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Government Unveils Plan to Take Over Chidambaram Temple

Spiritual Leaders in South India Uniting to Preserve Autonomy of Hindu Institutions

The Tamil Nadu State Department of Hindus Religious and Charitable Endowments Commission has unveiled a plan, long anticipated by observers of the political scene, to assume the administration of the Chidambaram Nataraja temple of South India, among the most sacred of Saivite temples with vast wealth and land holdings in excess of 3,000 acres. Religious Endowments Minister, Mr. R.M. Veerappan, announced at the Legislative Assembly on April 22nd, that "The state government would bring separate legislation to take over the administration of the Nataraja temple of Chidambaram, The Hindu reported. The Minister said the government would model the bill after the one which was used for a similar takeover of the Kasi Viswanath Temple in U.P. and the Acts relating to the takeover of the Tirupati Temple (Andhra Pradesh) and the Guruvayoor Temple (Kerala). Later, however, the Minister stated that an "influential advisory committee" would consider how the takeover could be accomplished within the framework of existing laws relating to the temple.

To date, over 30,000 temples are reportedly under the jurisdiction of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department (the H.R.C.E). The Podhu Dikshitar, a hereditary priesthood which has owned and managed the extensive Siva temple for many hundreds of years, has with some success appealed to the High Court to squelch earlier attempts by the Commission to assume authority at Chidambaram. In the present confrontation, the priests are working diligently and apparently holding their ground. A protective writ petition has been filed by them in Madras High Court.

The Minister made a series of comments to The Hindu in April essentially playing down the takeover, indicating that it is following a set pattern toward government administration, with the aim of better administration, to correct alleged "mismanagement" and to prevent "malpractices." He gave assurance that there

would be no interference with the performance of religious rituals within the temple or with the work of the Podhu Dikshithars. He said the legislation would enable the Government to appoint an Executive Officer for the temple and emphasized that if the temple were to be administered and maintained well, it was imperative that men of dedication and involvement in temple worship and administration be chosen as trustees. Sri R. N. Nataraja Ratna Dikshitar, Secretary of the Podhu Dikshithars, told The Hindu that the Minister's remarks appeared more in the nature of pressuring the Dikshithars to surrender their just and legal rights settled by decisions of courts in regard to the management of the temple and its properties. He was also quoted as depicting the Minister's statements about the proposed takeover as "based on one-sided information and distorted facts."

According to N. Venkataraman Iyer, retired Madras Civil Court Judge, former Deputy Commissioner of the H.R.C.E. and now prominent defender of the rights of Hindu institutions, the commission's proposal to take control of Chidambaram is legally "not feasible." He told Mr. N.K. Murthi for the NSW that the ordinance used at the Viswanath Temple will not apply here, as the rights of the Podhu Dikshithars are quite different. Mr. Iyer insists that the federal Constitution guarantees the right of the Dikshithars to manage the temple and properties as a religious denomination and that "No law could take away their rights." He pointed out that no mismanagement has been proved, and also that whereas the historical integrity of the Dikshitar trusteeship has been questioned on the basis of certain inscriptions at Thiruvavur Temple saying that they had not managed the temple without interruption, the inscriptions "had been misread and misinterpreted. A close scrutiny of the same only showed that kings were renovating the temple, and that is quite different from administration."

Wider issues: While the outcome of the administration of Chidambaram is yet to be decided, the hotly debated question of who should own and operate the temple and its many resources draws attention to the wider issue of the steady, gradual assimilation of the administrative functions of literally hundreds of Hindu institutions by the H.R.C.E. Those in favor of the assimilation claim it will result in more efficient management of an important asset of the state, while opponents describe it as an unjust and unnecessary abrogation of rights and property which lie in the private sector and cannot be expropriated by the government, except illegally.

The H.R.C.E.'s position seems fairly straightforward. It is forging ahead under the guidelines of the Acts of 1927, 1951, and 1959, which vested it with management of Hindu religious institutions, and the pending "Hindu Religious Endowment

Amendment Bill 64 of 1981," which would augment its authority tremendously. Already passed by the legislature, the bill has been awaiting the signature of no one less than the President of India, apparently held in abeyance due to protests by representatives of the elite leadership of the Hindu religion in South India.

Those leaders, the prominent and powerful heads of ashrams, maths, and aadheenams with literally millions of devotees, have recently banded together in a notable showing of mutual strength and cooperation. In the early part of 1982, the All India Association of Maths and Ashrams was formed, with the Senior Shankaracharya of Kanchi as President and Retired Justice N. Venkataraman Iyer as his Delegate Representative, to protect the rights of maths.

Taking its case to the office of the President of India, the Association has, among other objections, decried the powers that the 1981 Bill invests in the H.R.C.E. Commissioner, which include the right to review the nomination of successor by a math head for suitability and exercise considerable control of funds of the institutions, as "illegal and contrary to the established law and usage."

In late March of 1983, another impressive array of Hindu swamis and heads of ashrams, maths and aadheenams met at an unprecedented gathering at the Chidambaram Temple, a meeting interpreted as a show of Hindu unity and solidarity in the face of the government's stated objectives. The two-day program, as reported in Yoga Life, was under the auspices of the venerable head of the Dharmapuram Aadheenam. Though its first-priority goal was to "deliberate ways in which Hinduism could be propagated to the people and the Hindu population kept firm in their faith," among seven resolutions was that "All religious leaders should support the uplift the Hinduism at all levels, resisting pressure by vested interests and government," and that "Government interference in Hindu religious matters should cease."

The challenge to the mathadipathi's powers has taken shape in more than one dispute over the appointment of successors to the heads of maths over the past three years. In the model Thiruvavaduthurai case, a bench of the High Court of Madras, overturning a lower court decision apparently based on the 1981 Bill, ruled that the right of nomination of a successor is a religious act and not an administrative one and that the substitution of a single commissioner for the court in regard to disciplinary functions (as occurred in this case) affects the dignity of the head of maths, as they would then be subordinate to the commissioner.

Discrimination?: In challenging the overall propriety of government control of Hindu institutions, the most potent criticism being levied is that legislation is not being uniformly applied to Christianity, Islam or other religions in India. Swami Jyotirmayananda of Vivekananda Kendra, Vivekanandapuram, states in a paper entitled "Whither Secularism?" that "While the Hindu temples and their properties are being controlled by the government through Religious Endowment Department, neither mosques nor the churches are brought under the purview of this department. In fact, the government dare not interfere in the affairs of mosques and churches." Other critics are even more severe. Sri Kambliswamy Madam/Ananda Ashram, of Pondicherry through its monthly publication, Yoga Life (March 1983), proclaims, "South Indian governments, and particularly the Tamil Nadu government, have launched open oppression on the Hindu community, even denying them the right to hold public religious functions, while in no way interfering with Christian, Muslim or other religious groups...Protests in the press, cases in the High Court and submissions to the President of India are going on."

Another key argument defends the right for maths and ashrams to manage their own affairs on grounds that matters relating to spirituality and religion require the guidance of qualified religious persons who are Hindus and who care about Hinduism and dearly wish Hindu Dharma to flourish. The government of India is secular, which opposition leaders point out means that it should either treat all religions equally (and thus take over Christian, Moslem, Sikh and Jain institutions and temples as part of their plan to improve administration of religious resources in the country) or keep a way from all equally and leave the Hindus alone. Many find it ironic that a government which runs a country in which the population is overwhelmingly Hindu appears to have singled out that religion for what is judged by some as unjust treatment.

Metaphorically, viewed from atop one of Chidambaram's towering gopurams, the potential takeover of that temple is clearly just one part of a large and very delicate issue which extends far past the visible horizon. What is at stake is religion, the freedom of religion and the proper relationship between religion and government in a secular nation - a challenging issue for all nations not politically aligned with one or another religion. This quiet but fervent battle is having its effects. Rumbling through institutions which have stood autonomously for centuries, it threatens to shift the foundations of India's Hinduism, to disempower a stable and venerable hierarchy, and the repercussions will affect thousands of common devotees. Ultimately, litigation and possibly, future legislation will determine the proper and just sphere of interest of the government in the nation's extensive religious affairs. It is not a simple issue for which there dare simplistic answers. Men of divergent interests, backgrounds and opinions must inquire into the relationship of government and religion, to define where one ends and the

other begins in the world's largest democratic society. Right now, the best of minds are endeavoring to define the problem, and reach solutions which best serve the citizens of Tamil Nadu.