

Sabarimala through the ages

The focus needs to shift from the entry of women to ecological destruction of the Western Ghats



RAJAN GURUKKAL

Public opinion on the question of women's entry into Sabarimala is polarised. While some cite "age-old traditions" to explain why women aged 10 to 50 should not enter the temple, others believe that such a practice discriminates against women.

Sensing the unrest in the State following the Supreme Court judgment, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress plunged into the protests against the verdict, led by the Nair Service Society. Though opposed to each other on all other issues, the two virtually became one as they fished in troubled waters. They exposed themselves as they shamelessly defended upper-caste beliefs in purity and pollution, and gender discrimination. They also seek to destroy the secular character of Sabarimala. It is believed that Lord Ayyappa had a close friend, a Muslim called Vavar, or Vavaraswami. In fact, a stopover at the Vavar mosque is an essential part of the Sabarimala pilgrimage. Many devotees also visit the Arthunkal church during their pilgrimage. That the mosque and temple coexist in Sabarimala shows the spirit of unity that these political parties, as well as upper castes through their belief in purity and pollution and exclusion, are trying to destroy.

On the other hand, the government and public intellectuals have sought to recall history to understand and implement the Supreme Court verdict and emphasise the progressive character of the temple.

Ownership of Sabarimala

The Sabarimala temple had a humble beginning. Forest dwellers used to flock to the spot where their tutelary deity, Ayyanar, resided. The Malampantaram, Ullatar, Mannan and Narikkurava tribes in the forest used to visit the shrine, nestled deep inside the forest, during Makara Sankramana (January-February). The tribals now stake claim to the temple, regretting their expulsion by the upper caste-led Travancore Devaswom Board. It is a fact that the forest-



"The Travancore Devaswom Board, on the pretext of meeting the needs of the pilgrims, has been pushing for urban development in the core of the Periyar Tiger Reserve." A devotee in Sabarimala. ■PTI

dwellers and tribals visited the spot with women and children.

The Pandalam royal house's ownership of the temple gets exposed if we look at historical records. According to a document called the Pandalam At amanam, in 1794, the royal house legally alienated the entire forest, including the temple and other establishments, to the Travancore king, to clear the huge debt incurred to money lenders such as Thachil Mathu Tharkan and Muralikrishnad. This is how the Travancore Royal Devaswom Commission (TRDC), constituted in 1810 by Rani Lakshmi Bai on Colonel Munro's advice, came to own the temple. In 1850, the TRDC was dissolved and the Travancore Devaswom Board was constituted. It became the sole custodian of the temple and its property and remains so till today.

Ever since the destruction of the temple by some people in 1950, and the construction of a new temple in the spot thereafter, there has been a steady rise in the number of pilgrims to Sabarimala. These pilgrims are largely from the lower middle class in the southern States. The number of pilgrims rose to more than a lakh by the nineties. Given this rise, the number of days of worship also increased. In the process, the temple, once the destination of tribals and lower castes, as well as the pilgrimage slowly came to be dominated by upper-caste beliefs, customs and practices. Pilgrim expansion turned Sabarimala into a veritable pool of

wealth. Sabarimala is not just a pilgrim spot today, but a massive business.

The ban on women

There was virtually no restriction on women's entry until the Kerala High Court upheld in 1991 the restriction of women aged between 10 and 50 into the temple. It said that this was in accordance with a usage from "time immemorial". The court observed that women would be unable to do penance for 41 days due to menstruation. The ban was also based on the belief that Lord Ayyappa, a celibate, would not approve of young women flocking to Sabarimala. There is neither ritual sanctity nor any scientific justification for this stipulation. For the tribal people, menstruation was considered a symbol of fertility. Women and children went to the temple till the sixties. Archival records also show that young, upper-caste women from the Travancore region entered the temple till the eighties. While it is true that they abstained from entering holy places during menstruation, it is equally true that most male pilgrims today are least aware of the tradition of observing penance for 41 days. Many hardly observe the restrictions on meat, alcohol and sex. So, why are traditional observances binding for women alone?

Caste prejudices (and now even gender prejudices) are evident in the purification rites and rituals followed in the temple. Nampoothiri tantris

considered Sabarimala, a temple in the forest with junior deities like Ayyan and Karuppa Sami, least amenable to purification through agamic rituals. They wondered whether any tantrist who had knowledge of agamic rules would dare to undertake the responsibility of maintaining the purity of the Ayyappa temple with 18 hills as its boundary. This exposes the lack of textual tradition and professional legitimacy of Sabarimala's Thazhamon tantric family. Traditions change over time; they are reinterpreted and even invented. Sabarimala is no exception to this sociological phenomenon. Most legends and traditions about the Ayyappa temple are fabrications of recent times with stock motifs from the epics and the puran as.

Environmental concerns

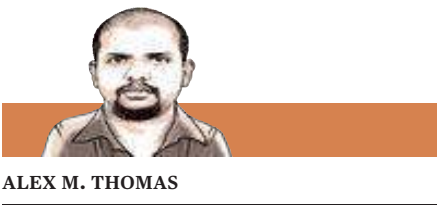
Amidst debates on fundamental rights and the need to preserve tradition, what is being ignored is the important fact that Sabarimala falls in a fragile region of the Western Ghats. A portion of forest land in the Periyar Tiger Reserve, a hotspot of biodiversity, was allotted to the Travancore Devaswom Board in 2012 so that the Board could implement its Sabarimala development plan. The Board, on the pretext of meeting the needs of the pilgrims, has been pushing for urban development in the core of the tiger reserve, paying little attention to environmental regulations. Land has been auctioned to hotels, shops and guesthouses. This violates not only the Kerala Forest Act of 1961, the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, and the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, but also a series of verdicts, including by the Supreme Court.

Further, construction of permanent buildings in leased forestland violates the rules between the government and the Travancore Devaswom Board. Of the total land leased, 14.6% is privatised for the use of 9.5% of the total pilgrims, and 3.4% is extremely privatised for the use of only 0.1%. This is injustice. That the Travancore Devaswom Board is destroying the ecology of the Western Ghats under the pretext of pilgrim welfare is unfortunate and this issue is what awaits meaningful protests.

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Why Adam Smith favoured public education

Contrary to popular opinion, he was not a free market apologist



ALEX M. THOMAS

The authority of Adam Smith is frequently invoked by supporters of the free market, who argue for extending the market forces to all conceivable goods and services and eliminating any kind of government intervention in markets. However, Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* make it clear that he was not a laissez faire or free market capitalism apologist.

Favouring liberal capitalism

Smith favoured liberal capitalism over the extant socio-economic arrangement (elements of feudalism and mercantilism). While feudalism was characterised by the rule of the nobility/landowners, mercantilism was characterised by state monopoly over trade. The East India Company was an example of the latter. It is in this historical context that Smith called for the state to withdraw its monopolistic interventions in both external and internal commerce.

Contrary to public opinion, Smith presupposed the government provision of legal infrastructure, defence, transport infrastructure and education for the proper functioning of liberal capitalism. For him, the responsibility of providing institutions "for promoting the instruction of the people" is one of the chief duties of the state. The state, he said, must undertake this responsibility just as it accepts responsibility "for protecting society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies".

The appropriators of Smith also forget his telling commentary on the role of power in society. One aspect of this relates to the power employers have over workers. The second aspect relates to the inequality of power, expressed in the form of status and ranks.

Modern appropriators of Smith also make abundant use of the "invisible hand" metaphor. But Smith used this metaphor only once in *Wealth of Nations*, and twice in his other writings in different contexts.

The self-interested individual in the *Wealth of Nations* is embedded, as it were, in the society Smith described in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which is characterised by good moral sentiments: "All the members of human society stand in need of each other's

assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where the necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy." Indeed, the *Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* are complementary texts.

Education is not a commodity

Smith conceived of education in a broad manner. Education for him not only includes the "study of wisdom" but also the learning of good moral sentiments such as virtue, sympathy, gratitude and benevolence. Since Smith considered education as central to a flourishing society, he did not treat it as a commodity. He argued that the costs of education should be such that "even a common labourer may afford it". In the *Wealth of Nations*, he said: "For a very small expence the publick can facilitate, can encourage, and can even impose upon almost the whole body of the people, the necessity of acquiring those most essential parts of education." This dispels the myth of him being a champion of private education.

Almost all popular commentaries on Smith's economics highlight the role of division of labour or technological progress in the growth of an economy. The growth enhancing effects of division of labour via increasing labour productivity are an important part of Smith's growth account. But Smith understood the central consequence of division of labour on the workers: repetitive work numbs their minds and negatively influences their capacity to make prudent decisions. Therefore, the "education of the common people requires, perhaps, in a civilized and commercial society, the attention of the publick."

Smith advocated accessible education for the entire class of workers, which constitutes the majority of the population. In fact, he advocated compulsory education for them so that it offsets part of the debilitating effects from the division of labour. Smith also believed that education would empower the citizens to make wise decisions which contribute to the "safety of the government". Yet another reason is that education positively affects customary wages, which over time, would increase workers' real wages.

It would therefore be wise to take heed of Smith's views on education, which comprise both the learning of "wisdom" and "moral sentiments", and not only strengthen but also expand India's public education system.

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SINGLE FILE

The space race

China's recent achievement could trigger yet another rivalry with the U.S., this time in outer space

ATUL ANEJA



There are several reasons why China's achievement in landing a spacecraft on the far side of the moon could trigger a rivalry with the U.S. in outer space. For starters, China's January 3 landing on the mysterious "dark" side of the moon, the first by any country, gives Beijing a leg up on Washington over big ticket space exploration. Unlike the near side, the far side of the moon is shielded from radio transmissions from earth. The Chang'e-4 mission got around the problem of lack of communication with those on earth by using a relay satellite. The data that China obtains on the moon's craters could help it acquire an edge over other countries, including the U.S., in the highly competitive domain of space research.

The Chinese could also steal a march over the Americans by launching advanced rockets, which would explore new frontiers in space. Unlike earth, the moon has an abundance of helium-3. In the far future, this can serve as the ideal fuel to power a new generation of spaceships, with the moon as the launchpad, instead of earth.

The Chinese may have also taken the lead over peers in exploring the possibilities of human habitation on the moon. The Yutu-2, the rover of the ongoing Chang'e-4 mission, is programmed to explore the South Pole-Aitken Basin. This vast impact region, 13 km deep and 2,500 km wide, has copious reserves of ice. The promise of water has persuaded international space scientists to peg the site as suitable for a permanent lunar outpost, which is on China's radar.

The promise of the moon's natural resources can add another layer of rivalry between the Chinese and the Americans. Space exploration buffs have considered asteroids as lucrative sources of precious metals such as gold, platinum, silver and iridium in the future. But if the relatively more accessible surface of the moon could yield precious resources, the race for lunar colonisation would begin, providing China a substantial early-mover edge.

So far, NASA has congratulated its Chinese counterpart on the impressive success of the Chang'e-4 mission. But its graceful applause is unlikely to yield step two: an offer of active space collaboration between the two countries. The popular mood within Washington's political class has been soured by the sentiment to contain China's rise. In China, an intense techno-war, furthered by the U.S.-inspired arrest in Canada of the scion of the telecom giant, Huawei, has bruised the country's nationalistic psyche.

A new generation of Chinese and American peace advocates, global citizens and cyber-activists have their task cut out – to step up their game and prevent outer space from becoming another arena of a budding Cold War between Washington and Beijing.

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FAQ

A question of citizenship

Why the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill is so contentious in the Northeast

RAHUL KARMAKAR

What is the Bill about?

More than 33 years after an anti-foreigners' agitation from 1979 to 1985, Assam is in turmoil again – this time because of the Modi government's bid to get the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 passed in Parliament. Assam and the rest of the Northeast shut down on Tuesday after the Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha.

Seeking to amend the Citizenship Act of 1955, the Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2016 for granting citizenship to minority Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians who came to India on or before December 31, 2014 due to religious persecution in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The Bill requires such immigrants to spend at least six years to be eligible for citizenship, instead of 12

years as is currently applicable.

Why is there opposition to the Bill in Assam?

The Assamese and other indigenous communities in Assam say that the Bill is against the spirit of the Assam Accord as well as the National Register of Citizens being updated. The Assam Accord, signed in August 1985, prescribed March 24, 1971 as the cut-off date for detecting and deporting illegal migrants irrespective of religion. The same date applies for NRC inclusion. Some locals argue that the Bill, if passed, will make those who entered India after March 1971 eligible for citizenship overnight. They say that Assam has been bearing the burden of migration even before 1971, and cannot accept any more people.

What is the BJP's stand?

The BJP says India was

divided on the basis of religion and the country has to create space for the non-Muslim victims of Partition facing religious persecution in the neighbourhood. Muslims comprise 34% of Assam's population. The BJP is believed to have gone ahead with the Bill despite opposition after "testing the waters" with the December panchayat polls, when it won an unprecedented 41% of the seats. This implied that the issue had little or no impact on the voters.

Who will benefit?

The BJP has given the issue a communal edge by arguing that 17 Muslim-majority Assembly seats should not go "jinnah's way". But it is not clear if this can be done by granting citizenship to a large number of Bengali Hindus among the 40.07 lakh people left out of the NRC. The BJP is clearly

eyeing the votes of Bengali Hindus, who were once a Congress vote bank, comprising less than 10% of Assam's population of 3.29 crore. Many Bengalis, however, feel the Bill will do them more harm than good, specifically if 1951 is taken as the base year by the Assam government for a move to define who are 'Assamese' and ensuring political, land and other rights for only "sons of the soil".

What may be the political fallout?

The Asom Gana Parishad has pulled out of the alliance with the BJP. Other regional allies of the BJP are unhappy with the Bill and could take a call with the Lok Sabha elections drawing near. But regional parties in the Northeast are usually dependent on the party or coalition in power at the Centre, and their decision may depend on the trend post-elections.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 10, 1969

EMS challenges Centre to order inquiry

The Chief Minister, Mr. E.M.S. Nambudiripad today [January 9, Trivandrum] demanded the Union Government to conduct an enquiry into the sources responsible for making allegations against the Marxist Communist Party from 1962 onwards and also whether these sources had any connections with Pulpalli and Tellicherry incidents in Kerala. Mr. Nambudiripad said that the enquiry should cover the period beginning with the presentation of the White Paper in Parliament by the then Home Minister, Mr. G.L. Nanda, alleging Marxist guerrilla activities. He asked whether the Central Intelligence which was responsible for presenting such a report, had been able to find out what had happened in Kerala now. The Chief Minister, who was replying to the three-day debate on the Governor's address to the Assembly, was commenting on the demand for a judicial enquiry into the Tellicherry and Pulpalli incidents.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 10, 1919.

Leakage of Question Papers at Calcutta University.

The enquiry into the leakage of question papers in connection with the recent Calcutta University examinations by a Committee sitting under the Chairmanship of Sir Asutosh Mukerjee has resulted in an almost extraordinary situation being created. The majority of the committee signed a report to the effect that they have failed to make any discovery that throws light upon the leakage. A minority report makes diverse charges of negligence against the Registrar and of indifference against the majority of paper setters who appear to have refused to help in the enquiry. The result is that the fresh batch of controversial resolutions appear on the Senate's Agenda, one of which goes so far as to suggest that two of the majority have no power to sign the report while another moves that the note of dissent be expunged. Both majority and minority reports declare that the leakage was brought about by an organised body of persons anxious to bring discredit on the University.

CONCEPTUAL Biological immortality

BIOLOGY

This refers to the biological state where certain organisms like the bristlecone pine and the jellyfish can live forever. These organisms can be killed by external causes like injuries caused by harmful predators, catastrophic changes in their environment and fatal diseases, but they do not get fatally affected by the ageing process like in the case of other organisms. They are considered to be biologically immortal as they can possibly live forever by endlessly replicating their dying cells. Some scientists, however, have argued that such resistance to ageing may decrease over time.

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