



GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL OUTREACH, AND ASSET STEWARDSHIP OF TELANGANA'S TEMPLES

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Abstract:

This paper examines the governance, social outreach, and asset stewardship of temples in Telangana, emphasizing their evolving role beyond religious institutions to socio-economic engines. Temples in the region, such as Yadadri Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Temple, Vemulawada Rajarajeshwara Swamy Temple, and Medaram Sammakka-Sarakka Jatara, serve not only as spiritual centers but also as hubs of economic activity, cultural preservation, and social welfare. The study investigates how the Telangana Endowments Department governs temple administration, regulates finances, manages land holdings, and ensures transparency in religious institutions. It also explores how temples contribute to education, healthcare, food distribution, and disaster response through community-based programs. These initiatives reflect the temples' growing role in addressing public needs and promoting inclusive development. In terms of asset stewardship, the paper highlights issues of land encroachment, financial mismanagement, and the need for digital records and policy reforms to protect temple properties. The research further addresses contemporary debates on the balance between state control and institutional autonomy, stressing the importance of empowering local temple committees while maintaining oversight.

Keywords: Temple Governance, Social Outreach, Asset Management, Endowments Department, Religious Institutions, Economic Impact, Cultural Heritage, Public Welfare, Temple Land Reforms.

Drawing from government reports, policy documents, and case studies, this work concludes that strengthening temple governance can contribute significantly to economic growth, cultural continuity, and social equity in Telangana.

Introduction

The administration of Hindu temples in Telangana is governed primarily by the *Telangana Charitable and Hindu Religious Institutions and Endowments Act, 1987* (Telangana Act No. 30 of 1987). This Act, adapted to the new state in 2014 under G.O.Ms.37 (Endowments), consolidates the law on charitable trusts and temple endowments. It applies to “all public charitable institutions and endowments” (other than Wakfs) and “all Hindu public religious institutions and endowments whether registered or not”. The Telangana Endowments Department – headed by the Commissioner of Endowments – advises the government on temple administration and enforces the Act. Its official mandate is “administration and governance of all public charitable institutions and endowments... (other than Wakfs) ... and of all Hindu public religious institutions and endowments whether registered or not”. Under this scheme, the Endowments Commissioner (a senior IAS officer) and subordinate regional/assistant commissioners oversee temples, approve budgets, and ensure compliance with the law.

Temple Classification and Administration

Telangana temples are grouped by size and income into four classes (6A, 6B, 6C, 6D), each with a distinct administrative setup. The largest **6A** temples are further divided by administrative cadre. Three temples (Sri Raja Rajeshwara Swamy, Vemulawada; Sri Seetha Ramachandra Swamy, Bhadrachalam; and Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy, Yadagirigutta) form the Joint Commissioner (JC) cadre of 6A, each with annual incomes exceeding ₹5 crore. A second 6A tier under Deputy Commissioners (DC) covers about 15 temples with incomes above ₹3 crore. The 6A Assistant Commissioner (AC) temples earn between ₹1–2 crore. **6B** includes medium temples (₹2 lakh–₹25 lakh income), **6C** the small temples (₹0.5–2 lakh), and **6D** covers mathas/mutts regardless of income. Each class is overseen by commissioners or assistant commissioners as needed. All temple finances and accounts are subject to Endowments Department rules (such as annual budget approval by authorities under the Act).

The Act also empowers the government to appoint trustees or management committees. Historically many temples were managed by hereditary or “mutual” trustees. Reforms now encourage broader boards: for example, amendments envisage including hereditary trustees as non-official members and adding experts to newly formed temple trusts. In practice, each temple maintains an Executive Officer (a civil servant or priest) to implement policy, supervise rituals and finances, and liaise with the department. Smaller temples often have local advisory committees. All temple earnings must be used for religious and charitable purposes (with only a small percentage retained by Endowments for administrative expenses, not non-religious uses).

Regulatory Framework: The Telangana Endowments Department

The administration and governance of charitable and Hindu religious institutions in Telangana are primarily regulated by the Telangana Charitable and Hindu Religious Institutions and Endowments Act, 1987.¹⁵ The state's Endowments Department is responsible for overseeing these institutions, which are categorized based on their annual income.¹⁵

Temples are classified into several categories: 6A, which includes institutions with an annual income of ₹5 crore and above (further subdivided into Assistant Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, and Joint Commissioner cadres); 6B, for temples earning between ₹2 lakh and ₹25 lakh; 6C, for those with an income between ₹50,000 and ₹2 lakh; and 6D, which applies to mutts without a specific income criterion. Notably, three prominent temples—Vemulawada, Bhadrachalam, and Yadagirigutta—fall under the high-income 6A-JC cadre, signifying their substantial annual revenues.¹⁵

Recent reforms, enacted in 2025, have introduced more stringent financial oversight. All 6A and 6B category temples are now mandated to submit annual budget proposals exceeding ₹10 lakh to the Endowments Minister for thorough examination and approval. This measure aims to enhance transparency and accountability in temple management, addressing previous concerns where officials reportedly approved budgets without ministerial notice. The

Minister is empowered by Section 154 of the 1987 Act to ensure proper management of these institutions.

For institutions with exceptionally high annual incomes, specifically those exceeding ₹100 crore, the government is empowered to constitute a dedicated Board of Trustees. The Yadagirigutta Devasthanam (YTD) is a prime example, for which a specific board can be established with government-appointed members, including ex-officio members such as the Principal Secretary of Revenue and the District Collector. This board is tasked with overseeing the temple's affairs, finances, and development. These boards possess the authority to fix fees for various services, call for financial accounts, and delegate powers to Executive Officers, ensuring a structured approach to administration.

Furthermore, temples are legally required to contribute a percentage of their income to various state-managed funds. These include 12% to the Endowment Administration Fund (EAF), 1.5% as an Audit Fee (AF), 5% to the Common Good Fund (CGF), and 3% to the Archaka Welfare Fund (AWF) for temples with annual incomes exceeding ₹20 lakh.

The increasing government oversight and formalization of temple management, particularly for high-income temples, signals a shift towards viewing these institutions not merely as religious entities but as significant public bodies requiring robust financial governance and accountability. This approach has the potential to enhance their long-term economic stability and their capacity for broader development initiatives. However, while government oversight aims for transparency, the mandatory contributions to state funds and the perceived "total lack of financial autonomy" in some government-controlled temples can paradoxically erode their financial base and administrative flexibility. This can potentially hinder their ability to invest in local economic development or meet their own operational needs, as exemplified by the financial difficulties faced by the Bhadrachalam temple. This creates a tension between state control for accountability and temple autonomy for effective local economic engagement.

Recent Reforms and Financial Oversight

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specific income criterion. Notably, three prominent temples—Vemulawada, Bhadrachalam, and Yadagirigutta—fall under the high-income 6A-JC cadre, signifying their substantial annual revenues.¹⁵ Recent reforms, enacted in 2025, have introduced more stringent financial oversight. All 6A and 6B category temples are now mandated to submit annual budget proposals exceeding ₹10 lakh to the Endowments Minister for thorough examination and approval. This measure aims to enhance transparency and accountability in temple management, addressing previous concerns where officials reportedly approved budgets without ministerial notice. The Minister is empowered by Section 154 of the 1987 Act to ensure proper management of these institutions. For institutions with exceptionally high annual incomes, specifically those exceeding ₹100 crore, the government is empowered to constitute a dedicated Board of Trustees. The Yadagirigutta Devasthanam (YTD) is a prime example, for which a specific board can be established with government-appointed members, including ex-officio members such as the Principal Secretary of Revenue and the District Collector. This board is tasked with overseeing the temple's affairs, finances, and development. These boards possess the authority to fix fees for various services, call for financial accounts, and delegate powers to Executive Officers, ensuring a structured approach to administration. Furthermore, temples are legally required to contribute a percentage of their income to various state-managed funds. These include 12% to the Endowment Administration Fund (EAF), 1.5% as an Audit Fee (AF), 5% to the Common Good Fund (CGF), and 3% to the Archaka Welfare Fund (AWF) for temples with annual incomes exceeding ₹20 lakh. The increasing government oversight and formalization of temple management, particularly for high-income temples, signals a shift towards viewing these institutions not merely as religious entities but as significant public bodies requiring robust financial governance and accountability. This approach has the potential to enhance their long-term economic stability and their capacity for broader development initiatives. However, while government oversight aims for transparency, the mandatory contributions to state funds and the perceived "total lack of financial autonomy" in some government-controlled temples can paradoxically erode their financial base and administrative flexibility. This can potentially hinder their ability to invest in local economic development or meet their own operational needs, as exemplified by the financial difficulties faced by the Bhadrachalam temple. This creates a tension between state control for accountability and temple autonomy for effective local economic engagement.

Budgetary and Audit Controls: The Endowments Act already requires that temple annual budgets be sanctioned by the Commissioner or higher officers, and the new rules reinforce this oversight. For example, circulars now insist that *all* annual budget proposals of 6A and 6B temples be sent to the Endowments Department (and over ₹10 lakh budgets must be approved by the Endowments Minister) before disbursement. Officials note that Sections 34 and 154 of the Act envisage government scrutiny of temple finances to ensure transparency.

In practice, temples must file detailed financial statements and undergo audits by the department or AG auditors.

Digitization and Transparency: In 2025 the Endowments Minister ordered all temple processes (donations, accounts, services) to be digitized for transparency. This includes online accounting of collections and expenses, e-hundi management, and electronic public display of accounts. The government also directed a GIS survey of all temple lands to map boundaries, detect encroachments and facilitate efficient leasing. These steps are intended to curb illegal land encroachment (a chronic issue, see below) and to ensure temple assets are properly recorded and used.

Temple Contributions to Social Welfare and Community Development

Telangana's temples are more than places of worship; they engage in numerous social welfare activities. **Free Food (Annadanam):** Many major temples run continuous annadanam programs. For example, Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Temple at Yadagirigutta maintains a "Nitya Annadanam" scheme feeding roughly 500 pilgrims daily (and at least 1,000 on festival days). Similarly, the Bhadrachalam Seeta Ramachandra Swamy Temple "regularly distributes free meals to the needy, especially on auspicious days and during festivals". Smaller temples also often serve prasadam or host free community lunches on special occasions.

Education and Health Support: Temples sponsor educational aid. The Bhadrachalam temple "provides educational resources and scholarships for underprivileged students" in its neighborhood. Under the new trust-board regime, Yadagirigutta is planning Vedic colleges and schools to preserve traditional learning. Health camps and basic clinics are sometimes organized by temple trusts or in cooperation with the government: for instance, Bhadrachalam conducts periodic medical check-ups for local villagers. Temples also contribute in-kind services like blood donation drives or disease screening during festivals.

Community Services: Major temples provide essential services for pilgrims: lodging (prasadam halls, dharmasalas), drinking water, etc. Some temple trusts have built guest houses or freed public transport schemes. For example, after the state launched a free bus service for women, daily footfall at Yadagirigutta jumped (to ~50,000 devotees per day), prompting the temple authority to enhance amenities. The Bhadrachalam temple also coordinates with local authorities to manage crowding during its annual Rama Navami festival. In addition, an Endowments-funded *Welfare Trust* now supports temple priests ("archakas") and staff: roughly 13,700 temple functionaries up to Assistant Commissioner level receive assistance for medical care, children's education, weddings, funerals, and even disability support. These measures reflect the temples' role in social insurance for their own communities.

Asset Management: Land and Leasing Practices

Temple endowments include vast land holdings and properties, which are a source of income and also face management challenges. In Telangana about **87,235.39 acres** are recorded as temple-owned lands. These lands (under the Endowments Department's purview) are typically leased for agriculture, grazing or commercial use; the lease rentals fund temple rituals and maintenance. For example, a Deccan Chronicle report noted that, state-wide (in undivided Andhra), only ~25% of temple lands were being cultivated or yielding revenue, with large areas lying fallow or encroached. Similar underutilization exists in Telangana: authorities report thousands of acres encroached (e.g. over 3,000 acres in Mahabubnagar district alone). The government's new surveying initiative aims to identify these unutilized or illegally occupied plots and recover them.

There are opportunities to better develop temple lands. The new temple trust boards are expected to propose land-use plans (e.g. Yadagirigutta's 1,241-acre hill temple campus is being developed as a tourist "temple city"). At Basar, officials have promised development of the temple complex and ghats along the Godavari for pilgrims. Responsible leasing (transparent auctions, fixed-tenure contracts) could increase revenues. However, challenges remain: encroachers sometimes build on temple land or claim ownership (political pressure has been reported, especially in remote districts). To safeguard these assets, the Endowments Department has been directed to systematically document all land titles, digitize records, and resolve pending court cases. All such steps are aimed at ensuring temple lands – which belong to the public charitable corpus – are neither sold off nor diverted inappropriately.

Economic Data and Case Studies of Major Temples

Telangana's temple economy is substantial. The Yadagirigutta (Yadadri) Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple is by far the largest: it reported an income of **Rs 224 crore** in 2023–24. It now draws ~50,000 visitors daily and has become a major pilgrimage center. Vemulawada's Sri Raja Rajeshwara (Shiva) temple earned **₹187 crore** (2023–24); on high days it sees ~48,000 devotees. Basar's Gnana Saraswati temple (Saraswati) earned **~₹64 crore**, with footfall surging (e.g. ~70,000 on one festival day). Bhadrachalam's Seetha Rama temple earned **₹57 crore**; it attracts ~4,000 devotees on weekdays and ~15,000 on weekends. Even Chilkur Balaji (the famed "Visa Temple" of Hyderabad) draws on the order of **75,000–100,000 pilgrims per week**, though its official declared income has historically been trivial (a 2002 audit noted the hereditary priest recorded only ₹12,000 annually, reflecting opaque accounting). Overall, these temples generate hundreds of crores annually and support thousands of jobs (priests, administrators, workers).

The temples' budgets are large but geared to service and maintenance. For instance, the Yadagirigutta development authority (YTD) was allocated substantial state funds for temple

infrastructure, and the new trust board will plan a budget covering pensions, education, and community programs. The Vemulawada temple runs multiple ritual services daily and maintains associated mathas; Bhadrachalam funds its famous rathotsavam (chariot festival) and the upkeep of nearby Sadhana Saptaha (religious discourses). In each case, offerings (hundi donations), state grants (for festivals and pilgrim welfare), and leasing income combine to fund salaries of priests and staff, temple improvements, and the social schemes noted above.

Challenges: Encroachment, Dependence, and Autonomy

Despite reforms, Telangana's temples face several governance challenges:

- **Land Encroachment:** As noted, large tracts of temple land are illegally occupied or idle. Attempts by temple EOs to clear encroachments have sometimes led to conflicts: media reports detail incidents (e.g. temple officers being assaulted while repossessing land in Bhadrachalam). The BJP and others have repeatedly urged the government to protect temple lands as “public trust” properties. Recovering encroached lands and ensuring ongoing lease revenues is a pressing task.
- **Financial Dependence and Accountability:** Many smaller temples depend on government grants for basic operations. Endowment salaries and pensions are funded by temple revenues, but shortfalls are covered from government coffers. This financial dependence raises questions of accountability: temples must balance traditional religious autonomy with statutory oversight. Periodic audits and the requirement for government approval of large expenditures are meant to prevent misuse of funds. Nevertheless, there are complaints that some temple officials (EOs, trustees) may misapply donations – a phenomenon not unique to Telangana. The recent push for digitized accounts and audit trails aims to strengthen accountability.
- **Autonomy vs. State Control:** Some temple activists object to excessive government interference. Telangana's laws vest temple control in the state, and hereditary custodians (like the Chilkur pujari) have historically resisted takeover. Indeed, in 2002 the hereditary priest of Chilkur publicly defied a proposed government trust board, accusing the state of “politicising” the temple. Similarly, religious leaders elsewhere (e.g. Tamil Nadu) argue for “free temples” run by independent boards. Telangana's approach has been to gradually involve community and expert appointees while keeping a government role. The new trust boards aim to strike a balance: they include local trustees and non-official members, but are constituted by the government for accountability. Whether this will satisfy calls for greater self-governance remains to be seen.

- **Underutilization of Assets:** Beyond land, some temple resources (donations, shops, heritage structures) may be underused. For example, Chilkur historically had no hundi (donation box) despite millions of visitors, limiting income. Enhancing pilgrim facilities (lodging, parking, guides) could both serve devotees and boost revenue. The new boards have mandates to explore such opportunities. But they must do so without commercializing the sacred.

Conclusion

In sum, Telangana's temples operate under a complex governance regime that seeks to protect religious assets while providing modern oversight. Recent reforms (budgetary controls, digitization, trust boards) mark a shift toward transparency and structured management. At the same time, temples continue their age-old charitable roles – feeding the hungry, supporting education, and serving devotees – which remain central to their public value. The coming years will test how well the state can safeguard temple wealth and heritage while respecting the devotion and service at the heart of these institutions.

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