





RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘Elections can wait!’ The politics of constructing a ‘Hindu atmosphere’ in Kerala, South India

Dayal Paleri  and R. Santhosh 

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai, India  
Emails: [hs17d005@smail.iitm.ac.in](mailto:hs17d005@smail.iitm.ac.in); [rsanthosh@iitm.ac.in](mailto:rsanthosh@iitm.ac.in)

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## Abstract

The lack of electoral success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the South Indian state of Kerala is often explained through the idea of Kerala ‘exceptionalism’, a broad term used to explain the unique historical, political, and developmental trajectory of the state. However, such explanations do not adequately address the systematic and concerted attempts by Hindu nationalist organizations to transform the cultural sphere of Kerala into a fertile ground for its future electoral politics. Through an ethnographic study of three Hindu nationalist organizations in the civil society sphere of Kodungallur, a multi-religious town in central Kerala, this article explores the politics and implications of their cultural interventions. The article argues that, peeved by an ‘absent Hindu atmosphere’ in Kerala, these organizations are trying to construct new forms of sociality and subjectivity and a grassroots public sphere embedded in Hindu nationalist ideology in Kodungallur. Often described by these organizations as ‘apolitical’ and ‘cultural’, these interventions are indeed a critique of the Kerala public sphere which is characterized by religious pluralism and secular sociality. Hence, the attempt to create a ‘Hindu atmosphere’ by these organizations is a deeply political endeavour aimed at creating an exclusivist Hindu hegemony in the cultural sphere, which they assume will pave the way for their electoral hegemony in Kerala in the long run.

**Keywords:** Hindu nationalism; Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); Kerala; secularism; sociality; religious pluralism

## Introduction

The rise of the Hindu nationalist movement led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (henceforth the Sangh/RSS) in India since the late 1980s has attracted widespread scholarly attention. Most of the studies have focused on the nature of mass mobilization, which has been quite virulent and often accompanied by large-scale violence that culminated in the Babri Masjid demolition of 1992 and the Gujarat riots of 2002. These studies focused on the production of riots, marginalization, and ghettoization of minorities, and the militarization of Hindu social groups from several disciplinary

perspectives in different empirical contexts.<sup>1</sup> The 2014 national elections that led to the ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (henceforth BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Modi as a hegemonic electoral power inaugurated another wave of writings focused on Hindu nationalist engagement with state power, forms of governance, and practices of constitutional democracy.<sup>2</sup>

This transformation of Hindutva from a mass mobilization movement to an electoral force, well entrenched within the socio-political spheres of society and the state machinery, has rekindled scholarly attention towards ‘the world of the everyday and the ordinary, from the homes, workplaces, schools and communities, where the realities of Hindu nationalism are created and maintained’.<sup>3</sup> The everyday turn in Hindutva has encouraged ethnographic studies that provide an incisive analysis of the vernacularization of Hindutva, elaborating the ways in which Hindu nationalism has entrenched itself in the consciousness of ordinary people and become embedded in the logic of their social and cultural practices.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the inculcation of Hindu nationalist sensibilities in children, using various pedagogical and institutional methods,<sup>5</sup> and the instrumental use of social service provisions among lower caste and disaster-affected communities have also been critically examined.<sup>6</sup> Hindu nationalists’ engagement with diverse sacred figures, symbols, myths, and practices for the

<sup>1</sup>Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Angana P. Chatterji, *Violent gods. Hindu nationalism in India's present: Narratives from Orissa* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2009); Ornit Shani, *Communalism, caste, and Hindu nationalism: The violence in Gujarat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Howard Spodek, ‘In the Hindutva laboratory: Pogroms and politics in Gujarat, 2002’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2010, pp. 349–399.

<sup>2</sup>Christophe Jaffrelot, ‘India’s democracy at 70: Toward a Hindu state?’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2017, pp. 52–63; Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Thomas Blom Hansen, ‘Democracy against the law: Reflections on India’s illiberal democracy’, in *Majoritarian state: How Hindu nationalism is changing India*, (eds) A. P. Chatterji, T. B. Hansen and C. Jaffrelot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 19–40; Hilal Ahmed, ‘New India, Hindutva constitutionalism, and Muslim political attitudes’, *Studies in Indian Politics*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2022, pp. 62–78; Ajay Gudavarthy, *India after Modi: Populism and the right* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

<sup>3</sup>Shubh Mathur, *The everyday life of Hindu nationalism: An ethnographic account, 1990–1994* (Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, 2008), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>L. Michelutti, ‘The symbolism of Ram and Krishna in Uttar Pradesh politics: Understanding the “normalisation” of Hindutva in North India’, in *Cultural entrenchment of Hindutva: Local mediations and forms of convergence*, (eds) D. Berti, N. Jaoul and P. Kanungo (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 241–272; Thomas Blom Hansen, ‘The vernacularisation of Hindutva: The BJP and Shiv Sena in rural Maharashtra’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1996, pp. 177–214; Deepa S. Reddy, ‘Hindutva as praxis’, *Religion Compass*, vol. 5, no. 8, 2011, pp. 412–426.

<sup>5</sup>Peggy Froerer, ‘Disciplining the Saffron way: Moral education and the Hindu Rashtra’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 5, 2007, pp. 1033–1071; Tanika Sarkar, ‘Educating the children of the Hindu Rashtra: Notes on RSS schools’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1994, pp. 10–15; Nandini Sundar, ‘Teaching to hate: RSS’ pedagogical programme’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39, no. 16, 2004, pp. 1605–1612.

<sup>6</sup>E. Simpson, ‘“Hindutva” as a rural planning paradigm in post-earthquake Gujarat’, in *The politics of cultural mobilization in India*, (eds) J. Zavos, A. Wyatt and V. Hewitt (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 136–165; Ketan Alder, ‘Authority, ethics and service (seva) amongst Hindu nationalists in India’s assertive margins’, *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2018, pp. 421–438; Malini Bhattacharjee, ‘Seva, Hindutva, and the politics of post-earthquake relief and reconstruction in rural Kutch’, *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 75, no. 1, 2016, pp. 75–104.

mobilization of different sects and communities has also been subjected to empirical analysis.<sup>7</sup> Scholarly attention has been paid to various strategies adopted by Hindu nationalists to solicit support from communities from diverse social backgrounds to emerge as a hegemonic social and political power. While this range of studies on ‘everyday Hindutva’ has explored various conceptual sites, its empirical contexts were predominantly the arenas where Hindu nationalism has made substantial political and electoral progress. Consequently, the everyday life of Hindutva in states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where Hindu nationalists have failed to make political inroads and win elections, is largely overlooked. Kerala, with a decisive presence of non-Hindus<sup>8</sup> and continuing powerful electoral support for the communists, is widely seen as hostile and nonreceptive to Hindu nationalist ideals and politics. While recent scholarship has emphasized the need to understand how contemporary Hindu nationalism spreads into new spaces,<sup>9</sup> the concerted effort of Hindu nationalism to permeate the everyday life of Kerala remains underexplored, with exceptions such as Guillebaud,<sup>10</sup> Roopesh,<sup>11</sup> and Chaturvedi<sup>12</sup> who studied the engagement of the RSS in Kerala within the realm of art, temple culture, and political violence, respectively. Existing academic studies on the Sangh have either been excessively sympathetic<sup>13</sup> or confined their focus to its political arm, the BJP.<sup>14</sup> Yasser Arafath, in his rather synoptic discussion of Hindu nationalism in Kerala, has correctly highlighted the scholarly failure to ‘unearth the intricate web of relations that underlie its [the Sangh’s] political growth’ in Kerala, as ethnographic research on Hindu nationalism in the region remains scarce.<sup>15</sup>

Most recently, Felix Pal argued for a shift in the methodological approach to researching the Hindu nationalist movement from an analytical focus on isolated nodes targeting individual organizations to unravelling interorganizational network

<sup>7</sup>Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron politics and Dalit mobilisation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009); Deepa S. Reddy and John Zavos, ‘Temple publics: Religious institutions and the construction of contemporary Hindu communities’, *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2009, pp. 241–260; Anja Kovacs, ‘You don’t understand, we are at war! Refashioning Durga in the service of Hindu nationalism’, *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2004, pp. 373–388.

<sup>8</sup>According to the 2011 Census, the Muslims and Christians of Kerala constitute 26.56 per cent and 18.38 per cent of the population respectively, making it one of the most religiously diverse states in India.

<sup>9</sup>Edward Anderson and Arkotong Longkumer, ‘“Neo-Hindutva”: Evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism’, *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2018, pp. 371–377.

<sup>10</sup>C. Guillebaud, ‘Music and politics in Kerala: Hindu nationalists versus Marxists’, in *Cultural entrenchment of Hindutva: Local mediations and forms of convergence*, (eds) D. Berti, D. N. Jaoul and P. Kanungo (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 241–272.

<sup>11</sup>O. B. Roopesh, ‘Educating “temple cultures”: Heterogeneous worship and Hindutva politics in Kerala’, *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2021, pp. 485–501.

<sup>12</sup>Ruchi Chaturvedi, ‘Somehow it happened: Violence, culpability, and the Hindu nationalist community’, *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2011, pp. 340–362.

<sup>13</sup>K. Jayaprasad, *RSS and Hindu nationalism: Inroads in a leftist stronghold* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1991).

<sup>14</sup>James Chiriyankandath, ‘Hindu nationalism and regional political culture in India: A study of Kerala’, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1996, pp. 44–66; J. Chiriyankandath, ‘“Yes, but not in the South”: The BJP, Congress, and regional parties in South India’, in *Rise of saffron power*, (ed.) Mujibur Rehman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 44–61; Michael Gillan, ‘Assessing the “national” expansion of Hindu nationalism: The BJP in southern and eastern India, 1996–2001’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2002, pp. 17–39.

<sup>15</sup>P. K. Yasser Arafath, ‘Southern Hindutva’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2021, p. 51.

and linkages.<sup>16</sup> Pal correctly identifies that most of the ethnographic studies on Hindu nationalist activities focus on individual organizations, and the general scholarly consensus on the extensive organizational network of the Sangh has not been translated into rigorous empirical analysis. Such a network-centric approach to understanding Hindu nationalist politics enables us to make sense of the connections between seemingly different and independent organizations and analyse how their latent interconnections contribute to the ideological and organizational strengthening of Hindu nationalism on the ground.

Within this context, this article attempts to understand the nature of Hindu nationalist politics in contemporary Kerala through an ethnographic study of the everyday activities of the Hindu nationalist organizational network in Kodungallur, a multi-religious town in central Kerala. How are Hindu nationalists seeking to overcome and redefine the recalcitrant political and social terrain in Kodungallur, a region that symbolizes Kerala's religious and political pluralism? How do their activities and activism in the cultural realm envision transformations in the political fortune of Hindutva in the region in the future? This article is an attempt to engage with these questions by examining how the Hindu nationalist network constructs Hindu nationalist socialities and sensibilities using a network of civil society organizations such as the Deseeya Seva Bharathi (National Service Organization, henceforth DSB), Kerala Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi (Temple Protection Council of Kerala, henceforth KKSS), and Vivekananda Vedic Vision Kendra (Vivekananda Centre for Vedic Vision, henceforth VK). The article argues that these organizations lament the 'absent Hindu atmosphere'<sup>17</sup> in Kodungallur and firmly believe that they have a fundamental obligation to create it. This stance goes against the grain of the Kerala public sphere characterized by visible multi-religious markers and a secular sociality, which is also inclusive of multi-religious identities and religiosities. The attempt to create a 'Hindu atmosphere' by these organizations ultimately aims at building a hegemonic and exclusivist Hindutva sociality, public sphere, and subjectivities devoid of the impurities of other religions and irreligiosities of the secular ethos of Kerala society. The Hindutva organizations assume that their paramount mission is to bring about a foundational cultural transformation of society centred on a 'Hindu atmosphere', which they believe will naturally lead to the political and electoral preferences of people becoming solely confined to Hindutva politics.

As the study focuses on exploring the more subterranean organizational activities of the Sangh, the research adopted an in-depth ethnographic method through long-term interaction with Hindu nationalist activists and participation in their everyday activities. The primary data for the study was collected from Kodungallur municipality, located in the Thrissur district of Kerala, between January 2021 and February 2022. We conducted more than 30 structured interviews and several unstructured and informal interviews with Hindu nationalist activists belonging to the rank and file of the Sangh. Furthermore, we have chosen to focus on four Hindu nationalist leaders, primarily belonging to the 'non-electoral' affiliates of the Sangh, such as the DSB, VK, and

<sup>16</sup>Felix Pal, 'The shape of the Sangh: Rethinking Hindu nationalist organisational ties', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2022, pp. 1–11.

<sup>17</sup>The Malayalam phrase used by Sangh activists for 'Hindu atmosphere' is 'Hindu *anthareeksham*'. We elaborate on this idea below.

KKSS, as their narratives and engagements illustrate the Hindu nationalists' attempts to find a space in the contentious political landscape of Kodungallur and, as an extension, Kerala. Interviews with leaders and members of other major political parties in the region, such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (henceforth CPI(M)), Communist Party of India (henceforth CPI), Indian National Congress (henceforth INC), and BJP, along with members of caste and religious organizations, journalists, and academics, also inform the insights and materials presented in the article. We have also used the publications of Hindu nationalist organizations and corroborated them with interviews and historical materials. The interviews were recorded whenever permitted by the participants and otherwise concurrently written down, again with consent. All interviews were conducted in Malayalam and subsequently transcribed and translated into English by the authors. We have also anonymized the respondents' names, but certain biographical details are included, with consent.

The remainder of the article is divided into seven sections. The following section situates the trajectory of Hindu nationalist politics within the regional context of Kerala. It evaluates the academic conceptions of Kerala exceptionalism that overlooked the everyday life of Hindu nationalism in the region. The second section traces the evolution of Hindu nationalist politics in Kodungallur in relation to the development of communist and communitarian mobilizations that shaped the political landscape of modern Kodungallur. The following three sections present ethnographic accounts of the shifting modes of Hindu nationalist politics by zooming in on three specific organizations—the DSB, KKSS, and VK—and foregrounding the everyday nature of Hindutva politics in Kodungallur. We specifically explore how everyday Hindutva is involved in the process of reshaping the sociality, subjectivity, and community of 'Hindus'. In the sixth section, we present an analysis of this everyday Hindutva and interrogate the perception of the 'absent Hindu atmosphere' in Kerala, which is critical in making sense of the nature of Hindutva in the context of severe political and religious contestation. We conclude the article with a brief discussion of the future of Hindutva politics and its possible implications for the notion of Kerala exceptionalism.

### Hindu nationalism and Kerala exceptionalism

Kerala is widely considered a political exception in contemporary Indian politics, primarily due to the continuing electoral marginalization of the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, in the state. Though the BJP has overcome its 'southern discomfort'<sup>18</sup> and made considerable electoral advances in the neighbouring states, Kerala remains the only South Indian state that has never elected a BJP member of parliament and has had only one Legislative Assembly member elected in the history of the state.<sup>19</sup> So far, the BJP remains outside the bipolar electoral competition in the state between the

<sup>18</sup>J. Manor, 'Southern discomfort: The BJP in Karnataka', in *The BJP and the compulsions of politics in India*, (eds) T. B. Hansen. and C. Jaffrelot (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 163–201.

<sup>19</sup>Among the southern states, the BJP is strongest in Karnataka where it formed a government in 2008–2013 and 2019–2021 and won 25 parliamentary seats in the 2019 elections. While the BJP remains a marginal party in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, it has formed alliances with ruling fronts there as well as won parliamentary seats in the recent past. In Telangana, the BJP won 4 parliamentary seats in 2019 and 48 seats in the Hyderabad corporation election held in 2020.

Left Democratic Front and the United Democratic Front led by the CPI(M) and INC, respectively.

However, attempts to build a unified Hindu political community in Kerala have a long history, dating back to the early 1940s. First, in the 1950s, the RSS actively supported the political alliance between two major caste associations—the Nair Service Society (NSS) representing the Nairs and Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) representing the Ezhavas—which led to the formation of the Hindu Maha Mandalam (HMM) in 1952. Although internal conflict led to the dissolution of the HMM, nevertheless it had inaugurated the attempt to build a unified political community of Hindus in Kerala. Second was the emergence of the Vishal Hindu Sammelan (VHS) in Ernakulam in the early 1980s. The VHS formed an electoral front called Hindu Munnani to construct a ‘Hindu vote bank’ and released a charter of demands made up of long-standing Hindu nationalist agendas such as the prohibition of cow slaughter, removal of minority rights, demand for the abolition of government control in temple management, and legislative steps to prohibit religious conversion.<sup>20</sup> The Hindu Munnani contested elections in alliance with the BJP and polled around 7 per cent of the total votes. However, the Hindu Munnani, too, could not sustain any momentum due to its lack of a coherent organizational structure.<sup>21</sup> The third major attempt was in 2016 when the BJP joined forces with a newly formed political outfit of the SNDP, namely the Bharath Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS) and a tribal front called the Janadhipathya Rashtriya Sabha (JRS), winning its first legislative seat in Kerala. The BJP alliance won 14.96 per cent of the total votes, an almost 9 per cent increase from the previous election, a clear indication of its expanding support base. Though the alliance has continued, the BJP experienced a decline in its vote share to 12.36 per cent, losing its only incumbent seat in the subsequent election held in 2021.

The electoral marginalization of the BJP has occurred despite its numerous attempts at forming alliances and active participation and mobilization in various agitations during different periods in post-colonial Kerala. Hindu nationalists actively participated in the infamous liberation struggle of 1958.<sup>22</sup> Later, in the 1960s, they led the Thali temple agitation that earned them a favourable court verdict to build a temple at a contested site in northern Kerala.<sup>23</sup> They simultaneously led a state-wide campaign against the formation of Malappuram, a Muslim-majority district in

<sup>20</sup>Jayaprasad, *RSS and Hindu nationalism*.

<sup>21</sup>Chiriyankandath, ‘Hindu nationalism’.

<sup>22</sup>The liberation struggle was an organized anti-communist movement against the first elected government in Kerala, primarily against the agrarian and educational reform brought in by the government. See T. J. Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A study in political adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 149–157, for a detailed discussion.

<sup>23</sup>In 1968, the remains of a temple were found on government-owned land at Angadipuram, which a few local Hindus attempted to renovate with the support of the Malabar Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi, the predecessor organization to KKSS. This move was opposed by the state government as well as the local Muslims, as the proposed site of the new temple was near a Muslim religious site. Later the lower court approved the construction of the new temple, which is now known as Thali Sree Mahadeva Temple. See O. B. Roopesh, ‘Temple as a site of modern contestations: Kshetra punarudharanam in postcolonial Kerala’, *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2020, pp. 300–316, for a detailed discussion on Thali agitation.

North Kerala in 1969.<sup>24</sup> Several agitations around the Sabarimala temple, including the Nilakkal agitation of 1982 and the Sabarimala agitation of 2019,<sup>25</sup> were led primarily by the Hindu nationalists. Simultaneously, the RSS engaged in instances of violent mobilization. It was allegedly involved in the 1982 Trivandrum and Marad riots of 2002 and 2003 in Malabar's coastal region.<sup>26</sup> Most notably, Hindu nationalists were also involved in a loop of infamous targeted political violence, primarily with the CPI(M) in North Kerala and, most recently, with the Muslim outfit, the Popular Front of India (PFI).<sup>27</sup>

Why does Hindu nationalism remain a marginal electoral issue, despite a long history of concerted efforts to build a Hindu nationalist political community through electoral coalitions, agitative politics, and the use of communal and political violence? Does the political marginality of the BJP here suggest that Kerala is an exception to the dominant trend of embracing Hindu nationalism among Indian states? The bulk of the academic scholarship on Kerala affirms this perception and places it within a broader idea of Kerala exceptionalism, especially in terms of its political, developmental, and historical trajectories. Such scholarship is primarily focused on the presence

<sup>24</sup>The demand for Malappuram as a separate revenue district to address economic backwardness was raised by the Muslim League in the early 1960s and was implemented in 1969 by a second communist-led government. Jana Sangh, the predecessor of the BJP, engaged in a nationwide campaign against the move. See Mohamed Shafeeq K., 'Reading the Malappuram debate: Postcolonial state and the ethics of place', *Subversions*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, pp. 88–104, for a discussion on the debate about the formation of Malappuram district.

<sup>25</sup>Sabarimala shrine in southern Kerala is one of India's most important pilgrimage centres. In 1983, the RSS organized a nationwide agitation against the Congress-led government's decision to permit the construction of a Christian church in Nilakkal, which is situated at the foothills of Sabarimala. A Supreme Court judgment in September 2018 granting women of all ages entry to the Sabarimala shrine provoked intense protest, led by the Sangh, in defence of the 'tradition' that barred the entry of women of menstruating age into the shrine. See J. Devika, 'The defence of aacharam, femininity, and Neo-Savarna power in Kerala', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2020, pp. 445–470, and O. B. Roopesh, 'Sabarimala protest', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 53, no. 49, 2018, pp. 12–15, for a more detailed analysis of the Sabarimala agitation.

<sup>26</sup>RSS involvement in the Trivandrum riots of 1982, which occurred against the backdrop of a communal clash in Alleppey, is documented in a report published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. See O. J. 'KERALA: Political backdrop to Trivandrum riots', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 18, no. 7, 1983, pp. 209–211. The two communal riots in Marad, a coastal village in Calicut, between a group of Hindus and Muslims, killed 14 people. For a brief discussion on RSS's involvement in the Marad riots, see Arafath, 'Southern Hindutva', p. 54.

<sup>27</sup>According to Kerala police records, around 85 CPI(M) and 65 RSS activists were killed in the loop of political violence between 2000 and 2017, in which more than 30 per cent of incidents took place in the northern district of Kannur. See TNM Staff, 'How many political murders have taken place in Kerala in the last 17 years? What the numbers say', *The News Minute*, published online on 6 August 2017, available at <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/how-many-political-murders-have-taken-place-kerala-last-17-years-what-numbers-say-66354>, [accessed 30 May 2023]. The cycle of violence unleashed between the RSS and PFI in 2022 claimed the lives of three RSS and two PFI activists in a span of six months. See TNM Staff, 'Kerala on edge as PFI-RSS violence claims five lives in six months', *The News Minute*, published online on 16 April 2022, available at <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/kerala-edge-pfi-rss-violence-claims-five-lives-six-months-162955>, [accessed on 30 May 2023]. For a detailed ground report on political violence in Kerala, also see Nidheesh J. Villat, 'The Saffron siege. Inside the killing fields of Kerala', *The Caravan*, published online on 1 April 2019, available at <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/inside-killing-fields-kerala>, [accessed 30 May 2023].



of 'democratic communism' since the state voted a communist party to power in its first election held in 1957. Much of the initial scholarship credited the strong presence of communists with institutionalizing an egalitarian policy regime<sup>28</sup> along with peaceful communitarian forms of mobilization. Chiriyankandath locates the failure of Hindu national political community within this exceptional political culture of Kerala, which is characterized by an amalgamation of class and community mobilization.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Mannathukkaren argued that liberal communalism, characterized by non-antagonistic forms of competing mobilization of religious communities, forms an integral part of Kerala exceptionalism.<sup>30</sup> The idea of the 'Kerala model of development', referring to its unique development trajectory characterized by high human development indices despite lower economic growth, forms another significant aspect of Kerala exceptionalism.<sup>31</sup> Scholars have also linked the state's development achievements to its peaceful nature<sup>32</sup> of religious pluralism.<sup>33</sup> Historians of the region have emphasized the unique nature of socio-economic developments which have enabled peaceful forms of inter-religious relations. Roland Miller argues that Kerala is home to a unique 'triological experience' of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians living in close proximity for over 13 centuries, yielding important insights about managing religious conflicts in a pluralistic context.<sup>34</sup> Stephen Dale, in his study of Hindu-Muslim relations in sixteenth-century Kerala, reiterates the economic basis of religious harmony,<sup>35</sup> which was characterized as a form of 'cultural symbiosis' by Narayanan.<sup>36</sup> Scholarly attention on the presence of strong associational and everyday forms of inter-religious civic engagement<sup>37</sup> and emphasis on shared and syncretic religious practices have also reproduced the notion of Kerala exceptionalism in religious pluralism.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Manali Desai, 'Indirect British rule, state formation, and welfarism in Kerala, India, 1860–1957', *Social Science History*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2005, pp. 457–488.

<sup>29</sup>Chiriyankandath, 'Hindu nationalism'.

<sup>30</sup>Nissim Mannathukkaren, 'Communalism sans violence: A Kerala exceptionalism?', *Sikh Formations*, vol. 12, no. 2–3, 2016, pp. 223–242.

<sup>31</sup>John Kurien, 'The Kerala model: Its central tendency and the outlier', *Social Scientist*, vol. 23, no. 1/3, 1995, pp. 70–90; Govindan Parayil, 'The "Kerala model" of development: Development and sustainability in the Third World', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 5, 1996, pp. 941–958.

<sup>32</sup>Kerala remains relatively immune to communal violence, with notable exceptions such as the Marad riots of 2002 and 2003 and the long cycle of violence between Muslim and Christian fishermen in coastal Trivandrum. See Salah Punathil, *Interrogating communalism: Violence, citizenship and minorities in South India* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 15–20, for a critical discussion on communalism in the Kerala context.

<sup>33</sup>Rex Casinader, 'Making Kerala model more intelligible: Comparisons with Sri Lankan experience', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 48, 1995, pp. 3085–3092.

<sup>34</sup>Roland E. Miller, 'Triologue: The context of Hindu-Christian dialogue in Kerala', in *Hindu-Christian dialogue: Perspectives and encounters*, (ed.) H. Coward (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publications, 1993), p. 47.

<sup>35</sup>Stephen F. Dale, 'Communal relations in pre-modern India: 16th century Kerala', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1973, pp. 319–327.

<sup>36</sup>M. G. S. Narayanan, *Cultural symbiosis in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972).

<sup>37</sup>Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic conflict and civic life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>38</sup>Yoginder Sikand, *Sacred spaces: Exploring traditions of shared faith in India* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2013); Corinne G. Dempsey, *Kerala Christian sainthood: Collisions of culture and worldview in South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).



However, these accounts overlook the presence of Hindu nationalist politics beyond the visible sites of elections, agitations, and violence. Recent studies have called for 'further research' to understand the tremendous growth of Hindu nationalist politics in the site of everyday life.<sup>39</sup> We believe that the grassroots activities of Hindu nationalist organizations in the private and civil society spheres of Kerala society assume significance as these attempts are aimed at much deeper cultural transformations that could facilitate stable political fortunes for Hindu nationalism. Through an ethnographic study of Hindu nationalist activities in the town of Kodungallur in central Kerala, this article seeks to address the gap by exploring the nature of Hindu nationalist politics in the broader context of its continuing electoral marginality.

### Evolution of Hindu nationalist politics in Kodungallur

'Because there is no Hindu atmosphere here': Rajendran was quick and unequivocal in responding to the first author's long question about the failure of Hindu nationalist politics in Kerala. The first author met Rajendran at the RSS taluk (local administrative unit in the RSS organizational structure) office in Kodungallur. He is a retired teacher, a full-time activist, and a state committee member of the RSS. He is also the state chief of Gramavikas, a new organization focusing on developing ideal 'Hindu' villages across the state. The term 'Hindu atmosphere', which is referred to multiple times in conversations with various Sangh activists, was intriguing. Rajendran explained that people in Kerala do not have a sense of Indian culture: 'The politics, religion, and culture of Kerala are more influenced by ideologies from Russia, Gulf or the West, than of India.' For Rajendran, unlike Kerala, North India always had a 'Hindu atmosphere' even before the Sangh was born, as reflected in the collective respect for cows, for instance. 'In Kerala, we had to start from scratch, and there is no point in winning elections without having a Hindu atmosphere first,' he said. Rajendran described an occasion when BJP leaders came to meet him prior to the 2020 local elections. They wanted to field Mukundan, a widely popular KKSS activist who was instrumental in renovating the Thiruvallur temple, as a BJP candidate in the ward.

I told them that elections can wait. I know that Mukundan has a lot of acceptance, and he will surely win. But what will happen if Sangh *karyakartas* (volunteers) work only for election results? What *karyakartas* like Mukundan do in Thiruvallur is more important than the election. (Interview, September 2021)

Rajendran's emphasis on everyday forms of mobilization over electoral politics is a vital feature of Hindu nationalist politics in contemporary Kodungallur. This is not because of the Hindu nationalists' aversion to political power but due to their conviction that the 'absent Hindu atmosphere' in Kerala is the main hindrance to the formation of a sustainable Hindu political community. This view was shared by almost every Hindutva activist we came across in Kodungallur and they attributed the central motif of their varied activities and civil society activism to this goal. Rajendran's diagnosis of the failure of Hindu nationalist politics is directed at Kerala's much-discussed

<sup>39</sup>Arafath, 'Southern Hindutva', p. 58.

cosmopolitanism, which he perceives as the lack of a 'Hindu atmosphere'. Kodungallur, the ethnographic site of this article, in a sense, represents this cosmopolitan spirit due to its historical place in the production of Kerala's cosmopolitanism.

Historically, Kodungallur is known as the 'cradle of religious diversity' in India, as most religious communities trace the origins of their remembered past to Kodungallur.<sup>40</sup> Muslims believe that the Cheraman Juma Masjid in Kodungallur is the first mosque in India, built in the time of the Prophet Muhammad himself. The Christians believe that Kodungallur is where St Thomas, one of the Apostles, landed in 52 AD and began spreading the message of Christianity. The Jews believe that Kodungallur is the site of Shingly, a prominent Jewish settlement that flourished until the Portuguese invasion in the sixteenth century. Alongside these popular beliefs, historical research also has brought out the possibilities of the prominence of Buddhism and Jainism in Kodungallur.<sup>41</sup> The two ancient temples in Kodungallur—Thiruvanchikulam Shiva and Thrikkulasekharapuram—were prominently associated with Tamil Shaivite and Vaishnavite Bhakti traditions, respectively. Most significantly, Kodungallur is also home to the Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy temple, known for the famous annual Bharani festival,<sup>42</sup> which attracts devotees from across Kerala. The centrality of Kodungallur as the sacred capital of Kerala emerged as a consequence of its political and economic importance in early medieval Kerala.<sup>43</sup> Kodungallur is identified as Mahodayapuram, the capital of the Chera dynasty, and Muziris, the port that formed a significant part of the Indo-Mediterranean Ocean trade network.<sup>44</sup> While recent historical research and archaeological findings severely contest the identification of Kodungallur as Muziris or as the single origin of religious communities,<sup>45</sup> it continues to hold an important place in the sacred landscape of Kerala and remains a sacred centre for believers of all religious persuasions. Moreover, recent touristic and artistic initiatives led by the Kerala government, such as the Muziris Heritage Project and Kochi-Muziris Biennale, reproduce the quasi-historical notion of Kodungallur as the predecessor of Kerala's religious and cultural cosmopolitanism and a metaphor for an ideal syncretic past and peaceful coexistence.

<sup>40</sup>Ashis Nandy, 'Time travel to a possible self: Searching for the alternative cosmopolitanism of Cochin', *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2000, pp. 295–327; C. Adarsh, *Vibhavanakal Vinimayangal: Kodungalloorinte Vyavaharika Bhoomisasthram* (Sukhapuram: Vallathol Vidyapeetham, 2013).

<sup>41</sup>M. G. S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala: Brahmin oligarchy and ritual monarchy. Political and social conditions of Kerala under the Cera Perumals of Makotai (c. AD 800–1124)* (Thrissur: Cosmo Books, 2013).

<sup>42</sup>The Bharani festival, popularly known as Kodungallur Bharani, is an annual festival that takes place at the Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy temple. It has been widely discussed for the practice of singing Bharanipattu, a set of songs that contains explicit sexual and lewd references which are sung to propitiate the goddesses of Kodungallur. See Adarsh, *Vibhavanakal Vinimayangal*, pp.150–187; V. T. Induchoodan. *The secret chamber* (Trichur: The Cochin Devaswom Board, 1969); Sarah Caldwell, *Oh terrifying mother: Sexuality, violence and worship of the Goddess Kali* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); M. J. Gentes, 'Scandalizing the goddess at Kodungallur', *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1992, pp. 295–322, for a detailed analysis of the event.

<sup>43</sup>Kesavan Veluthat, *The early medieval South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>44</sup>Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*.

<sup>45</sup>Rachel A. Varghese, 'What constitutes Muziris? Past and the production of heritage destinations in the South Indian state of Kerala', *Journal of Tourism History*, vol. 9, no. 2–3, 2017, pp. 178–192; Ophira Gamliel, 'Back from Shingly: Revisiting the premodern history of Jews in Kerala', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2018, pp. 53–76.

However, present-day Kodungallur is an ordinary municipal town located in Thrissur district, bordering with the neighbouring Ernakulam. The political significance of Kodungallur diminished in the twelfth century after the disintegration of the Chera kingdom, while its economic fortunes declined in the fourteenth century due to a devastating flood that also created Kochi port which subsequently developed into a major port and the centre of trade in the region.<sup>46</sup>

By the early twentieth century, Kodungallur had moved far from the imaginings of the glorious past and was mired in feudal structures of caste and class exploitation with strict social and ritual norms of purity and pollution dividing Hindu society. Similar to other parts of Kerala, the norms of pollution and purity in Kodungallur went beyond Untouchability to include 'atmospheric pollution—pollution from a distance, and, in the case of the lowest castes, even by sight'.<sup>47</sup> These stringent and exclusionary caste norms were most severely manifested in spaces such as the Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy temple, which is situated in the heart of Kodungallur. The town's residential pattern was determined by caste structure, with upper-caste Hindu communities residing in areas surrounding the temple and neighbouring Sringapuram, which were in the vicinity of the former seat of the Chera kingdom. While the temple welcomed hordes of lower-caste people during the three-day annual Bharani festival, which William Logan described as the 'most popular feast next to Onam in Malabar',<sup>48</sup> it remained an exclusive site of worship for caste Hindus throughout the rest of the year. E Gopalakrishnan, who later became the member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for Kodungallur, recollected the strict norms of 'atmospheric pollution' around the Kodungallur temple:

Kodungallur Bhagavathy temple is less than one kilometre from my house. The roads leading to the temple were narrow. The temple's surroundings were inhabited by caste Hindus, especially Nairs and Konkani Brahmins. The older members of the caste Hindu families, while on their way to visit the temple, used to shout 'Ho-Ho'. The shout was a warning to lower-caste people to hide from their view so that they won't pollute even by 'sight'. While hearing the 'Ho-Ho' shout, the lower caste and Harijans used to move away from the vicinity themselves. This practice was widely accepted, and most people saw nothing unnatural in it.<sup>49</sup>

The practices of caste exclusion around the Kodungallur temple were frequently reported in newspapers, such as *Mithavadi*, which were published in Malabar in the early twentieth century. For instance, *Mithavadi* published a long story in February 1917 that reported an incident of an Ezhava youth being badly beaten up by a few Nairs for using the public road on the eastern side of the temple.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, another

<sup>46</sup>Rajan Gurukkal and Dick Whittaker, 'In search of Muziris', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, vol. 14, 2001, pp. 334–350; Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and faith on the medieval Malabar coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>47</sup>Prema Kurien, 'Colonialism and ethnogenesis: A study of Kerala, India', *Theory and Society*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1994, p. 392.

<sup>48</sup>William Logan, *Malabar manual* (Asian Educational Services, 1887, reprint 1989).

<sup>49</sup>E. Gopalakrishnan, 'Jaathipishachinte attahasam', in *Kodungallur Directory*, (ed.) Kadiayalm Aboackar (P. Vamballur: Vartha Publications, 1996), p. 205.

<sup>50</sup>Adarsh, *Vibhavanakal Vinimayangal*.

report in January 1916 said that Ezhava girls were denied entry to the school because of its proximity to the temple. It is also widely believed that Swami Vivekananda, the famous Hindu monk, was denied entry to Kodungallur temple in 1892, as his caste was not apparent to the temple authorities, forcing him to characterize Kerala as a 'lunatic asylum of casteism'.<sup>51</sup> Further, caste norms also governed the economic opportunities and occupations of different communities. The Ezhavas, one of the largest Backward Caste communities in the region, traditionally engaged in toddy tapping and coir weaving, also constituted the majority of agricultural labourers working on the land owned by upper-caste Hindus. The coastal side of Kodungallur is composed of two villages—Eriyad and Edavilang—where the agricultural land belonged to two prominent Muslim landlords, namely, the Manappattu and Karikulath families. The majority of agricultural labourers in this part of the region were Ezhavas, Muslims, and Pulayas, with a section of Muslims and Dheeveras also involved in fishing.

The response to these oppressive caste norms emerged primarily from the social reform movement that took an organizational form in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The host of organizations formed in Kodungallur include the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, Njanarthidayini Sabha, Sree Dharma Prakashini Sabha, and Sri Vidya Prakashini Sabha among the Ezhavas; the Kalyanadhayini Sabha among the Dheeveras; the Samastha Kochi Pulaya Mahasabha among the Pulayas; and the Viswakarma Union among the Viswakarma.<sup>52</sup> These organizations widely advocated the language of social reform and mobility, primarily through modern education and new economic institutions. They attempted to annihilate 'superstitious' and 'irrational' religious and social practices in their respective communities.<sup>53</sup> The wave of social reform among the lower castes and the drive towards modernity has also inspired similar efforts among Muslims in Kodungallur, with the formation of the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham in 1922 in Kodungallur.<sup>54</sup> The social reform movement and subsequent political change in the region has led to a decline in traditional caste-based economic relations and fuelled migration and mobility among these communities. In keeping with the migration patterns observed throughout Kerala, since the late 1970s, a large number of Muslim and Ezhava youths from Kodungallur have migrated to the Gulf countries, resulting in the commercial development of the northern part of the town, known as Vadakke Nada.<sup>55</sup> As the Osellas observe, remittances

<sup>51</sup>George Mathew, 'God's own challenge', *The Indian Express*, published online on 24 December 2018, available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/kerala-secularism-hindus-christians-5506515/>, [accessed 30 May 2023].

<sup>52</sup>P. G. Menon, 'Kodungallur: Innu, Innale, Nale', in *Kodungallur Directory*, pp. 219–232.

<sup>53</sup>Charles H. Heimsath, 'The functions of Hindu social reformers—with special reference to Kerala', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1978, pp. 21–39; P. Chandramohan, *Development modernity in Kerala: Narayana Guru, SNDP Yogam and social reform* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016); Francois Houtart and Genevieve Lemercinier, 'Socio-religious movements in Kerala: A reaction to the capitalist mode of production: Part one', *Social Scientist*, vol. 6, no. 11, 1978, pp. 3–34; Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social mobility in Kerala: Modernity and identity in conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

<sup>54</sup>M. Abdul Samad, *Islam in Kerala: Groups and movements in the 20th century* (Kollam: Laurel Publications, 1998); Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'Introduction: Islamic reformism in South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2–3, 2008, pp. 247–257.

<sup>55</sup>However, this period has also witnessed the decline of traditional cottage industries such as coir manufacturing, fishing, and mat weaving. There has also been a reduction in the town's reliance on agriculture, with cultivators and agricultural workers comprising only 4 per cent of the total workforce as

from the Gulf also played an important role in the reinvigoration of temple festivals in Kerala, making them grander, and Kodungallur is no exception to this trend.<sup>56</sup>

In parallel to the rise of the social reform movement, Kodungallur also witnessed the emergence of intense peasant mobilizations that eventually prepared the ground for the growth of communist politics in the region. The most notable early peasant movement was in 1933: their protest against the collection of high taxes and a court verdict that led to the eviction of the poor peasantry was primarily directed against the Cochin government. As peasant distress continued, the newly launched Communist Party formed its unit in Kodungallur in 1942. It gained immediate traction among the poor peasantry, lower-caste agricultural labourers, and progressive young caste Hindus. The Communist Party, in subsequent years, simultaneously led popular mobilizations against the eviction of tenants, such as the Pariyaram agitation<sup>57</sup> as well as the Paliyam satyagraha,<sup>58</sup> both of which took place in 1948.<sup>59</sup>

Socio-political churnings since the 1920s have led to two distinct, yet interrelated, forms of collective mobilization in Kodungallur, such as the social reform and communist movements, which in subsequent decades reshaped the modes of sociality, spaces, and sensibilities in the region. Soon, Kodungallur recorded the first democratically voted for communist MLA in the country when E. Gopalakrishna Menon was elected in the Thiru-Kochi Assembly by-election in 1949. Subsequently, the electoral landscape of Kodungallur was alternately dominated by the Communist Party and Congress Party, reflecting the broader frame of Kerala's political landscape, characterized by an amalgamation of class and communitarian politics. The Congress Party drew support mainly from upper-caste Hindu communities and a large section of upper class Muslims, while the communists' social base consisted largely of lower-caste Hindus and poor Muslim peasantry. In 1971, P. K. Abdul Khadir, a prominent Congress leader from an influential Muslim family, joined the CPI(M), which led to the expansion of communist influence among Muslims.<sup>60</sup> Although Kodungallur had a sizeable Muslim population, the presence of the Indian Union Muslim League, the party that dominates the Muslim constituency in Malabar, is almost negligible. As communist influence grew, the CPI-CPIM alliance has consistently won the Kodungallur municipality elections since its formation in 1979.

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of the 2011 Census. According to a report by the Centre for Development Studies published in 2005, Kodungallur had a substantial unemployment rate of 16.3 per cent, which was slightly lower than the state average of 19.2 per cent. See K. C. Zachariah and S. Irudaya Rajan, 'Unemployment in Kerala at the turn of the century: Insights from CDS Gulf Migration Studies', Institute of Development Studies Working Paper 374, 2005.

<sup>56</sup>Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'Migration and the commoditisation of ritual: Sacrifice, spectacle and contestations in Kerala, India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 37, no. 1–2, 2003, pp. 109–139.

<sup>57</sup>The agitation was an agrarian struggle led by the CPI.

<sup>58</sup>The Paliyam Satyagraha was an agitation for access to a public road in Paliyam. The agitation was led by the CPI, SNDP, and Pulaya Mahasabha.

<sup>59</sup>Rajsekhar Basu, 'A page from Dalit history in Kerala: The Pulaya movement in Travancore–Cochin in the pre-communist phase', *Studies in People's History*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, pp. 45–58; Ambadi Venu, *Ormacheppu Thurannappol* (Mathilakam: Printhouse Publications, 2016).

<sup>60</sup>Within two months of joining the CPIM, Abdul Khadir was allegedly shot dead by Congress activists for his support of the ongoing 'Micha Bhoomi Samaram', an agitation demanding the takeover and redistribution of excess land from the landlords by the government led by the CPIM; see Venu, *Ormacheppu Thurannappol*.

The new forms of political mobilization have transformed the public spaces in Kodungallur, most significantly the space around the temple where entry had been restricted to the upper castes. Now, the temple grounds of Kodungallur were used for routine informal gatherings and events open to the wider public. As communist influence grew, many places in the region were named after places significant to the communist movement, such as Moscow,<sup>61</sup> Yenani,<sup>62</sup> and Vayalar.<sup>63</sup> A host of new secular public spaces, such as public libraries, art and sports clubs, theatre organizations, and film societies, emerged in the region in the subsequent decades. For instance, a book on the local history of Kodungallur—the *Kodungallur Directory* published in 1991—lists the names of as many as 25 active public libraries across Kodungallur. With the involvement of members from every religion, these public libraries and youth clubs functioned as secular spaces. The names of the libraries, such as the Muhammad Abdurahman Memorial Library, EMS Memorial Public Library, Pundit Karuppan Memorial Library,<sup>64</sup> and so on, broadly reflected the multiple currents within the broad secular mobilizations that shaped the public spaces of Kodungallur.

While the RSS had commenced its activities in North Kerala by the early 1940s, it reached Kodungallur only in 1966, with a *shakha*<sup>65</sup> that began functioning in the vicinity of the Sringapuram temple. Although a *shakha* started a decade ago in 1954 near the Thrikkulasekharapuram temple, mainly due to the efforts of *pracharaks* from Kochi, its activities died out as many of the earliest volunteers left Kodungallur for education and employment opportunities. The initial group of activists were mainly from the Goud Saraswat Brahmin (GSB) community, who were prominent traders and shopkeepers operating in the Sringapuram market.<sup>66</sup> By 1966, the *shakha* near the Thrikkulasekharapuram temple consisted of children and youths from Nair and a few

<sup>61</sup>Thiruvallur, where the CPI formed its Kodungallur unit, is called Moscow.

<sup>62</sup>Kadukachodu, a place later known for the influence of the Naxalite movement, is known as Yenani.

<sup>63</sup>Named after 'Vayalar', a village in Alleppey that witnessed a landmark communist revolt in 1946.

<sup>64</sup>Muhammad Abdurahman, born in Kodungallur, was a renowned leader of the anticolonial movement. E. M. S. Namboodiripad was the leader of the first communist ministry, and Pandit Karuppan was a renowned poet, literary scholar, and leader of the anti-caste social reform movement among the Dheevara community.

<sup>65</sup>A *shakha* (branch) is the basic unit of the RSS's organizational structure working at the village level.

<sup>66</sup>The GSBs are Konkani-speaking 'Business Brahmins' mainly engaged in entrepreneurial activities, who claim to have migrated to various cities of southern India, mainly from Goa: see Harald Tambs-Lyche, *Business Brahmins: The Gauda Saraswat Brahmins of South Kanara* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2011). The GSBs are one of the earliest social bases of the Sangh in the south, and many of the early full-time activists and leaders hailed from the community. The GSBs were instrumental in institutionalizing Hindu nationalist politics in many regions, most notably in coastal Karnataka. See Greeshma Kuthar, 'How coastal Karnataka was saffronized: The story of rise and rise of Hindu nationalism in syncretic South Kanara', *Firstpost*, published online on 7 April 2019, available at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/how-coastal-karnataka-was-saffronised-the-story-of-the-rise-and-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-syncretic-south-kanara-6363461.html>, [accessed 30 May 2023], and R. Santhosh and Dayal Paleri, 'Ethnicization of religion in practice? Recasting competing communal mobilizations in coastal Karnataka, South India', *Ethnicities*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2021, pp. 563–588, for a discussion on the GSBs in coastal Karnataka and the growth of Hindu nationalist politics.



Ezhava families, apart from the GSBs, and eventually fanned its *shakha* training to other temples such as the Raveeswara and Kodungallur temples.

A senior RSS leader belonging to the GSB community narrated the emergence of the RSS in very striking terms. According to him, Kodungallur embodied the Hindu ethics of accepting any 'foreign' religion, and hence it welcomed the three major 'Semitic religions'—Christianity, Islam, and communism. However, for him, by the 1950s, these three religions were already organized. At the same time, the Hindu community remained 'unorganized' as each caste community operated separately, often competing with each other, hence lacking a 'strong Hindu mind' and 'atmosphere'. According to his narrative, RSS *shakha* activism faced opposition from Christians, Muslims, and communists in its initial years.

At that time, we had to face resistance from different quarters. There was resistance from Christian and Muslim communities. Then there was strong resistance from the Marxists. The Sangh strengthened here, overcoming all these difficulties. As I said earlier, the road beside Sringapuram temple was a public road. Back then, the people who were against idolatry, like Christians, used to walk through that road. We used to stop them, but they didn't budge. Then we had to use some force. That's why the need to close the boundary of the temple came up. So, in Sringapuram there was an atmosphere of tension and situations to use force. In the case of Muslims, they resisted wherever we started *shakhas*. (Interview, August 2021)

Though the *shakha*-centric activities were gradually expanding, the RSS remained insignificant until the early 1980s, as its support base was confined to a section of caste Hindus. The electoral arm of the Sangh, the Jana Sangh, was not able to achieve a breakthrough in the political arena, which was dominated by the competition between the CPI and INC. While the Hindu nationalists remained outside the mainstream of electoral and everyday politics of the region, they rose to prominence in the 1980s due to their involvement in a loop of political violence against the CPI(M). It had its origins in the early 1970s, as the Karshaka Sangham, affiliated with the CPI(M), advocated a forceful takeover of land by the Kudikidappukar (landless hutment dwellers). The RSS, whose support base was primarily the land-owning caste Hindus, opposed the movement, leading to a series of conflicts, especially in the coastal region of Thrissur. The cycle of violence reached Kodungallur in 1984, when V. K. Gopalan, the area secretary of CPI(M), was killed in March. Two months later, Satheeshan, the RSS Taluk *Karyavahak* (office-bearer), was killed in retaliation. After a brief period of 'peace', the cycle of violence intensified in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the leadership of BJP was dominated by Sreekumar, an Ezhava businessman who made a fortune out of taking over the economic activities associated with the temple. Sreekumar's leadership attracted a new support base for the BJP, primarily from lower caste youth, mainly from the Ezhava and Pulaya communities. Between 1996 and 2008, six activists from CPI(M) and BJP were killed, and there were frequent conflicts and hartals. While the cycle of violence put the RSS at the centre of the political discourse, it remained a marginal electoral force throughout the period, unlike the CPI(M), which has won the



Kodungallur municipality elections consecutively since 1979.<sup>67</sup> However, in the following years, the BJP leadership changed, reportedly under the direction of the RSS, and the focus of Hindu nationalist activities shifted from confrontational politics towards a series of non-violent and everyday activities primarily offered through a set of Sangh affiliates. A BJP activist who was once accused and later acquitted of the murder of a CPI(M) activist elaborated to the first author about the retreat from violence:

In the 1980s, when we were starting to make inroads in the leftist strongholds, the CPI(M) started attacking us. In 1984, our Taluk Karyavahak, Satheeshan, was killed, and all our cadres felt frightened. We had to fight back; retaliation was necessary to make our cadres feel secure. Things have changed now, as we no longer need to retaliate and have more confidence, power, and acceptance than ever before. (Personal interview, July 2021)

In the Hindu nationalist narrative, resorting to violence was an act of self-defence against communist aggression and to preserve their sense of security and confidence; the retreat from violence came when it gained sufficient acceptance in the region. However, several other respondents emphasized that the primary reasons for the end of violence in Kodungallur were the strict police interventions and the campaign against political violence led by a women's collective, Sthree Koottayma, which emerged in the wake of consecutive political murders in 2006.<sup>68</sup> Notwithstanding the truth of these contested views, the period witnessed a resurgence in the activities of non-electoral organizations affiliated with the RSS which actively mobilized individuals in areas that are perceived as non-violent, such as social service, temple, and spiritual activities. For Rajendran, this shift towards everyday mobilizations through non-electoral organizations is a return to one of the basic organizational visions of the RSS, which is to 'recover' the social identity of the 'Hindu' before embarking on building an electoral or political unity of Hindus. Emphasizing the impossibility of establishing a Hindutva political community in the absence of a 'Hindu atmosphere', which results in the absence of a social sensibility of being Hindu in everyday affairs, Rajendran elaborated the organizational logic behind the shifting emphasis of the RSS activities in Kodungallur:

Each *Swayamsevak* who has undergone physical, intellectual, and management training through the *shakhas* is sent to work in any of the spheres of society such as politics, education, art, economy, and so on. They work in Sangh affiliates that work to transform each of these spheres, such as *Vidyarthi Parishad* for students, *Vidya Bharathi* for education, BJP for politics, *Mazdoor Sangh* for labourers, and so on. But these spheres are generally competitive, and therefore any progress

<sup>67</sup>The INC also enjoys considerable electoral support in Kodungallur and has occasionally won the Kodungallur assembly constituency, which consists of Kodungallur Municipality and neighbouring *panchayaths*.

<sup>68</sup>The campaigns by Sthree Koottayma highlighted the gendered nature of political killings and they organized several programmes by bringing together the women family members of the accused and victims of political killings.

we make is reversible. For instance, take politics; BJP can lose in the next election, it is uncertain. For a more permanent and stable change, we need to change society as a whole. That's why the Sangh has recently decided to put more energy into activities for societal transformation. Since the last decade, there has been a decision to focus on five areas, such as *Gramavikas* to develop ideal villages, *Kudumbaprabodhan* to recover Hindu values in families, *Dharmajagaran* for religious awareness, *Samajik Samarasatha* to address [caste] tensions within Hindus, and *Paryavaran* to protect our environment. I oversee Gramavikas in the state, and we are working to implement this idea of permanent societal transformation through our different organizations. (Personal interview, September 2021)

To make sense of the shifting modes of Hindu nationalist activities in Kodungallur, we suggest that their claims about addressing the 'absent Hindu atmosphere' and striving towards 'societal transformation' through different non-electoral organizations need to be looked at critically. In order to locate the concrete forms of engaging in the politics of constructing a Hindu nationalist atmosphere, the following sections focus on the actors and activities of the three Hindu nationalist organizations in Kodungallur—the Deseeya Seva Bharathi (DSB) that seeks to reshape everyday sociality through *seva* (social service), the Vivekananda Vedic Vision Kendra (VK) that focuses on ordinary spirituality as a means to transform individual subjectivities, and the Kerala Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi (KKSS)—that seek to build a Hindu community around temples.

### The DSB and the construction of Hindu sociality

*Seva* is an instinct. The willingness to do *seva* for others is inherent in every human being. If we both were walking together and suddenly, I was to stumble and fall, you would instinctively try to hold me and help me. *Seva*, for us, is nothing but developing this inherent instinct for selfless action, beyond politics, beyond religion. (Personal interview, September 2021)

Madhu, one of the state secretaries of the DSB and a native of Kodungallur, was explaining the idea of '*seva*'. The DSB is the Kerala unit of the Rashtriya Seva Bharathi, the social service wing of the RSS, registered in 1982. Madhu says that the idea of *seva* has been a constituent aspect of the RSS since its formation, inculcated in each volunteer through *shakha*-based training. By the 1980s, as *seva* activities expanded, the formation of a separate registered organization was inevitable, hence the emergence of the Seva Bharathi. Today, Kodungallur is one of the most active units of the DSB in Kerala, and it is hard for anyone visiting the town not to notice its presence.

The DSB started its activities in Kodungallur in 1989 as part of the birth centenary celebrations of K. B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS. Today, it mainly focuses on the areas of health, education, palliative care, and disaster relief. It owns the Sevanjali Trust, which runs three schools, all affiliated with Vidya Bharathi, the educational wing of the RSS. In 2001, the DSB began a project to provide daily meals to patients and their caretakers at Kodungallur Government Hospital, which continues to date. It has further grown into a Seva Bharathi Santhvanam Samithi (relief network), which

offers treatment and palliative care to patients at various hospitals in Kodungallur. It owns several institutions in Kodungallur, such as homes for uncared-for mothers and residences for young boys from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds. Simultaneously, it undertakes several campaigns such as ‘Thalachaikanoridam’ (space to sleep) to build houses for the homeless and ‘Gramavaibhavam’ (glory for village), which involves providing financial assistance to organic farming, animal husbandry, and other self-help initiatives for select families. The DSB undertook extensive relief activities during the recent floods and the Covid pandemic, including a counselling centre to address mental health issues during the lockdown period.

Studies on the social service activities of the RSS highlight their instrumental nature as a means to address the material inequality among ‘Hindu’ communities and thereby resist the politicization of caste differences. As a result, the service activities are overwhelmingly carried out among lower caste and tribal communities.<sup>69</sup> However, emphasizing the electoral marginality of the BJP, Thachil argues that RSS’s social service among lower caste communities in Kerala failed to appeal because of the state’s solid social service provisions and prevailing programmatic ties with lower caste and communist politics.<sup>70</sup> While few of the DSB activities, such as its services in the Kodungallur Government Hospital, are aimed at people of all religious communities, in Kodungallur they are principally targeted at the lower caste communities. While DSB leaders, such as Madhu, acknowledge the extensive outreach of the state and the caste consciousness of the lower castes as a hindrance to the Sangh’s agenda, they identify the recent crises created by the floods in Kerala and subsequent pandemic years as opening up unprecedented possibilities for *seva* activities among all sections of the population. He showed a long video that gives a detailed account of the household survey and food kits provided by the DSB to the lower caste households who could not manage despite state support during the pandemic. Contrary to the supposedly ‘service sans publicity’ that Madhu initially portrayed to the first author, similar videos and photos that vividly describe the DSB activities are routinely publicized on social media handles as well as in its monthly magazine *Sevanavartha*.

Ethnographic studies in regions such as Gujarat have highlighted how the RSS’s social service activities furthered the existing social segregation between Hindus and non-Hindus, especially in the disaster-affected regions.<sup>71</sup> However, in the context of Kodungallur, social service provisions were primarily used to construct a sense of sociality among Hindus, that is, a complex of societal interactions in the site of everyday life that goes beyond the formal patterns of ‘social relations’ between various caste communities.<sup>72</sup> For instance, the DSB started a programme in 2015 named ‘Annadana

<sup>69</sup>Soundarya Chidambaram, ‘The “right” kind of welfare in South India’s urban slums: Seva vs. patronage and the success of Hindu nationalist organizations’, *Asian Survey*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2012, pp. 298–320; Devika Bordia, ‘The ethics of des seva: Hindu nationalism, tribal leadership and modes of sociality in Rajasthan’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2015, pp. 52–76.

<sup>70</sup>Tariq Thachil, *Elite parties, poor voters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>71</sup>E. Simpson, ‘“Hindutva” as a rural planning paradigm in post-earthquake Gujarat’, in *The politics of cultural mobilization in India*, (eds) J. Zavos, A. Wyatt and V. Hewitt (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 136–165; Malini Bhattacharjee, ‘Seva, Hindutva, and the politics of post-earthquake relief and reconstruction in rural Kutch’, *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 75, no. 1, 2016, pp. 75–104.

<sup>72</sup>Nicholas J. Long and Henrietta L. Moore (eds), *Sociality: New directions* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); J. David Velleman, ‘Sociality and solitude’, *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2013, pp. 324–335.

Mahayanjam', which provides food and medical services to lakhs of devotees attending the annual Bharani festival of the temple. In 2020, the organization committee of the Annadana Mahayanjam consisted of 61 Hindu organizations, out of which 18 were caste associations in Kodungallur, ranging from the Vishwa Brahmana Sabha to the Kerala Pulayar Mahasabha, representing every caste group in the hierarchy. According to Madhu, organizing this massive event enabled the DSB to create a 'Hindu platform' for continuous interaction between various caste associations, who were otherwise competing politically, and avenues for more permanent social relations and solidarity, which we describe as 'Hindu sociality'. These events provide opportunities for scores of youth volunteers representing various caste and community organizations to interact closely and develop a sense of camaraderie and belonging. For instance, the various duties of Annadana Mahayanjam, which include the collection of funds, cooking utensils, groceries, publicity, cooking, and serving, were all carefully distributed across caste divisions so that the entire process becomes a performance of a coordinated 'Hindu unity'. For Madhu, the DSB's activities 'rebuild the bridge between caste communities, that are constantly fractured by electoral politics'.

The construction of sociality through *seva* also enables Hindu nationalists to engage with those who do not subscribe to their political ideology and make them part of the larger cultural initiative of the Hindu right, as noted by earlier scholars.<sup>73</sup> How proactive social service activities earn goodwill for Hindutva from unexpected quarters is also noted elsewhere.<sup>74</sup> Along similar lines, DSB activities have enabled Hindu nationalists in Kodungallur to achieve a much-needed image makeover as these activities have helped them gain public support and acceptance and put their violent past behind them. For instance, in December 2019, the DSB received an award named after a veteran Congress leader at an event presided over by the Kodungallur MLA and municipal chairman, both members of the Communist Party. Similarly, in June 2019, Kodungallur Thampuran, the ritual custodian of the Kodungallur temple, organized a public function to acknowledge the DSB's initiative in providing food and medical services to lakhs of devotees attending its annual Bharani festival. Madhu emphasized the 'non-political' aspects of the event by narrating how a group of devotees from Kannur, who were card-holding members of the CPI(M), were impressed by the Annadana Mahayanjam programme and started contributing financially to the feast every year. Affirming this sentiment, several respondents who do not subscribe to the political ideology of Hindu nationalism expressed their respect and admiration for the activities of the DSB and even echoed the narrative about the 'selfless' nature of its service.

Further exploration of the non-political activities led us to the Sukrutham Kootukudumbam, an institution run by the DSB in Kunjeni village of Kodungallur. Registered with the Orphanage Control Board of Kerala, Sukrutham is one of over 90 children's homes run by the DSB across the state to raise children from underprivileged backgrounds in an 'ideal Hindu atmosphere'. Kunjeni is one of the three villages

<sup>73</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Hindu nationalism and the social welfare strategy', in *Development, civil society and faith-based organizations*, (eds) G. Clarke, M. Jennings and T. Shaw (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 240–259.

<sup>74</sup> Malini Bhattacharjee, 'Seva, Hindutva, and the politics of post-earthquake relief and reconstruction in rural Kutch', *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 75, no. 1, 2016, pp. 75–104.

that are included in the DSB's Gramavikas project, which is one of the five Gatividhis (planned social movements) that the RSS started in the last decade with the aim of permanent social transformation. Suresh, who is in charge of Gramavikas, elaborated on the nature of the activities. He said that the social and physical spaces of the villages in Kerala are entangled in influences and institutions that lack any affinity to the Hindu culture. Gramavikas, according to him, is an elaborate project that seeks to organize all sections of Hindu communities through activities and institutions that will create a sense of Hindu-ness in the everyday and routine life of the people in the village. Suresh regularly travels across the state to train volunteers in villages, which are classified into different categories based on the extent of Hindu nationalist engagements. 'The objective is to have thousand Adarsh villages (ideal Hindu villages) in the state by 2030, and Kunjeni would definitely be one of them,' Suresh tells the first author.

In Kodungallur, the DSB runs a vast network of engagements comprising routine and mass activities. It simultaneously enables Hindu nationalists to win support outside of their traditional quarters and project a compassionate image in contrast to its violent past. While non-Hindus also benefitted from the DSB's activities, especially during the Covid pandemic period, the vast majority of its service provisions were exclusively directed at the Hindus. Apart from the DSB, similar embedded forms of mobilization using social services are found in the activities of other Hindu nationalist organizations in the region, as discussed in the following sections.

### Temple protection as community building: the KKSS in Kodungallur

The Kerala Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi (Temple Protection Council of Kerala) was founded in 1975 by P. Madhavan (1926–1988), one of Kerala's first *pracharaks* (full-time functionaries) of the Sangh. A compilation of Madhavan's writings on various aspects of temple protection, published as *Kshetra Chaithanya Rahasyam*,<sup>75</sup> acts as the organization's manifesto. The KKSS operates on the premise that social disunity and lack of solidarity among Hindus have led to the destruction of Hindu society and the temple, the epicentre of the community. Hence the organization undertakes activities designed to make temples a centre of the material and spiritual upliftment of Hindu society. Madhavan visualized the organization's task as protecting Kerala's temples from multiple threats: from other religions, from the intrusions of the state in the management of the temples, and the encroachment of materialistic and atheistic ideologies, such as communism, among Hindus.<sup>76</sup> Since its inception, the KKSS has organized several agitations related to temple issues and engaged in litigation to challenge the mechanism of temple administration in modern Kerala, often resulting in favourable judicial verdicts.<sup>77</sup>

The KKSS was quick to start its activities in Kodungallur, mainly around the Sree Kurumba temple, one of the prominent temples under the administration of the

<sup>75</sup>P. Madhavan, *Kshetra Chaithanya Rahasyam* (Kozhikode: Kerala Kshetra Samrakshana Samithi, 1988).

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>V. U. Nirmala, 'Temple as a site of contestation: The left's engagement with Hindu identity politics in Kerala', in *Left politics in South Asia: Reframing the agenda*, (ed.) Ravi Kumar (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2019), pp. 95–131.

Cochin Devaswom Board. In 1986, the KKSS led an agitation against the Board's decision to construct a trade complex on temple land, alleging that it was a communist conspiracy to insult the divinity of the temple and take over its land.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, in an open letter addressed to the Board in 2007, the KKSS expressed its opposition to non-Hindu traders operating shops within the temple grounds.<sup>79</sup> Members of the Muslim community were the main traders who ran various shops during the Thalappoli (annual temple festival), to the extent that Kodungallur Thampuran, the ritual custodian of the temple, once said that the traditional right to conduct trade during the Thalappoli belongs to Muslims.<sup>80</sup> Muslims in Kodungallur played an important role in the organizing committee of the Thalappoli, which was widely perceived as an annual festival of the Kodungallur region, irrespective of religious affiliations. Temple festivals that involve the participation of multiple religious communities are common in Kerala, though not unique to the state.<sup>81</sup> Muslims living in the town often evoked the deity of Kodungalluramma as a friendly divine presence, as the temple surroundings were widely accessible to all religious communities. Most significantly, the Thalappoli festival witnessed massive participation by Muslims, who joined in with their families, taking part in games and events associated with the festival and also enjoying the cultural programmes organized as a part of the festival. Dr Siddique, the president of the administrative committee of Cheraman Juma Masjid, narrated an instance that demonstrates the extent of the 'Muslim presence' in the Thalappoli festival:

One weekend in 1968 I came home from college and met my friends. They were in a taxi ready to go to Irinjalakuda, a town 15 km away, to book a renowned musician for the programme on the last day of the Thalappoli festival. I joined them. We reached the place, met the musician, made the advance payment, and confirmed the booking. Over the homemade hot coffee, the musician, a high-caste Brahmin, was casually enquiring about our details and names. We started with Kareem, Moideen, Driver Kutty, Mohamed, Easa ... and then the Bhagavathar politely interrupted 'Are not we talking about the Bhagavathy Temple Festival?' 'Yes,' Ramankutty replied. 'I am the Programme Committee Chairman. These are my friends and together we are responsible for the function'. (Personal interview, February 2021)

However, the series of agitations organized by the KKSS problematized the 'Muslim connection' with the temple. Sahadevan, the leader of the KKSS in Kodungallur, highlighted how its activities have resisted the 'public use' of Kodungallur temple. According to him, as the temple is in the heart of the town, people from all religious

<sup>78</sup>Guruvayoorum Kodungalloorum Samaravedikalukunu' report, Kesari, 14 June 1987.

<sup>79</sup>Adarsh, *Vibhavanangal Vinimayangal*, pp. 319–321.

<sup>80</sup>Kodungallur Thampuran is the oldest member of the Kodungallur Kovilakam, a former royal family that governed Kodungallur as a principality subordinate to the Cochin kingdom. The family still possess many ritual rights in relation to the various temple ceremonies in Kodungallur and the Thampuran is considered as the ritual custodian of the Sree Kurumba Temple.

<sup>81</sup>Dianne Jenett, 'A million "Shaktis" rising: Pongala, a women's festival in Kerala, India', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2005, pp. 35–55; Ophira Gamliel, 'The syntactic roles of touch in shared festivals in Kerala: Towards an analysis of ritual categories', *Entangled Religions*, vol. 10, 2019.

communities were using its premises as a 'public space'. Secondly, the grounds of the temple were being used for all kinds of public events. Until recently, the space in the eastern part of the temple was known as 'Gandhi Maidan' where various political parties organized their public meetings, hosted state-level volleyball tournaments, public performances, exhibitions, and so on. He claimed that the KKSS organized the Hindu communities (referring to caste associations) to create awareness that the temple should not be used as 'public property' but must be maintained as the 'property of Hindu devotees' and used strictly for ritual purposes. The Sangh's conception of the Muslim presence as a contamination of the 'Hindu atmosphere' around the temple is evident in an open letter to the temple administration released by the KKSS in 2008. The letter opposes the administration's decision to construct a commercial complex in the temple premises, asserting that it will invite the 'non-Hindu' presence further, which goes against 'the purity of *kshetra sankalpam* and rituals'. The letter further states that:

The tenancy buildings [around the temple] have been bought and sold by private individuals many times and the [religious] backgrounds of current occupants are unclear. Moreover, it is known that in a shop, facilities have been provided for non-Hindu traders to offer prayers on Fridays.<sup>82</sup>

The letter refers to an instance where a textile shop had arranged a temporary prayer facility for Muslim customers during the month of Ramadan, which was stopped due to opposition from the KKSS. As the subterranean network of Sangh activities around the temple as well as across Kodungallur grew in later years, the Hindutva aspiration for a pure 'Hindu atmosphere' around the Kodungallur temple became increasingly normalized without any considerable opposition. As an instance of the banal acceptance of the Sangh's claim over the temple space, public events were gradually shifted to a ground near the Kodungallur police station, owned by the revenue department of the Kerala government. The Kodungallur temple grounds today are the epicentre of Sangh activities as it also houses the offices of several of its affiliates, including the DSB and the BJP. The Sangh affirmed its exclusive claim over the temple space by organizing new mass rituals and events such as the Annadana Mahayanjam, the massive feast during the Bharani festival, and Vidyagopala Manthrachana, a mass ritual for school children facing public examinations, both exclusively aimed at the 'Hindu' devotees. Most of my Muslim respondents in Kodungallur perceived the loss of access to this earlier shared space around the temple as symbolic of the passive transformation of everyday inter-religious relations in the region. The KKSS, through its interventions, has effectively operationalized the dichotomy of 'public' and 'Hindu' to transform the nature of everyday social relations around the temple and portray non-Hindus, especially Muslims, as the permanent outsiders of the 'Hindu' space.

While the KKSS is very articulate about who constitutes the 'outsider' to the temple, the idea of the 'insider' is equally striking. It is exemplified in the organizational logic of Kshetra Raksha Vedi (KRV), an agitational platform comprising different caste associations that the KKSS organized in 2021 to protest against the Board's decision to

<sup>82</sup>Quoted in Adarsh, 'Vibhavanangal Vinimayangal', pp. 318–321.



construct a museum inside the temple. The insider is not just a 'Hindu devotee' but one who belongs to a particular caste community yet subscribes to the Hindutva ideology. The KKSS carefully maintained representation of every caste community throughout the agitation, as the leadership of the KRV was carefully distributed across caste lines. Interestingly, at the end of every public meeting, a brief ceremony felicitating the members of each caste community was organized, illustrating the formal recognition and centrality of caste in the imagined Hindu unity of the KKSS.

Apart from protecting the temple from external threats, the 'silent and routine' activities that seek to establish a deeper sociality between the 'Hindus' around a temple forms the other important aspect of the KKSS. In Kodungallur, the Thiruvallur Sree Mahadeva Temple, run by the KKSS, exhibits an attempt to operationalize the process of Hindu community formation. Madhavan, the founder of the KKSS, had introduced the idea of 'social worship' in *Kshetra Chaithanya Rahasyam* to create a community of worshippers across caste communities who routinely engage in worship practices. Aware of the absence of 'joint worship' in temples due to caste hierarchies and segregation, Madhavan suggests two steps to overcome this. First, to accept the ritual legitimacy of *avarna* forms and sites of worship and, second, to consciously create a community of worshippers around the temple through constant *samparkam* (interaction) with all the households across caste around the temple.<sup>83</sup>

Following this strategy, in 2015, the KKSS initiated the renovation of the old temple at Thiruvallur and raised more than ₹20 million for the renovation. Currently, the temple comprises a newly built *sanctum sanctorum*, a well-maintained temple pond, a cow shelter, and a spacious public hall for conducting events. The temple committee also runs a Brahavidya Sanathana Patashala, which organizes weekly classes for children on temple rituals, religious texts, and various performing arts. It also runs Mathrusamithi, an association of women devotees in the village, which also works as a self-help group by producing and marketing various food and ritual items and has an active Gramaseva Samithi, which engages in various social service activities within the villages, including sponsoring treatment, marriages, and education for poor families. For Mukundan, a KKSS activist who coordinates the activities in Thiruvallur at the library, the temple's regular activities have brought most Hindu families together, irrespective of their political and caste affiliation. He claimed that despite initial reluctance, several families with communist backgrounds send their children to the Patashala and participate in the temple activities as they realize that the activities have no 'political' intentions. Thiruvallur, once known as 'Moscow' for being the birthplace of the Communist Party in Kodungallur, is today a site of active efforts to construct a Hindu nationalist community through 'silent and routine' forms of engagement.

Hindu nationalist engagement with the temple as a site of constructing Hindu victimhood through constant agitations and litigations has been explored earlier.<sup>84</sup> Roopesh has documented how the RSS combines heterogeneous worship practices to create 'proper knowledge' about Hindu culture.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, the KKSS in

<sup>83</sup>Madhavan, *Kshetra Chaithanya Rahasyam*, p. 212.

<sup>84</sup>Nirmala, 'Temple as a site of contestation', pp. 95–131; O. B. Roopesh, 'Temple as the political arena in Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 52, no. 16, 2017, pp. 12–16; Roopesh, 'Temple as a site of modern contestations', pp. 300–316.

<sup>85</sup>Roopesh, 'Educating "temple cultures"', pp. 485–501.

Kodungallur also engages in the construction of public spaces around the temple to create a sense of community and cohesion among the ‘Hindu’ families in the village across political affiliations. In doing so, caste distinctions are duly recognized but reconfigured as internal diversity within its imagination of the Hindu community.

### Constructing the spiritual subjectivity: The VK in Kodungallur

Culture? Kodungallur had no sense of culture when we arrived here about 25 years ago. There was only violence and bloodshed because of the loss of cultural consciousness. There was only a cultural nihilism here. We started working here in 1997, and without disturbing anyone, we integrated ourselves into Kodungallur and added the much-needed cultural fragrance to this society. (Personal interview, March 2021)

Dr Lakshmi Kumari, known as Didi, responded to the first author’s statement about the cultural heritage of Kodungallur on his first visit to the Anandha Dham, the serene campus of the Vivekananda Kendra Vedic Vision Foundation (VK), located on the banks of the Sringapuram canal in Kodungallur. Kumari is a former microbiologist who gave up an attractive career as a scientist at a national agricultural research institute to become a Jeevanvratī (life-worker) of the Kendra. She is currently the lifetime director of the VK in Kodungallur, established in 1997 on a plot of land gifted by a Brahmin businessman in 1992.

The VK in Kodungallur is one of the 241 centres of the Vivekananda Kendra network that was founded by the former general secretary of the RSS, Eknath Ranade (1914–1982), in 1972 with the objective of national reconstruction through a philosophy of ‘ordinary spirituality’.<sup>86</sup> Ranade formulated the vision of the VK through reinterpreting Vivekananda as a champion of Hindu nationalism and presenting the Sangh as an extension of his work and vision.<sup>87</sup> Ranade defined the VK as an organization that ‘steers clear of politics’ and a ‘force without politics, which in turn may influence politics’.<sup>88</sup> The philosophy of the VK has been summarized as ‘ordinary spirituality’ that involves the twin process of ‘man-making’ or the realization of the divinity inherent in everyone, and ‘nation-making’ or the conversion of divine energy for national reconstruction into the realization of the Hindu nation through a series of activities.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup>Gwilym Beckerlegge, “‘An ordinary organisation run by ordinary people’: A study of leadership in Vivekananda Kendra”, *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2010, pp. 71–88.

<sup>87</sup>The story of how Ranade successfully created a consensus across political parties for establishing the Vivekananda Rock Memorial in Kanyakumari is frequently used as a metaphor to explain the potential of cultural nationalism to rise above political divisions if such manoeuvres are undertaken carefully and patiently.

<sup>88</sup>Eknath Ranade, *The story of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial* (Chennai: Vivekananda Kendra Prakashan Trust, 1995).

<sup>89</sup>Beckerlegge, “‘An ordinary organisation run by ordinary people’”; P. Kanungo, ‘Fusing the ideals of the math with the ideology of the Sangh? Vivekananda Kendra, ecumenical Hinduism and Hindu nationalism’, in *Public Hinduisms*, (eds) J. Zavos, P. Kanungo, D. S. Reddy, M. Warriar and R. Williams (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2012), pp. 119–140.

For the VK, social transformation and ‘nation-making’ require a simultaneous project of ‘man-making’, which means transforming the self and individual subjectivity of ordinary people, with an emphasis on ordinary spirituality. ‘Subjectivity’ is a loosely defined term that refers to the ‘inner life of the subject, to the way subjects feel, respond and experience’<sup>90</sup> or the actor’s ‘thoughts, sentiments and embodied sensibilities, and, especially, their sense of self and self-world relations’.<sup>91</sup> The VK recasts the process of a Hindu nationalist subject formation as a process of ‘cultural and spiritual awakening’ that seeks to address issues that concern the individual and his embodied sensibilities.

Like the RSS, the VK operationalizes its vision of ordinary spirituality through a committed band of life-workers who are assigned to different centres across the country. The first author’s meeting with Kumari was held in the presence of two other Jeevanvratīs in Kodungallur—Venkatesh from Anantapur in Andhra Pradesh and Suresh from Kollam in Kerala, both of whom had worked in VKs in Delhi, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Andaman Island. Venkatesh, who had been working in Kodungallur since 2001, was very fluent in Malayalam and expressed his dismay and anxiety over people’s ignorance of their cultural traditions. Even though Venkatesh affirmed the VK’s inclusive attitude towards all religions by citing instances where Muslims and Christians take part in its activities, he frequently emphasized the superiority of ‘Hinduism as a cultural and spiritual outlook and a way of life’ over other religions, clearly affirming his commitment to the Hindu majoritarianism of the RSS, albeit in its benevolent form.

The VK’s activities are aimed at transforming the subjectivity of individuals in Kodungallur, mainly through yoga, spiritual education through routine study circles, residential camps, social service activities, and self-help groups, with an overarching focus on family as the primary site of the activities. Yoga, which Kumari describes as the ‘magic wand for mobilizing ourselves’, is at the core of reshaping subjectivity. According to her, the nation, similar to our bodies, is also an organic entity and the practice of yoga is the best way to keep the national body pure, clear of maladies like ‘cultural nihilism’, a term that she often evokes to denote the lack of a ‘national cultural self’ in Kerala. She elaborated that the routine practice of yoga enables an individual to develop a deeper understanding of their own authentic cultural self, which will nurture an ideal family built on the foundation of our traditions, consequently building a strong nation. The VK organizes two kinds of routine yoga programmes—the Yoga Satras, regular morning classes within the Anandha Dham campus, and the Yoga Vargas, weekly workshops organized in different parts of Kodungallur. *Viswabhanu*, the VK’s bi-monthly bulletin, vividly reports on these outreach activities, including the collaborative events that the VK organizes with the municipality, police, excise department, and colleges and schools across Kodungallur.

The VK identifies the family as the primary site of engagement to overcome the problem of ‘cultural nihilism’ and advocates a ‘silent revolution’ at home by ‘slowly re-establishing the sanctity and sacredness of our cultural relationships’. The idea of ‘cultural nihilism’ is used to imply a perception of a ‘lack of religio-moral principles’ in

<sup>90</sup>T. M. Luhrmann, ‘Subjectivity’, *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2006, p. 345.

<sup>91</sup>Dorothy Holland and Kevin Leander, ‘Ethnographic studies of positioning and subjectivity: An introduction’, *Ethos*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2004, p. 127.

individual sensibilities and micro-social relationships. The term ‘culture’ in the discourse of the VK clearly denotes individual consciousness about ‘being Hindu’ and a commitment to Hindu nationalist ideals<sup>92</sup> and emphasizes familial relations as the site of overcoming this ‘lack’. In reforming families to establish new modes of cultural awakening, the VK places greater emphasis on women and children; therefore, a significant share of Kendra’s activities is aimed at them. The writings and speeches of Kumari assign significant responsibility to women in overcoming cultural nihilism: as she writes, ‘where “enlightened” mothers preside over homes, man-making and nation-building values get inbuilt in the home culture’.<sup>93</sup> In her book *Sita Must Live*, Lakshmi Kumari describes the role of women in the making of [Hindu] nation by evoking the figure of Sita.

Restoration of Rama to his rightful place is no doubt important, but if Hindu Dharma is to regain its glory and make its impact on the present-day world civilization, ‘Sita’, the spiritual power and essence in Rama’s life, must also be given her place by his side. The restoration and revitalization of Hindu dharma lie in the hands of the present-day daughters of Sita, the women of India.<sup>94</sup>

She narrated an instance to illustrate the role of women in the ‘revitalization of Hindu dharma’ that she has been advocating through her activities. Sunitha, a regular attendee of the yoga classes, once approached her to talk about her drunkard husband, who seldom went to work. Kumari took him on as her driver and made him accompany her to her daily public speeches and family meetings. According to Kumari, the routine exposure to her speeches and classes on individual spiritual potential transformed him as he developed a keen sense of ‘culture’ and started attending the yoga classes at the Kendra of his own volition. He not only gave up drinking but also started taking part in the VK’s service activities, eventually becoming a municipal councillor of the BJP. For Kumari, though her involvement was instrumental in the transformation, Sunitha’s resilience and moral persuasion played a crucial role in transforming her husband from a drunkard to a responsible and successful politician. The story also illustrates the inherent relation of the ordinary spirituality of the VK to the political course of Hindutva. While the role of women in the traditional patriarchal family structure in remaking the familial and individual affinity for Hindu culture is at the heart of the VK’s activities, it also substantially engages with children through a residential school it runs named Sandipani Sishu Vihar, which combines modern education with a spiritual curriculum developed by the Kendra.

Kumari enjoys far more acceptance than any other Hindu nationalist leader in Kodungallur and she is often invited to events organized by other political parties and non-Hindu religious communities. The mode of engagement of the VK—using yoga and focusing on seemingly non-political sites such as familial spaces—has rendered

<sup>92</sup>Kanungo, ‘Fusing the ideals’, pp. 119–140; Samta P. Pandya, ‘The Vivekananda Kendra in India: Its ideological translations and a critique of its social service’, *Critical Research on Religion*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, pp. 116–133.

<sup>93</sup>Lakshmi Kumari, ‘The role of women in revitalizing Hindu dharma’, *Viswabhanu: Bulletin of Vivekananda Kendra Vedic Vision Foundation*, June–September 2018, p. 25.

<sup>94</sup>Lakshmi Kumari. *Sita must live: The role of women in society* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1997), p. 47.

its intrinsic ideological and organizational connection to Hindu nationalism elusive to the larger public in Kodungallur. The 'silent revolution' that VK aspires to is the construction of cultural relations in familial spaces through the agency of women and children, which inhabits a non-masculine form of advancing masculine Hindu nationalist politics.

### Cultural Hindutva as the precursor for political Hindutva

As we have elaborated in the earlier sections, the mode of Hindu nationalists' politics in Kodungallur involves a network of activities, targeted interventions, and a sustained ideological drive to redefine the cultural context of the region. The community service initiatives, for example, *seva* carried out by organizations, such as the DSB, aim to address the problem of economic inequality among Hindus, targeting the lower caste with the larger aim of facilitating a sense of Hindu community. Sustained efforts of social service activities carried out on a regular basis are crucial for the creation of a Hindu sociality, which is reinforced through the everyday activities of cooperation and social service among its members. Various occasions of charity activities and functions of the organizations, built on a specific sense of camaraderie, provide for the creation and sustenance of a Hindutva sociality shared by its members. This process is accentuated by the sustained intervention in the private sphere such as the family for the reformulation of the individual subjectivity of Hindus in Kodungallur. Organizations such as the VK work exclusively with this objective of reformulating individual subjectivity and creating households that subscribe to the Hindutva version of spirituality and religiosity. More important are the activities of organizations like the KKSS that work exclusively on temples to reformulate their physical and religious spatiality. The KKSS seeks to transform the temple into the spiritual epicentre for the undifferentiated Hindu community, devoid of any state interference or non-Hindu connections, and as a platform that serves the ideological and political dissemination of Hindutva morality and politics.

These efforts, aimed at creating a new Hindutva culture in Kodungallur through redefining individual subjectivity, sociality, and community, are carried out through a reformulation of gender and caste relations within the Hindu community. The activities of the VK directly reinforce the idea of gendered patriarchal families as the bedrock of Hindu cultural awakening. It uses yoga and spiritual education to construct an ideal Hindu family that emphasizes traditional gender roles, advocates for the domestic role of women, and desists from questioning a patriarchal ethos and practices within the family and community. Spiritually awakened women are presented as the embodiment of patience and sacrifice and the bearer of traditional virtues as opposed to modern non-spiritual women who are preoccupied with questions of gender equality and feminist ideas. Children also are an important constituency in the project of this subjectivity formation; and through sustained and focused activities carried out by organizations such as Balagokulam,<sup>95</sup> similar ideas and ideologies are spread among them as well.

<sup>95</sup>Balagokulam is the RSS affiliate for inculcating Hindu nationalist culture in children.

Caste occupies an interesting place in the project of creating a Hindu atmosphere in Kodungallur. As we have seen, activities such as the Annadana Mahayanjam by the DSB or Kshetra Raksha Vedi by the KKSS duly recognize caste differences and boundaries, but these are portrayed as non-hierarchical diversity within the Hindus. For instance, Sahadevan, the leader of KKSS, asserts that the different castes are like the different fingers on a hand, which, while different, come together for any activity. Hence, it is not the traditional position of a caste that matters, but how each of the castes works for the betterment of the Hindu community as a whole. In 1987, the KKSS issued a statement known as the Paliyam Declaration, which argued that the bestowal of caste is not based on birth but on the actions that formed the core of the KKSS's project of reconfiguring caste to construct a unified Hindu community centred on the temple.<sup>96</sup> This recasting of caste from an ascribed category to an achieved cultural category is central to Hindu nationalists' construction of a coherent Hindu community. Natrajan describes this process as the 'culturalization of caste' whereby caste is primarily depicted as an axis of cultural difference within the Hindu social order rather than as an axis of hierarchy and inequality.<sup>97</sup> As in the case of gender, the central features of the caste system such as hierarchy and inequality are deliberately sidestepped, and Hindutva organizations have no agenda to facilitate inter-caste marriages within the community, which has the real potential to create a casteless Hindu society. Hence, the Hindu community is imagined as an organic conglomeration of diverse endogamous castes existing on a non-hierarchical platform bound by similar religious, ethical, and political ideologies.

There are three critical aspects for this process of the routinization of Hindu nationalist politics taking place in Kodungallur. First, all the activities are seemingly non-violent and mark a decisive shift from the earlier mode of using direct violence against political opponents in Kodungallur and elsewhere. In contrast to the scenario in North Kerala that Chaturvedi studied,<sup>98</sup> RSS organizations in Kodungallur adopt routine and non-confrontationist activities and spaces to construct Hindu nationalist sociality, subjectivity, and a sense of community. Secondly, the activities of non-electoral Hindu nationalists in Kodungallur are consciously rendered inconspicuous as they primarily take place in private settings such as religious, familial, and personal spaces. Longkumer points to the discreet nature of Hindutva activities in the northeast because of the long history of the natives' hostility towards and suspicion of these organizations.<sup>99</sup> However, in Kodungallur, the adoption of covert activities is a strategic choice as these 'cultural interventions' obscure the extent of the Hindu nationalists' grassroots network and activities from their political opponents. Finally, it also makes the political character of these Hindu nationalists elusive and enables them to position their activities as cultural and non-political.

<sup>96</sup>G. Tarabout, 'Birth vs merit. Kerala temple priests and the courts', in *Filing religion: State, Hinduism, and courts of law*, (eds) D. Berti, G. Tarabout and R. Voix (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>97</sup>Balmurali Natrajan, *The culturalization of caste in India: Identity and inequality in a multicultural age* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>98</sup>Ruchi Chaturvedi, 'Somehow it happened: Violence, culpability, and the Hindu nationalist community', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2011, pp. 340–362.

<sup>99</sup>Arkotong Longkumer, *The greater India experiment: Hindutva and the northeast* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

The Hindu nationalists make a binary between ‘political’, which is inherently competitive and divisive, and ‘non-political’, which is located primarily in the realm of culture that is constructive and creative. While the former is morally inferior, it is a necessity in an electoral democracy to facilitate the more fundamental transformation of the cultural realm. This privileging of the non-political over political contestations is what Reddy termed the search for ‘possibilities of the apolitical’ in constructing a Hindu sociality and the sense of being Hindu outside the realm of the political.<sup>100</sup> This strategy of foregrounding the culture helps these organizations to engage constructively with individuals and social groups politically opposed to the BJP. They are confident that this emphasis on culture, articulated through the language of spirituality, *seva*, and community formation, will lay the necessary foundation for the emergence of the ‘true Hindu atmosphere’, which would in turn engender formidable support for Hindutva electoral politics in the future. Needless to say, the dichotomy of the non-political and the political in the Hindu nationalist discourse is an artificial one and a façade to intervene in the cultural milieu of a locality to transform it politically to suit the political and electoral objectives of Hindutva.

As indicated earlier, the idea of a ‘lack of Hindu atmosphere’ in Kerala, which the Hindu nationalist organizations lament, is steeped in a Hindu nationalist imaginary that supposedly exists in an undifferentiated understanding of North India. Hindus in Kerala are seen as deficient in their religio-moral qualities in comparison to their North Indian counterparts, and Kerala’s public sphere is seen as inimical to the growth of a ‘Hindu atmosphere’. However, we argue that this sense of ‘absence’ which defines the Hindu nationalist perception of Kerala simultaneously implies the ‘presence’ of certain political, sociocultural, and historical elements that define the idea of ‘Kerala exceptionalism’. A close examination of the articulation of ‘lack’ or ‘absence’ enables us to understand what Maidul Islam described as the ‘antagonistic frontier’<sup>101</sup> of Hindu nationalism, which is critical to understand the aspirations of Hindutva politics in Kerala. The ‘presence’ of communists, Christians, and Muslims in the public life of Kerala constitutes the ‘antagonistic frontier’ whose primary sense of belonging and source of influence are external and thereby perpetually impede the aspiration for a proper ‘Hindu atmosphere’ according to the Hindutva narrative. Hence, the attempt to construct a ‘Hindu atmosphere’ through a non-electoral network that seeks to reshape the everyday sense of sociality, community, and subjectivity is indeed the organizational expression of the Hindutva aspiration to unsettle and replace these entrenched sociocultural and historical features of contemporary Kerala.

Kerala’s political, religious, and cultural imaginations constantly transgress regional and national boundaries and exhibit a cosmopolitan sensibility largely due to a host of factors, including the presence of historic Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities; transnational connections of trade and pilgrimage; a very high rate of international out-migration; and the robust presence of communist politics. Islam and Christianity have a historic presence in Kerala, derived from the ‘entangled history’ of the region owing to its position in the Indian Ocean trade network dating back several centuries, and played an important role in shaping the tradition of ‘cultural

<sup>100</sup>Deepa S. Reddy, ‘What is neo- about neo-Hindutva?’, *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2018, p. 4.

<sup>101</sup>Maidul Islam, *Limits of Islamism* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 85.



symbiosis' of the region.<sup>102</sup> They continue to hold a decisive share in the political, economic, and cultural attributes of the state. Similarly, communist politics in Kerala has attracted global scholarly attention for its unique success in indigenizing communist ideals through persisting popular appeal and state policies.<sup>103</sup>

Given the historical context, the cultural sphere of Kerala that the Hindu nationalists are trying to redefine is a product of various forms of ideological contestations and an important site of democratic politics. For instance, the communists' attempt to transform social consciousness through sustained engagement in the sphere of 'everyday culture' in various sites such as literature, folk arts, and theatre,<sup>104</sup> religious sites, especially temples,<sup>105</sup> music and festivals,<sup>106</sup> popular science,<sup>107</sup> and public libraries<sup>108</sup> has been documented before. Similarly, how social service activities formed a major part of the public action of various religious groups, especially among Muslims,<sup>109</sup> as well as by the Kerala state<sup>110</sup> have been well documented. Apart from the communist left, the public culture of Kerala has also been exposed to the vibrant campaigns of rationalist and atheist movements that go back to the 1920s, long before the beginning of Hindu nationalism in the state. Organizations that put forth a staunch critique of religiosity and promoted irreligious life such as the Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham and movements seeking to shape a scientific temper in everyday life such as the KSSP occupied a prominent space in Kerala's civil society. For the Sangh, the cumulative effect of the presence of these movements is the absence of 'collective consciousness of Godliness'<sup>111</sup> among Kerala Hindus or, as Sahadevan puts it, 'Hindus sans Hindutva'.

<sup>102</sup>M. G. S. Narayanan, *Cultural symbiosis in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972).

<sup>103</sup>T. J. Nossiter, *Communism in Kerala: A study in political adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Dilip Menon, *Caste, nationalism and communism in South India, Malabar, 1900–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Nissim Mannathukkaren, 'The rise of the national-popular and its limits: Communism and the cultural in Kerala', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2013, pp. 494–518.

<sup>104</sup>Mannathukkaren, 'The rise of national-popular and its limits', pp. 494–518.

<sup>105</sup>Nirmala, 'Temple as a site of contestation', pp. 95–131.

<sup>106</sup>Guillebaud, 'Music and politics', pp. 241–272.

<sup>107</sup>Mathai Zachariah and R. Sooryamoorthy, *Science for social revolution: Achievements and dilemmas of a development movement—the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

<sup>108</sup>R. Raman Nair, *People's library movement* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2000); V. Bijukumar, 'Radicalised civil society and protracted political actions in Kerala (India): A socio-political narrative', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2019, pp. 503–521.

<sup>109</sup>Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'Muslim entrepreneurs in public life between India and the Gulf: Making good and doing good', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 15, 2009, pp. 202–221; R. Santhosh, 'Islamic activism and palliative care: An analysis from Kerala, India', in *Religion and the politics of development*, (eds) P. Fountain, R. Bush and R. M. Feener (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 83–103.

<sup>110</sup>Thachil, *Elite parties*; René Véron, 'The "new" Kerala model: Lessons for sustainable development', *World Development*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2001, pp. 601–617.

<sup>111</sup>The phrase is used in an article titled 'Kerala: God's own country or godless country?' published in *Organiser*, the official mouthpiece of the RSS, in November 2015. The article blatantly reproduces some Hindu nationalist perceptions of Kerala as the fertile hub of 'Communist militancy' and 'Islamic fundamentalism' and laments the lack of 'Hindu consciousness' among Kerala Hindus as a consequence. The then chief minister of Kerala, Oommen Chandy, wrote a rebuttal letter to the editor of *Organiser*, claiming the article has 'wounded the feelings of Malayalees all over the world'. Notably, the chief minister evoked the story of Cheraman Perumal's act of giving land to construct the first mosque in India to argue that 'tolerance is an integral part of the Malayalee psyche'. See Oommen Chandy, 'Letter to the editor', *Organiser*, December 2015.

Interestingly, when it comes to the specific case of Kodungallur, the town is seen as the cradle of religious diversity in premodern Kerala as the Islamic, Christian, and Jewish communities in the state trace their remembered past to Kodungallur as their origin and growth occurred primarily through trade networks.<sup>112</sup> Modern Kodungallur was one of the epicentres of lower-caste social reform movements and witnessed the emergence of the Islamic reform movement through the Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangam formed in 1922.<sup>113</sup> Most significantly, the communist movement gained traction in Kodungallur as it elected the first communist legislator of independent India, E. Gopalakrishna Menon, to the Cochin Assembly in 1949. Moreover, Kodungallur also became a robust stronghold of the Yukthivadi movement in the 1920s and the epicentre of the Naxalite movement that emerged in the 1970s. Therefore, the Hindu nationalist attempt to overcome the 'absence' and construct a 'Hindu atmosphere' in a region that is emblematic of Kerala exceptionalism is a significant aspect of Hindutva aspirations in Kerala.

The sustained cultural activism of Hindu nationalist organizations in Kodungallur is beginning to have its implications. Hindu nationalists have successfully built an entrenched network of non-electoral activities and largely remain uncontested in their respective activities. While there has been a recent attempt by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) to engage with temple affairs through state-controlled Devaswom boards, it remained a top-down engagement, confined to the major temples with very little effect. While the youth organizations affiliated with the communist parties and independent civil society groups such as the Health Care Institute are proactive in providing medical assistance and services, they do not match the ideological commitment and organizational discipline of entities such as the DSB. The decisive intervention of the left in the public sphere based on class politics and secular ideals has been stagnant in Kodungallur for a long time. The left's successive electoral victories have rendered these initiatives rather sedate and lethargic. Other political parties such as Congress are more or less absent from such grassroots interventions. In that sense, the politics of building a Hindu atmosphere that is under discussion here amounts to a form of 'banalization of Hindutva', which refers to the process whereby Hindu nationalist ideas firmly become part of everyday common sense in unnoticeable and taken-for-granted ways.<sup>114</sup> In Kodungallur, the politics of Hindutva finds newer ground through a series of activities that are seemingly banal yet enable the entrenchment of Hindu nationalist ideals in the sphere of everyday spaces and social relations, without much contestation.

What are the electoral implications of the effort towards constructing a 'Hindu atmosphere' in Kodungallur? The receptivity of Hindu nationalist efforts towards transforming everyday sociality, community, and subjectivity is duly reflected in the electoral landscape of Kodungallur, especially in the local municipal elections. Despite

<sup>112</sup>Ashis Nandy, 'Time travel to a possible self: Searching for the alternative cosmopolitanism of Cochin', *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2000, pp. 295–327.

<sup>113</sup>Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, 'Introduction: Islamic reformism in South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2–3, 2008, pp. 247–257.

<sup>114</sup>John Harriss, Craig Jeffrey and Stuart Corbridge, 'Is India becoming the "Hindu Rashtra" sought by Hindu nationalists?', *Simons Papers in Security and Development*, 60, 2017; Véronique Benei, *Schooling passions: Nation, history, and language in contemporary western India* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

the unwillingness of Sangh leaders like Rajendran to conflate cultural and electoral politics, the BJP, the electoral front of the Sangh, has consecutively increased its seats from two in 2010 to 16 in 2015 and to 21 in 2022, out of the total of 44 seats, making it the single largest party in the Kodungallur municipality. While many respondents from other political parties and local journalists attribute the steady increase in the BJP's performance to the decline of the Congress Party, reduced to a single seat in the last election, many Sangh activists perceive it as the impact of their non-electoral activities. While neighbouring local bodies remain electorally hostile to BJP, its electoral success in Kodungallur needs to be understood in the context of the expansive non-electoral network that we have examined in detail.

## Conclusions

Recent scholarship has explored the ways in which Hindu nationalist politics permeates into regions that were hitherto considered peripheries of its landscape and how it negotiates with local dynamics and diversity. The BJP has made considerable electoral inroads in the northeastern states and in West Bengal and has secured a firm social base in the south, specifically Karnataka. Kerala is among the few states where the Hindu right appears to be marginal in the electoral statistics. Kerala remains a paradox for the Hindu right, where its consistently poor electoral results continue despite its long history of organizational presence. Consequently, 'mainstream academics have treated the presence of Hindutva [in Kerala] either as the effect of an invisible melancholy or an inconsequential anomaly', resulting in few attempts to understand the intricacies of Hindu nationalists' determined efforts to forge better fortunes in the region.<sup>115</sup> Existing studies have often invoked Kerala's exceptional historical, religious, and political factors as the deterrents to Hindutva's aspirations for a homogeneous cultural identity. However, Kodungallur, which is emblematic of the political and religious diversity that constitute Kerala's cosmopolitan and exceptional culture, draws our attention to different and newer dynamics in Hindutva politics in the region. The Hindu right, through a set of non-electoral organizations, was successful in advancing the politics of constructing a 'Hindu atmosphere', which consequently resulted in favourable electoral performance. Hindu nationalist politics in Kerala, which is premised on overcoming the 'non-Hindu' presence from the shared public sphere, forces us to rethink the prospects of what comes to be constituted as Kerala exceptionalism—communist and secular politics, shared religiosities and irreligiosities, and assertion of caste differences. The growing appeal of Hindutva politics in everyday life need not necessarily translate into electoral politics elsewhere, and whether Hindutva will have an electoral future in Kerala is unpredictable. Nevertheless, it certainly finds newer grounds and a *modus operandi* that seemingly transcend the cultural and political limits that it encountered earlier in the region.

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<sup>115</sup>Arafath, 'Southern Hindutva', p. 51.

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