

## **An Understanding of Bharat's Mandir Arthvyavstha – Synthesizing Resource Allocation and Growth**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since ancient times, mandirs have been the hallmark of Bharat's cultural and spiritual heritage. More than places of prayer, the "Mandir ecosystem" has historically nurtured the Dharmic cultural and social milieu. Serving as repositories of knowledge, centers of charity, art and tradition, mandirs held administrative power, governed local self-governance and administered justice. They provided venues for community gatherings and entertainment, thus serving societal sustenance. In their multifaceted roles, mandirs in Bharat evolved into vibrant economic hubs, offering livelihoods to local communities. The symbiotic relationship between mandirs and civilization has long intertwined spirituality with community sustenance and economic prosperity and socio-economic landscape. Strategically placed along vital trade routes, ancient mandirs were linchpins in extensive trade networks, fostering cross-cultural interactions and the exchange of ideas. This paper delves into how the *arthvyavastha* of mandirs in Bharat shaped resource allocation and underscores the huge impact ancient mandirs had on the socio-economic framework of Indian Subcontinent.

**Keywords:** Mandir, Arthashastra, Bharat, Ancient, Economy

### **INTRODUCTION**

Mandirs have maintained a central role in Bharat's cultural and spiritual heritage since ancient times. The term "Mandir" or "Mindira" originates from the Sanskrit language, combining 'mana' (inner self) and 'dir' (place), thus signifying a location where the inner self resides. A mandir serves as the divine abode of Bhagwan, embodying a sacred space that transcends the conventional function of a temple as merely a place of prayer.

The "Mandir ecosystem," sometimes referred to as the "Devalaya Ecosystem," encompasses the Temple Culture that has historically nurtured, sustained and disseminated the cultural and social milieu of Dharma since time immemorial. Mandirs in Bharat traditionally functioned as repositories of knowledge and education as well as centers of charity. They preserved art and tradition while holding administrative authority, governing local self-governance, and administering justice. Additionally, mandirs served the community by providing venues for gatherings and entertainment. In these multifaceted roles, temples in Bharat emerged as vibrant centers of economic activity, offering livelihoods to local communities and villages.

Throughout history, a symbiotic relationship has existed between Mandirs and civilizations, intertwining spirituality with community sustenance and economic prosperity. Ancient

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Bharatiya Mandirs played a significant role in the economic development of towns, supporting livelihoods through rituals such as Pooja, Bhog, and Prasad, as well as through cultural activities like dance, drama, and art. These mandirs also engaged in business and philanthropic activities. Located strategically along key trade routes, ancient mandirs were essential to the extensive trade networks across the country. They facilitated cultural exchange, supported commercial activities, and promoted socio-economic growth (Elisseeff, 2000). As centers of religious and cultural significance, these temples attracted pilgrims, traders and travelers from afar, fostering cross-cultural interactions and the exchange of goods, ideas and knowledge. Moreover, mandirs served as important landmarks for travelers, offering shelter, sustenance and spiritual guidance during their journeys.

The economic contribution of Indian mandirs is immense and far-reaching even in contemporary Bharat. Home to approximately 648,000 Mandirs across various states, the Bhartiya ecosystem underscores the deep-rooted significance of mandirs as institutions that serve not only as places of worship but also as centers of community life, art, and tradition, intricately woven into the daily lives of the people. The economic contribution of Indian mandirs is immense and far-reaching. According to the NSSO survey, the temple economy is estimated to be worth ₹3.02 lakh crore<sup>i</sup> constituting approximately 2.32 percent of India's GDP. This figure likely underestimates the actual impact, considering the engagement of informal sector.

In this paper, we dwell on the exploring how the *arthvyavastha* created by Mandirs in Bharat driven resource allocation, power dynamics, dissemination of knowledge and artistic patronage within the Indian context and highlighting how ancient mandirs have been shaping the face of socio-economic fabric of Bharat. A comprehensive review study has been conducted with searches using keywords like "temple economy," "mandir arthvyavastha," "economic impact of temples in India," "religious tourism in India," and "temple donations and revenues" across Peer-reviewed articles, books, government reports, and credible news sources published on using academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar etc. Insights from various sources were integrated and case studies and examples of ancient mandirs were positioned within the broader context of India's economic landscape, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the *Bharatiya Mandir Arthvyavastha*. The paper has been structured into an introduction and Section two discussing Multifaceted Role of Temples, followed by Section three shedding light on Temple-Led Urbanization, Section four presents Temples as Models of Economic Growth before concluding the discussion of the paper in Section five of the study.

## **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. Being the “Abode of Bhagwan”, the construction of a mandir involves a series of meticulous ritualistic procedures essential for sanctifying the site and invoking the divine presence. These rituals include *bhumi shodhana* (earth purification), *vastu-puja* (worship of the deities of the land), *balidana* (offerings to attendant spirits), *homa* (fire rituals), *prathameshtika-nyasa* (laying of

the first brick), and *garbha-nyasa* (sanctum consecration). Without these sacred rituals, the installation of the icon within the mandir's sanctum would fail to achieve the necessary divine consecration, rendering the space spiritually incomplete. But it is not only in its physical form that the Mandir reveals its spiritual significance; the concept of "darshan," the act of beholding the divine presence, completes the divinity of the place.

The origins of the 'Temple Ecosystem' and 'temple trade' are deeply rooted in the Vedic practice of Yajna, an intricate ritual of community participation and collective offerings in pursuit of *Dharma*. Yajna brought together various communities and societal strata, each contributing material and non-material resources for the collective welfare of the nation. This practice symbolized the reinforcement of human, social and national bonds on a grand scale. Consequently, Mandirs emerged as embodiments of this ethos of sharing, serving as centers for spirituality, knowledge, sustenance and material support. But being more than just spiritual havens, Mandirs have always held a distinguished and peerless position within Bharat emerging as multifaceted centers, encouraging social engagement and cohesion among communities. Construction of Mandir involves knowledge of Architecture to Acoustic, Astronomy to Cosmology, Geometry to Seismology etc. To sum it up, mandirs are places of science, technology, philosophy, art (craft, music, dance, theatre) and place of learning and driving local economies and trade.

#### *Mandirs as Gurukuls*

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 were passed down to generations (Selvamani, 2019). Schools (pathashalas) and seminaries (mathams) for the cultivation of Vedic studies and other branches of learning were patronised by the mandirs (Raman, 2023). Inscriptions highlight the educational and social roles of ancient Bharatiya Mandirs. The Vishnu mandir in Bahur near Pondicherry housed a Vedic college, while the Adipurisvara Mandir in Tiruvottiyur had a Vyakarana school with a special mandapa for Panini's sutras. Around 1000 CE, Anur in Chingleput District had a Salai teaching Veda, Grammar, Alankara, and Mimamsa. Ennayiram and Tribhuvanam were key centers for Sanskrit and Tamil learning, with detailed records of their students and teachers (Kannan, 2017). Enneagram had 270 junior and 70 senior students with 14 teachers, and the Sri Varadarajar Mandir at Kanchi taught Ubhaya-vedanta. In 1067 CE, Tirumukkudal had a college and hospital at the local Vishnu mandir. By 1121 CE, Peruvelur allocated land for Veda and Shastra scholars, providing housing near the mandir. Temples also promoted Tamil studies through donations for recitations. A 16th-century record at Tadikkombu near Madurai lists services for studying sacred texts. Temples offered comprehensive support, including grants and housing for students, supported professional artists, and played roles in community decisions, social and civic duties. The city's economy often centered around the temple, which represented the state rather than the raja. Mandir 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.

#### *Mandirs as Centres for Art and Culture*

Mandirs in ancient Bharat played a crucial role in (Waghorne, 2004) for preserving and transmitting cultural legacies as centers for art, culture, dance, music, drama, entertainment, performance spaces, dedicated halls for hosting festivals, theatrical performances, and music and dance recitals. An inscription at Meenakshi<sup>ii</sup> Amman Mandir, Madurai, mentions the land-grant given to a musician as *jivita*. He was honoured with a title "Pandya Vadayamarayar" Another record gives a list of eleven musicians who were honoured. They were experts in playing various instruments like Vira-maddalam, maddalam, timilai, Semamakkalam, Tirchinnam, etc. Another example is the Airavatesvara temple at Darasuram, known for its stone steps that produce seven different musical notes. Mandir orchestras, established during the Chola period, included instrumental music and Tevaram songs, with Nadasvaram orchestras performing daily during worship. These orchestras were supported by grants, ensuring musicians could focus on their art without needing external patronage, as seen in the preservation of Tamil music from ancient texts like *Silappadhikaram*. Classical dance forms, such as *Bharatanatyam*, originated and flourished in Mandirs. The Chidambaram temple features carvings of all 108 *Bharatanatyam* poses from the *Natyashastra*. Dance dramas, depicting stories from the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and Puranas, were commonly performed, enriching cultural and religious life. Inscriptions reveal the origins of drama in temples, with detailed guidelines for constructing drama halls found in texts like Bharata's *Natyashastra*. Mandirs hosted sacred dramas, such as those performed in Athur's Alagia Pandian Kudam, depicting scenes from epics and Puranas. Land grants, known as *kuthukani*, were provided to dramatists and dancers. Mandir paintings, often created using natural herbs and materials, have survived for centuries, showcasing the advanced science of natural colour development. These murals, like those in the Srirangam temple, depict episodes from sacred texts such as the Bhagavatam in a comprehensible style (Raman, 2023)

#### *Mandirs as Architectural Marvels*

Ancient Bharatiya mandirs exemplify a wonderful fusion of science, arts, and engineering, exhibited in their awe-inspiring architecture.. The Pallava emperors of Kanchi, particularly Mahendravarma Pallava (circa 590 CE), revolutionized temple architecture by constructing rock-cut cave temples. The Mandagapattu temple, dedicated to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, exemplifies this innovation, built without the aid of brick, mortar, timber, or metal<sup>iii</sup>. Temples like the Meenakshi Amman Temple at Madurai exemplify advanced engineering, sculpture and painting. The 6th-century Kailasa Temple at Ellora, carved from a single basalt rock, and the musical pillars of the Suchindram Temple in Kanyakumari produce a different musical note when tapped (Biswas, 2023). The Mahalaxmi Temple in Kolhapur, during the three day annual Kiranotsava, demonstrates sophisticated astronomical alignment, allowing sunlight to illuminate the devi's statue in a precise sequence - on the first day, the sun's rays fall on Mahalakshmi's feet, second on her middle and on the third day, they illuminate her entire vigraha. The architects of ancient Bharatiya mandir demonstrated an advanced and nuanced

understanding of mathematics, geography, physics and seismology, despite the absence of modern instrumentation. Mathematics in ancient India began with practical applications, particularly in designing and constructing altars for rituals. The *Sulbasutras*, associated with the Vedas, provided mathematical formulations for these purposes, showcasing early advancements in geometry and proportionality. The construction of idols, or murtis, in Hindu temples exemplifies the application of mathematical principles, particularly the Golden Ratio. In *Tantrasamuccaya*, the height of a Navatala bimba (idol) is divided into 108 parts, each called an *Angula* (Ramakrishnan, 1998). Further, Mathematics along with astronomy has been utilised in defining Time. Shashikant Jha highlights the intricate mathematical puzzle associated with the Kashi Vishwanath temple, involving three posts and 64 golden discs. This puzzle requires moving the discs from one post to another, following specific rules. Pujaris have been diligently performing this *samskar* since ancient times, symbolizing the cyclic nature of creation. Ancient Hindu architects demonstrated an advanced understanding of geography without modern technology. The Baan Stambh pillar inscription 'आसमुदांतदक्षिणध्रुवपर्यंत, अबधितज्योतिर्मार्ग' at Somnath Mandir notes that the temple lies directly along a straight line to the South Pole (Aiyer, 1946). Additionally, eight Shiva temples, including Kedarnath and Ramanathaswamy, are precisely aligned along the 79° E longitude. For over 1,000 years, large temples have withstood natural disasters, including earthquakes. In the 13th century, the Kakatiya dynasty built the Ramappa Temple using sandbox technology, formally recognized by Indian Archaeological Department and NIT Warangal in 1991. The foundation was filled with a mix of sand, granite powder, jaggery, and Terminalia Chebula, absorbing seismic vibrations and protecting the structure. A case in point is the The Meenakshi Sundareswarar Mandir. The Mndir, dedicated to Bhagwan Shiva (Sundareswara) and Devi Meenakshi, is centrally located in Madurai, with streets arranged in concentric squares around it, likened to a lotus in ancient Tamil literature. Each street bears the name of a Tamil month, reflecting the traditional procession routes for the deity during those months. Unique among temples, devotees worship Devi Meenakshi first, followed by the male deity. The temple boasts 33,000 statues on its towers and within its premises. The famed 1,000 Pillar Hall, now with 985 pillars, showcases diverse styles and statues. The temple also features five musical stone pillars that emit different musical notes when struck. Adjacent to the Garba Griha is a mandap with carvings of 108 dance poses. Recently, a "Chiththira Kavi" or picture poem, was discovered, written in a circular form that reveals a poem when read correctly. Historically, poets from the Sangam era launched their works here, emphasizing the temple's cultural significance. The 985 pillars are so arranged that the deity is visible from any point without obstruction. Despite its bustling atmosphere, the temple maintains a sound level below 80 dB and has no echoes. The Meenakshi Amman Mandir exemplifies the pinnacle of temple architecture, seamlessly blending art, culture, science and technology, with the entire city of Madurai developing around this magnificent structure.

#### *Mandirs as Pivots of Law and Order*

The presence of Mandirs 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. Further, Mandirs have historically served as community centers where panchayats convene to make decisions (Chawda, 2022). At the swayambhu Ganpati temple in Kanipakam, individuals often confess their guilt before appearing before the deity. Here, disputes are resolved by taking a dip in the sacred temple tank and swearing before the deity. Similar traditions exist at Golu Devata temples in Kumaun, notably in Chitai, Almora, where devotees submit petitions for swift justice. This deep-seated concept led Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III to name the court in Baroda as Nyaymandir, or Temple of Justice.

Mandirs 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 community dining. Prasad preparation is closely connected to Ayurveda, considering local produce, seasonal changes, the body's nutritional needs throughout the day, and above all, devotion. It integrates elements of economics, Ayurveda, and spirituality. Ingredients are chosen based on their appropriateness for the season and their inherent properties, or '*taseer*.' In northern Bharat, where winters are severe, warming spices such as *jaiphal* (nutmeg) and *kesar* (saffron) are essential during the colder months. Conversely, in the humid eastern regions of Bharat, where infections are more prevalent, *laung* (clove), known for its antiseptic qualities, is frequently used. This careful selection ensures that prasad is both beneficial and harmonious with the seasonal and regional needs (Geeta and Budhiraja, 2012). Temples also supported local farmers and vendors by purchasing their produce, receiving food donations and maintaining granaries to aid the local producer and trader. The Tirumala prasad has a centuries-old tradition, significantly contributing to the economy of Tirupati. Historical inscriptions indicate that the daily offerings of prasad far exceeded the consumption needs of donors and temple functionaries. This surplus led to a lucrative trade managed by a group of 11 vendors, known as *prasadakkar*, who sold the prasad to pilgrims. Typically, a donation yielded an annual return of 10%, with 25% going to the donor and 75% to temple functionaries. The *prasadakkar* paid a lease fee for the right to sell the prasad, a practice supervised by the *Sthanattars*. This trade allowed both temple functionaries and donors to profit, contributing to the economic prosperity of Tirupati (Dikshitulu and Neelima, 2017) and encouraging further endowments to the temple. The Jagannath Temple in Puri attracts over 10 million visitors annually, driving significant local tourism and revenue. *Mahaprasad* is prepared daily in large quantities under strict religious protocols, using rice, lentils, vegetables, and spices. *Mahaprasad* is cooked in large earthen pots using a traditional method in the communal kitchen, known as '*Ananda Bazar*.' This unique process, believed to be imbued with divine grace, ensures that the *Prasad* is distributed to millions of devotees, reinforcing its sacred significance and the temple's cultural heritage.

### *Mandirs as grounds of Festivals, Fairs and Celebrations*

Festivals and fairs, tirath, handicraft, toys celebrated in temples were given grandeur which was indicative of their economic progress. During the Amarnath yatra, local Muslims earn by selling walking sticks, puja items and Kashmiri shawls, with the walking stick business alone reaching Rs 40 lakh annually<sup>iv</sup>. Over 200 sellers distribute around 1,000 sticks each, priced at Rs 20 per stick, totaling 2,00,000 sticks sold. Local taxi operators also benefit by ferrying pilgrims to the Chandanwari base camp. These activities highlight how mandir rituals and yatras stimulate local commerce and livelihoods. Prayagraj Maha Kumbh 2013 generated 635000 jobs and revenue worth Rs. 12000 crore for the state of Uttar Pradesh Only, which increased to 1, 20,000 crore in 2019. 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. Temples played a pivotal role in nurturing and conserving Bharat's cultural heritage (Krusche & Bharne, 2012).

### *Mandirs as Stewards of Ecological Sustainability*

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. 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. In Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha mandir, Simhachalam, the idol of Varaha Narasimha is covered with sandalwood paste. The sandal paste is meant to calm the Varaha Narasimha, which is the aggressive form of Bhagwan Vishnu. The message is passed down to generation after generation about the properties of sandalwood i.e., it calms the mind and body, which can be helpful to common man in day-to-day life (Geeta and Budhiraja, 2012). Provision of fresh flowers for adornment and decoration boosts economy, but recycling them adds further economic value. Entrepreneurs and NGOs collect used flowers to make incense sticks and textiles, generating profits and providing jobs. Historically, divinity rendered by these temples bridged the conflict between ecology and trade. 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 Chittaurgarh (Meena, 2014).

## **TEMPLE-LED URBANIZATION: CATALYSTS OF ANCIENT URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

Most importantly, Temples helped in urbanization. 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). The urban planning was centred around our mandir and importance of economic activity

(Champaklakshmi, 1996) Take for instance, the city of Thanjavur, with the mandir at its center, developed around an *Ullalai* (inner quadrangle) for elite groups and a *purambadi* (outer circuit) for other professionals. Named after royalty, these areas housed palace servants, royal retinues, and various craftsmen requisitioned from across the kingdom. Royalty recruited workers from various regions of the kingdom, including Colamandalam and other mandalams, to serve the mandir and settle in Thanjavur. This influx included 48 musicians for hymn recitals, 400 dancing girls, dance masters, drummers, parasol bearers, lamp lighters, and craftsmen like tailors, braziers, goldsmiths, and astrologers. Brahmanas served as mandir staff and accountants, also arriving from different places. The peasantry and artisans who supplied the city with ritual furniture and services in general lived in the villages in the surrounding countryside. The distinctive character of Thanjavur as a city derives from the fact that it was a planted city-that it was created by a deliberate act of royal polity in imitation of a sacred bhakti centre with the mandir as its nucleus (Champaklakshmi, 1996). Similarly Palani Temple, one of Bhagwan Murugan's six primary abodes, ranks among the highest revenue-earning temples after Tirupati. Because of the temple, the town was constituted into a municipality on 1st April 1886 with a population of 13,315. Palani was upgraded as Grade II municipality in November 1949. Palani was further upgraded as grade I municipality in April 1982. Now it is functioning as selection grade municipality since from 01.12.1988. The total area of the town is 6.63 sq.km with a population of 70,467 as per 2011 census. In 2012, it generated Rs. 114.49 crores, with ticket sales alone totaling Rs. 25 crore. The temple efficiently utilizes its revenue, transforming Palani into the economic nucleus of its city. The temple supports diverse socio-economic activities, including educational institutions like Oriental and Arts colleges, Naadasvaram and Thavil schools, and welfare initiatives such as schools for the deaf and orphanages. It also funds health care through Siddha and allopathic hospitals, demonstrating extensive community support beyond religious functions.

The Hindu mandir is carefully designed. Positioned as the axis mundi, it includes a tall pinnacle above the garbhagriha, the sanctum where the deity resides. This pinnacle symbolizes the deity's power to grant spiritual liberation beyond material space. The characteristics of an architect of mandir is highlighted in *Samarangansutradhara* by Raja Bhoj, underscoring the importance of the role. The mandir architect must master architectural science, traditional shastras, mathematics, astronomy, and *chhandas*. They excel in drafting precise plans, measuring accurately, and are skilled in carpentry, stone-masonry and goldsmithy. A respected *sthapati* (architect) embodies these skills, revered for their engineering prowess and purity of mind in the profession. 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 to be always 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, craftsmen and labourers in their construction and upkeep, priests, choristers, musicians, cooks, and artisans. Sculpture was one of the great artistic achievements of Bharat in ancient times. The remarkable Chola and Kurkihara bronzes are immortal examples of this.



There were innumerable Shilpa shastras on the canonical requirements of good sculpture. Thus, 'the sculpture had to master six essentials according to sage Pippalada: the knowledge of stones; the compositional diagram; the carving and the dressing of stone; the arrangement of various elements of a sculpture; the representation of the mood of a piece; and the final integration of all its component parts' (Verma, 2021).

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. The Great Mandir of Tanjore supported 400 devadasis transferred from other temples, each receiving a *panga* consisting of a house and land yielding, 100 *kalanis* of paddy annually. Additionally, 150 such shares maintained 212 male professionals like dancers, musicians, drummers, tailors, goldsmiths and accountants. This group included singers of Ariyam and Tamil music styles. A choir of 50, paid three *kurunis* of paddy daily, performed Tiruppadiyam with musical accompaniment and filled vacancies by co-option. The mandir exemplified the highest standards of cultural excellence, governed by principles of dharma, serving as a unique social institution in medieval India (Sastri, 1955). 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 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 mandirs under the patronage of rulers and dynasties impacted nearby economies by fostering various crafts and industries. Lost wax casting, a prominent Chola technique, involves creating a wax model, covering it in clay, and baking it. The wax melts, leaving a clay mold for molten metal. Once cooled, the clay is removed, revealing the metal statue (Sharma, 2022). This method produced portable bronze deities, like Nataraja, as alternatives to stone idols. Sthapatis, the sculptors, continue this tradition in Swamimalai, Tamil Nadu, earning a Geographical Indication (GI) tag. They adhere to ancient Shilpashastra texts for precise measurements.

## **TEMPLES AS MODELS OF ECONOMIC GROWTH : AN ANALYSIS**

Economics and Arthashastra differ fundamentally. Economics, as a social science discipline, analyzes production, distribution and consumption of goods and services, disregarding

ethical, moral, philosophical and spiritual values. It values GDP, even if it includes pollution cleanup, crime, natural disasters, and wars, focusing on quantity over quality. In contrast, work for the community becomes a form of prayer, fostering non-exploitative activities and spiritual development, worshipping society as Samaaja Parameshwara, and ensuring success, which is what is Arthashastra (Singh, 2024).

A case study contrasting Detroit and ancient Indian Mandir towns illustrates this difference. Detroit, once the heart of the American automotive industry and a symbol of mass production, has seen a dramatic population decline. From 2000 to 2010, Detroit lost a quarter of its population due to cheaper manufacturing in Asia. Similarly, other American cities like Cleveland, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and Toledo, once part of the "New Economy," are now termed the "Rust Belt." In contrast, mandir towns like Puri, Varanasi, Ujjain, Madurai, Pushkar etc have sustained continuous habitation for thousands of years, centered around their Mandirs rather than industry. This *arthavyavastha* rendered by mandirs, has ensured their longevity and stability.

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 (Pattanaik, 2023). This accumulated wealth, in turn, fueled economic activities in surrounding areas, propagating trade and commerce.

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. Revenue streams flowed steadily into temple from lands, villages and produce, gifted generously by monarchs, merchants, devotees and landowners. Many businessmen allocated 1% to 5% of their profits to the mandir, considering Bhagwan as a silent partner. This ritualistic donation explains the substantial amounts often found in mandir hundis. Inscriptions at the Great Mandir of Tanjore reveal that Rajaraja's gifts, largely from war booty, included over 41,500 *kalanjus* of gold (about 500 lbs), jewels worth 10,200 *kasus*, and 50,650 *kalanjus* of silver (over 600 lbs). He allocated lands across his dominions, including Ceylon, yielding an annual income of 116,000 *kulams* of paddy (equivalent to 58,000 *kasus*), and a cash income of 1,100 *kasus* (Sharma, 2021). Royal grants were of two types: Sarvamanya, where entire villages were given to the temple, and Devadana, where taxes payable to the king were collected by the temple. These grants, donations and offerings once made became *Devaswa*—Property of the Deity. For instance, Rajaraja the Great allocated lands in multiple villages, including Ceylon, to generate an annual income of 11,600 *kalams* of paddy for temple employees. Temples maintained extensive flower and fruit gardens, managing agricultural operations across numerous villages through direct cultivation and leasing. 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-appointed agents supervised cultivation and harvest, ensuring produce was brought to the temple and measured accordingly. A 13th-century inscription mentions the appointment of village supervisors (Kankan-ippar) and their overseer (*Araindunirppan*). Labourers received wages in cash and

kind. In the leasing system, the temple received the owner's share (*melvaram*) of the produce, typically a 75:25 owner-cultivator ratio (Srinivas, 2023). During severe droughts, the temple's share was reduced to two-thirds. 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 relationship. Notably, Mandirs were further empowered by patronage of successive Hindu rulers and dynasties, such as the Pandya and Vijayanagar when they grew into epicenters of wealth and prestige (Meena, 2014).

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. Mandirs with ample resources, could undertake the task of converting waste lands into cultivable areas, as in 1467 CE, where a mandir purchased high-level uncultivable lands, leasing them to cultivators who reclaimed the land for agriculture (Singh, 2024). The lessees enjoyed the produce, paying taxes in gold or grain, incentivizing them to work hard on land reclamation. Inscriptions document various concessions and relief measures offered to farmers by the temples. Mandirs provided long-term agricultural solutions by facilitating irrigation systems. An inscription from 1495 records that Kandadai Ramanuja Ayyangar, an official at the mandir, allocated 1,300 *panam* from a grant for the excavation of an irrigation channel in the village of Vikramadityamangala<sup>v</sup>. The yield from this channel funded food offerings to deities, demonstrating how mandirs invested in sustainable agricultural improvements. 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. Thus, with vast expanses of land under their purview, managed by temple administrators, temples wielded influence over landholding patterns, thus shaping socio-political dynamics. Furthermore, temples strategically invested in livestock, assigning donated animals to specific shepherds, thus benefiting both individual shepherds and the broader agrarian community.

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 diverse societal strata. Taxes levied on commercial transactions provided funds for temple maintenance, facilitating celebration of local festivals, undertaking rituals, and the sustenance livelihoods of priests. The Tiruamattoor Mandir operated a school for sixteen blind men, teaching them *Tevaram* songs and providing for their maintenance through special funds. This reflects the Mandirs' role in promoting social responsibility and community service. In

CE 1068, the Vishnu Mandir at Thirumukudal featured a school, hostel, and 15-bed hospital, as per an inscription by Veerarajendra<sup>vi</sup> Chola. The endowment included provisions for a physician, a surgeon and various medicinal supplies. This initiative highlights the mandir's role in education and healthcare, maintaining detailed inventories of personnel and medicines, and ensuring the well-being of the community through continuous support and resources. 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. The Great Mandir of Tanjore housed 400 devadasis from other temples, each granted a *panga*, which included a house and land producing 100 kalanis of paddy annually. Scholars like B.K. Pandeya (1979) equated them to early money lenders, highlighting their crucial role in providing financial assistance to agrarian communities. Mandirs historically functioned as financial institutions for their devotees. 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. 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. At Srirangam, money endowments were used to provide commercial loans to businesses in Trichinopoly. 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."

Mandirs served as significant consumers. They require a wide range of commodities and services for daily activities and special events, including cereals, vegetables, spices, milk, honey, ghee, oil, sandalwood, kumkum, cloth, metal products, and clay pots. Shrinathji changes his cloths with matching adornments, every day eight times. The cloths change according to season, giving birth to variety of textile and designs. The elaborate Navratri decorations at Vaishno Devi Mandir, costing three crores, significantly boost the economy. Flowers from Delhi's Ghazipur<sup>vii</sup> market include 18,000 bundles of roses, 122,000 gerberas, 7,000 orchids, and 10,000 lilies. This process employs 350 to 400 decorators, providing substantial local employment. Other mandirs, like Kangra Devi and Jwala Devi, also use Ghazipur flowers, underscoring the economic impact of temple decorations. Devi Meenakshi at the Meenakshi Amman Mandir, Madurai, is adorned with jasmine(malligai) six times daily and the demand for jasmine<sup>viii</sup> is similar in mandirs across Bharat, boosting local economies. This tradition sustains a thriving jasmine industry, supporting eco-friendly practices and traditional flower-selling methods. Jasmine is a major commercial crop, especially in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where it is ideal for small farmers with less than one acre of land. Despite COVID-19 challenges, the reopening of mandirs further enhanced jasmine's demand and supply, benefiting small growers, with the price of jasmine touching a new high of Rs. 4,000 a kg at the Madurai Flowers Wholesale Market after post lockdown relaxations. These

demands provide a substantial boost to local economies, making mandirs major consumers in their communities.

## CONCLUSION

Mandirs in ancient Bharat were far more than religious sanctuaries; they were pivotal economic and cultural hubs strategically positioned along major trade routes. These sacred sites, such as the Somnath Temple near Veraval, Dwarka Temple, and the Shore Temple in Mahabalipuram, played a crucial role in encouraging economic growth and cultural exchange. Maritime temples, like the Konark Sun Temple and Padmanabhaswamy Temple, and inland sites such as the Kanchipuram and Khajuraho Temples, acted as vibrant nodes in extensive trade networks, driving regional prosperity through their strategic locations. In the northern and Himalayan regions, temples like Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain, Dashavatara in Deogarh, and Kedarnath in Uttarakhand were integral to trade routes that connected Bharat with distant lands, catalyzing both economic activity and cultural interactions. The Vaishno Devi Temple, emerging as a major tourism and trade center in Jammu and Kashmir, further exemplifies the dual role of temples in boosting local economies and facilitating spiritual journeys.

These temples served not only as places of worship but also as governing and administrative centers that supported diverse economic, political, and social activities. However, as trade routes evolved and communities migrated, some of these once-thriving centers, like Deogarh and Khajuraho, experienced a decline in economic significance. This shift underscores the interplay between commerce and migration, highlighting a need to further dwell on changes and impacts these trade routes brought on *Mandir Arthvyavastha*. Thus, the historical significance of these temples as economic powerhouses challenges conventional perceptions of their role, urging a re-evaluation of their multifaceted contributions to society.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2022/columnists/the-religious-economy---40-billion-and-growing.html>

<sup>ii</sup> The Wonder that is Madurai Meenakshi Temple by Santanam Swaminathan, [tamilandvedas.com](http://tamilandvedas.com)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://puratattva.in/mandagapattu-%E2%80%93-the-first-cave-temple-of-tamilnadu/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://m.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/j-k/local-residents-cash-in-on-amarnath-yatra-434197>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/content/3034/temples-of-irrigation-and-land-management/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2016/Jan/13/vaishnavite-shrine-with-college-hostel-and-hospital-868120.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Flowers from Ghazipur market adorns Vaishno Devi Temple, 6 October 2019, [business-standard.com](http://business-standard.com)

<sup>viii</sup> Price of jasmine hits the roof in flower market, 13 December 2021, [thehindu.com](http://thehindu.com)