



Devotional landscapes: An exploration of Vaishnava worship traditions in Ambasamudram

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Abstract

This paper explores the growth and cultural significance of Vaishnava worship traditions in the South Indian town of Ambasamudram, situated in Tamil Nadu's Tirunelveli district. It examines how Vaishnavism, through the devotional bhakti movement led by the Tamil Azhwars, shaped religious, social, and architectural developments from the early medieval period onward. Focusing on key temples such as the Sri Krishnaswamy Temple, Purushotama Perumal Temple, Sri Thennazhagar Perumal Temple, and Mannarkoil Rajagopala Swamy Temples, this study highlights the diverse ritual practices and theological emphasis that define local Vaishnava worship. The paper also contextualizes Rama worship within the broader Vaishnava framework and investigates how epic narratives, particularly the Ramayana, influenced devotional practices. By analyzing both historical foundations and living traditions, this paper offers insight into how temple institutions in Ambasamudram have served as dynamic centers of religious life, cultural continuity, and community identity.

Keywords: Vaishnavism, bhakti movement, divya desams, rama worship, religious patronage, tamil devotional tradition

Introduction

The emergence of temple institutions in medieval Tamil Nadu represents an important shift in the socio-religious and political dynamics of the region. From the seventh to the thirteenth century, the construction and patronage of temples increased dramatically under powerful dynasties such as the Pallavas, Cholas, and later the Pandiyas. These temples became not just places of worship but also important centers of economic, social, and cultural life. In this transformed era, temples played a multifaceted role within society. They served as centers for industry, administration, and trade. They not only served as sites for religious rituals and gatherings but also played an important role in local administration, often serving as administrative centers for their respective regions. This research paper focuses on the popularization of Vaishnava temples in Ambasamudram, highlighting how the Vaishnava tradition firmly established the supremacy of Vishnu. Throughout early medieval Tamil Nadu, various incarnations or avatars of Vishnu gained prominence due to the prevailing socio-political and economic conditions: among these incarnations, Krishna and Rama (commonly referred to as Rama in Tamil) emerged as particularly significant figures and attracted the devotion of the people. Exploring these themes reveals the complex interplay between temple, social life, and religious practices, underscoring the enduring influence of Vaishnavism. By examining how the worship of Vishnu and his incarnations shaped not only religious beliefs but also social and economic structures, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the central role of temples in the social fabric of medieval Tamil Nadu. In doing so, it seeks to shed light on how these institutions fostered a rich cultural expression, social engagement, and enduring devotion that still resonates in the region's heritage today.

Furthermore, this research explores the complex relationship between Vaishnava cultic traditions centered on Rama and the Ramayana narratives in Tamil Nadu. It examines how the themes, characters, and events of the epic influence

devotional practices and cultural expressions within Vaishnavism in the region.

Objectives

- To trace the historical development of Vaishnavism in Tamil Nadu, with special emphasis on the role of the Azhwars and the impact of temple institutions in medieval society.
- To analyze the emergence and significance of Vaishnava temples in Ambasamudram, focusing on architectural features, ritual traditions, and the theological importance of the presiding deities.
- To explore the integration of Ramayana narratives in Tamil Vaishnava worship, examining how Rama became a significant figure in Ambasamudram's devotional landscape.
- To document and interpret the ritual practices observed in key Vaishnava temples in Ambasamudram, especially their liturgical frameworks (Pancharatra, Vaikanasa), temple festivals, and community participation.
- To understand how temple worship practices, reflect broader socio-religious transformations in medieval Tamil Nadu, particularly in relation to patronage, caste, and communal identity.

Hinduism: The Etymology of the Term and Its Diverse Traditional Evolution

The word 'Hindu' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Sindu,' the original name of the river in the area that is now part of India and Pakistan. The aliens from Central Asia could not pronounce the Indus correctly, and it was pronounced "Ind" or "Hind" in their language (the Greeks called it Hydaspes), which later provided the roots for the name of the country, India, and its religion, Hinduism. The Persians were the first to use the word 'Hindu' in the Persian language. In Arabic, the word "al-Hind" (Hind) was used to refer to the land of the people who lived east of the Indus River. The term 'Hinduism' was first introduced into the English language in

the 19th century by the Indian social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy to describe the religion of that land. Over time, "Hinduism" came to refer to the religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions indigenous to India, along with their ethno-geographic connotations.

Unlike other religions, Hinduism does not have a common historical founder. It has no central authority to rule in religious matters. It is formed by various traditions and is spread over a large territory marked by significant ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Cultural and ethnic diversity has given rise to a large number of traditions due to the large number of followers of Hinduism. Therefore, Hinduism is the most complex of all the religions living in the world. Despite its complexity, Hinduism is one of the oldest major religions in the world. Demographically it is the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam. Most of them live in India, with a very small percentage of the population in other countries.

Worship of Gods in Hinduism

Historical Hinduism has three main gods: Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. These gods are found in Sanskrit religious texts and are controlled by the Brahmins, the religious elite of society. In addition, there are many other gods and goddesses. There is a rural or folk form of Hinduism, in which people worship gods centered on their own village, who are called village deities. Although there are many sects within Hinduism, Vaishnavism and Shaivism are the two main sects of Hinduism. They have dominated the religion with a large following among various sections of society and with state patronage. Most urban Hindus follow one of these two sects. Shaivism considers Shiva as the ultimate deity, while Vaishnavism considers Vishnu or his avatars, such as Rama and Krishna, as the supreme god.

The growth of Vaishnavism in Tamil Nadu and the devotional movement of the Alvars

Vaishnavism emerged as an established religion within Hinduism a few centuries before the pre-Christian era, but its roots are found in the Vedas. Vaishnavism is a tradition of Hinduism that is distinguished from other schools by the worship of Vishnu or his related avatars as the original and supreme god. Vishnu is considered to embody the qualities of the three members of the Hindu Trinity, namely Brahma as the creator and Shiva as the destroyer, along with his position as the protector, in his own personality." The followers of Vaishnavism are called Vaishnavites or Vaishnavas. It spread its wings to various parts of the country, especially to South India, a region inhabited mostly by Saivites. It has a large following in the Tamil-speaking region of South India, known as Tamil Nadu. It saw phenomenal growth and flourished in Tamil Nadu from the sixth to ninth centuries AD due to the efforts of Tamil saints, or Azhwars. The Tamil Azhwars took Vaishnavism to the nooks and crannies of Tamil Nadu with their devotional songs. These songs are an expression of intense devotion to an individual. "God is called bhakti," and it was also an emotional approach to God. A.K. Ramanujam Bhakti is called "a major, multifaceted transformation in Hindu culture and consciousness between the sixth and ninth centuries." 15 Wendy Doniger (O'Flaherty) considers bhakti to be the dominant theme in the last of the three broad periods of Hindu mythology. "The Alvars sought to

create a personal connection between God and devotee and among devotees." The sacred collection of four thousand hymns sung by the Alvars in praise of Vishnu and his holy abodes, known as the Divyakshetras, is collectively known as the Nalayira Divyaprabandham, "a poetic collection of 4,000 hymns." Nadhamuni. A 10th-century Vaishnava acarya who collected scattered hymns and composed them for singing in Vishnu temples. He was responsible for converting the oral hymns of the Alvars into Vedic text. These songs were first sung in Tamil Nadu at Kattumannarkudi (or) Veeranarayana Chaturvedimangalam near Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu. The azhvans and their songs were recognized as sacred and incorporated into the ritual order of the temple. The places where the 20 azhvans sang in praise of the local deity of the temple are now called divyadesam. It may be noted that initially, a divyashetram was also called divyadesam. "Divya" means divine, peaceful, sacred, etc. Kshetram is a sacred place where a god or god-man resides. Desa is the equivalent of kshetram according to the context and refers to the country. The phrase "divyashetram" or "divyadesam" is mostly used by Vaishnavas. The Shaivites do not use this phrase. But it may be noted that the Saiva Nayanmars have listed at least 300 sacred centers of contemporary Shiva worship.

The Origin of temples in medieval Tamil Nadu

The Pallava dynasty, which flourished from 600 to 900 AD, played a major role in establishing temple institutions that shaped the cultural and religious landscape of Tamil Nadu. Early rulers such as Mahendravarman I and Narasimhavarman II, also known as Rajasimhavarman, were instrumental in this change. They pioneered the construction of rock-cut temples, moving away from their earlier reliance on wooden or brick temples. This innovative architectural style laid the foundation for subsequent developments in temple architecture. Among the most important contributions of the Pallavas are the Kailasanathar Temple at Kanchipuram and the remarkable temples at Mamallapuram (historically known as Mahabalipuram). These temples served not only as places of worship but also as powerful symbols of royal power and prestige, reflecting the strength of the Pallava rulers. Their support for Saivism was particularly notable, with numerous Shiva temples built during this period. However, the Pallavas also supported Vaishnavism and other sects, which showed the characteristics of the era. These temples became centers for the growing Bhakti (devotion) movements, and revered poet-saints like the Nayanmars and the Azhwars composed heartfelt hymns dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu, respectively. The Chola Empire, which ruled from 850 to 1279 AD, further consolidated and expanded the temple institutions established by the Pallavas. Under powerful kings like Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, temple construction became a state-sponsored endeavor. Chola rulers endowed temples with vast lands, wealth, and resources, transforming them into powerful institutions with significant religious and economic influence. The Rajarajeswarar Temple at Thanjavur, built by Rajaraja I in the eleventh century, is a prime example of Chola architectural grandeur. The temple was not just a place of worship; it evolved into a vast economic enterprise that controlled vast agricultural lands and employed thousands of individuals. The Rajarajeswarar Temple and other temples like it became repositories of wealth, art, and culture, with exquisite collections of bronze

sculptures, inscriptions, and murals celebrating both the divine and the achievements of the Chola dynasty.

The Chola emperors also institutionalized temple administration by establishing temple councils called *sabhas* or *urs*. These councils were responsible for overseeing land grants, revenue collection, and organizing festivals, thus embedding the temples deeply within the socio-economic fabric of Tamil society. Inscriptions from this period reveal a vibrant involvement of the temples in various economic activities, including land grants, agricultural production, and financial contributions from merchant and artisan guilds.

Following Chola rule, the later Pandya dynasty continued this rich tradition of temple building and patronage. For example, the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai was significantly expanded during this period, reflecting the Pandyas' devotion to both Saivism and Vaishnavism. Temples established during Pandya rule became integrated with the religious and social life of the region, evolving into complex institutions intricately intertwined with the political, economic, and cultural fabric of Tamil society. By this period, temples had become centers of learning, often housing schools called *kathikas*, which offered both religious and secular learning. They also became vibrant centers for the arts, providing stages for music, dance, and theatrical performances that retold popular epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In this way, the legacy of temple institutions in Tamil Nadu continued to flourish, reflecting the changing interplay of religion, politics, and culture throughout the region's history.

Vaishnava temples in medieval Tamil Nadu

Vaishnava temples are generally classified into two main categories: *Divya Desams* (also known as *Mangalasanam* temples) and *Abhimana Kshetras* (or *Abhimana Sthalams*). *Divya Desams* are temples that have special spiritual significance due to their association with Tamil Azhwars, Vaishnava ascetics who composed hymns in praise of Vishnu. These temples are mentioned in their devotional hymns and are highly revered in the Vaishnava tradition. On the other hand, temples that are not included in the list of *Divya Desams* are classified as *Abhimana Kshetras*. These temples have significant spiritual and cultural value, but they are primarily recognized for their local legends and importance in the Vaishnava tradition. In addition to these two classifications, other groups of Vaishnava temples, such as *Pancharangam*, *Pancha Rama* temples, and *Nava Tirupati*, also further highlight the uniqueness of Vaishnava worship in Tamil Nadu.

Divya Desams and Mangalasanana

The term "*Mangalasanana*" refers to the practice of the Azhwars in their hymns of praising, offering obeisances to, and praying for Vishnu, expressing their devotion and respect. These hymns are considered very sacred and also serve as a form of worship to the deity. *Divya Desams*, which means "divine holy places," are considered to be the temples glorified in these Azhwar hymns. There is a total of 108 *Divya Desams*, which are considered to be the most sacred Vaishnava temples, representing major pilgrimage sites for devotees of Vishnu of the 108 *Divya Desams*, 105 *Divya Desams* are located on Earth, while the remaining three are believed to be in the divine realms. Tamil Nadu, the heartland of Vaishnavism, has 84 temples, while 11 temples are located in Kerala (referred to as *Malai Nadu*), 2

in Andhra Pradesh, 4 in Uttar Pradesh, 3 in Uttarakhand, 1 in Gujarat, and 1 in Nepal. Two divine places, *Thiruparkadal* (Ocean of Milk) and *Paramapadam* (Sree Vaikuntam, the eternal abode of Lord Narayana), are of great spiritual significance. These non-physical places mark the final destination of a Vaishnavite's spiritual journey and are revered as divine places where Vishnu resides. In the order of numerical superiority, *Pandinādu* gets the third place, the first being *Cōlanādu*.

The *kshetras* in the *Pandinādu* zone are the following, of which the earliest is *Maliruncolai*. The other places are: *Kōttiyūr*, *Meyyam*, *Pullāṇi*, *Taṅkāl*, *Mōkūr*, *Kūṭal* (*Maturai*), *Villiputtūr*, *Kurukūr* or *Ālvār Tirunakari*, *Tolaivillimaṅkalam*, *Cīvaramankai*, *Tiruppēreyil*, *Vaikuntam*, *Puliyankuṭi* (in literature *Pulinkuṭi*), *Varakunamankai*, *Kulantai*, *Kurunkuṭi*, and *Kōlūr*.

The rise of Rama worship in the medieval Ambasamudram

In the Middle Ages, the religious landscape in *Ambasamudram*, located in the *Tirunelveli* district, was mainly affected by the worship of Lord Shiva and Vishnu. They were a significant force in promoting Vishnu worship, and they were a group of poet-scholars who played an important role in the design of devotional practices. The subconscious composed the *Divya Prabandha*, which is primarily a valuable set of devotional songs centered on his various incarnations, including Vishnu and Krishna. In this collection, the songs also had key points of Vishnu's incarnation, Rama, which contributed to the expansion of his worship throughout Tamil Nadu. It was categorized by this period, with a deep change in the worship of Lord Rama, the contributions of the poet and the scriptures, and the establishment of significant temples dedicated to his worship. The songs of the subconscious not only celebrated Vishnu's divine qualities but also helped to recognize Rama as a central person.

This cultural and religious enrichment reflected the increasing coordination of Lord Vishnu's vast worship, strengthening his importance among the devotees. Worshipping Rama as the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, especially in the late Middle Ages, was significantly important as the interim progress advanced. This change was greatly affected by the rise of the Vaishnava religion and the growing political dynamics within the region, which developed an environment for religious expression. Although the number of Rama temples is low compared to the temples dedicated to Vishnu's other forms, many of the major temples dedicated to him have begun to emerge, indicating the growing devotion to Lord Rama. The devotional movement, especially Vishnu and his incarnations, played an important role in this change. This movement promoted the most intimate and personal interaction between the devotees and the deities they chose, which led to an increase in the popularity and worship of Lord Rama. The temples were established, along with the literary works of Rama's virtues and achievements, further confirming his position in the religious land of the country.

Vaishnava worship in Ambasamudram

Ambasamudram, located in the *Tirunelveli* district of Tamil Nadu, has historically served as a vibrant center for Vaishnava worship. The region is home to several ancient temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu and his incarnations,

particularly Krishna and Rama. These temples are not merely architectural marvels but active centers of devotional activity, spiritual education, and community bonding. Each temple follows distinct Agamic traditions and hosts a wide variety of rituals and festivals that reflect the deep roots of Vaishnavism in the region. The temples of Ambasamudram

reflect a diverse range of Vaishnava liturgical traditions such as Pancharatra and Vaikanasa Agamas, and many are associated with Alvars and local devotional lore. Below is an overview of the most prominent Vaishnava temples in the area:

Temple	Deity/Key Features	Ritual/Worship Traditions
Sri Krishnaswamy Temple (Ambasamudram "Krishnan Koil")	Presiding deity: Lord Krishna (Venugopalan) with consorts Rukmini & Satyabhama. Location known as Punnarvana Kshetra. Holy trees: Pavalamalli, Pathiri. Holy water (theertham): Harihara Theertham. Agama used: Pancharatra.	Daily rituals include Tirumanjanam (ablution), decoration (alankaram), food offerings (naivedhyam), lamp waving (deepa aradhanai). Devotees come with prayers for family unity, marriage children, remedy from planetary defects. The idol is in Salagrama stone, and the Lord is worshipped always with consorts: hence Lo is called Nitya Kalyana Perumal.
Purushotama Perumal Temple	Presiding deity: Purushotama Perumal: consort: Alarmelu Mangai. Sthala vriksham: Punnai tree. Theertham: Pongi Karai Theertham. One notable iconographic peculiarity: two conches and two discuses (instead of single),	Daily worship consistent with Vaishnava norms: pujas, decoration: etc. Devotees also perform rituals seeking relief from astrological afflictions. The temple is among the 108 Divya Desams (sacred Vaishnava shrines).
Sri Thennazhagar (Vinnagar) Perumal. Kovilkulam	Deity: Thennazhagar/Vinnagar Perumal, with consorts Soundaravalli & Sundaravalli, Theertham: Markandeya theertham. Agama: Vaikanasam Histon ge-500-1000 years.	Regular opening hours (morning & evening): rituals done per Vaikanasam tradition. Devotees gather especially for certam Saturdays and festival days.
Vedapuri Mannarkoil Rajagopala Swamy Temple	This temple has a very distinct architecture: three vertically aligned sanctums, one above the other, all facing east. Lower sanctum has standing Vishnu holding Sankha & Chakra. First level: sitting posture: second level: reclining on Adishesha. Saints/Alvars (Kulasekara Azhwar) associated here: vigrahams of saints are housed.	Worship: standard Vaishnava pujas: many devotees come due to the saintly association (Kulasekara Azhwar lived and attained moksha here). Rituals include ceremonies connected with the acharyas.

Conclusion

The Vaishnava temples of Ambasamudram stand as enduring symbols of Tamil Nadu's rich devotional heritage. Rooted in the bhakti traditions popularized by the Azhwars, these temples reveal how religious practice extended beyond mere ritual to become a cornerstone of cultural identity, community organization, and artistic expression. The study of Rama worship, in particular, shows how regional cults adopted and reinterpreted pan-Indian epics to deepen local spiritual life. While Krishna, Vishnu, and Rama dominate the divine landscape, each temple in Ambasamudram embodies unique ritual practices and historical narratives that collectively contribute to the continuity of Vaishnava worship. The blend of architectural innovation, theological depth, and community engagement observed in these temples underscores the complex and dynamic nature of devotional landscapes in South India. Ultimately, this research affirms the centrality of temple institutions not just as places of worship, but as living spaces where devotion, culture, and social history converge.

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