

**Diaspora of the Gods:
Modern Hindu
Temples in an Urban
Middle-Class World**

JOANNE PUNZO WAGHORNE

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2004

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Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai
Nairobi São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Copyright © 2004 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Waghorne, Joanne Punzo.

Diaspora of the gods : modern Hindu temples in an urban middle-class world / Joanne
Punzo Waghorne.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-515663-3; 0-19-515664-1 (pbk.)

1. Temples, Hindu—India—Madras. 2. Hinduism—Economic aspects. 3. Middle class—
Religious life. 4. Globalization—Religious aspects—Hinduism. 5. Hindus—England—
London. 6. Hindus—Washington (D.C.) 7. Hindu diaspora. I. Title.

BL1243.76.M32W34 2004

294.5'35'09049—dc22 2004007154

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

*In memory of my parents and grandparents, who lived
a diasporic experience in America with Italian flair.*

Anna Aiena Punzo

Henry Rocco Punzo

Jennie LoBiondo Aiena

Anthony Aiena

Carmella Ferraro Punzo

Dominic Punzo

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Preface

The Kapaleeswara Temple in the middle of Mylapore in Madras (now Chennai) always seemed welcoming to visitors from abroad. I remember attending a function in the temple in 1967 as the guest of Dr. V. Raghavan, who was my advisor in India at the time. I later discovered that Dr. Raghavan's expertise also benefited Milton Singer, whose soon-to-be published book on Madras would influence the study of culture, religion, and modernization for the next thirty years. Over a decade later I first saw the grand procession of Lord Kapaleeswara in his silver palanquin along South Mada street, one of the four streets that border the temple and its massive tank. The late-afternoon sun shone on Lord Shiva's bronze face as all of his sixty-three devoted servants—the Nayanmar—faced him, two by two and three by three, in their own brightly painted palanquins. At that point I was researching many miles to the south in the former princely state of Pudukkottai, but that sight stayed with me over the next decade. When I returned with my photographer-husband Dick Waghorne in 1986–87, we documented most of the festival cycle of this grand Shaiva temple, funded through a senior fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies.

During that year, our interest in rituals led us to the suburbs of the city, where groups of neighbors hired priests to perform elaborate consecration rituals for their new temples just coming up in the “colonies”—the term used, ironically, for subdivisions of old farmland. Much to our surprise, announcements for the same rituals of

consecration greeted us on our return to North Carolina. So every summer for four years we stood with the new devotees of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in suburban Washington, D.C., watching and photographing the consecration of divine images within the temple. First in 1990, an orthodox ritual gave the cosmic breath of life to the stone images of Durga, Hanuman, and Ganesha. Then over the fourth of July weekend in 1991, visiting priests consecrated the sanctuaries of Shiva and Parvati as well as Murugan with his two consorts in an elaborately organized ritual. By 1994, the consecrations of Ananda Padmanabha Swami (a form of Vishnu), and Venkateswara and a series of other Vaishnava deities had completed the temple.

By this time these new Hindu temples had galvanized my interests in globalization and the well-worn problem of modernization. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided me with a much-appreciated faculty fellowship to study the phenomenon of new temples in the city of Madras with comparisons in London and Washington, D.C. In 1994–95, I returned with Dick to Madras—by now very much our home. For twelve months we mapped over 108 temples in the metropolitan area, with return trips to our beloved Pudukkottai. Over the next years I received various grants that allowed research in London. The University Research Council of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill supplemented research during the summers of 1996 and 1999, when I visited new temples there and also worked in the Oriental and India Office Collection of the beautiful new British Library. I discovered the old maps of Madras and much of the historical material integrated into the first three chapters of this book. My research funds at Syracuse University allowed a final trip to London in 2003 for photography. The writing of this book was a long process funded in part by a faculty fellowship in Institute for the Arts and Humanities, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in the fall of 1997. Syracuse University kindly granted leave for my first semester to finish the manuscript. I also owe my new university a debt of gratitude for their grant to Oxford University Press to allow more photographs to be included in the book.

Both my husband and I have received warm welcomes and help in the many temples that we have visited in the last decade. In Chennai, executive officers in government temples sat for many hours answering my questions, as did the many trustees and devotees wherever we went. Not all of their temples find a formal place in my text, but everything they said ultimately added to my slowly growing understanding of the rise of modern Hindu temples within urban life. I do want to mention two energetic founders of temples whose insights helped shape my thinking: Dr. K. N. Siva Subramanian of the Children's Medical Center of Georgetown University, one of the founders of

the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Lanham, Maryland; and Dr. Alagappa Alagappan, a major force in the construction of new temples worldwide. I also thank Mr. C. T. Pulendran of London, who kindly introduced me to many of the temples and provided very helpful insights to the religious life of Sri Lankan Tamils in the city. My many conversations with Rani Rema Devi Tondaiman of Pudukkottai moved my thought in many ways, and I remain grateful for her friendship.

In Madras, I must mention the enduring help and friendship of Mrs. Mythili Raman and Mr. K. Lakshminarayanan, who has held curatorial positions in government museums in Tamilnadu. For assistance during my research in Madras, I especially thank Dr. G. John Samuel and Dr. Shu Hikosaka, my sponsors in the Institute for Asian Studies, and Dr. Vengopala "Pappu" Rao, Regional Director of the American Institute of Indian Studies. Many people aided me, but I especially remember the kindness of Mr. S. Muthiah, historian of Madras par excellence; Sri Raman Bhattar, priest of the Byragi Matam-Sri Venkatesa Perumal Devasthanam; Mr. G. M. Ramachandran, secretary of the Kanyaka Parameswari Devasthanam; and Dr. K. P. Misra of Jagannath Spiritual Cultural Complex. During the many consecrations that we attended, I almost always spotted and enjoyed conversations with the energetic Dr. Nalli Kuppaswami Chetti, then chairman of the board of trustee of the Kapaleeswara Temple, and Mr. A. N. Srinivasa Rao of the Anantha Padmanabha Swami Temple. I especially remember the kindness of Mr. R. Prabakar of the Adhiviyadhihara Sri Bhaktanjaneya Swami Temple, and of Mr. R. Venkatramanan and Mr. C. T. Arumugam of the Virupaksheeswara Temple.

I am fortunate to be a part of a close-knit scholarly community working on South Asian religions. My long-term conversation partners include Indira Viswanathan Peterson, Leslie Orr, Philip Lutgendorf, George Michell, C. J. Fuller, H. Daniel Smith, Karen Pechilis, and my new colleagues Ann Gold and Susan Wadley. I am grateful to Jack Hawley, whose careful reading of the first draft of this book helped me to sharpen my thinking. In North Carolina, I benefited from the many colloquia of the Triangle South Asia Consortium (now the North Carolina Center for South Asian Studies). John Richards and David Gilmartin, as historians, helped to sharpen my focus especially on world history and world-systems theory.

Two chapters in the book are revisions of earlier articles. Chapter 1 appeared in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 58.3 (1999) and is reprinted with their permission. Chapter 3 appears as part of a special issue on modern India and the question of the middle class in the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 5.3 (December 2001). I thank Sushil Mittal, editor of the *IJHS* and other readers of those drafts for their very helpful comments.

My husband, Dick Waghorne, best described now as an “old India hand,” defies the India visa category of accompanying spouse. His photography grounds my work, my thinking, and all of my publications, including this one. With the exception of the maps from the British Library and photos kindly lent by Dr. Alagappan, all of the photographs in this book are his. He first encouraged me to look at temple rituals because of their intrinsic beauty. I later discovered that the gods are ornamented precisely to entice us toward devotion. We both have felt that passion begins with the eye and then moves the heart.

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Note on the Transliteration of a Layered Language

Records of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment and many other departments of the Government of Tamilnadu were maintained in English until the late 1970s, so that older temples have well-worn Anglized names, as do ritual and architectural terminology. The long-established and popular English language daily, *The Hindu*, uses a sometimes-updated form of these same names and terms in its extensive coverage of activities at the city's many temples. I have followed the same practice. I use the most common English form of names—where such exist—that appear in the temples' own English publications, the records of Government of Tamilnadu, and *The Hindu*. A few small temples conduct all of their business in Tamil and in these cases I have transliterated their Tamil names, with diacritics in the text. The transliteration of temple names appears in the index where possible. Readers familiar with Sanskrit will notice that some temple names have a long "ē," which exists in Tamil but not in Sanskrit. The transliteration of temple names is complicated because most are derived from Sanskrit but exist only in Tamil form. The name in English often derives from a Tamil transliteration of Sanskrit and the exact form of the original is not always clear. Matters are even more complex because all records in government offices were maintained in English until the late 1970s. Sometimes the name had gone through three iterations. I have seen cases where the old English name of a temple is transliterated into Tamil script on the signboards; in these cases, only the

English form appears in the index. In the case of deities, I use the most common English form of their names and transliterate the names in the index. I also use the most common English form for proper names and place names and transliterate these in the index only in cases of lesser-known persons or places.

In the case of terms, I have used the most common English forms in the text and have indicated the transliterations (with diacritics) from Tamil and/or Sanskrit in the glossary. I diverged, however, from the more usual Anglized word for a series of Tamilized Sanskrit terms called Grantha. In Madras city, for example, the architectural term *vimana* is usually written *vimanam* by Tamil-speaking priests using Sanskrit; I have omitted the final m. For the sake of clarity for readers unfamiliar with Tamilnadu, I also omit the honorific endings usually placed onto Sanskrit names for the temples or deities. I therefore write Kapaleeswara, not Kapaleeswarar. I mean no disrespect, but I feel that this eases reading for a wider audience. Readers will notice some differences when I quote verbatim. In the case of titles of those who were appointed by the British—such as Collector, Dubash, and Merchant—I follow the British custom and capitalize their titles.

The point here is that Madras has a four-hundred-year history of intimate contact with the European world, and the language of the city and its multiethnic and multireligious inhabitants reflect this.

Diaspora of the Gods

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Introduction

New Houses for the Gods in an Urban World

The southern Indian city of Madras, recently renamed Chennai, never fares well in tourist guidebooks on India. The popular *Lonely Planet Guide* describes Madras “as something of a non-event compared to the marvels elsewhere in the state. The main reason travelers come here is to transact business” (Crowther 1984, 696). This coastal city suffers from the sin of not being ancient, as all good Indian cities should be, at least for the adventure-seeking tourist. The East India Company officials began construction of their trading post here, Fort St. George, in the same decades of the seventeenth century as when the port of Boston opened. Soon groups of Indian merchants began to settle weavers, dyers, and all those needed to produce and sell the bright cottons, the “calicos,” that Europeans craved. The fort plus the surrounding settlement became Madras, eventually the colonial capital of the southern “Presidency”—one of three major administrative units for the British Empire in India. All of this is rather dull for those looking for the “real India.” And indeed many a British connoisseur of great Indian art and temple architecture found it equally dull at the height of imperial rule. A guide popular in Great Britain still carries the flavor of its original nineteenth-century edition. The guide recommends seeing Central Station, the High Court building, Government House, St. Mary’s Church, and St. George’s Cathedral, all British architecture (L. F. Williams 1975, 500–509). At least these now give Madras some romantic interest, as colonial buildings metamorphose into the tat-

tered remnants of a bygone empire and suddenly become interesting to art historians, just at the moment of their destruction to make way for modern Chennai (see London 1994). S. Muthiah remarks in the preface to his beautifully illustrated *Madras: The Gracious City* that the razed colonial-era buildings “deserve a memorial if they cannot be conserved. This book is as much a memorial to them as it is a tribute to 350 years of a gracious city” (Muthiah 1990, 7). But even three centuries cannot make Chennai into an exotic tourist site. Chennai still maintains its colonial legacy of single-family houses, with a fine park hugging its white sandy beach. Nonetheless, its air carries the fumes of many new cars produced in the far suburbs, not the ethereal scent of the spiritual. Its streets hold hurrying entrepreneurs, shoppers clutching their bags, shouting hawkers, and buzzing motor rickshaws, not the aura of serene sacrality.

In short, no one ever lists Chennai as a “temple city,” in spite of the six hundred large temples and numerous street shrines scattered throughout the metropolis—not to mention the many major churches and mosques. None of these is very old by Indian standards, although a very few temples predate the colonial city. Step out of the taxi or bus almost anywhere in Chennai, and the spire of some temple will peek out between the office buildings and houses. In the large and often affluent suburbs that surround the core city, “temples are mushrooming,” as one retired government officer put it at a civic club where I had just described my research: a study of the new temple-building boom in this modern commercial city. In reaction to my talk, members seemed divided in their views of this resurgent interest in temples. Some considered religion “a personal matter,” and expressed the idea that they were not members of any religion but did find peace or some special power in certain temples and even in churches. “Temples are only the hardware, but philosophy is the software that makes religion run.” Others were even more frank and saw the temples as contrived organizations. Others, especially two, were deeply involved in new temples—one had built a temple in the popular suburb of Besant Nagar and another was a devotee of ISKCON. The “Hare Krishna” movement has come full turn back to India via many American devotees. Members explained that temples were already in the oldest neighborhoods of Georgetown and Mylapore. People there “lived around these temples just as in the villages.” But the new temples have come up in the “colonies”—the interesting term Madrasis use for suburban developments—to which many professionals seeking good jobs have migrated from near and far. “Anna Nagar [a very new colony] is 80 percent from the outside.” Some members spoke with that refreshing Madrasian cynicism, “Temples occupy the land, it’s a way to take over some public space for something else, a place to park auto rickshaws; a place

to do business.” Another member mentioned that he noticed temples are “now vying with another for domination of an area by getting the best musicians or trying to get their pujas [worship] on TV. There is a mania for publicity.” Others thought that “the building of temples may be a reaction of the middle class against the period of state atheism,” referring to the victory of the populist DMK party in 1967, which officially opposed temples as an imposition of old priestly—Brahman caste—authority. Everyone agreed that temple architects and artisans were making a good living these days.

Chennai may not be a temple city, but (sub)urbanites have turned toward temples in a way that many older residents felt was more fervent—for better or worse—than their relationship with temples had been in the decades just after Independence. Not all Madrasis approve of this rush of temple building, as my encounter with the civic club demonstrates. Some educated people remain openly agnostic or stridently atheistic. Others accuse these temple builders of wasting money on unproductive rituals and lavish edifices while the poor go hungry. Many religious people, like my former upstairs neighbor, prefer to pray and meditate in their own quiet rooms set aside for worship at home. Many enjoy religious discourses and silently read sacred texts, but forgo public ritual. But temple building and temple worship increasingly interests the middle class. They opt now for enthusiastic engagement with ritual and public display. They organize and contribute to the construction of new and often innovative temples. In spite of the constant (often hopeful) predictions at the turn of the last century and the hand-wringing of the theologians of the 1950s, the demise of “organized” religion among the educated secular and scientifically minded has failed to materialize. This is as obvious in urban India as in the United States and around much of the world. The temple donors that I met in Chennai, however, are not “fundamentalists,” though they do share their educated-middle-class status with many who follow the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad, “world Hindu federation”) or RSS (Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh, “national self-service organization”)—the groups that are usually named as “Hindu nationalist” or fundamentalist, and are “credited” with the destruction of a famous mosque in Ayodhya and communal riots through out India. The poor and uneducated cannot engineer the level of organization of the RSS or manage a worldwide network like that of the VHP. The urban middle classes whose religious life centers on temple are constructing another dimension of resurgent religion, but receive much less attention in the press and in the academy.

My photographer-husband and I were left breathless trying to keep up with the surge of consecrations of new temples, with the display of new rituals, and with the activities of building committees for just a single year in this

secular business-minded and technologically savvy city. Several years earlier, while working on a study of an older temple, we first noticed the new temples and decided to return to map them within this urban space. The array of contemporary temples as well as the renovation of older sanctuaries was staggering. Notices of mahakumbhabhisheka, the ritual of consecration for new temples, appeared almost weekly in the daily calendar of the English-language newspaper, *The Hindu*, widely read by middle-class people in the city. The new deities housed within these temples ranged in size from massive to miniature, and many took a new form or a rejuvenated body. In the far southwest suburb of Nanganallur, proud trustees presided over the consecration of a majestic new temple for Hanuman, the divine servant extraordinaire of Lord Rama in the epic *Ramayana*, who takes the form of a monkey. The nationally honored M. Muthiah Sthapati carved the thirty-two-foot-high stone image-body—termed a *vigraha* or *murti*—of Lord Hanuman, called Anjaneya in south India, from a single granite rock.¹ At the other end of the scale and of the city, police officers proudly sanctified two diminutive shrines just outside their station. These small temples held the holy images of the two sons of Lord Shiva portrayed as babies. In an outer “colony” established thirty years ago in the western suburbs, “a cross section of the residents . . . met and unanimously decided to have temple for day to day worship,” explained a pamphlet distributed at the kumbhabhisheka (consecration ritual) of the eclectic Sri Sankara-Narayana Temple, which literally conjoined the two major sects of Hinduism. In our photos devotees admire the skillfully decorated bronze icon with one-half of its body portraying Shiva and other half Vishnu. A superb stone image of Vishnu still waits with a *linga*, Shiva’s iconic form, to be installed together in the central sanctum. In another “colony” northwest of the center city, trustees of another new temple told a similar story. A “cooperative movement of people belonging to various walks of life, various communities” formed an association and constructed the temple to the ever-popular Lord Venkateswara, a deity “common to all the communities.”² They still sit laughing together in another photograph. At the city’s western edge, near the site of the new central produce center, an older temple shines with newly repaired spires and gate thanks to the efforts of another strong neighborhood association.³ The renovated temple intensified the general ecumenical spirit of the new colonies. This older temple shared a common courtyard with an ancient temple dedicated to Shiva as the savior of the two sons of King Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu! At the southern edge of the city limits, the state government reopened the renovated ancient Marundeeswara Temple dedicated to Shiva as the divine healer. Rows of black cars carried government officials—from a political party that once eschewed

traditional religion—in a fanfare of newfound devotion, reminding me of their newly pious counterparts in the United States.

Notices of newly instituted festivals, processions, and special rituals filled the pages of *The Hindu*, and these events filled our days. Along the coastal road near Injambakkam, teenagers from educated, moneyed families wore bright red headscarves and yellow shirts, all tied in the fashion of their beloved saint and incarnate deity Sai Baba of Shirdi, a small town near Bombay. They danced out, singing, from the grand temple complex where a massive marble lifelike image of the saint looked down from a central platform in the main building. A young man beating a tambourine, wearing fashionable jeans under his bright amber shirt, still beams enthusiastically out of our photographs (figure I.1). In another affluent neighborhood, other young men with saffron dhotis and bare chests, their sacred thread betraying their status as Brahmans, carried pots of holy milk on their shoulders through the streets as they danced and sang, abandoning high-caste propriety. They moved toward the new temple to Murugan constructed in the courtyard of a nearby house. In an older suburb just across the Adyar River that was once the border of Madras, a group of excited devotees pointed at a small eagle hovering around the pole as they raised the flag to begin their first major festival (figure I.2). That auspicious moment preceded a successful Brahmotsavam—ten days of processions, lectures, and music by the stars of the classical scene in Chennai. The trustees of the Anantha Padmanabha Swami Temple, all successful businessmen, turned their management skills to this complex festival that is usually under-



FIGURE I.1. A joyous young man with a saffron-colored tunic topping his fashionable jeans dances in procession in Injambakkam with a young woman, also dressed in imitation of their beloved divine saint Sai Baba of Shirdi. They dance on the road leading to the grand Shirdi Sai Baba Spiritual Center.



FIGURE I.2. A group of women stand near the sanctum of the Padmanabha Swami Temple in Adyar, Chennai. They gratefully watch a kite (small eagle) soaring around the flagpole on the opening day of the temple's first Brahmotsavam—a very auspicious sign.

taken by older well-established and well-endowed temples. Daily, we followed the intricate decoration of the bronze Lord Padmanabha prior to his procession around this upscale neighborhood of apartment complexes and fine single-family houses. Nightly we heard famous musicians and an address by Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, headquartered in the Arsha Vidya Retreat Center in Pennsylvania (www.arshavidya.org). English was the cosmopolitan language of choice in signs, posters, pamphlets, and in speeches for many of these festivities over the city. Tamil, the official language of the city and the state, usually appeared alongside or under all printed material.

After locating, visiting, and photographing 108 of the new and renovated temples, we returned home with hundreds of photographs, temple brochures, and taped interviews—a mass of mixed media that reveal many new dimensions of Hinduism. I added this collage of images of carved stone, paint, and patronage to the already large collection of pictures that we had taken of vibrant rituals and new temples constructed by middle-class professionals and businessmen who migrated to the United States after 1965. From 1989 to 1993, my husband and I witnessed the consecration and the establishment of full ritual services in temples in metropolitan Nashville, Tennessee; Washington,

D.C.; Malibu, California; and in Cary and Raleigh, North Carolina. Here, as in Madras, the building committee and the trustees of the new temples over and over again stated: "Once only kings could build temples, but now we middle-class people are able to do this!" Listening now to their voices, I hear echoes of the newest temple patrons in Chennai. Looking at the Hindu architecture in Nashville, I see the designs of a Hanuman temple in Nanganallur, and carefully scanning the faces of the priests as they pour the holy waters over the newly consecrated temple in Washington, I recognize familiar faces. Later, in London, I added more images of former residents of south India and Sri Lanka who created new temples. Once again I saw the face of the renowned architect Muthiah Sthapati in a proud display of photos in a former pub turned temple. Soon the stone pillars and blocks carved by his *shilpis*, traditional temple craftsmen, would be assembled as the new London Murugan Temple of East Ham. In another temple in the same East Ham neighborhood, I spotted an image of a newly popular goddess Gayatri. The temple manager mentioned that there was only one other temple in the world with such an image of Gayatri—in Sri Lanka, where many Tamil Hindus from Madras settled in the nineteenth century. Remarkably, a friend who fled the violence in Sri Lanka to settle in Raleigh, was a major supporter of this temple in her homeland. Each full-moon day for many years, she led a group of devotees in worship of Gayatri in the family room-turned-temple of her split-level house in North Carolina. It should be no wonder that the same families of Tamil-speaking origin are building temples here and in Madras, and that the same architects fly back and forth with new plans. A priest I meet in Madras was in Washington in 1993. His nephew serves in the temple in Boston. Another Madras priest gave me the address of his bother-in-law working in London. The same faces inhabit my photographs and the same names appear as patrons in the printed prospectuses for new temples, be they there or here. The temple building boom in Chennai stretches to London and Washington, and the borders of this supposedly dull secular city expand with it.

"Madras, a modern commercial and administrative metropolis in south India has at least six hundred functioning Hindu temples built or refurbished since its founding in 1638, most of them constructed in the last two decades by educated scientists, physicians, and many other professional and business people! Now Hindus from the same area are building temples as they migrate throughout the world." I reported my findings excitedly to a monthly colloquium of specialists on South Asia from the three major universities in the Triangle area of North Carolina. I explained that I had selected Madras not only because I knew the city well but also because forty years earlier anthropologist Milton Singer first laid out the interrelationship of urbanization, mod-

ernization, and religion with Madras as his centerpiece in his influential *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*. In 1955, when Singer began his work, he provided some descriptions of temples. His concern focused on the processes of cultural change in what he called the “Great Tradition”—a very important term for the next thirty years. His understanding of this Great Tradition at this time in his career centered more on texts than on architecture, more on religious narratives than on religious spaces—an outlook he would modify much later, as I will explain in time. The process of urbanization and modernization, he hypothesized then, led to “a change from ritual and learned orthodoxy to devotion and popular religion” (1972, 144). As sites for what he called “traditionalization” and as centers of ritual, temples drifted out of his purview as he discovered new forms of devotion in popular media and cultural performances. Either much had changed in the intervening forty years, I told my colleagues, or something had kept Singer from seeing the same type of eclectic and often innovative temples that I had found among the very the urban “intelligentsia,” the “new social type” credited with taking control of culture in the process of modernization (Singer 1972, 60). Yet a colleague challenged my own excitement at the novelty of this phenomenal growth of temples among the urban middle classes. I had to face the blind spots in my own vision before worrying about those of Milton Singer.

“How many churches have mushroomed in the last decades in an American city of six million?” he asked, and wondered why I was so surprised that successful educated businessmen or administrators were erecting religious structures. We sat talking only a few blocks from the massive Gothic cathedral that James B. Duke had built in his university in 1935 because, he said, “I want the central building to be a church, a great towering church, which will dominate all of the surrounding buildings.” I had studied for five years in the shadow of Rockefeller Memorial Chapel at the University of Chicago—another Gothic structure built by a major architect of American capitalism. I realized at that moment that I had to understand this almost frantic construction of Hindu temples in Madras city as well as in metropolitan London or Washington or New York City in the context of a larger history. Trained as a historian of religions, I assumed the worldwide reach of “Religion” and religions, but not in the context of another revived discipline, world history, with its concern for cities and commercial and cultural exchanges. Milton Singer initially understood this wider context. His interest in Madras grew out of an early joint article that he published with his mentor Robert Redfield on “The Cultural Role of Cities” (Singer and Redfield 1954). This long essay marked an important turn in anthropology from exclusive interest in “primitive isolates”—intensive studies of preliterate and simple societies and cultures (Singer 1972,

5–6)—to interest in the city marked by both literacy and heterogeneity. In the context of the increasing dominance of area studies, however, Singer's long-wrought book (seventeen years in the making) and the trajectory of his own later theoretical work so featured India that the global historical and economic context receded in many significant ways. The same myopia that missed the global context of the subcontinent infected "area studies" in general, according to many recent critics.

When Milton Singer chose Madras as his exemplary site to study modernization, he glossed over what I now see as the major fact about the city. Madras, like its fellow port cities of Bombay and Calcutta, was a multicultural global trading center from the first. Madras now bears its presumably more indigenous name of Chennai, like its sister cities of Mumbai (Bombay) and Kolkata (Calcutta), all ironically renamed to white out the legacy of European origins at the very moment when the business-minded in these cities celebrate their return to worldwide commerce. The glitzy Chennai Online Web site developed by Chennai Interactive Business Services nonetheless openly celebrates the city's past and present global status: "Chennai, the present Gateway to the South of India, is, however, only about 350 years old. Chennai is ever growing, changing and pulsating with new activities. . . . The city of today, one of the great metropolitan cities of the world, and the fourth largest city in India, grew from the Fort that Francis Day and his superior Andrew Cogan of the East India Company built on a narrow spit of no man's land that Day's dubash Beri Thimanna negotiated with the local governor of the Vijayanagar Empire" (<http://www.chennaionline.com/toursntravel/singaarachennai/city.asp>). But the imperial past was not always so openly mentioned. Singer began his study of the city a decade after Independence, when the colonial period was at best an embarrassment. The first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, reoriented—at least ideologically—the economy of India away from its cities as centers of commerce and consumer goods. Eventually adopting a Soviet-style model, Nehru emphasized agricultural development and state-owned large-scale manufacturing. The independence movement under Mahatma Gandhi glorified rural life, where "real India" and by extension "real" Indians lived. This antiurban emphasis suited anthropology's own inclinations. As much as Singer's great book intended to return interest to the city as a site of cultural and religious continuity and change, it was finally as an *Indian* city that Singer reintroduced Madras. Remapping Chennai as "one of the great metropolitan cities of the world" requires a change of consciousness and a new encounter with the city and its temples as well as with its expanding borders that now, in some special way, encompass London, Washington, New York, and points east and west. Thus I take on a double task: first, to put Hindu temples and temple

builders into conversation with the complex study of “religion and the city”;⁴ and second, to put both modern Hindu temples and world history into conversation with the study of religion. This book abides within that double-edged conversation.

Religion and the City

With the exception of Milton Singer and his mentor Robert Redfield, and a few others whose names will appear throughout this book, anthropology ignored urban life before and then during the first decades of Indian independence. In the British and American world, sociology rather than anthropology focused on cities; issues of dislocation, economic unrest, unemployment, and social welfare dominated. The living contemporary city understood in cultural or symbolic terms—the space that anthropology allotted for religion—was missing in the English-speaking world. In the late 1950s, sociologist Don Martindale offered an edited English translation of Max Weber’s influential *Die Stadt* (1921), *The City* (1958), in hope of generating a renewed consideration of the city as a cultural phenomenon. Martindale begins his prefatory remarks, “The theory of the city somehow cannot account for what every journalist, poet, and novelist knows—the city is a living thing.” He points out that for much of American sociology, the city was treated as a social problem, not a concept. Observing the urbanization process at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, the rising field of sociology widely regarded the city as both the site and the cause of social dislocation and “moral decline” (Martindale 1958, 9–19). “While European students had materials available from cities that had been going-concerns for a thousand years, American cities were often not more than a few decades old” (43). The *raison d’être* for the city’s existence, “materialism,” supposedly put urban life in contest with enduring moral and spiritual values. Forty years and many postmodern perspectives later, Robert Orsi describes the same situation in popular literature, where the city “rendered as site of moral depravity, lascivious allure, and the terrain of necessary Christian intervention—became an enduring commodity of American popular culture” (Orsi 1999, 6). Although Martindale sharply contrasts European and American scholars, British sensibilities toward the city (consider Dickens) resembled American attitudes. For many, religiousness in the *modern* city remained an oxymoron. That special American-British context adds an irony to any discussion of “religion and the city.”

Understanding the nature of a city can be surprisingly complex. People live in close quarters in a village or a town—so what makes a city? To move

beyond conjured images of crime and corruption, as Martindale suggested forty years ago, means changing the way we frame the question. In the last few years the city has become fashionable not only as a place to reside but also for scholars to roam. Now the city appears in a several new volumes as a site for religious innovation and religious transformation, mostly in the United States (Orsi 1999, Sharma 2001, Livezey 2000) or as a special place with almost religious connotations (Miles, Hall, and Borden 2000). Each of these collections of essays provide detailed discussions of changing perspectives on the city but only hint at the reasons for this sudden spurt of interest. Woven into the introductions is often a Hindu temple or a mosque—something that set the rest of those too-familiar-to-notice churches or synagogues in relief, just as they did for me. Diana Eck begins her popular discussion of a new religious America: “The huge white dome of a great mosque with its minarets rises from the cornfields just outside of Toledo, Ohio. . . . A great Hindu temple with elephants carved in relief at the doorway stands on a hillside in the western suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee” (2001, 1). The concept of the city as a built environment—as space—begins to dominate much of the language here. Orsi speaks of “urban landscape, spaces of the city, urban religious cartographies” (1999, 1–62); Livezey maps “places of public religion” (2000, 2); and the editors begin the *Cities Cultures Reader* with the heading “forms and spaces” (Miles, Hall, and Borden 2000). Discussions of social dislocation transform into *dis-location*. Issues of complex urban identities become “maps of being” (Orsi 1999, 51). The relocation of the city into the realm of *space* makes this an ideal era to look again at Hindu temples within modern cities. And the turn toward space as the venue for discussions of religiosity and sacrality leaves just that little fissure into which any historian of religions worth her pay will quickly slide. But that move must wait.

My initial surprise at the contemporary building boom for Hindu temples focused not only on the urban context but also on the social status of the builders. The space of the city also related in some way to those businessmen and women, engineers, doctors, teachers, and government officers who eschewed mention of a caste identity for themselves or their fellow donors. They often openly called themselves “middle class” when asked to characterize the donors and devotees as a group. I remain determined to take this self-identity seriously in the face of the persistent public vision of the city as the place of the poor. “The urban holy is now encountered in neighborhoods of hard-working, disciplined people just like the rest of us,” Orsi can still say of common American attitudes (1999, 12). The many Hindus I encountered were urban middle-class people with religious values in common with their professional counterparts in America or Europe. They work as close as the next