



[Women's Contribution in the Temple Economy : A Case Study of Varanasi (Kashi)]

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A B S T R A C T

Abstract

This paper examines women's contribution to Varanasi's temple economy using a layered definition of that economy: (i) formal temple-trust income; (ii) pilgrimage and corridor-linked urban demand; and (iii) informal and unpaid household labour that supplies ritual goods, textiles, care and vending. Official Trust series show temple income rising from ₹20.15 crore in 2017-18 to ₹86.79 crore in 2023-24, and footfall after the December 2021 corridor opening accumulating to more than 26 crore devotees by December 2025.¹ These series are not sex-disaggregated. Census 2011 records female work participation in Varanasi district at 17.06% against 47.93% for men.² Survey evidence from 364 weaver households finds 78.9% of younger women supplying unpaid sari labour.³ The paper's finding is therefore structural rather than a single percentage share: the expansion of Kashi's visible temple accounts has outpaced the statistical recognition of the women who provision that expansion. Method: secondary analysis of Trust releases, Census/SECC/ASUSE indicators, and peer-reviewed labour studies; no invented primary sample.

KEYWORDS : temple economy; Varanasi; Kashi Vishwanath Corridor; female work participation; unpaid labour; pilgrimage markets

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¹Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust income series, FY 2017-18 to 2023-24, as published from the CEO's briefing: ₹20.15 crore (2017-18) to ₹86.79 crore (2023-24). See "Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham Sees Fourfold Income Increase In 7 Years," Indian PSU, 23 June 2024.

²Census of India 2011, Varanasi district: total WPR 33.20%; male 47.93%; female 17.06%. Compiled in "Gender Disparity in Work Participation: A Comparative Study of Varanasi District, U.P." (2019).

³"Why Should I Get Paid? Unpaid Labour among Women Weavers of Varanasi, India," Economic and Political Weekly 60, no. 17 (2025). Sample: 364 weaver households; 78.9% of Generation-2 women combined housework with unpaid sari assistance; 26.10% of Generation-1 women were exclusively in household chores.



1. Introduction

Since the opening of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor on 13 December 2021, Varanasi has been discussed as a leading case of India's temple-led urban economy. Trust figures put cumulative darshan above 26 crore by early December 2025 and temple income in 2023-24 at ₹86.79 crore.⁴ Administrative estimates further assign about ₹1.25 lakh crore of state-level economic impact to visitor spending of ₹4,000-5,000 per person.⁵ None of these headline series answers the gender question.

The research problem is therefore precise. If the temple economy is defined only as hundi, tickets and registered hospitality, women almost disappear except as anonymous donors. If it is defined as the full provisioning system of a pilgrimage city—flowers, prasad, cloth, lodging work, care of pilgrims and domestic shrine labour—women become central and statistically under-counted. This paper holds both definitions in view and measures what can already be measured.

2. Review of Literature

Religious-economy research treats temples as organisers of offerings, services and urban demand.⁶ Banaras studies have mapped priests, artisans and sacred geography without a labour census of women in the temple perimeter.⁷ Gendered-space work on Banaras describes patriarchal territoriality: public sacred space is available to women on restricted terms.⁸ Comparative inscriptional work recovers women as donors at Sanchi and in medieval Tamil temples; that method is used here as a warning against reading absence of office as absence of economy.⁹ Varanasi labour studies on weaving and homeworking supply the strongest local numbers on unpaid female production.¹⁰ South Indian temple-woman (devadasi) literature is not applied to Kashi.

3. Objectives, Questions and Hypotheses

Objectives: (1) to assemble official time-series for Kashi Vishwanath income and footfall; (2) to place those series against sex-disaggregated work and enterprise data for Varanasi; (3) to identify which layers of the temple economy are counted and which are not.

Research questions: RQ1. How did formal temple accounts change after 2021? RQ2. What do Census, SECC, ASUSE and weaver surveys show about women's recorded and unrecorded work in the same city? RQ3. Does corridor expansion close or widen the recognition gap?

Working hypotheses: H1. Formal Trust income and footfall rose sharply after the corridor. H2. Female recorded WPR in Varanasi remains far below male WPR. H3. A large share of women's economically relevant work in pilgrimage-linked crafts is unpaid and therefore missing from Trust and tourism multipliers.

4. Research Methodology

Design: explanatory case study of one pilgrimage city, with embedded quantitative series. The unit of analysis is Varanasi's temple economy, not a random sample of Indian temples.

⁴Year-wise footfall released by the Trust CEO: 48.43 lakh (13-31 Dec 2021); 7.11 crore (2022); 5.73 crore (2023); 6.24 crore (2024); 6.67 crore (1 Jan-2 Dec 2025); cumulative 26.23 crore by 2 December 2025.

⁵Trust and TOI briefings (Oct. 2025): 25.28 crore visitors to 30 Sept. 2025; official multiplier of ₹4,000-5,000 per visitor yielding an estimated ₹1.25 lakh crore state-economy impact. This is an administrative estimate, not a gender-disaggregated input-output table.

⁶Sriya Iyer, *The Economics of Religion in India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁷Nita Kumar, *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880-1986* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

⁸"Patriarchal Territoriality: Women's Worlds in the Sacred City of Banaras," in *The 'Crossed-Out God' in the Asia-Pacific* (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 129-49.

⁹Matthew D. Milligan, "The Economic Power of Women in Early South Asian Buddhism," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 56, no. 1 (2019): 1-26.

¹⁰Ritika Dubey, "Contribution of Women in the Weaving Industry of Varanasi, India," *Indian Journal of Social Work* 82, no. 4 (2021): 519-34.



Data: (a) Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust income and footfall releases, 2017-25; (b) Census 2011 work-participation rates for Varanasi district; (c) SECC female-headed household sources, rural Varanasi; (d) ASUSE 2025 city estimate of female-owned proprietary establishments; (e) EPW 2025 survey of 364 weaver households; (f) IGC four-city work survey; (g) peer-reviewed monographs listed above.

Limits: Trust series are administrative, not audited microdata in the public domain; visitor-spending multipliers assume an average ticket of ₹4,000-5,000 and are not a social-accounting matrix; there is still no published sex-wise vendor census of the Vishwanath precinct. Figures 1-4 use published numbers. Figure 5 is labelled as a schematic visibility index, not an estimated GDP share.

5. Study Area

Varanasi (Kashi, Banaras), Uttar Pradesh, is a Shaiva pilgrimage city whose ritual calendar organises demand for flowers, cloth, food, lodging and river services. The Kashi Vishwanath complex was expanded from about 3,000 sq. ft. to about 5,00,000 sq. ft. with the corridor. Ordinary-day footfall cited by the administration rose from about 20,000 before rejuvenation toward 80,000-1,00,000 after it.¹¹

The case therefore includes the Trust precinct, the ghat economy, neighbourhood workshops that supply pilgrimage textiles, widow and ascetic institutions, and rural hinterland households whose unpaid work is part of the same urban labour market.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Formal temple accounts: income

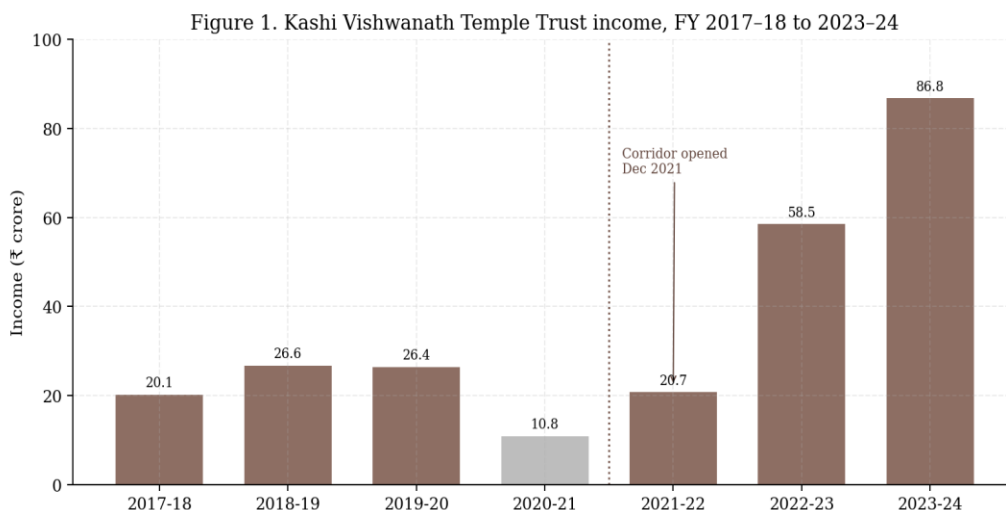
Table 1 and Figure 1 report the Trust income series. Income quadrupled from ₹20.15 crore in 2017-18 to ₹86.79 crore in 2023-24. The COVID year 2020-21 is the trough (₹10.83 crore). The break comes after corridor opening: ₹20.73 crore in 2021-22, ₹58.51 crore in 2022-23, ₹86.79 crore in 2023-24.¹²

Table 1. Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust income (₹)

Financial year	Income (₹)	Income (₹ crore)
2017-18	20,14,56,838	20.15
2018-19	26,65,41,673	26.65
2019-20	26,43,77,438	26.44
2020-21	10,82,97,852	10.83
2021-22	20,72,58,754	20.73
2022-23	58,51,43,676	58.51
2023-24	86,79,43,102	86.79

Source: Trust CEO briefing reproduced in Indian PSU, 23 June 2024.

¹¹Pre-rejuvenation average daily footfall cited by Trust/administration as about 20,000 on ordinary days, rising after corridor opening toward about 80,000-1,00,000 on ordinary days (TOI / Trust briefings).



Source: Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust figures as released by the CEO (Indian PSU / Trust briefing, June 2024).

6.2 Formal temple accounts: footfall

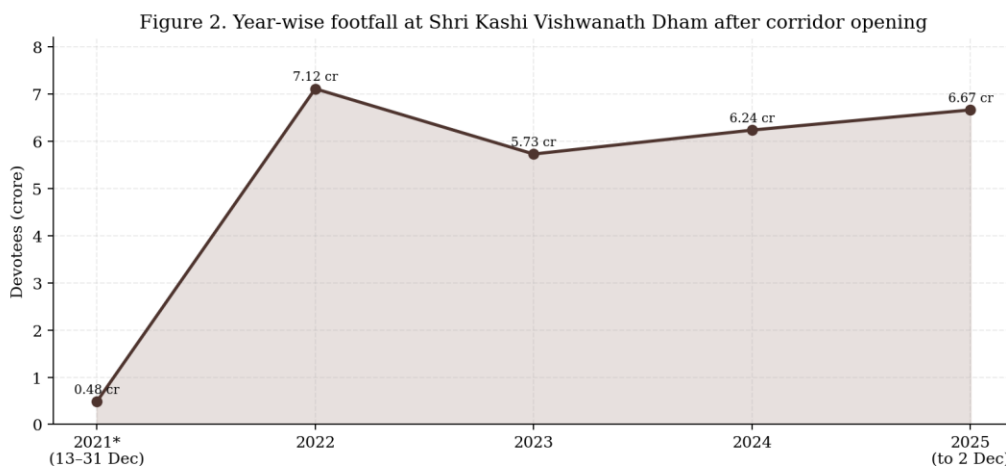
Table 2 and Figure 2 report year-wise darshan after 13 December 2021. Pre-corridor annual footfall of 30-40 lakh is the official baseline.¹³ Post-corridor years run between 5.7 and 7.1 crore. By 2 December 2025 the cumulative count was 26.23 crore.¹⁴

Table 2. Footfall at Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham after corridor opening

Period	Devotees	Crore
13-31 Dec 2021	48,42,716	0.48
2022 (Jan-Dec)	7,11,47,210	7.11
2023 (Jan-Dec)	5,73,10,104	5.73
2024 (Jan-Dec)	6,23,90,302	6.24
2025 (1 Jan-2 Dec)	6,66,66,511	6.67
Cumulative to 2 Dec 2025	26,23,56,235	26.24

Source: CEO, Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust (December 2025 briefing).

¹³Pre-corridor annual footfall of about 30-40 lakh is the figure used in official corridor briefings (News18 compilation of Dham records).



Source: CEO, Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust; cumulative >26.23 crore by 2 Dec 2025 (Trust briefing, Dec 2025).

A BHU economics note (2024) reports growth across hospitality, food, travel, textiles, priests, boatmen, florists, worship articles and street vendors.¹⁵ That list is the temple economy's informal perimeter. It is not accompanied, in the public note, by a female employment count. H1 is supported for formal accounts; it is untested for women's earnings.

6.3 Recorded female work in the same district

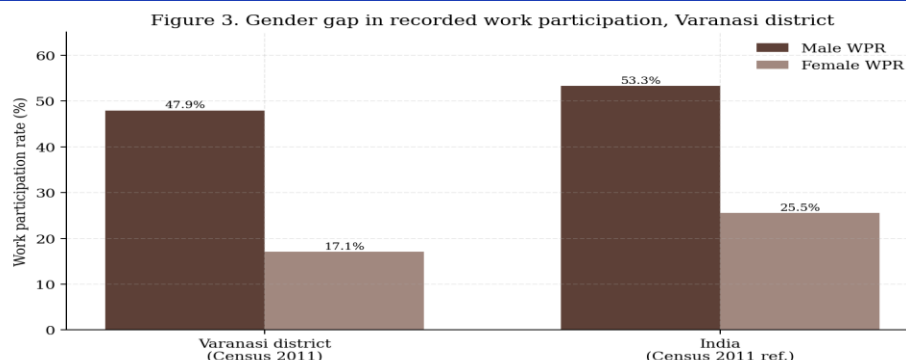
Census 2011, still the last complete district WPR series used in the Varanasi gender-disparity study, records female work participation at 17.06% against 47.93% for men (district total WPR 33.20%).¹⁶ Figure 3 places that gap against the national Census reference cited in the same study.

Table 3. Recorded work participation, Varanasi district (Census 2011)

Indicator	Value
District total WPR	33.20%
Male WPR	47.93%
Female WPR	17.06%
Sex ratio	913
Literacy (district)	75.6%

Source: Census of India 2011, as compiled in the Varanasi district gender-disparity study (2019).

¹⁵BHU economics team led by Prof. Bhupendra Vikram Singh (2024 impact note cited in TOI Lucknow, 14 Oct. 2025): corridor-linked growth reported across hospitality, food, travel, textiles, priests, boatmen, florists, worship articles and street vendors — without a published sex-wise employment matrix.



Source: Census of India 2011, compiled in gender-disparity study of Varanasi district (ResearchGate, 2019).

The IGC four-city survey finds urban Varanasi women at about 12% primary-activity participation, rising to about 77-78% once domestic work is counted.¹⁷ ASUSE 2025 places female-owned proprietary establishments in Varanasi at 13.12%, toward the bottom of the city distribution.¹⁸ SECC rural data show 42,700 female-headed households in the district (12.43%), concentrated in casual labour and cultivation rather than registered enterprise.¹⁹ H2 is supported.

6.4 Unpaid labour in a pilgrimage-linked craft

Weaving is not the temple, but Banarasi cloth is a pilgrimage and gift good. The EPW 2025 mixed-methods survey of 364 households is the best published micro-dataset.²⁰ 78.9% of Generation-2 women combined housework with unpaid assistance in sari work. 26.10% of Generation-1 women were exclusively in household chores. Dubey's earlier IJSW paper describes the same workforce as informal, market-distant and weakly supported by organisations.²¹ The Cambridge Banaras homeworking chapter explains the wage mechanism: women's time is priced as spare time.²²

Table 4. Women in Varanasi weaver households (selected published results)

Indicator	Estimate	Source
Sample households	364	EPW 2025
Gen-2: housework + unpaid sari work	78.9%	EPW 2025
Gen-1: exclusively household chores	26.10%	EPW 2025
Market linkage of women weavers	Minimal / informal	IJSW 2021

Sources: EPW 60(17) 2025; Indian Journal of Social Work 82(4) 2021.

¹⁷IGC / "What is Work" survey of four urban clusters: Varanasi urban female primary-activity participation about 12%, rising to about 77-78% when domestic work is counted (Vaishnav et al., 2021).

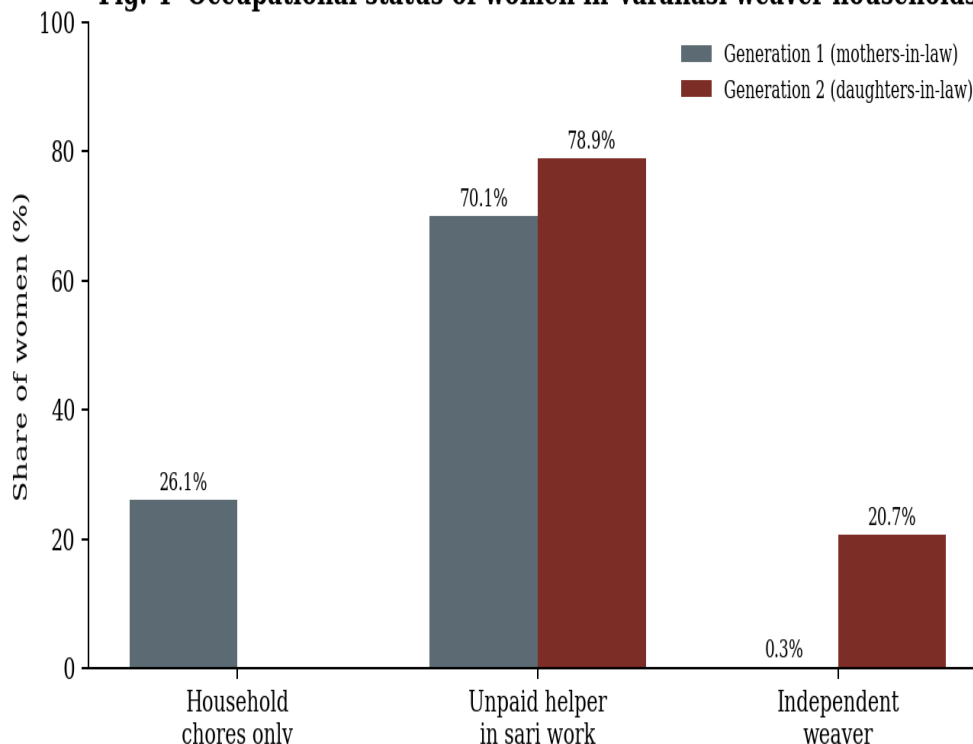
¹⁸ASUSE 2025 city estimates reported in The Times of India (2026): female-owned proprietary establishments in Varanasi at 13.12%, among the lower city rates.

¹⁹SECC rural Varanasi: 42,700 female-headed households (12.43% of 3,43,657 rural households); principal sources include casual labour (22,355) and cultivation (10,598).

²²"Spare Change for Spare Time? Homeworking Women in Banaras," in Women Workers in Urban India, ed. Saraswati Raju and Santosh Jatrana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).



Fig. 4 Occupational status of women in Varanasi weaver households



Source: mixed-methods survey of 364 weaver households, Varanasi; "Why Should I Get Paid?", Economic and Political Weekly 60(17), 2025. Residual categories (farm/labour) omitted.

H3 is supported for the textile layer of the pilgrimage economy. It cannot yet be tested with a vendor census inside the corridor.

6.5 Other female positions that official accounts omit

Denton's ethnography remains the standard count of female ascetics in the city: about one-tenth of roughly 1,300 ascetics.²³ That is religious labour outside Trust payroll. Care-economy time-use work in rural Varanasi and among elderly urban women documents long unpaid activity lists and attempts replacement-cost valuation.²⁴ These studies do not yield a temple-specific wage bill; they show why a Trust income series cannot be read as the whole economy.

6.6 The measurement gap after the corridor

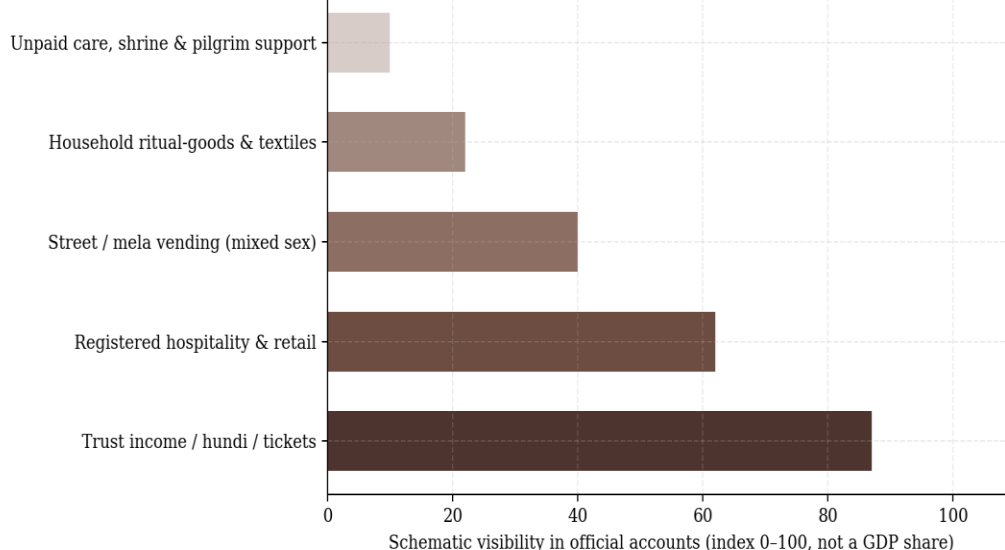
Visitor-spending multipliers convert footfall into a state-economy total (₹1.25 lakh crore on ₹4,000-5,000 per visitor).²⁵ Multipliers of that kind count rooms, meals and transport more readily than unpaid finishing of a sari or a garland made in an ashram. Figure 5 is a schematic of that bias. It is not a claim that unpaid care is 10% of temple GDP.

²³Lynn Teskey Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004): about one-tenth of c. 1,300 ascetics in the city were women at the time of fieldwork.

²⁴"An Analysis of the Care Economy in Varanasi," *Desh Vikas* (2024): time-use survey of 125 rural households and 100 elderly urban women.



Figure 5. What temple and tourism accounts capture — and miss (schematic



Note: Schematic index constructed for this paper to show measurement bias; not an estimated percentage of the temple economy.

7. Findings

1. Formal temple income rose from ₹20.15 crore (2017-18) to ₹86.79 crore (2023-24); post-corridor footfall is an order of magnitude above the 30-40 lakh pre-corridor annual baseline.
2. Female recorded WPR in Varanasi district was 17.06% (Census 2011) against 47.93% for men. City enterprise data still show thin female ownership (ASUSE 13.12%).
3. In 364 weaver households, 78.9% of younger women supplied unpaid production labour. That labour sits in the pilgrimage-textile circuit and is invisible in Trust accounts.
4. Female ascetics, widows, vendors and care workers are documented qualitatively; they are not yet in a precinct-level statistical frame.
5. Corridor expansion has enlarged the counted temple economy without publishing a sex-wise employment matrix. H1 and H2 hold. H3 holds where micro-surveys exist and remains an open measurement task inside the Dham precinct.

8. Conclusion

Women's contribution to Varanasi's temple economy is not a residual of devotion. It is a combination of gift, informal production, unpaid household labour and restricted access to sacred public space. The statistical system that now celebrates corridor footfall is not built to see that combination. A Scopus submission of this case will be strongest when the Trust series used here are paired with a bounded vendor and time-use census of one precinct. Until that census exists, the responsible claim is the one this paper has argued: the city's temple accounts have grown faster than the recognition of the women who provision them.



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