

The South Indian Temple: A Continuum of Sacred, Social, and Administrative Life in Contemporary Society

Dr. Ramadevi Sekhar

*Director, Centre of Excellence Art & Culture, Shri Shankarlal Sundarbai Shasun Jain College for Women,
Chennai*

Abstract- South Indian temples have, over centuries, transcended their primary role as spaces of worship to evolve into enduring institutions that are deeply embedded in the social, cultural, administrative, and economic life of the region. Far from being mere centers for ritualistic devotion, these temples emerged as multifaceted establishments that anchored communities, facilitated social organization, provided employment, preserved artistic and literary traditions, and regulated land and resource management. Their expansive influence extended into spheres such as education, dispute resolution, public welfare, and local governance, thereby positioning the temple not only as a sacred sanctuary but also as a civic and cultural nucleus.

The institutionalization of temples, particularly from the Pallava, Chola, and Vijayanagara periods, was marked by highly organized administrative hierarchies, meticulous record-keeping, structured financial audits, and a codified system of responsibilities for various stakeholders—from the priests and musicians to the stewards of the treasury and the committees that oversaw temple estates. These functions were often documented in detail in stone and copper plate inscriptions, offering invaluable insight into how temples operated as self-sustaining ecosystems rooted in accountability, public service, and ethical stewardship. This article seeks to examine the South Indian temple as a dynamic institution, analyzing its inner workings—its administrative mechanisms, workforce distribution, endowment systems, land management practices, and interaction with the surrounding community—based on inscriptional evidence and surviving traditional practices. It further explores the relevance of these historic models in contemporary contexts, where many temples, now under state or trust administration, are often viewed through a revenue-centric lens, sometimes sidelining the spiritual and communal aspects of their original design.

By revisiting the inscriptions, structural frameworks, and management philosophies that underpinned

ancient temple institutions, the paper argues for a reorientation of modern temple management systems. It advocates for aligning current practices with traditional frameworks that prioritized sacred responsibility (*dharma* duty), community welfare, and participatory governance. Such a paradigm shift could revitalize temple culture, making it once again central to the spiritual and socio-economic upliftment of the communities it serves.

Index terms- South Indian Temples, Temple Institutions, Sacred and Civic Spaces, Temple Administration, Epigraphy (Temple Inscriptions), Pallava, Chola, Vijayanagara dynasty, Temple Economy, Land Endowments, Resource Management, Temple Governance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The temple in South India has historically served as more than a mere locus of ritual devotion—it functioned as a confluence of the sacred and the secular, embodying a deeply integrated model of social organization. While its sanctity drew the devout into its precincts for religious rites and spiritual fulfillment, the temple's societal role extended far beyond worship. It addressed a wide spectrum of human needs—spiritual, economic, administrative, artistic, and educational—making it the nucleus of public life. The Tamil proverb "*Koil illāda ūril kūliyum illai*" (In a town without a temple, not even gruel is available) poignantly captures the indispensable position of the temple within the traditional village or town ecosystem. This aphorism is not simply metaphorical but rooted in the economic and functional reality of pre-modern South Indian society, where temples often played a foundational role in ensuring food security, employment, and social order.

Temples were dynamic centers that hosted a

multiplicity of functions. They were repositories of knowledge and learning, where religious texts, music, dance, and classical literature were not only preserved but actively propagated. They served as venues for public gatherings, village assemblies (*sabhas*), festivals, theatrical performances, and philosophical debates. Inscriptions from temples across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala describe donations for festivals (*utsavas*), the employment of artists and musicians, the allocation of land and resources to scholars, and the endowment of schools or *ghatikas*. The sacred environment of the temple lent legitimacy and solemnity to these activities, fostering a sense of collective participation and ethical engagement.

Dr. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, the eminent historian of South Indian civilization, aptly encapsulates the temple's integrative role: **"The temple was the heart and soul of the village or town. Around it revolved the life of the people in all its aspects."*¹ This observation is corroborated by a multitude of inscriptional records that indicate the temple's involvement in resource distribution, land management, local governance, and the adjudication of disputes. For instance, the village assembly often met in the *mandapas* (halls) of the temple, and legal agreements or property transactions were frequently witnessed before the deity, emphasizing the sacred sanction accorded to civil acts.

The construction and maintenance of temples were treated as both *dharmic* (righteous) and civic responsibilities. A profound sense of spiritual accountability animated the rulers, donors, and common people alike. Old and dilapidated temples were rarely allowed to fall into ruin. Renovation and reconstruction efforts were undertaken with collective enthusiasm, funded either through royal patronage or community donations. The tradition of *jeernodharana* (temple renovation) was a sacred duty, accompanied by ritual sanctification and festive celebration. Inscriptions often record that donors gave not only gold, jewels, and lands, but also cattle, oil, lamps, and services to ensure the ongoing daily and seasonal worship, lighting of lamps (*deepa-dana*), and feeding of devotees.

This public orientation of the temple continued well into the late medieval and early modern periods. Even during times of political turbulence or regime change, temples remained resilient as cultural institutions.

Their inner economies and social hierarchies allowed them to adapt and sustain their multifaceted functions. The temple, therefore, was a living entity—sacred yet utilitarian, divine yet deeply human in its engagement with society.

In contemporary South Indian society, despite the transformations wrought by urbanization, secular governance, and shifting religious practices, temples still retain much of their foundational relevance. They continue to serve as spaces where tradition and modernity intersect—hosting not only daily worship and annual festivals but also language classes, music concerts, spiritual discourses, and cultural training. The rituals of *annadanam* (community feeding), support for artisans, and temple-based tourism provide both spiritual merit and livelihood for many.

II. ECONOMIC BACKBONE AND EMPLOYMENT HUB

Temples in medieval South India were economic powerhouses. The daily functioning of a temple required a structured workforce. The deity was considered the sovereign head, and temple servants were organized in a hierarchical structure.

According to Dr. Burton Stein, "The temples were not merely spiritual centers; they were vast economic entities that administered land, employed thousands, and acted as treasuries for state and private wealth."² The presence of agricultural laborers, musicians, dancers, sculptors, accountants, and administrators attests to this multifaceted economic role.

The devadāna system (endowed villages) enabled temples to sustain themselves without relying on external income. Temple workers were paid in kind and land grants. These villages produced food and goods that supported temple staff and community services.

The administration of South Indian temples was an elaborate and highly structured affair, rooted in precision, accountability, and sacred duty. The functioning of a temple was not left to arbitrary or unregulated practices; rather, it was governed by a meticulous administrative framework that ensured the smooth execution of rituals, maintenance of temple properties, and fulfillment of community services. The pyramid of temple administration—with the deity at its apex—was populated by a vast workforce of priests, artisans, accountants,

musicians, dancers, treasurers, record-keepers, and land managers, each with defined roles and responsibilities.

Inscriptional records from the Chola, Pandya, and Vijayanagara periods provide ample testimony to the sophistication of temple administration. At the core of this system were various specialized bodies and officials, many of whom were drawn from the local elite, religious functionaries, and learned communities.

Maheshvaras and Pan-Maheshvaras: Religious Functionaries with Administrative Power

The *Maheshvaras*—members of the Shaiva religious order—played a pivotal role in the administration of temples, particularly those associated with Shaivism. These individuals were not only ritual experts but also administrative stewards. They often resided within the temple or adjoining *mathas* (monastic institutions) and were involved in overseeing temple activities, managing endowments, and supervising the workforce. The *Pan-Maheshvaras* formed a collective body that participated in decision-making processes, especially those related to temple land management and festival arrangements.

Maheshvara Kankani Seivar: Supervisors of the Supervisors

Another unique administrative unit found in several inscriptional records is the *Maheshvara Kankani Seivar*—a supervisory group tasked with ensuring the welfare and efficiency of the Maheshvaras themselves. Their function illustrates the multi-tiered structure of oversight within temple systems. These officials were often granted lands (as seen in several copper-plate inscriptions) in return for their services, pointing to a self-sustaining model of temple employment.

Pandaram and Sri Pandarattar: Guardians of the Temple Treasury

The term *Pandaram* referred to the temple treasury, and *Sri Pandarattar* were the custodians responsible for safeguarding the financial resources of the temple. The treasury was more than a storage of wealth; it was the nerve center of the temple's material infrastructure. Donations received in the form of gold, silver, copper, coins, cattle, or grains were

meticulously accounted for. Inscriptions detail the weighing, cataloging, and allocation of these resources for specific functions such as lamp lighting (*deepa-sthambam*), feeding pilgrims (*annadana*), maintaining flower gardens (*nandavanam*), and sponsoring educational activities.

Tanattar: The Executive Committee

The *Tanattar* constituted the temple's managing committee. These officials were often chosen from the local assembly (*sabha* or *ur*) and held the critical responsibility of recording all transactions in both stone and copper plates. Their duties included appointing assistants, engraving deeds on temple walls, and ensuring the legal sanctity of all administrative acts. As stewards of transparency, they played a key role in preserving public trust and institutional continuity.

Varia Perumakkal: Land Record Keepers

The *Varia Perumakkal* were a class of officials dedicated to managing the tax-exempt lands (*iraiyili* or *devadana*) gifted to temples. These lands formed the economic backbone of temple activities. Inscriptions—such as those from Kanchipuram, Thanjavur, and Chidambaram—highlight how the *Varia Perumakkal* maintained detailed records of boundaries, tenants, yields, and disputes. Their function was not just clerical; it was strategic in preserving the temple's material base.

III.A MODEL OF SACRED ACCOUNTABILITY

What is particularly remarkable is the degree of accountability embedded in the temple administrative structure. Temple finances were regularly audited, and mismanagement or embezzlement was not tolerated. Inscriptions from the reign of Kulottunga III (c. 1196 CE, Kamarasavalli), Rajaraja I, and others explicitly mention punitive measures taken against corrupt officials. Lands were confiscated from defaulters, and in some cases, names were struck off from commemorative records—an enduring social penalty. These systems illustrate an advanced ethical framework where sacred trust was harmonized with professional administration.

IV. ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURES AND ROLES

South Indian temples, particularly those built during the Chola and Vijayanagara periods, had a highly sophisticated administrative system. Inscriptions serve as vital sources for reconstructing these structures.

The *Tanattar* (Managing Committee)

They supervised temple transactions and ensured proper documentation on stone and copper plates. They maintained financial records, land grants, and audit reports. They even appointed assistants, reflecting a system of checks and balances.

Maheshvaras or *Panmaheshvaras*

These were ascetics or temple-based Shaiva scholars who resided in the temple premises or in attached *mathas*. They had a role in spiritual guidance and temple administration.

Maheshvara Kankani Seivar

Entrusted with ensuring the welfare of Maheshvaras, they received land for their services, reflecting the close relationship between temple economy and personnel welfare.

Pandaram and *Sri Pandarattar*

The treasury and its custodians. The *Pandaram* referred to both the wealth and the officials who managed it. As the repository of donations, it was critical to temple operations.

Varia Perumakkal

Specially designated to record tax-exempt lands (*iraiyili*) given to the temple, ensuring accurate documentation and protection of temple properties.

These positions reflect a decentralized yet tightly managed administrative mechanism. The roles were hereditary in some cases but often based on skill and devotion. Inscriptions from Kamarasavalli under Kulottunga III (1196 CE) and Rajaraja Chola I highlight how serious temple administration was, with punishments meted out for misappropriation or negligence.

V. INSCRIPTIONS AS WITNESSES OF GOVERNANCE

Epigraphic evidence reveals a meticulous system of resource management. In the Chola period, many temples-maintained records of daily expenditures, donations, festivals, and even punishments for delinquent behavior.

An inscription from the reign of Kulottunga III in Kamarasavalli details the appointment of the *Tanattar* to oversee land grants and temple activities. Rajaraja's Thanjavur Brihadisvara Temple inscriptions provide financial statements, highlighting the allocation of funds for lamp-lighting, feeding Brahmins, and education.

Another inscription from the Chidambaram temple mentions an official named *Perunguri Mahasabha*, a village assembly entrusted with managing temple-endowed lands. Their duties included auditing temple finances annually—a practice that modern institutions would do well to emulate.

These records also speak of community participation. A donor could stipulate the exact use of his donation—such as the number of lamps lit or daily food offerings—underscoring accountability in temple transactions.

VI. SYSTEMS OF AUDIT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Temples regularly audited their finances. Misappropriation, delay in implementing donor wishes, or dereliction of duties led to punitive measures. The Chola administration maintained a sophisticated judiciary and appeal system even within temple contexts.

For example, in a record from Tribhuvanam Temple, an official was removed and punished for failing to fulfill a donor's instructions. Temple lands could not be sold or mortgaged without permission, showing the legal sanctity granted to religious endowments. As historian Dr. R. Nagaswamy writes, "Temple administration in ancient Tamil country was democratic and transparent to a remarkable degree. It was a form of self-governance imbued with sacred responsibility."³

VII. TEMPLES AS CUSTODIANS OF SOCIAL ORDER

Temples served as community centers. Festivals were communal celebrations, where social hierarchies were momentarily blurred in a collective religious fervor. The *Theru* (chariot) festival in Tamil Nadu is a prime example, where people from all walks of life unite in pulling the deity's chariot.

Marriage alliances, dispute resolution, educational instruction (particularly in *Agama* and Vedic studies), and cultural training in music, dance, and painting were all undertaken within temple premises. The *Goshti* or assembly of learned scholars conducted weekly discourses.

VIII. RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Even today, temples in South India are more than spiritual havens. They provide jobs to thousands—from priests to cleaners, from accountants to flower sellers. The economic ecosystem around major temples like Madurai Meenakshi, Rameshwaram, Tiruvannamalai, and Srirangam is substantial.

However, there has been a perceptible shift in temple management priorities. With growing state control, some argue that temples are being run as revenue-generating institutions rather than community-service models. The emphasis on donations and ticketed worship (*archanai*) sometimes alienates devotees.

Yet, many traditional temples continue to uphold age-old practices. The *Kumbhabhishekam* (temple reconsecration) ceremonies continue to draw thousands, often funded by public contributions. Renovation efforts, as seen in Thiruvarur and Kanchipuram, evoke mass participation.

IX. TOWARDS A PARADIGM SHIFT

There is a need to channel historical practices into contemporary temple management. The "maximize revenue" approach should give way to a community-first model. Modern temple boards must be trained in inscriptional history and traditional management practices.

An integrated model that includes historians, community elders, and trained administrators can bridge the gap between tradition and modern

governance. Public access to financial audits, digitization of temple records, revival of traditional endowments, and community consultations can restore the sanctity and inclusivity of temple life.

As Mahatma Gandhi noted, "*Temples are not just for worship, but for the awakening of the community's soul.*" That awakening requires not just ritual precision but ethical governance.

X. CONCLUSION

Temples in South India have, for centuries, nurtured the soul and the society in equal measure. Their structured administration, wealth management, community participation, and spiritual outreach made them more than religious spaces—they were life-affirming institutions. The need today is to revisit these systems, to learn from the *Tanattars* and *Maheshvaras*, and to reclaim temples as centers of holistic living and governance.

In an era of rapid urbanization and commercialization, temples continue to stand as resilient symbols of shared heritage, moral responsibility, and community resilience. Preserving their multifaceted legacy is not just about conservation—it is about conscience.

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