



## Tourism development in Picturesque Theni District, Tamil Nadu, India

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### Abstract

Tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors globally, playing a pivotal role in economic development, cultural preservation, and employment generation. In India, tourism is not only a significant foreign exchange earner but also a crucial catalyst for regional development. This study explores the tourism potential of the Theni district in Tamil Nadu, an area known for its natural beauty, cultural richness, and historical significance. The paper presents a detailed overview of tourism in India and Tamil Nadu, leading to an in-depth focus on the key tourist attractions of Theni including Suruli Falls, Meghamalai, Vaigai Dam, Kumbakarai Falls, Kolukkumalai, and the Pennycuik Memorial. Using a combination of descriptive, historical, and analytical methodologies, this study draws upon both primary and secondary sources to evaluate existing tourism infrastructure and suggests strategic measures for sustainable tourism development. The findings reveal that Theni possesses a high potential for eco-tourism, heritage tourism, and spiritual tourism. However, to fully realize this potential, the district requires improved connectivity, targeted promotion, investment in infrastructure, and preservation of ecological balance. The study aims to serve as a foundational resource for policymakers, tourism planners, and stakeholders interested in enhancing the tourism appeal of Theni and similar semi-urban regions in Tamil Nadu.

**Keywords:** Theni District, Suruli Falls, Meghamalai, Vaigai Dam, Kumbakarai Falls, Kolukkumalai, Pennycuik Memorial

### Introduction

Tourism promotes national integration and international understanding. It encourages preservation of monuments, heritage properties and eco-sanctuaries and helps survival of traditional art forms, crafts and culture. It has achieved rapid strides due to its capacity to earn foreign exchange, generate employment opportunities and inculcate a sense of fraternity in the minds of the people. The economic liberalization, open-sky aviation policy, luxury cruises, improved surface transport, tourist trains, increased business travel and e-booking facilities have created a paradigm shift in the tourism sector. From a mere service industry, tourism has transformed into a major revenue generating industry. Tourism is defined as travel for recreation, leisure, religious activity, family visits, business promotion, medical treatment, adventure, sports, education and research, usually for a limited duration. It is commonly referred to as travel to another place within or outside the country. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourists as people "travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one year for leisure, business and other purposes".

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) plays a vital role in promoting the development of responsible, sustainable and universally acceptable tourism and is paying particular attention to the interests of developing countries. People in general now view tourism as a way of life rather than a luxury reserved for the affluent and the elite. Tourism has emerged as the largest service industry globally in terms of gross revenue, as well as foreign exchange earnings. With rapid development in the field of transport and communications, the size of the global tourism industry is likely to double in the next decade. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will see a higher percentage of the total population travelling, especially in developing countries and people will be going on holidays more often. Travellers will also be going farther and farther.

Tourism is emerging as the industry of industries and has a great multiplier effect on other industries. Tourism serves as an effective medium for transfer of wealth because, here income earned in places of "residence" is spent in places of "visit". Tourism employs 260 million people and generates 10.7 per cent of world's GDP. According to United Nations World Tourism Organisation, international tourist arrivals have increased from 278 million in 1980 to 527 million in 1995, and it has increased to 1458 million in 2016 and earned the foreign exchange of US\$ 1245 billion. UNWTO has stated that international tourist arrivals in the world are expected to increase by 3.3 per cent a year between 2010 and 2030 and it would reach 1.8 billion by 2030 <sup>[1]</sup>.

In India tourism and hospitality industry has emerged as one of the key drivers of growth among the services sector. Tourism development is an important catalyst for a rapidly growing economy like India. Tourism in India has significant potential considering the rich cultural and historical heritage, variety in ecology, terrains and places of natural beauty spread across the country. Tourism is also a potentially large employment generator besides being a significant source of foreign exchange for the country. The industry is expected to generate 13.45 million jobs across sub-segments such as Restaurants, Hotels and Travel Agents/Tour Operators. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, plans to help the industry meet the increasing demand of skilled and trained manpower. India has moved up 13 positions to 52<sup>nd</sup> rank from 65<sup>th</sup> in Tourism and Travel Competitive Index. Besides, tourism and hospitality sector are among the top 10 sectors in India to attract the highest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). During the period April 2000 to March 2016, the hotel and tourism sector attracted around US

\$9.23 billion of FDI, according to the data released by Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) <sup>[2]</sup>.

India's rising middle class and increasing disposable incomes has continued to support the growth of domestic and outbound tourism. Total outbound trips increased by 8.7 per cent to 19.9 million in 2016. Inbound tourist volume grew at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 6.8 per cent during 2010-16. Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India increased to 11.8 per cent year-on-year to 670,000 tourists in August 2016, while Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) from tourism increased to 13.1 per cent year-on-year to Rs.12,903 crore, according to data from the Ministry of Tourism [3]. India's travel and tourism industry has huge growth potential and the industry is also looking forward to the expansion of E-visa scheme which is expected to double the tourist inflow to India.

### **Tourism in Tamil Nadu – An Overview**

Tamil Nadu is an enchanting and ancient land in the extreme south of Peninsular India and it is a unique State from the tourism point of view. The immense tourist wealth of Tamil Nadu is one of its greatest assets, which would make the State a preferred tourism destination worldwide. With an area of 130,058 sq.km and a population of over 70 million, Tamil Nadu is the eleventh largest populated and the third most industrialized State in India. It boasts successful tourism infrastructure in its Western border with Karnataka State on the West and also enjoys a long unbroken coastline on the East along with the Bay of Bengal. Tamil Nadu is a wonderful tourist place for many reasons. First, it has glorious culture and history. Tamil Nadu has one of the oldest civilizations of the world. It is the home of Dravidian art and culture, characterized by its distinctive music and dances, its amazingly decorated temples with their soaring towers and its plentiful and colourful festivals. There is at least one festival per month, celebrating various events like Karthigai Deepam, Pongal, Thaipusam, Natyanjali Dance Festival, Thiruvaiyaru Music Festival, Mahamaham etc.

### **Tourist Arrivals and Earnings to Tamil Nadu**

According to the Department of Tourism, Government of Tamil Nadu, the number of tourists who visited Tamil Nadu has increased from 9,550,000 in 1991 to 24,585,000 in 2001 and the Government has vowed to make Tamil Nadu one of the most favoured tourist destinations in India. The State has registered an 11.68 per cent growth in terms of foreign tourist arrivals in the year 2006 with the registered arrivals of 1.1 million tourists in the State as against 4.43 million arrivals with a growth of 13 per cent in India. The Government of Tamil Nadu has stated that tourist arrivals in 2016 was 349.2 million, includes 344.5 million domestic and 4.7 million foreign tourists, as compared to 338.1 million (includes 333.5 million and 4.6 million) in 2015 and 331.6 million in 2014 (includes 327 million and 4.6 million) domestic and foreign tourists respectively [5].

Tamil Nadu has been ranked first in both domestic and foreign tourist arrivals in 2014 and 2015 consecutively in the country. Its 'Enchanting Tamil Nadu' campaign has

been running for 13 years now and the State has targeted for 15 million foreign tourist arrivals by 2023. Many steps are being taken to sustain the top position in both domestic and foreign tourist arrivals in the ensuing years. Targeted promotional strategies and extensive marketing campaigns through print and electronic media at the national and international levels and creation and upgradation of basic amenities and infrastructure at tourist destinations have resulted in the increase of tourist arrivals in Tamil Nadu.

The State has been vigorously pursuing a three-pronged strategy of attracting more tourists to Tamil Nadu, making them stay for a longer period in the State, and providing them with world class infrastructure facilities in order to boost the tourism sector. And the tourism sector has been accorded top priority by the Government of Tamil Nadu and huge investments are being made to tap its potential. The focus is on everything that concerns tourism – be it beaches, temples, parks and other places. On the other side, there is spiritual tourism in which everybody is a part since going to temples with family is also part of tourism.

### **Review of Literature**

There exists some literature on tourism and its development. Some books give a detailed description of the concept of tourism and its development, policy and planning in a global context. Such books which are relevant to the research topic are included wherever necessary and possible. There are some research studies on the growth and development of tourism and its infrastructure in various places of India. Some of them are as follows:

There are certain studies on tourism potential, planning and development in various parts of the world. For instance, Robinson (1976) in his book 'Geography of Tourism' has discussed the importance of geographical components. Besides the general descriptive aspects of tourism, he gives an account of regional tourism for several countries. It also gives a good coverage of theoretical aspects of tourism and no analytical work has been done. Khan (2009) wrote an important book series on "Encyclopedia of Tourism" which emphasizes on theoretical framework of tourism development such as fundamental aspects, salient features and various organizations. He gives the role of tourism organization at the international and national levels for the development and promotion of tourism industry, and all phenomena have been explained in the series.

### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted in this study is a combination of historical, descriptive and analytical approaches. The study is preceded by setting some hypotheses. A lot of information collected from both primary and secondary sources has been used to highlight the potential of Tourism Infrastructure and development in Theni and Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu with effective programmes. The collected information from the sources has been well analyzed and interpreted in the study.

### Theni District



**Fig 1:** Suruli Falls: A beautiful waterfall with an untamed appeal, mentioned in the epic Silappathikaram

Suruli Falls, located in the Western Ghats, near Theni in Tamil Nadu, is a beautiful waterfall mentioned in the epic Silappathikaram, known for its untamed charm and beauty. The falls are formed by the Suruli River, originating from

the Meghamalai mountain range and plummeting approximately 150 feet. The area is shrouded in dense forests and believed to have been a favored haunt of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati during their exile, adding to its mystical allure.



**Fig 2:** Meghamalai: A hilly village with tea plantations and a unique village life experience

Meghamalai, known as the "High Wavy Mountains," is a hilly village in Tamil Nadu's Western Ghats known for its tea plantations, unique village life, and pleasant weather. It offers

scenic views and a peaceful escape, featuring attractions like the Megamalai Wildlife Sanctuary, Suruli Falls, and Maharaja Mettu viewpoint. The best time to visit is between October and March when the weather is mild.



**Fig 3:** Vaigai Dam: Offers scenic views of Cumbum valley and the surrounding area

Vaigai Dam, located near Andipatti in Tamil Nadu, offers scenic views of Cumbum valley and the surrounding area, including the Vaigai River. The dam, built across the Vaigai River,

is a significant source of water for irrigation and drinking water for the Madurai and Dindigul districts? The views from the top of the dam are particularly striking, offering a panoramic perspective of the landscape.



**Fig 4:** Kumbakarai Falls: A scenic spot in the foothills of Kodaikanal, popular for its beauty

Kumbakarai Falls, located in the foothills of Kodaikanal, is a popular tourist spot renowned for its scenic beauty. It's a

lesser-known, yet picturesque waterfall that draws visitors to take a dip in its waters.



**Fig 5:** Kolukkumalai: The world's highest tea plantation, located near Munnar in Tamil Nadu

Kolukkumalai, located near Munnar in Tamil Nadu, is recognized as the world's highest tea plantation. Situated at an altitude of 7,900 feet (2,170 m), it boasts breathtaking

views and a unique tea-growing environment. The tea produced here is known for its high quality and distinct flavor, thanks to the high-altitude conditions.



**Fig 6:** Pennycuick Memorial: A memorial to Colonel John Pennycuick

The statue of Colonel John Pennycuick - donated by southern Tamil Nadu state - will be unveiled on 10 September at a public park in Camberley, 50km (31 miles) from London. Pennycuick is a revered figure in Tamil Nadu for designing and building the Mullaperiyar dam, which provides water for drinking and irrigation to five districts in the state. The 127-year-old dam has long been a source of tension between Tamil Nadu and neighbouring Kerala state, which has often called for its demolition. But Pennycuick's legacy remains strong in Tamil Nadu, especially in the five districts which get water from Mullaperiyar. In one of them, Theni, photos of Pennycuick hang in shops, homes and government offices. Many baby boys are named Pennycuick while some have named their daughters Sarah after the engineer's mother.

## Results

### 1. Diverse Tourist Attractions

- **Natural Wonders:** Suruli and Kumbakarai Falls, Meghamalai Hills, and Kolukkumalai (world's highest tea plantation) offer significant appeal for nature lovers and eco-tourists.
- **Cultural and Historical Assets:** The Pennycuick Memorial showcases the region's historical importance and emotional connect with British engineer Col. John Pennycuick.
- **Infrastructure Assets:** The Vaigai Dam not only serves as a critical resource for agriculture and drinking water but also holds scenic and tourism value.

### 2. Tourism Growth in Tamil Nadu

- Tamil Nadu remains the top destination in India for both domestic and international tourists, recording over 349 million tourist arrivals in 2016, indicating the state's strong tourism appeal and the potential spillover benefit for Theni.

### 3. Strategic Advantages of Theni

- The district's proximity to Kerala and major Tamil Nadu cities enhances its accessibility.
- Its varied topography, from hills to plains, makes it a suitable candidate for developing hill station tourism, heritage tourism, and agro-tourism.

### 4. Challenges Identified

- Limited promotional strategies at the district level compared to more prominent destinations.
- Inadequate infrastructure such as roads, accommodation, and communication networks in remote scenic areas.
- Environmental concerns due to increasing footfall without appropriate conservation efforts.

### 5. Recommendations

- Integrated Tourism Development Plans including eco-friendly infrastructure.
- Enhanced marketing strategies focusing on the unique attractions of Theni.
- Community involvement and skill training for locals to enhance employment through tourism.
- Development of guided tours, eco-resorts, and wellness retreats in areas like Meghamalai and Kolukkumalai.

## Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the untapped tourism potential of Theni district, which is currently overshadowed by more popular destinations in Tamil Nadu like Ooty, Kodaikanal, and Madurai. Theni's scenic landscapes, including waterfalls, tea plantations, and wildlife sanctuaries, along with its cultural and historical assets like the Pennycuick Memorial, position it uniquely for eco-tourism, heritage tourism, and rural tourism. Despite its potential, tourism in Theni remains largely underdeveloped due to challenges such as limited accessibility, poor infrastructure in interior tourist spots, lack of adequate accommodation, and minimal global promotion.

The district can benefit significantly from Tamil Nadu's overall success in attracting tourists, particularly if integrated into the broader "Enchanting Tamil Nadu" campaign. This calls for coordinated efforts between local authorities, the tourism department, private stakeholders, and local communities.

Ecological sensitivity must be prioritized, especially in areas like Meghamalai and Kolukkumalai, to avoid over-tourism and environmental degradation. Additionally, community-based tourism models can ensure that the economic benefits of tourism reach local populations, creating employment and promoting traditional crafts and culture.

Investments in transport, digital connectivity, signage, multilingual guides, and eco-friendly amenities will enhance visitor experience and safety. Educational campaigns about the historical and environmental significance of sites can help promote responsible tourism. With Tamil Nadu already leading the country in tourist arrivals, a strategic focus on underrepresented regions like Theni could distribute tourist traffic more evenly, reduce pressure on overburdened sites, and contribute to balanced regional development.

## Conclusion

Tourism development in Theni district holds immense promise due to its rich natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and historical significance. With attractions like Suruli Falls, Meghamalai, Vaigai Dam, and Kolukkumalai, the region offers unique experiences for nature enthusiasts, spiritual seekers, and heritage tourists alike. However, to fully harness this potential, there is a pressing need for improved infrastructure, effective promotion, and sustainable practices that balance growth with environmental conservation. By integrating community participation, leveraging government support, and adopting innovative tourism models, Theni can emerge as a prominent destination contributing significantly to Tamil Nadu's tourism economy and regional development.

## References

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