

## 1. Ideology, Interest and Incidents

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The recent incident of self-immolation by four Vanniyars, two men and two women, on the demand of entry by few youths of the Adi Dravida (Dravidar) community into the temple of Sri Dharmaraj Draupathi Amman of Melpathi village in Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu is apparently a clash between two different castes. The Vanniyars, who are dominant caste of the village, but historically Shudras, have been opposing the entry of Adi Dravida who are also historically Shudras but constitutionally SC and thus belong to dalit social category.

Adi Dravida belonged to earlier Paraiyar social category and the nomenclature Adi Dravida (meaning original Dravidians, though the word Adi is not of Dravidian origin) was coined towards the end of the 19th century. Iothee Thass, a leader of the community, believed the nomenclature Paraiyar to be an exonym and a slur for their identity used by upper-caste invaders who also subjugated them. Construct of traditional social categories, as is evident from some scriptures, had the basis of religious ideology. First time Thass asserted Adi Dravida identity and introduced it to a political discourse. Understandably, the construct of Aryan-Dravidian divide and the theory of Aryan invasion underlay the assertion.

Vanniyar is also a Dravidian community and historically belongs to a low caste category. Scholars have noted that traditional South Indian societies did not recognise Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, the two of four occupational groups in Hindu Varna system. The other two, namely Brahmins and Shudras were main caste divisions in the South. However, Shudras and untouchables together formed one broad division. Vanniyar, in later years, through the process of Sanskritisation upgraded their socio-religious status; but till now they are considered most backward caste. Their position as upper caste is a relative status.

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Melpathi is a village of Adi Dravids and Vanniyar castes; both the castes are Dravidians. The village deity Sri Dharmaraj Draupathi Amman is worshipped by both castes within the framework of an arrangement based on traditional socio-religious ideology. According to this arrangement, entry of the former caste into the temple is not permitted, but not the worship from outside.

Over the years, the Adi Dravidas have been exposed to emerging ideologies, such as dalit, leftist and political beyond the socio-religious one. Their aspirations, inter alia, reflects in their demand for equal rights; entry inside the village temple as equal partners is symbolic assertion of the demand. Entry, however, is not absolutely prohibited. It is reported by the temple priest that on the occasion of the 'Dharmar Pattabhishekam' (coronation of the deity) people of Adi Dravida community were allowed inside the temple. On an earlier occasion, members of Adi Dravidian community admit that the then district collector took them into the temple, but they were prevented to see and worship as a screen was put up to cover the deity. So, the issue is not about entry, but about enjoying equal rights like Vaniyars in the matter of entry and worship. Probably, given the Tamil Nadu government's desire to appoint non-Brahmin priests, the claim for priesthood could be an agenda of enjoying equal rights in Melpathi village. This demand undoubtedly has a political overtone, facilitated by politicians according to their political agenda and government's support, along with growing awareness of rights of dalits and corresponding outlook. In case of Tamil Nadu, it is maintained that the government has been heavily influenced by EV Ramasamy's "Dravidian" model, proclaiming "rationalism" as the only Truth. While it encouraged atheism and propounded rationalism among the Hindus, it largely left the idiosyncrasies of Islam and Christianity alone. The present DMK party follows this discrimination among the religions. Its stand on the continuance of temple control is claimed to ensure social justice which is denied normally in Hindu caste structure.

No doubt, Dravidian model of idea and ideology is at the backdrop when the Adi Dravidas met Higher Education Minister K. Ponmudy on Wednesday, 17 May, 2023 with the complaint of "atrocities" which means in the context 'not being allowed into the temple'. K. Ponmudy later spoke to the media, "I have informed them (the Dravidian community) that they will be allowed to visit the temple. Officials have also given instructions to them". As the temple is administered by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Act, he quipped, it was 'not any one's private property'. The remark is enough of a political dose to ignite fire in people, particularly youths ready for action.

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Following Minister's remark, the incident that took place on 18 May, 2023 and violent protests occurred on the issue of entry to the temple. Political overtone is also evident in Vanniyars' protest against K. Ponnudurai.

Government control and management of temple apparently indicate to phenomenon of transfer of community ownership to the government. Two major issues, on the matter of ownership, come to the fore. The temple is under the management and control of the state government's HR&CE Department. Management and control is not same as owning something. Obviously, it is not government owned, but in principle ownership is 'transferred' from management. This point needs to be clarified as trusts managing the temple often results into clashes between traditional priests and management officials all over India. In olden days, temples belonged to the community, but on occasions several works were done under the patronage of kings and queens, devout citizens, wealthy patrons or private, charitable trusts run by certain communities or religious leaders. There were also temples built by private individuals or handed over to an individual family whose members used to maintain them from generations to generations. Is it the case in Melpathi village, for Vanniyars claim that they are following the traditions of the temple set by their ancestors.

Whether the temple is built by Vanniyar's forefathers or by some unknown person, two crucial points emerge for consideration. If Vanniyars came from outside, the goddess is also an outside import. If the goddess emerged in the process of Hinduisation of both the communities, either by introducing or equalising an indigenous deity with Sri Dharmaraj Draupathi Amman still the outside influence is visible. But what is important is that both the communities have belief in the same deity from a distant past within the arrangement of a socio-religious ideology. The tradition that has been prevailing suggests to an arrangement of mutuality then confrontation on the basis of caste. When this ideology was posited and compared with emerging ideologies, then confrontation and conflict ensued.

The tradition broke with The Religious Endowments Act, 1863, Act No. 20 of 1863 of the British Government for the due appropriation of the rents and produce of lands granted for the support of Mosques, Hindu Temples and Colleges or other public purposes; for the maintenance and repair of Bridges, Choultries, or Chatrams, and other public buildings; and for the custody and disposal of Escheats. Actually the British administration had an eye on temple donations and resources which

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they wanted to use through their Department of Revenue, recognizing the potential of temples as significant financial contributors to their economic and military plans.

In 1925, the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act, 1923 (Act I of 1925) was passed by the local Legislature, with the supposed objective of providing better governance and administration to certain religious endowments. As the name suggests, the Act was Hindu biased and this continues till now thereby inviting criticism from BJP, RSS and other Hindu organisations. While BJP ruled states are mulling to liberate temples from government control, opposition ruled states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, etc. tighten the hold. On 16 May, 2023 the Madhya Pradesh government took a decision in its Cabinet meeting to allow temple priests to sustain their livelihood from temple agricultural land and would not depend on salaries given by the government. But in September, 2022 the Supreme Court observed that government interference is justifiable as all temple earnings come from society, so they may well be returned to the people by way of establishing colleges and universities by the temple trust. The controversy goes on.

Point of criticism is that funds collected through Hindu temples are being spent on maintenance of churches and mosques which violates the Constitutional spirit of 'secularism'. Even Spiritual Guru Jaggi Vasudev (popularly known as Sadguru) is also campaigning for liberating Tamil Nadu temples from government control and management. As the name of the Act suggests, it is only the Hindu temples and charitable organizations that are regulated by the HR&CE Department. But, churches, mosques and their charities, schools, hospitals, etc. are not monitored, regulated, legislated or controlled by the State. Evidently, State's interference in religious matters is not based on secular principle as enshrined in the Constitution. In addition to the issue of violation of the principle of secularism, the government management is charged with corruption, gross mismanagement of financial resources and negligence in maintenance of temple heritage by temple officials as often reported in newspapers. Negligence is visible in reports which state that over 5000 temples are in dilapidated condition. Further, there have been several reports of stolen temple property/ possessions including ancient idols, jewellery and art work.

Emerging ideologies like feminism, activism, human rights, secularism, leftist perspective, etc. which could be characterised as categorised perspectives/ideologies, confront traditional socio-religious ideology resulting in social tension and violence. In 2016 led by activist Trupti Desai, several women

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of Maharashtra protested against gender bias in the worship of Sri Shani Dev in Shani Shingnapur village. The women certainly were not traditionalist, but a few imbued in the spirit of emerging ideologies. Two-three years ago, women of Kerala influenced by emerging ideologies, also supported and led by activists, attempted to enter Sabarimala temple. Traditionally, women and girls of reproductive age are not allowed entry and worship to the temple. Kerala High Court banned entry in 1990 in view of its contour of traditional essence; the Supreme Court in its verdict allowed entry on the ground of equality. Obviously, a confrontation of traditional and emerging ideologies is evident. The entry attempt led to protest by Ayyappa male devotees, which often turned to be violent. Needless to say, the traditional socio-religious ideology also encounters formal legal system and administration.

Clash of ideologies occur because emerging ideologies are not inclusive of all aspects of life. Formal legal system has specific contexts and government intervention could not be a proper replacement of traditional arrangement. The confrontation occurs because lapses in government interventions such as apparent bias against the Hindus, violation of principle of secularism, no provision to address the issue of ideological shift in society and so on. While adopting control of temple, mainly for revenue purpose, social dynamics were not given due consideration or engaged in right direction. In most cases user parties, practices of use, etc. weren't given serious thought in the Act. As the problem relates to traditional socio-religious ideology that has been continuing for a long time, its settlement should be within it. With emerging ideologies and their onslaught, the traditional one starts fracturing. It is to be argued that entry into the temple has not resulted from religious calling, but from the influence of ideology and political intervention. Undoubtedly, a situation of confrontation between traditional ideology and emerging categorised ideologies ensues due to their incompatibility.

It is to be mentioned that the stigma of untouchability attributed on caste basis is not more a reality today. So called untouchable people are now in such occupations as teaching which was exclusively held by higher castes like Brahmins. Even people of all the castes are engaged in same occupations like doctors, engineers, scientists, business, army, etc. As the social dynamics, based on caste occupation are changing, it is now time to relook into socio-religious ideology in the line of contemporary societal needs for a peaceful co-existence and strong social solidarity.