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Constitution, not Caste, Must Govern Temple Space

By: Dhivya Sivaramane

Despite Tamil Nadu's history of anti-caste movements, continued reports on the denial of temple entry to Dalits indicate that the space has to come under greater legal and public scrutiny. The state must ensure that it follows the Constitution, not caste dictates.

In March, Tamil Nadu's chief minister M.K. Stalin announced the government's plan to organise year-long programmes to celebrate the centenary of the Vaikom satyagraha (1924–25) and to honour Periyar's contribution to this struggle for social equality.

The Vaikom satyagraha, which questioned the cruelties perpetuated against lower-caste people and Dalits in the name of caste and religion, marked an important point in the history of the anti-caste movement. The satyagrahis protested against the Brahmanical prohibitions that barred the lower castes from accessing the streets surrounding and leading to the Sri Mahadeva Temple at Vaikom, now in Kerala. The Vaikom satyagraha eventually became the inspiration for protests against caste injustices in the temple space and temple entry movements in many other parts of the country.

On 27 December 2022, Iraiur-Vengaivayal village in Pudukottai district of Tamil Nadu was in the news for water in a tank supplying the Dalit part of the village being contaminated with faecal matter. Three days later, the village again garnered media attention when the district collector led Dalits into the Ayyanar temple there, where lower-caste people had been prohibited from worshipping by the higher castes of the village for several decades.

In the months that followed, a few more cases of caste discrimination against Dalits in temples in Tamil Nadu and agitations for temple entry came to light. In January, a video surfaced in which a ruling party functionary was seen publicly humiliating a Dalit youth for entering and praying at the Periya Mariamman temple at Thirumalaigiri village in Salem district. In April, three Dalit youths were insulted and assaulted by caste Hindus for praying during the temple festival at the Dharmaraja Draupadi Amman temple at Melpathi village in Villupuram district. On 7 June, the district administration temporarily sealed the temple after Vanniyars, the dominant caste, opposed Dalit entry into the temple, and discussions to resolve the issue failed.

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On 2 January 2023, Dalits entered the Varadharaja Perumal temple at the Eduthavainatham village in Kallakurichi district. They also gained entry to the Muthumariamman temple at Thenmudiyanur village in Tiruvannamalai district on 30 January 2023. All these incidents, both for and against Dalits, demonstrate how caste continues to operate in the temple space in Tamil Nadu and makes some devotees more equal than others.

Tamil Nadu is known for its history of assertions against an Aryan-Brahmanical hegemony and caste inequalities. Temples in the state have been reformed through socio-religious movements protesting against caste discrimination and exclusion and through state policies instituting equality in the temple space. Amongst state-led initiatives, three interventions merit our attention – the [Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Act](#), the ['priesthood for all' scheme](#), and temple entry legislations.

In the 1920s, when the Justice Party held political power in the Madras Presidency, it passed the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1927, which later came to be known as the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act 1947. This has been an important legislation that has brought temples under a secular administration, making them subject to constitutional laws. It also makes temples public places to which all have equal access.

Before the act, temples were under the management and control of Brahmins and high-caste non-Brahmins, and they imposed caste and religious norms to bar the entry of the lower castes and Dalits. Now, temples under the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department of the state government must ensure all devotees have rights to free and equal worship.

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In August 2021, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government in Tamil Nadu under Chief Minister Stalin implemented a scheme by which people from all castes could become priests. The state appointed 24 government-trained non-Brahmins as priests in temples administered by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department. DMK governments under Stalin’s father, M. Karunanidhi, had taken steps to abolish the hereditary priesthood and ensure equality of opportunity for all to become priests.

Karunanidhi had carried forward Periyar’s campaign against caste practices in temples, calling for non-Brahmin priests to be admitted to the sanctum sanctorum of temples and ensuring the self-respect and dignity of all in the temple space. The reforms initiated by Tamil Nadu in this sphere have been socially significant in that they have removed caste distinctions and made the temple space a level playing field for all communities.

During the colonial period, legislators in the Madras Presidency had introduced bills in the legislative council seeking the entry of all the oppressed castes to temples. These included P. Subbarayan’s Temple Entry Disabilities Removal Bill, 1932; C.S. Ranga Iyer’s Hindu Temple Entry Disabilities Removal Bill, 1933; M.C. Rajah’s Madras Temple Entry Disabilities Removal Bill, 1937; C. Rajagopalachari’s Malabar Temple Entry Bill, 1938; and the Madras Temple Entry Authorisation and Indemnity Bill, 1939.

Back then, religious traditionalists and the high castes had expressed their disapproval of these bills, exposing their casteist inhibitions to opening temples for worship to all. Some of these bills laid down the acceptance of caste Hindus as a precondition to permitting the entry of the excluded castes. The liberation of the sacred space from casteism was thus dependent on whether a majority of the caste Hindus assented to it.

When the temple entry bills were introduced in the legislative council, legislators from the oppressed communities such as Rettaimalai Srinivasan, M.C. Rajah, and Swami Sagajananda spoke with insight on the issue. Finally, the Madras Temple Entry Authorization Bill of 1947 was drafted and introduced by T.S.S. Rajan in the Madras Legislative Assembly. It became the Tamil Nadu Temple Entry Authorisation Act of 1947, which removed caste barriers and opened the gates of temples for common and equal worship by all.

In Dalit claims for temple entry and religious worship, one can find narratives that treat temples and temple lands as common resources. In other words, as public places where all citizens are entitled to free and equal access.

Following Independence, the constitutional rights enshrined in Article 14 (right to equality), Article 15 (right against discrimination), Article 17 (abolition of untouchability), Article 19 (right to freedom), Article 21 (right to life and personal liberty), Article 25 (right to freedom of religion), Article 46 (protection against exploitation and ensuring social justice), and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 have become crucial to ensuring equality of access in the temple space. Movements fighting to win the oppressed classes the right to enter all temples have evoked these provisions to secure equality and justice in that space.

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Tamil Nadu has had a history of social agitations against caste discrimination in the temple space. The temple entry at Madurai Meenakshi Sundareshwarar temple in 1939 is usually held up as the defining moment in the history of the temple entry movement in Tamil Nadu. This was led by Gandhian leaders belonging to the Madras Harijan Sevak Sangh, and it was supported by the Congress government.

R.S. Naidu, an executive officer at the temple belonging to the Justice Party had also facilitated the entry of some of the lower castes to it. Another narrative emphasises how the Temple Entry Proclamation issued in 1936 by Maharaja Chittira Thirunal of Travancore, a princely state in today’s Kerala, generated similar measures in the Madras Presidency.

Both these narratives overshadow the early efforts of the Nadars in seeking temple entry in the 19th century (1870s to 1890s) and the temple entry agitations that were undertaken by Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement in the early 20th century. It is important to note that Periyarist, Dalit, and Communist organisations, parties, and movements in Tamil Nadu have undertaken temple entry agitations opposing

caste practices to secure equal rights of worship for the lower castes.

Differing from temple entry movements that focused on the religious aspects of worship, the temple entry movements led by Periyar's Self-Respect Movement were revolutionary. Through this, activists challenged the Brahminical orthodoxy and priestly authority in temples, showing how godly beliefs and religious texts and scriptures were used to perpetuate untouchability. Periyar understood how caste permeated both the temple space and the social space, and influenced social relations in both, thereby lending legitimacy to inhumane practices.

Periyar and B.R. Ambedkar believed that opening temples to the oppressed castes was not only about allowing them to attain god's grace but also about annihilating caste wherever it operated. They warned that temple entry movements organised by the higher castes were pretentious acts aimed at disguising their oppressive casteist behavior. They also pointed out that temple entry alone was unlikely to ensure social equality and freedom for the lower castes.

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Although temples are often seen as symbols of Hindu unity and inclusivity, recent reports on the denial of rights of temple entry and worship to Dalits in Tamil Nadu have drawn attention to the continued prevalence of social discrimination and exclusion in the temple space. Dalits face various forms of discrimination in some temples, including being denied entry, not being appointed priests, and not being allowed to participate in rituals, festivals, and processions. They are also not permitted to make contributions to temple funds.

At Kandadevi village in Sivagangai district, despite a court order permitting Dalits to pull the temple chariot of the Swarnamoortheswarar temple, it has not happened since 2005 because the chariot is being "repaired." At Ottanandal village in Villupuram district, three elderly Dalit men were forced to apologise by prostrating themselves before the higher castes for holding a festival without seeking their permission.

The higher castes cancelled ceremonies scheduled to be held at the Mariamman temple at Niramani village in Cuddalore district by protesting Dalits. They blocked the entry of Dalits to the Kasiviswanathar temple at Oduvankurichy village in Namakkal district by staging a sit-in, following which government officials sealed the temple. Meanwhile, four Dalits were murdered at Kurinjakulam village in Tirunelveli district for constructing a Gandhari Amman temple. A Dalit demand to perform rituals as a part of the Shenbagavalli-Poovananathar temple festivities at Kovilpatti ended in violence and suspension of the temple festival.

At Pazhankallimedu village in Nagapattinam district, the upper castes compelled Dalits to sign a declaration saying that they would not demand any participation in the Bhadrakaliyamman temple festival if they were assigned jobs under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). When Dalits demanded rights to worship at the Kalahastheeshwarar and Varadharaja Perumal temple at Vadakumarai village in Salem district, the higher castes refused to sell them groceries by shutting their shops and blocked their access to fields and schools.

Dalits in Thenmudiyanur village in Tiruvannamalai district were subjected to a socio-economic boycott by the higher castes after their entry to a Muthumariamman temple. They were denied food at hotels, the water supply to their fields was cut off, and they were not allowed to collect milk or work as labourers on farms owned by the higher castes. In Sittilarai panchayat of Musiri Taluka in Tiruchy district, the higher castes barred Dalits from entering the Mahamariamman temple even after a court order allowed them to do so.

In cases of caste discrimination against Dalits in temples, even when the local administration and police step in to broker peace between the communities, the higher castes disapprove of such measures. They refuse to take part in talks, stage protests, and postpone efforts to grant rights to Dalits. In some instances, they lock the temple or stop conducting temple festivals. When Dalits are able to enter temples and worship with state protection, the higher castes threaten them or resort to other retaliatory measures.

Despite opposition to their demands for temple entry and worship, Dalits across Tamil Nadu have been raising their voice against caste oppression in the temple space. This articulation of dissent is to be understood within the context of their ongoing fight to dismantle casteist norms that prohibit their access to public places and common resources.

What has been significant in Tamil Nadu is the presence of anti-caste movements and parties in demanding equal rights in temples. The Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, Dalit Viduthalai Iyakkam, Puthiya Thamizhagam, Adhi Thamizhar Peravai, Dravidar Kazhagam, Thanthai Periyar Dravidar Kazhagam and

others have carried out agitations against caste injustices in temples. Through public meetings, rallies, petitions, protests and negotiations with the authorities, social activists and political leaders from these organisations have been at the forefront of taking action to remove caste prohibitions in temples. Their efforts have been crucial in activating a social consciousness among the oppressed communities.

Protests by the Dalits and the involvement of the state and anti-caste movements and parties in the temple space have been vital in debunking the idealistic portrayal of temples as guardians of the country's Hindu cultural, architectural, spiritual, and historical heritage. By drawing our attention to how caste permeates the performance of worship and rituals in temples, they awaken us to the need to contest this. Whether attaining the rights of temple entry and worship will ensure equal social conditions for all Dalits remains to be seen but tackling inequities in the temple space is the first step towards this.

Anti-caste activism in Tamil Nadu has created an atmosphere where Brahmanical hegemony, Aryan traditions, and exclusionary caste norms in the temple space can be questioned. However, given that we still hear reports of caste prohibitions in the temple, violent attacks on Dalits by the higher castes, and socio-economic boycotts of them, the temple realm has to come under legal and public scrutiny and the state must ensure that the constitution, not caste, governs it.

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