

Restrictions on women at Sabarimala: It is complicated

[\(A shorter version of this article appeared as part of a Left-Right-Centre debate that can be read here\)](#)

Taking the Sabarimala temple to court for restricting the entry of women of a certain age group is akin to meat-eaters suing vegetarian restaurants for discriminating against non-vegetarians by refusing to serve meat. Common sense response would be to say—‘Go find a non-veg restaurant, of which there are plenty’. Tomorrow, self-styled, ill-informed reformers might demand that Durga-Kali worship be stopped because it legitimizes violence or declare the worship of Shiv lingam as “obscene.” This is not farfetched because politically motivated groups have been decrying Durga as a whore and Krishna as womanizer. Therefore, they declare these deities are not worthy of reverence.

In any civilized society, gender equality is to be treated as one of the core values. However, with apologies to Faiz Ahmed Faiz, aur bhi gham hein zamane mein gender equality ke siwa”. There are many more important values a democracy must uphold while standing up for gender equality—certainly not make a fetish of women’s rights.

Other core values of our democracy & India civilization are respect for diversity among the enormous range of communities co-habiting in India with substantial differences (as well as commonalities) in matters of faith, cultural practices, value systems, family structure, dress codes, food habits & ways of relating to the world as well as the Divine. While the leftist-feminist reformers have no difficulty in respecting the rights of ‘religious minorities’—namely Muslims and Christians—to live by their own cherished cultural and faith traditions, when it comes to diverse Hindu groups, they consider it their divine right to dictate terms.

The unique grandeur of the Hindu faith lies in the fact that each group, each sect and each individual is free to envisage the Divine in whatever form, shape, and temperament that devotees like. That’s how we have millions of Devis and Devatas with new ones taking avatar as and when the situation so demands or their devotees so desire. Practically every village in India has its own gram devi or devata. Our devis and devatas are not distant, unfathomable entities forever sitting in some distant god-land or heaven. They take avatar on earth to offer succour & comfort to those in need. In the process each one acquires distinct personality traits as well as preferences with regard to mode of worship.

Take the contrasting tastes of Ma Kali and Vaishnodevi, both of whom are manifestations of the same Shakti. While Vaishnodevi demands strict vegetarianism, animals are routinely sacrificed as offerings to Ma Kali. Lord Ganesh likes modak as prasad while Hanuman ji prefers boondi and Lord Shiva devotees offer milk and even bhang. Devotees of various deities do not begrudge the practices of others. This freedom has kept alive vibrant diversity in our faith traditions because they allow individuals and groups to define their relationship to the Divine according to their preferences.

It is the same freedom which allowed Manushi to invoke ten armed Ma Swachhnarayani, as our isht devi. She wields ten different non-traditional weapons that include a broom as symbol of cleansing society of corruption, weighing balance to symbolise social justice, a calculator that demands honest accounts of government, and a video camera that points to the need for an accurate grasp of ground reality for those engaged in social reform. No Hindu has ever questioned or protested against the powers we attribute to our Isht devi or our mode of worship that includes jhadu puja.

The Hindu faith has thus remained amongst the most liberal in the world, with different groups and individuals exercising the right to relate to the Divine in whatever way they wish, without insisting that others must follow their chosen path.

Even the most conservative among Hindus don't insist on uniformity of beliefs and practices. This spontaneous, mutual respect for differences in ways of being, ways of worship, singing, dancing, clothing, cooking and so on, is what enabled the rich diversity of India to survive through millennia. But in the name of equality rabid feminists can't stomach such freedom and liberalism.

Traditional Hindu temples are run by different sects with each choosing a particular deity in a particular form as their isht dev or devi. They're not meant as tourist spots for all to come & go as they please. If you don't respect the unique temperament of that deity or find beliefs of a particular sect offensive, you are free to opt for the devata or devi that suits your taste. There are lakhs of others to choose from.

Just as our colonial rulers with their faith in the superiority of their monotheistic faith, despised Hindu religious practices, with their millions of gods and goddesses, our modern day missionaries can't stand the temperamental nuances of our diverse deities. They have no problem in accepting that women are barred inside friaries meant to house Catholic priests who have taken a vow of celibacy. But they can't stomach the idea of a Hindu deity who has vowed eternal celibacy which involves avoiding the company of young women. They take it upon themselves to cure this kink because their feminist indoctrination interprets it as misogyny and gender discrimination! They choose to ignore that it is only one or two temples in all of India where women of certain age groups are denied entry whereas there are several 'women-only' temples where males are denied entry.

As far as the issue of gender justice is concerned, the Hindu faith can hardly be considered anti-women, considering it is the only faith that worships the feminine as Shakti--the mighty force that moves the universe. Male deities are powerless without feminine Shakti from whom various devatas derive their strength.

When I find the case against Sabarimala frivolous, it is not to suggest that Hindu faith traditions are writ in stone and unchanging. Devotees reserve the right to change their dharmic practices as well as demand improved behavior by their chosen deities as per the requirements of changing times. That is how we have countless re-writings of Ramayanas in different ages with each one interpreting Ram in their own way and many even improving upon Valmiki's depiction of Ram's conduct in various ways, especially his abandoning Ma Sita even after she had gone through an uncalled for agni pariksha or the deceit involved in the killing of Baliraja. But it doesn't behove non-believers or hostile attackers of Hindu faith to impose their fads and sensibilities on groups who don't share their worldview, especially if their practices don't impact, leave alone harm the non-devotees. A genuine devotee has the right to demand change but not politically motivated hateful critics.

Ironically, the flag bearers of women's equality don't seem to have any problem with special compartments reserved for women in trains. Most of them insist on our parliament enacting a law to reserve 33% constituencies for women whereby males are barred from contesting from those seats. They're not satisfied with laws that promise equality. They insist on legislation that is unjustly loaded in favor of women. You can't have it both ways – Fetishize equality when it suits you and insist on special concessions and privileges as per your dictates.

It is ironical that the Supreme Court has entertained this petition at a time when Hindu groups are already in the Apex Court demanding that Hindu temples be freed from statist controls whereby ruling parties in every state have the power to appoint their political flunkies as well as favoured

bureaucrats and politicians to Management Boards of all major shrines and dharmasthans. This power has mostly been used to control and siphon off the enormous loads of money that devotees offer to these temples. The government of India dare not take such liberties with running of mosques and churches.

While delivering its judgement, the Supreme Court should keep in mind that none among the devotees of Sabarimala have come to court demanding changed rules. It's only hostile and motivated outsiders who are using the fig leaf of gender equality to push their partisan agendas.

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