

## Temples: Centre of Economic Activities in India

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### ABSTRACT

Temples are traditionally seen as the place of worship and solace of spiritual peace. Along with that, they also serve as the pivotal centre of economic activities. This paper highlights the significant role of temples in the development of India and its economy since ancient times. Temples significantly contribute to the local economy by providing economic opportunities through pilgrimages and festivals. This study analyses the multifaceted role of temples, especially their role in providing public facilities and economic activities in their surroundings.

**Key Words:** Temple economics, NEP 2020, public facilities, economic activities, livelihood, market, trade, pilgrimage, tourism.

The vision of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is to instill among the learners a deep-rooted pride in being Indian, not only in thought, but also in spirit, intellect, and deeds. The rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought has been a guiding light for this Policy. The pursuit of knowledge (*Jnan*), wisdom (*Pragyaa*), and truth (*Satya*) was always considered in Indian thought and philosophy as the highest human goal <sup>1</sup>. The temples in India have been a cornerstone of the country's economic and social life since ancient times. Temples are not merely places of worship; they have historically been centres of economic activities in the surrounding areas. Vendors and markets offer everything from food and flowers to religious artefacts in the surrounding of temples, creating a vibrant local economy and providing public facilities and livelihoods for large number of people. They serve as centres of trade, tourism and related industries, pilgrimage, exchanging ideas, goods and services. The multifaceted role has influenced the Indian economy effectively right from ancient times to the present day.

In ancient civilizations, Indian culture revolved around village temples, being the epicentre of economic life due to land endowments, gold and financial contributions. With this surplus wealth, temples began to play multifaceted roles as landowner, employer, banker, agrarian stimulator, etc. in the local areas. These revenues were also used for various social services and public works. In modern times, temples continue to influence economic development through religious tourism, pilgrimages and religious festivals. They attract millions of visitors annually leading to substantial revenues for both local businesses and government.

According to recent [research](#) conducted by SBI (2024)<sup>2</sup>, 'as a counter measure, in recent years, central government's PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive) scheme, in conjunction with partnering states has played a crucial role in the development of spiritual travel, creating an enabling ecosystem by augmenting infrastructure while disseminating knowledge at tier III and tier IV cities too as travel and hospitality sector integrates and gears up for the mega makeover to serve the hitherto

unserved. The construction of Ram Mandir could supplement the Central Government PRASHAD scheme in terms of pilgrimage drive and could add Rs. 25000 crore annual to Government kitty. Given the completion of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya this year and a melange of initiatives taken by the UP government to promote tourism, we believe that the total expenditure by tourists (domestic + foreign) in UP may cross Rs. 4 lakh crore mark by end of this year helping the state Government earn an additional tax revenue of Rs. 20,000-25,000 crore due to huge spurt in number of tourists during FY25.' These revenues not only contribute to GDP but also provide employment opportunities to millions of people. According to the research conducted by Shrivasatva, Vinod (2023-24)<sup>3</sup>, 65,000 - 70,000 people in Ayodhya have gained employment in the past two years. Verma, M. P. (2023-24)<sup>4</sup> found that with the construction of Shree Ram temple, religious tourism of Ayodhya has increased which boosted employment and prosperity. Further, Tiwari, A. P. (Rtd) (2023-24)<sup>5</sup> added that with the construction of Shree Ram temple in Ayodhya, infrastructure has improved. The model of 'Temple Economics' has started working. Timane, Rajesh et al. (2024)<sup>6</sup> found that the city has witnessed a surge in tourists coming to pay their respects and seek blessings at this sacred site. This has also given a boost to the local economy and provided job opportunities for the residents. Similarly, Iyer, Shankar Subramanian, et. al. (2024)<sup>7</sup> emphasized, "The economic factors have overwhelming bearing on the Templenomics factors leading to the vibrant self - reliant Bharat. The experts agreed along with the survey respondents on the temple township economics can lead to Bharat's future growth in terms of tourism, hospitality, the business hubs around the temple leading to employment opportunity, the big temples can pool in 1 billion per annum like Ayodhya Ram temple." Moreover, Lovelesh Gupta, et al. (2024)<sup>8</sup> noted, "In recent years, Kamakhya Temple has witnessed a significant increase in footfall owing to both the rise of spiritual tourism and the government's efforts in promoting India's Northeastern cultural heritage. The introduction of improved connectivity, infrastructure development, and dedicated tourist circuits has made the temple more accessible to visitors." Gupta, Charlie et al. (2023)<sup>9</sup> also observed, "The idea of a pilgrimage to Vrindavan has changed, moving away from its original meaning as a trek to the home of the gods and instead becoming more of a holiday and leisure destination. This change has produced exciting opportunities for investors and developers, prompting growing urbanisation and a notable break from the customary pilgrimage practices that were traditionally observed." Singh, Ranbir (2023)<sup>10</sup> also highlighted, "The temples in India have a significant impact on the economy and employment of the country. They generate a substantial amount of revenue through donations, offerings, and other sources, which is used to maintain and develop the temple infrastructure, contributing to the local economy. The temples also provide employment opportunities to a large number of people, including priests, temple staff, and local people, who sell goods and services to the devotees." Likewise, Mohanty, R., et al. (2023)<sup>11</sup> pondered light on how "Bhubaneswar, Puri, and Konark form a triangle known as the Golden Triangle of Odisha, and they are just three of the many tourist circuits in the state that have been identified as having significant potential for growth." Chaudhari, A. K., et al. (2022)<sup>12</sup> found "After the inauguration of Vishwanath Corridor, the hotel, guest house business in the city has got revival. More than 40 hotels have been constructed in Banaras during one year." Furthermore, Kaviezhil, N., et al. (2021)<sup>13</sup> argued, "The income source, expenditure and budget analysis undertaken in the medieval

temples would prove to be useful to the present, municipal Taluk and District management of revenue administration and public administration for making decisions in the near future. It also brings the present society to understand financial management scientific manner through economic activity of our medieval temples". Samanta, S., et al. (2019)<sup>14</sup> found "all the people those are working as sevakas/ servitors are getting their livelihood by providing different services to the devotees and tourists throughout the year on a regular basis and more during different festive occasions. A large many of the sevakas are engaged and employed for this purpose through generations and some through hereditary arrangements."

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyse the contribution of temples to India's socio-economic development. The contribution of temples through various channels such as trade, religious festivals, and tourism has been analysed using a historical analytical approach. Data for this research has been collected from multiple sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles and research papers, newspapers articles, historical and contemporary books, government reports, etc. The data includes scholars' evidence-based views, historical records, government statistics on economic activities around temples providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The study focuses on different economic activities adjacent to temples and multifaceted role of temples including their role in economic activities, healthcare, education, cultural heritage and social bonds. It emphasizes temples' historical and continuing significance. Temples in ancient India were not only religious centres but they also played crucial roles in economic activities. One of most significant contribution of temples was their role in facilitating trade and commerce. Temples were strategically located along the trade routes. They attracted traders and pilgrims. This helped in exchange of goods and services. Many temples acted as financial institutions. They provided loans and engaged in commercial transactions. This stimulated local economies.

Temples also played pivotal role in the social welfare of communities. They provided food, shelter and healthcare to the needy. This support system helped in stabilizing local communities. It encouraged economic activities by ensuring that basic needs were met, allowing people to engage in productive endeavours. Additionally, festivals and events organized by temples attracted visitors and pilgrims. This boosted local economies through increased demand for goods and services.

The economic impact of temples was not limited to ancient times but their influence continues in modern India. Many temples remain significant tourist attractions. They generate revenue through tourism and related industries. This ongoing economic contribution highlights the enduring legacy of temples as catalysts for economic development.

Temples are contributing significantly to local economies in contemporary times also by creating job opportunities and attracting millions of tourists and pilgrims annually. For instance, the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya has led to a substantial increase in the number of tourists, which in turn boosts the local economy. Similarly, if we look at Vrindavan over the past few years since 2014, tourism and pilgrimage have grown significantly. This not only boosts the economy but also provides employment opportunities

to the local people. For example, in Vrindavan, Ayodhya, Varanasi, Thiruvananthapuram, Odisha, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, one can find individuals applying tilak, selling flowers, Prasad, sweets and traditional clothes in the surrounding areas of temples. It has been observed that due to increasing number of tourists, real estate businesses such as hotels, guest houses, Airbnb, and dharmashalas (pilgrims' rest houses) have also been expanded significantly.

‘As a great devotional experience, as a famed pilgrim centre, as an extremely prosperous place of trade and commerce supporting skilled craftsmen, as a meeting point of excellence in religious, scholastic and artistic ability, as a lauded seat of educational, devotional and martial training (Kandalloor Salai near Valia Chalai) and temple of learning.....the city of Sree Padmanabha Swamy basked in great repute’<sup>15</sup>. ‘With regard to the presence of records, Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple stands as a centre of historiographic revelation, which finds no comparison anywhere else in the world, ranking it a record-house of awesome magnitude. The value of all the information so painstakingly recorded and preserved in the Churunas (cadjan scrolls) of the Temple cannot be assessed as they number to over thirty lakhs. The second point relates to the great festivals with special mention of the fabulous Lakshadeepam festival conducted in the Temple and not seen anywhere else. Emperor Kartaveeryarjuna of yore once conducted the Lakshadeepam festival. This was in the Puranic period, in the Mahabharatham age (Travancore rulers claim descent from this emperor). The next known King to have done it was Maharaja Anizhom Thirunal Marthanda Varma, in the Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple. From the time of Marthanda Varma to now, this festival has never been discontinued thereafter. Despite changes and constraints, it continues to be celebrated’<sup>16</sup>. ‘Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple is significant consumer of goods such as milk, rice, sugar, firewood, sandalwood, flowers, oil, ghee, butter, and jaggery, providing prosperity to producers, merchants, and middlemen. This temple also provides livelihoods to its permanent employees and many artists who participate in temple activities, along with their attendants and families. The temple also follows a mandatory dress code for both men (dhoti) and women (saree). If pilgrims or tourists do not already have these specific dresses, they need to purchase them from the nearby shops. This, too, is a form of economic activity. The very strict rules of entry, regulation of dress etc., have contributed to preserving its purity and cleanliness which are outstanding.’<sup>17</sup> All these activities help in supporting and boosting the local economy.

Similarly, ‘Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), a non-profit organisation that was established to protect this important religious heritage. Since its establishment, this trust has been involved in providing various educational services.’<sup>18</sup> It independently runs several degree colleges such as Sri Venkateswara Arts College, Tirupati, junior colleges such as Sri Venkateswara Junior College, Tirupati and schools such as SP Girls High School, Tirupati and SV Higher Secondary School, Vellore in and around Tirupati. Additionally, it operates Sri Venkateswara College in New Delhi as well. TTD also maintains several hospitals and dispensaries at Tirupati, Tirumala and Tiruchanoor for the benefit of its employees, pilgrims and the local population. Some of these hospitals are Aswini Hospital, Tirumala, Central Hospital, Tirupati Dispensary at INC, Sri Venkateswara Institute for Medical Sciences - A superspeciality hospital, Sri Venkateswara Poor Home, etc. Pilgrims are given free medical

aid at the Aswini Hospital near Seshadri Nagar in Tirumala. Twenty-four-hour medical assistance is provided to pilgrims all along the footpath from Alipiri to Tirumala. 'Health and Sanitation is one of TTD's priorities to ensure hygienic conditions both at Tirumala and Tirupati. The quality of food supplied at all TTD canteens and private hotels at Tirumala is constantly checked by food inspectors. The Quality Control Department operates out of a fully-equipped laboratory at Tirumala, to ensure the supply of pure drinking water, and the use of good-quality provisions. TTD also takes measures to prevent the spread of contagious diseases in Tirumala and Tirupati.'<sup>19</sup>

Given these significant contributions of temples, it is essential to integrate this topic into school textbooks so that students can understand the role of temples in India's socio-economic development. Learning about the multifaceted functions of temples allows students to gain a deeper appreciation for India's cultural and economic heritage. They can recognize the importance of preserving these institutions. Educating young minds about the impact of temples on economic development can inspire future generations. They may explore innovative ways to leverage cultural heritage for sustainable development.

To integrate the topic such as "Temples: Centre of Economic Activities in India" into the school curriculum under the 5+3+3+4 education system, it is essential to tailor the content to the developmental stages of students. In the Foundational Stage (till Class 2) and the Preparatory Stage (Classes 3-5), the focus should be on simple storytelling and visual aids that introduce temples as community centres. By the Middle Stage (Classes 6-8), students can begin to explore the broader roles of temples, such as their role in providing public facilities such as education and health through activities like role-play and cultural projects. Finally, in the Secondary Stage (Classes 9-12), students are ready for more detailed case studies and projects that highlight how temples contribute to local economies. The curriculum can delve into economic analyses, research projects, allowing students to critically assess the historical and contemporary roles of temples in India's economic development. This approach will not only enrich students' understanding of history, geography, and economics in interdisciplinary way but also develop critical thinking and problem-solving abilities about establishing connections of culture, religion, and economics.

Given their profound impact on India's economic development, it is essential to integrate temples and their economic contributions in school textbooks. By doing so, students will gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted roles temples have played in India's development, fostering a greater appreciation for the country's cultural and religious heritage. Educating young minds about this aspect of history can inspire future generations to explore how cultural heritage can be leveraged for sustainable economic growth.

The study is focused on the temples: Centre of Economic Activities in India. While it provides valuable insights into the multifaceted contributions of few temples, it does not ponder light on the non-economic activities such as 'Seva' and impact of other religious places such as Gurudwaras, Jain temples, Mosques, Churches, etc. Including these aspects of institutions in future researches could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how various religious places collectively shaped the economic development of India. Further research on the contributions of other religious institutions in providing public facilities and



economic activities in their surroundings is essential, not only to gain a holistic picture of India's economic development but also to promote the value of living together in diversity.

Ancient Indian temples have been instrumental in shaping the economic development of India through their diverse roles in facilitating trade and tourism through pilgrimage and festivals. These institutions not only served religious purposes but also acted as centres of economic activity as well as non - economic activity (Seva), contributing significantly to the development of local economies and communities. The legacy of temples continues to influence contemporary economic activities, particularly through tourism and cultural preservation, highlighting the enduring relevance of the cultural and religious heritage in economic development.

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