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Temples

Kerala Temple's Wealth Astounds India

Court case alleging mismanagement of assets leads to opening of old vaults containing what appears to be billions of dollars worth of gold and jewels

By Choodie Shivaram, Bengaluru

In July 2011, the Sree Anantha Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, captured world headlines when vast wealth was discovered in its vaults, catapulting it to the position of the world's richest temple. The wealth came to light as a result of on-going litigation concerning control of the ancient temple. The Supreme Court of India ordered an inventory of the temple's six sacred vaults. Four of the vaults, which are opened regularly, contained no surprises. The remaining two, denoted A and B by the court and said to be unopened for centuries, caused great excitement.

A media frenzy ensued after vault A was opened in the presence of a committee appointed by the court. Heaps of gold coins, hundreds of big gold chains, crowns, Deities and other precious valuables of antiquity lay buried under broken dusty cabinets. News of the "treasure" dominated TV screens and newspapers. In no time, fake photos circulated on the Internet. Rumored figures of the value of the wealth neared 38 billion dollars. The flow of misinformation, so-called expert analysis and suggestions for use of this wealth have continued since. The Supreme Court explicitly rejected all hypothetical estimates valuing the find: "What is appearing in the newspapers is just surmises and conjectures."

The temple, located at Kerala's southern end, is a trust managed and administrated by the erstwhile royal family of Travancore, the former princely state of the area. The temple Deity, Lord Vishnu, is represented by Sri Padmanabha reclining on the serpent Anantha. The unusual, 18-foot-long murti is made of 12,000

shaligram stones brought from the Gandaki river in Nepal.

Indian law allows a State government to seize control of a religious institution that is being mismanaged. As a result, for example, nearly all the temples in Tamil Nadu, including the incomparable Chidambaram Temple--are now under state control. [Hinduism Today, which has followed this issue since the 1980s, has never discovered a case where the law was used to seize an institution of any other religion.]

History of the Case

In 2007, T. P. Sundara Rajan and Sri Padmanabhan brought a case claiming mismanagement and misappropriation of the temple assets. On January 31, 2011, Kerala's High Court ordered that control of the temple pass to the State. The royal family appealed to India's Supreme Court, which responded by ordering an inventory of the temple's assets.

After opening vault A on June 28 and inspecting its riches, the committee observed a snake insignia on the door of vault B--a warning that opening it is prohibited by divine sanction. Many fear that opening the vault could lead to calamity for the city and personal harm to the royal family. This omen gained credence even among skeptics when one original petitioner, T. P. Sundara Rajan, died just days after the opening of vault A. His untimely demise led to comparisons with the supposed curse upon those who, in 1922, opened the tomb of the Egyptian King Tutankhamun--which was also guarded by the image of a snake. Sundara Rajan's death, interpreted as divine retribution, caused considerable alarm in the city.

Before the court's judgment regarding the opening vault B, several respected astrologers sought to divine the will of the Deity by conducting a ceremony called Ashtamangala Devaprasnam at the request of the royal family. They reported that the contents of vault A had been defiled by the investigation and that opening Vault B would incur the Deity's displeasure. Initial attempts to open Vault B in July failed and, to date, no further attempt has been made.

My First-Hand Report

In September, I requested assignment from Hinduism Today to go to Kerala and

explore the situation. I found the topic on everyone's mind in Trivandrum. Many sided with the royal family, who are held in the highest regard here. Some told me that Sundara Rajan's case had been vindictive in nature, that he was unhappy with his treatment by temple officers and sought revenge on the Maharaja, Uthradom Tirunal Marthanda Varma. The second petitioner, Padmanabhan, is a temple worker who was suspended for alleged misconduct.

I learned how deep feelings are running there when I asked my taxi driver if he thought the Maharaja was stealing the temple's wealth, as accused. He stopped short in the busy road, angrily slapped his head and let out a stream of Malayalam curses against those questioning the Maharaja's honesty. I took that as a "No."

Staking Claim to the Treasure

When the Supreme Court ordered the opening of the six vaults on June 18, 2011, they appointed a seven-member expert committee headed by C. V. Ananda Bose, the director general of National Museums. The committee included representatives of the Archeological Survey of India (ASI), the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), retired judges of the Kerala High Court, the Maharaja and Jaya Kumar, the high-ranking Additional Chief Secretary of Kerala's state government.

The reports of vault A's contents generated an avalanche of suggestions on what do with the wealth--even though the Chief Minister of Kerala, Oommen Chandy, stated, "No part of the wealth belongs to any person except the Deity, Lord Padmanabhaswamy."

Under Indian law, the Deity of a temple is a "juristic person," and all of the temple properties and wealth are held in the Deity's name. This principle was honored even under British rule. (Recently London courts reaffirmed the principle in the case of a 12th-century Nataraja murti that had been stolen from the ancient Pathur Temple in Tamil Nadu. Police confiscated the Deity from the British Museum in 1982, and it was eventually returned to India.)

At stake in the Padmanabha Temple case is not the right to own the wealth, but the control of it, and of the temple itself, both of which are now under the royal family's oversight. Several such government takeovers (such as that of the Tiruvattar Kesava Perumal temple in Tamil Nadu) have been followed by systematic

looting of the temple's wealth by persons in connivance with the priests. Tiruvattar, which belonged to the same royal family, was known to be richer than Padmanabhaswamy Temple. In the 1990s it came to light that a huge amount of gold decorations for the Deity had been replaced with copper plates. It is speculated that the temple has vaults similar to those at Padmanabha.

Kerala's Communist Party Leader, V. S. Achutanandan, an atheist, claimed that the Padmanabha wealth belongs to the people and demanded it be used for social welfare programs. Others suggested displaying the sacred treasures and murtis in a Louvre-like museum. Some advocated an auction, with the proceeds going toward education, development, roads or even reduction of India's national debt.

Shashi Tharoor, a member of parliament from Trivandrum and a former Foreign Affairs Minister, told a local news channel, "I object to those who are anxious to be generous with other people's money. It's important that we honor the sanctity of the temple and its possessions. It is the symbol of the city. "

Central to the petitioners' request for takeover of the temple is the claim that the temple was always under control of a committee, and not the king. The committee consisted of six brahmins and a secretary and was presided over by the Namboodiri Chief Priest. These eight members--called the Ettara Yogam and appointed by the king--managed the temple. Eetta means "eight" and ara (for arasan) means "king." Shungoony Menon, author of A History of Travancore, mistranslated ettara as "eight and a half," claiming that the king had only a half vote in temple affairs. This reference was used by the petitioners to argue that the king held only nominal power, and thus, could not assert control of the temple.

In a joint statement, experts Prof. Shashibushan, Dr. Raja and Uma, countered this claim, saying, "No voting system ever existed, there are no records to show that this 8-1/2 voting, or any voting system existed. This is a completely English concept that had influenced the writer's opinions and is a distortion of history." Other scholars, including Elankulam Kunjanan Pillai and Dr. A.G. Menon, also dismissed Shungoony Menon's half-vote theory.

Tight Security. Or Is It?

It will take at least a year to catalog, analyze and individually value the contents of

vault A. Since all of the items are antiquities, their value is exceptional, but no list and not a single photo has been released to the public (though there are bogus photos circulating on the Internet). The small amount of valid information that is known is said to have been leaked in breach of confidentiality by an over-enthusiastic committee member or by petitioner Sundara Rajan, who eagerly addressed the media upon exiting the vault.

The royal family was displeased with the leaks. Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, niece of the present Maharaja, told me, "He or his representatives would come out and regularly give details to the press. Sundara Rajan was a police officer and should have been aware of the security concerns. It's surprising that he was not prevented from talking. But then, the BBC acknowledged Ananda Padmanabhan, Sundara Rajan's lawyer, as being one of those who revealed details. We informed the court through our representatives that there was a serious security threat with this breach."

Nearly 40 persons were involved in the inspection of vault A. They included jewelers brought in to weigh the ornaments, technicians supplying oxygen to the underground chambers and security personnel. Each person represented an increased risk of leaks. As a result, security in the area has been greatly increased, to the considerable inconvenience of local residents. A five-kilometer wide "sanitized" zone has been established in which vehicles may be searched and no construction is allowed.

Jaya Kumar, the government representative on the court-appointment committee, summed matters up for Hinduism Today in an exclusive interview: "No one is claiming the treasure, neither the State nor the royal family. It is not palace property, but has been offered to the Lord Himself."

Jaya Kumar defended the need for an inventory, saying it would prevent future thefts, and that it is the State's responsibility to guard the treasure, now that they know about it. Throughout the court case, he explained, the government has taken the position that the temple was well run, and there was no need for intervention.

He criticized the premature publicity by other committee members. "I feel that one mistake some of the observers made was sharing their feelings about the find in

public. I wasn't awestruck by the jewels and ornaments. I was just doing my duty. Only after the news broke did my wife ask me why I hadn't mentioned any of the riches in the vaults and wondered why I was so stoic about it. Now it is up to the court what to do with the treasures."

The Vaults

The vaults (kalaras in Malayalam) are inconspicuously tucked around the perimeter of the sanctum sanctorum. "Common people who have no connection with the temple will not know these are the vaults," noted Dr. R. P. Raja, a senior scholar and historian. "According to temple protocol, three people are necessary to open these vaults. The keys to the vault are held in a safe in a strongroom in the temple. The key to the safe is with the maharaja, and the key to the strongroom is with the princess. The executive officer, the representative of the maharaja, the treasurer, and at least 12 people on duty whose names are registered are required to be present whenever the vaults are opened, and these are clearly documented."

Two vaults on the northwestern side are opened eight times a year to bring out ornaments and other items for special festivals. Two other vaults house puja items for daily use. Temple sources state the vaults under contention, vaults A and B, were never opened, as there was no need to do so.

On entering vault A, the team found an empty, dusty room in which they discovered a hatch in the floor and steps leading to an underground chamber containing the wealth. They also tried at that time to open vault B, but the key failed to work. Now, in addition to trepidation occasioned by the serpent image, there are concerns that opening vault B's heavy door may result in structural damage.

Princess Gouri Lakshmi Bayi told Hinduism Today, "None of us has been inside the vaults. We knew that Padmanabha was rich, but not to what extent. Even Uncle did not know about the contents of vault A. The find came as a huge surprise to us all."

The Royal Family

The temple has an archive of 3,000 palm-leaf bundles. They contain records of donations, rituals, festivals, royal adoptions, appointments and even minor altercations among the staff. Some of the bundles are Palace Manuals, which contain detailed instructions to the royal family for observance of rituals, donations, traditions and conventions, including the royal adoptions, which are a major feature of Travancore history.

One manual states, for instance, that the king must visit Padmanabha every day to report the day's developments and duties performed. Any default in this incurs a penance--a fine payable to the Deity. To this day, the aging Maharaja visits the temple at 7:30 am and spends ten minutes in front of the Deity, reporting to Him as a humble servant.

The family's devotion was exemplified by Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma's Tripadidanam ceremony in 1750, in which he formally dedicated his entire kingdom to the Deity. From that moment on, Lord Padmanabha Himself has been the ruler of Travancore; the royal family function as His faithful servants and trustees. The family has always seen that revenue from temple property went to the temple. However, the government took over much of the temple's land under the Land Ceiling Act shortly after India's Independence.

The royals' piety is the source of much of the temple's wealth. The Palace Manual requires lavish gifts to the Deity, such as a golden pot of one to two kilos on every birthday in the family. Weddings require a donation of three 18-foot-long gold sarapoli necklaces for the Deity. Maharaja Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma (1813-1846), an extraordinary ruler and patron of the arts, is said to have given 200,000 gold coins in a single day, putting them into the donation box one at a time with his own hands

The current Maharaja, who turns 90 in April, unfailingly fulfills his duty to the Lord. Despite an injury to his feet, he goes to the temple every day. Twice a year he walks barefoot three kilometers with the Aarat procession. In a rare interview, he told me, "I'm a young person of 90, and I'm fortunate to be born in this family which has a great deal of submission to our treasured ideals, traditions and spiritualism." He continues to meet all the expenses of the temple staff from his own pocket, estimated at us\$50,000 per month. In addition, the family provide \$70,000 per year toward the daily rituals and periodic festivals.

Unlike many other erstwhile princely families in India today, the Travancore family has eschewed political involvement. They live a life of piety and frugality and are revered here by high and low alike. Recent allegations have been painful to the family.

Anantha Krishna, a journalist with one of India's premier dailies, told me, "If the royals really had been looting the temple as alleged, they would have been living in pomp and splendor. Look at the Kaudiar palace. It is badly in need of maintenance, which obviously means huge expenditure. Yet, they are spending out of their personal finances to maintain the temple." Now the court proceedings have placed further financial strain on the family's resources.

Conclusion

Other temples with royal patronage may have had similar stores of wealth, but these have been lost to looting and thieving--not just by the invaders, but by our own people as well. The temples are now a pale shadow of their glorious past. It is a testament to the devotion of its guardians that the Padmanabhaswamy wealth has been preserved.

I spoke to innumerable people in Thiruvananthapuram: auto drivers, the guest house staff, officials, devotees, shopkeepers, laypersons on the street, historians, temple workers, government officials, businessmen and film stars. There was no division of opinion or question about the royal family's integrity or devotion to Padmanabhaswamy. "Everyone knows the Maharaja and his family are totally honest, and even those criticizing them secretly agree that their integrity is of the highest order," offered one of the communist union workers.

If this sort of takeover attempt were aimed at a religious center of any other religion, one can easily imagine the worldwide expression of outrage that would ensue. A 2003 attempt by the Kerala government to merely inventory the wealth of the state's Christian churches was canceled after a storm of protests from church officials. But most Hindu organizations have been silent in the matter of Padmanabhaswamy temple.

Prof. Shashi Bhushan said, "This is the worst I have seen in my life. Very few Hindu organizations are concerned over these developments; they think this is a Padmanabhaswamy temple affair. No, it's not just the temple. It's the very foundation of Hindu faith that is being shaken. This is exposing the disunity of Hindus, and this worries me."

The princess expresses the steadfastness of her family: "We have to wait and watch how things will evolve, but the family is united in this: that our seva to the temple is of paramount importance. The moment I go into the temple, it supersedes all the turbulence and trauma that defies expression."

When the mythical ocean of milk was churned for the nectar of immortality, poison emerged first. In case of Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple, a great deal of venom has been spewed; we can only wait for the ambrosia to follow.