

**WOMEN IN DIVINE SPACES: BHUMATA RANRAGINI BRIGADE AND  
SHANI SHINGANAPUR TEMPLE-ENTRY AGITATION**

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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**DECLARATION**

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**CERTIFICATE**

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## INTRODUCTION

“Women are not impure and the Indian Constitution gives us the right to claim spaces. The Trustees are misusing their power. Religion does not say this. Religion does not give second-class citizenship to women, men do” (Desai)

Trupti Desai

Bhumata Ranragini Brigade challenged the 400 year old tradition of barring women from entering the sanctum sanctorum of the Shani temple in Shinganapur, Maharashtra. In 2015, when Bhumata Ranragini Brigade started the agitation against the practice of barring women’s entry, it received huge criticism from the Hindu right-wing parties in Maharashtra and the local women of Shinganapur. The 400-year-old ban preventing women from entering the sanctum sanctorum of the Shani Shinganapur temple was lifted by the Bombay High Court on March 31, 2016. A girl entered the sacred sanctum of Shani Shinganapur Temple located in Ahmednagar district in November 2015, unleashing the 400-year-old question of a ban on women’s entry to the shrine. It triggered a wave of activism and protests and the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade was at the forefront of this struggle. Social activist Vidya Bal took up the legal cudgels, filing a public interest litigation (PIL) against such prohibition at the Bombay High Court (HC) in March 2016, along with advocate Neelima Vartak.

A majority of the activists of the Bhumata Brigade are Hindu believing women and their demand to enter the sanctum of the Shani Shinganapur temple was not only the demand for equal accessibility to the places of worship but also the right to worship. Here, these women were not

only the citizens of the country claiming equal rights but also believers who were defining their faith practices on the basis of the Constitutional guarantees.

Women from different religious communities have demanded the right to enter places of worship in India. If we see the demand to pray, worship and enter the places of worship as religious reforms, then how can we conceptualize it through the lens of gender? How can feminist politics understand this demand made by believing women? There have been several participants in the women's movements in India and in other countries who have advocated religious reforms and who wish to remain believers. Islamic Feminism advocates religious reforms, reconciliation with their faith through a feminist reading and understanding of the Quran. Among Christians, there have been attempts to develop a feminist theology. Similarly, women's movements in India have also witnessed cases of resistance against the religious authorities to allow women to enter the places of worship. The Bhumata Ranragini Brigade's demand to enter and worship in the sanctum sanctorum of the Shani temple in Shinganapur, Ahmednagar district in Maharashtra, the demand to allow women belonging to all age-group to offer prayers at the Sabarimala Shrine in Kerala and the demand to allow women entry into the Haji Ali Dargah in Mumbai are some of the recent demands by women to enter the places of worship.

My research project seeks to engage with the question of women's engagement with divine spaces. In my study, I focus particularly on the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade and how its women activists engaged with the question of ban on women's entry in the Shinganapur temple. When we put the question of divine and faith practices at the center of the women's movements, then what kind of negotiations and conversations are possible? It is important to study the different bases on which women organize and in the case of my research, define faith practices. The Shani Shinganapur agitation saw two kinds of mobilization- one involved the local women of



Shinganapur who were opposed to the breaking of the traditions and were mobilized by the temple trust and the other involved the women activists of the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade who demanded entry into the temple<sup>1</sup>.

The focus of study in my research is a temple, which is central to the description and analysis of the way religious beliefs and practices take shape. My research project studies the Shani temple at Shinganapur village, Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra. Which human activities are accepted and which are not and which gender is required to maintain the sacredness of the temple space? Bhumata Ranragini Brigade as an organisation and as an organisation which led a temple-entry agitation at Shinganapur is another important part of my research. The organisation has also organized similar agitations in Amba temple in Kolhapur and Trimbakeshwar temple in Nashik. It had also supported the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan activists in their agitation against the ban of women in Haji Ali Dargah. However, the organisation gained nationwide attention during and after the Shinganapur agitation. Hundreds of women from the organisation participated in this agitation. Lastly, I discuss how law constructs the categories of religion and women. From the contemporary times, I focus on the Kerala High Court's engagement with the Sabarimala case and Bombay High Court's engagement with the Haji Ali Dargah and Shinganapur cases. In all three, women were barred from accessing the sacred spaces because of their gender. It is important to look at how law shapes the body and lived experiences of women when it intersects with faith practices.

Four larger frames emerge in the course of my research and I have engaged with debates around these frames: women and religion, religion and the women's movements in India, women,

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.frontline.in/cover-story/struggle-for-equality/article8523453.ece>).

religion and temple-entry and women, religion and law. These large frames run throughout the chapters.

### **The First Frame: Women and Religion**

How does religion intersect with identities such as gender? In the course of my research, the categories of religion and gender have travelled through many pathways. The question of temple entry is not only a question of gender; nor is it merely a question of religion. It was important for me to ask repeatedly of how religious women conceptualize gender equality and what does gender equality do to the category of religion. I address these questions through engaging with the question of temple entry in my research. It is important to look at how religious women comply with, resist or subvert gender inequalities within their own communities. It is significant to look at how faith can become an inspiration or a medium for mobilizing women in women's struggles for social justice and women's rights. In the Shani Shinganapur temple-entry agitation, faith plays a crucial role in organizing the agitation; a 400 year old faith practice is what had been challenged. On one hand, Bhumata Ranragini Brigade comprises of a group of Hindu believing women in majority who demanded reforms in the traditional practices of the Shani temple. Their demands were based on both their identity as Hindu believing women and as law abiding citizens of the country. On the other hand, the local women of Shinganapur and women belonging to the Shani Shinganapur Temple Trust were against the breaking of their age-old traditions and saw this as an attack on Hindu religion. Both these groups of women invoke faith practices but can be seen defining it and their religiosity very differently. While understanding these two sets of women believers through the interviews and field study I conducted, the question of religious agency had continuously been in my mind. Phyllis Mack (2003: 153) puts forward a general assumption that religious people have limited or no agency in comparison to

non-believers and secular people who are considered to be more capable of autonomous behavior. However, a growing number of feminist scholars of religion are engaged in a more critical understanding of religion in relation to both religious piety and activism. Saba Mahmood, in her study of urban women participants in the Egyptian mosque movement, argues that agency is not only limited to behavior or actions that challenge social norms; agency can also be studied in behavior patterns that reproduce such norms. Mahmood discusses a divide between Muslim subjectivities and western subjectivities as they are formed and shaped in different historical circumstances. Mahmood poses the question if a desire to be free and resist oppression is not innate or universal, how do we analyze different desires, capacities and virtues which are historically and culturally specific? According to her 'agentival capacity' is not only present in progressive changes but also in continuity and stability (Mahmood 2001). Mahmood (188) locates agency in the exchange between discursive practices and practical forms of life which are set in particular contexts. There are innumerable examples where women are curtailed from taking on positions of religious authority and decision making. There are limitations to this kind of understanding of religious agency then. In my study, the activists of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade have redefined their religious agency through the invocation of rights given under the Constitution of India.

According to Patricia Jeffery (2001), how women's agency is read depends on who is reading it. Similarly, the meaning of resistance for women in Shinganapur village and women belonging to the Brigade might be totally different and yet seen as resistance. In the essay, Jeffery suggests moving away from the binaries of victims and agents and engaging with the question of what sort of agents women can be despite their subordination and further how agency might translate into feminist political activism. Women have organized themselves for or against religion and

religious authorities and also for making spaces within religions. As Patricia Jeffery (2001) suggests in the essay, politicized religious movements organized by women or which see the participation of women are crucial in the context within which feminist politics must operate today. She raises the question of situated-ness. Women's contexts are situated within contexts of state and economy (Jeffery 2001). Her essay helps my research in situating the demands raised by women in Shinganapur temple entry agitation within the economy of Shinganapur as a pilgrimage and tourism site.

During the course of my research, I came across different stands of feminist scholarship and scholars who outrightly rejected religion for being inherently patriarchal. This outright rejection opens very few doors for feminist politics. It is important to question whether religion can become a catalyst for feminist activism. The role played by Bhumata Ranragini Brigade in the temple-entry agitation at Shinganapur opens up such possibilities.

Feminist work on religion has adopted multiple strategies. Feminist work has critiqued, challenged and engaged with religions. However, the impact of feminist studies upon the academic study of religion has a shorter history. Feminist studies in religion have followed their own trajectory which cannot be easily aligned with either women or gender studies or with religious studies. However, the questions of "who defines?" and "who names" remain pertinent in all these fields. Religion makes woman an ever more marked and differentiated category (Castelli 2001). It is important to question how religion(s) is "produced" at a certain time, in a certain location. If we talk about gender as defined or produced by the divine in the human realm, we need to see it as a question of difference and power. What does Shani Shinganapur temple authority mean when it uses the term "woman"? Who are the women believers who want to enter or not enter the place of worship? Most importantly, as the divine produces gender in

this context, how do the categories of woman and gender shape the divine? The focus on women's experiences in reconstructing religious history does not only reconstruct the understanding of gender but also reconstructs the understanding of religious beliefs. Women's role in religious traditions either through participation or non-participation, through support or protest, through solidarity or denial is important to be discussed to make the conversation possible between gender and religion (King 1995). Both absence and presence of women are equally important in understanding how certain faith practices become dominant. Some of the questions which Ursula King emphasizes in her essay remain important for my research. What religious roles and rituals do women participate in and from which ones are they excluded? Most important, how do they read this exclusion?

Feminist work is both investigatory and transformative in character. Feminist work on religion investigates the sources which have been historically constructed and asks how we know what we know (O'Connor 1995). The literature available in the Shinganapur village about the miracles of Shani and the history of the Shani temple build a religious discourse of its own which may or may not be supported by the women who were restricted from participating in the knowledge-making process. It is important to question the grounds on which they were excluded. As Ursula King (48) discusses in the introductory chapter of *Religion and Gender*, the silence and voices of women are equally important. Though women have engaged in different and contrasting ways with the question of temple entry, their positions and locations have shaped the faith practices prevalent in Shani Shinganapur temple.

The emphasis on lived experiences in religious studies opens up the question of 'whose' experience and challenges the idea of a universal religious subject (Shaw 66). In the context of the Shani temple, how is the believing subject who wants to get the right to worship by basing

such a claim on the Constitution and the rule of law different from the believing subject who does not want to alter the practice of not allowing women to come near or touching the main shrine. The centrality of women's experiences in the construction of the divine opens up the question of whose experience gets to shape the divine knowledge. Morny Joy (122) emphasizes the need for women to bring their lived experiences into the knowledge making process. In my research, I carry forward this question by asking whose experience gets to shape the divine and is sanctioned by the divine. It is wrong to say that the women of Shinganapur have not participated in the decision making process of the temple trust or have not participated in Shani worship. The temple trust is led by a woman at the Shani temple. However, the experiences of the women devotees who raised the question of temple entry shape a very different notion of the divine.

### **The Second Frame: Religion and the Indian Women's Movement**

Though movements can be understood as "dates", "events", "phases" and "moments"; it cannot be trapped in any of these categories. A part of introducing the present phase of women's movements in India and the role of religion in it requires us to go back into the past.

Questions of religion, particularly, faith, piety and belief have remained areas of relatively benign neglect amongst feminist scholars in India (Nair 36). Feminist discussions were centred on the religious, political and legal rights of women during and in the aftermath of the Shah Bano case (Mohd Ahmed Khan v Shah Bano Begum 1985). The feminist scholarship on religion witnessed a major shift during the critical years of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the demolition of the Babri Masjid. These years saw large scale participation of women in politicised religiosity. There is no neat framework within which women's movements can address issues such as secularism, religion and communal politics. Till the mid-eighties, there was an opinion in

the women's movement in India that religious faith needed to be a private affair along with the assumption that much of religion consisted of superstitions (Dietrich 24). In the nineties, the myth that women have a separate existence away from their communal identity where once can discuss problems of rape, divorce and maintenance on a communal platform was shattered (Agnes 4). The enormous amount of support given to the movement by participants from all regions, classes and castes of India reminded how strong the hold of religious belief and meaning is in the subcontinent. However, newer forms of religious engagements cannot be seen only in the arena of 'Hindutva' or orthodox Islam or Christianity. Apart from the question of bringing visibility to women in the public sphere, new forms of religious engagements not only provide sources of identity and access to forces of legitimation, they also develop new forms of spatial and ritualistic practices (Nair 40). How important is the role of engagements then for feminist politics and scholarship?

Bhumata Ranragini Brigade finds a place in these engagements. As an organisation it strategically leverages constitutional rights over religious rights in order to claim religious spaces. The state and particularly the institution of Law have been summoned time and again to the aid of women who have asked for equal right to worship within communities. The invocation of constitutional rights here is not against faith but to enable it (Nair 38). Apart from law and state, believing women have also redefined piety not as a form of abstinence but as an assertion of equality to all religious spaces. This can be seen as a different way of embracing religiosity rather than rejecting it. This kind of religion engagement may open new possibilities for feminist politics. Can one read feminist politics in these engagements instead of situating these in the larger arena of feminist politics? From earlier feminist positions that either religion outright or debated for its secularisation, new feminist politics and also the women's movements appear

more acceptable towards the belief that faith and belief may not always be patriarchal and open doors for feminist politics and engagements (Nair 2017).

### **The Third Frame: Women and Divine Spaces**

It is important to understand that temples are built and they grow in historical and social contexts. The role played by the state in their management is equally important as the religious rituals associated to them. In my research, it was interesting to look at how Maharashtra government's tourism website constructs the practices of Shani Shinganapur.

How does a space get salvific power? A large part of Hinduism is about sacred landscapes and sacred sites. According to Knut A. Jacobsen, the narratives of Gods and Goddesses are significant in the context of pilgrimages. At pilgrimage places, the behavior of the pilgrims is supposed to follow certain rules prescribed by the temple authorities and rituals. Jacobsen defines salvific space as a type of geographical site in which many goals of religion, such as health, wealth, moral purity, divinity and final salvation are promoted and these traits appear attainable to the pilgrims through worshipping the pilgrimage sites (Jacobsen 2013). In the case of the Shani temple, the idea of justice is of supreme importance. The narratives around Shani and particularly his appearance in Shinganapur led to the development of Shani Shinganapur as a pilgrimage site. The village forms a crucial part in the Nashik-Shinganapur-Shirdi pilgrimage tourism series. In my research, I have attempted to look at how the presence and absence of women from the divine space of Shani Shinganapur temple change the character of Shinganapur as a pilgrimage site.

Whatever happens in a temple is the result of the presence of the deity and this presence both transforms the territory, gives a divine characteristic to the space and arranges social relations



around it. In the Shani temple at Shinganapur, the holy platform of Shani and the holy rock-structure of Shani comprise the spaces which were inaccessible to women. The absence of women's bodies does not only define the divine characteristic of the temple but also construct the notion of pure and impure bodies. The considerations of spatiality can shape the bodily practices of women within diverse contexts and settings (Niranjana 13). According to Seemanthini Niranjana (16), spatial axis decidedly orients bodily practices, defining the world into one's own and the other and designating what is proper and improper, moral and immoral. The placement of the holy platform at the Shani Shinganapur temple is crucial in the creation of the 'Other', which are women in this context. Here, gender runs alongside space and not only any other space but divine space. The sanctum sanctorum of the Shani temple is also a ritual space which was kept inaccessible to women. Several rituals like pouring of oil on the stone structure of Shani, offering flowers etc. which required bodily proximity were performed only by men. A spatial perspective has been important for me to understand this agitation for temple entry at Shinganapur as spatiality produces gendered bodies and it is important to see how these gendered bodies negotiate in these social spaces. The female bodies who formed the part of the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade claimed the sanctum sanctorum of the Shani temple by not only climbing the holy platform but also performing several rituals which were barred for women earlier. These women activists of the Bhumata Brigade not only inhabited the divine space but also negotiated with the rituals and other everyday practices on their own terms. The character of the divine spaces of Shani Shinganapur had been altered and redefined.

Ursula Rao's *Negotiating the Divine: Temple Religion and Temple Politics in Contemporary Urban India* provided me insights into how to locate my own territories of research at the Shani temple in Shinganapur. In *Negotiating the Divine: Temple Religion and Temple Politics in*

*Contemporary Urban*, Rao (59) discusses how the sanctuary of the main deity remains the main attractions at temples. The divine power that is understood to be contained in the statues and structures of the deities transforms the place and makes it a sacred and divine territory. Ursula Rao (59) mentions expressions like people taking off their shoes before entering the sanctum sanctorum, covering of head in respect, abstaining from eating meat inside the sacred territory etc. The temple as a space is used by the believers to oppose the claim of the state to sovereignty. Experiencing divine agency, they fight for a space exclusively for the deities they worship (Rao 152). Despite the enforcement of Maharashtra Hindu Places of Worship (Entry Authorisation) Act<sup>2</sup>, 1956, women were barred from entering the sanctum of the Shani temple. Only when the Bombay High Court made it clear that it was mandatory for the State Government to ensure that the Act was properly ensured through its 2016 verdict, the temple trust allowed the entry of women. Priors to this the rules related to the temple space was solely administered according to the decisions taken by the temple trust.

The role played by the state in the management of temples is equally important as the religious rituals associated to them. In my research, it is interesting to look at how Maharashtra government's tourism website narrativises the practices of Shani Shinganapur. It is important to understand that temples are built and they grow in historical and social contexts.

### **The Fourth Frame: Women's Bodies, Religion and Law**

In the Bombay High Court verdict which came out in support of the entry of women in the sanctum sanctorum of Shani Shinganapur temple, gender is constructed at the intersection of law

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<sup>2</sup> The Maharashtra Temple Entry Act was enacted in 1956 to enable temple entry for Dalits, long forbidden to enter public temples by Hindus. It was held to be equally applicable to women who had been excluded from praying at the temple. The Bombay High Court's March, 2016 verdict which allowed the entry of women in the Shinganapur temple invoked this Act. See <http://bombayhighcourt.nic.in/libweb/acts/1956.31.PDF>

and religion. In Sabarimala temple, women belonging to the reproductive age-group of 10 to 50 are not allowed to enter or participate in its annual pilgrimage because Ayyappan is a celibate deity. Despite the restriction on the age-group 10-50, it's difficult to say that only age is censored here. Women's bodies and certain kinds of women's bodies are censored and scrutinized. Women's bodies are centrally located in the legal texts. Though the arguments are based on religious texts, 'essential' practices and constitutional provisions, all of these come together in shaping "woman". How does one then understand "woman" and "women's bodies" through this location, the point at which faith and law come together? How helpful then is the sex/gender binary in understanding the shaping of "woman"? The lived body experiences of women who are not allowed to enter these places of worship and how these experiences are framed in the discourse provide insights into understanding the construction of woman as a category. In the case of Shinganapur, Sabarimala and Haji Ali Dargah, can the lived experiences of "woman" become a category of analysis? Also, what is the empirical material in the question of banning "fertile women" from entering the places of worship? Can the corporeal body become an entry point in discussing the construction of category "woman" at the interface of law and faith practices? Lived body is not merely a physical body; it emerges in and is shaped by a socio-cultural context. Moi (1999) asks the readers to not confuse lived body with sex. Can lived body become a historical category of analysis then? It has the possibility of becoming a useful category of analysis. It is not merely sex, not merely gender and neither is it biology. Lived body is situated in a historical, social, cultural location. It is useful in this research as it is important to remember that the ban in Shinganapur, Sabarimala and Haji Ali Dargah are not merely bans on "women" but also on the "lived bodies" of women. These bans are on age, fertility and other embodied experiences which cannot be disassociated from women and are part of their everyday

lived experiences. The concept of lived body raises the question of how a body is placed in social structures and which are the opportunities and constraints available to it (Young 16).

In “Celibate Gods and ‘Essential Practices’ Jurisprudence at Sabarimala, 1991-2001”, Deepa Das Acevedo (104) sheds light on the process by which a religious practice is accorded constitutional protection. The identification of ‘essential practices’ of a religion and the protection given to them under Article 25(1) questions the religion-state nexus. The *Shirur Mutt* case (1954) is the earliest and most significant case regarding freedom of religion. In the judgement, Supreme Court rules that the Constitution guarantees freedom not only of religious belief but also of religious practice. The question of “essential practices” comes from here which forms an important part of the Sabarimala judgement as well. The judgments discussed by C.J. Fuller in “Hinduism and Scriptural Authority in Modern Indian Law” assist in reading the Bombay High Court judgment which lifted the 400 year old ban on the entry of women. Though the Bombay High Court verdict (2016) allowed the entry of women in the Shani Shinganapur temple; it is important to look at how law understands the question of women’s right to access places of worship.

### **Research Methodology**

Though my interest in women’s religiosity faith practices is informed by nearly four years of engagement with women and gender studies, I conducted most of my intense research during a period of one year from 2017-2018. My first opportunity to visit the Shani temple in Shinganapur and interview the activists of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade took place in June, 2017. Over the next few years, my visits to the Shani temple were sporadic and informal, part of the process of getting to know the temple space. My interactions with the participants in my study

took place at a number of differing levels. At one level, I was gathering experiences and information from through observation and interaction in and around the Shani Shinganapur temple: inside the temple premises, the shops in the outskirts of the temple and the local shopkeepers. Through these interactions, I could gather the booklets and books produced by the temple trust of Shani Shinganapur temple which are sold both inside and outside the temple. At another level, I was building personal relationships within the circle of the activists of the Bhumata Brigade in Pune, Maharashtra. Since, I was based in Pune during my fieldwork; it was more accessible for me to visit the Bhumata Brigade's office on a daily basis. These visits were much higher than my visits to the Shani temple in Shinganapur which was 160 kilometres away from Pune. In Pune, I was able to have extended conversations, ask questions and get to know more about the what the women and men activists of the Bhumata Brigade were doing and why. Other than these, my both formal interview and informal conversations with the social activist Vidya Bal helped me in understanding the motivation behind filing a PIL at Bombay High Court demanding the entry of women at the sanctum of the Shani temple. She was one the petitioners. At a third level, my interviews with the members of the temple trust at Shani Shinganapur were more formal and direct in comparison to my interviews with the activists of the Bhumata Brigade. The interview of the temple trust members expanded my understanding of the regional Hindu right organisations and their firm stand against the entry of women in the temple.

All the interviews were conducted in Hindi except Vidya Bal's interview which was conducted in English. Though most of the participants were Marathi speakers, they could converse in and understand Hindi quite well. Therefore, language was not a challenge in this study. In conducting my research, I generally chose to rely on extensive note taking and audio recording. During the interviews of the temple trust members, I was not allowed to proceed with audio recording and I

had to take extensive notes to record the conversations. I have not changed people's name or personal details in the chapters as none of them had any objection to their names and other details being used in this text.

The primary sources in my research include the interviews of the Bhumata Ranragini Brigades' female and male activists and Vidya Bal in Pune and the members of the temple trust in the Shani temple in Shinganapur. The pamphlets and posters used by the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade are my other major sources to understand the kind of work done by this organisation and to look at how it mobilized women and led the temple entry agitation in 2015-2016. The regional magazines and newspapers covered the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade extensively during and after the Shinganapur agitation. These further provide me secondary sources to understand the regional reception of a large-scale agitation run by women. The FIRs filed on the members of the Bhumata Brigade and the different kind of complaints the organisation receives are other important sources to reflect upon the working of the organisation. Several 'Hindu' organisations opposed the entry of women in the Shani temple and made public statements on their online platforms against the women activists of the Bhumata Brigade. These online pamphlets are other sources to understand the kind of opposition Bhumata Brigade faced during and after the temple-entry agitation. Apart from these, temple literature which is both produced and sold by the temple trust in Shinganapur was extremely helpful in engaging with the myths generated around Shinganapur village and the ban on women in the sanctum sanctorum.

## **Chapter Plan**

The chapters in my dissertation emerge out of the four larger frames which I have introduced in the beginning.

In Chapter 1, I introduce the ethnographic setting of my research and further move to engagement of women with divine spaces. It is important to discuss how the character of this divine space is shaped through the myths around Shani worship and Shinganapur village. It is also important to discuss how the entry or ban of women in this space shapes this divine space. The temple-trust gained support from several regional Hindutva organisations during the temple-entry agitation and the attempt to break the 400 year old tradition was popularized by these organisations as an attack on the larger homogenous Hindu religion. The Hindu identity was invoked and on the other hand, Hindu nationalist identity was also invoked. I discuss the role played by these Hindutva organisations in the later sections of the chapter. Finally, I discuss the larger questions of divine space and women. How does the meaning of divinity, religiosity and space change with the entry and presence of women?

In Chapter 2, I introduce Bhumata Ranragini Brigade. In the initial sections, I discuss how feminist politics can be seen engaging with the question of religion through the kind of work Bhumata Ranragini Brigade does as an organisation. In the final sections, I discuss the Shani Shinganapur temple entry agitation 2015-2016 which was organized and led by Bhumata Ranragini Brigade. The attempt has been to locate feminist politics in Bhumata Brigade's engagement with the question of women's entry in the Shani temple. Whether a conversation between a religious and a secular framework is possible? I have attempted to discuss these questions through Bhumata Ranragini Brigade's work as an organisation; its engagements with the question of faith and constitutional values and lastly, its role in the Shani Shinganapur temple entry agitation.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the construction of "woman" as a category through the intersection of law and religion. The legislations regarding the question of temple entry have a long history. The

question of temple entry developed and intensified in pre and post-Independence period. However, it was majorly discussed with respect to caste. The Bombay High Court verdicts in Shani Shinganapur case (2016) and the Haji Ali Dargah case (2016) open up the category woman and so does the Mahendran case (1993) related to Sabarimala shrine in Kerala. Law and Constitutional rights provide a framework through which I intend to understand the engagement of women with the question of temple entry at Shinganapur. This chapter emerges out of the larger discussions around the question of banning women in sacred spaces in the court verdicts and how women's bodies are shaped in the absence and presence of ban on them in divine spaces.



## CHAPTER ONE

### SHANI SHINGANAPUR

#### WOMEN AND DIVINE SPACE

##### Introduction

“God is, but temple-less,

Houses are, but door-less,

Tree is, but shade-less

Fear is, but enemy-less”<sup>3</sup>

The words above have been taken from *Significance of Shani Shingnapur*, a small book sold inside a shop run by the temple-trust of Shani Shinganapur temple. The book is available in Marathi, Hindi and English. In the first chapter of my dissertation, I intend to begin from the location which is central to the narratives around the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade and the Shani Shinganapur temple-entry agitation. The agitation was organized to put an end to a 400 year old practice of not allowing women on the holy platform of the Shani temple. After the Bombay High Court verdict came out in March, 2016, the temple trust had to comply with the judgement and allow women to climb the holy platform and worship Shani. In this chapter, I intend to move

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<sup>3</sup> The quote is from the book *Significance of Shani Shinganapur*. The book is sold by the temple trust and is available in Hindi, English and Marathi. See Desai, Bapurao. *Significance of Shani Shinganapur*. Ahmednagar: Shri Shanaishwar Devasthan Trust, 2006.

away from who led the agitation and from who legally allowed the entry of women in the Shani temple. I intend to begin the story of Shinganapur village to understand the question of women's engagement with divine spaces. The Shani temple in Shinganapur is a divine space which was not accessible to women for a very long period. However, the history of the temple is not separate from numerous myths around Shani that proliferate in and around Shinganapur. It is important to discuss how the character of this divine space is shaped through these myths around it.

In the first and second sections of the chapter, I introduce the Shinganapur village and the famous Shani temple. Apart from Maharashtra State Gazetteers, a large part of the information regarding the village and the temple come from my own visits to the village. The interviews of the members of the temple-trust prove to be an important source of information in understanding how those in authority at the Shani temple see the question of Shani worship and women's entry in the temple. I rely extensively on the books and booklets sold in the shop run by the temple trust inside the temple premises and in small shops right outside the temple to understand how the history of the Shani temple has been narrativised by the residents of the village. These books and booklets do not only discuss Shani worship but also take up the issue of why women shouldn't be allowed on the holy platform.

The Shani temple is an important pilgrimage site. The Nasik-Shirdi-Shani-Shinganapur is a popular pilgrimage triangle. The temple-trust of Shani Shinganapur runs two websites to promote pilgrimage tourism and the Maharashtra government's tourism website also narratives the myths around the Shani temple to attract pilgrims and tourists<sup>4</sup>. In the third section of the

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://shanishinganapur.com/>  
<http://www.shanidev.com/>

chapter, I discuss the importance of Shani Shinganapur as a pilgrimage site and how the Bombay High Court order regarding the entry of women changes the religious character of this pilgrimage<sup>5</sup>.

The temple-trust gained support from several regional Hindutva organisations during the temple-entry agitation and the attempt to break the 400 year old tradition was recast by these organisations as an attack on the larger homogenous Hindu religion. I discuss the role played by these Hindutva organisations in the fourth section.

Finally, I discuss the larger questions of divine space and women. How does the meaning of divinity, religiosity and space change with the entry of women? The divide between private and public falls short in understanding this kind of engagement of women with the question of claiming and worshipping in divines spaces which were not earlier accessible to them.

### **Shani Shinganapur: The Ethnographic Setting**

The study which I discuss in this chapter is located in Shani Shinganapur, a small village in Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra. Its history is marked by its importance as the only village where houses are without locks and doors. This special character of the village is the result of the presence of the “Shri Shaneshwar Devasthan”, the most famous Shani temple in the country. According to 2011 census data, Shinganapur village, in Nevasa sub-district which is located in Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra has total population of 8,528, which consists of 4,491 males and 4,037 females<sup>6</sup>. Though the villagers participate in agricultural labour in large numbers, a

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<https://www.maharashtratourism.gov.in/treasures/temple/shani-shinganapur>

<sup>5</sup> See Smt Vidya Bal & Anr. Vs . The State of Maharashtra & Others

<https://barandbench.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Shani-Shinganapur.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/pca/SearchDetails.aspx?Id=629175>

large part of village economy is dependent on the Shani temple and the booming tourism and pilgrimage industry around it. Tourism has become a huge business in Shani Shinganapur. Until about 15 years ago, villagers relied on sugar cane farming to sustain themselves but now with hordes of tourists descending there to see the door-less buildings, tourism has become an important source of income for the villagers. In recent years, the Shani temple has seen large scale renovation and enlargement. The “Shani Devasthan” consists of a black rock structure, over five feet tall, installed on the holy platform without a roof. The temple sits at the heart of the village. It’s this temple that strengthens the local tradition of not installing doors and locks to the village houses. Once a humble affair, the temple has now grown into a large trust with extensive property and donations that run into lakhs. There are several myths which float around the temple and Shani worship in Shani Shinganapur village. Some of them also discuss women’s role in Shani worship and why women should not climb the holy platform to worship Shani. I decided to take this dimension of the village into account in both my selection of the areas I visited in the village and while interviewing the members of the temple-trust and the executive committee of the Shani temple. The 1884 Maharashtra State Gazetteer mentions the presence of a “Jagrit Devasthan” in Shinganapur village, Ahmednagar District and the organisation of a massive fair in the honour of Shani on every “Shani Amavasya”. The temple trust and the locals trace the history of the temple and Shani worship in a 350 year old myth regarding the arrival of Shani in Shinganapur village.

During my first visit to the village, I was not astonished to see a large number of houses without doors and locks as I had been reading on the myths around the temple and Shani worship in the village. The road which leads to the temple in the village had houses on both sides without doors and locks. Some do not have window frames. It is impossible for the tourists and pilgrims to

miss this visual display of belief of the villagers in the power and justice of Shani. During my interview with some of the members of the temple trust, I was reminded by them again and again about the uniqueness of the village as no cases of robbery and theft take place there. However, newspaper reports mention both minor and major cases of robbery in the village. The books sold by the temple trust and the website maintained by them create an idyllic picture of the village where there is no enmity among the residents and no quarrel and theft take place. It's important to mention here that they root this idea of peace and tranquility in Shani worship. The villagers believe that Shani is the lord of the locals and consider him to be the God of justice. During my interview of the members of the temple trust, I was informed that Shani believes in the idea of justice and punishes or rewards people according to their deeds. The villagers believe that Shani protects them from mishaps and therefore it's not necessary to lock their houses and properties in the village. However, the strong emphasis on this aspect of the in the literature which is produced by the temple trust adds to the character of the temple and contributes immensely to pilgrimage tourism. According to the members of the temple trust and the books which they sell, the stone structure of Shani which is worshipped in the temple appeared on its own in river which flows near the village. Since one has not constructed this stone structure of Shani, it is called "swayambhu"; something which appears on its own. The locals believe that around 350-400 years ago, Shani came in a dream of one of the devotees in the village and asked him to pick up the stone structure and establish it in the village. The stone structure of Shani was placed on a terrace and since then the temple premises started expanding. The idea of justice and the emphasis on bad and good deeds is dominant in this small village. Despite registered cases of theft and robbery, the temple trust maintains that there's no such vice present in the village and the natives are righteous and morally upright in their daily conduct. Although this was alien to

my way of thinking, I have to admit that the interaction with the members of the temple trust helped me in understanding this temple as a social and religious institution which had been following the practice of banning women from climbing the holy platform and from worshipping Shani.

Ursula Rao's *Negotiating the Divine: Temple Religion and Temple Politics in Contemporary Urban India* provided me insights into how to locate my own territories of research at the Shani temple in Shinganapur. My field work did not involve solely looking at the history of the temple and its evolution as a social and religion institution. I was more interested in how the question of women's ban and entry can be located in this setting. However, a broad understanding of how Hindu temples evolve in particular moments was extremely beneficial. Rao's study is located in Bhopal; in two temples dedicated to the "devi" (Goddess, here in the form of Kali and Durga). She asks two very important questions in her study, "How is a public temple built?" and "How groups were shaped or re-shaped through joint efforts in construction and management of temples?" (Rao, 22). In her study, she focuses on the changing caste structures and how the Durga temple in Bhopal has strengthened feelings of Hindu solidarity. She also associates it with larger Hindu nationalist project in which all castes come together to define the Muslim 'Other'. Through this understanding of Hindu solidarity, one can question who is the 'Other' in the Shani Shinganapur temple-entry agitation? If women are part of the 'Other' in Shani Shinganapur, it is important to understand that every woman is not a part of this group. In one of the later sections, I discuss how Hindu nationalism was both utilized and promoted by the Shinganapur temple trust and other Hindutva organisations related to it.

### **The Temple as Divine Territory**

Whatever happens in a temple is the result of the presence of the deity and this presence both transforms the territory and re-arranges social relations. In *Negotiating the Divine: Temple Religion and Temple Politics in Contemporary Urban*, Rao (59) discusses how the sanctuary of the main deity remains the main attractions at temples. The divine power that is understood to be contained in the statues and structures of the deities transforms the place and makes it a sacred and divine territory. She mentions expressions like people taking off their shoes before entering the sanctum sanctorum, covering of head in respect, abstaining from eating meat inside the sacred territory amongst others. In the Kali and Durga temples of Bhopal, where Rao conducts her study, people perceive the touching of the deity as a special blessing. The sacred territory in Shani Shinganapur temple attains a different meaning by the banning of women. With the absence of women's bodies on the holy platform of Shani, the sacredness of the temple is maintained. I would like to briefly discuss how the books sold by the temple trust discuss women and women's bodies in this respect. The *Significance of Shani Shinganapur* mentions the rules and regulations to worship Shani. It mentions that women are prohibited from stepping on the holy platform of Shani in the temple and women should not even come in the presence of Shani or cannot perform *darshan* during menstruation (Desai, 18). Before the Bombay High Court gave the judgement allowing the entry of women to worship in the sanctum of the temple, the temple had two separate lines for men and women. I visited the temple after the High Court verdict came out and women had started climbing the holy platform and worshipping Shani by then. However, through my interaction with the members of the temple trust, I was informed that earlier, there were two separate lines for men and women and only the men were allowed to climb the holy platform, offer oil on the stone structure of Shani and perform other rituals. Women's queue was stopped at a certain distance and they were only allowed *darshan* from afar.

This situation has changed after the passing of the judgement and men and women can both perform rituals at the holy platform now.

Central to temple worship is the 'beholding' (*darshan*) of the deity. It is through *darshan* that the worshipper comes in close contact with the gods or goddesses (Rao, 59). During the interview, the women members of the temple trusts emphasized on women's accessibility to *darshan* which can be performed without climbing the holy platform. The aura of the sacred and divine territory is not only limited within the boundaries of the temple. In the case of Shingnapur, the entire village lives under that aura. Here, temple is not the only transformed territory but the divine presence is felt in other parts of village as well and it has implications on the social life of the local people.

### **Negotiating Pilgrimage and Tourism: (Un) Shaping of a Divine Space**

Pilgrimages are major sources of movement, mobilization and migration. The ban on the entry of women at the Shinganapur Shani temple and the reasons given for the ban are crucial elements of the narratives constructed around Shinganapur as a pilgrimage site. In *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: Salvific Space*, Knut A. Jacobsen (2) discusses how a space becomes sacred and the processes involved in this. How does a space get salvific power? A large part of Hinduism is about sacred landscapes and sacred sites. According to Jacobsen (3), the narratives of Gods and Goddesses are significant in the context of pilgrimages. At pilgrimage places, the behavior of the pilgrims is supposed to follow certain rules prescribed by the temple authorities and rituals. Jacobsen (3) defines salvific space as a type of geographical site in which many goals of religion, such as health, wealth, moral purity, divinity and final salvation are promoted and these traits appear attainable to the pilgrims through worshipping the pilgrimage sites. In the case of the



Shani temple, the idea of justice is of supreme importance. The narratives around Shani and particularly his divine appearance in Shinganapur led to the development of Shani Shinganapur as a major pilgrimage site. The village forms a crucial part in the Nashik-Shinganapur-Shirdi pilgrimage tourism series. The sacred geography proves that god, goddesses and sages were present on the earth at some point of time. These divine sites provide an embodied experience to the pilgrim. The mythical story behind the self-appearance of the stone structure of Shani in Shinganapur, hundreds of years ago is an important part of the sacred aura maintained in Shinganapur. However, it is important to ask who could get the most of this embodied experience? Earlier, when women were banned from climbing the divine platform, this sacred experience was only available to men. Though the temple trust boasts that it does not distinguish between castes and calls itself and the entire village righteous and just in their actions- the question of gender had never been in their consideration.

“What would you say about a village where its homes, shops or temples have no doors? Strange but true, this is the case with a village called Shani Shinganapur which is a unique place of pilgrimage where the deity himself stands under an open sky without shelter and the devotees and local residents enjoy a fearless life, all thanks to the blessings of Lord Shani who, it is believed, is very powerful and immediately punishes anyone attempting theft with blindness.”<sup>7</sup>

The lines above have been taken from Maharashtra government’s tourism website. Even the tourism department of the government promotes Shinganapur as an idyllic place where no theft takes place despite cases of theft registered at the local police station. This kind of promotion by the state does not only change the religious character of the temple but of the entire village.

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.maharashtratourism.gov.in/treasures/temple/shani-shinganapur>

## **Women in Shani Shingnapur**

According to the 2011 census, 4,037 women reside in the village. The temple trust had never had women trustees until January-2016. The temple-entry agitation led by Bhumata Ranragini Brigade was at its peak in January, 2016. On January 7th, 2016, the trust board announced the nomination of two women as part of the eleven member temple trust. Anita Shete was declared the President of the temple trust and Shalini Lande was nominated as one of the members of the trust. Both the women trustees have time and again asserted that do not want to break the hundred years old tradition of not allowing women in the sanctum of the temple. Though the move to nominate two women for the first time in trust seems symbolic, it is important to discuss how these women shape their idea of faith and Shani worship. In this section of the chapter, I rely on the interview with Shalini Lande and other members of the temple trust and executive committee of the temple. Other than the interviews, the books and booklets which are sold by the temple trust is an important secondary source as they have long sections on why women shouldn't be allowed inside the inner sanctum of the Shani temple.

In my ethnographic work, I intended to interview both the women trustees of the Shani temple. However, even after several attempts, I was allowed to talk to only Shalini Lande and that too in the presence of her husband, Raju Lande and G.K.Dharandale, the executive officer of the Shani Shinganapur temple. I was not allowed to record the interview and most of my questions which were directed to Shalini Lande were answered by the two men present during the interview. According to them, though women were part of the trust for the first time, they were elected

democratically. The trust claims that it received 200 applications for the post of President. However, they could not provide any written advertisement or other document supporting their claim. According to them, 1000 women from the Shinganapur village and other nearby villages supported the temple trust to stop Trupti Desai and other activists of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade from entering the village on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2016. I was informed that there was no political motivation behind the participation of these women but their sole motivation was ‘sachchi ashtha’ (true faith) on Shani. These women were called true Hindu women who had to leave their houses and take the streets to save the age old tradition of not allowing women into the inner sanctum of the Shani temple. When the temple-entry agitation was going on, newspaper reports had mentioned cases of violence; that the local women of Shinganapur took to violent means to stop the women activists of Bhumata Brigade from entering the village. However, during the interview, the trust members did not accept this. There was total denial of their association with the 18 Hindutva organisations which led their support to the temple trust. I could not get even a second in privacy with Shalini Lande. Though I went with the intention of interviewing Anita Shete, the president of the temple trust and Shalini Lande in privacy, I ended up getting most of the answers from the men associated with the trust. At some places, where Shalini Lande spoke to me, she claimed to represent the local women of the village and asserted that no woman of Shinganapur or no Hindu woman would dare to break the tradition of the temple. The question of not allowing women in the inner sanctum is a matter of faith for them.

“Women from Shani Shinganapur and surrounding areas have not yet gone to the temple-pedestal of Shri Shanidev although permission has now been granted for women to have *darshan* from the pedestal. Going to temple-pedestal of Shanidev for *darshan* is not abiding by Dharma, reiterated local women and expressed their resolve to have

*darshan* only from below the temple-pedestal. All women should keep local women from Shinganapur as ideal before them.”<sup>8</sup>

The above quoted lines are from one of the pamphlet cum public statements of Hindu Janjagruti Samiti, a Maharashtra based Hindutva organisation. Now, returning to the books and booklets which the temple trust sells inside the temple premises, one can see similar arguments reverberating in these texts. In *Significance of Shani Shinganapur*, among the ten important rules which need to be followed in Shani worship inside the temple, two deal with women. One rule says that women are prohibited from stepping on the platform of Shani and the other one bans even *darshan* or the beholding of Shani when a woman is menstruating (Desai 18). It is important to remember that Shani Shinganapur does not ban women in a particular age-group like the Sabarimala shrine in Kerala. The ban is on women of all age groups and only *darshan* is allowed to them. However, to menstruating women, even that is prohibited. There’s a separate section called “Ladies’ views about Shani” in the book which discusses interviews of local women.

“We have no complaints, without hesitation, we go to seek vision and seek vision of God without entering the temple or without stepping on the holy platform. Our sons and husbands can seek the vision of God in close proximity, ultimately it is ours. So, we don’t feel any difference between men and women. We are happy and satisfied and we have no complaints” (Desai 36)

Here, I have quoted from the interview of Vithabhai Yashwant Borude, which is narrated in *Significance of Shani Shinganapur*. The book narrates interviews other local women and

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.hindujagruti.org/news/85686.html>

dismisses any kind of discrimination against women in the Shani temple. For the women interviewees, it is not necessary to enter the inner sanctum of the Shani temple as they have true faith in Shani.

"*Bhai Saab*, in my mind there is absolutely no complaint about this, no hesitation, I am always happy. When husband and children went to the foundation and took a glimpse of God Shani, it was the same as my taking it. There is no difference between them males and us females. Whether the *darshan* is taken from there near the deity or from down here, there is no difference. Faith depends on the happy mind. And so, when we take the glimpse of God from below here, we find peace of mind" (Desai 35).

Though the temple trust declined association with other regional Hindutva organisations, there were around 18 such organisations that supported the trust's decision to stop the activists from entering the village on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2016, the day which was chosen by Bhumata Ranragini Brigade to barge inside the inner sanctum of the Shani temple. One such organisation, Hindu Janjagruiti Samiti, called for a "Movement to Protect Hindus' Religious Traditions" and organized a 'Chalo Shinganapur' drive on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2016. It also prepared a long list of the reasons supporting the ban on women in the inner sanctum of the temple. One of the important reasons which it mentions is that every deity has a certain function to perform and Shani is a fierce deity and therefore the energy of such a deity can cause distress to women. Therefore women should be only allowed *darshan* from a distance. In the interviews of the members associated with the temple trust, in the booklets circulated by the trust and in the statements of Hindutva organisations, the question of women's bodies is at the forefront. Unlike the Sabarimala Shrine in Kerala, the discourse in Shinganapur does not openly talk about the

menstruating and ‘fertile’ bodies of women and bans the presence of women belonging to every age group.

### **Hindu Nationalism and the Ban on Women’s Entry**

The role of religion in society is related to both public and private spheres. It cannot be essentially a matter of private faith. The discourse built by the temple trust and the Hindutva organisations supporting the trust during the agitation organized by Bhumata Ranragini Brigade was not limited to the question of personal faith and belief. The tropes of true ‘Hindu-ness’, nationalism and Hindu nationalism were invoked. In *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender and Sampraday*, Antony Copley (18) asks where one can locate the religious experience. Is it essentially a private affair or should it be regulated in the public sphere? According to Copley (24), the religious experience fatal change the more it veers into the public sphere. Here, he focuses on the politics of Hindutva.

Now, if one looks at the kind of counter-agitations which were organized by the temple trust along with other regional and national Hindutva organisations, one will find the invocation of Hindu nationalism. In January, 2016, a “Rashtriya Hindu Andolan” was organized in response to Bhumata Brigade’s declaration to break the tradition of banning women in the inner sanctum<sup>9</sup>. In one of the public statements circulated by Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, the issue of Shani Shinganapur is being discussed alongside the issue of displaced Kashmiri Hindus and Malda riots in Bengal. This public statement is a call to save Hindu religion and dharma from everything which these Hindutva organisations consider ‘anti-hindu’, such as Kashmiri Muslim, Muslims in West Bengal and the Bhumata Brigade. In other public statements, the emphasis is

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.hindujagruti.org/news/72866.html>  
Published January 19, 2016

not on the tradition of not allowing women into the sanctum of Shinganapur as something unique to Shinganapur. Rather, there is an invocation of larger Hindu traditions and culture. This homogenous understanding of Hindu religion and traditions dismisses everyone who seeks to reform the traditions of the Shani Shinganapur temple as non-Hindu and atheist.

### **Women and Divine Space**

Gendered bodies and gendered spaces are produced. How do conditions of spatiality construct the bodily practices of women or how do the bodily practices of women construct the spatial? Space enables the definition of material bodies. One of the most important ways of defining objects is in terms of the spaces they occupy (Niranjana 34). However, this does not mean that spaces are unchanging and homogenous. Space is not an independent category and is constructed out of social relations (Massey 2). It is important to discuss how spatiality produces gendered bodies and the how embodied persons negotiate in these social spaces and change the dynamics of these spaces. How can one understand the bodily experiences of women in a divine space like the inner sanctum of Shinganapur? The myths around Shinganapur and Shani worship do not provide space for women's bodies. Can the village and the holy platform in the temple remain as idyllic and magical as it has been imagined when women's bodies start claiming them? It won't be fair to say that the negotiations between women's bodies and the divine space only began when the activists of the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade claimed the inner sanctum or when the Bombay High Court gave judgement in support of the entry of women in the sanctum of the temple. Earlier, when women were not allowed entry into the holy platform, they had defined their bodily experience in the divine space through *darshan*. However, *darshan* here also become a way of keeping women's bodies and sexuality at a distance from the divine space. Religious rituals and practices do not only engage in transactions with the divine but also mobilize space in

definitions of communities (Niranjana 83). Here, it is important to see which community has access to the sacred space and which is not allowed access.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued in this chapter that temple as a divine place is created through myths, stories and social structure, and also through the presence and absence of women's bodies. The Shani temple in Shinganapur maintains an aura which is not only limited to the temple but is spread in the entire village. The tradition of banning women inside the inner sanctum of the temple is an important part of this aura. However, by this I do not intend to say that the divine space does not require women. The divine space is shaped with a differentiation between 'true' Hindu women of Shinganapur who still uphold the age-old tradition and those women who enter the inner sanctum. The organisation of the temple does not take place in isolation from the social and gender relations.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **BHUMATA RANRAGINI BRIGADE: INTERSECTION OF FAITH AND FEMINIST POLITICS**

The idea of locating origins for the women's movements in India is an enormous task. Do they have "beginnings" or "origins"? Which moment in the Indian women's movement led to another? In this huge cycle of continuity, I choose to locate the Indian women's movement(s) in the subject of my study, and not vice versa. The women's movement does not stand in isolation as other social movements form an integral part of it and vice versa (Agnes 152). The contradictions and ideological shifts are present within both women's movement and social movements. In this chapter, I intend to discuss a Pune based organisation, run by women, comprising of Hindu believing women in majority. Bhumata Ranragini Brigade as an organisation invokes both the religious and the secular framework. It surpasses the religious-secular binary which has been an important tool in discussing different periods of the Indian Women's Movement. This chapter asks questions of religion, and its engagement with feminist politics. I intend to discuss these questions through Bhumata Ranragini Brigade's work as an organisation; its engagements with the question of faith and constitutional values and lastly, its role in the Shani Shingnapur temple entry agitation.

Firstly, I discuss the women's movement and the Hindu Right in India. In the further sections of the chapter, I introduce Bhumata Ranragini Brigade. In these sections, I discuss how feminist politics can be seen engaging with the question of religion through the kind of work Bhumata

Ranragini Brigade does as an organisation. In the final section, I discuss the Shani Shingnapur temple entry agitation 2015-2016 which was organized and led by Bhumata Ranragini Brigade.

### **Women, Religion and the Hindu Right**

While recognising the differences among women without imbibing any particular identity, the issues before women's movements in India are certainly complex. There is no neat framework within which women's movements can address issues such as secularism, religion and communal politics.

Questions of religion, particularly, faith, piety and belief have remained areas of relatively benign neglect amongst feminist scholars in India (Nair 2017). Feminist discussions were centred on the religious, political and legal rights of women during and in the aftermath of the Shah Bano case (Mohd Ahmed Khan v Shah Bano Begum 1985). The feminist scholarship on religion witnessed a major shift during the critical years of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the demolition of the Babri Masjid. These years saw large scale participation of women in politicised religiosity. The enormous amount of support given to the movement by participants from all regions, classes and castes of India reminded how strong the hold of religious belief and meaning is in the subcontinent. In *Women and the Hindu Right*, Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia discuss the anguish that feminists experienced when they came face-to-face with women marching in support of the Hindu Right and the Hindutva politics. This assertive participation of women in right wing politics and campaigns shattered the previously held assumptions that women can only be victims of violence and not perpetrators and most importantly, the public and political activity of women can always be seen as a positive liberating force. The question of informed consent and agency was also very much at the forefront as the women of the Hindu

right were both leading and participating in the right-wing campaigns in large numbers. Sarkar and Butalia (1995:4) emphasise on the need to identify the social bases of the women's contingent, their ideology, their gender notions and the larger social interests with which they have been mobilised. It's also important to look at the direction into which such activism in which women are involved is going to lead and the role it plays in terms of gender politics (Sarkar and Butalia 5). Religious fundamentalism by the Hindu Right provides an important and new legitimacy to keep the Hindu woman under patriarchal control and at the same time allow them to move away from the narrow confines of their private arenas. Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman (105) discuss this strategy in the context of the new Hindu woman of Hindutva. According to them, the new Hindu woman may be educated and may work outside of the Home but she might still be constituted through the discourses of *Shakti* (strength) and *Sita* symbolising chastity, purity and loyalty. The RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) takes a strong stand against violence against women and organises regular congregations of women to teach them self-defence. A strong Hindu woman is then seen as crucial for a strong Hindu nation (Kapur and Cossman 106). Hindu communal forces usurped the ways and medium of protest popularised by the feminist movement such as protest marches and road blocks, while at the same time it totally rejected the women's movement's ideological stand. The women's movement in India had adopted a populist approach through the usage of mythical symbols like Shakti and Kali in order to reach out to women from different classes, castes and cultures. However, the intention of using these symbols was not to promote Hindu religion and ideology (Agnes 139). These symbols were also efficiently used in the Hindutva campaigns and soon the symbol of *Durga* became a symbol of aggression against Muslim community. The engagement of women with their religion proves to be highly beneficial for Hindutva politics.

However, newer forms of religious engagements cannot be seen only in the arena of ‘Hindutva’ or orthodox Islam or Christianity. Apart from the question of bringing visibility to women in the public sphere, new forms of religious engagements not only provide sources of identity and access to forces of legitimation, they also develop new forms of spatial and ritualistic practices (Nair 39). How important is the role of engagements then for feminist politics and scholarship?

Bhumata Ranragini Brigade finds a place in these engagements. As an organisation it strategically leverages constitutional rights over religious rights in order to claim religious spaces. The state and particularly the institution of Law have been summoned time and again to the aid of women who have asked for equal right to worship within communities. The invocation of constitutional rights here is not against faith but to enable it (Nair 38). Apart from law and state, believing women have also redefined piety not as a form of abstinence but as an assertion of equality to all religious spaces. This can be seen as a different way of embracing religiosity rather than rejecting it. This kind of religion engagement may open new possibilities for feminist politics. Can one read feminist politics in these engagements instead of situating these in the larger arena of feminist politics? From earlier feminist positions that either religion outright or debated for its secularisation, new feminist politics and also the women’s movements appear more acceptable towards the belief that faith and belief may not always be patriarchal and open doors for feminist politics and engagements (Nair 39).

### **Bhumata Ranragini Brigade: Between Religious and Secular Frameworks?**

At this juncture, before introducing Bhumata Ranragini Brigade, I would like to discuss what makes it different from other women’s groups and collectives which engage with religion. The engagements of women with religion have been diverse and sometimes contrary to each other.

For Goddess-inspired activism of the Hindu Right, the use of Hindu religious symbols becomes an attempt to marginalise minority communities and those who do not fit in the Hindu order. In RSS and VHP Shakhas, the para-military training given to women revolves around the empowered Goddess trope. It is interesting to see the women of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade invoking both constitutional rights and religious practices. Through constitutional guarantee of equal rights for all, these women have challenged and reframed the religious rights. The question of religious reform becomes important in this context. In “Women’s Movement and Religion”, Gabriel Dietrich (2008) questions the relationship of the women’s movement to genuine religious reforms. According to her, genuine religious reforms enable individual and groups to participate in secular political processes which are struggling for equality of all citizens and against economic, political and cultural exploitation, without being forced to abandon the faith dimension of their religious identity. The question of religion has not been raised in depth in the women’s movement (Dietrich 2008). Though the identification of which religious engagement is not communal in nature or which religious engagement might open door for feminist politics is difficult, it must be discussed repeatedly and vigorously. Though Bhumata Ranragini Brigade comprises of Hindu believing women in large number and even the name of the organisation invokes Hindu Goddesses which I discuss further in the section below, it cannot be aligned with the women ‘shakhas’ of RSS and VHP. However, one can also not assimilate this organisation in the secular women’s organisations, which maintain a distance from engaging with religions. Instead of trying to locate Bhumata Ranragini Brigade in the women’s movements, it would be fruitful to understand the work being done by this organisation and how can one locate the components of women’s movement in it. In the next section of the chapter, I discuss Bhumata Ranragini Brigade through the information I gathered in my ethnographic study.

## **Introducing Bhumata Ranragini Brigade**

Bhumata Ranragini Brigade is the women's wing of Bhumata Brigade. It is based in Pune and was established in 2010. The membership of the organisation is open to members of all genders, classes, castes and religions. The organisation was established and is run under the guidance of Trupti Desai who is the President of the organisation. It currently has 25,000 members in 15 districts of Maharashtra. Kantilal Anna Gaware is the chairperson of the organisation. Though Bhumata Ranragini Brigade is the women's wing of Bhumata Brigade, both work together. The members of the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade have asserted in their interviews that their organisation works on the principle of humanity and justice. They claim to work for farmers, Dalits, Muslims, women and other marginalized sections of society. The senior members of the organisation have been working in similar areas since 2004. However the organisation was formally established in 2010.

The name of the organisation invokes Hindu goddesses. However, the organisation does not limit itself to members of only Hindu religion. In one of the interviews, Trupti Desai said,

“We chose the name “Bhumata” because the land which gives us everything, from food to house is “dharti-mata”, “Bhumata” for us. I consider that my work is of aggressive nature. We work aggressively so we work as an army works and therefore we chose “Brigade” and since the organisation was taking up the issues of women, we feel women should be like Goddess Durga and ‘Jhansi ki Rani’. “Ranragini” is another name of Durga in Marathi. Therefore, we named our organisation “Bhumata Ranragini Brigade”.

Though Bhumata Ranragini Brigade became known at the national level through the Shani Shingnapur temple entry agitation, it engages with many issues other than women and religion. However, as the name of the organisation suggests, the idea of a reformed and empowering religion lies at the centre.

The organisation fights for the rights of farmers in Pune district. It has also time and again fought against farmers' suicides. The organisation runs awareness campaigns against female infanticide in the villages of Maharashtra. This initiative's name is 'Kanya Ratna Janmaotsav Abhiyana'. It was started from Shingnapur right after the completion of one year of women's entry in the shrine of Shani Shingnapur temple. This place was chosen by the members of the organisation because they believe equality came to that place through the opening of the doors of the temple for women. Another important campaign being run by the organisation is for liquor free Maharashtra.

Another important aspect of the Bhumata Brigade is the aggressive, fierce and militant stands it has taken in cases of violence against women. The organisation is in the process of creating groups of women in villages called "Taigiri Squad". According to Trupti Desai, "Taigiri" is a response and challenge to male dominance and male dominated concepts like "dadagiri" and "bhaigiri". Groups of 7 women are being formed in every locality, into what are known as "Taigiri Squads" to fight cases of eve-teasing. These women will beat the perpetrator up with slippers and sticks. According to Desai, it's a symbolic gesture to get the attention of authorities as in many of the cases; the police do not register the cases of violence against women. The invoking of militant Hindu goddess figures by Bhumata Ranragini Brigade is a part of the establishment of such squads. The recuperation of a Hindu goddess as a feminist figure is problematic in the present historical juncture as the same is being done by radicalized Hindu

groups such as RSS and VHP in their women's wings. However, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1998) discusses in "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" it's important to consider who is invoking the Hindu goddess figure as symbol of woman power and who is opposing it. What investments can one discern in the investment in the goddess (Rajan 1998)? The invocation of gods and goddesses cannot be detached from the location of the groups who advocate them. How efficient are goddess tropes for feminist politics then? The question of the relationship between Indian goddesses and women has multiple dimensions and leads to contradictory answers depending upon how the question is framed; who is asking and who is answering it. Even if one hesitates or refuses to call the goddess a feminist, she raises feminist questions (Hiltebeitel and Erndl 20). The goddesses as symbols are not tied to their primary cultural matrices according to Hiltebeitel and Erndl (21) and are fluid with respect to both place and time. The Hindu "anti-God" Shani is acquiring a new mobility in occupying prime shrine spaces in many street corners of the country. Usually worshipped by the lower castes and marginal communities, Shani's rise has also been enabled by women worshipers (Nair 2017). Similarly, the invocation of Hindu Dalit goddess Pochamma (a popular Dalit-Bahujan goddess in Andhra Pradesh) is politically more in affiliation with democratic feminism (Rajan 1998). Though Bhumata Ranragini Brigade takes up aggressive stands on the cases of violence against women, it also clearly mentions that it believes in the Indian Constitution and does not want to indulge in violent practices. Is the invocation of goddess tropes feminist in the context of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade? As Rita M. Gross (104) answers to a similar question in "Is the Goddess a Feminist?"; the answer here would also be 'It depends'. It depends on how the term feminist is defined and who the Goddess' devotees are (Gross 104).



The organisation receives 10-15 complaints regarding cases of violence against women every day. Most of these complaints come in form of letters and phone calls. The complainants are women in most of the cases and the cases include dowry, physical and mental abuse and torture for having a girl child. In few cases, women have demanded Bhumata Ranragini Brigade to take direct action against the husband and the in-laws. However, majority of cases come after the complainant has already filed an F.I.R and further needs support of the Bhumata Brigade to exert pressure on the authorities.

Bhumata Ranragini Brigade's awareness campaigns run through pamphlets, posters and word of mouth. Their pamphlets and posters played crucial role in organizing the temple entry agitation in Shingnapur. Before discussing how religion and invocation of faith plays a major part in the posters and pamphlets, I would like to discuss the involvement of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade with the temple entry agitation in Shingnapur.

### **Bhumata Ranragini Brigade and the Shani Shingnapur Temple-Entry Agitation**

“On 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2015, a young female devotee broke the ban against women's entry in Shani Shingnapur temple and climbed the holy platform of Lord Shani and touched God's statue. Nobody knows who that girl was. Later, the temple trustees and prominent villagers of Shingnapur organized a meeting and declared that God Shani has become impure because a woman touched him. After the meeting, the statue of Shani was cleansed with milk and water. These incidents were reported on TV and we watched them. Isn't cow a female animal? Why are they using cow's milk then? Will God not get impure in this case? I am a believer myself. There are temples of Lord Shani and Lord Maruti near my house and people in large numbers worship in these

places. If women are allowed to worship in these temples, then why can they not in Shingnapur? God doesn't differentiate between men and women. God's blessings are equal for people of all genders. No matter what is the gender of God, they are born from a woman's womb. If feminine energy is behind the birth of Gods and Goddesses, then how can men stop women from entering and worshipping in temples? After watching that news on television, I called a meeting of the members of my organisation and decided to visit Shingnapur"

"Women are not impure and the Indian Constitution gives us the right to claim spaces. The Trustees are misusing their power. Religion does not say this. Religion does not give second-class citizenship to women, men do"

(Trupti Desai)

Here, I quote from one of Trupti Desai's interviews in my ethnographic study. I met Trupti Desai for the first time in June, 2017 and since then I have met her several times to understand the kind of work her organisation is doing and particularly how it organized the temple-entry agitation in Shingnapur. Trupti Desai lives in Gurukrupa Apartment on the busy Pune-Satara road in Dhankawadi locality of Pune. One can easily find the name-plate of the woman whose organisation played a central role in the agitation to enter the main shrine of the Shani temple in Shingnapur; the temple which had not allowed women to enter in last 400 years of its existence. She started working as an activist with Krantiveer Jhopdi Vikas Sangh. In 2007, she protested against Ajit Cooperative Bank with NCP heavyweight Ajit Pawar as its chairman, for allegedly perpetrating a fraud of 50 crores. After her campaign against Ajit Cooperative Bank, a few people suggested to Desai that she should form a social organization; this led to the formation of

Bhumata Brigade on September 27, 2010. In her interview, Trupti Desai has discussed how her organisation got involved in the question of women's entry in the shrine of Shani Shingnapur temple. On 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2015, a young female devotee broke the restriction in Shani Shingnapur temple and climbed the holy platform of Lord Shani and touched God's statue. When the members of Bhumata Brigade came to know that a woman had entered the core shrine area of Shani temple which was deemed sacrilegious, they decided to go to the temple to enter the shrine area. On December 20, 2015, when some women from the Bhumata Brigade including Trupti Desai tried to enter the sanctum, they were stopped by 15-20 guards. Even after requesting the temple trust several times, they didn't get any response and then they decided to enter the shrine area on the Republic Day, 2016.

In her interviews, Trupti Desai has clearly mentioned that if the religious traditions are wrong and against women, then they should be challenged. According to her, 'Sati' system was banned, and several other forms of injustice against women, like taboos against widows and child marriage were challenged in earlier times. According to her, this is how a society moves towards change. Though Trupti Desai considers herself a devout Hindu, she did not consider it a contradiction, to demand the right to enter the temple; she saw this as a part of the rights provided to her by the Constitution and those enshrined in the Maharashtra Hindu Places of Worship (Entry Authorization) Act, 1956.

When Bhumata Ranragini Brigade started the agitation, they were blamed for standing against the Hindu religion by the some political parties and 'Hindutva' organisations in Maharashtra. I would discuss how these organisations framed Bhumata Ranragini Brigade's work as anti-Hindu and atheist in nature in the later sections of the chapter. It is significant that religion remains at the center of these debates.

Trupti Desai has time and again mentioned in her interviews that her organisation is not opposed to any religion. The Hindutva organisations blamed the Bhumata Brigade for humiliating Hindu religion. These organisations declared that they would not allow it to break the 400 year old tradition in Shingnapur.

Trupti Desai has questioned religion and religious practices followed at the Shani temple in Shingnapur. In her interview, Trupti Desai questions the tradition of not allowing women in the shrine of the Shani temple. She asks whether the temple trust has any proof of how and why this tradition was maintained for the last 400 years. Secondly, she questions the temple trust's stand on the impurity of women. Her organisation was told by the temple trust that women are impure, that God Shani cannot take the shadow of women and that God Shani's wife had cursed that women should not come near him, and that the rays coming from Shani's stone idol might harm the reproductive organs of women. Bhumata Brigade claimed that they would send pregnant women members from their organisation on the holy platform to challenge the traditions and belief followed at the Shani temple.

“If God doesn't stop any devotee, how could the temple trust members and other villagers stop women? If this temple became popular through devotees, then why should there be a difference among devotees? Can women not become devotees?”

(Trupti Desai)

On 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2016, 1200 women started out from Pune for Shingnapur. Bhumata Brigade led this agitation. Women agitators were stopped in Supa village which is 50 kilometers away from Shingnapur and were not allowed to even enter the district. The agitators were further detained by the Police.

“We believed in God and God must have also been thinking that injustice is happening with women. If God would not have been in the form of an idol and if he could speak, he would have allowed women to enter the shrine. If this is God’s will, then who could stop us? We kept protesting”.

(Trupti Desai)

On 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2016, the High Court verdict came out in response to the Public Interest Litigation filed by Neelima Vartak and Vidya Bal. The verdict made the implementation of the 1956 Act mandatory. On 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2016, the members of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade went to Shingnapur and they were stopped again. They were beaten up by both local men and women of the village and further detained by the Police. Since, the Bombay High Court had already given the judgement in support of women’s entry in sanctum of the Shingnapur temple, the Police and the temple authorities had to allow the activists to enter and worship in the sanctum of the temple. The 400 year old tradition was broken on that day. Since then, women can enter the main shrine of the Shani temple without any restrictions.

### **Bhumata Ranragini Brigade: Gender, Religion and Feminist Politics**

Trupti Desai reflects upon right to religious practices and engagements for women and this claim is supported by the Right to Equality given in the Indian Constitution and the Maharashtra Hindu Places of Worship (Entry Authorization) Act, 1956. Here, embrace of religion cannot be seen as a constraint for women. In the intertwined context of religion, politics and social agitations, how can one place the demands of believing women? Though there is a constant invocation of religion and injustice in the eyes of God, the demand for this kind of religious reform has been based on constitutional guarantees. Religion makes woman an ever more marked and

differentiated category. Considering religion only a constraint and reading the embrace of religious affiliations and institutions as false consciousness open very few doors for feminist engagement with religion. Religion cannot be detached from historical contexts, social frameworks, political struggles and institutional constraints (Castelli 2001). It is important to question how religion(s) is “produced” at a certain time, in a certain location. The questions whether women should be allowed inside a place of worship open up many more questions. If we talk about gender as defined or produced by the divine in the human realm, we need to see it as a question of difference and power. In the Shani Shingnapur temple-entry agitation, it is important to see who is questioning the religious traditions and demanding a change in them. A group of hundreds of women did not only claim a divine space but also the customary practices to which they belong. The attempt was not to relinquish the God-devotee relationship but how to remain a devotee when their right to worship in religious spaces is curtailed by a 400 year old religious tradition in Shingnapur. Here, women’s experiences become a major source for reconstructing religious history. The focus on women’s experiences in reconstructing religious history does not only reconstruct the understanding of gender but also reconstructs the understanding of religious beliefs (King 1995). Women’s role in religious traditions either through participation or non-participation, through support or protest, through solidarity or denial is important to be read to make the conversation possible between gender and religion. Both absence and presence of women are equally important in understanding how certain faith practices become dominant and then how they are challenged. The posters and pamphlets used by women in mobilizing women during the Shingnapur agitation are important to understand how certain religious beliefs are being challenged through invoking both faith and constitutional values. In the next section of the chapter, I discuss how certain religious tropes are repeated in

the visual and written material produced by the Bhumata Brigade along with the ideas of equality and justice.

## Shani Shingnapur Temple-Entry Agitation and the Mobilization of Women

In this section, I discuss the posters and pamphlets which have been used by the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade to spread awareness about certain issues. Among these, the question of temple-entry is the most crucial one. As I have discussed earlier, 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2016 was chosen by the Bhumata Brigade to enter the religious space which was banned for women in the Shani temple. A detailed pamphlet was circulated by the organisation in Pune and nearby districts in Maharashtra to mobilize women to join the agitation.

**चला शनिशििंगणापूर**

**मागू अन्यायाची दाद,  
देवाच्या दारी  
न्यायासाठी हाक.**

**महिला जन आंदोलन  
२६ जानेवारी २०१६**

येत्या २६ जानेवारीला नवीन क्रांतीच्या चळवळीत सहभागी होण्यासाठी तसेच इतिहासाचे साक्षीदार होण्यासाठी चला शनिशििंगणापूर .

**भूमाता रणरागिणी ब्रिगेडचे महाराष्ट्रातील सर्व शनिभक्त आणि महिलांना आवाहन.**

भारतीय राज्य घटनेने दिलेल्या स्त्री पुरुष समानता अधिकार भिळविण्यासाठी महिलांना शनिचौथ-न्यावर दर्शन घेऊन २६ जानेवारीला स्वप्नार नवीन इतिहास...

सौ. तृतीताई देसाई (अध्यक्षा)  
भूमाता रणरागिणी ब्रिगेड, महाराष्ट्र राज्य.  
+९१ ९३२६२०१२१२

**नवी पहाट उजाडेल  
महिलांना हक्क मिळेल.**

**भूमाता  
रणरागिणी**  
प्रतिष्ठान (ब्रिगेड)

**चला शनिशििंगणापूर**

**महिला जन आंदोलन २६ जानेवारी २०१६**

शनिदेवावर निस्सीम भक्ती असणाऱ्या आणि छत्रपती शिवाजी महाराज, डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर, सावित्रीबाई फुले, छत्रपती शाहु महाराज, अहिल्याबाई होळकर यांच्या विचारसरणीला भूमाता ब्रिगेडचा प्रवेश देणार पुन्हा एकदा उजाळा....

या जनआंदोलनात आपल्या आई बहिणींना त्यांचा हक्क व अधिकार मिळवून देण्यासाठी सर्व समाजातील महिलां व पुरुषांनी पुढाकार घेऊन पाठिंबा द्यावा आणि सहभागी व्हावे...

शनिशििंगणापूर येथील चौथ-न्यावर महिला प्रवेशबंदी याचा कोणत्याही वेद, उपनिषद यात उल्लेख नाही त्यामुळे ही प्रथा महिलांना दुय्यम स्थान देण्यासाठी आणि महिलांचा अपमान करणारी आहे.

आमच्या या चळवळीला विरोध करणारे नागरिक व संघटना यांना भारतीय राज्यघटना मान्य नाही का ? तसेच महिलांचा सन्मान बघवत नाही का ?

आता महिलांसाठी समानतेच्या नव्या पर्वाला आरंभ ...

पुष्पकताई केवडकर, सौ. मनिपाताई टिळेकर, सौ. प्रियंकाताई जगताप  
व सर्व पदाधिकारी भूमाता रणरागिणी ब्रिगेड.

**सभासद नोंदणी व अधिक माहिती करीता संपर्क  
+९१ ९६०४०३२३२ / +९१ ९७६२३६०००५**

**नवी पहाट उजाडेल, महिलांना हक्क मिळेल.**

Picture 1

Picture 1 depicts the pamphlet which was circulated right before the 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2016 march to Shani Shingnapur. It assertively asks the readers to march towards Shingnapur. It asks for justice in the divine space. It considers 26<sup>th</sup> January as a historic day as this day was chosen to break the 400 year old tradition in the Shani temple. The pamphlet asks the support of the devotees of Shani and those who follow the ideology of B.R. Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj and Ahilyabai Holkar. Both men and women have been called upon to participate in and support the movement. The pamphlet invokes both Constitutional rights and the religious scriptures. It says that the Vedas and Upanishads do not give a secondary position to women and neither does the Indian Constitution. It ends with the reminder that a new chapter for women's equality is going to begin. This new form of religious engagement not only provides new forms of legitimation as the demand for women's equality is not only being made through quoting the names of religious texts and similarly not solely on the basis of the constitutional rights. Apart from legitimation, it also sets new form of identity, where these women participants are not only believers but also constitution abiding citizens who are defining their belief through the Constitution.





## Picture 2

I discussed Bhumata Ranragini Brigade's concept of 'taigiri' in opposition to 'bhagiri' or 'dadagiri' in the earlier sections. The poster in Picture 2 is aimed towards the irresponsible behavior of the Government and how the rotten mentality against women is affecting women adversely. Later, the poster declares that it is time for 'taigiri'.

### **Shani Shingnapur Temple-Entry Agitation and the Hindu Right in Maharashtra**

When Bhumata Ranragini Brigade organized an agitation against the tradition barring women from entering the sanctum sanctorum of the Shani temple, the Shingnapur temple trust retaliated by mobilizing women of the Shingnapur village and nearby villages who protested against the women activists of the Bhumata Brigade. Many regional and national 'Hindutva' organisations also came out in support of the temple trust and the continuation of the 400 year old tradition. Around 18 organisations and political parties supported the Shani Shingnapur temple trust's demand to maintain the 400 year old tradition. The question of women's entry to the sacred platform of Shani Shingnapur temple was soon reformulated as an attack on 'Sanatan Dharma' by these organisations. In this section, I would discuss the public statements given by some of these organisations in 2016 regarding Bhumata Ranragini Brigade and the question of temple entry. The divide between Hindu religion and atheism in their statements is evidently clear.

“Devout Hindus, Shani-devotees, Hindutvavadi women, local residents and Devasthan Trust members took it upon themselves to protect religious traditions of Hindus as they learnt about the plan of atheist women from 'Bhumata Brigade' who were not ready to accept Dharma-Shashtra, had decided to go to Shani Shingnapur and try to climb the temple sanctum.”

(Hindu Janajagruti Samiti)<sup>10</sup>

Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, a Maharashtra based Hindu organisation circulated pamphlets and issued statements against Bhumata Ranragini Brigade and in support of the Shingnapur temple trust and the ban on women inside the Shani temple. These statements and pamphlets circulated by the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti mainly emphasized on two aspects. One, that the local women of Shingnapur are still observing the tradition of not going to the holy temple pedestal and second, that the activists of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade are not true Hindus and they are anti-religion and atheists. In the public statements published on their website, Hindu Janajagruti Samiti has asked 'all' women to consider the local women of Shingnapur as their ideals and devote time for the protection of 'dharma'. In many other pamphlets, the Hindutva organisation has called the women of Bhumata Brigade atheists, devoid of religious knowledge. The binary between the women activists of Bhumata Brigade and the women of Shingnapur has been clearly established by these Hindutva organisations. The fear was not only against the breaking of a tradition in the Shani temple but against hurting the religious sentiment of Hindus. The Hindutva organisations along with the Shani temple trust jointly asked the Maharashtra Government to ban Bhumata Brigade.

Gender relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities as well as in most cultural conflicts and contestations (Yuval-Davis 1997). The Hindutva organisations which spoke against the Bhumata Brigade saw its activities not only an attack on the traditional practices of the Shani temple but more of a larger attack on Hindu 'culture'. Although the discourse of religion and culture is distinct from that of power relations, it is always embedded in them both historically and substantially. Who would culturally and

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.hindujagruti.org>

politically be excluded when religion gets incorporated into hegemonic traditions of different collectivities and acquire specific cultural signifiers? A hegemonic practice of not allowing women entry into sacred spaces is not only restricted to the question of divine space and accessibility. However, the agitation by the women of the Bhumata Brigade was seen as an attack on Hindu religion and believers. Sexuality and gender are central in the constructions of inclusions and exclusions in religious and cultural imaginations (King 1995). Gender relations are often seen as constituting the essence of cultures. The burden of representation is on women as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour (Yuval-Davis 1997). Though the Hindu believing women of the Bhumata Brigade have time and again asserted that they are not against the Hindu religion but against the traditional and ritual practices in religions which curtail the rights of women, their attempt of making reforms or making a space within the folds of religion has been completely dismissed by the trustees of the Shani temple and the Hindutva organisations which support them. The binary created by these organisations is not between a good and a bad Hindu believer. The binary is between a Hindu and a non-Hindu, a believer and an atheist.

### **(Un) tying the Loose Ends**

The chapter has discussed the role played by the Bhumata Brigade in organizing the Shani Shingnapur temple entry agitation. The attempt has been to locate feminist politics in Bhumata Brigade's engagement with the question of women's entry in the Shani temple. The chapter began with a discussion on women's movement and the Hindu Right in India and the location of religion and concluded with the reception and attacks received by the Bhumata Brigade by the Hindutva organisations in Maharashtra. Alongside I pose the question of whether a conversation between a religious and a secular framework is possible. I have attempted to discuss these

questions through Bhumata Ranragini Brigade's work as an organisation; its engagements with the question of faith and constitutional values and lastly, its role in the Shani Shingnapur temple entry agitation. Cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities are shaped immensely through gender relations. Which definition of religion becomes hegemonic and which one is sidelined as not a part of religion? Though women activists of the Bhumata Brigade have claimed to be devout Hindus, their demand to reform the Hindu religion through the assistance of constitutional rights and values has led to their being characterized as atheists and non-believers by the Hindu Right.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “WOMAN” NOT ALLOWED IN SANCTUM SANCTORUM

#### WHOSE BODIES, WHOSE SPACES?

##### Introduction

“The entry in Sabarimala temple is prohibited only in respect of women of a particular age-group and not women as a class”

*S. Mahendran v. Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board* (1993, 10).<sup>11</sup>

“In short, women after menarche up to menopause are not entitled to enter the temple and offer prayers at any time of the year” *S. Mahendran v. Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board* (1993, 10).<sup>12</sup>

“To put it schematically: “women” is historically, discursively constructed, and always relative to other categories which themselves change; “women” is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned ...How can it be overlooked that women are a natural as well as characterized category, and that their distinctive needs and sufferings are all too real.” (Riley, 12)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See *S. Mahendran v. Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board*, AIR 1993 Ker 42. Pg 10. The Judgment can be found at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1915943/> (Accessed 30 March 2017)

<sup>12</sup> See *S. Mahendran v. Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board*, AIR 1993 Ker 42. Pg 10. The Judgment can be found at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1915943/> (Accessed 30 March 2017)

<sup>13</sup> Riley, Denise. “*Am I that Name?*” *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. Pp 1-2,5,6.

“Woman” is historically and discursively constructed and so are the categories of law and faith practices. In this chapter, I intend to discuss the construction of “woman” as a category through the intersection of law and faith. Though these faith practices fall under the larger rubric of Hinduism and Islam in India, I would like to narrow it down to two places of worship and their practices.

The legislations regarding the question of temple entry have a long history. The people who were considered untouchables were prevented from entering any of the common temples to which persons belonging to the four ‘varnas’ freely visited for the purpose of worship. The movement for temple entry was first started in Travancore by the Ezhavas in 1919. The agitations for temple entry developed and intensified in pre and post-Independence period. However, it was mainly discussed with respect to caste. The Bombay High Court verdicts in the Shani Shingnapur case (2016) and the Haji Ali Dargah case (2016) open up the category woman and so does the Mahendran case (1993) related to Sabarimala shrine in Kerala. Law and Constitutional rights provide a framework through which I intend to understand the engagement of women with the question of temple entry at Shingnapur. This chapter emerges out of the larger discussions around the question of banning women in sacred spaces in the court verdicts.

### **“Woman” at the Intersection of Law and Faith Practices**

The Mahendran Case (1993) and a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by a group of young lawyers in the Supreme Court against the state of Kerala are my entry points in understanding the (un)making of the category “woman” in the context of ban on the entry of “fertile” women aged between 10 to 50 years in the Sabarimala temple in Kerala. The Bombay High Court judgment (2016) rejecting the ban on the entry of women in the main shrine of Haji Ali Dargah is my other

entry point. Finally, I will discuss the Bombay High Court verdict which allowed the entry of women in the Shingnapur shrine. These legal documents do not merely shape “woman” as a category but also mould the categories of law and religion. However, in this chapter, I intend to focus on “woman” and how this category is shaped through the intersection of law and faith practices.

In Sabarimala temple, women belonging to the reproductive age-group of 10 to 50 are not allowed to enter or participate in its annual pilgrimage because Ayyappan, the deity worshipped here is meant to be a celibate deity. Despite the focus on fertility, the ban lays strong emphasis on age and physical appearances. Female officers of the Kerala State Police visually assess female pilgrims and stop and question suspected violators regarding their proof of age. Physical appearance is so much at the center of this scrutiny that a youthful 65-year old woman and a well-developed 8 year old girl can easily come into the circle of legal scrutiny (Acevedo, 110). Despite the restriction on the age-group 10-50, it’s difficult to say that only age is censored here. Women’s bodies and certain kinds of women’s bodies are censored and scrutinized. A discussion on the Jaimala case is important at this juncture to understand the question of age and body and the ban on these by the temple and state authorities<sup>14</sup>. In 2006, Jaimala, a Kannada film artist confessed that she had visited Sabarimala in 1987 when she was 27 and was not aware of the ban on women’s entry into the temple. Her confession was followed by heated public discussions, legal battles and police investigations.

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/sabarimala-case-hc-lets-off-actor-jaimala/story-ApeEkCLKJKU4cQZq9ODhYK.html> and <http://www.oneindia.com/india/interview-jayamala-who-entered-sabarimala-in-1986-now-advocates-women-rights-1984061.html>. Also, see Acevedo, Deepa Das. “Celibate Gods and ‘Essential Practices’ Jurisprudence at Sabarimala, 1991-2001” *Filing Religion: State, Hinduism and Courts of Law*. Ed. Berti et al. New Delhi. Oxford University Press, 2016.

The Mahendran case began with the submission of a PIL petition at the Kerala High Court by an Ayyappan devotee in 1991. The petitioner complaint was against the visit of ‘young’ women to the Sabarimala temple. The petitioner’s major concern was the presence of wives of VIPs who may have received permission from the Travancore Devaswom Board because of their position and power. The court accepted the allegation of the petitioner that the restriction imposed on women of a particular age-group from entering the temple is a matter of religion and a matter of religious faith under Article 26 (b) of the Indian Constitution.

Another interface of law and faith practice with which the chapter engages is the Haji Ali judgment, 2016. A PIL was filed by Muslim women activists of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan against the state of Maharashtra, Haji Ali Dargah Trust and the Charity Commissioner of Maharashtra state in 2014. The Bombay High Court permitted the entry of women up to the restricted tomb area of the Haji Ali Dargah.

Lastly, I discuss the Shani Shingnapur temple entry agitation which is at the heart of my research. Women were allowed entry into the sanctum sanctorum of the Shani temple only when the Bombay High Court gave orders to implement the provisions of the Maharashtra Hindu Places of Public Worship (Entry Authorization) Act, 1956.

Women’s bodies are central in these legal discussions. Though the arguments are based on religious texts, ‘essential’ practices and constitutional provisions, all of these come together in shaping “woman”. How does one then understand “woman” and “women’s bodies” through this location, the point at which faith and law come together? How helpful then is the sex/gender binary in understanding the shaping of “woman”? The lived body experiences of women who are not allowed to enter these places of worship and how these experiences are framed in the



discourse provide insights into understanding the construction of woman as a category. This chapter does not intend to imagine a universal definition of the category “woman” but look at how the above mentioned legal cases around women’s entry into Sabarimala temple, Shingnapur shrine and Haji Ali Dargah ask questions about category “woman”. Lived experiences unlike sex are not biological. The poststructuralist feminists have questioned the sex and gender divisions. Thus, even sex is not entirely biological. Body allows us to think about subjectivity in a very different way. How shall one discuss women’s bodies which have been prohibited from entering places of worship and which have been further allowed to enter these places by law? The question “what is woman?” then becomes a political question and not only a biological one.

### **Lived Bodies and Lived Religions**

The legal documents analyzed for this research revolve around the question of women’s bodies, age and fertility. It is significant that despite these questions being at the center and of major concern, both religious and legal authorities rely on the religious texts and histories to prohibit or allow women’s entry into sacred spaces. The construction of “woman” as a category at this interface can be understood through the lived bodies of ‘young and fertile women’ in question and how these bodies are being shaped.

The Haji Ali judgment mentions the reasons declared by the Haji Ali Dargah Trust for imposing a ban on women’s entry. The idea of the bodies of women wearing blouses with wide neck bending on the *Mazaar* (tomb) was declared a site of contention. This was one of the reasons behind the ban. The onus of showing or not showing their body parts was on women. Mr. Shoab Memon who appeared for the Trust gave several reasons which place women’s bodies at the center of the ban. He relied on Quran and Hadith to strengthen his arguments. According to him

several complaints of eve-teasing and theft have been recorded with the Trust. He further states that “perverted men would come close to women and touch them inappropriately”. Therefore, the Trust found it sensible to segregate the women from men, in order to protect them. Memon also invoked the impurity of menstruating women and that they could not offer prayers in the unclean condition<sup>15</sup>. Through women’s bodies, clothing and menstruation, the definition of who the woman is in this legal document is constantly being shaped. Is this an old woman? Is this a woman in her reproductive age? Which woman needs to be protected against eve-teasing? The Dargah trustees were unanimous on the point that women should not come in close proximity to the tomb of a male saint. This was considered a sin by the Trust. Here, women’s bodies are shaped through this understanding of the Trust which restricts them from entering a particular divine space.

In Mahendran case, the court accepted the contention of the petitioner that the ban imposed on women of age-group 10-50 from entering the temple is a matter of religion and religious faith under Article 26 (b) of the Constitution. The Court ruled out the restriction of women as a discriminatory practice. The judgment prescribed, “The entry in Sabarimala temple is prohibited only in respect of women of a particular age-group and not women as a class” and in 1991 issued a direction to the Travancore Devaswom Board to not permit women above the age of 10 and under the age of 50 to enter the temple and worship during any period of the year. The fear of young and fertile women touching the celibate God is an important point in the Court document.

“Since the deity is in the form of a Naisthik Brahamachari, it is therefore believed that young women should not offer worship in the temple so that even the slightest deviation

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<sup>15</sup> See [https://sabrangindia.in/sites/default/files/160826\\_haji-ali-judgment.pdf?584](https://sabrangindia.in/sites/default/files/160826_haji-ali-judgment.pdf?584) (Accessed 30 March 2017)

from celibacy and austerity observed by the deity is not caused by the presence of such women”

*S. Mahendran v. Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board* (1993, 10)<sup>16</sup>

Though the judgment in Mahendran case says that the entry of women is prohibited only in respect to age and not women as a class, it uses the term ‘woman’ in every sentence. Who is this woman? Does one need to belong to a particular age group to be a woman? What about the older women who have crossed the age of 50 and are still menstruating? How do they then change the construction of “woman” as a category?

If one looks at the debates which took place in 2006 regarding the Jaimala case, one can see how women’s bodies are shaped in these discourses and how corporeality then shapes women. The debates mainly revolved around how a beautiful young actress could go unnoticed. Jaimala’s husband suspects that her memories of her visit in 1987 are the result of over-devotion (Acevedo 2016: 110). Here, Jaimala’s identity as a woman is shaped alongside her identity as a believing woman devotee.

In the Bombay High Court verdict which allowed the entry of women in the Shani temple in Shingnapur, the Court asks the State Government of Maharashtra to implement the provisions of the Maharashtra Hindu Places of Public Worship (Entry Authorization) Act, 1956 throughout the state of Maharashtra and it asks the Superintendents of Police and Districts Collectors of all districts to ensure that the provisions of the Act are implemented. It reminds the State government its duty to prevent any discrimination based on gender, keeping in view the provisions of Articles 15, 25 and 51-A (e) of the Constitution. Despite of an Act which was

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<sup>16</sup> See *S. Mahendran v. Secretary, Travancore Devaswom Board*, AIR 1993 Ker 42. Pg 10. The Judgment can be found at <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1915943/>

passed in 1956, women were not allowed in the Shingnapur shrine<sup>17</sup>. The 2016 judgement invokes the same Act to allow the entry of women in the temple. The emphasis in the judgement is on the failure of implementation of the Act. The category woman is an unmarked and undifferentiated category in the legal document.

### **“Woman” and Lived Bodies**

In this section, I intend to open up the questions I introduced in the last section by engaging with debates around gender, woman and body emerging from feminist political theories. Large numbers of works have been produced on women and gender history in global contexts. How shall one then open up the concept of gender to different meanings emerging from different contexts? When one sees gender as a category of historical analysis, does it mean exporting gender as an analytical category to different parts and histories of the world? How useful will that be? It is crucial to rethink the category itself in the light of different locations and histories. So, the important issue here is not what gender as a theoretical category can bring to different locations but what and how different locations contribute to the meaning of gender theoretically. It is important to give theoretical weight to the contexts in which gender is articulated, rather than imposing a previously articulated conception of gender (Sinha, 359).

There have been several critiques of extending this fixed notion of gender to other times and places and how modern European-derived gender categories cannot be translated uncritically to different societies and time periods. Age and class have emerged as important categories in understanding the constitution of gender identities.

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<sup>17</sup> See <https://barandbench.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Shani-Shingnapur.pdf>

Mrinalini Sinha (2012) suggests deriving the theoretical and conceptual categories from the empirical material itself. Can “woman” become a category of historical analysis then? In the case of Shingnapur, Sabarimala and Haji Ali Dargah, can the lived experiences of “woman” become a category of analysis? Also, what is the empirical material in the question of banning “fertile women” from entering the places of worship? Can the corporeal body become an entry point in discussing the construction of category “woman” at the interface of law and faith practices?

“If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through ‘the eternal feminine’, and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman?” (Beauvoir 1956:2)<sup>18</sup>

What is it to be a woman? Can we separate gender from body? Can we think about ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ without thinking about the body? It’s most important to ask how one becomes that body. Simone de Beauvoir (1956) is interested in the question of embodiment; experiencing sex within gender. For her, woman is corporeal and has to be thought with the body. However, this body is not a homogenous and stable unit. It has to be thought with lived experiences, the body in situation (Beauvoir, 1956). Beauvoir’s detailed accounts of the ways in which women live their bodies and how their bodies are produced is my starting point in asking the question ‘what is a woman?’ in the context of Sabarmila and Haji Ali Dargah’s legal documents.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted from de Beauvoir, Simone. “Introduction” *The Second Sex*. Translated and ed H.M Parshley. London. Jonathan Cape, 1956.

“In contemporary feminist theory so much energy is spent keeping the spectre of biologically based essentialism at bay that it is easy to forget that generalizations about gender may be just as oppressive as generalizations about sex”. (Moi 17)<sup>19</sup>

It's important to ask at this juncture what we lose when we lose body. “Woman” is not an umbrella term. The sex/gender distinction in 1960s and 1970s and later, in the onset of poststructuralist feminism this category has been discussed. According to Toril Moi, one cannot think of a woman as sex plus gender plus race plus other categories (Moi, 1999). How can one detach the experience of being white or black, belonging to upper caste or lower caste from the experience of being male or female? Sex/gender is not enough in this case. “Lived body” and its situated-ness can be an important entry point in asking “what is a woman?” and “what is it to be a woman?” Thinking about body and biology in this context then is not essentialism.

In *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” And Other Essays*, Iris Marion Young(2005) discusses Toril Moi's (1999) arguments for abandoning the concept of gender for feminist theory and replacing it with the concept of lived body from existential phenomenology. Both Young (2005) and Moi's (1999) proposals keep “lived body” at the center and it is useful for reading “woman” as a category shaped at the interface of law and faith. Moi (1999) proposes to return to the idea of lived body and framework of existential phenomenology which has been earlier advocated by Simone de Beauvoir. Lived body is not merely a physical body; it emerges in and is shaped by a socio-cultural context. Moi (1999) asks the readers to not confuse lived body with sex. Can lived body become a historical category of analysis then? It has the possibility of becoming a useful category of analysis. It is not merely sex, not merely gender and

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted from Moi, Toril. “What is a Woman? Sex, Gender and the Body in Feminist Theory” *What is a Woman?: And Other Essays*. Great Britain. Oxford University Press, 1999.

neither is it biology. Lived body is situated in a historical, social, cultural location. It is useful in this research as it is important to remember that the ban in Shingnapur, Sabarimala and Haji Ali Dargah are not merely bans on “women” but also on the “lived bodies” of women. These bans are on age, fertility and other embodied experiences which cannot be disassociated from women and are part of their everyday lived experiences. The concept of lived body raises the question of how a body is placed in social structures and which are the opportunities and constraints available to it (Young 16).

The concept of lived body and its relevance for feminist politics has also been discussed by Elizabeth Grosz (1994) in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. Grosz (1994) rejects the binary of mind/body and male/female. She views the body as a social construct and a site of various cultural representations. It is important to see how a body is lived and how the social, historical and cultural factors represent and shape this body. If body is seen as a social construct, then it has to change with difference in experience and representation in different societies and locations. Body cannot be reduced to psychology and vice versa. Body is linked to spatiality. One grasps the idea of space through bodily situation, in the ways in which that body is situated in space. Experience can only be understood in between mind and body; in the lived conjunction of mind and body (Grosz 90). When one talks about mind and experiences, one will have to talk about corporeality. In the Court judgments, the biological is continuously used to produce the social and the legal. The lived experiences of religion are dependent on the lived bodies of women.

## **Conclusion**

In Jaimala's narrative, the Mahendran Case, Haji Ali and Shani Shingnapur verdict, bodies of women and their lived experiences shape the understanding of "woman" as a category. In the chapter, I have attempted to discuss that the idea of space emerges through bodily situation and bodily situation defines the idea of space. The question of situated-ness remains central to the understanding of "woman" at the intersection of law and faith practices. If the places of worship are spaces where women are not allowed then how does they change the understanding of "woman" as a category and also how does the absence of "fertile" young bodies of women change the dynamics of that space?



## CONCLUSION

The temple-entry agitation organized by the Bhumata Ranragini Brigade in 2015-2016 is not the first temple-entry agitation of the country. However, it's still unique as it opens up the divine space through the lens of gender. Most importantly, the presence of Bhumata Ranragini Brigade in the agitation provides a unique characteristic to it. As an organisation comprising of Hindu women in majority, it invokes both customary practices and the Constitution of India to challenge the 400 year old ban in the Shani temple at Shinganapur.

The first chapter begins the story of Shinganapur village to understand the question of women's engagement with divine spaces. The Shani temple in Shinganapur is a divine space which was not accessible to women for a very long period. The history of the temple is not separate from numerous myths around Shani that proliferate in and around Shinganapur. The chapter discusses how the myths and narratives associated with the temple and Shani in Shinganapur impact the absence and presence of women in the divine space. The interviews of the members of the temple-trust prove to be an important source of information in this chapter in understanding how those in authority at the Shani temple see the question of Shani worship and women's entry in the temple. I have relied extensively on the books and booklets produced and circulated by the temple trust to understand how the history of the Shani temple has been narrativised by the residents of the village. The Shani temple in Shinganapur maintains an aura which is not only limited to the temple but is spread in the entire village. The tradition of banning women inside the inner sanctum of the temple is an important part of the narratives around Shani and Shani worship.

From the question of divine space, I move towards the organisation which challenged the customary practices prevalent in this space in the second chapter. Bhumata Ranragini Brigade as an organisation invokes both the religious and the secular framework. It surpasses the religion-secular binary which has been an important tool in discussing different periods of the Indian Women's Movement. The second chapter asks questions of religion, and its engagement with feminist politics. It introduces Bhumata Ranragini Brigade and its organisation of the temple-entry agitation at Shinganapur. This chapter discusses how feminist politics can be seen engaging with the question of religion through the kind of work Bhumata Ranragini Brigade does as an organisation.

I enter the domain of law and its intersection with religion in the final chapter. This chapter emerges out of the larger discussions around the question of banning women in sacred spaces in the court verdicts. The legal documents which I discuss in this chapter do not merely shape "woman" as a category but also mould the categories of law and religion. Women's bodies are central in these legal discussions. Though the arguments are based on religious texts, 'essential' practices and constitutional provisions, all of these come together in shaping "woman". Through women's bodies, clothing and menstruation, the definition of who the woman is in these legal documents is constantly being shaped.

Throughout the chapters, I have tried to answer the questions which were my entry points in the arena of religion and feminist politics. My work engages with them through the categories of space and law in the first and final chapters. Bhumata Ranragini Brigade and the kind of politics and religiosity it advocates remain central in my research.

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