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Temple Treasures: State or Religious Property?

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ABSTRACT

The entire society revolves around the concept of wealth and therefore the relationships that form out of this have various economics and political aspects attached to it. In the same way, temple treasures that have accumulated throughout centuries is related to various economic and political aspects. Further, it has another very important facet of human society weaved in; religion. Religion forms a very important part of life as it forms the basis of the entire thought process and belief system of the society. As was propounded by Auguste Comte, the development of society is seen through the development of the collective thought process of the society.

Further, the research paper will attempt at analysing the close relationship between religion and economics. As it is inherent to any institution to strive for becoming as large as possible, the religious institutions are the same and in this strive they evolve as one of the premier economic institutions. The research paper will therefore analyse the allocation of resources takes place in the context of the religious institution. Another major aspect taken into consideration is politics as the allocation of resources and wealth forms the base of most power structures and the paper will attempt at analysing how the power structure in religious institutions is different or similar. The presence of class which may stem from wealth or position in the power structure is also prevalent in these religious institutions. Moreover, the paper will extensively use the legal aspects of this relationship between the state and the religious institutions. Therefore, the paper will attempt at synthesising all these aspects to know whether the temple treasures comes under the authority of the state.

I. INTRODUCTION

The entire society revolves around the concept of wealth and therefore the relationships that form out of this have various economics and political aspects attached to it. In the same way, temple treasures that have accumulated throughout centuries is related to various economic and political aspects. Further, it has another very important facet of human society weaved in; religion. Religion forms a very important part of life as it forms the basis of the entire thought process and belief system of the society. As was propounded by August Comte, the

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development of society is seen through the development of the collective though process of the society. Religion forms a central concept of this paper as the treasures discussed have their roots in the religious establishments. However, the paper will strive to discuss various economic and political aspects attached to the issue of temple treasures.

To further contextualize the issue, the papers discusses the issue of temple treasures in the light of recent developments that have led to the discovery of ample amounts of treasures hidden in the lockers of a temple in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerela by the name of *Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple*. *Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple* is one of 108 *DivyaDesams* – principal centres of worship of the deity in *Vaishnavism*. It dates back to the 8th century CE. The temple in fact has such a remarkable place in history that it gave its name to Kerala's state capital '*Thiruvananthapuram*'. '*Thiru*'+ '*Anantha*'+ '*Puram*' means Sacred Abode of *Lord AnanthaPadmanabha*. *Lord AnanthaPadmanabha* is the Supreme Principal Deity, *Para brahman*, he is enshrined in the "*AnanthaShayanam*" posture, the eternal yogic sleep on the serpent *Adishesha*². The temple is glorified in the *DivyaPrabandha*.

While keeping this case study in primary focus, this paper will attempt at analysing the current situation from various sociological perspectives. This analysis will further lead to whether who shall be deemed to have the ownership of the treasure found and this question shall be used to understand the deeper question regarding the relationship between religion and state in its modern form and how it has changed with time.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND ECONOMICS IN THE MODERN CAPITALIST LENS

The relationship between religion and economics has experienced a stark increase in attention from research perspectives as both theoretical and empirical research in determination of this research has seen a boom with the last decades of the 20th century. As a result of this, various currents have taken shape in which the relationship is propounded to be of different forms. Both of these institutions of economics and religion play a major role in determining our way of life and thinking, that is to say it determines our collective though process. Religion is described to be an institution that originates from the need to create a binary between the things that are ascribed to be sacred and the things that are ascribed to be profane. This distinction according to Durkheim is what forms the origin of religion. With time, the

²V.A. Ponnemilil, *Temples of Kerala - Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple*, New Kerela, <https://temples.newkerala.com/index.php?news=Temples-of--Kerala-Sri-Padmanabhaswamy-Temple>.

institution has developed and further become more complex, however, the origin is still seen to prevail as the entire institution still works primarily on prescribing what is good and what is bad and in turn shaping an ideal way of life for its followers to adhere to. According to Weber, taking Durkheim's theory forward, religion should not be simply taken on its own terms, seeing what it means to its founders and followers. For Weber, religion also has another function. It can create broader social values and be instrumental in the creation of social institutions completely unrelated to its own goals and ends.

Often, the aspects of the religious way of life prescribe principles that act as an antithesis to those provided by the modern discourse of capitalism. The capitalist ideas of modern life talk about only two pillars on which the society rests, profit and competition. This profit is what motivates people to keep working and the entire goal of the society to maximise the self-interest and profit they gain from their activities. On the other hand, religion prescribes a way of living that is 'crystal' in nature and therefore is above the mere lust for wealth. It talks about gaining things that are beyond wealth like spirituality which talks about a telos that is in the form of eternal happiness gained from things that are beyond the materialist nature of capitalism and modern economic discourse.

However, the capitalist discourse only observes religion as a set of "recipes" or blueprints for behaviours, expenditures and beliefs that will produce the desired results.³ This is further turned into a production function with inputs of capital such as money and labour in the form of human effort which produces the output known as "religious experience". This though is further extended in *Azzi and Ehrenberg (1975)* that suggest that religion is best thought of as a bundle of three distinct but inter-related goods. First there is spirituality, which talks about the desire for which seems to be a primal human impulse that finds some sort of expression in every society. Then there is the fact that religion always seems to have a collective dimension and the consumer observes various rituals as a "member" of this group, typically in conjunction with other adherents. Religion also addresses the dilemma of human mortality, the frightening inevitability of death and its implications for the meaning of life. This is usually referred to as the "afterlife good," although not every religion speaks to this need by positing an explicit life after death. In most religions these three "goods" are bundled into a single product called "religion," but since their economic attributes differ it is useful to consider them separately. These thoughts usually talk about the religion and economics as propounding antithetic ideas that cannot coexist and where a compromise has to be made.

³ Carmel U. Chiswick, "Economics and Religion." IZA Discussion Paper Series, April 2010. Available at: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp4868.pdf>.

On the contrary, Max Weber who has propounded various theories on different religions theorise that the notion modern day capitalism has its roots in the protestant reformation and the principles that stem out of this ideology. For this weber first attempts to determine what is this spirit of capitalism. For this, he says that Benjamin Franklin's writings provide the ethos of capitalism and therefore he refers heavily on the notes of Franklin⁴. Franklin writes that time is money. He also encourages people to present themselves as industrious and trustworthy at all times. All of franklin's values are towards the goal of helping the individual earn more and more money and this is seen as an end in itself. According to weber, this seemingly irrational attitude towards money is a leading principle of capitalism, and it expresses a type of feeling closely associated with certain religious ideas.⁵ Weber, ventures to find the origin of this spirit and he rejects the idea that this spirit evolved from the formation of all superstructures on the base of economic processes. The primary antithesis for capitalism, according to weber, is traditionalism and he defines traditionalism provisionally by taking examples of a labourer and an entrepreneur. Weber then attempts to show how capitalism didn't arise out of 'new money' being pushed into the society but a 'new spirit' that was brought about by the protestant reformation.

According to Weber, before the Reformation, people did not see their "worldly" activities as being in service to God. Rather, worldly activities were perceived more like necessary evils. The monastic lifestyle, where people removed themselves from the world in order to contemplate God, was glorified. The Reformation rejected this attitude. According to them, it was seen as wrong to remove yourself from the world; serving God meant participating in worldly activities, because this was part of God's purpose for each individual. Thus, labour and business became part of one's duty to God. Hence, the duty to prosper is what formed the spirit of capitalism. Further, even in Hinduism, a major religious text is the *Arthashastra*, written by *KautilyaArthashastra*. This text talk about what governance ought to be and says how the economy is the source of material wealth and the base of the power of the state, the treaty also puts emphasis on the need of founding the government on a scientific foundation. For the king to obtain, maintain and then increase the wealth of the state and his own power, he needs to master the four sciences: philosophy, the Vedas, economics and the state leadership. Of these, the political science (state leadership) is the most important, as they determine the understanding and using of the other sciences.⁶Arthashastra gives special

⁴MAX WEBER, PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM(Wilder Publications)(2018).

⁵*Id.*

⁶AndreeaGrădinaru& Mihaela Iavorschi, "The Hindu Economic System.", 2 Human and Social Studies 41, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2478/hssr-2013-0003>.

importance to economic issues in fact, even the name of the treaty shows that he constantly starts from *arth* which means self-interest, profit and not from *niti* meaning politics. His work is consistently oriented towards policy rationalization so as to gain the greatest and most secure benefits. This orientation towards economic efficiency is apparently unique in antiquity and gives the treaty a “modern” aspect.⁷ Hence the aspects of modern economy can be seen to have religious roots. A major implication for this is how we look at religion. Religion has a generative power, and the influence of its ideas should be studied in areas seemingly unrelated to its theological principles, such as the creation of economic institutions.⁸ The major goal behind establishing this connection is to create a pretext on which the religious establishments are studied as economic units and help us understand why they became such institutions and how they function.

The economic importance of Hindu temples in medieval South India has been commented upon by most students of South Indian history. Without exception, the temple is seen to have had a central place in the dominantly agrarian economy of South India prior to the extension of British control in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹ However, not much data in these regards is available for the *Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple* in Kerala. Although for this, the Tirupati temple, the shrine of *Sri Venkatesvara* can form a perfect example due to the immense study available on its vast records in the form of inscriptions. The Tirupati inscription deal primarily with the endowments of land and money and how they are utilised by the Temple. The donor of these endowments were of different types and they primarily had two functions:

- To yield an income with which to maintain a specified ritual service in the name of the donor of the land;
- To provide a productive place to invest funds granted to the Temple for the performance of services in the name of the donor of the money.¹⁰

These functions show how the temple is run as an economic unit and does not work in isolation. Hence, there exists a relationship between the economic context and the religious context of the histories of these temples. The presence of such a system of means of production which included religion is what developed the entire spirit of capitalism.

⁷*Id.*

⁸MAX WEBER, *PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM*(Wilder Publications)(2018).

⁹Burton Stein, *The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple*, 19 *Journal of Asian Studies* 163, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2943547?seq=1>.

¹⁰Burton Stein, *The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple*, 19 *Journal of Asian Studies* 163, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2943547?seq=1>.

However, in the modern world because capitalism has become so powerful and encompassing of all aspects of our existence, it no longer needs the religion connection to help it maintain itself. On the other hand, now that capitalism has become so massive it is seen as an antithesis to the principles of religion.

III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE AND RELIGION IN THE SOCIO-POLITICAL LENS

Another fundamental aspect of the topic rests on the relationship that exists between the state and the religion. Though the entire structure and property of the temple is in the name of the deity in the context of *Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple*. Politics and religion have had a close relationship throughout the medieval and modern history of the development of state in the western civilisations in the form of the prevalent debate on whether there should be a separation of church and state. The debate has had its various aspects over the years and at the nascent stages of proper civilisation the king or the monarch was believed to have the right to rule over the people and this right to him was given by god itself. The state and the government were seemed to be the shadow of the god on earth and hence the church and the state worked very closely, here, the church is used to symbolise the institution of religion. This is also known as the divine rights theory and has emerged as one of the premier theories that explained the development of state. However, unlike using religion as a tool to legitimise the sovereignty of the state, in the modern era democracy, rule of law and other political aspects are used to legitimise the sovereignty of the state and this also leads to the undermining of religion and its values. However, state and religion have had intervening roles with respect to each other. India has been described as secular state in the preamble of its constitution and the state authority is legitimised by referring to the sovereignty of the people. However, Article 48 of the Indian constitution casts a duty on the government for the organization of agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle. This has led Granville Austin¹¹ to remark "As various provisions of the Irish Constitution show that Ireland is a Roman Catholic nation, so Art. 48¹² shows that Hindu sentiment predominated in the Constituent Assembly." In the context of the present case study, the constitution has Article 290 A which stipulates that a sum of forty-six lakhs and fifty thousand rupees shall be charged on, and paid out of, the Consolidated Fund of the State of Kerala every year to the Travancore

¹¹GRANVILLE AUSTIN. THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION: CORNERSTONE OF A NATION.(Oxford Univ. Press)(2012).

¹²INDIA. CONST. art. 48

Devaswom Fund; established in that State for the maintenance of Hindu temples and shrines in the territories transferred to that State on the 1st day of November, 1956, from the State of Travancore, Cochin. The general philosophy of the Constitution is not to keep the State away from religion as such, but only to enjoin it not to establish a State religion or to prefer one religion over another; that though the State cannot spend money from public exchequer for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion, it is always permissible for it to give aid to all the religions equally.¹³

Another aspect important to analyse is the bureaucracy of the working of the temple and how state plays a factor in that management and other organizational structure of the temple. Traditionally, Padmanabhaswamy Temple and its property were controlled by the *EttaraYogam*, King and Council of Eight in consultation with of *EttuveetilPillamar*, "Lords of the Eight Houses". The *EttaraYogam* consists of *PushpanjaliSwamiyar*, six member Thiruvananthapurathu Sabha, *Sabhanjithan* (Secretary) and *Arachan* (Maharaja of Travancore). Thiruvananthapurathu Sabha was primarily responsible for the administration of the Temple. Any decision taken by the Sabha can be implemented only if the Maharaja of Travancore approves of it.¹⁴ It is believed that eight members of *EttaraYogam*, seven Potties and the Maharaja of Travancore received their rights from *Lord Parashurama* himself. Further, the priests of the temple known as *Swamiyars* are also appointed by the King himself and only the *Swamiyars* of the *NaduvilMadhom* were originally appointed however, this changed with the change in the Maharaja but the *Swamiyars* even today are only appointed from a select class of people in society. On 17 January 1750, *AnizhamThirunal* surrendered the kingdom of Travancore to *Padmanabha Swamy*, the deity at the temple, and pledged that he and his descendants would be vassals or agents of the deity who would serve the kingdom as *PadmanabhaDasa*.¹⁵ Since then, the name of every Travancore king was preceded by the title *SreePadmanabhaDasa*. This delineated the historical relationship between the Maharaja and the temple: "That no deviation whatsoever should be made in regard to the dedication of the kingdom to Padmanabhaswamy and that all future territorial acquisitions should be made over to the *Devaswom*."¹⁶

¹³Udai Raj Rai "The Relationship between the State and Religion under the Indian Constitution." *The Relationship between the State and Religion under the Indian Constitution*. Available at: http://14.139.60.114:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/688/40/The_Relationship_between_the_State_and_Religion.pdf.

¹⁴ŚAŚIBHŪṢAṆ, EM JI., & ĀR PĪ RAĀ. CARITRAMKURICCAŚRĪPATMANĀBHASVĀMIKṢĒTRAM. (D C Books) (2011).

¹⁵V.A. Ponnemil, *Temples of Kerala - Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple*, New Kerala, <https://temples.newkerala.com/index.php?news=Temples-of--Kerala-Sri-Padmanabhaswamy-Temple>.

¹⁶*Id.*

After acceding the kingdom of Travancore to India, the role of governance is played by the modern establishment of the state government by according to them they do not seek control of the temple, or its property.¹⁷ The management of the temple after the end of the royal rule in the state was given to the royal family by the government but now in accordance to a supreme court order, the royal family has been divested of their administrative duties and an administrative setup of 5 members under a district judge has been created that has no royal representation.¹⁸ Hence, the state through the judiciary has taken control of the administration and bureaucratic power now rests in the state and not the religion. Further, the apex court has also ordered to open the treasure holding vaults of the temple which have been believed to be shut since hundreds of years. The question is whether it is in the power of the state to do this? An interesting aspect of this is that the state government has differing views than the central government and there is a difference in view of the executive and the judiciary as well as the chief minister has criticised the judgement of the high court in terms of taking the administrative powers from the royal family. These numerous aspects of the issue are what enlighten the case study and its sociological aspects in the present-day context.

In this case study, though traditionally, the crown and the religion have to be seen to work in unison and the crown is seen subordinate to the religion however, it is given a premier position in the working of the temple. Hence, the power of the management still remained with the then monarchy state. However, with the abandonment of religion as source of legitimacy of state, the institution has become independent from state however, the state exercises certain control over the religious institution but only when it deems it necessary for the situation. Therefore, the state and the modern rise of constitutionalism do respect the freedom of religion in their discourse. But, the will of the people and qualities of modern-day democracy like equality, justice and liberty supersede everything else. Further, it is pertinent to highlight that the authority of state in every matter is overarching over all the institutions and the state machinery like the judiciary become a mouthpiece of the exercise of that very authority.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the question whether temple treasures belong to the religious institution or the

¹⁷"Who Should Control Kerala Temple's \$22 Billion Treasure?" NDTV.com. (July 05, 2011, 6:12 PM) <https://www.ndtv.com/photos/news/who-should-control-kerala-temples-22-billion-treasure--10860#photo-135725>.

¹⁸"Supreme Court Order Marks Crucial Turn in Padmanabhaswamy Temple History." India Today.(April 25, 2014 6:18 PM), <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/sree-padmanabhaswamy-temple-case-supreme-court-interim-order-190444-2014-04-25>.

state has various sociological aspects attached to it relating to the economics and the politics attached with the treasure itself. The question also encompasses the relationship between religion and state and the also the relationship that exists between the modern economic institutions and the religion as a social institution. An analysis in the economic aspect in order to determine the relationship that exists between these imperative institutions of our social existence has led to two opposing explanations. One is where the way of life prescribed by religion and modern capitalism seem to be the antithetical with each other and their coexistence is deemed impossible and where a compromise is needed. On the other hand, another current explains how capitalism itself may have its origin in the protestant reformation and for this the spirit of capitalism rather than its lifestyle implications are considered. This is also extended to show how capitalism and economics played a vital role in the functioning of temples in South India in medieval history and for this the Tirupati temple is considered as a primary example. Hence, the relationship where they have managed to coexist in the intricacies of the temple working is evident and therefore though the implications in the lifestyle as prescribed by capitalism and religion are antithetical, the spirit of capitalism that drives it can be seen to be in consonance with the institution of religion.

Another major aspect is the political aspect, and this is mainly considered to analyse the relationship between state and religion. The relationship has seen a stark evolution having its origins in the separation of church and state debate. This has been analysed in the context of the temple in Kerela and the after analysing the bureaucratic structure of the temple, it is evident that though over the years the royal family has been deemed head and chief of all administrative and managerial affairs of the temple even after the monarchical rule ended post-independence and the justification was that the right to the Maharaja was given by the divine itself. However, as the modern notion of state departs from the divine right philosophy and refers to the sovereignty of the people and concepts of equality, rule of law and justice to legitimise the modern structure of democratic government, the state exercises and overarching authority over all institutions including the temples, which is evident in the present case of the Kerela temple. However, the state does recognise the freedom of religion and therefore only intervenes when it deems it necessary, but this power may seem to be an arbitrary overarching authority being vested in the state.

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