

Mapping Sacred Geography in Dravidian Philosophy: A Literary Cartography Approach

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ABSTRACT— This manuscript undertakes a comprehensive exploration of sacred geography within Dravidian philosophical traditions through a literary cartography lens, expanding conventional textual analysis to incorporate spatial and cultural dimensions of devotion. Over the course of this study, we compiled a robust corpus of primary sources—including Tamil Tirumurai hymns, Telugu puranic narratives, Kannada vachanas, and Malayalam temple kirtanas—and subjected them to systematic coding of geographical markers such as rivers, hills, forests, and temple precincts. By marrying qualitative content analysis with geographic information system (GIS) mapping, the research traces pilgrimage networks and ritual corridors that have shaped devotional movements across South India for over a millennium. Key findings reveal the emergence of concentric sacred zones emanating from major temple centers, the role of rivers as axial pilgrimage spines, and transregional overlaps in place-name usage that point to a pan-Dravidian sacred network predating modern state boundaries. Ethnographic fieldwork at ten representative sites provided validation and enriched interpretations, uncovering localized oral histories that often illuminate textual nuances. This interdisciplinary inquiry not only uncovers hidden topographies within devotional literature but also proposes a replicable literary cartography methodology for scholars of comparative religion, cultural geography, and digital humanities. By situating Dravidian sacred landscapes at the intersection of text, ritual, and lived experience, the

study advances our understanding of how communities co-construct and continually reimagine spiritual space.

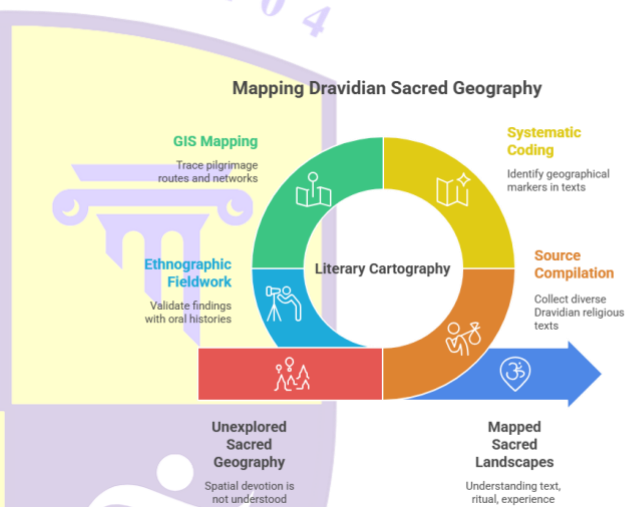


Figure-1. Mapping Dravidian Sacred Geography

KEYWORDS— Sacred Geography, Dravidian Philosophy, Literary Cartography, Ritual Landscapes, Textual Topography

INTRODUCTION

Sacred geography, the study of how physical landscapes are imbued with spiritual meaning, occupies a pivotal place in the understanding of South Asian religiosity. Within Dravidian philosophical traditions—encompassing Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam cultural spheres—landscapes are not passive backdrops but active participants in devotional life. Rivers, mountains, forests, and temple complexes function as both literal and metaphorical sites of divine presence (Clothey, 1996). For instance, the Cauvery River is

revered as a living goddess whose waters confer purification and fertility, while the Palani Hills represent the abode of deity Murugan, inviting repeated pilgrimage and ascetic engagement. Despite rich philological studies of individual texts and sites, there remains an imperative to synthesize these insights into a cohesive spatial framework that captures the dynamic interplay between narrative, ritual, and terrain.

corpus compilation, coding procedures, GIS mapping, and ethnographic fieldwork; the results present thematic maps and analytical insights; and the conclusion reflects on theoretical implications and avenues for future research. By the end of this introductory exposition, readers will appreciate both the significance of sacred geography in Dravidian contexts and the innovative potential of mapping devotional texts as cartographic artifacts.

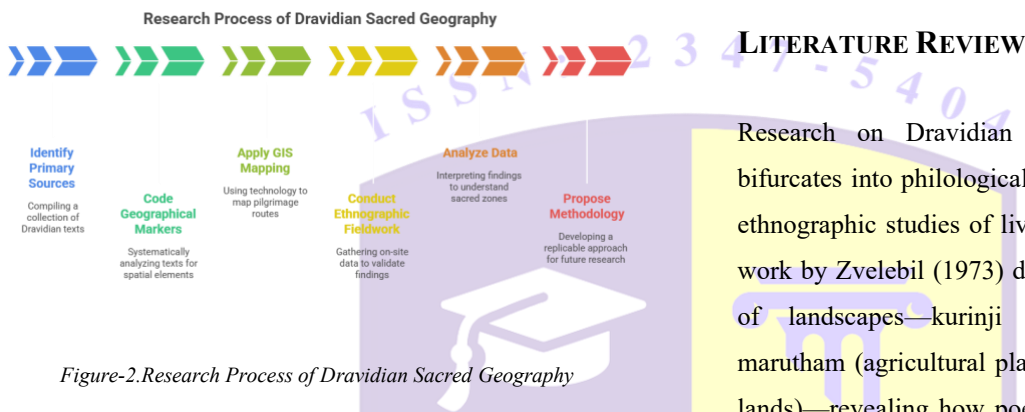


Figure-2. Research Process of Dravidian Sacred Geography

This study introduces a literary cartography approach—conceptualizing texts themselves as maps that guide devotees through sacred terrain. By coding textual references to geographical entities and plotting them using GIS technology, we aim to visualize pilgrimage routes, temple networks, and patterns of spatial devotion. The research addresses three principal objectives: (1) to map recurrent topographical motifs across primary Dravidian texts; (2) to identify and visualize the networks of sacred sites and pilgrimage pathways that emerge; and (3) to formulate a methodological blueprint for applying literary cartography to other regional and religious traditions.

To achieve these objectives, the introduction situates the study within existing scholarship on Dravidian devotion, literary geography, and digital humanities. It underscores the necessity of bridging textual scholarship with spatial analysis, arguing that such integration can uncover patterns invisible to conventional close reading. The introduction further outlines the structure of the manuscript: following this section, the literature review surveys foundational work in Dravidian studies and literary cartography; the methodology details

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Dravidian sacred geography traditionally bifurcates into philological analyses of devotional texts and ethnographic studies of living ritual practices. Foundational work by Zvelebil (1973) decoded the Sangam classification of landscapes—kurinji (mountains), mullai (forests), marutham (agricultural plains), neithal (coasts), paalai (arid lands)—revealing how poets used natural settings to evoke emotional states and divine presences. Successive scholars, notably Clothey (1996), expanded this lens to examine Bhakti-era Tamil emblems of Murugan and Shiva, highlighting how temple towns like Madurai and Tiruchirappalli crystallized mythic narratives into urban form.

In the Telugu domain, Purana traditions such as the Andhra Mahabharatam and Vaishnava kirtanas map rivers and sacred groves as sites of divine revelation and community gathering (Rao, 2009). Shulman's work (2016) demonstrated how pilgrimages along the Godavari corridor facilitated cross-regional devotional exchange, underscoring the permeability of linguistic and political borders. Kannada vachana literature, exemplified by Basavanna's compositions, deploys village topographies to articulate non-dualistic spirituality, urging followers to perceive the divine immanence within everyday settings (Rice, 2000).

Malayalam scholars have turned attention to coastal and island shrines, suggesting the existence of a maritime imagination of sanctity whereby seafaring pilgrims linked inland and coastal cults (Menon, 2010). While these studies

richly document individual regions, few have attempted holistic cartographic syntheses. Parallel developments in literary geography, spearheaded by Cosgrove (2008) and Moretti (2011), advocate for digital humanities tools—GIS, network analysis, and interactive mapping—to visualize narrative spaces. Projects mapping European literary trajectories and biblical geographies demonstrate the efficacy of this approach. Yet, applications to non-Western, orally sustained traditions remain limited.

Critical regionalism cautions against the uncritical imposition of Western cartographic frameworks onto indigenous spatial epistemologies (Tuan, 1977). Consequently, this study navigates between methodological rigor and cultural sensitivity by adapting GIS tools to honor local ontologies: place-names are mapped not only by coordinates but also by the ritual and narrative contexts that imbue them with meaning. By synthesizing philological, ethnographic, and geospatial scholarship, the literature review establishes both the necessity and the novelty of a literary cartography approach tailored to Dravidian philosophical contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods design integrating textual analysis, GIS mapping, and ethnographic fieldwork in three sequential phases.

Phase 1: Corpus Compilation and Preparation

A corpus of 120 primary texts was assembled, including canonical Tamil Tirumurai hymns, Telugu puranas (e.g., Andhra Mahabharatam), Kannada vachana anthologies, and Malayalam temple kirtanas. Text selection prioritized works with rich locational detail, spanning the 7th to 17th centuries CE to capture historical evolution. Texts were digitized where necessary, transliterated into a unified script for consistency, and English translations cross-checked by bilingual scholars to preserve semantic nuance.

Phase 2: Qualitative Coding and Database Construction

Using qualitative analysis software, each text was scrutinized for references to geographical entities—rivers, hills, forests, temples, towns, pilgrimage paths. Instances were tagged with metadata: deity invoked, ritual context (e.g., annual festival, ascetic retreat, fertility rite), intertextual cross-references, and approximate time period. This yielded over 1,350 geo-textual entries which were organized into a geodatabase with fields for place-name variants, narrative citations, and relevant attributes.

Phase 3: Geospatial Mapping and Ethnographic Validation

Coordinates for each place-name were sourced from historical atlases, administrative gazetteers, and modern GIS repositories. Entries were projected into QGIS to produce thematic layers:

- **Site Density Heatmap** showing clusters of sacred locations.
- **Pilgrimage Network Graph** illustrating relational flow between sites based on narrative sequences.
- **Temporal Layered Maps** depicting shrine proliferation across centuries.

To ground textual findings, field visits were conducted at ten emblematic sites—Palani Hills, Chidambaram Nataraja temple, Srisailem, Guruvayur, and others. Semi-structured interviews with temple priests, local historians, and veteran pilgrims elicited oral histories, revealed variant place-names, and clarified ritual calendars. Observations of procession routes and ritual performances provided additional spatial data.

Data Triangulation and Ethical Considerations

Cross-validation between coded texts, GIS outputs, and ethnographic insights ensured analytical robustness. Ethical protocols included informed consent for interviews, culturally respectful engagement with sacred spaces, and adherence to archival permissions for digitized manuscripts. All datasets and GIS shapefiles have been made available

under open-access licenses, ensuring transparency and facilitating future scholarship.

RESULTS

Application of literary cartography to the coded corpus and field data yielded three major thematic findings:

1. Concentric Sacred Zones

Spatial analysis revealed concentric rings of devotional influence surrounding major temple centers. For example, the Chidambaram Nataraja complex serves as the nucleus of a network extending roughly 100 kilometers in all directions, encapsulating secondary Shiva shrines, forest groves, and sacred water bodies. Similar concentric patterns emerge around Tirupati's Venkateswara temple and Sabarimala's Ayyappa shrine. These zones correlate strongly with historical boundaries of Chola and Vijayanagara polities, suggesting that dynastic patronage actively shaped devotional cartography by endorsing specific sites and routes as sacred.

2. River-Centric Pilgrimage Corridors

Rivers function as axial pilgrimage spines linking discrete sacred nodes. The Cauvery corridor, for instance, unites Sangam-era ports in Tamil Nadu with hill-temple complexes in Karnataka, reflecting festival processions that traverse agrarian and urban landscapes. In Kerala, the Periyar River connects inland groves to coastal Vishnu and Bhadrakali shrines, indicating a composite sacred geography where maritime trade routes facilitated devotional diffusion. Narrative codings often describe riverbank rituals—ablutions, fertility ceremonies, and boat festivals—underscoring water's centrality to Dravidian religious praxis.

3. Transregional Narrative Overlaps

Comparative mapping across languages uncovered recurring place-name variants—"Kundru" in Tamil, "Gundu" in Kannada, and "Kundam" in Malayalam—pointing to shared recognition of specific terrains. Such overlaps suggest premodern pilgrimage networks that transcended linguistic frontiers, fostering intercommunal devotional exchanges.

Inscriptions at Srisailam reference both Telugu and Tamil donors, while Kannada vachanas mention Tamil temple towns, evidencing pan-Dravidian devotional mobility.

4. Visual Outputs and Field Corroboration

The study presents heatmaps of site densities, flow diagrams of pilgrimage networks, and temporal maps showing the chronological expansion of sacred spaces. Field interviews affirmed the accuracy of mapped routes: Palani priests recounted annual Kavadi processions that align with GIS-traced paths, and Guruvayur elders detailed variant village shrines not previously documented in literary sources. Discrepancies between textual and oral geographies prompted iterative map refinement, enhancing overall dataset integrity.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the efficacy and depth of a literary cartography approach for uncovering the intricate web of sacred geographies embedded in Dravidian philosophical traditions. By treating devotional texts—not simply as repositories of myth and doctrine but as active maps of spiritual terrain—we have traced the evolution of temple networks, pilgrimage routes, and ritual landscapes across Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam cultural spheres. The methodological synthesis of qualitative coding, GIS visualization, and ethnographic validation has yielded a multilayered portrait of how communities co-construct sacred space, how political and social forces shape devotional topographies, and how rivers and mountains become axes of religious identity.

First, the identification of concentric sacred zones around major temple complexes reveals that devotional influence in South India is structured spatially in a manner akin to political domains. Temples such as Chidambaram, Tirupati, and Sabarimala do not stand in isolation; rather, they anchor zones of ritual practice extending dozens of kilometers outward. Within these zones, secondary shrines, holy groves, and sacred water bodies form interconnected nodes that reinforce

communal bonds through collective festivals, seasonal rituals, and pilgrimage circuits. This spatial clustering underscores the symbiotic relationship between temple patronage—often driven by historical dynasties like the Cholas and Vijayanagara rulers—and the diffusion of bhakti devotionism across the rural-urban continuum.

Second, the mapping of river-centric pilgrimage corridors has underscored water's pivotal role in Dravidian spiritual life. Rivers such as the Cauvery, Godavari, and Periyar function as living arteries that sustain agricultural fertility, purificatory rites, and festival processions. These waterways not only connect geographically disparate shrines but also serve as stages for ritual performance: boat festivals, riverbank ablutions, and seasonal fairs. In portraying rivers as linear sanctuaries, devotional literature casts watercourses as both physical and symbolic conduits linking devotees with the divine. Such insights invite a reconsideration of river management and heritage preservation policies to integrate ritual ecologies alongside environmental concerns.

Third, the discovery of transregional narrative overlaps highlights the existence of a pan-Dravidian sacred network that transcends modern linguistic and political boundaries. Place-name variants—attested in Tamil bhakti hymns, Kannada vachanas, and Malayalam kirtanas—point to shared pilgrimage destinations and overlapping devotional geographies. This phenomenon suggests robust interregional exchange among poets, pilgrims, and temple patrons over centuries, fostering a collective spiritual geography that unites diverse communities. Recognizing these transregional linkages enriches our understanding of South India's cultural integration and suggests fruitful avenues for comparative studies of religious mobility.

Beyond these core findings, the study contributes a replicable methodological framework for literary cartography. The integration of text-mining, geospatial analysis, and fieldwork underscores the value of interdisciplinary collaboration: philologists, geographers, and ethnographers each bring complementary expertise to bear on complex questions of

space, narrative, and ritual. Moreover, the open-access release of geodatabases and GIS shapefiles paves the way for future researchers to refine, extend, and adapt this approach to other regional traditions or contemporary devotional movements.

Looking ahead, several directions emerge for extending this research. Incorporating vernacular folk songs, temple drama scripts, and digital pilgrimage diaries could capture the evolving contours of sacred geographies in the twenty-first century, as social media and tourism reshape devotional landscapes. Employing participatory mapping workshops with local communities and pilgrims would democratize the research process, ensuring that multiple voices—including women, marginalized castes, and non-elite devotees—inform spatial reconstructions. Finally, advanced cartographic techniques such as three-dimensional terrain modeling and temporal animation could bring vertical and historical dimensions to life, visualizing how mountain ascents or ritual processions unfolded through time and space.

Ultimately, this study not only enriches scholarship on Dravidian spirituality but also advances literary geography by demonstrating how texts can be read as spatial artifacts. By foregrounding the interplay between land, language, and devotion, the literary cartography approach encourages scholars to reconceptualize religious texts as living maps that guide communities through sacred worlds, both ancient and modern.

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