Court Decree Retires Tirupati Temple's Hereditary Priests
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High-Stakes Controversy Engulfs India's Most Affluent Hindu Shrine at the Close of a Ten-Year Supreme Court Struggle

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The Thirumala Tirupathi Temple of Lord Venkateshwara, arguably the most widely revered, well-attended and richest temple in the world, has found itself entangled in an intricate web of sacred duty and judicial intervention. A landmark judgment on March 19, 1996, by the country's highest tribunal, the Supreme Court, upheld the nullification of the centuries-old trusteeship rights of the temple's hereditary Mirasipriests. The decision abolishes the traditional organizational structure which hitherto managed the temple. Some welcome the decree as a means to curb rampant corruption, while others feel the temple has been violated, its sanctity compromised and its future threatened. In either case, the lives of the hereditary and hired priests of the temple will never be the same.

It began in 1985 when the Andhra Pradesh government, under the Chief Ministership of N.T. Rama Rao, commissioned the Justice Chella Kondiah committee to recommend measures for the effective maintenance of temples in the state. The ensuing

voluminous report advised, among other things, the abolition of Mirasirights. Prompted by this, the government, through its Act 30 of 1987, promulgated the Andhra Pradesh Charitable and Hindu Religious Institutions and Endowments Act, which annulled all the rights and emoluments accrued in cash or kind to the Mirasis(Sec 35), including their share in prasadam, hundior sevas(Sec 144). The most profoundly affected were the twelve Mirasifamilies of the Thirumala Tirupathi temple. They lost a combined yearly income of us$909,000.

The Tirupati Mirasischallenged the Act as a violation of their fundamental rights. Their plea was dismissed in the High Court, and the recent rejection of their appeal in the apex court brings the curtain down on a decade-long legal battle. The priests have lost.

As the Tirumula Tirupati Devasthanam took over management of the temple, they quickly learned the ponderous nature of their task. [The TTD is an administrative body which oversees all the temples and many schools in Andhra Pradesh.] The day after the court decree, the main archaka (priest) reportedly refused to adorn the Deity with His invaluable jewels. (The Deity possesses a rich array of antique diamond-studded jewelry beyond value. His diamond crown alone is supposedly worth US$4 billion.) The main archaka,the only person authorized to touch the Deity, had personally kept guard over the Lord's jewels as a moral imperative. If anything was found missing, he would reimburse the temple immediately. By relinquishing this sacred responsibility, the ball fell into the TTD's lap, a high security task it was not prepared for. It was only after lengthy deliberations with TTD officials that the matter was settled and the archakafinally complied.

"All the precious jewelry of the temple has hitherto remained safe on the Deity. Let the TTD bring its own security men and keep guard. Let's see how long they can run the show," contests Shri Ramanachar, one of the archaka gumasthas.

Other than the Mirasi'scircle of friends, temple workers and a handful of enlightened sevaks,most people seem to be blissfully unaware of this problem. "The Mirasishave gone," say people when queried, but they do not seem to know why. The devotees who continue to throng the temple know nothing of the turmoil that is going on within its walls.

Cozen Communications

When I arrived at this holy town in April, I realized no one was willing to comment on this issue. I was informed that the Mirasidarswere either away at Delhi or Madras. No one was willing to guide me to the Mirasifamilies. On the contrary, I was intentionally misled to knock at the wrong doors. One Mirasi family denied that they were Mirasis. Even the surrogate agents the Mirasishired were in hiding and were avoiding the press. Knowing that TTD is in full charge now, and being unsure of its new course of action, they did not want to annoy the management. The TTD is being tightlipped, terming the whole thing as a 'sensitive issue.'

I accidentally stumbled onto a Mirasifamily yards away from the Govindarajaswamy Temple in Tirupati. Sitting in their traditionally decorated hall lined with photos of their forefathers and Lord Venkataramana, I got a glimpse of the

orthodox aristocratic lifestyle they lead. They were understandably unhappy about the decision. "How can the court take away a religious right guaranteed as a fundamental right in the constitution? They seem to have set their eyes on the money the Mirasisare getting, forgetting the service that is being rendered. This is indirect looting," roars a visibly annoyed Mrs. Srimathi, and advocate and wife of a Mirasi.

"It was the dedication and hard work of our forefathers that has developed the temple which now attracts millions of devotees everyday. We have been performing the rituals with unstinted orthodoxy and sincerity as prescribed by the shastras.Now the government wants to keep us out," accuses Sri Sreenivasan, a Mirasiof the Acharyapurushaclass.

A New Pattern for Priesthood

All archakas, gamekarsand other temple workers will now be put through a selection process to assess their competence and knowledge of the requisite shastras.They will have to pass stringent proficiency requirements either through a guru or elder at home, or by attending any of the schools imparting Vedic education. The court has concluded that the legislature is competent to define qualifications for archakasand to conduct examinations to approve them.

Not everyone agrees. "A child from an archakafamily learns from an early age, listening to the Vedasand Prabandhams being recited at home--it is in his genes. You cannot convert this traditional knowledge into stereotyped book education,"

challenged Mr. Parasaran. Mr. Narayana Gowda, an executive engineer, avers, "All these years these Iyengars have been performing the pujas without compromising traditions. It is they who have increased the power of the temple. If they are removed and replaced, people will stop visiting the temple--they will lose faith. Certainly, I would stop making my monthly trips if that were to happen." Obviously, it is a conflict between church and state, faith and finance.

The State has also been directed to determine the conditions of service, scale of pay and other emoluments for employees, relative to the income of the temple. This has generated debate on the efficacy of such a system.

A predicted effect of the new administration is that the sincere and temple-dedicated archakawill be transformed into a mere government employee. "The archakaswill slacken in their work and attitude, the traditional values attached to the profession will vanish. They will open and close the temple to set timings, demanding holidays and Sundays off. The whole atmosphere will change," warns senior archakaand advisor to the temple, Sri Madambakam Srinivasa Bhattacharya.

The TTD has often been accused of converting this temple into a lucrative business house. Rampant corruption, governmental interference, favoritism and red-tape dogs the management, very often at the cost of inconveniencing the pilgrims who wait for more than 30 hours to catch a 30-second glimpse of the Deity. Faced with these complications, the future of the temple and how the TTD is going to solve the issues is uncertain. The benefit of 30 million rupees aside, the TTD has taken on

prodigous reponsibilities, the failure of which could backfire on the government. Employing and managing the dedicated workers and ensuring the security of the invaluable jewelry must all be done under the eye of the Deity, and in such a way as to preserve the faith of the all-important pilgrims.

Suffering Servants of the Lord

Not everyone will miss the Mirasi."If kingship can go, landlords can go, nizamscould go, and the zamindaricould be abolished, why not the Mirasi? The food was converted into money to fill the pockets of these brokers who are Mirasis,"remarks Mr. Krishnaswamy, an advocate in Tirupati. There is also a section of workers who welcomed the Court's decision. Ironically, they are the worst affected lot, called "potu-workers" laboring as laddumakers under the Gamekar Mirasi[see sidebar, "Priestly Heirarchy"]. About 220 of these workers have been toiling long hours in the temple kitchen preparing the special and highly regarded food offerings that have been served to pilgrims for at least 600 years. Some of them have been on this job for over fifty years. Though the Mirasis change every year, the temple workers have remained the same, working as daily wagers for whichever Mirasiwhose term it is. It was the proxy Mirasidarwho was their master and controlling authority.

After March 19, neither the Mirasinor the TTD agent showed up, leaving the workers in a state of confusion, with no one officially in charge. In order to avert a major breakdown of temple administration, the TTD promised to take all the 220 workers into its fold. But within two days the TTD went back on its word and absorbed only 87 workers, leaving out some

senior employees who had spent all their life making prasada at the temple. The potu-workers protested, and after long hours of heated discussion with the TTD officials a second list was issued from the TTD. In all only 140 workers were retained.

It is the magnanimity of these workers that has seen to the smooth functioning of the temple kitchen, and continuous availability of laddus.Had they struck work, the whole administration would have crumbled into chaos. "Our duty is towards the Lord and the devotees. We will not let them down. Pay or no pay, even if we have to starve and take to begging, we shall see that the prasadawill reach the people," say the potu-workers in unison.

While I was talking to these workers, one of them pointed to an elderly associate standing in a remote corner staring blankly. He had served the temple for fifty years and was now without work. As he caught me looking at him, tears swelled in his aging eyes. Little did these workers imagine that hunger and poverty would strike them right under the gaze of the Lord whom they devotedly served.

The Supreme Court has directed the State to set up a committee to go into the conditions of service, wages and selection and submit its report within six months to the apex court for approval. With India's elections just around the corner, this is not likely to be on the government agenda for quite sometime.

Sidebar: Hereditary Pretense?

The 12 Mirasifamilies seem to have themselves to blame for the loss of their hereditary rights. They have failed to elicit a convincing answer to the central question: "What is the contested hereditary duty when the Mirasishave virtually stopped serving in the temple, hiring agents to do their work?" The essence of the hereditary system is that the nominated families alone serve the temple, as their forefathers did. But over the years, most of the Mirasis have migrated away from the temple and hired substitutes, or "agents," to operate on their behalf and receive the emoluments and prasadam. Even those who stayed in Thirumala and Tirupati adopted this practice. The Supreme Court noted this in their statement, " Archakasand Gamekarshave not been rendering service personally but only through their deputies who have been working for a consideration. The hereditary nature of the right became irrelevant."

Sidebar: Tirupati's Priestly Hierarchy

It is unknown exactly when and how the Mirasisystem began, though there are claims that Sri Ramanuja started it in 1040ce, installing the Mirasisfor the effective management of the temple. The earliest reference to the distribution of prasada dates back to an inscription of the 14th century.

The two major Mirasisare the Archaka Mirasi, who looked after the pujas and rituals, and the Gamekar Mirasiwho was in charge of preparing the sacred food offerings, prasada.In return for their services, they were entitled to a share in the prasadaas well as to donations received from the various other sevas (priestly services) they performed.

The Agama Sastrasprescribed that the Archaka Mirasialone could perform the pujas and rituals.They hired a number of assistants called Archaka Gumasthasand paid them for their services.

The prasadaused in the various sevas,including the famous laddus,were the privileged duty of the Gamekar Mirasito prepare. They too hired assistants, called "potu-workers" or Gamekar Gumasthaswho were paid daily wages on a contract basis by the Mirasis.

While the archaka Mirasisreceived a share of the prasadaand collections from the sevas, the Gamekar Mirasisgot a share only from the prasada.The other minor beneficiary Mirasisalso partook in the temple duties and rituals and obtained their share of the prasada.The Mirasitradition began with four families, which have gradually expanded and become more than twelve. The families take turns and serve at the temple for one year at a time. This system continued up until the March 19 decision.

Sidebar: The Politics of Food

Prasadais a Sanskrit word which literally means "clarity, brightness, grace." Its most common modern usage refers to food offered to the Deity or the guru, or the blessed remnants of such food. Practically all Hindu scripture advises the eating of prasadaas a way to physically imbibe the blessings from the Deity or guru. Tirupati prasadaspecifically refers to the laddu, an otherwise common Indian sweet which has become renowned through its daily offering to Lord Venkateshwara and subsequent sale to His devotees.

In earlier days, the Mirasiscarried home their share of the prasadaand consumed it. But as the number of devotees swelled and the quantity of prasadaincreased, the Mirasiswho got larger quantities started selling their share. The TTD provides all the provisions for the prasadapreparation--nearly 80,000 ladduseveryday. Some days the number exceeds 125,000. The Mirasisreceive a 21.6% share, or 11 laddusfor every 51 prepared. The subsidized cost of each ladduis Rs.4. So by cashing in on his share, the major Mirasiswere getting a tidy sum of nearly 69,000 or more rupees every day on laddus alone and scoring a princely sum of over 26 million rupees a year (that's us$761,000)--the Archaka Mirasireceived 11 million, and the Gamekar Mirasicollected nearly 15 million. The TTD was effectively paying out over 30 million rupees to all the Mirasisannually, which they now stand to gain.

When I last visited, the ladduswere being rationed. Pilgrims could only purchase a limited quantity. Yet they were also being sold clandestinely for 25 rupees. "It was a well organized operation between the agents, the Mirasisand some of the TTD workers. This was being done right under the nose of the TTD," observed Mr. Shridar, a shop owner near the temple. To put an end to this practice, the TTD drew up a system to buy back the black market laddusat the normal subsidized rate. This clipped the wings of the errant agents and avaricious Mirasisto some extent.