

Research Article

Pilgrimage Tourism Centres of the Kumbakonam Region, Tamil Nadu: A Multifaith Sacred Landscape

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Abstract: Kumbakonam, located in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu, represents one of South India's most significant pilgrimage tourism destinations due to its dense concentration of Saivite, Vaishnava, Navagraha, and Divya Desam temples, along with Christian and Islamic religious institutions. The town is mythologically associated with the Mahamaham festival, a pan-Indian sacred bathing event held once every twelve years, which situates Kumbakonam within a broader sacred geography comparable to the Kumbh Mela tradition. This study aims to systematically document and analyse the pilgrimage tourism resources of the Kumbakonam region, including temples within the town and those located within a 15-kilometre radius, while also highlighting its multifaith character and associated cultural heritage resources. Using a descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary sources, the article evaluates the religious, cultural, and tourism significance of these pilgrimage centres and discusses their potential contribution to sustainable regional development. The findings underline Kumbakonam's role as an integrated pilgrimage hub where mythology, ritual practice, architecture, and living traditions converge.

Keywords: Pilgrimage tourism; Kumbakonam; Mahamaham festival; Saivite temples; Vaishnava temples; Navagraha; Divya Desams; multifaith heritage; Tamil Nadu.

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INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage tourism constitutes a major segment of cultural tourism in India, shaped by religious beliefs, sacred geographies, and ritual mobility. Tamil Nadu occupies a prominent position in this domain due to its long temple-building tradition and continuous patronage of religious institutions. Among the pilgrimage centres of the state, Kumbakonam stands out as a unique sacred town renowned for its association with the Mahamaham festival and its exceptional density of temples representing both Saivite and Vaishnava traditions. Kumbakonam is often described as a living religious landscape where myth, history, and everyday worship intersect. In addition to Hindu pilgrimage centres, the town also hosts significant Christian churches and Islamic mosques, reflecting centuries of religious coexistence. This article seeks to examine Kumbakonam as a comprehensive pilgrimage tourism destination by systematically categorising its sacred sites and assessing their tourism relevance within the broader framework of Tamil Nadu's religious tourism.

This study is significant as it provides a comprehensive spatial and thematic understanding of pilgrimage tourism in the Kumbakonam region, one of the most complex and multifaceted sacred landscapes in Tamil Nadu. By systematically mapping pilgrimage centres, thematic circuits, and road connectivity, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts and offers a spatially grounded analysis of how religious sites function collectively as an integrated tourism system. The identification of concentric pilgrimage zones and nodal structures highlights the strategic role of Kumbakonam as a central ritual hub, thereby contributing to tourism geography and pilgrimage studies.

The study is particularly important for understanding the tourism value of circuit-based pilgrimage, including the Mahamaham Saivite circuit, Vaishnava–Divya Desam circuit, Navagraha circuit, heritage and Nayanmar circuit, and multifaith religious circuit. By demonstrating how these circuits operate across different temporal scales—seasonal, annual, and continuous—the research explains variations in tourist flow, length of stay, and visitor behaviour. This integrated perspective is valuable for tourism planners, heritage managers, and policymakers, as it underscores the need for coordinated infrastructure development, crowd management during peak festivals, and sustainable destination planning in pilgrimage-intensive regions.

From a broader academic and societal perspective, the study holds significance by highlighting Kumbakonam’s multifaith sacred landscape and its role in promoting inclusive religious tourism. The coexistence of Hindu, Christian, and Islamic heritage sites within a shared urban space reflects historical religious harmony and expands the conceptual boundaries of pilgrimage tourism beyond single-faith frameworks. Additionally, by linking pilgrimage tourism with cultural assets such as UNESCO heritage monuments and traditional craft centres, the study emphasises the economic and cultural sustainability of heritage-based tourism. Overall, the research contributes to theoretical debates on sacred geographies while offering practical insights for the sustainable development and preservation of one of South India’s most important pilgrimage destinations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing studies on pilgrimage tourism in India emphasise the role of sacred geography, ritual festivals, and temple networks in shaping travel patterns (Singh, 2006; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Research on Tamil Nadu highlights temple towns such as Madurai, Rameswaram, and Chidambaram as major pilgrimage centres (Ramaswamy, 2010). Scholarly attention to Kumbakonam has largely focused on the Mahamaham festival, Chola temple architecture, and Navagraha pilgrimage circuits. However, comprehensive documentation of Kumbakonam as an integrated, multifaith pilgrimage tourism region remains limited. This study attempts to bridge this gap by presenting a holistic inventory and analysis of pilgrimage resources in and around Kumbakonam.

Classical works by Bhardwaj (1997) and Jacobsen (2013) conceptualise pilgrimage landscapes as sacred systems in which religious meaning is produced through spatial concentration, mythological association, and ritual movement. Bremer (2006) and Insoll (2011) further emphasise that sacred spaces are not static locations but dynamic cultural landscapes shaped by historical processes, architecture, and collective memory. These perspectives underline the importance of viewing pilgrimage centres not as isolated sites, but as interconnected sacred networks that structure devotional practices and tourist mobility.

From a tourism studies perspective, researchers have examined the transformation of pilgrimage into an organised form of religious tourism. Gladstone (2005), Gupta (1999), and Singh (2004) highlight how improved accessibility, infrastructure, and institutional support have enabled pilgrimage destinations to evolve into major tourism hubs. Nolan and Nolan (1992) and Rinschede (1992) classify religious sites as important tourism attractions capable of generating sustained visitor flows and economic benefits. Studies by Singh (2011) and Narasimhan (2018) specifically focus on India and Tamil Nadu, demonstrating how pilgrimage circuits, thematic routes, and regional clustering of temples enhance destination competitiveness, length of stay, and repeat visitation. These studies stress the importance of circuit-based pilgrimage planning in regions with dense religious landscapes.

Recent literature also points to the integration of pilgrimage tourism with heritage conservation, cultural tourism, and policy frameworks. Shackley (2001) discusses the challenges of managing sacred sites under increasing tourist pressure, while UNESCO (2023) highlights the global significance of heritage temples such as the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram in attracting international visitors. Government and institutional reports, including the Census of India (2011), Government of Tamil Nadu (2020), Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (2022), and UNWTO (2018), emphasise the role of religious and cultural tourism in regional development strategies. Together, these studies underscore the need for spatial mapping, circuit-based analysis, and inclusive tourism planning to sustainably manage pilgrimage destinations that combine religious devotion, cultural heritage, and tourism development.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are:

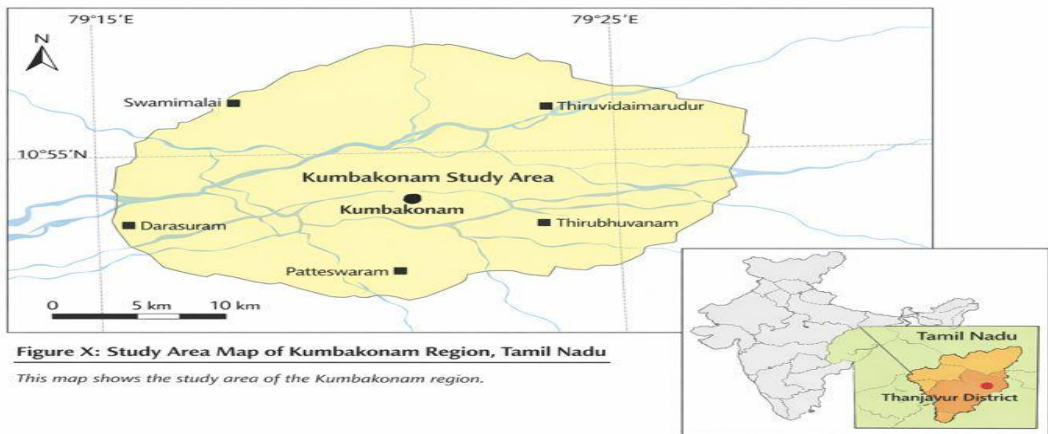
- To document the major Saivite and Vaishnava temples in Kumbakonam associated with the Mahamaham legend.
- To identify important pilgrimage centres located within a 15-kilometre radius of Kumbakonam town.
- To analyse the significance of Navagraha temples and Divya Desams connected to Kumbakonam.
- To examine the presence of Christian and Islamic religious institutions within the pilgrimage landscape.
- To assess the pilgrimage tourism potential of the Kumbakonam region from a sustainable development perspective.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based entirely on secondary data. Information was collected from temple chronicles, regional histories, religious texts, tourism department publications, scholarly articles, and official records. The identified pilgrimage centres were categorised thematically into Saivite, Vaishnava, Navagraha, Divya Desam, and multifaith religious institutions. Qualitative content analysis was employed to interpret the mythological, historical, and tourism significance of these sites. Spatial mapping was carried out using secondary locational data of temples and represented using geographic coordinates (latitude–longitude). The map adopts a simple GIS-style visualisation to highlight spatial clustering and pilgrimage circuit logic rather than precise cadastral boundaries

Study Area

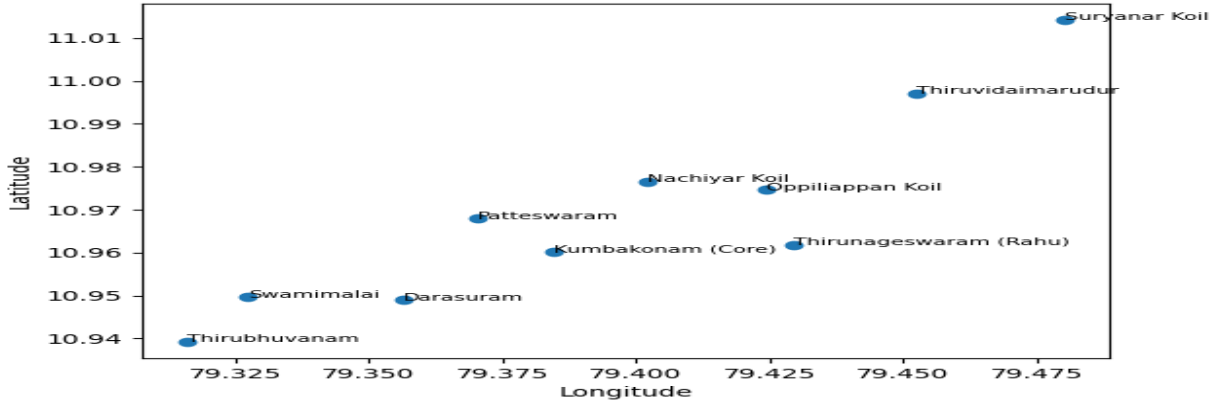
Figure 1: Study Area Map of Kumbakonam Region, Tamil Nadu



The study area map illustrates the geographical context and spatial extent of the research conducted in the Kumbakonam region, located within Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu. The shaded polygon, represented in a light pastel colour, demarcates the defined study boundary and visually distinguishes the research area from its surrounding regions. At the core of the map lies Kumbakonam town, marked by a solid circular symbol, signifying its role as the ritual, cultural, and spatial nucleus of the study. The centrality of Kumbakonam reflects its historical and religious significance, particularly associated with the Mahamaham Tank, which acts as a focal point for pilgrimage activities and urban interactions.

Surrounding the core area, several important pilgrimage and heritage centres—namely Swamimalai, Darasuram, Thiruvudaimarudur, Patteswaram, and Thirubhuvanani—are depicted as peripheral reference locations within an approximate 15 km radius. These settlements are shown as smaller point symbols, indicating their functional linkage to Kumbakonam while maintaining distinct spatial identities. Their inclusion highlights the interconnected pilgrimage landscape of the region and supports the study’s emphasis on spatial diffusion and regional religious networks. Cartographic elements such as the north arrow, scale bar, and latitude–longitude grid enhance spatial orientation and measurement accuracy, ensuring the map meets academic and journal standards. The inset map further situates the study area within a broader administrative hierarchy, progressing from Tamil Nadu to Thanjavur District and finally to the Kumbakonam region, thereby providing multi-scale geographical context. Overall, the map effectively conveys the spatial framework of the research, clearly defining the core–periphery structure of the Kumbakonam region and reinforcing its suitability as a focused study

Figure 2: Geospatial Distribution of Major Pilgrimage Centres in the Kumbakonam Region, Tamil Nadu



This map illustrates the spatial distribution of major pilgrimage tourism centres in and around Kumbakonam. The town of Kumbakonam functions as the ritual core, while satellite pilgrimage centres such as Swamimalai, Darasuram, Thirubhuvanam, Thiruvidadimarudur, Patteswaram, Oppiliappan Koil, Nachiyar Koil, Suryanar Koil, and Thirunageswaram form an interconnected sacred hinterland. The spatial proximity of these sites facilitates multi-temple pilgrimage circuits and reinforces Kumbakonam's role as an integrated pilgrimage tourism hub."

Saivite Temples Associated with the Mahamaham Legend

The Saivite sacred landscape of Kumbakonam is deeply rooted in the myth of the Amrita Kalasha. Temples such as Kasi Viswanathar, Kumbeswarar, Nageswarar, Someswarar, Gautameswarar, Abhimukteswarar, Banapureswarar, Kambatta Viswanathar, Ekambareshwarar, Koteeswarar, Kalahasteswarar, and Amirthakalasanathar collectively narrate the dispersal of the nectar pot during the cosmic deluge. These temples form a ritual circuit that pilgrims traditionally visit during the Mahamaham festival, reinforcing Kumbakonam's identity as a Shaiva sacred town.

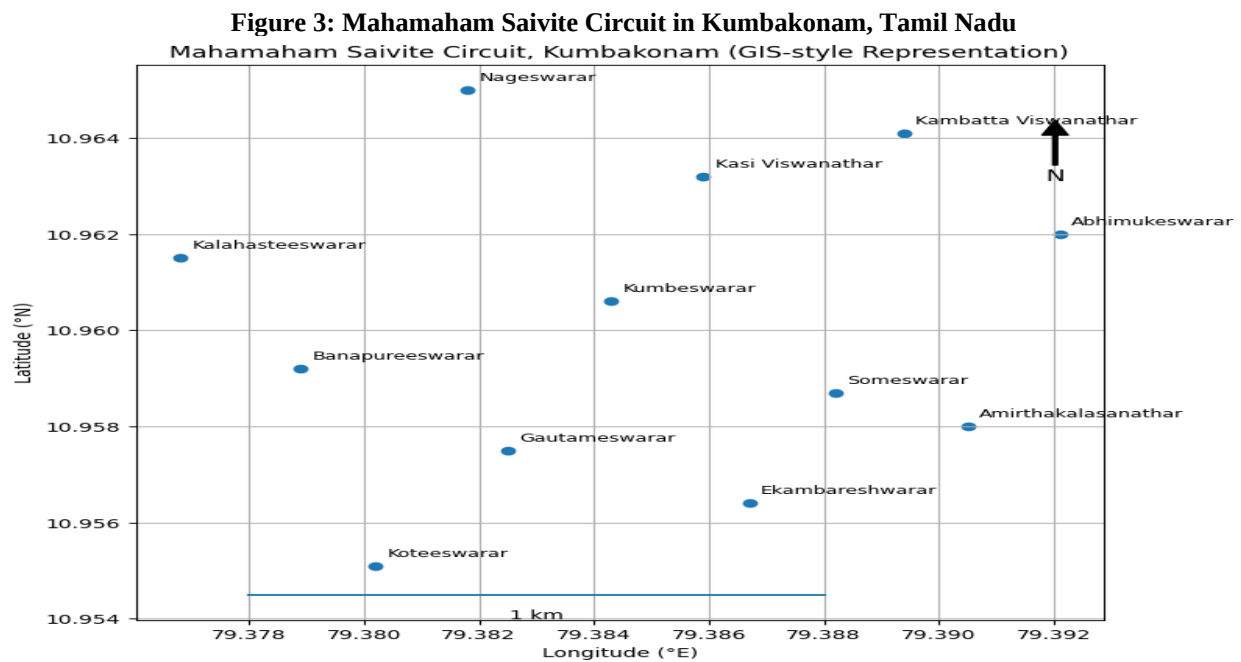


Figure 4: Mahamaham Saivite Circuit in Kumbakonam

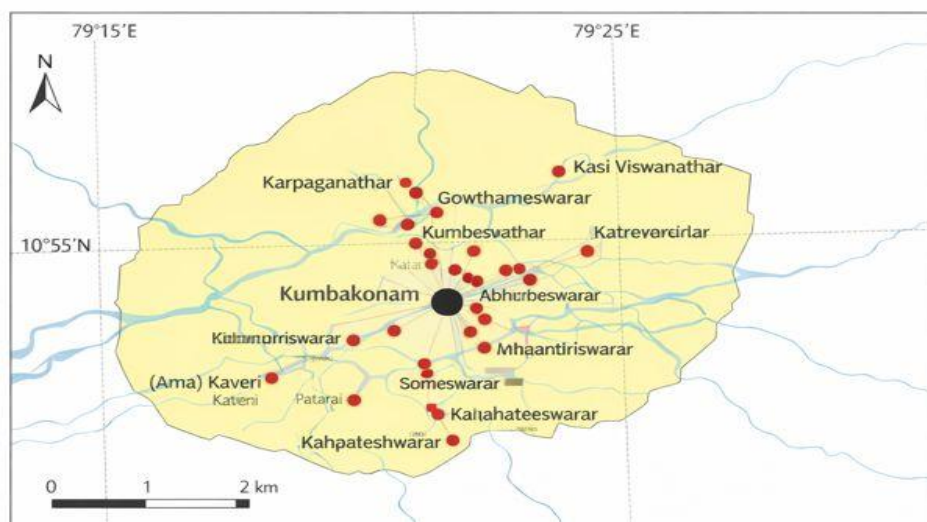


Figure X: Saivite Temples Associated with the Mahamaham Legend in Kumbakonam

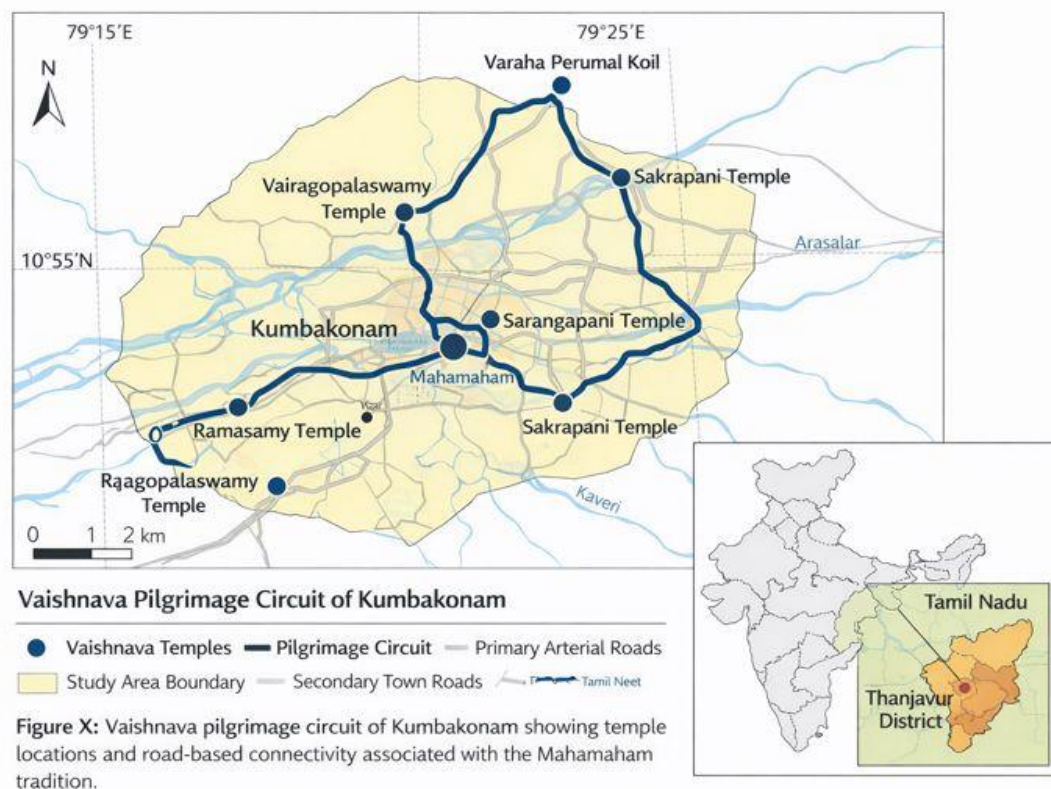
This map depicts the spatial distribution of the twelve Saivite temples associated with the Mahamaham (Amrita Kalasha) legend in Kumbakonam. The dense spatial concentration of these temples highlights the town's role as a unified Shaiva sacred landscape and explains the ritual feasibility of circuit-based pilgrimage during the Mahamaham purnima.

The map shows the spatial distribution of the twelve Saivite temples associated with the Mahamaham (Amrita Kalasha) legend within Kumbakonam town. The close clustering of these temples around the central area highlights Kumbakonam's role as a unified Shaiva sacred landscape rather than a set of isolated religious sites. This dense spatial arrangement enables pilgrims to visit multiple temples within a short distance, making circuit-based pilgrimage practical during the Mahamaham festival. Overall, the map visually reinforces the ritual, cultural, and spatial coherence of Kumbakonam as a major Shaivite pilgrimage centre.

Vaishnava Temples and Mahamaham Association

Vaishnavism constitutes an equally important dimension of Kumbakonam's pilgrimage character. Major Vaishnava temples such as Sarangapani Temple, Sakrapani Temple, Ramasamy Temple, Rajagopalaswamy Temple, and Varaha Perumal Koil are closely associated with the Mahamaham tradition. These temples highlight the historical coexistence of Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions and enhance the town's appeal to a wider spectrum of pilgrims.

Figure 5: Vaishnava Pilgrimage Circuit of Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu

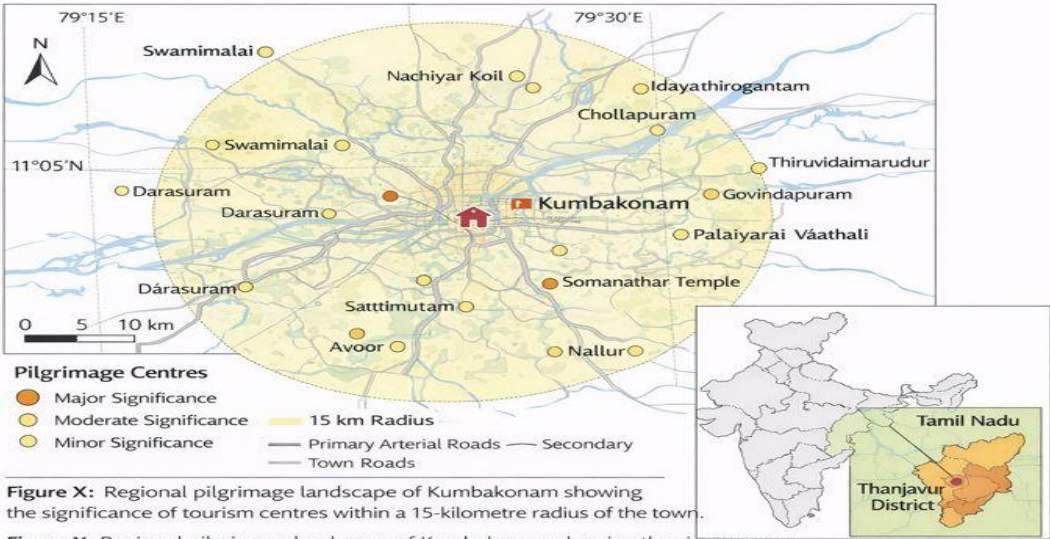


The map illustrates a well-defined Vaishnava pilgrimage circuit within Kumbakonam, where major Vaishnava temples are spatially integrated through a coherent road network. Sarangapani Temple functions as the central node near the Mahamaham Tank, from which the circuit extends radially to Sakrapani Temple in the eastern urban core, Ramasamy Temple along the south-western residential corridor, and Varaha Perumal Koil on the northern urban edge. The inclusion of Rajagopalaswamy Temple as a peripheral node highlights regional connectivity beyond the immediate town boundary, linked through primary arterial roads and state highways. Secondary town roads and circumferential routes ensure continuous intra-urban movement, enabling pilgrims to complete the circuit efficiently. Overall, the connectivity pattern reflects a radial-circumferential structure that supports sequential temple visitation and demonstrates how road infrastructure reinforces Kumbakonam's composite pilgrimage landscape associated with the Mahamaham tradition.

Extended Pilgrimage Centres within 15 Kilometres

The pilgrimage geography of Kumbakonam extends to numerous temples located within a 15-kilometre radius. These include historically and religiously significant centres such as Thenupuriswarar Temple at Patteswaram, Somanathar Temple at Keezhapalaiyarai, Dharmapureswarar Temple at Palaiyarai Vadathali, Pasupatheeswarar Temple at Avoor, and Kalyana Sundareswarar Temple at Nallur. Several of these temples are associated with Nayanmars, distinctive Madakkoil architecture, and unique ritual traditions, thereby enriching the regional pilgrimage network.

Figure 6: Regional Pilgrimage Landscape of Kumbakonam with 15-Km Radius of the Town

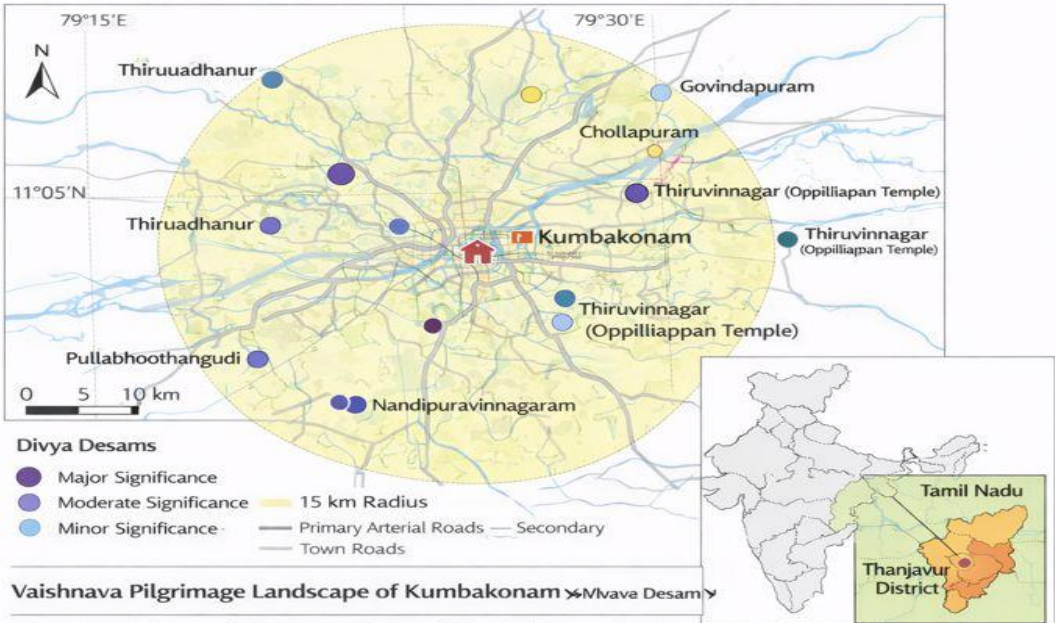


The map highlights Kumbakonam as the primary tourism nucleus within a broader regional pilgrimage landscape extending up to a 15-kilometre radius. Kumbakonam occupies a central position and functions as the main hub for religious tourism, from which several historically and ritually significant Shaiva temples are spatially distributed across surrounding settlements such as Patteswaram, Keezhapalaiyarai, Palaiyarai Vadathali, Avoor, and Nallur. Temples of major tourism significance, marked prominently on the map, reflect strong associations with Nayanmars, distinctive Madakkoil architecture, and specialised ritual traditions, thereby attracting pilgrims beyond the town limits. Moderately significant centres complement this core by forming a dense and accessible network connected through primary and secondary roads, enabling circuit-based pilgrimage and short-distance travel. Overall, the map demonstrates that tourism in the Kumbakonam region is not confined to a single urban centre but is sustained by an integrated regional sacred network, enhancing its appeal as a multi-nodal pilgrimage destination of considerable cultural and tourism importance.

Divya Desams and Vaishnava Sacred Geography

The presence of multiple Divya Desams elevates the Vaishnava pilgrimage importance of the Kumbakonam region. Notable Divya Desams include Thiruadhanur, Pullabhoothangudi, Thiruvinnagar (Oppiliappan Temple), Thirunaraiyur (Nachiyar Koil), and Nandipuravinnagaram. These temples, glorified in the hymns of the Alvars, attract pilgrims from across India and contribute significantly to religious tourism flows.

Figure 7: Vaishnava Pilgrimage Landscape of Kumbakonam



Thirudadhanur Divya Desam



Thirudadhanur Divya Desam holds significant pilgrim tourism importance due to its association with the Alvar hymnal tradition and its location within the sacred Vaishnava landscape surrounding Kumbakonam. As one of the Divya Desams glorified in the Divya Prabandham, the temple attracts Vaishnava devotees seeking spiritual merit through Alvar-connected sacred sites. Its proximity to Kumbakonam enables pilgrims to include Thirudadhanur as part of a larger circuit-based pilgrimage, thereby strengthening its role in regional religious tourism.

Pullabhoothangudi Divya Desam



Pullabhoothangudi Divya Desam is an important Vaishnava pilgrimage centre known for its unique iconographic

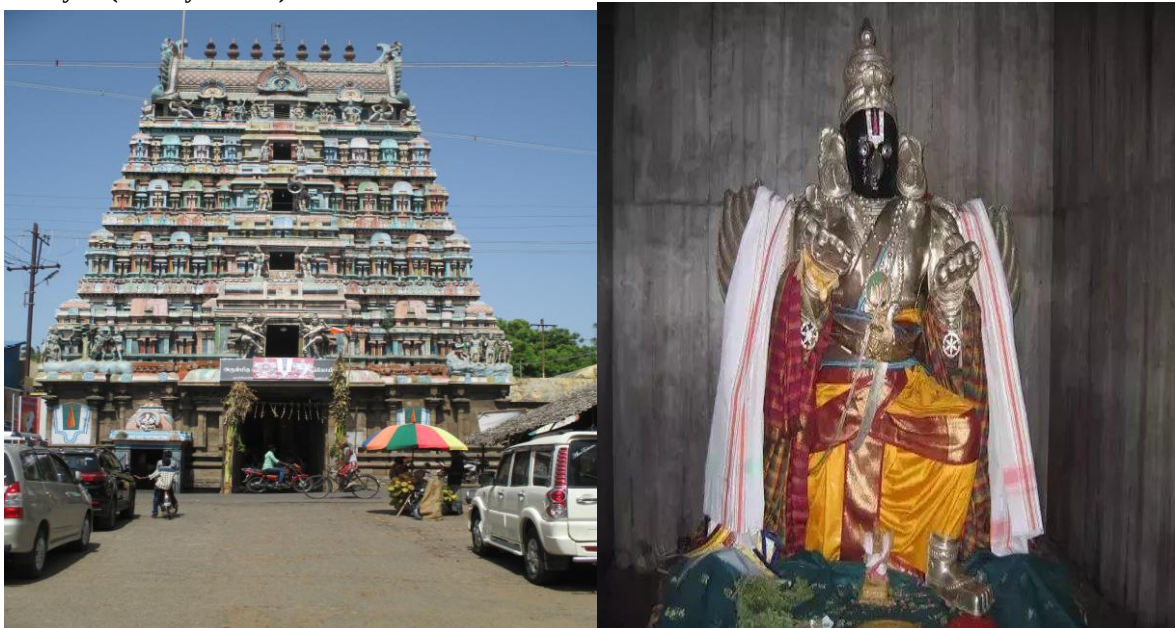
representation of Lord Vishnu in a reclining posture, which distinguishes it from other Divya Desams in the region. The temple's artistic and theological distinctiveness enhances its appeal among pilgrims and heritage tourists alike. Its inclusion within the Kumbakonam pilgrimage hinterland contributes to sustained visitor flows, particularly during major festival seasons, reinforcing its importance in religious tourism circuits.

Thiruvinnagar (Oppiliappan Temple)



Thiruvinnagar, popularly known as the Oppiliappan Temple, occupies a central position in Vaishnava pilgrim tourism due to its strong ritual association with marriage blessings and family well-being. As one of the most visited Divya Desams near Kumbakonam, it draws pilgrims from across India throughout the year. Its accessibility via major roads and its close integration with the town's pilgrimage infrastructure make it a key node in sustaining large-scale religious tourism in the region.

Thirunaraiyur (Nachiyar Koil)



Thirunaraiyur, widely known as Nachiyar Koil, is a major Vaishnava pilgrimage centre distinguished by its emphasis on Goddess Nachiyar and the famous Kal Garuda iconography. The temple's unique ritual traditions and architectural prominence significantly enhance its tourism value. As a Divya Desam deeply rooted in Alvar devotion, Nachiyar Koil attracts both religious pilgrims and cultural tourists, contributing substantially to the regional pilgrimage economy.

Nandipuravinnagaram Divya Desam

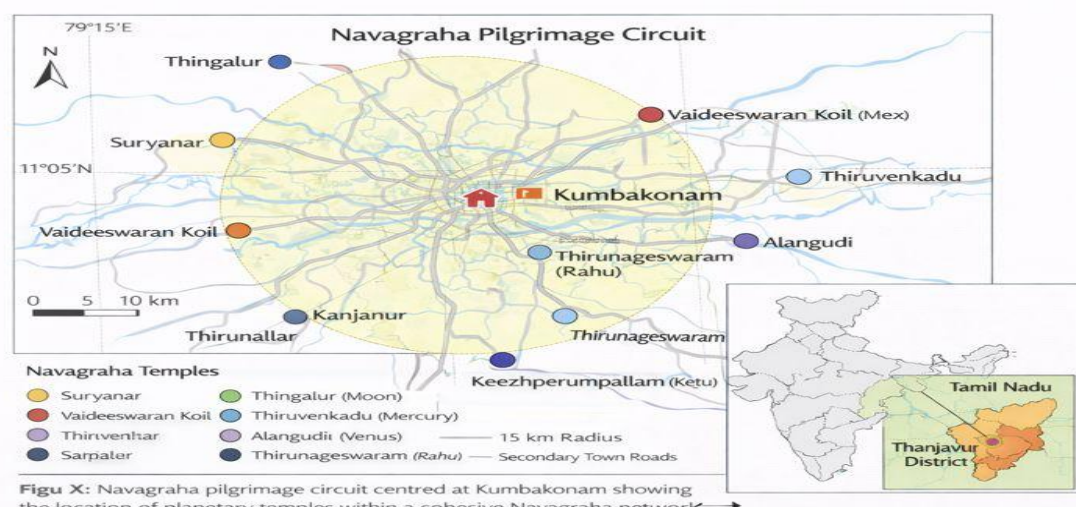


Nandipuravinnagaram Divya Desam represents an important yet comparatively tranquil pilgrimage destination within the Kumbakonam Vaishnava network. Its spiritual significance as an Alvar-praised shrine attracts devotees seeking contemplative worship experiences away from heavily crowded temples. The temple's inclusion within the 15-kilometre pilgrimage radius strengthens the diversity of pilgrim choices and enhances the overall tourism depth of the Kumbakonam region

Navagraha Pilgrimage Circuit

Kumbakonam functions as a central node for the Navagraha pilgrimage circuit, dedicated to the nine planetary deities. Among these, Suryanar Temple and Thirunageswaram (Rahu) are located within close proximity to the town, while the remaining temples are easily accessible. This planetary pilgrimage circuit substantially enhances Kumbakonam's tourism prominence and length of stay for pilgrims.

Figure 8: Navagraha Pilgrimage Circuit, Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu



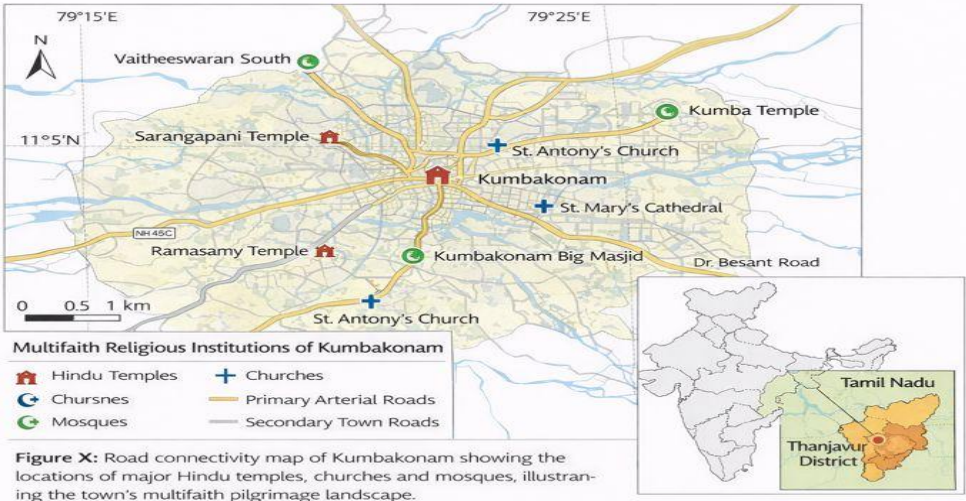
The map illustrates Kumbakonam as the central hub of the Navagraha pilgrimage circuit, from which the nine planetary temples are spatially distributed and well connected by road networks. Temples such as Suryanar Temple and Thirunageswaram, located close to the town, attract high pilgrim footfall, while the remaining Navagraha temples are easily accessible within short travel distances. This radial spatial arrangement enables pilgrims to complete the circuit efficiently,

often over one or two days, thereby increasing the length of stay in Kumbakonam. Overall, the Navagraha circuit significantly strengthens the town’s pilgrim tourism by integrating astrology-based worship, regional mobility, and ritual sequencing within a cohesive sacred landscape.

Multifaith Religious Institutions

An important dimension of Kumbakonam’s pilgrimage tourism is its multifaith composition. Christian institutions such as St. Antony’s Church and St. Mary’s Cathedral, along with numerous mosques, including the Kumbakonam Big Masjid and Mohaideen Aandavar Jamiya Masjid, serve as centres of worship and heritage. Their presence reflects historical religious harmony and broadens the scope of pilgrimage tourism beyond a single faith tradition.

Figure 9: Multifaith Religious Institutions of Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu



The road connectivity map highlights Kumbakonam as a well-connected pilgrimage and heritage destination within the broader transport network of Tamil Nadu. Kumbakonam is linked to major cities such as Chennai, Tiruchirappalli, Thanjavur, and Madurai through national and state highways, enabling smooth regional and inter-regional access. These arterial routes converge into the town’s primary road network, from which secondary town roads provide easy access to key religious institutions, including churches and mosques. The clear road-based accessibility from major urban centres facilitates short-stay visits as well as extended pilgrimage itineraries, supporting multifaith tourism and reinforcing Kumbakonam’s role as an inclusive pilgrimage hub within Tamil Nadu’s religious tourism landscape.

Other Cultural and Heritage Tourism Resources

In addition to pilgrimage centres, the region hosts significant cultural tourism assets. The Airavadeeswarar Temple at Darasuram, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, exemplifies Chola architectural excellence. Traditional crafts such as Thirubhuvanam silk sarees and Nachiyar Koil brass lamps contribute to the cultural economy and enhance the overall tourism experience.

Figure 10: Airavadeeswarar Temple, Darasuram - (UNESCO World Heritage Site – Architectural Tourism)



Tourism importance: Thirubhuvanam Silk Sarees

The Airavadeeswarar Temple represents the zenith of Chola temple architecture and serves as a flagship cultural tourism

attraction in the region. Its UNESCO World Heritage status draws international tourists, historians, architects, and heritage enthusiasts, significantly enhancing Darasuram's visibility on the global tourism map.



Thirubhuvanam is renowned for its handwoven silk sarees, known for durability, intricate borders, and traditional motifs. The weaving clusters attract craft tourists, researchers, and heritage shoppers, contributing to experiential tourism and sustaining the local cultural economy.

Figure 12: Nachiyar Koil Brass Lamps



Nachiyar Koil brass lamps, especially the iconic kuthu vilakku, are valued for their craftsmanship and ritual significance. These artisanal products attract pilgrims, cultural tourists, and collectors, strengthening the link between religious tourism and traditional craft production

Spatial Distribution of Pilgrimage Centres

The pilgrimage tourism landscape of the Kumbakonam region can be spatially understood as a nodal sacred system with Kumbakonam town as the core and multiple concentric pilgrimage zones extending up to 15 kilometres and beyond. Kumbakonam functions as the central ritual nucleus due to the Mahamaham tank and associated Saivite and Vaishnava temples. Surrounding this core are satellite temple clusters located in Patteswaram, Thiruvanchuzhi, Swamimalai, Darasuram, Thiruvaidaimarudur, and Thirubhuvanam, forming an easily navigable pilgrimage hinterland. From a tourism planning perspective, the spatial concentration of sites allows pilgrims to undertake multiple temple visits within a short duration, thereby increasing destination competitiveness and visitor retention.

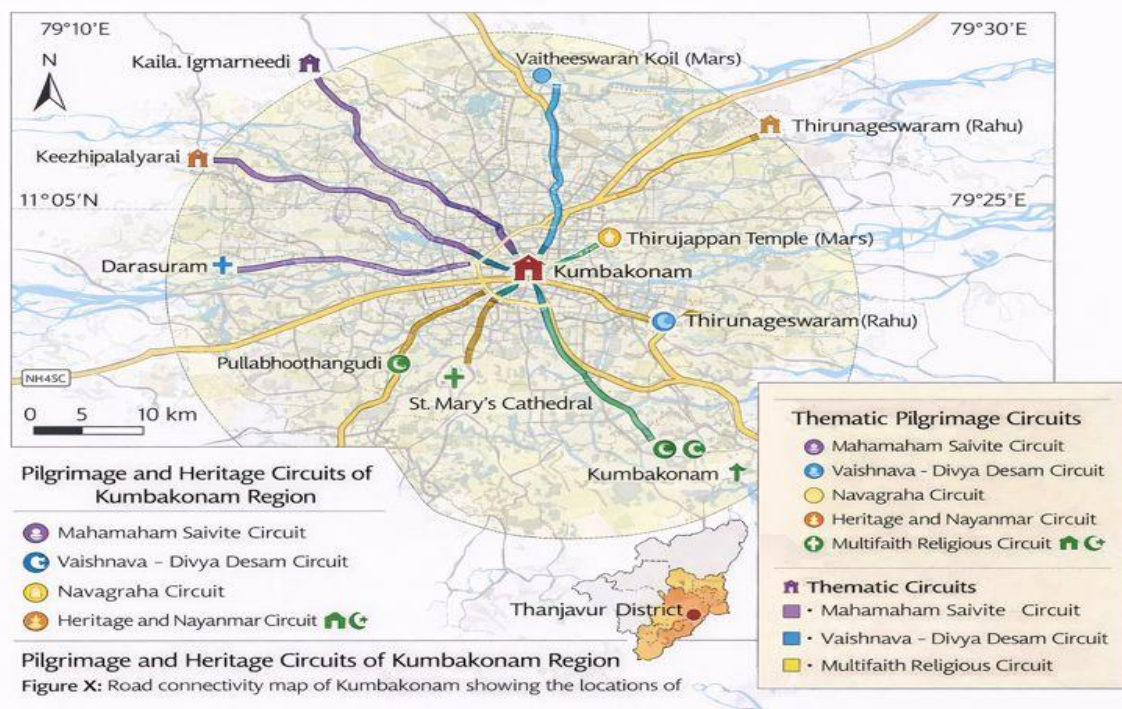
Major Pilgrimage Circuits in the Kumbakonam Region

Based on religious affiliation, mythology, and travel feasibility, the pilgrimage centres of the region can be organised into distinct thematic circuits:

- a) Mahamaham Saivite Circuit

- This circuit connects the twelve Saivite temples associated with the Amrita Kalasha legend, including Kumbeswarar, Kasi Viswanathar, Nageswarar, Someswarar, Gautameswarar, Abhimukteswarar, Banapureswarar, Kambatta Viswanathar, Ekambareshwarar, Koteleswarar, Kalahasteeswarar, and Amirthakalasanathar temples. The circuit is primarily undertaken during the Mahamaham festival and other auspicious Shaiva occasions.
- Vaishnava–Divya Desam Circuit**
This circuit links Sarangapani Temple, Oppiliappan Temple (Thiruvinnagar), Nachiyar Koil, Pullabhoothangudi, Thiruadhanur, and Nandipuravinnagaram. It caters to Vaishnava devotees following the Alvar tradition and is active throughout the year.
 - Navagraha Circuit**
Kumbakonam serves as the base for the Navagraha pilgrimage circuit. Suryanar Temple and Thirunageswaram (Rahu) fall within proximity, while the remaining seven temples are accessed through radial travel routes extending across the Cauvery delta region.
 - Heritage and Nayanmar Circuit**
This circuit connects temples associated with Shaiva saints and architectural uniqueness, such as Keezhpalayaiyari (Mangayarkkarasiyar), Nallur (Amarneethi Nayanar), Thiruchenganur (Chandesha Nayanar), Darasuram (UNESCO site), and Thiruvidadimarudur.
 - Multifaith Religious Circuit**
This circuit integrates Hindu temples with Christian churches and Islamic mosques within Kumbakonam town, promoting inclusive religious tourism and interfaith heritage appreciation.

Figure 13: Pilgrimage and Heritage Circuit of Kumbakonam Region, Tamil Nadu



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spatial Structure of Pilgrimage Tourism

The spatial analysis reveals that Kumbakonam functions as a dominant pilgrimage nucleus within a broader sacred landscape extending across the Cauvery delta region. The town's centrality is reinforced by the Mahamaham Tank and a dense concentration of Saivite and Vaishnava temples, which collectively anchor ritual, cultural, and tourist activities. The spatial clustering of pilgrimage sites within the town and its immediate hinterland (up to 15 km) enables high accessibility and efficient movement, allowing pilgrims to visit multiple sites within short durations. This nodal configuration enhances destination competitiveness by reducing travel costs and increasing the feasibility of short-stay and repeat visits.

Mahamaham Saivite Circuit and Festival-Driven Tourism

The Mahamaham Saivite Circuit, linking twelve temples associated with the Amrita Kalasha legend, emerges as a festival-centric tourism system. The results indicate that pilgrimage flows intensify during the Mahamaham festival, transforming Kumbakonam into a large-scale ritual landscape capable of accommodating mass tourism. The spatial proximity of these temples supports circuit-based pilgrimage on foot or through short road journeys, reinforcing the town's image as a unified Shaiva sacred space. This concentration significantly boosts seasonal tourism, accommodation demand, and ancillary

services, underscoring the economic importance of festival-driven religious tourism.

Vaishnava–Divya Desam Circuit and Year-Round Pilgrim Flows

In contrast to the seasonal Saivite circuit, the Vaishnava–Divya Desam Circuit demonstrates sustained, year-round tourism activity. Major Divya Desams such as Sarangapani Temple, Oppiliappan Temple, Nachiyar Koil, Pullabhoothangudi, Thirudhanur, and Nandipuravinnagaram attract pilgrims from across India due to their association with the Alvar hymns. The spatial distribution of these temples within an easily navigable radius strengthens Kumbakonam's role as a base town for Vaishnava pilgrimage tourism. This continuity of pilgrim flows contributes to stable tourism revenue and extends the functional tourism season beyond festival peaks.

Navagraha Circuit and Extended Length of Stay

The Navagraha pilgrimage circuit further enhances the tourism significance of Kumbakonam by positioning the town as a logistical base for astrology-based worship. Temples such as Suryanar Temple and Thirunageswaram (Rahu), located close to the town, along with the remaining planetary temples distributed across the region, form a radial travel network. The results suggest that pilgrims undertaking the Navagraha circuit typically extend their stay over one or two days, thereby increasing local expenditure on accommodation, transport, and services. This circuit diversifies the pilgrimage portfolio and attracts a distinct segment of astrology-oriented religious tourists.

Heritage, Nayanmar, and Cultural Tourism Integration

Beyond ritual worship, heritage assets such as the Airavadeeswarar Temple at Darasuram (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and Nayanmar-associated temples at Keezhapalaiyarai, Nallur, and Thiruvidadaimarudur add a strong cultural and historical dimension to tourism. These sites attract heritage tourists, scholars, and international visitors, thereby broadening the visitor profile. Additionally, traditional craft centres such as Thirubhuvanam silk weaving and Nachiyar Koil brass lamp production enrich the tourism experience by linking pilgrimage with living cultural practices. This integration strengthens cultural tourism and supports local artisanal economies.

Multifaith Religious Landscape and Inclusive Tourism

The presence of Christian churches and Islamic mosques within Kumbakonam town highlights its multifaith religious character. Institutions such as churches and mosques, located along major town roads and easily accessible from pilgrimage zones, reflect long-standing religious coexistence. From a tourism perspective, this multifaith landscape broadens the scope of religious and heritage tourism beyond a single tradition, promoting inclusive tourism narratives and enhancing the town's appeal to diverse visitor groups.

Implications for Tourism Planning and Sustainability

The results collectively demonstrate that Kumbakonam's tourism strength lies in its multi-circuit, multi-faith, and multi-temporal pilgrimage system. The spatial concentration of sites, strong road connectivity, and thematic diversity allow for efficient tourism planning, circuit packaging, and destination branding. By integrating pilgrimage, heritage, craft, and multifaith tourism, Kumbakonam emerges as a resilient and competitive religious tourism destination. Strategic planning focused on infrastructure, crowd management during festivals, and heritage conservation can further enhance sustainable tourism development in the region.

CONCLUSION

The pilgrimage tourism landscape of Kumbakonam, located in Tamil Nadu, is structured around a strong spatial core–periphery system in which the town functions as a central ritual nucleus. Anchored by the Mahamaham Tank and a dense concentration of Saivite and Vaishnava temples, Kumbakonam supports multiple concentric pilgrimage zones extending up to 15 kilometres and beyond. Satellite temple clusters at Patteswaram, Swamimalai, Darasuram, Thiruvidadaimarudur, Thirubhuvanam, and nearby settlements form a highly accessible pilgrimage hinterland. This spatial concentration enables pilgrims to undertake multiple temple visits within short durations, enhancing destination competitiveness, visitor convenience, and overall tourism efficiency.

The region's tourism importance is further strengthened by the presence of multiple well-defined pilgrimage circuits that operate across different temporal and devotional contexts. The Mahamaham Saivite Circuit, centred on twelve temples associated with the Amrita Kalasha legend, generates intense seasonal pilgrimage flows during the Mahamaham festival. In contrast, the Vaishnava–Divya Desam Circuit and the Navagraha Circuit sustain year-round pilgrim movement, drawing devotees motivated by Alvar traditions and astrological worship, respectively. These circuits encourage extended stays, repeat visits, and circuit-based travel, thereby increasing local economic benefits through accommodation, transport, and allied services. The integration of UNESCO-recognised heritage sites and Nayanmar-associated temples further diversifies the tourism profile by attracting cultural and heritage-oriented visitors.

An important distinguishing feature of Kumbakonam's pilgrimage tourism is its multifaith composition, which reflects a long history of religious coexistence. Alongside Hindu pilgrimage centres, Christian churches and Islamic mosques located

within the town contribute to a shared sacred and cultural landscape. This multifaith presence broadens the scope of pilgrimage tourism beyond a single religious tradition and promotes inclusive heritage appreciation. When combined with traditional craft centres such as Thirubhuvanam silk weaving and Nachiyar Koil brass lamp production, the region offers a holistic tourism experience that blends devotion, culture, and living heritage. Collectively, these elements position the Kumbakonam region as a resilient and multifaceted pilgrimage tourism destination of regional, national, and international significance.

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