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Cape-to-Madras March Vents Frustration Over 30-Year Mismanagement of 32,000 Temples

"Encyclopedia Britannica," year 2000: In the aftermath of the late 1980's ministry scandals, leading to congressional probes into gross tax fraud and funds misappropriation, the U.S. government took over administrative and monetary control of all Christian churches with congregations of 10,000 members or more. Bitter legal and civil struggles ensued, climaxed by a dogged march from Dallas, Texas, to Washington D.C. by hundreds of Christian clergy. The march marked the beginning of a reversal of state-controlled churches.

Obviously, this is a fictitious rendering. It is, in a word, unbelievable. But for 350 orange-robed Hindu monks and determined devotees on the Kanyakumari beachhead at India's southernmost point, it is fact. It is May 1st, 1988. As a bloated, rising sun casts a gold-orange veil on the Vivekananda Memorial in the distant Cape Comorin waters, some of the swamis wonder what Swami Vivekananda would have done in their stead. Some sit cross-legged, a scrubby beard, and stubble on their shaven head, indrawn, contemplating their mission or some recessed state of God-joy. Others are pensive, furrows of righteous indignation moving over their faces as they speak animatedly. A younger group, sunglasses pushed up the nose to fend off India's summer sun, are anxious to march. Thirty days of ozone-thin solar rays, hot winds and applauding, chanting crowds await them.

They are walking to Madras, a sannyas protest march 700 miles long, timed to arrive at the Tamil Nadu Governor's office on May 31st. Inside the air-conditioned office, a petition with tens of thousands Hindu signatures will be presented. The padayatra (pilgrimage) is the latest maneuver engineered by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (Universal Hindu Assembly) to leverage government control of Hindu temples into private, autonomous governing boards.

Swami Sundaranatha of the Tiruvavadhuthurai Saiva Monastery distills the gathered monk's feelings, "Our ancestors built huge temples all over the land and now we, their so called descendents, aren't even able to light lamps inside these magnificent temples. They are in a pathetic condition due to mal-administration by selfish and atheistic politicians. It is time we free our holy temples from the clutches of such elements."

In India, state governments do control the monetary, administrative and succession policies of many Hindu temples. For Tamil Nadu, South India - studded by 32,215 historic temples scattered across Middle-Eastern-type landscape - the legislated takeover began in 1951 and was consummated in 1959, coincidentally the year Chinese communist forces annexed Tibet. The agency's name is Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HRCE) and it keeps tab on an annual temple income of U.S. \$10 million. Islamic and Christian institutions are autonomously administered - left alone by the government.

For most of the past 29 years, the temples and many Hindu monasteries associated with them have been oversighted and controlled by politicians, atheistic and opportunistic in spirit and some with socialist coloring. There have been bright exceptions, Hindu appointees who take the stewardship of ancient, sacred precincts and property more seriously than their own careers.

But overall their efforts have been like butterfly wings against a slag pile. The temples look unkempt, a dishevelled, greasy shadow of their former towering elegance. Priests are underpaid to the point of malnutrition, valuable icons are routinely stolen, embezzlement is frequent. Sacred granite halls painstakingly assembled and sculpted by craftsmen ten centuries ago are converted into government warehouses, gunnysacks piled to the ceilings where once musicians, dancers and scholars celebrated the Deity's presence. Mismanagement of the endowment lands for the temples has led to phenomenal revenue shortages. And at one estimate over 31,000 smaller, less prestigious and popular temples receive very little of the financial pie. The final blow came when the government began siphoning off temple funds to sponsor social welfare programs.

One Hindu industrialist interviewed in the Madras-based *Aside* magazine explained the economic illusion, "The average temple has probably an income of Rs. 30,000 per month. The government takes 20,000 for its social programs, leaving just Rs 10,000 for the temple. The temple officers, priests and servants have to be paid

from this amount. With what is left, the temple has to conduct daily worship, as well as the festival pujas that happen frequently. The result is that there is no longer enough money to conduct worship in the way it used to be conducted before. Temples need a kumbhabhishekam every twelve years to maintain the sanctity and energy source of the temple through special pujas and mantras. But these days hardly any temple has the funds to carry out the kumbhabhishekam."

Three years ago, in what seemed a sincere attempt to repair government policy, a Rs 6.5 million interest-bearing fund was created by HRCE to help maintain impoverished temples. But a quick analysis shows the program is far too little, too late. Thirteen hundred temples receive benefits-that is Rs 5,000 each from the deposit fund. The interest is about Rs 750 a year. That works out to Rs 65 a month, Rs 2 a day - a sum that wouldn't buy one person a decent meal.

One of the most unsettling facets of the HRCE laws is that the government has a muscular voice and arm in choosing the successor to the abbot position of Hindu monasteries. This is like the Italian congress choosing the next Roman Catholic pope. Many of the monasteries have endowment agricultural lands gifted by ancient royal decrees. And as the abbot's seat is as much an administrative as spiritual one, the government is very interested in who has the checkbook for large pools of monastery funds. This has stoked the ecclesiastical ire to red hot over the years.

The sannyas community has been sailing deeper into political waters over the past five years. The result has been a more vociferous call for mixing politics and religion among swamis, even at major Hindu conferences in Singapore and Kathmandu, Nepal. The swami-maneuvering for a Hindu vote bank to elect Hindu leaders pledged to Hindu interests is gaining momentum again after repeated failures to actually manifest wins. The march is the latest show of orange angst, and one way they see to regain religious autonomy in India.

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