Chapter II

Male Householder, Caste Patriarchy and the Family: Locating Masculinities in the Sabarimala Women's Entry Protests (2018)

This chapter is centred on the Supreme Court of India verdict (2018) allowing women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala. Entry of menstruating age women into a male homosocial pilgrimage space like Sabarimala, which is also studied as a symbol of heteropatriarchal welfare in Kerala, the chapter argues, has created a moment of crisis in the ostensible heteropatriarchal consensus regarding the existing gender order of the state. Positing the apex court verdict as a significant event that reconfigured the understanding of gender regimes in contemporary Kerala, it tracks the multiple discourses on masculinities after the verdict and their stance concerning patriarchal structures and institutions in Kerala. The first section of the chapter extends existing research work, specifically of Osellas (2003), which argues that the Sabarimala pilgrimage is a cultural/religious practice undertaken by men in relation to their role as a patriarchal male holder for the welfare of the family. This existing argument is integrated into the study by historically tracing the Malayalam films centred on the Sabarimala pilgrimage to establish how this patriarchal role of men in Kerala changes during different historical periods. While it tracks films from the 1960s to the contemporary period, it marks the film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), released after the Supreme Court verdict, as making a break or rupture in the role of the male householder in relation to the Sabarimala pilgrimage. The second section (through a review of existing works)

further links this relationship between male householder/heteropatriarchal family welfare and homosocial male pilgrimage to Sabarimala to the question of the formation of modern engendered caste based conjugal families in the backdrop of social reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala. The first two sections connect the male householder, heteropatriarchal family and concerns of masculinity and its relation to the pilgrimage to provide a base for the third section, which examines the formation of multiple masculine positions regarding women's entry that emerged after the apex court verdict and the gender concerns that inform each position. It traces conservative, liberal and Dalit masculine positions regarding the issue and argues how Dalit masculinities' support of women's entry at the intersection of the questions of caste and gender is significant in the study of masculinities in Kerala. It establishes the necessity of a framework of intersectionality to understand gender configurations/tensions in contemporary Kerala/India. The chapter uses materials including films, archival documents, court orders, newspaper and magazine articles, public statements of different community leaders and debates by diverse groups accessed through discussions on television and online media sites like YouTube and social media, government orders, and literary texts for analysis.

The current chapter begins by elaborating on how the Supreme Court verdict on women's entry into Sabarimala and its aftermath becomes an event revealing the crisis in heteropatriarchal consensus regarding gender order in contemporary Kerala. Elaborating on the entry of two women, Bindu Ammini and Kanaka Durga, into Sabarimala amidst the violent protests, it explains what this moment conveys about the challenges this act posed to caste-based heteropatriarchy and the attributed masculine and feminine roles

within a family structure. The following section establishes, using existing literature, the centrality of the Sabarimala pilgrimage as a homosocial male activity undertaken for the welfare of the heteropatriarchal family. The male householder performs the pilgrimage as a masculine duty for the welfare of the family he heads. This existing argument is integrated through the Malayalam films that, as the chapter argues, played a significant role in establishing the pilgrimage as a masculine duty for the well-being of the heteropatriarchal family. The third section traces back the question of the welfare of the heteropatriarchal family (which is at the centre of the film narratives), the pilgrimage and the protests regarding the women's entry to the *Navodhanam* (Renaissance) periods in Kerala in the 19th and 20th centuries and locates the roots of the current crisis during this period. This section argues that the Kerala Renaissance was centred around the creation of engendered individuals who had specific masculine and feminine roles to play within their modern conjugal family and community. While it envisaged equal education and employment opportunities for women and marginalised communities to a certain extent, the Kerala Renaissance left the question of the gendered division of the duties, attributes, and spaces untouched. The community reform contained within the caste lines was also not extended to the imagination of the annihilation of caste. This led to the perpetuation of caste patriarchy in the private and public realms of life in Kerala. The final section of the chapter locates the Right/upper caste, Left, and Dalit masculine positions regarding the Sabarimala verdict as having roots in the Renaissance moment and studies what these positions inform about the changing configurations of masculinities in contemporary Kerala. This section argues that the women's entry into the homosocial masculine space of Sabarimala intensifies the existing challenges posed by neo-liberalism and

globalisation to the role of the patriarch within the family. The women's entry into Sabarimala can obliterate the very few masculine-only spaces, which act as an ideological axiom for patriarchy to exercise power on women with the sanction provided by religion in a globalised world where it is otherwise becoming increasingly difficult. This challenge to the existing hegemonic roles of masculinity within the patriarchal familial order makes it necessary for masculinities to open up and reveal themselves, and the attempt and argument of the chapter is precisely to map and discuss the same.

Supreme Court Verdict on Women's Entry into Sabarimala (2018): Tracing the Events

The Supreme Court verdict allowing women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala temple in Kerala was a landmark event in the history of modern Kerala. Upholding the Right to Equality and Freedom of Religion in the Indian constitution, the Supreme Court, in its verdict, highlighted that banning women based on menstruation is another type of untouchability (Indian Young Lawyers Association vs The State of Kerala on 28 September, 2018, Civil Original Jurisdiction Writ Petition [Civil] No. 373 of 2006, 2018). Sabarimala pilgrimage is mainly undertaken by male pilgrims, and women of menstruating age do not generally visit the temple. Though this gender-segregated nature of the pilgrimage was a matter of convention, it was the High Court of Kerala in S Mahendran vs The State of Kerala (1991) that made the restriction on the entry of women of age group 10-50 a mandatory practice. The court declared that "women after menarche up to menopause are not entitled to enter the (Sabarimala) temple and offer prayers there

at any time of the year" (S. Mahendran vs The Secretary, Travancore on 5 April, 1991, 1991) because the main deity is a *Naisthik Brahmachari* (eternal celibate). The court took into account the arguments of three persons representing three groups who were associated with the beliefs and practices of the temple: *Thanthri* (the spiritual head of the temple), the Secretary of Ayyappa Seva Sangham, and a senior member of Pandalam Palace, besides relying heavily on the *Devaprasnam*[14] conducted in 1985. The Supreme Court, however, quashed the High court verdict pointing out that the latter relied solely on the testimonies of the *thanthri* "without an enquiry into its basis in religious text or whether the practice claiming constitutional protection fulfilled the other guidelines laid down by this Court" (Indian Young Lawyers Association vs The State of Kerala on 28 September, 2018, Civil Original Jurisdiction Writ Petition [Civil] No. 373 of 2006, 2018, p. 106). The biological process of menstruation was cited as the reason for the restriction of women by the High Court, and this was quashed by the apex court asserting that the "menstrual status of a woman is deeply personal and an intrinsic part of her privacy" and the Indian constitution "must treat it as a feature on the basis of which no exclusion can be practised and no denial can be perpetrated" (Indian Young Lawyers Association vs The State of Kerala on 28 September, 2018, Civil Original Jurisdiction Writ Petition [Civil] No. 373 of 2006, 2018, p. 108). Supreme Court, in its verdict, highlighted certain complex issues concerning gender and caste and pointed out that banning women is another type of untouchability (Indian Young Lawyers Association vs The State of Kerala on 28 September, 2018, Civil Original Jurisdiction Writ Petition [Civil] No. 373 of 2006,

[14] *Devaprasnam* is a religious practice conducted by *thanthri* of the temple when there is an impasse in taking decision about a religious practice.

2018). Bringing into account the relation between caste and gender, the court based the whole problem of Sabarimala on the Indian realities where an inseparable relation exists between caste oppression and gender inequality (Rege, 1996). Highlighting the Right against Discrimination in Article 15 of the Indian constitution, the apex court reiterated that women are not lesser human beings and menstruation cannot be cited as a reason for the exclusion of women (Indian Young Lawyers Association vs The State of Kerala on 28 September, 2018, Civil Original Jurisdiction Writ Petition [Civil] No. 373 of 2006, 2018).

The historic verdict of the Supreme Court allowing women of all ages to enter the temple became a significant moment in contemporary Kerala and received national and global attention ("Angry Crowd Protests against Female Entry to Sabarimala Temple," 2018; "Sabarimala: The Indian God Who Bars Women from His Temple," 2018). However, this was followed by violent protests by some caste and political groups, initiating a series of debates on the status of women in Kerala, a state otherwise known for its achievements in human development indicators, including the welfare of women (Drèze & Sen, 1995). The verdict on women's entry into Sabarimala disturbed the heteropatriarchal masculinity because of the specific position of Sabarimala in the cultural sphere of Kerala. As a major temple in Kerala, Sabarimala has been a predominantly male space, and the beliefs around it are intrinsically linked to the welfare of heteropatriarchal families in Kerala (F. Osella & Osella, 2003). When the caste patriarchy and the Right-wing groups protested against the apex court verdict, the ruling Left government seemingly supported the women's entry (however, the government was unresponsive in facilitating the entry through required police protection and other legal measures) denoting the whole event as an extension of the Renaissance (*Navodhanam*)

movements of Kerala. This thesis juxtaposes these narratives around *Navodhanam* and the protests against women's entry into Sabarimala in the backdrop of the formation of modern patriarchal families in Kerala. Along with the question of women in religious beliefs, the reliance on *Navodhanam* in the narratives of the Left further problematizes the Sabarimala event, as it reconfigures the contemporary by reinstating patriarchy in new forms.

The Supreme Court's Sabarimala verdict and the entry of the two women— Bindu Ammini and Kanaka Durga— are significant events in the history of contemporary Kerala. I argue that women's claim to a male homosocial space like Sabarimala and the two women's entry into the temple provide the context to interrogate the question of men, especially the heteropatriarchal masculinity in Kerala in newer directions. How does caste patriarchy negotiate a crisis in their current male positions through a religious site like Sabarimala, the history of which has been intrinsically linked with the welfare of heteropatriarchal households of Kerala? What are the problems in the counter-narratives based on *Navodhanam* by the Left when *Navodhanam* itself was critiqued on the grounds of reinstating patriarchy and shaping the male-centred modern family in Kerala? How does the question of women continue to shape the politics of Kerala? This chapter addresses such a series of questions about studying masculinities at this momentous time in Kerala following the Sabarimala verdict in 2018. Sabarimala women's entry protest in that way is a significant event in shaping the discourses around masculinities in the present times. On the one hand, I argue that the violent protests deeply influenced by caste patriarchy indicate certain troubles in the existing masculine order. On the other hand, it also reveals more complex problems concerning caste and gender, including in

the positions of the Left, especially following the intervention of the subaltern masculinities in the Sabarimala debate.

II

Hypermasculine Deity and the Male Householder: Sabarimala as a Symbol of Heteropatriarchal Welfare in Kerala

Analysing the films released in Malayalam in different periods, this section discusses how Sabarimala emerged as a symbol of heteropatriarchal welfare in Kerala in the 20th century. I argue that the film *Swami Ayyappan* (1975) played a significant role in popularizing the myth of Sabarimala Temple across Kerala and in South India, linking the beliefs of the temple to the heteropatriarchal familial welfare. I also discuss the film *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (1998) in the following part to discern how Sabarimala played its role in negotiating the tensions within heterosexual families in the period after liberalization by bolstering the role of the male householder and marginalizing the question of women within the family. In the backdrop of the protest following the Supreme Court verdict allowing menstruating age women to enter Sabarimala in 2018, the concluding part of this section uses the film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) to argue how the entry of menstruating age women into Sabarimala disturbs the foundations of the modern engendered heterosexual family in Kerala that was formed during the period of *Navodhanam* (Renaissance).

Sabarimala Temple in the Pathanamthitta district in Kerala is one of the major pilgrimage centres in South India. More than 30 million pilgrims visit the temple (J. K. Joseph et al., 2016) during the main season (called Mandala season), which lasts only for a short period of 41 days every year[15]. The visitors include devotees not only from the state of Kerala but also from the other South Indian states, including Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. Sabarimala, meaning "the hill of Sabari," is situated on a hilltop amidst eighteen hills in the Periyar Tiger Reserve. The traditional path to Sabarimala involves a long walk of over 60 km through dense forest. This religious trekking also contributes to the narrative of masculine valour involved in the pilgrimage, simultaneously branding women with a lack of "physical and mental strength" (C. Osella & Osella, 2006, p. 156) to undergo the strenuous journey through the forest[16]. Sabarimala occupies a significant place in the studies based on Kerala because of the specific form of rituals and beliefs associated with the temple (Jitheesh, 2016; C. Osella & Osella, 2006; Pereira, 2019). The temple is visited predominantly by male devotees after taking *vratha* (abstinence) for 41 days, during which they abstain from alcohol and non-vegetarian food. Besides, they are also expected to refrain from acts of

[15] Sabarimala also leads as one among the top temples in India in terms of generating income. This is significant as this huge revenue is created during a short period of pilgrim season. In 2023 it contributed Rs 320 crore to the Kerala government's exchequer. See https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/sabarimala-records-320cr-in-revenue-101674068502898.html

[16] These days a large number of pilgrims take an alternate route to Sabarimala through Pamba which is around 6 km.

violence and sex and are supposed to help other Ayyappas[17] preparing for the pilgrimage. The temple is also known for its secular credentials, as Sabarimala beliefs are closely associated with Muslim and Christian traditions, and interfaith relationships are at the core of Sabarimala beliefs (Roopesh, 2018). Male pilgrims proceeding to visit Ayyappa also visit a mosque in Erumeli, which is dedicated to Vavar, a Muslim believed to have been a close friend of Ayyappa. Another interesting aspect regarding the main deity Ayyappa is the myth of his origin. Ayyappa is believed to have been born from the male gods Shiva and Vishnu, two of the three main deities, *Trimurti*, of the Hindu pantheon. Believed to be a celibate, beliefs about Ayyappa are also closely associated with Malikappurathamma, a female deity whose temple is located in some distance away from the main temple of Ayyappa in Sabarimala. It is believed that Malikappurathamma is perpetually waiting to get married to Ayyappa as he promised to marry her when no first-time pilgrims (*kanniswamis*) visit the temple (Younger, 2002). Hence it is the duty of the male pilgrims to visit Sabarimala every year so that Ayyappa remains celibate, looking after the welfare of the Malayali households (C. Osella & Osella, 2006). This marginalisation of the women's question in the belief is further catered to by the supposedly masculine act of pilgrimage through the dense forest by Malayali men to visit Ayyappa. The majority participation of men dutifully going to Sabarimala every year, combined with the masculine ethos deeply enshrined in the beliefs, make Sabarimala an interesting site to discuss masculinity in Kerala.

[17] The male pilgrim visiting Sabarimala is called Ayyappa while the female pilgrim is called Malikappuram named after the deity Malikappurathamma.

The 1970s was a significant period in the history of Sabarimala as the temple witnessed an enormous leap in the number of pilgrims. This was also when Sabarimala emerged as a major pilgrimage site in South India. Historian M. G. S. Narayan (2018) notes that the 1950 arson made Sabarimala famous and that till 1950, only the local population had visited it like any other village temple. Rajan Gurukkal (2018), another prominent historian, notes that from the 1950s, the temple gradually attained fame, and the number of pilgrims peaked in the 1970s and 1980s. The pilgrims of Sabarimala mainly include Dalits and OBCs and are rarely visited by Brahmins, and this interest of Avarna pilgrims indicates its non-Brahminical roots (Roopesh, 2018). Historical records also show that Sabarimala was a tribal worship centre under the Mala Araya tribal community (Mateer, 1883), while some indicate its Buddhist connections (A. S. Menon, 2007) and also the temple's non-Hindu traditions (Syamkumar, 2019). It was in the 1900s that it was appropriated by Brahmins, which eventually replaced the tribal practises of the temple with Brahminic practices (Sajeev, 2019). However, this increase in popularity of Sabarimala after 1950 was influenced by several factors, including the role played by organisations like Akhila Bharathiya Ayyappa Seva Sangham (ABASS). The role of cultural mediums like films is also equally significant. In the next section, I discuss the role of the film *Swami Ayyappan* (1975) in popularising Sabarimala, developing it as a site of heteropatriarchal welfare in Kerala and South India. I also discuss the films *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (1998) and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) in the subsequent sections to understand how Sabarimala continued to remain significant in the narratives of heteropatriarchal welfare during different periods in Kerala's history.

The Eternal Celibate Ayyappa and the Patriarchal Male Householder: Role of the film *Swami Ayyappan* (1975) in Popularising Sabarimala

Mythologicals were a significant category among the films produced during the initial decades of the Indian movie industry. Dada Saheb Phalke, a pioneering figure of Indian cinema, made the first Indian film *Raja Hairshchandra* (1913) in this genre, through which he also "established India's first filmic genre, the 'mythological', creating an immediate connection between religion and cinema in India which persists to this day" (Dwyer, 2006, p. 12). In the context of South India, an inseparable relation exists between popular religion, popular cinema and politics (Bhrugubanda, 2018; Prasad, 1999; Srinivas, 2006). Mythologicals were more popular in Kerala when "they featured local deities or religious sites" (Swart, 2011, p. 10). Several of the films (*Kodungallooramma* [1968], *Sree Guruvaryoorappan* [1972] and *Devi Kanyakumari* [1974]) made during this era dealt with the myths associated with major temples in Kerala like Guruvayoor Temple, Kodungalloor Bhagavathy Temple, and so on and gradually devotional films also became famous in Malayalam. *Sabarimala Sree Ayyappan* (1961, directed by S. M. Sreeramulu Naidu), *Sabarimala Sree Dharma Sastha* (1970, directed by M. Krishnan Nair), *Swami Ayyappan* (1975, directed by P. Subramaniam), *Sree Ayyappanum Vavarum* (1982, directed by N. P. Suresh) and *Sabarimala Sree Ayyappan* (1990, directed by Renuka Sharma) are some of the major films based on Sabarimala, released before the 1990s. However, unlike any other film, the film *Swami Ayyappan* (1975, directed and produced by P. Subramaniam under the banner of Merryland Neela Productions) occupies a predominant position in the history of mythological and devotional films in Malayalam and in the history of the Sabarimala temple.

Besides being a super hit at the box office, *Swami Ayyappan* also bagged four awards in the 1975 State Film Awards, including the maiden award for the "Best Film with Popular Appeal and Aesthetic Value". Simultaneously released in Tamil, *Swami Ayyappan*, "apart from telling the story of Lord Ayyappa in a colourful and captivating manner", also included "a couple of miracles linked to Sabarimala, succeeded in even triggering strong devotion among large sections of the Tamil audience towards Sabarimala" (Pereira, 2019, p. 11). The producer P. Subramaniam used a portion of the film's profit to improve the infrastructure facilities in Sabarimala, including building the famous Swami Ayyappan Road that enhanced the connectivity between the Pamba and the main temple**.**

Swami Ayyappan (1975) is a major landmark in the genre of mythological/devotional films based on Sabarimala as this film integrated the Sabarimala myth with the everyday lives of Malayalis. This is a crucial shift as the previous films *Sabarimala Sree Ayyappan* (1961) and *Sabarimala Sree Dharma Sastha* (1970) focused on the myth and the heroic deeds of Lord Ayyappa. This interaction of the "mythical" with the "real" in *Swami Ayyappan* (1975) is significant, and this thesis interrogates the historical context that made such representations possible in Malayalam cinema, where the celibate Ayyappa was reconfigured as the protector of Malayali heterosexual households.

Such a "reincarnation" of Ayyappa in the lives of Malayalis has to be analysed in the larger context of the shifting paradigms of gender politics in Kerala and the changing role of the state. Devika (2002) denotes the developments in Kerala during the mid-20th

century through the term "domestication". According to her, the "domestication" of Malayalis is

> A complex conjunction of discursive and non-discursive changes, which effected the direction of the major portion of the energies, interests, desires and commitments of individuals into their immediate families…this implies a solidification of modern gender relations and the intensification of their power effects…For to be "domesticated" was to be integrated into the modern domestic domain as responsible father/ householder or mother/homemaker, engaged primarily in the individualising of their children (p. 58).

This development of the dominant gender ideology, which posited men as bread winners and women as keepers of the home, also has its origins in the social transformations and reform movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In such a transformation, there was the "restructuring of families and marriage practices through legal reforms that paved the way for a specific form of patriarchy—'conjugal patriarchy'—in Kerala society, which institutionalised the authority of the husband over wife and children and reoriented gender identities toward the conjugal 'home'" (Hapke, 2013, p. 15). At this historical juncture, the Sabarimala temple emerged as an ideal location for the re-masculinisation of the Malayali male householder, further catered to by a film like *Swami Ayyappan*. *Swami Ayyappan* (1975) carefully integrated into its narrative an image of Ayyappa, who, more than a mythical figure, is a heroic protector of the Malayali male householder and his family. This role of Ayyappa in moulding an ideal

male householder or patriarch is the leading factor that links the different sub-tales of the film. Narrated by a *Guruswami*[18] (RS Manohar) during the day of *Makaravilakku* (the annual festival in Sabarimala), this film reinforces various Brahmanical-patriarchal myths about Sabarimala in the context of the welfare of heterosexual families in Kerala.

In its first half, the film presents Ayyappa's birth and his upbringing in the Pandalam Palace as the adopted son of the king of Pandalam. Picturised in the model of conventional mythological films, this part stars Gemini Ganeshan (as the Pandalam King), Sreevidya (as the Pandalam Queen) and Master Reghu/ Master Sekhar (as Ayyappan, as a child and as an adolescent respectively) in leading roles. One important feature of this film is the careful selection of popular actors from both Tamil and Malayalam film industries to play the major roles. Gemini Ganeshan was one of the prominent stars in Tamil Nadu, and him playing the King of Pandalam, who was also Lord Ayyappa's step-father, helped the narrative transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries. While retaining stars like Gemini Ganeshan in both the Tamil and the Malayalam versions of *Swami Ayyappan*, some significant changes were made in the casting of other characters in each version to cater to the interests of the audience accordingly. Besides the characterisation, the distinctive promotional strategies of the film also contributed to its wider popularity than any other Sabarimala film of the previous decades. *Swami Ayyappan* was advertised as presenting the Sabarimala pilgrimage in its entirety, which would be a "great experience for families" and for those

[18] Someone who has undertaken Sabarimala pilgrimage at least eighteen times. He usually leads the Sabarimala pilgrimage group.

who “could not visit the temple, especially women” (See Figures 1 and 2). The viewing of this film was marked as a “duty” of Ayyappa devotees in Kerala. The promotional strategies of the film, especially targeting the family audience, and the plot that reiterated the relationship between Lord Ayyappa and the patriarchal households of Kerala further added to the film’s success. Watching the film was projected as a spiritual exercise and the producer’s publicised decision to spend the profit gained from the film for the infrastructural development in Sabarimala (early in the production stage itself) also played its part. The state government relaxed the entertainment tax which also led to the wider viewing of the film. The advertisement strategies, the governmental intervention through tax exemption, and the series of plots capturing the evolving heteropatriarchal structure of the state— all contributed to *Swami Ayyappan’s* success. However, it is to be noted that Ayyappa’s story, as depicted in the film, adopts the popular Brahminical narrative of Ayyappa, and it overlooks the tribal and other subaltern claims on the origins of Lord Ayyappa and Sabarimala.

Figure 1: Film poster announcing the release of *Swami Ayyappan* (1975)

Figure 2: Film poster marking the 25th day of *Swami Ayyappan* (1975).

The narrative of *Swami Ayyappan* harmoniously blends the Lord Ayyappa myth with the lives of the male pilgrims portrayed, establishing Ayyappa as his devotees' protector. The first subplot depicts an elderly man, Sanku Pillai (S. P. Pillai), seeking a neighbour's help to go to Sabarimala, but the latter proceeds to the temple without taking Pillai along. Driven by his intense desire to visit Sabarimala for the auspicious 18th time (symbolising *pathinettampadi*, the eighteen holy steps of the Sabarimala temple), Pillai decides to go to the temple by himself. His position as the single parent of five daughters and the sole male member of the family is depicted to be in conflict with his role as a staunch devotee of Ayyappa. This is evident in a scene where his daughters are shown praying to Ayyappa and Lord Ganesha to take care of their father during the arduous journey through the forest. The longing for a child, especially a male heir, is a common thread in most of the stories depicted in the Sabarimala films. This is evident in *Swami Ayyappan* too, especially in a scene depicting Pillai uttering in dismay that if he had a son, the son would have taken him to Sabarimala. This "marginalisation of the woman's question" (L. Mani, 1987; Spivak, 1994) within the pilgrimage and the reinforcement of the man being the ideal householder and pilgrim permeate throughout this narrative**.** Pillai's daughters also lament at their inability to accompany their father to Sabarimala as they "have no right to enter the temple" (indicating that they belong to the menstruating age group). The film narrative here deconstructs the longing of women to visit Sabarimala by marginalising their sexuality and excluding them on account of menstruation. The plot ends with the tired old man being taken to the main temple by an elephant (symbolising Lord Ganesha, the elephant God believed to be the remover of obstacles in Hindu mythology). The story clearly shows that it was his dedication as a good father and pious devotee of Lord

Ayyappa that was rewarded by the divine intervention to facilitate his difficult journey through the forest. It also asserts that his daughters' devotion to the Sabarimala customs (which include their own exclusion from the temple) saved their father and in turn, their own family by retaining the sole male householder.

This denial of the women's question and the assertion of the male agency in the belief is also emphasised in another subplot in the film. Here a young girl (Baby Sumathy), a devout believer of Lord Ayyappa, is shown undertaking the arduous journey to the Sabarimala hill with her father (Vanchiyoor Madhavan Nair). On the way, the girl requests her father to take her to Sabarimala every year, indicating her extreme devotion towards Ayyappa. But the father tells her that she can visit Sabarimala only for a few more years till she attains puberty. The girl in turn asks an interesting question whether Lord Ayyappa does not like women to which her father replies that Ayyappa is a *nithya brahmachari* (eternal celibate), and that prohibits women's entry. Here the film narrative asserts that Ayyappan being a *brahmachari* necessitates the denial of women's presence, though this idea is disputed within the religious beliefs (Syamkumar, 2019). Here the young girl, wishing to have been born as a boy, prays to Ayyappa to give her a younger brother so that he can take her father to Sabarimala every year when the father becomes old. The final song (*Thedivarum Kannukalil Odiyethum Swami*) shows the girl singing in front of the sanctum sanctorum praying for Ayyappa to be born as a younger brother; this reveals the masculine beliefs embedded in the whole pilgrimage, the desire for the inheritance through male heir and the female devotee's expected fraternal relation to the deity. This song which became hugely popular in South India, reiterates the myth of

Ayyappa while reinforcing the patriarchal lineage both in the beliefs associated with Sabarimala and in Kerala households.

The patriarchal authority and masculine ethos within the family and in the Sabarimala-related customs are further bolstered in another subplot of the film. Here, Captain Prabhakar (Raghavan), an officer in the Indian Army, decides to go to Sabarimala to fulfil the vow of visiting Sabarimala with his only son, whom he believes was a divine reward for his years of prayer to Ayyappa. But later, Prabhakar's wife and son, waiting for his return from the Army, receive a telegram informing that Prabhakar died in an accident. However, to their surprise, he returns and narrates the whole story, which points out his devotion to Ayyappa and the observance of self-restraint during the 41 days of *vratham*[19] (abstinence) before the Sabarimala visit. The narrative asserts that his strict observance of *vratham* saved him from the car accident, while the contempt for Ayyappa by forcing the male devotee Prabhakar to break the *vratham*, led to the ill fate of Prabhakar's friends. The narrative reiterates the male householder's devotion to Ayyappa which saved his family (from losing a father and a husband) and the country itself by not losing a brave soldier. Ayyappa, in this narrative, reconfigures as the protector of the male who is cardinal to the survival of the family and the nation itself.

The film *Swami Ayyappan* (1975) was released in a specific historical context of Kerala's history when the state was focusing on new developmental paradigms with more attention to family and children. The era also saw the "father/householder-

[19] *Vratham* means abstinence. It is the period during which the male devotee leads a celibate life. Additionally, he does not take non-vegetarian food and alcohol; does not utter abusive words or indulge in any physical violence.

mother/homemaker axis" crystallised and the "nuclear family consisting of the breadwinning husband and his housewifely spouse, and their children gaining ground as 'natural'" (Devika, 2002, p. 72). Osellas (2006) note,

> Sabarimala pilgrimage—whose increasing popularity appears overdetermined by current economic and political processes—(re)produces very modern (and politically inflected) ideal gender subjectivities: the all-powerful, heterosexual householder invested with the duty of providing for the spiritual and material well-being of the family, a task which sees women—as housewives and mothers—playing a complementary but— importantly—subordinate role (p. 166).

The centrality of the male within the family during this time was also aided by the community reform movements and the role of the Left in the rise of modern patriarchy (Devika, 2010a). The Malayali men's mass migration to Gulf countries and the resultant contact with newer consumption regimes was also a significant phenomenon during this era (E. T. Mathew & Nair, 1978). *Swami Ayyappan* (1975), in this context, contributed to re-masculinising the domestic through the hypermasculine myth of Lord Ayyappa. Sabarimala here acts as a medium for the patriarchal assertions in the Malayali households, bolstering the "gendered demarcation of the public and the private spheres as masculine and feminine respectively" (Chatterjee, 1989). The film *Swami Ayyappan*, a synthesis of a series of "myths" and "real" stories, helped considerably in developing the cult of Sabarimala across South India. The songs also became hugely popular, further aiding in the film's popularity. The song *Harivarasanam* (sung by K. J. Yesudas)

recorded for the film became a part of the daily ritual of the temple, and the other songs in the film are still popular among the devotees of Sabarimala.

Tensions in the Male Householder Positions: Contextualising Sabarimala in the Post-Liberalisation Kerala

During the 1990s, Kerala witnessed major transformations in the social and political fronts. The intensification of feminist activities and organisation of marginalised communities like Dalits, sex workers, lesbians, and others posed a challenge to the patriarchal heterosexual masculinities (Devika & Sukumar, 2006; Raj, 2013). Globalisation induced consumption and the more extensive engagement of women and other minorities intensified men's anxieties during this era (C. Osella & Osella, 2006). However, the family as a social institution continued to play a significant role while the male householder confronted new challenges. The falling fertility rate in Kerala and the transition to small families were also accompanied by a considerable focus on children's welfare (Devika, 2002). Liberalisation induced consumption regimes and the increased expense on children, mainly due to the rapid spread of private education, led to more challenges to the families. Women's labour underwent a quantum shift as, along with the increase in responsibilities towards children, they also became a part of the "governmental labour" through their participation in SHG's, NGOs and micro enterprises (Neysmith et al., 2012; Thampi, 2007). These tensions in the gender regimes in the 1990s along with the rising criticism against the Kerala Model (Sreekumar, 2009), provide a platform to enquire why religious sites like Sabarimala gained more prominence during this time. I argue that the rising patriarchal anxieties and increased

demands of the family made Sabarimala more prominent during the 1990s. This trouble in the traditional male roles resulted in a crisis of masculinity, leading to a "regressive phenomenon of remasculinisation of the public sphere and feminisation of the private, where tradition was powerfully invoked to restructure family and sexuality" (Pillai, 2013, p. 110). The Sabarimala films in this era, while representing these tensions within the narrative, reinstated the patriarchal authority of the male householder.

Sabarimalayil Thanka Suryodayam (1992, directed by K. Shankar) is one such earlier film which shows that along with the welfare of heterosexual families, financial and material well-being also emerged as a prominent theme. Women also occupy a significant role in this film while there are definite means within the narrative to affirm their relation to the domestic as a mother and a wife, undercutting the possible exercising of her agency. Sabarimala, in the films during this era, provides an ideal platform to depict these changes in heterosexual families post-liberalisation, where the male householder faces new challenges over the new role of women within the domestic and public spheres. These films also mark (temporary) celibacy as a necessary condition for the heterosexual male householder while it is integrated into the larger purpose of the family and the state. This stress on celibacy in these films has an inseparable relation with the spread of Hindutva movements in India in the 1990s, as celibacy is often considered the "preferred state for possessing concentrated masculine vigour" (Chakravarty, 1998, p. 256). However, later films like *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (1998) problematise the celibacy-male householder relationship to depict more complex problems within the families in Kerala.

Inconsiderate Man, Enterprising Woman and the Sabarimala in *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (1998)

Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala (1998, directed by Sreenivasan) was released eight years after the liberalisation, during which the households in Kerala underwent radical transformation. The Gulf remittance and the average per capita consumption of Kerala increased considerably, which was also impacted hugely by the economic policies in India following liberalisation (Kannan & Hari, 2002). The middle class emerged as a powerful group, but a large section of this group was "economically fragile and susceptible to the anxieties of falling in social or economic status" (Fernandes, 2015, p. 236). As men were away, women gained confidence in managing the households, though men continued to retain control of the households in several ways (Gulati, 1993; Zachariah et al., 2002). The government gradually moved from the welfare state post-liberalisation, and the era also saw an increase in the expenses for education and health (M. A. Oommen, 2010). The film *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (meaning "Shyamala engrossed in thought") provides an interesting case in this context as it depicts a woman fulfilling all the responsibilities associated with managing the household when her husband leads a careless life disregarding his wife and children. One of the major films capturing men's anxieties during the era, the film became a box office hit and won several awards including the "National Award for Best Film on Other Social Issues" (1998). Narrated from the point of view of the female protagonist Shyamala (Sangeetha), the film represents the new roles played by women in post-liberalised Kerala. Though the film represents a change within the domestic sphere troubling the centrality of men after liberalisation, it is through participating in a hypermasculine pilgrimage to

Sabarimala and embarking on a celibate life that Shyamala's husband Vijayan (Sreenivasan) eventually becomes an ideal householder. However, unlike in the previous films, I argue that Sabarimala in *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* acts as a complex symbol; simultaneously troubling the centrality of the male householder and aids in eventually retaining the patriarchal control of the family.

Vijayan (Sreenivasan) is a government school teacher, but he takes a long leave from his work with the aspiration of becoming a businessman. However, Vijayan fails in his business ventures, which leads to a lot of money being lost including that of his father and his wife. This failure of Vijayan as a householder and father forms the centre of the film narrative. Liberalisation created newer opportunities and intensified the anxieties within households, especially regarding the management of increased expenses. The film shows all the responsibilities, including the children's education and household expenses, falling onto Shyamala and Vijayan remains untouched by her repeated demands to join back in his job. An economics graduate, Vijayan uses his limited knowledge of the Indian economy to trick Shyamala, and he keeps convincing her that it is only business that can save them from their problems. The desire to start a business to become rich prompts masculinities like Vijayan to attempt ventures in which he does not have any expertise, like directing advertisements or producing herbal toothbrushes. He continues to fall into debt because of the lack of proper planning and implementation. In this context of Vijayan's negligence to his wife and children, his father Karunan (Thilakan) asks him to undertake the Sabarimala pilgrimage. In Kerala, the Sabarimala pilgrimage has been widely considered a means to make men responsible for their families and children, and it symbolises the means to address the tensions of the male positions, especially through

"masculine and heteronormative ways" (C. Osella & Osella, 2006, p. 158). The male householder's entry into temporary celibacy, his union with the hypermasculine Ayyappa and his eventual return from the pilgrimage mark the heterosexual family's retaining of the patriarchal householder.

In *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala,* though Vijayan is born in a Nair family, he does not enjoy the privileges of the hypermasculine upper caste characters (especially played by stars like Mohanlal/Mammooty in the same decade). It is through the historical construction of the star persona of Sreenivasan that such a representation of Vijayan is made possible, as Sreenivasan has been the masculine "other" in Malayalam cinema (Tharayil, 2022). In the film, his decision to continue abstinence following his visit to Sabarimala creates further conflict in the family, and Vijayan eventually leaves home to lead a celibate life.

It is because Sreenivasan playing the character of Vijayan a strong female character like Shyamala is possible, as female characters were largely marginalised during this era in Malayalam films (Pillai, 2017). Shyamala, though she upholds an essentially patriarchal idea of family, is articulative and strives to sustain her family despite the problems caused by Vijayan. However, the narrative does not allow Shyamala to be like Seetha in Kumaranasan's classic poem *Chinthavishtayaya Seetha* (the film's title is owed to this poem) as the end of the film shows Shyamala reuniting with Vijayan. In contrast, the poem presents a powerful image of Seetha "having intense feeling of resentment towards Rama", and she remembers and meticulously analyses the

past events to observe that “the injustice she suffered should not be excused as a fate” (Kadavath, 2019, p. 230-235).

The climax of *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* shows Vijayan delivering a message about finding one’s true self in front of his students, and the narrative glosses over Shyamala’s efforts to sustain their family by starting a unit of garment factory. The narrative establishes that the return of the male householder rejuvenates the family of three females, and it is made possible through the setting of the story in the larger background of Sabarimala belief and pilgrimage. However, though Sabarimala provides a major context for the film, the state of eternal celibacy (like Lord Ayyappa) poses a problem for the heterosexual family as Vijayan is continuously haunted by his thoughts about Shyamala and children when he leaves home to lead the life of a celibate. It is due to Vijayan’s angst over the condition of his wife and children that he finally leaves the ashram to join back as a responsible householder.

Through the character Shyamala, I argue that the film also portrays the problems of women within the Kerala Model. She is expected to cater to the needs of the domestic and be part of the production necessitated by the state post-liberalisation especially through women empowerment programmes like Kudumbashree (Devika, 2016). In the film, Shyamala is shown responsible for making her husband come to terms with the needs of the family and retaining his patriarchal authority within the family. Though Shyamala is economically self-reliant, she is not ready to accept her parents’ advice for a divorce and instead waits for Vijayan’s return. The film here conveniently overlooks the double burden on the woman while the narrative reinstates the male as the ideal

householder. Here Sabarimala provides a pivotal link in relegating woman's position within the heterosexual family while reconstituting the man's dominance in the domestic and the public spheres. Connell (1995) argues that masculinity is reaffirmed in some means at the phase of a crisis. In this context, Sabarimala contributes to the affirmation of masculinity and masculine ethos in the backdrop of its crisis post-liberalisation.

Sabarimala Symbolising Patriarchal Crisis: *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) and the Women Entry Protest of 2018

Sabarimala, post 2000, has become a site of contest for many reasons. Besides being a major pilgrimage centre in South India, the temple has attracted national and global attention following the Supreme Court of India's ruling on 28 September 2018, allowing women of all ages to enter the temple. The Supreme Court, in its verdict, highlighted complex issues with regard to gender and caste and pointed out that the banning of women is another form of untouchability (Indian Young Lawyers Association vs The State of Kerala on 28 September, 2018, Civil Original Jurisdiction Writ Petition [Civil] No. 373 of 2006, 2018). Considering the link between caste and gender, the apex court based the whole problem of Sabarimala on the Indian realities where an "inseparable relation exists between caste and gender" (Rege, 1996, p. 15).

The Supreme Court intervention in Sabarimala occurred during an era when Kerala witnessed several protests against heteropatriarchal control of women's sexuality. This included protests like Kiss of Love (2014), *Aarrpo Aarthavam* (Hurray Menses, 2019), Happy to Bleed (2015) and so on. The period is also noted for several legal

interventions concerning gender and women's rights, including decriminalising sections in the Indian Penal Code on adultery (section 497) and homosexuality (Section 377), banning the Triple Talaq, and others. In this larger socio-political context of crucial changes happening in Kerala and across India, the Supreme Court gave the Sabarimala verdict, followed by violent protests across Kerala by certain Right wing and caste organisations to protect the customs of the Sabarimala temple. The neo-Savarna women also supported this protest by organising transnational protests like "Ready to Wait" where these women claimed that they were ready to wait till they attained the age of 50 to enter the temple (Devika, 2020).

This protest against the women's entry into Sabarimala garnered national and global attention as it simultaneously sparked debates on women's status in Kerala and the continuing restrictions on women by Brahmanical patriarchy. Becoming a significant moment in the modern history of Kerala, the Sabarimala protest revealed the inherent tensions in the existing gender order and the problems faced by women and other marginalised groups within Kerala. The heated debates on gender and religion in the public sphere are also reflected in Malayalam films. The widely acclaimed Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021, here on GIK), produced during the time, employed Sabarimala as a site to discuss the complex issues about gender and Brahmanical patriarchy in modern Kerala. I attempt to understand the representation of Sabarimala and the women's entry protest in contemporary Malayalam cinema by closely studying GIK. I argue that, unlike the films of the previous decades based on Sabarimala, GIK problematises the patriarchal heterosexual families and the male householder in the backdrop of Sabarimala.

GIK (2021, directed by Jeo Baby) discusses the condition of women within the patriarchal households of Kerala. In the backdrop of hypermasculine beliefs and the women's entry protests concerning Sabarimala, the film extends the women's question within the domestic to more complex issues like menstrual taboo, which is fundamental to the Brahminical Hinduism (Hembroff, 2010; Leslie, 1994). GIK uses Sabarimala women's entry protest to discuss how religion/caste and patriarchy collude to ensure the subordination of women and other marginalised groups in Kerala. The film reveals the voids in Kerala modernity as religion and caste continue to provide spaces for patriarchal assertions in Kerala's rapidly changing gender paradigms post-liberalisation and globalisation.

To identify with the women's gendered experience, GIK does not name most of the characters (including the main characters), and the film notably lacks background scores except for the carefully captured sounds within the kitchen. Nimisha Sajayan and Suraj Venjaramoodu play lead roles in the film as newly married wife and husband respectively, in an upper caste Nair household in northern Kerala. Sajayan's character grew up in a more liberal environment and is married to Suraj's character who is a teacher by profession and is from an aristocratic, patriarchal Nair family. The film portrays the new bride having difficulty adjusting to the highly patriarchal and traditional marital family. It depicts women, including the daughter-in-law (Nimisha Sajayan) and her mother-in-law (Ajitha V. M.), tirelessly working in the kitchen while the men in the house do not help them with domestic chores. The men instead lead a comfortable life by engaging themselves in yoga or checking their mobile phones. Close-up shots are

employed as an effective tool throughout the movie to represent the monotonous jobs of women within the domestic sphere, especially within the kitchen.

The initial part of the film shows Nimisha's character trying to adjust to the oppressive conditions of the new house as a housewife, and she is even shown taking up the huge responsibility of running the house when her mother-in-law leaves to be with her pregnant daughter. Working within the kitchen and doing even the minute works of her husband and father-in-law (played by T. V. Suresh Babu), the film shows Nimisha's frustration mounting with time. Interestingly, the two men—the husband and father-in-law— are mostly polite and gentle towards Nimisha, occasionally employing passive aggression to get their whims and demands met. However, the film narrative affirms that such conduct by these men is a patriarchal burden on the women, even making them compromise their careers and interests. In one scene, the father-in-law dissuades the new bride from attending a job interview by glorifying motherhood, claiming that his unemployed wife's undivided attention to her family was what enabled their children to attain high positions in life. This "housewification" which is produced at "the intersection of Victorian ideas about motherhood filtered through colonialism and locally present Brahminical ideologies of feminine chastity and procreative duty" (Devika, 2019b, p. 81) is of substantial interest in the film. GIK here politicises the domestic sphere in Kerala, especially by giving a considerable focus to the kitchen (the film itself is satirically named *The Great Indian Kitchen*). The kitchen in the film represents the burdens on women within the heterosexual households of contemporary Kerala. It also puts forth a staunch criticism of the patriarchal householders in Kerala who "moor the women in tradition by espousing family values" (Rajeswari, 1993, p. 124).

Menstruation, Domesticity and the Religion

Besides politicising domestic spheres, GIK extends the women's question to the spheres of caste and religion in Kerala. The film links the domestic burden on women with contemporary issues like the menstruation taboo related to the Sabarimala women's entry protests of 2018. While most interpretations limit the Sabarimala Protest to be solely concerned with traditional religious beliefs being encroached upon by the modern institution of law, GIK succeeds in showing the everyday modalities of gender oppression as having their roots in discriminatory Brahmanical religious practices. The way in which religious customs act as a sanction for oppressive gendered practices within the private and public sphere is brought to light through the film (Krishna & Kadavath, n.d.). The film successfully captures everyday experiences of gender embodied and entwined by religious and caste patriarchy, making it a pan-Indian success.

In the film, despite Sajayan's character trying to adjust to the oppressive household chores, the severe restrictions during the time of menstruation force her to rethink her situation. This moment of the film links the everyday problems of gender to the larger problem women face within the Brahmanical religion as represented through Sabarimala in the film. During her menstruation, she is asked to confine herself to a room, made to sleep on the floor, and is not allowed to touch anything in the house, outside her room. The *ammayi* (aunt, played by Ramadevi) character has an important role in the film, and she comes to the house to carry out household chores and take care of the men during the daughter-in-law's menstrual days. The Aunt's character complies with the emphasised feminine (a usual trope in Malayalam cinema), who complies with

the universal notion of subordination of women to men "and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (Connell, 1987, p. 183; Pillai, 2013, p. 112). The Aunt asks Nimisha to wash everything she used during her periods in running water and instructs her to keep her washed clothes away from others. The aunt even tells her to purify those with holy water to protect herself from the wrath of the Sun God. The element of untouchability that permeates in these practices in the film depicts that it is primarily through women the taboo on menstruation is practised and propagated.

The film narrative links these restrictions within households during menstruation to further significant problems concerning caste and gender in the Brahminical religion. In the film, the temporary celibacy of the male householders (the son and his father) observed as part of the Sabarimala pilgrimage and the resultant burden on women within the household is paralleled with the burden of Ayyappan's celibacy on the larger category of women in Kerala. The film signifies that the selective restriction on women of menstruating age is a problem by itself and is inseparably linked with women's problems in the domestic and public spheres. Menstruation here is employed as a means to control women's sexuality "and by extension the boundaries of the religious community and maintenance of social hierarchies which are regulated according to particular ideologies, propagating the idea that women are the bearers of tradition and are responsible for the well-being of the family, society, and religion itself" (Cohen, 2020, p. 126). By portraying a Dalit character like Usha (a maid played by Kabani, a character with a name), the film further shows that a Dalit woman is doubly marginalised in terms of her caste and gender (Guru, 2015; Raj, 2013). Usha remarks at one point that her menstruation is not a problem for anyone, and she engages with her work in upper caste

households even during the time of her menstruation in order to sustain her family. This contrast between the representation of an upper caste female character and that of a Dalit woman traces the relationship between gender and caste more evidently within the film narrative.

GIK also discusses the detrimental effects of the Sabarimala protest on the lives of women in Kerala who firmly stood by the Supreme Court verdict. Several feminists who supported the women's entry into Sabarimala and the women who attempted to enter the temple were brutally attacked and their houses were vandalised during the protest. Besides this was the wide use of social media for cyberbullying and issuing threats to these women. The film narrative shows the female protagonist supporting the activist (Aparna Sivakami) who argued for menstruating women's entry into Sabarimala. Nimisha's character, while being ostracised in a room due to menstrual taboo, shares a Facebook post by Aparna Sivakami supporting women's entry. Aparna Sivakami, whose house was attacked during the protest, plays herself in the film. It is an instance of the film's strong political stance on the Sabarimala issue. Nimisha is asked to delete the Facebook post by the members of the *karayogam*[20] as it is against the stance of the caste organisation. GIK thus presents the complexity of the women's question in Kerala at the intersection of caste, religion and Brahmanical patriarchy of which the Sabarimala protest serves as a revealing moment.

In comparison to the films like *Swami Ayyappan* (1975) or *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (1998), GIK does not idealise the role of the male householder within the

[20] Local chapter of the caste organisation

family but instead, it problematises the category in the context of Sabarimala. Towards the climax, a scene shows the first day after Suraj's character's second marriage where he declares that his first marriage was a "rehearsal" and that he is going to "rectify the mistakes made then". However, he proceeds to behave exactly the same way as before by leaving his tea cup unwashed, indicating that to be his wife's job. The wife dutifully takes and washes it with a smile, completely accepting the role. The scene implies the householder to be unchanging; he merely replaces his wife with another woman according to his desire. The film affirms that the male householders represented in the film are no more desirable and fluidity becomes the marker of masculinity in contemporary Kerala. Sabarimala in the film symbolises a rupture within the heterosexual households and also the affirmation of women's agency as represented through the character of Nimisha Sajayan.

The concluding scene of GIK shows Nimisha walking out of the oppressive household amidst the *irumudikkettu nirakkal* ceremony (an event in which the male pilgrims get ready to proceed to Sabarimala by filling the holy *irumudi,* the travel kit to Sabarimala), walking across a coastal road. By the side of the road are a group of women protesting to safeguard the customs of Sabarimala (popularly called by the name *Sabarimala Achara Samrakshana Prakshobham* meaning "Agitation to Protect the Customs of Sabarimala") and a waiting lounge painted red with the image of Ernesto Che Guevara (symbolising the Left). The film here represents the limitations of the Left and other progressive groups in addressing the gender and caste questions in the Sabarimala issue and also in delinking women's agency from the goals of progressive politics (Wilson, 2013). It draws in its narrative the problems of Kerala modernity, including the

Navodhanam (Renaissance) propounded by the Left during the Sabarimala protest (T. T. Sreekumar, 2019). *Navodhanam* made the taboo on menstruation stronger, and the silence on menstruation post *Navodhanam* represents the increasing burden on women within the domestic households of Kerala (Devika, 2019a). By remaining critical of the religious beliefs and the progressive groups including the Left, GIK reveals the intensified male anxieties in Kerala post-Sabarimala verdict. I argue that GIK, in the backdrop of hypermasculine beliefs around Sabarimala problematises the private-public realms of Kerala that subjugate women and other marginalised groups. Sabarimala, in this context, also symbolises the remaining few spaces to channel the patriarchal control on women's bodies.

The tensions in an upper caste heteropatriarchal family after the Supreme Court verdict allowing women of all ages to enter Sabarimala are well evident in films like the GIK. The apex court verdict emerged as a significant event in contemporary Kerala that unravelled the tensions among the heteropatriarchal masculinities. In the subsequent sections, I analyse the different protests that were conducted in Kerala after the verdict. This is mainly elaborated in three directions depending upon the position each group took regarding the menstruating women's entry into Sabarimala—the first was the Right-wing groups and upper caste groups that challenged the verdict through protests like "*Nama Japa Yatra*" and "Ready to Wait" campaign, the second faction being the Left-wing who seemingly supported the women's entry by organising the "Women's Wall", and thirdly, the Dalit groups (mainly the Mala Araya tribal group and Dalit Pulaya community) who questioned the ownership of the temple itself by critiquing the problems of the mainstream political positions in Sabarimala women's entry at the intersections of caste

and gender. These multiple discourses of masculinities on women's entry into Sabarimala, I argue, are also linked to the tensions within the modern heterosexual families in Kerala, which are centred on the position of women in the private and the public realms of life. In the next section, I elaborate on the contexts that led to the formation of the modern caste-based heteropatriarchal families in Kerala in the 19th and 20th centuries.

III

Formation of Modern Engendered Caste Patriarchy and Family in Kerala

This section discusses how the heteropatriarchal family was placed at the centre of discourses of modernity and community reforms in Kerala. It was done through the linking of women to the domestic/private and men to the public realms. Women became the carriers of the culture and tradition, while men became the providers and patriarchs of the family. It clearly defined gendered masculine and feminine roles for men and women, and breaching these boundaries was considered problematic. This transition was particularly significant as many dominant castes and communities in Kerala were matrilineal till then. This also reinstated patriarchy in newer forms that continue to subjugate not only women but also men from subaltern communities.

While the Kerala Model is hailed as a successful development model by the ruling government, especially considering its achievements in gender equality, the government's

inability to implement the Supreme Court verdict allowing women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala temple is paradoxical in itself. This gender paradox has been much discussed in the development studies based on Kerala (Mukhopadhyay, 2007). It is to be noted that though performing well in the development indicators for several decades, Kerala continues to remain unsafe for women. The rate of crimes against women in the state is currently one of the highest in India, and these crimes include acid attacks, dowry deaths, honour killings and others ("Crimes against Women:Kerala, among Others Recorded Crime Rates Higher than National Average," 2023). This paradox in the development model (Mukhopadhyay, 2007) also points to the caste patriarchy that operates in diverse spheres in Kerala. I argue that Sabarimala women's entry protests is a significant instance in contemporary Kerala to have revealed these tensions, as the women's claim to an exclusively male space like Sabarimala has had far reaching consequences on the public and private lives of Malayali men and women. For instance, Kanaka Durga, a backward caste woman and one of the two women who visited Sabarimala following the Supreme Court verdict, faced domestic violence from her mother-in-law and husband, and she was also forcefully separated from her children (Devasia, 2019; "Woman Who Entered Sabarimala Injured in Attack by Mother-in-law," 2019). Kanaka Durga's natal family ostracized her for her decision to visit Sabarimala. Bindu Ammini, a Dalit woman, who visited the temple along with Kanaka Durga, also faced several attacks, including physical assaults in public and cyberbullying. Many such attacks, especially through social media, also targeted her gender and caste identity to the

extent that some of them described her as "neither a woman nor a man"[21]. The familial and social hostility these two subaltern women underwent for visiting the Sabarimala temple by exercising their constitutional rights granted by the country's apex court, point to much more significant concerns in a "model" state like Kerala. However, the support for the menstruating age women's entry to the temple by the ruling Left government, focussing on the *Navodhanam* ideals of the state, also did not help much in facilitating women's entry. Why is it that the Left government, a powerful supporter of women's entry that also hailed the Sabarimala verdict as a continuation of Kerala's Renaissance (*Navodhanam*) project, could not provide the state protection needed for women's entry into the temple? Such questions point to the predominance of caste patriarchy in contemporary Kerala, the present forms of which have their origins in Kerala's reform movements in the 19th and 20th centuries and were later shaped in the period after independence by different groups, including the Left.

Devika (2006) notes that the caste based social order was replaced by the category of gender in the late 19th and 20th centuries during the reform movements, and this was followed by the imposition of "clear cut gender roles prescribed for men and women directing them into public and domestic domains respectively" (p. 11). It was further facilitated by modern education and the interventions by the colonial state in different ways. Central to these reforms was the formation of a familial ideology focussing on conjugality (Arunima, 2003; Kodoth, 2001). G. Arunima (1995) notes this by studying how the legal abolition of matriliny among the Nairs led to patrilineal practises getting

[21] See https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1879063905564153&set=a.318515328285693

established wherein men started gaining control within the family, and patriliny became a legitimate form of descent and kinship in the later years. This validation of patrilineal nuclear families among Nairs (which also significantly influenced the practices of other communities in Kerala) to abolish the *sambandham*[22] marriages in the Nair families eventually marginalised women themselves. Here, women became the sites of reformation by the Nair male elites during the period and "female sexuality, female sexual subject and notions of femininity then do not appear to have been culturally produced by Nair women themselves" instead "emerged as the 'other' of the new masculine 'self'" (Arunima, 1995, p. 161). Similar reforms can also be observed in other communities, including Ezhavas, Syrian Christians, and others (Kodoth, 2002; Velayudhan, 1999). These measures, on the other hand, did not completely replace the earlier forms of caste and gender but refashioned them in newer ways. Any breach of this order was severely punished in Kerala, which had more serious ramifications in the lives of women. It limited women to family and children's welfare while connecting them to society and work force in different ways (Devika, 2010b). However, these larger inequalities that emerged during the reform movements or the *Navodhanam* period remained unaddressed in post-independence Kerala, further contributed by the narratives about the Kerala model in the 1970s, primarily based on the quantitative economic data

[22] This was a type of marriage followed by communities including Nairs till the 1920s. Jeffrey (1976) notes that samabandhams were "contracted and ended with considerable ease" (p. 15). A woman could have sambandham with many men at the same time while these men "had no rights over her or her children, but were expected to provide her with small presents of luxury items like bath oil and to pay her expenses when she had a child" (p. 16).

provided by the government sources. Kerala model narratives neglected the rise of this new patriarchy as Devika (2006) notes,

> First, by projecting the public space as if it were a space free of patriarchy; and secondly, by remaining vague about new patrifocal family forms and other constraints on women inaugurated by social reformisms and political movements; and thirdly, by ignoring the histories of the women of marginal and excluded groups which do not fit into the general picture of liberation from tradition (p. 12).

This rise of modern patriarchy led to women's lesser participation in public life, including in politics and women's movements in modern Kerala (Arunima, 1995). Moreover, caste was also reconfigured in newer forms with "new institutions and new identities", especially with the formation of organisations like SNDP, NSS and others (Devika, 2006, p. 7). These "new community identities like Ezhava, Nair, etc." also negotiated actively with the state "to corner material and cultural resources" (Devika, 2006, p. 7).

As mentioned, women from privileged castes garnered more opportunities in comparison to those from marginalised communities during this period. Women from marginalised groups, on the other hand, moved from earlier feudal labour to paid agriculture-related labour or industrial labour and were often considered outside the ideal feminine (Devika & Thampi, 2011). This entry of savarna women into the job market and public spaces did not break the traditional gender models completely but rather reconfigured them into newer forms (Devika, 2020). The women's labour also increased while the taboos on biological processes like menstruation were also reconfigured within

families so that the women's labour was used at its maximum potential for familial welfare (Devika, 2019a). The family thus gradually evolved into an institution that was primarily dependent on women's labour, and domestic labour was considered to be no labour at all. Devika (2002, 2006, 2010b, 2019b, 2020), who worked extensively in this area, notes that the modern nuclear family in the 20th century works on two axes, the one with the husband and the wife and the other with parents and children. She also notes that this new constitution of family relied primarily on the economic support of the father while it was managed by the mother (Devika, 2002). Calling this process as "domestication" (Devika, 2002, p. 58), this was one of the major developments in the late 20th century in Kerala and was further bolstered by the state and its machineries as part of the welfare schemes and also by the community groups (which are primarily based on caste). Thus, the family evolved into an institution responsible to the state and also became a means to perpetuate caste, as Devika notes that "modernising caste community or the modernising nation could appeal to them to engage in 'responsible parenting' understood in clearly gendered ways" (Devika, 2019b, p. 82).

There are also other significant ramifications for the whole process as the transition to male-centred nuclear families in modern Kerala was accompanied by the transfer of resources from women's families to men's families in the form of dowry (Kodoth, 2008). This further problematised the women's lives, including those of highly educated women, since they were forced to pay higher amounts as dowry during marriages. Marriage thereby transformed not only into an event of consolidating heteropatriarchy and caste but also in orienting the resources towards men. It is this hegemonic form of familial ideals that are challenged in recent times, as revealed through

the protests following the Sabarimala verdict allowing menstruating women's entry. By actively supporting menstruating women's entry into Sabarimala, many women questioned the heteropatriarchal hegemony in the domestic and public spheres of Kerala and several of them also expressed their willingness to undertake the pilgrimage to Sabarimala at the next available opportunity. This caused tensions in the heteropatriarchal families in Kerala, which have already been undergoing a crisis through the interventions of law and feminist engagements that have challenged the very structure of the modern family. The recent cases, including those of Hadiya and Anupama S. Chandran[23], also underscore the tensions in modern Kerala families (M. Menon, 2021), which are bound by the limits drawn by caste, religion and heteropatriarchal masculinities. The Supreme Court's interventions, including quashing the sections on adultery, decriminalisation of homosexuality, banning triple talaq and others, also significantly challenged the fundamentals of heteropatriarchal families, reorienting family into a more inclusive union encompassing the differences in caste, gender, sexuality and religion.

[23] In this case, a one-year-old boy child has been given for adoption without the consent of his parents Anupama S. Chandran and Ajith Kumar. For more details visit: https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/kerala-adoption-row-anupama-chandran-ajit-kumar-7638898/

IV

Locating Dalit Masculinities in Sabarimala Women's Entry Protests

In this section, I discuss the intervention of Dalit masculinities in the discourses around the Supreme Court verdict allowing women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala temple. I argue that the interventions by the tribal Mala Araya and the Dalit Pulaya communities problematise the hegemonic narratives of the Left and the Right-wing/upper caste groups that stood against and in support of women's entry into Sabarimala. Dalit masculinities' support for women's entry by challenging the hegemonic masculine narratives of progress and tradition of the Left and Right-wing/upper caste groups at the intersections of caste and gender is critical in understanding the issues of gender in the whole debate on women's entry in Sabarimala which confine women to the gender roles defined within the modern heteropatriarchal families in Kerala.

The Supreme Court verdict in 2018 allowing women of all ages to enter the temple was followed by violent protests across Kerala, especially by the upper caste organizations and Right-wing groups. Several hartals were organized by different organizations across the state, especially in the district of Pathanamthitta, where the Sabarimala temple is located. Many of these protests turned violent, leading to extensive damage to public properties ("1400 Arrested for Violence During Sabarimala Protest," 2018). Many women activists and feminists who supported the women's entry were also attacked ("Criminals Attack House of Woman Who Planned to Visit Sabarimala," 2018). Another prominent feature of the protests was the wide use of social media platforms for

bullying and issuing threats, including rape threats ("Cyber Attack Against WCC's Post Favoring Sabarimala Verdict," 2018). Protests were more intense in the areas near the Sabarimala temple, especially in Nilakkal and Pamba, the basecamps of Sabarimala. Several women proceeded to visit the temple following the verdict, and female journalists were attacked by the protesters in these areas ("Photos of Tearful Woman Journalist Battling Attacks During Sabarimala Protests Go Viral," 2019). While there was a large-scale consolidation of Hindutva and upper caste masculine forces around Sabarimala through these protests, the Left government, which was in power in the state, supported the women's entry. They gathered women in large numbers for the symbolic Women's Wall supporting the apex court verdict and to uphold the state's *Navodhanam* (Renaissance) ideals. In addition to the Left and the Right-wing groups, Dalit groups like Mala Araya and Pulaya communities also supported women's entry into Sabarimala. By highlighting more complex problems of caste and gender in the whole issue spearheaded by the Right and the Left groups, Dalit intervention further revealed the inherent tensions in the whole issue around women's entry into Sabarimala. Focusing on these debates around women's entry, I attempt to understand the complex patterns of masculine politics that evolved at the interstices of religion, caste, and gender in contemporary Kerala following the Sabarimala verdict.

The Position of Conservative and Liberal Masculinities in Sabarimala Women's Entry Protests: Problematising *Nama Japa Yatra* and Women's Wall

This section problematises the positions of the conservative masculinities (Right-wing and upper caste) and the liberal masculinities (Left government), which stood against and

seemingly in support of the Supreme Court verdict allowing menstruating age women's entry into Sabarimala. Centring on the protests led by these two groups, namely "*Nama Jaya Yatra*" by the Right-wing and the upper caste organisations and the "Women's Wall" by the Left, I argue that the positions of both these groups intersect in marginalizing the question of women, limiting them to the modern engendered heteropatriarchal families. The recurrent trope of *Navodhanam* (Renaissance) in the narratives of both the Left and the Right/upper caste masculinities is also contested in this section to unravel the complex issues of caste and gender in the whole debate around the question of women's entry into Sabarimala.

Nama Japa Yatra and Opposing Women's Entry into Sabarimala: Caste Patriarchy, Heterosexual Family and Conservative Masculinities in Kerala

The Supreme Court verdict allowing women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala temple was received by violent protests across Kerala. This was led mainly by conservative male groupings under the aegis of upper caste organizations like NSS (Nair Service Society), Brahmin Maha Sabha, Right-wing political parties and organizations like Akhila Bharathiya Ayyappa Seva Sangham (ABASS) and Sabarimala Dharma Sena. All these groups opposed the menstruating age women's entry into Sabarimala, highlighting that the deity Ayyappa in Sabarimala is a *Naisthik Brahmachari* (eternal celibate), which prohibits women of menstruating age from visiting the temple. These protests, led mainly by men, are also noted for the large participation of women, especially those from privileged castes and educational backgrounds. These women were

at the forefront of protests like *Nama Japa Yatra* (a protest conducted by chanting the hymns of Lord Ayyappa) and the "Ready to Wait" campaign, which were organised by the groups protesting against the apex court verdict. This large-scale organisation of women by the upper caste and Right-wing groups, I argue, is not confined to restricting the entry of women into Sabarimala Temple but is also extended to the tensions in the heteropatriarchal positions within the domestic and public spheres of Kerala. I further argue that the violent protests against the menstruating age women's entry unravel the increasing tensions in the heteropatriarchal families, the welfare of which is linked with the symbolic function of the Sabarimala pilgrimage. The moment a woman of menstruating age undertakes the Sabarimala pilgrimage, she is considered to question the role of the male householder within the caste based heteropatriarchal family, thereby unsettling the gendered roles and divisions within the family. The sections that follow problematise the positions of the major groups that protested against the Supreme Court verdict allowing menstruating age women's entry at the interstices of the formation of caste based heteropatriarchal families and Kerala modernity.

Nair Service Society (NSS), an organization representing the prominent upper caste Nair community[24] in Kerala immediately reacted against the Supreme Court verdict

[24] Nair community, a former *Sudra* community, has been a politically and economically powerful community in Kerala. Erstwhile landowning group, though their dominance was reduced (Jeffrey, 1976), they still occupy a predominant position in Kerala's economic and political lives. Representing this community, Nair Service Society (NSS) has also been intervening in the coalition politics of Kerala ever since the formation of Kerala. *Vimochana Samaram* (The Liberation Struggle 1958-59) is an earlier event wherein the upper caste communities, including NSS and some Christian communities, came strongly against the state, leading the central government to dismiss the ruling Communist government (Shefi, 2019). NSS, though, was part

on Sabarimala allowing the menstruating women's entry into Sabarimala. They marked strong resistance against the apex court ruling and the Left government, which stood in support of the verdict. Besides filing review petitions in the court of law, NSS conducted several *Nama Japa Yatras* across the state along with the Right-wing organisations, other caste groups and political parties like the Congress. The primary feature of many of these protests was the large-scale presence of women, with which the NSS and its allies forecasted that the safeguarding of customs in Sabarimala was primarily the responsibility of women and families in Kerala. In its official notification against the verdict, NSS General Secretary G. Sukumaran Nair (2021) noted:

> NSS is in a firm position to preserve faith and customs (in Sabarimala) ... If the five-judge judgment of the honourable Supreme Court is implemented, it is not only in Sabarimala but all Hindu temples in the state and the various customs that have survived for centuries will be affected.

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of several community reform movements before independence under the leadership of its founder Mannath Padmanabhan (Padmanabhan, 2003); the post-independence period has seen NSS standing largely in support of the Brahmanical masculine groups, including the Hindutva groups. This post-independence consolidation of Brahmanical masculinity through an erstwhile *Sudra* community is an interesting paradox in Kerala.

Figure 3: *Nama Japa Yatra* Protest (Courtesy: Malayala Manorama)

This official statement from the community leadership asserts that women's prohibition has been in place for a significant part of the temple's history[25], but the historical records suggest that Sabarimala was visited by women, though less in number, most of the time in its history (S. Mahendran vs The Secretary, Travancore on 5 April, 1991, 1991). NSS also opposed the proposed plan to conduct the "Women's Wall" by the Left government, criticizing the government that linked the whole issue to the *Navodhanam* (Renaissance) Movement of Kerala:

> When the government failed to destroy Sabarimala's customs, rituals, and beliefs in the name of women's entry, they highlighted it was for

[25] The considerable influence of NSS on the temple administration in Kerala also helps the organization to remain dominant in the domains of belief in Kerala. Besides running a network of temples across Kerala, NSS exercises considerable influence over the government controlled Devaswom Boards.

> *Navodhanam*. A "Women's Wall" is being organized here in the name of *Navodhanam*. If it is *Navodhanam*, why are only women participating? (*NSS Stand in Sabarimala Issue and Women Wall-News Hour*, 2018)

The position of the community organisations like NSS regarding the entry of women into Sabarimala is reflective of the problems in the formation of such organisations during the Renaissance movements in Kerala in the 19th and 20th centuries. These organisations, while embracing certain reforms with regard to the upliftment of women, did not entirely give up many of the earlier value systems (Devika, 2010b). Instead, they refurbished certain earlier values that ensured the continuous subjugation of women. These developments confirmed the bolstering of women's role in the domestic realm while their public participation was extended in newer ways. It also demanded that women have to remain chaste, obedient and committed to the family above all (Devika, 2010b). Devika and Thampi (2011) note that terminologies like *chanthapennu* (market women) and *taravattil pirannaval* (the one who was born in an aristocratic household) have origins in such ideological shifts that occurred in the 20th century. This ensured the woman's role as a manager of the domestic, while those breaching the limits of this new patriarchy were marked as outside of the ideal feminine. While these terminologies are obsolete to a large extent in contemporary times, Sabarimala women's entry protest revealed newer modes by which the patriarchy functions, as evident through terms like *feminichikal* (a derogatory term for feminists). Here, I take into account one of the major figures in this protest, Rahul Easwar, the president of the Ayyappa Dharma Sena, an organisation formed to protect the Sabarimala beliefs. Easwar, who is also a member of the Sabarimala Tantri family, has been at the forefront of the protest to protect the Brahmanical practices around

Sabarimala. Besides his participation in the offline protests, he was also one of the prominent faces in the online campaigns and the television debates on Sabarimala during this time. Easwar also played a significant role in raising the Sabarimala issue nationally. In one of his debates (2016) with Arnab Goswami, he elaborates that the ban on the entry of menstruating women in Sabarimala is not misogyny but is part of the tradition of the Sabarimala temple. According to him, other Ayyappa temples across Kerala do not discriminate against women, and in Sabarimala, the restriction is imposed because of the *naisthika brahmacharya* (eternal celibacy) nature of the deity (*Women Not Allowed in Sabarimala Temple : The Newshour Debate* [*12th Jan 2016, Times Now*], 2016). For him, the real woman *bhakta* (believer) does not go to Sabarimala, but it is only *feminichikal* (a derogatory term he uses for feminists) who wish to visit the temple to disrupt communal harmony in the state (*Ultimate Sabarimala Faceoff Between Trupti Desai and Rahul Easwar* [*The Debate with Arnab Goswami, November 17, 2018, Republic World*], 2018). This creation of binaries, i.e., the "true" woman *bhakta* vs *feminichikal*, is one of the central contests spearheaded by Easwar in the debates concerning the Sabarimala protest.

Ambedkar argues that Hinduism is intrinsically linked with caste order (Ambedkar, 1945), which is further linked to other critical factors like family mobility (F. Osella & Osella, 2000). For an upper caste community like Nairs, this is more important as "caste continues to be reproduced through (the) family" and "private spaces are to be kept pure" (Chakravarty, 2018, p. 263). This is done through the disciplining of the sexuality of women (Chakravarty, 2018). In the case of Sabarimala, through opposing women's entry, NSS attempts to extend their control on women's sexuality in their private and public lives as otherwise it challenges the caste patriarchal power in different walks

of life in Kerala. I argue here that the resistance from the upper caste masculinities like Nairs is linked with the loss of traditional masculine power in the socio-political spheres in Kerala. Osellas (2000) note that Nairs "are defined in opposition, as adherents to tradition and the maintenance of good things of the past 'culture', religious observance, dharma" and this historical dominance of the community in the past also led to their practices and customs being followed by subaltern communities for their social mobility (p. 249). In the case of Kerala, this has further led to the reinstation of Brahmanical hegemony through the upper caste yet formerly *sudra* communities spearheaded by Nairs. This is also further evident in the intensification of NSS activities around the temples in Kerala following the Sabarimala verdict by the Supreme Court[26].

Besides the upper caste organisations and the Right-wing political parties, several organisations actively protested against women's entry into Sabarimala. This includes Ayyappa Dharma Sena, ABASS, Sabarimala Ayyappa Seva Samajam (SASS) and others. They organised protests across Kerala, and many of these groups also camped in the basecamps of Sabarimala, thoroughly checking the pilgrims in order to prevent menstruating women's entry. This sometimes led to violence, to the extent of attacking female pilgrims and children. The majority of members of these groups were men, and this homosocial act of masculine resistance against women's entry for protecting the celibate Ayyappa is significant in the study of masculinity in Kerala in many ways. These

[26] In a recent case, NSS reacted strongly against the CPI (M) leader and Kerala Legislative Assembly speaker A. N. Shamseer's comment on the origin of Lord Ganesha. This was followed by wide protests across Kerala including the NSS' decision to organize *Viswasa Samraksha Dinam* (Beliefs Protection Day).

masculinities opposing menstruating women's entry into Sabarimala based the prohibition of women in Sabarimala within the ambit of the Brahmanical beliefs around the temple. Menstrual taboo, which is at the centre of Brahmanical Hinduism (Hembroff, 2010; Leslie, 1994), is repeatedly reiterated in prohibiting the entry of women of menstruating age by all these groups. For instance, by supporting the restriction on women to Sabarimala, Sabarimala Ayyappa Seva Samajam notes,

> Completion of the 41 days *vratham* is not possible for pre-menopause women… Unlike other excretions, menstrual flow is a continuous process for 2 to 5 days, resulting in the waste matter remaining in the body of the woman till the flow is stopped. The body of a woman cannot be kept clean by washing or bathing during this period. Hence, with the presence of this excretion, menstrual blood in the body of a woman, she cannot do a holy/divine/spiritual activity, including observance of 41 days vratham (Shanmuganandan, 2018).

Here, the restriction on women on account of menstruation is further extended to more significant concerns regarding gender and caste in Brahminical religion. The burden of the eternal celibacy of Ayyappa and the temporary celibacy of the male pilgrim is placed on the larger category of women. Menstruation is employed here as a means to control women's sexuality "and by extension the boundaries of the religious community and maintenance of social hierarchies which are regulated according to particular ideologies, propagating the idea that women are the bearers of tradition and are responsible for the well-being of the family, society, and religion itself" (Cohen, 2020, p. 126). On the other

hand, movements like “Ready to Wait” revealed further significant concerns concerning gender in Kerala. In this transnational protest, mostly held online, women from privileged caste and educational backgrounds announced that they were ready to wait till they attained the age of 50. This protest by neo-Savarna women organised in close association with the Brahmanical masculine forces unravels the gender paradox in Kerala (Devika, 2020), where the taboo on menstruation is perpetuated and practised through women themselves.

Upper caste organisations like NSS and the Right-wing organisations that reacted strongly against the menstruating women’s entry into Sabarimala based the women’s question on Brahmanical masculine beliefs. This, on the one hand, safeguards the tantric practices in Sabarimala while protecting the patriarchal masculine power that is channelised through religion and caste. I argue that the protests on the women’s entry into Sabarimala are extended to more critical concerns regarding masculinity and power that continue to thrive at the intersections of caste, religion, and heterosexual families in contemporary Kerala.

Women’s Wall, *Navodhanam* and the Liberal Masculinities

The liberal masculinities under the aegis of left political parties and the Left government in Kerala seemingly stood strongly in support of women’s entry into Sabarimala, creating a counter public to the hegemonic narrative of the Right-wing and upper caste masculinities in the Sabarimala issue. Pinarayi Vijayan, the current Chief Minister of

Kerala and the leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), announced that the government would not allow anyone to destroy the *Navodhanam* (Renaissance) ideals of the state (Rakesh, 2019). The Left government also decided to organise the "Women's Wall" in Kerala, promoting it to be the "Second *Navodhanam*" (Second Renaissance) in Kerala (Ayyappan, 2019). I attempt here to understand the position of the Left in the Sabarimala women's entry as well as their plan to organise "Women's Wall" with regard to the question of masculinity and gender in Kerala. By evaluating the Left's position at the intersections of caste and gender, I argue that the intervention of the Left in the Sabarimala debate is also a part of the hegemonic masculine project marginalising the women and subaltern communities alike. This further troubles the Left's seemingly "progressive" position in the debate around Sabarimala.

The Left occupies a significant position in the socio-political contexts of Kerala. This extends to its substantial presence in electoral politics and other domains like literature and culture (Varghese, 2021). The formation of the first government in Kerala by the Communist Party under E. M. S. Namboodirippadu was also significant as it was the first elected socialist government in the world. This also led to increased academic interest on Kerala, especially in the 1970s, when Kerala was marked as a model state for the third world (Drèze & Sen, 1995). Popularly called the "Kerala model", the Left is also claimed to have played a role in this reformative state policy (G. Parayil, 2000). However, in the 1990s, this model was criticised on different fronts (Devika, 2016; Raj, 2013; S. Sreekumar, 2009). Besides the marginalisation of the caste for the class question (Saradamoni, 1999), several scholars also highlight the role of the Left in perpetuating caste in different ways. Devika (2010) notes that the absence of "traditional caste

practices" (p. 802) does not negate the existence of casteism in Kerala. Calling this a "secularized casteism" (p. 802), she points out that the Left is not an exemption. Devika elaborates this further by studying the Left's interventions in the Dalits' welfare, including their role in land struggles in Kerala. She argues that the Left could not effectively challenge the upper caste cultural hegemony besides contributing in several ways to regaining the upper caste practices as the "'unifying core' of Kerala's national culture" (p. 809). She also adds that the Left limited the subaltern communities into a governmental category (p. 802), and fewer Dalits were in the leadership of the Left parties in history (T. K. Oommen, 1985) and much less was the number of Dalit women leaders. This problem of the Left in addressing the caste question is also evident in the Sabarimala issue. The claims on the temple by the Mala Arayas are not adequately addressed by the Left, besides the complex caste and gender issues raised by the other Dalit groups in Kerala.

The "Women's Wall," organised by the Left in support of the entry of menstruating women into Sabarimala, received national and global attention, and it was marked as an effort "to combat inequality and counter the efforts of the Right-wing groups that support the ban on women" (Lenin, 2019). Conducted on 1 January 2019, the "Women's Wall" involved large-scale participation of women. Organised as a human chain from Kasargod to Trivandrum, the wall was claimed to be 620 km long, with the participation of about 5 million women. This is also reported to be the fourth largest human chain ever ("In Case You haven't Noticed yet, the Women's Wall in Kerala was the Fourth Largest Human Chain Ever," 2019). Given the large-scale participation of women, the Left could provide an alternative to the Hindutva and upper caste

masculinities with the "Women's Wall". However, it also received several criticisms. One of the major criticisms was the significantly lower number of women in the organisational leadership of the protest ("Govt to Spend Rs 50 Crore from Women's Security Fund to Build 'Wall,'" 2018). The protest was conceptualised by the party leadership, which was primarily men and was implemented through women. There was also widespread criticism of forcing women from the Left affiliated organisations and Self Help Groups (SHGs) to be part of the protest, even threatening some of them of denying their wages for their non-participation (Schultz & Venkataraman, 2019). There was also criticism against diverting the funds for women's safety for the wall [27]. These problems in conducting the Women's Wall, wherein women were confined to being a site of protest denying their political agency, problematises the stance of the Left. This delinking of the women's agency from "progressive politics" (Wilson, 2013, p. 94) is pointed out as a limitation of the Left historically. Erwer notes that the welfare programmes initiated by the Left are also linked with the disciplining of the sexuality of women as well as binding women closely with their responsibilities towards the family (Erwer, 2003). Several scholars also discussed this in relation to the Left's historical role in the evolution of modern patriarchy in Kerala (Lindberg, 2001; Velayudhan, 1999). By citing the welfare programmes initiated by the Left governments over the years, Devika (2010) notes,

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[27] For example, see https://english.manoramaonline.com/news/kerala/2018/12/21/women-security-fund-used-building-wall-kerala-govt.html

[27] See for example https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2018/nov/12/suspected-entry-of-non-hindu-temple-closed-for-purification-1897011.html

> The agents of such effort were to be reformist men, who, it was suggested, possessed true insight into the past and the present of the community and the capability to shape the future. This necessitated and authorized nonreciprocal and non-reversible didactic ties and relations of power between the reformer man and the woman he was to reform. These formed the core of modern patriarchy in Kerala (p. 804-805)

Figure 4: Women's Wall (Courtesy: Sai K. Shanmugam)

Though the Left was successful in organising a symbolic protest against the caste patriarchy and Hindutva masculinity, I argue there are many significant problems concerning the governmental interference in providing a smooth entry for women in

Sabarimala. The Left government could not provide adequate state security to many women who attempted to visit Sabarimala after the apex court ruling. Even the police failed to prevent the attacks on these women, and only two women successfully visited the temple after the Supreme Court verdict. Besides failing to provide enough support for the women's entry, the Left government further complicated the issue by attributing a division among the women pilgrims. This is evident from Devaswam Minister Kadakmapalli Surendran's remark that Sabarimala is not the place for women's activism ("Sabarimala Not a Place for Women Activists: Kadakampally," 2019). This division of the women as activists ("bad" women/non-devotees) and non-activist devotees ("good" Hindu women) in the Left narrative further problematises the Left's position in the Sabarimala debate and is also akin to the Right-wing narrative of limiting menstruating age women pilgrims as *feminichikal*(feminists). This intersectionality of the Left position with the Right-wing/upper caste patriarchal masculinities also has its origins in the Renaissance movements in Kerala.

Renaissance, or *Navodhanam* as it is popularly called, was a set of social reformation movements in the 19th century against untouchability, women's oppression and other social issues (Heimsath, 1978; Tharakan, 1998). Led by leaders like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and others, one of the significant features of the Renaissance in Kerala was that it originated from the subaltern communities. In the context of the consolidating Hindutva-upper caste masculine forces following the Sabarimala verdict, the Left government in Kerala invoked the reformation or *Navodhanam* to provide a counter movement against Brahmanical masculinity. They also formed *Navodhana Samrakshana Samithi* (Renaissance Protection Forum) on this front. All these contributed

to the *Navodhanam* or Renaissance being discussed again in the Kerala public milieu. T.T. Sreekumar (2019) argues that *Navodhanam* was an ideological construct for satisfying the later acclaimed Kerala model. It systematically integrated the caste Dalits' struggles with the upper caste men's struggles within their caste (including the protests led by leaders like Mannathu Padmanabhan, E. M. S. Namboodirippadu and others), thereby conveniently forgetting the complex history of caste and caste discrimination in Kerala. This later contributed to building a public sphere that prevented one from speaking about caste and caste discrimination in Kerala (T. T. Sreekumar, 2019). *Navodhanam* also made the taboo on menstruation stronger, and the silence on menstruation in the subsequent decades reveals the larger burden women have borne in the domestic realms (Devika, 2019a). Some scholars also criticise the problems in comparing the reform movements in Kerala with that of the Western model of Renaissance (Binu & Manoharan, 2021). Sunny M. Kapikkad (2019) points out that the Sabarimala protest against women's entry in Sabarimala unravels the state's failure in integrating the values of the caste struggle ushered in by subaltern leaders like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and others. He notes that movements like "Ready to Wait" that rose during the Sabarimala protests indicate the neo-Brahmanical tendencies in Kerala that marginalise the Dalits and the women alike. The extensive use of words such as *rajavu* (king), *tantri* (Vedic head), *shudhi* (purity) and others are reminiscent of this Brahmanical power that is being carried over into a contemporary protest (Kapikkad, 2019).

By problematising the discourses of major political/community groups on the women's entry into Sabarimala following the Supreme Court verdict, I argue that their

positions intersect in consolidating the women into their conventional gender roles within a modern heteropatriarchal family. The Sabarimala women's entry protest thereby emerged as a significant event revealing these tensions in the hegemonic masculine positions in Kerala at the intersections of caste and gender. In the next section, I mark the intervention of Dalit masculinities in the debates on Sabarimala women's entry protest as crucial, revealing the tensions in the heteropatriarchal masculinities in contemporary Kerala.

The Intersection of Caste and Gender in the Sabarimala Issue: Intervention of Dalit Masculinities in the Sabarimala Debate

In the study of masculinities in contemporary Kerala, the Sabarimala women's entry protest is significant as this event is marked for initiating a counter-hegemonic public with the intervention of Dalit masculinities. Accounting the binaries of conservative/progressive positions of the Right and the Left, I argue that the intervention of Dalit masculinities is unique as it unravelled the complex intersection of caste and gender that marginalise women and subaltern masculinities in Kerala.

Caste discrimination and associated violence have always been a part of Kerala society. People of "lower castes" had to maintain a certain distance from the people of the "upper caste" in the earlier centuries (Jeffrey, 1992). Besides was the rampant untouchability and prohibition of lower caste people from visiting the temples. Women of subaltern communities were not allowed to wear upper clothes during this period (Binu & Manoharan, 2021). Though the works of social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru,

Ayyankali and others brought drastic changes in Kerala's social sphere, caste discrimination has not been completely eradicated in Kerala society. Tribal communities and Dalits face different problems in contemporary Kerala regarding access to resources, education and others (Subrahmanian & Prasad, 2008). Though several of these communities' poverty levels have decreased, many remain marginalised in their social and political lives (Devika, 2010a). Sonja Thomas observes, "even after these social reform movements and continued Dalit Bahujan activism against discrimination, certain religious restrictions remain and are practised today as a generally unquestioned 'tradition'" (Thomas, 2019, p. 3). One such remnant trait is the aversion to inter-caste marriages in the Kerala society. It is common to see the matrimonial columns in the newspapers seeking alliances based on caste and religion. These endogamic practices help maintain not only caste but also the patriarchal order (Chakravarty, 1993; Rege, 2013). Non-Hindus are not allowed to enter many of the temples, and there are many cases where "cleansing" rituals were performed after the entry of non-Hindus ("Suspected Entry of Non-Hindu: Temple Closed for Purification," 2018). Another major feature of Kerala society is that it is not only the Hindus that follow discriminatory caste practices but also the Muslim and Christian communities[28]. In this backdrop of a problematic public sphere in Kerala, which is a complex amalgam of a narrative of "progress" while there is a live in reality of caste and gender oppression, I evaluate the diverse discourses around the Sabarimala verdict by the Supreme Court of India. Here, I

[28]One of the recent cases in this the murder of Kevin Joseph. See https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/kerala-honour-killing-girl-brother-others-found-guilty-kevin-joseph-murder-drowning-1590428-2019-08-22

focus on two major Dalit groups—the Mala Arya tribal community and the Pulaya community—that have actively raised their concerns regarding the upper caste masculine project in the Sabarimala Temple. The Mala Araya tribal community primarily challenged the ownership of the Sabarimala temple itself and the planned expulsion of tribals from temple rituals and priesthood. According to them, the temple was priorly under the control of their community, and it was during the 1900s that the temple was gradually brought under the control of upper caste Brahmin groups (Thadathil, 2019). P. K. Sajeev (2019), the leader of the Mala Araya tribal community remarks,

> The real issue at Sabarimala is not women's entry. With the judgment of the Honourable Supreme Court, there has been a permanent solution to this problem. All those who respect the Constitution have to accept this verdict. The main issue that needs to be resolved now is who are the rightful owners of this temple (p. 5)

The history of the Mala Araya community is intrinsically linked with the history of Sabarimala. Several historical documents suggest that Sabarimala was a tribal temple under the control of Mala Arayas and it was in the 1900s, with the Brahmanisation of the temple, that Mala Arayas were ousted from the temple and its associated rituals (Mateer, 1883). P.K. Sajeev notes that in the 1940s, Thazhamon Madom (the Brahmin family from where the head priests are appointed in Sabarimala) became in charge of the temple rituals following the visit of the king of Travancore to Sabarimala (Konikkara, 2018).

Many myths associated with Sabarimala originated from the Mala Arayas' beliefs (Sajeev, 2019). Sree Ayyappan, the main deity, was believed to be born in the Mala Araya

community and played a significant role in defending the community from the attack of Cholas. The 18 steps to the Sabarimala temple symbolise the 18 hills as per the Mala Arayas' customs. Tadayani, the elder member of the community, used to perform the role of Velichappadu of the temple, and he resided there for four months a year (Konikkara, 2018). The community used to perform many rituals in the temple, including *thenabhishekam*, and lighting the Divya Jyothi during Makaravilakku. It is interesting to know that many such tribal practices were discontinued in the temple following the great fire of 1950. The tribal rituals were then replaced by Brahmanical rituals [for example, *thenabhikshekam* became *neyyabhishekam* and so on] (Sajeev, 2019). The governments in modern Kerala also played their part in ousting the community from certain practices, including preventing them from lighting the holy light (makara jyothi) during *Makaravilakku* (The Devaswam Board took this over in the 1950s). I argue that this marginalisation of the tribal communities in Sabarimala over the years is also linked with the intensification of Brahmanical masculine practices in the temple, and the neo-Brahmanical masculinities further complicate the whole problem as the demands of Mala Arayas are not considered actively by these groups. P. Ramabhadran (2020) compares the case of Sabarimala with that of the Padmanabha Swami Temple in Thiruvananthapuram. He notes that while the rights of the Travancore royal family in the Padmanabha Swami Temple in Thiruvananthapuram have been recognised by subsequent governments, Mala Arayas' claims on Sabarimala remain unrecognised ("Sabarimalayude Avakasikal Mala Arayar: Pathmanabha Swami Kshethrathil Raja Kudumbathinte Adhikaram Angeekarikkunnvar Ith Parisodhikkananm: P. Ramabhadran," 2020). Mala Arayas being one of the most marginalised communities in Kerala, their claims on Sabarimala are not

considered by any of the major groups involved in the debate. The primary contest in the whole issue hegemonized by the Left and the Right is the maintenance of the Brahmanical practices focusing on menstruation and the women's question. However, Mala Arayas' claims on Sabarimala highlight deeper problems challenging the Brahmanical practices that displaced a subaltern community from the Sabarimala temple.

While the Mala Araya community primarily highlights the issues concerning the ownership of the temple, the intervention of the Pulaya community unravelled more complex issues with regard to Brahmanical masculinity in contemporary Kerala. Here I consider the participation of the Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha (KPMS) in the Sabarimala debate. KPMS, especially the faction led by Punnala Sreekumar, immediately came in support of the Supreme Court verdict allowing menstruating women into the Sabarimala temple. Supporting the verdict, Punnala Sreekumar, the General Secretary of KPMS, notes that banning women from entering the Sabarimala temple is akin to untouchability that the Kerala upper caste practised towards the lower castes in the earlier centuries (Balan, 2018). Pulaya community was an "untouchable" community in the erstwhile Kerala, occupying one of the lowest positions in the caste spectrum. They were majorly agricultural workers categorised as "slave caste" (Saradamoni, 1980, p. 44). People of the Pulaya community had to avoid being seen by the Namboodiris and had to maintain a distance of at least 96 feet from the latter (Mateer, 1883). Any breach of this would lead to severe punishment including death. Ayyankali, the Pulaya community's prominent leader, played a significant role in fighting for the community's rights by challenging the Brahmanical hegemony. The most famous protest he led was the *Villu Vandi Samaram* (Bullock Cart Protest) in 1893. As part of this protest, Ayyankali rode a bullock cart

through the public streets of Thiruvananthapuram, where Dalits had no access. “Draping a white lungi, white vest, a matching shawl, a white turban, along with a thick moustache” (Arafath, 2020), Ayyankali’s “bullock cart bears two conflicting caste scripts: one asserting domination, and the other performing resistance…these conflicting caste scripts abrade to enact political claims: on public space, on embodiment, and ultimately, on equality” (Narayan, 2021, p. 5). Under his persistent effort, the community gained many rights, including the right to education and access to public spaces. By bringing in the history of these caste struggles to evaluate the marginalisation of women in Sabarimala, the intervention of KPMS helped to base the whole problem of Sabarimala in Indian realities where an inseparable relation exists between caste and gender (Rege, 1998).

Following the verdict given by the Supreme Court, KPMS played a significant role in supporting the rights of women in Sabarimala. Sreekumar was appointed as convenor of the *Navodhana Samrakshana Samithi* (Renaissance Protection Forum) by the government, which organised the “Women’s Wall” on 1st January 2019. As I argued earlier, for the Left, the Women’s Wall was a political alternative to the larger challenges posed by Brahmanical masculinity in Kerala. However, KPMS extended the Sabarimala issue to much more significant issues in contemporary Kerala. Sreekummar noted that the protest against women’s entry into Sabarimala by certain communities like NSS was a struggle to maintain their “power and wealth” (*Aathmeeya Rangath Oru Ashaya Samaram Venam* [*There Should Be an Ideological Struggle in the Spiritual Field, Interview with Punnala Sreekumar*] *Viewpoint 300, Mediaone TV Live*, 2018). Here he indicated that the entry of women into Sabarimala could disturb the Brahmanical

masculine hegemony in Sabarimala, which would further lead to their loss of power in Kerala's socio-political lives, including their dominance in land holdings, political representations and others. Moreover, he noted that Sabarimala did not qualify as a public space because of the current discrimination. Appealing for democratisation in Sabarimala, he pointed out the historical and systemic expulsion of the Mala Araya and women from the temple. He also highlighted the Brahmanical hegemony in Sabarimala's practices, including non-Brahmins' ineligibility to become the *Melsanthi* (head priest). He noted,

> The entry of women into a public space like Sabarimala is also part of its democratization process. Through this, the people who have been marginalized for a long time in history can ensure representation. For KPMS, Sabarimala is an opportunity to eradicate the impediments in attaining equality in Kerala…For subaltern communities in Kerala, civil rights were availed through ritual violations during different times of history. Sabarimala protest is also a part of this ideological struggle (led by KPMS) in the spiritual domain in Kerala (*Close Encounter With Punnala Sreekumar* [*Interview with Punnala Sreekumar by Abhilash Mohanan, Reporter Live*], 2018).

Sreekumar emphasized that Sabarimala was a public space and that any form of discrimination must be resisted. He also denoted the importance of the organized struggle from the subaltern communities in breaking the hegemonic order, only through which Brahmanical masculinity can be challenged. By pointing out the protests like *Villuvandi Samaram* (1893), the installation of the Siva idol in Aruvikkara by Sree Narayana Guru

(1888) and others, he noted that drastic changes were brought in Kerala by breaking the established Brahmanical order (*Aathmeeya Rangath Oru Ashaya Samaram Venam* [*There Should Be an Ideological Struggle in the Spiritual Field, Interview with Punnala Sreekumar*] *Viewpoint 300, Mediaone TV Live*, 2018). Such movements also helped subaltern communities, including the most marginalized, to get access to public space. The intervention of KPMS unravels that the denial of menstruating women's entry into the Sabarimala temple manifests the contemporary form of discrimination and the neo-Brahmanical power that functions through Brahmanical Hinduism. This historicity of the subaltern protests that Sreekumar tried to bring into Sabarimala protests aids in a more complex understanding of the contemporary, where Brahmanical masculinity reconfigures itself through multiple forms in present Kerala.

By linking the question of untouchability with menstrual taboo, the Dalit masculinities' support of menstruating age women's entry into Sabarimala is significant on different fronts. While it unravels the continuous subjugation of women by heteropatriarchy through the channels of caste and religion, it also points to the persisting role of Brahamanical masculinity in regulating the women's question. Besides unveiling the marginalisation of women's question in the narratives of the Left and Right-wing/upper caste masculinities, the Dalit intervention also highlights the problems faced by men from marginalised locations. Placing the question of women's entry into Sabarimala at the intersections of caste and gender, Dalit masculinities problematise the hegemonic masculine narratives that limit women to the confines of the modern heteropatriarchal family. On the other hand, these interventions also influenced more significant discussions about the caste marginalisation among masculinities in Kerala.

V
Conclusion

The diverse debates around the Supreme Court verdict on women's entry into Sabarimala in 2018 have turned into a significant event wherein the women's question in Sabarimala beliefs is configured into a series of discourses on masculinity. These discourses that are centred on the masculine control of a public place of worship, I argue, are further extended to the policing of women's sexuality in contemporary Kerala, limiting them to the gender roles as defined within the modern heteropatriarchal family. Sabarimala women's entry protests show that even in contemporary Kerala, the women's question is derived through the hegemonic masculine narratives of the Left, the Right, and the upper caste groups. This configuration of the public through the hegemonic masculine narratives around Sabarimala is very significant in my project. I argue that the masculine discourses around women's entry into Sabarimala are not only limited to the masculine control of the public but are also extended to the realms of the private. The policing of women's sexuality, primarily through reiterating the menstrual taboo, illustrates Brahmanical masculinity's persistent role in regulating the women's question in Kerala and its roots in the *Navodhanam* (Renaissance) movements in Kerala in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Sabarimala protests of 2018 is an important event in the history of masculinities as it saw newer and diverse means by which the discourses on masculinity are circulated in contemporary Kerala. It is significant as we see that Brahmanical masculinity is reconstituted in newer forms but it is also noted for the challenges posed by the subaltern masculinities like Mala Araya and Pulaya masculinities. Dalit

intervention in the women's entry protest linked the questions of the marginalisation of women through menstruation and that of certain communities based on caste. This intersectionality of the questions of caste and gender also informs the hegemonic caste patriarchal power that circulates primarily through regulating women's sexuality and subaltern masculinities in Kerala.

These multiple discourses on masculinities during the women's entry protest in Sabarimala problematising the hegemonic caste patriarchy are not only operated through the traditional means of print but also through new media platforms, including social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and others. Kerala has historically been placed within the derivative of Habermas's model of the public sphere, and the intervention of the working class and the Communist party movements played a significant role in this regard (Habermas, 1989; Radhakrishnan, 2006). The large-scale establishment of libraries and the increase in popularity of films and theatre movements also shaped the Kerala public sphere (Harikrishnan, 2022). However, the Sabarimala women's entry protest is one of the major events in the history of Kerala that employed new media widely. For instance, Darsana Vijay and Alex Gekker (2021) note the use of TikTok during the Sabarimala protests. Different groups also employed other new media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to further their positions during the protests. Besides, some Malayalam movies on Sabarimala also reached a larger audience, especially through OTT during the time of COVID-19 (Sooraj et al., 2023a). I argue that Sabarimala women's entry protests, in that way, contributed to a new masculine public which developed not only through print media but also through new media. Besides, new media also contributed to facilitating the entry of women into Sabarimala. It was a

Facebook group *Navodhana Keralam Sabarimalayilekku* (Renaissance Kerala to Sabarimala) which played a crucial role in the successful entry of two women—Bindu Ammini and Kanaka Durga—into the temple on 2nd January 2019. This configuration of Sabarimala in the digital space is significant in the contemporary history of Kerala but could not be discussed in greater detail as it falls outside the scope of this thesis.