

Om

Government Control of Hindu Temples in India: A Blatant Violation of Secularism and Religious Freedom

Both India and America are secular democracies in the sense that both have constitutions that prohibit the government from establishing a state religion or interfering with religious organizations. But there the similarity ends. While America more or less scrupulously adheres to the separation of church and state, in India the picture is dramatically different.

Not too many Indians are aware that even though India is officially a secular democracy, state governments in India can take over Hindu temples and their properties, can appoint the people who will run temple committees and operations, and can take away hundi collections and other donations from temples and use them even for non-Hindu purposes. *And they have been doing this for almost six decades now all over India.* Such government interference does not occur with churches or mosques or gurudwaras or other places of worship of non-Hindu faiths. They are left alone by the government, and are allowed to own and operate their institutions autonomously, without state interference. In secular India, with an 83% majority of her citizens being Hindus, Hindu temples are singled out for government control and management. A comparable analogy would be if the secular US Government were to exercise full control over the finances and collection plates of Christian churches and dictate who could be ordained as a priest or minister, and dictate the hiring and firing of Church elders. That India's state governments routinely indulge in such practices with regard to Hindu temples, but not with the institutions of other religions, is a telling commentary on the state of religious freedom and secularism in India today.

Status of Hindu Temples

This astounding fact of a supposedly secular government operating, selling the assets of, distributing the collections of, and in other ways imposing state control -- often with appointees who are non-Hindu, and even anti-Hindu, bureaucrats or politicians -- over Hindu temples, is directly responsible for the pathetic condition of many Hindu temples in India. Many magnificent buildings are deteriorating; and even the daily ritual of cleaning and purifying the precincts is not happening. Some temples don't even have oil for their lamps because the paltry rupees the government promised when it took over the temple seldom comes on time; priests on miserly salaries are reduced to poverty and asking for money from devotees. These are all too common sights at many Hindu temples today.

While there are many causes for the problems faced by temples, chief among them is the misappropriation of temples' lands and monies during the last century, starting even before our Independence. For instance, the British government in collusion with local leaders in Orissa took over the properties of the famed Puri Jagannath temple in 1878. Continuing the stance of the British regime and its proxies towards the appropriation and looting of Hindu temples, Indian politicians after Independence in 1947 concocted the fatally flawed, and the blatantly anti-secular, Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act (HRCE Act) in 1951 to "provincialise

the administration of Hindu Religious Institutions.” Under its aegis, variously amended and often challenged by Hindu groups over the years, the state governments have taken over thousands of temples, generally under the pretext of preventing “mismanagement” by Hindus. In other words, Hindus, and only Hindus, are not considered capable of managing their places of worship without government oversight.

Thousands of small and medium temples, in addition to nationally and historically important temples such as Jagannath in Puri, Tirupati, Kashi Vishwanath, Vaishno Devi, Shirdi, Guruvayoor, Chamundi Devi, Dattapeeth, Kali Mandir of Patiala, Amarnath, Badrinath, and Kedarnath, *are already under government control, and have been so for decades in many cases.*

Examples and Effects of Government Interference

The devastation caused to Hindu temples and other institutions, as a direct result and consequence of the HRCE act, can be illustrated by a few examples:

- The famous Siddhi Vinayak Temple in Mumbai was “nationalized”, i.e. the state government took over its previously independent board of trustees, in 1981. Various political and government appointees have siphoned off crores of rupees out of the temple’s coffers. Some of this money is given out as ‘donations’ -- of Rs. 50 lakhs or more -- to other non-profit institutions, selected on the basis of political connections. These organizations may not serve Hinduism or Hindu devotees at all. Such donations continued even after the Bombay High Court issued a prohibitory order stopping them. During 2004-2005 alone, seven crore rupees were paid out to such beneficiaries out of the temple’s inflow. The government appointed trustees of this temple also spent over Rs. 24 lakhs of the temple’s money in two days on a lavish marketing event held at a seven star hotel to discuss how to promote temples as tourist attractions! In other words, the hard-earned money that devotees offer out of love and a sense of duty to a Hindu religious institution, is being used not for the benefit of the Hindu community, or to promote Hindu religious activities, but for other purposes.
- In 2002, from the 2,07,000 temples in Karnataka the government took in revenues of Rs. 72 crores, returned Rs. 10 crores for temple maintenance, and granted Rs. 50 crores for madrasas, and Rs. 10 crores for churches. The fundamental question to be asked is: Why is money from Hindu temples disappearing into government accounts in the first place, to be distributed to other third party interests, be it non-Hindu or otherwise? Why did only six crores make it back to the temples that generated the Rs. 72 crores? An estimated 50,000 temples have shut down during the last five years in Karnataka due to lack of resources. How can this happen if there is a surplus Rs. 66 crores of Hindu temple money in the hands of the government?
- Under the openly Christian evangelical regime of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y. Samuel Rajsekar Reddy, the Tirumala Tirupati Devaswom (TTD) authority, which is controlled by his state, frontal assaults have been made on the very hills of the beloved temple of Lord Balaji in Tirupati. In March 2006, the government demolished a centuries old, 1000 pillar mantapam in the Tirumala complex. The state government has not

denied a charge that 85% percent of revenues from the TTD, *which collects over Rs. 3,100 crores every year as the richest temple in India*, are transferred to the state exchequer. The non-temple use of this colossal amount of money is not fully accounted for by the government. Temple watchdog groups have alleged that the government has allocated Rs. 7.6 crores of TTD money towards repairs and renovations of mosques and churches in a recent year. JRG Wealth Management Limited, a Christian owned organization, was given a lucrative contract to procure materials for the prasadam that is given to temple devotees. On January 21, the Chief Minister announced the sponsorship, using TTD money, of a hockey tournament in his parents' name. An attempt to take over five of the seven hills that belong to Lord Venkateswara, *according to legal deeds*, and hand them to Christian institutions, was thwarted last year only when Hindu religious leaders, under the aegis of the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha united to lodge strong, and unprecedented, protests. TTD wealth is being distributed as gold bars "for the poor", with no transparency as to who the "poor" are who will get the temple's riches. There are plans to build a ropeway to the hills to make it a more appealing commercial tourist attraction. While owing the TTD Rs. 1,500 crores already from various earlier proceeds, the government is trying to take away another Rs 500 crores from TTD for state irrigation projects! There have been allegations of TTD appointees being non-Hindus, but these are hard to verify since many Hindus who convert to other religions keep their original names for various benefits. TTD's medical and educational institutions have also been turned into centers for proselytization by Christian missionaries.

- Elsewhere in Andhra Pradesh, out of 420,028 acres owned by temples in Vishakhapatnam, Kakinada, Guntur, Kurnool, Warangal, and Hyderabad, 60,843 acres were allowed to be occupied illegally by professional land grabbers. The state government, the inheritor of the responsibility under the HRCE Act to prevent such actions, did nothing to prevent these incursions, even though it has a staff of over 77,000 people (paid from a 15% charge on temple revenues) to look after temple interests. In August 2005, the state decided to sell 100,000 acres of the Sri Narasimha Swamy Temple in Simhachalam and other nearby temples. On March 14, 2006, the government auctioned 3,000 acres of temple lands in East Godavari district. Proceeds from these sales rarely reach the temples, which have to depend on the same government for doles to light their lamps and pay their priests. 884 acres of endowment lands of the famous Sri Rama temple at Bhadrachalam have been allocated to Christian institutions by the current government. In Simhachalam, 300 acres belonging to the temple have been allocated for churches and convent schools, who even exercise an illegal authority to stop devotees from visiting the temple atop the hill! There is also an attempt afoot to take over the 500 year old Chilkur Balaji temple.
- In Sabarimala, the forested hill with the famous temple of Lord Ayyappa in Kerala, 2,500 acres of temple property have been sold by the Communist government controlled Travancore Devasvom Board to a non-Hindu group. Even though this Board gets about Rs. 250 crores every year in income, it is almost bankrupt today, after years of government diversion of funds. Rs 24 crores from the Guruvayoor Devasvom have been spent on a drinking water project in ten nearby panchayats, which include 40 churches and mosques. Some of these non-Hindu places of worship have larger revenues than the

Devasvom, but none of them have been asked to pay towards the project, even though their members will be beneficiaries.

- In Bihar, government control over the temples through its Hindu Endowments department has resulted, according to the Religious Trust Administrator, *in the loss of temple properties worth Rs. 2000 crores.*

More Government Control on the Horizon

While these tales of the terrible fate of Hindu temples under government control can be multiplied a thousand fold, and the collapse of the Hindu religious infrastructure as a direct result of government control can be documented in painful detail, it is more important at this point to pay attention to the even more ominous threats of assault that are now on the horizon.

The Maharashtra government, literally bankrupt due to profligacy (including an Indian Enron scandal of mammoth proportions) and bad economic policies, is moving forward with a bill that would enable it to take over the 4.5 lakh Hindu temples in the state. The outpouring of contributions to temples by millions of Hindus is seen as a huge cash flow opportunity by politicians of all stripes all around India. In Kerala, the communist state government has promulgated an ordinance on February 4, 2007 to disband the Travancore and Cochin Autonomous Devaswom Boards (TCDB) and usurp their already limited independent authority over 1800 Hindu temples. In Orissa, the NDA state government is on its way to sell some 70,000 acres of Jagannath temple endowment lands due to a financial crunch brought about by its own mismanagement of the temple's assets. The BJP government in Rajasthan is planning to auction off temples and transfer their control to the highest bidders, *even if they are from the other religions.* Under the 'Apna Dham, Apna Kam, Apna Nam' scheme, a 30-year lease would be signed between the state government and private bidders on a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) basis, similar to national highway construction projects! Many other outrageous proposals of the same kind abound across many states.

Response from the Hindu Community

The Hindu community, after decades of apathy, disunity, and sporadic court fights to secure their rights to practice their religion without government control, has now belatedly woken up to address these fresh assaults. Local leaders have formed coalitions to take matters to court to prevent new takeovers and the sales of temple properties. The existence of the HRCE Act makes it an uphill legal battle to challenge and overturn the government's stranglehold over Hindu temples and their assets. Recent court victories in Karnataka and Rajasthan are encouraging in this regard.

Online petitions and signature campaigns, often led by NRI Hindus who seem to be more aware and concerned about this issue than Hindus in India, have become a standard tool of the newly awakened Hindu community. Most of the mainstream media in India, especially the English TV and press, have a covert or overt anti-Hindu position, and stories of government atrocities against Hindu temples rarely make it into the news pages. Appeals often have to be made to the President of India himself for relief from open aggression against Hindu interests by

state and district level government authorities. The collusion between missionary and communal forces and political parties hostile to Hindus, such as the communists and the Congress party, have further complicated the equation of elements that work against the religious freedom of Hindus. Thanks to blogs, websites, bulletin boards, and email forums that have recently sprung up, awareness about these issues is now starting to proliferate. Even as Hindu awareness grows, and the call for action mounts, the media and political parties are quick to slap on a Hindutva or fundamentalist label to discredit these grassroots efforts of Hindus to claim the same basic religious rights as Indian Christians and Muslims.

The attack on Hindu temples is an attack on the body and soul of Hinduism, because temples are the sacred and sanctified places where most Hindus practice their faith. Others may not understand our ways of worship, but to the practicing Hindu all deities represent the One Supreme Reality and Being in diverse ways and forms that make the divine accessible to all levels of religious and spiritual temperaments. The images of our gods and goddesses are not just stone or metal idols. They are profound symbols and splendid representations of the One in its many manifestations, they are holy reminders of the divine being everywhere, they are aids to meditation and worship, and they are also ceremonially sanctified centers of spiritual energy and divine grace. Our priests should not be reduced to the status of government servants who have to depend on miserly salaries from the state that has usurped their traditional means of sustenance, and who are thereby forced to demand money, sometimes so aggressively, from devotees. Our acharyas should not be sidelined to being helpless observers even as the institutions they are vested with leading are being reduced to insolvency.

The Way Forward

Through the millennia, Hindus have found in their temples succor for all their religious and spiritual needs, and vital sense of community with their fellow devotees. The sanctity of temples is diluted by turning them into commercial tourist attractions, their integrity as Hindu institutions is compromised when non-Hindus, or anti-Hinduism elements, are allowed to run them, and their very survival is threatened when the money of devotees is taken away by government appointees or politicians and diverted to fund external causes.

Even if there had been some rationale for the HRCE Act to improve the administration of Hindu temples in the early days after India's independence, the exclusive way that only Hindu organizations are so targeted is a blatant violation of the concept of secularism and the religious rights and freedoms of Hindus. If Hindu temples are mismanaged or corrupt, as often alleged to justify their takeover, the sad record of Indian state governments with regard to governance and corruption in general, and their sorry record with the temples they already control in particular, hardly makes them a better candidate to look after the welfare of yet more temples! If Hindu temples need better management, the communities which support them should form the independent bodies to do so. If the traditional administrations of our temples need revamping for modern times, such reforms and reorganization should be led by practicing Hindus and their leaders, and not by outsiders from the government or non-Hindu constituencies.

The diversion of the wealth of Hindu temples by the states in the first place, and their use to fund non-Hindu purposes, is a flagrant travesty of the principle of separation of religion and

state. Government officials looking to take over and exploit yet more Hindu temples should instead consider appropriating some non-Hindu religious organizations first, to restore some balance and equality to their strange brand of secularism. If they dare not do so, they should immediately cease and desist from controlling Hindu institutions and liquidating their assets, even if there be misguided statutes that are in place that give them the legal right to do so. And full reparations should be made to all the temples that have been devastated over the decades through a combination of the HRCE Act and various land reforms that have selectively annexed only Hindu properties in so many states.

A major breakthrough towards obtaining the freedom of Hindu temples from government control has been made with the establishment of the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha in 2003. The convener of the meeting, Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati, emphasized the need for Hindu religious leaders to have one common, united voice to speak for Hindus and their institutions. 125 Hindu religious leaders -- peethadipatis, mathadipatis, jeers, acharyas, and mahamandaleshwars -- representing major traditions of Hinduism from all parts of India have since come together under this platform to free temples and other Hindu institutions from the clutches of the government. The Tirupati Declaration of 2006, spearheaded by the Sabha, was an effective voice to prevent various TTD (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam) malpractices and imminent anti-Hindu moves.

Currently the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha is pioneering a movement to challenge the constitutional validity of the HRCE Act and its derivatives, and to prevent further government incursions into Hindu religious affairs. Through the Forum for Religious Freedom (FRF), incorporated as a US non-profit organization, efforts are under way to support the Acharya Sabha with the financial resources needed to mount a legal challenge to overturn the HRCE Act, and to take other measures to prevent further annexation by the states of our religious infrastructure. The viability of Hinduism rests in the health and vitality of our temples. All Hindus should consider it their dharma – their duty and responsibility -- to make sure that this important mission of the Acharya Sabha is properly funded towards accomplishing this crucial objective.

The reverse discrimination against Hindus and our institutions by a supposedly secular government cannot be allowed to continue any more. The time has come to secure for the majority Hindus of India the same secular rights and religious freedom that the followers of all minority religions already enjoy.

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