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THE NATURE OF TEMPLES IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE OF MEDIEVAL KARNATAKA

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Abstract
Temples occupied a central position in the economic as well as religious life of medieval Karnataka. From the early medieval period through the age of the Kalyani Chalukyas, Hoysalas and Vijayanagara rulers, temples functioned not merely as places of worship but also as landholders, employers, centers of production, institutions of redistribution, and focal points of trade and urbanization. Their economic importance rested particularly on land grants, irrigation investments, agricultural production, merchant donations, craft activity, markets and the employment generated by temple institutions. In places such as Aihole, Lakkundi, Itagi, Evooru, Belavadi, Talakaadu, shrigeri, Gaddavalli, Belur, Halebidu Hampi, temples were closely connected with wider networks of villages, merchants, artisans and political authorities. Inscriptions constitute the principal evidence for reconstructing these activities. This article examines the major economic functions of temples in medieval Karnataka and argues that temples acted as important institutional links between agrarian production, craft production, commerce and political authority.

Keywords: Medieval Karnataka, temple economy, social life, land grants, agriculture, trade, merchants, artisans, Badami Chalukyas, Gangas,Kalyani Chalukya. Vijayanagara inscriptions

INTRODUCTION

The temple was one of the most important institutions of medieval South India. Its significance extended far beyond religious worship. In a predominantly agrarian society, temples accumulated land, received taxes and produce, employed large numbers of people and participated in the organization of local economic activity. Burton Stein's influential study of the medieval South Indian temple demonstrated that temples could occupy a central position in an agrarian economy through their control and management of land, revenue and endowments. Medieval Karnataka provides particularly rich evidence for studying this phenomenon. The region was successively influenced by the Gangas, Badami Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Kalyani Chalukyas, Hoysalas and Vijayanagara rulers. The inscriptions of these dynasties record donations of land, villages, money, livestock, produce and taxes to temples and religious institutions. The economic role of the temple therefore needs to be understood within a wider institutional framework. Temples were connected with agriculture, irrigation, land administration, craft production, employment, trade, markets and urbanization. They were also important meeting points between kings, local chiefs, merchants, cultivators and artisans.

SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF TEMPLE ECONOMY

The principal sources for studying the economic activities of medieval Karnataka are stone inscriptions, copper-plate grants, temple records, architectural remains and literary sources. Inscriptions are particularly valuable because they record actual transactions. They mention donors, recipients, quantities of land or money, taxes, irrigation facilities and the purposes for which donations were made. Research on the Western Gangas, for example, demonstrates that inscriptions provide evidence for agricultural expansion, irrigation and the donation

of land and villages to religious institutions. The concentration of inscriptions at major temple centres such as Aihole, Lakkundi, Belur, Halebidu and Hampi allows historians to reconstruct aspects of their economic organization. Aihole is particularly significant because inscriptions from the region provide evidence concerning merchant organizations such as the Ayyavole/Aihole merchant guild and their connections with temple complexes.

TEMPLES AS LANDHOLDERS

The most important economic function of medieval temples was their role as landholders. Kings, chiefs, merchants and other individuals donated agricultural land and sometimes entire villages to temples. Such grants were known by different terms in different contexts, including *devadāna*. The income generated from these lands was used to maintain worship, lamps, and festivals, feeding houses, temple buildings and personnel. The importance of land endowments is demonstrated particularly clearly by the inscriptional evidence from South India. Temples could control substantial agricultural resources, which were cultivated by peasants or leased to cultivators in return for a share of the produce. The temple therefore became an institutional intermediary between land and economic resources. The system also had implications for local agriculture. Temple lands required cultivation, maintenance and sometimes irrigation. Consequently, temple endowments could stimulate the expansion of cultivated areas. This created an economic chain:
Donor → Temple → Agricultural land → Cultivator → Produce/revenue → Temple services

TEMPLES AND AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Agriculture formed the foundation of the medieval Karnataka economy. Temples contributed to agriculture not only by receiving land but also by participating in the development of irrigation. The construction and maintenance of tanks, wells, canals and other water-management structures was particularly important in a region containing both fertile and semi-arid zones. Evidence from Karnataka inscriptions indicates that irrigation facilities were associated with processes of agrarian expansion. This is important because a temple endowment was not simply a transfer of land. In some circumstances, making the land economically productive required investment in water management and cultivation. Research on the Vijayanagara period similarly identifies temples as significant centers of agricultural investment and land control. Temple donations could be associated with the improvement of irrigation facilities and the expansion of productive land. Thus temples could participate in a cycle of:
Land grants → Irrigation → Agricultural expansion → Increased produce → Temple revenue → further economic activity

TEMPLES AS CENTRES OF EMPLOYMENT

Medieval temples were large institutions requiring a considerable workforce.
Priests were only one section of temple personnel. Temples also required:

- Accountants and administrators,
- Gardeners,
- Cooks,
- Watchmen,
- Musicians,
- Dancers,
- Drummers,
- Oil suppliers,
- Flower suppliers,
- Cleaners,
- Craftsmen,
- Sculptors,
- Builders,
- Scribes and

- Other service providers.

The Vijayanagara evidence illustrates the breadth of temple employment particularly well. Temple establishments could employ ritual specialists, managers, accountants, watchmen, storekeepers, musicians, gardeners and other workers, with payment sometimes being made in cash, kind or land.This meant that temple expenditure circulated through the local economy. Consequently, the religious activities of the temple generated continuous economic demand.For example, daily worship required:Flowers + oil + food + cloth + vessels + ornaments + musical services + labour

TEMPLES AND ARTISANS

Temple construction was an important source of employment for skilled artisans.
The great temples of medieval Karnataka required specialists in:

- Stone cutting,
- Sculpture,
- Architecture,
- Metalworking,
- Jewelry,
- Carpentry,
- Painting and Other crafts.

The construction of temples at Lakkundi, Belur and Halebidu demonstrates the scale of this artistic and technical activity. Lakkundi, for example, developed as an important center under the Western Chalukyas, with numerous temples and inscriptions. Evidence associated with the region also points to craft and commercial activity and to the relationship between merchants, monetary activity and temple donations. One inscription from Lakkundi dated to 1186 records a merchant's donation to the Nannesvara temple from income connected with minting. This illustrates an important feature of the medieval economy: commercial wealth could be converted into religious endowment, while temples in turn helped sustain local production and employment.

MERCHANT GUILDS AND TEMPLE PATRONAGE

Merchants were among the important patrons of temples. The relationship between merchants and temples were mutually significant. Merchants donated money, land or commodities to temples, while temple centers provided places around which commercial activity could develop. Aihole is particularly important in this respect. Inscriptions from the Aihole-Pattadakal-Badami region provide evidence concerning the activities of the Ayyavole merchant guild and its donations to temple complexes. This demonstrates that temple patronage was not exclusively a royal activity. Merchant groups and local economic elites also participated in temple patronage. The Hoysala period provides another striking example. The Hoysaleshvara temple at Halebidu was associated with a merchant named Ketamalla, who sponsored its construction in honor of King Vishnuvardhana. The king subsequently granted land whose agricultural income was intended to support the temple. This example demonstrates a three-way relationship:

Merchant patronage + Royal land grant + Temple institution

TEMPLES AND MARKETS

As temple institutions grew, they attracted economic activity around themselves. Temple towns frequently contained shops and market streets. The temple created demand for food, textiles, flowers, oil, metal objects, jewelry and other goods. Pilgrims and festival visitors also increased commercial activity. This process was especially prominent in Vijayanagara.At Hampi, major temples such as the Virupaksha, Krishna and Vitthala complexes were associated with urban spaces and market streets. The temple centers were connected to bazaars, workshops and surrounding villages. The development of temple-centered urbanism was one of the important characteristics of the later medieval South Indian economy. Burton Stein's work on South Indian urbanization emphasizes the importance of temple centers within the developing urban economy of the period. The temple therefore functioned as a kind of economic magnet:
Temple → Pilgrims and festivals → Demand → Shops and artisans → Market expansion → urban growth

THE VIJAYANAGARA PERIOD

The economic role of temples reached a particularly elaborate form under the Vijayanagara Empire (c. 14th–16th centuries)**.**Vijayanagara rulers made extensive donations to temples. These included:

- Agricultural lands,
- Villages,
- Gold,
- Money,
- Tax assignments,
- Buildings and Resources for ritual services.

At Hampi temple complexes formed important components of the urban landscape. Research on Vijayanagara temple urbanism identifies the close relationship between temples, bazaars, artisans and royal authority. Temples could also become involved in revenue collection and the regulation of economic activity. Evidence discussed by Nalini Rao indicates taxation associated with shops, weaving, cotton processing, washer men, salt production, crops and ferry services around Vijayanagara's temple-centered economic system. This shows that temples were not isolated religious institutions. They were connected to a network involving:
Royal court → Temple → Market → Artisan → Merchant → Village → Agricultural producer

TEMPLES AND URBANIZATION

The growth of temple institutions contributed to the development of towns.
Temple centers attracted:

1. Pilgrims,
2. Merchants,
3. Artisans,
4. Priests,
5. Administrators,
6. Agricultural producers,
7. Entertainers and
8. Service communities.

Consequently, settlements surrounding important temples could become economically differentiated urban centres.The relationship between religious establishments and urbanization is also visible in early medieval southern Karnataka. Research on Western Ganga inscriptions argues that demand generated by state institutions and religious establishments stimulated the movement of goods and services and contributed to the expansion of existing exchange centers.
Therefore, the temple should be seen not simply as a building but as part of a larger economic landscape**.**

REDISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH

Another important function of temples was the **redistribution of economic resources**.
Wealth entered the temple through:

- Royal donations,
- Merchant donations,
- Land grants,
- Taxes or assigned revenues,
- Individual endowments,
- Offerings and
- Income from temple lands.

The temple then redistributed these resources through:

- Wages,
- Payments to artisans,
- Purchase of commodities,

- Agricultural investment,
- Maintenance of buildings,
- Festivals,
- Feeding houses and Religious services.

Cynthia Talbot has described the South Indian temple as an important focal point for economic redistribution, in which material goods could be transformed into religious prestige and social influence. Thus, religious donation had economic consequences beyond the immediate religious purpose of the gift.

POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND TEMPLE ECONOMY

The economic role of temples was closely connected with political authority. Kings presented themselves as protectors of religion and generous donors. Temple patronage helped rulers establish relationships with local elites and religious institutions. Under Vijayanagara, royal donations to temples formed part of a broader system of political and religious patronage. Royal benefaction supported temple institutions while simultaneously linking temples to the authority of the state. However, it would be misleading to describe temples simply as instruments of the state. Merchants, local elites, communities and temple personnel were also important participants in temple economies. The temple was therefore a negotiated institutional space connecting political authority with local society.

THE TEMPLE AS AN ECONOMIC INSTITUTION

The various activities discussed above demonstrate that medieval Karnataka temples performed several economic functions simultaneously. The temple consequently operated simultaneously as a religious institution, landholding institution, employer, consumer, patron and economic center.

Economic function	Major activity
Landholding	Control of agricultural land and villages
Agriculture	Cultivation and management of temple lands
Irrigation	Tanks, wells and water-management facilities
Employment	Priests, artisans, musicians, administrators and service workers
Craft production	Sculpture, construction, metalwork, textiles and other crafts
Trade	Merchant donations and commercial exchange
Markets	Shops and bazaars around temple centers
Redistribution	Circulation of land, produce and monetary resources
Urbanization	Growth of temple-centered settlements
Political economy	Royal and elite patronage

LIMITATIONS AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ISSUES

The economic importance of temples should not be exaggerated. Not every temple possessed extensive land or functioned as a major economic institution. The scale of economic activity varied according to the size, location and political importance of individual temples.

Moreover, inscriptions disproportionately record donations and formal transactions. They provide less information about ordinary cultivators and laborers. Therefore, the inscriptional record must be supplemented by archaeology, architecture, literature and comparative economic history. There is also an important historiographical debate concerning the interpretation of South Indian temple economies. Scholars have variously emphasized temples as centers of redistribution, institutions of agrarian integration, mechanisms of political authority, and contributors to urbanization. Burton Stein's work was especially influential in directing attention toward the temple's economic functions, while later scholarship has examined the diversity of temple institutions and the agency of merchants, local elites and producers.

CONCLUSION

Temples played a major role in the economic life of medieval Karnataka. Their significance cannot be reduced to religious worship. Through land grants and agricultural management, they became important participants in the agrarian economy. Through irrigation works they could contribute to agricultural expansion. Through their demand for goods and services they supported artisans, merchants and numerous occupational groups. Through donations and redistribution they helped circulate wealth. Through their association with markets and pilgrimage they contributed to the growth of urban centres.The evidence from Aihole, Lakkundi, Halebidu, Belur and Vijayanagara demonstrates that temple institutions were deeply integrated into the economic structures of medieval Karnataka. At the same time, temple economies were not independent systems: they were embedded in relationships involving rulers, merchants, cultivators, artisans and local communities. The most useful way of understanding the medieval Karnataka temple, therefore, is as a multi-functional institution situated at the intersection of religion, agriculture, commerce, labour and political authority. Its economic importance was a consequence of precisely this combination of functions.

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