EVOLUTION OF SRIRANGAM TEMPLE
(CIRCA 10th-18th CENTURY): A STUDY IN
POWER, PATRONAGE AND LEGITIMATION

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ABSTRACT

For many decades, historians have been working on the importance or the relevance of a temple in understanding the history of south India in its totality. Temple was at the center of people’s life, and strategically very important for the powerful in society. It is believed that in Tamilakam, a logical and elaborate historical understanding of kingship is possible only in relation to the temples. Importantly, the temple and the palace are both indicated in Tamil by the same word i.e. Koyil. The deity, it was imagined, commanded all the services which the king normally enjoyed in his palace.

A temple was witness to unfolding of a whole gamut of products, processes and potentials which have been of great importance to a historian. The Srirangam temple in Tiruchirapalli district in Tamilnadu is an important centre especially due to many donative inscriptions that have been found engraved on the walls and pillars within the temple complex. There are more than six hundred inscriptions found here and this work argues that a deeper analysis of these inscriptions presents to us with a clear insight into the working of power, patronage and legitimation over a period of almost eight hundred years from about c. 1000 A.D. which saw various dynasties patronizing this temple. A study of these dimensions over so many centuries was a challenging task in itself, though once the classification of inscriptions was complete, the picture was clearer. The evolving bond between the temporal and the transcendental, the extended networks--both local and trans-local-- of social and political control and consequently, the
evolution of the regional state brought forth by the interpretation of the inscriptions highlight the importance of the historical developments in these centuries in this part of the Indian sub-continent.

Many of these inscriptions provided an integrated understanding of social, political as well as architectural history that brought to light the evolution of Srirangam temple over these centuries in its totality. From the pre-Vijayanagara times to Vijayanagara and Nayaka times, as the ritual space came to be shared by more and more people, the Srirangam temple became a center--and also a witness-to power struggles between different dynasties and sects with sometimes intended and the other times unintended competition for patronage and legitimacy.