

## Cultural Legacy of Lamp Donations in Tamil Society: A Study of Amritaghatesvara Temple

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### ABSTRACT

The tradition of lamp donations, or "Deepa Daanam," holds a significant place in Tamil culture and religious practices. This article explores the cultural legacy of lamp donations at the Amritaghatesvara Temple in Thirukkadaiyur, based on epigraphical evidence. Lamp donations, symbolizing the dispelling of darkness and the ushering in of light, both spiritually and literally, have been a vital part of temple rituals for centuries. Inscriptions found at the temple provide valuable insights into the historical context, donors, and the socio-religious impact of these donations. The study highlights how these contributions not only supported temple activities but also reflected the devotion and religious fervor of the Tamil people. By examining the inscriptions, the article sheds light on the enduring tradition of lamp donations and their role in sustaining the spiritual and cultural fabric of Tamil society. The findings underscore the significance of epigraphy in understanding the historical and cultural narratives of the region.

### Introduction

Lamp donations have long been an integral part of Tamil culture and religious practices. The tradition of donating lamps, or "Deepa Daanam," symbolizes the act of dispelling darkness and bringing light, both in a literal and spiritual sense. This practice is deeply rooted in the rituals of Tamil temples, where devotees offer lamps to seek blessings, fulfill vows, and express their devotion to the deities. Inscriptions found in ancient temples across Tamil Nadu provide valuable insights into the historical and cultural significance of lamp donations. These records highlight the contributions of various patrons and the role of lamp donations in supporting temple activities and rituals. Examining the inscriptions at the Amritaghatesvara Temple in Thirukkadaiyur reveals the rich legacy and enduring tradition of lamp donations, which continue to illuminate the spiritual landscape of Tamil society.

### Thirukkadaiyur Temple

Thirukkadaiyur Temple, often referred to as "Sri Abirami Amirtha Kadeswarar Temple," is a significant site in Hindu mythology. Renowned for its associations with Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, this temple is situated in Thirukadaiyur, 21 km east of Mayiladuthurai, Tamil Nadu, India. With a history spanning over a millennium, it is imbued with rich traditions and ancient legends. The temple is famed for the legendary boon of eternal life granted by Lord Shiva to Markandeya, a devout young sage. This event elevated the temple's status as a

pilgrimage destination for couples desiring a blessed and enduring marital life. The architecture of the temple, a testament to the grandeur of the Chola dynasty, features intricate carvings, majestic gopurams (towers), and a sanctum sanctorum adorned with exquisite sculptures.

The annual "Kalyana Utsavam" is a major event, celebrating the divine marriage of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. This festival draws devotees from across the country. Devotees also perform "Abishekam" rituals to Lord Shiva, seeking his blessings for a happy and prosperous marriage. The serene ambiance of the temple, along with the resonant sacred chants, creates a tranquil spiritual atmosphere. Thirukkadaiyur Temple remains a beacon of devotion, love, and eternal bonds, continuing to provide solace and hope to devotees from all walks of life. The temple is maintained by the Dharmapuram Adheenam, ensuring its rich legacy endures.

### **Mythology**

The name Thirukkadaiyur originates from the Tamil word "Gatam," meaning pot. The legend narrates that Vishnu, Indra, and other Devas, offended by an unintentional slight, stole the pot of Amrita (elixir of immortality) and hid it at Thirukkadaiyur. Ganesha, in response, created a Shiva Lingam dedicated to his parents and poured some Amrita over it. Another popular legend revolves around a sage named Mrikandu and his wife Marudmati, who resided near the temple. After years of penance, Shiva appeared before them and granted their wish for a child. They were blessed with a son, Markandeya, who was destined to die at sixteen. An ardent devotee of Shiva, Markandeya clung to the Shiva Lingam in the temple when Yama (the lord of death) came for him. Impressed by his devotion, Shiva intervened, saving Markandeya and commanding Yama to spare his life.

### **Significance of the Temple**

The celebration of the 60th marriage anniversary, known as "Sashtiabdapoorthi" or "Shastipoorthi," is an important cultural and spiritual milestone. It symbolizes the enduring bond of a couple's 60-year marital journey. In Hindu tradition, this occasion is deeply revered, honoring the couple's commitment, love, and companionship. It is a time for families to gather, express gratitude, and seek blessings for the couple's continued happiness and well-being. Thirukkadaiyur Temple has become a renowned destination for celebrating this milestone. It is believed that blessings from Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati during this auspicious time bring longevity, harmony, and prosperity to the couple's life. Devotees perform special rituals, including "Abishekam" to the deities, seek blessings from priests, and participate in ceremonies that blend tradition, spirituality, and celebration. The serene ambiance of the temple enhances the sanctity of the occasion, creating cherished memories for the couple and their loved ones. Thirukkadaiyur Temple continues to be a symbol of devotion, love, and enduring bonds, inspiring and blessing countless devotees who visit to seek divine favor.

### **Lamp Donations at Amritaghatesvara Temple: An Epigraphical Interpretation**

The inscriptions at the Amritaghatesvara Temple in Thirukkadaiyur, written in Tamil, provide a fascinating glimpse into the tradition of lamp donations, reflecting the socio-religious practices and the devotion of the people during the Chola and Pandya periods.

East Wall of the Central Shrine (44th Year of Kulothunga Chola): An inscription, though partly damaged, records the donation of a lamp and a lamp stand by an unnamed donor during the reign of Chola King Rajakesarivarman, also known as Tribhuvanachakravartin Kulothunga Chola. This act of donation underscores the importance of providing light for the temple rituals and signifies the donor's devotion and contribution to the upkeep of the temple. Lamp donations

were crucial as they ensured the temple was well-lit during rituals, enhancing the spiritual experience of the devotees.

**South Wall of the Central Shrine:** Another inscription from the reign of Chola King Rajakesarivarman records the gift of a lamp. This brief yet significant record highlights the ongoing tradition of lamp donations, which were crucial for maintaining the sanctity and spiritual ambiance of the temple. The consistent mention of lamp donations across different reigns indicates the importance placed on this practice by successive generations.

**East Base of the Central Shrine (23rd Year of Rajaraja Chola):** An inscription from the 23rd year of Chola King Rajaraja Rajakesarivarman, alias Sri Rajarajadeva, documents the sale of land to provide for a lamp. This record indicates the economic measures taken to ensure a steady supply of oil for the lamps, reflecting the community's commitment to sustaining temple rituals. The sale of land for maintaining lamps shows how deeply ingrained the practice was in the local economy and society.

**South Wall Mandapa of the Central Shrine (27th Year of Vikrama Chola):** A mutilated record from the 27th year of Chola King Parakesarivarman, also known as Tribhuvanachakravartin Vikrama Chola, mentions the gift of money for a lamp. The donation of money, instead of physical items, illustrates the flexibility in supporting temple activities and the various forms of contributions made by devotees. This adaptability in donations ensured that the temple could always meet its needs, regardless of the form the contributions took.

**South Wall of the First Prakara (Reign of Vira Rajendra Chola):** This inscription records the gift of land for lamps to the temple of Udaiyar Sri Kalakaladeva at Tirukkadur in Akkur Nadu, a district of Jayangonda Chola Valanadu. Land donations were a significant means of ensuring long-term financial support for the temple, indicating the donors' foresight and commitment. By providing land, the donors ensured that the temple had a sustainable source of income to fund its lighting and other activities.

**South Wall of the First Prakara (Reign of Rajadhiraja Deva):** An inscription by the Chola King Tribhuvanachakravartin Rajadhirajadeva documents the gift of land for a lamp by a native of Emapperur in Emapperur Nadu of Naduvil Nadu, alias Rajaraja Valanadu. Another lamp was given by a native of Nadir in Pambura Nadu, a district of Uyyakkondar Valanadu. These records highlight the widespread participation in lamp donations, involving people from various regions. The diversity of the donors shows the communal effort and the widespread appeal of contributing to the temple's upkeep.

**South Wall of the First Prakara (25th Year of Rajadhiraja Deva):** Another record from the 25th year of Chola King Rajakesarivarman, alias Tribhuvanachakravartin Rajadhirajadeva, notes the gift of land for a lamp by a native of Pudalur in Pudalur Vattam, a district of Pandikulasani Valanadu. This further emphasizes the community's role in sustaining temple rituals through land donations. The consistent theme of land donations across different reigns and regions highlights the importance of securing long-term resources for the temple.

**South Wall of the First Prakara (9th Year of Kulothunga Chola):** An inscription from the 9th year of Chola King Tribhuvanachakravartin Kulothunga Chola records the gift of land at Manalkunru in Erukkattuchcheri by a native of Perunallur in Kilvengai Nadu, a district of Rajaraja Valanadu. This donation highlights the continued tradition of land gifts to support the temple's lighting needs. The regularity of these donations suggests a well-established and respected tradition within the community.

**Base of the Verandah Enclosing the Central Shrine (34th Year of Pandya King Kulasekhara Deva):** A record from the 34th year of Pandya King Maravarman

Tribhuvanachakravartin Kulasekhara Deva mentions the gift of land for forty lamps for the merit of Ulagudaiya Perumal. The inscription notes that the country had been in a state of confusion and distress due to the king transferring parts of his dominions to his younger brothers. The king's resumption of these lands helped restore stability, allowing for such donations to be made. This record highlights the political and social stability's impact on religious practices and the ability of the community to support their temple.

### Conclusion

The inscriptions at the Amritaghatesvara Temple in Thirukkadaiyur, written in Tamil, provide a detailed account of the tradition of lamp donations, reflecting the deep-rooted cultural and religious practices in Tamil society. These records highlight the various forms of donations, including lamps, land, and money, made by devotees to ensure the continuous illumination of the temple. The contributions from individuals across different regions underscore the communal effort in maintaining the spiritual sanctity of the temple. Through these epigraphical records, the enduring legacy of lamp donations and their significance in Tamil culture is vividly illuminated. The continued practice of these donations across various reigns and regions indicates a deeply ingrained cultural tradition that supported and enriched the religious life of the community.

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