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Speak Up

SHIKHARJI'S VICTORY: A LANDMARK JUDGMENT FOR JAIN FAITH

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For centuries, Jain pilgrims have climbed Sammed Shikharji barefoot, their hearts filled with devotion to a sacred hill in Jharkhand's Giridih district, where 20 of the 24 *tīrthamkaras* attained *mokṣa*, or liberation. Also known as Parasnath Hill, named after Pārśvanātha, the 23rd *tīrthamkara*, this *mahātīrtha* holds a place in Jainism as vital as Mecca is to Muslims or Ayodhya to Hindus. Its forested slopes, part of the Parasnath Wildlife Sanctuary, rare flora and fauna add ecological significance to its spiritual weight. This unique blend of sacred and natural value made Shikharji a contested space when tourism plans threatened its purity.

In May 2025, the Jharkhand High Court issued a historic ruling to protect the hill, a triumph driven by the Jyot Trust, guided by Acharya Yugbhushan Suri, who inspired the legal battle. This victory transcends the preservation of a physical site, safeguarding the essence of the Jain faith for those who revere Shikharji.

The struggle to protect Sammed Shikharji began years earlier, shaped by government decisions and determined community resistance. On October 22, 2018, the Jharkhand government, responding to the Jyot Trust's "Save Shikharji" campaign, issued an Office Memorandum pledging to maintain the hill's sanctity (Jharkhand High Court, 2025; Business Standard, 2018). However, in February 2019, the state declared Shikharji a tourist destination, proposing amenities like paths and toilets, alarming the Jain community. That August, the Union Ministry of Environment established an eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) covering 208.82 square kilometers around the hill,



promoting eco-tourism without consulting Jains (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2019). Tensions surged in November 2022 when vandals defaced a Jain saint's sacred footprints, sparking nationwide outrage. Protests intensified through December 2022 and January 2023, culminating in a massive rally at India Gate in Delhi on January 1, 2023. On January 5, 2023, the Central Government issued another memorandum halting all tourism on the hill (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2023). Despite this, illegal mining and tourism promotions continued into 2024, prompting the Jyot Trust to file a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Jharkhand High Court on January 8, 2025. The court's ruling on May 2, 2025, marked a decisive win for Jains.

The Jharkhand High Court's decision affirmed Sammed Shikharji's sanctity, equating it to global religious landmarks like Ayodhya and the Vatican. Drawing on a 2004 case, *Shrenik Bhai v. Ganpat Rai Jain*, which mandated state support for traditional Jain worship, the court ruled that mining, unauthorized constructions, and non-vegetarian food violated the 2019 ESZ Notification and 2023 Office Memorandum (Jharkhand High Court, 2025). The 2023 memorandum banned liquor, meat, loud music, and all tourism on the hill, a prohibition the court upheld as absolute, rejecting Jharkhand's claim that religious tourism was permissible. Noting weak enforcement, with only 25 home guards for 16,000 acres, the court ordered strict compliance with the 2019 and 2023 directives, an investigation by the District Legal Services Authority in Giridih into ongoing violations, increased security, and a review hearing on July 21, 2025. This ruling emphasized the government's duty to protect sacred spaces and religious sentiments.

The Jain community's opposition, led by the Jyot Trust, stemmed from fears that tourism would erode Shikharji's sacred character. For Jains, Shikharji is a pilgrimage site, not a tourist destination; pilgrims visit with devotion to honor its role as the place where 20 *tīrthaṅkaras* attained *mokṣa*, unlike tourists seeking leisure or curiosity. The 2019 tourist designation and eco-tourism plans, launched without Jain input, raised concerns about activities disrupting the hill's holiness. Potential issues included tourists introducing liquor, meat, or noise, clashing with Jain principles of purity and non-violence (*ahimsā*), alongside eco-tourism ideas like poultry farming that contradicted Jain



ethics against harming animals. Illegal mining and constructions further damaged the hill's natural and spiritual integrity, while events like New Year picnics in 2024 disregarded its sacred purpose. These risks threatened to transform a site of liberation into a commercial hub, infringing on Jains' right to worship peacefully.

The Jain community's response was resolute and multifaceted. The 2022 vandalism ignited over 85 rallies across India, including a significant protest at India Gate on January 1, 2023. The Jyot Trust, collected over 700,000 signatures for its "Save Shikharji" campaign. Social media amplified their message, condemning Jharkhand's 2024 tourism promotions. The Trust filed the 2025 PIL and engaged in the Supreme Court's Sabarimala case, showcasing their commitment through protests, petitions, digital advocacy, and legal action (Jharkhand High Court, 2025).

The May 2025 judgment ensures Shikharji's future by prohibiting tourism unless it aligns with its sacred character, as mandated by the 2023 memorandum. Enhanced patrols and investigations into violations like mining strengthen its protection. The ruling sets a precedent for other sacred sites, requiring governments to consult religious communities before altering such places. Future tourism must adhere to Jain values, excluding liquor, meat, or disturbances, ensuring Shikharji remains a spiritual and ecological haven (Bajpai, 2018).

The 2019 ESZ designation aimed to protect Shikharji's environment but initially conflicted with its spiritual role by promoting eco-tourism without Jain approval. The 2025 judgment clarified that ecological efforts must also honor the hill's sanctity, banning eco-tourism on Shikharji itself. Limited activities may continue in the broader ESZ if they respect Jain principles, preserving the hill's dual identity as a natural and sacred space (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2019, 2023).

To sustain this victory, Jains must remain vigilant, monitoring government compliance with court orders, collaborating with Jharkhand to develop pilgrimage facilities that honor Shikharji's holiness, supporting the Jyot Trust's advocacy, and educating younger generations about the hill's significance. Unity will ensure its sacred legacy endures. Sammed Shikharji, where the



tīrthamkaras attained moksha, remains a beacon of Jain reverence. The Jharkhand High Court's May 2025 ruling, driven by the Jyot Trust's leadership, protects this sacred ground. Through protests, legal battles, and collective resolve, Jains demonstrated the power of faith. By defending their *tīrtha*, Jains have ensured that just as pilgrims ascend Shikharji with devotion, its sanctity will endure for generations.

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