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**Gendering the Sabarimala Conundrum: Female Body,
Sexuality and Desire in the Sanskritic Brahmanic Tradition**

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Abstract. Historians have for long ignored the human body as a theme of inquiry. While there cannot be a history of the biological body, there is tremendous scope for enquiring into the religious, social and cultural attitudes towards this body. Recently, the female body impinged on our collective consciousness in the context of the Sabarimala temple entry controversy. The debate which this issue generated gives me an entry point to examine the gendered nature of social institutions, their normative injunctions, and their cultural symbolism within the wider Sanskritic / Brahmanic traditions, since it was precisely the bias of this tradition that labelled the presence of females of a particular age group as not only polluting but also presenting a threat to the seclusion of a brahmachari deity who presided over this temple complex. By analyzing a wide corpus of Sanskrit textual tradition, I seek to argue that female and male bodily secretions are represented asymmetrically and sought to degrade woman by representing her as a site of revulsion.

Keywords: Sabarimala temple; female body; pollution; sexuality; renunciation

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**Гендерная проблема и храм в Сабаримале: женское
тело, сексуальность и желание в санскритской
брахманической традиции**

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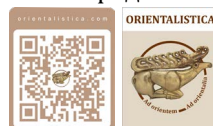
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Аннотация. Долгое время человеческое тело не являлось предметом исторических штудий. Хотя тело как биологическая субстанция не может быть предметом



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исторического исследования, человеческое тело как религиозный, социальный и культурный феномен вполне может выступать в таком качестве. Не так давно в связи со спором о том, допускались ли женщины в храм в Сабаримале, интерес историков привлекло женское тело. Различные мнения, высказанные по этому поводу, автор принял как отправную точку для изучения гендерной природы социальных институтов, их нормативных предписаний и культурного символизма в более широких санскритско-брахманических традициях. Причина тому – предвзятое отношение представителей этой традиции к женщинам определенной возрастной группы не только в связи с тем, что они несут опасность «загрязнения», но и с тем, что они представляют угрозу для уединения индийского локального божества (*брахмачари*) Аяппана, которому этот храмовый комплекс посвящен. На основании богатой санскритской текстовой традиции автор стремится показать, что восприятие мужских и женских выделений было асимметричным, в результате чего женское тело воспринималось как вместилище мерзости.

Ключевые слова: Сабаримала, храм; тело, женское; тело, женское, отречение от; сексуальность

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In the Indian Republic's southern state of Kerala, there is a temple complex in the town of Sabarimala whose presiding deity lord Ayyappa is, according to tradition, a celibate. The Sabarimala temple has, for a long time, attracted annual pilgrimage (in the months of November-December) from male devotees of all ages, who usually dress in black clothes and undertake a vow of celibacy for the duration of the pilgrimage. On the other hand, only very young pre-pubertal girls and menopausal women can undertake this pilgrimage to the temple of the celibate god Ayyappa. While this profiling of the pilgrims had been a customary rule and a usage prevalent from an undated past, the whole issue of female temple entry was accorded "legal" validity by the Kerala High Court's 1991 judgment. Acting on public interest litigation, the High Court pronounced that entry to the Sabarimala temple would be barred for women in the age group of 10–50 years, for this was in keeping with the usage prevalent from time immemorial. This legal position, which made it binding on the executive to employ force if necessary to implement this law, was challenged in 2006 when several female lawyers petitioned the Supreme Court of India to lift this ban. After several hearings, the apex court in its 2018 judgment with a 4:1 majority (ironically the lone female judge on the bench being the sole dissenter), struck down this ban on the ground that it violated Article 25 of the Indian constitution about the fundamental Right to Freedom of Religion. The backlash¹ against this liberal progressive judgment was fast and furious,

¹ Sixty-five review petitions were filed against the apex court's September 2018 order.



acquiring a lot of traction from the impending general election of 2019. By the end of the same year, the Supreme Court decided to review its judgment. The present paper is not intended as an analysis of the apex court's past or future judgments on this matter. Instead, it seeks to examine the gendered nature of the female body which impinged on our collective consciousness in this entire squabble. Furthermore, the debate which this issue generated gives me an entry point to examine at some length, the gendered nature of social institutions, their normative injunctions, as also their cultural symbolism, within the larger Sanskritic/Brahmanic tradition, because it is precisely the biases of this tradition that provide the foundation to this controversy.

There are two axes of this patriarchal, Brahmanic opposition to the presence of females of a particular age group in the temple complex. First, there is an obsessive concern with bodily pollution owing to the menstrual cycle of these women², who are thereby designated impure and unfit to enter the sacred precincts of the temple, which would otherwise be "desecrated"³. The masculine scriptures harp on the physical impurity of the menstruating woman at great length. Not only does she have to be in seclusion, but she, with her stained garment, gets described as *malodvāsas*. The Sanskrit word *mala* carries the meaning of dirt, filth, excreta; and the impurity can be both physical and moral. *Mala* is also used to denote any bodily excretion or secretion [2, p. 792, columns 1–2], so rationally speaking, *malodvāsas* a noun can also be used for a male with dirty garments. However, we find this term⁴ used categorically for a menstruating woman. The traditional scriptures also tell us, that menstruating women are impure because they carry part of Indra's sin⁵ of killing the Brahmin Vṛtra. Furthermore, according to Brahmanic scriptures, this impurity is explicitly linked to the pollution of the *śūdra* caste⁶.

The term *vṛṣalī*, is used interchangeably to describe both a *śūdra* woman and a menstruating woman [2, p. 1013, column 1]. Therefore, Brahmanical law books, such as *Āpastamba* and *Pārāśar smṛti* [4, 7.4; 5, 7.18–19]⁷ prescribe that menstruating woman must be dreaded – on the first day as *cāṇḍālī*, on the se-

² In fact, the Sanskrit term *rajasvalā* for such women means "full of dirt".

³ In stark contrast to Brahmanism and its desecration narrative, in the Tantric temple of goddess Kāmākhyā in the state of Assam, pilgrims accept a piece of red cloth symbolic of the goddess' menstrual blood with reverence, in the belief that it will bring them good fortune [1, p. 167].

⁴ *Malopahata*, which is a gender-neutral term meaning soiled or dirty, in Sanskrit is used as a general adjective.

⁵ In Brahmanic mythology, Indra as the king of gods had to be redeemed of this grave sin. So his guilt was divided into many portions and attributed to others. Menstruating women were among those who shouldered a part of this sin [3, 5.13.17].

⁶ In Brahmanic theology, while menstruating women are impure periodically, the *śūdra* who are placed at the lowest rung in the varṇa hierarchy, are always polluting for the highly placed dvija caste.

⁷ *Cāṇḍālī* and *rajakī* are classified as *śūdra*.



cond as *brahmaghātini*, and the third as *rajakī*; and, consequently, excluded from all sacred rites and daily activities. So severe is this notion of menstrual pollution, that although Brahmanic theology looks upon the dead body (*śava*) as polluting, the female corpse was seen as particularly defiled if the female was in her menses at the time of death. The *GaruḍaPurāṇa* [6, 2.4.110–112] pronounced such a death as an unfortunate death, where no offering to the dead (*pinḍadāna*) could be made, and if made inadvertently, that would be seen as wasted.

Yet, this negative connotation for menstrual blood was absent within Tantricism⁸. Indeed, the menstrual course of a girl was an occasion for her worship, since the energetic female principle was seen as operative when she had her menstrual flow. In the Tantric system, the first menstrual blood of the maiden (or *svayambhukusuma*) was perceived to be sacred, and was prescribed as an offering to the great goddess; and if this was not available, the goddess was offered *triśūlapuspa* or the menstrual blood of a *cāṇḍālī* (females despised and considered polluting in Brahmanism, but considered initiated within Tantricism) [1, p. 165–166]. Furthermore, ethnological studies of India's caste system use field data to point out that many Indian tribes did not observe menstrual taboos until they got integrated into the Brahmanical caste structure [7, p. 9]. In other words, the notion of the female biological rhythm being inherently impure is a patriarchal bias of the Brahmanic scriptures and not an eternal truth. It is also tempting here, to draw attention to the Virashaiva ideology of southern India [8, p. 3]⁹, which rejects outright all Brahmanic notions of impurity, including the contamination of menstruating and newly-delivered women.

It is the gendered social reality that is at the heart of the asymmetrical response to male and female bodily emissions in the Sanskritic/Brahmanic tradition. While the *rajasvalā* are considered impure, no such inauspicious or polluting imputation is accorded to the masculine discharge of semen (*vīryaskhalana*). Excessive release of semen is merely considered a loss of strength. Those indulging in masturbation and nocturnal emission (*śuokrayoniśī*) are categorized as fools (*mūḍha*), even as the forced retention of semen is decried for causing impotence (*śukraveganirodhaṣaṇḍyakāraṇam*) in the medical (*Āyurveda*) texts [9, p. 69]. Furthermore, the masculinist Brahmanic tradition celebrated conserved semen as a power of the celibate (*brahmacārī*) vis-à-vis others. The *Mahābhārata* [3, 3.110.3, 2–2] narrates the tale of Rṣyaśṅga, whose celibacy was of such high order, that his mere presence could ensure rainfall in drought-hit regions.

⁸ Tantric beliefs, with their worship of the female principal, originated in the tribal zone of central India around the 7th century CE and became quite widespread. Tantricism inverted Brahmanic ideology, jettisoning its notions of pollution, the varṇa hierarchy, and misogyny, among others. However, all Tantric texts are in the Sanskrit language.

⁹ The Virashivas originated in the early medieval period in Karnataka and were antithetical to Brahmanism. They also rejected Sanskrit, using the local language Kannada, to compose their short prose verses (*vacana*).



The second axis of opposition to the female temple entry in Sabarimala, revolves around the *brahmacarya* of the temple deity (Ayyappa), which would be compromised¹⁰ if youthful women of reproductive age were to enter the temple premises. In the masculinist world, “sexual desire” is seen as a male prerogative. Women can be the object of that desire, but not desiring subjects themselves. *Carakasamhitā* [10, 2.1.4–7] categorically defines a woman who is pretty (*surūpā*) and youthful (*yauvanasthā*) as the best aphrodisiac (*vr̥ṣyatamā*). Menopausal older women (*vr̥ddhā*), says Padmaśrī in his sexology text *Nāgarasarvasva* [11, 16.2–3], are not fit for intercourse (*suratotsavavarjitā*). Yaśodhara [12, 1.5.29], in his commentary on the famous text *Kāmasūtra*, justified the sexual undesirability of older women (*gatayauvana*) because sexual coupling with such women would adversely affect a man’s age (*āyu*) and vigour (*teja*). We, thus, see that the masculinist discourse objectified only a specific kind of woman as sexually alluring. So, from an entirely masculinist point of view, it was “safe” for the women of menopausal age to enter the precincts of a *brahmacārī* deity. However, the waning of sexual desire with old age was not the self-perception of all women; not all of them saw a certain threshold of biological age as a stumbling block, which hindered their sexual yearnings. In a Sanskrit one-act play *Pādadaḍitaka*, we meet courtesan Madayantī, who after menopause (*rajoprodhāta*) lost her sexual urge (*nivṛtakāma*). Yet, we find her indulging in the salacious talk (*śabdakāmāmanuvartate*) [13, p. 100]. The Sanskrit poetess Śilābhaṭṭārikā is most strident in claiming the same prerogative as men, whose age does not circumscribe their sexual urges. Āyurveda only proposes that such men should undergo virilification therapy (*vr̥ṣacikitsā*) as a treatment for sexual dysfunction. Śilā boldly asks, “How unfair and improper is the decree of fate, which makes men succumb to the sentiments of desire even when they are too old for them, especially when we see that the life of women is unrestricted by the sagging of their heaving breasts” [14, verse 83]. Śilābhaṭṭārikā was quite obviously critiquing the Patriarchy’s representation of the female body which equated sagging breasts (*bhṛṣṭapayodhara*) with the end of women’s good luck [15, 226.5]¹¹. Not only were older women presented as sexually undesirable, the masculinist discourse also represented the sexual urges of older women as beyond the bounds of propriety (*nirmāyāditā*). Thus, in Bhavabhūti’s play *Mahāvīracaritam*, Śūrpaṅkhā’s erotic desire for a younger (*kṣīrakanṭhaka*) Rāma is depicted as censured [16, Act V.11].

Within the somatophobic renunciatory tradition, the female body, both in its sexual and reproductive capacities, is once again centre-stage. Not only are women denied desiring subjectivity be they young or old, but even the “re-

¹⁰ Interestingly, at the same time, although neither Durgā nor Kālī is either a “spousal” or a “mother” goddess, male presence of any age group in their temples, as priests or pilgrims, is never an issue.

¹¹ *Saubhāgyaguṇoṅganānāmanaṣṭa*.



nouncing” of sexual desire is an entirely male prerogative. Women cannot be renouncers because female temperament (*strīsvabhāva*) is that of an undisciplined wanton (*pramadā*). The 8th canto in Aśvaghoṣa’s *Saundarānanda* [17] (this text traces the course of Buddha’s cousin Nanda’s entry into the *Samgha*) is titled female impediment (*strīvighnaḥ*). A woman, through her womb, perpetuates rebirth, and thus cuts at the root of transcendence, which is Bhartrihari’s major grouse against women in his didactic text on renunciation, titled *Vairāgyaśataka*. He states, “still unborn man suffers confinement in a woman’s foul womb” [18, verse 199].

Another manner in which the male renunciatory discourse problematizes the female body is as a cause of entrapment, whereby it acts as an impediment in the celibate renouncer’s (*sanyāsī*) path of spiritual progress. Ironically, then, a desiring male “subject” as a practicing renunciate, can fall an effortless victim to the wiles of an attractive woman! See how easily his hitherto active subject-hood is compromised, while the passive female body is attributed agency as a seductress. Bhartrihari proclaiming his repugnance of the female body states, “Her face a vile receptacle of phlegm is likened to a moon, her thighs dank with urine are said to rival the elephant’s trunk, mark how the poets praise this despicable form (*nindyārūpam*)” [18, verse 159]. In this verse, the erotic and repulsive mood is intentionally collapsed to evoke the transformative renunciatory (*vairāgya*) mood. Sanskrit texts repeat ad nauseam “Where there is a woman there is desire; if you renounce women, you can renounce the world, and renunciation brings happiness” [15, 449.24–25]¹². Since the object of temptation is always a woman, while the subject of redemption is forever the man, it is not surprising that the male pilgrims to Sabarimala merely need to undertake a vow of celibacy, but only the very young girls and old women who are perceived as “naturally” celibate and beyond temptation may undertake this pilgrimage.

Since patriarchy confers no legitimacy on female renunciation¹³, a renouncing woman in such a world gets stigmatized as unchaste and promiscuous. The Sanskrit prose texts like Daṇḍin’s *Daśakumāracarita* [19], Kṣemen-dra’s *Kalāvīlāsa* and Vararuchi’s one-act play *Ubhayabhisārikā* present ascetic women as procuresses and prostitutes; and they are painted as figures of commiseration where they are not chastised as decadent and immoral. Thus, in Harṣa’s two plays *Ratnāvalī* and *Priyadarśikā*, the ascetic woman (*tapasvinī*) is given the persona of a pitiable woman in distress [13, p. 76–77]. Furthermore, since a renouncing woman is an oddity in the male world, her austerities (*ta-*

¹² *Yasyastrītasayabhogecchā strīyamtyaktvājagattiyaktam jagattiyaktvāsukhībhaveta.*

¹³ Unlike Brahmanism, although both Buddhism and Jainism had orders of nuns (*bhikkhuni* and *sādhvī*, respectively), they too remained ambivalent towards their potential for attaining salvation.



pasyā) evoke surprise [3, 9.53.6–8; 3, 9.304*.1]¹⁴. It is for this reason that the Śvetāmbara Jainas looked upon Mallī becoming a Jaina *tīrthankara* as one of the ten surprises (*āścarya*), even as the Digambara Jainas insisted that Mallī was a male ascetic or Mallinātha.

Yet another persona which the Sanskrit texts give to an ascetic woman is that of a woman in separation (*viyoginī*), and then proceed to compare her to a woman in a mystic trance (*yoginī*) or one who meditates not on the divine or higher spiritual truth, but upon her absent beloved [20, Verse 703]. Such imagery underlines the frivolity of women’s celibacy (*brahmacarya*) and their austerities (*tapasyā*). The only kind of female austerities which patriarchy understands and applauds are those done to attain a suitable husband; what we can refer to as the Umā/Pārvatī model of austerities, made famous by Kālidāsa in his poetic text *Kumārasambhavam*. Patriarchy’s opposition to female asceticism sprang from the perception that it would be subversive of the “ideal” woman, for an ideal woman must above all be a caregiver. So Siddhārtha Gautama can make a grand exit from worldly life (Mahābhiniṣkramaṇa) and proceed on his ascetic journey to attain enlightenment, even while his wife Yaśodharā is left at home, holding their week-old infant son Rāhula. In the *Mahābhārata* [3, 13.124.8], the devoted wife (*pativrata*) Śāṅḍilī, very superciliously states that she had not attained heaven garbed in the ochre garment of a renunciate sporting either matted locks or shaved head, but by being a dutiful and considerate wife. Kauṭilya in *Arthaśāstra* [21, 2.1.29] prescribes punishment for those who would induce a woman to renounce her role as a wife. Megasthenes, the ancient Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court in India, noted that “Indians did not communicate their metaphysical doctrines to women, thinking that if the women understood these doctrines and learned to be indifferent to pleasure and pain, and consider life and death the same, they would no longer continue to be the slaves of others” [22, p. 24]. Undeniably, then, unlike the male ascetic and celibate *brahmacārī*, the female ascetic never became a repository of moral authority and the founder of a counter-culture. It is this asymmetry of moral perception which provides “legitimizing fuel” to stoke the fire of the Sabarimala conundrum.

Even as I write this paper, the entire Sabarimala temple entry issue is in a state of flux. One can only hope that the enlightened views will prevail, and the so-called “time-honoured traditions” will be critiqued for their gender symbolism. For as the Virashaiva saint, Akkā Mahādevī, so perceptively underlined in one of her Kannada *vacana* [23, p. 15], “So long as a woman is a woman, man defiles her. So long as a man is a man, woman defiles him. But when the mind’s taint is gone, can there be room for the body’s taint?”

¹⁴ *Tapoghoramduṣkaramstrījanena*.



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