

## CASTE, GENDER AND POLITICS IN KERALA: CONCERNS IN TEMPLE WORSHIP

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### Abstract

*Temples in Kerala have been all the time, amazing factors for their uniqueness in structure, art, rituals, tradition, customs, festivals, architecture, mural paintings etc. Regarding temple administration, there have been certain controversies existing from the formation of the Devaswom department or some years before its formation. Devaswom Boards are constituted for the administration of temples in the state and the members of these bodies are appointed merely on the basis of their political ideology and not of their belief in God or temple worship. Through historic struggles, the Hindu population of Kerala gained freedom of worship, but still, there are hurdles in preserving this freedom in the true sense. It is paradoxical that even at the 81st anniversary of the Great 'Temple Entry Proclamation' and the centenary of Sahodaran Ayyappan's 'Misra Bhojanam' (common dining), Kerala temples become centres of caste, gender-based discrimination to the devotees. This paper is an attempt to examine the nature of temple administration; the various issues existing in the temple administration like unhealthy political interference, corruption, nepotism mismanagement, favouritism, misappropriation of funds etc. The appointment of non-Brahmin priests in state-owned temples, restriction for women of a particular age group to enter and worship in Sabarimala temple, denial of entry to non-Hindus in certain temples etc. are the issues that widely discuss today.*

**Keywords:** Temple administration, Hindu MLAs, Non-Brahmin Priests, Temple Entry. Secularism

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### Introduction

Freedom of religion and worship is the fundamental human rights guaranteed to every citizen in a secular state like India. The healthy growth of a secular state; religious freedom with no political interference is inevitable. Governmental interference over temple administration is a serious threat to the very existence of temples themselves. It is ironical that in a secular state, administration of temples is carrying out by a body in which members are appointed not by believers but the politicians. It is the Hindu MLAs who select and appoint the members of Devaswom Boards (governing body of Hindu temples in Kerala). It is the need of the hour to examine the so-called concept of 'Hindu MLAs' in a secular state. Appointment of non-believers in temple governing bodies is often criticized by the High Court and various commissions appointed for enquiring reforms in temple governance. Justice Paripoornan Commission in its report regarding the malpractices and corruption rampant in temples under the Travancore Devaswom Board found out that political interference is one of the causes of the prevailing corruption in the administration of temples.

### History of Temple Administration in Kerala

Temples in Kerala have been all the time, amazing factors for their uniqueness in structure, art, rituals, tradition, customs, festivals, architecture, mural paintings etc. In earlier times, the temples were associated with institutions like polity, economy and caste. Temples functioned as centres of political legitimacy, power and authority (Selvan, 2003:8). In Travancore, temples were managed by private individuals and bodies known popularly as oorallars or karakkars, in some cases synod of priests (Padmanabha Menon, 1942:140). In course of time the temples, particularly major ones, came to possess immense wealth contributed by devotees including rulers, administrators, and the public. The managers introduced rules and customs for temple administration for their own benefit and the state had not intervened in the internal affairs of

temples. Thus, most of the temples were ill-managed and the revenues from them were being misused by the trustees (Yesudas, 1977:37). The huge wealth owned by the Devaswoms and the great influence that the trustees had over the people, were posed as potential sources of threat to the state. So Diwan Velu Thampi proposed that the entire property of the temples should be confiscated by the government (Pillai. KK, 1953:164). Thus the process of centralization of administration of temples was started during the time of Velu Thampi. It is a fact that the State's efforts to control temples did not just happen in an impersonal evolutionary sense, but the politicians, bureaucrats, judges and colonial rulers had definitely a hand in it (Pressler, 2008:156).

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British took keen interest in Temple administration. Col. Munro, the Divan of Travancore, took over the Hindu temples along with their properties in the year 1811 (Velu Pillai, 1940:559) and they were put under the control of the Revenue Department so that the lower caste people and non-Hindus were denied job opportunities in the Revenue Department. From then the marginalized groups organized civic rights movement to resist this and to achieve democratic rights. Under their pressure, a committee was appointed by Travancore government in 1919 under Krishna Ayyangar, which recommended the formation of a separate Devaswom department under the direct supervision of the government (Suresh Kumar, 1994:108). In 1922, on the basis of the Devaswom separation committee report, separate Devaswom department was created for the administration of temples. After independence and the introduction of constitutional changes, Devaswom Department was kept separated from the effective control of the state. When the Travancore and Cochin states were integrated on 1st July 1949, the administrative control of Devaswoms had been vested with Travancore Devaswom and Cochin Devaswom Boards, in pursuance of the articles of the covenant and provisions of Travancore Cochin Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1950. The temples in Malabar area were governed by HR&CE Department on the basis of Madras HRCE Act of 1951. Special enactments were framed for two major temples having hereditary legitimacy; Guruvayur temple and Koodal Manickyam temple at Irinjalakkuda which were made under separate Devaswom committees as per the provisions of the respective development Acts.

### **Major Concerns in Temple Worship**

Though centers of spirituality, the temples of Kerala are nowadays, facing several grave issues. The temples were once the wealthiest institutions in the society, now struggle for meeting their day to day affairs. After the assumption of temples by the state, their properties became confiscated to the exchequer. For compensating this, government provides financial assistance to the temples in the form of annuity (Article 290A of Indian Constitution), which is inadequate; temples have to depend on the mercy of the devotees for their survival. (Rajagopal, 2017:1-15)

### **Politicisation of temple administration**

Historically, temples in Kerala became platforms for great social reforms and revolutionary movements. Unfortunately, now the temples have become an asylum for political parties. They nominate their representatives to various Devaswom Boards in the state with a view to promote their narrow political interests. This led to the complete politicization of Devaswom administration which becomes the most fundamental issue facing the temples today. Temples in Kerala with their unique ritualistic traditions and temple practices are being buffeted by pressure of change (Leela Menon, June 3, 1990). The misappropriations of funds, maladministration and such other defects in parochial politics have affected the day to day affairs of Hindu temples. (Rajagopal, 2017:1-15) High Court full bench in 1999 had ruled that for taking part in the election process to Devaswom Boards, the MLAs need not to proclaim whether they are believers or not. However, it had made clear that only believers should be allowed to be members of Devaswoms Boards. The Court concluded that it would be better for temples and worshippers if politicians are

barred from temple affairs. Interestingly, some years later, the Kerala High Court had pronounced that the body which nominates the members to Devaswoms should be believers of god and temple worship. Thus, the Bench disagreed with its earlier judgment. The verdict also said that those Hindu ministers and MLAs taking part in the election process to the Board, even they are non-believers in God and temple worship, have the responsibility to ensure that only persons of integrity with faith in temple worship and god are to be nominated to the Boards.

### **Appointment of non-Brahmin priest**

Today temples become the axle of a lot of controversies regarding freedom of worship guaranteed to the marginalized sections of society, especially the womenfolk and Dalits. There are serious complaints from various quarters regarding caste-based discrimination towards Dalits; the disqualification imposed on them to become priests in temples. The verdicts of our apex court in 1995 and 2002 for the appointment of non-Brahmin priests in temples become historic in the sense that it removed the taboo on non-Brahmins including Dalits to become priests and practising tantra vidya. Recently, the Devaswom Board has appointed several non-Brahmins as priests and it is a matter of joy that these appointments come at a time when Kerala is set to observe the 81st anniversary of the historic Temple Entry Proclamation. But opposition from some quarters is also being reported; the resistance of a section of people against the posting of a non-Brahmin sub priest at Chettikulangara temple has created issues recently. The tantri of Guruvayur temple very recently stated that like in the temples under the devaswom boards, non-Brahmin priests could not be allowed in the Guruvayur temple as the temple had its own sets of tantric rules on such a matter. The devaswom recruitment board in a recruitment drive appoints 62 priests to the temples under the TDB, more number of non-Brahmins qualified for the job. While 36 candidates made it to the final list from the non-Brahmin castes, only 26 of the selected candidates were from the Brahmin community, sixteen candidates from non-Brahmin communities made it to the list in the merit category and the rest found a place on the list through the state-mandated reservation policy of 32 percent. For the first time in the history, in 2017, a person belonged to SC pulaya community was appointed as priest in a temple in Kerala on the basis of reservation rules followed as in the case of government staff recruitment.

### **Entry of non-Hindus in temples**

Even after seven decades of the Temple Entry Proclamation, the state of Kerala witnessed a controversy over the issue of entry of believers, irrespective of caste in all temples in the state. Notice boards restricting entry of non-Hindus in temples are exhibited in various temples under Devaswom Boards. While Guruvayur Satyagraha was conducted in 1932 to protest against the prohibition of low caste Hindus from entering into the temple, the shrine is now witnessing another movement that seeks all believers, irrespective of religion, to be allowed unrestricted entry into its premises. There have been persistent demands in favour of the famous playback singer, Yesudas who is a Christian but showing respect to Hindu religion and has intense desire to enter into that temple, to be permitted inside the temple since he has been singing Hindu devotional songs in praise of Lord Krishna for the last several years. Guruvayur devaswom authorities followed a negative approach towards the issue. Now, the chief priest (tantri) of the temple has expressed a positive signal of changing the customs and allowing non-Hindus into temples. He suggested that a committee of tantris and scholars should discuss and decide the possibility of allowing non-Hindus who follow Hindu faith to enter into the temples across Kerala. The opinion of thantri, who is the final word in temple custom, opened a new chapter in the issue of entry of all believers irrespective of religion in temples. Minister in charge of Devaswoms in Kerala, Kadakampally Surendran has welcomed the opinion of the Guruvayur temple tantri, Chennas Dinesan Namboodiri and hoped that the state government can take the lead in allowing non-Hindus to the temple.

## Women Entry Issue

The entry of women in Sabarimala is another grave issue that the Travancore Devswom Board and the state government are facing today. As far as womenfolk is concerned, it is stipulated that only those who have not attained the age of puberty and the menstrual cycle and those who are past menopause alone should undertake the pilgrimage. The entry of women in the age group of 10 to 50 years is prohibited in the shrine because the presiding deity Lord Ayyappa is considered to be a 'naishtika brahmachari' (perennial celibate). In 2006, the Indian Young Lawyers Association challenged the constitutional validity of Rule 3(b) of the Kerala Hindu Places of Public Worship (Authorisation of Entry) Rules, which bars women from entering the temple and sought removal of the ban in the Supreme Court. The court questioned how a temple managed by a statutory board and financed out of the Consolidated Fund "can indulge in practices violating constitutional principles. The Supreme Court appointed amicus curiae and referred the case to a five-judge Constitution Bench. Now, the major issues identified regarding the administration of temples and the suggestions to remedy them are listed in a nutshell;

### Major Issues identified

1. Control of the State Government infringes autonomy of the Devaswom Boards in the state;
2. Corruption, mismanagement and other defects in parochial politics existing in temple administration also;
3. It seems that the devotees are almost alienated from temple administration as there is no provision for incorporating their representatives to the Board administration;
4. Governmental interference on temple administration sowed the seed of Hindu communalism in state politics;
5. Issues like the appointment of non-Brahmin priests, entry of non-Hindus and women in certain temples have created a bad image on the administration of temples in the state.

### Suggestions

1. Temple administration should be completely revamped and give adequate representation to believers and religious leaders;
2. Avoid political interference, as far as possible, in temple administration;
3. Temple advisory committees should be constituted in all the temples;
4. Priests in temples may be selected according to the proficiency in tantric rules than the criterion of caste;
5. Reservation for the post of the temple priest is not at all good and it should be avoided;
6. An institution of higher learning in tantric studies and temple art may be started in the government sector with the financial aid of the Devaswom Boards;
7. An expert committee consists of chief priests, saints, temple trustees and religious leaders should be constituted for discussing the issues such as the entry of non-Hindus and women in all the temples in the state.

### Conclusion

Temples in Kerala are today facing a multitude of issues which are socio, economic and political, rather than spiritual or devotional. Freedom of worship and religion is the fundamental human rights guaranteed to citizens in a secular state like India. Discrimination of human beings on the ground of religion or belief is a breach of human dignity. For the healthy growth of the secular state, religious freedom with no governmental interference is inevitable. In 1811, during the Diwanship of Col. Munro, the revenue and landed properties of temples were considerably lost and later the progressive land legislation in Kerala resulted in the heavy loss of the temple assets. Now, most of the temples are dependent on the mercy of the devotees for their survival. It is true that the major temples in the state are the revenue generators to the Devaswom Boards, thereby

to the government. So, it is unfortunate to drag the temples into controversies. Devotees would be in a position to enjoy spiritual freedom only when they become competent to free temples from the clutches of politicians and they themselves can administer the temples. Otherwise, they will be denied the religious freedom and freedom of worship granted to other communities. Temples like Sabarimala are the centres of communal harmony and symbols of secular traditions. And through a series of commendable moves, many customs which might be meant for hundreds of years old are making revised according to the change in time. It appears that Kerala is going through a period of revolution regarding the customs, practices and administration of temples. The rights of the underprivileged obtained through Temple Entry Proclamation should be maintained in its true spirit. Temple customs should be revised in accordance with the changes in time and environment.

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