

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-4, AUGUST 2025

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**
Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Menstrual Impurity and Religious Sacrilege: *The Great Indian Kitchen* as a Document of Women's Empowerment in Kerala

Dr. Jeeja Ganga

Associate Professor,
Govt. Victoria College,
(Affiliated to the University of Calicut),
Palakkad, Kerala.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17058266>

Article History: Submitted-24/07/2025, Revised-08/08/2025, Accepted-13/08/2025, Published-31/08/2025.

Abstract:

The Supreme Court verdict of September 2018 permitting women of menstruating age to enter the famous Sabarimala temple was met with vehement protests all over Kerala. The state witnessed campaigns for the preservation of customs and traditions, widespread riots, scenes of arson, rage and vituperation -- all pointing to the misogyny of a society which was regarded as modern and progressive. *The Great Indian Kitchen*, a movie by Jeo Baby released in the year 2021, is a response to the incidents surrounding the Sabarimala Verdict. The female protagonist, who undergoes harrowing experiences in her marital home including ostracization during her menstrual period, retorts by polluting the sacred rituals of the male folk who are embarking on a pilgrimage to Sabarimala. The paper examines how the movie subverts the notion of menstrual impurity through the act of religious sacrilege and the questioning of patriarchal authority.

Keywords: menstruation, impurity, misogyny, movie, subversion.

Menstruation, a vital physiological process in a woman's body, presents several difficulties and setbacks for a woman. The physical and physiological difficulties are heightened by the stigma and embarrassment surrounding menstruation and the dictates of

societal institutions like religion and family on the menstruating woman. In most cultures, the menstruating female body is considered deviant, polluted, and “monstrous” and in need of surveillance and disciplining. The menstruant is expected to observe certain stringent rules like isolating herself from other members of the household, keeping away from places of worship and refraining from religious rituals and prayers. The isolation, which implies practices like retiring to a segregated portion of the household which lacks the physical comforts needed for a menstruating woman, eluding the sight of the menfolk, lying on the bare ground or mat rather than on the bed and observing untouchability, is an extremely excruciating and debilitating experience. As Ilana Cohen puts it, “The relationships between menstruation and religion, and religion and culture suggest that menstruation is a cultural phenomenon just as much as it is a physiological one” (116).

Disciplining the tainted and monstrous body of the woman has been topmost in the agenda of patriarchal institutions like the family and religion all over the world. A look at the rules prescribed by the Hindu religious text *Manusmriti* for the menstruant reveals a misogynistic attitude that considers her on par with untouchables and dehumanises her to the level of beasts. The misogyny evident in the religious text is intertwined with Hindu religion's infamous caste system, a fact made clear from the list of impure items/people the Brahmana is advised to shun by *Manusmriti*: “A kandala, a village pig, a cook, a dog, a menstruating woman, and a eunuch must not look at Brahmanas while they eat” (3.239). The text also prescribes corrective measures for a Brahmana tainted by touching or being touched by polluted people: “When he has touched a kandala, a menstruating woman, an outcast, a woman in childbed, a corpse...he becomes pure by bathing” (5.66). Obsessed with notions of purity, the religious text dehumanises and degrades both the lower caste person and the menstruating woman and divests them of their basic humanity. As Deepthi Sukumar puts it,

At their core, the menstrual taboos are designed to maintain the systems of caste and patriarchy for the dominance of the touchable caste men... Menstrual taboos that deem women impure and polluting in their periods contribute to the belief system that women are inferior. This menstrual shaming of women's bodies into impure and inferior objects has allowed the male to dominate and control women and their sexuality. Women are made to carry the burden of protecting the supremacy and purity of the male and his caste with deeply ingrained cultural practices such as menstrual segregation, ritual fasting by women to protect the men, and covering the head and face in a male presence.

(141)

The paper investigates questions of sacredness and profanity writ large in sociocultural practices which deem the woman's body as impure in the light of the incidents surrounding the Supreme Court Verdict of 2018 which permitted women of menstruating age to enter the shrine of the Naishtika Brahmachari or the eternally celibate deity, Ayyappa in Sabarimala and the film *The Great Indian Kitchen* by Jeo Baby released in 2021, which can be regarded as a response to the turmoil that Kerala saw in the wake of the verdict.

In concord with the purity of the celibate deity, the Sabarimala pilgrim was supposed to stringently undertake a penance for forty-one days wherein he had to observe rituals of purity before embarking on the pilgrimage to the shrine. The same concept of purity led to the prevalence and practice of the unwritten law that women between the menstruating age of ten and fifty should not enter Sabarimala. In 1991, the Kerala High Court took up the issue of the prohibition of women in Sabarimala and it was contested both in the High Court and the Supreme Court of India. In a landmark judgement in 2018, the Supreme Court declared that the prohibition of women of menstruating years from entering the temple was "unconstitutional and a violation of the fundamental rights of women". Any kind of "social exclusion based on notions of 'impurity'" amounted to untouchability ("Sabarimala" n.p), violating both the Right

to Equality under Article 14 and the right to Freedom of Religion under Article 25. There was a huge furor all over the state, with devotees taking to the streets and protesting against the judgement under the instigation of right-wing political parties and organizations. The movement comprised large groups of men and women chanting *bhajans* in public spaces, protests by bodies like *Achara Samrakshana Samitis* and widespread riots, scenes of arson, rage and vituperation. Television channels flooded with debates on the questions of purity and impurity, religious sacrilege, women's rights and superstition. It was surprising that educated and seemingly progressive people still clung on to illogical superstitions and outdated notions about the impurity of women. The sad truth that the women of the state were also a party to the outdated notions of impurity was clear from the stance of the "Ready to Wait Campaign," a social media movement initiated in 2016 wherein women dutifully photographed themselves holding posters stating their willingness to wait until they were above fifty years of age to enter the temple and posted those photos on social media. A spokesperson of the Campaign strongly condemned the verdict by stating that it was a violation of the rights of the deity. The unleashing of violence on 'activists' who tried to enter the shrine, the price such women had to pay in terms of ostracization by society and their intimate family members and the threats to their life and property -- all indicated the misogynistic nature of a society which had often been praised for its modern outlook and progressive thinking.

The *Great Indian Kitchen* was released on a lesser-known Malayalam OTT platform *Neestream*, as more prominent live streaming platforms rejected the movie on account of its controversial references to the Sabarimala issue. The female lead role in the movie is played by Nimisha Sajayan, a newer face in Malayalam cinema and an actress lacking the glamour or star value of the established heroines. The film centres around the life of a young girl who is married into a well-known Nair family that is particular about observing rituals and traditions. The girl remains nameless throughout the film, just like her husband and hence the former will

be referred to in the paper as the wife, daughter-in-law, young woman or girl as the occasion demands and the man will be referred to as the husband. Though *The Great Indian Kitchen* depicts incidents related to the Sabarimala issue and the theme of the tainted menstruant versus the holy pilgrim only during the last thirty minutes, questions of purity and impurity and the sacred and profane are probed from the very beginning, making the film have a bearing on contemporary events and discourses. The right-wing central government of India along with other right-wing factions had been striving to introduce several reformative measures and taboos which were justified and defended as being in accordance with religious dictates and traditional practices. The events that ensued the Sabarimala verdict of the Supreme Court in 2018 and the controversial ban on the slaughter of livestock which amounted to a ban on beef, an important part of the diet of Muslims, Christians and the Dalit community of India are instances of the surge of Hindu nationalism and fervour. The ban on cow-slaughter and beef eating was justified on the ground that the cow is a sacred animal in Hinduism. But the ban curtailed the freedom of a vast population of non-Hindus as well as Hindus all over India who consumed beef. Many states, including Kerala, refused to implement the ban and protests were held by various groups all over India against the ban. The film, in passing, refers to the issue of cooking beef when the newly married couple are offered the favourite dish of Kerala, *kappa* and beef at a house where they are invited as newlyweds. The host appeases the groom, who has conventional views on such matters, by saying that the beef was cooked outside the house. The host further adds that beef which was once eaten by them only in hotels has now entered the courtyard of the house and will soon enter the kitchen too. Though this incident looks insignificant, it suggests the film's take on the sacred-profane debate of contemporary times.

The inferior and tainted female body versus the pure and sanctified male body is the central theme of the film and this is brought forth in the persona of the young bride married into a renowned upper caste ancestral home or Nair *tharavadu* that keeps alive age-old customs

and rituals. The only value of the woman's body is that it is needed to toil day in and day out to satiate the gustatory or carnal desires of the menfolk. In a system where a woman has no say before and after marriage, the young bride loses her identity. She becomes a body that is lost in the unseemly spaces of the old smoke-infested kitchen, engaging in chores of cooking, cleaning and housekeeping. As the women of the house toil in the kitchen, the men are seen relaxing in more presentable parts of the house like the sitting room or *verandah*, scrolling their mobile phones, reading the newspaper, watching television or doing yoga. The film is the first of the kind in Malayalam cinema that portrays the life of women within the kitchen by giving shots of women engaged endlessly in the task of chopping and sauteing vegetables, scrapping coconut, making dosas, grinding spices, serving the male members of the family, cleaning pots and dishes, washing clothes, mopping the floor and cleaning the house. The elaborate steps of cooking, which include the cutting of vegetables, scrapping of coconuts, frying and sauteing, are all repeated every single day in a ritualistic manner by the women. Top angle shots are used for the scenes in the spacious kitchen of the ancestral house to show how the woman who toils there loses her human value and becomes a part of the ever-expanding eeriness of the room. The men present themselves at the dining table for the meals which the women serve with devotion, a devotion akin to the sacred ritual of making offerings to Gods at places of worship. When the older woman leaves the *tharavadu* for an extended period to visit her pregnant daughter living abroad, the father-in-law draws up some dictums for his young daughter-in-law to follow. He insists that she wash the clothes by hand rather than in the washing machine and use the fire grate for cooking rice instead of a pressure cooker. The compulsions made by the men, their insistence on how the food should be cooked and served, what kind of food should be served and the dos and the don'ts are not unlike the religious dictates and observances maintained in the ritualistic worship of Gods.

This idea of the elevated and lordly head of the family served by his woman is perceived in the image of the elderly woman who obsequiously fetches the tooth brush for the patriarch as he reclines idly in his armchair in the *verandah* in the mornings. She also fetches his sandals for him whenever he wants to go out of the house. However, the daughter-in-law refuses to follow the example of the mother by openly showing her repulsion to the father-in-law's insistence that she fetch him his toothbrush in the mornings. The ancient *tharavadu* with its antique buildings adheres to rituals of purity and religion like lighting the lamp or *sandhya deepam* at dusk and worshipping the holy basil plant in the courtyard, which is regarded as a symbol of purity. In fact, the daughter-in-law had received the customary ritualistic welcome on the day of her wedding and had entered the threshold of the marital house in an auspicious way by placing her right foot inside first and with a lamp in her hand. A woman, who is regarded as an auspicious presence in the house and a key player in the sacred rituals, is also considered impure and tainted, not just during her menstrual period, but even otherwise. She is expected to perform the sacred rituals of lighting the lamp or tending to the *tulasi* plant just as she is expected to do the menial labour of the household like mopping the kitchen floor, washing the piled up dirty dishes and clearing up the dining table filled with the chewed pieces of drumstick and leftovers of the male members who had horrible table manners.

The images of the unrepaired, dripping kitchen sink that fills the area with stench and filth and the maggot-infested bin under the sink in which the leftovers of the men are piled are central to the purity-impurity discourse. The dirty sink, which remains unrepaired despite repeated pleas from the woman, is an objective correlative to the worth of the woman's body in the household. She is in a constant battle in the arena of the kitchen, cleaning the piled-up dishes and pans in the sink, managing the water clogged sink from which dirty water drips into a bucket placed beneath it and frantically using sacks and rags to dry up the leaking water. The young woman flinches every night as she clears up the mess in the sink and rubs her palms

hard with soap to get rid of the stench before going to sleep. Furthermore, at bed time, the sexual act with her husband becomes an ordeal, haunted as she is by images of the maggots infesting the kitchen waste and the stench of her palms. The husband's insensitivity to the various needs of his wife like repairing the messy sink, refraining from littering the dining table with leftovers, permitting her to seek a job as dance teacher and having some foreplay during sexual intercourse is an offshoot of misogyny that deems the woman's body as inferior and insignificant.

The *tharavadu* strictly observes rituals of purity including taboos of menstruation and caste system, but the film offers a deconstructive reading of the ancestral house, making it a site where the pure and impure clash. Usha, the Dalit maid servant, who with her friendly banter and bold and candid talk offers consolation and a whiff of fresh hope to the newly wed woman, tells her how in the yesteryears, her mother who belonged to the low caste *paraya* community was not permitted to enter the upper caste household and could only do *puram panni* or work outside the house. Usha, meaningfully named so (Usha means morning in Indian languages and stands for freshness, novelty and hope), given her liberated stance when compared to the regressive life the wife of the house is forced to live, is relied upon by the menfolk for the preparation of food during the wife's menstrual period. She reveals to the young bride that she cooks food for her employers even during her periods, as she cannot afford to abstain from work for three or four days a month. Principles of purity are sometimes bent tacitly, as her comment "How do they know whether it is my period or not" suggests (00:44:19-00:44:21). In her irreverence to the rituals and traditional practices, the low caste maid stands as a stark contrast to the upper caste bride of the ancestral household. In fact, she becomes the inspiration for the latter to break the shackles of superstition and misogynistic attitudes that deem women impure. The words of Deepthi Sukumar become relevant here:

Most ‘upper caste’ feminist campaigns do not address the role of caste in menstrual taboos.... caste and patriarchy have designed and planted traditions and behaviour for ‘upper caste’ women to diligently follow and be responsible to uphold the ‘purity’ of their caste. Menstrual behaviour and taboos are part and parcel of the caste and patriarchal design to maintain the hierarchy of caste structure by propagating and using the belief system of purity and pollution. (Sukumar 140-41)

The character of Usha, the Dalit maid, who breaks taboos of menstruation by cooking for her upper caste employers even during her periods, defies the praxis of untouchability based on caste and menstruation. While doing the chores in the presence of the young wife of the household, she sings “Oru Kudam par”, a song penned down by the Dalit activist and lyricist, Mrudula Devi S, in Paluva, a script-less language spoken by the *Paraya* community. The foregrounding of caste is evident by the fact that this song by Mruduladevi has been used as the title song of the film. In addition to the song mentioned above, “Chemrantham”, another song penned by Mruduladevi, is played at the end of the film. The second song describes a beautiful girl of the Paraya community who cooks well and defies custom: “On her period defying custom/ She will be red with betel/ taken with a dab of lime/ As the sun goes down/ her radiance grows” (01:38:51-01:40:08). There is a shift from the persona of a beautiful young woman whose only worth in the title song is her beauty and coyness to the radiance and empowerment of a menstruating woman who defies customs in the second song. The twin projects of the movie, which are the defying of caste restrictions and the overcoming of menstrual taboos are writ large in the lyrics of this song.

The young daughter-in-law is initially a coy and demure girl, who conforms to the requirements of patriarchy, but as the film progresses, we see her being filled with repulsion at the dirty tasks she must perform on a routine basis, the inconsiderate nature of her husband and

the illogical traditions that hamper her as a woman. A turning point comes after the *malayidel* ceremony of the male members of the family, a ritual that elevates them to the position of *Swamis* or the personae of Lord Ayappa himself. The vow of *brahmacharya* taken by the *swamis* involving strict restrictions of diet and lifestyle points to the patriarchal and misogynistic attitude of religion and society. Though women below the age of fifty are deemed unfit to enter the shrine of Sabarimala on the grounds of impurity, they are supposed to maintain the religious rituals and principles of purity with utmost rigour when the men become *swamis*. The onus of catering to the wellbeing of the *swamis* by cooking fresh meals for them three times a day and safeguarding their purity by observing the necessary rituals falls on the womenfolk. There is a scene where the overworked wife serves the previous day's curry that had been stored in the refrigerator to the *swamis*, much to the consternation of the husband. Later, when the chagrined man discusses the matter with his colleague, the latter reminds him that times have changed and there are even *swamiyars* who take liquor during their penance. The double standards of the social order are such that compliance with norms is expected only from women.

A major hardship faced by women when the men of the household become *swamis* is the constant anxiety in which they dwell about the onset of their periods and the precautions taken by them to avoid polluting the *swamis* and their rituals. The film portrays the degrading experience of the protagonist who isolates herself during menstruation. Her husband's aunt arrives at the *tharavadu* to take care of the needs of the *swamis*. The older woman is rigorous in her observance of rituals and she comes with a list of strict prescriptions and rules for the daughter-in-law, which include keeping away from the sight of men, sleeping on a mat spread on the floor rather than on the bed, having a separate plate in her room for meals and so on. The aunt also suggests that she shift to the *kalapura* or granary of the *tharavadu* during her period, reprimands her for hanging her inner garments for drying in the open and warns her

that she will incur the wrath of the serpents if they happen to crawl on her disposed sanitary pads. Each act of the young woman comes under censure during her period. For instance, she incurs the displeasure of the patriarch when she plucks a few leaves from the tulasi or holy basil plant to cure her cold. Again, she is angrily shoved away by her husband when she helps him to his feet during a minor bike accident in the courtyard. When the ‘tainted’ husband consults the elderly pilgrim of his group as to what should be done to be absolved from the impurity incurred by the touch of his menstruating wife, the latter replies, “If made impure by the touch of a menstruating woman, you should swallow fresh cow dung or drink cow dung water” (01:22:07-01:22:17).

The *malayidel* and the consequent isolation of the menstruant at the *tharavadu* coincide with the incidents that rocked Kerala following the Supreme Court verdict permitting women of menstruating age to enter Sabarimala. Television channels boom with live telecasts of the riots and talk shows where participants either endorse or condemn the verdict. The isolated menstruant could hear the discussions happening on the television from the loneliness of her room. One incident that stands out in the turmoil is the torching by miscreants of the scooter of a woman activist, who expresses her views in support of the court verdict on *Facebook*. The simmering anger and the protest that the young daughter-in-law had been lodging within herself so far find an outlet at this point of time. She shows her dissent to the oppressive nature of patriarchy and expresses solidarity with the woman activist by ‘liking’ the views expressed by the latter on *Facebook*. The members of the NSS *karayogam*, an upper caste organisation, are quick to intervene. They opine that a woman belonging to a respectable Nair family should not indulge in such ‘activism’ and request the patriarch and his son to force her to delete the post. She however refuses to comply with their demand. The woman, a campaigner, who had hitherto waged a lone battle in the kitchen, now shifts her fight to the public domain. This act of posting her view on social media becomes her first substantial act of protest against the misogyny of

society. Her acts are in resonance with the acts of scores of women who had to put up with abuse and threats from members of their own family during the days following the court verdict for supporting the verdict and for partaking of the other progressive views and debates that were rampant.

Her rebellion touches its highest point during the *kettunira* ceremony of the *swamiyars* in the *tharavadu*, a ceremony held just before they embark on their pilgrimage to the shrine. As the woman stands alone in the kitchen, her seven-day period over, she can hear the chanting of *swamiye sharanam* as the rituals proceed in the puja room of the house embellished by the paraphernalia of camphor, flowers, lighted lamps, ghee and coconut. When her husband comes to the kitchen and orders her to bring tea for the *swamis*, she performs the supreme act of sacrilege by pouring the sink water collected in a bucket into the steel tumblers and taking it to the *swamis*. The husband and father-in-law, after taking a sip of the dirty water, rage into the kitchen taking off their sacred chains or *malas*, thereby coming out of their status as *swamis* to confront the evil doer who has broken their vow by polluting them. The woman empties the remaining sink water on them and rushes out of the kitchen, closing it behind her and leaves the *tharavadu*. The men are trapped in the kitchen where they had trapped her so far, drenched as they are in the same impure and nauseating water from the sink that the woman had been forced to handle all by herself. We see her walking down the street, filled with rage at the patriarchal system that had trapped her till then and with a new sense of purpose. She walks past wall paintings of a leftist youth party of Kerala and a small gathering of the *achara samrakshana* movement, an indication that progressive and regressive forces exist side by side in Kerala even now. Her act of tainting the *swamis* could be shocking to the religious sensibilities of the believers, given the lordly position and reverence accorded to Sabarimala pilgrims. However, it comes as a befitting retort given by her to a system that deems women and their menstruating bodies polluted.

The last few scenes show the complete transformation she has undergone in demeanour, as an empowered woman who has broken her shackles to engage in the prime interest in her life, dance. Dressed in a more modern attire and exuding confidence in her new role as dance teacher, she drives to the auditorium and monitors the dance of a group of girls. The song to which the girls dance is one that variously describes ‘woman’ as the music of earth, as valour personified, as the bestower of life, as an unextinguishable flame and a radiant face that rules forever. As the movie comes to an end, we listen to the song penned by Mruduladevi in Paluva language that describes the beautiful menstruating *paraya* woman who defied customs. The film exemplifies how patriarchy and religion had joined to confer the status of ‘untouchables’ on women and Dalits and how the protagonist rises above the situation to deconstruct these notions of impurity by her bold act of sacrilege and defiance of rituals and meaningless customs.

Works Cited:

Cohen, Ilana. “Menstruation and Religion: Developing a Critical Menstrual Studies Approach.” *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chris Bobel et al. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565605/.

Manu. *Manusmriti in English with Sanskrit Translation*. archive.org/details/ManuSmriti_201601/page/n30/mode/1up.

“Sabarimala Temple Entry.” *Supreme Court Observer: A Living Archive of the Supreme Court of India*. www.scobserver.in/cases/indian-young-lawyers-association-v-state-of-kerala-sabarimala-temple-entry-background/.

Menstrual Impurity and Religious Sacrilege: *The Great Indian Kitchen* as a Document of Women's Empowerment in Kerala

Sukumar, Deepthi. "Personal Narrative: Caste is My Period" *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Chris Bobel et al. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. pp.137-41. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565605/.

The Great Indian Kitchen. Directed by Jeo Baby, 2021. *Neestream*.