

# Studying the urban characteristics of a heritage town to develop sustainable urban strategy – A case study of Kumbakonam

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**Abstract** - A community with a closely knitted culture and tradition constitutes the identity of any settlement. The rituals and customs were the results of a myth, facts or historical background. Though temple towns in Tamilnadu can be classified as single centered or multcentred, a strong religious and heritage characters bounds the town and in turns it propagates the growth from earlier periods. The habitat near the temple structures are seems to be satisfied with the program goes in and around the premises. In this paper the temple town Kumbakonam is explored for its development from the sangham period to till date and it's concluded that the town plays a major role in religious, cultural, economical developments. It is also invites tourist in major role and its proper heritage town to develop sustainable urban design strategy.

**Key Words:** temple town, heritage, urban centre, culture, sustainability.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Any urban area for its persistent livelihood needs a sustained human life. Arguments related only to the aesthetics of a neighborhood area are described to be superficial as it is not concerned with the issues of any sort. In the period of global warming and depleting natural resources, a heritage town has to be conserved and preserved. Otherwise, all the globalization and economic development process will disturb the quality of life of the future generation.

### 1.1 History of Kumbakonam

Located at 47km from Tanjore District, Kumbakonam was called by the name Kutamakku in the medieval period. Two rivers Kaveri towards the North and Arasalar towards the South define the edge and demarcate the boundary for the town. The history of the town backs to Sangham Age (300 B.C.E.–300 C.E.) and it is believed that the present day town was the site of Kudavayil, the place a Chola king, retained his court<sup>1</sup>.It was major urban complex attached to Palaiyaru, a Chola Capitol. Both twin towns have temples, palaces, religious institutions through the period<sup>2</sup>. Though the temple settings are the establishments by Cholas, the urban set up was because of Nayaks. After Cholas, different dynasties of

people constituted for the development of the town as an urban centre.

**Table -1:** The dynasties, the period and its contribution to the town.

|   | Time line           | Contributions                                     |
|---|---------------------|---|
| Sangham period                          | 300 B.C to 300 A.D  |   |
| Pallava and pandya period               | 300 A.D to 500 A.D  | Excavation of tanks                               |
| Chola period                            | 900 A.D - 1200 A.D  | Shiva temples                                     |
| Vijaynagar and Nayak Period             | 1400 A.D- 1800 A.D  | Vaishnavite Temple                                |
| Pandya revival and Muslim rule          | 1200 A.D - 1400 A.D |   |
| British Rule Independence and Democracy | 1800 A.D - Present  | Acquired cultural Name – Cambridge of South India |

### 1.2 Role of a Temple

The temples were constructed for the purpose of worship, group gatherings and religious festivals by various kings. It has been ornamented in various styles of decoration. Kumbakonam Taluk has 180 temples in and around. During Chola or Vijayanagar period, the dynasties don't have any department for agricultural improvements, though it was taken care by few individuals, the temples also played a major role in it. The income received from the temple was redirected to the amount of agricultural development. The money is also used for the purpose of temple maintenance, festivals and fairs for the deities. There are more number of Vaishnavite and the Shaivite temple in the town which is the reason for the conductance of more number of celebrations<sup>3</sup>.

### 1.3 Role of Tanks

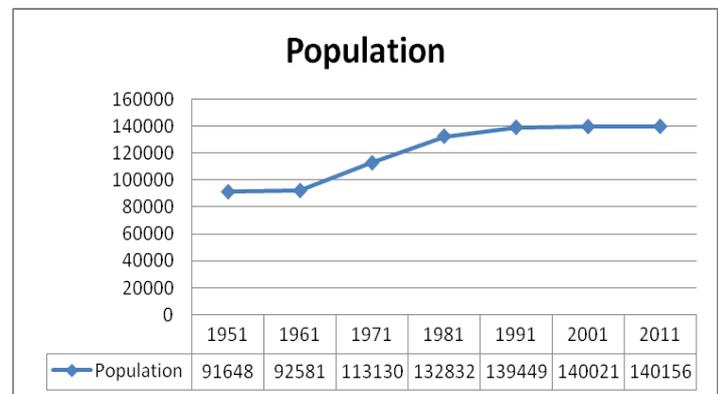
It is stated in a Telugu epic poem that the construction of tanks and irrigation canals also constituted for the prosperity than the land extent. Tanks are mostly present inside the temple used for religious and ablution purpose. While other

tanks were constructed throughout the town as a tool in town planning, to sustain ground water table and to be used by the localities <sup>4</sup>. The tanks in Kumbakonam are mostly rectangular and trapezoidal in plan. Most of the tanks present in the town could be filled by rain water and water channels from the two main rivers. The Mahamagam tank in Kumbakonam is famous for festival conducted once in 12 years is for the purpose of holy dip. Other tanks have been continuously engaged with the temples and its celebration.

|   | Existing Conditions  |
|---|--|
| Mahamagam Tank                                    | Plays a role in Religious Activities   |
| Potramarai Tank                                   |  |
| Reddy Roa Tank                                    |  |
| Pidari Kulam                                      | No major role in religious activities  |
| Nageswaran Kulam                                  | Became a residential colony  |
| Saraya Pond                                       | Illicit liquor production in the olden days and now it is caught in between the development. |
| Ayikulam  | Converted into taxi stand  |
| Kumbeswara Kulam                                  | Converted into a park  |
| Pond attached to the Mettu Street Vinayaka temple | Housing Development  |

## 2.1 Existing Land use and Demographics Characteristics

Residential area covers 83% of the total land use and commercial 5%, industrial 1% educational 3% and other few areas covers about 20.15%. The town area of Kumbakonam covers agricultural land also. It constitutes around 125 Hectares and dry area of 48.70 Hectares. It is stated that the religious activities in the town went down and there was a continuous relocation of people during 1770. The invasion from northern areas is the cause for this change<sup>5</sup>. There is a gradual increase in population from the year 1951 but still the percentage of growth is only 4.3% from 1991 to 2001. Geographical constraints in the area because of the two rivers is the main reason for the slow progress of population growth in the town.



Graph -1: Population Trend

Source: Census of India

## 2.2 Economic activities

The retail activity goes around the temple premises is directly related to the programme goes into the temple. Starting from garlands, ritual offerings , refreshments for devotees , copper or bronze items , local authentic products all these things are the part of the commercial area that originated in and around the temple premises. Having large number of temple complexes in town creates a very active participation of commercial areas for the running of temple activity. The following table shows the commercial area and its economic activity.

Table -2: The commercial area and its economic activity

| Area                      | Activity                      |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Ayikulam Road             | Lodging , Hardware            |
| Dr.Moorthi Road           | General Shopping Nehru Market |
| Chakkarapani South Street | Godowns , Whole sale markets  |



Image 1: The existing condition of Ayikulam tank

|                          |                                      |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Kumbeswarar North Street | Brass Stainless steel Vessels        |
| TSR Big Street           | Jewelry , Banks , Financial Services |
| Head Post office Road    | Automobiles , Lodging                |
| Town Hall Road           | General Shopping                     |
| Thanjavur Road           | Textiles                             |
| Kamarajar Market         | Vegetables                           |

Kumbakonam, Mayiladuthurai, Vaitheeswaran Koil, Sirkhazi, Chidambaram, Virudhachalam and Thozhudhur.



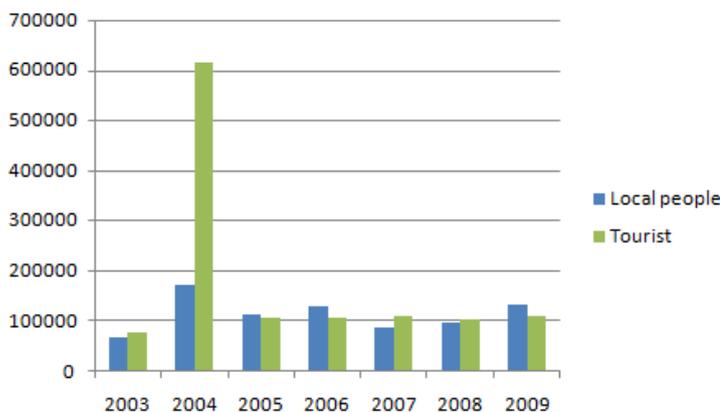
Image 2: Showing the interim circuit

Source: Interim Report-Priority Circuit Tamil Nadu July 2012.

Source: <http://tnuifsl.com/documents/ccpbp/Kumbakonam.pdf>

### 3.1 Tourism

Visiting a pilgrimage center for an important occasion is a part of religious life. It gives the sense of assurance and confidence to a devotee. Since the temple town has lots of programmes in a form of festivals, celebrations, fairs there is a gradual growth of tourist from all over the world. Mahamagam festivals attract lakhs of people for every 12 years. There is also a progressive growth of domestics and foreign tourist to the town.



Graph -2: Tourism Statistical Data of Kumbakonam Town from 2003 - 2009

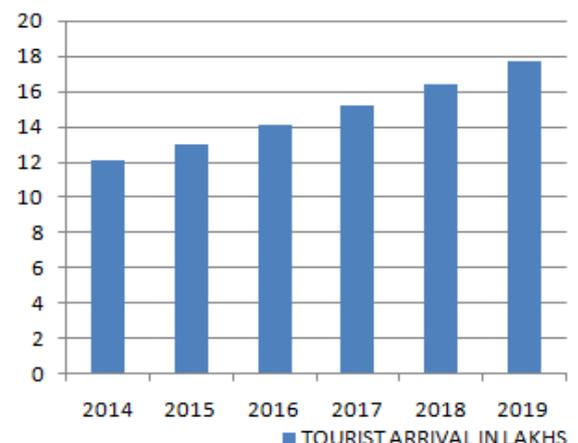
Source: Kumbakonam Municipality and TNSTC Kumbakonam

### GOVERNMENT PROPOSALS

- In 12<sup>th</sup> five year plan, Ministry of Tourism has appointed National Level Consultant (NLC) as IL&FS Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd (IL&FS IDC). They have identified tourism circuits across all States and Union Territory after due consultation with all the stakeholders. Under this one of the circuits covers Trichy,

- Tamil Nadu Urban Infrastructure Financial Services Limited (TNUIFSL) has prepared a report on the Conversion of City Corporate Plan to Business Plan for Kumbakonam Municipality in May 2007. They have identified Heritage areas as Temples, Religious Institutions, Environmentally sensitive areas & Minor Heritage areas.

- Government of India with Ministry of tourism and culture has given a final report on 20 year perspective tourism plan for the state of Tamil Nadu. According to this in 2019 the expected tourist 17.70 lakh approx which comprises domestic tourist 17.66 lakh & international tourist 0.04 lakh.



Graph -3: Tourist arrival Data

Source: Results of Market Research by the CONSULTING ENGINEERING SERVICES (I) PVT. LTD.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The growth of a temple town can be clearly seen from sangham period to till this century through the chronology, heritage characters, tourist arrival and economic activities. The urban fabric is bounded with cultural values and developmental aspects. Protecting the temple town with urban design strategies will help to preserve the heritage character which in turn will have its effect on sustained human occupation.

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