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Twist in Sabarimala tale: Kerala's Mala Araya Adivasi tribe claims ownership of the hill shrine

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has admitted that members of the tribe used to conduct the main ritual at Sabarimala decades ago.

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Devotees at the Lord Ayyappa temple at Sabarimala. | PTI

At a time when the entry of women at Kerala's Sabarimala temple has [snowballed](#) into a political controversy, an Adivasi tribe has staked its claim over the hill shrine in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district.

The Mala Araya community is classified as a Scheduled Tribe. Its 30,000-odd members live in

Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Idukki districts of South Kerala. The tribe has traditionally worshipped Ayyappa and claims that its members were forcibly evicted from Sabarimala and the 17 hills around it by the royal family of Pandalam in the 1800s. They say that the state government must reinstate their rights over the popular temple, whose presiding deity is Ayyappa and which attracts a few hundred thousand pilgrims every year. The temple is believed to have been established in the 12th century and has been managed by the Travancore Devaswom Board since 1950.

“The government should give the temple back to us and correct a historical wrong,” said PK Sajeev, founder general secretary of the Aikya Mala Araya Maha Sabha, a tribal organisation working for the welfare of the Mala Araya tribe. “Mala Arayas were tortured and coerced to leave Sabarimala. It is time to make amends for the atrocities. We will move court if the government fails to address the issue.”

This demand has also brought the issue of the Brahminisation of Kerala temples into the limelight. Adivasi and Dalit organisations in the state have for long claimed that Brahmins had taken control of their temples and imposed Brahminical rituals there.

Who are the Mala Arayas?

Mala Araya means King of the Hills.

“Mala Arayans reside generally on the western slopes of the higher range of mountains or their spurs,” wrote Samuel Mateer in his book titled *Native Life in Travancore*, published in 1883. “Their villages consist of houses scattered all over the steep hill slides.”

Members of the tribe believe that Ayyappa was born to a tribal couple called Kandan and Karuthamma in a cave in Ponnambalamedu near the site of the Sabarimala temple.

Sajeev, who has conducted extensive research on the subject, said Mala Arayas were driven out of Sabarimala by the Pandalam king in the 1800s. “Idols of the Mala Araya community were found abandoned deep inside the forests of Karimala, Ponnambalmedu, Kothakuthithara, Nilakkal and Talaparamala,” he said. “These idols were replaced by new idols. All the temples are now being administered by the Travancore Devaswom Board.”

He said the rituals at Sabarimala turned Brahminical after the Travancore king appointed the Thazhaman family – who were Brahmins from Andhra Pradesh – as the temple’s chief priests in 1904. “The Brahmin priests replaced the most important Adivasi ritual of Thenabhishekam, bathing the Ayyappa idol with honey, with Neyyabhishekam, bathing the idol with ghee, in Sabarimala,” he said.

Sajeev said that his research showed that seven priests from the Mala Araya tribe used to conduct

rituals at Sabarimala. “The first priest was Karimala Arayan who had laid the temple’s foundation stone,” he said. “The last priest was Kochukuthy Kochuraman whose relatives are now living in Mundakkayam in Kottayam district.”

He said despite facing hardships and eviction, the Mala Araya community did not lose faith in Ayyappa. “Mala Araya tribespeople built Ayyappa temples wherever they went,” he said.

At present, Mala Arayas own more than 100 places of worship and all of them follow Dravidian rituals. “We do not receive assistance from the Travancore Devaswom Board which once had harassed our community,” said Sajeev.

Sabarimala and entry of women

The Sabarimala temple shot into the spotlight after a Supreme Court judgment on September 28 said that women of all ages must be permitted to offer prayers at the shrine. Prior to the judgment, women between the ages of 10 and 50 were barred from entering the temple. Ayyappa’s devotees believe he is an eternal celibate.

Sangh Parivar and other Hindutva organisations held violent [protests](#) in Sabarimala when the temple opened on October 17 for five days, for the first time since the Supreme Court verdict. Armed with the ruling and the Kerala government’s promise to implement it, 15 women tried to enter the shrine over this period. They were forced to turn back by a mob that claimed to be preserving the purity of the temple. Its members mainly comprised supporters of the Sabarimala Karma Samithi, a recently-formed association of around 50 Hindu groups led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. They organised protest marches, blockaded roads, intimidated women who were trying to enter the temple and attacked journalists.

Two women – Rehana Fathima and Kavitha Jakkala – reached close to the sanctum sanctorum under heavy police protection on October 20. That day, the Sabarimala head priest Kantararu Rajeevaru threatened to close the temple and hand over the key to the Pandalam family. The erstwhile royal family enjoys traditional rights over the conduct of rituals in Sabarimala.

The priest’s statement prompted a sharp retort by Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who alluded to the tribe’s association with the temple. Vijayan [said](#) at a public meeting in Pathanamthitta on October 23 that the Thenabhishekam ritual was the main ritual at Sabarimala long before the appointment of Brahmin tantris or priests in the temple. “Sabarimala is not the private property of the tantris or the Pandalam family,” said Vijayan. “Mala Arayas used to conduct the main rituals there. The tantris should not think that the temple would remain closed forever if he walked away with the keys.”

The Mala Arayas have said that they will abide by the Supreme Court verdict. “If a woman of menstruating age goes to the Sannidhanam [sanctum sanctorum], it must be because of

Ayyappa's invitation," said Sajeev. "Our community has a deep-rooted belief in Ayyappa."

Demanding ownership of shrines

The claim by the Adivasi tribe over Sabarimala comes at a time leading Adivasi and Dalit organisations have come together to reinstate the right of these communities to run more than 100 temples in the state.

One of these organisations is the Avakasha Punasthapana Samithi or Committee for Reinstating the Rights. Dalit writer and activist Sunny Kapikkadu, one of its leaders, said that hundreds of temples owned by Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala were appropriated by Brahmins in the past. "Sabarimala is one among them," he said. The organisation has demanded that the government hand over the ownership of Sabarimala to the Mala Araya tribe, he said.

Kapikkadu added that reclaiming ownership of temples would not be an easy task. "But we are here to fight a long legal battle," he said. "We will announce the demand at a mass meeting at Erumely in Kottayam district on December 1." He added that the organisation also planned to demand that the government implement the Forest Rights Act 2006 in Sabarimala as that would help the Mala Araya community live in the area without fear.

The Aikya Mala Araya Maha Sabha has already demanded that the government hand over Sabarimala to members of the tribe. It has also demanded ownership of three nearby temples – Karimala, Ponnambalamedu and the Nilakkal Mahadeva temple. "We will first approach the government," said Sajeev. "If it fails to act, we will move the Supreme Court."

Sajeev added that many other Adivasi and Dalit outfits are waiting to demand ownership rights of the temples appropriated by Brahmins in the past. "Our demand will open up the sluice gates," he said. "Kerala will witness mass Adivasi and Dalit movements. It is just a matter of time."

Kapikkadu said the protests against women's entry at Sabarimala were a blessing in disguise. "We could establish that Pandalam family, chief priest and Travancore Devaswom Board are not the owners of Sabarimala," he said. "Now it is time to fight to regain our rights."