

# SACRED DISCIPLINE AND BODILY CYCLES: A DHARMIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE SABARIMALA TEMPLE TRADITION

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## *Abstract*

The Sabarimala Ayyappa Temple in Kerala has emerged as a focal point in contemporary debates concerning religion, gender equality, and constitutional rights in India. Public discourse frequently interprets the traditional restriction on the entry of women of menstruating age as a form of gender discrimination. However, such interpretations often overlook the internal philosophical and ritual frameworks of Hindu religious traditions. This paper re-examines the Sabarimala tradition through a non-gendered interpretive approach that integrates dharmic philosophy, yogic and Ayurvedic understandings of physiology, and insights from modern biomedical science. Situating the practice within the theology of Lord Ayyappa as a *Naishtika Brahmachari* and the rigorous forty-one-day *mandala vratham* undertaken by devotees, the study argues that the restriction historically functioned as a context-specific ritual discipline rather than an assertion of impurity or gender hierarchy. Drawing upon Vedic, Upanishadic, and classical Hindu texts alongside contemporary physiological perspectives on menstruation, the paper highlights how voluntary health-oriented practices gradually evolved into rigid social prohibitions due to historical and institutional transformations. The study concludes by reflecting on the ongoing dialogue between religious traditions and constitutional modernity, emphasizing the need for culturally grounded interpretations when examining ritual practices.

**Keywords:** Sabarimala, Dharma, ritual discipline, menstruation, Naishtika Brahmacharya, Hindu philosophy

## *Introduction*

The interaction between religious traditions and modern constitutional frameworks has become a significant subject of debate in contemporary India. Questions of gender equality, religious freedom, and cultural autonomy frequently arise when ancient ritual practices are evaluated through modern legal and social frameworks.

The controversy surrounding the Sabarimala Ayyappa Temple exemplifies this tension. Public narratives frequently interpret the traditional restriction on the entry of women of menstruating age as a form of gender discrimination. While such interpretations emphasize modern ideals of equality, they often overlook the ritual, philosophical, and physiological foundations that shape Hindu temple traditions.

Hindu religious practices are rarely structured solely around social categories such as gender or class. Rather, they are embedded within broader cosmological, ethical, and ascetic systems rooted in the concept of **Dharma**. Ritual observances are designed to regulate bodily conduct, mental discipline, and spiritual focus.

The Sabarimala temple represents a distinctive ritual environment dedicated to Lord Ayyappa, who is worshipped as a **Naishtika Brahmachari**, a deity embodying lifelong celibacy and ascetic discipline. The pilgrimage requires devotees to undertake a rigorous forty-one-day period of preparation known as **Mandala Vratham**, emphasizing austerity, restraint, and spiritual purification.

This paper seeks to re-examine the Sabarimala tradition through a multidisciplinary framework that incorporates scriptural interpretation, traditional Indian knowledge systems, and contemporary scientific insights. By situating the practice within its civilisational context, the study attempts to move beyond simplified narratives and offer a more nuanced understanding of the tradition.

## *Sabarimala as a Vrata-Centric Sacred Space*

The Concept of Vrata in Hindu Thought

In Hindu philosophical traditions, **vrata** refers to a voluntary vow undertaken to cultivate spiritual discipline and ethical conduct. The observance of vrata integrates physical restraint, mental focus, and devotional commitment.

Vedic literature consistently associates spiritual realization with discipline and austerity. The **R̥g Veda (10.190.1)** links cosmic order with the principle of tapas:

### Sanskrit

ऋतं च सत्यं चाभीद्धात् तपसोऽध्यजायत ।

### Transliteration

ṛtaṃ ca satyaṃ cābhīddhāt tapaso'dhyajāyata

### Meaning

Cosmic order and truth arise through the transformative power of austerity and disciplined effort.

Similarly, the **Taittirīya Upaniṣad (3.1)** highlights the central role of austerity in the pursuit of spiritual knowledge:

### Sanskrit

तपसा ब्रह्म विजिज्ञासस्व । तपो ब्रह्मेति ॥

### Transliteration

Tapasā brahma vijijñāśasva  
tapo brahmeti

### Meaning

Through austerity seek to understand Brahman, for austerity itself is a path to spiritual realization.

Within this philosophical framework, austerity is not understood as self-denial but as a means of refining bodily and mental energies.

### The Forty-One-Day Mandala Vratam

The Sabarimala pilgrimage requires devotees to undertake a **forty-one-day period of spiritual preparation** known as *Mandala Vratam*. During this period devotees observe:

- celibacy
- simple vegetarian diet
- avoidance of luxury
- daily prayer and meditation
- walking barefoot
- disciplined conduct

The **Bhagavad Gītā (6.16–17)** emphasizes the importance of moderation in spiritual practice:

### Sanskrit

नात्यश्रतस्तु योगोऽस्ति न चैकान्तमनश्रतः ।  
न चाति स्वप्नशीलस्य जाग्रतो नैव चार्जुन ॥

युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु ।  
युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य योगो भवति दुःखहा ॥

## Meaning

Yoga cannot be attained by those who indulge excessively or those who practice extreme deprivation. Balance in food, activity, rest, and sleep enables spiritual harmony.

The Mandala Vratam reflects this classical yogic principle of disciplined moderation.

### *Naishtika Brahmacharya and the Theology of Ayyappa*

Lord Ayyappa is revered as a **Naishtika Brahmachari**, representing the highest form of ascetic celibacy.

Classical Hindu texts emphasize brahmacharya as a foundational spiritual discipline. The **Manusmṛti (2.160)** states:

## Sanskrit

ब्रह्मचर्येण तपसा देवा मृत्युमपाप्नत ।

## Meaning

Through celibacy and austerity, divine beings transcend the limitations of mortality.

The ascetic identity of Lord Ayyappa therefore shapes the ritual atmosphere of the Sabarimala temple, which emphasizes restraint and spiritual concentration.

### *Menstruation in Hindu Scriptural Thought*

Contrary to common assumptions, early Hindu scriptures do not portray menstruation as a form of impurity. Instead, bodily processes are viewed as natural expressions of life.

The **Atharva Veda (6.138)** refers to blood and bodily vitality as integral elements of reproductive life, reflecting the sacredness of biological processes.

Similarly, the **Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (1.5.3)** discusses physiological processes within the broader context of natural cycles of creation and regeneration.

These texts indicate that menstruation was historically understood as a natural biological phenomenon rather than a marker of moral impurity.

### *Menstruation as a Physiological Process*

Modern biomedical research describes menstruation as a complex physiological process involving hormonal fluctuations, uterine contractions, and metabolic changes. During this period many women experience fatigue, discomfort, or reduced physical stamina.

In pre-modern societies lacking modern medical infrastructure, cultural practices often encouraged rest during menstruation as a protective health measure. Such practices may have been intended to safeguard physical well-being rather than enforce exclusion.

Temple environments historically involved prolonged standing, fasting, and large gatherings. Temporary withdrawal during menstruation may therefore have functioned as a form of physiological care.

### *Ayurvedic and Yogic Physiology*

Classical Indian medical traditions describe the body in terms of vital energies known as **vāyus**.

Menstruation is governed by **Apāna Vāyu**, the downward-moving energy responsible for elimination and reproductive functions.

The **Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā (2.4)** explains the relationship between vital energies and mental stability:

#### Sanskrit

चले वाते चलं चित्तं निश्चले निश्चलं भवेत् ।

#### Meaning

When vital energies become disturbed, the mind becomes unstable; when they remain balanced, the mind remains steady.

Rest during menstruation was therefore considered beneficial for maintaining energetic balance within the body.

#### *Bhakti Beyond Bodily Conditions*

Hindu devotional philosophy consistently emphasizes that **spiritual devotion transcends bodily conditions**.

The **Bhagavad Gītā (9.26)** states:

#### Sanskrit

पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति ।

#### Meaning

Whoever offers a leaf, flower, fruit, or water with devotion is accepted by the Divine.

This verse highlights the primacy of devotion over ritual eligibility.

#### *Contemporary Legal Developments*

In **2018**, the Supreme Court of India ruled in *Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala* that restricting women's entry into the Sabarimala temple violated constitutional principles of equality and freedom.

The decision generated widespread public debate, reflecting the complex interaction between constitutional law and religious traditions. While the judgment emphasized individual rights, critics argued that it did not sufficiently engage with the theological and ritual foundations of the practice.

The debate continues to illustrate the broader challenge of reconciling ancient religious traditions with modern constitutional frameworks.

#### *Conclusion*

A civilisational examination of the Sabarimala tradition reveals a complex ritual system grounded in ascetic discipline, physiological awareness, and spiritual symbolism. Practices historically associated with menstruation appear to have originated as context-specific guidelines aimed at preserving bodily health and ritual coherence.

Over time, the erosion of explanatory traditions and the emergence of rigid social structures transformed flexible practices into rigid restrictions. Recognizing this historical transformation allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the tradition.

A deeper engagement with both traditional knowledge systems and modern scientific insights may help foster constructive dialogue between religious practices and constitutional values.

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