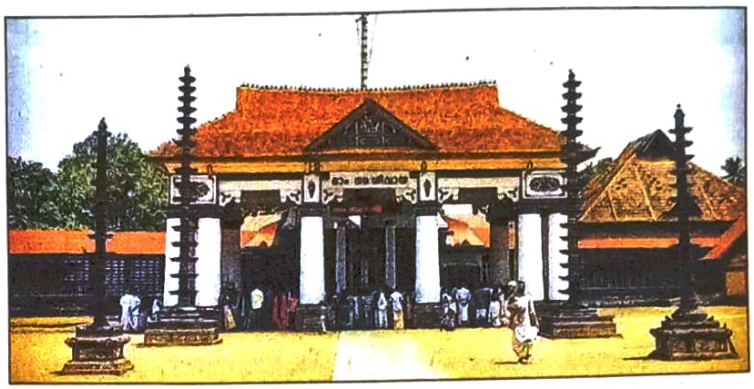
Freedom and faith

THE PEOPLE'S SANCTUM: THE 100-YEAR STRUGGLE TO DEMOCRATIZE TEMPLES IN INDIA
By Manuraj Shunmugasundaram,
Vintage, ₹699



The subtitle to the Introduction of Manuraj Shunmugasundaram's book poses a candid query for readers: "Are all Hindus Equal?" Riding on B.R. Ambedkar's *Riddles in Hinduism*, Shunmugasundaram's prologue states, while simultaneously reiterating some of the ostensible conundrums supposedly dogging the faith: "It [Hinduism] shelters within its portals monotheists, polytheists; worshippers of the great Gods Shiva and Vishnu or of their female counterparts, as well as worshippers of the divine mothers or the spirit of trees, rocks and streams and the tutelary village deities; persons who propitiate their deity by all manner of bloody sacrifices, and persons who will not only kill no living creature but who must not even use the word 'cut'." Bereft of appropriate elucidation, such inherent incongruities had led to the creation of religious schisms in society, facilitating an oppressive, hierarchical structure that continued to exert a manipulative chokehold of illogical domination, ruthless exploitation and repressive marginalisation on the lower castes. The tyrannical absurdity of such an existent social disparity necessitated and, refreshingly, unleashed a pressing urgency for reforms, paving the way for the democratisation of temples in India.

At the very outset, Shunmugasundaram draws readers' attention to the famous, non-violent Vaikom agitation (1924-25), which was launched in order to gain access for the oppressed castes to the once forbidden public areas of the Vaikom Mahadeva Temple (picture) in the kingdom of Travancore. As detailed in the second chapter of the book, "Vaikom: Breaking the Barriers", Shunmugasundaram assiduously traces the crucial roles played by leaders like T.K. Madhavan, K. Kelappan, K.P. Kesava Menon, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, George Joseph, Mannathu Padmanabhan, and Mahatma Gandhi in sustaining the movement and ensuring social justice. The protest carved the way for lower caste Hindus accessing the erstwhile prohibited environs of the Mahadeva temple: "Finally, in October 1925, the discriminatory signboards (*theendal palaka*) were taken down from the roads along the western and southern gates of the temple. Soon, thereafter, the roads on the north and east were slowly opened up to permit movement of all persons. It was on 17 November 1925, finally, that all four roads adjoining the temple were made open to people belonging to all castes."

The astounding triumph of the Vaikom movement gradually paved the way for stirring the indigenous Self-Respect Movement — a home-grown, sociopolitical agitation that confronted existing caste hierarchies within other temples: "Over the following months, various temple entry agitations were led by K.A.P. Viswanathan, J.N. Ramanathan and others in Mayuranathaswami temple in Mayiladuthurai and Malaikottai temple in Tiruchirappalli." The centenary of the extraordinary success of the Vaikom agitation was recently commemorated by the Kerala government with the release of a new book, *The Dawn of a New Era*.

Adroitly intertwining social and constitutional history with issues pertaining to community restructuring, Shunmugasundaram's work evolves into a comprehensive, well-researched introspection on social rights and equality. Interestingly, his charting of the struggle of democratisation of temples in South India reverberates with the present-day political discourse revolving around caste, statutory civil liberties and the function of religion in the public domain.

The People's Sanctum should appeal to scholars and general readers alike not only for its significant chronicling of temple management but also for meticulously exploring the wide-ranging deliberations pertaining to egalitarianism, cultural traditions and religious liberty. What makes *The People's Sanctum* unique is its resolve to ensure human rights and contest discrimination by razing areas of ingrained class hierarchies, exclusivity and marginalisation that have persisted as chronic social maladies. However, this well-documented volume, exploring a wide range of political personalities and challenging socio-political circumstances, would have benefitted from the inclusion of a proper index.

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