

Establishing Significance of Astrolatry in Indian Context Case of Navagraha temple cluster, Cauvery delta region, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract- Astrolatry is the worship of stars and other heavenly bodies as deities, or the association of deities with heavenly bodies. The Planet and star worship is an ancient tradition which varies according to the region, beliefs and practices. In Hindu tradition, worship of celestial bodies dates back to Vedic period which are practiced till date. Astrolatry are manifested both tangible and intangible manner. The spatial arrangement, Architecture, Iconography, Iconometry and sacred elements associated with celestial bodies varies according to its geographical location and history of the place. In Tamil Nadu, majority of temples dedicated to Navagraha, and Nakshatras are located in Cauvery delta region. These are called Dosha nivarthi sthalam. These temples are dates back to medieval Cholas. This research paper aims at establishing significance of Astrolatry through case example.

Key words- Astrolatry, Astronomical heritage, Iconography, Navagraha, Nakshatra, Cauvery delta region

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sky is always a fascinating one for human beings since early times. The study of the sky and elements in the sky has started because of this curiosity and gave rise to different disciplines such as Astronomy, Astrology, and Cosmology, etc. Along with these disciplines, religion has also intervened to create another discipline called Astrolatry. Astrolatry is the worship of heavenly bodies as deities. This kind of worship is an ancient tradition and observed in different parts of the world, some are continued even today. This research paper aimed at understanding the Astrolatry practice in the Indian context and establishing its significance through a case example.

Aim

To establish significance of Astrolatry in Indian context through case example. In this research paper, Navagraha worship in Cauvery delta region has taken as case example.

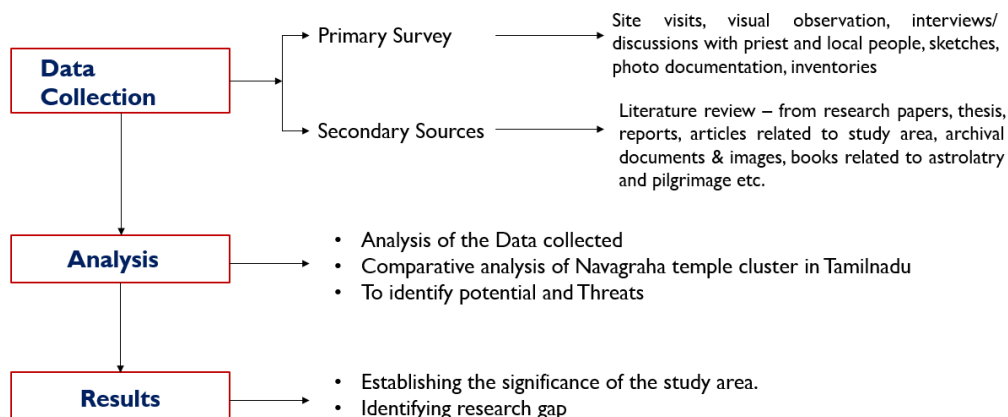
Objectives

- To study the history of Astronomy and Astrology in Indian Context.
- To study the tangible expression such as Temple and other spatial expression with respect to Astrolatry.
- To study the cultural setting of Cauvery delta region (Case example).
- To study the Mythology and tangible expression associated with the Navagraha Temples, Cauvery delta region.

Scope

- Mapping the Temples dedicated to Astrolatry in Cauvery delta region.
- To establish the significance of astral worship in Cauvery delta region.
- To know the threats and issues related to the study area and identify the research gap.

Methodology



Limitation

Research paper related to Astrology are minimal. The primary data collected in limited site visits. The study area is limited to Cauvery delta region due to time constraints. Google maps are used to show the location of temples.

Research Questions

- How the Astral practice originated and evolved in Indian context (Tangible expression)?
- In Tamil Nadu, Why Cauvery delta region has majority of Navagraha and Nakshatra temple?
- Why particularly this region is very significant for astrology?
- How the practice and beliefs are continued till date? What is its significance?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Vahia, M. N. (2011), In his paper, 'The Origin and growth of astronomy in Indian context' describes the stages of astronomical growth in Indian context. Astronomy is the discipline developed along with the growth of culture or a civilization and its needs. In astronomy, technology, science and mythology all merge. Astronomy can be represented in two ways, one is highly utilitarian where it helps to understand seasons, weathers etc. In another way it is abstract, more related to human place in the vastness of the universe. The stages of astronomical growth are divided into four phases namely,

Initial phase (20000 to 5000 B.C):

In this phase we can find evidence of rock art done by semi settled and paleolithic people. This phase brings in first stage of astronomy in defining seasons and their relation to sunrise points. The Sun, rain, sky is seen as life givers and the sky is considered to be heaven or abode of gods.

Settlement phase (5000 to 1500 B.C):

This phase marks the beginning of civilization. People started settling down and farming activities emerged. People understood the importance of sky and started recording the sun path, moon, stars and constellation. Large structures are discovered to study the sky. At this stage, people are terrified by forces of nature. The concept of space and time enters into people life. They started giving respect to the heavenly bodies through rituals. Megaliths are introduced as funerary structure.

Vedic astronomy (3000 B.C):

In India, Rig Veda is found to be the oldest literature reference written during 3000 B.C. Sun, Agni is considered to be the primary god and construction of altar, auspicious time has been calculated. Solar calendar is created. In Yajur Veda, Lunar calendar was found. The concept of yuga was introduced to synchronize Solar and Lunar calendar. In Atharva Veda, water clock was used to measure time. Settlement phase paved way for Astrology in next phase which studies the movement of celestial bodies and its influence on human affairs and natural world.

Civilization Phase (2500 B.C to 500 A.D):

At this phase, society is well organized and knowledge is emerged. The disciplines such as astronomical mythology, astrology and cosmology takes its root. Predicting future becomes common in this phase, Astrology becomes driving force for astronomy. In Indian context, mix of astronomy and religion are reflected in temple and sculptures. The iconography and iconometry for celestial bodies are developed.

Technological phase (from 500 A.D):

In India, modern astronomy is rooted. The various texts like Brihat Samhita of varahamihira, Surya Siddhantha are written. During Mughal times many observatories are made. In 1724 during Jai Singh Reign, Jantar Mantar is discovered in Delhi, Ujjain, Jaipur, and Mathura etc. which has strong interaction of European, Indian and Arabic Astronomy. From the literature review, we understood the different phases of astronomy and astral practice evolved in India.

III. TANGIBLE EXPRESSION: CASE OF NAVAGRAHA

Navagraha represents nine planets such as Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Rahu and Ketu are ascending and descending nodes of moon. These two are dark planets which are later added. These nine planets are referred in Vedic period which are considered to influence the life of an individual. Navagraha, 'Nava' means 'nine' and 'Graha' means 'to catch'. The Navagraha statues are seen along the North East corner of Shiva temple. Each planet faces particular direction. The color, ornaments, garments vary according to its characteristics and mythological stories. Rajarajan R. K. K. (2015), In his paper 'Navagrahas in Indian Thought and Nayaka Temples of Tamil Nadu' discussed about the nine planets and its tangible expression through mythological references which are summarized as follows

Sun - Surya

Surya is a Vedic god referred in Rig Veda (1500 B.C). He is considered to be son of Kashyapa and Aditi. He has two wives Sanjna and Chhaya. Earliest note of Surya iconography is seen in Vishnu purana (450 B.C). It represents Surya as dwarfish stature, burnished copper skin color and slightly reddish eye. The vehicle of Surya is one wheeled chariot pulled by seven horses or one horse with seven heads. Surya is the lord of grahas. He is lord of Kalinga desa. He is red color holding lotus on arm and other is abhaya-hasta. He is equal to tirumurti. He is seated in padmasana.

Moon - Chandra

Chandra is considered as lord of herbs. He is son of Atri and Anasuya. He is lord of Trans Yamuna Desa. The body is milk white in color. He is dvibhuj, holds gada in one hand and other shows Varada mudra. The ornaments studded with pearls; garment is white. He uses three wheeled chariots, fitted with white flag and ten horses. He is seated in square Agni pedestal and his tejas drives away darkness.

Mars – Angaraka/ Mangala

Angaraka is born from the sweat of Lord Shiva. He is considered to be son of Lord Shiva and Bhumi devi. In Ganesh purana, he is considered to be son of Bharadwaj. He belongs to Bharadwaj Gotra. He is king of Avanti Desa. He is a Chaturbhuj who carries Sakti, Sula, gada and Khatvanga. His garments and garland include red, ornaments include coral. The vehicle is chariot fitted with red banner and pulled by saffron colored 8 goats. He is seated in triangular pedestal.

Mercury – Budha

Budha means wise or intelligent. He is son of Chandra and Rohini. His descendant becomes King of Kashi. He belongs to Atri gotra. He is king of Magadha desa. The body shines like Kumkum. He is Chaturbhuj carries Khadaga, Khetaka, gada and Varada mudra. The ornaments include emerald. The garments and garlands are yellow. The vehicle is ratha pulled by 4 lions. He is seated in Simha vahana.

Jupiter – Brihaspati

The Brihaspati is considered to be preceptors of God. He is son of Angiras. He is Adi devata of Sindhu Desa. The body shines like Gold. He has Chaturbhuj includes Danda, kamandalu, Japa Mala and varadahasta. He wears yellow garments and garland. His ornaments have gems fitted with pushpanga (topaz, yellowish brown gemstone). The vehicle is golden ratha pulled by 8 white horses.

Venus – Sukra

Sukra is son of Sage Bhrgu. He is a preceptor of Asuras. His wife is Sataparva. He is the author of Sukra Nidhi and master of Bhojagata desa. His skin shines like silver. He is Chaturbhuj carrying Danda, kamandalu, Japa Mala and varadahasta. His garment includes white and decorated with white flowers and diamonds. He is expert in Nidhi sastra. The vehicle is chariot fitted with white banner pulled by 8 horses.

Saturn – Sani

Sani is son of Surya and Chhaya. He is considered to be most dreaded among planetary deity. He is from Kasyapa gotra. He is lord of Saurashtra desa. His complexion is black. He is Chaturbhuj carries dhanush, bana, curika and abhayahasta. The garments, garlands are yellow and ornaments studded with blue gems. His vehicle is chariot studded with blue banner and pulled by 8 vultures.


Rahu (Lunar node)

Rahu is considered to be king of meteors and guardian of south west quarter. Rahu (Daitya) swallows sun and moon, obscure their rays and cause the eclipse. He is son of Viprachitta and Simhika (Kasyapa). He is from Baitinasi gotra and master of Barbara desa. The skin color is draining drenched clouds and having terrific face. He is Chaturbhuj carries Khadga, Khetaga, Sula and Varadahasta. His garland, garment is black and ornaments studded with gomedaka gems. His vehicle is chariot pulled by black lion.

Ketu (Lunar node)

Ketu is represented by dragon tail. He is son of Viprachitta and Simhika. He is Jamini gotra. He is lord of Madhya desa. He is Dvibhuj bears gada and varadahasta. The ornaments studded with Vaidurga (cat’s eye gem). His vehicle is chariot pulled by pigeons. Below Table 1 shows the direction of nine planets in Indian Astrology. This direction is based on the Rajarajan R. K. K. (2015) paper titled ‘Navagrahas in Indian Thought and Nayaka Temples of Tamil Nadu’

Table 1 Direction of Graha/ Planets (Source: Author)

North 	Budha (Mercury) ↑	Sukra (Venus) ↑	Chandra (Moon) ↑
	Guru (Jupiter) ←	Surya (Sun) ↑	Angaraka (Mars) →
	Ketu (South Lunar Node) →	Sani (Saturn) ↓	Rahu (North Lunar Node) →

IV. CASE EXAMPLE: NAVAGRAHA TEMPLE CLUSTER, CAUVERY DELTA REGION, TAMIL NADU

In India, Navagraha are part of Shiva temples which is located in Northeast direction. It is absent in most of the Vishnu temple. There are some individual temples dedicated to Surya (Sun) and Sani (Saturn) but there is no evidence of Navagraha Temple clusters in India apart from Tamil Nadu. In India, Navagraha temples are seen in Assam, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. These temples are installed after 18th Century. In Tamil Nadu, there are four Navagraha temple cluster found. These are located in Chennai, Vellore, Tanjore, Mayiladuthurai and Tirunelveli. Apart from Navagraha Temples we can see Nakshatra (Birth star) temples and Zodiac temples in Tamil Nadu which are spread across the region. This Research paper tried to explore the cultural setting and Navagraha temple cluster in Cauvery delta region, Tamil Nadu.

Site Context

Navagraha temple cluster in Cauvery delta region spread across present day Tanjore, Mayiladuthurai, Nagapattinam districts of Tamil Nadu and Karaikal in Puducherry. Each temple is considered as abode of one of the Navagraha. Out of nine temples, eight temples have main deity as Shiva and Graha as attendant deity. Only Surya temple have Sun as a main deity. These nine temples form a network which is visited by people in two ways, one is the pilgrim route where pilgrims visit the temple as per astrological

sequence and another one is tourism route where tourists visit according to the geographical location. This research paper maps the temple location, its importance, different routes, mythology, practices etc. and establishing its significance. It also outlines the issues faced by the temple cluster. Table 2 shows the list of Navagraha temples in Cauvery delta region of Tamil Nadu state.

Table 2 Navagraha Temple cluster list, Cauvery Delta region, Tamil Nadu

Sl. No.	Planet	Temple
1.	Surya (Sun)	Suryanarkovil, Tanjore
2.	Chandra (Moon)	Thingalur, Tanjore
3. a.	Guru (Jupiter)	Thenkudi Thittai, Tanjore
3. b.	Guru (Jupiter)	Alangudi, Tiruvarur
4.	Rahu (North Lunar node)	Thirunageshwaram, Tanjore
5.	Budhan (Mercury)	Thiruvenkadu, Mayiladuthurai
6.	Sukran (Venus)	Kanjanur, Tanjore
7.	Ketu (South Lunar node)	Keezhaperum pallam, Mayiladuthurai
8.	Sani (Saturn)	Thirunallar, Karaikal
9.	Angarakan (Mars)	Vaideeshwaran Koil, Mayiladuthurai

Fig. 1 shows the Cauvery delta region in Tamil Nadu state. Fig. 2 shows the nine temples dedicated to nine different planets in Cauvery delta region. The numbering of temple is based on the Table 2 according to the astrological sequence.



Fig. 1 Cauvery delta region in Tamil Nadu state
(Source: Author, Google map)

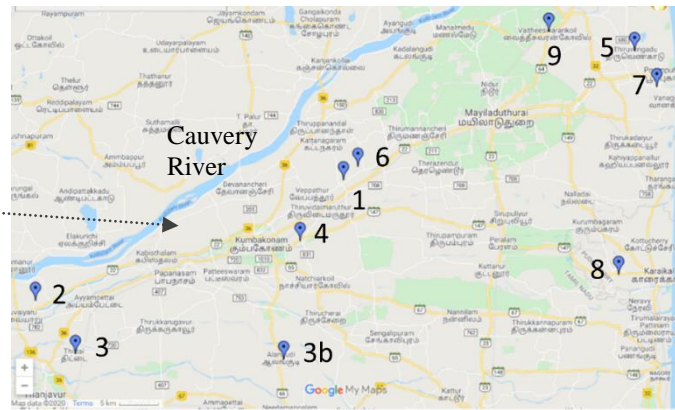


Fig. 2 Navagraha temple cluster, Cauvery delta region
(Source: Author, Google map)

Temple Description

- 1. Suryanar Kovil (Surya/ Sun):** This temple is dedicated to Surya (Sun). It is located in Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu. The temple was built by Kulotunga Chola-I, the temple has been patronized by the King of Srivijayam, the current day Indonesia. It was built during the year 1100 A.D. Sun is the presiding deity, Usha and Chhaya devi are consorts. The temple embodies Dravidian architectural style. Suryanar Koil (the sun temple) is the only temple in Tamil Nadu, where we found separate shrines for all the nine planetary deities. The temple has references from Markandeya purana where Sun was created by Brahma.
- 2. Kailasanthar Temple, Thingalur (Chandra/ Moon):** This temple is dedicated to Chandra (Moon). It is located in Kumbakonam, Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu. This temple was believed to be built before bhakti movement in 7th Century A.D. Lord Shiva (Kailasanathar) is the main deity whereas Chandra graha is attendant deity. According to Astrology, Chandra is the planet that removes stress and sorrow.
- 3. Sri Dakshinamurthy Temple, Alangudi (Guru/ Jupiter):** This temple is dedicated to Guru (Jupiter). It is located in Thiruvarur district of Tamil Nadu. It was built during 7th Century A.D. Lord Shiva (Abathusagayar) with his consort Umayammai (Elavar Kuzhaliammai) as main deity whereas Guru (Jupiter) as attendant deity. This Temple attracts a large number of devotees, when Jupiter transits between zodiac signs.
- 4. Sri Naganathaswamy Temple, Thirunageshwaram (Rahu/ North Lunar node):** This temple is dedicated to Rahu (North lunar node). It is located in Thirunageswaram of Tanjore district. It was built during 10th Century A.D by Aditya Chola I. Lord Shiva (Naganathaswamy) as main deity, Rahu with his consorts Nagavalli and Nagakanni as attendant deity. This temple is one of the master piece of Dravidian architecture of Chola style. This temple was referred in literature such as Periya Puranam, Devaram and Thirumarai. This temple attracts devotees during Rahu kalam to do dosha nivarti pooja for having Rahu dosham.
- 5. Sri Swetharanyeshwar Temple, Thiruvengadu (Budha/ Mercury):** This temple is dedicated to Budha (Mercury). It is located in Thiruvenkadu of Mayiladuthurai district. It was built during cholas but the temple got its full structure during 16th Century by Vijayanagara empire. Lord Shiva (Swetharanyeshwar) as main deity whereas Budha (Mercury) as attendant deity. The temple has references from Valmiki Ramayana where this temple is considered to be equal to Kashi. This temple attracts devotees because Budha is considered to bestow wisdom and intellect.

6. Sri Agneeswarar temple, Kanjanur (Sukran /Venus): This temple is dedicated to Sukran (Venus). It is located in Kanjanur of Tanjore district. It was built during medieval cholas and renovated during Vijayanagara times. Lord Shiva (Agneeswarar) with his consort karpagambal as main deity whereas Sukran (Venus) as attendant deity. This temple attracts devotees to pray for the well beings of their wives. The temple is also referred as Agnistalam, Brahmपुरi and Palaasavanam.

7. Sri Naganathaswamy Temple, Keelaperumpallam (Ketu/ South Lunar node): This temple is dedicated to Ketu (South lunar node). It is located in Keelaperumpallam of Mayiladuthurai district. It was built during 9th to 10th century A.D by Cholas. Lord Shiva (Naganathar) with his consort Soundarya devi as main deity whereas Ketu (South lunar node) as attendant deity. Devotees believes that visiting the temple will rescue from Ketu dosham.

8. Sri Dharbaranyeshwarar Temple, Thirunallar (Sani/ Saturn): This temple is dedicated to Sani (Saturn). It is located in Karaikal of Pondicherry. It was built during 9th century A.D by Cholas and later expanded during Vijayanagara rule. Lord Shiva (Dharabaranyeshwar) with his consort Parameshwari as main deity whereas Sani (Saturn) as attendant deity. This Temple attracts a large number of devotees, when Saturn transits between zodiac signs. Devotees believes that taking bath nala theertha here will wash away all kinds of misfortunes and affliction.

9. Vaithyanathaswamy Temple, Vaitheeshwarankoil (Angarakan/ Mars): This temple is dedicated to Angarakan (Mars). It is located in Mayiladuthurai district. It was built during 7th Century A.D by Cholas. Lord Shiva (Vaithyanathaswamy) with his consort Thaiyalnayagi as main deity whereas Angarakan (Mars) as attendant deity. The temple is referred in Devaram and Thirupugazh literature. Devotees believes that doing rituals to Angarakan (Mars) will remove obstacles which delay marriages and relives from chevvai dosham.

Sequence of visiting the Navagraha temple

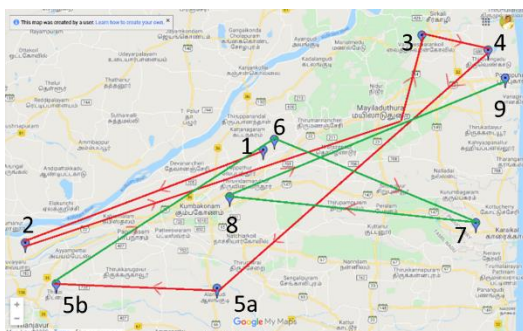


Fig 3. Pilgrim route,
(Source: Author, Google map)

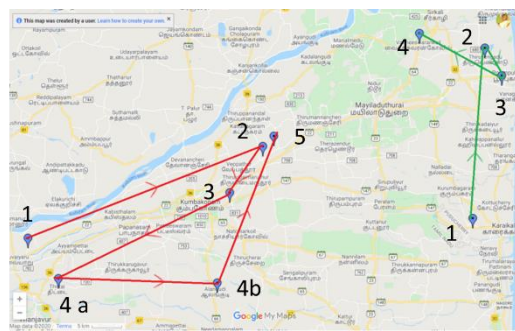


Fig 4. Tourism route,
(Source: Author, Google map)

Pilgrim route: As per astrological sequence, Navagraha temples are visited according to the table 2 which will take 3 to 4 days. Fig 3. Shows the pilgrim route sequence. The numbering and sequence to visit the temple is (1) Sun, (2) Moon, (3) Mars, (4) Mercury, (5) Jupiter, (6) Venus, (7) Saturn and ends with (8) North and (9) South lunar node respectively.

Tourism route: Fig 4. Tourism route includes two cluster and take one or two days. The numbering and sequence of two cluster are Cluster 1: (1) Moon, (2) Sun, (3) North lunar node, (4) Jupiter and (5) Venus and Cluster 2: (1) Saturn, (2) Mercury, (3) South lunar node and (4) Mars respectively. These cluster are based on the geographical location of temple. These temples are visited individually also according to its movement in the space.

V. SIGNIFICANCE

Historical Significance

Navagraha Temples dates back to Early and medieval Cholas from 7th to 11th Century A.D. The temple has been expanded over a period of time. The contribution of Cholas, Vijayanagara, Nayaka and Hoysala are seen. The Navagraha temple cluster has long tradition of worshipping these temples. Hence, it has strong historical significance.

Architectural Significance

The temples of Navagraha manifest the Dravidian Architectural style. It has rectangular plan oriented in East- west direction which is approached by entrance gateway (Gopuram). Each of the nine temple has unique gopuram, the scale and size depend on the patron/ builder. Temples of Thirunageshwaram and Thiruvengadu has elaborate and intricate sculptures. Vault is a prominent architectural feature seen in most of the Navagraha temple. The hierarchy of Navagraha is also reflected in architectural form and spatial arrangement of Temple. These temple stands an identity and landmark for the town. All these temples have strong architectural significance.

Astrological Significance

The direction of Graha in each temple is depend on Indian astrology. The ornaments, garments, sacred tree and tank depends on ancient texts and mythological stories. For pilgrimage, the sequence of visiting temple is based on the astrological sequence. All these temples are built according to Silpasastra and reflecting the cosmic order. Hence Navagraha temple has astrological significance.

Economic Significance

Navagraha temple clusters in Cauvery delta region is a part of the Tamil Nadu tourism. It is also part of Navagraha pilgrimage. The pilgrim visits these temples individually or as a part of tourism circuit. Apart from this Nadi astrology which is one of the ancient and unique things practiced even today in Vaitheeswarankoil. The Tourism, pilgrimage and astrology adds to economic significance of the place. Also, the people of the temple town are directly or indirectly depending on temple revenue.

VI. CONCLUSION

From this research paper we discussed the evolution of astrology. Astronomy and Religion played important role in Astral worship. The significance varied over a period of history. In the beginning people believed that Navagraha (planets) plays an important role in individual life. This fear factor towards Graha leads to development of many temples and sculptures associated with it. According to the movement of graha in the universe, paved way for making differences in rituals, festivals and offerings in each temple.

The case study identifies there is a hierarchy of Grahas but its significant varies according to the fear factor. According to the ancient text, Sun and Moon are the important Graha but from case example we found that the temples of Sun and Moon are not much significant. Instead, Sani (Saturn), Angarakan (Mars), Rahu (North Lunar node) and Guru (Jupiter) are more significant. Pilgrim fall is observed more in this temple. The reason could be people believes that position of this Graha in Jathagam decides individual life, marriage and future.

Out of nine in six temples the circumbulatory path are altered in a way that we will first visit the Graha then we are directed to Lord Shiva (main deity). This could be the recent one because according to the temple layout it was designed to worship main deity first then while circumbulation we will pray the Grahas. This can be due to the modernization and tourism pressure. There is also trend of installing Navagraha in existing temple to make it famous and attract people. The impact of tourism over pilgrimage is identified as research gap and trying to explore in the upcoming research paper.

In Tamil Nadu, Cauvery delta has majority of temples dedicated to astral worship. From literature review we found that during farming phase, people started understanding the sky and documented the movement of sun, moon and season. In Cauvery delta region particularly Tanjore is the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu. This might be one of the reasons for maximum number of celestial temples here. Each temple might orient and aligned according to movement of celestial bodies. The detailed study needs to be carried out in Cultural geography of Cauvery delta region to find the authenticity and integrity of these astral temples.

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