answer,” referring to the constant delays customers have to deal with because of their greed in taking more orders than they can manage; “The goldsmith knows what ornaments are of fine gold,” referring to their materialistic quality for knowing who

the rich people are anywhere; “It must be with the goldsmith, or in the pot where he melts gold,” which is “said to one who is in search of something that cannot be found”; “Goldsmiths put inferior gold in the refining-pot”; “The goldsmith will steal a quarter of the gold of even his own mother”; “Stolen gold may be either with the goldsmith, or in his fire-pot”; “If the ears of the cow of a Kammalan is cut and examined, some wax will be found in it,” referring to their inclination to cheat by “substituting sealing-wax for gold”; and “to not even accept a cow from a Kammalan” (1909:123–4). Notably, those proverbs relating to the ironsmith and carpenter are much less accusatory.

This characterization of the untrustworthy artisan continues today. While volunteering at a craft exhibition organized by a non-profit dedicating to promoting handicrafts, I accompanied the coordinator whom I will call Seetha, who was quizzing an artisan on whether he had put up a stall at a competing NGO’s exhibition. The artisan was adamant that he had not, saying, “I would not lie to you.” Later, Seetha commented to me, “*Karigar*¹⁷ tell a lot of lies. If I had a penny for the times *karigar* have lied to me...” Organizing a craft exhibition is a difficult task and this one featured over 200 artisans, and although each artisan was responsible for taking care of their own wares, responsibilities would still spill over onto the exhibition organizers’ hands. Each artisan had different concerns and the two coordinators (supported by three volunteers, but only for the set up) had to handle everything. One weaver was worried about the possibility of rain and how that might affect his textiles; another did not like the sand floor and wanted rugs placed, because sand was not good for his silk wares; yet another was not happy about her

¹⁷ Hindi term for artisan.

location, which she felt would not draw much crowd. The collection of the bills was an especially fraught task every evening. The exhibition was set up such that customers could make cash and credit purchases at each artisan stall, unless the stall did not have a credit card machine, which was most of them. In the latter case, they would get a receipt from the stall, go to the reception, make the payment, get a stamped receipt, go back to the stall, hand it over and collect their purchase. The NGO wanted to know how everyone was doing financially every evening so that they could keep account of it in their books. They also took a commission of a little less than ten percent from each artisan, although they tended to waive it for many of the poorer artisans. Consequently, the organizers always believed that artisans would deflate their numbers while submitting their sales every evening. I was collecting these numbers for a couple of days and it allowed me to see why these suspicions might crop up. Many of the artisans would just yell out a rounded number without consulting their sales books. One told me that he had had no sales even though his open sales book showed several transactions for that day. Another, I later found out, had not shared his credit card sales with me. These suspicions were not just relegated to the organizers; even artisans did not trust each other to be truthful about their sales. Two of the artists at the exhibition had a friendly rivalry going on, and when I approached one of them for his day's sales figures, he asked me if he could know what the other artist had made. "He keeps complaining that he has had no sales, but how is that possible?" he claimed. Around the same time, the block-print textile seller in the next stall also joined us, curious about the situation. At that time, a weaver who was on good terms with these men was walking by and seeing our conglomeration exclaimed that he knew that the block print

textile seller would want to know the weaver's numbers, and was that not what he was asking me. The block print seller laughed, and vehemently denied it. I moved on. These were joking relationships, but the rivalry between artisans often involves suspicion of deceitfulness.

On the other hand, the tension in the interactions between artisans and others is also because of the tendency to perceive artisans as "primitive," as examined by Michael Herzfeld. That artisans had to be concerned about these environmental conditions because their wares were their livelihood was easy to forget when one had to deal with two hundred of them. Even customers while interacting with artisans treated them with suspicion, demanding they reduce the prices of their goods, confident in their assumptions that the artisans had inflated the prices. A middle aged woman was haggling with a *sari* vendor in the exhibition, asking the weaver to reduce the price of the sari she wanted from 2500 rupees to 1000 rupees. When the weaver said he could not afford to do that, she replied that she would do him a favour and purchase two *saris* if he sold it for a thousand each. No, he said again, and when she left, laughed with me, grimly.

I had volunteered for this exhibition twice, it being organized recurrently, two years apart. The first time, one of the most successful aspects of the exhibition had been a series of art classes where interested visitors could pay to learn a "traditional" art from the artisans. The money would be pooled together and would be split up equally between the artisans. I had coordinated the events and was supposed to do the same the second time around, but the second exhibition was just not going as well as the previous one. The weather was sluggish, visitors just were not coming, and those who did come did not buy

much. To compare, the first exhibition would see around a hundred to a thousand visitors every day (for ten days), many of them repeat customers, purchasing anything from a few hundred rupees to a few hundred thousand. The organizers had estimated that the artisans had made a combined amount of 4 million rupees in that exhibit. This one was nothing like that, and the artisans were already feeling depressed and anxious; this often took the form of curtness towards customers (and everyone else). The artisan who was supposed to teach the art class was not happy when he found out that only one person had signed up for it. Twenty minutes into the class, I was at the reception when the customer who had paid for the class returned – she was not happy. “He is not teaching me anything,” she complained. “He is not even there. He just left.” She did not want her money back, but left disappointed and annoyed. Another two women wanted to sign up for a class with the *patachitra* artist, but when they met him, they decided not to. “He is too shy,” they told me later when I asked why they had decided against the class. “We did not think he would actually talk to us and if he would not talk, how can he teach?”

Several months later, I was back in the US writing up my dissertation when I received a message from Seetha. She asked me if I remembered the amount that had been collected for one of the painting classes and if I gave the money to the artist or to the organization. I was puzzled at the question because when I had realized that there was only one customer, I had asked Seetha if I should just ask them to pay the artist directly and had received an answer in the affirmative. I had been there when the customer had paid the artist and I had given her a receipt. So why was I being asked about this again? I clarified the details with Seetha who then confessed the problem. The artist in question had claimed

that he had not been paid and had asked the organization to pay him the amount. Having been busy, Seetha had given him the money, but later, the books did not add up. When she confronted the artist, he broke down in tears and confessed that he had lied. He had not sold much in the exhibition and his finances were in dire straits. He apologized and offered to give the money back. Seetha then asked me if I would not mind sending her an email saying that I did add the money to the organization's till but had forgotten to make note of it in the books. I sent the email. What struck me about this episode was not so much the deceitful action of the artist, but rather, Seetha's response. Seetha was both the chronicler of the untrustworthiness of artisans and their defender. As a person who has been working in the handicraft sector for over 15 years, Seetha has witnessed the financial and other challenges faced by artisans. Thus, her response to the artist's clumsy and repentful dishonesty was to protect him. Still, her everyday interactions with artisans have either reiterated the common perception that they are untrustworthy, or have at least not disabused her of the notion. Ultimately, it is striking that even a person working so closely with artisans develops feelings of distrust with them, considering the veritable opportunities they have to witness the diversity and nuances of individual artisans.

When it comes to Vishwakarma particularly, similar suspicions abound in addition to very particular ones bounded with their history and caste. The Kaligambal temple in Chennai is a large and old temple in a remarkably crowded area of the city. It is unique in that it is managed by a community of Vishwakarma, specifically goldsmiths (*pathar*). I was considering researching it, and so I met with the chief Brahmin priest who was administrating the everyday religious operations of the temple. His home was across the

street from the temple and I had come in when he was in the middle of his worship. Dressed in a resplendent red *veshti* and a gold shawl, he was a striking figure. His hair embroidered with grey was long and tied in a bun. A tall man, he had a slight paunch, and was not wearing a shirt, revealing several gold chains around his neck and the sacred thread (*poonal*) across his torso. After his prayers, he was finally ready to talk to me and asked what I wanted to do. When I told him about my interest in the Vishwakarma community, he responded, “You do not have to talk to them to know about the temple. They are not really reliable, you know? You will not get any information that you can really use if you talk to them.” When I asked for a clarification, he would not elaborate too much, but vaguely communicated that I should not trust them. While this can be attributed to both political and social biases, considering his position required him to follow the orders of the Vishwakarma trustees of the temple’s Board and the fraught relationship between Brahmins and Vishwakarma, there were other people who also casually shared their lack of trust in Vishwakarma during the course of my fieldwork. One day, my neighbors in Swamimalai, none of whom were Vishwakarma, were discussing buying and pawning their jewelry when one of them advised caution to the others: “*Thankam thirudaatha thattaan kidaiyathu – urasi urasiye thirudiduvan*” (There is no goldsmith who will not steal gold – they will scrape and scrape and steal it away).

Vishwakarma sculptors in Swamimalai have also shared stories of the times when they had been suspected by their customers or others of fraud. Ravi Sthapati is a Vishwakarma bronzecaster of outstanding skill who specializes in making one of a kind bronzes that mimic the Chola style. He is also well versed in silver plate work, which

involves doing inverse relief sculpting on silver plates that will be attached to architectural elements in temples. Thus, it is work that is only ordered for temples, but is usually commissioned by patrons who might be temple trustees or just devotees. Ravi is a short man with a stomach that was a slight paunch when I first met him in 2008. It had quadrupled in size by the time I finished my fieldwork and left Swamimalai in 2015. His hair had also gone from pitch black to having strands of grey. Hard of hearing in one ear, he tends to smile a lot, which I usually took as a sign that he might not have heard what I had asked. A shy man who had had many troubles in his family, especially after he married his wife, Rajeshwari, who turned out to be an excellent sculptor herself, Ravi tended to keep to himself and his workshop-home and did not mix much with the rest of Swamimalai. Thus, his clients usually came to him via referrals of other clients and rarely through other sculptors. Ravi told me the story of one of his past clients, a *chettiar* caste man who exported textiles and was presumably very rich. But Ravi had not known about his client's economic status until much later, he told me. Furthermore, this was one of the few clients who had been introduced to Ravi by a sculptor acquaintance.

Taken to the client's town, Ravi was shown a temple and was told that silver relief plates needed to be done for a section. Rajeshwari, his wife interjected then that Ravi was only 22 when this story happened and looked much younger than his age. Ravi got the feeling that the client was unimpressed and hesitant about giving this job to such a young looking man. What the client did not know, Ravi said, was that at that time, even though Ravi had two elder brothers, he was the one who was earning livelihood for the entire family. The client then said that he wanted Ravi to show the designs he could come up

with immediately if possible, or he could take a week and get back to him. Ravi told him that it would just take him one night's work and asked for some chalk and a ruler. He worked on the designs, drawing on the temple floors until late night, around 11 pm, and showed the client his work. The client conferred with the other people in his retinue in Telugu and Ravi could not understand what they were saying, but at the end of the consultation, he had the job and the client said that he would also give him the silver. "I will not rub off this chalk," said the client, "So you better make something that looks exactly like this. And also you must do the work while staying here." Ravi said that the chalk was fine, but he cannot work anywhere but his own workshop. The client was eventually convinced and immediately handed over 30 kilograms of silver, all with a 995 mark (indicating high quality). "He did not even ask me for a receipt," said Ravi, and had felt impressed. "I should have given it back in four months, but it looks me none months." The reason for that was another story – a worker next to him had something that had angered Ravi so much that he had broken the nose of one of the figures he had been chiseling on the silver. He had to do the entire door again, all by himself, and also did some additional fittings as compensation for the extra time he had taken.

Finally, he took it to the client and they set it up. The client loved it and on top of the 50,000 rupees commission he had given with the silver, he also gifted Ravi with six export-quality *veshti*, fruits and more money (which Ravi distributed with the others in his workshop). Then, on a stage during the ceremony where the silver work was fixed onto the temple and unveiled, the client spoke to the large celebratory audience about how impressed he was with Ravi, not just for his talent, but also for his integrity. At some point

of time during the nine-month work, he had sent a man to ask for a sample of the silver and Ravi had given it without much thought since he had been much too focussed on work. The client had actually sent it for testing to see if it was the silver he had originally given to Ravi and test confirmed that it was. On the stage, the client narrated this story, this test, and expressed his appreciation for Ravi for having come through it with flying colors. He gifted him another 20,000 rupees.

Ravi's story tells many things. Other than the obvious distrust that the client showed towards Ravi, it reveals the informal and unorganized sector in which sculptors operate, their tendency to not meet deadlines which can cause anxiety for those waiting to get back an order they had already paid for and have supplied expensive materials towards, the delicacy and accuracy of work required where a single mistake might require the sculptor to start all over again, and the processual negotiation that is a sculptor-client relationship. Ravi's reason for telling me this story had been to show how he is a trustworthy sculptor, but it also revealed the general circumstances that can make clients feel hesitant about trusting an artisan, and also how entrenched these suspicions are. That the client thought the best way to honor Ravi was to announce on a stage how he tested his honesty and found him to be up to the mark was not considered anything other than a compliment by Ravi. I believe that reiterates how commonplace it is for sculptors to be treated with suspicion.

In addition to these accusations of untrustworthiness and deceit, the Vishwakarma as a caste community also perceive themselves to have been marginalized historically by Brahmins and other castes who refuse to give them what they consider to be their due. This

is tied to the mythic past considered to be Vishwakarma history. The history of the Vishwakarma caste is convoluted because of its expanse. It is a pan-Indian artisan caste, but there are regional variations in cultural practices and claimed history. Nevertheless, generally Vishwakarma communities trace their mythic lineage to the five sons of the god Vishwakarma, the architect of the world, who was featured in the myth narrated at the beginning of this chapter. These five sons, Silpi, Manu, Mayan, Dwasta, and Pandava, each have their particular skill; Silpi works on stone, Manu on iron, Mayan on wood, Dwasta with precious stones and metals, and Pandava in brass (Nambiar 1964:4). Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari (1909:113) write in the fourth volume of the *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* on Kammalar explaining that “in some places [Kammalar] claim to be superior to Brahmans, calling the latter Go-Brahmans, and themselves Visva Brahmans.” In their description of Vishwakarma’s sons, they are named Manu, Maya, Silpa, Tvashtara, and Daivagna. According to Thurston & Rangachari, Manu engages in smithwork, Mayas in carpentry, Silpis work on stone, Tvashtaras work on metal and Daivagnas (also called Visvagnas) make jewelry. These sons, who originated each craft, is the progenitor of each of the five subcastes of the Vishwakarma, which are split across similar occupations lines. Thurston and Rangachari (1909:108) also comment on the rivalry between the Vishwakarma and Brahmins stating that they “claiming [...] to be Brahmans, have adopted Brahmanical gotras,” that their marriages “closely imitate the Brahmanical ceremonial,” however also noting that “The parisam, or bride’s money, is paid, as among other non-Brahmanical castes.” The authors also enumerate the ways in which Kammalar are not like Brahmins (widows can use jewelry, certain fasts and feasts

are not observed). Another origin myth narrated by Thurston and Rangachari has the Vishwakarma being the offspring of a Brahman and a Beri Chetti woman¹⁸. The most revealing story, however, is that of the town of Mandapuri, which Thurston and Rangachari cite as part of the Mackenzie papers, and describe as being prevalent throughout the Tamil speaking region in South India, presumably amongst Vishwakarma communities:

In the town of Mandapuri, the Kammalans of the five divisions formerly lived closely united together. They were employed by all sorts of people, as there were no other artificers in the country, and charged very high rates for their wares. They feared and respected no king. This offended the kings of the country, who combined against them. As the fort in which the Kammalans¹⁹ concealed themselves, called Kantakkottai, was entirely constructed of loadstone, all the weapons were drawn away by it. The king then promised a big reward to anyone who would burn down the fort, and at length the Deva-dasis (courtesans) of a temple undertook to do this, and took betel and nut in signification of their promise. The king built a fort for them opposite Kantakkottai, and they attracted the Kammalans by their singing, and had children by them. One of the Deva-dasis at length succeeded in extracting from a young Kammalan the secret that, if the fort was surrounded with varaghu straw and set on fire, it would be destroyed. The king ordered that this should be done, and, in attempting to escape from the sudden conflagration, some of the Kammalans lost their lives. Others reached the ships, and escaped by sea, or were captured and put to death. In consequence of this, artificers ceased to exist in the country. One pregnant Kammalan woman, however, took refuge in the house of a Beri-Chetti, and escaped decapitation by being passed off as his daughter. The country was sorely troubled owing to the want of artificers, and agriculture, manufactures, and weaving suffered a great deal. One of the kings wanted to know if any Kammalan escaped the general destruction, and sent around his kingdom a piece of coral possessing a tortuous aperture running through it, and a piece of thread. A big reward was promised to anyone who should succeed in passing the thread through the coral. At last, the boy born of the Kammalan woman in the Chetti's house undertook to do it. He placed the coral over the mouth of an ant-hole, and having steeped the thread in sugar, laid it down at some distance from the hole. The ants took the thread, and drew it through the coral. The king, being pleased with the boy, sent him

¹⁸ The Beri Chetti is described in the book as a merchant caste.

¹⁹ Kammalan is the singular of Kammalar. Sometimes, Kammala might also be used.

presents and have him more work to do. This he performed with the assistant of his mother, and satisfied the king. The king, however, grew suspicious, and having sent for the Chetti, enquired concerning the boy's parentage. The Chetti thereon detailed the story of his birth. The king provided him with the means for making ploughshares on a large scale, and got him married to the daughter of a Chetti, and made gifts of land for the maintenance of the couple. The Chetti woman bore him five sons, who followed the five branches of work now carried out by the Kammalar caste. The king gave them the title of Panchayudhatar, or those of the five kinds of weapons. They now intermarry with each other, and, as children of the Chetti caste, wear the sacred thread. The members of the caste who fled by sea are said to have gone to China, or according to another version, to Chinga dvipam, or Ceylon, where Kammalans are found at the present day. (Thurston and Rangachari 1909:113–115)

This fascinating story lays bare several themes that run through this dissertation. Firstly, this is a story of persecution and genocide, of a community that had to live in secret, unable to claim the social position that is owed to them. These themes of persecution and eventual resurgence and moral victory are repeated in many of the Vishwakarma authored books, both historical and fictional (which will be examined in a later section). It is also a story that illustrates the importance of artisans to a state, especially in terms of economy, and also how artisans could challenge even kings because of the indispensable service they provide. That does not stop the state from trying to eradicate them, however, as the Kammalars' rejection of state authority is perceived by the disciplinary state as going a bridge too far. The artisans' monopoly over parts of the economy add to this grievance. Kammalars are indispensable for the economy and thus, have to be made into subjects. If they cannot be made into subjects, the state will eradicate them. Another theme of this story is the idea of talent being a biosubstance that rests in the body of the artisan. Here, it pertains to the boundedness of the Vishwakarma caste identity, clarifying the boundaries of membership. It is striking that ultimately, the Kammalars are

restituted into the larger community and given a privileged position by the very same state that took everything away. Thus, the agents of persecution also hold the power to mete out restitution, and even in myths have to be acknowledged as so.

In terms of historical lineage however, the Vishwakarma claim to be the original inhabitants of the Bronze Age Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), a complex state level society that lasted for over a thousand years (Varghese 2003). The question of the identity of the inhabitants of the IVC has been a political tussle between several communities for many years. The divisions are across linguistic and racial lines. IVC is considered to be the earliest urban civilization in the South Asian region, and thus, groups attempt to situate themselves in it to claim their historicity in the region, and consequently, establish a deeper, more authentic link to the region of South Asia (or the state of India). The only inscriptions²⁰ found in IVC are on hundreds of seals associated with trade and accompanied by depictions of anthropomorphic forms, and flora and fauna. Scholars I. Mahadevan and others (Rao et al. 2009) claim that these are a proto-Dravidian script which would mark the IVC inhabitants as ancestors of the South Indian communities speaking Dravidian languages (such as Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada). However, there are also scholars (Kak 1988; Mitchiner 1981) who believe that the inhabitants of IVC were Indo Aryans, migrants from Central Asia, who brought along with them Sanskrit, the Vedas and the caste system. Brahmins are one of these castes. The Vishwakarma community, by claiming to be the original inhabitants of the IVC, place themselves chronologically earlier to the IndoAryan Brahmins. However, Vishwakarma also claim to be the original speakers of Sanskrit,

²⁰ Some scholars do not even consider them inscriptions, instead arguing that they are symbols representing clan or guild names (Farmer et al. 2004).

which they say was appropriated by Brahmins. Coomaraswamy (1909:55) also recounts a paper by Pulney Andy in the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry* in which the latter claims that the Vishwakarma community are the Aryan migrants themselves. Thus, the Vishwakarma's claims situate them as historical predecessors to the Brahmins, pitting them in competition for ownership over what can be called the Sanskritic tradition. The claims also solidify the position of the Vishwakarmas as the earliest inhabitants of South Asia. One of the Vishwakarma I had interviewed described the *Shilpashastras* as the *Vedas* in praxis. Since various classical arts are founded on the principles and instructions in these texts, the Vishwakarma artisans consider themselves to be the practitioners of the *Vedas* twice over. In the *On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsa or India*, Oppert (1893:58) writes that the Vishwakarma "assume the title of Acarya, wear the holy thread, and claim the right to perform religious ceremonies among themselves" and also that they "declare that there were originally five vedas, but that Veda Vyasa, in order to curtain their privileges, suppressed the fifth and arranged the other four in such a manner as suited Vyasa and the false Brahmans whom he headed." Some Vishwakarma in Swamimalai also told me that the fifth Veda was a *Shilpashastra*. The figure of Ved Vyasa recurs in other Vishwakarma stories as the stand-in for Brahmins with evil intent who oppress and marginalize the Vishwakarma, denying them their rightful status in society.

It is unclear if these historical constructions from the Vishwakarma took place as a reaction to a history of being marked as an "inferior" caste or vice versa, but it seems to be a self-fulfilling cycle of struggle. In the *Madras Census Report* (1893), H.A. Stuart states that inscriptional evidence as early as 1033 CE showed that the Kammalar were considered

to be lower on the caste hierarchy based on where they were allowed to have residences, which was near where the Paraiyans and Pallans lived (both “lower” in the hierarchy). Stuart thought it was because the Chola period were times when martial castes held a more privileged status and those who performed labor were considered to be less privileged. K. R. Hanumanthan (1976:109) notes that the group that the Vishwakarma were part of during the medieval period seem to have been taxed more heavily, which would have added to their feelings of penury. Stuart (1893: 280) concludes that, “With the decline of military power, however, it was natural that a useful caste like the Kammalans should gradually improve its position, and the re-action from this long oppression has led them to make the exaggerated claims [...], which are ridiculed by every other caste, high or low”. Even in the 1961 Census of India, P.K. Nambiar (1964:5) writes, “This background,” referring to the Vishwakarma’s knowledge of Sanskrit and association with religious art, “has given this community an exaggerated idea of their own importance and achievements with its natural reaction viz., a tendency to show off before other castes.”

There were also the *Idankai/Valankai* (left hand/right hand) factions that operated from the eleventh to the nineteenth century in which the Vishwakarma occupied the left hand faction, and various agricultural castes, dominated by the Vellalar occupied the right hand faction (Appadurai 1974). According to Thurston and Rangachari (1909:117), one of the many explanations for this division is a historical dispute between the Kammalar and the Vellalar, when “the latter claimed the former as their [...] caste dependents, while the former claimed the latter as their own dependent.” A king presided over the issue and sided with the agriculturalists, who were standing to the right of the king. This made the

Kammalar the left-hand caste and the losers of this struggle. Importantly, the left hand is not considered to be “clean” in Tamil culture, and there are restrictions on food intake depending on which caste made it. What also has not helped the Kammalar, according to both M.N. Srinivas (2002) and Arjun Appadurai (1974:224–5), has been their efforts to claim Brahmanical status. Srinivas called this Sanskritisation, referring to the appropriation of the language, texts, and Brahmanical practices to attempt upward social mobility (For more scholarship on the left hand/right hand factions, and the struggle of the artisans, see Beck 1970; Brimnes 1999; Hanumanthan 1976; Mines 1982; Srinivasachari 1929). M. N. Srinivas (2002) notes that, “Normally Sanskritisation enables a caste to obtain a higher position in the hierarchy. But in the case of the smiths [kammalar] it seems to have resulted only in their drawing upon themselves the wrath of all the other castes.” Appadurai (1974:226) reiterates how unfavourably these efforts of Kammalar were received, especially by the agricultural castes, but argues that the efforts of the artisans during the medieval period were in line with the “general upward mobility amongst craft and trading groups”, especially in connection with temple urbanism (Heitzman 1987).

M. Srinivasa Aiyangar (1914:98–99) narrates at least two stories explaining the origins of the left hand/right hand divisions, and each are striking for different reasons. One of them involves a copper plate at Kanchipuram, a city 72 km from the Tamilnadu capital, Chennai, which is supposed to have inscriptions explaining how the division came about. But Aiyangar states that neither of the parties could produce it in court when it was requested during two cases in Salem and Chittoor (discussed later). Aiyangar (1914:99) then claims that the “Kammalas have forged a series of copper plates (dated 1098 SS) in

favour of the left-hand faction to justify its preference over the right-hand in matters local.”

I believe it is noteworthy that Aiyangar feels comfortable declaring the copper plates a forgery without any evidence to the contrary, or at least without explicitly stating any evidence. This goes in line with the assumption that the Kammalar caste tends to resort to falsification and deceit. That copper plates involve metalwork, which the Kammalar specialize in is also a point worth nothing. In the second story, the Kammalar were performing priestly services to the Chola kings when Vedvyasan, a Brahmin, (and perhaps a stand-in for all Brahmins; see the caste politics of Mahabharatha which is attributed to Ved Vyasa and has been interpreted as an attempt to legitimize Brahmanical practices and social positions retroactively during the 2-4th century presenting an interesting context in terms of understanding Ved Vyasa’s role) attempts to take over their role, and failing with the king, conspires with his illegitimate son to assassinate the king, take this place, and overthrow the Kammalar. This results in the entire nation striking, and the neighboring kingdom invading it to restore order by reinstalling the Kammalars to their rightful place. It must be emphasized, however, that Aiyangar is the surname of a Brahmin and thus, certain biases must be taken into consideration. Aiyangar (1914:88) also categorically denies that Kammalars could be Brahmins, citing their absence in the *dharmashastras* and other ancient Sanskrit texts and calling to attention their practice of burying the dead and worshipping Kali, which he notes as similar to “pre-Dravidian or aboriginal Naga tribe”. Appadurai (1974:233) also includes the earlier Chola story and contextualizes it as having been found in a book published by the Kammalar community in Madras in the late nineteenth century. It is from the nineteenth century onwards that Vishwakarma

communities all over the country started forming political groups to bargain for rights under the British rule that they were often denied under previous indigenous governments.

It is noteworthy that at some point of time, Kammalars began to consider the left hand side as better than the right hand side, conferring it as a status of honor (1893:59). This strategy of appropriation and recontextualization is applied by the contemporary Vishwakarma to texts that have been authored by or on them in order to construct a historical narrative that reiterates what they consider to be their rightful social position, while also performing as symbols to mobilize around. While the contemporary context of their struggle has changed, there being no left hand and right hand factions, and no restrictions on using particular last names, perform religious rituals, or wear caste symbols such as the sacred thread, their feelings of continued persecution are born out of the very same laws that disbar discriminations based on caste lines: if the state does not officially recognize caste hierarchy as a prescriptive practice, Vishwakarma cannot be recognized by the state in terms of their social position. Harkening back to one of the historical narratives of persecution used by the Vishwakarma, namely the one where the town of Kammalar who are defeated, murdered, and run out by the state, at its conclusion, it is the state that restitutes them to into society. The post-independence “secular” Indian government could not really do the same. Furthermore, the state’s attempt to eliminate discrimination is what led to the inclusion of other castes into bronzecasting in Swamimalai, and other artisan industries in other parts of the country.

In the present day, the left hand/right hand conflict has given way and taken the form of rivalry with the Brahmin caste members as well as a general effort to structure a caste

history. Jan Brouwer's (1995) ethnographic study of Vishwakarma artisans in a Karnataka village revealed that there was an ideological competition between the Vishwakarma and the Brahmins with respect to social status in the caste hierarchy. Vishwakarma people contend that their rightful place at the top was usurped by Brahmins through an erasure of their history from the popular imagination. This is paralleled by George Varghese's (2003) findings amongst the Vishwakarma community in Kerala, where a prominent political mobilization of the caste members has happened in the post-independence period, mounting a direct challenge to the authority of the Brahminical castes. This rivalry between the Vishwakarma community and Brahmins is not significantly present in Swamimalai, but there is an occupational rivalry between Vishwakarma sculptors and sculptors of other castes.

Constructing Archives

Subramaniyan Achariyar was introduced to me by a Swamimalai sculptor, Mohanraj Sthapati, when he saw my interest in Vishwakarma literature. After talking to Achariyar several times over the phone and ordering copies of many of the texts he had acquired, I began to realize that there was an informal network of Vishwakarma scholars, professional and amateur, who were reprinting and photocopying books that had been written by Vishwakarma, on Vishwakarma, and published by Vishwakarma organizations. These included compilations of court proceedings from the 17th century onwards, calls to action for the mobilization of people by Vishwakarma organizations, as well as literary and

historical interventions in classical vernacular texts. In the following pages, I describe a few examples of each of these publications.

Firstly, many of the reprinted books contain an advertisement for the Brahmasri Vaithianatha Acharya Foundation, which operates out of Bangalore, Karnataka. It lists the “Core Objectives of the Trust” as the collection of texts about Vishwakarma including “literatures (Sastras) and books pamphlets/monographs, census reports”; the dissemination of information about Vishwakarma heritage by making it available to many families; and to provide funding for scholarship on researching Vishwakarma issues. Many of these books also have a few additional pages at the end added by the Vishwakarma caste associations taking the form of requests for support, financial and otherwise. One entitled “What to Do” is a plea to the “Elite, Enlightened and Educated Viswakarmas” who “instead of distancing themselves from the rest of the community, should spare, some time for Social uplift.” It then appeals to them to contribute towards their community by “searching[ing] in every nook and corner all over the country and unearth[ing] many such hidden treasures of history [...] so that they may be compiled, printed and given to the younger generation to enable them, to pursue any avocation of their choice with the sense of pride.” The primacy of books and the role they play is highlighted in this appeal as they are the treasures through which a good future for the community can be achieved. Even more striking is the reference to the younger generation and how knowledge of the history and culture of the Vishwakarma community through these books would allow them to still feel pride as Vishwakarma, whatever occupation they may pursue. This is a direct response to the growing awareness amongst the larger Vishwakarma community of the disinterest

amongst youngsters in continuing the hereditary arts occupations. In Swamimalai, more and more often, Vishwakarma youngsters who are generally from middle class families, opt for a college degree in computer science, engineering, or architecture. More and more, they leave Swamimalai for larger cities for work. These caste archives, then, are willfully curated technologies of narration that are supposed to help these un-practicing Vishwakarma construct their caste identity. Swamimalai's Mohanraj Sthapati, who introduced me to Subramaniyan Achariyar, has developed such an interest in such intellectual avenues possibly as a forward looking strategy for thinking about an artisan caste on caste, instead of artisan lines. The appeal in these books goes on to describe a series of well known Vishwakarma writers who have defended the caste from further persecution and names Subramanian Achariyar for working on the reprinting of old these books. It concludes chastening the "educated elite" for recusing themselves from the participation in this work and tells them to "come out on [their] own accord and unearth the history of the past and make it available to society." The collection of these books and their circulation then is a history project where a caste history is constructed, not so much for communicating with outsiders, but for within the community itself.

One of the main types of books that are found in these collections are publications of court cases involving the Vishwakarma. Of the court cases, the oft-cited case amongst the Vishwakarma community as well as the earliest one, is the 1818 Chittoor Adalat district case, which has been translated and published in various languages (Tamil, Kannada, Telugu) by Vishwakarma organizations (Chittoor Jilla Adalat Court Judgment 1880). The plaintiff in the case is one Margasahaya Achari, who had sued to claim that Vishwakarma

are the real Brahmins. K. V. Krishnamurthy (2012) claims that the case was decided by a magistrate, J. H. Decker, for the defendants and against the Brahmin plaintiffs. The Court Judgment publication itself is not very readable, being a photocopy of a publication from 1880, and also appears to be a retelling of the court case rather than the actual proceedings. Krishnamurthy lists several other cases as having been brought into courts by Vishwakarma: the Mumbai High Court judgment of 1824 in which Brahmins sued the Vishwakarma for refusing to hire Brahmin priests and using their own priests for ceremonies, concluding with the court dismissing the case since it considered priesthood to be a profession that should not be dictated by caste; and a rather complex case from Masulipatnam dated to 1894. The latter has also been included in a book (Sanmuganathan 2011) on Vishwakarma court cases in Tamil published by an independent press but circulated as informal books (photocopied, cut up and tied with string) within Vishwakarma networks. In that book, titled *Vishwakarma Samudayamum Needimandrangalum (Vishwakarma Community and Courts)*, the proceedings are included in English. The case was filed against a goldsmith by a group of Brahmins for entering the Kasi Visveswara Swami temple in Rustumbada, Masulipatnam in Andhra Pradesh, and performing an *abhishekam* (ritual bath) for the deity, thereby polluting it. The Assistant Magistrate, J. W. Hughes, acquitted the accused stating that he did not see this as an intentional act of insult or even as an act of defilement. Hughes noted that there were caste tensions in this town and there had been a history of such provocations, including by the accused's brother (who had also been acquitted). However, Hughes found the statements of the accused and the documents supplied by him to be convincing; these essentially

amounted to the claim that the Vishwakarma are Brahmins, have the same rights as them, and clinchingly, a previous proceeding in the town which had been presided over by a respected Brahmin who had granted Brahminical rights to the Vishwakarma. Hughes further pointed out that there were two Brahmins who witnessed the goldsmith perform the *abhishekam*, but did not say anything because they could not tell that he was not a Brahmin. While whether the Vishwakarma are the same as Brahmins is a question for the ecclesiastical courts, concluded Hughes, he was acquitting the goldsmith since he did not see his action as an insult to Hinduism, which is also the religion of the goldsmith himself. Other court case judgments reprinted by the Vishwakarma networks include a case in Salem from the 1840s and another from the Guntur district in 1912.

Thus, from the 19th century, there was enough mobilization from various Vishwakarma who filed cases with the British Raj's district and high courts suing for permissions to perform religious rituals that in the past had been restricted to Brahmins. Thurston and Rangachari (1909:123) identified a Vishwakarma caste organization operating in Madras from 1903 called the Vishvakarma Kulabhimana Sabha, and describe it as aiming for the "advancement of the community as a whole on intellectual and industrial lines, the provision of practical measures in guarding their interests, welfare and prospects of the community, and the improvement of the arts and sciences peculiar to them by opening industrial schools and workshops, etc." Krishnamurthy lists several organizations formed during this period including the All India Vishwakarma Liberal Federation which started holding conferences from 1917, the Viswa Brahma Poursheya Seva Samaja in Hindupur in Andhra Pradesh in 1930, the Madras Vishwa-karma Labour

Union, the Akhila Kerala Viswakarma Maha Sabha, the Tamilnadu Viswakarma Artisans Sangam, and the Karnataka Rajya Viswakarma Maha Sabha. These organizations also intervened in the political processes by submitting memos and publishing mobilization pamphlets. These are also some of the documents which are circulated amongst Vishwakarma networks today.

One of them is a stapled photocopy document compiling several attempts by Vishwakarma in the Legislative Assemblies of various southern regions during the British rule to claim more rights for the community. This includes “A Memorandum to His Excellency Lord Erskine (Governor in Council) on the subject of the representation of the Viswa-Brahmana Community in the Local Legislative Council (Upper House) to be constituted under the Government of India Act, 1935” authored by K. C. Ayyavoo Achariyar, the Secretary of the Madras Viswa-Karma Labour Union; The Artisan’s Protection Bill and various commentaries on it; and the various bills introduced by Ramamoorthy Garu, a Vishwakarma activist in the 1930s. Under the Table of Contents, the patron, K. P. Subbayan, who sponsored the republication of this work writes as a member of the Tamilnadu Vishwakarma Artisan’s Sangam, contextualizing it as an effort by Brahmasri Rao Sahib Pandit Ganala Ramamoorthi Garu “to restore the prestigious titles ‘Brahma Sri’ and ‘Achary’ which were segregated during 1913 by an order of the Govt. for the exclusive use of Brahmins; and to persuade the Govt to indicate our community as ‘Viswa Brahmans’ in Govt. records.”

There are also several publications from Vishwakarma organizations themselves, such as the one published by the Tamilnadu Viswakarma Artisans Sangam, *Viswakarma’s*

Struggle for Social Justice on a Different Plank! in 2012. The book is divided into several subheadings, such as “Viswakarma, the All Maker”, and “Native Engineers are Jagath Guru!”, “Astonishing Standard of Excellence!”, “Most Organized Society” and “The real Brahmins of Viswakarma Caste!” among others. It also includes sections of the court judgments mentioned earlier, extracts from the writings of well known Vishwakarma such as Ramamoorthi Garu who is also featured in the compilation mentioned above, as well as letters written by the President of the organization to various elected officials requesting more opportunities for members of the caste, and infrastructural and financial help for artisans. The last of these, a letter addressed to a Minister of the Parliament, E.M. Sudarsana Nachiappan dated 26th March 2005, by K. P. Subbayan, the Founder and Patron of the VK Sangam is especially interesting because he positions Vishwakarma as a Backward caste deserving of special consideration, a replication of their earlier efforts under kings and the colonial courts, but using the language of postcolonial secularism. He also advocates against the introduction of the creamy layer category. Under the post-independence Indian government, the Vishwakarma are categorized as either “Backward Caste” (BC) or “Other Backward Caste” (OBC) depending on the state, for purposes of special reservation in educational institutions and for government positions. Thus, in terms of advocating for political measures to help the community, Vishwakarma organizations lean into their categorization as BC/OBC to claim marginalization and demand support. But this exists parallel to their continued claims to be the same as Brahmins, who are categorized as “Other Caste” by the government and do not receive any special dispensation in reserved seats in governmental institutions. This is a discursive maneuver

by the Vishwakarma, because castes that are classified in these two categories are those that have been historically educationally or economically disadvantaged, while Vishwakarma's claim of marginalization comes from being denied what they consider to be their rightful social position. The creamy layer category refers to those within the BC and OBC who have been able to secure most of the opportunities given to these groups, because they have the most financial and social capital within and outside the group. The introduction of the creamy layer category would segregate those in the BC and OBC groups by annual family income. The Vishwakarma community letter advocates against the creation of the creamy layer category, calling it harmful to the members of their caste. The logic of this would permit the interpretation that Vishwakarma would be considered as the creamy layer and this is why the introduction of the category would be harmful to them, since it would remove them from some of the reservation lists. Yet, Subbayan states, "It would be more appropriate to brand us the most backward of all the backward classes." This is because of the caste system, he continues, where Vishwakarma were included under the Sudras, who, according to the *Manusmirithi* [sic] "were totally denied all opportunities for education and entry into the Govt. Service for generations together." Subbayan thus remonstrates against the caste system and the Sanskrit scriptures that ordain it, but especially the "vested interest", who proposed the creamy layer category, stall any research on the actual economic conditions of the BC, and block government orders willy nilly. Unnamed though is the "vested interest", it is clear that it is a reference to the more privileged caste communities, especially Brahmins.

A large section of the books also includes interventions in well known Sanskrit and Dravidian literature and historical texts. One such example is a 1909 publication called *Visvakarma and His Descendants* authored by Alfred Edward Roberts (b. Ratnajinendra Rabel Ratnawira). It is a treatise of the history of the caste in Sri Lanka and an argument for the superiority of their position in society. The Visva Brahmins, as Roberts, a Vishwakarma himself calls the caste, have long been subjected to unfair treatment because they have been indexed in a lower position in the caste hierarchy. This book attempts to rectify that by interceding in Ceylon's history and articulating the "real story". For instance, Roberts (1973:28) narrates the story of Shankara, an 8th century Hindu philosopher and saint renowned for his theory of Advaita, who while visiting a town titles himself *Jagadguru* (Teacher of the world), causing the Vishwakarma of the town to take great offense since that is a title reserved for their community. Being questioned, Shankara responds with a Sanskrit verse in which he claims to being a descendant of Tvashtar (one of the sons of the god, Vishwakarma), and a Brahmin of the Vishwakarma caste. Shankara, thus, is indexed as a Vishwakarma in this narrative, and more importantly, Shankara, who is considered a Brahmin by the official organization that represents his religious institution (Jagadguru Sri Vidyanarya 2006), is used to cast Vishwakarma as the real Brahmins. Brahmins, who have historically enjoyed a privileged social position, become the latecomers who appropriated the myths and rights of the Vishwakarma, in this narrative. Thus, Roberts, provides a narrative scaffold in history, that could be used to mobilize a caste identity and work towards constructing a better future for the Vishwakarma. In the Publishers Appeal section of this third edition, G. Veerendra writes, "If any social,

economic and moral degradation is felt in any community one of the fundamental reasons for this is the lack of knowledge about the heritage and rich culture that community has inherited.” He continues, “By knowing past happenings and legitamate [sic] rights and duties it is always possible to improve the lot.” Knowing about the past is an important step in “improving one’s lot”, and through these interventions in history, the Vishwakarma provide a foundation for individuals within the community to identity with their caste even if they themselves are not artisans.

Appadurai (1974:223) does not think that these narratives should be defined through Western categories such as history and myth, and uses the term “tradition” which he defines as “beliefs concerning the past which are of normative and explanatory value to a social group.” But as Ricoeur has explained, history is also a narrative plotted from experiences of the world, which is a place of values and beliefs. For Ricoeur (1992:162), narration was one of the ways through which individuals and communities could reflect on their position in time and evaluate the ethical implications of their actions. As life is lived, an individual repeatedly constructs a plot that anchors a particular context to the larger life path and plan, making meaning out of unmanageable time. Similarly, when it comes to myths, Ricoeur (1974:28–29) sees them as being more meaningful when perceived in a tradition of interpretation that gets transmitted and reevaluated at different junctures of history. When such a hermeneutic understanding of narration as a speech-act is applied to the works of these Vishwakarma authors, we can perceive two ways in which action springs from discourse. Firstly, by creating a corpus of caste literature, the community has a narrative tradition to base its identity upon – it is based on “trace” but it is also a creation

of “trace”. Second, by intervening in history, the community (re)interprets their community history to fit the vision of the future they want to achieve. With a *totem simul*, these authors are writing backwards and forwards. Paralleling this, in Hindu tradition, the myth of the cosmic time is a device that transports the listeners and narrators into atemporality according to Eliade (1957:173), as we saw in the beginning of this chapter. The extraction of an individual from historical time to an atemporal plane shocks them into realizing the larger truth of life – the cosmic time – and their quotidian duty. Roberts and the other Vishwakarma who are performing the labor of discourse certainly do not think of their narration as myth; it is, of course, history. However, as a discourse, it performs the function of a myth – it takes its audience to a primordial time of beginnings and reminds them of their real place in the world. It drives them towards action, or at least the realization of the possibility of action.

Roberts’ *Visvakarma and His Descendants* has one larger narrative arch that I think is important to mention. While most of the book is about the unfair marginalization of the Vishwakarma caste, Roberts’ first and last chapters are dedicated to a harsh indictment of the caste system itself. For Ceylon to progress, says Roberts, the caste system must be destroyed and all people should become one. How can we reconcile this call for the destruction of the very system that forms the basis of Roberts’ argument for the veneration of the Vishwakarma caste? I believe the answer lies in the beginning and in appreciation of Hindu time, this conclusion will also go back to the beginning of this chapter and remind the audience of the cosmic and profane time. In profane time, history matters, social positions matter. In cosmic time, none of these earthly matters matter. And thus, while

Roberts demands a better position for his caste in the profane time, he also pronounces what is the cosmic truth – the caste system does not really matter in the great scale of the *yugas*.

This chapter has examined the Vishwakarma community in general, and how they deal with the uncomplimentary discourses that characterize them as untrustworthy, positioning lower in the hierarchy of caste than they should be. I argue that as a community, Vishwakarma construct historical narratives that can legitimize their identity as a caste, their rightful social position in society, the marginalization they have faced, often in ways disconnected with the labor of being an artisan. However, what can artisans do in the face of these challenges? The next chapter deals with how Swamimalai artisans have to contend with governmental narratives about traditional art and artisans that are meant to be helpful but also cause challenges.

Chapter 3: The Problem of Tradition in Swamimalai

Observing a master sculptor at work is a mesmerizing sight. Sampath Sthapati was sitting in his diminutive workshop on a distressed pallet surrounded by the tools of his trade. He was going to make a wax model of a Hindu deity. This wax model would later have to be destroyed in the process of creating a clay mould. That clay mould will also be destroyed in the process of creating a metal sculpture. But everyone begins with the wax model and making a perfectly proportioned figure is a rare skill, even in the town of Swamimalai, which is renowned for being a pilgrimage center and the historical residence of a community of traditional artisans. Sampath Sthapati is one such sculptor in Swamimalai and for twenty minutes, he prepared the wax that he was to melt and manipulate into a god. Taking hours upon hours of work, the wax model possesses a transient beauty and worth because of the inevitable tragedy of having to be lost in the course of the process. Finally, Sampath declared that the wax was of the right consistency and he could start the shaping. At this pivotal moment, he took out a hardened clay mould shaped like the Hindu deity he was going to make and stuffed the cavity on one side with the prepared wax. Carefully adjusting the amount of wax, he closed it with the other half of the mould. “Now we wait,” he said, “in twenty minutes, the wax model will be ready.”

Surprised by the unexpected turn of events, I sat in mute silence. I had wanted to see a master sculptor mold a wax model with intricate hand work and Sampath had assured me that he was going to use the traditional method. So I asked Sampath about it, and he responded, “This type of clay molding, it used to be an age-old secret in our community. No one knew how to do it, but somehow, the secret got out.” It was true that I had seen

concrete and wooden block molds in many workshops all over Swamimalai. I had just assumed that it was the sign of technological progress, not 'tradition'. According to the narrative espoused by the Indian government and the handicraft industry, a traditional craft indicated a completely hand-made process and for Swamimalai bronzes, block moulds would not fit into that designation. For the Deputy Commissioner of Handicrafts, and the Tamilnadu Handicrafts Corporation, not to mention the eminent art historians and Indologists who wrote the value into Indian arts and crafts, traditional artisans are the repositories of this narrative. Sampath's challenge of this notion of tradition had obliterated my assumptions and theirs.

In the first chapter, I described how the governmental handicraft institution, Poompuhar, appropriates the museum narratives on Indian art and culture to construct contemporary craft practices as traditional and thus, commercially valuable. While this does help artisans by creating a market demand for the products of their labor, it also creates dissonances in their identity because of the paradox of tradition. As Michael Herzfeld and several other scholars have pointed out, "the irony of tradition [is] that it cannot exist except in relation to a self-serving concept of modernity" (Herzfeld (2003:18), and what this means is that the construction of bronzecasting as both traditional and economically viable is inherently in conflict. Herzfeld (2003:21) explains that when institutional narratives circulate, in which artisans are defined by their backwardness, especially in the service of nationalism, they are forced to conform to the dictates of this discourse and reproduce it. The Cretan potters who are the focus of his book, *The Body Impolitic*, are marginalized for being "primitive," and their own method of training

reinforces this characterization since it inculcates craftiness and insolence. A Cretan potter cannot learn his trade without undergoing the training that renders him into a stereotype. The Swamimalai sculptors share a similarity of circumstance to the Cretan potters, including the presence of a hierarchy of values in art and craft production, which has a significance beyond the European context on which Herzfeld focuses (McGowan 2009; Myers 2005; Steiner 1994; Wood 2000). This “global hierarchy of values” is a structural classification that exists at a global scale, according to Herzfeld, and involves a hierarchy based on the value of aesthetics that crystallizes into class categories. As a result, often, the individual taste of an artisan themselves is discounted as too common or tacky as seen in the ethnographic anecdote described by Soumhya Venkatesan (2009b:136) in which a Pattamadai mat weaver’s personally designed mat is rejected for a National Craft Award in India by the selection committee made up of elite connoisseurs of art and craft for being too garish and inauthentic. This discounting of the tastes and preferences of artisans goes in line with the dismissal of their day to day realities. To be “traditional,” Swamimalai sculptors have to produce without using technologies that index modernity, and create bronzes that are iconically paralleled by the medieval bronzes found in museums and temples. But this is neither possible nor desirable.

Dr. Santosh Babu was the newly appointed Chairman and Managing Director of the Poompuhar Chennai office in 2014 when I was conducting my fieldwork in Chennai. With a medical degree and another in business, he was ready to tackle the challenge of developing the business prospects of the hitherto sluggish corporation. The yearly profit for the corporation was around thirty crore rupees (approx. 4,100,000 USD), but the new

plans targeted a turnover of a hundred crore rupees (approx. 13,700,000 USD). Santosh Babu believed that design and marketing were the key areas where Poompuhar could improve its performance. “I see two possibilities,” he told me after explaining how because many crafts and especially the bronzes were considered “divine”, no contemporary designs were being attempted. “We do not produce anything for modern holidays, like Valentine’s day and Mother’s day. We also do not have light and cheap souvenirs, like key chains, and paperweights. We need to start thinking about how to take advantage of these two avenues.” But Dr. Babu did not think that artisans could really help with this. “What we need is innovation right from the stage of design,” he declared. “But our artisans are traditional and cannot get out of the design rote they operate out of. So we are planning to start a university and a design center, and get people from the National Institute of Design, people who know CAD, and who can make designs for artisans to manufacture. We cannot ask artisans to do creative work; they will only do what they are used to doing. That is where we come in. Our new motto, which I have asked to print everywhere is, ‘Hand in Hand with our artisans’, so we want to help them in their business and also promote the handicraft.” This perspective of a traditional artisan as one without creativity and one who cannot change strongly resonates with Herzfeld’s findings in Crete, and Venkatesan’s in India. One of the employees at Poompuhar Chennai reiterated this point telling me how he used to describe the traditional method used by bronzecasters as “primitive” until his old boss corrected, saying he should use the phrase “age-old method”. He explained, “She told me to be proud of this, that primitive is the wrong word.”

The very fact that bronzecasting was revived in the past is obscured in the governmental narrative. For example, Poompuhar's marketing literature mentioned in the first chapter describes bronzecasting as having "continued uninterrupted till today [...]" (Poompuhar 2000:12). However, the 300-year colonial period saw hardly any temple-building or patronage of religious arts. Considering that the 1961 *Census of India* (Nambiar 1964) found just 26 sculptors in Swamimalai, who were described as economically struggling, the craft and its practitioners had definitely fallen on hard times. P. K. Nambiar further notes that only two sculptors of those 26 admitted to knowing the *Shilpashastras* and having copies of the texts. Nambiar (1964:9) emphasizes, "Even those who possess, do not understand the different manas or measurements indicated therein" and that "Not a single Sthapathi knows anything about the uses of lambamana or plumb line measurements in the actual making of their images" and concludes that they have not even heard of the lambaphalaka, a measuring board mentioned in the *Shilpashastras*. As one might expect of a revived craft community, bronze casters have undergone systemic changes, not only in the composition of the artisanal population but also in the technology they use and the style of bronzes they produce.

There is also, as the introduction described, the change in the sculptor population in terms of caste. The Poompuhar Training Centre started in 1962 admitted students of all castes. Thus, today in Swamimalai, there are more sculptors from castes other than the Vishwakarma. I had met with Mr. Premkumar, the Regional Manager at the Chennai Poompuhar, to know about the future plans that had been drawn up by the newly appointed Chairman and Managing Director. While talking about his experiences in the corporation,

he mentioned how difficult it had been for him to do a survey as an enumerator ten years ago in Swamimalai, when he had to ask questions about the caste and income of the sculptors. During his survey, he found that there were more sculptors from agricultural castes, such as the *vellala* community. The interaction with respect to caste, Mr. Premkumar said, had become sensitive. “When we had to pick an instructor for the Poompuhar Training Centre, it had to be someone who would be welcome all castes,” he explained. “There was a government meeting of artisans and one invited participant would not eat with others because he felt uncomfortable. We could not have something like that happen, so it was important to find the right mentor.” This is especially pertinent because the Poompuhar Training Centre in Swamimalai admits students from Dalit and Scheduled Tribe backgrounds, and these historically marginalized and mistreated communities continue to be discriminated against. Thus, the membership in the artisan community has shifted quite a lot in the past few decades, primarily due to the efforts of the government and the attractiveness of the handicrafts market.

The Swamimalai bronzes are supposed to use the *cire perdue* or lost wax method of bronzecasting. Many scholars have studied this process from technological, metallurgic, art historical, and archaeological perspectives (Davis 1999; Dehejia 2007; Levy et al. 2008; Nagaswamy 2000; Sinopoli 2003; S. Srinivasan 2015; Vogel 2000). The lost wax method is detailed in a few of the *Shilpashastras*, which are considered the foundational texts on all the Indian Hindu traditional art forms, specifically in *Manasara*, *Shilparatna*, and *Kasyapa*. Furthermore, the bronze-age Indus Valley metal sculptures such as the Dancing Girl are also considered to have been made in the lost wax method, thus lending a

prehistoric²¹ antiquity to this process in the South Asian region. The antiquity of this process means that it has been historically practiced without the use of complex machinery. For the craft industry and organizations such as Poompuhar, this translates as a process that is all hand-work, and therefore firmly under the category of handicraft. When the Indian government began to implement nation-wide handicraft engendering policies in the 1950s, it based the details of its plans on the census surveys it conducted in various craft communities. P.K. Nambiar (1964:8), who was responsible for the 1961 census of Swamimalai sculptors describes the process he found in the town as “in no sense an improvement on what is described in the Manasara” and that the “tradition and technique have survived unchanged.” At the Poompuhar showroom in Chennai, the bronzes are displayed in the first floor on the right, an entire room stacked from floor to ceiling with bronzes, both bright and dull. The signboard hoisted on top of the main central display of the bronzes reads,

The most famous of Tamilnadu's art forms. They represent a rare combination of beauty and power emphasized by variety and range and command reverence and praise by virtue of their grandeur and adherence to Shilpa shastras. The art has continued uninterrupted for more than 1000 years and even today the 21st century bronzes continue to be truly representative of the Pallava and Chola art forms, making them an invaluable heritage of the past.

It continues on to list the names of various religious idols (Nataraja, Ganesha, and so on), and describes solid and hollow bronzes.

²¹ Whether script-based writing existed in the Indus Valley civilization is a much debated issue. The thousands of seals found in the various sites of the IVC contains symbols that have not yet been deciphered. Some scholars do not consider them to be a language-script at all, while others definitely consider them to be so and have been attempting to detect if the language articulated is a proto language that can be linked to Indo Aryan, Dravidian or other language families. Also detailed in the previous chapter.

Thus, the governmental efforts to popularize this art emphasized the unchanged nature of the technique and the emphasis on handwork. Yet, in the 60 years since then, much has changed. The turnover necessary to maintain a viable business in the current capitalistic handicrafts market makes it crucial to cut out large portions of the hand work. Swamimalai sculptors have access to faster burning fuel and plaster moulds that significantly cut short the duration of the process. Machines that scrape away at the casted metal and buff the surface to a polish have not only shortened the time involved, but also replaced the need for workers with chiseling and scraping skills. Sharada Srinivasan (2015:215) also mentions that some workshops use dilute nitric acid to clean the fired surface of a casted mould for urgent orders instead of scraping away the scorched parts by hand. All sculptors use a mechanized furnace blower during the casting process instead of the obsolete hand blower. Thus, it is inarguable that the lost wax method has evolved with technological advances and is not an “unchanged process” as Poompuhar advertises it. Even the staff at Poompuhar Chennai are aware of the technological changes that have occurred as well as the shifts in the organization and specialization of labor. Mr. Premkumar, the Regional Manager at Poompuhar, had warned me when he heard about my plans to go to Swamimalai, “If you go to Swamimalai, you will find that no artisan there knows how to do every stage of the process. There are only specialists.” While it was true that most of the workshops had workers specializing in different stages of the process (wax work, mould making, casting, cleaning, metal work, and polishing), there were also smaller workshops where one or two sculptors would do all of the work. These were just not visible to Poompuhar, which stocked its galleries with bronzes made in its own

production center and from the large workshops who could manage the scale of demand. To the earlier point, although the people working at Poompuhar were aware of the ground realities, the institution was invested in promoting the heritage discourse, examined in the first chapter.

In terms of iconography, the colonial interruption of the art had brought about stylistic discontinuity in the bronze images. While art historians have created stylistic typologies for bronzes from the 8th to the 17th century, bronzes from the colonial era have not merited equal attention because they are considered to have deteriorated in artistic quality, particularly because of the lack of patronage. The bronzes made now in Swamimalai are a bricolage of antique replicas, individualistic variations, and what the sculptors refer to generically as “the temple style”. While some bronze casters do create replicas based on photographs of antique museum and temple bronzes, this is a specialized skill that not all sculptors possess. Those who are not capable of making exact replicas instead extract identifiable elements from antique bronzes, and use them in their own individualistic creations. Temple bronzes, on the other hand, are highly polished icons with large faces and ample proportions. When dressed in ceremonial finery and flowers for use in ritual procession, the faces of these gods shine far and bright.

What defines a traditional bronze is subject to interpretation. Is a bronze traditional if it looks exactly like a medieval bronze but is sold as a handicraft? Is a bronze traditional if produced for a temple even if it looks different from medieval bronzes? Is a bronze made by a trained artisan traditional if he claims to be an atheist? These are questions that contemporary sculptors struggle with, and the discourses of the state, whether they are

meant to help or not, complicates the existence of sculptors, raising questions on the authenticity of their self-representation. The previous chapter dealt with the history of the Vishwakarma in general and also the discursive response of the community which included building a caste archive. I argued that Vishwakarma were creating narratives about the past to situate themselves into a social position that they preferred. As per Ricoeur's theory of "narrated time", humans establish links with the past through narration as time can only be accessed through language. One of the links to history are the traces from the past, which according to Ricoeur can be texts, monuments, archives and so on. But what about intangible knowledge, performance, and belief? Bronzes themselves are material traces of the past, but the way in which they were made and the qualities of the people who made them are only assumed through the *Shilpashastras*, which are prescriptive, not historical texts. This chapter examines how sculptors in Swamimalai who are Vishwakarma attempt to connect with the past through performativity rather than texts and traces.

Performing Authenticity

In a street called Rajaveethi (King's street) in Swamimalai, there are many bronzecasting workshops, but two stand out, not just on account of the large and impressive name boards that declare their presence, but also because of their inexplicable proximity. Why are two large bronzecasting workshops that do the same work so close to each other? Modern business logic would dictate that they spread themselves out, especially in a town known specifically for sculptors. The story of these two workshops

not only explicates the reasons for their proximity, it also reveals the ways in which history and tradition play out and have to be performed by the sculptors in Swamimalai.

Sri Jayam Industries is one of the pre-eminent bronze casting workshops in Swamimalai, and is visited by customers, many of whom are politically and socially influential, picking up orders placed for temples they patronize, or for personal worship at their home. The declarative, large name board at the head of the entrance features a 3D sculpture of a bronze, and spells out “Sri Jayam Industries” as well as “S. Devasenapathy Sthapathy Sons” bracketed by an image of Devasenapathy Sthapati doing what he did best – sculpting. Understandably, the workshop is referred to with both names, the latter the name of the late founder of the workshop and the former, the name he gave it. Currently, it is run by his three sons, Radhakrishnan, Srikandan and Swaminathan Sthapati. Specializing in making only religious bronzes, for temples and homes, the brothers are well-versed in the measurements and iconographies described in the *Shilpashastras*, as well as in astrology which is used to determine the right idol for the right patron, although only Radhakrishnan Sthapati is trained in Sanskrit. Radhakrishnan studied at the Government College of Architecture and Sculpture in Mamallapuram, which offers a four-year Bachelor of Technology course in the traditional arts. These qualifications and the decision to make only religious bronzes have gone a long way in establishing the brothers as the real deal, the bastions of traditional sculpting in Swamimalai. South Indian bronzes were, after all, originally temple idols. Thus, a workshop that only produces bronzes for temples is establishing a connection to the past.

“We looked everywhere for the right sculptors,” declared Ramanan as he sipped the filter coffee that all guests are served at Sri Jayam Industries. A middle-aged man, Ramanan owns a flooring business in Chennai. He had commissioned a bronze figure of the goddess Amman for his office’s prayer room because an astrologer had recommended it. “Everyone told me that if you wanted an original bronze, you had to come to Swamimalai, so one day, my family and I drove down here to find the perfect sculptor, and we did,” explained Ramanan, who had returned to Swamimalai now to witness the metal casting. When Ramanan arrived at the workshop, Srikandan Sthapati, who sat by a pillar carving a bronze, took only a few seconds to recognize him even though this was only the second time that they had met. “Oh, look who it is!” he exclaimed, standing up with a laugh and clasping Ramanan’s hands. “Do you see who has come?” he rhetorically questioned his younger brother Swaminathan, who sat nearby making wax models. “Do you recognize him?” Ramanan laughed along, exchanging pleasantries. Although the visit is pre-planned, the theatre of receiving guests with surprised pleasure not only puts Ramanan at ease, but also makes him appreciate his sculptor-hosts. Later Ramanan commented, “You can just tell from the way they treat their customers that they are the real deal. You can tell that even just from the way they look.”

The appearance of a sculptor, indeed, goes a long way in defining the extent to which he is deemed “authentic”. The brothers of Sri Jayam Industries are almost always dressed in a white *veshti* (sarong-like leg wear), and a white undershirt, over which they wear a short-sleeve shirt if they are heading out. As Vishwakarma, they wear the sacred thread (*poonal*) across their torso, a marker of religious status also worn by the Brahmin caste.

Their hair always oiled and combed, they prominently sport religious markings on their foreheads. This is a uniform of a sort for Vishwakarma artisans and those sculptors who prefer to be seen as “traditional”. For Ramanan, the brothers’ appearance immediately signalled authenticity. This was in contrast to his experience elsewhere: “We went all over the town,” Ramanan related. “In other workshops, they would show us their bronzes, but something just did not look right in them. But when we came here to this workshop, one look, and I knew we will give the order here.” This is especially noteworthy, because Sri Jayam Industries charges more than most other sculptors. Ramanan confessed the cost made him hesitate, but not for long. He thought it was worth the authenticity.

Another sculptor explained the importance of the right appearance to me, one day, when I had asked about the role of religion in bronzecasting. The sculptor, Ragavan Sthapati, attributed it to the culture of the country and the industry. “In India, you have to demonstrate traditional culture. Look at priests in temples. If they were not dressed the way they are, would you take the *prasadam* they give and feel that it is from god?” he asked me rhetorically, *prasadam* referring to the blessed offerings such as flowers, and a red turmeric powder (*kungumam*) and an ash powder (*vibhuti*) that are applied on the forehead by devotees. Ragavan reiterated, “If a regular guy with short hair and a striped shirt gave you *vibhuti*, you will take it to be polite and then throw it away when you leave. It is the same for us. When a person sees us, they must feel that we are spiritual people. Otherwise why would they expect us to make sculptures of gods properly? I do not actually go to the temple often and I do not wear a sacred thread, but I will still try my best to show that I am a person of religion.” Ragavan was indeed dressed much like the

Devasenapathy brothers, in a white *veshti*, white cutoff vest, which he would cover with a shirt after work. His hair was well oiled and combed, and he always had the *kungumam* mark on his forehead, all signs of a man of religion, even if he did not practice the ways of the religion.

The vestments are not just an index of caste and tradition; they are also a connection to the past, which Vishwakarma sculptors believe was a time when only members of their caste practiced bronzecasting. Allusions to the past are aplenty amongst Vishwakarma sculptors and it usually takes the form of familial reminiscences. Seated on a reed mat and drinking filter coffee, I asked Srikandan Sthapati about the history of his workshop, Sri Jayam Industries, which had been started by his father around sixty years ago. This was not my first conversation with him. We had met several years earlier, even before I started my graduate program, when I had visited Swamimalai with my family on a pilgrimage. My father had wanted to buy a bronze for worship and he had been led to the Sri Jayam workshop by a journalist friend from a nearby town. Srikandan Sthapati took my father's order and made an Abirami bronze for him. When I met him again several years later, he looked exactly the same – a short man with a belly, neatly combed hair parted sideways, and one lazy eye. He remembered every detail from our earlier visit – my father's name, his job, his order. Srikandan Sthapati has a good memory, and he likes to talk about the past.

“When my father was still alive and managing this workshop, one day he met the Mahaperiyavar,” he began, referring to the late Head of the Kanchi math, an esteemed leader of an important religious institution. “He heard about this workshop from my father

and told him, never change any piece of this workshop. Another time, the great Ganapati Sthapati²² came here to look around and he said the same thing: to never change anything, especially the lowered center because that is incredibly rare and old and is never seen anymore.” Srikandan Sthapati always seemed to be near tears when he talked of his father, who had also been his teacher, and whom he holds in the highest regard. Thus, when his father became old, he told his three sons, of whom Srikandan Sthapati was the second, to promise to never alter the main workshop, and they have kept their word to this day. The moral obligation to be true to the wishes of their ancestors runs strongly in the Devasenapathy household. Even today, when Srikandan Sthapati is working in his workshop, carving away at a god’s face, he always keeps near him the last, unfinished work of his father’s – an Ardhanari (half Shiva, half Parvati) sculpture. He likes to point it out every now and then and marvel at the technique that must have resulted in so beautiful a form. When I asked him if he would finish it, he sighed, and said no. It will always remain an unfinished masterpiece, a work in progress, a memorial for his father. These strains of paternal devotion and a melancholia attached to a craft where perfection always seems impossible in the present are recurring motifs in the stories of many of the sculptors.

One of the older buildings in Swamimalai, the workshop is a long, rectangular tile-roofed house supported by several strong wooden pillars and divided into two main work areas and a couple of smaller office rooms. In the first work area is the much-praised

²² Ganapati Sthapati was a prominent Vishwakarma sculptor, teacher, and scholar, who translated the *Vastu Shastras*, the treatises on architecture, from Sanskrit to Tamil and English, and led the planning and building of the first traditional architecture and sculpture college in Mamallapuram, Tamilnadu. Mamallapuram is the town of stone sculptors and has been researched in detail by Sam Parker (1992, 2003a, 2003b). More on Ganapati Sthapati in Chapter 5.

sunken center, in which its owners, Radhakrishnan, Srikandan and Swaminathan Sthapati, sit and make wax models surrounded by the twenty or so workers they employ chiseling and carving at the casted metal sculptures. Photographs of the family ancestors and the bronzes crafted by the brothers are displayed against the thick walls. A hundred-odd bronzes lie strewn across the workshop, some clearly finished and ready to be picked up by their buyer, their plastic covers enhancing their shine while masking their shape. Others are works in progress being chipped away by the metalsmiths, and still others have been set aside for later. This extends into a long second work area, which is a garage-like structure with a high roof and uninterrupted space with work stations informally segregated by task, marked by the tools lying around. For all the accolades the brothers shower onto the workshop for its traditional layout, the fact remains that it only recently celebrated its 60th anniversary.

Sixty years is not long time when it comes to a craft that has been practiced for over a millennium, and with a family that traces its lineage back the same amount of time. But there is a reason for why the workshop is relatively young. Devasenapathy Sthapati, the father of the brothers, grew up working in his father, Srikandan Sthapati's²³ workshop, along with his three brothers, Karunanithi Sthapati, Ramalingam Sthapati and Pranaavam Sthapati. This was a large house that used to be across the current workshop. It makes sense for children, especially male, to be involved in the work from a very young age

²³ The circulations of names, people, and objects strengthen the bonds between these families, but they also create tension when one branch does not do as well as the other. Srikandan Sthapati is not the only one named after his grandfather; the repeated names within the community can get very confusing, especially when multiple generations are still alive and when competing family lines name their grandchildren after the same ancestor. Resentment can also crop up when extended families feel left out by the more successful relatives. I have explored more on these feelings of animosity in Chapter 4.

because the delineation between workshop and domesticity is a thin and informal line in family-run bronzecasting workshops. Many sculptors still follow this model where their backyard and interior parts of their home is used as a workshop (For more on workshop layouts and organization, see Levy et al. 2008). The backyard is essential because of the use of the furnace and molten metals in the casting process. Families change – they split up, die off, gain new members, move away, and so on. And thus the workshop too is carried over in the labor and domestic arrangements of the sculptors. The late Srikandan Sthapati was a master sculptor but he died young, leaving behind his four sons, the eldest of whom, Devasenapathy, was 11. Along with his brother, Karunanithi, Devasenapathy became the heads of the relatively large family and their father’s workshop, while taking care of their younger siblings. Eventually, when the brothers were older and married with children, they decided to go their separate ways, with Devasenapathy starting Sri Jayam Industries, and Karunanithi Sthapati starting Kuberan Icon Industries. As their businesses had needed larger spaces, they had moved across the street, establishing workshops next to each other. Their ancestral home was eventually split up to be shared between the sons of the brothers. The lack of primogeniture means that a family workshop rarely stays pristine and in the family line. It gets split up and renovated generationally. Thus, place is transient in Swamimalai, and those marked as traditional are created through stories and effort.

Sculptors share a similar fondness for Swamimalai for its history, even though their settlement at the town started, similar to the Devasenapathy workshop, later than expected. No one knows when exactly bronzecasters settled in Swamimalai. “We first built the big temple in Thanjavur,” explained Balamurugan Sthapati, the son of Ramalingam Sthapati

(brother to Devasenapathy and Karunanithi Sthapati). The big temple is the Brihadeshwara temple, a UNESCO heritage monument consecrated in 1010 CE, around 40 kilometers southwest of Swamimalai. It is the first of four royal temples build by Chola kings. The others are the Gangaikondacholisvaram temple (1035 CE), the Airavateshwara temple in Darasuram (12th century), and the Kampaheshwarar temple at Thribuvanam (1176 CE), all located in the Thanjavur area. Balamurugan continued, “Then, we moved to Darasuram to build the temple there. And then, eight generations ago, we moved to Swamimalai.” The Swamimalai temple, as mentioned earlier has a vague history, but received significant updates during the Nayak period (16-17th century). I had several sculptors muse over when they arrived in Swamimalai, and they usually conclude that it was probably around then. The history beyond a couple of generations becomes ephemeral for these itinerant groups. Not so much for the Devasenapathy family, which was helped by the *Census of India* (Kurup 1967) to chart its genealogical tree back to eight generations (which the 2001 Census updated to nine), which explains Balamurugan’s confident claim about his family’s migration to Swamimalai. Sri Jayam’s website (declaratively titled sthpathi.com) narrates the history of their family as so:

Most of such icons are manufactured at Swamimalai by the sthpathies belonging to Viswakarama Community. These sthpathies are said to belong to Gingee in North Arcot District and their services were utilised by the famous king Raja Raja Chola for construction of the famous Big Temple (Sri Brahadeeswarar Temple) at Thanjavur. After construction of this great temple, a group of sthpathies under the leadership of Akora Veera Badra Sthapathy migrated to Swamimalai. (Sri Jayam Industries nd)

Beyond the community, personal feelings also play a role. Valli is a middle aged woman who looks too young to be a grandmother. She is the only daughter of Karunanithi Sthapati, and sister to Kuberan and Mohanraj Sthapati. Her attachment to Swamimalai is

born out of her devotion to the Swaminatha Swamy who resides in the temple (and who is the namesake of the town), and her lifelong appreciation of bronzecasting. “Even when I got married and went to live in my mother in law’s house, I just did not like it there. I felt like I was leaving everything behind. Please let me live in Swamimalai, I asked [her]. Buy me a house here and I will live here itself, I told [her],” she said, after inviting my mother and I to sit in the living room of the old house she lived in at Swamimalai. Perhaps it was the presence of my mother, a woman of similar age to her, that prompted her to open up about her feelings of loneliness and longing after her marriage. Her husband, who is also her mother’s brother, worked abroad, which contributed to her loneliness, but it was also because of her missing Swamimalai. One of the reasons for her sorrow at leaving Swamimalai was the temple. The Swaminatha Swamy temple was right at her doorstep, and she would wake up to the bells and chants of the early morning darsan. The silence of her mother-in-law’s house felt wrong to her. The second reason was her father’s work. “I really like my father’s *thozil*²⁴,” Valli continued. “My biggest sorrow is that I cannot do my father’s *thozil*. So, I was adamant that my son would follow in his footsteps. I made him stop his work. He was getting a degree in engineering. There are so many people in this world who get these degrees, but there could be only one person who would learn this craft from my father and it had to be my son. This boy was going out and working but I made him stop and learn this craft and now he is as good as my father,” Valli smiled contently. “To live here [in Swamimalai] and do this work is something to be proud of.”

²⁴ Tamil word for occupation/vocation/work/craft.

While describing how her father had to start working at a very young age, Valli also explained how that could help a sculptor. “My grandfather was a great sculptor, but he died young, so my father and his brother had to start working from the age of ten. But that was the way of the past. You have to start learning at a very early age to become good at this work, especially the wax modeling.” This practice of learning at a young age is rarely practiced outside of Vishwakarma families since often, this kind of pedagogy begins informally with the children observing their father working and playing around with the wax. Formal training in sculpture for individuals from non-sculptor families is only given to teenagers, since it involves apprenticeship at a workshop and the government has banned employing children under the age of 14. It is also rare to find an entire family involved in bronzecasting unless they are Vishwakarma, although that condition is slowly changing. Thus, Valli’s mention about the past was more than just a strain of nostalgia; it was also a reference to an age-old pedagogical practice that is still practiced amongst Vishwakarma families albeit rarely. The current dwindled practice is not as important as the weight of the past that literally enforces the potential of a Vishwakarma sculptor’s labor. Although Valli herself never learnt bronzecasting, she involved herself in the business of it, converting the front of her house, which faces the main street leading to the temple, into a bronze gallery. Everyday, I would walk down this street and see the front of her sparsely decorated shop, a contrast to other galleries in Chennai and Thanjavur, as well as the vessel shops in Kumbakonam, that were overpopulated with shiny wares stacked so wide and high that it felt dangerous to walk in between the makeshift lanes. This gallery

was in addition to the ancestral workshop on Rajavidhi mentioned earlier, which was being run by her brothers, Kuberan Sthapati and Mohanraj Sthapati.

Kuberan Icon Industries shares a lot with Sri Jayam. It shares a wall, as do the homes of the cousins on the opposite side. It shares a similar layout but without the sunken centers and the pillars in the first work area of Sri Jayam. It has a much busier second work area or perhaps it appears busier because it is a smaller space than its counterpart. It has a second story unlike Sri Jayam. It is also run by brothers, albeit only two. “S. Karunanithi Sthapathy’s Kuberan Icon Industries” says the large signboard on top of the workshop accompanied by an image of Karunanithi Sthapati working on a Nataraja bronze, the dome of the LOTUS (Light of Truth Universal Shrine) temple in Virginia, which was built by him, and, understandably, the big temple of Thanjavur. Mohanraj Sthapati and Kuberan Sthapati not only take on bronze orders; they also construct temples. In the first workspace, the inner walls are all covered with several paintings done by Mohanraj Sthapati, but they are all paintings of bronzes. Only one man works at sculpting a bronze in this space; it is mostly filled with finished bronzes that can be sold immediately. Every now and then, customers would come in and ask for a particular god, and one of the brothers would look through the stacks of bronzes and pick one out and show it to the customers. Many times, they would purchase it as is and leave.

Mohanraj Sthapati is the only sculptor in Swamimalai with a doctoral degree in sculpting from the Thanjavur University. Approaching sculpting from an academic perspective is rare in Swamimalai, so I asked him why he decided to get such a degree. “Interest!” he exclaimed, his dark eyes sparkling. Mohanraj is around forty years old, his

hair still dark and long though receding and combed tightly towards the back. He is also usually dressed in a white shirt and white *veshti*, but unlike his cousins, he delegates the sculpting work, preferring to immerse himself in the archaeological and art historical literature on bronzecasting and Vishwakarma history. A patient and quiet man, he was delighted with my presence in a way that not many of the sculptors were. All the sculptors were welcoming and Srikandan Sthapati would comment every now and then how amazing it was that I was staying for months on end to learn about the craft. People usually only stay a couple of days or a week – how much I must be learning, he would exclaim. You will know more than all of us at the end of it, he would joke, as I would deny, deny, deny. But Mohanraj Sthapati's appreciation was that of a colleague. Whenever I would visit him, he would be sitting in his small office at the front of the workshop, its clear window facing the street. Crammed to the ceiling with books and sundry metal objects, it looked like a professor's office. "You learn how to get other people to work for you," he told me one day, when I asked him about whether he did any sculpting work. "Delegation!" he declared. "From the middle rung craftsman, everyone in a workshop asks a person lower in the hierarchy to do something for them and they unquestioningly do it. I think the only ones who do so survive for many years in a workshop." For Mohanraj Sthapati, the greatness of bronzecasting was all in the past, and he found it, not in recreating the bronzes of the past or running a traditional workshop, but in books and religion. The first time I met him was when I had just completed an interview with Srikandan Sthapati and asked him if I could be introduced to his neighbor. Srikandan Sthapati immediately called forth one of the workers to accompany me to the neighboring

workshop and introduce me to his cousin. Mohanraj Sthapati nodded several times once I was introduced and smiling, asked questions about my education. When he heard about my research, he walked over to a filing cabinet and showed me an article he had saved from a local newspaper about “sculpture day”, an international celebration. “There is nothing for sculptors anymore,” he told me, “there is something for workers, but not for sculptors.” Mohanraj was commenting on what he saw as the decline in the art of sculpting and the quality of sculptors. The apex of the art was during the Chola period, he explained, and the work from now does not come close. This was because of the kind of market everyone had to work in.

Thus, for Mohanraj Sthapati, being a Vishwakarma became less about the practice of sculpting and more about unpacking the knowledge of the art and the history of the caste to lay the foundations for the future he envisioned. On one of my last days in Swamimalai, Mohanraj Sthapati asked me to come see him because he wanted to show me something. When I met him at the workshop, he said that we were taking a trip. His car driver drove us to the outskirts of the town to a less populated area, where we got down next to an enclosure crowned by a large signboard that said “S. Karunanithi Sthapati Sirpa Kalai Araichi Maiyam” (S. Karunanithi Sthapati Sculptural Arts Research Institution) and under that “Shilpa Kalakshetram” (Sculpture Academy). Topped by the phrase, “கடல் மல்லை முதல் களஞ்சியம் வரை சிற்ப கலை,” the signboard also had images of the Shore temple from Mamallapuram, a bronze Nataraja, and the quintessential Brihadesvara temple. It also included the address of Kuberan Icon Industries as the head office. “This is my work,” gestured Mohanraj. “See what that line says?” he asked me of the Tamil phrase on top of

the sign board. “கடல் மல்லை (kadal mallai/pride of the sea) is Mamallapuram and the pallava history. Thanjavur and the Cholas are களஞ்சியம் (kalanjiyam/repository or treasury). This institution is about the best of sculpture, from the Pallavas to the Cholas.” Inaugurated in 2000, Mohanraj explained that the original plan was to install a museum, but since then he has changed his mind. Now, he wanted it to be a university. “For research,” he emphasized, “not for people.” What Mohanraj envisioned then was a scholarly institution, where sculpture would be pursued academically, not practiced.

“It has become a business,” complained Mohanraj about the bronzecasting industry. This was a common refrain amongst many of the older sculptors and also some of the younger ones. “I do not think sculpting should be taught for another twenty-five years,” said Mohanraj seriously. “We have enough people practicing.” The buildings themselves were a work in progress, with differently sized rooms, which were presumably offices for scholars at work. Unable to resist bronzes though, Mohanraj had a small gallery in front, which had a few bronzes as well as a painting. The painting was of a bronze, a Kalyanasundarar (Shiva), which Mohanraj had painted in oils, much like the other ones decorating the walls of his ancestral workshop. “This place is about what *we* want to say, not what the government wants to say,” he explained as the institution’s purpose. The government, according to Mohanraj, helped reenergize the craft, but at the cost of making it into a business, not to mention the inclusion of sculptors of other castes. “When people from other caste do this *thozil*,” explained Mohanraj, “they do it for convenience, for money. They take what they want out of this *thozil* but they do not put anything back in. I want my university to be a place where only people who are truly interested in the art

aspect and the research aspect can take part.” Mohanraj was one of the few people who had been clear about his stance on other caste sculptors practicing bronzecasting, but this was something that was clearly in the minds of many of the Vishwakarma sculptors.

However, in such a construction of the art and its practitioners, Mohanraj Sthapati was leaving out some important bits of the story, including the ambiguous history of the Vishwakarma and the question of whether artisans in ancient South Asia identified themselves through caste or guilds. In Swamimalai itself, Vishwakarma sculptors competed in the commercial handicrafts market and as described earlier, it was not by practicing an age-old practice, or by recreating medieval sculptures. Srikandan Sthapati, had told me about the three rules his father had set out for his sons when they were about to take over the workshop: to not use middle men; to only make bronzes for temples and worship; and to never change the workshop. While these rules appear to be an effort to keep with the old ways, each of these dicta have helped the brothers establish a business that thrives in the current capitalistic craft market. By making themselves directly available and answerable to their customers, the brothers ensured that their name is strongly associated with Swamimalai bronzes. It is not an exaggeration to say that most Hindus visiting Swamimalai first go to the Swaminatha temple and then make their way to the Devasenapathy workshop either as old customers or as new ones (much like my own father). What complements their carefully preserved workplace and practice is a state-of-the-art management system assisted by two air-conditioned offices with computers, a printer, a fax and the internet. A small showcase designed to display smaller icons faces seats where guests can wait and perhaps make impulse purchases. There was also the fact

that while Sri Jayam mostly made temple bronzes, sometimes they also made decorative bronzes. The bronze for which Devasenapathy Sthapati had won a National Craft Award in 1984, and the bronze for which Srikandan Sthapati won a State Craft Award were not made for temples. The brothers also make decorative bronzes for customers from particularly elite backgrounds.

Both Mohanraj Sthapati and the Devasenapathy brothers live in today's world and thus have to compromise. But this Sculptural Arts Research Institution was going to be Mohanraj Sthapati's legacy. "We leave things behind when we die," he said. "Kings of the olden days left behind temples; politicians have statues of themselves built for them. There are a lot of bronzes in a lot of temples, but who knows who made those sculptures? That is why I want to start this research institution." But Mohanraj's attempts to establish a connection with the past did not stop with the creation of an institution that would research it. He himself had started doing the work. For the past several years, Mohanraj has been communicating with Vishwakarma from other parts of the country, most of whom were not artisans, but scholars and writers. It was through his introduction that I met Subramaniam Achariyar, the Vishwakarma who was collating a caste archive and circulating rare literature by and on Vishwakarma. Thus, slowly, Vishwakarma from Swamimalai were reaching out to the diasporic population and forming links on caste lines, perhaps because of the increasing awareness that their ties to the craft of bronzecasting was stretching thin. This sense of anxiety associated with the loss of their identity also transformed into accusations of lack of fealty to the caste, explored in the next chapter.

The Hazards of Authenticity

In 2016, a Tamil movie called *Iraivi* was released. Directed by a young and lauded filmmaker, Karthik Subbaraj who was previously known for irreverent takes towards genre films, there was much anticipation surrounding the movie. When it came out, the reception was mixed, with some lauding it as a new kind of feminist movie, while others decrying it as a failed effort at centering the struggles women face in contemporary society. The movie is about toxic masculinity, and the ways in which men take women for granted, or exploit and abuse them, by prioritizing their own feelings and needs. However, the reason why I brought this movie up here is because the main plotline involves a family of bronzecasters, who are never explicitly referred to as Vishwakarma, although they are indexed in many ways as so. Two of the main characters in *Iraivi* belong to a family of sculptors, although the practice seems to have stopped with their father. The father wears clothing that would not make him out of place in Swamimalai. Their house is filled with bronzes inside and out, some present to beautify the place, but others clearly forgotten, perhaps orders that stalled or clients who did not pick them up for whatever reason. The elder brother is a failed film director whose finished film is held ransom by a producer who is willing to sell it to him for a large amount of money, and the younger brother deals in antiquities and decorative objects. In one scene, the younger son has asked his father's friend and accountant for some records from earlier decades. The accountant is too loquacious in his explanation and losing his patience, the son says that he does not need to hear these useless stories. "Useless stories," the accountant exclaims, "Do you know what a great sculptor your father was? The only Tamil sculptor to have won the Bharat Kala

Ranjan award. You are his son. What are you going to do to make him proud?" The Bharat Kala Ranjan award is fictitious, but the annoyance of the older generation with the younger, more recalcitrant generation feels real. In the next scene, the son's ambition is revealed: he has decided to smuggle a deity from a small village temple. When he confesses to his friend and colleague about his idea, the friend inquires indignantly, "What is this? We steal the sculptures that we ourselves made?" The son responds, "You can think that way, or you can think, we are sending the sculptures that your dad and my dad worked very strenuously on, from a place that no one knows about to a place where they will be prized." Later on, when the elder brother needs money to purchase his movie and the entire family including the friend and the accountant are discussing what to do, the younger brother suggests smuggling. "If we pick one or two of the sculptures made by our father, grandfather, his father, and smuggle them abroad, we can make the money," he says. The shocked accountant tells him that this is wrong, it is stealing, and the elder brother tells him that they will get caught. He responds, "No we will not, because we will not target a famous temple. It will be a small temple that is not maintained and people will not even realize that the sculptures are gone for a couple of years. Especially female deities, that we have made." While the others speak out in criticism, the father who had been silently sitting in the background intercedes and asks the younger son to explain further, indicating that he is, in fact, listening, and perhaps approving the idea. The younger son says, "Father, sculpture is such an important art. The sculptures that you worked so hard at are decaying. An artistic creation should never be in a place where it is not appreciated." The accountant responds, "What you are proposing to do is smuggling

but you are using words like art and creation to make it seem like something else.” But the father stands up and declares, “One creation will save another creation [namely, brother’s film]. This is not wrong. Do it.”

These scenes of moral arguments and the theme of Vishwakarma smuggling antiquities from temples are especially relevant today because of the flood of recent news reports and the media attention being paid to international smuggling rings. There are two ways in which this connects with the themes of this dissertation. One, the first chapter looked into how the museum operates in an economy of discourse and not commodities, while the craft organizations appropriate the discourse to be involved in the commodity market. So, where would we situate smuggled bronzes? These are objects resting in temples, that are not supposed to have commodity value and are not supposed to circulate except around the temple in preordained festivals and ceremonies for the main purpose of being *seen*. Instead when they are smuggled, they become economically valuable, are circulated internationally, *unseen*. The second point is how they feed into the general distrust of artisans and specifically bronzecasters, but in a way that the Vishwakarma community cannot really respond to with their historical constructions. The second chapter detailed the history of distrust against the Vishwakarma through texts, and how Vishwakarma today also respond to it discursively. The arguments exist in a discursive plane, which makes sense for dealing with the past, something that exists only in narratives, not in the actual. But the current accusations of sculptors being involved in smuggling is not something that can be handled through texts or even through discourse successfully. The discourse around smuggling is very current and pernicious, operating as

unconfirmed reports, police insinuations and raids, private interviews, and gossip. Thus, they impact the way sculptors are perceived, but the sculptors cannot substantively respond to the doubts raised. The next chapter accounts for how sculptors in Swamimalai attempt to use gossip as a discourse to battle aspersions cast on their character. For the rest of this chapter, I will explain the most well known cases of smuggling that have involved Vishwakarma and how it immediately impacts sculptors.

I woke up the day I was writing this chapter, and saw that my mother had texted me multiple times, both on Whatsapp and on Facebook messenger. And then my brother started texting me too. My stomach dropped as I furiously checked all the messages to see what had happened. “I have very interesting news,” my mother had typed. But my brother had just typed out the news itself: the house next to ours in Chennai had been invaded by the Chennai Idol Wing of the police department to look for smuggled antiquities. Buried in the garden, they had discovered 11 stone idols amongst other antiquities. The owner of the house, Kiran Rao, is business partners with Ranvir Shah, a prominent player in the Chennai cultural scene, being the founder-director of Prakriti Foundation, an NGO that funds and organizes theatre and dance festivals and other art-oriented events. The Idol Wing had similarly searched Shah’s house a week earlier and found 213 antique artifacts from his multiple residences. Four years ago when I was in India starting my fieldwork, my friend had suggested that I talk to Ranvir Shah about working as a consultant with him to catalogue his extensive private art collection. I decided not to. But now all I can think about is, what if I had?

The stain of smuggling is hard to wash off. There has been a history of antiquities from small, unknown temples being smuggled out by a network of operators starting with one of the most famous ones, the Sivapuram Nataraja, which had been smuggled out of a temple and sold to the Norton Simon Museum. The Sivapuram Nataraja is a 10th century bronze that had been accidentally found buried under the ground near the town of Sivapuram in Tamilnadu. As per the Treasure Trove Act of 1878, it was found to be ownerless and although the Government took ownership, the 44-inch bronze itself was given to the Sivagurunathaswamy temple in Sivapuram. In 1954, the temple authorities decided to send the bronze to a Swamimalai sculptor for restoration since it had some damage from being buried for hundreds of years (Pachauri 2003:274). This sculptor was Ramaswamy Sthapati, an esteemed bronzecaster who was at the height of his career, had been instrumental in getting the Swamimalai Sculpture Institute off the ground, and was the brother to Srikandan Sthapati, the father of Devasenapathy Sthapati. Thus, he was well-connected both in terms of the Vishwakarma and sculptor community in Swamimalai, as well as government officials involved in the handicraft industry.

The Antiquities and Art Treasures Act of 1972 (Government of India and UNESCO 1972) regulates the definition of antiquities and under what circumstances they can be exported; it is specifically geared towards controlling the export of antiquities by defining antiquities as any artifact that is over one hundred years old, requiring the registration of such artifacts if owned by a private person within India, and prohibiting their export unless specifically authorized by relevant authorities. For bronzes, this would be the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which has branches all over the country that

certify newly made bronzes as non-antique, especially ones that have been made to look like antiques. Sculptors in Swamimalai and mediators and gallery owners who want to export a bronze have to send the bronze to the ASI and an archaeologist inspects and provides a certification about its provenance. The certificate would need to accompany the bronze when it is shipped to its destination. Smuggling rings circumvent this process by procuring a newly made bronze that is a proximate replica of an antique bronze, get it certified, and use the certificate with the antique bronze which is what is shipped. This is also when bronzecasters become necessary for the operation.

The Sivapuram Nataraja stayed with Ramaswamy Sthapati to be restored for two years, until 1956, and when it was returned to the temple, it was not the original bronze anymore. The Sivapuram Nataraja had been sold for five thousand rupees to a dealer who sold it for a higher price to another dealer and so on, until it ended up being sold by Ben Heller to Norton Simon in 1973 for a million dollars. However, when Douglas Barrett, the curator of Indian Art at the British Museum, mentioned having seen the Sivapuram Nataraja in a private collection in his book, *Early Chola Bronzes* (1965), it caught the attention of the Tamilnadu Government who investigated the temple and found the idol in there to be fake (Pachauri 2003:274). The Government of India eventually filed court cases in the UK and the US in 1973 and an agreement was reached with the Norton Simon Foundation in which the Nataraja would remain at the Norton Simon museum for ten years as a loan and then be returned to the Government of India.

The indictment of Ramaswamy Sthapati, the Swamimalai sculptor in the Sivapuram case acted as a broad brush that could be used to paint the entire community as

potential accomplices for smuggling. Thus, even in 2014, when I asked a curator at the Chennai Government museum about possible collaborations with Swamimalai sculptors, his answer was a definite no. “They are not the same as the medieval sculptors,” he explained his rationale. “The people in Swamimalai now, they might have memorized the *shastras*, but they do not know the true meanings. But a good sculptor even today, if he sees an image, he can duplicate it. That is a problem for us, because we have the duty to protect these bronzes from criminal elements.” With an absolute refusal to ever publish any scientific investigation of the antique bronzes or a record of all the bronzes in the museum collection, the curator explained that secrecy was the only way to protect these bronzes, as it is sensationalism that puts them at risk. Even today in Swamimalai, sculptors speak of Ramaswamy Sthapati with both respect and as a cautionary tale. After being arrested for his role in the smuggling of the Sivapuram bronze, he was released after some negotiation with the Councilor of Kumbakonam, the closest city and municipality to Swamimalai. However, he never recovered from the shame and the strain, becoming bedridden. His sister, Rajamani Ammal, who was 92 when I talked to her in 2015, described the aftermath: “He became sick. He just could not get up from the bed. When he made a bronze, it would smile at you. Other sculptors, they make a bronze, it would look glum. But his bronzes smiled. He stopped making bronzes after that and just withered away.” Rajamani Ammal and other sculptors attributed Ramaswamy Sthapati’s deterioration to the fallout from the criminal indictment (which he escaped without a jail sentence), and the consequent loss of face and business. Ramaswamy Sthapati was unable to make bronzes

anymore and what is a sculptor if he stops making sculptures? No wonder he wasted away, they told me.

The fear of being marked as an accomplice to smuggling has continued in Swamimalai since then, but has taken on a particularly higher intensity since the recent upsurge in media attention towards antiques smuggling following the high profile investigation and arrest in October 2011 of a New York art dealer, Subhash Kapoor (Ilangovan 2014), who had sold antiquities to everyone from rich private patrons to international museums, including the National Gallery of Australia (NGA). The latter institution came under fire in 2013 for housing what was identified as a Nataraja smuggled out of a temple in Tamilnadu (Srivathsan 2013). The fallout from his arrest was enormous, raising questions about the provenance of many of the antiquities Kapoor had sold over the years, especially since he seemed to have been creating spurious documents. The Nataraja at the NGA was supposed to have been purchased by Subhash Kapoor from an American in 2004 according to its provenience documents and which also demonstrated that it had been exported out of India before 1976. That year is important because that is when the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act became effective. Since the Act prohibits the export of all antiques by private persons (only the Government of India and institutions that it has authorized to act on its behalf have the right to export antiques), any antique that has been exported after 1976 would have been done so illegally. Thus, Kapoor's provenience documents, which showed that the sculpture had been exported before 1976 provided a legitimate source record for the antique. However, according to the investigative journalism blog run by Jason Felch and Ralph Frammolino, *Chasing Aphrodite*, Subhash

Kapoor's emails showed that he had received photographs of the idol in 2006 that had been taken recently, which placed the idol within India. Then, the Chennai-based art dealer Deenadayalan was arrested, leading to an investigation into all of his clients, which included Ranvir Shah, mentioned earlier.

PonnManickavel, the Inspector General in the Idol Wing of the Tamilnadu Police is a true Madurai man. His strong convictions match his frank verbosity, and he has the piercing stare, a well groomed moustache, and the polished black boots that one expects an Indian policeman to possess. His team tackles the growing rings of smugglers trading in antique and often religious arts, stolen from temples to be sold to international customers, both complicit and unaware. "We just took down a minor operator in Kerala," he told me in the air-conditioned Chennai office which served as the headquarters of the Idol Wing. "We managed to seize a beautiful 16th century bronze and an older stone idol. Would you like to see the bronze?" he asked me casually, surprising me into stammering, yes, yes, of course, I would like to see it. I was surprised because in the one year that I had been working with the Government Museum in Chennai in my capacity as a researcher, I had never managed to see even a single bronze that was not on display. And here was a man responsible for the protection and retrieval of endangered bronzes making a proposition that the museum curators never offered.

"There are two main problems that are causing this rampage of smuggling," enumerated Mr. PonnManickavel, "one, the erosion of the caste system resulting in the loss of temple vanguards when young Brahmin men leave for alternative careers, and two, the total lack of transparency in the operations of the HR&CE and the museum." The

HR&CE is the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, a branch of the state government of Tamilnadu, which is responsible for the safekeeping and maintenance of some 36,000 temples all over the state. Recently in August 2018, a senior official at the HR&CE has been accused of misappropriating funds that were donated by patrons and devotees for the making of a temple's religious sculptures ("HR&CE official held for embezzlement" 2018), which also resulted in arrest of the temple Sthapati, M. Muthiah ("Palani idol theft" 2018). "The sculptors in Swamimalai, we question them now and then. They think that they are the genuine sculptors," he shrugged, as if disagreeing. "But there is no criminality there. One of our interests is that they make copies of old ones, but as long as they do not steal the idols themselves, it is not something we are that concerned with." However, PonnManickavel did not think that the Swamimalai sculptors were entirely without deceit. "They might say that an idol is antique and sell it to ignorant customers," mused the policeman, "but that is part of regular trade – nothing to do with us." Thus, although PonnManickavel, the officer in charge of investigating the smuggling rings does not really think that Swamimalai sculptors are a significant component of the criminal operations, there is a persistence of such discourse in general and also in Swamimalai. Unfortunately, the sculptors who are most at risk here are the ones who make replica bronzes modelled after the medieval and other antique styles.

One of the sculptors so impacted was Rajan, a sculptor who was not Vishwakarma and had owned a thriving workshop in Swamimalai, which he has since sold to a friend. I met Rajan in Mamallapuram where he had settled since moving away from Swamimalai, and he was wry but equanimous while talking about the obstacles he had faced there. One

of them had been when many of his idols which were antique replicas had been detained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) on suspicion of being real antiques when he had sent them to be certified as new bronzes for export. The archaeologist in charge certified them as antiques even though he knew otherwise, said Rajan. It was an underhanded plot to ruin him, done by corrupt officials and some of the other sculptors. Rajan had not been a quiet and easy-going sculptor in Swamimalai and had created problems for many of the Vishwakarma sculptors along cultural and religious lines (explored in Chapter 4). This disruption by the ASI resulted in him losing the international contract, because he could not ship the commodities in time and could not provide the clients with a timeline. The ASI could hold the idols indefinitely while an investigation was being conducted. This caused many lakhs of rupees in loss and put him in financial difficulties.

It is striking that Rajan specializes in antique style sculptures and is not a Vishwakarma. While Rajan believes that it is the latter that caused his rivals and enemies to plot against him, it behoves us to also question the role played by the replica bronze too. Both of these factors play out in the events concerning another sculptor, still working in Swamimalai, Satishkumar. Satish is a sculptor who loves the art of sculpting and is interested in exploring the boundaries of it. Thus, he not only works on temple idols, but also antique style ones, and even naturalistic sculptures. Self-taught and running his own workshop at the young age of 30, Satish's outlook is a strange mix of the philosophical and the cynical; Satish would talk to me about god, art, and the problems in the bronzecasting industry, all in one breath. Thiyagarajan, an older sculptor who has retired and is a mentor

of sorts to Satish told me one day that something was going on with Satish, that there was a dissatisfaction in him, that he was always worried even though he is in a good place now, financially and otherwise. Satish himself had reiterated this to me, lamenting about the problems in Swamimalai, one of which was what he perceived to be many people working against him. Obsessed with technique and with antique idols, Satish had started to experiment with recreating the green patina of the unearthed medieval bronzes. As the first chapter illustrated, this was done nowadays using chemicals, but Satish wanted to go further. He decided to create a bronze and then bury it for a few months to see what the effect would be. This news, unfortunately, spread outside his workshop resulting in people gossiping that Satish was working with antique smugglers. When his friends told him what was going on, Satish became rattled and immediately shut down his experiments and melted the bronze he had buried. Even though this happened at least a year ago, people still talked and now Satish was associated with the illegal antique trade. Even just a week earlier, I had been conversing with the owner of a sculpting workshop, who told me how much he liked Satish's work, but how unfortunate it was that Satish was going down the path of crime. "They will not let you do anything here," Satish grumbled to me about the toxic nature of the gossip in Swamimalai. "I really want to experiment and recreate an antique bronze, but then they put me on a terrorist list. They keep trying to treat me as if I am doing something illegal," he lamented. "You just need some guy to say, oh he is doing illegal bronzes, he is involved in smuggling, and it just spreads. They are constantly trying to bring me down." The insidious nature of such gossip, especially in the localized and tight-knit Swamimalai community is explored in the next chapter.

For an artist like Satish, it was difficult to indulge in what he saw as his calling when there were such threats looming around. His dissatisfaction is a result of his realization that these kinds of discourses are often insurmountable. Yet, he had to continue working on his bronzes and his techniques because not only is this his livelihood, but also his passion. One day Satish was telling me about the time he went to the Thanjavur museum to look at the old bronzes. “You can stare at them for hours, you know?” he exclaimed. “I kept looking at this Ardhanari²⁵, for 30 minutes, for an hour, and then the security guard came in and started questioning me. What are you doing? Why do you keep staring? You need to move on!” Satish was outraged, “They’ve put these bronzes inside glass cages. You cannot get near them, not even artists like us!” he seethed to me. And yet Satish keeps making antique bronzes day after day, experimenting with new methods to achieve the perfect look. “Those old men, they created something amazing and have given me a challenge,” he explained his tenacity. “He’s told me, here you go, try to do better if you can. That is how I see the past masters, the real masters.” The bronze replicas the Swamimalai sculptors create today are not mere commodities for sale for them. They are the objects through which the sculptors can establish a connection to the past that is lost to them in content and title.

²⁵ Popular Hindu bronze image of Shiva and Parvati split vertically down the middle.

Chapter 4: Wasteful Talk: Morality, Skill, and Boundary-Making through Small Town Oral Discourse

When I crossed the one-year mark of living in Swamimalai, I could sense that I was becoming less of a stranger to the sculptors and residents. So we would talk, not just on the more impersonal subjects like the ineffectiveness of the government's developmental activities, the history of Indian art, and the technicalities of bronzecasting, but also about caste politics and other bronzecasters. One day, I was observing the sculpture class in the Poompuhar ArtMetal Training Centre, intermittently chatting with the instructor, Veera Ragavan Sthapati, a Vishwakarma sculptor who had been appointed in the competitive 3-year position to teach sculpting in a formal setting to 15 students. A tall, portly gentleman, Ragavan had an innate gravity and contentment that sometimes I felt that he was physically establishing a bounded space of shelter and introspection in the cacophonous and chaotic government workshop. Situated within the Poompuhar Production Centre, the Training Centre was a tiny room, 4 x 6 meters, surrounded by the loud metal work room; a liminal hall housing a prayer shrine, finished and unfinished goods, and raw materials; and the large room where leftover wax models fought for space with metal and wax workers. Within that pedagogical unit, Ragavan would conduct lessons on iconography, drawing, and wax modeling, although most of the time I only saw him and the students being recruited to help out the workshop workers with the commissions that they did not have time for. Ragavan would sit in the class surrounded by those students who had been able to make it (usually around four, five having dropped out), and mold a small wax figure, helped by his favorite student softening a clump of wax over an open flame charcoal stove

(*kumutti aduppu*). Another student would be making tea for everyone in the workshop. That day, Ragavan was introspecting on his own student years, but also making declarative comments on the general state of affairs in his caste community, the Vishwakarma. Having lost (what they considered to be their) the caste rights to practice bronzecasting as their exclusive occupation, the Swamimalai Vishwakarma sculptors face tight competition from other caste sculptors who have been trained in the craft by the very institution in which Ragavan was teaching. The ability to mourn and critique a reality while actively participating in fostering the forces that made things that way is not seen so much as hypocrisy but inevitability.

“You know Chettiars,” Ragavan asked me. “Sure,” I said and described what I knew of the merchant caste. “They have the best system,” he continued, “When a son in the family gets married, the parents set up a shop and a house for him. For a year the father sits with the son in the shop because people only know the father, right? Not the son.” Do Sthapatis not also do this, I asked. After all, many of the Vishwakarma workshops I have been observing are family operations involving fathers, sons, and maternal cousins. “Sthapatis are the worst,” Ragavan declared, “They do not want anyone to prosper, not even their own kin.” In the meantime, an older man who was visiting Poompuhar and clearly on friendly terms with everyone sat next to us. He had been taking turns sitting with every worker and complaining about several aspects of his life. Each worker had commiserated while gently humoring him. Ragavan introduced him to me as a Vishwakarma from Karaikudi who does *kalasam* (temple tower topper²⁶) work. He handed

²⁶ [Web image of a Kalasam](#)

me his visiting card which said his name was Rasu Achari. Rasu joined our conversation and joked, “It is not Sthapati anymore, it is *sagathi* (waste, dirt, sewage).” Rasu did not like the new normal of the government supporting a caste-less society, at least in terms of occupational categories. He said that he wanted things to be the way they used to be. “Vishwakarma was the creator,” explained Rasu, “He was making things for the gods and we worship him as our *kula deivam* (caste deity). Other castes,” he continued, “they have too much *ugravam* (rage, disturbance, unsettlement, anger, aggression). They can be warriors and do well because they want to destroy things, but they cannot be good makers.” Ragavan immediately interrupted Rasu’s speech because of the very explicit caste talk and mischievously told Rasu that I was a customer. “Why do you think she is here?” he inquired, and said that I had come to order a *kalasam*. Rasu started to believe Ragavan and asked how big it should be and assured me that he was great at his work. Ragavan said “60 feet”, which is a ridiculous height for a *kalasam*. He repeated, “60 feet. It is for the White House. She has come from Obama and he wants a *kalasam* for his home.” Rasu, who had been briefly alert, looked disappointed and lapsed back into leisure.

This was not the first time I had encountered caste talk in Swamimalai and it would not be the last. However, between the acknowledgement of the criticisms against the caste and the complaints about post-independence secular policies, it was the former that was more striking. Why were Vishwakarma artisans who had a caste history of legally, politically, and religiously suing “society” (as seen in Chapter 2) for disrespecting them accepting and even participating in the criticism of their caste? I believe that Vishwakarma sculptors, faced with these kinds of accusations as well as their own dwindling numbers,

confront a quandary: How could individual Vishwakarma deal with the societal gossip that characterizes them as untrustworthy, when it is a fluid, amorphous, and long-lasting discourse? Secondly, what does it mean to be a Vishwakarma sculptor if they were not the exclusive practitioners of the bronzecasting tradition? In this chapter, I detail how the nature of gossip lends itself to be appropriated by Vishwakarma sculptors such that they are able to reframe ethics from its generally accepted meaning as moral behavior to a more vernacular understanding in terms of caste belonging and skill. In short, Vishwakarma sculptors, while participating in the gossip about the unethical behavior of their caste members, decenter moral behavior, and instead emphasize disloyalty to the caste and the consequent lack of skill as the real ethical failures. This act of vernacularizing ethics not only disrupts the societal discourse on the character of Vishwakarma, it also constructs the Vishwakarma as a community under attack, reinforcing their bounded identity.

Gossip as a Discourse

As a category of analysis in anthropology, gossip has had intermittent spotlight, with most studies focusing on its function in society as boundary making. In her ethnographic account of the Makah Indians, Elizabeth Colson (1953) noted that several families would compete for a higher social position through claiming a chief or two in their ancestry. This ensured that the family would secure a larger voice in the political proceedings of this tribe, living in Neah Bay, Washington in the 1940s. However, every claim was unilaterally rejected with ridicule and rebuttal, not just by other rival claimants but also by the larger polity. Colson was nevertheless impressed at the tenacity of an

individual unit amidst societal rejection. “From amidst this welter of boasts, insults, charges, and countercharges,” she wrote, “the investigator emerges with an amazement that each family is able to have faith and pride in its own blue blood though no one else in the village may be willing to recognize that the family has any standing in the tribe or possesses a single ancestor of note” (Colson 1953:251). Gossip was being used by the Makah people to regulate the overreach of the individual and establish the core values of the community.

Max Gluckman (1963) expanded on Colson’s conclusions about gossip’s social function: to enumerate the values and morals that provide the group a shared identity. Gossip helps a group maintain social cohesiveness and the reason why accusations of immoral or unacceptable acts are done behind people’s backs is because a direct confrontation would disrupt the appearance of amity. The very participation in the act of gossiping affirms an individual’s inclusion in the group as it requires intimate knowledge of people, of history, and the acceptance of the participation by other members. Gluckman (1963:314) illustrates this through the examples of academics, professionals and social elites, who can maintain boundaries through communicating about specific histories through specialized terminologies. Some scholars, thus, have a benevolent view of gossip, in spite of it being perceived negatively in most societies because of its often judgmental content. It maintains group solidarity, promotes amity, and sustains equality or hierarchy, depending on the structure of the group.

Robert Paine (1967:281), however, opposed Gluckman’s structural rendering of gossip, instead emphasizing the individual. It is the self interest of the individual, he says,

that motivates them to gossip. Paine believed that gossip should be defined as information management instead of moral cues, and individuals resorted to gossip because they believed that it could help them achieve power and status. While morality is the issue being negotiated, individuals feel it is in their self interest to achieve high moral status, and it is this motive that promotes gossip. But since this is basically an argument between psychology and anthropology (individual vs culture/society), both Donald Brenneis (1984) and Sally Engle Merry (1984) advocate for a complementary analysis at the societal and individual level. Merry (1984: 271) asks when is gossip taken seriously, that is, when does it cause individuals to change their behavior and found that it was only when “it can have social, economic, or political consequences,” meaning when it acts as a social sanction. In other words, the context of gossip determines if and how gossip should be studied. So you have scholars like Karen Brison (1992) who argues that in the Kwanga society in Papua New Guinea where talking is considered a prized skill, gossip is used by skillful talkers to achieve personal goals such as defending themselves against accusations, acquiring public support or sympathy, or downplaying the power and influence of others. Similarly, following James C. Scott, Niko Besnier (2009:17) has also illustrated how gossip could be used by the socially marginalized as resistance because it “is particularly difficult to repress or contain”. Scott (1987) calls it one of “the weapons of the weak” as it facilitates appropriation of mainstream discourse by the marginalized.

So what was the nature of the gossip I was coming across in Swamimalai? Was it establishing group boundaries through affirming common moral values? Was it maintaining order in the distribution of resources or status quo? Or was it being used by a

group that considered itself marginalized as a form of resistance to take control over narratives about its character? The gossip in Swamimalai was not bounded by the sculptor community, the Vishwakarma community, or the town. Fed by historical factors and reinforced by vertically operating institutions as explained in the previous chapters, the gossip circulating in Swamimalai is a metonymy. I argue that, in this context, gossip needs to be understood and addressed as a discourse. When a piece of gossip is unleashed, it establishes the parameters of discussion, the criteria considered significant, and the tone and vocabulary. Much like discourse, gossip cannot be categorically denied. However, one can conduct discussions within its framework, redefining meanings and decentering those criteria considered significant.

F. G. Bailey (2001) contends that political players who use “moral teams” often use denial and disorder as strategies to win an advantage. A moral team is driven by the need to uphold a “shared ethic” and its leader has the “monopoly [...] of the right to communicate with or to symbolize whatever mystical value it is that holds the group’s devotion” (Bailey 2001:82). Bailey contends that the caste system runs on such a premise where purity laws are maintained by denying certain communities the right to establish relations with other communities that are considered to be in a hierarchically higher position. If, however, the aspirational caste community is able to use economic or political power that it has gained recently to access a certain privilege that has been withheld until then (say, a ritual performed by a Brahmin priest), others in the system could deny the legitimacy of the achieved privilege by asserting the worthlessness of the symbol (for example, a Brahmin who provides services to the aspirational caste would be declared as

either not a real Brahmin or a Brahmin who has lost his legitimacy making his rituals worthless). In Swamimalai, Vishwakarma sculptors were reframing the gossip about ethical behavior by defining ethics in terms of loyalty to the Vishwakarma caste and the demonstration of aesthetic skill. This is a vernacularization of ethical behavior, which situates it in the very particular historical and cultural context of this caste and town.

Decentering Moral Behavior

At some point during my fieldwork, I started noticing that sculptors were talking more about others than themselves or their experiences. After a point, I became uncomfortable. How was I supposed to participate in a conversation as an ethnographer when the content of it was, if not malicious, at the least mischievous gossip? And since I considered myself to be a friend to some of the sculptors, how could I not? When I moved into the almost fully built apartment in Swamimalai to begin my fieldwork, I was visited by a man and his 10-year-old daughter whom I had never met before. They had come to see an apartment to decide if they wanted to rent one of the other unoccupied ones. I showed them around, served them coffee, had a pleasant chat about each other and the town and then they left. When I mentioned this to one of the sculptors I was interviewing the next day, he was aghast. “That man is a murderer!” exclaimed my friend, the sculptor. “Do not let anyone into your house, even if it’s daytime if you do not know them! He killed his brother for money,” I was admonished. “He brought his daughter? What was she like?” my friend enquired. After dealing with the shock of this discovery in terms of personal safety, I was struck by something. I was being included in the local gossip. Was I

being seen less as an interloping anthropologist, and maybe more as a member of the community, I asked myself. But at the same time, it was through the slander of an individual from the community that this was possible. My strategy to deal with the double-edged sword that my interviews were becoming was to adopt a position of curiosity irrespective of whether I had already heard the particular story or not. This meant I heard the more popular stories many times, but it became especially useful when it came to accounts of sculptors committing acts of fraud and criminality.

Near the end of my fieldwork, I had managed to talk to one of the more elusive Sthapatis in the Swamimalai area. Although he lived in a town only 8 kms away from Swamimalai, he had an active schedule and traveled extensively. Excited about this accomplishment, I mentioned to one of my friends, a Vishwakarma sculptor in Swamimalai about meeting this expert on Sanskrit aesthetic scripture and architecture, all of which are considered to be significant areas of knowledge for a traditional artisan according to the *Shilpashastras*. My friend immediately scoffed and said, “That guy is a *bayangara* (terrible) fraud. He tells everyone that he is of the Vengai subcaste under Vishwakarma but there is no such thing. They are just Pathars (goldsmiths) who started doing our work.” The other sculptor had told me about this subcaste and described it as a specialized branch of the Vishwakarma who focused on architecture. Irrespective of who was right about this, the Swamimalai sculptor’s challenge of the Vengai sculptor reveals what counts as a fraudulent act. The Vengai sculptor was misrepresenting himself in his caste category and in the Swamimalai sculptor’s eye, elevating himself, when in fact he

belonged to a subcaste that was hierarchically lower than the Sthapati subcaste that the Swamimalai sculptor himself belonged to.

My friend continued to describe the time he had been commissioned to work on a silver relief sculpture plate, which he tended to avoid because of the risks involved in holding precious metals. Since the sculptor was supposed to purchase the silver himself and work on it, the customer could claim any kind of theft or cheating on the sculptor's part. However, as the customer was a friend, my friend had agreed but said that he would only buy the silver; someone else has to work on it. The customer commissioned the Vengai sculptor to work on it, who ruined the piece because he used the wrong material to prepare the metal and used too much copper. "It was very disheartening and embarrassing and I had to fix everything," my friend confessed. "Those guys only know *Shastram* (the Sanskrit rules of iconography in the *Shilpashastra*). They do not know work. And they call themselves Vishwakarma. That is why they say only Sanskrit and theory is important. Look at the great sculptures of the past," he demanded, "Do you see Sanskrit when you look at them? They are made with hands, are they not? They show the skill of the artisan. Then what Sanskrit?!" My friend had been hopeful of the sculptor's claims matching his skill and these hopes were dashed. The fact that the sculptor was building his reputation on being a Vishwakarma and arguing that he was skilled because of his knowledge of Sanskrit made him the fraud, because in my friend's eyes, that man was clearly not skilled.

The positioning of representation as central to ethical behavior decenters untrustworthiness or moral behavior in the criticism against the Vishwakarma community. As F. G. Bailey, explained, this is a diversionary tactic; by discrediting the caste identity of

the Vengai sculptor, the Vishwakarma sculptor could claim that the lack of ethics in behavior could not be laid at the feet of “authentic” Vishwakarma sculptors. This argument works within the framework of the societal gossip about the general untrustworthiness of Vishwakarma, but it vernacularizes what ethics means by situating it within the context of caste identity and occupational ethics. While larger society has called these artisans to be deceptive because of their perceived tendency to cheat customers, the Vishwakarma sculptor in this incident instead has used that frame to criticize what he perceives as a misrepresentation of caste identity and a lack of skill, as the signs of ethical failure.

One of the oft-repeated pieces of gossip involved an old smuggling case in which a Vishwakarma sculptor was legally implicated. I was sitting in Sampath Sthapati’s workshop as he was putting the final touches to an idol. A grey-haired man in his 50s, Sampath had three sons, two of whom worked for him at his workshop, Sri Annam Industries, one was working as an engineer abroad, as well as a daughter who was in graduate school. A cheerful man with a strong work ethic, I rarely ever saw Sampath taking so much as a coffee break. He was complemented by his equally cheerful wife who would visit the workshop often because it was attached to his house and especially after the sons started working there. Bringing coffee and food for her family, she would often join in our conversation. One day, he was telling me about the various workshops at which he had worked when he mentioned being an apprentice several decades ago to the very renowned Ramaswamy Sthapati. Since I had read about that sculptor (Davis 2009) and his involvement in the Sivapuram Nataraja case from the 1970s²⁷, I asked Sampath if he had

²⁷ Discussed in the previous chapter.

been there when that had happened. Sampath said yes. “He made the replica, all right, and he was arrested. But he was able to get away without a criminal sentence by making an arrangement with the counselor,” he said, implying that bribery was at work. “Do you know how he got caught?” he continued laughing, “They gave him the photo of the Nataraja (Dancing Shiva) to work with and he did it perfectly. Only too perfectly. The antique idol had a broken flame but my master, he corrected that in his work. So when an American saw the bronze in the temple, he knew it was fake.” Sampath had started to shake his head as if disapproving of his ex-teacher’s conduct, but he was also smiling, as one would do with one’s precocious child – exasperated, but also a smidgen proud. I listened to the story with bemusement, having never heard these details before. I have still been unable to find out if that was indeed how the duplicity of the sculptor and the fake bronze at the temple was discovered, but for the purposes of this chapter, the facts of the case are irrelevant.

It was several days later while talking to another sculptor, Ramesh Sthapati, that I mentioned hearing about how Ramaswamy Sthapati got caught. I had wanted to verify the details. “Who told you that?” asked Ramesh, and not wanting to disturb waters, I said an old student of Ramaswamy Sthapati. But that was enough for Ramesh to declare him an ungrateful wretch. “He was given a life by this master,” said Ramesh alluding to his workshop and career, “and he turns around laughing about how that great man made a mistake. That is the problem with these people! No loyalty! You cannot trust anyone in this community!”

To recount these successive events, both Sampath and Ramesh are criticizing the

acts of Vishwakarma sculptors, Sampath of Ramaswamy Sthapati, and Ramesh of Sampath Sthapati. Sampath's gossip was explicitly about how Ramaswamy Sthapati's drive to achieve perfection led to his downfall, and implicitly about bribery and smuggling, although Sampath passed no judgment about those aspects. According to this narrative, Ramaswamy Sthapati was caught because he was too good a sculptor, both in terms of technique and dedication. In essence, a Vishwakarma sculptor acknowledges a criminal act by another Vishwakarma sculptor but finds the most compelling component of the story to be the magnificence of the latter's skill, and how his work ethic caused his downfall. This is a dismissal of what can be considered a universal ethical failure, namely, assisting in the smuggling of an antique bronze from a temple. Ramesh's criticism of Sampath, however, is about disloyalty within the Vishwakarma caste community. Sampath had not shown respect to his master, who was also a member of his own caste.

These sculptors are doing two things here: Both are appropriating discourse by agreeing with it and participating in it. Sampath is appropriating the discourse of the unscrupulous artisan, but decentering criminality to emphasize what really caused the failure of morality: the Vishwakarma's prodigious and *inherited* skill. So while societal gossip might tarnish Vishwakarma as unscrupulous, Vishwakarma themselves center the discourse on their knowledge and skill. Vishwakarma might not be moral sculptors in the sense of ethical norms, but they are sculptors who follow the right practice, meaning, proper and skilled sculptors. "Correct practice" is the closest approximation to the Tamil word used by these sculptors to define what they perceive to be ideal arts practice: முறை

(*murai*)²⁸. While Sampath does not deny the accusations of criminality, and consequently the societal narratives about the Vishwakarma caste being untrustworthy, he decenters it. Morality becomes an aside in this framing of ethics.

Ramesh Sthapati had more to say about Ramaswamy Sthapati, nevertheless. Although he had criticized Sampath's disrespect, Ramesh did not like Ramaswamy Sthapati. Talking about earlier times when his late father was working, Ramesh recalled that there were mostly only Vishwakarma sculptors working with a few exceptions. But, Ramaswamy Sthapati who was doing pretty well for himself was befallen by some bad business. "He took a vow then that he would bring this *thozil* to its lowest point," Ramesh exclaimed. "He brought everyone into this work – even SC/STs. He brought the ruin of this *thozil*." SC/ST²⁹ was the term used to refer to Dalit, tribal and other caste communities who have faced social, economic and religious discrimination from society historically. As implied in Ramesh's statement, they continue to be considered low in the social hierarchy. Ramaswamy Sthapati, thus gained Ramesh's accolades because he was an excellent sculptor, but his collaboration with the government that resulting in the starting of the Poompuhar Training Centre, made him person non-grata. This was directly tied to what Ramesh perceived as his disloyalty to the caste and the *thozil*.

²⁸ I will address the employment of the term *murai*, how it is defined, and the ways in which arts practice is negotiated in Chapter 5.

²⁹ SC/ST, expanded as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe, is a government category referencing the community that used to be labelled "untouchable", were renamed "Harijan (Children of Krishna/God)" by Mahatma Gandhi, and have themselves adopted the name "Dalit", meaning broken, as well as tribal communities. Historically one of the most cruelly treated "caste" (considered to be so impure that they were not even part of the caste system), the Dalit people continue to face violence and discrimination. A Poompuhar employee had in fact, confessed that because the government production center employed a few Dalits, it had consequently lost some temple orders when the clients came to know.

“Vishwakarma are the Worst”

Gossip about uncooperative and disruptive sculptors was plentiful in Swamimalai. When I mentioned to a sculptor about how another sculptor I interviewed in Swamimalai had received many awards for his work, he replied that the man bribed officials for the awards, knew nothing, and often came to him to outsource work that he himself has been given. I complained to another sculptor about the difficulty I was facing in securing a meeting with a reputable wax modeler and he explained that it was probably because that man could never be caught sober. An older, retired sculptor who looked broken and yet smiled gently had been wronged by his ex-student who turned his son to drink causing him to commit suicide. One sculptor refused to allow me to photograph any of his bronzes because at an earlier instance, such a photo had been used by his relative as an example his own work to secure himself a customer.

Sivaraman is a Vishwakarma sculptor who is related to several of the more successful workshops but has not found that kind of a financial success himself. “I did not learn from my relatives,” he said, “they would not teach me.” I was sitting in his roomy house in one of those rare occasions when I did not have to make a workshop visit, and on account of the domestic space, both his wife and mother were also present. His wife, a plump woman with a glowing face and a bold red *bindi* on her forehead had been shaking her head and frowning when Sivaraman talked about his relatives. She interjected angrily, “His own uncle would tell him, ‘Do not start your own workshop. Just do this *kooli velai* (manual labor). It is so much headache starting your own [workshop]’. They would keep talking like that and they kept him doing work for others all his life.” Historically,

Vishwakarma learnt bronzecasting from their older male relatives and this mode of instruction has continued in several households. Thus, Sivaraman had a right to expect instruction in his hereditary occupation from his uncle. However, negotiating such pedagogical spaces can be tricky since instruction is informal and like many apprenticeships, requires the student to be demanding and even sneaky. Michael Herzfeld's (2003) ethnography on Cretan potters details how apprentices adopt techniques of subterfuge in order to learn specific skills from their teachers, who try to keep such knowledge secret. There is a presence of a similar kind of secrecy in Swamimalai here, which I explore more elaborately in the next chapter. In any case, Sivaraman feels cheated out of a successful livelihood because of what he perceives as selfishness of his relatives. This was a common sentiment in Swamimalai.

The tight network of Vishwakarma sculptors often results in works spilling over from a bigger workshop to a smaller one. When a well established sculpting workshop does not have the time or does not employ the right person for a particular order, they call upon a relative who works at a smaller scale or is an employee in another workshop to do the work for them. This might just be the wax modeling, but it could also be the entire process. The larger workshop claims these pieces as their own, but this is often done without much thought given to individual authorship, which is a recent concept in this artistic tradition anyway. One of the reasons why it is difficult to research the history of artisan communities is because of the lack of authorial ascription given to them. In rare occasions, their names might be inscribed in the temples where they worked, but sculptors would never dare to inscribe their names on anything they worked on – after all, they work on gods, and who has the right to sign a god. But the practice of passing on work takes a

more marginalizing tone in the contemporary handicraft industry, and several sculptors had complained to me that their own family would steal their work and claim credit. Soon, I encountered such an instance. While interviewing a Vishwakarma sculptor from a renowned family, he spoke about this prominent business house that always bought sculptures from him. A gregarious man of above average height, and a bright smile, he was one of the few Swamimalai sculptors who consider themselves an artist in the Western mold. Many of the stories he told me were about his experiences in the art world, and his interactions with his clients, many of whom he had met at museums and elite exhibitions. “There is this very old artist. He has gotten the President’s award,” he told me, grinning, referring to one of the governmental awards given to traditional artisans every year. “But he could not satisfy the [business house] people. They did not like his work. So, one day he asked me why he could not when I could and I told him that maybe it is because he was not able to communicate through his sculptures. I used to work for another member of the [business house] so I knew exactly what they wanted and could give it to them.” Several days later, I had been spending time at another workshop, in which the nephew of this artist-sculptor worked. The nephew is an expert in antique-style sculptures and was showing me the almost-finished sculptures that would soon be leaving for fairer pastures. “This one is going to the [business house],” he said, naming the same one the artist-sculptor had mentioned. “They know our work very well,” he continued. “They actually send the order through my uncle, but they will tell him to ensure that we are the ones who actually do the work. If he sends something else, they will immediately know and send it back.”

Going back to the introductory anecdote in which two Vishwakarma artisans criticize their caste, I had initially thought that when Ragavan made his comment about

Vishwakarma sculptors not wanting their own kin to prosper, he had ignored the several family-run workshops in Swamimalai, but that was not the case. In an earlier conversation, Ragavan had made a more direct reference to the ways in which sculptors were looking out for themselves and their immediate family instead of their community (including affinal relations). Bringing up a very successful Vishwakarma sculptor family in Swamimalai, Ragavan had wondered out loud why they have not done anything to help their poorer relatives who live down the street from them. “Selfishness!” he declared. From Ragavan’s perspective, Vishwakarma ought to feel a responsibility towards the members of their caste and support them. The lack of this support was tied to the current state of affairs as espoused by Rasu, the *kalasam* maker – all castes were trying out all kinds of trades resulting in what he perceives as an occupational anarchy. The surprising thing about this accusation against the successful Vishwakarma family was that several of their relatives were indeed being supported by them either through employment in the workshop or through outsourced smaller commissions that the family did not have time to do. Several of these relatives had spoken to me about their more successful brethren with fondness and gratitude. That might have either been because that was what they felt or because they did not feel comfortable enough with me to air out their frustrations. On the other hand, Ragavan’s opinion about the successful Vishwakarma family could have been born out of hearing a singular complaint against the successful directed by a frustrated relative, or the perception that the Himalayan success of the family was evidence of them not sharing the gains. Whatever the case might be, these sculptors are cast as unethical because of their disloyalty to the Vishwakarma caste.

One day, Ragavan was describing the history of the Vishwakarma caste as he had heard it, when he paused for a second and looked at me inquiringly: “Have you talked to the Swami family yet?” I told him that I had. “Did they tell you that their family built the Thanjavur temple?” Yes, they had told me that. “Did they also tell you that their family built the Kallanai dam³⁰?” Yes, I said hesitantly, I thought they had. “Now tell me something,” said Ragavan, “Do Vishwakarma build dams? Who builds a dam? Is it a Vishwakarma or a Kothanar? If their family built a dam, are they Vishwakarma or Kothanar?” Kothanar is the caste that has historically been involved in manual labor, usually construction, and is considered to be on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. It is not one of the subcastes of Vishwakarma. Ragavan was critical of this family’s indiscriminating and unverifiable claim of what could be imagined as a communal past for all artisans. The ancestry of the Thanjavur temple is especially significant because it is one of the most famous historical religious sites in India and a UNESCO heritage monument. The medieval bronzes associated with the 10th century temple are hailed as masterpieces. To claim that as their own made the Swami family selfish and inconsiderate of the caste community’s position, pointing to the general decay of society. Not only was this evidence of ignorance of the history of the caste, it was also pointing to individual caste members doing whatever they can to get ahead at the expense of caste solidarity.

This sense of a degenerating present was echoed by other sculptors who reminisced about a quieter, but more meaningful past. Sixty years ago, there were only ten Vishwakarma families in Swamimalai, as the story goes, and everyone got along with each

³⁰ The Kallanai dam is in the Trichy district and services the Kaveri river (which also runs by Swamimalai). It is attributed to the 2nd century CE and is considered to be one of the oldest dams in the world still in use.

other famously. But the opening of the sculpture school, the incursion of other castes into the field, and the burgeoning craft industry changed many things. That an art had become a business is lamented by many, especially as a reason for the breakdown of their community. How could there be a community when the knowledge and arts practice that was supposed to be the fount of it was disappearing from the consciousness of its members? Older Vishwakarma sculptors and even young, emergent artisans know that they are not operating in the same world as their ancestors but the ways in which their livelihood was practiced was also the way in which caste identity was maintained. The changes in practice brought upon by the post-colonial capitalist handicraft driven market also changed the way the Vishwakarma studied the art, practiced it, and even comported themselves. Vidhyashankar Sthapati, an 80-year-old National award winning contemporary artist mourned to me about the younger folks' hairstyles. "We used to have longer hair and wear it as a tuft like the Brahmins," he complained, referencing the priestly caste. "But no longer. The hair is gone. People dress in pants and shirts. They do not even keep their family names". While in Swamimalai, the caste surname of Sthapati was prized and every practicing Vishwakarma sculptor used it, it was indeed slowly going out of vogue for the younger generation who were gaining degrees in computer science, engineering and architecture and seeking employment in more metropolitan cities like Bangalore and Coimbatore.

Comparisons were also constantly made about the neighboring town of Nachiar Koil some 10 miles away, which was also an artisan town specializing in the making of brass lamps. The brass-smiths of Nachiar Koil had formed an organization that negotiated

with potential buyers and maintained minimum rates that could be charged in an effort to protect its more vulnerable artisans. Sculptors complained about the lack of a similar organization in Swamimalai and blamed it on the ethos of the sculptor - they just could not work together. The Nachiar Koil brass-smiths, however, were not organized on caste lines – their union was based on a shared occupation. Swamimalai sculptors of other castes blame the Vishwakarma sculptors for disrupting any attempt to form an occupation group. Nevertheless, the fact that there is no Vishwakarma caste organization is also striking, especially since the neighboring states of Kerala and Karnataka both boast outspoken, politically mobilized Vishwakarma communities. As one sculptor told me, “It just will not happen. They will not join together and get along. They might talk about it but they would not really want it”. It is in this context of a degenerating caste society that the individual Vishwakarma complaints about the lack of cohesion in their caste reads as a call to delineate belonging. Society as it was known was breaking down; the older ways were not kept up; members of the caste were not helping each other. So what was the point of even belonging to this caste?

Casting Boundaries

Gluckman had pointed out the social function of gossip as boundary-making and for all the Vishwakarma sculptors’ gossip about each other and the disintegration of their caste, they were also actively excluding those who did not fit the appropriate indices with the help of the exclusionary potential of gossip. Varadarajan is a sculptor in his early thirties who started his workshop with his two brothers in 1998 and achieved significant

financial success. Crisply dressed in western attire when I met him for the first time, Varadarajan maintains an oak paneled office with an up to date computer system inside his large, airy workshop in which he is supervising the making of a 23-ft Nataraja, a feat never attempted before. Quietly spoken and confident, Varadarajan, who was not a Vishwakarma, explained how he was taught by a sculptor who was also not Vishwakarma, and described his journey to the present after the retirement of his teacher. He is admired by younger sculptors in Swamimalai, especially those who are not of the Vishwakarma caste, and several Vishwakarma sculptors have confessed to me that although every workshop has workers who leak business information to outsiders, that never happens to Varadarajan. Attributed to his charisma by outsiders, it is also because he cultivates an atmosphere of artistry, creativity, and commitment at his workshop. Workers are given free time to pursue a creative design and experimental techniques were encouraged. When I asked him why he gave his workers such leeway unlike other workshops I had seen around Swamimalai, Varadarajan credited it to the influence of his teacher.

Considering his clearly prodigious talent and general reputation in the town, I wondered if he had received any governmental awards. Varadarajan laughed and covered his mouth as if he had done something inappropriate. Then he smiled and said, "I'll tell you a story". This was his story: A few years ago Varadarajan had decided that he wanted to try for an award because he had been working on an innovative, impressive technique. When he was setting up his sculpture at the place where the judging was held, he came across an eminent older Vishwakarma sculptor from Swamimalai, who was also submitting a sculpture. When everyone was waiting for the judges to go over the

submissions, the politically connected sculptor spied Varadarajan and sneered, “Why, you are just a small boy!” implying that this award was out of his league. Milling around, Varadarajan happened to be standing next to the older sculptor, when the judge, a renowned Vishwakarma temple architect, who also happened to be a close friend of the older sculptor, came out of the judging room and started talking to his friend. He had not realized that the young man nearby, Varadarajan, was also one of the candidates. “What have you done?” the judge scolded the older sculptor. “What is this work? Why have you made this simple piece? It is not good at all!” The judge then namechecked Varadarajan, saying, “Someone by this name has made a piece and called it ‘The first piece in the world in this technique’,” and expressed being impressed. The senior Sthapati fell on the feet of the judge, apologizing, and Varadarajan felt so terribly humiliated on his behalf that he started to slip away. But he still heard the judge murmur, “I still selected you though, so you just look after things hereafter.” The selected sculpture went to Delhi where it competed with other handicrafts from other parts of the country. It was not selected as the winning entry and Varadarajan mused that these kinds of things probably cannot happen in Delhi. When a similar incident happened the next year, he decided never to participate in such events.

According to this story, the caste nexus between the Vishwakarma artisans had kept Varadarajan from acquiring a governmental award. Although these awards are meant to help and honor individual artisans, the way the bureaucracy and process works, it is often the well-connected that end up receiving many of the awards. Varadarajan’s point was that when it comes to bronzecasting, the Vishwakarma sculptors are very well connected, not

just because several of them have been political appointees for various positions in the handicraft sector, but also because they maintain links with each other and corral resources and power. Varadarajan's sentiments are also understandable when one considers what happened to his teacher, Rajan, for whom he had great respect and to whom he attributed a lot of his success.

The Atheist

There are two men charged with the degeneration of the craft of bronzecasting by the Vishwakarma community. One is the Vishwakarma sculptor who collaborated with the government to start the sculpture school which would open its doors to students of all castes. The other is Rajan. At the age of 20, home life had become untenable for the vivacious Rajan who decided to leave and find his own purpose in life. A friend's recommendation to go to Swamimalai led him there and over the course of a few years, Rajan got himself admitted into the Poompuhar Training Centre, kicked out of it, acquired an apprenticeship with two Vishwakarma sculptors one after another, got kicked out of both, and started his own workshop, which became one of the most successful businesses in Swamimalai until it incurred massive losses forcing Rajan to sell it to a trader. I had been told that Rajan was not a Vishwakarma, perhaps a Brahmin, definitely a Kerala artisan caste that was NOT Vishwakarma, an elephant mahout caste and possibly a merchant caste. The very first time I met Rajan in 2008, I was conducting a census survey of sculptors in which one of the questions asked for his caste. He had paused, smirked, and said, "Indian". He had been a smartly dressed man, a self-avowed bachelor, with curly

greying hair, a thin frame, and a joyous manic energy. When I met him again in 2013, he had retired to Mahabalipuram, a town 60 kms south of Chennai, which was not only a UNESCO heritage site boasting archaeological wonders dated to the 7th century, but also where a community of stone sculptors (a minority again being Vishwakarma) lived (For more on this community, see Parker 1987, 1992, 2003b). Having moved out from Swamimalai some five years ago, Rajan had set up a small workshop employing a couple of workers, which was a stark contrast to his old business, which had also operated as an informal school graduating 216 students. His manic energy had subsided for the most part but would spark up every now and then when he became interested in a subject. This time, I did not ask about his caste.

Mischief was tolerated for the most part in Swamimalai, but Rajan might have tried to push the limits one too often. “I lied to the Vishwakarma sculptors that I was one of them,” Rajan grinned unrepentantly, “and that is why they allowed me to join their workshop”. Lighter skinned and educated, Rajan could have passed as a person from a privileged background, although in Swamimalai and elsewhere, members of privileged status run the gamut of colors and have variable levels of schooling. Several sculptors had described Rajan to me as an arrogant trouble maker who acted without caring about the consequences, and who purposefully tried to bring in as many other caste individuals into the sculpture industry as possible as revenge for being rejected by his teachers. Rajan admitted to encouraging other caste students, but did not comment on the revenge theory. There was always an extreme binary in the comments about Rajan depending on whether it came from his students or other (and often rival) sculptors. His students had a worshipful

attitude towards him, even those who had fought with him around the end. Ragavan, the master at the Poompuhar school from the opening anecdote once pondered how Rajan was able to teach so many students considering he himself never finished training. “He became so bitter,” Ragavan reminisced, “and decided that he would only teach people who were not Vishwakarma, especially SC/ST.” Ragavan’s manner was gentle when he talked about Rajan, but his words became harsher and harsher. Echoing a couple of other sculptors, Ragavan declared that Rajan had wanted to destroy this craft.

The fact that Rajan had declared himself an atheist and joined the Dravida Kazagam, a rationalist political party popular with the Dalit caste, did not help things. Although the bronzecasting had becoming very commercialized, the bronzes being made were still gods, and sculptors in general respected their creations. Even at the Poompuhar workshop, which employed Christian Dalits, Friday mornings started with a prayer asking for a good day of work, and every worker participated in the ceremony. Swamimalai itself is a popular pilgrimage town which receives hundreds of religious Hindu tourists everyday. A sculptor told me about how Rajan became increasingly antagonistic towards religion, which might have stood as a proxy for everything establishment in Swamimalai. Rajan would break the leg of a deity and ask, where is my punishment? Had he forgotten that art had an inherent value, the sculptor asked rhetorically. It needs to be respected at least for that. Rajan had become all about the business, said the sculptor, and he had forgotten about *murai*. Rajan had made his views about caste and religion loud and clear in public. Gluckman would comment that amity had been broken. Rajan also held parties in his workshop where alcohol and meat was served. While Vishwakarma sculptors also indulge

in both, it is done in secret and is often a source of gossip. “I do not like secrets,” Rajan had claimed to me, which was apparent in his proceedings. Even if Rajan had been considered a part of the group on account of his success and reputation as a sculptor from Swamimalai, his refusal to demonstrate conformity in public made it difficult for anyone to make excuses on his behalf. More importantly, without any sculptor allies, who was going to protect him in the vicious gossip that had started to circulate about his private life and business practices?

Although considered to be an excellent sculptor by his students and customers, I have also heard disparaging comments from Vishwakarma sculptors about his work. Ravi Sthapati once called his technique “தந்திரம் (*thanthiram/trick/artifice*)”. Ravi’s argument is that eschewing the traditional methods that Vishwakarma sculptors use and claim to have done so since the medieval period, Rajan was developing short cuts to reduce the time and resources required. Furthermore, Rajan was opting for techniques that were all about grandstanding and flash. This was not proper sculpting according to Ravi. Rajan’s perspective, on the other hand, was that bronzecasting was an art and art requires innovation. The word artifice borrows the element of creativity from the term art. Can a traditional art not contain creativity, Rajan asked, what is wrong with trying new things? Considering Rajan’s inclination to break old conventions and innovate not just in terms of societal rules but also technological standards, it is understandable why he was seen as a destroyer of bronzecasting by the Vishwakarma sculptors, for whom the preservation of tradition was the core value of bronzecasting. A particularly good illustration of this conundrum is the dual tone 6 ft Ardhanari sculpture that Rajan made for the Indeco Resort.

The Ardhanari is a composite of the male god Shiva and his female consort, Parvati, both merged together split down the middle. A popular icon, Rajan's Ardhanari had a uniqueness: the female half was copper toned and the male half was brass toned. Rajan denied that any welding had occurred and claimed that the entire thing was casted as a single piece. In terms of the technological process, this is a masterpiece. Against the standards of the traditional rules of bronzecasting, it is a *thanthiram* (trick). The first time I met Rajan, I also encountered one of his favorite hobbies: magic tricks. An amateur magician, he liked to dazzle people he'd just met with disappearing coins, ropes that grew and shortened, and tiny sponges that appeared under the wrong cups. The experience of connoisseurship was important to Rajan, and that involved creating a spectacle that would elicit wonder. The same old sculptures were not enough nowadays. So for Rajan, *thanthiram* was necessary to evoke wonder in art connoisseurs and he did not see anything wrong in that.

In addition to the gossip about his slanderous life, there was also talk about his professional misdemeanors. Speculations began to arise that some of the antique-style bronzes in his workshop were actually antique bronzes that were being smuggled out of the country. Things reached a low point when a batch of his icons which had been sent to the Archaeological Survey of India to be certified as new bronzes were marked as antique by the archaeologist in charge (described in the previous chapter). Rajan suspected that underhandedness was at play and had to spend a lot of money and use his political connections to get things resolved. This did not help the gossip in Swamimalai. Within a year of this, a major project he had undertaken failed spectacularly. Rajan had decided to

make a 20 ft Nataraja in a single casting, the largest bronze that would ever be. He had made 6 ft and 9 ft bronzes before, one of which is the bronze at CERN³¹ (referred to in the Introduction). As per his disposition, he had invited several power players to witness the casting process when the molten metal would be poured into the clay mold. Alas, one of the chains that was lifting the crucible containing hundreds of kilograms of metal broke. The metal spilled all over the ground and became useless. The mold was broken, as were Rajan's financial resources and reputation. Gossip began to circulate that this was retribution from god for all of his blasphemous talk and acts, while his loyal students speculated sabotage. Rajan was never able to recover from this failure and sold his business. His favorite student, Varadarajan, several years later, decided to reattempt his master's mission, only the bronze would be bigger – 23 ft. He successfully casted the icon in 2013 and the finishing work is being conducted presently. I did hear a Swamimalai sculptor comment that it was taking a suspiciously long time to do the finishing work on this bronze and maybe there had been some flaw in the casting? I did not follow up on that wisp of gossip.

Rajan's outspoken behavior and unconventional views, exacerbated by his antagonistic stance towards caste and religion were all factors that led to his ostracism. However, the way in which gossip was used in Swamimalai to keep him at arms length, whip up hostile views, and ultimately cause mental, if not a physical collapse, demonstrates its exclusionary capacity. A boundary was drawn around "traditional" bronzecasting and that centered Vishwakarma ways of thinking. Rajan did not fit.

³¹ CERN Nataraja: <https://cds.cern.ch/record/745737>

Although Rajan is criticized even today in Swamimalai, everyone is eager to talk about him and are curious about him. His exclusion is material, but not discursive. However, the other sculptor who was also a victim of the marginalization powers of gossip has been occluded completely. Except for a single sculptor who is also a relative to this ostracized artisan, no one in Swamimalai even told me about their existence. While gossip around this sculptor most definitely exists, the communal decision to remove this person from any conversation with me was striking and sad because of the gender politics involved.

The Woman

Rajeshwari is the only woman sculptor in Swamimalai, and possibly the only one in all of history. The latter is difficult to say with surety because history and historians are forgetful of women. Born in Thiruvarur (50 km southwest of Swamimalai) in the 1970s, she married Ravi Sthapati in 2002. Having always been artistically inclined, Rajeshwari had taught herself to sketch and paint after a brief series of classes with an art teacher. Although Vishwakarma, Rajeshwari's family belonged to the goldsmith subcaste and women were never allowed in the workspace. Rajeshwari is shorter than average, and has a round face ready to burst into a smile or a frown, matching her fluid disposition. She remembers herself as being very quiet, introverted, and watchful as a teenager and attributes her decision to agree to marry Ravi whom she met just once, to her natural instinct. "Something told me that he would be right for me," she claimed, "and I was right." Ravi Sthapati is a compact man with an overbite, and an accident at a young age has made him hard of hearing. Seven years older than Rajeshwari, Ravi was still quite young

when he got married, but as the middle brother in a family of 5 (including two sisters), he was next in line in the conveyor belt of dutiful matrimony. Rajeshwari moved to Swamimalai after the wedding and lived with Ravi in his ancestral house, that shared walls with his married brothers' households. His youngest brother still lived with him and his married sisters were nearby too. The brothers worked together in their family workshop which they had inherited from their father, Swaminathan Sthapati, a large man with a big reputation. The family had always been poor though, since the father was mercurial in what orders he would take, and as Rajeshwari described it, the only person doing any work after the old man died was Ravi. The trouble had started even back then. Through a complex turn of events, Rajeshwari had been found as a possible bride for Ravi, but according to Rajeshwari, his immediate family wanted him to marry a relative since that would keep him bounded to his existing affines. Rajeshwari was a Vishwakarma, but she was not from Swamimalai. Thiruvarur is a bigger town and Rajeshwari has a college education. Rajeshwari was an outsider, but she thought her quiet reserve might have made the relatives think that she would suit their family. "They made a miscalculation, didn't they?" laughed Rajeshwari.

I first met Rajeshwari in 2008 when interviewing another sculptor who mentioned that I should talk to a couple who worked together in their workshop. I did not think much of that since I had already met a woman who did basic metal work. That woman, Sarasu, has started doing menial work in workshops to support her family after her husband had passed away and was taught how to do the work of scraping the top layer of a newly casted bronze. It was tough, monotonous work, hard on the eyes and hands, and Sarasu had been

an exemplary worker. I had assumed that this wife did similar work and helped the husband out with maintaining the workshop. I was wrong.

When the newly married Ravi caught his bride drawing realistic portraits, he became curious and decided to keep her with him while he did wax modeling, feeding her bits of wax to work with. He had not anticipated that Rajeshwari was a natural talent who would not only pick up the techniques involved in wax modeling, but excel in it at such a capacity that Ravi, who himself is an astonishing wax artist, would leave all of the wax work to her in a few years. The husband and wife team would sit quietly next to each other and work on different components of an order, exchanging critiques on each other's work in between discussing household matters. But the family was not happy about the way things were going, especially Ravi's focus on his bride instead of his brothers. Rajeshwari suspected that they were afraid that she would "steal" their brother away, the brother who was the basis of their survival. Disagreements started small but grew so big that when I met them, Ravi and Rajeshwari were living in a separate house in a different street from their family residence. Although I was a stranger, an outsider, and was only there for a month, Rajeshwari was desperate for company and friendship because there was no one in Swamimalai that she could or would talk to. The couple had sequestered themselves in their small home and Rajeshwari refused to go out entirely, except for shopping trips to the nearby town and to her mother's home in Thiruvarur.

While Rajan had not liked secrets, Rajeshwari avariciously sought privacy. "I would never open the door," Rajeshwari explained of her behavior as a new bride. "I would not speak to the men and I always offered help to the women but I did not really

speak with them either.” This also translated into a distaste for gossip. Rajeshwari preferred direct confrontations and when she started hearing stories being told about her by her new relatives, she decided to put a stop to it by confronting them directly. “I marched into their house- I was so angry, do you think I would have ever done something like that- I just marched into their house and told his sister that she needs to stop this mischief. You want to tell me something, tell it to me directly. When have I ever denied you anything, I asked her. She did not say a word.” But Rajeshwari’s inability to participate in gossip meant that she did not know the everyday happenings that one would need to know while dealing with fellow community members. Her obvious dislike of it also marked her as someone who considered themselves to be above the locals. The main problem though, according to Rajeshwari, was her immense and obvious talent in bronzecasting. “They could not take it, the men AND the women. This woman, an outsider, comes here and she is better than all of us?! They hated that and still do.” Rajeshwari recounts the times when other sculptors would try to sneak a peak at her work, mine her for information, and finally try to use the more affable Ravi to get access to her work. With Rajan, the community could criticize his work because he eschewed the proper standards of arts practice. But Rajeshwari followed the traditional ways, was religious, and a Vishwakarma. Of course, she was also a woman.

Rajeshwari has many stories of the aggrievement she underwent because of her affinal family but the one that seems to be most enraging to her was about a more distant relative, a Vishwakarma sculptor who was very successful, respected, and popular as a town leader, being educated in Sanskrit and formally trained in the arts. But Rajeshwari’s

respect for him shriveled when she came upon his interview in a Tamil magazine in which he had been asked if women could learn to sculpt, and he had responded that it was impossible because their fingers lacked dexterity and delicacy. “He has seen my work!” exclaimed Rajeshwari in anger. “I have seen him sit stunned in front of a Murugan statue I did. He could not take his eyes off of it and even though he had come to our house to invite us for a wedding in his family, he was so disoriented that he forgot all about giving us the invitation and left without exchanging a single word!” And yet, this sculptor had talked about women sculptors as if they were hypothetical. And yet, no one in Swamimalai told me about Rajeshwari even though I repeatedly asked them if there were any women sculptors practicing this craft.

If the practice of gossip could include or marginalize individuals, what happens when you are completely excluded from it? Are you not considered to even be a member of the community anymore? To be fair, I am referencing only those exchanges that sculptors had with me, an ethnographer who lived there on and off for two years. Although many of those relationships became friendships, I was always perceived as the student doing a silly project on things that either everyone already knew about or could not possibly be interested in. Yet people were unbelievably helpful and generous in giving their time and resources to help me. So it was startling that even in that spirit, not a single person mentioned Rajeshwari as a sculptor I should know about and interview. The fact that I was visiting Ravi and Rajeshwari’s house every other evening, and it was a block away from where most sculptors lived meant that they at least knew that I was aware of her existence. Thus, the denial to speak about Rajeshwari was a choice to exclude, to ostracize.

Rajeshwari is not one of us, they seemed to be saying. She is not part of our discourse.

Just as Rajan reacted to the gossip and the ill will he perceived towards him with flight, Rajeshwari also withdrew to the extent she could. First she stopped leaving her house, then her room, and when a particularly violent fight between the brothers caused their molds to be broken, Ravi and Rajeshwari decided to leave the street, moving into the house in which I first met them. Making gods is their sole purpose in life, they've both told me, and since it would be difficult to continue making bronzes if they moved away from Swamimalai, that was out of the question. Even today Rajeshwari prides herself on her seclusion. "There are people in this town who have not seen my face in five years," she claimed proudly. "I used to walk with him [Ravi] but I stopped that too. I did not want to see the faces of many of those people." The husband and wife continue to make bronze sculptures, some of the most beautiful ones in Swamimalai, and are extremely protective of their space, work, and connections. "This is an awful caste," they have both told me. However, sometimes Ravi likes to reminisce about his younger days when his father and uncle used to make amazing sculptures. Rajeshwari listens eagerly to these stories even though she must have heard them many times, and she would interject questions as if it were the first time she was asking them. "Do you think he would have liked me?" she would ask Ravi about his father. "Of course! He would have been shocked and impressed," Ravi would answer. "I know people ultimately disappoint you, but these men were the great masters of recent years," explained Rajeshwari. "Maybe they would have been the same as the people here now, but I would have still liked to have met them." Both of their reluctant loyalty for the Vishwakarma caste is apparent though when it comes to their

familial duties. They still go to every religious or social ceremony their family holds. They have offered money and kind as is their duty during those occasions. They even voted for the man who offended Rajeshwari with his comment about women sculptors. “Well, he is Vishwakarma,” exclaimed Ravi. “What else could we do?”

Conclusion

While theorizing about the strategies of political players, F. G. Bailey (2001:87) contends that while normative rules are established and enforced by “authorities”, the common person wants to either win or at least “beat the other fellow despite the constraints and restrictions which the authorities seek to impose”. So individuals often disrupt proceedings when it looks like they might be on the losing side since it would stop their loss from being finalized. Gossip is a disruptive discourse: it cannot be controlled or pinned down, and it creates enough chaos to derail a planned or incidental sequence of events. Rajan’s path towards a successful career was derailed by gossip as was Rajeshwari’s aspiration to become an acknowledged sculptor. Vishwakarma sculptors disrupt societal discourse about their caste by appropriating it through gossip but although they are able to decenter moral character from being the primary criteria for evaluating ethical practice to valorize skill/*murai*, the end result of their verbal politicking is to aggravate each other to the extent that their very caste, the fulcrum around which their identity as artisans is built, becomes an albatross.

Chapter 5: The *Murai* of It All: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Arts Practice in Swamimalai

The famed Indologist Ananda Coomaraswamy (1909: 47), relates a story from the *Mahavamsa*, an epic poem about the history of Sri Lanka, of a master bricklayer who was asked by King Duttha Gamani to describe the monument he had been commissioned to build. Although until then the craftsman had not thought about it, in that moment he received divine inspiration from the god Vishwakarma. The bricklayer splashed a palmful of water onto a water-filled bowl and when “a great globule, like a ball of crystal, rose to the surface [...] he said ‘I will construct it in this form.’” The creative source of a South Asian craftsman’s art, according to the *Shilpashastras* stems from when an artisan goes inward, into their interior self to receive divine inspiration (Acharya 1994). However, the *Shilpashastras*, which are artistic treatises that contain the descriptions, processes and codified rules for the practice of various arts, are themselves also considered to be the foundational texts for South Asian art traditions. This contradictory discourse of arts practice in which both imagination and sacred technical manuals coexist imitates the contemporary dilemma of traditional artisans which was explored in Chapter 3; that is, sculptors needing to demonstrate authenticity as traditional artisans while also having to succeed in a capitalistic handicrafts market. The insidious gossip that has permeated the industry and social consciousness about artisans being party to the illegal smuggling of temple antiquities, and the Vishwakarma community’s sense of historical marginalization complicate this situation. Perhaps this is why throughout my fieldwork in Swamimalai, the one word that was consistently used by all the sculptors to index aspirational values, be it

in arts practice, commercial success, or morality, was *murai* (முறை), which can mean method or practice, but also the right method or practice.

So the South Asian artisan has to straddle the lines between a divine imagination that can manifest in a moment, and following the rules established in the *Shilpashastras*, which can seem contradictory. But even more importantly, artisans who are practicing these kinds of traditional crafts today have to also succeed in a competitive capitalistic handicrafts market. This chapter interrogates the concept of *murai* and argues that it stands in as much for arts practice as it does for ethical practice. I argue that *murai* is conceived as the right action that can lead towards goodness, where goodness is not understood in terms of virtuous character or being. This is why Swamimalai sculptors conceive *murai* as something that is aspirational, something that is lost, and something that should be kept a secret.

The anthropology of ethics usually examines the good over the right, and this is tied to the theories on ethics that are used to explicate ethnographic findings. Michael Lambek's recommendation to center virtue ethics in anthropological studies makes sense in this regard since virtue ethics, as the name signifies, centers the cultivation of virtue, however that might be imagined in various communities. Ethnographically, virtue ethics allows for a vernacular diversity in interpretation of what the good can mean, while also providing an overarching theoretical framework. The sculptors of Swamimalai, however, do not prioritize the good so much as the right. The historical marginalization that they perceive, as well as the institutional and societal narratives that implicate them in criminal activities, interpellates the Vishwakarma as well as other caste sculptors into subject

positions that have cause to demonstrate virtue or goodness. But as the previous chapter elucidated, the Swamimalai sculptors neither see virtue as something important nor as something that is demonstrable. Thus, what Swamimalai sculptors pursue is not goodness in outcome or character, but rightness of practice. Considering the practice-centric identity of sculptors and the scholarly emphasis on the tangled relationship between the artisan and their work, an ethical being centered on the right practice is eminently sensible.

John Rawls (1999:21) considered the good and the right to be central to determining the nature of any ethical theory, writing, that “The structure of an ethical theory is, then, largely determined by how it defines and connects these two basic notions.” Teleological theories prioritize the good and make the right depend on its ability to maximize the good. Rawls (1999[1971]:22) considers these to be appealing since they simplify the relationship to be based upon the rationality of humans: “those institutions and acts are right which of the available alternatives produce the most good.” This means that good is defined irrespective of what is right, and ethical theories vary depending on what they equate to be good: happiness, pleasure, and so on. Shyam Ranganathan (2017:23–26) writes that the relationship between the good and the right can be resolved in four ways: virtue ethics, in which “the good (state of mind, or character, or organization of society) is a condition of right action”; consequentialism, where “the right (Action) is justified by the good (Outcome)”; deontology, in which “the good is justified by the right”; and finally, *bhakti/yoga*, where “the right (procedure) causes the good.” The first two, as Rawls explained, prioritize the good over the right, but the latter two conceive of a more complicated relationship. Deontology, which is usually illustrated through Immanuel

Kant's ethics, finds good in an individual's will to act, irrespective of the outcome. This is also the foundation of *karma* in the *Bhagavad Gita*, as espoused by Krishna to Arjuna. Krishna tells Arjuna that he needs to act as per his duty as a warrior irrespective of what will follow. Arjuna's disquiet about the consequences of his action, which will include the destruction of his enemies who also happen to be his beloved cousins, elders, and friends, needs to be quelled because what matters is Arjuna's intention to perform whatever his duty is. Kant's theory is similar as it considers duty to dictate the right action, and because one can never predict what the consequences of action might be, deems the will to be the good, rather than determining whether there is a good outcome.

It is tempting to associate Ranganathan's *bhakti/yoga* with deontology because there is a prioritization of the right action (which can be interpreted as duty). However, there are key differences. Ranganathan (2017:26) explains that the right action, which he called procedure, is independent of the good and has to be prioritized over the good, and this is done by "the regulative ideal". The individual has to work at perfecting the procedure through practice, which causes goodness; in other words, perfecting the practice is the good. The example Ranganathan uses to explain this ethical theory is the *Bhakti* tradition in which the devotee practices devotion to a deity who fulfils a function in the cosmic order, that is, the maintenance of *dharma* (cosmic order). However, it is the practice itself that results in a good outcome, which can be salvation or freedom or whatever the devotee considers as good. The deity, in this regard, does not really matter except as the point to focus upon. Ranganathan emphasizes that the regulative ideal cannot itself be the good, because this would just make it virtue ethics, in which the wise person

or a good deity dictates or advises the individual on the right thing to do. Furthermore, Ranganathan argues that this deity or regulative ideal is right rather than good, thus allowing for it to be compatible with evil in the world. A theistic ethical theory would find the juxtaposition of evil and good to be an incommensurable problem needing resolution, but in *bhakti/yoga*, right action is “logically compatible with a lot of evil (bad outcomes)” (Ranganathan 2017:27). *Bhakti/yoga* is also different from deontology, in which although there is a focus on right action, the good is centered on the will, whereas in Ranganathan’s *bhakti/yoga*, the good is caused by the right action, by the perfected practice.

In the case of the Swamimalai sculptors, I adapt Ranganathan’s ethical theory and apply it to aesthetic practice. As explored in the previous chapter, the Swamimalai sculptors find it difficult to establish an ethical being that is centered in good character because of the hegemonic nature of gossip, as well as the weight of historical narratives that have characterized them as untrustworthy and overreaching their social position. *Murai*, or the right procedure, is the practice that sculptors have to perfect in order to cause and achieve goodness. This right procedure is dictated from several sources, including the *Shilpashastras*, and hereditary knowledge. By attempting to gain the knowledge and experience that will help them follow *murai*, which is the perfected practice, Swamimalai sculptors can achieve goodness, a goodness that is defined by the procedure and the art object they create, rather than by virtue. The co-presence of evil, or immoral character, in the presence of this aesthetic good is not an incommensurable problem, because both their action, or *murai*, and their regulative ideal constitute what is right, rather than good. In this case, the perfection of practice, or achieving the pinnacle of *murai* is something that they

can aspire to, something that is a challenge that they labor towards, and something that the Vishwakarma community considers as needing protection. The nostalgia for the medieval past strengthens this imagining of an unachievable, aspirational *murai* which existed in the past and was the exclusive prerogative of the Vishwakarma.

For the community of bronzecasters, this translates into what the Vishwakarma consider to be the core of their identity – arts practice – and what other caste sculptors believe might be the way to achieve authenticity. As the last chapter explained, moral being in the community is detached from character, ie virtue ethics, and is instead predicated on being a good sculptor. Being a good sculptor requires *murai*.

The *Shilpashastras* and the Artisan

South Indian bronzes were historically made to be used as processional idols in temples. They continue to be made for this purpose, but as described in the earlier chapters, their construction as a handicraft object has diversified their function. However, it is their historicity and traditional quality that imbues them with value. When art historians and scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch started writing about South Asian art, they relied mostly on the art objects and the Sanskrit aesthetic texts to describe and characterize the qualities and values of traditional Hindu art and their makers. Ananda Coomaraswamy (1909:68) accords a spiritual, social and economic status to the artisan which he associates with the caste identity and its related duties. He categorizes the medieval artisan into three types: the rural craftsman, the urban merchant/guildsman, and politico-religious royal temple official, and comments that the Kammalar, or the South

Indian artisan had a “social status equal or superior to that of Brahmans” (1909:1, 52).

While there were crafts that had explicitly religious purposes, the historically close relationship between caste, craft and religion has imbued all South Asian Hindu crafts with, as Coomaraswamy (1909, p.70) calls it, an “intrinsic religiousness”. Thus, *Karma*, or action that leaves behind a trace, are linked to the fulfillment of artisanal and religious duties for the artisan. Coomaraswamy quotes the technical architectural manual *Mayamataya*³², which describes the wealth and success that will come to good artisans and the calamities that will befall bad artisans:

Builders that build houses thus, after their death, will be re-born in a royal family; painters, if they make images accordingly, in noble families; cunning and skilful builders, though they should die, are friends of mine, for as they do, they become rulers and nobles, such is the old saying of the sages. One who knows amiss his craft, taking hire wrongfully, the which wife and children eat and enjoy, bringing misfortune on the owner of the house, that builder will fall into hell and suffer - these sayings are in *Mayamataya*, what remedy can there be then, O builders? There are men who make images of Buddha, though knowing naught of their craft; put no faith in what they say. Builders and painters both, who know naught of their craft, when hire is given according to the work accomplished, take that money and (leaving their work) rush home therewith; though they get thousands, there is nothing even for a meal, they have not so much as a piece of cloth to wear, that is the reward of past births, as you know; dying, they fall into hell and suffer pain a hundred lacs of years ; if they escape they will possess a deformed body, and live in great distress; when born as a man, it will be as a needy builder; the painter's eyes will squint look ye, what livelihood can there be for him? Builders who know their business well will become *rajas* lacking nought, so also cunning painters are meet [sic] to become nobles. Builders and painters taking money falsely from other men, thereby grow poor, so ancient sages have declared and shewn; doubt not this saying was in the *Mayamataya* book of sages lore; therefore, let builders and painters study *Mayamataya*: misfortunes ensuing in this world and the next are told of in its stanzas, behold how excellently. (Coomaraswamy 1909:69–70)

³² Probably the *Mayamata*, a South Asian architectural treatise, and one of the *Shilpashastras*.

In these verses, the artisan who does his work well is rewarded with a good birth in his next life. “Cunning” here is seen positively, in line with skill. However, an artisan who is incompetent, does not have the requisite arts knowledge, and takes payment from client which he does not deserve. is punished with poverty, hell, and suffering. The actions that determine the future of the artisans are entirely related to their commitment to their arts practice and their competency in serving their clients. The ethical criteria are predicated on labor, knowledge, and business ethics. Furthermore, Coomaraswamy (1909:73,75) comments that the artisan’s skill is a divine manifestation, not just “the accumulated skill of ages,” and consequently, is also not an individual espousing their own perspective, but “a part of the universe, giving expression to ideals of eternal beauty and unchanging laws,” much like nature.

These ideas are echoed in the writings of Stella Kramrisch (1958:226), the eminent art historian, who in describing the relationship between the artisan and Tradition says, “The awareness of the Tradition is active on all the levels of the craftsman's being. If he infringes on the Tradition, if the composition of a painting has no wholeness, the painter shows himself not only as a poor artist but he becomes, thereby, an unholy person.” Her essay, entitled, “Traditions of the Indian Craftsman” begins with an explanation of the relationship between the artisan, his profession, and his knowledge of “the Principle”, which she says “is the source and origin of his calling,” is also called “Visvakarma”, and is “the sum total of creative consciousness” (Kramrisch 1958:224). The artisan, Kramrisch says, is connected to this Principle not only because of his calling, but also because of the “unbroken line of sages and craftsmen who have transmitted to him his particular craft.”

Drawing from both *Agamas*³³, and *Shilpashastras*, Kramrisch paints a picture of the ideal craftsman who embodies the culture of “Tradition”, as well as a divine, religious imagination. Tradition, then is inextricably bound with religion, and failure in the former results in besmirching the integrity of the latter. Kramrisch (1958: 226) relates one of the stories in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* (a 16th century Vaishnavite text) about the fall of the artisan, in which Visvakarma is made to live a mortal life because of a curse. He is born to a Brahmin mother, becomes a successful architect, and fathers nine sons illegitimately with a Sudra woman. These sons become expert craftsmen in different fields but the architect, painter and goldsmith commit moral failures and become “incompetent to offer sacrifices and unholy”. Their crimes were stealing from a Brahmin, not following the directives of one, and a painting that did not follow the rules. Kramrisch (1958: 226) calls this the “moral and artistic defection from the Principle,” which she characterizes as a “betrayal of the Tradition.” While stealing is a moral failure by any account, the other two are explicitly concerning what the Swamimalai artisans would call *murai*. By not following the rules as laid out in the *Shilpashastras* and by not fulfilling the promised order given to a customer (who happens to be a Brahmin), the artisans have committed ethical misconducts. There is an intersection of religious rules with aesthetic principles in these cases, but they all seem to be subsumed under what Kramrisch calls the Tradition. Importantly, both Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch point to bad artistic practice as the foundation of the artisan’s ethical failure.

³³ Agamas are religious texts describing particular strands of Hindu philosophy and also dictating processes such as temple building and rituals.

Samuel Parker (1987:26) cites Coomaraswamy as quoting that meditation or *yoga* was a necessary practice in the sculpting process. These feed into the language of perfecting practice, described earlier in relation to *murai*. Parker (2003a:129) also notes that during his fieldwork in Mamallapuram with stone sculptors, the aesthetic discourse included words such as *dhyana* (meditation), morality, devotion, especially in association with creating art. While this process prepares the sculptor to engage in his practice, it also prepares his body to be the repository of artistic and cultural knowledge. Parker (1987:27) claims that the artisan's knowledge is "inseparable from what he is as a physical being." In other words, the artisan is the repository of Tradition, which is the combination of knowledge, skill, and cultural practice. Thus, the artisan is as much a source of artistic knowledge as the *Shilpashastras* themselves (Nardi 2009). This can also be observed in the government marketing literature described in the earlier chapters where there is as much a mention of the age old traditions of the artisans as there is about the technical manuals that they use. Nevertheless, the *Shilpashastras* are still an important part of the artistic discourse especially in Swamimalai. This is partly because as texts, they can claim an unchanging objectivity that people cannot, and as the attempts to translate them from Sanskrit increased, it also allowed scholars to center them over living artisans (Parker 2003b:7) . Furthermore, with the opening up of bronzecasting to sculptors of all castes, the *Shilpashastras* (and the knowledge of them) become central to defining what counts as *murai*, in a way that what Vishwakarma sculptors say cannot. Parker (2003b:9), in fact, declares that rather than performing as prescriptive manuals, the *Shilpashastras* are more

actively used by artisans in “fabricating identity, authority, a respected social standing, and a prosperous family enterprise”.

Thus, it is essential to delve into the texts that lay out the rules of such traditional arts practice and police what counts as good and bad, or ethical and unethical. The *Shilpashastras* are the aesthetic treatises that describe the rituals, process, proportions and iconography for various kinds of art. There are dozens of *Shilpashastras*, some have been recovered whole, others we only have parts of, some seem to be translations or adaptations of earlier ones. In short, it is important to understand that there are many voices in the *Shilpashastras*, that they were written during a broad time period from 4th century to the 18th century, and which artisan follows what is a matter of family convention. Architecture and sculpture, which are considered linked, are dealt with in the *Manasara*, the *Shilparatna*, the *Madhuchehhishthavhanam*, the *Manasollasa*, the *Kashyapa* amongst others. What is striking in all these texts are the diversity of voices present and the options offered to the artisans. However, artisans believe that the first voice of the *Shilpashastras* comes from Vishwakarma, and is thus divine in origin. While the *Shilpashastras* are in agreement about several aspects of arts practice, they also disagree, and these gaps provide contemporary sculptors with the leeway to update their arts practice. Additionally, it also raises the possibility that *murai* can be fluid, and changes over time and space.

That bronzecasting started as a religious art means that the *Shilpashastras* ought to be closely followed for the sculptor to claim traditional status. As the 68th chapter of the *Manasara*, a *Shilpashastra* (4-7th century CE, but could be as early as 2nd century BCE) says, “If, with the help of, and in accordance with, the methods here set forth in respect to

the construction of temples, the making of images is faithfully adhered to, it will lead to wealth and prosperity, but if deviated therefrom will cause poverty and distress” (Reeves 1962:29). The *Manasara* was translated into English from Sanskrit by the Sanskrit scholar, P.K. Acharya, who worked at it for 17 years. As one of the most complete *Shilpashastra* texts, the *Manasara* is considered to be the “standard,” although Acharya comments that all *Shilpashastras* are, in fact, compilations. The *Shilparatna* is another treatise compiled in the 16th century by SriKumara, but probably adapted from the *Kashyapa*, a *Shilpashastra* attributed to Orissa. The *Shilparatna* was translated into Tamil as *Shilparatnam* (2014) by Devanathachariyar³⁴, a Sanskrit scholar at the Saraswathi Mahal Library in Thanjavur, Tamilnadu. Most recently, V. Ganapati Sthapati (1927-2011), a sculptor and architect, whose father was the first Principal of one of the first college institutions teaching traditional art and architecture in India, the Government College of Architecture and Sculpture at Mamallapuram in Tamilnadu, authored the *Sirpa Senool* (Sthapati 1978), a Tamil language textbook on traditional sculpture, compiled from several *Shilpashastras*, and the English language version, *Indian Sculpture and Iconography* in 2002. Ganapati Sthapati had succeeded his father as the Principal of the College, and after his retirement, started the research and publishing organization, Vaastu Vedic Trust, to promote traditional architectural knowledge and architects. In *Indian Sculpture and Iconography*, Ganapati Sthapati (2002:4) reiterates the idea of divine imagination and art’s inherent religiosity, as evoked by Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch. However, he (2002:4) also lays out more concretely, the centrality of iconometry, stating that it is “eternal”, “is considered

³⁴ It is unclear when the first edition of this book was printed, but Devanathachariyar’s Acknowledgment is dated 1st May 1961.

to be the process through which the *Brahman* manifests itself,” and is thus essential learning for sculptors. Irrespective of the function of the idol, Ganapati Sthapati writes that the sculptor should know about the proportional measures, the iconography, symbols, and so on. He also writes extensively about the religious philosophies in the *Agamas*. This book (and others that he has written on *Vaastu shastras* or the treatises on the science of architecture) is still being used in sculpture schools in South India to teach traditional arts. One reason Sthapati attributed for writing this book was to make it accessible to aspiring sculptors who might not have the time or background to learn Sanskrit. Ganapati Sthapati knew that knowledge of Sanskrit was dwindling and only epigraphy experts read *Grantham*, the script in which most *Shilpashastras* are written. Thus, writing a compilation that expressed the ideas of the *Shilpashastras* in simple, accessible language was important to preserve the knowledge. However, there was also another reason why he could have written it, and that is to standardize the aesthetic rules for sculpting.

All of these texts follow a rote sequence when it comes to content. They provide a table of contents, followed by a description of the qualifications of the architect/sculptor, the measures, how to build various parts of a temple, laying the foundation, measures for different kinds of sculptures, gestures and poses, and finally, how to consecrate the idols through the eye opening ceremony. The qualifications of the master builder/architect, whom the *Manasara* calls Sthapati, are: “is capable of directing, knows the Vedas (and) is deeply learned in the *sastra* (science of architecture)” (Acharya 1994:6). Ganapati Sthapati (2002:xii) also lists “immense skills, [...] mathematics, is a painter, has deeply understood the many traditions of fine arts, and has followed the course of myths and legends and

intuitively understands the secrets of natural phenomena” as other necessary traits. Other *Shilpashastras* have laid out several character traits that the architect should have such as to “be perfect in body, righteous, kind, free from jealousy, and well-born” (Kramrisch 1958:229). Thus, while moral qualities are listed, the Sthapati needs to be a man of knowledge, most of all. Additionally, none of these texts link the term Sthapati to a caste.

The combination of metals that are supposed to be used in bronzes are a little confusing, as is the term bronze itself. Bronze, technically, is an alloy of copper and tin, but the tin content in South Indian bronzes is often negligible. According to the *Shilparatna*, the metals in which images can be made are gold, silver, copper, brass, tin, iron, and lead. Other *Shilpashastras* describe *panchaloha* (five metal sculptures) as containing copper, zinc, lead, gold and silver. Testing of antique bronzes have revealed that they are actually composed of copper (89-99%³⁵), tin (1-3%), lead (0.34-4%) and iron (0.05-0.5%;Raj et al. 2006). But when Swamimalai bronzecasters were asked what they were using, in 2006 they said it was copper (82%), brass (15%) and lead (3%), where brass itself is an alloy of copper and zinc (Levy et al. 2008). In 2008, the sculptors said that they purchase copper and gunmetal, where gunmetal is an alloy of copper, zinc, lead and tin. Thus, the quality and composition of metals is not strictly controlled by the sculptors operating in Swamimalai today. For temple bronzes, gold and silver are added according to the desire and capability of the customers but usually only in trace amounts since they can interfere with the tensile strength of the bronzes. Ultimately, the composition of metals that

³⁵ Figures have been rounded.

make up a bronze sculpture are not really detailed in the *Shilpashastras* and thus, might come down to historical convention and availability.

The proportional measures for sculptures laid out in the *Shilpashastras* are considered to be the most important aspect of bronzecasting, both according to scholars and according to many sculptors in Swamimalai. These detail the measures of each aspect of the divine body, and reproducing the exact measures will not only deliver a perfect sculpture, but also infuse it with the qualities necessary for a divine idol. The *Shilpashastras* lay out their own set of measures called the *taalaparimanam*, the main ones being *yaavai*, *viral* or *angulam*, and *talam*. Eight *yavai* make one *viral*, and twelve *viral* make one *talam*. In terms of absolute measures, Ganapati Sthapati writes that one *yavai* is 0.43 cm, one *viral* is 3.49 cm, and one *talam* is 41.91 cm, but because of the proportional relationship between the measures, sculptors often ignore the absolute numbers. Each *Shilpashastra* also lays out the kinds of proportional measures that should be used for each sculpture. The most popular ones are *dasatalam*, *navatalam*, and *ashtatalam*, where *dasa* means ten, *nava* nine, and *ashta* eight. Thus, *dasatalam* is composed of 120 *viral*, *navatalam* of 108, and *ashtatalam* of 96. Each of these measures are further divided into three types: *uttama* which adds 4 measures, *adhama* which deducts 4, and *madhyama* which does not make any further computations to the numbers. While *uttama dasatalam* (124 *viral*) is supposed to be used only for the three main Hindu deities - Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, *madhyama dasatalam* (120 *viral*) is used for their female consorts and for female deities in general; *adhama dasatalam* (116 *viral*) is used for deities such as Indra, Varuna and other Vedic gods. *Navatalam* is applied towards idols of lesser gods such as

Garuda and the planets, and *ashtatalam* is used for devotees. However, in Swamimalai, sculptors mostly only use the *navatalam* measures for most deities. What is also interesting is the difference in how each of these measures are calculated in the *Shilpashastras*. The following table detail the proportional measures for each aspect of the idol's figure under the *uttamadasatalam* in three of the texts I had introduced earlier – the *Shilparatna*, the *Manasara*, and Ganapati Sthapati's textbook.

Table 1. Proportional Measures of Sculptures in the *Uttamadasatalam* according to the *Shilparatna*, *Manasara*, and Ganapati Sthapati's *Indian Sculpture and Iconography*.

Shilparatna			Manasara			Ganapati Sthapati		
Parts of the Body	Viral	Yavai	Parts of the Body	Viral	Yavai	Parts of the Body	Viral	Yavai
Tuft	1	3	Crown to hair	4		Top of Head	4	3
Hairline	3	0	From hairline to chin	13		Hairline to level of Eyes	4	3
Eyes	4	3	Height of neck	4	4	Eyes to base of Nose	4	3
Nose	4	3	End of neck to end of heart	13	4	Nose to Chin	4	3
Chin	4	3	From heart to navel	13	4	Chin to base of Neck	4	3
Until the neck	0	4	Navel to limit of sex organ	13	4	Base of neck to Chest	13	3
Neck	3	7	Sex organ to knee	27		Chest to Navel	13	3
Until the heart	14	3	Knee	4		Navel to Genital	13	3
Until the navel	14	3	leg	27		Length of Thigh	27	
Genital area	14	3	Foot	4		Knee	4	
Thighs	27					Length of Leg	27	
Knee	4					Foot	4	
Leg	27							
Until the sole	4							
Total	127		Total	124	0		124	0

Clearly, there is some disagreement in what the exact proportional measures are supposed to be even amongst the *Shilpashastras*. John Mosteller (1991), who did a study of proportions in North Indian stone images found similar fluidity in how sculptors approach measures. It was up to the discretion of the sculptor to include the hair or the crown within the proportions. There was also leeway in determining the length of the torso and the groin area and thus, the sculptor could choose to elongate the figure's torso or legs, as per their preferences. The earlier quote from the *Manasara* that stated, "If, with the help of, and in accordance with, the methods here set forth in respect to the construction of temples, the making of images is faithfully adhered to, it will lead to wealth and prosperity, but if deviated therefrom will cause poverty and distress" seems a little disingenuous now considering that each *Shilpashastra* seems to have slightly different rules that practitioners are supposed to follow. However, the sentence that follows this quote is so: "However, if certain useful formulae and procedures not described here are found in similar texts dealing with this process, there is no objection to the *Sthapati* adopting them for his own improvement" (Reeves 1962:29). This is an articulated permission, but it is also common for artisans to understand omissions are implicit permissions – that is, when the *Shilpashastra* does not explicitly forbid a practice, it is considered to be allowed (Parker 2003b:15).

Other scholars have also noted that even ancient art seldom strictly follow the conventions prescribed in the *Shilpashastras*, including the artisan-author of the *Silpaprakasa*, a 10th century *Shilpashastra* from Orissa. The author, Ramacandra Mahapatra Kaula Bhattacharya (1966:379) writes, "In the understanding of the various

excellent s̄astras there are differences due to local customs, the temples, similarly are of various types, according to regions and canons. Since there are different local traditions of architecture the styles also become different. Accordingly, this S̄astra follows the Kaula practice and doctrine,” where Kaula practice refers to local traditions. Acknowledging the difference in the *Shilpashastras*, Ramacandra ascribes as much authority to the knowledge he received from his master and local customs as he does to the technical manuals, like the one he wrote. Samuel Parker defines the combination of technical treatises and ritualized, historically constructed practices of living artisans as “ritual modes of production,” and stresses their inherently context-sensitive, improvisational nature.

Thus, fluidity in *murai* is intrinsically a part of the aesthetics in the *Shilpashastras*. So what could this mean for ethical practice and moral being? That even the *Shilpashastras* have varying opinions on proportions when they are the canonical treatises dictating *murai* means that sculptors living in Swamimalai today cannot be expected to demonstrate perfect and full knowledge that is historically, religiously, and technically accurate. In other words, they have some leeway in determining what *murai* can mean, and if they develop it to suit their contemporary context, it is an understandable maneuver. In the next section, I detail the ways in which Swamimalai sculptors talk about *murai* followed by how the governmental sculpture school, Poompuhar Training Center constructs and teaches it.

Sculptors and *Murai*

Vishwakarma sculptors generally referred to *murai* when talking about traditional knowledge, but the exact connotation of the word would change depending on the conversation. It could mean religious rituals that are necessary for making a bronze, the knowledge of Sanskrit and *Shilpashastras*, an understanding of the measurements, or even having learnt the arts practice the traditional way – from their fathers and uncles. All of these, however, signal *murai* as something challenging, and difficult to achieve.

One of the common instances when Vishwakarma sculptors brought up *murai* was while talking about temple bronzes and the process involved in consecrating the bronze as a deity. The eye opening ceremony, also called the “Chiselling of the Eye” in the *Manasara* is the final ritual before the idol can be worshipped in a temple. It involves a series of rituals which, according to the *Shilpashastras* can only be performed by the Sthapati. Coomaraswamy (1909:79) described in detail such a ceremony that he witnessed in Sri Lanka by the artisan caste architects and sculptors at a Buddhist temple. He explains that these are basically Hindu rituals that have been adopted and in South India are typically performed by Vishwakarma artisans. This ritual is considered a right and a privilege of Vishwakarma artisans in Swamimalai today.

Saravanan, a Vishwakarma sculptor told me that it was a blessing given to the Vishwakarma to be given the right and opportunity to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, “A place into which not even the President can go,” he smiled, proudly. I was curious about whether the sculptors who made the idol were always invited to do the eye opening ceremony thought, especially because of Souhmya Venkatesan’s account of a temple ceremony in which the Vishwakarma who had made the idol was sidelined in favor

of a more famous architect to do the eye opening ritual by the temple patrons (Harvey and Venkatesan 2010:138). In a big, public ceremony, attended by many devotees, the famous architect opens the eye of the idol, but after he leaves, Selvamani, the idol maker insists that he will do the eye opening again even if someone else already did it, because it is his right as the maker to do so. Venkatesan found that the patrons preferred to avoid the dilemma of the situation and just accepted it as something that happened. However, it is striking that although the *Shilpashastras* and the Swamimalai sculptors might insist that the proper process involves only the maker of the idol to open its eyes, the temples do not always seem to follow this convention. Saravanan, the Vishwakarma sculptor in Swamimalai, agreed that sometimes convention was broken. “The patrons of the temple decide whether they want to invite us or not,” he admitted. “But if they want to follow *murai*, we are the ones who should be doing the eye opening. We are the mother of the idol.” This equation of *murai* with the right to pierce the eye of the deity is significant, because it is only the Vishwakarma who are supposed to have this right. Even in the case described by Venkatesan, it was only another Vishwakarma who is invited to perform the ritual.

Thiagarajan Sthapati, an older sculptor who was introduced to me as the only sculptor in all of Swamimalai who knew Sanskrit, also agreed with Saravanan. Giving a detailed description of the ritual, which involved bathing the idol with water, grains, milk and other materials, followed by chanting done by married women, and the sculptor finally using a silver needle to mark the eye, Thiagarajan Sthapati concluded, “This is the *murai*. It is necessary.” In all these cases, *murai* is associated with the religious component of

bronze casting – that which involves invoking the god into the idol, making it qualified for worship. Also noteworthy is that these instances of *murai* are dictated by patrons, not sculptors. While it is proper for the sculptor to do the eye opening ceremony, sometimes they might be denied this right, and in those cases, the fault does not lie with the Vishwakarma. Thus, performing this religious and ethical obligation is not entirely in the hands of the sculptors, relieving them of the responsibility of the action. Still, some sculptors take it seriously enough that they have confessed to me of doing the eye opening ceremony in their workshop itself before the idol is even picked up by the patrons. “We cannot be sure if they invite us or not,” said one of these sculptors, “but it is our duty to open the eyes. So we do it as soon as the idol is completed irrespective of whether the patron asks us to or not. If they ask us, we make sure that we do it when they come to pick the idol up. If not, we do it regardless.” Balamurugan Sthapati had a slightly less severe opinion on it, and said, “*Murai* is that if I make the idol, I open its eyes. There is nothing wrong if another Sthapati does it, but it is not respectful.” Thus, a line is drawn by these Vishwakarma sculptors about who can open the eyes of the idol. While it is *murai* for the maker to do the ritual, it is still acceptable if another Vishwakarma performs it. What is not acceptable is if someone who is not a Vishwakarma takes on the right. If *murai* is considered a process through which goodness can be claimed, this rendering makes anyone who is not a Vishwakarma ineligible to practice it. However, other Vishwakarma sculptors have a different understanding of what can be described as *murai*.

Murai is not always about the religious aspects of bronze casting according to some Swamimalai sculptors. Sometimes, religion becomes diluted to suit contemporary needs,

and consequently, *murai* too is interpreted differently. Satishkumar, the sculptor who liked to experiment and had been accused of being involved in bronze smuggling, had brought me to a workshop where his friends worked. In a more interior part of the area, the workshop is a large open space with one set of rooms up front, another in the middle, and a third area with sheds. The first set of rooms in the front left contains some finished bronzes, an office, and also a metal working area. Outside these rooms in the open is a small Ganesha stone figure on a tall pedestal. It is decorated with a flower garland and has an umbrella protecting it from the elements. The second set of rooms further inside the grounds are stacked with wax models, some unfinished, and others ready to be casted. At the entrance of these storerooms, is an open shed with no walls and only a covered roof. Here, the wax modelers sit and work. The shed extends back to some 30 meters, to the casting area. The day that Satish first brought me there, it was a warm balmy day that was surprisingly pleasant because of a brisk wind. The open areas in the workshop is surrounded by tall trees and the workshop itself is covered on three sides by open paddy fields. Apart from the noise of the workshop itself, all one can hear is the wind rustling the trees. Satish told me that Venkatesan Sthapati used to own this workshop with his brothers, but it had been sold to a man called Raju some five years ago. Satish pointed to a photograph of Raju in the office and it was next to a framed certificate granting permission to conduct a handicrafts business. "He is a waste of space," spat Satish. "He used to come to Master to buy a bronze, first by walking. Then he came in a cycle, then a bike, finally in a car, and then he bought the business." Satish never calls Venkatesan by his name, only Master. At some point, Satish used to work for Venkatesan, but has since then started his

own workshop, but he continues to show his respect to Venkatesan, who is not much older than him, through this label of their former relationship. After an hour or so, Venkatesan arrived in a bike along with an older man called Shankar. Venkatesan is a lean, young looking fellow very neatly dressed, hair parted on the side. Shankar must be in his 40s and is a plump short man who sports the white ash, typical marker of a Shiva devotee on his forehead, and white vest and veshti of most self respecting Sthapatis. Venkatesan is from a family of Sthapatis and has been working since he was around 12 years old. He was 32 when I talked with him. A gentle conversationalist, Venkatesan recalled his education as not very successful. “I have less education,” he said, “It never came easily to me, but this did,” referring to bronzecasting. “So when I turned 16, I decided to do just this and stopped studying. I learnt from my mother’s brother, who learnt from my grandfather.” His uncle also used to be an instructor and a worker at the Poompuhar Training Centre, but it was unclear if he ever taught Venkatesan Sanskrit or the *Shilpashastras*.

“The *Shilpashastras* and Sanskrit, they are all very important,” explained Venkatesan when I asked him about them. “Every idol has a different measure. A sculptor must learn these measures and the *Slokam* that contains that information,” said Venkatesan, referring to the verses from the *Shilpashastras*. “The weapons of each god is also described in these *Slokam*, and every Vishwakarma should learn them.” Venkatesan never actually confirmed if he knew and used the *Slokam* or Sanskrit, but in Swamimalai he is considered a master of wax modeling. While he could make an entire bronze from the wax modeling to the metal work, he did not have the time or need to do that anymore. “It takes too much time for one man to do everything,” explained Venkatesan. “In those days,

it was like that. But nowadays, a sculptor should still learn to do everything. Only then will he be able to make others do the work.” Thus, the Sanskrit education and knowledge of the complete process of bronzecasting was less necessary for doing the work, and more to ensure that the sculptor is able to supervise the work of others. The nature of the contemporary handicraft industry does not allow for sculptors to indulge in the arts practice and take their time. A similar practicality is found in their sense of spirituality and religion.

Shankar, the older man who had accompanied Venkatesan on the bike, is also a wax modeler and has been working since he was 20 years old. “It has been twenty years since I started,” he said and described his training at Poompuhar, although his interest in sculpting began when he was a child and used to spy on his neighbors, a Vishwakarma family, while they worked. Shankar was emphatic that *Bhakthi*, or devotion, was important for this *thozil*. “If you do not have it, you cannot do this work,” he emphasized. So I asked him about sculptors of other religion who were practicing sculpting – what about them? Shankar then clarified what he meant, “*Bhakti* is not about religion. We have to feel sincerity in our heart and then we can do it.” Venkatesan interjected and reiterated this point, “Your mind has to be completely in your work, and only then you can do it well.” Shankar then elaborated on this, saying, “It is about *murai*. You have to do the right process. If you do not do that, you will not get the result. If you put in the appropriate metal, you will get the result.” *Murai*, thus, is having the right knowledge and doing good work, both of which are also considered to be a kind of spirituality.

Shankar thought this knowledge and practice was also directly linked to how you

were taught. “For example,” he continued, “if you are doing sheet metal work, you must know how to make the metal smooth and even. You must have the knowledge and the technique. The master will see you do the sheet and he will note how you do it. If he does not like it, then he will just tell you, okay, that is enough, go there and do the scraping work. And that is that!” The scraping work (*raavu velai*) is a monotonous task that does not rank high in the hierarchy of skilled arts practice. It is usually relegated to apprentices or those who are not able to perform well in either wax modeling or metal finishing work. Shankar was explaining how instruction worked: if you did your work according to the *murai*, the results will be good and the instructor/master will appreciate your work. If you did not, you will be perceived as talentless and given the grunt work in the workshop. Once given grunt work, it is impossible to get any opportunities to learn in the workshop and one would have to either find a new instructor or workshop to try again. *Murai* in this case is theorized along with spirituality as adjacent to a work ethic. When one also considers Satish’s commentary about the unfairness of a sculptor who has been practicing with *murai* having to work for someone else, the workings of the logic become clear. Venkatesan, who follows *murai*, should have been rewarded for his goodness with success and financial independence. But because of the disagreements within his family, he has been unable to succeed, leading to his workshop being taken over by a businessman.

Sambanthamurthy Sthapati is a Vishwakarma sculptor but comes from a family of goldsmiths. While most of the Vishwakarma in Swamimalai in the bronzecasting business come from goldsmith families, they are still considered not quite at the level of the Sthapatis whose families have been exclusively involved in temple building and sculpture.

It has become a common practice amongst any Vishwakarma in the sculpting profession to adopt the last name Sthapati though, irrespective of their subcaste. Sambanthamurthy Sthapati had learnt bronzecasting from his sister's husband who is a Sthapati and eventually started his own workshop in Swamimalai. A short, dark man with a strong moustache game, Sambanthamurthy Sthapati is always dressed in white clothes and presents a smiling countenance. His workshop is on the main road that leads to the Swamimalai temple and just across the street from the Poompuhar workshop. In big letters, his workshop signboard proclaims its name, "A.S. Sambanthamurthy Arts & Crafts", and a second one on the garage door says in Tamil, "Honorable Tamilnadu Chief Minister Announced Swamimalai Bronze Sculptural Art Gurukula Process 3 year Training Scheme" with an image of the Nataraja on the left, the late ex-Chief Minister of Tamilnadu Dr. J. Jayalalitha's image on the right, and underneath in small font, "Conducted by Poompuhar" followed by its address in Chennai. This was the new program that had been started by the Poompuhar Chennai in 2014 which was supposed to mimic the traditional pedagogical system (Gurukula) in which students would learn from the teacher through apprenticeship, which included staying at the teacher's home. This was in contrast to the Poompuhar Training Centre across the street, which had been taught since 1962, also as a three-year course, but did not include room and board for the students enrolled. Additionally, the Gurukula program was advertised as a tender to workshops in Swamimalai to which sculptors could apply to compete as hosts. The winning bid, which was Sambanthamurthy's, received a grant to employ an instructor who would teach Sanskrit and *Grantham* and to sponsor the room and board for eight students for three years. When

I asked Sambanthamurthy about why there was a need for a second sculpture school, he explained about the significance of the financial guarantee and also the instruction method, “Students should learn from sculptors who have received awards – who have been recognized by the government as being good at their work. In our workshop, the first thing we do with our income is to set aside the salaries for our workers. So we employ very good people to work here and they will be teaching the students. There are some workshops here that will not even have money for tomorrow. We always have work going on. On top of these, in a gurukula, students have to be with us for 24 hours. They should eat with us, stay with us. I did this in 1986 with six students and some of them are still working with me.” But Sambanthamurthy also admitted that not all of the students currently in the gurukula are staying with him since most of them were locals and had their own homes nearby. He was also not the person instructing them since he was mostly involved in managing the administrative affairs of the workshop, which were plentiful because it supplied bronzes to some of the out of state Poompuhar showrooms. Thiagarajan Sthapati, an 80- year old ex-Poompuhar Training Center instructor was the one teaching Sanskrit and *Grantham* to the students. Also, the hands-on training was conducted entirely by the employees of the workshop. There were these divergences between Sambanthamurthy’s discourse and practice, creating a split between the ideal and the real. Even when it came to making bronzes, his workshop’s style splits the difference between the traditional and trendy. Although the workshop makes bronzes for both the temple and tourist market, all bronzes have a flavor of the Hoysala style characterized by ostentatious ornamentation. The Hoysala style is not a sculptural tradition but an architectural one. The temples built during

the Hoysala period (10-14th century) in the Karnataka region (north west of Tamilnadu) are renowned for their intricate and ostentatious decorative features. In Sambanthamurthy's workshop, those decorative motifs from friezes and columns are added to the jewelry or frames of bronzes.

Yet, Sambanthamurthy Sthapati highlighted the significance of traditional knowledge and learning. Many sculptors in Swamimalai had complained to me about this new program because it would create more sculptors than the industry can already support. When I brought this up, Sambanthamurthy Sthapati pointed to the Sanskrit teacher, Thiagarajan Sthapati: "He is the only man in all of Swamimalai in this *thozil* who knows Sanskrit. Maybe even in all of this country. If even two of the students in our class are able to learn from him, then Sanskrit will not disappear from this *thozil*. Nowadays, more work is done by sculptors who do not know this *thozil* properly. This is what we are hoping to change through this program." This idea of knowing Sanskrit to knowing the profession properly is tied to the not only the Indological notions of artisanship, but also the aesthetic ideologies of the *Shilpashastras*. Sambanthamurthy continued, "Sanskrit is really important, but see, even I do not know Sanskrit. I cannot read the old books and get knowledge from them." Yet, for Sambanthamurthy, these traditional ways need not be tied to religious devotion. "Being religious is not important, but having appreciation for art is," said the sculptor when I asked about the role of faith in the profession. "A priest conducting service in the temple needs to have faith, but the sculptor making the idol does not. Rather, the sculptor needs to follow the rules and live properly." But what does living properly mean? "There is miscommunication about spirituality. People think it's about

being a *brahmachari* (chaste bachelor), going to the temple and so on, but it is not that. It is doing good work (*murai*). When I was a kid, I thought I had to be devoted to god to do good work, but now I have realized that if you keep thinking about work, that is also devotion.” Much like Shankar and Venkatesan, Sambanthamurthy was recalibrating the way in which religious devotion and ethical behavior (“live properly”) could be practiced. He was equating belief in God (*aanmeegam*) as devotion (*bhakti*), which could be towards work. And doing that work properly, namely, traditionally and backed by the knowledge from the *Shilpashastras* and associated Sanskrit texts with *murai*, was to live properly, that is, ethically.

The knowledge and practice of *murai* mentioned by sculptors such as above, usually referred to the proportional measures. In Swamimalai, sculptors demonstrated this through the *odi olai*. The *odi olai* is a practical tool to flesh out the proportional measurements of an idol no matter what size it was. Srikandan Sthapati was one of the many sculptors who demonstrated it to me. He took out a palm leaf and cut the ends off to make the edges neat. “This is the *odi olai*,” he told me. Then in a kinetic series of gestures, he folded the leaf over and over again, following a scale only he knew. In the end, he flattened it and showed it to me. It had various striations from the folds of differing lengths. “This is the measure – the forehead, the face, the torso, the feet, and so on,” he said pointing to each section that had been created between the striations. “After I finish a wax model, I compare it to this to see if it fits.” The *odi olai* was talked about as a traditional practical tool by many Vishwakarma sculptors, often used as a stand in for the measures detailed in the *Shilpashastras*. Valli, the daughter of Karunanidhi Sthapati who

talked about her family's history in Chapter 3 told me that she felt sad that sculptors were not using the *odi olai* anymore, instead preferring a scale and compass. "We do not want to let go of that tradition," she said, indexing the *odi olai* as historical, traditional, and *murai*. The *odi olai* is a common way of establishing proportions since one can quickly get a visual idea of them without having to calculate it for different bronze heights, but all the sculptors who demonstrated it to me were only producing the *navatalam* measure, that is, the 108 *viral* proportion, which is not the one that most idols are supposed to use. It is important to note, however, that the *odi olai* is easy to teach, and is accessible to all sculptors, not requiring knowledge of Sanskrit, and not only to those belonging to the Vishwakarma caste. In that sense, the *odi olai* is an egalitarian pedagogical device, and is used in the government sculpture schools.

However, one day I was talking with another sculptor, Umapathy Achariyar, who lived in the nearby town of Kumbakonam. A renowned Sanskrit scholar who was working on his PhD in Sanskrit, he is also an expert on iconometrics and the *Shilpashastras*. "The *odi olai* is what you teach to the bad student," he told me. "It is a drastic simplification of very complex measures and you will never find it in the *Shastras*. Ask one of those sculptors who showed it to you to point out the verse where any of the *Shilpashastras* talk about the *odi olai*," he declared a challenge. According to Umapathy Achariyar, there were a lot of secrets in the *Shilpashastra* and one needed to be in the know to decipher the coded language that had been used, and these codes were passed down within the family. He claimed that his father had maintained *shastric* knowledge for over 650 years and had physical copies of *Shilpashastras* (presumably as palm-lead manuscripts) that were that

old. “Let me tell you an example,” he said. “There is this cantilever called *vikkaprasthiram*, which people will tell you is a kind of roof, but that is not all it is. *Vikka* is a 16-year-old pregnant female elephant. Now, imagine a father teaching his two sons about architecture. He says that there is this pregnant elephant walking around, when it suddenly starts to rain. The elephant gets worried because she does not want her baby to get sick. So she starts looking for shelter frantically, and stands near a temple wall. Now, imagine the kind of a cantilever that will deflect the rain. Imagine that if such a cantilever existed, any pregnant elephant would know that she can find shelter there. This is what the father tells his sons, and as they imagine this, they know what the *vikkaprasthiram* should look like.” He continued, “But one day, I was giving this lecture and I mentioned this and this scientist in the audience who also knew Sanskrit interrupted me and asked, how can that be, because a *vikka* is a male elephant, not a female one.” The sculptor stopped, enjoying himself, and revealed to me the twist, “That is true, but that is how our family hides our secrets. Even if a person who knows Sanskrit reads our documents, they will not get the real meanings because we will confuse them by using such codes. Only the people in my family know about these codes.”

So *murai* gets further muddled, becoming a thing that is perhaps lost, and perhaps a secret. For this sculptor, and for others, the knowledge in the *Shilpashastras* were coded and require specialized knowledge that is tied to familial memories. The same sculptor also criticized the translation of the *Manasara* by P.K. Acharya, accusing him of making errors because while he might have been an expert in Sanskrit, he was not an architect or a sculptor, and thus did not have specialized knowledge of the technical terms. To P.K.

Acharya's (1994:xv) credit, in the Preface, he admits that efforts that were made "both official and non-official, to engage the services, against tempting payment, of teachers or advanced students of the few schools of arts and architecture in the Indian states and elsewhere, mostly under the government, ended also in failure." The refusal of traditional artisans to cooperate with Acharya and help with the translation of the *Manasara* is interesting in itself and lends credibility to Umapathy Achariyar's claim that artisans consider technical knowledge to be secrets. However, ironically, the element of secrecy also obfuscated what could be *murai*.

Ravi Sthapati and his partner in life and work, Rajeshwari liked to talk about the older sculptors quite a bit. Ravi especially liked to talk about his father, Swaminathan Sthapati, who had been a cousin of Devasenapathy Sthapati, and a sculptor of great repute but moody temperament. Ravi also described him as extremely secretive, but so knowledgeable that everyone would try to observe his work to learn the secrets of the craft. "My father would work till 10 pm at night and the people would still be waiting outside looking into his workshop," Ravi recounted. "No one wanted to leave. Then he would tell everyone that he was calling it a day. He would clean up and shut down the workshop and go home [next door] to sleep. But then secretly, he will wake up at 3 am in the morning, go to the workshop and do *mannu kattarthu*." *Mannu kattarthu* refers to the preparation of the clay that will be used to cover the wax model and will ultimately be heated in the furnace to become the mold for the molten metal. The composition and preparation of the clay was extremely important since it had to have the perfect sensitivity to acquire the nuanced impression of the wax model. Not all *Shilpashastras* detail this process and every sculptor

seems to have their own recipe. A good sculptor would have a good recipe for the clay, and this is why Swaminathan Sthapati was being stalked by an eager audience, composed of his rivals. "People would come in the morning and ask if he was going to start with the clay," Ravi continued, "and he would say, 'What clay? It is already done! Look, it is right there,' and everyone would be so astonished." In this story, the secret technique was not something that could be acquired from the texts, but something that had to be learnt through instruction. However, even learning from Swaminathan Sthapati was a challenge.

"The only way to learn from my father," explained Ravi, "was to sit right next to him. He would constantly try to trick everyone. I have six siblings but I am the only one who learnt everything from him and he liked me the best. We would all be working and my father would say, 'It is 1 pm. Are you not going to eat?' and my brothers would agree and leave. I will keep working and he will ask me the same thing, but I would say, 'I'll eat when you go to eat. Then he will say, 'But I will first bathe before I eat, so you should go now' and I will respond, 'No, I will bathe when you bathe. He will always try to finish the important work when no one was around, so if I had left, he would have done everything and I could not have learnt anything.'" Rajeshwari interjected at this point by tapping my knee and she faux-whispered, "It is always this way; people who are very knowledgeable and talented are also very cunning and crooked. Their brain is always thinking about how to do something in a non-straight forward way." This strangely echoed the larger sentiments about Vishwakarma caste members or even artisans in general, as described in the previous chapters. However, that is not the point Rajeshwari and Ravi were trying to make. When I asked why his father was so secretive about the clay application, Ravi

shrugged and explained, "That is how that generation was. They thought an art should not be learnt very easily. If you were trying to learn, you had to do everything you could to learn from them. It is only in that way that you show them that you are really interested. Otherwise, you do not deserve to know the secrets." Ravi continued with another story about how the earlier generation, consisting of his father, Swaminathan Sthapati, Ramaswamy Sthapati (Devasenapathy Sthapati's father), and Krishnamurthi Sthapati would secretly get together at night at the attic at one of the houses to prepare clay molds. Ravi was saying that learning from a master sculptor involved effort, perseverance, and even non compliance. I persisted in my questions to Ravi and Rajeshwari though, because I still was not sure how secrecy would help. What is wrong with doing an art in front of other people though? I asked. It is not like mere knowledge could make someone an artist. They would need the skill and dedication. Some stranger who watches Swaminathan Sthapati prepare and apply clay is not going to be able to replicate it just because he has theoretical knowledge of how to do that. Ravi and Rajeshwari both shook their heads and smiled the smile of a person who has been through it all. "It is not that," said Ravi. "The secrets cannot be known outside." "The respect just will not be there anymore, Sowbi," Rajeshwari agreed, calling me by my nickname. "If everyone on the street knows everything about this art, it has no value. They will talk amongst each other and make this *thozil* stink." The secrecy of the knowledge was a quality that ensured that only those who struggled towards it received it. If *murai* was something aspirational, and if it determined who could achieve good, it made sense that it had to be something difficult to achieve, and if not, made to be difficult to access.

Furthermore, Ravi and Rajeshwari refuse to even hang a signboard outside their home and workshop to declare their presence, and when one considers how ubiquitous such signboards are not only all over Swamimalai, but in India in general, it makes it apparent how little they want to be seen. While part of this is because of their general seclusion (Chapter 4), this was also because Ravi associated secrecy with *murai*; openness was antithetical to the right practice. “A name board will bring in the sort of people I do not want as customers,” explained Ravi. “They will accept whatever I give them – not the real lovers of art. Those people will find us even if we make no effort to be known.” Not only did Ravi associate the signboard with commercialization, he also thought it was synonymous with corruption. “If I kept a name board, I could also keep ten workers and then cheat every customer who walks in,” he said, implying that a desire for such recognition goes hand in hand with deceit.

Ravi described the earlier generation as just overall more dynamic, practical, and ingenious. This is in line with several of the qualities that even the *Shilpashastras* detail about the Sthapati explored earlier, qualities such as patience, determination and faith, but they also are qualities necessary to persevere against a difficult pedagogical system. Ravi recalled the time when his father had to do a casting quickly but did not have a wind blower for keeping up the fire in the furnace. “He asked a relative if he could borrow his, but that man was jealous and said he did not have it. My father did not say anything. He just went home quietly and made a hand blower out of a rubber tire and a plastic bag. Can you imagine that?” he marveled. Ravi then narrated an incident that happened when he was a child, when a water pipe burst in the main street in front of the temple. Everyone was

panicking and wondering what to do. Someone called the corporation but they said it would take at least a day to find a plumber who was free. Meanwhile water was flowing everywhere. Devasenapathy Sthapati was one of the Panchayat³⁶ members at this time and he had just returned from a trip to a nearby town. “When he saw the situation, he immediately hiked up his *veshti* and asked one of the men to bring him his tools. When the man came back, Deva Sthapati went to work and fixed that pipe in ten minutes. What a handyman he was! He was a leader of the village but no work was beneath him. He really had the spirit of an artisan,” exclaimed Ravi. The *Shilpashastras*, as we have seen, have a long list of qualities that the Sthapati is supposed to exemplify, but I think they are all encapsulated in this idea of dynamic improvisation. To be a bronzecaster is not just to seek spiritual inspiration or to find knowledge in a manual; it is also to consider the mundane, everyday circumstances and adapt to the situation.

However, secrecy in instruction does not lend itself well to sculptors who are not from Vishwakarma families, because it makes access to instruction nearly impossible and puts them at the mercy of their instructors. Murugadoss was an older sculptor, around 70 years old, who complained to me about the wasting away of bronzecasting, and emphasized that only the Vishwakarma follow *murai* and *alavu* (measurements). When he had started working some 35 years ago, not many people were in the industry, but now since so many sculptors were available, the monetary value of sculptures had depreciated. Murugadoss explained that a small sculpture that he had done decades ago would have sold for some 4000 rupees, but now it will only sell for 1500 rupees. Murugadoss thought

³⁶ A Panchayat is the ruling body of a village made of locals chosen via elections.

that the increased competition in labor was at fault since there were several rival sculptors who would discount a couple of days of labor to attract customers. What this also resulted in was that many sculptors have started to sell bronzes by weight and height instead of quality. Even the Devasenapathy workshop which prides itself on its traditional features and practices has adopted this pricing system, although they charged more for a kilogram than other workshops. Many sculptors admitted that that calculating the price of a sculpture based on its weight was a sign of the lack of appreciation of the art form and the increasing commercialization in the industry. For Murugadoss, these were all factors that went hand in hand with the fear in the community about knowledge transfer. “Most people are scared to teach,” said Murugadoss, “because these students will learn a little bit and then set up their own workshop.” It was implied that these were students not from Vishwakarma backgrounds, since Vishwakarma would usually learn from family members (although as the previous chapter revealed, this was also not always so). Is that why there is so much talk about secrecy, I asked, and Murugadoss replied, “If there are secrets, you can teach them. You can make this craft grow. But *murai* is important and if you do not learn *murai*, you have to depend on other people to do the work.” Murugadoss seemed to be distinguishing between secrecy and *murai* here. Even if arts knowledge is kept a secret, it can be passed on, merely because it is something that exists. There is always a possibility of secrets being transmitted. But what was more important was *murai* – the right way. Passing on secret knowledge was useless if it was also not *murai* that was being passed on. “*Murai*”, Murugadoss continued, “is doing good work.” Considering himself as a good worker, Murugadoss explained his work ethic: “I tell people I do not do certain kinds of

work – alterations to broken pieces, things like that. I tell them that my rate is so much. I tell them that they have to give me good quality metal because if we have a problem, only copper can listen to our touch. If we make a god, the metal has to be right.” It is illuminating that Murugadoss explained his *murai* using a combination of business ethics and principles of arts practice, which seems to be an adaptation of the word to contemporary concerns of the capitalistic handicrafts industry. However, it also obfuscates the fact that acquiring traditional instruction, or *murai*, is made difficult for students of other castes.

Satish’s mental state of disquiet that I had touched upon in one of the previous chapters was not just because of the gossip that had started circulating about him being involved in antique smuggling. Having run away from home at the age of 10, Satish had started working in workshops to survive, but his homeless status made it easy for workshop owners to exploit him, making him work all day and night. One of his employers beat him black and blue because an accident had caused a water pipe to burst resulting in the workshop being flooded, even though Satish had nothing to do with it. Another employer had made him stay guard at his workshop for five days without giving him anything to eat. Afraid to leave the workshop, fearing that he would be blamed if something got stolen, Satish starved, eating raw pumpkin seeds he found on the ground. Even more benign employers, if not cruel, did not consider Satish as an apprentice. At one workshop, Satish would stay late and work as he liked to experiment, but a relative of the owner would berate him for tunning up the electricity charges. While not all of the employers of Satish were Vishwakarma sculptors, the general tendency to consider

workers as a danger to the workshop because of the risk of them learning and leaving, as Murugadoss pointed out above, causes workshop owners and sculptors to, at the least, ignore potential apprentices and discourage their learning, or inflict the kinds of cruelty Satish faced.

Thus, it is easy to understand why sculptors from other castes did not look upon Vishwakarma sculptors with much friendliness. It is a strange thing that in South India, the hotter it gets, the more hot drinks you consume. So, on one very hot morning in Swamimalai, I had joined my mother who, after visiting the temple had stopped for some coffee at the Ganesh Bhavan, a restaurant/café right outside the East entrance of the temple. My mother had become friends with the owner/manager of the café, Shakti, and had been telling him about my work in Swamimalai. Shakti thought I should talk to another friend and customer of his who might be able to help me. That is how I met Mr. Vilvanathan, who knew many sculptors although he was not one himself. He had worked at the Government Arts College nearby for many years. Neither being a Vishwakarma, nor a sculptor, Mr. Vilvanathan had a unique perspective about Swamimalai and bronzecasting. A tall man with suspiciously dark hair, well oiled and combed, he was probably in his sixties although he looked much younger. I could imagine him being a strict teacher with strong views and occasional jokes. “They will all tell you that it is their *kula thozil*,” he said. *Kula thozil* translates to caste occupation, and Vilvanathan was referring to the Vishwakarma claim about bronzecasting being their hereditary livelihood. He continued, “But it is all gone. There is no such thing called *kula thozil*; it is just something they made up to maintain their status.” Vilvanathan had strong opinions about

what really mattered in the arts, and neither history nor inheritance made it. “*Murai* is important,” he told me, “But not many people know it anymore. For art to have any meaning or value, you must do it with *murai*.” For Vilvanathan, a lot of the blame was at the feet of the Vishwakarma community, who, he claimed, had come from Senji and Kanchipuram, two towns near Chennai in Tamilnadu, to make replica sculptures for the Swaminatha Swamy temple after it had been damaged in a war sometime in the 17th century. He did not think they had anything to do with the Thanjavur Brihadeswara temple, however. Most importantly, the problem was that the Vishwakarma kept *murai* a secret, and because of this lack of openness, much has been lost. This was why, he said, many Vishwakarma sculptors will not talk to me freely about the intricacies of technique, about *murai* – because they did not know enough. “They will worry that you will ask questions and they will not know the answers,” he explained. Thus, Vilvanathan believed in a general state of decay in the art of bronzecasting. What knowledge had been there had been forgotten or had not been passed on, which he felt was irresponsible. His contradictory comments about Vishwakarma knowing the secrets of *murai* while also not being eligible to call bronzecasting their *kula thozil* then makes sense; it was not that the Vishwakarma had not been hereditary practitioners of sculpting – it was that they had failed to fulfill one of the important criteria of hereditary practice, namely, knowledge transmission. Vilvanathan was attributing this pedagogical failure to the secrecy in the Vishwakarma community. This is not a new sentiment. Rám Ráz, the 19th century translator of the incomplete *Manasara* (introduced in Chapter 2), writes in a letter to his patron,

Our architecture, sculpture, painting &c. have been for ages confined to a class of people whom our ancient legislators have ranked amongst the lower

orders of society. This class, perhaps, jealous of the *Bráhmans*, whose sacerdotal authority they have always opposed with a spirit of independence, or more naturally, apprehensive of competition in their trade, took particular care to conceal the sacred volumes which have descended to them, from the rest of the people, but as they have on their own part been long denied the benefit of Sanskrit literature, these treatises could be but of little use to themselves; and the consequence has been, that while the practical part of the science continued to be followed up amongst them as a kind of inheritance from generation to generation, the theory became gradually lost to the whole nation, if not to the whole world. (Ráz 1834:xi–xii)

It is against this context that the Poompuhar Training Centre serves as an opportunity and threat to the art of bronzecasting. As a government institution, the Poompuhar Training Centre has to follow secular democratic rules that forbid it from denying admission based on caste, class or religion. As an institution that was founded and set up by a Vishwakarma sculptor, it had courses and syllabi that were adapted from traditional systems of knowledge. And for these reasons, it was also a threat, because for Vishwakarma, the egalitarian system of Poompuhar democratized *murai*, making it accessible to everyone. In the hands of the State, *murai* was some aspirational, that anyone could hope to access, learn, and practice.

***Murai*, the government, and Arts Practice**

The Poompuhar ArtMetal Training Centre (PTC, henceforth) was started in 1962 with the help of Ramaswamy Sthapati, the Vishwakarma sculptor who was eventually arrested for colluding with smugglers in the case involving the Sivapuram Nataraja. For this, more than one Vishwakarma sculptor blame him for the ruin of the craft, imagining it as a place which exclusively employs students of other castes. It is, nevertheless, a fact that several well established Vishwakarma sculptors have studied in the program, and continue

to enroll their children there. PTC is the only institute exclusively teaching traditional bronzecasting in South India, and is in many ways unlike the historical institution of transmitting knowledge in bronzecasting. Instead of instruction that was conducted within families between generations, bronzecasting is taught in PTC with a syllabus, well-defined subjects that included theory, art and practical training, and assignments and evaluations. In other words, it is conducted like a class in a modern school in contemporary India. A three-year program that only takes in students when one program ends, the PTC occasionally gets suspended because of bureaucratic reasons. There had not been a class for a couple of years before the one that started in 2012 because PTC could not find an instructor. When I was in Swamimalai, I followed the 2012 program which ended in 2015 and had eight students enrolled, ranging in ages from 13 to 18 years. I rarely saw more than six at a time and eventually learnt that at least three had dropped from the program. While the instructor for the class taught lessons and provided one on one instruction to the students, I also observed that most of the time, the students were expected to help out with the operations of the Poompuhar Production Centre, the government production unit that was in the same building as the school. While the formal structure of the PTC centered *murai* through its syllabus, the instructor of the program had a say in what was actually being taught, and this was based on not only what the instructor considered *murai*, but also if they thought *murai* mattered.

Veera Ragavan Sthapati, the instructor who had been hired to teach the course was a graduate of the Mamallapuram College of Architecture and Sculpture, the institution which V. Ganapati Sthapati had led. I had introduced him in the previous chapter when he

had been chatting with Rasu Achari about the status of the Vishwakarma community in the bronzecasting industry. From the very first time I met Ragavan Sthapati, he had been eager to talk about the PTC and its merits and faults. We would sit in the tiny room furnished with a blackboard, teacher's table and chair, book shelves filled more with raw materials than books, and floor desks for the students. The walls were covered with several calendars and a photo of the then Chief Minister Dr. J. Jayalalitha. This image is a recurrent feature of every governmental institution in Tamilnadu, as is the stultifying bureaucracy. Once formalities had been structured, change was nigh impossible. In that sense, Poompuhar had its own *murai* – its own proper way of doing things. This was illustrated by my struggle to get access to the 1962 syllabus. When I asked Ragavan if I could take a peek, he told me that he did not have it, and that I should ask the Superintendent of Poompuhar, Mr. Elangovan. His designation has since then been changed to Manager, which better describes his duties. Although he was placed at the Poompuhar production unit and its attached sales showroom, he was also in charge of the administration of the PTC. At the end of that day, I went to Mr. Elangovan to ask for the syllabus and he said that he would have it ready the next day. The next day, he brought it out of the drawer of his desk. As I flipped through the pages, Mr. Elangovan told me that the third year's schedule was missing from the syllabus. "Is that all right?" he asked me. Right enough, the last page of the stapled sheets had been ripped, only half a page remained with a jagged edge. What happened to it, I wondered and Mr. Elangovan shrugged; he did not know. I asked if I could take photographs of the syllabus and he acquiesced. It was around 9 am by then and the students had already been there for an hour. I went to the class and saw from the

blackboard that six were marked present, although only three were sitting with Ragavan, who was excited to see that I had the syllabus. One of the students returned from the workshop and had a flat piece of soft wax with him, which he was working into a *peedam* (foundation). Ragavan was also working on a wax model of a hand, and in front of him were four other hands that he had already completed. One of the three students around him was stoking the fire in the charcoal stove that Ragavan was using to keep the wax malleable. When he saw that I had the syllabus, he grinned, stood up, and ambled over. “I have the same thing,” he chortled and opened a drawer, pulling out a photocopy of the syllabus. “I could not give it to you, but the Superintendent can; that is why I asked you to ask him for it,” he said. The mysteries of the government bureaucracy are many.

“We are still using the 1962 syllabus that was created by Ramaswamy Sthapati,” said Ragavan when I asked about the structure of the course. “It includes five subjects that we will cover over three years: Drawing, *Grantham*, Practicals, Project, and Iconometrics.” Drawing involved practicing the various figures and decorative elements that are used in wax modeling. *Grantham* is the script in which most *Shilpashastras* have been written. Practicals involved hands-on learning of the various aspects of bronzecasting, including wax modeling, preparing the mold, cleaning the metal, decorative sculpting, and polish work. Project referred to particular bronze idols that students had to create from scratch, handling every aspect themselves. Iconometrics involved memorizing the verses from the *Shilpashastras* that described the measures and attributes of various deities, but the syllabus also included verses from other Sanskrit texts such as the *Manusmriti*. Ragavan would refer the verses on measures as *Slokam* and the others as *Shastram*. Strangely,

Sanskrit was not taught as a subject, but everyone generally spoke of PTC's classes as involving Sanskrit classes. Later, I understood that memorizing the verses was considered to be training in Sanskrit. This resonates with Samuel Parker's (2003b:12) finding with an artisan who claimed that although he did not understand Sanskrit, memorizing the *Slokas* meant that the knowledge in them was absorbed materially into the body of the artisan.

The content to be covered and the assignments to be completed by the students were explicated in detail in the syllabus. For example, wax modeling, which was part of the Practicals, required students to complete 60 models before the course ended, with each of them enumerated in the syllabus. Ragavan commented that not every student might be good at everything, in fact some might not be good at anything. But it was his responsibility to ensure that they learnt as much as they could. Ragavan's copy of the syllabus had check marks next to the completed lessons and had relevant dates highlighted. "It is not even complete," he complained, pointing to the torn last half-page. "Only the first month of the last year is even here," he said. I wondered how he knew what he would have to teach, but Ragavan was more concerned about the obsolescence of the entire syllabus. While Ragavan took the practical assignments seriously, he seemed to be a bit laxer when it came to the teaching of *Grantham*, *Slokam* and *Shastram*. "*Needhi Shastram* is not necessary," Ragan proclaimed. "It is there in the first year schedule, and it describes laws and duties, but why do these boys need to know that?" The *Needhi Shastras* are also known as the *Dharmashastras* and refer to treatises such as the classical period *Manusmriti* which lay out religious and social rules that were meant to be followed in particular historical periods. The laws are founded on the individual's caste position and explicate

Hindu theological morals. “I understand why we need to teach the *Slokam*; they have descriptions of the different idols. But we also do drawing and practicals, where we teach iconography. They are the same thing. So is even *Slokam* that necessary? Also, there are already *Shilpashastra* books in Tamil available. So what use of *Grantham*?” argued Ragavan, before inexplicably concluding, “Actually, it is good for students to know these things. But I think they are also unnecessary. It has been too long. These things will not be of use to the students of today.” Thus, while Ragavan acknowledged the general significance of those aspects of the syllabus that would be considered *murai*, he was also critical about their immediate significance in terms of utility and relevance. Ragavan’s conflicted feelings about *Ggrantham* and *Shilpashastra* verses makes sense when one considers the socioeconomic situation of most of the students enrolled.

“The problem is,” confided Ragavan, “the parents of these boys treat them like they are property. Once he is done with training,” Ragavan said, pointing to Ganesan, one of the students, “his parents will find a workshop that is willing to give them a loan against him as a worker. He will get paid monthly but based on interest adjustments. But nowadays, everyone has financial problems. So, one day his parents might borrow another 25,000 rupees against him, and then it will be Deepavali³⁷ and they will borrow another 4000 rupees. Then, there will be some family emergency, another 3000 rupees. This will go on and on and this boy will have to work for the rest of his life like that. Poompuhar might take them on if they need workers, but they only pay around 3000 to 5000 rupees, which

³⁷ The Hindu festival of lights also called Diwali, celebrating the return of King Rama (the epic hero of Ramayana), and his wife and brother to Ayodhya after their 14 years of exile. It is usually celebrated with new clothes, sharing sweets with relatives and friends, and lighting fireworks. Thus, it involves quite a few expenses.

might not be enough for the parents.” “They want me to teach these kids Sanskrit and *Grantham*,” he laughed. “How is that possible in two years and how is it possible when these boys do not even know how to read and write well? Why do you think these boys are even here? It is because they did not do well in school. They cannot get into engineering colleges because they failed 10th standard. So their parents join them here and ask me, when will they start earning money?” At least two students in the class belonged to the Dalit Christian community who are marginalized financially and socially in society, but especially when it comes to a quasi-religious art like bronzecasting. Poompuhar as a government institution is one of the few bronzecasting workshops where Dalits could learn bronzecasting and practice it as an occupation. Ragavan’s dissatisfaction with the bureaucratic decree is understandable considering the mismatch between the syllabus’ focus on proper learning and the ground realities of the students in the class. He also felt it was too much work that needed to be done in too little time. “When I was in Mamallapuram,” he recalled his experience at the College of Architecture and Sculpture, “in one year, we only do a Sivagami³⁸. This boy here,” he pointed to Eli, one of the smaller students, “he has done ten pieces already. This is too much for him – he is only a boy.”

So, do you teach them Sanskrit and *Grantham*, I asked. “I do what I can and teach them what they need to know,” he admitted. “What use is even those two things for them? Is a customer going to go to a workshop and say you need to recite the *Sloka* for the Ardhanarishvara idol and only if you know it and say it correctly, I will give the order to you?” Raghavan had a point about the pragmatic nature of the contemporary bronzecasting

³⁸ Sivagami is another name for Parvati, the consort of the god, Shiva.

industry. While some customers might want to see some markers of tradition and traditional knowledge, those usually take the form of the appearance of the sculptor, and how well they are able to communicate their art and work process, as seen in Chapter 3. Thus, when I first met with Raghavan and his students, the first thing he made the students do was to recite the *Slokam* from a *Shilpashastra* that describes the iconographic attributes of the god, Ganesha. Everyone did not know it and the class recited it en mass, giggling, but the Sanskrit and the *Slokam* were demonstrative tools to showcase the traditional quality of bronzecasting. Raghavan was teaching students “what they need(ed) to know” to perform as a traditional sculptor. Raghavan recounted the time that the new Chairman & Managing Director of Poompuhar Chennai, Dr. Santosh Babu, an Indian Administrative Services Officer who had been recently appointed, visited the Swamimalai Poompuhar. Although trained in business, Dr. Santosh Babu is new to the handicrafts industry. “He seems like a nice person,” mused Raghavan, “But he did not know much about this field. He came to the class and talked to the students and was shocked at how young they were. He asked one of the students his age and when he said 16, the MD said, You must be brilliant to be able to do this at such a young age. I interrupted and said that the student was very capable, all of these students were quite good. The MD exclaimed, They must all be brilliant. I know what these boys are brilliant at, and it is not work,” smirked Raghavan. But he played along with the MD and made the students recite a *Slokam*. “He called that brilliant too,” scoffed Raghavan.

Raghavan oscillated between being a defender of the students, especially against the bureaucrats and workers of Poompuhar, and a critic of the entire system. Still, he worked

conscientiously to ensure that the students knew enough to survive. Ganesan is a wiry young man who is one of the more dedicated students, perhaps because as one of the older students, he knew the value of being helpful to the workshop workers and officials in terms of future job opportunities. He was also extremely enthusiastic about the drawing classes that take place for the first three months of the program. Showing me pages upon pages of the various gods, goddesses, animals, birds, and abstract designs that he had drawn as per the proportions indicated in the Ganapathy Sthapati book mentioned earlier, Ganesan described the first year of training, “We drew a lot of gods. Sometimes, the master would draw half of it and we would have to make a mirror image on the other side. Then we had to draw the whole thing. I am pretty good at drawing. Then we started to learn how to make wax pedestals. That is a lot of measuring and my eyes hurt from looking at the tiny units. Mostly though, we sat with master and saw how he made wax models”. Eli, another student joined us, bringing his drawing pad to show me the works that he had done. “Everything is taught as a subject,” Eli said, who had moved on to showing me all the wax models he had made yesterday. “In the morning, we do wax work, and then in the afternoon for an hour, we do drawing,” he explained. “But the other students found drawing to be really boring,” interjected Ganesan, “The boys were not doing the drawings, so the master said that we will focus on wax modeling in class. Also we are behind on that according to the syllabus. So now we take drawings home and do wax modeling here.” All the students had been mainly working on wax when I had visited them intermittently over a few months in the second year of their program. That day, one student was scraping a wax model, smoothening its surface. Another was using a ruler and a cutter to create

squares of flat wax sheets. Another held a bit of melted wax and was trying to create a head and a torso.

Often students were interrupted, however, and pulled in to help the Poompuhar workers. One day, when the class was particularly quiet, with everyone working on different wax models, one of the workshop workers came in and asked Ganesan why the *peedam* (foundations) were not done yet. Ganesan grinned abashedly and showed them the wet wax models sitting in front of him on the desk. “We have done a few and we are taking it out of the water,” he replied. “It is the fifteenth day,” the worker admonished, “Should we not be doing casting now?” Ragavan interrupts at this juncture though, defending the students and arguing that the worker should have kept melted wax ready for them in the morning since that took a lot of time. These were not considered interruptions, so much as necessary practice for the students. “We support the workshop,” explained Ragavan. “The students just made eight *peedam* for them. So, we help the workers, and the students get experience. Both sides profit.” This transaction is mainly because of the importance of learning wax work, which is covered in the syllabus for two entire years. “Only if they are able to do and understand this, will they understand how to make anything,” opined Ragavan, listing the kinds of structures students had to know how to do – *peedam*, *vikraham* (crowns), and *thiruvaachi* (frames). These were aspects of the sculptures that needed precise measurement and often used angular forms. The *peedam* and the *thiruvaachi* especially was repetitive work involving making flat pieces of wax, cutting them to size, and melting pieces together. Although Ragavan considered these essential skills that the students must definitely know how to do by the end of the program if they

wanted to work outside in workshops, not all students were capable of wax work. “Wax work is memory work. It requires mental skills,” rationalized Ragavan. “Not every student will be good at it, but we can tell in six months if a student has that talent. If he is no good, we will find something else for him to do and train him in that.” Wax workers also receive a higher salary compared to others, but are also rarer. While these proclamations of Ragavan seemed egalitarian, biases do exist. The sons of Sthapatis are usually good at wax, he suggested, but another day, while talking about the changes in the field, Ragavan proposed a more nuanced perspective. “There is a caste called the Valluvar caste, which is like the Vishwakarma, in that they have a hereditary occupation. But they are astrologers. The grandfather will do astrology, the father will assist him by doing the mathematical calculations and writing up the astrological charts. When the grandfather passes away, the father will become the astrologer and his son will become his assistant. That was the way in which it was done in the old times. But now, you can do a PhD in astrology,” states Ragavan, “and you can just learn from books. But at some point of time, a Valluvar caste astrologer would have contributed to that student’s education, either by being his teacher or by writing the book that he reads.” Ragavan continued, “My teacher was a Vishwakarma, and I am a Vishwakarma, but I do not feel special consideration or anger towards my community. My teacher was never biased and he taught everyone. See those two boys over there are from the Vishwakarma community,” he pointed to Ganesan and Ekambareshwaran. “But that does not mean the other boys will be treated differently or taught different things. Whatever is good will flourish. Whatever is bad will wither away.”

In Ragavan and in Poompuhar resides a pragmatic consideration of *murai*. While

there is an acknowledgment of what counts as tradition and “right”, there is also an awareness of what works and what does not. Ragavan’s consideration for his students has made him question what exactly *murai* is, not only in terms of knowledge, but also in terms of pedagogy. The ability to demonstrate traditional knowledge, and gesture towards it, is something necessary to survive as a bronzecaster in Swamimalai, and thus, Ragavan ensures that the students learn enough to be comfortable engaging in that discourse.

However, hands-on training and apprenticeship, even at the cost of the scripted classes, provides students with better training and more experience in bronzecasting. This approach to bronzecasting imagined it less as an arts practice and more as a *thozil*, a profession and an industry. In this sense, what is proper for Ragavan was to fulfil his responsibility as an instructor and ensure that students are able to succeed by getting gainful employment.

Unlike the earlier characterizations of *murai* as an aspirational value that needs untoward and unpleasant struggle, PTC and Ragavan were attempting to make it more accessible.

Murai here is something aspirational, that sculptors of any caste and background could attempt to learn.

While leaving PTC the day I was given the syllabus, I stopped over at the gallery to say goodbye to Elangovan and to tell him that I will return the syllabus the next day. I asked him when the syllabus had been created. "The very beginning," said Elangovan with a smile. "It is from when all of this started." Will it ever be changed, I asked, Ragavan’s admonishments ringing loudly in my ears. "Never!" declared Elangovan, proudly. "This syllabus will never change. It cannot be changed." But as I started to smile and say goodbye, he continued casually, "Of course, we do not follow it as it is anymore. Too

much has changed. We cannot use it as it is. But the syllabus is the standard. It will always remain as it is. It will never change."

Conclusion

Rajanarayanan, the folklorist and storyteller, tells of a proverb about the Kammalar community. Someone was telling a story about a mound of earth and a dried up banyan leaf who were friends. The leaf protected the earth from the rain and the mound of earth would protect the leaf from wind by shifting its weight onto it. The audience were listening to the story enraptured, when a Kammalar listener interrupted with a question: “What happens when the rain and wind come at the same time,” he asked. The storyteller, peeved, stopped his narration and left. The proverb is that stories should never to be told to a Kammalar. This is a dissertation about the many stories that are told to and about the Kammalar – stories about tradition, heritage, art, ethics, and the lack thereof. This is also a dissertation about the stories that Kammalar tell about themselves and other.

Leela Prasad’s (2006) study of the pilgrimage town of Sringeri establishes stories as the medium for negotiating and communicating about ethics. Interceding Hindu moral codes with everyday logic and common sense, the residents of the religious town approach ethics from various perspectives, that include performativity. This dissertation studies discourse and ethics, but also tradition, arts, heritage, commerce, caste, and everyday life in a small town in Tamilnadu. While discourse is used to disseminate ethics, ultimately, ethics for the artisan is rooted in practice. Arts practice is what keeps the Swamimalai sculptor grounded, caught as they are in forces of global capitalism and criminality, national institutions and agendas, historical formations of caste and tradition, and the unknowable future as it stretches to the infinite until it reaches the beginning again.

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