

# The Relationship between Female Deity Temple Exposure and Intimate Partner Violence

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## Abstract

This paper explores the historical roots of attitudes towards women by analyzing the relationship between intimate partner violence (IPV) and historical exposure to female deity temples in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Using hand-collected data on historical temples, this study constructs a district-level measure of exposure to goddess temples. Employing an conditional on observables methodology and individual-level IPV data from the National Family and Health Survey, this paper investigates whether historical exposure to female deities correlates with current IPV incidence. The results suggest a counterintuitive association: higher exposure to female-deity temples is associated with increased IPV. This suggests a complex relationship between religious beliefs and gender norms, where cultural reverence for goddesses might not translate into respect for women, potentially exacerbating IPV.

## 1 Introduction

Understanding the historical roots of attitudes towards women can provide valuable insights into addressing and mitigating harmful behaviors directed towards women. Intimate partner violence (IPV), one such behavior, is a public health issue around the world. According to the World Health Organization’s handbook on IPV, of all women in various parts of the developing world who have ever been in a relationship, 13-61% reported ever having experienced physical violence by a partner, and 40-70% of female murder victims were killed

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by their husband or boyfriend.<sup>1</sup> IPV, therefore, is a public health crisis for many women in the developing world.

In India, according to data from the National Family and Health Surveys, 30% of women who have ever been in a relationship have endured intimate partner violence at some time in their lives. For the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, this same statistic much higher, at 42%.<sup>2</sup> In many parts of India, there is high acceptability of intimate partner violence; IPV is vastly underreported, and while IPV is illegal, it is poorly enforced.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is a dearth of services such as domestic violence shelters (ICRW, 2000). It is important to find a viable solution to this high incidence of IPV in such parts of India as Tamil Nadu.

In fact, efforts are made to appeal to historical, cultural goddess-worship as a way to decrease gender-based violence; an NGO sponsored billboard campaign in 2012 depicted goddesses bearing physical signs of intimate partner victimization, urging the public to reflect on the inherent contradiction of venerating female deities while tolerating widespread abuse against women.<sup>4</sup> In order for this approach to be effective, it is important to understand the relationship between the perception of female goddesses and intimate partner violence.

In this paper, I present a descriptive analysis of the relationship between the incidence of intimate partner violence and the historic exposure to female deity temples. I use hand-collected data on historical temples, constructed 1500-500 years ago by kings with idiosyncratic preferences for deities, along with information on which temples are devoted to female deities, in order to construct a measure of exposure to goddesses at the district level. I focus on the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu due to the significant resources required for the hand-collection of data.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I find the share of total temples in each district which are goddess-temples. For IPV data, I use individual-level data from the National Family and Health Survey (maintained by the Demographic and Health Surveys) Section on

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<sup>1</sup>Organization (2012). These numbers are from a study of 10 developing countries.

<sup>2</sup>for Population Sciences (IIPS)

<sup>3</sup>Burton et al. (2000)

<sup>4</sup>AGC (2017)

<sup>5</sup>I discuss issues of external validity in a later section.

Domestic Violence, which questions women who were ever married on whether they’ve been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused. If a woman reports being physically or sexually abused, for purposes of my analysis, I consider it to be an incidence of intimate partner violence. I employ an conditional on observables methodology to study the relationship between the treatment, exposure to goddesses, on the incidence of intimate partner violence, the outcome variable.

If female-deity exposure is associated with a lower incidence of IPV, it is consistent with the hypothesis that the exposure to goddesses engenders a culture of respect towards women and lower acceptability of IPV. If exposure is associated with higher incidence of IPV, it may suggest a more complicated interpretation of the goddesses. There is documented evidence that aspects of religion are sometimes weaponized against women<sup>6</sup>. If women are told to endure hardships as a virtue, as the goddesses are sometimes represented as enduring<sup>7</sup>, they may view abuse and self-sacrifice as one such hardship and forego seeking help, reducing the risk of consequences of IPV for abusive husbands.

Preliminary results show evidence that female-deity exposure is associated with a higher incidence of IPV.

In economics literature, it is documented that historical events and interventions affect outcomes in the modern-day<sup>8</sup>; we further understand the impact of historical events and family structure on outcomes for women (Tur-Prats (2019); Alesina et al. (2013)). A strand of the intimate partner violence literature investigates the determinants of IPV; short term determinants of IPV associated with the bargaining power distribution in the household (Tauchen et al. (1991); Farmer and Tiefenthaler (2003); Aizer (2010)), while Tur-Prats investigates a long-term (historical) determinant of IPV - historic roots of family types and how they affect intimate partner violence outcomes. My paper dovetails two primary areas of literature: the impact of historical influences on contemporary behavior and the potential

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<sup>6</sup>Levitt and Ware (2006)

<sup>7</sup>Jayasundara et al. (2017)

<sup>8</sup>See Lowes et al. (2017); Dell and Olken (2020); Dell et al. (2018); Caicedo (2019)

causal relationships between perceptions of women and women’s outcomes. It delves into the intersection of these fields by examining how historical events or beliefs shape current gender-related outcomes.

More broadly, this research question focuses on women’s outcomes in a developing country, exploring the origins of behavior patterns concerning women. This can inform policy interventions to improve these outcomes in developing countries, thereby contributing to the extensive literature on reducing intimate partner violence, increasing women’s literacy, improving women’s health, and enhancing resource allocation toward women.

In the next section, I provide background on the historical temples as a treatment.

## 2 Background and History

### 2.1 The Three Kingdoms: History and Temple Construction

The first historic temple complexes in Tamil Nadu appeared around the year 500. These were very expensive projects that only kings could afford to construct. For the next thousand years, three kingdoms in Tamil Nadu constructed almost all of the historic temples in Tamil Nadu. These three dynasties, Pandyas, Cholas, and Cheras, maintained relevance and power for a millennium. Even before the year 500, each of the dynasties maintained some regional stronghold in the southern-most part of the Indian peninsula, but they were also each a dominant power of the region at some point during the thousand-year period of 500-1500 AD.<sup>9</sup> During this time, as a matter of legacy, the reigning kings of each dynasty had a practice of constructing temples in honor of a deity that they favor. These favored deities could be quite idiosyncratic, as sons of kings who favored a particular deity were known to construct temples dedicated to different deities than their fathers, once they were king.<sup>10</sup> Between the

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<sup>9</sup>Kulke and Rothermund (2004); Maps 4-8. These dynasties mainly gained power over the other two through being the main “uniting force” of tribes at various times rather than fighting wars. Other than these territorial disputes, the kingdoms coexisted for much of history.

<sup>10</sup>Rao (1961) p. 87.

change of dynasties and the construction of temples based on a king’s preference, I propose that the “gender assignment” of deities across these historic temples is random.

## 2.2 Conceptual Framework

A district with a high level of exposure to female deities via goddess temples, may offer a chance for individuals in that district to engage more often and deeply with their level of regard for women. In turn, status of women in these districts – including incidence of intimate partner violence – may be improved relative to that of women in low-exposure districts. In this case, initiatives like the Abused Goddesses Campaign may successfully leverage religion to ameliorate IPV outcomes for women.

However, it may be possible that high exposure to female deities can engender a worse culture for the status of women. Research has documented that religion, in general, can act as an obstacle to seeking help for abuse (Beaulaurier et al. (2007)), and that certain religious elements may be used to oppress women (Levitt and Ware (2006)). If female deities are emphasized as symbols of sacrifice (Jayasundara et al. (2017)), women in high-exposure districts may be held to a high standard of self-sacrifice by society and themselves, making avenues of redress scarce and potentially increasing the incidence of intimate partner violence.

In the next section, I discuss the data used in this paper.

## 3 Data

### 3.1 Temples Data

I have hand-collected data on historical Hindu temples.<sup>11</sup> Overall, I obtain a list of 558 temples. I then categorize the temples as male or female-deity based on the main deity

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<sup>11</sup>I used the Google Maps API to find temples that are also “tourist attractions” in order to identify temples that were built by kings from the three kingdoms.

shrine in that temple. In Figure 2, I present a map of districts with the number of total temples in each district, and in Figure 3, I present a similar map with the number of female deity temples in each district.

I construct the exposure or treatment variable by dividing female deity temples by the number of total temples in each district. In Table 1, I report the exposure measure for each district. As documented in the table, there is a lot of variance in the exposure variable.

### 3.2 National Family and Health Surveys and IPV Data

To measure the attitudes toward intimate-partner violence (IPV), I will use individual-level data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), a repository of demographic and health-related surveys from around the world. The DHS maintains the full collection of National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) of India, conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences.<sup>12</sup> The NFHS was initiated in the early 1990s and has been conducted exactly four times in irregularly spaced waves. I use the fourth of these four cross-sectional surveys in my analysis, from 2015-16 (NFHS-4), the one wave of survey data that includes questions for women about their personal experience with IPV and their general attitudes towards IPV, which I henceforth refer to as the “domestic violence section.” NFHS-4 importantly tabulates the domestic violence section at the district level, which is important for my analysis.

The NFHS is conducted in person by sending field workers to interview selected households at their homes. Interviews are conducted only if a member of the household answers the door. If a household is part of the sample, one eligible woman in the household aged 15-49 is asked the questions in the domestic violence section of the Women’s Questionnaire.<sup>13</sup>

The respondents in the Women’s Questionnaire gives a reasonably representative sample of women in Tamil Nadu in the 2015-16 wave of the NFHS (sample size of 3,550 for ever-

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<sup>12</sup>ICF (2017)

<sup>13</sup>for Population Sciences (IIPS). Only one woman per household is surveyed for the domestic violence section. This is in accordance with the World Health Organization’s guidelines on ethics regarding collection

married women).

The domestic violence section’s questions are focused on spousal violence and aim to capture the extent of physical, sexual, and emotional violence inflicted upon an ever-married woman by her current husband or previous husband(s). These questions are listed in 2. If a respondent answers “yes” to any of the questions about physical or sexual violence, they are counted as a victim of IPV in my analysis. In Table 2, I partition the districts into quartiles by exposure measure and report the share of individuals who answered “yes” to any question.

### 3.3 Covariates

The NFHS Section on Domestic Violence includes a wealth of information on women and their husbands including age, educational attainment, employment status, and religion. In addition, the NFHS includes a “wealth index.” I use information from the 2011 Census of India on district-level population and share of female population.

## 4 Methodology

I hypothesize that there is a relationship between exposure to female deity (temples) and incidence of intimate partner violence. I make use of a basic conditional on observables effects methodology, modeling the outcome  $IPV_{id}$  (intimate partner violence) for person  $i$  in district  $d$ , as follows:

$$IPV_{id} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 FemDeity_d + \beta_2 X_i + \beta_3 W_d + \epsilon_{id}$$

$IPV_{id}$  is defined to indicate whether an individual has been subjected to intimate partner violence.  $FemDeity_d$  is the treatment variable, which measures each district’s level of exposure to female deities on a continuous scale from 0 to 1. To control for individual-level

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of information on domestic violence (WHO 2013).

characteristics, specifically age and wealth index, I include a vector of individual controls represented by  $X_i$ . To control for district-level characteristics, district population and proportion of women, I include a vector of these controls represented by  $W_d$ . Finally, I use  $\epsilon_{id}$  to represent the error term.

Included in the vector  $X_i$  are age dummy variables and a set of five categorical controls for the wealth index, representing the categories of poorest, poorer, middle, richer, and richest. The district-level controls, given in the vector  $W_d$  are two continuous controls for population and proportion of females in each district.

$\beta_1$  is the main coefficient of interest, representing the effect of an increase in female deity exposure on intimate partner violence. Given the anticipated ambiguity of the effect, as previously discussed in Section 2.2, I empirically test the relationship between female deity exposure and intimate partner violence. I discuss estimates of  $\beta_1$  in the next section.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Main Results: Female Deity Exposure and Intimate Partner Violence

In Table 3, I present descriptive statistics by Quartile of the exposure variable, Share of Female Deity Temples, which help to inform the interpretation of my main results. The districts in each Quartile are, on average, very similar across the various characteristics in the table, suggesting they should serve as good comparisons for one another in my analysis.

My main results are summarized in Table 4. The baseline specification regresses intimate partner violence on the share of female deities in each district. The estimate of  $\beta_1$ , 0.0942, suggests that a 1 percentage point increase in the percent of female deity temples is associated with a 0.000942 percentage point increase in the likelihood of IPV incidence. This is a statistically significant result, with 95% confidence interval of (0.03600, 0.1524), allowing us to rule out the probability that the true association is zero with 95% certainty. Adding age



dummy variables attenuates the result slightly, but adding Wealth Index controls and district level controls (population and share of female population) diminish the point estimate’s value while increasing the standard errors.

With the full set of baseline controls, the effect of interest is 0.0462, representing that a 1 percentage point increase in the percent of female deity temples is associated with a 0.000462 percentage point increase in the likelihood of IPV incidence. The 95 percent confidence interval of (-0.0202,0.1126) does not rule out the possibility that the true estimate might be zero.

The specification in Column (4), with the full set of baseline controls, is my preferred specification.

Thus far, these results suggest that districts with greater exposure to female deities may have higher incidence of IPV. This is consistent with the theory that Hindu goddesses may be associated with interpreting female deities as figures of self-sacrifice and rendering women unlikely to seek support for abuse. If women are less likely to seek support for abuse, husbands face lower risk of consequences for their abuse, and IPV becomes prevalent.

In the next section, I explore controls that may be potential mechanisms for the main effect.

## **5.2 Main Results: Education, Husband’s Education, Employment, and Religion**

Because temples influence IPV by influencing overall gender attitudes, it may be inappropriate to control for other characteristics also shaped by these attitudes: namely, the controls for education, employment, and observed religion. Adding these controls may capture the mechanism through which temples influence IPV. Despite this concern about overcontrolling, I present specifications which include controls for Education, Husband’s Education, Employment, and Religion in Table 5. In all of the specifications, the estimate – both magnitude and statistical significance – is unchanged.

## 6 Conclusion

Intimate partner violence, one aspect of women’s well-being, is multifaceted. The way individuals engage with religion, including symbolism, belief systems, and its interaction with society, can vary from person to person. Initiatives like the Abused Goddesses Campaign attempt to leverage religion to mitigate abuses toward women. However, if people do not engage with this imagery in the intended manner, such a campaign may be rendered ineffective or worse.

In this paper, I attempt to establish a descriptive relationship between female deity exposure and the incidence of intimate partner violence using a cross-sectional, conditional on observables analysis. I find, consistently across all specifications, that more exposure to female deities – through exogenous placement of historical temples – is associated with more intimate partner violence.

## 7 Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Tamil Nadu Map of Districts

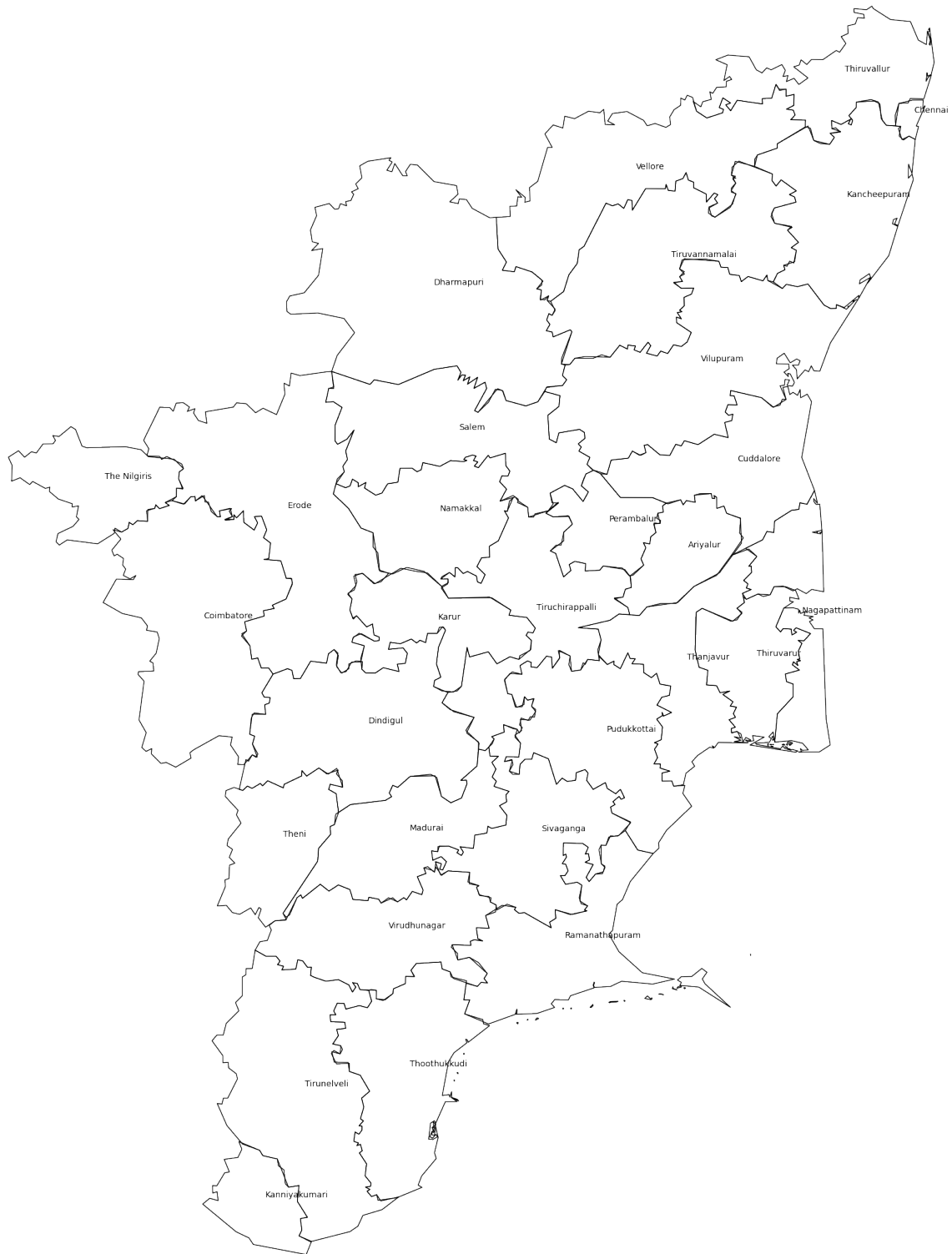


Figure 2: Tamil Nadu Map of Districts: Historic Temples Per District

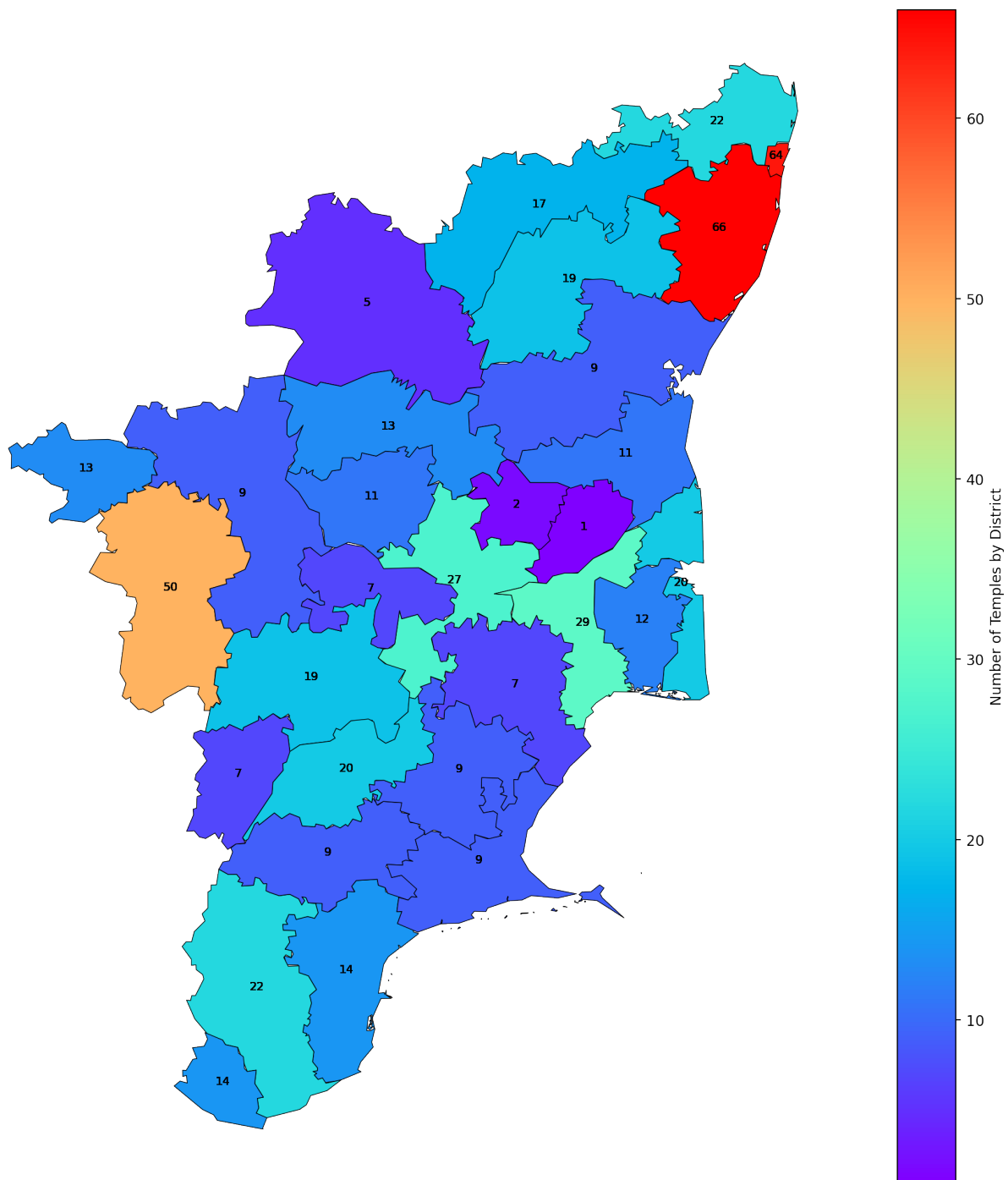


Figure 3: Tamil Nadu Map of Districts: Historic Female Deity Temples Per District

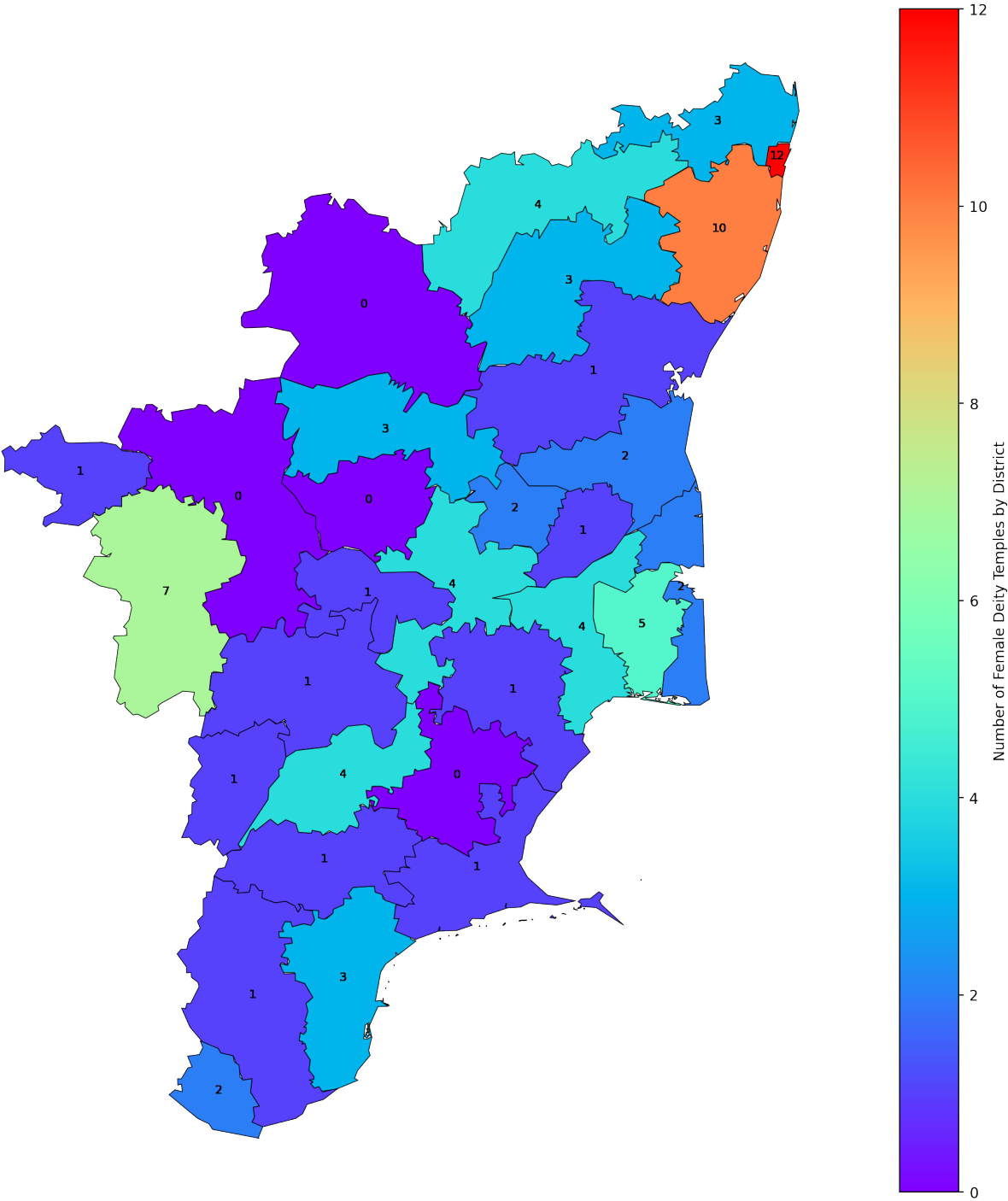


Table 1: Exposure/Treatment Variable: Share Female Deities

Quartile of Share Female Deities	District	Share Female Deities (Treatment Var)
1	Dharmapuri	0.000
	Erode	0.000
	Krishnagiri	0.000
	Namakkal	0.000
	Sivaganga	0.000
	Dindigul	0.045
	Tirunelveli	0.053
	Tiruppur	0.067
2	The Nilgiris	0.077
	Nagapattinam	0.100
	Ramanathapuram	0.111
	Viluppuram	0.111
	Virudhunagar	0.111
	Thiruvallur	0.136
	Thanjavur	0.138
	Coimbatore	0.140
3	Kanniyakumari	0.143
	Karur	0.143
	Pudukkottai	0.143
	Theni	0.143
	Tiruchirappalli	0.148
	Kancheepuram	0.152
	Tiruvannamalai	0.158
	Cuddalore	0.182
4	Chennai	0.188
	Madurai	0.200
	Thoothukkudi	0.214
	Salem	0.231
	Vellore	0.235
	Thiruvarur	0.417
	Ariyalur	1.000
	Perambalur	1.000

Source: Hand-collected data from Google Maps API

Notes: Using hand-collected data, I obtained the number of total historical temple complexes in each district. I then identified the temples that are devoted to female deities. Share Female Deities (Treatment Variable), Female Deity Exposure, is the share of temples in each district that is devoted to female deities; this is presented in column 3 of the above table. The quartiles in column 1 are based on the Treatment Variable.

Table 2: Outcome Variable: Intimate Partner Violence Incidence

		Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6	Question 7	Question 8	Question 9	Question 10	IPV (outcome)
Quartile of Share Female Deity	1	0.319	0.712	0.220	0.233	0.050	0.029	0.090	0.064	0.296	0.068	0.388
	2	0.343	0.769	0.198	0.231	0.028	0.016	0.122	0.047	0.343	0.058	0.437
	3	0.314	0.714	0.210	0.283	0.027	0.018	0.124	0.053	0.285	0.056	0.420
	4	0.364	0.768	0.248	0.289	0.034	0.019	0.157	0.073	0.341	0.081	0.438
	Total	0.335	0.740	0.219	0.258	0.035	0.021	0.122	0.059	0.315	0.066	0.420

Source: International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India. Mumbai: IIPS

Notes: Quartile of Share Female Deity is obtained by arranging each District in ascending order by Exposure/Treatment Variable, Share Female Deity, then partitioning them by quartile based on Share Female Deity (See Table 1).

The questions used in determining whether a respondent (woman) has been subjected to IPV are the ten questions in the NFHS Domestic Violence Section that pertain to Physical Violence and Sexual Violence. Each respondent is asked whether their current or former husband does the following:

(Question 1) pushes you, shakes you, or throws something at you (Physical Violence)

(Question 2) slaps you (Physical Violence)

(Question 3) twists your arm or pulls your hair (Physical Violence)

(Question 4) punches you with his fist or with something that could hurt you (Physical Violence)

(Question 5) kicks you, drags you, or beats you up (Physical Violence)

(Question 6) tries to choke you or burns you on purpose (Physical Violence)

(Question 7) threatens or attacks you with a knife, gun, or any other weapon (Physical Violence)

(Question 8) physically forces you to have sexual intercourse with him even when you did not want to (Sexual Violence)

(Question 9) physically forces you to perform any other sexual acts you did not want to (Sexual Violence)

(Question 10) forces you with threats or in any other way to perform sexual acts you did not want to (Sexual Violence)

The outcome variable in my analysis, IPV, indicates whether an individual has responded "yes" to any of the above questions.

Table 3: Balance Table

		Quartile 1	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4
<b>Individual Level Variables</b>					
<b>Wealth Index: Distribution</b>	<b>Age</b>	33.969	33.660	34.165	34.215
	<b>Poorest</b>	0.165	0.204	0.192	0.226
	<b>Poorer</b>	0.243	0.218	0.198	0.205
	<b>Middle</b>	0.230	0.216	0.193	0.181
	<b>Richer</b>	0.229	0.200	0.240	0.196
	<b>Richest</b>	0.132	0.162	0.177	0.193
<b>Religion Distribution</b>	<b>Employed</b>	0.328	0.301	0.328	0.313
	<b>Hindu</b>	0.924	0.901	0.866	0.923
	<b>Muslim</b>	0.035	0.054	0.038	0.039
	<b>Christian</b>	0.041	0.044	0.096	0.037
	<b>Other</b>	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.000
<b>Education Distribution</b>	<b>No Education</b>	0.193	0.168	0.182	0.195
	<b>Incomplete Primary</b>	0.054	0.042	0.039	0.048
	<b>Complete Primary</b>	0.101	0.085	0.082	0.097
	<b>Incomplete Secondary</b>	0.417	0.450	0.430	0.425
	<b>Complete Secondary</b>	0.106	0.104	0.123	0.110
	<b>Higher</b>	0.130	0.152	0.145	0.126
<b>Husband's Education Distribution</b>	<b>No Education</b>	0.168	0.142	0.136	0.175
	<b>Incomplete Primary</b>	0.068	0.048	0.045	0.041
	<b>Complete Primary</b>	0.099	0.094	0.077	0.092
	<b>Incomplete Secondary</b>	0.456	0.483	0.501	0.471
	<b>Complete Secondary</b>	0.078	0.082	0.074	0.083
	<b>Higher</b>	0.132	0.152	0.166	0.139
<b>District Level Variables</b>					
	<b>Population</b>	1,268,887.00	1,373,340.00	1,211,011.00	1,312,637.00
	<b>Share Female Population</b>	0.498	0.502	0.502	0.500

Source: International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India. Mumbai: IIPS



Table 4: The Relationship between Female Deity Exposure and Intimate Partner Violence

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	IPV	IPV	IPV	IPV
Share Female Deities	0.0942** (0.0297)	0.0914** (0.0307)	0.0643* (0.0251)	0.0462 (0.0339)
Observations	3492	3492	3492	3408
Age Controls	no	yes	yes	yes
Wealth Index Controls	no	no	yes	yes
District Level Controls	no	no	no	yes

Standard errors in parentheses. All Standard errors are clustered at the district level.

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 5: The Relationship between Female Deity Exposure and Intimate Partner Violence

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	IPV	IPV	IPV	IPV	IPV	IPV
Share Female Deities	0.0393 (0.0350)	0.0418 (0.0343)	0.0448 (0.0338)	0.0403 (0.0342)	0.0461 (0.0338)	0.0399 (0.0341)
Observations	3408	3408	3408	3408	3408	3408
Education Controls	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes
Husband's Education Controls	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes
Employment Controls	no	no	yes	yes	no	yes
Religion Controls	no	no	no	no	yes	yes

Standard errors in parentheses. All standard errors are clustered at the district level.

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

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