



## Heaven is a Gopura

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*Gopuras*—the tall, gracefully sloping towers that mark passageways through drāvida-style temples—are ubiquitous throughout the landscape of the Tamil country, and icons of the contemporary state of Tamil Nadu. Yet, it would be fair to say that art and architectural history have limited their analyses to considerations of that which is exterior: the symbolism attached to the form, and the structure's location, external decoration, and etymology. The *gopura* is variously defined as a gateway, a tower, and built-up part of the wall of which it is a part. Questions of access and use almost never enter into interpretation of the form as a building. In this paper, Anna Seastrand suggests a reading of these gateway structures as functional, inhabitable, multi-storied buildings, meant to be experienced and understood from the inside as well as the outside. In this light, the intensely decorated interiors of the *gopuras* are of particular interest because they present the opportunity to rethink questions of context and audience within the temple precinct. Were paintings and sculptures meant to be apotropaic, didactic, or simply decorative? Would their position within the liminal space of the *gopura*—neither quite inside nor outside of the temple—have made them accessible to an audience different from that normally allowed inside of the temple? Were their interiors intended to be as hidden and difficult to access as they are today? These questions suggest new ways of understanding the symbolism, meaning, and functions behind the iconic form of the *gopura*.