

# A Unique Model Recommended to be implemented in Religious Shrines across India as a part of ‘Swachh Bharat Abhiyan’

**Prof. V. N. Saxena<sup>1</sup>**

[vidhunath@gmail.com](mailto:vidhunath@gmail.com)

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Be it Badrinath, kedarnath, Ajmer Sharif, Rameshwaram or Shridi Saibaba shrines, devoties from various religions and cultures have a lifetime desire to visit the holy places / dhams to attain ‘Nirvana’ and ‘Parinirvana’, thinking that their soul will rest in peace after death. The poor and the rich are harassed by the ‘pandits’ / priests / imam and made to offer cash and other offerings if they want their wishes to be fulfilled by deities / God / Allah. This article suggests a unique model for temples to generate revenue for their upkeep and distribution of ‘prasad’ / sacrament without accepting any donations or offerings from devotees either in terms of money or kind.

Majority of Indians have profound religious faiths and beliefs. They are God/Allah fearing and act according to their religious teachings. The poor and the rich alike; devotees from various religions and cultures have a lifetime desire to visit the holy shrines / ‘dhams’. The economically poor people spend a major part of their hard earned and lifelong savings to offer prayers at these shrines. It is very painful to see the pilgrims being harassed by the clergy / ‘pandits’ / imams who literally force them to empty their pockets in the name of appeasing the deity/Allah and getting blessed in return. Pilgrims are also pestered by the so called religious priests to conduct special prayers to appease the Gods. A huge amount of money is exorted from the poor pilgrims by the clergy on the pretext to save them from evil spirits and God’s wrath. Many devotees complain about the organized loot by the priests / imams on their return from pilgrimage.

There are innumerable merits if offerings, whether in money or kind are banned at all shrines. Not only the temples / mosques will bear a very neat and clean look but the number of pilgrims will increase as even the poorest can visit the shrines without having to purchase any kind of sacrament or make any kind of offering, be it a single rupee or a flower or even an incense stick. Critiques would argue where would the funds come from for the upkeep of these pilgrimage sites? All devotees who offer prayers at these shrines want not only to have ‘prasad’ / sacrament but, to also take the sacrament along to distribute it to others. How will that be funded? How are the priests / imam’s and their families who have devoted their entire life in the upkeep of these shrines going to survive? Very valid questions indeed and the need

arise to generate funds for the upkeep of these religious places, for sacrament, for the livelihood of the priests but without taking any donations / offerings from any individual / agency.

<sup>1</sup>Faculty Member, ICFAI Business School, The ICFAI University, Dehradun (Uttarakhand), India.

Generally these shrines are maintained and taken care by a 'Trust'. Painted and chained donation boxes of all shapes and sizes are placed all over the shrine premises which are an eyesore to the otherwise beautiful archaeological sites. Moreover it appears as if these shrines are starving and craving for donations. In fact, the shrine boards should generate their own funds for its upkeep and sacrament.

A small shopping complex in conformity with the landscape and architecture of the archaeological site, consisting of fixed price retail outlets should be located within the premises of the shrines. The shopping complex should be devoid of any eateries. The price of each item must be fixed, clearly displayed and bargaining by devotees should not be entertained at all. These should be manned by the trustee's / clergymen/ sadhus / imams and not by hard core retailers. Their only objective being is supervision of the outlets. Price range of the goods should vary from Rs 5/- to Rs 50,000/- and beyond, so that they can meet the demands of the poor and rich alike. Billing for all purchases along with guarantee cards (if applicable) is to be mandatory for accountability. These outlets should be catering to goods such as incense sticks, clay and metallic idols of god and goddesses, items generally used for worship, local handicrafts, semiprecious and precious stones etc. All items sold should have undergone strict quality control and all gemstones be certified. The price of the goods should be compatible with the nearby market. The profit earned from their sales is to be used for preparing and distribution of sacrament and upkeep of the shrine. The key to success of this model lies with the priests/'maulvais' /yogis managing the shrine and the retail outlets. They should be humble, honest and devoted to the 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan'. They should not insist any one to buy the goods and detest from letting anyone offer anything at the temple/mosque. The retail outlets should be well segregated; such as of brass items, stainless steel, incense sticks, wooden sculptures, silk, local handicrafts, natural pearls, semiprecious stones and necklaces, precious stones and pendants of God and Goddess, picture postcards of the shrine etc. Items for children such as trinkets, rings, key rings for young girls and boys should be available so that they are attracted to the outlets and insist their parents to visit these outlets and buy something for them.

The main consideration for the shopping outlet should be that it should be located very near to the shrine so that the devotees don't miss it and visit it before putting on their footwear which they had removed before entering the holy shrines. The stalls should be well lit and attractive. Items display should be aesthetically done so that one can just demand for the item from the counters and need not spend a lot of time in seeing them; so as to control the rush. Price list should be prominently displayed and fixed price boards should be displayed in every outlet. Indians have tremendous faith in their religions and they do want to donate magnanimously in temples and mosques. When they visit the shrine as per the proposed model where they will not be allowed to make any kind of offering or donations to God and yet receive sacrament; they will be pleased to buy something or the other which they can afford from the retail outlets thinking that they have offered at least something to God, albeit indirectly. The footfalls in the shrines will increase by word of mouth publicity. The rich and the poor will get the same sacrament and will be treated by the priests/moulvi's alike. As there is no compulsion of

buying goods from the outlets and their price range variation is large any one can buy the goods according to their needs and purchasing power.

A retail outlet selling sacrament's from other far off shrines with minimal profit can also be included with signboards displaying ' If anyone proves that the sacrament is not originally from the shrine from where it is claimed to be brought from; then the person will be rewarded rupees ten lacks'. This is to ensure the devotees that they are not being cheated and the sacraments are authentic, and the Trustees are genuine. The cost of the sacrament from other shrines should include cost of transportation, packaging etc. This is to cater to the needs of those devotees who yearn to go for a 'Char Dham Yatra' or 'Mecca' but due to their frail health or less finances or paucity of time cannot visit the other shrines. For e.g. a devotee at 'Rameshwaram' if he gets the holy water 'Ganga jal' from 'Har Ki Pauri' at Haridwar or sacrament from 'Badrinath' or 'Jagarnath Puri', in Rameshwaram itself he will be ecstatic and think it's a God sent opportunity to procure the sacraments. However, strict quality control has to be maintained and their shelf life ascertained. Similarly a devotee visiting 'Ajmer Sharif' will be delighted if he gets sacrament from 'Mecca' at Ajmer Sharif. Sacraments from different shrines which can be purchased from a particular religious shrine visited by a devotee are listed in the table below:

S.No	Religious Shrine	Sacrament from other shrines
1	Amarnath Cave	Kanya kumari, Rameshwaram, Dwarka, Trimbakeshwar, Puri, Kamakhya, Tirupati , Water from holy wells of Rameshwaram, Ganga Jal from Har ki Pauri, Haridwar, <i>Vaishno Devi</i> . Dharamshala, Golden Temple
2	Badrinath & Kedarnath (clubbed together due to their proximity)	Amarnath, Vrindavan, Rameshwaram, Dwarka, Trimbakeshwar Puri, Kamakhya, Water from holy wells of Rameshwaram, , Tirupati, Ganga Jal from Har ki Pauri, Haridwar, Vaishno Devi, Vrindravan
3	Dwarka	Amarnath Cave, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vrindavan, Kanya kumari, Rameshwaram, Trimbakeshwar, Puri, Kamakhya, Water from holy wells of Rameshwaram, Tirupati, <i>Pushkar 'Bhrama Temple'</i> Ganga Jal from Har ki Pauri, Haridwar, <i>Somnath</i>
4	Rameshwaram	Amarnath Cave, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vrindavan, <i>Kanya kumari</i> , Trimbakeshwar Puri, Kamakhya, Tirupati, Ganga Jal from Har ki Pauri, Haridwar, <i>Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple</i> Thiruvananthapuram
5	Shridi Sai Baba	<i>Shani Shinganapur</i> , Amarnath Cave, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vrindavan, <i>Trimbakeshwar</i> , Puri, Kamakhya, Tirupati, Water from holy wells of Rameshwaram, Ganga Jal from Har ki Pauri, Haridwar, <i>Mahalaxmi temple Mumbai</i>
6	Siddhivinyak Temple	Amarnath Cave, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vrindavan, Trimbakeshwar Puri, Kamakhya, Shridi Sai Baba, Tirupati, Ganga Jal from Har ki Pauri, Haridwar
7	Kashi Vishvanath	Amarnath Cave, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vrindavan, Kanya kumari, Rameshwaram, Trimbakeshwar, Puri, Kamakhya, Water from holy wells of Rameshwaram, Kamakhya, Tirupati , <i>Ayodhya, Sarnat, Bodh Gaya</i>
8	Tirupati	Amarnath Cave, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vrindavan, Kanya kumari, Rameshwaram, Trimbakeshwar, Puri, Kamakhya, Water from holy wells of Rameshwaram, Ganga Jal from Har ki Pauri, Haridwar

**Note:** Temples mentioned in italics are relatively close to the religious shrine and may not be as popular as to the shrine itself.

The profit from the goods sold at these retail outlets is to be used for the upkeep of the shrine, preparation of sacrament and food and lodging of its employees. The sacrament can not only be in the form of simple 'prasad' ('bundi', 'laddos' or 'elachi dana') but can include nutritious food such as fruits, 'kitchari' or even food in the form of 'Langar' (sacred food service). The idea being the sacrament should be made of seasonal fruits and vegetables that are readily available in the nearby local market. In 'Langar's' proper washing area for utensils used for cooking and serving the food should be made; so that the sevaks / devotees can wash the plates and glasses. If 'pattals' and 'kullars' are being used then, dustbins should be suitably placed to throw them. High standard of hygiene and sanitation should be maintained not only in the cooking areas but throughout the premises of the shrine. The complete shrine area should be enclosed with a boundary wall or a barbed wire fence to ward off stray animals. In most cases the restoration and upkeep of the shrines is being carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India.

This model can be successful only if all the trustees, employees and 'sewadars' are fully devoted to the work they are assigned, are altruistic and have no vested interests. About eighty percent of them should have given up the worldly pleasures and taken sannyas at 60 years and crave to do only 'sewa' for the rest of their life. Twenty percent of the employees should be young and energetic to do the laborious jobs in the shrine. Cleanliness is next to God and purity of our soul takes us nearer to God. Seeing the clergy/ priests / imams working selflessly will inspire the devotees to be compassionate, kind and to have a 'swachh' heart and mind. The cleanliness of the shrine will motivate and influence them to keep their surroundings clean leading to a 'Swachh Bharat'.

## References

1. Swachh Bharat Mission, Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India. <http://moud.gov.in/swachchbharat>

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