



## Cultural Traditions and Social Life in Pudukkottai during the Tondaiman Period

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the cultural heritage and daily life in Pudukkottai during the Tondaiman rule, a period characterised by notable socio-economic and cultural advancements. By analysing the social structure, economic conditions, cultural practices, and administrative governance, the study aims to offer insights into the complexities and dynamics of life in Pudukkottai under the Tondaiman dynasty. Using historical records, architectural surveys, and literary analyses, the study highlights the influence of Tondaiman rule on the region's cultural landscape and the everyday lives of its inhabitants.*

**Keywords:** Tondaiman Dynasty, Pudukkottai, Governance, Cultural Heritage, Social Structure, Agriculture and Trade.

### Introduction

The Tondaiman dynasty, which governed Pudukkottai from the late 17th century until its integration into the Indian Union in 1948, played a key role in shaping the region's cultural and social identity. Pudukkottai's strategic location in Tamil Nadu endowed it with a rich cultural heritage, influenced by various historical and socio-political developments. This paper examines the cultural heritage and daily life of the people during this period, with a focus on the relationship between royal patronage, social structures, economic activities, and cultural practices.

### Historical Background

The historical background of Pudukkottai under the Tondaiman rule is a fascinating chapter in the history of Tamil Nadu. This period witnessed the rise and strengthening of the Tondaiman dynasty, which played a pivotal role in the region's social, political, and cultural development until the mid-20th century. The dynasty's roots in Pudukkottai go back to the late 17th century. Its founder, Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman, established his authority over the area with support from the Raja of Ramnad. Initially, the Tondaimans were feudal chiefs under the Vijayanagar Empire and later served as vassals to the Nayaks of Madurai before asserting independent rule in Pudukkottai. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Tondaiman rulers expanded and consolidated their territory through military success and diplomatic efforts, bringing significant nearby regions under their control. This territorial expansion was crucial in establishing Pudukkottai as a significant princely state. The dynasty's reign coincided with the expansion of British colonial power in India. The rulers of Pudukkottai managed their relationship with the British East India Company through strategic diplomacy. In the late 18th century, they signed treaties with the British, recognising their supremacy while maintaining internal autonomy. Such diplomacy helped the Tondaiman dynasty avoid direct colonial rule while preserving a degree of sovereignty. Under their rule, Pudukkottai saw notable cultural and administrative advancements. The rulers were notable patrons of art and architecture, contributing to the building of numerous temples, palaces, and public structures that remain as lasting legacies of the region's architectural heritage. They also introduced administrative reforms to establish an organised system of governance, covering revenue collection, law and order, and public works. The rule of the

Tondaiman dynasty ended in 1948 when Raja Rajagopala Tondaiman, the last princely ruler, signed the instrument of accession to the newly independent Union of India. Following this, Pudukkottai was incorporated into the Madras Presidency (later Tamil Nadu), bringing its autonomous princely status to a close.

### **Social Structure and Daily Life**

The caste system in Pudukkottai during the Tondaiman rule was a defining feature of society, reflecting the wider caste-based social structure found throughout India. This system played a vital role in shaping the social, economic, and religious aspects of people's lives. The hierarchical nature of caste affected many areas of daily life, including occupations, education, and social interactions.

The caste system was rigidly hierarchical, with the society divided into various divisions based on hereditary occupation and birth. At the top were the Brahmins, who were priests, scholars, and teachers. Below them were the Kshatriyas, the warrior and ruling class. The Vaishyas, who were traders and agriculturists, occupied the next rung, followed by the Shudras, the working class responsible for serving the above three castes. Outside this hierarchy were the Dalits, historically referred to as "untouchables," who were marginalised and subjected to severe social discrimination and exclusion.

Caste determined the profession and economic activities individuals could pursue. Traditional occupations were passed down through generations, with limited opportunities for mobility across different lines of work. This system ensured that certain professions remained the exclusive domain of particular castes. Access to education was also heavily influenced by caste, with Brahmins generally having the greatest access to learning opportunities. Educational inequalities contributed to maintaining the socio-economic status quo, restricting upward mobility for lower castes. Caste governed personal relationships, including marriage, which was mainly endogamous, meaning individuals married within their own caste. Social interactions between castes were regulated by strict codes of conduct, with concepts of purity and pollution playing a central role. The caste system influenced religious practices and access to places of worship. Higher castes had privileged access to temple rituals. They were often the custodians of spiritual knowledge, while lower castes and Dalits faced restrictions in temple entry and participation in religious ceremonies. The period under Tondaiman rule, as elsewhere in India, saw the emergence of social reform movements aimed at challenging and dismantling caste-based discrimination. Reformers sought to promote social equality, education for all castes, and access to temples for lower castes and Dalits. These movements laid the groundwork for future efforts to address caste disparities and social injustices in Indian society.

During the rule of the Tondaiman in Pudukkottai, traditional values and societal norms profoundly influenced gender roles and family life, reflecting the broader patriarchal structure of Indian society at that period. These roles and norms dictated the daily lives of men and women, shaping their responsibilities, opportunities, and social interactions within both the family and the wider community. Men were typically the primary breadwinners and heads of households, responsible for providing for their families and making key decisions. Among the higher castes, men also participated in public and political life, held positions of authority, and had access to education and religious training. In agricultural and artisan families, men worked in the fields and workshops, while also engaging in trade and commerce.

Women's roles were mainly focused on the domestic sphere, including household management, child-rearing, and caregiving. Women from higher castes were more likely to be confined to the home, observing practices like *purdah* (seclusion of women from public view). Women from working-class families, however, often took part in agricultural work and other labour to help support the family's income, though within the limits of their social roles.

Marriage was a fundamental institution in society, arranged by families based on caste, social status, and economic factors. It was more than a union between individuals; it symbolised an alliance between families, strengthening social bonds and community ties. Child marriages were prevalent, and dowry was an essential part of marriage negotiations. The joint family system was widespread, with extended families living together under one roof, sharing resources and responsibilities. This setup provided a support network but also reinforced patriarchal authority, with the eldest male often holding the final say on important matters.

Access to education for women was limited, especially in higher castes, where female literacy was not a priority. However, there were exceptions, particularly in families engaged in trade or craftsmanship, where women might learn accounting or other skills related to the family business. Women's participation in public life was restricted, with societal norms discouraging their presence in the public sphere. Nevertheless, women played key roles in religious and cultural life, organising and participating in festivals, rituals, and other community activities. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of social and educational reform movements across India, including Pudukkottai, which advocated for women's rights, education, and social reform. These movements began to challenge traditional gender roles and paved the way for gradual changes in women's status.

## Economic Conditions

During the Tondaiman rule in Pudukkottai, agriculture and trade were vital to the region's economy and the daily lives of its inhabitants. The socio-economic structure of this period was heavily influenced by farming practices, crop choices, and the trade routes that linked Pudukkottai with other areas. Agriculture served as the backbone of the economy, with the majority of the population engaged in farming. The region's fertile land supported the cultivation of various crops, ensuring food security and underpinning economic stability. The main crops included rice, the staple food, as well as millets, pulses, cotton, and vegetables. These crops not only met local dietary needs but also served as commodities for trade. Effective irrigation systems, such as tanks and wells, were essential for agriculture, particularly in semi-arid regions. The Tondaiman rulers and local chieftains frequently took steps to build and maintain these irrigation facilities, underscoring the significance of agriculture to the region's economy and society. Land ownership patterns varied, with some lands directly controlled by the Tondaiman rulers, while local landlords or zamindars managed others. Small-scale farmers and tenant cultivators also played a significant role in the agricultural landscape, working on lands leased from landlords.

Pudukkottai was an active centre of local and regional trade, with markets and fairs facilitating the exchange of agricultural produce, handicrafts, textiles, and other goods. The region's artisans and craftsmen played a vital role in this trade, producing goods that were in demand both locally and in distant markets. The strategic location of Pudukkottai, near the Coromandel Coast, enabled trade with coastal regions and beyond. Maritime trade networks connected Pudukkottai with other parts of India, as well as with Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices. Trade contributed to Pudukkottai's prosperity, leading to the development of urban centres and the rise of a merchant class. It also facilitated cultural exchanges and shaped social and economic structures within the region.

Agriculture and trade experienced fluctuations due to climatic variations, market demands, and political changes. Droughts, floods, and other natural calamities could negatively affect agricultural output, while shifts influenced trade in political relations and market dynamics. To address these challenges, the people of Pudukkottai, supported by the Tondaiman rulers, adopted various strategies, including crop diversification, the development of storage facilities for surplus produce, and the establishment of alternative trade routes. Agriculture and trade were deeply intertwined within the economic and social fabric of Tondaiman-ruled Pudukkottai, shaping the lives of its inhabitants. The region's economic activities were not only essential for sustenance and prosperity but also encouraged a rich cultural exchange, contributing to the social hierarchy and mobility.

In Tondaiman-ruled Pudukkottai, artisans and craftsmanship played a vital role in the socio-economic fabric of the region, reflecting a rich tradition of skill, artistry, and cultural expression. The contribution of artisans was not only limited to the economic sphere but also extended to cultural and social domains, showcasing the region's unique identity and heritage. Artisans in Pudukkottai were engaged in various crafts, including:

- i) **Textile Production:** Weaving was a major craft, with the region being known for its high-quality fabrics. Silk and cotton were commonly used materials, and artisans produced a range of textiles, from everyday garments to elaborate sarees for special occasions.
- ii) **Metalwork:** Craftsmen specialized in metalwork produced jewellery, utensils, religious idols, and decorative items using metals like gold, silver, copper, and brass. The intricate designs and techniques demonstrated the artisans' skill and creativity.
- iii) **Pottery and Ceramics:** Pottery was another important craft, with artisans creating a variety of functional and decorative items from local clay. The techniques and styles often varied from one locality to another, reflecting regional influences.
- iv) **Woodworking and Carving:** Woodworkers and carvers produced furniture, architectural elements, religious icons, and household items. The craftsmanship involved detailed carving and joinery, showcasing the artisans' mastery over their material.
- v) **Stone Carving:** Stone carving was integral to the construction of temples and public buildings, as well as the creation of statues and other ornamental pieces. The skill of stone carvers was evident in the intricate details of architectural and sculptural works.

Artisans played a vital role in the local economy, with their products being essential for everyday life, religious ceremonies, and trade. The sale of crafts provided livelihoods for many families and contributed to the region's prosperity. The crafts made by artisans were not only practical but also held cultural importance. Textiles, pottery, metalwork, and other crafts often displayed motifs and designs that reflected local myths, beliefs, and traditions, serving as a means of cultural expression and preservation. The social status of artisans varied depending on their craft, skill level, and the patronage they received. Some artisans, especially those involved in producing luxury goods or working for the royal court or temples, enjoyed higher status and recognition. However, most artisans were part of the broader working class, with their social mobility limited by the prevailing caste system.

Artisans faced various challenges, including competition from imported goods, fluctuating demand, and the impact of social and economic changes. In response, many adapted their techniques, explored new materials, and diversified their products to cater to changing tastes and markets. The support of the Tondaiman rulers through patronage, as well as the establishment of guilds and marketplaces, also helped sustain craftsmanship.

### Religious Life and Temple Patronage

In Tondaiman-ruled Pudukkottai, religious life was deeply intertwined with the social and cultural fabric, with Hinduism taking centre stage. The Tondaiman rulers, devout Hindus themselves, were key patrons of temple building, renovation, and religious festivals, which reinforced their legitimacy and divine right to rule. This patronage not only demonstrated their devotion but also supported social hierarchies and the political order. Temples in Pudukkottai were more than places of worship; they played a vital role in daily community life, serving as hubs for education, arts, and social functions. The construction of temples fostered the growth of arts and crafts, as artisans were commissioned to create intricate sculptures, murals, and architectural details depicting Hindu mythology and local legends. The Tondaiman rulers also granted lands and resources to temples, guaranteeing their upkeep and the organisation of elaborate rituals and festivals that attracted devotees from distant places. These religious activities cultivated a strong sense of community and identity among the people, while the temples stood as lasting monuments to the dynasty's religious dedication and support. The influence of this era remains evident today in the numerous temples of Pudukkottai, which continue to serve as centres of cultural and spiritual life.

### Governance and Administration

During the rule of the Tondaiman in Pudukkottai, governance and administrative systems combined traditional practices with adaptations to contemporary needs, maintaining stability and order within the region. The Tondaiman rulers established a structured administrative framework that enabled effective governance, revenue collection, law enforcement, and management of public works. The administrative structure was hierarchical, with the Raja (King) at the top, followed by ministers and officials responsible for various aspects of governance, including finance, justice, and military affairs. The kingdom was divided into several administrative units for efficient management, each headed by appointed officials overseeing local governance, tax collection, and law and order. Revenue collection was vital, mainly derived from land taxes, trade duties, and custom fees. The Tondaiman rulers adopted a systematic approach to land measurement and assessment, aiding equitable tax collection. This revenue funded the kingdom's infrastructure, administration, and support for arts and culture. The judicial system was based on traditional laws and customs, with local courts handling civil and criminal cases. The Raja held the final authority in judicial matters, including the power to pardon. Law enforcement was carried out by officials appointed to maintain peace and order, ensuring fair and swift justice. The Tondaiman rulers were notable for their patronage of public works, including the construction and upkeep of roads, irrigation systems, and public buildings. These efforts not only facilitated trade and agriculture but also enhanced the living standards of the inhabitants. Temples served as religious centres and also played social and educational roles, reflecting the rulers' dedication to the welfare and cultural development of their subjects.

### Conclusion

The Tondaiman rule fostered a period of stability and prosperity, which facilitated the flourishing of arts, literature, and architecture, alongside the development of a complex social fabric underscored by the caste system and gender roles. Agriculture and trade emerged as the backbone of the economy, supporting the region's sustenance and enabling interactions that extended beyond its borders. The patronage of temples and the arts by the Tondaiman rulers not only enriched the religious and cultural landscape but also cemented their legacy as benefactors of Pudukkottai's heritage. The legacy of the Tondaiman dynasty in shaping the socio-cultural and economic contours of Pudukkottai offers valuable insights into the enduring impact of governance and cultural practices on regional identity. As we move forward, the rich tapestry of Pudukkottai's past continues to be a source of inspiration and reflection for both scholars and the wider community, emphasising the importance of preserving and celebrating our collective cultural heritage.

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