

Burra charter, focus of Heritage conservation shifted from monuments to 'cultural significance' [3]. UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has acknowledged that social practices, rituals and festive events offer communities and individuals a sense of identity and continuity [4] [5].

At the national level too, this focus is apparent as The Ministry of Urban development (MOUD) charter [6] states that heritage is any tangible or intangible value which is passed on to us from the past. Our heritage comprises our cultural resources and our common assets which provide us with our identity and distinction. The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) in its Charter for the Conservation of Unprotected Architectural Heritage and Sites in India [7], recognises the role played by ICH in imparting unique cultural identity to communities. Mythology, customs, rituals and worship are identified as salient aspects of ICH.

These aspects are critical in the conservation of Temple towns and associated sacred landscapes, particularly in India. Cultural heritage, especially of religious built forms (as it predominates in India), has been historically important [8]. Several settlements and towns were established across the country with temples as their core and to date, many of them thrive as living heritage places of religious significance. In the case of South India, the early medieval urbanization of ancient Tamilakam (Tamil-speaking regions of South India) can be identified within a broad time span of six centuries beginning with the 7th century [9]. Rulers established numerous temples in the region to assert their sovereignty. With the temple as a core, both physically and in their operational roles, settlements arose and grew under successive rulers and kingdoms. These were the distinctive temple towns of Tamil Nadu.

Several scholars have extensively studied the temple architecture of Southern India [10] [11] [12]. Research on the associated cultural landscapes surrounding these temples and hinterland beyond is limited. As Mitchell explains, in temple towns religious processes necessitated a constant interaction between sacred and urban space [13]. Kong opines that beyond the 'officially sacred' there are indigenous sacred sites, religious schools, religious organizations and their premises (communal halls), pilgrimage routes, religious objects, memorials and roadside shrines, domestic shrines, and religious processions and festivals [14]. Bharne points out that rituals physically expand the perceived experience of a temple beyond its walls into micro and macro geography creating larger sacred landscapes [15]. Pieper refers to this as the town and the umland (that portion of land around the urban center which is linked culturally with the town as the center) and streets leading away from the temple as umland streets [16]. Thus, in the case of the temple towns religious processes, both tangible and intangible in nature, necessitate blurring of boundaries between the sacred, the settlement and beyond, all together forming the sacred

landscape.

Thus, beyond the tangible physical aspects of temples, the identity of historical religious settlements relies heavily on the process of socialization involving festivals, rituals, folklore and narratives, art and craft forms, and place visits. These cultural practices become critical in establishing and sustaining the distinctiveness of heritage places.

2. Methodology

This research paper aims to posit and to explore the relationship between the tangible and intangible aspects of a key feature of temple towns, festivals and how they play are critical to the identity of historic religious towns. This examination is done through a variety of different lenses, historical, mythological, anthropological and architectural. A case study approach was used to comprehend the entire phenomenon of festivals and their significance in the identity of historic religious towns. Case study selection was based on 4 critical values- age of the settlement, urban form attached to the temple, living rituals of continued significance and an influx of tourists, pilgrims and devotees even in the present time. The town of Thiruvavarur was chosen for the study as its antiquity goes back to the ancient text Skanda Purana (attributed to the sage Vyasa, around 1500 BCE). The original morphology of the settlement and its strong association to the temple, both in terms of its structure and its functioning still exist. Rituals and festivals carried down through the ages such as processions, temple festivals, float festivals continue to define the popular identity of Thiruvavarur. The famous Azhi Ther Thiruvizha (chariot festival) which finds reference in the verses of the Saivite saints as early as 7th CE today draws more than 2 lakh people on a single day.

This is a study of the process and precincts associated with the festival Urbanism of the Azhi Ther festival. The study was conducted in three stages. First, data was collected from archival sources related to the festival including historical background of the town and festival, reference in poetry, music, religious art, craft forms, religious texts, mythical base, social-cultural and religious significance. Second, data was collected from multiple stakeholders by creating detailed database of transcripts of interviews of experts such as priests in the temple, residents of the town, scholars from Central University, Thiruvavarur, active participants in the festival such as masons and members of various communities involved, proponents of unique religious art and craft forms of Thiruvavarur as well as officials of HR and CE. Finally, Field Visit and Data collection by the author-The Author had visited the study area from 12th -16th August 2023 (Reconnaissance study), 25-28 February 2024 (beginning of Thiruvavarur Brahmotsavam and work on the Chariot) and 18-21 March (Azhi Ther festival 2024). The data collection was done through field notes, photographs, material digitisation, semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation of Oral traditions.



Figure 2. Triplicane Varadarajaswamy temple Float Festival, SOURCE: Author



Figure 3. Mylapore Kapaleeshwarar temple procession SOURCE: Author

Festival urbanism as a ‘time out of time’ is an important attribute of Indian Festive Cities [21]. Festival events being temporal in nature, work in structuring the lives of communities besides affirming shared convictions and identities in the life in the city of those who practice them. Historically, the urban festival served as an occasion for affirming shared convictions and identities in the life of the city [22]. Singh summarised it as a ‘wholeness’ carrying the inherent and imposed spirit of ‘holiness’, which is to be called ‘sacredscapes’, and is regulated and survived by the faith involved in and the sacred rituals [23].

4. Temple Towns of Tamil Nadu

The temple towns of Tamil Nadu are considered to form a unique type of an urban settlement that emerges from a rich history and religious origin. Mitchell notes that Tamil Nadu preserves a remarkable and rigorous religious tradition which has dominated the everyday lives of the people, inspiring major building projects [13]. The built form and its associated festive events, the constant juxtaposition of Time over Space, the metaphysical and the symbolic meaning of spaces all putting together

constitute the Collective Urban form of a Temple Town [24]. Thilakam points out that medieval temple towns of Tamil Nadu in South India evolved under the predominant influence of religion and bore this symbolic imprint in their urban form [25]. The genotype of Hindu sacred space inscribed on the urban form of the settlement lends a distinct spatial identity to these towns. Rulers built temples dedicated to either Shiva or Vishnu as the principal deity in the proximity of rivers, accompanied by the establishment of multiple religious settlements in the region. The earliest inscriptions about temple towns are from the reign of the Chola ruler Parantaka I (AD 907-955). The Kaveri River delta saw the rise of several such religious towns including Tanjavur, Kumbakonam, Mannargudi, Kancheepuram and Thiruvavur.

Temples became institutions playing a dual role, religious and political. As Heitzman explains, temples developed as a central core of ‘ritual polity’, a complex phenomenon that enabled the ruler to establish legitimate control over his territory, subordinating lesser rulers and the people through a sociocultural formation rather than military [26]. This is evident in the morphology of temple towns dominated by the temple complex, physically, visually and symbolically.

5. Temple Town of Thiruvavur

The town of Thiruvavur also known as Arur (Arur), Thiruvavur, Kamalalayaksetra (holy place that is an abode of lotuses), famed for its Thyagarajaswami temple, is situated on the banks of the Odambokki river (a distributary of Cauvery) in the Thiruvavur district in Tamil Nadu. (Fig 4) First mention of Thiruvavur is in the Nagara Kanda (Tirtha-māhātmya or greatness of sacred place) of Skanda Puranam (attributed to sage Vyasa). The terms *thiru* and *ūr* denote the sacred prefix and type of settlement, respectively (Thirumoorthy, 2020). Thiruvavur was an important religious centre during the bhakthi movement (a theistic devotional trend that emerged around 6th CE) and is alluded to in the Saiva canonical work, Tevaram by Nayanmars (poet-saints in Tamil Shaiva literature, 7th–8th CE) Appar, Sundarar, Manikkavacakar and Thirugnyanasambanthar. Hence it is referred to as Padalpetrastalam (temple revered in the verses of Nayanmars). The trinity of Carnatic music, Shri Thyagarajar, Shri Muthuswamy Dhikshithar and Shri. Syma Shastri (18th century) were born here. Further, Thiruvavur is closely linked with the Thyagaraja cult, a devotional tradition that centered on the worship of Lord Thyagaraja, a form of Lord Shiva closely linked to the religious heritage of the region.

Residents of the town, religious heads and devotees who regularly visit Thiruvavur, when questioned, strongly attribute the identity of the town to its Religious, Historical and socio cultural dimensions including the Azhi Ther festival.

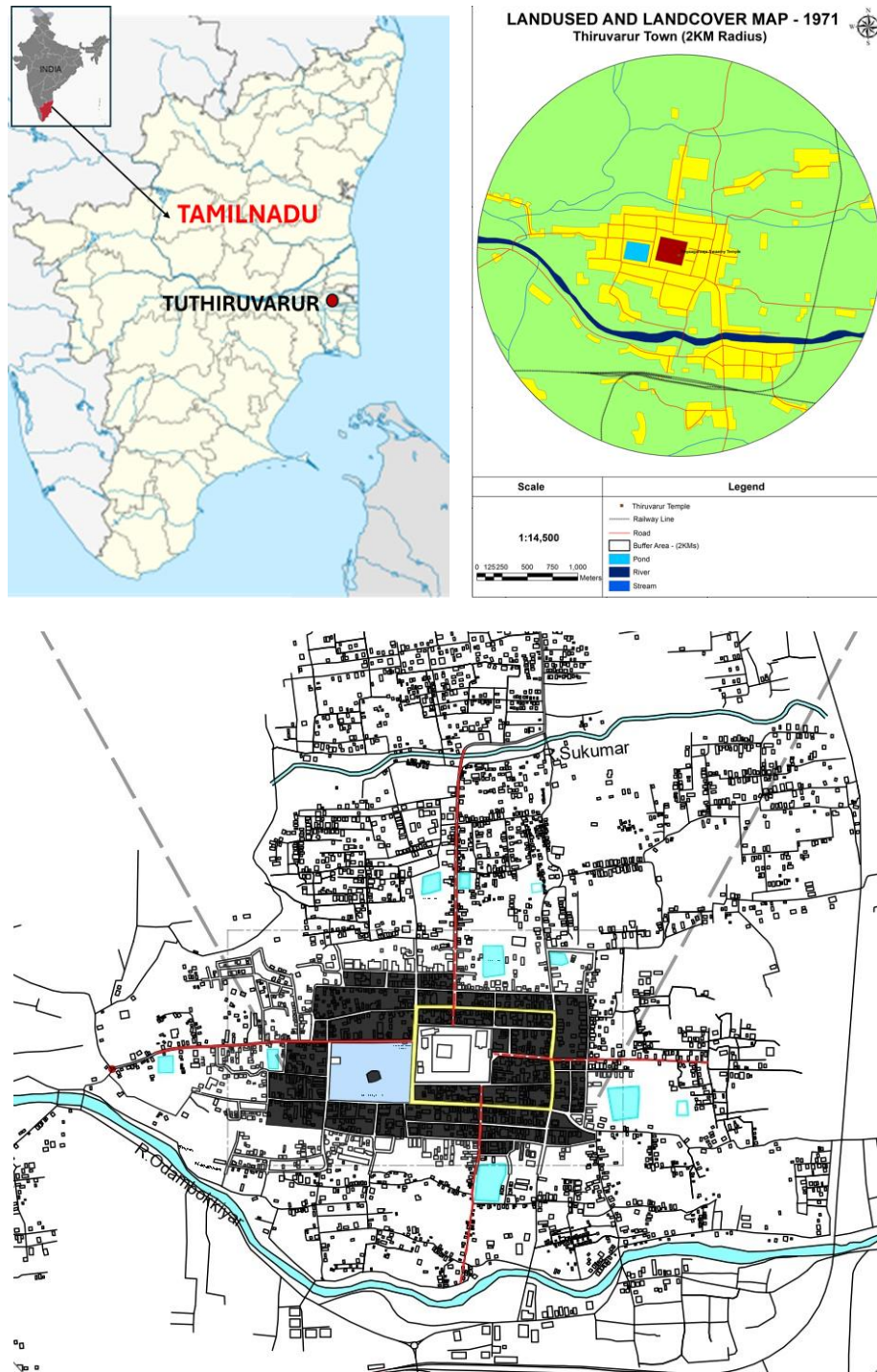


Figure 4. Thiruvur town location, GIS Landuse map and extent. Source: Author

As is seen in Fig 5, the morphology Thiruvur exhibits-

- **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CENTRE:** This symbolic point represents the geometric, topological, and conceptual heart of the city, regarded as a place of utmost sacredness-The temple of Lord Thyagaraja
- **SETTLEMENT PATTERN FURTHER EMPHASISING THE CENTRE:** Evident in the strict orientation of the settlement parallel to the temple complex. Symbolically, the ‘Sannidhi’ street,’ facing east is seen spatially as an extension of the temple’s sanctum sanctorum.
- **AXIAL ORGANIZATION:** Originating from the entrance gates (gopurams) of the temple and radiating out into the urban space forming the primary physical and visual axes.
- **CONCENTRIC ORGANIZATION- PATH OF CIRCUMAMBULATION/PROCESSIONS:** Streets that run parallel to the temple complex's wall create

a concentric pattern, symbolically reinforcing the center and simultaneously creating the paths of circumambulation.

- **TEMPLE DOMINATING THE SKYLINE OF THE TOWN:** Appar (in Thevaram verses) describes Thiruvavur as a flourishing town with the skyline dominated by towering structures of the temple and

the fluttering of the flag in air. This continues to date.

Unregulated development and changes in landuse and built form have altered this distinct morphology of the historic core of Thiruvavur, as is apparent from GIS maps in Fig 6.

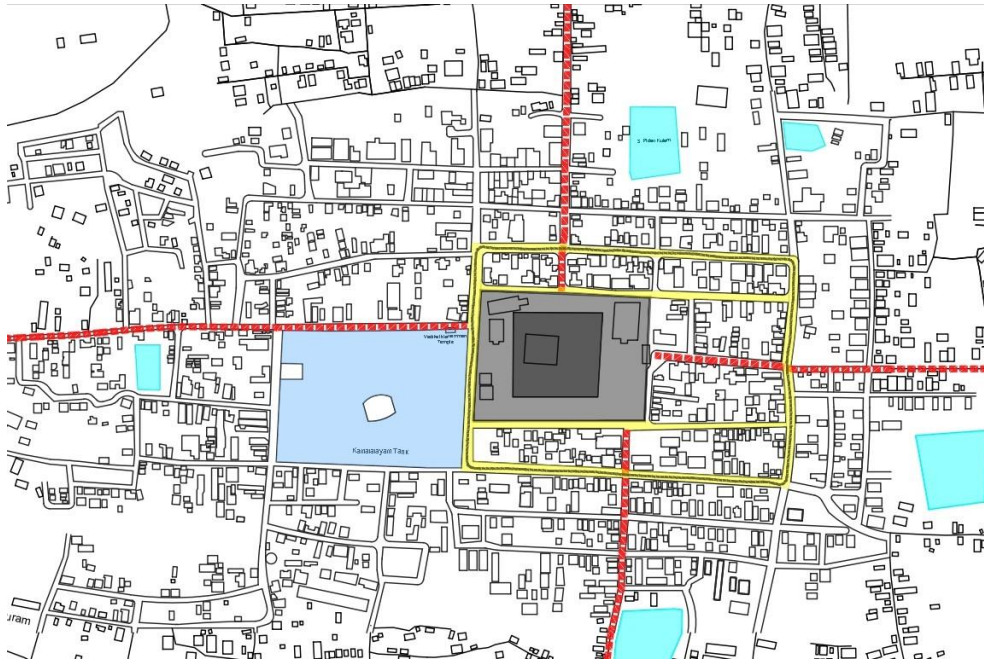


Figure 5. Settlement structure of Thiruvavur with emphasis on the center (temple), the axial and concentric organization. Source: Author

Figure 6. Landuse landcover changes in Thiruvavur. Source: Author

5.1. Thiruvavarur Brahmotsavam and Azhi Ther Festival

Festivals and rituals in Indian Temple towns embody the varied complex yet structured relationships between the religious traditions and socio-cultural patterns. As Bharne posits, symbolically they commemorate man's connection with the universe through choreographed enactments, many meticulously based on the positions and alignments of celestial bodies [15]. Thiruvavarur has a structured annual religious calendar indicating several rituals and festivals categorized into daily, special and annual events, many of which entail movement of the deity beyond the temple complex thereby creating significant semi sacred precincts beyond the walls of the temple complex.

Bharne posits the emergence of sacredscapes when ritual Geographies at the Macro, Meso and Micro level merge as is indicated in Fig 7. In Thiruvavarur, the Utsavar (deity in a portable festival form) is taken out from the temple complex in established processional routes. This process redefines the boundary of the sacred core and establishes extended Kshetrams (sacred landscapes) spatially merging the Macro (Regional), Meso (Settlement) and Micro dimensions (Temple complex). This process is complex due to the dynamic and temporally varying nature of the tangible and intangible aspects associated with the event, as is the case in the Thiruvavarur Brahmotsavam and the Azhi Ther festival therein.

As Davis observes the most dramatic manifestations of public religiosity are the great annual temple festivals known in Sanskrit as Mahotsava or Brahmotsava and in Tamil as Thiruvizha [27]. He looks at festival processions as a widespread form of cultural performance in India. The occurrence of the festival on an annual cycle brings into focus the aspect of temporality. Oral traditions carried down through the ages (senior priests) explain the festival as a means for Lord Shiva to transfer his presence from the immobile deity within the temple (Moolavar) to a variety of processional forms, (Utsavar) for him to proceed from the sacred center to the outer regions of the ritual space. This extended region is the 'Stalam' or 'Kshetram' (sacred landscape) and includes dynamic salient sacred nodes, precincts (Fig 8A, 8B, 8C) being formed beyond the temple boundary due to the process of transfer of sacrality.

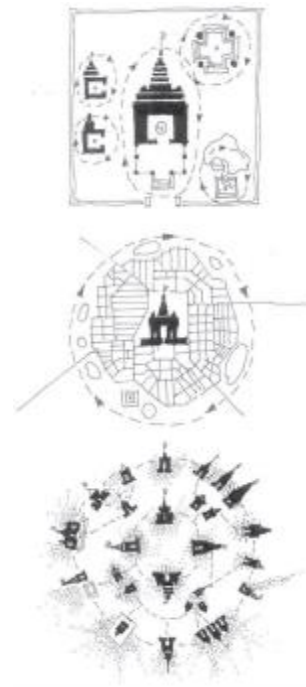
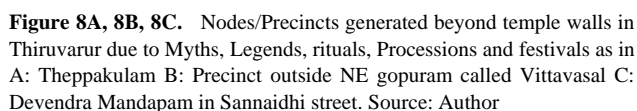


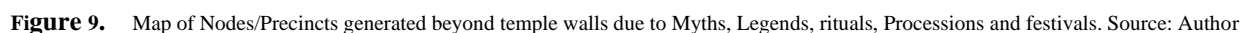
Figure 7. Ritual geographies in space from top to bottom, micro- around a temple to meso -around habitat settlement and macro across the region diagram. All 3 scales merge sacred urban and natural space into ritualsapes. (Bharne, 2012)





deity beyond the walls of the temple. For instance, on the day prior to Dwjaroahanam, the festivities shift to the abode (now a temple) of the Nayanmar Sundarar who is looked upon as a close associate of lord Thyagaraja (blurring of distinction between God and mortals) and his wife Paravaiyar [28]. Semi sacred precincts emerge due to transfer of sacrality to spaces, natural elements artifacts, and through movement of Gods beyond the boundary of the temple (Fig 9, 10).

This manifestation of sacrality beyond the temple occurs at the regional level too- Lord Chandikeshwara (an associate of lord Shiva) is carried in procession to Marudhapattinam, a nearby village to paying obeisance to Lord Shani as a prerequisite for the Brahmotsavam. Further, as per an associated myth, food grains for the festival are brought by Shiva's Boothaganas (attendants) from another nearby village called Kundaiyur. Regional linkages are thus established by Myths, traditions and rituals, generating semi sacred precincts that redefine the extent of the Kshetram.



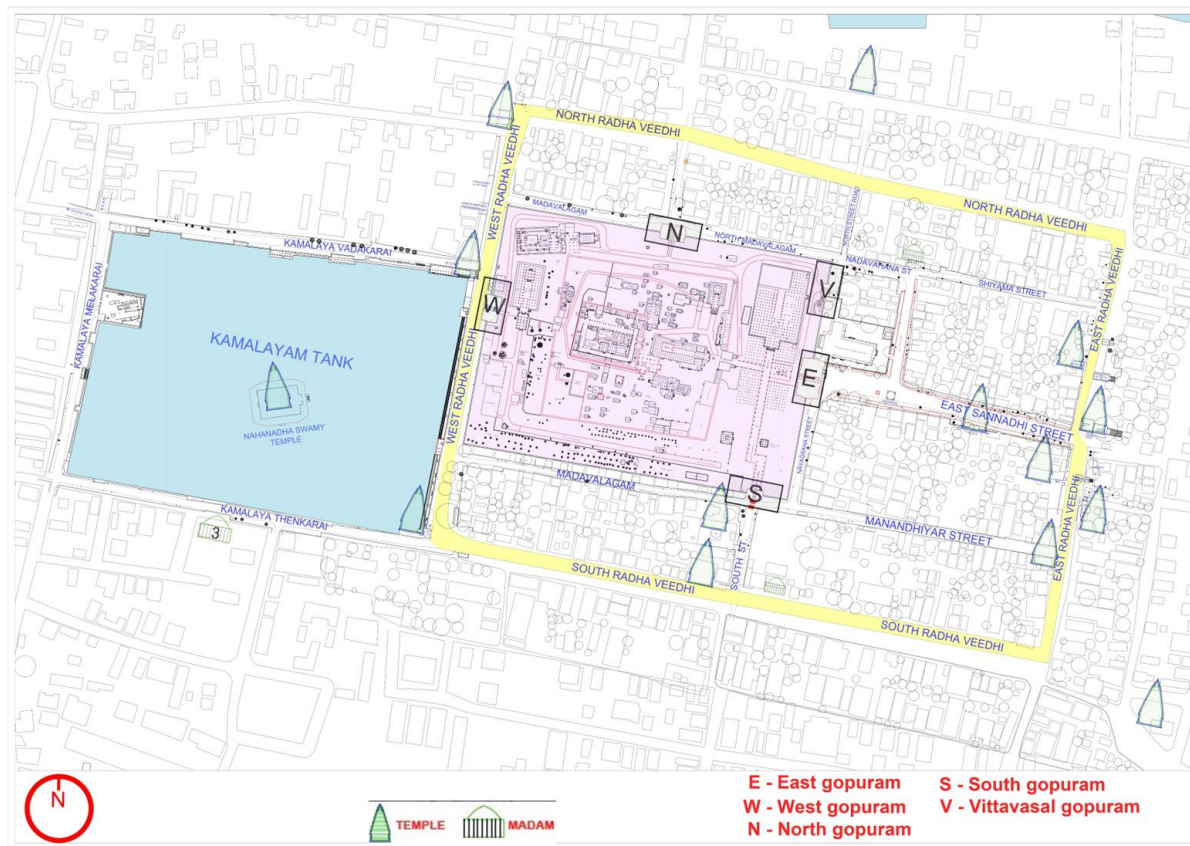


Figure 10. Map with all entrance gates to the temple. Source: Author

5.2. Historicity of Azhi Ther Festival

Festivals provide many points of identification and contribute to the birth of non-mainstream urban identities [29]. Corroborating the popular identity of the town is the popular saying “Tiruvārūrterāḷaku” meaning, “beauty is the Ārūr chariot”. The Thiruvavur chariot festival, on the penultimate day of the Brahmotsavam in the month of Panguni (March, April) is extolled in the hymns of the bhakti saints, the Nayanmar (in the Tevaram hymns). Sekkizhar (a saint during the reign of Kulottunga Chola II) in Periya Puranam gives a detailed description of Arur Azhi Ther (chariot) in verse form [28].

The saint Thirunavukarasar (Nayanmar saint) in his Tevarapadikam describes the temple car known as ĀZHITHĒR. The Mahotsavavidhi, a twelfth-century Sanskrit text, written by Acarya Aghorasiva in 1157CE during the reign of Rajaraja II is a text of rules or prescriptions still followed to guide the performance of the brahmotsavam festival [30]. This reference to ancient texts for procedural aspects and description in the works of Nayanmars and Deekshithar krithis (musical compositions) renders the event with immense value as intangible manifestation of the culture in the region.

As Branfoot explains, festivals occur as part of the lunar calendar, often in the first day of the month or the new moon and as local events dramatizing the myths of

deity and temple site, a central feature of most festivals is the procession (Purappatu, ‘going forth’ or Eluntharul, ‘graciously appear’) [31]. In the Tevaram hymns, the mythological basis of the chariot festival is associated with Lord Shiva setting out to fight with Tripurasuras (three demons) with the earth as his chariot, Brahma as the charioteer the four Vedas as horses and the sun and the moon as Chariot’s wheels [30]. The Thiruvavur Ther Festival is renowned for its large-scale celebration involving the colossal chariot (ther) of the deity and its procession is believed to end evil and ensure peace and prosperity as is recommended in āgamas and vāstu- śilpa-śāstras. Balasubramanian explains that Chariots are used as moving temples enabling transfer of sacrality beyond the temple and their design and construction are based on texts such as Manasaram, Vijaya Tantra and Rathalakshanam [32].

The antiquity of the festival is further established by the Padigam (verse) by Thirunavukarasar stating that the temple car was drawn by prancing male horses with the amazing god (Viththakan) as witnessed him at Thiruvavur and mentions that the streets around the temple enabled the temple car procession (therurumneduvīdhi) and the procession of God [28]. There is a reference to the festival which took place in 1746 in one of the Modi (Marathi) documents currently preserved in the Saraswati Mahal Library in Thanjavur Palace.

5.3. Tangible and Intangible Aspects in the Preparation of the AZHITHER

The festivals celebrated in Tamil Nadu set the background for a detailed analysis of the usage of ritual spaces and their contribution to the urban form, structure and shape of a religious centre [33]. The Tamil Lunar calendar has 12 months with Lunar mansions called nakshatrams (stars) further dividing the sky into 27 sections based on moon's motion. The symbolic start of the Azhi Ther begins on the auspicious Poosam star of the month Thai (Jan-Feb) with a ritual called Pandhakaal (pre festival ritual). The Azhi Ther is one of the largest chariots in India and weighs around 350 tonne and has a height of 96 feet. The base of the chariot in wood (Ulukkumaram) is called Peedam, a twenty-sided pattern while the superstructure supported by palm slats and long poles tied with bamboo and ropes is called Kattumanam. The Kalasam (finial) is placed at the top of the peak. The Chariot's roof is covered with coconut leaves and then decorated. Four floating horses (representing the four Vedas), made of bamboo cane, straw, netti (pith), paper, etc. are tied in front of the chariot in a flowing position near the top floor. The entire process of building the chariot takes around eight weeks.

An image of Brahman sitting as the driver of these horses is made of bamboo, netti, and paper and attached to the front of the chariot. On either side of the dais featuring God's idols are placed two gigantic Dwarabalagar (entrance guardians) figures made of netti and paper. The traditional integrated efforts and craftsmanship of skilled artisans, sculptors, carpenters, blacksmiths, wooden horse makers, masons building the roof of the chariot, and the design, weight, and movements of the parts created by them with mathematical precision are critical for Ratharohana (temple car procession). These and the myths and rituals involved are significant intangible dimensions of the festival.

5.4. Process and Procession of the Azhi Ther Festival

Scores of devotees arrive and the Kshetram is animated by the devotees moving inwards 'Ula' and by the processions of the gods themselves within the temple complex and moving outwards and around the town. Table 1 illustrates sequentially the entire festival of Thiruvavur Azhither. Announcing the upcoming procession of Lord Shiva, in the morning, a pair of swords (Veerakathi i.e. sword of valour & Gnyanakathi i.e. the sword of knowledge, representing Shiva and Shakthi) is ceremoniously brought from the temple (Veerakandeyam) in a palanquin and placed on the Chariot. In the E main street there are elaborate mandapams with steps to carry the idols to the chariots. Inscriptions refer to these halls as ThiruthTheraetruKoodam or Thernilai.

The much-awaited exit of the Utsavar (Festival deity) from the temple complex happens in the night from the NE Gopuram called Vitta vasal, a unique additional Gopuram featured in this temple (Fig 8B, 10) (associated with the myth of Lord Indra waiting in the E gopuram to take back the deity). The space outside the Gopuram becomes energised with religious fervor and a precinct or religious plaza emerges resonating with the 'Spirit of the place'.

The procession then moves through the (from north to south) Nadavagana street to the Devendra Mandapam (pavilion) on the Sannadhi street where the initial anointing, chanting and worship are offered (First Veneration point). The deity is then carried by the priests along the Sannadhi street, (from west to east) to the Theradi (chariot precinct) (Fig 11) to occupy his new abode, the Azhither. The next morning, the chariots of Lord Ganesha and Murugan circle the town and establish the processional route prior to Lord Shiva's procession. The chariots of Amman, and Chandikeshwarar follow Azhither. The processional movement happens along the four car streets, locally referred to as Kizhakku (East), Therku (South), Vadakku (West) and Merku (North) Therveedis or Rathaveethis (Chariot Streets). Several communities participate in various aspects of the procession including the Devaradiyar community, (Women associated with temple activities, first mentioned in 9th century Inscriptions) who get the first sight (Darisanam) of the Utsavar and render the invocation songs for the festival.

The entire procession is choreographed as a rhythmic combination of energised movement punctuated by pauses at specific points. Veneration points are halts to provide time and space for rituals while pause points are not for religious needs. These pauses generate distinct semi sacred nodes which have tangible as well as intangible dimensions such as association with myths, legends, oral traditions as well as distinct rituals, art and craft forms (Fig 11, 12). The temporal nature of the various rituals incorporated render places of everyday encounter with distinct sacred identity.

Religious fervor reaches its peak as more than 2 lakh people partake in this magnificent journey of the deity through the streets of the mortals (Fig 12). Chants, cymbal sounds, accompaniment by the Deiva Vadyams (Divine Instruments of the God, said to have been brought down by the lord himself) [27] [32], dance, and the devotees fervently chanting 'Aroora Thyagesa' make the procession an integration of tangible and intangible manifestation of culture and tradition. After the chariot procession returns to the Theradi, devotees worship the deity and then the Utsavar (processional deity) is brought down from the chariot and carried along Sannadhi and Nadavagana Street to enter the temple complex from the Vitta vasal. With this, preparations and procession extending for over a month of the Thiruvavur Azhi Ther festival end.

Table 1. THIRUVARUR Azhi Ther FESTIVAL DETAILS







MONTH/ STAR TAMIL MONTH / STAR TAMIL MONTH / STAR	TIME	EVENTS	PRECINCTS (VALAGAM)/ STREET (VEEDHI)	VENERATION POINTS	TANGIBLE HERITAGE	INTANGIBLE HERITAGE	PRECINCT IMAGES
THAI / POOSAM	MORNING	PANDHAKAAL FOR THER UTSAVAM	THERADI	Temple and THERADI	Therkoodams (5 in numbers) Built during the rule of Marathas: 1684 AD – 1855 AD.	R: Veneration of the wheel and five palm slats (to be used in 5 Thers' structures) as precursor for festival. PA: Vedic chants. Shiva Vadyams (Shiva's instruments)	
MASI / POOSAM	MORNING	PROCESSION OF VENERATED SWORDS	From the NE gate to the Ther via Sannadhi street	THERADI	E Gopuram, Traditional houses on Sannadhi street, Madam in Nadavagana st. Therkoodams .	ORE: Odhuvars singing Thevaram, Traditional instruments. E: Name Sannadhi street H: Originated during the rule of Sarafoji Maharaja (18th CE)	 
	(PERNOCTATION) LATE EVENING	PROCESSION OF THE DEITIES	VITTA VASAL		Spatial construct framed by the NE gopuram, Manuneechic holan Kalthar (stone chariot), traditional street and houses of N Madavilagam Agraharam houses, Traditional houses of Odhuvars (who sang verses from Tevaram).	L: Associated with Manu Needi Cholan and Muchukunda Cholan. Instruments brought down from heaven Unique to THIRUVARUR temple. ORE: Odhuvars singing Thevaram, Vedic Chants. R, PA: AJAPA DANCE while carrying Thyagaraja to the chariot. PA: instruments such as Shudhamattalam, Barinayanam, Ekkalam, Udal, Brahmathalam, Sankhu, Thiruchannam etc.	  

Table 1 continued







			NADUVAGAN A THERU		Heritage structures such as old temples, Agraharam houses Annadanakattalai Madam.	ORE: Etymology-street name ORE: Odhuvars singing Thevaram, Traditional instruments. PA: Accompanying Divine instruments.	
			SANNADHI THERU	DEVENDRA MANDAPAM	Traditional Agraharam houses of Sannadhi street DEVENDRA Mandapam	ORE: Etymology-street name SP: WHITE CLOTH (3ft wide) by the Washermen (VANNAN) community lining the deity's route. (called PAVADAI SATHUVADHU)	
			E THER VEEDHI (KIZHAKKU THER VEEDHI)	THERADI	Therkoodams Axis from E Gopuram. (Sannadi street)	R: First pooja and fireworks Chants of ARROA THYAGESA. Pooja for Wheels by ADHEENAMS (a form of Hindu monastery) SP: First Darisanam (viewing) and invocation songs by member of Devaradiyar community.	
PANGUNI /AYILYAM (MARCH/APRIL)	MORNING	PROCESSION OF THE AZHI THER (CHARIOT)	E THER VEEDHI (KIZHAKKU THER VEEDHI)	THERADI PULLAYAR KOIL	Historic temple	R: Vedic chants, Veneration to lord Ganesha. Abhishekam (Anointing)	
				MANDAPAM near VEERA ANJANEYAR KOIL	Historic temple with Mandapam Across.	SP: Barber's community (PARIVALIGAL SANGAM), honouring Kothanar (chariot builders).	
					Traditional Agraharam houses, Theradi structures, Temples, Mandapas, Institutions of various guilds.	R: Vedic chants, Lakhs of people pulling the chariot, Chants of ARROA THYAGESA, accompanied by 27 instruments (favorite of Lord Shiva), Tevaram hymns.	

Table 1 continued









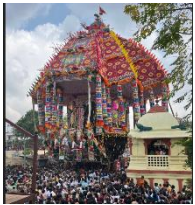


PANGUNI /AYILYAM (MARCH/APRIL)	MID DAY	PROCESSION OF THE AZHI THER (CHARIOT)	S THER VEEDHI (THERKU THER VEEDHI)	DHARMAPURAM ADHEENAM	Dharmapura m Adheenam structure, S Gopuram of Thyagaraja temple, Thirumanjana veedhi (street from temple to River)	ORE: Etymology: Thirumanjana veedhi, Therku Gopuram theru. ORE, SP: Lakhs of people pulling the chariot, Chants of AROORA THYAGESA, accompanied by 27 instruments (favourite of Lord Shiva), Tevaram hymns.	
				SW CORNER	Temples, Kamalalayam tank, Manuneehdic holan palace remains municipality office).	SP: Arankavalar (temple trustees) honouring Chariot Kothanar (Chariot builders). R: Vedic chants, Veneration to lord of the SW direction.	
			W THER VEEDHI (MERKU THER VEEDHI)	MATRURAIT HA VINAYAGAR TEMPLE, KAMALALAYAM	Historic temple	M: Lord Ganesha confirming quality of gold that was placed in Manimutha in Vriddhachalam and received at kamalalayam tank for Sundaramurthy Swami.	
					Kamalalayam tank with temple in it, Padithuarai (Ghats)	ORE, SP: Lakhs of people pulling the chariot, Chants of AROORA THYAGESA, accompanied by 27	
					Oonjal Mandapam, W Gopuram of Thyagarajaswamy temple, Heritage structures including houses, Temples, pavilions.	instruments (favorite of Lord Shiva), Tevaram hymns E: Street names-N, S Madavilagam, Kamalalayam Vadakarai and Kamalalayan Thenkarai streets.	
							

Table 1 continued

			N THER VEEDHI (VADAKKU THER VEEDHI)		Agraharam Houses of Temple priests	ORE, SP: Lakhs of people pulling the chariot, Chants of AROORA THYAGESA, accompanied by 27 instruments (favorite of Lord Shiva), Tevaram hymns.	
						Break for lunch. Important for point of turning. E: Street name - Melavadambokki theru, (Chariot Turning point), Merku Therveedhi.	
			E THER VEEDHI (KIZHAKKU THER VEEDHI)	Return to Theradi.	Therkoodams (5 in numbers) Built during the rule of Marathas: 1684 AD – 1855 AD.	ORE, SP: of people pulling the chariot, Chants of AROORA THYAGESA, accompanied by 27 instruments (Favorite of Lord Shiva), Tevaram hymns.	
			SANNADHI STREET AND NADUVAGAN A STREET	Return to temple.	E Gopuram, Traditional houses on Sannadhi street, Devendra Mandapam, Madam in Nadavagana st. Vitta Vasal, NE Gopuram.	R: Deities carried back to the temple. ORE, SP: Vedic chants, 27 instruments (favorite of Lord Shiva), Tevaram hymns. E: Street Names- Sannadhi Theru, Nadavagana Theru, Navagraha Theru.	
							

H: HISTORICAL SP: SOCIAL PRACTICES

ORE: ORAL TRADITIONS AND EXPRESSION

L: LEGENDS R: RITUALS E: ETYMOLOGY M: MYTHS PA: PRACTICING ARTS (Traditional)

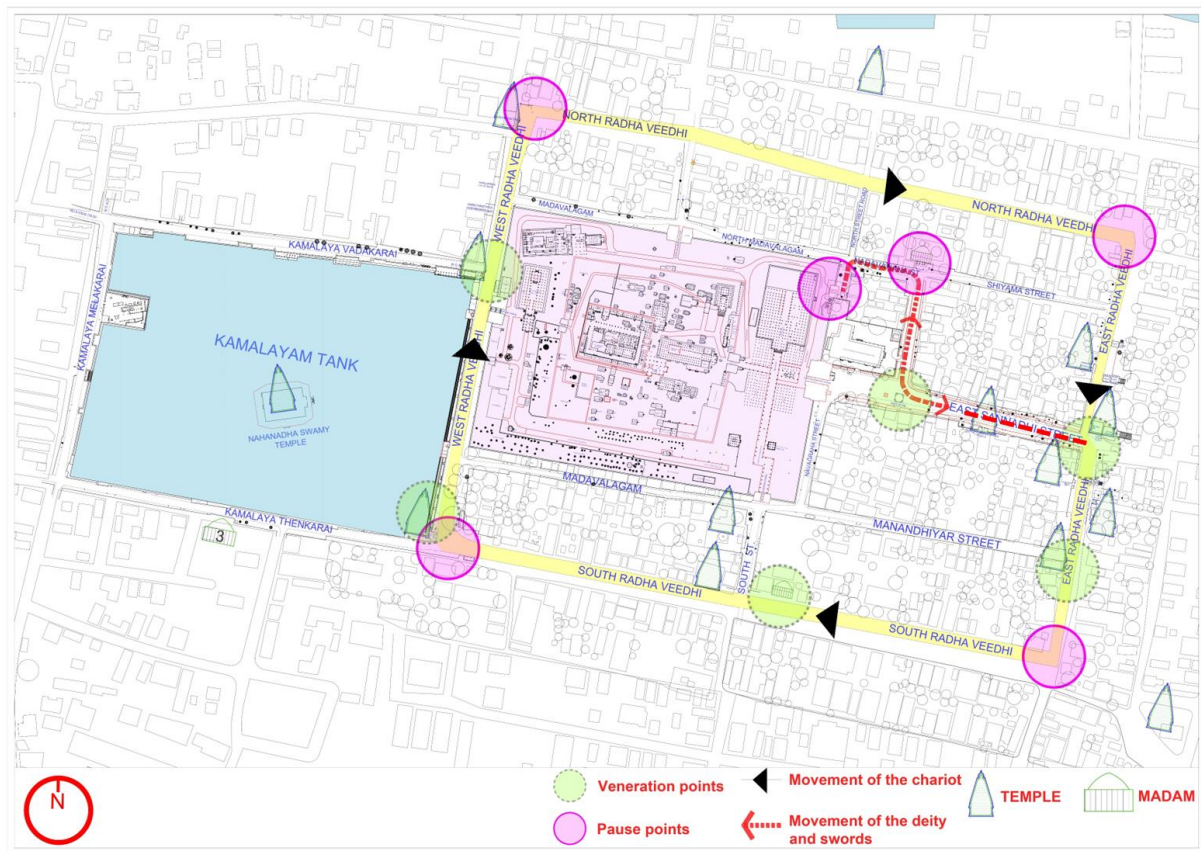


Figure 11. Details of processional route Source: Author



Figure 12. Image of procession in progress Source: Author

6. Discussions and Conclusions

The analysis of The Azhi Ther festival reveals findings

that are applicable to other temple towns. The practice of elaborate celebration of the festival contributes to the collective identity and uniqueness of the Thiruvavur. The processional route that is otherwise a hub of daily activities holding significant value for residents, serves as a reminder of the grand Azhi Ther festival. The study reveals that the orchestrated movement of the chariot creates a network of places associated with religious as well as cultural traditions. This is characterised by critical Tangible and Intangible aspects along the processional route that are crucial for sustenance of centuries old Azhi Ther festival. A Cultural Inventory is essential to consolidate all built and unbuilt dimensions contributing to the heritage of Thiruvavur.

6.1. Tangible Aspects

As is tabulated in Table 2, the numerous veneration points, precincts, heritage structures, urban markers along the processional route such as axial streets focusing on the temple gateways, smaller temples, shrines, Thretrukoodams, Mandapams, Kulam, Matams and streets with distinct style of traditional houses are invaluable due to their historicity and are representative of the way a society lived. Their physical and spatial features accentuate the festive experience as well as reinforce the town identity. As a Cultural resource, there is a need to undertake detailed documentation of the status of these

structures, not in isolation, but in the context of the associated precincts generated as well as the procession as a whole. Controls In land use zoning (complementary to the precinct such as residential, commercial, religious institutions, trade guild centres etc.), built form and typology controls, height zoning and design guidelines for traditional street elevations, sight lines and street front heritage elements are required to preserve the character of

the processional route and the historic core of Thiruvavur. Strategies are needed to reduce the vulnerability of the historic core to ensure continuity of the unique character of the built heritage in general and the religious heritage in particular. This will ensure sustainability of the heritage character of the built fabric and spatial characteristics of the town complementing ritual traditions along the processional route.

Table 2. TANGIBLE HERITAGE ASSOCIATED WITH THIRUVAVUR AZHI THER FESTIVAL

TYPOLOGY	LOCAL TERM	EXAMPLES ALONG PROCESSION ROUTE	SIGNIFICANCE	
Chariot stands	TheraetruKoodam	5 theretrukoodam One each for the chariots of Thyagarajar, Ganesha, Murugan, Amman, and Chandikeshwarar	Pavilions with steps to carry the idols to the chariots built by the Marathas and Nayaks. Temporary abodes for the UTSAVAR (festival Deity)	
Ancient temples and shrines	Kovil	Theradi Pullayar & VeeraAnjaneyar kovil,	Ancient temples and shrines of historic significance. Association with Mythology and local folklore too.	
Pavillions	Mandapams	Nalu kaal mandapam, Devendra Mandapam, Oonjal Mandapam, Mandapam near Veeranajaneyar koil	Pavilions served as Civic Urban markers in the settlement and during Festivals became temporary sacred abodes for the processional deities to be venerated, worshiped or merely for rest.	
Adheenams, Matams and associated spaces	Matams	Thirupanandal Adheenam Matam Dharmapuram Adheenam Matam	Adheenams and their Matams (religious centres and resthouses) - Saivite monastic institutions established by the Cholas, Nayaks (15-16th CE) that administer an network of endowments and in turn are to discharge duties such as feeding the devotees, maintaining Vedapatashala, providing for rituals in the temple etc.	
Tank	Kulam	KAMALALAYA THEERTHAKULAM	Thirukkulam named Kamalalayam is associated with many mythological and historical events. There are 64 holy steps in this Thirukkulam & in the middle of there is a temple called Naganathaswamy Temple. The float festival & Theerthavizha are held here.	
Traditional residential streets	Agraharams	Madavilagams(N,S.) E,N,S Radha vedhis & Naduvagana theru	Traditional courtyard houses dating back to the Pandyas, built of Timber, bamboo and bricks.	

6.2. Intangible Aspects

It is evident from the above study that intangible dimensions associated with The Azhi Ther festival are a very crucial layer in the identity of Thiruvavur (table 1). These intangibles take the form of Myths, legends, history, poetry, folklore, music, Vedic chants, artwork, Crafts and rituals. To sustain this intangible heritage, it is vital that measures need to be initiated for documentation, Digitization, creating Audio Visual Repository of Oral traditions, transfer of traditional Knowledge through capacity building and preparation of Monographs and manuals. Intangible heritage must be seen as the broader context that gives shape and meaning to tangible heritage. The above measures will result in sustaining the intangible dimensions of Azhi Ther festival.

Processional rituals reiterate the representation of values, myths, beliefs and symbols in the traditional urban form. The Azhi Ther festival has been woven into the cultural milieu of the people of Thiruvavur, a factor that has led to its sustenance till today albeit with variations. The study of this festival has highlighted the integration of tangible and intangible cultural values/ traditions embedded in festivals and the role they play in establishing the identity of the town. Further, this study reiterates the need to define cultural region, the sacred landscape (Kshetram) referring to ancient texts, history, legends and mythology, historic prose poetry and art, as well as past and present rituals and religious practices. Micro-level planning of historic religious cores should be integrated with meso- and macro-level urban development processes to effectively plan for and expand traditional temple towns and their umland (hinterland).

The study emphasizes the temporal role of temple cities, serving not only as venues for grand celebrations but also as hubs for residential, commercial, and tourism activities. So, all stakeholders involved, starting from the residents of the town, keepers of the religion, planning authorities, departments such as HR and CE, conservation experts, historians, need to work in conjunction to ensure a meaningful, sensitive as well as effective approach towards sustaining living traditions such as the Azhi Ther festival.

A comprehensive understanding of the entire phenomenon of critical religious festivals is crucial for recognizing the heritage value of temple towns and integrating them into all development processes. This will ensure sustaining the unique living heritage of towns like Thiruvavur and festivals like the Thiruvavur Azhi Ther festival.

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