



## TEMPLE ADMINISTRATION IN KERALA: POLITICS AND THE ROLE OF 'HINDU MLAs'

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is a critical study of the role of "Hindu MLAs" and ministers over the administration of temples in Kerala and the politicization of their administration by a secular government. In Kerala, members of Devaswom governing bodies are elected and nominated by the Hindu MLAs and Hindu Ministers. The leaders of the political parties trying to convert temple administration into a political activity like that of any other government department. Sometimes they nominate non-believers as members of Devaswom governing bodies. The Gods in our temples have now been made pawns in the political chessboard. In 1999, the Hon'ble High Court directed the Government that the members of Devaswom should be believers in God and temple worship. We can see that the politicization of temple administration sowed the seeds of Hindu consolidation and RSS led Parivar Organizations use this issue for Hindu consolidation which sometimes paves the way for Hindu communalism, a threat to the secular fabric of Kerala society.*

**Keywords:** Hindu MLAs, Temple administration, Communalism, Secular state, Devaswom Board.

### **Introduction to the study**

Kerala, God's own country is famous for social reform movements and other political movements associated with temples. Temples in Kerala with their unique ritualistic traditions and temple practices are being buffeted by the pressure of change (Menon,1990). Temples in an earlier time were associated with institutions like polity, economy and caste and functioned as centres of political legitimacy, power and authority (Selvan, 2003). History of Hindu cultural legacy and tradition is deeply embedded with temples. The administration of temples by the politically nominated bodies creates several issues in state politics. In Kerala, members of Devaswom governing bodies are elected and nominated by the Hindu MLAs and Hindu ministers. Hindu MLAs and Hindu Ministers nominate the members to the Boards and thus the divine places of Hindus become playgrounds for political parties and their governments (Govindankutty, 1990). Such interference in the administration of temples by the state is contradictory to the secular character of our government. Temple

assets are mismanaged and temples become the hotbed of maladministration and corruption. Once these members are elected, they are supposed to be free from any political control. But in actual practice, they act according to the whims and fancies of their party leaders. It is the need of the hour to examine the so-called concept of 'Hindu MLA' in a secular state. (Rajagopal, 2018) This paper is a critical study of the role of 'Hindu MLAs' and Ministers over temple administration and the politicization of their administration by a secular government.

### **Objectives of the study**

*The objective of the study is to critically analyze the role of the so-called secular state in the administration of temples in Kerala. The state control leads to politicization in its administration that is resented by large sections of devotees. Temple employees are politically organized under different trade unions that affect the serenity of temples. Corruption, mismanagement of Devaswom fund, theft of valuables, etc. are prevailing in temple administration. Members of various Devaswom governing bodies are*

*elected by the Hindu MLAs as part of the democratization of temple administration leads to the politicization of temples governance. The interference of the Hindutva organization in temple administration is also creating a lot of controversies. They started temple liberation movements which have a political overtone. The so-called atheist political parties interference in temple administration is also invited criticisms State control over temples*

*It is a reality 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 a hand in it (Pressler,2008). Till 1811, the state of Travancore was not concerned with the management of any temples. Col. Munro, the British resident in Travancore assumed the management of temples along with their movable and immovable properties in 1811 on charges of mismanagement and corruption prevailed in their administration (Pillai,1940). Col Munro, who was regarded as the patron of Christian missionaries in Travancore had spent enormous income from the temple funds for proselytization activities (Sadasivan,1977). TK Velu Pillai in his Travancore State Manual pointed out that Munro did more for Christianity than any other administrators anywhere in India. Munro placed Devaswoms under the direct control of the Revenue Department and merged the income from temples and their land with the general revenue of the state (Aiya, 1906:380-81). Ultimately in 1922, under the pressure of non-Hindus and other backward communities, the Devaswoms were separated from the Revenue Department and separate Devaswom department was created. After independence and the introduction of*

*constitutional changes, the Devaswom department was separated from the effective control of the state (Kumar, 1994). Later in 1949 Travancore Devaswom Board and Cochin Devaswom Boards were created for temples in Travancore and Cochin states. The British government made laws to control the Hindu temples in the erstwhile Malabar region in the Madras presidency that are maintained by successive governments in Kerala.*

*There is no uniform pattern of administration for temples in Kerala. There are four kinds of laws prevailed in the administration of temples; Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institution Act of 1950 for temples in the erstwhile Travancore and Cochin States, Koodalmanickam Devaswom Act, 1971 for the administration of Koodalmanickam temple at Irrinjalakkuda in the former Cochin state, Madras Hindu Religious Endowment (Amendment Act) 2008 for Malabar temples, and Guruvayur Devaswom Act 1978 for reputed Guruvayur temple in the erstwhile Malabar region. Based on these four acts, five Devaswom governing bodies are functioning in the state- Travancore Devaswom Board, Cochin Devaswom Board, Malabar Devaswom Board, Guruvayur and Koodalmanickam Devaswom Managing Committees. It is a fact that the temples governed by private Devaswom are functioning very well compared to the state-regulated Devaswom governing bodies. Hindu temples are the wealthiest institutions that possess immense land, precious metals, and valuable ornaments. Due to the Kerala Land Reforms Act, thousands of acres of the temple's land have been reduced to a few hundred acres.*

Table  
The general picture of Devaswom Administration in Kerala

SI No	Devaswom boards/committees	Area of operation	Devaswom Acts in force	Year of formation
1	Travancore Devaswom Board	Travancore	Travancore Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act 1950	1950
2	Cochin Devaswom Board	Cochin	Travancore Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act 1950	1950
3	Koodalmanickyam Devaswom Managing committee	Cochin-koodalmanickyam temple and sub-temples	Koodalmanckyam Devaswom Act of 1978	1971
4	Guruvayur Devaswom Board	Malabar – Guruvayur temple	Guruvayur Devaswom Act 1978	1978
5	Malabar Devaswom Board	Malabar	Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Act 1950(amendment )Act 2008	2008

### Hindu MLAs and temple Administration

Very recently a controversy arose in state politics over the issue of administration of temples by a secular state. While examining the history of temple administration, it can be seen that the Devaswom Boards become the battleground for political experiments and pressure game politics. The gods in our temples have now been made pawns in the political chessboard. Both the leftist and centrist parties made legislation to control temple administration into a political activity like that of any other government department. Sometimes they nominate non-believers as members of devaswom governing bodies. (Jayashanker, 1997). In 1999, there is a direction from the High Court of Kerala that the members of Devaswoms should be believers in God and temple worship. We can see that the politicization of temple administration helped Hindu consolidation groups to

strengthen their base. RSS and their Parivar organisations using this issue for Hindu consolidation which sometimes opens the way for Hindu communalism, a threat to the secular fabric of Kerala society

The separation of religion and state is the basis of secularism ( Chandhoke, 2012). It bans the religious groups not to interfere in the affairs of the state and ensures the state's non-interference in religious affairs. Secularism is intended to ensure and protect freedom of religious belief and practice for all citizens. Freedom of religion and freedom of worship are integral parts of secularism. Constitution and other international charters and declarations assure these rights. Secularists want the freedom of thought and conscience equally to all – believers and non-believers alike. They do not wish to curtail religious freedom. Secularism seeks to defend the absolute freedom of religion and other beliefs and protect the right to

manifest religious belief insofar as it does not intrude on the rights and freedom of others. Secularism guarantees that the right of individuals to freedom of religion is always balanced by the right to be free from religion.

The religious freedom guaranteed under Article 25 or 26 of the constitution of India is not an unconditional or unrestricted right; they are subject to reform by appropriate legislation by the State. And there is a question arose why a 'secular, socialist' government should control only Hindu places of worship, but not Muslim and Christian religious institutions. In the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court regarding the governmental control over Chidambaram temple at Tamil Nadu, the court has set the constitutional parameters on the scope of governmental intervention in the management of religious institutions (.Sreevathsan:2014). The Court has opined that taking over a temple must be for a fixed limited period of three years (Subramaniam Swamy Vs State of Tamil Nadu). Guruvayur Devaswom Act 1971 was struck down by the High Court of Kerala in 1973 on the ground that some of its provisions were violative of Article 25 and 26 of the constitution of India.

#### **Conclusion:**

The managerial control over Hindu religious institutions by a secular state is unethical and unjust and a violation of the freedom of religion guaranteed by the constitution of India. It is important to note that the religious institutions of organized religions like Christianity and Islam are free from any such control. One of the interpretations of secularism is that the state shall not discriminate between citizens based on their religious beliefs. India's policy of secularism and its commitment to religious freedom imply that the government must maintain a distance between itself and religious

institutions. For the healthy growth of a secular state, religious freedom with no political interference in religious affairs is inevitable. Religious affairs should be completely delinked from the scope of state activity. The Hindus should be able to free their temples from the iron fort of politicians and they can administer temples, otherwise, the Hindus alone would be denied the religious freedom and freedom of worship granted to other communities.

Since temples belong to Hindu society which has built and maintained them over the centuries, these must be restored to the Hindu community. Hindus have a constitutional right to manage their places of worship. Independent temple governing bodies comprising of Hindus directly elected by Hindus alone must administrate all Hindu temples as is the case places of worship of other communities. In such elected boards, there may be some professionals nominated by Governments and some hereditary functionary as per local tradition if any. Uniform Central Law providing for Devaswom boards elected by Hindus should be enacted so that Hindu temples could be liberated from the clutches of secular governments. A decentralized administrative set up with the participation of devotees is necessary for the development of temples in Kerala. It is to remember here the sayings of Hindu leaders and saints that the conscience of the rulers who opened the temples to all worshippers through Temple Entry Proclamation should again act now to open the temple administration to the Hindus.

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