

## SHOES AND OTHER FOOTWEAR THROWN INTO TEMPLE

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I read in a Malayalam daily newspaper dated January 7, 2007 the story of shoes and other footwear being thrown into a temple from an adjoining Masjid at Palayam. I could not believe the story easily. So I read it a second time. The facts were undeniable.

Thiruvananthapuram is the state capital of Kerala. Palayam is an area of the capital city. In British time it was the Camp area of the soldiers and the place got its name 'Palayam' in Malayalam, meaning Camp.

Today one speciality of the place is that the area has the places of worship of three religions. The Catholics have their Church, The Hindus have Ganapati Temple and the Muslims have their mosque. The Ganapati Temple and the mosque are so close that they have one common wall between them. But the mosque is located a little higher than the temple. So from the boundary wall of the mosque one can clearly see the dome of the temple.

One evening. The priest of the Ganapati Temple was preparing to light the lamps for evening worship. The devotees had not yet come. The priest and his helper were cleaning the auspicious lamps and lighting them. Then, the unthinkable incident happened. From the mosque shoes and other footwear were thrown into the temple desecrating it. The priest was awestruck as if he was struck with lightning.

According to the local culture, people remove their shoes and other footwear before entering the temple. The place for all footwear was always outside the temple, never inside. So it was unthinkable for anybody to see footwear flying into the temple. But on that day the unthinkable happened! And that too from the adjoining Muslim mosque.

One can imagine the consequences of such a sacrilegious incident! The people in the temple were shocked. But the most shocked were the Muslims who come to pray in the mosque. So some Muslim brethren ran to the Maulvi, Muslim priest and told him about the footwear thrown into the temple.

In fact, it was a retarded Muslim boy who entertained himself by picking up the footwear and throwing them at random. Some of them fell in the temple.

Hearing about the incident the Maulvi rushed to the wall near the temple. He looked at the temple. His friend the temple priest were standing stunned and looking towards the mosque. Maulvi explained to the priest what actually happened.

“Yes, I thought something amiss has happened. But now you don't worry. I have hidden the footwear behind some bushes so that the devotees don't see them. After the night worship you may send a bag without anybody else knowing it. I shall reach you the footwear,” the priest said.

Hearing the consoling words of the priest the Maulvi felt at peace in his heart as if water has been poured on burning fire! Blessing his friend, the priest in his mind 'Aslam alaikum', the Maulvi turned to the Mosque.

As I read about this event while I was in Kerala my mind flew to Gujarat. I asked myself: if this event took place in Gujarat what would be the consequences? It was good that at Palayam both the temple priest and the Maulvi were friends. They could understand each other. They believed each other. They respected each other.

If such an event occurred in Gujarat, perhaps, the communalist fanatics would have burnt not only the temple and the mosque but the whole city! The desecration of the Ganapati Temple occurred at Palayam, Triruvananthapuram. The cause of the desecration was the adjoining mosque next to the temple. The footwear thrown from the mosque fell inside the temple. Not only one shoe but several shoes and other footwear. There were more than enough reasons for a communal riot to take place. But at Palayam there were two truly religious men. They were friends. They were tolerant. So the desecration did not break into a communal outburst.

The priest of the temple and the Maulvi of the mosque were true religious leaders. They were true leaders of their religions. I call them true civilized religious leaders. They were truly enlightened leaders. Their god-experiences made them mature leaders of their community. As true devotees of God they were not interested in fishing in troubled waters. They did not have any selfish motive or goal to attain through their leadership positions. They did not have any game to play with a hidden agenda.

They could accept a retarded child's playfulness as nothing else but playfulness. They responded in a mature way. The temple priest could have taken exception to the footwear thrown into the temple and could have created havoc by enflaming the passion of the Hindu devotees against the 'Muslim Fanatics' of the adjoining mosque. He could have created an atmosphere of hate and enmity against his Muslim neighbours. But no such thing happened. Instead the temple priest proved himself a truly religious man of God by his concrete action.

In the same way the Maulvi of the mosque, taking advantage of a misdeed, could have enflamed the passion of the Muslims who came to pray in the mosque against the Hindus gathered in the next door temple. But the Maulvi as a true devotee of Allah approached the priest and acknowledged regretfully what had happened and brought the situation under control.

Even this inflamed situation did not excite the passion of the two religious leaders against the followers of the other religion. Both the religious leaders behaved in true freedom. They did not poke to awake the sleeping lion of communal hatred. Both gave their mature response to the unthinkable situation. The priest collected the footwear which had fallen in the temple and without calling the attention of the devotees, he returned them to his friend the Maulvi.

Similarly the Maulvi, like a man of understanding and wisdom, hurried to the temple priest as soon as he came to know about the untoward incident and appraised him about the unpleasant but true reality and asked his forgiveness. Thus instead of quarrelling about an event beyond their control, they contained it with their true religiosity and wisdom. Both the friends behaved

with maturity and understanding. Both the religious leaders instead of displaying religious fanaticism and fundamentalism showed the essence of true religion, love and brotherhood. May their tribe increase in our midst.