

# Entry of Women into Sabarimala: An Analysis of News and Opinion

Abatis Thokalath Sunny<sup>1</sup>, Susan Thottan Athi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Scholar, Department of Visual Communication, Loyola College, Thrissur, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Loyola College, Thrissur, India

**Abstract:** The Sabarimala issue in the recent past has gained a huge momentum and has influenced the media and people in such a way that it becomes important to study various aspects in connection to it. In the cyber-age, people's attitude to customs and gender bias and holding on to traditional practices have all contributed to the controversy in the region of Kerala. The blend of politics and people and the spirit of Communism along with religious sentiments have changed the shrine into a battleground, where people have staged different kinds of protests. The question of women entering the shrine has been analysed and discussed over and over again and the discussion has provided enough scope to analyse the news coverage, interference of government, religious fanaticism, gender discrimination and public opinion.

This study aims to study the newspaper articles and analyse the content in this light and arrive at a conclusion based on the inferences obtained through a survey. The Sabarimala shrine and the controversy associated with it, is introduced in the first chapter and the discussion made so far on the topic is summed up in the next chapter, 'Review of Literature'. In this chapter, the discussion and debate made so far in terms of religious, political and feminist aspects of the issue are summed up. The interpretation or the main area of the study culminates into a point where it is understood that the main stake holders of the issue are the women ranging from 10 to 50 years of age. Hence a small survey has been conducted on 50 women between the 30 to 50 years and the results have been summed up and interpreted in the conclusion.

**Keywords:** Religious controversy, Political debate, Feminist overtones, News analysis and Opinion Poll.

## 1. Introduction

Before any research is carried out, it becomes important to study the background of the issue and the crux of the problem in order to analyse other factors pertaining to this research. Sabarimala is situated in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala, adjoining the Periyar tiger reserve. Small towns like Kottayam and Adhoor serve as passages to the shrine and millions of people visit every year. The temple is said to have been built before the 12th century and there are strict rules and regulations to visit the place and its not like any other place of pilgrimage. The pilgrims are expected to wear the holy beads and fast for a period of 40 days, abstaining from alcohol, non-vegetarian food and others. This shrine has been a men's affair and women from the age group of 10 to 50 are not permitted to take this pilgrimage. However, women were allowed through a different

route inside the temple until 1991 and later this privilege was taken out.

The riots became one of the most discussed national news. The news story was watched with interest by Indians all over the world. Almost all the national news channels covered the issue and closely followed up the case. The riot was a result of a Supreme Court verdict by the bench headed by Dipak Mishra which associated the barring of the entry of women to untouchability stating article 15 which came as a backlash to the conservative Hindu groups of the country. In the year 1990, Mr Mahendran filed a petition in the Kerala high court seeking the ban and the high court of Kerala in the year 1991 upheld the ban. The Young lawyers Association filed a petition in Supreme Court in 2006, after nearly 15 years challenging the ban on entry of women. The five-member bench of the Supreme Court came out with the verdict on a scale of 4-1 that women of all age groups could be allowed into the temple.

The verdict came along with a 411 paged report discerning the issue from every possible angle and the temple soon turned into a battleground with people taking different stands.

Some termed the issue to be a mischievous act to nullify customs and practices of the Hindu religion. While the verdict brought happiness to many Indians all over the country especially women devotees, the temple and the royal family of Pandhalam filed petitions to revoke the verdict stating reasons that lord Ayyappa was a sworn celibate and such practices were not to be changed according to people's will. The LDF government was resolute and determined about bringing a drastic change in the society and by curbing religious practices against women, it carried out secret operations by supporting women's entry into Sabarimala. This was regretted by the parties of the right wing which supported the agitations staged by Hindu religious groups. The entire society of Kerala stood divided on this issue, with some supporting the verdict and some slandering it. In what came as an epoch-making event, the government of Kerala conducted this operation, where in the police escorted two women in their forties into the shrine and they were present in the inner sanctum for 2 minutes. This attracted state-wide debate and discussion. The Hindu religious organisations expressed their hurt feelings and the protests intensified. The purification rituals were conducted post the visit, which antagonised the women's groups in Kerala.

Feminists took to the streets and the ritual came as a set back to the success of the women's wall. The entry of women into Sabarimala was not feasible for women and it was just the two women who could achieve their dream of entering the shrine. There were widespread protests in Kochi following the women's entry. The Hindus of the state organised and staged protests and burnt the effigies of the chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan. BJP leaders who supported the protest were held in custody and the state of Kerala turned into a battle field which was much worse than the time of the verdict. While the Hindu nationalists looked at it as a threat to their faith, the other liberalists mocked the purification ritual and floated cartoons in the social media and the web.

The cartoons were stingingly sarcastic with words like whiplashes. Some women radical groups expressed their dissent over the so called purification and menstruation came to be discussed and debated.

## 2. Review of Literature

The Sabarimala issue has already been discussed under the light of religion, political scenario and feminist perspectives. The editorial columns of news magazines were filled with opinion articles and there was a powerful debate which kept developing through the months of October, November and December 2018. The argument persists even today after being intensified in the month of January 2019.

## 3. Religious controversy

The religious controversy in the Sabarimala row cannot be ignored. It has been argued so far that the compromise forced on religious sentiments practised by a certain group led to trouble. It is therefore important to sum up the opinion arrived so far in this connection.

Religion is an important word in India with which the culture and socio-political system are inextricably bound. It's also a strong word in India which leads to riots, demonstrations and others. The religious sentiments, yet again, being a strong phrase, incites the mob reaction when compromised. There are religions, castes and sub-castes which form the vote bank of India.

According to the belief system followed in Hinduism, no man should embrace celibacy until he has lived in a household or the Grihastham. However, this would be applicable only to human beings and with gods, there is a special clause. Some gods are celibates and Lord Vinayaka is an example. Goddess Shakthi and Lord Shiva are symbolic of a conjugal life. Lord Vishnu is said to have given his heart (vakshasthalam) to his wife, Goddess Lakshmi. Radha and Krishna stand as a symbol for love and the religion does not shun the love between a man and woman without any ties of marriage.

Thus the principles of Hinduism appear to be complicated and different. Even though the rituals have a lot of meaning behind them, the modern generation seems to have lost connection with the ancient practices and knowledge and the

Hindu families have adapted to a modern life, where the rituals could not be followed as they were in the olden times. The land of India is the birthplace for Hinduism and hence some practices are too ancient to be changed. The country is flooded with temples and places of worship of all kinds and women's entry is not restricted in most places. Every place of worship has a story which is referred to as 'Sthala purana' (story of the place). Every ancient temple has a history in the making.

It is believed that lord Ayyapa sat in the divine abode of Sabarimala to bless the devotees who came to him in NAISHTIK BRAMACHARYAM, abstaining from women and worldly pleasures. Therefore, it is believed that young women of child bearing age had to keep away from the shrine as Lord Ayyapa had rejected the advance of Malikapurathama and the entry of other women could be understood as the breach of promise by the lord.

In this light the views on making amendments to religious practices would become different when looked at the light of the Sabarimala perspective.

From this perspective we understand that the entry of women into Sabarimala is not just a question of whether menstruating women were pure or impure, but a belief that is deeply ingrained and a religious conviction that is followed for a long time. While things were believed this way, the verdict of Supreme Court came with a dilemma whether or not the ban on women to enter Sabarimala is associated with the breach of human rights and untouchability. The Supreme court had earlier, in the recent past had interfered with the religious rights of Muslims by abolishing the 'triple talaq' which received support from a large section of people in India while lifting the ban on women's entry proved otherwise.

The ban on entry of women and its revocation is often compared to the abolition of triple talaq and hence it becomes important to study the case briefly as well because the treatment of both Hinduism and Islam are expected to be fair due to the country's secular outlook.

## 4. Political debate

The parties of the left and right in Kerala often clash with each other in issues related to the majority and minority groups of people. The state of Kerala is not a cantankerous state when it comes to communal rivalry. The fact that the BJP could not win the elections in the year 2019 is a proof that the state had majority of supporters for the parties of the Left wing. The ruling party at Kerala, which is the CPI(M) or the Left Democratic Front has stood firm in honouring the Supreme Court's verdict as it believed that temples and other institutions had to be progressive. The leader, Mr. Pinarayi Vijayan, has endeared the hearts of the people. He is adored by the youth of Kerala for his progressive plans and for running a fair government.

While the ruling party has been supporting a liberal outlook, the BJP on the other hand stood by the protestors as the party felt that there was a need to protect the sentiments of Hindus.

Various demonstrations were carried out by the RSS which is said to be abetted by the BJP. The Shiv Sena, a group which is detested by most progressive states in South India involved itself and created a discord in the state.

### 5. Feminist overtones

The set of rules that govern the society based on religious and social factors, seem to be unfriendly for women in India. Apart from Islam which treats women in unfair ways, Hinduism is no lesser in comparison. Social evils like Dowry system, female infanticide, rape and others still torment the country. Interestingly the first feministic wave in India was during the colonial times, when the British abolished 'Sati'. Even though the British claimed to have abolished 'Sati' some cases were reported until 1980s. The dowry system is still in place today and the battle has not been won.

The debate on Sabarimala may outwardly look like a political drama or a religious controversy. But, when looked closely, one can understand that it is nothing but rights denied to women. Hinduism is a fluid religion which has adapted to a lot of social changes. Some customs have been changed owing to the practicality of the changing times. When habits and traditions have thus been changed, it would only be more appropriate if women are given a free play in the Sabarimala controversy. Women are the real stakeholders in this issue and their opinion should be taken into consideration before the debate is closed.

### 6. Methodology

The research work having thus recalled the contributions made in the area so far, embarks on an analysis of some important news articles in 'THE HINDU' from the last week of September to the first week of January. Since the number of newspapers is very high, 2 articles have been chosen and analysed. These articles have been chosen from the Kerala edition of The Hindu and thus become very important sources for analysis and interpretation.

After the interpretation has been done, the research concludes with a survey conducted on a small group of women ranging between 30 to 50 years. A group of 50 women have been chosen and asked to fill a questionnaire with yes and no type of answers, along with a choice of a few stipulated explanations to choose from. The women shall not be forced to offer an explanation and the field is not mandatory. The filling of the questionnaire shall be done through Google forms and the response sheet shall be presented through a link.

### 7. News analysis

The following news analysis has been carried out using the first page in the regional column of The Hindu. However, the news articles are placed in the page 4 of the newspaper. There are two significant news stories that have been taken for discussion.

#### News Story #1

TITLE OF THE NEWS STORY: Caution is the word as temple entry verdict sinks in

Date: 29.09.18

Written by: C. Gouridasan Nair

*Positioning of the news:*

The news is positioned at the fourth page of the newspaper. The previous day was a historical day where in a five bench jury revoked the ban on women's entry into Sabarimala. All the dailies were filled with news of the verdict in the front page all over India. This news was of national importance and at the same time more important to the state of Kerala. It belonged to the regional section, yet the news was of national significance.

*Key words:* Historic verdict, Antagonise powerful community leadership, and Consensus.

*Summary:*

- A pro-active state government welcoming the verdict
- BJP chief secretary's dissent
- TDB's concern about infrastructure
- Members of opposition practising caution.

*Purpose:*

The news story by Mr. Gouridasan presents the situation here which is unprecedented in the state of Kerala. The writer of the news story does not intend to inform, but as the title says, to caution.

*Interpretation of the purpose:*

The purpose of the article was met with and after a year from the date of its writing, it still stands true to its purpose as the place was a mayhem owing to the unpreparedness of the place of worship in terms of infrastructure and consensus.

*Tone:*

The news story presents a gloomy and serious tone, that of warning. The prophesising words synthesise an eerie tone.

*Techniques:*

The writer uses the word Caution in the title and there is a pun. The caution is for the state government as well, when it is interested in serving justice to women. At the same time, there is another caution which is said to be practised by the opposition members. When looked at the incidents of future, one could understand that the parties like BJP did not actually practise caution. The caution was also the word for the TDB. Interestingly the TDB expressed its concern over the infrastructure at first and did not mention the religious and cultural sentiments. Thus it is a well written article which provides a lot of meaning and purpose.

*The Picture:*

The picture shows a serene representation of Sabarimala with glimmering lights and long, winding pathways for the pilgrims. In connection with the title of the article, it heightens the importance of the word 'Caution' as the place was soon going to become a battleground.

#### News Story #2

Title: I respect court order: says Tantri.

Date: 29. 10.18

Written by: Special Correspondent

*Positioning of the News:*

The news is positioned in the Fourth page of the newspaper, in the regional affairs of the state. It is also positioned below the news that is representing the calm picture of Sabarimala, luring the women devotees. At this juncture, the readers tend to pay more attention to this news as they are interested in knowing the opinion of the authority in this.

*Key words:* Unique tantric quality, Naishtika Brahmachari and Unique ritualistic tradition

*Summary:*

- The chief tantric of the Sabarimala temple says he would honour the verdict.
- The tantric expresses his concern over protecting the uniqueness of the temple.
- He describes the uniqueness of the temple
- Requests the Hindus to stand united.

*Purpose:*

The purpose of the article is to express willingness to execute the court order and at the same time, express concern about implementing it. It also informs the readers about the uniqueness associated with the temple and requests Hindus to show their solidarity.

*Interpretation of the purpose:*

The purpose has been made clear at the first place and the justification as to why the tantric does not favour the judgement is also given. The tantric talks about his willingness, which looks like a forced acceptance as it would be his duty to abide by the law.

*Tone:*

An ironic tone is seen in this story as it begins with a positive tone and ends in a negative one. The title of the story and the contents do not match, thus leading to irony.

*Techniques:*

The news story talks about an impending disaster associated with the entry of women. It also makes it clear that the implementation of the court verdict was not going to be easy at all. However, the court could issue the verdict, the tantric had to express his concern over the distortion of the uniqueness of the temple. The tantric tries to express that the ban on women had not to be understood as discrimination. The special correspondent had been clever in positioning this news story. The title attracts the readers, who eventually get warned of the difficult times ahead.

*The Picture:*

The picture looks very optimistic and matches with the title. The picture, along with the title, present a progressive picture of a young tantric.

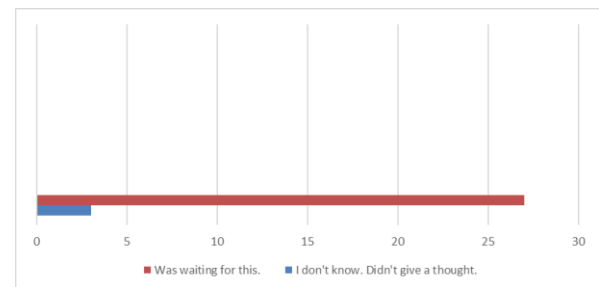
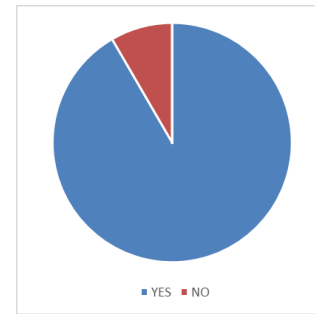
## 8. Conclusion

The Sabarimala debate has not ended and the stalemate over the issue is due to the politicization and exercise of patriarchal authority. Some reasons have been quoted in support of the ban

on women's entry and women are not taken into consideration in making some changes in the tradition.

A short survey conducted on women ranging from 30 to 50 years has yielded the following results:

When asked a question, 'Did you feel delighted to hear the Supreme Court verdict on 29th February that all women could enter Sabarimala? 36 women answered in the affirmative and 14 in negative.



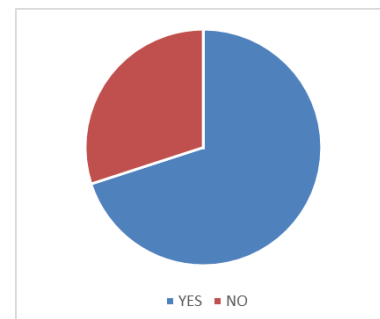
It should also be noted that 9 women out of the 14 were Hindus. 27 women who answered in the affirmative were eagerly waiting for this moment and out of those 27, 11 women were from other religion.

This only shows that India has been turning into a harmonious country where religious divide was not felt much.

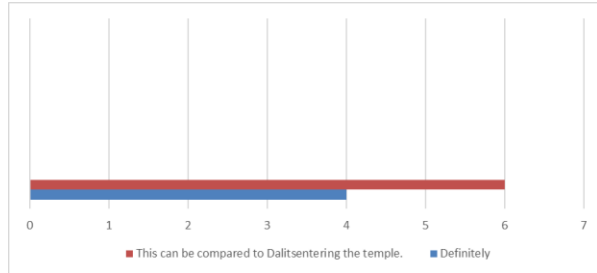
The second question was asked to analyze if the women interpreted the ban on their entry into Sabarimala was just a faith or associated with inequality and human rights. The question, when asked produced interesting results again.

'Do you really think that the SC verdict on Sabarimala should be associated with human rights issue?', was the question.

The graphic representation of the result is as follows:







To this question 34 women said yes. Of those 34, six women compared this to the equality crisis and related it to the oppressed people not being allowed into a temple in the olden times.

Thus the results show that women are very interested in visiting the shrine and their opinion should be taken into consideration.

Thus it can be observed through this study that a dialogue has to be strengthened between the religious body, government and political parties if a plausible solution should be achieved.



Caution is the word as temple entry verdict sinks in - C. Gowridasan nair, Thiruvananthapuram

The Supreme Court verdict permitting women of all ages to offer worship at Sabarimala, which raises memories of the Vaikom and Guruvayur satyagrahas and the royal fiat allowing ‘untouchables’ to enter temple precincts in Travancore in the first half of the last century, appears to have left the mainstream political leadership in the State a little dazed, resulting in mixed reactions from different corners of the political spectrum.

The CPI(M) and the government have welcomed it as a ‘historic verdict’, but the leadership of the Congress and the BJP have chosen not to make their stand clear.

CPI(M) State secretary Kodyeri Balakrishnan felt that the Supreme Court verdict would put an end to the discrimination against women at Sabarimala. However, Leader of the Opposition Ramesh Chennithala felt that though everyone was bound to abide by the Supreme Court verdict, the customs and rituals based on which places of worship in the country functioned could not be lost sight of.

BJP State president P.S. Sreedharan Pillai also said the same when reporters reached out to him for his views on the SC verdict on Friday.

‘Efforts for consensus’

On his part, TDB president A. Padmakumar said the effort of the board would be to build a consensus on the issue. The

government appears averse to antagonise powerful community leaderships by being proactive and the TDB seems worried about the many tricky issues it would have to tackle once women begin arriving at Sabarimala, which is hardly a gender friendly place now.

While the challenge of maintaining law and order would have to be tackled by the government, the main worry of the Travancore Devaswom Board would be about creating the necessary infrastructure to accommodate the women devotees.

And nobody is sure whether the verdict would indeed result in sudden in- flux of women devotees into the hill shrine, given the ‘let things be the way they were’ stance that many women approached by reporters for their views on the SC verdict seemed to have.



I respect court order, says Tantri. - Special Correspondent

Sabarimala Tantri (chief priest) Kandararu Rajeevararu on Friday said he respected the Supreme Court order permitting entry for women of all age groups to Sabarimala even though the customs and practices did not permit it.

Talking to The Hindu, Mr. Rajeevararu said there had never been any ban on women’s entry to Sabarimala. Instead, menstruating women were not permitted to enter Sabarimala adhering to the unique tantric character of the presiding deity installed at the Ayyappa temple in the form of a persistent bachelor (naishtika brahmachari) and this could not be treated as gender discrimination.

The issue pertained to the ritualistic tradition at Sabarimala and the temple authorities might explore the possibility of initiating appropriate legal steps to address the issue.

Akhila Bharatha Ayyappa Seva Sanghom general secretary N. Velayudhan Nair termed the Supreme Court order disappointing. The court verdict, he said, would destroy the unique ritualistic tradition and practices at Sabarimala.

“Sacrificing the unique ritualistic tradition at Sabarimala in the name of social justice was unfortunate. It is high time Hindus stood united to protect temple rituals and practices,” Mr. Nair said.

## 9. Conclusion

This paper presented an analysis of news and opinion on entry of women into Sabarimala.

## References

- [1] <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/do-all-women-have-a-right-to-enter-sabarimala/article19883956.ece>