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## THE ECONOMICS OF SACRED KNOWLEDGE: REVENUE SHARING MODELS FOR MANUSCRIPT TOURISM AND DIGITAL ACCESS IN INDIAN MONASTERIES

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### ABSTRACT

Manuscript collections in active Indian monasteries are living cultural assets facing conservation costs of 1,800–2,400 crore INR over 20 years, yet 92% lack formal revenue mechanisms. This study evaluates revenue sharing models that connect manuscript tourism and controlled digital access to monastery sustainability. We surveyed 42 monasteries across 8 states, conducted 186 interviews, and analyzed 2018–2025 financial data. Four revenue streams were modeled: ticketed viewing, licensed digital access, experience-based tourism, and academic/commercial image use. Monasteries with formal agreements earned 3.8–11.2 lakh INR annually versus 0.3–0.9 lakh for donation-only sites. Digital licensing produced 2.1x higher net revenue than physical tourism while reducing handling risk by 97%. The most equitable models allocated 40–60% to conservation, 20–30% to community welfare, 15–25% to custodian livelihoods, and 5–10% to a pooled risk fund. Barriers include unclear intellectual property status, absence of standard contracts, infrastructure gaps, and doctrinal limits on commodification. We propose a “Sacred Knowledge Stewardship Framework” comprising: 1) A Community-Controlled Licensing Entity, 2) Tiered pricing with free, research, and commercial levels, 3) Reinvestment rules codified in trust deeds. Monte Carlo simulation shows adoption across 200 repositories could generate 42–68 crore INR annually and 1,800–2,400 livelihoods. The framework reframes manuscripts from cost centers to community assets while maintaining spiritual authority with custodians.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural economics; Manuscript heritage; Revenue sharing; Digital access; Religious tourism; Community stewardship

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

India holds roughly 5 million manuscripts. An estimated 1.2 million remain in active religious institutions where they are used in ritual, pedagogy, and legal interpretation. Supports include palm leaf, bark, and handmade paper, with inks ranging from carbon to iron-gall. These materials are hygroscopic and chemically unstable. Above 65% relative humidity, fungal germination occurs in 48–72 hours. Above 28°C, cellulose hydrolysis and ink corrosion rates double per 10°C rise. Traditional funding from land grants and patronage has declined since the 1950s. The National Mission for Manuscripts estimates a 1,800–2,400 crore INR conservation backlog. Simultaneously, demand for access has grown. Academic digitization requests rose 340% between 2010 and 2024. “Spiritual heritage travel” bookings increased 61% from 2023 to 2025. Yet a 2024 survey of 214 repositories found that 93% had no HVAC, 76% had no dehumidification, and 92% had no formal pricing for access.

### 1.2 Research Problem

Three conflicts define the problem. First, doctrinal limits. Many monastic codes prohibit “selling” sacred knowledge. Charging for access risks theological censure. Second, preservation versus access. Physical viewing causes light exposure, humidity fluctuation, and mechanical wear. Digital access reduces handling but requires capital and bandwidth absent in remote areas. Third, value capture. Tour operators, publishers, and platforms often monetize manuscripts while monasteries bear conservation costs. Indian copyright law is ambiguous for pre-20th century works. The Indian Trusts Act 1882 permits income generation if aligned with charitable purpose, but 78% of trusts surveyed were uncertain if manuscript fees qualify. No tested model resolves doctrinal, legal, and financial constraints together.

### 1.3 Importance of the Study

Without viable models, repositories face decay or uncontrolled commodification. A workable system would: 1) Fund conservation without grant dependence, 2) Create local livelihoods and reduce youth migration, 3) Enable scholarly access under community terms, 4) Provide a template for global sacred heritage. The study is timely. Digital India has extended fiber to block level. The 2024 Antiquities Amendment Bill is clarifying custody. UNESCO’s 2023 “Ethics of Digital Heritage” emphasizes community control.

## 1.4 Scope

Covers Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh manuscript-holding monasteries with active ritual use. Excludes private collections and state archives. Focuses only on manuscript-related revenue, not general pilgrimage or lodging. Financial data 2018–2025.

## 2. OBJECTIVE

1. To document existing formal and informal revenue practices related to manuscripts in Indian monasteries.
2. To measure the financial impact of manuscript tourism and digital access under different governance modes.
3. To identify legal, doctrinal, and operational barriers to equitable revenue sharing.
4. To design and test revenue sharing models that maximize conservation funds while respecting spiritual authority.
5. To propose policy and contract templates for adoption by monastic trusts.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

Mixed-methods sequential design with three phases. Phase 1: Quantitative survey of 42 monasteries stratified by religion, state, collection size, and remoteness. Phase 2: Qualitative case studies of 12 sites representing different revenue models. Phase 3: Participatory design workshops to co-create and simulate revenue sharing models with custodians and stakeholders.

### 3.2 Data Collection

#### 3.2.1 Survey

A 90-item questionnaire captured collection size, access policy, annual visitors, fees, digital projects, income, expenditure, legal status, and doctrinal rules. Administered in-person 2023–2024. 100% response due to prior consent and community introduction.

#### 3.2.2 Financial Records

Trust accounts, visitor registers, and platform dashboards 2018–2025. All figures normalized to 2025 INR using CPI. Costs include conservation labor, materials, environmental control, security, and digitization.

### **3.2.3 Interviews**

186 semi-structured interviews: 62 head custodians, 38 junior custodians, 41 tour operators, 22 academic users, 23 tech platform managers. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and coded in NVivo using grounded theory.

### **3.2.4 Legal Review**

Analysis of Indian Trusts Act 1882, Copyright Act 1957, Antiquities and Art Treasures Act 1972, and relevant case law. Comparative review of Indigenous data sovereignty protocols from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the CARE Principles.

### **3.3 Analytical Methods**

1. Descriptive statistics for revenue, costs, and visitor numbers.
2. Multiple regression: Annual net revenue ~ access mode + collection size + remoteness + governance type.
3. Thematic analysis of interviews for doctrinal boundaries and ethical principles.
4. Stakeholder power-interest mapping.
5. 10-year Monte Carlo cash flow simulation under 4 scenarios with 10,000 iterations.

### **3.4 Ethics**

Approved by Institutional Ethics Committee Ref IEC-CHS-2023-22. Free prior informed consent from all trusts. Data anonymized unless public attribution was granted. No secret or ritually restricted text was digitized, photographed, or quoted.

## **4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **4.1 Cultural Economics**

Throsby 2001 distinguishes economic and cultural value, arguing that heritage requires dual accounting. Frey and Steiner 2012 show that World Heritage listing increases tourism but can dilute cultural value if community control is weak. In India, Nair 2019 analyzed temple economies but did not isolate manuscript revenue.

### **4.2 Religious Tourism**

UNWTO 2022 values global religious tourism at 18 billion USD. Singh 2020 found 74% of visitors to Indian monasteries would pay for “authentic learning” if funds supported conservation. Timothy and Olsen 2006 warn of “Disneyfication” where sacred sites adopt mass tourism models and lose meaning.

### **4.3 Digital Heritage Ethics**

Christen 2015 developed “Traditional Knowledge Labels” to attach community terms to digital objects. The CARE Principles 2019 call for Collective benefit, Authority to control,

Responsibility, and Ethics. Menon 2021 audited 28 Indian digital manuscript projects and found only 3 had community-approved licenses.

#### 4.4 Benefit Sharing

Kerala Responsible Tourism allocates 15–30% of revenue to local groups. Posey 1996 and Dutfield 2004 discuss benefit-sharing for intangible heritage but not physical manuscripts in living use. Gap: No model integrates monastic doctrine, Indian trust law, and digital licensing for sacred collections.

### 5. RESULTS

#### 5.1 Current Practices

Of 42 monasteries, 29 had no formal fee. 13 had some fee: 6 charged 50–200 INR for viewing, 4 licensed images at 500–5,000 INR each, 3 ran workshops at 1,500–4,000 INR per person. Mean annual manuscript income: 0.6 lakh for no-fee sites, 4.7 lakh for fee sites. Highest earner: 14.8 lakh via mixed streams.

#### 5.2 Stream Performance

Stream	Mean Gross/yr	Mean Net/yr	Handling Risk	Capital Needed
Ticketed viewing	2.1 lakh	1.2 lakh	High	Low
Digital licensing	3.4 lakh	2.6 lakh	None	High
Workshops	1.8 lakh	1.1 lakh	Medium	Medium
Academic MoU	0.9 lakh	0.8 lakh	Low	Low

Digital licensing gave 2.1x higher net than physical tourism and 97% lower damage risk.

#### 5.3 Governance Typology

1. Trust Only: Head custodian decides. Revenue 0.3–1.1 lakh. Low conflict, low income.
2. Trust + External Agent: Operator or university manages access. Revenue 2.4–6.8 lakh. Custodian share 10–25%. High conflict.
3. Community Board: Trustees + lay members + youth. Revenue 4.2–11.2 lakh. Custodian share 40–60%. High transparency.

#### 5.4 Barriers

Legal: 78% unsure if charging is permitted under charitable status. Doctrinal: 64% cited prohibitions on “selling knowledge”. Operational: 82% lack internet >2 Mbps. Contractual: Only 2 sites had written licenses.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Why Digital Scales

Physical viewing is capped by ritual calendars and conservation limits at ~200 views per year per manuscript. A digital image can be licensed 2,000 times with zero marginal wear. After initial digitization of 8–12 lakh for 1,000 folios, marginal cost approaches zero. Hence net revenue is higher.

### 6.2 Doctrine and Language

Interviews show “sale” is prohibited but “service fee for maintenance” is acceptable if: 1) Funds go only to preservation and community, 2) Access respects purity rules, 3) Custodians retain veto. This aligns with seva and dakshina. Models must use “conservation contribution” language, not “price”.

### 6.3 Sacred Knowledge Stewardship Framework

1. Community-Controlled Licensing Entity: A society under Societies Registration Act, separate from but accountable to the trust. Holds digital copies, issues licenses. Custodian has veto.

2. Tiered Pricing: Level 1 Free for public low-res thumbnail. Level 2 Research for non-commercial high-res, 1,000–5,000 INR per manuscript. Level 3 Commercial, 10,000–50,000 INR plus 2–5% royalty. Level 4 Ritual, in-person only, contribution-based.

3. Reinvestment Rules: 50% conservation, 25% community welfare, 20% custodian livelihood, 5% risk fund. Codified in trust deed.

Simulation for a 2,000-manuscript repository shows 10-year NPV of 1.1–1.9 crore versus 0.2 crore under donation.

### 6.4 Implications

Unlike state-led models, this centers ritual authority. Unlike museum licensing, it mandates a free tier and community veto. It operationalizes CARE Principles with contract clauses and Traditional Knowledge Labels.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Manuscript repositories in Indian monasteries can become sustainable community assets without violating doctrine. Formal, community-governed revenue sharing yields 6–12x higher income than ad-hoc donations. Digital licensing offers highest net return and lowest risk. Success depends on governance, not technology. The Sacred Knowledge Stewardship Framework provides a pathway: vest licensing in a community-controlled entity, frame payments as conservation contributions, and mandate transparent reinvestment. Legal

uncertainty and infrastructure gaps are addressable through trust deed amendments, standard tiered licenses, and Digital India infrastructure. If scaled to 200 major repositories, the model could generate 42–68 crore INR annually and 1,800–2,400 livelihoods while keeping manuscripts in ritual use. The economics of sacred knowledge must be grounded in stewardship and benefit-sharing, not sale. This reframes manuscripts as living capital measured in cultural continuity and community welfare, not only rupees.

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