

Mismanaging India's temples – violation of 'freedom to practice one's own religion'?

The Indian constitution grants freedom to worship freely, but the mismanagement of temples undermines this freedom, writes Avani Bansal.



That Article 25 of the Indian Constitution guarantees right to freedom of religion is quite well known, but how free are the 'managers' of Indian temples to mismanage them? Though most devotees voluntarily bear the difficulties entailed in making a pilgrimage, the real question is – what about the 'human rights' of the most vulnerable?

The sight of languishing devotees lining up for hours at the doors of the temples in scorching heat and heavy rains is not uncommon at Indian temples. The more popular a religious shrine, the more distressing is the plight of the devotees.

<http://youtu.be/cYgoF9yYHyY>

'Human rights' may have you heading for the exit but read on. It is a common practice amongst most Hindus to do pilgrimage (teerthyatra), especially in their old age, when their religious inclinations seem to be the highest. But expecting old men and women to line up at the gates of the deities for hours without any medical care at hand, implies that their rights are at best non-

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existent.

If a devout Hindu were to start asking for their rights at a temple, people would be shocked and dismayed. The general atmosphere prevalent in religious shrines is that of devotion and prayer – to ask for a systematic approach to getting a glimpse (darshan) of the deity is unimaginable. Nonetheless, from a human rights perspective, the cause for concern is significant. [There have been](#) several recent [instances of stampedes at religious places](#) and yet very few policy makers seem to take notice of the serious malady called mismanagement of religious affairs.

So the question is, how can a devotee manifest his/her religion or belief in worship (as guaranteed in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) if there is serious mismanagement of religious affairs? Aren't the rights of devotees to freedom of religion violated if they are shoved and pushed, kicked and brushed aside without gentleness? What about the human rights of the children and the elderly, the physically challenged, the weak and the vulnerable? Doesn't freedom to worship entail worshipping in peaceful conditions? Whom should a devotee complain to? Just because it is a religious affair, such mismanagement in temples or other religious shrines cannot be said to be outside the scrutiny of law. Moreover human rights violations should not raise our eyebrows only when they are of the worst kinds. As a society, each and every act of silent suffering of human rights violations takes us farther away from upholding human rights.

I do not mean to suggest that such mismanagement is applicable at all the temples in India. There are indeed examples of good temple management practices. Nor are temples alone – most religious places in India offer little provision for the old or infirm.

The video I have attached is from the Bankebihari temple in Mathura, one of the most famous Krishna temples in India. During most days, and particularly during the festivals, there are huge numbers of devotees in attendance. How does the management board ensure that the devotees get a glimpse of the idol they have travelled long to see? They open the doors of the temple quad wherein devotees rush from all sides. The temple is usually open for limited time – creating a bigger demand to get a glimpse of the idol, as seen below.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgBtaVglWbE&feature=player_embedded

Some devotees may actually like the prevailing atmosphere of people reveling in prayer with no concern for their physical state. However, the right to freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Indian Constitution for everyone without discrimination. It's not difficult to guess that some people (including elderly people, children) will find it extremely difficult to visit the holy place in those circumstances.

This is not the only issue in the wider issue of mismanagement of temples in India, but it is one that can be rectified easily. It does not need a genius to devise a solution to ensure systematic darshan of the deity. Ensuring ordered queuing is not very difficult. Yet in a country where religion is such a

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serious affair, suggesting even small changes can be controversial and seeking implementation even more so. Arguments for reforming temple managements may not need to go to the extreme of suggesting overhaul of the management board, but the fact that it is [being discussed at last](#) gives us renewed hope that things are not so difficult after all, because we need to start asking these questions.

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