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# Travel and Economy - The Contribution of Saivite Thirumurai in Spiritual economy

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## Abstract

Tamil Nadu has a vibrant spiritual space. This space is espoused by a cultural opulence and elaborate architecture. One of the economic sources of income generation in Tamil Nadu is the Bhakti ecosystem. Bhakti literature remains relevant in the contemporary praxis because of its effective existence. This existence is possible through a dynamic interstition of Literature, Spirituality and economy. This paper tries to trace the role of Saiva literature in effectively building the temple economy of Tamil Nadu. The interdependence of Culture and religiosity has effectively created a synergy rendering the literature a timeless space & authority. This paper aims to identify the intersectionality in Tamil culture and religious space from the context of Cultural materialism.

Travel and Bhakti are intrinsic to Indian spiritualism. Travels of Saints led to the birth of Thirumurai (the Saivite literary canons) restructuring the sociocultural milieu of the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Tamil country. This paper explores the intersection of Travel and reformation movements in South India in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Saiva literary tradition started in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century with Tevaram, the compilation of hymns (during travels) of Thirunavukkarasar alias Appar, Thirugnanasambandar alias Sambandar, and Sundarar. The pilgrimage and peripatetic lifestyle of these three Saints in the early 6<sup>th</sup> Century invoked the ideals of Saivite consolidation and end the hetero-religious expulsion (in 6<sup>th</sup> century Tamil Nadu). They attempted to subvert the social hierarchies by challenging the predominant Buddhist and Brahmin hegemonies. Subsequently, this embarked on the rise of the organic intellectuals in Tamil society. The Tamil ethos emerged because of the intellectual tradition spearheaded by Tevaram. This paper traces their spiritual travels and trails as a cultural phenomenon.

The Kalabhras ruled Tamil Nadu till the 6<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Historians term the period as “Dark Age” because the era faced abrupt changes in the socio-political and linguistic arena of the Tamil Country. Consequently, the Tamil language and ethos also suffered a setback with the growing dominance of Buddhism and Jainism. Saiva Siddhanta, the inherent school of Tamil Saivism felt the backlash due to the entry of the heterodoxical religious groups such as the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions.

The Moovar<sup>1</sup> faced many hardships due to the repressive measures of the Buddhist and Jainist monks. The group set out on a crusade to spread the tenets of Saivism in a decentralized fashion

across the Tamil Kingdoms. Gradually, their pilgrimage gained momentum garnering the support of the laity. What started as a mere pilgrimage transformed into a peregrination of grand fashion. The songs sung by these saints were later compiled under the title, *Tevaram*<sup>2</sup>. Gradually, this movement expanded into a mass movement leading to the widespread reformation of Saiva Siddhanta.

**The details of this school are as follows:**

**Name of the School:** Saiva Siddhanta (SS)

**Source/scripture:** Panniru Thirumurai<sup>3</sup>

**Located:** In Tamil Nadu

**Prominent Saints:** Nayanmars. Chiefly Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar & Manickkavasar

This movement challenged Buddhism by regaining its political patronage through debates and miracles. Besides those elements, they started to build temples, incorporate the SS practices in temple worship, and unify the masses on the lines of Saivism. Similarly, accounting the travels and life accounts of Saivite Saints, in general, provides a unique window to understand and analyze the intersection of religion and culture. This paper attempts to contextualize the role of travels from the perspective of Cultural studies, to decode the process of Counter hegemony in Tamil literature and culture.

### **Historical View of Tamil Saivism**

The 6th century Pallava period marked the onset of Cave architecture and stone sculptures. Saint Appar won over the Buddhists by gaining the patronage of King Mahendravarman I. Consequently, Pandya and Chola Kings endorsed SS. In the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, King Raja Raja I, commissioned Nampi Andar Nampi to compile the verses composed during the travels of the Moovar. Pallava King Mahendravarman I, built the rock-cut temples. Later, the Cholas became prominent in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century AD and contributed to the development of Saivism through temple construction, compilation of thirumurai, and patronage of Monasteries.

### **Significance of Travel:**

#### **i) Travelling and Grassroots:**

The travels popularized the temples and expanded the geographical extent of SS across the territories of the Chera, the Chola, the Pandya, and the Pallava Kingdoms (Spencer, 233). The predominant hegemonies (Brahmanic and Buddhist) were actively challenged by the wandering Saints through rigorous debates, egalitarian practices, and encouraged the collective participation of people regardless of their classes.

#### **ii) Trickle-down approach:**

The Saints started with pilgrimage which gradually expanded as peregrination with a band of Minstrels. Travels broke the social barriers between the Saints and the common people enabling them to initiate discourses. Even the Marginalized were allowed to be a part of the entourage of Sambandar and Appar. Their travels manifested into social deliverables through versification. The uniqueness of the Saivite literature is evident through the Saivite-specific genre – Pathigam<sup>4</sup>. The Holy Songs were composed in the form of the Decads (containing 10 verses) called Pathigams. This anthology of seven books is collectively known as “*Tevaram*”. Books 1-3 contain the songs of Sambandar. Books 4-6 presented the songs of Appar. Book 7 presented the songs of Sundarar. *Tevaram* is a combination of two words: Te – Divine, Aaram – Necklace/Garland; *Tevaram* means a necklace of Songs in praise of the Lord. These verses accorded a special status to those temples where the Pathigams were composed. Even today, the Temples visited by them carry an epithet, “*Tevara Paadal Petra sthalam*”<sup>5</sup> accorded a sacrosanct status to the temple. Subsequently, these temples received patronages from the Zamindars, Kings, and rich Businessmen.

### **Tevaram – Source of Spiritual Fortitude:**

Nampi Antar Nampi was the first to conceive the idea of Thirumurai (The Holy Canons) as a unified whole. His motive was to collect and collate the scattered songs sung by The Moovar. This task was an ambitious endeavor because of the vast pilgrimage undertaken by Sambandar and Appar; their songs were spontaneous, oral, simplistic hymns, and they visited more than 260 temples across the Tamil Country (Spencer, 244). Hence Nambi focussed on their travels and miraculous anecdotes from their lives. Especially, the story of Appar's resilience is evident in Book 5. Appar was tortured in different ways to endorse Jainism. In one instance, he was locked in a lime kiln for days. He came out unharmed and sang the following verse:

The shelter under the parallel feet of the God, my boss,  
is like the nice melody of Veena (Musical Instrument),  
the early evening moon, pleasant breeze,  
the Spring, a pond where bees are in making sound. (Thirukurunthogai,  
Thevaram, 5.90)

However, the Jain monks encouraged the Pallava King (Mahendra Varma I) to drop Appar into the sea chained to a rock. Miraculously, the stone instead of submerging him, acted like a boat and landed him ashore as he sang the following song:

The reciter of the Vedas, the flame like God, Prakash D 6  
if we pray with folded hands to his gold like glittering feet,  
even if we were tied to a big stone and thrown in the sea  
there is a savior - that is the NAMASHIVAYA (The Holy five letter).  
(Namashivaya Pathigam, 4.11)

Similarly, Sambandar's entourage faced life-threatening situations due to the malfeasance of the Jain monks. They set ablaze the choultry where the group stayed. He sang, "Let the schemes of the wicked Jains never hurt me". (Sambandar, 3.51). Later, the pathigam ends with the lines cursing the Pandya King Koon Pandiyan to be infested with the heat boils. When the Jain monks couldn't cure the King, Sambandar cured him and won over his support.

Sundarar bridged the gap between the deity and the devotee through his hagiographical account named Thiruthondathogai.<sup>6</sup> He identified the devotees from all classes. He bridged the gap between the deity and devotee by deifying the latter. He initiated the practice of revering the devotee by referring him as "adiyaarkum adiyen" (the servant of the Holy servants). Thus, he subverted the hierarchies by offering a high pedestal to the followers.

### **Institutionalization and fostering Organic Intellectuals:**

The Saiva monasteries were established in the 7th century to institutionalize the sect and counter the Jainist influence in the society. Ironically, the Jainist and Buddhist intellectualism and monastic culture inspired Sambandar to install the first Thiruthondathogai served as the basis for Peria Puranam, the official hagiography of all Saivite Saints. monastery during one of his travels (Sivaprakasam, 202). The Saiva Saints served as the organic intellectuals, and constructed the Indigenous framework preserving the values and autonomy of Tamils by actively interrupting the intrusion of Pali and Prakrit through Jainism and Buddhism. These organic intellectuals built the Tamil schema through a spiritual circuit, supporting the economic requisites, to be an alternative to the foreign intellectuals<sup>6</sup>. The travel circuit served as an economic forum and a spiritual map for the devotees. This sacred mapping earned the landscapes a distinct identity which according to Eric Isaac is "the landscape of Myth". The hymns along with the miracles qualify the Bhakti literature as mystical testifying to the benevolence of God and his non-chalance. (Peterson, 69-90)

### **Conclusion**

The element of travel started as a pilgrimage that was decentralized. Later, due to an overwhelming response, it was institutionalized with adequate patronage from the Kings and the nobility. The laity hailed the sect because of its inclusivity and ease of following, unlike the

physically strenuous traditions. The simplicity of tenets, the trickledown approach of the intellectuals, and the simple versification were the outcomes of the relentless travels of the Saints. What commenced as an act of worship, metamorphosized into a mass movement, and culminated as a tool to fight hegemony. Thus, Travel preserved the Saiva Siddhanta, besides safeguarding the linguistic and spiritual autonomy of the Tamil populace.

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### Footnote

1. Moovar (Holy Trio) – 3 Predominant Saints namely Appar, Sundarar & Thirugnanasambandar
2. Tevaram – comprises books 1-7 out of the 12 holy books of Thirumurai
3. Panniru Thirumurai, a collection of 12 holy books
4. Pathikam – Genre created by Saivite Saints in form of Decads
5. Temples mentioned in Tevaram
6. Jain, Buddhist and the Brahmanic traditions originated from foreign sources w.r.t Tamil society hence they collectively be regarded as the foreign intellectuals.