



**BALANCING SECULARISM, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, AND TEMPLE GOVERNANCE IN
KERALA: ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

Rajagopal PK¹

Affiliations:

¹Associate Professor & Head
PG & Research Department of
Political Science,
NSS Hindu College,
Changanacherry
Kottayam District, Kerala.

Corresponding Author(s) Email:

¹pkrgopal@rediffmail.com

Abstract

Temple played a pivotal role in the socio- cultural political and economic, scenario of the state. There is an on-going battle occurs in the state by political parties for temple control seems to be paradoxical in a secular context. Politicization, trade unionism among temple employees, mismanagement of funds are the direct result of the state control. Devaswom Boards were created for temple governance are fully politicized. The members of temple governing bodies are nominated or elected by the Hindu MLAs and Hindu Ministers in the state cabinet. It is considered as a severe discrimination to the Hindu community when a secular government makes the temple platform for political clashes and pressure game politics. It is noted that the religious institutions of organized religions like Christianity and Islam are free from any such control. The study is concerned with the interference of secular state's on the management of particular religious institutions and trying to investigate the nature of state control over temple management which is contradictory to the secular concept. Over time, a story takes shape. Tradition, authority, and the desire for independence are entwined. The researcher's conclusions provoke discussion, dispelling myths and providing solutions.

However, a bridge that connects religion and government holds the key to the solution rather than a single voice. a bridge that maintains secular ideals while honouring tradition. This is a timeless tale of faith navigating change, not just the story of Kerala. An appeal for comprehension, for a realm in which the sacred and the profane coexist, so that the murmurs of the past are full of promise for the future.

Keywords: Devaswom Boards, Secular State, Hindu Mahamandalam, Devaswom Amendments

1. Temples in Kerala

Kerala temples are renowned for their architecture splendour; sacredness and serenity. They are the centres of spiritual as well as material life of the Hindu community and served as symbols of rich culture and tradition. They are the divine places of worship of the Hindu community which forms 54.72% of the total population of the state. Temples were not only centres of worship but also power centres patronised



through the royal palace and managed by the members of dominant castes. They have played a pivotal role in the socio-economic, cultural and political scenario of the state. Today, as ever before, they continue to play an important role in the social and spiritual life of the Hindus. Kerala temples have a major role to keep our environment also. The Kavu (sacred grove) attached to each temple preserve forestation and abode of many rare and endangered species of plants and animals.

2. Secular State Control over temples

The study focuses on the issues concerned with secular state's interference on the management of particular religious institutions. A secular state should treat all religious institutions equally. Religious tolerance, communal harmony, proper religious awareness, equal rights to citizens is the essential components of a secular state. The Constitution of India postulates a separation between the state and religion. However, the state is directly involved in the direct administration of Hindu religious institutions. The study is trying to investigate the nature of state control over temple management which is contradictory to the secular concept. It is considered as a severe discrimination to the Hindu community when a secular government makes the temple platform for political clashes and pressure game politics. It is noted that the religious institutions of organized religions like Christianity and Islam are free from any such control.

Historically temples had a close link with institutions like politics, economy and caste. Temples functioned as centres of political legitimacy power and authority (Selvan, 2003: 8). In the legislative sphere, many states have enacted series of laws for regulating religious and charitable endowments. Some of the temples of all India reputation have been covered by special legislations. The Puri Jaganath Temple Act, the Guruvayur Devaswom Act 1978 etc. have brought those temples under the direct superintendence of the state governments (Prakash, 2006: 58-59). There is no uniform Act across the country for Hindu Religious and charitable Endowments.

Temples coming under the control of state is not a modern development. Till 1811, the state was not concerned with the management of any temple. In 1811, Col. Munro took over the administration of temples on charges of mismanagement and corruption prevailed in their administration. Assumption of temples by Col. Munro is a major landmark in the history of temple administration in Kerala. A separate Devaswom Department was constituted for temple administration in the state in 1922 through royal proclamation. After independence and the introduction of constitutional changes, Travancore and Cochin Devaswom Boards were created to look into the matters of temples in Travancore and Cochin area. Travancore Cochin Hindu religious endowment act of 1950 is the primary law for temples in Travancore and Cochin Devaswom boards. Besides the temple under these two boards, there are several private temples in the state directly under the control of respective trusts or local devotees

3. Devaswom Laws

It is unfortunate to note that there is no uniform pattern of administration for temples in Kerala. There are four kinds of laws applicable for temples in Kerala. Travancore –Cochin Hindu Religious Endowment Act 1950, Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1951, Koodalmanickam Devaswom Act of 1976 and Guruvayur Devaswom Act of 1978 are major legislation in force for temples in Kerala. Till 2004, Malabar temples were under the control of the Commissioner, Hindu Religious Endowment Department appointed by the state government. In a historic move Malabar Devaswom Board was constituted by the state government in 2004. Under the control of these three leading Devaswoms in the state today there are around 3000 temples. Very few temples are the major source of income of each Devaswoms.



Table 1

Leading Devaswom boards in Kerala

No.	Devaswom Board	Total Number of temples
1	Travancore Devaswom Board	1248
2	Cochin Devaswom Board	403
3	Malabar Devaswom Board	1335

Table 2

Principal legislations in Kerala on temple administration

No.	Devaswom Area	Devaswom Act	Leading temples	Devaswom Board
1	Temples in Travancore Area	Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institution Act of 1950	Sabarimala, Ettumanoor, Chettikulangara	Travancore Devaswom Board
2	Temples in Cochin	TCHRI Act of 1950	Chottanikkara Trippayar. Trippunithura kodungallur	Cochin Devaswom Board
3	Malabar Region	Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment (Amendment) Act 2008	Kadampuzha	Malabar Devaswom Board
4	Koodalmanickam Temple	Koodalmanickam Devaswom Act 1971	Koodalmanickam Temple	Koodalmanickam Devaswom
5	Guruvayur Temple	Guruvayur Devaswom Act 1978	Guruvayur Temple	Guruvayur Devaswom

Mannathu Padmanabhanⁱ, a prominent leader of the Nair community and a social reformer led the first board of the TDB with R Sankarⁱⁱ, an Ezhava leader and SankaranarayanaAiyar as members. Leaders within the Congress Party belonged to Christian community, strongly demanded the ouster of Mannam and Sankar and under their pressure the then Chief Minister TK Narayana Pillai brought forward a Bill to control Devaswoms in the state. Mannam and Sankar raised their objection and started agitation against the Bill to control Hindu temples in the state. As a result of political conspiracy within the Congress Party Mannam and Sankar lost their chair in Devaswom committees in 1950. Later they expelled from the Congress Party and they formed Hindu Mahamandalamⁱⁱⁱ an abortive Hindu consolidation movement in Kerala. The developments occurred after the controversial Devaswom Bill led to the defeat of T K Narayana Pillai as the Chief Minister who resigned on February 1951.

While examining the history of temple administration in Kerala, we can see that as part of politicization of temple administration, the Government of Kerala enacted two principal legislations, one in



1971 for the management of Guruvayur temple, leading temple in south India (Guruvayur Devaswom Act) and other is for Koodalmanickam temple (Koodalmanickam Devaswom Act). Guruvayur Devaswom Act was challenged in the court by a group of devotees and finally the High Court nullified the Act on the ground of violation of religious freedom (Tharamel Krishnan, 1977). The High Court of Kerala criticized the interference of government over the management of temples (GOK, 1984:67). The decision of the court is hailed as the *Magna Carta* of Hindu religious freedom by the believers. In order to overcome the court order the Kerala Legislature enacted Guruvayur Devaswom Act in 1978. Accordingly GDB was constituted with zamorin Raja and Malliserry Namboothiri, traditional managers of the temple were retained as permanent members. In the first time in the history of temple administration Guruvayur Devaswom Act incorporate SC/ST members to Devaswom Boards.

In 1974, through the amendments of the Devaswom Act, the nominal right of the king in the administration of temples in Travancore Cochin came to an end. In 1984 an Ordinance was issued to amend TCHRI Act 1950 for limiting voting rights enjoyed by the Hindu MLAs for narrow political gains. Government moved for an amendment in 1986 accordingly only believers in god and temple worship should have the voting rights in the election of Devaswom Board members. Through this amendment the Congress led UDF Government inflicted a blow to the voting rights of the majority of the Hindu MLAs who belonged to the left political ideology that does not permit them to give a signed declaration that they believe in God and temple worship. Again in 1989 the LDF Government made another controversy by issuing a notification, which reinstated the voting right of all Hindu MLAs irrespective of their faith in god and temple worship. But the High Court of Kerala nullified this notification, pronouncing that faith in God and temple worship alone makes a Hindu MLA competent to take part in election of Devaswom Board members (Govindankutty 1990). This was a major setback to the politically motivated attempt of the leftist. In order to overcome the court ruling again in 1990 the LDF Government introduced a controversial Hindu Bill, which again reinstated the voting rights of the non-believers (Govindankutty 1990). Amidst widespread criticism the government moved the bill and finally succeeded in getting it passed.

In 1994 in a historic verdict the High Court of Kerala directed to the state government to regarding the creation of a unified Devaswom Board for temples in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar areas and considers the formation of Malabar Devaswom Board for Malabar temples^{iv} (The Hindu, 1994). Accordingly Malabar Devaswom Board (MDB) was constituted through HR&CE (Amendment) Ordinance of 2008 by the leftist government in Kerala for temples in the erstwhile Malabar region. The first Malabar Devaswom Board with 9 members assumed office on October 2nd 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 coming under the direct control of Devaswom governing bodies with 9000 administrative and ministerial staff and 4000 connected with internal rituals and customs of the temples (Rajagopal, 2016).

In 1997 the LDF Government introduced Kerala Hindu Religious and Charitable Institutions and Endowments Bill to consolidate the laws on the administration, supervision and control of Hindu religious institutions in the state (Rajagopal, 2016). The bill has provision to tighten the bureaucratic and political control over Hindu religious institutions and empowered the government to take over the direct administration of any temples not under the control of boards. Again in 1999, the LDF Government made a controversy by introducing an amendment on the principal Devaswom act by restoring voting rights of Hindu MLAs. The bill was challenged in the court by various Hindu organizations in the state. The court



upholding the amendment and directed the government that nominated members should be believers in god and temple worship. The verdict of the court was a legal victory for the government and a moral victory of believers. From all these it can be convinced that the political parties introduced legislative measures for protecting their own interest, rather than the concern for development of temples.

In 2007, G. Sudhakaran, then Devaswom Minister in his reply to the state assembly said that the government makes timely changes in temple rules to allow all those who believe in Hindu gods to worship in all temples. The question of temple entry rights for all believers has been a hotly debated topic since the Devaswom Minister wrote a letter to Guruvayur Devaswom authorities to consider the possibility of allowing singer. K. J. Jesudas^v in to the shrine .During the time when Yesudas had applied for permission to enter Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple, the LDF government in Kerala supported temple entry for all, irrespective of religion. However, the Kerala Devaswom Minister stated that every temple has its own rules and that they cannot be changed overnight (www.thenewsminute.com). While leftist organizations have campaigned for radical changes in temple customs and rules, Hindu organizations have cautioned the government against rushing in to hasty decision on a sensitive issue.

In 2011, Kerala High Court directed the government to take over the administration of Sree Padmanabha Swami Temple^{vi} and form a trust in three months, holding that the Travancore royal family have no hereditary rights over the religious places. While all other temples in south Kerala were brought under the control of the TDB, Sree Padmanabha Swami Temple alone was allowed to be retained under a special trust under royal family. Temple bringing under the Government control would infringe the covenant entered into by the royal family.Later the Supreme Court issued a stay on the impugned High Court order on a special leave petition filed by royal family (The Hindu, 2011).

4. Issues in Temple Administration

Temples in Kerala are centres of spirituality, but now a days, their administration faces several serious 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, the government offers financial support to the temples in the arrangement of annuity, which is insufficient(Rajagopal, 2017).Temples has to depend on the mercy of the devotees for their survival. Historically, temples in Kerala became platforms for great social reforms and revolutionary movements. Unfortunately, now the temples have become ashelter for political parties. They nominate their representatives to various Devaswom boards in the state with a view to promote their political advantages. This led to complete politicization of their administration (Rajagopal, 2018).

Today, temples are the centres of political bargaining forces. Members of temple governing bodies are appointed on the basis of their political belief and not of their belief in God or temple worship (Rajagopal, 2017). In Kerala; there is a Minister in charge of Devaswom affairs at the cabinet level and a secretary to assist the minister. Devaswom Boards are supposed to be autonomous institutions constituted for temple administration and its members are appointed by the Hindu MLAs and ministers. Such interference in temple administration by the state is contradictory to its secular character.

5. Conclusion

The concept and regulations governing of Hindu MLAs and ministers in the formulation of Devaswom Board is ironical. Critically speaking, it is contradictory to the very principles of Secularism. The contribution of the rulers and activist 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. It is the need of the hour to examine critically the so-called concept of 'Hindu MLAs' in a secular state. 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 few who do not have faith in god and temple worship. Hindu MLAs and Ministers play a very critical role in the formation of Devaswom Boards in Kerala. Travancore Devaswom Board and Cochin Devaswom Boards, the two leading Devaswom Boards in the state are composed of 3 members each. Two of them are nominated by Hindu ministers and one member is elect by Hindu MLAs. At the cabinet level, there is a minister for Devaswoms, who is in charge of Devaswom affairs in the state .Political parties make legislations frequently to control the Devaswom Management committees. Even non-believers or those who have no faith in God and temple Worship also participate in the election process. The 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 Board.Hindu Devaswom Board is essential instead of the present politicized Devaswom Board.Akind of democratized and centralized administrative set up is prevailed in the temple management that should be substituted by a decentralized managerial scheme with the involvement of believers is a indispensable steps for the progress of temples in Kerala.

Notes

ⁱ Mannathu Padmanabhan was a social reformer and a freedom fighter (Kerala), recognized as the founder of Nair Service Society. a service organization equipped and committed to the welfare of Nair community that forms 12.10% of the total populace of the state. He was born in Perunna, on 02 January 1878 AD, a small village in Kottayam district of Kerala

ⁱⁱ R. Sankar was the Deputy Chief Minister of the Kerala from 1960 to 1962 and the third Chief Minister from 1962 to 1964. During his long association with the SNDP Yogam, he served as the General Secretary and President and Chief of the SN Trust. Under his leadership the SNDP Yogam gave emphasis to the field of education and started many educational institutions.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hindu mahamandalam was the first hindu consolidation movement in Kerala founded by Mannathu Padmanabhan and R.Sanker in 1950.It was short-lived,but it has been a great attempt at bringing Nair and Ezhava communities together on a common platform:seeSadasivan, S. N. (2000) A Social History of India, New Delhi: APH Publications:546

^{iv} In its historical verdict, the Honourable High Court of Kerala issued certain directions to the state government to redress the grievances of temples of Malabar area and the issue of under payment of temple employees in 1994 on the basis of newspaper reports.The main directions were; to pay better wages to the temple employees (from January 1st 1995 onwards), prepare a scheme for the purpose,utilize the income from the vested forest for this purpose, constitute a unified Devaswom Board for three regions-Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, revise the annuity to temple periodically.



^v *Singer Yesudas is the beloved voice of Kerala, born in a Roman-Catholic family, is also a follower of the Hindu religion. He has not been allowed to enter the famous Sree Krishna temple in Guruvayur because the temple bars the entry of non-Hindus.*

^{vi} *Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple dates back to 8th century, is one of the 108 sacred Vishnu temples situated in the capital city of Kerala. It is believed to be the world's richest temple managed by Travancore royal family*

References

- GOK, (1984). *Kerala Devaswom Administrative Reform Commission Report*, (K.P.Sankaran Nair Commission Report), Thiruvananthapuram: Government Press.
- <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/could-have-entered-guruvayur-if-id-been-insect-singer-yesudas-temple-entry-78451>
- Govindankutty, K. (1990), *Politics of Temple Control*, The Indian Express, July 19.
- Prakash, B. (2006). *Varadachari's Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments*, Lucknow: Eastern book company.
- Rajagopal, PK, (2016), *Politicisation of Temple Administration In Kerala: Issues and Challenges*, International Journal of Management and Social Science Research Review, Vol-1, Issue – 30, Dec - 2016. retrieved from <http://ijmsrr.com/downloads/3012201612.pdf>.
- Rajagopal, P.K. (2017). *Major Issues in the Administration of Temples in Kerala*, International Journal for Social Studies, 3 (1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.26643/ijss.v3i1.6539>
- Rajagopal, PK, (2018), *Caste, Gender And Politics In Kerala: Concerns In Temple Worship* Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities, Vol. 5 No. 4 April 2018
- Selvan, R. (2003). *Religion, State and Social Polity, Changing social organizations of Hindu Temples*, New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers Distributors.
- Tharamel Krishnan vs Guruvayoor Devaswom Managing Committee*, (1977), Retrieved from <https://indiankanoon.org/docfragment/48525/?formInput=managing%20committee%20%20doctypes%3A%20kerala>.
- The Hindu Daily, (1994), July 22.
- The Hindu Daily, (2011), May 3.