

Pilgrimage Tourism Resources in the Kumbakonam Region – A Study

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மலர்: 10

சிறப்புத்தகுதி: 1

மாதம்: ஜனவரி

வருடம்: 2026

P-ISSN: 2454-3993

E-ISSN: 2582-2810

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.5281/
zenodo.18981536](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18981536)

Abstract

The Kumbakonam region is one of the most important pilgrimage centres in Tamil Nadu, where the religious traditions of Saivism and Vaishnavism have flourished together. The region is distinguished by a large number of ancient temples, sacred water bodies, mythological associations, and vibrant festivals, all of which contribute to its enduring spiritual significance. The Mahamaham Festival, celebrated once every twelve years, serves as the principal sacred identity of Kumbakonam and attracts pilgrims from across India. Prominent Vaishnava shrines such as the Sarangapani, Chakrapani, Ramaswamy, and Uppiliappan Temples, along with heritage monuments like the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, highlight the cultural, historical, and architectural importance of the region. In addition to its religious value, pilgrimage tourism in Kumbakonam supports traditional crafts such as silk weaving and brassware production, thereby strengthening the local economy. Thus, the Kumbakonam region represents a significant spiritual and cultural landscape where religion, heritage, and economic activity are closely interlinked.

Keywords: Kumbakonam Region – Mahamaham – UNESCO Site – Saivite Temples – Vaishnava Temples – Other Tourism Features.

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Introduction

India is a country enriched by people of diverse ethnicities, religions, and languages. Nevertheless, it remains integrated by a fundamental sense of unity. “Unity in diversity” is not a concept imposed by foreign influences; rather, it is a philosophy that emerged from the nation’s internal cultural development¹. The spiritual essence of Indian civilization stands as a powerful force that has profoundly influenced global thought. Religion and spirituality occupy a central place 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 oldest spiritual practices in human history². Since it originated in the earliest stages of human civilization, it is impossible to associate its beginning with a specific historical period. Even epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana contain references to pilgrimage. For thousands of years, pilgrimage traditions have existed across many world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Kumbakonam, a historically significant city located in the renowned Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, also served as an administrative center during the Chola period. With a large concentration of Shaivite and Vaishnavite temples, the city has earned the identity of a “City of Temples.” This study examines in detail the spiritual significance of the Kumbakonam region, its pilgrimage centers, cultural exchanges, and the necessity for sustainability.

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. km³.

Kumbakonam is one of the cities in Tamil Nadu with the highest concentration of temples. Over time, the city has been known by various names such as Kudanthai, Kudamooku, and Bhaskara Kshetram. The Navagraha (nine planetary) pilgrimage shrines are located in the regions surrounding Kumbakonam⁴. Every year, lakhs of devotees undertake the Navagraha pilgrimage. To facilitate this pilgrimage, the Government of Tamil Nadu operates a special daily bus service. Tickets for this service can be booked online. The tour is designed to enable devotees to visit all nine Navagraha temples within a single day, completing the pilgrimage circuit. This service has gained significant popularity among the general public.

The Government Arts College in Kumbakonam is one of the oldest educational institutions in Tamil Nadu. In earlier times, it was renowned as the “Cambridge of South India.” The world-famous mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan pursued his studies at this institution. Tirubuvanam, located approximately five kilometers from Kumbakonam, is home to the Kampaheswarar Temple, which was fully completed during the Later Chola period by Kulothunga Chola III. The town is also well known for its handloom silk weaving industry. Most families in and around Kumbakonam purchase the famous handwoven silk sarees of Tirubuvanam for wedding ceremonies in their households.

The major water resources of the city are the River Cauvery flowing to the north and the Arasalar River flowing to the south.

These rivers encircle the town and provide a lush green environment throughout the year. Agriculture forms the primary economic base of the region, with paddy, sugarcane, banana, and cotton being the major crops cultivated extensively. At present, Kumbakonam hosts more than ten 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 infrastructure, government bus services, modern hospitals, theatres, sports stadiums, libraries, and parks, Kumbakonam today stands as a well-developed and self-sustained city.

A notable recent development is the announcement of the establishment of “Kalaingar University” in Kumbakonam in the forthcoming academic year. This has been officially declared in the Legislative Assembly, and land acquisition work is currently in progress. The university is proposed to be established at Marudhanallur village, located near Kumbakonam.

Kumbakonam Region A Unique Pilgrimage Tourism

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 peace. 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 spirituality.

Major Pilgrimage Tourism Destinations in the Kumbakonam Region Mahamaham Tank

It is famous for the Mahamaham festival, which is celebrated once every 12 years. Every year, the Masi Magham festival is celebrated on the “Maham” star day in the Tamil month of Maasi. The Mahamaham event occurs once in twelve years. Generally, in India, the sacred bath for Hindus takes place only on the banks of rivers. But in Kumbakonam, the sacred bath specifically refers to bathing in the Mahamaham tank. According to tradition, after taking a holy dip in this tank, devotees also bathe in the Pottramarai tank and then proceed to the Cauvery River⁵.

Mahamaham – Mythological Story

According to Hindu belief, the nine sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Narmada, Kaveri, Sindhu, Godavari, Sarayu, and Tamiraparani became burdened with the sins of devotees whose impurities they had washed away. Troubled by this, the rivers approached Lord Shiva and prayed for relief from these accumulated sins.

Lord Shiva said, “In Kumbakonam, in the direction of Agni (the southeast), there is a sacred tank. When Jupiter is in the zodiac sign of Leo, on the full moon day that coincides with the star ‘Maham’, the day known as Mahamaham occurs. If you bathe in that sacred tank on that auspicious day according to prescribed rituals, your sins will be removed”. Following His instruction, the rivers took a sacred dip in the tank at Kumbakonam and were freed from their sins, his is the ancient legend associated with the Mahamaham festival. Every year, during the Maasi Maham, people of Kumbakonam

and nearby regions perform the important ritual of tarpanam (offerings for deceased ancestors) on the banks of the Mahamaham tank. They believe that through this ritual, their departed ancestors attain moksha (liberation).

Darasuram - Airavadeeswarar Temple UNESCO Heritage Site

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 Darasuram⁶.

The architectural structure of the Airavadeeswarar Temple includes the sanctum (garbhagriha), ardhmandapa, 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 astonishing⁷.

The Sacred Place that Gave the Name “Kumbakonam”

The Adi Kumbeshwarar Temple is located in the sacred town of Kumbakonam. The presiding deity of this temple is Adi Kumbeshwarar. The term Adi signifies the beginning, the origin, and the primordial state. Lord Kumbeshwarar appears in the form of a Shiva Linga, which is formless and limitless. This particular Shiva Linga is uniquely shaped like a pot (kumbha), a rare feature in temple iconography. The name Kumbakonam itself is said to have originated from the divine pot (kumbha) and also from the slight inclination of the Shiva Linga, giving rise to the term “Kumba-konam” (the bend/angle of the pot).

This temple is one among the 127 Shiva temples located on the southern bank of the River Cauvery. In the Thevaram hymns, this place is celebrated as Thirukkudamooku, which is known today as Kumbakonam. Among the many temples in Kumbakonam, this shrine holds a place of great prominence. The presiding deity is Adi Kumbeshwarar, and the consort is Goddess Mangalaambikai⁸. The leftward tilt of the Shiva Linga is also cited as a reason for the town's name, Kumbakonam.

The Deluge (Pralaya) Legend

During the time of the great deluge (Pralaya), a pot filled with nectar (amrita) floated across the inundated world. Lord Shiva appeared in the form of a hunter and shot an arrow at the pot, splitting it open. The nectar within spilled out in all four directions through the pot's spout, which resembled a nose (mooku). Thus, the place came to be known as Kudamooku (kudam = pot, mooku = spout/nose). The sacred items that adorned the pot such as mango leaves, darbha grass, rope, bilva leaves, coconut, sacred thread, etc. were swept away by the swirling wind and fell in various

places. Wherever these items fell, Shiva Lingas manifested. These later became the numerous Shiva temples found in and around the region⁹.

Saivite temples in Kumbakonam associated with the mythological legend and the Mahamaham festival:

1. Kasi Viswanathar Temple - The place blessed by the Navakanniyars (Nine Maidens)
2. Kumbeswarar Temple - The place where the sacred pot (Amrita Kalasha) rested as Kudamooku
3. Nageswarar Temple - The place where the Vilva leaf fell.
4. Someswarar Temple - The place where the hoop (Uri / Sikkesam) fell.
5. Gautameswarar Temple - The place where the sacred thread (Poonool / Yajnopaveetham) fell.
6. Abhimukeswarar Temple - The place where the coconut fell.
7. Banapureeswarar Temple - The place where Lord Shiva, in the form of a hunter, shot the arrow to break the Amrita pot
8. Kambatta Viswanathar Temple - The place where the flowers fell.
9. Ekambareshwarar Temple - The place where other scattered fragments fell.
10. Koteeswarar Temple (the holy well of this temple) - The place where drops of nectar (Amrita) fell.
11. Kalahasteswarar Temple - The place where sandalwood fell.
12. Amirthakalasanathar Temple - The place where the middle portion of the Amrita pot fell.

Vaishnava temples in Kumbakonam associated with the mythological legend and the Mahamaham festival:

Sarangapani Temple

It is one of the 108 Divya Desams. Lord Vishnu blesses devotees in a reclining (lying) posture here. During the Mahamaham festival, it is considered one of the most important

Vaishnava sacred destinations. It is located in the central part of Kumbakonam city. Lord Vishnu is generally depicted holding only the conch (shankha) and the disc (chakra). However, at this sacred site, He is also seen holding the bow known as Sarangam. It is a special feature that both the presiding deity (Moolavar) and the processional deity (Utsavar) are shown holding the Sarangam. Owing to this unique attribute, the Lord here came to be known as Sarangapani.

The Sarangam held by the Moolavar cannot be clearly seen. Since Kumbakonam is a sacred theertha (holy bathing) centre, the Lord in the sanctum is believed to be worshipped by the river deities and celestial beings (Devas) who come to attend the Mahamaham festival, and He is seen bestowing His grace upon them.

Chakrapani Temple

This temple is believed to be the place where Lord Vishnu revealed the Sudarshana Chakra during the time of the cosmic deluge (Pralaya). Here, Lord Vishnu appears in a standing posture. It was one of three prominent Vaishnava temples in Kumbakonam that flourished under Nayaka patronage, alongside the Ramaswamy Temple and the Sarangapani Temple. The Chakrapani Temple in Kumbakonam celebrates several festivals throughout the year, including the prominent 10-day Brahmotsavam in Chithirai (April-May), Pavitrotsavam, and the Float festival (Theppotsavam) in Vaikasi (May-June). Additionally, the significant Mahamaham Festival, held every 12 years, is also observed with grandeur at this temple, which is one of the five Vishnu temples linked to the Mahamaham Festival.

Ramaswamy Temple

Lord Sri Rama blesses devotees along with Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna, and Hanuman. This temple is often referred to as the "Southern Ayodhya." This is an ancient

Vaishnavite sacred shrine of great artistic excellence located in Kumbakonam. The temple stands prominently at the southern end of the Big Bazaar Street, in the very heart of the town, facing north. It was constructed in the 16th century by Raghunatha Nayak, the Nayaka ruler who governed from Thanjavur as his capital. The distinctive feature of the presiding deity in this temple is that Lord Rama is enshrined in the Pattabhishekam (coronation) posture. Within the sanctum sanctorum, exquisitely carved sculptures of Lord Rama, Goddess Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna, and Hanuman can be seen together. Their divine forms appear as though beauty itself has taken sculptural shape.

Hanuman is portrayed in a rare and unique form, holding a veena and engaged in the recitation of the Ramayana. Lord Ramachandra and Goddess Sita are seated together on the same throne, while Bharata holds the royal umbrella, Shatrughna fans them with a chamara, and Lakshmana stands with folded hands, holding the bow (Kodanda), as if awaiting the command of Lord Rama. A particularly rare feature of this shrine is that Lakshmana is shown holding both his own bow and Lord Rama's bow together, an arrangement not found in other sacred temples.

Oppiliappan Temple (near Kumbakonam – 6 km)

This is one of the 108 Divya Desams. Lord Vishnu appears in a standing posture. It is popularly known as the “Tirupati of Tamil Nadu.” No salt is added to the offerings (prasadam) prepared here. During the Tamil month of Purattasi, a large number of devotees visit this temple every Saturday. Special bus services are arranged during festival days for the convenience of the public.

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.

Swamimalai Murugan Temple

Swamimalai Swaminathaswamy Temple is located 6 kilometers west of Kumbakonam. It is the fourth among the six sacred abodes of Lord Murugan (Arupadai Veedu). This is the holy place where Lord Murugan taught the meaning of the sacred “Om” (Pranava Mantra) to his own father, Lord Shiva. According to Hindu mythology, when Lord Brahma was unable to explain the meaning of the Pranava Mantra “Om,” Lord Murugan imprisoned him¹⁰. Later, Murugan himself explained the true meaning of the mantra to Lord Shiva. By doing so, Murugan became the guru (teacher) to his own father. Hence, the deity here is known as Swaminatha Swami, meaning “the Lord who became a Guru to God.” Every year, on the Visakam star day in the Tamil month of Vaikasi, devotees from Kumbakonam and the surrounding regions undertake a sacred pilgrimage to this temple, carrying kavadi, paal kudam (milk pots), and making the journey on foot. Additionally, on every Karthigai day of each month, large numbers of pilgrims visit Swamimalai to offer their worship.

Other Tourism Features

Thirubuvanam Silk Sarees

Thirubuvanam is a town located about five kilometers from Kumbakonam. It is an ancient temple town renowned for its exceptional silk weaving tradition since the era of the great Chola rulers. A distinctive feature of Thirubuvanam silk sarees is the use of filature silk for both warp and weft, which results in high quality, enhanced shine, uniformity, and lustre. The town has also been awarded a Geographical

Indication (GI) tag for its silk sarees. People living in and around the town weave silk sarees in their own homes using traditional handlooms. A government-regulated sales outlet functions within the town for the benefit of buyers. For weddings and all auspicious family occasions, people from the surrounding regions visit Thirubuvanam to purchase silk sarees

Nachiyar Kovil Brass Lamps

This town is located 6 miles (9.7 km) southeast of Kumbakonam on the Kumbakonam, Thiruvarur main road. Brass lamps of various sizes and shapes are crafted by local artisans known as Kammalars (Pattar community). The lamps produced here are richly decorated and have a grand appearance, which greatly attracts tourists. In 2010, it received the Geographical Indication (GI) tag for the “Nachiyar Koil Kuthuvilakku” under the Government of India’s Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999. Pilgrims visiting this region customarily travel to Nachiyar Koil town to purchase these traditional kuthu vilakkus (brass lamps) as part of their pilgrimage.

Conclusion

The Kumbakonam region stands as one of the most significant pilgrimage centres in Tamil Nadu. It is a unique sacred town that harmoniously preserves the rich traditions of both Saivism and Vaishnavism. The presence of numerous ancient temples, sacred water tanks, mythological associations, and vibrant annual festivals has transformed Kumbakonam into a living spiritual and cultural hub. The Mahamaham Festival, celebrated once every twelve years, represents the foremost sacred identity of Kumbakonam. This grand event attracts lakhs of pilgrims from various parts of India and elevates the town to the status of a pan-Indian pilgrimage destination. Renowned Vaishnava shrines such as Sarangapani, Chakrapani, Ramaswamy, and Uppiliappan Temples, along with heritage monuments like the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, further emphasize the cultural and religious importance of the region. Pilgrimage tourism in Kumbakonam also supports traditional crafts and local economies, including silk weaving, brassware production, and temple-based artisanal activities. Thus, the Kumbakonam region serves as an exemplary model where pilgrimage, culture, and economy are intricately interconnected, sustaining its enduring spiritual significance.