

Behaviour change of a society

BEHAVIOUR BY BRAIN

BIJU DOMINIC

What does it take to change the behaviour of a society? Changing a society's behaviour involves changing the predominant norms, rituals and beliefs of a society. The question about societal behaviour change is being answered in the context of two recent events in Indian society: the #MeToo movement and the Supreme court verdict allowing women of all ages to enter Sabarimala temple.

What was the starting point of these events? The #MeToo movement was the result of ongoing discomfort felt by many women about the behaviour of a few men. So the change agents of the #MeToo movement are insiders, the women themselves.

On the other hand, the issue of the entry of women of all ages to Sabarimala temple was not a burning issue for the vast majority of women in India. Many of the women devotees of Lord Ayyappan, the deity at the Sabarimala temple, are not even interested in entering the temple. Even if there was a group of women who were keen to enter the temple, the strength of the traditions have made sure their voices were never heard. In the case of Sabarimala

temple, the insiders did not want any change. They were very comfortable with the status quo. So for a change to happen, it was inevitable that it had to be initiated from the outside. In this case, it came from a verdict of the Supreme Court of India.

Although there were some voices of protest against the #MeToo movement—that it is being used by some women to frame innocent men—overall, there is very little overt opposition to the change sought by women. When the change agents are insiders, chances of protests against societal change will be minimal.

The opposite is the case with the Sabarimala temple issue. The change agents here are considered outsiders to the whole issue. In this scenario, it is very easy to frame the whole change initiative as a tussle between the in-group and the out-group. Fear and anxiety can easily be aroused in members of the in-group that the attack by the out-group could destroy their age-old traditions, their very existence. These negative emotions tend to make the in-group more cohesive, united in its efforts to protect itself from outside attacks. This sets the stage

clearly for a confrontation.

Societal behaviour changes are influenced by other trends that occur from time to time in any society. For the past few centuries, globalization was a strong influence across various developing countries. The colonial powers, the initial harbingers of cultural globalization, made it a point to reinforce the view that their customs, beliefs and social norms were far more superior to those of the natives. Many of the local customs and rituals were surely seen by colonialists as regressive in comparison to those of the developed countries. In this context, it was easy to pass a law against women jumping into their husbands' pyre without too much opposition, because it was not what women in developed countries did.

all ages should be allowed entry into Sabarimala temple. On the other hand, this culture closure trend does not have any impact on the #MeToo movement.

Changing human behaviour has always been a difficult task to achieve. As compared to changing an individual's behaviour, changing a whole society's behaviour has always been far more difficult. Unlike individual behaviour change where nudges might work, social behaviour changes require far more fundamental change initiatives. Societal changes require battles being fought on various fronts. So as compared to individual behaviour change, the time frame required for societal behaviour change is much longer. As M.N. Srinivas, the famous sociologist, pointed out in his book, *Social Change in Modern India*, all societal changes take a long time to achieve. In fact, a generation or two will have to pass by before a change is conceded by all concerned. But can the legal system achieve faster societal behaviour change?

If the Supreme Court does not change its present verdict, sooner or later authorities will have no option but to implement

the court's order. Women of all ages will soon enter Sabarimala temple. Will it suddenly change the status of women in Indian society? No, it will not. But one should remember the important role of symbolism and images in creating momentum for societal movements. The act of Rosa Parks, the African American refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man, is one of them. The Sabarimala issue has far more symbolic value than the #MeToo movement.

In the absence of a bigger wave of #MeToo disclosures, the movement will not have much impact in the future. On the other hand, the Sabarimala temple issue, which resulted in significant legal judgements, controversies and discussions, will have a far greater impact on the momentum of the long journey of Indian women to achieve equality.

Biju Dominic is the chief executive officer of Final Mile Consulting, a behaviour architecture firm.

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