



Madras HC: Merit over Caste in Temple Priest Appointments

For Prelims: Agama Shastra, Agama Principles, Article 15

For Mains: Tradition vs. Modernity in Temple Priest Appointments, Legal aspects related to temple priest appointments in India.

Why in News?

The Madras High Court has recently made a significant ruling that highlights the **importance of meritocracy and equality in the appointment of temple priests.**

- The court's decision comes in response to a [writ petition](#) filed in 2018, challenging a job announcement for the post of **Archagar/Sthanigar (temple priest)** in **Sri Sugavaneswarar Swamy Temple, Salem (TN).**
- The petitioner argued for appointments based on **traditional guidelines mentioned in the temple's Agama scriptures** and the **hereditary rights of long-serving priests.**
 - The **court ruled in favor of merit-based appointments**, rejecting the petitioner's claim.

What are the Legal and Historical Aspects of Temple Priest Appointments?

- **Legal Aspects:**
 - **Article 15** prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.
 - It states that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on these grounds **in matters of employment or access to public places.**
 - **Also, states have the authority to regulate religious institutions** and their affairs, including the appointment of temple priests. State legislation may prescribe **qualifications, procedures, and eligibility criteria** for such appointments.
- **Historical Aspects:**
 - In many Hindu temples, the tradition of **hereditary appointments** has prevailed, where temple priesthood is passed down within specific families or castes.
 - Temples often follow **Agama scriptures that provide guidelines for temple rituals** and practices.
 - This practice is often based on the **belief in ancestral knowledge and purity of lineage.**
 - However, in some regions **open competitions or selection based** on qualifications are also prevalent.

What are the SC Judgements regarding Temple Priest Appointments?

- **Seshammal & others vs. State of Tamil Nadu (1972):**
 - The SC held that the appointment of an Archaka (temple priest) is a **secular function**, and

the **performance of religious service by the priests is an integral part of the religion.**

- The court **differentiated between the secular and religious aspects** and stated that the prescription provided by the Agamas (scriptures) is significant only for the performance of the religious service.
- **Any individual, regardless of caste or creed, can be appointed as an Archaka** if they are well-versed and qualified in the Agamas and the rituals required for temple worship.
- Based on this decision of the SC, the Madras HC in this case has held that **ancestry based on caste will have no role to play in the appointment of Archaka** if the person so selected otherwise satisfies the requirements.
- **N. Adithayan vs. Travancore Devaswom Board (2002):**
 - The SC rejected the customary claim that **only Brahmins (in this case Malayala Brahmins)** can perform rituals in temples.
 - The court ruled that **trained individuals qualified to perform the puja in an appropriate manner** can carry out the rituals.
 - The SC emphasised that the restriction of **only Brahmins performing rituals** in certain temples was due to historical reasons, such as limited access to Vedic literature and sacred initiation.

What is Agama Shastra?

- **Agama Shastra** is a manual for worship, rituals and construction of temples in Hinduism. In Sanskrit, **agama means “handed down by tradition”** and shastra refers to a commentary or treatise.
- Agamas expound a variety of subjects and could be called the guides to a huge range of Hindu practices. They contain:
 - Manuals for deity worship, religious ceremonies, festivals etc.
 - Methods for salvation, Yoga
 - Devata, Yantra
 - Prayogas using various mantras
 - Temple Building, Town planning
 - Iconometry
 - Domestic practices and civil codes
 - Social/Public festivals
 - Holy Places
 - Principles of Universe, Creation and Dissolution
 - Spiritual Philosophy
 - Worlds
 - Austerities
- Agama Principles emphasize the importance of **following precise rituals and procedures to maintain the sanctity** and spiritual efficacy of the temple.
 - The Agama texts are considered authoritative and hold significance in the **appointment and training of temple priests.**

Source: IE