

Kings and temples of power

DH deccanherald.com/opinion/panorama/kings-and-temples-of-power-1172960.html

December 18, 2022



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It has been reported that the Karnataka government will soon rename the ‘Salaam Aarti’ to Aarati Namaskara. This ritual dates back to the rule of Tipu Sultan and is still practised in the Mookambika Temple at Kollur and the Cheluvanarayana Swamy Temple at Melkote.

The Salaam Aarti issue gives us a close glimpse into several answers to the historical conundrums we are posed with today. It can help us ask: How should we remember Tipu Sultan? Is this about Tipu Sultan at all? What did the temple as a site mean for politics and the State in the 18th century? How should this push us to think of current day secularism?

Renowned historian Janaki Nair said that Tipu Sultan lives many afterlives in our daily politics. In our public debates, he is born and reborn, named and renamed. In the current controversy, a member of the Karnataka Dharmika Parishat, a body formed under the Department for Hindu Religious Institutions, stated that the ritual used to be conducted for the “welfare of the state administration,” which now will be replaced with the “welfare of the people.” Tipu has been condemned as an anti-people monarch who was out to destroy Hindu culture and heritage.

One response to this has been to remember Tipu as a deeply spiritual person, imbibing both Islamic and Hindu traditions in his life. It is true that he can be perceived and remembered that way. In one episode, Tipu’s imperial elephant lost its eye sight. It is said

that Tipu then went to Nanjangud temple with his blind elephant for 41 continuous days and applied a special temple paste on the elephant's eye and prayed. Historians have also recorded the large number of grants he made as king to Hindu temples.

He is also remembered by several progressive circles as a just ruler. For instance, Tipu had ordered that peasants should be urged to work harder, given loans, and protected from physical violence. In another instance, during Tipu's rule in Malabar, he forbade Brahminical practices that prevented oppressed caste women from covering themselves. Tipu is also seen as an individual who stood in resistance to British colonialism as part of the anti-colonial struggle in the 18th century.

It is therefore reasonable to construct Tipu Sultan as a complex historical figure and an important actor in the history of the subcontinent. Yet, a narrative of Salaam Aarti as the benevolence of Tipu's character cannot help explain its political relevance, a phenomenon that is as pertinent to the present as it is to the past.

Often, the Salaam Aarti has been noted as an instance of our composite and syncretic culture. This, however, does not explain the entire picture. Furthermore, if we are to imagine communal harmony and secularism, we must use the tools of reason and rationality rather than romanticise bygone eras. Understanding Salaam Aarti as an expression of state politics can help decipher the past, and reimagine the secular foundations of our democracy.

Historian Richard Eaton explains that temples had "latent political meanings" long before Tipu's era. Temples existed as an expression of sovereign power, and acted as a power base to further one's political aspirations. Kings were highly aware of this and used the temple as a site to further their own rule. Temples acted as state property, an extension of its authority. Such an analysis of state power further helps us see how temple desecrations too were expressions of monarchical power—attempts to consolidate state control.

Looking at the Salaam Aarti as inhabiting this social universe of the temple explains its political significance. It was not an expression of Islamic despotism, nor did it signify a glowing beacon of modern secularism. Renaming the Salaam Aarti because it stands as a symbol for Hindu suffering and victimhood means denying the political meanings that the temple carried, and the structure of the state. By making it about the 'despotism' or 'benevolence' of Tipu, one runs the risk of uncritical retellings of history, which do not take us far.

Instead, the issue points to the need for a critical investigation of the question of power, especially that which emanates from the state. Salaam Aarti shows us that for a secular and democratic present, we must be provoked to poke holes in history.

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