

Sabarimala controversy.

Amidst mounting protests by Hindu devotees from all across Kerala against the Supreme Court verdict lifting the ban on women of ten to fifty-year age group from visiting the Sabarimala hill-deity, the door of the Sabarimala shrine opened for darshan on October 17, 2018. However, not a single woman devotee of 10 to 50-year age group could enter the temple until the closure of the shrine on October 21. About six or seven feminists, all non-Hindu activists, who reached the entry point of the shrine with heavy police protection however had to beat a hasty retreat because of the angry and belligerent response from the devotees. Two women activists by name Rehna Fatima and her Telugu friend Kavita reached the entry point with heavy police protection on October 19, but the chief tantri Rajiv refused to let them in by telling the police that in case of any violation of the tradition, he will close down the temple and hand over the key to Pandalam royal family. After consulting with the political bosses over the tantri's threat, the police authorities decided to send the two activists back, thus avoiding a bigger crisis. It is now clear that despite efforts by the state government to send as many young women devotees as possible to Sabarimala, not a single woman devotee came to Sabarimala to offer prayers. Six or seven women who attempted to enter the temple with police cover were only activists or non-believers whose only aim was to break a holy tradition associated with the Sabarimala deity. One of them, by name Rahna Fatima was a 'kiss of love' activist who had even acted in a nude film. Since her attempt to enter Sabarimala temple, she has been expelled from Muslim community for hurting the sentiments of Hindu community.

This is the second time that a verdict of the Supreme Court has created such a hostile reaction and response from the affected people. In 2016, a Supreme Court decision banning Jallikattu, a bull-taming sport in Tamil Nadu, had created similar adverse reaction from the public as most Tamils considered the Jallikattu as a part of their ancient cultural tradition and they took the ban on Jallikattu as an attack on their ancient Tamil culture. When the protest gradually began to take a violent turn, the state government introduced an ordinance restoring the practice of jallikattu, thereby overcoming the impediment created by the Supreme Court judgment. The Supreme Court which cut a sorry figure on this issue, just had to watch on helplessly.

It is very unfortunate that even after the Jallikattu fiasco, the Supreme Court did not seem to have learnt any lesson as it has again ventured to rush into a similar tricky situation at Sabarimala from which it will find it difficult to extricate itself. The Sabarimala hilltop shrine is one of the biggest pilgrimage centres in the world with about 40 to 50 million devotees visiting this Hindu shrine every year. This pilgrimage, involving some simple but strict religious rituals and practices, has been going on for the last few centuries without any problems or disputes. This year, a needless controversy was deliberately raked up by some feminist activists who challenged the existing practice of a ban on entry of women of 10 to 50-year age-group from visiting the Sabarimala temple by filing some petitions in the Supreme Court and a five-member Supreme Court bench giving a verdict in favour of the feminists and lifting the ban on entry of women of 10 to 50- year age group to the temple. The court justifying its verdict pointed out that not allowing women of 10 to 50 age group from visiting Sabarimala shrine amounted to gross discrimination against women and it was necessary to end this discrimination to ensure gender justice to women. This was a big mistake and miscalculation on the part of the Supreme Court. How did the court come to the conclusion that women in Kerala considered the ban on women of menstruating age group from visiting Sabarimala temple as a discriminatory act against women? It is mainly the women in Kerala who have come out in large numbers to protest against the Supreme Court verdict. The truth is that 99% of Hindu women in Kerala have no problem with such restrictions on women at Sabarimala temple. Why should then the Supreme Court have any issue with such a practice just because of some objections raised by some feminists and non-believers and try to impose their own interpretation of gender justice on Kerala women?

The Supreme Court, being the highest court in India, should have studied the complete history and background of an issue before it is taken up for a verdict. The Sabarimala temple is unique in many respects. It is a hill shrine located at a remote hilltop surrounded by mountains and dense forests in Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. After taking a vow to go to Sabarimala temple, the devotee has to wear a customary rudraksha chain and observe a 41- day strict penance before he begins his pilgrimage. During the 41-day penance period, he has to keep himself from all ostentatious display of wealth and glory, visit the local temple twice a day, has to wear only

simple black clothings, discard even footwear and avoid non-vegetarian food, alcohol, sex, etc. He is even supposed to have strict control over his temper and emotions.

‘Tatvamasi’ (Tat Tvam Asi), a Sanskrit word meaning ‘You are That’, which means that (you, the self) is part of That,(the Brahman, the ultimate reality). This is the principle philosophy that governs this temple and the pilgrimage. This pilgrimage is symbolic for the journey to self-realization that ‘all living beings possess the essence of Brahman’. After undertaking the tedious journey through the mountainous route and dense jungles, when the pilgrims reach the temple, they are welcomed by the grand proclamation ‘Tatvamasi’ prominently displayed in front of the temple. It tells you that ‘You are That (the Paramatma, the almighty)’. ‘You are the one you came in search for. You are the One, you are seeking’. No other place of worship anywhere in India or elsewhere greets you with such a philosophical concept. This concept is reflected in some other practices associated with Sabarimala pilgrimage. From the moment the devotee takes a vow to go to Sabarimala and puts on the rudraksha chain, he is referred to as a Swami by everyone including his parents and friends and treated respectfully. Even the minors who take such a vow, are given same respect. In schools, the teachers address the students who observe the 41-day penance as Swamis. Here, the swami denotes Swami Ayyappa. The underlying principle is that once the devotee takes the vow and wears the rudraksha chain, he becomes one with the Lord Ayyappa and treated accordingly, acknowledging his divinity. The rituals and practices associated with Sabarimala pilgrimage are described in details here, because many people in India may not be aware of the peculiarity and significance of such rituals and practices associated with Sabarimala pilgrimage, as Ayyappa worship is mainly confined to Kerala and its neighbouring states. Another interesting point to be noted is that a devotee who goes to Sabarimala on pilgrimage for the first time always gets an inner call and motivated to undertake this annual pilgrimage every year. There are tens of thousands of people in Kerala and neighbouring states who go to Sabarimala every year after undertaking the 41-day penance (vratham).

The hill shrine opened for 24 hours on November 5, in connection with ‘Chitira Attavishesham’ function. No woman of 10 to 50 age group tried to enter the temple this time and the event passed off peacefully.

When the review petitions against the women's entry into the Sabarimala temple came before the Supreme Court on November 13, the court agreed to hear all the 49 review petitions against the Supreme Court verdict of 28 September, 2018, in an open court on January 22nd, 2019. However, the court refused to stay the court's September 28 verdict allowing women of all age groups to enter Sabarimala shrine. This makes a mockery of Supreme Court decision to hear the review petitions on January 22nd, as there is no meaning or relevance in taking up these review petitions after the women of barred age group have already started entering the Sabarimala shrine. The Supreme Court's refusal to give a stay on its September 28 order until the final hearing of the review petitions on January 22nd has resulted in the present confusion and tension at Sabarimala, a most revered holy place in South India.

All Ayyappa devotees are very much hurt by the Supreme Court judgment allowing women of 10 to 50 age- group to offer prayers at Sabarimala shrine violating the existing ban on entry of this particular age group of women. The Hindu women in Kerala are particularly very angry and agitated because it is for their sake that the Supreme Court has lifted this ban so as to ensure gender justice to women. The CPM –led state government in Kerala, being a government of non-believers, did not inform the top court that the existing ban on women was not considered as a discriminatory act against them by women, as they never wanted to enter any temple or attend pujas and other rituals during their periods. The Supreme Court's soft corner for activist lobbies and the state government's adamant stand against giving any review petition in the Supreme Court on this issue, is responsible for the present crisis in Sabarimala.

Amidst the continued confusion and tension over the supreme Court decision to do away with the present restrictions on entry of women of 10 to 50 age- group into Sabarimala shrine, the hill top shrine reopened for the annual "Mandala Makaravilaku" on November 18. With both the state government and the Ayyappa devotees sticking to their respective stand on the women's entry issue, a tense situation prevails in the temple and the surrounding areas. Heavy police 'bandobast' in the area, severe restrictions on movement of devotees in 'Sannidhanam' and chanting of 'swami saranam' slogans, declaration of Section 144 in the crowded temple premises, etc, have further created a war-like situation in the area. More than 100 Ayyappa devotees, including a few BJP leaders have been arrested by the police from the temple premises for chanting prayers in groups and sent to jail. There is a substantial fall in the number of

devotees visiting the temple this year because of the prevailing tense situation in the area. Many Ayyappa pilgrims who came from far away places had to abort the pilgrimage at places like Nilakkal or Erumeli itself and go back in consideration of their personal safety. The Supreme Court cannot absolve itself from the charge of being a party to creating such an unfortunate situation at Sabarimala. The Sabarimala pilgrimage season has just started and the flow of pilgrims will continue like this for another 45 days. In case of any deterioration in the situation resulting in violence and bloodshed in the coming days, the Supreme Court will be solely responsible for the same, as it is the Supreme Court's insistence on imposing an unwanted reform on the Sabarimala traditions of the Hindu community that has triggered this crisis and converted a most peaceful and holiest place like Sabarimala into a war zone.

The Supreme Court is no more considered as a sacred institution of India because of its known proclivity towards certain activist groups which are known to be indulging in some shady activities, as is evident from some of its controversial judgments in the recent past. In fact, the so called activist groups, supported and promoted by some western agencies, have become the greatest threat to the very survival of India as a sovereign democratic country. These activist groups, commonly known as civil society groups, are created by certain western agencies with the state patronage of the US to create pro-American lobbies in all important institutions and power centres to implement their agenda in different countries. In India, the agenda of the US-led western lobby is aimed at the weakening of the Hindu society so as to help the Christian missionaries to promote Christianity and the total destabilization and destruction of India by supporting all secessionist and anti-national forces and elements in the country. The fact that even the Supreme Court is heavily infiltrated by the agents of this lobby, clearly shows the extent of penetration of this lobby into all our vital institutions and power centres in India. The internal crisis as witnessed recently in the case of the Supreme Court and the CBI, is likely to escalate further affecting the normal functioning of more such institutions in the country, if the Modi government fails to curb the activities of all activist groups in the country with an iron hand.

There are reasons to suspect that the activist groups have started creating their lobbies even among the armed forces personnel. The Supreme Court has also started interfering and questioning certain operational activities of the army personnel, casting aspersions on their intentions and motivations, etc, which is likely to cause serious resentment and demoralization among the army personnel in future which may eventually lead to a confrontation between the armed forces and the Supreme Court in future. Thus, it appears that the western lobby's destabilization activities seem to have reached an advanced stage in India. Under the circumstances, the recent Supreme Court judgment putting an end to the centuries- old practice of not allowing women of 10 to 50 age group from visiting Sabarimala temple has to be seen as an unwarranted attack on Hindu cultural practices. The celebration of many Hindu festivals have already been severely affected by severe restrictions imposed by the courts on their duration, noise level and environmental pollution, etc. As a result of such restrictions, all the charm and thrill associated with Hindu festivals like Dipavali and Navrathri is lost according to many of the aggrieved Hindus in India. There is also a move to sabotage the holding of the world famous 'Thrissur Pooram' in Kerala with some activists challenging the use of elephants and crackers for the 'Pooram' raising the issue of animal cruelty and noise pollution. There are enough grounds to suspect that this attack on Hindu religious practices, traditions and festivals is part of a bigger conspiracy by certain western agencies to defame and destroy Hinduism using the west-sponsored activist groups.

Hindu society is not very rigid on its traditions and practices and has accepted reforms in the past. The ban on entry of women of 10 to 50-year age group at Sabarimala was introduced in the past at a time when women undertaking such a trip to Sabarimala was almost unthinkable. Some reforms in this regard, like lifting the ban on women of a particular age group from visiting Sabarimala and reducing the 41-day penance period to 11 or 15 days, etc, may become necessary in future so as to allow young women also enter Sabarimala shrine. But, it should come from within the Hindu community and not from the Court or activists. The activists are non-believers. Their only aim is to defame all Hindu traditions and practices and destroy the sanctity of all Hindu institutions. It is unfortunate that the Supreme Court has sided with the activists on the Sabarimala issue and thus unwittingly became a party in creating social tension in Kerala. The Hindu women in Kerala did not consider the ban on women of 10 to 50 -year age group from

visiting Sabarimala discriminatory. Indu Malhotra, the only woman judge in the five-member bench of the Supreme Court, did not consider it as a discriminatory act against the women. How come then only the four male judges of the bench found it discriminatory?

The behavior of both the print and the electronic media in the coverage of developments in Kerala in connection with the Supreme Court verdict in lifting an existing ban on entry of women in the age group of 10 to 50 years into the Sabarimala shrine, was sickeningly biased and hence highly deplorable. After the pronouncement of the judgment, massive demonstrations were taken out in every nook and corner of Kerala, with women predominantly leading from the front. These demonstrations despite being so massive were most peaceful, with the devotees raising only 'Saranam Ayyappa' slogans. But these massive protest demonstrations were mostly ignored by the local press. Those newspapers which reported it, relegated it to some inside corners as an insignificant news item. The electronic media also did the same thing. Though there are more than a dozen local news channels, except the 'Janam TV' (a pro-BJP channel), no other channel gave a true picture of the massive scale of this protest programme and the uniqueness of its most peaceful and orderly nature, chanting only Ayyappa prayers.

The national English channels also deliberately underplayed the massive and widespread protest in Kerala over the Supreme Court's September 28 judgment and the massive participation of women in these protest programmes over the verdict which the Supreme Court ironically claimed to have delivered in order to ensure gender justice to women. Various debates conducted in these channels over the Sabarimala crisis were highly critical of the way Hindus of Kerala decided to defy the Supreme Court verdict and openly revolted against the verdict with the anchors including Arnab Goswami describing the Hindu leaders as goons and law breakers. All of a sudden, these anchors have become great admirers and protectors of the highest court in India and they just cannot tolerate anyone showing the slightest disrespect to any Supreme Court verdict. These anchors should better remember that the greatest insult to the sanctity and reputation of the Supreme Court in the history of independent India happened on January 12th, 2018, when four senior most judges of the Supreme Court of India revolted against the CJI and defiantly held a press conference at the residence of Justice Chelameswar, the second senior most judge and one of the rebels, raising several allegations and irregularities against Chief Justice Dipak Misra over the way he was managing the affairs of the Court. The present CJI

Ranjan Gogoi was among the four rebel judges who revolted against the then CJI. Our English channel anchors who were so much pained and agonized over the utter disregard shown by the Hindus in Kerala over the Sabarimala verdict on temple entry, surprisingly had taken a neutral stand on the most barbaric act of four senior most judges of the Supreme Court who staged a revolt against the CJI over baseless charges, bringing the hitherto sacrosanct image of our Supreme Court into dishonor and disrepute before the international community. Instead of asking for immediate impeachment proceedings against the four rebel judges, the activist lobbies supported the cause of the rebel judges and sought impeachment proceedings against the Chief Justice of India. Not only, no action was taken against the four rebel judges, but one of them was allowed to become the Chief Justice of India.

The failure of the local and national media in reporting the extent of anguish and anger felt by the Hindus in Kerala over the SC verdict on Sabarimala dispute cannot be dismissed as an inadvertent lapse. The near total black out of the protest in Kerala, even by the pro-NDA media clearly indicates the total control of the Indian media by certain western agencies which can easily manipulate the Indian media into submission while pushing for their anti-India and anti-Hindu agenda in India. The refusal of the Supreme Court to give an urgent hearing of the review petitions or to give a stay on the September 28 verdict allowing entry of women of menstruating age group also to the temple showed the unsympathetic stance of the court on the demand by the Hindu groups. While rejecting the demand for urgent hearing on the review petitions, Chief Justice commented that the court gets hundreds of review petitions on various issues, and the court has to separate the grains from the chaff. So, for the court, the review petitions of the Hindu groups are just chaff. With such an arrogant attitude of the SC towards a sensitive issue agitating the minds of Hindus in Kerala, how can the Ayyappa devotees in Kerala and elsewhere could expect any justice from the Supreme Court?

There were some comments in 'Quora' bulletins stating that the Hindus in Kerala failed to build up a bigger and more effective people's movement in Kerala, like the Jallikkattu agitation in Tamil Nadu, to force the SC and the Centre to work out a solution to the Sabarimala issue. This is factually wrong. There was greater mobilization of people in Kerala on the SC verdict on Sabarimala issue than the Jallikkattu agitation in Tamil Nadu. The activist lobbies in India supported the Sabarimala verdict of the Supreme Court and opposed the protest programmes in

Kerala. The massive protest by the Ayyappa devotees in Kerala was by and large suppressed and underplayed by the local and national media only to support the anti-Hindu agenda of some western agencies and thus concealing the depth and scale of the protest from the public. Massive protest demonstrations were taken out even in interior villages, but they were all conducted in most peaceful manner, with the participants chanting only Ayyappa prayers. With no support from the activist groups and with no mayhem and violence and inadequate media coverage, the protest in Kerala did not attract Jallikettu-like headline news. The 'Jallikettu' is a bull-taming sport associated with Pongal festival in Tamil Nadu. This rural sport is conducted during the Pongal festival every year, mainly only in Madurai and neighboring districts of South Tamil Nadu. The Jallikettu is a traditional sport, which sometimes leads to accidental death of some of the participants during the fierce struggle for taming the bull. Following strong pleas by the activist lobbies led by PETA, the Supreme Court imposed a ban on Jallikettu on May 7, 2014 which had evoked a lot of protest in Tamil Nadu in the initial stage. After the death of Chief Minister Jayalalitha on 5th December, 2016, the agitation against the ban on Jallikattu in Tamil Nadu picked up momentum again and by January, 2017, the movement gradually began to take an anti-Centre and anti-India turn under the influence of Tamil separatist groups and pro-western civil society groups. It was then, that with the silent approval of the Centre and the Supreme Court, the Tamil Nadu government passed an ordinance in the state assembly on January 21, 2017, nullifying the ban imposed on Jallikettu in Tamil Nadu.

Thus, the Jallikettu agitation in Tamil Nadu, which was confined only to southern parts of Tamil Nadu attracted more publicity and wider national and international coverage because of the support it enjoyed from the NGO and other activist lobbies in India and their funding agencies in the west. Moreover, the jallikettu agitation was becoming more and more violent with some fanatic Tamil separatists and other anti-national elements trying to hijack it as an anti-Centre and anti-India struggle to save the Tamil culture, thereby forcing the Centre to work out a compromise formula at the earliest by allowing the state government to issue an ordinance to settle the issue. However in Kerala, the massive but peaceful demonstrations by Hindus over a Supreme Court verdict that dismissed and ridiculed an age-old custom of Ayyappa devotees as illogical and superstitious, do not appear to have created any positive impression on the Supreme Court. Under the circumstances, it is unlikely that the Supreme Court will give a favourable

hearing to the Hindu groups when the review petitions are taken up by the court on January 22nd 2019.

The Supreme Court should note that despite its September 28 verdict lifting the ban on menstruating age group of women into Sabarimala temple and the strong support for this verdict from the Communist government in the state, not a single woman from this age group could enter the temple so far. This shows the extent of opposition and disagreement of Hindus against the SC verdict of September 28, 2018. The court should note that 99% of Hindu women in Kerala did not want to violate the existing ban on entry of 10 to 50-year age group of women to Sabarimala temple. The Supreme Court should respect the sentiments of Hindus in Kerala and desist from any action that could lead to dissension and disaffection among the people.