

Annapurna Garimella

Final Evaluation

This grant supports an art historian and her associate to research religious art and architecture in Bangalore. Situated within an enquiry into the politics of public space, the project will document, among other things, roadside architecture and religious icons that eclectically blend calendar art, modern and historical architectural styles and technological innovation. Design elements and aesthetic choices involved in the making of religious shrines of all denominations will be studied as well as their patterns of social patronage and use. The grant will defray travel expenses, photography, archival and library work, and pay for cartographic and translation services.

Annapurna Garimella's research into religious art and architecture in Bangalore challenges traditional notions of what are considered fit subjects of study for art and architectural history. According to Garimella, this discipline broadly concerns itself either with the classical or the folk. With reference to south India, the classical ends with the architecture of the Vijaynagara empire, while folk studies focus on the design of vernacular domestic buildings and artisanal practices and are often housed in anthropology departments. Modern architecture is rarely studied and when it is, the focus is generally on "spectacular instances of Modern and High Modern elite and/or state-sponsored architecture."

Very little research has been done, points out Garimella, on urban contexts where religion is the impetus for the construction of new buildings which "circulate and reify elements taken from 'popular' architecture, historic styles, calendar and cinema art, and modern architecture." Garimella's project lies at the intersection of classical, modern and folk. She also theorises a fourth category of architecture which she terms "urban ephemeral"—for those structures and spaces that are temporary.

A primary strength of the project is that, as evaluator Tapati Guha Thakurta pointed out, it is concerned both with aesthetics of the forms and designs of religious architecture as well as the social matrix of their patronage and use. The two are connected as (by way of an example) in the case of the Ramanjeneya temple in Bangalore inaugurated by the ex-M.P. Kengal Hanumanthaiya. Garimella shows how the architectural and sculptural forms of the temple invoke and represent older traditions (Hanuman supplicating to Rama) while creating the new theme of Rama embracing Anjaneya and, by extension his namesake Kengal Hanumanthaiya, thereby "creating a public display of love, devotion and acceptance of both the monkey god and the Congress politician."

One of the ambitions of the project has been to theorise urban religious architecture through the perspective of caste and gender. According to Garimella these

buildings occupy a contradictory status—“masculinized since they construct urban men’s authority but feminised since women are often priests and/or users who move through these spaces with great ease.” In a paper on Miracle Park—which is connected to St. Anthony’s Church in the small town of Thambushettyalya outside Bangalore—Garimella discusses the aesthetic choices governing the construction of the Park (which consists of fourteen miracle pavilions featuring St. Anthony). She goes on to explore the link between these aesthetic choices and issues of sex, gender and caste. The builders were aware that many visitors to the Park and targets of the Church’s evangelism would be Dalits so they sought to ensure that the central figure of St. Anthony does not resemble Ambedkar, taking pains to distinguish the “the materiality of a spiritual St. Anthony” from the “materiality of a political Ambedkar”. In their representation of miracles connected with women, the builders stated that they wanted to emphasise the feminine but not femininity—Garimella reads the former as representing the space of family, domesticity and middle-class morality. She notes that the builders “want morality to be primary, not questions of gender or sexual politics”. Yet despite the builders’ and church authority’s emphasis on a transcendental morality and the resistance to the Indianisation of Christianity, Garimella notices Dalit Christian women and visiting Hindus repeatedly offering puja, one example of how a site’s users can subvert the agenda its builders have.

Another significant area of interest for Garimella was how the location of these religious structures in a fast-growing city (and one where the ownership of land is often contested), results in many of them standing on disputed land and on illegally encroached public property such as sidewalks. Given their status as ‘urban ephemeral’, one immediate outcome of this interest was her keenness to document these sites. She noted that many religious institutions themselves take the question of documentation seriously and commission paintings and photographs to capture its history, partly because this can serve as evidence should the authorities face legal challenges.

By the end of the project, Garimella and her research associate had built up a database that included photographic and written documentation of close to a hundred religious structures; a collection of relevant books, journals, brochures and pamphlets; posters and calendars; and objects such as audio cassettes, votives, souvenirs, wall hangings and idols. They have also built up a substantial print media archive of about 10,000 articles from local English and Kannada newspapers as well as national newspapers and magazines. This archive is organised according to various categories including heads such as old and new religious buildings, archaeological and architectural politics, communal tensions, minority communities and tourism.

The entire archive is catalogued and housed at an organisation Garimella set up in Bangalore called Art, Resources & Teaching (A.R.T.) which “works in both formal and non-formal educational fora, and engages with artists, craftspeople, organizations and academics”. The archive is open for the public to use and she also plans to digitise all the images and place them in a wiki-style web archive on the A.R.T website.

Garimella also collaborated with a number of Bangalore institutions to start a lecture series that broadly dealt with the question of what kinds of new methodologies are

needed to rethink the project of art history given that the discipline is in a flux. The lecture series also sought to broaden the field to consider areas such as tourism and the connection between art history and visual literacy. Between 2000 and 2005 fourteen lectures were organised.

Garimella herself presented a number of papers connected with the research, and published an essay titled 'Miracles in the Park: The Design and Politics of a Contemporary Religious Space in Bangalore' in the volume *Towards a New Art History* edited by Shivaji Panikkar and Parul Dave (DK Publishers, New Delhi: 2003).

Garimella stated in her proposal that this project presents various challenges to her training as an art historian and this is borne out by her discussion in her final report. At the level of fieldwork, she had to grapple with the issue of how her (and the photographer Clare Arni's) presence and the class/caste/education/secular agenda implicit in their questions to their subjects impacted the way these subjects *performed* their worship. Garimella writes that, "The dilemmas concerning my desire for narrative without performance and their desire for performance as the site for creating narrative were never resolved during the project."

Theorising religious built environments and the lives of the objects and people who inhabited them also turned out to be an uphill task. Though she knew in advance that classical understandings of art/architectural history did not consider such buildings as worthy of study, she was surprised to find that progressive academics too were not interested in the material aspects of these sites, even while they were interested in what their use revealed about caste politics or how they were able to promote communal harmony through religion.

For Garimella the greatest advantage of the project was that it resulted in a "beneficial shift in perspective" for herself. She discovered that the frameworks that academic discourse has to offer are limited when it comes to understanding practices connected with religion and religious architecture. Academic, particularly social science discourse, says Garimella, can only relate religious structures to politically-correct interests such as anti-nationalism or Dalit resistance and argue that as long as such structures challenge hegemonic discourses, they serve an important political purpose. Garimella found it severely limiting that the Hegelian master-slave dynamic or the Foucauldian one of power and resistance are presupposed in every aspect of society. What she found particularly constricting was that these frameworks offer no way into the subjectivities of the users of these buildings. She writes in her report that, "When I saw people visiting and using shrines, it was hard to thematize into an academic analysis the fragility and tenderness of an awesome but simple existential need. Academic discourse (i.e. the followers and borrowers of Foucault, not Michel Foucault the philosopher) with all its intelligence and institutional apparatus, does not have the creative power of art or life to embrace the contradictory, even obscure realities that shape human behaviour."

The shift in perspective was one that led her to withdraw from academia to some extent and explore more public and at the same time more subjective spaces for thought,

writing, analysis and creativity. She sees her organisation A.R.T as detached from and yet engaged with both academic, market and popular art cultures. She has also set up Jackfruit Design and Art, seeking to return to her earlier training in design and art. As a result of the discoveries made during the course of this project, Garimella has come to see academic rigor as a means to refine art practice and writing, rather than an end in itself.

**Anjum Hasan**  
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