

NAVAGRAHA TEMPLE TOURISM IN KUMBAKONAM REGION

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Abstract

Kumbakonam, near Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, one of the oldest towns in South India, is a sacred pilgrim centre on account of its numerous ancient temples and the sacred Mahamaham Tank situated on the banks of the river Cauvery, it rose as an important and oldest cultural centre of South India. It is one of the famous tourist attractions in Kumbakonam Region. The hospitality industry is inextricably linked to the travel and tourism industry and the growth in Indian travel. Tourism industry in India is booming at the moment and has tremendous potentials to become a major global tourist destination. In Tamilnadu, hospitality and guest-care are not a profession but a way of life. Guest-care is enshrined in our literature and scripts. In Tamilnadu there are number of tourist places and temples. Thanjavur district is one among the important places for visit. Many people across the world visit many places in Thanjavur district especially in Kumbakonam (a place of Navagraha) and they select different kinds of hospitality and guest care service for their stay. The objective of this study is to measure the Navagraha temples in Kumbakonam.

Key Words: *Navagraha, Brahmanas, Hospitality, Industry, Kumbakonam.*

Introduction

The most ancient literature of India is the Vedic literature; it includes the Brahmanas and the early Upanishads, containing not listing of the five planets by name. The Vedanta Jyotisa, the earliest Vedic astronomical text, mentions the Sun, Moon and Constellations (Naksatra) but not the planets. The first clear reference to the planets by name is found in the epic, the Mahabharata which is generally dated around the 2nd century BC this clearly pointed out that the Vedic people were not aware of the planets and knowledge of them it came from an outside source, possibly as late as the Greeks after the time of Alexander. The Vedas have the system of Astronomy dividing zodiac into 27 or 28 lunar constellations. This system of Nakshatra is highly practical and scientific divisions of the Zodiac it provides different constellations for the moon to occupy every day. Actually the term Nakshatra included the planets along with the Sun and Moon. In Mahabharata (1.66. 16 – 16) and Puranas the Nakshatra are considered to be the daughters of the creator Daksha, who were given as wives to the Moon (Chandran). Each of the planets is supposed to bestow a particular boon to human life¹. The Sun, Moon and the five planets were Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn and the remaining two nodes are ascending and descending nodes of the Moon called Rahu and Kethu these nine were collectively called as Navagrahas in the Hindu astronomy. These planets required ongoing observation of their positions. The term planets, graham is described as Soma cups that can be offered to the different Gods. The Soma cup is well known to be the moon which is filling during the waxing half and emptied during the waning half. The words of wise sages with their fashion the one being the eagle in various ways, that sustained the meters in the rituals, they measure the twelvefold the soma

cups. The twelve grahas are observably the twelve moons of the year. The planets like the Moon also have their motions whereby they wax and wane. The term Navagrahas, thereby suggests an observation of the waxing and waning of the brightness of the planets through their synodic periods.

The Hindu astronomy, whose origins are in the Vedas, is based upon the configuration of the nine planets (grahams) and their collective influence on the world in general and each individual in particular. Depending upon where these planets are located at the time of a person's birth, Hindus believe that the possibilities and potentialities of his life and energies are determined well in advance. As many other concepts in Hinduism, the word graha has multiple meanings. The Upanishads describe the senses as grahams, since they are the grasping (graham) ones². The deities that preside over them are called Atigrahas, or their controllers. For example the mind and the breath are considered Atigrahas because you can control your senses with their help. They are worshipped in Hinduism for good luck or to overcome adversity, bad luck and misfortune from the past karmas or birth related defects (dhoshas).

"The great festivals of the Hindus a small offering is made to all the planets at once; but, excepting on these occasions, they are never worshipped together. They are, however, frequently worshipped separately by the sick and unfortunate who suppose themselves to be under the baneful influence of one or other of them. At these times they are worshipped one after the other in regular succession." Seven of the planets give names to the days of the week; the other two represent the ascending and descending nodes. Surya and Chandran (Soma) have already been noticed at length among the Vedic Deities; they are again described briefly along with the planets, under the names they bear in this connection. "To Surya or Ravi are offered in the burnt sacrifice small pieces of the shrub arka (*Asclepias gigantea*); to Chandran those of the palasa (*Butea frondosa*); to Mangala (Mars) those of the khudiru (*Mimosa catechu*); to Budhan (Mercury) those of the apārmārga (*Achryranthes aspera*); to Vrihaspati (Jupiter) those of the asvattha (*Ficus religiosa*); to Sukran (Venus) those of the urumbara; to Sani (Saturn) those of the Sami (*Mimosa albida*); to Rahu (the ascending node) blades of Durva grass; and to Keta (the descending node) blades of Kusa grass."

"The image of Surya is a round piece of mixed metal twelve fingers in diameter; of Chandran, a piece like a half - moon, a cubic from end to end; of Mangala, a triangular piece six fingers in width; of Budhan, a golden bough two fingers in breadth; of Vrihaspati, a piece like a lotus; of Sukran, a square piece of silver; of Sani, an iron sword; of Rahu, an iron makara (a fabulous animal, half stag and half fish); and of Kethu, an iron snake." They are found in most Hindu temples either grouped together on a panel or on a pedestal in commonly visible areas of the temple³. Devotees usually propitiate these gods before offering prayers to the main deity in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. The remaining two deities are actually demons who managed to gain a place in the pantheon through an act of deception. Their names are derived from either comets or from the dark and somewhat hostile planets of the solar system (Neptune and Pluto). Depending upon their location in the planetary system and their association with the remaining deities, they are deemed either auspicious or inauspicious. The nine planetary gods have a great significance in Vedic astrology. Hindu astrologers draw the birth charts of individuals based upon their position at the time of their birth. Depending upon where they are located in the astrological chart at a given time, they exert positive or negative influence upon people and their destinies. The position of Guru, Sani, Rahu and Kethu are especially considered important. If their positions are not favourable, astrologers suggest remedial measures to pacify the planets and ward off their negative influence.

The Navagrahas are usually found in many temples as subordinate deities, there are some temples which are exclusively built for them where they are worshipped as the main deities. One such temple is the Navagraha temple located on the banks of the river Kshipra in the outskirts of Ujjain, a famous pilgrim centre of Saivism in Central India. Sometimes temples built exclusively for only one of the Navagrahas such as the temples built for Surya and Sani in many parts of India. For example, there is a famous temple of Sani near Hindupur, which is frequently by many devotees. Likewise, in South India, Navagraha temples were built in Kumbakonam – Mayavaram area and in Tondaimandalam area particularly in around Chennai⁴.

Kumbakonam - City of Temples

Kumbakonam, near Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, one of the oldest towns in South India, is a sacred pilgrim centre on account of its numerous ancient temples and the sacred Mahamaham Tank situated on the banks of the river Cauvery, it rose as an important and oldest cultural centre of South India. From about the 6th century A.D it seems to have been under the rule of the Pallavas. Thirunavukkarasar and Tirugnana Sambandar have visited Kumbakonam and sung in praise of the deities. The noteworthy temples of Kumbakonam included the Ramasamy and Adikumbeswarar temple which contain excellent and exquisite sculptures. The Ramasamy temple is in the western part of the city near the market place called Ayyankadai. It is believed to have been constructed in the 16th century by Raghunatha Nayak of Tanjore⁵. The temple contains the well known idols of Vishnu as Trivikrama, Rama in coronation robes, Vishnu with his consorts Sri Devi and Bhoo Devi and the marriage scene of Siva with Parvathi. The temple is full of beautiful and artistic sculptural pieces. The exquisite image of Lakshmi standing with a lotus bud in her hand is a marvellous piece of architecture. An earring with a lotus motif, armlets, bracelets and belts of artistic design give her a quiet serene beauty. The Dora Sari is tightly worn and the sculptor has succeeded remarkably in showing the figure of Lakshmi to advantage suggesting the dress, yet not allowing it to hide Her charms.

The important temple in Kumbakonam is the Adikumbeswarar temple. The temple is in the centre of the city and has a lofty gopurams about 43 meters' high. The presiding deity Siva Linga is said to be composed of fragments of a 'pot' or 'Kumba'. The town derives its name from the presiding deity 'Kumbeswarar'. The gopuram of the temple can be viewed from a distance as the view is obstructed by rows of shops on either side of the roadway leading to the front entrance. The Goddess here is known as 'Mangalamba' and the sculptured figures depicting the legend of Adikumbeswara forms the high point of the art work. The Mahamaham festival is celebrated once in every twelve years only in this temple. The Nageswara Swamy temple is also of great interest. It is constructed in such a way that the front 'gopuram' is at higher level than the 'sanctum sanctorum'. Every year during the month of Chitrai, for three days, the sunlight shines directly on the Lingam when the 'Surya Pooja' is performed⁶. A separate shrine is constructed for the Sun God, who is said to have worshipped Siva at this place. The idol of Nataraja in this temple is a striking one. It is said that Goddess acted as the drummer, when the Lord danced. There is a stone chariot in the temple which is noted for its workmanship on the wheels, all in one block of stone. Apart from these Siva temples, there are a few other minor Siva shrines within the town itself such as Adhimuktheswara temple, Gautameshwara temple, Kalakastiswara temple and Ekambareswara temple.

Kumbakonam is also famous for its Vaishnava temples. One of the early temples is that of Sarangapani, otherwise called as Aravamudhan. The temple is in the form of a stone chariot from which Vishnu is supposed to have descended to please Hema Rishi and did penance here. Vishnu is in the Ananthasayana posture inside the beautifully carved chariot. The Goddess of this shrine is called Komalavalli. The temple chariot used for the annual Brahmotsava is one of the biggest in South India. The Sarangapani temple tower is the tallest in Kumbakonam, and has been recently renovated. It has a height of about 50 metres and stands on a base with 30 mts x 18 mts. It has eleven tiers and there are steps to reach the top from where one can have a panoramic view of the country side. The Teppotsava (floating festival) of this temple is celebrated on a grand scale in the Tamil month of Masi. The Pottamaraikulam (golden lotus tank) is just outside the temple. A mandapa with sixteen pillars is situated in the middle of the tank. The Chakrapani temple, situated near the Chakra bathing ghat of the river Cauvery is an ancient shrine. The presiding deity of the shrine is Chakrarajan and the Goddess is named Vijayavalli. Sun God, whose brightness was absorbed by Chakrayudha, prayed to the deity and got back his lusture. The place where Brahma offered

worship to Chakrayudha under an 'Arasu' (*Ficus religiosa*) tree on the southern bank of the river Cauvery is known as the Chakrabath ghat. Some of the other Vaishnava temples are Varaha Perumal temple near Chakrapani temple, Gopalaswamy temple in the big bazaar street, Varadaraja Perumal temple, north of the new bridge on the river Cauvery, Vedanarayana Perumal temple, near Sowrashtra big street, Udayavar temple at big bazaar, Brahman Koil in Sowrashtra street, Pattabhirama temple near Kamakshi Joshyar street and Saranarayana Perumal temple at big bazaar street. Kumbakonam became famous on account of the sacred Mahamaham tank⁷. This is a fine reservoir of water surrounded by picturesque mandapas situated in the heart of the town. It is also known as 'Kanya Tirtha' as nine virgins bathed here.

There is a belief that this tank contains a number of other 'Tirthams' in the form of wells or springs. There are sixteen towers with mandapas all round and the gods from all the temples assemble here for sacred bath. The legendary belief is that on the Mahamaham day, once in twelve years, all important rivers enter the tank at Kumbakonam. By taking a bath in the tank on that day, the pilgrims have the benefit of having bathed in all the sacred rivers like Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswathi, Cauvery, Narmada and Vegavathi. It is the popular belief that the Mahamaham tank has numerous natural springs in its bed to supply fresh water to it. Before the great festival day, the tank water is drained to facilitate the collection of fresh waters from the springs.

The water level is also used to be kept very low to guard against drowning accidents and to accommodate lakhs of pilgrims who take a dip in the tank on that day. After taking bath in the sacred tank, pilgrims usually take a second bath in the river Cauvery. The pilgrims start the bath at 5 a.m. and it goes on till afternoon. The leading mutts and philanthropic institutions like the Annadana Siva Samajam and Arulneri Sangham undertake feeding the poor on an extensive scale. This is the great occasion for the residents of Kumbakonam to play host.

Navagraha Temples in Kumbakonam

Kumbakonam is considered as one of the holiest places in Tamil Nadu. It is situated in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. It is bounded by two rivers – River Kaveri on the North and River Arisolar on the South. Kumbakonam is known for its temples and Mathas (monasteries which were centres of Brahminical learning). There are around 188 Hindu temples within the municipal limits of Kumbakonam. Apart from these, there are several thousand temples around the town thereby giving the town the name "Temple Town" and "City of temples". "Kudandai or Kumbakonam is one such place where every street can boast of a temple." The images in the Hindu temples can be classified into three broad groups: Saiva, Vaishnava and Sakta representing the three cults of Siva, Vishnu and Sakhti⁸.

For believers in astrology and the influence of planets over individual destiny, Tamil Nadu is a great destination. Indian astrology is determined by the planetary position of nine planets in a geocentric orbit. Navagrahas simply mean nine planets and there are nine temples located in Tamil Nadu representing each. All of them are located within sixty kilometers radius around Kumbakonam in Thanjavur District. Tamil Nadu is the only state where the temples dedicated to the nine celestial bodies are located in such close proximity.

Sl. No.	Planet	Temple
1.	Surya (Sun)	Suryanarkoil
2.	Chandra (Moon)	Tingaloor
3.	Chelae (Mars)	Vaitheeswarankoil
4.	Budhan (Mercury)	Tiruvengkadu
5.	Guru (Jupiter)	Alangudi
6.	Shukran (Venus)	Kanchanoor
7.	Shani (Saturn)	Tirunallar
8.	Raahu	Tirunageswaram
9.	Kethu	Keezh Perumpallam

Suryanar Koil (Sun)

It is situated 21 kilometers from Swamimalai in the Thanjavur District is the Suryanarkoil built by king Kullothunga Chola-I in the year 1100 A.D.²²⁷ This temple is dedicated to Surya - Sun God. Surya is known as the giver of health, success and prosperity. Every year in mid-January, the harvest festival is celebrated as thanks giving and to honour Surya.

Tingaloor (Moon)

Though there is ambiguity about when this temple was built, historians agree that it must have been in existence before the beginning of the Bhakti period in 7th century A.D. Dedicated to Moon²²⁸ (Chandra in Sanskrit and Thingal in Tamil) a visit to this temple is said to grant a comfortable and long life. In astrology, Chandra is the planet that removes stress and sorrow.

VaitheeswaranKoil (Mars)

Within the Vaitheeswaran koil, there is a special shrine dedicated to Ankarakan or Chevaai (Mars). The belief is that offering prayers to Ankarakan will bestow valour, victory and strength. While entering the temple, devotees first go to the Siddhamrita tank. The water is said to have curative properties for various skin ailments⁹. There is also a widespread belief that a visit here would remove obstacles which delay marriages.

Tiruvenkadu (Mercury)

There is a reference to this temple in the Valmiki Ramayana. Hence it is believed that the oldest part of the temple is more than 3000 years old. Dedicated to Budhan (Mercury) this temple in Tiruvenkadu makes up the last of the Navagraha temples. Budhan is said to bestow wisdom and intellect.

Alangudi (Jupiter)

This is regarded as a Gurustalam (Abode of Jupiter) where Lord Dakshinamurthy is held in great reverence. The shrine attracts a large number of devotees, when Jupiter transits between zodiac signs. This place abounds with innumerable legends that lend colour and meaning to Hindu mythology and divinity. For instance, Dakshinamurthy is said to have preached to the Devas who had swooned under the impact of the poison that came out of the churning of the milky ocean. Parvathi, the consort of Lord Siva, is said to have been reborn on the banks of Amrita Pushkarini within the temple precincts before being reunited with Lord Siva.

Kanchanoor (Venus)

The temple is associated with Sukran (Venus) and is maintained by the Madurai Adheenam. It is located in a quiet hamlet of Tiruvaavaduturai. This temple is also referred to as Palaasavanam, Bhrammapuri and Agnistalam. Bhramma is said to have been blessed with a vision of Siva's marriage with Parvathi here. Devotees visit to pray for the well-being of their wives.

Tirunallar (Saturn)

This is the only temple that is dedicated to Lord Shani (Planet Saturn) when the planet Saturn transits between zodiac signs, literally millions throng this shrine. The legendary king Nala is said to have been relieved of his afflictions which were due to the malefic influence of Saturn, after worshipping here. Of the numerous teertams (tanks), the Nala teertam is the most important one. By bathing here, it is believed that one is washed away of all kinds of misfortunes and afflictions.

Tirunageswaram (Raahu)

This is a vast temple dedicated to Lord Raahu, one of the nine celestial bodies of the Navagrahas. According to legends, it is believed that the mythological serpents Aadiseshan, Dakshan and Kaarkotakan worshipped Siva here.

Keezh Perumpallam (Kethu)

This is an ancient Siva temple, where Kethu and the other planetary node of the nine celestial bodies worshipped Siva¹⁰. Raahu and Kethu are associated with the legend of the churning of the milky ocean.

Conclusion

The Navagraha Temples for believers in astrology and the influence of planets over individual destiny, Kumbakonam is a great destination. Indian astrology is determined by the planetary position of nine planets in a geocentric orbit. Navagrahas simply mean nine planets and there are nine temples located in Tamil Nadu representing each. All of them are located within sixty kilometers radius around Kumbakonam in Thanjavur District. Tamil Nadu is the only state where the temples dedicated to the nine celestial bodies are located in such close proximity.

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