

THE DEBATE OVER 'FREEING' TEMPLES

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Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai offers prayers at a temple in Bengaluru before presenting the State Budget. | Photo Credit: PTI

Even before the debate on the controversial Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill, 2021 (known as the anti-conversion bill) and its passage in the Upper House of the Legislature could be completed, the BJP government in Karnataka announced that it will bring in a law to free temples from government control, during the State Budget. This may lead to another round of political slugfest. It is seen as one more RSS-backed initiative being implemented by the BJP government.

The demand for freeing Hindu temples in Karnataka from the purview of The Hindu Religious Institutions and Charitable Endowments Act, 1997 (Muzrai Act) has grown especially loud after a misinformation campaign, allegedly by Hindutva groups, that the funds collected in temples are being "diverted" to non-Hindu religious institutions. This has continued despite clarification by the Department that the 'tasdik' amount for maintenance of non-Hindu religious places, to compensate the religious institutions that had lost their Inam lands when land reforms were implemented in the State, come from the government and not from temple collections. The 'diversion' of fund collected in temples, if any, has been from rich temples for the development of 'C' category temples. The Department provides 60,000 annually as tasdik for holding daily rituals in temples that have meagre incomes from devotees. It has 34,559 temples under its control of which 190 temples (earning more than 25 lakh annually) and 163 temples (earning between 5 lakh and 25 lakh annually) have been categorised as 'A' and 'B'. As many 34,206 temples that have an annual income of less than 5 lakh have been categorised as 'C' and these receive tasdik.

Politically, the move is expected to help the ruling BJP. The narrative of freeing temples from government control has gathered steam in other parts of the country too. The Congress, which has been at loggerheads with the government on the anti-conversion bill and the anti-cow slaughter bill, will be on the back foot in putting up a strong opposition to the narrative on temple collection while fighting the BJP in the polls next year.

The proposed law comes at a time when many powerful religious mutts across the State have evinced interest in taking over ancient temples, some of which have reportedly high incomes with a steady flow of devotees. This has raised fears about social exclusion in temple management and activities and the takeover of temple management by caste groups. It has also raised concern that only rich temples will benefit from the move while more than 34,000 temples with meagre incomes could end up remaining with the government. Interestingly, the Karnataka Federation of Archakas and Agamikas of Hindu Temples has opposed the proposal as they are insecure about their positions in case the government moves ahead with the law.

Though BJP insiders pushing for the law argue that the freed up temples will be managed by trustees who will bring in transparency and greater accountability, there are also fears to the contrary. At least three very popular temples run by private trusts in Bengaluru, for instance, have been taken over by the Muzrai Department in recent years after a section of trustees alleged financial and administrative mismanagement.

As of now, it is not clear whether the trust will be handed over the responsibility of the temple

buildings land, and the temple jewellery. The combined property of all Muzrai temples is said to be about 1 lakh crore although an audit is still to be done. The details are of the proposed law are unclear but what is clear is that the Bommai government is keen to implement the proposal.

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