



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

A Study On The Pilgrimage Sites In Kanchipuram And Its Distinctive Features

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ABSTRACT

Kanchipuram, often referred to as the City of Thousand Temples, is a city in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, renowned for its rich cultural heritage and religious significance. The city is a significant pilgrimage site for followers of several religions, showcasing India's pluralistic religious fabric. Hinduism is the predominant religion in Kanchipuram, with the city being home to numerous temples that are architectural marvels and of great religious importance. Some of the most famous temples include the Kailasanathar Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, and the Varadharaja Perumal Temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu. These temples not only draw devotees from across India but are also significant historical sites, reflecting the Dravidian architectural style. During the Pallava dynasty, which flourished from the fourth to the ninth centuries CE in what is now Tamil Nadu, several religions were practiced and patronized. The Pallavas played a significant role in the development of South Indian religion, Art, and Architecture. In this paper, an attempt to reveal the significant Pilgrimage sites in Kanchipuram.

Key Words: Pilgrimage, Temples, Architecture, Kanchipuram.

INTRODUCTION

Kanchipuram has Hindu temples. Hinduism was the predominant religion under the Pallava rule, with significant patronage from the Pallava kings. The dynasty is known for its substantial contributions to Hindu temple architecture, and many of the magnificent temples built during their reign are dedicated to Hindu deities. Kanchipuram also holds historical significance various religions including Jainism and Buddhism. It was once a major centre of Jain learning and culture. The city has several ancient Jain temples and monuments, such as the Trilokyanatha Temple and the Chandraprabha Temple, which reflect the rich presence of Jainism in this region in the past. The Jain temples in Kanchipuram are known for their unique architectural styles and sculptures. Jainism received considerable royal patronage in the early phases of the Pallava dynasty. Kanchipuram, under the Pallavas, was a significant Jain center, with several Jain temples and educational institutions. The Pallavas supported Jain scholars and the construction of Jain temples. This support reflects the inclusive religious policies of the Pallavas, who patronized multiple religious communities. Although Buddhism is not as prominently practiced in Kanchipuram today as Hinduism or Jainism, the city has historical connections to Buddhism. It was once a significant center for Buddhist learning and culture, with scholars and monks visiting the city. There are historical accounts and records of Buddhist monasteries in the region, but most of these have not survived the passage of time.

SIGNIFICANT PILGRIMAGE SITES IN KANCHIPURAM

Kanchipuram is considered one of the seven holiest cities to the Hindus of India. Following are some of the notable temples in Kanchipuram from the Pallava period that were significant pilgrimage centres.

1. Ekambareswarar Temple: Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the Ekambareswarar Temple is one of the five major Shiva temples or Pancha Bootha Sthalams, each representing one of the five elements; this temple symbolizes the element of Earth. The temple's towering gopuram (gateway tower) is one of the tallest in South India, and the sprawling temple complex is adorned with intricate carvings and sculptures.
2. Kailasanathar Temple: The oldest structure in Kanchipuram, the Kailasanathar Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is renowned for its architectural beauty and the intricate frescoes that adorn its walls, which are some of the finest examples of Pallava art.
3. Varadharaja Perumal Temple: This temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and is considered one of the 108 Divya Desams, the holy abodes of Vishnu. The temple is known for its magnificent sculptures, including the intricately carved 100-pillar hall built by the Vijayanagar kings. The deity, Varadharaja Perumal, is worshipped here in a majestic form, and the temple festival held in May attracts thousands of devotees.
4. Kamakshi Amman Temple: Dedicated to Goddess Kamakshi, a form of Parvati, this temple is situated in the heart of Kanchipuram. It is one of the 51 Shakti Peethas, where the goddess is worshipped as the supreme mother. The temple's golden gopuram and the sanctum sanctorum, where the goddess is depicted seated in a yogic posture, are focal points for pilgrims.
5. Kumarakottam Temple: Dedicated to Lord Murugan (Kartikeya), the Kumarakottam Temple is situated between the Kamakshi Amman and Ekambareswarar temples, symbolically representing the son between the divine parents Shiva and Parvati. The temple plays a crucial role in the spiritual landscape of Kanchipuram, with devotees visiting to pay homage to the god of war and wisdom.

Divya Desams are the 108 Vishnu temples that are mentioned in the works of the Tamil Azhwars considered as saints. Temples dedicated to Vishnu glorified in the Nalayira Divya Prabandham, the early medieval Tamil literature canon of the Azhwar saints from the sixth–ninth centuries CE. There are Fifteen Divya Desams in Kanchipuram.

1. Thirukkivilur - This is technically not within the town of Kanchipuram but is included as part of the regional grouping.
2. Thiruvaheendrapuram - Located near Cuddalore, this temple is often associated with Kanchipuram's spiritual geography due to historical and religious linkages.
3. Ashtabujakaram (Sri Adikesava Perumal Temple) - Known for the deity with eight arms.
4. Thiruvelukkai (Azhagiya Singaperumal Temple) - Dedicated to Narasimha, an avatar of Vishnu.
5. Thiruthanka (Thoopul Vilakoli Perumal Temple) - Known for the deity depicted as "Light of the Lamp."
6. Thirukkalvanoor (Within Kamakshi Amman Temple) - This shrine is within the Kamakshi Amman Temple premises.
7. Thiru Ooragam (Ulagalantha Perumal Temple) - Known for the deity in a standing posture depicting Vishnu's Vamana avatar.
8. Thiruneeragam (Jagadeeshwarar Temple) - Vishnu is worshipped as Jagadeeshwarar here.

9. Thirukkaragam (Karunakara Perumal) - Dedicated to Karunakara Perumal.
10. Thirukkarvanam (Tirukkarugavur Karpaga Vriksha Perumal) - Features Vishnu as Karpaga Vriksha Perumal.
11. Thirukkalvanur (Sri Kalvar Perumal Temple) - This temple is situated within the precincts of another temple.
12. Thiruparameshvara Vinnagaram (Vaikunta Perumal Temple) - Known for its historical inscriptions and architecture.
13. Thirupavala Vannam (Pavala Vanam) - Also known as Pavala Vanam.
14. Thiruputkuzhi (Vijayaraghava Perumal Temple) - Famous for its Vijayaraghava Perumal deity.
15. Varadaraja Perumal Temple - One of the most famous Vishnu temples in Kanchipuram, dedicated to Lord Varadaraja. These temples span across the Kanchipuram district, each with its unique history, architecture, and traditions, embodying the spiritual heritage and architectural grandeur of Tamil Nadu.

Shiva Temples and its Importance

The Ekambareswarar Temple

The temple is situated in the historical town of Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, India, stands as a monumental Hindu shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva. This temple holds a pivotal place within the Saivism tradition, marking its prominence as one of the Pancha Bhoota Stalas, which represent the five elements, with Ekambareswarar symbolizing the element of earth. Lord Shiva, venerated here under the names Ekambareswarar, Ekambaranathar, or Rajlingeswaram, is worshipped in the form of a lingam known as Prithvi Lingam. Goddess Parvati, his consort, is adored as Elavarkuzhali. Esteemed in the seventh century Tevaram, a seminal work in Tamil Saiva literature penned by saint poets known as the Nayanars, the temple is also celebrated in the Vaishnavite tradition for housing the Nilathingal Thundam Perumal temple, one of the 108 sacred DhivyaDesams.

The Ekambareswarar Temple is among India's most extensive temple complexes. It features four majestic gopurams that is gateway towers, with the southern tower rising to an impressive 192 feet, making it one of the tallest in the country. The temple complex is adorned with numerous shrines, particularly dedicated to Ekambareswarar and Nilathingal Thundam Perumal, alongside a remarkable thousand-pillared hall from the Vijayanagar era. The temple's daily and annual rituals, including the widely celebrated Panguni Uthiram festival during March-April, form a significant part of its religious calendar, attracting devotees and tourists alike. With its foundations dating back to the ninth century Chola dynasty, subsequent expansions were made by the Vijayanagar rulers, contributing to its grandeur. Currently, the temple's upkeep is managed by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department of the Tamil Nadu Government, making it a key cultural and spiritual landmark in Kanchipuram.

Kailasanathar Temple in Kanchipuram

Kailasanatha Temple, is an ancient Hindu temple from the Pallava era. It is one of Kanchipuram's oldest still-existing monuments, dedicated to Shiva. Built by Narasimhavarman II in 700 CE, with additions by Mahendravarman III, it exhibits Dravidian architecture. This temple is square in shape and contains three main areas such as the main sanctum, the maha-mandapa, and the mukhamandapa, which is crowned by a four-story vimana. Nine shrines, seven outside and two inside that flank the sanctum's entrance, all feature images of Shiva and encircle the main sanctuary. Cells also round the outside walls of the temple's courtyard. The exquisitely sculpted galaxy of Hindu art from the late seventh and early

eightth century Tamil tradition is the main attraction of the Kailasanathar temple. These are mostly associated with Shaivism, but they also contain a good deal of motifs from Vedic deities, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism. One of Tamil Nadu's earliest and best examples of Hindu mural art is another noteworthy feature of this temple. This is located in the courtyard cells' interior walls. The murals' style is reminiscent of the ancient paintings in Kanchipuram's eighth-century Vaikunthaperumal temple and the Ajanta Caves. Numerous inscriptions in early scripts found on the temple walls are significant for epigraphical research on local history and Tamil temple customs. The temple was thought by the locals to be a secure haven for the kingdom's kings during times of conflict. The monarchs constructed a covert tunnel that is still visible and was utilized as an escape route. It is thought that the temple was visited by Raja Raja Chola I (985–1014 CE), who used it as inspiration to create the Brihadeeswara Temple.

The Sathyanatheswarar Temple

The temple is also known as the Karaivananathar Temple or Thirukalimedu Temple, is a serene Hindu sanctuary dedicated to Lord Shiva. It stands in Thirukalimedu, near the Indira Theertham in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. Here, Shiva is venerated as Sathyanatheswarar, alongside his consort Parvathi, known as Pramarambikai. The temple holds a prestigious place in Tamil Saivaite tradition, being celebrated in the seventh-century Tevaram, a canonical work of Tamil Shaivaite hymns by the Nayanars, and is recognized as one of the 275 Paadal Petra Sthalams. Featuring a three-tiered tower gateway and encircled by granite walls, the temple complex is a spiritual haven. It conducts two daily rituals from dawn till dusk and hosts three major yearly festivals: the Margalhi Tiruvathirai, Aipassi Annabishekam, and Mahashivarathri, drawing devotees from all corners.

The Muktheeswarar Temple

Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, is nestled within the town of Kanchipuram. It finds its place close to the Vaikuntha Vasa Perumal Temple and behind the Ulagalandha Perumal Temple, boasting a history that spans over a thousand years. The care and preservation of this ancient site fall under the jurisdiction of the Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department. A relic of the past attributed to Nandivarman II, stands testament to the architectural prowess of the Pallava period. Presently, the temple finds itself in a state of neglect, with the ravages of time evident in its structure. Despite its dilapidated condition, the temple grounds are home to inscriptions that hark back to the glorious era of the Pallavas, offering a glimpse into the rich historical tapestry of the region. Notably, the sculpture located in the front mandapa (hall) of the temple is distinguished by its bold outlines, showcasing the artistic excellence characteristic of Pallava craftsmanship. This temple, though in need of preservation, continues to be a significant historical site, embodying the spiritual and cultural heritage of its time.

Iravatanesvara Temple, Kanchipuram, is also known as The Jurahareswarar Temple simply called as the Jvarahareswara Temple, stands in the revered temple city of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, India. This temple, showcasing the Dravidian architectural style, is dedicated to Lord Shiva, who is venerated here as Jurahareswarar. It is famous for its splendid vimana which has circular sanctum.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT TEMPLES

The Kamakshi Amman Temple

This is initially founded by the Pallavas in the sixth century and later modified between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, houses the goddess in the unique form of a yantra, positioned before the deity's idol. This temple, which also encompasses one of the 108 Divya Desams dedicated to Vishnu known as Tirukalavanur, primarily worships Kamakshi, followed by Vishnu in his Varaha avatar. Celebrated by Vaishnavite saint poets, the Alvars, between the sixth and ninth centuries in the Naalayira Divya Prabandham, the temple's establishment is attributed to the Pallava kings, who had their capital in

Kanchipuram. Together with the deity shrines in Madurai and either Varanasi or Thiruvanaikovil, it forms a core trio of Shaktism's sacred sites in Tamil Nadu. The temple's origins are also mentioned in the Sangam literature Perumpanatruppadai as Kamavelkottam, alongside Kumarakottam, under the reign of Sangam era King Thondaiman Ilandiraiyan. In various Hindu scriptures, Kamakshi Amman is equated with Meenakshi of Madurai and Vishalakshi of Varanasi or, in some accounts, Akilandeswari of Thiruvanaikovil. Unique among Kanchipuram's Shiva temples, Kamakshi Amman is the exclusive Shakti shrine.

The Trilokyanatha Temple

Temple is also known as the Chandraprabha Temple, stands as a remarkable Jain heritage site dating back to the eighth century CE under the patronage of the Pallavas. This twin Jain temple boasts a rich tapestry of inscriptions from notable historical figures, including Pallava king Narasimhavarman II, as well as Chola monarchs Rajendra Chola I, Kulothunga Chola I, and Vikrama Chola. Additionally, it features Kanarese inscriptions from the celebrated ruler Krishnadevaraya, bridging a significant cultural and temporal span in South Indian history. The preservation and upkeep of this architectural and historical marvel are undertaken by the Tamil Nadu archaeological department, ensuring its legacy continues to enlighten future generations. The temple is adorned with ancient murals, some of which date back to the thirteenth century but were later restored by Krishnadevaraya in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries. The Tamil Nadu Archaeological Department is responsible for the maintenance of this historic site.

The Ulagalandha Perumal Temple

Temple is situated in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, stands as a monument to the worship of Lord Vishnu. Showcasing the Dravidian architectural style, this temple is honored in the Nalayira Divya Prabandham, a revered collection of hymns by the Alvar saints dating from the sixth to ninth centuries CE. It is recognized as one of the 108 Divya Desams, sacred sites dedicated to Vishnu, here worshipped as Ulagalantha Perumal and his consort Lakshmi as Amuthavalli. The temple's inception is attributed to the Pallavas in the late eighth century CE, with subsequent enhancements by the medieval Cholas, Vijayanagara kings, and Madurai Nayaks.

The Pandavatutar Perumal Temple, also known as Thirupadagam,

It is situated in Kanchipuram, and is devoted to Lord Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu. Celebrated in the Nalayira Divya Prabandham, an anthology of early medieval Tamil hymns by the Azhwar saints from the sixth to ninth centuries CE, this temple is among the esteemed 108 Divya Desams. Here, Vishnu is venerated as Krishna alongside his consort Rukmini. Recognized as one of Kanchipuram's three most ancient temples, alongside Ulagalantha Perumal Temple, its origins trace back to the Pallavas in the late eighth century CE, with significant enhancements by the Medieval Cholas and Vijayanagara monarchs. The temple's architecture is fortified by a granite wall that encloses the shrines and two sacred tanks, and features a striking four-tiered gateway tower.

The temple's history is rich with inscriptions from the Chola period. One notable inscription details a donation by a merchant during the reign of Rajakesari Varman, also known as Kulothunga Chola I, in his fifth regnal year. This record highlights the provision of a flower garden to the temple, funded by the acquisition of lands from the village of Ovirukkai for the gardeners' benefit. The transaction for these tax-exempt lands, measuring 2,000 kulis, involved a payment of eleven kalanjus, showcasing a high degree of craftsmanship comparable to that of the Madhuranthaka madai. This donation exempted the temple from various local taxes and levies such as vellikasu, nirallai, silvari, and sorumattu. Further, inscriptions on the temple's southern wall from Kulothunga Chola I's 39th year mention a gift of two kalanjus and two manjadi to the temple priest by a merchant. This contribution was intended for the daily provision of two malis of curd to the temple.

CONCLUSION

Kanchipuram temples are not just places of worship, also they are historical landmarks that offer a window into the religious, architectural, and cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. In the Pallava regime, Kanchipuram was a significant centre of religious activity and architectural innovation, making it a major pilgrimage destination even in ancient times. The city's deep spiritual roots and its array of ancient temples make it a major pilgrimage centre for Hindus. The Pallava dynasty's contributions to religion extend beyond mere patronage; they were instrumental in the architectural and cultural development of the religions the dynasty supported. The temples and monuments built during their reign are not only places of worship but also hold great historical, architectural, and cultural significance. These structures are a testament to the religious tolerance and the eclectic nature of the Pallava rulers, who, while being ardent devotees of Hinduism, also supported Jainism and Buddhism.

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