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Temples in Travancore: History, Polity and Governance

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Temples in Kerala have been all the time, amazing factors in the society for their uniqueness in tradition, customs, rituals, festivals, art, architecture, mural paintings, etc. It is believed that most of the ancient Hindu temples in Kerala have been consecrated by Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. According to legend, after the departure of Parasurama, the Brahmins became the virtual rulers of the land. They divided the land into several Desams, and in each, they erected a temple, consecrated it and placed an image in them, and performed the prescribed rituals. The ownership of Hindu temples became the bone of contention for the temples that were associated with power in the locality. In the course of the conflict for the ownership of temples, the management of several of them became disorderly, and the state had, in consequence, to assume their control through the exercise of its paramount melkoima right. This paper is a historical analysis of the role of temples in society and the evolution of temple administration in the erstwhile Travancore state.

Keywords: Devaswom, Temple Entry, Temple Administration and Devaswom Board**Travancore State**

Travancore is an erstwhile princely state in Kerala was known for its relatively high literacy rate and its progressive governments. It is the first state in India thrown open its temples to the marginalized Hindu populace. The Travancore region lay between Kanyakumari in the south and North Paravoor in the north. In the northern part, Travancore shares its border with Cochin State. It is interesting to see a weathered milestone situates beside the NH 47 at Aroor in Alappuzha district, on its face carries two Malayalam letters 'this' and 'ko' on opposite sides, two words which stand for Thiruvithamcore (Travancore) and Kochi (Gowri Lakshmi Bayi: 1998:392). A rough estimate shows that Travancore itself possessed around 1573 temples, excluding private temples and sacred groves of varying stature and nature (Gowri Lakshmi Bayi:1998: XXIX). As per the administration Reports of Travancore Devaswom Board, at present, 1248 temples are there under its management. After the independence of the country, the two princely states of Travancore and Cochin integrated into the state of Travancore-Cochin, and its boundaries were redrawn.

Temples in Travancore

Temples in Kerala have been all the time, amazing factors in the society for their uniqueness in tradition, customs, rituals, festivals, art, architecture, mural paintings, etc. Temples were once functioned as centers of political legitimacy, power, and authority and also associated with institutions like economy and caste. (Selvan 2003: 8; Rajagopal, 2018:119). Temples are the fountains of spiritualism, and they carry with them the socio-cultural legacy of a large section of the population of Kerala. Their significance can be understood from the fact that once they acted as the makers and breakers of rules and regulations of the state's social structure.

As a treasure house of culture and history, the temple possesses rare documents and valuable inscriptions. Temple inscriptions throw light on the nature of extensive royal patronage on the temple and its administration. Royal patronage helped very much for its reputation. This paper is a historical analysis of the role of temples in society and the evolution of temple administration in the erstwhile Travancore state.

Usually termed as *Devaswom*, which means attributed to deva or deity, the temples in Travancore played a crucial role in the life of the Hindu community. The Temples were once the abode of conservatism. There were restrictions for the people who were regarded as *untouchables* to enter and worship God. Even before the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, under the initiative of reformers like Mannathu Padmanabhan¹ Kumbalathu Sanku Pillai etc. many a temple in Travancore opened their gates to *avarnas*. Mannathu Padmanabhan threw open the doors of Maranathu kavu Devi temple at Perunna, Changanacherry, Kumbalathu Sanku Pillai² did the same at Panayannarkavu Temple and Kannankulangara Temple near Panmana Asramam to all the people irrespective of their caste. According to Sanku Pillai, "Backward caste members are also human beings. If God flees from the temple because of their entry into it, let God flee" (<http://panmanaashram.com>). Travancore is the first state in India, where the temple entry *proclamation* allowed the entry of all sections of the Hindu community into the temple. Kumaranalloor Devi temple is remained as the first private temple in Travancore to be opened to the *avarnas*.

Most of the ancient temples are believed to have

1 Mannath Padmanabhan was a renowned personality who devoted his life to the upliftment of the people in Kerala in general and the Nairs in particular. He is recognized as the founder of the Nair Service Society, which claims to represent the Nair community that constitutes 12.10% of the population of the state

2 Kumbalath Sanku Pillai was one of the leading lights of the erstwhile Travancore politics fought relentlessly against untouchability. Even before the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 Sanku Pillai had opened the gates of Panayannarkavu Temple and Kannankulangara Temple near Panmana Asramam to all the people irrespective of their caste, <http://panmanaashram.com/>

been consecrated by Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Parasurama instituted Devaswom and entrusted Koviladhikaarikal as the managers of temples. This adhikaarikal rose in power and in the course of time, established themselves as petty chiefs. Devaswom managers and trustees enacted rules and laws for the management of Devaswom property and began to enforce this law, independent of the king within the limits of their landed property (Sanghuni Menon, 1878:89). According to legend, after the departure of Parasurama, the Brahmins became the virtual rulers of the land. They divided the land into several Desams, and in each, they erected a temple, consecrated it and placed an image in them, and performed the prescribed rituals. This theory was put forward deliberately for affirming the Brahmanic hegemony in the land. As there is no mention of temples in the Vedas, R C Dutt, in his *Ancient India*, states that temples were not a part of Hinduism before the Buddhistic revolution and temple worship becomes a post-Buddhist development. In ancient Travancore, the temples had a definite place in the socio-political life of the Hindus.

Temple Administration

The ownership of Hindu temples became the bone of contention for the temples that were associated with power in the locality. Kesavan Veluthat considers the temple as an instrument for strengthening the power structure of kings. He classifies temples into two kinds; Royal temples and those that formed the nucleus of agrarian settlements (Veluthat, 2009:72.). In the course of the conflict for the ownership of the temples, the management of several of them became disorderly, and the state had, in consequence, to assume their management through the exercise of its paramount *melkoima* right (Narayanan Tampi, 1941: 129).

Land-based power structure relations existed during the medieval period. Two types of property rights existed were *Brahmaswam* and *Devaswom* land. The extensive land area possessed by the temples were known as Devaswoms and the families of hereditary temple trustees who were endorsed with private land known as *Brahmaswam*. Uralers were the managers of temple administration, controlled temple lands, and gave the land for lease to the

tenants known as *Karalars*. The socio-economic system developed by the *uralers* and *karalars* has existed for a long time in Kerala. Land rights were settled on the basis of certain customs and traditions. Besides *uralers*, *poduvals* managed both internal and external administration of temples (*purapoduval* and *akapoduval*). In the agrarian scene, these changes gradually altered the prevailing land ownership structure and created favorable conditions of the emergence of Brahminical landlordism in Kerala.

During the period of the Perumals of Mahodayapuram, certain cultural and administrative regulations or contracts were formed known as *kachams*. They applied to both temple and revenue administration. Various inscriptions found in temples had references on *kachams*. *Kachams* reminded us that the temple property should not be mortgaged. There are Temple inscriptions dealt with the punishment to the *uralers* for the misappropriation of devaswom land and also punishments to those tenants who failed to remit the rent to the temple. The Kulasekhara period or the Perumal period (800 to 1102AD) is considered as the golden age in the history of temples in Kerala and is particularly significant due to the emergence of the first *Bhakti* movement and the revival of Hinduism led by Sankaracharya. Sri Krishnaswamy temple of Thirukulasekharapuram near Kodungalloor is believed to have been founded by Kulasekhara Aazhvar during the first half of the 9th century (Sarkar, 1978:60.) It can be presumed that several important temples in Kerala existed at the close of 11th century AD. (Jayashankar, 1997: 13)

At the beginning of the 12th century, there were several temple states or village republics and principalities existed (Sreedhara Menon 2016:168) Known as temple *sanketams*; they exercised jurisdiction over the inhabitants of the locality independent of the ruling power (KK Pillai, 1953:143). A large number of temples in Kerala were sovereign states with well-defined territories called *Sanketam* and well-defined organs of government (Krishna Aiyer, 1966:113). Temples in Travancore were managed by *uralars* or *Karakars*, either directly or through their delegates called the *Samudayam* or *Manushayams*. A few of them were established and endowed by the king of Travancore. In some

cases, a synod of priests managed the temples. The important devaswom synods afforded a safe asylum to lawbreakers. The vast accumulation of wealth and property in the hands of devaswom authorities was a standing menace to the tranquillity of the state (Ulloor 1931:54).

Marthanda Varma in 1729 realized this menace, introduced measures to check the influence and power of these priestly classes. (Rajaraja Varma 1931: 97) He initiated a bold action to curb the excessive powers of the yogam or council of the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple (Aswathy Thirunal, 1998:22). The regime of Marthanda Varma marks an epoch in the history of temple administration, as he introduced for the first time, a centralised administrative system for temples. There were serious allegations of corruption and mismanagement against the temple trustees during this period. In 1750, Maharaja Marthanda Varma, the maker of modern Travancore, dedicated Travancore to Sri Padmanabha which became a landmark in the political as well as the religious history of the state (Velu Pillai, 1940:556-57).

Dewan Velu Thampi developed a bold plan for confiscating temple properties to the government, realizing the enormous influence they exercised over the society. But he could not fulfill this mission. Appointment of Col. Munro on September 3, 1811 as, the resident dewan of Travancore, was a turning point in the administrative history of temples in the state. During this time, the conditions of temples were miserable, and they were utterly neglected. Temple trustees misused temple revenue for personal purposes. The flagrant abuses in temple management and its lands made Munro take necessary steps to transfer them to the more direct management of the government. Accordingly, he took over the direct management of 348 major temples and 1128 minor temples with their properties and merged it with the state accounts. Munro justified the action on the grounds of better management of temples. As a colonialist and committed Christian, his action is characterized as the promotion of Christianity at the expense of Hinduism. According to Nagam Aiyar, through this assumption of temples, the state gained an addition to its revenue (1906: 464). Through this process, Col Munro got a chance to repay the long-standing and heavy arrears of subsidy payable to

the British Government, thus Munro saved the state when it was in serious peril.

The Hindu Religious Endowments Act, III of 1903-04 provided for the better administration of Hindu religious endowments other than those under the management of the government. Nagam Aiyya in his State Manual (Vol III) pointed out that there were 7758 temples belonged to this category (1906:524). The Act made the Government competent to intervene in the affairs of such institutions and assume their management whenever necessary. (TAR,1941 :150) Thus the government had taken over the administration of 116 private temples. Their income came to be credited under the head of 'personal deposit' and their expenditure was also separately charged. These temples were named as *Unincorporated Devaswoms* or Personal Deposit Devaswoms.

The merger of Devaswom with Revenue Department had created more problems in the state as the non-Hindus, and non-caste Hindus were denied job opportunities in the Revenue Department. In April 1920, the government appointed a mixed committee of Hindu and Non-Hindus to investigate the question of separating the administration of Devaswoms from the Land Revenue Department and the financial implications of such a change (Menon, 2001:342). The committee submitted its report in 1922. Accordingly, Maharajah Sri Mulam Thirunal issued a Proclamation on 12th April 1922, separating the Devaswom from the Revenue Department. (The Regulations and Proclamations of Travancore, Vol. V, 1929:.825)

In 1949, the Government of India appointed a committee chaired by N M Buch, joint secretary of the Ministry of States, to work out the problems of integration of Travancore and Cochin. The committee examined and reported on several issues, including the administration of *Devaswoms* in the state. Chapter XIII of the Report of the Travancore –Cochin integration committee deals with *Devaswoms*. In 1949, Travancore- Cochin Hindu religious institutions ordinance was promulgated by the Maharaja of Travancore. Accordingly, TDB was constituted with Mannathu Padmanabhan as the first president. An annual grant in lieu of the properties taken over by the state during 1811 was given

to the temples in Travancore. Accordingly, after independence and integration of states, a Covenant was made between Travancore- Cochin and Indian Union. As per the settlement, a sum of forty-six lakhs and fifty thousand rupees including six lakhs of rupees payable towards the expenditure in the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple, Thiruvananthapuram should be charged on, and paid out of the Consolidated Fund of the State of Kerala every year to the Travancore Devaswom Fund; and a sum of thirteen lakhs and fifty thousand rupees should be charged on, and paid out of the Consolidated Fund of the State of Tamil Nadu every year to the Devaswom Fund established in that State for the maintenance of Hindu temples and shrines in the territories transferred to that State on the 1st day of November 1956, from the State of Travancore- Cochin. This was a religious obligation that independent India had inherited from the two erstwhile princely states provided for in the Article 290A as a precondition for their joining the Indian Union. Devaswom surplus fund was also to be divided into two parts in the ratio of 37.5 and 13.5, the smaller amount being payable to the Madras state. The amendments were made in the TCHRI Act 1950 (Report of High-Level Committee: 23). The Annual grant of 46.5 lakhs is inadequate to meet the day to day management of temples. Kuttikrishna Menon Commission recommended enhancing the contribution in proportion to the rise in the price of commodities (1964: 144). The Government of Kerala in 2003 raised the annual grant to TDB into one crore (out of this, 20 lakhs to Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple).

When we examine the history of temple administration in Kerala, we can see that there are several turning points in the course of its development from 1750 (thrippadidanam) to 1956, the state reorganization. The milestones in the historical development of temple administration, in a nutshell, are i) introduction of state control over temples in 1811 by Col. Munro, ii) formation of separate department for Devaswoms in 1922 iii) integration of Travancore and Cochin in 1949 and iv) state reorganization in 1956. In 1949, as part of the integration of Travancore and Cochin, a Covenant was signed. As per the section VIII of this Covenant, Devaswom Boards were created for the

administration of temples. The State reorganization of 1956 caused heavy loss of a sizable portion of the South Travancore region with rich temples like Kanyakumari, Sucindram, Thiruvattar, Padmanabhapuram, etc. transferred to Kanyakumari Devaswom.

Conclusion

From the time of Col. Munro, the series of land legislations effected by the successive governments could inflict seriously the revenue of the Devaswoms. Now the temples have to depend on the mercy of the devotees for their survival. Major temples are the revenue generators not only to the Devaswom boards but to the government also. There are moves to revolutionize the existing temple rituals and customs that invite criticisms from devotees as well as the Hindu organizations. The clash between tradition and modernity will certainly affect the serenity and divinity of the temple atmosphere that can hamper our cultural ethos.

Temples in Kerala are facing today with a series of socio-economic, political as well as spiritual issues. Freedom of worship is ensured through the historic temple entry proclamation, but the right to administer temple still remains as an unfulfilled dream for the devotees. 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 can administer the temples. Otherwise, they will be denied the religious freedom and freedom of worship granted to other communities. The rights of the underprivileged obtained through the Temple Entry Proclamation should be kept in its true spirit.

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