

A BATTLEGROUND CALLED SABARIMALA

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Not a week passes without some critical issue or the other splitting public opinion right through the middle, quite painfully. Sometimes it is the despicable lynching of Muslims or whether Aadhar impacts our right to privacy or not; at it could be on whether homosexuality is permissible. Even ‘triple talaq’ and ‘respect’ to our national flag are passing through well-planned controversies because they generate votes for someone. The issues and the venues do change, but opposing ideologies clash so bitterly that it appears as if we are in the throes of an ideological civil war. The battle of Sabarimala is the latest and though the media reports every move, many people still cannot appreciate the central burning point. It is, after all, difficult when we see a large group of women (and men) who are fighting an obdurate patriarchy to enter the sacred temple an equally large group of women who are out on the streets, with men, again, rejecting the rights that the highest court has just conferred on them. They latter is quite strange, as Kerala is the most progressive state in terms of women’s empowerment, literacy and other factors. Obviously, political parties have jumped headlong into this holy mess.

Sabarimala or Sabarimalai is, incidentally the name of the hill, not the god. His name is Sastha Ayyappan and both his appellations are interesting. The first one, Dharma-Sastha is a Malayalam term for Buddha and it is widely believed that the original god here was Buddhist. Even now, pilgrims keep chanting ‘smaranam’ all the way. The other name, Ayyappan is derived from lord Ayy of the oldest Dravidian tradition. The Tamil folk god is called Ayyanar and he is depicted as a thick moustachioed man who stands guard outside every village, seated on his horse with his sword upright. So non-Aryan is his lineage that none of the 18 Maha Purans even mention him, but a local upa-puran called Bhootanatha-Upakhyanam sings of his Mahatmya, thus ‘brahmanising him in the process. This made the job easier for the Nambudiri Brahmans, who entered Kerala in the 8th century, as their mission was to Sanskritise almost everything possible — from language and culture to temples and worship. Sastha of Sabarimala was taken over through this Ayy route as Ayyappan, a fearless prince of the Pandian kingdom who had been born out the union of Shiva with Vishnu’s feminine rupa, Mohini. We may recall that Kerala’s famous Mohini Attam dance that is now recognised as a ‘national classical dance’. Ayyappan defeated Mahishasuri, the buffalo demoness and also the dacoit-king Udayanan who had terrorised everyone. Ayyappan then led his troops in a victory march to Sabarimala temple, where he climbed up its 18 holy steps. But as he came near the idol, he was suddenly and miraculously merged with Sastha. The brahmanisation of Kerala’s most popular folk god was thus completed in one stroke, though many of the customs and rituals in the worship of Sastha-Ayyappan still remain quite non-Sanskritic.

Each year, crores of devotees from all castes and classes assemble at the foot of the hills from all parts of Kerala and beyond to begin the arduous trek to the temple, which is open for a very limited number of days. Even Muslims and Christians join, which speaks of the basic inclusive nature of this pilgrimage, that passes through the forested hills of the Periyar Tiger Reserve. In fact, there is a Muslim deity called Vavar within the temple premises, while most pilgrims make it a point to seek blessings at the nearby Arthunkal church. In the recent past, only those ladies who are above 50 years old are allowed and the present controversy is over why women between 15 years and 50 are strictly prohibited. They are branded as ‘menstruating women’, which, incidentally, is a terrible term to describe mothers who give life. But before we touch this explosive issue, we must remember that all pilgrims have to abide by certain very rigid rules and abstain from non-vegetarian food and liquor for 41 days before starting the tough trek. This must really be difficult for many, and oh, they also have also to abstain from sex.

On the 28th of September, a five-member bench of the Supreme Court, headed by the Chief Justice, disposed a petition on this issue by declaring that women between 10 and 50 years cannot be debarred from entering the Ayyappan temple at Sabarimala, as it violates Article 25 of the Indian Constitution. Surprisingly, the lone lady judge on the bench, Indu Malhotra, dissented with this majority decision of the court. The majority decision was, as expected, welcomed but the high priests of Sabarimala called Guruswamis objected to it as violating ‘tradition’. So did many lakh others, who say that since Ayyappan is a Naishitika Brahmachari, his ‘purity’ would be transgressed by ‘menstruating women’. The same Hindu Right that had recently celebrated the Triple Talaq judgement of the Supreme Court as one that liberates Muslim women, now claims that the court cannot interfere in religiously-approved practices, even if they appear ‘unjust’. But their claim that this obscurantist rule was always there is not true. Till the 1940s, women of all ages could enter if they could undertake the rigours. A fire at the temple in 1950 started a strange process of orthodoxy. Records show that women of all ages had entered the temple, in small numbers, even after 1965 when the Kerala Hindu Places of Public Worship (Authorisation of Entry) Rules was promulgated. The real trouble began from 1983 when a stone cross was discovered in that area and Christians built a church at Nilakkal near the Mahadev temple — when mobs led by the temple priests fought with policemen. It was only in 1991, that the Kerala High Court, in its wisdom, ruled that women between 10 and 50 should not enter the temple and now, 28 years later, the Supreme Court has opened the gates once again. In short, it is not a Sanatan Dharma issue, though it has given its votaries a window to scramble into Kerala, that has traditionally never entertained them.

And, let us not forget that menstruation symbolises women’s power of creation and there have been constant efforts by patriarchy all over the world to demean it, rather than celebrate it. In Kerala, there is a temple at Chengannur near Alapuzha, where the goddess has ‘regular periods’. The issue is now before a 21st century India, that has worshipped the mother goddess for ages, to decide whether it will uphold its god’s gift

to womankind to ensure the survival of the human race or condemn it like mindless, insensitive Talibanis.