



Sustainable Pilgrimage Centers in Kumbakonam Region – A Study

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Abstract:

Kumbakonam is one of the Major Sacred cities of Tamil Nadu. This city is world renowned for its ancient temples, holy tanks, and grand festivals such as the Mahamaham. Every year, it warmly welcomes lakhs of pilgrims, and today it is growing into a metropolitan city. However, the continuously increasing number of pilgrims every year, along with factors such as traffic congestion, unauthorized private commercial establishments, encroachments by local residents, and inadequate sanitation maintenance by the municipal authorities, have begun to affect the very identity of the city. This situation has become a matter of concern.

In light of this, the present article identifies the major sacred pilgrimage centers of Kumbakonam. It further emphasizes the need for Integrated Infrastructure Planning to create a balance between heritage conservation, environmental sustainability, and urban development. Such integrated measures would not only enhance the experience of pilgrims but also strengthen the livelihoods of local communities. These efforts would greatly contribute to the continuous development of Kumbakonam as a sustainable spiritual city and support regional growth.

Keywords: *Kumbakonam Region, Pilgrimage, Major Pilgrimage Centers, Historical significance, Overall Pilgrimage Centres, Sustainable Practices*

India is a land of astonishing contrasts and vast cultural-linguistic diversity, it remains united by a fundamental sense of oneness. “Unity in diversity” is not an idea imposed by foreign influences; rather, it emerged from the internal cultural evolution of the nation. The spiritual essence of Indian civilization is a powerful force that has deeply influenced global thought. Religion and spirituality play a vital role in the lives of Indians. Although India’s religious and spiritual life is complex, it exhibits a remarkable sense of order.

The concept of pilgrimage is one of the most ancient spiritual practices in human history. It is impossible to attribute the beginning of pilgrimage to a specific period because it originated in the early stages of human civilization itself¹. Even epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana contain references to pilgrimages. Pilgrimage traditions have existed for thousands of years across many world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Kumbakonam, a historically prominent city in the renowned Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, later served as an administrative center during the Chola period². Celebrated for its numerous Saivite and Vaishnavite temples, the city has earned the identity of the “City of Temples.” Throughout the year, the city is filled with spiritual vibrancy through temple festivals, cultural events, Navaratri celebrations, auspicious rituals, holy dips,

and divine marriage ceremonies. This study explores in detail the spiritual significance of the Kumbakonam region, its pilgrimage centers, cultural exchanges, and the need for sustainability³.

Aim of the Research

To identify and document the major Saivite and Vaishnavite temples, sacred tanks, and pilgrimage routes of the Kumbakonam region with their historical and cultural significance, assess the existing infrastructure and carrying-capacity limitations during regular and festival seasons, and propose an Integrated Sustainable Pilgrimage Development (ISPD) framework encompassing heritage protection, environmental conservation, infrastructure improvement, governance, community participation, and digital systems, along with prioritized, actionable recommendations and monitoring indicators.

Objectives of the Study

To examine the historical development of the Kumbakonam region as a major pilgrimage center and understand its cultural, spiritual, and architectural significance; to identify and document the major Saivite and Vaishnavite temples and sacred sites that shape its prominence in pilgrimage tourism; and to analyze the geographical features particularly the influence of the Cauvery and Arasalar rivers on the evolution of pilgrimage routes and regional settlements.

Research Methodology

This study examines integrated infrastructure planning for pilgrimage tourism in Kumbakonam. Primary data are direct field study and personal interactions with pilgrims, local residents, temple administrators, and tourism department officials. Secondary data are obtained from government reports, research articles, and previous studies. The data are analyzed using qualitative methods, emphasizing a holistic approach that integrates stakeholder opinions and sustainable development planning strategies.

Kumbakonam Region

The Kumbakonam Municipality was established in 1866. Later, on 20 December 2021, it was upgraded to a City Municipal Corporation. It is the second largest town in Thanjavur district in terms of administrative status and is presently a City Municipal Corporation. As the headquarters of Kumbakonam Taluk, this town has been known by various names since ancient times, such as Kudanthai, Kudamooku, and Bhaskara Kshetram. Kumbakonam is located 313 km south of Chennai, 90 km east of Tiruchirappalli, and 40 km northeast of Thanjavur. The town area covers 14.18 sq. km, while the Local Planning Area (LPA) extends over 64.02 sq. km⁴.

Historical Background and Key Features:

Kumbakonam is one of the cities in Tamil Nadu with the highest number of temples and stands as an important temple city next only to Kanchipuram. Over time, it has been known by names such as Kudanthai, Kudamooku, and Bhaskara Shethram. Navagraha pilgrimage sites are located around this city. Every year, lakhs of people undertake the Navagraha tour. The Tamil Nadu Government operates a special daily bus service exclusively for the Navagraha pilgrimage. Tickets for this service can be booked online. This tour covers all nine sacred shrines in a single day, completing the Navagraha circuit. It is considered a highly popular service among the public.

What makes Kumbakonam truly special is the Mahamaham festival, which is celebrated once every twelve years⁵. It is believed that the divine powers of the sacred rivers—Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Sarayu, Godavari, Mahanadi, Narmada, Payoshini, and Kaveri—converge in the Mahamaham tank. According to Hindu

tradition, taking a holy dip in this tank grants liberation from sins⁶. On the new moon day (Amavasya) of the Tamil month Aadi, and during the Maham star in the month of Maasi, people living around this region offer *tarpanam* (ritual offerings) in the tank for the salvation of their departed ancestors. The Government Arts College in Kumbakonam is one of the oldest colleges in Tamil Nadu. In earlier times, it was celebrated as the “Cambridge of South India.” The world-famous mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan studied at this institution⁷. Tirubuvanam is located about 5 kilometers from Kumbakonam. During the later Chola period, the Kampaheswarar Temple found here was finally and completely constructed by Kulothunga Chola III. This town is also well known for its handloom silk weaving industry. Most people living in the areas surrounding Kumbakonam purchase the renowned handloom silk sarees woven in Tirubuvanam for conducting wedding ceremonies in their households.

The main water sources of the city are the Cauvery River flowing to the north and the Arasalar River flowing to the south, encircling the town and offering it a lush green environment throughout the year. The major economic resource of the city is agriculture. Paddy, sugarcane, banana, and cotton are the main crops cultivated in abundance. At present, the city has more than 10 government and private higher secondary schools, one private university, two government arts colleges, one government college of fine arts, two private engineering colleges, three private arts and science colleges, and one government polytechnic college. With improved road facilities, government bus services, modern hospitals, theatres, sports stadiums, libraries, and parks, Kumbakonam today stands as a well-developed and self-sustained city. A noteworthy development is that “Kalaignar University” is set to be established in Kumbakonam in the coming academic year. Announcements regarding this have been made in the Legislative Assembly, and land acquisition work is currently in progress. The university is to be set up near Kumbakonam, in the village of Marudhanallur.

Pilgrimage - The true purpose

Pilgrimage is a journey undertaken by people to sacred places for religious, spiritual, or devotional reasons. It is not a leisure-oriented form of tourism; its primary purpose is worship, prayer, holy bathing, inner peace, and spiritual elevation. Pilgrimage tourism includes festivals, rituals, ceremonies, holy baths, and sacred darshans. People generally visit sacred rivers and tanks to perform holy baths for mental peace⁸. In the name of pilgrimage, they connect with nature and rejuvenate themselves. In today's mechanized world, pilgrimage has become essential for human beings to relieve mental fatigue. The true benefits of pilgrimage are the mental peace, enthusiasm, self-confidence, physical well-being, and healthy state of mind that people attain through spirituality⁹.

UNESCO Heritage Tourism Site in the Kumbakonam Region:

Darasuram - Airavadeeswarar Temple

The Airavadeeswarar Temple located at Darasuram is one of the three major Chola temples, that have been inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list. This is a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. This temple was built in the 12th century by Rajaraja Chola II. The Airavadeeswarar Temple is approximately 850–880 years old. The town referred to as Rajarajapuram in Chola inscriptions is today known as Darasuram¹⁰.

The architectural structure of the Airavadeeswarar Temple includes the sanctum (garbhagriha), ardhamandapa, mahamandapa, and front mandapa. The vimana of the temple has five tiers and reaches a height of 183 feet. At the four corners of the griva (neck) section, Nandi (bull) sculptures are placed. The shikhara is

circular and adorned with intricate designs. Although the vimana is not as tall as that of the Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, it remains equally magnificent in beauty. One of the most remarkable features of this temple is that the vimana is designed like a chariot (ratha). Beautifully carved wheels and horses, along with elephants pulling the chariot, are sculpted on either side. To showcase the Cholas' musical expertise, they created the famous musical steps, which produce the seven swaras when tapped. Because of its numerous sculptural works, it appears like a magnificent gallery of sculpture. During the rainy seasons, the temple naturally gets surrounded by water. At that moment, under the glow of lamps, the sculptures take on a new appearance, creating a divine atmosphere for the viewers. The craftsmanship of the pillars in this temple is truly astonishing.

Figures of deities, apsaras, musicians, and dancers are exquisitely carved on the pillars of the mandapas with lifelike anatomical precision. On the walls of the sanctum, miniature sculptural panels of mythological scenes are finely executed with remarkable detail. Today, this temple stands as one of the most important tourist attractions in the Kumbakonam region, drawing a large number of international visitors.

The Temple that was Completely Constructed during the Later Chola Period:

Tirupuvanam - Kambahareswarar Temple

The village near Kumbakonam is Tirupuvanam. This is a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, The temple built here around 1176 CE by Kulothunga Chola III is known as the Kambahareswarar (Kambakeswarar) Temple. This temple, like the Darasuram temple, features a chariot-shaped front mandapa with stone wheels. Similarly, the Sarangapani Temple and Nageswarar Temple in Kumbakonam also have mandapas designed in the form of a chariot. This temple is significant because it was completely constructed during the reign of a single king. It also belongs to the final phase of the Later Chola period, built shortly before the Pandya rose to power and took over the Chola kingdom.

The height of the temple vimana is approximately 126 feet. The seven-tiered vimana covers the sanctum (garbhagriha), artha-mandapa, maha-mandapa, and mukha-mandapa. The temple also includes separate shrines for Chandeswarar, Sharabeshwarar, and Uma, along with sub-shrines, a gopuram, and various other structures. The seven-storeyed vimana and its superstructure (shikhara) are constructed with brick and lime mortar. The *adhisthana* (base) above the sub-platform consists of the classic elements: vimanam, padma-jagati, kumudam, kandam, pattigai, and yali frieze. The walls, not only of the main shrine but also of the subsidiary shrines, have numerous sculptures. A separate shrine for Somaskandar is also found here, which is a noteworthy feature of the temple¹¹.

The Esteemed place that gave Kumbakonam its name:

Adi Kumbeswarar Temple:

Adi Kumbeswarar Temple is located in the holy city of Kumbakonam. Adi Kumbeswara is the main deity of the temple. Adi is of primordial origin implies ancient or the first and the foremost. The Kumbeswarar is in Shiva Linga form which is formless and boundless. Aaru (formless) + uru (form) = aaruuru. The shape of the linga is of very special significance, it is a conical shaped lingam, This is a unique linga in the world. The Pururanas derive the meaning of the shape and the name. The city name Kumbakonam itself is derived from the name of God, Kumba and the slight angle of the Linga and hence the name "Kumbakonam". The name Kumbakonam is a combination of mythological history and geographical identity. There are several explanations for its origin. According to legend, during the time of the great deluge (Pralayam), the pot of nectar (Amrita

Kumbha) created by Lord Brahma drifted across the world. The sacred place where this pot is believed to have broken is Kumbakonam.

It is one of the 127 temples on the southern banks of the river Cauvery. It is mentioned as, 'Thirukkudamooku' in 'Thevaram' and at present it is called Kumbakonam. It is a prime temple amidst the many temples in Kumbakonam. The presiding Murti(deity) is Adi kumbeswarar and His consort is Mangalambika. It is also one of the 64 saktibheta sthala (Mantrabheta sthala). The Shiva Linga is slightly tilted at the top towards left and hence the name kumbakonam (kumba – pot, konam -bend) and the deity kumbeshwara. As per puranas the genesis of life happened by the the Thiru Vilaiaadal (divne play) of God Shiva here, and from here all the living beings originated¹².

Overall Kumbakonam Region Temples:

Temples	The name by which it is commonly known today.
Kudanthai Keezh Kottam – Naganathaswami Temple	Nageswaran Temple
Kudanthai Karonam – Someswarar Temple	Someswarar Temple
Patteswaram – Thenupuriswarar Temple	Durka Temple in Patteswaram
Thiruchaktimuttam – Saktivaneswarar Temple	Saktivaneswarar Temple
Keezh Pazhayarai – Somanathar Temple	Birthplace of Mangaiyarkarasiyar
Pazhayarai Vadathali – Dharmapureeswarar Temple	Mada Koil
Aavoor Pasupatheeiswaram – Pasupatheeiswarar Temple	Mada Koil in Aavoor
Nallur – Kalyanasundareswarar Temple	Mada Koil; Amarneedhi Nayanar birthplace
Thiruvalanchuzhi – Kabartheeswarar Temple	White Vinayagar Temple
Kottaiyur – Koteeswarar Temple	Koteeswarar Temple
Innamboor – Elutharinathar Temple	Elutharinathar Temple
Thiruppurambiyam – Satchinathar Temple	Satchinathar Temple
Thiruvijayamangai – Vijayanathar Temple	Vijayanathar Temple
Thiruvaikaavoor – Vilvavaneswarar Temple	Vilvavaneswarar Temple
Kalayanallur (Saakkottai) – Kalasanathar Temple	Kalasanathar Temple
Thirunaraiyur (Nachiyar Koil) – Sithhanadeswarar Temple	Sithhanadeswarar Temple
Thirupandhurai – Pranaveswarar Temple	Pranaveswarar Temple
Thiruppenuperundurai – Sivanandeeswarar Temple	Sivanandeeswarar Temple
Thirukkarukkudi (Marudhanallur) – Karkkudi Nathar Temple	Karkkudi Nathar Temple

Sivapuram – Sivagurunatha Swami Temple	Sivagurunatha Temple
Thirunageswaram – Naganathaswami Temple	Naganathaswami Temple
Thiruvidaimaruthur – Mahalinga Peruman Temple	Mahalingaswamy Temple
Viyaloor (Thiruvisanallur) – Sivayoganathar Temple	Sivayoganathar Temple
Thirunthuthevan Koil – Karkateswarar Temple	Karkateswarar Temple
Thiru Paadalavanam – Sundareswarar Temple	Vaippu Sthalam
Thiruchchengaloor – Saktigiriswarar Temple	Birthplace of Chandesa Nayanar
Thirukkudanthai – Sarangapani,	Divya Desams
Thirukkudanthai – Chakrapani	Chakrapani
Thirukkudanthai Southers Ayodhya	Ramasamy Temple
Thiruppullabhoothangudi – Valvil Ramar Temple	Valvil Ramar Temple
Thiruinnankur (Thirunageswaram)	Ragu sthalam
The Tirupati of Tamil nadu	Oppiliappan Temple
Thirunaraiyur – Srinivasa Perumal Temple	Nachiyan Koil
Nandhipuravinnagaram – Jagannatha Perumal Temple	Jagannatha Perumal Temple
Thirupuvanam – Nadukkam Theertha Nathar Temple	Sharabeshwarar Temple
Ayyavadi – Pratyangira Devi Temple	Pratyangira Devi Temple
Karuvarcheri – Agatheeswarar Temple	Garuvazhtha Nayaki Temple
Thukkachi – Abathsagayeswarar Temple	Durga's blessed shrine
Valangaiman – Paadaikatti Mariamman Temple	Paadaikatti Mariamman Temple
Valangaiman – Madhuvana Ramar Temple	Madhuvana Ramar Temple

The Temples listed in the above sequence are compiled through direct field study of places located within a 15-kilometre radius from the central part of Kumbakonam city. The major temples of Kumbakonam city have been identified here. Only a few temples continue to receive frequent visits from most tourists. Unlike that, this study provides information about the integrated temples situated around the Kumbakonam region.

Sustainable Recommendations:

To preserve Kumbakonam's identity as the "City of Temples," sustainable recommendations are essential. Around the famous temples in Kumbakonam, a growing number of star-rated luxury hotels continue to emerge. For their commercial purposes, these establishments drill deep borewells and extract groundwater. When groundwater is extracted in this manner, the nearby temple tanks begin to lose water. Therefore, a legally protected buffer zone of about 200 meters should be declared around the temples, prohibiting the construction of permanent

commercial buildings within that area. Existing commercial establishments must also be closely monitored to ensure that they do not extract groundwater¹³.

Traffic congestion in Kumbakonam is steadily increasing. Therefore, it has become essential to create well-organized parking facilities in and around the temple and pilgrimage center zones, and to maintain them properly. In some temples within the city, the parking spaces and fee collection are managed by private parties. These activities must be regulated and brought under proper administrative control. Additionally, creating pedestrian pathways that connect temple clusters and regulating vehicular entry during specific hours in core sacred zones are also necessary. During festival seasons, providing designated entry and exit points, temporary barricades, and trained personnel for crowd control becomes crucial¹⁴.

The green Environment of the Kumbakonam region is one of the major factors that has made this city an important pilgrimage destination. However, in recent times, the canals that carry water from the rivers to the rural areas have become encroached upon by private parties. Household waste, plastic usage, sewage flowing directly into the rivers, and the irresponsible practices of local residents are polluting the sacred tanks. Therefore, essential measures include deepening the Mahamaham and other temple tanks, restoring the natural water flow channels, ensuring regulated water inflow from the Cauvery, and implementing water-quality monitoring.

The Mahamaham tank, which stands as the identity of Kumbakonam city, is now surrounded by numerous fast-food stalls and pavement shops. It is distressing to see that the Mahamaham tank “once the heart of the city” is gradually losing its identity. It should be considered the responsibility of the government to remove such private encroachments and protect the sanctity of this sacred site¹⁵. The major temples in Kumbakonam contain countless sculptures and paintings, which are irreplaceable over time. Yet, due to public negligence, these are being damaged. Permission for private events within temple premises should be restricted. Surveillance cameras must be installed to ensure the safety and preservation of sculptures, paintings, and the surrounding prakaras.

The famous Government College of Fine Arts has been functioning in Kumbakonam for over 50 years. The institution teaches painting and sculpture, and students produce excellent works. However, there is no dedicated market space in the city for their creations. Therefore, the government should establish craft-sales zones as part of pilgrimage centers. These will serve as marketing hubs for students’ works and also generate revenue for the government¹⁶.

Conclusion

This study Emphasizes that integrated infrastructure planning is essential to protect Kumbakonam and guide it on a sustainable development path for the long term. Declaring protective zones around sacred tanks and temple complexes, restoring natural water channels, improving waste management, regulating transportation, controlling visitor congestion, creating livelihood opportunities for local artisans, and establishing a coordinated governance system are key measures that safeguard the sacred identity of the town.

At the same time, active participation from the local community in understanding and valuing Kumbakonam’s spiritual and cultural heritage, along with digital facilities, accurate information systems, and careful preservation of traditional sculptures and artworks, collectively strengthen sustainability within the town’s tourism development. Overall, if Kumbakonam adopts and implements a holistic approach that integrates “Heritage + Environment + Infrastructure + Social–Governance,” future generations will be able to experience the town as sacred, beautiful, and livable at the same time. The recommendations presented in this study have the

potential to elevate Kumbakonam from being merely a pilgrimage destination to becoming one of India's leading sustainable cultural and spiritual cities.

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