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メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 国立民族学博物館, National Museum of Ethnology 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード: 作成者: 田中, 雅一 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00003048

Why are Brahman Temple Priests Highest in the Caste Hierarchy?—A Case of Chidambaram Naṭarāja Temple, South India

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INDIA: A WORLD OF INTERDEPENDENCE

What is the distinguishing feature of Indian society? Researchers in various fields have been attempting to answer this question for many years. One such answer would have it that the distinguishing feature of Indian society is the caste system. Stated in simple terms, castes are ranked, hereditary occupational groups. What images, then, do we associate with this term “caste”? In order to preserve its status, each caste does its utmost to avoid contact with members of other castes; contact in any form whatsoever with members of a lower caste gives rise to impurity; marriage is permitted only among members of the same caste, and the partaking of meals too is in principle possible only together with members of the same caste; and severe punishment in the form of expulsion from the caste awaits those who do not observe the rules. These “premodern” class groups have, moreover, hindered the development of the capitalist system, which presupposes the free intercourse of people and things, and the root cause of the sluggishness of India’s economy lies in fact in the caste system. Such is probably our view of castes.

In a work entitled *Homo Hierarchicus* (Dumont 1980) and first published in 1966, however, the French social anthropologist Louis Dumont states that this view of castes is based on nothing more than the prejudices of Westerners and distorts the real situation.

Dumont poses the question of how caste members themselves conceptualize castes, and he inquires into the ideology of the caste system. According to Dumont, the underlying ideology of the caste system is represented by the twin concepts of purity and impurity.

It is by this means that people explain the ranking of castes. This means that if a certain caste has a high rank, this is because it is pure, while if it is of an inferior rank, this is because it is impure. Furthermore, in order to preserve their purity, those of a higher rank have a need for people of a lower rank in order to remove any impurity that they may contract. What comes to light, at least on an ideological plane, is not mutual exclusion but a complementarity or interdependent relation-

ship revolving around the concepts of purity and impurity.

If the ranking of castes is to be explained by means of the concepts of purity and impurity, does this mean, then, that the power ladder grounded in political and economic factors does not exist?

This is not the case, and Dumont recognizes that even in a caste society one cannot disregard factors such as political power and economic dominance. But it is not possible to comprehend caste society by such means, since the reason that the Brahman caste occupies the highest position in the caste hierarchy does not lie in its power or in the amount of land that it owns, but is to be sought in a religious cause, namely, its superior purity. In the words of Dumont, the ideology of purity and impurity "encompasses" political and economic factors.

According to Dumont, Indian society is a world of relationships. This is because castes are not exclusive groups, but are marked by interdependence, and this interdependence is ensured by a gravitation towards the "whole." Dumont writes as follows: "The caste isolates itself by submission to the whole, like an arm which does not wish to marry its cells to those of the stomach." (Dumont 1980: 41) In other words, castes too, which would appear to be discrete entities observing the principle of mutual nonintervention, isolate themselves for the very reason that they submit to the "whole." In their relations with the whole, the castes are not in a relationship of conflict and competition with one another, but in a relationship of interdependence. This means that upper castes and lower castes stand in a complementary relationship that presupposes a hierarchy.

By introducing the concept of the "whole," Dumont discovered between upper castes and lower castes, which would appear to be related to one another by mutual exclusion, a relationship of interdependence. Underlying this is a religious concept involving a hierarchy of purity and impurity. But a closer examination of Dumont's caste theory reveals a second relationship of interdependence that can also not be disregarded. This concerns the relationship, alluded to above, between religion on the one hand and politics and economics on the other. Dumont does state that on the whole the relationship between the two is that of one encompassing the other, but when explaining the concrete example of, for instance, the relationship between the "pure" Brahman caste and the dominant caste of landowners, who wield power, he does not employ the ideology of purity and impurity, but instead introduces the logic of *varṇa*, closely related to the class system of ancient Indian society. "*Varṇa*" refers to four classes, consisting of *brāhmaṇa* (priests), *kṣatriya* (kings and warriors), *vaiśya* (merchants, peasants, etc.), and *sūdra* (serfs). According to Dumont, the relationship between Brahmans and the dominant caste in contemporary India cannot be understood without taking into account the relationship between the *brāhmaṇa* and *kṣatriya* in ancient times. This was a relationship whereby, through their solidarity, these two classes ruled all else. The *brāhmaṇa* required the patronage of the *kṣatriya*, while in exercising his power the *kṣatriya* needed the religious sanction of the *brāhmaṇa*.

A similar relationship may also be found between Brahmans and the dominant

caste in the villages of present-day India. For example, members of the dominant caste eat meat, and yet they have precedence over vegetarian occupational castes like goldsmiths. The fact that a pure vegetarian should be of a lower status than people who are not vegetarian cannot be explained on the basis of the ideology of purity and impurity, and it becomes necessary to take into account the interdependent relationship presupposing a hierarchy of *brāhmaṇa* and *ksatriya* that is found in the *varṇa* system or, more generally speaking, the interdependent relationship obtaining between religion and power. The dominant caste comes to be closely associated with the Brahmans not through purity but on account of its power. Thus the two points in Dumont's caste theory that would seem to be especially important are the complementarity of upper castes, represented by the Brahmans, and lower castes and the complementarity existing between the Brahmans and the dominant caste.

Dumont has developed a similar discussion elsewhere on the subject of religion (Dumont 1960). He points out that although a complementary relationship exists in Hinduism between, for example, purity and impurity, spirit possession and priests (offerings), and male and female deities, this is absent in Brahmanism, the historical precursor of Hinduism. If one here looks upon Brahmanism as something close in nature to the religion of present-day Brahmans, this means that their religion is somewhat wanting in this complementarity. Dumont does, however, consider that it is not so much the Brahmans, but rather the renouncers, who live in a monistic self-contained world, and he regards the world of Brahmanism as having been inherited by these renouncers. The reason for this would appear to be related to the fact that, for Dumont, the Brahmans were indispensable to the development of his caste theory, for if the world of the Brahmans were regarded as being monistic and substantive, this would contradict his contention, referred to above, that caste society is a society of interdependent relationships centred on the Brahmans.

Since then, however, there has been a move towards reconsidering the complementary relationship that Dumont's caste theory presupposes. Broadly speaking, this may be divided into two trends. The first, focussing on lower castes, especially the Untouchables, attempts to consider what the caste system means for these lower castes (for example, Mencher 1974). The criticism made here is that, while professing to uphold a holistic perspective, Dumont is perhaps presenting nothing more than a theory of the caste system advantageous to the Brahmans, and his critics question whether people in the lower ranks of the caste system do also in fact regard the caste system in terms of an interdependent relationship based on the concepts of purity and impurity. The second trend, on the other hand, turns its attention to the upper end of the caste system and questions whether the Brahmans, who have been treated of as representative of the upper castes, do in fact fall into a network of relationships such as that delineated by Dumont. In the following section I wish to examine in particular this second current of criticism.

THE IMAGE OF THE IDEAL BRAHMAN: PRIEST OR RENOUNCER?

Dumont considers the Brahman to be above all a spiritually pure being who is typically a priest communing with the gods through ritual (Dumont 1980: 47). Priests are not, however, necessarily considered to be pure, and a further problem arises from the fact that their status is lower than that of other Brahmans. Those of superior status among the Brahmans are not the hired priests who perform rituals and depend upon gifts (*dāna*) and donations (*dakṣiṇā*), but the scholars who enjoy considerable social and economic independence. By going one step further, it has been argued that the Brahman ideal is not to stand at the pinnacle of a network of interdependent relationships, but rather to negate this complementarity and stand outside of it. The Brahman ideal is, in other words, to be found in the self-contained world that evolves when one has escaped both dependence upon impure castes and collusive relationships with those in power. In practical terms, this corresponds to the world inhabited by the renouncer, for by negating the world of purity and impurity the renouncer becomes free of both interdependence based on the ideology of purity and impurity and interdependence with secular power.

A scholar who has been developing from an early stage the argument that the Brahman ideal is that of the renouncer is the Dutch indologist Jan C. Heesterman (Heesterman 1964), and the issue to which he addresses himself has been further pursued and his arguments further developed by Jonathan Parry, who undertook a survey of Brahman priests in the holy city of Benares in north India. On the basis of material gathered in the course of fieldwork, he points out that the *dāna* received by priests when performing a rite is closely connected with their low status (Parry 1980). The priests at pilgrimage centres conduct services for ancestral spirits along the riverbanks, and among the *dāna* that they receive there are some that are ill-omened or inauspicious, embodying in particular the sins of the donor. It is the task of none other than the Brahman to guide the donor to salvation by accepting and "digesting" such *dāna*. This means that a function similar to that regarded by Dumont as the main function of the lower castes, namely, that of eliminating the impurity of the upper castes, is to be found also among the Brahman priests. If this should be the case, then the priests at pilgrimage centres are far removed from the pure world that constitutes the Brahman ideal. Yet they are forced to depend upon inauspicious *dāna* in order to make a living.

If the Brahman ideal is identified with renunciation, then these priests are divorced from the world of the renouncer. Parry considers that it is here that the key to explaining the low status of priests lies¹⁾.

Christopher Fuller too, basing himself on an analysis of the priests at Minaksi Temple in Madurai in south India, accepts the thesis that the status of Brahman priests is low (Fuller 1984). He points out that the erudition and saintliness of the renouncers is absent in Brahman priests, and he maintains that this is the reason used for explaining the low status of priests. Compared with north India, the character of *dāna* and their dependence on it are of a secondary nature. Common

to this and the foregoing discussions is the fact that, allowing for some differences in emphasis, they all draw attention to the cultural significance of *dana* and the idea of renunciation and attempt to understand the status of priests on the basis thereof ²⁾.

By way of contrast, Peter van der Veer (Van der Veer 1985, 1988, 1989) argues on the basis of a survey undertaken at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, renowned as the birthplace of Rama, that one should not make generalizations about present-day Brahmins from a perspective such as that of the world of renunciation, deriving as it does from classical literature, and that one must analyze the actual conditions of priests in various regions with reference to the political and economic context. Pointing out that the thinking of the priests is influenced more by economic values than by the cultural significance of *dāna*, van der Veer states that even if negative values are attributed to *dāna*, it is affirmed as long as it is a source of stability and enrichment for the priests' livelihood, and he concludes that the Brahman ideal is not world renunciation, with its premised religious connotations, but nothing more than economic independence (Van der Veer 1988: 263)³⁾.

Van der Veer's observation that the static stance that would discuss Brahmins, assuming as they do a diversity of forms both regionally and historically, from the viewpoint of priest or renouncer is itself open to question carries considerable conviction. It is, however, probably advisable to avoid simple economic reductionism. I regard the viewpoint of Fuller and others, namely, that Brahmins aspire to a self-contained world, as being still meaningful, even if the validity of linking this to the world of renunciation is open to question.

In the present study, bearing in mind the above discussions of Brahmins and their religion, I wish to suggest an approach to a different picture of Brahmins, so indispensable for an understanding of the world of Hinduism, by focussing on the Brahman priests at Naṭarāja Temple in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, in south India. First I shall sketch an outline of Naṭarāja Temple, and then I shall describe the priests who administer the temple and conduct the rituals, the Brahman functionaries other than the priests, and the people who work at the temple. Next I shall examine the main ritual activities, their management, and the economic background of the temple. Finally, after a comparison with other temple priests in Tamil society, I shall consider, with reference to the complementary relationships noted in this introductory section and regarded as distinctive of caste society, caste relationships revolving around purity and impurity, the Brahmins' relationships with their influential patrons, and their religious world.

It should be mentioned that the priests considered in the present study are, unlike other temple priests, regarded as enjoying a *relatively* high status among Brahmins. In other words, Dumont's schema of "Brahman = pure being = priest" does apply in this case.

Nevertheless I cannot uncritically adopt his standpoint, and it is necessary to start from the debate over the question of why Brahman priests are of low status if only in order to consider the character of the Brahman priest from a more flexible perspective.

NAṬARĀJA TEMPLE

Southern India is known as the land of temples, and between the tenth and thirteenth centuries many enormous temples were constructed. The form of Śiva enshrined at Chidambaram is properly known as 'Naṭarāja', meaning 'king of dance', or 'Sabhānāyaka' or 'Sabhāpati', both meaning 'lord of the assembly halls', with 'assembly hall' (*sabhā*) here referring to the five principal buildings of the temple. Hence the temple has come to be known as Naṭarāja Temple or Sabhānāyaka Temple⁴).

According to legend, the temple was founded when a prince called Singavarman, who lived around the sixth century, bathed here, thereby curing his skin disease. There are also records of saints who flourished in the seventh and eighth centuries having visited Naṭarāja Temple. It may thus be assumed that a temple, albeit of a small scale, had been erected by about the eighth century. The principal buildings extant today were built between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, and since then the buildings have been repeatedly renovated and further buildings continually added down to the present day.

As may be seen on the accompanying map (Fig. 1), Chidambaram is situated about 155 miles south of Madras, the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu, and the 1981 census gave its population as approximately 56,000. Chidambaram is renowned above all for the presence of Naṭarāja Temple. The temple more or less occupies the centre of the town and covers an area of about 40 acres (7 miles from east to west and 10 miles from north to south). Many buildings stand within its extensive grounds. Since the organization of the temple is closely connected with its architectural structure, I shall first describe the structure of the temple in some detail.

Starting from the outside, one finds that it is surrounded by four roads (*vīti*) running in the four cardinal directions. The buses from Madras enter the road on the north side from the northwest corner. Apart from the post office, this road is lined almost exclusively with ordinary houses, and the homes of lawyers and doctors are especially numerous. The homes of the priests and facilities for accommodation are to be found concentrated along the road on the east side, and during the pilgrimage season there are always many buses parked here. There are some priests' houses also along the road on the south side, but shops predominate here. The road on the west side is the main shopping centre in Chidambaram, and clothing stores dealing in saris, etc., and inns are especially numerous, while to the rear of this road there is a greengrocery market that is always bustling with activity.

There are four gates opening onto the temple grounds, and to reach these gates one must pass along small streets called *caṅṅiti* that link the four roads with the gates. Each of these streets leads to a small gateway and a gate-tower (*gopura*), which is peculiar to the temple architecture of southern India (see Fig. 2). The gates and portals represent the entrances through the two walls (which I shall call the outer and inner walls) surrounding the temple buildings. The two walls are separated by a distance of more than thirty feet. Except for the *caṅṅiti*

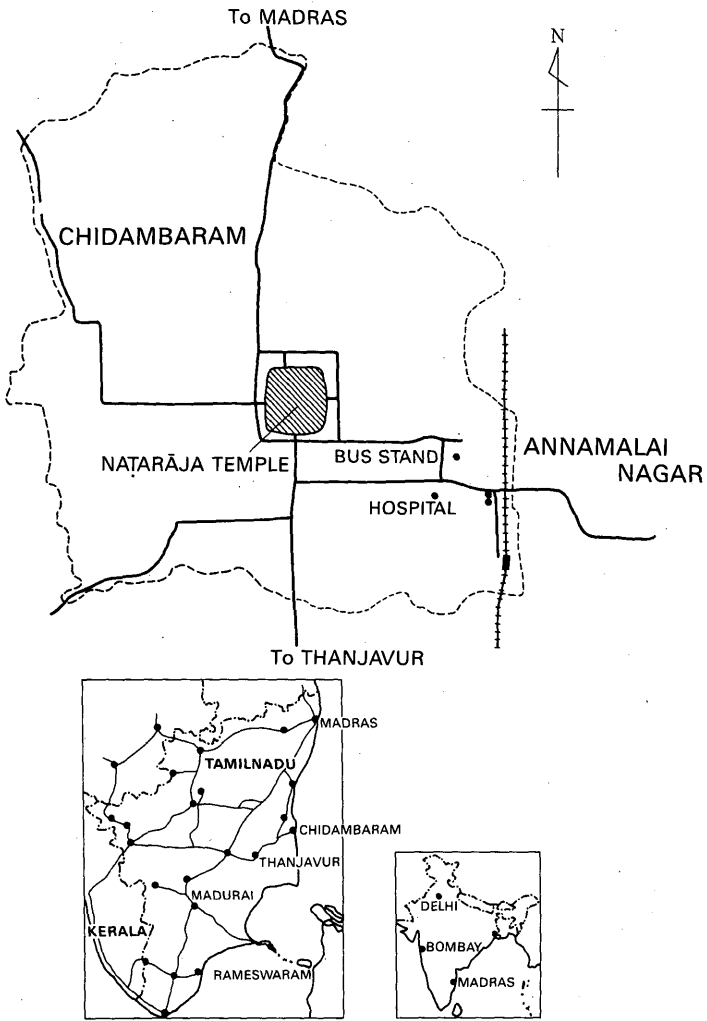
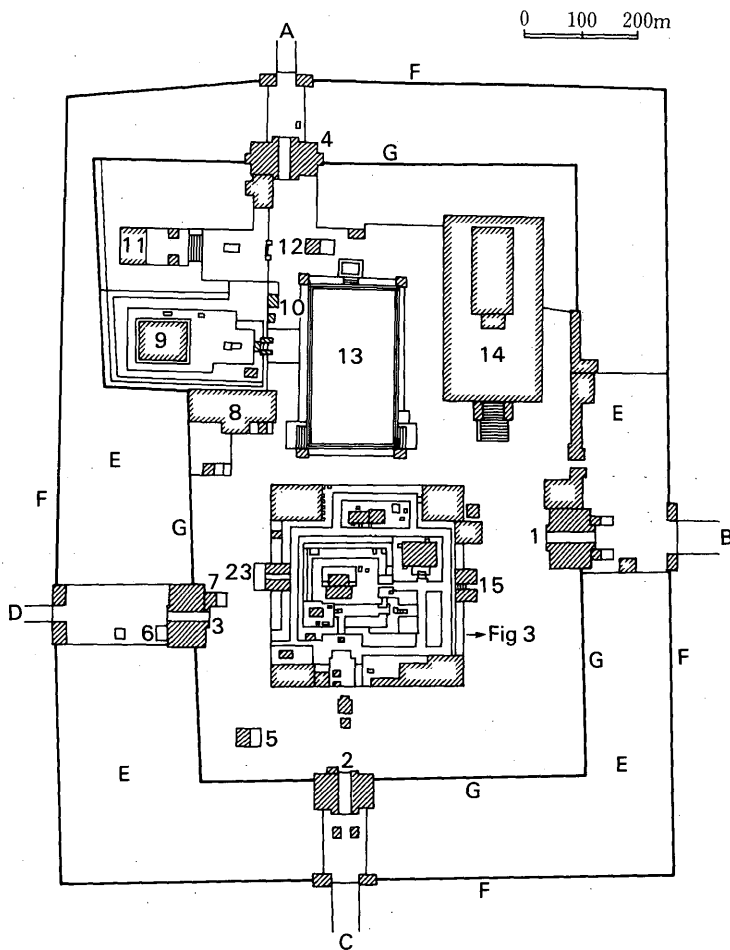
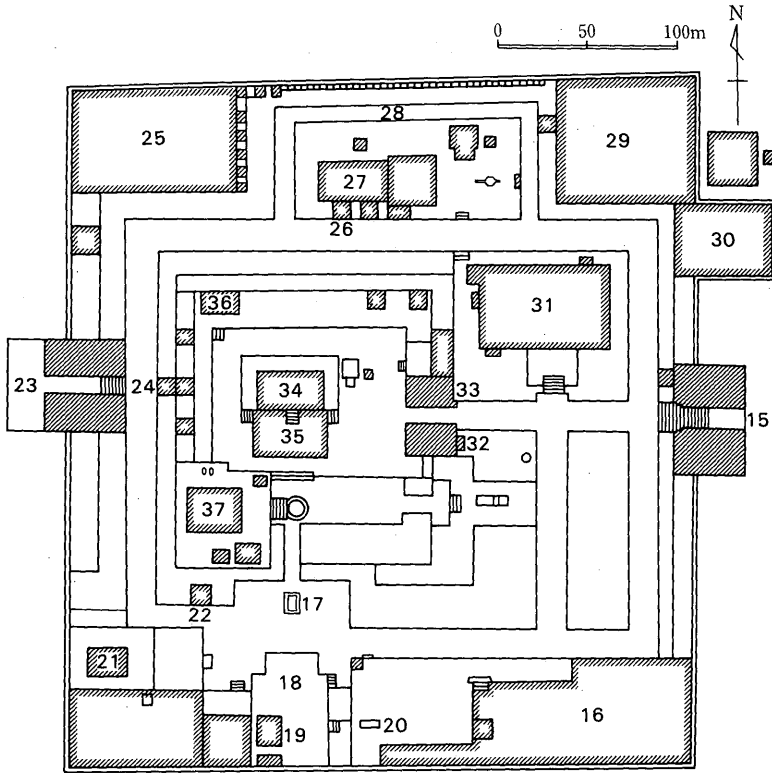


Fig. 1 Chidambaram



- | | |
|---|---|
| A. North Canniti | B. East Canniti |
| C. South Canniti | D. West Canniti |
| E. Orchards | F. Coconut palm gardens |
| G. Outer wall | H. Inner wall |
| 1. East Gopura | 10. Durgā temple |
| 2. South Gopura | 11. Pāṇḍya Nāyaka temple |
| 3. West Gopura | 12. Navaliṅga shrine |
| 4. North Gopura | 13. Śivagaṅga (tank) |
| 5. Mukkurūṇi Vināyaka temple | 14. Thousand-pillared hall
(Rājasabhā) |
| 6. Kalpaka Vināyaka temple | 15. East entrance |
| 7. Vira Subrahmaṇya temple | |
| 8. Hundred-pillared hall | |
| 9. Śivakāmasundari temple
(Jñānaśakti) | |

Fig. 2 Naṭarāja Temple (1)



- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 16. Kitchen | 27. Mūlasthāna |
| 17. Flagstaff | 28. Śiva's sages (Nāyanmars) |
| 18. Nṛttasabhā | 29. Kalyāṇamaṇḍapa |
| 19. Ūrttuva Tāṇḍavamūrti | 30. Yāgaśālā |
| 20. Stand selling <i>prasāda</i> | 31. Devasabhā |
| 21. Lakṣmī temple | 32. Māmpaḷa Vināyaka shrine |
| 22. Daṇḍāyudhapāṇi shrine | 33. Navagraha shrine |
| 23. West entrance | 34. Citsabhā (Naṭarāja, Kriyāśakti) |
| 24. Ākāśa Vināyaka shrine | 35. Kanakasabhā |
| 25. Vāhanamaṇḍapa | 36. Bedchamber (Bhogaśakti) |
| 26. Dakṣiṇāmūrti shrine | 37. Govindarāja temple |

Fig. 3 Naṭarāja Temple (2)

on the north side, the *cannitis* linking the main roads and the gateways are lined with small shops selling such things as offerings and booklets describing the history of the temple for pilgrims, general stores, and eating establishments. The gateways are built into the outer wall enclosing the temple on all four sides, and they have bells for announcing when a service or worship (*pūjā*) is to begin. It was noted earlier that the houses occupied by the priests are concentrated along the east road, and the rear of these houses facing the main road corresponds to the outer wall of the temple. Thus, although they have the appearance of row houses with a frontage of perhaps eighteen feet, the length of these houses, extending from the main road to the outer wall, is almost three hundred feet. The area between the outer and inner walls consists of gardens, and the flowers, coconuts and fruit necessary for the various temple rituals are cultivated here.

Between the outer wall and the *gopuras* there are enshrined a number of gods to whom pilgrims pay their respects. For details of the layout of the temple, reference should be made to Figures 2 and 3. Here I shall touch only on those parts of the temple that have a special bearing on my later discussion. The area enclosed by the *gopuras* represents the temple courtyard, and it is forbidden to wear shoes or sandals here. The courtyard is paved with stones, and there is considerable space between individual buildings and the walls. There are in all twenty temples, a thousand-pillared hall called Rājasabhā, and a hundred-pillared hall that is no longer used. There is also a huge man-made pond or tank 210 ft. long and 246 ft. wide in the northern sector. This is called Śivagāṅga, and it corresponds to the site of the pond in which the aforementioned king is said to have bathed. In the northwest corner are located a temple dedicated to Śiva's consort Śivakāmasundari and the Pāṇḍya Nāyaka temple, dedicated to Śiva's second son Murukaṅ (to be precise, the former of these two temples enshrines a manifestation of Śivakāmasundari known as Jñānaśakti). These temples contain a number of smaller shrines.

The central building complex encompassing the Citsabhā, which is dedicated to the main deity, has two entrances, one on the east side and the other on the west side. Upon descending a rather steep flight of steps, one comes to a corridor that encircles the interior of Naṭarāja Temple proper. Let us now follow this corridor from the east entrance in a clockwise direction. Turning right (towards the west) at the end of the corridor along the eastern side, we come to an enormous kitchen for preparing offerings on the left. Further along the corridor on the right-hand side there is a golden flagstaff that reaches up as far as the ceiling. From here it is possible to directly worship the main deity, Naṭarāja, enshrined in the Citsabhā. Opposite the flagstaff stands the Nṛttasabhā, said to have been the site of Śiva's dance, and it houses a shrine dedicated to Ūrttuva Tāṇḍavamūrti, a manifestation of Śiva with his right leg raised up to touch his ear. Nearby there is a stand selling sanctified offerings (*prasāda*). To the west of the Nṛttasabhā there is a temple for Lakṣmī, Viṣṇu's consort, and further along the corridor there is a shrine dedicated to the god Murukaṅ with the name Daṇḍāyudhapāṇi, the image of whom is carved

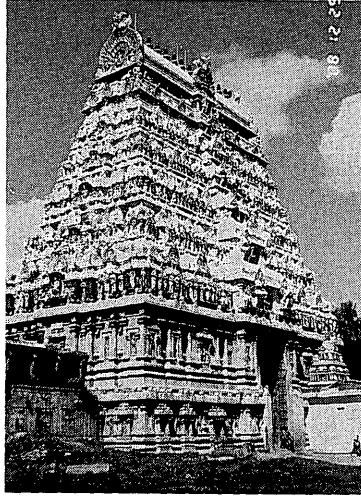


Plate 1 The West Gopura

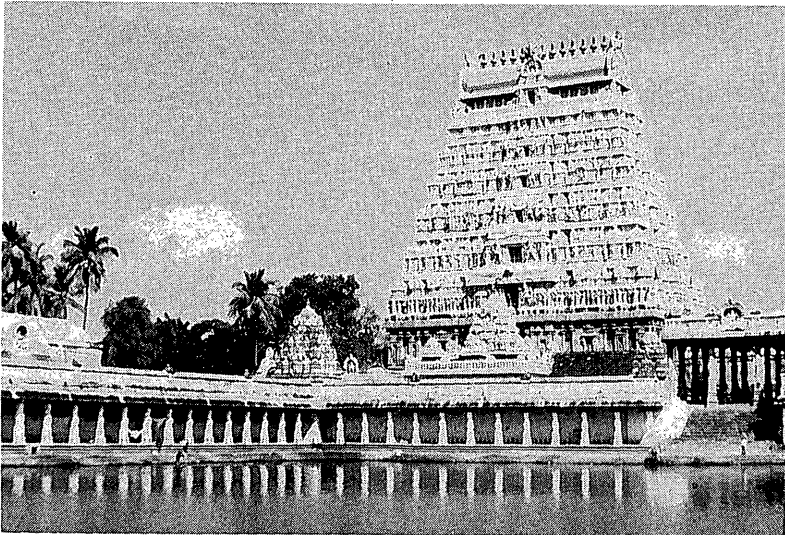


Plate 2 The Śivagaṅga and North Gopura

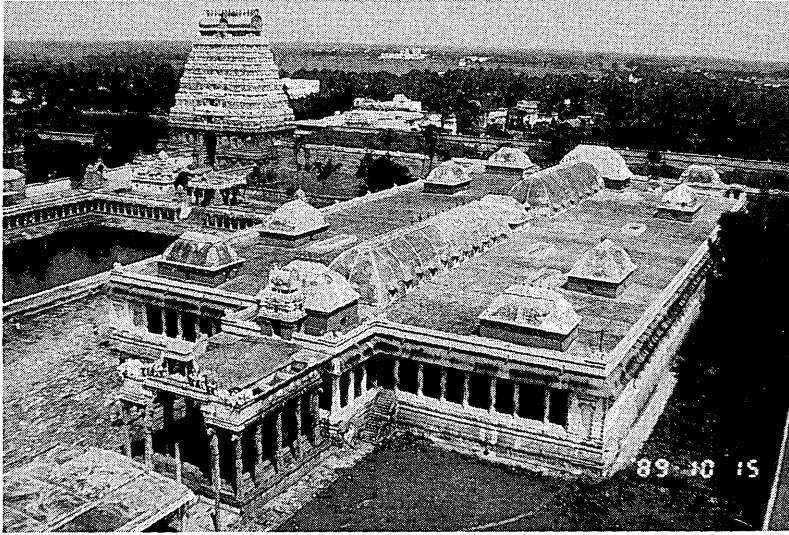


Plate 3 The Rājasabhā and North Gopura

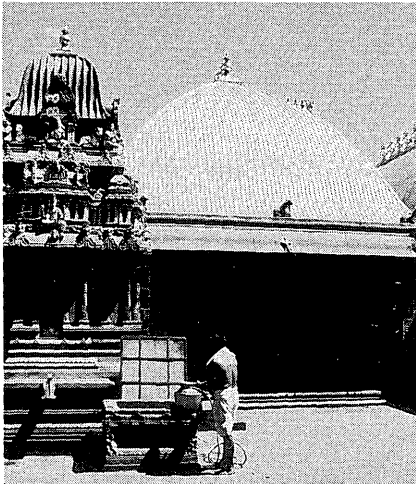


Plate 4

Plate 4 The Citsabhā and Kaṇakasabhā (east side)



Plate 5

Plate 5 A Dikshitar father and son



Plate 6 Dikshitar and a Cōliyā Brahman (right)

on a pillar.

Proceeding along the corridor, we turn right again, this time towards the north. About halfway along the corridor there is a flight of steps leading up to the west entrance, and directly opposite the steps stands a shrine for Śiva's eldest son, the elephant-headed Ākāśa Vināyaka.

Moving further north, we come to a room (Vāhanamaṇḍapa) in which are stored the vehicles (*vāhana*) that are used in festival processions. Here we turn eastwards and soon come to a number of small shrines on the left-hand side dedicated to the form of Śiva known as Dakṣiṇāmūrti and to other gods. We then come to the entrance of the Mūlasthāna, in which is enshrined a *linga* (Śiva's phallic symbol) called Mūlanādar. It is said to be the oldest building among the buildings of the Naṭarāja Temple complex and is built facing east; it is surrounded by images of Śiva's sixty-three sages (Nāyanmar) and various gods.

Returning now to the corridor, we come to a room (*yāgaśālā*) that is used for performing the fire ritual (*homa*) during festivals. We have now returned to the corridor from where we set off. Let us now proceed from the eastern entrance directly towards the Citsabhā.

Firstly, on the right-hand side there is the Devasabhā, which houses the festival images. Then to the left and right of the gateway leading to the central courtyard in which the Citsabhā is situated there are shrines dedicated to Māmpaḷa Vināyaka and Navagraha respectively. Upon passing through the gateway, we come to the Citsabhā itself, dedicated to Naṭarāja and his consort Śivakāmasundari, the latter in her manifestation of Kriyāśakti⁵, regarded as the source of the energy for Naṭarāja's dance. Next to the Citsabhā stands the Kanakasabhā, and these two buildings

are covered with a roof made of sheets of gold. By ascending the staircases on the east and west sides, worshippers are able to enter as far as the Kanakasabhā.

To the south of the Kanakasabhā there is a temple facing east and dedicated to Viṣṇu under the name of Govindarāja. The rituals of this temple and of the above-mentioned Lakṣmī temple are performed by Vaiṣṇava priests. It is extremely unusual for there to be temples dedicated to both Śiva and Viṣṇu within the same temple compound and, what is more, adjacent to one another. They are, moreover, administered and managed in complete independence of one another.

From the above brief account it will be evident that Naṭarāja Temple is a complex consisting of numerous temples and shrines, and there are in fact many more shrines other than those that I have mentioned here. The temple complex is said to consist of several circular "walkways." The innermost one is around the Naṭarāja and his consort in the Citsabhā. The second is the inner courtyard where the Citsabhā and Kanakasabhā stand. The third is the corridors in the main building. The fourth is the courtyard. The fifth corresponds to the gardens between the inner walls and the outer walls. The sixth is four streets.

THE PRIESTS OF NAṬARĀJA TEMPLE

The people who play the leading role at Naṭarāja Temple are the priests (*arcaka*), who are called Dikshitars (an Anglicized term of Dīkṣitar in Sanskrit, or Tīkṣitar in Tamil). They may be encountered in all parts of the temple complex. They wear a white robe gracefully fastened around the waist, leaving the upper half of the body uncovered, and they wear the sacred thread, characteristic of a Brahman, over the left shoulder and under the right arm. In their hands they may be carrying an aluminium vessel for leftover offerings (*prasāda*). Both sides of the head are shaven, while the hair on top of the head is left uncut. Because this tuft is in principle never cut, it may grow as much as three feet in length, and it is neatly twisted and knotted towards the front of the head on the right-hand side. It may be noted that although Brahmans elsewhere in Tamil Nadu similarly shave the sides of the head and leave the tuft to grow, they knot it at the back of the head.

In 1988 the Dikshitars constituted a small community of 196 households with a total population of 686. They administer the temple collectively, and the majority of them depend for their livelihood upon the emoluments gained from visitors to the temple.

Some may work at minor temples in and around Chidambaram. With some exceptions, they all live in Chidambaram. Regular employees outside the temple other than priests are less than thirty in number, mostly taking teaching or clerical work, but provided that they live in Chidambaram, they too work as priests at the Naṭarāja temple⁶.

They make frequent pilgrimages to far-off places, but they do not visit temples at which animal sacrifices are performed.

Traditionally there are said to have been 3,000 priests, but today there are 265 married men who qualify as priests. They claim to have the highest status among the inhabitants of Chidambaram, and they are also regarded as such by the other castes. The following legend has been preserved among the Dikshitaras.

Once an important ritual was to be performed at faraway Antarvedī, near Benares, and three thousand Dikshitaras were invited by the god Brahmā. They hesitated leaving Chidambaram, but finally decided to accept Brahmā's invitation. They then hastened back to Chidambaram so as to be in time for the temple rites, only to be thrown into great consternation when they discovered that one of their party was missing. A voice was then heard from heaven, informing them that the missing one was none other than Śiva. Śiva is therefore one of them, and the Dikshitaras all maintain that they have no leader because in their society all are equal and that Śiva himself is their leader.

As priests who participate in religious services, the Dikshitaras observe extremely strict rules relating to purity (*matī*) and impurity (*tīṭṭu, doṣa*). As regards meals, they are strict vegetarians and also avoid stimulants such as onions and garlic. They do not eat in the company of other people apart from high-ranking Brahmans, while marriage is possible only within their own group.

When there has been a birth or a death in the family, the period of impurity is in both cases ten days, but in the latter case the husband is unable to make private offerings (*arcanā*) for forty days and he must abstain from participating in public worship at the temple for one year. In the case of childbirth, the husband cannot perform *arcanā* for ten days, but he may participate in worship after forty days. A woman does not worship during pregnancy. The Dikshitaras pride themselves in their strict observance of these rules relating to purity and impurity.

Worthy of special mention is the Dikshitaras' control of women (*muraipatti*). Once a girl has reached maturity, it is regarded as undesirable for her to go anywhere other than along the streets where the houses of the Dikshitaras are located and inside the temple grounds. Furthermore, once a menstrual period begins, she must neither look at her husband nor speak to him. If they are already living together, she will return to her parents' home and spend three days in isolation in an earth-floored room. During this time she is the last member of the family to eat at meal times, while her husband is not allowed to perform any religious rites.

Until recently child marriage has been the norm among the Dikshitaras⁷⁾. Once a man marries, not only is he able to serve as priest, but he also has a say in the management of the temple. In addition, the practice of child marriage may also be considered to be closely connected to traditional Brahmanical values concerning the control of women. The Dikshitaras are divided into four patrilineal exogamous groups (*gotra*), and marriage takes place between members of these groups. There are no differences of status between the *gotras*. After marriage the girl is taken twice a month by her mother to the husband's house to participate in a religious ceremony (*sthālipāka*). During the ceremony she takes up a position behind the husband and touches his shoulder with some *darbha* grass. In this action one may

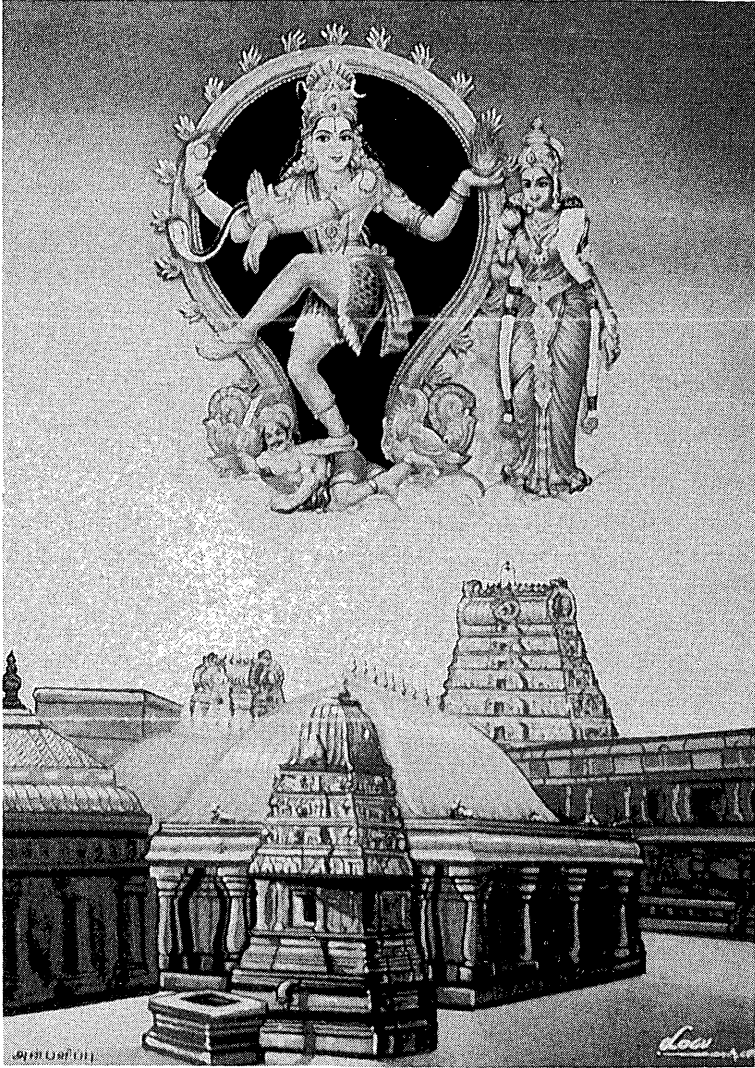


Fig. 4 Natarāja

clearly discern a relationship between husband and wife in which not only are they one, but the wife is subordinate to the husband. Prior to cohabitation the couple are not allowed to speak with one another. It is only after menstruation has started and cohabitation has been deemed practicable that the wife moves to the husband's house and the couple enters into married life. The wife must serve her husband, looking upon him as the equal of a god. If the husband should die, she is not allowed to remarry, even if this should happen prior to the commencement of cohabitation. Only men are permitted to marry again.

But since the marriage networks do not extend beyond Chidambaram, women do not feel particularly isolated even if they do go to live at their husband's home after marriage. The same may be said about the treatment of widows, and they would not appear to be leading a particularly miserable life. As was noted above, during the menstrual period the wife must always return to her parents' home, and when expecting a child she returns to the parental home in the eighth month of pregnancy and gives birth there. In addition the dowry, the question of which is frequently brought up in connection with the low status of women, is approximately a mere 2,000 rupees (approximately \$ 150.00 in 1988) and has not become a social problem. As for children, there does not appear to be any tendency to favour boys rather than girls. Women are not isolated as sources of impurity, nor are they regarded only as mothers; they are looked upon above all as playing a pivotal role as partner in the husband's religious life, and it may be said that it is for this reason that they are placed under strict control.

Characteristic not only of Dikshitaras but of Brahmans in general, scrupulous as they are about purity, are the strict control of women and the tendency for both men and women to have only a limited circle of acquaintances outside of their own caste. But as will be seen below, in their capacity as temple priests the Dikshitaras associate with people from almost all parts of India.

THE BRAHMANS OF NATARĀJA TEMPLE

The traditional occupations of Brahmans are those of priest and scholar, and there are in fact many different groups of Brahmans. When considering India as a whole, one finds that even the same Brahmans will form separate groups if they speak different languages, and even if they speak the same language, they will be subdivided into smaller regional groups. Moreover, the Brahman caste (*jāti*) living in a particular region is further divided into subcastes (called *pirivu* in Tamil). This type of subdivision is not, however, generally recognized by people other than Brahmans.

There have been reports of the Brahman caste in Tamil Nadu being divided into several groups, but there are considerable regional differences in their inter-relations, which make it difficult to generalize. But, as has often been noted, they are first broadly divided into two groups depending upon which god they worship.

That is to say, they are divided into the Brahmans of the Śaiva sect, worshipping Śiva, and those of the Vaiṣṇava sect, worshipping Viṣṇu. There is in principle no difference of rank between these two groups, each of which has a number of internal subdivisions. The Brahmans who have traditionally devoted themselves to learning enjoy the highest status, followed by a subcaste the traditional occupation of whose members has been that of serving as the priests who conduct rites of passage and domestic rites for other Brahmans, and they are followed by the Brahmans who have traditionally acted as priests at the rites of passage and domestic rites of castes other than that of the Brahmans. Below them are stationed the temple priests. This ranking is, of course, one based on traditional occupations, and today there are many Brahmans who are not engaged in these traditional occupations.

Fuller has given a detailed ethnographical description of temple priests typical of Tamil Nadu (Fuller 1984), but regrettably he has not considered in any great detail the other Brahmans with whom they come in contact. He mentions, for example, domestic priests who perform rites of passage for the temple priests, but one is left completely in the dark as to the nature of these family priests. With a view to filling the gaps in Fuller's account, I shall here consider the other Brahmans with whom the Dikshitar associate, although I wish it to be understood that I shall leave out of consideration those Brahmans with whom they do not come into direct contact⁸⁾.

The Brahmans who participate in the religious rites of the temple together with the Dikshitar are called Cōḷiyās. At one time there are said to have been as many as six of them, but at present there are three. They are related to one another, and their forebears have participated in the religious rites of the temple over successive generations. Their basic duty is to assist the Dikshitar by chanting mantras during the daily worship and the *homa* (fire sacrifice). As will be mentioned below, pilgrims to the temple will sometimes ask for special rites to be performed as tokens of gratitude to the gods. Representative of such rites is the *rudra-abhiṣeka*, in which water sacralized by mantras and *homa* is poured over the small crystal *līṅga* (*sphaṭika*) and the image of Ratnasabhāpati in the Citsabhā. On this occasion the Cōḷiyā Brahman will declare a vow (*saṅkalpa*) on behalf of the patron of the rite and put an amulet in the form of a ring of grass (*pavitra*) on the finger of the Dikshitar who actually performs the rite together with him.

In a certain sense the Cōḷiyā Brahmans are more knowledgeable about ritual procedure than the Dikshitar who actually perform the rituals, and they have a thorough knowledge of all the mantras. It is no exaggeration to say that no large ritual could proceed without them. For this reason they are referred to with deference as 'venerable master' (*vāṭṭiyār*) by the Dikshitar. At the same time they also serve as the domestic priests (*śāstri* or *purohita*) of the Dikshitar, performing their rites of passage, ranging from pregnancy and childbirth to marriage and death, as well as services for their ancestors. They are not allowed to become the domestic priests of other castes, and are permitted to perform only the rites for

blessing a new house (*grhapraveśa*) and for warding off misfortune (*śānti*). As for their own domestic rites, these are performed by other Cōḷiyās and not by other Brahmans.

The Cōḷiyā Brahmans would appear to be more learned than the Dikshitaras, and yet it is acknowledged by both Cōḷiyās and others that their status is lower than that of the Dikshitaras. The Cōḷiyās say that it is thanks to the authority granted them by the Dikshitaras that they are able to meet the famous politicians, artists and sages who visit Naṭarāja Temple, and they regard it as an honour (*mariyātai*) to be able to work at this temple. The Dikshitaras claim that it is because the Cōḷiyā Brahmans are unable to serve as temple priests that their status is lower than their own. The Cōḷiyā Brahmans' economic dependence on the Naṭarāja Temple may explain these statements. However, those who have no economic relation to the Naṭarāja Temple support the Dikshitaras' claim.

In addition to the Cōḷiyā Brahmans, there are also the Aiyar Brahmans, who recite Vedic mantras for the *pūjā*. Their number increases during the festivals. The Aiyar Brahmans sometimes participate in the domestic rites of the Dikshitaras. They do not actually perform the rites, and theirs is no more than a supporting role, chanting mantras and accepting offerings on behalf of the ancestral spirits. Some Aiyars (also known as Smārthas) do, however, fulfill the role of domestic priest for other Brahmans. Aiyars are the most numerous of the Śaiva Brahmans and are divided into a number of smaller groups of whom only the Vaṭamās are associated with Naṭarāja Temple.

The Vaṭamā Brahmans have many different functions, the first of which is that in their capacity as cooks (*paricārakar*) they prepare the daily offerings. There are in all six cooks working in the temple kitchen (*maṭappali*), and they take turns in preparing the offerings, three in the morning and three in the evening.

Vaṭamā Brahmans also fill the post of *tirumañjanam*, responsible for miscellaneous tasks such as carrying the water and other things necessary for the temple worship. There are two at the Citsabhā and at the Mūlasthāna, alternating with one another in the morning and evening, one at the Śivakāmasundari temple, and one at the Pāṇḍya Nāyaka temple. Although they are allowed to enter the Citsabhā, they are not permitted to touch any of the divine images.

There is another similar post called *tiruttaḷmurai*. This was originally filled by Vaṭamās, but it is now held by Dikshitaras. Their task is to clean and polish the lamps and other ritual utensils used during worship and to hand them to the priests during the worship. There are two of them, taking turns in the morning and in the evening, and they are in charge of the Citsabhā and Mūlasthāna.

Lastly, mention must be made of two Brahmans called Cavuṅṅi Brahmans. The Cavuṅṅi Brahmans are the lowest in rank among the Brahmans, and they are also looked upon as inauspicious figures. Their duties are related to death and evil spirits. When a Dikshitar dies, the Cavuṅṅi Brahmans carry the corpse to the cremation grounds, and on the eleventh day they receive a meal from the chief mourner. During the rites for blessing a new house, an ash-pumpkin is cut as a substitute for

an animal in order to propitiate the evil spirits, and it is the duty of the Cavuṅṭi Brahman to cut this ash-pumpkin. On the first day of a major festival or in cases when there has been a sudden occurrence of some sort of impurity within or near the temple, a long bundle of dried palm leaves is lit, and is dragged along the ground, again in order to placate the evil spirits (*Vāstu śānti*), and it is the Cavuṅṭi Brahman who drags this straw. Because such rites are connected with impurity, they are not conducted directly by Dikshitaras or Cōḷiyā Brahmans.

The Cavuṅṭi Brahmans do not necessarily constitute a hereditary group, and they themselves say that it is only because they are poor that they take on such dangerous and impure tasks. But because they do not observe in daily life the rules obligatory for Brahmans, they are impure, and they are not allowed to enter the homes of Dikshitaras or Cōḷiyā Brahmans. It may be noted that when Brahmans other than Dikshitaras die, the corpse is carried to the cremation grounds by members of the immediate family, while in the case of other castes Untouchables are sometimes called upon to do this.

At other temples there is no one fulfilling the role here discharged by the Cavuṅṭi Brahmans and, although inconceivable at Naṭarāja Temple, Cavuṅṭi Brahmans will sometimes even carry the festival image during a festival. It may therefore be said that in this region the Dikshitaras have a special need for this type of Brahman⁹.

In the above I have described the Brahmans associated with the Dikshitaras. Regardless of the existence of the Cōḷiyā Brahmans, who act as domestic priests and are well-versed in ritual and mantras, the position of the Dikshitaras in Chidambaram would seem to be quite secure. The high status of the Dikshitaras could be said to be guaranteed by their proximity to Śiva within the temple. But this alone is inadequate as an explanation, for, as will be discussed in detail below, the position of priests at other temples is not considered to be particularly high.

NON-BRAHMAN TEMPLE EMPLOYEES

In this section we shall turn our attention to people other than the Brahmans at Naṭarāja Temple. Firstly, there is a person known as the *potumanīṭaṅ*, who is closely involved with the management of the temple. He generally belongs to an upper vegetarian caste (the present incumbent is a Caiva Mutaliyār), but the position is not hereditary. Every morning and evening he lights the lamps in each temple, and when the priests hold their periodic meetings, he carries the lamp said to represent Śiva himself from the Citsabhā to the Devasabhā or Kalyāṇamaṇḍapa, where the meetings are held. He also checks the attendance of the priests when they rotate their duties every twenty days (*vaṭṭam*). The priests' roster system is described in the section below. He has in addition various miscellaneous duties.

In front of the Kanakasabhā there are two florists selling flowers to pilgrims.

One of them belongs to the Caiva Pillai, and it is his hereditary duty to offer flowers daily to the main deity. The second florist belongs to the low-ranking Vanniyaars, who are meat-eaters, and he has no obligations whatsoever.

At the temple a bell is rung every hour on the hour, the number of peals corresponding to the hour of the day. Two people are employed for this task, one of them being responsible for ringing the bell between noon and midnight and the other between midnight and noon, and they change over every twenty days. At present these two positions are filled by members of the Caiva Pillai and Caiva Mutaliyaar, both upper vegetarian castes. There are also bells above the four gateways to the temple, and these are struck to announce the times of the worship that are performed six times daily in the Citsabhā. They are struck by four watchmen. The temple has seven additional watchmen: one at each of the eastern and western entrances of the central building complex, two who patrol the extensive temple grounds (although at present there is only one), one at the Śivagaṅga, and two at the entrance to the Kanakasabhā. Other full-time employees of the temple include three charwomen, who keep the temple clean both inside and outside. The people filling the above positions do not belong to any particular castes, and they are continually changing. But they basically belong to the upper vegetarian castes, and they do not include any Untouchables.

The goldsmiths who repair the jewels adorning the divine images, the blacksmiths and carpenters who renovate the temple buildings, and the washermen who wash the cloths used to adorn the divine images are determined by heredity. The jars used in the temple are, however, purchased at shops.

Among the people who directly participate in the rituals, there are two chanters (*ōtuvāra*) who sing Tamil hymns (although at present there is only one), two drummers and one pipe player. The present chantor belongs to the vegetarian caste of Caiva Pillai, and he sings hymns daily after the first morning and first afternoon worship. He is not, however, employed by the temple but is dispatched by one of the patrons of the ritual, and the patron pays him directly for his services. The musicians belong to the vegetarian caste of musicians called Icai Vēlālar, and they perform during the rituals. They are also invited to perform on such occasions as a Dikshitar marriage ceremony.

Needless to say, many more people become involved with the temple when important festivals take place. These include the carpenters who assemble the festival floats, approximately eighty labourers (who do not include Untouchables) for carrying the divine images, and professionals who decorate the festival floats. The number of musicians and charwomen also increases on such occasions.

For these people working at the temple, the temple provides a common ground for establishing relationships. But they have scarcely any connections with one another and become involved with the temple only through a one-to-one relationship with the Dikshitar, the collective administrators of the temple. Hence this serves only to reinforce the ascendancy of the Dikshitar, and we do not find that there has been constructed any hierarchical order embracing all these employees.

Nor do wages vary in accordance with differences in caste status¹⁰. In this respect the temple cannot be likened to a place such as a village, in which to a certain degree caste ranking manifests itself in all its ramifications.

RITUALS AND FESTIVALS

In the temples of south India the most important activity is the performance of the daily worship (*pūjā*), which are held to pray for the development and peace of the world (or cosmos). At Naṭarāja Temple worship is conducted daily at fixed times at thirteen temples and shrines. At the Citsabhā six services are performed daily (three in the morning and three in the evening), while at the Śivakāmasundari temple, Pāṇḍya Nāyaka temple and Mūlasthāna there are four services daily (two in the morning and two in the evening)¹¹.

At the other ten temples with priests on duty there is one worship in the morning and one in the evening. The Devasabhā receives *ārati* for festival images at noon. After the final morning worship has been concluded, the doors to the Citsabhā and other temples and shrines are closed, and one cannot reenter them until 5.00 p.m. The same happens at night: after the conclusion of the final worship, the doors are closed until 6.00 a.m. the following morning. Only the bell ringer and priests remain inside. The doors of the *gopuras* are also closed at night. Let us now briefly review the services that take place in the Citsabhā, where the main deity is enshrined.

In the Citsabhā the day begins with the awakening of Naṭarāja. Every night Naṭarāja goes to his bedchamber (*paḷḷiyarai*), where he spends the night with his consort Bhogaśakti¹², a manifestation of Śivakāmasundari, and every morning he (or, to be exact, a pair of silver sandals, or *poṭukai*, symbolizing him) is returned to the Citsabhā. Shortly afterwards the first worship of the day is conducted by the priests on duty for that day. They receive Naṭarāja with ritual offerings of water, flowers and so forth, as well as offering him food (*naivedya*) that has been prepared in the kitchen. Naṭarāja is accorded this treatment, with minor differences in detail, six times during the course of the day, and after the final worship the symbolic foot is carried back to his bedchamber.

Next, let us move on to private ritual acts. People usually come to the temple in order to pray or to render thanks for recovery from an illness or for success in an examination or in obtaining employment. If some misfortune should befall them, Hindus will generally pray to the gods for the removal of that misfortune, promising to perform a specific action for the gods if their prayers should be answered. This action will assume a variety of forms, but at Chidambaram it usually takes the form of an *arcanā* or *rudra-abhiṣeka*.

'*Arcanā*' is the act of making offerings of coconuts and other things to the gods. This is performed either through the priests in each temple or through a particular priest with whom one is on friendly terms (called *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar). In the

Citsabhā there are, in addition to the priests who perform the regular worship, also priests whose special duty it is to make *arcanā* offerings, and even at shrines where there is no priest on duty it is possible to ask for an *arcanā* to be offered. As for the *rudra-abhiṣeka*, I have already given a brief description of it.

Partly because of the convenience of the *arcanā*, about seven hundred of these offerings will be made in a single day at the Citsabhā alone. By way of contrast, the *rudra-abhiṣeka* will be performed at the Citsabhā only a few times monthly.

There are, in addition, many temple festivals. In the case of Naṭarāja Temple, special mention must be made of the elaborate festivals spanning ten days that are performed in the summer and in the winter (*brāhmotsava*). These two festivals mark the division of the year into two six-monthly periods. Festivals other than these two main festivals may last only one day or they may continue for several days.

Generally speaking, it may be said that the festivals at Naṭarāja Temple are usually centred on the Dikshitar and are of a refined nature, and rites involving spirit possession, trance or ordeals such as fire walking are not performed. There are some festivals with slightly frenzied elements, but on the whole they may be described as orderly.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION OF THE TEMPLE

Naṭarāja Temple is administered by an executive organ called the '*potu* Dikshitar' and composed of all the married male Dikshitar. A periodic meeting is held at Devasabhā or Kalyāṇamaṇḍapa every twenty days to discuss various matters of concern. At the start of the meeting, the *potumaṇiṭaṇ* brings a lamp from the inner sanctuary of the Citsabhā to the meeting place. This signifies that Śiva too is participating in the meeting, and the *potumaṇiṭaṇ* suggests topics for discussion. It may happen that several married men from the same household will be participating, and since everyone has the right of veto, it is possible (regardless of whether or not it occurs in actual practice) that a son may oppose the views of his father. At these meetings the basic unit may be said to be not the household but individuals who are all on an equal standing with one another.

The *potu* Dikshitar has a supervisory organ in the form of a committee made up of nine members. Their term of office is from 1 April until 31 March of the following year. The committee chairman assumes in particular the role of representative of the Dikshitar when dealing with the outside world, but he is neither leader nor head of the Dikshitar community, for the Dikshitar maintain that their leader is Śiva himself. This committee is directly concerned with the administration and maintenance of the temple. If, for example, a priest on duty has not been discharging his duties properly, the committee will hold a hearing and may impose a fine.

Let us now examine the priests' roster system (*murai*). In 1988 there were 265 married men, and there was a roster listing their names in the order in which they

had married. Teams of twenty are formed following the order of this roster. The members of these teams are called *muraikkārar*, and they serve as priests for twenty days, or one *vaṭṭam*, at the five main temples. To this end each team of twenty is further subdivided into five groups of four members each. Each group is in charge of one temple for four days. The four members of each group take turns in acting as the officiating priest (*pūjakkārar*)¹³, and the other three act as his assistants. After four days, when each has taken his turn as the officiating priest, they move on to another temple. The order in which they move around the five temples is: Citsabhā, Śivakāmasundari temple, Mūlasthāna, Devasabhā and Pāṇḍya Nāyaka temple. For example, the group that is allocated to the Mūlasthāna for the first four days of the *vaṭṭam* will next move to the *Devasabhā* and spend the final four days at the Śivakāmasundari temple. By moving as a group through all five temples in this manner, one *vaṭṭam* is concluded.

A simple calculation would suggest that a priest should be able to serve as priest at, for example, the Citsabhā once every 265 days or once in nine months. But those who are in fact able to officiate at rituals as priests are restricted on account of various conditions. Firstly, those under twenty years of age are considered to have insufficient knowledge for conducting worship. I have heard that one must be over thirty years old before being able to officiate as priest at the Citsabhā. A man whose wife has already died is also not allowed to serve as priest, and even if his wife is still alive, he will decline the position of priest if he himself is infirm owing to old age or illness. In addition, during his wife's menstrual period or in other cases of impurity, such as when there has been a childbirth or death in the immediate family, a man is also unable to serve as priest. In such cases someone else is chosen to act in his place. If the person in question is still a minor, then his proxy will be his father or an elder brother, while if he is too old or has lost his wife, his proxy will be an adult son or a younger brother.

There are also a number of other rosters in addition to the above roster system. There is first of all the roster for the smaller temples and shrines, of which there are ten. Following principles similar to those in the case of the above five main temples, teams of twenty are divided into ten teams of two, who move in pairs from one temple to the next every two days. The order of temple rotation, starting from the south and moving in a clockwise direction, is as follows: Mukkuṟuṇi Vināyaka, Kalpaka Vināyaka, Vīra Subrahmaṇya, Durgā, Navalīṅga, Ākāśa Vināyaka inside the central building complex, Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Ūrttuva Tāṇḍavamūrti and Daṇḍāyudhapāṇi and, although not a temple, the stand for selling *prasāda*.

During the important festivals an *ācārya* acts as officiant. He is chosen by lot fifteen days prior to the commencement of the main summer and winter festivals, and he is selected from a list of approximately 160 experienced priests. He may become *ācārya* only once in the course of his life. He does not, however, conduct the daily worship on behalf of the priest on duty at the time.

In the Citsabhā there are, in addition to the group of four priests who preside

over the worship, priests whose duty it is to accept *arcanā* from the temple visitors. They form teams of five and are on duty for five days. They charge an entrance fee of 1.25 rupees to those who enter the Kanakasabhā for the purpose of *arcanā*, and they also sell holy ashes and the holy water used in the *abhiṣeka*. They deduct from the day's takings the 100 rupees paid to the priests on duty at the Citsabhā and the wages paid to the bell ringers and other employees, and then divide the rest amongst themselves. When there is a festival, a group of Dikshitaras for accepting *arcanā* will also be assigned to four major temples in addition to the Citsabhā for forty days or longer (sometimes two hundred days). This is decided by auction (*ēlam*) at the periodic meeting. In the same way, the rotation of priests is suspended at ten smaller temples, and a group of Dikshitaras will be fixed for a particular period.

In addition, there are also teams of four who look after the vehicles and cooking utensils (*vākaṇakkārar*), changing every month (that is, every thirty or thirty-one days), and a team of twenty people that looks after the jewels (*kaṅkāṇam*) and changes every six months on the third day after the conclusion of the summer and winter festivals. In the latter case, each member of the team is entrusted with a key to the storeroom inside the Devasabhā, and all twenty must be present in order to be able to open the storeroom, and take out the jewels.

Those who must stay overnight at the temple are the team of twenty priests on duty at the Citsabhā and the other main temples, the group of five in charge of *arcanā* at the Citsabhā, and the group of four in charge of the vehicles, making a total of twenty-nine. The roll is called by the night bell ringer.

There are also two people called *maṇiyakkārar*, whose task it is to raise funds for the temple festivals, and they, too, change every month (that is, every thirty or thirty-one days). On the occasion of the summer and winter festivals this post is put up to auction, with four people being selected. They produce and distribute posters and collect funds not only from already existing patrons but also from the general public, and they also make repairs to the temple and advance arrangements for any necessary items. In addition they will, for example, secure labourers and invite extra musicians. After the conclusion of the festival they will share amongst themselves whatever is left from the donations after all expenses have been deducted.

To sum up briefly, services at Naṭarāja Temple are conducted on the basis of a roster system, and during festivals priests are also appointed by means of auction for accepting *arcanā* at temples and shrines other than the Citsabhā. It may be said that the principle of equality is maintained on an individual level in the roster and auction systems.

THE PRIESTS AND THEIR PATRONS

A temple is a centre of religious activity, but in order to support such activities economic support is indispensable. From the tenth century onwards Naṭarāja

Temple grew under the patronage of successive kings, and it is to be assumed that, as in the case of other temples, the land donated by kings formed the economic foundations of the temple. But with the passage of time this supposedly donated land lost its economic significance. Details of this process are unclear, but it does appear that at least by the second half of the nineteenth century Naṭarāja Temple was looked upon as having no land, and in its place contracts with specific patrons (*kaṭṭalaitār* or *upayatār*) came to play an important role. In the following I shall examine the relationship between the patrons and the priests.

With the expansion of British rule in the nineteenth century, the Ceṭṭiyārs of Nāṭṭukoṭṭai in southern Tamil Nadu, who had made economic advances into Burma under the protection of British rule, accumulated enormous wealth and made efforts to renovate Naṭarāja Temple. The construction and restoration of the main temple buildings to be seen today became possible only because of the financial support of the Ceṭṭiyārs and other members of the newly-arisen merchant class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They built a school in Chidambaram, provided the necessaries for religious services, and maintained the flower gardens, and with the growing popularity of pilgrimages that resulted from an expanding traffic network they also built accommodation facilities for pilgrims. Among these patrons, the name of Annamalai Cettiayar is especially well-known. Annamalai University, a residential university in Annamalainagar near Chidambaram, was established by him in 1929.

But by the mid-twentieth century business in Malaya and Burma had slumped, leading to the ruin of the newly-arisen merchant class. Furthermore, as a result of land policies favouring tenant farmers and the abolition of the princely states after independence, the economic base of the patrons who had traditionally supported the temple was shaken. Prior to this, in the first half of the twentieth century, Dravidian nationalism had spread throughout Tamil Nadu in the form of anti-Aryanism and anti-Brahmanism. It is likely that these political currents were rather harsh on the Dikshitaras, who were by no means prosperous.

After independence the state government Tamil Nadu, carrying over the policies of the British colonial administration dating from the second half of the nineteenth century, made efforts to consolidate its control of temples. This was because it considered the priests and temple administrators to be responsible for the fact that the administration of temples, which were essentially public religious institutions, was often slack and services were not even properly conducted¹⁴). A policy was adopted of putting temple administration on a fair-and-aboveboard basis through the intervention of the government and, in cases of temples with large earnings, of passing any surplus funds on to other temples. In some cases the government would actually appoint the administrators.

Naṭarāja Temple was no exception, and it was decided to place it under government control, but the temple objected and took the matter to court. In 1951 the merits of its case were recognized and the Madras High Court decided in its favour. Since then appeals and fresh lawsuits have been repeatedly filed by both

the state government and the temple, but the situation has remained basically unchanged since 1951. As a result Naṭarāja Temple still stands outside government control, which is unusual for a temple of its size.

Factors that led to the case being decided in the temple's favour include the recognition that Naṭarāja Temple is the private temple of the Dikshitar "denomination," it has no property such as land requiring supervision, and the temple is being managed in an orderly fashion and does not require government control. According to the Dikshitar, in cases where the government has become involved in temples on the condition that its authority be limited to the financial aspects of temple management, it often happens that its influence has extended to religious activities, and temple practices are disregarded out of political considerations, with, for example, leading politicians being allowed to enter the temple grounds with their shoes on and officials who are Untouchables by birth being appointed administrators. If this occurs, then 'spirituality' (*āṇmīkam*), the most essential element for a temple, disappears. Judging from my own observations, Naṭarāja Temple enjoys a good reputation compared with other temples that have been placed under government control.

But as a result of repeated lawsuits, the economic decline of traditional patrons, and the anti-Brahman movement, the Dikshitar appear to have been reduced to considerable poverty during the 1950's. About this time some of them sold their homes and moved into smaller houses or converted part of their homes into shops. But at present, although by no means prosperous, the Dikshitar may be said to be enjoying a stable livelihood. The reasons for this may be sought in the fact that the legal proceedings have been at least temporarily resolved, the anti-Brahman movement has lost its former extremism, and there has been an increase in temple earnings as a result of the growth of tourism and pilgrimages.

The practice whereby a patron (*kaṭṭalaitār*) would financially support a certain ritual through the agency of a particular Dikshitar (*kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar) had taken root at Naṭarāja Temple by the nineteenth century at the latest. These patrons are only the patrons of specific rituals, and they do not administer the temple itself. The administration of the temple remains in the hands of the Dikshitar.

Patrons are divided into three types. Firstly, there are the patrons who provide financial support for the daily worship. They are called '*potu kaṭṭalaitār*' or '*kōyil kaṭṭalaitār*', and they meet the expenses for the worship with the interest accruing from their savings.

Secondly, there are the patrons of particular ceremonies. In the case of Naṭarāja Temple, these include not only major festivals lasting for several days, but also the monthly new-moon ceremony and the ceremonies celebrating the birthdates of saints, of which there is one held almost every week. The execution of these ceremonies is all made possible through the patrons' support. Because the patrons of particular ceremonies have become fixed over successive generations, it is difficult for a newcomer to become a patron of this type. To each patron is attached a particular Dikshitar. The basic rites of large festivals are performed by the *ācārya*,

but the minor rites incorporated within these festivals and ceremonies in which the *ācārya* has no involvement whatsoever are performed by this *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar in his capacity as priest. This does not follow the roster system, but is a right that is inherited by particular Dikshitar families.

Because the number of services and rituals is limited, not all Dikshitar can become the *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar for a particular ritual, and since this position is an inherited one, some sort of adjustment becomes necessary in cases where there are two or more sons. If the father should be in charge of several rituals, then they will be shared equally among the sons, while if he is responsible for only one ritual, the sons will serve as *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar in turn.

The same applies to the *kaṭṭalaitār*: if he is patron of two or more rituals, he simply needs to share them among his sons, but if he is patron of only one ritual, the sons will either provide financial support in turn or share the expenses.

Thirdly there are people referred to as patrons who are not associated with any particular ritual. They will ask a Dikshitar (occasionally several Dikshitar) to become their *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar and then have him perform private ritual acts such as *arcanā*. In some cases this relationship will continue from one generation to the next. Insofar as this relationship is unconnected with ceremonies, services and similar public activities of the temple, it is a private affair. Typical of this relationship is a sort of indenture system whereby the *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar undertakes to make *arcanā* offerings to Naṭarāja on behalf of the patron every month on the day corresponding to his birth star (*nakṣatara*) and to then send him some sacred ashes and vermilion powder as the *prasāda*. There are some Dikshitar who have as many as one thousand patrons of this type.

If this type of patron should wish to have the *rudra-abhiṣeka* performed, he will again approach the same *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar. The *rudra-abhiṣeka* differs from the *arcanā* in that the *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar only makes the arrangements for the rite, and the rite itself is performed by the priest on duty for that particular day. Cōliyā Brahmans and more than ten Dikshitar who chant mantras also participate in this rite.

A person may be introduced by an acquaintance to a particular Dikshitar, but it is commoner to make the acquaintance of a Dikshitar at the temple and to pay him a sum of approximately 100 rupees to cover the expenses for one year. A Dikshitar may acquire as many as one hundred new patrons of this type in a single month, but the relationship with patrons gained in this manner does not last very long. Especially in the case of pilgrims from afar, there is a tendency for them not to send the fees for the following year, and so the relationship dissolves after the first year.

These private patrons do not belong to individual Dikshitar, but are rather the common property of the household. Therefore, if the household should split up, they are shared equally among the sons as in the case of the festival patrons. In order to keep a large number of patrons, it is necessary to go almost daily to the temple to make *arcanā* offerings, and in order to acquire new patrons it is to

the Dikshitar's advantage to be placed in charge of *arcanā* at a particular temple by auction or some other means, for it is in such a situation that he will find pilgrims who may be prepared to enter into an annual contract.

In some cases the relationship between the patron and *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar will develop beyond a contractual one into a more personal relationship. For example, when a domestic rite is performed at the *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar's home, the patron will offer a special gift of money, and they may also become trusting confidants of one another. Furthermore, in some rare instances the *kaṭṭalai* Dikshitar will accept *dāna* when there has been a death in the family of a particularly close patron.

Dikshitar households may be said to stand in the relationship of competitors to one another in regard to the acquisition of patrons, for the greater the number of their patrons, the more stable their level of income becomes. But to the best of my knowledge there have in recent years been no major disputes among the Dikshitar households concerning patrons.

THE DIKSHITARS AND GURUKKALS

In the large Śaiva temples of south India there are groups of priests closely connected with individual temples. Although there are some exceptions, these groups are usually made up of people called Gurukkals or Ādiśaivas, and their status is lower than that of other Brahmans, and in some cases they are not even looked upon as Brahmans. One reason for their low status may be sought in the fact that, as temple priests, they indiscriminately serve many different people. The status of Brahmans who make a living by serving others, including priests who officiate at domestic rites, is low. Furthermore, as is pointed out by Fuller, their knowledge is by no means extensive (Fuller 1984: 135–146).

But such assertions are not accepted by the temple priests in question. They alone are able to approach and make contact with the deity enshrined in the temple. Other people, including even the Brahmans who boast of their higher status, are not permitted to enter the inner sanctuary, let alone touch the image of the deity. Hence, if one considers the ranking of castes on the basis of their respective proximity to the gods within the temple, the priests enjoy the highest rank. Yet in spite of their claims to the contrary, it would appear to be an incontrovertible fact that the status of the Gurukkals is comparatively low. However, it is not the case for the Dikshitar households. Francis, for example, reported that the Dikshitar households were higher in rank than other Brahman temple priests (Francis 1906: 272).

Let me give a minor example. Among the Gurukkals in Chidambaram there are 'venerable masters' (*guru*) who hereditarily maintain links with individual families. The *guru* too is one of the Gurukkals, and he participates in the *abhiṣeka* and other rituals performed at the temple, chanting mantras and supervising proceedings, although it is the temple priests who actually conduct the rituals. One may discern here a division of labour similar to that existing between the

Dikshitar and Cōḷiyā Brahmans. But whereas the status of the *guru* is considered to be higher than that of the Gurukkals, that of the Cōḷiyā Brahmans is lower than that of the Dikshitar¹⁵). I shall now consider the reasons for this difference.

The first factor to be noted in explaining the differences between the Dikshitar and Gurukkals concerns doctrine. Whereas the Gurukkals conduct their rituals on the basis of religious scriptures called Āgamas, said to date from the medieval period, the Dikshitar perform their rituals using mantras taken from the Vedas, India's oldest religious scriptures, and they do not employ hand gestures (*mudrā*) or use incense during their worship¹⁶). One reason for the high status of the Dikshitar may be considered to lie in the fact that they adhere to the Vedas, which are older than the Āgamas.

In order to become priests, the Gurukkals receive initiations in four stages¹⁷). It is only by this means that they become qualified to conduct temple worship, and they receive the title of '*śivācārya*'. Marriage constitutes a condition for the initiations from the second stage onwards. By way of contrast, in the case of the Dikshitar marriage is the only condition for becoming a priest, and after marriage, once they have reached a certain age, they are able to conduct temple worship. There is no need for them to undergo any form of initiation except for the learning of a sacred formula (Loud 1990: 86); they are, as it were, priests by birth.

The Gurukkals look upon Śiva as their ancestor, but in the Dikshitar myth mentioned earlier Śiva was one of the Dikshitar. A comparison of their respective myths would suggest that the Dikshitar are closer to Śiva.

Lastly, let us touch on their relationships with renunciators, to which Fuller has attached considerable importance. The ninth-century sage and philosopher Śāṅkarācārya founded four monasteries (*maṭha*). The chief abbot (Śāṅkarācārya) of Kanchipuram, one of these four monasteries, is regarded by the Gurukkals as their *guru*¹⁸). The same applies also in the case of the Aiyars and other Śaiva Brahmans.

The Dikshitar, however, although Śaivas, cherish no special emotions towards the Śāṅkarācārya, nor do they recognize any difference in rank between him and themselves. It is only Śiva who stands above them. In their relations with the Śāṅkarācārya and other eminent renunciators the Dikshitar do not, in other words, consider themselves to be of inferior status. It may be said that they do not set a high value on the life-style of world renunciation¹⁹).

The above factors would appear to be linked not only to the fact that the status of the Dikshitar is higher than that of the Gurukkals, but also to the view that their status is the highest of anyone in Chidambaram. In addition, their great knowledge, their observance of rules relating to purity, their control of women, and their high level of economic independence reflected in the joint administration of the temple are all closely connected to the high status of the Dikshitar. In the following section I wish to consider the Dikshitar's aspirations for independence from a more general perspective and with reference to the discussions outlined in the first section above.

THE AUTONOMOUS WORLD OF THE DIKSHITARS

First, having ascertained the fact that the life-style of the Dikshitar is one proper for Brahmans, I shall examine their relations with pollution and lower castes, and their views on *dāna*.

The Dikshitar observe rather strict life norms and are translating into practice, at least in part, the life-style that, properly speaking, Brahmans ought to observe. For this reason they are held in high regard by traditional Brahmans. For example, the practice of child marriage, which was prevalent until recently, reflects the original mores of Brahmans. The Dikshitar also perform the daily rites (*sāndhya*) with reasonable fidelity. In addition, they avoid contact with impurity in order to preserve their high level of purity, and for this reason a Dikshitar's wife must return to her parents' home during her menstrual period. This is a custom not found among other Brahmans.

What, then, is the situation in regard to their relations with lower castes, who are also regarded as being impure? Musical bands consisting of Untouchables do not participate in their funerals or on other occasions, nor is there any involvement on the part of washermen. Apart from the barber who comes to shave their hair, it is only members of the Brahman caste that are directly involved in their rites. Nor can they be said to be open towards other castes when a marriage takes place. The sphere of interdependent relationships based on caste may be regarded as rather narrow in the case of the Dikshitar.

But it is virtually impossible for them to completely exclude the lower castes and create a "pure" world by their own efforts alone. Even the Dikshitar cannot avoid contact with impurity. For this reason they require the services of the Cavuṅṭi Brahmans who belong to the same Brahman caste and, although not Untouchables, handle impurity. They are the people who take on any unclean tasks. In other words, the world of purity to which the Dikshitar aspire is not a self-contained world of absolute purity, but nor is it a world that unconditionally presupposes a complementary relationship with lower, impure castes such as was posited by Dumont (1980). Interdependent relationships based on a hierarchical principle according to which the pure have need for the impure are only partially recognized by the Dikshitar. The complementary relationship does not extend to caste society as a whole, employing, for example, the assistance of the Untouchables, as was suggested by Dumont.

It has been pointed out that one of the main factors lowering the status of priests in north India is their acceptance of *dāna*. Dikshitar too, just like other Brahmans, will assume the role of ancestral spirits and accept *dāna* from their patrons. *Dāna*, especially *dāna* connected with death, embodies the sins of the donor. The Dikshitar are well aware of this, and in this they are not alone. The Cōḷiyā Brahmans too, who as domestic priests have many opportunities for receiving *dāna*, are also fully cognizant of the nature of *dāna*. But they unanimously declare that the *Gāyatrīmantra* has the power to destroy the donor's sins²⁰. When

asked why they accept *dāna*, they will reply that it is one of the six duties incumbent upon Brahmans (cf. *Mānava-sāstra*, 10.75). But this does not mean that the Dikshitaras will accept *dāna* from anyone who invites them to do so. The Dikshitaras have, in other words, the option of refusing *dāna*.

In view of the above it may be said that in this region the negative values of *dāna* do not bear directly upon the status of the Brahman priests. At least in regard to the Dikshitaras, it may be said that they do not depend for their livelihood upon *dāna*.

As well as being priests, the Dikshitaras are also the joint administrators of their temple. In a sense they enjoy considerable economic independence when compared with the Gurukkal priests of other temples, who are no more than employees, whose range of options is limited. The desire to continue administering the temple on the Dikshitaras' own initiative is reflected in their dispute with the state government and in the detailed regulations governing the management of the temple²¹). But it is nevertheless a fact that the Dikshitaras are dependent upon many patrons in their management of the temple, and although they would appear to be keeping interdependent relationships within the narrowest possible bounds in their relations with other castes, in their relations with their patrons they are intent upon extending the range of such relationships in order to secure a stable livelihood. In regard to their relations with patrons there is virtually no mention of the question of purity and impurity, and the patron's caste is left out of consideration. One gains the impression that for them economic rationality and purity-impurity (religion) are completely separate.

The first point, however, of which I wish to take note here is that the relationship between the Dikshitaras and their patrons is not an intimate one such as prevails between Brahmans and landowners in rural villages. In the case of Naṭarāja Temple, the patrons do not explicitly demand of the Dikshitaras that they assume a subordinate attitude towards them²²). There is room for choice on both sides. Even if his relations with a dozen-odd patrons were to be severed, it would not be a matter of any great social or economic concern to the Dikshitaras. The situation would be radically different in a village situation, for if the village priest should in any way impair his relationship with his patrons, he will find himself unable to make a living. In the case of Naṭarāja Temple, the majority of patrons expect no more of the priests than the provision of services such as *arcanā*. In other words, it is in the role of devotees that they approach the priests. For their part, the priests not only mediate between the gods and the faithful, but also associate with the faithful in their capacity as joint administrators of the temple.

The next point to which I wish to draw attention in regard to the Dikshitaras' relations with their patrons is the role of the patrons during rituals. One gains the impression that the patron's participation in the ritual is kept to a bare minimum. For example, during the *rudra-abhiṣeka* performed in the Citsabhā the patron comes to the fore only when the initial vow is recited, and the rest of the rite is carried out by the Cōliyā Brahmans and the priests on duty. The patron is no more than an

onlooker. In a similar *abhiṣeka* which I observed in Sri Lanka the patron sat next to the priest and threw offerings on the fire during the *homa* rite (Tanaka 1991: 129–50). No such form of participation on the part of the patron is, however, to be seen at Naṭarāja Temple. In the case of Sri Lanka, there is a strong element of the village hireling in Brahman priests, and economically too theirs is an unstable livelihood. It may thus be considered that their dependence upon village patrons is directly reflected in the rituals that they conduct. This is much removed from the situation of the Dikshitaras at Naṭarāja Temple, and I would here recognize the desire of the Dikshitaras to conceal their essential dependence upon their patrons²³). As was noted in the first section, Dumont has presented a number of interesting perspectives on the monistic characteristics of Brahmanism. Among these, I have already considered the absence of the complementarity of purity and impurity, and I shall now consider some of the other characteristics, one of them being the absence of spirit possession, which is true also of the Dikshitaras. They have no fear of evil spirits (*pēy*) or low-ranking gods (*turttēvatai*), and there are no instances of spirit possession among them. In Naṭarāja Temple there are no shrines dedicated to demon-like gods who take possession of people. As exceptions, mention might be made of Muṇisvaraṇ, who has a shrine near the North Gopura, and the goddess Māri, who is enshrined in the South Gopura. But the shrines of both stand, strictly speaking, outside the *gopura*, and they cannot be said to be enshrined within the temple grounds.

The reasons given by the Dikshitaras for the absence of spirit possession, especially by evil spirits, include the fact that they conscientiously perform their rituals and that they are vegetarian and therefore not involved in the taking of life. More generally speaking, the absence of spirit possession may be said to be due to the fact that they observe the rules relating to purity and impurity and organize their daily life around prayers to the gods and the performance of rituals.

Lastly, I wish to touch on the relationship between male and female deities. As an example of the cooperative relationship existing between male and female deities, Dumont states that the male deity will protect the village land while the female deity will protect the villagers from infectious diseases (Dumont 1960). By way of contrast, this type of cooperative or complementary relationship between male and female deities does not exist in Brahmanism, and although the gods may be depicted as couples, there is no functional complementarity between gods and goddesses such as may be seen in villages. It is not possible to consider here in detail the validity of Dumont's discussion of the gods of Brahmanism²⁴), but at least in Naṭarāja Temple one cannot disregard the existence of female deities and divine marriage. The main deity Naṭarāja is enshrined in the Citsabhā together with his consort Śivakāmasundari (in the form of Kriyāśakti), and he spends each night in his bedchamber with the goddess, Bhogaśakti, while the festival for the goddess, Jñānaśakti, performed at the Śivakāmasundari temple near the Śivagaṅga, culminates in her marriage to Śiva. In personal relationships, moreover, the relationship between the priest and his wife is of importance in the religious activities of

the former. In view of the above facts, it is probably possible to discern some sort of complementary relationship as far as the relations between male and female deities or men and women are concerned. It is not, of course, a relationship between equals, but there should be no problem in regarding it as a form of complementarity presupposing a hierarchical relationship such as that posited by Dumont. And unlike the relationship with their patrons, this complementarity would also appear to be accepted on an ideological plane. In this sense it may be said that the rejection of complementarity, or aspirations for independence, to be seen, for example, in intercaste relations concerning purity and impurity, in the Dikshitar's relations with patrons and in the absence of spirit possession and cults centring on lower-ranking gods, are not evident in the realm of gender.

As was stated in the first section, world renunciation has often been given as the Brahman ideal, and, needless to say, renunciation rejects any enduring relationship between man and woman. Therefore, when considered from the perspective of renunciation, the world of the Dikshitar could perhaps be described as defective. But on the basis of my considerations in the present study, could it not be said that a self-contained world differing from that of the renouncer is being sought after by the Dikshitar? If the world of renunciation is something that is realized in an ascetic life, then it would seem that the Dikshitar conceive of a cooperative world centred on male/female and god/goddess relationships as the self-contained world for the realization of which they are striving. And in the course of this process the symbolic space of the temple plays an important role.

The temple does not simply constitute their property, representing the basis of the economic independence of the Dikshitar community, but is sealed with inexhaustible sacred power (*śakti*). It is this power which really renders possible the independence of the Dikshitar. Their control over the temple affairs implies more than economic necessities. It means the monopoly of sacred power, which constitutes the basis for the independent world of the Dikshitar.

Of course such an ideological implication is true of other Hindu temples in south India, as is pointed out by Shulman (1980) and Pfaffenberger (1990). However, here again, the Naṭarāja temple stands in a prominent position, because it is "the Temple," or the temple of the temples. It is said that the day's final *pūjā* at the Citsabhā is an hour later than other temples, because all gods and goddesses can leave their own temples for Chidambaram to worship Naṭarāja (Loud 1990: 180–181). In the literature mentioned in footnote 4 the centrality of the Naṭarāja temple in the universe and its supremacy among all the temples are repeatedly emphasized.

CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing sections I took up for consideration the society of the Dikshitar of Naṭarāja Temple and probed the interdependence with others and contrasting aspirations for independence that may be seen in their lives. In doing so, I

took care not to assume any simplistic connections between the high status of the Dikshitaras and their purity or positions as priests.

As will now be evident, the Dikshitaras may be considered to have rather strong aspirations for independence. But their ideal is not the much-vaunted world of the renouncer, and their wish would seem to be rather the creation, within the religious space of the temple, of a cooperative world centred on complementary relationships between male and female deities and husband and wife, with Śiva at their centre. In this respect there is a need to modify previous discussions based on the premise that renunciation alone represents the path leading to the ideal Brahman world, a world of absolute purity, and the highest status.

[A Note on the Transliteration]

For readers' convenience, deities and rituals are mostly expressed in Sanskrit. Proper names for places and persons mostly follow established Anglicized usage. Tamil transliteration follows that of *The Tamil Lexicon* (Madras University Press, 1982).

[Acknowledgements]

The fieldwork was undertaken intermittently between 1987 and 1991. While in Chidambaram, I received much assistance from the Dikshitaras, Professor Gomatinayakan, Dr Tirumurti, Veerapandian, Kumar, Priya, and many other people. I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to them. A preliminary draft was read at a seminar on occupation and status held at the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University on September 22, 1992. The original version in Japanese was entitled *Minami Indo no Burāman Shisaitachi* or Brahman Priests in South India, and published in *Indo-Hukugōbunka no Kōzō* or *Structure of Cultural Complex in India* (edited by Y. Nagano and Y. Ikari) from Hōzōkan in 1992. It should be noted that the Japanese version had been written before I could read Loud's important Ph.D. thesis on the Dikshitaras. The present English version incorporates his own findings with due acknowledgements, and, if necessary, notes some factual differences between his data and mine.

NOTES

- 1) Zeitlyn (1986) develops a similar argument on the basis of investigations undertaken at a pilgrimage site in Rajasthan, while Raheja (1988), who conducted fieldwork in a north Indian village in Uttar Pradesh emphasizes the fact that a negative value is attached to *dana*, and she looks upon Brahmans as people who, just like other servicing castes, accept *dana* from the dominant caste of landowners. She then goes on to posit the existence of an ordering, differing from the hierarchy culminating in the Brahmans and supported by the concepts of purity and impurity, that is centred on the dominant caste surrounded by different groups of people who remove sin and impurity. Regrettably Raheja does not, however, devote sufficient discussion to the question of how the two images of the pure Brahman and the Brahman who accepts the sins of the non-Brahman dominant caste are understood by the villagers, in particular by the Brahmans themselves.
- 2) Dumont was not necessarily unaware of this point (1980: 69–70). But he considers Brahman priests to constitute but one section of Brahmans as a whole, and he does not

- believe that the Brahmans are looked upon as being of inferior rank on their account (1971: 74–75). But as has already been noted, Dumont's thesis is based on the assumption that priests are representative of the Brahman caste, and hence this is by no means a convincing explanation.
- 3) On Parry's counterarguments, see Parry 1989: 71, n. 4.
 - 4) On the subject of the origins and history of Naṭarāja Temple and on the history of the individual buildings, I have referred to Francis 1906, Loud 1990, Natarajan 1974, Ramakrishna Ayyar 1946, Ramalinga 1965, and Somasundaram Pillai 1963.
 - 5) According to Loud (1990: 29), she is *Iccaśakti*.
 - 6) See Loud (1990: 92) for details regarding the other occupations of the Dikshitaras than the priesthood.
 - 7) Although there are no precise figures, boys married in their early teens, while girls married under the age of ten.
 - 8) Thurston (1909: 334–356) gives a detailed account of the Brahmans of Tamil Nadu. On the Śaiva Smārtha Brahmans, see Subramaniam 1974, while on the Vaiṣṇavas see Rangachari 1931.
 - 9) There are reports of similar Brahmans, although in northern India, in Van der Veer (1988: 207) and Zeitlyn (1986: 72–74). A detailed survey is necessary in order to determine the situation in southern India.
 - 10) Meals are supplied separately. The employees' wages, at an average of 100 rupees for twenty days, are by no means high.
 - 11) See Loud (1990: 140–232) for details regarding temple rituals and festivals.
 - 12) According to Loud, she is *Kriyāśakti* (Loud 1990: 29).
 - 13) According to Loud (1990: 70–71) a *muṛaikkārar* is the priest in charge. The *pūjakkārar* is the priest in charge for private offerings. "On the first day of the four days that a set of priests is on duty at a shrine. The first priest [of the list] performs the public worship and the third priest performs the private worship. On the second day the second priest performs the *pūjā* and the fourth priest performs the *arcana*. On the third and fourth days the duties are the reverse of the first two days" (Loud 1990: 71).
 - 14) On the policies of the state government of Tamil Nadu towards temples, see Fuller 1984 and Presler 1988. I wish to leave to another occasion an analysis of the records of the legal action that has taken place between Naṭarāja Temple and the government since the nineteenth century.
 - 15) The position of domestic rites is generally looked upon as being higher than that of temple rituals (Zeitlyn 1986: 70).
 - 16) Loud extensively argues the nature of the mantras used by the Dikshitaras for *pūjā* and other rituals (Loud 1990: 163–65).
 - 17) For details on the initiations of temple priests, see Fuller 1985.
 - 18) For details on the Śaṅkarācārya and attitudes of temple priests towards him, see Fuller 1984: 52, n. 3; 54–62.
 - 19) When people visit a temple, they receive *prasāda* in the form of holy ashes from a priest, and they themselves do not take the ashes directly from the vessel in which they are kept. By way of contrast, when the Śaṅkarācārya visits a temple, he himself takes some ashes

- and rubs them on his forehead. But the Dikshitar do not condone this (cf. Thurston 1909: 340). It may therefore be assumed that the Dikshitar treat the Śaṅkarācārya in the same manner as they treat all other pilgrims. That the Dikshitar do not, however, reject all the values attached to world renunciation may be seen in the fact that there is at present one Dikshitar who has become a renouncer. He seems to spend most of time in meditating on Śiva inside the Natarāja Temple. Unfortunately I have little data of him.
- 20) Parry too has reported on the belief that Brahmans have the power to purify the evil and sins embodied in *dāna*. But he maintains that the Brahmans themselves are sceptical about the efficacy of their power (Parry 1980: 103).
- 21) Similar instances are not, however, nonexistent; see, for example, the temples of Pandharpur in Maharashtra (Dingre 1976).
- 22) For a comparison of the relationship between patron and priest in villages and pilgrimage centres, see Van der Veer 1988: 263. To use David's concepts, the Dikshitar-patron relationship is "unbound", while the village priest-patron relationship is "bound" (David 1977). In the case of the Dikshitar, the bound relationship seems restricted to the transactions with other Brahmans.
- 23) The differences between the Dikshitar and the situation in Sri Lanka may, however, be no more than regional differences. In order to clarify this point, it will be necessary to undertake investigations at other temples in Tamil Nadu.
- 24) For example, Fuller criticizes Dumont's view that Brahmanism does not recognize the complementarity of male and female deities, but his own standpoint is by no means clear (Fuller 1988: 30).

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