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Embedded economies: Waqf, Pilgrimage Economy and Redistribution in Kashmir

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Abstract

This paper examines the economic dimensions of Sufi shrines in Kashmir, arguing that shrine complexes constitute important centres of economic exchange, livelihood generation and social redistribution alongside their religious and spiritual functions. Drawing upon field-based observations and interviews conducted at five major shrine complexes, the study analyses three interconnected dimensions of shrine economy: **Waqf endowments, pilgrimage-driven market economies, and redistributive practices such as langar, charity and informal assistance**. The evidence indicates that shrines create employment for vendors, transport operators, food sellers, artisans and service providers, particularly during ‘Urs and other major religious occasions. At the same time, shrine institutions facilitate the circulation of resources towards poorer households through feeding programmes, charitable assistance and hospitality. The paper employs Karl Polanyi’s concept of the ‘moral economy’ to interpret these practices, suggesting that economic activity around Kashmiri shrines is embedded within religious ethics, social obligations and communal norms. Shrines therefore represent not merely sacred spaces but significant nodes of informal economy and community-based social security.

Keywords: Kashmir, Sufi shrines, Waqf, pilgrimage economy, bazaar, langar, redistribution, moral economy, informal economy

Introduction

The history of Kashmir cannot be adequately understood without considering the economic and social significance of its Sufi shrines. From the medieval period onwards, shrines associated with prominent Sufis have functioned as centres of devotion, pilgrimage, charity and community interaction. Their importance extends beyond the strictly religious sphere. Around these sacred spaces have emerged markets, transport networks, hospitality services, food stalls and numerous forms of small-scale commerce.

The economic significance of shrines becomes particularly visible during ‘Urs, festivals and periods of heightened pilgrimage. Large gatherings of devotees generate temporary and seasonal employment for people whose livelihoods depend upon the circulation of pilgrims. Vendors of all sorts, potters, wicker workers, cap sellers, food providers, transport operators and small retailers all participate in this pilgrimage economy.

At the institutional level, Waqf properties and donations provide an economic foundation for the management of religious establishments. At the community level, the shrine frequently becomes a site where resources are redistributed through langar, charity, hospitalit, transport and rental accommodation. The shrine economy therefore combines commercial exchange with ethical and social obligations.

This paper explores this relationship between faith and livelihood. It argues that the Kashmiri shrine is best understood as an economic institution embedded within a moral and social order rather than simply as a place of worship.

Objectives of the Study

The study has three principal objectives:

1. To examine the role of Waqf institutions in the economic management of major Kashmiri shrines.
2. To analyse the pilgrimage market economy and its contribution to local livelihoods.
3. To examine the redistributive and social-security functions associated with shrine institutions.

Methodology

The study is based on field observations and interviews conducted at five important shrine complexes: **Hazratbal, Charar-i-Sharif, Makhdoom Sahib, Dastgir Sahib and Shah-i-Hamdan**. The fieldwork focused on the economic activities surrounding these shrines and the experiences of people dependent upon them.

Interviews were conducted with approximately 120 respondents, including vendors, shrine-related workers, Waqf officials and devotees. Particular attention was given to changes in income during Urs and other major religious occasions, sources of livelihood, patterns of expenditure and experiences of charitable assistance.

The quantitative figures presented in the study are based on field responses and available institutional information and should therefore be regarded as indicative rather than as a comprehensive statistical account of the entire shrine economy.

The Waqf Economy

Waqf constitutes an important institutional foundation of the shrine economy. Historically, religious endowments have enabled shrines and associated institutions to maintain buildings, employ religious personnel and support charitable activities. In contemporary Kashmir, Waqf institutions have an important role in the administration and management of shrine-related properties and resources.

The principal sources of shrine-related income include donations, Waqf properties, rents from shops and commercial premises, and offerings made by devotees in the form of *nazr-o-niyaz*. Field discussions indicate that donations constitute an important source of revenue for major shrines.

Waqf properties also connect sacred institutions to the wider local economy. Shops situated around shrine complexes provide commercial opportunities to traders while simultaneously generating rental income for religious institutions.

The expenditure of shrine income reflects the multidimensional nature of the institution. Field data suggested an approximate distribution of expenditure towards maintenance, salaries of Imams and Khadims, and charitable or educational activities. Rather than treating revenue simply as institutional income, the shrine economy converts a portion of these resources into employment, infrastructure and welfare.

Pilgrimage and Market Economy

The most visible economic impact of shrines appears in the markets surrounding them. Pilgrimage creates demand, and that demand supports a diverse network of small entrepreneurs. The shrine market includes permanent shops as well as temporary stalls that appear during ‘Urs and other major gatherings.

Sellers of clay and wicker work items, clothes, toys, prayer caps, religious literature, souvenirs and perfume similarly benefit from pilgrim traffic. Food stalls and tea vendors meet the immediate needs of visitors, while transport operators benefit from increased movement between villages, towns and shrine complexes.

The economic impact of ‘Urs is especially significant. Interviews with vendors indicated that average daily earnings during major ‘Urs periods could rise substantially.

The shrine market is therefore a form of informal economic infrastructure. It creates opportunities requiring relatively little capital and often allows families to combine shrine-related commerce with other occupations. The economic chain extends beyond the immediate vendor: wholesalers, farmers, transporters, packaging suppliers and food producers can all benefit from increased demand.

Field estimates further suggested that more than 10,000 families across the Valley may have some direct dependence upon shrine-associated bazaars and pilgrimage-related activities. This figure should be treated as an indicative field estimate rather than a definitive census. Nevertheless, it points towards the considerable employment multiplier generated by religious tourism.

Redistribution, Community Kitchen and Social Security

The economic role of shrines cannot be understood solely through income generation. Their significance also lies in the circulation and redistribution of resources.

Langar or community kitchen represents one of the clearest expressions of this redistributive economy. During ‘Urs and major gatherings, at some shrines, community feeding provides food to pilgrims irrespective of their economic status. The practice reduces the immediate costs of pilgrimage for poorer visitors and transforms individual donations into collective consumption. In addition, devotees distribute turmeric flavoured rice, popularly known as *tehri*, amongst the devotees.

Shrines may also serve as points of assistance for widows, elderly persons, travellers and economically vulnerable families. Direct financial assistance, food distribution and other forms of charity contribute to an informal welfare system.

The Shrine as a Moral Economy

Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon. Polanyi argued that economic activity is historically embedded

within social institutions and relationships rather than existing as an autonomous market mechanism. The Kashmir shrine economy illustrates this embeddedness particularly well.

Transactions around shrines undoubtedly involve profit and commercial calculation. Yet economic behaviour is constrained and shaped by religious values, community expectations and ideas of fairness. During religious occasions, vendors often recognise the sensitivity of pilgrims and the importance of maintaining reasonable prices. Likewise, charitable giving is not simply an economic transfer but an act associated with religious obligation, compassion and social solidarity. The concept of moral economy therefore helps explain why the shrine market cannot be reduced to a conventional marketplace. Exchange occurs within a moral environment. Donation, commerce, hospitality and redistribution coexist within the same institutional space.

The shrine economy also challenges the artificial separation between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ economies. A potter, wicker worker, toy seller, transport operator or food vendor may operate outside conventional corporate structures, yet their economic activity is organised by relatively stable networks, customary practices and institutional rhythms. The ‘Urs calendar itself becomes an economic calendar, determining periods of heightened demand and employment.

The findings suggest that Kashmiri shrines perform three interconnected economic functions: **resource mobilisation, livelihood generation and redistribution.**

First, Waqf and devotional contributions mobilise resources for the maintenance of religious institutions. Second,, pilgrimage creates markets and employment, particularly for small traders and service providers. Third,, a portion of resources is redistributed through charity, langar and community support.

This threefold structure distinguishes the shrine economy from a purely commercial marketplace. The economic value generated by pilgrimage does not remain confined to individual vendors. It circulates through households, suppliers, transport networks and charitable institutions.

The shrine economy is consequently part of a broader social ecosystem. Its significance becomes particularly pronounced during periods of economic uncertainty, when informal employment and community networks can provide resilience. Nevertheless, the system also faces challenges, including inadequate regulation of commercial spaces, overcrowding, waste management, price fluctuations and the need for greater transparency in institutional financial administration.

A sustainable shrine economy would therefore require a balance between preserving the sacred character of shrine spaces and recognising their legitimate economic functions. Better vendor management, transparent Waqf administration, improved sanitation, regulated commercial zones and systematic documentation of pilgrimage-related employment could strengthen both institutional accountability and community livelihoods.

Conclusion

The Sufi shrine in Kashmir is simultaneously a sacred institution, a marketplace, a centre of hospitality and a mechanism of social redistribution. Its economic significance lies not merely in the volume of money generated around pilgrimage but in the manner in which economic resources are embedded within religious and social relationships.

Waqf endowments provide institutional resources; pilgrimage markets generate employment; and langar and charitable practices redistribute resources towards pilgrims and vulnerable members of society. Together, these functions create what may be described as a **moral economy of the shrine**.

The Kashmiri shrine therefore challenges conventional distinctions between religion and economy, sacred space and marketplace, and charity and social security. Its economy is neither wholly commercial nor wholly charitable. It is a hybrid system in which livelihood, devotion, exchange and redistribution intersect.

Understanding this economy is particularly important in the contemporary context. For thousands of households, shrine-related activity provides seasonal or supplementary income, while for poorer visitors and community members, shrine-based charity offers forms of assistance that may not be readily available through formal institutions. The shrine consequently remains an important node of economic circulation and social resilience.

Future research should undertake systematic comparative studies of shrine economies, including audited Waqf data, household-level income assessments, gendered participation in pilgrimage commerce and the changing impact of tourism and digital payment systems. Such research would deepen our understanding of how sacred institutions continue to shape economic life in contemporary Kashmir.

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Primary Field Data. Interviews and observations conducted at Hazratbal, Charar-i-Sharif, Makhdoom Sahib, Dastgir Sahib and Shah-i-Hamdan.



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