

Colonisation of Women and Sabarimala

By Kota Neelima

The Sabarimala temple controversy represents the modern colonisation of a people within a free country. It is the subjugation of half the population for the progress and purpose of the other half. It is exploitation of the resources of women for advancement and pleasure of men. It is the repression of freedoms of women in the name of rules and tradition drawn by men who act like colonisers. If there is a difference at all between the British times and what is happening at Sabarimala today, it is that the repressive regime belongs to Indians themselves. Perhaps, when India achieved its Independence from the British colonisers, only the men attained freedom. The women of India are not yet free.

Religion plays a crucial role in the colonisation of women as the traditions and customs are formulated in places of worship, which are then followed in every household across the country. Functional processes are sanctified through religion and are imposed on women daily and normally, and are required for formalisation of women's position in the society. In other words, if these everyday rules are not followed by women, they would find it difficult to be accepted in their homes, community and country. Seemingly, women's rights and freedoms emanate from male-centric social and religious institutions, and neither from the Constitution nor from the democratic system.

Sabarimala could have been the symbol of reform of Hindu religion and the beginning of a freedom movement by women of India. Instead, it is being utilised to ensure that the colonisation of women continues for a few more centuries in the following ways.

First, Hindu rituals, like many other religions, are particularly harsh towards women. And no, it is not enough to cite that no puja is complete without the wife accompanying the husband. There are severe regulations on a woman's actions during menstruation, which are designed to segregate the woman within the household and the community. Ironically, these regulations are followed even in households that worship the Devi, and other forms of the Mother Goddess. If a temple respects women's equality, such restrictions would end. Every Hindu woman would be equal to a Hindu man in this country. That is the first danger of allowing women of a certain age into Sabarimala.

Second, the colonised must support their own colonisation. The evidence of the victimhood is the silence of women against such comprehensive control of their life by men, because they must survive in a patriarchal society. Earlier, sections of women had come out against entry of members of their own gender into Sabarimala, now effectively countered by Women Wall of thousands. Every citizen has a constitutional right to religion and to practise it in his or her own way. But women enjoy neither all the rights nor the freedoms enshrined in the Constitution mainly because of the patriarchal influences on democratic, political and social institutions. This awareness will end the exploitation of women. That is the second danger of allowing women of a certain age into Sabarimala.

Third, the colonised must live in a state of fear. As is visible in the protests across Kerala against the entry of two women into the temple, the colonisers will use all forms of intimidation to ensure that such acts do not become widespread. Such acts of colonisation cannot be easily protested against, and there are serious repercussions against the few women who fight against injustice. The equality of women will no longer remain a slogan if they succeed in their freedom movement. That is the third danger of allowing women of a certain age into Sabarimala.

Fourth, the only way for the colonisers to maintain their control over the rebellious population is by hiding behind traditions, and rules. In case of the temple, it is through mythology and scriptures, which give prominence to the gender of the God and, therefore, the gender of the devotee. God, the traditions seems to be imply, does not look at men and menstruating women as equal. This artificial difference must be maintained between the colonisers and the colonised at any cost. To allow women into Sabarimala is almost equal to sitting at a roundtable with the colonisers to discuss the modalities of achieving independence from them. That is the fourth danger of allowing women of certain age from entering Sabarimala.

Perhaps, keeping these dangers in mind, the Supreme Court in September 2018, had allowed the entry of women within the age group of 10-50 years into the Sabarimala temple. It was based on the reading of the Constitution, a document prepared by freedom fighters who wanted to uphold the values denied to them under the British rule of India.

On the other hand, the contrast is the purification ritual on January 2 at the temple, after the two women in their 40s, Bindu and Kanakadurga, entered it. It was an attempt to wash off the impact of the rebellion from the sanctums of the colonisers. The petitions challenging this decision by the temple priest will be heard by the Supreme Court on January 22, and will create

a face-off between the values of freedom and tradition. It is expected of a religion with the antiquity and wisdom of Hinduism, to merge freedom and tradition into a reform for the world to appreciate and emulate. That is, however, only possible in an ideal world where there are no politicians!

Because, eventually all colonisation is about power. The power over women, or half the population of the country, is not an easy thing to let go. Those politicians who are standing by the men in this debate are thinking of the next elections. They would be well advised to remember that even women vote in India. And that is what politicians who support women in this battle are hoping to exploit. Only a constitutional position like that of a prime minister can rise above such electoral opportunism and set a new direction. But even there, the women of India have no ally. History will mark this moment and tell future generations on how lonely the battles of gender equality were. And how they were won.

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