



Church and temple festivals have been reduced to a cacophony of voices and noises. They have lost the sanctity of yesteryears >>>

BY DR. PHILIP UMMAN

In the best of times people living near temples and churches considered themselves blessed. Not any longer. These are the worst of times. I live next door to a church and during church festivals I am woken up at sharp six in the morning by the loudspeaker. It blares out songs one after the other. There is a hospital nearby but nobody seems concerned. Admittedly such festivals come only once a year for a few days and nobody wants to deny anybody their right to celebrate but one man's meat should not be another's

poison.

I remember once during an urgent call from the hospital, I found the road blocked by a huge procession. People were walking in two or three columns occupying almost half of the already narrow road, holding colorful umbrellas and flags. At the head of the procession, a golden cross was being carried by a church official and following him, a priest in purple robes reading out blessings on onlookers. Not content with blocking half the road, there were other men wearing colorful badges (probably identifying them as volunteers) lighting up crackers every now and then. Everybody was in high spirits. Forming part of the procession were two

EPIPHANY or CACOPHONY?

music bands, one traditional while the other was belting out more familiar and popular tunes. All in all, a cacophony of voices and noises. It was the procession in connection with a church festival. I had to literally wave my stethoscope around to get the road cleared.

As I soon realized, this was not an isolated event, but one that is repeated across churches in Kerala. Sadly, temple functionaries are also hell-bent on copying their counterparts in the churches. There is no denying the fact that such church and temple festivals in connection with certain holy days or martyrdom of saints had their role in getting the people in a town or village together for a common purpose. It was also a time for introspection,

for religious intercourses and spiritual growth.

But with the passage of time, creeping commercialization has eaten into the sanctity of festivals. Committees vie with each other and also with their counterparts in previous years to set up bigger and grander show. Garish decorations and loud music are de rigeur. Full-page supplements in newspapers are brought out. What should have been confined to church or temple grounds spills into and takes over public space. Everything belongs to the Lord and even if He is not interested, His devotees will claim it for Him! And to top it all, the hordes of wandering merchants who set up shop selling everything from knives and knick-knacks to juices and joyrides. They could be the modern day nomads, moving from one temple festival to another church festival, pitching tent in each village for a few days.

And what about the people themselves? Religious fervor or frenzy? Pilgrimages have been a part of the Indian scene since time immemorial. However, they were individual journeys. It is interesting to note that the word for pilgrimage in the vernacular is "*theertha yatra*". Could it be a journey where a man would come to the limit of his strength and capabilities and suddenly step into the vastness of the One above?

It is said that Swami Vivekananda meditated on a rock in the sea away from the southern shoreline. Sages and sanyasis meditated in the Himalayas far away from the madding crowd. That was

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then. What is a pilgrimage now without a crowd? All you have to do is to get some friends together, hire a van or a tempo and hop in. Everything is made to order, nothing to worry about. Fill it, shut it and forget it (as the catch line of the ad used to go) and the tour operator will take care of the rest. On the way back, even throw in some sight seeing.

The temple and church authorities as also the media highlight the large crowds that gather irrespective of caste or creed. But it is just that – a crowd. The crowd soon disappears leaving behind a wasteland. In the best of times, Indian cities and towns have

no waste disposal facilities to speak of. What then after such gatherings? No sooner have the incense and the holy fires doused out, that town officials will begin lighting up (unholy) fires in garbage dumps. The stench from the rotting garbage and burning plastic will drive away any good spirit still present after all the cacophony.

But who is bothered? The coffers are full and overflowing (closed circuit cameras to monitor His men counting money as if God needed help to see what is going on in His world). Business was good. Epiphany can wait. The cacophony is sufficient for now.

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