



THE RIGHT OF WOMEN TO ENTER PLACES OF WORSHIP

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Abstract

The glaring example of Haji Ali Dargah, Sabarimala Temple and Shani temple has come up where women are stopped to worship but in Shani Temple case, A Division Bench of Chief Justice U.D.H. Waghela and Justice M.S. Sonak said: "There is no law that prevents entry of women in any place. If you allow men, then you should allow women also. If a male can go and pray before the deity, why not women? It is the State government's duty to protect the rights of women." But on the other hand it is a shame that even in the 21st century, we have not taken leave of superstition and obscurantism. The time has come for us to allow the light of reason into our religious life. God is light, not darkness. The crucial enquiries that has been covered under this paper is what kind of judicial scrutiny should be employed in examining the claims of religious denominations? How far can a gender discriminatory custom be allowed under the guise of it being an essential religious custom? Can the individual right to religion (Article 25) be completely overshadowed and abrogated by a denominational right to manage internal affairs [Article 26(b)]? Does preventing entry of 'menstruating women' in temples qualify as discrimination under Article 15? This paper also focused on the International

Perspective of Rights of women. The battle for gender justice, individual rights and non-discrimination cannot be waged on piecemeal orders and obiter dicta

"You can tell the condition of a Nation by looking at the status of its Women."¹

Equality and Egalitarianism are just utopian concepts and can never be a reality in the society. They are just words to appease the masses. Absolute equality is impossible. You cannot socially engineer a society each and every person. India is a patriarchal society where we are trapped in old customs and traditions. In this web women are usually the victims and discriminated and men always rule. The old belief -a tradition-bound societal atmosphere where male line is considered as race bearer, family bearer and a developmental tread towards right direction.

India is facing a large number of social issues such as caste system, child labor, illiteracy, gender inequality, superstitions, religious conflicts, and many more. India, the cradle of civilization, is now beset with a number of social evils. They are so numerous that one shudders to think of them.

Women are constantly fighting a battle for equality. In India, they are also currently fighting to be treated as equals in the eyes of their gods. According India's constitution, women are legal citizens of the country and have equal rights with men still women are powerless and are mistreated inside and

¹Jawaharlal Nehru, Leader of India's Independence Movement, and India's first Prime Minister.



outside the home. This paper highlights the evil in the society where women are not given access to Right to Worship at worship places. It is an irony that we go to temple and worship goddess Lakshmi, Durga, Saraswati. We bow our heads in front of these sculptures and worship them and on the contrary women are denied to enter the religious places. If this the situation then all female goddess should be removed from temples and all male Gods should only be worshipped.

We call India as Bharat Mata or, Mother India, is the national personification of India as a mother goddess. She is an amalgam of all the goddesses of Indian culture and more significantly of goddess Durga. She is usually depicted as a woman clad in a saffron sari holding the Indian national flag, and sometimes accompanied by a lion². There is so much criticism when somebody denies to say *Bharat Mata ki Jai*. All the feeling of nation hood among the Indians awake but when it comes to actually giving them equality in any sphere our Indian behaves like Gandhi's three monkeys. If men can pray to God why not women?

Navratri is amongst the most important Hindu festivals. This auspicious festival is celebrated with great zeal and devotion throughout the country. Navratri is a pious festival celebrated in the honor of nine different forms of the Goddess Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati for nine continuous

days. The Goddess of Power is worshipped during these days in order to seek her blessings and protection from any unknown fear and possible threat. The devotees ask for peace and prosperity from the Goddess. People do 'Kanya Puja' on the last day. On the concluding day, nine young girls are invited in the house and feasted with delicious food. These nine young girls are treated as the nine forms of the Goddess. They are welcomed by washing their feet and putting tilak on their forehead.

God is everywhere but if a woman finds her faith in a temple idol, how can tradition stand in the way of her right to worship? If we can worship women as a God then why can't a woman worship God.

MYTHS AND SUPERSTITIONS

"When men are oppressed, it's a tragedy. When women are oppressed, it's tradition."

When superstition has such influence on people, it becomes a social weapon, subtle yet devastating. Superstition works on the victims as much as on the perpetrators of injustice. Very few cultures across the world have acknowledged that menstruation is a natural phenomenon.

Even in historic times, menstruation was seen as a time to seclude women from the household. In Mahabharata, it is said that Draupadi was menstruating during her 'vastra-haran', and that is why she was in separate quarters, and wearing a single piece of cloth before taking her ritual bath, when she was dragged by Dushasana. Not much has changed since then because even today, girls are asked to stay away from rituals, temples, and anything remotely 'holy'. No

²History lesson: How 'Bharat Mata' became the code word for a theocratic Hindu state, February 21st 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/805247/history-lessons-how-bharat-mata-became-the-code-word-for-a-theocratic-hindu-state>, last visited on 12th February 2018.



touching, because then everything will become 'impure'.

According to historian N.N. Bhattacharyya, different areas of India have had notions of the menstruating goddess. In Punjab, it was believed that Mother Earth ('Dharti Ma') 'slept' for a week each month. In some parts of the Deccan after the 'navaratra' goddess temples were closed from the tenth to the full moon day while she rests and refreshes herself. In Malabar region, Mother Earth was believed to rest during the hot weather until she got the first shower of rain. Still today in the Kamakhya temple of Assam and in parts of Orissa the rituals of the menstruation of the goddess are celebrated during the monsoon season

Menstruation is stigmatized in our society. This stigma built up due to traditional beliefs in impurity of menstruating women and our unwillingness to discuss it normally. We don't know what may have been the reason that forced the holy men to refer to menstruating women as 'unclean'. But almost all religions refer to menstruating woman as 'ritually unclean'. According to Hindu beliefs a girl should not visit a temple or offer prayers while she is menstruating. According to these beliefs and customs a girl who has periods is impure and hence, should not even touch anything that shall be given as an offering to God. They also cannot take part in the religious ceremonies. But if logic is taken into consideration it is something that is given by God himself. It is the biological key to a woman's motherhood. So how can this be impure? Without this the process of generation can't continue.

There are the hilarious beliefs and customs which take the cake when it comes to

treating menstruation as a malady. Among some of these customs and norms, there are beliefs that if a menstruating woman waters a plant, it is destined to die. Moreover, it is also believed that menstruating woman can spoil foodstuffs like pickles just by a mere touch. It is one thing to attribute supernatural, almost voodoo-oriented powers to menstruating woman, but another thing to claim that they are capable of destruction just because they are going through a biological transition. Strangely enough, in remote areas of the country, women are not even allowed to touch their husbands while they are menstruating. They are made to sleep on mats on the ground away from their husbands, irrespective of the season and the conditions which she finds herself in.

The silence and shame around the menstrual cycle has caused severe problems for girls. In a survey conducted in 2011, it was revealed that in north India, over 30% of the girls interviewed dropped out of school after they start menstruating.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, condemned the practice of treating women as impure while menstruating. In Sikhism, the menstrual cycle is not considered a pollutant. Certainly, it can have a physical and physiological effect on the woman. Nonetheless, this is not considered a hindrance to her wanting to pray or accomplish her religious duties fully. The Guru makes it very clear that the menstrual cycle is a God given process. The blood of a woman is required for the creation of any human being. 'By coming together of mother and father are we created, By union of the mother's blood and the father's semen



is the body made. To the Lord is the creature devoted, when hanging head downwards in the womb; He whom he contemplates, for him provides.’³

The requirement of the Mothers’ blood is fundamental for life. Thus, the menstrual cycle is certainly an essential and God given biological process. In other faiths blood is considered a pollutant. However, the Guru rejects such superstitious ideas. Those who are impure from within are the truly impure ones. ‘Should cloth be reckoned impure if blood-stained, How many minds of such be deemed pure, As blood of mankind suck? Says Nanak: With a pure heart and tongue God’s Name you utter: All else is worldly show, and false deeds’⁴.

There is one more belief that women were not allowed to worship because men would not be able to focus on prayers rather than watching women in the temples so they could be distracted and ‘protecting’ female worshippers from sexual attention because, when they bowed, the pallu [loose end] of their saris fell, exposing their chest area which aroused the men who might be looking at them,” Is it a valid reason? Stopping women from entering worship places. If this would be the scenario then women should not be allowed to go anywhere because men would be distracted everywhere.

³ Guru Granth Sahib Ji, p. 1013

⁴ Guru Granth Sahib Ji, pg. 140

The word "tradition" is most often deployed by patriarchal religions as a euphemism for practices designed to discriminate against women and demean them. These age-old customs are backed by a reasoning that presumes that women are somehow impure, or second-rate citizens. Most shrines cite menstruation as the ground on which the entry of women is limited, implying that a natural biological process renders a woman unworthy of the right to worship.

UPANISHADAS AND VEDAS

In India many temples we have God and Goddess together like we can’t imagine Rama and Sita sculpture standing alone or Krishna and Radha similarly every religious ceremonies are performed by husband and wife together. Prohibiting women from entering temples and castigating them as impure is squarely against the teachings of the Vedas.

Baba Hari Dass, a well-known modern living saint reminds us that:

“Wife and Husband are like two equal halves of a soybean. One half-alone will not grow. If two parts are separated and planted in the earth, still they will not grow. The bean will grow only when both parts are covered by one skin, which makes them one.”

Agnihotrayagna, which is performed daily by vaidiks, is considered as mahayagna, which means prominent among all yagnas. The Vedas stipulate that this yagna should be performed by both men and women without fail. If mahayagna can be performed by menstruating women, there can be no ban on their temple entry during their monthly periods. Even hard-core traditionalists didn’t block women from Vedic rituals.



Madhavacharya, whom many see as a traditionalist, has asserted that women have the right to learn and perform rituals. He cites the examples of women such as Urvasi, Yami and Sami. Such instances are innumerable in the Vedas.

The philosophy of all the Upanishads is summarized in four verses, which are called Mahavakyas (great utterances). These are: ahamBrahmasmi (I am the spirit, i.e. atman), tat tvamasi (That thou art), prajnanam Brahma (Brahman is pure consciousness) and ayamatma Brahma (this self is Brahman). In different ways and by different words, all these four Mahavakyas simply confirm the fact that an individual regardless of religion, race, culture, gender, color, cast, creed or geographic location is atman clothed in a physical body. The physical body we get is the result of our past karma. What we are now is the result of our past practice and again practice makes us what we shall be. The differences between individuals exist only at physical level. There are no spiritual differences between man and woman. The husband and wife are the two sides of the same coin. They are the two manifestations of the same atman.

Louis Jaccoliot, the celebrated French author of the Bible in India: Hindu Origin of Hebrew and Christian Revelation said: "India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship; a fact which we seem little to suspect in Europe when we accuse the extreme East of having denied the dignity of woman, and of having only made her an instrument of pleasure and of passive obedience." He also said: "What! here is a civilization, which you cannot deny to be older than your own, which places the

woman on a level with the man and gives her an equal place in the family and in society."

In conclusion, woman has the same religious and spiritual freedom in Hinduism as man. Like a man, she is the soul in bondage and the goal of her life is the same as that of man, spiritual perfection or moksha through selfless work, meditation and yoga. Hindus have elevated women to the level of divinity. They worship God in the form of Divine Mother. However, the status of women in Hindu society has also been affected by factors other than the ideals set forth in the Vedas and Upanishads, such as cultural mores and the exploitation of the biological and psychological differences between men and women. Therefore, on an individual and social level, complete and total equality of women is a goal that Hindu society (and other societies) is still striving for. As Swami Vivekananda says, we must realize that man and woman are two wings of the same bird; that in order to truly soar to great heights, a man and woman must work in unison in order to achieve greater harmony in life.

*"Where women are honored, there the Gods are pleased. But where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards."*⁵

LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

The polity assured to the people of India by the Constitution is described in the Preamble wherein the word "secular" was added by the 42nd Amendment. It highlights the fundamental rights guaranteed in Articles 25

⁵ Manu Smriti 3.56



to 28 that the State shall have no religion of its own and all persons shall be equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion of their own choice, in brief, this is the concept of secularism as a basic feature of the Constitution of India and the way of life adopted by the people of India as their abiding faith and creed.⁶

“Fundamental rights are the rights having a noble pedigree. They are the natural rights which are in the nature of external conditions necessary for the greatest possible unfolding of the capacities of a human being. These secured and guaranteed conditions are called fundamental rights. It is generally agreed that these natural rights are inherent in man and cannot be taken away by the State.”⁷

The Indian Constitution has no unequivocal meaning of “religion” or ‘matters of religion’. Under the order of article 32 of the Constitution, which gives the privilege to protected cures, it is left to the Supreme Court to settle on the legal importance of such terms.

The view taken by court in Sabarimala Temple and Haji Ali Dargah case was that the custom of prohibiting women or menstruating women enjoyed constitutional sanction. Articles 14 and 15(1) emphasize equality before the law, and are two facets of the same fundamental right. The articles emphasize the fact that any discrimination

which is based only on the ground of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth is prohibited. Article 15(1) implies that there may be discrimination on other grounds, but these cannot be arbitrary, capricious or oppressive.

In the case of Shri Ram Krishna Dalmia v. Shri Justice S. R. Tendolkar & Ors.⁸ The Court after considering a large number of its previous decisions observed as follows:

“It is now well established that while [Article 14](#) forbids class legislation, it does not forbid reasonable classification for the purposes of legislation. In order, however, to pass the test of permissible classification two conditions must be fulfilled, namely, (i) that the classification must be founded on an intelligible- differentia which distinguishes persons or things that are grouped together from others left out of the group; and (ii) that that differentia must have a rational relation to the object sought to be achieved by the statute in question. The classification may be founded on different basis, namely, geographical, or according to objects or occupations or the like, what is necessary is that there must be a nexus between the basis of classification and the object of the Act under consideration”.

But the decision of the Courts in Sabarimala Temple and Haji Ali Dargah case emphasized the restriction is reasonable as they are not stopping the entry of women of a particular age group and not women as a class. According to Article 14 of the Constitution, reasonable classification is inherent in the very concept of equality, because all persons living on this earth are

⁶Dr. M. Ismail Faruqui Etc, Mohd. V. Union Of India And Others AIR 1995 SC 605 A.

⁷B.K. Sharma, Introduction To The Constitution Of India, 58, 2007Edn.

⁸AIR 1958 SC 538



not alike and have different problems. The legitimacy of classification by denying women to access to worship is totally unreasonable as the classification was clearly on the basis of sex. There is no nexus between the object and classification as there is no conclusive proof to ban the entry of women. Rule of law also, requires that no person shall be subjected to harsh, uncivilized or discriminatory treatment even when the object is the securing of the paramount exigencies of law and order⁹.

“Any god or goddess can be worshipped anywhere by anyone. The power is all around us, omniscient. But you have structured god into an idol. Women want to come to your temple and worship him there ... Why don't you allow them,” Justice Dipak Misra. The ban, Justice Misra observed, is considered “grave” as it endangers gender justice. “There is this tradition, we understand, of not allowing women of a certain age. But what we will decide is whether this tradition, this source of the ban, overrides constitutional provisions... What right do you (temple authorities) have to forbid women from entering any part of the temple? This is a class grievance from women denied their right to worship.”¹⁰

Article 21 of the Constitution- Protection of Life and Personal Liberty: No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established

⁹Rubinder Singh v. Union of India, AIR 1983 SC 65.

¹⁰Krishnadas Rajagopal, ‘How can tradition impede woman’s right to worship?’ The Hindu New Delhi, April 12, 2016.

by law. Bhagwati, J. in Maneka Gandhi case, established that the requirement of reasonableness of procedure in Art. 21 through Art. 14, it was said that the procedure in Art. 21 “has to be fair, just and reasonable, not fanciful, oppressive or arbitrary”. The ‘law’ in Art. 21 “is reasonable law, not any enacted piece”.

Restricting women to enter to worship places clearly hampering the liberty of women to profess any religion which is also cover under article 19 of the Constitution. Personal liberty is being violated by stopping her access to worship places and it the duty of state to protect these rights. The right to freedom of Speech and Expression as per the Indian Constitution – means the right to express one’s own convictions and opinions freely. The word “freely” means the freedom of a citizen to express his views and opinion in any conceivable means including by words of mouth, writing, printing, banners, signs, and even by way of silence.

In case of Olga Tellis and others v. Bombay Municipal Corporation and others¹¹, it was observed: Just as a mala fide act has no existence in the eye of law, even so, unreasonableness vitiates law and procedure alike. It is therefore essential that the procedure prescribed by law for depriving a person of his fundamental right must conform the norms of justice and fair play. Procedure, which is just or unfair in the circumstances of a case, attracts the vice of unreasonableness, thereby vitiating the law which prescribes that procedure and consequently, the action taken under it.

¹¹ AIR 1986 SC 180



Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion to all the citizens of the Union of India Article 26(b) awards to religious categories the privilege to deal with their own undertakings in the matter of religion. These rights are not absolute rights; they are subject to public order, morality and health, as well as to the other provisions of Part III. The right under Article 25(i) is further subject to the right of the State to make any law regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice. It is further subject to the right of the State to provide legislation for social welfare and reform.

In *Javed vs. State of Haryana*¹², this Court dealt with the issue in question and held that what was protected under Article 25 was the religious faith and not a practice which may run counter to public order, health or morality.

It is his proponent that the right of a woman to visit and enter the temple as a devotee of the deity, as a believer in Hindu faith is an essential facet of her right and restriction of the present nature creates a dent in that right which is protected under Article 25 of the Constitution. The distinction between entry into temples and right to conduct the worship of the deity as per ritualistic process of worship by an “Acharya” has been recognized to keep the constitutional norm at its pedestal¹³.

¹²Writ Petition (civil) 302 of 2001.

¹³ *Nar Hari v. BadriNath Temple Committee* (1952) SCR 849

Though Article 26 gives overriding power to the religious institutions to manage their own affairs but this regulation is fundamentally and irreversibly challenging the existence of the sect and its core belief system. In para 22 of the judgment in *Sabarimala Temple*, the Kerala High Court said:

“The position that emerges is that a religious denomination or organization enjoys complete autonomy in the matter of deciding as to what rites and ceremonies are essential according to the tenets of the religion. No outside authority has any jurisdiction to interfere with the decision of such religious denomination. Article 26(b) gives complete freedom to the religious denomination to manage its own affairs in matters of religion. The only restriction imposed by that article is that the exercise of the right is subject to public order, morality and health.”

This decision clearly depicts that Constitution makers were quite unfair, discriminatory religious practice and committed purging to remove them. The court has failed to provide harmony between individual interests with the group interests, here individual interest is the person who has Right to profess Religion under Article 25 and group interest is the Managements of Religious Affairs or Institutions. Moreover, managing religious affairs, all practices are not always sacrosanct, for there may be many ill-practices like superstitions which in due course of time may be merely accretions to the basic theme of that religious denomination. The entry to the temple is not essential to religion and there is difference between “regulation of entry” and “complete



prohibition of entry". The religious denomination cannot completely exclude the members of any community and may only restrict their entry in certain rituals¹⁴. It is not a custom as is conceived of by the authorities and even if it is accepted as such it is wholly unconstitutional as it creates an invidious discrimination perpetrating sexual differences.

Section 295A of Indian Penal Code 1860 : Criminalizes "deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings, including words, signs, visible representations"; entails 3 years and/or fine.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Human Rights, are derived from the dignity and worth inherent in the human person. Human Rights and fundamental freedoms have been reiterated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and have mutual reinforcement. The full development of personality and fundamental freedoms and equal participation by women in political, social, economic and cultural life are concomitants for national developments social and family stability and growth, culturally, socially and economically. All forms of discrimination on grounds of gender is violative of fundamental freedoms and human rights.¹⁵

¹⁴Sri Venkatramana Devaru & Ors. v. State of Mysore & Ors. (1958) SCR 895.

¹⁵Madhu Kishwar & Ors. Etc vs State Of Bihar & Ors. 1996 SCC (5) 125.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), of which India is a signatory, requires that it gives to its citizen's freedom of religion¹⁶, and the right against discrimination on the basis of gender¹⁷.

Notably, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR)¹⁸, of which India is a signatory, says:

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to limitations as are

¹⁶Article 18 of UDHR- Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

¹⁷Article 07 of UDHR- All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

¹⁸Article 18 of ICCPR-

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, con science and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.



prescribed by law that are necessary protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. As it has been established earlier, these exceptions are not relevant to women and their access to places of worship.

Further, India is also a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979 (CEDAW) ¹⁹, which requires India to eliminate discrimination against women and recognize that they should be treated at par with men in the eyes of the law.

¹⁹ Article 2-States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to send, undertake:

- (a) To embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation if not yet incorporated therein and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle;
- (b) To adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women;
- (c) To establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination;
- (d) To refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation;
- (e) To take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise;
- (f) To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women;
- (g) To repeal all national penal provisions which constitute discrimination against women.

The right to equality and right against discrimination fall under the ambit of *jus cogens* --principles of International Law which cannot be set aside. In addition to all this, the right to equality and right against discrimination fall under the ambit of *jus cogens* --principles of international law which cannot be set aside. This rule will apply in the context of customary rules so that no derogation would be permitted to such norms by way of local or special custom as *jus cogens* will always override domestic law.

“A woman is not an object of convenience; but a creation of Gods purpose.” — Wayne

CONCLUSION

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan said. "I want to State authoritatively that Secularism does not mean irreligious. It means we respect all faiths and religions. Indian Scholars believe that every religion is a compound blind beliefs, irrational dogmas and evil social practices. The two fundamental axes of social inequality in India are caste and gender. Caste distinctions were central to orthodox Hinduism. Their influence was so pervasive that they carried over even when people converted to faiths based on more egalitarian principles. In India, Muslims and Christians also practiced (and often still practice) caste-based discrimination.

As for gender, Hinduism is notable for having many women represented in its pantheon. However, while there are women deities, until very recently there were no women priests. Successive shankaracharyas have argued that women are not authorized



to read or interpret sacred texts. In Islam, the discrimination is arguably even greater, with no women priests of course, and often, segregated worship as well. The religious texts of Hinduism and Islam are also heavily loaded in favour of patriarchy. No doubt, through selective quotations from the Quran or the Vedas, one can claim they respected or even revered women, but taken as a whole, there is no question that Hinduism and Islam are both religions where men are held to be superior, and thus mandated to dominate family, society and community life. Indians need to press the managements of the country's temples, mosques, churches and gurdwaras towards less discriminatory practices, so that women can enter and worship in any part of a shrine, so that women can, if they so wish, become pujaris, mahants, maulanas, imams, priests and bishops too.

Legal and religious reforms are important, but in the context of caste and gender discrimination, the reform of individual and collective behaviour may be more important still.

In this conservative society where internet pornography is popular and sex columns in the newspapers discuss masturbation and premature ejaculation, talk of menstruation is taboo. So many Hindu and Muslim women have internalized the notion that it is unclean that they voluntarily stay away from temples and mosques when they have their periods. The purpose of a holy shrine is worship, a deeply sacred and sentimental act between a person and their god. The authors do not see how restrictions on women could help the act of worship, but do believe that

such restrictions take away from women a right guaranteed to them by the Constitution. **The deification of women as goddesses, feared and worshiped, pure and powerful, gentle and bloodthirsty, emotional and stoic, strong and delicate, angry and loving, and any other stereotype one wishes to project onto the female sex, has contributed to the persistence of these contradictory ideas about women in popular culture.** To put it simply, the notion of woman as goddess is a set of popular cultural memes that serve to justify anything one believes about women.

There is a pressing need for the legislature to create a central law which outlines the rights and duties of administrators and worshipers, especially women. This law should elaborate upon the right to worship and the right against discrimination available to all Indians in the context of entry into places of worship of all religions. Thus, it would follow that women could not be restricted from entering places of worship. Further, the judiciary should strike down all laws and customs which allow for such discrimination against women and declare them unconstitutional.

True equality means holding everyone accountable in the same way, regardless of race, gender, faith, ethnicity – or political ideology. – Monica Crowley
