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ROLE OF TEMPLE IN ANCIENT INDIAN SOCIETY



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ABSTRACT:

The greatest contribution of India to the world is its high and rich spiritualistic heritage. India's spiritual lineage is so powerful that it has attracted people all around the globe towards her. The spiritual thoughts along with its cultural values, art forms all paved the way to the birth of Temples as institutions to promote and develop all the natural skills that were bound in each and every Indian. Temples emerged as a centre for celebrations of rites and traditions, a panorama of myths and legends for the entertainment and enlightenment of the devotees, a source to uplift the worshippers, a symbolic presentation of the aspects of good and evil birth and death, worldly and divine, mortal and immortal, a social and cultural centre and a spectacular display of political and economic power of the country. Temples assumed an important role in politics, economy, society as well as in religious matters and different powers competed with each other for patronage and legitimation for themselves through the temple. The present study attempts to the various role played by the temple in ancient

Indian society.

KEYWORDS : Temple, society, role, culture, education, economy.

1. INTRODUCTION - Temple-Its meaning:

The life of the vast majority of Hindus in India is centered around temples even today. This is true not only of life at the individual level but also at the social level. The fabric of socio-cultural activities of the Hindus is made up of the warp and woof of religious beliefs and rituals. Music, sculpture, painting, dance and a host of performing arts, besides architecture, Vaastushashtra, astronomy and astrology owe their origin to the institution of the temple. Though temples are devoted for the worship of the supra-mundane, it is paradoxical but true that they serve as the centre of the mundane life of the people. Some temples turn into pilgrim centers and they in turn attract trade and commerce. In course of time, some of them develop into not only economic growth centers but also into centers of political power.

The temple is a structure designed to house an icon, which is both an object of veneration and a work of art. The icon in the temple has a cult, a tradition, a function that is laid down as a paramount within the community. Etymologically, the term 'temple' is derived from the Latin word 'templum', which originally signified any holy enclosure or building screened from the eyes of the profane. It is the dwelling place of god; it serves the purpose of housing, his image and it is the architectural frame of the liturgy and cult of the god.

The temples in ancient India became great centre of cultural activities. The life of the town or a village revolved round the local temple, however, small it might have been. They became the hub of social, economic and cultural activities. Even today the cultural life of the people revolve round the temples. Temples were the repositories of music and dance on the one side and centre of education on the other. In fact many of the temples undertook economic activities like controlling the land belonging to the temple and arrange for the building of tanks and other irrigational facilities. As huge quantities of material were required by the temples for the daily worship as well as for special occasions, large sums of money were required. Hence the services of many employees had to be requisitioned for the proper running of the temples. Thus the temples were full of activity of different nature. Fortunately some of these activities are known to us through the inscriptions and we can reconstruct the role of the temples in a moderate way. Following are some of the important role played by the temples in ancient society.

Temple Administration:

The administration of the temples can be classified into two systems, viz., public and private. Under the former is included the temple administration carried out by public bodies such as village communities or assemblies (sabha) and merchant guilds either wholly as a body or by some of its members or priests of the temples duly elected and appointed for this purpose. In the latter the administration was carried out by any person or persons appointed by the builder and donor of the temple.

a.Public Administration: The temples, irrespective of the status of the builder-kings, chieftains, merchant guilds or rich individuals, were treated as community property. The village or township was a community of landholders organized for political, social, economic, religious and professional purposes. They were autonomous bodies in the kingdom. The important function of the community was the supervision of all the charitable endowments in the village or township. The village assemblies, used to manage temple affairs either through a full time manager duly appointed by it. The village

assembly would elect every year some elder persons from its own body to look after the management of charities including temple administration.

b.Private Administration: In the second mode of administration of the temple i.e., the private administration, generally, managers of the temples were elected by the members of the village assembly or the constructors and donors of the temples, and we have also seen that even a priest could be entrusted with the management of a temple. But, in this instance, the temple priest paid fifty gadyanas to acquire the temple management. It shows it was profitable because the manager was generally entrusted with various grants made for the services of the god out of the income or interest of the grants. This income or interest always exceeded the expenditure incurred for the requisite service. Thus the important functions of the village communities (assemblies, sabha, mahasabha, ur and nadu), besides involving the control and regulation of land holdings, management of irrigation works, collection and remission of taxes, serving as banks by receiving deposits of money and lending and looking into the cultivation, included the management of charities and temples.

Temple Economy and Finance:

The temples played the role of a financial institution of different types. Collective practice of religion naturally involves professionals of various categories. A temple, for instance, not only employs priests and their attendants, but architects, sculptors, carpenters, smiths, musicians (pipers and drummers) and suppliers of several articles. The temple is a means of gainful employment for numerous people in the community. The temple is also a big consumer in the locality; it buys not only the articles necessary for daily worship (like flowers, fruits, sandalwood, oil, milk, kumkum and turmeric, betel-leaves and nut) but also the provision for the kitchen to supply the daily food-offerings as part of the worship ritual.

The stupendous role to be played by the temple in the society naturally required huge income to meet its expenditure. In this context the temples received the grants made by the kings, chieftains, rich individuals and corporate bodies such as merchants and other guilds, village assemblies, etc. The poor people, too, never lagged behind in contributing their mite to the financial resources of the temple. The grants consist land, village grants, providing food to the students, ornaments, money etc. Besides, income derived from the grants of various taxes and dues constituted a considerable part of the total income of the temple. The temples of the period played the role of a financial institution of different types. As remarked the maintenance of the temples depended upon the gift in kind and cash. In addition to these duties, the temples performed another duty. It was that of working as a bank. Not all the temples did this work but some temples took up the transactions which are normally done by the banks or such financial institutions. Depositing certain amount as capital with the temple treasury and stipulating that the interest earned should be used for various services is a common practice in the history of the temples.

Temple- A Repository of fine arts:

Basically the temples were a repository of fine arts like music and dance. It is believed that for the recreation of the deity music and dance were provided many times during the puja, after the recitation of the four Vedas. This practice has come down even today in all the temples and forms an integral part of the daily worship. Hence the temple appointed male and female singers as permanent employees in the temples. The singing in the temples was accompanied by instrumentalists among whom the vina players, drum beaters, flute players and gong beaters are important. Thus, vocal as well

as instrumental music formed the part of the services in the temples in ancient period. Besides, dance occupies a better place than music, which were performed in the open navarangas or kakshasanas.

Temple-An Educational Centre:

That the temples were great education centres is a well known fact in the history of ancient period. Though educational institutions were divided as agrahara, brahmapuri, ghatikasthanas and matha, it is important to note that all of them had a temple as their nucleus. An agrahara without a temple was not known in the ancient period. Likewise brahmapuri, ghatikasthanas also could not function without a temple. Matha always can be considered as an appendix of a temple. Thus all the educational institutions were blessed with the presence of a temple.

Temple Patronage:

Hindu rulers used to take keen interest in the establishment and management of temples. Kautilya in his treatise on statecraft 'Arthashastra' recommends that the king construct and protect places of worship. He is of the view that the king must support ashrams (Monasteries) by donating land for their establishment. Kautilya had great influence on the rulers of yester years. And it is not surprising that Indian rulers, realizing the importance of the political economy of religious institutions were great patrons of temples. In this respect, the hundred years of Gupta dynasty has no parallel in the annals of Indian history. The Gupta kings not only constructed numerous temples, but they also appointed priests to perform religious rituals in those places of worship. Likewise, the Hoysalas, Vijayanagar kings, Chalukyas etc constructed so many temples either for one reason or another like to commemorate the success in war, during coronation ceremony etc. The kingly patronage was not merely a matter of simple and pure piety, but a matter of political economy as well.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Thus the temple in addition to being a great attraction because of the sculptures, and also as the abode of the god also had many roles to play. People visited the temple, worshipped the God, admired the sculptures, sat there for music and dance programs and also recitation of the puranas and also watched the dramas.

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