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978-0-521-05367-9 - Religion under Bureaucracy: Policy and Administration for
Hindu Temples in South India

Franklin A. Presler

Excerpt

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*Introduction: studying religion–state
relations*

The past decade has seen a significant change in our perception of the relations of religion and politics. The once widespread belief that modern times would bring the inevitable decline of religion as a force in public life has been profoundly shaken. The interplay of religion and politics seems suddenly again a world-wide phenomenon, affecting both the “developing” world of Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, and the “developed” world of Europe and North America, and involving all the great religious traditions: Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and their various sects. The prominence of religion in public life has reopened a whole set of issues which many people had regarded as closed, such as the role of religion in party politics, public education, family law, taxation, foreign relations and civic morality.¹

The resurgence of religion poses many challenges to our understanding. As scholars search for explanations, clergy and politicians struggle with the more immediate problem of finding effective ways to address each new controversy as it emerges. Many urge as a basic principle that religion and politics be kept separate, that the health of both church and government can be ensured only when they are allowed considerable autonomy in their respective domains. This separation, it is said, is the only feasible arrangement given the increasing religious pluralism of most societies. But this prescription, however important, has not always been helpful in negotiating satisfactory relations between religion and the state. The problem remains universal, and is apparently intractable. We need to accept as a starting point the clear fact that religion and public life *do* penetrate each other, and reflect on how we might best interpret this fact. Greater specificity is needed regarding the different ways and contexts in which religion and politics intersect, the types of conflict which emerge, and the influence of economic, social, historical and cultural factors. Only then can we assess the meaning and consequences of what is clearly a world-wide phenomenon.

¹ Ainslie T. Embree, “Religion, nationalism and conflict,” in J.S. Bains and R.B. Jain, eds., *Contemporary political theory* (New Delhi: Radiant Publisher, 1980), p. 105.

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Religion under bureaucracy

This book is a study of religion and politics in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It focuses on a central institution of south Indian religion, the Hindu temple, and explores its relation to the state. This institutional approach permits concentration on relatively stable features of the religion–politics relation, as distinguished from the more fleeting movements of political parties and public opinion, and identification of underlying, structural dimensions. It also provides an unusual position from which to view the activities of political parties, bureaucracy and interest groups, and to examine the effects on the political system of ideologies, patronage systems and legal structures related to religion.

The south Indian Hindu temple is a major institution. There are approximately fifty-two thousand temples in the state of Tamil Nadu, dotting the countryside, dominating the horizons of cities and shaping the life of both. Temples are also complex institutions, with complicated systems of internal organization and governance, economies based on endowments, offerings and highly detailed exchange relationships, and elaborate modes of worship rooted in history and tradition. Because of the wealth of the temple, primarily in the form of land endowments, because of the patronage which control of wealth brings, because of the significance of the temple in culture and society, and because of the deities residing in them, temples create economic and political power, and social and ritual status. Trustees in the larger temples are often prominent landlords, former rajahs and zamindars and other local notables. But countless south Indians of far lower social standing also care deeply about and vie for place in their local temples. Many aspects of life intersect in the temple.

Throughout the modern period, governments in south India have been deeply involved in temples. Their purpose has been to establish a presence in temple management, and thereby to regulate the use of the temple's material and symbolic resources. Inevitably, regulation has implied controlling the details of Hindu organization, economy and worship. This is true despite the fact that for at least a century the state has been committed to nonintervention in religion, and since 1947 has been constitutionally secular.

The key to this apparent contradiction lies partly in a structural conflict which has developed in the modern era between Hindu temples and the state. Modern state development in south India, as elsewhere, is in the direction of centralization of control, expansion of jurisdiction, autonomy, and rationality in administration.² These characteristics

² Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the history of European state-making," in Charles Tilly, ed., *The formation of national states in western Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 70.

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place the state in tension with other established institutions, and the resulting conflict is manifested in many political, institutional and cultural contexts, one of which is the temple. Indeed, Hindu temples more than any other institution seem to have represented a challenge to the modern south Indian state. The details of the challenge have varied at different times, but the challenge itself has been constant.

The twists and turns in the government's response over the past century and a half to the temple challenge have resulted in an extraordinarily complex temple–state relationship. The central purpose of this book is to analyze this relationship: the nature of the challenge, the response, and the structures and dynamics which have been the result. The analysis should also illuminate a number of more general issues crucial for understanding processes in postcolonial political systems, such as the effectiveness of legal–rational administration, the effect of bureaucracy on political representation, the importance of patronage for political parties, and the relationships between the centralized state and the localities.

I shall analyze the Tamil Nadu case through the state's central organizational vehicle for dealing with temples, the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (Administration) Department (hereafter HRCE).³ I shall focus especially on three HRCE initiatives: the effort to change the authority, functions and prerogatives of priests, trustees and other personnel; the effort to standardize temple landholdings and land use; and the effort to establish a central ecclesiastical organization directed by the state. These policies encompass central institutional dimensions of temples: *governance*, *economy*, and *religious life*. Taken together, they reveal a systematic attempt to penetrate the temple, to bring it within the orbit of state power and to ensure that it accommodates or furthers public purposes as defined by the state. HRCE administration in these areas is not uniformly effective. It has been stronger in religious life, weaker in governance and weakest in economy. This is somewhat ironic, since the state's authority over the religious dimension is far less clear than it is over the other two.

³ The HRCE is the successor to the HRE Board, which was founded in 1926. The latter was an independent regulatory agency whereas the former, formed in 1952, is an executive department of the government. For most purposes, however, there is a single line of continuity between the two and, unless made necessary by the context, I shall refer to the state's administration of temples by the single designation "HRCE."

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The Tamil Nadu case is a dramatic example of how entangled the institutional fortunes of religion and state can become, even in a society formally committed to “secularism.” It is also an example, I think, which can shed light on characteristic features of religion–state interactions elsewhere. Rather than limit ourselves to country-by-country studies, or to the unique configurations associated with each of the great religious traditions, it seems useful to identify more general and characteristic patterns. What follows is an effort in this direction, one which focuses on the processes surrounding the emergence of the modern state, and the modern state’s almost universal tendency to propagate its vision of rationality.

The emergence of the modern state involves processes basic to political development in all countries and extraordinarily significant for religion. The characteristic direction everywhere in the world is towards the expansive “rational” state – autonomous, differentiated, centralized and internally coordinated.⁴ Almost without exception, modern governments see religion – its beliefs and practices, its leaders and institutions – as a potential or actual threat to this expansion. The reverse is equally true. Religious leaders, worried about modernization and about what the changing political order portends for religion, develop strategies to defend their domains from state encroachment. Each side is concerned to defend its authority and legitimacy. Religion–state relations are not static. The conflict is sometimes subdued and at other times explicit, but both sides are continually alert to one another and to change in the larger environment of the society. The result is continuing structural tension. To analyze this tension, it is useful to view it in terms of three central dimensions: a *political* conflict between governmental and religious elites; an *institutional* conflict over the use of economic and cultural resources; and a *cultural* conflict over legitimacy, authority and the definition of the ideal society.

The political conflict between governmental officials and religious elites tends to be the first manifestation of underlying tensions. Centralizing states typically begin with attacks on ecclesiastical properties and benefices and on the status and influence of the religious elite. As they find their positions jeopardized, religious leaders (bishops, abbots, priests, monks) search for ways to save their positions, sometimes through resisting the state’s incursions, other times through forging an alliance with it. These strategies have made for high drama: Henry VIII

⁴ Tilly, “Reflections,” p. 70.

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and Thomas More, the French Revolution and the “nonjuring” Catholic clergy, Atatürk’s abolition of the Caliphate. In Tamil Nadu, as we shall see, the state has moved to undercut many prerogatives enjoyed by temple elites, such as control over temple land and income, religious authority, and local prestige and status; the elites, in turn, have not lacked means of resisting, at least temporarily, the state’s threat.

Lying behind the political struggle is a set of tensions between institutions of religion and the state as the latter press to exert influence over an ever-widening range of social activities, including economy, property, welfare, law and education. State expansion is accompanied by “demands that these vital areas be brought directly under state control,” that the state be “sovereign.”⁵ In Tamil Nadu, the state has claimed sovereignty in a wide variety of areas: land and tenancy reforms, supervision of education, changes in inheritance, property and charity laws, and efforts to channel religious wealth in socially “progressive” ways. The state’s claim in these areas has posed direct, major challenges for Hindu temples.

In a sense, the cultural conflict between the modern state and more traditional religion lies behind and is logically prior to the previous two. At issue are the basic values, understandings and symbols in terms of which shared social purpose and unity are possible. Especially important is the issue of legitimacy. The growth of the modern state is accompanied by major shifts in the structure, procedure and goals of public power, often in directions not entirely compatible with those of the past. Legitimacy in the premodern era was often tied institutionally and ideologically to religion. Modernizing states usually stake out independent claims, resting their rule on written constitutions, statutory laws, formal procedure, and actual performance in such areas as physical health, economic prosperity and national security.⁶ Even states which maintain a religious connection, such as extreme cases of theocracy, attempt to enhance their own autonomy.⁷

The conflict over legitimacy is not necessarily expressed fully or formally. It can be mediated through very narrow and specific disputes and, indeed, this is the common pattern. After all, the modern state does not spring into being all at once; it forms slowly, incrementally. Conflicts over legitimacy thus occur case by case, as when the state moves into an area, such as education or priest selection, which heretofore had been

⁵ Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and political development* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1970), p. 97.

⁶ Smith, *Religion*, p. 116; Raymond Grew, ed., *Crises of political development in Europe and the United States* (Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 19–20.

⁷ Embree, “Religion.”

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more or less autonomous. Here state officials must justify the state's right to take charge, and their justification often represents a quite different interpretation of the state's relation to and purpose in society. New categories and definitions may be introduced, different goals and meanings may be appealed to. The new interpretation is thus essentially a cultural act. The state is successful to the extent that its cultural interpretation becomes dominant, edging out the other, previously established, religiously based views.

In Tamil Nadu religion–state relations are marked by cultural conflict of a complex kind. The Indian state is constitutionally secular. For ordinary purposes, this is understood as meaning that religion and state coexist, but in separate realms, with “noninterference” and the “wall of separation” being the standard for their interaction. To be legitimate, therefore, the Tamil Nadu government must redefine its relation to temples as something other than control. Thus, control is called “supervision,” “protection,” or “oversight”; religion is labelled a “cultural heritage”; and temples are defined as “public trusts” or “monuments.” Conflict also surrounds the relationships among state agencies. For example, the HRCE has a view of the Hindu temple which is vigorously resisted by other state agencies, especially the courts and the Revenue Department, as well as by temple spokesmen in the localities. Unravelling the strands of these conflicts will be a major task throughout this study.

Religious policy and political development

The combined force of the political, institutional and cultural challenges explains why religion–state relations are a central issue in modern state formation. Yet the direction of the state's response is not automatic; history gives evidence of many different patterns. In general, though, we can say that the strategy that a particular state follows is conditioned by the underlying strength of the regime, by the support and opposition it receives from political elites, and by procedures, jurisdictions and managerial styles in the state's administrative agencies. These can be elaborated briefly.

Policy must always take into account underlying *regime strength*. It is not always true that the state will be made more secure and that its control will be augmented by an expansive, domineering approach to religion. Officials must evaluate the nature of religious leadership, and the extent of popular loyalty to religion in order to avoid precipitating general resistance to the state's claim to sovereignty and legitimacy.⁸

⁸ Tilly, “Reflections,” p. 35.

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State officials in modern south India have repeatedly had to make these sorts of calculations. For example, British colonial administrators in the nineteenth century perceived religion in India to be an especially sensitive and often dangerous force, which needed to be handled with great tact and sensitivity. Muslims and Hindus were believed to be highly volatile when their religious privileges, beliefs and institutions were threatened. The 1857 Mutiny especially, but many other smaller incidents as well, reinforced this belief. Threats to colonial power could of course come from many quarters, but the British believed that the threat from religion was perhaps the most significant. They were by no means always as confident of the Empire's basic security as their public statements would suggest.

British policy thus vacillated between two basic strategies. One implied expansion: assert the state's sovereignty and spread the administrative net over all religious institutions. Local officials could keep tabs on trouble spots, and state financial and political interests could be protected. The second strategy implied separation and noninterference: religion was too explosive. State interests were best ensured by severing all connections and by refusing to pass laws which could in any way offend religious sensibilities.

Each strategy had supporters. Noninterference found its main supporters at the higher levels of government, in Calcutta and London, and expansion tended to be favored by lower provincial and local officials. Cutting across this general pattern, however, is the fact that different departments at the same organizational level tended to emphasize those strategies which conformed best to their particular organizational interests. Everyone, of course, at whatever level or in whatever department, defended his views as being the most consistent with the cultural and political traditions of both British and traditional Indian governments. Not surprisingly, actual state policy tended to combine features of state expansionism and nonintervention.

Political support and opposition also weigh heavily in formulating religious policy. Religion affects a variety of social, economic and cultural interests; a policy which benefits and draws support from one group may damage and be opposed by another. As state activities widen in scope and detail, new segments of the population are mobilized and for the first time enter the political arena, sometimes to oppose and at other times to support the state.⁹ Religious policy may now become part of the government's overall strategy of building support for itself in society. A particular policy may strengthen existing alliances between

⁹ Ibid. p. 32.

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the regime and its supporters, forge new ones, and diffuse opposition. The interactions between religious policy and politics enter a new, quite different and, for the state, immensely important phase.

In south India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, newly mobilized groups began to claim and achieve representation in state agencies.¹⁰ Indians became especially influential in the courts, municipal councils, provincial assemblies and other advisory boards. Many were new entrants to politics, English-educated and living in urban centers; others were older elites from the countryside. All had much to gain from political activity, and especially from issues relating to temple finance and administration. The colonial state, in turn, increasingly needed the support of the emerging Indian political and administrative classes. As the twentieth century opened, Indians were taking over more and more pivotal positions, so much so, indeed, that older established state agencies, and the British officers who primarily staffed them, found their jurisdictions threatened. The clearest evidence of this is the HRCE itself. Its formation heralded a dramatic expansion of the state's initiatives in religion, but was brought about only under the auspices of the elected Indian government set up under the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms. The British had long resisted changing the pattern of religious policy; for the emerging political classes, however, the reformed temple administration was an important vehicle for political growth and gain.

The *interaction among state agencies* is a third factor shaping religion–state relations. New policies often upset the existing balance among government agencies, and affect long-standing jurisdictional boundaries, prerogatives and responsibilities, introducing periods of uncertainty, rivalry and imbalance. Administrators are frequently quite parochial and conservative. A policy designed to benefit the state in overall terms may well be subverted as administrators jockey to protect their positions, resources and power. Smooth administration may eventually be reestablished, based either on compromise or on dominance by one side. However, well-entrenched agencies may in the end successfully resist the new policy. A standoff results, with no resolution of conflict, and concerted state action may simply not be possible. The formal attributes of legal–rational authority, in other words, do not immunize government agencies from struggles for power or from the inefficiencies to which such struggles lead.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 35.

¹¹ Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoebler Rudolph, "Authority and power in bureaucratic and patrimonial administration: a revisionist interpretation of Weber on bureaucracy," *World Politics* 31 (January 1979): 195–227.

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In south India, interagency conflicts have been and remain a crucial variable in temple administration. Especially important are conflicts among three agencies: the HRCE, the judiciary and the Board of Revenue. These are agencies with vested jurisdictional interests, and strong but fundamentally different administrative traditions and interpretations of the Hindu temple. The structure of temple–state relations is shaped in pivotal ways by these conflicts.

Levels of stateness, administrative ineffectiveness and the concept of secularism

This perspective on religion–state relations can be clarified by some further comments in three areas. The first relates to the dynamic quality of religion–state relations, the second to the problem of government ineffectiveness, and the third to the concept of secularism.

It is important to emphasize that the structure and intensity of religion–state interactions can vary considerably over time. Constitutions and legal systems, it is true, make for relatively stable patterns, but there is still room for change. Recently several authors have found it useful to think in terms of J.P. Nettl's notion that there can be levels or degrees of "stateness," and that the level in any given country can rise and decline over both the long term and the short term. High stateness means that the state assumes, and society in turn expects it to assume, basic responsibility for law and order, for setting public purposes and for attaining them.¹² At such times, the state is firmly differentiated from other organizations: it is autonomous, centralized and formally coordinated.¹³ In turn, persons associated with the state – bureaucrats, military officers, prime ministers, judges – enjoy enormous prestige and authority. Their definitions of the public interest are, for the time being at least, compelling and legitimate. The state in these circumstances may be described as enjoying constitutive powers; it is strategically placed to shape society in a wide range of areas. It selects public values, certifies some groups as having public standing and rejects other groups as illegitimate, and defines the overarching principles which guide the use

¹² J.P. Nettl, "The state as a conceptual variable," *World Politics* 20 (July 1968): 559–92. For an application of the concept of stateness in the all-India context, see Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *In pursuit of Lakshmi: the political economy of the Indian state* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

¹³ Charles Tilly, ed., *The formation of national states in western Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 638. For a recent analysis of the subsequent use of Nettl's concept of "stateness," see Gabriel Ben-Dor, *State and conflict in the Middle East: the emergence of the postcolonial state* (New York: Praeger, 1983), esp. chs. 1–2.

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of public coercion. High stateness, in other words, gives government remarkable power. Low stateness, on the other hand, is marked by the relative absence of the features outlined above. Nettl notes that the strength of the state, its level of stateness, is the product both of long-range historical and cultural traditions and of more proximate political, economic and social factors.

The Tamil Nadu state enjoys relatively high stateness in matters of religion for three especially important reasons. First, south Indian kings historically had important connections with religion and temples. The cultural expression of this connection is the concept of the state as “protector” of religion generally and of temples specifically. Some would argue that the HRCE is simply performing the contemporary version of this traditional role. Second, the modern Indian state is regarded, especially since Independence, as a positive countervailing force to traditional society. Insofar as temples can be said to embody old and traditional patterns, the state enjoys considerable public support in its effort to bring temples under control. Third, there is the ever present struggle for “place” – for economic, social and political position – in the face of scarcity. Much of Indian public life involves constant jockeying for status, privilege and opportunity. The state, more than any other single agency, is in a position to affect the outcome of these struggles. Through its own employment, and through laws which regulate how others give employment, the state has become the great gatekeeper of place. This is as true in temple matters as it is in other areas.

High stateness inevitably affects the profile of political representation in temple matters. The state’s preeminence places critics and opposition groups at a disadvantage; the burden of proof rests heavily on them, and it is difficult to influence policy through “normal” channels. The state, for its part, is able to claim legitimacy for its policies by appealing to its historic role as protector. Governments also can shape the broader environment in which policy is made. On a number of occasions, as we shall see, governments have designated, in a quasi-corporatist fashion, particular organizations as *the* legitimate representatives of society’s interests, in return for which the organizations have observed certain restraints on their demands and activities.¹⁴

Other groups, in contrast, are dismissed as bothersome interferences,

¹⁴ On the corporatist concept, see Philippe C. Schmitter, “Interest intermediation and modes of societal change in western Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 10 (April 1977): 7–35; “Still the century of corporatism?” *Review of Politics* 36 (January 1974): 85–131.