

# Guardians of the Sacred Public

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The Devi is a fierce feminine energy whose shrines are found all across Bangalore



The Grama devate or devis are almost always female, and often have a protective male attendant



The Devi's colours are red (life) and yellow (healing) that point to her role as a divine guardian of the village

When Bengaluru became home nineteen years ago, I remember wandering around neighbourhoods and markets all the time, visiting every local festival and fair on weekends. On these walks, some alone and some with friends, I stumbled upon many invisible treasures that the city was built around or over. Starting in the 1980's with what was a cluster of *petes* (markets), *hallis* (villages) and cantonment settlements, Bengaluru started expanding into a technology and software hub and continues to grow. The city then saw high rises, illegal construction and haphazard urban planning to accommodate the thousands who were moving into the city in search of better opportunities. In the process, the visual markers of the city's history slowly became obscured, leaving very few traces of her earlier life.

The physical erasure of the city's memory happened slowly and deliberately over time. *Viragallu* (inscription stones) buried under construction rubble, sacred spaces and fort walls broken down to create tech parks, lakes reclaimed to build houses in the sky, centuries old trees and village *kattes* uprooted for road expansion, vibrant village *jatres* squeezed under poorly constructed flyovers, seasonal harvest fairs like the *Kadlekai Parishe* (groundnut fair) losing their audience. The emotional erasure however is far more subtle. But cities are made of people and for people. People from different social strata, celebrating different ways of life, religious, culinary and cultural practices, holding on to our place within this endless transition. Over the years Bangalore has shuffled between its urban and rural identity, the rural sometimes getting lost within the more visible and louder urban fabric; that the city prefers to be draped in now. Nowhere is this more evident than in the city's sacred spaces that blur the boundaries between the private and the public, the urban and the rural.

This work is a small part of a larger visual documentation of Bangalore's neighbourhoods, their people and cultural practices, forgotten architectural and geographical markers of the city's history. This work was started in 2009 as a way to forge a connection, to understand the city's personality and pulse and to seek a sense of belonging. Within the images I look for the meaning of some of the city's place-based practices.

The images in this essay document the *grama devate* (village deities) that reside within a warren of narrow lanes and cultural practices associated with them. Many of them are known to have been brought to the city by their migrant devotees, only to take up permanent residence in shrines and temples. These rural goddesses are revered as protectors of their communities, and as healers of various diseases like smallpox, plague and measles. They keep the believer safe from evil spirits.

As history-writer and city documentarian, Aliyeh Rizvi writes on her blog, "...*Mariamamma's healing powers are seen in her symbols-the colour yellow from turmeric and lemons, neem leaves that possess healing-antiseptic properties, 'cooling' curds, and peppercorns to ward off the evil eye, much like her sisters Gangammā and Mutyālamā.*" These then, are the divine protectoresses of the city.



Locals consider the Sri Yellamma Devi shrine located at a street corner in Aralepete, a site of powerful healing



Sri Patalamma Devi Temple is located in the heart of Kankanpalya, a long-gone village that now sits in the modern suburb of Jayanagar



The Goddess is also seen with the trident, a symbol of her feminine power and energy. The bowl in her hand positions her as a nourisher-nurturer



Peppercorn packets are often stashed at the entrance of a shrine and bought by devotees as an offering to the Goddess whose blessings are as powerful as her wrath



Sacred thread tied around trees as a mark of veneration



Devotees offer curds and other 'cooling' substances such as lemons, neem leaves and turmeric to the Goddess Bisilu-Mariamman who is placed at the entrance of Sri-Annamadevi's shrine in the Majestic area



Lemons are powerful votive offerings because they are considered to have properties that are essential to maintaining good health



The Grama *devate* and *devis* are solicited for the wellbeing of the home, happy marriages and healthy children



Devotees take home votive objects such as the thread and bangles as a mark of her protection



Symbolic offerings of salt, turmeric and vermillion at the entrance to the shrine



Traditionally, livestock and fowl were once offered as a gift to the Goddess to appease her or seek her blessings

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Several rural deities from neighbouring shrines in the Ulsoor area and beyond, are brought to the city to witness the divine nuptials between Lord Shiva as Someshwara and his consort Kamakshi, during the Ulsoor *Poo Pallakki* (flower palanquin) festival. They sit here juxtaposed against the Metro line as reminder that the rural will continue to find its own place in the urban