

International

# India temple trailblazers braving serious threats and family anger

‘This was another step forward to reinforce gender equality’

**KERALA:** Bindu Ammini and Kanakadurga are living on the run since infuriating Hindu traditionalists by entering one of India's holiest temples that for generations banned nearly all women. In black robes and under cover of darkness, the two women evaded a blockade to enter the remote hilltop Sabarimala temple early on January 2, setting off violent protests across southern Kerala state.

Physical threats have since forced the temple trailblazers into hiding, and they have moved to more than 10 different safe houses. But they told AFP in an interview at a secret location that they hope to escape their clandestine existence in the coming days to take more action on Sabarimala, as well as face the ire of their families.

Both were unrepentant over their defiant gesture, which turned them into heroes for women's groups, but hate figures for Hindu hardliners. "I wanted to exercise my right as a devotee, that's all," said Kanakadurga, a 39-year-old government worker who like many people in southern India uses just one name. "This was another step forward to reinforce gender equality." Getting access to the women meant going through a string of intermediaries, switching cars and turning off phones before being taken to a villa where the pair were waiting. They said they would leave their latest bolthole for an 11th safe house the next morning.

**Social flashpoint**

Sabarimala has become a new flashpoint for Indian women in their battle for social change. The country saw massive protests after the brutal gang rape and murder of a student on a Delhi bus in 2012 and last year female actors, journalists and academics detailed cases of sexual aggression. Bindu and Kanakadurga said they believed only extremists wanted to harm them, adding that most worshippers did not harass them when they went to Sabarimala, where up to five million people trek each year.

"The real devotees caused us absolutely no problems. We stopped for refreshments on the way and all behaved as though we were just another pilgrim," said Bindu, a 40-year-old law professor. "It is only a select few who are

politically motivated who always cause trouble for us." After India's Supreme Court ruled on September 28 that all women should be allowed into the temple, the pair linked up on social media. They were among scores of women who tried to reach Sabarimala soon after, but were blocked by thousands of opponents. Kanakadurga said the authorities did not know in advance that they would enter the temple on January 2 and police there "did for us what they would have done for any other devotee".

**Mother's anger**

"Police made sure we got out safely from the temple. But after that we did not want them involved, so now we are on our own," she said. "But we both hope we can come out of hiding in the next week to resume our normal lives." Their actions have also angered family members. "I have my family's complete support except for my mother, who genuinely believes I should not have broken tradition," said Bindu. "But I know that she is concerned for me, I respect her right to a different opinion."

Kanakadurga did not tell her family in advance that she was going to Sabarimala. "Had I told them, they would surely have done everything to block me. So because I kept them in the dark, there is friction between us, but I think it will only be temporary." "Most people are with me and that gives me courage." Hours after the women walked into Sabarimala, violent protests erupted across Kerala and more than 1,000 people were arrested.

The temple priest ordered purification rites because women of menstruating age had entered the shrine. Bindu is from the Dalit community, a downtrodden caste considered "untouchable" until this was declared illegal under the 1950 constitution. She said she would go to the Supreme Court to seek action against the priest for breaching India's caste laws. "By holding purification rituals after my visit to the temple, what the priest did was practice untouchability," said Bindu. "It is an offence, so Kanaka and I have made up our minds to go to the Supreme Court against the priest."



**KERALA:** In this photo taken on January 11, 2019, Bindu Ammini (R) and Kanakadurga (L), the two Indian women who entered the Sabarimala Ayyappa temple, pose for photographs during an interview with the media. —AFP

**Political fuse**

Their entry into the temple has lit a political fuse as India prepares for general elections in the coming months. The ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has sided with devotees who accuse the Supreme Court of rejecting their beliefs by letting women in. Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi meanwhile said Sunday there was "validity" in both sides of the argument. Sabarimala is dedicated to the celibate Ayyappa, and followers believe letting in women goes

against his wishes. A longstanding ban on women was made legal in 1991 by the Kerala High Court, but the Supreme Court overruled this as unconstitutional and discriminatory. Some BJP leaders have called Bindu and Kanakadurga anarchists and anti-Hindu, but the women dismissed the claims. "We were not the first ones to try to enter Sabarimala. Scores of women went in the past, but failed," said Kanakadurga. "I am a believer who always wanted to worship Ayyappa at the Sabarimala temple." —AFP

## China sentences Canadian drug suspect to death

**DALIAN, China:** A Chinese court sentenced a Canadian man to death on drug trafficking charges yesterday after his previous 15-year prison sentence was deemed too lenient, a ruling that has deepened a diplomatic rift between Ottawa and Beijing. Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, 36, nodded as the judge in the northeast city of Dalian asked him whether he understood the verdict, following a day-long retrial in which he declared his innocence. He can appeal against the sentence in an upper court.

The sentence comes against the backdrop of the Chinese government's anger over the arrest in Canada of a top executive from telecom giant Huawei last month on a US extradition request related to Iran sanctions violations. Chinese authorities later detained two Canadian nationals - a former diplomat and a business consultant - on suspicion of endangering national security, a move seen as retaliation over the Huawei executive's arrest.

Schellenberg had originally been sentenced to 15 years in prison and a 150,000-yuan (\$22,000) forfeiture in November. But following an appeal, a high court in Liaoning ruled in December that the sentence was too lenient given the severity of his crimes. "I am not a drug smuggler. I came to China as a tourist," Schellenberg, said in his final statement before the sentence was announced. The Dalian court said Schellenberg, who was detained in Dec 2014, played a "key part" in an international drug trafficking syndicate.

"The court completely rejects the accused person's explanation and defense because it is completely at odds with the facts," the chief judge said in a courtroom packed with observers - among them Canadian embassy officials and three foreign reporters, including one from AFP. "This syndicate... does not just spread drugs in one country, the problem has spread across borders... it is a harm to human health and also to the stability of countries," the court said. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau yesterday expressed "extreme concern" that China had "chosen to arbitrarily" apply the death penalty in Schellenberg's case.

**China denies political link**

China has executed other foreigners for drug-related crimes in the past, including a Japanese national in 2014, a Filipina in 2013 and a Briton in 2009. Experts said retrials are rare in China, especially ones calling for a harsher sentence, but rights groups noted that courts are not independent and can be influenced by the Communist Party. "Many factors in this case raise serious questions of concern: particularly, that the retrial was rushed through so quickly and that state-run media drew such deliberate attention to the case," William Nee, China researcher at Amnesty International, told AFP. "Most likely, China wants to send a tough message to Canada," Nee added.

Beijing has repeatedly denied any links to Canada's arrest of the Huawei executive. The Chinese foreign ministry said Friday critics "can stop recklessly suspecting others of politicizing legal issues just because they have done so". Last week, Trudeau accused China of "arbitrarily and unfairly" detaining former diplomat Michael Kovrig and business consultant Michael Spavor, who were rounded up nine days after Canada arrested Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou. Trudeau suggested that Kovrig still enjoyed diplomatic immunity, an assertion rejected by the Chinese foreign ministry yesterday. —AFP

## Indonesia recovers second black box from Lion Air crash

**JAKARTA:** The cockpit voice recorder from an Indonesian Lion Air jet that crashed in October has been recovered, officials said yesterday, a discovery that could be critical to explaining why a brand new plane fell out of the sky just after take-off. The Boeing 737 MAX vanished from radar about 13 minutes after departing Jakarta, slamming into the Java Sea moments after pilots had asked to return to the capital and killing all 189 people onboard.

The bright orange voice recorder was discovered early yesterday about 10 meters from a flight data recorder that was located back in November, authorities said. "It's broken into two pieces so hopefully it's still useful" to investigators, Haryo Satmiko, deputy head of Indonesia's National Transportation Safety Committee (NTSC), told AFP. More human remains were also found near the voice recorder, he added, without giving details. "This will really help the investigation... and could give some more answers on the cause" of

the crash, said Jakarta-based aviation analyst Dudi Sudibyo. The doomed airliner's flight data recorder supplied information about its speed, altitude and direction before it plunged into the sea on October 29. "But (the data recorder) does not show how the flight crew's decisions were made or discussed in those final moments," Stephen Wright, an aviation expert at Leeds University, told AFP.

A preliminary crash report from Indonesia's transport safety agency suggested that the pilots of Flight 610 struggled to control the plane's anti-stall system just before the accident. The agency also found that the Lion Air jet should have been grounded over a recurrent technical problem before its fatal journey, and it criticized the budget carrier's poor safety culture. But it did not pinpoint a definitive cause of the crash and a final report is not likely to come before later this year.

**Boeing lawsuits**

Despite the name, black boxes are usually bright orange with reflective stripes, and all commercial planes are obliged to have them on board. They're built to survive at vast depths and in extreme heat, and are fitted with a beacon which can emit a signal for one month. Black box data helps explain nearly 90 percent of all crashes, according to aviation experts.

Authorities called off the grim task of identifying victims of the crash in November, with only 125 people named after tests on human remains that filled some 200 body bags. "We're thankful



**A cockpit voice recorder, the second "black box" from Lion Air flight 610 that crashed last October killing all 189 people onboard, is displayed to the media by Indonesian Navy personnel after the device's recovery at sea off the coast of Karawang. —AFP**

and grateful that they have found the CVR, but it's not enough," said Evi Samsul Komar, whose son and nephew were on the fatal flight. "There are still many passengers unaccounted for."

Despite a spotty safety record and an avalanche of complaints over shoddy service, the carrier's parent Lion Air Group — which also operates five other airlines — has become

Southeast Asia's biggest airline group by fleet size in less than 20 years of operation. Indonesia's aviation safety record has improved since its airlines, including national carrier Garuda, were subject to years-long bans from US and European airspace for safety violations. But the country still recorded more than three dozen fatal accidents over the past 15 years. —AFP

# AUK... Driven by Quality

**ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING (BE) DEGREE PROGRAM**

ABET Engineering Accreditation Commission

**COMPUTER SCIENCE (BSc) DEGREE PROGRAM**

ABET Computing Accreditation Commission

**COMPUTER ENGINEERING (BE) DEGREE PROGRAM**

ABET Engineering Accreditation Commission

**THE COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES**

AAL American Academy for Liberal Education

**BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (BBA) DEGREE PROGRAMS**

ACBSP GLOBAL BUSINESS ACCREDITATION

**INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM**

CEA

2018

2016

2011

2009

AUK WEBSITE

Tel: 1-802040 / (+965) 2224-8399 Ext: 3148 Fax: (+965) 2224-8379

admissions@auk.edu.kw | www.auk.edu.kw

The American University of Kuwait | @AUKtweets | @auk\_kuwait | AUKVideos

AUK is institutionally accredited by the Private Universities Council in the State of Kuwait, and has a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation with Dartmouth College (Hanover, New Hampshire - USA).

**LEARN • THINK • BECOME**