Padmanabhaswamy Temple Case

Why in news?

The Supreme Court upheld the right of the Travancore royal family to manage the property of deity at Padmanabha Swamy Temple.

What is the case about?

- The central legal question was whether Marthanda Varma could claim to be the "Ruler of Travancore".
- [Marthanda Varma is the younger brother of Balarama Varma, the last Ruler of Travancore who died in 1991.]
- The court examined this claim within the meaning of that term as per the Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act, 1950.
- This claim also includes the ownership, control and management of the temple, Thiruvananthapuram.
- The court said that the **shebait rights survive with the family members** even after the death of the last ruler.
- [Shebait rights - Right to manage the financial affairs of the deity.]
- This SC decision has reversed the 2011 Kerala High Court decision.

Who had these claims of the temple before 1991?

- Before 1947, the Travancore Devaswom Board controlled the temple that was under the control of the former Princely State of Travancore.
- The Instrument of Accession was signed between the princely state of Travancore and the Government of India in 1949.
- Since then, the administration of the Padmanabhaswamy Temple was "vested in trust" in the Ruler of Travancore.
- In 1971, privy purses to the former royals were abolished through a constitutional amendment stripping their entitlements and privileges.
- The move was upheld in the court in 1993.
- The last ruler of Travancore who died during the pendency of this case continued to manage the affairs of the temple till then.

When did the legal issue begin?

- In 1991, when the last ruler's brother took over the temple management, it created a furore among the devotees.

- They moved to the courts leading to a long-drawn legal battle.
- The government joined in; supporting the claims of the petitioner that Marthanda Varma had no legal right to claim the control of the temple.

Is the temple the property of the royal family?

- The character of the temple was always recognised as a **public institution** governed by a statute.
- The argument of the royal family is that, as per custom, the temple management would vest with them for perpetuity.
- The last ruler had not included the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple as his personal property or dealt with it in his will.

What about the temple's property, including the riches in the vaults?

- A consequence of who has administrative rights over the temple is whether the vaults of the temple will be opened.
- In 2007, Marthanda Varma claimed that the treasures of the temple were the family property of the royals.
- Several suits were filed objecting to this claim.
- A lower court in Kerala passed an injunction against the vaults' opening.
- In 2011, the Kerala High Court ordered that a board be constituted to manage the affairs of the temple, ruling against the royal family.
- The royal family filed the appeal in the SC against this verdict immediately.

What did the SC rule?

- The SC had stayed the HC verdict.
- It also appointed two amicus curiae to prepare an inventory of items in the six vaults.
- While five vaults were opened, vault B was not.
- Since 2011, the process of opening the vaults has led to the discovery of treasures within the Padmanabhaswamy temple.
- This prompted a debate on who owns temple property and how it should be regulated.

How temples are controlled?

- India is a secular country that separates religion from the state affairs.
- However, Hindu temples and its assets are governed through statutory laws and boards heavily controlled by state governments.
- This system came into being through the development of a legal framework to outlaw untouchability by treating temples as public land.
- It has resulted in many legal battles.

Source: The Indian Express

