

Temple Economy in Ancient and Medieval Bharat

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Abstract: Temples in ancient and medieval India were not just places of worship but vital centers of community, education, governance, and economic life. Supported by state patronage and land endowments, they became powerful institutions that shaped agrarian economies, trade, and social structures. Temples provided employment to a wide range of people, from artisans to administrators, and played a key role in urban development. They also acted as hubs for barter and exchange, supporting local economies in regions where monetized systems were less common. Temples helped integrate diverse communities, including tribal and pastoral groups, into the social fabric, reinforcing caste structures and political power. Their economic influence extended through land ownership, taxation, and revenue generation, establishing temples as both economic powerhouses and cultural pillars in medieval Indian society.

Keywords: *temple economy, temple architecture, socio-economic functions of temples, Tirupati temple, Jagannath Temple*

Introduction

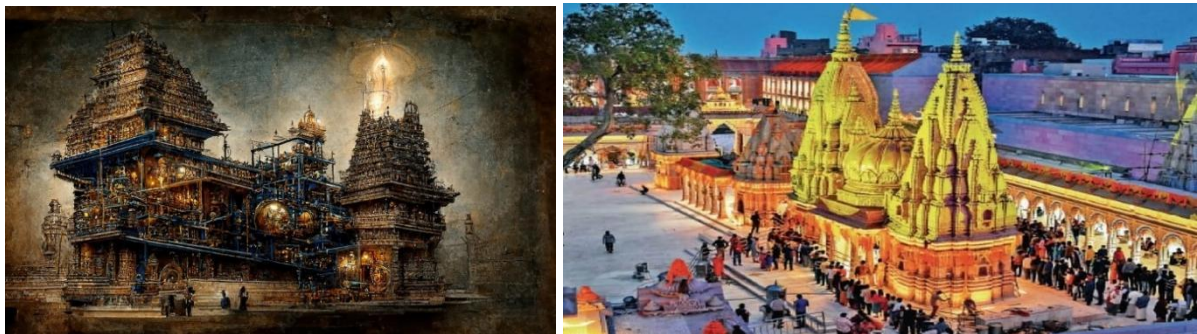
Bharat's ancient temples held deep cultural, economic, and social significance, serving as far more than places of worship. In the past, Bharatiyas considered a village incomplete without a temple at its heart. Temples played a central role in daily life, shaping communities and fostering connections through festivals, ceremonies, and communal activities. They influenced nearly every aspect of civic life, making them essential to the social fabric.

Temples were not only spiritual centers but also economic hubs. Devotees, patrons, and royalty contributed extensively, endowing temples with wealth and land, known as *Devadaya* or *Deva-bhumi*, often tax-exempt and used to support the temple's functions. These lands were either managed by temple authorities or leased to tenants, with agricultural yields sustaining temple activities. Over time, donations in the form of gold, silver, and precious artifacts turned temples into prominent economic forces.

The temple economy extended beyond wealth collection, incorporating a wide range of economic activities. Temples engaged in trade and commerce, often strategically located along trade routes that drew in merchants and traders. Skilled artisans created intricate sculptures, textiles, and other crafts, which were sold to support temple operations. Temples provided merchants with a safe space for business and blessing, cementing their status as economic centers.

This wealth was also invested in community welfare. Temples funded educational institutions, hospitals, and other public services, supporting scholars, artists, and the less fortunate. Temple administrators, including officials like the *Dharmakarta* or *Bhandagarika*, managed finances with precision, reflecting a sophisticated financial structure.

Temples and ruling powers also maintained a close relationship. Kings made significant contributions, recognizing temples' influence and supporting them during times of war or crisis. However, some scholars highlight concerns about wealth concentration in temples, noting that it sometimes led to inequality and, in cases, resource misuse. Despite these challenges, temples remained foundational to Bharat's society, bridging spiritual, economic, and social realms.



The Economic Power of Temples: Land Endowments and Revenue Generation

Inscriptions from regions like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh reveal that temples were significant landowners, managing lands known as *devadana*, or temple lands, which were often exempt from taxes (*sarvamanya*). These lands, given by kings and elites, formed the backbone of the temple's revenue. For instance, in medieval Tanjavur, the Brihadeshwara Temple managed lands that contributed to its maintenance and the employment of hundreds of temple servants, which allowed temples to exercise considerable economic influence, organizing local agrarian activities and acting as landlords. Tenant cultivators worked temple lands, and the produce from these lands sustained the temple's daily needs, from ritual offerings to community welfare activities.

Temples also generated revenue through other means. Apart from agricultural yield, temples levied protection dues (*raksabhoga*) and imposed penalties on defaulters (*dandam*). They actively engaged in trade, acting as centers for barter and exchange.

Temple Employment: Medieval Tamil inscriptions mention large numbers of temple servants employed in roles such as teachers and officials. For example, **a Chola temple in Tanjavur listed 609 temple servants**, and an inscription from the Vijayanagar period noted a temple with 370 temple servants.



Consumption of Local Products: Temples were major consumers of local products used for rituals and sacrifices. Local goods were regularly purchased by temples to support their religious activities.

Supporting the Needy: Temples utilized granaries to provide food for the hungry and those unable to earn due to illness or other reasons. Temples thus played a role in supporting the welfare of the community.



Temple taxation was highly organized; lands leased by temples, such as those managed by the Brihadeeswarar Temple, generated revenue through taxes shared between the temple and the state, consolidating temple finances and state wealth. Furthermore, temples levied taxes on lands granted by traders and guilds, enhancing their financial resources—a point noted by historian Burton Stein in his studies of South Indian temple states. Skilled artisans and craftsmen contributed significantly to temple economy by producing sculptures, murals, textiles, and jewelry to adorn temple spaces; for instance, guilds of artisans worked for the ***Jagannath Temple in Puri, creating exquisite metalwork and textiles that enhanced the temple's prestige and drew in additional patrons.*** Positioned along prominent trade routes, temples like the Somnath Temple in Gujarat became bustling trade hubs, attracting merchants who saw their donations not only as acts of devotion but also as prudent investments, as temples provided essential services such as lodging, security, and even credit for merchants.



Other multifaceted roles :

In ancient and medieval Bharat, temples played multifaceted roles beyond spirituality and economic activities, deeply influencing agrarian expansion, social transformation, and cultural preservation. For instance, temples like the Brihadeeswarar Temple in Tamil Nadu facilitated the extraction of surplus produce from peasants, bolstering agriculture and extending it into tribal regions, thus reinforcing landownership hierarchies. In regions like Odisha, ***the Jagannath Temple in Puri helped reshape tribal societies into a caste-based system, moving tribal communities toward structured social roles around temple activities.*** Temples also acted as connectors within caste hierarchies, as seen in the ***Chola temples of Tamil Nadu, which linked various castes and supported Brahmin-endorsed regional monarchies.*** By legitimizing emerging political structures, temples, including the Konark Sun Temple, fostered mutual patronage with the state, strengthening both their authority and that of their patrons. The Varnashrama ideology found reinforcement through temple activities, with the Bhakti movement—centered around temples like the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai—spreading this ideology across society. Temples amassed considerable wealth,

such as at the Tirupati Temple, which held vast amounts of gold and silver, becoming hubs for the elite and securing protection through fortress-like designs. Temples like the Hampi temples in Vijayanagara, with their layered streets and marketplaces, functioned as fortified complexes. Ultimately, temples served as custodians of culture, preserving and transmitting Bharat's heritage across generations, showcasing its artistry, music, and literature in places like the Khajuraho temples.

Urban Development and Temple Influence:

Large temples, like the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, drew traders, artisans, and pilgrims, fostering vibrant urban hubs that contributed significantly to economic and social cohesion. The construction and daily maintenance of temples provided extensive employment opportunities, creating positions for architects, artisans, sculptors, priests, musicians, and dancers, among many others. Historians such as A. Appadorai and D. Dayalan have underscored the temple's role as a major employer, second only to the state, which supported countless livelihoods.

The roles within these temples extended beyond immediate religious functions; for example, the Brihadeswara Temple employed choristers, garland makers, and cooks, generating a self-sustaining local economy. Even smaller temples required a network of services, such as garland-making and supply contracts, which encouraged community integration. Inscriptions from South Indian temples reveal details of these services, showing roles like drummers, lamp maintenance workers, gardeners, and cooks, often compensated with land grants, money, or both.

This ecosystem of temple-related employment went beyond direct hires; indirectly, it also engaged local communities. Brahmins served as priests, while peasants cultivated temple lands, and merchants supplied essential goods, contributing to an economically symbiotic relationship with the temple. Additionally, *many roles were hereditary*, ensuring continuity within the temple's workforce and embedding these roles in the fabric of local communities.



Temples as Barter Centres:

Temples played a vital role as centers for barter and exchange, particularly in areas where currency was scarce. Acting as neutral, trusted institutions, temples facilitated trade by accepting various commodities as offerings, which were then redistributed to meet community needs. In his work published in the *Journal of Kerala Studies*, historian M.G.S. Narayanan highlights how medieval Kerala temples served as hubs for economic activity, offering locals a safe environment for transactions.

For example, locals would bring rice or spices to temples, which were exchanged under regulated conditions with standardized rates, such as a set amount of gold for paddy.

Temples also established and upheld consistent inter-commodity exchange ratios, ensuring that the community had stable rates for goods, which is evident in records of ***gold-to-paddy exchanges***. This practice, often in place of a formal monetary system, suggests that temples were primarily reliant on bartering, rather than cash transactions. These organized barter systems provided a structure that reduced dependency on coinage, allowing temples to serve as essential economic centers within the broader state economy.

Stipulated Conditions and Standardized Exchange Rates :

Historians have emphasized the importance of standardized conditions and exchange rates in temple-based transactions. In “The Early Medieval in South India”, Kesavan Veluthat explains how temples helped maintain fair trade by setting clear conditions, which reduced disputes and encouraged orderly exchanges. ***Temples were also responsible for establishing***

consistent exchange rates, creating a dependable framework for trade. Some historical records, as noted by Jane Smith in the Journal of Ancient Economic Studies, reveal stable inter-commodity ratios, like the exchange between gold and paddy. This steady rate emphasized the temple's authority in managing commodity values and provided a reliable benchmark for economic stability. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, in "A History of South India", adds that these regular exchange ratios hint at a minimal use of currency, suggesting that temples often operated without formal money.

Function of Temples as a Bank :

Renowned historian B.K. Pandeya has noted how temples acted as early money lenders, offering loans to cultivators, village assemblies, and private individuals, thus resembling a prototype of modern banking. Temples would lend either with or without collateral, with borrowers repaying in cash or goods, addressing diverse needs like agricultural investments, family events, and emergencies. For example, ***farmers often borrowed funds for cultivation costs, and in many cases, individuals used temple lands as security.*** Temples also contributed to community welfare, selling land to help farmers repair village water tanks or maintain irrigation infrastructure, especially when state support was limited. This community-centered approach extended even to livestock management, as temples assigned donated animals to shepherds, benefiting local agrarian livelihoods. Furthermore, temples provided support to non-Brahmin communities and small-scale peasants, often offering aid during famines or droughts.

Temples as Educational Institutions :

Temples, much like Buddhist and Jain monasteries, offered educational opportunities where students, under the guidance of religious gurus, studied sacred texts, spiritual principles, and stories from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Historians highlight how these temple schools offered resources such as food, housing, and even medical care for pupils. The Bhakti movement, which saw a rise in temple constructions, intensified the temples' role in education, making them the primary educational institutions in many regions. ***Major temples established learning centers known as ghatikas, salais, guhais, and mathas, functioning as residential colleges where students were taught Vedic scriptures, Sastras, and grammar.*** Historian Kesavan Veluthat notes in "The Early Medieval in South India", how temple education emphasized training the mind as an instrument of knowledge, aiming to foster wisdom rather than simply imparting information. Libraries associated with these centers contained valuable collections of texts, plays, and commentaries, thus contributing to a thriving literary culture.

Evolution of Temple Architecture :

Initially, temple construction was influenced by Buddhist cave art, with early temples built within caves to serve small congregations. However, as the need for larger gathering spaces grew, architects began transitioning to open plains, for example - modest Temple No. 7 at Sanchi, which featured a sanctum and frontal space. This architectural journey continued with notable developments in sites like Tigava, Nachana, and Devgad, leading to the creation of complete temples with sanctums, enclosed circumambulatory paths, frontal spaces, and intricate sculptures. A key characteristic of this architectural style was the treatment of the

Shikhara, which tapered at the top, drawing the viewer's gaze upward—a hallmark of the 'Nagara style.'



In contrast, temple architecture in the Deccan and South India followed a different trajectory. The Chalukyas advanced from rock-cut structures in Badami to freestanding temples in Pattadakal and Aihole, while the Pallavas carved remarkable rock-cut temples, such as the 'Ratha Temples' at Mahabalipuram. The Cholas later built grand temples, and the Rashtrakutas created the renowned Kailasa temple at Ellora, showcasing their expertise in rock-cut designs. Temples in these regions commonly featured stacked stone slabs for their Shikharas, resulting in a tiered appearance characteristic of the 'Dravida style.' By the 6th to 7th centuries AD, the rise of regionalism fostered diverse architectural styles, transforming India into a vast repository of temples adorned with intricate sculptures and complex designs.



*During the earlier Sangam Age, worship of various deities in temples became a sophisticated practice, as evidenced by references to temples dedicated to gods such as Siva, Muruga, and Vishnu in Sangam texts. For example, the **Manimekalai** mentions a significant brick structure called **Cakravahakottam**, while **Silappadikaram** describes stone images of deities. T.A. Gopinatha's archaeological discoveries, include - a dating lingam from centuries B.C. - support these literary accounts. The worship practices during this time often involved offerings of flowers, rice, and meat, and the deities were frequently placed under trees, illustrating the connection between nature and spirituality.*

*Agriculture also played a vital role in the Sangam society, with paddy and sugarcane being the two major crops cultivated. The Tolkappiyam outlines a five-fold division of land—**Kurinji** (hilly), **Mullai** (pastoral), **Marudam** (agricultural), **Neydal** (coastal), and **Palai** (desert)—**with distinct deities and occupations associated with each**. For example, Murugan was the chief deity of the Kurinji region, where hunting and honey collection were prevalent, while Vishnu (Mayon) was worshipped in Mullai, where cattle rearing was the primary occupation.*

Religious symbols on coins also reflect the dynasties' religious perspectives. For instance, coins from the Greek king Agathocles featured symbols of Krishna and Balarama, indicating their cultural influences, while Gupta coins showcased symbols related to Vishnu, like the Garuda-dhvaja, revealing their adherence to Vaishnavism. Historians note that Gupta rulers used titles such as Param-vaishnava and Param-bhagavat, signifying their deep-rooted devotion to Vishnu, while Samudragupta's association with the Garud-dhvaja further illustrates this religious inclination.

Temple's Role in Political Context :

Analysis of donation patterns to temples reveals a notable correlation with the rise of the "Imperial Gangas" of Kalinga. During this period, the Draksharama temple emerged as a pivotal site of contention between the Gangas and their rivals, the Cholas. The temple became a legitimizing factor for both factions, reinforcing their competing claims to authority in the region. As historian Kenneth R. Hall notes, sacred sites like the Draksharama complex were instrumental in integrating tribal communities into the broader social and economic framework of the state, thereby enhancing the social status of groups like the Boyas and influencing regional political dynamics.

Also the significance of temple cities in South India extended to the concentration of weaving guilds and textile production. The Chola period marked the beginning of organized weaving guilds, but it was during the Vijayanagara period that these guilds became more concentrated in temple cities, which provided favorable economic and cultural conditions for their activities. An *inscription from Tirupati dating back to 1538 exemplifies a temple-oriented economic policy, documenting an agreement among cloth and yarn merchants and outlining regulations for weavers*. This inscription mandated that the regulations be communicated to Hindu villages and Muslim communities involved in weaving, emphasizing the interwoven nature of economic practices and religious institutions across regions like Tirupati and Kanchipuram.



The concept of "*religious diplomacy*" further illustrates the political significance of temples, as Kenneth R. Hall describes diplomatic missions often masquerading as religious endeavors. These missions typically involved the construction of temples in the host kingdom, where local rulers would grant land and revenue to support such initiatives. A pertinent example of this practice can be found in the actions of King Kyanzittha of the Pagan kingdom in Burma during the mid-eleventh century, who sought the Pala King of Bengal's assistance in repairing

the sacred temple of Bodh Gaya. This act of "religious diplomacy" not only facilitated temple construction but also strengthened diplomatic relations between the kingdoms. Additionally, Kyanzittha is said to have converted a Chola prince, sending him a Buddhist text composed on golden leaf, further exemplifying the intertwining of religion and politics.

SPECIAL CASE OF THE TIRUPATI TEMPLES

The Tirupati Temples illustrate the intricate relationship between religious institutions and economic development in medieval South India. Their economic significance was profound, with land and monetary endowments playing crucial roles in supporting rituals and infrastructure. This is particularly evident from a study of over **1,000 stone inscriptions** from the Sri Venkatesvara temple, which shed light on the temple's economic activities and ritual evolution from the 9th to the 16th centuries. These inscriptions reveal that during the 15th and 16th centuries, the Vijayanagara rulers significantly patronized the Tirupati Temple, granting numerous villages and funds for rituals. This support facilitated investments in irrigation projects around Tirupati, thereby ensuring a stable income for both the temple and its donors. The management of the temple underwent a notable shift in the 1380s when twelve trustees, known as "***sthaanaattar***," took charge, marking the beginning of an efficient secular management system. This transition was pivotal for the temple's irrigation initiatives, as it allowed for the interdependence of resources and management. Furthermore, the temple's relationship with the land was influenced by various land tenure systems, including crown lands administered for revenue, military service tenures held by local chieftains, and eleemosynary tenures granted to Brahmins and educational institutions.

The ***Nayakas***, influential local leaders during this period, ***became hereditary leaseholders of temple land, consolidating their authority and contributing to the weakening of central power within the Vijayanagara empire.*** This practice, which can be traced back to the 3rd century B.C., was instrumental in establishing a network of landowners and temples. Notably, historians like Kenneth R. Hall have explored how the practice of granting land to officers was linked to the emergence of a feudal and manorial system in India, though this connection is debated.

The inscriptions from Tirupati, particularly those from the mid-15th to mid-16th centuries, indicate that the temple ascended to become the most prominent shrine in southern India, receiving generous grants, including over a hundred villages and substantial monetary endowments. These resources not only financed rituals for over 300 donors but also highlighted the temple's critical role in developing irrigation facilities, which were essential for sustaining its economic activities. The irrigation initiatives provided a reliable income stream for the temple, crucial for maintaining the opulence of its rituals and encouraging further donations.

There has been some debate regarding the existence of a fourth tenure system in medieval South India, known as "peasant proprietor tenure." However, existing records indicate that only three villages granted to the temple could potentially fall under this form of land tenure.

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