In the second half of the twentieth century, Tamilnadu (Tamil Nadu) in South India witnessed a proliferating growth in the production of feature films on the goddess Mariyamman. At least twelve Tamil films, produced between 1970 and 2003, contain the name of the goddess Mariyamman, the goddess of rain, fertility, and ammai (poxes and measles) in their title, and the narratives of these films are woven around the figure of the goddess. In addition, some other films have employed the affliction of ammai as an effective narrative device for articulating the social concerns that one encounters in a “modern” era.

For instance, I would like to draw attention to the following four films of the early 1970s and 1980s: Athi Parasakthi (“Primordial Sakthi”) (1971), Nattaiyil Muttu (“The Pearl in the Snail”) (1973), Vazhaiyadi Vazhai (“Generations”) (1972), and Samsaram atu Minsaram (“Family is a Live Wire”) (1986). When we bear in mind that a smallpox eradication campaign was advanced vigorously in the late sixties and early seventies, before India became smallpox-free in 1975,1 narrations of ammai in these films are worth investigating, because these films could provide an idea of the articulation of the “modern” in the cultural realm against the background of a “modern scientific project” in the form of smallpox vaccination, promoted by the Indian state and government.

One comes across “two senses of modernity,” elaborated by John Jervis. One is modernity as “project,” which entails “planning” and “purposive rationality.” Another is modernity as responsive, contemporary “experience” of a transforming world that is exposed to the “project.” As Jervis remarks, “we do not experience the world as project, even though the world we experience is...
fundamentally marked by project”. At the outset, I can say that the above films deploy the affliction of ammai and the sacred framework of such an affliction for foregrounding the changing dynamics of relationship between the British and the natives, or between the “upper” castes and the “lower” castes, or between woman and her in-laws in the public and private spheres of nation and home. This encourages me to situate the discourses of the goddess and ammai in the context of modernity as represented in these films. This chapter pays special attention to the reworking of the myths of Mariyamman and ammai in these four films to understand how modernity, defined in terms of the “experience” of a subject in a transforming world, is constituted in Tamil culture.

As for the relationship between the goddess Mariyamman and the disease of ammai, Tamils believe that the goddess Mariyamman is the one who is present in the body as ammai, who distributes ammai, and who cures them. Ammai, which is the Tamil term for poxes and measles, also means mother / the goddess. Convention decrees that a person afflicted with poxes be regarded with due respect and treated as the goddess herself. Normally, one does not resort to a physician seeking a cure for ammai; the family often takes a debt-vow (nerittikkadan) to the goddess so that the pearls of the goddess “descend” from the body soon. When an imminent cure is not in sight, a “traditional” healer/priest is sought for; he visits the house regularly, daily or on alternate days, and sings songs on the goddess, especially a lullaby to the goddess (Mariyamman Talattu), to please her and to enable her to cure the patient.

After this introduction, let us look at a few origin myths of ammai that were narrated to me by priests and devotees during my ethnographic field research in Tamilnadu. The goddess Mariyamman is very much present in these narratives as a key character.

The first myth, from Tiruverkadu near Chennai in north Tamilnadu, tells about Renuka, the wife of the sage Jamadagni. Renuka is a chaste woman—so chaste that she can make a pot out of wet sand on the banks of a river to bring water for her husband to perform his daily religious chores. One day, as Renuka is trying to take water from the river as usual, it so happens that a gandharva (one of those heavenly beings who are known for their proficiency in music) with thousand arms and thousand feet is flying in the sky, together with his wives. Renuka, upon seeing his reflection in the water, gets distracted for a moment and remarks, “What a handsome man!” Immediately she loses the power of chastity and the pot breaks. Her husband, who sees this in his mental vision, gets furious. He asks their sons to behead their mother for her impropriety. The first four sons refuse his command. He curses them and they turn into stones and trees. The fifth and last son