

# Politics, Religion and Temple Governance: A Study on the Administration of Guruvayur Sree Krishna Temple in Kerala

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## Abstract

Guruvayur Temple is one of the most well-known religious destinations in Kerala and the country. Due to its stunning architecture and extensive history, the temple draws visitors from all over the world. This temple, located in the Thrissur district in northern Kerala, is also regarded as the *Dwarka* of the south. With its diverse social and religious functions, cultural norms, and symbolic arrangements, Guruvayur is the hub of an extensive cultural history that includes secular and sacred establishments. Pilgrims from all over the country and overseas have come to commemorate the diversity of traditions that have defined Kerala's religion and culture. The temple forbids the entry of non-Hindus which creates controversies occasionally in the political and religious arena. The Government of Kerala took over the administration of the temple through an ordinance that became an Act in 1971. Several Enquiry Commissions on Temple Administration made radical ideas, but the government did not execute any of them. The study discusses the history and legend of the temple as well as problems concerning the temple administration. The administration of Temple draws the interest of political scientists, administrators, and the media because of its politicisation, corruption, inefficiency, and governmental control.

**Keywords:** Devaswom, Guruvayur satyagraha, temple entry, Secularism, temple administration

## 1. Introduction

The study is primarily based on Kerala, the southernmost state in India. Kerala is popularly known as God's own Country and is famous for temple (Hindu worshipping place) festivals and rituals. Guruvayur Sree Krishna Temple is one of the well-known shrines in South India in terms of devotees, wealth and cultural ethos, being the second-largest temple in South India in the matter of revenue, behind Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam. (Rajagopal, 2022). The temple is widely known as the *Dwaraka* of South India, is a well-known noted for its culture, customs, support of temple arts, and daily rituals. Due to the Gandhian-style agitation for temple entry to the non-caste Hindus, the temple is renowned as a hub of social reform activities

## 2. Objectives of the Study

The work aims to investigate the social reform activities associated with Guruvayur temple, its cultural legacy, rituals and temple traditions

The broad objectives of the study are the following;

- i. To analyse the state–temple relationship since the formation of Kerala, its nature, socio-economic, political and cultural dimensions and its limitations;
- ii. To identify and analyse various issues widespread in the administration of temple and its socio-political, cultural, religious and legal dimensions;
- iii. To examine recommendations of various Commission Reports on the problems prevailing in temple administration.

## 3. Methodology

The study employed a methodology combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies for collecting and analysing research data. Historical and analytical methods are used in the study. The secondary data is collected through the publications of Devaswom, books, journals and News Papers. The primary data is collected through government publications and Commission Reports. Field study is also conducted to collect primary data for the study.

## 4. Temple History and Legend

In Malabar at the time William Logan produced the Malabar Manual, the Guruvayur Temple was not very notable. According to him, the Thirunavaya Temple in Ponnani Taluk was one of the most important temples at the period (Logan, 1887). Up until the Portuguese desecrated it, the Guruvayur temple was submissive to the well-known Siva temple at Thrikkanna Mathilakom. The first mention of Guruvayur is found in the 14th-century text Kokasandesam, according to renowned historian M. R. Raghava Varier (Myriad, 2016). Tamil literature also makes reference to a place known as Kuruvayur. The temple should have existed there before 52 AD, according to renowned historian K.V. Krishna Iyer, even though it appears under many titles in Dutch and British documents. Although there is no historical evidence to support the legend, the god of Guruvayur is said to be more than 5000 years old. The name is claimed to

have been formed by combining the terms Guru (for Guru Brihaspati), Vayu (for the God of the Wind), and Ur (meaning land in the native Malayalam dialect).

#### *4.1 Hereditary Trustees*

Seventy-two Namboothiri families originally managed the temple. The Zamorin, the ruler of Malabar, recognised them as the trustees of both Thrikkannamathilakam and Guruvayur (Myriad, 2016). The temple, which was under the control of the Zamorin Raja, was not plundered or destroyed by the Dutch because they did not want to hurt the feelings of the Zamorins (Seth, 2009). It is interesting to note that Tipu Sultan and his aide, Haidros Kuttee Moopan, evinced great interest in the temple's affairs. Hidros Kuttee, who was in charge of Guruvayur, seems to have made, under the orders of Tipu Sultan, an annual grant to the temple for the conduct of daily poojas and offerings. Subsequently, the British authorities too accepted this obligation, exempting certain temple lands from assessment and authorising the use of the proceeds from them for the affairs of the temple (Menon, 1962, p. 615).

The Guruvayur temple, like many other temples in Malabar, was overseen by two hereditary trustees: Karanavan of the Mallisseri Illom and Zamorin Raja of Calicut. The Madras High Court arbitrarily resolved their disputes about the ooranma rights in 1889. In 1916, the British Government took over the administration and transferred it to the Court of Wards of Madras (Kurup, 2014, p. 33). In 1926, the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act was enacted and a scheme for the administration of the temple and its properties were settled accordingly. In 1927, the administration of Guruvayur temple was handed over to the Zamorin from the Court of Wards; then the total income and expenditure were not more than one lakh rupees (Kurup, 2014, p. 81). A group of devotees filed a petition before the duly constituted Hindu Religious Endowments Board complaining mismanagement of the affairs of the Temple by the hereditary trustees. The Board started enquiry which finally resulted in a scheme of administration being settled for the temple under section 63 (1) of the Act. The scheme recognized the hereditary rights of the Zamorin Raja and denied the rights of Karanavan of the Mallisseri Illom in the day-to-day administration of the temple (Rajagopal, 2019, pp. 103-104).

The District Court of Southern Malabar restored the hereditary rights of Karanavan of Mallisserry *Illom* which was reaffirmed by the Madras High Court later. In 1970, an unfortunate fire incident occurred in the temple which was enquired by Gangadharan Thampi Commission appointed by the Government of Kerala and the Commission pointed out prolonged neglect of the temple without proper maintenance and timely repairs. The report also unveiled gross negligence on the part of those in charge of the administration and management of the temple. It was an eye-opener to the mismanagement of the temple administration. Subsequently, the government took over its administration through an ordinance of 1971; the Guruvayur Devaswom Managing Committee was constituted (Rajagopal, 2019, pp. 103-104).

### **5. Temple and Social Reforms-Guruvayur Satyagraha**

Guruvayur Temple is a well-known Sree Krishna temple in the old Malabar region, where lower castes were also denied freedom of worship. The Guruvayur Satyagraha was the state's

first temple-entry protest. In May 1931, at the Vadakara Session of Congress, K. Kelappan filed a motion asking for temple access for the avarnas. With Mahatma Gandhi's permission, the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) launched the Guruvayur Satyagraha in 1931. The Guruvayur Satyagraha Committee was established by the KPCC and led by noted reformist Mannathu Padmanabhan. Under the direction of T. Subramanian Tirumumbu, a group of sixteen volunteers embarked on a route march to Guruvayur on October 21, 1931, from a location close to the Congress camp at Kannur (Sivathambika, 1991, p. 138). On November 1, 1931, a sizable group of volunteers gathered in Guruvayur, where the Devaswom authorities oppressively resisted them. P. Krishna Pillai suffered abuse for daring to exercise a Brahmin-only ritual by ringing the sacred bell in front of the sanctum sanctorum.

The temple entry supporters were agitated and physically dismantled the barricades surrounding the temple. The temple's administrators stopped the pujas and shut them down for a month (Nair, 2006, pp. 17–18). The temple wasn't reopened until January 20, 1932. Without allowing temple admission in the nearby Cochin and Travancore, Zamorin claimed he could not permit it in regards to the Guruvayur Temple (Padmanabhan, 1998, p. 123). Guruvayur Day was observed on January 8 throughout Kerala, and participants in the campaign showed their support for a bill on temple access introduced by Dr. P. Subramanyan in the Madras Legislative Council (Nair, 2006, p. 19). Gandhi proposed that a referendum be taken among the savarnas at Guruvayur and the surrounding area. Urmila Devi, C. Rajgopalachari, and Kasturba Gandhi appeared on the scene to convince the savarnas to consent to the demand for temple entry (Padmanabhan, 1998, p. 122). In Ponnani Taluk, a referendum was held under the KPCC's auspices to find out how the Hindu populace felt about temple access. More than 70% of respondents supported open temple access.

Even though the Guruvayur Satyagraha did not result in the immediate opening of the Guruvayur Temple or other temples in Kerala to all Hindus, the movement did help to develop strong public sentiment in the country in favour of temple entry and the abolition of untouchability. It should be remembered that Guruvayur Temple was first opened to Harijans in 1946. In truth, the Satyagraha's genuine purpose was to unify Hindus after they stopped polluting to restore Hinduism's illustrious stature with the temple's sword (Sivathambika, 1991, p. 141). The Guruvayur temple was also opened to all Hindus in 1947.

### *5.1 Administration of Guruvayur Devaswom*

The Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act was passed in 1926, and following it, a plan for the management of the temple and its assets was established. Guruvayur Temple's management was transferred to the Zamorin from the Court of Wards in 1927; at that time, the total income and expenditure did not exceed one lakh rupees (Kurup, 2014, p. 81). Several worshippers complained that the hereditary trustees were mismanaging the temple's affairs in a petition to the legally established Hindu Religious Endowments Board. The Board launched an investigation, which ultimately led to the settlement of an administration plan for the temple under Section 63 (1) of the Act. The plan denied the Karanavan of the Mallisseri Illom rights in the day-to-day management of the temple while recognising the inherited rights of the Zamorin Raja. The Karanavan of Mallisseri Illom's hereditary rights were reinstated by the District Court of Southern Malabar and later upheld by the Madras

High Court.

### *5.2 Temple under State Control*

The Guruvayur temple administration sparks a lot of controversy in state politics despite being one of the wealthiest and most well-known temples in South India. Hereditary Trustees Zamorin Raja of Calicut and Karanavan of Mallisserry were in charge of running the temple, but their management was found to be inadequate. The 1970 temple fire left a trail of destruction in its wake, and the Gangadharan Thampy Commission's investigation revealed that the temple's complete and ongoing negligence of maintenance and prompt repairs on the side of the temple officials was ultimately to blame.

The Kerala Government eventually took over the operation of the Guruvayur temple after the investigation exposed its mismanagement. Through an Ordinance that became an Act in 1971, the Kerala Government assumed control of the Guruvayur Temple's management. A Guruvayur Devaswom Managing Committee was established by the Act to oversee the management of Guruvayur Devaswom. The hereditary trustees appealed this Act to the Kerala High Court. The Act was revised in 1972, and the Kerala High Court heard a new challenge to it that year. In the *Krishnan vs. Guruvayur Devaswom Managing Committee* case that followed, a bench of five judges of the Kerala High Court invalidated the aforementioned Act (Tharamel Krishnan, 1978). Since it maintains the devotees' right to freedom of religion, the court's decision is seen as momentous.

### *5.3 Guruvayur Devaswom Managing Committee (GDMC)*

The Guruvayur Devaswom Managing Committee was reorganised following the terms of the Guruvayur Devaswom Act 1978, and it now consists of three permanent members and six political nominees from the Hindu community among the Council of Ministers. Hereditary Trustees, the Zamorin Raja, the *Karanavan* (for the time being, from the Mallisserrillom at Guruvayur) and tantri (Vedic head) of the temple (ex-officio member) are the permanent Members and the six nominees include a representative of the employees of the Devaswom and not more than five persons of whom one shall be a Member from Scheduled Caste, nominated by the Hindus among the Council of Ministers who are having an interest in the affairs of temples. The Committee in its first meeting elects one of its Members as the Chairman (Guruvayur Devaswom Act of 1978).

Before taking a seat, each member must swear an oath in the name of God. The government can always nominate six members out of a possible nine, making it simple to put its decision into effect. The Guruvayur Devaswom Act of 1978 and the Guruvayur Devaswom Rules of 1980 form the foundation for the organization's operation. The Devaswom Committee appoints the Administrator from among the panel of names furnished by the Government of Kerala as the head of the Guruvayur Devaswom Department's administrative apparatus. He must be a government employee with at least the rank of Deputy Collector. The Administrator is the head of the administrative machinery of the Guruvayur Devaswom Department and is appointed by the Devaswom Committee. In terms of the Administrator's authority, he will serve as the Committee's Secretary and Chief Executive Officer, be under the control of the Committee, and have the authority to carry out its decisions in line with the

Act's provisions. The Devaswom Recruitment Board shall appoint officials and other Devaswom workers under its policies.

The Chief Finance and Accounts Officer (CFAO), who has been deputed from the Accountant General's Office, is the head of the finance department and the second-highest executive officer in the Guruvayur Devaswom. To instruct the employees of the Finance Department, the Managing Committee requested that this method be implemented in 1989. The Devaswom Committee creates the Guruvayur Devaswom budget, which is then presented to the Commissioner, who then provides a copy of the approved budget to the government. The system guarantees account transparency and guard against any potential fraud with the Devaswom Fund. To audit the Devaswom's financial records, the local fund audit division of the Kerala government has a division at the Devaswom office. 13 other workers work for it, and the Joint Director is in charge of it. A copy of each audit report must be sent to the Committee by the Commissioner under Section 26 of the Act. The Committee has the authority to take the appropriate measures in this regard if the auditors find any irregular, unlawful, or improper spending, failure to recover financial losses or waste, or failure to reclaim other property due to negligence or misconduct, and they note it in their report.

One high school, an English-medium school, and a first-grade college are all under the control of GuruvayurDevaswom. The GuruvayurDevaswom took control of Sree Krishna College in 1976. (GDMC, 1977, p. 3) The Devaswom is in charge of a library and reading room that were established in 1945, under the rule of Zamorin Raja. There are 24,000 books in the library, many of which are Hindu sacred texts. In addition to this, the Devaswom also oversees hospitals, and institutions for studying murals, etc.

## **6. Issues in Temple Administration**

### *6.1 Mismanagement in Temple Administration*

Controversies in state politics are long-lasting because of political meddling in the administration of the ostensibly autonomous Devaswom Board. The management of the Guruvayur temple is not an exception to this procedure. The Government of Kerala adopted an ordinance in 1999 that reduced the Guruvayur Devaswom Management Committee's term of office from four to three years. (Mathrubhumi, 1999, June 3). Again in 2001, the GDMC's term of office was shortened to two years through another modification. Additionally, the measure proposed restricting Hindu MLAs and Ministers' voting rights to those who practise temple worship and believe in God (The New Indian Express, 2001, December 7). The Committee's responsibilities include making arrangements for the proper performance of rituals and ceremonies in temples, providing spaces for appropriate worship, ensuring the safe custody of money, priceless assets, and jewellery, and maintaining and managing the temple's real estate, among other things.

The *tantri* has sole discretion over all decisions involving religious or spiritual concerns about the temple. Decisions involving religious or spiritual matters at the temple cannot be made by the managing committee, the commissioner, or the government. The management of Devaswom Committees is the sole area in which the state government can intervene. The Devaswom Committee makes major decisions about temple governance. The government has



nominated a Commissioner of Devaswom, a Hindu who practises temple worship and holds the position of Secretary to the Government, who will hold charges, exercise the committee's powers, and carry out its duties until a replacement is found. In the Devaswom, IAS personnel have been used to appoint all commissioners thus far. He must supervise GuruvayurDevaswom's operations remotely from Thiruvananthapuram (KHC, 1993, p. 187).

The Devaswom Act requires the temple's money to be placed in the government treasury. *Vazhipadu* and endowment deposits, pension fund deposits, and security deposits are some of the Guruvayur Devaswom's investments. No misappropriation of Devaswom funds has been reported to the committee, according to Kuttikrishna Menon's report, however, Devaswom funds are not being used appropriately (GoK, 1964, p. 64). There are ten keezhedams (small temples) beneath the Devaswom. There are 687 permanent employees, based on data gathered from Devaswom. Additionally, several workers perform ad hoc tasks. Revenue receipts, income from offerings, investments, lands, guest rooms, publications, etc. are the main sources of income for Devaswom. One of the main sources of income for the Guruvayur Devaswom, the kanikka (the metal cash box) generates between 16 and 25 per cent of the overall income. No receipts are provided in exchange for the offerings, so it is impossible to determine the precise sum of money deposited in the cash boxes (Madhusoodhanan, 2010, p. 105). Allegations of accounting malfeasance in the management of hedge fund collections have been made. There is a potential that not all of the contents of the *bhandarams* (Coin boxes) will be recorded in the official ledger account books.

Table 1. Income and expenditure of Guruvayur Temple (2000 to 2016)

<b>Period</b>	<b>TotalIncome</b>	<b>Expenditure</b>
2000-2001	59,21,97,815	56,39,86,514
2001-2002	54,27,10,050	48,81,43,163
2002-2003	61,53,39,992.09	56,20,50,145.00
2003-2004	71,32,91,101.19	64,86,86,146.67
2004-2005	73,94,28,225.23	68,45,79,786.70
2005-2006	78,39,61,427.70	75,40,16,088.00
2006-2007	86,82,88,699.90	80,40,24,690.88
2007-2008	91,13,28,350.24	77,44,83,135.52
2008-2009	120,82,72,326.17	101,57,64,173.28
2009-2010	155,93,33,062.08	137,97,93,026
2010-2011	192,29,31,961	169,34,53,348
2011-2012	196,69,26,894	175,76,82,733
2012-2013	220,73,39,393	200,10,67,658
2013-2014	250,04,22,124	222,88,04,392
2014-2015	270,64,21,477.75	250,49,72,058
2015-2016	311,13,86,081	286,26,65,779

Source: Data collected from the Guruvayur Devaswom Administrative office.

A public interest litigation (PIL) was submitted to the High Court of Kerala to provide a suitable system for accounting the income from the *hundies*. In March 2002, the Court formed a committee with two of its nominees, the manager of the bank that receives the monetary deposits, one representative from the state's Vigilance Department, one representative from the devotees, and one representative from the Devaswom. After that, the *bhandarams'* receipts significantly increased. The High Court of Kerala appointed Krishnan Unni Commission to enquire because of allegations of rampant corruption in the Devaswom. (C.K. Rajan, 1994).

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The judiciary in the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple case mentioned the Guruvayur Devaswom administrative system as a model. There are concerns over the Malabar Devaswom Reform Commission's suggestion to merge Guruvayur Devaswom and the Malabar Devaswom Board. The several Commissions on temple reforms have recommended substantial changes to the way Guruvayur Devaswom is managed. Political meddling, corruption, inappropriate behaviour by temple employees, etc., plague the administration of Guruvayur Devaswom. The Kerala High Court issued directives concerning the political nomination of the Devaswom Committee, which raises several problems. The K. P. Sankaran Nair Commission also urged for the elimination of practices such as the Devaswom Management Committee selecting delegates from political parties. In place of the present Devaswom Management Committee, the Commission suggested forming a Temple Advisory Committee with six unofficial members, including Zamorin Raja, Namboothiri of Mallisserri *illom*, and Temple *tantri*. A senior Hindu official who believes in God and practices temple worship should serve as the administrator (GoK, 1984, pp. 42-43).

In a letter sent in 1993 to Justice Paripoornan, one of the honourable judges of the High Court of Kerala, C. K. Rajan, accused the administration of Guruvayur Temple of major irregularities, corruption and mismanagement. Based on the letter, the High Court designated S. Krishnan Unni, a District Judge serving as the Commissioner's Director of Training, to investigate the different issues raised in the aforementioned complaint. The Commissioner provided the Court with two volumes of the final report and fifteen intermediate reports (KHC, 1993). The Kerala Government recruited former Kerala High Court Judge N. Krishnan Nair in 2014 to study Devaswom reforms and recommend suitable changes to the Devaswom Act (KLA, 2014, July 10, p. 161).

Major recommendations of the Krishnan Unni Commission (1993) are the following;

- i. Tantri, Karanavan of Mallisserryllom, and Zamorin Raja may be relieved from the burden of the Devaswom administration. The representative of employees may also be removed from the committee;
- ii. On all religious rites, the committee should consult temple tantri.;
- iii. Members of the Devaswom Committee must be unaffiliated with any political party or communal group, and no politicians may be nominated to the Temple Managing Committee;



- iv. A retired High Court judge is required for the position of Devaswom Commissioner; IAS personnel lack competence since they are frequently intimidated by the government's political favour. The Devaswom will gain sovereignty, respect, and dignity as a result;
- v. Enhance the term of the Managing Committee to 4 years;
- vi. All temple staff should be properly trained in the fundamentals of the Hindu religion;
- vii. Devaswom should deposit all of its funds in the government's Treasury; no funds should be deposited anywhere outside Guruvayur.;
- viii. A District Judge be deputed as Law Officer and disciplinary authority in the Devaswom;
- ix. The employees should have only one association and all other unions based on political lines should be banned;
- x. Devaswom is an autonomous institution, concerned only with the interests of the deity and the devotees. Though the Government may have control over it, it shouldn't be subordinated to the Government (KHC, 1993).

The Commission made some radical recommendations, but neither the government nor the Devaswom Committee has so far carried them out. One of the report's main recommendations is to extend the Devaswom Committee's mandate to four years, but the government has not yet agreed. Hereditary trustees' removal from the Devaswom Committee was proposed, but it was rejected because of their involvement in spiritual matters. Given the unique conditions of Devaswom and the volume of complaints made against them, the proposal to remove employee representatives from the board is a need.

## **8. Suggestions**

An effective system free from corruption is necessary for the temple administration. The Devaswom Ombudsman mechanism has to be improved. For proper auditing in the Devaswoms, an audit department operating at the state level is necessary. It is crucial to have error-free accounting and auditing, and the authority to audit state-run businesses should be given to representatives of the Accountant General Office. It is recommended that auditors be appointed by the Accountant General's Office through deputation. Moreover, a state-level Vigilance Cell is advised.

Devaswom management should be improved by ensuring proper representation for devotees. Temple advisory committees are formed to guarantee devotee participation in temple administration. An orientation programme for temple staff members should teach the fundamentals of Hinduism and temple ceremonies. The hiring of temple workers is based on whether or not they practise temple worship and believe in God. As recommended by the Kerala High Court's High Power Committee report, political trade unionism on temple grounds ought to be outlawed.

If a secular government uses temples for political gain and power politics while ignoring

other religious institutions, it is an outright betrayal of Hindu culture. Hindu communalism is sown in the state as a result of this discrimination, which strengthens the Hindu population's sense of group cohesion.

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