



# No freedom without equality at Sabarimala

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**Freedom of religion means the right to practise one's own religion, not the freedom to undermine fundamental rights**

## The memory of Mahad

- Ambedkar's Mahad satyagraha had two chapters, on March 19-20, 1927 and on December 25, 1927.
- The symbolism of mass drinking of the water, with Ambedkar himself taking the first sip, was akin to an act of civil disobedience.
- Both were carefully planned, peaceful and disciplined protests, and yet were violently disrupted.
- Mobs, rioters and police colluded to attack and disperse the Mahar satyagrahis; the local British administration ended up siding with the Hindu hardliners under the guise of not wanting to hurt the religious sentiments of this socially dominant and politically powerful group.
- At that time Ambedkar's efforts were focussed on claiming that the tank was a public resource and drawing water from it was a basic human right for 'Untouchables' as much as for others.
- But Ambedkar did play a role in temple entry satyagrahas at the Parvati Temple in Pune in 1929 and the Kalaram Temple in Nasik from 1930 to 1934.
- All these campaigns ultimately failed: upper castes pushed back using Brahmin strictures of adhikar (entitlement) and bahishkar (exclusion), arguments from private property, outright physical violence, as well as the law and order machinery of the colonial state to keep Dalits out.
- Adding insult to injury, first they performed purification rituals, then they obtained stay orders from government authorities, and later they filed legal cases.
- At Mahad, Ambedkar endorsed the Gandhian language of satyagraha.

## Different discriminations

- Apart from the reactionary impulse to "purify" what has been sullied by

the proposition of equality, Sabarimala is and is not like Mahad.

- True, a specific group is targeted for exclusion in both cases: women of ages 10-50 (deemed reproductively active) at the Ayyappa Temple, and Dalits at the Chavdar Tank nearly a century ago.
- But in today's India, Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees equality, and the Supreme Court verdict of September 2018 further reiterates that females of any age have the right to perform the 41-day pilgrimage and worship at the Sabarimala shrine.
- Fittingly, as the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice, it is precisely Ambedkar's momentous intervention in our life as a nation that gives us an egalitarian Constitution and a strong judiciary.
- Ambedkar did not have these institutions to back him up during his own shattering struggle against caste, but ensured that Untouchability was outlawed, and that equal citizenship and fundamental rights — regardless of gender or community — were enshrined in the charter document of the Indian Republic.
- The historic precedent of Vaikom, together with the gains of decades of progressive politics in postcolonial Kerala, make the resurgence of religious orthodoxy, caste mentality and misogynistic patriarchy at Sabarimala hard to swallow.
- Gender and caste are both definitely grounds of discrimination in Hindu society, but they do not occasion similar responses from those who are at the receiving end.
- India's feminist movement, Kerala's long engagement with Communism and the verdict of the Supreme Court all offer different avenues to women seeking justice at Sabarimala.
- However, a radical resort to Ambedkarite religious conversion does not seem to make sense in this situation.

## **Reform and renewal**

- Freedom of religion means the freedom to practise and pursue one's own religion, not the freedom to undermine the fundamental rights of others.
- Nor does freedom of religion warrant contravening the writ of the Supreme Court, which explicitly grants women the right to worship at Sabarimala.
- Hinduism as a faith is capacious, inherently diverse and continually evolving, with strong themes of self-criticism, self-correction and self-improvement written into it.

## Conclusion

- Fellow citizens of all religious persuasions are as much the heirs of these dissenting, progressive and indeed provocative traditions from the deep past, as they are the children of a modern-day enlightenment brought about by Gandhi and Ambedkar.
- We owe it to ourselves as democratic Indians to throw open the doors of the Ayyappa Temple to all those who wish to enter and worship there.

The Hindu

