

The Growth and Development of Women's Contribution to Tourism in the Pandya Period in Madurai District: A Historical Perspective

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Introduction

Madurai, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the Indian subcontinent, has been a centre of pilgrimage, trade, and cultural confluence for over two millennia. The Pandya dynasty, which ruled from Madurai across various periods from the Sangam age until the fourteenth century CE, played a pivotal role in shaping the city's enduring identity as a sacred and commercial hub. While much historical scholarship has focused on the political and architectural achievements of Pandya kings, the contributions of women both as agents of religious patronage and as participants in the economic and cultural life of the region have often been relegated to the margins of historical discourse. This article seeks to examine the growth and development of women's contributions to what may be understood as the "tourism economy" of Madurai during the Pandya period, arguing that women, through their roles as temple patrons, queens, donors, traders, and cultural bearers, were instrumental in creating and sustaining the conditions that made Madurai a perennial destination for pilgrims, traders, and travelers.

Keywords : Sangam, Pandiya, Women, Economy, Growth,

Madurai as a Destination: The Historical Context

Madurai's emergence as a destination of regional and transoceanic significance predates the Common Era. As early as the third century BCE, the Greek ambassador Megasthenes visited Madurai, and later, travellers and traders from Rome and Greece established commercial relations with the Pandya kings. The city's reputation as a centre of wealth, culture, and spirituality attracted visitors from across the ancient world. The Pandya kingdom was well known for pearl fishery, with Korkai serving as the principal centre of the trade, and exports included pearls, spices, ivory, and shells, while imports comprised horses, gold, glass, and wine. The accounts of Marco Polo and Wassaf, referring to Kayalpatinam, describe the brisk trade during the Pandya period, where goods were imported and exported.

Madurai's magnetic pull was not merely commercial but deeply spiritual. The Meenakshi Temple, associated with the Pandya kings since legendary times, became the spiritual heart of the city. According to legend, the Pandya king Malayadhvaja, who had hoped for a son, was blessed with a daughter who was born from a pit of fire the princess who would become the goddess Meenakshi. The temple, built and expanded under Pandya patronage, became a monumental centre that attracted pilgrims from across the subcontinent. Temples during the Pandya period functioned not merely as spiritual centres but as multifaceted economic entities employers, traders, consumers, bankers, tax collectors, land magnates, entertainers, and treasure houses of art and architecture.

Women as Royal Patrons and Temple Benefactors

The most visible and historically documented contribution of women to Madurai's development as a pilgrimage and tourism centre during the Pandya period comes from the realm of royal and elite patronage. Women of the royal household and the upper strata of society enjoyed a sufficiently good status and played active roles in

religious and cultural life. Ancient Tamil poems refer to a woman as the founder of the Pandyan dynasty, who was subsequently worshipped as a goddess in Madurai.

Queen Mangayarkarasi (also known as Mankayarkkarasiyar) stands as one of the most significant figures in this regard. Far more than a devout consort, she was a strategist, a patron, and a woman who understood that faith, economy, and architecture could together anchor a kingdom. Through quiet political strategy, she helped steer Madurai away from Jain dominance towards Shaivism, strengthening temple patronage, gold circulation, and popular support. Her influence shaped royal succession, stabilised governance, and laid foundations for Madurai's enduring temple-centred economy and cultural identity. The work of religious revival initiated by Karaikal Ammaiyar was continued by Tilagavatiyar and Mankayarkkarasiyar. The Pandya queen played a major role in changing her husband Kun Pandyan from Jainism to Shaivism, inviting the young Shaivite saint Thirugnana Sambandar to the Pandya country.

This religious transformation had profound implications for Madurai's development as a destination. By consolidating Shaivite temple patronage, Mangayarkarasi ensured that temples became economic centres that supported local communities. Her contributions laid the groundwork for the dynasty's stability and cultural identity, emphasising the importance of women in governance. Her name appears in numerous inscriptions, highlighting her independent authority.

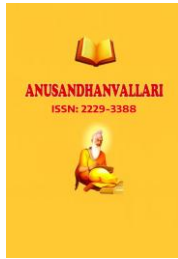
The tradition of women's temple patronage extended beyond the royal household. Inscriptions from the period reveal that women were given proper status to offer donations, and their names were engraved on the walls of temples. Nakkankorri, the wife of Sattan Ganapathi, a Mahasamanta of the Pandyan king, constructed shrines for Durga Devi and Jyeshta Devi in Tirupparankunram. A tenth-century inscription from Gangaikondan mentions a Brahmin woman, Naduvinangai, who donated a lamp and fifty sheep to a temple, revealing that women had the right to property and the liberty to donate them for charity. In Kudumiyanmalai, a Devaradiyar named Thukkaiyandi erected an Amman shrine during 1250 CE in Veera Pandya's reign.

These acts of patronage were not merely expressions of personal piety; they were investments in the religious infrastructure that made Madurai a destination. Temples, as the primary sites of pilgrimage, required continuous endowments for maintenance, rituals, festivals, and the sustenance of priests, musicians, and dancers. The donations of women—whether queens, noblewomen, or temple dancers—contributed directly to the vibrancy and sustainability of these institutions.

Women in the Temple Economy and Cultural Life

The economic role of women in the Pandya period extended beyond patronage to active participation in the temple-centred economy that attracted visitors to Madurai. In towns and cities, women of lower classes were employed as hawkers, vendors, shopkeepers, or servants in rich households, and in villages, they worked in the fields and gardens alongside men. Women were exposed to education, a fact testified by the presence of at least thirty women poets in the Sangam works, including Avvaiyar, Mudatamakkanniar, Nanmullaiyaar, and Ponnudiyaar.

The institution of the Devaradiyar (temple dancers and musicians) represents a significant, if complex, dimension of women's contribution to the cultural economy that sustained pilgrimage and tourism. Devaradiyars were prominent in dance and music, and some were appointed as heads of musicians and dancers in particular regions. The title "Kavithi" was conferred upon Devaradiyars during the tenth century CE as a sign of honour. These women performers were integral to temple rituals and festivals, which drew large numbers of pilgrims and visitors to Madurai. The cultural performances they sustained were, in effect, a form of "cultural tourism" that enhanced Madurai's reputation as a centre of art and devotion.



Women also participated in the Bhakti movement, particularly Shaivism, which was instrumental in shaping the religious identity of Madurai. The religious festivals and processions in which women participated such as the Kartikai festival, Taipusam, and the making of Pavai (images of the goddess Karttiyayini) with sand were occasions that brought communities together and attracted visitors. Women joined processions and went out to invite their friends and relations, contributing to the social fabric that made Madurai a welcoming destination.

Women as Traders and Economic Actors

The commercial prosperity of Madurai during the Pandya period created conditions that attracted traders and travellers from distant lands. Women were participants in this commercial economy. In towns and cities, women of lower classes worked as hawkers and vendors. In the earlier period, women were engaged in cultivation and the selling of goods. Both internal and foreign trade flourished during the Pandya period, with internal trade largely conducted on a barter system in mobile shanties.

While the historical record does not provide extensive documentation of women's roles in long-distance trade, their participation in local markets and their roles as artisans and producers of goods contributed to the commercial vibrancy that made Madurai an attractive destination. The handicrafts that played an important role in domestic trade including textiles, metal industries, woodwork, leather industries, and pottery were sectors in which women were likely involved. The textiles of the Pandya country, in particular, were renowned, and women's labour in textile production would have been significant.

The Legendary and Divine Feminine: Meenakshi as Destination Brand

No discussion of women's contribution to Madurai's identity as a destination during the Pandya period would be complete without considering the figure of Meenakshi herself. The goddess, who finds mention in literature as the queen of the ancient Madurai-based Pandya kingdom and was later deified, became the tutelary deity of Madurai. According to Hindu legend, the god Shiva came to Madurai in the form of Sundareswarar to marry Meenakshi, the daughter of the Pandya ruler.

The Meenakshi Temple, with its origins traced to the Pandya king Kulasekhara who built a temple at the site, became the epicentre of Madurai's religious tourism. The goddess Meenakshi, as the divine queen and the city's presiding deity, became synonymous with Madurai itself. The Chitrai Festival in April-May, which celebrates the marriage of Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswaran, continues to draw millions of pilgrims and tourists to Madurai. This festival, rooted in the Pandya period's mythological and cultural traditions, represents one of the earliest and most enduring forms of "religious tourism" in the region.

Greek historian Pliny mentioned that Madurai was ruled by the Pandya and that the kingdom was a republic run by women, and the Mahavamsa refers to this fact, dating the period between 43 and 29 BCE. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court in the fourth century BCE, also wrote about a South Indian kingdom ruled by women. These references, while perhaps embellished, indicate that the association of female power with Madurai had transcontinental resonance.

Women Warriors and Defenders

The contribution of women to Madurai's security and stability conditions essential for the flourishing of trade, pilgrimage, and tourism is also noteworthy. During the later Pandya period, we come across women as warriors in charge of garrisons during Jatavarman Sundara Pandya's I rule. While the historical record does not provide extensive details, the presence of women in military roles suggests that the society recognised women's capacity for leadership and defence. The security provided by these women warriors would have contributed to the safety of travellers and traders visiting Madurai.

Assessing the Impact: Women's Contributions to Madurai's Enduring Appeal

The cumulative impact of women's contributions during the Pandya period on Madurai's development as a destination can be assessed across several dimensions:

- First, royal women like Mangayarkarasi played a decisive role in shaping the religious character of Madurai, ensuring that Shaivism and its associated temple culture became the dominant force. This religious consolidation created the spiritual infrastructure the temples, rituals, festivals, and priestly institutions that attracted pilgrims for centuries.
- Second, women's temple patronage, whether by queens, noblewomen, or Devaradiyars, provided the economic resources necessary for the maintenance and expansion of temple complexes. The donations of land, gold, lamps, and livestock recorded in inscriptions represent a continuous flow of resources that sustained the temple economy.
- Third, women's participation in the cultural life of the temples as dancers, musicians, and participants in festivals created the vibrant ritual and artistic traditions that enhanced Madurai's reputation as a centre of culture and devotion.
- Fourth, women's roles in local trade, agriculture, and handicrafts contributed to the economic vitality that made Madurai a commercial destination for traders from Rome, Greece, and across the Indian Ocean.
- Fifth, the figure of Meenakshi herself the divine queen, the goddess with the fish-shaped eyes, the tutelary deity of Madurai became the enduring symbol of the city, a "brand" that has drawn visitors for over two millennia.

Conclusion

The growth and development of women's contribution to tourism in Madurai during the Pandya period must be understood within the broader context of a society where women's status was complex and often contradictory. While legal and social inequality between the sexes persisted women had limited property rights and were generally subordinate to men women of the elite and royal households enjoyed sufficient status to act as patrons, donors, and political actors. The practice of Sati was prevalent, yet women were also exposed to education, composed poetry, and participated actively in religious and cultural life.

What emerges from the historical record is a picture of women as active agents in the creation and maintenance of the conditions that made Madurai a destination. Through royal patronage, temple donations, participation in the temple economy, engagement in trade, and the embodiment of divine feminine power, women contributed significantly to the growth and development of what we would today recognise as the "tourism industry" of Madurai. Their contributions, while often overlooked in conventional historical narratives, were essential to the city's enduring appeal as a centre of pilgrimage, culture, and commerce.

The legacy of these contributions endures. The Meenakshi Temple remains one of India's most visited pilgrimage sites; the Chitrai Festival continues to draw millions; and Madurai retains its identity as a city where the divine feminine embodied in the goddess Meenakshi presides. The women of the Pandya period, through their patronage, piety, and participation in the economic and cultural life of the city, helped create a destination that has endured for over two thousand years.

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