

MARITIME NEXUS AND RELIGIOUS LEGACY: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF BUDDHIST HERITAGE IN NAGAPATTINAM DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist heritage of Nagapattinam, a prominent coastal region in Tamil Nadu, which served as a critical hub for maritime trade and cultural exchange in ancient and medieval times. Drawing upon archaeological evidence, epigraphic records, and literary sources, the research examines the origins, evolution, and decline of Buddhism in the district, focusing on its role as a center for religious learning and international cultural diplomacy. construction of significant Buddhist monuments, such as the Chudamani Vihara, established by the Srivijaya kings, and the artistic contributions reflected in bronze and stone sculptures discovered in the region. It also delves into Nagapattinam's strategic importance in fostering trade and the dissemination of Buddhist ideologies across the Indian Ocean, linking South India with Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and China. The study further investigates the socio-political factors that contributed to the eventual decline of Buddhism in the region, particularly during the rise of the Bhakti movement and the resurgence of Hinduism. By situating Nagapattinam within the broader context of Indian Ocean trade networks and religious exchanges, this research underscores its significance as a historical epicenter of Buddhist culture.

Introduction

The coastal district of Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu holds a prominent place in the historical narrative of India's maritime and religious landscapes. Situated along the Coromandel Coast, Nagapattinam emerged as a thriving port that facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures across the Indian Ocean. Among its many contributions, the district is renowned for its role in fostering Buddhist heritage and cultural exchanges that extended far beyond its shores. The material remains of this vibrant Buddhist legacy, including bronze sculptures, stone stupas, and epigraphic inscriptions, offer a glimpse into the artistic and spiritual contributions of the region. However, the decline of Buddhism in Nagapattinam, influenced by the rise of Hinduism and the Bhakti movement, marks a significant transition in the district's religious landscape. Nagapattinam's Buddhist heritage, exploring its origins, growth, and eventual decline. It also examines the district's strategic role in maritime trade and its impact on the dissemination of Buddhist ideologies. By situating Nagapattinam within the broader framework of India's religious and cultural history, The district became a focal point for Buddhist cultural and religious activities, linking South India to Southeast Asia and beyond. Buddhism in Nagapattinam is believed to have flourished as early as the 3rd century

BCE during Emperor Ashoka's reign. Ashoka's missionary efforts to spread Buddhism to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia likely influenced the region. The Chola dynasty (9th–13th century CE) actively supported Buddhist establishments in Nagapattinam.

The period saw the construction of vihara complexes and temples that became centers of learning and religious practice. Nagapattinam district, situated along the Coromandel Coast, boasts a rich historical narrative marked by its strategic maritime prominence, cultural significance, and religious diversity. From the 3rd century BCE, Emperor Ashoka's missionary activities introduced Buddhism, establishing the region as a hub of early religious influence, while by the 1st century CE, it emerged as a vital port during the Sangam period, facilitating trade with Rome, Southeast Asia, and China. In the early medieval period (4th–6th centuries CE), Nagapattinam thrived in Indian Ocean trade, exporting textiles and spices, and later became a center of Buddhist art and scholarship in the 7th century, despite the rise of Saivism and Vaishnavism. Under Chola rule (9th–13th centuries CE), the district flourished as a maritime and religious hub, epitomized by the construction of the Chudamani Vihara by the Srivijaya king, which enhanced its Buddhist cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia.

The late medieval era (13th–15th centuries CE) saw the decline of Buddhism, influenced by Hindu resurgence and the Bhakti movement, though the region remained an active trade center under Pandya and Vijayanagara rule. In the colonial period, starting from the 16th century, Portuguese, Dutch, and later British control transformed the district, with infrastructural developments under the Dutch and shifts in prominence under British rule. Modern history witnessed Nagapattinam becoming part of the Madras Presidency, with economic transitions towards agriculture and fisheries post-independence, its establishment as a separate district in 1991, and the devastation of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, followed by extensive rehabilitation. Today, Nagapattinam thrives as a center for agriculture, fishing, and heritage tourism, with its Buddhist and maritime legacies preserved through archaeological and conservation efforts, reflecting its enduring significance in South Indian history.

Chudamani Vihara

Built in the 11th century CE by the Srivijaya king from Sumatra, this monastery was a symbol of international cultural exchange. It housed Buddhist monks and scholars and was a center for religious discourse and maritime diplomacy. Excavations in Nagapattinam have uncovered remarkable bronze images of Buddha, showcasing artistic influences from Amaravati and Southeast Asia. Stone stupas and sculptures reflect the region's Buddhist architectural and artistic excellence. Tamil and Sanskrit inscriptions provide valuable insights into the donations made by merchants, rulers, and commoners to Buddhist institutions. These records highlight the role of Nagapattinam as a thriving cultural and trade hub.

Role in Cultural and Maritime Exchange

Nagapattinam was a prominent link in the maritime trade routes connecting India with Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indonesia, and China. Buddhist monks traveled through these routes, spreading teachings and facilitating cultural exchanges. Nagapattinam's Buddhist institutions were instrumental in transmitting Indian art, architecture, and philosophical thought to Southeast Asia. By the 13th century, the Bhakti movement and the increasing influence of Saivism and Vaishnavism led to the decline of Buddhism in the region. Many Buddhist monuments fell into disrepair due to a lack of patronage, leaving only remnants of the once-

thriving tradition. The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) have taken steps to preserve Buddhist artefacts and sites in Nagapattinam. Buddhist relics from Nagapattinam are displayed in museums, attracting scholars and tourists interested in exploring the district's historical and cultural significance. Despite its decline, the Buddhist heritage of Nagapattinam district remains a vital part of its historical narrative. The district stands as a testament to South India's pivotal role in the spread of Buddhism and the cultural exchanges that shaped the Indian Ocean world.

Nagapattinam emerged as a town of considerable significance, primarily due to its strategic position in trade and cultural exchanges, which became even more pronounced as the traditional overland Silk Route stretching from the Mediterranean through the Middle East to China faced increasing challenges. These challenges arose from the sporadic conflicts in the Middle East, which disrupted the once-reliable route. In response to these disruptions, Nagapattinam's geographical location became increasingly crucial, as it provided an alternative maritime route that was both more reliable and economically viable. This sea route, which circumnavigated the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean and traversed the waters of Southeast Asia to reach China, played a pivotal role in strengthening Nagapattinam's prominence in international trade. The strategic advantages offered by this maritime corridor cemented the town's importance as a bustling center of commerce, facilitating the exchange of goods, culture, and ideas across vast regions.

The prominence of Buddhism and its associated cultural activities in Nagapattinam could have been significantly influenced by the tumultuous events unfolding in northern India at the time. Among the key factors that may have shaped this development were the invasions of the White Huns, the resurgence of Hinduism, and the subsequent Islamic invasions. These events, which led to the decline of Buddhism in northern India, had profound consequences, plunging the region into a prolonged state of political and social instability. The decline of Buddhism in the north provided an opportunity for the growth of Buddhist influence in the south, with regions like Nagapattinam becoming focal points for Buddhist practices and cultural activities. However, the connection between these historical upheavals and the rise of Buddhism in Nagapattinam remains a subject that requires further scholarly inquiry. While the overall pattern of religious and political upheaval is evident, more in-depth research is needed to establish a definitive, direct link between these developments and the concentration of Buddhist culture in the region. During these turbulent times, the Chola Empire, along with the Srivijayan rulers, identified and capitalized on a unique opportunity to foster cooperation across a wide array of domains, including cultural, religious, and political spheres. Both the Cholas and the Śailendras of the Srivijayan Empire, who ruled across the Bay of Bengal, were particularly distinguished for their extensive and fruitful cultural exchanges. These exchanges were characterized by the mutual sharing of gifts, architectural knowledge, and religious teachings, all of which played a significant role in shaping the region's cultural landscape.

The Cholas, as devout Shaivites, not only promoted the spread of Hinduism through the construction of monumental temples but also supported the continuation of Buddhist practices. This is clearly evident in their patronage of Buddhist viharas, such as the ones in Nagapattinam, which served as important centers for Buddhist monastic life. This cultural diplomacy, which thrived during the reign of the Cholas and their Srivijayan counterparts, served as a means of not only enhancing their religious and cultural ties but also strengthening the maritime trade networks that connected the vast regions of Southeast Asia, South India, and beyond. The city of Nagapattinam, in particular, emerged as a critical nexus

between these two flourishing regions, linking the cultural, religious, and commercial worlds of the Chola Empire with those of Southeast Asia. As such, Nagapattinam's role as a center for Buddhist and Hindu cultural exchanges, coupled with its strategic importance as a maritime trade hub, positioned it as a significant player in the broader Indian Ocean world, amplifying the influence of both the Chola Empire and the Srivijayan Empire in shaping the cultural and economic dynamics of the region. A central aspect of Nagapattinam's prominence lay in its role as a conduit for the dissemination of Indian culture across Southeast Asia, facilitated by trade and commerce, particularly in textiles. The Chola traders, far from merely serving as economic agents, acted as cultural emissaries, fostering harmonious relations between the Tamil region and Sumatran Island. These interactions were driven by the interests of the Śailendra Dynasty, with the Srivijayan rulers closely aligned with Buddhism viewing this shared religious commitment as a favorable point in their diplomatic relations with the Cholas.

The Srivijayan Influence on Nagapattinam

In 1005 CE, King Chudamanivarman of Srivijaya funded the construction of a Buddhist vihara in Nagapattinam, thereby augmenting the port's religious and cultural significance. Nearly a decade later, a representative of the Srivijayan king presented precious stones to an idol in a Nagapattinam temple, followed by the donation of lamps by a Srivijayan trader. By 1018 CE, another Srivijayan ruler, referred to as "the king of Kadaram," offered valuable gifts, including "Chinese gold" (cinakkanakam), to a local temple. Numerous scholars have observed that these contributions were not merely acts of religious devotion, but rather strategic initiatives aimed at cultivating commercial and diplomatic ties with the influential Chola kingdom. The exchange of gifts symbolized a deep and cordial relationship, reflecting a mutual commitment to peace and prosperity. Despite the Cholas' earlier military campaigns that included the sacking of Srivijayan's capital, relations between the two kingdoms eventually grew more harmonious. In 1090 CE, another king of Kadaram (whose name remains unknown) sent a mission to the Chola court, seeking confirmation from King Kulottunga I regarding the grant of villages previously allocated to the Buddhist temple constructed by Chudamanivarman in Nagapattinam, a request recorded in the Smaller Leiden Plates. As trade flourished, so too did the exchange of ideas, art, and religious practices. Trade routes not only facilitated the movement of goods but also the spread of intellectual and spiritual knowledge. This dynamic was exemplified by the Chola expeditions to the Srivijaya Empire, undertaken to secure trade routes, assert leverage in the Chinese trade network, or to procure supplies from Kadaram. Buddhist monks and scholars frequently traversed the Indian Ocean, moving between India and Southeast Asia, thereby promoting Buddhism and enhancing cross-cultural interactions.

Conclusion

The historical study of Buddhist heritage in Nagapattinam illuminates the district's central role as a pivotal maritime nexus, where the worlds of trade, culture, and religion intertwined to shape its unique and lasting legacy. Strategically located between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, Nagapattinam emerged as a crucial port that facilitated not only the exchange of goods but also the free flow of ideas, philosophies, and religious practices. This thriving exchange was especially evident in the dissemination of Buddhism, a religion that found a significant base in Nagapattinam during the 10th and 11th centuries. The strategic location of Nagapattinam, coupled with its prominence in maritime trade, allowed it to become a focal point for cultural and religious exchanges, particularly through its

connections with the Srivijayan Empire and the Chola Kingdom. One of the key factors in the flourishing of Buddhist influence in Nagapattinam was the active involvement of the Srivijayan rulers, who played a critical role in supporting Buddhist institutions in the Chola kingdom.

The construction of Buddhist viharas, along with the donation of precious gifts to local temples, demonstrated the significant cultural and religious ties that developed between the Srivijayan and Chola realms. These actions were not simply acts of religious devotion; rather, they were intricately connected to broader political and commercial objectives, where cultural diplomacy was recognized as a powerful tool for strengthening ties and ensuring mutual prosperity. Through these acts of support and patronage, the Srivijayan rulers were able to solidify their relationship with the Chola kingdom, which, in turn, facilitated the spread of Buddhist practices and teachings across the region. Furthermore, the Buddhist presence in Nagapattinam during this period was deeply intertwined with the political and economic ambitions of both the Chola and Srivijayan rulers. Their cultural exchanges and diplomatic efforts were not limited to religious practices but also extended to trade and military considerations. The Chola Empire's incursions into Srivijaya, while initially characterized by conflict, eventually gave way to a more cooperative relationship, with both sides recognizing the benefits of maintaining peaceful and prosperous ties. This resilience in cultural and religious exchange, even amidst periods of military tension, highlights the enduring nature of these diplomatic efforts and their long-lasting impact on the region's socio-political landscape.

The legacy of Buddhism in Nagapattinam is a testament to the broader cultural dynamism of the Indian Ocean world, a region where the movement of goods, ideas, and people facilitated the flourishing of diverse traditions. Nagapattinam's role as a center for Buddhist heritage, coupled with its strategic importance as a key node in maritime trade routes, placed it at the heart of cross-cultural exchanges that defined the region's history. This study underscores the profound and far-reaching impact of these maritime exchanges on the development of religious, cultural, and political landscapes, offering a deeper understanding of how trade, religion, and politics intersected to shape the heritage of Nagapattinam and its surrounding regions. The continued exploration of these interconnected dynamics provides invaluable insights into the complexity of historical interactions in the Indian Ocean world and highlights the enduring significance of Nagapattinam as a site of cultural convergence and exchange.

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