

Major Issues in the Administration of Temples in Kerala

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Abstract

Temples in Kerala are centres of spirituality, but now a days, their administration faces several grave issues. The temples were once the wealthiest institutions in the society, now struggle for 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, which is inadequate. Temples have to depend on the mercy of the devotees for their survival. Temples in Kerala today, facing several serious issues, most of them are economic and political rather than spiritual. Politicisation 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.

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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 gains. This led to complete politicization of their administration. The process of centralization of administration started with the period of Marthanda Varma. During the time of Dewan Veluthampi, a bold plan for temple administration was developed. The huge wealth owned by the Devaswoms and the great influence that the trustees had over the people, were the potential source of threat to the state. So, Velu thampi proposed that the entire property of the temples should be confiscated by the government.¹

.IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEMS

Temples in Kerala today, facing several serious issues, most of them are economic and political rather than spiritual. Politicisation 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

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Politics in temple Administration

Politicisation of temple administration is 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 change². Temples in Kerala often become the playground for politics with successive governments. Temple assets are often mismanaged and temples become hotbeds of maladministration. In Kerala, ministers are involved in temple administration and the state government, through legislation, has taken over the administration of temples. The misappropriation of funds, maladministration and such other defects in parochial politics has affected the day to day affairs of Hindu temples. Healthy growth of a secular state, religious freedom with non political interference is inevitable. It is a grave injustice to the Hindu community that the secular state makes temple platform for political clashes and pressure game politics. It is interesting to note that the religious

¹ Pillai .kk, Sucindram Temple, Kalakshetra publications, Madras, 1953, p.164

² Leela Menon, "The pros and cons of Universal Temple Entry", Indian Express, June 3, 1990

places of other organised religions are free from such political control. Hindu MLAs and ministers play a very critical role in the formation of Devasom Boards. Even non-believers or those who have no faith in God and temple worship also participate in the election process. Various Hindu organizations in the state raised their objection against politicization of temple administration. Hon'ble High Court of Kerala several times criticized the government policy of political appointment in Devaswom boards. In 1982 the *Vishal Hindu Sammelan* demanded liberation of temples from politics. The *Vishal Hindu Sammelan* can be considered as the forerunner of the Hindu front in Kerala.³

KP Sankaran Nair Commission and High Power committee report recommended depoliticisation of temple administration. VHP leader Kummanam Rajasekharan stated that while other religions have the right to administer their religious institutions themselves, it is discriminatory to deny that to the Hindus. The government has thrown to the winds the High Court directive that political interference should not be allowed in temples and the recommendations of Kuttykrishna Menon and Sankaran Nair Commission⁴

Ashok Singhal, all India secretary of VHP, stated that if politicians are allowed to control the affairs of the temples, the customs and traditions of the Hindus would be thrown to the winds.⁵ A division bench of Kerala High Court appointed a three member high level team to probe corruption charges against TDB that runs temples including Sabarimala temple. Justice Paripoornan Commission urged the government to facilitate complete de-politicization in temple administration and mooted for separate administrative body for Sabarimala temple. Justice Chandrashekhara Menon Commission, which had inquired into the *Pampa hill top tragedy* some years ago, had mooted an independent administrative body for the hill shrine at Sabarimala. In 2000, a Division Bench of High Court of Kerala had observed that members of political parties should not be appointed to the devaswom panel of Guruvayoor Devaswom Management Committee.⁶ In its report, Paripoornan Commission called for total depoliticisation of TDB, calling it a undisciplined organization. Other recommendations were appointment of police officer of higher rank, appointment of a devotee as administrator in the TDB etc. Moreover

³ K jayaprasad ,RSS and Hindu Nationalism,p.236

⁴ Hindu 21, February, 1999.

⁵ Indian Express , 16,july, 1988.

⁶ The Hindu 5,,july, 2000.

it emphasized that appointments should be free from nepotism, favouritism etc⁷.

Mismanagement of funds

Misappropriation of fund and corruption are the major problems facing Temple Administration today. Honourable High Court of Kerala, in 1990 appointed a three member High Power Commission to investigate the improper and inefficient administration and lack of financial discipline in TDB and CDB. Again in 2002 High Court appointed a six member committee on the basis of a Public Interest Litigation. There is another controversy in connection with the the conduct of a programme 'Satakoti archana' in Malayalappuzha Devi Temple in Pathanamthitta district under Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB)in 2002 . It is alleged that the Satakoti archana coupons of rates ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 1 lakh has been printed at a private press in Thiruvananthapuram without seeking the mandatory clearance from the Board despite the fact that the TDB has got a modern printing press at its headquarter in the capital city. There were reports that certain TDB staff have even went to Chennai for mobilisation of funds for the ritual without obtaining permission from the Board. A group of

local people locked up a team headed by the Devaswom Commissioner, C.P.Nair, inside the temple at Malayalappuzha,alleging the Devaswom Commissioner's inept handling of the situation. Malayalappuzha temple incident indicates the inefficiency of the administrative system committing financial misconduct and irregularities.

Shortage of finance

Except Guruvayur Devaswom Board, Travancore, Cochin and Malabar Devaswoms in Kerala are facing serious economic crisis. There are several reasons for this financial crisis. Mismanagement of temple funds,corruption,excess staff, unscientific financial planning and negative attitude of the government etc are prominent among them. Major portion of temple properties were lost due to land reforms and other progressive legislations in the state. Each Devaswom Board has a few temples,which constitute the major source of its income.The only remedy to make over this situation is to enhance the governmental contribution to the Board. The Board should prepare a plan for utilizing the land of temples with active participation of devotees.

Pathetic condition of the temples

⁷ www.newindpress.com

Dewaswom Boards are considered as the protector of temples in the state. Board spent huge amount for the social welfare activities like the management of schools, colleges, medical centres, tourist buses, marriage hall and other no devotional purposes. In 1994 high court criticized the policies of TDB and remarked that the primary duty of the board was not to build shopping complexes but maintain temples. It was painful to note that periodical repairs of the temple structure were not properly carried out.⁸ The conditions of temples in Malabar is also pathetic. Among 1500 temples in Malabar only sixty are financially viable. The rest of them are in a pathetic condition. It is essential that the board must give priority to upkeep and maintain the temple and its structures instead of embarking up on schemes in construction of shopping complexes. As far the Devaswom Board are concerned, they had never built any new Hindu temples during the last sixty years or more from their own funds. Even in the case of renovation of old temples under the board, major part of the expenses are met from Hindu devotees. It is an alarming fact for the Hindus that within a span of fifty years

seven thousand temples had disappeared from Travancore area.⁹

Issues of Malabar temple employees

Temple employees in Malabar area are poor paid and their wages terms and conditions are pathetic. Malabar Devaswom Board was created to ensure the minimum standard wages and redress pathetic condition of temples, as per the direction of high court of Kerala. But Employees in temples with less than Rs 15 lakh revenue are not getting salary for 20 months in 2013 and 2015.¹⁰ In 2015 an order issued by the Government of Kerala stated that salary of temple employees working under the temples having annual income of ten lakh and above should bear from its own fund.¹¹ Now the staff of the income deficit temples which is between 3000 and 5000 per month for an employee for the last four years.¹²

GOVERNMENT MOVE TO SEIZE DEVASWOM FUND

Kerala government Very recently moves a plan to take loans from devaswom fund

⁸ Indian Express, September 8, 1994.

⁹ Kerala devswom administrative reform commission report, 1984, p.6

¹⁰ Mathrubhumi, 26, August, 2015

¹¹ the hindu, 26 August, 2015

¹² hindu ibid

to overcome their financial crisis. As a part of this move government take a step to transfer the money deposited in the banks to the Government treasury. The Travancore Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions (TCHRI) Act, defer the diversion of its funds for public purposes. The funds at the disposal of the boards can be utilised only for the upkeep and propagation of Hindu religion and allied institutions. It cannot be utilised for other purposes. The Act specifically states devaswoms are independent bodies and the government does not reserve the authority to intervene in their administration. The Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) has bank deposits of around Rs.170 crore. This is deposited to meet the salary and pension of staff and retirees, execution of civil works and other commitments. In addition, the TDB gets annual grant of about Rs.76 crore. There are no provisions for transferring the deposit or the grants from the bank to the treasury for weathering the government's crisis. Authorities of the boards are reported to have apprehension about depositing the funds in the treasury. In the event of a financial crisis, if the government imposes restrictions on releasing payments, it is feared to impede the functioning of the boards¹³. Due to the

protest from the devotees government finally withdrew the plan ,

CORRUPTION IN TEMPLE ADMINISTRATION

The Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB), administrative body of temples, including the famous pilgrim centre of Sabarimala, is facing rampant official-level corruption and misappropriation of funds allegedly owing to absence of checks and balances. The Devaswom Ombudsman appointed by Kerala High Court, P.R.Raman, has taken serious note of a case involving theft of Devaswom fund by a an employee of devaswom board The TDB Accounts and Audit wing as well as external auditors have unearthed corruption and large-scale erosion of revenue at Kottarakkara Maha Ganapati Temple during 2008. Though Devaswom Commissioner had promptly reported the matter to the TDB recommending appropriate disciplinary action against the erring officer, no action was taken by the Board. The auditors as well as the vigilance wing have also detected forgery involving Rs 2 crore by producing bogus vouchers and bills for various purchases being made by a former Deaswom Executive Officer at Sabarimala during the annual pilgrim season in 2008. In another case, the TDB vigilance wing had found that the administrative officer at Chali

¹³ The Hindu 3, March 3, 2014, Accessed On 10/7/2

Narayanapuram Temple at Cherthala had clandestinely replaced the precious Thiruvabharanam at the temple in 2008-'09. Though the Devaswom Commissioner had reported both the issues to the TDB, the board has not taken any action, allegedly leaving the corrupt elements at large in the temple administration. And now, the Devaswom Ombudsman has intervened in the issue, seeking TDB clarification on the misappropriation of Devaswom revenue at Kottarakkara Ganapati Temple.¹⁴ The Government has received several complaints about the Travancore, Cochin, Guruvayur and Koodalmanikkam Devaswom Boards and the Hindu

¹⁴ The Hindu 5, April, 2010 accsd 10/7/2015

Table

LIST OF DEVASWOM REFORM COMMISSION

(appointed by central, state governments and high court of kerala)

Serial number	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

Religious and Charitable Endowment .An official note issued by the Ministry for Devaswom said that a majority of the complaints were about the corrupt practices of board presidents, members and officials.As many as 954 complaints were given by the public and 96 by MLAs. The note said that 25 complaints were referred to the Home Minister and the others for departmental inquiry. Complaints against the Cochin Devaswom were mainly about appointments and public works executed in

violation of rules and misuse of Devaswom funds. An inquiry was sought into the death of an employee, Vinod. The Devaswom Ministry recommended a probe into the fire that broke out at the Vadakkumnathan temple. Another complaint was about irregularities worth Rs.50 lakh in the maintenance of the Poornathrayeesa temple at Thripunithura.

Complaints against the Travancore Devaswom Board pertained to the

Sabarimala temple and the appointments in the board. The files on 'annadanam' and procurement of jaggery in Sabarimala were handed over to the Vigilance. The complaints that board members and top officials had taken bribe from Rs.1 lakh to Rs.10 lakh for appointments had been referred to the Vigilance. The Government got a suggestion that a person should not be allowed to continue as manager for more than a year. VIP darshan and appointments on daily wages too had come in for complaints. Complaints against the Koodalmanikkam Devaswom were about misuse of funds by the board members and officials. Complaints had been raised about financial misappropriation by trust board members, executive officers and clerks of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment.

Issues against Temple Employees Behaviour

There are complaints of unruly or bad behavior of temple staff to the devotees, creates serious issue. In 1991, Division bench of Kerala High court opined that deterrent punishment should be given to devaswom employees, who conduct

themselves in an unruly, indisciplined and reprehensible manner¹⁵. The court reminded that the employees have to discharge duties faithfully and sincerely and in accordance with the temple custom and rituals. There is another incident happened in guruvayoor temple, devotee was brutally beaten by a group of devaswom staff. In guruvayoor temples there are several employees appointed on the basis of daily wages.

Temple Land Encroachment

Acres of temple land was encroached by individuals and institutions in several years. The State government's attempts to recover temple lands encroached upon by various parties appear to be moving at a very slow pace. The effort to recover alienated land belonging to the temples began in 2006 when the State government launched a massive eviction campaign in Munnar. The government appointed a Land Special Officer to identify encroached temple lands belonging to the Travancore Devaswom Board in July 2007 and a special tahsildar with the powers of District Collector under the 1957 Kerala Land Alienation Act in October 2008. For the Guruvayur

¹⁵ Indian Express, (kochi), 3/9/1991.

Devaswom, the Thrissur District Collector was entrusted with the job of recovering land belonging to the Devaswom.

In the case of Malabar temples, the government adopted a different mechanism. It appointed a special team for various divisions under retired officials of the rank of Deputy Collector who functioned under the HR & C department. The team has become defunct after the establishment of the Malabar Devaswom Board. The main task of the team was to measure the land in possession of temples, construct boundary walls or fences and trace and set right land records. An elaborate mechanism to identify encroached land and recover it had been established, but only 15 acres of land has been recovered so far, according to official government figures. Out of the 25,000-odd acres of identified encroached land, only 15 acres have been recovered by evicting the current occupants even though an elaborate mechanism has been appointed to deal with these cases for individual Devaswoms¹⁶.

Malabar temples, which were under the Hindu Religious and Endowment

¹⁶ The Hindu, April 5, 2010, www.thehindu.com

Department till the formation of the Malabar Devaswom Board, are the biggest losers. According to official figures, more than 24,900 acres of land belonging to 353 temples under the Malabar Devaswom Board has been encroached upon. In the case of Travancore Devaswom Board, more than 500 acres of land belonging to 525 temples (out of the 1,210 temples under the board) have been occupied by various parties. In addition, the TDB is saddled with 160 cases related to encroachments, but has not been able to make much headway due to several obstacles, including absence of land records that has prevented measurement and surveys. Official records show that 245 temples under the Kochi Devaswom Board have also lost land to encroachment, but the extent of land lost has not yet fully been calculated. Guruvayur and Koodalmanikyam Devaswoms have lost 2.50 acres and one acre of land respectively¹⁷

The government appointed a special Tahsildar under the Kerala Land Conservancy Act to recover encroached land for the Kochi Devaswom Board and a Tahsildar and a Surveyor for the Koodalmanikyam Devaswom. So far, the

¹⁷ The hindu, April 5, 2010, www.thehindu.com

government has recovered 6.12 acres belonging to the TDB, 1.05 acres belonging to Guruvayur, 3.35 acres belonging to Malabar, 2 hectares belonging to Kochi Devaswom and 45 cents belonging to Koodalmanikyam, according to official figures. Sources pointed out that there were several hurdles in getting the land back. One of the main issues related to lack of proper land records. In several cases, the survey work had been stalled owing to disputes and other obstacles. Unless the State government launches a special drive, it would be difficult to get the land back for these temples, some of which are in financial crisis. Many of these temples are dependent on financial assistance from the Devaswoms to carry out the daily pujas even. According to official figures, the TDB and Malabar Devaswom doled out Rs. 5 crore each for rehabilitation of various temples and conduct of daily pujas in 2009-10. The Kochi Devaswom provided Rs. 9 crore while the Guruvayur Devaswom extended assistance of Rs.1.50 crore.

Problems of Sabarimala Temple

Sabarimala temple is one of the major temples in Kerala faces a lot of issues. The

most important problem is that the alleged discrimination of the state government towards the hill shrine. The state government gets more than fifty crore rupees from the Sabarimala pilgrim season as sales tax, vehicle tax etc.¹⁸ In 1992 a Division Bench of Kerala High Court appointed Advocate Balagangadhara Menon to enquire apprise the allegation that TDB is bent on giving Mandala Makaravilakku festival at Sabarimala a commercial flavour¹⁹. There are several committees reports on Sabarimala including Justice T Chandrasekhar Menon Commission, AV Thamarakshan led Legislative Committee on environment, Public Account Committee of Parliament chaired by Bhutta Singh recommended several suggestions and severely criticized the existing system of arrangements for the smooth conducting of mandalam makaravilakku festival. They severely criticized several issues like lack of sanitation, clean drinking water, hygienic food, toilet facility, etc. Bhutta Singh committee recommended national pilgrim centre status to Sabarimala.²⁰ Chandrashekhara Menon Committee

¹⁸ Kummanam Rajasekharan, "save Sabarimala" (M), Janmabhumi (Coch), October 22, 1994.

¹⁹ Indian Express, 4 December, 1992.

²⁰ The Hindu, February, 11, 2011.

recommended setting up of a nine member statutory body for sabarimala temple administration including representatives of Forest Department, Union Ministry of Environment, tantri and pandalam royal family.²¹ A study reports of KFRA maintained that the devaswom board should imbibe a pilgrim centered approach rather than a revenue based one. State government and Devaswom board ignored the suggestions of these committees

.Devaswom recruitment issues

Appointments in devaswom boards create controversies in the state politics. All appointments in the board were done by respective board .corruption and other serious allegations were leveled against all appointments done by the board. There is no proper norms for their appointments. In 2007 kerala government issued an ordinance which envisages handing over all appointments to the state Public Service Commission.²² Hindu organizations raised their objection against the ordinance, alleged that it is a direct attack on the rights of the Hindus in Kerala. Amidst the opposition raised by NSS and other Hindu organizations ,the Government decide to

constitute of a devaswom recruitment board for devaswom appointments.. The board was constituted as per an ordinance in April 2015. Appointments to various posts under various Devaswom Boards are at present governed by the provisions of the Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act, 1950, Madras Hindu Religious Act and Charitable Endowment Act, 1951, Guruvayoor Devaswom Act, 1978 and Koodalmanickam Devaswom Act, 2005 etc. Devaswom recruitment board is on the recommendations of Justice Paripoornan Commission, appointed by Kerala High Court in 2007 to enquire into the alleged irregularities in some appointments in the Travancore Devaswom Board.²³ The Assembly passed the Kerala Devaswom Recruitment Board Bill- 2015 as reported by the Subject Committee. The major highlight of the Bill is that once it becomes law, there will be 32 percent reservation for SC/ST and OBC candidates in the appointment of employees in the Devaswom Boards in the state.

Conclusion

Temples in Kerala faces serious challenges. A sort of democratized and centralized

²¹ ibid

²² The hindu ,February 6,2007.

²³ Mathrubhumi 31/7/2015 ,mathrubhumi.com accessed on31/7/2015

administrative set up is prevailing in temple administration today. A 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 are pathetic and miserable. In 1994 High Court of Kerala directed the TDB to prepare every year an estimate on the repairs to be carried out on temple structures. It was painful to note that periodical repairs of the temple structures were not properly carried out.²⁴

Major issues identified

There is no uniform pattern of administrative system for temples in Kerala.

1. Devaswom boards are supposed to be autonomous institutions, but in practice they are under the direct control of the State Government.
2. President and members of Devaswom Boards are appointed by Hindu MLAs and ministers on political basis rather than their belief in god and temple worship.
3. Corruption, mismanagement and other defects in parochial politics existing in temple administration also

4. Devaswoms in the state are spending huge amounts for non-devotional purposes.
5. Devotees are completely alienating from temple administration as there is no provision for incorporating their representatives to the Board administration.
6. Political interference on temple administration sowed the seeds of Hindu communalism in state politics.
7. There are several private temples in the state functioning better compared to the temples under Devaswom Boards.
8. There are no steps to promote and protect temple art, architecture, rituals which constitute the cultural heritage of Kerala.
9. The condition of low income temples under the Board are pathetic and they have to depend upon the devotees for their day today affairs.
10. The statutory grant (Article 290A of the Constitution of India) given to temples are insufficient.

Suggestions

²⁴ Indian Express, September, 8, 1994

1. A Uniform law is essential for the administration of temples in the state.
2. Governmental control over temples should be minimized.
3. Hand over temple administration to a body consisting of believers in god and temple worship.
4. Government should appoint an ombudsman to make the administration of temples corruption free.
5. Income from temple should be utilized for devotional purposes only.
6. Encroached temple lands should be recovered and hand over to temples concerned.
7. Proper audit system should be made available for temple administration.
8. Forming an independent devaswom board with due representation of devotees is essential.
9. Proper representation should be ensured to the marginalized sections of the Hindu society, particularly SC/ST and women in temple governing bodies.
10. Temples should be depoliticized and state should relieve its duties from temple administration.
11. An alternative administration is needed for temples on the basis of KP Sankaran Nair commission report
12. Temple advisory committees should be granted more powers in temple administration.
13. Proper system of audit should be introduced and its monitoring should be done under the direct supervision of the Hon'ble High Court of Kerala.
14. Revise the service conditions of temple employees at par with state government employees
15. Introduce independent administrative body for major temples like sabarimala.
16. Trade union activities among temple staff on party basis should be regulated
17. Government should enhance the annuity given to the temples.
18. State should made an effort to establish a school of temple Arts to promote various temple arts
19. A decentralized administrative system with the active participation of devotees is essential for temple administration

For the healthy growth of secular state, religious freedom with non political interference in religious affairs is inevitable. Religious affairs should be completely delinked from the scope of state activity. The Hindus would be able to enjoy real religious freedom only when they are able to free temples from the clutches of politicians and they themselves can administer temples, otherwise the Hindus alone would be denied the religious freedom and freedom of worship granted to other communities.

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