

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF TAMIL VAISHNAVISM THROUGH TEMPLE WORSHIP

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Abstract

The theological foundation of Tamil Vaishnavism is intensely entwined with the ritual, architectural, and philosophical dimensions of temple worship. Emerging from the Bhakti movement spearheaded by the Ālvārs, Tamil Vaishnavism articulated an inclusive devotional theology centered on Śrīman Nārāyaṇa as the supreme reality and the temples as living embodiments of divine presence (archāvatāra). This research observes Tamil temples—such as those at Srirangam, Tirupati, and Kanchipuram—function as theological spaces where metaphysical ideas are expressed through liturgy, iconography, and ritual practice. It explores the integration of prabandham hymns with Vedic and Āgamic traditions, illustrating vernacular devotion redefined orthodoxy. The temple thus becomes not merely a site of worship, but a medium of theological communication where concepts of divine grace (śaraṇāgati), service (kainkarya), and cosmic order are ritually enacted. The paper argues that Tamil Vaishnavism's theological depth lies in its synthesis of metaphysics and emotion, doctrine and devotion, and its unique ability to translate abstract theology into embodied communal worship.

Keywords: Tamil Vaishnavism, Temple Worship, Ālvārs, Bhakti Theology, Śrīman Nārāyaṇa, Archāvatāra, Śaraṇāgati, Kainkarya, Prabandham, Āgamic Tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The theological foundation of Tamil Vaishnavism represents one of the most profound religious and cultural developments in South Indian history. Rooted in the sacred synthesis of Sanskritic philosophical traditions and Tamil devotional expression, this tradition evolved not merely as a spiritual movement but as a living theology articulated through temple worship, ritual performance, and poetic revelation. Between the 6th and 9th centuries CE, the rise of the Bhakti movement—spearheaded by the Alvars, the mystic poet-saints of Tamil Nadu—transformed the understanding of divine experience from abstract speculation to emotional intimacy. Their hymns, collectively known as the Divya Prabandham, articulated the omnipresence of Vishnu through vernacular idioms, situating the divine within the local landscape and community life. Through their visionary hymns, the Alvars consecrated 108 sacred sites, later identified as the Divya Desams, each embodying a specific manifestation of Vishnu's grace. These temples were not seen merely as physical structures but as archavatara sthalas—places where the deity had descended to dwell among devotees in tangible form.¹ The idea of archavatara (the incarnation of the divine in image) became the theological cornerstone of Tamil Vaishnavism, reinforcing the belief that devotion and surrender (prapatti) could lead the soul toward liberation (moksha) through the divine's compassion. This transformation of metaphysical ideas into temple-centered worship practices marked a decisive shift from ritual orthodoxy to experiential religion, making divinity accessible to all, irrespective of caste or learning. Historically, the consolidation of this devotional theology coincided with the political and cultural patronage of the Pallava and Chola dynasties. Under the Pallavas, temple architecture in regions like Kanchipuram and Mahabalipuram began to reflect the grandeur and metaphysical symbolism of Vishnu's transcendence. The Chola period, from the 10th to the 13th centuries CE, witnessed the further institutionalization of temple worship as a complex system integrating ritual, music, dance, and philosophy. Temples such as Srirangam, Tirupati, and Srivilliputhur became both sacred and administrative centers, uniting theological instruction, social organization, and cultural creativity. These sacred spaces functioned as living embodiments of Vaishnava theology, where the ritual of daily worship mirrored the eternal relationship between the devotee and the divine.

The Vaishnava Acharyas—Nathamuni, Yamunacharya, and Ramanuja—played a decisive role in giving intellectual structure to the devotional movement.² Nathamuni's compilation of the Divya Prabandham preserved the Tamil hymns within a Sanskritic theological framework, legitimizing the vernacular as a medium of divine revelation. Yamunacharya systematized key theological doctrines, preparing the way for Ramanuja, who would later articulate the Visishtadvaita Vedanta, or qualified non-dualism. Ramanuja's synthesis of Bhakti and Vedanta established the philosophical legitimacy of emotional devotion, arguing that God, though transcendent, was accessible through compassionate grace and temple-centered ritual.³ The temple, in this sense, became both the theological and experiential center of the Vaishnava world, where metaphysical truth was enacted through ritual and where community participation became an act of collective theology. By embedding metaphysical thought into the rhythm of temple worship—through festivals, recitations, processions, and music—Tamil Vaishnavism transformed theology into a lived cultural practice. The sacred architecture of temples, the rhythmic chanting of

Tamil hymns alongside Vedic recitations, and the ceremonial enactment of divine play (leela) all worked together to create a profound sense of divine presence.⁴ This synthesis of faith and form, of reason and emotion, gave Tamil Vaishnavism its enduring vitality. It cultivated a mode of religiosity that was not confined to philosophical abstraction but expressed through communal devotion, ethical discipline, and aesthetic celebration.

In this historical and theological continuum, the temple stood as the microcosm of the divine cosmos. Its sanctum represented the spiritual heart of the universe; its rituals reenacted the eternal connexion between God and the soul. The worshipper, through Bhakti and Prapatti, entered into a covenant of surrender, finding liberation not in renunciation but in divine intimacy. Thus, the theological foundation of Tamil Vaishnavism through temple worship reveals a profound union of philosophy, poetry, and ritual—one that continues to define the spiritual and cultural identity of Tamil Nadu. Periyalvar's Tiruppallandu offered the earliest liturgical form of blessing, establishing the ritual dimension of Tamil Vaishnavism. Andal's Tiruppavai and Nachiyar Tirumoli presented a feminine theological perspective, merging ritual observance with mystical longing. These hymns conveyed the principle that Vishnu incarnates (Archavatara) in temple images to dwell among his devotees—a doctrine that made temple worship the heart of Tamil theology. From a historical standpoint, the Alvar movement coincided with the rise of urbanization and temple patronage under the Pallavas. The democratizing message of Bhakti—that divine grace transcends caste and ritual hierarchy—resonated with the growing social mobility of this era. As historian R. Champakalakshmi notes, the Bhakti movement was both a spiritual and social reform, transforming Tamil religion from an elite ritual system into a participatory devotional culture.⁵

Vaishnavism in the Sangam Age

The roots of Vaishnavism in Tamil culture lie in the Sangam corpus, where Mayon—the dark-hued god of the hills (Kurinji Thinai)—appears as the earliest Tamil counterpart of Vishnu. Literary sources such as Paripadal (verses 3, 5, and 8), Akananuru, and Kalithogai describe Mayon as both a cosmic and pastoral deity, the protector of cattle and the beloved of the cowherd maidens. The poets portray him as “the eternal lord with dark hue, dwelling in the mountains,” reflecting a nascent theology of divine immanence. While the Tolkappiyam focuses on grammar and social order, its emotional landscape (thinai) indirectly shaped the devotional sentiment that later characterized Bhakti poetry. The Sangam concept of arul (grace) resonates with the later Vaishnava idea of kripa, or divine compassion. This phase shows an indigenous devotional structure that laid the foundation for later Vishnu-centered worship.⁶

Puranic Influence (4th – 6th Century CE)

By the early centuries CE, the diffusion of Sanskritic Puranic traditions began to influence Tamil religion. Texts such as the Vishnu Purana, Harivamsa, and Bhagavata Purana introduced the concept of Vishnu's avatars—especially Krishna and Rama—into Tamil folklore. These were localized through Tamil oral and literary retellings. Inscriptions from the Pallava territories of Kanchipuram and Mahabalipuram indicate the existence of early Vishnu shrines. The adaptation of epic narratives into Tamil works, like Perundevanar Bharatham and Villibharatam, demonstrate a cultural synthesis between northern epic theology and southern devotional idiom. The Alvars—a group of twelve Tamil mystic poets—transformed Tamil spirituality through their divine hymns collectively known as the Nalayira Divya Prabandham (“Four Thousand Divine Verses”). Figures such as Poigai, Bhoothath, and Pey Alvar pioneered this movement, while Nammalvar, Periyalvar, and Andal shaped its theological depth.⁷

- **Nammalvar's Tiruvaymoli:** Considered the Tamil Veda, it presents a theology of Bhakti and Prapatti—surrender to divine grace.
- **Periyalvar's Tiruppallandu:** A benedictory hymn invoking divine protection, performed in temple processions.
- **Andal's Tiruppavai and Nachiyar Tirumoli:** Feminine expressions of devotion that blend ritual, mythology, and emotional union with Vishnu.

The Divya Prabandham localized Vishnu's presence in 108 temples—Divya Desams—creating a sacred Tamil geography. The hymns thus merged theology, poetry, and space into a living devotional framework.⁸

Pallavas and Cholas (7th – 10th Century CE)

The Pallavas provided architectural foundations for Tamil Vaishnavism. Temples like the Vaikuntha Perumal and Paramesvara Vinnagaram at Kanchipuram illustrate early Vaishnava iconography and liturgical sophistication. The Pallava inscriptions mention both Vedic and Tamil recitations during rituals, highlighting the integration of Sanskritic and vernacular traditions.⁹ The Cholas expanded Vaishnava institutions, supporting temple endowments and ritual codification. Temple inscriptions refer to recitations of the Divya Prabandham and Vedas. The Araiya Sevai—a musical dramatization of Alvar hymns—emerged as a unique liturgical performance, symbolizing the cultural embodiment of theology. Nathamuni (10th century CE) revived and systematized the Divya Prabandham for temple recitation, establishing a link between Tamil Bhakti and Vedantic philosophy.¹⁰ Yamunacharya authored works such as Siddhitrayam and Agama Pramanya, introducing a logical defense of devotion and divine grace within Vedantic metaphysics. Ramanuja (1017–1137 CE) united Tamil Bhakti and Sanskrit Vedanta in his seminal works—Sri Bhashya, Vedartha Sangraha, and Gita Bhashya. He articulated Visishtadvaita Vedanta (“qualified non-dualism”), affirming the coexistence of the individual soul (jiva), matter (prakriti), and God (Ishvara) as real but hierarchically ordered realities. Ramanuja's reforms at Srirangam, recorded in Guruparampara Prabhavam, integrated the Alvar hymns into temple liturgy and democratized access to worship, making Tamil Vaishnavism both a theological and social movement.

Sectarian Developments and Scholastic Expansion (13th – 17th Century CE)

Post-Ramanuja, interpretative differences led to the formation of two major schools Vadakalai (Northern Tradition) – Emphasizing Sanskrit texts and disciplined ritual practice.

- Tenkalai (Southern Tradition) – Centering on Tamil hymns and unconditional divine grace (nirhetuka kripa).
- **Vedanta Desika (1268–1369 CE):** Authored *Rahasyatrayasara*, *Dayasatakam*, and *Tattva Mukta Kalapa*, combining reason and poetry.

• **Manavala Mamunigal (1370–1443 CE):** Produced Tamil commentaries on *Tiruvaymoli* and Acharya *Hrudayam*, emphasizing devotional surrender and the authority of Tamil scriptures.¹¹

Temples continued to be centers of both worship and learning, with libraries (Saraswati Bhandaras) preserving manuscripts in palm-leaf form. Bhakti themes persisted in modern Tamil literature, influencing poets like Subramania Bharathi, who celebrated Vishnu and Krishna as symbols of ethical devotion and national renewal. In contemporary times, Tamil Vaishnava communities across the diaspora have established Divya Desam-style temples and cultural centers, extending the literary and ritual life of Vaishnavism beyond India.

LITERATURE AS THE LIFELOOD OF TAMIL VAISHNAVISM

Across two millennia, Tamil Vaishnavism has evolved through an unbroken literary continuum—from *Paripadal* to *Divya Prabandham*, from *Sri Bhashya* to *Dayasatakam*, and from *Kamba Ramayanam* to modern devotional poetry. Its theology of Bhakti (devotion), Prapatti (surrender), and Visishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism) was never detached from literary expression.¹² The Tamil temple, as both cultural text and sacred space, embodies this synthesis—where poetry becomes prayer, philosophy becomes ritual, and literature becomes living theology. Tamil Vaishnavism is best read as an extended, reciprocal conversation rather than one-way assimilation. Local Tamil devotional practices, languages, and ritual forms supplied affective grammar (bhakti idioms, cultic topography, and temple forms) while Sanskritic Vedantic categories supplied conceptual grammar (metaphysics, soteriology, technical theology).¹³ The result was a system that preserved indigenous devotional intensities—vernacular hymnody, caste-and-village centred cults, land-based ritual economies—while reframing them within metaphysical categories such as ātman, āmśa, and the doctrine of qualified non-duality. This produced theological syntheses that are recognizably Vedantic in argumentative register but distinctly Tamil in liturgical practice, social idioms, and poetic expression. Practically, the dialogue took three forms: translation (vernacular hymns reinterpreted using Sanskrit terms), institutionalization (temple and monastic reforms that adopted pan-Indian norms), and rhetorical appropriation (use of Sanskritic authority to legitimize local practices). The exchange created mutual transformation: Vedantic arguments were made more experiential and affective; Tamil devotional idioms acquired philosophical depth and institutional durability.¹⁴

Ritual to the theological articulation of Visishtadvaita Vedanta.

Temple art and ritual function as working theology: sculpture, relief programmes, and iconographic conventions encode doctrinal claims about God's nature, divine attributes, and the relational ontology central to Visishtadvaita. Examples of doctrinal translation into visual form include the representation of the divine as both immanent and transcendent (compound images, seated and standing postures that emphasize personable accessibility), panels that narrate avatāra episodes to illustrate cosmic governance, and paired imagery of guru and deity that asserts the integrity of teacherly transmission. Ornamentation and spatial sequence (prakaras, mukha mandapa → sanctum) stage the soteriological path from world to presence. Ritual actualizes those claims: daily pūja, alankāra, and festival dramatizations enact the philosopher's insistence on God as both ontological ground and personal lord. The ritual language—prasāda distribution, circumambulation, anointment—operationalizes Visishtadvaita's emphasis on personal relationship (bhakti) as means to liberation, while liturgical uses of Vedic mantras and Sanskrit passages integrate Vedantic authority into Tamil ritual life. Thus art, iconography, and ritual together make theoretical assertions palpable and experientially verifiable. Canonization turned vernacular hymns into institutional scripture and relocated theological authority from exclusively Sanskritic texts to Tamil sacred literature.¹⁵ The *Divya Prabandham*'s entry into temple liturgy did several things it sacralized vernacular language within ritual performance; it permitted local poetic theology to function as doctrinal evidence in ritual and juridical contexts; and it altered the hermeneutic norms—temples became custodians of both pan-Indian and Tamil textual canons. Consequently, textuality and spatiality became mutually reinforcing. Hymns were tied to specific shrines and seasons, creating a lived textual geography where a poem's meaning was inseparable from its performance location and liturgical context.¹⁶ Canonization also provided a medium for popular theological education: congregational recitation and festival performance made canonical theology accessible to non-Sanskrit publics, thereby redistributing textual authority into temple space and community practice.¹⁷

Evaluate the temple as a site of theological performance

The temple functions as an interpretive theatre: philosophy supplies scripts and interpretive frames, poetry supplies affective content and mnemonic structure, and ritual supplies embodied enactment. Philosophical categories (for example, God as characterized in Visishtadvaita) acquire narrative and emotional force through hymnic poetry; ritual then stages those narratives in time and movement so that abstract claims become sensory and communal knowledge. Festivals and daily rites are not mere ornamentation but structured performances where theological propositions are iteratively taught, contested, and reaffirmed before an audience that includes lay devotees, priests, and visiting scholars. This multilayered performance sustains theological continuity while

allowing innovation new hymns, commentary traditions, or ritual permutations can be absorbed because the temple's performative logic privileges enactment and communal uptake over purely textual orthodoxy. Tamil Vaishnavism expanded access through language, liturgy, and social practice. The use of Tamil hymns in liturgy displaced Sanskrit as the sole liturgical idiom, allowing broader participation. Corporeal rituals—*prasāda* sharing, communal festivals, and public recitations—created ritual moments where social boundaries could be temporarily crossed. The narrative emphasis on God's gracious accessibility (*anugraha*) and saintly exemplars from varied social backgrounds provided theological sanction for popular devotion. Institutional reforms — for instance, Ramanuja's reorganization of temple administration, emphasis on congregational rites, and articulation of communal responsibility — further decentralized devotional access. While caste and social hierarchies persisted and varied regionally, the movement's theological rhetoric and many temple practices opened repeated institutional and ritual avenues for wider devotional participation.¹⁸

Acharya-parampara (teacher lineage)

Acharya lineages operate as channels of doctrinal fidelity and liturgical continuity. They perform multiple functions interpretive (exegesis of scripture and hymn), pedagogic (training priests and devotees), and juridical (adjudicating ritual and institutional disputes). Within temple institutions, an Acharya's authority legitimizes local ritual variants and binds temple practice to a recognized doctrinal tradition. The lineage's textual commentaries and ritual manuals become repositories of institutional memory that translate philosophical norms into daily praxis.¹⁹ Lineages also mediate between local cultic practices and pan-Indian scholastic norms: they can sanction vernacular innovations or correct perceived deviations, thereby maintaining a balance between continuity and adaptation. The authority of the Acharya is both spiritual (as conduit of transmission) and administrative (as overseer of liturgical orthopraxy).²⁰

Participation (sampradāya) transform

Ramanuja recast the temple from an elite ritual locus into a communal centre of shared soteriological responsibility. His emphasis on *sampradāya* foregrounded the collective dimension of salvation: community practice — liturgy, philanthropy, and teaching — became an indispensable medium for realization of divine grace. Temple function expanded to include education, social welfare, and ritual training; it became a hub where doctrinal instruction, devotional practice, and community governance intersected. Theologically, this meant temples were not merely sites of individual ascetic attainment but arenas where communal identity and mutual ethical obligations were theologized. The *sampradāya* model also legitimized institutional authority: a temple's practices were validated by its embeddedness in an authenticated community lineage. Living theology here denotes a dynamic system where doctrine is enacted, tested, and revised through practice. Texts (Sanskrit and Tamil) provide doctrinal matrices; images (*murti* and relief programmes) encode theological propositions in visible form; ritual performs and re-enacts those propositions.²¹ Because liturgy repetitively re-embodies scriptural claims and poetry, doctrinal ideas are internalized in communal memory and bodily disposition, not merely in abstract cognition. This integrated mode allows theology to respond to social exigencies (new patrons, local disputes, and shifting demography) because changes can be introduced at the level of hymn selection, iconographic emphasis, or ritual format without rupturing the tradition's doctrinal core. Thus temple worship sustains theology as an embodied, adaptive practice.²²

Tamil Vaishnavism to the broader evolution of Hindu temple theology

Tamil Vaishnavism contributed in several durable ways: (1) it legitimized vernacular scripture as liturgical and doctrinal material, influencing other bhakti movements; (2) it developed institutional models that combined liturgy, education, and social welfare, later emulated across South Indian temple systems; (3) its iconographic and ritual innovations offered templates for representing relational theologies (devotee–lord–guru triads); and (4) its synthesis of poetic devotion with scholastic Vedanta encouraged analogous syntheses in Shaiva and other traditions. Collectively, these contributions helped shape a South Indian temple theology that privileges performative communal devotion alongside sophisticated metaphysical discourse.²³ Religiously, it is a doctrinal formation that articulates the divine is known, experienced, and approached: doctrines of grace, the role of the guru, devotional practices, and liturgical forms constitute its theological content. Historically, these religious forms emerged, solidified, and transformed in response to specific social, political, and institutional conditions: regional polity, temple economy, patronage networks, linguistic politics, and inter-tradition encounters.²⁴ Theological formulations thus reflect long-term negotiations — between local cultic claims and pan-Indian philosophical discourses, between popular devotional practice and monastic reforms, and between textual authority and ritual innovation. Understanding it as a combined process highlights how doctrine is not static proposition but an outcome of historical agency: poets, acharyas, temple managers, and lay communities all contributed to shaping theology through concrete practices and institutional decisions. Therefore analysis must attend to texts and doctrines and to material conditions, patronage, and performative routines that produced and reproduced those theological claims.

CONCLUSION

Tamil Vaishnavism, as expressed through temple worship, emerges as a profound synthesis of devotion, philosophy, and lived religiosity. It stands at the confluence of vernacular spirituality and Vedantic intellectualism, transforming both into a unified theological culture. Through the idiom of temple ritual, poetic hymnody, and

metaphysical reflection, the movement reshaped the experience of the divine from an abstract philosophical reality into an accessible, emotionally resonant, and communally enacted presence. Temples became more than architectural marvels or ritual centers—they evolved into living institutions of theology. Every component of temple life—the sacred image, the daily puja, the recitation of the Divya Prabandham, the festivals, and the Acharya-led discourses—together embodied the principles of Visishtadvaita Vedanta philosophy found expression not only in scholastic argument but in sound, movement, and collective emotion. The divine was experienced not merely as an idea to be known but as a relationship to be lived.

The canonization of the Divya Prabandham and the integration of Tamil hymns into temple liturgy democratized the sacred. It broke the linguistic and ritual monopoly of Sanskritic orthodoxy, enabling ordinary devotees to participate directly in divine worship. By situating theological expression in the local language, Tamil Vaishnavism blurred the distinction between elite and popular religion, embodying the ideal that bhakti transcends caste, language, and intellectual barriers. Ramanuja's theological reforms further institutionalized this inclusive vision. By reimagining temple worship as *sampradāya*—a shared heritage of the community—he embedded theology within the structures of everyday devotion. His reorganization of temple administration and emphasis on collective participation transformed the temple into a moral and spiritual republic, where faith and social responsibility intertwined. The Acharya Parampara ensured that theology remained a living, transmissible tradition, balancing doctrinal stability with adaptive vitality. Ultimately, the theological foundation of Tamil Vaishnavism cannot be understood in abstraction from its material and ritual embodiments. Its theology was sung in hymns, carved in stone, enacted in ritual, and preserved in lineage. It was both intellectual and affective, historical and transcendent. The Tamil Vaishnava temple, in this sense, is not merely a space of worship but a dynamic arena where text, image, and community converge to realize the divine in tangible form. Through temple worship, Tamil Vaishnavism established a “**living theology**”—a continuous dialogue between the eternal truths of Vedanta and the temporal realities of Tamil devotional life. This synthesis not only shaped South Indian religious consciousness but also contributed enduringly to the broader evolution of Hindu temple theology, where philosophy is not confined to discourse, but enacted as devotion, discipline, and divine communion.

END NOTES

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