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Luisa Steur



## A Women's Wall against the fascist menace in Kerala? Some less-comfortable observations

January 20, 2019

On New Year's Day, the world was treated to the spectacle of a 640-kilometer-long "Women's Wall" in Kerala (South India). This human chain of more than five million women stretched the length of the state, making a spectacular statement for the "renaissance values" of women's equity and rational thinking. Progressive organizations linked to Kerala's Communist government organized the demonstration to counter the hate-filled Hindu protests that had been ongoing since 28 September 2018, when the Supreme Court of India ruled that the Sabarimala temple's ban on women of menstruating age was unconstitutional and had to be lifted. Implementation of this court order had so far been sabotaged by the militant protests of orthodox Hindus, fueled by the BJP (the Hindu nationalist party).



Women's Wall at Angamaly, 1 January 2019 (© [Navaneeth Krishnan S](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#), [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)).

These Hindutva protests frame the Sabarimala issue as an example of how "Hindu identity" is under threat in India today. Right-wing Hindu activists warn of a liberal, secular elite that is progressively dismantling Hindu India and will leave it unarmed in the face of the "Muslim enemy." Right-wing commentators also like to claim a position of "indigeneity," defending an "indigenous" Hindu tradition against a foreign constitutional ideal. What is at stake at Sabarimala, they argue, is an ancient Hindu custom, grounded in holy scriptures: Lord Ayyappa, worshipped at Sabarimala, is a celibate god who is not to be confronted with young women.

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Moreover, it is necessary to avoid all forms of "pollution" for 41 days prior—impossible for women of menstruating age (10 to 50 years old), as menstruation is seen as a pollutant.

This right-wing discourse has been criticized from many angles. Environmentalists point to the contradiction between the supposed obsession with “purity” and the actual functioning of Sabarimala as a billionaire enterprise that ignores all court verdicts against ongoing construction on forest lands and receives millions of pilgrims every year, a process that progressively erodes all that was “pure” in the Periyar National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary surrounding the temple ([Gurukkal 2018](#)). Transgender activists have criticized the right-wing discourse for advancing patriarchal and homophobic values under the guise of religion: trans women don't menstruate, yet they too have been turned away from the temple ([Deep and Rana 2018](#)).



*Crowd management at Sabaramila, 5 December 2007* (© [ragesh ev](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#), [CC BY 2.0](#)).

Another forceful criticism of the supposed “indigenous” Hindu tradition of banning women came from actual “indigenous” people (Adivasis) themselves. In the weeks following the Supreme Court order, various Dalit-Adivasi organizations participated in protests and “Villuvandi marches,”<sup>[1]</sup> demanding the temple be restored to the Mala Arayan, the indigenous people it belonged to before it was taken over by Namboodiri Brahmins. It turns out that though Sabarimala itself is indeed “ancient,” the practice of banning women is of modern making, only gradually introduced by Brahmin high priests in the second half of the twentieth century and turned into law in 1991. The actual “ancient custom” at the shrine, developed from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century when Sabarimala was still in the hands of the local population, was one of ritual openness and social flexibility. Ayyappa was open to all, regardless of caste and even of religion: Ayyappa was closely associated to Vavar, a Muslim, so Ayyappa devotees used to pay homage to the Vavar mosque en route to Sabarimala. As for gender, fertile women were considered auspicious by the Mala Arayan and used to be particularly welcome at Sabarimala ([Gurukkal 2018](#)).



Women's Wall platform at Kollam, 27 January 2018. The banner reads, "Kerala comes together to protect renaissance values" (© [Sai K Shanmugam](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#), [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)).

Defending the court order on Sabarimala thus seemed to allow for a perfect political alignment on the Left: environmentalist, queer, Adivasi, and feminist critiques could not only converge; they moreover could naturally do so under an anti-fascist agenda. Opposing the BJP's defense of an orthodox Hindu practice that stigmatizes women as periodically "untouchable" is an entirely straightforward progressive stance, unlike the more complex case of the politics around the "triple *talaq*" judgment two years ago.<sup>[2]</sup> It was also obvious the BJP was fomenting the violent, hate-filled orthodox Hindu protests in Kerala because of the forthcoming national elections in April ([Dennis 2018](#)). Indeed, in order to capture the votes of the majority Hindu community, the BJP has in recent decades consistently orchestrated violent religious polarization before every major election.<sup>[3]</sup> In preparation for the national elections in April 2019, then, BJP strategists spotted what the Kerala BJP chief openly called a "golden opportunity" in the local protests against the judgment on Sabarimala.

But surely the BJP was mistaken in thinking its usual tactic of fomenting religious bigotry for electoral gain could work in Kerala? The massive success of the Women's Wall has suggested to many commentators that the BJP made an epic miscalculation this time. And indeed, I initially shared the sense of optimism of commentators like [Vijay Prashad \(2019\)](#), whose widely circulated post portrays Kerala's Left Democratic Front government—and Kerala's women "of all ages and backgrounds"—as standing steadfast, explicitly speaking out against the everyday humiliation of women on grounds of religious orthodoxy, and demonstrating once more that the BJP had little chance of gaining ground in Kerala. But, just as I was

about to sit back and watch the spectacle of the BJP meeting its nemesis in Kerala, more nuanced stories started to reach me from Kerala's anti-caste activists and intellectuals—those that were the focus of my earlier research in the state (see Steur 2017).

### The shaky foundations of the Women's Wall

First of all, the generally suggested picture of an organized but spontaneously expanding momentum of women joining to stand for equality turned out to be somewhat misleading. In organizing the Wall, women's organizations themselves apparently had played only a subordinate role. One could even say the Communist government was using women for waging its own battle with the BJP: it even diverted funds earmarked for women's safety toward organizing the Wall (Abraham 2019). Stories reached me, moreover, that suggested Kerala's widely praised Self-Help Groups for women had been instrumentalized in unsavory ways: Wall organizers had threatened to withhold some of these groups' government subsidies if women did not ensure that all members of their group showed up. The apparent need for such heavy-handedness in bringing women to the Wall was a worrying sign that perhaps Kerala was not as unitedly progressive as the Women's Wall suggested at first glance.



*Women's Villuvandi March Declaration, 15 December 2018. Radical women activists (feminist, Dalit, forest rights, transgender) declaring their right to enter the temple (© Diyya K).*



*Sunny Kappikad speaking at Erumely. In background , holding a green placard, is Bindu, one of the women who entered Sabarimala on 2 January (© Divya K, reproduced with permission).*

Consequently, I learned the Wall organizers had carefully avoided an explicit call for the right of women to enter Sabarimala. The whole effort had unfolded under the somewhat vague heading of “renaissance values.”<sup>[4]</sup> Some of the Communist government leadership—notably, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan himself—were coming out in favor of the Supreme Court judgment, but there was no public statement about this regarding the Women’s Wall, and the government failed to de facto implement the order: women were still being stopped by orthodox Hindu protesters, and evidently, even the police were advising women not to enter the temple (see [Abraham 2019](#); [Devika 2019a](#)). When two women—one Nair (upper-caste) “devout Hindu” and one Dalit gender activist ([Ameerudheen 2019a](#))—finally entered the temple at dawn on 2 January, such Hindutva violence was sparked that the women, and other feminist activists, feared for their lives ([Devika 2019b](#)). For days, the whole state of Kerala grid to a halt.

Progressive commentators have been eager to portray the Hindu protests against the court injunction as instigated and financed by the BJP ([Dennis 2018](#)). But before the BJP came in, the Hindu crowds were already quite sizeable. In fact, many local leaders who had initially welcomed the Supreme Court judgment made an opportunistic U-turn<sup>[5]</sup> after being confronted with the “popular sentiments” visible in the Save Sabarimala agitations—with crowds of women and men in *nama japa yatras* (hymn-singing marches)—and the Ready to Wait sloganeering of young Hindu women ([Ittype 2018](#)). Progressive commentators also

conveniently ignore the fact that the neo-Brahmanical, upper-caste movements at the forefront of these protests seem to thrive in Kerala today (Sunny Kappikad, cited in [Ameerudheen 2019b](#)).<sup>[6]</sup>



*BJP strike protesting against young women entry in Sabarimala, 3 January 2019 (© [Ranjithsiji](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#), CC BY-SA 4.0).*

It is, finally, questionable to what extent the less vocal masses in Kerala are actually opposed to the militant Hindu protests: the more local stories I hear, the more it seems to me that people from various backgrounds (including Christians) are actually in favor of “respecting the religious custom” of banning women. They don’t like the confrontational attitude of women trying to enter Sabarimala,<sup>[7]</sup> they aren’t eager to open up the taboo about women’s menstruation, and they blame those pushing for women’s entry to Sabarimala—not the BJP, which was actually calling for the violent strikes—for paralyzing everyday life in Kerala. The masses in Kerala are no longer the proletarian classes struggling together with the Communist Party to emancipate themselves from the various oppressive structures: the masses in Kerala today have become rather “bourgeoisified,” largely thanks to money earned in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere abroad. These are by and large politically and economically emancipated middle classes now engaged in a fierce competition for cultural capital, of which a key ingredient is the modesty and general “pleasantness” of the family’s women in accordance with the expectations of caste. Though they like to wear the badge of progressive cosmopolitanism vis-à-vis other Indian states, the Keralese certainly don’t want the status quo to be shaken up too much. The Communist Party seeks to accommodate these conservative desires by avoiding explicit action against religiously ingrained patriarchal and casteist practices. While the media present starkly polarized images of the demure woman devotee versus the

assertive sloganeering woman ([Carmel 2019](#)), the Communist Party in general seems unable to take sides.

As an anthropologist, I find it difficult to simply focus on the larger political picture in which Kerala characteristically emerges as an anti-fascist inspiration, as [Prashad \(2019\)](#), for instance, has done. An anthropological approach produces a more realistic picture, sensitive to the crucial local question of caste, but also to the effects of global processes of capital accumulation on class formation in Kerala (see Steur 2017). This picture presents a less rosy image of what is going on in Kerala today. And yet, it should be clear by now that advancing an agenda of universal social emancipation in the old way leads to a dead end. It no longer works to engage oppressed social groups in the progressive struggle only as voiceless followers; to let Dalits and women speak only in those rare moments when electoral calculations are not of the utmost importance and only if they forever prioritize political and economic equality over and above their passionate desire to abolish caste and patriarchy in *all* their manifestations. It is precisely this tendency that has led to the rise of “identity politics” of oppressed groups in *antagonism* to the Left: under the existing priorities of the Left, these oppressed social groups will only fall in line with it, reluctantly, in times of actual fascist menace. This, I'm afraid, is the real meaning of the Women's Wall in Kerala.

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## Notes

[1]. Villuvandi marches proceed with bullock carts and are a form of protest echoing the tactics of Ayyankali (1863–1941), the renowned Dalit social reformer from Kerala.

[2]. The 2017 judgment posed quite a dilemma for progressive feminists. Muslim feminists had been working for years to repeal the legality of “triple *talaq*,” a custom in certain Muslim communities whereby a man merely had to pronounce three times that he wanted a divorce from his wife in order for it to become realized. Valid feminist arguments said this made it much too easy for men to (threaten to) abandon their marital obligations, while women's possible calls for a divorce were incomparably more limited. The BJP jumped on the issue, however, and made it very awkward politically. The BJP supposedly clamored for women's rights while in fact its interests obviously were to once again stigmatize all Muslims as “backward” and demonstrate Hindu power to curtail Muslim religious practices. In reaction, there were many splits on the Left between those prioritizing the feminist case and those refusing to play into the BJP's Hindu majoritarian agenda.

[3]. The archetypical case was the violent Hindu campaign to demolish the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya, followed by the anti-Muslim pogroms in 2002 in Gujarat under Narendra Modi's chief ministership, and repeated in 2013 at Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh in the run-up to the national electoral victory of the BJP in 2014.

[4]. These renaissance values refer to the caste-reform movements active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Kerala. Radical anti-caste intellectuals argue that these social reform movements have been suppressed by the Communist movement's consolidation since the 1930s (see Steur 2017: 160ff.).

[5]. The latest politician to do so is [Rahul Gandhi, who erstwhile said](#): “My personal view . . . is that men and women are equal. All women should get permission to enter into the temple.” As of 14 January 2019, per the [Times of India](#), Gandhi has adjusted this “personal view.”



[6]. Kappikad (cited in [Ameerudheen 2019b](#)) discusses neo-Brahmanism as follows: "Brahmanical practices in the 19th century mainly focused on religious rituals. But in the 21st century, it transformed into a political narrative and this is known as neo-Brahmanism, which thrives on the premise that India has a rich Brahmanical tradition and all Indians should protect Brahmin culture if they want to defend India."

[7]. One of the women who had entered Sabarimala was beaten up by her own relatives on returning home.

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