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The Raja's Magic Clothes

*Re-Visioning Kingship and Divinity
in England's India*

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Toward a Recovery of Religious Things: An Introduction

Many years ago there lived an Emperor, who cared so enormously for new clothes that he spent all his money upon them, that he might be very fine. He did not care about his soldiers, nor about the theatre, and only liked to drive out and show his new clothes. He had a coat for every hour of the day; and just as they say of a king, “He is in council,” one always said of him, “The Emperor is in the wardrobe.”

—Hans Christian Andersen

The king is dead, or to say it as it was said in the little kingdom of Pudukkottai in India, *kālañcenṛatu*—his time lapsed. Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman, who died in 1886, remains embodied in a series of portraits and in pages of old records kept in archives in London, New Delhi, and his old capital city. His once-dashing successor, His Highness Sir Martanda Bhairava Tondaiman, G.C.I.E., died in Paris in 1928 but leaves his vitality in a portrait with his British knightly robes elegantly draped over his silk brocade frock coat. He had been to England to see the queen. Old court officials still keep a reproduction of this portrait printed as a keepsake at the time of his death (Plate 1). The present Raja Rajagopala Tondaiman safeguards many of these mementos of his erstwhile kingdom in his palace in nearby Trichinopoly. Like all such “Native States,” Pudukkottai was amalgamated into the Indian union in 1948. Now *Putukkōṭṭai kālañcenṛatu*.

Gone too are the British civil officers of “the Raj,” as the British government of India came to be called. Ironically their portraits now rest alongside those of rajas whose lavish spending



Plate 1. A memento distributed at the death of His Highness Martanda Bhairava Tondaiman in 1928. The caption reads in very anglicized Tamil: "His Highness Sri Brihadambadas Raja Sir Martanda Bhairava Tondaiman, G.C.I.E. Born 26-11-1875. Died 28-5-1928." The cameoed portrait is a popular painting of the raja rendered by Venkatarayalu Raju in 1914. (A gift of the palace Head Harikar Sri K. Subramanian.)

was so often the occasion for their stern reprimands. In His Highness's palace in Trichinopoly, the face of the British tutor from Cambridge who carefully trained the young Martanda Tondaiman so long ago is fixed forever in a hunting scene. He sits among the tusks of elephants with his guns and tents, looking much like a raja in his own domain (Plate 2). Portraits of British governors who sat under the royal canopy with the raja "in durbar" (in a formal audience with the full court) (Plate 3) are now hung next to the very men whom they doubted were fit to rule. The great dewan Sir A. Sashia Sastri, appointed by the British to bring order to Raja Ramachandra's domain, has left his face and corpulent figure seated appropriately between British officers and the raja in durbar (Plate 4, color section). The spirit of the queen-empress whom they all served has been distributed all over India into the many bronze and stone statues in front of the old offices and universities built in her name. Sometimes a garland can still be seen draped over the bronze shoulders of one such Victoria who sits in front of the University of Madras, her eyes glancing toward the Bay of Bengal.

As living memory fades, time has turned the rajas and the rulers of the imperial past into the very bric-a-brac that has become a popular cliché for anything Victorian. There was something about the heyday of the British Empire that left a myriad of mementos. Our Victorian attics, those public museums and private palaces throughout London and the former Indian empire, are stuffed with grand ornaments, crowns and turbans, and paintings of people bedecked in the same. This intense interest in decoration and in a world of public



Plate 2. Neither the subject nor the artist is identified in this painting, which hangs in His Highness's palace in Trichinopoly, but several photos of Mr. F. F. Crossley in the royal family's photo albums make the identification certain. Crossley, who tutored the young Raja Martanda for seven years, encouraged the raja's hunting and apparently accompanied him throughout India on such adventures, ostensibly to increase the young king's knowledge of India. This painting may date from 1893, when the raja went on an elephant hunt in nearby Travancore State. Crossley, on the far right, a graduate of Cambridge University, shed his bookish vocation here and basked in royal glory as he confidently struck the pose of a big-game hunter. The young man seated on the far left may be Raja Martanda.

display was shared by Britain's queen, India's many rajas, and even aspiring middle-class families in Britain and the empire whose carefully preserved parlors and elegant front porches were created for the public eye like the court of any prince. In the middle-class homes, the first photo albums, often hand painted by the ladies of the house, brought the opportunity to share in this world of the gilded image. But the centerpiece for this world of display was always the Raj in India embodied in public statues and popular etchings of Victoria on her throne (Plate 5), sometimes surrounded by India's many bejeweled rajas, all paying obeisance to this queen-empress.

So I begin by making a suggestion: Indians who attended "princes" like the raja of Pudukkottai, the British who served in these "Native States," and perhaps even the British public, who eagerly made the Raj and its exotic princes part of the decor of their homes, came to share a common culture. This is not a radical thesis for a modern cultural historian. There have been excellent works on the revival of royal rituals in Britain, and detailed studies on the construction of a "ritual idiom" for the Raj in India (see Lant 1979; Hobs-

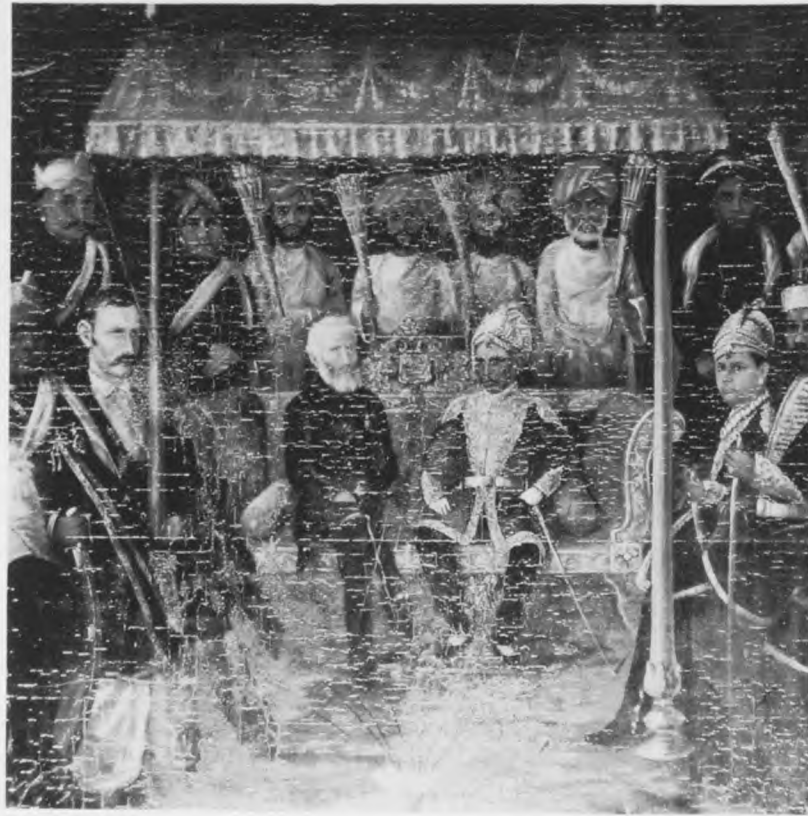


Plate 3. In this detail of a larger painting, Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman shares his throne with the visiting governor of Madras, Sir Grant Duff, in the last year of the raja's life. The paint on the cloth canvas is now badly cracked after a century of summer heat, but Sir Grant can still be seen sitting with complete aplomb as an honored guest, but also as the representative of the "Paramount Power." The painting, now in the keeping of the Government Museum in Pudukkottai, is signed by Ravi Varma and dated months after the raja's death. Although the faces are executed with fine detail, the painting overall lacks Ravi Varma's usual grace. This piece was probably created from memory or from a photograph by one of Varma's students and completed by the artist to commemorate the last glorious moment of the now-deceased king. Raja Ramachandra had patronized the well-known artist throughout his life, commissioning several major works.

bawm and Ranger 1983). Pudukkottai has been the subject of a fine study that details, among other aspects of kingship, the importance of the rajas' gifts of *pirutus*, honors, which often took the form of the right to wear certain ornate clothing and other ritual garb (Dirks 1987). In all these studies, the decorative elements, the items of fancy dress or elegant decor, are understood within the political and social contexts of the day. These "symbols" or "ritual idioms" were means to legitimize rule, to express both social solidarity and social segmentation. They were valued "texts" that if properly read have much to say about the complex configuration of the state in both India and Britain.

Plate 5. A group of Parsi gentlemen look up curiously at a newly installed marble image of Queen Victoria in this Bombay park sometime in the 1870s, after Victoria became the Empress of India. The ornate statue portrays a young Victoria and may have been modeled on Sir George Hayter's famous painting of the queen now in the National Portrait Gallery (see Bayly 1990, 331). Apparently unable to accept the then matronly Victoria, both Hayter and this sculptor re-created her seated upon the throne, young and vigorous on her coronation day—not as she was when she assumed the Indian imperial title. (Photo by T. W. Scadden. Courtesy of the Oriental and India Office Collections, The British Library.)



In this book, however, I take a more radical tack. As a historian of religions, my foray into the domain of history has other purposes than to reveal the nature of cultural transitions or to explore the changing nature of the state or of society. The domain of symbols and of ritual has long been the special province of the comparative study of religions. When "symbols" appear in ritual texts, we are accorded the right to discuss their theological significance along with their social or political import.

The reader should be warned, then, that this study is neither a history of Pudukkottai or the empire, nor a history of ideas. This is a work of "ethno-theology," the study of the nature of divinity within the historical moment. The particular moment in question was what I will term "iconic." I use "iconic" not in the later sense of Peirce's philosophy but more literally, for in this world of surface display, photos, paintings, books, and even persons were concretized into icons, into valued *things*.

This is not to say that many in the British empire willingly admitted to participating in such a system. And I do not want to suggest that this was not also a period deeply involved with principles and purposes, an era that worked hard to bring all hidden motivations, religious or secular, into consciousness. These same times of grand royal ritual also developed science as we know it, and intense belief in rationalism, and the very modern disciplines that study ritual and religion. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, I argue that in the often unspoken and many times denied—but lived—world of display, the Victorian period

left us with what it has most to contribute to our modern understanding about religion: its intense involvement with the ornamental and the decorative, with highly prized *things*. Moreover, this intense involvement with valued things was not simply another convenient form of communication in an age when a vast empire made a shared vocabulary of words much less effective than a shared stock of ritual images. I would argue instead that this was a new age of “idolatry.” A multitude of new icons, holy persons, and sacred things were available to the British openly in places like Pudukkottai and in camouflage as “political” pageant at home.

The court rituals of a little kingdom like Pudukkottai, or even the controversies over Victoria’s own royal ceremonials, might now be only of passing interest to the modern study of religion if it were not for one important fact. The founders of the comparative study of religion as well as of modern anthropology lived in this same imperial world of royal display. The push and pull between a desire to share in a renewed chance for ritual splendor that an empire made possible, and an old allegiance to a rationalism free of frivolity, vexed scholars as much as civil servants and queens.

Friedrich Max Müller, the period’s most influential scholar of India, and James George Frazer, the young man whose name would become synonymous with the study of sacral kings, both lived in tension with the empire. During his early career, Max Müller was supported by funds from the East India Company and the later British Government of India. He served as an examiner for candidates for the Indian Civil Service. His papers contain numerous invitations to Buckingham Palace. At the end of his life, Queen Victoria named Müller to her Privy Council. Yet he, more than any other scholar, was responsible for creating a great counterimage of India as the model of a truly spiritual, nonmaterialistic culture. His work helped to make the ornamented lords, like the raja of Pudukkottai, insensible to several generations of scholars and to reformist Indians alike. Yet ironically, just after his death, a number of his fellow scholars openly criticized his pride in worldly success and the vanity of his stylish clothes (Chaudhuri 1974, 372).

James Frazer, too, deplored the modern materialistic culture of his day. His famous tome, *The Golden Bough*, opined the tragic mistakes of a ritual world that was built upon a fantasy, the fantasy that human beings could control matter. Although his own life was simple, his books were ornate. If photos reveal much about the man, then Sir James wore his knighthood with considerable pride.¹ The scholars, the very agency of modern theory about ritual, were thoroughly a part of the Victorian world that made ritual with one hand and wrote it off with another. They delighted in knightly robes and silk cummerbunds, but spoke of the foolishness of magic and the glorification of infinite spirit.

Only a Victorian scholar, however, would have the bold sense of grandeur to argue this case with the entire empire as a subject. In our age of much smaller aspirations, the theater here can be more modest, but the script need be no less complex. The small princely state of Pudukkottai is enough to stage the argument as long as the reader keeps in mind that in the backdrop to every scene must be painted the empire. There was an astonishing circulation of

ideas, as well as things, throughout India and from India to Britain, even in a place as small as this fifty-square-mile kingdom in the dry lands of South India. This will become clear in the pages that follow. Furthermore, I claim the right to insinuate such scholars as F. Max Müller and James Frazer into this tiny set, precisely because their ideas and their books helped to veil the religiousness, the very sacredness, that operated here among the fly whisks, fans, and fancy plumage of the rajas’ courts. They were the real phantoms of this small but still grand opera.

Ironically, Pudukkottai became one of those places where the British could permit themselves real access to such sacral things, precisely because the British civil service officers classified court rituals as “political ceremonials” and the scholars did nothing to change that designation. Yet in places like Pudukkottai, divinity had the most to do with material things, particularly with one certain thing: the body of the king. If we replay the drama of the British participation here and then rerun the story a second time with the spotlight on this royal court in its own South Indian scenery, then a fuller range of *theo-logies* can be revealed.

The reader, then, can expect a book in two parts. The first to explore and deconstruct an encounter of the Raj with its rajas, looking at this tiny kingdom in South India with a wide-angle lens, and the second to return to Pudukkottai with an eye focused close up and with a mind intent on reconstructing its rajas in their fullest ceremonial context. The opening set will be the small princely state of Pudukkottai and its own central scene, the durbars—the ritual occasions in which the raja and his entire court would assemble in full state dress to give what in Britain would be called an audience, a hearing, but what in Pudukkottai was considered a *darśan* (also *darśana*), a seeing, a gift of a splendid sight.

The durbar and other rituals of display were part of the courtly life of most Indian princes, and the British quickly adopted these “ceremonials,” as they called them, and participated in the durbars of their feudatory princes. In such places as Pudukkottai and in the capitals of the three Presidencies that comprised British India and in the imperial capital, the British created their own durbars. In the great Delhi Durbar of 1877, which honored the assumption of the title of Empress of India by Queen Victoria, the British proved that they could at times excel in this ritual medium, a fact that made some British at home uncomfortable (Cohn 1983b, 206). In Pudukkottai they succeeded in yoking the British lion to the Indian elephant and pulling off a very good show indeed. Here the Hindu and the British Christian, as well as the British rationalist, played together for a time with royal *things* and, as we shall see, made and unmade Gods.

The reader must be warned that the world I am constructing/reconstructing existed only for some of the people, some of the time. This was equally a time of antiroyalism in Britain and of the bitter Irish struggle for Home Rule. In most of India, the rule of queens or princes must have seemed remote because British India was a bureaucratic state. Only in the third of India under “native rule” did this royal world survive. Many of the British civil servants who experienced, even reveled, in these Native States did so with a divided conscience and a divided mind. Many were Scotsmen, Presbyterian Calvinists unsure of both ritual and royalty; others were good bureaucrats committed to a rational system of government, who considered ceremonials a sad necessity in this oriental world.

Yet some of these same staid servants of the empire also betrayed an overly keen interest in

1. See photographs entitled “Sir James and Lady Frazer, annual dinner of the Royal Literary Fund, London, 1930” (Ackerman 1987, plates 9 and 10).

the very ceremonials they found so irksome. Some officials—such as Sir Charles Tupper and William Lee-Warner—spent years sorting out the proper ceremonial relationships between the queen-empress's regal status and that of the Indian princes. Tupper confidently declared these princes to be ruling “chiefs,” but not kings, noting Pudukkottai as a prime example of a state whose dewan had to be reprimanded after daring to call his raja a “royal” person. Tupper, quoting Sir Henry Maine from a memo dated 1864, reminds his reader, “There may be found in India every shade and variety of sovereignty, but there is only one independent Sovereign, the British Government” (Tupper 1895, 19–20).

Others in the empire, including Victoria herself, were never comfortable with all this bulky garb of the empire. There was a running battle between the queen and those who organized her now-famous Golden Jubilee over Her Majesty's attire. The queen refused to appear in full state dress and absolutely would not use the gold state coach. The grand queen-empress thus refused to appear in the way she was so often portrayed in India, seated in state with crown and scepter. Instead, she wore a bonnet and insisted on riding in an open carriage to a simple service in Westminster Abbey. The queen was not enamored of ritual and was decidedly “low church.” As Jeffrey Lant put it, “Not only did she like her religion simple, she liked it short and sweet. When it was otherwise, the Defender of Faith was given to fidgeting” (1979, 162). How very disappointing it must have been to the Charles Tupper of the empire to see the likes of a raja of Pudukkottai who ruled an area measured in square miles more capable of a grand show than this dowdy queen on whose empire even the sun never set. But when the queen would not oblige by putting on her crown, the print-makers, the engravers, the painters, and the sculptors would supply the proper dress. The empress of India always wore her crown, even when Victoria, queen of Great Britain, wore a bonnet as she drove alone in her old landau.

While the queen fidgeted in her crown, while a Scotsman governor uncomfortably shared in native rituals, while Max Müller was dismissed by fellow scholars for the vanity of his dress, the raja of Pudukkottai sat on his throne. Neither a privy councillor nor considered a royal personage of the empire, Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman sat with his silks, his jeweled turban, and his bejeweled courtiers “in durbar.”

The durbar was the ultimate ritual of display. The raja sat under his brocade canopy surrounded by a group of “servants” called the Dignitary Establishment, each of whom held one of his royal emblems, which included fly whisks, maces, and silver rods. On the left side of the raja's canopy sat his immediate family, usually brothers and uncles and the Sardars—military officials who were understood as kinsmen. On the right were the court administrative officials, the dewan (chief minister), and various judicial and tax officials. All were splendidly attired in court dress that carefully displayed their rank and their status in the realm. The durbar ritual itself was this very display followed by presentation of a coin to the raja by the raja's kinsmen and of a lemon by his officers. At the close of the ceremony the raja distributed “attar and pan,” the traditional parting gift to guests of rose water perfume from an ornate decanter and sweetened betel nut, both offered on a tray. The same kind of display occurred more publicly outside the durbar hall when the raja rode in procession with the Dignitary Establishment surrounding him and all of his courtiers ahead. In earlier days, the Tondaimans rode in state around the borders of their capital city every night. In Raja

Ramachandra's time, the raja rode in procession during certain festivals associated with the state temple and later to mark special imperial holidays.

When asked today to explain this display of the raja, old members of the court agree: The raja was displayed in order to allow his subjects to “take *darśan*”—a term usually used in connection with the ornamented images of deities displayed in the sanctum of a temple. The God embodied in the bronze or stone image within the temple is believed to grant devotees this power-laden vision, a revelation of divine presence. Similarly, the sight, the darsan, of the rajas had this same divine power. So powerful was this vision of the raja that a person experiencing exceptionally good luck was asked, “Have you seen the raja's face today?” During interviews in Pudukkottai the last living devadasi, who had served as a dancer for rituals in the palace, and the old Agama Sastri, who had been the chief priest in charge of properly performing all state ritual, openly declared that the raja was “God” (here both Sanskrit, *devatā*, and Tamil, *cāmi*)—much to the surprise of a very modern member of the Pudukkottai royal family!

In spite of such open statements about the raja's position as a “God,” the meaning of the divine status of the Indian king has been much debated and often misunderstood, as scholars have tried to apply Western theology to a place like Pudukkottai (Gajendragadkar 1962, 421; Gonda 1969, 134; Dumont [1966] 1970, 72). Many scholars even as late as the 1970s assumed that divine powers belonged to only the Brahman priesthood as the mirror of the Gods on earth. For example, political scientist Charles Drekmeier felt justified in insisting that when Brahmanic texts used divine terminology to describe the king, the language had to be understood as metaphor:

The word *deva* is often translated by Western scholars as “god.” *Deva* is used, however, to connote moral superiority rather than omnipotent divinity in the Judeo-Christian sense. It meant resplendent or awe-inspiring and was applied to that which possessed more than ordinary power. When the king is described in the ancient scriptures as *devata*, his importance to the community is extolled, and we are not justified in reading more into the term. (Drekmeier 1962, 251)

But Ramachandra Tondaiman seated “in durbar” is neither an omnipotent nor an omnipresent God, nor is his divinity simply an aggrandized mask of status or power. At the center of the durbar sat a “god,” but not “in the Judeo-Christian sense.” Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman in durbar, like the many objects that surround him, must also be understood as an icon. This special nature of this living icon is at the heart of the entire culture of display. The pages that follow verify that we are justified in reading much more than metaphor into the terms *devatā* and *cāmi*.

Given the continued downplaying of the sacredness of the Hindu king, is it any wonder that the early British civil servants never ventured officially to disclose this religious aspect of the durbar? Although it was undisclosed, they did not fail to notice the fact. The British official in the field may not have chosen intellectually to justify the raja, but their descriptions of what was clearly some form of divine kingship fill the pages of that once-popular literary genre “memoirs-of-my-years-in-Injha.” One such late memoir records with wonder

how “one Hindu ruler, highly cultured and well known in London drawing-rooms, poses as a semi-divinity in his own State” (Barton 1934, 61). E. M. Forster described quite elegantly in *The Hill of Devi* how the raja, whom he served as private secretary, functioned at the very least as a priest, if not a God, in the ceremonies of his realm ([1953], 102–20). But in the official records of the Raj the durbars are strictly classified as “political” and are called simply “ceremonials.” No official record I reviewed gave even the slightest hint that the British “Resident,” the official representative of the Government of India to the rajas, or any member of the Political Department that oversaw the Native States, openly revealed the religious nature of this ceremony. Even the Indians that prepared the official administrative manuals in English for states like Pudukkottai tended to follow the British classification and wrote that the raja’s household and all the “servants” that formed his court existed to enhance his “dignity.”

The British saw the splendor of the durbar and imitated its form in their own ceremonials, but they did not ask how it all worked. And scholars of the realm, who should have been able to say much about such sacral kingship, never directed their attention to these Native States. Max Müller was not interested in such modern creations. Frazer, who wrote the most extensive discussion of the sacral king ever attempted, let his pen roam the ancient world from Japan to Rome to seek examples, but somehow passed over the capitals of the Raj, where British governors were sitting down under silk canopies with rajas they saw as men but whose people saw them in some important sense as embodied divinity.

This is not to say that everyone in South India or even everyone in Pudukkottai acknowledged Raja Ramachandra and his successors as a “god” or even as a king. Antiroyal feelings were not foreign to India. There is a strong tradition that suspected the divine power of kings and even tried to write sacral kingship out of orthodoxy. In modern times, there were those in Pudukkottai who supported the developing movement of the 1920s to free “the millions of people in the Indian States suffering under the autocratic rule of their Princes” (Chudgar 1929, v), and a more recent history of the freedom struggle in the princely states records the work of the All-Indian States’ Peoples’ Conference (Handa 1968), which was active in Pudukkottai. But for many of the people much of the time, if Raja Ramachandra did not take this ornamented throne someone else would have occupied it in the same posture that he so conspicuously assumed.

The very culture of ornamentation in Pudukkottai was not fragmented by either an Age of Reason or a previous age of theology whose arguments against the real presence of divinity in ritual had triumphed. That divinity could take concrete form in a king or a saint, or even a seeming madman, is not a serious question here. To put it another way, there is no commandment against “idolatry.” And here is the rub. A “chief” of one of the smallest Native States in India can openly display his divinity to those who cared to look, while Her Majesty and a whole retinue of those participating in the ceremonials of an empire stand embarrassed in their own lordly array.

I have heard it said that the Tondaiman family were not really kings because this family were upstarts. The most sarcastic statement came from a well-known collector of folktales about royal families who wrote to tell me he did not collect material from Pudukkottai because these kings were really just “made by the British.” And this indeed is the supreme

irony. Many of the Tondaimans’ honors—their titles, their rights to land, even their right to carry certain gold sticks—were conferred by the East India Company and later by Her Majesty’s Government of India. Collection of such honors made a warrior lord into a king and, more important, into a divine personage. Those who saw nothing of splendor in the Tondaimans saw them as mere puppets of the British. But for those who acknowledged the Tondaimans as rajas, the British honors were simply a part of the accoutrements that added to their lord’s regal status and thus to his divinity. In spite of British attempts to classify all these rituals as “ceremonials” and the rajas as “chiefs,” at some level, they participated in this act of king-making and, ironically, God-making. And if the Pudukkottai raja was considered divine, what could be said of his liege lady? Who was Victoria?

In this empire where a Calvinist sat on a throne with lavish princes, actions belied words. Images belied events when Victoria’s jubilee bonnet in Britain became a crown in India. Articulated principles inherited from the Enlightenment are at odds with the culture of a new royal age where the British must make kings (and Gods) as part of their great Raj. This is the problem in restructuring the memory of even this tiny kingdom in the imperial galaxy. There have been several decades of discussion about the “Westernization” of India, but near silence on the “Easternization” of Britain. The assumption is that the only influence India had was through the few Hindu reformers and preachers who filled the language of intellectuals in Britain with words like “karma” and “dharma” and filled their heads with images of India as the last haven for the nonmaterialistic people of the world.

As Ronald Inden now asks in his provocative reevaluation of the Euro-American “imagining” of India, “European discourses appear to separate their Self from the Indian Other—the essence of Western thought is practical reason, that of India, dreamy imagination. . . . But is this so?” (1990, 3). The answer is indeed no. But the real conjunction of “West” with “East” may well have occurred in a place like Pudukkottai without words, silently, so that normal discursive language failed to announce the event and so that, ironically, all participants actually remained free to act and move together in a space that slipped beyond and between the hard pen of imperial discourse.

Historians of religions have too long looked only at words. Religion can exist as much inside a durbar hall as in a temple. Clues to the presence of a religious culture can be as much embedded in a decorated elephant as in an ancient myth. The official printed schedule of ceremonials to be observed for a visiting governor reveals another side to kingship that orthodox Brahman texts from the eighth century cannot disclose. The word of bureaucratic documents, the paraphernalia of the court, the style of dress, the colors of a painting—all these “things” must be added to the words of theological and mythic discourse we have learned to read so well.

Not all forms of religious history can be reduced to science with hypothesis, data, and conclusion. Historians of religions, like lawyers, journalists, or novelists, must convince their public to accept a certain configuration of events, a particular evaluation of characters, a certain reading of material evidence as “true.” That reconstruction changes as time passes. This book is not structured around a central “thesis” on the topic of sacral kingship that I intend to “prove” by marshaling all possible evidence. Rather, I am asking readers to begin by looking at a curious phenomenon: a common interest in both India and Britain in king/

queen/rajas. Moreover, instead of supposing that India forced Britain to take its rajas seriously because of its own ritual instincts, let us allow for the possibility that Britain was equally if not more involved with creating a new royal age. Moreover, and more important, scholars were not aloof from the enterprise of empire. They must be added to the script, not dropped from it. Intellectually, they represent what Ronald Inden has called the “loyal opposition” (1990, 66), but their own work and even their own careers were englobed by the world of ornamentation.

The central problem then becomes why this world of ritual splendor was so readily embraced in praxis by the British but not in open theory. Why the doubts, the near subterfuge, the embarrassment? And India shares in the same embarrassed loving of its own ornamented lord and its lavish rituals. This is not a case of a materialistic West subverting an ascetic East into a foolhardy attempt to emulate the splendor of an empire, nor is it a pageant-plagued, vain, and effeminate East seducing a staid soldier of Christ. The rajas of Pudukkottai, no less than the nearby British civil servants, shared in a culture that gloried in ritual splendor but also felt a nakedness underneath this garish garb. This story does have a central mystery: What is this drawing toward royal splendor and, at the same time, how can we explain away the equal repulsion? Frazer suggested a dark side to kingship, but after rewriting his story three times in thirty years, he never fully told his anxious audience what that darkness might have been.

Setting the Scene

This study depends primarily on an analysis of images, not of concepts. The argument is created not through a progression of ideas but in a chronological progression of portraits and photographs, a play of images. The point is to convince the reader that ornamentation—particularly in the crucial image of the ornamented raja seated in state (or, as more commonly put, “in durbar”)—defines a serious form of religiousness in this tiny state. This seeming oriental ostentation both absorbed British styles into its own forms and in many subtle ways allowed the British to experience their own intense fascination with the same kind of sacredness.

This book reverses the assumption of the British that it was Indians who could not bring their own history and culture to consciousness. Here we see the British as willing and sometimes eager participants in a system that they at first denied, then understood pragmatically, and ultimately rejected. Comparative studies of the royal court in India and in Britain had to wait until the late 1920s, and then were largely ignored by the public and by scholars (for example, Buckler 1985 and Hocart 1970).

The progression of images dates from 1858 to 1928, from the moment the British woke up to the importance of “ceremonials,” to the time when their political, religious, and social interests in this ornamented world waned. Ironically, only in the very last period of the Tondaiman rule of the Pudukkottai state do the British sufficiently disappear from the

picture to leave room to reconstruct a memory of what this ornate sacral kingship might be without their presence. But by then India was moving toward independence with a program that abjured the irrationality and wastefulness of the “pageant princes.” The British never dissolved the Native States, and in fact insisted that their old treaties with the princes be honored in the new republic. This became one of the issues that delayed negotiation for independence. It took the new Government of India to dissolve the states one year after independence, much to the surprise and great anger of many of the rajas. The British could never and perhaps would never have annexed all of this princely world into their dominion. There were ties that bound the British to the rajas that went well beyond the good rationality that was supposed to rule the rest of India. But again, it is the complexities of this shared world of ornamentation, not the world of commerce, that our old attic of images can begin to reveal.

The best introduction to this kind of argument is to stop and take a close look at an early set of Victorian images of Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman in durbar, all of which were produced between 1858 and 1886. The first is a photographic portrait dating from 1858 produced for the East India Company. The second is a painting of the same scene by an Indian artist in a traditional style. The third is a painting by a well-known British artist that probably dates from the 1860s. The last canvas, dated 1886, bears the name of an Indian artist whose mastery of European technique made him famous in his time.

The reader-viewer must realize at the beginning of this excursion into the Victorian trove of images that the paintings that serve as the text for much of the discussion here and in the ensuing chapters were commissioned by the rajas of Pudukkottai and have remained with the Tondaimans. To this day, they bedeck the walls of His Highness’s palace in Trichinopoly; of the “Residency,” the grand house built for the use of British officials and visiting dignitaries, and now the home of the family of the raja’s brother; and of the nearby Government Museum, once the private palace of a most engaging rani of Pudukkottai. The condition of the paintings reflects their survival as living artifacts. They appear here, as they do in Pudukkottai—on the walls and in the life of this family. The photographs seen here and in later chapters, preserved in albums in India, also wear the stains and the insect bites of daily life. The British photographs have had a less rigorous life on the guarded shelves of the old India Office Library, now the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library.

“Photographic Views of Poodoocottah”

His Excellency Ramachandra Tondaiman sits under a gold brocade canopy surrounded by his court. The camera has stilled this ceremonial durbar (Plate 6), leaving an image of royal ritual in one of the smaller kingdoms in British dominated India. The image appears very oriental, a photo from a land still under ancient native rule. The bejeweled raja and his courtiers in traditional Moghul court dress still silently nod to the tutelary overlordship of the Muslim king of Delhi. But this photograph was taken in 1858, a watershed year. The



Plate 6. Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman seated with his court in durbar. The photo, taken in 1858 by Captain Linnaeus Tripe, is part of a series of photographic folios documenting the southern provinces of the East India Trading Company. A sample of Captain Tripe's extensive photography was displayed in a 1984 exhibit organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum, "The Golden Age of British Photography, 1839–1900." The catalog of the exhibit mentions that Tripe, infantryman turned photographer, traveled to Pudukkottai in 1856 and again in 1858 (Haworth-Booth 1984, 105). "Photographic Views of Poodocottah" was produced for the library of the Secretary of State for India. Each page of the still-beautiful folio is embossed with Tripe's own seal: "LT" forming a cameo in a floral frame. (Courtesy of the Oriental and India Office Collections, The British Library.)

British ruled as administrators from Calcutta but continued until now to let that pensioned "pageant prince," the Moghul emperor in old Delhi, provide the ceremonial cloth for the British Raj. The British had tolerated, or had planned merely to tolerate, all such pageantry as a necessity in this land of endless ritual. The Moghul emperor, and even this little king, were all part of the same image of the "effeminate life of Asiatic pageant royalty" that caused the resigned smile so often pictured on the faces of the British civil servants in India (Clunes 1833, 38; see also Thompson 1943, 279). But this was the year of the great Indian Mutiny. The British nearly lost their domain to rebels whose first political act was to march to Delhi and seat their pageant prince back on the Peacock Throne. The British did not laugh at their finely bejeweled and feathered friends after that. Pageant apparently held power. This photograph of odd oriental splendor was now more serious business.

Look carefully for a moment at this image of Ramachandra Tondaiman seated with his full court. The eye behind the lens was not an Indian, but Linnaeus Tripe, an East India Company officer turned photographer. Captain Tripe was commissioned by the company to photograph people and places of antiquarian, historical, or ethnographic interest in the southern dominions (Haworth-Booth 1984, 105). Ramachandra Tondaiman in durbar was part of a series of photographs of oriental exotica created for British eyes. Here, then, are Ramachandra's court ministers seated in European chairs. The raja, having moved during the long exposure, presents a shadowy face at the edge of the depth of field. His Dignitary Establishment, those turbaned figures holding vague objects in hand, form a blurred backdrop out of the focus of the lens. The geometric center of the image is the raja, but the real objects that dominate the photograph are the European crystal chandelier and two crystal wall sconces ironically illuminating the multiple pillars so reminiscent of a Hindu temple.

This photo clearly pleased the raja but was really meant to be enjoyed in the libraries of London, where the album still resides in the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library. The camera of Linnaeus Tripe makes the raja look both exotic and familiar. The viewer meets His Excellency literally through European glass in the light of the grand chandelier. This Victorian glass chandelier and the prominent chair in the foreground seem to mediate between the raja and the viewer like radical new artwork safely framed in familiar gold gilt.

A Very Large Indian Miniature

The raja commissioned painters, both Indian and British, to portray the same durbar scene. The work of a traditional Indian artist, Govindasamy Maistry, presents some interesting contrasts (Plate 7). The painting measures 64" × 36" but adopts the style of miniature painting. Many of the same persons and objects in the photographic scene are present, but arranged in a very different order. Missing are the European chairs; the ministers are packed into the edges of the portrait. The Dignitary Establishment, all clearly in focus, surround the raja, whose body now swells to a disproportionate size. He sits at the geometric and the



Plate 7. This painting entitled "Ramachandra Tondaiman in Darbar," by Govindasamy Maistry, has no date but is probably from the same period as Tripe's photograph (Plate 6). This painting was photographed and cataloged in *The Pudukotah Portraits* by Percy MacQueen in 1926 (16) and remains in the Government Museum at Pudukkottai. Here His Excellency wears flowing Moghul court robes rather than a brocade coat and pants, which betrays concessions to English style in Tripe's photograph. But the glass chandelier still hangs above and is even mirrored below the painting.

actual center of vision. On the top of the painting is again that chandelier, diminished in size and sharing the foreground with a set of objects miniaturized to present a uniform band across the bottom of the painting (Plate 8, color section), a decorative style familiar on friezes of Hindu temples. But here tiny jeweled elephants and ornately decorated horses with grooms share the stage with crystal candlesticks, glass-cased clocks atop Victorian tables, and repeated miniatures of the same grand chandelier.

The European furnishings are truly decontextualized. The chandelier is valued as an object of pure grandeur. The clock, the couch, and the table (Plate 9) serve no purpose in the frieze other than "decorative." Yet the importance of these valued things is not diminished. As reflected in their size, they are given a position equal to the jeweled elephants and the Kothal Horse, the decorated horse used for processions. The Kothal Horse and the Jeweled Elephant (Plate 10) were the two primary signs of kingship in Pudukkottai. Clearly the British "decorations" have joined these other powerful signs of an enhanced royal status. The Indian painter has read the chandelier now as part of the raja's own domain.



Plate 9. In this detail of Maistry's painting, Raja Ramachandra shows a good sense of what constituted basic elegance for his new overlords. No British house of any status would be without a fine table, an ornate clock, and a proper couch. Of course, the raja's couch is a throne, and his clock a new sign of royal authority perhaps over time itself. It is interesting that the Persian term *divan* became "dewan," meaning both the seat of administration and the chief administrator in India, but in Britain became the most elegant word for the parlor couch, "divan."

Lewis's Romantic Flourish

After a lifetime of world travel as an artist, F. C. Lewis spent much of his later years painting commissions for many of India's ruling princes. A catalog from a 1982 exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *India Observed: India as Viewed by British Artists*, describes Lewis as obtaining "generous patronage from Indian rulers who at that time were equipping their palaces with European paintings and furniture. He specialized in large durbar scenes, which included portraits not only of the rulers and their courtiers but also of the British Residency staffs" (Archer and Lightbrown 1982, 133–34). The catalog places Lewis in Pudukkottai between 1851 and 1854 but he was clearly in possession of Tripe's photographs



Plate 10. Here Maistry's care with painting the Kothal Horse and the Jeweled Elephant, along with their groom and the mahout, respectively, reflects the importance of these emblems in the realm.

when he created his durbar scene for Raja Ramachandra. The number, dress, pose, and position of the courtiers and the Dignitary Establishment is too similar to be a coincidence. Lewis more likely painted this portrait from the photograph rather than strictly from life, later in the 1860s when he toured India for a second time.

A portrait photographer's images, no matter how interpretive, are bound to persons and places more strictly than a painter's. Lewis kept the outlines of Tripe's photographic image, but he added key elements and subtracted others (Plate 11). Gone is the grand chandelier that so dominated both Tripe's photograph and Maistry's "Miniature." Gone too are the ornate pillars of the raja's durbar hall, which are replaced by generic arches that Lewis used in paintings of other such durbar scenes. The colors are subdued. The vibrancy that Lewis subtracted from things was added to the human face. The uniformed Dignitary Establishment standing behind the courtiers wear the bold expression of honest English yeomen. Their ceremonial rods become real weapons in their hands as they stand ready to defend their lord (Plate 12). The courtiers now are poised at the edge of their chairs, ready for some quick decision (Plate 13). Lewis embellishes the face of this raja whose family had not seen battle for sixty years, and provides him with the curled moustache and testy expression of a



Plate 11. Frederick Christian Lewis, 1813–1875, toured the royal courts of South India and Rajasthan, including Pudukkottai in 1851–1855 (Archer and Lightbrown 1882, 133). The brass plate on the painting now kept in His Highness's palace in Trichinopoly sets the date at 1853. Lewis also painted striking individual portraits of the raja and his brother (MacQueen 1926, 3, 19, 20). Lewis reportedly returned to India in 1863–1866, traveling in nearby Travancore but not in Pudukkottai. Tripe's photograph of the durbar scene is dated 1858, but he was in Pudukkottai earlier, in 1856. The overall similarity of the two durbar scenes, however, is striking. Photographs of the actual durbar room in the last chapter of this book show that Lewis's arches simply mute the already blurred details in Tripe's work. The pillars in the durbar room are quite ornate. Lewis may have painted the royal portraits in 1853, but his durbar scene may well have been painted later from Tripe's vision, not from life.

bold warrior lord (Plate 14, color section). Lewis provides his Indian characters with very European expressions. Their features are certainly Indian, but not their demeanor, which evokes King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table rather than the indolent pageant princes a British viewer a half century earlier might have expected. It is interesting to note that Tennyson had just published his popular *Idylls of the King* in 1859. The more ornate second edition of 1862 was dedicated to the memory of Prince Albert, whose tragic death put the queen and the empire into mourning. Tennyson's poetry created verbal images of splendor, of grandly dressed maidens and shining knights, that might have seemed to come



Plate 12. The faces of the Dignitary Establishment (out of focus) in Tripe's photograph give Lewis leeway for a most telling flight of fancy. With eyes that gleam even in the back row with sharp white paint against very black pupils, these household officials become bold warriors, a technique in sharp contrast to Lewis's otherwise soft palette.

to life in this lavish Indian court rather than in England, where a joyless queen would continue to prefer black for the rest of her reign. By muting the Indianness of the place and by creating familiar faces, Lewis left viewers with room to fill in their own location for this scene of royal splendor.

Here are two civilizations, each learning to incorporate the other into its own image of grandeur, but both have much in common. There is the common need for such splendor, and yet there is the common loss of real sovereignty for both this Indian house and the British royal house. Raja Ramachandra was now under the watchful eye of the British political agent, and Victoria commanded little but her own privy purse. Jeffrey Lant (1979) labels the pageants of the Windsor "insubstantial," and Nicholas Dirks (1987, 356) terms the ceremonial emblems of the Tondaimans "fetishized things." Just as court life in Britain was once the center of real political power, so too the display of the highly decorated person of the raja was a central feature in the royal ritual in Pudukkottai.



Plate 13. Lewis paints the raja's immediate family sitting on the edge of their seats as if events might demand an act worthy of noble heritage.

The durbar itself, in the early eighteenth century, was at the same time both a ritualized public display of the grandeur of the raja and a place to conduct official business. For any court officer to speak "in full and open Durbar" was to take an official stand (Board of Control's Collection, 245/5541, letter from W. Blackburne dated October 21, 1807). Thus the durbar both sanctified and legitimized public actions. When the raja was seated "in durbar" surrounded by his court, his very presence became sacred. The awe surrounding the raja did not diminish, but his power to move armies, to tax, and to give and take away land gradually ceased.

When the political power of kingship declined, all that was left was the ritual state. This was as true in Buckingham Palace as it was in Pudukkottai. Walter Bagehot in *The English Constitution* (1867) had actually made this point and openly recommended the aggrandizement of royal ritual in England. In Pudukkottai the first act of a new claimant to royal power was to hold a durbar. If a substantial number of important people attended and paid him honor, he reigned. If not, he and all of his armies remained a band of mercenaries. As history would have it, the ritual of the king seated in state was the first act and the last remnant of kingship. Ramachandra Tondaiman, no less than Victoria, shared her fate and her power as a thing of pageant rule. The commonality of this tale of two cities is apparent in the next painting of Ramachandra Tondaiman in durbar.

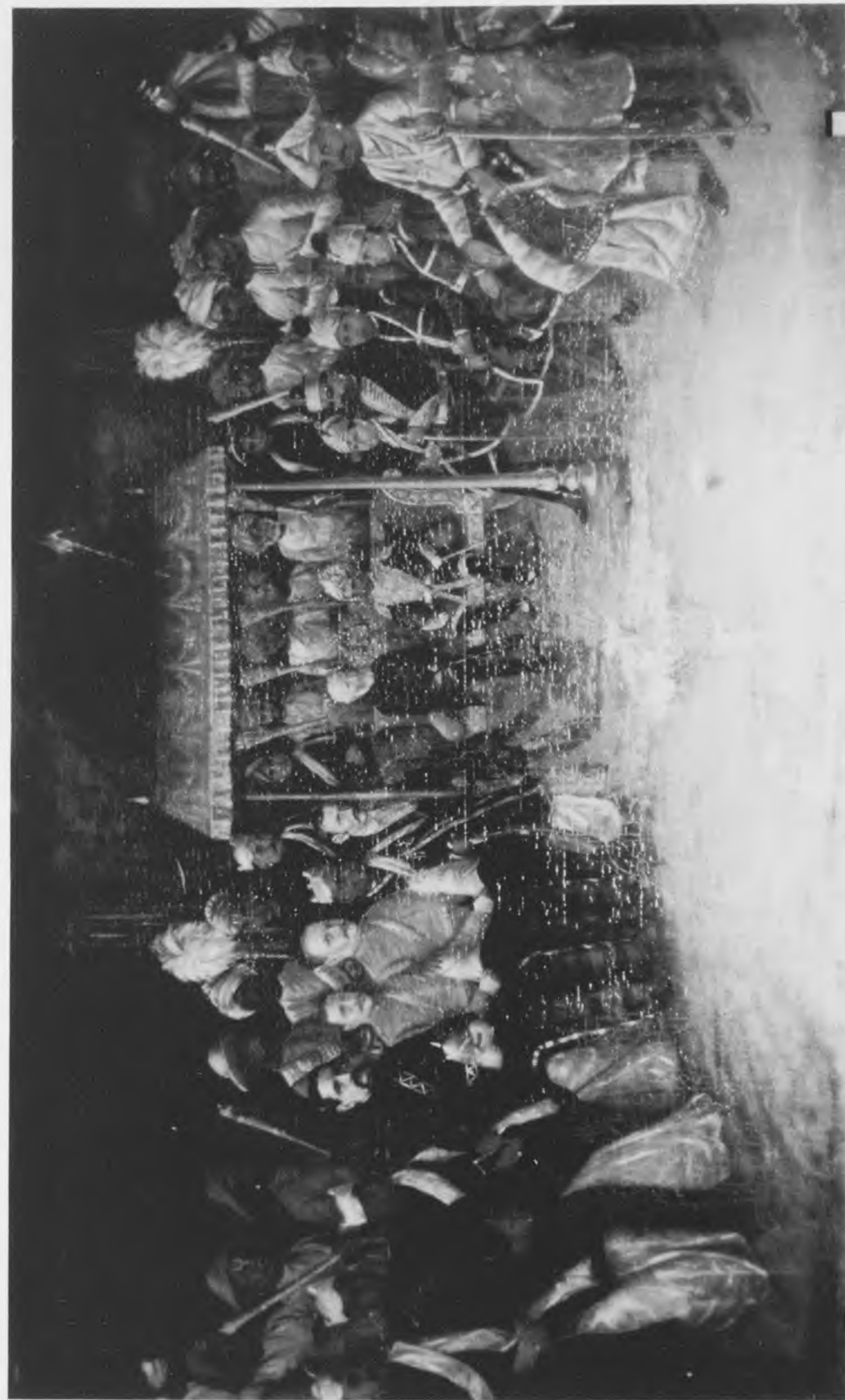


Plate 15. This durbar scene, which now hangs in the Government Museum, Pudukkottai, does not resemble Ravi Varma's earlier paintings except in the fine detailing on the faces. When viewed as a whole, the grand brass incense-holder dominates the scene here much as the glass chandelier monopolized earlier durbar scenes. Now the viewer must look at this scene through a very Hindu object. Here the invocation of divinity is apparent, not transparent. If the painting was indeed completed after the raja's death, then the need for an aura of sanctity would be even more compelling.

A Moment of Confluence

In the early period of borrowed images and mixed metaphors, none of the British had yet walked onto the raja's set to share the stage with him. By 1886 the British had joined this durbar scene. In a painting attributed to an Indian master of European technique, Ravi Varma, a rigid governor of Madras in black to suit his Protestant upbringing (Plate 15) nonetheless shares a seat on the garish throne of Raja Ramachandra in what came to be called a "political" durbar. To the left of the raja, as always, sit the hereditary courtiers (Plate 16). To his right, his ministers of state are now joined by British officers (Plate 17). The first place next to the throne is usurped by the political agent. The dewan, Sir A. Sashia Sastri, is well placed between the British officers and the rest of the Indian ministry (see Plate 4, color section). Sastri, a most important person in this process of the anglicization of the raja and of the domestication of the British, was a creature of both worlds.

The programs for the visit of political agents and the governor were published by the dewan and are still kept among the Pudukkottai papers in the Indian Office Library. Sastri's "Notes of Ceremonies and Etiquettes on the occasion of the Durbar during the Governor's Visit," dated 1892, provides a matter-of-fact description of a grand scene by this bureaucratic Brahman who organized rituals for the now ritual-minded British.

Plate 16. Although the raja had no sons, his grandsons were numerous. Here the young boys sit with quiet dignity. The place next to the throne should have belonged to the raja's adopted heir, Martanda, but the face of this young man who does wear a state turban does not resemble another earlier portrait of Martanda done by Ravi Varma. The Indian painter seeks to accentuate the nobility of the royal grandsons by giving them very adult faces, while Varma's earlier portrait of Martanda emphasizes his sweet innocence (see Plate 27).





Plate 17. Not only has the British governor shared the raja's throne, but British and Indians sit beside each other with remarkably similar clothing. British and Indian courtiers wear the same style of coat, with sashes indicating their rank. Only the headdress and the lower garments differentiate the two, as if their commonality at the torso must be sandwiched between their difference at the head and the foot.

At 10:45 A.M. His Excellency the Governor and party will drive for Durbar escorted by Troopers by the Pududvayal Tope Road, and when the old battery is passed a salute of 21 guns will be fired.

His Excellency and party will enter the palace by the Western Gate, and on arrival at the Palace Square they will be received by the Commandant and the Dewan Peishkar at the carriage door and conducted to the foot of the staircase.

His Excellency and party will be received at the foot of the staircase by the Assistant Dewan, the band playing.

At the top of the staircase, His Excellency and party will be received by His Highness the Rajah and the Dewan-Regent and conducted to the Canopy where the State Sofa is placed.

His Excellency and His Highness will take their seats on the Sofa.

After His Excellency and party have taken their seats, the Dewan-Regent and members of the Rajah's family and all Durbarees will assume their usual seats in two rows.

A little nautch [performance by the palace dancers and musicians] will then take place, heralds proclaiming the ancient titles of the Rajah.

The nautch over (10 or 15 minutes), His Highness will rise to present garlands, sandal, attar and *pan supari* [prepared betel nut] to His Excellency the Governor and party. The sandal and *pan supari* will simply be touched and the garlands worn.

This over, all will resume their seats for a minute or two and then rise on His Highness and His Excellency rising, when the Durbar will break up.

His Excellency the Governor and party and His Highness the Rajah and the Durbarees will then if convenient sit for a photo. (Residency Records, R2/21, 1884–95, "Ceremonials")

Sastri's account leaves little to suspect that anything of sacred significance will happen here. Only the photo will preserve the scene.

In contrast to the stodgy words of Dewan Sastri, Ravi Varma painted a holy scene. The raja and His Excellency, Sir Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant Duff, G.C.I.E. (see Plate 3), present a delightful contrast. Devoid of frivolous finery, the governor wears no insignia of his rank save that grave expression of indisputable authority. Raja Ramachandra, in the jeweled turban of state, shines in gold braid. The British officers do not share their chief's simplicity; they sport their share of gilded finery. But the raja and the governor are not really so disparate. In place of his former Moghul court dress, Ramachandra Tondaiman now wears a suit that could have been made by the governor's own tailor. In the foreground of the painting is neither chandelier nor jeweled elephant. Instead, incense—usually reserved for images of deities—burns in a large elaborate stand in front of this scene. Varma's vivid painting seems to hint that by coming under the raja's sacred canopy the British had joined the world of the Gods.

Alone, these four images of Raja Ramachandra in durbar do not tell the whole story, but they may well be the best synopsis of a complex tale. Moreover, these images are self-fulfilling statements. The paintings and photograph depict a glittering raja in court, but they also are clearly meant to confirm what they display. This is the primary image the raja wanted to project, and the British were willing, it seems, to buy into this same scene.

The origins of the durbar as a political and cultural ceremony are not as important as the fact of its common acceptance. It would be foolish to claim that because the British willingly entered the picture they had fully joined in all the cultural and religious nuances this image had in Pudukkottai. Likewise, because the raja's durbar hall was lighted by a European chandelier does not mean that European purposes highlighted his intentions for rule as he sat in state. But nonetheless, when two cultures share the same space at the same time using the same valued things, something is happening there, even if no one quite acknowledges what it is. Certainly after 1858, when Ramachandra sat in durbar, there was always some thing of Britain there. Whatever occurs under that sacred canopy is meant to be seen in London as

Ornament as Ontology: A Conclusion

His Excellency the Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman remains seated in durbar like a pressed flower marking an important page in a now-unopened Victorian book. While the empire existed, such a photographic image had a worldwide significance. The popular “art unit” created by Victorian ladies around the beloved fireplace moved such images into the everyday life of the modern middle-class wherever the fashion of the empire reigned. As exotic as they may have seemed, India’s native princes were not strangers in the Victorian house. They entered as “decoration” in an era that loved the decorative. As the Indian princes adorned their palaces with glass chandeliers, their own stilled images decorated many a Victorian “castle” as they rested on the hearth in the heart of the middle-class home.

This remains the most enduring—and most telling—image of the Indian maharajas, their place on the mantelpiece of the Anglo-American home. Here they were “merely” exotic decoration, but in Pudukkottai—we must not forget—the raja’s holy body was no less “decoration,” *alaṃkāra*. And, like the Victorian lady decorating her home, the empire’s political agents in the Native States also took to this world of buttons, bows, and bunting and created their own “art units” with themselves at the center. Thus I end not with another photograph of the durbar but with two curious snapshots of Mrs. Bossom’s living hall and fireplace, Boston 1912. Here the most serious possibilities and problems for the recovery of *religious things* sit neatly on a shelf—visible if we begin to look with an eye that has seen durbar halls and palaces and temples of Pudukkottai and is ready to bring it all home.

Mrs. Bossom's Living Hall

The Victorian living hall was a very public space. This enlarged entrance hall, eliminated from domestic architecture immediately after this gilded age, served as a parlor when the formal parlor was too fragile and beautiful to expose to common use. The purpose of the hall was to impress, to make a statement, to invite a neighbor into the publicity of one's life. It is the closest that domestic architecture ever came to a royal anteroom. Mrs. Bossom followed custom perfectly by hiding her actual living and dining rooms behind a closed door and a drawn portiere while exposing much of herself right inside her own front door (Plate 90).



Plate 90. This photograph is filed as "Room in Mrs. Bossom's House" and has already served as the cover illustration for *The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors Through the Camera's Eye, 1860-1917* (Seale, 1975). The layout of Mrs. Bossom's house and her eclectic decor was actually quite typical for suburban Bostonians at the turn of the century. My own interest in such living halls stems from a ten-year project restoring a similar Victorian house in Boston. (Courtesy of the Prints and Photographic Division, Library of Congress, LC-C801-118.)

I know nothing of Mrs. Bossom that her living hall does not tell, and perhaps that is as it should be. Obviously from a well-traveled family, Mrs. Bossom has collected artifacts from several different Eastern countries, but India dominates her motif. An American flag leans casually on the stair, as if to reveal her patriotism in spite of overwhelming evidence of her love for the foreign (note the leopard skin on the handrail). The art unit around her mantel (Plate 91) brings together with amazing acumen various emblems of Indian royal life. Swords that might have been seen at the sides of a raja's courtiers hang now under and over her mantel interspersed with antelope horns. Just above the raised shelf at the center of the mantel stands a photograph of what appears to be a village chieftain and his noble folk. Above to the right is a photograph of man who, if not a prince, poses in princely fashion. On the upper mantel from left to right rest a large incense urn, two bronze elephants, a laughing Buddha, an intricate (possibly carved ivory) vase, a two-bladed axe, a brass bucket, a butterfly, and another large vase. The main mantel holds an embossed plate with the image of what looks like a Moghul emperor. Mrs. Bossom has draped *rudrākṣa* beads, the sign of asceticism, at the base of this medallion. Similarly around the subsequent photograph of an obviously much revered man she has placed rosary beads. Another brass plate, a glass vase, a larger ornate vase, several photographs of young women, and a snapshot of a naval officer follow. At the end of this mantle, Mrs. Bossom has set sticks of incense in a miniature holder. Thus both on the right and on the left of the mantel are signs of spiritual India like bookends to the martial world held between.

This art unit would, by any other name, be called an altar. It is astonishing how close Mrs. Bossom has come to including the key emblems of Indian kingship here: the antelope and leopard, the ascetic's beads and the warrior's swords. The fact that she chose to place at the center of her "altar" an ornate vase in the shape of the ultimate aniconic image of deity, the Kumbam, must be put to sheer coincidence of the uncanny variety. I would guess that the vase was her most valuable piece and thus placed at the center of her collection. Even more astonishing is the simple fact that His Highness Martanda Tondaiman, reigning in Pudukkottai in 1912, would have felt quite at home in her living hall in spite of its modest proportions. The house built as his actual residence near the British cantonment in Trichinopoly was furnished much the same way. His present Highness maintains this room with swords, axes, and trophies of hunting (Plate 92) on a scale that befits the difference between a prince and a middle-class Bostonian. Yet on the other side of the globe from princely India, Mrs. Bossom made her home in the shared space of imperial decorative culture. Like our opening portrait of Raja Ramachandra, she too has her ornaments and willy-nilly mixes, cut glass and porcelain with swords, miniature elephants and leopard skins.

However, a significant difference between "East" and "West" remained. In the greater empire, decoration was given the ardor, the passion, frequently reserved for divine matters, but not the name. Ultimately James Frazer and Max Müller would reserve the term "Religion" for the "Infinite" which was beyond, behind, beneath surface display. They, as scholars who followed them, dismissed both idolatry in India and "materialism" in England as the tragic vanity of their time. In doing so, they not only bifurcated religion from magic, material from spiritual, but also alienated Mrs. Bossom from her would-be prince charming



Plate 91. The photograph is cataloged as "Mrs. Bossom's Fireplace." (Courtesy of the Prints and Photographic Division, Library of Congress, LC-C801-113.)



Plate 92. I pose for a portrait amid the many trophies of the Tondaimans in His Highness's living room at his permanent residence in Trichinopoly. Members of the household staff told me that most visitors picked this spot for a snapshot.

by sequestering the spiritual from the decorative. Already her art unit betrays a move toward the modern, with neatly framed photographs and vases and few of the handmade laces and "fancy work" that would have been omnipresent a decade earlier. The more "educated" Mrs. Bossom became, the more she would have replaced her "clutter" with good books on dusted shelves.

Middle-class Indians also read Max Müller with great passion, but they never "read" him with the logic of the Anglo-American world. They devoured his books, praised his grasp of the spiritual, and then sent him shawls and Prasadam. This is because in places like Pudukkottai outward signs are not signs at all. The "spiritual" is coterminous with the very outwardness that the nineteenth-century scholar assumed must give way to some inner truth. In middle-class India, Mrs. Bossom's art unit would indeed be an altar. At its center might have been placed *Jñāna* Saraswati, Goddess of learning, like the small house version one sculptor made for me in Kumbakonam on a model of a larger piece commissioned by a university in Tanjore. This divine lady's buxom bronze body is etched over with intricate carving that creates the jewels and the clothing that bedeck her. With book in one hand, the holy *rudrākṣas* beads in another, and a small pot of tirtha (holy water) in the third, her fourth hand makes the sign of wisdom. The holy book, holy tirtha, and holy prayer adorn her body like the jewels in her crown or the flowers etched into her feet. She teaches openly

what Mrs. Bossom intuited and what Raja Ramachandra “knew”: The spiritual body is not inside or underneath the fleshly body, it is layered on top of it.

To acknowledge this difference in the “location” of the sacred as exterior and not interior, as surface and not inner reality, as ornament and not essence, would have demanded that Protestant Europeans radically reform their perceptions of sacredness in the nineteenth century. Ironically at the very time that the comparative study of religion began, the goal of the new and very sincere academic enterprise of Max Müller was to legitimize the religions of the East by making them look outwardly different but inwardly compatible with basic Victorian values. Müller built an image of India as more committed to the frequently acknowledged Christian goal of inward spiritual development. Frazer introduced much of the logic of “magic” and argued passionately that this ancient attempt to control matter was at the heart of modern science. Then, instead of affirming the fact, he denounced the whole enterprise as vanity quite in keeping with the age of *Vanity Fair*. In a very pragmatic sense, Müller and Frazer had no choice. As scholars of religion, their supporters were frequently drawn from the ranks of reformist church leaders and religious scientists. Certainly, ardent rationalists and the coming positivists and Marxists were not likely to join hands with a discipline that asked the public to take religion seriously as religion. To openly name Mrs. Bossom’s art unit, the raja’s durbar, or the ceremonials of the Raj as “religion” would have forced the fledgling discipline into a confrontation both with church leaders and with sympathetic scientists. The former would have been shocked at the idolatry, and the latter might well have objected to the loss of a safe corner for religion that would remain compatible with but essentially outside the stricter empiricism of their scientific world. Such a confrontation would have ensured that a Max Müller or a James Frazer, rather than joining the ranks of the British Empire’s academic nobility, would have ended in obscurity. To relocate religion at the surface of things, in the ornamental, would have forced Müller and Frazer to embrace much of the very “vanity” and “foolishness” they condemned.

Such a relocation of sacredness, however, is possible now in these times of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and the general willingness to revise the study of religion in a post-Imperial and perhaps post-Marxist world. The time is right to return to the original thesis of this study. The late nineteenth century in places like Pudukkottai, the residences of political agents, governors’ mansions, and even Mrs. Bossom’s living hall, came to share a common but unvoiced culture—a culture of ornament, fabrication, and grand display. But now we can confront the central *mystery*—and I now apply that term much as it was used in the Catholic church—of this ontology that was revealed within the raja’s world in Pudukkottai. *Ornament/display/fabrication is about materialism, but not about matter. It is about bodies, but not about the physical form.* There was no need for the comparative study of religion to retreat from its initial insistence that there existed a sense of religion that was intimately connected to the visible world. The discipline need never have discarded the notion of “mana” or “animism” to embrace, as Eliade put it, “the sign of logos,” if they had only been willing to admit what has been called the “excluded middle” into their own ontology (Derrida 1982, 79; see also Derrida [1967] 1976, 30–44). This middle is a point between matter and the immaterial, between subject and object, between existence and nonexistence.

That excluded metaphysical middle is the world of the iconic—the location of beingness not in the essence of things but in their *pūrṇa*, their fullness, their overflow into image, into form that exists in full view of the human imagination.

I have also suggested throughout this study that iconic culture in Pudukkottai and in the imperial world was sometimes “reformed” and at other times simply co-opted and thus silenced by those who preferred order, bureaucracy, permanences, and solid rationality to what seemed a spendthrift, immoral, and dangerously chaotic world. Giving voice to the iconic world would have produced more than an academic conundrum. The iconic is deeply implicated in the world precisely because it is by its very nature *historical*. The “icon” is eminently visible and at the center of power. The king or God in this bodily form is power incarnate, and that power is sustained by his very existence as an icon. That is why the study of this sort of theo-logy cannot be accomplished outside of history. It belongs ontologically to history.

Thus iconic culture implies its own sense not only of the *space* that “sacredness” occupies but also of the definition of *time* in relationship to that “sacredness.” I do not employ the familiar terms “the Sacred” or “the Holy” here because such a sense of ongoing permanence, of independence of both space and time, is also quite inappropriate to the system. But it is equally inappropriate to continue to describe “iconic culture” in overly generalized language at the end of what has been a detailed study of a fifty-square-mile area in South India. Yet the system in Pudukkottai, and the more general turn toward the ornamental in the empire, demands explication in more general terms of what the system implies for the very categories that the study of religion has developed as scions of Frazer and Müller. A systematic study of iconic culture belongs to future work and is in many respects already in progress in new work on the body, on “public culture,” on performance theory, on dress, on the changing definition of “text” in literary criticism, and so on. A careful review of all these new theories, as well as the ongoing theories and arguments about the nature of religion developed in the last hundred years in the field, would be more appropriate for the introduction of such a new study than for the conclusion of this one. Moreover, this is not a study of anthropology, or of art, or even of history but a study of theo-logy. I offer, then, four general observations on the ontology of ornament in Pudukkottai and in the decorative world of the empire that, if given a voice in the history of religions, might in some small way have altered the dimensions of God in the modern world.

1. The Material, the Spiritual, and the Natural

The notion continues in textbooks and in almost all basic introductions to Hinduism that much of India shared a belief in *māya*, “the illusionary nature of the phenomenal world and its corollary, skepticism about the physical world and a desire to find truth beyond the material” (Huntington and Huntington 1990, 88). Little could be further from the truth in Pudukkottai, which reveled in material things and even used such things to create a body for divinity. Yet there is no denying that the Tondaimans were deeply involved with the ascetic

tradition and honored as their great guru a naked saint. What was the relationship between spiritual and material in this little kingdom?

The problem of the material versus the spiritual as formulated by Max Müller and repeated in a thousand different ways over the last century is a misunderstanding of the nature of “materialism” in a place like Pudukkottai. There is nothing natural, nothing physical, about the king’s ornamental body. There is equally nothing “physical” about the palace or the temple or the great Gods that inhabit these structures. Yet all divine things here are visible, audible, and even tactile. They are fabricated: matter once-removed, twice-born, re-created. *Religious things* do not gain their holiness by coming “fresh from the Creator’s hand,” as Mircea Eliade put it ([1957] 1963, 65), but by being remade by the hand of a human being. They are “spiritual” because they are the art-ificial product of ritual—ritual war, ritual hunting, ritual dressing. The Tondaimans, in fact, become royal because they tamed the “natural” power of wild elephants and tigers and make of them a glittering world of seemingly frivolous decoration.

But how can the naked ascetic fit into such an explanation of the “spirituality.” Surely he has turned his back on the material world. Indeed, Sadasiva Brahmendra openly ignored the physical world, but that does not mean he did not value his “body.” Yoga, in South India, should not be interpreted via modern psychology as a form of inner transformation. Yoga is an exercise to transform the body. The yogi needs no clothes because his very body has become “dress,” a glittering body re-created from flesh. Sadasiva, like most saints in South India, was not cremated when he died. Instead, he was buried, and over his samadhi the Tondaimans are said to have built a temple to house his new icon body. Such a theo-logic may not apply to all yogis or to all parts of India, but certainly in Pudukkottai and I suspect much of South India the yogi-saint belongs most firmly with the king in a common mode of material beingness that transcended nature while existing firmly in the world.

Where did scholars like Max Müller and Frazer go wrong? Anthropology began by noticing the materialism of religious phenomenon. The young discipline fed from notions of “mana.” Max Müller’s *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion* began as a brilliant argument for applying Kant’s critique of pure reason to the study of religion. Müller used the term phenomenon and distinguished between nomen and phenomenon. He did not mistake religion for science, as some of the early anthropologists did. Yet at the end of the same ground-breaking lecture, he lost his footing in Kant and introduced the concept of a “mistake” of language to dismiss the interconnection between Gods and nature in India, and in doing so to dismiss contemporary “idolatry” in India as well. That was his own mistake of language. Whatever the relationship of Gods to “nature” in the Vedas might have been—and the question needs reconsideration (see Brian Smith 1989)—the Hindu icon is not an extension of any such nature mistaken for God. It is its own category of beingness.

South India clearly has a multiplicity of theo-logies and ontologies. Because Max Müller and others diverted attention toward their own version of Advaita Vedanta as the essential theology of India, a vast storehouse of texts and ritual practice in South India has gone unstudied and uncataloged even among academics in India. Those years of neglect are over, as the pioneering work of such scholars as H. Daniel Smith, Guy Welbon, and Fred Clothey

in the United States, and S. S. Janaki, N. R. Bhatt, and K. K. A. Venkatachari in India,¹ allow an emerging new group of scholars, like Richard Davis in *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Śiva in Medieval India* (1991), to expand definitions of the subtle relationships between matter, soul, spirit, and “nature” available in India. I suspect that as more of the Agamas and related texts become accessible, the theo-logic of the royal icon in Pudukkottai will have richer analogues in many of these theologies. Although as a hinterland such a state was not, and will not ever be, defined through any single system.

At this point in what will always remain a work-in-progress, the study of the royal body in Pudukkottai provides an alternative theo-logic to much that has passed for near axiom in the study of religion. Here I suspect that what is unreal is not the physical world but rather the very familiar European “naturalism,” the belief that there is a stable entity called Nature with immutable laws that even God cannot disrupt. In Pudukkottai the material world is either “raw” or “cooked,” to borrow from Lévi-Strauss—that is, matter is untransformed or transformed. Untransformed matter is “natural” but *not* valued as a sign of God’s fixed laws. The physical is valued because it is capable of transformation. Neither ignored nor denied, certain kinds of matter are the substance needed to form the divine. In Pudukkottai the forest is the best source of “raw” matter from which to make the royal body precisely because it is raw—never touched by agriculture and therefore the base metal needed to create gold. Thus the forest is neither chaos nor cosmos, but serves the divine much as it serves humans as an inexhaustible source of the unhewn, the unpolished, and the undressed.

Thus in Pudukkottai the only *really real* is not real at all—it is artificial. No subject of the Tondaimans would be impressed by Hans Christian Andersen’s bright little boy who could not “see” the king’s magic clothes. Of course they knew the king was naked, for underneath his glittering clothes was an ascetic’s form. But that form too was also “dress” for the ascetic’s naked body, and is not his natural body anymore than the king’s royal body is “natural.” So the categories of material and spiritual do not work in an inverse relationship, but rather function in the same way that materials matter to the artist. Once re-created, feathers or rocks or gold become more than the sum of their parts. They are a new construction with an ontological status “beyond” matter but not beyond the sensual world.

As a theological postscript to this discussion of the spiritual and the material body, it is important to remember that the perception of the physical body as raw material for the spiritual, rather than as its prison house, does have antecedents in early Christianity. There is at least one major exception to the usual Western notions of the body and soul that scholars of the Victorian era never mentioned, perhaps because it remained as “absurd” to their scientific world as it did to the philosophy of the Greeks. That exception is the doctrine of resurrection. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul explains resurrection in these terms:

1. Examples of this work can be found in two excellent volumes of collected articles published in India: *Saiva Temples and Temple Worship*, ed. S. S. Janaki, includes essays by Bhatt (1988, 24–45) and Janaki (1988, 122–81); *Agama and Silpa*, ed. K.K.A. Venkatachari, includes work of Bhatt (1984, 14–28), H. D. Smith (1984, 50–68), and Welbon (1984, 69–102). Clothey’s work is best seen in *Rhythm and Intent: Ritual Studies from South India* (1983).

It is so with the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in decay. It is sown in humiliation, it is raised in splendor. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in strength. It is a physical body that is sown, it is a spiritual body that is raised. If there is a physical body, there is a spiritual body also. . . . It is not the spiritual that comes first, but the physical and then the spiritual. (15:42–47)

The resurrected body of Christianity's kingdomless king, like the royal body and the ascetic body in Pudukkottai, had flesh as its raw matter, and then through a process of transformation—death, in the case of Christianity—took on a transfigured, splendid, but very visible form. I do not know how much more could or should be said about this analogy between the resurrected body and the iconic body, but the issue might well be traced in the Eastern church, which preserved the term "icon" for the modern world.

2. A Variation on Sacred and Secular

Although sacred/profane has become the modern map of religious consciousness, this dichotomy assumes the same worn dualism, material/spiritual, that reentered the new "academic" study of religion a century ago. The daily world is, as Max Müller put it, "but a dream," or, as Eliade put it, "the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, . . . an illusion" ([1957] 1963, 28). The irony is that Max Müller and later Mircea Eliade took most of their material, and later even their language, from India to further this discussion of the dichotomy of the commonplace and the sacred world.

But where is this dichotomy in places like Pudukkottai or, for that matter, even in Mrs. Bossom's living hall? Clothes, vases, pots are the decoration of daily life just as they are the ornaments that make a king. The line between fashion and holy ornament, between an ever so lovely hat and a crown, between a flower vase and a holy Kumbam, between a chandelier and an oil lamp, between a clock and a holy calendar, between an incense burner and a nosegay, is thin and meant to be so. That is why the religiosity of ornament can be so difficult to recognize but so easy to experience and to share.

In Pudukkottai no sharp line demarcates the sacred from the profane. Even the king's house is designed as a link between the ordinary and the extraordinary rather than as a haven/heaven in the middle of an otherwise tainted world. But this is not to say that everything is sacred here, but rather to suggest that dichotomy or demarcation is simply not the correct imagery to describe this sacredness. That which is sacred did not drop from another world, but rather was transformed from this world. It is an elaboration on the simple, a dressing of the undressed, a crafting of the unhewn.

The sacred in this sense is not a noun or even a verb, but an adjective, as Ananda Coomaraswamy argued in his now-famous essay on ornamentation. Adjectives elaborate but also specify, turning the common noun into the specific, the real. His point that "a person or thing apart from its appropriate ornaments . . . is valid as an idea, but not as a species" (1938, 252) places the accent on the right syllable in Pudukkottai. Ideas, abridge-

ments, sketches, and generalizations are equated with the common, the mundane. The sacred here is not the essence apart from the material, or the core without the fruit, or the bone without the flesh. The daily becomes sacred as it fills out form, dots the "i," crosses the "t," and then turns mere letters into art.

3. The Value of "Sin"

The rajas of Pudukkottai were glorious "sinners," but the nature of that sin is far removed from the notion Frazer first introduced of the king as scapegoat, the bearer of the sins of his people. "Sin" in Pudukkottai derives from a source other than contagious magic. This is the "sin" of second birth—the very deed that could have made Adam and Eve into heroic figures had the biblical editors chosen to tell their story without a monotheistic overlay. Adam and Eve give up simplicity for complexity, naiveté for enriched sensitivities, and nakedness for dress. They leave an enclosed, formed, static world to live in an incomplete world that they must "create." The Tondaimans' world was just such a patch of thorns, a "fort" in the midst of endlessly potential forest. The Brahman pandits, such as Sastri and the accountants of the empire, wanted to make them a garden land to fence in their willful desire for self-creation. But the Tondaimans, like the biblical progenitors of the human race, broke down the fences, broke through their natural place in the universe, not to become *like* God but to do what eluded Adam and Eve—to *be* God.

This is indeed the original sin that even a Frazer had to condemn in its modern form: the arrogance of humanity assuming that now, through science, it had won the power to remake the world. Fifty years later, Mircea Eliade would not have his *homo religiosus* transgress on this one grand commandment. In his description of archaic man's attempts to re-create the world through the repetition and reenactment of creation myths, Eliade stopped to make certain that "we must not suppose that *human* work is in question here, that it is through his own effort that man can consecrate a space. In reality the ritual by which he constructs a sacred space is efficacious in the measure in which *it reproduces the work of the gods*" ([1957] 1963, 29). As long as the Gods provide the blueprint, the holy order, then humanity can reproduce. Any other mode of creation is what? Idolatry? Vanity? Sin? If this is the case, then the *homo religiosus* in Pudukkottai were the master sinners. And joining them in this "sin" were the British civil servants as they sat down with the rajas in durbar, the empire builders as they made an empress out of a queen, and a legion of Victorian housewives as they fashioned a world for themselves out of the plethora of the empire and the work of their own hands.

The "idolatry" of the Raj and the "idolatry" of Pudukkottai were not false charges from those who would equate the Sacred with a predefined order that forbade any tinkering with its perfection. Why should the academic study of religion convolute the theo-logic of any iconic culture in order to defend it as serious and worth consideration? The rajas built their own divine bodies. The British politicals were likewise self-made men. Each sought legitimation in a world that had no language for their type of sacredness and indeed would not even

have given it the name. Yet when the religion of India, or of archaic peoples or any such "others," was ardently defended, the "sins" were washed away and the whole of Hinduism came out looking like a white sheet of otherworldliness. Pudukkottai rajas challenged basic religious *and* academic values in the same way that they infuriated the political agents and exasperated the Brahman Dewan Sastri. They *were* Kallars, they never denied their cattle-raising and cattle-lifting past. They were extravagant. They were self-willed. They were disorderly, spendthrifts, and ardent materialists. And that is precisely why they were divine!

4. History as a Theo-logical Category

There are historians who see history as the place where pragmatism rules over idealism, where the struggle for power, money, and status frequently makes a mockery of supposed higher values. History is said to prove that everyone is after Number One, and such statements are supposed to shock the sensitivities of those in the humanities who would argue for right over might, and justice over self-aggrandizement. But such logic works only as long as history is the domain of the expedient, the makeshift and made-do, while the realm of religion is the ideal, the should-be and must-be. But this dichotomy, like many others, does not do justice to the complexity of Pudukkottai. If divinity must have a body, and bodies are built out of the world and for the world, then *certain* processes of history—the wars, the conflicts—are indistinguishable from ritual. This was the point Heesterman so boldly suggested. Events are processes of transformation that for "pre-axial" cultures, are experienced as ritual. The Tondaimans' rise to power is both a ritual and a historical process. Their actions within history garner the emblems they need to build their royal bodies. Taken to perhaps legitimate extremes, the argument over axial and pre-axial civilization could be extended to claim that ritual merely replaces "the real act" when consciousness and rationalization demand *play* where there was once *deed*. The parades that accompany all important rituals in the Pudukkottai state bear a striking resemblance to the vivid scenes still part of our film heritage of the triumphal marches of the legions back to Rome. In each case the captured emblems of the enemy were displayed often with the now-naked vanquished enemy in tow.

Beyond these suggestions of history as transformative deed is a theo-logical issue. The "Western" God acts in history, as biblical theologians so often stress, and thereby sanctifies actions that otherwise would have remained profane. Discussion of the basic differences between East and West often cited these acts of God in history as fundamental to the West's affirmation of the world. A recent textbook still teaches students:

Eastern religion is basically world denying. . . . In contrast, the religions of the West understand God to be active in nature and in history. Nature and history have not been abandoned by the Ultimate; nor *are* they ultimate in some mystical way. Rather, they are the arena in which God acts. He is separate from them, but works with them.

So instead of denying and withdrawing from them, one looks for God within them. (J. F. Wilson 1982, 66–67).

Again what is missing here is the excluded middle. The "West" has a God separate from but active in history. The "East" is forced to deny history not because it radically separates God from history but precisely because it makes no distinction between God and the world and thus so ties divinity to the world that God has no space in which to act. The East ends up in a mystical muddle, denying the very world that its theology would seem to affirm. While the West, giving no sanctity to the earth or to history, affirms the world because its transcendent God deigns to act there. Never is it allowed in this closed logic that in India history is holy because the Gods' very bodies are created within and by its processes. The Prajapati myths present this connection between rebuilding the world and rebuilding the God's body on a grand scale. The processes that involve Prajapati might be described as "natural," but the processes that made the Tondaimans were thoroughly historical even by biblical standards—acts of war, of conflict, and of peace.

When the Pax Britannia stilled the ritual process of war in India, the political processes of fighting for rights, of court "intrigues," of legal battles (see also Price 1991, 110–12), even of begging and clever borrowing, and buying, secured the rajas of the hinterlands a steady supply of new ornaments to sustain their royal bodies. A gilded songbird "won" by cajoling the political agent might have been a trophy in its own right. Certainly Raja Ramachandra annexed clocks and chandeliers into his own domain as signs of his incorporation of a world that thought itself his superior. Even the daily banter of this time of "peace," the constant exchange of memos and minutes swinging back and forth from bureaucrat to king, marked time in the raja's steady aggrandizement of power. The records of this "history" are as much part of a new ritual process as the Tondaimans' deeds in war. The ties that bind the Tondaimans to history are the ties that bind human to divine. There is neither a God above history nor a God below it, but slow process whereby history itself becomes the agency for the embodiment of God.

Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman in durbar, then, displays a complex theology for those with eyes to see. The photographs and the painting of this durbar became the writing that stilled this ever-flowing event for those of us accustomed to immobile data, to muse over the scene. Iconic culture has no "writing" other than the very world that it creates. This scene is its own event and its own inscription of the event. This ultimately is a system without abstraction, without an outside plan. It sits squarely in time, for it is made by time constantly adding new players and new emblems and even new Gods. It was a glorious play that even the British were invited to join as long as they brought more things to fill up a space that was never satiated and never complete. It is this holy consumerism that ultimately linked the raja to the Honorable East India Trading Company and to a European world that learned to revel in the very same process of venturing out amid danger—be it the dense forest, the high seas, or High Street—taking/winning/buying *things* to decorate a world of one's own fabrication. Victorian domestic architecture remains unrivaled in its sheer fancy, its abundant space meant to capture the bounty of a trading world within the bosom of the home. The material-

ism of Pudukkottai matched the growing consumerism of middle-class Britain, and we are left to speculate how the two meet and marry in the heyday of the Empire.

The term “material” has as its simplest meaning “cloth” or “fabric.” Even the pejorative use of the term “materialism” refers to the growing worldwide shopping spree of late nineteenth-century Europe, which began in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when oriental textiles and other ornamental wares sparked an appetite for fashion. If Chandra Mukerji is correct in her history of the patterns of modern materialism, the British built their own great industrial enterprises not to establish secure and sober heavy industry, as Weber claims, but to produce cheaper versions of the coveted textiles, teapots, and numerous other trinkets that even the lower middle-class British began to demand for their homes (Mukerji 1983, 1–29). Mukerji doubts that there ever was a period of “this-worldly asceticism” in Europe. From the start of its trading and manufacturing, the Occident shared with the Orient a mad love of *things*. Consumerism fueled the industrial revolution as surely as it sent European ships to the far corners of the world in search of sugar, spice, and everything nice.

Scholars like Max Müller rose up in his day to denounce such materialism and thus began the long crusade by the academic humanities to educate modern people back into more-stable values through a reconstructed and revived Jesus, Socrates, or Buddha who were portrayed as the earliest fighters against materialism. Thus began the myths of Israel as the first nation to denounce Mammon in the West while India lighted the path to asceticism in the East. His Excellency Raja Ramachandra with his ever wily face would have smiled at all this. The life of the mind is not a home. Human beings, as even the Bible makes clear, must live in the space they have created, wear clothes they make, and tend this barren earth until it bears fruit. Ornaments mattered to the raja, to Mrs. Bossom, to the British governors, and even to Max Müller so elegantly dressed in his cummerbund, because ornaments confer actuality, vitality, and life.