

Article

# The Experience of Srividya at Devipuram

Mani Rao

Independent Scholar; emailmanirao@gmail.com; Tel.: +91-8861891807

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses the religious experience of Srividya practices at Devipuram in Andhra Pradesh, South India, based on ethnographic studies conducted in 2014 and 2015. A summary of phenomena described by Amritanandanatha Saraswati in his memoirs situates the background. Interviews with three disciples of Amritananda probe their visionary experiences, practical methodologies and relationships with the Goddess. An inter-textual study of interviews, memoirs and narratives helps identify a theme of vision and embodiment—in particular, the aniconic graphic form of the Goddess, the Sriyantra, which is experienced as embodied within the practitioner.

**Keywords:** Indian Religions; religious experience; Ethnography; tantra; yantra; Srividya

## 1. Introduction

“Srividya” may be translated as “Auspicious Knowledge;” it refers to a tantric religious tradition in which the primary deity is Goddess Lalita Tripurasundari, a form of the primordial feminine principle also referred to as “Shakti.” Srividya is practiced at Devipuram in South India, where Amritanandanatha Saraswati (1934–2015) founded a temple to Goddess Lalita based on a visionary experience. Historically, Srividya is regarded one of the four transmissions (*āmnāya*) of the Kula within the non-dualist tradition of Kashmir Shaivism (Padoux 2013, p. 2). A number of sources in Sanskrit such as *Yoginīhṛdaya*, *Nityāṣoḍaśikāṛṇava* or *Paraśurāma Kalpasūtra*, and such secondary sources as Padoux (1990, 2011), Sanderson (1988, 2006), Brooks (1990), Goudriaan (1981), Gupta (1979) and Khanna (1986) help understand both the metaphysical underpinnings and ritual procedures of Srividya. More recently, Yelle (2003) studies tantric mantras through Peircean semiotics and Sthaneswar Timalina (2015) uses cognitive theory as well as Indian aesthetics to discuss the imagery of tantric deities.

However, whereas descriptions of tantric rituals tell us what practitioners do—such as chant mantras, or worship yantras (for definitions, see Section 1.1)—they do not give us insight into *why*, nor indicate *how* actual practice articulates and innovates upon given frameworks. And the theoretical lenses of modern scholarship offer explanations which are not derived from and disconnected to the world of practice. My ethnographic research in *Living Mantra: Mantra, Deity and Visionary Experience* (Rao 2019) brings a new area, that of practice, into scholarship. Along with questions about the nature of a mantra and its relationship to deities in this book, I probed the visionary experiences of contemporary practitioners in Andhra-Telangana, especially at three communities including Devipuram.

Compared to western phenomenology of religion about the *sui generis* nature and ineffability of religious experience, the narratives I documented in my fieldwork had particulars and rich details that were effable as well as seemed repeatable. Practitioners described bodily sensations, development of extraordinary faculties, visions of deities, communications with deities, reception and perception of mantras (including *new* mantras). For them, experience was evidence of progress in *sadhana* (spiritual practice). Derived from the Sanskrit “*siddh*” (to achieve), *sadhana* refers to earnest effort that results in achievement, and a practitioner who does *sadhana* is a “*sadhaka*.” Advanced *sadhakas* tend to become gurus for other *sadhakas*, and function as primary sources—they author books, disseminate guides

for practice and their interpretations and editions of source texts often displace previous versions. Additionally, a visionary guru functions as a “mandala” (circle of influence) within which a process of transformation occurs for his/her followers. Sadhakas seem to mirror the experiential themes and values held in esteem by their gurus. The authority of a guru is usually also ratified on the basis of the sadhaka’s experience during practice; thus, experience is a crucible where we witness the formation of authoritative sources.

My fieldwork for *Living Mantra* (Rao 2019) amply illustrates how it is experience that motivates sadhakas to undertake arduous disciplines, not intellectual considerations. Because contemplation of a deity calls for imagination, it is offset, or anchored by the body, which becomes the site of empirical, sensory evidence. From the scholar’s perspective, bodily techniques do not always have to be abstracted into principles, nor considered only symbolic of some other meanings. As Michael Jackson has argued in “Knowledge of the Body” (Jackson 1983), semiotic and linguistic analysis cannot substitute for experience (pp. 327–45). Commenting on a Kuranko ritual, Jackson upholds “the practical and embodied nature of Kuranko thought [ . . . ] as an ethical preference, not a mark of primitiveness or speculative failure” (p. 341).

### 1.1. Mantra and Yantra in Srividya

In addition to an iconic form (*murti*), the Goddess also has aniconic forms—a phonic form (*mantra*), and a graphic form (*yantra*). Mantras and yantras are regarded as ontological forms associated with deities and perceived by *rishis* (seers) in revelations.

In common parlance, a yantra means an instrument or weapon; in tantra, a yantra is a mystical diagram considered a revelation. In Srividya, the graphic form of the Goddess is called *Sriyantra* or *Srichakra*. Literally, a “chakra” means “wheel” and in tantra, a chakra is an enclosed space within which a ritual activity occurs. The Sriyantra consists of a *bindu* (represented by a point, or dot) at the center of five inverted and four upright triangles that are interlocked. The apexes of these nine triangles are in a line, and together this creates forty-three triangles (see Figure 1). This triangular grid is set within eight- and sixteen-petaled lotuses surrounded by three circles enclosed in a square with four openings (see Figure 1). This periphery is enclosed by three concentric lines with four ‘T’ shaped portals like thresholds facing four directions. When in a three-dimensional form, the Sriyantra is called a “*meru*” (“mountain” in Sanskrit). In the Navarana (nine-enclosures) puja, mantras and substances are offered to Khadgamala deities at specific locations upon the yantra—Khadgamala goddesses are the retinue of the Goddess and are also her forms.

A fundamental idea in tantra is that of the dyad of Shiva and Shakti, wherein Shiva is cosmic consciousness and Shakti is the activating power that generates the material world. (This is similar to the dyad of Purusha-Prakriti in Samkhya-darshana (school of thought) wherein Purusha is consciousness and Prakriti, matter). In the Sriyantra, five downward pointing triangles emanate from the Shakti principle and four upward pointing triangles emanate from the Shiva principle—the *Yoginīhṛdaya* explains that the chakra as creation has five energies (inverted triangles) and as dissolution has four fires (triangles with apexes upwards)—the chakra is the union of five energies and four fires (Padoux 1990). The nine interlacing triangles are described as the *navayonis*, or the primal cause (*mulakarana*) of the universe (*prapancha*). Shakti resides in the bindu at the center. When practitioners worship or/and contemplate the Sriyantra, they move their attention from the outer perimeter to the center bindu and enter deeper meditative states.

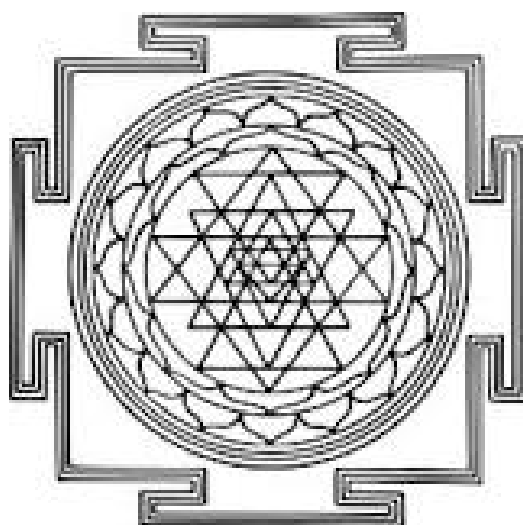


Figure 1. Sriyantra.<sup>1</sup>

Srividya mantras are also referred to as “vidya” or “Srividya”—i.e., they are synonymous with the mystical knowledge that a practitioner seeks. Mantra plays a vital role in tantric worship. Not only do mantras invoke deities, but they are also identified with deities. Because the purpose of tantric worship is identification, even the worshipper’s body must be made of mantras. As a part of the ritual procedures, the worshipper mentally dries, burns and destroys his or her own body, and then reconstitutes it using mantras. The process of placing a mantra in the body is called *nyasa*. Individual syllables are prominent in tantric mantras, and adding the nasal *ṃ* sound (*anusvara*) to each letter/syllable turns the entire alphabet into the Aksharamala mantra. There are a number of mantras in Srividya including the Bala mantra to invoke nine-year old Goddess Bala, the fifteen-syllable Panchadashi mantra and the sixteen-syllable Shodashi mantra. Hymns to the Goddess addressing Her different forms and with Her various names include Soundarya Lahiri, (Ocean of Beauty), Lalita Sahasranamam (Thousand Names of Lalita), and Khadgamala Stotram (Garland of the Sword)—these are regarded as *mālā*-mantras (garland-mantras) due to their length. The benefits of a mantra are said to accrue only upon initiation by the guru, and mantras initiated by the guru are guarded with utmost secrecy. For example, the syllables of the Panchadashi mantra are no secret—*Ka E I La Hriṃ, Ha Sa Ka Ha La Hriṃ, Sa Ka La Hriṃ*—but unless the mantra has been given by a guru, its practice is considered ineffective by traditional practitioners.

The Srividya *puja* (worship ritual) involves a purification and consecration of both the space and the worshipper, and it is then that the deity is invited to be present. The puja is addressed or offered to the specific yantra of the Goddess being worshipped (e.g., Shyama, Bala, Varahi, Lalita), along with the specific mantra. The puja follows the basic scheme of any tantric puja (see Gupta (1979) for a detailed description).

This essay discusses the religious experience of Srividya practices at Devipuram. Visionary experiences described by the guru Amritanandanatha Saraswati situates the background. Interviews with three of his disciples probe their experiences, practical methodologies and relationships with the Goddess. An inter-textual study of interviews, memoirs and narratives helps identify a theme of vision and embodiment.

<sup>1</sup> By N. Manytchikine [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons.

## 1.2. Body and Temple at Devipuram

The experience of Srividya discussed in this essay is associated with Devipuram near Anakapalle in Andhra, South India. Devipuram was founded by a nuclear physicist called Pahlada Sastry, who became a visionary guru called Amritanandanatha Saraswati (1934–2015).<sup>2</sup> In a journal that he maintained online during his lifetime, Amritananda recalls that he had a questioning, empirical approach during his youth.<sup>3</sup> During meditation, he experienced “humming sounds” and “300 Hz sounds” within himself (“Guruji’s Experiences”). An early vision that he had was that of mantras from the Ishavasya Upanishad. He also experienced sensations typical of kundalini activation along his spinal column. The kundalini refers to Shakti incarnate dormant at the base of the spine in every person. In treatises of yoga such as Purnananda Giri’s *Shadchakranirupana*, kundalini shakti is described as rising along the spinal path and activating different energy centers (chakras) along the way, eventually resulting in a spiritual awakening (Woodroffe 2012).

When Amritananda conducted an elaborate *Devi-yajña*, he received a piece of land as a ritual gift. Located in Anakapalle near Visakhapatnam, and surrounded by nine mountains, this land as if embodied the nine enclosures (*navarana*) of Sriyantra. Meditating on a hillock here one day in 1983, Amritananda experienced *himself* as the ritual offering of a yajna being conducted by four others, and felt that a heavy object had been placed in his heart. After meditation, he dug at the site, and found a Sriyantra Meru buried there, made of *pancha-loha*, an alloy of five metals conventionally used in icons of deities. With a *svayambhu* (self-manifested, or natural) *yonī* as the deity, this became the location for a Kamakhya temple. Visitors can ask to *receive* the Kalavahana puja here, a puja where the *kalas* or aspects of the Goddess are invited into oneself. For this puja, one has to sit at the *yonī*, taking the place of the deity, and is formally worshipped along with oblations and mantras. ‘Yoni’ which means the generative center, is in the image of female genitalia.

Directly across the Kamakhya pitham, as if replicating the Meru unearthed at the pitham, Amritananda established a temple to Goddess Lalita in the shape of a Sriyantra (see Figure 2). The name, Sahasrakshi Meru temple, literally means “thousand-eyed,” but it is really a trope for omnivoyance, or omniscience of the Goddess. Measuring 108 ft × 108 ft and 54 ft high, this is literally a Sriyantra one can walk into. Three levels must be climbed to arrive at the inner sanctum, and as you enter and exit the temple using different flights of stairs, you would also have circumambulated the deity. Just as a bindu is at the center of a Sriyantra, Goddess Lalita is at the center of Her temple. Additionally, She is surrounded by all the goddesses named in the Khadgamala stotram. Amritananda’s followers told me that each of the Khadgamala goddesses was sculpted based on the visions and visualizations of Amritananda, a process which took several years. Thus, Devipuram was not only a manifestation of the Goddess but also an extension of Amritananda’s self.

<sup>2</sup> Renaming marks a transition from one phase of life to another; in religious orders and spiritual practice, it marks a life-long commitment to the order or/and practice. Pahlada Sastry and his wife Annapurna trained in Srividya with B.S. Krishna Murthy in Mumbai, and were initiated (and renamed) after a yajna in Kollur, Karnataka. Devipuram official website, under “Srividya,” <http://www.devipuram.com/about-devipuram> (accessed on 1 April 2015).

<sup>3</sup> During my fieldwork in 2014 and 2015, I had referred to journal entries by Amritanandanatha Saraswati (Amritanandanatha Saraswathi Blogspot 2018) on the Devipuram Official Website [www.devipuram.com](http://www.devipuram.com) under the section “Guruji’s Experiences.” I accessed and made a copy of these for my reference on 1 April 2015, and continued to refer to them offline during the writing of *Living Mantra* (Rao 2019). After Amritananda’s demise in October 2015, the Devipuram official website was revised. The old journal entries are now available on Vira Chandra’s blog. (Chandra, Vira. “Guruji’s Life Experiences,” *Amritananda-Natha-Saraswati* (blog), accessed on 2 May 2018).



Figure 2. Sahasrakshi Meru temple, Devipuram. Photo by Mani Rao.

## 2. Srividya Practitioners at Devipuram

### 2.1. Seeing Yantra Within

Mani Prasanna's apartment in Ameerpet, Hyderabad, is also a "pitham" (sacred seat, temple) where Srividya rituals are conducted on a daily basis. The altar and *homa-kunda* (fire-pit for rituals) were in a small room at the back, and which could accommodate, perhaps, not more than fifteen people. After showing me around, she ushered me into an adjacent room where we talked. Answering my questions without hesitation, she told me that she did Srividya rituals twice a day, and attributed her visionary experiences as well as a sense of contentment to Srividya *sadhana*.

Mani Prasanna's first vision of, and conversation with, the Goddess was in her teen years; at the time, she did not know the identity of the visitor. It was only over a decade later, in 2003, that she realized the identity of her visitor. She had attended a *homa* (ritual, *yajña*) for Goddess Chandi at Devipuram, and felt a sensation of movement in her womb during the *homa*. When she anxiously asked Amritananda what it meant, he told her that she was pregnant and would have a daughter. When pregnancy tests confirmed this prediction, Mani Prasanna began to believe in Amritananda. She also received the Bala-mantra from Amritananda on that visit, and began to do the mantra for Goddess Bala (the Goddess in the form of a little girl). Soon, she was visited by Goddess Bala, who spoke to her at length. Mani Prasanna recounted Goddess Bala's talk. She had said that although every part of the body was a seat of Shakti, the mind did not "know" that to be so. However, when every part of the body was "affected by mantra," the mind would become aware of that, and one would be able to "see" the inside of the body. Mani Prasanna said she had wondered how a little girl knew so much (and such a remark also, for the skeptical part of me, cued in authenticity).

I did not understand how Mani Prasanna (and Goddess Bala) meant "seeing inside" the body? As we continued to talk, Mani Prasanna gave me specific examples:

Mani Prasanna: Once when I was reciting Khadgamala, I saw my body cut into nine pieces. Like a piece here, one here, and here, in a row, like a yantra. So then I got scared and I asked Guruji [Amritananda] and wondered what that was. He said "it appeared that way to tell you that there is no difference between you and the Sri-Vidya. That is why She [the Goddess] did it like that.

Mani Prasanna then realized the equivalence, or identification, between the Sriyantra and herself. She understood that the nine enclosures of the Sriyantra were also present in the body. When she recited the *aksharamala*, which is a mantra that names all the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet as individual deities, she saw the syllables in her body. This vision recurred when she recited the Khadgamala stotram, when she invoked the Vagdevatas. Vagdevatas are the goddesses of Speech, and regarded as the *rishis* (seers, sages) of the Lalitasahasranamam mantra. Every mantra has a rishi, who is the first to perceive that mantra and transmit it to the world; here, the rishis are the goddesses of Speech. After three months of sadhana, when she invited a deity, she felt that deity entering her body. Her puja, then, was to the deities established in her own body, and Srividya helped her realize that her own body was a Sriyantra. The detail described by Mani Prasanna suggested that this was a vision based upon which she came to the conclusion of identification with the Sriyantra and Goddess.

## 2.2. Yantra As A Rosary

Another advanced Devipuram *sadhaka* whom I interviewed was Donald McKenna. An architect by profession, he was a part of Devipuram's project to provide economical geodesic homes to the local community. We chatted at the yajna-shala in Devipuram a few steps away from the Sahasrakshi Meru temple. Don had been introduced to the Devipuram community through a colleague at Rochester, N.Y., called Chaitanyananda, aka "Aiya." He began to attend the gatherings at Aiya's home, and was impressed by the relationship between the sadhakas and the Goddess, and at how tangible it seemed. In 1993, he went to Devipuram and was initiated by Amritananda and given the Maha-Shodashi mantra (the Great Sixteen-syllabled mantra),<sup>4</sup> a mantra guarded with utmost secrecy and said to grant liberation to the sadhaka in this lifetime. When we spoke, Don had been reciting this mantra (among other mantras) for over twenty years.

Fascinated by the Sriyantra, Don began to learn how to draw it, and then understood the precise location of the Khadgamala goddesses.

Don: having some understanding that the *avaranas* [enclosures] were the layers of the meru, coincided with the physical plane and celestial plane, but it also mapped out the various chakra locations of the body, for instance. So I said—ok! I am just going to stand inside the meru and I am going to put my mantra on every single location, all the way up, all the way up. And if they fell close to the right place, I was going to be happy.

Charts of Sriyantra and deities along with ritual procedures are widely available today, and while they may be drawn from sources such as the Parashurama Kalpa Sutra, it is ultimately the guru of a community of sadhakas who approves them. At Devipuram, the locations of the Khadgamala deities at the Sahasrakshi Meru Temple and in the manuals are based on notes circulated among his disciples by Amritananda. Don's methodology seemed like he was using the yantra like a rosary (*japamala*)—he "put" the mantra on each location just as one repeats the mantra with the movement of each bead of a rosary during *japa*. Don not only agreed with my analogy, but also told me that he turned around when he reached the top. This too was a typical japamala move, where one switches directions at/before the outer bead called meru. The Sriyantra had ninety-eight locations for the Khadgamala deities, and Don placed or offered his mantra at each location—on the way up and on the way down from the meru.

Next, Don felt that the mantra was like a "chord" that was already within him, and that he was not uttering it, but echoing it. When he recited mantra, it seemed to "take over," and the sounds and vibrations were so profound that he did not notice the passage of time. Don called it a

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<sup>4</sup> Some traditions including the Dattatreya tradition of Amritananda consider that this mantra has 28 syllables; however, fifteen syllables at its core are considered as three (sets), thus justifying the name of Maha-shodashi (sixteen-syllabled) mantra. While the Shodashi mantra is the sixteen year old deity Tripurasundari, the Maha-shodashi mantra includes the ten Dashamahavidya deities and the five deities of the Parashurama Kalpasutra—this is also why it is regarded as a very powerful mantra.

“three-dimensionality,” and said that it was more than visual. When I asked if by that he meant visual imagination, in the mind, he replied, “inside the body!”

Don: Inside the body! Your body almost ceases to exist. Your body all of a sudden is a location. And in something much larger. And all of a sudden, in a location, you are a speck. You are like an atom. And this *Hrīm-Hrīm-Hrīm* sounds sending out and echoing back. I mean there are aspects that are very similar to sonar . . . all of a sudden I am getting these perceptions of sonar, there is a blackness.

This also coincided for him with the periods of time he was reciting Panchadashi mantra, and he found himself receiving what he called “packets of information.” Don gave me some examples: these packets of information were cognitive and precognitive, and they could be about someone’s illness, or a thought in their mind. Don also talked at length about how the Panchadashi mantra had given him an ability to maintain equanimity in the midst of hectic projects that involved multi-tasking. Since Don recited more than one mantra, I asked if he found any differences in the practice or results of the different mantras. Here’s a summary of what Don told me: His perceptions had been improved by Chandi, he had gained clairvoyance with Maha-Shodashi, and had better physical aptitude as well as an influence over the weather due to Panchadashi mantra. Don explained that Chandi mantra was invoked *automatically* if he sent “energy” to friends in need. Typically, he would receive a confirmation by way of a phone call the next day to thank him.

### 2.3. Yantra As Sacred Seat

Gopichand Balla and I talked on the first floor of the Sahasrakshi Meru temple, surrounded by Khadgamala deities. At the time, Gopi and his wife had been practicing Srividya for six years. His great grandfather lived with Aghoras in Kerala, and his grandfather was a tantric who worshipped Goddess Kali. He said he had a great “zeal and attraction” for Mother from a very young age and followed the traditions taught him by his great grandfather and grandfather. He had learned the complete set of mantras for Kali, Durga, Varahi, Lalita, Syama, and Ganapati yantras—no mean achievement. In 2008, he met Amritananda who initiated him into Srividya. I summarize two specific anecdotes, and then excerpt from our conversation to convey the flavor of his expression.

In 2009, Gopi’s wife was pregnant, and astrologers told Gopi that ideally, he should have a daughter: “One astrologer said that if I had another son, I would perish. If you get a daughter, then you have life.” To add, he lost his job, and was in financial difficulties. This was when he made a bold move to do the chakra puja, by learning how to draw the yantra from a pdf file Amritananda had uploaded on the internet. Gopi and his wife converted their 12 × 12 ft bedroom into a space for the chakra puja, and Gopi drew the yantra in the center of the room. Next, he consecrated the various forms of the Goddess in the yantra. Gopi says, “I don’t know how I did it too! [Goddesses] Varahi, Mahendri, Chamundi, Vaishnavi, Mahalakshmi, . . . Everyone! I do not know, where in Srichakra [the Sriyantra] they should be placed too. This is the truth! Believe it or not!” Gopi learned how to draw the yantra on the internet, but he was intuitively able to conduct the ritual and place all the ritual paraphernalia such as betel leaves with rice and peeled coconuts in appropriate locations within the yantra. He and his wife—who was then seven months pregnant—then sat upon the yantra and chanted mantras ten million times. Gopi does not remember how many days this took—“21 days, or maybe 41” he says—but upon completion of a cycle (*purashcharana*) he “got a vision! And a date and a time! that I will get a daughter.” After some more twists and turns in the narrative, their daughter was born on the (en)visioned time and date. After this, his career took off and he became a very successful man in Vishakapatnam.

Gopi told me that his experience of the mantras was physical, and he felt the vibrations in the corresponding chakras. When Gopi recited the Ganapati mantra, he felt the vibration in the *muladhara* chakra (root chakra). Similarly, Shyama mantra generated vibrations in the *anahata* chakra (heart chakra); Guru mantra in the *sahasrara* chakra, and Chandi corresponded to the *manipura* chakra

(solar plexus). Gopi recounted a number of anecdotes from his life of worshipping Mother and then getting results—“all is done by HER. I know she is doing it.”

### 3. Conclusions: Embodiment and Vision

One may not extrapolate from Devipuram narratives to *all* experience of Srividya, and it would take a much wider study to think about discernable patterns of experience we can identify as Srividya experience. Therefore, I limit my conclusions to the experience of Srividya at Devipuram. “Puram” in “Devi-puram” means place, abode, or even city—in these narratives, we find how the practitioner’s body is also a Devipuram, an abode of the Goddess. The experience of Srividya for all four practitioners involves the Sriyantra, the aniconic graphic form of the Goddess. Practitioners locate themselves in the Sriyantra, or the Sriyantra within themselves, and firmly link their practice to the Sriyantra. The Sriyantra is both location and map, inner meaning as well as reality, and this is a necessary step in the process wherein the practitioners arrive at a visionary experience and reaffirm their relationship with the Goddess.

The correspondence between the practitioner and the Goddess is a theme in the very foundational story of Devipuram. Amritananda feels as if a heavy object has been placed in his heart and immediately discovers a meru buried at the site of his meditation. The implication is that the two events are connected, and even though the first event occurs in Amritananda’s mind, the physical discovery of a meru suggests that the event was not imaginary. The discovery of the meru is a manifestation of the sacred in a profane space, and an event that makes a sensory experience of the sacred possible; it is a classic example of hierophany as posited by Eliade (1961). The immolation described by Amritananda also recalls the scene from the Purusha-suktam, where the universe is created from the yajna where the offering is a cosmic Purusha.<sup>5</sup> At this yajna-like event in Devipuram, Amritananda *is* the “Purusha.”<sup>6</sup> In the PS it is the *sapta-rishis* (seven seers) who conduct the yajna; in Devipuram, the ritualists are “four others,” we do not find out who they are. Typically, in the final ritual movement of *purnahuti*, the entire person is offered to the sacrificial fire with the mantra “*purnamadah purnamidam*.” Amritananda’s narrative is also reminiscent of another Vedic hymn, the Narayana-suktam, where the space within the heart is the location for the presence of the deity Narayana. Verse nine ends with how everything is established in this space (*tasmin sarve pratishthitam*) and verse ten speaks of the great fire (*mahānagni*) at this location, and at the center of which lives the deity Narayana.<sup>7</sup> *Pratishtha* is a technical term in Hindu rituals meaning “establishment,” and a *prana-pratishtha* means that a deity’s life-force has been established in an image. In Amritananda’s narrative, his heart is the site of the pratishtha. Not only is Devipuram a manifestation of the body of the Goddess, the Goddess is established in Amritananda’s heart and through him, within the community he was soon to lead.

Mani Prasanna saw her body cut up into triangles, suggesting a deeper grammar, or an underlying grid. This helped her realize an equivalence between herself and the Sriyantra, also made of triangles. For Mani Prasanna, the mantra “put” into the body activated the reality of the body as a Shakti-pitham; the yantra is inside her. Don reversed this process, he is inside the yantra, and he has precise vision of the locations of the Khadgamala deities. Don locates his position within the meru, and retraces the walk up and down the meru, which is now also his body. Gopi and his wife are physically inside a yantra—the yantra dominates the floor space of their room, which is their bedroom and their puja room. Once seated inside the transformed space, Gopi continues to conduct the worship intuitively. Sitting upon the sacred seat and reciting mantras is transformative, giving him an instinctive knowledge

<sup>5</sup> The Purusha-suktam is also in the Rigveda (*Rigveda Samhita* 2006, vol. 4, pp. 287–91).

<sup>6</sup> Even though the cosmic ‘Purusha’ has been understood as a genderless, representative figure, i.e., as ‘Man’ rather than ‘a man,’ his masculinity is not to be ignored. In verse 5 of Purusha-suktam, Purusha produces the feminine principle, the cosmic egg, ‘Viraj’ and then unites with her.

<sup>7</sup> Narayana Suktam is a vedic hymn that is also in the Mahanarayana Upanishad. The portions I am quoting are from mantras 9 and 10 of section 11 (p. 11) in the version edited by Jacob (1888, pp. 11–12).



of the ritual procedures. Gopi gains a specific vision with the information he is looking for, and the fulfillment of his hopes—the birth of a daughter. The motif of vision is highlighted in the very name of the Goddess—“Sahasrakshi.” Devipuram practitioners see and know something beyond what they can perceive through their ordinary sensory apparatus. The experience of Srividya at Devipuram has a thematic consistency, of embodiment.

Each of the practitioners brought a unique methodology to their practice. Mani Prasanna, Don and Gopi followed the framework of Srividya practice including the appropriate mantras and the ritual placement of the mantra in the body/yantra; at the same time, their practice expressed their own individualistic ways of relating to the Goddess. It is possible to posit that the methodologies of practice and experiences relate to their personalities and even occupations. Amritananda’s experiences read like those of a physicist—he notes the frequency of the sounds when describing his first experiences. Don is an architect and his narrative shows how he is able to visualize an entire three-dimensional architectural meru in such detail that he knows precisely where each Khadgamala deity is located. It seems apt that Mani Prasanna received the Bala-mantra and saw the Goddess in the form of a little girl when she was pregnant and perhaps harboring motherly emotions. Mani Prasanna realized that her own body was a temple-yantra right down to the details including the placement of syllables—she became a priestess of Kalavahana later.

Mantra plays a vital role in the experience or realization of embodiment and identification with the deity. Mani Prasanna articulates clearly how the mantra must be placed in the body of the practitioner and Don attributes his heightened cognition to mantra. Don speaks about mantra as if it were his pulse or heartbeat that continues, involuntarily, within his body. For Gopi and his wife, it is after ten million counts of the mantra that results arrive—the vision about their forthcoming child. Srividya practitioners at Devipuram experience Srividya in tangible and palpable ways, from physical sensations to optical visions, and the Sriyantra is a core element in this experience.

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