



## **Temple worship in Kerala: Issues and controversies**

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### **Abstract**

Regarding the temple worship in Kerala, there have been certain controversies existing from the formation of the Devaswom Department or some years before its formation. 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 83rd anniversary of the Great 'Temple Entry Proclamation' and the centenary of Sahodaran Ayyappan's 'Misra Bhojanam' (common dining); Kerala temples become centres of caste, and gender based discrimination to the devotees. These centers of spirituality are today met with several grave issues like mismanagement, favoritism, 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 discussed today.

**Keywords:** temple administration, Hindu MLAs, Non-brahmin priests, temple entry

### **1. Introduction: Temples in Kerala**

Temples are the religious centres of the Hindu believers; occupy a unique place in the socio political, economic and cultural spheres of the state. They represent the cultural legacy of the state as many of our traditional art forms were originated, developed and patronised by them. Once became power centres, they acted as castles of orthodoxy and caste based segregation. The historic Temple Entry Proclamation had broken these caste based fetters and ensured social justice to the marginalised. Owing to the power, influence and wealth of the temples, the government took over their administration in disguise of corruption in 1811 by Dewan Col. Munro along with their enormous properties in disguise of corruption. When monarchy gave way to democracy, the administration of temples was entrusted with the Devaswom governing bodies constituted by the Government. Due to the progressive land legislations of the State Government, large tracts of landed properties belonged to the temples were lost that affected the revenue of the temples considerably.

### **2. Devaswom Governing bodies**

In Kerala temples are categorised in to two sections; the first being the category of temples under the control of state regulated Devaswom bodies and the other is private temples. The major temples in the state are administered by Devaswom boards created on the basis of respective Devaswom laws. At present the temples are governed by Travancore, Cochin, Malabar Devaswom Boards and Guruvayur, Koodalmanickam Devaswom Managing Committees. Travancore Devaswom Board is the leading temple governing body in Kerala manages 1248 temples including reputed Sabarimala temple. Cochin Devaswom Boards manages 403 temples in the erstwhile Cochin region. Lack of uniformity in temple administration creates major hurdles for their development and well-being of temple employees.

### **3. Issues in Temple Management**

The temples in the state today met with several grave issues. Like mismanagement, favouritism, misappropriation of funds, political nomination, 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. In Kerala the administration of temples are carrying out by governmentally controlled Devaswom governing bodies and the government control gradually paved the way for the politicisation of its administration. Devaswom Boards, created as religious trusts for administering the property of God, consist of Members nominated by the Hindu Ministers and MLAs. The concept of Hindu MLA and ministers are contradictory to the secular spirit of the Constitution of India.

### **4. Issues of Temple Entry**

Today temples become the pivot of a lot of controversies regarding freedom of worship guaranteed to the marginalized sections of society, especially to 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 apex courts 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 practicing 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 Guruvayur temple as the temple had its own sets of tantric rules on such a matter.

Besides, the issue of appointment of non-Brahmin priests, the entry of non-Hindus, entry of women, etc. are frequently discussing in the media today. Even after seven decades of 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 many temples under Devaswom Boards. While Guruvayur Satyagraha was conducted in 1932 to protest against the prohibition of low caste Hindus from entering in to 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 play back 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. The 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.

The entry of women in Sabarimala is another grave issue that the Travancore Devaswom Board and the state Government are facing today. As far as women 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. Finally, the apex court in its historic verdict in 2018 favoured for the entry of women irrespective of their age.

## 5. Major Issues Identified

Now, the major issues identified regarding the

Administration of temples and the suggestions to remedy them are listed in a nut shell;

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.

## 6. 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.

## 7. Conclusion

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 MLA 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 MLA' 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.

Temples in Kerala are today facing a multitude of issues which are socio, economic and political, rather than the spiritual or devotional. 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 to say that the major temples in the state are the revenue generators to the Devaswom Boards, thereby to the government. So, it is very unfortunate to drag the temples into controversies. They contributed much to the cultural heritage of the state. 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.

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