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Women on the Temple Walls: Recovering the Forgotten Voices of Female Patrons in Medieval Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

This paper re-evaluates the history of medieval Tamil temples by shifting the focus from dynastic kings and monumental architecture to the ongoing institutional participation of women. Drawing on epigraphic evidence carved into temple walls, the author highlights women omitted from conventional royal chronicles who actively managed property, donated gold and land, and supported ritual life. The study nuances the retrospective categorization of temple-affiliated women (often broadly grouped as devadāsīs) by showing their diverse roles as independent donors and economic actors, while framing their involvement through historical agency—their ability to allocate resources within existing social structures—rather than modern concepts of gender resistance. Ultimately, the paper argues that integrating these inscriptional records into traditional art and architectural histories provides a more complete and complex understanding of female agency in medieval Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Women in History; Forgotten Voices; Female Agency; Temple Patronage; Medieval Tamil Nadu; Chola Period; Epigraphy; Temple Women; Art History; Religious Institutions.



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Introduction: Recovering Women from the Temple Walls

The temples of medieval Tamil Nadu provide an unusually rich body of evidence for studying the society that produced and maintained them. Their architecture and sculptures reveal artistic practices and religious ideas, while inscriptions provide information about land, wealth, administration, worship, and relationships between individuals and institutions.

Yet the way these monuments have traditionally been studied has often placed rulers at the centre of the narrative. A temple tends to be remembered through the king who constructed, enlarged, or endowed it. This is understandable in the case of royal foundations, but it can make the history of the people who sustained the institution considerably less visible.

Women's history illustrates this problem particularly well. Women such as Sembayan Mahādevī and Kundavai are well known because their royal status placed their patronage within the larger history of Chola political power. Their importance is unquestionable. At the same time, a history of women constructed mainly around such prominent figures risks becoming a history of exceptional women rather than an examination of women's participation at different levels of society.

Temple inscriptions permit a broader investigation. A woman may appear in an inscription only because she endowed gold for a lamp. Another may occur in a record concerning land. A third may be identified through her connection with a temple or deity. These references are often brief, but they provide evidence of individual actions that would otherwise be difficult to recover.

Leslie C. Orr's *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God: Temple Women in Medieval Tamilnadu* is particularly important for understanding this material (Orr). Her study brings together a substantial body of inscriptions and examines temple women not only in relation to service but also in relation to patronage, property, and religious institutions. The present study takes that evidence in a somewhat different direction by asking:

Who participated in making the temple function?

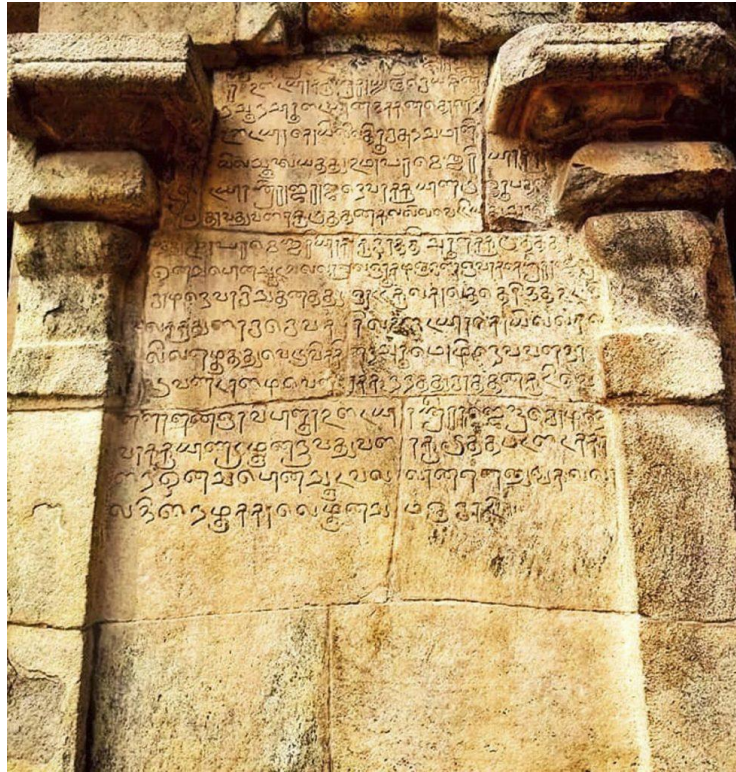
The question deliberately moves beyond the individual responsible for monumental construction. It draws attention to the continuing economic, ritual, and social activities through which a temple remained an active institution.

From Monumental Patronage to Institutional Participation

A medieval temple cannot be understood simply as a building completed at one point in time. Once established, it required continuing resources and organised activity. Lamps had to be maintained, offerings supplied, festivals conducted, lands managed, and people supported.

The physical monument was therefore only one part of the institution. A large royal donation may be visible in architecture. A much smaller gift may be visible only through an inscription. Yet the smaller gift could have a continuing purpose. Gold assigned to a perpetual lamp, for example, could generate resources for an obligation that continued after the donor's lifetime. Land assigned for offerings or festivals could likewise provide income over an extended period.

This makes it useful to distinguish between monumental patronage and institutional participation. The former is easily recognised because it leaves a substantial physical mark. The latter is often dispersed across administrative and ritual records (see fig. 1).



Two Ways of Reading a Temple's History

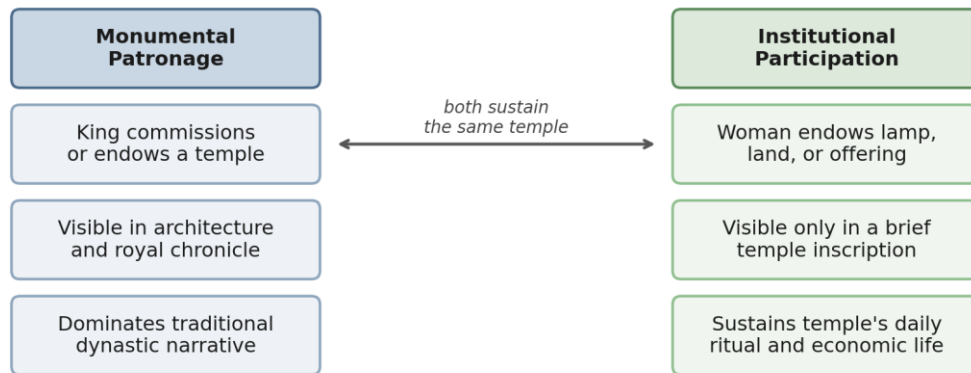


Fig. 1. Two contrasting but complementary registers of temple history: monumental patronage, visible in architecture, and institutional participation, visible mainly in inscriptions.

For women's history, this distinction is particularly valuable. Many women preserved in temple inscriptions appear not as builders of major structures but as participants in the economic and religious arrangements that sustained those structures.

The question is therefore not simply: Who built the temple? It is also: Who helped sustain the temple once it became a functioning institution? The answer is necessarily wider. It includes rulers and queens, but also merchants, landholders, religious personnel, temple servants, donors,

and women whose individual contributions have received much less attention in conventional accounts.

The Inscription as an Archive of Women's History



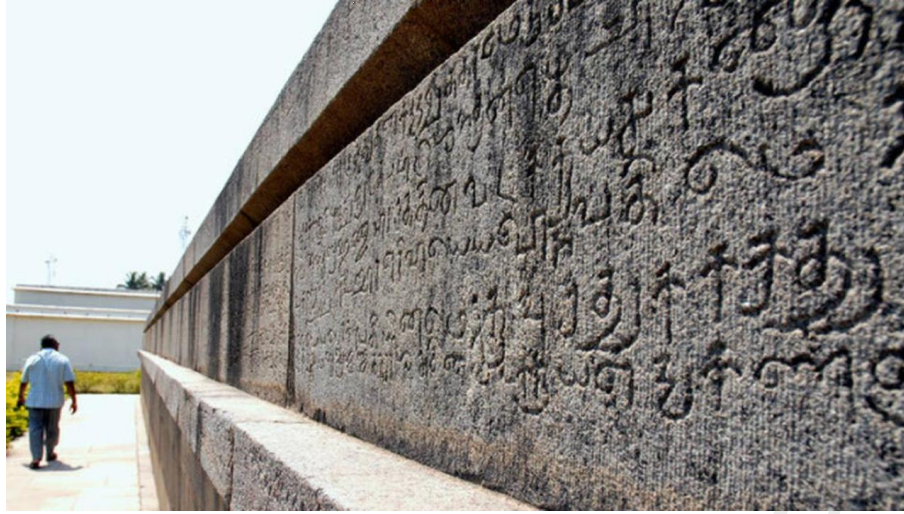
An inscription can preserve a surprisingly large amount of information in very few words. Depending on the record, it may identify a woman by name, give her social or institutional designation, specify the property or wealth involved, and indicate the religious purpose of her contribution.

Such details allow questions to be asked about identity, access to resources, and participation in institutional life. At the same time, inscriptional evidence has to be handled cautiously. The record may tell us that a woman donated gold. It does not necessarily tell us why she made the donation. It may establish that she participated in a land transaction, but it does not automatically tell us how extensive her property holdings were. It may identify her as a temple woman, but that designation should not be turned into a complete description of her social life.

This distinction between recorded evidence and historical interpretation is central to the present study. A donation can reasonably be treated as evidence of an action. From that action, the historian may discuss economic or religious agency. But the historian should not attribute motives that the inscription does not reveal.

Orr's larger corpus demonstrates the value of placing individual inscriptions alongside other records rather than treating each one as an isolated anecdote (Orr). The result is a fuller picture in which small inscriptional references can contribute to a broader history of women.

Forgotten Women Beyond the Royal Household



The history of medieval Tamil women extends well beyond the royal household. Inscriptions refer to women in different social and institutional settings. Some belong to royal families. Others are associated with temples, local communities, or religious institutions. Some appear as donors, while others are mentioned in connection with property or service.

Their historical significance often lies precisely in their lack of fame. A queen can enter historical writing through dynastic records. An ordinary donor may survive only because an inscription recorded a particular act. In many cases, we cannot reconstruct the woman's life beyond that single record.

That limitation should not make the evidence unimportant. A short inscription can establish that a particular woman existed, that she was identified in a particular way, that she had access to certain resources, and that she directed those resources towards a specific purpose.

The historian should resist the temptation to fill the gaps with speculation. Instead, the fragment itself should be taken seriously. A name, a donation, and a temple connection may not provide a biography, but they do provide a historical presence.

Nakkan Kālī: A Woman Remembered through a Lamp

An instructive example is provided by Nakkan Kālī. An inscription from Tiruccennampundi, belonging to the reign of Nirupatuṅgavarman, identifies Nakkan Kālī as a *tēvanār makaḷ* associated with Śrīkāntapuram. It records her contribution of twelve *kalanju* of pure gold for a perpetual lamp dedicated to Tirukkaṭaimuṭi Perumāṇaṭikaḷ (South-Indian Inscriptions, vol. 7, no. 526).

The record is short, but several features deserve attention. The inscription identifies her name, the material she contributed, and the religious purpose for which the contribution was made.

These details are enough to establish an act of participation without requiring us to construct a biography that the inscription does not provide. The donation is particularly interesting because it was connected with a continuing ritual obligation. A perpetual lamp was not a one-time event. Its maintenance required resources over time.

Nakkan Kālī's historical significance therefore does not depend upon the architectural scale

of her contribution. Her name entered the temple's institutional record because of a gift that helped support continuing worship. This provides a different way of thinking about patronage.

The history of a temple is not made only by those whose names are connected with towers, walls, and shrines. It is also made through the smaller financial arrangements that allowed ritual activity to continue.

Women, Land, and Institutional Patronage

Land provides another important form of evidence. An inscription concerning Cuntari Utayañceytāl, also known as Piventiyacōla-māṇikkam, identifies her as a dēvaratiyār and records her involvement in the purchase of two vēli of land from the nakaram. The land was subsequently given as a dēvādāna endowment connected with offerings and festival lamps (Orr 18). This record is important because the woman is visible in more than one role.

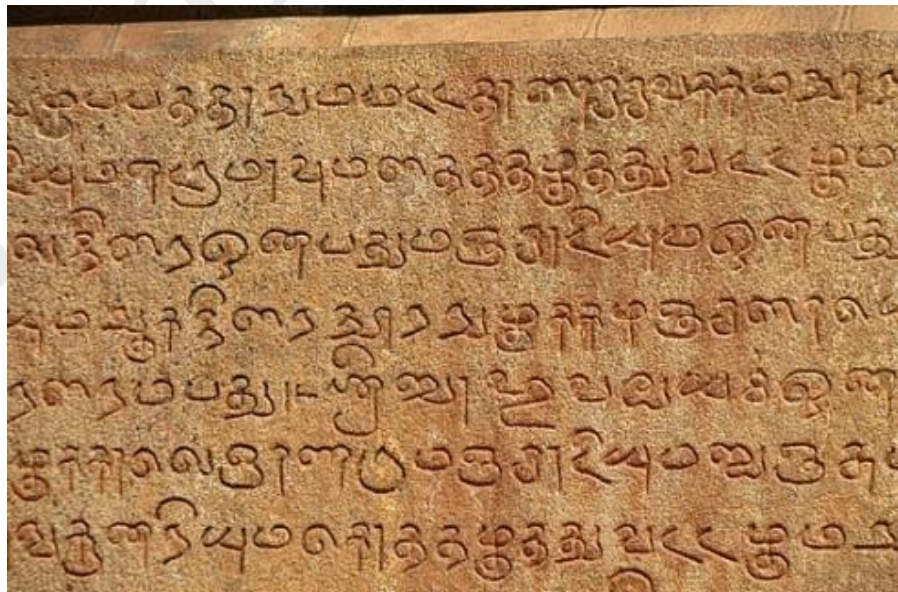
She is associated with a temple, appears in a property transaction, acquires land, and then directs that land towards a religious purpose.

The inscription does not justify a general statement that all temple women possessed independent economic power. Medieval society was varied, and one example cannot represent every woman belonging to the same category. It does, however, establish that this particular woman participated in a transaction involving land and subsequently used that property for religious patronage.

That distinction matters. The evidence is strongest when the argument remains close to the record. Orr's examination of temple women as patrons provides a wider framework for understanding the relationship between property and religious activity (Orr 65-87).

From this perspective, the temple woman cannot be understood only through ritual service. At least some women connected with temples also appear in the economic relationships through which temple institutions operated.

Tiruvalaṅjuli: Women, Property, and Sacred Place



Tiruvalaṅjuli offers another useful example. SII VIII, no. 228 records the participation of

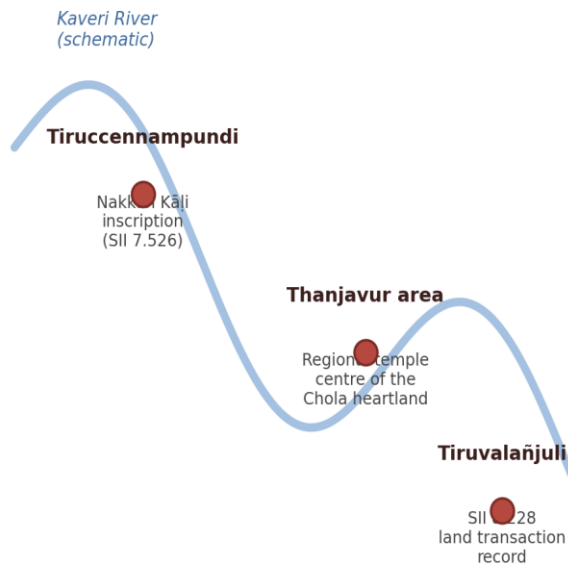
Ātkoṇṭān Tēvuṇṭiruvumuṭaiyāl and Kīlakkataiyiṇṇāl, women identified as dēvaratiyār. The record concerns their involvement with land given for religious purposes and preserves the transaction in formal inscriptional form (South-Indian Inscriptions, vol. 8, no. 228).

The significance of the record lies not simply in the fact that the women are named. It places them within a documented economic and religious transaction. They appear in relation to land and participate in its transfer. The land is directed towards religious purposes, and the transaction becomes part of the permanent record of the institution. The example therefore adds another dimension to the discussion of female patronage. Women associated with temples could, in particular circumstances, be participants in the economic arrangements surrounding those institutions.

The record should nevertheless be treated as evidence concerning particular individuals rather than as proof of a uniform social condition.

The geographical dimension is also significant. Orr's discussion of temple women shows that their identities could be closely connected with particular temples, deities, and places (Orr 135-48). Sacred place was therefore not merely the setting in which these women acted. In some cases, their relationship with a temple formed part of the way in which they themselves were identified in the historical record (see fig. 2).

Approximate Locations of Inscription Sites Discussed in This Paper (Tanjavur Region)



Note: schematic sketch for orientation only, not a scaled cartographic map.

Fig. 2. Schematic sketch, not to scale, showing the relative positions of the inscription sites

discussed in this paper within the Kaveri delta / Tanjavur region.

Temple Women and the Problem of the Devadāsi

The terminology used to describe temple women presents a major historiographical problem. The modern category of the devadāsi is often projected backwards across several centuries, creating the impression that women associated with temples in different historical periods belonged to one continuous and unchanging institution.

Such an approach can obscure rather than clarify the medieval evidence. Orr's study is valuable precisely because it examines the terminology and social contexts in which temple women appear in medieval Tamil inscriptions (Orr 3-36).

The records show variation. Some women appear in relation to temple service. Some appear as donors. Some participate in property transactions. Some are connected with particular temples and religious communities.

The category should therefore not be treated as though it carried exactly the same meaning in every period. At the same time, the evidence should not be used to create an equally simplistic picture in the opposite direction. It would be wrong to conclude from several examples of property or patronage that every temple woman was economically independent or institutionally powerful.

The more useful conclusion is that temple women occupied different positions and that their experiences varied according to period, place, and institution. Orr's discussion of "Temple Women as Temple Patrons" is particularly relevant because it places questions of property and religious devotion alongside the institutional roles of these women (Orr 65-87). The medieval temple woman should therefore be studied within her own historical context rather than being defined solely through a later social category.

From Representation to Agency: An Art-Historical Perspective

The evidence discussed here has implications beyond women's social history. It also provides a useful bridge between epigraphy and art history.

South Indian temples contain sculptures, bronzes, and architectural forms through which women were represented. These visual sources tell us about artistic conventions and religious imagination. Inscriptions provide a different kind of evidence: they allow us to identify women as historical participants. This creates an important distinction:

Visual art can show how women were represented; inscriptions can sometimes show what particular women did.

The two forms of evidence complement one another. Temple art existed within a functioning religious institution. Images were worshipped, festivals were conducted, lamps were maintained, and offerings were made. All of this required material resources and organised participation.

A woman who endowed a lamp may not have commissioned an image. Nevertheless, her contribution supported the ritual environment in which temple images continued to have religious significance. Similarly, land assigned for offerings or festivals helped maintain the institutional setting in which the temple's artistic heritage remained active.

Epigraphy can therefore contribute to a social history of temple art. It enables the historian

to move from the question of how women were represented to the broader question of how women participated in the institutions that produced, maintained, and activated temple culture.

Agency and Resistance

This article emphasizes forgotten voices, resistance, and contributions. The evidence examined here fits the first and third elements particularly well. The question of resistance requires greater caution.

The inscriptions rarely tell us that a woman intended to challenge patriarchy or oppose an established social order. It would therefore be misleading to label every female donation as an act of resistance. The more defensible concept is agency. In the records examined here, agency can be discussed in several forms (see fig. 3).

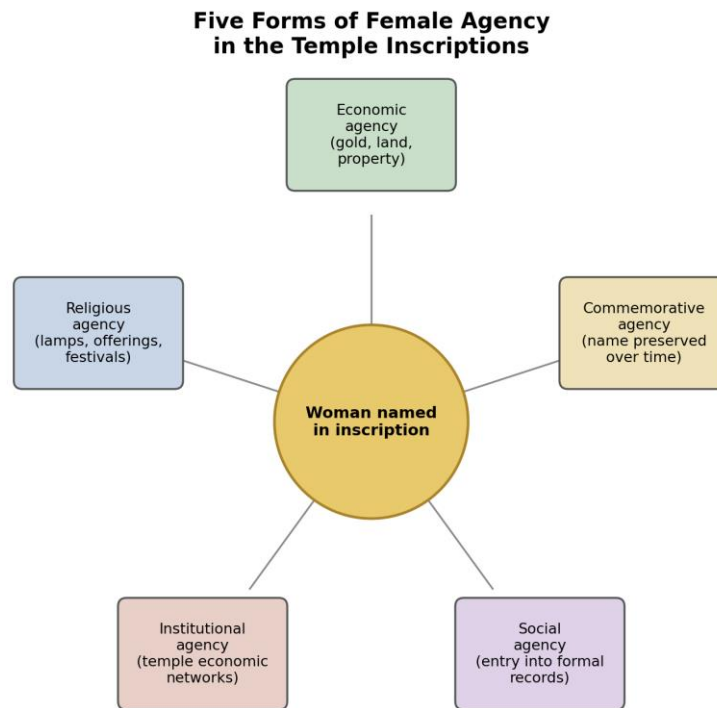


Fig. 3. Five overlapping forms of female agency visible in the temple inscriptions discussed in this paper.

Economic agency.

Some women appear in connection with gold, land, or property.

Religious agency. Women directed resources towards lamps, offerings, festivals, or particular religious purposes.

Institutional agency. Some women participated in the economic and religious networks through which temples operated (Orr 98-126).

Social agency. Their names and actions entered formal institutional records.

Commemorative agency. The inscription allowed a particular action to remain associated with a woman's name long after her lifetime.

These forms of participation should not be exaggerated. They do not prove that medieval Tamil society was egalitarian. Nor do they demonstrate that temple women as a group enjoyed unrestricted control over property or institutions.

What they do demonstrate is that women were capable of acting within the structures available to them. This is an important distinction for women's history. Resistance does not always have to be assumed in order to recognise significance. A woman could exercise meaningful agency without openly challenging the social order (Orr 135-60).

The Temple Wall as a Counter-Archive

The inscriptional record allows us to look at temple history from a different angle. A conventional dynastic narrative might be organised around a simple chain: king, authority, construction, monument. The evidence discussed here suggests another possible sequence: woman, resource, action, institution, ritual, remembrance.

The second sequence does not contradict the first. It simply draws attention to a different scale of historical activity. A king may be remembered because his name is attached to a major temple. A woman may be remembered because her donation supported a lamp. The physical scale of the two contributions is obviously different. Their historical meanings, however, cannot be measured only by the size of the monument they produced.

A temple needed both. The large structure provided the physical setting. The smaller endowments helped sustain its continuing ritual life. This is why the temple wall can be read as a counter-archive. The term is useful not because the inscriptions necessarily opposed royal history, but because they preserve people who are easily overlooked when the history of the temple is told only from the perspective of rulers and monumental construction.

The names are publicly carved into stone. Yet many of the individuals represented by those names have remained almost invisible in later historical narratives. The wall therefore provides a meeting point between monumental history and the histories of people who sustained the monument.

Why Were These Women Forgotten?

The relative disappearance of these women from historical narratives is connected partly with the ways in which history has traditionally been organised. Political history naturally gives prominence to rulers. Architectural history concentrates on buildings and monuments. Dynastic history follows royal families. Art history often focuses on major artistic achievements. Even women's history can reproduce similar patterns when attention is concentrated mainly on famous queens or other exceptional women.

The inscriptions suggest a methodological alternative. The women were not necessarily absent from the historical record. They were often present in the record but not given a central place in the interpretation of that record. This distinction is crucial.

Recovering forgotten women does not always require the discovery of an unknown archive.

Sometimes it requires returning to an existing archive with different questions. A lamp inscription can be read as evidence for women's participation. A land transaction can provide evidence concerning female involvement in property relations. A temple designation can reveal the connection between gender, sacred geography, and institutional identity.

Once the questions change, sources that previously appeared to be minor administrative records can acquire new historical significance. The temple wall was already speaking. The problem was that historians did not always ask it questions about women.

Conclusion: From Monument to Living Institution

The monumental temples of medieval Tamil Nadu have understandably been studied through kings, dynasties, and architectural achievement. Such approaches remain essential. But they cannot by themselves explain the complete history of these institutions.

The temple walls preserve another dimension of that history. They preserve women's names. Some women belonged to royal families. Some appear as donors. Some were associated with temple service. Some participated in property transactions. Some are known to us through a single inscription.

Nakkan Kālī's donation of gold for a perpetual lamp provides one example of a woman whose contribution became part of the continuing ritual arrangements of a temple. The record concerning Piventiyacōḷa-māṇikkam demonstrates that a woman identified as a temple woman could participate in the acquisition and religious dedication of land. The Tiruvalaṅjuli record provides another example of women appearing within a formal transaction connected with religious purposes.

These records should not be transformed into a romantic picture of medieval female freedom. Nor do they justify the conclusion that all temple women were economically independent or institutionally powerful. Their significance lies elsewhere: they establish that particular women participated in the economic, religious, and institutional life of medieval Tamil temples.

Their actions took different forms. They gave. They acquired. They endowed. They participated in transactions. They supported ritual. And, through inscription, their actions entered the long-term record of the temple.

This returns us to the central question of the paper:

Who participated in making the temple function?

The answer is broader than the list of rulers responsible for monumental construction. A temple was not simply a building. It was a continuing institution sustained through wealth, land, ritual, labour, administration, devotion, and memory. Women were part of that process.

Their importance does not depend upon proving that they resisted every social restriction of their time. Their historical importance lies in demonstrating that they acted within the institutions of their society and sometimes left material evidence of those actions.

This changes the scale at which temple history can be written. If we look only at the monument, kings dominate the narrative. If we examine the institution, a much larger community comes into view. Among them are women whose names have survived in stone. They were not simply figures represented within temple culture; they were participants in the social and institutional world that sustained it. The history of medieval Tamil temples was therefore not made

by kings alone. It was also sustained by women whose contributions, although sometimes preserved in only a few lines of inscription, remain part of the historical memory of the temple.

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*I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work