

Exhibiting its defiance and belligerence on April 30, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad hurriedly conducted the "idol installation ceremony" at the "Ayyappa temple" it constructs within the reservoir of Idukki Dam. This was done in an apparent attempt to outwit the Kerala High Court verdict to be pronounced on Friday, May 2nd, over the ongoing temple construction.

The VHP mobilized about 500 people from different districts to participate in the ceremony. They were brought in different vehicles on April 29 night. The rituals were performed by Eswaran Namboodiri, Narayanan Namboodiri and Damodaran Namboodiri, brought in from their native place at Kanjangad in northern Kasargode district of the State. The 550 ft high and 650 ft wide Idukki dam is the world's second and Asia's first arch dam constructed across the Kuravan and Kurathi hills. Idukki hydro-electric power station serves as the main artery of Kerala's power needs. Notably, the High Court was to pass its order on the writ petition filed by Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) on April 29, but deferred it for May 2nd as the VHP advocate was absent. This was regarded as deliberate move by VHP to facilitate its idol installation ceremony before the court pronounce the likely adverse verdict.

The VHP militants took all precautions to counter any possible police move to stall the function. It, however, went on smoothly since there was no move to stop VHP activity, said to be under orders from higher ups in Thiruvananthapuram. About hundred people are still remaining at the place where the idol was illegally installed. The KSEB moved the High Court seeking to restrain the VHP from continuing with the construction of the temple in the Idukki dam reservoir area, falling in Ayyappankovil Village of Udumbanchola Taluk in Idukki district. The reservoir area also forms part of the highly protected Periyar Wild Life sanctuary at Thekkady.

The petition filed by KSEB Research Division Deputy Director, K. R. Gopalakrishnan, contended that the VHP had "no manner of right" to construct the temple "in the protected area". Admitting the existence of a temple on the banks of Periyar River before construction of Idukki dam, it was pointed out that eight acres of land and Rs. One lakh resettlement amount was allotted by the Government in 1974 for relocating the temple since the area where the temple originally situated would submerge in the reservoir water on completion of the dam. Accordingly, and as per then High Court order in 1976, the original idol was installed at the newly constructed temple at Thoppippala as per the tantric rituals. A Trust formed by the local people and believers take care of this new temple.

As such, pujas were not performed in the old temple from 1985 as the entire area got submerged in the reservoir. However, of late, the VHP activists trespassed into the 30-cent land where the old temple stood and started renovating it, the petition pointed. On its part, the Travancore Dewaswom Board informed the High Court that it had no knowledge of the temple construction, nor it had any proposal for such construction, and that no temple employee was appointed by it for that purpose.

The Ayyappankovil area remains at a distance from the dam site. When the water level recedes during summer, some people used to light lamps at the remains of the old temple. This was particularly performed as a mere ritual by the local tribals, and a tribal priest, Kiliyan Chothi, used to conduct the "poojas" for the past more than a decade on such occasions. However, the VHP never allowed Kiliyan Chothi anywhere near the temple for its April 30 idol installation ceremony, which was performed by the Namboodiris (Kerala Brahmins) brought in from far

away Kanjangad.

Incidentally, Idukki has a large population of tribals in Kerala and its main tribal sects are Muthuvan, Malayarayan, Mannan, Paliyan, Urali, Ulladan, Malavedan and Malampandaram. The VHP took advantage of low rainfall during the past two years to start encroaching the old temple place in the reservoir during October-November last year.

It suddenly identified that the temple was relocated in 1976 not according to "tantric" rituals. In order to give sanctity to its propaganda, the VHP conducted "Deva Prasnam" by three astrologers and under whose opinion the temple construction was formally started on November 18 under the guidance of Kunjambu, a "Vaastu" Pandit who, too, hails from Kanjangad. The proposed Sabarimala-model temple on a platform of 18 feet high and with 18 steps was estimated to incur a total expenditure of Rs. 2 crores. Even before completion of the temple, the VHP conducted "Makara Sankranti" festival on January 14 and "Vishu" festival on April 14 this year, mainly to attract people and to establish their claim on the encroached reservoir premises.

In spite of this open encroachment there was no move against it from the District Administration, and KSEB-Revenue-Forest authorities. Ironically, the temple construction was restarted after the April 14 "Vishu" festival. The summer vacation of the High Court also came in handy for the VHP move since the authorities cannot get a quick stay against the illegal construction. The April 30 idol installation was also performed before completion of construction of the temple and its "Sreekovil" (sanctum sanctorum).

Notably, on April 28 the Udumbanchola Deputy Tahsildar served a "stop memo" to the VHP-led committee against construction of the illegal temple within the reservoir. Despite this, the construction was continued by participating women and children, and about 12 of the proposed 18 feet platform of the temple was built. On April 29, a top KSEB delegation comprising of Research Division Director Ms. Annamma John, Executive Engineer Subramaniam, and Asst. Executive Engineer P. N. Biju visited the spot and held discussion with VHP Idukki District President K. N. Rajendran. The latter informed the officials that the temple would be constructed at all costs and irrespective of the Court verdict. "The divinity of the temple would solve all power crisis", the VHP leader told the officials. According to Ms. John, a final decision can only be taken after the Court verdict. Denying lapses on the part of KSEB in preventing the illegal construction, she said that the Board had duly informed it to the District Revenue authorities, who are empowered to take such actions. "We informed the District Collector and also moved the High Court.

The issue was discussed with Minister for Power, Kadavur Sivadasan." Pointing out that the temple within the reservoir would adversely affect the dam and power production, she said that it was not correct on the part of VHP to construct the temple since it was relocated in 1976 after performing due "tantric" rituals. The KSEB had in fact informed the District Collector in writing in December last year about the VHP encroachment in the reservoir. The District Collector, Rajesh Kumar Sinha, said that he was informed about the whole thing only the other day and that he had given instruction to the RDO to conduct a spot investigation. The fact, however, remains that despite the "stop memo" served on April 28 by the RDO, the revenue officials and the police were conspicuously absent when the idol installation ceremony was held on April

30. Notably, the relocated Temple Trust of Thoppipala, headed by its Chairman E. K. Vasu, filed a case (OS 1092) before the Idukki Munsif Court and got a favourable verdict against reconstruction of the temple at its old place in the reservoir in Ayyappankovil village and using the same temple name. The VHP started the temple construction and conducted the April 30 idol installation ceremony in violation of this existing court verdict.

The new turn of events at Idukki reservoir came closely on the heels of VHP supremo Ashok Singhal's visit to the state and launching the "Thrishul Diksha" ceremony at Alwaye on April 26, and threatening to "eliminate" the entire minorities, communists and secularists. Singhal also demanded to oust Dewaswom Minister G. Karthikeyan from the State Cabinet for his comment that Sabarimala, where people of all religions go, is not a temple of Hindus alone. Yet, unlike his Rajasthan counterpart Ashok Gehlot, Chief Minister A. K. Antony opted to remain casual. On the very day the VHP conducted the illegal idol installation at Idukki reservoir, Antony said that his government did not intend to prevent VHP's "Thrishul" distribution as demanded by the Opposition parties. "The traditional communal amity in Kerala is very strong, which cannot be harmed by the "Thrishul" distribution. Therefore there is no need for the government to prevent it", he said at the post-Cabinet meet press briefing.

Apart from CPI(M) State Secretary, Pinarayi Vijayan, who took strong exception on Antony's stand, senior Congress leader K. Karunakaran also joined issue. "Both BJP and VHP are two sides of the same coin. They should not have any place on Kerala soil. There is a need to pluck the menace right at the bud with the cooperation of all. Otherwise, I am afraid, there will be catastrophe in future", Karunakaran warned in a TV interview on May 1. Answering a specific question on Antony's citing the traditional strong foundation of communal amity in Kerala, Karunakaran quipped: "That is merely an excuse or ploy to be inactive..."

Meanwhile, experts pointed out that the VHP temple within the reservoir would cause greater hardship for power in Kerala.. If the temple was permitted to exist, the dam's water storage level has to be reduced by 33 feet from above. Water is presently stored within the 123 feet space between the full reservoir level of 2,403 feet and the low level of 2,280. Reducing water level by 33 per cent will, in turn, reduce the water capacity of the reservoir by 50 per cent. Because of the dam's triangle shape, the water capacity increases as it goes above. Therefore, reducing the water level by 33 feet from above would reduce both water capacity and power production by 50 per cent. And, if this was not done, the VHP temple in the reservoir would be submerged in water.

The power production capacity of Idukki dam is 214.55 crore units. Because of the VHP temple in the reservoir, this will have be reduced to 107.5 crore units. And, it is bound to adversely affect the already hampered power situation in the State, which is surviving with daily power cuts and load shedding. High Court rejects KSEB plea Admitting the Advocate General's plea for more time, the Kerala High Court's vacation bench on May 2 rejected the KSEB petition seeking issuance of orders against construction of VHP temple at Idukki dam reservoir. The VHP, on its part, informed the Court that the temple construction has already been completed and the idol was installed.

The Bench comprising Justice A. K. Basheer and Justice R. Basant said that orders would be

passed only after knowing the actual position and asked the State Government, Superintendent of Police, Idukki, to file counter affidavits, if any. The case is now posted for May 6. The KSEB moved yet another petition seeking the Courts direction to the police to clear the encroachers from the reservoir.

Mukundan C. Menon, "Indian Currents", 11 May , 2003