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Bharat's Temple Trade Ecosystem

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1. INTRODUCTION

History reveals that temples have always held a pre-eminent position in Bharat. "Mandir" or "Mindira" is the Sanskrit word for "Temple" in English, made of the Sanskrit word 'mana' meaning 'inner self', and 'dir' meaning 'a place'; a place where the inner-self lives in. So "Mandir ecosystem", sometimes also called the "Devalaya Ecosystem", could be a direct translation of the "Temple ecosystem". It was the Temple Culture that spawned, incubated, nurtured, sustained, and spread the *Dharma's* cultural and social milieu from time immemorial. Temples of Bharat used to function as repositories of knowledge and education, centers for charity, along with nodes for preserving art & tradition. They also had administrative power, governing local self-government, rendering justice, while serving communal utility by providing venues for gatherings and entertainment. Among many other roles, thus, temples of Bharat emerged as thriving centers of economic activity providing livelihoods for local communities and villages.

Throughout history, it is evident that a symbiotic relationship has always existed between temples and civilizations, in effect, intertwining spirituality with sustenance of communities and economic prosperity. Ancient Indian temples were linked to the vast network of trade routes that crisscrossed regions all across the country. The temples, situated along key trade routes, played a vital role in facilitating the exchange of cultures, thriving communities, supporting commercial transactions and socio-economic development (Elisseff, 2000). Further, as centers, holding multitude religious and cultural importance, these temples attracted pilgrims, traders, and travelers from distant lands, propagating cross-cultural interactions and the exchange of goods, ideas, and knowledge. Temples would serve as landmarks for travelers, providing shelter, sustenance, and spiritual support along their journeys.

In this chapter, we dwell on the linkage between trade, migration, and its impact on temple-centric societies, exploring how temple trade ecosystem in Bharat dictated resource allocation, power dynamics, dissemination of knowledge, and artistic patronage within the Indian context. It further highlights how crucial temples have been in shaping the socio-economic subcontinent what is now known as Bharat.

2. MULTIFACETED ROLE OF TEMPLES – DHARMA, DHYANA, KARMA

Temples have been sanctuaries of the soul, sacred mandala wherein the forces of creation, preservation, and dissolution find expression in intricate architectural symbolism. It is not only in its physical form that the temple reveals its spiritual significance, i.e., the concept of "darshan," the act of beholding the divine presence.

As stated above, temples have always held a distinguished and peerless position within Indian society, serving not only as spiritual havens but also emerging as multifaceted hubs, encouraging social engagement and cohesion among communities. The origins of the 'Temple Ecosystem' date back to the Vedic concept and practice of Yajna. It was an elaborate ritual of sharing—a ritual where all communities and strata of society came together and offered their material and non-material services for the welfare of the entire country. It was an act of strengthening human, social and national bonds on an epic scale. Thus, temples epitomized the ethos of sharing—be it spirituality, knowledge, food or material resources.

Temples in ancient times were vital centers of sustenance and community support. The tradition of offering *Prasad* (Srinivas, 2023) symbolized communal unity and divine benevolence. In temple kitchens, volunteers prepared meals for pilgrims, travelers, local residents and the needy, encouraging compassion, nourishment, spirituality, equality through communal dining. Temples also supported local farmers and vendors, purchased their produce, received food

donations and maintained granaries to aid the local producer and trader. However, in agrarian economies, temples also functioned to extract surplus from peasants, contributing to agricultural expansion and landlord domination.

At the heart of these sacred places lay the Gurukuls, nurturing spaces where seekers of knowledge immersed themselves in knowledge of Vedic studies, Sanskrit literature, and philosophical discussions. The Devalaya Ecosystem played a vital role in sustaining this revered guru-shishya tradition. Guided by *Gurus*, shishyas did not just learn academic lessons but also imbibed moral values and spiritual insights, ensuring that traditions and legacy was passed down to generations (Selwamani, 2019). Within the serene walls of temple libraries, ancient manuscripts preserved the wisdom of Vedas, Puranas and Shastras. Scholars and seekers pondered over these texts, seeking to deepen their understanding of humanity and the higher self.

Temples became agents (Waghorne, 2004) for preserving and transmitting cultural legacies as centres for art, culture, dance, music, drama, entertainment, performance spaces, dedicated halls for hosting festivals, theatrical performances, and music and dance recitals. Festivals and fairs celebrated in temples were given grandeur which was indicative of their economic progress. The result was that the traders who used to wander in far-flung villages with their goods and those who needed goods which they could not get easily, made temples their rendezvous for sale/purchase or bartering. They played a pivotal role in nurturing and conserving Bharat's cultural heritage.

Temples even doubled as training grounds for martial arts, echoing with the clang of swords and the disciplined footsteps of warriors. Here, communities honed their skills in defense and combat, safeguarding their sacred heritage and ensuring the security of their people against external threats.

The presence of temples played a significant role in maintaining law, order and neutrality in towns and thereby promoting trade activities in the area. The religious and spiritual vibrations of these sacred spaces encouraged honesty and fair dealings among traders and merchants. The fear of divine retribution for dishonesty or unfair practices served as a deterrent against fraudulent activities, promoting a sense of trust and reliability in trade transactions. The moral authority of the temple and its priests ensured that decisions made within its premises were honored and upheld by the community.

Preserving ecological balance has been a crucial function of temples in ancient times. Temples stood as guardians of ecological harmony, with sacred groves and water conservation systems serving as testaments to humanity's reverence for the natural world (Narayanan, 2001). Through rituals and ceremonies that celebrated the elements, devotees were reminded of their intrinsic connection with all living beings, cultivating a deep sense of environmental stewardship and respect for the delicate balance of life. Further, divinity rendered by these temples bridged the conflict between ecology and trade. As Geographical landscapes like hills and forests made it challenging for traders to navigate through tribal areas, Brahmanical influences helped in appeasement of the tribes and construction of temples on these rugged terrains as safe spaces through the route. This also involved integration of local gods and goddesses and cults into the mainstream religions. The Dabok inscription, dated A.D. 644, attests the patronage of the cults of Māheśvara (Śiva) and Ghattāvāsini (the goddess residing in the pot) by a local kayastha family through land and cash grants in Dhavagarṭa locality near Chittaurgadh (Meena, 2014).

Temple-Led Urbanization: Catalysts of Ancient Urban Development

Most importantly, Temples helped in urbanization. Taking the instance of the temples commissioned by the Vijayanagara kings along the banks of river Tungabhadra in the 14th century (Pattnaik, 2023), these signified a mix of spiritual sanctity and economic prosperity. Similarly in Kerala, agricultural development was very closely linked to the temples, highlighting the relationship where temple was crucial for community's economic and social prosperity. Temples served as hubs of activity, employing a diverse range of individuals for construction, maintenance,

and daily operations. Literature highlights the temple's significance as a major employer, offering livelihoods to architects, artisans, servants, and various other personnel (Appadorai, 1936; Dayalan, 1992). Merchants considered 'the sound of stone masons' in temples as an indicator of success of the community and the village, thus attracting further trade in the vicinity. Hence, Temples had always to be under construction; temple construction as an economic activity underscored the integral role played by temples in sustaining local economies by providing income opportunities for architects and sculpturers, architects, craftsmen, and laborers in their construction and upkeep, priests, choristers, musicians, cooks, and artisans. Temples served as meeting grounds for merchants, artisans, and scholars, facilitating the exchange of goods, craftsmanship techniques, and ideas. Craftsmen and artisans were integral to temple economy. They offered their skills in creating intricate sculptures, paintings, textiles, and jewelry that adorned the temple premises. Large temples, often owned by wealthy landowners, bolstered nearby economies by fostering various crafts and industries. Many temple roles were hereditary, ensuring continuity and perpetuating traditional practices. Moreover, temple services such as cleaning, cooking, and gardening were integral to community life, with individuals rewarded with lands or monetary incentives for their contributions. Through land grants and charitable endowments, it supported local artisans, vendors, and the marginalized, creating avenues for employment and fostering economic growth within the community. Each temple, linked to a marketplace, served as an axis of economic exchange, supporting diverse trades ranging from spices to horses to jewelry. Furthermore, temples emerged as political centers, endowing legitimacy upon local rulers through their patronage towards the temples. Temples often found support from ruling dynasties and local people, further strengthening their position as hubs of power and prestige. The king who would fund a temple was respected and revered as the beloved of the gods, inculcating a sense of loyalty towards the ruler among the people. This fusion of spiritual and political authority provided temples with a sense of permanence and stability, laying the grounds for not just economic prosperity but a sense of societal order.

Temples as Economic Powerhouses

Accumulating substantial wealth through donations of land, gold, and money from both royal families and individuals, temples emerged as economic powerhouses, their treasuries functioning akin to modern banks. These grants, donations and offerings once made became Devaswa—Property of the Deity. Thus, with vast expanses of land under their purview, managed by temple administrators, temples wielded influence over landholding patterns, thus shaping socio-political dynamics.

Revenue streams flowed steadily into temple from lands, villages, and produce, gifted generously by monarchs, merchants, and landowners. Temple lands, designated as Devadana, enjoyed exemptions from various taxes, while farmers and cultivators were bound by stringent regulations to cultivate these lands with strict adherence to specified norms. Temple taxation, including levies on leased lands and impositions on lands granted by traders and guilds, further augmented their financial strength. The Shiva temple at Kāmyaka (Kamān) portrays this relationship through a collection of deeds documenting donations and endowments made in support of the deity, Shiva (Meena, 2014) These records reveal that guilds of potters, artisans, and gardeners residing in Kāmyaka were obligated to pay a permanent cess, contributing to the temple's sustenance. Taxes levied on commercial transactions provided funds for temple maintenance, facilitating celebration of local festivals, undertaking rituals, and the sustenance livelihoods of priests. Furthermore, these finances also supported and encouraged a thriving art in temples, assisting musicians, dancers, painters, and sculptors to flourish under the patronage of the temple.

In reciprocity, the temple bestowed not just blessings upon the marketplace by infusing ethical values and integrity in a marketplace but also assumed a societal stewardship, overseeing locals' sustenance and prosperity and ensuring cohesiveness among activities diverse societal strata. Scholars like B.K. Pandeya (1979) likened them to early money lenders, highlighting their crucial role in providing financial assistance to agrarian communities. Becoming major landowners, temples catalyzed shifts in land ownership, as donations from rulers, nobles, and commoners strengthened their extensive holdings. Temples extended loans to various entities, including private individuals, village assemblies,

and cultivators, often without stringent security requirements, thereby stimulating economic stability and growth. Leasing arrangements, whether permanent or short-term, were meticulously structured, delineating crop types and produce shares, fostering stability and enduring relationships. Beyond their financial functions, temples actively engaged in social welfare and community development initiatives, selling portions of their land to assist farmers in repairing breached village tanks and maintaining irrigation works, particularly in affluent temples with surplus funds and land. Furthermore, temples strategically invested in livestock, assigning donated animals to specific shepherds, thus benefiting both individual shepherds and the broader agrarian community. In essence, temples in ancient Bharat wielded significant economic and social influence, serving as pillars of financial support, agents of social welfare, and catalysts for community development, thereby leaving an indelible mark on the socio economic landscape of Bharat. In this manner, temples acted as trustees and guardians of moral order, ensuring the fair and just operation of the marketplace through the regulation of societal conduct.

Implicatively, in this confluence, Brahmins were more than priests and held authority as landowners, mediators in commercial disputes, and custodians of administrative records. The concentration of power within Brahmins facilitated the zenith of Hindu temple influence, particularly during the medieval Tamil era under the imperial Cholas. (Kavita, 2017) Further empowered by patronage of successive Hindu rulers and dynasties, such as the Pandya and Vijayanagar, temples grew into epicentres of wealth and prestige. It was observed that temples were endowed with vast landholdings, gold, and financial resources, further endowing them with unparalleled economic influence. Moreover, temples often accumulated wealth and resources through donations, endowments, and offerings from devotees and patrons. This accumulated wealth, in turn, fueled economic activities in surrounding areas, propagating trade and commerce. Inscriptions from various periods offer glimpses into the intricate financial transactions facilitated by temples. Sometimes, Villagers used to mortgage the jewels of temple idols to settle land dues, highlighting the temples' role as economic resorts for the needy. Additionally, temples extended loans to villagers and merchants to meet tax obligations, reinstating their economic influence. For example, an inscription dating back to 1503 A.D. mentions a land sale to a temple, originally borrowed from the temple treasury to pay royal dues. Similarly, a sixteenth-century epigraph documents loans extended by temple treasuries to local tenants and landowners to settle outstanding dues. Thus, these institutions transformed into pivotal sources of economic support for society at large along with self-sustenance. As aptly noted by Nilakanta Sastri, "the temple and the matha were the most notable recipients of gifts in land and cash, and these played an important role in shaping the economic and social life of the neighborhood."

3. TEMPLES ON TRADE ROUTES: CATALYSTS OF ANCIENT BHARAT'S PROSPERITY

Temples in ancient Bharat served as heartbeat for flourishing trade towns. Strategically built along major trade routes, these temples attracted both pilgrims and traders, fueling economic and cultural growth in their regions. By discussing several key temples as nodes of trade activities, we can see how temples played a crucial role in shaping economic and cultural legacy in the land of Bharat.

Maritime and Coastal Temples

Positioned near the flourishing port of Veraval, **Somnath Temple** in Gujarat was a major draw for traders and pilgrims, its location made it a hub for maritime trade¹ across the Arabian Sea, prospering the local economy. Similarly, **Dwarka Temple** in Gujarat, thrived as an important stop for maritime traders, enhancing regional

¹ Read more at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/on-gujarat-coast-temples-that-once-blessed-sailors-cry-for-care/articleshow/101770549.cms>

commerce. On the southeastern coast, the Shore Temple Mahabalipuram, on the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu, served as a significant trade hub. Built by the Pallava dynasty, Mahabalipuram was known for its intricate stone carvings, which became valuable trade items. The town facilitated cultural and economic exchanges across the Bay of Bengal. In Southern Bharat, **Konark Sun Temple** of Odisha, near the ancient port town of Puri, has been a key maritime trade location with the temple drawing traders and pilgrims, creating vibrant local markets and facilitating cultural exchanges². Further down south In Kerala, **Padmanabhaswamy Temple** in Thiruvananthapuram leveraged its location near the spice trade routes along the Malabar Coast. The temple attracted traders dealing in spices and textiles, significantly contributing to regional prosperity³. **Rameswaram Temple**, at the southern tip of Bharat and positioned near the Pamban Channel, has served a crucial intermediary for traders moving between the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, turning Rameswaram into a thriving commercial town.

Temples stimulating Inland Trade

Inland temples like those in **Kanchipuram**, Tamil Nadu, were strategically placed along trade routes linking the eastern and western coasts. Known for its silk industry, Kanchipuram attracted artisans, traders, and pilgrims, making it a major trade hub. The **Khajuraho Temples** are another example of trade catalization in ancient Madhya Pradesh. Located near central trade routes, Khajuraho⁴ became a vibrant junction for traders, pilgrims, and artisans, boosting local economic activity. **Thanjavur Brihadeeswarar Temple** in Tamil Nadu, built by the Chola dynasty, Thanjavur became a hub of agricultural and trade activities. The revered temple highlights the economic impact of temple patronage with the temple attracting traders and stimulating local crafts in ancient Bharat. The **Lingaraj Temple** in Bhubaneswar, reinstates how temples integrated into trade networks by being positioned along ancient trade routes. In the western Bharat and modern day Rajasthan, a string of temples appeared, stretching from the Jodhpur area to Sirohi and Pali. Among these, **Nadlai** (Sharma, 2021) emerged as a significant pilgrimage site for both Jains and followers of Shaivism, attracting devotees, merchants and travelers from far and wide and emerging it as a strategic location for regional trade. This also led to induction of Jain merchants in commerce and politics in alliance with ruling dynasties during the tenth to thirteenth centuries.

Northern and Himalayan Temples as Nodes of trade

In the north, **Mahakaleshwar Temple** in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, was situated on trade routes connecting northern and western Bharat. In Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, along the ancient trade routes connecting northern Bharat with Central Asia, stood the **Dashavatara Temple**. Adorned with intricate sculptures, the temple attracted patrons, traders, and pilgrims from distant lands, catalyzing an atmosphere of trade and cultural exchange. The **Kedarnath Temple** in Uttarakhand, located on ancient pilgrimage and trade routes in the Himalayas, shows the synergy between spiritual journeys and local economies. Pilgrims supported local trades, boosting the regional economy. Further up north, the **Vaishno Devi Temple** in Jammu and Kashmir in itself became a tourism and trade centre attracting millions of visitors, fostering a robust local economy centered around hospitality, retail, and transport.

Temples strategically built along major trade routes in ancient Bharat were more than spiritual centers—they were vital economic hubs. By attracting pilgrims and traders, these temples fostered thriving trade towns and facilitated cultural exchanges.

4. CONCLUSION

² Josefsada, S. (2024, March 7). Sun Temple. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Konark-Sun-Temple>

³ <https://www.peepultree.world/livehistoryindia/story/monuments/padmanabhaswamy-temples-treasure>

⁴ <https://www.khajurahoonline.in/city-guide/economy-of-khajuraho>

In essence, temples transcended their spiritual role to become multifaceted institutions--serving as nodal governing bodies, secretariats and supporting varied economic, political, and social activities. These practices, far from the notion of conventional formal temple, underscore the significance of these institutions within ancient and modern Bharat. Also, since this re-establishment of temples as economic powerhouses challenges conventional perceptions of the religious dimension of these institutions, urging a reevaluation of their role within society. While this entire subcontinent of Bharat is adorned with the presence of such temples, which once were bustling hubs of commerce and spirituality, some are now pushed to the pages of history due to shifting trade routes in contemporary times. As trade routes twisted across the subcontinent, communities migrated in tandem, seeking new opportunities and fertile grounds for economic prosperity. This impacted the social and economic landscape of Bharat because the ebb and flow of commerce not only shapes the destinies of nations but also redefines patterns of demographic shifts, human habitation and cultural exchange. Consequently, temples, once revered as epicentres of religious and communal gatherings, witnessed a gradual erosion of their fervour, mirroring the changing currents of trade and migration. Consider the Deogarh and Khajuraho temples, once flourishing centres of trade and commerce, saw a decline in its economic significance due to shifts in trade routes over time. As trade routes evolved and shifted to other regions, the economic prosperity of these temples waned, leading to a reduction in patronage and resources available for temple upkeep.

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