

Diverting Temple Resources

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Diverting Temple Resources : Historical Roots and Contemporary Debate

Context

Recently, a **political controversy** has erupted in **Tamil Nadu** over the **diversion of temple funds for establishing colleges**. This debate has gone beyond financial concerns and highlighted a **unique social justice model** of regulating the **secular practices** of religious institutions.

As elections in **Tamil Nadu and Kerala** approach, a clear understanding of this issue becomes crucial to avoid **religious polarization** and ensure that debates remain rooted in facts, law, and historical context.

What is the Issue?

- **Diversion of Temple Funds** - Allegations about using surplus temple resources for college construction.
 - **Regulation of Secular Practices** - Raises questions about state oversight of non-religious functions of temples.
 - **Social Justice Angle** - The debate touches on **equitable opportunities**, ensuring **welfare of marginalized groups**, and the broader aim of creating a discrimination-free society.
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Historical Background of Religious Endowment

- **Meaning** - Religious endowment refers to assets dedicated for **religious or charitable purposes**, managed by institutions like temples.
- **Ancient Tradition** - Since **970 AD under the Chola Empire**, rulers and figures such as

Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi made strategic land and wealth donations to temples.

- **Temples as Cultural Hubs** - Functioned as centers of **education, culture, and welfare**, justifying their role in supporting educational institutions even today.
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Evolution of Legislative Framework

- **Religious Endowment Regulation (1817)** - Brought by the East India Company, first formal law on temple regulation.
- **Royal Proclamation (1858)** - Limited Crown's interference in religious practices but maintained control over secular matters.
- **Justice Party Reforms (1920s)** - Advocated accountability and transparency in temple management.

Key Legislative Milestones

- **Hindu Religious Endowments Act, 1922** - Allowed diversion of surplus funds, though controversial.
 - **Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, 1959** -
 - **Section 36:** Trustees can use surplus funds beyond temple maintenance with state approval.
 - **Section 66:** Surplus funds may establish **colleges/universities**, provided they impart **Hindu religious or architectural education**.
 - **Judicial Validation** - The **1959 Act** has been upheld by courts, confirming the **legality** of fund diversion for educational purposes.
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Legacy of Social Justice

- **Pre-Colonial Period** - Temples used as tools for **welfare allocation** by rulers.

- **Colonial Period** – British regulation ensured revenue generation and stable governance.
 - **Self-Respect Movement (1920s-30s)** – Positioned temple reform as part of **anti-caste struggles**, paving the way for **Temple Entry Legislations (1936, 1947)**.
 - **Modern Developments** – Tamil Nadu and Kerala have appointed **priests from backward classes**, marking a significant step in religious equity.
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Present Significance

- **Legal and Governance Angle** – Oversight ensures **fairness and accountability** in temple fund allocation.
 - **Electoral Relevance** – Clear understanding prevents **misuse of religious sentiments** during elections.
 - **Social Justice Continuum** – Opposing oversight risks reversing **decades of reforms** that shaped South India's progressive model.
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Conclusion

The controversy over temple funds in Tamil Nadu is not just about financial diversion but about the **essence of social justice, accountability, and inclusive governance**.

With deep roots in **history, colonial regulation, post-independence legislation, and social reform movements**, the diversion of temple funds for education stands on a **legally valid and socially progressive foundation**.

Challenging this model would mean undermining **South India's legacy of reform, equity, and welfare-oriented governance**.

Source : Indian Express