

# Empowering Women Through Pilgrimage Tourism: A Comparative Study of Rural-Urban Economic Opportunities in Tamil Nadu

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## Abstract

Tamil Nadu's economy depends heavily on pilgrimage tourism, which creates a lot of job and business opportunities, especially for women. The economic effects of pilgrimage tourism on women in rural and urban areas are examined in this study, along with the variations in opportunities, difficulties, and empowerment tactics. Rural pilgrimage sites like Rameswaram, Thiruvannamalai, and Palani offer opportunities in handicrafts, traditional food production, and cultural tourism, while metropolitan pilgrimage hubs like Madurai, Chennai, and Kanchipuram offer organized employment in hospitality, retail, and tourism services. Despite their potential, rural women confront obstacles such as limited access to markets, financial limitations, and infrastructure, while metropolitan women face fierce rivalry and regulatory hurdles. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study evaluates women's economic contributions, participation in pilgrimage tourism, and policy gaps impeding their advancement using surveys, interviews, and secondary data analysis. The results show that rural women have unrealized potential in heritage-based tourism businesses, while urban women enjoy the advantages of established business networks and digital connectivity. The gap between rural and urban economic opportunities can be closed with the use of tactics like skill development, financial inclusion, digital marketing assistance, and better tourism infrastructure. In Tamil Nadu, pilgrimage tourism has the potential to be a potent instrument for women's economic empowerment by promoting inclusive and sustainable growth. In order to increase women's involvement in the tourism economy, the study ends with suggestions for legislators, business stakeholders, and grassroots groups.

**Keywords:** Pilgrimage Tourism, Women's Economic Empowerment, Tourism Infrastructure, Entrepreneurship, Employment in Tourism

## Introduction

In Tamil Nadu, pilgrimage tourism is a major economic driver that combines economic growth with cultural legacy. In addition to drawing millions of followers each year, this industry creates a significant amount of jobs and business prospects, especially for women. Studies show that women's involvement in tourism can result in increased economic and social empowerment, demonstrating the global recognition of women's role in the industry. Arockkia Joseph Jerald, A. (2024). Tamil Nadu's pilgrimage tourism scene contrasts rural areas like Rameswaram, Thiruvannamalai, and Palani with urban areas like Madurai, Chennai, and Kanchipuram. Urban pilgrimage centers frequently offer organized job opportunities in retail, hospitality, and guided tour services, giving women more formalized positions in the travel and tourism sector (Ram & Rao, 2023). On the other hand, rural pilgrimage locations provide special chances for women to participate in traditional crafts, regional food, and cultural performances—all of which are fields where women's involvement is common but frequently unofficial and underappreciated.

The differences in women's empowerment between Tamil Nadu's rural and urban areas have been highlighted by recent studies. For example, studies show that metropolitan women are more likely to participate in financial and home decision-making processes due to their improved access to education and work. On the other hand, women in rural regions encounter obstacles that impede their economic empowerment, such as

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restricted access to market exposure, financial resources, and education. Tamil Nadu, the relationship between women's empowerment and pilgrimage tourism is therefore complicated. Although the tourism industry has the potential to help women grow economically, the advantages are not equally shared between rural and metropolitan locations. Targeted interventions that take into account the distinct socio-economic circumstances of different areas are necessary to address these gaps. Shyju et al. (2021). In addition to analyzing the obstacles and suggesting solutions to improve women's empowerment through pilgrimage tourism, this study attempts to compare the economic opportunities accessible to women in Tamil Nadu's rural and urban pilgrimage locations.

## Significance of Pilgrimage Tourism in Tamil Nadu

One of India's most popular pilgrimage travel locations, Tamil Nadu is well-known for its historic temples, deep spiritual legacy, and colorful religious celebrations. The state's economy depends heavily on pilgrimage tourism, which supports local company growth, job creation, and cultural preservation.

### Economic Contribution

*Revenue Generation:* With millions of pilgrims visiting each year, Tamil Nadu is one of India's major pilgrimage destinations both domestically and abroad. Through local businesses, lodging, transportation, and gifts to temples, the tourism industry makes a substantial contribution to Tamil Nadu's GDP (<https://tourism.gov.in/>). *Employment Opportunities:* The industry supports a variety of occupations, such as those in restaurants, hotels, tour companies, handcraft industries, and transportation services. Women gain from self-employment options in local food and craft companies, especially in rural areas. *Urban and Rural Economic Impact:* While rural pilgrimage sites like Rameswaram, Thiruvannamalai, and Palani offer livelihood prospects through traditional handicrafts and cultural tourism, major cities like Chennai, Madurai, and Kanchipuram offer organized employment in tourism services.

## Social and Cultural Significance

*Heritage Preservation:* The temples in Tamil Nadu, such as the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, the Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, and the Ramanathaswamy Temple in Rameswaram, are historical sites that draw tourists from all over the world and encourage cultural tourism. *Religious Festivals & Community Engagement:* By raising demand for goods and services, festivals such as Pongal, Mahashivaratri, Karthigai Deepam, and Chithirai Festival help small businesses and artisans in the area. *Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer:* By promoting the preservation of traditional music, art, and temple rites, the tourism sector helps to uphold Tamil Nadu's rich cultural heritage. *Government Initiatives:* By boosting road connectivity, building temple infrastructure, and providing funding for spiritual tourism projects, the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) encourages pilgrimage tourism. *Smart Temple Towns:* Efforts to create "Spiritual Tourism Circuits" link important pilgrimage sites, guaranteeing pilgrims a smooth journey and stimulating local economies. *Sustainability & Eco-Tourism:* Sustainable tourism practices are aided by eco-friendly pilgrimage tourism projects, such as better trash management in temple towns.

## Infrastructure Development and Policy Support

*Government Initiatives:* By strengthening road connectivity, building temple infrastructure, and providing funding for spiritual tourism initiatives, the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) encourages pilgrimage tourism. *Smart Temple Towns:* Efforts to create "Spiritual Tourism Circuits" link important pilgrimage sites, guaranteeing pilgrims a smooth journey and stimulating local economies. *Sustainability & Eco-Tourism:* Sustainable tourism practices are aided by eco-friendly pilgrimage tourism projects, such as better trash management in temple towns.

One of the most popular pilgrimage tourist sites in India is Tamil Nadu, which is home to well-known temples like

- Meenakshi Temple (Madurai).
- The temples of Rameswaram,
- Bhihadeeswarar (Thanjavur),
- Chidambaram Nataraja, and
- Kanchipuram

Millions of devotees visit these pilgrimage locations, creating substantial income and employment prospects. In tourism-related fields like handicrafts, hospitality, and traditional food services, women are essential.

## Literature Review

A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey undertaken to visit heritage sites with the purpose of seeking peace and liberation (mukthi). It represents a transformative experience where each step carries profound significance. Dhar (2015) highlighted that pilgrimage tourism holds spiritual importance and is a subset of religious tourism. In the Indian context, socio-economic status and nationality play a crucial role in shaping the behaviors of pilgrims and tourists. Individuals from higher income groups are often categorized as tourists, while those from lower income groups are identified as pilgrims.

Sharpley and Telfer (2015) noted that India's tourism sector primarily emphasizes recreational and business tourism, with relatively limited attention given to the development of pilgrimage tourism. Nicolaides (2016) emphasized that shortcomings in marketing communication, infrastructure, and related areas can hinder the growth of pilgrimage and religious tourism, which represents a significant niche market. Meeting the evolving needs of travelers visiting holy sites is essential to ensuring their satisfaction (Raj, 2007).

Sivakumar (2019) examines the role of cultural heritage and pilgrimage tourism in fostering socio-economic development in Tamil Nadu. It highlights the economic benefits, employment opportunities, and challenges faced in this sector, such as inadequate infrastructure and environmental concerns. The study identifies key pilgrimage sites and proposes solutions for sustainable development to enhance tourist satisfaction and local economic growth. The findings emphasize the importance of strategic improvements in infrastructure, cultural preservation, and government support for advancing tourism in the region.

Suresh (2021) explores the diverse cultural aspects and historical significance of Tamil Nadu, positioning it as a key destination for cultural tourism. The study delves into the region's rich heritage, focusing on its temples, festivals, and historical monuments that continue to attract both domestic and international tourists. The research effectively highlights Tamil Nadu's potential to serve as a hub for cultural and heritage tourism, underlining the role of traditional practices, architecture, and religious landmarks in promoting tourism.

Thomas, Williams and Naiju (2024) the article entitle on "A Comparative Study on Women Entrepreneurship in Rural and Urban AREAS" the ideas of "women empowerment" and "equality of women and men" are universal. Creating a society where women have more agency in decision-making is what we mean when we talk about women's empowerment. They make decisions on their own, taking into account both their own and society's interests. The fact that promoting gender parity and women's empowerment is a Millennium Development Goal indicates how crucial this problem is to the development agenda (UN 2002). The concept of empowerment has many facets, levels, and perspectives. The process of giving people more resources and skills to engage with, bargain with, influence, control, and obtain access to a variety of social, political, educational, religious, and cultural institutions that impact their life is known as empowerment. The main research topics of this intervention were female empowerment and the factors that influence it.

## Objective of the Study

- To compare economic opportunities for women in rural and urban pilgrimage centers.
- To identify challenges faced by women in tourism-related businesses.
- To suggest strategies for sustainable economic empowerment of women.

## Research Methodology

*Primary Data Collection:* Surveys and interviews with women entrepreneurs.

*Secondary Data:* Government tourism reports, economic surveys, and case studies.

*Comparative Analysis:* Assessment of rural and urban pilgrimage centers in terms of employment, wages, market access, and entrepreneurship.

## ANOVA Findings Indicate No Significant Difference in Economic Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs Across Rural Pilgrimage Centers

**Table 1**

ANOVA						
		<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Availability of Business Spaces	Between Groups	16.567	4	4.142	0.975	0.421
	Within Groups	2110.431	497	4.246		
	Total	2126.998	501			
Access to Pilgrims and Customers	Between Groups	15.323	4	3.831	0.887	0.471
	Within Groups	2145.627	497	4.317		
	Total	2160.95	501			
Demand for Products/Services	Between Groups	27.318	4	6.83	1.753	0.137
	Within Groups	1935.885	497	3.895		
	Total	1963.203	501			
Market Competition	Between Groups	0.84	4	0.21	0.052	0.995
	Within Groups	1998.134	497	4.02		
	Total	1998.974	501			
Business Growth Potential	Between Groups	15.315	4	3.829	0.927	0.448
	Within Groups	2051.771	497	4.128		
	Total	2067.086	501			
Digital Marketing & Online Sales	Between Groups	5.998	4	1.5	0.36	0.837
	Within Groups	2073.087	497	4.171		
	Total	2079.086	501			
Collaboration with Local Government or NGOs	Between Groups	11.901	4	2.975	0.746	0.561
	Within Groups	1981.135	497	3.986		
	Total	1993.036	501			
Training & Skill Development Opportunities	Between Groups	21.053	4	5.263	1.367	0.244
	Within Groups	1913.785	497	3.851		
	Total	1934.839	501			
Support from Family & Community	Between Groups	8.388	4	2.097	0.523	0.719
	Within Groups	1991.031	497	4.006		
	Total	1999.418	501			
Ease of Starting a Business	Between Groups	12.994	4	3.249	0.859	0.488
	Within Groups	1878.998	497	3.781		
	Total	1891.992	501			

Source: Primary data.

From the above Table Availability of Business Spaces, Access to Pilgrims and Customers, Demand for Products/Services, Market Competition, Business

Growth Potential, Digital Marketing & Online Sales, Collaboration with Local Government or NGOs, Training & Skill Development Opportunities, Support

from Family & Community, Ease of Starting a Business is greater than 0.05. It is concluded that there is no significance difference among economic opportunities for women and rural of compare economic opportunities for women in rural pilgrimage centers. Hence null hypothesis is accepted. Women in rural areas generally face similar challenges and opportunities in business operations, customer access, market demand, and institutional support. Future interventions should focus on improving business conditions holistically rather than targeting specific subgroups.

### Rank Analysis: Economic Opportunities for Women and Rural

**Table 2**

Importance of Information	Mean	Rank
Availability of Business Spaces	3.998	5
Access to Pilgrims and Customers	3.99	7
Demand for Products/Services	4.0398	4

### Economic Opportunities for Women and Urban

**Table 3**

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Availability of Business Spaces	Between Groups	19.054	5	3.811	0.897	0.483
	Within Groups	2107.944	496	4.25		
	Total	2126.998	501			
Access to Pilgrims and Customers	Between Groups	47.423	5	9.485	2.226	0.051
	Within Groups	2113.528	496	4.261		
	Total	2160.95	501			
Demand for Products/Services	Between Groups	18.411	5	3.682	0.939	0.455
	Within Groups	1944.792	496	3.921		
	Total	1963.203	501			
Market Competition	Between Groups	33.966	5	6.793	1.715	0.13
	Within Groups	1965.008	496	3.962		
	Total	1998.974	501			
Business Growth Potential	Between Groups	27.524	5	5.505	1.339	0.246
	Within Groups	2039.562	496	4.112		
	Total	2067.086	501			
Digital Marketing & Online Sales	Between Groups	14.728	5	2.946	0.708	0.618
	Within Groups	2064.358	496	4.162		
	Total	2079.086	501			
Collaboration with Local Government or NGOs	Between Groups	15.848	5	3.17	0.795	0.554
	Within Groups	1977.188	496	3.986		
	Total	1993.036	501			

Importance of Information	Mean	Rank
Market Competition	4.1096	1
Business Growth Potential	3.9382	10
Digital Marketing & Online Sales	4.0618	3
Collaboration with Local Government or NGOs	3.9562	9
Training & Skill Development Opportunities	3.9821	8
Support from Family & Community	4.0717	2
Ease of Starting a Business	3.996	6

Source: Primary data.

Market competition, family support, and digital marketing are the top three factors influencing women’s economic opportunities in rural areas. Business growth potential, government collaboration, and training opportunities are seen as less influential, suggesting a need for stronger interventions in these areas. Policymakers should focus on enhancing competitiveness, improving digital access, and fostering community support to create a more inclusive business environment for women.

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Training & Skill Development Opportunities	Between Groups	14.286	5	2.857	0.738	0.595
	Within Groups	1920.553	496	3.872		
	Total	1934.839	501			
Support from Family & Community	Between Groups	16.954	5	3.391	0.848	0.516
	Within Groups	1982.465	496	3.997		
	Total	1999.418	501			
Ease of Starting a Business	Between Groups	5.551	5	1.11	0.292	0.917
	Within Groups	1886.441	496	3.803		
	Total	1891.992	501			

Source: Primary data.

From the above Table Availability of Business Spaces, Access to Pilgrims and Customers, Demand for Products/Services, Market Competition, Business Growth Potential, Digital Marketing & Online Sales, Collaboration with Local Government or NGOs, Training & Skill Development Opportunities, Support from Family & Community, Ease of Starting a Business is greater than 0.05. It is concluded that there is no significance difference among economic opportunities for women and rural of compare economic opportunities for women in rural pilgrimage centers. Hence null hypothesis is accepted. Access to customers is the

only factor approaching significance, indicating that some urban women might have better customer reach than others. All other factors (market competition, business space, digital marketing, government support, training, and family support) show no significant differences among groups, suggesting a generally uniform experience. Policy Focus are improving access to customers, particularly for women facing challenges. Enhancing business growth opportunities and digital marketing adoption. Strengthening government and NGO collaboration to provide more effective support.

### Rank Analysis: Economic Opportunities for Women and Urban

**Table 4**

Importance of Information	Mean	Rank
Availability of Business Spaces	3.998	5
Access to Pilgrims and Customers	3.99	7
Demand for Products/Services	4.0398	4
Market Competition	4.1096	1
Business Growth Potential	3.9382	10
Digital Marketing & Online Sales	4.0618	3
Collaboration with Local Government or NGOs	3.9562	9
Training & Skill Development Opportunities	3.9821	8
Support from Family & Community	4.0717	2
Ease of Starting a Business	3.996	6

Source: Primary data.

Market competition, family support, and digital marketing are the top priorities for urban women entrepreneurs. Business growth potential, government collaboration, and

training programs rank lower, suggesting areas that need improvement. Recommended Policies and Strategies are Support for women-led businesses through funding,

mentorship, and networking programs. Enhanced digital literacy programs to maximize online business opportunities. Better access to high-demand locations and

improved customer engagement strategies. Government initiatives to improve long-term business growth potential for women entrepreneurs.

### Challenges Faced by Women in Tourism-Related Businesses

**Table 5**

<i>Final Cluster Centers</i>						
	<i>Cluster</i>					
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>				
Lack of Initial Capital	4.49	3.65				
Difficulty in Finding a Business Location	4.24	3.8				
Lack of Proper Licensing and Permits	4.47	3.51				
Limited Customer Footfall	4.14	4.15				
Seasonal Business Dependence	4.39	3.82				
High Competition from Established Businesses	4.19	3.77				
Fluctuating Prices of Raw Materials	4.69	3.46				
Difficulty in Accessing Loans	4.26	4.01				
Poor Financial Literacy	4.79	3.45				
Lack of Advertisement & Promotion Knowledge	4.51	3.54				
Social Restrictions on Women Entrepreneurs	4.4	3.6				
Family Responsibilities Affecting Business	3.56	4.35				
Gender Discrimination in Business Operations	4.04	4.07				
Limited Mobility Due to Safety Concerns	4.09	3.95				
Difficulty in Balancing Work & Family	4.37	3.84				
Lack of Decision-Making Power in Financial Matters	3.62	4.32				
Limited Exposure to Business Networks	4.22	3.98				
Poor Road Connectivity to Pilgrimage Sites	3.91	4.01				
Insufficient Public Transport Facilities	4.93	3.19				
Awareness of Government Support Programs	4.97	3.2				
<i>ANOVA</i>						
	<i>Cluster</i>		<i>Error</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>df</i>		
Lack of Initial Capital	87.632	1	3.899	500	22.478	0.000
Difficulty in Finding a Business Location	23.794	1	3.906	500	6.091	0.014
Lack of Proper Licensing and Permits	113.029	1	3.978	500	28.41	0.000
Limited Customer Footfall	0.004	1	4.241	500	0.001	0.976
Seasonal Business Dependence	39.505	1	3.794	500	10.412	0.001
High Competition from Established Businesses	21.44	1	3.959	500	5.416	0.020
Fluctuating Prices of Raw Materials	185.619	1	3.879	500	47.856	0.000
Difficulty in Accessing Loans	7.764	1	3.87	500	2.006	0.157
Poor Financial Literacy	220.887	1	3.801	500	58.11	0.000
Lack of Advertisement & Promotion Knowledge	115.306	1	3.99	500	28.899	0.000
Social Restrictions on Women Entrepreneurs	79.029	1	3.917	500	20.176	0.000
Family Responsibilities Affecting Business	75.198	1	3.848	500	19.544	0.000
Gender Discrimination in Business Operations	0.171	1	4.17	500	0.041	0.840
Limited Mobility Due to Safety Concerns	2.332	1	4.193	500	0.556	0.456
Difficulty in Balancing Work & Family	34.048	1	3.693	500	9.22	0.003

ANOVA						
	Cluster		Error		F	Sig.
	Mean Square	df	Mean Square	df		
Lack of Decision-Making Power in Financial Matters	60.024	1	3.77	500	15.923	0.000
Limited Exposure to Business Networks	7.182	1	3.855	500	1.863	0.173
Poor Road Connectivity to Pilgrimage Sites	1.264	1	3.983	500	0.317	0.573
Insufficient Public Transport Facilities	375.361	1	3.19	500	117.662	0.000
Awareness of Government Support Programs	385.62	1	3.532	500	109.18	0.000
Number of Cases in Each Cluster						
Cluster				1		218
				2		284
Valid						502
Missing						0

### Cluster Centers Interpretation

From the above table the two clusters represent groups of entrepreneurs facing different levels of challenges. Cluster 1 (Higher Difficulty Cluster - 218 cases) is faces significantly greater challenges across most factors, particularly in financial literacy (4.79), lack of government support awareness (4.97), insufficient public transport (4.93), and fluctuating raw material prices (4.69). This cluster appears to struggle more with financial, regulatory, and external business environment issues. Cluster 2 (Lower Difficulty Cluster - 284 cases) is faces comparatively lower difficulty, but still experiences moderate challenges. Notably, this group struggles more with family responsibilities affecting business (4.35) and lack of decision-making power in financial matters (4.32), indicating that this cluster may represent entrepreneurs with more personal and social constraints rather than external business challenges. Cluster 1 represents entrepreneurs facing more severe financial, regulatory, and environmental barriers, likely struggling with external business challenges. Cluster 2 deals more with social and family-related constraints, where gender roles and household responsibilities influence business operations.

### ANOVA Interpretation

From the above Table Limited Customer Footfall, Difficulty in Accessing Loans, Gender Discrimination

in Business Operations, Limited Mobility Due to Safety Concerns, Limited Exposure to Business Networks and Poor Road Connectivity to Pilgrimage Sites is greater than 0.05. It is concluded that there is no significance difference among economic opportunities for women and rural of challenges faced by women in tourism-related businesses. Hence null hypothesis is accepted. Lack of Initial Capital, Difficulty in Finding a Business Location, Lack of Proper Licensing and Permits, Seasonal Business Dependence, High Competition from Established Businesses, Fluctuating Prices of Raw Materials, Poor Financial Literacy, Lack of Advertisement & Promotion Knowledge, Social Restrictions on Women Entrepreneurs, Family Responsibilities Affecting Business, Difficulty in Balancing Work & Family, Lack of Decision-Making Power in Financial Matters, Insufficient Public Transport Facilities, Awareness of Government Support Programs is less than 0.05. It is concluded that there is significance difference among economic opportunities for women and rural of challenges faced by women in tourism-related businesses. Hence null hypothesis is rejected.

### Suggestion and Recommendation

The findings suggest that policy interventions should focus on financial literacy, accessibility to government programs, and infrastructural improvements for Cluster 1, and Cluster 2 may benefit from social support systems, gender empowerment initiatives, and work-life

balance solutions. Women Entrepreneurship Support: the Financial incentives, microloans, and training programs. Digital and E-Commerce Initiatives are Online marketplaces for rural artisans to sell temple-related crafts. Infrastructure Development are better roads, transport, and safety measures in rural pilgrimage sites. *Capacity Building and Skill Training*: Government and NGO programs for women in tourism services.

## Conclusion

Empowering women through pilgrimage tourism requires a structured approach that bridges the urban-rural divide. While urban centers offer immediate market access, rural regions hold immense potential for sustainable economic growth. Strengthening infrastructure, providing financial support, and fostering digital connectivity will ensure greater inclusion of women in the tourism sector. According to the conclusion, policy interventions for the financial literacy, government program accessibility, and infrastructure upgrade the profit from work-life balance strategies, social support networks, and female empowerment programs. *Support for Women Entrepreneurs*: Training initiatives, microloans, and financial incentives. Online marketplaces allowing rural craftsmen to sell crafts related to temples are known as digital and e-commerce initiatives. Improved roads, transportation, and security measures at rural pilgrimage destinations are examples of infrastructure development. Government and non-profit initiatives for women in tourism services that focus on skill development and capacity building.

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