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THE TEMPLE ENTRY PROCLAMATIONS AND SEEING OF THE UNSEEN



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ABSTRACT:

The paper discusses the plight of lower caste people of the State of Kerala in the 20th century. As they were not allowed to enter the temple premises. This led to the beginning of bi-partisan class struggles in the social history of Kerala. Bhimrao Ambedkar founded the Temple Entry Movement as a nationwide strategy to combat caste injustice. Hindu societal change was the primary objective. In Kerala in the 20th century, the poor were forbidden from entering temples. It was started with the intention of opening all Hindu temples while waging a large propaganda effort to promote social advancement and the untouchability of members of lower castes. Similarly in Kerala, the Ezhava spiritual leader Narayana Guru led a social reform movement that called for allowing the downtrodden sections of society entry into State operated temples.

Keywords: *Temple Entry – Downtrodden section – Proclamations – Suppression of Legal Rights.*

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(a) Introduction

The temple entry agitations throughout the State for the right of lower classes necessitated the Government to inquire. Mounting opposition framed through the Guruvayur Satyagraha forced the Government to take such a stand. In the Second Round Table Conference, the pathetic condition of the untouchables became a topic of heated debate. Subsequent declaration of the Communal Award by Ramsay Macdonald, the British Prime Minister, again widened the drift between various communities. But it totally disappointed Gandhi, in his view; eradicating untouchability was the better solution rather than intensifying it. So Gandhi sent a telegram to the Maharaja of Travancore indicating the necessity and possibility of temple entry.¹ These circumstances forced the Government to form a Temple Entry enquiry Committee.

The committee was formed with Subrahmanya Iyer, a retired Dewan of Travancore as the President of the Committee.² It was formed on November 8, 1932, and it submitted the report taking much time and enquiry.³ The committee had taken written and oral shreds of evidence.⁴ It also gave a questionnaire and secured reply from 3,122 persons and among these 2,867 *savarnas* and 255 *avarnas* were included.⁵ Besides this the written documents received from the *savarnas*, 3230 were against the temple entry and 888 were for the temple entry. The oral evidence shows 160 for and 37 against temple entry.⁶ The committee submitted its report on 11, January 1934 and it laid stress on the fact that all the people irrespective of caste had the right to use public roads at their own will. The committee recommended the necessity of taking immediate measures on a wartime footing for the upliftment of the *avarna* socially and economically. It suggested that distance pollution or *Theendal* should be removed by appropriate legislative measures.⁷ Public tanks, public wells and Government

Satroms should be thrown open to all. Arrangements should be made for providing *Bhajanamadoms*, opening schools for adult instruction, due attention to proper housing and sanitation etc. Even if there were major and minor temples, new temples may be built and consecrated, where *avarnas* and *savarnas* may worship together.⁸ A report in all together recommended actions for the upliftment of the *avarnas*. The report was vehemently criticized by the caste Hindus. Yet the question of temple entry continued under the auspices of *Kerala Harijan Sevak Sangh*. It conducted an all-Kerala Temple Entry conference. The conference urged upon the Government to open all State-controlled temples to depressed classes and decided to send a deputation to wait upon Maharaja Sri Chithira Thirunal and to present a memorial. They collected signatures of about 55000 *savarnas* for temple entry questions and observed April 19, 1936, as Temple Entry Day in Kerala.⁹ The deputation party made a consultation with Sri Chithira Thirunal and C.P Ramaswamy Iyer. They understood the favourable attitude of the King. The secretary of *All India Harijan Sevak Sangh*, in June 1936, in one of his speeches hoped that Maharaja's decision may come on his nearing next birthday itself.

(b) The Temple Entry Proclamation of Sri Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma

The *avarna* got the right to travel through approach roads after the Vaikom Satyagraha and secured the right to entry into the temples by the Proclamation of 1936. It was issued by Sri Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma, which marked silver linings in the social and cultural history of Kerala. It was on 12th November 1936 the King issued this progressive reform on his 25th birthday.¹⁰ The content of the proclamation is as follows;

“Profoundly convinced of the truth and validity of our religion, believing that it is based on divine guidance and all-comprehending toleration, adapted itself to the needs of changing times, solicitous that none of our Hindu subjects should by reason of faith or caste or community be denied. The consolations and solace of the Hindu faith, we have decided and hereby declare, ordain and command that, subject to such rules and conditions as may be laid down and imposed by us for preserving their proper atmosphere and maintaining their rituals and observances, there should henceforth be no restriction placed on any Hindu by birth or religion on entering and worshipping at the temples controlled by us and our Government.”¹¹

About 21 rules and conditions were laid down by a proclamation dated 24th November 1936.¹² Provision IV of the proclamation stated that temple entry would not mean entry into *srikovil*, *thidapally* and other previously restricted areas. Smoking within the temple premises, taking meat onto the temple, umbrella, and kerosene lamp would be disallowed.¹³ The violation of these rules, which causes purification ceremonies will result in the punishment to the victim by a Magistrate and the expenses for the purification ceremony will be levied from that person itself.¹⁴

(c) Response to the Proclamation

Not only the people of Travancore but also the whole of India heard and welcomed the proclamation with great pleasure. In January 1937, Gandhi visited Travancore viewing his visit as a pilgrimage to the holy land. In his Thiruvapur speech, Gandhi said that the ‘proclamation is a miracle of the modern times.’¹⁵ It washed away all the sins made by *savarnas* towards the *avarnas*. In his view, the proclamation should be remembered by future generations with gratitude. It was with his instruction that

Mahadev Desai wrote, *The Epic of Travancore*.¹⁶ Again Jawaharlal Nehru, on 19th November 1936 commented on the proclamation that the prohibition of *avarnas* was actually a violation of the law. As these problems were closely related to economic matters, as it affected the section of landless people, the proclamation put the right way to tackle these problems.¹⁷ Subhash Chandra Bose responded to the proclamation that it heralded the opening of a new age as it was a boundary line, where the *avarnas* resurrected towards progress.¹⁸ The poets and writers of the age also bestowed congratulations on the Maharaja and the Dewan for this noble gesture of magnanimity. Vallathol stated that Travancore became a model to other States of India through this noble act. Poems written in praising the ruler came innumerable which includes *Soubhathra Vijayam* by Kuttamath,¹⁹ *Nilolpalappoo* by P. Kunjiraman Nair,²⁰ *Pulayippennu* by K. Madhavi Amma,²¹ *Munnottupoka Nam* by P. V. Krishna Varrier,²² *Muttuvin Ningal Veendum* by Pallathu Raman,²³ and *Kshetra Pravesam* by Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer²⁴ deserved special mention.

The Madras Legislative Council congratulated the Travancore King for his gracious venture. The resolution was introduced in the Council by Mr D. Ramalinga Reddy on 25th September 1937. Council viewed it as a righteous measure, which had far-reaching social and religious consequences.²⁵ In Travancore public meetings and *Jathas* were conducted to express gratitude and delight regarding the proclamation. To create a long-lasting impression among the public, the people of Travancore decided to erect an immortal statue of Sri Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma.²⁶ Under the presidency of Changanasseri Parameswaran Pillai, a Temple Entry Proclamation Memorial Committee was formed on 10th December 1936. Committee entrusted the duty to upright the bronze statue of the King to Mr

Deviprasad Chaudhary, a well-known sculptor. The Maharaja of Bikaner laid the foundation stone for that in the Fort premises, near the temple of Sri Padmanabha.²⁷ It took 18 months for the completion and the unveiling ceremony of the statue was held on 20th July 1940 by the Maharaja of Dholapur.²⁸ The ordinary public thus viewed the temple entry proclamation as a monument of victory as it was a blessing bestowed on them by the then Maharaja Chithira Thirunal.

(d) Inner Politics of Temple Entry Proclamation

Though the proclamation was hailed as a miracle of modern times, an analysis of the then circumstances and standpoints of leaders and organizations lead to some serious wrapping up in this matter. All these inner forces had their own role in bringing the proclamation as the need of the hour. Disappointment created by the Report of the Temple Entry Enquiry Committee did not satisfy the desires of the lower communities. The Temple Entry Committee under N.S Subramanya Iyer was published on 21 April 1934.²⁹ The report of the committee recommended for the upliftment of the *avarnas*, socially and economically. It desires the Government that if temple entry is allowed, it had to face opposition from the large sections of the *savarnas* and it will lead to breaches of the peace. The committee insisted that any change made to existing rules of observances should be made with the men of learning in the *sastras* like Azhvancherry Tamprakkal.³⁰ The extent, to which the present rule prohibiting the entry of *avarnas* into the temples may be modified, should be determined by the sovereign on the advice of a *Parishad*.³¹ These recommendations did not satisfy the *Ezhavas* as they were socially and culturally the most advanced among the non-caste Hindus. The majority of the members of the committee were highly cautious in their recommendations.

Some members disagreed with the appointment of a *Parishad* in determining the extent of concessions to the *avarnas*. So, the Government did not take any immediate action on it because of the conflicting viewpoints within the committee.

The Report of the Temple Entry Enquiry Committee did not satisfy the *avarnas* and to conciliate the *avarnas* the Government made an announcement which opened the roads, wells and *satroms* to all castes.³² Even after that, the *Ezhavas* continued to intensify the struggle with the open threat of mass conversion and to leave Hinduism. It forms another reason for such a proclamation. There was mass conversion to other religions such as Christianity by the *Ezhavas* and it acquired political and economic dimensions. Moreover, the *Ezhavas* who were numerous and economically advanced gradually come to show a greater interest in abstaining from the Hindu faith.³³ In the latter half of the 1920s, it was a conflicting matter even among the leaders. In effect, the *Ezhavas* were the main source of inspiration for the other depressed classes to create forms of agitation. Their main grievances were related to social inequality and they demanded higher social status. Though conversions to other religions started much earlier, it acquired momentum in the 1920s and 1930s. C. V Kunjiraman, the editor of *Kerala Kaumudi* urged to renounce Hinduism if the upper castes did not support their cause. C V Kunjiraman was one of the advocates for conversion.³⁴ Though they were in confusion regarding the choice of religion, a large section of *Ezhavas* welcomed the decision. The Christian missionaries were to make good use of these circumstances. Some leaders of the *Ezhava* community decide to join Christianity while others opted for Buddhism. The Sikh leaders of Punjab took much interest in the conversion movement among the *Ezhavas* and some members of the community joined Sikhism.³⁵ They thought that the age-long

sleep under the curse of pollution thus end with mass conversion and it shocked the *savarna* sections. Leaders like Mannathu Padmanabha Pillai, Pattom Thanu Pillai, and George Joseph; all were upset and smelled the danger. It is to be noted that the caste-Hindus began to think in such a way that large-scale dropout from the Hindu religion ultimately broke away from the foundation of Hinduism. The threats of conversion of *avarnas* alarmed the Government. C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the new Dewan tactfully advised the King of the inevitability to issue the Proclamation at a wartime footing as it was the need of the hour. It ended in the proclamation issued by Sri Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma on 12th November 1936, which provisioned to throw open all the Government temples to all Hindus irrespective of caste or creed.³⁶ In fact, the temple entry proclamation of 1936 appears to have been propelled by the threat of mass conversion which helped to break apart the conversion movement.³⁷ On the political side, the prevailing circumstances also forced the Government to take such a measure to satisfy the desired corners. There representatives of different organizations assembled in the *London Mission Society* Hall in Trivandrum on 7 December 1932 to chalk out a common programme which turned out to be the All-Travancore Joint Political Congress.³⁸ It decided to work for the political advancement of these communities.

In 1932, the Govt. announced its intention to reconstitute the Sri Moolam Popular Assembly and the Legislative Council. The *Ezhavas*, the Christians, Muslims etc., submitted memorials to the Government, raising their demands. The formal announcement of the proposed reform was made on 28 September 1932, but it disappointed all.³⁹ On 25th January 1933, the JPC again met at LMS hall, and adopted a resolution to start the Abstention movement.⁴⁰ They decided to abstain from the elections to be held under the new

constitutional reform, which retained the property qualification for franchise. The JPC adopted much or less the same strategy to fight constitutional reform as the Indian National Congress did against the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919.⁴¹ Moreover, the *Ezhava* youths formed the *Ezhava Youth League* and urged that *Ezhavas* would be declared non-Hindus by SNDPYogam.⁴² The next thing that added fuel to the fire was the arrest of C. Kesavan, an *Ezhava* leader, who made reference to the monopoly of the Nairs in the administration of the State. He was arrested and sentenced to two years imprisonment and a fine of Rs.500.⁴³ In his speech he also endorsed the resolution of the annual meeting of the SNDP Yogam demanding the dismissal of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer as the constitutional and legal advisor of the Maharaja.⁴⁴ His arrest created mounting public protests. On this occasion, it was highly necessary to suppress the subsequent political agitation as the *avarnas* were already awakened from their age-old beliefs and traditions. The Government very well understood the fact that the religious protest gradually gave way to increasing awareness of political rights. Again, the role of the Indian National Congress in the temple entry struggles offered it a big platform for action. The question of religious disability taken up by Mahatma Gandhi gave the matter, a higher national outlook. They took solid determination to accomplish the cherished dream of temple entry which later appeared as a matter of immediate necessity. Another factor that contributed to such a declaration was that, at that time Travancore was passing through a period of economic depression. There was a fall in prices of agricultural products resulting from the arrival of new products from abroad, the introduction of commercialization of agriculture and other related issues like the Growing more food campaigns, all makes the peasants, who were from lower sections in a disparate situation. They were ready to fight at any

cost. The Government had to tackle this problem, as to escape from the allegation of inefficiency, so the authorities wanted to divert attention towards allowing the temple entry. Last but not the least, is of course the shrewd and cunning policies of the new Dewan, Sir C P Ramaswamy Iyer. On 8th October 1936, CP Ramaswamy Iyer took over as the Dewan of Travancore.⁴⁵ He had got many allegations in the case of the Reforms of 1932. At any cost, he wanted to satisfy the depressed classes and win their confidence, at the same time suppress the elements raised against his rules. Thus, he successfully implemented his agenda, to bring the whole Hindu community under one umbrella and blockade the possible threats of political emancipation. Whatever may be the fact, this proclamation was viewed as a bold attempt to wash away the age-long curse of untouchability in the Hindu religion. It was the first of its kind in India and it has a lofty validity marked with silver linings in the history of Kerala.

(e) Temple Entry Proclamation in Cochin

As Cochin is situated near Travancore and being more than that, it is a Princely State, the Temple Entry Proclamation of Travancore had evolved repercussions in the Cochin State. Besides this, the Travancore King had certain rights over some of the temples situated within the Cochin territory like the Koodal Manikyam temple of Irinjalakkunda. With the Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation, the temples of Travancore were thrown open to untouchables. But the right of the Travancore ruler over some of the temple routines of the Cochin area created confusion and tensions in the daily temple rites. This type of temple includes that of Vaikom, Thrippunithura, Chottanikkara, and the Perumtrikkovil.⁴⁶ The ruler of Cochin as well as the Government was not willing to give temple entry to untouchables. Another

factor that bewilders the temple entry decision was the negation of Dewan Shanmughan Chetti, who was very orthodox in nature. He was not much concerned to tackle the problem of temple entry. In its place, he gave insist on achieving appointments by the *avarnas* within Government service as early as possible. Temple Entry Authorization Proclamation of Cochin was issued by Sree Kerala Varma, Maharaja of Cochin on 20th December 1947, but it could not come into prominence at that time.⁴⁷ This proclamation could not have given full temple entry freedom to the people of Cochin. It had certain limitations. The list of temples published by the Government includes the list of Devaswam incorporated and unincorporated temples.⁴⁸ The owner of the private temples was not favourable and they did not want to implement these laws to those temples. The owner of the private temples files suits in the High Court and District Courts of Cochin for granting permission to define their temples as not coming within the criteria of the temples included in the Authorization Act. The frequent filing of suits for exemption and the mounting demand for full temple entry freedom often led to making the situation more vibrant. Full temple entry freedom in Cochin was obtained during the reign of Sri Ramavarma when a bill was passed in the Cochin Legislature assembly to solve the limits and defects of the Temple Entry Authorization Proclamation of 1948.⁴⁹ With the passing of this bill, the temple entry in Cochin became a reality. It was published in the Gazette through a notification dated February 19, 1949. After that, Kerala fully enjoyed social equality in the case of temple worship.

(f) Temple Entry Proclamation in Malabar

Malabar did not produce a similar picture in shaping the ground for temple entry. After the Guruvayur Satyagraha, most of

the agitations that sprang up in Malabar were mainly backed by nationalist propaganda as well as peasant and labour movements.⁵⁰ Due to this a caste-wise consolidation did not take place in Malabar. As Malabar was a part of the Madras Presidency, they had direct touch with British Imperialism, unlike the case of Travancore and Cochin. As a result, the native States of Travancore and Cochin and the British district of Malabar remained as three different political units. The element of nationalism should be the convergent margin. But in Travancore and Cochin the rulers were able to win a pivotal position in popular minds more than that of Malabar. So, in British Malabar, the Temple Entry Proclamation of Travancore King could not make any serious effect in Malabar. The attitude of *Zamorin* was no longer in favour of such initiatives as he stated that, unlike the Travancore King, he was only a trustee of the temples.⁵¹ By this time nationalism, liberalism, Marxism and Gandhian ideologies strived to cut across the caste and communal, regional and political barriers.⁵² The material changes that were brought in the last 20th century destroyed the caste-ridden feudal structure of medieval Kerala society.⁵³ Moreover, the progressive sections in each caste of Malabar were ready to internalize the demands of modernization duly get legitimized by the colonial law and jurisdiction. The Malabar Temple Entry bill was duly taken up by the Madras Government by this time. Congress Ministry was in power under C. Rajagopalachari. A conference was held under the auspices of the Malabar Temple Entry Committee on October 16, 1938.⁵⁴ It started propaganda to create a favourable background for the reform. Madras Temple Entry Bill was introduced in the Madras Assembly on December 1, 1938, by C Rajagopalachari.⁵⁵ By the approval of the select committee after careful scrutiny and subsequent changes, the bill was passed by the legislative body. After that effort was

taken to strengthen public opinion in favour of the bill was made, as a referendum will be forthcoming. It got the approval of the Governor of Madras on January 18, 1939. Among the responders for and against the Bill, the attitude of the Zamorin deserves special mention. He sent a memorandum in which he stated that no one should have the authority to claim entry into the temples, which were at that time private property.⁵⁶ The Sanatanist's were another conservative minded Hindus who made a protest against the bill. They sent a memorandum to Prime Minister C Rajagopalachari, even to postpone the implementation of the Bill.⁵⁷ Again on July 17, 1939, the Governor of Madras made an ordinance Temple Entry Indemnity Ordinance of 1939 in connection with the entry of untouchables into Madurai Meenakshi temple.⁵⁸ The aim of this ordinance was to make a clarification in the case of the trustees. The passing of the Temple Entry Indemnity Bill resulted in the opening of only a few temples in Madras and a few temples in Malabar. The passing of these acts did not evolve a permanent solution to the problem.

(g) Conclusion

Finally, the Temple Entry becomes a reality on June 2nd, 1947, and only with the passing of this act, untouchables got the full freedom of entry into the temples.⁵⁹ The passing of the act created a festive mood for the people of Malabar. A welcome committee was formed at Guruvayur on 31 May 1947, to celebrate the temple entry freedom.

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