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## TEMPLE ENTRY IN TAMIL NADU: ISSUES, LEGISLATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

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### ABSTRACT

*Temple entry issue was a major social issue connected with the practice of untouchability in India and Tamil Nadu. Temple, the abode of God, is restricted to a major section of the people. The entry into temple is connected with social status of the people. Only the higher and dominant caste people were allowed to enter into the temples for a long time. As untouchability is a social problem, it was a hurdle for the participation of the untouchables in the Nationalist Movement. Hence, the Nationalist leaders came forward to abolish the practice of untouchability in the Indian soil. As a part of the eradication move, the Congress and its leaders were in favour of temple entry of untouchables in Tamil Nadu. Gandhi even called untouchables as 'Harijans' and he replaced the name of his newspaper, Young India as 'Harijan' and above all he conducted 'All India Harijan Tour. In this regard, he visited Tamil Nadu in 1933-1934 and appealed the people to end the practice of untouchability by allowing Harijans into the temples.*



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**KEYWORDS:** Temple Entry, Tamil Nadu, Madurai, Untouchables, Harijans, Vaidyanatha Iyer, Madras.

### INTRODUCTION

Temples play a major role in the cultural and religious history of Tamil Nadu. From time immemorial they have been the sacred places of veneration of the Hindu people. Temples are grouped into two types, namely, village and Brahminical temples based on by the *Agama Sastras*. Village temples are found in almost every village where each village community or caste worshiped the village gods. They are called Dravidian deities, usually local in their origin and very popular in the country side.<sup>1</sup> In the village temples, people worshiped the folk heroes and legendary deities like Madurai Veeran, Karuppanasamy, Aiyanar, Muniswaran, Mariamman, Sonaisamy, Pechiamman, etc. Brahmins do not officiate as priests in the cult of the lower classes.<sup>2</sup>

The other types of temples were built by the Tamil kings. The ancient rulers as head of the Theocratic status mobilized all the resources and manpower of the states and erected a magnificent granite temples in cities and towns. All sectors of society have launched their own ritual in its construction. After a large scale purification ceremony, the Brahmins deprived them of entering the temple. In these temples, in their taking office, the roles of Brahmins were predominant and they got all the rights from while the role played by all others communities have been denied or restricted.<sup>3</sup>

The *Agama* text, the ruling doctrine of temple rituals, stated that temples dedicated to the public were open to all Hindus, but distinctive places were assigned to different castes for the purpose of

worship. The Brahmin priests followed the prescription of the *Agama* text upon entering the sanctum sanctorum of the temples. The Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras could not go beyond the Mahamandapam of Hindu temples. The remaining people were considered contaminated classes and were reduced to the level of untouchable, inaccessible and invisible. They had to offer their prayers to the deity from outside the temple and denied worship on the temple premises.<sup>4</sup>

With the arrival of the British as the political head of the state, social changes took place. The British brought with them their form of government, the legal system and the policy of non-interference and neutrality in religious affairs naturally led to revolt in caste-based restriction society. The Western education provided by scientific truth was based on the improvement of civil morals.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the western impact and political awakening, a section of the people of Tirunelveli and Madurai Districts made several attempts to enter Hindu temples and claimed the right to worship in Madurai and Tirunelveli neighbourhood in the last quarters of the Nineteenth Century. It led to bloodshed, massacres and loss of property in Sivakasi and its adjacent areas in 1899.<sup>6</sup>

In the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, a progressive section of the caste Hindus and Congress leaders realized the need to eliminate social disability. They considered the proposal mooted in 1923 that the opening of the temples to the entry of Harijans.<sup>7</sup> The Congress led the temple entry movement. In 1924, Congress organized a campaign in Vaikkam in the Central Travancore State with the aim of guaranteeing the rights of the Harijans to enter the streets around the Vaikkam temple.<sup>8</sup>

However, the real beginning of the temple entry movement of the times gained momentum after Poona's Pact of 1932. It opened a new era in the history of the temple entry movement. It insisted the removal of the disparity of the depressed class to make good use of the public well, public schools and streets. The Pact gave more impetus to the movement to enter the temple in the country.<sup>9</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, the great social reformer led the movement to abolish untouchability. He appealed to all caste Hindus to help the Harijans enter the Hindu temple and offer worship.<sup>10</sup> At the Madras Provincial level, Congress elected some leaders such as T.S.S. Rajan, A. Vaidyanatha Iyer and N.M.R. Subbaraman to prepare the ground for leading the Harijans to the temples.<sup>11</sup>

As the work of the Congress progressed, the Justice party actively participated in the opening of the temples to the depressed classes. On November 1, 1932, P. Subbarayan, the Premier of the Madras Presidency presented a resolution in Madras Legislative Council to bring temple entry. In December 1932, he presented the Council with a bill called the Temple Entry Disability Removal Act. However, under the Government of India Act 1919, the Governor General's sanction was required to introduce a bill. The Governor General refused to grant permission on the grounds that it was an all-India nature, not provincial in character.<sup>12</sup> Seeing the reaction of the Orthodox section, the Government did not like to interfere in the socio-religious customs of the people. Meanwhile, in 1932, a referendum was held among municipal voters in Madurai and eighty percent of the people supported the cause of temple entry. While a growing volume of public opinion to eliminate disabilities, in November 1936, the Maharajah of Travancore Sri Chitrai Tirunal issued a royal proclamation for the opening of Hindu temples, which further strengthened the demand for entry to the temple.<sup>13</sup>

The temple entry movement became a reality when Congress took power in Madras Presidency in 1937. The Governor of the Madras Province assured the Congress Ministry that he would not interfere with provincial autonomy. In the Madras Legislature, M.C. Rajah, a prominent leader of the Depressed Class people introduced a private bill in 1937 to eliminate the disabilities of Harijans with regards to their entry into Hindu temples, but Rajaji opposed the bill. M.C. Rajah accused Rajaji and the Congress Party of betraying the interests of the Harijans. However, on December 1, 1938, Rajaji introduced the Malabar Temple Entry Bill, which was passed in the Madras Legislature and became a law in 1939. This bill paved the way for the Temple Entry Awakening in Tamil Nadu.<sup>14</sup>

The opening of a number of famous temples in South India began with the opening of the famous Meenakshi Amman temple to all in July 1939. Vaidyanath Iyer and his collaborators made relentless efforts to educate the public in Madurai regarding the removal of untouchability. As the temple entry campaign continued, the provincial temple entry conference was held in Madurai to expedite the process of entering of untouchables into the temple. On June 13, 1939, the conference was

chaired by Romeshwari Nehru, the Vice-President of All India Harijan Seva Sangh.<sup>15</sup> The conference was a major event in the campaign against untouchability. More than 300 delegates represented the conference from various parts of India. In this conference, Rajaji, V.I. Muniswami Pillai and T.S.S. Rajan fully convinced the public of the need for reform to purify Hinduism. In the evening a public meeting was held in Madurai which was attended by 30,000 people, and in a solemn voice they have rendered their unconditional support for the entry of the Harijans to the temple. Further, a temple entry propaganda committee was opened in one of the main streets of Madurai.<sup>16</sup>

A. Vaidyanatha Iyer, President of Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh launched an intense propaganda and prepared five Harijans and a Nadar to enter the Meenakshi Amman temple. It was done with the consent of C. Rajagopalachari and the R.S. Naidu, the temple Executive Officer.

On July 8, 1939, A. Vaidyanatha Iyer and L. Gopalasamy went to Meenakshi temple together with five Harijans, namely Swami Muruganathan of Alampatti, K. Kakkan of Tumbapatti, Muthu, a servant of Harijan Sevalaya, V.S.Chinnaya of Madichinam and B.R. Povalingam of Virattipatti as well as S.S. Shunmuga Nadar, a prominent Virudhunagar city councilor. The entry to the temple was a historic event, as the ancient custom was broken and a new chapter was opened in the annals of Hinduism. They entered the Golden Lily Tank inside the temple and after finishing the ablution they worshipped various shrines inside the Meenakshi Temple Complex. The Orthodox sections of the Madurai City found it difficult to reconcile. On July 11, 1939, Netasa Iyer, a prominent *Sanantanist* lawyer, filed criminal charges against Vaidyanatha Iyer and the temple executive officer. C. Rajagopalachari, the Premier of the Madras Presidency acted quickly. On the same day, the Government issued a retroactive indemnity bill. The bill was prepared well in advance and kept ready for publication as soon as the Madurai temple was finished. Since the Madras legislature was not in session, Lord Erskine, the Governor of Madras, on the advice of the Premier Rajaji, passed an ordinance. It has effectively put an end to all temple entry controversy. Subsequently, the ordinance was replaced by an appropriate law passed by the Madras Legislative Assembly that legalized the entry of the untouchables to the temple. On August 3, 1939, Premier C. Rajagopalachari introduced the Madras Temple Entry Authorization and Indemnity Bill. The Legislature passed the bill on August 5, 1939.<sup>17</sup>

After the successful entry into the Meenakshi Temple, Tanjore temples were thrown open to the public on July 16, 1939. Rajaram, the Prince and hereditary trustee of the Tanjore Palace Devasthanam thrown open ninety temples including the famous Brihadiswara Temple for the depressed classes.<sup>18</sup> On July 26, 1939, Thirukkuthaianatheswarar Temple, Courtallam and the next day the Kasi Viswanatha Temple, Tenkasi were opened for the depressed class people.<sup>19</sup> As a result of the legislation, three other temples in Madurai, one in Tiruchi, Chengleput, Coimbatore and Nilgris were opened to the Harijans.<sup>20</sup>

After independence, the Madras Government passed the Temple Entry Authorization Act of 1947 which eliminated handicaps sustained by the customs or habits of certain classes of Hindus regarding entry to Hindu temples, offering worship there. The law gave the excluded class the right to enter any public temple open to the Hindu public and to offer worship. This law replaced the Act of 1939.<sup>21</sup> The law extends to the whole of Tamil Nadu. The Temple Entry Authorization Act of 1947 and the provisions of the Constitution legally abolished the traditional practice of untouchability and social disabilities suffered by the Harijans.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the temple Entry Movement was a momentous event in the social history of Tamil Nadu and the nation.

To conclude, during the first half of the Twentieth Century, the temple entry was a successful event in Tamil Nadu. The major Brahminical temples in Tamil Nadu were thrown to the Harijans who were denied the right to enter into temples for a long period. The constructive programme of Congress and Gandhi propelled the nationalist leaders of Tamil Nadu like Rajaji, A.Vaidyanatha Iyer and T.S.S. Rajan to lead the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple entry very successfully. Following it, all the major temples of various regions of Tamil Nadu thrown open one after another. In spite of this, some of the private temples of the dominant communities are not thrown open till now. It shows the practice of untouchability persists still now all over India and Tamil Nadu is not an exception.

**END NOTES**

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