Chapter 5

Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the various kinds of temples that the Nattukottai Chettiar affiliate themselves to, their origin, the characteristics of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple management, the role of various temples in the Nattukottai Chettiar family and marriage and the arbitrating function of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple.

This chapter will synthesize and summarize the key issues discussed in the dissertation, in a way to portray the Nattukottai Chettiar community as a temple-oriented community.

Social Conformity

The Nattukottai Chettiar temple functions as an institution that binds the community members together. One of the distinguishing traits that the temples instil among the Nattukottai Chettiars is social conformity.

The functioning of the nagara kuttam is an exceptional system that exists among the Nattukottai Chettiars. It is an effective system devised by the members of this community to maintain harmony in their town and in their community.
The *nagara kuttam* also brings to light the importance the Nattukottai Chettiars give to social conformity.

Peter M. Blau (Wallace and Wolf: 1991) says that 'individual rationalizations are transformed into social consensus and indeed social norms' which is seen in the functioning of the *nagara kuttam*. Certain elderly individuals are accepted as representatives of the community members of the town and their decisions or judgements made on various important issues concerning the town/community are accepted and collectively followed by. Thus collective conformity is created among the community members. Any member of the community who departs from this collective norm is met with social disapproval as seen in Kandanur during the cremation of the Nattukottai Chettiar corpse.

Rewards for conforming to temple rules and decisions do not come in the form of material rewards. Rewards received by the Nattukottai Chettiars are not tangible. They receive social approval among the community members in exchange for their conformity.

By adhering to the moral values and principles of the community, the Nattukottai Chettiar individuals establish a good reputation and sound credibility among the community members which stand them in good stead in subsequent social interaction in the community.
A Nattukottai Chettiar father tells me, 'By following the community rules like marrying within (and sometimes outside) temples and abiding by a decision made in a nagara kuttam in a temple, my credibility is augmented and I get a 'good name' (nala per). I become a person whose word is respected and influential. My family members and friends are also benefitted. For example, my good name in the community helps me get a good marriage proposal for my children.'

The strong bond with the community rules and regulations and the internalization of the community's social norms make the Nattukottai Chettiar feel that the above mentioned kind of social approval and social acceptance is reward enough for their conformity to community values and rules.

In fact it can very well be said that one can see social approval and community acceptance as the main force creating conformity. However it seems less plausible and unlikely that people will know enough about their fellow community members' actions for this to create and maintain conformist behaviour and thereby reward them with social approval.

When I questioned a Nattukottai Chettiar woman about this, she said, 'In this community, even if one may not know a certain person at a personal level, when enquiry about a certain Nattukottai Chettiar individual is conducted (say in
the event of a marriage proposal), information (especially negative aspects) about the concerned individual will be obtained through the temple sources.

Contacts developed among fellow community members during temple meetings are one source. The temple register is another source which gives information about a person's grandparents, parents, siblings and other family members. Information on the family's marital history is available.

This is considered an essential element in choosing a marriage partner. A family member of the potential groom or bride who broke marriage rules of the community can negatively affect or maybe even deter the chance of a Nattukottai Chettiar person getting a suitable match in the community.

Therefore, it is clear that another factor creating social conformity is social stigma. Punishments for non-conformity come to the non-conformer in a direct fashion and also in an indirect, latent manner. A non-conformer of marriage rules of temple loses his membership in his/her respective sect temple. The community members from then on, do not give him the same kind of respect that he once commanded.

This sort of punishment not only serves the function of deterrence of communal crime but also maintains collective
sentiments and shared community values. The social stigma inflicted on non-conformist behaviour also maintains the community rules with the same level of intensity because the significance and importance of the rules to the community members will be weakened, if the offences committed against them remain unpunished and ignored.

The fear of being social stigmatized by the community members becomes as important a factor (sometimes even more important) as the desire to win social approval, in maintaining conformity. Therefore both social approval and disapproval motivates the Nattukottai Chettiar$s$ to follow the temple regulations and community rules.
Community/Collective Consciousness and Integration

The temple rules (for example, marriage rules), the management system of the temple and the institutional role played by the temple in the form of nagara kuttam integrate the members of the Nattukottai Chettiar community together.

The Nattukottai Chettiar temple defines the group/community. It makes the community self-aware. The Nattukottai Chettiar temple with its marriage rules and its system of management sets boundaries between communities (namely between the Nattukottai Chettiar and other members of this community in the case of marriages and between the Nattukottai Chettiar and the local residents of Chettinad like Vellalar, Kallars and so on in the case of temple management).

It strengthens community consciousness. It creates an awareness of 'separateness' thus establishing the community’s identity. It maintains stability and increases cohesion and integration among the Nattukottai Chettiar.

However while establishing community consciousness among the Nattukottai Chettiar on the one hand, the temple's system and rules excludes certain communities from participating in temple activities in a certain capacity, thereby, on the other hand creating some hostile sentiments.
The community's identity is further emphasized by introducing a 'reference group' to which the Nattukottai Chettiars contrast themselves (Wallace and Wolf: 1991). The Nattukottai Chettiars participate even more enthusiastically and fulfil their duties at their temple with more sincerity in order to reinstate their exclusive rights at the temple, which are not allowed to be enjoyed by other community members.

The disassociation of the Nattukottai Chettiars with the other communities has a unifying effect among the Nattukottai Chettiars themselves. In other words, otherwise disintegrating factors create integration and cohesion in the Nattukottai Chettiar community itself.

While most Nattukottai Chettiars are community conscious, there have been occasions when deviant behaviour - by breaking community laws - has been exhibited by some Nattukottai Chettiars. However it should be noted that hostility and deviance from certain Nattukottai Chettiars who do not abide by marriage rules of the temple or a certain decision made by the temple management, has not led to community dissolution. In fact, on the contrary, it only has served to very clearly identify the norms that define 'correct' behaviour. The non-conformers and deviants of the community are outcasted and never receive approval and
support from the other Nattukottai Chettiar as in the case in Kandanur.

The Nattukottai Chettiar feel that maintenance of exclusive rights for certain temple duties by them is based on the belief that only then can community integration exist among the Nattukottai Chettiar. When people belonging to different castes and communities run the management system of the temple, each one will pursue interests beneficial to himself or his particular community. It would be less likely that they would devote all their energies to the common, collective goal of efficient temple management. Instead factors like perceived superiority of one community over another and personal ego problems will create conflicts of interest. Conflicts of interests may transform into conflicts of ideas as Mannheim says (Wallace and Wolf: 1991) which may shake the ideologies of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple which is what the Nattukottai Chettiar want to avoid.
Functional Alternatives

Max Gluckman notes that 'all over the world there are societies which have no governmental institutions ... Yet these societies have well-established and well-known codes of morals and law ... We know that some of them have existed over long periods with some kind of internal law and order ... ' (Wallace and Wolf:1991). Nattukottai Chettiar community is definitely one such society which developed its own temple registration of marriage long before the coming of the Government/Corporation registration of marriage and its own justice system through the temple much before the common usage of courts. It is the Nattukottai Chettiars' internal code of laws and values that has preserved the distinguishing cultural characteristics of this community.

Each society / community has a set of social institutions / social systems forming a social structure. They fulfill specific functions. Robert K. Merton however emphazises that 'there is no reason to suppose that particular, given institutions are the only ones able to fulfill these functions; therefore, a given social structure is in no way sacrosanct. On the contrary, there may be a wide range of what he terms functional alternatives, or substitutes, able to perform the same task' (Wallace and Wolf:1991).
In the olden days the Nattukottai Chettiar temple unilaterally performed many institutional functions and played an all pervasive role in the social institutions of the community like marriage and family, legal systems and business.

Today in the Nattukottai Chettiar community, it is still the Nattukottai Chettiar temple that serves as a functional alternative to many aspects of the lives of the Nattukottai Chettiars. It questions the indispensability of the functions of other institutions.

In any society temples are supposed to execute the traditional function of combating anomie and personal unhappiness of the members of the community and provide them with peace and happiness.

The Nattukottai Chettiar temple does more than just that. It maintains and inculcates certain norms and values that are central to the community and thereby binds and integrates the community members together. The management system of the temple performs the function of ‘sorting and separating’ communities out and enhancing the unity of the Nattukottai Chettiars in the name of performing temple duties and other temple activities.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Even today when the Corporation marriage registration of a wedding is adopted by every single couple, the Nattukottai Chettiar still consider their temple registration of their wedding important. It is more than just a functional alternative to them. It is considered as the seal of approval from the temple which wins them and their posterity good respect. Therefore, the Nattukottai Chettiar temple registration of a wedding can be interpreted as a culturally instilled goal with an institutionally provided seal of recognition which every Nattukottai Chettiar strives to attain.

The Corporation registration of a couple’s wedding is not totally substituted by the temple wedding registration. It is not a substitute as Merton says, but rather a supplement.

Similarly even with the existence of courts, Nattukottai Chettiar temples and their nagara kuttams are often resorted to, once again functioning as a functional alternative. In many cases, like for example the burglary problem in Devakottai, is best solved by the nagara kuttams. Therefore, courts and police are not the only answer for the problems that the Nattukottai Chettiar face. Their Nagara Sivan temple serves them just as well in that capacity. The Nattukottai Chettiar Nagara Sivan temple thereby executes the same functions of law, order and public
protection that the law and police force are supposed to provide.

Thus similar functions are fulfilled by very different institutions, thereby reducing the tendency of a society/community to come to a cultural status quo in the event of one institution failing to perform its functions efficiently (Gamst and Norbeck: 1976). The Nattukottai Chettiar thus, fulfills functions of different institutions and gives its community members an alternative resource to turn to, when failed by other institutions in certain matters.

However the functional alternative may be more functional or less functional for different people. The Nattukottai Chettiar temple though solves a town's problems (as in the town of Devakottai) which benefits both the Nattukottai Chettiars and the other local residents of the town, this may not be the case on all occasions.

The Nattukottai Chettiar temple is primarily designed to serve as a functional alternative for the members of its community. Though the Nagara Sivan temple works sometimes to solve the collective problems of a town, the Nattukottai Chettiar sect temple, as the very name implies, will obviously function with the welfare of the Nattukottai Chettiar as its primary interest.
A Concluding Analysis

The Nattukottai Chettiar temple's functioning centres upon its role with reference to both the Nattukottai Chettiar individual and the Nattukottai Chettiar community. There is an interrelationship between the Nattukottai Chettiar temple and the Nattukottai Chettiar culture in the various capacities discussed in the dissertation. The Nattukottai Chettiar temple is a structured system which aims at maintaining equilibrium and integration among the members of the community. While the sect temple operates towards the maintenance of a whole Nattukottai Chettiar community, the Nagar Sivan temples besides maintaining a oneness in the community, also function to create a compatible enmeshing of the Nattukottai Chettiar community with the other non Nattukottai Chettiar communities of the town.

The Nattukottai Chettiar temples, which have made themselves an indispensable part of the Nattukottai Chettiar community and cultural habits, have clear lines of emphasis. The Nattukottai Chettiar temples' manner of operations make clear that their interests are generally weighed toward the group rather than the individual.

The Nattukottai Chettiar temples - their ideologies and the belief systems they create - support the social structure
and the institutionalized customs of the Nattukottai Chettiar family and other social units, the scheme of social and community stratification, moral and ethical codes, institutions such as marriage and even their economic systems.

The traditions and manners of the Nattukottai Chettiar community’s customs and social relationships. A common trait of the Nattukottai Chettiar community’s customs is the placing upon them a stamp of sacred approval. For example, the custom of the various kinds of payment of monies to the temple symbolically expresses the committed relationship of the Nattukottai Chettiar family with their temples. The Nattukottai Chettiar marriage rules is a symbolic expression of their perceived superiority over their community members. Certain isolated Nattukottai Chettiar traditions such as pulli registration, koil malai, koil melam and so on are symbols of the stamp of sacred approval from the sect temple and nagara Sivan temple. The customs of padappu and life - cycle ceremonies symbolize the importance the Nattukottai Chettiar family give to the Ayyanar temples also.

The Nattukottai Chettiar family's relationship with the various temples namely their nine temples, nagara Sivan temples,
Ayyanar temples and the Dhandayuthapani temples abroad fortify the individual element and also the community element as a whole. The various group actions and collective behaviour are seen in various activities such as temple management of the nine temples, town temples and temples abroad, grand festive temple functions like thiruvizha, group participation of all the members of the nine temples in padappu performances, temple meetings like the nagara kuttam and so on.

Such group activities of the community members play a role in promoting social cohesion by jointly expressing the views of the community, in the context of issues regarding both the Nattukottai Chettiar individual and the Nattukottai Chettiar community as a whole, thereby reinforcing and teaching the values of this community. Group participation in religious rites or temple meetings intensifies social unity with a formal seal of sanctification which it gives to the cultural values and norms expressed about the Nattukottai Chettiar community.

The existence of the Nattukottai Chettiar's distinguishing and unique cultural traits depend upon the shared social sentiments among the community members, which are reinstated by the Nattukottai Chettiar temples. It is the Nattukottai Chettiar temples that have aided the community in preserving, reaffirming and maintaining the intensity of
their unique cultural characteristics through their various regulations such as marriage rules, religious rituals and so on.

While analyzing the kinds of functions of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple, the kinds of functions identified by Gamst and Norbeck (1976) can be applied. 'A four-fold scheme of classification of types of functions has emerged in these analyses of the role of religion with reference to society and the individual. A distinction is made between positive functions ............ and negative functions ............ a distinction is also made between manifest functions ............ and implicit functions ............' (Gamst and Norbeck: 1976).

The positive functions can be defined as those functions that contribute to social consensus and solidarity among the members of the Nattukottai Chettiar community. The manifest functions can be defined as the purposes of the various activities and attributes of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple as they exist in the thoughts of the 'actors' (i.e. community members). The implicit functions can be defined as the effects or consequences of the various activities and attributes of the Nattukottai Chettiar temple that are generally unclear or unknown to the community and its members (Gamst and Norbeck: 1976). In other words, manifest functions are obvious, intended and recognized, while latent or implicit functions are not obvious, unintended and unrecognized.
The positive functions executed by the Nattukottai Chettiar temple is that it had preserved a culture that is unique to the Nattukottai Chettiar community. The Nattukottai Chettiar nine temples, the nagara Sivan temple and the Dhandayuthapani temples abroad bring the Nattukottai Chettiers together for various occasions and meetings and thereby create unity among them. The Nattukottai Chettiar temples - nagara Sivan temples - create interpersonal relationships between the Nattukottai Chettiers and the non Nattukottai Chettiers of the Chettinad towns and villages. The Nattukottai Chettiar temples and the elderly members of the community (who maybe important members of the temple) conduct temple meetings as and when necessity demands to solve problems reported regarding the community members, the Nattukottai Chettiar community itself, the respective town in which the temple is located and so on.

As regards the manifest functions and the implicit functions of the Nattukottai Chettiar temples, the temple regulations, religious occasions, system of money management and various other processes of working of the temple perform functions that are intended and aimed for and also that are unintended. A few examples follow.

The adoption rules in this community serve the manifest function of making sure that when a Nattukottai Chettiar
adopts a child, he does adopt a child from the same temple that he belongs to or of the same patrilineal descent.

This rule however also serves the implicit function of ensuring that a family's wealth is not inherited by an 'outside member'; in other words, to make sure that a family's wealth and property is not inherited by a member belonging to another temple or to another patrilineal descent. Therefore in many cases, the family properties and money circulate within the same family itself as adoption predominantly takes place among members of the same patrilineal descent.

An important tradition followed by the Nattukottai Chettiers is the performance of padappu. During the padappu, especially pothu padappu, all the members belonging to a temple gather in a particular village to perform the padappu. The manifest function here is to worship the family deity and invoke the blessings of the Lord on the gatherers.

The implicit function that this practice of padappu performs is that, it brings together all the Nattukottai Chettiers of one temple to a place and also the Nattukottai Chettiers of different temples to one place. This promotes community unity through joint action and common religious worships.
Another implicit function is that it helps match-making. A Nattukottai Chettiar tells me, "Many marriage alliances have begun in such meetings of the community members. New contacts and new friendships that were developed in such religious occasions have played a vital role in seeking a bride or groom. As we have to marry within our community such acquaintances go a long way in match-making. Sometimes a man and woman who are about to be engaged also see each other here for the first time."

One important characteristic of the relationship between Nattukottai Chettiers and their temples is the payment of monies to the various Nattukottai Chettiar temples. The nine temples, nagara Sivan temples and the Dhandayuthapani temples abroad, all have a definite system of payment of monies by the Nattukottai Chettiers. The manifest function of the various payment of monies is to collect money for temple maintenance and other activities of the temple.

The implicit function is that the systematic method of payment of monies instils among the Nattukottai Chettiers the quality of systematic organization, methodical planning and orderly manner of doing things. Infact one of the notable qualities of the Nattukottai Chettiers is their organizational skills. This is seen in one marriage customs of theirs, where a list of things has to be written down by the samanthi (bride's parents). This list of things /
gifts is what the bride's parents have to give the bride. This list is written in such an orderly manner, listing the things that they would give the bride not only during the betrothal and marriage but also for every occasion after the marriage, like the first festival of Deepavali and Pongal, adi siir [gifts given in the month of adi (July - Aug)], gifts for the new born baby of the couple, gifts for the first birthday of their child and so on. This shows that the parents have planned for their daughter's future and are clear in what they can give their daughter.

The Nattukottai Chettiar temple as any social institution, has certain negative functions. As the Nattukottai Chettiar temple management excludes the involvement of other caste members, it creates a rift between the Nattukottai Chettiars and the non-Nattukottai Chettiar residents of a town. During festivals or other religious celebrations in the temple, the Nattukottai Chettiars are given special preference to [by allowing them to enter the swami sanidhi (place where the deity is) by a separate channel as mentioned earlier], which creates hostile sentiments among members of other communities. Therefore, this causes disruption and disintegration between the Nattukottai Chettiars and the non-Nattukottai Chettiars.

Though the Nattukottai Chettiar temple does not, for the most part, create dissensus among the members of its
community, the concept of dysfunction can be portrayed in the light of certain components of the temple rules being more functional to the Nattukottai Chettiar males than to the Nattukottai Chettiar females, in some instances. This can be seen in the adoption rule that strictly prohibits an adoption from the matrilineal descent and in the pulli system's disguised opposition to widow remarriage by its categorization of a widower as a full pulli and of a widow as a half pulli.

The Nattukottai Chettiar temples' marriage rules require the community members to marry within the same community and also allows marriages among the same temple members (in the case of two temples). This may have a negative effect on the community members' physical and mental health. This kind of marriage practice may cause the community members to suffer from diseases just as how the Parsis are faced with.

A pediatrician I interviewed says, 'I have treated increasing number of cases ailing from mental sluggishness and defects among the babies in the Nattukottai Chettiar community. This is probably due to the generations of marriages that have taken place within the same community members and in some cases even within the same family members (like cross - cousin marriages, uncle - niece marriages etc.).'
The Nattukottai Chettiar temples have created a culture among their community members which is exclusive to them. The Nattukottai Chettiar have a set of rigid belief systems and customs. This is negative in the sense that it inhibits acceptance of other beliefs and customs. It does not expose the Nattukottai Chettiar community to the customs and manners of other societies and therefore restricts and limits the community to a narrow platform of ideologies and denies the community a broader perspective on the social and cultural aspects of other societies and its own community.

This may cause a culture status quo and stagnancy and make the Nattukottai Chettiar community wear blinders and ignore the beliefs and customs of other communities. After all, belief systems and customs of other communities / societies might also better foster social unity and individual well-being among the members of the Nattukottai Chettiar community.