



KANCHIPURAM THE ANCIENT TIRTHYATRAS OF INDIA

Kashi (Varanasi, U. P.), Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu), Mayapuri (Haridwar, Uttaranchal)
Ayodhya (U.P.), Avantika (Ujjain, M. P.), Mathura (U. P.), Dwaravati (Dwarka, Gujarat)



Painting showing Goddess Parvati embracing the lingam. Ekambareswarar Temple, Kanchipuram.

Ancient religious texts mention seven cities in India as sacred. These seven cities are called as Saptapuri in Sanskrit. 'Sapta' means 'seven' and 'Puri' means 'town'. They are Ayodhya, Mathura, Maya, Kasi, Kanchipuram, Avanthika and Dwaravati. They are called as Mokshapuris – meaning the towns in the soul can be liberated from worldly sins and salvation can be attained. The Garuda Puranam mentions them in the following verse.

**Ayodhya Mathura Maya Kasi Kañchi Avantika I
Puri Dvaravati chaiva saptaita moksadayikah II –
Garuda Purana I XVI .14**

This article is a researched article and borrows heavily from printed and electronic encyclopedias as well as material provided by our panel of research scholars, astrologers, academics and pundits

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&
the char dharal

Among the seven holy cities mentioned above, Kanchipuram and Kasi are the more holiest. While dying in Kasi gives salvation for a soul, getting born into Kanchipuram assures a person of salvation. Not only that, even if a person is not born in Kanchipuram, if he or she set foot there, they will get rid of all sins.

Kanchipuram is bounded on all sides by holy rivers such as Palar, Cheyyar, Kambaiyar, Vegavathi, Manjalaru, Vanniyaru and Kanchiyaru.

Of the five natural elements such as, air, water, fire, earth and ether, Saivites consider Kanchipuram as the Prithvi (earth) Kshetram. The followers of Saktham (Goddess religion) revere Kanchipuram in terms of Aakasam (ether). Vaishnavites consider Kanchipuram as Thyaga Bhoomi – meaning the place in which God Vishnu appeared from Yagnam (sacrificial fire). Moreover Kanchipuram is also called Satya Vrata Kshetram – meaning that the residents of Kanchipuram will always speak truth in all circumstances.



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Saivism

There 108 Shiva temples scattered around the town limits of Kanchipuram each having its own story. All these have been dealt in detail in the 'Kanchipuranam'.

The Ekambaranathar Temple legends

Parvati's Penance – At Mount Kailash, once Goddess Parvati covered the eyes of God Shiva in a playful mood. However, Shiva got angry and made Parvati leave Kailash. Goddess Parvati selected the bank of Kambai river to stay. There she made a Linga out of sand and started praising it. To test the perseverance of Parvati, Shiva flooded the Kambai River that threatened to wash away the sand Linga. Parvati embraced the Linga to save it. Due to this, Shiva melted down and brought back Parvati again to Kailash. The sand Linga then hardened, and as believed by the

devotees, it bears the marks of Parvati Devi's embracing.

Shiva – Parvati Marriage - The holy marriage between God Shiva and Goddess Parvati occurred in Kailash. All the Gods and Sages went to the Himalayas to witness the marriage. Due to this, the northern side of India started to tilt downwards. To equalize the weight between north and south sides, God Shiva ordered Sage Agasthya to go southwards. However, the Sage was saddened that he could not see the marriage. Seeing this, Shiva assured Agasthya that he would once again marry Parvati in Kanchipuram in order to enable the Sage to witness their wedding.

Thereafter, every year in the Tamil month of Panguni (March - April) the holy wedding of Shiva and Parvati is celebrated as a festival. Elsewhere in the temple there is a Sannidhi for Sage Agasthya as referred by Pallava King Mahendra Varman I in his drama "Matta Vilasa Prahasanam".

Prithvi Kshetram - According to the Saivist belief Kanchipuram is a Prithvi Kshetram. 'Prithvi' means sand. The five elements (Pancha Bhutas) of nature, water, fire, earth, ether and air are the great sources of life sustaining energy. There are five Shiva temples, four in Tamil Nadu and one in Andhra Pradesh, each one preserving and exhibiting the core energy of that particular divine element. Except the Jambukeswarar temple in Tiruchirappalli which is a Appu (water) Kshetram, the remaining four are situated in the ancient Tondaimandalam which is spread between Tirupati in Andhra to Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu. The symbolic interlinking of Prithvi (earth) with Kanchipuram is manifest in the famous Ekambaranathar Temple where the Lingam is made up of sand with the outer metallic shield.

Vaishnavism

The Vaishnavite mythologies revolve around the 'mountain' inside the Varadaraja Perumal temple in the south-eastern part of the city (Little Kanchipuram) and the 'cave' inside the Kamakshi Amman temple in the northern part of the city (Big Kanchipuram). Embedded in several tales linking the foundation of these sites with Vishnu's incarnations is the theme of the city as a sacred field within which sacrifice takes place. Kanchipuram is termed in Vaishnavite tradition as 'Thyaga Bhoomi' (land of sacrifice). The initiator of holy

sacrifice in these tales are not human beings like a king or a warrior. God Brahma himself is engaged in this ritual practice to have the vision of Supreme God Vishnu.

There is similarity in story lines associated with Yathokthkari Perumal temple, Ashta Bhujam Perumal temple, Vilakkoli Perumal temple, Singa Perumal temple and the Varadaraja Perumal temple. God Brahma goes for Yagnam without his consort Goddess Saraswati who attempts to disrupt the holy sacrifice. God Vishnu interferes and saves the Yagnam. Eventually Goddess Saraswati turns submissive. At last, Vishnu appears from the sacrificial fire and gives vision to all.

Saktham

All the mythologies of Sakthi (Goddess) worship in Kanchipuram revolve around the Kamakshi Amman temple. According to the Saktham tradition, Kanchipuram is Akasa Kshetram (ether holy place). Moreover, Kanchipuram is one among the 51 Sakthi Pithams spread all over India. According to legend, once Daksha (father of Goddess Parvati) performed a Yagnam with a desire to take revenge on Lord Shiva.

Daksha was angry because his daughter Dakshayani also known as Sati had married the 'yogi' God Shiva against his wish. Daksha invited all the deities to the Yagnam except for Shiva and Shakti. The fact that she was not invited did not deter Shakti from attending the Yagnam. She had expressed her desire to attend to Shiva who had tried his best to dissuade her from going. Shiva eventually allowed her to go escorted by his followers.

But Shakti, being an uninvited guest, was not given any respect. Furthermore, Daksha insulted Shiva. Shakti was unable to bear her father's insults toward her husband, so Dakshayani (the other name of Shakti meaning the daughter of Daksha) invoked her yogic powers and immolated herself.

Enraged at the insult and the injury, Shiva destroyed Daksha's sacrifice, cut off his head. Still immersed in grief, he picked up the remains of Sati's body, and danced the dance of destruction through the Universe. The other gods intervened to stop this dance, and the Vishnu's weapon Sudarshana Chakra (the disc) cut through the corpse of Shakti. The various parts of the body fell at several spots all through the Indian subcontinent and formed sites

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Mandapa (hall) of the Varadaraja Perumal temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, India

The Kamakshi temple today is at the very center of the city, with the Ekambaranatha temple to the north-west and the Varadaraja temple to the south-east. It is interesting to note that all the major temples in the city are structured to face the prominent Kamakshi Amman temple.

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which are known as Shakti Peethas today. At all Shakti Peethas, the Goddess Shakti is accompanied by Lord Bhairava (a manifestation of Lord Shiva)

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The seated Kamakshi is a noble image, and to her front is the Sri Chakra in which the Mother Goddess is said to reside in her subtle form. Originally Kamakshi was the fierce form of the Supreme Goddess - Ugrasvarupini.

It was Adi Shankara who installed the Sri Chakra, which contained the ferocity of the goddess and transformed her into the calm and beautiful Brahmasvarupini. Kamakshi's residence in her Brahma-Shakti form is in a cave below. She is said to have appeared on earth once to destroy demons, including the notorious Bhandasura. The Tapas Kamakshi (goddess in penance to expiate the sin of having closed the Lord's eyes) has also been placed in the sanctum sanctorum. Coming out of it, on the left can be seen Kamakshi's attendant Varahi. To her front is the Santana Stambham indicating the place where King Dasharatha

gained the boon of progeny from Goddess Kamakshi.

Planned City

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The town of Kanchipuram was surrounded by a fort and moat in the form of a lotus flower. It had wide roads and streets and trees were planted on both sides. Chariots moved freely in the streets. There was a market place on the outskirts of the town. In the first century AD, neither the temple structure nor the rituals were grown to such an extent in order to enable clustering of settlements around the temples.

The Vaishnavite Tiruvekka or the Yathokthakari temple was the first temple to be mentioned in literary sources. According to archaeological sources the areas surrounding this temple could be royal palace. The city was developed on the Nanthivartha pattern with 2 or 4 groups of settlements with a temple or the palace as nucleus, linked with straight roads cutting at right angles, it was thus on a cross pattern with palace or Temples as Vista closing and terminal points at the ends of the



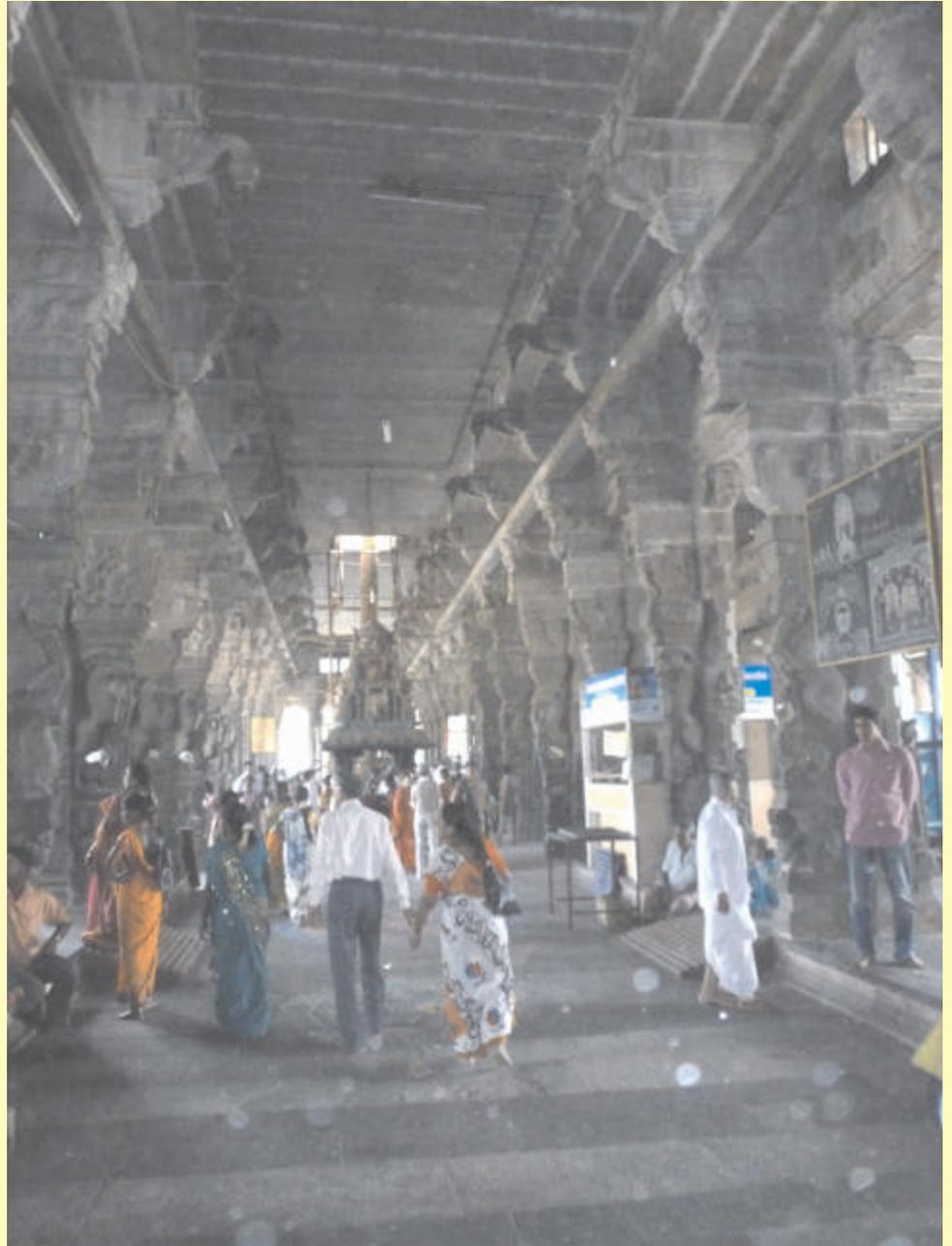
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Rajaveedhi on North and South and Kailasanathar and Vaikunda Perumal temple at the eastern and western ends respectively.

The Pallava King Narasimha Varman II constructed Manjaneer channel to facilitate drainage outflow. and digged the Sarvathirthakulam for public bath near the Ekambaranthar Temple. Houses came up on raised grounds and with burnt bricks for the first time, and the concept of garden at the backyard, a wide front space in the form of 'Thinnai' or Verandah which is the scene in old parts of the city even today. This was to provide good ventilation and for draining of rain water swiftly.

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Ekambareswarar Temple, Kanchipuram.

Religious Centre

Kanchipuram was one of the important places in the annals of the history of religion in India. It has the distinction of accommodating the major religions of Ancient India - Saivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism and Jainism. The leaders and ideologues of these religions chose Kanchipuram as their head-quarters. Scholars set up monasteries, to engage in philosophical debates etc. Even though these religions had uncompromising positions and even showed enmity in standpoints, they coexisted in Kanchipuram. The city of Kanchipuram itself was divided into Siva Kanchipuram, Vishnu Kanchipuram, Jina Kanchipuram

and Buddha Kanchipuram. Among these four, the first two divisions are still followed.

Saivism - There are five Siva temples in Kanchipuram which were sanctified by the verses of Samayakkuravars, the prominent four among the 63 Nayanmars. They are Aneka Thangapada Eswarar temple, Ekambara Nathar temple, Onakantha Eswarar temple, Tirukkaleeswarar temple and Tirumetralli Eswarar temple. Of these five temples, the Ekambara Nathar temple is very old and mythologies knitted around it are unique and popular. Moreover, all the four Samayakkuravars sang verses on it. Including these five sanctified temples nearly 108 Saivite temples are spread all over the Kanchipuram town area – all are



Varadaraja Perumal Temple, Kanchipuram.

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old and each one of them having a distinct mythological background.

The architectural marvel, Kailasa Nathar temple is a standing example of the development of Saivism in Kanchipuram. Its creator, the Pallava King Narasimha Varman II presented himself through his inscriptions as a staunch Saivite. Siva Chudamani was one of the titles he bore. The big temples such as, Kachapa Eswarar temple, Kamakshi Amman temple and Kumarakkottam are also strongly rooted in Saivite tradition. Even though Kamakshi Amman temple belongs to the Saktham tradition (Goddess worship) it cannot be separated from Saivism. All the Saivite sects such as Pasupatham, Kalamukham and Kapalika existed and flourished in Kanchipuram.

Vaishnavism - Out of the 108 Divya Desams (Vaishnavite temples or shrines sanctified by the hymns of Azhwars) eighteen are situated in the Kanchipuram town itself. The Yathokthakari Perumal temple was the oldest one and finds reference in the Sangam literature Perumpanatruppadai. Poigai Azhwar, the first and foremost among the twelve Azhwars was born in Kanchipuram. The Divya Prabandham originated from his first Tiruvandhadhi. He also takes credit for being the first person to write Vedic philosophy in Tamil and in poetic form. In this respect, it can be said that the great Vaishnavite tradition of South India originated in Kanchipuram.

The fourth among the twelve Azhwars, Tirumazhisai Azhwar lived in Tiruvekka at Kanchipuram with his disciple Kanikannan. Ramanujar, who established Vaishnavism as an organized religion and provided the strong philosophical foundation called Visishtadvaita, stayed at Kanchipuram for learning during his younger days. In Kanchipuram he was identified by Saint

Alavandar as the future leader of Vaishnavism.

Vedanta Desikar, one of the great teachers of Vaishnavism was born in Kanchipuram. He was a great intellectual, philosopher and authored more than 100 texts. During his time he surpassed all opponents of Vaishnavism through debates. Prativati Bayangaram Annam, who wrote the famous 'Venkatesa Suprabhatham' was also born in Kanchipuram. Tiruvaimozhi written by Nammazhwar which is also known by the name 'Dravida Veda Sagaram' was summarized by Nambi Pillai. But for some reasons it was kept incognito. This book was first published as 'Yatindra Vaishnava Prabhavam' at Kanchipuram.

Sri Bhashyam written by Ramanujar was compiled into a text by Sudarsana Acharya, a disciple of Ramanujar. This text also originated at Kanchipuram. A doyen of the Vaishnavism, Prativati Bayangaram Annangarachariar was also a native of Kanchipuram. He has published more than



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1000 religious texts. He was the recipient of President's award and his birth centenary was celebrated all over Tamil Nadu.

Jainism - Kanchipuram, being the capital of the Tondaimandalam was not insulated from this sweep of Jainism all through South India.

The Pallava king Simhavishnu, who ruled from Kanchipuram, was a follower of Vaishnavism, but he did not look down upon other religions. His son Mahendravarman I (Seventh Century AD) was drawn to Jainism early in life. The wonderful cave temple at Sittannavasal is attributed to his munificence. Located in the Pudukottai area, the cave has frescoes on Jain spiritual themes like the Samavasarana (divine pavilion) Lake. It is significant that Mahendravarman's drama, Matta - vilasa - prahasana, which is a satire on the ways of the Pashupatas, the Kapalikas, and the Buddhists, avoids any criticism of Vaishnavism, popular Saivism, or Jainism

At a distance of ten miles from Kanchipuram is Tirupanambur, where the Jain acharya Akalanka lived. He is said to have defeated the Buddhists in a debate in the court of King Himasitala of Kanchipuram. The eminent Jain commentator Suranandi lived in Tiruparuttikunram. 'Merumandara Puranam' is the legend of the two assistants of the thirteenth Tirthankara, Vimalanatha. This narrative in thirteen cantos about the princes Meru and Mandara is attributed to Mallisena Vamana (Fourteenth Century AD) who lived in Kanchipuram. The impressions of his feet and those of his disciple Pushpasena are honoured in the Chandraprabha temple at Tiruparuttikunram in Kanchipuram. The village of Tiruparuttikunram and the surrounding places are called as Jina Kanchipuram.

Buddhism - Manimekalai, the epic poem of the later Sangam age elaborately describes the events that take place in Kanchipuram that are related to Buddhism. The central character of this primarily Buddhist epic is Manimekalai, who was a dancer before but later became a nun. She obtains the Amuda Surabhi (nectar vessel) which produces food without end. This she uses for performing charity. In the course of her travels, she is directed by her grandfather Masattuvan to go to Kanchipuram, as the city had been devastated by a drought. When she goes there, she finds a temple of Buddha at the very center of the city: The king builds a garden in honour of Manimekalai's coming to help his people. Delighted, Manimekalai makes him build a lotus seat for Buddha. She then places the

Amuda Surabhi on the lotus seat and welcomes all living beings to gather to be fed. She then meets her spiritual teacher, Aravana Adikal, who instructs her in the Dharma.

Her mind illumined, Manimekalai dedicates herself to the ideal life that leads to salvation. There is a place called Arappanancheri, where the sage Aravana Adigal is said to have spent the latter part of his life. Today the place is known as Arapperumchelvi Street (Maid of Great Charity). History records the names of several great Buddhists of Kanchipuram who spread the Dharma all over the world. Buddhaghosha (Fifth Century AD), along with the monks Sumati and Jotipala, lived in Kanchipuram. Aniruddha, author of Abhidhammatthasangaha, lived in the Mulasoma Vihara.

A Pallava king named Buddhavarman apparently built many viharas. Acharya Dharmapala, who entered the Sangha on the eve of his wedding, lived in Patatitta Vihara built by Ashoka near Kanchipuram. He wrote Pali commentaries for some of the Tripitaka texts. He taught at Nalanda University but died young at the age of thirty-two.

Ashoka's closeness to Kanchipuram has been recorded by Hsuan Tsang, who says that a Buddhist stupa built by him was still standing four centuries later. Deepankara Thero, author of the Pali work Bhujja Madhu, lived in Balatissa Vihara in Kanchipuram. Ananda Thero of Kanchipuram was taken by addhamma Jotipala to Burma to spread Buddhism there.

There are other revered names associated with Buddha Kanchipuram: Venudasa, Vajrabodhi, Sariputra Among the most famous Buddhists of ancient Kanchipuram are Dignaga and Bodhidharma. Hsuan Tsang, who visited Kanchipuram in the 7th Century AD, records that there were one hundred monasteries with ten thousand monks belonging to Theravada Buddhism following Dignaga's yoga. Dignaga (Fifth Century AD) was a native of Kanchipuram and was born in Simhavaktra (Seeyamangalam). His Hetuchakra (Wheel of Reason) inaugurated Buddhist philosophical logic. Bodhidharma (Fifth Century AD) was a Brahmana prince of Kanchipuram who became a Buddhist and was trained in the techniques of meditation by Prajnatarata.

The areas now included in the Big Kanchipuram were once considered as Buddha Kanchipuram. ■