

Indian Temple Set to Allow Entry to Women of Menstruating Age After Top Court's Ruling



Men favoring barring women of menstruating age from entering the Sabarimala temple take part in a motorcycle rally at the base camp on the way to the shrine on Oct. 16, 2018 in Pathanamthitta, India.

Vivek Nair—Hindustan Times/Getty Images

By ASHOK SHARMA / AP

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(NEW DELHI) — A temple in southern India that's one of the largest Hindu pilgrimage centers in the world is set to open its doors to females of menstruating age following a ruling by the country's top court.

Some 1,000 police officers cleared protesters from the vicinity of the Sabarimala temple in Kerala state on Wednesday, hours before the temple's doors were to open to females ages 10 to 50, said police officer Manoj Abraham.

Police arrested 11 protesters when they tried to block the path of some females. On Tuesday, hundreds of protesters stopped buses carrying devotees to two of the temple's base camps and asked females to show documents to prove their age.

Since a state court ruling in 1991, the centuries-old temple has barred women and girls ages 10 to 50 from entering. India's Supreme Court lifted the ban last month, holding that equality is supreme irrespective of age and gender.

Temple management and the protesters argue that the celibate nature of the temple's presiding deity, Lord Ayyappa, is protected by India's constitution. Some religious figures consider menstruating women to be impure.

Meghna Pant, a female activist, said the celibacy of the deity was not more important than the equality of women. "Who are men to decide where women can go or not?" she said.

Supporters of the ban have been angered by the state government's decision not to seek a review of the Supreme Court's ruling.

Rahul Easwar, an attorney for the temple, appealed to the female devotees not to enter the temple and give temple authorities until next week to file a review petition in the Supreme Court.

Sabarimala is surrounded by mountains and dense forests in its location at the Periyar Tiger Reserve. Up to 50 million devotees visit the temple every year.

Several temples across India have banned women, saying the policy is intended to preserve the purity of their shrines. The operators of a temple in the northwestern state of Rajasthan believe the Hindu god Kartikeya curses women who enter the temple, instead of blessing them.

India's secular courts have intervened recently in cases in which a religion's gender beliefs were seen as discriminatory.