

Menstruating Against the State: Addressing Caste, Domesticity, and the Politics of Destigmatisation in *The Great Indian Kitchen*

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/galaxy.v15.n5.7>

Abstract:

The paper intends to analyse the Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), directed by Jeo Baby, as a cultural intervention addressing menstrual stigma in contemporary Kerala. It is read against the backdrop of the 2018 Supreme Court verdict permitting the entry of women of menstruating age into the Sabarimala temple and the wave of public protest, both progressive and reactionary, that followed it. The film's unnamed protagonist, a newly married woman absorbed into an upper-caste Nair household, is shown navigating an unrelenting cycle of domestic labour. This reaches a climax with her ritual seclusion during menstruation. The film uses this sequence to link the unexamined, personal burdens of housework to the broader structures of Brahminical patriarchy. At the time of the film's release, these structures were being openly challenged at Sabarimala itself. Drawing on Mary Douglas's account of purity and pollution, Julia Leslie's and Nicole Hembroff's scholarship on orthodox Hindu attitudes to menstruation, R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, Meena T. Pillai's analysis of gender in Malayalam cinema, J. Devika's account of housewifisation and neo-Savarna resistance in Kerala, and Dalit feminist theorisations of intersectional marginalisation, this article explores how *The Great Indian Kitchen* highlights menstrual stigma, depicting it as part of a societal structure that disproportionately burdens women, especially Dalit women, under upper-caste patriarchy's views of impurity. The film advocates breaking the stigma around menstruation by featuring elements such as the absence of background music and character names, real footage, and an activist's cameo, which together constitute a powerful cultural intervention in discussions of gender, caste, and religious authority in twenty-first-century Kerala.

Keywords: Menstrual Destigmatisation, Sabarimala, Brahminical patriarchy, Caste and Gender, Malayalam cinema, Domestic labour.

Article History: Submitted-30/08/2026, Revised-11/09/2026, Accepted-18/09/2026, Published-30/09/2026.

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Introduction

On 28 September, 2018, the Supreme Court of India delivered a verdict that would place the Sabarimala temple, and by extension the question of menstrual stigma in Hindu religious practice, at the centre of Kerala's public life for years to come. Ruling that the temple's centuries-old prohibition on the entry of women between the ages of ten and fifty amounted to a form of untouchability rather than a legitimate religious custom, the court held that the exclusion of menstruating women from a public place of worship violated the constitutional guarantee of equality (Supreme Court of India). In the following months, Kerala experienced sustained and often violent protests from right-wing and caste organisations determined to preserve the temple's traditional practices. This protest was then joined by upper-caste women, who organised campaigns like "Ready to Wait," in which participants publicly declared their willingness to wait until the age of fifty to enter the temple, rather than assert the right that the court had just granted them (Devika, "Defence of Aachaaram"). This protest occurred against a wider backdrop of contestation over women's bodily autonomy in Kerala's public sphere because this was a period that had already seen movements including "Kiss of Love" in 2014 and "Aarpo Aarthavam," or "Hurray Menses," in 2019, as well as the transnational circulation of India's own #HappyToBleed campaign in 2015. The verdict, thus, did not settle the matter so much as detonate it.

It was into the politically charged context of Kerala that Jeo Baby's Malayalam film *The Great Indian Kitchen* was released in 2021. Moreover, the central contention of this paper is that the film cannot be adequately understood outside the Sabarimala controversy that forms its explicit backdrop. Unlike earlier Malayalam cinema, which primarily focused on Sabarimala as a site of devotion and pilgrimage, *The Great Indian Kitchen* uses the temple and related protests to

illuminate the everyday lives of an upper-caste Nair household. How the menstrual taboo within and outside the home, especially in the temple, is rooted in a shared Brahminical-patriarchal perspective is illustrated by connecting the film's distinctive narrative style to existing scholarly insights on menstrual taboo and gender dynamics in Kerala.

The article reviews existing scholarship on the film and on the Sabarimala controversy more broadly. It develops a theoretical framework drawing on anthropological, sociological, and feminist accounts of menstrual pollution, hegemonic masculinity, and caste. The paper offers a sustained textual analysis of the film's treatment of domestic labour and menstrual seclusion. Then it turns to the film's treatment of caste, examining its Dalit character, Usha, and its inclusion of the real-world activist, Aparna Sivakami. It considers the film's formal strategies to constitute an argument for destigmatisation. The paper finally concludes by situating the film's intervention within the broader, still unresolved politics of the Sabarimala verdict.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on *The Great Indian Kitchen* has located the film within two mutually connected critical discussions: feminist film criticism on domestic labour and the exploration of caste and religion in Kerala's public sphere. Meena T. Pillai's broader body of work on gender in Malayalam cinema provides an essential frame for understanding the film's departure from prior conventions. Pillai has argued that mainstream Malayalam cinema has historically relied on an "emphasised femininity," a mode of representation in which female characters are shown accommodating themselves to male desire and domestic expectation even within narratives that appear, on their surface, to critique patriarchal arrangements (112). *The Great Indian Kitchen* has been read by subsequent commentators as a self-conscious departure from this pattern, refusing

the emphasised-femininity mode even in its supporting characters while reserving its critique for the structural conditions of domesticity itself rather than for any individual male character's personal failings.

J. Devika's scholarship on Kerala's gendered political history provides the second major frame for this article. Devika's account of the "Ready to Wait" campaign as an instance of "neo-Savarna power," in which upper-caste women mobilise the language of choice and tradition to resist a legal victory ostensibly won on their behalf, offers crucial context for understanding why the film's protagonist, despite belonging to the same upper-caste Nair community as the Sabarimala protesters, is nonetheless shown supporting the opposing, pro-entry position. Devika's earlier work on the ideological construction of Kerala housewifery, tracing how Victorian-inflected ideals of domestic motherhood were absorbed into and naturalised within Brahminical ideologies of feminine chastity and procreative duty during and after the colonial period, provides this article's account of the film's father-in-law character, who explicitly invokes maternal sacrifice to dissuade the protagonist from pursuing paid employment ("Defence of Aachaaram").

The paper also focuses on scholarship dealing with menstrual taboos in orthodox Hindu texts and rituals. In her foundational study on traditional Indian views on menstruation and female sexuality, Julia Leslie examines how menstrual restrictions are embedded within a wider dharmic framework that governs women's ritual and domestic conduct. She argues that such restrictions cannot be understood as mere superstitions but must be read as central to orthodox constructions of feminine duty (Leslie 63-81). Nicole Hembroff extends this study by analysing orthodox Hindu attitudes towards menstruation. His study situates menstrual restriction within Mary Douglas's anthropological account of purity and pollution. He specifically addresses how

menstrual taboos function to regulate women's relationship to sacred space (Hembroff). This article draws on both scholars to read the film's menstrual-seclusion sequence as a dramatisation of the textual and ritual logic these scholars describe.

Finally, Dalit feminist scholarship provides the framework for reading the Dalit character, Usha in *The Great Indian Kitchen*. Her menstruation differs markedly from that of the film's upper-caste protagonist. This article argues that the film's inclusion of Usha constitutes a deliberate refusal to universalise menstrual experience across caste lines. The article treats this refusal as central to the film's broader project of destigmatisation.

The film was initially rejected by major streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video due to the scenes that directly refer the controversy of women's entry into the Sabarimala temple. Later, at first, it was released on Neestream, a smaller Malayalam-language streaming service on 15 January, 2021. Amazon Prime Video subsequently acquired the rights and made the film available more widely. However, this initial reluctance among major platforms is itself significant evidence for this article's central argument: the film's treatment of menstrual stigma was recognised, even by the commercial platforms that eventually profited from its success, as materially continuous with, rather than merely allegorically related to, the live political controversy at Sabarimala, sensitive enough to generate institutional caution.

Theoretical Framework

Mary Douglas's classic anthropological argument that dirt is fundamentally "matter out of place," substance that violates a given culture's system of classification rather than possessing any inherent, self-evident uncleanliness, remains foundational to any analysis of menstrual taboo

(44). Menstrual blood, within orthodox Brahminical ritual thought, is understood not merely as unhygienic but as actively polluting sacred space and the persons and objects the menstruating woman touches, a classification that requires elaborate ritual management to contain. Leslie's study of traditional Indian views on menstruation demonstrates that this classification is deeply embedded within dharmic textual tradition, where a woman's conduct during menstruation, what she may touch, where she may sleep, and whom she may approach, is subject to detailed prescriptive regulation understood as integral to her fulfilment of *stridharma*, or the proper duty of a wife (Leslie 63-81). Hembroff's analysis extends this account, arguing that orthodox Hindu menstrual restriction operates simultaneously at two levels, ie, at the level of domestic ritual and at the level of access to sacred institutional space, precisely the dual register that *The Great Indian Kitchen* dramatises through its parallel treatment of household seclusion and the Sabarimala pilgrimage (Hembroff).

The film's decision never to show menstrual blood directly on screen offers a complementary explanation of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of bodily abjection. Kristeva's argument that bodily fluids provoke horror precisely because they blur the boundary between self and other, threatening the coherence of the bounded subject, helps explain why a visual depiction of menstrual blood risks reproducing the very horror-and-spectacle register the film's broader argument works to dismantle (Kristeva 71). This film brilliantly shifts focus from the spectacle to the social dynamics of seclusion and dietary separation. By doing so, it skillfully critiques menstrual stigma without reinforcing its negative aspects.

R. W. Connell's influential theorisation of gender relations distinguishes between hegemonic masculinity, the culturally dominant and idealised form of masculine identity within a given social order, and emphasised femininity, a complementary mode of feminine identity that

Connell describes as being oriented specifically toward accommodating the interests and desires of men (183). Connell's framework proves valuable for reading *The Great Indian Kitchen* because the film's male characters do not conform to any conventionally villainous or overtly abusive model of patriarchal authority; rather, as this article's textual analysis in Section 4 will demonstrate, the husband and father-in-law are depicted as habitually polite and even affectionate, exercising control instead through passive aggression, quiet expectation, and the invocation of tradition. This method of control seems to be aligned with Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity: dominance achieved not mainly through overt force but by normalising gender roles that appear natural, inevitable, and beyond negotiation. Meena T. Pillai's application of related concepts to Malayalam cinema specifically, tracing how the industry has historically required its female characters to perform an emphasised femininity that reconciles apparent modernity with underlying subordination, provides the film-specific extension of Connell's framework this article employs throughout (112).

J. Devika's account of the ideological formation of Kerala housewifery offers this article's third theoretical resource. Devika argues that the ideals of the modern Kerala housewife, which emerged from Victorian ideals of domestic motherhood and were transmitted through colonial education and administration, were filtered through and ultimately merged with pre-existing Brahminical ideologies. It produces a durable ideological formation in which a woman's confinement to domestic labour could be represented as modern maternal virtue and as ancient religious etiquette ("Defence of Aachaaram").

Finally, this article draws on Dalit feminist scholarship to read the film's treatment of caste difference among its female characters. Gopal Guru's foundational analysis of humiliation as a distinct category of caste-based subordination provides the framework through which this article

approaches the significant inclusion of Usha, the household's Dalit domestic worker (Guru). Subsequent scholarship on the intersection of caste and gender specifically has argued that Dalit women's experience of menstruation cannot be assimilated to that of upper-caste women, since Dalit women frequently continue paid domestic and agricultural labour through menstruation out of economic necessity, in stark contrast to the ritual seclusion upper-caste women may be required, or in some contexts permitted, to observe (Mandal). This article treats the film's inclusion of this contrast as a deliberate and important complication of what might otherwise be a purely upper-caste account of menstrual stigma.

Domestic Labour and Menstrual Seclusion: A Textual Analysis

The Great Indian Kitchen follows an unnamed woman, played by Nimisha Sajayan, from the early days of her arranged marriage into an aristocratic Nair household in northern Kerala, opposite Suraj Venjaramoodu as her husband, a schoolteacher. Having grown up in a comparatively liberal household, the protagonist struggles to adjust to the highly patriarchal and tradition-bound rhythms of her marital home, where she and her mother-in-law, played by Ajitha V. M., perform an unrelenting cycle of cooking, serving, and cleaning while the men of the household, the husband and father-in-law, occupy themselves with yoga, mobile phones, and the general comforts of a household whose maintenance they neither perform nor appear to notice. The film's visual strategy depends on close-up shots that dwell on the monotony of this labour, tracking hands kneading dough, scrubbing vessels, and clearing food waste, training the viewer's attention on the sheer repetitiveness of domestic work rather than on any single dramatic incident.

This structure intensifies when the mother-in-law departs to care for her pregnant daughter elsewhere, leaving the protagonist to assume sole responsibility for the household's daily

functioning. The film shows her frustration as she takes the responsibility of cooking and cleaning, and also of the minute, unacknowledged labour of anticipating her husband's and father-in-law's needs. The two men are depicted with consistent politeness and gentleness in their behaviour toward her. Instead, their control operates through what the film repeatedly stages as passive aggression. This is Connell's hegemonic masculinity, ie, dominance so thoroughly naturalised that it requires no raised voice, no confrontation, no admission that dominance is even occurring (183).

The film crystallises the sequence in which the father-in-law dissuades the protagonist from pursuing a job interview by glorifying his own wife's undivided domestic attention as the reason their children achieved professional success. This argument is presented not as an appeal to religious duty but as secular common sense concerning family welfare. This illustrates how the colonial Brahminical fusion Devika traces continues to structure contemporary domestic ideology ("Defence of Aachaaram").

About two-thirds of the way through the film, the protagonist begins menstruating, and the household's response inaugurates the film's most sustained engagement with menstrual taboo specifically. She is compelled to confine herself to a separate room, sleep on the floor rather than in her marital bed, and avoid touching anything in the house outside that room. The *ammayi*, or aunt, played by Ramadevi, arrives to manage the household's cooking and the men's care during this period, a figure the film uses to demonstrate how menstrual taboo is propagated primarily through women themselves, an observation with direct support in Pillai's account of emphasised femininity, since the aunt's compliance with and active enforcement of the household's restrictions exemplifies precisely the accommodation to patriarchal expectation Pillai's framework describes (112).

The aunt instructs the protagonist to wash everything she has used during menstruation in running water, to keep her already-laundered clothes separate from the rest of the household's washing, and even to purify these items with holy water as protection against the wrath of Surya, the sun god, a detail that makes explicit the film's engagement with the specifically religious, rather than merely hygienic, register of the restrictions it depicts. This leads directly to the ritual logic of Leslie and Hembroff who describe menstrual pollution as not to threaten merely domestic cleanliness but to maintain the cosmic and religious order, which requires purification rites (Leslie 63-81; Hembroff). The element of untouchability, the prohibition on touching objects, the necessity of physical separation and the need for ritual purification connect the film's domestic sequence directly to the language the Supreme Court itself employed in its 2018 verdict, which explicitly characterised the Sabarimala exclusion as a form of untouchability rather than a merely customary practice (Supreme Court of India).

The film makes this connection between domestic seclusion and the Sabarimala controversy explicit rather than merely implicit. While confined to her room during menstruation, the protagonist is shown engaging with news about the Sabarimala protests on her phone, at one point sharing a Facebook post supporting the campaign for women's entry into the temple, authored by real-life activist Aparna Sivakami, who appears in the film as herself. This link is reinforced by the film's broader treatment of the men's relationship to religious observance. The husband and father-in-law's preparation for the Sabarimala pilgrimage requires them to observe a period of temporary celibacy and ritual purity. The film makes clear that the domestic burden this observance places upon the household, including additional cooking restrictions and heightened attention to ritual cleanliness, falls entirely upon the women, even as the men's own bodies are never subject to comparable scrutiny or restriction. This asymmetry crystallises the

film's central argument: menstrual taboo is not simply a rule governing female bodies in isolation but a mechanism, in Leslie's and Hembroff's terms, for regulating the boundaries of religious community and maintaining social hierarchy more broadly, one in which women are positioned as bearers of tradition and are held responsible for the ritual well-being of family, society, and religion itself, a responsibility from which men's bodies remain conspicuously exempt (Leslie 63-81; Hembroff).

Usha, the household's Dalit maid, is a comparatively minor character in terms of screen time, but her presence performs significant argumentative work. At one point, she remarks that her own menstruation poses no obstacle to her continuing her domestic labour in upper-caste households. She performs her work even during her period, concealing the fact in order to sustain her family's income. Usha's situation is not simply a less privileged version of the protagonist's experience. Instead, it is moulded by economic precarity which makes the very ritual seclusion, the film's protagonist experiences as oppressive and Dalit woman, dependent on daily-wage labour, experiences as unaffordable luxury (Guru). This reveals how menstrual restriction functions differently across caste positions. For the upper-caste woman, seclusion is enforced as a mark of ritual status. However, for the Dalit woman, continued labour even during menstruation, achieved through concealment, is often an economic necessity (Mandal).

The film includes an actual Sabarimala-entry activist, Aparna Sivakami, whose own house was attacked during the 2018-19 protests. She plays herself within the film's fictional narrative, which constitutes one of its boldest formal choices. When the protagonist is confined to her room during menstruation, she shares Sivakami's Facebook post supporting women's temple entry. The members of the Karayogam, the local caste-based community organisation, instruct her to delete the post, since it contradicts the organisation's official position on the Sabarimala dispute.

It is one among the clearest textual signals that the film understands its own project not as a private family narrative but as a direct intervention in the Sabarimala debate. Using the resources of fiction, it argues that the documentary record alone could not deliver as effectively to a mass audience.

The Great Indian Kitchen's treatment of Sabarimala gains further significance when situated against earlier Malayalam cinema's engagement with the same pilgrimage site. Prior films addressing Sabarimala have tended to approach the temple primarily as a setting for devotional narratives or as a backdrop for stories of male pilgrimage and spiritual transformation, rarely, if ever, foregrounding the specific question of women's exclusion for critical scrutiny. The innovative ideas in *The Great Indian Kitchen* lie not merely in its choice of subject matter but in its structural inversion of the genre's usual focus. This film centres on the domestic consequences of the male pilgrims' spiritual journey for the women left to manage the household's ritual and practical demands in their absence, including the aunt's temporary relocation to oversee cooking during the protagonist's menstrual confinement. This shift in narrative centre of gravity, from the pilgrim to the women who sustain the conditions of his pilgrimage, exemplifies the broader critical move Pillai identifies across recent Malayalam cinema attentive to gender, in which films increasingly interrogate the invisible domestic labour underwriting practices and journeys conventionally represented as purely spiritual or individual achievements (112).

The Great Indian Kitchen supports its destigmatising argument through specific formal choices that warrant attention in their own right. Most notably, the film declines to name its principal characters, including its protagonist, referring to them throughout only by their relational roles: wife, husband, father-in-law. This choice functions to generalise the protagonist's experience

without erasing the specificity of caste and class the film otherwise carefully maintains; the audience is invited to understand her situation as broadly representative of women's position within similar upper-caste Nair households across Kerala, even as the film's attention to specific ritual detail, the purification with holy water, the invocation of Surya's wrath, prevents this generalisation from becoming so abstract as to lose its cultural and religious specificity.

The film's second major formal choice is its more or less complete absence of a conventional background musical score. The background score is replaced instead by the amplified, carefully recorded sounds of the kitchen itself, chopping, running water, and the scrape of vessels, working to resist the emotional cueing a background score would provide. The audience realises and feels, in any given moment, through the sheer accumulated weight of repeated, unscored domestic labour. This formal restraint extends to the film's treatment of the menstrual seclusion sequence itself, which it stages without any of the visual or musical spectacle that a more conventional treatment of menstrual blood might employ, choosing instead the same observational, unhurried register that characterises its treatment of cooking and cleaning throughout. The effect is to position menstrual stigma not as an exceptional, dramatic rupture within an otherwise ordinary domestic life. Instead, it should be seen as continuous with the ordinary, unnoticed labour the film has meticulously documented in its first half.

In the film, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the female protagonist experiences some domestic restrictions during her menstrual period. This is actually correlated to situations that existed across many Indian households, especially within upper-caste Hindu communities, where Brahminical patriarchal norms remain most ingrained. These commonly include prohibition of temple entry, exclusion from social gatherings and being in contact with other family members, prohibition from entering the kitchen or other common areas of the home, confinement to a

single room or requirement to sleep on the floor, banishment to separate structures, sometimes referred to as menstrual huts, and specific dietary restrictions understood to be necessary during the menstrual period. *The Great Indian Kitchen* dramatises several of these practices directly, and its broader cultural resonance in India.

It is important to situate the film's intervention within the limits of what legal reform alone can accomplish. The 2018 verdict of the Supreme Court represented a significant symbolic and legal step toward destigmatising menstruation, establishing clearly that the exclusion of menstruating women from public religious space constitutes discrimination rather than legitimate custom (Supreme Court of India). However, the verdict provoked sustained protest in which upper-caste women themselves even participated. By conducting such campaigns, they resist their own newly affirmed right of entry, which demonstrates that legal recognition of a right does not by itself dislodge the deeper ideological structures, housewifisation, hegemonic masculinity, and purity ideology, that the film identifies as sustaining menstrual stigma at the domestic level. (Devika, "Defence of Aachaaram"). The significance of the film, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, lies precisely in its attention to this domestic and non-institutional register of tracing menstrual stigma into the household. This is the site where, as Devika's and Pillai's scholarship together demonstrates, patriarchal ideology is most thoroughly naturalised and therefore most difficult to legislate against directly. The film advocates for a cultural and ideological transformation that surpasses the impact of any single court ruling.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *The Great Indian Kitchen* constitutes a significant popular-cultural intervention into the politics of menstrual destigmatisation in contemporary Kerala. All the arguments put forward in the paper are conceived through Douglas's account of purity and

pollution, Leslie's and Hembroff's scholarship on orthodox Hindu menstrual restriction, Connell's and Pillai's accounts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, Devika's genealogy of Kerala housewifisation, and Dalit feminist critiques of caste-blind gender analysis. Rather than a simple domestic drama, the film presents a well-constructed argument that menstrual stigma cannot be understood or dismantled without considering the broader structures of caste, religion, and gendered labour that support it. The portrayal of Usha complicates any attempt to generalise menstrual experiences, which emphasises how caste influences not only the nature of menstrual restrictions but also who can observe them and who can not. The inclusion of Aparna Sivakami bridges the gap between fiction and fact.

The 2018 Supreme Court verdict and the 2021 release of *The Great Indian Kitchen* together mark a significant moment in India's broader reckoning with menstrual stigma. The ongoing political struggles depicted in the film refuse to treat menstrual stigma as a resolved historical issue but rather as a critical contemporary political question. This is the moment in which legal, religious, and popular-cultural registers have converged on the same fundamental question: whether menstruation constitutes a legitimate basis for the social, religious, and domestic exclusion of women. Situated within a broader transnational movement, the film's approach ultimately aims to destigmatise menstruation. This movement has evolved from the domestic hashtag activism of #HappyToBleed in 2015 to more recent digital campaigns on period poverty, product taxation, and workplace menstrual leave. *The Great Indian Kitchen* maintains a unique focus on the household as the primary site of ideological reproduction. However, the home is less conducive to direct political mobilisation than more overtly political venues, such as temple gates or legislative chambers.

The film underscores the household as a site of political struggle, which performs a crucial role in the destigmatisation process. It highlights that the same patriarchal and casteist dynamics publicly debated at the temple gate continue to flourish in kitchens and bedrooms. Thus, it challenges the household's belief in its apolitical stance. This approach constitutes the most significant and lasting contribution of the film to the ongoing cultural project of menstrual destigmatisation in contemporary India.

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