

Mahishi's rage

Communitas and protest at Sabarimala, Kerala

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1. More precisely, at the Periyar Tiger Reserve of the Western Ghats in Pathanamthitta district.

2. Unlike other temples, Sabarimala is opened for worship only during the festival season and on the first five days of every Malayalam month.

3. For a discussion on gender and law in relation to the Sabarimala case, see Acevedo (2018); Jassal & Chibber (2019). See also Sarukkai (2018).

4. I was told that in a meeting of Hindu organizations held at Kochi at the height of the turmoil, more than 70 Hindutva organizations participated.

5. Many women tried to enter but were prevented from doing so. Two eventually managed to enter Sabarimala with the support of the police. However, as a consequence, they had to live in hiding for several weeks and were subjected to abuse from their kin and at work.

6. The women's organization of the BJP played a major role.

7. The situation became very threatening for the media. Many international and national journalists were forced to leave Sabarimala by Hindutva militias.

8. Mahishi is the sister of the buffalo demon, Mahishasura, whose death at the hands of the gods (*deva*) Mahishi must avenge. She is virtually invincible. Only a being born of two males can defeat her. Ayyappan is her nemesis.

9. The Pandalam royal family is said to have migrated from Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Their small kingdom was absorbed into the Travancore kingdom in the 18th century.

10. It is customary that a first-time pilgrim (*kanni Ayyappan* – 'virgin' or novitiate) to Sabarimala should perform the *pettathullal*.

The pilgrimage shrine to Lord Ayyappan at Sabarimala (Fig. 1), located in a remote jungle area in the southern Indian state of Kerala,¹ is a liminal space and site of *communitas par excellence*. Sabarimala attracts people from across the religious and socio-ethnic spectrum, including many of the most socially and politically excluded and marginalized in contemporary India. At the shrine, worshippers of different identities and stations in life move outside the hierarchies of routine existence and form a unity – an existential *communitas*, as Victor Turner ([1969] 1995) might have said – in the primordial presence of Ayyappan (Fig. 2).

Central to Turner's discussion in *The ritual process*, is the idea that *communitas*, an anti-structural dynamic, is intimately bound up with structuring, hierarchizing processes. Although the one is overcome in the other, they are joined in a contradiction which creates a tensional dynamic that is a driving force in socio-cultural processes of tension and transformation. There is a paradoxical intensity in the mutual implication of anti-structure (*communitas*) with structuring (hierarchical) processes that can underpin violent eruptions.

This became starkly apparent at Sabarimala over the main festival and pilgrimage season from October to January in 2018-19.² Scenes of protest and violence broke out, drawing the attention of national and international media. The liminal space of Sabarimala, far from being apart from or outside the orders and structures of everyday life, became a vortex for the expression of conflicts and contradictions at the heart of the existential realities of India – the more focal, such as those of gender, having significance also for global discourses of egalitarian concern.

Women and the Supreme Court 2018

The scenes of protest and violence at Sabarimala were sparked by the announcement on 28 September 2018 of the majority decision by the Supreme Court of India to abandon the existing rule banning women and girls of fer-

tile menstrual age (i.e. those between the ages of 10 and 50) from the temple site and to permit entry to all females, of whatever age (The Supreme Court 2018). The judgment had been made in response to a petition by the Indian Young Lawyers Association (IYLA) asking the court to direct the Kerala government and the ritual authorities governing Sabarimala to allow all females access to the site, on the grounds that the then legal regulations supporting the menstruation rule were in contravention of the Indian Constitution and its provisions against exclusionary practices on the grounds of biology and caste.³

The decision of the court not only coincided with the start of the Sabarimala season, but also with a heightened period of political campaigning as India moved towards its national elections. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was seeking re-election, appealing to Hindu nationalist and traditionalist interests promoting Brahmanic values – part of the India-wide Hindutva populist movement for which the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) militant right-wing organization is a primary force. The BJP had made virtually no successful political inroads into Kerala, which is famously politically secular and ruled by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Significantly, the state of Kerala had, in the recent past, been part of a region where royal and Brahmanic values, of a remarkably oppressive, exclusionary and marginalizing kind, had held sway (Roopesh 2018). This was very much alive in the historical consciousness of many, a ghost of the past that haunted the present.

The historical and sociopolitical context of Kerala provided ready fuel for the protests and violence that exploded following the court's decision. The court judgment struck at nationalist and religious sentiments and values which are at the root of the populist appeal of the BJP among traditionally oriented elites, but which also cross over into the interests of those populations otherwise subject to the hegemony of such elites. The direction to abandon the menstrual rule restricting the access of females to the



Fig. 1. The temple sanctum.



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Fig. 2. Pilgrims arrive at Ayyappan's temple carrying offerings on their heads.

Fig. 3. The namajapaghoshayatra: high-caste women chanting songs to Ayyappan in defence of the pollution rule.

Sabarimala site (not all females are excluded: *only those of reproductive age*) hit at what may be conceived as a value of central hegemonic potential.

Louis Dumont (1980) has famously argued for the general and overarching significance of religious/ritual values centred around purity and pollution in the dynamics of hierarchizing structuring processes within the routines of everyday life and their tragic impetus within discourses of modernity in India (e.g. in the violence of Partition). Dumont suggests that the concepts of purity and pollution are active in the reproduction (and resilience) of caste relations. The concepts also have relevance for understanding class (in which caste plays a role, see Kapferer [1983] 1991) and in the politics of ethnicity and identity etc. Dumont's understanding is controversial among anthropologists and other scholars of India, not least because it relies on Brahmanical values which have played a significant role in national politics, as Perry Anderson (2012) and Arundhati Roy (2014) have noted. Notwithstanding the controversial reception of Dumont's argument, his approach does provide an understanding of the kind of fury that erupted at Sabarimala but also, in this particular case, reveals the limitations of his perspective.

Sabarimala and the assemblage of division

Initially, there was general enthusiasm for the court's decision in Kerala. But this quickly dissolved and divisions emerged when members of the Nair Service Society – representative of the elite fraction of the dominant caste in

Kerala, with ties to the Brahmin ritual head of Sabarimala – declared the court ruling to be an assault on Hindu tradition. Women from elite sections of the Nair organized protest marches throughout Kerala, chanting the names of Ayyappan (*namajapaghoshayatra*) (Fig. 3). The protest was joined by the Thazhamon tantri (the ritual head of Sabarimala), members of the Pandalam royal family (who once owned Sabarimala temple), the caste organization of Kerala Brahmins (Yogakshema Sabha) and the organization of Brahmin priests (Tantri Samajam). At this point, the RSS and the BJP joined the protest and a host of short-lived organizations sprang up in support of opposition to the decision.⁴

In response, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) conducted what they called a 'Renaissance Assembly' (appropriate to the spirit and potency of Ayyappan at his annual festival) throughout the villages in Kerala to resist the BJP and Hindutva attempts at Hindu nationalist communalization. The Kerala government, with the support of well over 100 local social and political groups, organized some five million women into a 'women's wall' across the state to coincide with New Year's Day 2019, with the aim of defending gender equality and to protect progressive values against the forces of tradition (Fig. 9). Gender activists conducted parades celebrating menstruation (see cover photo). Dalit excluded or outcaste groups and marginalized tribal groups (Adivasi) added their voices to the cause of the social revolution sparked by the court ruling. Adivasi took the opportunity to declare that their traditional authority and ownership of Ayyappan's temple, as well as land, had been falsely appropriated by dominant castes (Sajeev 2019).

The situation worsened when women tried to enter Sabarimala (Fig. 8).⁵ Hindutva groups, including women, sometimes masked and bearing offensive weapons, attempted to block their entry (Figs 4 & 5).⁶ Groups gathered at critical points along the pilgrim route preventing access to any female of inappropriate age (Figs 6, 7 & 11). Persons (including representatives of the media) who broke the customary rule were threatened with extreme violence, rape or death (Fig. 11).⁷ On 2 January 2018, two women were given police protection to enter Sabarimala and this provoked state-wide violence. Indeed, throughout the festival season and with increasing intensity, Sabarimala and its pilgrim route became a zone of violence, with protesters pelting police with stones, vandalizing state-run buses and organizing state-wide protest strikes (*hartals*). Supporters of the verdict were stabbed and home-made bombs thrown. Hate speech was rife and this spread onto the Internet, on Facebook and WhatsApp. Some supporters of the court ruling were hunted into their homes and places of work. In the course of the weeks and months of violence, some 40,000 protesters were arrested or charged and a few jailed.

Ayyappan: Liminality and heterodoxy in myth and practice

The division and violence that marked the events at Sabarimala have much to do with the liminal dimensions of the site effecting a high degree of social, ethnic and religious inclusiveness. The extensive range of Sabarimala's appeal made it attractive as an apparatus of capture (Deleuze & Guattari [1987] 2004) for the hegemonic interests of the BJP and other powerful groups, as well those resisting them.

The menstrual rule applies to all sections of society, Hindu or non-Hindu, and may be seen as a principle underpinning the formation of a cross-cutting community of adepts who are predominantly male, though not exclusively so. The menstrual rule is a unifying principle for the worshippers (including females who are not of repro-

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Deleuze, G. & F. Guattari (1987) 2004. *A thousand plateaus*. London: Continuum.

Dumont, L. 1970. A structural definition of a folk deity of Tamil Nad: Aiyyanar, the Lord. *Religion/politics and history in India: Collected papers in Indian sociology*. Paris: Mouton Publishers.

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Jassal, N. & P. Chibber 2019. India in 2018: Crises of institutional legitimacy and gender. *Asian Survey* 59(1): 85-97.



Fig. 4. A woman symbolically commits suicide in support of female exclusion. She is surrounded by protecting Hindutva militants. A policeman pulls the noose away.

Fig. 5. A twice-born Brahmin abuses himself before Ayyappan's shrine. It affirms Brahmanic authority over Ayyappan's shrine.

Fig. 6. Hindu militants surround the Ayyappan shrine excluding women of reproductive age.

Fig. 7. A nine-year-old girl displays her support for the menstruation rule.

ductive age) in the encompassing primordial presence of Ayyappan. Although exclusionary, this rule does not have to be understood in a negative sense – e.g. as in the assertions of traditionalists such as the BJP and Hindutva or in the views of many gender activists who regard the menstruation rule as a pollution rule. The negative valuation of the rule is supported in other contexts of ritual practice, as it is part of a widespread, popular, 'commonsense' prejudice that wins easy acceptance transnationally.

Rather, there is a more positive interpretation of the menstrual rule in the context of Ayyappan: the female, in her reproductive centrality to the continuity of life and society, is *threatened, rather than threatening*. In this sense, and as I will explain further below, the menstrual rule is more egalitarian in effect, rather than hierarchical and exclusive. The attempt by Hindutva hegemonic interests to assert the menstrual rule in terms of Brahmanic values, accentuates the divisive, hierarchical and subordinating potential of the rule rather than the more positive, and less exclusionary (if still masculinist) understanding of the rule that emerges from an examination of the logic of Ayyappan myths and stories as well as practices at Sabarimala.

Myths and practice

There are numerous myths and stories surrounding Ayyappan and new ones are continually being invented. They legitimate the rights of different castes, tribal, ethnic and religious communities or groups of interest to Ayyappan's temple (for such stories see Osella & Osella 2003; Rajeev 2019; Sekar 1992; Thekkumbhagam 1985). During the period of protest and violence, new narratives were invented (Sajeev 2019, also see episodes of the television drama *Ayyappa Saranam* telecasted through a pro-BJP channel). Hindutva groups constructed stories asserting an interpretation of the menstrual rule as a pollution prohibition and broadcasted them via the Internet. Adivasi (tribal) groups declared that Ayyappan was born in

their community, but was killed resisting a Tamil invasion of Kerala in the 12th century (Sajeev 2019).

The most popular and widely known myth of Ayyappan tells that he was born from the union of two male deities, Siva and Visnu. This marks him immediately as a liminal heterodox god conjoining the two major divisions in Hinduism. His point in life, his *raison d'être*, is to kill the demoness, Mahishi,⁸ who attacks fertility and reproduction. The baby Ayyappan is given to the childless Pandalam king⁹ (a totalizing symbol of Mahishi's curse) who, while out hunting, hears the child crying on the mud-bank of the Pamba river. The king takes him to his palace and brings Ayyappan up as his successor. In the meantime, the king's queen gives birth to a son and desiring to make her son the royal successor, plots the demise of Ayyappan. She pretends to have a stomach ache that is to be cured by drinking leopard's milk. She asks Ayyappan to collect the milk from a lactating leopard, expecting him to be killed. In collecting the milk and avoiding death, Ayyappan also achieves his life's purpose, which is the killing of Mahishi, whom he meets on the way. On his successful return to the palace, the queen, acknowledging her devious intent, accepts Ayyappan as the king's successor. However, Ayyappan renounces the claim, returning to the wilderness of Sabarimala where he continues to help those who seek refuge with him. Among the main boons that Ayyappan grants is the gift of children and protection against threats to fertility and reproduction.

In the context of this myth, it could be argued that the banning of girls and women of reproductive age from Sabarimala has more to do with the danger to their fertility and reproductive capability – a positive, protective reason for exclusion – than the more negative, widely held understandings of impurity and pollution of Hindutva insistence. The menstrual rule insulates (quarantines) reproductive females from the danger of Mahishi, the manifestation of death and discontinuity, who causes infertility. Mahishi's

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 Menon, A.S. 1975. *Kerala District Gazetteers: Kottayam*. Trivandrum: Kerala Gazetteers.
 Osella, F. & C. Osella 2003. Ayyappan Saranam: Masculinity and Sabarimala pilgrimage in Kerala. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9: 729–753.
 Rajeev, L. (ed.) 2019. *Sabarimalayam Sthreekalum*. Chennai: Eka.



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Fig. 8. A woman activist, even though protected by police, fails to break through a barrier of Hinduva militants.

Fig. 9. 'Women's Wall' defending the 'renaissance' of the Supreme Court ruling.

destructive energy is not merely killed by Ayyappan, but quite literally stamped out in Ayyappan's victory dance on Mahishi's dead body. The dance (*pettathullal*) is a major event in the Sabarimala season and is re-enacted by men (and occasionally non-reproductive females) from across the socio-ethnic and religious spectrum (Muslims particularly, see below): some of the dancers wear horned devil masks, others have their faces painted with tribal markings (those of the jungle tribal peoples who aided Ayyappan's victory, according to participants) and wield swords, clubs and other weaponry (Fig. 12).¹⁰

The pilgrimage to Sabarimala, the main event of the ritual season, plays out the logic of the myth. Pilgrims (males and non-reproductive females) effectively become Ayyappan and follow his path. By symbolic extension, they also overcome death and act regeneratively. Pilgrims are addressed as 'swamy', an honorific of Ayyappan. They undergo a vow of 41 days of strict purity, involving abstinence from sexual congress. This is understood by many (certainly Brahmin priests) as conforming to values of celibacy, but it may just as well be a mimetic playing out of Ayyappan's birthing, a virtually autogenetic process outside that of heterosexual reproduction. The pilgrims wear black loin cloths, indicative of death or perhaps their liminal or transitional state between life and death. Throughout the pilgrimage, they carry a cloth bag on their heads containing sacred (protective) offerings.

The pilgrims' first stop (or initial stage of congregation) is at the Vavar mosque at Erumely (55 miles from Sabarimala). According to legend, Vavar, a Muslim warrior saint, became an adept of Ayyappan, helping him in his fight with Mahishi and other battles. The pilgrims circumambulate the mosque, where they re-enact Ayyappan's victory dance (*pettathullal*) on Mahishi's body, from where they proceed to the Pamba river (where the baby Ayyappan was found), close to the main Sabarimala shrine. Finally, the pilgrimage ends with the pilgrims entering Ayyappan's

shrine and offering the sacred objects they have been carrying on their heads.

Ayyappan: A being of unifying communitas

Lord Ayyappan of Sabarimala is an all-inclusive divinity. He is a being born of division, himself a divided unity. He is a cohesive force in a heterodox and heterogeneous socioreligious, ethnic and political reality. The continuing history of his formation indicates such. A diversity of religious and cultural influences are evident in his construction. Many communities, from the most dominant to the most marginal, have narratives of connection to him and of his beneficial potency in their existence. The stories of Ayyappan tell of him overcoming the conflicts and oppositions inherent in a heterogeneous/heterodox reality. His potency lies in the facilitation of relations and transactions across divisions for the benefit of all.

The collective *pettathullal* performed by pilgrims at the outset of their journey to his shrine is intensely expressive of the nature of Ayyappan's battles. They are conflicts of generation, of turning or transmuting antagonistic, destructive and rupturing potential into a force of unity, generative beneficence and continuity. Ayyappan creates positive relations in the place of negative division and opposition.

The *pettathullal* (literally 'market dance') occurs in a centre of trade, an intense space of entropy threatening disorder in division, which Ayyappan overcomes through killing the prime agency of decline and destruction, Mahishi, who strikes at the generative root of life and its renewal. The dance is a symbolic action of conversion and metamorphosis. Mahishi's death is facilitated by the assistance of Vavar, an erstwhile enemy who became an ally. The dance also effects the emergence of the beautiful and fecund Malikapurathamma, Ayyappan's bride-to-be.

Overall, Ayyappan represents the positivity of structure and anti-structure, in Victor Turner's sense, and the negation, amelioration or reduction of their negative or internally contradictory possibilities. As such, Ayyappan describes a tension towards communitas. His is a decentred, generative potency to be distinguished from the centred, totalizing power of kingship, for example. Hence, the significance of Ayyappan's renunciation of kingly power, its hierarchy and potentially oppressive and fragmenting potency, from which he is distanced in his jungle abode. Ayyappan interrelates heterogeneous populations horizontally rather than vertically, permitting their relative autonomy. His is a more egalitarian force, facilitating unification in difference and its fruitfulness per se. In the jungle of Sabarimala, he becomes one with its abundance and endless dynamic of renewal.

Sabarimala as a liminal vortex

The all-inclusiveness of worship at Sabarimala, with Ayyappan as the dynamic of such inclusiveness, set the ground for the eruption of protest and violence throughout Ayyappan's festival season in 2018-19. To put it another way, the all-encompassing nature of Ayyappan's domain makes it a fragile space, open to the destructiveness, division and fracturing processes of that which it brings into union. It is a place for what might be regarded as the pivoting of the sacred or the overturning of the very union (one that is virtually totalizing) that is achieved in Sabarimala's liminal space. During the 2018-19 festival season, what was potential, became realized. Far from being a space apart from the realities of the everyday social and political world, Ayyappan's domain was converted into an epicentre, a vortex, for the expression of the many conflicts and tensions that lie at the root of contemporary India. Mahishi raged.

The conversion or subversion of the overarching communitas in the realm of Ayyappan into what may be

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Turner, V.W. (1969) 1995. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.



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Fig. 10. Brahmin priests and temple employees sitting on Ayyappan's temple steps and protesting the Supreme Court verdict.
Fig. 11. Hindutva volunteers intimidating a female pilgrim of reproductive age walking to Sabarimala.
Fig. 12. A novice with painted face and the arrow of Ayyappan that kills Mahishi preparing for the pettathullal victory dance.

described as a fractured communitas of intense and violent turmoil of opposing passions was triggered by the Supreme Court judgment on the menstruation rule. This affirmed the menstruation rule as integral to the logic of purity and pollution and therefore to the exclusionary and subordinating effects of hierarchy, of structure. It agreed with Hindutva values but gave them negative value rather than the affirmative weight of Hindu nationalism.

Diametrically opposed camps were united in their valuation of the menstruation rule and effectively combined to suppress the more positive aspects or possibilities that are evident in the logic of the Ayyappan myths and stories. As outlined earlier, these myths and stories indicate that the menstruation rule operates in the interests of protecting and securing fertile and reproductive females from the dangers to their generative potential and therefore their benefit to society as a whole. Sabarimala in the festival season is a dangerous space in this regard. In other words, females are excluded because they are endangered, rather than being themselves in a dangerous polluting condition. Moreover, the menstruation rule enables a communitas among the less vulnerable (males and non-reproductive females), a bonding against the present danger of Mahishi, whom the pilgrims, in their progress, as Ayyappan, will conquer.

The menstruation rule understood in the foregoing sense is a relatively egalitarian and unifying principle. That is, it applies in the same way to all, regardless of religious practice, caste, class, ethnicity and identity. Moreover, the rule transects all communities, uniting them in a common purpose. All are placed in more or less equivalent relation to Ayyappan, with their own mythic claims to the benefits of his potency.

The assertion of the menstruation rule as a pollution rule by Hindutva interests (in effect supported by the Supreme Court ruling) gave rise to a negative value in the context of Sabarimala. The stress on pollution not only subordinates women, but also gives force to the rules of hierarchy within traditionalist Brahmanic Hinduism, especially those which have a hierarchizing, differentiating effect among Hindus and in their relations with other communities (affecting females and males).

The establishment and broad acceptance of the menstruation rule as one of pollution and exclusion counteracted the tension towards a singular unity in communitas, the spirit of Ayyappan and the impetus of the more positive interpretation of the rule.

The re-evaluation of the menstrual rule opened the gates of hierarchical fracture and a virtually unbridgeable division, indeed a fractured communitas, of opposed camps bonded in passionate reciprocal antagonism.

All the above being said, the hierarchizing and subordinating effect of the pollution rule is nonetheless implicit in the more positive interpretation that it dominated and suppressed. As gender activists would point out, the idea that the rule is protective of females, legitimates male control and the subordination of females. The inegalitarian potential of what has been presented as a relatively egalitarian principle is immanent within it.

The abolition of the rule certainly expands the egalitarian and non-hierarchical energy of Ayyappan and the sense of renewal or 'renaissance' expressed in the Kerala government's support of resistance to the Hindutva reaction.

More generally, the events of 2018-19 at Sabarimala underline the potential of ritual institutions of liminality and communitas to become vital foci for social and political transformation. As a catalytic vortex of social and political forces in contention, reacting explosively against one another, Sabarimala operated in a manner something akin to a catalytic converter. Thus, contradictions at the heart of social and political processes in contemporary India were brought into the open, were made part of public consciousness, but in the main, were resisted with renewed, overall unifying effect. It might be said that the spirit of Ayyappan prevailed against the forces of division. The BJP did increase its vote among the population in Kerala, but won no seats there. The political commitment of Kerala to egalitarian values and to the overarching unity of its heterogeneous population held firm. ●