

Dalit musician banned at GURUVAYOOR temple

Deputy administrator Nambair said temple thantri would have to decide on whether the custom has to be changed or not.

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A dalit percussion artiste was banned from performing within the precincts of the famous Sree Krishna Temple at Guruvayoor in Kerala, bringing back the spectre of caste-based discrimination. The temple in Thrissur district is open to all Hindus.

A taxi driver by profession, Kalloor Babu, 40, has been playing ‘elathalam’ — one of the five instruments in panchavadyam — for the past 15 years. He used to go for panchavadyam performance outside the temple along with artistes belonging to other Hindu segments, particularly the Marar sect. Marar, an upper class Nair segment, is a community traditionally performing percussion instruments in temples.

On January 5, Babu got a chance to make his debut performance within the temple. Thinking that there was nothing wrong in a Dalit performing elathalam, a metallic musical instrument which looks like a miniature of cymbals, Babu took part in the panchavadyam ensemble within the temple.

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According to Babu, “Certain temple staff members belonging to upper class Hindu spotted the Dalit performing at the temple. They complained to the temple authorities, who asked me through an agent not to repeat the performance in the temple. I have been banned on caste basis.”

Babu said the upper class members in the panchavadyam team had persuaded him to join them in the temple performance. Non-Marar upper class Hindus are performing kombu, a wind instrument, as part of panchavadyam.

“If a Dalit is offering a lamp to the temple, the priests have no qualms. If a Dalit is offering money, the temple does not throw it away on the ground that the amount was from backward caste. If they can accept Dalit money, why not allow a Dalit to perform elathalam,” asks Babu.

Deputy administrator Vijayan Nambair said certain temple staff complained against Babu performing within temple precincts. “There is an age-old tradition in the temple that only Marar community members should beat drum instruments. Although several Hindu organisations and writers have protested against the decision on the Dalit performer, we have to look at the tradition. Temple thantri would have to decide on whether the custom has to be changed or not,” said Nambair.

Guruvayoor Temple Affairs Board chairman and [Congress](#) leader T V Chandramohan said the board has received a complaint from an organisation against the decision on the Dalit artist. “We will look into the issue in the January 21 meeting,” he said.