The priest sits carefully in a makeshift wooden seat attached to the very end of a fifty-foot pole, a tamarind tree with its bark and branches removed, rubbed golden yellow with turmeric (pasupu). On his lap, wrapped in silk, are three elongated pieces of wood. A fourth, slim and attached to a squareish rectangle, he clutches firmly in one fist. The pole swivels against its upright wooden fulcrum, itself set into a wheeled carriage. Dressed as a king, wearing a royal turban, the priest is tied into the seat with new saris. Self-contained, reserved, he is surrounded by police who shape the great crowds into a semblance of orderly flow. At the signal, as the crowds shout and pelt the priest/king with bananas, hundreds of thousands of them, the pole is raised high at a forty-five degree angle to its carriage. With its precariously dangling figure ensconced on his seat, the tree top reaches forward, into the sky, as the carriage begins its trundling journey down the packed, narrow thoroughfare toward the Kota, the Fort, the palace of the king, some hundreds of yards away. The tree is the goddess, Paiditalli, the Golden Lady, who some two and a half centuries earlier was the younger sister of Peda Vijaya Rama Raju, the king of Vizianagaram. As she carries the king aloft, Paiditalli begins the Sirimanu Jatra (‘Goddess Tree Movement’), the climactic event of some five months of ritual acts that, in our words, grow the kingdom of Vizianagaram (and its kingship). Before Indian Independence, Vizianagaram was a little kingdom in northeastern Andhra Pradesh, in the region called Southern Kalinga; the Sirimanu Jatra continues, perhaps because growing the kingdom was related intimately to the growth rhythms of cosmos, and cosmos continues.

Growing kingdom and kingship is our problematic: How is this done? What kind of cosmos potentiates the growing of kingdom? What are the implications of growing cosmic kingship for the little kingdom in this region of India? How does the growing of kingdom resonate with the growing of rice? With the growing of the Goddess? And, within all such questions, though we can touch on this theme only briefly in this essay,
what is the nature of the Telugu tie between sister and brother, one through which the male is himself shaped and formed by the female with whom he has an organic relationship? To grow a kingdom and its kingship quickly comes to imply growing a cosmos in all its complexities, with ‘growth’ not a metaphor for these dense connectivities but rather a continuous dynamic through which cosmos re-forms itself within itself as it proceeds through itself, spatially, temporally. Our immanent concern is to explore this cosmos through its Goddess, its ritual, and its history.

1. Prologue: Every King Needs a Goddess.

On the Curved and the Flat, Wilderness and Civilization

Every Andhra king needs a goddess, but not every Andhra goddess needs a king. Moreover, a king needs a goddess who is a sister to him, comforting, consoling, protecting, and saving him without asking questions, without setting conditions. The goddess who is (like) a sister to a king is a goddess to kingdom and kingship precisely because she is (like) a sister. Kingship needs nurturance; it needs to grow, organically, from depth into depth, from depth out of depth, like a field of rice. And like a rice field, kingdom and kingship need to be fed, watered, and protected from mishap, assault, and disease. Like rice, then, kingdom and kingship must find the rhythms of being planted, transplanted, grown, harvested. The goddess of kingship and kingdom, Paiditalli, grows these rhythms, and she herself grows into these rhythms as she grows them. Therefore she herself is grown or, more precisely, she grows herself together with the cosmos that is her kingdom. As the goddess grows, so does kingship. This too is the nature of the sister/brother tie—a linkage of deep organic affinities (unlike that between husband and wife, more a forced conjunction of opposites). This means that, whatever they do, sister and brother naturally activate, affect, and effect one another, as do goddess and king. The yearly growth of the Goddess is that of the self-organization, the autopoiesis, of her Vizianagaram cosmos.

We argue that in the little kingdom of Vizianagaram, kingdom and kingship are grown organically, like a crop of rice. Together with rice, kingdom and kingship grow into maturity—rice the sustenance for human beings, the others the organizers of sustenance, yet themselves sustenance for cosmos and goddess. Kingdom and kingship are grown during the annual growth cycle of rice, dependent on the great southwest monsoon of June–July. The monsoon rains that grow rice are brought by the Goddess,