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Vaishnavite Heritage In Viluppuram District- A Historical Outlook

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Abstract
The Vaishnavite heritage of Viluppuram district stands as a testament to the region's deep-rooted religious traditions, architectural grandeur, and epigraphic wealth. This study examines the historical evolution, architectural significance, and epigraphic records of prominent Vaishnavite temples in the district, with a particular focus on the Thirukoilur Ulagalantha Perumal Temple, Thiruvahindrapuram Devanayaka Perumal Temple, and other notable shrines. The research traces the patronage of various dynasties, including the Cholas, Pandyas, and Vijayanagara rulers, highlighting their contributions to temple construction, maintenance, and religious endowments. Through an analysis of temple inscriptions, this study explores the socio-religious impact of Vaishnavism, the role of Alwar saints and Srivaishnavite scholars, and the significance of temple-centered communities.

Keywords: Vaishnavism, Viluppuram, Divya Desams, Alwars, Srivaishnavism, temple inscriptions, Chola dynasty, Pandya dynasty, Tamil Bhakti tradition, temple conservation.

Introduction

Vaishnavism, one of the principal traditions of Hinduism, has profoundly shaped the religious and cultural landscape of Tamil Nadu. Rooted in the Bhakti movement and enriched by Tamil devotional literature, the tradition gained prominence through the hymns of the Alwars, who extolled Vishnu's divine manifestations. Among the regions that witnessed the flourishing of Vaishnavism, Viluppuram district holds a distinctive place due to its historical connections with powerful South Indian dynasties and its preservation of architectural and epigraphic heritage. The Vaishnavite temples of Viluppuram trace their origins to the early medieval period, with significant patronage emerging during the Pallava rule (6^{th}–9^{th} century CE). The Pallavas, known for their contributions to temple architecture, established early Vishnu shrines, incorporating rock-cut and structural elements that laid the foundation for later Dravidian temple styles. However, it was under the Cholas (9^{th}–13^{th} century CE) that Vaishnavism in the region gained extraordinary momentum. The Chola monarchs, particularly Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, not only expanded temple complexes but also facilitated the composition and preservation of Tamil Vaishnavite literature, integrating religious worship with artistic and scholarly endeavors.

The subsequent Pandya (13th–14th century CE) and Vijayanagara (14th–17th century CE) dynasties further strengthened Vaishnavite traditions in Viluppuram, as reflected in temple inscriptions detailing land grants, ritual practices, and administrative reforms. Architecturally, the Vaishnavite temples of Viluppuram, such as the Thirukoilur Ulagalantha Perumal Temple and the Thiruvahindrapuram Devanayaka Perumal Temple, exemplify the evolution of Dravidian temple design. Towering gopurams**,** intricately carved mandapas, and sculptural panels depicting Vishnu's Dasavatara narrate the artistic and theological developments of the time. Additionally, the temples serve as repositories of epigraphic records, offering valuable insights into temple management, land revenue systems, and the socio-economic interactions between temple institutions and local communities. Beyond their historical and architectural significance, these temples continue to function as active religious centers, preserving Vaishnavite traditions and rituals. However, in contemporary times, the challenges of heritage conservation, modernization, and administrative shifts pose threats to the continuity of these historical structures and their associated traditions. By integrating historical narratives, epigraphic studies, and architectural analysis, this study aims to present a comprehensive outlook on the Vaishnavite heritage of Viluppuram district. It examines the district's temples not only as religious landmarks but also as cultural and historical artifacts that illuminate Tamil Nadu's enduring engagement with Vaishnavism.

Epigraphic Evidence of Vaishnavite Heritage in Viluppuram

The Vaishnavite heritage of Viluppuram district is well-documented through numerous temple inscriptions, which provide valuable insights into the religious, social, and administrative aspects of temple management over the centuries. The Thirukoilur Ulagalantha Perumal Temple houses inscriptions from the Chola period (10th–13th century CE)**,** detailing royal endowments, land grants, and donations made by local merchants and devotees for temple maintenance. One such inscription from the reign of Rajaraja Chola I (ARE No. 432 of 1911) records the gift of gold and land to sustain daily worship and festivals. Similarly, an epigraph from the reign of Rajendra Chola I (ARE No. 218 of 1914) mentions the construction of a mandapa and the installation of bronze images of Vishnu. During the Pandya period (13th–14th century CE)**,** Vaishnavism received continued patronage, as evidenced by inscriptions found in the Thiruvahindrapuram Devanayaka Perumal Temple**.** A Pandya inscription (ARE No. 379 of 1916) records the donation of land to Brahmins well-versed in the recitation of the Divya Prabandham, the Tamil hymns of the Alwars. The Vijayanagara rulers further strengthened temple administration, as seen in an inscription from the time of Krishnadevaraya (ARE No. 217 of 1922)**,** which refers to the renovation of temple structures and the establishment of endowments for Vaishnavite scholars. In addition to royal decrees, inscriptions from local chieftains and temple donors highlight the socio-economic role of Vaishnavite temples in Viluppuram. A 16th-century Nayak inscription (ARE No. 121 of 1934) from the Veeratteswarar Temple at Thirukoilur**,** though primarily a Shaivite temple, acknowledges grants to the adjacent Vishnu shrine, indicating the coexistence of both traditions. The presence of these inscriptions across multiple temples in Viluppuram underscores the enduring significance of Vaishnavism and its deep integration into Tamil religious and cultural history.

Villupuram District, nestled in the southern part of India within Tamil Nadu, is a treasure trove of historical and cultural heritage. Its strategic location has positioned it as a vital hub for trade, religion, and governance throughout the centuries. The history of Villupuram District is intricately intertwined with the illustrious Tamil dynasties such as the Cholas, Pandyas, and Nayaks. Archaeological findings suggest that this region was inhabited during ancient times, as evidenced by inscriptions and ruins discovered in places like Tirukkoyilur and Kallakurichi They are revered for their contributions to literature and culture, promoting the Tamil language as a primary means of governance and religious discourse. The Pandyas played a significant role in the cultural renaissance of Tamil Nadu, leaving a profound impact on the region's identity. The Nayaks, who ruled after the decline of the Vijayanagara Empire, also left an indelible mark on Villupuram. As patrons of the arts and architecture, their influence can be witnessed in local temples and structures that reflect the grandeur of their era.

The Nayaks fostered a cultural environment that encouraged artistic expression and innovation. Villupuram is home to numerous ancient temples, including the famous Veeratteswarar Temple in Tirukkoyilur, dedicated to Lord Shiva. These temples stand as architectural marvels and are also centers for social and religious activities, drawing devotees and visitors alike. The intricate sculptures and carvings within these temples narrate stories of divine lore and historical events, showcasing the artistic talents of the period. The region has produced a plethora of notable Tamil poets and scholars, whose contributions have enriched Tamil literature and philosophy.

The festivals celebrated in Villupuram, such as Pongal and Thaipusam, highlight the district's vibrant culture and the communal harmony among its diverse population. These festivals are characterized by lively celebrations, traditional rituals, and community participation, reinforcing social bonds and cultural identity. Villupuram District is dotted with numerous historical sites that bear witness to its rich past: Renowned for its ancient temples and inscriptions, Tirukkoyilur is a historical town that played a significant role during the Chola and Pandya reigns.

The town's temples are architectural gems, and the inscriptions provide valuable insights into the socio-political landscape of the time. This town holds historical significance due to its temples and educational institutions, serving as a hub for learning and culture. Kallakurichi has been a center of intellectual activity, fostering a spirit of inquiry and knowledge even though not extensively documented; the remnants of Villupuram Fort indicate its historical importance as a defensive structure during various reigns. The fort's strategic location provided a vantage point for overseeing trade routes and local governance.

The historical glory of Villupuram District stands as a testament to its rich cultural heritage, shaped by various dynasties and influences over the centuries. From its ancient temples to its vibrant traditions, Villupuram occupies a significant place in the history of Tamil Nadu. It is essential to preserve and promote this heritage, ensuring that future generations appreciate and celebrate the district's remarkable past. Until the time of the Cholas, in the centrally located Brahmadeyayam region of the Chaturvedimangalams, the governance of the Kadavarayar emerged. Following this, when the Pandiyas took control, the

region became a significant community in administrative matters, which likely led to the name change of the area to "Viluppuram." This observation is noteworthy, as mentioned by Kanchi Peethadhipathi Sri Chandrasekarendra in his work Kanchi Munivar Ninaivuk Kathambam regarding the Viluppatharayar and Viluppuram. The inscription from Abirameshwarar refers to the warrior Rachendrakaran as "Vizhupraiyan, the commander." The inscription from Thirunavalur identifies him as "Jeyankonda Chola Vilupparaya Naadhalvan." Aadhinathan Vilupparayan is recognized as the military leader under the rule of the first Kulothunga. The Jeyankondar honored him with praises such as "Karanai Vilupparayan Madal" or "Aadhinathan Valamadal."

The above references serve as evidence that Viluppuram was under the jurisdiction of Vilupparayan. Researchers indicate that towns where merchants thrived were often referred to as "puram." Consequently, it is presumed that Viluppuram was once a commercial hub. Kanchi Peethadhipathi Sri Jayendrar describes it as "a town that is always awake; a town that enlightens those in ignorance." K. Krupananda Variar interprets "Viluppuram" to mean "the town of significance." According to Thirukkuralar V. Munusami, "It is named Villupuram because it is the place where Rama captured the bow and aimed it towards gold." While these accolades are noteworthy, there are historical reasons for the name Viluppuram.

The Pallava Emperor Nirobadhunga Varman inscribed his name on this region as "the Chaturvedimangalam established by Vijayanirobhunga," and he graciously endowed the four Vedas to the Brahmins. The first Rajaraja also named this region "Janadhas Chaturvedimangalam," bestowing it as a grant to the Brahmins. This town, known as Vijayanirobhunga Chaturvedimangalam and Janadhas Chaturvedimangalam, has been referred to as Vilupparaya Puram and subsequently Viluppuram since the reign of the first Chadayavarman Sundarapandyan (1265).

The Abhidana Chinthamani, which mentions Viluppatharayar (Vilupparayar), states, "On the seventh day of the Avani Thiruvizha, which marks the coronation of Sundarapandiyan, they received the privilege to read the accounts daily." Furthermore, a proverb notes, "Viluppatharayar is necessary for the Pandya dynasty." "Who is this Vilupparayar?" he is regarded as one who has conferred distinction upon his birthplace. Next in rank to the Vedic Brahmins, he held positions in the royal court. Even during the reign of the Thanjavur Nayak kings, the significance of this community in the administration is evident. These Vilupparayar are sometimes referred to as "Viluppiramar," where "Piramar" denotes their origins in Vedic Brahminry. The term "Ariyar" suggests their martial lineage, and it is believed that they were also referred to as "Viluppadarayar (Viluppatharayar)." Additionally, the residents of Viluppuram often refer to the area as "Vizhimaa Nagar," signifying a grand expanse of land marked by its large eye-catching features.

Conclusion

The Vaishnavite heritage of Viluppuram district stands as a witness to the enduring spiritual and cultural legacy of Tamil Nadu. Rooted in the early medieval period, the district's temples, inscriptions, and traditions reveal a profound historical connection to the Bhakti movement,

the Alvars, and the patronage of the Pallavas, Cholas, and Vijayanagar rulers. From the revered Tirukkovilur Ulagalantha Perumal Temple to the sacred shrines nestled along the Pennai River, each site reflects the theological depth and architectural grandeur of Vaishnavism in this region. The inscriptions and literary references provide insights into the socio-political dynamics that shaped temple patronage, land grants, and ritual practices. The enduring presence of Vaishnavite traditions in Viluppuram, despite historical shifts, underscores the resilience of Tamil devotional culture. The continued observance of festivals, recitation of Divya Prabandham, and temple rituals affirm the deep-seated faith that has transcended generations the Vaishnavite heritage of Viluppuram is not merely a relic of the past but a living tradition that continues to shape the religious consciousness of the region.

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