

Unveiling Vennar Padithurai and its connected ensemble: A Riverfront Gem Calling for Heritage Restoration

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Abstract: Thanjavur, a city in Tamil Nadu, holds immense historical, cultural, and architectural significance. During the 18th century, Marathas had already established their dominion in Thanjavur and started constructing various chatrams and padithurais, including Vennar padithurai, strategically located at the convergence of pilgrim and trade route. A comprehensive methodology was employed to document, study, and analyze the historical background, functional usage, and architectural style of Vennar padithurai and its connected ensemble. This methodology encompassed a multidimensional approach, incorporating Context and Macroanalysis, Microanalysis, Spatial analysis, and Architectural design analysis. This research highlights importance of conserving these heritage sites through condition assessment and proposes a sustainable conservation strategy by integrating the complex into the existing tourism belt, ensuring its self-sustainability. By recognizing the potential of these historical sites and actively involving the community, we can safeguard and promote our rich traditions, revitalize the essence of travel, and generate economic prosperity for the region.

Keywords: Padithurai, Chatram, Sustainable Heritage Conservation, Dravidian Architecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Padithurais or ghats hold immense architectural significance due to their multifaceted nature. Primarily, they serve as gateways that grant access to water bodies, facilitating a wide range of activities. These sacred sites hold deep cultural and religious importance, acting as crucial spaces for hosting religious ceremonies, rituals, and funeral rites. In doing so, they establish a profound connection between communities and the water sources that sustain them. In addition to their religious and cultural significance, they also function as vibrant social hubs. They provide gathering spaces where people can come together, fostering community interaction and strengthening social bonds. The architectural design of padithurais enhances the overall riverscape, creating a picturesque environment. With well-structured steps and landing places, they allow individuals to approach the water, engage in cultural practices, and participate in various social activities. Additionally, these architectural wonders serve a practical function by providing reinforcement for embankments, aiding in flood management. Padithurais embody a harmonious blend of cultural, social, aesthetic, and practical elements. They serve as essential architectural spaces that connect communities with water bodies, creating an atmosphere of spirituality, social cohesion, and natural beauty.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Tamil Nadu has a rich history of river-based settlements that have greatly influenced the region's architecture. Notably, the ancient civilization of Keezhadi thrived along the Vaigai River, boasting advanced infrastructure and active participation in global trade (Rajan, 2020). Similarly, Arikamedu, situated on the Ariyankuppam River in present-day Pondicherry, played a significant role in the Indo-Roman trade (Wheeler, 1946). These settlements gave rise to the creation of Padithurais, which provided refreshing rest spots for travelers, nomads, and traders seeking respite along their journeys (Hegewald, 2022).



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During the late 18th century, the Dravidian art and architecture saw the influence of the Nayakas and Marathas, leading to the integration of Ghats and rest houses (Neela et., 2016). Vennar, situated along the Nagapattinam and Adirampattinam trade routes, boasted 28 Ghats. However, as time passed, shifts in functionality and accessibility gradually led to the abandonment of these Ghats and rest houses, marking the end of an era. The river-based settlements and the architectural elements they inspired remain significant remnants of Tamil Nadu's vibrant history. They highlight the region's active participation in trade, cultural exchange, and the evolution of architectural styles over time. While many of these structures may no longer be in use, they serve as valuable reminders of the past and contribute to the cultural heritage of the region.

2.1. Methodology

The research paper employed a comprehensive methodology to document, study, and analyze the historical background, functional usage, and architectural style of Vennar padithurai and related spaces across different time periods. The methodology encompassed a multidimensional approach comprising Context and Macroanalysis, Microanalysis, Spatial analysis, and Architectural design analysis, all of which aimed to unravel the intricacies inherent in the subject matter. The macroanalysis phase involved examining the context-specific factors and conducting an in-depth analysis of the purpose and significance of padithurais and chatrams within the studied area. This was followed by an exploration of the trade routes and their relationship with the establishment of riverside structures, unravelling the connections between commerce and architectural development. The microanalysis stage focused on identifying and understanding the interrelationships among the various structures within the heritage complex. This analysis aimed to reveal the functional and spatial connections between different elements, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the site's layout and organization. Spatial analysis and Architectural Design analysis formed integral parts of the methodology. The spatial analysis encompassed assessing the condition of the site and analyzing its overall spatial arrangement. Additionally, the architectural design analysis delved into the examination of architectural styles and their functions, shedding light on the evolution and characteristics of the structures.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Context and Macroanalysis

Thanjavur, situated in the state of Tamil Nadu, is a city of great historical, cultural, and architectural significance. One of its most renowned landmarks is the Brihadeeswarar Temple, constructed by the Chola dynasty during the 11th century. This magnificent temple, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, stands as a testament to the rich heritage of Thanjavur. Located along the banks of the Vennar River in the village of Palliagraharam, lies the Vennar Padithurai. This area is known for its picturesque setting and serene atmosphere. Adjacent to the river, the Vennar Padithurai encompasses notable attractions such as the Thalikeswara Temple, Vennar Chatram, and Sandhya Mandapam. Together, these structures form a complex that graces the southeastern edge of Palliagraharam village. Flowing near the city of Thanjavur, the Vennar River adds to the charm and beauty of the region. Its gentle currents and scenic surroundings make it a cherished natural feature of Tamil Nadu, India.

3.1.1. Pilgrimage Route

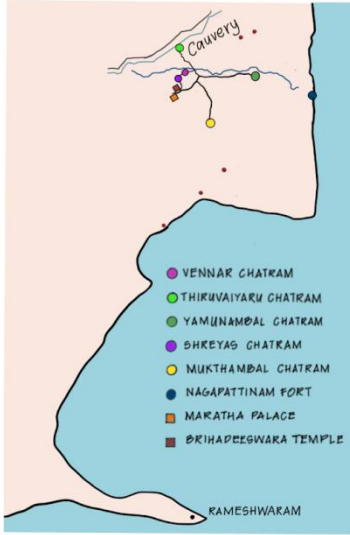
Chatrams are commonly recognized as charitable rest stops or wayside inns intended to accommodate travelers. Typically, these chatrams are strategically positioned at the outskirts of towns, lining the path of pilgrimage routes like the one from Kashi to Rameshwaram. Similarly, the Vennar Chatram was purposefully constructed along the pilgrimage route connecting Thanjavur and Rameswaram. Situated at the southeast edge of Palliagraharam village, it stands as one of the oldest chatrams in the region, with its origins tracing back to 1749 (Roshini, 2020). During the late 17th century, Thanjavur came under the rule of the Marathas, led by King Venkoji. It was during this period of Maratha reign, spanning from 1743 to 1837, that a total of 20 significant chatrams were erected (Thavasi, 2015). The Vennar Chatram



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stands as a testament to this era of development, serving as a testament to the Maratha kings' commitment to facilitating pilgrimage journeys and providing necessary support to travelers.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 1: Map showing the

pilgrim Figure 2: Images of (a)Padithurai, (b)Thalikeswara and travel route temple, (c)Chatram and (d)Sandhya mandapam

3.1.2. Trade Route

In addition to being situated along the pilgrimage route, the Vennar Chatram is also strategically positioned along a trade route that leads to the Nagapattinam fort via the Needamangalam Chatram (Figure 1,2). The Maratha Chatrams constructed in Thanjavur played a crucial role in facilitating trade activities between Thanjavur and Nagapattinam.

Figure 4: Site plan of the Padithurai and its associated buildings

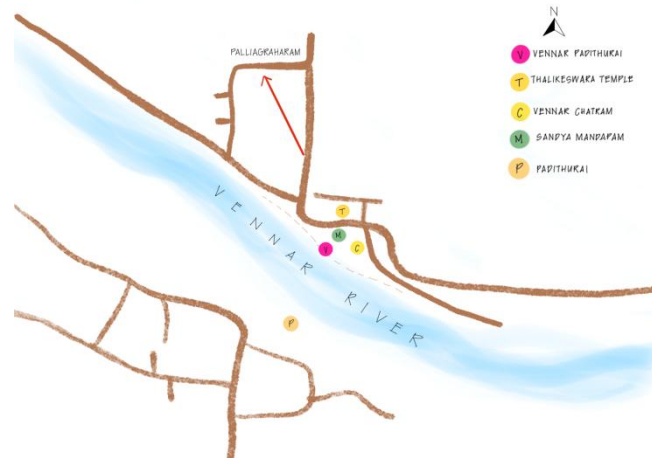
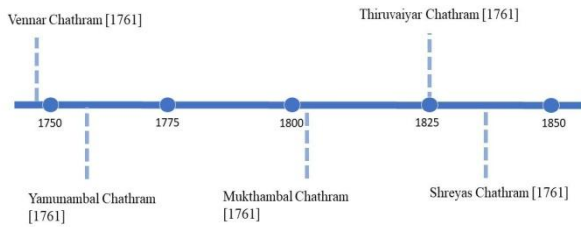


Figure 3: Timeline of the construction of various Chatrams (Roshini, 2020)

The trade route between Thanjavur and Nagapattinam served as a conduit for various commodities. Thanjavur was renowned for its exquisite silk sarees, making silk one of its prominent exports.

Additionally, spices, rice (as Thanjavur is often referred to as the "Rice Bowl of Tamil Nadu"), and a range of handicrafts such as Thanjavur paintings and other artisanal products were also exported from Nagapattinam to different parts of the world. Moreover, Nagapattinam held significant importance as a center for salt production. The salt produced in Nagapattinam was transported to Thanjavur and other regions, further enhancing the trade activities along this route. The Vennar Chatram's strategic location facilitated the smooth flow of goods and contributed to the flourishing trade relationship between Thanjavur and Nagapattinam.

3.2. Microanalysis - The Heritage Ensemble

The Padithurai was constructed with the primary purpose of facilitating transportation between the banks of a river. Its counterpart, located on the opposite bank, served a similar function. Furthermore, the Padithurai also served as a crucial resource for nearby temples, which utilized it for conducting their rituals. Additionally, the adjacent Vennar chatram was initially used as a resting place during the early stages of the Padithurai's construction.

3.2.1. Padithurai - The Connection to Water

The architectural rationale behind building ghats along the curved riverbank encompassed several considerations. These included ensuring stability, optimizing space utilization, providing convenient access to the water, enhancing visual aesthetics, and honouring the cultural and ritual significance associated with the water body.

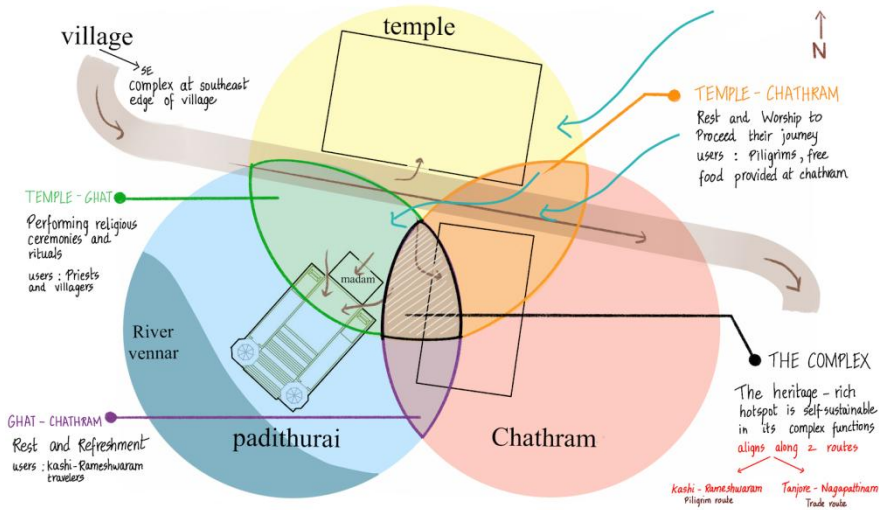


Figure 5: Representation of the design program within the Vennar complex

Throughout its existence, the Padithurai has fulfilled various roles and functions: Initially, it served as a place of respite and a site for conducting rituals by travelers and visitors to the temples in the vicinity. In subsequent periods, it transformed into a communal bathing area utilized by villagers and became a venue for recreational activities. Presently, the Padithurai primarily serves as a location for temple rituals and the performance of funerary rites. However, it is closed to the public during non-operational hours due to misuse by trespassers and locals. By adapting to the changing needs of the community over time, the Padithurai has played a significant role in facilitating transportation, supporting religious practices, and providing a space for communal activities.

3.2.2. Thalikesawara Temple and Vennar Chatram

The Thalikesawara Temple beautifully exhibits a fusion of Marathi and Dravidian architectural styles. This harmonious blend is evident in the use of bricks, vaulted roofs, intricately adorned gopurams



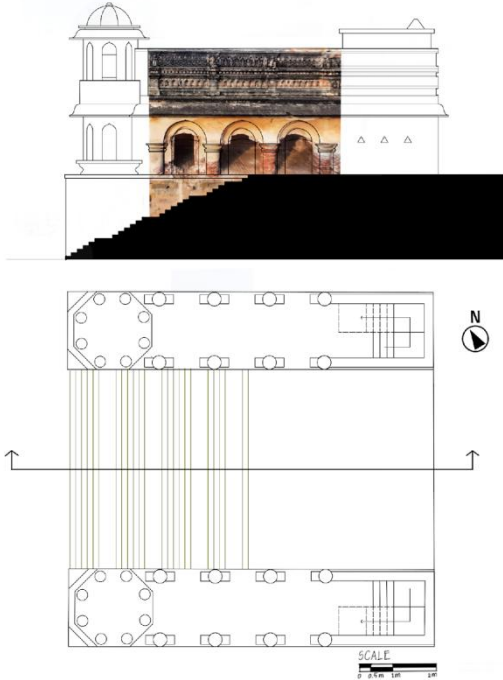
(towered gateways), and detailed column work. The consistent implementation of these materials and design elements throughout the entire complex reinforces the distinctive architectural style that characterizes it.

3.2.3. Sandhya Mandapam

The Sandhya Mandapam holds great significance as it serves as the venue for rituals conducted every four years in remembrance of Shri Vasudevanand Sarawati Swamy, the founder of Sandhyamadam. Even to this day, various saints from different madams come to participate in these rituals, preserving the rich tradition associated with the mandapam.

3.3. Spatial Analysis

The interrelationship between the buildings (Figure 5) within the complex demonstrates its self-sustaining nature in meeting the diverse needs of users across different periods. From the Kashi-Rameshwaram travelers finding accommodation in the chatram to the temple's devotees engaging in rituals and the village community utilizing the complex, it caters to a wide range of users and their respective functions. By facilitating the harmonious coexistence of these diverse groups, the complex fosters a sense of unity and inclusivity.



The Plan (Figure 6) illustrates the following attributes: The pillared aisle is 15mx 3m with ogee arches over 8 circular columns. The ceiling of each cell is vaulted. The octagonal bastion has 8 circular columns with a chatri on top. a platform of 6m x 9m is followed by a series of steps of uniform breadth. Six or seven steps alternate with the landing. The paving material used here is stone. With respect to the Form, the two-sided pillared aisle with octagonal bastions stands as arms on either side of the steps that gradually slope into the river. These bastions served as buttresses to the ghats and helped to break the force of the flood waters. The stone base prevented any possible disintegration of the ghat.

3.3.1 Condition Assessment

The padithurai is in a state of deterioration and has been poorly maintained, resulting in various damages caused by weathering and biological deterioration. Visible structural elements such as ripped plaster, damaged columns, and broken motifs indicate the extent of the damage.



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3.4. Architectural Design Analysis -Learning from evidence

The various design parameters and the corresponding characteristics of this magnificent heritage structure are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Design Parameters and corresponding characteristics

Parameters	Characteristics (Figure 7)
Style	The architectural design of the padithurai showcases a blend of Dravidian and Marathi styles, evident in its various detailing.
Brick legacy	The extensive use of flat elongated bricks in the construction provides high compressibility and stability. Lime mortar helps channel any dampness in the walls to the surface for evaporation, contributing to the structure's longevity.
Climate responsiveness	Traditional features like chajjas (Traditional overhangs with intricate stucco work, serve as solar shading and rain protection devices for the building's facades), chattris (used as leisure points and provide a cooler environment compared to the outdoor temperature), and lattice work (jali windows in chatri support sunlight and ventilation.) are used to provide solar shading, rain protection, and ventilation, resulting in a comfortable microclimate.
Material application	Stone is employed for the plinth, while bricks are used for columns, arches, vaults, and other elements. Lime is utilized for plaster and mortar, providing a cooling effect through moisture evaporation.
Construction techniques	Efficient brick arrangements for vaults and columns, along with a well-designed drainage system using stone paving in platforms, landings and steps, contribute to the overall construction.
Skill set	The craftsmanship displayed in the building highlights the hard work, effort, skill, diligence, and patience of the craftspeople involved in its fabrication.
Architectural significance	Architectural significance: The vennar Padithurai holds historical, social, and cultural importance. As a unique complex from the 18th century, it serves the community and preserves a rich heritage.

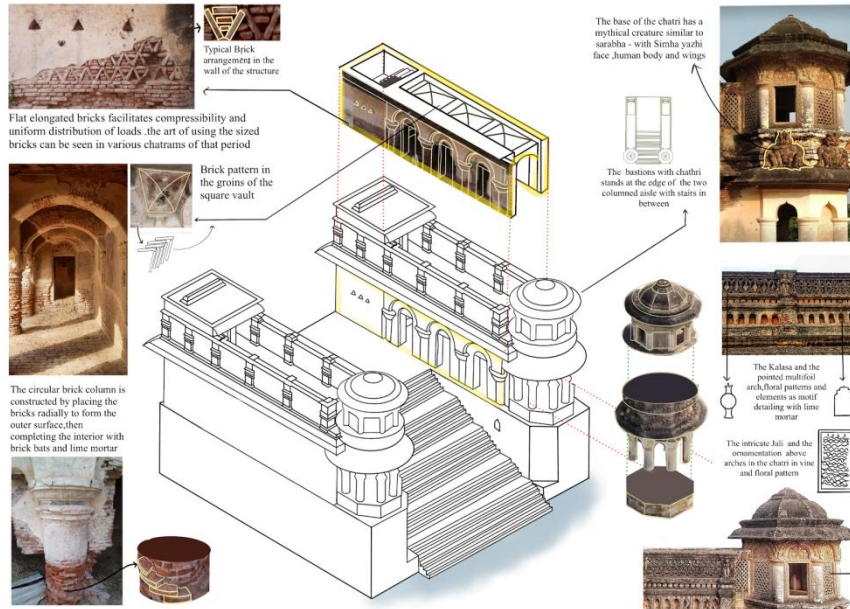


Figure 7: Architectural detailing of Vennar padithurai

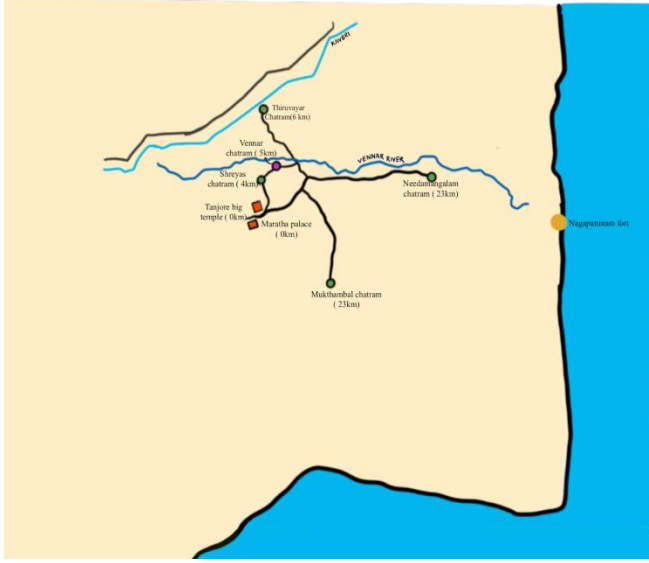


Figure 8: Map showing the tourism belt

4. CONCLUSION

Vennar Padithurai is an invaluable treasure, showcasing the rich heritage of Dravidian and Maratha Architecture. It holds immense significance as it is at the crucial junction of pilgrimage and trade routes. However, it is disheartening to see that such a complex, brimming with historical and cultural richness, is not being adequately conserved. There are several reasons contributing to the dilapidated state of heritage structures like Vennar Padithurai. One of the primary factors is the financial aspect involved in conservation efforts. Proper restoration and maintenance require significant funding, which may not always be readily available. Additionally, the lack of consistent maintenance over the years has contributed to the deterioration of these structures. Furthermore, there seems to be a general lack of awareness among the people regarding the importance of preserving our traditions and heritage. It is crucial to instill a sense of pride and ownership in the community to encourage their active participation in conservation efforts.

In this specific context, a sustainable heritage conservation approach is proposed to mitigate these challenges. The approach involves integrating the Vennar Padithurai complex as part of the larger tourism belt of Thanjavur. Thanjavur, with its historical significance, already attracts a large number of tourists who come to visit iconic landmarks such as the Brihadeeswara temple and the Maratha Palace. By conserving the Padithurai, temple, and chatram complex, we can expand the existing tourism belt (Figure 8) and offer visitors a more comprehensive heritage experience. The inclusion of these heritage sites within the tourism belt would not only contribute to their preservation but also generate revenue for the community. This revenue can be reinvested in the conservation and maintenance of these structures, ensuring their long-term sustainability. Additionally, the conservation efforts can create an extended heritage walk, allowing visitors to explore and appreciate the architectural marvels while immersing themselves in the essence of travel. Moreover, such an approach encourages the local community to take social responsibility for preserving these invaluable treasures. By involving the locals in the conservation process, we foster a sense of ownership and pride in their heritage. This community involvement not only ensures the long-term preservation of the structures but also creates a deeper connection between the people and their cultural roots.

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