

## Menstruation, Purity and Right to Worship

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The growing protest against temples that deny access to menstruating women should also challenge the institutionalisation of faith and the mediating power of the priest.

Banning menstruating women to enter places of worship by priests is not new in India. What is interesting is that a few fundamentalist forces want to nurture and continue this practice in the name of religion and cultural practices. What needs to be argued is whether these priests or fundamental forces have the right to decide the appropriate behaviour for women in religious places. Secondly, are these forces above the Constitution and the constitutional rights given to its citizens by the state? Finally, what is the role of the state in protecting and ensuring the rights of its citizens?

It seems that there is an increasing interest and inclination towards religion, and worship of gods and goddesses in recent years. It would be interesting to understand and explore this new found interest, its political economy and the forces behind it. Historically, many of these institutions have played a significant role in nurturing patriarchy and disempowering women. It is difficult to understand why women are trying to break centuries old traditions that apart from their right of access to god and the temple. In fact, earlier temple entry movements by marginalised sections were more of a symbol of protest against exclusion and challenge to establish a power hierarchy in the society rather than a renewed interest in God and Goddesses. Undoubtedly, [banning entry to the temple is discriminatory since it subverts the idea of everyone being equal to God](#) (Saxena 2016). Nevertheless, there is a trap which women should be aware of. They should understand that the power and influence of organised religion cannot be limited to the temple. The demand to access temples to worship god runs the risk of institutionalising the mediating power of the priests.

The conflict is obvious and expected, where priests are openly announcing and passing strictures that menstruating women will not be allowed to enter the place of worship. In this conflict, the state has become a mute spectator or playing in the hands of priests. Although the Supreme Court of India has pronounced that such a prohibition is unconstitutional, the Kerala state government's stand to defend the ban on the entry of women in Sabrimala temple is surprising. The Kerala government told the Supreme Court [that beliefs and](#)

[customs of devotees cannot be changed through a judicial process and that “the opinion of the priests is final”](#) (Anand 2016). The government fails to recognise women as a devotee. It seems that it has lost its power to protect its citizens, safeguard people’s constitutional rights, and stand for marginalised and excluded population groups including women.

In a secular country like India, which promises to protect the rights of its citizens to practice religion and faith of his or her choice, such rulings are a violation of one’s rights. The recent ruling by the Sabarimala temple in Kerala is that it will [only allow women to enter if a scanning machine is designed to ensure none of them are menstruating](#) (Sanghani 2015). The temple has currently prohibited the entry of all women in the menstrual age group because it believes that bleeding makes them impure which is not only an attack on women’s rights, but it is a question of one’s privacy. It is another form of Hindu majoritarianism, where a few wants to dictate what to do and what not.

It is a serious issue—where these forces are proclaiming themselves as supreme power above the State, although not in words but in acts. We do not know whether the state is supreme or these fundamentalist forces. We have seen the consequences of it in the other parts of the world where these fundamentalist forces have thrown out the State. The state should take strict action against those brahmanical fundamentalist forces, otherwise they are nurturing the ground for Hindu talibanisation.

Women’s groups and organisations have come forward and challenged this whole notion of “purity-impurity” and are protesting against this unjust ruling by the temple heads in the name of god, religion, culture and practices. However, one should not forget that it is not their fight only. There is a need to fight against this whole design of fundamentalist forces to break the social fabric of society. Patriarchal forces are reemerging to marginalise, exclude and control women’s mobility and access to institutions. Today, its women, tomorrow it will be for others, particularly the marginalised and excluded population groups.

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