

Temple Tourism and the Local Economy: How Madurai's Small Businesses Depend on Pilgrim Footfall

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Independent research paper prepared for submission

Abstract

Madurai district had the highest number of tourists (1.40 crore) in 2020 among all districts in Tamil Nadu, overtaking the state's capital city Chennai. Trade, hotels and restaurants account for 25 per cent of the district's economy. Informal employment in total employment increased in Madurai from 74.7 per cent in 1999-2000 to 81.5 per cent in 2011-12. Tamil Nadu tourism employment multiplier is 2.5105 as compared to 2.2931. The tourism share in employment including the indirect impact was 15.97 per cent (India: 12.38 per cent). Tourism share in the direct value added was 2.59 per cent (India: 2.78 per cent). A low margin, labour intensive tourism economy is reflected by the high employment intensity in the industry and its relatively low per capita value addition. Madurai has not received any funding under PRASHAD scheme implemented by the Indian Government for developing pilgrimage infrastructure for tourism, which has sanctioned Rs 1726.74 crore across 54 projects in 28 Indian states and UTs since 2015. It collates existing public evidence, highlights the problem of a data gap (no published footfall estimate exists for Meenakshi Amman Temple), and suggests an enterprise-mapping survey of businesses surrounding temples to measure dependency.

Keywords: religious tourism, pilgrimage economy, Madurai, informal sector, tourism multiplier, temple towns, Tamil Nadu

1. Introduction

The temple governs the streets around the Meenakshi Amman Temple more than the city planning authority. The flower merchants congregate near the entrances of the temple as garlands should reach the deity in fresh condition. Shops selling brass lamps, camphor and framed images occupy the next ring. Then come the eating houses, then the lodges, then the shops selling things a visitor might buy because they have travelled and it seems a waste not to.

This arrangement is old and it is economically precise. Every business in it exists at a particular distance from the temple because that distance is what its trade can support. It is a functioning local economy with a single anchor tenant, and the anchor tenant does not pay rent, employ anyone commercially, or publish any figures at all.

That last point is the problem this paper runs into repeatedly.

1.1 The question

How dependent are Madurai's small businesses on pilgrim footfall, and how much of the money that footfall brings actually stays in the local economy?

The second half of that question is the more interesting one. Tourism studies have long distinguished between the gross income a destination receives and the income it retains after leakage to suppliers, platforms and owners elsewhere. A town can have very high footfall and very low capture.

1.2 Why Madurai

Three things make Madurai an unusually good case.

It has scale. In 2020, Madurai district was the most visited in Tamil Nadu with 1.40 crore visits.

It has an identifiable dependency. Trade, hotels and restaurants contribute a quarter of the district economy, and the peer-reviewed city profile by Kundu and colleagues states directly that this reflects Madurai's religious importance.

And it has a documented informality problem. The same study records informal employment rising to 81.5 per cent and characterises Madurai as a shrinking city with a narrow economic base.

High footfall, high informality, narrow base. That is a leakage question waiting to be asked.

2. The demand side: how many people come

2.1 Tamil Nadu arrivals

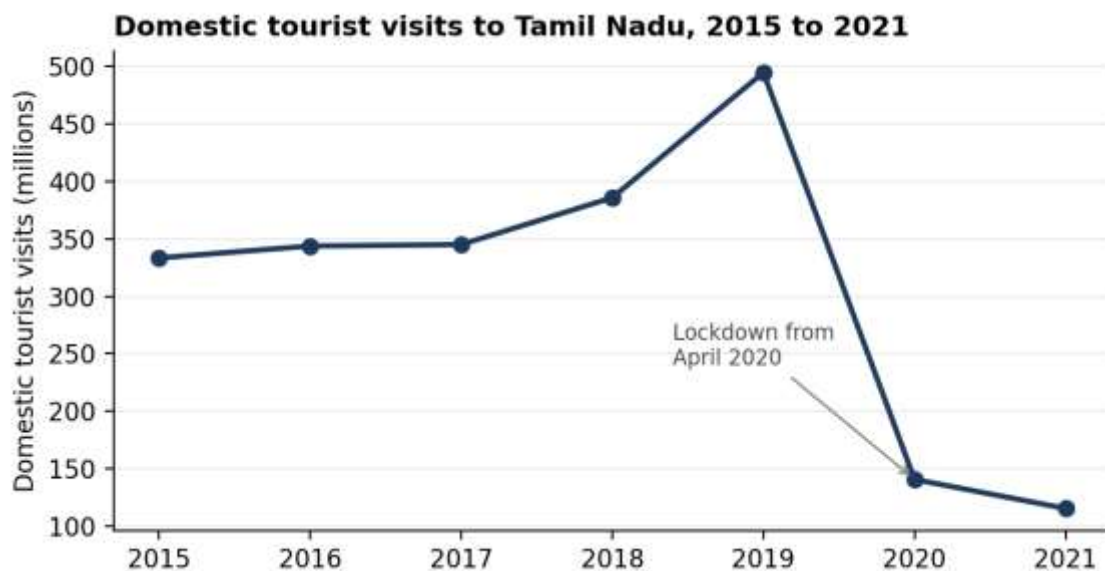


Figure 1: Domestic tourist visits to Tamil Nadu, 2015 to 2021. Source: Government of Tamil Nadu, Department of Economics and Statistics, Statistical Hand Book of Tamil Nadu, Table 40.2, citing the Commissioner of Tourism, Chennai.

Domestic tourist arrivals in Tamil Nadu rose from 33.35 crore (333.5 million) in 2015 to 49.49 crore (494.9 million) in 2019 before plummeting to 14.07 crore (140.7 million) in 2020 and 11.53 crore (115.3 million) in 2021. The state's tourism guide footnotes its 2020 figure with: no arrivals from April to August 2020 lockdown.

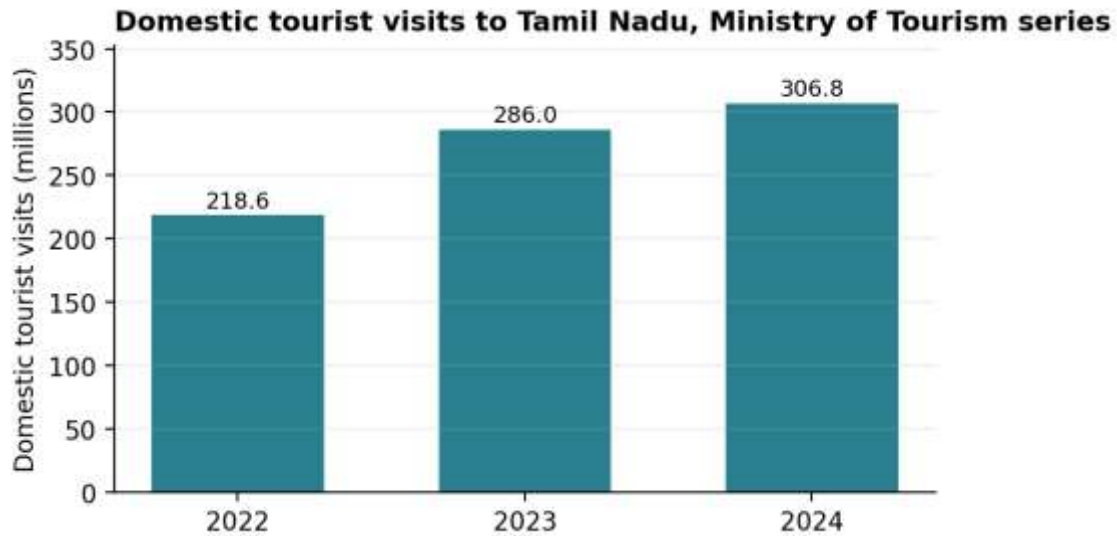


Figure 2: Domestic tourist visits to Tamil Nadu, Ministry of Tourism series. Source: Ministry of Tourism, India Tourism Data Compendium 2024 and 2025, Table 4.1.2, compiled from state tourism department returns.

Ministry of Tourism series stated domestic tourist arrivals were 21.86 crore in 2022, 28.60 crore in 2023 and 30.68 crore in 2024. 10.41 per cent of national domestic tourist arrivals were in Tamil Nadu making it the second most visited state. In the Assembly in August 2026, the state tourism minister told the assembly that combined tourist arrivals in the state increased from 30.80 crore in 2024 to 36.47 crore in 2025. Because this is an assembly statement, not a published statistical table, it is approximate

2.2 Three cautions about these numbers

These are the main methodological notes of the paper, so they should be included in the main text, not as a footnote.

These are visits, not visitors. A person visiting three districts is counted three times. The compendium states that figures are generally compiled from monthly returns collected from hotels and other accommodation establishments, plus estimation.

There is a methodology break. Despite recording 49.49 crore domestic visits in 2019, Tamil Nadu has not come close in the following years, with 30.68 crore domestic visits in 2024. This is unlikely to be pure pandemic effect five years later. The state appears to have changed how it counts, and Figures 1 and 2 are therefore presented as two separate series rather than one continuous line.

Foreign tourist visits to states are not foreign tourist arrivals in India. The first double-counts across states. By 2023, these figures were 1.92 crore and 95.2 lakh.

2.3 Madurai specifically

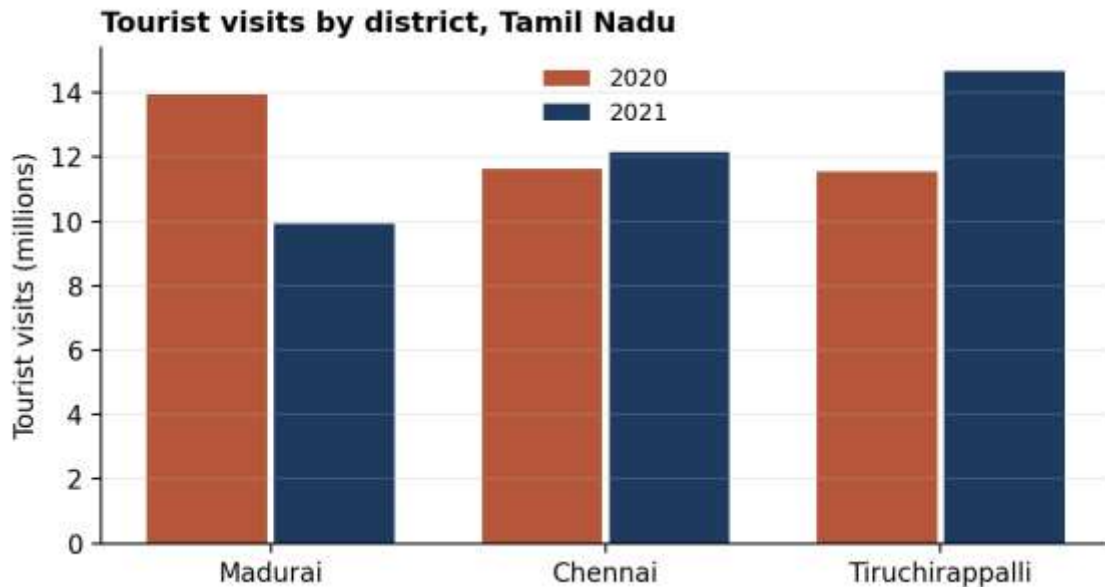


Figure 3: Tourist visits by district in Tamil Nadu, 2020 and 2021. Source: Statistical Hand Book of Tamil Nadu, Table 40.3, citing the Commissioner of Tourism.

In 2020, Madurai district was the most visited district in the state with 1.40 crore visits, followed by Chennai (1.16 crore) and Tiruchirappalli (1.16 crore). Madurai district accounted for 9.84 per cent of all visits in the state. It registered 99.3 lakh visits in 2021, placing it third in ranking that year.

Foreign arrivals through Madurai airport totalled 10,570 in 2024, or 0.13 per cent of all air-mode foreign tourist arrivals in India, against Chennai's 8,14,594.

The combination is informative. Madurai's tourism is overwhelmingly domestic and overwhelmingly not arriving by air, which is exactly what a pilgrimage economy looks like.

2.4 The religious share of Indian travel

The only national household survey with purpose-of-trip data is the National Sample Survey Office's report on domestic tourism from the 72nd round, covering July 2014 to June 2015. Among overnight trips in the thirty-day reference group, religious and pilgrimage travel accounted for 8.3 per cent, with 7.6 per cent in rural areas and 9.8 per cent in urban.

Two findings from the same survey matter more than the headline. Religious and pilgrimage trips carried an average of **2.27 overnight visitors per trip**, the largest travelling group of any thirty-day purpose. And average expenditure per overnight religious trip was Rs 2,717, against Rs 1,068 for social trips.

Pilgrims travel in groups and spend more than the far larger category of people visiting relatives. For a local economy, that is a materially better customer.

A necessary caveat: the 72nd round used two different reference periods, capturing leisure and health trips over 365 days and business, social, pilgrimage and education trips over thirty days, tabulated separately. The 8.3 per cent figure is therefore the share within the thirty-day group, not a share of all domestic tourism. It is frequently misquoted as the latter. The successor survey, fielded from July 2025 to June 2026, had not been published at the time of writing, which means the most recent published Indian data on why people travel is now eleven years old.

3. The supply side: what tourism contributes

3.1 National

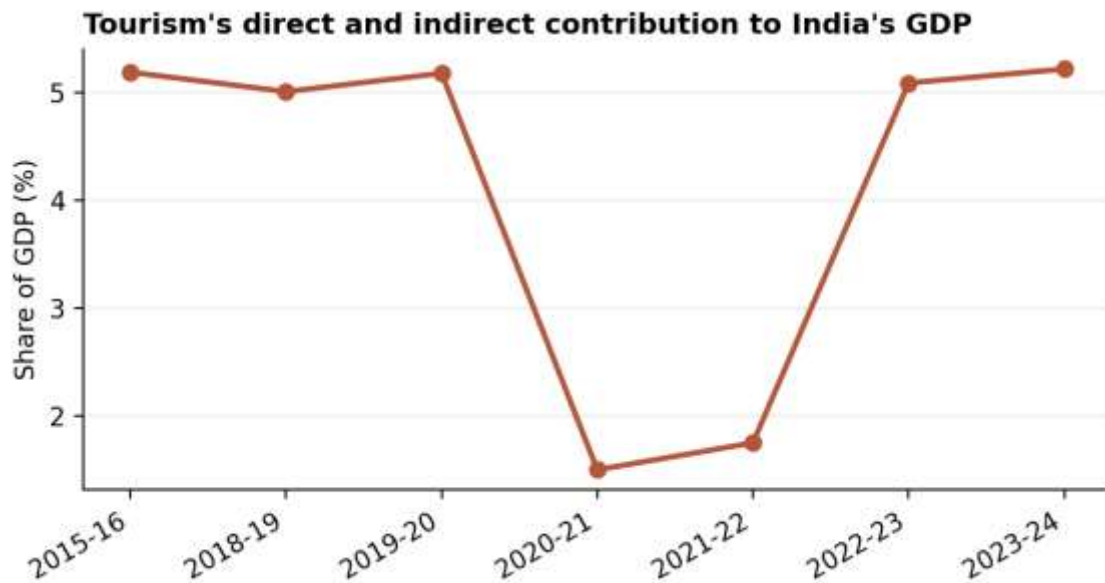


Figure 4: Tourism's direct and indirect contribution to India's GDP. Source: Ministry of Tourism, India Tourism Data Compendium 2025, Table 7.4.1, based on National Accounts Statistics 2025 and the Third Tourism Satellite Account.

The contribution of tourism to the GDP in 2015-16 was 5.19 per cent, from 2016-17 to 2019-20 it was 5%, in 2020-21 it was 1.5% of GDP, and in 2023-24 it was 5.22%. The tourism direct GDP was 8,18,117 crore Indian Rupees in 2023-24.

In terms of employment, in the year 2023-24, tourism contributed to 3.69 crore jobs directly and 8.46 crore direct and indirect jobs, which is 13.34 per cent of total employment.

The 2020-21 collapse deserves some space. Direct and indirect contribution fell from 5.18 per cent to 1.50 per cent in a single year. Whatever one thinks of tourism's long-run resilience, this is a sector with almost no floor, and the people holding the informal jobs at the bottom of it had no floor either.

3.2 Tamil Nadu

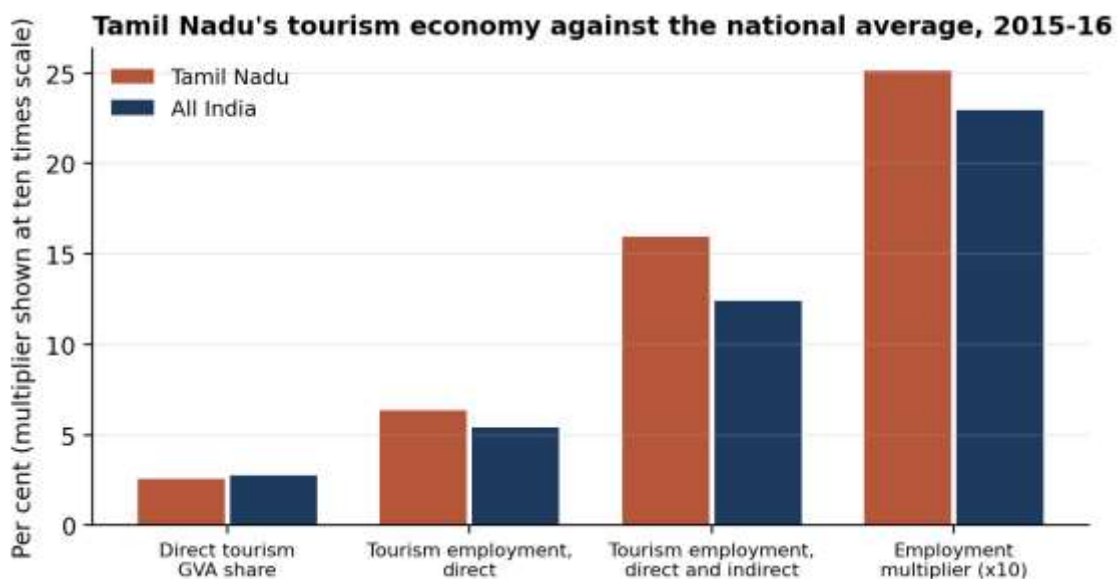


Figure 5: Tamil Nadu's tourism economy against the national average, 2015-16. Source: NCAER, India: Regional Tourism Satellite Accounts 2015-16, Tamil Nadu, Table VI.2. Employment multiplier shown at ten times scale to fit the axis.

This chart contains the central argument of the paper.

Tamil Nadu's direct tourism gross value added share was 2.59 per cent, **below** the national 2.78 per cent. But its direct tourism employment share was 6.36 per cent against 5.40 per cent nationally, its direct and indirect employment share 15.97 per cent against 12.38 per cent, and its employment multiplier 2.5105 against 2.2931.

Tamil Nadu's tourism economy employs proportionally more people than the national average while generating proportionally less value added. Per rupee of tourism output, it supports more jobs. Per job, it generates less money.

That is the economics of a sector composed largely of small, labour-intensive, low-margin enterprises: flower sellers, tea stalls, small lodges, cycle-rickshaw drivers, garland makers, photographers. It is the statistical shadow of the streets described in the introduction.

The numbers from the NCAER study for Tamil Nadu economy are: Total internal tourism consumption of Rs 74,255.6 crore (7.78 per cent of all-India share), tourism direct gross value added of Rs 27,869.13 crore against Tamil Nadu total of Rs 10.76 lakh crore.

Notes on competing figures: WTTC has projected that tourism's contribution to GDP in India will be 6.6 per cent in 2025 with employment of 4.62 crore. In contrast, the Ministry of Tourism's Tourism Satellite Account estimates tourism's contribution to GDP in 2023-24 to be 5.22 per cent.

3.3 Madurai's economic composition

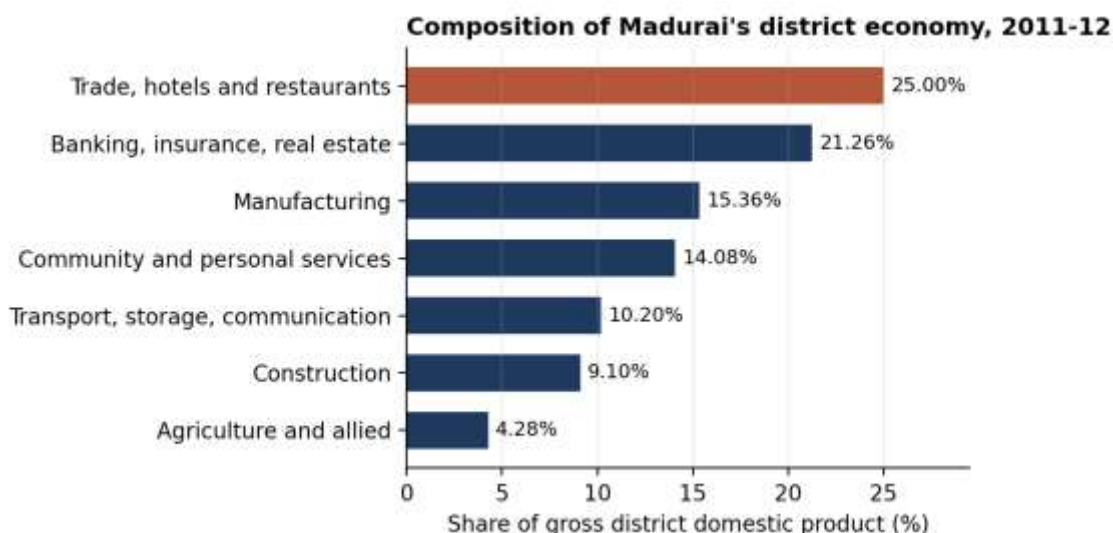


Figure 6: Composition of Madurai's district economy, 2011-12, at constant prices. Source: Kundu, Lahiri, Pandey and Sharma (2019), City Profile: Madurai, Environment and Urbanization Asia, Table 6, citing State Planning Commission data.

Trade, hotels and restaurants constitute 25% of the gross district domestic product of Madurai. This is followed by banking, insurance and real estate (21.26%), and manufacturing (15.36%). The tertiary sector, which includes trade, hotels and restaurants, banking, insurance and real estate, contributes to 70.55% of the city's gross domestic product.

The authors of that study state the connection explicitly, writing that tourism and its associated sectors such as hotels and restaurants play an important role in the city's economy mainly because of the religious

importance of Madurai as a temple city, and concluding that the temple's importance is reflected in the higher share of trade, hotels and restaurants in Madurai.

3.4 Informality

The same study provides the figures that make this a distributional question rather than merely a growth one.

However, share of informal sector employment in total employment in Madurai increased from 74.7 per cent in 1999-2000 to 81.5 per cent in 2011-12. The share of marginal workers rose from 3.94 per cent to 7.10 per cent (female marginal workers from 7.99 per cent to 13.44 per cent) in total workers during 2001 to 2011. The population living in informal settlements increased from 23.83 to 27.32 per cent.

According to the authors, short-term seasonal jobs exist in the small and medium industries, such as agro-based food processing, hotels and restaurants, but are not organized formally.

For the year 2011-12, the per capita income in Madurai district has been reported at ₹67,258, which is above the state average of ₹63,996 per capita income. Madurai district was the 13th of 32 districts in Tamil Nadu in per capita income for the year 2010-11. The district contributed 4.15% of Tamil Nadu GDP.

4. The policy picture

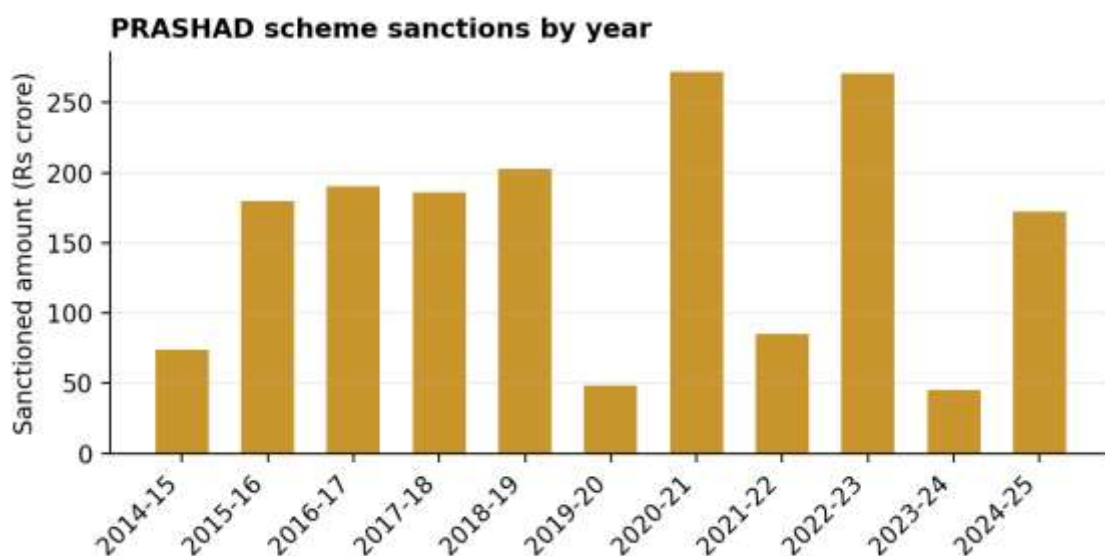


Figure 7: Sanctions under the PRASHAD scheme by year. Source: Ministry of Tourism, Annual Report 2025-26, Section 3.2.

PRASHAD, the Ministry of Tourism's dedicated scheme for pilgrimage rejuvenation and spiritual augmentation drive, has sanctioned Rs 1,726.74 crore across 54 projects in 28 states and union territories since its launch in January 2015, with Rs 1,200.47 crore released. Thirty-two projects are physically complete.

So far, the following three PRASHAD projects have been sanctioned for Tamil Nadu: Kanchipuram (Rs 13.99 crore) in 2016-17, Velankanni (Rs 4.86 crore) in 2016-17 (both completed), and eight Navagraha temples (Rs 40.94 crore) in 2024-25 (under implementation).

Madurai has received nothing under PRASHAD.

Of the various tourism programs attributed to Madurai in the Ministry's annual report, only Rs 4.48 crore for Madurai railway station is a central allocation. Of that, Rs 3.56 crore was released, which the report

shows as physically complete. Rs 4.70 crore for Rameshwaram railway station and Rs 5.75 crore for Tirupati railway station were also awarded.

But Madurai is absent in the Rs 73.13 crore Swadesh Darshan coastal circuit and the Rs 30.02 crore Swadesh Darshan 2.0 engaging experience at Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu's only Swadesh Darshan 2.0 entry.

The Tamil Nadu Tourism Policy 2023 envisages Madurai as one of the five short term Gateway hubs, and envisages the share of tourism to grow to 12% of the state gross domestic product (GDP) providing employment for 25 lakh persons and attracting Rs 200 billion of investment. The targets are not based on reality, and the religious tourism section of the policy does not mention Madurai or the Chithirai festival in any of the pilgrimage trails.

The position, then, is that India's most-visited district in 2020 and one of its principal temple cities is outside India's flagship pilgrimage infrastructure programme.

5. Literature review

5.1 Religious tourism as a category

Rinschede (1992), in *Annals of Tourism Research*, produced the canonical typology, distinguishing short-term from long-term religious tourism and establishing religious tourism as an analytical category distinct from both pilgrimage and leisure travel.

Collins-Kreiner (2010), in *Annals of Tourism Research* and separately in *Applied Geography*, traced the convergence of pilgrimage and tourism studies, arguing that the analytic separation between pilgrim and tourist has become untenable in practice.

Vukonić (2002), in *Tourism Recreation Research*, addressed the economics directly under the title "Religion, Tourism and Economics: A Convenient Symbiosis", which is the most directly relevant of his works for a study of this kind.

5.2 Multipliers and leakage

Archer (1982), in *Tourism Management*, remains the standard reference on tourism multipliers and, importantly, on their misuse. **Fletcher (1989)**, in *Annals of Tourism Research*, set out the input-output methodology that underlies the satellite account figures used in Section 3. **Wanhill (1994)** addressed the measurement of tourist income multipliers specifically.

Cukier and Wall (1994), in *Tourism Management*, studied informal tourism employment among vendors in Bali. This is the closest methodological template available for surveying temple-adjacent traders, and the parallel is close: street vendors serving a high-footfall religious and cultural site, operating informally, with earnings and conditions largely undocumented.

5.3 Indian temple towns

Shinde (2026), The nearest was a 2026 *Tourism and Hospitality* paper by Shinde, which used visitor surveys, enterprise mapping and entrepreneur interviews to describe a high-density but risky local economy based in Maharashtra's temple towns of Jejuri and Tuljapur, based on religious retail, street vending and small-scale services provision. The businesses are economically fragile, low margin, and weakly integrated into policy, while entrepreneurship is constrained by religious authority, informality, seasonality, and a low capacity for innovation.

Each of these labels is a proposition this paper might test when looking at Madurai.

Shinde (2010), looked at entrepreneurship in Vrindavan in the *International Journal of Tourism Research* and argues that, on its face, informal categorization keeps that entrepreneurship from being regulated and

held accountable. It keeps that entrepreneurship from receiving credit for helping preserve that which drives religious tourism: the religious character of the city.

Kandasamy and Thirumaran (2019), *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, cover the impact of uncontrolled and unplanned construction, alteration of land use, commercialization and lack of strict policy guidelines on the heritage of the Tamil Nadu town of Kumbakonam. The authors also conducted a detailed study of the town of Kanchipuram.

5.4 Madurai

Kundu, Lahiri, Pandey and Sharma (2019), in *Environment and Urbanization Asia*, published for the National Institute of Urban Affairs, is the strongest Madurai-specific academic source identified. It supplies the economic composition, informality and per capita income data used throughout Section 3, and frames Madurai as a shrinking city with a narrow economic base.

5.5 The gap

No peer-reviewed study of Madurai's temple-adjacent informal economy appears to exist. Kundu and colleagues cover Madurai's economy but not the temple-linked traders specifically. Shinde covers exactly this question but in Maharashtra.

This is the gap the study below addresses, and the obvious method is to replicate Shinde's enterprise-mapping approach in a Tamil Nadu setting.

6. A data gap worth naming

Footfall numbers are not published by the Meenakshi Amman Temple or the Tamil Nadu government-controlled Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department. No Tamil Nadu government tourism department catalogues the Meenakshi Amman Temple at the level of an individual temple.

This is a genuine absence rather than a search failure, and it is worth stating what it means. Every figure circulating online for daily or annual visitors to the temple, and there are several, is unsourced. This paper uses none of them.

The contrast with other major Indian temples is stark and itself analytically interesting. Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams also announces daily footfall numbers. In the financial year 2025-26, the average footfall is 73000, and the annual hundi income is Rs 1420 crore. For the 2025-26 season, the Travancore Devaswom Board reported that the Sabarimala temple attracted 51 lakh pilgrims and earned Rs. 429 crore in revenue. The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board registered 94.80 lakh pilgrims in 2024. The Shirdi Sai Baba Sansthan reported donations of Rs 660 crore in 2025-26.

Tamil Nadu's temple administration publishes none of this. Whatever the reason, the consequence for research is that the anchor of Madurai's tourism economy is the one entity in it whose scale cannot be measured from public sources.

The district-level arrivals figures in Section 2.3 are therefore used as the best available proxy, with the limitation stated. The primary research below is designed to measure dependency from the business side, which sidesteps the footfall question entirely.

7. Proposed methodology

7.1 Design

An enterprise-mapping survey of small businesses in the temple's commercial catchment, combined with short interviews, following the approach used by Shinde (2026) in Maharashtra and by Cukier and Wall (1994) in Bali.

The design measures dependency from the business side. If the temple's footfall cannot be counted directly, it can be inferred from what happens to the businesses that depend on it when footfall changes.

7.2 Sample

Target: 20 to 30 businesses.

Spatial design. This is the methodological core. Define three concentric zones by walking distance from the temple's main entrances:

Zone	Distance	Expected character
1	Immediately adjacent, within roughly 200 metres	Flowers, ritual goods, small eateries, photographers
2	Roughly 200 to 800 metres	Lodges, restaurants, textiles, souvenirs
3	Beyond 800 metres, comparable commercial street	General retail serving mainly residents

Zone 3 functions as a comparison group. If dependency on pilgrim footfall declines sharply with distance, the gradient is itself the finding, and it distinguishes a temple economy from a city economy.

Within each zone, sample systematically along a defined stretch, approaching every third qualifying establishment, and record refusals.

7.3 Instrument

Section A, enterprise profile. Trade. Years in operation. Whether the business was inherited. Number of people working, distinguishing family from hired and full-time from casual. Premises: owned, rented, licensed stall, or unfixed. Whether registered under Udyam, under GST, or not at all.

Section B, customer composition. Approximately what share of customers are pilgrims or visitors rather than local residents? Recorded in bands, not as a precise figure, because a precise figure would be invented. How does the respondent tell the difference?

Section C, seasonality. This is the section that measures dependency most directly.

- What are the busiest and slowest months?
- What is the worst month for takings and what is the best month?
- What happens to the business during Chithirai?
- Do you hire more staff for festivals? If so, how many?
- What did you do during the 2020 and 2021 closures?

That last question is unusually valuable. The lockdowns were an involuntary natural experiment in which footfall went to zero while the local resident population stayed. Businesses that survived it can say exactly what pilgrim trade was worth to them.

Section D, supply chain and leakage. Questions such as, where are the products from? Place of origin within Madurai, Tamil Nadu, or elsewhere? What is the ownership of the space? Is the owner local? Do they use any delivery or booking platform and, if so, what do they pay? Has it taken a loan, and from whom: bank, cooperative, moneylender, family?

Leakage is measured by where the money goes, and these are the questions that trace it.

Section E, policy and recognition. Has the business received any government support? Is the respondent aware of any tourism scheme? Has anything about the area improved or worsened for business in the last five years?

Section F, open. If pilgrim numbers doubled, what would change for you? If they halved?

7.4 Interviews

Six to eight longer conversations, drawn from the survey sample, deliberately including at least two businesses in Zone 1 that survived the lockdown period and at least one in Zone 3 for contrast.

7.5 Analysis

- Descriptive statistics by zone, with the pilgrim customer share by zone as the headline result.
- Seasonality ratio by zone and trade.
- Informality indicators: share unregistered, share without fixed premises, share of workers who are casual.
- Leakage indicators: share of goods sourced outside the district, share of premises owned by non-residents, share paying platform commission.
- Thematic coding of Sections E and F.

7.6 Ethics and practical notes

Several of these businesses are unregistered. Questions about registration and lending are sensitive and could be read as official enquiry. The following are therefore necessary rather than optional.

- State at the outset, in Tamil, that this is student research, that no government department is involved and that nothing will be reported to anyone.
- Do not record business names.
- Do not ask for exact revenue figures. Ratios and bands answer the research question and exact figures will either be refused or fabricated.
- Accept refusal immediately and record it as a refusal, since a high refusal rate in Zone 1 would itself be a finding about informality.
- Conduct interviews at times that do not cost the respondent trade, which for a flower seller means not in the morning.

7.7 Limitations

Small non-random sample in a single city. Self-reported customer composition and seasonality. The author is not a Tamil speaker at trade-vocabulary level and will require assistance, which introduces translation effects into open responses. Recall of the 2020 and 2021 period is retrospective across five years. None of these prevent the study from being worth doing, but all belong in the final paper.

8. Conclusion

It is true that the official census data has accurately described Madurai until a point, after which it stops exactly where the interesting question begins.

It also tells us that Madurai district was most visited among the districts of Tamil Nadu in 2020. That trade, hotels and restaurants make up a quarter of its economy and that a peer-reviewed study attributes this directly to the temple. That Tamil Nadu's tourism sector employs proportionally more people and generates proportionally less value added than the national average, which is what a small-business tourism economy looks like in the aggregate statistics. That informal employment in the city has risen past

eighty per cent. And that India's flagship pilgrimage infrastructure scheme has funded 54 projects across 28 states without funding this one.

What it does not tell us is how much of a flower seller's income comes from pilgrims rather than residents, what happens to that income in the slow months, where the money goes once it is earned, and how far from the temple the dependency reaches before it fades.

Those are answerable questions. They require walking the streets in Section 7.2 with a clipboard and asking about thirty people what their slowest month looks like. Given that the temple itself publishes nothing, that may be the only way to find out.

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