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They Are Massaging The Temple

Scandals in Ram Mandir, Tirupati, Sabarimala are a result of these places being run like fiefdoms, with a small group of people overseeing vast amounts of money & valuables. Govt-led management and audit are the first corrective step

Raghav Chandra

India's temples have been in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons – Tirupati and Sabarimala rocked by scandals, a rathyatra tragedy at Jagannath Puri – and now, the Ayodhya Ram Mandir is embroiled in allegations of theft by insiders. Admitting the absence of professional supervision, the Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust will now scout for a CEO.

Ram Mandir, inaugurated in Jan 2024, drew over 160mn visitors that year alone and became India's most visited attraction, ahead of the Taj Mahal. Searches for pilgrimage hotels in Ayodhya rose more than 500% year-on-year. Ujjain and Mathura saw similar surges.

Govt estimates India's religious tourism at over 1.4bn domestic visits in 2022, the sector's revenue estimated at \$10.8bn in 2024, projected to more than double by early 2030s. Union budgets routinely announce new 'spiritual corridors'; schemes like PRASHAD and Swadesh Darshan have sanctioned thousands of crores of public funds for temple-town infra.

This, overall, is encouraging – convergence of faith, livelihoods, regional development and tourism. But it is viewed as success entirely from metrics of footfall, hotel occupancy, ribbon-cuttings and event management. Scarce energy is spent on how these institutions, handling crowds and cash flows on industrial scale, and sponsored by state itself, are governed. Three temples and three scandals, with similar pattern, within a year, make the cost of that neglect impossible to ignore.

At Tirupati (TTD), SIT's chargesheet established adulterated ghee was supplied for laddu prasadam since at least 2019, sustained for five years through systemic bribery, including cash transfers of nearly ₹20cr routed through hawala channels and gifts of gold coins and smartphones to officials.

Lab reports flagging the adulteration as early as 2022 were reportedly suppressed. Roughly 68L kg of tainted ghee, worth about ₹250cr, entered the supply chain. In Sabarimala, several kilos of temple gold were substituted with cheap gold-plated copper. Now, the Ram Janmbhoomi trust is grappling with a temple donation and land embezzlement racket involving various layers of staff.

What connects these cases is the absence of the accounting architecture enacted to prevent malfeasance in corporate world – independent directors, mandated audit trails and audit committees, segregated duties between those who collect money, those who count it, those in treasury, and risk management, and whistleblower channels that don't depend on a scandal reaching the press before anyone investigates.

Large temples are run more like family fiefdoms, than as the financial and hospitality operations that they've become. Since state is developing infra that enables them to benefit from such large footfalls and donations, it is state's right and responsibility to enforce effective management systems.

Hereditary and privileged nature of temple staffing is a problem. The same lineage of priests that conducts rituals, also controls new appointments, and succession – often basis heredity. There is little separation between religious authority and administrative accountability. This makes the incentive structure inherently perverse, increasing the incentive for familial control.

Image: AI

While in a few temples, eg, Tirupati and Vaishno Devi, there is reasonable govt involvement, in many others, including Char Dham, a small group of priests manage internal arrangements and have full sway over temple staffing.

Crowd management is the second risk. Vaishno Devi crush (Jan 2022) killed 12; Sabarimala crush (2011) killed 106; Tirupati stampede (Jan 2025) killed six; Puri rathyatra stampede killed 6, and injured over 50; the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj stampede officially killed at least 30. Crowd control is ignored.

One reason is that the entity setting the pace and regulating pilgrim inflow – temple trust and priests – have a vested financial interest in maximising, not capping, footfall, since donations, special darshan fees, and local commerce all scale with numbers. That is a structural conflict of interest as basic as a company auditing its own books.

There is something to be learnt from good practices elsewhere. Saudi Arabia's management of Haj – which brings over a million and a half pilgrims to a single site on a single day – now runs on AI-powered platforms that flag congestion before it becomes dangerous; entry metered by quota and timeslot, not open-ended.

Vatican has built financial governance ground up, creating an Office of Auditor General that conducts unannounced inspections; a Secretariat for the Economy that separates custodianship of funds from oversight of funds. Japan's major shrines and temples also offer a template for visitor management: metered with timed entry during peak times, professional sanitation contracts, strict licensing of precinct vendors, and volunteer corps for crowd flow.

Visit any major Indian temple town outside Tirupati and complaints are the same: overflowing waste bins, inadequate sanitation, unregulated hawkers occupying pilgrim pathways, unmanaged monkey population, organised begging rackets, chaotic sprawl of unlicensed eateries and shops with no health or safety inspection regime. None of this requires new tech or large budgets to fix – it requires municipal-grade planning with master plans that separate ritual, retail, and transit zones instead of letting them collide.

This is not to make a case against temple tourism or state promotion of pilgrimage economies – economic upside for temple towns is real. It is a case for sequencing: infra and governance systems should get embedded and precede marketing. Give doctrinal and ritual autonomy to priests, but subject finances and management to strict govt oversight. Treat temples as religious corporations. Enact a national law for management of large temples (where govt provides infra and funds) and of related trusts. Such law could mandate independent directors, minimum standards for internal and statutory audit, crowd-capacity limits, sanitation, and vendor licensing, with statutory teeth, rather than advisory status.

This would save the nation the embarrassment and torment caused by financial scandals of the kind that have surfaced. The devout deserve safe and well-managed temples – it shouldn't take a body count or a scandal to be reminded of that imperative.

The writer is a former secretary, GOI