



## POLITICISATION OF TEMPLE ADMINISTRATION IN KERALA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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This paper examines the various issues prevailing in the administration of temples in Kerala by politically nominated devaswom boards and how far it is detrimental to the development of temples and spirituality. Temples in Kerala are not mere religious institutions, but organizations where economic, cultural and to some extent political activities are concentrated. As such the administration of temples needs special attention. Temples are the symbols of our cultural heritage. Temples in Kerala have a unique indigenous architectural tradition.<sup>i</sup> Further the temples in Kerala are famous for the importance given to their sanctity and serenity, which is rarely seen in any other part of the country. Besides being a place of pilgrimage, they provide worshippers with mental solace. Kerala temples have a unique pattern both in architectural style and in rituals. The individuality of the Kerala temples consists in three aspects, architectural style, mode of worship, with scrupulous enforcement of sanctity, taboo and conservatism and the social economic political and cultural superstructure<sup>ii</sup>. The history of temple worship is closely linked with the evolution of human society.

In the past, Hindu temples in the state were mostly under the management of private bodies known as Oorallars or Kariakkars<sup>iii</sup>. In course of time, the temples, particularly major ones, came to possess immense wealth by way of contributions from the devotees including rulers, administrators, and the public. The managers of temples enacted rules and customs for administration, mostly favourable to them and not for the benefit of temples or devotees. The British began to take keen interest in the control and administration of temples from the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1811, Col. Munro, the Dewan of Travancore took over the administration of Hindu temples along with their properties.<sup>iv</sup>

After attaining Independence and the introduction of constitutional changes, separate Devaswom boards were constituted for the administration of temples. Devaswom Boards are constituted to effect better management of temples in Kerala. When the Travancore and Cochin states were integrated on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1949, the administrative control of Devaswoms was vested with Travancore Devaswom and Cochin Devaswom Boards, in pursuance of the articles of the Covenant and provisions of TCHRE Act of 1950. The temples in Malabar area were governed by HR&CE Department on the basis of Madras HRCE Act of 1951. Guruvayoor temple is governed by separate Devaswom committee as per the provisions of Guruvayoor Devaswom Act of 1978. Malabar Devaswom board was constituted by Kerala government as per the directions of hon'ble High Court of Kerala in 2008.

In 1994 in a historic verdict high court of Kerala directed the state government to consider the formation of a unified devaswom board for management of temples in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar areas and urgently consider the formation of Malabar devaswom board for Malabar temples<sup>v</sup>. Malabar Devaswom Board was constituted on the basis of HR&CE (Amendment) Ordinance of 2008. The first Malabar Devaswom Board consisting of 9 members assumed office on October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008. A total of 1600 temples in the districts from Palakkad to Kasargod and parts of Thrissur, excluding those under Cochin and Guruvayur Devaswom Boards, come under the direct supervision of MDB. There are more than 5000 temples in the state under the control of devaswom boards. 9000 administrative and ministerial staff and 4000 connected with internal rituals and customs of the temples.<sup>vi</sup>

**Table 1, General Picture of Devaswoms In Kerala**

S. no	Devaswom Area	Devaswom principal Acts	Number of temples	Devaswom Board	Membership in board
1	Travancore \	Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institution Act of 1950	1208	Travancore Devaswom Board	3
2	Cochin	TCHRI Act of 1950	403	Cochin Devaswom Board	3
3	Malabar Region	Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment(Amendment)Act 2008	1348	Malabar Devaswom Board	9
4	KoodalManickam Temple	KoodalManikkam Devaswom Act 1971	1	Koodal Manikkam Devswom	7
5	Guruvayur Temple	GuruvayurDevaswom Act1978	6	Guruvayur Devaswom	9

Devaswom Boards in the state together have an annual budget exceeding 1000 crores and have more than 10,000 employees across more than 3000 temples in the state<sup>vii</sup>



Temples in Kerala today, facing several serious issues, most of them are economic and political rather than spiritual. Politicization of temple administration is the most important one that adversely affects temple administration. There is an ongoing debate in Kerala over the management of Hindu temples by the state. Political interference over temple administration, mismanagement of funds raised through contributions from devotees, corruption etc by politically appointed authorities are the major issues facing by the temples. Problems relating to the welfare of employees and devotees and shortage of finance, mismanagement, favoritism, misappropriation of funds, etc. are also prevailing.

### Politics of State Control over Temples

There is an ongoing debate in Kerala over the management of Hindu temples by a secular state. It is interesting to see that the state government never interferes in the affairs of the churches and mosques, but often interferes in the day to day affairs of Hindu temples. In order to legitimate the state control redefine its relation to supervision, protection or religion is labeled as cultural heritage and temples are redefined as public trusts.<sup>viii</sup> There is nothing wrong in government looking after the administration of temples provided that wealth of the temples is used for the betterment of the Hindu society.

Most of the problems faced by the temples in Kerala are political and economic rather than spiritual. Several factors like politicization of temple administration, trade union activities among temple staff, mismanagement and diversion of temple funds for non-devotional purposes, corruption etc. badly affect the spirituality of temples today. Temples wielded enormous influence over the society from time immemorial. This may perhaps, be the main reason for the major political parties in Kerala to take interest in their administration. Other factors like chances of corruption and favoritisms in the appointment also make them interested in temple affairs.

Temple administration today faces numerous problems such as political interference, mismanagement of funds raised through contributions from devotees, lack of uniform law, problems relating to the welfare of employees and devotees, pathetic conditions of temples and shortage of finance. Trade union activity in the temple signifies the influence of the political process within the temple<sup>ix</sup> Majority of the Hindu temples are finding it hard to perform daily rituals During the past fifteen years numerous temples in Kerala were renovating by the devotees themselves. The support from the government was marginal. Mismanagement, favoritism, misappropriation of funds etc. are prevailing in temple administration. The Devaswom minister himself has admitted that corruption is the objective of the politicians, whether belonging to the left, right or centre. The misuse of temple funds corruption in administration; pathetic condition of temples, governmental discrimination towards major temples etc were frequently criticized by the High Court.

It is the need of the hour to examine critically the so-called concept of 'Hindu MLAs' in a secular state. In a state where secularism and religious freedom are guaranteed by the constitution it may be seen paradoxical for the state to take over the administration of mismanaged temples, through the instrumentality of statutory boards.<sup>x</sup> Hon'ble High Court of Kerala pronounced that faith in God and temple worship alone makes a *Hindu MLA* competent to take part in the election of members to Devaswom Boards. However there are complaints that non-believers are nominated to devaswom boards. Moreover among the Hindu MLAs' there are a few who do not have faith in god and temple worship. Hindu MLAs and Ministers play a very crucial role in the formation of Devaswom Boards in Kerala.

### Suggestions and Recommendations

Kuttykrishna menon commission, KP Sankaran Nair commission, High power commission, justice Paripoornan commission etc, were made series of recommendations for improving temple administration in Kerala.

### List of Devaswom Reform Commission

(Appointed by Central, State Governments and High Court of Kerala)

Sl No	Name of commission	year	Issue of enquiry	Appointed authority
1	Hindu Religious Endowment Commission	1962	Study religious endowments	Central government
2	Kuttikrishna Menon Commission	1963	Devaswom reform	State government
3	Bhaskaran Nair Commission	1974	TDB	State govt
4	Kainikkara Kumara Pillai Commission	1966	Salary revision of TDB	State govt
5	Krishna Moorthy Commission	1974	TDB	State govt
6	K P Sankaran Nair Commission	1983	Devaswom Reform	State govt
7	High power Commission	1991	Devaswom Reform	High Court of Kerala



8	Chandra shekhara Menon Commission		Sabarimala stampede	State govt
9	Justice Paripoornan Commission	2007	TDB irregularities	High Court of Kerala

In the present conditions temples in Kerala needs systematic administrative set up .For achieving this following suggestions are offered.

1. Income from temples should only be utilized for devotional purposes.
2. financial disciplines should be in top priority for spending of devaswom fund.
3. Mismmanagement of income from temples should be firmly restricted.
4. Steps should be taken to enhance governmental grant to devaswoms as per Article 290A
5. Unified administrative set up with adequate representation of temple employees and devotees is essential.
6. Temple administrations should be depoliticized.

### Conclusion

Temples in Kerala faces serious challenges. A sort of democratized and centralized administrative set up is prevailing in temple administration today decentralized administrative system with the active participation of devotees is a necessary requirement for the development of temples in Kerala. The condition of majority temples in Kerala is pathetic and miserable. It is painful to note that periodical repair of the temple structures were not properly carried out. The concept of Hindu MLAs and ministers in the formulation of devaswom boards are ironical. Critically speaking, it is contradictory to the very principles of Secularism. The contribution of the rulers and activists who opened the temples to all worshippers through 'Temple Entry Proclamation' should again work to see that the temple administration is managed by the Hindus. No society is free and no state is democratic unless rights in widest community spread are achieved by every citizen.

### Reference

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