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Category : [October/November/December 2009](#)

Published by senthil on Sep. 03, 2009

Temples

A Priestly Clan Under Siege

The legendary Dikshitar face a government takeover of Chidambaram Temple, but their profuse trials extend far in time and complexity

By Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

It should be an honor second to none. In the heart of many a devout Saivite, there is a dream that arises when one sees Lord Nataraja at the most holy Chidambaram temple. It beckons to let go of all else, to devote life to Him alone. There are a few men born with this opportunity, the dikshitar priests whose lives revolve entirely around His service in His foremost citadel. Earning birth into such hereditary priesthood is regarded as a glorious fulfillment of many lives of bhakti and purification, and so it was centuries ago when the maharajas ruled strong, their empires centered around temples rather than palaces. In those days, a vibrant host of 3,000 priests served at Chidambaram.

These days, the dikshitar, reduced to little more than 300, find themselves as characters in a very different story. Though the massive stones of Lord Siva's temple still hold firmly in place, the walled chambers now witness a depopulated and impoverished priesthood, struggling to perform their work and, in some cases, even to survive. The decline of the dikshitar started centuries ago but has intensified in the last fifty years. The latest and most severe blow was a hostile takeover by the Tamil Nadu government on February 2, 2009, which has sparked outrage, public protests and a cloud of uncertainty, all meeting nothing more than an odd silence from the Indian media.

To shed light on the controversy, Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik traveled to Chidambaram in March 2009, where intense days awaited. News of his arrival--as the representative of an international publication--spread like wildfire in

the town of 60,000 people whose life is deeply tied to the temple. His small hotel room became a press center, with an incessant flux of priests, devotees and leaders of local communities lining up to be interviewed. They all longed to be given a voice, offering well-informed opinions, stories, legends and mystical insights. In this emotionally charged atmosphere, Rajiv Malik was even advised against wandering alone in the evenings.

The Tamil Language Conundrum

The dikshitar's latest woes were brought about by one incident, a catalyst of things long in the making. In 2008, the oduvar Arumugaswami--a singer of sacred Tamil songs called devarams--accused the dikshitars of not allowing him to sing to Lord Nataraja. The story brought extensive negative publicity to the priests. Stripped of most details, the news reached the Indian media portraying the dikshitars as arrogant Sanskritists, contemptuous of the Tamil language and callous toward the people's needs. The case was taken to the government and then to the local courts, causing a commotion of proportions unseen in Chidambaram's recent history.

"This is a fabricated story," decries B. Kadhiresan, a lecturer of English at nearby Annamalai University and a member of the Organization for the Protection of Hindu Temples. "This is the main temple that historically promoted the Tamil language and also the singing of devarams. The songs, scribed on palm leaves, were hidden here in hostile times. When the Cholas took over, the dikshitars handed them the devarams, and the kings made them public."

Why, then, did antagonism arise between the dikshitars and Arumugaswami? Kadhiresan says that it was not a matter of linguistics. "This gentleman wanted to be in the holy chit sabha, the chamber of Lord Nataraja, and sing during the puja. But for mystical and traditional reasons, no one is ever allowed in the sabha during puja except for the dikshitar who is the pujari on that particular day, not even other dikshitars! But Arumugaswami tried to bully his way to the sabha."

The tensions and interests involved more than it is apparent to the average devotee, as it draws on ideological and political factions. In much of South India, there is a strong movement to install Tamil as the language of worship in temples in Tamil Nadu, decrying Sanskrit as outdated and elitist. The supporters of this theory, often Marxists and members of the government, see temples as social institutions, places created to serve the people who gather to practice their beliefs.

The other side of the language debate sees temples as places of power built to invoke the blessings of the Gods, sanctuaries for mystical communion using techniques and precise Sanskrit mantras revealed by the ancient rishis. Abandoning the liturgy of the worship, in their opinion, would cause its potency to wane and the temple itself to fade into a soulless edifice of stone.

It is not a genteel debate, and arguments can be inflammatory. Dr. Thiagarajan Rajagopalam, former head of the Sanskrit department at Presidency College in Chennai and a renowned singer, asks, "The Tamil Nadu government claims to be an atheist government. What right does it have to interfere with matters of worship?"

Discredited and Vulnerable

The incident with the oduvar at Chidambaram provided ample ammunition for the interventionist camp. The dikshitaras, a reclusive community with no media savvy, were easy prey to the campaign of disinformation that followed. Rumors abound, a popular one being that the dikshitaras wanted to forbid spoken Tamil even in conversations inside the temple complex. TV stations as far as Malaysia showed the dikshitaras as a clique of decadent, money-grabbing priests who ran an unkempt temple with filthy walls and unfriendly services. With a sweeping media spin against them, the dikshitaras, few of whom speak English, did not stand a chance.

The oduvar, backed by a mandate from the state court, was finally allowed to sing just as he wished, while the dikshitaras just stopped the puja and waited before they would proceed. One hot-tempered young dikshitar did not take this well. Far from the eyes of the crowd, he gave Arumugaswami a beating--providing more fuel for the fires of criticism. Dr. Ananda Nataraja, a dikshitar who currently works as a professor of Tamil language at Annamalai University, observes, "That was the mistake of one particular dikshitar. The community tried to protect him, which I think was wrong. The governing body of the dikshitaras, however, publicly criticized his actions."

Cries of mismanagement escalated. The temple itself, in its state of relative decay, was pointed to by critics as evidence of poor management. The Hinduism Today team also took notice of the dirty pillars and stained stones. They stand as a paradox, a contrasting background to the priests who, undeniably, have a strong affection for the temple.

A new rumor took flight, its source unknown, about how jewels from Lord Nataraja Himself had been missing, stolen or lost by the priests. Though government officials mentioned this freely in conversations, none would make a formal charge. Still, the cascade of accusations and slander further eroded the standing of the beleaguered priesthood.

A Long-Planned Takeover

The Tamil Nadu government's decades-long interest in Chidambaram Temple is notorious. In India, administration of temples follows state law, not federal law. Tamil Nadu has an estimated 38,000 Hindu temples, with all but the smallest ones run by the government--and Chidambaram was the last big one outside the system.

Back in July, 1983, Hinduism Today reported, "The Tamil Nadu State Department of Hindu 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." In 1987 the post of executive officer for Chidambaram was created but not implemented. Until now, the judiciary had dismissed all attempts to seize control.

Finally, emboldened by current circumstances, on February 2, 2009 the Tamil Nadu government appointed an Executive Officer with ample powers to oversee the temple in all aspects. On that same evening, the officer arrived at Chidambaram.

Protesting in the Streets

The dikshitaras immediately appealed the takeover, but the Chennai high court judge, Ms. Banumathi, upheld the decision. Popular outcry quickly followed.

On March 25, over 6,000 devotees joined a protest march and rally, demanding a reversal of the takeover. Braving the hot weather, a crowd of men, women and children chanted slogans and carried signs demanding, "Leave the temple!" Many waved flags representing Hinduism, with kolams or Nandi, Siva's mount, and often the whole crowd chanted a reverberating "Aum Namasivaya" that resonated along

the streets of the small temple-town.

Leaders of the community, who co-organized the event, marched representing their groups, including Sri Kunchitapatam, leader of the Tamil Nadu Hindu Temple Protection Committee, and the BJP's state leader Sri L. Ganesan. Though most participants of the peaceful demonstration came from Tamil Nadu, Siva devotees from all over the world could be seen marching the streets.

Inexplicably, the Hinduism Today news crew found no other reporters present to record the people's opinion, just as with the oduvar incident earlier. Distressed, senior dikshitar Sri N. Srimulalingam lamented, "Not a single English-language newspaper bothered to cover the event. This shows how our media is completely biased and is suppressing the voice and aspirations of dikshitar community." His concerns echoed the insecurity that prevailed among the priests. "There seems to be a deep-rooted conspiracy behind the takeover of Chidambaram Temple. It is one of the strongest pillars of Saivism, and this is going to adversely affect the spiritual rituals and practices."

The march lifted the spirits of those against the takeover, but so far it seems to have had little real effect. Judge Banumathi said she saw no grounds to review her ruling of the case. As far as state law goes, the takeover is now irreversible.

Dr. S.P. Sabharatnam is a world expert in Saiva Agamas, the scriptures that define Saivite worship and its mysticism. He told Hinduism Today, "The dikshitars are a venerable tradition, with the same standing as the Adi Saivas. They are pro-Tamil, though they have been accused otherwise. The take-over of the temple is illegal, unethical and finds no support in holy scripture."

Living for Lord Nataraja

In between a frenetic schedule of meetings, Rajiv found some time to visit the temple as a pilgrim, experiencing it firsthand. He talked to other pilgrims and to a few dikshitars there, who, comfortable in their element, had much to say.

The dikshitars are a temple priesthood like no other in modern India. They bring a

sense of timelessness to their work, their tradition and the management of the temple. Little or nothing has changed in their ways in the last centuries, even as much of their world has eroded away. Many pilgrims express the opinion that their most distinguished trait is their degree of devotion. They consider themselves to be the slaves, the keepers, the foremost devotees of Lord Nataraja.

For them, Chidambaram is the center of Lord Siva's universe. During the daily puja, they believe, a pulse is sent to the far reaches of Earth, the life current without which the cosmos would cease to exist.

To a devout Hindu with an open heart, the sublime shakti of Chidambaram Temple is magnificent. The temple halls are hallowed by numerous saints who worshiped here over the centuries; a divine presence is felt everywhere.

Dikshitar perform their pujas in groups of four to six priests. Only one is the main pujari for the day, assigned on a rotating schedule that takes about a year to bring another opportunity. The task is approached with reverent anticipation. In the course of a day, dikshitar perform all tasks, big and small--from exquisite chanting of the Vedas, using a liturgy that is exclusive to Chidambaram, to lighting lamps, carrying offerings and guarding the temple at night. They know of no other life.

Also present are many priests who approach guests, offering services, sometimes with the energetic insistence of an aggressive salesman, sometimes with the noble composure of a seasoned dikshitar. The outstretched hands are unsettling, creating an air of commerce that is not welcomed by most pilgrims and diminishes their regard for the priests. U. Usha, a housewife, complained, "Dikshitar are a little money-minded. They need to change their attitude."

In the traditional system, the relationship between the devotee and the dikshitar is personal, and payment for services is direct. There is little pooled income and the priests must find their own sponsors for the pujas. They are forced to spend much of their time looking for donors, which, according to many priests, is an unfortunate necessity contrary to their heritage.

"My aim in life is to serve Lord Nataraja. He is always giving life and energy. We crave His blessings only," says Ramu Dikshitar, 52. Ramu's bright smile gives way to an expression of anguish when he talks about the dikshitar's financial situation, lightening up again only when he speaks of Lord Nataraja.

Ramu and his family, six in all, live in a single, small, dilapidated room (see photo on page 28). Resting on the room's only furniture, a swing-like board held by chains, with his two sons who are apprentices of the priestly craft, Ramu wept while he spoke. "Our whole aim is to serve Lord Nataraja and his devotees. We have never demanded any money from the government. We want to do our pujas with freedom. We are facing a very critical situation today. The Hindu community should come forward. We are not thieves or robbers. We are in the service of Lord Nataraja. Please help us."

A typical dikshitar makes between Rs. 1,000 and 2,000 a month--or US\$42 at most to support his entire family. The temple's donations in the form of food and rice grain are shared by all. The rice comes from lands that belong to the temple, but only a handful of farmers actually pay their dues. Even when they do pay, they do so with inferior grains. "I do not think many of the people who criticize the dikshitar as exploiters would be able to eat the rice which they consume every day," observes S. Rajasekaran, a leading local businessman. "If you see it, you don't feel like eating it at all."

There is hope in the hearts of a few that the takeover might improve the economic situation of the priesthood. In most temples run by the government, priests have a fixed salary. But each temple follows a different arrangement, and for Chidambaram this is not in the plan so far. The government's investments are limited to improving the grounds, and a new official hundi (donation box) is thought to be diverting to the state donations that would normally go to the priests, making the situation worse for them.

The Dikshitar's History

The dikshitar's predicament is sad but also puzzling. This is, after all, a legendary temple, with an original staff of 3,000 priests--among whom, it is said, was Lord Siva Himself. It was in this grove of tillai trees that saints Vyagrapada and Patanjali worshiped the Lingam and witnessed Siva's unsullied ananda tandava, the cosmic dance of bliss. Mr. V. Sundaram, a former officer of the Indian Administrative Service and a journalist, shed some light on the history of the dikshitar and the

reasons behind their hardships.

According to him, in ancient times, each reigning maharaja successively added to the wealth and glory of his kingdom's temples, which were the epicenters of their empires. Temples were where the kingdom's populace worshiped, but also socialized, conducted business and met with government officials. Temples were unmediated courts of law, where truthful contract agreements could be made, because in front of the Deities few would dare to lie.

In those times, the priesthoods of major temples were partially sponsored by the raja's government, while retaining a high degree of independence. No temple would deny the monarch's personal requests or affront temporal power, but tradition itself--the system of jatis, or occupational clans--created a separation between the government and the clergy. A temple's administration stayed in the hands of its priests.

Mr. V. Sundaram explains that Lord Siva Nataraja of Chidambaram was given lands and properties that would serve as an endowment to the temple, a source of steady income designed to last forever. Sometimes, gifts were given to the dikshitaras as a group. Copper plates found by the Archeological Survey of India record a gift from King Rajendra Chola to the dikshitaras in 1120 ce, a whole village awarded in recognition of their devotion. By the early 1800s, the temple owned 5,500 acres. Because the priests are not allowed to work in agriculture themselves, peasant families grew crops on Nataraja's lands, paying part of their harvest as rent. The system provided bountiful offerings and tranquility to the priests.

When the maharajas fell, the British East India Company initially upheld the existing system. They were inclined to respect the private property records of the late empires, including the vast expanses of land owned by temples. A temple's land was traditionally registered under the name of the main Deity--at Chidambaram, it was "Nataraja." But the British, who were disdainful of Hinduism and ignorant of the ways of the land, helped pave the way for usurpers and opportunists. It came to pass that any person named "Nataraja" could claim some of the temple's land as his, and be granted lawful rights.

Gradually, families who lived on temple lands became less inclined to pay their

rents, going from a third, to a fifth, to a tenth, to nothing. Many claimed (and won) hereditary rights over the land, arguing that their family had occupied it for generations. Ancient laws, which decreed that the estate of a single person with no heirs should be given to Lord Nataraja, were spurned and ignored. With landed revenues depleted, the temple priests fell to a state of uncertainty and near pauperdom.

The Priests Today

If in the old days 3,000 priests worked to keep the temple clean and the vibration pristine, the diminished ranks of today, with just 373, are woefully deficient. In fact, much of the criticism aimed at the dikshitar is a direct result of their impoverishment and decimated ranks. It is a vicious cycle that only brings further decay.

There are, among the dikshitar, some who face the challenge with a full heart and dignified forbearance. S. Kailasa Sankara Dikshitar, 52, keeps an inner perspective, seeing not financial, but mystical missteps behind the problems. "Since 1957, we dropped many of the traditional ways. We do not perform a ghee abhishekam to the sphatika (crystal) lingam anymore. We abandoned certain rites that are expensive. We have even missed kumbhabhishekams and performed them on the wrong dates. Our rites deal with forces of the cosmos. I feel that if we solve this, it will have a positive effect on the Tamil people, in Sri Lanka and in the world."

D. Raja Dikshitar, a young mystic of 25, explains what it means to be a dikshitar, whether the times are good or bad: "We are connected to the Lord all the time. My life and my temple activities cannot be separated. Even as babies, when we drank milk from our mothers, we were creating a commitment to this divine task."

A New Commissioner

Mrs. N. Thirumagal, from the Hindu Religious & Charitable Endowments, is the strong woman now in charge of the male hereditary priesthood. She began her work quietly, taking on the least controversial projects first--with one exception. She placed a hundi in Chidambaram Temple, defying a centuries-old tradition, a point of contention that is seen by many as physical evidence of who is now in charge. But Mrs. Thirumagal has otherwise tried to listen to the opinions of the dikshitar and find common ground. "We wanted to build a tank at a small Sri Vinayaka shrine in the corner, where breaking coconuts has become untidy. Since the dikshitar who is

the pujari of that shrine objected, we cancelled the project," she shares.

Emotions still run high in the chaotic and wavering moods common to the aftermath of confrontation. Some dikshitar avoid any contact with the new commissioner; others have gone so far as honoring her with a shawl. Mrs. Thirumagal is not the stereotypical stone-hearted, anti-Hindu marxist, but a devout Hindu, and that blurs the lines of the quarrel.

Still, her commitment to her job is unflinching. She speaks with pride of her previous work at Kapaleshwar Temple in Mylapore: "During my term as a deputy commissioner there, the temple's yearly income went from US\$312,000 to US\$1.5 million. I also renovated the temple. How is it possible that Chidambaram, a world-famous temple, had an insignificant income last year?" Kapaleshwar Temple is today often mentioned as an example of good governance, with high standards for cleanliness and organization.

She has ambitious plans, mostly related to administration and maintenance. Some of the improvements, such as cleaning, are widely supported. But her financial strategies will change the dynamics of Chidambaram and put an end to customs that date back to the Chola empire, conforming it to the other government-run temples in the state. The main innovations are charging for admission and creating VIP passes with special privileges--which are common in India.

G. Kunjithapatham, 59, President of the Hindu Temple Protection Committee and one of the organizers of the rally, summarizes the most common concerns. "We go to the temple to worship the Lord and to have His darshan. In front of God, everybody is the same. In this temple, so far, there is no distinction between VIPs and commoners. Here, anyone can stand anywhere and have darshan for as long as they want."

V. Chandrasekaran, Secretary of Tamil Nadu Brahmins Association, adds, "All the pujas here are performed at their proper time. Even if a minister comes, the pujas will not be disturbed; once the temple is closed, no one is allowed. But in other temples, if an important official comes, they tell the archakas to open the temple. Pujas are delayed for hours, waiting for such VIPs. At Chidambaram, the dikshitar respect not just the money but also the devotion of the pilgrims."

The dikshitaras are singular in their organization, one of the world's oldest functioning democracies. In their assemblies, each dikshitar has one vote, sometimes giving equal weight to the opinions of father and son. It is still uncertain how control will now be shared with the new commissioner.

Though the first months of the new power-sharing arrangement brought few changes, uncertainty and fear of the future are common among the dikshitaras interviewed. S. Thillai Nagarathina Dikshitar explained, "If the temple stops making prasadam food available to us, we will be in trouble. The temple provides food to all the 373 families, regardless of status and position. Two thirds of the families are so poor that they cannot survive without the food they get from the temple."

Uncertain Future

The next step, according to B. Kumar, the dikshitaras' lawyer, is to take the case to federal courts. The argument is that the dikshitaras are a minority protected by constitutional laws. "It is a crystal-clear case. The rights of denominations are safeguarded under the constitution. The bench said that the podhu dikshitaras are a denomination and are entitled to the management of their institution." In Indian law, denominations, or micro-minorities as they are sometimes called, are small groups that share a common heritage and are the living embodiment of a tradition that needs to be preserved. As B. Kumar explains, "This is not a temple where there are just ten pujaris. They are 373 families. That is why, in 1952, the state bench decreed that the podhu dikshitaras are entitled to remunerate themselves using the donations given to the temple. It is a community prohibited by tradition from taking any other remunerated job. If a podhu dikshitar takes any other avocation, he is disqualified from sharing the proceeds."

B. Kumar also considers the financial situation of the dikshitaras an important point in their defense against the accusations of mismanagement. According to him, "It is incorrect to say that the dikshitaras are living in luxurious conditions, or getting rich. This distinction is very vital. No act of mismanagement was ever proven in court. "

The proceedings of the case may take years. Meanwhile, Chidambaram is likely to remain under governmental control.

For the Tamil Nadu government, this means that all noteworthy temples are under state management, but only as far as the Hindu religion is concerned--the houses of worship of all other religions have so far been left undisturbed. Our correspondent Rajiv Malik inquired if there is a plan to continue to also take over mosques and churches. Mrs. Thirumagal said, "I cannot comment on why only Hindu institutions or temples are taken over. It is basically a government's decision. But wherever mismanagement is taking place, we will take over." It is a position that draws criticism. Dr. Thiagarajan Rajagopalam denounces, "If the government is taking over Hindu temples, can it claim to be a secular government? Under the garb of secularism, the government is silent about the administration of any temple of other religions. This is wrong. A full takeover of property that does not belong to the government is tantamount to stealing the temple."

The dikshitar's--and Chidambaram's--future is unsettled. How will their woes be solved, and how will their heritage survive, only Lord Nataraja may say. All is His dance, and though some of His steps are fierce, the diskhitar's know well it is also an infinite dance of bliss.Pipi

T.R. Ramesh, the Dikshitar's' Representative

What is it, in Indian law, that allows the government to take over religious institutions?

The draconian section 45 of Tamil Nadu's Hindu Religious & Charitable Endowments Act provides sweeping powers to appoint an Executive Officer to "manage the secular affairs" of a public temple. But denominations, like the dikshitar's, are protected by the Indian Constitution, entitled to survive and maintain their unique identity.

Is Chidambaram the only temple fighting against intervention in Tamil Nadu?

Chidambaram is the last one, except for temples belonging to maths, which can only be audited, not managed by the state.

Why oppose the government?

First, because with their interference corruption becomes widespread. Second, the government is interested only in revenues. They have no intention of observing tradition or preserving our rites and culture. Temple revenues, which are offerings made to the Gods, are often diverted to non-sacred or even anti-religious initiatives. Third, the government is known to interfere with the mystical practices, setting rules for pujas and festivals that are not traditional. Fourth, administrative officers, ignoring the community, never consult the priests or local people.

Is the staff of some temples satisfied?

No, not even temples with income exceeding millions of rupees. Their revenues are not properly collected and later are misused. Temple property is sold surreptitiously or leased out for a pittance. Most of them become highly commercialized; their festivals and rituals are changed with the intention of making them more popular, to attract more visitors.

Does Indian law have similar rules for other religions?

There are specific laws to control wakf properties (belonging to mosques). But they have never been applied. Nor has a Christian church ever suffered an intervention.

N. Thirumagal, the Government's Commissioner

What is your background as a temple commissioner?

I was a law graduate and practiced as a lawyer for seven years. More recently, I managed the Kapaleshwar Temple. I work at a state department overseeing Hindu religious institutions, where we manage around 38,000 temples in Tamil Nadu. Most big temples are being administered by deputy commissioners like me. The

department is headed by a senior officer of the Indian Administrative Service, but I am not affiliated with the IAS.

What has changed since the takeover?

We installed a hundi, and also focused on cleaning. There were dirty walls and garbage. We also fixed the drainage system.

What are the future plans?

We are getting in touch with those who have leases of land belonging to Chidambaram. We want to make sure their leases are properly paid. We want also to improve the lighting in the temple, set up a security system and develop the surrounding gardens. We plan to create a website, renovate the 1000-pillared mandapam which is today closed, and provide proper facilities for visitors.

Will the dikshitaras be consulted about your decisions?

The administration of the temple will be done by us together. They will be heard as trustees. The administration is run by me as the executive officer with a trustee board. We will look for agreement in our relationship with the dikshitaras.

What will change for the dikshitaras regarding the donations?

I do not think they will be much affected economically. Whatever is offered to them on the puja plates would be available to them. I guarantee there will be no change in that. Some archakas can also be paid servants, receiving both a salary and the puja tray offerings. Revenue coming out of hundi will be utilized for the development of the temple. In fact, we do not know what is the exact income of the Chidambaram Temple.

