

# Temple Trade Unionism in Travancore

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## Abstract

*Politicization has grappled the administration of Hindu temples in the state of Kerala since the formation of Devaswom Boards which are envisaged as autonomous bodies entrusted with the administration of temples here. Trade unions and their activities are rampant today in the temples of Kerala. Trade unionism is nothing other than the direct result of the politicization of temple administration. Though trade unionism is significant for protecting the rights of employees, often its politicization affects the serenity of temples and the unity and general discipline of employees as it involves direct action methods for achieving goals. Various Commission Reports and Court verdicts often pointed out that politically affiliated trade unionism is detrimental to the temples. The administration of Devaswom boards has been deteriorated to the level of a business establishment due to the presence of strong and highly politicized trade unions. The study tries to examine the historical and contemporary role of trade union movements existing among the temple employees of public temples in Kerala.*

**Keywords:** Devaswom, Trade Unions, Politicization, Labour Laws, Temple Administration

## Introduction

Formerly a royal kingdom in Kerala, Travancore was renowned for its progressive governance and relatively high literacy rate. There are currently 1248 temples managed by the Travancore Devaswom Board, according to its administration reports. Compared to most other states in India, Kerala has a higher level of working-class political consciousness and mobilisation. This region is less desirable for industrial investment because the labour force is more aware of its rights and frequently engages in militant behaviour that disrupts industrial operations (Zacaria, 2012: 28). The tight linkages between Kerala's trade union movement and political parties are an additional intriguing characteristic. Typically, political parties use unions for their own ideological ends. Trade unions also developed as a result of the politicisation trend in the area of temple administration. What's strange is that temple employees' jobs are quite different from those of people who work in other industries. Even the clergy class has its own charitable groups, sometimes supported by revolutionary theory. Given that temples are meant for the worship of God and are thought to have a quiet atmosphere, it may seem strange to expect trade union activities to generate disturbances on the temple grounds. Nevertheless, this is exactly what might happen.

## History of Trade Unionism in Kerala

According to the Trade Union Act of 1926, a "trade union" is an organisation created primarily for the purpose of regulating the relationships between employees and employers, employees and other employees, or employers and employers, or for the purpose of imposing restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business.

This definition also includes any federation of two or more trade unions. For the sake of their members' joint interests, trade unions are frequently found in industrial sectors or commercial businesses. According to Webb, "trade unions are a continuous association of wage earners to maintain or improve the conditions of their work" (Webb, 1950:1; Sinha, 2017: 3). They assist the employees in enhancing their working circumstances, job security, welfare programmes, and other factors.

The trade union movement had played a significant role in defending labour rights. Trade unionism instills a sense of class consciousness in its participants and frequently joins political struggles, embracing radical tactics like strikes, dharnas, protest movements, and marches. They safeguard better working conditions and fair pay in addition to safeguarding the working class from exploitation. Trade union operations are subject to labour laws, and collective labour laws address the tripartite connection between the union, the employer, and the employee.

In England's industrial sector during the second part of the 18th century, trade unions first appeared. Since the industrial revolution, labour rights have played a crucial role in both social and economic progress as well as in social movements that support the rights of the working class. The first organised labour movement in India was the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), which was established in 1920. The Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union (TCFWU) established itself as the first trade union for the working class in Kerala.

### **Radical Trade Unionism among Temple Employees in Travancore**

The fact that trade unionism is highly strong in Kerala, especially among priestly ranks and temple staff, is an intriguing trend. In light of the fact those temple employees' jobs are very different from those of their counterparts in other industries, the situation becomes contradictory. Trade unionism also goes against the tranquil, reverent environment that is typical of temples. Trade unions were first established in the industrial sector as a form of collective bargaining that used direct action techniques like strikes, dharnas, satyagrahas, etc. to

achieve their political and other goals. In the state's temple governing bodies (TGBs), trade unions with revolutionary histories are currently very active.

Despite the common misconception that leftists are atheists, TGB employees are actively active in trade unions with their support. The Hindutva organisations initially refrained from setting up trade unions in temples, but eventually realised this was necessary and organised workers under their banner in numerous Devaswoms around the state. The BMS-affiliated labour unions in Kerala's Devaswoms were born as a result. Trade unionism in the temples of Kerala can be viewed as the result of politicization of temple administration.

Employees of temples have a mixed opinion of the labour unions' operating method. The employees are compelled to join different unions in order to defend their working conditions and as a safety measure for defending their private affairs. The staff of the temple now receives a respectable pay and perks as state employees thanks to trade unionism. The variety of trade unions and their political ties cause discord and chaos in the temple administration, which brings us to the negatives. Both the calm environment of temples and the commitment of temple staff to their work are impacted by their direct activities and radicalism.

Category wise unions are there among Devaswom Board employees, most of them are politically affiliated ones. Subgroup officers Association, Devaswom Officers Association, Temple Employees Union, Maramath Employees Association etc. are a few among them. Through the formation of trade unions, the working atmosphere in Devaswom Boards has become deteriorated to the level of a business establishment. The conflict between Devaswom Board administration and staff and the overabundance of trade unionism have further altered the temple's environment to resemble a marketplace where people bargain (Jayaprasad.1989:272).

### **Sagas of Temple Employees' Agitations**

In his book "The History of Trade Union Movement in Kerala," Prof. Ramachandran Nair describes the struggles of temple workers as an unforgettable narrative. These different efforts were essential in improving temple workers' socio-

economic standing among other working-class groups as well as among the state's general populace (2006: 438). Leading figures K. C. Vamadevan, K. V. Sreedharan, and K. Narayanan Potti organized the state's temple personnel.

The Devaswom Servants Recruitment and Conduct Rules of 1952 banned service associations with political bearing under the Devaswoms. A Temple Employees' Union was established during the early years of the Devaswom Board under the direction of the Devaswom Commissioner. In order to get the employees' wages revised, the Union staged a hunger strike in front of the Board office in 1953. The protest was called off after receiving assurances from Pattom Thanu Pillai, the Chief Minister at the time. However, Pattom Thanu Pillai's administration ignored the workers' demands, which led to discontent among temple workers and the exodus of numerous union members (Vamadevan, 1974:15).

Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) is the first political party in Kerala that mobilized temple employees. In 1956, Maramath Work Establishment Employees Association was formed under the Presidentship of N. Sreekandan Nair, a veteran RSP Leader and K. C Vamadevan as General Secretary. They organized an agitation demanding pay hike at par with that of Public Works Department (PWD) employees in the state government. The Labour Department interfered in the issue, referred it to the Industrial Tribunal and the Tribunal issued its order in favour of the Union.

In 1964, the state witnessed a prolonged strike of different categories of employees under TDB that resulted in the appointment of Devaswom Employee's Salary Revision Committee headed by Kainikkara Padmanabha Pillai. The Committee in its Report (1966) recommended the scientific reorganization of the whole contingent services, grouping them according to their functions, dividing each group into grades on the basis of the quality and quantity of their work and fixing them the proper scale of pay. It would also mean guaranteeing them the security of tenure instituting some pension or provident fund and bringing them under Kerala Service Rules (KSR) both regarding rights and

restrictions (GoK, 1966: 169). The most fundamental aspect of the Committee recommendation was that for the first time the contingent employees have been brought under regular service patterns and modern salary structure. The employees belonged to about 85 categories have been grouped under ten categories; each group has been graded and each grade given suitable pay and allowances (GoK, 1966:170). The Committee proposed creation of five selective posts to accommodate a few of the most outstanding artists like *nagaswaram*, *takil* etc. (GoK, 1966:174).

The temple employees raised objections against many of the recommendations of the Committee. Despite all objections, the Board decided to implement the recommendations. The employees' union organized a march to the residence of the Devaswom Board President, Mankuzhi Madhavan to press their demands. But the Board was not ready to heed the demands of the Union. So, the employees started a hunger strike and extended their agitation to all the temples premises in central Travancore region. They organized a demonstration at Thiruvananthapuram raising slogans like, "We are unable to perform rituals on an empty stomach, jail or wage" to indicate their plight (Nair, 2006: 433-34).

The Union resorted to direct action by starting a satyagraha in front of the Devaswom Group Offices and finally before the Board office. Unfortunate incidents happened including, police action of arresting employees including the priests who were sentenced to undergo imprisonment. The Union began a hunger strike before the residence of the Devaswom Board President which lasted for 13 days. Again, a mass picketing and demonstrations before the Board Office were organized. Finally, the Board referred this matter to a Committee consisting of Kumbalathu Sanku Pillai, N. Govinda Menon and K. R. Narayanan. The Committee recommended removal of 147 employees from service and 726 employees placed under suspension (TDB. 1968:19-20). When the United Front (U.F.) Ministry came to power in 1967, the union leaders became Ministers and MLAs. A new Board was constituted with members nominated by the U.F. Government

which took the initiative to revert the decisions of the previous Board and to reinstate all dismissed employees (TDB, 1968:18). The Board implemented the scheme of pension and gratuity to the Devaswom employees on a par with the state government employees with effect from 1st April, 1969 (GoK, 1970: 331).

In 1974, Kerala witnessed another agitation of temple employees demanding a revised pay structure equal to that of the last grade staff in government service. The Board decided to implement their demand on the same day the Union declared their strike. Consequently, the strike was withdrawn. In 1975, temple employees again organized protest demonstrations and 24-hour strike in front of the temples without affecting the temple rituals. These agitations of politically affiliated trade unions created concerns among the devotees. This was the first organized political movement of temple employees in front of temples. Later, they shifted their satyagraha in front of the Board Head Office (Nair, 2006: 435). Expressing solidarity with the agitators, UTUC, the trade union wing of RSP issued a call to all unions affiliated with it to extend support to the strike of temple employees (Nair, 2006: 436). Several employees were suspended by the Board and some of them faced serious police actions including arrest and imprisonment. In 1975, Devaswom Staff Union was formed which became the sole association of all employees of the Board except temple employees.

In 1980, Travancore Devaswom Employees' Union staged a demonstration in front of the Devaswom Board Office demanding better pay scale for the staff and legislation to ensure better governmental control over the Board (The Hindu, 1980). RSP leader, V. P. Ramakrishna Pillai raised the issue as a submission in the Kerala Legislative Assembly and urged the government to introduce a Bill to control the TDB as in the case of Guruvayur Devaswom (Proceedings of KLA, 1987: 76-77).

### **Recommendations of Various Commission Reports**

K.P. Sankaran Nair Commission (1984) in its report suggested providing a systematic facility for

redressing the grievances of temple employees. Their service associations should not to have political affiliations or not to indulge in any activities that affect the spiritual atmosphere of the temples (GoK, 1984:176). Again, in 1993, the KHC appointed S. Krishnan Unni, a District Judge as enquiry commission on the allegations of corruption rampant in the Guruvayur Devaswom. The Commission in its Report stressed the need for a check into the trade union activities of Devaswom employees and even went to the extreme of recommending the ban of union activities in Devaswoms that may affect the discipline of the Devaswom servants. Politicization may badly affect temple administration and so the Commission recommended a single union for the entire Devaswom employees.

### **Judicial Interference**

In 1992, a division of the Kerala High Court (KHC) made the following observation: "The right to join associations and air grievances should be provided; nevertheless, it should be in conformity with the sanctity of the Hindu shrines without any disturbance either directly or even remotely. Consistent with the high standards required in temple atmosphere, it is only proper to keep off political or other influences. It will be ideal to have one Service Association in each TGBs (Jayaram, 1999). Because trade union activities like calling for strikes, dharnas, satyagraha, etc. are illegal, unjustified, and completely opposed to the tranquil ambience of temples, they are not permitted at places of worship.

The court also directed the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) to take necessary action for banning trade unions and political interference in the Board based on the High-Power Committee Report. A petition filed by P. Jayaram a native of Vaikom in Kottayam District and a member of the Temple protection committee urged to free the temple from trade unionism and politicization. The petitioner alleged that politicization and trade union activities adversely affect the day-to-day functioning of the Board (Jayaram Vs TDB, 1999).

The High Court of Kerala directed the Devaswom Boards to derecognize the trade unions as per the recommendations of the High Power Commission

Report. The Court insisted to recognize a single union for the Board employees and derecognize all other unions and to vacate the places occupied by derecognized trade unions (Kerala Kaumudi, 1999). Consequently, the TDB imposed certain restrictions on trade union rights of Devaswom employees including temple employees. This move of the Board was questioned by the left trade unions on the ground that it will affect the bargaining power of Devaswom employees in Kerala (Kerala Kaumudi, 1990).

Based on the Court direction, the TDB issued a notification taking steps to derecognize all category wise unions and unions with outside politicians as office bearers. The notification stipulated that the associations should have a bye-law that ensures calmness, serenity and discipline ordained by Hindu religious faith and without resorting to direct action and strike (TDB, 1999). Accordingly, the Board has to conduct a referendum and that the association which secures the maximum percentage of votes would be granted recognition. The referendum is valid for five years.

The direction of the Court was a major setback to more than eleven unions in the Devaswom Board. The Sub Group Officers Association filed an appeal before the Supreme Court against the verdict of the High Court that curtailed the rights of employees. But the Supreme Court upheld the verdict of the High Court that banned trade union activities (Mathrubhumi, 1999). Devaswom Board Employees Confederation, a joint platform of various associations of employees, urged the government to take necessary steps to protect the trade union rights of 6000 Devaswom employees (Kerala Kaumudi, 1999, November, 12).

As mentioned earlier, the High Court of Kerala ordered to disband trade unions with leaders from politicians outside as per the High-Power Commission recommendations. Against this, Devaswom Subgroup Officers Association approached the Supreme Court, but the Supreme Court rejected their appeal. Thus the fate of more than eleven trade unions under TDB became in crisis (Mathrubhumi, 1999). Then the TDB issued guidelines for recognizing a single union for Devaswom employees by conducting a

referendum. Accordingly, a referendum was held in 2005 and CITU affiliated Travancore Devaswom Employees Confederation got recognition. After this, two referendums were held and the Travancore Devaswom Employees Front of the Congress Party got recognition twice.

Concerning the grievances of employees, the Board has to discuss only with the recognized union. The TDB issued directions to the unions reminding them that they should not indulge in extremely risky exercises with the help of outsiders and spoil the serene atmosphere of the temples. Accordingly, the Board framed rules for the effective functioning of one service association for all categories of employees and published Devaswom Servants Rule in the Gazette.

### **Findings of the Study**

1. Service conditions of the temple employees are entirely different from employees of other sectors.
2. Temple employees are not coming under the purview of labour laws in the state.
3. There is no capitalist or employer-employee relationship in Devaswom affairs and so labour laws are not applicable to them. Working hours, rules regarding holidays, overtime work etc. cannot be applied to them.
4. Kuttikrishna Menon Commission stated that trade unionism is against the spiritual atmosphere of the temple and should be prohibited
5. The administration of Devaswom Boards in Kerala today has been deteriorated to the level of a business establishment due to the presence of strong and highly politicized trade unions
6. Plurality of associations or organizations will only hamper and lead to more confusions and not in the larger interest of the devotees,
7. The existence of category-wise trade unions in Devaswoms creates mutual hatred, disunity and conflict among its employees
8. The union activities are not conducive in temples because trade union activities such as calling for strikes, dharnas, satyagraha etc. are illegal and unjustifiable and totally against the serene atmosphere of temples.



9. Politicization and trade union activities adversely affect the day-to-day functioning of the Board
10. The proliferation of trade unions which were impeding the serene and holy atmosphere and also the functioning of the temple.

## Conclusion

Temples are holy places and not industrial establishments; so extreme direct action methods usually resorted by the trade unions are not suitable in the calm, serene atmosphere ordained by religion. All political parties have their affiliated trade unions for temple employees; even for the priestly classes and their radicalism have often disrupted the holy atmosphere in temples. Commissions appointed from time to time for Devaswom reforms; K. Kuttikrishna Menon (1964), K.P. Sankaran Nair (1984), High-Power Commission (1990), S. Krishnan Unni (1993) and Justice Paripoornan (2007) in their Reports unanimously stressed the need for regulating trade unionism among temple employees. As per the directions of the court, the TGBs imposed certain restrictions on trade union rights of Devaswom employees; these were challenged, but the court stick on to the decision to ban trade union activities. Plurality of trade unions in Devaswoms is another important issue. As a defense, the court suggested selection of a recognized trade union through referendum for ventilating the grievances of employees. Still, politically affiliated trade unions are there, but unions with outside politicians and category wise unions are prohibited on the basis of High Power Commission Report. It is a matter of relief for the devotees that the processes of referendum for a recognized union in various TGBs are going on as per the directives of the court. Such measures become part of democratization process and could establish a balance between the interests of temple employees and rights of devotees.

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