

Grihalakshmi Magazine Case

What is the issue?

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- The bare upper body has always been a sticky topic in Kerala's political context, with multiple movements associated with it.

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- In this context, the cover page of a Malayalam magazine that depicted a woman breastfeeding a baby, has stirred a controversy.

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- The Kerala High Court has now upheld the magazine's right to expression in its verdict on a case filed in this regard.

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What is Kerala's historic context regarding bare-breasts?

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- **Oppression** - Many battles were fought in Malayali society of the early 20th century (and before) over the exposure of the upper body.

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- Caste rules in Kerala had traditionally required that the lower castes (both female and male) must be bare chest in front of ostensible social superiors.

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- Perhaps, such exposure of lower castes was a way of making their vulnerabilities visible to the powerful social classes.

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- **Reform** - While the exposure rule was gender neutral, social reformism in general seemed outraged only by the nakedness of the female form.

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- This bias was because 19th century reformists largely based their worldview in "Victorian morality", that was hawkish to upper caste sexual predators.

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- By around the 1970s, reformists had managed to secure for all women, the right to cover their breasts, while the male bare chest was hardly noticed.

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- Nonetheless, breastfeeding openly continued to persist widely in the keralite society till the turn of the 21st century.

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What has brought the libertarian debate back to centre-stage?

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- The cover-page of a leading Malayalam women's magazine "Grihalakshmi" recently displayed the image of "a woman breastfeeding a baby".

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- This attracted courts cases and stirred a controversy, with some calling it obscenity and others seeing it as an excellent artistic expression.

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- A writ petition was filed in Kerala High Court, claiming that the image in Grihalakshmi was obscene, insulting to women and in violation of child rights.

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- But the judges in their verdict have explicitly stated that these claims were unfounded and cited recent scholarship on free speech to drive their point.

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- Kerala High court has now dismissed the claims of obscenity and given an eloquent judgment, which is likely to have far reaching implications.

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- The court has also advocated a liberal attitude and also cautioned against an anti-pornographic position sliding into rank conservatism.

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- The verdict has hence been hailed as a vindication of the righteousness of the bold depiction of motherhood and the mother-child physical bond.

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What could be read form the image?

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- The magazine carried an expressive image of a young model breast-feeding a baby, and thereby breaking a relatively modern but entrenched social taboo.
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- From the depiction, one can infer that the woman is clearly married, respectable, and elite in appearance (unlike the topless downtrodden).
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- More importantly, the image has been clearly intended as maternal with all its motherly charms, and begs to clearly distinguish itself from sexual gaze.
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- Hence, there has been an attempt portray a familiar stereotypical mother's body that is locally perceived as non-sexual and above physical pleasures.
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- A critical scrutiny of the statement being made on biological motherhood would've been a healthy; but it was lost amidst the conservative opposition.
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- Nonetheless, having beautifully portrayed a professionally-groomed young woman in a home setting, the picture deserves artistic appreciation.
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- From another perspective, it is a case of "a modern woman balancing community sanctioned traditional ways with her professional responsibilities".
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Source: The Hindu

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