Chapter 1

Introduction

History of the Nattukottai Chettiar

As concerning the Nattukottai Chettiar's origin the following story is usually told. "In ancient days, the Vaisyas of the lunar race were living in the town of Santhyapuri in the Naganadu of the Jambudvipa (India). They paid daily visits to the shrine of Vinayaka God made of emerald and were traders in precious stones. They were much respected and led the life of orthodox Saivites, wore rudraksha beads, and smeared themselves with sacred ashes. They were, however, much oppressed by a certain ruler, and emigrated in a body to Conjeeveram in the Tondamandalam country in the year 204 of the Kaliyuga. The king of Conjeeveram gave them permission to settle in his territory, and made grants to them of land, temples and matams. They stayed there for a very long time, but, troubled by heavy taxes and fines, left this part of the country about 2312 Kaliyuga, and settled in the Chola country. The Chola king, being much impressed with them, bestowed on them the privilege of placing the crown on the head of a new ruler at his coronation. At this time, the town of Kaveripumpattanam is said to have been in a very flourishing
state, and the north street was occupied by Vaisyas from other countries. Being unwilling to disturb them, the king made the new settlers occupy the east, west, and south streets. As a mark of respect, they were allowed to use flags with the figure of a lion on them, and use golden vessels (Kalasam) in their houses. They all, at the instigation of the king, became disciples of one Isanya Sivachariar of Patanjalikshetra (Chidambaram). About 3775 Kaliyuga, Puvandi Chola Raja imprisoned several of the Vaisya women, whereon all the eight thousand Vaisya families destroyed themselves, leaving their male children to be taken care of by a religious teacher named Atmanadachariar. In all 1,502 children were thus brought up, viz., 600 of six ways from the west street, 502 of seven ways from the east street, and 400 of four ways from the south street. Later on, Puvandi Chola fell ill, and knowing his recovery to be impossible, sent for the Vaisya boys and asked them to look after the coronation of his son Rajabhushana Chola. But they said that, as they were bachelors, they could not comply with his request. The king accordingly made them marry Vellala girls. Those of the west street took as wives girls of the Karkaththar section, those of the east street girls of the Sozhia section, and those of the south street girls of the Kaniyala section. The three groups became disciples of three different matams, i.e. Tiruvarur, Kumbakonam, and Vanchium. In the year 3790, a dispute arose in connection with the right of priority in
receiving sacred ashes between the Vaisya and true Vellala women and the former were made to become the disciples of a new guru (religious preceptor). About 3808, a Pandya king, named Sundara Pandya, is said to have asked the Chola king to induce some of the Vaisyas to settle down in the Pandya territory. They accordingly once more emigrated in a body, and reached the village of Onkarakudi on a Friday (the constellation Astham being in the ascendant on that day). They were allowed to settle in the tract of country north of the river Vaigai, east of the Piranmalai, and south of Vellar. Those from the east street settled at Ilayaththukudi, those from the west street at Ariyur and those from the south street at Sundarapattanam. Thus the Chettis became divided in to three endogamous sections, of which the Ilayaththukudi and Sundarapattanam are found at the present day in the Madura district. The members of the Ariyur section migrated to the west coast on the destruction of their village. The members of the Ilayaththukudi section became the Nattukottais. They not being satisfied with only one place of worship, requested the king to give them more temples. Accordingly, temples were provided for different groups at Maththur, Vairavanpatti, Iraniyur, Pillayarpatti, Neman, Iluppaikudi, Suraikudy, and Velangkudi’’ (Thurston: 1987).

However another source gives the information that the king did not give the Nattukottai Chettiar community the nine
sect temples. My research clearly tells me that there were only seven temples earlier. These seven temples themselves are believed to have evolved on their own (which will be discussed shortly) and not given by any king (Thinnappan: 1983).

According to a variant of the story relating to the origin of the Nattukottai Chettiar, they were formerly merchants at the court of the Chola kings who ruled from Kaveripattanam, at one time a flourishing sea-port at the mouth of the Cauveri, from which they emigrated in a body on being persecuted by one of them, and first settled at Nattarasankottai, about three miles north-east of Sivaganga (Thurston: 1987).

By other castes, the Nattukottai Chettiar are said to be the descendants of the offspring of unions between a Shanan and a Muhammadan and Upu Korava women (Thurston: 1987).

**History of the Nattukottai Chettiar Nine temples**

The origin of the nine Nattukottai Chettiar temples started with only one temple Illayathangkudi, and then was divided into seven and then finally nine. How the division took place is explained as follows. During the earliest days of the Chettiar, they first migrated into a town given to them by the King and started out with only one temple
(Illayathangkudi). People who had migrated from various other towns lived in various streets of this town. Members who resided in these various streets of the town initially belonged to the one temple. But later on the members of these different streets wanted an individual management and brought in a rule where marriages should be conducted only among members of different streets (Thinnappan: 1983).

Today in Poompuhar, it can be found that there are still some streets that bear the names of the temples (7 temples). Therefore it can be derived that the people who belonged to different streets later broke out into different temples. In other words, one temple became several streets, then, the members of these streets moved into different neighbouring town establishing their own temples which were seven (Thinnapan: 1983). But later two more branches came from the Illayathangkudi temple. They were: (1) Pillayarpatti and (2) Iraniyur. The eighth and ninth temple (namely Iraniyur and Pillayarpatti) members are considered as brothers and sisters.

There is no special reason attributed to the division of temples from one to seven to nine except for some probable guesses like the possibility of a feud which is common among any joint management or the more basic human instinct of a set of people wanting freedom and individual identity which is part of the evolution of any society / community. The
Nattukottai Chettiars say that just like how one family or one house becomes several families or several houses (one extended / joint family becomes several nuclear families) likewise one temple became nine temples.

At the present day, the Nattukottai Chettis are divided into the following divisions (kovils or temples) and exogamous sub-divisions:-

1. Illayathangkudi kovil-
   - Okkurudaiyar
   - Pattanasamier
   - Perumaruthurudaiyar
   - Kazhanivasakkudaiyar
   - Kinkinikkudaiyar
   - Perasendurudaiyar
   - Sirusetththurudaiyar

2. Mathur kovil-
   - Uraiur
   - Arumbakur
   - Manalur
   - Mannur
   - Kannur
   - Karuppur
   - Kulathur

3. Vairavan kovil-
   - Sirukulaththur
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Fig 1 The Nine Nattukottai Chettiar Temples in Chettinad
Kazhanivasal
Marudendrapuram
4. Iraniyur kovil
5. Pillayarpatti kovil
6. Neman kovil
7. Iluppaikudi kovil
8. Suraikudi kovil
9. Velangkudi kovil

Each of the nine temples has a God (Sivan) and Goddess (Amman).

The nine Siva temples are very important to the Nattukottai Chettiar community. The very existence of the Nattukottai Chettiar community is based on these nine temples. If one goes through the Thurston's volume on castes and tribes there are about 108 community names all over India ending with the word Chettiar. What distinguishes the Nattukottai Chettiar from the other Chettiar is the nine temples, i.e. only when a Chettiar belongs to a temple which is one among the nine Sivan temples he is called a Nattukottai Chettiar. Therefore the affiliation to the nine temples is a distinguishing marker of the Nattukottai Chettiar.
During the olden days the Nagarathar women were never allowed to mix with the other society members. They were confined to themselves. According to the history known to the Nagarathars when a Nagarathar girl child (8-10 years) was about to be hurt by an elephant on the road, a Chola king in Kaveripumpattinam who happened to pass by, saved her and took her to his palace. Later on when the Nagarathars learnt about this, they sacrificed the life of the child as she was touched by another person (even though it was the king himself) and had stepped into the house of an 'alien' (i.e. anniyar or matran) and enjoyed his hospitality.

When the king learned about this atrocity, he was infuriated and ordered ten Nagarathar heads to be slaughtered as a punishment. Therefore, nine people from the nine temples were chosen to be sacrificed. As they were short of one person they were in a fix. Finally, a member of the Illayathankudi temple and Okkur sub-division volunteered. Therefore that temple sacrificed two of its members while the other eight temples lost only one member.

So in order to show their gratitude and respect to this temple's sub-division, in any Nagarathar temple the first respect (muthal mariyathal) of the temple is always given to the Okkurar (member of the Okkur sub-division). Even today
this way of showing respect to an Okkur member can be seen, as this temple sub-division made its mark in the Nagarathar history.

A Note on Other Nattukottai Chettiar Temples

Besides the nine temples, the Nattukottai Chettiers also affiliate themselves to a set of temples that they have built in every Chettinad town/village. These temples are also Sivan temples just as their sect temples. These temples are known as the Nagara Sivan temples. Membership in the Nagara Sivan temples is based on residentship in a certain town.

Though it is the nine Sivan temples that play a distinguishing role among the Nattukottai Chettiers by dividing this community's members into nine sub-divisions, by governing marriage proposals and adoption procedures, by giving their seal of approval or disapproval of marriages and adoption (see chapter three) and thereby dictating their membership in the very community itself, the local Nagara town temples also play a prominent role among the Nattukottai Chettiers.

The Nagara Sivan temples play a major role in various aspects of the Nattukottai Chettiar lives, namely marriage,
certain life-cycle ceremonies, social and communal problems and so on.

As the Nattukottai Chettiers do not reside in the villages where their sect temples are located, but in the towns where they conduct their business, they felt the necessity to build the Nagara Sivan temples in places where most of the community members reside.

These Nagara temples, in my opinion are also products of the Nattukottai Chettiers’ practical need of convenience. As the nine temples are in remote interior villages of Chettinad, making frequent visits to them is difficult. But as this community’s members were made of strong religious and temple affiliation, the conception of the Nagara Sivan town temples was the only practical and logical choice of the Nattukottai Chettiers.

It should be understood that the Nagara Sivan temples were not an attempt to substitute the Nattukottai Chettiers’ interaction with the nine temples. It played a more complementary role to the nine temples in the lives of the Nagarathars.

This practice of building temples in the cities where they go to conduct business is followed even when the Nattukottai Chettiers go out of the country, thereby introducing another
set of temples that the Nattukottai Chettiar affiliates themselves to, namely the Nagarathar temples abroad. These temples are always Dhandayuthapani / Murugan temples.

*Nattukottai Chettiars - What is your name?*

The members of this community were commonly referred to as Chettiar without any prefix or suffix. However, the name 'Chettiars' was not given by the members of the community. They call themselves as Dhanavysiars, Nattukottai Chettiar or Nagarathars.

The name Dhanavysiars originated when they were residents of Kaveripumpattinam. During those times as they were a community involved in business/trade they were called as Dhanavysiars. The name 'dhanavysiars' must have originated from the Tamil word *vysiam*.

\[ vysiam = \text{business} \]

The word Nattukottai in 'Nattukottai Chettiars' is said to be a corruption of Nattarasangkottai, the name of a small village near Sivaganga. But this derivation appears to be doubtful. The name is usually said to be derived from Nattukottai which means 'country fort' (Chandrasekhar: 1980).
Their affinity to the temples is also portrayed in the meaning behind the name by which this community is referred to, i.e. Nagarathars. In an article titled "Nagarathar per karanam", it has been explained that the word \textit{nagar} in ancient Tamil literature means 'temple' (Thinnappan: 1983). In ancient \textit{puranam} and \textit{Sanga Ilakiyam} it is denoted that \textit{nagar} means 'temple'. Therefore Nagarathar means temple-based community. The meaning 'town' or 'city' for the word \textit{nagar} only came later on. Since Nagarathars moved from a town Kaveripumpattinam, the meaning 'town' was implied onto the name 'Nagarathars' and interpreted then on as the people from a town. However, the usage of the word \textit{pattinam} preceded the usage of \textit{nagar} for 'town'. Other interpretations were also offered for the word 'Nagarathar' like for example \textit{Nagarigam} which means civilized/civilization.

Kunrakudigalar has named the Nattukottai Chettiar community as a '\textit{koil vashi samuthayam}' i.e. temple-based society (Thinnappan: 1983).
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How and why this topic?

I chose to focus on the Nattukottai Chettiar community because of my personal experiences and observations of their profuse piety. This motivated me to study this community's religious aspects.

My interaction with the Nattukottai Chettiers began from childhood, because of my father's work in a Nattukottai Chettiar firm. This introduced me to this community and gave me the opportunity to be an invitee during their functions and other important family ceremonies.

However the urge to conduct research about this community emerged during my pursuit of Master's Degree in the United States of America. During my Master's degree course, I was gaining expertise in studying various communities and tribes in Africa, China and Australia. This prompted me to look at the Nattukottai Chettiar community, a community with which I already had developed good contacts, through the prism of research.

There are 350 Nattukottai Chettiar families in the United States and 15 families in Washington, D.C. alone. During my interaction with the Nattukottai Chettiers in the United States, I found that the Nattukottai Chettiers carry their religiosity to the foreign lands also, where they go to make
a living. As I was in Baltimore, I used to drive to Washington, D.C. very often (as commuting time was only less than an hour) to visit some Indian friends and to visit two beautiful temples. It was later that I came to know that one of the temples, which was a Murugan temple was built by the Nattukottai Chettiar of that city.

Another reason why I chose this study is, because the kind of temple affiliation the Nattukottai Chettiar have, in their lives, is unique only to them. I think this calls for special emphasis, especially so now, as in today's modern world, members of many large communities associate themselves rather minimally with religious institutions. But among the Nattukottai Chettiar, a minority community, the temple is still very much a driving force.

This dissertation therefore aspires to throw light not only on the Nattukottai Chettiar community as a temple oriented community but also as a unique community that has still kept its strong ties with its temple as an essential facet of its community members. This dissertation hopes to be a valuable addition to the documented information in cultural anthropology on the Nattukottai Chettiar.
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A Brief Review of Literature

The study of Nattukottai Chettiars has interested many scholars. This small community's strong financial and economic roots and successful business ventures have always intrigued and amazed many scholars. During my literature review, I found one of the most interesting and informative books on the Nattukottai Chettiars, written by an American anthropologist, David West Rudner (1995). His book focuses largely on the commerce and business aspects of this community.

Weerasooria (1973), a lawyer in Ceylon, studied the banking and trading practices of this community through an analysis of the Nattukottai Chettiar litigation cases. S. Chandrasekhar (1980) wrote a brief descriptive essay which identifies some key features of the social, religious and economic aspects of the lives of the Nattukottai Chettiars.

Writers have also focused on the history of this community. Ramanatha Chettiar (1953) and Seshadri Sharma (1970) have done significant work on the history of the Nattukottai Chettiars.

Studies have also focussed on their marriages, whose initial interests in that field, were stirred up by the extravaganza and grandeur of a Nattukottai Chettiar wedding. The
Nattukottai Chettiars' who are stereotyped as stingy, exhibited no trace of that trait in conducting a wedding. A.R. Mani (1994) and Rama Narayanan and Perichiyappan (1991) have authored books in Tamil on the marriage customs of the Nattukottai Nagarathars.

Regarding the religious dimension of this community, Somalay (1979) has written a book in Tamil about the temples activities of the Nattukottai Chettiars overseas. Valli Chockalingam in Karaikudi has dealt with the Nagarathar charities in her Ph.D. dissertation in which their charity to temples is one section. Palaniappan's (1995) book gives a detailed account of 108 family deities (kula deivam) of the Nattukottai Chettiars, covering aspects such as mythological background of the deities, religious affiliation of the Nattukottai Chettiar sects to the deities and so on.

Recently a book was published by a Japanese anthropologist, Yuko Nishimura (1998), who studied the marriage practices and kinship of this community's members. Her study also laid emphasis on the Nagarathar womanhood. Another recent and valuable addition to the documentation on the Nattukottai Chettiars is a book titled 'Nagarathar Kalai Kallanji' compiled by Meyappan. This book is an encyclopedia / dictionary on the Nattukottai Chettiars.
giving information on any possible concept relating to the Nattukottai Chettiars.

Yet another book is underway, which is being compiled by a historian S. Muthiah and Visalakshi Ramaswamy (Madras Craft Foundation). This book is mostly illustrative in nature and captures the interesting characteristics of the Nattukottai Chettiars, including their textiles, ornaments, food and so on.

Problem

Studies that have focussed on the temple affiliation and religiosity of the Nattukottai Chettiars have been examined by me. During my literature review in this field I found three significant areas of pursuit relating to this field. One of them is Thenappan's (1990) work which deals with the nine sect temples of the Nattukottai Chettiars. The second one is Palaniappan's (1995) book on the family deities of the Nattukottai Chettiars. The other one is a brief work which focusses on the religious activities of the Nattukottai Chettiars abroad.

To the best of my knowledge, no work has attempted to discuss the role of the various Nattukottai Chettiar temples in various aspects of the Nattukottai Chettiar lives. The functioning of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple as a legal
instituion / arbiter besides other roles, is an area virtually untapped. Therefore the aim of my dissertation is to provide a well-rounded picture of the Nattukottai Chettiars' religious and social affiliation with all the temples that they are involved with.

None of the above mentioned books or for that matter no book deals with the involvement of the Nattukottai Chettiars with their local Nagara Sivan temples, along with their involvement with the nine sect temples, which I found during my field work was a significant part of their temple affiliation.

The dissertation will seek to find answers to questions like:
1. What are the temples the Nattukottai Chettiars are affiliated to?
2. What is the nature of interaction between the individual community members and the temples with specific reference to temple management?
3. What is the role of the Nattukottai Chettiar temples in the family and marriage of this community?
4. Does the Nattukottai Chettiar temple function as an institution among the members of this community?
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Objectives

* To identify the temples the Nattukottai Chettiars affiliate themselves to

* To discuss the pattern of interaction between the individual members of this community and their temples with specific reference to temple management

* To study the role of the Nattukottai Chettiar temples in the family and marriage of this community

* To describe the institutional role played by the Nattukottai Chettiar temple

* To apply theoretical concepts for the analysis of certain relevant and key issues discussed in the dissertation

Research Techniques

The research method adopted to collect data is key-informant interviewing. Informants were chosen through snowballing technique, i.e. new informants were obtained through references from existing informants. I have carried out field research with informants, from March '97 to July '98. My informants are mostly residents of Madras (as today most
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Nattukottai Chettiar residents reside in the major cities and not in their native Chettinad village) except for some who I had interviewed during my stay in Chidambaram ('Chetti Chidambaram' as it is popularly referred to) and Chettinad (Karaikudi, Puduvayal, Pallathur and Pillayarpatti). My informants though residents of the city were frequent visitors of their homeland Chettinad to which they returned for the performance of a family member's life-cycle ceremony, especially marriage or for the participation in a temple meeting or religious occasion (like Kumbabishekam. The kinds of informants interviewed were culture enthusiasts, writers, journalists, historians, businessmen, temple trustee members, professors and housewives.

Some of my informants though residents of this country have business ties abroad. There was one informant of mine, who was the Managing Director in a company belonging to one of India's largest industrial concerns which belonged to the Nattukottai Chettiar. This informant's grandparents had lived in Burma for several years and he claims that there are still properties in Burma belonging to his family. The informant himself has for the past many years established business ventures in Malaysia/Singapore which are taken care of by his sons. As this informant of mine was also an extremely religious man, the information gathered from him covered the varied social, economic and religious aspects of the lives of the Nattukottai Chettiar residents. Yet another
informant of mine was a temple trustee both in the temple he belongs to in Chettinad and in the Chettiar temple in Malaysia where he spends a few months every year. He proved particularly resourceful in providing information on temple-related activities.

During my key informant interviewing, I found that the men were particularly informative with regard to the temple activities while my women informants were knowledgeable in the social aspects like marriage and logically so, because it was the Nattukottai Chettiar men who performed many roles in the management of the temple, while the women's initiative was directed towards social occasions like marriage, baby-naming ceremony and other life-cycle ceremonies.

The information given by the informants was not taken at face value as statement of truth. Their reliability and credibility were checked. This was accomplished by cross-checking one informant's information with another. For example, when an informant belonging to Illayathangkudi temple gives details on the management of this temple, that information was checked against what another member of the same temple had to say on the same issue. Attention was paid to see if any discrepancies surfaced and if so clarifications were obtained and inconsistencies were put to rest with a logical and comprehensible explanation.
informant's information is also checked for its agreement with pertinent information available in the secondary sources.

I used observation technique to supplement my key informant interviewing. Observations have been made so far of a Chettiar wedding, engagement ceremony and temple meeting. During my stay in Karaikudi in September '97, I observed the wedding of a Chettiar couple (whose engagement I participated in, in Madras earlier in the year in April 1997). I witnessed the traditions and temple-related customs followed in the bride's house (where the wedding took place) the day before and on the day of the wedding in Puduvayal and the customary practices in the groom's household in Pallathur.

My stay in Chettinad was planned, so that, I would be present there during the festival of Vinayaka Chathurthi as this festival is very special in Pillayarpatti (as the name of the town itself implies). One of my informants (a temple trustee of the same temple) told me about this aspect and also informed me that another important event during this celebration was the change of one temple trustee management to another. As the wedding I observed was on the same day as the celebrations in Pillayarpatti temple, I could not be present for the entire proceedings of the temple. But my informant was present at the religious celebrations and
during the 'management changeover', as it was his management team that was handing over the responsibilities to the new management.

I followed Malinowski's advice to get as much information as possible from an informant immediately after the occurrence of an event. Accordingly, in the later hours of the very same day, I inconvenienced my informant with several questions about the happenings in the temple. I was therefore able to avail myself of his play-by-play descriptions of the temple events.

Case-study method was also used to provide a lot of insight to the understanding of the various attributes of the Nattukottai Chettiar's lives. For example, the repercussions faced by a couple and their families in the event of not conforming to the norms of the temple on the occasion of a marriage or a temple decision became evident when studying certain individual cases of such families. Such individual, isolated happenings among the community members were studied in the light of the dissertation's aim. Recordings were also made of the time (and place) of an incident or event so that comparisons can be made between events of similar nature in the past and present. This will aid the understanding of any changing or unchanged patterns and trends in the religious and social systems of the Nattukottai Chettiar community.
Use of secondary sources is another aspect of the research technique adopted in this dissertation. The documents examined range from the scholarly, objective materials like books (in English and Tamil), literary epics, journals and periodicals, magazines and palm-leaf manuscripts to more personal materials like caste journals, documents from *Nagara Viduthis*, souvenir books published during festive or religious events like a temple *Kumbabishekam* or during family occasions like a marriage or sixtieth birthday celebration, marriage documents and account books.

**Outline - Chapterization**

The first chapter has just introduced the Nattukottai Chettiar community as a temple-centered community. Background information like the history of the Nattukottai Chettiars and their temples has been provided. The various temples the Nattukottai Chettiars affiliate themselves to have been identified. This chapter has set the ground to discuss the role of these temples in various capacities in the following chapters.

The second chapter talks about the management of the temples which portrays the contribution of the Nattukottai Chettiar members in terms of time and effort through the system of
trusteeship and administration and in terms of money through their various systems of payment of monies to the temples. This chapter concludes with the pointing of certain outstanding traits of the temple management and the application of theoretical concepts.

The third chapter deals with the role of the Nattukottai Chettiar temples in the family and marriage of the community members. The section on family discusses for the most part issues like rules of adoption, conformity and non-conformity of those rules, ancestor worship and family deities, rituals done during these religious worships and their significance. The section on marriage talks about the rules and criteria of marriage, conformity and non-conformity of those rules, marriage traditions carried out at the temples, select interesting aspects of the marriage customs and rites and the unique pulli system.

This chapter also has a brief sub-section which deals with the roles of temples in select life-cycle ceremonies. This chapter ends again with the application of relevant theoretical perspectives.

The fourth chapter discusses the role played by the Nattukottai Chettiar temples as arbitrating institutions among the community members. The institutional role of the two major Nattukottai Chettiar temples identified in the
first chapter, namely the Nattukottai Chettiar sect temples and the Nattukottai Chettiar Nagar Sivan temples, is dealt with. Emphasis is given to working of the temple with its own system of justice and decision-making authority in the contemporary situation. In this context, certain historical certain obsolete practices identified by Thurston (1987) and Thenappan (1990) are mentioned in order to provide an angle of comparison with the contemporary functioning of the temple's system of justice and system of solving communal and social problems.

The fifth and final chapter synthesizes and summarizes the key issues and theoretical perspectives discussed in the previous chapters. It provides a whole picture of the dissertation and throws light on the Nattukottai Chettiar community as a temple oriented community.
Plate 1. Ilayathangkudi Temple

Plate 2. Mathur Temple
Plate 3. Vairavan Temple

Plate 4. Iraniyur Temple
Plate 5. Pillayarpatti Temple

Plate 6. Nemam Temple
Plate 7. Illupakudi Temple

Plate 8. Suraikudi Temple
Plate 9. Velangkudi Temple