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Revisiting the Temple Entry Movement in Kerala

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The Temple Entry Proclamation is considered a pivotal moment in Kerala renaissance. Jenny Rowena delves into lesser known facets of the temple entry movement to interrogate the Malayalee consensus about the movement as one which granted rights to oppressed lower castes and ushered in a renaissance period in Kerala.

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ക്ഷേത്രപ്രവേശന വിളംബരം

"ശ്രീപദ്മനാഭദാസ വഞ്ചിപാല സർ രാമവർമകലശേഖര കീർടപതിമന്നേ സുൽത്താൻ മഹാരാജ രാമരാജ ബഹദൂർ ഷാഷെർ ജംഗ്,നെറ്റ് ഗ്രാൻഡ് കമാൻഡർ ഓഫ് ദ് ഇന്ത്യൻ എംപയർ, തിരുവതാംകൂർ മഹാരാജാവു തിരുമനസ്സുകൊണ്ട് 1936-നു 12-നക്ഷ ശരിയായ 1112 തുലാം 12-ന് പ്രസിദ്ധപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന വിളംബരം:

നമ്മുടെ മതത്തിന്റെ പരമാർത്ഥതയും സ്വപ്രമാണതയും ഗാഢമായി ബോധ്യപ്പെട്ടും ആയതു ദൈവികമായ അനുശാസനത്തിലും സർവ്വവ്യാപകമായ സഹിഷ്ണുതയിലുമാണ് അടിയറച്ചിരിക്കുന്നതെന്നു വിശ്വസിച്ചും, അതിന്റെ പ്രവർത്തനത്തിൽ അതു ശതവർഷങ്ങളായി കാലപരിവർത്തനത്തിന് അനുയോജിച്ചു പോന്നുവെന്നു ധരിച്ചും, നമ്മുടെ ഹിന്ദുപ്രജകളിൽ ആർക്കൊതന്നെ അവരുടെ ജനനമോ ജാതിയോ സമുദായമോ കാരണം ഹിന്ദുമതവിശ്വാസത്തിന്റെ ശാന്തിയും സാന്ത്വനവും നിഷേധിക്കപ്പെടാൻ പാടില്ലെന്നുള്ള ഉത്കണ്ഠയാലും നാം തിരുമാനിക്കുകയും ഇതിനാൽ പ്രഖ്യാപനം ചെയ്യുകയും നിയോഗിക്കുകയും ആജ്ഞാപിക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നതെന്തെന്നാൽ, സമുചിതമായ പരിതഃസ്ഥിതികൾ പരിരക്ഷിക്കുന്നതിനും ക്രിയാപദ്ധതികളും ആചാരങ്ങളും വച്ചുനടത്തുന്നതിനും നാം നിശ്ചയിക്കുകയും ചുമത്തുകയും ചെയ്യാവുന്ന നിയമങ്ങൾക്കും നിബന്ധനകൾക്കും വിധേയമായി, ജനനാലോ മതവിശ്വാസത്താലോ ഹിന്ദുവായ യാതൊരാൾക്കും നമ്മുടെയും ഗവൺ മെന്റിന്റെയും നിയന്ത്രണത്തിലുള്ള ക്ഷേത്രങ്ങളിൽ പ്രവേശിക്കുന്നതിനോ ആരാധന നടത്തുന്നതിനോ ഇനിമേൽ യാതൊരു നിരോധനവും ഉണ്ടായിരിക്കാൻ പാടില്ലെന്നാകുന്നു."

Temple Entry Proclamation 1936 by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma
(Source: Navaneeth Krishnan S / CC0)

The 2018 controversy, which erupted after the Supreme Court verdict granted women the right to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the Sabarimala temple, was largely framed in terms of women's rights in modern democracies. Such rights, it was said, ought to remove problematic traditions in order to create a more gender-just world. However, soon this conversation slipped into a larger discussion on caste and the issue of temple entry, which was hailed as a landmark move in the democratization of Kerala. As part of this, we also saw the largescale mobilization of Dalit Bahujan groups under the ruling left government, which they had rejected as hegemonic and Savarna until then. Most of the questions that were raised centred around the gains of the temple entry movement, which is said to have ushered in the Kerala renaissance or *Kerala Navodhanam* in the early twentieth century.

Thus, the entire Sabarimala discourse was seen as aimed at upholding the *Kerala Navodhanam* and the temple entry proclamation, in order to retain its historical gains. In this brief article, I examine three major facets of the original temple entry movement, which is less known, so as to interrogate the Malayalee consensus about the temple entry movement as one which granted rights to oppressed lower castes and ushered in a renaissance period in Kerala. Instead, I argue here, the temple entry movement, which was couched in a modern liberal vocabulary (thereby resisting a religious articulation) actually worked to prevent the mass conversion of lower castes, in order to contain them within the Hindu religious fold, under the subtle guidance of upper-castes.

To begin, it must be seen that there are a few aspects of the temple entry movement that are often overlooked in most accounts. The first is that this movement had strong roots in upper-caste social reform with the involvement of national and regional Hindu reformers like Annie Besant, Mannathu Padmanabhan, K Kelappan, and Gandhi. As N Kumaran, one of the Ezhava members of the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha, which was a legislative assembly under the King writes in his autobiography:

“Temple entry is not an idea that sprouted in the head of any Ezhava, it was Raman Thampi (an upper-caste leader and judge) who made this declaration in a program commemorating Guru Devan. On this occasion, he made this spirited speech, in which he declared that Ezhavas don't need their own temples anymore, but

should be allowed the freedom to enter and worship government and caste Hindu temples.”¹

Even if this is not entirely true, as other records tell us that Ezhavas did have an investment in this movement, it is clear that there was a significant upper-caste guidance that was available to them, and as is well known, the Vaikom Satyagraha was entirely stage-managed by Gandhi, who also made sure that Periyar participated in it.

Secondly, the line between religious rights and other civic rights gets blurred in the temple entry discourse. The question of untouchability, the pitiable state of Ezhavas and Dalits, the prohibition on walking on the roads before the temple, the shame and humiliation of not being allowed entry into temples, all merge together here, but in a way that always prioritizes the issue of temple entry. Moreover, the lower caste representatives, continuously used modern means such as petitions, memoranda, meetings, walkouts, and constantly used the language of political rights in this campaign. Going through the records of this period, you come across terms like *pauravakasham*, *prathishedham avakasha samaram*, *pauran*—that is, civil rights, protest, protests for rights, citizen, etc.—in the assembly records, speeches, resolutions and writings generated as part of this campaign. More importantly, you can see this campaign overshadowing all other issues of social rights and gaining space in the local and national media, drawing activists from all over the country to Kerala, and during the Vaikom Satyagraha, you can really see how it mushrooms into a national-viral event such as the ones that we witness often these days after social media.

In fact, when lower caste groups find a certain empowerment, through western liberal discourses and through newly opened trade and other opportunities, they start coming up with a politics that not only aim for social mobility and caste unity, but also put up a huge and solid resistance to the restrictions and prohibitions that had been imposed on them from a very long time. In Kerala, for instance, the *Villu Vandi samaram*, *Channar samaram*, *Kallumaala Samaram*, the Ezhava Memorial, Vaikom Satyagraha, Guruvayur Satyagraha, etc., were all along these lines—they were all for social rights, to ward off prohibitions and to gain greater participation in the modern edifice

¹ Velayudhan P.S, 1978, SNDP Yogacharithram, SNDP

Thus we can see that the demand for religious equality, by lower caste communities in Kerala, was not a spontaneous outburst of anti-caste sentiments, activated by some enlightened lower caste leaders that then came to mark the glorious Kerala Renaissance, as it is always made out to be. Instead, it was a carefully orchestrated event, where a final inclusion within Hinduism was achieved for the Ezhavas, couched in a modern political language, that works to negate any connection to a religious debate, and conducted under the watchful guidance of upper-caste leaders, in a terrain where the possibility of Ezhava conversion loomed large.

In the light of this, it would be interesting to examine the following exchange that happens as part of a longer conversation about temple entry and the prohibition of Avarnas from entering the road before the Vaikom temple, between Kumaran Asan, the famous anti-caste Ezhava leader and poet, and the Diwan, in the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha of Travancore.

Here, Kumaran Asan asks the Diwan:

“Will the government make a public declaration that Avarnas will be allowed entry in all public schools, inns and public places, or at least will you allow them their liberty and rights the minute they convert to Christianity?” The Diwan’s answer is very interesting: “The rights that are granted Avarnas when they convert to Christianity, cannot be given them when they are part of the Hindu religion.”³

And yet, Kumaran Asan and other Ezhavas chose to stay within the Hindu fold!

So, the temple entry movement is not only happening in the background of an attempt by the Ezhavas to convert out of the Hindu religion but despite the existing legal option of gaining rights denied them in Hinduism, outside its fold, through conversion. In other words, all the anti-caste leaders here are using the modern political discourse in order to fight for their rights against upper-caste domination, but from within the Hindu religion, the boundaries of which are marked by acts of conversion. In short, even in the context of a fierce debate against caste discrimination, the anti-caste articulation remains self-consciously Hindu.

Notes

³ Velayudhan P.S, 1978, SNDP Yogacharithram, SNDP

that was coming to be. Given this nature of early anti-caste articulations, which focused on campaigns for civil and social rights, it was easy for them to intersect with Hindu social reform, which, as discussed above, was invested in a language of social emancipation for untouchables and other lower castes. Therefore, in many places like Maharashtra, Kerala, Andhra, Bengal, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, etc, you can see Dalit articulations evolving out of Hindu social reform movements, beginning with an association with these upper-caste associations, and slowly dissociating with them and moving on to a realm that focuses solely on social rights.



Temple Entry Proclamation Monument (1936) at Navayikkulam
 (Source: Kkkrishnakumar / CC BY-SA)

It is thus that temple entry movements became an integral part of the civil rights demands of many untouchable communities, often with the support of upper-caste Hindu social reformers, even when the Hindu orthodoxy was against it. In fact, in most places, the present-day anti-caste discourse not only starts with an association with upper-caste Hindu reformers, but also an initial focus on temple entry, or at least a brief, temporary period of engagement. Even the atheist Periyar, it would be interesting to know, used self-respect groups, to conduct a series of temple entries. The more the anti-caste movements branched out as predominantly Dalit-based movements, the temple entry demands are abandoned for a rights-based discourse.

Thirdly, the temple entry debate was carried out in the background of a continuous threat by the Ezhava community to convert out of Hinduism. In fact, by the time of temple entry, a prominent section of Ezhavas had almost come to the decision of converting, or leaving the Hindu fold, in other ways. Dalit scholar K.K. Kochu writes about the same:

“In spite of various protests, the king of Travancore king did not allow temple entry. It was then that a discussion on religious conversion was initiated by C V Kunji Raman. The editor of *Mithavadi*, C Krisnan, also advocated that Ezhavas converted to Buddhism...The SNDP secretary of the day, C V Kunji Raman, started a campaign that called for conversion to Christianity and even met Bishop Kanji-rappally regarding this... At this time, in Edavanakad in Ernakulam, Ezhavas converted to Islam during an Ezhava congregation. It was at this time that temple entry gained currency.”²

There was also another important articulation, along these lines, that need to be mentioned here: the book *Asavarnarkku Nallathu Islam*, which can be roughly translated as “*It is Islam that is good/suitable for Asavarnas.*” This book was published by a group called the Thiyya Youth Collective, which was mobilizing against caste, and here many Ezhava scholars of the period advocated leaving Hinduism for a better religion, especially Islam. (It must be said here that today this book is unofficially banned in Kerala.)

² Vaikom Satyagrahathinte Mathavum Raashtreyavum, Thejas, June 16-30, 2014