

# What Sort of Secular Society is this?

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**If assets belong to Hindu temple can be managed by the government, why the same rule does not apply to properties owned by mosques is the moot point.**

An interesting debate has begun among India's Catholics overland and other assets possessed by the church, worth literally billions of rupees. A report in the media notes that some sections of the laity are objecting to the assets being administered by Bishops. All India Catholic Union president Remy Denis is quoted as saying, "We all revere the Bishop as our guide on matters of faith and morals, but not in matters of property" Another Catholic leader and Director of Indian Institute of Christian Studies Joseph Pulikunnel is reported to have said that although church properties are acquired through contributions from the laity the laity has no say in their administration. Pulikunnel charged that "canon law allows the Bishop, as the Pope's representative, to administer church property, using legislative, executive and judicial powers'.As he put it, "It is legally not viable to say that the Head of the Vatican, a sovereign state, has the administrative power over church property in India, another sovereign state." The Catholic Church in India questions this, saying that "church properties in India are owned by the country's Catholic community, and not Rome'. Catholic Goan politician and former minister Edwardo Faleiro questions the assertion of the church on the grounds that in other parts of the world, government laws control churches, but in India canon law is permitted. According to Faleiro, 'religious organizations cannot form a state within a state".

What does the Catholic Church possess in India? The Roman Catholic Church reportedly runs five engineering colleges, 28 general colleges, 240 medical and nursing colleges, 2,457 hospitals and dispensaries, 3,765 secondary schools, 3,187 nursery schools and 7,319 primary schools. The church is alleged to own one of the largest chunks of non-agricultural land and a budget equal to that of the Indian Navy Now that is something. What is important to know is that it has complete control over its assets.

But what is the position regarding temples? Through the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Act of 1951, State governments have appointed managers to the boards of temples in the name of better administration, while mosques and churches are completely autonomous. The Act allows State governments and politicians to take over thousands of Hindu temples and maintain complete control over their property

It is claimed that in Andhra Pradesh, Hindu temples and certain institutions are illegally targeted by those in power. It is alleged that under the Temple Endowment Act in Andhra, about 34,000 temples have come under government control. Only 18per cent of the revenues of those temples are supposedly given back for temple purposes, but apparently little is known of how the rest (82 per cent) is spent. It is argued that even the world famous sacred temple at Tirumala-Tirupati which is believed to collect Rs 3,000 crore every year does not get more than 15 per cent of its revenues donated by devotees. The rest, one believes, gets transferred to the State exchequer. In an article appearing on a website the point is made that in

Karnataka, as recently as in 2003, some 79 crore dollar was collected from about two lakh temples. Of that, apparently only some seven crore dollar was returned to the temples for their maintenance. If these bits of information are correct, it amounts to downright loot.

Two questions arise. Firstly, if Hindu temples can be charged, why should churches and mosques not be charged? Why should there be one law for temples and another for churches and mosques? Secondly, why, in the first place, should the running of temples be taken over by the government? What temples are getting constitute donations and offerings from devotees. In no way can this amount be considered as "profit". Temple are not in business. Politicians are. No government has any right to order how a religious institute is run as long as all its activities are within the ambit of law and order. If it is felt that the temple authorities are cheating, it is for the devotees to call the former to order, if necessary, by appealing to the courts. In Kerala, it is claimed; land belonging to the Ayyappan Temple in Sabarimala has been grabbed and misused. If true, this calls for an explanation. It is no secularism to take away funds from the Guruvayur Temple and divert them to government projects. If such diversions take place, devotees are within their rights to call governments to order. The state cannot make use of temple assets for projects other than the care and comforts of devotees. One understands that whenever any educational trust of minority religions applies for income tax exemption under Section G of the Income Tax Act, the government freely obliges such requests. On the contrary, it seems, such requests by Hindu institutions like Veda Pathashalas are denied on grounds that they are 'communal'.

All this calls for public debate. Governments must be made answerable. What comes as a shock is to learn that thousands of small and medium-sized temples are already under government control and in some cases have been so for decades. According to reports, the Bihar government's control over the temples through its Hindu Endowments Department has resulted in the loss of temple properties worth Rs 2,000 crore. Does anybody care Here is a task for immediate inquiry by the BJP which must demand a White Paper on the subject.

According to the Forum for Religious freedom, based in Staten Island in the United State in 2002, from some thousand temples in Karnataka, the government took in revenues of Rs.72 crore, but returned only Rs 10 crore for temple maintenance. If the charges made against the government are wrong, it must be made explicit. But it is time all the facts were revealed, so that the people become aware of what is going on behind their backs in a 'secular' society.

Meanwhile, the question raised by the Catholic laity needs to be answered. If assets belonging to Hindu temples can be managed by the government, why should the same rule not apply to properties owned by churches and mosques?

Furthermore, the public surely has the right to know how many million dollars flow into Christian organizations in India from abroad and how they are spent. And how many million dollars flow into Islamic organizations in India from abroad and how are they spent? Why should all these questions be treated in a hush-hush manner and not discussed openly and in all fairness? What sort of pseudo-secular government do we have in Delhi?

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