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Senior Advocate Guru Krishna Kumar cited Supreme Court rulings from 1972 and 2016 to emphasise the necessity of adhering to Agama traditions for appointing archakas in Agama temples.

Written by [Arun Janardhanan](#)
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"Learning Agama Sastra in a year doesn't equip one to manage a temple, which is a combination of experiential concepts, ideas, and dedication. Temple administration is not the same as running a company, and Agama Sastra is not a black book," the priest said.

The Supreme Court this week ordered status quo on the appointment of archakas (priests) in Agamic temples in Tamil Nadu. The Srirangam Koil Miras Kainkaryaparagal Matrum Athanai Sarntha Koilgalin Miraskain-karyaparargalin Nalasangam, an association of archakas, had challenged reforms introduced by the DMK government, which are seen as attempting to change the hereditary system of appointing archakas in Agama temples.

The petitioners asked for the quashing of the state government's order and letters dated July 27 and August 28, 2023 respectively, which paved the way for individuals trained in Agama Sastra, irrespective of caste and gender, to assume priesthood. The petitioners alleged the state government was unlawfully attempting to appoint non-believers as archakas, infringing upon religious rights protected under the Constitution.

They contended that knowledge of the Agamas, which are significant religious practices, could not be secured by completing the one-year certificate course run by

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the government, but required years of rigorous training under learned Gurus.

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Positions in Govt and law

The debate over the appointment of temple priests in Tamil Nadu stems from various government and judicial actions.

In 1971, the DMK government of Chief Minister M Karunanidhi amended the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious & Charitable Endowment (HR & CE) Act to abolish the hereditary appointment of priests, and to allow individuals from all castes to be priests.

In 2006, the government declared all qualified persons eligible to be priests. The Supreme Court struck this down in 2015 — it underlined the adherence to Agama Sastras, while ensuring that constitutional rights were not violated.

In 2009, Madras High Court ruled in favour of a woman priest from Usilampatti, Madurai, who was facing opposition from male priests regarding her inherited right to conduct puja at the Arulmigu Durgai Amman temple. The court underlined the irony of objecting to puja by a woman in a temple with a female deity, emphasised historical precedents of women conducting rituals, and rejected the unwarranted application of Agama Sastras and norms of the Manusmriti in this context.

It stressed on the need to eliminate gender bias from temples to realise the constitutional mandates under Articles 15 (“prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth”) and 51A(e) (fundamental duty “to...renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women”).

In the Guruvayoor Devaswom case (2004), the SC upheld the appointment of non-believers to the temple trust board. In the N Adithayan (2002) case, the SC ruled that no custom pre-existing the Constitution could exclude non-Brahmins from performing puja in temples if they were otherwise trained and qualified.

These judgments highlighted the judiciary’s commitment to ensuring equality and non-discrimination in the appointment of priests, asserting that neither caste nor family succession should dictate eligibility for performing temple rituals and the appointment of pujaris (archakas).

Divine contradictions

Despite Constitutional provisions and the abolition of hereditary priest appointments in Tamil Nadu, the Agama tradition persists in temple administrations. In Kerala, Hindutva groups have asked why only Hindu temples are under government control, and not churches or mosques. Tamil Nadu also saw a campaign for “reclamation” of temples ahead of the 2021 Assembly elections.

During the colonial period, when the Chittoor district collector was in charge of the Tirupati temple, Christian establishments in India expressed concern over the involvement in British officials in Hindu rituals. This led to the transfer of control over temples to local communities — and the introduction, in 1951, of the HR & CE Act restricted the role of the government to administration and finance.

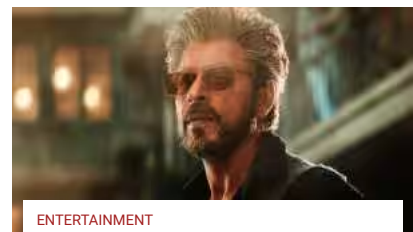


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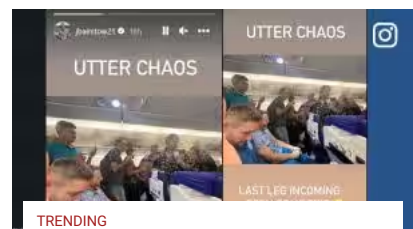
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Debates over the hereditary rights of priests or the pushback against the Supreme Court's decision to allow the entry of women into the Sabarimala temple reflect the persistent friction between modernity and tradition, which defies straightforward solutions.

A priest from a prominent temple in Chennai argued that rules that apply to other faiths may not necessarily apply to the Hindu religion. "Christianity has a system to manage and appoint priests. But the situation is different in Hinduism, with its innumerable traditions, contradictions, and thousands of gods and goddesses," he said, requesting anonymity.

"Rituals in temples are not just ceremonial displays but involve extensive unseen preparations. There are thousands of priests who maintain these traditions with no expectation of financial gain, reflecting the enduring importance of these customs beyond monetary considerations. Priesthood should not be merely an option for a candidate who has failed to get a bank or a government job," he said.

Also, unlike in Semitic traditions where the venue or idol is secondary, Hindu temples are perceived as epicentres of "soul energy", each with a unique deity and purpose. The concept of worship centres also varies significantly.

The priest pointed out that while Sabarimala was painted as a temple that stood against menstruation and women, in many temples including Kondungallur in Kerala, menstrual days are celebrated every month with special pujas. "You cannot apply logic or reasoning to faith without empathy," he said.

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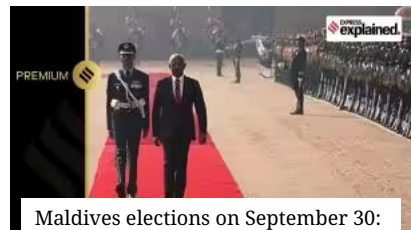
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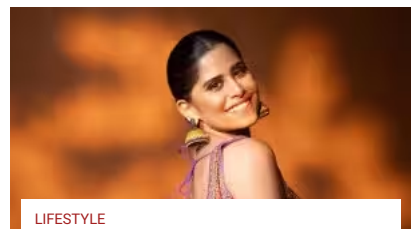
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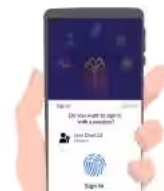
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