I remember an argument roughly a year ago, when I was told that since I was uninterested in stepping into the Sabarimala temple myself, fighting for women to be allowed entry into it was meddlesome and hypocritical on my part. I found this argument the most specious of the several on offer — more on those later — and so here is some more meddling from my side.

As I write this, the Sabarimala case is underway again, and one is full of hope that the judiciary will prove progressive. The case has divided the country sharply, but these are vital debates that will decide what sort of country we hoped to build when our Constitution was written and what sort of country we want our children to inherit.

The Sabarimala fight is being seen as interference in Hindu religious rights. But whether this, or the fight for Dalits to be allowed into temples, or when we wanted Sati abolished, the debate has never been about faith, but about how faith shapes the society we live in.

We are fond of saying that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life, which is why its practice cannot be dictated only and narrowly by religious pundits and Tantric priests, however spiritual and eloquent they might be. Where India is concerned, the religious is the social, and the concept of a “private temple” doesn’t apply, as Chief Justice Dipak Misra said in court.

This was also Ambedkar’s argument: that denying untouchables the right to enter religious places was a powerful way of extending the social discriminations against them. Food taboos, separate wells, separate cremation sites, ‘pollution’ rules — these are potent tools of control that Hindu society has long used against some sections of people. And the tools have always been made stronger by being given the sanction of the gods. Challenging these is to challenge society’s power structure. By denying women of a certain age entry into the temple, society reinforces rigid taboos about purity and pollution. By dismantling such rules, you slowly strip society of the power to declare someone ‘impure’ by reason of birth or menstruation.

This fight is as important for its symbolism as for actual access.

There’s also the absurd argument that since women can always go to other temples, they needn’t fight for this one. This reasoning didn’t hold water when white people argued that brown people had their own clubs and train carriages and must stay out of white-only spaces, and it doesn’t work now. It’s hardly an argument to say that Dalits have their own gods, so it’s okay to keep them out of mainstream temples.

Apartheid is apartheid, whether practiced for reasons of race or gender or caste or religion. A Muslim family might choose not to live in a Hindu dominated building, but for the building administration to turn away Muslim tenants is rabid communalism (and very much practised even today).

As in response to the women who have emerged from the woodworks to declare that they are happy to ‘wait till 50’ to visit Sabarimala, I support their right to stay away, but it is and must be a personal choice that women make, not the temple’s prerogative to impose.

About Ayyappa, the god at Sabarimala, being a celibate god: Ayyappa is a Brahmachari or unmarried young man in this temple, but he isn’t a celibate god — there are versions of him with wife Prabha and son Sathyak. I haven’t read of any sthalpuranas that specifically keep women out of this temple, but the pilgrims have always abstained from sex, alcohol and meat for 41 days. So chances are keeping women away is more about preventing these feeble creatures from being distracted by the sight of a female than about distracting Ayyappa. Once again, the same, tired story — women have to cover up, stay away, stay home because men can’t be trusted to have any control over their senses. How pathetic.

As for me, I have no intention of visiting Sabarimala, but I will defend to the death my right to go there.

Where the writer tries to make sense of society with seven hundred words and a bit of snark.