Chapter 4

Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter

The previous chapter talked about the role of the nine temples and the Nagara Sivan temples in the Nattukottai Chettiar family and marriage. A study of the role of family deities and ancestor worship in the community's family and marriage was also a part of the third chapter.

This chapter deals with the institutional role played by the Nattukottai Chettiar temples, specifically the role of the temple as a legal institution / decision-making institution, in other words the temple as an arbiter.

It is common among Nattukottai Chettiar to solve various issues/problems through temples. The Nattukottai Chettiar have been at any rate till recently remarkable for settling their differences out of court. The influence of the elders in preventing litigation is very strong.

However the spirit of give and take and trust in the temple's ability to solve problems effectively is now unfortunately diminishing, and the arbitration of the courts is more often resorted to than before.
The attitude of the Nattukottai Chettiars alone cannot be blamed for the diminished role the Nattukottai Chettiar temples play today in solving problems or making important decisions among the community members. An important factor that should be considered here is the size of the community and the domicile of the Nattukottai Chettiars.

Though this community is still small in comparison with other communities, it is big for a sect temple to get to know about the various problems of its individual members and solve it efficiently, as it did earlier. However the culture of solving problems via temple medium is still seen among the town temples today. This will form the crux of the details to follow.

**Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter Earlier**

Thurston (1987) says among the Nattukottai Chettiars there were two forms of panchayat called:

1. *madathhuvasal mariyal* [matam panchayat]

   and

2. *kovilvasal mariyal* [temple panchayat]

out of which he explains only the second one.
Chapter 4: Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter

The functioning of the *kovil mariyal* follows. When two parties were confronted with a problem they could not solve themselves, each one would register a complaint against the other in the temple. The concerned individuals will be asked to come to the temple fifteen days after the filed complaint. The message is carried to the parties by a messenger called *vairavi* in a palmleaf (*olai*). On the designated day the *mariyal kattu* will examine the conflict among the parties and provide a fair solution.

If any one of the concerned parties does not turn up for the *mariyal kattu* he will be stigmatized by the community members to the extent short of excommunication. He would be branded with the name *marikappattullar*. No one will speak with such a person. He will not be invited for any auspicious function that occur in the houses of his community members.

To make known to the community members that a certain Nattukottai Chettiar has been declared as *marikappattullar*, the *Vairavi* [who goes to bring the Nattukottai Chettiar on the fifteenth day (of the complaint)] will bring from the individual's house a vessel which has his name embossed on it. This vessel with the *marikappattullar's* name will be kept at the *nagara viduthi* in order to identify this individual to the rest of the community members. This individual will not be given food at the *nagara viduthi*. He
has to sleep isolated from the other people at the *viduthi* and cook his own meals (Thenappan: 1990).

In a certain case, a wealthy Nattukottai Chettiar promised his brother's widow that she should be allowed to adopt a boy. But, as the promise was not fulfilled, she complained to the temple; and as her brother-in-law did not attend the council meeting, the *Vairavi* went to his house and in his absence, abstracted what is called as *adavu* (the item taken away by the *Vairavi*). This was regarded as a great insult, and there was some talk of the case going to court (Thurston: 1987).

*Mariyal* is the power that the temple had to excommunicate its caste members in the even of breaking any rule of the community. This decision was made by a set of people who played the role of a judge in the temple. The 'judges' in the temple also dealt with quarrels relating to money or business transactions among the community members. These judges have also solved legal issues and dealt with court laws. They acted almost like a court. The concerned parties are expected to abide by any judgement given by the temple judges. If one fails to do so he will be made a social outcast (*thallivaithal* or *uravittu vilakivaithal*).

Panchayats in the earlier days executed punishments that are not done today like *thalli vaikaruthu* - literally meaning,
to be made an outcast of. These punishments were inflicted even on women if they had done something wrong, or if they married within the same temple, or if their daughter ran away with somebody. The Panchayats for such mistakes had the right to ostracise them in those days.

Final decisions are never recorded in writing, but delivered by word of mouth. Those who fail to abide by the decision of the council do not receive a garland from the temple for their marriage, and without this garland a marriage cannot take place.

The *karyakarans* who act as Panchayatdars manage the temple and are nominated to the place by the local elders. If a case is first referred to them it may, if necessary, be carried over again to the established courts of the country. But if once a case is first taken to the courts, they would not entertain it before themselves (Thurston :1987).

The coming of courts has made the Nattukottai Chettiar\s reject the *mariyal kattu* system and resort to courts for resolving their problems. The first set of Nattukottai Chettiar\s who rejected the *mariyal kattu* system and took their issue to a court belonged to the Illayatangkudi temple. Following them members belonging to other temples also started to resort to courts to solve their disputes.
The issue that was brought to the court by the Nattukottai Chettiars of Illayathangkudi temple was regarding the temple management. A group of Nattukottai Chettiars wanted to be a part of the then existing management and filed a petition in the High Court in Madras in 1923. On 1-12-1926 a verdict was given by the court. On the basis of this verdict a management team consisting of five members began to function. Out of these members four members were arangakavalars, whose post was passed on to family members in a hereditary fashion. Among the arangkavalars, two of them took turns and functioned as tharmagarthars. According to the verdict of the court all tharmagarthars should belong to the Illayathangkudi temple (Thenappan:1990).

This system of temple panchayat is not existent anymore with the coming of courts, because decisions made by such temple panchayats are not considered legally binding or in other words lack the legal validity (selathu). For example outcasting a person socially based on caste rules is not legally valid.

Today there is no mariyal panchayat system in any Chettinad village (they have been obsolete for the past twenty-five years), only some elderly, experienced people of the community who may mediate or advise to settle an issue (for example, a property division in a family) amicably. These people have no rights to punish anyone the way it was done.
in the olden days. Even a few years ago, there were some community resolutions passed in the temples in the 96 villages but not anymore.

Besides temples, there are also other legal institutions created among the Nattukottai Chettiars by the Nattukottai Chettiars themselves. Thenappan (1990) identifies five institutions that the Nattukottai Chettiars resorted to to obtain justice. There were:

1. Nagara Kuttam
2. Vaguppu Kuttam
3. Madathu Vasal Kuttam
4. Vattakai Kuttam
5. Nagarathar Kuttam

Nagara kuttam is the only legal institution among the above mentioned institutions that takes place in a Nattukottai Chettiar temple today (the others are non-existent). The nagara kuttam takes place in the local Nagara Sivan temple of a particular town. The functioning of this nagara kuttam will be explained in detail shortly.

The second institution which is also known as mariyal kattu, which is probably what Thurston refers to as koil vasal mariyal, used to take place in the sect temples in the towns of Illayathangkudi, Mathur, Vairavanpatti, Illupakudi and
suraikudi. Today this practice is obsolete except in Vairavanpatti according to Thenappan (1990) where the mariyal kattu section is still a part of the nagara viduthi there. The sect temple with large number of cases of conflict resolution through the mariyal kattu is the Vairavan temple.

If a conflict is not resolved at the mariyal kattu, it is taken to the ashram (madam) at Kovilur which is the third legal institution called as Madathu Vasal Kuttam. Though this madam at Kovilur exists, today as my informant tells me no Nattukottai Chettiar resorts to solving his problems through this madam.

With regard to the Vattakai Kuttam and 96 Ur Nagarathar Kuttam most Nattukottai Chettiar informants are unable to provide any kind of details regarding its functioning capacities. Thenappan in his book says that he was unable to find any document or written information on the last two kuttams.
Chapter 4: Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter

Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter Today

Nagara Kuttam

The concept of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple functioning as a legal institution solving conflicts among Nattukotti Chettiar families or among individuals exists in the Nagara Sivan temples. It is known as *Nagara Kuttam*. The term panchayat is not used while referring to the *nagara kuttam* as some non Nattukottai Chettiers refer to as. The term panchayat is used to refer to only the statutory village panchayat or the *pangali* panchayat which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The *nagara kuttam* is called for at the local Nagara Sivan temple. The temple trustees of the Nagara Sivan temple organize this *kuttam* (meeting). The members who resolve / mediate between two parties in conflict and make a decision/judgement are elderly members who serve as representatives of the Nattukottai Chettiers in that particular town. For example, in Devakottai, the Nattukottai Chettiers further sub-divide themselves into what they call as *aru vagai* (literally meaning six types). Though the basis for this sub-classification is not clear, it is usually on the basis of their membership in their nine sect temples. Thus as Nattukottai Chettiers belonging to various temples reside in a town, they further sub-divide
themselves and appoint an elderly and knowledgeable person as the representative of their *vagai* (sub-division). The appointment of such representatives also has its criteria the accessibility of the potential representative; so naturally preference is given to the local residents of the town because they are more available when a *nagara kuttam* is called for.

The *nagara kuttam* is called for by the chief *nagara* trustee member i.e. President of the Trust. He chooses the date, time and place. Since the *nagara kuttam* takes place only in the local Nagara town temple a notice is put up or sometimes even a messenger is sent out to announce the oncoming meeting. This messenger is called a *pandaram* who goes from house to house making the announcement. Sometimes non-Nattukottai Chettiar are also invited to participate as special guests / invitees in the discussion.

This system within the Nattukottai Chettiar community, of solving problems through the local Nagara temple's *nagara kuttam* has even today resolved many issues to the satisfaction of the community members.

**Ur Kavai System**

In Devakottai, a family tells me that during the recent times the families residing in this town were faced with
Chapter 4: Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter

The town was plagued by burglars. Many families complained of jewels, money and other valuables being stolen. The matter was reported to the police. But the situation did not improve. Instead the burglary continued. Later, the residents claim that they found out that the local police force was hand in glove with the thieves. Therefore, the Nattukottai Chettiar had to resort to another means to solve their problem.

A nagara kuttam was called for to resolve this matter. In this meeting it was decided that they would implement an effective system of ur kaval (literally meaning protection of the town) with the help of all the male residents. One male resident of every street was asked to perform the duty of a watchman at night. He was to walk up and down the street with a flash light and a stick. This resolution was unanimously passed in the nagara kuttam.

This system of guarding one's neighbourhood turned out more effective than expected. The residents trusted themselves rather than the police. Each resident would perform his duty diligently and guard his neighbour's house like his own as only then would his neighbour do the same for his. A joint responsibility was then created.

The security measures of the police then slowly changed and were forced to become more alert and conscious of the
residents' problems and concerns as the residents themselves were taking control of a bad situation and making it better.

Solving Minor Political Scenarios

Similarly on another occasion in Kandanur the nagara kuttam implemented a decision. When the Panchayat Board elections in the State were about to take place the Nattukottai Chettiars had to elect a person who was to be nominated as Chairman to be a local Panchayat leader. For this issue a local nagara kuttam was called for in Kandanur. The idea was to unanimously nominate a person so that he/she would win without any opposition.

Thereby the nagara kuttam came to a decision about who was to be nominated to run for Panchayat leader. A lady candidate was unanimously decided upon. However a certain politician wanted to go against the decision of the nagara kuttam and appoint another nominee, which he did. The politician's candidate however lost the election to the lady nominee of the nagara kuttam. A local resident says, "The residents of Kandanur respected only the decision made by the nagara kuttam and not the power of the politician." This shows the unity among the members of the Nattukottai Chettiar community and portrays the kind of power and say the nagara kuttam commands over the community members.
Chapter 4: Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter

Working Towards Communal Harmony

Another instance where the Nagara town temple provided a solution to a problem in a town in Chettinad is regarding the koil thiruvizha (holy festive celebration) in the Nagara Sivan temple. As we already know during temple functions like thiruvizha celebrations, the Nattukottai Chettiars to who the Nagara Sivan temples belong to, are the ones who are honoured. This honouring of the Nattukottai Chettiars is referred to as mariyathai (respect). For many years this practice was followed. For many generations the Nattukottai Chettiars were given prime importance in the thiruvizha celebrations without any objections.

However one year as the thiruvizha function was nearing, this practice of honouring the Nattukottai Chettiars exclusively was questioned by the local residents of the town. They were the local non-Nattukottai Chettiars who also patronized the Nagarather town temple. They demanded that they should also be offered mariyathai in the town town temple.

A nagara kuttam was called for in the Nagara Sivan koil. The temple authorities assembled and heard the demands and arguments of both the Nattukottai Chettiars and the non Nattukottai Chettiars.
The Nattukottai Chettiars felt that the demands of the local non Nattukottai Chettiar residents cannot be complied with as it was they who, as the proprietors of the temple, had made the maximum contributions, and therefore deserve the right to maintain exclusivity in receiving mariyathai at the temple.

Besides, the Nattukottai Chettiars felt that in a Nagarathar temple exclusivity must be maintained in key aspects of the temple management such as trusteeship and rights of honour. There is no room for non Nattukottai Chettiars in these aspects of the Nagara Sivan temple.

However the non Nattukottai Chettiar residents of the town felt that, as they had also made some donations for the welfare of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple, they should also be given some recognition in the thiruvizha. The non Nattukottai Chettiars were furious that the Nattukottai Chettiars would not agree to their demands and as a result created a big commotion (galleta).

The temple authorities gathered at the nagara kuttam were not able to pacify the non Nattukottai Chettiars and were neither able to provide a solution that was acceptable to both the Nattukottai Chettiars and the non Nattukottai Chettiars. As a result the nagara kuttam ended with the decision to cancel the very celebration of the thiruvizha.
itself that particular year. Due to the lack of mutual consensus and harmony among the local residents and the Nattukottai Chettiar s, in this town, in certain years the thiruvizha celebrations had to be cancelled.

However one particular year, the temple authorities called for a nagara kuttam with a determined mind to put an end to the perennial feud about the thiruvizha celebrations, as the thiruvizha in the Nagara Sivan temple is an auspicious occasion and should not have been cancelled in the first place. That year the nagara kuttam convinced the Nattukottai Chettiar s of the town to give some significant role and some kind of an honouring act, on any one day (of the few days of thiruvizha celebration) during any one particular time of the day (morning or evening puja) to the non Nattukottai Chettiar s. This was acceptable to both the Nattukottai Chettiar s and the local non-Nattukottai Chettiar s. Henceforth the thiruvizha celebration has been smooth in this town.

Reconstructing Old Building

Yet another instance where the Nagara Sivan koil's nagara kuttam did an act of social and communal welfare was in a town called Chettinad. In this town a madam (choultry) was found in ruins. This madam belonged to the local Pillayar temple in the town. When I questioned the Nattukottai
Chettiar informants about the details of the *madam* in ruins, I got ambiguous answers.

Some people said that the owners of the land felt that the *madam* was not being properly maintained due to lack of time and lack of a systematic method of maintenance on the part of the people running the *madam*. Therefore it is in ruins.

Some people said that the *madam* had existed for many years. As it was not used by the residents of the town, to the extent that it was expected to serve the people, it was not maintained properly. Eventually time took its toll on the building. As it was very old, the foundations of the building became weak and gave away. As it was not maintained with care, the building had to bear the brunt of the seasons of heat, cold, rain and storm which caused irreparable damages.

A few years ago this building in ruins set many residents of the town thinking. As it was a sizeable area of land, it was not a prudent decision, the Nattukottai Chettiyars felt, to let the land lay purposelessly. To resolve this issue the local Nagara Sivan temple set a date for the *nagara kuttam* and notified the residents about the subject of discussion.
On the designated date the *nagara kuttam* commenced in the Nagara Sivan temple. Different people suggested different ideas as to how to utilize the available land. Some suggested that the *madam* should be reconstructed. Some others suggested that the land should be used for commercial purposes so as to earn money.

The temple authorities after hearing different views and suggestions came to a decision. They decided to build a community centre which will efficiently serve and aid the residents of the town in social and communal matters. A unanimous consent and agreement was reached by the temple authorities and the gatherers at the *nagara kuttam*.

Another *nagara kuttam* was later convened at the Nagara temple again in order to discuss issues relating to the building of the community centre. Issues such as how to raise money for the construction, when to start the construction, the approximate time in which the construction should be completed, to whom the construction contract could be given, who are the Nattukottai Chettiar who could be placed in charge of supervising the construction activities and other key issues regarding the building of the community centre. An informant of mine tells me that it is common practice in many Chettinad towns, for the Nagara Sivan temples to convene *nagara kuttam* to reconstruct old buildings.
Yet another incident where the Nagara Sivan temple brought to effect a decision through its nagara kullam meeting was in the Chettinad town of Kandanur. The Nagarathar temple in this town had a kullam (pond) like many other temples. Though the temple was being used by ardent devotees, the kullam was not being used in an appropriate manner. The water from the kullam which is supposed to be used for sacred purposes by the devotees was not being used in that manner.

The quality of the water of the kullam had degenerated due to abuse of the kullam. Some local residents of the town abused the kullam by washing their dirty clothes and bathing in the kullam water. As a result the soap residue contaminated the water. Some other illiterate boys who took cows and buffalos to graze the grasslands also took these animals to the kullam and used to give them a wash in the kullam water, thereby making the kullam water not suitable for sacred purposes or for drinking purposes. Besides this, stray cattle themselves, wandered into the kullam and polluted the kullam with their excreta, any virus they may carry and so on. The kullam due to lack of proper maintenance also had overgrown weeds and thick layers of
moss. This bad state in which the *kullam* was needed some attention.

The temple authorities learned about the badly maintained *kullam* and called for a *nagara kuttam* in the Nagara Sivan temple. They brought a system / project to effect called as *Ur Ani*. This *ur ani* system had as its purpose the cleaning of the *kullam* of the Nagara temple.

The name *ur ani* was probably derived from the tamil word *uthu thanni*.

*uthu thanni* - spring water/
    well water

*uthu* - any water springing
    from the ground

*thanni* - water

The word *uthu thanni* in course of time, with the fast pronunciation of the people must have become *ur ani*.

Another possible derivation of the word *ur ani* could be from the word *ur thanni*

*ur thanni* - town water

*ur* - town/village

*thanni* - water
In the olden days, the *kulathu thanni* (pond water) of the temple must have been referred to as *ur thanni* because the water from the temple *kullam* was not used for only holy and sacred purposes, but also for other purposes such as drinking, or for performing rites in a person's house during padappu and so on. Therefore as the *kullam* water was used by the entire population of the *ur* (town) for various needs, the *kullam thanni* must have also been called as *ur thanni*. As in the case of the formerly mentioned tamil word, this word - *ur thanni* - also was transformed into *ur ani* in course of speech.

The *nagara kuttam* drew up a list of rules and regulations regarding how the *ur ani* system was to function. There were two major aspects of the *ur ani* system:–

(1) How to clean the *kullam*

and

(2) How to maintain it henceforth?

A listing was made and followed as to how the temple *kullam* could be cleaned. A fence was set up around the *kullam* to inhibit any further use by people or cattle, until it was cleaned. Men were hired to clear the *kullam* of its weeds and moss. The water was purified with the advice and help of some professional water testing institutions.
concentration was next laid on the maintenance of the kullam. The nagara kuttam very firmly advised the town residents not to dirty the kullam water by using it for personal needs. To hinder cattle from straying into the temple kullam, fences were put up at appropriate places.

As sometimes the town suffered from water scarcity, residents of the town had to depend on the kullam water. But as the ur ani system restricted and questioned residents walking away with vessels of water from the kullam, the residents were faced with difficulty in obtaining drinking water. So the nagara kuttam made arrangements for a bore well / water tank to be built in the temple premises itself. The nagara kuttam also appointed security guards (kaval) to make sure that the regulations of use for the kullam and well were being followed and to make sure there was no abuse.

In another Chettinad town, Puduvayal an ur ani system was brought to effect by the nagara temple’s nagara kuttam. The degenerated kullam of the temple was rejuvenated by the methods mentioned in the former case. In order to maintain the kullam’s cleanliness another suggestion was made by the nagara kuttam.
The nagara kuttam gave a decision to build petty shops in the temple premises close to the area where the kullam was located (kadai katti vidalam). The nagara kuttam felt that by building shops around the kullam area, more than one goal will be achieved. Firstly it will prevent abuse of the kullam and secondly certain social causes will be met.

To explain the prevention of abuse of the temple kullam, building of shops around the kullam area will make that area very busy with people and action and not as deserted and free of public view as it was formerly. Therefore this will prevent residents of the town from bathing and washing in the kullam water. Similarly cattle can be prevented from dirtying the kullam water, as people will chase them and the boys bringing them, away. Therefore, by building shops the area will not be sparsely populated with only occasional visits by devotees. There will be people to question and restrain the abusers of the kullam. Besides this, there will be kavai (security) for the shops who besides guarding the shops will also watch over the kullam.

Secondly, the building of shops as the nagara kuttam said will meet certain other needs of the town besides aiding the kullam maintenance. By building shops, opportunities for business will be created. Some unemployed residents of the town could utilize this proposal to set up a small shop that sells various interesting and necessary items and make a
living. As the shops are set up in the temple lands belonging to the Nattukottai Chettiaras, shop-keepers pay rent to the temple proprietors. This way some money is generated for the temple which will make the Nagara Sivan temple more self-sufficient. Therefore this nagara koil's decision to build shops had a dual purpose of maintaining a clean temple kullam and meeting social causes of unemployment and any thin opportunities for business.

The kullam of the Nagara Sivan temples are usually maintained by the Nagara temples themselves. In most Chettinad towns the temples take good care of the kullams. However there have been a few towns wherein the nagara temples could not maintain the temple kullams efficiently. In those cases the local Panchayat Board in the town was requested to takeover the maintenance of the kullam.

Protecting and Managing Temple Lands

In another Chettinad town the nagara kuttam gave a decision regarding some vacant lands (porampokku nilam) belonging to the Nagara Sivan temple. In this town there was a sizable property belonging to the temple lying vacant. It had been so for some years, because no proper plans were made by the temple to utilize the land.
This continued vacancy in the land caught the eye of some poor town residents. They noticed that the land was not being used and was also not being guarded properly. A set of poor people therefore started using this land for their personal use. They started tying their cows and buffalos in this land and were using it as a cowshed. One day a Nattukottai Chettiar who passed by noticed this and when he realized that it was the temple land he reported the matter to the concerned people. Action was then taken to remove the cattle and the residents responsible for this action were admonished by the temple personnel.

For some time the land was not used. But after a few months once again another set of poor inhabitants of the town occupied the vacant property. These people had in fact set up huts and had even started residing there. This was brought to the notice of the temple authorities. Once again the temple authorities had to go through the process of evicting the illegal residents of the temple land.

The temple authorities realized that this was going to be a perennial problem as vacant, unused property always faces the problem of illegal occupation by people. Therefore a nagara kuttam was called for to decide the best possible way to utilize this land belonging to the temple.
The nagara kuttam came up with the idea that the land could be used for vara santhai (weekly market). In the villages it is common practice to set up such santhai (market) where various kinds of activities take place, some of which are selling of one's cattle at a good price, having professional photographers take pictures, selling and buying vegetables and fruits at a whole sale price, making available to the town residents some articles from the city which are not otherwise available in the village and so on. The santhai is therefore a big event for the villages and the villagers. It is also a source of entertainment and passtime for some and thereby attracted large numbers of teens and the youth of the village. The nagara kuttam said that by having such a santhai every week, the temple land would be filled with activity every week and would restrict illegal occupation of the land.

In another town in Chettinad, a vacant temple property was faced with similar problems of occupation by vagrants and the poor of the town. In this case also the local Nagarasivan temple convened a nagara kuttam to resolve this issue. The nagara kuttam decided that the temple land would be given on lease to some local residents / businessmen of the town and would charge a certain amount of money. The nagara kuttam said that the land should be given on lease to trustworthy and honest businessmen who would pay the lease amount regularly, because the money generated in the name of
lease money was intended to be used for the temple. Therefore they wanted to ensure regular flow of money to the temple by leasing the land to trustworthy people. The nagara kuttam's decision therefore made the Nagara Sivan temple capable of self-generating revenue for at least part of its needs.

body cremate me' cries a voice

In the town of Kandanur, there was a remarkable and yet a sad incident that happened which shows the extent to which a Nagara Sivan koil's nagara kuttam plays a role in the Nattukottai Chettiar community. There lived a Nattukottai Chettiar who was very rich with properties and wealth worth several crores of Rupees. He had even established business ventures in Malaysia. He was well respected in the community. He was married and had children. He also had a mistress. He had children with this woman also. He passed away in June 1991. At the time of his death, he was living with the mistress in Kandanur.

Hearing the news of her husband's death, his wife asked for her husband's corpse to be given to her, so that she could have her son perform the cremation rites for his father. But the mistress refused to give the corpse to the wife. She insisted that the rites would be performed by her son. She said that her son was the one with the right to perform
the death rites (ima chadangugal). The mistress said that the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar had written a will which made his mistress and his children through the mistress, the legal heirs to his wealth which in her opinion further reinstates her son's right to perform the death rites for his father.

The wife said that she does not wish to contest for the property heir nor does she intend to completely deny the son of the mistress the right to perform the rites. She said, 'All I want is for my husband's corpse to be given to me, so that my son can perform the death rites first. Following that, let the 'other' son also perform the rites. But my son deserves the right to perform the rites first.'

The mistress rejected this plea and was adamant that her son should conduct the rites completely. This greatly infuriated the wife. She said that as the legal and only wife of the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar, she was being more than fair in offering to allow the son of the mistress also to participate in the death rites performed, following her son. She felt that the mistress, who did not possess the same social status and social title (of 'wife') as herself, was being totally unfair by insisting that she would not give the corpse to the wife and that her son would monopolize the cremation procedures of the deceased man and would not allow the wife of the deceased Nattukottai
Chettiar and his son to perform any of the rites in any capacity.

The wife of the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar felt that this issue called for intervention from the local Nagara Sivan temple. She therefore approached the temple management trustees with her problem. Though the Nagara Sivan temple's nagara kuttam does not usually solve personal problems of a Nattukottai Chettiar, in this case the Nattukottai Chettiar woman felt that her family problem was also a community problem. It was as issue that challenged, disrespected and dismissed a community / temple rule. She felt that this issue was questioning the very pulli system itself.

The wife of the Nattukottai Chettiar businessman with their children as considered a pulli. In other words, this family is recognized by the Nattukottai Chettiar temple as a legal Nattukottai Chettiar nuclear family of the Nattukottai Chettiar community. This family will also lose its pulli status and become half pulli as the man of the family has passed away. The deceased Nattukottai Chettiar's mistress and children are not considered a pulli at all. In other words, the mistress' family is not a legal unit of the community. Therefore, it is clear that the Nattukottai Chettiar temple considers and recognizes only the family of the Nattukottai Chettiar consisting of his wife and the children born to the two of them, as the 'real' and 'valid'
family of the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar. In other words, it is the wife's son and not the mistress' son with the legal right over his father's corpse.

The wife of the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar also said that she did not contest the Nattukottai Chettiar's will which entrusted the mistress' children as the ones with the right to inherit his wealth, as that was an individual's right of choice. But as far as the performance of death rites and cremation procedures, she and her son cannot forgo their rights. Because if they do so, then her very social status of wife and her family's status of pulli, given to them by the Nattukottai Chettiar temple would become meaningless.

The authorities of the Nagara Sivan temple after hearing the complaints of the wife complied with her request to interfere in this issue. They decided to convene a nagara kuttam. As the cremation of a corpse was not an issue that could wait long, the Nagara Sivan temple decided to call for a nagara kuttam at their earliest possible. Accordingly, a nagara kuttam was convened within four hours.

The mistress was also present at the nagara kuttam expressing her version of her right over the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar's corpse. The nagara kuttam however saw no justice and right in her request and asked her to hand over the corpse to the wife of the deceased Nattukottai
Chettiar. But the mistress flatly refused to abide by the decision of the nagara kuttam.

The nagara kuttam therefore passed another ruling / decision. It said that no member of the Nattukottai Chettiar community should aid or involve himself or participate in the death rites and cremation procedures of the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar. The nagara kuttam also said that no ambattan (the person who performs the act of 'head-shaving' for the son who cremates his father's corpse) or vettiyan or parayar (the person in charge of cremation in the crematory) in the town of Kandanur should perform any of their customary duties for the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar's death rites and cremation procedures. The nagara kuttam also said that the land in which the cremation would take place belongs to the Nagar temple and as the mistress did not abide by the decision of the nagara kuttam, the corpse of the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar would not be allowed to be cremated in that crematory.

These various conditions of the nagara kuttam's ultimate decision clearly ruled out any possibility of the mistress to provide a respectable cremation for the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar. As the mistress went against the temple's decision she then found herself alone and helpless with no one to aid her cremate the corpse. She even considered bringing an ambattan from a neighbouring town,
but no one would dare help her at the expense of incurring the ill-will of the local Nattukottai Chettiar temple.

The members of the Nattukottai Chettiar community felt sorry for the deceased Nattukottai Chettiar, because he was a respected man and was not being given a proper cremation. An ambattan said with tears rolling in his eyes, 'Just three days ago I borrowed Rs.3000 from this gentleman. He has been so helpful and kind to me. I am sad that I am not able to perform any death rite for him. What can I do? My hands are tied by the temple's decision.'

The corpse was finally deprived of a proper cremation. It was just put away in a land where anatha ponams (corpses which have no family members to perform the cremation) are cremated. The corpse was torn to pieces by crows and foxes and left in a pathetic state to decay.

Solving Goshti Sandai

The nagara kuttam is used to solve major issues like goshti sandai (quarrel between two groups or sects of people). Once in a town in Chettinad the celebration of the Kantha Sashti vizha came up which involved an amount of Rs. 2 lakhs. There were two parties (goshti) wanting to conduct this major event. Therefore, a nagara kuttam was called for to decide which one of the two groups of people was
responsible and trustworthy enough to take on the organization of the above mentioned event.

This system of nagara kuttam still prevails and plays a role in important town affairs like nomination of leader, goshti sandai and so on and does not interfere in the one on one petty individual fights. The nagara kuttam has as its aim the larger purpose of the welfare of a Chettinad town/village and maintaining community solidarity.

**Pangali Panchayat/Kattu System**

While examining the different kinds of panchayat systems (some obsolete and some existent) mentioned above, I find that a certain type of panchayat has not been dealt with namely, pangali panchayat or kattu.

Certain family issues are also settled though this system. But it is not referred to as nagara podhu kuttam (as in the former cases). It is referred to as pangali panchayat or kattu or just panchayat. In this case, there is no need to assemble the entire town's residents. It is solved in a more private manner. A local community head who is affiliated to the temple will solve the issue.

For example, in Devakottai the concerned parties will approach one or two elderly members who serve as heads and
representatives of the six types (*vagais*) of Devakottai Nattukottai Chettiers. This sort of panchayat does not necessarily occur in the temple. It may take place at the house of the respective people itself, as it is the private matter of some family.

The term the Nattukottai Chettiers constantly use is *pangali* panchayat, because the above mentioned kind of panchayat is organized with the *pangali* members and not with the temple trustees or temple authorities as in the case of the widely existing *nagara kuttam*.

Property disputes were not usually settled by these panchayats unless two parties wanted the panchayat to mediate and settle the issue amicably. Such personal, family problems were taken to the panchayat out of choice. It was not compulsory. Though panchayats are quite common for the Chettiers, both parties have to go voluntarily to a certain older person who sorts out the matters. This older person will usually be one of the most respected people of the town. He may be experienced in dealing with Panchayat justice. But it was not necessary that this person held a high place/post in the temple.

The *pangali* panchayat resolves problems and handles issues among the community members that exist at an individual level or at the family level. Issues that do not concern
the community's welfare or the town's welfare are not referred to the nagara temple or the nagara kuttam. Instead an individual's member's griefs and family quarrels are solved with the help of the elderly members of the pangali family.

The elderly members conciliate the disputants as far as possible and, after reducing the difference between them to a minimum, they often get their signatures to an award, in which a blank is left to decide the still existing point of difference, the disputants agreeing, after putting in their signatures, to the mediators' filling in the blank and deciding the dispute as they choose. This is basically like a memorandum of understanding (MOU).

The pangali panchayat / kattu system functions not only in a way to solve the personal grievances of an individual or a family but also in some instances as a witness for important family affairs. I would like to narrate a few incidents, where the pangali panchayat / kattu system, in one instance provided a solution to a Nattukottai Chettiar woman and in other instances, brought to effect a rule among a set of pangali families.

In a town Chettinad there was a Nattukottai Chettiar man who had borrowed money from a money - lender. He was paying his dues in the form of interest money every month to the money
Chapter 4: Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter

- lender. This man passed away unexpectedly. Therefore his widow was obligated to pay her husband's debt. She was expected to pay her husband's dues in the manner her husband was paying. However as the widow had to already battle the sudden loss of her husband and also strive to manage her family single-handedly without the man of the house, she was not able to pay the interest money to the money-lender. The money-lender was enraged by the lack of systematic receipt of his interest money.

This matter was referred to the pangali panchayat. The elders of the pangali family after hearing the complaints of the money-lender and the grievances of the widow came to a decision. They told the money-lender that he should go easy on his demands in this case, because the widow was honestly in financial trouble due to the loss of her husband and was not trying to cheat him. The money-lender was asked to take into consideration her husband's honesty and regularity in paying his dues. The money-lender was asked to excuse the widow from paying the interest money.

The widow was however told that though she was exempted from paying interest money it would not be fair to let the money-lender lose his entire principal money also. She was asked to work out some acceptable arrangement with the money-lender to pay the principal money in small amounts at least, over a period of time. By this decision the widow
was not unfairly harrassed and the money - lender did not lost atleast his principal money.

The elderly members of the pangali family sometimes also serve the role of witnesses of important family issues and affairs like for example, division of property in a family. This is common practice among the member of this community. There was one instance, when a widow was dividing the family property, she requested the pangali elders to be present during this act. This is usually done in a family, in order to avoid quarrels and discussions about fair division later on.

The kattu system in some cases also functions in a way to change certain traditions and customs among a group of pangali families in a certain Chettinad town. For example a Nattukottai Chettiar informant tells me that in her town, particularly among her pangali families the celebration of the life - cycle ceremonies of pudumai and thiruvadiraI were grand events. A big function was organized, many people were invited, elaborate meals were arranged and many rituals were conducted, thereby spending enormous amounts of money.

However a set of families could not afford to spend a lot of money for such ceremonies. Therefore these families decided to put forth their difficulties regarding such grand celebration of life - cycle ceremonies to the kattu. The
elderly members of the kattu after examining the personal difficulties of these individual families and after analyzing the actual symbolism behind these ceremonies, passed a ruling that grand celebrations of pudumai and thiruvadirai had become nothing but a sign of ostentation. Therefore the kattu said that among this set of pangali families it was not necessary to conduct pudumai and thiruvadirai functions.

Similarly the kattu system also made a change in another custom of the Nattukottai Chettiars. It is common among Nattukottai Chettiars, during their marriages, to have a practice called panam ezhuthartha. Panam ezhuthartha is a practice where the name of the person attending the wedding and the amount of his gift money is written down in a book. For example,

Mr. P.C.Chidambaram - Rs.201
Mr. L.S.Lakshmanan - Rs.101
Mr. P.L.Ramanathan - Rs.11
Mr. R.M.Palaniappan - Rs.501

Such a system made some people feel humiliated and inferior to some others as they may not be able to give a large sum of gift money and may feel bad to even write their gift money amount in the book.
Therefore the *kattu* system brought a rule saying that in the custom of *panam ezhutharthu*, an amount should be fixed which is what all the invitees at the Nattukottai Chettiar wedding will write against their names in the book. Any other gift should be given separately to the bride and the bridegroom. The amount fixed in one *pangali* circle by the *kattu* was 25 paise. Henceforth, in that *pangali* circle the *panam ezhutharthu* practice was carried out in the following manner: -

- Mr. P.C. Chidambaram - 25 paise
- Mr. L.S. Lakshmanan - 25 paise
- Mr. P.L. Ramanathan - 25 paise
- Mr. R.M. Palaniappan - 25 paise

The *kattu* said that by the above kind of practice the actual and original purpose of the *panam ezhutharthu*, namely to know who attended and who did not attend the wedding, is fulfilled and no exhibition of ostentation is made.

The *kattu* system has also devised rules regarding how many times a Nattukottai Chettiar can eat in his or her *pangali* family's house. An informant of mine, Mrs. Visalakshi Ramasamy says that she can eat only two times in her *pangali* family's house, when she goes there for some occasion or function. She says that this rule must be strictly adhered to, and cannot be relaxed even to the extent of allowing her
to have even one extra meal. This system was probably devised, because the Nattukottai Chettiar usually invite large numbers of guests for any function they conduct. Therefore a system like the above mentioned one will help them organize the number of meals and the amount of food that is necessary for a celebration in their house.

Nagarathar Temple – The Ultimate Arbiter

The temple functioning as a decision-maker/arbiter is a distinguishing characteristic of the Nattukottai Chettiar community. Though the Nattukottai Chettiar sect temple does not play the role of a legal court as earlier and though the various systems of temple panchayat that existed at one point in time have become obsolete, the ideology behind the existence of such a system still exists.

The idea behind the Nattukottai Chettiar temples functioning as an arbitrating institution / entity was to solve problems at all levels like at the individual level, social level and community level. Today the Nattukottai Chettiar sect temple does not solve individual problems or family problems or social problems or community problems. The Nagara Sivan temple in every Chettinad town also does not solve individual problems or family feuds but it does solve social and communal problems. However to solve individual grievances and family quarrels, the Nattukottai Chettiar
Chapter 4: Nattukottai Chettiar Temple As An Arbiter

have maintained among themselves the pangali panchayat / kattu system.

The Nagar Sivan temple has solved a wide range of issues, namely social issues, communal issues, religious issues and even minor political issues existent in the various Chettinad towns which are brought to light by the detailed and descriptive case studies discussed in this chapter. Such an authoritative role that the Nagar Sivan temple plays in the Nattukottai Chettiar community, is because of a two-way relationship. In other words, the Nattukottai Chettiar temples function efficiently as an arbitrating entity and therefore the Nattukottai Chettiers go to the temples with their problems; and since the Nattukottai Chettiers to trust the efficiency and fairness of the Nattukottai Chettiar temples' decisions, the Nattukottai Chettiar temples function efficiently.

The successful functioning of the Nagarathar town temples as arbiters and decision-makers is because of its principles and well-organized structure. When a nagara kuttam is convened, it functions in a professional manner, just as the legal courts in the city function. Just as how legal cases in the courts of the city have experienced judges, the nagara kuttam also has esteemed members, who are the temple management trustees or the eldest member of the temple or
renowned community members with a good reputation, making decisions and judgements.

Decisions made by the nagara kuttam are never hasty decisions. A temple trustee member tells me, 'One never makes a decision simply because a nagara kuttam has been called for. A decision is made only because it is the right one. There have been occasions when a certain nagara kuttam has ended without being able to make a suitable decision. The nagara kuttam in this case will be deferred to another date (just as in the case of the governmental legal courts)'.

The Nagara temple also keeps in mind another important factor while making decisions through its nagara kuttam, which is fairness and justice. No special preference is given to any one community member's interests. This can be seen in the case of conflict of opinions during the thiruvizha celebrations, between the Nattukottai Chettiers and the non Nattukottai Chettiers. The decision that the nagara kuttam gave reflects that there is no partiality or bias in their decision. They were fair to the non Nattukottai Chettiers and did not favour the Nattukottai Chettiers unconditionally.

Another key trait of the Nattukottai Chettiar temples functioning as a problem-solving entity, is that their
decisions and always prudent and shrewd. They go beyond just solving a problem. They make a bad situation better which is what their duty is. But they do not stop with just that. They analyze various other possibilities and opportunities that may arise from a situation and turn a bad state of affairs into a good monetarily beneficial situation.

This can be seen in the case studies where they decided to build shops in the temples premises and when they decided to give the temple lands to certain individuals on lease. On both these occasions the nagara kuttam exhibited not only its efficient way to function as a legal entity but also as a prudent institution guarding all its interests.

Another reason why the Nattukottai Chettiaras readily refer their problems to the Nagara Sivan temples is because, the nagara kuttam is committed to keeping public interest as one of its major priorities in any decision that it may make. The previously mentioned incident at Kandanur shows that the nagara kuttam suppresses an individual’s interest and keeps its focus on the public interest / collective interest, that is the welfare and harmony of the residents of the town. It is because of this goal of the nagara kuttam that it is existent even today and sort to often in subsequent problem-solving occasions.
Plate 15. Nagara Sivan Temple at Kandanur
Plate 16. Nagara Sivan Temple at Devakottai