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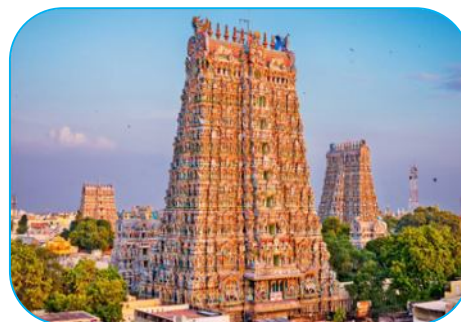
TOURISM POTENTIALS AND PROSPECTS IN MADURAI, TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Madurai, 'the Athens of South India' and the 'Mother City of Tamil' is well known for its progressive and assimilative culture and civilization. Its historical significance in in limelight from the dawn of history down to the contemporary times. It is a city of temples and festival in Tamil Nadu. Madurai is the famous cultural centre of Tamil Nadu. As a seat of Tamil culture, it patronized Tamil poets and pundits and witnessed the emergence of the illustrious Tamil Academy called 'Sangam' which is noted for egalitarian outlook. It served as the headquarters of the Pandya Country and it became a great centre of cultural activity during the period of the Nayaks of Madurai. In Madurai, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism had grown well in the ancient period. There are Buddhist and Jainist caves are found in the hill areas of Madurai. No doubt Historically the Madurai is connected with very ancient past. Its glory is still sustaining making, it a renowned tourist centre of Tamil Nadu.



KEYWORDS: *Madurai, Tourism, Pandya, Meenakshi Amman Temple, Resort, Tank, Nayak, Gandhi.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a very diverse phenomenon. It is one of the leading and developing industries around the world in the recent past. The word "tour" comes from the Latin "Tornos" which describes a circle on Turner's wheel. The tour depends on the individual's taste and takes place out of human curiosity. ¹ Tourism is a continuous and millennial human activity and today traveling has become so fast because it is the era of automation. The satisfaction of insatiable human curiosity is now just one of many impulses that drive individuals and groups to see and even know what's on the other side.² India has an incredibly rich and varied tourism potentials and prospects. The tendency of tourists is to limit India to a series of monuments or scenic wonders.³ Tamil Nadu is equally significant as the other states of India for having a variety of resorts.

Madurai, known today as a pilgrimage centre, is one of the oldest cities in South India. For the past two thousand years it has been a great centre of South Indian culture and civilization.⁴ 'Madurai' comes from the Tamil word "Madhuram" which means sweetness. Its origin and name derives from a beautiful and misty legend. In a forest near a lotus pond, Indra, King of the Gods, worshiped Lord Siva as Swayambu Lingam. In this sacred place, the Pandyan monarch Kulasekhara built a great temple and, clearing the forest, created a lotus-shaped city around the temple. The land and its people, the divine

madhuram (nectar) was poured over the city from its tangled locks, from which the city became known as Madurai.⁵

Madurai City

The City of Madurai, situated on the South Indian Railway, 347 miles south of Madras, was the second largest city in the Madras Presidency. Although it is in a flourishing condition today, it has suffered many changes of fortune during its long life of two thousand odd years. New dynasties appeared upon its soil from time to time, ruled a few centuries and subsequently disappeared, but the Madurai City has survived and is to-day as prosperous as in its palmist days in the past.⁶ The central core of the old city of Madurai, which is still the heart of the modern urban agglomeration, was mostly constructed during the Nayak period.⁷

Meenakshi Amman Temple

The Meenakshi Amman Temple is one of the largest in India and covers an approximately rectangular area, 850 feet long by 720 feet wide. The outer walls about twenty feet high, protect the Temple like a fortified palace, the residence of royal god and goddess.⁸ The Meenakshi – Sundareswarar Temple is usually known simply as the Meenakshi Temple owing to the goddess' pre-eminence and popularity in Madurai. Mainly because it is located in a large thriving city, the temple continues to be a vibrant place of worship and historical site, visited by an estimated average of twenty thousand devotees and tourists a day.⁹ This is a twin temple complex and has become popularly known as the Meenakshi - Sundareswarar Temple. Originally the temple was built by Kulasekhara Pandya, but all the credit for making the temple as it is today goes to the Nayaks.¹⁰ The Nayaks promoted and patronized the Dravidian style of art and architecture in Madurai.¹¹ The prominent features of the temple are the Golden Lilly Tank, Mukkuruni Pillaiyar (a huge Vigneswara figure), The Velliyambala Sabha with Nataraja dancing to His left and the Thousand Pillar Mandapa. The four main outer gopuras of the Madurai Temple have a unique beauty and grace. They have won the admiration of the tourists and the appreciation of the critics.¹² The festivities are celebrated every twelve months of the year and the main festival was the Chitra festival which lasts ten days and ends with the big temple car festival.¹³

Koodal Azhagar Temple

Koodal Azhagar Temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu is as old as Madurai itself. Vishnu is depicted in three poses sitting, standing and reclining one above the other. The temple also contains some beautiful carvings which makes the tour rewarding.¹⁴

Mari Amman Teppakulam

The Mariamman Teppakulam, the sacred reservoir of the Madurai, was built by Thirumalai Nayak in 1646.¹⁵ This huge temple reservoir is fed by water carried by the Vaigai through an ingenious system of underground channels. The float festival takes place annually on Thai Poosam Day (January to February). The idols of Sundareswara and Meenakshi float on a decorated plank with a thousand colored lights.¹⁶

Thirumalai Nayak Palace

Thirumalai Nayak, the greatest Nayak rulers of Madurai, had built this palace in 1639. This palace is considered to be the most wonderful secular building in south of Mumbai and is a fine example of Indo-Islamic architecture.¹⁷ The old Madurai city map shows that the palace building originally occupied a larger space and four times larger than it is today. The most impressive remnant is a huge audience hall that opens onto a richly decorated courtyard with arches.¹⁸ The sound and light show is an important feature of this palace. It attracts both domestic and foreign tourists now-a-days.

Gandhi Museum

The Gandhi Museum symbolizes Gandhi's work and sacrifices made for the cause of Indian unity, communal harmony and the struggle for national independence. K. Kamaraj, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu gave his approval to build the museum in the Rani Mangammal Palace with the surrounding lands of Tamukkam.¹⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, inaugurated the museum on April 15, 1959.²⁰ Exhibition Hall, Hall of Relics, Khadi and there are also the Village Industries and Gandhi Kuthir sections. Library and the government museum are located within the Gandhi museum complex.

Vandiyur Kanmoy Resort

Located 6 km from the Periyar bus stop and closer to the only bus stop "Mattuthavani", Vandiyur Kanmoy (tank) is an ideal place for a picnic. Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation operates a children's train and a boat service to this place. There is also a restaurant in the tourist complex.²¹

Tirupparankundram

Tirupparankundram is located about 7 km southwest of Madurai. A temple was built by Sattanganapati, Minister of Nedunjadaga Parantaka. It is one of the six mansions of Lord Muruga, located at the foot of the Skandamalai Hills. Legend says that Lord Muruga married Deivanai, daughter of Indira in this place.²²At the top of the hill is a tomb which is said to be that of a Muslim fakir. There is evidence that the Jains resorted to the hill in previous centuries.

Alagarkovil

Alagarkovil is located 20 km northwest of Madurai. It is one of the most important Vaisnava temples in Tamil Nadu. It is located near the southern end of the hill called Alagarmalai, which runs for about 15 miles from east to west. This being the bottom of the temple, it offers a panoramic view. Beyond, at a distance of about three miles, the mountain is very green and there are springs, the water from these springs flows very close to the temple enclosure. Alagar or Sundnararaj is the processional deity and the Moolasathanam is known as Paramaswami. ²³ Many festivals take place in this temple, of which the Chitra Pournami festival is very important and is celebrated at the same time as a similar festival at Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai.

Sathiar Dam

The Sathiar Odai reservoir was formed at Sathiar Odai in the Vadipattuy taluk of the Madurai District. The Sathiar Odai flows from the southern side of the Sirumalai Hills. The construction of this dam began in 1962 and was completed in 1965.²⁴ The catchment area of the river at the dam site is 35.41 square miles.

Kulasekharan Kottai

Kulasekharan Kottai is located more than 28 kilometers west from Madurai and closer to Vadipatti, at the foot of southern most part of Sirumalai. Kulasekhara Pandyan, one of the mighty leaders of the Pandyas, built a fort in Manaur, currently this fort is called Kulasekharan Kottai with the name of Kulasekhara Pandyan.²⁵ Today this fort is in dilapidated condition. Some inscriptions are incomplete and, due to the Muslim invasion, many of the inscriptions were damaged and many were lost in different places and scattered here and there in this fort. There is a large temple for Meenakshi Sundareshwara.

Kutladampatti Waterfalls

Kutladampatti water falls is located at the foot of the southern part of the Sirumalai Hills on the national highway from Madurai to Dindigul. Kutladampatti waterfalls is a great place for tourists all the year round. The other name for the Kutladampatti Falls is called Siddhar Falls.²⁶ Two more small

waterfalls, Thadakainachiar and Ramanar Theertham adds charm to this place. Kutladampatti is will becoming a famous tourist center because of the special attention is given to it. .

Athisayam (Theme Park)

Theme parks are the recent attractions that encourage people, especially children and young people, to enjoy the technological improvements made to games and other adventurous activities. Athisayam, a theme park in the village of Paravai, is located 20 km northwest of Madurai on the national high way road to Dindigul. It began to function on May 1, 2000.²⁷ Athisayam has a variety of activities ranging from traditional rides and gentle kiddie rides to scenic cable car or monorail rides and beautiful gardens with colorful flowers for tourists to stroll and relax through. Thrills and spills are offered as a way to pamper the stomach. The thrill of a roller coaster ride on a runaway train is a novel experience to the youngsters. Diving into water slides is another thrilling experience.

To conclude, the Tamil Nadu State Government and the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation are taking all the possible steps to promote tourism in Madurai. The Madurai Tourism Office and the Tourism Information Centre are rendering remarkable service to the tourists. Thus Madurai became a luminous tourist centre attracting the tourists at the International level. The oldest city of Tamil Nadu still illuminating because of its attraction among the devotees and tourists.

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