Akshardhara Research Journal
Single Blind Peer-Reviewed & Refereed International Research Journal
E ISSN -3048-8095 / SJIF Impact- 5.16 / October 2026/ Special Issue 05 Volume I

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Sacred Economies along Trade Routes: The Brihadeshwara Temple at Thanjavur in Early Medieval India

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DOI. https://doi-ds.org/doilink/10.2026-99626682/ARJ/2026/V1/SI05/101026A013

Abstract
In early medieval South India, religious institutions were more than places for ritual devotion. They also played a key role in the economy, connecting with both local and overseas trade networks. The Brihadeshwara Temple at Thanjavur, built around 1010 CE by Rajaraja Chola I, is a good example. It combined religious authority with organized management of land, labor, trade, and credit. This paper utilizes epigraphic and archaeological evidence to demonstrate that temples like Brihadeshwara functioned as "temple-cities." In these places, ritual, economic exchange, and political power came together to support both local production and long-distance trade across the Indian Ocean.Records from the Chola temple complex document extensive land donations across multiple villages in the Kaveri delta, along with meticulous inventories of offerings such as precious metals, farm animals, fabrics, and various food supplies. These records reveal a highly organised system of surplus extraction, storage, and redistribution managed by the temple. Inscriptions further attest to the temple's role as a financial institution, receiving endowments, lending money at interest, and serving as a secure repository for capital.The paper emphasizes the temple's connections with merchant guilds, including supra-regional corporations such as the Ayyavole 500. Collective endowments by merchants indicate that temples provided institutional legitimacy, ritual sanction, and financial security for long-distance trade. Strategically located at Thanjavur; an urban centre integrated with the Kaveri river system and connected to ports such as Nagapattinam; the Brihadeshwara Temple anchored exchange between agrarian hinterlands and Indian Ocean trade routes linking South India with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.The study also examines the temple's role in stimulating production and consumption. The requirements of temple architecture and religious ceremonies fostered growth in specialized trades like bronze work, masonry, and weaving. Furthermore, significant religious festivals served as recurring hubs for commerce and trade. Finally, the paper analyses the political economy of the temple, highlighting a tripartite ruler-temple-merchant nexus through which royal authority, mercantile capital, and religious ideology converged. As a result, the Brihadeshwara Temple illustrates the way religious sites acted as central points for trade and cultural interaction in early medieval India.
***Keywords**: Brihadeshwara Temple, Economy, Trade Networks, Merchant Guilds, Cultural Exchange*

Introduction

In early medieval South India, temples functioned as complex institutions that combined ritual authority with economic management, social organisation, and political ideology. Far from being confined to the religious sphere, major temples operated as landholders, employers, financial intermediaries, and nodal points within regional and long-distance exchange networks. Over the past several decades, historians and archaeologists have increasingly recognised that temples were integral to processes of agrarian expansion, monetisation, and urban growth between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE. Within this broader landscape, the Brihadeshwara Temple at Thanjavur, constructed around 1010 CE under the patronage of Rajaraja Chola I, stands out as one of the most extensively documented temple complexes of early medieval India.The Brihadeshwara Temple was not only an architectural and ritual centre but also a highly organised economic institution embedded within

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the fertile Kaveri delta and connected, through riverine and overland routes, to the ports of the Coromandel Coast. These ports, particularly Nagapattinam, linked South India to the wider Indian Ocean world, facilitating exchange with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. The temple thus occupied a strategic position at the intersection of inland agrarian production and transregional trade networks.



Brihadeshwara Temple, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, early eleventh century CE (©thedecorjournalindia.com)

This paper examines the Brihadeshwara Temple as a key node within what may be conceptualised as a "sacred economy," in which religious authority structured economic activity and enabled long-distance exchange. Drawing primarily on epigraphic evidence, supplemented by archaeological and art-historical data, the study argues that the temple functioned as a temple-city: an institutional space where ritual practice, economic redistribution, and political power converged. By analysing land endowments, financial transactions, craft production, and interactions with merchant guilds, the paper situates the Brihadeshwara Temple within broader debates on temple economies, state formation, and Indian Ocean trade in early medieval South Asia.

Historiographical Context and Theoretical Framework

Early scholarship on South Indian temples largely focused on their religious significance, architectural form, and iconographic programmes, often treating economic functions as secondary or derivative. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's seminal studies of the Chola dynasty provided detailed documentation of royal patronage and temple administration, yet these were framed within a predominantly political narrative that foregrounded kingship and imperial expansion (Sastri, 1955). Within this paradigm, temples appeared primarily as instruments of royal authority rather than as autonomous or semi-autonomous economic institutions.

A significant historiographical shift occurred with the work of Burton Stein, whose segmentary state model reconceptualised the Chola polity as a loosely integrated system composed of relatively autonomous local segments (Stein, 1980). In this formulation, temples functioned as centres of redistribution that mediated surplus flows between agrarian producers and political elites without reliance on a highly centralised bureaucratic apparatus. While Stein's model was influential in redirecting attention toward institutional decentralisation, it has been critiqued for underplaying royal intervention and for insufficiently engaging with the expanding role of commerce, monetisation, and long-distance trade.

Subsequent scholarship has offered more nuanced interpretations. R. Champakalakshmi emphasised the role of temples in processes of urbanisation, trade expansion, and ideological transformation, arguing that religious institutions were central to structuring economic and social change rather than merely reflecting it (Champakalakshmi, 2011). Y. Subbarayalu's epigraphic analyses further demonstrated the administrative sophistication of temple management and highlighted the close integration of temples with royal authority and mercantile interests (Subbarayalu, 2012). Parallel work on Indian Ocean trade by K. N. Chaudhuri and Rila Mukherjee have underscored the importance of durable institutional frameworks: ports, merchant guilds, and religious centres in sustaining long-distance exchange across political boundaries (Chaudhuri, 1985; Mukherjee, 2011).

The theoretical framework adopted here draws on economic anthropology and historical archaeology, particularly the understanding that economic activity is embedded within social and ritual structures. The concept of "sacred economy" is employed to describe systems in which religious institutions generated legitimacy, trust, and institutional continuity for economic transactions.

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Rather than reducing temples to proto-secular economic agents, this approach emphasizes how ritual authority actively structured surplus management, credit, and exchange. In this framework, the Brihadeshwara Temple is analyzed not simply as a recipient of agrarian surplus, but as a dynamic institutional actor embedded within regional and transregional trade networks.

Historical and Spatial Context: Thanjavur and the Kaveri Delta

Thanjavur emerged as the principal imperial centre of the Chola polity during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries CE, reflecting both strategic political calculation and economic advantage. Its location within the Kaveri delta, one of the most fertile agrarian regions of the Indian subcontinent, provided the material foundation for Chola expansion and state consolidation. Extensive irrigation networks- canals, tanks, and embankments- transformed the delta into a highly productive landscape capable of generating sustained agricultural surplus. This surplus underwrote military campaigns, administrative infrastructure, and monumental temple construction.



Map of the Kaveri delta showing Thanjavur, Nagapattinam, and the Kallanai (Grand Anicut) irrigation structure, illustrating the riverine network that sustained the agrarian economy of the Chola period (©Scroll.in)

The Kaveri delta was not an isolated agrarian zone but part of an integrated system of circulation. The river functioned as a major conduit linking inland settlements to the Coromandel Coast, enabling the movement of grain, craft goods, revenue, and personnel. Riverine routes connected Thanjavur to coastal ports, most notably Nagapattinam, which emerged as a major maritime hub in the early medieval period. Archaeological and textual evidence indicates that Nagapattinam facilitated overseas trade with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, hosting diverse mercantile communities and religious establishments. Through these connections, agrarian surplus generated in the hinterland entered wider Indian Ocean exchange networks.

The construction of the Brihadeshwara Temple by Rajaraja Chola I around 1010 CE must be understood within this spatial and political framework. The temple was not merely a devotional project but a calculated assertion of imperial authority embedded within an economically strategic landscape. By situating a monumental temple at Thanjavur, the king anchored royal power within the heart of the agrarian surplus zone while simultaneously aligning it with commercial circuits extending to the coast. Epigraphic records linking land grants, temple revenues, and administrative oversight further demonstrate that temple-building was integral to statecraft.

Geographically, the Brihadeshwara Temple thus occupied a pivotal position within inland–coastal exchange networks. It mediated flows of surplus from rural producers to urban and maritime contexts, reinforcing Thanjavur's role as both an imperial capital and an economic hub within the early medieval Chola world.

The Brihadeshwara Temple as an Economic Institution

The economic role of the Brihadeshwara Temple is most clearly attested through its extensive epigraphic corpus, engraved on the walls of the main shrine and associated structures. These inscriptions, dated largely to the reign of Rajaraja Chola I and his immediate successors, document a wide range of land endowments, including *devadana* grants made directly to the temple, *brahmadeya* donations involving Brahman settlements, and tax-free transfers of revenue-bearing lands. Several inscriptions specify the precise boundaries of donated lands, the categories of taxes remitted, and the obligations of cultivators, indicating a high degree of

administrative precision. Entire villages in the Kaveri delta were assigned to the temple, with their produce earmarked for specific ritual functions such as lamp maintenance, daily offerings, and festival observances.

Epigraphic records further provide detailed information on the management of agricultural surplus. Inscriptions enumerate fixed quantities of paddy, ghee, oil, and other consumables required annually or daily for ritual services. Provisions were made for the collection, storage, and regulated disbursement of these resources, often with named officials responsible for oversight. Penalties for default or misappropriation are occasionally recorded, suggesting formal mechanisms of accountability. Such data demonstrate that the temple maintained systematic control over surplus extraction and redistribution rather than functioning as a passive recipient of donations.

The organization of labour is similarly well documented. Inscriptions list a wide range of personnel attached to the temple, including priests (*archakas*), musicians, dancers, accountants, guards, cleaners, and various categories of artisans. Specific duties, remuneration often in kind and conditions of service are recorded, indicating contractual relationships rather than informal patronage. The scale of this workforce reflects the temple's role as a major employer within the urban economy of Thanjavur.

Interpretatively, this epigraphic evidence reveals that the Brihadeshwara Temple operated as an institutionalized economic entity with bureaucratic structures comparable to those of urban administrative centres. The precision of record-keeping, regulation of labour, and long-term management of agrarian resources indicate deliberate economic planning. Rather than merely redistributing surplus generated elsewhere, the temple actively structured production, consumption, and labour relations, reinforcing its position as a central economic institution within the early medieval Chola polity.

Temples as Financial Nodes: Credit, Endowments, and Capital Storage

Epigraphic evidence from the Brihadeshwara Temple indicates that, in addition to managing agrarian resources, the temple functioned as a significant financial institution within the early medieval Chola economy. Numerous inscriptions record monetary endowments in gold and silver, as well as donations of high-value commodities such as lamps, textiles, and vessels, deposited with the temple for perpetual ritual services. These endowments were typically accompanied by precise instructions regarding their use, expected returns, and the ritual obligations they were intended to sustain. The regularity and scale of such donations suggest that temples were recognised repositories for liquid and semi-liquid forms of wealth.

Several inscriptions further attest to the practice of lending temple-held capital at interest. Terms such as *kanam* (principal deposit) and *vatti* (interest) appear in records documenting the circulation of endowed wealth. In these arrangements, donated capital was loaned to individuals or corporate bodies, with the interest designated for temple maintenance or ritual expenditure. The careful specification of interest rates and repayment conditions indicates a regulated system of credit rather than ad hoc financial activity. The temple thus acted as an intermediary, transforming static donations into productive capital while maintaining long-term ritual continuity.



Tamil inscription from the Brihadeshwara Temple recording endowments for ritual services and land administration (©tamilnadu-favtourism.blogspot.com & gemini.google.com)

The role of the Brihadeshwara Temple as a secure repository of wealth is underscored by the confidence donors placed in its institutional stability. Depositing capital in a temple offered

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protection from political uncertainty and social contestation, while the religious sanctity of the institution reinforced norms of accountability. This function was not unique to Thanjavur. Comparable inscriptional evidence from the temples of Chidambaram and Srirangam demonstrates similar practices of capital endowment, interest-bearing loans, and financial stewardship, suggesting a broader systemic pattern across early medieval South India.

Interpretatively, these practices position temples as key financial nodes within regional economies. By mobilising endowed wealth through credit mechanisms, temples facilitated agricultural investment, artisanal production, and commercial exchange. The financial role of Brihadeshwara must therefore be understood not as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of an institutional network through which sacred authority structured the circulation of capital along trade and exchange routes.

Merchant Guilds and Long-Distance Trade Networks

The integration of the Brihadeshwara Temple within long-distance trade networks is most clearly visible through its documented relationships with organised merchant guilds, notably the Ayyavole 500 and Manigramam. Epigraphic records from the Chola period attest to collective donations made by merchants and merchant corporations to major temples, including Brihadeshwara. These donations typically took the form of monetary endowments or provisions for perpetual lamps and festivals, indicating sustained institutional engagement rather than episodic acts of piety. The collective nature of these offerings suggests that merchant guilds viewed temples as corporate partners capable of safeguarding shared capital and symbolic interests.

The motivations underlying merchant patronage were not exclusively devotional. Temples provided ritual legitimacy that reinforced the moral economy of trade, embedding commercial activity within a sacred framework. By associating mercantile wealth with divine service, guilds enhanced their social status and reinforced trust within trading communities. In addition, temples functioned as institutional spaces for dispute mediation and record-keeping, offering a stable forum for resolving conflicts that could arise within long-distance commercial operations. Although direct evidence of formal judicial functions remains limited, the administrative authority of temples made them effective arbiters within mercantile networks.



Maritime trade routes connecting the Coromandel Coast with Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia during the Chola period. Merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole 500 and Manigramam operated across these networks, linking inland centres such as the Brihadeshwara Temple to overseas markets through ports including Nagapattinam (©Wikimedia Commons)

While the Brihadeshwara Temple itself was an inland institution, its connections with merchant guilds indirectly linked it to overseas trade routes extending across the Indian Ocean. The Ayyavole 500, in particular, is well attested in inscriptions from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, indicating the transregional scope of its activities. Through such guilds, temples like Brihadeshwara were embedded within exchange systems connecting the Kaveri delta to maritime circuits centred on ports such as Nagapattinam.

Within Indian Ocean trade scholarship, this evidence supports an interpretation of temples as stabilising institutions that underwrote long-distance commerce without directly managing overseas trade. Brihadeshwara thus functioned not as a commercial hub in itself, but as an institutional anchor that integrated inland production with transoceanic exchange through mercantile intermediaries.

Production, Consumption, and Craft Specialisation

The scale and ritual requirements of the Brihadeshwara Temple played a crucial role in

stimulating specialised production within the Chola economy. The construction and maintenance of the temple complex demanded sustained input from skilled stone masons, architects, sculptors, and metalworkers. The monumental granite *vimana*, executed with remarkable precision, reflects advanced quarrying, transportation, and construction techniques, implying the organisation of large, skilled labour forces over extended periods. Such architectural scale provides material evidence for intensified production supported by institutional patronage.



Bronze image of Shiva as Nataraja, Chola period, c. 11th–12th century CE (©metmuseum.org)

Bronze casting represents another key area of craft specialisation associated with temple demand. The proliferation of high-quality Chola bronzes, characterised by technical refinement and stylistic coherence, indicates workshops operating under stable patronage systems. Temple inscriptions and surviving icons suggest that bronzes were commissioned not only for permanent installation but also for use in processional rituals, creating recurring demand for metalworking expertise. Similarly, temple rituals required large quantities of textiles for deity adornment, banners, and ceremonial use, stimulating weaving and related crafts within the region.

Temple festivals further amplified patterns of production and consumption. Major ritual events necessitated substantial provisions of food, flowers, lamps, and performance materials, drawing resources from surrounding villages and towns. These festivals attracted pilgrims, artisans, and merchants, transforming Thanjavur into a periodic centre of exchange. Archaeological indicators of urban density and the spatial organisation of the temple complex support the interpretation of festivals as catalysts for market activity.

Taken together, architectural remains and art-historical evidence demonstrate that the Brihadeshwara Temple functioned as a sustained driver of craft production and consumption. Temple demand not only absorbed surplus but actively shaped artisanal specialisation and economic rhythms within the early medieval Chola landscape.

Political Economy: The Ruler–Temple–Merchant Nexus

The economic functions of the Brihadeshwara Temple were embedded within a broader political framework structured by interactions between royal authority, religious institutions, and mercantile capital. Royal patronage played a central role in legitimising the temple's authority. The extensive land grants and material endowments bestowed by Rajaraja Chola I not only financed ritual activity but also positioned the temple as an institution of imperial significance. Monumental architecture and epigraphic self-representation further reinforced the association between kingship and sacred space, embedding royal power within a religious idiom.



Chola-period Tamil inscription from the walls of the Brihadeshwara Temple recording royal endowments issued during the reign of Rajaraja Chola I. Such inscriptions document the institutional relationship between royal authority,

temple administration, and economic resources in the Chola polity (©Wikimedia Commons)

Temples, in turn, functioned as stabilising institutions within the regional economy. Through long-term management of land, surplus, and capital, the Brihadeshwara Temple regulated flows of resources across agrarian and urban sectors. Its administrative continuity and ritual permanence provided a degree of economic stability that transcended individual reigns, enabling sustained investment in production, credit, and exchange. In this sense, temples acted as institutional anchors that mediated between political authority and economic practice.

Merchant groups benefited from this arrangement by operating within an ideologically sanctioned and institutionally secure framework. By associating mercantile wealth with temple patronage, guilds gained social legitimacy and access to stable mechanisms of capital storage, dispute mediation, and collective representation. This relationship, however, was neither purely hierarchical nor static.

Engaging with state-formation debates, the Brihadeshwara case complicates models that emphasise either strong centralisation or fragmented authority. Instead, it suggests a flexible political economy in which power was distributed across interconnected institutions. The ruler–temple–merchant nexus functioned through mutual reinforcement rather than unilateral control, allowing the Chola state to integrate economic and ideological resources across diverse spatial and social contexts.

Comparative Perspectives

The economic functions of the Brihadeshwara Temple find close parallels in other religious institutions operating along major trade routes in South and Southeast Asia, underscoring the broader relevance of sacred economies in pre-modern exchange systems. Buddhist monasteries along the Silk Routes of Central and South Asia, for example, functioned as centres of storage, credit, and hospitality for merchants and pilgrims. Archaeological and textual evidence indicates that monasteries accumulated endowments, managed land and donations, and facilitated long-distance trade by providing institutional stability and social trust within otherwise fragmented political landscapes. Comparable patterns are visible in Southeast Asia, particularly in temple complexes associated with Khmer and Javanese polities. Sites such as Angkor and Borobudur were embedded within agrarian systems that generated surplus through temple-controlled land and labour. These institutions similarly combined ritual authority with economic management, supporting large-scale construction, craft production, and redistribution. Inscriptions from these regions record land grants and labour obligations dedicated to religious foundations, paralleling practices observed in Chola South India.Within the Indian Ocean world, such institutions functioned as stabilising nodes that linked inland production zones to maritime trade networks. While the Brihadeshwara Temple was not directly involved in overseas commerce, its role in regulating surplus, credit, and labour mirrors the institutional functions of monasteries and temples situated closer to trade corridors. This comparison highlights a shared structural logic across diverse cultural contexts, wherein religious institutions mediated economic flows by embedding exchange within sacred frameworks.

Taken together, these parallels demonstrate that the Brihadeshwara Temple represents not an isolated phenomenon but part of a wider pattern in which sacred institutions facilitated trade, surplus management, and socio-economic integration along major pre-modern trade routes.

Conclusion

This study has examined the Brihadeshwara Temple at Thanjavur as a central institution within the sacred economies of early medieval South India, demonstrating that temples functioned as far more than sites of ritual devotion. Drawing on epigraphic, archaeological, and art-historical evidence, the paper has shown that the temple operated as an economic and administrative hub that integrated agrarian production, financial activity, craft specialisation, and mercantile exchange. Through systematic land endowments, surplus management, credit mechanisms, and labour organisation, the Brihadeshwara Temple actively structured regional economic flows rather

than merely absorbing surplus generated elsewhere.

By situating the temple within the spatial context of the Kaveri delta and its connectivity to coastal ports such as Nagapattinam, this study has highlighted how inland religious institutions were embedded within Indian Ocean trade networks. Although the temple did not directly control overseas commerce, its close relationships with merchant guilds and its role as a stable institutional anchor linked agrarian hinterlands to transregional exchange systems. The analysis of the ruler–temple–merchant nexus further underscores how political authority, religious ideology, and mercantile capital were mutually reinforcing within the Chola polity.

The paper contributes to broader debates on temple economies and state formation by advancing the concept of a "sacred economy," in which ritual authority enabled economic transactions without collapsing religious institutions into secular economic agents. Future research could build on this framework through quantitative analysis of inscriptional data to assess the scale of surplus flows and credit operations. Spatial approaches, including GIS-based mapping of land grants and trade routes, also hold significant potential for refining our understanding of how sacred institutions structured economic and cultural connectivity in early medieval India.

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