

Women's Agency in Local Governance During the Pandya Period: An Epigraphic Study of Madurai Region

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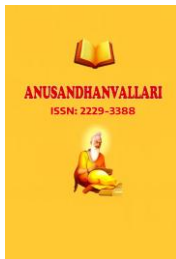
Abstract: This study examines women's agency in local governance during the Pandya period (c. sixth–fourteenth centuries CE) through an analysis of epigraphic records from the Madurai region. While medieval South Indian administrative institutions such as the *ur*, *sabha*, *nagaram*, and temple organizations have been widely studied, the role of women within these institutional frameworks has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Drawing upon inscriptions published in South Indian Inscriptions and the Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy, this paper investigates how women participated in governance through property ownership, religious patronage, land transactions, and temple endowments. The study argues that although women rarely occupied formal positions within village assemblies, they exercised meaningful influence by supporting institutions that formed the administrative and economic foundations of local society. Donations of land, livestock, lamps, and other endowments initiated administrative procedures involving temple authorities and village institutions, thereby integrating women into governance processes. The inscriptional evidence also reveals significant variations in women's participation based on social status, caste affiliation, and access to economic resources, with queens, elite women, and temple-associated women enjoying greater opportunities for public engagement than women from lower social groups. By reinterpreting governance beyond formal political office, this paper demonstrates that women's contributions were embedded within the interconnected spheres of religion, economy, and local administration. It contends that female agency in the Pandya period was negotiated within prevailing patriarchal structures rather than exercised through direct institutional authority. The study contributes to the historiography of medieval South India by foregrounding gender as an essential dimension of local governance and by offering a more inclusive understanding of political participation in the Pandya kingdom.

Keywords: Pandya Kingdom, Women's Agency, Local Governance, Epigraphy, Temple Administration, Medieval Tamil Nadu.

Introduction

Historical Setting of The Pandya Kingdom

The Pandya period, spanning approximately from the 6th to the 14th centuries CE, represents a significant and transformative era in South Indian history marked by dynamic political, social, and cultural developments. This period witnessed the consolidation and expansion of the Pandya dynasty's influence across the Tamil region and beyond, encompassing both urban centers and rural hinterlands. Local governance during this era was characterized by a sophisticated and multilayered system of assemblies and temple administrations that played crucial roles in managing community affairs, regulating economic activities, and maintaining social order. These institutions, including village assemblies (*ur*), Brahmin councils (*sabha*), and merchant guilds (*nagaram*), formed the backbone of decentralized governance, reflecting a complex interplay between political authority, religious institutions, and local communities. Within this framework, the roles and contributions of women in governance have often been overlooked or marginalized in historical narratives dominated by male perspectives. Understanding women's participation in these governance structures offers valuable insights into their agency,



social status, and influence in pre-modern South Indian society. It also enriches the broader discourse on gender and power relations in historical contexts, challenging traditional assumptions about women's exclusion from political life.

Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to investigate the nature, forms, and extent of women's participation in local governance during the Pandya period. The primary research questions focus on identifying the specific avenues through which women exercised agency—whether through formal involvement in village assemblies, engagement in temple administration, property management, or informal social networks. Additionally, the study seeks to examine the constraints and limitations imposed by prevailing social, cultural, legal, and institutional norms that shaped women's governance roles. By highlighting women's contributions and influence in historical governance contexts, this research challenges male-centric historical narratives and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender and power in pre-modern societies. The findings have broader significance for comparative studies of women's political agency in other historical and regional settings, offering a critical perspective on how gender intersected with caste, class, and religious identities to shape political participation.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates insights from gender studies and historical institutional analysis to explore women's participation in governance during the Pandya period. Gender studies provide the conceptual tools to analyze power relations, agency, and social norms affecting women's roles, while historical institutionalism facilitates an understanding of governance structures and their evolution over time. The research draws primarily on epigraphic evidence, including inscriptions and administrative documents from the Pandya period, which serve as primary sources for reconstructing women's roles and social status. These inscriptions, preserved in volumes such as South Indian Inscriptions Volume XIV, provide concrete data on land donations, temple endowments, property transactions, and references to women's titles and social identities. Supplementary institutional records of village assemblies and temple bodies offer additional context for understanding governance mechanisms. Analytical methods include critical examination and interpretation of inscriptional texts to identify explicit and implicit references to women's involvement, property rights, and social roles. This approach enables a nuanced reconstruction of women's governance-related activities, balancing formal institutional roles with informal influence and patronage.

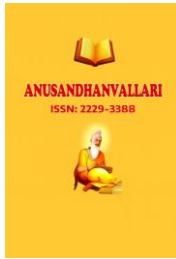
Institutional Foundations Of Local Governance in The Pandya Kingdom

The Political Landscape of the Pandya Kingdom

The Pandya dynasty was one of the most prominent ruling powers in South India, with its origins tracing back to early centuries CE and extending through the medieval period until the 14th century. The dynasty's political history is marked by phases of independence, territorial expansion, and periods of subjugation, notably under the Chola empire during the 10th and 11th centuries. The geographical extent of Pandya rule encompassed key urban centers such as Madurai, as well as extensive rural territories across the Tamil region and adjacent areas. This territorial diversity facilitated varied governance practices tailored to local socio-economic conditions. The dynasty's political and social developments included the establishment of robust administrative frameworks, patronage of religious institutions, and the promotion of trade and cultural activities, all of which shaped the governance landscape.

a. Village Institutions and Decentralized Administration

Local governance during the Pandya period was organized around several overlapping institutions that collectively managed village and urban affairs. The *ur*, or village assembly, functioned as a grassroots institution responsible for managing agricultural land, water resources, dispute resolution, and communal activities. These



assemblies were generally composed of local landholders and elders and operated through consensus or majority decisions. The sabha, predominantly a Brahmin assembly, oversaw religious, educational, and administrative matters, often regulating temple affairs and maintaining social norms within Brahmin communities. Merchant guilds, known as nagaram, played a vital role in regulating trade, market activities, and economic policies, reflecting the commercial vibrancy of the region. Together, these bodies constituted a layered governance framework that balanced local autonomy with broader dynastic authority, ensuring effective management of political, economic, and social life.

b. Temples as Administrative and Socio-Economic Institutions

Temples in the Pandya period served multifaceted roles beyond their religious functions, acting as significant administrative and economic institutions within local governance. Temple administrative bodies managed extensive landholdings, collected revenues, and oversaw charitable activities such as feeding the poor and supporting pilgrims. The temples functioned as centers of social organization, influencing local customs, legal norms, and political allegiances. The intersection of religious and political spheres is evident in the temples' role as hubs of governance, where religious rituals and administrative decisions were intertwined. Women's involvement in temple administration, through donations, endowments, and participation in rituals, positioned them as important actors within these governance networks.

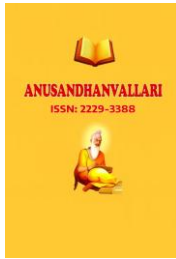
Women's Participation in Local Governance

a. Women's Roles in Village Assemblies

Epigraphic records provide limited but significant evidence regarding women's presence in village assemblies (ur) and Brahmin councils (sabha). Although formal participation of women in these assemblies appears restricted by prevailing social and cultural norms, some inscriptions suggest instances where women exercised influence or were acknowledged in local decision-making processes, often indirectly. For example, inscriptions from the early Pandya period include administrative orders (Inscription No. 78) and land sale records (Inscription No. 91) that, while not explicitly naming women as assembly members, indicate women's involvement in property transactions that assemblies oversaw. Women's involvement may have been mediated through male relatives or exercised through patronage and property control. The scarcity of explicit references to women in assembly records reflects broader gendered limitations on public roles but does not preclude their active engagement behind the scenes.

b. Women's Engagement with Temple Administration

Women actively engaged in temple administration primarily through donations and endowments, which included gifts of land, livestock (such as cows, buffaloes, and sheep), and funds designated for religious services like lamp burning and ritual offerings. These contributions reflect women's economic agency and their role in sustaining temple functions, which carried governance implications in the local context. For instance, the wife of Pandimartanda-Pallavarayan (Sinnapp) made a gift of buffaloes for a lamp in the temple of Tiruvaludiśvarattu-Ālvār at Perungulam (dated to the 15th year of Vira-Pandya), demonstrating independent religious donations by women. Similarly, Mapukutti-nangai of the Kundina-gōtra donated 25 cows for lamps in the Mahadeva temple at Nigarilisōla-chaturvēdimangalam (Inscription No. 184, A.R. No. 628 of 1916). Andamainhehahi, wife of Barangaphai-Tirmilakanthan of Rajaraja-chaturvēdimangalam, donated a shop, lamp-stand, and money for feeding pilgrims, showcasing property control and charitable agency. Even women of lower social status, such as Kuditangi-Svigodi, a "vēlattā" (servant-maid), made smaller donations, reflecting socio-economic hierarchies among female donors. These inscriptions collectively highlight women's embeddedness in temple administration through patronage and resource allocation.



c. Elite Women and Governance

Elite women, including queens, high-status householders, and wives of prominent officials, exercised governance influence through patronage, administrative contributions, and property management. Their caste and class status facilitated greater access to governance roles and resources, enabling them to commission religious constructions, manage estates, and sponsor charitable activities. For example, Nakkan-Korri, described as the Dharmapatnī (wife) of Sattan-Ganapati, the mahasamanta (great chief), constructed shrines to Durgādevī and Jyeshthādevī at Tirupparanikungam (Inscription No. 3). This inscription, dated to the 6th year of Maranjadaian, is engraved on a pillar in a rock-cut cave in Madurai Taluk and illustrates elite women's authority in religious patronage and temple administration. Such women's activities shaped local governance dynamics by reinforcing social hierarchies and political alliances.

Women's Agency in Local Governance

a. Land Donations and Property Management

Inscriptions document women making land donations, indicating their control over property and active participation in governance-related economic activities. Women managed family properties and exercised authority in land transactions, intertwining property rights with governance functions at the local level. Examples include Anukki-Sundaravalli of Kannikudi, who owned property and made gifts of perpetual lamps, affirming ownership and control. The recorded gifts of land and livestock for temple maintenance and religious purposes signify women's capacity to mobilize resources and influence administrative decisions. These acts of property management and donation highlight women's tangible contributions to local governance and community welfare.

b. Religious Endowments and Their Administrative Implications

Women's endowments for lamps, rituals, and temple services activated temple administrative mechanisms, embedding female patronage within governance structures. Such endowments had enduring administrative impacts, influencing temple management, revenue flows, and local socio-political relations. Donations by women of varying social status—from elite Brahmin donors like Mapukutti-nangai to servant-maids such as Kuditangi-Svigodi—demonstrate the wide spectrum of female participation in religious and administrative affairs. These contributions also provided women with symbolic recognition and social capital within their communities. Artistic commemoration, such as a lamp-stand cast with a female figure holding a lamp, further symbolizes formal recognition of women's patronage.

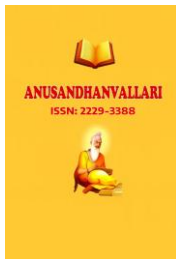
c. Informal Influence and Networking

Beyond formal roles, women exercised informal influence through kinship networks, social relationships, and patronage ties. These networks enabled women to participate indirectly in decision-making processes, leveraging familial connections and social capital to affect governance outcomes. For instance, women serving as ladies-in-waiting (anukki) at the royal court held recognized positions that facilitated access to political and administrative circles. Informal influence complemented formal agency, allowing women to navigate and negotiate the gendered constraints of their time.

Constraints And Limitations on Women's Participation

a. Patriarchy and Social Expectations

Gender norms in Pandya society largely shaped women's public roles, often limiting their formal participation in governance institutions such as village assemblies and sabha councils. Prevailing patriarchal values prescribed women's roles within domestic and religious spheres, constraining their visibility and authority in public decision-



making. Women employed strategies such as religious patronage and charitable donations to secure agency within socially acceptable frameworks, thereby circumventing direct confrontation with restrictive norms.

b. Legal and Institutional Barriers

Formal restrictions on women's involvement in governance included limitations on property rights, assembly membership, and official administrative roles. Institutional structures often codified male dominance, restricting women's direct access to governance decision-making and legal authority. These barriers curtailed women's ability to participate openly in political institutions, although epigraphic evidence reveals that some women negotiated these constraints through property control and religious endowments.

c. Intersections of Gender, Caste, and Class

Caste and class significantly influenced women's governance participation. Elite Brahmin women enjoyed greater opportunities and resources to engage in religious patronage and property transactions, while women of lower social status faced more pronounced barriers. The inscriptional record reflects this stratification, with varying scales of donations and differing titles used to denote social rank. Intersectional factors shaped the diversity and complexity of women's political lives during the Pandya period, highlighting the need for nuanced analysis that accounts for multiple axes of identity.

Conclusion

Women in the Pandya period participated in local governance through diverse forms of agency including property management, religious patronage, and informal social influence, despite facing significant social and institutional constraints. Epigraphic evidence reveals nuanced roles exercised by women across different social strata—from elite patrons commissioning temple shrines to servant-maids making modest donations—demonstrating their substantive involvement in governance-related activities.

These findings challenge male-centered historical narratives by highlighting women's meaningful contributions to governance in pre-modern South India. They underscore the complex nature of political participation where religious, social, and political spheres intersected, revealing a more inclusive and layered understanding of governance that incorporates gendered dimensions of power and agency.

Further studies are needed to explore underrepresented aspects of women's political agency, including comparative analyses across regions and periods, and deeper investigation into informal networks and non-elite women's roles. Expanding research on women's influence in temple administration and local assemblies will deepen understanding of gendered power dynamics in historical governance contexts. Integrating archaeological, literary, and oral sources alongside epigraphic data could provide a more comprehensive picture of women's roles in pre-modern governance.

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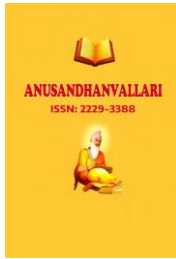
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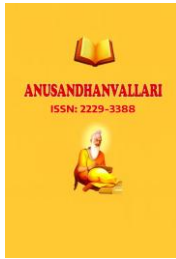
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