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**Nine Poisons and a Broken Promise:  
Changing Narrative, Cultural Loss & the Commodification of the 'Navapashanam' Icon at  
Palani**

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Abstract

In the 1940's a narrative began to circulate that the icon in the Palani Murugan Temple had been crafted in ancient times by the Siddha alchemist Bhogar and that oblations poured over the icon were infused with healing properties. These offerings suddenly became a much desired commodity, inspiring a lucrative trade in them, along with an influx of new pilgrims to the site. To meet a growing demand, priests began to find ever news ways to make the body of the transmutative icon available to his devotees. They scraped his body and increased the number of daily abhishekas (oblations), until Murugan seemed to wither away under the hopeful gaze of his devotees. By the 1970s, concern about the viability of the icon under this onslaught began to spread among temple adminstators, devotees and government officials. Simultaenously, new narratives emerged of duplicate icons hidden away in a subterranean passage beneath the temple sanctum leading to an underground cave where Bhogar's body is believed to be interred. It was said that when this icon has worn away the deathless saint will cause a new "simulacratic" icon to rise up in its place. But the promised icons never appeared, even as it became evident that the weathered and worn icon of Dandhayudapani Murugan was no longer worshippable. The temple and its precious icon have been at the center of a host of legal disputes, which have added to the growing disenchantment and cultural loss that loomed behind the myth of the miraculaous alchemical icon of Bhogar. This paper explores the formation, dissemination, and impact of this modern siddha mythos at Palani. It examines the modalities of narrative change in the face of modernity, and nationalist attempts to transmute the narrative capital of a community, allowing it to sustain value in a technological age. But it also explores the reperussions of what happens when these modern myths of hope and promise fail and come to echo old mythic themes of Tamil cultural loss.