

## **“Religious Pluralism and Heritage Tourism in Early South India: A study of Kanchipuram”**

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### **Introduction**

Kanchipuram, situated in coastal Tamil Nadu to the northwest of present-day Chennai, has long occupied a central place in the cultural and historical imagination of South India. Its significance emerges vividly in both early Sanskrit and Tamil literary traditions, where it is celebrated as a sacred and prosperous urban centre. Beyond its literary fame, Kanchipuram gains tangible visibility in the archaeological and epigraphic record from the early medieval period, particularly under the Pallava dynasty. These sources collectively attest to the city’s enduring political, religious, and economic prominence across centuries.

Modern scholarship often foregrounds Kanchipuram as a “city of temples,” emphasizing its monumental sacred architecture and its status as a major Hindu pilgrimage site. However, this image tells only part of the story. Kanchipuram also functioned as a thriving commercial and artisanal hub, renowned for its production and exchange networks, including the silk weaving industry that became a hallmark of the region in later centuries. Its location along key trade routes facilitated exchanges not only of goods but also of ideas, doctrines, and artistic forms.

Equally significant was Kanchipuram’s role as an intellectual and spiritual crossroads. It served as a major centre for the circulation of religious teachers, monks, pilgrims, and textual traditions associated with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Monastic institutions and temple complexes became focal points for religious education, philosophical debates, and the patronage of rulers and merchants alike. This confluence of economic vitality and religious mobility positioned Kanchipuram as a unique site where urban development, temple-building, and networks of mobility were tightly interwoven.

### **Aims of the Study**

This paper seeks to move beyond a temple-centric narrative and adopt a more integrated approach to understanding Kanchipuram’s early history. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Examine the interconnected roles of temple-building, royal patronage, and religious institutions in shaping the city’s urban identity.
2. Investigate how commercial and artisanal networks sustained and complemented religious activity, contributing to Kanchipuram’s prosperity.
3. Explore the movement of monks, teachers, and pilgrims—both within the Tamil region and across broader South and Southeast Asian networks—to illuminate Kanchipuram’s place in transregional religious landscapes.
4. Synthesize material culture, inscriptions, and textual sources to reconstruct the multi-layered character of Kanchipuram as both a sacred and commercial centre.

Through this synthesis, the paper highlights how Kanchipuram’s evolution as a religious and economic hub cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within the wider dynamics of political authority, trade, and cultural exchange in early South India.

### **Historical Background: Urbanism, Politics, and Sources**

Kanchipuram functioned as the political capital for several dynasties (notably the Pallavas) and is referenced in classical Sanskrit and Tamil works. Its growth into an architectural and religious centre intensifies under Pallava rule (c. 6th–9th centuries CE), which sponsored monumental stone temples and nurtured courtly intellectual life. The principal sources for this study are the surviving Pallava-era temples and their inscriptions, travel and hagiographic accounts, archaeological surveys of Buddhist and Jain remains in the region, and later medieval Tamil literature that records sacred topography.

Kanchipuram occupies a prominent position in the early historical and early medieval urban landscape of South India. Its emergence as a significant urban centre can be traced to its strategic location on important trade routes linking the eastern coast to the interior Deccan, as well as to its role as a political and religious nucleus. Over the centuries, the city served as the political capital of several ruling houses, most notably under the Pallava dynasty, whose rule (c.6th–9th centuries) marked a decisive phase in its architectural, cultural, and religious development. Earlier references in classical Tamil works such as those of the Sangam literature.

The Pallavas consolidated their authority in the region and transformed the city into a major centre of royal power and intellectual life. Their patronage was instrumental in the transition from perishable wooden architecture to enduring stone structures. This period witnessed the construction of monumental temples, including some of the earliest examples of Dravidian-style architecture, which not only articulated royal ideology but also facilitated the growth of religious institutions and scholarly communities. The royal court attracted poets, philosophers, and theologians, turning the city into a cosmopolitan hub where multiple religious traditions Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism interacted.

The historical reconstruction of Kanchipuram's urban and political past draws on a rich body of sources. Primary evidence is provided by surviving Pallava-era temples and their inscriptions, which record royal donations, temple endowments, and administrative activities. These epigraphic materials offer crucial insights into political authority, landholding patterns, and religious patronage. Archaeological investigations have revealed the material traces of Buddhist and Jain establishments in and around Kanchipuram, pointing to its multi-religious character well before the exclusive association with Hindu sacred geography in later centuries.

Additionally, later medieval Tamil devotional and literary traditions, including the hymns of the *Divya Prabandham* and the *Tevaram*, played a crucial role in mapping the sacred topography of Kanchipuram. These texts not only preserved memory of the city's shrines and religious communities but also helped shape its identity as a "city of temples." Together, these literary, epigraphic, and archaeological sources allow for a nuanced understanding of the evolution of Kanchipuram as an urban, political, and religious centre over more than a millennium.

### **Temple Architecture and Patronage**

The stone built Kailasanathar Temple and the larger Ekambareswarar complex are hallmark examples of Pallava temple architecture and royal patronage. These monuments demonstrate continuous state investment in *Saivite* and *Vaishnavite* institutions, both as devotional centres and as centers of economic activity (land grants, temple-servicing guilds, and endowments). The proliferation of stone shrines and sculptural programmes under the Pallavas both institutionalized Hindu ritual spaces and attracted pilgrims and scholars.

Before the ascendancy of the great temple complexes, Kanchipuram was already known as a vibrant centre of religious and intellectual activity. Multiple strands of archaeological and literary evidence attest to the presence of Buddhism and Jainism in and around the region during the early centuries. Excavations and surveys along the Coromandel Coast have revealed stupas, sculptural fragments, and remains of brick-built monastic structures, indicating an established Buddhist monastic network linked to maritime and inland trade routes. Tamil and Sanskrit literary sources reinforce these findings. Texts such as the *Manimekalai*, an important Tamil Buddhist epic, refer to Kanchi as a centre of Buddhist learning. Jain literary traditions and inscriptions likewise speak of mendicant activity, monastic settlements, and intellectual debates. The presence of Jain *Basadis* and references to *ascetics* in inscriptions suggest that Kanchipuram was an important site for the diffusion of Jain philosophical and ethical thought. While the Buddhist institutions in the region experienced a gradual decline from the late first millennium partly due to shifting patterns of royal patronage and the rise of temple-centred Hindu devotional movements many of their spaces were later absorbed or repurposed within the expanding Hindu sacred geography. However, their earlier influence left an indelible mark on the city's intellectual culture, contributing to its reputation as a site of religious pluralism, scholastic exchange, and vibrant philosophical debate.

This layered religious landscape where Buddhist monasteries, Jain basadis, and Hindu temples coexisted highlights Kanchipuram's historical role as a dynamic urban and sacred centre. The multiplicity of traditions fostered a rich atmosphere of dialogue, competition, and synthesis, shaping the city's identity well into the medieval period.

#### **Trade, Production, and Urban Economy**

Kanchipuram's economy combined agriculture in its hinterlands with urban artisan production and trade. Though the famous silk-weaving identity of Kanchipuram (Kanjeevaram sarees) is better documented in later Medieval and early Modern sources, evidence suggests that textile production and craft specializations had deep roots that linked local producers to wider markets. For religious institutions, temples played economic roles they owned land, acted as employers of artisans, patrons of crafts, and nodes of redistribution further tying religious and economic life. Trade routes along the Coromandel coast facilitated exchanges with Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and beyond, enabling movement of people (pilgrims and monks) and texts.

#### **Monasteries, Pilgrims and Scholars**

Monasteries and temple-centered educational activity were principal vehicles for religious transmission. Buddhist *vihāras* and Jain *sabhās* (assemblies) functioned as teaching centres where doctrinal debate and scriptural study flourished, often accommodating Migratory monks and foreign pilgrims. Temples likewise maintained schools for ritual specialists and scholars. These institutions formed dense networks that allowed ideas and practices (ritual forms, iconographies, exegetical traditions) to travel across linguistic and regional boundaries.

Religious transmission in early South India was not limited to textual circulation or royal patronage alone; it was deeply embedded in the institutional landscapes of monasteries and temple complexes. Buddhist *vihāras* and Jain *sabhās* (monastic assemblies) played a crucial role as organized teaching centres, where the study of canonical texts, philosophical debate, and ritual instruction took place in a structured environment. These monasteries often doubled as rest houses for itinerant monks, pilgrims, and foreign visitors, thereby functioning as nodal points in broader networks of mobility and intellectual exchange. For instance, during the early medieval period, the presence of Buddhist

establishments in and around Kanchipuram was noted in both literary and travel accounts. Monastic life here was characterized by the systematic training of novices, the copying and preservation of manuscripts, and engagement in scholastic disputation with adherents of other traditions. Jain communities similarly maintained educational assemblies where philosophical instruction, logical reasoning and scriptural exegesis formed the core of intellectual activity.

Hindu temples, particularly those associated with royal and mercantile patronage, were no less important in this landscape. Major Saivite and *Vaishnavite* shrines often maintained schools (*Ghatikas and Agraharas*) dedicated to training ritual specialists, temple functionaries, and religious scholars. These institutions provided instruction not only in liturgy and philosophy but also in grammar, logic, astronomy, and other disciplines integral to religious scholarship.

Together, these monasteries and temples formed dense, interconnected networks. They facilitated the circulation of religious ideas, ritual practices, iconographic forms, and exegetical traditions across linguistic and regional boundaries. The movement of monks and pilgrims from different parts of India and beyond including regions in Central Asia and Southeast Asia reinforced Kanchipuram's reputation as a cosmopolitan centre of learning and religious activity. The intellectual vibrancy of these spaces allowed for both the preservation of established traditions and the emergence of new forms of religious expression.

#### **Kailasanathar Temple and the Pallava Cultural Program**

Kailasanathar exemplifies the Pallava strategy of monumentalizing royal authority through stone temples. Its sculptural programme Saivite iconography, ritual spaces, and subsidiary shrines served both liturgical and didactic functions, propagating Saiva theology while anchoring the city's economy. The temple's architectural innovations influenced later Chola and Vijayanagara constructions, spreading forms that were imitated across South India.

#### **Conclusion**

The historical prominence of Kanchipuram was the outcome of a sustained interplay between royal patronage, craft production, mercantile activity, and the coexistence of diverse religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Far from functioning solely as ritual spaces, temples in Kanchipuram emerged as multifaceted institutions that anchored the city's social and economic life. They operated simultaneously as cultic centres, administrative hubs, repositories of artistic knowledge, and spaces of intellectual production. This institutional complexity positioned Kanchipuram as a nodal point within extensive regional and transregional networks of exchange. Monastic establishments, scholastic debates, and pilgrimage routes further extended the city's reach, integrating it into broader circuits of religious and intellectual mobility that linked South India with other parts of the subcontinent and beyond. Archaeological and epigraphic evidence including monumental temple architecture, foundation inscriptions, and the vestiges of now-vanished *Vihāras* and Jain *Basadis* reveal a densely layered urban landscape where faith, political power, and economic forces intersected in dynamic and often negotiated ways.

In historiographical terms, Kanchipuram exemplifies how early and medieval South Indian cities cannot be understood solely through the lens of religious devotion or political authority. Rather, its trajectory illuminates the intricate entanglement of sacred and secular domains, where patronage, pilgrimage, and production coalesced to shape enduring patterns of urbanism and cultural transmission. As such, Kanchipuram stands not only as a major sacred centre but also as a critical

locus for understanding the formation of religious and intellectual geographies in premodern South Asia.

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