

## AT SABARIMALA, WALKING THE EXTRA MILE

Relevant for: Government Policies & Welfare Schemes | Topic: Welfare of Women - Schemes & their performance; Mechanisms, Laws, Institutions & Bodies

The [path-breaking verdict of the Supreme Court striking down the exclusion of women](#) in the 10-50 age group from the Sabarimala temple in Kerala might have put to rest the long-raging question of gender discrimination. But that is not the end of the story. Several aspects of the pilgrimage have rested on the premise that there are no women around. Now that the situation is set to change, considerable flexibility and sensitivity are required to bring about a radical transformation in the management of Sabarimala.

Agencies of the Kerala government and the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) already have their hands full in restoring normalcy in the area that was affected by the flood-swollen Pampa river before the annual pilgrimage begins mid-November. With less than six weeks to go, the court ruling only introduces multi-dimensional consequences. The shrine is about 5 km inside the forest, and the difficult terrain is accessible only by foot. It offers basic facilities. However, accommodation at the Sannidhanam, where the shrine is located, is woefully inadequate. The dozen buildings and a few sparsely furnished cottages, that were built by sponsors nearly 50 years ago, offer accommodation to not more than 3,000 pilgrims at a time. Several thousand (male) pilgrims converging at the shrine normally huddle on sheets or mats spread in open spaces. Constructing more buildings now to accommodate more pilgrims, especially women, is not an available option, as land available with the TDB is quite limited. Now, to demand additional forest land for all this is tempting but not the most viable option in the long run.

The Sabarimala Master Plan, which is premised on the acceptance of Sabarimala as a forest shrine located in the Periyar tiger reserve, does not contemplate the construction of new blocks at the Sannidhanam. Rather it advocates the demolition of all unnecessary buildings. The principle is to limit accommodation at the Sannidhanam by developing a base camp at Nilakkal and encouraging satellite camping centres en route. From the base camp, entry into Sabarimala is regulated. This way, pilgrims will have a smooth darshan and exit.

However, this is easier said than done. A growing number of pilgrims and the basic limitations thwart any such ideal scenario. In fact, the whole pilgrimage is regulated by the holy 18 steps that lead to the sanctum. Steep and narrow, they permit only a maximum of 90 persons in a minute. Even if entry is permitted throughout the day, the total number cannot be more than 1.2 lakh pilgrims. As the temple is not kept open 24 hours, this will effectively limit the number to around 50,000 — a small percentage of the number of pilgrims reaching Sabarimala every day. Thus queues are unavoidable. Under the Master Plan, queue complexes have been built for a comfortable waiting period but these have not been integrated properly with pilgrim management strategies. This has often led to a tedious wait, with little room for free movement — a factor that has often been the single largest cause of deaths. After the judicial verdict, there will have to be a considered decision about intermingling versus segregation of male and female pilgrims in these queues.

Today, policing at Sabarimala is more in the nature of crowd control than pilgrim management. With larger numbers of women pilgrims expected now, having women police alone will not help. The style of policing has to change drastically. The law and order approach till now, primarily because of its all-male nature (unruly at times), is no substitute for professional policing. The change has to be from one of control and regulation to that of facilitation and safety.

A new accommodation policy needs to be framed, toilets segregated, women staff engaged and

several gender-specific requirements planned and provided for. With meticulous planning and professional management, using existing infrastructure is possible. However, the existing managerial and administrative ethos is inadequate to meet these challenges. Solutions can be found by admitting deficiencies and showing a willingness to embrace unfamiliar changes.

The TDB will be well within its rights to seek from the Supreme Court a preparatory time of a year before Sabarimala can be made gender-sensitive. The judgment has to be seen as an opportunity to change archaic practices and attitudes and usher in a new management culture. The TDB has to absorb the ramifications of the order and undertake planning with foresight. It will be a tragedy if this judgment becomes cause to undertake additional construction at the Sannidhanam. Large-scale modifications of existing buildings, a re-engineering of processes and much-needed training of staff in housekeeping, office management and counter management, etc. are the major tasks the TDB cannot shy away from. With the entry of women now a legally recognised right, its implementation has to be elegant and foolproof. Inadequate safeguards and preparations will only make a mockery of the verdict and validate the worst fears.

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