

# **Cultural Geopolitics and Territorial Legitimacy in the River Vaigai– Keeladi Civilisation: Sacred Landscapes, Urban Heritage, and Contemporary Extensions**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a comprehensive examination of the cultural–geopolitical foundations of the Vaigai–Keeladi civilisation, a discovery that has significantly reshaped the scholarly understanding of early urbanism and cultural development in Tamil Nadu. The emergence of Keeladi—situated along the Vaigai River in the Sivaganga district near Madurai—as a major urban centre of the Sangam era provides compelling evidence of a highly organised, literate, and craft-specialised society. Far from representing a peripheral settlement, Keeladi demonstrates the presence of an advanced urban culture with structured habitation, industrial activity, interregional exchange networks, and a sophisticated material life. As such, the site stands as an important civilisational marker that bridges archaeological data with broader questions of cultural continuity, territorial identity, and political imagination.

A key interpretive framework for this study is drawn from R. Balakrishnan’s *A Journey of a Civilization*, which situates Keeladi within a long historical continuum of Tamil antiquity. Balakrishnan’s work foregrounds deep-time processes—such as language migration, ecological adaptation, settlement geography, and the development of a materialist worldview—that collectively shape the civilisational trajectory of the Tamil region. His approach provides

an essential lens for understanding Keeladi not as an isolated archaeological discovery but as part of a sustained cultural landscape in which territory, ecology, and identity formation are deeply interlinked. Incorporating this perspective allows the paper to position Keeladi within a broader civilisational narrative that emphasises structural continuity across millennia.

The Vaigai River basin, long recognised as a crucial ecological and cultural corridor, serves as the geographic core of this analysis. The river has historically supported dense human habitation, agricultural surplus, craft production, and sacred–ritual practices. This study therefore extends beyond artefactual analysis to include the region’s enduring sacred and cultural landscapes—such as the Meenakshi Amman Temple, Thirumalai Nayakar Mahal, and related ritual geographies—which collectively illuminate how spatial organisation, religious symbolism, and political authority have mutually shaped the territorial identity of the Tamil region. These landscapes exemplify how cultural meanings are continuously inscribed onto territory, transforming geographical space into a site of civilisational memory and legitimacy.

Contemporary institutions, including the Keeladi Museum and modern interventions like the Vaigai Dam, further demonstrate the ongoing relevance of cultural geopolitics in the public and political imagination of Tamil Nadu. These sites reflect the dynamic process through which heritage is curated, reinterpreted, and mobilised in present-day identity discourse. They signal that the Keeladi discovery is not only an archaeological turning point but also a contemporary cultural resource that informs regional pride, political narratives, and debates on historical autonomy.

The paper argues that the Vaigai–Keeladi civilisation functions as a durable cultural archive that continues to shape Tamil territorial identity from antiquity to the present. Through an integrated analysis of archaeological evidence, ecological landscapes, sacred geographies,

and contemporary cultural sites, the study illustrates the enduring power of cultural geopolitics in structuring historical consciousness and spatial identity in the Tamil region.

**Keywords:** Vaigai–Keeladi civilisation; cultural geopolitics; territorial legitimacy; sacred landscapes; urban heritage; Sangam-era urbanism; Tamil civilisational identity

### **Introduction:**

The Vaigai River Basin has long functioned as a vital ecological and cultural axis for Tamil civilisation. The archaeological findings at Keeladi—situated in the Sivaganga district near Madurai—have dramatically reshaped current knowledge of early Tamil society. Since the commencement of excavations in 2015, the site has revealed evidence of a well-planned urban settlement featuring organised street layouts, brick-built structures, an advanced drainage system, industrial activity, and indications of widespread literacy. These discoveries overturn earlier views that Sangam-era Tamil society was largely agrarian or pastoral in character.

R. Balakrishnan's *A Journey of a Civilization* offers interpretive frameworks that deepen the understanding of Keeladi, particularly in relation to linguistic movement, landscape-rooted identity, and the distinctly materialist ethos that underpinned ancient Tamil culture. Adopting a cultural–geopolitical perspective, this paper examines Keeladi's territorial significance, sacred spatiality, and the processes of identity construction, drawing extensively on Balakrishnan's foundational insights.

### **Keeladi: Archaeological Foundations of an Urban Tamil Civilization - Location and Archaeological Significance**

Keeladi, located on the fertile Vaigai plains, occupies a strategically advantageous landscape that supported sustained urban development, intensive agriculture, and specialised craft production. Its close proximity to Madurai positions it within a historically significant urban corridor, indicating that

Keeladi may have been part of a larger and interconnected settlement system. The site's geographic setting, combined with evidence of planned habitation, economic activity, and regional exchange networks, underscores its role as a key node in the early urbanisation of the Tamil region.

### **Excavation Findings**

Excavations at Keeladi have uncovered a wide range of material evidence, including multi-room brick structures, industrial features such as kilns and furnaces, bead-production areas, and numerous artefacts bearing Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions and graffiti. The findings also include iron tools, diverse pottery types, spindle whorls, and an impressively organised drainage system, along with indicators of long-distance exchange networks. Collectively, these discoveries point to a highly urbanised society characterised by widespread literacy, advanced technological capabilities, and well-developed economic specialisation.

### **Urban Organization and Material Culture**

The material record from Keeladi points to a highly developed urban culture that placed strong emphasis on literacy, skilled craftsmanship, aesthetic sensibility in daily life, and well-organised spatial planning. The diversity of artefacts—ranging from inscribed pottery to finely crafted tools and household objects—illustrates a community with established social routines, specialised labour, and a clear sense of urban order. The Keeladi Museum, which curates and exhibits these findings, plays a crucial role in consolidating the site's cultural legacy, offering tangible evidence of early Tamil urbanism and reinforcing its significance within contemporary Tamil identity and heritage discourse.

### **The Vaigai River as Cultural and Territorial Spine**

The Vaigai River has long functioned as both an ecological lifeline and a symbolic axis for Tamil civilisation. In Sangam literature, the river is celebrated as a source of abundance, continuity, and cultural cohesion, shaping the identity and livelihoods of the communities along

its banks. Major urban centres such as Madurai emerged and prospered because of the Vaigai's fertile plains, with city life organised around temple-centric streets, ritual processions, seasonal festivals, and water-dependent social rhythms. The river not only sustained agriculture and trade but also structured the spatial, ritual, and political landscapes of the region. In this sense, the Vaigai operates simultaneously as a natural resource, a cultural map, and a foundational element in the collective memory of Tamil society.

### **Contemporary Cultural Extensions**

#### **Meenakshi Amman Temple**

The Meenakshi Amman Temple stands as one of the most enduring centres of Tamil culture, ritual authority, and sacred geography. Its expansive complex, with concentric streets, towering gopurams, and choreographed ritual pathways, reflects a sophisticated spatial imagination that has shaped Madurai's urban identity for centuries. The temple continues to function as a living repository of Tamil religious practice, artistic expression, and civic organisation. Its role in festivals, pilgrimage circuits, and everyday social life demonstrates a remarkable continuity of cultural geopolitics, where sacred architecture reinforces territorial identity and historical memory.

#### **Thirumalai Nayakar Mahal**

The Thirumalai Nayakar Mahal embodies the political power, architectural innovation, and aesthetic sensibilities of the Nayak period. Its monumental arches, vast courtyards, and composite architectural style reveal a blend of indigenous and external influences, signalling the cosmopolitan nature of pre-modern Madurai. Today, the Mahal functions as a prominent cultural landmark, contributing to the region's collective memory by linking contemporary society with its royal and administrative past. Its preservation and public engagement underscore its role in shaping modern interpretations of authority, heritage, and regional pride.

## **Vaigai Dam**

The Vaigai Dam represents a modern extension of long-standing traditions of river management and ecological governance in the Vaigai basin. Constructed to regulate water supply, enhance irrigation, and support agricultural livelihoods, the dam continues a civilisational legacy of viewing the river as both a resource and a strategic territorial asset. By transforming the hydrological landscape, the dam reinforces the deep historical relationship between human settlement and the Vaigai River, illustrating how ancient practices of water-based territorial organisation persist in contemporary infrastructural forms.

## **Keeladi Museum**

The Keeladi Museum serves as a crucial institutional anchor for Tamil Nadu's historical narrative, providing public access to the extensive material culture uncovered at the excavation site. Through curated displays of pottery, inscriptions, tools, ornaments, and industrial artefacts, the museum highlights the technological skill, literacy, and urban sophistication of Sangam-era society. It also plays an important role in heritage education, identity formation, and cultural diplomacy by presenting Keeladi as a testament to the depth and autonomy of Tamil civilisation. In doing so, the museum reinforces the region's cultural– geopolitical significance in both academic and public discourse.

## **R. Balakrishnan's Interpretive Framework (A Journey of a Civilization) Scientific Methodology and Historical Objectivity**

Balakrishnan consistently emphasises that Keeladi must be interpreted through a rigorous scientific lens, grounded in verifiable data such as carbon dating, stratigraphic context, artefact typology, and linguistic analysis. He argues that archaeological interpretation should not be shaped by political sentiment, cultural pride, or ideological narratives. Instead, the integrity of Keeladi's significance must rest upon empirical evidence and methodologically sound scholarship. By foregrounding scientific objectivity,

Balakrishnan places Keeladi within a global archaeological framework in which conclusions are drawn from data rather than contemporary identity politics.

### **Interrogation of Civilisation Claims**

A major component of Balakrishnan's critique addresses the unsubstantiated claims that equate Keeladi with the Indus Valley Civilization or label it a "River Valley Civilisation" equivalent in scale and complexity. He insists that cross-civilisational comparisons require substantial, multi-layered proof—ranging from technological parallels to socio-political structures and urban metrics. Without such evidence, premature assertions risk distorting the academic value of the site. His intervention thus calls for intellectual restraint and scholarly precision while situating Keeladi within the broader discourse on early urbanism in South Asia.

### **Absence of Organised Religion**

Among Balakrishnan's most significant contributions is his argument that Keeladi, much like the Indus Valley Civilization, exhibits no demonstrable signs of organised religion. The absence of temples, ritual structures, idols, and elaborate religious artefacts suggests a society shaped primarily by materialist and secular orientations. He contends that this silence in the archaeological record must be acknowledged as a scientific reality rather than explained away through speculation. This interpretation challenges widespread assumptions about the ancient past and highlights the uniqueness of early Tamil cultural formations.

### **Defense of Excavation Integrity**

Balakrishnan also intervenes in debates regarding the authenticity and quality of the initial excavation reports. He strongly supports the archaeologists who led the first phases of work at Keeladi, arguing that their methodological approaches were robust, transparent, and aligned with accepted archaeological standards. He dismisses criticisms of their procedures as unscientific or politically motivated, reaffirming the credibility of the findings that first brought

Keeladi to prominence. His defense underscores the need to protect archaeological scholarship from external pressures and misinterpretations.

### **Landscape-Based Identity and Materialist Culture**

In *A Journey of a Civilization*, Balakrishnan develops a broader civilisational theory that situates Tamil identity within the interconnected frameworks of landscape, ecology, and material culture. Drawing on the *tinai* system of classical Tamil literature, he argues that identity was historically rooted in ecological belonging—where people, landforms, occupations, and emotions formed an integrated cultural unit. He proposes that ancient Tamil society was deeply materialist, emphasising practical life, environmental adaptation, and social learning rather than metaphysical cosmologies. Furthermore, he asserts that early Tamil communities viewed deities as inhabitants of the landscape rather than transcendent creator beings. This worldview aligns closely with Keeladi's archaeological record, which reveals no evidence of temple-based religious practice. Balakrishnan thus situates Keeladi as an embodiment of an indigenous civilisational model grounded in ecology, equality, and material culture rather than ritual hierarchy.

### **Conclusion: Cultural Geopolitics and Reinterpreting Keeladi through Balakrishnan's Lens**

Keeladi fundamentally transforms prevailing understandings of ancient Tamil civilisation. The site's urban sophistication—reflected in its planned architecture, advanced drainage systems, industrial production zones, literacy markers, and specialised crafts—reveals a society deeply rooted in material culture, knowledge traditions, and ecological adaptation rather than monumental religious structures. These findings reposition early Tamil society as one that prioritised functional urbanism, social learning, and cultural continuity anchored in land, river, and craft-based life.

R. Balakrishnan's *A Journey of a Civilization* provides a crucial interpretive framework for making sense of these discoveries. His insistence on scientific rigor, archaeological objectivity, and evidence-based interpretation challenges the distortions that often accompany heritage narratives. Balakrishnan's emphasis on landscape-based identity—particularly through the tinai ecological system—clarifies how ancient Tamil communities understood themselves in relation to their environments. His articulation of a distinctly materialist worldview strengthens the argument that Keeladi represents a civilisation shaped not by temple authority or royal monumentalism but by everyday life, ecological belonging, literacy, and collective knowledge systems. Through this lens, Keeladi becomes part of a deep-time Tamil cultural continuum, extending across language, land, and social organisation.

By bringing together archaeology, cultural geography, sacred spatiality, and contemporary heritage institutions, this study demonstrates that Keeladi should be viewed not merely as an excavation site but as a significant cultural–political landmark. Its discoveries reaffirm the enduring structures of Tamil territorial identity—formed through river systems like the Vaigai, shaped by long-standing ecological relationships, reinforced through linguistic antiquity, and expressed through material culture across millennia. In doing so, Keeladi stands as both a testament to the depth of Tamil civilisation and a compelling reminder of how landscape, culture, and identity remain tightly interwoven in the region's historical imagination.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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