

Sacred Geography and Tamil Saivism: Temple, Landscape, and Memory in Thevaram Hymns

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *Thevaram consists of hymns by three Nayanmars (Appar, Sambandar, and Sundarar) who praise Shiva and also lay the cement for building a 'sacred geography' for the beginning of Tamil Saivism. This paper focuses on Thevaram Hymns and looks at the cross-section of elements of devotion, memory and landscape of Tamil Nadu. The Thevaram song fully and theologically sanctifies the Tamil landscape including rivers, hills, towns, cremation grounds and temples into a living a map of Theolog. The Thevaram anchors abstract religious ideas to a concrete physical location via its notes and descriptions of various the locations. Devotees were then able to experience the Divine in an active (via songs, personal memory and pilgrimages) authentic way.*

Methodology: *In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.*

Analysis/ Results: *The songs of the Thevaram initiated a highly decentralized, yet simultaneously unified, Shaivism world. This world was a tangible manifestation where the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human, coexisted and interacted within the same geographical loci. This study attempts to illustrate the importance of Thevaram to Indian Knowledge Systems and to contemporary religion as an embodied practice, all within the frameworks of spatial religion, memory studies, and lived theology.*

Originality/ values: *Thevaram's enduring strength is the extent to which it makes the land of Tamil Nadu an active locus of Saiva spiritual imagination. This paper suggests that the Thevaram's 'sacred geography' functions as an 'affective archive' of devotional routinization and the crystallization of communal identity.*

Type of Paper: *Exploratory Research.*

Keywords: Thevaram; Tamil Saivism; Sacred Geography; Bhakti; Cultural Memory

1. INTRODUCTION :

Tamil Saivism stands as a profoundly regional yet philosophically rich religious tradition in South Asia, centered on the devotional hymns known as Thevaram. This corpus is unique in its fusion of theology with geography: rather than establishing abstract metaphysical systems, Thevaram anchors the divine presence of Siva in specific physical locations. These include riverside temples, hill-shrines, dense forests, and populated urban centers, thereby transforming space itself into a medium of divine revelation. The Nayanmars encountered Śiva not as an abstraction, but tangibly—in the sacred dance of Chidambaram, along the banks of the Kāveri River, and within the singing streets of holy towns [1-4].

This emphasis on spatial orientation reflects the core *bhakti* ethos, where devotion is a lived, performed, and remembered journey across sacred places. Here, pilgrimage serves as a spiritual lesson, and collective memory becomes the foundation of theology. The hymns effectively function as oral cartography, guiding devotees through a consecrated Tamil landscape while simultaneously strengthening communal solidarity and ethical principles. This approach offers a powerful alternative

to models of religious transmission that prioritize written texts, highlighting the crucial roles of performance, place, and emotional connection (*affect*) [5-9].

Against the backdrop of increasing scholarly focus on "lived religion" and "sacred space," Thevaram offers fertile ground for interpretation as a spatial text. This paper contributes to this evolving discussion by investigating how Thevaram both sacralises the physical landscape and acts as a repository of cultural memory. It posits that these hymns construct a devotional cartography that is simultaneously rooted in history, infused with emotion, and defined by theological significance. By grounding Saiva devotion in concrete, tangible locales, Thevaram has ensured the enduring, dynamic continuity of Tamil across centuries [10-11].

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

(1) Historical Context and Canon Formation:

K. A. Nilakanta Sastri situates Thevaram within early medieval Tamil society, emphasizing its role in consolidating Saivism through temple networks and royal patronage [12].

(2) Bhakti and Lived Theology:

Scholars such as Karen Pechilis highlight bhakti as an experiential mode, where place and emotion mediate divine intimacy rather than philosophical abstraction [13].

(3) Music, Performance, and Space:

P. Sambamoorthy and later musicologists stress how hymn-singing in temples transforms architecture into acoustic theology, reinforcing sacred geography [14].

(4) Memory and Cultural Identity:

Recent cultural historians read Thevaram as an archive of Tamil collective memory, preserving regional identities through sacred placenames and narratives [15-18].

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

- (1) To analyze how natural landscapes such as rivers, hills, forests, and cremation grounds are theologized in the *Thevaram*, revealing a distinctly Tamil Saiva understanding of nature as a living medium of divine presence.
- (2) To examine the role of temple-centered devotion in Thevaram hymns in shaping sacred towns and regional religious networks, highlighting how architecture, ritual, and hymnody together construct enduring centers of Saiva worship.
- (3) To investigate the functions of pilgrimage, musical performance, and collective singing in Thevaram as mechanisms for preserving communal memory and transmitting Saiva values across generations.
- (4) To assess how Thevaram's sacred geography contributes to the continuity and resilience of Tamil Saiva identity, enabling the tradition to remain socially rooted, culturally cohesive, and spiritually dynamic over time.

4. METHODOLOGY :

In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected through keyword-based searches on Google and Google Scholar, as well as AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted in accordance with the paper's objectives [19-26].

5. THE SACRALISED LANDSCAPE OF THEVARAM: SHIVA'S PRESENCE IN RIVERS, HILLS, AND FORESTS :

The 7th-9th century *Thevaram* hymns, composed by the Nayanars (Sambandar, Appar, and Sundarar), are a foundational text of Tamil *bhakti* literature. Far from simply describing the geography of the Tamil land, these hymns perform an act of sacralization, transforming the natural world—rivers, hills, and forests—into a vibrant, living expression of Shaiva theology. In this sacred cartography, geography is not merely a setting for devotion but the very medium through which the devotee achieves mystical union, making every natural feature a conduit for Shiva's dynamic presence [10-11].

Rivers: The Flow of Divine Grace:

In *Thevaram*, rivers are theological narratives in motion, never just physical bodies of water. The Ganga, eternally held within Shiva's matted locks, establishes a core theological principle: Shiva, the container

of transcendent power (symbolized by the *moksha*-giving celestial river), actively channels that grace into the immanent, earthly realm. Thus, the river symbolizes divine grace descending from the transcendent to the human.

The Nayanars' devotion is also profoundly rooted in their immediate surroundings. Tamil rivers like the Kaveri, Penner, and Vaigai are celebrated with equal reverence. Described as "cool," "sparkling," and "prosperity-bestowing," they embody Shiva's generative and life-sustaining aspect (*Srishiti*). Bathing in these waters transcends mere physical cleansing; it is a ritual participation in the flow of divine grace. Temple sites on their banks, such as Thiruvaiyaru ("the place of the five rivers"), become *tirthas*—sacred crossing points. The river's physical journey from its source to the sea is a metaphor for the soul's spiritual journey from bondage to liberation, guided by Shiva.

Hills: Steadfastness and the Axis-Mundi:

Hills and mountains provide the stable, vertical axis (*axis-mundi*) of this theology. Arunachala (Tiruvannamalai) is the supreme example, famously hailed by Appar as "fire" and "the form of light." This hill is not merely a residence for Shiva; it is Shiva, manifested as a limitless column of light (*Lingodbhavamurti*). This identification elevates the geological feature to a *swayambhu* (self-manifest) icon—a natural *lingam* piercing the earth. Consequently, the pilgrimage of circumambulation (*girivalam*) around the hill is a circumambulation of the divine itself.

Other peaks, like Kalahasti and Tirukkolakka, are praised as "peaks of glory," representing steadfastness, eternity, and a critical vantage point. They lift the devotee's vision from the mundane plains to the transcendental. The physical act of climbing is an allegory for the arduous path of devotion, culminating in a panoramic vision of the divine that unifies the landscape below.

Forests: The Theatre of Cosmic Play:

Forests and groves (*vanam, tuyil*) function as the lush, dynamic theatres for Shiva's cosmic play (*lila*). These are not forbidding wildernesses but sacred orchards (*nandavanam*) teeming with life: the buzz of bees, the cries of peacocks and parrots, and the scent of *kongu* and *campaka* flowers. This environment represents the fecund, unpredictable, and awe-inspiring nature of the divine, a space where conventional order dissolves, and direct, mystical encounter becomes possible.

It is in these groves that Shiva performs his most iconic acts: as the wandering ascetic in the Pine Forest (*Daruvanam*), as the rider of the bull amidst *kallala* trees, and as the Dancer in the *tillai* forest (Chidambaram). Wandering through this sylvan tapestry, the devotee experiences Shiva's pervasive presence in every leaf, flower, and creature—a Shaiva theology of pervasive sacrality.

Synthesis: An Integrated Eco-Theology:

The *Thevaram* ultimately synthesizes these three elements into a unified theological vision. The descent of the river's grace, the steadfast ascension of the hill, and the enveloping, playful immanence of the forest are not discrete truths but complementary facets of the one Shiva. The entire landscape is transformed into a *mandala*—a sacred map for contemplation.

For the Nayanars, to sing of these natural features is to invoke the divine; to traverse them in pilgrimage is to navigate the contours of God's own body. This profound eco-theology teaches that the divine is not detached from the world but profoundly within it—rippling in the water, rising in the stone, and pulsating in the green heart of the forest. The *Thevaram* thus offers a timeless vision where the endeavour to know the land and the endeavour to know God are inseparable.

6. THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF THE THEVARAM: HOW DEVOTION FORGED HOLY TOWNS :

The *Thevaram* hymns, composed by the Tamil Shaiva saints (Nayanars) like Sambandar, Appar, and Sundarar, were more than abstract praise; they were a systematic and powerful force that shaped the religious landscape of Tamil Nadu. By anchoring devotion to the physical structure of the temple, the hymns transformed ordinary geographical locations into revered, pilgrimage-worthy sacred towns (*pati*), thereby establishing a vast network of spiritual power [27-29].

Localization of the Divine: The Temple as Axis Mundi:

At the heart of *Thevaram* theology is the concept of *stalasthanam*, the specific sacred site. The saints did not sing of an ethereal deity, but of Shiva as the distinct presiding Lord of a particular temple, such as "*Tillaiavanamathan*" (Chidambaram) or "*Arunachaleshwarar*" (Arunachala). Each verse meticulously addresses the deity of a unique temple, celebrating its local myth (*sthalapurana*), its enshrined form (*lingam* or *murti*), and its physical environment. This practice served a critical

theological function: it proclaimed that the infinite, formless Absolute (*Para Shiva*) purposefully made itself accessible in finite, localized forms (*Sthala Shiva*) for the salvation of devotees. Consequently, the temple became the devotee's Kailash—the central point (*axis mundi*) where the divine and the terrestrial intersected.

The Nayanars' Role in Urban Sanctification:

This relentless localization through devotional poetry directly spurred the creation and growth of sacred towns. By celebrating the physical features of a place—its tank, groves, and bustling streets—the Nayanars inscribed profound spiritual significance onto its topography. For instance, a town like Thiruvavur, praised for its spacious *Kamalalayam* tank and its deity (Thyagaraja), derived its sanctity equally from its physical structures and Appar's verses. The hymns functioned as theological charters and divine promotion, attracting royal patronage, pilgrims, and economic investment. As a result, kings and chieftains enlarged and beautified temples that the saints had authenticated. The temple complex subsequently became the central nucleus around which the town's social, economic, and cultural life was organized, housing markets, monastic centers (*mathas*), and streets named for the temple deities.

Canonical Pilgrimage and a New Shaiva Center

Furthermore, the *Thevaram* established a definitive pilgrimage circuit by celebrating 274 *paadal petra sthalangal* (places sung in the hymns). Inclusion in this list represented the highest sanctification a town could achieve. Pilgrims used the hymns as spiritual maps, physically traversing the geography of devotion laid out by the saints. This process elevated places like Chidambaram (center of the cosmic dance), Tiruvannamalai (the fiery column of light), and Madurai (seat of the Sangam poets) into major religious destinations, their identities permanently linked to their temple's legend and the saints' poetry. Ultimately the *Thevaram* movement fundamentally shifted the focus of Tamil Shaivism away from remote asceticism and Vedic fire rituals toward the community-centered temple within an urban or semi-urban context. The sacred town was the tangible manifestation of this theology—a place where the divine, as immortalized in the hymns, was perpetually resident and accessible. The temple provided the anchor, the hymns offered its sacred resonance, and the thriving town that emerged around it stood as proof of a successful devotional ecosystem. Through the *Thevaram*, the Nayanars didn't just express their faith; they fundamentally built a civilization centered on the divine temple.

7. THE THEVARAM TRADITION: A DYNAMIC SCRIPT OF PILGRIMAGE, PERFORMANCE, AND MEMORY :

The *Thevaram* hymns, the bedrock of Tamil Shaivism, are not merely ancient texts but the active blueprint for a continuously enacted tradition. This tradition dynamically intertwines pilgrimage (*tirthayatra*), embodied performance, and the constant revitalization of communal memory. Through these integrated practices, the theological essence of the hymns is physically inscribed onto the sacred landscape, the devotee's body, and the collective Shaiva identity [30].

The Journey: A Kinetic Map of Devotion

Pilgrimage, as charted by the *Thevaram*, serves as a physical expression of faith. The Shaiva saints—the Nayanars—themselves traversed the land, establishing the journey as the model for seeking Shiva's divine vision (*darshan*). Their hymns create a sacred geography, naming and exalting the 274 *paadal petra sthalangal* (temples praised in song), thereby choreographing the paths for subsequent generations.

This is more than simple travel; it is a physical re-tracing of the saints' own ecstatic encounters, effectively collapsing the temporal gap. By walking the streets of Tiruvavur, circling the Arunachala hill, or bathing in the Kaveri at Thiruvaiyaru, pilgrims step into the footsteps of figures like Appar and Sambandar. The pilgrimage circuit transforms into a spatial narrative of faith, where the geography itself recounts the story of Shiva's grace. The challenges inherent in the journey mirror the saints' own trials, making the pilgrim's body an active instrument and offering of piety.

The Performance: Making the Past Audible:

The physical journey is inseparable from its vocal performance. The *Thevaram* hymns were intended for ecstatic singing (*pan*), carefully set to specific melodic modes (*ragas*) and rhythms (*talas*), not for silent reading. Their performance is an immediate re-enactment of the original moment of divine inspiration.

Within temple rituals, the *otuvans* (reciters) chant the hymns during daily *pujas*, their voices functioning as a vehicle for the saints' presence, thereby making the sacred past immediately audible. The annual

tiruvila (temple festival) is a large-scale performance where the processional deity (*utsavamurti*) tours the town.

The *Thevaram* hymns serve as the constant soundtrack to this mobile *darshan*. This performance extends to individual devotees, who frequently sing the hymns as they approach a shrine, their voices joining the imaginary chorus of the Nayanars. This embodied, vocal performance is a vital technology of memory, internalizing the sacred landscape through melody and breath.

The Memory: A Participatory Sung History:

It is through this cyclical, performed pilgrimage that communal memory is both forged and sustained. The *Thevaram* functions as the community's "sung history." The hymns encode not only the myths of Shiva but also the historical context of early Shaivism, including its struggles against Jain and Buddhist ascetics, the accounts of the saints' miraculous deeds, and the patronage of specific rulers.

By performing these hymns at the sacred sites, the community ritually reaffirms its theological and social origins. Every pilgrimage narrates the story anew, and every festival re-enacts the triumph of *bhakti*. This memory is profoundly participatory, not merely archival. A devotee participating in pulling the temple chariot (*ther*) is not just performing a ritual duty; they are physically connecting to the countless generations who have done the same, embodying a shared identity as "the servants of the servants" (*tondar*) of Shiva, just as the Nayanars styled themselves.

A Self-Perpetuating Circle of Devotion

The *Thevaram* tradition thus establishes a self-perpetuating circle of devotion: the hymns inspire pilgrimage, the pilgrimage necessitates performance, and the performance in turn regenerates communal memory, which fuels further pilgrimage. The sacred town is far more than a setting from the hymns; it is the living stage where the hymns are eternally re-validated. The pilgrim, through these performative acts, becomes a co-participant with the saints in a timeless narrative (*itihasa*). This tradition ensures that Shaiva devotion remains a lived, collective, and deeply corporeal experience—a memory preserved not solely in books, but in the soles of feet, the rhythm of breath, and the united voice of the community singing its way toward the divine.

8. SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND THE CONTINUITY OF TAMIL SAIVA IDENTITY IN THE THEVARAM :

The *Thevaram* hymns of the Tamil Saiva saints—Sambandar, Appar, and Sundarar—are a foundational text for Tamil religious identity, not merely describing a landscape but systematically consecrating a sacred geography. This network of places, known as *paadal Petra sthalangal* (places sung in the hymns), has been the bedrock for the continuity of Tamil Saiva identity for over a millennium, anchoring faith in specific, tangible locations [31-33].

This creation of a sacred map served as a powerful act of cultural consolidation. By composing the *Thevaram* in the vernacular Tamil, the saints embedded divinity within the familiar Tamil milieu, moving spiritual authority away from purely Sanskritic or ascetic traditions. They transformed the Tamil land (*Tamilakam*) into a *devabhumi* (land of the gods) by singing into sanctity its rivers (like the Kaveri and Tamiraparani) and hills (like Arunachala). By naming 274 specific sites, they established a cohesive spiritual network and pilgrimage route, asserting that liberation (*moksha*) was locally accessible.

The resulting sacralised landscape became the bedrock of identity continuity. While political kingdoms like the Cholas and Pallavas changed, the sacred geography provided a constant frame of reference. The temples celebrated in the hymns became fixed points of cultural memory, preserving art, architecture, music, and dance as offerings to the *Thevaram* deities. The ritual chanting of the hymns (*otuvams*) acted as a daily, aural reaffirmation of this sacred order. To be a Tamil Saiva means to know this map, orienting oneself within these *shakti sthalas* (power places) and tracing one's lineage back to the original singers.

Furthermore, this geography offered a template for renewal and resistance. The canonical status of temples in the *Thevaram* provided the divine mandate and impetus for kings and communities to rebuild them after neglect or damage. In the face of homogenizing modern forces, this deeply emplaced identity serves as a resilient counter-narrative: an assertion that "our God is here." Pilgrimage (*tirthayatra*) is the living enactment of this identity, a physical journey that continuously educates each new generation in its sacred history.

Ultimately, the *Thevaram* sacred geography collapses the distinction between the cosmic and the local. It presents grand theological concepts—like Tiruvannamalai as the fiery *axis mundi* (*lingodbhavamurti*) and Chidambaram as the center of the cosmic dance—as both immanent and accessible through local specificity. The continuity of Tamil Saiva identity is found in this synthesis: a portable faith carried in hymns, yet irrevocably bound to specific, named places. The land itself is rendered a scripture, the temples its verses, and the pilgrimage a perpetual act of reading and remembrance, ensuring the Tamil Saiva self is always located within a living, sung, and sanctified homeland.

9. THEVARAM: GEOGRAPHY, DEVOTION, AND IDENTITY :

The hymns of *Thevaram* transform the Tamil landscape into a living, sacred text, a convergence point for geography, devotion, and collective memory. By specifically naming and glorifying distinct locations, the *Nayanmars* firmly embed Saiva theology within the everyday environment. This process allows devotees to encounter the divine through the physical acts of travel, song, and remembrance [6-9].

This resulting sacred geography is not passive; it is a performative element that actively shapes ritual practices and solidifies communal identity. Functioning as essential mnemonic devices, the hymns both preserve historical consciousness and continuously invite re-enactment through the traditions of pilgrimage and music.

Ultimately, *Thevaram* sustains a Saiva world that, while decentralized, remains coherent, held together by shared landscapes and deep emotional ties. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of *Thevaram* necessitates moving beyond the mere text to engage with its spatial dimension, performance, and the lived experience of its practitioners.

The *Tēvāram* hymns reveal that Tamil Śaivism was fundamentally a geography of the sacred — every *sthalapurāna*, river bend, and granite shrine becoming a node in a living theological cartography. Appar, Sambandar, and Sundarar did not merely praise temples; they inscribed landscape into devotional memory, transforming Tamil *nādu* itself into divine body. This sacred geography remains the most enduring cognitive map of Tamil Śaiva civilisational identity.

10. CONCLUSION :

Thevaram hymns evidence the geo-poetics of sacred Tamil Saiva with the integrated dimensions of land, devotion, and memory. The hymns do not abstractly symbolically describe the land's sacralization. Instead, they do so through the experience of the rivers, the sung streets, and the people who inhabited the temples. The Sivite landscape, deeply theological, continues to practice, and, so, is accessible, renewing, and deeply pronounced. *Thevaram* hymns evoke the devoted, the prideful, the singing and non-doctrinal centralization.

Thevaram through the Indian Knowledge Systems evidences the emotional and spatial understanding as an embodied transmission. The devotion serves as a map with the hymn interwoven awareness, memory, and ethics. The sacred geography *Thevaram* is in an urban and indifferent world a model of sustainable cultural continuity, where the land is sacred, the memory is ecstatic, and spirituality is lived. The work is a reminder of the holy being in the devotion, the remembrance of the past, the walk of faith, and not being a mere concept.

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