

A STUDY OF THE ARRIVAL, EXTINCTION AND REVIVAL OF THE BUDDHA DHAMMA IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract: The study examines the historical trajectory of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, focusing on its arrival, decline, and contemporary revival. Buddhism first arrived in the region around the 3rd century BCE, facilitated by trade and cultural exchanges, leaving lasting imprints on art, architecture, and literature. Key sites like Kanchipuram emerged as centers of Buddhist learning, supported notably by the Pallava dynasty's patronage from the 3rd to 9th centuries CE. However, Buddhism gradually declined from the 7th century CE onwards due to various factors. The rise of Hindu Bhakti movements, shifts in royal patronage favoring Hinduism, internal doctrinal conflicts within Buddhism, competition with Jainism, and economic shifts all contributed to its diminished influence. This decline saw Buddhism assimilated into Hindu practices and rituals, blurring religious boundaries. The revival of Buddhism in recent decades has been catalysed by socio-political movements advocating for social justice and equality, notably championed by figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Governmental support for the preservation of Buddhist heritage sites and the resurgence of Buddhist art and literature have further bolstered its resurgence. Global influences and the contemporary appeal of Buddhist principles such as mindfulness and ethical living have also contributed to its renewed relevance in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Arrival, extinction, revival, Buddhism, Tamil Nadu, socio-cultural dynamics

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism's historical trajectory in Tamil Nadu reflects a rich tapestry of arrival, decline, and eventual resurgence, intricately woven into the socio-cultural fabric of the region. From its early introduction during the Mauryan period to its contemporary revival, Buddhism's journey in Tamil Nadu spans millennia, leaving an indelible imprint on its art, architecture, literature, and societal dynamics.¹ The teachings of the Buddha, known as Dhamma or Dharma, found their way into Tamil Nadu as early as the 3rd century BCE, propelled by the expansive influence of Emperor Ashoka. Under Ashoka's patronage, Buddhism flourished across India, reaching even the southernmost parts through maritime trade routes and cultural exchanges. Evidence of early Buddhist presence in neighboring regions like

Andhra Pradesh, with sites such as Bhattiprolu and Nagarjunakonda, suggests that Tamil Nadu was not isolated from these developments. The strategic coastal position of Tamil Nadu facilitated interactions with Buddhist merchants, monks, and scholars from Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and northern India, fostering a fertile ground for the propagation of Buddhist ideas.²

Kanchipuram emerged as a pivotal center of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, renowned for its spiritual significance and role in nurturing Buddhist learning and practice. Monasteries and stupas established in Kanchipuram attracted scholars and monks, contributing to the growth of Buddhist thought and culture in the region. The Pallava dynasty, from the 3rd to the 9th century CE, notably supported Buddhism. Kings like Mahendravarman I and Narasimhavarman I patronized the construction of Buddhist monuments and promoted the study of Buddhist scriptures, further solidifying Buddhism's influence during their reigns. Buddhism's impact extended beyond religious and philosophical realms into Tamil Nadu's artistic and architectural heritage.³ The synthesis of indigenous Tamil artistic traditions with Buddhist motifs is evident in the region's rock-cut cave temples, sculptures, and frescoes. The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mahabalipuram stands as a testament to this syncretic blending, featuring exquisite rock-cut temples adorned with carvings that depict both Buddhist themes and Hindu deities. Similarly, the Sittanavasal Cave in Pudukottai district showcases vibrant frescoes dating back to the 7th century CE, illustrating scenes from the Buddha's life and Jataka tales.⁴

Literature also flourished under the influence of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Works like the "Manimekalai," an epic composed by Seethalai Saathanar, and the "Tirukkural," traditionally attributed to Thiruvalluvar, embody Buddhist principles of compassion, ethical conduct, and wisdom. These texts not only enriched Tamil literature but also provided insights into the socio-religious milieu of their time, highlighting interactions between Buddhism and other religious traditions. However, despite its early flourishing, Buddhism in Tamil Nadu faced a gradual decline influenced by socio-political, religious, cultural, and economic factors.⁵ The resurgence of Hinduism, catalysed by the Bhakti movement from the 7th century CE onwards, posed a significant challenge. The Bhakti movement, emphasizing devotion to Hindu deities through inclusive and emotional means, resonated deeply with the populace and critiqued Buddhism as foreign to indigenous Indian spirituality. This ideological shift, coupled with royal patronage shifting towards Hinduism under dynasties like the Pallavas and Cholas, marginalized Buddhist institutions and contributed to their neglect and decline.

The given literature review synthesizes key studies on Buddhism in Tamil Nadu and among Dravidian-speaking peoples. It begins by discussing Ma. Velusamy and V. Thiruvani's exploration of Tamil Buddhism's evolution, emphasizing its revival in the 19th century through figures like Col. Olcott and Pandit K. Ayothi Doss, highlighting its role in social reform and cultural identity. K. Mavali Rajan and Palas Kumar Saha then delve into 6th-12th century patronage of Buddhism by Tamil rulers, noting royal support during crises as depicted in texts like the "Silappatikaram," while Bryan G Levman's "Dravidian Buddhism" examines its early development and linguistic influences. Prof. Dr. R. Gopalakrishnan's study chronicles Buddhism's history in Tamil Nadu, detailing its spread, cultural contributions, and eventual decline, offering insights into factors influencing its trajectory and suggestions for revival.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to examine the historical trajectory of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, from its early arrival and flourishing to its gradual decline and contemporary revival. Through an analysis of archaeological evidence, literary sources, and socio-political factors, this research aims to elucidate the socio-cultural dynamics that influenced Buddhism's evolution in the region over millennia.

Methodology

The Historical method is employed in this study which further involves a review of historical texts, archaeological findings, and scholarly analyses to trace the arrival, flourishing, decline, and contemporary revival of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. The study incorporates qualitative analysis of primary sources such as inscriptions, cave art, and literary works, alongside secondary research from academic publications and cultural studies, to provide a holistic understanding of Buddhism's historical trajectory in the region.

The propagation and eventual decline of Buddhism in South India are intricately tied to historical events and socio-religious dynamics that unfolded over several centuries. Buddhism initially spread in the region following the directives of King Asoka during the third Buddhist Council, where missions were dispatched to various lands. Monks encountered formidable challenges from Hindu and Jain opponents as they endeavored to disseminate the Dhamma across villages and cities. Despite these obstacles, they found support from kings, merchants, and noblemen, which facilitated the establishment of monasteries and centers of Buddhist learning throughout South India.⁶

Monastic communities played a crucial role beyond spiritual guidance, becoming hubs for medical care and education. They offered free services to the populace and disseminated Buddhist teachings through storytelling, scripture readings, and philosophical discussions. This inclusive approach, which disregarded caste distinctions, resonated deeply with marginalized communities, providing them a path to emancipation from the rigid caste system prevalent in Hindu society.⁷ The popularity of Buddhism in South India is vividly depicted in literary works such as the *Silappadhikāram* by Ilango Aḍigal and the *Maṇimekhalai* by Sāttanār, alongside references in the hymns of Hindu saints like Appar, Sundarar, and Tirujñāṇasambandhar. Despite its early ascendancy, Buddhism began to decline around the 7th century CE, amidst competition from Jainism and a resurgent Vedic Hinduism that incorporated local deities and rituals to gain popularity.⁸

Internal divisions within Buddhism, reflected in the emergence of various sects like Mahāyāna, Śrāvakayāna, and Mantrayāna, further weakened its influence. Monastic communities also shifted focus away from social welfare activities, diminishing their support base among influential patrons. Jain resurgence in the 5th and 6th centuries added to Buddhism's challenges, leading to its gradual decline.⁹ By the 14th century, Buddhism had largely vanished from South India, with its remnants preserved only in archaeological sites and cultural influences absorbed into Hindu practices. The final blows to Buddhism came from unified attacks by Hindu revivalists like Tirujñāṇasambandhar, who engaged in debates and conversions, hastening its decline. Despite its disappearance from South India, Buddhism continued to thrive in neighboring regions like Sri Lanka, where cultural exchanges and the migration of scholars kept its legacy alive. This historical trajectory underscores the complex interplay of religious ideologies and socio-political dynamics that shaped the rise and fall of Buddhism in South India.¹⁰

Arrival of Buddha Dhamma

The teachings of the Buddha, known as Dhamma (or Dharma), emphasized the path to enlightenment through ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. By the time of Emperor Ashoka (304–232 BCE), Buddhism had become a major religious force in India. Ashoka's patronage played a crucial role in disseminating Buddhist teachings across his empire, including Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu's earliest encounters with Buddhism likely occurred through trade and cultural exchanges. The region's strategic coastal location facilitated interactions with Buddhist merchants, monks, and scholars from northern India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. The Mauryan Empire's influence under Ashoka, who actively promoted Buddhism, further catalysed the spread of Buddhist ideas to Tamil Nadu.¹¹

The earliest traces of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu can be traced back to the 3rd century BCE, evidenced by rock-cut inscriptions and cave sites like those found in Bhattiprolu, Salihundam, and Nagarjunakonda in neighboring Andhra Pradesh. These discoveries indicate a significant Buddhist presence in the southern regions of the Indian subcontinent, including Tamil Nadu, which was influenced by these early developments. Kanchipuram emerged as a prominent centre of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu during ancient times. Renowned for its spiritual significance, the city became a hub for Buddhist learning and practice. The establishment of monasteries and stupas in Kanchipuram attracted scholars and monks, fostering the growth of Buddhist thought and culture in the region. The Pallava dynasty, ruling parts of Tamil Nadu from the 3rd to the 9th century CE, notably supported Buddhism. Kings such as Mahendravarman I and Narasimhavarman I patronized the construction of Buddhist monuments and encouraged the study of Buddhist scriptures, further solidifying Buddhism's influence during their reigns.¹²

Buddhism's introduction into Tamil Nadu also left an enduring imprint on the region's art and architecture. The syncretic blending of indigenous Tamil artistic traditions with Buddhist motifs is evident in numerous monuments and sculptures. One of the most significant architectural contributions is seen at the Mahabalipuram complex, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Dating back to the 7th and 8th centuries CE, this site features exquisite rock-cut cave temples like the Varaha Cave Temple and Tiger Cave, adorned with intricate carvings depicting Buddhist themes alongside representations of Hindu deities.¹³

Another notable site, the Sittanavasal Cave in Pudukottai district, showcases early Buddhist art through its frescoes dating to the 7th century CE. These vibrant frescoes depict scenes from the life of the Buddha and Jataka tales, illustrating the profound influence of Buddhist narratives on Tamil artistic expression. Sculpturally, Tamil Nadu's bronze statues of Bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities reflect a high level of craftsmanship and aesthetic sophistication, blending local sculptural techniques with Buddhist iconography to create distinctive works of art.¹⁴

The impact of Buddhism extended beyond art into Tamil literature, fostering the creation of significant literary works that expounded Buddhist teachings and philosophy. Among these works, the "Manimekalai" stands out as one of the five great epics of Tamil literature. Written by Seethalai Saathanar, this epic narrates the life of Manimekalai, a Buddhist nun, exploring themes of renunciation, compassion, and the pursuit of enlightenment.¹⁵ The "Manimekalai" also provides insights into the socio-religious milieu of its time, highlighting interactions between Buddhism and other religious traditions in Tamil Nadu. Another seminal contribution to Tamil literature influenced by Buddhism is

the "Tirukkural." Traditionally attributed to Thiruvalluvar, this work consists of ethical aphorisms that transcend religious boundaries, aligning closely with Buddhist principles of moral conduct, compassion, and wisdom. Revered as a universal guide to ethical living, the "Tirukkural" continues to influence Tamil culture profoundly to this day.¹⁶

The coexistence of Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Nadu underscores the region's syncretic religious heritage. Both traditions, rooted in ancient Indian thought and emphasizing non-violence, coexisted harmoniously in Tamil society. Jain communities in places like Madurai and Kanchipuram contributed significantly to the cultural and religious diversity of the region, evident in the construction of Jain temples, sculptures, and literary works that reflect the intertwined histories of Jainism and Buddhism in Tamil Nadu's religious landscape.¹⁷

The Extinction of Buddha Dhamma in Tamil Nadu

Scholars have long grappled with the factors that contributed to the gradual extinction of this once-vibrant tradition, and the topic remains a subject of intense academic discourse. One key aspect to consider is the sacred geography of the Tamil Shaivite hymns, which have long been a subject of interest to students of Indian religious history.¹⁸ These devotional works, rooted in the Tamil Shaivite tradition, offer valuable insights into the regional dynamics and cultural shifts that unfolded in the region. The recent development of scholarly interest in modern Indian regionalism and its historic roots has added new urgency to the task of studying these movements, which have important implications for the cultivation and dissemination of religious and literary symbols, values, and themes shared by the inhabitants of this linguistic region.¹⁹

The relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism in the broader context of Southeast Asia also sheds light on the trajectory of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. The popularity of Hinduism has been declining since the 13th century, while the popularity of Buddhism was gradually increasing. In the beginning, there was no significant difference between these two religions, as Buddhism was practiced in Hindu places of worship. Successively, the extent of Buddhism became apparent over time.²⁰ However, the long-standing relationship between India and parts of Southeast Asia, particularly the presence of 'Indic traces' in these regions, has been a subject of scholarly debate. The various debates about the modes and methods through which Hindu and Buddhist elements 'originally' interfaced with and were embedded in Southeast Asian civilizational contexts continue to engage scholars.²¹

In mainland Southeast Asia, Theravāda Buddhism is the established religion of all states except Vietnam, where both Mahāyāna Buddhism and Confucianism predominate. Yet, Hindu-Buddhist religion prevails in Bali, and tribal religions have persisted almost everywhere in the more remote areas. Moreover, the great religions have been influenced by earlier tribal beliefs.

It is against this broader backdrop that the decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu must be understood. The task of the historian is to describe and, if possible, to elucidate the religious developments in order to enable us to look at the present conditions against their historical background. The extinction of Buddha Dhamma in Tamil Nadu was a complex process, shaped by a confluence of regional, cultural, and religious dynamics that continue to fascinate scholars and researchers alike.²²

Therefore it can be argued that A significant socio-political factor contributing to this decline was the resurgence of Hinduism, notably catalysed by the Bhakti movement that gained prominence

from the 7th century CE onward. This movement advocated for personal devotion to Hindu deities through emotional and inclusive means, such as poetry and music, resonating deeply with the populace. Leaders of the Bhakti movement, such as the Nayanars and Alvars, actively propagated Hinduism while critiquing Buddhism and Jainism as foreign to the indigenous spiritual fabric of India. This ideological stance, coupled with the emotional bonds forged by the Bhakti movement, gradually diminished Buddhist influence in Tamil Nadu.²³

Another pivotal socio-political influence was the shift in patronage from Buddhism to Hinduism by influential dynasties. Initially supportive of both religions, the Pallavas gradually redirected their patronage toward Hinduism. This trend became more pronounced with the ascendancy of the Chola dynasty in the 9th century CE. The Cholas, who ruled over Tamil Nadu for centuries, staunchly supported Hinduism and invested heavily in the construction of elaborate temples dedicated to Hindu deities. Notably, Rajaraja Chola I and Rajendra Chola I sponsored grand architectural projects like the Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, symbolizing their commitment to Hindu religious expression. This patronage bolstered Hinduism's prominence while concurrently marginalizing Buddhist monasteries and stupas, which suffered from neglect and abandonment as a consequence.²⁴

Religiously, Buddhism faced internal conflicts and external competition, further contributing to its decline in Tamil Nadu. The emergence of diverse Buddhist sects, such as Mahayana and Theravada, introduced doctrinal disparities and weakened the unity of Buddhist communities. Concurrently, the rise of Jainism presented formidable competition, as both religions vied for patronage and adherents in the region. Jainism's established monastic practices and community organization enabled it to maintain a substantial presence alongside Hinduism, perpetuating challenges for Buddhism to sustain its influence.²⁵

Culturally, Buddhism underwent assimilation into Hindu practices and symbols, blurring the distinct identities between the two religions. Many Buddhist rituals, iconography, and even deities were absorbed into Hinduism, with the Buddha occasionally depicted as an avatar of Vishnu.²⁶ This cultural assimilation minimized the necessity for separate Buddhist institutions and rituals, contributing to the gradual eclipse of Buddhism as an independent religious entity in Tamil Nadu. Economically, the decline of maritime trade routes and shifting economic dynamics in the Indian Ocean region also impacted Buddhism's decline. The early propagation of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu was facilitated by thriving trade networks that connected the region with other parts of India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. As these trade routes declined, so too did the economic foundations that supported Buddhist institutions, leading to their decline and eventual abandonment.

Buddhism, like many faiths, experienced internal divisions and doctrinal disputes over time. The emergence of sects such as Mahayana and Theravada led to fragmentation within Buddhist communities in Tamil Nadu, weakening their unity and resilience against external pressures.²⁷ The decline of centralized Buddhist institutions and the withdrawal of royal patronage further exacerbated these internal divisions, making it increasingly challenging for Buddhism to maintain a cohesive presence in the region. This internal discord left Buddhism vulnerable to the competitive pressures it faced from other religions.

Jainism, a contemporary and similarly rooted religion in Indian philosophy, competed with Buddhism for patronage and followers in Tamil Nadu.²⁸ Both religions emphasized non-violence,

asceticism, and spiritual liberation, sharing common principles that appealed to the populace. However, Jainism's well-established monastic traditions and organized community structures enabled it to maintain a robust presence alongside Hinduism. Jain temples, sculptures, and literary works from this era illustrate the enduring influence Jainism held in the region. The competition for limited resources and royal favour often disadvantaged Buddhism, contributing to its gradual decline as Jainism continued to flourish.

Culturally, Buddhism underwent a process of integration and assimilation into Hinduism, blurring the boundaries between the two religions. Over time, many Buddhist practices, symbols, and even deities were absorbed into Hindu rituals and traditions. For instance, the Buddha was occasionally revered as an incarnation of Vishnu within Hinduism, consolidating the spiritual traditions and making it challenging for Buddhism to maintain a distinct identity separate from Hinduism.²⁹ As Buddhist teachings and practices became intertwined with Hindu customs, the necessity for distinct Buddhist institutions and rituals diminished, further contributing to the erosion of Buddhism's independent religious identity in Tamil Nadu. Economically, the decline of maritime trade routes and economic shifts in the Indian Ocean region also played a role in Buddhism's wane. Buddhism initially spread in Tamil Nadu through thriving trade networks connecting the region with other parts of India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. These trade routes facilitated the flow of ideas, resources, and religious practices that supported Buddhist institutions. However, as these trade routes declined over time, so too did the economic foundations that sustained Buddhist monasteries and stupas. With diminished economic support, many Buddhist sites fell into disrepair and abandonment, hastening the decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu.³⁰

Revival of Buddha Dhamma

The revival of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu in recent decades can be attributed to a confluence of socio-political, cultural, and global factors. One of the most significant catalysts has been the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement. Dr. Ambedkar, a prominent social reformer and the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, converted to Buddhism in 1956 as a means to escape the entrenched caste-based discrimination prevalent in Hinduism.³¹ This conversion was not merely a personal spiritual journey but a powerful social and political statement that inspired millions of Dalits, historically known as "untouchables," to embrace Buddhism as a path toward social equality and dignity.³² In Tamil Nadu, the Dalit movement has played a pivotal role in promoting Buddhism as an alternative to the oppressive caste system. Leaders and activists within the movement have vigorously advocated for Buddhism, highlighting its principles of social justice and equality. The establishment of various Buddhist organizations and the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti (Dr. Ambedkar's birthday) have further solidified Buddhism's presence among marginalized communities in Tamil Nadu.³³

The Indian government's policies and initiatives have significantly bolstered the revival of Buddhism in the region. Government efforts to preserve and promote Buddhist heritage sites, such as the Mahabalipuram complex and the Sittanavasal Cave, have brought renewed attention to Tamil Nadu's rich Buddhist past. This recognition has not only fostered a sense of historical pride but also encouraged contemporary interest in Buddhism. Moreover, the government's support for the establishment of new Buddhist institutions and the restoration of ancient monasteries and stupas has

provided crucial infrastructure for the practice and propagation of Buddhism. These socio-political efforts, both from grassroots movements and governmental policies, have created a conducive environment for the resurgence of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu.³⁴

The revival of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu has been significantly influenced by cultural factors, particularly through the rediscovery and preservation of the region's Buddhist heritage. Archaeological excavations and research have unearthed numerous Buddhist artefacts, inscriptions, and monuments, illuminating the rich Buddhist history of Tamil Nadu. These discoveries have sparked a sense of interest and pride among the local population, leading to increased efforts to preserve and promote these important historical sites. Organizations dedicated to the study and preservation of Buddhist heritage, such as the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and various cultural societies, have played a crucial role in these endeavours.³⁵ Through public exhibitions, seminars, and publications, these institutions have raised awareness about Tamil Nadu's Buddhist legacy, fostering a renewed appreciation for the region's historical and cultural richness.

Moreover, the revival of Buddhist art and literature has significantly contributed to the resurgence of interest in Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Contemporary artists and writers have drawn inspiration from Buddhist themes, creating works that reflect the teachings and values of Buddha Dhamma.³⁶ This renaissance in Buddhist aesthetics has resonated with a broader audience, fostering a renewed appreciation for the region's Buddhist heritage. The artistic and literary revival has not only celebrated the historical significance of Buddhism but also reinvigorated its cultural relevance in modern times, bridging the past with the present.³⁷

Global influences have also played a pivotal role in the revival of Buddha Dhamma in Tamil Nadu. The international spread of Buddhism has facilitated a resurgence of interest in the region, with global Buddhist organizations and networks establishing a presence in Tamil Nadu. These organizations have provided essential support and resources for local Buddhist communities, fostering a vibrant exchange of ideas and practices with Buddhists from other parts of the world.³⁸ Prominent Buddhist leaders and teachers, such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, have visited Tamil Nadu, further promoting the revival of Buddhism. Their teachings and public engagements have inspired many to explore and embrace Buddhist practices, enriching the spiritual and cultural landscape of Tamil Nadu. The modern appeal of Buddhist philosophy has also significantly contributed to its revival in Tamil Nadu. In today's world, the emphasis on mindfulness, meditation, and ethical living has attracted individuals seeking spiritual solace and mental well-being. The contemporary relevance of Buddhist practices has resonated with people from diverse backgrounds, contributing to its resurgence in the region. The universal values of compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness promoted by Buddhism have found a receptive audience in Tamil Nadu, further solidifying its revival.³⁹

The revival of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu has left a profound impact on contemporary society, influencing various facets of social dynamics, cultural expressions, and individual spiritual practices. At its core, the revival has empowered marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, by providing an alternative path to social equality and dignity. Buddhism's emphasis on compassion, non-violence, and social justice resonates deeply with the aspirations of these communities, offering a sense of identity and belonging that fosters unity and solidarity among Dalits. This empowerment has not only uplifted individuals but has also contributed to broader movements advocating for social justice, human rights,

and the elimination of caste-based discrimination. Through the revival of Buddhism, Tamil Nadu has witnessed significant strides towards a more inclusive and equitable society.⁴⁰

Culturally, the revival has sparked a resurgence of interest in Buddhist art and architecture, breathing new life into ancient motifs and traditions. Contemporary artists and architects have drawn inspiration from these themes, creating works that reflect the teachings and values of Buddha Dhamma. The restoration and preservation of ancient Buddhist sites have become a cultural imperative, attracting both local residents and tourists alike. This revitalization of Buddhist cultural heritage has not only enriched the artistic landscape of Tamil Nadu but has also served as a source of pride and historical continuity for its people.⁴¹

Literature and performing arts have similarly experienced a revival through the incorporation of Buddhist themes into contemporary Tamil expressions.⁴² Writers, poets, and playwrights have explored Buddhist philosophy and narratives, infusing the literary scene with profound insights into human nature and spirituality. Traditional art forms, such as dance and theatre, have embraced Buddhist stories, further promoting cultural dialogue and understanding among diverse audiences. This integration of Buddhist ideals into artistic expressions has contributed to the preservation and evolution of Tamil Nadu's cultural heritage in a dynamic and meaningful way.

Individually, the revival of Buddhism has sparked a growing interest in meditation and mindfulness practices across Tamil Nadu. Meditation centres and retreats have proliferated, offering individuals opportunities to explore Buddhist teachings and cultivate inner peace. The emphasis on mindfulness has resonated particularly with those seeking spiritual growth and mental well-being in their daily lives.⁴³ Buddhist principles of ethical living and compassion have influenced personal behaviour and lifestyle choices. The teachings of the Buddha on moral conduct, compassion for all beings, and the pursuit of wisdom have inspired many to adopt more mindful and compassionate lifestyles, evident in choices such as vegetarianism, heightened environmental awareness, and increased social responsibility.

CONCLUSION

The study of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu reveals a complex narrative of arrival, decline, and revival, shaped by a multitude of historical, socio-cultural, and religious factors. Initially introduced around the 3rd century BCE, Buddhism thrived in Tamil Nadu, evidenced by significant archaeological findings such as rock-cut inscriptions, cave temples, and vibrant literary works like the "Manimekalai" and "Tirukkural." The region became a hub for Buddhist learning and artistic expression, deeply influencing local culture and spirituality. However, Buddhism faced a gradual decline from around the 7th century CE onwards, influenced by various socio-political shifts. The rise of Hindu Bhakti movements, shifts in royal patronage towards Hinduism, internal doctrinal conflicts within Buddhism, and competition with Jainism all contributed to its wane. Additionally, economic changes, including the decline of maritime trade routes, diminished the economic foundations supporting Buddhist institutions. Despite these challenges, the contemporary revival of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu is noteworthy. Spearheaded by figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and bolstered by governmental initiatives to preserve Buddhist heritage sites, this revival reflects a resurgence of interest in Buddhist philosophy and values. Global influences and the appeal of mindfulness and ethical living have also contributed to

Buddhism's renewed relevance in modern Tamil society.

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