

EPILOGUE

RETAINING OF CASTE HIERARCHY IN THE DISGUISE OF *TANTRIK*
JUSTIFICATION AFTER TEMPLE ENTRY PROCLAMATION

Temple Entry Proclamation has been recorded in the history of Kerala and the nationalist movement of India. "The [Temple Entry] Proclamation", wrote Mahatma Gandhi, "is an act of God through his servant, the present Maharaja [of Tiruvitankur]. Whatever may be the cause, the fact of proclamation being given effect to by an overwhelming number of *savarnas* and being freely availed of by *avarnas* stands out as miracle"³³⁹. Chittira Tirunal Balarama Varma, Maharaja of Tiruvitankur and the Diwan, Sir CP Ramaswamy, got instant fame and 'dearly loved publicity'³⁴⁰ as the reformist rulers of the reformist state of Tiruvitankur. However, not everyone believed that a mere proclamation by the Maharaja would drastically alter the social fabric of a region in a jiffy. In fact Sir T Paneerselvam in discussion in Madras Assembly had made statement as follows, "'One of the arguments advanced by the Premier in support of the measure was that temples in Travancore had been thrown open to the 'Untouchables.' A Maharaja vested with autocratic powers did so by an order. But how was it working there? From representations received, he was led to believe that after the first flush of enthusiasm, Harijans had left off going to temples, and people who used to worship previously before Harijans were allowed to enter the temples, had stopped worshipping in temples"³⁴¹. Ambedkar reacts to Pannirselvams observation in his piece on *Temple Entry in Travancore* thus, "How far did this Proclamation change facts and how far it has remained a show? It is not possible to get real facts as they exist in Travancore. In the course of the discussion on the Malabar Temple Entry Bill in the Madras Legislative Assembly, certain facts relating

³³⁹ Chavan, Sheshrao, GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR, SAVIORS OF UNTOUCHABLES, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2001, p.191

³⁴⁰ Jeffrey, Robin, , Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Vol.4, No.8, [March, 1976], p.22 [JSTOR]

³⁴¹ Ambedkar BR *Temple Entry In Travancore* APPENDIX V,
http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/41M03.Appendix_What Congress and Gandhi have done.htm

to Travancore were mentioned by Sir T. Pannirselvam which, if true, would show that the whole thing is hollow”³⁴². Ambedkar also quotes a letter from Mr.Narayanaswami where the writer has complained to Ambedkar stating that except the permission to enter into the temples, the life of the Harijans in Tiruvitankur has not changed much³⁴³. Based on these facts Ambedkar questions thus, “Is the temple entry to be the final goal of the advancement in the social status of the depressed classes in the Hindu fold? Or is it only the first step and if it is first step, what is the ultimate goal?”³⁴⁴

The Proclamation and the Temple Entry Right to the depressed classes in Kerala should be seen solely as the first constructive step towards the development of the depressed class. It was in fact, merely a symbolic step for towards the liberation of the depressed classes. Through the proclamation, the king of Tiruvitankur took away the religious and political authenticity of the system of casteism and untouchablity. The ‘protectors’ of the temple who pretended to be the maintainers of the law and order of the state; like the drunken ‘*savarna*’ who forced the Pulaya leader Ayyankali to alight from his bullock cart and walk on the circular road avoiding the Vaikom Temple but willingly permitted the bullocks to continue on the temple road or the obstinate Nambutiri who made Mahatma Gandhi to sit outside his house while he himself sat inside because Gandhi sat with the lower castes in the Vaikom Satyagraha pandal, lost their self claimed position as the protectors of the civic society.

³⁴² Ambedkar BR *Temple Entry In Travancore* APPENDIX V,

http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/41M03.Appendix_What Congress and Gandhi have done.htm

³⁴³ Ambedkar BR *Temple Entry In Travancore* APPENDIX V,

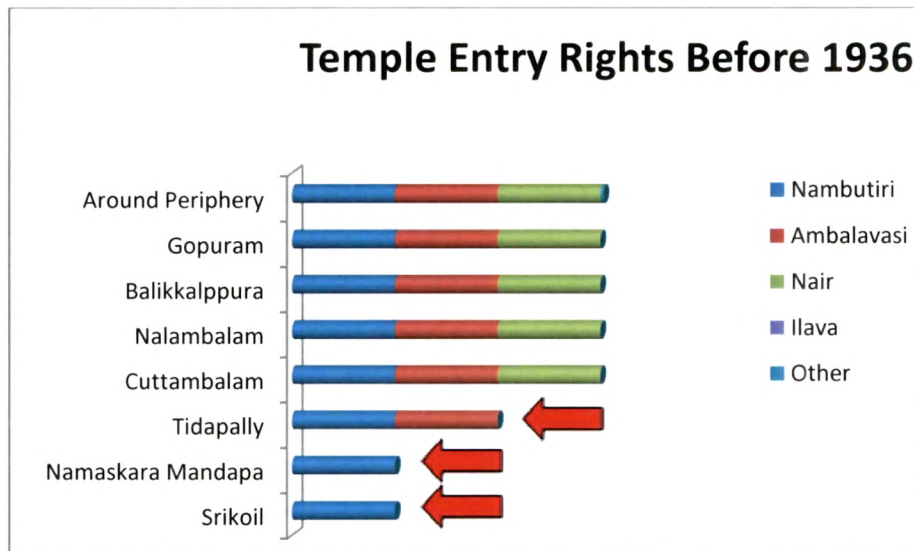
http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/41M03.Appendix_What Congress and Gandhi have done.htm

³⁴⁴ Chavan, Sheshrao, GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR, SAVIORS OF UNTOUCHABLES, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2001, p.192

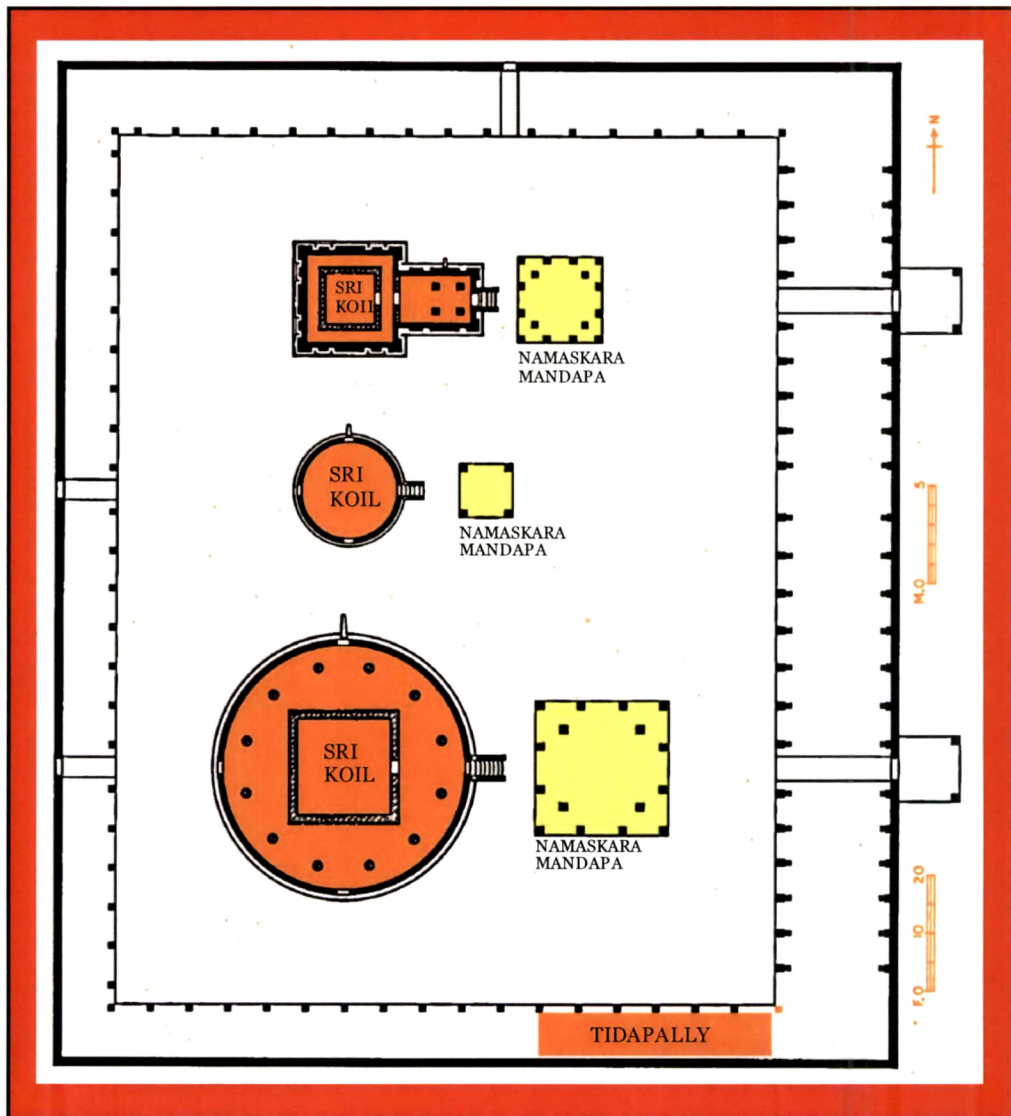
Even the *savarnas* took the Proclamation merely as a symbolic gesture as the sub-text of the Proclamation in accordance with the Temple Entry Committee recommendations did not infringe into the space or right of the *savarnas* in the temple, especially the Brahmins. The area where the Brahmin had exclusive right of entry has retained that exclusivity. Here I am referring to **the *namaskara mandapas* which still remain as a reserved space** for the Brahmins.

The prevalence of caste hierarchy is still tangible in the rituals and practices of Kerala temples. The maintainable distance between the Brahmins and castes lower to them considerably reduced from 60 feet of the olden days to mere 6 inches, however the concept of distance remains as it is. A Brahmin boy would sit shoulder to shoulder with an *avarna* in the school, a tea shop, but in the premise of the temple the Brahmin have to keep a distance with his *avarna* schoolmate. In the temple only the Brahmin boy would be allowed to enter the *namaskara mandapa* solely for the reason that he is born a Brahmin.

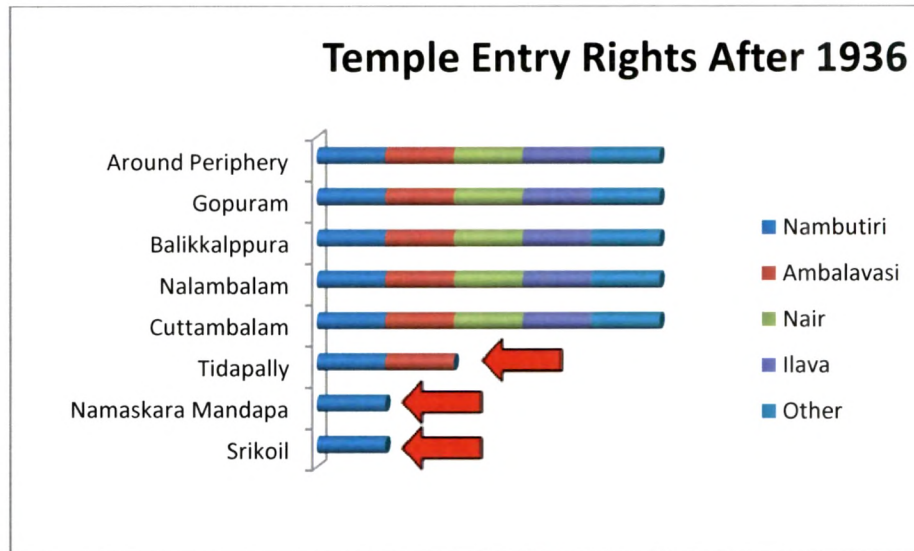
A question may arise naturally here, whether the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 in Tiruvitankur State and similar declaration in Kochi [1948] and Malabar [1939] subsequently allow **all Hindus** right to access to **all part of the temple**. The answer is that the declaration only allowed the partial entry into the temples to the lower castes. The following chart would explain this further.



In the above given chart I have identified the spatial organization of the Kerala Hindu Temple. Each of these spaces is separated with architecture members like walls and roofed areas. The outer most shell of temple is the *prakara* wall or the peripheral wall. Gopuram is the cardinal entrance to a temple, often called as the *padippura* in Kerala temples. Balikkalppura is the entry into the *nalambalam* area with balikkal [sacrificial stone dedicated to the main deity]. The core of the temple complex is the *nalambalam* with Cuttambalam, *Tidappalli*, *Namaskara mandapa* and *Sri Koil*. The chart also has separate color codes to the castes. In the scenario before the Temple Entry Proclamation of Travancore [1936] Nambutiri or Malayala Brahmins had complete access to the temple and the Nairs and Ambalavasis had partial access. The lower castes who are considered to be untouchables are kept outside the peripheral wall not even allowing in certain cases to use the public roads around the boundary



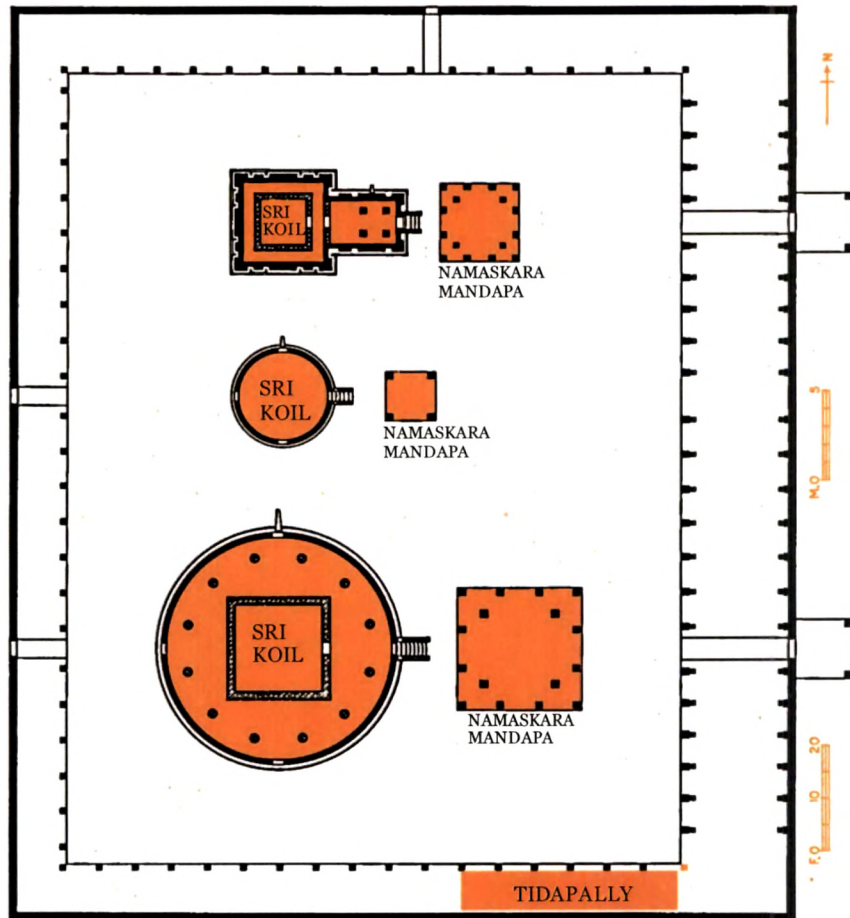
walls of the temple. The arrows denote the areas which were exclusively reserved for Brahmins and the Ambalavasi caste.

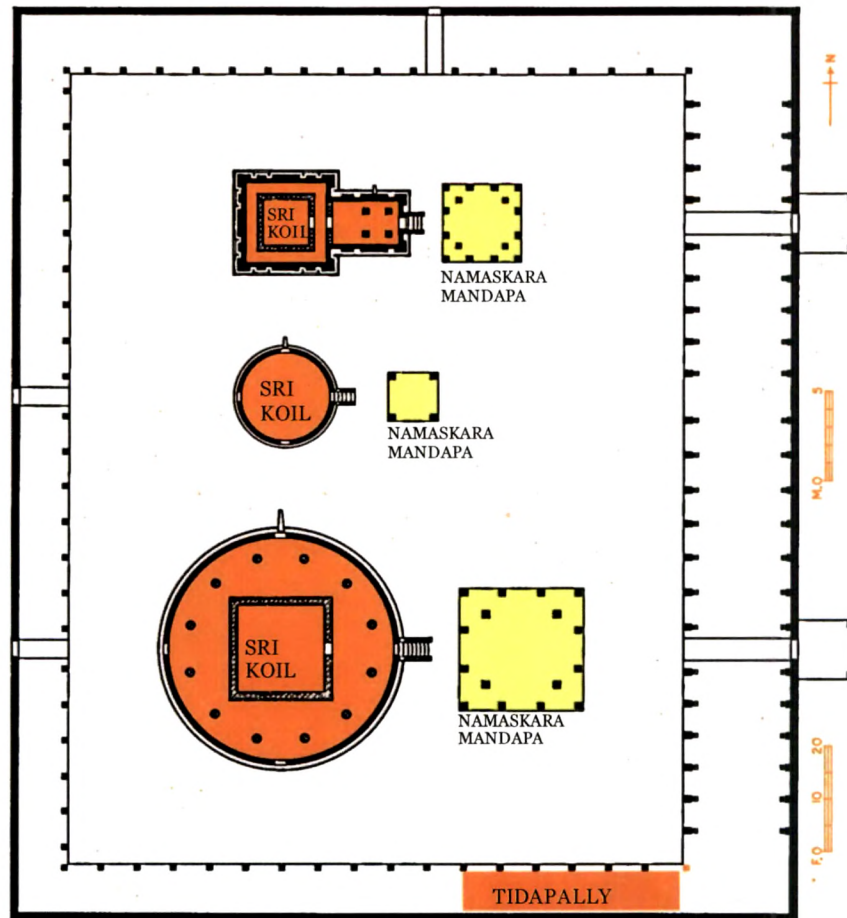


The chart above explains the entry rights of the castes in the post Temple Entry Proclamation scenario. Note the purple and blue bars representing Izhavas and other Destressed added to the list of castes that are given permission to enter into the temple complex, however the areas of exclusivity pointed by the red arrow remain the same in both the diagrams. In fact the Proclamation **did not open** the doors to all castes **to all part** of the temple. To quote Jayashanker³⁴⁵, “the net result of all these agitations was that all places of Hindu worship were opened to all Hindu believers without disturbing the *sanctity*³⁴⁶ of the temples i.e. all were permitted to enter all

³⁴⁵ Jayashanker, Temples of Kerala, Censes dept, pp 241

³⁴⁶ The italics are purposefully added, as the sanctity becomes the weapon for the caste segregation in Kerala temples.





parts of the temples, except the sanctum sanctorum, *Namaskara Mandapa*, and *Tidappalli*. In these places only **permitted persons**³⁴⁷ can enter”.

Sri Koil or main shrine is where the image is placed and thus only entered by the priest, who conducts the rituals. Even other persons from the priestly class or Brahmins are not allowed inside. *Tidappalli* is where the *naivedya* (ritual food) is prepared by the priest himself, thus has restricted entry. The third part where only “permitted persons” can enter is the *Namaskara Mandapa*. *Namaskara Mandapa* serves no role in the routine ritual of a temple and unlike *Tidappalli* and *Sri Koil* the permitted person is not an individual employ of the temple but the entire community of Brahmins. **The fact remain that even after the Temple Entry proclamation the Brahmin caste have reserved a position in the spatial organization of Kerala Temples.** Even the members of *ambalavasi* [temple employees] castes like Varriers, Nambiars, Marars and Poduvals or the *koil adhikari* [the patron / employer of the temples, usually from the *Naduvazhi* [royal] family] were not entitled to enter into the space reserved **solely** for the Brahmin caste. The lower castes were given permission to enter into the first five areas which were used only by the Nairs apart from the Ambalavasis and Nambutiris. Last three areas as the *Tidappalli*; *Namaskara Mandapa* and *Sri Koil* remain exclusively for the Nambutiris and Ambalavasis. Here it should be mentioned that the Ambalavasis are allowed in the *Tidappalli* region primarily on the vocational convenience not because of the hierarchy of the caste. As late as 1993, more than 57 years after the temple entry proclamation I was asked about my caste before entering into the *Tidappalli* of Vaikom Mahadeva Temple. It is not surprising that the caste system still holds sway

³⁴⁷ Bold by the present author

in certain realms of the social system in Kerala as caste system has made deep roots in the minds of the people and retained in institutions like the temples.

The Temple Entry proclamation and the legislations around it and the ensuing change in the civil society in fact proved that the temples did play the role model for the society for its caste discrimination. The social reformation movements like the Vaikom Satyagraha were not fought because of the *avarnas*' eagerness to worship the god in the temple but to abolish the discrimination in the society including the temple as the temples remained as the pillars of orthodoxy, which the Temple Entry Movement targeted. However the truth is that the Temple Entry proclamation in fact only allowed the devotees from the lower castes to enter into the **space excluding** that **reserved** for the dominant caste, the Brahmins. The caste hierarchy and exclusivity of the dominant caste was written in fine print as a subtext which gave Brahmins exclusivity of space, which is Namaskara Mandapa which remain as the vestige of a caste-ridden society and its expression in architecture, a sacred justification of the draconian reality.