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INTERVIEW

History is being deliberately neglected: Sabarimala and the Brahminisation of an Adivasi deity

AATHIRA KONIKKARA

<https://caravanmagazine.in/religion/pk-sajeev-sabarimala-mala-araya-brahminisation-ativasi-deity>



VISHNU VISWANATH FOR THE CARAVAN

On 28 September, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court lifted the ban on women's entry into the Sabarimala temple situated on a hilltop in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district. The temple, managed by the socio-religious trust Travancore Devaswom Board, is a shrine to Ayyappan, a deity regarded as a Naishtika Brahmachari—eternally celibate—in Hindu mythology. Around 1955, the TDB prohibited the entry of women in the age group of 10–50 years to “protect Ayyappan’s vow of celibacy.” After the judgment, thousands descended on the streets of Kerala proclaiming that the verdict was an attack on their faith regarding Ayyappan. On 17 October, the temple opened its gates for six days for its monthly puja. Women who attempted the pilgrimage to the shrine were hounded by mobs, which created a situation that threatened to escalate into riots. No woman was able to enter the temple.

In the Supreme Court judgment, DY Chandrachud states in his concurring opinion that prohibiting women's entry was a form of untouchability.

Appointing priests from non-Brahmin communities is also a disputed (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kozhikode/sabarimala-why-silent-about-right-of-tribal-community-ask-dalit-activists/articleshow/66292070.cms>) issue in Sabarimala. The verdict states, “A claim for the exclusion of women from religious worship, even if it be founded in religious text, is subordinate to the constitutional values of liberty, dignity and equality. Exclusionary practices are contrary to constitutional morality.” In the wake of the verdict, the Mala Araya, an Adivasi community listed as a Scheduled Tribe by the central government, is staking its claim to practise religious rituals at the temple. Mala Araya, from the word “Malai Arayan” which means “Monarch of the Hills,” is one of the largest tribal communities in areas of Kottayam, Idukki and Pattanamtitta districts of Kerala.

They claim that they practised religious duties in the temple until they were forced to stop after the Thazhamon Madom, a Brahmin family, took over the priestly responsibilities of the temple in 1902. Since then, the post of the thantri, or the head priest of the temple, has been passed on hereditarily within the Brahmin family. According to the Mala Araya, the subsequent Brahminisation of the temple—and its rituals and history—effectively ousted the Adivasi community from the temple.

Aikya Mala Araya Maha Sabha is a developmental organization working towards the welfare of the Mala Araya people in Kerala. In an interview with Aathira Konikkara, a reporting fellow at The Caravan, the founder and general secretary of AMAMS, PK Sajeev, discusses the Mala Araya’s beliefs about Ayyappan, the disputed belief regarding women entering the temple and the Brahminisation of rituals in the temple. “That is my biggest point of protest,” Sajeev said, referring to the Mala Arayas’ role in Sabarimala. “History is being deliberately neglected.”

Aathira Konikkara: Which rituals and customs did the Mala Araya’s practise before the Thazhamon Madom took over?

PK Sajeev: Sree Ayyappan was born in this [Mala Araya] community to Kandan and Karuthamma, in a cave in Ponnambalamedu [a district in

Kerala near the Sabarimala temple]. During this period of history, the Cholas had been on the offensive against Kerala for over 100 years. Kandan and Karuthamma had approached a priest known as Korman, praying for a solution to defeat the Cholas. It is said that they were told to fast for 41 days so that they would have a son who could defeat the Cholas. So the 41-day fast emerges from Sree Ayyappan's birth. Sree Ayyappan, as the commander, mobilised the people against the Chola dynasty. He united all the people who were trained in martial arts and became a force of strength. That is how they faced the Cholas.

The Mala Arayas looked after the temple till the 1800s. The rituals came into being after Ayyappan attained samadhi. The ritual of the 41-day fast is what makes Sabarimala distinct from other temples.

As far as I have read, the numbers 18 [in reference to 18 steps leading to the temple's sanctum sanctorum that is considered sacred] and 41 [in reference to the 41-day fast that has to be kept before the Sabarimala pilgrimage] do not hold any importance in Hindu mythology. The 18 steps are symbolic of 18 hills [that surround Sabarimala] in the Mala Arayas' belief. One must visit Ayyappan only after saluting the 18 hills.

The customs of the Mala Araya community entered Sabarimala. Later, it was Brahminised. The 18 steps were later given other terminologies such as Sama, Dhana, Bheda or something along those lines.

Neyyabhishekam [the offering of ghee to the deity, which is the first ritual that pilgrims perform upon reaching the temple] is not ancient. Before that, the Mala Arayas performed *thenabhishekam* after the 41-day fast—they collected honey and bathed the idol of Ayyappan with it. This was the most important ritual.

AK: When and how were the Mala Arayas ousted from Sabarimala?

PKS: This was around the 1800s. It had only been a short while since the king of Pandalam started ruling there. Kerala had laws such as head tax and breast tax. [Till the mid-nineteenth century, Kerala

imposed taxes on all members of lower-caste communities to cover their head and on women from these communities to cover their breasts.] Abuses and atrocities were rampant. From what I hear, everyone was threatened and driven away from the hills. They had to flee their homes—our ancestors in Karimala had to go as far as Thodupuzha.

These were innocent people with no one to protect them. Today, we have a constitution to protect us. But back then, the powerful attacked the innocent.

AK: How did the Thazhamon Madom family take charge of the temple? After they took over, were there any changes in the temple and its customs?

PKS: The responsibility was entrusted to them by the kingdom of Travancore. Around 1942, when the kings visited the temple for puja, they brought their own thantris [the Thazhamon Madom family] for the purpose. The *Padi Pooja* [worship of the 18 steps] did not exist before. All the customs practised there today were introduced by them.

Ayyappan is Ayyan + Appan. Appan [father] is someone we respect. Ayyan was a name commonly used among people of ancient times. In our community, a majority of us had grandfathers named Ayyappan. But we don't see anyone named Ayyappan Namboothiri. Even after earning an income from Sabarimala for centuries, why has nobody in that family been named after Ayyappan?

AK: What changed after the TDB was established in 1950?

PKS: Majority of temples in Kerala, which belonged to Parayars, Pulayars, Sambavars or Adivasis were Brahminised and adopted other customs—including temples managed by my own community such as the Karimala and Nilakal Mahadeva temple. These are now administered by the Devaswom board. The Valliyankavu Devi temple, which receives devotees in large numbers, is also now run by the Devaswom board.

AK: How did *Makara Jyothi* originate in the Mala Araya faith?

PKS: When Sree Ayyappan attained samadhi, his parents in Ponnambalamedu were inconsolable on receiving the news. Sree Ayyappan appeared before them and said that he would appear every year as *jyothi* [flickering light]. [The] ritual is performed to receive the *jyothi* [in the Ponnambalamedu district]. Earlier *thellipadi* [fire-inducing material] was used. But now, camphor is used instead.

The forest officials harassed the [Mala Arayas] living in the forests in various ways. They used to go back to practise the ritual even after that. But when threats and harassment increased, it became impossible. Aruvikkal Appooppan was a priest and an oracle in Karimala. He had to move to Kalaketty village due to the threats. He still walked all the way back to light the lamp and had to trek several hills to make it. Forest officials and people from the Devaswom board threatened him and drove him away.

AK: What is the existing archaeological evidence of the Mala Arayas' life in Sabarimala?

PKS: The temples were built from ancient rocks, nearly 10,000 years ago. Intricate sculptures were carved on to the pillars of the temple. They were found in Karimala, Ponnambalamedu, Kothakuthithara, Nilakkal, Thalaparamala and so on. They are in ruins now. They were abandoned in forests—these were deliberately neglected as a part of the plan to introduce new customs and traditions. Today, you won't see those kind of idols. Old idols were disposed and replaced with new ones which were projected as idols.

A civilisation and a culture was lost. That is my biggest point of protest—that history is being deliberately neglected.

AK: Are there members of the Mala Araya community still living in Sabarimala or the surrounding regions?

PKS: Yes. They live in four hills—Udumbaramala, Koparamala, Nilakkal and Karimala. They constructed new temples for worship because they cannot return to the places under the control of

Devaswom board—they cannot be challenged.

AK: Have you considered resorting to legal remedies?

PKS: Yes, we are planning to move the Supreme Court. Many have asked me why this issue was not raised earlier. The British ruled India for 200 years—our predecessors could have asked for their rights 10 years later or even 100 years later. But they were unable to question it in the face of threats. [We] were evicted from Ponnambalamedu the way Red Indians were evicted from America. After the kingdom's rule, it was the reign of forest officials in these regions.

The SC verdict was historic and instrumental in giving us an opportunity to speak up. It created a huge opportunity for us to reveal a historic truth. We want all the rights restored.

The ownership over the temple was with a member of our community. We want the right to perform the thenabhishekam, which was practised on the 1st of every month, as per the Malayalam calendar. We also want the right to practise the ritual of Makara Jyothi in Ponnambalamedu. We are not asking for anything new—these were experiences of our forefathers.

In a democratic country, those who are in power should restore the rights to those who lost them. The Mala Araya cannot be compared to other communities because traditions are to us what water is to fish, what air is to humans. Even when a tree grows up, it cannot stay on earth without its roots.

AK: Do you agree with the Supreme Court verdict on women's entry into Sabarimala?

PKS: They can go if they are going out of faith. To tell you impartially about what I have seen in my community, women did not go to temples during the seven days of periods. I have never heard of any instance of young women from the Mala Araya community going to Sabarimala [while menstruating]. [But even] back then, after a delivery, women resumed their periods only after some [one or] two

years. They could follow the 41-day continuous fast completely—one or two have gone in those situations.

We as a community stay rooted in our beliefs. But as a part of democracy, we greatly depend on the constitution, the judiciary, the government and we are very much aware that such systems are what sustain the nation at all times. It is a change towards a mature society.

We perceive this as Sree Sabareesan, Ayyappan's, own people. So if women of that age group go there, our faithful evaluation is that they are going there because they wish to see Ayyappan, because Ayyappan has invited them there. Not activists, those who go there out of devotion. Why will we stop those who go to see Swami, to see Ayyappan? Obstructing them is equal to obstructing Ayyappan.

AK: I had read another article where you stated that the Mala Araya don't see a distinction between men and women ...

PKS: No, we don't see a distinction. The Neeli Mala hill is named after Neeli, a woman. In Ramayana, there is a portion known as Shabari Ashrama Pravesham. That hill is known in the name of Shabari [a woman]. Remember that Sree Ayyappan chose Sabarimala for his penance after praying to the ascetic, Shabari. Karimala was ruled by a woman from the community named Chakki—the region had several human settlements. So a woman from the community could become the ruler. Similarly, a woman who is an ascetic can also rise up. None of that is forbidden in terms of faith.

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the Supreme Court declared that prohibiting women's entry to Sabarimala was a form of untouchability. This has been corrected to reflect that it was stated only by DY Chandrachud. The Caravan regrets the error.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

AATHIRA KONIKKARA ([/AUTHOR/1079](#)) is a staff writer at *The Caravan*.

KEYWORDS:

COMMENT

SUBMIT

READER'S COMMENTS

mahara jothieswaran
[21 Nov, 2018](#)

Kandan and karuthamma did 41 days fasting to get the child named as sree ayyappan. Which deity give that gift to them? I mean fasting for which deity?

malayalee Indian
08 Nov, 2018

Kudos!!! a wonderful effort by the CPM in a way of diverting the attention of the people from the main issue of ban on entry of women. After the britishers left many years passed our own congress govt was there in power, still this story remain untold. All this years we saw the AMAMS fighting the govt for their rights to light makaravilakku at ponnambalamedu. Now they have come up with a new story, which is really a news, really astonished. It is understood that the Malaya community has found new strength under the CPM govt. CPM has got many who make the people to come with cooked up stories and with the help of medias they will take their fight forward to destroy the Hindu belief. Now CPM doesnt have any face before the people of kerala and they want to succeed in their agenda to extend tourism by encroaching the sabarimala and start minting 💰. Do they, including their followers have guts to comment anything like this against the other religions.....?
Also I have read an article recently in Deccan Chronicle where an Bengali journalist has commented against the BJP govt and has justified the entry of women to sabarimala explaining the customs of sabarimala which even the keralites or even the pandalam raja is not aware of. Her effort to study those thing sitting somewhere in India and writing that was much appreciable. Only Want to remind you on what our Hon. PM said "Journalism should be like a honey bee, and not a housefly, as housefly sits on filth and spreads it around".

deepak pacha
06 Nov, 2018

Wonderful piece of article. Congrats to Aathira.

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