

Sacred Centres, Living Economy:The Role of Temples in Birbhum

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Abstract:*Pilgrimage travel, whether for religious faith or personal interest, is rapidly increasing across the world. People visit holy places for various reasons. Some are deeply religious, some follow family or social traditions, and others travel simply as tourists. Today's pilgrims can be seen along a wide spectrum—from spiritual seekers to secular tourists. As a result, the difference between pilgrimage and tourism is gradually becoming less clear. Apart from these Peethasthans, notable tourist attractions include Bakreshwar, the Buddhist Stupa, Shikhar Deul, Buddha Statue, Tribhanga Vishnu, Svarnamangala Temple, Ichai Ghosh's Deul, Siddheshwari Temple, Kankaleswari Temple, and the 108 Shiva Temples. Among the hills, Mamabhagne and Garh Panchakot are significant. The main festivals and celebrations include Shiva's Gajan, Dharma Puja, Nabanna, Makar Parab, Bhadu Parab, Tusu Parab, Ghetu Parab, Itu Parab, Chhata Parab, Bandha Parab, Dasai, Eid, etc.¹ The Tarapith temple is considered the most important religious centre in the Birbhum district.² This study examines how tourism can support regional development in Birbhum district, with special focus on cultural and religious tourism.*

Keywords: Cultural Preservation , Heritage, Socio-Cultural, Temple, Tourism, etc.

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Introduction

Governments, businesses, and public organisations are highly interested in how tourism influences the economy at the national, state, and local levels. Tourism creates employment opportunities and generates income, particularly during festivals and special events.³ When tourists spend money, it benefits not only hotels and transport services but also many other sectors of the community. This process is known as the “multiplier effect,” where the spending of one visitor helps several people earn a livelihood. Because of these economic advantages, tourism has gained importance and recognition as a major industry. Therefore,

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governments often formulate supportive policies, as tourism affects the overall development of a region. The tourism sector depends on cooperation between the government, private businesses, and local communities.

In Birbhum district, folk arts that developed around temples—especially Baul music—play a significant role in attracting tourists.⁴ Various Shiva temples, Shakti Peethas, and other well-known pilgrimage sites are especially important in this context. From ancient times, temples dedicated to Shiva, Kali, and Radha Binod have been regarded as sacred places of worship by local people. Around major religious centres such as the Tarapith Temple and the Kankalitala Temple, many economic activities have developed over time.⁵ The number of hotels in these areas has increased significantly. Additionally, numerous food stalls, flower shops, and stores selling religious items have been established. As a result, local people's incomes have risen, and their economic conditions have improved. Pilgrimage-centred tourism has also led to the expansion of transport and communication systems. In particular, the number of toto (e-rickshaw) vehicles and other local transport services has grown, creating employment opportunities for many residents. Thus, religious tourism has contributed not only to cultural preservation but also to the economic development of the region. In addition, cultural and folk arts have also developed in these regions. Baul songs, jatra performances, and various religious and cultural programmes are organised around the temples. These activities are mainly managed by local clubs and organisations, which help preserve local culture and strengthen the local economy

Historical Perspective of Temple Tourism in Birbhum

India is a country rich in temples. The concept of temple architecture is very grand in the thought of ancient sages and philosophers of India. Most of the temples have been established with the financial support of the Indian royal family with devotion and respect. The Pancharudra temples of Birbhum still exist in the environment as a very valuable asset of classical. They remain important cultural and historical assets, preserving the region's artistic traditions and spiritual heritage. One of the most beloved and proud places for the local people of Dubrajpur in Birbhum district is Pahareswar. The hill known as Mama-Bhagne (maternal uncle and nephew) is emotionally connected with the local community. The presiding deity of Pahareswar is Devadidev Mahadev (Lord Shiva). The Shiva temple stands on the southern side of the hill, near a cremation ground. It is believed that there is no man-

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made Shiva lingam here; rather, the sacred stone fell naturally from a huge rock above. Beside it lies another small round stone block, and both are worshipped as sacred symbols of Lord Shiva.

A Marwari businessman, in fulfilment of his vow for a child, built a Shmashan Kali temple near the Pahreshwar temple.⁶ In Dubrajpur, there was also a long-cherished desire among devotees to establish a monastery or akhra (religious center). Later, after receiving land from the Dubey Raja, a Gauranga or Mahaprabhu Akhra was established in Nayak Para, dedicated to the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The Hanumanji temple and Gaushala in Dubrajpur are wonderful examples of Rajasthani architecture. In front of this temple complex stands the Rajarajeshwari Temple, built by Raja Ramaranjan Chakraborty, the ruler of Hetampur. Inside the large hall beyond the wide veranda is the idol of Goddess Rajarajeshwari.⁷ Near Mama–Bhagne hill, on a cremation ground, a Kali temple was built by the warrior Raghunath. At present, it houses one of the most famous and largest Mother Goddess idols in the area. Kuchil Chakraborty of the Hetampur dynasty built three Shiva temples at Kadamtola to the south. The Gauranga temple is located near Ranjan Palace, also known as Hazar Duari. It is said that the king began constructing this temple after his wife, Padmasundari, had a dream. Their family deity is Radha Ballabhaji.⁸

Sir Shambhunath Banerjee's wife, Sushma Devi, built the Labardeshwar Temple in 1915, believing that worship and bathing there would cure her heart ailments. It is said that many diseases are cured by bathing at Labardeshwar.⁹ Rajnagar in Birbhum is known for its historic temples, local fairs, and rich terracotta art. Prominent temples include Maa Bhabatarini Mandir (Baraban Tantipara), Saljor Hanuman Mandir, and Maa Siddhashari Kali Mandir. Nearby Hetampur is famous for the Hetampur Rajbari with its 999-door palace (Hajar Duari) and the surrounding ancient temples. Radha-Madhav, the household deity of the Hetampur royal family, is located here. Near the palace, visitors can also see the Diwanji Mandir of the Mitra family, which is dedicated to Lord Vishnu.¹⁰ The terracotta work of this temple is exceptional. Other important religious sites in and around Rajnagar include the Dharmaraj Temple (Perul Road), Tantipara Beltala Durga Mandir, Maa Teoyari Kali Mandir, Addiraburi Kali Mandir, Ashna Kartik Mandir, and Belera Durga Mandir. The temples of Fullara, Kankali, Suratheshwar, Rakhreshwar, Japeshwar, and others have undergone Sanskritization in various ways in recent times. Artistic entrance arches have been constructed at Suratheshwar, Fullaramhapeeth, and Kankalitala. Additionally, Pranab

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Mukherjee built a “Rajalakshmi-Toran” in honour of his pregnant wife for the pilgrims visiting the Japeshwar Temple.¹¹ In Dey Para, there is a famous Nrisinha (Nara-Sinha) temple. Both Ballal Sen and Laxman Sen were great devotees of Lord Vishnu, particularly of the Nrisinha (Vishnu in his man-lion form). The Murarai Thana’s Paikarr Pura region is known as a sacred place dedicated to Lord Narayan (Vishnu). It is said that Narayan, who once destroyed a demon named Mur, is worshipped here as Murari.¹²

Another sacred place of Birbhum is Bakreshwar Hot Spring, mentioned in the Puranas and epics.¹³ According to legend, because of a curse from his father (according to some versions, due to the wrath of Indra), the eight limbs of Sumati’s son became crooked. Hence, the sage came to be known as Ashtavakra. Seeking freedom from disease, Sage Ashtavakra practised Shaivism in the village of Dihi and attained spiritual enlightenment. From this legend, the place came to be known as Bakreshwar Dham. Besides these temples, there are several Shakti Peethas that attract the largest number of pilgrims. In particular, sacred sites like the Tarapith Temple and the Kankalitala Temple are considered highly holy and important pilgrimage centres by devotees. Tarapith Temple is a famous Shaktipeetha dedicated to Goddess Tara and known for tantric practices. Many devotees visit daily, and the temple tank is believed to have healing power. Fullara Temple is another sacred site near Santiniketan, known for its annual fair and mythological importance. Kankalitola Temple is one of the sacred Shakti Peethas of Birbhum. According to legend, the bones (or skeleton) of Goddess Sati fell on the bank of a sacred tank at this place.¹⁴ Because of this mythological belief, the site became a holy centre of worship. It is said that in ancient times, a form of the Goddess was established there, and the idol was symbolically associated with 108 human heads. The prospects of rural tourism in Bakreshwar are mainly based on religious tourism. Most visitors come to see the Mahishamardini Temple, an ancient temple known for its historical and mythological importance. The temple has carvings of Goddess Durga and other Hindu deities. It is believed to be associated with Goddess Sati, which makes it a sacred place for devotees. Another important attraction is the Bakranath Shiva Temple, also known as Bakreshwar Shiva Temple. It is considered one of the Shakti Pithas, where Sati’s eyebrow is believed to have fallen. Due to its religious significance, many tourists visit the area each year, boosting rural tourism in Bakreshwar.

Cultural Preservation

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Fairs are organised around the temple, and various cultural art forms are displayed. Through these festivals and performances, local culture flourishes and religious and traditional values become stronger in society. Birbhum is known for its strong religious traditions and rich cultural heritage. The district preserves its identity through famous temples, fairs, folk music, and rituals that have continued for centuries. Cultural preservation is also seen in Baul music and folk traditions, especially during the Kenduli fair near Jaydev Kenduli. These religious and cultural practices not only protect heritage but also strengthen social unity and the rural economy. The worship of Devadideva Mahadev is not performed separately at Anandamayitola. During the month of Chaitra, Shiva's Gajan and Shiva Puja are held at the Shiva temple in Bankeswartola, rather than being combined with other idol worship. Hattola is located to the south of Anandamayitola. There is also a temple of Kali mata situated near the shiva temple in front of the Kali temple, the local youth participate in various physical activities such as games, exercise, wrestling, stick fighting, and dancing. Along with the religious rituals, several cultural programs are organized, including drama performances, musical events, Harinam Sankirtan, Baul songs, Bolan songs, Kavigan, and Bhadugan. Sainthia, Birbhum, there are several prominent temples. Among them, the Sri Sri Radha Govind Mandir is a major place of worship, dedicated to Lord Krishna and Radha, symbolising divine love.¹⁵ Although it is not centuries old, the temple is active and culturally significant, with regular rituals and festivals, such as the Pran Pratistha Utsab. Nearby is the Nandikeshwari Temple, one of the 51 Shakti Peethas, where the main deity, Goddess Nandikeshwari, is worshipped. This temple was established around 1320 in the Bengali calendar. Other temples in Sainthia include the Ram-Sita Temple, Shiva Temple, Maha Saraswati Temple, Maha Lakshmi-Ganesha Temple, and Hanuman Temple.

Major festivals in the area include Makar Sankranti in mid-January and Shivaratri, which attract large numbers of devotees. The temples are located near the Mayurakshi River, enriching the town's spiritual and cultural environment. The Fullara Temple Mela is a famous religious fair held every year at Labpur in Birbhum district. It takes place during Magh Purnima (January–February) and lasts about 10 days. During the mela, thousands of devotees come to offer prayers and take part in rituals. Along with religious activities, the fair also becomes a centre of rural culture. The Kankalitala Fair is a popular religious fair. The fair is mainly organised during special religious occasions, especially around Poush Sankranti and other auspicious days. Many devotees visit the temple to offer prayers and take a holy dip in

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the sacred kund (pond). The Tarapith Temple Mela is a famous religious fair held at Tarapith in Birbhum district. The temple is dedicated to Goddess Tara, a powerful form of Goddess Kali, and is one of the important Shakti Peethas in India.

The mela becomes especially vibrant during Kali Puja, Amavasya (new moon) days, and other special religious occasions. Thousands of devotees from West Bengal and nearby states visit to offer prayers and perform rituals. Tarapith is also known for its tantric traditions and the nearby cremation ground, which has spiritual importance. Joydev Kenduli Mela is one of the largest and most famous rural fairs in Birbhum. It is held every year in the month of Poush (December–January) on the occasion of Makar Sankranti at Kenduli village, which is traditionally associated with the poet Jaydev. This mela is especially famous for the Baul tradition. Bauls are mystic folk singers of Bengal who spread messages of love, humanity, and spiritual unity through simple songs and music. During the mela, hundreds of Baul singers from across West Bengal and Bangladesh gather here. They sing devotional songs with *ektara*, *duggi*, and *khamak* throughout the night. The fair is not only a religious gathering but also a cultural festival. It preserves Bengal's folk music, spiritual philosophy, and rural heritage. Thus, Joydev Kenduli Mela plays a very important role in preserving the Baul tradition and the cultural identity of Birbhum. Folk art became an important medium of cultural expression. Jatrappala songs, theatre, Ramayana songs, Pala Kirtan, and Baul songs were performed during festivals. In the early twentieth century, many drama and theatre groups were formed in Bolpur. Outside artists also performed, creating a strong artistic environment. As a result, a unique cultural identity grew in Bolpur.

Several cultural organisations, such as Madhabikunja Club, Friends' Union, Tarun Samiti, Bandhab Natya Samiti, and Chittaranjan Banisangha, promoted drama and Jatra. Their performances became popular not only in Bolpur but also in nearby villages. Birbhum temples restored with government help: The natural beauty of Birbhum attracts tourists, and the temples here draw large crowds of pilgrims throughout the year. Therefore, the government and the municipality take initiatives to renovate, restore, and build up the temples to preserve their heritage and improve facilities for devotees and tourists. Recently, the municipality built Satma Mansatola, and therefore built a Manasa temple in Badi para, ward no 13. The Dharma Raj Temple of ward no 13 of Dangaltola has been partially constructed by the municipal authorities. The municipality has built a new Dharma Raj temple and a theatre in Lalbazar, Dubrajpur, which is becoming increasingly attractive not

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only for its Hindu temples but also for its Muslim cultural and religious sites.¹⁶ The Government of West Bengal allocated ₹350 crore for the development of 157 temples. This allocation included the famous Shakti Peetha, Kankalitala Kali Temple, located in the Birbhum district. The Birbhum Zilla Parishad has issued tenders for the maintenance of the hot spring bathing area and the vehicle parking area. The government supports temple tourism economically to boost its impact on the local economy.¹⁷

Socio-economic Impact of Temples

The Shakti Peethas in Birbhum are highly active and revered. Therefore, the fairs organised around these temples attract large gatherings of devotees. Some of these temples include Tawarapeeth Temple, Kankalitala Temple, and Fullara Temple, while local Shiva temples also host Gajan celebrations. The fairs held around these temples not only promote cultural exchange but also contribute to the local economy. Apart from the temples, there are also mazars here that serve as a centre for the confluence of Hindu and Muslim cultures. In Sukhbazar, Ilambazar, there is a shrine dedicated to Maichampabibi. Every Thursday afternoon, both Hindus and Muslims gather at the shrine to share sweets, sugar, and payesh. Large numbers of people come here, and many of their wishes are believed to be fulfilled. This place is a symbol of Hindu-Muslim harmony and communal unity. Magh Purnima is an auspicious day celebrated here with great grandeur. On this occasion, a ten-day fair is organised near the Fullara Temple, popularly known as the Phullora Mela, attracting thousands of visitors to Labhpur at the end of winter. Another important festival celebrated here is Navratri, which falls between September and October. During Navratri, local devotees worship the deities for nine consecutive days, and special ceremonies, including a nine-day Navratri fair, are conducted. A unique custom observed by some locals during this festival is refraining from consuming or using anything grown underground. The Kankalitala Temple celebrates major festivals such as Shivratri, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Diwali, Dussehra, Sawan Puja, and Ratha Yatra with great pomp and devotion. During the month of Shravan (July–August), numerous Kanwariyas visit the temple to offer holy water to the deities at this revered Shakti Peetha. Devotees believe that visiting the temple and praying to the deities can help them attain Moksha and bring good health and prosperity. In the Tarapith Temple, Kaushiki Amavasya in August is celebrated as a major festival marking the Goddess's

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emergence to slay demons, with vibrant nightly pujas and secret Tantric rituals. This Tantric tradition attracts many devotees and visitors, who come in large numbers to witness and enjoy the festival, while the Tarapith Rath Yatra in June–July features the idol of Tara Devi taken out in a chariot procession, coinciding with Puri’s Rath Yatra. And the northern edge of Islampur, across the railway line, under the ancient banyan tree, lies the shrine of “Alam Shah” Baba. This place serves as an important meeting point for both Hindu and Muslim communities. Devotees come from far and wide, awed by the miraculous greatness of Alam Baba.¹⁸ Every year, on the fourth Friday of the month of Ashadh, a large fair is held here, along with Sinni rides. Prayers, religious rituals, and Quran recitation programs take place. The ancient shrine has recently been rebuilt and, with the municipality's help, transformed into a monument. In Meho village, Birbhum, there are several ancient Shiva temples. These Shiva temples do not have temple buildings. The Shiva lingam is installed on a foundation altar that has no roof. The Shiva temple of Mitra Choudhary, located to the west of the village, is quite traditional. The Gajan festival of this Shiva temple is held in the village during Chaitra Sankranti. The devotees of Gajan are exclusively from the Scheduled Castes. Some of the customs, rules, and rituals followed by the devotees are puzzling and surprising, clearly showing the influence of Nathepanthi Shaivism. There is also diversity in the speech of the devotees. The Madneshwar Shiva Temple of Kotasura is an ancient Shiva temple that holds an important place in local religious practices and rituals. The temple houses a Shiva lingam and serves as a spiritual centre for the villagers. The regular minimum cost of worship is met with the support of the local caste Hindu community, and daily rituals are performed by the Pandas with dedication, sincerity, and respect. Currently, during the five days of Chaitra Gajan, there are about a hundred devotees from the ascetic community, both men and women. The worship of the village deity, accompanied by devotion, enthusiasm, and drum music, is celebrated grandly in Bodakori village. Both Hindus and Muslims visit the Sahodori Sahab’s tomb to offer their prayers and fulfil their wishes. In Chandpur, there is the tomb of Bibi Sahab and a mosque. The tomb is covered with a ceremonial cloth, which is a Buddhist tradition. Mainly through these rituals and cultural exchanges, people connect with one another, thereby spreading culture.

Economic Impact of Temples

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The impact of religious tourism is significant. Because it creates employment opportunities for many people. Visitors mainly come to worship Ma Tara and seek spiritual devotion, resulting in a continuous flow of tourists throughout the year. In response to this demand, various businesses have developed in Tarapith, forming a rural industry that supports local residents' livelihoods. A key concern for tourists visiting any destination is the availability of well-developed accommodation facilities. Tarapith and Konkalitola are well known for their lodging services. In Tarapith, approximately 1,400 small and medium-sized hotels provide accommodation, including 81 hotels and lodges ranging from single to three-star facilities. More than 25 per cent of local employment is generated in this sector, with both permanent staff and temporary workers during peak seasons. Restaurants and catering establishments have also been set up to provide clean and hygienic food to visitors, contributing about 15 per cent of local employment. There is a high demand for religious offerings such as flowers, vermilion, incense sticks, and sweets in Tarapith and Konkalitola, employing around 20 per cent of the workforce in shops that sell these items.¹⁹

Tarapith is located six kilometres from the nearest sub-division town, Rampurhat, and is well connected by both government and private transport services. About 90 per cent of employment in the transport sector is linked to serving tourists visiting this area. As the study area is primarily a religious tourism destination, it lacks famous handicraft products like those of Bolpur in Birbhum. However, significant employment is generated through local priests, known as pandas, who assist devotees in worshipping Ma Tara. Approximately 15 per cent of people earn their livelihood through these services. Additionally, around 10 per cent of employment comes from other tourism-related activities, such as temple maintenance, flower cultivation, and driving rickshaws for visitors. Overall, rural tourism in Tarapith and Konkalitola plays a vital role in sustaining the local economy and providing diverse livelihood opportunities for the community. But there are no pandas in the Konkalitola temples, and it is a free, pleasant site to visit. In Konkalitola, a few shops sell sweets, which also contribute to the local economy. The Brakshwar hot spring is not as famous as Tarapith, but people from nearby areas of Bihar and Jharkhand come to swim in its waters, as it is believed to help cure certain ailments.

Economic Potential of Temple Tourism in Birbhum

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The temples of Birbhum, especially the terracotta temples around Tarapith, Bakreshwar, and Santiniketan, play a significant role in both the local economy and the region's cultural heritage. The arrival of thousands of tourists and pilgrims generates employment and income through hotels, transportation, handicrafts, and the sale of puja items. This temple-centred tourism contributes significantly to the area's overall socio-economic development. Religious sites such as Satipeeth and Bakreshwar attract large numbers of devotees throughout the year, keeping the local economy active. Temples provide income not only to priests, service providers, and vendors of worship items, but also indirectly to hoteliers, auto and taxi drivers, and local guides. In places like Bolpur, Shantiniketan, and Joydev-Kenduli, tourists purchase local terracotta items, leather bags, Baul music recordings, and handicrafts, which further support the rural economy. The ancient temples along the banks of the Ajay and Mayurakshi rivers, as well as the tall Shiva temples at Dabukeshwar, enrich the tourism industry through historical and cultural tourism. Festivals such as the Joydev-Kenduli Mela and Paush Mela create substantial business opportunities around the temples, serving as a major source of income for local small traders. In short, the temples of Birbhum are not merely religious sites, but also act as one of the primary drivers of the district's tourism and service industries. With government support and the people's efforts, temple tourism will experience significant development.

Conclusion

Holy places are no longer only religious centres; they are now closely connected with society, politics, culture, and the economy. At present, the economic benefits of religious tourism are significant and should not be ignored. In the past, religious groups often avoided discussing financial matters, but today it is clear that tourism brings a significant economic impact. Birbhum district in West Bengal is a good example of a region with strong tourism potential, thanks to its historical, religious and rural attractions.²⁰ The district is known for its ancient temples, sacred sites, traditional fairs, and vibrant folk culture. Its religious centres attract pilgrims year-round, while its rural landscape, tribal heritage, and Baul music tradition draw cultural tourists and researchers. The centres of Vaishnava practice in this region are Mainadol, Muluk Sripath, Nanoor, and Jaydev Kenduli. Similarly, Nalhati, Tarapith, Bakreshwar, Kankalitala, Phullara, and Svarnamangala Temple are famous as Shakti Peethas. Deuli, Dabuk, Bhandirvan, Mallarpur, Kaleswar, and Kotasur are known as Shaiva Peethas.²¹

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Therefore, it can be said that the Triveni Sangam (confluence) of Vaishnava, Shakta, and Shaiva traditions took place in this region.

Apart from Shiva temples, Dharmathakanga is very popular among the lower-income communities in Birbhum. The Dharmaraj Temple at Kabilaspur is so famous among Hari, dom. All types of temples in Birbhum. And that's why numerous rituals and festivals are celebrated throughout the year. Among these festivals, the Joydeb Kenduli festival is especially famous, and the baul songs also preserve its tradition. Although Birbhum is known for its natural beauty, it is even more renowned for its temples, which play a significant role in the district's economic growth and make it an important socio-cultural hub. With government and local community support, these temples have made a lasting impact. The government has also built good roads to improve accessibility for pilgrims and tourists.

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