

**SACRED WORKSPACES AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE: REIMAGINING
EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL EQUITY IN SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLES**

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Abstract:

Temple institutions in South India, particularly those governed by statutory bodies such as the Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin Devaswom Boards, have historically functioned as religious centers as well as socio-cultural institutions with deep community engagement. Despite this dual role, there is a striking absence of scholarly focus on the inner workings of these temples as organizational spaces—employing a wide range of individuals across ritualistic, administrative, custodial, and voluntary roles. This conceptual paper interrogates this critical gap by reconceptualizing temples as sacred workspaces, where the complex interplay of tradition, ritual authority, and social hierarchy defines both employee experience and organizational governance. Drawing from the interdisciplinary fields of organizational behavior, workplace inclusion, employee well-being, and cultural legitimacy theory, the paper explores how temple governance can evolve to integrate principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) without compromising ritual authenticity. This paper offers a forward-looking framework for rethinking temple employment ecosystems in Kerala and broader South India. It challenges the dichotomy between sacredness and modernity, arguing that cultural institutions must evolve to remain ethically relevant. This reconceptualization has significant implications for policy reform, academic scholarship, and the development of inclusive, sustainable temple governance models grounded in both tradition and equity.

Keywords: Temple Governance, Employee Well-being, Inclusion and Diversity, Sacred Workspaces, Devaswom Boards, Intersectionality, Sacred Capital, Cultural Legitimacy, South India, Participatory Governance

Introduction

In the contemporary discourse on organizational behavior and workplace ethics, institutions rooted in tradition and religion often remain outside the purview of academic scrutiny. Yet, sacred institutions such as temples—particularly in South India—employ large numbers of people across administrative, ritualistic, and maintenance roles, making them significant spaces for understanding issues of employee well-being, inclusion, and diversity. The temples of Kerala, governed by statutory bodies like the Malabar Devaswom Board (MDB), Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB), and Cochin Devaswom Board (CDB), illustrate a layered organizational architecture. These temples are not merely spiritual centers but also administrative entities with hierarchical personnel structures comprising priests, Executive Officers, clerical staff, sanitation workers, musicians, and volunteers. Many of these workers, particularly those in custodial and gendered roles (e.g., Mathrusamithi members or female temple volunteers), operate in conditions shaped by ritual purity norms, caste-based occupational segregation, and informal employment contracts.

Literature Review

Temple governance in India, particularly in South India, has historically evolved through a complex interplay of religious authority, colonial administrative practices, and post-independence state control (Fuller, 2003). The state-managed temple boards—such as the Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin Devaswom Boards in Kerala—function under statutory frameworks, but the internal operations often remain opaque (Kurien, 2017). While substantial literature exists on temple architecture, rituals, and patronage (Tarabout, 2021), studies focusing on temples as employers or as organizational entities with HR concerns are minimal. Institutional theorists have argued that religious organizations often maintain legitimacy through cultural and symbolic continuity rather than through administrative efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Temples represent "total institutions" (Goffman, 1961) where ritual codes, hierarchical authority, and symbolic norms govern employee behavior and identity. Workers in temples often navigate dual roles—as religious functionaries and as institutional employees. This duality shapes their perception of autonomy, job satisfaction, and moral responsibility. Similarly, women volunteers like Mathrusamithi members contribute critical services but often remain invisible in policy discourse (Sreekumar, 2018).

The workforce in temples remains deeply stratified by caste, gender, and ritual purity norms. Hereditary priests (typically from Brahmin castes) occupy the upper echelons, while manual roles like cleaning, cooking, or flower collection are often assigned to Scheduled Castes or Other Backward Classes (Babb, 1986). Scholars such as Rege (1998) and Chakravarti (2003) emphasize the intersectionality of caste and gender in traditional institutions, but rarely within the context of religious employment. Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labor becomes particularly relevant here. Ritual staff, security personnel, or administrative clerks interact with hundreds of devotees daily, often without adequate psychosocial support.

Research Gaps and Need for Conceptualization

Most literature has either concentrated on the ritualistic or economic aspects of temple governance (Michaels, 2005) or framed workers as service providers devoid of agency. This paper aims to address this gap by proposing a conceptual framework for understanding temple governance through the triadic lens of employee well-being, inclusion, and sacred institutional reform. It introduces the idea of “Inclusive Sacred Workspaces” and situates it within the broader discourse of diversity management and cultural legitimacy in faith-based organizations.

Conceptual Framework

Sacred Workspaces and Inclusive Well-being in Temple Governance

This paper proposes a conceptual framework that integrates employee well-being, inclusion and diversity, and ethical governance within the unique institutional and cultural context of South Indian temples. The framework draws from organizational behavior theories, spiritual leadership literature, and indigenous sociocultural constructs to explore how temple institutions can evolve into inclusive and ethically governed sacred workspaces.

Key Constructs and Interlinkages

1. Sacred Workspace

A temple as a workplace is not merely a ritual site but an emotionally and spiritually charged environment. The term "sacred workspace" denotes an institutional space where religious duties and occupational labor intersect.

2. Employee Well-being in Sacred Institutions

In this framework, employee well-being is expanded beyond physical or psychological health to include:

- Spiritual affirmation (feeling respected and spiritually fulfilled through one's role),
- Occupational dignity (respect for one's labor regardless of caste, gender, or ritual role),

3. Inclusion and Diversity

Inclusion is conceptualized not just as representation but also as equitable participation in decision-making, access to promotions, and workplace dignity. Diversity in temple settings refers to caste heterogeneity, gender participation, and generational shifts in employee roles.

4. Ethical and Participatory Governance

Governance is reframed to include:

- Moral responsibility rooted in dharmic values and service orientation;
- Transparency and accountability, especially in staff appointments, conflict management, and rituals.

Limitations

1. This is a conceptual paper, and as such, it lacks empirical testing of the proposed framework.
2. The paper is anchored in the South Indian temple context, particularly in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka.

Conclusion

Temples in South India, historically revered as spiritual centers, are increasingly recognized as dynamic organizational entities housing complex human ecosystems. This conceptual paper has argued for the reframing of temples as sacred workspaces—sites where religious tradition intersects with modern institutional management and socio-cultural inclusivity. By integrating principles of employee well-being, diversity, and inclusive

governance into the operational fabric of temple administration, especially within structures like the Devaswom Boards, a holistic governance model can be imagined—one that honors sacred tradition while promoting social justice and human dignity. The framework proposed in this study sheds light on the possibilities of reconfiguring sacred institutions to accommodate the evolving expectations of dignity at work, gender inclusion, caste equity, and psychosocial support.

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