Autonomy For Hindu Temples Demanded In Tamil Nadu, India
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For Hindu activists in Tamil Nadu, August 31st was a "red letter day" as 100,000 devotees fasted to "liberate temples from the clutches of the secular government." For government ministers, it was another annoying episode in an unholy quarrel over 34,000 holy places.

The "token fast," held in 21 separate locations in front of a temple in each district, was organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, an organization formed in 1964. A VHP press release hailed the fast's success as "clear indication of popular will of the people that Government should quit the temple administration." It was the first visible action born of the June 21st 4th State-level Conference of the Sannyasis and Matathipathis held at Tiruvannamalai.

The June conference had demanded that all temples be handed over to an "autonomous board formed by Mutt Heads, Sannyasis and Hindu dignitaries and devotees." Detailed was the perceived decline in the care of temples, under various governments, since the state took control in 1925. Similar resolutions in recent years have fallen on deaf ears.

The Minister for the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Commission (HR&CE) denounced the fast as a misguided attempt to disrupt the temple administration. Sri. Sundaramurthy, Commissioner of the HR&CE, criticized the fast as a futile exercise, saying he had seen several such agitations in the past. Since the June conference the newspapers of Tamil Nadu have given steady coverage of the autonomy bid, often detailing heated debates between ministers and VHP leaders.

A unique feature of the present campaign is the participation by a broad

cross-section of the population. Notably, as Aside magazine put it, "the unlikely middle class" are taking part. During the recent protest, an Aside reporter was started to see one middle-aged matron scream "Get out of our temples! Corrupters of our places of worship, out!" Large numbers of devotees from rural areas of each district turned out for the fast, and harijan women participated in good number. A spokesman for the VHP told newsmen, "Our protest stems from the fact that the government seems clearly to be in the temple administration business simply for the profits...It shows scant or no interest in temples that have little income, but entrenches itself firmly in temples that attract large funds."

Former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M. Bhakthavatsalam, told Aside that "It's not fair to say corruption entered temple management only since it was taken over by the government. In fact, it was the mismanagement and corruption that was rampant when the [local religious leaders] were looking after the temples that led to the government takeover." The intent of the 1925 takeover, he said, was to "cleanse management and make temples a part of social progress."

VHP activists say it hasn't worked out that way. "Individual corruption, which was the exception rather than the rule, has been replaced by large-scale corruption propagated by the government machinery. In addition, temple affairs have become irrevocably and undesirably politicised," said one VHP member. At the heart of the matter, another sympathizer said, "When the Dravidian parties came to power in Tamil Nadu, what you had in effect were a group of non-believers - and in the early days, active haters of religion and the temple culture - in charge of temples! This was the beginning of the end as far as the temples were concerned."

According to a VHP spokesman, "The average temple has probably an income of Rs. 30,000 per month. This includes any income from temple property as well as the Hundi collection. The government takes away Rs. 20,000 for its social programs, leaving just Rs. 10,000 for the temple...The result is that even in well-funded temples there is no longer enough money to conduct worship in the way it used to be conducted...Upstart temple officers, who do not know the significance of the various kinds of worship, merely order priests to 'do pujas within your means.' "Priests are also suffering dearly: "Who would like his sons to follow an occupation in which salaries are not given for years and even when they are given, are too meagre to make ends meet?"

The VHP seems determined to get Hinduism's sacred temples out of government

hands, yet they and local religious leaders are prepared for a long struggle. Said the VHP release: "In short, the token fast has been a clear indication of Hindu awakening and their resolve to assert their right. A good beginning has been made in the long Dharmic struggle to follow."