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DEVOTIONAL LANDSCAPES: EXPLORING VAISHNAVA WORSHIP TRADITIONS IN TAMIL NADU

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Introduction

The emergence of temple institutions in medieval Tamil Nadu represents a significant transformation in the region's socio-religious and political dynamics. From the seventh to the thirteenth centuries, the construction and patronage of temples escalated dramatically, driven by powerful dynasties such as the Pallavas, Cholas, and later the Pandiyas. These temples evolved into far more than mere places of worship; they became vital centres of economic, social, and cultural life. During this transformative era, temples served a multi-faceted role within the community, functioning as hubs for industry, administration, and commerce. They were not only sites for religious rituals and gatherings but also played a critical role in local governance, often acting as the administrative nerve centres of their respective regions.

This paper focuses on the popularization of Vaishnava temples in Tamil Nadu, highlighting how the Vaishnava tradition firmly upheld the supremacy of Lord Vishnu. Throughout early medieval Tamil Nadu, various forms of Vishnu's incarnations, or avatars, gained prominence due to the prevailing socio-political and economic conditions. Among these incarnations, Lord Krishna and Lord Rama (commonly referred to as Ramar in Tamil) emerged as particularly significant figures, captivating the devotion of the populace.

The exploration of these themes reveals the intricate connections between temple, community life, and religious practices, underscoring the lasting influence of Vaishnavism. By examining how the worship of Vishnu and his incarnations shaped not only religious beliefs but also social and economic structures, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the pivotal role of temples in medieval Tamil Nadu's societal framework. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate how these institutions fostered a rich cultural expression, community engagement, and enduring devotion that continue to resonate in the region's heritage today.

Further, this research examines the intricate relationship between Vaishnava worship traditions centered on Lord Rama and the narratives of the Ramayana in Tamil Nadu. It investigates how the epic's themes, characters, and events influence the devotional practices and cultural expressions within Vaishnavism in the region.

Emergence of Temple in Medieval Tamil Naduⁱ

The Pallava dynasty, which thrived approximately between 600 and 900 C.E., played a pivotal role in establishing temple institutions that would shape the cultural and religious landscape of Tamil Nadu. Early rulers such as Mahendravarman I and Narasimhavarman II, also known as Rajasimha, were instrumental in this transformation. They pioneered the construction of rock-cut temples, moving away from the earlier reliance on wooden or brick shrines. This innovative architectural style laid the foundation for subsequent developments in temple architecture.

Among the most significant contributions of the Pallavas are the Kailasanatha Temple in Kanchipuram and the remarkable group of temples at Mamallapuram (historically known as Mahabalipuram). These temples served not only as places of worship but also as powerful symbols of royal authority and prestige, reflecting the might of the Pallava rulers. Their patronage of Saivism is particularly notable, with numerous Siva temples commissioned during this period. However, the Pallavas also supported Vaishnavism and other sects, showcasing a religious pluralism that characterized the era. The temples became centres for the burgeoning *bhakti* (devotional) movements, with revered poet-saints like the Nayanmars and Alvars composing heartfelt hymns dedicated to Lord Siva and Lord Vishnu, respectively.



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The Chola Empire, which reigned from around 850 to 1279 C.E., further consolidated and expanded the temple institutions established by the Pallavas. Under the leadership of powerful kings such as Rajarajan I and Rajendran I, temple construction became a state-sponsored endeavour. The Chola rulers endowed temples with vast tracts of land, wealth, and resources, transforming them into formidable institutions that wielded significant religious and economic influence. A prime example of Chola architectural grandeur is the Rajarajeswara Temple in Thanjavur, constructed by Rajarajan I in the eleventh century. This temple was not merely a site of worship; it evolved into a vast economic entity that controlled extensive agricultural lands and employed thousands of individuals. The Rajarajeswara Temple and others like it became repositories of wealth, art, and culture, housing exquisite collections of bronze sculptures, inscriptions, and murals that celebrated both the divine and the achievements of the Chola dynasty.

The Chola emperors also institutionalized temple management through the establishment of temple councils, known as *sabhas* or *ur*. These councils were responsible for overseeing land grants, revenue collection, and the organization of festivals, thus embedding the temples deeply within the socio-economic framework of Tamil society. Inscriptions from this period reveal a dynamic engagement of temples in various economic activities, including land grants, agricultural production, and financial contributions from merchants and artisan guilds.

Following the Chola rule, the later Pandiya dynasty continued this rich tradition of temple-building and patronage. The Minakshi Temple in Madurai, for instance, was significantly expanded during this period, reflecting the Pandiyas' devotion to both Saivism and Vaishnavism. The temples established during the Pandiya rule became integral to the religious and social life of the region, evolving into complex institutions that were intricately woven into the political, economic, and cultural fabric of Tamil society.

By this time, temples had transformed into centres of education, often housing schools known as *gatikas*, which offered both religious and secular learning. They also became vibrant hubs for the arts, providing stages for music, dance, and dramatic performances that retold popular epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In this way, the legacy of temple institutions in Tamil Nadu continued to flourish, reflecting the dynamic interplay of religion, politics, and culture throughout the region's history.

Saivism and Vaishnavism

The rise of Vaishnavism and Saivism in medieval Tamil Nadu played a transformative role in shaping the region's religious, cultural, and political landscape. Both traditions flourished during this period, primarily between the sixth and thirteenth centuries, under the patronage of powerful dynasties like the Pallavas, Cholas, and Pandiyas, as well as through the influence of the *Bhakti* movement.ⁱⁱ This era witnessed a vibrant religious awakening, with the development of grand temple institutions, devotional literature, and widespread religious worship. The rise of Saivism and Vaishnavism in medieval Tamil Nadu marked a golden age of devotionalism and temple worship. These two traditions, though distinct in their deities and theological frameworks, contributed to the rich religious fabric of the region. Saivism, with its emphasis on Siva worship and temple-centered rituals, thrived under the Pallavas and Cholas, while Vaishnavism, fuelled by the Alvars and later Ramanuja, became a powerful religious force, especially through the Sri Vaishnava tradition. Both religious movements not only shaped the spiritual life of Tamil Nadu but also left an enduring legacy in its architecture, art, and literature.

The Rise of Saivism and Vaishnavism in Medieval Tamil Nadu

Saivism, the worship of Lord Siva, became intricately woven into the fabric of Tamil society during the early medieval period, especially under the Pallava dynasty (circa 600–900 C.E.). Although the Pallavas were patrons of various religious traditions, their robust support for Saivism was particularly noteworthy. They played a pivotal role in institutionalizing the worship of Siva through extensive temple-building initiatives, setting a precedent for subsequent dynasties, such as the Cholas, who followed their example. This period marked a significant transformation in how divine worship was organized and practiced in Tamil Nadu.



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The Pallavas' patronage of Saivism was significantly manifested through their encouragement of the Nayanmars, a revered group of Saivite poet-saints. These saints composed devotional hymns known as the *Tirumurai*, which celebrated Siva and became integral to the Tamil Saivite tradition. The Nayanmars' poetry emphasized personal devotion to Siva, the importance of temple worship, and a rejection of rigid ritualism, thus making spiritual experiences more accessible to the common people. Their works highlighted a shift toward a more intimate and personal relationship with the divine, contrasting with the more formalized and hierarchical aspects of earlier worship practices.

The zenith of Saivism in Tamil Nadu occurred under the Chola dynasty, particularly during the reigns of Rajarajan I and Rajendran I. The Cholas, known for their devout Saivism, transformed the religious landscape into a state-sponsored institution. Temples dedicated to Siva evolved into vibrant centres of economic activity, education, and cultural patronage, influencing all aspects of life in Tamil society. The Chola kings regarded themselves as earthly representatives of Siva, and their monumental temple constructions, such as the Rajarajeswara Temple in Thanjavur, were designed to reflect divine authority and power. These temples not only served religious purposes but also acted as hubs for art, dance, music, and various forms of cultural expression, thus fostering a rich artistic heritage that would influence generations.

In parallel to the rise of Saivism, Vaishnavism—the worship of Vishnu and his avatars, particularly Krishna and Rama—also flourished during the medieval period, largely due to the efforts of the Alvars, the Vaishnavite poet-saints. Between the sixth and ninth centuries, the Alvars composed deeply devotional hymns dedicated to Vishnu, which were later compiled into the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, a sacred canon of Tamil Vaishnavism.ⁱⁱⁱ The earliest Alvars, including Poigai Alvar, Pudatt Alvar, and Pey Alvar, were instrumental in spreading Vaishnavism across Tamil Nadu through their heartfelt hymns, which articulated an intense personal devotion to Vishnu.

Later Alvars, such as Tirumangai Alvar and Nammalvar, further advanced this devotion by focusing on specific Vishnu temples, establishing a tradition of temple-centred Vaishnavism that linked community identity to sacred spaces. Their hymns were often sung in temples, creating a communal atmosphere of worship that resonated deeply with the Tamil populace.

Although the Pallavas were predominantly Saivites, they also recognized the significance of Vaishnavism, evident in the construction of early Vaishnavite temples, such as the Varadharaja Perumal Temple in Kanchipuram. The Cholas, despite their strong leanings toward Saivism, also contributed to Vaishnavite worship. One of the most prominent examples is the Srirangam Ranganathaswamy Temple, which gained considerable prominence during the Chola period and became a major pilgrimage site for Vaishnavites.

The *bhakti* movement played a crucial role in the rise of Vaishnavism during this time. The Alvar hymns, characterized by their emotional depth and personal devotion, became a vital part of temple rituals. This devotional literature not only helped popularize the worship of Vishnu but also emphasized personal salvation through surrender to Vishnu, known as *prapatti*. This message resonated deeply with the Tamil people, fostering a sense of belonging and communal identity centred around their faith.

Saivism vs. Vaishnavism: Coexistence and Competition

Throughout medieval Tamil Nadu, Saivism and Vaishnavism coexisted, though they occasionally competed for royal patronage and influence. Both religious traditions had powerful supporters among the ruling dynasties. The Pallavas and Cholas, though primarily Saivites, supported Vaishnavite temples as well, while the later Pandiyas tended to favour both traditions equally.

The *bhakti* movement, which emphasized personal devotion over formal ritualism, played a unifying role in both Saivism and Vaishnavism. The Nayanmars and Alvars criticized caste hierarchies and promoted equality among devotees, helping bridge the gap between the two traditions. However, there were also moments of theological tension between the two groups, as seen in later disputes between Saivite and Vaishnavite sects.



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The devotional hymns of the Nayanmars continued to inspire the Saivite community. *Bhakti* saints like Appar, Sundarar, and Manikkavacakar composed hymns that were later collected into the Saiva canon, known as the *Tirumurai*. These hymns emphasized the themes of love, surrender, and devotion to Lord Siva, while also criticizing the Brahmanical orthodoxy of the time, including caste distinctions and Vedic rituals.^{iv}

Vaishnava temples in medieval Tamil Nadu

Vaishnava temples are generally classified into two main categories: *Divya Desams* (also known as *Mangalasanam* temples) and *Abhimana Kshethrams* (or *Abhimana Sthalams*). *Divya Desams* are temples that hold special spiritual significance due to their association with the Tamil Alvars, the Vaishnavite saints who composed hymns in praise of Lord Vishnu. These temples are mentioned in their devotional hymns and are highly revered within the Vaishnava tradition. On the other hand, temples not included in the *Divya Desams* list are classified as *Abhimana Kshethrams*. These temples also carry significant spiritual and cultural value but are recognized primarily for their local legends and importance in the Vaishnava tradition. In addition to these two classifications, other groups of Vaishnava temples, such as the *Pancharanga*, *Pancha Rama* temples, *Nava Tirupathi* and further highlight the uniqueness of Vaishnava worship in Tamil Nadu.

Divya Desams and Mangalasanam

The term “Mangalasanam” refers to the practice in which the Alvars offer praises, salutations, and prayers to Lord Vishnu in their hymns, expressing their devotion and reverence.^v These praises are considered highly auspicious and serve as a form of felicitations toward the deity. *Divya Desams*, meaning “divine sacred places,” are temples that have been glorified in these Alvar hymns. There are a total of 108 *Divya Desams*, which are regarded as the most sacred Vaishnava temples, representing key pilgrimage sites for devotees of Vishnu.

Out of the 108 *Divya Desams*, 105 are located on Earth, while the remaining three are believed to exist in celestial realms. Tamil Nadu, the heartland of Vaishnavism, is home to 84 of these temples, while 11 are located in Kerala (referred to as Malai Nadu), 2 in Andhra Pradesh, 4 in Uttar Pradesh, 3 in Uttarakhand, 1 in Gujarat, and 1 in Nepal. The two celestial abodes, Tiruparkadal (the Ocean of Milk) and Paramapadam (Srivaikuntam, the eternal abode of Lord Narayana), hold great spiritual significance. These non-physical locations symbolize the ultimate destination of a Vaishnavite’s spiritual journey and are revered as divine realms where Lord Vishnu resides.

Abhimana Kshethrams or Abhimana Sthalams

In addition to *Divya Desams*, there is another important category of Vishnu temples called *Abhimana Kshethrams* or *Abhimana Sthalams*. These temples, while not specifically mentioned in the Alvar hymns, are still highly revered within the Vaishnavite tradition. *Abhimana Kshethrams* are significant due to their *Sthala Puranas*, or local legends, which are drawn from important Hindu texts such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and various *Puranas*. These legends often describe the temples as places directly connected to divine events or incarnations of Vishnu, giving them great religious and cultural importance.

The *Abhimana Kshethrams* are referred to as “close abodes” of Vishnu and share much of the spiritual importance attributed to *Divya Desams*. Many of these temples attract large numbers of pilgrims and devotees, who visit to offer prayers and seek blessings from Lord Vishnu. These temples play a key role in the spiritual and devotional life of Vaishnavite, representing an integral part of Vaishnava worship traditions.

Other Classifications of Vaishnava Temples

Beyond the categories of *Divya Desams* and *Abhimana Kshethrams*, Vaishnava temples in Tamil Nadu and beyond are also classified into subgroups such as *Pancharanga* temples, *Pancha Rama* temples, and *Nava Tirupati*. These classifications are based on the unique characteristics of the temples and their importance in different regional and



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spiritual contexts. For instance, the *Pancharanga* temples are a set of five Vishnu temples along the course of the river Kaveri, while *Pancha Rama* temples are dedicated to the episodes related to Lord Rama.

***Pancharanga* and *Nava Tirupati* Temples**

The *Pancharanga Kshetrams*, or *Pancharangams*, consist of five sacred Vaishnavite temples dedicated to Lord Ranganatha, a form of Vishnu, situated along the banks of the Kaveri River. These temples are of great religious significance for Vaishnavite, who visit them in search of blessings and spiritual solace. Together, the *Pancharanga Kshetrams* form a sacred chain, celebrated for their profound spiritual importance and devotion to Lord Vishnu.

The first temple in this series is the Srirangapatna Adi Rangam Temple, located in Karnataka. Known as “Adi Rangam,” or the first Ranganatha, it is the oldest and most significant temple among the *Pancharanga Kshetrams*. Devotees regard this temple as a source of powerful spiritual energy, making it a prominent pilgrimage destination for followers of Lord Vishnu seeking to offer their prayers and receive blessings. Next is the Sivanasamudra Madhya Ranga Temple, also in Karnataka, which occupies a central position in the *Pancharanga* chain. Referred to as “Madhya Rangam,” it is enveloped by serene natural beauty, creating a peaceful worship environment. Devotees from various regions visit this temple to experience its tranquillity and express their devotion to Lord Ranganatha.

In Tamil Nadu, the Srirangam Kasthuri Rangam (*Anthya Rangam*) stands as one of the most grand and renowned Vishnu temples in South India. Known as “Anthya Rangam,” or the last Ranganatha, this temple is vital to Vaishnavite tradition and pilgrimage. Its architectural splendour and religious significance make it a key spiritual hub, enriching the Vaishnavite culture and devotion in the region. The Appalarangam Temple at Tirupernagar and the Parimala Ranganatha Perumal Temple at Tiruindalur also play essential roles in the *Pancharanga* series, contributing to the spiritual vibrancy along the Kaveri River.

The *Nava Tirupati* refers to a group of nine sacred Hindu temples dedicated to Lord Vishnu, each of immense spiritual and historical importance. Located along the Tiruchendur-Tirunelveli route in modern Tamil Nadu, these temples position on the banks of the Thamirabarani River and are classified as *Divya Desams*. The *Nava Tirupati* temples form a significant pilgrimage circuit for devotees, embodying deep devotion and reverence for Lord Vishnu.

At the centre of this group is the Srivaikuntanathan Perumal Temple, renowned for its architectural grandeur and spiritual significance. The Vijayasasana Perumal Temple in Natham and the Vaithamanidhi Perumal Temple in Tirukolor, which symbolizes wealth and prosperity, are equally revered. The Tirupulingudi Perumal Temple, rich in sacred history, is another important stop, while the Alwar Tirunagari Temple, the birthplace of Nammalvar, holds special significance for devotees. The Makara Nedunkuzhai Kannan Temple in Thentiruperai and the Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Tirukulandhai are noted for their spiritual essence, while the twin temples at Tholavillimangalam, Aravindalochanar and Devapiran, complete the pilgrimage route.

The Rise of Ramar Worship in Medieval Tamil Nadu

During the medieval period in Tamil Nadu, the religious landscape was predominantly influenced by the worship of deities such as Siva and Vishnu. A significant force in the promotion of Vishnu worship was the Alvars, a group of poet-saints who played a crucial role in shaping devotional practices. The Alvars composed the *Divya Prabandham*, a revered anthology of devotional hymns that primarily focused on Vishnu and his various incarnations, including Krishna. Within this collection, the hymns also made important references to Ramar, another incarnation of Vishnu, thus contributing to the expansion of his worship throughout Tamil Nadu.

This era saw a profound transformation in the veneration of Ramar, characterized by contributions from poet-saints, literary adaptations, and the establishment of significant temples dedicated to his worship. The Alvars’ hymns not only celebrated the divine attributes of Vishnu but also facilitated a broader recognition of Ramar as a central figure in the



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devotional practices of the region. This cultural and religious enrichment reflected the increasing integration of Ramar into the wider worship of Vishnu, reinforcing his significance among devotees.

As the medieval period progressed, particularly into the later medieval era, the veneration of Ramar as the seventh avatar of Vishnu gained substantial prominence. This shift was largely influenced by the rising strength of Vaishnavism and the evolving political dynamics within the region, which fostered an environment conducive to religious expression. Although the number of Ramar temples was fewer in comparison to those dedicated to other forms of Vishnu, several key shrines dedicated to him began to emerge, symbolizing the growing devotion towards Ramar.

The *bhakti* movement, which emphasized personal devotion to deities—particularly Vishnu and his avatars—played a pivotal role in this transformation. The movement encouraged a more intimate and personal connection between devotees and their chosen deities, leading to an increase in Ramar's popularity and worship. The establishment of temples, along with literary works that celebrated Ramar's virtues and exploits, further solidified his position within the religious landscape of Tamil Nadu.

The Cultural Impact of Kambaramayanam

A significant contributor to the embedding of Ramar's status in Tamil Nadu's cultural and religious milieu was the retelling of the *Ramayana*. Notably, the *Kambaramayanam*, composed by the poet Kambar in the twelfth century, played a critical role in this narrative. Kambar's Tamil adaptation of the epic not only retold the story but also became a central element of Tamil literary and religious culture, reinforcing Ramar's status as a divine figure.

The *Kamba Ramayanam* is regarded as one of Tamil Nadu's most significant contributions to the *Ramayana* tradition in the Indian subcontinent. Kambar recited this epic within the sacred precincts of the Srirangam Temple, akin to the recitation of the *Periyapuranam* at Chidambaram, both of which were pivotal events in Tamil cultural and religious history. Additionally, Tirumangai Alvar, one of the prominent Alvars, is believed to have resided at the Srirangam Ranganathaswamy Temple, contributing to the temple's construction and its surrounding walls. This grand temple, dedicated to Vishnu, is particularly significant as it is said to enshrine an image of Vishnu that was worshipped by Ramar himself. According to legend, Ramar gifted this image to Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, who succeeded him in Sri Lanka, thereby establishing a deep connection between the *Ramayana* narrative and temple worship in Tamil Nadu.

Significant Temples and Their Associations with Ramar

Several temples in Tamil Nadu exemplify the enduring influence of the *Ramayana* and the rising importance of Ramar in the region's devotional practices. One of the most notable is the Vaduvur Ramar Temple, located near Thanjavur. This temple is celebrated for its exquisite depictions of Ramar, his consort Sita, his brother Lakshmana, and Hanuman. The Vaduvur Ramar Temple emerged as a significant centre for Ramar worship, closely tied to the *Ramayana* tradition and Vaishnavite devotion. Its prominence during medieval times illustrates the intersection of literature, devotion, and temple culture that characterized much of Tamil Nadu's religious history.

Another significant site is the Ramaswamy Temple in Kumbakonam, renowned for its intricate carvings and paintings that depict the entire *Ramayana* narrative. Built during the later medieval period, this temple stands as a testament to the growing devotion to Ramar, continuing to serve as a major pilgrimage site for Vaishnavite. The Ramanathaswamy Temple at Rameswaram, although primarily a Saiva temple, also holds substantial connections to Ramar worship. Legend has it that Ramar worshipped Lord Siva here before embarking on his journey to Sri Lanka. This dual association with both Saivism and Vaishnavism highlights the blending of religious traditions during the medieval period.



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Other temples associated with Ramar include the Tiruppullani Aadi Jagannatha Perumal Temple, near Rameswaram, believed to be the site where Ramar stayed before his expedition to Sri Lanka. The Erikatta Ramar (Kodandarama) Temple at Madhurantakam, near Chennai, is linked to legends of Ramar's return from Sri Lanka. Temples like Tiruusattanam and Ramanadeswaram Siva Temples, as well as the Tirukkannapuram *Divya Desam*, are connected to narratives about Ramar's return to Ayodhya after his victory over Ravana.

The Valvil Ramar Temple at Tiruppullambhootamkudi is also significant for its association with the legend of Jatayu Moksham.^{vi} Here, it is believed that Ramar performed the last rites for the eagle king Jatayu. Similarly, the Tiruputkuzhi Temple in the Kanchipuram district is linked to the same legend, reinforcing the connections between Ramar and the rich tapestry of Tamil religious narratives.^{vii}

The concept of Kothandaramar

The concept of Kothandaramar (Rama with a bow) holds a special place in the devotional landscape of Tamil Nadu, representing a popular and revered form of Lord Rama. Across the state, numerous temples dedicated to Kothandaramar are classified as *Abhimana Kshethram* or *Abhimana Sthalam*, which are esteemed sites within the Vaishnavism tradition. These sacred spaces are scattered throughout various regions in Tamil Nadu, with notable locations including Vaduvur, Paruthiyur, Adambar, Thillaivilagam, Tiruvarur, Patteeswaram, Ayothyapatnam, and Rameshwaram.

Among these significant temples, the *Pancha Rama* Temples hold particular prominence. The term "Pancha Rama" refers to five dedicated temples situated within the Tiruvarur district, which are collectively acknowledged as vital sites in the Vaishnavite tradition. The five *Pancha Rama Kshetras* are Mudikondan, Adambar, Paruthiyur, Thillaivilagam, and Vaduvur. Each temple within this group is unique, contributing to the rich tapestry of Rama worship in Tamil Nadu.

A highlight among these is the Thillaivilagam Kothanda Ramar Temple, an integral part of the *Pancha Rama Kshetras* located in Tiruvarur. This temple celebrates the divine presence of Rama, embodying the deep-rooted devotion that characterizes the region's spiritual landscape.

Another notable temple is the Kothandaramar Temple in Ayodhyapattanam, which lies approximately 10 km from Salem. This temple is recognized as one of the oldest in the Salem area, constructed during the Tirumala Nayak period in the seventeenth century. What sets this temple apart is its unique depiction of Ramar seated, with his left thigh crossed over his right—an unusual representation compared to the typical standing statues of Ramar found throughout Tamil Nadu.

These temples not only function as places of worship but also serve as cultural landmarks, preserving the rich heritage of Ramar worship. Each temple is characterized by unique architectural elements and religious significance that contribute to their individuality within the broader context of Tamil culture.

The Kothandaramar Temple holds profound mythological significance. Local myths assert that following his victory over Ravana, the king of Lanka, Lord Rama and Sita visited this sacred site and rested for a day. During their visit, Vibhishana, who had joined forces with Ramar, requested a special appearance of Lord Rama in the coronation posture. In response, the main deity of the temple, Lord Rama, is represented in this posture, with Sita seated beside him, while Vibhishana stands in a respectful pose, offering prayers to the divine couple. Inside the temple's sanctum, statues of Rama's brothers—Lakshmana, Bharata, and Shatrughna—are placed alongside the main deity. Additionally, a statue of Anjaneya (Hanuman), Ramar's devoted servant, is also present.

Conclusion

During the early medieval period, temples in Tamil Nadu transformed into centres of education and vibrant artistic hubs, reflecting a dynamic interplay of religion, politics, and culture. This era witnessed the rise of Saivism and



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Vaishnavism, marking a golden age of devotionism that profoundly influenced the region's architecture, art, and literature. Saivism, particularly under the Pallava dynasty, became deeply integrated into Tamil society, as the dynasty supported extensive temple construction and promoted the revered Nayanmars, who composed the *Tirumurai*—devotional hymns that emphasized personal devotion and temple worship. The peak of Saivism occurred during the Chola dynasty, especially under Rajarajan I and Rajendran I, when temples evolved into vibrant centres of economic, educational, and cultural life, with kings perceiving themselves as representatives of Siva.

Simultaneously, Vaishnavism flourished through the contributions of the Alvars, whose devotional hymns were compiled in the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*. While the Pallavas primarily favoured Saivism, they also recognized Vaishnavism's importance by constructing early Vaishnavite temples. This coexistence fostered a dynamic bhakti movement that promoted personal devotion and equality among devotees. The hymns of the Nayanmars and Alvars inspired a rich cultural and spiritual landscape in medieval Tamil Nadu, ultimately shaping the region's religious heritage and reflecting the deep interconnection between these two traditions.

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