The Politics of Heritage from Madras to Chennai

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Modernity Remembered:
Temples, Publicity, and
Heritage

Thiruvanmiyur traffic jams—at least those on the East Coast Road—seem to have their silver lining! Stuck in a particularly long one I was able to manoeuvre my car and park beside the wall of the Marundeswarar temple in Thiruvanmiyur. I had passed the temple many times knowing of its age but had never been inside. . . . What strikes one is the greenery and the quietness despite the throng of devotees. . . . On the way to the Thripurasundari Amman shrine, one is forced to pause and admire the pillars particularly those with warriors on prancing horses. . . . Nataraja has his own sannidhi here. The icon is large and very beautiful. That day, draped in white silk vastram He shimmered beautifully in the light. . . . The sound of the priests chanting the Vedas to the light coloured, slightly slanting main lingam comes across loud and clear. . . . The Thiruvanmiyur of the sages’ times would have been a lot greener, but ours . . . a little away from the concrete tentacles of Chennai, doesn’t seem to be much different from its ancient version!

Accounts like this one, celebrating serendipitous encounters between urban travelers and old temples, appear regularly in the “Heritage” column carried by the Chennai edition of The Hindu, an English-language daily founded in 1878. Written for The Hindu’s urban and transnational readership, these stories assert the presence of the ancient in the midst of the modern, and they index the persistence of Hinduism not only in India’s built environment but in the knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities of its modern citizens. With this narrative of discovery, the author distinguishes his own contemplative style of engagement from the popular devotionalism favored by the temple’s “throng of devotees,” even as he confirms his attachment to and appreciation for Hinduism’s richly sedimented praxis. Despite this being his first venture inside the temple complex, the encounter is framed in terms of recognition, of the remembrance of familiar pleasure. Just as important
is the implication that the temple is a space on which multiple remembering publics may converge, a space to which co-religionists, city dwellers in search of green space, and heritage enthusiasts can lay equal claim. Indeed, the temple's visibility in Wikipedia contextualizes and underscores these convergences in light of globalization. There it is asserted that a “once unknown” area “is now an upcoming destination with the Tidel park being located nearby.”

This temple, like growing numbers of others, is currently the subject of a heritage conservation program spearheaded by private voluntary associations working in uneven collaboration with state agencies. Over the past two decades, propositions linking temple visitation and maintenance to nationalist sentiment have resurfaced in discourses and institutions concerned with heritage preservation, borrowing that rubric directly from European and North American contexts. Temples are likened to the monuments, memorials, and museums in which the nation's history is encoded and that can impart to visitors lessons in citizenship and national identification. But distinct from monuments and museums, temples are considered sites of productive nostalgia, guarantors of a still-present past.

The current reclamation of Hindu temples as Indian heritage and the English mediation of many of these activities have arisen within a broader set of discourses that aim to delineate the presence of the past in the rapidly changing built environment. Attention to temples’ “pastness” and to their objectification of tradition is not new in itself, though state-led efforts to bind those interests to nationalist consciousness accelerated during the latter half of the twentieth century. The most recent interests in heritage are tied to state institutions that themselves have been articulated with and reconfigured by neoliberal globalization, a congeries of forces that seem both to threaten and revitalize the material past. “Heritage” here glosses an array of objects, knowledges and practices that new legislative measures are designed to protect, committees and statutory bodies are convened to identify and list, and local and transnational NGOs aim to conserve. Colonial office buildings and churches, forested tracts, dilapidated rural mansions, ancient forts and palaces, temples, synagogues, and mosques—all are potential heritage sites. Nor have the commercial opportunities presented by heritage gone unnoticed, as private and state-sponsored bodies seek ever more aggressively to market its sites, commodities, and services. English-language and vernacular print media, televisial programming, Web sites and Web blogs all now serve to mediate and publicize heritage.

In some instances, proponents of heritage reiterate the alarmism with which supporters of Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, regard Muslim and Christian “threats” to Hindu sites. Indeed, narratives on heritage, like those on Hindutva, often blur the boundaries between the secular and religious, a tendency that has been amplified by what Arvind Rajagopal describes as the advance of electronic capitalism in the context of the Nehruvian legacy of secularism. In Rajagopal’s words:

Given the volume and velocity of image flows set in motion with electronic capitalism and the new conjuncture represented by liberalization, it is unlikely that the cordon sanitaire between “community” and “secular” life could have been
maintained for long... Resorting to religious and community culture draws not only from those spheres' own considerable affective power, but their status of semi-exclusion from the public realm affords a surplus charge, as a quasi-forbidden pleasure."

Heritage discourses, I argue, may intersect with (and be used to legitimate) those of Hindutva; they are not reducible to, contained by, or isomorphic with Hindutva, however. As implied by this chapter's epigraph, heritage—its sites and artifacts, as well as the procedures by which their stories are discovered and composed—arises at conjunctures at which patriotisms, tourism, and consumption meet. This chapter examines these converging and competing streams of interest, their relations to Hindu sensibilities and practices, and their sociopolitical effects, taking the conservation of Chennai's Marundeswarar Temple as my case. Of special interest are the ways that heritage, as discourse, practice, and space, is deployed within statecraft to bridge the gap between bureaucracy and belonging. Whereas Tamil Nadu's Dravidianist leaders rely upon embodied metaphors of kingship to craft a legitimating past and produce affective attachment among the governed, Chennai's heritage enthusiasts envision subjects formed in articulation with modern, depersonalized institutions and ideologies of modern statecraft. It is a statecraft, however, in which Hindu discourses, spaces, and practices are always, albeit ambiguously, present as signifiers of national character and aspiration, as emblems of public space, and as markers of a shared past.

In the following pages I account for the ways that heritage came to frame the interventions of state and civil bodies in Hindu temples in Chennai during the 1990s, using as a lens a campaign to conserve and restore Marundeswarar's grounds. Spread over nearly an acre in the heart of Tiruvanmiyur's commercial center, the temple's two tanks (stone-lined pools fed by underground aquifers and wells) had gone dry, and small shops abutted its compound walls. Conservationists aimed to recharge the tanks, improve the temple's natural landscaping, and clean and restore its grounds. Their efforts dovetailed with state interventions geared to enhancing the temple's visibility and the area's commercial development, and what successes they achieved cannot be disentangled from the combined forces of state and market.

I interpret the practices and discourses set in motion by the heritage campaign as moments in what Talal Asad called the "formation of the secular"—the sensibilities, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and discourses that precede and regulate the application (usually by the state) of the doctrine of "secularism." "Secularism," he wrote,

builds on a particular conception of the world ("natural" and "social") and of the problems generated by that world... In the discourse of modernity, "the secular" presents itself as the ground from which theological discourse was generated... and from which it gradually emancipated itself in its march to freedom. On that ground, humans appear as the self-conscious makers of history... and as the unshakable foundation of universally valid knowledge about nature and society."
The conservation of the Marundeswarar Temple was an instance, like the prior development of a legal and bureaucratic apparatus for state oversight of Hindu temples, of an effort dedicated to producing the secular in, through, and finally beyond the terms, practices, and spaces of the religious.

I introduce these processes with a descriptive overview of the social space of the Hindu temple and the kinds of publicity it anchors, glossing publicity as both collective institutions and the "general social horizon of experience in which everything that is actually or ostensibly relevant for all members of society is integrated . . . a dimension of [people's] consciousness." I then return to the case of the Marundeswarar Temple, to consider how recent concerns with cultural conservation have created new stages for contestation between state and nongovernmental agents, ritual actors and local citizens about the role of religious spaces, and practices and identities in civic life and political participation. A discussion then follows of the ways that the temples figured in colonial and postcolonial modernization projects and the different mappings of the secular with which these efforts were aligned. Threading these discussions together is attention to the relation between the historicism of "heritage" and the ways of knowing, narrating, and living in personal and collective pasts that Hindu praxis engenders. How do these two frames intersect in the ways that subjects engage, interrogate, and reframe modernity and their own modernist subject-positions as citizens?

The Hindu Temple as Social Space

Hindu temples (kōvil) were and continue to be ubiquitous parts of southern India's built environment. Some seventy-five thousand temples are estimated to exist in Tamil Nadu, and, in Chennai, alone, temples may number in the thousands, ranging in size from small, open-air altars and sidewalk shrines (nātāippātai kōvil) to complexes extending over several city blocks. They are spaces of remunerative work, religiosity, expressive culture, sociality, and status production; they may be controlled by appointed committees, families, sub-sects, caste communities, or neighborhood groups. Temple wealth, acquired through donations of money, land, and valuables, and from rental income, can be considerable. Many have histories of close cultural, political, and economic ties with landowners, merchants, or regional dynasts, a pattern that extends to the present, with temples continuing to enjoy the patronage of businesspersons, industrialists, and elected officials.

As a consequence of their wealth and the competing interests among participants, temples have been flashpoints for conflict between managers, priests, tenants, and devotees. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, a steady stream of legal and political measures, principally concerning rights in decision making and resource allocation, has enrolled temples within debates on publicity, citizenship, and nationhood. State oversight of Hindu religious institutions had been sought originally to manage internal disagreements and to limit Brahman influence in temple affairs and resources. Over time, the pattern of state intervention shifted from conflict adjudication to more routinized forms of administration.
designed to anticipate and prevent conflict and to introduce reforms in the service of nationalism and modernization. The Hindu Religious Endowments Act of 1926 authorized the formation of a governmental agency whose members would be empowered to monitor (and, following later amendments, to redistribute) temple finances and organization. The Act, with some modifications, has remained in force ever since. With few exceptions, large temples in Tamil Nadu are now managed by the state government's Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, which oversees the collection and distribution of temple revenues, the appointment of managers, priests, and temple servants, the physical upkeep of the temples, and the scheduling of renovation rituals. At the national level, India's central government, while officially secular, has treated Hindu temples as icons of national memory and culture, sponsoring programs for preservation and restoration, and promoting them as destinations for domestic tourists.

The state effects that temples produce are mediated in their material spaces, in their governance, and in forms of everyday sociality that they engender. At the heart of these social and material processes are the deities, saints, or preceptors who reside within temples, embodied usually as stone figures known as mūrtti or mūlavar. Each temple bears the name of its presiding deity or deities and is a site for worship, which includes prayer, the offering of foodstuffs and valuables to the deity, and the redistribution of food offerings. These commonalities notwithstanding, temples differ in architectural and iconographic features, and in wealth and popularity. Large complexes, like Tiruvanmiyur's Marundeswarar Temple, contain multiple shrines, dedicated to various gods, celestial bodies and saints, as well as assembly spaces, where recitations, musical performances, lectures, and devotional gatherings take place. They are enclosed by compound walls whose entry gates are framed by towering arches, kōpuram, on which characters and scenes from the Puranas are carved. Temple complexes also include tanks (kulam), stone-lined pools, fed by underground aquifers or wells. Like rivers and other water bodies, temple tanks are considered to have ritually purifying properties; devotees bathe in them, and they are centers for festival activities. Though many tanks in urban areas have become desiccated, they were integrated originally within the regional water storage and circulation systems, encompassing rivers, human-made and natural lakes, and irrigation works, established under the imperial dynasties that controlled peninsular south Asia during the millennium prior to British colonization.

Lying in the shadows of the sometimes monumental temple complexes are thousands of small sidewalk shrines, Hindu and Christian. Usually found at intersections and near bus and rail stops, shrines exist as street furniture, freestanding structures that occupy the mediating spaces between the street and surrounding buildings. As land values have escalated, more shrines have cropped up as encroachments—illegal extensions of individual or corporate property—on footpaths, easements, and unoccupied government land. Sidewalk shrines are home to the same deities who, in more opulent garb, preside in larger, wealthier temple complexes. Most common is Ganapati (known also as Vinayaka or Ganesa), the “Lord of Beginnings” whose protection enables devotees to overcome
obstacles. He appears in endless variety, especially at intersections, where his presence is invoked as a hedge against the uncertainties represented, literally and figuratively, by crossroads. Ammans, such as Mariyamman, sometimes described as village goddesses and understood to be immanent within natural features of the landscape, particularly certain trees, are nearly as popular as Ganapati.19

In the past, large temples constituted the central places of urban settlements. Four mada (or mata) streets, oriented in each of the cardinal directions, enclosed the temple complex. Laid out along those streets were agraharam, residential blocks housing priests and temple servants.20 Open-air markets were often adjacent, as were offices and shops, which typically occupied the front portion of a residence. Agraharam houses represent one of southern India’s architectural vernaculars, the courtyard house; typical features include tinnaï (verandas), over which tile roofs extend, and central and rear courtyards.21 In those Chennai neighborhoods—Triplicane, Mylapore, and Tiruvanmiyur—that are located on the sites of precolonial temple towns, these settlement patterns remain discernable and examples of vernacular architecture still stand. Elsewhere, including in the city’s suburban extensions, a new wave of temple construction adapted to recent land use and growth patterns has come with the emergence of a more prosperous and sizable middle class.22

Creating Social Space

Any Hindu temple, as social space, is predicated on the embodied agency of the divine. Regardless of size, wealth, or popularity, temples are spaces where divine power is understood—and felt—as immanent. As material manifestations of the deity’s sovereignty, temples encapsulate the cosmos, itself. As Diana Eck has explained,

In building a temple, the universe in microcosm is reconstructed. The divine ground-plan is called a mandala, a geometric map of the cosmos. At its center is the sanctum, where the image [is] installed. Its eight directions are guarded by the cosmic regents. . . . Various planetary deities, world guardians, and gods are set in their appropriate quadrants. . . . The particular mandala of the Hindu temple is called the vāstu-purusa mandala . . . the cosmic “person,” from the sacrifice of whose giant body the entire universe was created. . . . The body, as an organic whole diverse in the function of its parts and limbs, is here the image appropriated for the cosmos . . . . The temple is the condensed image of the cosmos.23

Divine power—creative, destructive, sustaining—lies at the heart of the complex, always evolving network of relations that connect human and nonhuman actors. Humans as well as deities in their embodied forms are regarded as having capacities to experience and be transformed by the transactions of ritual. Those who visit, work, and worship in temples experience those spaces interactively, as successions of the visual, olfactory, gustatory, auditory, and tactile relations that connect deities, priests, and devotees. These transactions, at once, produce and are situated within the social space of the temple.

LeFebvre’s notion of social space provides an especially useful analytic entry into the temple life and helps to frame the temple’s publicity, understood
as the horizon formed by the temple's social organization of experience.\textsuperscript{24} Using LeFebvre's vocabulary, a temple can be said to exist as a "perceived," practiced space, as a "conceived" representation of space, and as a "lived" representational space, its meaning and significance filtered through language and cultural media.\textsuperscript{25} These three sets of terms, LeFebvre argued, denoted interpenetrating aspects of spatiality. As representations of space, temples offer schematic conceptions of cosmological wholes, for example, in the "ground plan" constituted by the mandala. More important, they are also iconic representational spaces. They may be treated by the state as embodiments of "Hindu culture," though for their communities of users, they are irritations of divine energy, manifestations of the sacred taking material form "of its own accord," a capacity denoted by the use of the Sanskritic term, \textit{swayambhu} (self-created).\textsuperscript{26} Tiruvanniyur's Marundeswarar Temple is renowned for the presence of such an icon. In its main shrine, Marundeswarar is embodied in the form of a \textit{swayambhu} lingam. Siva in the form of a stone phallus, whose white color is ascribed to the milk that Kamadhenu, the divine, wish-fulfilling cow, showered on it to nullify a curse. That lingam, along with more than a hundred others, is housed within the temple's \textit{mahāmantapam}, a stone canopy surrounding the shrine. The same space also contains images of the sixty-three Saivite saints, Ganapati, Muthukumaraswamy (also known as Kartikeya), and Nataraja. Another \textit{mantapam}, adorned by thirty-six carved stone pillars, holds the processional image of Siva, in the form of Tyagarajar.\textsuperscript{27} Other, smaller \textit{mantapams} contain shrines for Marundeswarar's consort, Tirupurasundari, Vijayaganapati (Victorious Ganapati), and Subramanyan (also known as Murukan).

Temples also exist as sensed or perceived spaces, that is, as ensembles of spatial practices associated both with temple building and ongoing use—processes that, in state-managed temples, are subject to regulation and oversight. A temple's construction is a deeply ritualized process. Hereditary builders, known as \textit{stapati}, understand the structure to be a materialization of divine agency to which they, through the application of divinely revealed principles of design and construction, have lent form.\textsuperscript{28} Such practices assure the community of believers that deity will live in the material name and form offered by the temple. A temple's ongoing sacrality depends as well on periodic reconsecration and renovation. The ideal interval for rituals of reconsecration—\textit{kumpapisēkam}—is twelve years, but in practice these events are less frequent given the demands that they make on resources and personnel. Re-consecrations, as well as other activities associated with construction and maintenance, are scrutinized and managed in Tamil Nadu by the HR & CE Administration Department. Marundeswarar's reconsecrations in 1995, and again in 2004, were indicative of the patronage that the state lavished on temples under both the first (1991–1996) and second (2001–2006) Chief Ministerships of J. Jayalalithaa.

Also relevant to the spatial practice of the temple is the complex meshing of rituals of worship with more mundane routines of work (physical maintenance, repair, and cleaning), financial transactions, and administration, all of which entail greater or lesser degrees of state surveillance. Specific observances may
mark transitions in the life cycles of temple deities and are performed at daily, lunar, seasonal, and annual intervals. Priests, singers, and other temple servants perform specific acts of worship that are directed to the deity in its embodied form; devotees may observe these rituals and participate by receiving shares of redistributed offerings, activities that require donations or the payment of specific fees, which are established and collected by the temple’s trustees and the HR & CE department. Devotees may also sponsor rituals or engage in personal worship, for example, by circumambulating shrines or engaging in private prayer.

The core transactions of temple ritual occur within its interior shrines. It is there that deities receive priests’ offerings of prayer, foods, and valuables, and that worshipers seek the deities’ darśan. Ritual also involves circumambulatory processions by both temple deities and devotees. At the Marundeswarar Temple, as at other Siva temples, major annual events take place during the Tamil month of Paṅkuni (mid-March to mid-April). Then, during a twelve-day festival, the deity Siva, manifested as Tyagarajar, is taken out in procession and performs his eighteen sacred dances. Ritualized spatial practices such as festivals and processions thus contribute as well to networks between temples and to the creation of streetscapes whose visual, spatial, and acoustic character is inflected by Hindu imagery and praxis. Finally, also within the realm of spatial practice, are activities ancillary to worship but crucial to temple life. These include commercial transactions of surrounding shops, many of which furnish goods essential for worship and occupy space that has been rented from the temple.

**Temples in and as Time**

Technologies of memory are critical in the making of temples as social spaces. Temples are necessarily made over time. More important, they materialize cosmological, political, and societal pasts and present meta-narratives on those pasts. Some temples are erected on sites associated with a deity’s earthly incarnation. Others are built to mark the spots at which deities’ images or other embodied representations have appeared, actions interpreted as the deity’s disclosure of her or his wish for a temple. Stories, oral and written, known as sthalapurana, recount temple origins. The site of the Marundeswarar Temple is said to be where Siva restored health to the sage, Agastya, and to the divine celestials, the Sun and Moon. Siva’s manifestation as a healer is alluded to in the name Marundeswarar, which translates as Lord of Medicine. Siva’s actions are recalled and commemorated by devotees’ worship of Marundeswarar and by the devotions of the Sun and Moon themselves, who are said to worship Marundeswarar each evening. And the garden of medicinal plants that the temple grounds once held formed a material mnemonic of Siva’s foundational gesture.

The temple has been dated to the Pallava period (ca. 575–900 CE), and references to the temple’s origin and opulence and to the piety of the village’s inhabitants are found in hymns composed during the seventh century by the saints, Tirunavukkarasar and Tirugnanaśambandar. Stone inscriptions on the temple grounds indicate its expansion and elaboration under Cola rule (950–1100 CE),
during which time regents' gifts as well as the temple's tax obligations were noted. Carvings on one of the columns in the temple recall the austerities performed by Valmiki, the poet-saint reputed to be the author of the Ramayana epic. In recognition of his devotion, the poet is said to have received a boon:  

darśan of Siva performing his cosmic dances, the same dances that are recalled and reenacted during the temple's annual Pañkuni month festival.

Origin stories, poems, hymns, and other representations offer foundational narratives for the aesthetic praxis of worship and for the social communities, the publics, that are engendered by, sustained through, and instantiated as the temple. They capture the simultaneity of the temple's materiality and its sociality: the connections among plants, persons, deity, foodstuffs, currency, jewelry, cloth, and other valued objects that are formed through acts of divine disclosure, human communication, worship, and labor. The stories affirm the embodied and aesthetic (that is, the sensory) qualities of Hindu worship and reveal the ways it is threaded with the construction of temple and its ongoing social functions. The architecture and spatial syntax of any temple, new or old, large or small, arises from ritualized interactions such as those described in their origin stories. Put differently, ongoing ritual praxis commemorates and reenacts a temple's origin.

Thus, whether taking the form of a multi-block complex or a tiny shrine at the base of a tree, temples are complex socio-spatial worlds, shaped by ongoing interactions among deities, temple servants, administrators, and worshipers, overseen and, to varying degrees, regulated and appropriated by the state. These are the relations by which a temple is made as a social space and its sacrality constituted and regenerated. These spatial practices operate simultaneously as the means by which priests and other temple servants earn their livings, by which donors build their reputations, by which devotees seek blessings, jobs, children, and health, and in which state and non-state actors monitor and regulate flows of labor, knowledge, and resources. Temples, in short, form the anchor and dynamic hub of a "public" that includes laborers, administrators, worshipers, and deities themselves—a horizon of experience predicated on, but not limited to, Hindu praxis and that, with the participatory possibilities now offered by the Internet, overcomes geographic distance through the digital mediation of image and sound.

How do the publics that arise in relational networks of worship and work and divine presence relate to the deliberative publics to whose interests the state is (theoretically) accountable? How do heritage discourses mediate competing and colluding claims? The next section turns to the conservation of the Marundeswarar Temple, launched in the late 1990s, and considers various interests that intersected in the discourses and practices associated with heritage.

Places for People

In 2000 the Marundeswarar Temple became the subject of a conservation plan authored by a local voluntary association, the Chennai chapter of INTACH, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage. Over the next four years, the
plan, in Power-Point format, was screened to local residents, business groups, state agencies, and fellow preservationists. Working with state agencies and other voluntary organizations, INTACH helped clean and restore sections of the temple. Additional maintenance and restoration projects were sponsored by the state, with the goal of promoting economic development and dispensing political patronage. Conservation was entwined with a productive nostalgia that unfolded in the shadow of, and in reaction to, Tiruvanmiyur’s own commercial growth coupled with the greater visibility of and receptivity to Hindu nationalism among Chennai’s residents.

**INTACH**

The first national organization dedicated to heritage preservation, INTACH was formed in 1984. Its founding came in the wake of a broader state-led effort to develop an infrastructure for preserving, exhibiting, and marketing the crafts and performance styles of India’s regions. It was an effort meant to promote a hegemonic national culture in the aftermath of the period of martial law known as the Emergency (1975–77) and to encourage greater production and consumption of cultural goods and services, domestically and abroad.

INTACH draws its membership from India’s English-speaking, cosmopolitan elites and was founded with close ties with the central government, at that point headed by the Congress Party under Rajiv Gandhi. It was administered by the central government’s Department of Culture and received an initial budget allocation of Rs.5 crores. With deregulation, INTACH lost most of its state funding and its chapters were decentralized. Local chapters now obtain funds from donations and occasional grants, seeking support from both domestic and international sources. The organization has also had an uneven alliance with Hindu nationalist interests, particularly during the period from 1998 to 2004, when a coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) controlled India’s parliament. A member of the Chennai chapter alluded to the difficulties posed by the presence of a “BJP man” at INTACH’s national headquarters. Although chapters operated independently and did not receive operating funds from the center, they stood to lose influence and political allies if they took an overtly critical stance toward the leadership’s nationalist orientation.

The group’s charge is to provide guidance on the ways that the conservation of both cultural and natural resources might be incorporated into urban and regional planning. In basic terms, this involves translating and implementing the notion of “heritage conservation” as defined in Europe and North America into terms compatible with Indian values and practices. As glossed by INTACH, “heritage” is not simply a generic reference to residues of the past but describes the conceptual and practical apparatus that define and organize these residues within historicist narratives. This apparatus encompasses techniques, spaces, and discursive regimes, including cataloging methods, photographic record keeping, museal architecture and practice, conservation techniques, and the ever expanding body of statutes and regulations by which the state manages its past.
The templates employed in managing and making pasts visible by INTACH are borrowed from the national trust models of heritage conservation used in Britain and North America. Although their roots lie in the colonial impulse to know, classify, and selectively conserve the remains of the subcontinent's pre-modern civilizations in the service of imperial rule, heritage templates are now sustained by English-mediated transnational flows of knowledge, funds, and technology, enabling their users to define and organize local pasts in ways that are legible to present-day global audiences of tourists, corporate investors, and development specialists. Thus, although INTACH uses Euro-Western protocols, such as listing and grading, and partners with international bodies such as UNESCO, it distinguishes its aims. INTACH’s 2004 Charter acknowledges that preservation involving minimal intervention and retention of patina has normative stature in the U.K. It maintains, however, that “India’s indigenous traditions idealise the opposite”—including the regeneration of that which decays, for example, by periodic rituals of temple renovation and reconsecration. The latter principles, they observed, mandate conservation of both architectural and “living” heritage (e.g., design and building techniques), as well as attention to the interdependence of natural and cultural resources.

With this charge, INTACH situates its operations and policies within the network of organizations, regulations, and conservation practices that have arisen since the 1980s, a matrix comprising legislative and administrative measures such as state-level Heritage Acts and municipal development control rules, as well as state agencies, committees, and commissions that work in conjunction with voluntary bodies. The group’s mission, however, is sufficiently broad that there are various competing interpretations about implementation, which I discuss later in the context of Marundeswarar project planning.

INTACH’s Chennai chapter, founded in 1984, had achieved limited success, given its small membership base and funds. The urban development of the 1990s, however, had sharpened local concern about the pace of change and the loss of the city’s historic character. Following its 1994 success in blocking the demolition of a nineteenth-century building in the city’s colonial core, the office of the Director-General of Police (DGP) (built originally as a Masonic Lodge in 1834), INTACH began to take a more proactive role in proposing conservation measures for other structures. The publicity gained from the DGP building action enhanced the group’s visibility. Its operations were covered by the city’s major daily newspapers, Tamil and English; several free, neighborhood weeklies also helped publicize INTACH’s goals. Buoyed by the public support it received, Chennai’s chapter was reorganized in 1996, with architects interested in conservation playing more prominent roles.

In a related development, INTACH and affiliates increasingly sought institutional presence as expert interlocutors in the field of heritage. Working as private sector consultants, they proposed not just the development of specific procedures for conservation, such as protocols for inventorying, listing, and grading heritage sites and determining materials specifications for conservation architecture, but
sought a role in decision making. For some, these activities dovetailed with commercial ventures. For example, one couple active in INTACH’s Chennai chapter had obtained contracts for designing heritage-themed hotels and resorts for private developers; others found work meeting the small but growing demand for neo-traditionalist design in residential architecture. Thus, while fanning popular tastes in traditional styles of architecture, INTACH also hoped to participate in the planning process by drafting state-level heritage acts that would lend statutory authority to conservation efforts and ensure INTACH’s ongoing participation in this arena. It sought to create a legally secured space for regular participation in decision making about heritage conservation, especially in the context of the formalization of the cityscape.

Spokespersons for INTACH often appropriated the normative language of civil society to frame their projects as “public-private partnerships” and themselves as “NGOs.” These goals were expressed not only in specific mission statements but also in their own emphasis on transparency and deliberative modes of decision making. These orientations were also evident in the civil society networks in which INTACH members participated and in the public challenges, both in the courts and on the streets, members have mounted against some state and market-led development projects. INTACH’s Pondicherry chapter carried out civil disobedience to protest the extension of East Coast Road without the mandated environmental impact assessment. Members of the Chennai chapter have formed alliances with consumer-action and government transparency advocates. In the early 1990s one of INTACH’s prominent members (Tara Murali) joined with environmentalists in successfully challenging the legality of a for-profit resort development scheme supported by the Tamil Nadu government and in which Chief Minister Jayalalithaa had invested personal funds.

With these actions, INTACH sought to call attention to corruption within Tamil Nadu’s Dravidianist ruling parties and to press for modes of decision making consistent with normative modern statecraft. Likewise, INTACH’s historicist approach to conservation was conceived in contrast to the styles of public memory, for example, the Marina memorials that the state’s ruling parties favored. INTACH members denigrated the latter as “myth” and regarded them as artifacts of the state’s not-yet-modern style of rule. For their part, state authorities have been quick to suggest that INTACH’s privileged membership was simply out of touch with the interests and sentiments of local people, who treat the memorials and monuments as popular spaces for leisure, education, and pilgrimage-style visitation.

In 1998 INTACH’s Chennai chapter unveiled a new initiative, “Places for People,” crafted to speak to popular concerns about the changing urban landscape and to enhance the group’s visibility as a civil society actor. The plan for conserving Marundeswarar was to be the centerpiece of this new initiative. “Places for People” represented INTACH’s desire to distance its work from that of colonial-era museums and conservation projects. It hoped to replace musealization with conservation of the actual, often ritualized, processes by which architectural
vernaculars and other culturally distinct components of the built environment were conceived, built, and renovated. INTACH, in other words, sought authenticity in the built environment through the preservation of what it identified as the traditional lifeways and social fabric associated with those spaces. At the same time “Places for People” was tied, inextricably, to a modernist vision of both the urban built environment and governance, particularly the attention to tradition that arises within modernist projects and discourses. The recuperation of tradition, in this instance reified in vernacular and historical architecture, was meant to engender ways of being and acting Indian that were compatible with consumerism, including tourism, and with the foundational categories and values of political modernity: citizenship, secularism, and democratic governance.47

INTACH’s modernist vision was evident not only in the ways that the group objectified “tradition” but also in their attention to gentrification. In an interview I conducted in 1999, one of INTACH’s convenors, “Venkatraman,” justified the new initiative by pointing to the many areas in the city that had become “backyards,” their original functions having been superseded by new structures elsewhere. He appealed explicitly to the “broken-window” theory of crime and disorder with the argument that further degradation would occur unless the sites were rehabilitated.48 As an example, he pointed to the Elphinstone Bridge, which spanned the Adyar River and had been closed to vehicular traffic and replaced by a new bridge, Thiru-Vi-Ka, erected to accommodate the increasingly heavy traffic flowing between the city’s core areas and the new industrial and residential developments of its southwestern quadrant. Upon its de-commissioning, Elphinstone Bridge became what Venkatraman likened to a “broken window”: squatters took occupancy, and graffiti and hoardings appeared. Unwilling to evict the squatters, the city left the site in disrepair, resulting in a blighted “backyard.”49 Such incidents, he observed, had occurred with greater frequency with the city’s expansion and its increasingly speculative real estate market. He opposed the demolition of these de-commissioned sites, hoping instead that they could be adapted for reuse. The bridge, he maintained, “could be made over into a pedestrian promenade, to watch birds, to stroll in the evening. What would it take to do it right now? We [INTACH] have even given them a plan to follow!” Conservation of this sort, he felt, both contributed in a positive way to gentrification and encouraged new ways of occupying and seeing the city that were compatible with modern citizenship.

INTACH’s formal activities, though conducted in an anticipatory mode (“planning” sessions, “proposals”), were material and discursive effects of INTACH’s intervention in heritage, particularly in their enactment of public/private institutional networks and their endorsement of modernist forms of cultural citizenship. Interactions such as the seminar on Places for People and the planning meetings for Marundeswarar’s conservation, described below, demonstrate how INTACH has sought to constitute its exteriority vis-à-vis the state, while crafting an institutional space within the state apparatus, as a regular participant in both rule making and policy implementation.
A Plan to Conserve Marundeswarar

The proposal for Marundeswarar’s conservation, drafted in 2000, was viewed by the group as a model for the Places for People initiative. Owned and administered by the state’s Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Administration Department, its elaborate interior and antiquity, coupled with the mounting threats posed by the pace of urbanization led to INTACH’s interest in its conservation. The group hoped to show that architectural history could be preserved in a way that accommodated the industrial and commercial growth ushered in by India’s neoliberal economic policies.

By 1999, when INTACH began to explore possibilities for the temple’s conservation, graffiti and poster advertisements covered the walls, its tanks were dry and filled with trash and sewage, and lean-tos and shop fronts abutted its exterior compound walls. The temple’s grounds, and thus its sacred geography, had been fragmented by a north-south thoroughfare, West Tank Road, which separated the temple’s core shrines from the larger of its two tanks. Another roadway, formed by Kuppam Beach Road and its extension, Sannadi Street, had isolated a mantapam at the southeast corner of the complex. Though the mantapam had been built (and continued to be used) as a stopping point along the temple procession route, vegetable sellers used it regularly as an open-air market site. Within the area bounded by the mada streets, there had been significant residential in-fill; few courtyard houses remained, and the mada street that once had formed the west boundary of temple grounds had been replaced by the East Coast Road.
The despoliation of the temple’s tanks, the loss of its garden and other greenery, and the fragmentation of its sacred geography were products of Tiruvanmiyur’s urbanization. Until the 1960s the area had been a sparsely populated agrarian village. With the development of industrial and power generation facilities to the south in the late 1970s, as well as Chennai’s own southward expansion, Tiruvanmiyur’s population grew to 47,269, according to the 1981 Census of India. Commercial and infrastructural development followed, and high-rise flat complexes were built to house a fast-growing middle-class population, as recorded, in 1995, by the Madras Municipal Development Authority. The 1990s brought new information technology and industrial campuses to Chennai’s southern and southwestern suburbs. Public transport services, including commuter rail, were extended and roadways widened to accommodate heavier automotive traffic. In 2006 both middle- and low-income flat complexes (built by the government in the late sixties) have been torn down to make way for luxury apartments. That growth strained the already inadequate sewage, storm drain, and transport systems; consequentially air and water pollution has increased, and the water table has dropped precipitously.

Following site visits by two members in late 1999 and early 2000, INTACH met to draft conservation and renovation measures. Members and invited consultants (engineers, architects, bureaucrats) participated in the meetings, which took place between February and May 2000. The final version of the proposal
took the form of a power-point slide show that was screened to residents, community groups, and representatives of those government agencies (the Public Works Department, the HR & CE Administration Department, and the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority) whose cooperation was sought for the plan's implementation. In this project, as in previous efforts, INTACH aimed to partner with state and municipal agencies; indeed, they hoped that their services as consultants to planning and public works bodies might be regularized. Despite friction stemming from the Tamil government authorities’ view that INTACH represented the concerns of a Westernized elite, INTACH hoped to tap into a shared developmentalist vision and to demonstrate that preservation could be compatible with gentrification. An illustration of this may be seen in an exchange I recorded during an INTACH seminar convened jointly with the regional planning authority to publicize the Places for People initiative.

S. Santhanam, a deputy planner in the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority, delivered a pessimistic appraisal of INTACH’s proposals, comparing them to European approaches: “It’s not in sync with local attitudes. We don’t go to parks like foreigners, we don’t have Saturdays and Sundays free, as they do. We don’t take walks for recreation, it’s not part of our concept of health. For leisure, we spend time with our families.” His comments elicited a sharp exchange among participants. “R. Jyoti,” a member of INTACH, broke in: “We don’t use our parks for recreation because of the condition they are in! Not because it is a foreign thing.” She added, “Don’t we have any self-esteem? Can’t we look to a better future? You look at it as a contradiction between development and conservation. We set up this forum to show that heritage is not in contradiction with economic development. It is part of the quality of life, it is a quality of life issue.”

Another CMDA planner, A. R. Doss, reacted impatiently to her comments. Referring to the memorials and monuments that the state’s ruling parties had commissioned since the late 1960s, he asserted: “Historical awareness is present, yet it is not recognized by elite organizations like yours!” In an effort to mediate what had become a tense stand-off, a representative from INTACH’s Hyderabad chapter encouraged those present to consider Hyderabad’s success in balancing development and conservation:

The Chief Minister took early morning walks from the time that he came into the office. Because people were aware that he would be seeing their streets close up, they tried to make the city cleaner. This has had the effect of improving people’s habits. There’s much less littering now. By educating people in this way, we garnered more support for heritage conservation measures, more compliance.

He alluded here to claims that are implicit in many INTACH proposals, including that prepared for Marundeswarar’s preservation. Heritage conservation as practiced by INTACH was predicated on new repertoires of practice for using public space and on styles of civic consciousness that were couched in the awareness that individual use and occupancy of public space derived from constitutionally established rights. The need, members argued, was for an approach to conservation that
could best be described as civic pedagogy, a reorientation of existing, commonsense notions about the use and value of public space. Such pedagogy, in combination with the state’s adoption of “heritage” as a warrant for development and planning, they suggested, would wean people away from the tastes for the “myth” that ruling parties promoted in place of history (e.g., as represented in the Marina memorials) and would beget the postures, attitudes, and consciousness of modern citizenship.

The plan for Marundeswarar's conservation embodied these sentiments and aims. The goal was to make it a public space, a space open and accessible to a range of users, which would accommodate Hindu spatial practice as well as evening strolls and morning power walks. INTACH encouraged ways of occupying and seeing that were informed as much by historicism as by consumerism. The plan’s core recommendations included repair of the temple tanks by cleaning and restoring their stone floors and walls. Members were less optimistic about restoration of water to the tanks, at least on a year-round basis. The well system that had once fed the tanks had gone dry, and engineers with whom they consulted were doubtful that it could be rehabilitated. Instead, they proposed to feed the tanks through storm drains laid on their north, east, and west sides, an ambitious goal that would require clearing and realigning the drainage channels. Such activities exceeded INTACH’s capabilities and necessitated the involvement of the Public Works Department, the Municipal Corporation and other agencies. Allying with other civic groups, INTACH also encouraged the adoption of residential water harvesting technologies, anticipating that this technology would also contribute to the sustainability of the recharging system.

INTACH’s conservation measures included recommendations for development control. The temple was conceived as the anchor of a heritage zone, whose spatial limits had been determined by mapping its festival procession routes. INTACH hoped to retain the locality’s vernacular character within that zone. As it was, the vernacular was in short supply, given the recent building boom. It was only near the temple's east-facing entry gate that a few vernacular structures, courtyard houses, remained, and they were used as residences or offices (Fig. 4.4). To the immediate south, east, and north of the temple were multi-storied flat complexes and commercial structures.

To retain what remained of the vernacular character of the area and to improve access to the temple, INTACH advised that the temple and environs be zoned as a mixed-use area, with the stipulation that natural assets be included as a defined use. Limits on paved coverage were proposed in order to facilitate groundwater recharging, as well as adaptive reuse of adjacent vernacular structures. INTACH members hoped to better delineate the temple grounds as sacred space with a plan for landscape design and restoration that included the reestablishment of an abandoned temple garden and the introduction of native species of trees to shade walkways and mark the boundaries of temple grounds. Other recommendations addressed problems related to encroachments and traffic. To reduce traffic congestion, allow for better access to the temple, and reintegrate its grounds, INTACH members proposed relocating the vegetable markets and shops
that abutted the temple along its north and east compound walls. Accompanying these measures, they recommended converting Sannadhi Street into a pedestrian walkway and rerouting the traffic flow along East Mada Street to the east side of the manṭapam.

The proposal, finally, offered broad guidelines for development control with its suggestion that planning guidelines be extrapolated from the traditional stock, its style and the patterns of mixed use that existed. To preserve the existing streetscape, height limits and the retention of existing floor area ratios were proposed. To accommodate the various uses and users that they hoped the restored temple would attract, INTACH urged that public, pay-for-use toilets be installed and that space for automobile parking be reserved. After drafting the proposal, INTACH held slide shows to publicize it. Members also prepared press releases that appeared in The Hindu, and in Madras Musings, a free English-language biweekly. The implementation of the proposal's recommendations was left to other voluntary groups and government agencies, and required the commitment of public monies as well as private donations.

As of this writing (2007), only some of the project's recommendations have been implemented. Efforts to clean and restore the tanks, pitched to capture environmentalist interests, followed in the path of previous initiatives in attracting the patronage of local notables and civic groups. By 2003 the tanks beds had been cleared of debris, their steps repaired, and old water inlets cleaned. With encouragement from INTACH and from municipal agencies, a community group called Puduvellam came forward to maintain the tank area, with the support of the Corporation and private donors. Together, these measures ensured that Marundeswarar's tanks would be able to hold water at least on a seasonal basis.54

Like gentrification measures elsewhere in the city, the plan rested on the elimination of the encroachments that abutted the temple. INTACH had advised relocation of these shops and offices, but, in what has become a ritualized civic spectacle, the city's Corporation demolished the encroachments along East and North Mada streets in an early morning operation in 2003. The city's goals, however, diverged from INTACH's—rather than restoring temple grounds and retaining vernacular character, the aim was to increase traffic capacity in a section of the city that was becoming an important node between the financial core and new industrial sites to the south and southwest.

The outcomes can also be taken as indexes of the relations between INTACH and the state in the broader context of the state's obligation to administer and maintain Hindu temples. INTACH's ability to garner support from local business and community groups stemmed, in part, from the perception, commonly voiced among temple servants, devotees, and local residents, that the state's management of the temple was flawed. Many problems were attributed to party politics, with some claiming that the state's attention waxed and waned depending on the party in power; many believed that the neglect was greater during periods of DMK rule.

As noted earlier, under one AIA-DMK government (1991–1996), the temple had been reconsecrated, its 1995 kumpapisēkam funded through the Temple
Maintenance Fund. In the late 1990s, however, the DMK government dismantled the fund and put further improvements on hold. In a conversation in early 2000, two of the five hereditary priests who served Marundeswarar complained to me about HR & CE “interference,” and one pointedly remarked that he refused any salary, taking only a share of the monies donated by devotees, because of his disdain for the “rules and regulations” that the agency imposed. Temple devotees maintained that managers and the Executive Officer were poorly remunerated at Marundeswarar in comparison with other large temples and attributed the temple’s rundown condition to their lackadaisical attitudes.

Not until 2001, when the AIA-DMK party (still headed by J. Jayalalithaa) regained control of the Legislative Assembly, did the temple begin to enjoy state patronage again. It was among the first group of sites selected, in 2003, to participate in a special program, “Annadhanam,” that combined meals distribution to poor children with religious education. That same year it was reconsecrated, less than a decade after the prior kumppapisekam. In 2004 temple trustees proudly announced their plans for commissioning a new golden festival chariot. And with the growth of the IT industry and the influx of Web-savvy residents, the temple became more visible on travel and tourism Web sites, such as Chennai Online and occasionally effusive Web blogs.

INTACH aimed to make the temple’s environs an appealing space for religious and nonreligious public gatherings and to make conservation and the nostalgia it invited a cornerstone of the area’s gentrification. To do this, INTACH took strategic advantage of both the existing dissatisfaction with HR & CE management prevalent among temple users and the temple’s shifting fortune as a beneficiary of the state’s largesse. From their perspective, the neglect of the HR & CE department was consistent with the preferences of ruling parties for mytho-history. Mindful of the agency’s uneven record of oversight, INTACH’s initial survey and plan were completed in 2000 without its participation, though renewed state interest in the temple after 2001 dovetailed with the group’s aims.

Central to the plan’s ultimate sustainability was the local involvement. This was sought by appealing both to the nostalgia of long-term residents and to the aesthetic sensibilities of newly arrived urban professionals. These objectives were conjoined in the notions that the temple could be marketed as civic space, which accommodated religious and nonreligious uses and whose social space was organized through practices of consumption and the rights, desires, and expectations that flowed from consumption. This meant entangling memory and consumption, and melding consumer citizenship with the identifying practices of Hinduism.

**Cultivating Local Tastes**

It was to the civic sense of these new locals—software engineers, financial services managers, real estate developers, and retailers—that the proposal was pitched. INTACH project leaders, most of whom resided outside Tiruvannmiyur, repeatedly called for residents’ participation. They hoped that residents might form voluntary associations for cleaning and maintaining temple tanks, harvesting rainwater,
and planting trees. On one occasion, co-convenor Venkatraman recommended that the proposal specifically encourage people on the mada streets to form welfare associations for residents in order to better deal with municipal agencies and ward councilors. Using the new lexicon of development, namely, globalization, he and others hoped that locals would recognize that they were “stakeholders” in the improvements.

This was not just civic boosterism. Threaded through their proposals and observations was a concern with the relations between citizenship and public space. They hoped that residents and visitors would come to see the temple as they themselves did—not only as a space of Hindu worship but also as an artifact of the region’s history, a space of performance and assembly, and an attractive tourist destination. They arrived at this only after discussion and debate, however. Despite shared social capital and cosmopolitan outlook, INTACH members were diverse in sectarian affiliation: some were Hindu by birth but characterized themselves as atheist or agnostic, others identified as devout Hindus, and still others were Christian or Muslim. Discussions during meetings reflected this diversity, echoing familiar modernist dilemmas concerning the relations between religiosity, citizenship, and public space. Did the value of the temple’s landscape lay solely in its ritual usage? Or should the complex serve as a non-exclusionary public space, available for evening walks, performances, political speeches, and rallies? What were the norms of behavior in this sort of public space? What subjects were constituted in and through this sort of publicity? Their own plural sectarian identities were a microcosm of the pluralism that they hoped temple conservation would anchor.

These themes surfaced repeatedly. Consider the following discussion about the adaptive reuse of the temple’s tanks during the summer months, a time when most went dry because of the region’s depressed water table. The discussion took place in February 2000, during one of the INTACH meetings I attended. Venkatraman began, “We should define the sorts of activities that the dry tanks could be sites for—otherwise they will be misused, they will be dumps. If some defined and valued activity takes place, then this will prevent misuse.” “Anjali,” an Anglo-Indian architect, recalled that there were some social service agencies near the temple. “Perhaps they could be brought in to participate in dry-period uses?” Venkatraman mused. “Maybe use the area for cultural festivals? You know, like open-air theatres.” “David,” a Malayali Christian, interjected: “Well, kids are playing cricket in them now!” “Jaya,” a devout Hindu, proposed, “We should suggest to the temple that they use the dry tank for [religious] discourses.” She paused and then chuckled softly, “Maybe if it had something to do with Tiruvalluvar?”—a joking reference to the then chief minister Karunanidhi’s lionization of the Tamil sage.

Friction emerged a few weeks later during a subsequent planning meeting after Anjali insisted: “The idea is to have a place that draws people for a variety of reasons, not only worship . . . [though] all activities should fit the temple function. . . . A better integration of spaces within the temple complex will lead to more temple-based usage.” Objecting, David observed: “If there is open space for public
activities, the first to exploit it will be politicians.” “True,” admitted Venkatraman, “but still it should be open, public, no matter which party wants to use it.” Jaya interjected: “I think that all activities should be consistent with the temple’s religious function.” After several more minutes of heated discussion, Venkatraman, who was chairing the meeting, offered a resolution: “These activities on the temple grounds, well, they really can be anything in which people can be involved—we just want to keep it open and accessible, not a dump, not a backyard.” Indicative of this flexibility and of the wider audience they hoped that the restored temple would attract, they agreed that public, pay-for-use toilets and a small parking lot were also essential features of the refurbished grounds.

The plan’s authors eventually settled on the idea that the temple’s grounds could fulfill a plurality of functions, from those associated with Hindu orthopraxy to those that were educational or simply recreational. Strategies for accommodating both religious and secular uses of the temple were offered; indeed, it was just such an amalgamation that defined both its modernity and its publicity. Notwithstanding their different assessments of the relative importance of secular versus religious uses of the space, the members hoped to make the temple part of a modern public realm. This included the expectation that embodied spatial practices accord with those observed in other spaces constitutive of modern publics. This matter touched on a more fundamental contradiction with which INTACH members grappled regularly. Despite their understandable disdain for the distanciating effects of musealization, INTACH members’ representation of the heritage value of temples endowed them with some of the same modernizing capacities attributed to spaces of the bourgeois public, such as museums, parks, theaters, and assembly halls. They hoped that refurbished temple complexes might offer opportunities to stroll, to acknowledge but not encroach upon others, to gain an appreciation of the surroundings and the cultural and historical knowledge encoded therein, and, finally, to learn that the rights to control public space lay with the citizenry.58

The methods by which INTACH intervened in public discussion and the effects the organization sought to bring about by conservation revealed that public space and citizenship were both bound, implicitly, by class sensibilities and structured by class difference.59 This surfaced in discussions about how to deal with those who currently occupied land along the perimeter of the temple grounds. Class difference here was expressed as a matter of taste and style, and the preferred style of habitation was that which conformed to sensibilities of urban elites, among whom upper-caste identity and class privilege were often conjoined. For example, meetings included lengthy and mostly unresolved discussions about the problems posed by persons who claimed these spaces for their livelihoods but lacked deeds, leases, or other official documentation of their rights to that property. These encroachments, as they are termed in English, are mostly small storefronts, temporary market sites, and offices used by local party operatives, businesses, and unions. They occupy lean-tos and, in some cases, more permanent structures that have been set against the temple’s exterior compound walls; some have electrical connections, and all pay rent to temple authorities or local “big men.”
These arrangements are not unusual in Indian cities. As Sudipta Kaviraj has observed, encroachment, as used by state actors and by propertied middle and upper classes, implies illegality. For the poor and working classes whose settlements and worksites are the most frequent targets of street-clearing campaigns, such occupation does not encroach on others' space but is a well-established way of claiming ground in the city, especially among migrants. In their understanding—that which is "public" is anything not privately owned—public is what they cannot be excluded from. The extent to which the urban poor and working classes have succeeded in holding space by encroaching has been because of the state's willingness, until recently, to allow occupancy as a right. Such rights, which are represented in land reform measures of the 1950s and 1960s, have increasingly conflicted with property rights (as owners seek demolition of encroachments on their property) and with middle- and upper-class norms pertaining to the use of public space. For urban elites, the meaning of "publicity" with respect to space derives from civic and educational discourses that reiterate nationalist pasts and the value of their representation as "history." That which is "public" is somehow tied to, or sacralized by, the nation-state and political modernity, and it is these associations with which conduct, habitation, and bodily comportment should conform.

INTACH's specific designation of Marundeswarar's temple grounds as a "public" space and its broader promotion of heritage are both contextualized by the latter usage of publicity, though it has been a source of conflict. Some members argued pointedly against demolition of encroachments: because they represented work sites, it was reasoned, encroachments were vital to the livelihood of the poor. Most, like bureaucrats and property owners, were not inclined to tolerate the encroachments but recognized that vested interests, including local politicians and party organizations, were represented among some of those "encroaching" on the temple grounds and were circumspect in their recommendations. The plan, in the end, represented a compromise position in favor of relocation rather than outright demolition. Despite INTACH's ostensible commitment to the principle of open-access, these (mainly) lower- and working-class users of the temple embodied a plebeian style of occupation at odds with INTACH's vision of the type of public that might take shape in and around the temple. The encroaching structures, besides violating property rights, constituted visual and temporal transgressions: they concealed the temple's distinctive profile and surfaces from the gaze of passersby, making it difficult to recognize the architectural differences between the old temple and its newer surroundings. In other words, encroachments diminished the temple's value as a marker and reminder of another time and space, a site of productive nostalgia, because without clear boundaries, the temple's value as an edifying anachronism—an island of "then" in a sea of "now"—was nil.

Also significant was that, in considering how commitments might be sought locally, INTACH focused on those whose presence was legally recognized, whose "rights" included those devolving from property ownership, and who were engaged, in some way, with temple-based praxis, whether as devotee or appreciative onlooker. They also speculated that old photographs of the area would pique local interest in
and support for their proposal. Said Jaya, during the above-mentioned February 2000 meeting: "We really need pictures of the street houses. People will relate to them, especially if they or their relatives lived in one." Those who lacked such grounds for remembrance — vendors, for example, who claimed space along temple perimeters to sell vegetables, bangles, plastic cups, or postcards — were not among the stakeholders whose interests INTACH hoped to invite. The plan, with its attention to tanks and processional routes as definitive features of temple geography, accommodated both the kind of miraculous excess that for orthoprax Hindus the temple embodied and the heritage appreciation that consumer-citizens have come to voice.

The View from the Street

Older residents of Tiruvanmiyur with whom I spoke had vivid memories of the area prior to its commercial growth in the 1970s. Their comments, even more than INTACH’s stated goals and activities, reveal the class-bound sense of publicity that attached to the temple and the porosity between religious and secular spatial practices that this publicity involved. They consistently recalled the temple’s rural environs and its geographic and psychological distance from the city. Some emphasized its loneliness and isolation; they welcomed the area’s modernization, which, rather than a threat to the temple’s condition, would bring more devotees.

"Yes, I remember it well," began Sarala, a middle-class Brahman woman in her late fifties. Though she had been brought up in Mylapore, she was familiar with Tiruvanmiyur and had considered purchasing a housing plot there in the 1970s. Since the early 1990s, she had lived in one of Tiruvanmiyur’s multistory flat complexes with her husband, son, and daughter-in-law. Speaking of the seventies, she remarked, "It was so isolated! How could you imagine living in such a place? It was all forest, all brush-covered. There were no conveniences — how could we have gone about day to day life? No electricity, no buses … so different from the way it is now." A seventy-nine-year-old man, Kannan, lived in a small hut near the temple’s east kōpuram from which he sold provisions for household rituals and various Ayurvedic preparations. He concurred with Sarala’s recollection of the area’s isolation: “I came to this place thirty-eight years ago. It was empty then, really scary. There were not many people. Now it’s different. Lots of buildings have come up. Then there were no buildings, just a few houses, a bus stop and this place [his house/shop].” The Muslim proprietor of a temple provisions shop abutting the tank’s east compound wall had arrived to the area more recently from Dindugal, a large town in the western part of Tamil Nadu. The shop that he operated had been in his family for twenty years, however. "Now, there’s more development, more ‘officers’ [Eng],” and he added, appreciatively, “it’s definitely come up.”

Others found deep satisfaction in remembering the village that Tiruvanmiyur had once been. For them, the village was a space of naturalized difference, a space in which caste and ethnic differences were constituted and preserved. Although they acknowledged that these differences existed as part of more enduring patterns of conflict or exploitation, they considered the political narrative incidental to the bigger story, in which caste was articulated with temple praxis forming a
sensory cartography of difference. Indeed, caste difference of the past, they suggested, was a matter of order and stability; it was the mitigation of difference in the present that yielded disorder and conflict.

A seventy-year-old Brahman man, “Muthuswamy,” who had been born in Tiruvanmiyur recalled: “We were eight miles from the city center, eight miles from Fort St. George. There was a sand-covered road and only bullock carts were plying. I had no fear, no feeling of isolation, only peace. From the Pallava times, it was like that, a village.” We were speaking in his third-floor flat, located a few blocks from the temple, and as he spoke he pointed out the window, contrasting the landscape of his past with the present layout: “It was all paddy to the south, from Valmiki Street to where the Jayanthi Theatre now stands. It was tattam tōttam, [a revenue garden] owned by the temple and rented to cultivators. North of the theater, toward Indira Nagar, there was a lake, now dry.” To the east, “it was dry, only gooseberries and cashews could be grown. So many snakes, too, in that cashew grove. My own father’s sister was bitten by a cobra in that place.” A rain-fed irrigation system watered the paddy, which he described with a Tamil proverb—“vāṇam pārttu pūmi” (“earth that looks to the sky for rain”). Pointing to nearby flats and businesses, he recalled the coconut and casuarina groves that once stood in those places. His family lived near the west tank, and he remembered the tanks as being full of water most of the year and surrounded on all sides by coconut trees.

Woven through Muthuswamy’s account of the area was a narrative of its social geography, articulated with sensual memories. He recalled that the streets were named after the castes that resided on them, and his descriptions of those places were imbued with the habits and materiality of their residents. “Valmiki Street had Etathurs, the mada streets were for the upper castes, the Brahmans and Vanniyars. Anna street was for the toddy-tappers.” He remembered only a few big landowners in the village, men named Babu Gurukal and Ramnathan Gurukal, both temple priests. He went on with his caste census: Another street, recalled for its cow sheds, had been home to a low-caste group of herders (Yadavs) who provided dairy products for the village and beyond. Inextricable from his account of that group’s socioeconomic and ritual status was his memory of the cows’ exquisitely flavored milk, and the yogurt and butter made from that milk. He recalled the proximity of another low-caste family, oil pressers, by remembering the sound of the bullock-operated mechanism and the earthy smell of the oil being released and pressed into cakes, commenting, “It was pure, not like now.”

Reiterating comments much like those I have heard from other Brahmans, this man voiced nostalgia for the “affection” that he felt had once existed between caste communities: “It was peaceful then—no fights, no tensions. Now,” he asserted, “there is no more affection, only mistrust.” He elaborated:

Then, “SCs” [Scheduled Castes] were not ill-treated. They voluntarily were respectful, they removed their footwear in our presence. SCs would walk only on the last step of the tank, kataci pati [farthest from the temple]. On West Tank Street where I lived, the SCs were not allowed to beat their drums. Even on buses, SCs would not sit when higher castes were present, now it is the opposite.
The story he told was one of harmonious difference, of a place inscribed by each person's knowledge of and attachment to her or his place. The past that he recalled was at odds with the norms of the liberal democratic statecraft that India's constitution mandates and that it seeks to establish with policies of positive discrimination. At the same time, essentialist differences and aestheticized hierarchies such as those that Muthu swamy described sustain and pervade the class-based distinctions of the modern capitalist order to which India is committed.

Other narratives marked the temple as a space remembered through Hindu praxis. When I asked one man, a retired businessman named "Vijay," about what he considered memorable or important about this temple, he began, like Muthu swamy, in a historicist vein, contrasting the landscapes of "then" and "now" to describe a past suffused by Brahmanic praxis and sensibilities. He recalled that Marundeswarar Garden Lane, now a residential street, covered the traces of what had once been a garden where flowers were cultivated for ritual use. An apartment block occupied a site that formerly housed a school, where Brahman boys had once assembled to chant the Vedas, sacred Hindu verses. He then shifted to a narrative about his devotion to the temple's deity, Marundeswarar, entwining the ontology of the deity's agentive power as a healer with the past of his own body. "I go daily to the temple. I had a slipped disc in my back and could not move or even sit. One doctor told me that I had to have an operation but I hesitated. Instead, I went to the temple, I put myself in the lord's care. Now it has been cured."

Vijay went on to praise the temple's festivals for their singularity; these he also recalled as embodied memories. It was, he said, the presence of another manifestation of the temple deity, Tyagarajar, that set this temple apart from others. During festivals, Tyagarajar is carried in a procession that circumambulates the temple complex. Unlike other processional deities, however, Tyagarajar is not tied to a platform but is secured only within an open bamboo frame. This is done because the deity manifests himself by dancing. As in other processions, devotees bear the deity figure, but this procession is especially demanding and unpredictable because of this deity's kinesthetic powers. Vijay recalled his own excitement when he himself had held that deity during the festival: "I was carrying him when, suddenly, he was there. I felt it, like a jolt, when he arrived." For Vijay, it was nothing less than the miraculous, that which exceeded nature, that made the place important.

For INTACH, the heritage that the temple embodied was of a piece with the heritage of the city's colonial core. Both spaces represented the cultural contours and genealogy of national community. Their preservation offered a kind of primer for enacting citizenship, from the implicit elements embodied in ways of inhabiting public space to explicit features, such as how to represent one's interests to government bureaucrats and how to conceptualize an interest in heritage as a matter of rights. These aims were not extricable from gentrification. What conservation and historicism did was invite a nostalgia, at least for some, for the lifeways of the
village in which everyone knew his or her place. This was a nostalgia that concealed the structural violence of gentrification by overlaying the space it produces with the veneer of tradition, making it part of the public of the nation and its past.

The public quality that was both the warrant for INTACH’s involvement and the result of conservation was understood also in terms of the accommodation (and blurring) of both religious and secular meanings and uses. Thus miraculous excess was accommodated by the conservation plan, which defined the boundaries of the temple grounds and thus the heritage zone on the basis of the procession route. The narrative space of the temple’s past was figured in individual stories such as Vijay’s and by collective stories that made up its sthalapurana. In an atmosphere in which strident Hindu nationalism was becoming normalized, INTACH members were groping for a way in which Hindu social space might be the touchstone for a pluralist public rather than the familial public of Hindutva or Dravidianism.

Religion in the Secular State

INTACH aimed to partner with the state in the management of those sites, including temples, that embodied heritage, but it was a complex and uneven partnership. The possibility of the Marundeswarar Temple being conceived as public in the way that INTACH proposed arose within a historical context shaped by more than a century of state management of Hindu institutions and practices. INTACH’s interests also conformed to the Indian state’s valorization of southern Indian temples as national icons. Against this backdrop, the proposal for Marundeswarar was envisioned as a secular endeavor, different from both the mythico-historicism of Hindutva, with its strident, violent tactics of reclaiming Hindu religious sites from Muslim and Christian “colonization,” and the mythico-historicism of Dravidianism, with its core of commemorative piety (see chapter 3). However, the kind of public space that INTACH members hoped to create by preserving Marundeswarar as a heritage site was delimited by Hindu visual and spatial praxis and by the exclusionary spatiality of gentrification with its inscription of both class and caste privilege. Also, the very possibility of carrying out the project was entangled with the Tamil state’s patronage of the temple. The same mythico-history and “corruption” that INTACH’s members disparaged were vital sources of visibility and support for the project. The following discussion historicizes INTACH’s project within postcolonial state formation, with special attention paid to those processes involving the development of a legal-bureaucratic apparatus for the regulation of Hindu religious institutions.

The ambiguities of the secular norms to which INTACH appealed characterize secularism’s career in postcolonial India, consistent with what Arvind Rajagopal has described as its variegated interpretation. In the electoral system, secularism amounted to the prohibition of religious language; in public institutions, it was invoked to justify fair and inclusive treatment of different religious groups; in the courts, it was interpreted as the grounds for protecting religious
sensibilities from various kinds of offenses. This ambiguity, he maintained, was strategic and served to mask the contradictions that arose from the state's intervention in religious organizations. He noted,

The Indian state saw its mission as a modernizing one, and was thus unavoidably committed to intervening in the affairs of religious communities even if only to eventually transcend the need for intervention. At the same time the presence of a Hindu majority and the legacy of violence against Muslims during the partition rendered the adjudication of minority religions a delicate matter... the precise meaning of secularism was thus too contentious at this point to be legislated upon, and remained as a political problem, if for a while a dormant one.

The doctrine of secularism embraced by the postcolonial Indian state was defined, as in other liberal democratic models, in accordance with principles of liberty, equality, and neutrality. Partha Chatterjee explained that, according to these principles, the practice of any religion is permitted within limits set by the basic rights that the state protects; nor does the state give preference to any particular religion or involve itself in religious affairs. In practice, however, these conditions have been rarely, if ever, met in any self-declared secular polity. Chatterjee elaborated on these observations in his comments about India's Constitution, which, he noted, acknowledged the liberty principle in asserting the "right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion" and granted "collective rights of religion" to denominations, allowing them to establish and administer their own educational institutions.

Those rights, however, were limited in practice by the state's own capacity to regulate financial, economic, and political activity associated with religious practice, to provide for social welfare, and to make Hindu religious institutions accessible to all caste communities. The codification of religiously based personal law and the state's administration of Hindu temples then followed upon the above qualifications of the liberty principle. The equality principle underlay the constitutional prohibition of discrimination on the basis of religion or caste (except in provisions for positive discrimination). The limits on this principle have emerged in state projects of Hindu reform, in legislation, and in religiously based personal laws. The third principle, separation, inhered in the prohibitions of an official state religion, of religious instruction in state schools, and of taxes to support particular religions. Nonetheless, the state has become increasingly involved in the support of Hinduism through its management and patronage of Hindu institutions and schools.

India's enactment of secularism, therefore, has been inseparable from the legal-bureaucratic apparatus that has been built to monitor, regulate, and administer Hindu religious institutions. While the meaning of secularism may have been left vague, the legal-bureaucratic regulation of religious institutions that had been established in the colonial era was quite specific. The retention of this apparatus was not simply to control the dangers of religious "excess" but also recognized the possibilities of vernacular modernity that religious identity and practice contained. It was following independence that the national state sought to draw back to itself the nationalist energies and affect that, earlier, had been mobilized against
the colonial state. In the 1950s and 1960s Hindu temples were identified as sites for the pedagogies and performances of postcolonial nationalism and the processes of state formation in which it was embedded. The 1961 Census included an enumeration of Hindu temples, one of a number of special projects undertaken “to highlight the social and cultural heritage of India.” The authors suggested that Hindu temples, particularly those of southern India, represented the cultural space of the nation and its past and, further, that they engendered attachments that informed citizenship and national belonging. “South India,” they wrote, “has been least affected by the series of invasions, which India witnessed because of its geographic isolation, and the Hindu culture has been preserved in its most pristine form in Madras State.”

The 1961 Census report, exemplifying the discourse of publicity that had long underwritten the state’s legal and political claims on Hindu temples, was one among several modalities by which the postcolonial state sought to reinvent the nation through, rather than against, the state. Temples, homes, and schools were deemed critical sites for nationalist pedagogies and performances. A series of committees were convened by the central government to survey these institutions and to recommend ways that they might better fulfill their role in nation building. Temples, even more than schools and homes, however, seemed redolent with tradition. In the new map of the nation, they were remade into artifacts of an Indian past but were shorn of unprogressive features. Pluralism and tolerance were foregrounded as the defining qualities of Hinduism, and it was treated as a fountainhead of indigenous nationalism. In state-sanctioned discourses, some differing little from those of militant Hindu nationalists of prior decades, Hinduism was treated less as sectarian identity and more as an ensemble of territorially bounded cultural traits. Hindu temples, represented as expressions of the inherent religiosity and assimilative character of Indian civilization, were described by the Hindu Religious Endowments Commission (HREC) as the foundation of the nation. By promoting their charitable as well as didactic and ritualistic functions, the authors of that report argued that it would be possible to “effect that integration of Indian endeavour and that sublimation of ideals which are of special significance to resurgent India.”

That same commission also reviewed existing forms of temple administration in all of India’s states and recommended appropriate modes of state oversight. Authors concurred with the census report in treating southern Indian temples as exemplars and proposed that the agencies developed in Madras State, as it was then known, be adopted elsewhere in independent India. The report’s authors justified their recommendations for more extensive state surveillance with the observation that temples were “public trusts in the sense that the public or a section thereof are [materially, psychologically, and spiritually] interested in and have the right to enforce their proper administration and management.”

Temples, as this brief discussion indicates, have figured prominently in post-colonial modernization efforts undertaken by both central and individual states’ governments. Although the officially secular state of the 1950s and 1960s could not go as far as promoting conversion to Hinduism, under the broader rubric
of consumption it encouraged other practices by which India’s Hindu and non-Hindu populations could be exposed to a Hindu national culture. Thus, in its report, the HREC urged that the government facilitate religious pilgrimage among Hindus, and that it promote Hindu temples as tourist destinations for the wider population. It advocated that India’s Archaeological Survey, another artifact of colonialism, be given a greater role in maintaining and publicizing the national heritage that temples were deemed to bear. Temples and associated ritual practices were not simply resources to be managed but have offered grounds for the cultivation and expression of citizenship and ethnicity in ways that employ while deferring sectarian identity.

Subtending the HREC’s recommendations were notions of the instrumentality of temple functions and, relatedly, of an instrumental rationality on the part of worshipers. These potentialities made temples and Hinduism itself susceptible to modernity. A passage from the HREC report described temples as “occult laboratories where certain physical acts of adoration, coupled with certain systematized prayers, psalms, mantras and musical invocations, can yield certain physical and psychological results as a matter of course.” The authors placed a culturally specific, rationalizing individual at the heart of Hindu practice, as spectator, beneficiary, and performer of ritual. Temples, like schools and worksites, were meant to be venues that relied upon and engendered a modern subject, a secular subject. Religion was thus re-imagined as a site of incipient modernity, as a glue that would bind nation and state through virtue and through the shared past that it made visible.

By the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence, Hindu spaces, practices, imagery, and discourses suffused a range of political projects, from Hindu nationalism to Dravidianist populism. The state’s reliance on Hinduism as nationalist glue created openings for the mobilization and normalization of Hindutva throughout India during the 1980s and 1990s. In southern India, this was hastened by the increasingly close relations between Tamil Nadu’s ruling parties and nationalist organizations, and by a resurgence of popular Hinduism, indexed by the popularity of epic tele-serials, increased temple building and renovation activities, and the growth of temple-based voluntary associations. Under Jayalalitha’s AIA-DMK government (1991–1996, 2001–2006), which enjoyed the broad support of Hindu nationalist organizations, legislation to ban conversions was introduced, public and private programs for temple building and renovation expanded, and a social welfare scheme launched that used temples as distribution points. The DMK party, which led the government between 1996 and 2001 and was reelected in 2006, has been less accommodating to nationalist interests but struck a formal alliance with the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which, between 1998 and 2004, led the ruling coalition at the center.

Temples throughout India had figured in Hindu nationalist efforts to mobilize popular support. Festival processions and pilgrimages, especially, were used to inscribe space as Hindu territory and thereby create a social horizon flooded by Hindu iconography and spatial practice. This has extended to Chennai, where, since the early 1980s, the annual Vinayaka Chathurthi festival and procession has
become an important staging ground. It was popularized in Maharashtra during the anticolonial struggle but has spread across India following its resurrection by Hindu nationalists and their sympathizers. Following its inception in the early 1980s, Chennai’s festival has been coordinated with similar events in other cities and towns in Tamil Nadu. As organized by the Hindu Munnani, a local affiliate of the RSS, the festival in Chennai continued for six to nine days, with a procession on the last day. During the days prior to the procession, images of Vinayaka (another name for Ganapati) were displayed and worshiped in public places, and on the final day of the festival the images installed around the city were carried in a procession to Marina Beach and immersed.

Not all appropriations of Hindu social space have been tailored to meet the aims of Hindu nationalism, however. Hindu-inflected political performance extends to the employment by central and state government authorities of the spatial logic and practices of temples in other contexts of political ceremony. Reflecting the hegemony of regionalist parties in Tamil Nadu since the late 1960s, temple architectural elements and design principles have been appropriated to assert Tamil ethnicity at some ceremonial and commemorative sites (see chapter 3). The practical vocabularies of worship are also part of the commemorative activity. Consider the DMK leader M. Karunanidhi’s memorialization of the early Tamil moralist and poet, Tiruvalluvar.

Tiruvalluvar authored the Tamil ethical tract, Tirukkural, and is said to have been born in what is now Chennai during the third century CE. In Chennai alone, Karunanidhi has commissioned several sites dedicated to Tiruvalluvar. The largest is a temple and a monumental assembly complex, the Valluvar Kottam, which uses architectural features and design principles ordinarily found in temples, including the incorporation of a massive temple car as a structural element. He also commissioned a huge statue of Tiruvalluvar in the waters off Kanyakumari, a town located at India’s southern tip, likening the figure to the U.S. Statue of Liberty in its scale and representational significance. During the unveiling ceremony in January 2000, Karunanidhi, a self-identified atheist, larded his speech with idioms alluding to the strategies of naming, seeing, and surrendering that permeate Hindu devotionalism:

I have prayed for this for twenty-five years. My dream is now fulfilled. . . . When I pressed the inaugurating button, I forgot myself. I am told over 300 nadeswarams were played at that moment. I never heard them. I was in another world. I spoke for forty-five minutes. I knew only from the paper the next day what I spoke of . . . I have meditated on Tiruvalluvar from childhood. I have ever remembered and stressed the genius in the philosophy, I built Valluvar Kottam for him, and I dedicated the day after Poitkal [a Tamil holiday marking the first rice harvest] to Tiruvalluvar. I displayed his poems on buses and in bus stations. I translated the 133 verses of his Tirukkural. For twenty-five years, I have waited, yearningly, for this installation.

Dravidianist ritual repertoire has also included the patronage of Hindu institutions and festivals. As already noted, J. Jayalalithaa, during her first term as chief
Minister (1991–96), initiated a temple maintenance project, launching it with a personal donation amounting to one month’s salary; the fund was reinstituted during her subsequent term. Contemporaneously, under the banner of its new “Citizens’ Charter,” the HR & CE department embraced an ambitious roster of temple maintenance, welfare, and renovation activities and has also made special efforts to incorporate temples within the spaces of statecraft by using them as welfare distribution sites. Under Jayalalithaa’s AIA-DMK government, temples’ precincts have been used as crèches for destitute children (Karunai Illam), old-age homes, dispensaries, and free meal delivery sites. The latter services are tied closely to Hindu praxis. Not only were children to be brought to temples to receive and consume weekly meals, but the meals were accompanied by religious education sessions. The program was initiated in 2003 at 63 temples, including Tiruvannamalai’s Marundeswarar Temple, and expanded shortly thereafter to 108—numbers that are both deemed auspicious within Hinduism—and the aim was to extend it to all the state’s temples.

Temples have been subjects of long-standing public debates about the domain of state authority and the nature of citizenship; indeed, over the past century, a public realm of Hindu imagery, activity, and sentiment has been produced under the sign of secular modernity, even while reworking the meanings of those terms. Hindu temples were stages on which colonial statecraft sought to redirect the communal attachments of its subjects. Temples have continued to be inscribed by the ambiguities of the postcolonial state’s secular commitments. Not only does the state use temples as platforms for representing national culture, but, no less than government offices, temples are sites on which the state is encountered and imagined through the intimate, everyday encounters by which individuals engage the collective pasts that undergird ethnicity, citizenship, and sectarian identity and the nation-state itself.

The political claims on the social space of Hindu temples, as well as the discourses and practices of state ceremony, besides defying categorical distinctions between political and religious realms, point to the plural pasts that are imagined and enacted in the making of Tamil and Indian modernities, modernities that encompass but are not contained by Hindu nationalism. In other words, even as they are put forward as modern, they solicit subjectivities, desire, and memories that rest uneasily, if at all, within the boundaries of modern. It is this uneven terrain on which new heritage discourses and activities arise. I argue that the state’s relation to Hindu temples should be understood as both seeking to contain sectarian threats (“communalism”) to the modern secular order and to appropriate popular attachments to Hinduism within the discursive practices of national belonging and citizenship, practices negotiated increasingly through consumption. Put another way, the development of an institutional apparatus for temple management indexes the genealogy, and the ambiguity, of secularism in India.
Such encounters, institutionalized through administrative structures, through the formation of combined pilgrimage and tourism circuits, and through the nationalization of Hindu iconography, shape the condition of possibility for INTACH’s conservationist attention to Hindu sites but also for Hindutva’s normalization.

Conclusion: Heritage and the Space of the Secular

Over the past three decades, heritage consciousness and memory discourses have become global concerns, fueling tourism and heritage industries as well as exclusivist ethnic and religious movements. In India, the organized heritage movement described in this chapter developed in tandem with a resurgence of Hindu nationalism. Despite their different sociopolitical agendas, both register alarm at the loss of spaces and practices that represent India’s past. The growth of religious nationalism, in particular, has meant that the ritual practices and social spaces of Hinduism have become matters of intense public scrutiny and contestation; these debates, in turn, have influenced the goals and methods of heritage conservation efforts. Centrally figuring in Hindu nationalist discourses are the histories of particular temples, which are narrated and visually represented to argue that, although “Hinduness” emanates from and suffuses the territory of the Indian nation-state, Muslim and Christian “others” have systematically sought to erase Hindus’ claims on these spaces.

In response to the bloody consequences of Hindu chauvinism and to the need for principled and unambiguous responses to it, liberal and left-wing intellectuals and activists have debated the value of religiously grounded political action and religiously informed designs for collective life. Although rightly alarmed by the implications and effects of nationalist mobilization, some critics of Hindutva have often appealed to an Orientalist dichotomy that pits superstitious and retrograde “traditions” against secular and rational “modernity.” In these secularist and implicitly historicist narratives, temples represent anachronistic holdovers of a premodern era.

I contend, however, that such analyses are limited insofar as they ignore the range of ways that modernity has been framed and encountered through religious practice and vocabularies, especially as religious sites and practices have been impacted, since at least the eighteenth century, by the transformations of colonialism and capitalism. More serious, dominant theories of modernization can be criticized for ignoring the plurality of ways of being in the world that exist contemporaneously, both now and in the past. In this light, it is crucial that critiques of Hindutva attend to the long history of mutual implication of state and religious institutions in southern Asia and to the heterogeneous, vernacular modernities that have been enacted in these spaces.

Though ostensibly concerned with architectural history and conservation, projects such as INTACH’s conservation plan for Marundeswarar are informed
by more than a century of debate about the publicity of religious space and action. Under the sign of heritage, temples have become stages, I argue, on which the relation between religious and secular norms and institutions in modern India are being revisited. Other debates on secularism, for example, liberal and leftist critiques of fundamentalism or neo-traditionalists' rejection of secular modernity, take as their point of departure the problem posed by the entry of religious subjects into a putatively secular arena. Even their different resolutions—embrace or rejection of the secular—are predicated on a notion of the secular as a space wholly disjunct from the space of religiosity.

By contrast, the new, consumer-friendly heritage discourses documented here imagine, interrogate, and debate the secular within the socio-spatial and pragmatic terrain of Hinduism, albeit a Hinduism that has been long entwined with statecraft. Current projects have roots in the colonial curatorial state's intervention in temple life, which involved conflict adjudication, administration, and financial oversight, and now exist alongside (and are enabled by) the bureaucratic control exerted by the postcolonial state. Even with the privatization of many state functions in the wake of structural adjustment, the state has not relinquished its role in temple administration. Indeed, Tamil Nadu's government patronage and surveillance of temples have grown as Dravidianist ruling parties struggle to maintain a populist profile. State programs dedicated to the "protection" of temples (physical maintenance and ritual activities) expanded, and temples were selected as sites for the delivery of welfare services. Heritage conservation groups work within this domain, and, in many cases, have sought to expand it, by institutionalizing public-private partnerships of the sort understood to index neoliberal reforms.

The representation of temples as embodiments of heritage therefore continues efforts initiated at mid-century to enroll temples in pedagogies of political modernity, which Dipesh Chakrabarty glossed as "the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise." Bringing political modernity into being were norms and institutions associated with citizenship, civil society, the public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, individuality, publicity and privacy, democracy and popular sovereignty, scientific rationality, and social justice—all entailing the "unavoidable and indispensable universal and secular vision of the human" that Chakrabarty attributed to the intellectual and theological traditions of Europe. The possibility of enacting secularism through heritage activities and ideas arises because of the historicism that subtends the secular and grounds its ontology and social spaces. Chakrabarty identified this convergence as a product of the "ontological assumptions entailed in secular conceptions of the political and the social." The first of these assumptions was that "the human exists in a frame of a single and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time"; the second was that "the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end 'social facts,' that the social somehow exists prior to them." Political modernity thus nurtures and depends on historicist discourses and their indexes of progress.

The case I have analyzed was a pedagogical project performed by, but designed to fashion, modern citizens, like the author of the article quoted in this chapter's
epigraph, by introducing a historicist orientation toward religion and thereby containing it within the projects of secularization. In both language choice and the specific lexicon employed, INTACH projects are allied with historicism. At the same time as it serves the ends of political modernity, however, heritage makes an appeal to memory, which in turn invites subjects to imagine and locate themselves in the past in ways that are incompatible or incommensurable with historicism. The technologies of memory associated with the conservation of temples arise from Hindu praxis and entertain the possibility of a “now” inhabited by gods, thereby re-sculpting the secularist presumptions of modernity. This is the conundrum—the everyday career of historicism within political modernity and its entanglements with memory—that this chapter has explored. The conservation plan for the Marundeswarar Temple amalgamated the spatial practice of Hindu ritual with that of modern citizenship and envisioned a hybrid representational space in which historicist values of heritage could be braided with the memory-work of Hindu praxis. This project and others like it are, along with Hindutva, the progeny of political modernity, albeit subscribing to different goals and aligned with different political positions.

Such developments belie the predictions of the secularization hypothesis, especially the expectation of the emergence of a neutral public sphere of which the modern state acts as executor, even as they invite consideration of the ways that temples are implicated within a secular imaginary. For besides demonstrating the conditions of possibility for majoritarian Hindu nationalism, this rudimentary genealogy of the secular shows that history of state intervention in temples has been less about the consignment of religiosity to a domain understood as “private” than about the creation of a “public” realm in which the diverse and competing claims of religious subjects (individual and collective) are accommodated and adjudicated. Rather than relegating India to the ranks of the incompletely modern or treating the conjunction of religion and publicity as a symptom of the malignant return of the premodern, it is more useful to consider the discourse on publicity around temples and their heritage as a particular unfolding of the secular imaginary, with its ragged edges and irresolvable contradictions.