

The Supply Chain Management of Shrines in India: Value addition to the Economic Prosperity

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Abstract

India known as the 'Abode of Gods'; is a land having religious places of worship or shrines in almost every other lane. The country is privileged of being a divine destination, a host to numerous shrines. These Religious places of worship have not only strengthened human beings in their spiritual pursuits but have also been a major source of economic value addition to society and the country. It is evident to learn that the places of worship have been a large stakeholder of the supply chain industry. From years a practice of offerings in the shrines has been prevailing which is closely related to the spiritual devotion of the devotees. This practice of offerings has enabled the system of supply chain in the regions where the shrines are situated. The complete chain of supply management has strengthened over decades. There are various religious products that are related to the religious sentiments of devotees which are manufactured at places distantly located from these shrines. The distribution of these products takes place across the country. The establishment of a shrine does not only invoke divine blessings but also provides employment thereby empowering every individual involved in the chain of supplying the products. It is important to learn how the lesser known supply chain management of shrines functions and adds value to the economic prosperity of the country. This research paper aims to throw light on the supply chain management that is enabled by Shrines in India and the economic value addition that take place resultantly. It will also focus on how the entire supply chain functions from one end to another across the country.

Keywords: *Shrines, Supply Chain Management, Value addition, Religious offerings, Religious Products, Economy.*

1. Introduction

India, also called "Dev Bhoomi" is a land of rich cultural diversity and a home to various religious places of worship. Shrines have always been cited as a place of worship but they are not more than that the spiritual connect. Shrines in India are known for engaging the regions into religious economic activities. Having religious importance on one hand, these shrines hold economic importance on another hand. They not only have their holy importance but also add a lot to the economy of the country. The economic function of shrines have been highlighted with time but very less attention has been drawn in the context of economic value addition being done by these shrines. India has a more visible aspect of spiritual presence which becomes evident when considering numerous spaces that are thought to be sacred and holy. India hosts numerous Religious Destinations belonging to all religions. People have immense faith in these places and are keen to visit them; they find satisfaction and feel contented by visiting the religious destinations. They specially plan a trip for the places of religious importance which are located far off and feel immense pleasure and privilege in visiting these shrines. **Gupta & Kunar, (2017)** quoted in their article about a study which states that 39% of people gave preference to visit pilgrimages/holy sites for a vacation. Religious places were ranked high among the preferred tourist destinations by Indians. A journey to a shrine reflects

the spiritual importance and emotional attachments of devotees. It is often seen that people wish to carry memories in the form of substance from their trips which they share it with kith and kin as a token of love. This practice become more prominent when people visit holy places and wish to bring back things related to their duties. The memories of pilgrimage centers are accounts to food (*Prasad*), articles of religious importance and values etc. These products are either manufactured at shrines or nearby places which are distributed to devotees coming from across the world. Devotees consider these products as highly auspicious and of spiritual importance. They also consider these as the blessings of the Almighty and feel honoured and privileged to receive products. These products are mostly either made available at shrines or nearby places and are distributed/sold to the end consumers. From times shrines are playing a role of manufacturer as well as seller of various products related to the sentiments of people. The category of these religious products may be classified as *Prasad* (special food offered to god, later distributed to devotees), Incense Sticks, flowers, *Kumkum*, *Bhabhoot* etc. Looking at the sentiments of devotees and pilgrims, gradually shrines have involved into purchasing manufacturing and selling the religious products and have become an important part of the supply chain industry.

Shrines make these products for certain reasons; *firstly* to offer it to the God or Deity in different ceremonies. There are certain rituals performed at certain times and maybe multiple times in a day, each time has its own significance in terms of the performance of rituals and its offerings. Also, there are various occasions that fall in place time to time for which special preparations are made like festivals and special dates of religious importance. These offerings maybe flowers, clothes, special food preparations for invoking gods. *Secondly*, these products are then made available to devotees. People consider these products to be sacred and wish to seek blessings of the Almighty by consuming the things given to them by their own God. Shrines which are engaged in large production, sell the products to devotees. *Lastly*, to generate income for the board/

trust; body that manages the functioning of Shrines. At places, there are people who work for the Shrines and are dependent on the salary or remuneration received from the Shrines for their livelihood. In the older times and even today some of the shrines follow the practice of distribute the food in the form of grains, *prasad* or processed food as a remuneration to employees, and then these employees sell them to visitors in exchange of money.

Shrines being part of the economic cycle are a major player in the supply chain industry. Supply chain management of these shrines plays pivotal role in adding value to the economic status of each individual involved in it. With time Shrines have stepped into branding, franchising etc. which has enabled and deepen the supply chain and spiritual business. For example, the chaadar offered to *Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti's*, Ajmer is made from the flowers grown in *Pushkar*, which enables a supply chain system.

2. Review of Literature

M.K.N, (2019) in a news article said that Kerala government intended to talk to Andhra Pradesh Government for supplying over 90 tonnes of cashews to Tirupati Temple for the preparation of the *laddoos* (sweet dish offered to God and later sold to devotees). The author also highlighted the distribution of the laddoos among tens of millions of pilgrims. His article clearly pointed towards the existence of supply chain in the operations of Shrines.

Haq & Medhekar, (2018) stated that Shrines played an important role in sustaining the local economies of India. Pilgrimage contributes to the economic activity starting from vendors selling flowers, candles, souvenirs, sweets, fruits and other offerings made by the devotees. Spiritual tourism related businesses not only create new job opportunities in organised and unorganised sectors in the tourism and hospitality industry, but also in construction, infrastructure development, local transportation, tour guides in foreign languages, small tea shops, reviving and sustaining local handicrafts and cottage industries related to spirituality.

Stein (1961) observed the economic role of temples in Southern India. He found that the temples developed close economic ties with local institutions, not only as the recipient of their endowments, but as landholder, employer, consumer, and source of loan funds. Hence, temples became economic as well as religious centers.

How do shrines manage supply chain?

There are big Shrines in India which evolved into developing their own brand and are very popular among devotees. With the growing interest of devotees, temples started manufacturing products of religious and spiritual importance. Many big shrines in India are involved into large scale production of these goods. Religious items and merchandise which are the produce of these shrines may be; books and literature, flowers and garlands, candles and incense sticks, *Prasad*, calendars, posters, *mauli / lachcha*, *chandan*, *kumkum* etc. The distribution channels that exist in the system can be categorized as: direct from religious places, retail stores and through electronic medium. According to a report given by **EMR, (2020)** the major stakeholders in the supply chain are trust or managing bodies of shrines, religious travel companies, transporters, merchandise companies, and online service providers. A few major trust or managing bodies of shrines are:

- Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD)
- Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board
- Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple Trust
- ShriSaibabaSansthan Trust (Shirdi, Mumbai)
- Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Mandir Nyas (Prabhadevi) Trust
- Akal Takht Sahib, Amritsar
- Shrinathji Nathdwara Temple Board, Nathdwara

For the purpose of this study, a research was conducted at Shrinath Temple Nathdwara, Udaipur, Rajasthan, for understanding the supply chain mechanism. **Purohit, (2021)** in an interview stated that there are many branches of Nathdwara Temple Board situated across the country which are run by the Board. These branches also serve as one of the distribution

channels for selling the *prasad bhog* of Shrinath Ji (A self manifested divine form of Lord Krishna). The supply chain management enabled by shrines functions in following manner:

• **Tender System**

Almost all the shrine boards or trusts in India which ensures the smooth functioning of shrines and provides facilities to the devotees are public bodies running under state government. The shrine boards or trusts follow the procedure of inviting tenders from suppliers of raw materials like Ghee (refined butter), flour, sugar, dry fruits, lentils, oil, grains etc. The tender with lowest bid is selected by a purchase committee and order is placed for required quantity from time to time. Usually the tender takes place once in a year or as per the norms of the board. This procedure gives open chance to suppliers across the country to gain business opportunity and be a part of this sacred event.

• **Suppliers in the Chain**

The supply chain of shrines includes end to end stakeholders i.e. from original initiators to end consumers. For example, flowers used as ornaments for deities, does not only include the garland makers but also flower sellers as well as the farmers or gardeners growing these flowers. Similarly Clothes, *Chunri* or *Chaadar* for dressing up of the deities not only help the vendor who is selling them, but the tailors, textile producer, yarn producer and the farmer. Thus, the whole economic chain is benefitted.

- *Farmers:* It is believed that farmers usually grow crops and sell them in market to retailers or consumers, but one of the major buyers of these crops is processing company which uses the crop for converting it into a more long term & useful product. The supply chain of temple benefits the very initiator or tier 3 supplier of raw material. For example, if shrine buys *Ghee* (refined butter) for preparing *prasad*, the cattle farmer will be benefitted who supplies milk to milk processor.
- *Processor:* The second stakeholder could be the processor or processing company which converts the originally produced raw material into usable

finished goods. Sometimes the processing company themselves directly supply their goods to the shrines or they will sell it to wholesalers or retailers for building further connections of this chain. Taking the above cited example forward, there are milk processing companies which produce *Ghee* from milk, may directly bid for invited tenders.

- **Wholesalers/Retailers:** The producer/processor sells products to wholesalers or retailers who then become a part of distribution channel and sell the products to shrines. For example, when shrine board buys material like sugar, clothes etc. it may buy it from wholesalers/retailers through inviting tenders.

- **Shrine Board/Trust**

The Shrines as discussed are the key players of the entire chain. Shrines have played a key role in building an emotional connection of the people with their deities. This is made possible when the offerings to the god are distributed among the pilgrims. These offerings are in the form of *prasad*, flowers, *bhabhoot* etc. which are taken as the blessings of Lord. Many shrines in India have a separate big area of kitchen and mess where the *prasad* is made. It employs lot of people for making the *prasad*. The Shrine boards became more active with time and keeping in concern the spiritual connection of devotees, they manufacture the *Prasad* (most preferred products by devotees) at their premises and sell it to the consumers/devotees. This act gave rise to the entire supply chain of shrines. Shrines are therefore playing the most important multitude role of buyer as well as seller in the chain. Shrines buy the raw material and manufacture the finished good or the end product to be consumed and sell it to the devotees either directly through their counters situated at/near the premises or through their branches situated at different locations.

- **Branches of Shrines**

For devotees located at distant locations, some of the shrines have their multiple branches located at popular places for devotees. These branches also serve as channel in the supply chain management of the

shrines. According to **Nathdwara Temple Board, (2020)**, there are nearly 8 branches of Shrinath ji temple which act as a distribution channel for *prasad*, to be sold to devotees who are situated at different places and wish to seek blessings of the almighty through the means of *prasad*.

- **The “e-platform”**

Though pacing with time, shrines had shifted to e-platform way back and were performing e-commerce activities of shrines related to pilgrimage. But the situations now have given a boost to the IT industry, and helped the shrine boards to enable another medium in the distribution channel so that the spiritual connect of devotees and their god may be maintained. Today the *Prasad* and religious articles are made available to the end consumers through various online websites and e-commerce vendors. **Mishra, (2020)** in her article said that the Panch Badri Prasadam pack named as Badrinath Prasad Bag was made available through online booking by doing a tie up with amazon. Due to the lockdown, the footfalls of pilgrims had reduced, in order to allow the faithfuls to get *prasad* at home while they couldn’t visit the holy place. She also stated that 18 self-help groups were involved in the manufacturing of *prasad*. The same practice was done at Shri Kedarnath Temple, the *prasad* pack was made available at www.onlineprasad.com.

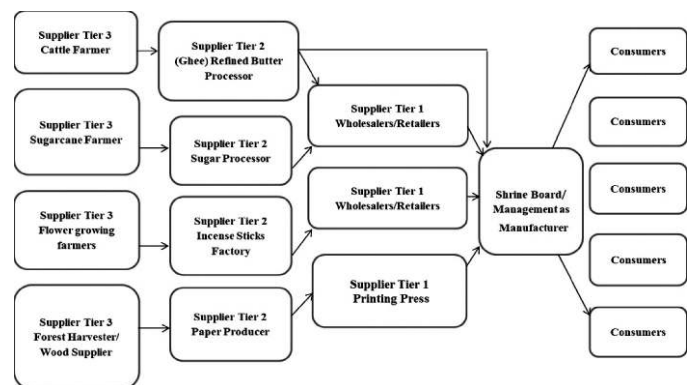


Fig. 1: Supply Chain Model of Shrines (Source: Compiled by Authors).

3. Value Addition to the Economic Prosperity

Religious places have not only strengthened human beings in their spiritual pursuits but have also been a major source of economic value addition to society and country, which have been talked about very less. The Shrines have a huge impact on value addition to the economy, as it provides immense economic opportunities to the local community. Through the merchandise activity various economic opportunities are created such as generation of employment, generation of income, increase standard of living among the people involved and overall growth the economy. The economic value additions that take place through the supply chain management of Shrines are as follows:

◆ Employment Generation

Shrines in India generate significant opportunities of employment, directly and indirectly. Through its supply chain management it provides employment to numerous people like farmers, wholesalers, retailers, transporters, shop keepers, street vendors, personnel at kitchen and manufacturing unit, store keepers, etc. This clearly indicates that shrines add to the economy of country through employment generation. For example, the *Venkateshwaraswamy* Temple at Tirupati employs more than 15,000 people, including hundreds of cooks, in its *prasad* making unit. Similarly, in an interview at *Shrinathji* Temple, **Ojha, (2021)** said that there are nearly 2000 people employed in direct or indirect way out of which many of cooks employed for making the *prasad* at *Balbhog* (kitchen) at *Shrinathji* temple in Nathdwara. Apart from the cooks, these temples also employ supporting staff, managing staff, accounts staff and other employees etc.

◆ Connectivity between Cities and Remote Areas

Many of shrines are situated in distant locations, but due to their religious importance they link the nearby cities and remote areas with each other. This results in the development of the rural area and connecting them with major cities, thereby enhancing its economic condition. For example, Rameshwaram town is

situated at south-eastern end of India, which used to lack proper transportation facilities, but due the very famous *Jyotirlinga* of Lord Shiva, *Ramanathswamy* Temple, this town is one of the most visited sacred places of India. Because of its pilgrim importance, the city and its nearby island has been connected by Indian Railway track built in the sea. There is a complete package containing religious products like *Prasad*, incense sticks, *chandan* etc. is sold at temple which enables a supply chain as well as connects the area with other cities.

◆ Shrines Boost Trade

Shrines have been pivotal in enhancing trade activities which had enabled the supply chain. For example, Coconuts are offered in the temples of all deities across the country as a general practice. The number of coconuts offered in the temples across the country on a daily basis runs in millions. Coconuts grow in South India and are distributed across the country. This creates the opportunities of trade connections across the entire country. A shrine situated anywhere in the country, encourages the coconut farming in South India. This contributes directly to retailers, wholesalers, transporters, warehouse owners, farmers and middlemen and adding business worth billions on daily basis, thereby having a significant contribution to the country's economy.

◆ Income Generation

Business in the city succeeds because of the popularity of the worship place and the footfall of large number of tourists. The shrines too generate huge income by various means and services to the people. Some shrines offer their own rest rooms facilities, *prasad* facility and even medical facilities. For example, *Shri Mata Vaishno Devi* Temple is situated on hill. Helicopter, battery car, refreshment, blanket, accommodation and many more services are offered to devotees which generate a lot of income for the Shrine Board. The supply chain of shrines is pivotal in generating income at individual as well as group levels.

◆ Economic Upliftment of the Region

Shrines contribute significantly to the economic upliftment of the city or the entire region by urbanisation and means of various economic activities like businesses pertaining to religious articles, guide services, clock rooms, hotels/rest rooms, food, adventure tourism etc. For example, the economy of the town of Nathdwara is running completely because of the shrine of *Shrinathji* or the economy of Shirdi is being run due to the presence of *Sai Baba Temple*. Through the economic activity of supplying religious goods and services, these shrines are centre pillars for economic upliftment of the entire region.

4. Conclusion

From years Shrines have been enabling a complete supply chain for products of religious importance. Lesser attention has been drawn towards the supply chain management of shrines. The research paper highlights that the lesser known supply chain of shrines is worth paying heed as it adds to the economic value of each individual, group and the country. The products related to religious sentiments of devotees are being either manufactured, produced or supplied by the shrines. These products are closely related to the emotions of people since they can get these directly from the places which they consider to be sacred. The products of religious importance are highly demanded by the devotees as they believe it to be a gift by their god. The demand of these products makes the supply chain stronger and hence shrines can be seen as one of the prominent part of supply chain industry. It is also observed that the shrines make the whole city a buzzing economy with the growth of trade and employment. They are now recognized as a source of diversifying the country's economy. It can be said that the shrines will continue to stimulate the economy.

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