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Sacred Power: The Political Role of Temples in India

Rachna[1]

ABSTRACT

Temples in India have historically served not only as religious centres but also as significant institutions of political and social influence. This paper explores the multifaceted political role of temples in India, analysing how religious spaces intersect with governance, identity formation, and power dynamics in both historical and contemporary contexts. By examining a range of case studies from different regions, such as Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Kerala, this study reveals how temples function as instruments of political mobilization, community control, and symbolic assertion of authority.

The paper starts tracing the historical evolution of temple-state relations, from royal patronage in pre-colonial India to state control under colonial and post-independence regimes. It then investigates how modern political parties utilize temples to mobilize votes, shape public discourse, and construct cultural legitimacy—particularly through religious nationalism. The role of temple trusts, government regulations, and temple wealth are also examined to understand the administrative and economic dimensions of religious influence on state functioning.

Special attention is given to contentious political movements such as the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign and the Sabarimala temple debate, which highlight how temples become battlegrounds for ideological, legal, and gender-based conflicts. These examples underscore the instrumentalization of sacred spaces to further majoritarian politics, identity claims, and policy shifts. By unpacking the strategic interplay between religious institutions and political actors, this paper contributes to broader discussions on secularism, democracy, and the role of religion in public life. Ultimately, it highlights the enduring and evolving role of temples as a form of "sacred power" within the Indian political landscape.

Keywords: *Temple politics, religious nationalism, political mobilization, secularism in India, sacred space and power*

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INTRODUCTION

Temples in India occupy a complex intersection of religion and politics. Far from being solely places of worship, they have historically functioned as instruments of governance, civic mobilization, and ideological assertion. This introduction traces the political dimensions of temples from medieval statecraft to colonial interventions, culminating in their contemporary political instrumentalization. The analysis is structured around three themes: temples as premodern political institutions, colonial reformulation of temple-state relations, and debates about Indian secularism and religious nationalism in modern political theory.

Temples as Premodern Political Institutions

In medieval India, temples were not just spiritual centers but pillars of political authority. Rulers across regions patronized temples to assert sovereignty, forge legitimacy, and integrate diverse populations into centralized polities (Outlook India, 2023). The temples of South India, particularly under the Chola and Vijayanagara dynasties, exemplify this: they functioned as economic hubs, large landholders, and administrative centers. These

[1] ✉Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana

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temples-maintained granaries, dispensed charity, and hosted major festivals that reinforced both the religious and political hierarchy.

The political symbolism embedded in temple rituals and iconography further strengthened that relationship—architecture and consecration ceremonies often conveyed the divine right of kings, projecting rulers as earthly representatives of the divine (Outlook India, 2023).

Colonial Disruption and Rearticulation

British colonial rule disrupted existing temple-state relations while paradoxically reinvigorating temples as socio-political sites. Colonial administrators categorized Indian religious traditions into neat binaries—"Hindu" and "Muslim"—transforming temples into symbols of communal identity (Chandra, 2008). They also codified personal laws, embedding communal identities into legal structures.

This era saw nationalist responses that mirrored colonial categorizations. Early leaders like Syed Ahmad Khan and Jawaharlal Nehru advanced ideas of composite nationalism, advocating a unified polity that embraced religious diversity (Wikipedia, 2025a). At the same time, religious revivalism emerged as a counter to colonial communal divisions. Temple restoration and construction movements—especially in Kerala—became prominent in opposition to perceived secular marginalization, illustrating how colonial reform policies often spurred intensified religiosity (Roopesh, 2020; Rajagopal, 2024).

Rajeev Bhargava's concept of principled distance provides a useful theoretical lens: unlike Western-style secularism, India's model allows for state involvement in religion—administrative or financial—conditional upon fairness across communities (Wikipedia, 2025b).

Postindependence Secularism and Temple Politics

After independence, India adopted a constitutional secularism aimed at managing religious pluralism—engaging with religious institutions only to ensure equality, not to endorse any faith (Rodrigues, 2022). Temples came under state oversight via bodies like Devaswom Boards and temple trusts, signifying increased institutional control and legal regulation.

Yet India's secularism remained fraught. Debates around the Shah Bano case (1985) and the absence of a Uniform Civil Code highlighted tensions between the principles of religious freedom and the goals of social justice. Bhargava's principled distance emerges again as a framework to understand why the state regulates religious institutions even while maintaining constitutional neutrality (Wikipedia, 2025b).

Rise of Hindutva and Instrumentalizing Temples

From the late twentieth century, Hindu nationalist ideology—originating in the RSS and consolidated politically via the BJP—began to reframe temples as markers of cultural and majoritarian identity. Deendayal Upadhyaya's doctrine of "Integral Humanism" positioned Hindu cultural unity at the heart of national identity, with temples serving as potent cultural symbols (Wikipedia, 2025c).

Notable manifestations include the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign and large-scale temple-building drives. These political projects transformed temples into active sites of electoral mobilization rather than passive spiritual centers (Truschke, 2023). Temple trusts and pilgrimage authorities, often under government control, serve as nodes of political patronage—resources, symbolism, and mobilization for electoral strategy (Rajagopal, 2024).

The redevelopment of New Delhi's sacred precincts under BJP governance and the completion of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya symbolize the strategic insertion of temples into national political narratives.

Theoretical Tensions: Secularism, Nationalism, and Sacred Spaces

The political prominence of temples reflects deeper theoretical tensions surrounding secularism and nationalism in India. Postcolonial constitutionalism envisioned a secular state upholding religious equality—but applied with

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practical flexibility (Georgetown, 2025). The notion of composite nationalism, advocated by Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, and others, still contends with religious fragmentation and identity politics in modern India.

Hindu nationalism—asserting religious majority status—offers a competing model of state-religion relations: what was once principled distance now appears to be shifting toward greater state endorsement of majoritarian religious symbols. This is visible in temple politics across party lines in regions like Kerala, where both right- and left-leaning governments have utilized temple administration for political expression and public legitimacy (Rajagopal, 2024).

Analysis of Ram Mandir and Sabarimala Temple: Politics, Religion, and Social Dynamics in Contemporary India

India's temples are not just religious sites but powerful symbols deeply embedded in the country's political and social fabric. Among these, the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala stand out for their complex interplay of faith, law, and politics. Both temples have been at the center of intense public debate, legal contestations, and political mobilization, making them critical case studies to understand the nexus of religion and politics in modern India. This analysis explores the historical background, legal struggles, political implications, and social dynamics surrounding these temples, highlighting how they reflect broader tensions in Indian democracy, secularism, and identity politics.

The Ram Mandir is situated in Ayodhya, the legendary birthplace of Lord Rama, a major deity in Hinduism symbolizing righteousness and virtue. The site's religious significance is immense, with numerous texts and traditions affirming its sacredness. However, its political significance emerged sharply in the late 20th century, when a mosque—the Babri Masjid—stood on the same site, symbolizing centuries of Hindu-Muslim historical contestation.

The mosque's demolition in 1992 by Hindu nationalist groups sparked nationwide communal riots and was a watershed moment in Indian politics, marking the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a political force advocating Hindu identity (Jaffrelot, 2007). The dispute centered around competing religious claims but quickly morphed into a broader political narrative about Hindu identity, historical grievances, and nationalism.

Legal Battles and Supreme Court Verdict on Ram Mandir

The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute was litigated over decades in Indian courts. The Supreme Court's 2019 verdict granted the disputed land to Hindus for temple construction while ordering alternative land to be given to Muslims for mosque construction (Supreme Court of India, 2019). This judgment was seen as an attempt to balance religious sentiments with constitutional law but also reflected the political ascendancy of Hindu nationalism.

The court emphasized historical and archaeological evidence supporting Hindu claims, which was criticized by some scholars for lacking neutrality (Engineer, 2020). The verdict effectively ended a protracted legal battle but intensified debates on secularism, minority rights, and majoritarian politics.

Political Mobilization around Ram Mandir

The Ram Mandir has been instrumental in mobilizing Hindu nationalist politics. The BJP used the Ram Temple movement as a rallying point to galvanize voters, especially in Uttar Pradesh and northern India, consolidating Hindu identity as a political agenda (Jaffrelot, 2007). The temple's construction, begun in 2020, symbolizes not just religious revival but also a political project to assert Hindu majoritarian identity and cultural nationalism.

This project also raises questions about the inclusiveness of India's democracy. Critics argue that privileging a specific religious community in national narratives risks alienating minorities and undermining the secular fabric enshrined in the Constitution (Engineer, 2020).

Sabarimala Temple: Religious Traditions and Gender Issues

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The Sabarimala Temple, located in Kerala, is dedicated to Lord Ayyappa and is renowned for its strict customs, including the prohibition of women of menstruating age (10-50 years) from entering the temple. This tradition stems from the belief that the deity is a celibate god, and women in their reproductive years are considered to disrupt this sanctity.

The temple attracts millions of devotees annually, with a pilgrimage marked by rigorous austerity. However, the ban on women became a focal point for debates on gender equality, religious freedom, and women's rights in India.

Legal Controversy and Supreme Court Verdict on Sabarimala

In 2018, the Supreme Court of India lifted the ban on women of menstruating age from entering the Sabarimala Temple, ruling that the prohibition violated constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination (Supreme Court of India, 2018). This verdict sparked widespread protests, particularly in Kerala, from traditionalists and devotees who argued that religious customs should be preserved.

The controversy exposed tensions between constitutional rights and religious traditions, highlighting the challenge of balancing progressive legal reforms with deeply held beliefs.

Political and Social Reactions to Sabarimala Verdict

The Sabarimala verdict became a flashpoint in Kerala's politics. The Hindu right-wing groups, including the RSS and BJP, supported the court ruling, framing it as a victory for gender equality, while many local devotees and political parties opposed it, seeing it as an infringement on religious freedom.

The protests led to violent clashes, arrests, and political polarization, with gender debates intertwined with identity politics and cultural assertion. The Kerala government's role in enforcing the verdict became contentious, reflecting wider debates on state intervention in religious affairs.

Comparative Analysis: Ram Mandir and Sabarimala Temple

While both temples are centers of religious devotion, their political trajectories reveal distinct yet intersecting dynamics. The Ram Mandir dispute is deeply entwined with Hindu nationalism's project to redefine Indian identity, involving historical grievances, communal tensions, and state policies that privilege Hindu symbols.

In contrast, the Sabarimala issue foregrounds the contest between constitutional rights and religious customs, focusing on gender justice within a pluralistic society. Both cases show how temples become arenas where religion, law, and politics collide, shaping public discourse and electoral strategies.

Implications for Indian Secularism and Democracy

The Ram Mandir and Sabarimala controversies underscore the complexities of secularism in India. Indian secularism is distinct from Western models, allowing state engagement with religion while attempting to ensure equal treatment of all faiths (Bhargava, 2010). However, these cases reveal tensions in applying secularism consistently, especially when majority religious practices are politically mobilized or minority rights are contested.

The politicization of temples challenges the constitutional ideal of a neutral state. When religious symbols become electoral tools, secularism risks being redefined as majoritarian nationalism, threatening pluralism and minority protections (Jaffrelot, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The Ram Mandir and Sabarimala temples are emblematic of the complex entanglement of religion and politics in India. Their histories, legal battles, and political mobilizations reveal how sacred spaces transcend spirituality, becoming sites of social contestation, identity assertion, and political power. Understanding these temples' roles is crucial to grappling with India's evolving democracy, secularism, and cultural pluralism.

Temples in India embody political history and contemporary identity: from medieval dynastic legitimacy and colonial communal categorization to secularist statecraft and Hindu-majoritarian assertion. They are nodes of

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power—cultural, political, ideological. In further sections, this paper will examine specific case studies (e.g., Tamil Nadu's temple administration, Uttar Pradesh's Ram Temple movement, Kerala's Devaswom politics), applying political theory frameworks—particularly secularism, nationalism, and state–religion paradigms—to unpack the evolving and enduring power of temples in India's public life.

RECOMMENDATION

To deepen the understanding of the political role of temples in India, future research should adopt a multidisciplinary approach combining political science, anthropology, and religious studies. Comparative studies of regional temple politics can reveal diverse local dynamics and how they shape national narratives. It is essential to analyze the evolving relationship between state policies and temple management, especially considering recent legal reforms and government interventions. Additionally, exploring the impact of temple politics on minority communities will provide a more nuanced picture of secularism and pluralism in India. Researchers should also investigate how political parties utilize religious symbolism linked to temples during elections to mobilize support. Finally, longitudinal studies on temple-driven social movements could shed light on how sacred spaces contribute to identity formation and political activism. Such comprehensive inquiry will enrich the discourse on religion's role in India's democratic and political processes.

FUTURE SCOPE

The political role of temples in India offers vast opportunities for future research, especially in the context of changing socio-political landscapes. Future studies can explore how digital media and globalization influence temple politics and religious mobilization. There is scope to examine the role of temples in regional autonomy movements and their impact on federalism. Additionally, investigating the intersection of caste, class, and religion within temple politics can provide deeper insights into social hierarchies. Comparative analyses with other countries where religion and politics intertwine could also broaden theoretical frameworks. This evolving field promises to contribute significantly to understanding the complexities of religion, identity, and power in modern India.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Rachna is a dedicated Research Scholar in the Department of Political Science at NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana. Her academic focus lies in exploring the intersections of politics, religion, and society, with a keen interest in Indian political dynamics and cultural studies. Through rigorous research, Rachna aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary political theories and their application in the Indian context. She is committed to advancing scholarship that bridges historical perspectives with modern political challenges, fostering informed discourse on governance, secularism, and identity in India.

AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

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