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SILENT REVOLUTION IN TEMPLE **PRIESTHOOD**

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The role of caste in determining who can serve as archakas, or temple priests, has long been a contentious issue in India. For centuries, the hereditary nature of priesthood in Hindu temples has resulted in discrimination and marginalization of certain caste groups, while privileging those belonging to so-called "higher" castes. The practice of restricting access to the priesthood based on caste has been deeply entrenched in Indian society, with many arguing that it is an essential aspect of preserving tradition and maintaining the sanctity of religious rituals.

However, in recent years, there has been a growing movement towards breaking down these barriers and challenging the traditional caste-based system of appointing archakas. This movement can be seen as a silent revolution, as it represents a significant shift in the way that society views and practices the role of priesthood in temples. This essay will explore the implications of this movement, examining how it is challenging traditional hierarchies and reshaping the way that temple priests are selected.

The practice of hereditary priesthood in Hindu temples dates back centuries, with certain families or castes traditionally holding the exclusive right to serve as archakas. This system has perpetuated caste-based discrimination and exclusion, as those from marginalized or lower castes have been unable to access the privileges and benefits associated with the priesthood. The hereditary nature of priesthood has also reinforced the idea of purity and pollution, with certain castes being deemed more suitable for performing rituals and conducting ceremonies due to their perceived purity.

However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to challenge these traditional practices and create a more inclusive and equitable system for appointing archakas. This shift can be seen as a response to increasing calls for social justice and equality, as well as a recognition of the inherent contradictions within the caste-based system of appointing priests.

The movement towards opening up the priesthood to individuals from all castes reflects a broader push towards social reform and the dismantling of discriminatory practices within Hindu society.

One of the key arguments in favor of opening up the priesthood to individuals from all castes is that it is a necessary step towards promoting social equality and inclusivity. By allowing individuals from marginalized or lower castes to serve as archakas, temples can challenge the entrenched hierarchies that have long defined the role of priesthood in society. This can help to break down barriers and create a more level playing field for all individuals, regardless of their caste or social background.

Furthermore, opening up the priesthood to individuals from all castes can also help to ensure that the role of archakas is performed more effectively and competently. By selecting priests based on their knowledge, skills, and qualifications rather than their caste or social status, temples can ensure that only the most qualified individuals are entrusted with the responsibilities of conducting rituals and ceremonies. This can help to enhance the overall quality and authenticity of religious practices within temples, as well as promote a greater sense of professionalism and dedication among those serving as archakas.

The movement towards opening up the priesthood to individuals from all castes has also been supported by legal and constitutional provisions that seek to prevent discrimination based on caste. The Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste, and several court judgments have upheld the rights of individuals from marginalized or lower castes to access opportunities and privileges that were previously denied to them. These legal provisions have provided a strong foundation for challenging the traditional practices of hereditary priesthood and promoting a more inclusive and egalitarian system for appointing archakas.

One of the key challenges in implementing a more inclusive system for appointing archakas is the resistance and pushback from those who benefit from the traditional caste-based system of hereditary priesthood. Many individuals and families who have held the exclusive right to serve as archakas for generations may view the opening up of the priesthood to individuals from all castes as a threat to their social status and privileges. This resistance can manifest in various forms, including protests, legal challenges, and social ostracism of those who advocate for a more inclusive approach to selecting priests.

Another challenge in implementing a more inclusive system for appointing archakas is the need to ensure that individuals from all castes have access to the necessary education and training to perform the duties of priesthood effectively. Historically, individuals from marginalized or lower castes have been denied access to formal education and training in religious practices, which has limited their ability to qualify for the role of archakas. To address this barrier, temples and religious institutions must take proactive steps to provide opportunities for individuals from all castes to receive the necessary education and training to pursue a career in the priesthood.

Despite these challenges, the movement towards opening up the priesthood to individuals from all castes represents a significant step towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society. By challenging the traditional practices of hereditary priesthood and promoting a more merit-based approach to selecting archakas, temples can help to break down barriers and create opportunities for individuals from marginalized or lower castes to pursue a career in the priesthood. This can help to promote social equality and justice, while also enhancing the quality and authenticity of religious practices within temples.

In conclusion, the movement towards opening up the priesthood to individuals from all castes can be seen as a silent revolution that is challenging traditional hierarchies and reshaping the way that temple priests are selected. By promoting a more inclusive and merit-based system for appointing archakas, temples can help to break down barriers and create opportunities for individuals from marginalized or lower castes to pursue a career in the priesthood. This movement represents a significant step towards promoting social equality and justice within Hindu society, while also enhancing the quality and authenticity of religious practices within temples. The transformation of the role of caste in determining who can serve as archakas is a powerful example of how grassroots movements can bring about meaningful change and contribute to the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality.

Case Judgements:-

The Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam v Government of Tamil Nadu 2016:

The Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam is an association of priests from the Adi Saiva community in Tamil Nadu. The Adi Saivas are a subset of Shaivites, who worship Lord Shiva, and have historically been excluded from serving as archakas in temples due to their lower caste status.

In 2017, the Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam filed a petition in the Madras High Court challenging the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act, which mandates that only Brahmins can be appointed as archakas in government-controlled temples. The Sangam argued that this provision was discriminatory and violated their fundamental rights under the Indian Constitution.

The case, known as *Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam v Government of Tamil Nadu*, sparked a nationwide debate on caste discrimination in temple priesthood. The Sangam's legal battle against the Tamil Nadu government brought to light the entrenched biases and inequalities in the temple priesthood system, leading to calls for reform and greater inclusivity.

The court's ruling in favor of the Sangam was a significant victory for the lower caste communities in Tamil Nadu. The judgment declared that caste-based discrimination in temple priesthood was unconstitutional and violative of the principles of equality and non-discrimination. It ordered the Tamil Nadu government to amend the Endowments Act to allow members of all castes to become archakas in government-controlled temples.

This landmark judgment marked a turning point in the fight against caste discrimination in temple priesthood. It challenged centuries-old traditions and practices that have marginalized lower caste communities and excluded them from participating in religious rituals. The Sangam's legal victory represented a triumph of justice and equality, signaling a shift towards a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

The Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam's legal battle against the Government of Tamil Nadu can be seen as a silent revolution in the temple priesthood system. By challenging caste-based restrictions on archakas and advocating for equal opportunities for all castes, the Sangam has brought about a fundamental shift in the way temple priesthood is perceived and practiced.

The Sangam's efforts have paved the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian temple priesthood system, where individuals from all castes have the opportunity to serve as priests. This has not only broken down barriers of discrimination and exclusion but has also promoted social cohesion and unity within the community.

The Sangam's campaign for equal rights in temple priesthood has had far-reaching implications

beyond just the Adi Saiva community. It has inspired other lower caste communities to demand equal opportunities in temple priesthood and has raised awareness about the need to challenge deep-rooted prejudices and biases that perpetuate caste-based discrimination.

The silent revolution in temple priesthood initiated by the Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam has set a precedent for social change and transformation. It has shown that grassroots movements can bring about substantial reform and challenge age-old practices of discrimination. The Sangam's victory in the courts has sent a powerful message that equality and justice must prevail in all spheres of society, including religious institutions.

In the case of Seshammal & Ors v State of Tamil Nadu 1972,

the issue at hand was the constitutionality of a Tamil Nadu government order that reserved the position of archakas (temple priests) in certain temples for members of certain castes. The petitioners in the case argued that this reservation violated their fundamental rights to equality and freedom of religion.

The Supreme Court, in its judgment, upheld the government order, stating that the reservation policy was aimed at rectifying historical social injustices and promoting social justice and equality. The Court held that in order to ensure equal opportunities for all sections of society, it was necessary to provide reservation in employment, including in the position of archakas.

The Court also emphasized the importance of inclusivity in religious institutions, stating that the practice of reserving positions for certain castes in temples was not discriminatory, but rather a step towards promoting diversity and representation in the religious sphere.

Overall, the Seshammal case highlighted the complex and contentious issue of caste and reservation in religious institutions, and the need to balance the principles of equality and social justice with the preservation of religious traditions and practices.

The Tamil Nadu government's 2006 order to allow individuals from all castes to become temple priests had a significant impact on the society in the state.

1. **Social Equality:** The order promoted social equality among different castes by removing the traditional restrictions that prevented individuals from lower castes to become temple

priests. This decision helped in breaking the age-old caste barriers and promoted inclusivity in the society.

2. **Empowerment of Lower Castes:** The order provided an opportunity for individuals from lower castes to pursue a career as temple priests and gain employment in the religious sector. This helped in empowering marginalized communities and improving their socio-economic status.
3. **Religious Reform:** The decision brought about a significant reform in the traditionally caste-based religious practices in temples. It challenged the notion of caste-based discrimination in the religious sphere and paved the way for a more inclusive and progressive religious environment.
4. **Resistance and Backlash:** However, the order also faced resistance from conservative groups who were against the idea of individuals from lower castes serving as temple priests. This led to some protests and challenges to the implementation of the government's order.

Overall, the Tamil Nadu government's 2006 order on allowing individuals from all castes to become temple priests had a positive impact on promoting social equality, empowering lower castes, and bringing about a reform in religious practices.

Challenges Still Prevailing

1. **Resistance and backlash from traditionalists:** Many traditionalists argue that only individuals belonging to specific castes or communities have the necessary qualifications and spiritual purity to serve as archakas. They may resist efforts to appoint individuals from other castes, leading to tension and conflict within the community.
2. **Discrimination and social stigma:** There may be discrimination and social stigma faced by individuals from marginalized or lower castes who seek to become archakas. They may face resistance and prejudice from the community, which can deter them from pursuing such a career.
3. **Lack of access to training and resources:** Individuals from lower castes may face barriers in accessing training, educational opportunities, and resources necessary to become qualified archakas. This lack of access can further perpetuate the caste-based divide in the priesthood.
4. **Challenges in breaking traditional norms:** It can be difficult to change long-standing traditions and practices, particularly in religious institutions. Resistance from those who

uphold caste-based norms and beliefs can hinder efforts to appoint individuals from all castes as archakas.

5. Legal and policy hurdles: In some places, there may be legal restrictions or policies that prevent individuals from all castes from becoming archakas. These barriers can make it challenging to implement inclusive practices in the selection and appointment of priests.

It is essential to address these persisting problems to ensure a more equitable and inclusive priesthood.

Article 14 of the Indian Constitution ensures equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. This means that individuals belonging to any caste have the right to equal opportunities and treatment, including the right to be appointed as archakas, or temple priests.

Traditionally, archakas in many temples across India have been drawn from specific castes, leading to a lack of representation from other communities. This has been a point of contention and has been challenged in courts, with many arguing that denying individuals from certain castes the right to become archakas is a violation of their fundamental rights.

In recent years, there have been efforts to diversify the pool of archakas by allowing individuals from different castes to be trained and appointed as temple priests. This move towards inclusivity not only helps in breaking down caste-based barriers but also ensures that talented individuals from all backgrounds have the opportunity to serve in religious institutions.

By upholding Article 14, temples can promote equality and inclusivity in their practices, allowing individuals from all castes to participate and contribute to the spiritual and cultural life of the community. This not only aligns with the principles of the Indian Constitution but also promotes a more harmonious and inclusive society.

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