Educating ‘Temple Cultures’
Heterogeneous Worship and Hindutva Politics in Kerala

O. B. Roopesh¹

Abstract
Contrary to the popular imagination of Kerala as a secular, rational left bastion, the state is witnessing Sangh Parivar’s active presence in the domain of temples and everyday culture. This study attempts to examine the anxiety of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its sympathisers about the ‘true’ knowledge on temple culture, and their efforts to teach everyday Brahmanical rituals and other forms of worship such as srividya and kuladevathas. I argue that Sangh Parivar is interested in heterogeneous worship practices in Kerala as part of their ideological expansion. Their obsession for the didactics of temple culture is a response to the modern secularisation process and ambition to educate the Other Backward Classes and Dalits in Brahmanical knowledge, for they are not traditionally inclined to the Brahmanical temples. Finally, the study aims to document the ethnographic details of Sangh Parivar activities in the world of worship and temple culture.

Keywords
Sangh Parivar, RSS, temple, rituals, Hinduism, secularisation

Introduction
I met Hindu Aikya Vedi (HAV)¹ state leader Dasan² for an interview. He invited me to a studio on the first floor of the Koyilandy Municipality stadium building in Kozhikode district of Kerala. I accompanied him. Meanwhile, a few men came and started to wish him very respectfully. Some of them touched his feet. In turn,
he placed his hand on their head to bless them. People were also expressing their respect in body language and facial expressions. They wore tilak (coloured mark) on their forehead and tied ritual threads on hand. It continued until we reached the studio. The owner of the studio also repeated these acts. I asked him, ‘Who are they? Are they your friends?’ He said, ‘No, they are my shishyas in Arsha Vidyapeedham (AVP), and some of them are Sangh workers. Respecting the Guru is part of our teaching programme’. This study will discuss AVP in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

The above narration is contrary to the popular imagination of Kerala as a secular, rational left bastion. Kerala is known for Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) unsuccessful attempt in the state electoral map. They failed to gain even a single seat in 2021 and lost their vote share against the previous election. Despite BJP’s poor electoral performance, Sangh Parivar steadily makes its inroads to Kerala through many strategies. It is noteworthy to sketch such intervention domains to capture contemporary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s (RSS) workings. Temple was one of the central concerns of RSS since the 1960s in Kerala (Jayaprasad, 1991, pp. 185–188; Roopesh, 2020, pp. 9–10).

Discussions on Sangh Parivar’s involvement in Hindu temples are primarily confined to the Ram Temple movement when it reached its peak in the 1980s. In his edited volume, S. Gopal provides an overview of the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhumi issue (Gopal, 1991). The violent assertion of Hindu nationalism was marked for the first time as fascism by Sarkar (1993). There were vibrant discussions on this naming (Reddy, 2011). The debates on temple politics primarily focused on the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhumi issue because of its pan-Indian significance, and it evolved as a significant mobilisation, which shaped the Indian polity. Aravind Rajagopal uncovered how the television series Ramayana shaped the Indian mind and garnered consent and momentum for the Ram Temple movement (Rajagopal, 2004). The review of the studies on Ram Temple movement can be extended further. Apart from the Ram Janmabhumi movement, studies did not much invest in exploring the nonviolent and silent activities of Sangh Parivar on the cultural project of Hindu nationalism. Temple culture has a significant role in the Hindu nationalist imagination of India. This study attempts to examine the anxiety of RSS and its sympathisers about the ‘true’ knowledge on temple culture, and their efforts to teach everyday Brahmanical rituals and other forms of worship such as srividya and kuladevathas. The study evolved primarily out of the materials from PhD thesis (Roopesh, 2019).

The regional character of Sangh Parivar and its effort to build bases in different regions have been unpacked by various scholars. The regions such as North India (Jaffrelot, 1999), Orissa (Kanungo, 2003), West Bengal (Ruud, 2013), Maharashtra (Hansen, 1999), coastal Karnataka (Santhosh & Paleri, 2021) and Kerala (Arafath, 2021) have mapped the growth of communal politics. At the same time, studies have rarely paid attention to Sangh Parivar’s nonviolent interventions. Unlike the Ram Temple movement, Sangh Parivar does not aim for an immediate political goal in the temple activities of Kerala. However, Sangh Parivar had kept an eye on immediate political goals in the Sabarimala protests of 2018 (Roopesh, 2018). This study tries to bring ethnographic
details of Sangh Parivar’s intervention in different forms of worship and their attempts to shape the everyday rituals through didactics. Apart from RSS, there are its affiliates—most notably Kerala Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi (KKSS) and HAV—that work primarily on temple-related issues. HAV has formed another organisation called Kshetra Ekopana Samithi (KES) in 2013 to coordinate temples of Kerala.

The above-mentioned Sangh Parivar organisations strongly emphasise educating the ‘Hindu’ believers in ‘proper’ religious and ritual practices. Their notion of Hindu and temple rituals are derived primarily from the Brahmanical tradition. However, their interests have spread into heterogeneous cultures, including non-Brahmanical worships. Their educational attempts focus on producing and reproducing resource-persons like temple priests through institutional training. Tantra Vidhya Peedham (TVP) is a famous centre for producing male Brahmin temple priests established by the initiative of late RSS leader P. Madhavan. This study does not discuss TVP. Instead, it discusses the centres that admit different sections to learn pujas and worships. Another focus of this study is on propaganda for mass education through speech, print, online and audio–video materials.

In this study, I argue that Sangh Parivar is interested in heterogeneous worship practices in Kerala as part of its ideological expansion. Temple is one of their significant activity sites; nevertheless, they are attentive to the non-temple worship traditions of srividya and kuladevatha. Sangh Parivar’s obsession to didactics of temple and ‘Hindu’ culture is a response to the modern secularisation process. It also expresses their ambition to educate the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits in Brahmanical knowledge. Because OBCs and Dalits are not traditionally inclined to the Brahmanical Hindu culture and temples. The idea of matha padasala proposed to resolve the anxiety on ‘proper’ knowledge about ‘Hindu’ culture including temples through systematic didactics. The lion share of the participants of the training centres are from OBC castes, non-Brahmin upper castes and a few Dalits. Sangh Parivar identifies temple as an essential part of the imaginations of Hindu nationalism. At the same time, without any conflicts with Brahmanical temple practices, Sangh Parivar also links and propagates the worships such as srividya and kuladevatha.

This study is composed of two sections; the first one discusses the Sangh Parivar’s fascination with educating believers about temple culture, attempting to shape personal religious practices in everyday life and propagate srividya and revive tharavadu (ancestral home) centred worship practices. The second section addresses the idea of matha padasala (religious study centre) and other education strategies for believers through speech, print and electronic media. Why are these organisations and institutes concerned so much about the didactics of rituals?

**Urge for ‘Proper’ Knowledge and Didactic**

The initiatives to shape future citizens based on Hindu nationalism through schooling is one of the key areas of Sangh Parivar’s activity. The national network of school education Vidhya Bharathi, an initiative for Adivasi
education by Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, Sewa Bharathi’s schools for Dalit students and Ekal Vidhyalay foundation for remote Adivasi hamlets are various enterprises for providing education to different sections based on their ideology. BJP ruling states have begun to reorient school textbooks against secular national imagination of history and society along with these parallel institutions (Sunder, 2004). Current BJP ruling government in centre also pushes their agenda into the extreme end through various educational bodies such as the National Council for Education Research and Training and the University Grant Commission.

Different from above mentioned educational interventions, RSS is also anxious about the ‘proper’ knowledge on temple practices and everyday rituals. Towards this end, Sangh Parivar and its sympathisers have established training centres to propagate ‘proper’ knowledge on temple culture and everyday rituals. The world of faith and rituals is strategically crucial for them to make inroads into new sections. The desire for ‘true knowledge’ related to temple rituals and practices is common among individuals, organisations and institutions associated with RSS in Kerala. Why are they so much concerned about didactics? We could assume the reason behind this as the fact that the majority of contemporary temple believers are from heterogeneous worship traditions and beliefs. It makes a person like Sankaran Namboothiri (KES district convener) and organisations like KES anxious about their ‘true’ knowledge and practice. Sangh Parivar mostly shares imagination of ‘true’ knowledge related to temple culture based on Brahmanical ritual texts and mythology.

One of the goals of KES is to educate ‘Hindus’ about temples and its practices. However, we hardly see Brahmins in RSS affiliate puja study centres, except TVP. As I mentioned above, the TVP is exclusionary for Brahmin boys. For KES, there are pujas in temples but hardly any attempt is made to teach ‘Hindu’ philosophy. Moreover, modern education, family changes and cultural practices also make these organisations more anxious. The idea of ‘true’ knowledge is rooted in Vedas and Puranas. Listen to the words of Sankaran Namboothiri,

There was an intensive influence of atheism in Kerala. So, there existed no opportunity to get scientific knowledge on Puranas and Vedas. Now, such knowledge is available in our society through the ashram and the speakers like Gireesh Kumar. But before 15 years, there were no scientific studies on Hindu religion and temple activities. It was considered as blind belief or superstition. People had lived their lives with beliefs and rituals, but they did not know the scientific basis of their faith. There is a vast gap between the knowledgeable past generation and the ignorant present generation.

Sankaran’s words clearly show his anxiety and confidence over the lack of ‘proper’ education on ‘Hindu’ culture and Kerala’s recent religious activities, respectively. He directly connects the lack of knowledge on ‘Hindu’ culture to atheism, which he broadly pointed to the Left influence in his conversation. The word scientific knowledge is a new normal used to justify the authenticity of Vedic and Puranic knowledge. This tendency has been subjected to stringent
criticism by scholars and activists (Nanda, 2005). Sankaran said, ‘What is a temple for? The temple management or believers are not at all clear on this. It is a strange situation. There is bhakti and belief, but no knowledge’. Anxiety on lack of knowledge and ‘true’ bhakti is an interesting point that needs to be noted. What does ‘knowledge’ mean? Knowledge is considered as the familiarity with Brahmanical texts and rituals, which is available in Namboothiris’ life world. Sankaran used the term ‘Hindu’ here as a proxy for the Brahmanical life world.

Sankaran’s anxiety indirectly refers to the secularisation process that transformed Kerala society. There had been severe setbacks in traditional education when the modern educational system was established and percolated. Religious texts such as Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavatha were part of the school textbooks in colonial South India to teach religious and moral values (Dharampal, 1983, p. 32). The secularisation process eventually made separation of state, education and other modern institutions from religious institutions. How much the separation existed in practice is a different question that has already been problematised by a large number of scholarly inputs (Bhargava, 1998; Needham & Rajan, 2007). Secularisation has transformed everyday life and practices in colonial and postcolonial Kerala. Sankaran thinks that the ‘gap between young and old generations’ had mainly affected the new generation acquiring knowledge in the religious domain. The gap shows the break in the flow of traditional knowledge to the next generation due to the social transformation. It has ignited the urge to set up institutions such as TVP to teach rituals and Vedas. Sankaran’s reply flags towards one aspect of upper caste conservative perspective on secularisation, whereas the ‘lower castes’ perceived these changes as providing social mobility from the oppressive traditional social system. However, Sankaran is happy about the activeness which the temples and other Hindu religious institutions have acquired in current Kerala. He believes that things had changed drastically compared to a few decades back: new studies coming up, several speeches and seminars are happening and new institutions like ashrams and study centres are being established. Sankaran considers these as mechanisms to spread knowledge to society and Hindu believers.

Sankaran was also concerned about a ‘decline’ in the family atmosphere mostly due to the flourishing of the nuclear family. He thinks that there is no attempt now to study Hindu dharma in families or temples. Dharma is practised through customs and rituals. However, those customs and rituals are not practised with proper knowledge by the believers. The modern is an indication of the secularisation process that already mentioned above. The system that existed in Namboothiri families to introduce temple culture and religious values to the family members has changed due to modern education and employment (Roopesh, 2017, p. 12). As against his notion, we know that the transmission of religious values and knowledge is still prevalent. Kerala witnessed conservative women assertion at the time of Sabarimala controversy (Devika, 2020). When Sankaran uses family as a general term, he presupposes that all families, including ‘lower castes’, had a strong relationship with the temple. It is not the case because only privileged castes accessed the Brahmanical temples in Kerala until the temple entry proclamation.
in 1936 (Jeffrey, 1976). Sankaran attempts to generalise Namboothiri culture as a common experience for everyone. Sankaran continues,

Practices with proper knowledge rarely exist. Spreading knowledge into society to create dharma is the aim of the temple. But unfortunately, such activities are rare in temples. Therefore, the Hindu community tends to accept other dharma in Kerala. What I mean is religious conversion. Conversions happen because of a lack of knowledge in Hindu culture. We don’t have scientific knowledge on these issues. They have bhakti; they pray every day in front of gods, without possessing the knowledge. People are aware of Puranas but not aware of the philosophy behind such stories.16

Sankaran’s conversation shows the disappointment of believers’ ignorance of Brahmanical ritual knowledge. He connects ignorance with religious conversion, which is one of the major national-level propaganda. His understandings clearly link with the pan-Indian agenda of Hindu nationalism.

Concern over ‘proper’ knowledge on ‘Hindu’ culture is not an individual case, but it is a pattern of thinking among Parivar organisations and sympathisers in the contemporary period. There are many significant attempts to address these issues from Sangh Parivar. Dasan, a state leader of HAV, and from Nair caste, established AVP, heeding the advice of swami Chithanandapuri,17 in Koyilandy, Kozhikode District. AVP teaches courses such as vaidika practices, shodasha kriyas18 and kshetra practices. Moreover, he also conducts Ramayanam classes in temples and other public events in the Malayalam month of Karkkidakam (July–August, which is called Ramayana month). Dasan studied Veda from M. R. Rajesh, a sympathiser of RSS born in a Namboothiri family, runs an institute Kasyapa Veda Research Foundation, in Kozhikode.

AVP teaches mainly shodasha kriyas as Hindu acharanam. Shodasha is 16 acharanas usually followed by Namboothiris. Dasan thinks that human beings need to practice acharanas from birth to death. According to him, everyone should follow these acharanas in their life to get peace and prosperity. By his interpretation, Brahmanical acharana applies to all, irrespective of caste, as Hindu acharana. According to his claim, AVP classes are based on Vedic acharanas. They have published a booklet called Yajnaprasadam to circulate among students (from all age groups). It explains mantras for morning prayer, evening prayer and the yajnas for family men/women. It describes shodasha acharanas too.19 Yajnas are acharanas of Vedic Brahmans. Now institutions like this propagate Vedic rituals among non-Brahmin communities as ‘Hindu’ rituals. Another booklet called sadhana educates people who are interested in practising rituals in everyday life. It explains the prayers and mantras for different moments in everyday life, for example, prayers before eating food, sleeping, prayer to take a bath and so on.20

According to Dasan, about 3,000 people had completed the course so far from his institute. It is a one-year course, which has a short syllabus and the classes are conducted in 12 centres every Sunday between 7:00 AM and 8.30 AM. After the course, students supposedly continue these acharanas in their daily life. Teaching proper temple worship and acharanas is another aim of the course. Its participants are not only Sangh sympathisers but are also from various political party
backgrounds and caste locations. Dasan said, ‘We don’t mind the politics of the participants; there are comrades (communists) too. I told them they could work for their party. This is the course for creating love inside, towards father, mother, and children.’ Dasan’s activities are not limited to temples but have a broader constituency—in cultural practices in home and everyday life. It establishes a set of Brahmanical acharanas as Hindu practices for everyone irrespective of caste. It aims to transform the daily life of non-Brahmins according to a set of ritual practices that have not been part of their lives.

Both Sankaran and Dasan aim to educate ‘Hindus’ according to Brahmanical knowledge and ritual practices. Dasan’s effort is to make everyday life more ritualised, which is different from temple-oriented activities. It significantly shapes the personal routine. They eagerly work to spread this into the new sections of society. RSS sympathisers work for non-Brahmanical rituals too. It is contrary to the common notion that RSS always supports only the Brahmanical knowledge system. They also support and propagate non-Brahmanical ritual practices with the framework of Hindu nationalism. Without eradicating the local traditions, they link them into pan-Indian Hindu culture. Appropriation of Dalit heroes and mythical past was a rigorous exercise of Sangh Parivar organisations in Uttar Pradesh. They attempted to fit the Dalit past into the broader ‘Hindu’ folder according to their nationalist project (Narayan, 2009). This study will now discuss srividya and kuladevatha worship, which are different from temple practice.

Ganesa Sadhana Kendram (GSK) (at Panthiramkavu in Kozhikode district) was established by a former RSS activist Thuppettan in 1996. His wife and son run the institution since his death in 2006. He was born in the Nair community, and traditionally they were vaidya (medical) practitioners and kalari (a martial art form in Kerala) trainers. He began to work as pracharak in the 1960s. At his home, his son Sivakumar talked to me about GSK and its activities.

The idea of GSK emerged in 1996 to provide training for non-Brahmins in puja, upanayana and so on. In 1996, GSK was officially inaugurated as part of the 60th birthday celebration of Thuppettan. He had been doing upasana of Lord Ganesa since his childhood. It developed into an advanced stage through his interaction with P. Madhavan, who helped Thuppettan to practice ‘higher level upasana based on srichakra’. He started puja courses, upanayana for non-Brahmins and homam as a social programme.

We provide training in srividya sampradayam, upasana, puja, etc. in the institute. We also train people in temple pujas, pujas at home, rituals, and upanayanas; apart from these, we organise camps for students. Around 30 to 40 people received upanayana from our centre in the initial years. Later we restricted the upanayana ritual because some of them were not careful about their life and activities. They did not follow the chittas (regulations) in their life. It was an act of betraying our vision. So we are more careful about giving upanayana and have restricted it for limited numbers. We try to ensure chittas and vruthi [cleanliness] in their life. We don’t like to hear about the misuse of the position. Many of our trained persons also work as temple priests.

Srividiya tantric tradition has thrived among various sections of society and has a strong Brahmanical root. It has regained momentum in the last few decades
Srividya worship tradition is different from temple tradition. However, there is no conflict with temple tradition as well. We learned from his words that upanayana is considered as a respectful and divine activity.

GSK follows its own course materials for training purposes. Currently, the number of enrolled students is less when compared to the initial enrolments. The women are also a target group of GSK. They teach pujas for women believers. When I reached Sivakumar’s house for an interview, I heard the bell ringing from the nearby room; someone was doing puja inside. In the middle of our conversation, a woman came out from the room wearing a red tilak on her forehead and carrying arati of camphor in hand. She was Sivakumar’s mother. She was doing puja inside the room. However, she does not do pujas for outsiders and temples. Women who got training in Sadhana Kendram conduct pujas only inside their houses. They do pujas such as Ganapathi homam, parayanams and chandika homam. When GSK organised a public programme of chandika homam, many women participated in it. This institute trains people irrespective of their caste. According to Sivakumar, ‘from Brahmin to Chandala all have the right to practice srividya tradition. Whether they are capable of practicing or maintaining quality and dedication in practice is the only thing that matters’. However, we hardly find any Namboothiri student in such institutes. They go only to TVP, which is exclusively for Brahmin boys.

They plan to build a Ganapathi temple close to their home, Ashtadasivaja Durga (18 handed Chandika Parameswari), and Dakshinamoorthi would be the other deities of the temple. Along with the temple, he has plans to start a srividya training centre.

Receiving srividya from a guru is a good tradition, but it has deteriorated in the new age. Therefore, I am thinking of developing an education center to teach srividya systematically. It should develop like studies of Vedas and other disciplines. I aim to build a systematic pedagogy for this program and a good library. My mother is working as acharya for this program.

Teaching and propagation of knowledge on temple rituals and tantric practices are the main focus of GSK. Mostly non-Brahmins, especially Nairs and Ezhavas/Thiyyas, are the receivers of these cultural practices. Reproduction of tantric practices and temple rituals is being institutionalised with the support of Sangh Parivar organisations. It is more evident in another organisation called Sreshtachara Sabha (SS).

The RSS activist Krishnakumar runs SS in Kozhikode. The institute primarily focuses on training in everyday pujas and rituals in tharavadu centred worship places. They provide training in temple pujas for those who are interested. It is an attempt to revive the practice of pujas for kuladevathas. The institute aims to spread this culture to modern nuclear families. Nowadays, it is perceived that very rarely do people follow the ritual for kuladevathas in families. According to Krishnakumar, irrespective of caste, all should learn pujas for kuladevathas. Institute offers an 11-month course to teach pujas; classes are held on every Sunday for two to three hours. Kuladevatha puja, Sandya vandhanam, gayathri
**Roopesh**

*Roopesh* and *ganapathi homam* are the major components of their teaching. Krishnakumar considers goddess Bhadrakali as the *kuladevatha* in Kerala. Interestingly he did not consider the diversity of worship practices among various castes. Instead, he proposes mainly Nair caste tradition. He said, ‘We teach the traditional system of Kerala. It still continues in *tharavadus*. Though they are not focused on temple activities, the institute provides minimum training in rituals for temple pujas too. I have come across priests who studied in SS, and work in different village temples. In such places (the places I know of), Brahmin priests come for the supervision and guidance of the pujas once a month or on special occasions. In the words of Krishnakumar,

All families of Kerala have their *kuladevatha*, and the family structure is based on this. We have eventually disassociated from this tradition because of social and historical reasons. The survival and prosperity of each family is based on the worship of the *kuladevatha*. When these worship practices declined, it led to many problems within the family. Society will survive only through the survival of the family. Hindus don’t have wealth, land, and job, so they are the poorest in every aspect. The status can resume only through the worship of *kuladevathas*. They could not survive through reservation or money. From this perspective, we started to teach pujas. In Hindu society, irrespective of caste and gender, all should learn pujas. Each family should worship their *devathas*. Each family used to have a guru to teach these pujas. *Kuladevatha* worship is not for society but for their families.26

Krishnakumar, a Nair, is attempting here to recapture the practice of worship in Nair *tharavadus*. Interestingly, most of the participants of the programmes are Thiyyas. Dalits are comparatively less in number. The institute gives *upanayana* (the sacred thread) to the non-Brahmins who are interested in temple pujas. According to him, it is for social recognition. ‘Without the sacred thread, people will not recognise or respect him as a priest’. It also indicates about the non-Brahmin’s ambition to become a priest.

Both institutes that we discussed in the above pages are not primarily focused on Brahmanical temple culture. Instead, they focus on *srividya* tantric practice and *kuladevatha* worship. It differs from dominant notion about RSS in that they focus only on homogenous practice. Here we saw that RSS leaders were involved in heterogeneous worship practices. RSS leader P. Madhavan was an ardent *Srividya* practitioner and propagator in Kerala. He had given *diksa*27 to many people as part of rejuvenating this tradition. RSS connect such practices with wider Hindu culture and put them into the basket of Hindu nationalism. They keep the flexibility to maintain coexistence with Brahmanical temple culture and tantric traditions. The language and ideas of Sankaran and Sivakumar are different though they are part of RSS. It demands us to revisit the dominant notion of RSS on ritual practices.

I argue that there are four undercurrents in this obsessive attempt to educate the ‘Hindus’: (a) the beliefs and ritual practices that they promote are Brahmanical, so it is not familiar to the new section who entered into temples. They are mostly ‘lower castes’, which means, they need to be ‘educated’ properly to assimilate into the ‘Hindu’ values. It is the rationale behind RSS, HAV and VHP’s continuous
attempt to educate and support the idea of non-Brahmin priests in temples. (b) They welcome non-Sangh Parivar and ‘lower caste’ people to the institutes for learning pujas and rituals. They are the ideological target of these institutions. (c) Without any contradiction with the Brahmanical temple culture, the individuals who support RSS or even workers of RSS take non-temple route in ritual practices. They put such traditions in the folder of ‘Hindu culture’. (d) The right-wing believes that Kerala faced drastic changes in culture and lifestyle by the modernisation process, and it has created a natural detachment from customs, ritual practices and values from everyday life. So they want to address ‘modern’ populations through new ways of institutional interventions.

Mass Education Strategies

RSS leaders, religious speakers, tantris and astrologers consistently attempt to educate believers mainly through three ways: first, matha padasala in temple compounds; second, speeches organised during various temple programs; and thirdly, TV and electronic media to address this anxiety. KKSS keeps constant concern to conduct matha padasala (religious study centre) in temples to educate the children in ‘Hindu’ culture from its beginning. They are running such centres in temples under the administration of KKSS. It was initially designed as a three-year course, and it followed a syllabus prepared by experts in the field.

T. S. Vijayan, a Sanskrit teacher and tantri from the Ezhava community (also a sympathiser of RSS) says, ‘the people who do not have dharmic education and customary practices are increasing in Hindu community. Hindu services will not be successful without any proper solution to this’ (Vijayan, 1985). He, who is also a follower of Sree Narayana Guru, continues,

Every day we face manifestations of these tragedies. Increasing caste issues, breakings of customs, superstitions, atheism are the best examples of this. Scientific Hindu principles, rituals, and institutions were handled carelessly and are declining every day. To find a solution for this is the responsibility of thinking people. I think the activities of matha padasala will be an effective one in this regard.

KKSS state secretary Manoharan says, ‘Every temple should conduct a religious study center for children as part of their activities to teach moral values. All families should send their children to the center’. Matha padasala was aimed to ‘educate Hindu cultural practices since childhood’. So it is imagined as religious study centres in temples for the kids. KKSS has developed a syllabus for matha padasala. In 1985, the organisation divided the lessons into nine sections. (a) Peace lessons: comprising of slokas of ‘Om Santhi Santhi....’ Guru, Saraswathi, Ganapathi and slokas for the gods of each temple. (b) Temple and rituals: it is the lessons to explain how to conduct temple worship, lessons on what a temple is, what the rituals of the temple are, and so forth. (c) Bhagavatha stories: meant for teaching divine stories to children. (d) Prathamshmarana: aimed to instil a national spirit for children against Western knowledge and its misleading tendencies.
(e) *Punya Purana Charithravali*: it is about the holy river, hills, places and stories of divine men like Rama. (f) Principles of *Gita*: provide three chapters of the *Gita* to learn its principles. (g) Storytelling: to teach moral lessons. (h) *Bhajana*: it teaches various bhajans to the students. (i) *Mangala slokas*: they are concluding slokas at the end of each class. Another study material published in 2001, which is more or less similar in content with a few additions: morality, Hindu dharma, *Vidyarthi* (student) dharma, Hindu festivals, notions of a good student, good child and so on. They have a plan to expand *matha padasala* to all temples in Malabar.

We can see that these are attempts for disciplining the children based on the philosophy of Hindu nationalism and Brahmanical Hinduism. The curriculum tightly fits into the imagination of Hindu India and the Indian landscape marked with sacred rivers, hills and pilgrim centres connected with Puranic myths. At the same time, it addresses the local gods, temple practices and rituals. The idea of *matha padasala* has percolated through public discourse into more sections of society.

The secretary and patron of Ambalakulangara Parvathi Parameswara Temple (at Kunnummal Village Panchayath in Kozhikode district) revealed their ambition to form a *matha padasala* in their temple. The temple committee does not have any connection with RSS, but it keeps a link with Indian National Congress (INC), and they are predominantly from Thiyya Community.

We are thinking of building a spiritual study centre as part of the temple. We won’t cultivate superficial faith, but we aim to develop a solid and meaningful faith. We should teach the essence of *Mahabharatha*, *Ramayana*, *Gita*, and *Vedas* for believers. In their life span, they do not attempt to understand the philosophy of these texts. We are thinking of developing a study center to provide such knowledge to people. We don’t have any base for such studies. It should begin from childhood and extend to old age. We don’t have any idea where to start and what to study. We need more authentic study material and approaches to learn.

The temple administration sees *matha padasala* as a way to achieve ‘proper’ faith against the ‘superficial’ faith. The ambition is to get sound knowledge of Brahmanical texts. It clearly shows the ambition of OBC caste members to get into the domain of Brahmanical knowledge. They also express their ignorance in this matter. It is noteworthy that this temple administration does not have any association with RSS.

Former Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) president (INC nominee to TDB) Prayar Gopalakrishnan, repeated the same point more rigorously. Secular public intellectuals criticised this project as an attempt to create Hinduism as a religion in the fashion of Semitic religion. It follows the model of Christian Sunday school and Madrasa education. Mahadevan *tantri* and the religious orator Gireesh Kumar identify the move as an attempt towards the semiticisation of the Hindu religion.

Second one is propaganda through speeches, print, online, audio and video materials. They have a pedagogical role in temple compounds. The programme such as *Bhagavatha sapthaha vajnam* (seven days Bhagavatha recitation), and other speeches influence believers, imparting them with certain religious values.
and temple rituals. Dasan said, ‘I attended the temple programs to talk about customs and rituals, not communal matters. Hindus do not have any facilities for teaching customs. All other religions have such facilities’. He adds,

Hindus don’t know how to pray, walk around the deity, hymns, mantras, etc. If you ask them what they were doing while praying, they would say they did it because their grandfather did the same. Therefore, I propose that temple should be a cultural center. I touch upon all these issues while delivering a speech in temples.35

Prabhashana Samithi is an organisation functioning in Kannur district; Dasan and a few other HAV activists are also members. Samithi is composed of 40 members who are orators. Samithi began to work with the speakers to maintain uniformity in matters regarding the subject of oration. Usually, opinions would vary from one person to another. Samithi was afraid of the contradictory statements among speakers. Samithi works to reduce such situations and maintain some minimum understanding among orators about their content. Uniformity was achieved through holding meetings and classes for speakers.

Earlier, there were no religious speeches in temples. Most of the public programs were like kadhaprasangam by Sambasivan.36 Its stories were mainly non-religious. People came for kadhaprasangam but they did not enter the temple. They went back after the program. Later, the people trained in sibirams (camps) began to conduct religious speeches in temples and villages. Nowadays, all temples conduct at least one religious speech; others organise even two, three, or four such events. When we ask the speakers, they say they gained inspiration from KKSS. When Chithanandapuri conducted a program to felicitate earlier speakers, I also attended it. I asked some of the old participants, “how did you come to the field of spiritual speech?” most of them told me that Samithi inspired them. Now they are not active in Samithis, and they have their sphere. It helped to organise Hindu solidarity associated with the temple.37

RSS activists compare the changes from past to present. The past they refer to is the recent past of the seventies or eighties. That was the time when temple committees used to organise secular cultural programmes such as plays and talks as part of temple festivals. The above statement shows their criticism towards secular programmes and their emphasis on having religious programmes in temple compounds. Along with this criticism, they have developed creative strategies to overcome this issue. Nowadays, temple committees predominantly organise religious and cultural programmes as part of the festival and temple events.

Sangh Parivar organises programmes called sathsangam in temples. By sathsangam, they mean a get-together for a good purpose. Here the good purpose is religious activities like reading Puranas, Gita and related speeches.

People have money, education and all but they suffer from mental issues. It can be solved through the sharing and opening of mind and discussion on puranas and itihassas. Sathsangams38 allow them to release the tension and feel relaxed. We had organised two or three sathsangams in each sakha territory.39
Sangh Parivar and its sympathisers use audio–video materials to spread such cultural messages to the public. Swami Chithanandapuri has published video CDs of his speech and other topics such as Hindu dharma and temple practices. He is a known figure in Sangh Parivar’s public events. He also enjoys many viewers on TV channels. His videos are available on Advaithashramam YouTube channel on various topics. It has 48.7k subscribers, and some video has up to 128k viewers. Gireesh Kumar is another well-known speaker and sympathiser of RSS who has 25.1k subscribers and up to 93k views on his YouTube channel Shripuram. He delivers speeches for the channels such as Amrita TV. Amrita TV is a venture of spiritual figure Mata Amritananda Mayi. I just picked two figures as an example, but many such figures give similar lectures to educate believers on Vedas, Upanishads, temple rituals and other religious topics.

In this section, I tried to elucidate various strategies of Sangh Parivar organisations to educate masses about temple rituals and the importance of Hindu culture, which is Brahmanical in nature. Matha padasala is a prolonged idea of Sangh Parivar in Kerala for addressing Hindu communities in the RSS line. The idea has received more currency over a period. Individuals and temple administrations have begun to imagine such a centre for educating believers for ‘proper’ knowledge on ‘Hindu’ culture including temples. However, it is still an unsuccessful project. Speech is another popular way of communication with larger audience. Sangh Parivar uses this platform as an effective method to spread their ideology. Temple programmes open a wider platform for such agenda. Sangh Parivar takes a certain effort to make uniformity in the speech’s content and avoid innate contradictions in mythology. There is also a conscious effort to eradicate secular cultural programmes from temple events. Moreover, electronic media and internet-based platforms have been used popularly for spreading messages to believers. The main target of their programmes is non-Brahmins, particularly ‘lower caste’ sections.

**Conclusion**

This study unravels the obsessive concern of Sangh Parivar organisations in Kerala on didactics regarding temple culture and rituals in everyday life. Sangh Parivar’s involvement in temples in India has primarily been elucidated in the context of the Ram Temple movement. Apart from this, the temple is an active domain of RSS activity for achieving the long-term cultural goal of Hindu nationalism. RSS in Kerala has been involved in temple activities from the early years of their organisation. P. Madhavan was the leading figure of RSS’s temple activities in Kerala. In this study, we saw RSS activists’ and sympathisers’ anxiety about the lack of ‘proper’ knowledge in temple rituals and ‘Hindu’ culture. This Hindu is a proxy for Brahmanical culture. Why are they so much obsessive in didactics of temple culture? I argue that this is because of two reasons: (a) the secularisation process caused to break the traditional system in upper-caste families to learn about ‘Hindu’ culture and temples and (b) coming up of more believers from ‘lower caste’ communities.
into the temple culture who are not traditionally associated with temples. The KKSS proposed a solution for systematic didactics through *matha padasalas* associate with temples. The idea of *matha padasala* has percolated beyond the Sangh Parivar circles. So, it reflects in the activities of temple administrations and Devaswom Boards. The speeches, print and electronic means have been used to reach out to more believers. Sangh Parivar has certain coordination to maintain uniformity in speech and reduce the contradictions inherent in Hinduism.

Apart from temple activities, there are robust attempts to spread the *srividya* tantric practice by RSS sympathisers. The *srividya* tradition also has a strong Brahmanical root. Former RSS leader P. Madhavan was also dedicated to propagating *srividya* practice and had many followers in many parts of the state. These sympathisers started various centres for *srividya* and to educate pujas for those who are interested. Moreover, there are attempts to regain *kuladevatha* worship by RSS sympathisers. It is a family-centred kali worship followed by various caste communities in Kerala. Such RSS endeavours are not only uncritical to the Brahmanical temple culture but also place them into the folder of ‘Hindu culture’. In conclusion, this study provides ethnographic nuances to shed light on the Sangh Parivar activities related to various ‘Hindu’ cultures based on Hindu nationalism.

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**Notes**

1. The organisation was formed in 1992 as an outfit of RSS. Its main aim is to coordinate various caste communities along the lines of RSS.
2. Names of the interviewees (except T. S. Vijayan) featuring throughout the article have been changed to protect their identity.
3. Interview with Mr Dasan on 04 August 2016.
4. See the website of the Election Commission of India, https://results.eci.gov.in/Result2021/partywiseresult-S11.htm?st=S11
5. RSS is a right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation formed in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in Nagpur, Maharashtra.
6. It is an umbrella term used to represent the RSS affiliated organisations.
7. RSS organised a long-term movement to demolish Babri-Masjid and build Ram Temple on that site in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. It gained huge momentum for Hindu nationalist politics in India. Hindu Nationalist militant mob demolished the mosque in 1992. Ownership dispute was resolved by the Supreme Court of India by granting the land right to the Hindu trust and providing permission to build the temple at the same site through a widely criticised final verdict. The court also mandated an alternative five-acre land plot to be given to build a mosque.
8. In this study, Brahmanical culture is used to denote the broader Sanskritic knowledge (philosophy/stories/myth) related to Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads. It has pan-Indian popularity among various sections. It also indicates the temple rituals in Kerala based on the ritual manuals such as Prayogamanjari and Tantrasamuchayam, which were used in Namboothiri tantric tradition. Moreover, the term directs to the rites and rituals such as 18 practices (shodasha kriyas), including upanayana, which is traditionally followed by Namboothiris.
9. Srividya (auspicious knowledge) is a tantric tradition that worships Goddess Lalita Tripurasundari as a primordial feminine power called ‘shakti’. See for more details (Karasiński, 2020).
10. Kuladevatha is a guarding deity of ancestral homes. Kula means family or clan in Malayalam.
11. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India allowed entry for women between the ages of 10 and 50 to the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala. It resulted in state-wide protest and violence.
12. I mean secularisation as a process of decline in religious belief and practices in modern societies and the differentiation of secular spheres. Casanova (2007) has analytically distinguished secularisation in three ways for better clarity on this debate.
13. Namboothiri is a Malayali Brahmin caste in Kerala.
14. Gireesh Kumar is a religious orator and RSS sympathiser. He has established Shripuram Tantra Gaveshana Kendram at Irinjalakkuda and is working as a guru for srividya tantric tradition.
15. Interview with Mr Sankaran Namboothiri on 25 August 2016.
16. Interview with Mr Sankaran Namboothiri on 25 August 2016.
17. He is an ascetic and vocal supporter of RSS located at Kulathoor ashram in Kozhikode district.
18. These are 16 rites practised by Namboothiris from birth to death.
19. Dasan, 2015. Yajna Prasadam, a booklet published for his classes.
20. Sadhana, Arsha Vidya Peedham, Vaidika Acharana Padana Kendram, Koyilandy, Kozhikode.
21. Nair is a privileged caste in Kerala.
22. Srichakra is a mystical diagram used by practitioners of srividya.
23. Interview with Mr Sivakumar on 19 August 2016.
24. Dakshinamoorthi is a Siva sitting towards the South. A god for wisdom, music and art.
25. Interview with Mr Sivakumar on 19 August 2016.
26. Interview with Mr Krishnakumar on 11 September 2016.
27. Diksa is a tantric rite and an initiation that gives access to tantric knowledge by a guru.
28. RSS declared a resolution (Paliyam Vilambaram) on this issue.
29. He was a spiritual leader and reformist born in Ezhava community (1856–1928) in Kerala fought against caste system. His enormous contribution significantly shaped the modern Kerala.
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