

[Sadhus Decry Temple Decay](#)

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One Hundred Sannyasins Demand Government Quit As Temple Custody Lords

Their meditations are disturbed. The holy men of India are starting to hiss. Unable any longer to passively watch the atheistic forces in government chronically mismanage the land's temple, shrines and tirthas, the sadhus, sannyasins and Shankaracharyas of India are now demanding - no longer requesting - dramatic changes.

Many who wear the kavi robes fell like the cobra in the popular tale teaching the fine line between non violence and self-dignity. A cobra once was converted to a life of non violence by a passing sannyasin Saint. Realizing that the cobra was no longer dangerous, the villagers teased, stoned and stick-beat the soft-hearted reptile. One day the sannyasin passed through the village again and was shocked to see the pathetic state of the cobra, on the verge of death. When the cobra explained all that had happened, the sannyasin admonished it saying: "I taught you not to bite. But I never told you not to hiss."

The Sixth Tamil Nadu Conference of Madathiapathis in Kumbakonam of February 15-16 showed that the saints of India were angry - righteously, but passionately. The fiery confrontational tone of the oratory was palpable in speech after speech. The list of alleged atrocities committed by the state government and certain politicians, as reported by the sages, was disturbing.

The spirited conference was convened by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in the

gigantic hall of the Arulmigu Nageswara Swami Temple and kept in control by their well-disciplined workers headed up by R.P.V.S. Manian, Propaganda Secretary and by Shri S. Vendantham, Organizing Secretary. The floating population of attendees wandering in and out of the conference site numbered 600-1,000 at any given time. Speeches with homa - like flames were the order of the day, with the more than 100 swamijis present calling for the government to extricate itself from temple administration affairs. The conference was attended by about 50 other Hindu monks, as well as a few Jain and Buddhist monks. Sessions went on into the evening.

Other Madathipathis present included Thavathiru Shantilinga Ramaswami Adigal of Perur Madam near Coimbatore; Thavathiru Orun Adigal of Ramalingam Madam at Vadalur; the Dharmapura Aadheenam Kartar; Thavathiru Sundaraswamigal of Seeravi Aadheenam near Salem; Thiruvavaduthurai Aadheenam Gurumaha Sannidhanam and MaPriya Brinda Devi of Pudukottai as the leading woman sannyasin present. Thavathiru Dr. Swami Gitananda of Sri Kambliswamy Madam, Pondicherry and Sri Tejomayananda Swamigal of Kailash Madam, Karur - a noted activist - were guests speakers. Sri Swami Purnand Giri of Jyothishmathi Ashram in Yercaud was also present as was the extremely popular devotional singer/sannyasin, Thavathiru Hari Doss Swamigal of Gnanandhar Ashram at Thirukoilur.

Forceful speakers like Tejomayananda questioned the word "secular" in the Indian constitution, charging that it had come to mean "pandering to the minorities with a view to capturing vote banks" and harassment of the passive and disorganized Hindu community. His view was shared by nearly all the speakers. Thavathiru Ekanath Swamigal, in a passionate oration, challenged social dharma itself calling upon the swamijis and sannyasins to refuse to pay any taxes or moneys from temple revenue to the government.

Pre-eminent Hindu leader, Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram, Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal was the featured speaker the second day of the conference. He also openly urged the government to get out of temple affairs and commanded brother and sister sannyasins to move out to the people and become more active in social service projects.

Further exemplifying this almost belligerent mood was the press conference which the Shankaracharya gave on March 9th at Trichi. In it, he criticized the Tamil Nadu

Government for the pathetic state of affairs in the ancient temple of Tamil Nadu. He called upon private citizens to take matters into their own hands and to form a "Protection Committee" around each temple to monitor its administration by the government and trustees. This is an urgent necessity, he said, "with the politically oriented temple management and administration."

Though Ms. Selvi J. Jayalalitha, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, had promised to constitute an autonomous board to take care of temple assets and administration on the eve of her election, she had, after taking office, not fulfilled this promise, he charged. Devotees also had high hopes that Ms. Jayalalitha would act much more effectively to correct temple problems on assuming office, but she appears powerless to stem the decay in management.

The conference preceded the grand Mahamagam festival held February 18th, in which 5 million pilgrims crowded the small pilgrim town to take their sacred dip in the holy temple bathing tank, an orthodox custom to purify sins. But tragically, this sacred event was marred when 48 people were killed in a human stampede during the auspicious bathing time. This episode ironically, illustrated much of what is wrong with Hinduism in India. The unfortunate deaths occurred when pilgrims rushed forth to view Ms. Jayalalitha, a brahmin and a devout Hindu, who was taking her sacred bath. The government blamed the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, saying the stampede occurred when a section of wall collapsed at the VHP's headquarters because of the crowd massing to receive food packets. For the VHP Shri. S. Vedantham charged that the crush occurred when people thronged forward to catch a glimpse of the Chief Minister having her sacred bath. He said, "When the crowds got restive, police resorted to a lathi charge. Such a thing was unheard of during a temple festival, even during the British rule." This, he claimed, was the cause for the stampede tragedy.

Tensions between sannyasins and VHP workers on one side and the police and Tamil Nadu government on the other started to build up the night of the 16th, after the conference concluded. The people and Collector issued a notice to the VHP to vacate the Arananai Choultry near the Mahamagam tank within 24 hours. The Parishad had set up elaborate cooking facilities there to supply several hundred thousand free food packets to pilgrims. Finally the government backed down and did not pursue the matter.

The confrontation came to a head again on Monday morning, the 17th. Though in

the past at the Mahamagam festival pilgrims did their ablutions days before the actual auspicious time in the temple tank, this year, for security purposes, police would not allow pilgrims near the tank. About 6:30 AM on the 17th, Swami Tejomayananda walked up to the tank to gain entry and take the ceremonial bath, but was turned away by the police in a rude and crude manner. The VHP then issued an ultimatum that if pilgrims were not allowed to take their baths by 11:00 AM, they would force entry to the sacred bathing tank. Although permission was not given, VHP volunteers approached the tank in large numbers and were allowed to take their baths. Later Swami Tejomayananda issued this statement:

"As one of the convenors of the Sixth Conference of Madathipathis and a member of the All India Marga Darshak Mandal, I wish to express my great anguish and hurt feelings of several hundred sannyasins gathered here and lakhs of Hindu who have come all the way undergoing great hardship to have a holy dip in the Mahamagam tank. It is the custom and convention for several centuries that the devotees take the holy dip from the very first day of the Brahmotsavam of the local temples and also perform religious rites on the banks of the Mahamagam Tank. Strangely, this year a secular government has turned the whole city into a police camp, frightening the common devotees and preventing them from entering into the tank for the holy dip, even on the penultimate day of the Mahamagam. It is wounding the religious sentiments of the Hindu and denying them their basic rights. Let better sense prevail and the Lord's blessings be upon all."

On the same day as the Kanchi Acharya held his colorful press conference, more than employees of temple in Thanjavur District held a one day fast in front of the Collectorate, demanding better service conditions. One brahmin, Santhanam Iyengar, who had been working in the temple, was present at the site of the fast, looking frail and ill, supported by a walking stick. When asked whether he was joining the fast, he retorted: "Why should I? I have been starving for months, unable to get the dues owed me to even purchase food."

In addition, there has been a horrendous increase in the incident of thefts and alleged murders for gain in regard to temple property. Nearly every day, reports are made of stolen temple jewelry, vessels and other valuables. The most alarming crime, becoming more common all the time, is thieves entering the temple and uprooting the idols, looking for gems, stones and gold which are buried in the base during the installation.

All to this internal discord and decay hangs like a heavy cloud over most of the temples of Tamil Nadu, polluting the sacred atmosphere built up for millennia by priests, devotees and conscientious temple custodians. Loud cinema music blares forth on festival days; gaudy neon signs deform the artistic ambience of the stone figures and carvings; painted signs read like menu cards with the cost of the various pujas; delicate sculptures are mindlessly whitewashed; temple guards mistreat devotees; trash is littered everywhere; and a general uncleanness marks the present condition of too many of the formerly majestic temples of South India. Politicians who have professed openly that "He who believes in God is a fool; he who preaches about God is a criminal" have been appointed as "trustees" of the very temples they mock. Positions on the temple boards are more and more used as prime political plums to be passed out as "rewards for favors granted," as they prove an opportunity to siphon off large sums of money, in the form of usurpation of the temple property or covert theft of temple assets. Brahmin pandits feel demoralized, forced to pander to authorities so removed and insensitive to their needs and problem. It is no surprise that many of the young generation of brahmins have simply fled from priestly work and have gone into totally unrelated professions or emigrated abroad seeking a better life.

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