Sabarimala: a place of worship for devotees, not for tourists

The current Supreme Court verdict on the entry of women to the Sabarimala temple has forced practicing Hindus including pious women devotees who prefer to worship in the sanctity of their homes to protest in streets. The verdict is touted as the big win for women although it has hurt the sentiments of many staunch devotees. However, the lone dissenting voice in the verdict very aptly warns that challenging religious practices through PILs by people who are neither devotees nor aggrieved parties could cause damage to the secular fabric of the country.

No wonder that the verdict on Sabarimala has triggered an outrage among devotees and there has been a demand for filing of a review petition. It is an irony that this verdict aims at promoting equal opportunity for women in a state like Kerala where matriarchy has been the norm and women are perhaps more emancipated compared to other states of India. The Supreme Court in its verdict on Sabarimala has perhaps trampled the beliefs of devotees by stepping into the sacred places of worship in its effort to establish equality before law for the weaker gender.

Earlier the Shani Shingnapur temple conceded to demands from activists and allowed women into its premises in 2016. A programme in one of the News channel which aired interviews of people who live near the temple revealed that only tourists have availed of the change in law and entered into the temple. The devotees including women of all ages have stuck to their beliefs and practices and not entered the temple.

Whether a menstruating women is polluting the temple, is not the issue. In fact, menstruation is celebrated in many temples such as the Kamakhya temple and festivals such as Rajo symbolizing the menstruation of mother Earth is a mass celebration in Odisha, till date. Hinduism as a religion embodies an amalgamation of diverse and sometimes contradictory beliefs and practices. At the same time Hinduism is perhaps the most adaptable religion and has changed over time by getting rid of unethical practices by the believers themselves. However, today the question that every Hindu is asking and perhaps apprehending is that - Will the courts destroy the sanctity of our places of worship in the name of equality?

Places of worship are regulated by norms laid down by a group of believers who are responsible for setting up and maintaining these places. Consequently not only Hindu temples, but in the context of all places of worship, there have been rules on entry to these places. However unlike other religions, places of worship for Hindus are diverse in nature and spirit. There is no temple which is same as the other. Somewhere Vishnu is worshipped, elsewhere Shiva and in the Lingaraj Temple situated in Bhubaneswar, both Hara and Hari symbolizing Shiva and Vishnu are worshipped. There is never a one size fits all structure of practices for believers of Hinduism. Only the believer who in turn is the worshipper understands these nuances of practices followed in the sacred spaces of temples.

Places of worship are for believers and not for tourists although these places have always attracted tourists. However, there is a big difference between the believer or pilgrim and the tourist or traveler. While the pilgrim is driven by a desire to earn religious fervor from the sacredness of the place of worship, the tourist is mostly motivated by the curiosity to explore the physical boundaries in order to fulfill the spirit of adventure and novelty that such places may offer. Hence the tourist longs for the satiation of sensory pleasures that the physical space offers whereas the pilgrim seeks communion with forces beyond the boundaries of the physical and the rational through unflinching faith.

A civilized nation owes its citizens a comfortable environment in which faith can flower. Destruction of faith in the name of equality or in the guise of rationality must never be executed. India as a nation draws its uniqueness from the diverse faiths that have been mothered here over centuries and these faiths should not be dispensed with under any pretext.