CHAPTER 21

The Temple in South India

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In this chapter, we take up certain aspects of the Brahmanical temple in South India from the beginning of the seventh century to the close of the eighteenth century. This period begins with the rise of the Pallavas in Tonḍaimaṇḍalam, and continues through the period of the Cheras, Pandyas, and the minor chieftains in the rest of Tamiḻakam, culminating in the Chola empire with which the treatment is largely concerned; it extends further to the close of the eighteenth century with one or two cases from the west coast in Kerala. In spite of the variety of dynasties and their conflicts, the period exhibits some unity of character in political, socio-economic, and religious matters. It witnessed the rise, maturity, and transformation of the temple as the centre of *brahmadēya* and *dēvadāna*. There was a spate of temple construction and endowment activity patronized by the monarchs and chieftains, and the evolution of proto-feudal structure in economy and polity grew into full maturity. The process is reflected in thousands of inscriptions. These activities are integrated in the movement of ideas expressed by the Nāyanārs and Āḻvārs in Tamil literature. In the period following the fall of the Chola empire, the processes at work in an earlier period had their own logic of development.

The vastness and variety of source-material—inscriptions, literary works, and monuments—preclude a comprehensive study at the present stage.[1] Our findings remain tentative, and subject to correction through further investigation. We have drawn substantially on our treatment of primary sources in different areas in our previous research and specifically on our joint study of the Tamil bhakti movement pertaining to the same period.[2] At the same time, we have depended heavily on authentic secondary works such as those of K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, C. Minakshi, T.V. Mahalingam, K.K. Pillay, Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, and K.V. Raman, including the able data analysis provided by the Noboru Karashima and Y. Subbarayalu team.[3] The formulation and findings of scholars and the recent conceptual exercise by Burton Stein, George W. Spencer, and others have been critically reviewed wherever relevent.[4] The overall framework of social development is borrowed from the studies of D.D. Kosambi and R.S. Sharma regarding Indian feudalism.[5] The critique of the peculiar Tamil socio-cultural complex has demanded certain theoretical insights which we have developed ourselves.

I

There is no trace of a 'classical' society in the Far South comparable to that of the Mauryan Empire. The semi-tribal pastoral mode of production and social relations during the Sangam period yielded place to proto-feudal social formations in which much of the earlier traditions survived in modified form. On these were superimposed new techniques of production and distribution and patterns of social relations. The temple was not merely the citadel of the new landlords, but also the instrument for the integration of agrarian society, including the native Tamil peasantry, which was assigned only a secondary role. In short, the temple cannot be taken up for study in isolation. It was not a separate institution in itself but the pivot of a whole complex of institutions which represented the spirit of the age.

Introducing a significant collection of essays on temples, Burton Stein makes the following observation:[6]

> Why scholars of south India, generation after generation, return to the study of Hindu temples is a question that may be answered in simple or complex ways. The simple answer is that like the mighty mountains they are often intended to resemble to the eye, they are there; and temples have been there for over a millennium. Temples command attention being the most enduring and grand monuments in the south of India.

He appreciates the political aspect of the institution in his own way:[7]

> . . . temples were in fact the prime locus of authority and dominance, issues and decisions. In no other social or cultural context were matters pertaining to authority and dominance so explicitly raised and resolved.

Elsewhere in his *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, Stein makes a statement about the political structures and processes and looks upon the temples as so many instruments through which the Chola rulers sought to extend their 'ritual hegemony' to the intermediate and peripheral zones of the South Indian macro region. His reference is chiefly to the ideological aspects of what he calls the 'royal Siva temples'; but he takes into account the institutional aspects too which encompassed wide sections of society. He looks upon the shrines of Devi or Amman, which were the symbols of 'folk Hinduism' and which came up in large numbers from the thirteenth century, as both a result and an expression of the supra-local integration of the peasant localities.

> Chola religious policies are not to be understood as arising from economic purposes nor the presumed zeal of Rajaraja and his successors, to expunge existing forms of ritual affiliation, but from a political design calculated to encompass independent and localized cultic affinities within an expanding Chola hegemony. The incorporation of local place and caste tutelary deities was one form of ritual sovereignty in which the lesser gods of local chiefs and places honour the god of the king, the god of his realm.[8]

Again,

> . . . the royal cult, the prominence of Brahmanical forms, and the network of Brahmanical institutions in the intermediate and peripheral zones of the Chola state is best viewed as a means by Chola rulers to affect ritual hegemony over the numerous locality chieftains of the macro region.[9]

However, Stein's formulations regarding the role of the temple in society and politics have to be rejected since his basic premise of a segmentary state, dual sovereignty, and a 'world of peasants without lords' cannot be accepted.[10]

Indeed, Stein's preoccupation with authority and dominance appears to be a regression from the more comprehensive and balanced view expounded by Nilakanta Sastri and others. They too had recognized the connection between royal authority and the temple without the one-sided emphasis found here. As early as in 1929, Sastri wrote:

> The temple is historically more important as a social and economic entity than a religious institution. The temple was the centre of universal culture. The best architecture and sculpture and such painting as there was were lavished on it. Fine arts like music, dancing and jewel-making flourished in the temples and primarily on their account. Several temples contained libraries and were centres of religious and secular learning. The drama, closely allied to the dance, was promoted by some temples. Above all, the temple was for the village the most powerful economic corporation which not only sustained, by means of its lavish endowments, the arts of civilised existence, but enabled the villagers to turn to it in times of need for economic support if not also purposes of defence.[11]

There is an almost parallel passage in the writings of Mahalingam with added emphasis on the economic functions of the temple.[12] These Indian pioneers erred, if at all, only in promoting a tendency to glorify but they did not ignore the economic, political, or cultural aspects of the temple's prosperity being directly proportional to the power of the state. George W. Spencer follows David Kaplan's formulation that the existence of monumental architecture does not necessarily presuppose the development of centralized bureaucratic state and that monument building may actually function in some societies as 'a system-maintaining mechanism of a weakly organized polity'.[13] He applies this seminal idea in the South Indian context, illustrating it with the help of the Great Temple of Tanjore. Burton Stein goes a step further and recognizes the temples as parallel sources of authority in the segmentary society with a complex network of temples, guilds, and village assemblies.[14] While discussing the rivalry between the Hindu bhakti movement on the one hand and Buddhist and Jain creeds on the other, Spencer considers the royal court as the chief arena of activity. The chief concern with authority pervades all these in some form or other. We disagree with both the eclecticism of the Sastri–Mahalingam School and the political interpretation of history implied in the writing of the Stein–Spencer School. Earlier writers have looked upon the temple as a religious institution with several social and economic functions. Our argument, on the contrary, is that the temple was primarily a socio-economic institution with a religious form and message. We seek to explain the temple within the framework of historical materialism with its emphasis on the primacy of economic factors.

Perry Anderson has stated that 'the church has never received theorisation within historical materialism'.[15] The same is true of the temple. In fact, the similarity extends further. We have only to substitute the words 'Hindu Temple' for 'Roman Church' in the following statement of Anderson:

> Issued from a post-tribal ethnic minority, triumphant in late antiquity, dominant in feudalism, decadent and renascent under capitalism, the Roman Church has survived every other institution—cultural, political, juridical and linguistic—historically coeval with it.[16]

It may be clarified that according to this view, the raison d'être of the temple as a socio-economic phenomenon was the fact that it was necessary and useful for the organization and development of the relations of production at a certain stage. Our sources go on to suggest that the temple was a powerful instrument in the hands of the Brahman landlord class who occupied an intermediate position between the rulers and the people. The tentative formulation that we have arrived at may be stated in a specific form below:

(a) The temple served as an agency for easier and more efficient extraction of surplus from the peasants in the agrarian economy and this contributed to the extension of agriculture in the tribal areas and the consolidation of the landlord domination.
(b) In the course of such extension, the temple accelerated the process of the disintegration of tribal society and its reorganization as a caste society.
(c) In the newly-formed caste society, the temple served as an integrating factor linking the high and low in its service and drawing towards itself as clients the different castes and sub-castes.
(d) Such integrated role paved the way for the Brahman-inspired and Brahman-supported state power in the regional monarchies of South India. The temple put its imprimatur of legitimacy on the new polity and this in turn guaranteed state patronage for the temple.
(e) In this process, the Brahmanical *varnashrama* ideology strengthened its grip on society, its latest weapon being the bhakti movement for which the temple served as an institutional base.
(f) In course of time, the prosperous temple, which was a landed magnate from the beginning, also developed into a storehouse of gold, silver, and precious jewels as well as the regular place of assembly for the rural elite.
(g) This produced the need for exclusiveness and protection leading eventually to the development of the temple to fortress like proportions with several circles of streets within streets, bazaars, and armed forces.
(h) Finally the temple acted as the agent for transmitting, conserving, and developing a consolidating legacy of culture.

It may be noted that all the seven points, which follow the first one, follow largely from it and are causally connected with it and with one another among themselves. In view of this complexity, the discussion which follows will treat them together for the sake of convenience.

We devote our attention less to the origin of the temple than to its multidimensional development and socio-economic role primarily because the circumstances of origin, whether in the north or the south, are not sufficiently documented, making any theorization at best an inspired guess. On the other hand, the development of the temple is clearly visible in the records when it began to play a dominant role in the socio-economic and political organization of the age. By promoting local centres of wealth and power, the temple was essentially a feudalizing agency. Though its ideology and cultural roots were largely imported from the north, it flourished in the south because the conditions of social development in this part of the country provided for such an institution, to carry agricultural production and social organization to the next higher stage. This is why the historical role of the temple in this period has to be assessed as progressive and dynamic although it sharpened class divisions and intensified peasant exploitation. The temple has been responsible for delinking the institutions of royalty, social groups, and markets from their tribal background and transforming them in a way that made them answer the needs of a more advanced feudal stage.

In the pre-Pallava period reflected in the Sangam works, there were perhaps Jains, Buddhists, Ajivikas, and Brahmans close to the courts of chieftains.[17] However, they had not gained sufficient grip over the economy and society that would enable their priestly and scholarly successors in the Pallava–Chola period to control and dominate the social system as a whole. The advent of large groups of Brahmans moving southwards introduced a new economic factor into Tamiḷakam by the close of the Sangam age. These Brahmans had a well-knit community organization, literacy, and knowledge of agricultural technology and political science. They gained access to land through the favour of the chieftains whom they served and praised. It would appear that they succeeded in producing considerable surplus from the cultivation of paddy. The temple grew up as their community centre. Part of their surplus must have gone back to the temple. Gradually donations to temples increased and so did the rituals and the festivities. Since consumption was strictly regulated by the austerities prescribed in the scriptures, a great deal of treasure accumulated in the temple. This would explain the rise of the temple as the central institution of society in the first place.

The Sangam works give a picture of a redistributive economy and society, based on the principle of reciprocity and patronage. The chief means through which resources were gathered were wars, which were followed by grand feasts and revelries.[18] Though the wars and revelries continued in the post-Sangam period, there was a higher state organization with regional monarchies and greater security within the territory of each state. Some part of the war booty at least reached the temple.[19] Part of the temple funds were utilized for clearing new lands for cultivation or for the construction and maintenance of irrigation tanks or the organization of market centres.[20]

It is true that the temple spent considerable resources on feeding Brahmans, but these were the people who undertook the propagation of cults, ideas, and culture that contributed to the maintenance of social peace. Thus, investment on 'idle Brahman groups' was not entirely a waste of resources from the point of view of the maintenance of social order. It created and preserved a cultural leisure class that served the ruling class in many ways. The Brahmans were temple-trustees and members of various committees and service groups, and they functioned as landlords and exploiters; they were also responsible for improving the standards of living and culture of the upper classes. In other words, the Brahman groups within the ruling classes maintained their creativity by contributing to the efficiency of management in the fields of state, economy, and social life. Even the historians who give them exaggerated praise for their creativity in the arena of learning, arts, and literature often overlook this fact.[21]

There is an interesting change in the role and status of the temple reflected in the epigraphic records of Tamiḷakam during the Pallava–Chola epochs. Nilakanta Sastri and others, including the American school of Burton Stein and his associates, have not identified this in their writings. In the early land grants of the Pallavas and the Pandyas, the Brahman *agrahāra*s or groups of landowning families appear to meet regularly for transacting public business, but this was not connected with a temple as its centre. The brahmadēya and devadāna exist side by side, often in close contact, but they are two different entities. The temple in the agrahāra gradually gains importance and serves as the meeting place. There is yet no trace of the temple of the Pallavas, Pandyas, and the Cholas. But in the second stage, the temple occupies a place under the *sabha* along with other institutions of the locality, like the common tank, the garden, the cremation ground, the grazing field, forests, and quarries.[22] In the third stage, which begins with the tenth century, the new

temples are the centres of new agrahāras, the sabha itself being the temple-council or vice versa, and even in old agrahāras like Uttaramerur, the sabha merges in the temple committee.[23] With the development of the bhakti movement, which reached its climax by the ninth century, there must have been the realization that it is easier to rouse and consolidate the loyalty of the Brahman landowners in the name of the deity rather than the abstract entity called the *grāma*. At the same time, the temple was capable of attracting and retaining the loyalty of the tenants and the servants, thereby helping to blunt the edge of contradictions and resistance.[24] In Kerala, the *grāma-grāmakṣētra* identification is found from the middle of the ninth century when we start getting inscriptions.[25] This was probably due to the west coast tradition of Karnataka. This tendency for the temple-centred grāma or agrahāra to put the earlier form of 'secular' agrahāra into the background manifests itself in the rest of Tamilakam under the Chola rulers.

The majority of inscriptions in early medieval South India record transactions of land related to Brahmans and their temples and this fact is itself a testimony to the pivotal role of the temple in agrarian expansion. It has been suggested that excepting the Paḷḷankōil and Hosakkōṭṭai grants, all the old Pallava copper plates speak of gifts of land to Brahmans.[26] Minakshi has pointed out that whenever a whole village or certain units of land were endowed, it was carefully stated that the tax-free lands already enjoyed by Brahmans, or by temples, were to be excluded from the later endowments.[27] This is expressed by the phrase *devabhōga-halavarjitam* in the early Sanskrit charters. This would lead to the assumption that the Pallavas were aware of the usefulness of temples from their early period. A large number of later Pallava and Chola inscriptions illustrate the process by which temples gradually accumulated more and more lands.[28] Almost every brahmadēya village enjoyed *sarvamānya* tenure and was free from paying a number of taxes and dues, usually covered by the term *aṣṭādaśaparihāras*. Another significant fact is revealed in the Vēlurpāḷaiyam grant where the village of Srikāṭṭuppaḷḷi was endowed to the God Yajnyēśvara in the sixth year of Nandivarman III.[29] The families living in such devadāna villages were mainly connected with temple services. It is explicitly stated in the Kuṛam grants that the village lands were gifted to twenty Chaturvedi Brahmans for rendering *dēvakarma* and *navakarma* services. It is also stated that the temple maintained a number of servants as Kōil Parivarām. The fact that for the purposes of the Kuṛam grant, the Pallava king himself purchased land from the previous owners demonstrates the eagerness of the rulers to promote the temple as well as the involvement of landed property in the organization of the temple.[30] The same tendency is manifested in Pandyan inscriptions also. For instance, Nilakanta Sastri points out that in AD 770 Māṛankāri alias Madhurakavi built a stone temple at Anamalai, six miles to the east of Madurai, and made a gift of an agrahāra in the neighbourhood to the Brahmans, evidently on the occasion of the setting up of the image of Narasimha in the temple.[31] The Pandyan king Māṛan Caṭayan alias Jaṭila Parāntaka is also known to have constructed a temple of 'considerable size' for Vishnu at Kanchivāypērūr in the Kongu country and several Shiva temples with rich endowments.[32] A record of the thirteenth year of the king at Tiruccentur mentions a considerable endowment from the proceeds of which regular worship was to be conducted in the temple of Kumara.[33] Parāntaka Vīranārayaṇa is stated to have endowed many agrahāras and numberless devadanas in the Sinnamanur plates.[34] There is a typical instance of the king Karunanantatakkan, belonging to one of the minor dynasties of South India in south Travancore, creating a large endowment at Uḷakkuḍiviḷa, renamed Pārthivaśēkharapuram in the ninth century. He purchased land in exchange for an equal measure of land elsewhere, established a Vishnu temple, and settled a number of Brahmans there. In this case a *Śālai*, a Vedic college with provision for ninety-five scholars, was also attached to the

temple.[35] The later Cera kings and queens of Makōtai from the ninth century to the twelfth century, and their vassals, are known to have made land grants to several temple-centred Brahman settlements such as Airāṇikkuḷam, Tirukkālkkara, Tirukkaḍittānam, Tiruvalla, Dēvidēvēśvaram, Tiruppālkkaḍal, and Tiruvaḍūr.[36] By the time the Cholas emerged as an independent power in the later half of the ninth century, land endowment to temples had become a routine practice among the kings of south India.[37] Though we have no definite information about the temples built and endowed by Vijayālaya and Āditya, both are known to have been patrons of temples.[38] Parāntaka, the son of Aditya, raised a shrine over his father's sepulchre (*paḷḷippaḍai*) and called it Kōdaṇṭarāmēsvara and Ādityēsvara.[39] This was the beginning of a series of sepulchral temples which was closely related to the cult of the god-king or Devaraja.[40] In the time of Parāntaka several grants given to the temples by the queen, the vassals, and officials are mentioned.[41] The imperial phase of the Chola dynasty witnessed the rise of several temples built and endowed directly by the kings and their subordinates.[42] Even the royal temples played an important part in socio-economic integration as they owned or managed several villages where agriculturists and artisans were settled on a large scale.

III

How these temples acquired more and more lands and made use of every opportunity to strengthen their hold on the land system may be briefly examined here. We have already pointed out the organic relationship between the Brahman agrahāra and the Brahmanical temple. Perhaps the agrahāras were not born with a temple; but the temple was invariably born with a Brahman settlement or agrahāra having some landed property managed by a council of Brahman trustees to defray the routine expenses of worship. The trustees appointed and controlled the appointment of the temple functionaries from the priests down to the sweepers, and received and administered endowments in cattle, gold, or land on behalf of the deity. Thus the existence of a temple was an open invitation for all devotees to make donations. These gifts were often in the form of land, but if gold was donated it was also invested in land in most cases. The trustees were called *Mahēśvaras* in Shiva temples or *Śrīvaishṇavas* in Vishnu temples or *Pādamūlam* or *Padineṭṭu-nāttār*. These were not representatives of eighteen districts as understood by Sastri, Mahalingam, and others but simply eighteen or twenty-five local Brahmans well-versed in Vedic–Shastric lore formed into a sabha or functioning under the sabha of the village.[43] These Brahmans were also endowed with landed property of their own presumably as remuneration for the work of managing the temple and its landed properties. In addition to these, the village contained agricultural land set apart as *virutti* or service tenure for temple servants. In their capacity as the representatives of the deity in all worldly affairs, the Brahman trustees collectively functioned as landlords, leasing out the temple land to tenants, fixing and collecting rent and other dues, and exercising disciplinary powers over the tenants. The conditions of land tenure were outlined in the documents and violations of the agreements were punished by restraint on cultivation or confiscation of land. However, it is interesting to note that great precautions were taken to see that individual trustees did not arbitrarily misuse their powers. For this purpose, the prescriptions and injunctions of the *Dharmashāstras* were invoked.[44] In fact, guaranteeing the legal authority and cohesion of the council appears to have generated great confidence among the people which in turn induced more and more landowners to accept tenancy under the temple. In the efficiency of management, combined

with strictness in adherence to the laws, lay the secret of the success and permanence of the temple.[45]

The landlord–tenant relation established through the temple was further cemented by the tenants' loyalty to the 'divine Lord' which manifested itself in the form of loyalty towards the Brahman representatives of the Lord. Thus the temple brought into existence a theocratic oligarchy of Brahmans in theory which functioned as an oligarchy of landed proprietors in practice. Therefore, the historian is justified in looking at the temple in socio-economic terms as the centre of a huge agrarian corporation. Patronage of the temple by kings and chieftains, or merchants and merchant guilds, meant in effect the promotion of the interest of these Brahman landed proprietors who perpetuated their power through hereditary rule.

These facts are usually overlooked by the historians who equate the Brahman with the priest and not with the landlord. In the historical context of the Tamil country during the period of our study, the power of the Brahman was primarily the power of the landlord—a particular type of landlord who could augment his power through the deity's influence. It would be wrong to see the place of the temple in society merely as that of a religious or even a political centre. The temple was the greatest landlord and the temple meant the Brahman trustee in terms of its effective role. This is often ignored or overlooked by scholars when they discuss art, philosophy, faith, and literature in connection with the temple. The trustee of an institution even in contemporary society often hides his identity and interests behind the institution which projects an image of selflessness, nobility, and service. In the case of the temple, 'hiding behind the idol' the trustee has an invisible and silent role. Only the careful eye, going behind the idol and searching among the legal documents, can discover him.

Due to the system of recording legal documents on the granite walls of the temples in South India, we are in a position to examine the internal working of the system and the skeletal frame of the institution; its philosophical spirit is found in literary works and its aesthetic and ritual aspects are experienced by the visitors. A believer would find it difficult, unless he goes to the records, to accept the fact that the great majority of temple documents express concern over the economic and managerial aspects of the landed properties. Even while cataloguing the economic functions of the temple as a landed magnate in a neat and beautiful manner, scholars like D.N. Jha have not raised the question as to why kings and chieftains patronized the temples on a large scale.[46] In other words, they did not discover the key role which the temple began to play in organizing agricultural production in South India. We propose the hypothesis that the efficiency of the Brahmanical temple in commanding the loyalties of the landlord and peasant groups, consolidating the landlord class on the one hand, and acting as a connecting link between landlords and peasants on the other, and smoothening the process of surplus extraction to the point of making it almost painless, enabled the religious institution to occupy the centre of the rural economy. This patently socio-economic utility of the temple induced the powerful kings and lords at the helm of affairs to promote the temple movement through donations and political support from the period of the Pallavas. The capacity of the trustees to stand united in land management in the name of a common symbol, that is the deity, became an asset in the socio-economic sense, playing a vital role in ordering agricultural production and extending dramatically the area brought under plough cultivation. This economic thrust of the temple made it possible for it to assume in South India its historic role of leadership in dissolving tribal groups in the settled areas and transforming them into sub-castes. It also enabled the Brahman trustees of the temple to integrate all society under their guidance, providing an ideological framework

of the *varṇāshrama dharma* imported from north India. This has a parallel in the European experience of the Middle Ages when the church played a key role in the development of the feudal society. On this basis it may even be possible to suggest that any society depending on serf-labour had to produce a strong religious ideology with institutional base in a church or temple to act as a cementing force. This ideology took over the role of the centralized state in the slave-labour societies of the previous age. Through minimum compulsion and maximum persuasion, it achieved what the powerful state had sought to achieve by the direct application of military force.

A couple of illustrations, where the temple functioned almost as a metaphor for the state and its power, may be in place here. We may consider two kinds of temples, the 'royal' temples and the temples that grew as centres of agrarian corporations and Brahman settlements. The latter had a richer religious tradition behind them.[47] They too had considerable patronage from royalty in most cases, but their raison d'être lay outside state patronage. The 'royal' temples were not only patronized by royalty, they were meant to be a *statement* of state power. A good case in point was the Brhadīśvara Temple at Tanjāvūr.

Tanjāvūr was not one of the centres celebrated by the bhakti saints of the Shaivites; nor is there any tradition, even in the *sthalapurāṇas*, linking the place or the temple with any of the Nāyanārs. It was the nucleus of a collection of agrarian villages at a relatively high ground on the Kavēri, where the river begins to fan out into distributaries. What we hear about the place for the first time is that Vijayālaya Chola captured it when it was under the control of the Muttaraiyar chief.[48] We are told that Vijayālaya built a temple for Goddess Nisumbhasūdini at Tanjāvūr.[49] Its capture in any case, brought a vast resource base, the Kavēri delta, under the control of the Cholas. By making that place the base of his operations and the ceremonial centre of the state, Rajaraja was not only able to control the resources very strategically but also made the statement of his power loud and clear, audible to all the important magnates of the territory he was controlling. The project was undertaken relatively late in his life, probably after all his military expeditions were complete.[50] He was by then heading a powerful and a somewhat centralized state most authoritatively, and the statement he made about that state was very bold and unequivocal. The temple was far from a 'system-maintaining mechanism of a weakly organized polity' suggested by George W. Spencer.[51]

This statement had two aspects: what was directly conveyed and what was symbolic or metaphorical. The number of royal inscriptions present on the walls of the temple, which is the 'literal' aspect of the statement, is too well known to bear repetition.[52] The range of activities in the temple, the amount of wealth and other resources that were mobilized in favour of the temple, and such other details which bring out the importance of the institution require no repetition either. The stupendous nature of the structure, too, has been adequately written about. The *vimāna*, a pyramidal structure with a heavy top, was itself a metaphor for the state under Rajaraja. Its conception as *daksiṇamēru* (the southern mēru, mēru being the mythological axis of the earth), surrounded by shrines of the guardian deities of the four cardinal directions and the four corners, is the first step in identifying the temple with the cosmos itself.[53] The chief deity is Daksiṇamēru-*vitankar*, also called Sri Rājarājēśvaram-*uḍaiyār*. By a sleight of words, as it were, Sri Rājarājēśvaram-*uḍaiyār*, the deity, is equated with *Uḍaiyār* Sri Rājarāja-*dēvar*.[54] Thus the temple-cosmos identification goes to the level of the identification of the temple cosmos as the territory and the God as king, where what he presides over is the entire cosmos.[55] The sacred and the secular blend is perfect here. This can also be seen in the architectural plan and the sculptural and other artistic detail.

The most frequently occurring theme in the sculpture of the temple is that of Tripurāntaka. This theme makes its appearance in the sculpture of Chola temples for the first time in the age of Rajaraja and in the environs of Tanjāvūr. There are about thirty representations of this theme in the temple.[56] Scholars have interpreted this in various ways. There is a fresco in Chamber 11, which recaptures the details of the mythological story in all its magnificence. It tells us how Shiva destroyed the *puras* of the three demons and reduced them to a state of servitude. Brahma was Shiva's charioteer in this battle and the four Vedas were the wheels of his chariot. Agni was his arrow and Mount Mandara, his bow. Nearly all gods played a supportive and subordinate role in the battle. Even Vishnu is presented in such a role when he, in the guise of *Māyāmōha*, is represented as attempting to delude the demons. Shiva destroyed the three puras ('towns') in the battle and took the demons as his servants, two of them as his *dvārapālas* ('doorkeepers') and the third, his drummer. R. Champakalakshmi has argued that by using this myth and the iconographic form in the temple's art in a dominant position and in the narrative paintings, 'Rajaraja achieved his aim of consolidating Shaivism and subordinating other faiths'.[57] While the consolidation of Shaivism and subordination of other faiths may well have been the agenda of Rajaraja, the political message should not be lost sight of. She does take the massiveness of the dvarapala images to show the power of the king; but not in the context of discussing the Tripurāntaka theme.[58] K.R. Srinivasan had earlier appreciated the political message by saying that Tripurāntaka was Rajaraja's favourite choice as the Shaiva counterpart of the Chakravartin ideal.[59] C. Sivarāmamūrthi had, as early as 1955, used this to emphasize the warrior aspect of Tripurāntaka and the Chola Rajaraja's choice of this form as indicating his prowess as a warrior.[60] Gary J. Schwindler argues that Tripurāntaka was Rajaraja's favourite personal deity, *iṣṭadēvata*, and that he used its unique iconographic symbology to restore the honour and dignity of his lineage, damaged at Takkōḷam. For him, it is evidence of the king's conscious assimilation of the divine and royal roles.[61] Schwindler shares the premises of Stein and Spencer.

Does the political significance of this theme, repeated over and over again, go beyond what has been suggested by these interpretations? Does it allude to the way in which Rajaraja reorganized the Chola polity by rolling the juggernaut of the state over the local chiefs (described as 'feudatories' by historians) in an attempt to centralize the administration of the empire? It is important to remember that these chiefs had exercised considerable power in their territories in the pre-Rajaraja period. We do not hear about them any more in the age of Rajaraja, or immediately thereafter. They were wiped off as political chiefs by Rajaraja and we notice them under him as the functionaries of the state (the 'bureaucracy' of conventional historiography), and that too in areas far removed from the home territories of these chiefs.[62] Here Rajaraja is himself Tripurāntaka, rendering the 'demons' homeless but taking them into his personal service. The stress on the power of those whom he subjugated, as in the massiveness of the dvarapalas in the temple, brings into high relief the still greater power of the monarch who subjugated and drafted them into his system, an effective statement of his own power. Thus Tripurāntaka forms an icon of Rajaraja's imperial power and position in every way. It may not be irrelevant that in the same chamber where the Tripurāntaka fresco figures is a fresco depicting Shiva as Ravananugrahamurti.

Chandesvara, described as the *mulabhrtya* of Shiva, is consecrated in a big way in this temple and in a bigger way in the Gangaikkondacolapuram Temple. This is not without its significance. The mulabhrtyas are of great importance in the politico-military structure of early medieval South India. It is shown that the mulabhrtyas, the 'Companions of Honour' of the kings, constituted the core of the military establishment there.[63] Their role in the

Pandya, Cera, and Chola states has been adequately appreciated.[64] In the case of the Chola state, where Rajaraja and his immediate successors had taken the military strength of the empire to its logical perfection, it is only appropriate that the mulabhrtya should have been given the kind of importance in the ritual and iconographic schemes of the great royal temples. Taken along with the message and implications of the Tripurāntaka icon, this acquires great significance. Thus, Champakalaksmi is right in her observation that 'the iconographic programme of Tanjavur was indeed the political iconography of Rajaraja'.[65]

There were other aspects of the institution of the temple which enhanced its political significance. The temples in the countryside had more or less a spontaneous development, beginning as somewhat humble shrines. They formed the nucleus round which Brahman settlements came up. The temples came to be managed by corporations of those who formed these settlements or their more notable representatives. These corporations were synonymous with the managerial bodies of the agrarian settlements around them, controlling landed wealth on behalf of both the temple and themselves. The temples and the corporations that managed them came to have command over enormous tracts of land. This meant control over large proportions of the population. In a period when vast sections of tribal population were getting transformed as peasants and drawn into caste society, the role of the temple became crucial.

IV

The position enjoyed by the temple gave it enormous political power in the locality in which it functioned. This is visible in the clearest fashion in the Cera kingdom in Kerala, where monarchical state was perhaps the weakest in South India. The local groups enjoyed vast powers in the political structure obtaining there. The only important local group, apart from the *nagaram* in a couple of records, was the Brahmanical corporation of non-cultivating intermediaries organized around the temple. These bodies came to enjoy immense power in the matter of fiscal, judicial, and political administration, the functions associated with the state. A lengthy copperplate record, or more correctly an incomplete collection of records in copperplates, known as the Tiruvalla Copperplates or the Huzur Office Plates, documents the process of this development elaborately.[66] We have made a somewhat detailed study of the development of the Tiruvalla settlement on an earlier occasion, bringing out the growth of a temple-centred Brahman settlement in space with a whole range of activities.[67]

There are many statements in the Tiruvalla Copperplates which show that the temple was assigned, or else arrogated to it, many functions which are usually regarded as of the state. There are many references to the temple collecting the revenue, which would have been normally due to the various nodes of state power. A very significant case is that of the grant of a village by Iravi Cirikaṇṭan, the chief of Veṇpolināṭu. Kuṭavūr, the granted 'village', is described as *of* the donor (*tannuṭaiya*), and when it was granted to the temple of Tiruvalla, 'all the eighteen taxes and the market [duties]' were also given away. The representative of the manager of the temple committee was authorized to collect 360 *paṟas* of paddy, this being the equivalent of eighteen *kaḻanju* of gold, the *rakshābhōga* (land tax) of that village, from the chief himself. In the event of a failure to make timely payment of such dues, the chief was required to pay the original due in gold even if the fault was not his. At the end of the details of the provisions is a very interesting prescription: the temple committee shall take the rakshābhōga, protecting [the settlement] from the wrath of the king and the *sāmanta*

Those members of the sabha, who are opposed to this arrangement, shall forfeit their rights including their membership of the sabha.[68] That the same statement, apparently in relation to the same endowment, is repeated elsewhere in the same document[69] may be a scribal error. If not, it is an extremely important repetition, bringing out the importance of this endowment and the conditions attached to it.

What does the Kutavur assignment signify? It is now well known that fiscal assignments were typical of the land grants in what is called 'Indian feudalism'. But the significance of the present case goes beyond this. The temple committee is not only assigned all taxes from the village but it is also placed in a position where it can redress the grievances caused by even the king and the sāmantas. For those who paid the tax and those who were otherwise concerned, here was the temple committee presenting itself as the very state. This is not a solitary case of the temple and its managerial body arrogating to themselves the functions of the state so far as revenue and judicial administration was concerned. Speaking about a particular expense, the record says elsewhere that it was to be met from the 'tax' (*vari*) due to Otanatu.[70] There are several other cases in the record of such assignment of 'taxes' from the *natu* units and the lesser ones such as *ūr* and *vālkkai*.[71]

As in the case of revenue administration, so in judicial administration we see the temple exercising state power. There is a very interesting case where it is stated that, in the event of any member of the managerial committee standing in the way of performing a particular service for which an endowment is made, he would be deemed to have killed his father and married his mother.[72] Even those who took his side would be treated in the same way. They would lose their caste and the committee was allowed to add their land and the sites of their houses to the properties of the God of Tiruvalla. Elsewhere, Māḷuvakkōn, the chief of Kīḻmalaināṭu, assigns some land to the temple. The trustees of the temple were authorized to attach the property of the village (in which the grant was made) in the event of default of the prompt payment of dues. It is absolutely important that this agreement, where the chief has to look on helplessly as the temple attaches his property, is attested by the Six Hundred, the chief's 'companions of honour' together with his other representatives.[73] The temple not only looks after judicial administration, but also does it over the head of the actual political authority, the local chief. In another case, it is stated that those who were required to supply the stipulated amount of oil to the temple should pay, in the event of their failure to do it, a fine of 50 kaḻanju of gold to the *Perumāḷ* or the king, 25 to the sabha of the temple, and 10 to the local chief.[74] This gives an idea of the relative position of the various nodes of power in the hierarchy. The temple was clearly above the local chiefs and it represented the state in its visible form. This is not to be confused with some kind of theocracy or with what are called 'temple states'; it was a case of the temple wielding the power of the state. This is apart from the obvious fact that the temple was co-opted as an agent of the state in a big way for purposes of the administration in the Cera kingdom.[75]

This development becomes clearest in the post-Cera period when even the fig leaf of central political authority was dispensed with. The territory around the temple developed into what came to be known as *sankētam*, a somewhat autonomous juridico-political territory. Historians have stated that the territory of the sankētam was immune to all political interference.[76] The case of the Trikkaṇḍiyūr Temple clarifies several aspects about the sankētam and illustrates the power of the temple and its managerial committee in the locality in a big way. A set of palm leaf records from the archives of an aristocratic Nambudiri house in the Tirur taluk, Malappuram district, throws light on the process of the development of the temple and the sankētam.[77] As the events described in the records took place between 1541 and 1886, they go beyond the temporal scope of this study. But mention of certain

incidents figuring in the records may be made here briefly to bring out the direction towards which the things were moving.

The Trikkaṇḍiyūr Temple owned vast estates of property and was managed by a Brahmanical sabha like any other temple. Like other temples of the post-Cera period, again, the sabha had lost its corporate character, with individual members coming to dominate the proceedings.[78] Thus the house of Vaññēri came to enjoy such extra privileges in the meetings, as that house is seen to be casting two votes.[79] The sabha looked after the administration of civil and judicial justice in the territory of the sankētam. Only when recourse to the coercive power of the state had to be made to execute the decisions or for purposes of policing, the intervention of the political authority of the local chieftain, the Raja of Veṭṭam, and his overlord, the *zamorin* of Calicut, was sought.[80] There is even an instance where the Raja of Veṭṭam was required to 'answer' for the wrongs that he, his nephews, and his servants had done. This 'answering' involved surrendering, as fine, a piece of land, a house-site, and two workers, a male and a female, to the temple.[81] That even the local raja had to make amends for the wrongs he had done shows the magnitude of power which the temple had acquired. We can also see how even the authority of the sankētam failed on one occasion when it confronted the newly emerging money power of the sea traders. Ceṟāya Marakkāyar polluted a newly-dug tank of the temple. The temple authorities purified it ritually and asked him not to do it again. He said impudently that he would. The authorities complained to the Raja of Veṭṭam; but the response was silence, perhaps a studied one. Thereupon they resorted to *paṭṭiṇi*, fasting, to pressurize the authorities. The nonchalant Marakkāyan hired two Brahmans from outside, who entered the temple and insulted the fasting members of the sabha by shouting obscene words.[82] The exact way in which the episode ended is not known as there is a major lacuna in the record. This may be an exceptional situation where the landed wealth and control of the temple and the sankētam were less than a match for the money power of the traders which probably silenced even the local raja. However, the bulk of the records certify to the power of the temple and the sankētam around it. The temple, thus, presented itself as the state in a most consummate way in the generally weak political order of the post-Cera period of Kerala history.

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6 Burton Stein (1978), p. 1.

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8 Burton Stein (1980), p. 331.

9 Ibid., p. 339.

10 For a fuller treatment, see Kesavan Veluthat, *The Political Structure of Early Medieval South India*, Delhi, 1993.

11 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1929), p. 231.

12 T.V. Mahalingam (1955), pp. 389–90 : 'The functions discharged by the temple were of a varied nature. As one of the biggest landowners in the locality it looked after the interests of the agriculture in the area. It cultivated lands, extended cultivation to uncultivated areas and worked for the rehabilitation of the dilapidated villages. As a big consumer it purchased different articles for various services connnected with worship in the temple. The temple encouraged rural industries like weaving by granting to the family of weavers lands round the temple precincts'.

13 George W. Spencer (1969), p. 42.

14 Burton Stein (1980), pp. 330–9.

15 Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, London, 1974, p. 131.

16 Ibid., pp. 131–2, fn. 11. Engels reflected briefly on the Church's long odyssey ('Ludwig Feurbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy', Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, London, 1968, pp. 628–31) but limited himself to registering the dependence of its mutations on those of the general history of modes of production. Its own regional autonomy and adaptability—extraordinary by any comparative standards—have yet to be seriously explored. Lucacs believed it to lie in a relative permanence of man's relation to nature's unseen substratums of the religious cosmos (George Lucacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, London, 1971, pp. 235–6). Let alone this particular problem of the temple, South Indian history itself awaits consideration within the framework of historical materialism.

17 N. Subrahmanyan, *Sangam Polity*, Bombay, 1966, pp. 262–77, 308, 366, 367.

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22 A good example is the Kuram plates of Paramēśvara Varman. *Thirty Pallava Copper Plates*, pp.51.

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27 Ibid., p. 73.

28 Ibid., pp. 157–8.
29 *Thirty Pallava Copper Plates*, p. 256, ll. 49–51.
30 *Thirty Pallava Copper Plates*, p. 52. ll, 70–7.
31 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1929), p. 60; *Travancore Archaeological Series (TAS)*, Vol. I, p.157; *EI*, Vol. VIII.
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37 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1955).
38 Ibid., pp.115–16.
39 Ibid., no. 286 of 1906 and no. 230 of 1903.
40 This was a very important development and gave added significance to the temple in the political life (K.A. Nilakanta Sastri [1955], pp. 452–3). See also K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1978), pp. 149–71; I.W. Mabbett, 'Dēvarāja', *Journal of South East Asian History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (September 1969), pp.202–23. This has also links with the practice of consecrating images of kings in temples (K.A. Nilakanta Sastri [1955], p. 453).
41 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1955), p.134.
42 Ibid., pp.173, 183,184, 234–5, 344–5, 452.
43 M.G.S. Narayanan (1977).
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47 The religious heritage of such temples is clear from the example of the temples known as the *Tirupatis*, sacred to the Vaishnavas. Of the *Malaināṭṭut-Tirupatis* or those in Kerala, most were also centres of the early Brahman settlements. For details, see Kesavan Veluthat (1978), see chapter on 'Original Settlements'. This heritage was not available to the 'royal temples', whether Shaiva or Vaishnava.
48 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1955), pp. 110–12.
49 For example, the Tiruvālangāḍu Plates of Rajendra I. *SII*, Vol. III, No. 205.
50 It is important to note that most inscriptions on the walls of the temple are of Rajaraja, that too of his twenty-ninth year (AD 1014), which also happens to be his last known year (*SII*, Vol. II). Was he a proverbial 'old man in a hurry'?
51 George W. Spencer (1969).
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58 She looks at the size and volume of the dvārapāla figures as 'a metaphor in stone for power'. Ibid., p. 428.
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69 Ibid., pp. 469–79.
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