

“You Can’t Live in a Place With No God”:
Sacred Space and Caste in Chavadipudur

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presented at the International Field Studies Inquiry Conference
BYU Kennedy Center for International Studies
Wednesday, 1 March 2006

I. Introduction: Encountering Sacred Space in Chavadipudur

A traveler visiting the southern India village of Chavadipudur for the first time would face the challenge of orienting herself or himself in an unfamiliar territory. To such a person the village represents what historian Mircea Eliade has variously called “homogenous,” “neutral,” “amorphous,” and “geometric” space; it is essentially a collection of places without significance. To a person who lives in the village, however—one familiar with the subtleties of the landscape, with the sunlit streets and shadowed corners—to this person there are lodged in the grid of geometric space pockets of what Eliade calls “qualitatively different space,” or sacred space.

This paper is an attempt to make these scattered pockets of sacred space more readily apparent to a Western mindset, to clarify and define their composition. From an academic perspective sacred space has typically been understood in terms of its separation from profane space; for the purposes of this discussion I offer the writing of foundational sociologist Emile Durkheim as an important example of this view. Eliade, however, has characterized sacred space beyond simple separation, asserting that it is a revelation of truth or reality that defines these places. These two concepts of sacred space—its separateness and the revelation of truth that occurs there—are what I intended to examine in Chavadipudur’s temples during a two-month field study over the summer of 2005. It is my argument that these theoretical concepts of sacred space accurately describe how Chavadipudur’s temples function within village society.

Beyond laying a foundation for future research on the connection between caste in rural India and Hindu temples, the purpose of this discussion is to make the operations of Chavadipudur’s temples evident as a meaningful, valid aspect of people’s lives. I share the belief expressed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “Imagining difference (which of course does not mean making it up, but making it evident) remains a science of

which we all have need” (Geertz:85). It is my hope, therefore, both for readers who will one day visit a rural Hindu community in India and those who will never have that opportunity, that at least at a basic level what I write here may help to orient them in a community that initially may seem very different from their own.

Accomplishing this goal will require consideration of a number of issues. First, I will describe my field experience and research methods. I will then introduce the village of Chavadipudur and its major temples. From there I will provide a more detailed discussion of Durkheim and Eliade’s ideas. I will then analyze Chavadipudur’s temples as places set apart from the profane world. Finally I will attempt to show, as Eliade hypothesizes, that reality is manifested through sacred space in Chavadipudur by considering demonstrations of caste in village temples.

II. Methodology

I begin with a brief description of the methods with which I approached my research in Chavadipudur.

Because Hinduism is a religious philosophy that tends to defy generalization, it seemed best to confine my research to one village where I was likely to find a fairly united worldview. As has already been indicated, the community I chose to work in was Chavadipudur, a rural village in the southern India state of Tamil Nadu. This 2005 project was actually my second opportunity to research in Chavadipudur as an university undergraduate. In the summer of 2003 I had conducted a research project on the social impact of the village’s developing transport systems. Although I was approaching a very different topic in my second project, there was much that I had gained during my first experience that contributed greatly to the development of this paper. It was during that first visit that I developed an interest in the variety of temples and shrine in the village. My familiarity with these sites and with Chavadipudur in general helped me to have realistic expectations as to what could feasibly be accomplished during so short a field experience. It was also during that first visit that I received my first lessons on the caste system operating in Chavadipudur, a topic which will become important later in this paper.

Of all the assets gained from my original fieldwork, by far the most valuable were the relationships I had built with a number of individuals in the village. Notable among these associating was, first of all, a young man

named Jegedesh who served as a translator and cultural informant throughout both projects. A second contact was Matthew Daniel, his wife Jeeva and their two children who hosted me in their home and who, in many ways, helped refine my cultural ineptitudes somewhat before I dragged them out into public.

Most of the information I have brought from the field was collected through informal and semiformal interviews with approximately thirty-five individuals from a variety of castes and ages, both women and men. In many cases these interviews were captured with a digital audio recorder and all interviews were recorded in my field journal shortly after their completion.

The vast majority of these interviews were conducted through a translator in Tamil, the state language of Tamil Nadu and the mother tongue of the people of Chavadi. I worked with three translators in the field. Jegedesh was the first. In 2005 Jegedesh was seventeen years old and was studying electrical engineering in a nearby technical college. His English proficiency is well above average for a native of Chavadipudur. After Jegedesh started the new school year and was no longer available to work with me on weekdays, I began working with a man named John Bosco. Bosco lived in the nearby city of Coimbatore and was doing translation work for another one of the students researching in the village. Being a forty-year-old urbanite with experience interviewing on television, he approached our work from an entirely different perspective than Jegedesh had. My third translator was a young woman named Priscilla who was also translating for one of the other students; she and I actually worked together for one afternoon only while I was in the transition period between Jegedesh and Bosco.

My inability to speak Tamil myself was by far the greatest limitation I faced in the field. While I was fortunate to have worked with three translators who were very accommodating with their schedules and truly did their best to facilitate my work, arranging to have one of them with me when I needed them was a constant burden. Especially once I began working with other translators besides Jegedesh I noticed how much their individual personalities, biases, language skills, and experience affected the information I was receiving from my interviewees. If I were to conduct an ethnographic project of this kind in the future, pursuing language training and strategizing ways in which to deal with communication challenges would be a high priority among my preparations.

Due to the challenges of developing questions that translate effectively into Tamil, I was unable to conduct the survey that I had originally proposed. I did not obtain much information that can be subjected to statistical analysis. While my research lacks a quantifiable aspect, I was continually working to refine a set of survey questions, and asked the same kinds of questions of most of my interviewees. Even without a tightly controlled survey or survey sample, I believe the data does give a fairly accurate picture of the common views toward sacred space in Chavadipudur.

III. Chavadipudur and its *Koyil*

Now that I have discussed my approach to my field study in Chavadipudur, I will now introduce the village itself along with its major temples, which were the subject of my research.

Chavadipudur is about a forty-five minute bus ride south of Coimbatore in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu. The village was founded approximately 200 years ago when the Gounden family somehow gained the favor of the local British government and was granted stewardship over some 7000 acres of land. One of the Gounden sons, named Chinnaiya Gounden, founded the village of Chinnaiya Gounden Chavadi, known commonly as Chavadipudur or simply Pudur.

Like most communities in India, Chavadipudur hosts a variety of deities. These gods are housed in sacred spaces known in colloquial Tamil as *koyil* (temples and shrines). As a Tamil proverb states, “you can't live in a place with no God”—a sentiment that is confirmed by the sheer number of *koyil* in even a small village like Chavadipudur. While certainly not the site of mass pilgrimages, the role that such smaller, local temples and shrines as these play within greater Hinduism should not be underestimated. It is typically among these places—rather than Banares or Madurai or Ayodhya—that most Hindus live their daily lives, perform frequent religious devotions, and deal with the stresses of everyday life. So it is that while temples and shrines abound in the Hindu landscape, scattered throughout cities and villages alike, the *koyil* of Chavadipudur are truly, as Jegedesh once explained to me, places that the people of the village “keep for themselves.”

The word *koyil* refers to a wider variety of sacred location than the English word “temple” does. Also included by the Tamil term are the family shrines, tree shrines, and sacred snake and termite mounds that can be

found throughout the village [see Photographs 1 and 2]. Almost every Hindu home has some space dedicated to the offering of prayers or other religious devotions. Whether this is a small shelf in a quiet corner of the house or an entire room, such domestic sacred spaces are also considered *koyil*. While all of these locations certainly vary in the quality of their sacredness, it is important to realize that distinguishing between them is often difficult and, when trying to truly capture an insider or emic perspective, not altogether desirable. However, the majority of my observations were done in Chavadipudur's larger public temples. This was not done with the intention of discounting or dismissing the role of smaller shrines. As I mentioned above, the sacred spaces that are intimately tied to people's daily lives are tremendously significant. As a matter of practicality, though, I had much more reliable and unobtrusive access to public worship ceremonies than I did to the private devotions performed in people's homes.

There are five of these public *koyil* in Chavadipudur to which I gave most of my attention. All five temples are located within the village proper, and together represent Chavadipudur's largest sacred spaces. They are also the sites where most temple-going villagers observe the most frequent and regular holy days.

The first of these public *koyil* is the Ganapati tree shrine on the eastern end of the village [see Photograph 3], dedicated to Shiva's elephant-headed son (known also in Tamil as Vinayagar). The black stone image of Ganapati stands on the east side of a giant peepal tree on a square cement terrace surrounding the tree's base. This is purportedly Chavadipudur's oldest *koyil*, making Ganapati the "first god" of the village.

Just to the west, overlooking the square where the peepal tree grows, is the temple dedicated to Shiva's second son, known in Tamil Nadu as Murugan. This temple was described to me as a "high caste" temple since the dominant caste in the village has maintained this temple, along with the Ganapati tree shrine for approximately 150 years. Despite this, the Murugan temple is seen as being the main temple in Chavadipudur, and Murugan as the village's main god. While the restrictions on caste have become more lenient in recent decades, the Murugan temple is still the least accessible of the public temple for the lower castes.

Down the road from the Ganapati/Murugan complex, in the northeast corner of the village, stand the Mari Amman temple, a Goddess temple [see Photograph 4]. Of the five temples, this one is used most frequently by the greatest number of people, and therefore was the locations where I did most of my observations of worship

ceremonies, particular the weekly *puja* every Friday night. This temple was described to me as a “middle caste” temple.

The other two temples stand in the southern portion of the village, surrounded by a number of smaller shrines. This section of the village is populated by the lower castes, those who traditionally would not have been allowed even limited access to the Murugan or Mari Amman temples. The first of these “lower caste” temples is the Apuchimar temple, which belongs specifically to the musician caste. The other is the Patal Talachi Amman temple, which, like the Mari Amman temple, is dedicated to the Goddess (albeit a different form of the Goddess). This is the temple for the lowest castes in the village.

From these brief descriptions it is already apparent that there are important connections between these temples and the caste system in Chavadipudur. However, for the time being we will forego further consideration of the subject of caste in village sacred spaces, as a later section is dedicated to an examination of these issues.

When asked why they worship at these particular locations, most of my interviewees explained that these are the places where their fathers and their father’s fathers venerated. They pay devotions to the gods of these temples because this is the tradition that was passed down to them by former generations.

C. J. Fuller (1992) has described at length the kind of worship that typically occurs in Hindu temples such as these, ceremonies generally called *puja* (worship). Fuller identifies sixteen offerings or services that may be included as part of a single worship ceremony. Not all sixteen are essential, and all of the worship rituals I witnessed in the Chavadipudur temples omitted the majority of these offerings. The most essential, which is always included in the ceremony, is the offering of light, presented to the deity by waving a camphor flame before the divine image. Other offerings may consist of a variety of other items, many of which are used in the ongoing operation of the temple: bananas, coconuts, incense sticks, pieces of camphor, money. After the offerings have been presented, the worshipper then receives grace or blessings from the deity through the priest. This grace often includes a portion of the goods offered to the deity, such as a fragment of banana or coconut that has been offered by worshippers. Also given to worshippers as grace from the deity are red, yellow, and white powders with which worshippers mark their foreheads, and a small portion of sacred water which is rubbed over the head or sipped from the hand in which the priest places it. After receiving these blessings, worshippers may

circumambulate the temple clockwise, and will more than likely sit in quiet contemplation for a few minutes before leaving the premises.

Fuller writes that “puja, at its heart, is the worshippers’ reception and entertainment of a distinguished and adored guest. It is a ritual to honor powerful gods and goddesses, and often to express personal affection for them as well” (57).

IV. A Definition of Sacred Space

Having established the context of my field experience, I will now consider in some further detail the definition of sacred space offered in the introduction, a definition derived from the writings of Durkheim and Eliade. Once these ideas have been clarified, we will be ready to consider whether they accurately describe what is actually taking place in Chavadipudur’s temples.

Durkheim wrote a great deal about the idea of the sacred as a social phenomenon. It was his understanding that the sacred is that which is consecrated or set apart from the profane, the profane being that which corrupts the sacred. He believed that these two concepts, the sacred and the profane, “have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common” (1915:54), and held that the division of the world between the two “is the distinctive trait of religious thought” (1915:52). While these ideas have been debated and articulated since Durkheim published them nearly a century ago, it is important at this point to make note of this basic concept of the sacred being set apart from the profane.

In a moment we will be considering a number of ways in which Chavadipudur’s sacred spaces are indeed places set apart. However, even without taking the specific details into account, we should already see that Durkheim’s definition of sacred space in terms of its separation and opposition to the profane is incomplete. It explains what the sacred is not rather than what it is, describing the universe as “divided between things and actions which are subject to restriction and others which are not” (Douglas 1966:9) without approaching the issue of why these divisions and these restrictions exist in the first place. We might hope instead for a definition that clarifies why the concepts of sacred and profane are opposed to each other, what kind of corrupting influence the

profane has on the sacred, or why this influence ought to be protected against in cultural practice. Why is it that there must be places set apart in the village of Chavadipudur, and how do they function in Chavadipudur's culture and society?

It is in the face of such questions that Eliade's characterization of sacred space beyond its relative difference to profane space proves especially valuable. "When the sacred manifests itself," Eliade writes, "there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also a revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse" (1959:21). The defining aspect of sacred spaces, then, is that in these places is made apparent a transcendent reality the supersedes the experiences of day-to-day living. The profane makes this kind of revelation impossible, and is therefore corrupting to the sacred experience. The two must be kept separate in order to preserve the revelation of absolute truth.

V. *Koyil* as Places Set Apart

Up to this point I have discussed the methodology with which I approached the subject of Chavadipudur's temples, I have briefly described both the village and these sacred spaces, and have reviewed the qualities of separation and the revelation of truth identified in Durkheim and Eliade's writings on the subject of the sacred. Now we are ready to see whether these theoretical conceptualizations of the sacred reflect the actual operations of Chavadipudur's temples. In this section I will discuss how these temples show themselves to be places set apart from the spaces of neutral, everyday experience. Identifying this separateness is a fairly straightforward task compared to finding manifestations of absolute reality, which will be attempted in the next section.

Chavadipudur's sacred spaces are marked from their origins, when either a deity is ritually installed in a place (a process called *pratishta*) or a supernatural event reveals a place to already be chosen by the gods (a process called *swayembo*). Temple structures are architecturally distinct from other buildings, designed to fit the proper specifications for the deity housed within. While the exact significance of the various design details may be lost on the general public, the importance of having a trained temple architect attend to these matters is well understood. There is also a difference in behavior within a temple; as one of my interviewees explained it, one

must “move with the fear of God” inside a temple. Shoes, therefore, are removed within temple compounds, and the prescribed motions of the worship rituals are performed. In preparation for worship in the temple, people will bathe themselves and eat only vegetarian foods. Those who are otherwise ritually impure, such as menstruating women, will not enter the temple.

The feature most often discussed by my interviewees as distinguishing sacred space from profane space were the unique feelings and emotions they felt in sacred spaces. Almost every person I interviewed reported feelings of calm, peace, and “no disturbance” inside temple compounds. At these places they are able to forget about their worries and trust that life will get better soon. They find it easier to focus on God, on the needs of their families and their village. Others mentioned feeling “comfortable” as they spent time with other people in the compound; seeing friends was often named as a reason for visiting temples and worship ceremonies in the first place.

The separation of sacred from profane space implies a division or boundary, or, as it is termed by Eliade, a threshold. The threshold, Eliade explains, not only separates sacred and profane space; it is also “the paradoxical place where these worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible” (1959:25). Passage over the threshold is often represented physically by stairways, bridges, or doors that carry a person into the presence of the sacred. They “*show* the solution of continuity in space immediately and concretely; hence their great religious importance, for they are symbols and at the same time vehicles of *passage* from the one space to the other” (1959:25). In the practices of many religions and cultures, passage over a threshold is often marked by certain ritual actions. For example, it is not uncommon in larger Hindu temples for devotees to bow or prostrate themselves at the threshold. Even in the smallest of temples, like those in Chavadipudur, it is expected that people will remove their shoes before entering. Often worshippers will reach down to touch the stairs that carry them up into the temple or the temple compound, showing, as a village woman explained to me, gratitude for a means of entering the temple. We see, then, that even in village temples, small and insignificant though they may be among the sacred sites of India, there is a recognition that one is stepping out of the world of common experience and into a different kind of space entirely.

In short, Chavadipudur’s temples are indeed perceived as places set apart, as evidences in their unique

origins and construction, the distinctive emotions felt at these sacred locations, and the rituals pertaining to the temple threshold.

VI. *Koyil* and the Reality of Caste

One of my purposes in studying Chavadipur's sacred spaces was to find out if an encounter of absolute truth lay at the heart of the sacred experience as Eliade proposed and, more specifically, what kinds of truths might be communicated through the experience of sacred space in the village. This was a fairly general and unfocused objective, particularly for a field experience of only a few months. Anthropologist Raymond Firth has observed that symbolic meanings "are often complex and of different layers" (Womack 2005:2), and this certainly is the case with the symbolism of sacred spaces in Chavadipur. At this point it is impossible for me to even pretend to have explored and comprehended a significant portion of these layers of complexity.

However, while I was in the field the subject of caste came up a number of times and in a number of ways in relation to sacred spaces. I offer just one example. I spoke one morning with a group of men who were doing some preparatory work for the construction of the new Patal Talachi Amman temple that was to be built later that year. I mentioned that I had some questions I wanted to ask them about temples and about the Patal Talachi Amman temple in particular. The man who had been doing most of the speaking for the group told me they would be happy to discuss these matters with me while they worked. I started the interview, rather tactlessly, by asking why they believe there are so many temples in the village. The spokesman's reaction was quite sudden; he dropped his tools and rushed towards us, gesturing with his hands for us to speak more quietly. Bosco translated his soft-spoken response. They are men of a lower caste, he explained, and are not as free to worship in temples that the higher castes use. Nor can they worship as "richly" and would therefore be embarrassed to present their humble offerings in front of those more wealthy than they. For these reasons, it is better that they have their own temple in which to worship.

From experiences like these, it is clear that Chavadipur's temples and the way these temples are used are connected in some way with the caste system in the village. For one, it appears that the multiplicity of

temples implies a corresponding multiplicity of castes relate hierarchically. The simultaneous implications of unity within a caste and distinction from other castes are not lost on those that worship in Chavadipudur's many temples. During an interview with the priest for the Apuchimar temple, he stated that he would be happy if there were one temple where all the people in the village could worship together. "That would mean that all the people were equal," he explained. For this man, and others whom I spoke with, experiences within the village's temples demonstrate and make visible the caste organization of village society as well as where individuals fit within that organization. I believe this constitutes the kind of revelation of reality identified by Eliade as being central to the experience of sacred space. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that this is the case by identifying further ways that caste is made apparent in Chavadipudur's temples. Before commencing this discussion, however, it is perhaps appropriate to pause in order to clarify a few points concerning India's so-called "caste system" in order to recognize representations beyond those of the most apparent caste realities.

Caste continues to be an aspect of Hindu culture that is, for the most part, misunderstood by the outside world. Much of the confusion can be traced to descriptions of the caste system by European Sanskrit scholars during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These studies were primarily motivated by a desire to uncover "the rich religious and philosophical heritage of South Asia" (Kolenda:37) rather than increase understanding of India's living culture. In their perusals of texts such as the Vedas, the Laws of Manu, and the Mahabharata, these scholars came across elucidations of what is often termed the *varna* system (Murdoch 1977:7-12). The most well-known and oft-quoted passage, called the Purusha Sukta, is found in the *Rig Veda*. The hymn describes how the cosmic Man Purusha was sacrificed by the gods and how a different group of people, or varna, sprung from each carved portion:

When they divided Purusha how many portions did they make?

The Brahman [Brahmin] was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya [Kshatriya] made.

His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra [Shudra] was produced. (Noss: 85; see also

Keay:53, Murdoch:8)

In the hymn the four varnas are identified: the priests (Brahmin), the warriors and nobles (Kshatriya), the merchants (Vaishya), and the peasants (Shudra). Often appended to this list is a fifth “caste,” the untouchables, who technically stand outside of the varna system and therefore below people of caste. While the oppression and exploitation of the untouchables has long drawn the attention of humanists inside and outside of India, it must also be noted that inequality exists between the varnas as well. This hierarchal arrangement is implied in the Purusha Sukta, in fact, as it draws associations between the different varnas and parts of the body that vary in purity and function.

In any case, it was apparent to even the first generation of indologists to actually visit South Asia in the 1800s that the varna system presented in passages of ancient text like the Purusha Sukta describe a system entirely different from the one actually operating in modern India (Kolenda:37). Despite this realization, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the focus of researchers began to shift from the study the caste theory encapsulated in ancient Hindu texts to the study of the actual practice of caste in Indian society. Even today, when it is clear that the realities of caste are far more complicated than the varna model might lead us to believe, the West typically understands India’s caste system in terms of the varna system’s fivefold division of society. It is important not to overlook the fact that the varna system has a role in present-day discourse among Indians about caste, representing a simplified caste model that all of Hindu culture can draw upon in order to discuss and apprehend the general principles underlying specific and local caste systems (see Sharma:35). However, if we are to examine caste reality as it is manifested through Chavadipur’s sacred spaces, we ought to have a more specific understanding of the village’s caste reality than the varna model can offer us.

For an outsider coming into village society, particularly an outsider who does not speak the local language, arriving at this kind of understanding is no small task. After several futile attempts to pursue the subject with my closest friends and informants, I had to abandon my initial visions of drafting a sort of organizational chart for village castes¹. To date the most thorough description I have received of Chavadipur’s caste system came from Mr. C. Ramachandra in 2003. Ramu (as he prefers to be called) is the acting head of the village’s dominant family, having married a descendant of Chavadipur’s founder, Chinnaiya Gounden. The purpose of our interview had initially been to talk about the history of the village. Among other things, Ramu

mentioned how each caste in the village is associated with a particular occupation. At Chavadipudur's inception it had been important to have certain castes represented to perform those services vital to the survival of the village. These same castes are still found in Chavadupudur today: masons, musicians, carpenters, traders, barbers, clothes-washers, and priest, among others.

The kind of system Ramu describes is what is typically called the *jati* system. Pauline Kolenda (1978:40-42) has drawn upon a number of studies in rural India to create a list of significant components of the *jati* system. While based on principles encapsulated in the *varna* system, the *jati* system more completely describes caste as it is found in India's villages today. Therefore, if the reality of caste is manifest in Chavadipudur's temples, we would expect to see in the typical rituals and behaviors associated with these sacred spaces demonstrations of at least some caste system components identified by Kolenda. For the remainder of this section I would like to describe some of these demonstrations that I observed in Chavadipudur's temples. Rather than enumerate all of Kolenda's points here, but will consider those aspects that seem pertinent to Chavadipudur's temples.

1. *"Caste as a system operates within a limited locality, a single village or a few linked villages."* The fact that a caste system operates at a highly local level probably does not warrant much discussion here. It is an important point to recognize, however, since most of the world has imagined "the caste system" in India to be a universal system, a misunderstanding which is perpetuated by emphasis on the *varna* system in caste studies. Further, the locality of caste underscores the need to focus on local temples in order to identify demonstrations of a local caste system within Hindu sacred space. We cannot expect that Chavadipudur's caste system will necessarily be apparent in the temples of other communities.

2. *"A village or local population is composed of a series of mutually exclusive castes, usually numbering anywhere from a handful to a score or more."* This point has already been discussed above in relation to Chavadipudur's sacred spaces. To restate briefly, it was shown how the presence of many temples in the village essentially demonstrates the existence of "a series of mutually exclusive castes" there.

3. *"Castes within a local caste system tend to be mutually ranked according to their respective degrees of pollution."* The outright exclusion of lower castes from Hindu temples has become uncommon since Gandhi's

fast-unto-death on behalf of untouchables in 1934. A person of low caste would not likely be turned out of even the most sacred of Chavadipudur's temple, the Murugan temple, provided they had performed important purification practices such as bathing or abstaining from non-vegetarian foods for a time. It is interesting to see, however, how practice has adapted to keep the more polluted or profane castes from direct contact with the sacred, as it is also interesting to see how these adaptations make even more apparent the gradations of pollution in the spectrum of Chvadipudur's castes.

While the design of each temple will vary slightly, the standard arrangement in Chavadipudur [see Figure 1] is to have a wall around the temple compound, marking the outermost threshold of the temple's sacred space; formerly this would have been the line that the lower castes would have been unable to cross. Inside the temple compound is the temple structure itself, consisting of a broad, covered terrace, and the relatively small inner chamber of the temple where the image of the deity is housed. While the lower castes are permitted within the temple compound, they do not mount the temple's terrace. Of the higher castes who are permitted on the terrace, none save the priest (or, on occasion, a male from the village's dominant family) is able to enter the inner chamber. Within the temple compound, then—inside the threshold marked by the wall surrounding the compound—we can identify several other thresholds, with each indicating a region of increasingly more sacred space.

It is an arrangement that seems to add a level of complexity to the binary opposition between sacred and profane discussed by Durkheim, Eliade, and others. It also makes apparent a gradation of pollution in Chavadipudur's castes, from those who must be content to worship from the base of the temple terrace, to the priest who ascends into the presence of the temple's god or goddess.

4. *“Each caste has an occupational specialty, and offers this to other castes in exchange for food, products, or services.”* The system of exchange between occupationally specialized castes is called the *jajmani* system, and it is in this system that Hindu communities are said to experience “organic solidarity.” Like parts of a living organism, the different castes function within their respective spheres so that the village as a whole can survive. This interdependency is something Ramu emphasized quite heavily during our conversation on the founding of Chavadipudur, citing several examples of rituals performed in temples that demonstrate the need for the

different castes in the village to rely on each other. For example, members of the barber caste are responsible for holding ceremonial torches during village rituals. Clothes washers provide a piece of cloth to lay in front of the temple steps at festivals—and in the case of a wedding lays cloth all the way from the bride's home to the steps of the temple. It is true that the priests perform rituals in behalf of the village, but they cannot do so without the help of the other castes in the village.

A scene I observed in the Mari Amman temple further demonstrated this principle of organic solidarity. I was seated on the temple terrace with Jegedesh observing a Friday night puja. Due to some family matters, the priest had to leave the temple for about a half an hour. By the time he returned there were dozens of people waiting for him to perform puja for them. In the rush to catch up in his work, the priest failed to offer the tray of colored powders to a group of low-caste worshippers at the base of the stairs so that they could mark their foreheads before leaving. He had already started helping another family, and would not be free for several minutes. Seeing the dilemma, Jegedesh leapt to his feet, took the tray from the stairs leading into the temple's inner chamber, and carried it to the people waiting at the end of the terrace. He came back to me after completing this service, smiling in embarrassment. As he rubbed colored powder from his hands and settled back down beside me he commented that he had never done that before, and had been scolded by an older woman for the manner in which he had presented the tray to them.

What this scene demonstrated was that the castes are meant to rely on one another. The priest is the one with the power to enter into the presence of the temple's divine image in behalf of the whole village; it is his role to operate within that specified space for the benefit of all. Similarly Jegedesh's caste determines that he can operate within the space of the temple terrace, and is permitted, when necessary, to act as a mediator between the terrace steps, and the steps that climb into the presence of the god.

5. *"A dominant caste, or a dominant family, [...] typically has preponderant political and economic power over everyone in the locality."* Chinnaiya Gounden's community was the Naidu Gounden, and to this day his descendants are the dominant family in the village; Ramu, as has been said, currently acts as head of the family with his wife's brother living in the city. The political and economic power of the Goundens is expressed in a number of ways in relation to the village's temples. For one, the Goundens are allowed to enter the inner

chamber of these temples, presuming they have observed the same purification rites required of the officiating priests.

Traditionally the Goundens were the ones to own land and coordinate agriculture in Chavadipur. They ordered the construction of public buildings, like the Murugan temple that stands on the eastern side of the village. While this role has changed to some degree, they still bear primary financial responsibility for the ongoing operation of the village's temples, they pay the salary of the priest, and as owners of the land the temples stand on, pay property taxes for the temple lots. While they no longer pay outright for the construction of new temples, they continue to organize fundraising to that end; even in the case that the lower castes decide to build a temple for themselves, the Goundens make the principal contribution, usually covering at least half the cost of the project. Since he came to the village following his marriage in the early 1980s, Ramu has overseen the renovation of the Murugan temple, the Mari Amman temple, and now the Patal Talachi Amman temple. "You can't live in a place with no God," he explains.

VII. Summary and Conclusion

Before concluding I will briefly summarize the topics covered in this paper. I began by describing my research methods, then introduced the village of Chavadipur and its temples. After discussing principles of sacred space set forth by Durkheim and Eliade, namely separateness and the revelation of absolute truth, I have identified expressions of these principles in Chavadipur's larger public temples. These temples were shown to be places set apart from profane space in the way that they become sacred, in the feelings people experience there, and in the special ritual observances observed there. While the full scope of truths and realities manifested in Chavadipur's sacred spaces could not be explored in my research, I have considered some important elements of the village's caste system that are expressed in the public temples, including the ranking of castes according to their degrees of pollution, the interdependence of castes within the village, and the eminent authority of the dominant family.

This field project and this paper have certainly not exhausted the research and discussion that could be pursued on any of these subjects—in Chavadipur, let alone other communities throughout India and the world.

What has been discussed seems to indicate that despite differences of opinion among the peoples of the world on what constitutes reality, sacred space in Chavadipudur is indeed what its participants believe it to be: a physical and spiritual center through which their specific reality is made manifest.

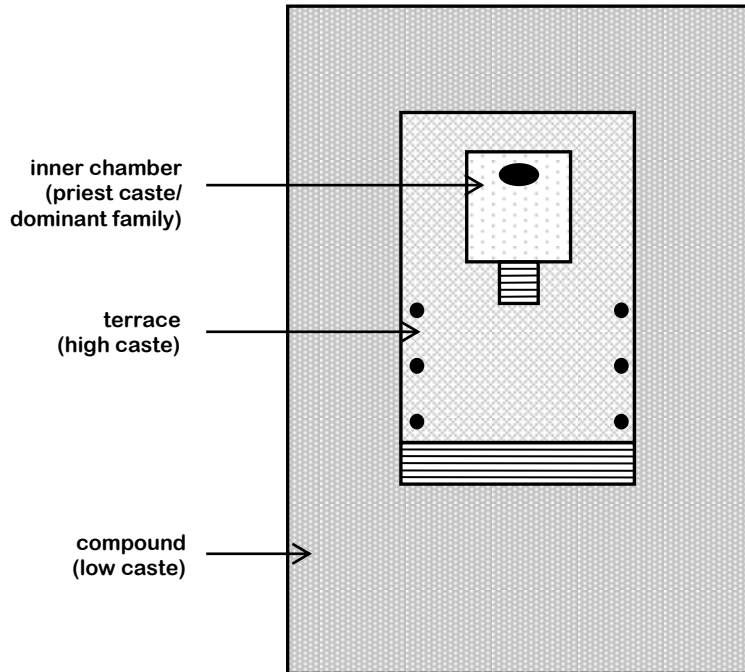


Figure 1. Chavadipur's larger temples tend to be divided into concentric regions of increasingly sacred space. A person's caste determines how closely he or she may approach the sacred inner chamber where the divine image is housed.



Photograph 1. A tree shrine with various gods represented by framed pictures and stones.



Photograph 2. A family shrine on the outskirts of the village.



Photograph 3. The Ganapati shrine in the foreground with the Murugan temple in the background.



Photograph 4. The Mari Amman temple.



Photograph 5. The ash, sandalwood, and kungumum powders that worshippers receive as grace from the god of a temple and use mark their foreheads.

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¹ I later came to recognize, as Dumont (1970:34) has noted, that even were it ultimately feasible to complete such a chart, it would not represent the local understanding of the castes and their relationships with each other.