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1. Sivagiri row: what is the outrage about?

Introduction

'GURU HAD NO RELIGION AND CASTE'

➤ CM Pinarayi Vijayan said Sree Narayana Guru's ideas remained relevant even today, especially in a world plagued by violence rooted in interpretations of religion

➤ He asked people to guard against attempts to present Guru as an advocate of whatever he fought against



CM Pinarayi Vijayan during his visit to Sivagiri Mutt

“ Attempts to downplay Sree Narayana Guru as a mere religious leader or a religious saint must be resisted. It should be understood that the Guru had no religion and no caste

—PINARAYI VIJAYAN, CHIEF MINISTER

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan used the inaugural event of the 92nd Sivagiri pilgrimage at Varkala on December 31, 2024, to slam what he saw as attempts to appropriate social reformer Sree Narayana Guru into the Sanatana Dharma fold. The CM also seconded Sivagiri Madhom president Swamy Sachithananda's opinion that the regressive practice of making men remove their shirts before entering

temples should be abandoned.

What happened?

Mr. Vijayan sought to equate Sanatana Dharma to the principles of Varnashrama Dharma which forms the bedrock of caste divisions in society. In his opinion, the attempt to portray Sree Narayana Guru as a champion of Sanatana Dharma ran counter to the renaissance leader's humanist message and his work to eradicate casteist oppression. He said that Sanatana Dharma, which commands the patronage of the powers that be, has resulted in the continuing oppression of Dalits, backward classes and minorities in rural areas of north India. The Bharatiya Janata Party was quick to react with former Union Minister V. Muraleedharan accusing the CM of insulting Sanatana Dharma in a manner similar to Tamil Nadu Deputy CM Udhayanidhi Stalin.

Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) President K.Sudhakaran in a way echoed the CM's words when he spoke at Sivagiri. He said that attempts to tie down the Guru to Varnashrama Dharma have to be resisted. However, Opposition Leader V.D.Satheesan struck a discordant note, objecting to the CM's equating of Sanatana Dharma to Varnashrama Dharma. He accused the CM of attempting to give the patent of Sanatana Dharma, which is the collective tradition of all Indians, to the Sangh Parivar.

Why is Sivagiri Madhom important?

Sree Narayana Guru, who founded the Sivagiri Madhom over a century ago, is regarded as one of the foremost social reformers of Kerala, who played a key role in transforming a society steeped in casteism and untouchability into a progressive one with at least some levels of

equality. In 1888, decades before temple entry movements and proclamations which allowed the oppressed castes entry into temples, Narayana Guru consecrated a Siva idol by the Aruvippuram river, in an effort to allow all castes to worship. When the consecration by a non-Brahmin led to opposition from various quarters, he explained that the idol was that of "Ezhava Siva, not a Brahmin Siva", referring to the Ezhavas, an oppressed caste.

Despite this statement which was meant as a counter to specific circumstances, Sree Narayana Guru propounded the wider and inclusive 'One Caste, One God, One Religion for mankind' philosophy. He established the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) in 1903 for the educational and social upliftment of oppressed castes. A decade later, he would disassociate from the SNDP Yogam, disappointed that the organisation was being reduced for the representation of just the Ezhavas. Sivagiri, established by the Guru, is now a major pilgrimage centre for Ezhavas.

Why are political parties eager to court the Sivagiri seers?

The Ezhava community, classified as an Other Backward Caste constituting 23% of Kerala's population, are considered as traditional voters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led LDF, with part of the votes going to the UDF. However, with the BJP's ascendancy in 2014, the Sangh Parivar has been making overtures to the community, and by extension to Sivagiri, as part of its larger strategy to make inroads into Kerala, which has remained electorally almost impenetrable to the BJP until recently. This has led to the Left as well as the Congress launching a counter-strategy to what they see as attempts to appropriate Narayana Guru and the Ezhava community into the larger Hindutva fold.

After the recent Lok Sabha elections, in which the LDF suffered a major defeat and the BJP made gains in left strongholds, the CPI(M) attributed the rightward drift in the backward-class Ezhava votes to the BJP as one of the major factors in its defeat. SNDP Yogam general secretary Vellappally Natesan stated that the Ezhava community had abandoned the LDF in the Lok Sabha elections in protest against the appeasement of minorities.

What is Sivagiri Madhom's stance?

The Sivagiri Madhom has always tried to maintain a considered, equidistant stance from all parties. At the annual Sivagiri pilgrimage, leaders of parties from across the political spectrum are accorded an opportunity to address the pilgrims. In recent years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi have addressed the pilgrims. Even as the SNDP Yogam hailed the consecration of the Ram temple, Swamy Sachithananda decided to stay away from the Ayodhya consecration ceremony. The Madhom leadership has used its influence to raise its voice against the "Brahmanical dominance" in priesthood in major temples, criticising the limiting of the post of priests in major temples to the Brahmin community. Aware of the political heft of the community, the Madhom has held its cards close to its chest. This stand is not expected to change anytime soon.

Relevance: GS Prelims; History and Culture

Source: The Hindu

2. Why has Trump called the Panama treaty 'foolish'?

Introduction

On December 22, 2024, Donald Trump threatened to take back the Panama canal, calling the transfer treaty "foolish". He said, "Our Navy and Commerce have been treated in a very unfair and injudicious way....we will demand that the Panama canal be returned to us, in full, and without question." Panama's President José Raúl Mulino rejected Trump's threat, and said, "I want to express precisely that every square metre of the Panama canal and its adjacent area belong to Panama, and will continue to belong to Panama."

Why is Trump upset with Panama?

The first and major reason for the U.S. President-elect's upset is the high transit fees applied on U.S. vessels by the ACP (Panama Canal Authority). In 2023, Lakes Gatun and Alhajuela experienced severe drought affecting the shipping and navigation of the canal as it relies on these reservoirs to operate its locks. Therefore, the ACP reduced the number of slots for crossing ships by 36%. This led to the increase in transit fees. The second cause of worry has been the increased Chinese presence in the Panama canal. In 2017, Panama became the first Latin American country to sign a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreement, and ever since then, Chinese investment has increased significantly. Hutchison Ports PPC, a subsidiary of a Hong Kong-based company, operates two ports near the canal's entrances, igniting concerns over Chinese influence on logistical operations and surveillance over the U.S. Navy.

What is the U.S.-Panama treaty?



The Panama canal is an artificial 80-kilometre canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, reducing cost, time and distance for international shipping. The canal is crucial for the global supply chain, and 6% of maritime world trade goes through it. The canal also symbolises U.S.'s technological prowess and economic power. It opened in 1914 after the U.S. finished construction, and was controlled by the U.S. until December 31, 1999.

The canal was handed over to Panama in 1999 under the Torrijos-Carter Treaties. The first, called the Panama Canal Treaty, cancelled the Panama Canal Zone and turned the canal over to the Panamanians on December 31, 1999. Under the second, the Permanent Neutrality

Treaty, the canal was declared neutral and open to vessels of all nations. Under this treaty, the U.S. has the right to defend the neutrality of the canal and have priority passage in military emergencies.

What has been Panama's response?

Panama's President José Raúl Mulino has rejected Mr. Trump's accusations. He addressed the accusations by defending the transit rates and clarifying the concerns about external influence over canal operations. He stated that the transit rates are set according to international standards and decided by a procedure. He denied any involvement of external powers such as China or the European community while emphasising the importance of sovereignty for Panamanians. He responded to Mr. Trump's accusation of Chinese soldiers operating the canal, saying, "There is not a single Chinese soldier in the canal, and on the other hand, there will not be".

What next?

The concerns over fee hikes and operations logistics will likely be discussed diplomatically, despite Mr. Trump's threats. While the U.S. might attempt to influence Panama and pressure the latter with renegotiations, Panama will look for international support to reaffirm its sovereignty. China has also responded to the accusations. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that the Panama canal was a great creation for the Panamanian people and a neutral passageway. He added that China respects Panama's sovereignty.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Relations

Source: The Hindu

3. Why China is building the world's largest dam on the Tsangpo, how India may be impacted

Introduction

On December 25, China approved the construction of the world's largest hydropower project on the Yarlung Tsangpo (or Zangbo) river in Tibet. On completion, the 60,000 MW project will have the capacity to produce three times the amount of electricity as the world's largest hydro project, the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze in central China.

From Tibet, the Yarlung Tsangpo enters Arunachal Pradesh, where it is known as the Siang. In Assam, it is joined by tributaries such as Dibang and Lohit, and is called the Brahmaputra. The river then enters Bangladesh, and makes its way to the Bay of Bengal.

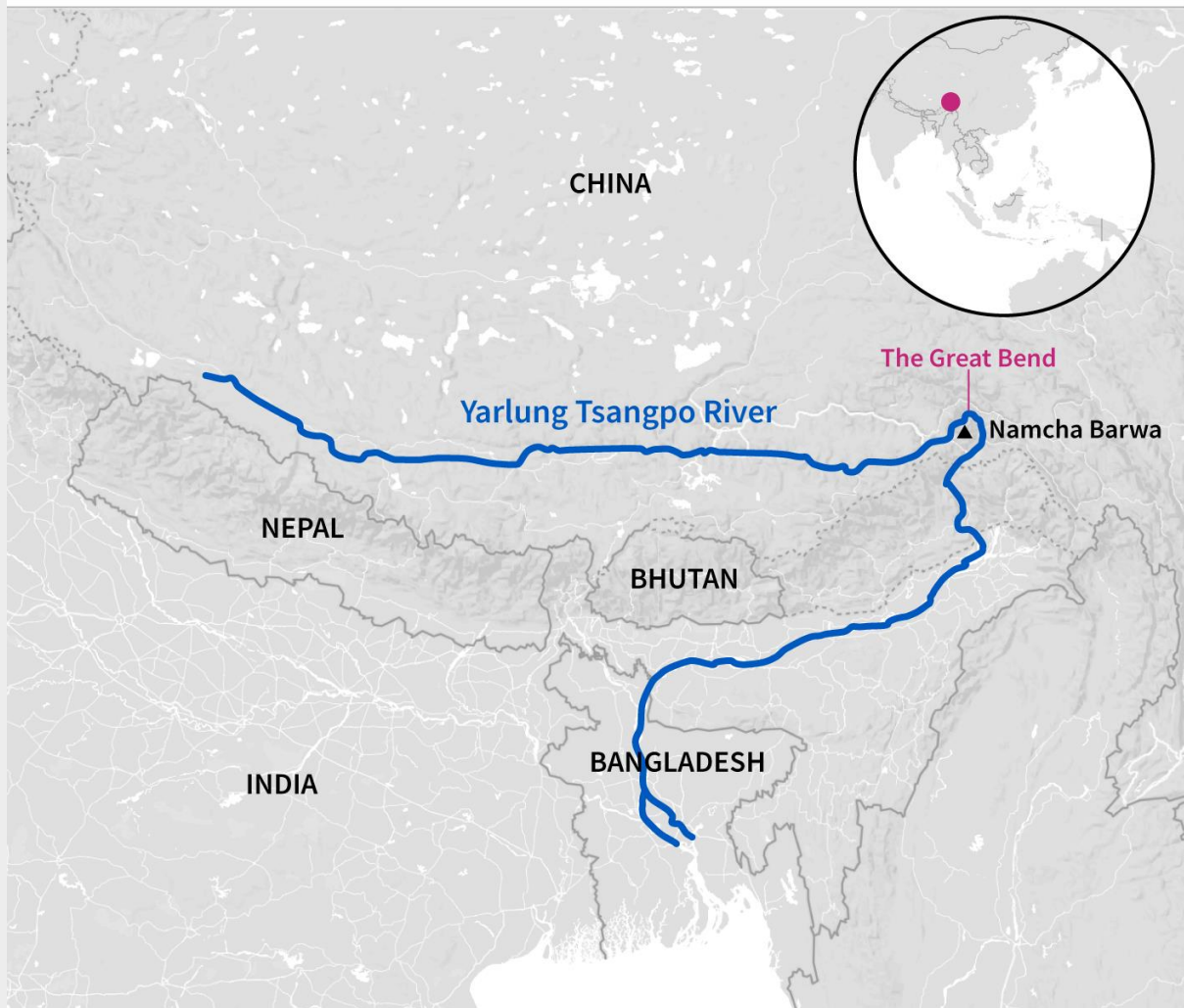
An infrastructure project of the scale that China is planning on the Yarlung Tsangpo could affect millions living in these regions, their livelihoods, and the ecology.

What is the Yarlung Tsangpo project?

Y Nithiyandam, Professor and Head of the Geospatial Research Programme at Takshashila Institution in Bengaluru, said the location of the dam is mentioned in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) — at the "Great Bend", where the Yarlung Tsangpo makes a U-turn in Medog county before entering Arunachal Pradesh.

Recent developments including the allocation of funds, development of smaller dams along the river channel, and changes in land use in upstream areas, indicate the project is in an advanced planning stage, and visible construction progress is likely to follow soon, Dr Nithiyandam said.

Why does China want this mega project?



China has said the dam will help it move away from conventional energy sources and achieve net carbon neutrality by 2060. The Yarlung Tsangpo is ideal for hydroelectricity generation — its steep descent from high mountains ensures a “remarkable flow rate”, Dr Nithiyandam said.

Some recent additions to China’s network of tens of thousands of dams are staggering in scale. The immense weight of the volume of water stored in the Three Gorges Dam reservoir is suspected to have caused blips in gravity anomaly maps, Dr Nithiyandam said. Water released from the dam has had severe environmental impacts — “the scientific community believes the massive storage of water can create earthquakes; and, more than all, it has displaced more than a million people...due to changes made in the river morphology,” he wrote in an article for Takshashila in July 2023.

What are the specific concerns for India?

The dam (or dams) could impact the flow of water from China to India, the lower riparian state, Kantha said. The bulk of the water in the Brahmaputra system comes from Tibet.

Also, "going by the experience of other large dams, they always lead to other negative consequences," Kantha said. The flow of silt, crucial for agriculture, can get interrupted, and changes in river flow can impact the local biodiversity.

This region is among the world's most ecologically fragile and earthquake-prone. Kantha recalled that a landslide in 2004 had created the glacial Parechu Lake in the Tibetan Himalayas near Himachal Pradesh. After the Chinese alerted India, the level of the lake was monitored daily. The lake burst in June 2005 and sent a large volume of water down the Sutlej, but timely coordination and planning helped limit the damage.

"Even if there is no mala fide involved, such incidents become very serious. In the Tsangpo case, you're talking about a large dam in an earthquake-prone area. Chinese scholars have also raised these concerns extensively, such as in the case of Three Gorges," Kantha said.

To prevent disasters, coordination and exchange of information between countries is essential, Kantha said. "China doesn't feel the need to cooperate more closely with lower riparians. In the Mekong river basin, China has constructed 12 large dams with negative consequences for countries downstream," he said.

What coordination mechanism do India and China have on transboundary rivers?

There is an umbrella Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation on transboundary rivers, and two separate MoUs on the Brahmaputra and Sutlej, Kantha said.

The need for the Sutlej MoU was felt after the Parechu incident — however, China did not agree to round-the-year provision of data, and the MoU is currently pending renewal.

The Brahmaputra MoU, renewable every five years, lapsed in 2023. The renewal process is ongoing through diplomatic channels, the Jal Shakti Ministry says on its website.

The umbrella MoU was signed in 2013, and has no expiry date. But at present, there is "no activity being undertaken under this MoU", says the Ministry's website. An Expert Level Mechanism set up in 2006 provided for annual meetings between the two sides, but the process has seen interruptions.

Within these limited avenues of cooperation, the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses can play a role.

"Neither India nor China is a signatory, but we abide by its key features, including the equitable and reasonable utilisation of waters," Kantha said. Under the convention framework, the upper riparian does not have a free run, and one country's actions cannot significantly harm another. The cooperation on data sharing has largely held, barring during the 2017 Doklam crisis and after the 2020 Ladakh standoff.

So what options does India have?

"The larger problem is that understanding (between the countries) is very limited and narrow in scope," Kantha said. "The Chinese are unwilling to discuss any agreement which should involve major commitments on their part."

Whenever India has raised concerns about such projects, the standard Chinese response has been that these are primarily run-of-the-river projects — meaning they did not involve major impounding of water, Kantha said.

He said that India must "challenge" Chinese statements such as the recent "completely wrong" claim by the foreign office spokesperson that the Tsangpo mega dam would not have negative impacts downstream. "We need to say that publicly – otherwise, it will become a fait accompli and a huge problem for India down the road," Kantha said. "India needs to have an honest dialogue and essentially dissuade them from taking up a project of this magnitude."

According to Kantha, water "will become, and should become, a major issue in India's engagement with China" — and "it should be made very clear to the Chinese side that if they're not mindful of our interests and concerns, it will have a serious, negative impact on relations."

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Relations

Source: Indian Express