



# Ascent to the temple of democracy

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## **Ascent to the temple of democracy-The opposition to the Sabarimala order is reflective of a wider gender inequality in Malayali society**

- Kerala's reputation as a society that has evolved to an exceptional degree may have taken a bit of a beating.
- The reputation itself has been built on the strides made in the sphere of development, by now internationally recognised to be human development as reflected in the health and education status of a people.

### **The Kerala paradox**

- When it was first noticed over four decades ago, Kerala's perceived uniqueness had stemmed from the realisation that it was among India's poorest States.
- To have achieved fairly high human development despite relative poverty was considered noteworthy.
- What was not apparent in the usual indicators, however, was something even more unique, the ending of social hierarchy.
- The caste system, which was at the centre of Kerala's social arrangements, disintegrated virtually overnight.
- This was fuelled by the enactment of a land reform programme that ended feudalism.
- Social distance in terms of caste distinctions just died.
- Given the experience of the ending of a feudalism that had persisted for centuries in Kerala, the reception to the Supreme Court's verdict on the practice of excluding women of menstruating age from the shrine at Sabarimala is disappointing.
- In Kerala, patriarchy is entrenched across all classes and social groups.
- It did not vanish with the land reforms, even if its architects had wanted it to happen.
- From the recent events at Sabarimala we can see that some sections do not want it to lose its stranglehold even today.
- The opposition to women's entry at Sabarimala is at times met with an

appeal to history, that the temples of Kerala have witnessed far greater transformation in the past, having been thrown open to all sections of Hindus over 75 years ago.

- While this history is correctly recounted, the issue of women's entry into temples is not a matter of accepting the inevitability of change, it is a matter of recognising what living in a democracy implies for its members.

### **Linked to representation**

- However, while democracy assures freedom to practise religion, citizens are expected to practise it in a way that is consistent with democracy.
- So the traditionalists on the Sabarimala issue must recognise that by excluding women, they are not keeping their side of the social contract as it were.
- In a way, the opposition to the entry of women to Sabarimala is reflective of a wider inequality between men and women that may be observed in Malayali society.
- Two indicators point to this, despite the very high literacy levels registered by women and a significant presence of women with higher education.
- First, female labour force participation is low in Kerala in comparison with other States.
- Second, the presence of women in governance roles is very low in Kerala.
- So long as women are not represented in the upper echelons of decision-making it will be difficult to break this mould.

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