

Social Spaces and the Public Sphere:
A spatial-history of modernity in Kerala, India

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Dedicated to my late grandmother P.V. Malathy who taught me so much about Kerala's culture;
late uncle Prof. T. P. Sreedharan who taught me about its politics; and
late Dr Vineet Kohli who taught me the importance of questioning

Your absence is forever felt.

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Abstract

Harikrishnan Sasikumar

Social Spaces and the Public Sphere: A spatial-history of modernity in Kerala, India

Every society produces its own social space—where people meet, engage and socialise in everyday life. Here, opinions are formed and “public consciousness” is shaped; it is a physical manifestation of the “public sphere”. What, then, can these social spaces tell us about modernity and social relations in a society? I explore this question in my research, in the context of Kerala modernity. Using discourse analysis, participant observation, and personal interviews, my work traces the transformation of public spaces in nineteenth and twentieth century Kerala. Here, I move away from an abstract notion of the public sphere, to focus on physical public spaces. Henri Lefebvre’s work on the production of (social) space, and the conceptualisation of a spatial triad—representations of space (conceived space), spatial practices (perceived space) and representational spaces (lived space)—allows us to study space “as itself”. Modernity then becomes linked to a contest for—and in—space.

Traditional social relations in pre-modern Kerala were determined by caste, and the lowered castes were excluded from mainstream society socially, ideologically, and indeed, spatially. The struggle for access to mainstream public spaces—markets, teashops, public roads—was pivotal in subverting this traditional social order. The socio-economic reforms of late nineteenth early-twentieth century created new spaces by the that continued to shape a rich and vibrant (masculine) modern public sphere centred around the various literary and science associations, reading rooms and libraries, film, arts and sports clubs, public grounds, etc. By the 1980s, a new struggle for spaces emerged between the state, capital and religion. Decentralisation project adopted by the government in the 1990s as a political response led to the creation of new spaces and a radical redefinition of civil society organisations in Kerala, thereby opening up a new spatiality—and new power struggle. Contemporary struggles in social spaces attempt to nurture on the one hand, the new grassroots movements, issue-based groups and rights-based organisations, while on the other, fight against the looming threat of political hijacking, privatization and communalisation. A spatial-history allows us to problematize a linear narrative of modernity, and account for its complexities in the contemporary times.

We sleep through our lives in a dreamless slumber.

But where is it, our life?

Where are our bodies?

Where is our space?

Georges Perec, *L'infra-ordinaire*

1. Introduction

- On January 31, 2018, the Durbar Hall in Eranakulam, Kerala saw unruly scenes after a group of people and temple officials of the nearby Shiva Temple objected to the display the body of award-winning artist Asanthan who had died of a heart attack. It was customary for the Kerala Lalitakala Akademi—an autonomous body promoting art—to display the body of any artist who passes away at the Hall for public to pay their homage.¹ In this instance, however, the temple officials argued that this would desecrate the temple. The issue was resolved after the Akademi decided to move the body to the eastern gallery, away from the temple’s entrance, but drew severe criticism for caving to fundamentalist, communal forces. Resigning from the Akademi for failing to “strongly defend against the fundamentalist, fascist agenda” of Hindu right-wing forces, art-critic and poet Kavitha Balakrishnan hit out at the institution, saying, “it owed an apology towards our democratic society”.²
- The same week, tensions build up at the site of an ongoing struggle by Dalit residents in Vadayampady near Kochi. Already for a year, Dalit families in the area had been protesting a “caste-wall” that was built around a public ground near the Bhajanamadam Bhagavathy temple by the Nair Service Society. The wall cut-off access to 95 cents of land that was shared by people in the locality, including Dalits who have inhabited the area since the late 1960s. In April 2017, demonstrators led by *Dalit Bhoo Avakasha Samara Munnani* had demolished the wall and continued with protests in the area. On 4th February 2018, a temporary truce was achieved when an all-party meeting agreed that the ground would remain accessible to everyone in the locality, with no wall around it for now.³
- In September 2018, Kerala saw unprecedented scenes after the Supreme Court of India ruled that women of all ages should be allowed entry into Sabarimala—a temple where, as-per customs, women of menstruating age (arbitrarily fixed at 10 to 50 years) were denied entry because of the belief that the deity is celibate. While the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) government led by Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) was quick to announce that it would take all necessary measures to implement this decree, large-scale protests were unleashed against this order by religious organizations with the support of the centre and right-wing political parties, leading to violence, imposition of curfews, and over 3000 arrests.⁴

¹ Anandan, (2018)

² Balan, (2018)

³ Anon., (2018)

⁴ Jayarajan, (2019)

The “public”—a shared field of visibility or common space for utterance—emerged in its modern form in Kerala for the first time in the nineteenth century.⁵ As in most other societies, the nascent public sphere in Kerala was an extremely cleaved space with most sections of populations having little or no access to it. Over the last two centuries, the struggle of modernity has been to expand the scope of these spaces, make them more accessible and available to people from across class, caste, gender and religious differences. Kerala has taken pride in the “progressive”, “secular” collective consciousness that had shaped its modern public sphere, thanks to the socio-religious reform movements of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries, followed by the wave of socialism and right-based development model that shaped politics since the 1930s.⁶ Yet, as the three incidents described above indicate, such struggles are far from settled. These are only three among the numerous cases that draw attention to the extremely complex story of modernity, religion and caste in contemporary Kerala, especially in the context of what has been termed the post-1980s religious revivalism,⁷ the “spilling over” of a proto-communalism that has long been incubating,⁸ and the resistance it faces from the progressive and secular forces. The challenges raised by the changing socio-political and economic developments over the last three decades have rekindled a debate on modernity both within the mainstream public sphere and within academic circles. This research contributes to these endeavours to problematize the story of modernity in Kerala. Moving away from the convention that most studies of modernity and public sphere begin with Habermas’ conception of the same, this thesis turns focus towards spaces—specifically on (social) spaces grounded in everyday experiences. It is guided theoretically by Henri Lefebvre’s emphasis on the importance of social spaces in shaping modern societies, which itself follows the humanist Marxist tradition. How can a study of spaces contribute to better understanding the contemporary contests between religious and secular forces? Who controls social spaces in Kerala and how are these power-relations changing? How resilient are everyday lived spaces to these controls, and what potential do they hold in resisting (and subverting) dominant social forces? A careful exploration of these questions, I argue, will help better understand the contemporary struggles in Kerala’s public sphere.

“Space” remains central to the various struggles that have contributed to dismantling existing hierarchies and replacing them with new forms of social formation—from the initial anti-caste movements like as the Channar Revolt of early nineteenth century, Ayyankali’s “bullock-cart protest” of 1893, the *panthibhojanam* (inter-caste dining), night-schools by early communists in the reading rooms, to the abovementioned incidents from contemporary times. If it was the pollution of a (dead) body in

⁵ Kumar, (2016), p.21

⁶ Electorally, both the left leaning Communist parties (their allies) as well as the centre-left Indian National Congress (and allies) have been active in Kerala. However, the acceptance that the communist ideology received meant that the political discourse in general adhered to the left of centre.

⁷ Osella & Osella, (2007), p.339

⁸ Panikkar, (2014), p.435

Asanthan's case, we see the struggle for a collective (Dalit) identity in Vadayampady, and that of gender identity in the case of Sabarimala—all manifesting themselves spatially. This, despite the fact that it was assumed that these questions—of human dignity, caste and gender—had been somewhat resolved by the progressive and secular movements that led Kerala into modernity: the social and religious reform movements of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, followed by the communist movement. Even as social spaces continue to be weighed down by hegemonic forces—most recently by neoliberalism and increased religiosity—a critical analysis demonstrates that this is also where resistance is built. A common thread running through this research relates to the struggles for control of social space and resistance, starting with the missionary activities that helped crack the traditional spatiality in early-nineteenth-century, to the forms of *autogestion* that have shaped resistance in contemporary social spaces through various civil society groups and associations. It allows critical analysis of not just caste and political forces that have constantly been at the centre of such struggles, but also critical questions of gender and religion. This is because this research does not treat them as struggles in the discursive and ideological realm alone, but explores their manifestation in everyday (physical) social spaces.

The disconnect between the lived spaces of higher caste Hindus and the lowered and slave castes is vital in understanding how hegemonic caste structure was challenged and subverted in nineteenth-century Kerala. The traditional order where the laws of purity and pollution defined spatiality meant that the Nambuthiri Brahmins along with the Nair Hindus dominated the distribution of social spaces, through carefully crafted spatial practices. Yet, the threat of pollution of the body meant that there remained a universe of difference between the everyday spaces of Brahmins and those of the slave castes like Pulaya and Paraya. Here, in these lived everyday spaces, missionaries and lowered caste reformers found the energy to subvert existing social relations. By the early twentieth century, everyday spaces like teashops, reading rooms, *kavalas*, schools and streets allowed the traversal of caste in a way unimaginable in the traditional order. Yet, part of this modernization also meant that there was a gendering of public spaces. The subversion of traditional order came at a compromise where gender replaced caste as a “natural” alternative. The progressive public sphere that was shaped in the background of the political movements starting 1930s was premised on this attempted binary of private/public roles for women and men, respectively. The unresolved questions of gender and caste were relegated to the private realm; a condition on which the “secular” public sphere was cajoled in the twentieth century.

As the state control over social spaces increased in the second half of the twentieth century, new forms of resistance grew. By the 1970s and 1980s, struggles between the state, religion and capitalism began a new phase of spatial transformation because of social, political and economic changes resulting from internal and external pressures. On the one hand, the Gulf migration allowed disposable income to be

available like never before, despite low economic growth. On the other, political changes, both within the state and outside, and stagnation of the left demanded a critical analysis of the coveted “Kerala model”. This period also saw a rise of Hindu nationalism in the social spaces across the state and increased political violence. The decentralisation project of the nineties ushered in a new model of expanding civil society organisations, which allowed for several new social movements transcending political differences to emerge. This is the contemporary phase of transformation of social spaces, where on the one hand, human rights and feminist organisations, cultural forums and non-party affiliated movements have emerged as the new social spaces, while on the other, religious social organisations, political parties, and private capital continue their attempts to appropriate and hegemonies them. Lefebvre’s framework allows for a careful study of the emancipatory power of such decentralised grassroots movement through *autogestion*.

This thesis argues, in short, that the spatial history of modern Kerala tells a fascinating story of dominance and resistance. It adds to the emerging literature on Kerala modernity that aims at problematizing a linear narrative and exploring the contradictions within such a narrative. Every time a certain hegemonic power has attempted to capture social spaces and maintain dominance—be it caste in the traditional system, the state in the post-1940s period, or communal-neoliberal nexus in the contemporary times—new forms of resistance have emerged from within the social spaces. Two observations may be made about these movements and such spaces: one, that the public in Kerala has preferred a public sphere and social spaces that are autonomous and remained outside any direct control; and two, that the contemporary social spaces have a potential to be progressive secular spaces if rightly nurtured. The challenge, as we will see, comes from the religious and capitalistic forces, rapid privatization, and the replacement of physical spaces by virtual ones.

1.1. Space and Time

“Father, isn’t the world only as far as Tripunitbura?”

No, son! It is as far as Vilangankunnu”⁹

This quote from an article on the printing press published in the turn of the twentieth century was meant to demonstrate how the introduction of print media revolutionized Kerala society. Already in the second half of the nineteenth century, and specifically since the 1890s, one can see how modernity was introduced into the public consciousness through articles on all aspects of Western modernity—from forms of governance to lifestyle-choices, and from ideologies to physics and chemistry. The abovementioned quote is specifically interesting because it points to another contribution of the print--

⁹ Cited in an article from 1901, this quote where a father tells his son that the world extended till Vilayankunnu (100 kilometres from Thripunnithura), had meant to demonstrate how the printing-press had broadened the worldview of Malayalees in Kerala. See: Shankunnimenon, (1076 ME (1901))

the spatial expansion of a Malayalee's world-view—by noting rather sarcastically here that it expanded from Thripunnithura to Vilangankunnu, which is only a hundred kilometres away. It reflects the sentiment that the invention of the printing was, in essence, the spatializing of the word: a “set of tiny marks marching in neat line... across pages and pages of white paper”.¹⁰In 1891 CE (1067 Malayalam Era; hereafter, ME), *Vidya Vinodini*¹¹ featured an article titled “*Manushyante Praacheenavasthayum Naveenavasthayum*” (Peoples’ Traditional state and modern state)¹². Here, modernity is not presented as a novelty, but as a “phase” or a “state of being” that take many millennia to normalize. The temporal nature of modernity is important. Nevertheless, it only tells half the story, since every society is also unique in its spatiality: “social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*”.¹³

The transformation of Kerala from a traditional caste-ridden society to a progressive, secular modern society has been a matter of much academic, social and political interest. Especially the pace at which this transformation occurred—specifically the period of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—has been of keen academic interest. While a majority of the works on Kerala modernity, especially in the last century, provided a linear story of transition (the initiation of Western education, modern forms of governance and the creation of middle-class facilitated modernity), newer studies have challenged this narrative.¹⁴ Research that revisits the role of lowered castes, women, and subaltern publics in Kerala point out that this transition was complex. This is because these sections remained economically, socially, culturally, and indeed spatially, excluded from the mainstream modern public sphere. Only recently have their self-narratives and world-views been given the academic and analytical rigour they deserve. Early reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and Poykayil Appachan did not fight against the caste system because they were introduced to Western ideas through formal education; they did so in spite of it. Their endeavours cannot be fully comprehended if we define modernity as a linear and temporal story. This is important for two reasons: firstly, these members did not form part of the mainstream public, and therefore, their contributions can and must be studied only by focusing on the everyday—more specifically, on the everyday social spaces and lived experiences. This is where the early struggles against hegemony were fought—in the public markets, schools, streets, and later, temples. Secondly, and consequently, a study of the spatiality of modernity (and not merely the temporality) is important. Identity is, after all, composed of interwoven threads—of caste, religion, gender, age, beliefs, occupations, etc.—all of which manifest themselves in space (bodily space, or social space).

¹⁰ Harvey, (1990), p.206

¹¹ a literary, cultural and social magazine published from Thrissur between 1889 and 1903

¹² VSV, (1891 (1067 ME))

¹³ Lefebvre, (1991), p.404; emphasis in original

¹⁴ Kumar, (2016); Mohan, (2016); Menon, (1994); Osella & Osella, (2000); Devika, (2012), etc.

1.2 Space and Place

A phenomenological understanding of “space” often uses as a starting point Entrikin’s 1991 book *“The Betweenness of Place”*, which sees space as a “meeting point for the subjective and objective space....where meanings and objective reality encounter”.¹⁵ Eric O. Jacobsen, in a more recent but similarly titled book *“The Space Between”*, makes clearer and more binary distinction between the two: “place, in contrast to space, is a context-specific, meaning-rich concept... Space is more abstract and undifferentiated than place.”¹⁶ In this sense, *space* is more abstract, while *place* is subjective space. However, such binaries are problematic because on the one hand, they provide an over-simplistic understanding of space and place, while on the other, they shift focus towards a space-place dilemma that remains unresolved and renders weak its analytical value.¹⁷ Firstly, in diverse societies, individual and social experiences are shaped not merely by subjectivity at a mental level, but also at the physical and sensory realms. The separation of an objective space and a subjective place becomes unviable here because, as we will see in Section 2.3, any attempt at understanding the everyday socials must include the experiences of touch, smell and taste. Subjective experiences, in other words, are influenced by the spatiality of society, which in turn is controlled by those in power. On the other hand, the Cartesian thinking that allows for such separation of “abstract” and “real” space does little to reconcile the dilemma that arises because of such distinctions. Even Entrikin’s humanist position only allows for a reversion to the Cartesian position of a duality between “material (external) world and the (internal) world of human consciousness”.¹⁸

The framework adopted in this research follows an approach that is less interested in the separation of place and space, but attempts to reconcile the two as being forged together in a “dialectical unity”.¹⁹ Consequently, the interest would move away from the separation and towards an analysis of their interdependence. How are place and space-related? Are they at once the domains of hegemony and dominance, but also of autonomy and resistance? How are these spaces and their spatial practices determined and how do they change? These are the more interesting questions, if we accept that “place” is, after all, “practised space”.²⁰ Place is where different social worlds, identities and politics manifest themselves at a given point in time; it is also where the contradictions of social order are laid bare. It is the everyday where experience is lived and acted out. This means it is also the avenue where

¹⁵ Saar & Palang, (2009), p.6

¹⁶ Jacobsen, (2012), p.55

¹⁷ For a detailed critique of the limitations of Cartesian definitions of space, see Saar & Palang, (2009) and Merrifield, (1993)

¹⁸ Merrifield, (1993), p.517; a similar limitation has also been pointed out in the separation of “inner” and “outer” realms by Chatterjee, (1993)

¹⁹ Merrifield, (1993), p.520

²⁰ Certeau, (1984), p.117

change in society and life begins.²¹ This is why any theoretic and political analysis must start with a systematic analysis of experiences in (and indeed, of) space, as embodied in place.

The *body* becomes central to understanding this relationship between place and space, and the interactions between people become more than mere socializing of the individuals themselves and take on a spatial significance. These associational spaces were important in shaping social, political and economic relations in a given society at a given point in time. This research is a study of such associational spaces in modern Kerala society. It focusses on associational spaces where human interactions occur, but unlike Putnam's "participatory spaces" which focus on organizational structures; my work turns towards the informal voluntary socials formed around spaces like reading rooms, public grounds and teashops, and the lived experiences of spaces like schools.²² Although some form of organizational structure might exist in some of the spaces studied here (such as Kudumbasree, caste-associations, etc), the framework adopted in the research allows us to separate their "conceived role" from their "lived role", where the latter often outgrows the former and shapes everyday social experiences. In Kerala, the separation or definition of such informal associations seems to have become much more important in the twenty-first century as the separations between *aalkkoottam* (crowds), *ayalkkoottam* (neighbourhood groups), and *koottayma* (a collective) reveal. For now, it will suffice to clarify that the use of the word "space" in the present work has been to accommodate for the socio-political significance, as derived from the phenomenological endeavours. "Place" has been used to describe the arena where space is embodied in a tangible, physical form. The two remain intertwined.

1.3 Methodology

A theoretical limitation of the postcolonial and subaltern scholars is that they fall back on binaries such as private/public, and believe in a misplaced idea of an *a priori* sense of collectivism.²³ Sociologists and historians have provided much more detailed accounts of specific caste-based impact of modernization in Kerala.²⁴ More recently, specifically over the last decade, there has been a revival of interest in the centrality of space and lived experiences, and this is where histories, narratives and autobiographies have served crucial methodological tools.²⁵ Self-narratives, as Kumar (2016) argues, offer crucial insights into the specific formation of modernity; its grounds "aren't found in the privately experienced moments of the self-intuition, but in the experience of being exposed in a field of perception populated

²¹ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.59-60

²² Putnam's understandings of social capital continue to consider associations in their organizational forms, and neglect both informal associational spaces, and new forms of associations, rendering it less useful for the present research. See: Fischer, (2005), pp.161-162

²³ Menon, (1994), pp.3-4; Thiranagama, (2019)

²⁴ See for instance, Jeffrey, (1976); Osella & Osella, (2000); Menon, (1994); Mencher, (1966), etc.

²⁵ See for instance, Kumar, (2016); Mohan, (2016); Chaturvedi, (2015); Amir, (2019); Thiranagama, (2019); Christy, (2019); Arunima, (2006); Varghese, (2014)

by others”.²⁶ Osella & Osella (2006) note, similarly, that narratives allow people to make sense of their lived experience in everyday life.²⁷ This nuance of separating the “lived” from the “perceived” is crucial, as we shall see, to the spatial understanding of modernity attempted in this research. The focus moved away from a definition (conception) of spaces, towards a better understanding of how (social) spaces are perceived and lived in.

Pilot visits were conducted in summer 2016 (during the state elections in Kerala), and in January 2017. During these trips, I attended the public events organised by the various political parties in central and northern parts of Kerala, and consulted some experts to get their inputs on my area of research. Among others, I spoke to Prof. K.N. Panikkar, Prof. J. Prabhash, M.G. Radhakrishnan, Dr J. Devika and Dr George Mathew, all of who have worked extensively on Kerala politics, history and culture. The party events helped interact with the common public were at these events. Two characteristic features of modern public sphere in Kerala that became increasingly clear from these conversations were that (a) it was very spatial in its scope; and (b) it was closely linked to the vernacular language of Kerala—Malayalam. The importance of libraries, reading rooms, teashops and other informal spaces came up in multiple conversations about where politics is discussed and debated. It also became evident that Malayalam has an extremely rich repository of literary and cultural material online, in print and stored away in the various archives across the state. Drawing on these experiences, extensive fieldwork was conducted for a total of nine months in summer in 2017 and 2018, during which I undertook archival research, and conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observations.

Archival research was carried out predominantly at Appan Thampuran Memorial Library in Thrissur, which has an extensive collection of little magazines and periodicals. While Kerala’s early journals like *Bhashaposhini* and *Vidya Vinodini* were useful records of how print-media assisted modernisation in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries, little magazines like *Gopuram*, *Mangalodayam*, etc. provided insights on the political debates of mid-twentieth century. Relevant secondary literature was sourced also from Sahitya Akademi (Thrissur), State Central Library and Kerala University Library (Thiruvananthapuram), Bharatiya Vichara Kendram (Thiruvananthapuram) and Kozhikode Public Library and Research Centre (Kozhikode). While the rich and varied accounts of caste and religious reform movements in Kerala, academic works on Kerala’s literary spheres and early novels provided useful insights into how space was conceived and divided in the traditional order, autobiographical accounts allowed the research to turn focus towards the everyday experiences.

Autobiographies, memoirs, biographies and recorded speeches from the early modern period of Kerala’s public sphere (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) have been used for analysis in this

²⁶ Kumar, (2016), p.281

²⁷ Osella & Osella, (2006), pp.572-573

research. One challenge in this regard has been the lack of literary records of people from the lowest tiers of society in the early stages—especially from the *Pulaya* and *Paraya* castes. However, this changed by the early twentieth century, when leaders like Poykayil Appachan and Ayyankali started to write in periodicals and magazines about the experiences of lowered castes. Autobiographies of Mannathu Padmanabhan, V.T. Bhattathirippad, E.M.S. Namboothirippad and Kanipayur Shankaran Namboothirippad were useful for insights into the everyday lives of caste-Hindus, and Devaki Nilayamgode's autobiography *Atharjanam* was crucial in experiences of Nambuthiri women. Published speeches by Sree Narayana Guru, Kumaran Asan, Poykayil Appachan, C. Kesavan, and Ayyankali, biographies of P. Krishna Pillai and K. Kelappan also provided useful insights into this period of Kerala history. The prevalence of autobiographies in the latter part of the twentieth century, especially by communist leaders provide useful insights into the public sphere in the post-reform period in Kerala. Early communist leaders like E.M.S, E.K. Nayanar, E. Balanandan and K. Madhavan were particularly useful, since they lived through the transitional phase of Kerala modernity. The anecdotes, experiences and memories in these texts made it quite clear that any reading of the public sphere in terms of binaries—private/public, inside/outside, traditional/modern and religious/secular cannot help critically analyse any society, and certainly not Kerala. This is not to say that these differences (between private and public, or traditional and modern) do not exist. But that these were not binary identities, but, as I shall attempt to demonstrate in this work, ambiguously defined dialectical unities at best. The second phase of modernity in Kerala roughly coincided with the rise of the communist movement. Beginning with the 1930s, this period saw the rise of social spaces that promoted democratic and secular associations, despite the strong gender bias. Personal interviews with ordinary people who are currently in their middle or old ages provided useful insights into the nature of living and/or growing up in late twentieth century, as did the autobiographies and memoirs of activists, political leaders, writers and common citizens.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for data on the more contemporary use of social spaces. Fifteen personal interviews were conducted, and there were seventeen respondents spread across different districts.²⁸ The resultant demographics of the interviewees (see Table 1) themselves represent some preliminary insights on the nature of social spaces in Kerala, and I shall briefly describe a few here. Firstly, although the respondents were selected using snowball sampling and no measures were taken to prioritize one gender, religion or caste over others, the fact that thirteen(out of fifteen) were males may be explained by the fact that socializing with a stranger (despite the explanation that I was a researcher) was not easy for women, especially younger women. Three potential female respondents, all in the age group of thirty years or lower, who had agreed to do interviews eventually cancelled. Despite initial interest in the research when I spoke to them, there was hesitance when I tried to follow up and

²⁸ Two interviews—both with respondents below the thirty-year age group—happened with two friends (each time) choosing to talk to me together.

arrange an interview; one said she didn't think she would have anything to contribute on a study on public spaces, and another suggested that I should talk to her husband or brother instead. The second interesting observation was to do with the spaces that the respondents chose for the interviews. Once I had arranged an interview with the respondent, I let them choose the location for the interview, and once again, some general and interesting observations can be made. Eight of the interviews happened in public spaces: two in upmarket cafes (one of which was in a shopping mall), three in wayside restaurants or teashops, one in a library premise, one under a tree on the beach, and one on the sidelines of a Kudumbasree meeting. The remaining interviews happened in private spaces like offices or homes of the respondent. The two interviews in cafes (3 respondents) were with respondents who were young—Arun (age 33), Jithesh (age 25) and Sreeraj (age 25). Although these are public spaces, they are spaces that had to be “purchased”, unlike a library or a beach. In one of the interviews, I had suggested a small teashop near our location, but the respondents chose to drive to a shopping mall in the outskirts of Kozhikode city instead and asked to meet them there. Older respondents unsurprisingly had a different notion of public places where to meet for an interview. I had called Ashraf (age 64) while waiting at a café in Kochi. When he arrived, he swiftly suggested that we move to the beach, where we sat under a tree for his interview.²⁹ Hema (age 45) met me in the premises of a library, and we spoke in a veranda in front of it. Although no generalization can be made as such, it was interesting that there seemed to be a clear indication that different age groups had different choices when it came to public/social spaces of choice even before the interview began.

Table 1: Interviewee Profiles

| Sl. No. | Interviewee profiles | Age Category | Gender | Date of Interview | Native |
|---------|----------------------|--------------|--------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | Santhosh | 30 to 50 | Male | 180613 | Murkkanad, Thrissur |
| 2 | Ashraf | Over 50 | Male | 180623 | Fort Kochi, Ernakulam |
| 3 | Hema Joseph | 30 to 50 | Female | 180627 | Pamboor, Thrissur |
| 4 | Kureepuzha Sreekumar | Over 50 | Male | 180703 | Kureepuzha, Kollam |
| 5 | Ajikumar | 30 to 50 | Male | 180704 | Poothotta, Ernakulam |
| 6 | Vijayakumari | Over 50 | Female | 180707 | Vembayam, Thiruvananthapuram |
| 7 | M.N.Karassery | Over 50 | Male | 180718 | Karassery, Kozhikode |
| 8 | Babu Purushottaman | Over 50 | Male | 180719 | Kozhikode |
| 9 | Jithesh / Sreeraj | Under 30 | Male | 180720 | Kozhikode / Kasaragod |

²⁹ Later, he said to me that the trees on that boulevard were all planted in the 1970s by youth clubs in the area, of which he was a member.

| | | | | | |
|----|---------------------|----------|------|--------|-------------------------------------|
| 10 | Madhu | 30 to 50 | Male | 180721 | Meenachil, Kottayam |
| 11 | Arun Shanthinilayam | 30 to 50 | Male | 180721 | Kozhikode |
| 12 | K. Ramachandran | Over 50 | Male | 180722 | Annur, Kannur |
| 13 | P. Achuthan | Over 50 | Male | 180724 | Mangattidom, Kannur |
| 14 | Ajith Kumar | 30 to 50 | Male | 180727 | Malayankizhu, Thiruvananthapuram |
| 15 | Gopal / Jishnu | Under 30 | Male | 180729 | Thrissur |

The overall aim of the interviews was to gauge the respondent’s experiences in—and perceptions of—public spaces. Respondents were a mix of people I met at the different public events and established contact with during my pilot fieldtrips in 2016 and 2017, prominent thinkers and activists who are known to the general public, or contacts I received from personal acquaintances who were associated with the communist party, RSS, etc. The idea was to gauge social spaces as perceived and/or lived spaces. How did the common man engage with/in public spaces, how did these interactions shape their political and personal life, and how have such interactions changed over time: these were the main themes I explored through the interviews. Specifically, I asked them open-ended questions on what they understood by *pothu-idam* (public places), examples of spaces that they would classify as “public”, and whether they actively used these spaces. The informal nature of some of the social spaces meant that their perceived and lived roles often outgrew their conceived roles. These questions also opened up other avenues, such as the interaction of public and private spaces, the nature of new “spaces” like WhatsApp and Facebook, etc. It was interesting to notice how certain aspects/spaces were prioritised over others, and what constituted different people’s understanding of what constitutes the public/private. All interviews were recorded with prior consent, respondents were explained the purpose and background of research. The consent forms signed by the respondents were notified to and approved by the Ethics Committee at DCU. Transcriptions of all the interviews were done by me and the same, along with the original audio recordings, have been stored on the encrypted workstation at DCU in compliance with the university regulations, and are available on request.

The transcriptions were then compiled on Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software for basic coding. The preliminary coding involved identifying the common themes or keywords that emerged in the interviews, such as political activism, religiosity, social values, family values, etc. These “nodes” were then assigned to the relevant discussions on specific social spaces. For instance, a mention of “increased religiosity” by a respondent could be assigned to a relevant discussion on religious institutions as public spaces, etc. This exercise helped to not only identify a set of most commonly recurring themes, but also to decide which ones were more relevant for the current study and narrow down to them. The next level of coding therefore allowed me to identify the most commonly

mentioned public spaces from across the interviews, as has been reproduced in Table 2. In subsequent stages of analysis, some of these were revised or grouped together for analytical purposes, and more weightage was given to ones which could reach out—at least in theory—to people from across gender, class, religious and political differences.

Table 2: Most common public spaces mentioned in the interviews, coded on Nvivo

| Name | Sources | References |
|--------------------------------------|---------|------------|
| HR, Environment, new spaces | 6 | 19 |
| Library and reading room | 11 | 19 |
| Arts, Theatre and Sports Clubs | 7 | 10 |
| Teashops | 8 | 10 |
| Temple Grounds | 7 | 8 |
| Public grounds | 5 | 6 |
| Other spaces | 4 | 5 |
| Seashores and river shores | 4 | 5 |
| <i>Aalthara</i> | 3 | 4 |
| Coffee shops | 3 | 3 |
| Barbershops | 2 | 2 |
| College and educational institutions | 2 | 2 |
| Film Societies | 2 | 2 |
| Junctions (<i>kavala</i>) | 1 | 1 |

Source: Coded from the transcripts by the author using Nvivo

1.4 Chapter outline

Studies on the modern public sphere, now accepted as a *sine-qua-non* of healthy democracies, almost always begin their analysis with Habermas’ definition. Habermas defines the public sphere as a space where “problems relevant for the reproduction of society *as a whole* could be perceived and dealt with...a sounding board that would be sufficiently complex for thematising and treating society-wide problems”.³⁰ Works on Kerala modernity have also followed this trajectory, beginning either from Habermas’ public sphere (See for instance Ramachandran, (1995), Devika, (2005); Punathil, S (2013)), or focus on organised social-capital frameworks (See: Mannathukkaren, (2010), Chathukulam & John, (2003), Radhakrishnan , (2005), Thiranagama, (2019)). While both of these provide fascinating insights into how public spaces are conceived, their theoretical limitation lies in the fact that both these frameworks either focus on a despatialised understanding of the public sphere, or fail to bridge the gap

³⁰ Habermas, (1998), p.343

between conceived and lived space. The first step in the present research, then, is to revisit the limitations of Habermas' understanding of the public sphere, and lay out the alternative theoretical framework that has been used in this research. This is done in the second chapter. This chapter engages at length with the strength of a spatial analysis in better understanding modernity. Beginning with Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space, it argues that this framework is adaptable in the Indian context, using the works of Guru and Sarukkai (2012; 2019) who have turned focus on the importance of lived experiences in understanding modernity in caste-societies. Guru (2012) extends Lefebvre's conception of "space as self" to look at the production of (social) space in a caste-societies. This idea of the self as space was extremely important to a society like Kerala, where the social reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries aimed to introduce agency to the former non-Brahmin castes, especially the Dalits. This done, four broad characteristics of this framework emerge, which take forward the present research.

Firstly, unlike Habermas, Lefebvre's social space is contextual, and does not make any claims to universality. This allows for a study of social spaces to take into account the temporal and spatial elements that elucidate the social formations in specific societies. For a large portion of Dalits in Kerala, the first social spaces were slave schools which were outside the "normal spaces" of the clean castes—the mainstream public sphere as we know it now.³¹ Surely then, a study of the public sphere in twentieth-century Kerala will be incomplete without studying how caste and gender played an important role in defining spatiality. What did it mean to women and other suppressed communities in Kerala that a new 'modern' secular public was taking shape in the nineteenth century? How did they lay claim to this space? The third chapter addresses these questions, to explore the ruptures and continuities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The *preparation* of the Dalit self to become public was an integral part of modernity in Kerala.³² Chapter 3 engages with this discussion on nineteenth and early twentieth-century Kerala. Who controlled social spaces? In what context—and where—did resistance to the traditional order emerge, and how was it received? I engage in this chapter with these questions. The deconstruction of spaces allows us to study how new social spaces are created in a new social order. If the traditional order was replaced in the early twentieth century by new social spaces, they must also shape new spatial practices. A study of the new social spaces and their potential for change are explored in Chapter 4. This phase ends with the 1930s when Kerala saw the first broad mobilization for civil and political rights.

Secondly, Lefebvre turns attention not just away from the advanced Western nations, but also towards socialist societies. The emergence of a state-socialist model in post-independence Kerala did much in the form of implementing land-reforms and shaping a left-leaning public discourse in Kerala based on

³¹ Mohan, (2016). p.47

³² Mohan, (2005). p.57

social equity and basic rights. The emergence of communism carried forward the social reforms that had redefined spatiality in early modern Kerala, but the State machinery's attempts at controlling social spaces raised new challenges. The attempts' to control spaces, and the resistance from below, form a crux of the arguments made in Chapter 5. How did the new (social) spaces transform (or not) existing power relations in society? What new challenges emerged which led to the social and spatial changes of the 1980s and 1990s in Kerala? These questions will be addressed in this chapter.

Thirdly, Lefebvre's framework also creates space to explore the questions of religion and secularism more closely. In Habermas' public sphere, it was assumed that secularism would ensure a modern public sphere where rationality and communication serve the social purposes that religion once served. Lefebvre, on the contrary, argues that while on the one hand religious spaces are used by the authorities to shape discourse and maintain a status-quo in the lived spaces, on the other urbanisation and modernity led to an increase in secular spaces.³³ But the test of space affected religion and Churches as much as it affected secularism. In other words, the secularization of society is like any other social change and can only happen if it is supported by the creation of spaces—both abstract but also 'real'—where religion and secularism can compete and coexist.³⁴ But the challenged posed by neoliberalism, increased privatization and the invention of digital media meant that private capital emerged as a major power in controlling social spaces. These changes and their impact on social spaces are explored in Chapter 6, which focuses on the post-1990s period when a new grassroots level politics allowed for a new form of resistance—that of *autogestion*—in social spaces. How can social spaces challenge rising religious and conservative sentiments? Can they do so successfully without direct control of states/political agents? What are the new spaces and how resilient are they to the contests of space? These questions are dealt with in detail.

Finally, the question of gender continues to be an underlying thread through these chapters. This is because it remained a question neglected by the spatial transformations and political movements in modern Kerala. Lefebvre acknowledges the masculine nature of spaces: since its inception, space has relied on the "dominance of male principle".³⁵ Massey (1994) makes a similar argument about the exclusionary nature of spaces, and on gender violence:

“...from the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are

³³ Lefebvre, (1991), pp. 253, 268

³⁴ Such public spaces will be a part of the Habermasian public sphere, but Lefebvre allows us to shift the focus from “sphere” to “space”, where traversal of sociabilities physically occurs. For such a space to exist, we must first understand the conditions that maintain the different sociabilities. Also, we must recognise that there exist other spaces outside of the public sphere; spaces where people meet and opinions are created.

³⁵ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.409-410

not only in themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood”.³⁶

In Kerala’s public sphere—especially in the literary sphere—this reflected through what Devika, (2013) calls ‘homoaesthetic circles’: informal but hierarchical intellectual-cultural networks of literary communication in which (almost exclusively) male critics, authors, readers, publishers and others participate.³⁷ Although attempts at challenging this dominance emerged in the early 20th century (See Chapter 4), Devika and Sukumar (2006) have argued that such attempts were soon “tamed” to the terms set by modern gender ideology (Chapter 5).³⁸ Lefebvre’s framework lets us go a step farther by differentiating literary publics from the non-literary (lived) public spaces. A change in social relations in society leads to (or is led by) the creation of new (social) spaces. Indeed, the homoaesthetic circles were not limited to an abstract literary sphere; the dominance of men continued also in spaces like reading-rooms, teashops, libraries and public grounds, where politics, books and public issues were engaged with on a daily basis. Chapter 7 is a summary of the observations made in the research, and possible scope for further research.

Kerala has been of keen interest to academics across disciplines owing to the pace at which it transformed from an extremely casteist society to a progressive and secular society. Generally, this rapid transformation is owed to the social and reform movements, early efforts to promote education and the communist wave from the 1930s. However, this research is an attempt to study Kerala’s modernity from the transformation in its social spaces. Here, we see the dynamics of this change, as manifested in a struggle between hegemonic power (caste, state, capitalism, communalism) and resistance (secularism, mobilization, grassroots democracy). It contributes, on the one hand, to a non-linear narrative of modernity which lays bare not just the strengths but also the weaknesses of it. More generally, by moving away from Habermas’ public sphere, I argue that an effective alternative framework to modernity can be arrived at using Lefebvre’s work on space, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the difference between “space as conceived” and “space as lived”. Kerala, as we will see, provides a compelling case-study in this direction.

³⁶ Massey, (1994), p.179

³⁷ Devika, (2013), pp.9-11

³⁸ Devika & Sukumar (2006), p.4472

2. Studying Space: Public sphere and the Social Space

Public sphere and modernity have come to be intricately connected concepts. This is because the idea of a “public opinion” emerges alongside the democratisation of politics, and the public sphere, it is generally assumed, is where these opinions are formed through deliberation and discourse between the different sections of populations. In other words, the public sphere as a *sine qua non* of a healthy democracy in the modern world, and a point of departure for studies on modernity. Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) was among the first works that systematically analysed the transformation of public sphere, where he studied the emergence and eventual decline of a bourgeois public sphere in Western European nations in eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Here, public sphere—“a *public* of *private* individuals who join in debate of issues bearing *common interest* or *public concern*”—is a space where “problems relevant for the reproduction of society as a whole could be perceived and dealt with...a sounding board that would be sufficiently complex for thematising and treating society-wide problems”.¹ It is conceived as a space where contentious issues were discussed, deliberated and weighed—rationally—and a ‘public will’ is shaped. Using examples from England, France and Germany, he studied how the democratisation of the public sphere—where its subject transformed from being the ‘educated strata’ to the uneducated ‘people’—was an important phase in strengthening participatory democracy in these societies.²

Over the last few decades, a number of criticisms of the Habermasian reading of the public sphere have emerged, especially from feminist and subaltern studies scholars who have pointed out the assumption of homogeneity, de-spatiality and neglect of subaltern public spheres.³ On the one hand, its assumptions that studied society through binaries of public/private, state/civil society, religious/secular came under scrutiny. Importantly, the argument that the public sphere was a space exclusively for ‘public matters’ and that matters of sex, gender and religion concern the domain of intimate domestic or personal life came to be disproved. For instance, the resurgence of religions and religious movements into political and cultural publics became a common feature across the world leading—as Casanova (1994) argued—to a *deprivatization* of religion since the 1980s. Habermas’ more recent works on religion and what he terms “post-secularism” take a much more balanced stand as compared to the binaries from his earlier works. On the other hand, there was also a rise in scholarship from the post-colonial non-West, providing fresh insights into how and why concepts of modernity, democracy and nationalism should themselves be read in a new light. Consequently, critical theorists, subaltern and

¹ Habermas, (1998), pp.27,343, emphasis added

² Calhoun, (1992), p.5

³ See for instance Fraser, (1990); Geoff, (1992); Devika, (2003)

feminist scholarship pointed towards a need for revisionist historiography of the concept of ‘public sphere’ altogether.⁴

This raises a theoretical challenge to the present research, which has at its centre, an inquiry into the transformation of space. This chapter addresses this challenge and argues that an alternative and more useful framework to understand modernity can be devised from Lefebvre’s work on space. Such an approach is beneficial for two reasons. Firstly, unlike Habermas’ conception, this allows for a much more complex and nuanced understanding of the avenues where public opinions are formed and socialization occurs at the level of everyday experience. Secondly, it allows for space itself to be treated with analytical rigour, taking account of the struggles for control of—and resistance in—social spaces. The following section will engage with the major limitations of Habermas’ conception of the public sphere which make it unfit as a framework for the present research. Then, I will turn specifically to the case of modernity in India, where I shall discuss some engagements of the postcolonial scholarship that have pointed to the complexities of modernity in India, and elucidate this point using examples from different parts of early-modern colonial India. Having demonstrated the limitation of Habermas’ public sphere in caste-societies like India, in Section 2.3, I make the case that a more useful alternative theoretical framework can be arrived at, using Lefebvre’s study of social spaces and grassroots democracy or *autogestion*. Finally, I will argue that this approach allows turning focus towards the everyday lived experiences, which is an essential part of understanding modernity.

2.1. Rethinking the Public Sphere

While studying the modern public sphere in Western Europe, Habermas borrows from Kant’s idea of the “public use of one’s reason” which, to Kant, was a precondition to the enlightenment project—to be considered credible one was expected to convince his public, his world.⁵ This “world” that Kant alludes to is the public sphere—constituted at the time by the educated, aristocratic classes, and mostly men. “Public will”, it was presumed, would be unanimous and shaped by these elites. The French Revolution and emerging class conflicts demanded a revision of the Kantian view that a public sphere of bourgeoisie created a public discourse from the perspective of humanity as a whole and that there was a singular public will. This idea that the public can have more than one opinion found a voice in the works of Hegel. As Habermas summarizes Hegel’s view on the issue, “the public opinion of the private people assembled to form a public no longer retained a basis of unity and truth; it degenerated to the level of a subjective opinion of the many”.⁶ Thus, there was a shift from what Kant called “public agreement”, to Hegel’s “public opinion”. Marx, in his work, uses this separation of Hegel’s and goes

⁴ Fraser, (1990), p.62

⁵ Habermas, (1991), p.106

⁶ Habermas, (1991), p.119

further to argue that public opinion was false consciousness and the public sphere was the arena of conflict of class interests.⁷ To Marx, a public sphere can only realise its ideal conditions—the subjection of political domination, and accessibility—by the destruction of class differences.⁸ Habermas dissents with Marx here, suggesting that a public sphere can be realised “without recourse to the violent overthrow of the existing social order” by democratising it to improve its quality (rational-critical debate) and quantity (accessibility).⁹ This is the crux of his argument, that in a liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere that he presents as an ideal-type, we as a society can conceive a single comprehensible public sphere where interlocutors participate *as if* they were social equals and public-will can be shaped. He concedes that in its earliest forms, these spaces claimed a sphere regulated “from above”—by the gentry and aristocratic classes—against public authorities themselves.¹⁰ The early bourgeois form of society meant that consequently, the public sphere thus developed was limited to the aristocracy and intelligentsia in society, keeping outside its purview, the large proletariat masses. Public opinion was shaped in the elite spaces, controlled by the intelligentsia. The new sociability and emphasis for a rational-critical discourse grew in spaces like coffee shops (in the United Kingdom), salons (in France), literary and table societies (in Germany), and other similar institutions.¹¹ In time, these spaces also began to embrace a ‘wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers’.¹² Soon, coffeehouses sprang up across Europe and were outlets for streams of newsletters, pamphlets, commodity and share prices, news and gossip.¹³ By the dawn of the eighteenth century, there were over a thousand coffeehouses in London alone; and in them, the gradual emergence of a ‘civil society’ separate from the ruler or the State where public opinion was formed, and a separation of the private and public realms.¹⁴ Further, religion was relegated to the realm of the private, since its traditional societal and public functions lose relevance in modern society.¹⁵ Yet, as we will see, “democratisation” does not always mean inclusion, insofar as the spaces continue to be owned and controlled by a privileged section. Even in Kerala, it was not so much the magnanimity of upper-caste Hindus that allowed an expansion of the public sphere, but the struggles led from the lowered castes.

As has been pointed out by others, this definition of the public sphere faces a number of theoretical challenges. Nancy Fraser, for instance, points to Habermas’ failure to problematize the dubious assumptions that underlie his bourgeois model, which leaves us at “the end of Structural

⁷ Holub, (1991), p.5; Habermas, (1991), pp.123-124

⁸ Habermas, (1991), pp.127-128

⁹ Holub, (1991), p.6

¹⁰ Habermas, (1991), p.27

¹¹ Habermas, (1991), pp.32-34

¹² Fraser, (1990); Ryan, (1999)

¹³ ‘The internet in a cup’ (18th December 2003), *The Economist (Christmas Edition)*:
<https://www.economist.com/node/2281736>

¹⁴ Calhoun, (1992), p.7

¹⁵ Casanova, (1994), p.19

Transformation without a conception of the public sphere that is sufficiently different from the bourgeois conception” that he begins with.¹⁶ A theoretical critique of Habermas’ model has grown over the last three decades, arguing that from the very beginning that the public sphere has been an arena where different and opposing publics contest for space and that there are groups of people—women, urban poor, lower castes—who have always remained outside the purview of the mainstream public sphere.¹⁷ Santos (2012) argued recently that the public sphere is an entirely eurocentric concept that the global South cannot relate to; a “tribalism of the European bourgeoisie at the beginning of the eighteenth century” converted into a universal theoretical concept by colonialism and capitalism.¹⁸

The most relevant critique of Habermas’ public sphere for the present research is the one aimed at its de-spatialized nature. While he positions the public sphere “between civil society and the state”, he does not clarify *where* this the place is. The sphere of literature, media and deliberation that shape public discourse is conflated with the spaces where such discourse is shaped. This “silence” about space has been pointed out by critics like Howell, (1993) and Calhoun, (1992). The problem, Calhoun (1992) argues, is that in his attempt to create a universal transhistorical theory, Habermas turns away from historically specific grounding for democracy.¹⁹ Howell (1993) points out in a similar vein, that social theory must engage with a historical geography of modernity; something that Habermas leaves as implicit, or is dismissive of.²⁰ As will be seen in Section 2.3, an attempt to engage with the spatiality of modernity must begin, instead, by problematising our understanding of the public sphere.

The Habermasian public sphere was a proleptic ideal-type at best, or—as Nancy Fraser (1990) puts it—a *bourgeois masculinist* conception at worst. Firstly, his assumption that a vibrant public sphere is achieved if status differences are bracketed out to make it inclusive has since been empirically challenged. In existing multicultural democracies, open access cannot be reduced to the presence or absence of formal exclusions. Even if structural exclusions are removed by a liberal State, informal and cultural exclusions may continue to dictate participation in a public sphere. The (non)inclusion of a minority community into the mainstream public sphere in any part of the world will elucidate this point—be it discrimination against the LGBT+ communities, women, racial minorities, or caste. A relevant example is the dominant public sphere in twentieth-century Bengal, where the *Bhadralok* (literally, the ‘gentlefolk’, a word that has come to denote the English educated and mostly higher caste Hindus in Bengal) symbolised *the* civil society, and despite measures by the authorities to remove hurdles, the *chottolok* (literally, the lesser folk) continued to remain on the fringes.²¹ However, this does not mean

¹⁶ Fraser, (1990), p.58

¹⁷ See for instance, Geoff, (1992), Fraser (1990), Devika, (2003)

¹⁸ Santos, (2012), p.62

¹⁹ Calhoun, (1992), p.35

²⁰ Howell, (1993), pp.304-305, 318.

²¹ Ghosh, (2008), p.284

there did not exist “a public” of the *chottolok*. What exists, in other words, are *multiple* publics and counter-publics that are in constant conflict and struggle for dominance. Devika (2012) has made a similar observation regarding modernity in twentieth-century Kerala that it comprised of several different “projects, minor and major, which combined at times and competed at others”.²² Here, the positive role of identity in creating a social-self becomes important: individual identities allow the creation of a collective-self—anotion that needs to be given more analytical importance, as Guru and Sarukkai (2019) argue.²³

This leads to the second critique that theorists point to—the assumption that a single comprehensive public sphere is preferable to a nexus of multiple ones.²⁴ Although Habermas acknowledges in passing that other public spheres exist, he emphasises the dominance of the bourgeois public sphere, which makes it—to him—the only one worth analysing in detail. Even in liberal democracies, researchers have since challenged this assumption.²⁵ Mary Ryan (1990), for instance, points towards parallel spaces women from various classes and ethnicities used in the USA once they were excluded from the dominant “official” public sphere. As the present research will demonstrate, this was also true for societies like Kerala. In a society where upper-caste men controlled spaces, women and members of the lowered castes could only engage with a social space outside their own through the creation of counter-publics. For women, gender became the identity around which attempts to create such counter-publics evolved.

Habermas’ arguments in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992) seem to accommodate some of the emergent criticism. Here, he refines his views on communicative action and the public sphere, arguing that social cohesion was a precondition to an effective discursive democracy. Social integration is presented now as an important function of the political agenda, and a vibrant and energetic civil society is entrusted with the responsibility of keeping intact the communicative structures of the public sphere.²⁶ By civil society, Habermas means:

“...those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere...More or less emerging from the private sphere, this public is made of citizens who seek acceptable

²² Devika (2012), p.134

²³ Guru & Sarukkai, (2019), pp.107-131

²⁴ Fraser (1990), p.62

²⁵ Santos, (2012), pp.44-45

²⁶ Habermas (1998), pp.353, 366-373

interpretations for their social interests and experiences and who want to have an influence on institutionalized opinion- and will-formation”.²⁷

To an extent, *Between Facts and Norms* is Habermas’ attempt to restructure his argument about the public sphere in post-liberal contexts. His recent works on discourse ethics and revisiting the questions of rationality and religion in contemporary times also indicate that the public sphere continues to remain an evolutionary concept. After the 1990s, Habermas had acceded to the modest claim that the basic assumptions of communicative action “*may* provide an opportunity, given the predicament posed by the pluralism of worldviews”.²⁸

As a concept, the *public sphere* is indispensable to any critical reading of democracy and modernity. Even critics of Habermas do not object to the analytical capability of the concept of the public sphere—only to Habermas’ narrow definitions of it.²⁹ Instead, we need to broaden our understanding of the public sphere. If we concede that the bourgeois liberal public sphere is but one of the many possibilities of the public sphere—that there is a wider “public-at-large” that includes the bourgeois public sphere but also other readings of it,³⁰ then we turn to more relevant and interesting questions that can guide this present research. What are the terms under which the different counter-publics interact in multicultural societies? Where do these interactions (if at all) happen and who controls these spaces? Do participants in such debates share enough in the way of values, norms and protocols of persuasion to engage in rational deliberation to achieve common agreements? The answer to these questions cannot begin from a Habermasian understanding of the public sphere, due to the theoretical limitations discussed in this section. In complex societies like India where caste and gender relations play a vital role in the shaping of modernity, Habermas’ public sphere throw numerable challenges. As I shall discuss in the following section, the experience of how early modernity was shaped in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in different parts of the country elucidate the theoretical limitations discussed here. Two things become evident—first, that the different regions point towards non-uniform trajectories of the evolution of public spheres. Secondly, we will see that “space” becomes an important arena where counter-publics resist power, and social relations are (re)produced. Both these reasons allow us to conceive an alternative framework for a historical-geography of modernity; one that gives space the analytical rigour it demands.

²⁷ Habermas (1998), p.367

²⁸ Habermas, (1998), p.41

²⁹ Devika, (2003) for instance, while pointing out to the gendered nature of the emergent mainstream public sphere in Kerala, acknowledges that she moves away from Habermas’ definition “somewhat”, owing to its limitations. However, the framework continues to be Habermasian since theoretical alternatives are yet to be developed.

³⁰ Fraser (1990) posits that subaltern counter-publics in stratified societies function as bases for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. See Fraser (1990), pp.67-68

2.2. Modernity and the Public Sphere in India

Since the 1990s, scholars from across the world and from across different disciplines have, consciously or otherwise, engaged in the exercise of refining our understanding of the modern public sphere. In independent India, literature from the postcolonial and subaltern studies camps have led from the front, revising notions of modernity, nation and State. In an essay on modernity, Partha Chatterjee points to social reformer Rajnarayan Basu's evaluation of *Se-Kal-ar-e-kal* [Those Days and These Days] from 1873, where Basu demarcates roughly the periods before and after the full-fledged English education in India as two epochs. Chatterjee argues that this distinction—which put “these days” (of modernity) marked by incompleteness and lack of fulfilment at the opposite end from “those days” when there were beauty, prosperity and a healthy sociability, and which was, above all, our own creation—is an important one that points to the contradictions that modernity faced in India.³¹

Such accounts of modernity suggest that it is a project of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in the backdrop of Western education, social and political reforms and the freedom movement. This was a period of rapid socio-political changes in the region, and the modern public sphere emerged because of these. The freedom struggle warranted a form of political participation that transcended caste and religious differences, and the idea of ‘nation’ thus necessitated a secular public sphere. However, post-colonial readings have two shortcomings. Firstly, as has been pointed out by others,³² such an approach attempts to render less importance to native imaginations within the colonial paradigms—there is instead an attempt to study the history of colonies in terms of binaries of “ours” versus “theirs”. What constitutes “ours” is often presumed as given. Consequently, it leads to the assumption that although non-Western, the public sphere and modernity in colonial India had a more-or-less homogeneous history. This has been a major criticism, for instance, of Chatterjee's work, which posits the home of Bengali middle-class (spiritual/inner/private) against the colonial regime as “the other” (material/outer/public).³³ Introducing space as an analytical category problematizes these binaries of inside/outside and private/public, thereby opening up a new avenue of understanding how space is controlled.³⁴ In caste-societies, this becomes important because, as we will see, these subversions of space played an important role in challenging the dominant public sphere. The conditions ascribed to the mainstream public sphere—of deliberating matters of public interest, and opinion formation—often emerged at the most controlled private spaces for populations outside of the mainstream. Slave schools, alternate temples, bathing *ghats*, the inner rooms of a *tharavadu* (ancestral

³¹ Chatterjee, (1997), pp.3-4

³² Menon, (2002); Menon, (2015), p.66; Mohan, (2005); Guru, (2017), pp.x-xii; Thiranagama, (2019), pp.2-6

³³ Chatterjee, (1993)

³⁴ Seemanthini, (1997)

home for joint Nair families) are examples of spaces where a women and lowered castes challenged the mainstream public sphere in Kerala.

Another important limitation is that post-colonial literature on the public sphere still fails to look critically at what constitutes it. Part of the problem is that by making Habermasean public sphere a point of reference means that while discursive communities are often the centre of such academic discourse, there rarely any discussion on the ways in which spatial and social relations shape and influence each other.³⁵ Can one speak of literary and poetic spaces, theatrical spaces, a reading room, a temple premise and a public ground as sharing the same characteristics of a public sphere? The answer, as I shall argue, is no. Literary sphere, media, newspapers all form a more abstract form of the public sphere that needs to be separated from physical spaces that facilitate deliberation. Spaces with an external control and vertical linkages such as religious or caste-based organizations, political parties and affiliated organisations, and ones that are more informal and non-institutional in nature such as voluntary associations, Youth Clubs, teashops, and beaches need to be studied separately.³⁶ There is a need to deconstruct what we mean by the public sphere—to separate the abstract spaces of the public sphere from the lived spaces where people interact on a daily basis, and to separate institutional spaces from the non-institutional ones. However, before we do this, it will be relevant to examine briefly, the evolution of the public sphere in colonial India. Many regional counter-publics developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries across south Asia, each with distinctly different characteristics. Each region shows a different “type” of the public sphere not necessarily reflecting the Western ideal-type, but often as alternates *to* them. Each of these types would further have a number of smaller counter-publics that may or may not be obviously visible. In Tamil Nadu, the vernacular language played an important role in democratising the public sphere in the early 20th century. In urban spaces, other forces of modernity and national struggle superseded linguistic and religious differences. Yet, examples from the north of India suggest that an alternative secular public sphere emerged in pre-modern times.

2.2.1. Public Sphere in Colonial India

In his very detailed account Haynes (1991) alludes to the presence of an elite public sphere—one relatable to Habermas’ “ideal-type” from Europe—in late 19th and early 20th century in the city of Surat in western India. Writing about the civil society in Surat during the period, he states:

³⁵ Thiranagama, (2019), p.4

³⁶ Recent scholarship from Kerala have attempted to make these distinctions. See, for instance, Devika & Nair, (2018) for a comparison of women’s SHG and their external/internal hierarchies. Also see Chathukulam & John, (2003) for a micro-analysis comparing voluntary organisations with strong horizontal linkages, with associational ones with vertical linkages.

“Surat’s Civil Culture³⁷ was...an elite culture; it marked a narrow sphere where educated Indians bargained with and cajoled their colonial rulers, a sphere with its own special terminology and rituals...for many Surtis, the language of civic expression proved to be inaccessible and esoteric, sterile and unemotive.”³⁸

For the civil society in Surat at the time, English education was a necessary condition.³⁹ During the late colonial period, no considerable transformation in social relations in Surat city accounts for shifts in political culture.⁴⁰ In other words, the educated elite dominated the nascent public sphere in Surat, and the leaders failed to embrace rhetoric that is more popular or to encourage social interactions across the different communities. Spaces of the public sphere were limited to the organisations where the Surti elite tried to create a space for themselves within the colonial order. The fact that he does not dedicate much discourse to the alternative spaces that exist makes it difficult to comment on the counter-publics. However, it would be safe to assume that the dominant public sphere in Surat was, at the time, bourgeois. The case in another colonial metropolis, Calcutta, suggests a similar trend where the *Bhadralok* with their claims that their culture was *the* Bengali culture, dominated the public sphere.⁴¹ Intellectually, the *Bhadralok* were much closer to European writers and thinkers, than to their regional counterparts.⁴²

Bayly’s (1996) work on the public sphere in the Hindi-speaking regions of north India already marks a point of departure from the story we see in Surat. Even before public associations and newspapers played an important role in shaping public opinion, Bayly argues that there existed in North India an Indian *ecumene*—a space for political and cultural debate, which borrowed from the Western ideas, but also from their own understandings of Hindustan.⁴³ Here, we also see useful insights into an alternate understanding of secularism and the public sphere:

“The learned and respectable elites kept up a constant conversation on matters of religious wisdom through ritual and official *darbars*, mosque schools, the Sufi orders and private homes... Congregational meetings among the Muslim community during the nights of the month of Ramadan provided a forum for wider discussions on matters concerning the community, and the consensus of these meetings might be

³⁷ Haynes’ definition of civil culture refers to the aristocracy, traders and educated Indians who engaged closely with the colonial authority and influenced policy. In this sense, it is very much like the civil society that Habermas mentions in his Habermas, (1998).

³⁸ Haynes, (1991), p.293

³⁹ Haynes, (1991), p.11

⁴⁰ Haynes, (1991), p.11

⁴¹ Ghosh, (2008), p.272

⁴² Bhattacharya, (2008), p.262; Ghosh, (2008), p.279

⁴³ Bayly, (1996), p.182

conveyed to the rulers. Alongside this, the educated maintained a debate on literature, language and aesthetics through poetry-reading circles or *mushairahs*.”⁴⁴

What Bayly presents is an empirical critique of the assumption that a secular public sphere emerged with (Western) modernity. Already, the notion of *Sarkar* (government) came to hold a virtue beyond the will of the king, and embodied sophisticated concepts of “just and unjust rule, *zulum* (oppression), which could be introduced into popular debate on the merits of rulers through poetic satire, handbills, speeches and by ironic visual displays during popular festivals.”⁴⁵ Interestingly, Bayly argues that it was with the advent of print capitalism and modernity in the 19th century that the differences between the Hindu and Muslim public spheres widened.⁴⁶ In a similar tone, Jeffrey (2009) briefly explored the relation between print capitalism, changing reading habits, and the impact on social spaces like Reading Rooms in Kerala. Apart from the importance of print in creating “imagined communities” and national identity, communal-reading of news also created everyday-socials—spaces where a diverse crowd can also actively engage in discussion and debates on the political and social events reported in the day’s news.

This presence of a ‘public authority’ in pre-modern north-India is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, this use of poetry, speeches, and theatre to comment on the actions of a ruler points to a form of public criticism and scrutiny of the king. To Habermas, the “public” did not exist apart from the king and his court in pre-modern societies.⁴⁷ Spaces for literary, cultural and political criticism only grew much later, as capitalism and the modern State evolved in Europe. Yet we see in northern India (at least) since the early 19th century, a public sphere cutting across caste, community and sect, and public dialogue between the elite and popular political culture. Secondly, it challenges the definition that secularism necessitates a clear separation of state and religion. On the contrary, we see that religious concepts and notions of justice, equality, etc. serve as points of public deliberation even on secular issues. More directly, festivals like Holi and Ramlila, which grew in the 18th and 19th centuries, were very much a part of the expansion of the public sphere.⁴⁸

In contrast to north India, the public sphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century south India evolved with anti-Brahmin characteristics, not just anti-colonial.⁴⁹ Anti-Brahmin reforms

⁴⁴ Bayly, (1996), p.188

⁴⁵ Bayly, (1996), p.184

⁴⁶ This argument that the forming of colonial publics facilitated by print capitalism created a political public but at the expense of hardening gender, caste, and religious identity has been argued also by others. See for instance; Orsini, (2002); Rao (2009), pp.39; and Bayly CA (1996), p.211

⁴⁷ Habermas, (1991), p.8

⁴⁸ It must be noted that such an expansive change in the public sphere need not automatically be progressive. Rao (2009) points, for instance, towards the aggressive staging of Hindu identity during *melas* (festivals) that politicized the public space through virulent anti-Muslim rhetoric. Rao, (2009), pp.31-32.

⁴⁹ Omvedt, (2011), p.246; Menon, (2015), p.79

spearheaded by leaders like Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar (in the Marathi-speaking regions), Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (in Tamil regions), and Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and others (in Kerala) played an important role in expanding the non-Brahmin public sphere. In western India, the Marathi language public sphere enabled a strong anti-caste critique to develop which saw its success not in the urban spaces like Mumbai, but in the rural areas.⁵⁰ Bernard Bate's interesting work provides some useful insights into the Tamil speaking regions further south. He argues that these regions saw a new communicative medium evolve in the early twentieth century, which transformed public action.⁵¹ It was only since the Swadeshi Movement of 1905-08 that a vernacular oratory addressed to the uneducated classes emerged. He states:

“In 1900, if you were engaging in “politics” in Madras City, you would bear a Brahmin surname such as Aiyer or Aiyengar (or perhaps one of the socioeconomically forward non-Brahmin communities such as Chettiar or Pillaimar), you lived in the neighbourhoods of Mylapore or Egmore, and when you engaged in politics in what were called public meetings you spoke in English.”⁵²

By 1920, this had changed and Tamil (or Telugu) became the language of choice. Political speeches either were made in the vernacular, or were translated into one. In other words, we see an expansion of the public sphere—the democratization of the space in which the uneducated masses. In 1918, Theosophist and labour organizer B.P. Wadia wrote:

“We want to bring the masses into line with the educated classes...The masses do possess political outlook; they have lost the art of making themselves heard, and our task should be to persuade them into speech and action.”⁵³

Although Bate argues that this linking of political speech and action was “unprecedented in Indian history”, we shall see that Kerala had already witnessed by 1918 many such meetings where socio-political action was called upon. In any case, the democratization of the Tamil public sphere had at its centre, the vernacular turn of the early twentieth century.

These records from different regions indicate that the nascent public sphere had different regional characteristics. More relevantly, a study of their spatiality indicates that the nature of the public sphere also depended on the transformation (or not) of spaces. For instance, the vernacular turn that oratory took in Tamil regions tells only half the story. Another important change that happens by the 1920s is the change in the space where such political mobilization emerges. Much has been written about the

⁵⁰ Rao (2009), p.39

⁵¹ Bate, (2013), p.145

⁵² Bate, (2013), p.146

⁵³ B.P Wadia, quoted in Bate, (2013), p.148

more abstract components of the public spheres, such as the change in literature and arts. Yet, these studies mention the changing nature of spaces, without engaging enough with what this actually means. In other words, “space” is seldom treated with analytical rigour, or engaged with critically.⁵⁴ In the case of north India that was briefly discussed here, Bayly mentions how public recitations in *bazars* or near the platform of the police station spread news quickly in the villages, and stalls selling tobacco, betel nuts, medicaments or sweets served as spaces where people congregated for gossip and news.⁵⁵ Such spaces where public opinion was formed in north India vary considerably from the elite salons and coffee shops that shaped Habermas’ early Western public spheres. The presence of intelligentsia and the use of public spaces to deliberate and discuss matters of public interest are characteristic features of public spheres—both Western and non-Western. The public sphere in late colonial Surat was ‘modern’ in that it shared more with Habermas’ modern public sphere, quite unlike the public sphere we see in 19th century north India, which was closer to the late antiquity Christian-Greek *ecumene*.⁵⁶ In Surat, where no considerable social change appeared even in the late colonial period, neither was the creation of new secular spaces that could bring together crowds. In contrast, Calcutta’s intelligentsia who related more to Western writers and philosophers also frequented the local teashops and football games to nurse their needs to “stay connected to the masses”.⁵⁷ And while the vernacular oratory made politics discourse comprehensible to the popular masses, the moving of the meetings from community halls, clubs, private homes and temples into the public grounds, beaches and *bazars* (public squares) was important in allowing to bridge the gap between leaders and masses—between the bourgeois public sphere and the commoners—in Tamil regions.⁵⁸ Space—physical space—is, therefore, an important component of the transformation of the modern public sphere.

Insofar as we attempt to critically study of the public sphere and treat the transformations in lived spaces seriously, Habermas’ conception could at best only be a point of departure. Studies that expose the narrow definition of the Habermasian framework, and the postcolonial and subaltern literature force us to rethink the notions of modernity, the public sphere and secularism in non-Western and multicultural contexts. This research aims to study space as *itself*—as a dynamic sphere where social relationships are (re)produced. For this, I turn to French thinker Henri Lefebvre and his engagement with the production of space. As a Marxist thinker, he was interested in studying how capitalism and urbanization can be better understood if we put “space” under a critical lens. Yet, as we will see, his study of how spaces are essential in both maintaining and resisting power resonate in caste-ridden

⁵⁴ Soja, (1985), p. 90; Thiranagama, (2019), p.4

⁵⁵ Bayly, (1996), p.202

⁵⁶ Bayly, (1996), p.182

⁵⁷ Bhattacharya, (2008), p.261-62

⁵⁸ Bate, (2013), p.146

societies because they influence human experiences. Before a more detailed discussion on using Lefebvre in the Indian context, the next section will expand on Lefebvre's theory of space.

2.3. The (Social) Production of (Social) Space

In the second part of the twentieth century, social theory took what has since been termed the “spatial turn”. From being a mere backdrop—a silent spectator of the changing world, an empty container to be filled with actions—“space” came to be redefined as an analytical tool at once both “a product” and “productive”.⁵⁹ This turn was first seen most clearly in the works of thinkers like Henri Lefebvre (in his *Production of Space*), and Foucault (in *Des espaces autres*, also extended in *Discipline and Punish* and other works), but has since influenced research in geography, urban studies, architecture, sociology, and political science, as well as in philosophy, literature and cultural studies.⁶⁰ Foucault, in his work, does a systematic study of experiences mediated through (and in) space, tracing the genealogy of social institutions—most notably the mental asylum, the clinic and the prison—as spaces of material instantiation of hegemonic discourse. He was interested in the legitimisation of power (governmentality, and the power of State over birth and death) in maintaining hegemonic power structures through the control of space. Lefebvre, on the contrary, was interested in studying the space as a site of contestation. Although both Foucault and Lefebvre argue for a theoretical importance given to space which allows for a structural study of the importance of space in affecting (and being affected by) society and its public sphere, Lefebvre provides the framework to separate the hegemonic and resistive elements of space, making it a more relevant and interesting framework for the present research. As has been argued in the last sections, this enquiry cannot begin from Habermas' limited definition of the public sphere. We must move further (to problematize the concept of the public sphere) and farther (theoretically from its universal assumptions and empirically from Western Europe as an ideal-type).

2.3.1. Theorizing Space

The limitations of the Habermasian public sphere have already been alluded to, but it is important to reiterate its de-spatialized nature. Arguably, this despatialization was a continuation of the extraordinary subordination of space (relative to time) that plagued Western social theory in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁶¹ Foucault (1980) notes in a similar vein that “devaluation of space has prevailed for generations. . . Space was treated as dead, fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary,

⁵⁹ Soja (1989) argues what happened in the 1960s was in fact the spatial (re)turn to the reassertion of space in social theory a century after the fall of the Paris Commune led to spatial critiques receding behind more powerful Eurocentric assertions of time and history. See: Soja (1989), pp.3-5; also Tally Jr., (2013), pp.119-120

⁶⁰ Tally Jr., (2013), p.116

⁶¹ Soja, (1989), p.123

was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic”.⁶² Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, there was as Soja (1989) argued, a reassertion of space (and spatiality—the relations dictated by and in space), a growing awareness about spatial praxis, and a recognition of the need to rethink social theory and incorporate the fundamental spatiality of social life—to introduce in other words a spatialized ontology.⁶³ There is thus the need to understand society as the medium (and outcome) of the production of spatiality in conjunction with the making of history—both spatial *and* temporal.⁶⁴ It may then be argued that the universality that Habermas assigns to the public sphere stems from his emphasis on a more historical—and less spatial—structural transformation. Over the last three decades, space as an analytical tool has re-entered social theory. The end of Cold War, globalization, the invention of the internet and the spread of capitalism have all pressed for a re-imagination of how space is conceived, perceived and lived. Michael Foucault and Edward Soja have already been alluded to, but worth mentioning are also the works of David Harvey, Derek Gregory, Doreen Massey, Laura Barraclough, Neil Brenner, Christian Fuchs, and others. In India, Guru and Sarukkai have over the last decade, turned to focus on the theoretical importance of space (and experience), but also works by (Pandian, 2002), (Jaaware, 2019), (Chatterjee, 1997) and the post-colonial and subaltern school.

A theoretical study of the public sphere with emphasis on space is yet to appear. For the purpose of the present research, a more engaged critique of the concept of space and how it underpins social relations in modern society can be found in Henri Lefebvre’s *La production de l’espace* (1974).⁶⁵ Lefebvre’s critical engagement with the concept of ‘space’ comes eight years after Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and has no direct mention of it. However, considering its theoretic and methodological potential and similarities in themes, it is surprising that within studies on the public sphere since, there has been little or no attempt to re-read Habermas’ concept of the public sphere using Lefebvre’s framework on social space. In his work, Lefebvre points out that ‘space’ remains a concept never fully conceptualized in social sciences. It continues to be used in myriad ways without being critically engaged with, and we are confronted with a “multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, and global. Not to mention nature’s (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on”.⁶⁶ Yet, he asks, why is it that there is no architectural or urbanistic criticism on par with the criticism of art, literature or music? This question leads Lefebvre in his endeavour to

⁶² Foucault, (1980), p.70

⁶³ Soja, (1989), pp.118-137

⁶⁴ Soja (1989), p.127

⁶⁵ An English translation of Lefebvre’s book by Donald Nicholson-Smith, first published in 1991 has been used for the present research.

⁶⁶ Lefebvre, (1991), p.8; Speaking to architects in 1967, Foucault argued that while a theoretical desanctification of space has occurred, we still haven’t reached a point of practical desanctification of space. See Foucault, (1984), p.2

theorize space, and to conceptualize a unitary theory that separates physical (nature), mental (including logical and formal abstractions) and the social space, to discern their mutual relationships and differences, and to open up space to critical enquiry. Such a critical enquiry was contingent on a Marxist analysis of society:

“...the social relations of production have a social existence only insofar as they exist spatially; they project themselves into a space, they inscribe themselves in a space while producing it. Otherwise, they remain ‘pure’ abstraction, that is, in representations and consequently in ideology, or, stated differently, in verbalism, verbiage, words”.⁶⁷

The idea is not to arrive at a universal theory but a unitary one—to force social sciences to think about space seriously—and “analyse not things in space but space itself, with a view to uncovering the social relationships embedded in it”.⁶⁸ We can begin to do this by separating space into three interconnected realms—representations of space (conceived space), spatial practice (perceived space), and representational space (lived space). This conceptual triad formed the core of Lefebvre’s theory of social space. Representations of space refer to the space of the experts—the planners, social engineers and technocrats—who conceptualise social spaces in society. It is space as conceptualised and defined by traditional theories.⁶⁹ On the contrary, a representational space is the “space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’”, the “dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate”.⁷⁰ In other words, it is the space formed by everyday life. Lefebvre argues that any dominant power attempts a total control of conceived and lived spaces. The spatial practices define the routines and norms that dictate the spatiality of any given society (at a specific time and space). In society, the subject—an individual member of a given social group—inhabit these spaces, moving from one to another in their everyday lives. Yet, these realms may or may not constitute a coherent whole.⁷¹ Lefebvre argues that in modernity—and more so, in neo-capitalism—such coherence is unachievable.⁷² Dominant social theories miss out in the constant attempts at control on the one hand, and resistance from the other, because they fail to engage with all the three conceptions of space, and focus on one or the other.

Seen thus, the control over spaces—the conceived, perceived and lived—becomes an important part of a dominant ideology, power structure or government: “according to the perspective of politics, no part

⁶⁷ Lefebvre, (1991), translated and cited by Soja (1989), pp.127-128

⁶⁸ Lefebvre, (1991), p.89

⁶⁹ Tally Jr., (2013), p.118

⁷⁰ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.38-39

⁷¹ This argument is even more relevant in India, as has been pointed out by Guru & Sarukkai, (2019) and Jaaware, (2019)

⁷² Lefebvre, (1991), p.40

of space can or may be allowed to escape domination...power aspires to control space in its entirety.”⁷³ In other words, space is what provides the necessary conditions for those in power, who can then use this dominance to produce particular kinds of experiences among people.⁷⁴ In contemporary times, the tools for such control of spaces have constantly expanded, allowing for the neoliberal state and/or capitalism to raise an imminent threat to social spaces in society. Lefebvre warned that such an urge to control spaces affects all forms of statehood, including social democracies.⁷⁵ A political response, he argued elsewhere, must come from the redefinition of the state as an arena for *autogestion*. Most closely translated as “grassroots democracy”, Lefebvre argued that *autogestion* was an essential for direct democracy and decentralisation of power to the grassroots in neoliberal states.⁷⁶ At a time when the struggle for control of spaces have become extremely complex and means of exploitation more subtle, he urged the political left to explore the potential of broad-based participatory politics as a counter-hegemonic use of space. This, as we shall see in Chapter 6, is an extremely useful analytical tool to study the struggles for control of social spaces, and the new social movements that allow broad-based alliances to build resistance in the contemporary Kerala, where the need has been issue-based political mobilisation that transcends political and religious differences.

The control of spaces also means control of bodies and experiences.⁷⁷ Lefebvre’s argument is that religious and political spaces are used by administrative and sovereign powers in an attempt to create a social space where society can achieve form through self-representation.⁷⁸ This is the space where philosophy or religion, ideology or established knowledge, capitalism or socialism, state or community are put radically into question and must validate themselves.⁷⁹ This importance given to the social space as an arena where ideas must gain legitimacy is similar to Habermas’ conception of the public sphere where competing thoughts are rationally deliberated. In fact, Lefebvre’s comments on the importance of ideas to be justified in a public space closely resemble Habermas’ conception of the public sphere. Lefebvre says:

“...nothing and no one can avoid trial by space—an ordeal which is the modern world’s answer to the Judgement of God or the classical conception of fate. It is in space, on a worldwide scale, that each idea of ‘value’ acquires or loses its

⁷³ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.387-388

⁷⁴ Guru, (2012), p.73

⁷⁵ Lefebvre, (1991), p.26

⁷⁶ Lefebvre, (2009), p.16

⁷⁷ Guru & Sarukkai, (2012); Guru & Sarukkai, (2019)

⁷⁸ Lefebvre, (1991), p.34

⁷⁹ Lefebvre, (1991), p.417

distinctiveness through confrontation with the other values and ideas that it encounters there.”⁸⁰

Here, *space* is understood as the arena where public consciousness is formed. He argues that when political scientists and sociologists study the material and social relations in society, they often jump from the “mental” to the “social” without any hesitation, presuming the link between epistemology and the practical to be self-evident.⁸¹ Instead, his attempt is to explain a sort of “spatial dialectic”—to separate abstract space from social space.⁸² The former space is strongly influenced by our imaginations and ideas, and is often open to transformations, while physical spaces are designed to reinforce status quo and are therefore more rigid structures.⁸³ Social spaces are thus to be ‘produced’ by transforming natural or existing spaces to serve the needs of the people that inhabit the space.⁸⁴ Such *appropriated spaces* can often be a structure—a building or monument—but it can also be a street, a site or a square. Another closely related practice in the production of space is that of *diversion*, when an “existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d’être* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, re-appropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one”.⁸⁵ Lefebvre argued thus, that the production of space is not merely a physical act. Instead, it was the interplay of perceived, conceived and lived spaces, produced and reproduced through social, economic and political processes. The case of the emergent public sphere(s) in colonial India has already been discussed above in Section 2.2. In each of those cases, we can read the formation of the public sphere in tune with changes in a spatial reconfiguration. In Bayly’s study of northern India, for instance, he notes how stalls and sweetshops emerged as spaces where people met and discussed gossip and news. Similarly,

“...political demonstrations were made at or near mosques. The shrines of saints, or of deceased rulers popularly revered as just men, were also the venue of demonstrations an indication of the relative importance for the subcontinent of tomb worship and Sufism in both elite and popular life”.⁸⁶

It was where the elites and the common people gathered for a common cause. Haynes’ (1991) study points out a contrast in Surat, where institutional spaces like the Surat Municipality and Bombay Legislature played a major role in shaping (and maintaining) an elite public sphere in Surat city. The failure to develop alternatives to liberal representative systems or social spaces that transcended such

⁸⁰ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.416-17

⁸¹ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.5, 60

⁸² Tally Jr., (2013), p.116

⁸³ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.26-30

⁸⁴ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.416-417

⁸⁵ Lefebvre, (1991), p.167

⁸⁶ Bayly (1996), p.202.

class differences was one of the reasons the colonial hegemony was not challenged successfully in Surat.⁸⁷ This is not to say that public-spheres of the underclass did not exist, but that in 19th century Surat, there lacked social spaces that transcended the various conceived, perceived and lived spaces of the people.

For the present research, this separation of spaces provides a useful entry-point to studying the public sphere. It helps us to acknowledge the existence of a discursive (abstract) space, and a lived (physical) place—both of which must play an important role in shaping social relations and political consciousness in modern societies. In other words, the public sphere—in its familiar definition—represents something larger than its parts, making it a difficult concept to conceptualize clearly. Consequently, studies on public sphere emphasize on their empirical contributions more than their theoretical ones. This is also, why we see critical studies on the public sphere concentrate on the role of media, literature, language and art, more than they do on public squares, streets, market-spaces, public grounds and reading rooms. Before we discuss the specific methodological advantages of using Lefebvre's framework to study the public sphere in Kerala, it will be relevant to briefly look at how Lefebvre deals with the general criticisms of Habermas that have already been discussed in section 2.1—the claims to universality, and the private-public divide.

Firstly, unlike Habermas, Lefebvre concedes that it is not clear if such distinctions (between physical and social spaces) can be generalized: “lacking adequate knowledge of the Orient, I shall offer no definite answer to it”.⁸⁸ In fact, he argues that one cannot claim to comprehend completely non-Western modes of production—its space, its towns, or the relationship it embodies between town and country—by using Western conceptual tools that confine us. Each society is unique, historical, and spatiotemporal: “every society...produces a space, *its own space*”.⁸⁹ Secondly, by using ‘space’ in itself as his category of analysis, Lefebvre escapes the private-public debate that studies on ‘public sphere’ often are tangled in. For analytical purposes, Lefebvre's framework studies space as connections of the public realm (the spaces of social relationships and actions) with private areas (spaces for contemplation, isolation and retreat) via ‘mixed’ areas (linking thoroughfares, etc.).⁹⁰ These relations, however, cannot be studied as binaries, but as levels of spatial and temporal organization bound together by relationships of reciprocal implication:

⁸⁷ Haynes, (1991), p.295

⁸⁸ Lefebvre, (1991), p.42

⁸⁹ Lefebvre, (1991), p.31

⁹⁰ Lefebvre, (1991), p.363

“The ‘public’ realm, the realm of temple or palace, has private and ‘mixed’ aspects, while the ‘private’ house or dwelling has public (e.g. reception rooms) and ‘mixed’ ones. Much the same may be said of the town as a whole.”⁹¹

Theoretically, this takes us a step further from understanding spaces from a public-private binary. Increasingly, social spaces transcend such divisions. As we will see (specifically in Chapters 3 and 4), this was also true of Kerala—the case in this study—in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the modern public sphere was still nascent. Especially for women who were never openly accepted as participants in the mainstream masculine public sphere, it was often the most intimate ‘private’ sphere that introduced them to revolutionary and progressive politics—a purpose otherwise delegated to the familiar public sphere. Once we problematize space, we can attempt to understand the underpinnings that support social relations in lived spaces. Then, meeting places, intersections, and crossroads become more important than other spaces.

It has already been argued that the universalistic assumptions of Habermas’ theory came to be challenged theoretically and empirically in the second half of the twentieth century. Lefebvre’s framework of theorizing space supports this claim, conceding that space needs to be analysed critically—but also that the meaning of space itself changes from one society to another. How space is produced, and reproduced, plays an important role in understanding social relations in a society. In other words, space is an inevitable component of a society’s public sphere, and any study of the public sphere is incomplete without a study of its (social) spaces. In a multicultural society, this becomes all the more important, since any claim to the possibility of a homogenous public sphere would be ill informed. In a society like India that is multicultural *and* caste-conscious, an attempt at social theory must begin—as Guru and Sarukkai (2012) argue—from experience.

2.3.2. Space as Experience

Space is where power manifests itself; not just physically by possession and control of access (like in private estates, clubs, etc), but also through formulations of norms and rules that dictate the social relations in public spaces. While class-relations characterize this hegemony of one group of people over another in modernity, in India, a social hierarchy has prevailed for centuries in the form of caste. The Brahmins controlled social spaces, which meant control over both the abstract spaces of social discourse, but also of lived spaces.⁹² Through this, they controlled *experiences*. The production of experiences, in other words, hinges on the production of social space.⁹³ If so, space—and consequently, experience—become important components in understanding social transformations. This is the

⁹¹ Lefebvre, (1991), p.153

⁹² Mohan, (2016), pp.43-44

⁹³ Guru (2012), p.72

attempt of Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai in *The Cracked Mirror* (2012)—to explore the politics of space, through experience. Here, Guru and Sarukkai argue that for long, mainstream social theory—including most postcolonial and subaltern literature—has considered *experience* as subordinate to *ideas*. In real life, experience precedes theory, and social theory cannot but engage with this creatively and comprehensively.⁹⁴ Once the focus is on experience (social space), any claim of universality is automatically lost. Moving away from a study of abstract space (which has dominated social theory for long), they encourage us to consider space in all its complexity. While accepting that there exists *a* public sphere as Habermas argues, they open up to use the need to look at social spaces that *also* constitute public spheres. Moreover, this separation of space into conceived and lived allows for an analysis of the similarities, differences and relations between the two.

In a chapter titled “Experience, Space and Justice”, Gopal Guru conceptualizes space in the context of Indian experience. He argues:

“...an effective expansion of ideas rests on the fluidity and flexibility of spaces that are inhabited by people who are socially and culturally fragmented. The expansion of modern ideas therefore is coextensive with the expansion of spaces”.⁹⁵

For centuries, caste relations dictated how spaces have been distributed and experience has been controlled, and any transformation of social relations and the public sphere will need to account for changes that happen in these spaces and to these relations. To Guru, a study of space is intrinsically a study of human experiences. Here, he attempts to extend to India Lefebvre’s framework of the body as space. To Lefebvre, the three elements of space—the perceived, conceived and lived—are mediated through the body: one’s space is “first of all [one’s] body, and then it is [one’s] body's counterpart or 'other', its mirror-image or shadow”.⁹⁶ In India, the prohibition—or invisibility—of lower castes is the ultimate foundation of social spaces. This is why, ultimately, caste can be understood as a matter of self (internal space) and its possession of territory (external space).⁹⁷ To Lefebvre, a study based on prohibitions—the ‘unsaid’ in communications between the members of society; the gulf between them, their bodies and consciousness; the difficulties of social intercourse—is limiting, because they put these prohibitions (and not the productive activity) at the origin of society.⁹⁸ Here, Guru would disagree with Lefebvre, because in India, the all-encompassing caste dictates both prohibitions (exclusion of lower castes from the public sphere), and productive activity. More importantly, upper castes controlled not

⁹⁴ Guru and Sarukkai (2012), pp.1-2

⁹⁵ Guru (2012), p. 80

⁹⁶ Butler, (2012). p.125; Lefebvre, (1991), p.184. A very similar understanding of body as sacred space was used in the teachings of Narayana Guru in late 19th and early 20th century Kerala. See: Kumar, (1997)

⁹⁷ Jaaware, (2019), pp.33-34; Menon, (1994)

⁹⁸ Lefebvre, (1991), p.35

just the representations of space by controlling ownership over land, but also the spatial practices (perceived space) and representational space (lived space).⁹⁹

Guru somewhat clarifies this argument by comparing the politics of Ambedkar and Gandhi. Gandhi was born a *bania* (trading caste), which helped him access spaces in a way Ambedkar could not. Gandhi's ability to travel around India freely was quintessential to his understanding of India. His call to unify the nation around peasant struggles and village communities was based on his experiences of interacting with people from all corners of the country and his ability to transgress spaces *vertically*—engage with the scavenger and the untouchable, but also with the kings and the gentry. Furthermore, Guru argues that being a caste Hindu opened up to Gandhi spaces not just of experience, but also of articulation:

“Spaces provide a necessary background condition for the comprehensive representation of ideologues and their ideas. Gandhi, through a favourable social space such as, the public *maidans* (grounds) ceases to be a *bania* (trading caste) or a Gujarati, and becomes a Mahatma”.¹⁰⁰

Space, thus, becomes important dually—first in shaping personal experiences and then in the public articulation of ideas and politics. In comparison, Ambedkar's social spaces only opened up to him *horizontally*. His travels across the country were not as easy. When he did, he generally stayed with Dalits and addressed gatherings of Dalit communities, a sharp contrast to Gandhi who enjoyed the hospitality of upper caste aristocracies and addressed large public gatherings of people across caste and class. For a Dalit, any travel or interaction with a caste-Hindu would have meant needing to penetrate the dominant Hindu public sphere and its spatiality. This is why a judge based in Dhule (Maharashtra), having found it difficult to invite Ambedkar to his school or home, decided to converse with Ambedkar in a moving car; the cost of fuel burnt thus would have been lower than the social cost that the judge if he had invited Ambedkar to either the school or his home.¹⁰¹ In another instance, his own teacher who wanted to invite him home could not do so fearing possible opposition from his wife.¹⁰² Here, one sees the prohibition of Dalits not merely from the larger public sphere, but also the private sphere of higher caste Hindu homes. The higher caste Hindus who showed the courage to invite Ambedkar home had to pay larger social costs like social boycotts or the wrath of their caste.¹⁰³ Such differences in access to spaces—and thus, experiences—led to Gandhi and Ambedkar having different understandings of India. The case in Kerala was no different, as will be discussed in detail later. A re-imagination of the

⁹⁹ Mohan, (2016), pp.43-44; Tally Jr., (2013), pp.117-118

¹⁰⁰ Guru (2012), p. 102

¹⁰¹ Guru (2012), p.105

¹⁰² Guru (2012), p.105

¹⁰³ Surbha Tipnis and Panwalkar from Panwel had to face a social boycott, and S.B. Tilak of Pune had to face social the wrath of Brahmins for inviting Ambedkar home. See Guru (2012), p.105

body as a “moment in the narrative of the search for self” reflects in the reform movements led by Sree Narayana Guru in late nineteenth century Kerala.¹⁰⁴ The “social” then becomes a means to aid this search for self and happiness through internal reforms.

2.3.3. Public Sphere as traversing “sociability”

A study of the public sphere cannot overlook a critical analysis of the lived spaces where people interact. Guru and Sarukkai argue that only when such experiences are given the attention they deserve can we claim to form a theory of social relations. Here, the human experience becomes an analytical tool; anecdotes, memories and self-narratives produce a resonance that may go beyond (even against) what is being said—they outlive “the particular” to say something about the time and space that they occur in. Only when spaces open up for everybody can a vocabulary emphasizes social justice, civil society, dignity and self-respect be conceived. As a modernist, Ambedkar believed that citizenship and urbanization would help liberate the Dalits from (their) quarantined spaces to democratize the mainstream public sphere and include all sections of society.¹⁰⁵

But *which* society? If, as we have seen, caste dictated social relations to the levels of untouchability—even unapproachability and unseeability—then what do we mean when we speak of ‘one’ society? While Guru and Sarukkai introduced a theoretical critique of mainstream social sciences and argued that space must be studied to understand social relations in modern India, Aniket Jaaware in his *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*(2019) furthers this endeavour and takes up the question of turning a critical lens on what we understand by modern “society”. By removing caste from subcontinental specificity, he urges us to rethink caste from the (apparently) simple division between touching and not touching: of bringing near of keeping something/someone at a distance.¹⁰⁶ There is no society; there are only forms of sociability—some decent, some indecent, some aggressive, some not, some sociable.¹⁰⁷ As we have seen, Gandhi’s (vertical) and Ambedkar’s (horizontal) traversal of social spaces must be accounted for to understand how their ideas and politics were shaped. On similar lines, Jaaware argues:

“The horizontal/vertical distribution of rights of touching generate nouns of commensality and connubiality. The maintenance of spatial distance among social groups is now transformed into hierarchical social distance and distinction. This would

¹⁰⁴ However, Udaya Kumar has argued that this reimagination remains ambivalent and unresolved. See: Kumar, (1997), pp.252, 254

¹⁰⁵ Guru (2012), p.90; Chatterjee, (2001), pp.403-404

¹⁰⁶ Rao, (2019), pp. vii-x

¹⁰⁷ Jaaware, (2019), p.172

allow us to say caste is, to a large extent...a matter of self and its possession of territory”.¹⁰⁸

The argument is that mere opening up of spaces to include people from across castes does not automatically result in the formation of a coherent public. The appearance of such a society must be critically analysed since it is within this supposition of unity that a hierarchy is posited.¹⁰⁹ (Social) space continues to be where power is at once both exercised and challenged. The example of a temple opening its doors to people of all castes, or a crowded bus in a city where people of all castes and classes travel together, while “public” in the sense that they accommodate everyone equally, would still fail to be representative of the emancipatory nature of modernity. The traditional forms of organization, Jaaware argues, continue to survive in a modified or hidden secretive manner:

“The community in the local train is a secret community, as far as organization of touch is concerned. We suspect that this is one of the secrets of modernity. This temporary community (or commonality) in the lack of sense of touch (the denial of it, to be precise) is in a certain sense, the very apotheosis of modernity”.¹¹⁰

A very visible example of this is in the local teashops and eateries, which played an important part in breaking caste-hierarchy in Kerala.¹¹¹ We can now problematize modern society as a collection of sociabilities and (social) space as the arena where sociality—the traversal of sociability—occurs. A fight for access to space, consequently, becomes not mere protests against upper caste domination, but as attempts at articulating the possibility of traversing to other sociabilities. How the rules of interaction are defined (or re-defined), depend on whether spaces emerged (institutions of governance, commercial establishments, public transport, etc. but also non-institutional spaces like teashops and reading rooms) or were re-appropriated (access to temples, public roads and a community well in a village) in modernity. In the case of the former, new norms of public engagement may be defined. Since these spaces did not exist in pre-modern times, these practices may not necessarily be confrontational between the different sections of society. In the case of the latter however, the coming forward of the backward castes into spaces that were earlier closed to them also meant that the forward castes had to redefine their own sociability as something that “others” would accept:

“...alterity becomes not an opaque wall but a hinged door that opens both ways...
One door opened outward (the backward classes came out of their own segmented

¹⁰⁸ Jaaware, (2019), pp.33-34

¹⁰⁹ Jaaware, (2019), p.100

¹¹⁰ Jaaware (2019), pp.103-104

¹¹¹ Venkiteswaran, (2011); Thiranagama, (2019), p.16

sociability) and as a result of that door opening, a door was pushed inward and opened”.¹¹²

Unless such spaces warrant an interaction without consideration of power, status or any similar concept used to gloss over social inequality, social relations remain unchanged, even if spaces open up. The opening up of a non-confrontational space like a temple does not bring about a *real* change in social relations.¹¹³ As Lefebvre argued, a revolution that does not change social relations remains incomplete.¹¹⁴

2.4. Space, experience and socialization in India

The attempt in this chapter so far has been to argue that to study any societal transformation, a limited understanding of the public sphere as a universal, homogenous, ideal-type is insufficient. A study of the many public spheres in a society, an acknowledgement of how power and authority are produced and reproduced in the public sphere is necessary; but even such an analysis only tells the partial story. This is because the transformation of society and its public sphere is not merely temporal, but is also spatial. Time and space, in other words, are theoretically concomitant, and there cannot—indeed, must not—be an inherent prioritization of one over another.¹¹⁵ In India where segregations of religion, castes and sub-castes have existed for centuries, the public sphere cannot be understood merely temporally. A materialist interpretation of the history of Dalits in India cannot be studied without understanding the spaces that remained closed to them because of their position in the social hierarchy. These exclusions form an important component of the mainstream public sphere, and form an integral part of Dalit experience and identity. A materialist interpretation of history and the materialist interpretation of geography are in other words, “inseparably intertwined” in India, as is elsewhere.¹¹⁶ Moreover, the public sphere is no longer a predominantly urban phenomenon as was argued in the mid-twentieth century. Today, progressive struggles and counter-publics—especially in the non-Western societies—do not dwell only in urban, industrial centres but in the hinterlands, rural and agrarian spaces, or urban suburbs.¹¹⁷

Social Space—where hegemony is (re)produced (as Lefebvre argues) and resisted (by those prevented access from it, as Guru and Jaaware point out)—and the transformation of space must, therefore, be treated as pivotal in any study of the modern public sphere. The traversal of spaces becomes important, as does the interaction (touching and not touching) of the people who now share a (modern, secular)

¹¹² Jaaware (2019), pp.184-185

¹¹³ Jaaware (2019), pp.33-34

¹¹⁴ Lefebvre, (1991), p.54

¹¹⁵ Soja (1989), p.130

¹¹⁶ Soja (1989), p.130

¹¹⁷ Santos (2012), pp.48-49

common space. The modern public sphere, in other words, is an attempt to reduce the differences between the multiple societies that exist *within* it. Consequently, social relationships and forms of socialisation are best understood within spatial contexts.¹¹⁸ The importance of studying space, thus, has led to a number of works that have focussed on especially urban societies. Here, most studies converge that casual interaction afforded through spaces like local markets, squares, canal-side walks, etc are important in shaping a sense of inclusion and community.¹¹⁹ In the present research, we turn to a study of the public sphere in Kerala, by emphasising on social space. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in South Asia was a period of radical and fast social changes. In Kerala, this period saw struggles for access to public roads, markets, temples from people across castes. There were, in other words, movements to redefine access to space. There was also the production of new spaces—reading rooms, libraries, public education institutions, teashops—where the modernity was produced (and reproduced) on a daily basis through lived experiences. Since the 1990s, scholars have revised the understanding of modernity and the public sphere in Kerala by turning the focus towards its lived experiences.¹²⁰ Menon (1994) has argued that in the early twentieth century, shrines and shrine festivals became spaces for negotiating the disparity in power in rural communities.¹²¹ The “profane and sacred, high and low, and superior and subordinate identities were subsumed within the space of these shrine festivals”.¹²² They were, in other words, transient ‘communities’ with specific spatiotemporal characteristics. In a more recent article, Mohan (2016) writes about the importance of slave-schools and prayer halls in creating a social-space for the Dalits. Here, he directly invokes Lefebvre and Soja’s understandings of the production of social space.¹²³ Missionary education, access to space for congregation, bring clothed—all led to these communities re-imagining their own body but they also developed new social translation of ideas and experiences. More importantly, we begin to see what Lefebvre called a distinction between the representations of space and representational spaces—between conceived space and lived space.

2.5 Conclusion

There is a politics of space, as Lefebvre says, because space is political.¹²⁴ Space is *also* political, and this is a crucial theoretical nuance that gets left out in studies of modernity that use Habermas as a point of departure. As I have argued in this chapter, the now obvious limitations of Habermasian public sphere and the possibilities opened up by the framework developed in Lefebvre’s works allow us to attempt a

¹¹⁸ Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, (2008), p.547

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Cattell et al (2008)

¹²⁰ See for instance Menon (1994), Mohan (2016), Devika (2003; 2012), Kumar (1997) and Bose & Varughese (2015)

¹²¹ Menon, (1994), pp.40-88

¹²² Menon, (1994), p.52

¹²³ Mohan, (2016), p.43; Mohan, (2005)

¹²⁴ Lefebvre, (2009); p.174

spatiotemporal history of modernity in Kerala. In other words, this research is an attempt to explore the importance and role of space in the ruptures and continuities of Kerala modernity. A study of social spaces in Kerala show that representational spaces have historically played a pivotal role in shaping counter-hegemonic movements in modern Kerala. From the nineteenth century onwards, we see the creation of a “public” which gradually expanded and democratised over the next century. Simultaneously, we see the creation, appropriation and reproduction of social spaces that encouraged a traversal of religious, caste and political differences. Only such an endeavour will help us understand the potential of broad-based and decentralised social spaces in counteracting the contemporary hegemonic structures—most importantly the state, capital, and communalism.

I will begin with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Kerala, a period when the traditional order was rapidly transformed and the seeds for a modern public sphere were sown. In doing so, the attempt will be to identify not just their characteristics but also their strengths and weaknesses, which will help us in better understanding the politics of contemporary Kerala. What was the politics of space in pre-modern Kerala? How did there emerge social spaces that subverted traditional power structures, and what negotiations were involved in opening up the mainstream public sphere to the lower castes? The next chapter will address these questions by studying how public spaces were produced and transformed as the modern public sphere emerged in Kerala.

3. Making “public”: Spatiality in pre-modern to early modern Kerala

Modernity is a temporal tale of continuities and ruptures. As I have argued in the last chapter, it is also spatial. To fully comprehend the changes that have defined the trajectory of modernity, we must begin with a discussion on the spatiality of pre-modern Kerala. Before the socio-religious movements of the nineteenth century, traditional order in Kerala organised society into social hierarchies each characterised by social and material practices that separated them. The distinctive features in Kerala as compared to other caste-societies were the matrilineal system, the dominance of Brahmins of not just the ideological but also the material realms, and the presence of a sizable Christian and Muslim population that fulfilled the role played by *Vaishya* or trader castes in other parts. The distinctive features of Kerala meant that there also developed laws of purity and pollution more stringent than other caste societies. This was the social order that cracked in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The coming of missionaries, the introduction of the printing press, and new forms of education and employment, all resulted in the worldviews of people to expand, and the traditional order, challenged.¹ Consequently, there was also a radical change in the spatiality of Kerala society. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in Kerala were marked by the emergence of common spaces with a shared field of visibility and public utterances and the emergence of new public spaces that allowed for socialization that transcended caste differences.²

Before we demarcate the limits of social spaces that emerged in modern Kerala, it is necessary to reflect on the ruptures that caused these new spaces to emerge in the first place. A historical geography of Kerala modernity, in other words, necessitates that we begin from this period of transition. What was the spatiality of pre-modern Kerala? How did the spaces of control—and resistance—transform in early modern phase? Where were the spaces of resistance, and how did they build? These are some of the questions engaged within this chapter. The first section addresses the spatiality of pre-modern Kerala, discussing how the “purity” of the Brahmin body dictated how social spaces were distributed. By discussing the spatiality of caste in the traditional system, it presents the case that barring some exceptions, everyday social spaces were extremely divided in pre-modern Kerala, and there was minimum vertical traversal. Section 3.2 problematizes the representational spaces (lived spaces), arguing that the same extremely rigid social structure and control made an absolute control—especially over representational spaces—impossible for the caste-Hindus. Consequently, the appropriation of such spaces and the emergence of “counter-publics” were a vital component of shaping the modern public sphere that Kerala witnessed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The making of a “public”

¹ Devika, (2006), p.45; Jeffrey, (2009)

² Kumar, (2016), p.21; Ganesh, (2018), p.21

during this period involved two components: the literal creation of “a public” from communities that had for centuries been excluded from the public sphere, and the “secularisation”—or making public—of old traditions, rituals and spaces themselves. These themes are discussed at length in Section 3.3. The last section turns to the vital question of religion and its influence on the emerging public sphere in Kerala.

3.1 Caste and Spatiality in Traditional Kerala

The traditional order in Kerala was organised in a Hindu Brahminical system and the Nambuthiris (Malayalee Brahmins) controlled the ideological sphere as the repository of knowledge and discourse. Unlike in other regions where the Brahmins were mostly the heads of the ideological and religious realm while political and economic heads were the non-Brahmin castes, Kerala Brahmins were, in general, the most powerful socially, economically and politically. Politically, the land was divided into semi-autonomous temple-centred villages. The means of production was controlled by the large temple corporations managed by Nambuthiris or Nairs. Every household in the village were directly or indirectly dependent on the temple for employment.³ There was, in other words, a spatiality to how the society, resources and communities were arranged. To understand the changes that “cracked” this traditional system, one must begin by critically looking at this spatiality of society. The idea of “body as space” is vital here because we see that the purity of the Nambuthiri body was the pivotal concept around which social—and consequently, material—relations were arranged. Social spaces were defined and arranged “outwards” from the Brahmin body, and analysing how spaces were distributed and controlled allows us—to borrow Lefebvre’s definition—to study space *as itself*. As Sanal Mohan (2016) argues:

“Representations of space in traditional caste society were the exclusive privilege of the upper castes. They in fact conceived and controlled it. Absolute control over space in the caste order that denied freedom to the slave castes was accomplished by exerting control over their spatial mobility. Stuck in the places where they lived, in most cases on the banks of rice fields or the borders of the landlords’ farms, the immutability of space was the experience of slaves”.⁴

The control of representations of space was not sufficient for the Brahmins since they also had to be able to travel across the region with minimal risk of polluting their body. For this, they also

³ Gurukkal, (2012), pp.291-305 and Ganesh, (2017) have argued that temples in pre-modern Kerala played an important role in ushering in a new-social formation and as social spaces in medieval and pre-modern Kerala, respectively.

⁴ Mohan (2016), p.43

commanded control over spatial practices (perceived space). As the laws of untouchability and unapproachability also penetrated into the various sub-castes, the society remained divided and the laws were internalised by each of the communities in the consolation that there was beneath them another group “lower” in the social stratification.⁵

Kerala has been an extremely diverse society for over a thousand years, in that people from different religions, regions, castes and sub-castes have cohabited the region. However, the spatiality that we witness existing in nineteenth-century forces us to deconstruct the understanding of this “society”. A good start would be to wonder, as Jaaware does, about “touching and not touching”: how did the various communities interact and socialise with each other? How much do they traverse their own sociabilities, who has access to the social spaces, who controls the spaces they live in? In general, caste inequalities in such societies stem from the absence of spaces and occasions when members from different castes would have to interact with—physically touch—each other.⁶ In other words, social hierarchies are maintained due to the absence of spaces that allowed them to be challenged. If so, what does the spatiality of pre-modern Kerala, where the purity and pollution laws penetrated into the hundreds of castes and sub-castes, tell us about the possibility of traversal of social spaces? An attempt to answer this question must begin from the most “pollutable” space of pre-modern Kerala, the Brahmin body.

3.1.1 “Purity” of the Brahmin body: Understanding Spatiality in Traditional Kerala

A peculiar feature of the caste system is the vulnerability of the Brahmin body. The dominance over social space by the Brahmin was, in other ways, also a regulation over his *own* personal space. As Jaaware (2019) argues, the maximum regulations, in fact, operated on the body of a Brahmin—and even more so on a Brahmin woman.⁷ The spatial structure of traditional Kerala revolved around the position of Nambuthiri Brahmins as the material and spiritual heads. Maintenance of the purity of the Brahmin body was essential in maintaining the social, political and economic order in society, and spatiality was designed (by the Brahmins) to assist with this. Therefore, the laws of purity and pollution and consequently, the spatiality of caste, must be understood *outwards* from the Brahmin body itself. A Brahmin body is vulnerable to touch by almost anybody except the Brahmin himself, provided he is not in an impure state.⁸ The complicated rules of purity and pollution that governed everyday practices of the Nambuthiri Brahmins, and their extreme rigidity, when compared to Brahmin practices in other

⁵ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.74

⁶ Jaaware, (2019), p.99

⁷ Jaaware, (2019), p.95

⁸ Jaaware, (2019), p.95

regions, is well documented.⁹ These relate to general rules on personal hygiene, eating, worship, conduct in society, stages of life, and specific regulations on women's conduct. Together, these "customs" controlled their body, public activities like travel and socialisation, and even the most private activities like consumption of food, bathing, clothing and using the toilet. Often, negotiating the relations between the purity of the body from *within* and *without* were complicated, as a story of three Nambuthiris narrated in Kanippayur's autobiography demonstrate. He elucidates on the extremely confusing laws of purity that the Nambuthiris were subject to using the story of three Brahmins who had wanted to relieve themselves while travelling somewhere. The religious laws strictly necessitated that the Nambuthiris wash soon after urination to cleanse themselves of the pollution. Since the three Nambuthiris in question had not come across a pond or a river to do so even after walking some distance, they were in a fix! Finally, the first decided to relieve himself despite not being able to wash-up afterwards. The second Brahmin followed suit but decided not to wear the now-polluted loincloth undergarment afterwards. Strongly criticising the first two for having sinned for polluting themselves, the third Brahmin decided to wait till they found some water where he washed himself after, as the law prescribed. Later, the three of them then approached a learned Brahmin to clarify the rules. "Would you like to hear his response?" asks Kanippayur's to his readers:

"The first...would be purified merely by wearing a new pair of clothes and washing himself. The second, who walked the road without wearing a loincloth, was prescribed some rituals for atonement. For the last person who walked on despite the urge to relieve himself, there was no prescribed penance. That is to say that since there was no prescribed atonement and he cannot be purified even with penance; he had to be excommunicated."¹⁰

The judgement was that while not cleansing oneself after urinating was a sin, it was a greater sin to not relieve oneself when the body demanded it; the purity of one's own body *from within* was most important—even more important than its purity from outside. Reflecting on these rigid laws later in his life, Kanippayur's notes:

⁹ William Logan's *Malabar Manual* (1887) recorded sixty-four customs of Nambuthiris that are not observed by Brahmins elsewhere. Autobiographies of EMS Namboothirippad and Devaki Nilayamgode, and memoirs by Kanippayur Shankaran Namboothirippad and V.T. Bhattathirippad which have been used for this research all provided plenty of anecdotes from everyday life relating to the rigidity of these laws to Brahmin bodies. .

¹⁰ Namboothirippad, (2004), pp.258-259

“Irrespective of how much people know about that impurity—the *ayitham*¹¹—no other community has suffered from its impact and rigidity as much as the Namboothiris have”.¹²

Elsewhere in the book, however, he notes that these laws never seemed like a “constraint” to him as a young boy; the young Brahmin boy internalised the laws that governed his body. Immaterial of whether or not the caste-Hindus saw untouchability as a constraint, one aspect of Kerala modernity that is often neglected is the fact that *even* a large portion of Nambuthiri and Nair populations lived under extremely rigid controls (of their own bodies and social spaces) until the reform movements of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries freed them from the clutches of archaic traditional caste laws. Not just the lowered castes; even large portions of the higher caste-Hindus such as Nairs and Nambuthiris only achieved a life of dignity once the traditional system was overthrown.¹³In the traditional order, the normalization of these religious laws was so entrenched that it was unimaginable even for most young Brahmins to think of breaking these strict religious laws.¹⁴

Spatially, these practices were laid *outwards*, starting from the inner sanctum sanctorum of the village temples into which only the “pure” Brahmin priest was allowed entry. Being the “purest” of spaces, the sanctum sanctorum where the temple deity was seated remained inaccessible to everyone except the (pure) Brahmin priest. The temple itself, which had remained for centuries the material and social fulcrum of the village, became the sacred space, accessible only to a selected section of the public—the *savarna* Hindus.¹⁵ Lower caste Hindus like the Ezhavas, although involved in some temple activities indirectly, were largely denied entry into the temple premises or even the access roads that lead to the temple. The slave castes were farther relegated to the outskirts of the village. They were not allowed access to the public roads, institutions, temples or markets in the village. Although other *savarna* Hindus (Nairs, temple-servant castes, etc) had fewer restrictions on the use of public spaces and markets, even they practised strict laws of purity and pollution among themselves (See Section 3.1.2 for a detailed discussion on such practices).

The position that Brahmins held as the hegemon of both material and spiritual spheres made it important that they controlled not just representations of space (decisions such as where the temples were built, where which community lived, etc.) but also the spatial practices. This was important because as heads of the economic and political spheres, they had to also traverse the regional

¹¹ Believed to originate from the Sanskrit word for impurity, “Ashudhdam”, *Ayitham* (untouchability) and *theendal* (unapproachability) constituted the practices based on purity and pollution in Kerala.

¹² Namboothirippad, (2005), p.231

¹³ Kapicadu, (2019)

¹⁴ Namboodirippad, (2017), p.64

¹⁵ Nambuthiris, other temple castes, and Nairs.

boundaries, and control and distribute means of production. For this to be done without polluting themselves, they needed the servitude of the non-Brahmins to the rules of purity and pollution. Consequently, public spaces became less and less accessible to people lower in the social hierarchy. In a multi-cultural and densely populated region, this social order could only be maintained by a carefully engineered and extremely complicated control over the social spaces—conceived, perceived and lived. The fact that the Brahmin body remained the most “vulnerable” meant that it demanded a kind of reciprocity in spatial practices from the non-Brahmins to be able to maintain their purity. It was the internalisation of this reciprocity among other castes that made it possible for Brahmins to control the social spaces in Kerala for centuries. The nature and degree of reciprocity, unsurprisingly, changes depending on who one asked. For instance, Kanippayur who was himself from an aristocratic Nambuthiri family makes the following observation in his autobiography:

“The ritual of untouchability cannot but exist unless two people meet... the *avarna* and *savarna* must meet as equals and must both comply; if one of the two people do not consent to it, the custom of untouchability cannot prevail... Just as the *savarnas* believed that they would become impure if they approached an *avarna* and that they would have to bathe to cleanse themselves thereafter before doing anything else; the *avarnas* believed—to the same degree—that approaching a *savarna* and polluting them was sinful. It is because *both of them believed in this equally* that the ritual existed unchanged till recent years”.¹⁶

Kanippayur’s position as a Brahmin dictated this rather outrageous—even ignorant—reading of the “ritual” of untouchability as being consensual. While the lowered castes may have abided by their role for centuries, it was clearly because the Nambuthiris maintained absolute authority over representations of space, that it automatically made it important that all other castes followed the spatial practices. Nair reformer Mannathu Padmanabhan (1878-1970), comments on the practice differently in his memoir when he says that it was considered the *duty* of the lower castes to ensure that they did not pollute the higher castes.¹⁷ In the speeches of reformers like Narayana Guru and Ayyankali who belonged to the Ezhava and Pulaya castes, respectively, we see a different understanding of untouchability; as a social evil instilled forcefully upon them by a Brahminical system.¹⁸ Whether or not the subordination of the lower castes was done by choice or out of duty, the *savarnas* and *avarnas* did not, in fact, meet as equals,

¹⁶ Namboothirippad, (2005), pp.275-276; Emphasis added. Kanippayur clarifies here that *savarna* and *avarna* are meant to mean any caste and the castes below it, including the non-Brahmin Hindu castes. In reality, the Brahmins, the caste of temple-servants and Nairs constituted the *savarna* while all castes below the Nairs, including the Ezhavas, Pulayas, Cherumas, Parayas, Nayadis, etc. were the *avarnas*. See Manmathan, (2013), p.59.

¹⁷ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.76

¹⁸ Ayyankali, (2017); Guru, (2017)

but both did comply—a compliance that was more an internalisation of the inequality in (material and social) power that existed between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin, than a choice.

The Nairs on whom the restrictions were least stringent, were already in social contracts with the Nambuthiris—directly through *sambandhams*¹⁹, but even as local chieftains and landlords, or as servants. The Ezhavas were on the fringes of the material public spaces like markets and roads, but they were kept outside sacred spaces like temples. To the Dalits and slave castes who were kept outside of most public spaces, familial relations, their tightly knit and small communities and the slave’s body became crucial aspects of lived spaces. As opposed to a Brahmin who had full awareness of the importance of the body as space, this recognition only came about much later for the Dalit communities (discussed in more detail in Section 3.3.2). Despite the strict control over spatiality, the disconnect between the representations of space and representational spaces that existed in the traditional order—and the strict absence of traversals of any kind—would eventually provide respite to the lowered castes and women across all castes to subvert these structures. However, before we discuss how this happened, it is relevant to explain how the different castes engaged with social space in pre-modern Kerala. The spatial relations that will be discussed in detail in the following section emerged from the Brahmins’ need to protect their bodies from pollution while still maintaining a functional society.

3.1.2 Caste and Social Spaces in traditional Kerala

The laws of purity and pollution dictated how the body of the Brahmin was to be kept pure. In Kerala, the status of Brahmins as not merely the head of the spiritual but as also economic and political spheres meant that to carry out their roles in society, they had to engage with people from the other castes directly or indirectly without polluting themselves. This is why the laws of unapproachability and unseeability prevailed in Kerala much more strictly than they did in other regions; a complete subservience by the other castes was necessary not just in the spiritual realm, but also in the material realm. Social spaces were designed accordingly. The temple, synonymous to the Brahmin body, was the sacred space, and the spatial role of each caste that followed depended on their position in the social hierarchy. Each caste and sub-caste were tied into the laws of purity and pollution through prescribed distances that each caste had to maintain from one another; a physical separation fixed in arithmetical precision to ensure the non-engagement of different castes:

“The rules of Malabar prescribed that a slave of the castes of poolayan, waloovan and parian shall remain 72 paces from a Brahmin and from a nair, 48 from a teean; a

¹⁹ *Sambandhams* were alliances between a man and a woman followed by matrilineal castes like Nairs, Nambuthiris and ambalavasis. It was common for Nambuthiri men to have *sambandhams* with Nair women. For more on this, see: Kodoth, (2001).

slave of kannukun caste 64 paces from a Brahmin and nair, and 40 from a teean; and the other castes generally 48 paces from a Brahmin and nair and 24 from a teean”.²⁰

How did these laws segregate the social spaces in Kerala? What spaces were accessible to the various castes, and how did this influence their experiences—and thereby, their world-views? Who could traverse social spaces and how? How did regulation of spaces influence the access of the lowered castes to mainstream public spaces, and how did they imagine their own body as space (to invoke the Lefebvrian conception of “body as space”)? These are some questions that will be explored in this section.

a) **Caste-Hindus (Nambuthiris and Nairs)**

As important political and economic agents, Nambuthiris had to travel beyond their local regions without being polluted—they had the unique role of functioning as messengers between different regions.²¹ Unlike the slave castes and the lower caste Hindus like Ezhavas whose life-experiences were almost always confined spatially either by birth or through their sale, the Nambuthiris were considered beyond territorial concerns:

“Every month one temple or another used to have a feast for Brahmins. Namboodiris would go from one to another and carry messages, even between regions that were at war with one another. We were good diplomats. One will say, ‘Are you going to see the Raja? I have a very good friend, tell him about this man.’ Another will say: ‘Y is going to sell land, I think you should tell Z, he might want to buy’”.²²

Here, a Nambuthiri alludes to the Brahmin’s political and economic roles. Pre-modern Kerala was divided into a number of loosely divided semi-autonomous administrative units each governed by Nambuthiris (managed in most cases by wealthy Nairs).²³ This made them close acquaintances of the king. In the abovementioned instance, the Nambuthiri also acted as an economic intermediary, mediating the sale of a piece of land between the seller and a potential buyer. This role of Nambuthiri Brahmins in Kerala led to an inherent contradiction—they had to traverse spaces meanwhile ensuring the purity of their body. This they did by a careful manoeuvre of the region along with the support of other lower castes so that the traversal of social spaces could occur without their body being polluted.

²⁰ H S Graeme in his Report on Slavery 1822, quoted in Saradamoni (1980), p.61

²¹ As did some sections of the Nairs. See: Mencher, (1966), p.187

²² Anonymous, quoted in Mencher, (1966), p.187

²³ Lemercinier, (1984), p.151; Narayanan, (2013), p.16

The rigidities of the laws that governed the spatiality of Nambuthiris continued well into the early twentieth century, as E.M.S Namboodirippad recounts in his autobiography, a pilgrimage made by him in his childhood, much before he had renounced religion:

“During the first pilgrimage of my life, we followed all the rituals as prescribed by the religion. Moreover, I also practiced all the customs prescribed specifically to Namboodiri Brahmins. Upon leaving from a specific location to another, we would not drink even water until we reached the destination and bathed to cleanse ourselves. The itinerary would be prepared in such a way that the evening rituals were strictly followed...as far as I was concerned, it was unthinkable to even consider breaking these daily rituals at the time.”²⁴

They followed extremely rigid practices to “protect” themselves from being polluted while travelling outside their homes. For Nambuthiri women, any travel outside the homes was even more restricted. The Malayalam word for a Nambuthiri woman—*Antharjanam*—literally meant, “people who live inside”. From a very young age, Nambuthiri girls were made to internalise their subservience to the Brahminical patriarchy that dictated and controlled their lives and social space.²⁵ Although they enjoyed the same social spaces as boys at a young age, such freedoms were quickly curtailed the moment she hit puberty. Immediately, there were major restrictions on her daily routine, socialisation, and use of public spaces. Devaki Nilayamgode recounts how she was confined to the family home and not allowed to play outside like before:

“...gradually, my life was confined to the inner rooms and to the company of my elder sisters. I could go to pray at the temple but not stay back to play. I could look at the boys and walk in the portico or the courtyard—only until puberty.”²⁶

Gradually, her social space became restricted to the visits to temples or to the homes of relatives for family events: “any interaction between the antharjanams and the other women took place, if at all, only in the temple premises”.²⁷ When she was married off and her new home had no temple nearby, Devaki notes that her bi-weekly congregation with other women also ended and she now met other relatives and friends only at weddings.²⁸ At times when they had to visit their parents or relatives, *Antharjanams*

²⁴ Namboodirippad, (2017), p.64

²⁵ Namboodirippad, (2004), pp.159-161; Nilayamgode, (2011)

²⁶ Nilayamgode, (2011), pp.31, 41

²⁷ Nilayamgode, (2011), p.48

²⁸ Nilayamgode, (2011), p.53

were to be accompanied by servants, and they had to use a large blanket and umbrella to cover their entire body to not be seen by others.²⁹

Kanippayur's autobiography contains detailed records of the very minute practices and rituals that had to be followed by the Nambuthiris when travelling to public places, a detailed account of which falls outside the purview of this research.³⁰ These made the traversal of spaces very tricky because although they controlled the representations of space in the villages, travelling far away also meant they had to control the spatial practices in the places they were visiting. This discouraged them from travelling to faraway places, especially to northern parts of India where the Nambuthiris had no control over spatial practices. In one instance, a Nambuthiri Brahmin who—despite being on a pilgrimage to Kashi—had to perform an act of atonement when back in Kerala, because he had not bathed in the prescribed way while he was travelling.³¹ Another Nambuthiri poet from the nineteenth century, Venmani Achan Nambudirippad (1817-1890) described the anguish of travelling “abroad” due to the lack of ponds or lakes where one could take a bath as prescribed.³²

Even within Kerala where the Nambuthiris had more control over the social space, travel was not easy. Kanippayur writes about the laws of purity and pollution associated with travelling outside the home. Even travelling too far away from the *illam* (family home) could cause *vazhisudhdham* (pollution by “way”) and the Nambuthiri was to take a bath to become pure again.³³ Not just this, he was also to only wear clothes that were washed and cleaned on the same day. If anyone other than the Nambuthiri himself or someone from the very specific Veluthedathu Nair caste touched the clothes, it would become impure. Therefore, it was customary for rich Nambuthiris to send a Veluthedathu Nair servant to a destination a few days before himself, so that clean clothes were available on the day he arrived.³⁴ The Nairs played an important role in acting as intermediaries between the Nambuthiris and other lower castes, giving them an important role in the political-economic developments in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

²⁹ Namboothirippad, (2004), pp.176-179

³⁰ In the first Volume, he dedicates three entire chapters explaining the concepts of purity and pollution during travels, from animals and other castes, and presents anecdotes from everyday practices like eating, praying, bathing, and playing. Apart from this, each chapter also throws light on these practices followed by the Nambuthiri Brahmins in traditional Kerala. See Namboothirippad, (2004)

³¹ Namboothirippad, (2004), p.163

³² By abroad, he means outside the region of Kerala. In his poem *Rameswarayatra*, he describes the experience of travelling to Rameswaram temple on the eastern coast. He calls it “hard” to travel where one had to use their hand to pour water over one’s head and bathe, as opposed to taking a dip in the lake or river, as is prescribed. See: Nambudiripad, (1106 ME [1931]), pp.99-100

³³ Namboothirippad (2004), p.246.

³⁴ Namboothirippad (2004), pp.244-245

The Brahmin-Nair alliance in traditional Kerala was one of power sharing and reciprocity, where the Nairs enjoyed their higher social status as compared to other *shudras* in exchange for their services, which allowed the Brahmin dominance over the material and spiritual realm.³⁵ Through their marital alliances, they also remained in close contact with the Brahmin social spaces. In general, the Nairs considered themselves closer to the Brahmins (although a level below), and higher in caste than the Ezhavas and other Dalit castes. Nair reformer Mannathu Padmanabhan (1879 – 1970) recounts in his autobiography that his mother had advised him that if he ever became polluted, he was not to allow even saliva to go down his throat or his eyes would burst.³⁶ K. Madhavan (1915-2016), who belonged to the Nair caste, for instance, recounts an incident from his childhood where he was asked to bathe in a canal after he took a tender coconut offered to him by a lower caste friend.³⁷ E.K Nayanar (1919-2004), born to a Nair sub-caste in Malabar and who was later to become a Communist leader and Chief Minister of Kerala, recalls when his father expressed disgust at the fact that Pulaya children were going to be given admission to the village school.³⁸ Such vertical traversals were seen as a threat to the prevalent social order.

b) Lower Caste Hindus and Dalits

Caste consciousness was so deep-rooted in Kerala that it divided the lower castes into many sub-castes—each separated from the other by rigid caste rules and had their own special customs. The 1875 census of Travancore discovered over four hundred subdivisions of Hindu castes in the region alone.³⁹ The case in Cochin and Malabar was not very different. Each of these sub-castes—including the lower caste Hindus (Ezhavas and Nairs), and Dalits and slave castes—in turn, practised laws of pollution between them, and practice of intermarriage or inter-dining between these castes was absent.⁴⁰ An Ezhava, who was to stay 32 feet away from a Nambuthiri Brahmin, also had to keep 12 feet distance from a Nair who was himself a *Shudra*.⁴¹ Unlike the caste-Hindus who had the freedom to move throughout the petty chiefdoms of the old Kerala region and have a clear idea of the caste practices and categories, members of the lower castes were bound to their locality:

“...his dress warned his caste-Hindu neighbours of his lowly status...To run away to another locality offered no prospect of improvement, for how would a man live

³⁵ Sreekumar, (2013)

³⁶ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), pp.75-76

³⁷ Madhavan, (2014), p.14

³⁸ Nayanar, (1997), p.7-8

³⁹ Jeffrey, (1976), p.6

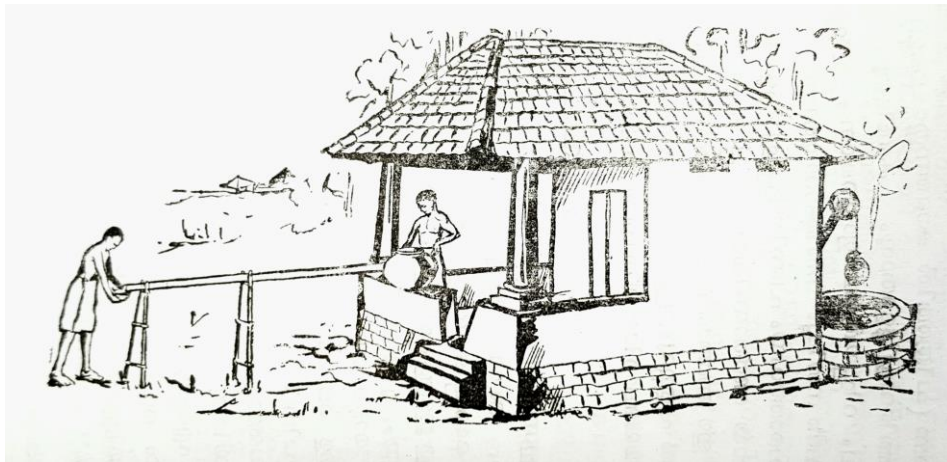
⁴⁰ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.74; Saradamoni (1980), p.63

⁴¹ Jeffrey (1976), p.6

without his traditional landlords and patrons? And in a land without roads and bridges, how far could a man run?”⁴²

The enslaved populations—most of who belonged to the Pulaya, Paraya and Kurava communities—constituted roughly 13 percent of the population in Travancore (1836), 11 percent in Malabar (1856) and 16 percent in Cochin (1854) and were owned by the upper-caste Hindus or Christians, the state, or the temples.⁴³ A member of the slave caste could not easily enter the town or village, and no employment was available to him except working at his owner’s farm. Even in the exceptional case where he—or she, although this was even less likely—gained access to education, being polluted barred them from working in any profession which needed interacting with upper castes. The social hierarchy consequently relegated a large section of Dalits as slaves of the upper caste landlords before slavery was abolished in 1843 in Malabar and in 1855 in the native states of Southern Kerala.⁴⁴ Records from the mid-nineteenth century mention prohibitions on the slaves from using highways and main roads as their presence would “pollute the houses situated nearby”.⁴⁵ Even in exceptional cases where they were allowed to use the main roads and highways, they were expected to stay out of sight of the caste-Brahmins, and roadside rest houses had provisions to ensure they did not come into direct contact with travellers from other castes. Kanippayur mentions, for instance, a long pipe of the prescribed length made of bamboo that was used in wayward rest houses to give water to a person from the lower castes without making contact with them (see Figure 1). Writing about Travancore in the late nineteenth

Figure 1 : *Vazhiyambalam* (Rest House) with a long pipe to serve water to lower castes



Source: Illustration from Namboothirippad (2005), p.23

⁴² Jeffrey (1976), p.7

⁴³ Saradmoni (1980), p.81; Logan, (1989), p.148; Mohan (2016), p.42; Lemercinier, (1984), p.164

⁴⁴ Saradmoni, (1980); Mohan, (2016) p.42

⁴⁵ Saradmoni (1980), pp.61-62.

century, Samuel Mateer in his *The Land of Charity* (1871) describes how the lower castes who sold their craft had to place their items for sale on the highway and retire to a distance shouting from there to potential buyers who might pass by.⁴⁶ He could never have any direct contact with the buyers or have a say in the price that was paid for the product.

The rituals of purity and pollution were strictly practised even between the lower caste communities. For instance although the *Vettomas* and the *Pulayas*—both slave castes—met and worked together in the fields, the former invariably had to bathe before returning home or tasting food:

“After bathing they utter the usual cry, and warn the coming poolayan to quit the road and retreat to the prescribed distance. Their houses were obliged to be forty paces distant from the poolayan’s, they desert their houses when less; they will not frequent the same roads, nor buy at the same bazar—there being a separate one kept by Mohomedans for the poolayans; nor will the children intermix in each other’s game or a common playground”.⁴⁷

Despite their non-engagement with the higher caste Hindus on an everyday basis, Dalits had access to markets and shops run by Muslims and lower caste Christians, as K.V. Kannan retells from his memory growing up in early twentieth-century Kerala: “We were allowed into Muslim homes. We could eat in their homes, quench our thirst from the water in their wells. But caste Hindus treated Harijans as inferior animals”.⁴⁸ The social space of the Dalit communities, in other words, was extremely limited. They survived for the most part by traversing horizontally while working at the fields or during festivals when they were allowed to make offerings of grain, fruits or other agricultural produce to the landlords.

c) Christianity and Islam

We have seen how the caste-system dominated and controlled the social spaces of the Hindus and Dalit communities in Kerala. It is relevant now to briefly talk about the spatiality as practices by the two other major religions in the region—Christianity and Islam.⁴⁹ One of the features that make Kerala a fascinating case study is the presence of a sizable Christian and Muslim population. Even before secularism became yardsticks of and religious tolerance in modernity, Kerala has had a history of peaceful co-existence of the three religions even in the pre-modern times. M.G.S Narayanan (2013)

⁴⁶ Mateer, (1871), p.47

⁴⁷ Murdock Brown, quoted in Saradamoni (1980), p.63

⁴⁸ Kannan, (1988), p.295

⁴⁹ Kerala has always had a sizable population of Christian and Muslim population. As of 2011 Census, 26.5 percent of Kerala’s population are Muslims and 18.38 percent Christian. 54.73 percent are Hindu. (C-1 Population By Religious Community, Census of India 2011)

traces back the distinctive features of early modern Kerala society and culture—the peculiar caste patters, matriline, plurality and peaceful co-existence of creeds, Malayalam language—to at least as early as AD. 800 to AD. 1124 when the Kulashekhara reigned the region.⁵⁰ Dale (1973) observed that sixteenth-century Kerala was “remarkably stable” Hindu-Muslim relations.⁵¹ The discovery of copper plate-grants issued as early as 9th century AD (Kollam Syrian copper plates) and 10th century AD (Jewish copper plates) record the then kings making generous donations of land, resources and slaves for the construction of Christian and Jewish settlements, respectively.⁵² The separation of the large masses of Muslim and Christian communities from the upper-caste Hindus was important in maintaining the stability of social relations.⁵³ It has already been mentioned briefly, how the slave castes and Dalit communities interacted more with the Muslim brethren than they did with caste Hindus.⁵⁴ These carefully crafted social relations rooted in a specific distribution of public spaces were transformed when the Portuguese and British arrived in Kerala in the late-medieval period.

The Christian community in Kerala has a long and fascinating history.⁵⁵ Broadly, the Christians in Kerala belong to three groups—Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New Christians. Fuller (1976) has argued that these groups could essentially be categorised as castes since they practised distance pollution and other practices like caste-Hindus.⁵⁶ Inter-dining and intermarriages were absent within the different Christian communities in traditional Kerala, as they were from the Hindu castes.⁵⁷ Claiming lineage from Nambuthiri Brahmins who converted to Christianity in the first century, Syrian Christians are the oldest group and were widely held—both by themselves and by Nairs—to be ranked marginally ‘above’ the Nairs in pre-modern Kerala.⁵⁸ Records of Europeans from as early as sixteenth-century record Syrian Christians as leading pepper merchants and landlords in some areas.⁵⁹ The second group, Latin Christians, were converts from the erstwhile fishing castes along the coastal belt who converted after the arrival of the Portuguese and their missionary endeavours. The last group—New Christians—were converts from the slave castes by Protestant missionary activities led mainly by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the nineteenth and twentieth

⁵⁰ Narayanan, (2013), pp.16-17

⁵¹ Dale, (1973), p.319

⁵² Narayanan, (2013), pp.

⁵³ Dale, (1973), pp.325-326

⁵⁴ Murdock Brown, quoted in Saradamoni (1980), p.63; Kannan, (1988), p.295

⁵⁵ For detailed accounts, see: Fuller, (1976); Brown, (1956); Vishwanathan, (1965); Koshy, (1968)

⁵⁶ Fuller, (1976), pp.63,68; Mohan, (2005), pp.39-40;

⁵⁷ Fuller, (1976), p.63 also see Brown, (1956), pp.173-174; Ayyar, (1926), pp. 216-218. Some recent events of caste-crimes, such as the murder of Kevin for his affair with a “higher caste” Christian girl suggest such issues continues. Off the record, a Latin Christian woman I met at a public event in Kerala said to me that she had married outside her caste a few years ago and her family had refused to accept the marriage.

⁵⁸ Fuller, (1976), p.56

⁵⁹ Fuller, (1976), pp.54, 56

century. Their position allowed them to interact closely with the lowered caste Hindu communities from which they had converted. Such horizontal traversal of social spaces appears to have been present also between the lowered caste Hindus and the Muslim communities, especially in Malabar. Even before the nationalist movement tried to enforce a Hindu-Muslim identity, those from the lowered caste Hindu sections had already been living and interacting with the Muslims in the region.⁶⁰

Christian and Muslim communities also had among them, more prosperous and wealthy section. The wealthy Syrian Christians enjoyed the status of high-caste Hindus. The absence of a conventional “trader” caste among the Hindus in Kerala unlike in other parts of India meant that this role was fulfilled by the non-Hindu Malayalis (mostly the Muslims and Christians) or the non-Malayali Hindus (Tamil or the Konkani Brahmins, the trader castes from Gujarat, and other smaller migrant communities). Because of this social position of being in-between Nambuthiris and Nairs, and since they were seen as being outside the traditional laws of purity and pollution, Syrian Christians acted as “pollution neutralisers” in certain instances as a Malabar Syrian recollects:

“...the present writer himself in his boyhood about thirty years ago, used to be asked by Hindu temple servants to touch conventionally polluted provisions intended for the temple about a stone’s throw away from his house.”⁶¹

Such practices where the Christians—especially Syrian Christians—“purified” a temple that had been polluted by a lower caste Hindu suggests their ability to traverse the spatiality of the Hindu caste-system in a way the Brahmins could not. Meanwhile, the Latin and New Christians were placed lower in the social hierarchy. Islam had an established presence in Kerala at least by the ninth century AD. The legend of the seventh century Chera king Cheraman Perumal who converted to Islam and travelled to Arabia to meet the Prophet features even within credible records of Kerala history.⁶² Much like the early Christian and Jewish populations, the Muslims received the benevolence, concessions and support of the early Muslim missionaries, and even those who converted from Hinduism to Islam, often as a *quid pro quo* for the economic benefits derived in return.⁶³ By the twelfth century, there at least ten recorded settlements of Muslims spread across Kerala, each of which developed with a mosque at its centre, much like the rural villages structured around a village temple.⁶⁴ A flourishing community and trusted associates of the *Zamorins* of Calicut in the medieval times, they suffered adversely from the

⁶⁰ Punathil, (2013), p.10

⁶¹ Joseph, (1928), p.29

⁶² Dale, (1973), p.320

⁶³ Dale, (1973), p.324

⁶⁴ Dalvi, (2011), p.3; Punathil, (2013), p.5

spread of Portuguese and British colonialism.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the Latin and New Christians and poor Muslim communities shared the social spaces with lower caste Hindus and former slave castes. Osella & Osella, (2007) argue that the modernisation of Muslim communities in Kerala followed the Kerala-wide patterns during the early-modern phase.⁶⁶

In general, we see that the Christian and Muslim populations had certain privileges of traversing social spaces horizontally with caste Hindus which were considered of similar social hierarchy. Christian shops, homes and markets were open to lower caste Hindus (especially in Cochin and Travancore where the Christian populations were high), as were the homes and shops of Muslim populations in the Malabar region. This allowed the Christians and Muslims access to the social spaces of the lower castes in a way that the Brahmins could not. Missionary Christianity from the nineteenth and twentieth-century and the conversion of New Christians came to play a central role in the ushering in of colonial modernity in Kerala.⁶⁷ The social position of Christians and Muslims as being equal to their Hindu counterparts also had a class element to it, as the examples here show. The horizontal traversal of social spaces therefore extended to a certain extent beyond religious differences, because a Paraya caste shared representational spaces with Latin Christians more than he did with higher caste Hindus. Such early horizontal traversals were important in shaping secularism in general in Kerala, but it will be interesting to study their role in the emergence of secular class solidarity in the later decades.

3.1.3 Spatiality, experience and the traversal of social spaces.

One's social experience—produced through the dynamic of spaces—influences one's worldviews.⁶⁸ This is why the control and (re)production of social spaces—conceived, perceived and lived—becomes important. Lefebvre saw the interconnectedness of these three realms and the ability of a “subject” to move from one to another a logical necessity for a functioning society.⁶⁹ In the last section, I have discussed the traditional order in Kerala which dominated the social relations for over a thousand years before they were cracked—but were not broken up entirely—in the nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Before we look in detail at the changes that led to this transformation, three observations about the spatiality of traditional order may be made, which can guide us further: firstly, the society remained extremely stratified spatially, with limited traversals across social spaces; secondly, the counter-publics that existed often transcend the conventional private/public distinctions; and finally, the disconnect between the

⁶⁵ Punathil, (2013), p.6

⁶⁶ Osella & Osella, (2007), pp.339-340

⁶⁷ Mohan, (2016), p.46

⁶⁸ Guru, (2012), pp.79-80

⁶⁹ Lefebvre, (1991), p.40

⁷⁰ Saradamoni, (1980), p.6

conceived and lived spaces allowed for a subversion of the power structures. I shall expand on each of these points.

The rigid control of spaces and the contradictions in society, such as the alienation of the peasant classes from the means of production and their exploitation by the upper castes were contained in two ways. In the ideological sphere, this was done through the spread of the Bhakti cult, which made the supreme dedication to god as important for salvation.⁷¹ In the material sphere, the lowliness and misery that dictated the social spaces of the slave castes were sometimes momentarily broken by making some exclusionary rights available to the people from these lower castes in the local temples. In some instances, lower castes were allowed to participate in specific parts of agriculture and harvesting festivals.⁷² Similarly, they were given certain “privileges” in some temples on specific days. *Theyyam* ritual in Malabar is an example, where the performer belonging to a lowered caste would become deified for the one time, and everyone in the village, including the high caste Nambiaris (Nair caste), would come seek their blessings.⁷³ Another way in which it was accommodated was through political satire, patronised by the kings, reminiscent of the *ecumene* discussed in Section 2.2 of the previous chapter. It was with the emergence of a modern public sphere and the migration of the castes, such as that of Nairs into the highlands, that such *mélange* of religions gathered pace in the twentieth century.⁷⁴ Such exceptions were carefully crafted in traditional Kerala in a way that did not seriously challenge the existing social order. Despite such symbolic exceptions which were restricted to the non-material domain, the traversal of social-spaces, for the most part, remained impossible, or extremely difficult under the traditional order. A subversion of this structure, in other words, meant a radical transformation of the representations of space and of spatial practices either through appropriating existing social spaces or by creating new ones.

Another community that lived under extreme spatial restrictions under the Brahminical system were the Nambuthiri women. Once again, Devika (2011) has argued, “the antharjanam’s extreme seclusion, the practice of their travelling without husbands escorted by servants, the extreme difficulties, material and otherwise...all left spaces in which the rules ordering everyday life could be potentially upturned.”⁷⁵ Unlike the caste-struggles for public spaces, the Nambuthiri women’s subversion of the power structures often emerged from within the most private of spaces—the bathing *ghats* or the inner rooms of their household. Nilayamgode’s anecdote from her life provides an excellent example. The laws of pollution dictated that during her menstrual cycles, the Antharjanam was “polluted” and was to be

⁷¹ Gurukkal, (2012)

⁷² Saradhamoni, (1980), p.65

⁷³ Menon, (1994), pp. 55, 89

⁷⁴ Menon, (1994)

⁷⁵ Devika, (2011), p.xxvi

confined to a room without touching or meeting anyone else. It was, in other words, a period of exclusion from any kind of social life. Yet, it was here that Nilayamgode also found herself subverting these power structures:

“Girls were not permitted to read and if the hidden books were discovered, punishment was certain...The monthly rest given to menstruating girls came as a godsend to my sisters. For three days, they had to stay cooped up in a room without touching anyone. No one went to see them either. Thus, it was possible to read uninterruptedly, without attracting any attention...This was how my reading began. It was amusing to watch my sisters take such pains to read in secrecy.”⁷⁶

She recalls that her favourite book was the Malayalam translation of *Les Misérables*. Here, in the lived spaces within the confinement of the rooms, she and her sisters were introduced to poetry and novels including translations of Bengali books. There were, as Devika (2011) argues, potentially subversive spaces within these controlled domains.⁷⁷ However, we see that the space of the body continued to remain controlled:

“...there was a problem. Touching books was taboo during [menstruating] days and we lacked the courage to break the custom. But here, the servants’ daughters came to our aid. One of them sat in front of us and turned the pages. Thus, we succeeded in reading books without touching them.”⁷⁸

The control of the gendered bodies especially that of women’s role within the realm of the private sphere will be discussed at length in Section 4.1. For now, what is relevant to note that these spaces which fulfilled the conventional roles of the public sphere, remained far from “public”. In fact, it was in the extremely confined spaces that the Nambuthiri women—and as we shall see, Dalits—were exposed to an alternate worldview and a new spatiality.

Finally, and consequently, the spatiality of traditional order—built as it was on the purity of the Brahmin body—also created a wide disconnect between the conceived and lived spaces. Despite an almost absolute control over representations of space (conceived space) and spatial practices (perceived space), the Nambuthiris did not vertically traverse these spaces easily. In the representational spaces (lived space) of lower castes, the Nambuthiri Brahmins did not have presence or dominance as much as the Nairs, Christians or Muslims did. Kanippayur’s confession in his autobiography that he was

⁷⁶ Nilayamgode, (2011), p.32

⁷⁷ Devika, (2011), p.xxvi

⁷⁸ Nilayamgode, (2011), p.32

ignorant of the difference between the Pulaya and Paraya castes until he saw one make way for another on a road is a striking revelation of this disconnect:

“I did not know that there was a difference between the Pulayas and the Pariahs; [I] had always thought that they were different names of the same community. Many years ago I saw a *Pulayan* make way for a *Mulayan*. I did not even know that the two of these were different castes.”⁷⁹

The fact that a learned Nambuthiri Brahmin was unaware of this difference points towards an extremely wide gap that existed between the two ends of the caste-structure. This contradiction between the need to control spatiality for their secular (economic and administrative) function and the laws of purity and pollution prohibiting a complete control over the representational (lived) space, as we will see in the next section, accentuated the rupture of traditional social order in Kerala in the late nineteenth-early-twentieth centuries. This disengagement and disconnect from the lower castes meant that despite strict restrictions, the lived spaces still managed to provide some reprieve for the lower castes.⁸⁰

These vital observations are helpful in tracing the trajectory of social spaces as they transformed in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The resistance to the social order emerged in this context, and the challenge came from within the cleavages of power that existed precisely because of disconnect between the representations of space and the representational spaces in the traditional order. As we shall see in the next section, the missionary works of the nineteenth century exploited this rupture to spread their activities among the lower-caste communities.

3.2 Representational spaces and glimmers of resistance

Kerala until the early nineteenth century was marked by the absence of any institutions or spaces that necessitated close physical contact between people of different castes.⁸¹ One reason for this, as we have already seen, is that for centuries people in the region had lived—to borrow Jaaware’s term—in fragmented “sociabilities”.⁸² Most people lived in their own social spaces—often disconnected and distant from each other. Only the Brahmins and a section of the Nairs had the luxury of traversing spaces. The lower caste Ezhavas and the Dalits and slave-castes were tied to their property owners and

⁷⁹ Namboothirippad, (2004), pp.241-242

⁸⁰ Mohan, (2016), p.50

⁸¹ Saradamoni, (1980), pp.28-29

⁸² Jaaware, (2019)

had minimal opportunities to migrate.⁸³ This was the nature of traditional society in Kerala for centuries—a sluggish agrarian non-kinship based social formation divided by caste hierarchies and centred around the temples. As an observation from early nineteenth-century Kerala note, “bazaars, where brisk sales and purchases took place, were absent in the region [and] the few shops found were kept by Muslims, Christians and low caste Nairs.”⁸⁴ The presence of non-Hindu religions often helped mediate any traversal of social spaces that were necessary.

Despite their control over the conceived and perceived spaces, the fear of pollution kept the Nambuthiris from engaging openly with the non-Brahmin castes, unless necessary. This meant that they also remained disconnected from the representational spaces. Here in the lived spaces, the intermediary castes like the Nairs and other groups like Christians and Muslims exercised more control. The nineteenth-century witnessed changes in society that necessitated a restructuring of these social relations, and consequently, its spatial composition. Many reasons contributed to this, but the role of missionary activities are of relevance to this research because of their direct impact on the representational spaces, and their ability to appropriate social spaces.⁸⁵ Initially, these changes did not mean much because they were not accompanied by economic transformation or social awakening of these castes.⁸⁶ This is an interesting characteristic of the transformation of social spaces in Kerala, that the changes weren’t forced as a result of material changes (in a classical Marxist sense of analysis), but through spatial changes (in a Lefebvrian sense). Social awakening and economic transformation came towards the end of the nineteenth century with the religious reform movements and the rise of a middle-class that demanded access to institutions. The struggle for space preceded these transformations. Many of the first struggles we see in the nineteenth century are direct contests for space and arose from a redefined understanding of spatiality—both of the body, but also of public spaces.

Sanal Mohan (2016) has recently provided an excellent study of the impact of early missionary conversion on redefining the spatiality of lowered castes in Kerala as a result of the opening up of spaces like chapels and schools where they could congregate, violating the restrictions imposed on their use of public spaces.⁸⁷ When the missionaries started their work within the slave castes, their first challenge was to simply gain access to these communities. The Hindu and Christian upper castes who

⁸³ There were a few exceptions, like the Ezhavas who migrated to Sri Lanka, or lowered caste Christians who managed to escape the clutches of their landlords and flee to another country, and Malayans who had relative freedoms because they weren’t tied to any Nair *tharavad*, See Menon, (1994), p.54; Fuller, (1976)

⁸⁴ From Buchanan observed a sluggish society in Malabar, while Ward and Conor observed the lack of brisk sales in the market places of Cochin and Travancore. Quoted in Saradamoni (1980), pp.30-31.

⁸⁵ Mohan, (2016), p.44

⁸⁶ Saradamoni, (1980), p.103

⁸⁷ Mohan, (2016), p.46

owned the slaves and their social spaces knew the importance of controlling spaces in maintaining a favourable system of social formation and opposed the initial attempts by the CMS to reach out to these communities.⁸⁸ The CMS's access to the social spaces of the slave castes was a direct challenge to the status-quo that maintained the hegemony of upper castes. The extremely rigid control that especially the higher caste Hindus maintained over the spatiality of the lower castes becomes clear from the fact that when CMS first established its presence, it had to be in a village where some Syrian Christian landlords who owned the slaves were attracted to the CMS and gave them access.⁸⁹ This opened up a narrow cleavage within the highly stratified social structure; an entry into the very restricted social space of the lower castes. As the CMS' work spread, their activities at the slave-schools and prayer halls had to be carried out in many cases secretly and at great risk, because the landlords were on the lookout for slaves who were coming under the influence of missionaries.⁹⁰ Even in the early twentieth century, Poykayil Appachan, a Dalit-reformer who converted into Christianity before breaking away from it and establishing his own movement, organised congregations secretly in the jungles.⁹¹ But the fact that the higher castes remained extremely disconnected from the slave castes also made it possible for these new spaces like slave schools and prayer halls to emerge as new spaces; counter-publics where the Dalits were introduced into new ideas and worldviews. More importantly, their relations with spaces were changing. Even in Malabar, lower castes were much more welcoming of Christian missionary activities than the higher castes.⁹² The huts of members from the houses often doubled up as schools or prayer halls. Here, what we see is a reshaping of representations of space; huts were moving beyond their conceived role of dwelling spaces, to serve a new purpose. During this period, some of the lowered caste members who were not allowed access to education in Kerala, also managed to travel to other parts to get education, giving them a broader worldview.⁹³

However, the majority of slave-castes like the Pulaya and Paraya who were at the bottom tier of the social hierarchy remained literally and figuratively invisible. Literally, because not just touching them but even seeing them or their shadow “polluted” the *savarna* Hindus; they were unapproachable and “unseeable”. Figuratively, because this rigidity in the structure meant that they continued for generations as counter-publics, never having access to the mainstream public sphere. It is this stratified nature of social spaces that succumbed to the pressures of its internal contradictions in the nineteenth

⁸⁸ Mohan, (2016), p.45

⁸⁹ Most people who were converted by CMS belonged to the lower castes. But a few Nairs were attracted to the CMS, and some Syrian Christians had started their own attempts to attract lower castes into their fold and compete with the CMS. See: Fuller, (1976), p.55; Mohan, (2016), pp.45-46

⁹⁰ Mohan, (2016), p.49

⁹¹ Mohan, (2005), p.45

⁹² Aslam, (2018), p.47

⁹³ One such was Dr Palpu, who led the reform movement among the Ezhavas in the 1890s and founded the SNDP along with Sree Narayana Guru; Menon, (1994), p.64

century and was replaced by a modern public sphere with new rules of social engagement and social relationships. This new social formation also evolved new spaces—both abstract (new forms of literature, art, ideology and politics) and social (democratisation of spaces like markets and temples, but also the creation of new ones like schools, libraries, reading rooms, organisations).

“Making public” in this period of Kerala’s history meant two things. In one sense, it meant bringing critically into the social space, the various traditions, rituals and customs with an attempt to reform them. But in the other and more important sense, it meant—quite literally—creating a “public” from communities that had been, until then, not just excluded from a mainstream public sphere (based on education, for instance, as was the case in the elite coffee shops and clubs, etc), but worse—was disdained and kept away from even sight or approach. It was common for people from the lowered castes to travel along wastelands and farms because main roads were inaccessible to them and they were to stay away from the sight of higher castes.⁹⁴ In this sense, the immediate struggles were to do with access to physical spaces than they were to do with abstract and discursive spaces. As we will see in the following section, both these aspects of “making public” together cajoled the public sphere in Kerala during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the struggle for spaces remained at the centre-stage of this transformation. This was because part of the project of modernity in Kerala was to make a “public” out of the large section of the population that had been kept outside of the public sphere. One must differentiate this from the mere exclusion from public affairs on account of education or class (as we see in Europe). What we see in caste societies and in an extreme form in Kerala was a different kind of discrimination, premised on centuries of very rigid rules of purity and pollution. Here, the exclusion wasn’t just from a mainstream public sphere, but from any definition of the public itself.

3.3 Stepping out: Expanding social spaces

Through new social spaces like slave schools and chapels, and the evening gatherings and prayer meetings, Christianity was offering the slave castes a new way to engage with spaces in a way impossible under slavery.⁹⁵ Soon, there emerged from within this group, a section of educated members who dared to move beyond the restricted counter-publics and out into public spaces like roads and markets. The freedom to walk on roads came to be seen as the first step towards the removal of untouchability.⁹⁶ For the first time in centuries, members of the non-upper caste were laying claim to spaces. As seen in the last section, the first step was the horizontal traversal of social spaces. Here, the missionary schools and prayer halls introduced them to the ideas of group prayers—a new form of organising the social and

⁹⁴ Bhaskaranunni, (2012). P.141

⁹⁵ Menon, (2002), p.1664

⁹⁶ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.77

everyday life unknown to the lower castes in the traditional order.⁹⁷ The invisible sections of the population, now informed with ideas of equality, social emancipation and justice, were emerging out of their cocooned social spaces out into the mainstream public sphere. Together, these changes had two implications. Firstly, it made the mainstream public sphere a confrontational space. Unlike the slave-schools and prayer halls, this assertion of space in the mainstream public sphere was by nature confrontational, because it also meant vertical traversal. It was, to recall Jaaware's analogy, a hinged door—one's opening outwards resulted in the other's being pushed inwards. Although these communities had been gaining access to education and had been congregating for prayers, the spaces remained non-confrontational because they were outside of the social spaces of the caste-Hindus. This changed as they moved out from their "spaces of evil and pollution" into the "normal spaces of the clean castes".⁹⁸ Especially after the mid-nineteenth century, tensions started to grow rapidly as confrontations arose in the mainstream public sphere. Secondly—and consequently—the increasing tensions demanded a reorganising of spatiality. Here, we see the transformation of the traditional organisation of spaces and the emergence of a modern public sphere and its spatiality in Kerala.

The caste dominance over the social spaces had been challenged openly, and the upper castes (including the wealthy Nairs, Christians and Muslims) had to respond to this change. On the other hand, the lower castes had to redefine their selves to prepare them to participate in these spaces. Starting with the missionaries, we see these redefinitions of the idea of self-as-space being developed in the teachings of social reformers of the time. In this section, we look at each of these—the confrontations in the mainstream public sphere, and the redefinition of self—both of which paved the way to the creation of secular social spaces by early twentieth century.

3.3.1 The fight for public space

Unlike the slave schools and chapels that the upper caste property owners had opposed but later conceded, the assertion by the new generation of educated Dalits over access to public roads and markets transformed these spaces into confrontational ones. The first such popular instance when these emerging tensions poured out into the public was the Channar Revolt, which started in the early nineteenth century but intensified in the 1850s. Troubles started in 1822 when a group of traditionally lower-caste Channar women who were recent missionary converts went to the marketplace wearing a

⁹⁷ For a detailed analysis of how missionary activity led to such horizontal traversal among Dalits, see: Mohan (2016); and the activities of missionaries among the Muslim communities in malabar, see Aslam, (2018)

⁹⁸ Mohan, (2016), p.47

breast cloth.⁹⁹ In traditional Kerala society, permission to cover their upper-bodies was restricted to caste-Hindus. A group of Nairs forcefully stopped the women and humiliated them by ripping their clothes.¹⁰⁰ They could not bear the fact that Channar women who didn't cover their breasts till yesterday were now showing the courage to walk before them by covering their breasts.¹⁰¹ Although the caste-Hindus were worried about the conversion, they were more troubled by the challenge posed to the traditional laws of purity and pollution by the presence of the converts *in public places*. While they may have converted to another religion in the ideological realm, the presence of a Dalit body in a public place like a market, thus defying the rules of pollution, was at once a threat to the control over these spaces, but also to the control over spatial practices maintained by upper-caste Hindus. Despite Travancore government's issuing of orders in 1813, 1823 and 1829 in favour of the Channar women who had converted to Christianity, the caste-Hindus in Travancore saw the presence of these communities in public areas as openly defying caste-norms. Women who appeared in markets wearing a breast cloth were attacked and abused, missionary schools burnt and books destroyed; the troubles continued sporadically for decades. At the Neyyattinkara market in 1859, a Channar woman's breast-cloth was ripped, and she was abused by a caste-Hindu. This event led to a number of similar instances across Travancore and clashes broke out between the Channars supported by the missionaries and the caste-Hindus who had taken it upon themselves to protect the customs of traditional Kerala society.¹⁰² Following interventions from the Governor of the Madras Presidency and the missionaries in Travancore, the following proclamation was issued on July 26th 1859 by Uthram Thirunna Marthanda Varma:

“Channar women are hereby granted complete freedom to wear any cloth of their choice according to their dignity, to cover their breasts. However, they are not to imitate the clothes worn by higher caste women.”¹⁰³

After three decades of the revolt, the solution remained the same—that Channar women could appear in public wearing breast-cloth, provided it did not “imitate the cloth worn by the upper castes”. It was an accommodation of the demand for equality, while simultaneously allowing certain castes to remain more equal than the others. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the controversy over wearing breast cloths in public had become a part of a number of similar movements that started across the

⁹⁹ Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century designed a garment for the new converts to wear, called a 'Jacket'. See Abhimanyu, (1990), pp.37

¹⁰⁰ Most protests were led by Nairs who, as has already been pointed out, had more presence in lived spaces than Nambuthiris.

¹⁰¹ Abhimanyu (1990), p.38-39

¹⁰² Abhimanyu, (1990), p.43

¹⁰³ Uthram Thirunna Marthanda Varma's proclamation, quoted in Abhimanyu, (1990), p.46

region.¹⁰⁴ One can see that the nature of control of spaces had been challenged—a first step towards the appropriation of social spaces.

Ayyankali (1863-1941), a reformer who belonged to the *Pulaya* community, burst into Kerala's public sphere in 1893 with a peculiar and visibly spatial mode of protest. At a time when public roads were closed to Dalits and travelling by a bullock-cart was a right reserved to the Brahmin and Nair castes, Ayyankali rode a cart on the public road, dressed in upper-caste clothes and a turban, screaming "Stop me if you can!!" at the top of his voice. Needless to say, the Nairs and Nambuthiris of Venganoor were shocked to see what was unfolding before them. Eventually, Ayyankali and his group of volunteers were confronted by a group of Nairs and beaten up when they reached Kalliyoor. However, the damage was done. The upper-caste dominance over the road had been challenged, and this had been done publicly. Such violent assertion of public spaces became a feature in the second half of the nineteenth century in Travancore.¹⁰⁵ Already during the Channar Revolt, leaders like Velayudha Panikkar, who although belonged to a caste higher than the slave-castes, had supported the struggles of the Channar women. His means of resistance were violent, and he was notorious for beating to pulp those caste Hindus who abused lower caste women in public places.¹⁰⁶

All these protests indicate towards a redefinition of social spaces and the challenge it posed to the traditional caste-relations. The confrontations between the traditional order and the social reforms were putting social spaces at their centre, and the physicality of space gained a literal and symbolic meaning to these struggles. For instance, after the Hindu and Christian landlords burnt down a slave school near Mallapally, the community took a vow to rebuild the slave school and chapel on *the same spot*, and they said in unison that it was there that they found their Lords and Saviour and would worship him again there.¹⁰⁷ The missionary records that despite their suggestion that the prayers be temporarily moved elsewhere, the community insisted that prayers be held on the ashes of the burnt-down chapel. To the slaves, the school and chapel held both a literal and symbolic importance. We see this emotive importance of space again after Ayyankali was assaulted by the caste Hindus after his bullock-cart protest. He screamed back at his perpetrators, "I will avenge you in *this very spot*...I will avenge you *here*, and will return on a cart".¹⁰⁸ We see here how making a presence in a "public" previously denied to him was itself his protest—an "appropriation of space", to borrow Lefebvre's term.

¹⁰⁴ Although the wearing of breast-cloth became accepted thereafter, sporadic instances of violence were reported like in 1899, at *Aralumoodu* Market where a Pulaya woman had been humiliated for covering her breasts in public. There was another confrontation there with the Muslim youth who had assaulted the woman with the backing of the caste-Hindus. See: Mani, KS and Anirudhan (2013), p.25

¹⁰⁵ Led by Ayyankali, but also by others like Velayudha Panikkar in Travancore.

¹⁰⁶ Shekhar, (2017), p.67

¹⁰⁷ Mohan, (2016), p.48; emphasis added

¹⁰⁸ Mani & Anirudhan, (2013), pp.22-23, emphasis added

During the nineteenth century, Dalit communities were the most influenced by missionary activity. The Ezhavas who were an intermediary caste between the Nairs and the slave-castes were happy to gain access to missionary education, but being on the fringes (but never completely outside the mainstream public sphere like the Dalits), they were not interested in religious conversions to the extent Dalits and former slave-castes were.¹⁰⁹ Caste Hindus appear to have shown interest in the Bible-women's visits and general thoughts about material life in Europe, but they had little interest in Christian religion:

“Nayar women are very interested, as long as she talks to them about Europe or things of general interest. But as soon as she begins to read the Bible, they say, they have house-work, and disappear one after the other. An old Nayar-woman was very kind and friendly in the beginning; but when the conversation turned to religious matters she said, she had a day of fasting and had to go to the temple...”¹¹⁰

Although technically belonging to the lower castes, Nairs had played an integral role in maintaining the traditional order in Kerala. The temples were open to them, as were mainstream social spaces. Their dominance in representational spaces meant that it was their authority that was directly challenged when the lower castes began to assert themselves in public spaces. This is why confrontations with Christian missionaries became common once Nairs started opposing religious conversions; Nair reformers like Chattampi Swamikal and Mannathu channelized Nair reforms as a way to counter missionary activities. Chattampi Swamikal (1853–1924) went on to become one of the lone voices from Kerala of the Hindu revivalist movement that had gained strength elsewhere in India.¹¹¹ When missionaries started street-preaching and approaching Hindu devotees who were leaving temples saying they were worshipping Satan, Chattampi Swamikal wrote *Kristumatachbedanam* (1890) [A Refutation of Christianity] as an ideological polemic to the missionary work; to “spread the [Hindu] good word against the [Christian] bad”.¹¹² In the process, he also engaged with the traditions of argumentation *within* a secularised version of Hinduism to create a history of Kerala.¹¹³ Chattampi's focus on the revival of the Nair community from within Hinduism strengthens the response recorded by the missionaries' in Malabar that as far as the Nair community was concerned, the fact that they were already accepted in the mainstream public sphere of Kerala meant that the religious conversion did not offer much to them (as compared to the other lower castes) in terms of emancipation. This is arguably why the missionaries did not engage actively with or gain access to the women from the Nambuthiri

¹⁰⁹ Aslam, (2018), p.47

¹¹⁰ Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission 1904, quoted in Aslam, (2018), p.46

¹¹¹ Menon, (2015), p.69

¹¹² Menon,(2015), p.74

¹¹³ Menon, (2015) provides a detailed study of Chattampi's response to Christian Missionary activities.

castes.¹¹⁴ Although women from the Nair and Nambuthiri communities also had restrictions on their sociability, religious spaces like temples where they could interact with others were still open to them.

Even the Muslim communities in Malabar showed interest in listening to stories from the Bible but showed resistance to any stories that contradicted Islamic thought. A Missionary report from 1901 notes:

“Some women begged the Bible-women to come to their houses, even a Mopla-woman complained that the Bible-women always pass her house and only visit Hindu women. That Christ is greater than Mohammed she found difficult to understand, but she was very anxious to hear something of Jesus”¹¹⁵

As in the case of the lower caste-Hindus, Muslims showed interest in listening to stories but were not interested in converting to Christianity. In this region, the missionaries started needlework and embroidery training centres with the main aim to encourage women to congregate in small groups.¹¹⁶ There were many instances at the time of members from the lowered castes being thrashed at the behest of the Nambuthiris and Nairs for “stepping out” of their closed spaces designated to them under the traditional laws.¹¹⁷

When the social spaces of Dalit communities expanded and they moved out from “their spaces” into the mainstream public sphere, obvious confrontations arose. The solidarity built among the lower castes, the emergence of an educated middle-class among the Dalits and the support they received from the British authorities all encouraged them to fight for access to public spaces, institutions, markets, schools, government services, etc. Eventually, the upper castes came under increasing pressure to open up their spaces and to make the mainstream public sphere more inclusive. Needless to say, there was resistance from the conservative members of the upper castes who controlled these social spaces. The lowered castes responded by a simultaneous movement of social reform led by leaders like Narayana Guru, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Poykayil Appachan, and others, who saw a redefinition of one's bodily space as equally important as gaining access to public spaces. We shall now explore these efforts in detail.

¹¹⁴ Aslam, (2018), p.46

¹¹⁵ Report of Basel German Evangelical Mission 1901, quoted in Aslam, (2018), p.49

¹¹⁶ Aslam, (2018), p.54

¹¹⁷ Menon, (1994), pp.80-84

3.3.2 “Preparing” the Self

Caste Hindus protested the early attempts to challenge the traditional social order and the appropriation of social spaces that resulted from the changes in the nineteenth century. In conventional public spaces like markets, these played out in visible form, as we see in the case of Channar Revolt. However, as new spaces like modern schools, libraries and entrepreneurial spaces emerged in the twentieth century, the higher castes needed to reassess their protest. When caste-pollution could no longer serve as a justification for exclusion, other excuses were invoked, most importantly those of cleanliness and hygiene.¹¹⁸ An impression that the lowered castes deserved a lower social status was linked to an arbitrary question of hygiene. For instance, a report on the tribes from the first decade of the twentieth century compiled by a Tamil Brahmin characterised a Pulaya as someone whose “hair is allowed to grow wild and forms an immense matted filthy mass”.¹¹⁹ The same report also comments that their habitations are “deficient in ventilation and the air is always more or less foul”.¹²⁰ Clearly, the attempt was to argue that the rules of purity and pollution based on the senses of touching and seeing had more than merely a religious element; an attempt to find “scientific” explanations for exclusion to suit their purposes.¹²¹ In some churches in Travancore, there erupted a controversy towards early twentieth century regarding separate seating arrangements for Dalit Christians and upper-caste Christians.¹²² When restaurants and coffee-clubs started to appear in Kerala in the twentieth century, Kanippayur writes how there were separate ones for the Brahmins and non-Brahmins, and a general feeling that the Brahmin hotels run by Nambuthiris, Tamil Brahmins or Saraswad Brahmins were considered more clean and hygienic:

“...there was no need for a sign-board to help differentiate a Brahmin Coffee Club from a non-Brahmin one. However, most Brahmin places would still have a board outside stating it. A container and a *davara* made of brass, clay or steel was used until recently in Brahmins hotels, and not glass tumblers”.¹²³

Although he does not specify what the distinctions were based on, the implicit assumption is that some coffee shops were more hygienic by virtue of their nobility. The attempts at citing cleanliness as a marker of caste difference received some impetus when Gandhi invoked a similar sentiment in the

¹¹⁸ Mohan, (2005), p.43

¹¹⁹ Iyer, (1981 [1909]), p.126

¹²⁰ Iyer, (1981 [1909]), p.98

¹²¹ Sunandan, (2015)

¹²² Report on the incident in Deepika (11th April 1910), quoted in Mohan, (2005), p.43

¹²³ Namboothirippad, (2005), pp.312-315; a *davara* is a little container that came with the tumbler which was used to cool the coffee or drink from. For more on how caste influenced the coffee-culture in South India, see: Venkatachalapathy, (2002).

1920s. In the late 1920s, Congress-led initiatives to reach out to the Harijans also stressed that their reason for low status was lack of cleanliness.¹²⁴ But such attempts would remain incomplete unless the society at large was ready to accept them—and this is why both aspects of “making” a public were important here.

Redefinition of the “self” aimed at giving agency to the common masses was one of the prime focuses of the social reform movements led by leaders like Sree Narayana Guru (hereafter, Guru), Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan and others. For them, it meant a spiritual awakening and instilling a sense of agency among the members. But for many, it was also about adopting the physical appearance of a superior caste, as in the case of Cheruma labourers starting to sport *kudumis* (knots) on the side of their head, as the Nairs did.¹²⁵ The missionaries work had already been focussing on the redefinition of the identity of the lower castes and stressing on the importance of cleanliness in clothing and appearance, as the events that led to the Channar Revolt indicate. The contests for space within the mainstream public sphere had started already, as we have discussed. It was now necessary to make the caste-Hindus acknowledge the presence of the lower castes in such spaces. More importantly, the lower castes had to be made conscious of their body as a space to be asserted in a modern secular public. As important as it was to stand up against the caste Hindus, it was important to instil a sense of identity and self-assertion among the non-caste Hindus.

The Dalit reformer Poykayil Appachan (1879 - 1939) emphasised the need for the former slave-castes to redefine their relationship with their body before they could traverse their social spaces and engage with the modern public sphere. When he spoke to his followers that he had “annihilated caste in [his] body” and that “now [they] have to realise it”,¹²⁶ he alludes to this idea that caste and subjugation were directly linked to the human body and its experience.¹²⁷ A subversion of the spatiality of the traditional order had to begin with the annihilation of caste in the most private space—one's body. Consequently, cleanliness of the body formed an integral part of his emancipatory movement. Under his direction, groups of Dalits were taken to riverbanks for instructions on how to use oil and soap and bathe. Some periodicals from the period also ran articles with instructions on how to bathe, wash clothes using soap, etc. A similar reading of caste—that the true semiology of differentiation is marked not by caste markers but by the body itself—can be found in Guru's definitions of caste.¹²⁸ This reconceptualization of the body as important to worldly existence while simultaneously stressing on its connection with

¹²⁴ Menon, (1994), p.85

¹²⁵ Menon, (1994), p.85

¹²⁶ Poykayil Kumara Guru Devan, quote in Mohan, (2005), p.57

¹²⁷ Guru & Sarukkai, (2019)

¹²⁸ Kumar, (1997). p.257

spirituality was the core of Guru's principles.¹²⁹ Social space is now redefined as a virtuous space where one must engage with others to reform their community so that spiritual happiness can be attained. He observes in *Advaita Jeevitam*:

“For a community to achieve prosperity of all sorts-related to the body, the mind and the soul-the religious and moral rectitude of its members can be a source of great help. Temples and places of worship can be useful in developing these qualities in everybody in the community. However, the economic prosperity of the members of the community is equally essential. For this, we need to reform agriculture, trade and technical education, among other things...the body enjoys happiness thanks to the harmonious functioning of all its parts. Similarly, for the human community to attain its ultimate goal of happiness, the harmonious functioning of various spiritual and worldly arrangements is needed.”¹³⁰

Here, he stresses the role of temples not merely for spiritual gratification for the individual, but to develop the “community”. To Guru, this “community” included people from all castes and religions—something that necessitates a vertical as well as a horizontal traversal of social spaces. Temples, he believed, could provide this space. Only such a society where all sections work together can develop themselves—like a body that enjoys happiness when all its parts function harmoniously. For this, he urged all members of the Ezhava community to focus on education, cleanliness and hygiene and work with each other for the upliftment of everyone. The “preparation of the self” to become public, in other words, became important. Guru saw socialising as the important aspect of reform; temples, religious festivals and temples were important for purifying the self, while modern education, employment, etc. opened the doors towards economic prosperity:

“Today, the roads to prosperity lie in front of us, but members of our community are lacking the courage to take the first steps on them.”¹³¹

For this self-assertion, Guru believed that an organisation was important. The SNDP was set up in 1904 aimed at fulfilling this purpose. Kumaran Asan, poet and disciple of Guru in Kerala, speaking at an Ezhava meeting, said in 1917:

“To achieve wealth and independence under the British Rule, education, employment, etc have been opened up to one and all. This is a blessing, which was

¹²⁹ Kumar, (1997), pp.254-255; Osella & Osella (2006), p.573

¹³⁰ Guru, quoted in Kumar, (1997), p.256

¹³¹ Sree Narayana Guru 's speech from 1910, printed in Bijuraj, (2017), p.21

denied to our ancestors. Therefore, we must raise ourselves to take these paths. As Buddha says, we must work out our own salvation”¹³²

Guru and Appachan had faith in the new institutional spaces that gave the lower castes access to education and employment. Like other reformers from the lowered caste, the creation of an agency for the Dalit body was as important as the appropriation of social spaces that had been denied to them earlier. Such a reappropriation of body and space, Lefebvre argues, must be a non-negotiable part of any revolutionary project.¹³³ The institutions would help reimagine identity and encourage them to mobilize for their common cause of emancipation.¹³⁴ In their speeches and activities, they insisted that all members of the community—irrespective of gender—had to reach out, grasp these opportunities, and claim their spaces in the modern public sphere.¹³⁵ In other words, it was a call not just for the appropriation of social spaces, but also of the spatiality of one’s body—something these communities had been denied for centuries—and claim new social spaces that were opening up in colonial modernity.

3.4 Placing religion in the public sphere

The *making* of the public sphere in Kerala, as we have seen, involved a combination of social, economic and political reform movements that transformed the traditional order drastically. They aimed at creating social spaces where people could move outside their confined sociabilities to meet and interact with other castes. As we will see in the next chapter, these included appropriating some conventional spaces, but also creating new ones. At the same time, these movements did not simply reject or negate the traditional, but reformed it from within the religious framework, by putting to public scrutiny contradictions that existed within the caste system. It was the visible presence of religion in the public sphere—the confrontations in and struggles for access to public spaces by Christian converts and other lower castes—that initiated for the first time, agitations and movements for emancipation. Christianity, in other words, opened up the possibility of a ‘public sphere’ to lower castes, while raising questions on social justice and equality, which contributed to the religious reform movements of late 19th century. These religious reformers, led by reformers like Sree Narayana Guru (Guru), Poykayil Appachan and Chattampi Swamikal dealt with this question. In their teachings, one sees a deep engagement with the question of religion in the public sphere. In 1888, at the age of 32, Guru made one of his first

¹³² Kumaran Asan’s speech at the Ezhava Samajam on 30th December 1917, printed in Bijuraj, (2017) p.31

¹³³ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.166-167

¹³⁴ Mohan, (2005) pp.62-63

¹³⁵ Sree Narayana Guru’s speech from 1910, printed in Bijuraj, (2017), p.21; Mohan, (2005)

interventions by installing an idol and a temple in Aruvippuram.¹³⁶ The Nambuthiris who were furious that a *Shudra* had consecrated a temple, questioned him. Guru replied that what he installed was an *Ezhava Siva* and not the *Nambuthiri Shiva* that the high-caste Brahmins worshipped. We have already seen that to Guru, the temple served a more important purpose—as a socialising space for people of all castes and communities to come together with the aim to reform society. In doing so, he was invoking spiritual and material aspects of human life, both of which he saw as equally important. Importantly, as we shall see in the next chapter, he was creating a specific spatial purpose for these temples.

A religious rewriting of Kerala history to organise a collective memory is another characteristic feature of this time across castes—be in Chattampi Swamikal who attempted to secularise and rewrite Kerala history from a Hindu perspective, Mannathu who believed that the religious and political position of Nairs declined under the British suzerainty, or Guru and Poykayil Appachan who aimed at invoking religion while redefining the identity of the lower castes.¹³⁷ Speaking for the Dalits in 1921, Poykayil Appachan says: “At some point in history, ‘we’ were enslaved. Hence we failed to realise the value of land”.¹³⁸ Appachan’s definition of history begins from a period of social equity before Hinduism led to caste cleavages.¹³⁹ Similarly, Kumaran Asan, poet and follower of Guru, speaking at a convention of Ezhavas in 1917, lamented on the fate of pure Hinduism; the Brahmin is identified as the corruptor:

“Is there another place in the world where roads on which cats and dogs roam freely are prohibited to certain men by other men? Do men take a bath upon touching other men? Or consider seeing other humans as a sin? Oh *pure Hinduism*—these Vedic men commit such heinous acts in your name! How long do Hindu pundits wish to hide these tumours?”¹⁴⁰

What begins as a social critique of Hinduism quickly transforms into a critique against the misrepresentation of Hinduism by the Brahmins. Through this rational critique of religion, the attempt was to reform religion, not reject it. The attempt was, once again, to rationalise the inequality as stemming not from the religion itself, but from a specific interpretation of it. A similar attempt has been discussed in the last section when caste-Hindus attempted a “rational” justification of caste segregation as rooted in hygiene and cleanliness. Together, such instances point towards the complexity

¹³⁶ Although this is known in popular history as the first “alternate” temple that allowed admission to people of all castes, there are records that Velayudha Panikkar had already built a temple in 1851 specifically for the lower castes but also open to everyone irrespective of caste differences. See: Shekhar, (2017), p.65

¹³⁷ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.28; Arunima, (2006), p.66

¹³⁸ Poykayil Appachan’s speech from 1st March 1921 at the Prajasabha, printed Bijuraj, (2017) p.44

¹³⁹ Mohan, (2005), p.56

¹⁴⁰ Kumaran Asan’s speech at the Ezhava Samajam on 30th December 1917, printed in Bijuraj, (2017). p.31; emphasis added

and non-linear nature of the public sphere in Kerala, and the constant negotiations and deliberations that accompany these complexities, both in the discursive and physical spheres.

The role of religion in shaping Kerala's public sphere cannot be ignored. Far from the thesis that modernity assigned religious affairs to the private sphere, religion was one of the major points of deliberation in the nascent public sphere in Kerala. Religious identities were consciously made public—scrutinized, debated, reformed and reinterpreted. Moreover, the consensus arrived at shaped how secularism was defined in post-reforms Kerala. The progressive consciousness, religious tolerance and liberal politics that characterised post-1930s Kerala were shaped by the churning of religion in the public sphere that we see in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Kerala. On an abstract level, there were engagements on how Hinduism can reform itself from within, by correcting wrongs of the caste system. Simultaneously, there was an attempt to reshape the identity of the lower castes to *fit* the new public sphere.

These attempts at negotiating religion, modern education and community-mobilization during this period in Kerala was perhaps best summarized by a disciple of Guru and the very eloquent poet, Kumaran Asan:

“Drench the scattered sands with love to bring them together, and then strengthen it with the community as its walls. Place the love for God in the sanctum sanctorum; worship it with lamps of knowledge. Adore it with flowers of truth, fraternity and righteousness. Only then will our temple—the community—be purified. All men and Gods will help us. Our prayers will be fulfilled”

This close link between religion and the expansion of public sphere is a peculiar feature of Kerala, especially since the socio-religious reform movements, as we shall see, started not from the higher castes, but from the lowered castes like Ezhavas, Pulayas and Parayas. More importantly, this is why when a democratisation of spaces happens in the twentieth century, religious spaces become the last bastion of caste-Hindus to fall. The decision to open up Hindu temples to all castes happens only towards mid-twentieth century, much after public schools, markets, roads, libraries, reading rooms and teashops had opened up to everyone irrespective of caste differences. This is also symbolic because it means that the temples, which were the fulcrum of the traditional social order, were the last ones to fall.

3.5 Conclusion

In the traditional order, any traversals of social spaces or participation in the mainstream public sphere depended on one's position in the social hierarchy; the lower one was, the more they remained

excluded—invisible to the mainstream public. Any change in the spatiality meant, therefore, the creation of social spaces where these members of society could be visible, and make their voice heard. This is what happened during the period studied in this chapter: the traditional social order along with its spatiality that had continued unabated for centuries came under severe strain in the nineteenth century, and this transformation of the social spaces had some defining characteristics. Most importantly, there were two projects involved—one that aimed at the redefinition of the agency of those who had remained outside mainstream society for centuries, and another that aimed at a radical redefinition of social spaces and spatial practices that had governed the traditional social order. Together, these projects catalysed a move towards new spaces and new social relations.

A couple of observations are relevant regarding these movements for new spatiality. Firstly, religion remained at the backdrop of the expanding public sphere in Kerala; the temple remained the last bastion of the traditional order and remained one of the last to be democratized in the twentieth century, much after schools, roads and libraries were made accessible to all in theory. Secondly, the opening up of public spaces to people from all castes necessitated each of these communities to reinvent their identities. The redefinition of Hinduism from within a religious framework by leaders like Chattampi Swami and Guru helped this effort in the ideological sphere. In the material sphere, there was a push towards cleanliness and hygiene being equally important to divinity and spirituality. These were seen as preconditions of sort for the lowered castes to be able to attain all the opportunities that opened up to them in colonial modernity. Along with the strides being made in the literary public sphere, these transformations of (and in) space—both bodily and external—were crucial in shaping the trajectory of modernity in twentieth century which I will explore in the following chapters.

As these efforts gained momentum by the early twentieth century, we see the creation of social spaces with spatial practices unimaginable under the traditional order. The experience of living as a Dalit in Kerala changed dramatically as a result of these changes. Consequently, they asserted for space in the mainstream public sphere—both abstract and social. As Lefebvre argued, a transformation in social relations can only come about with the creation of new spaces. The reform movements of early modern Kerala and the churning of the conflict between the traditional and a modern order resulted in the emergence of new social spaces, which helped mobilise people who had for generations lived as a divided community. We see institutional spaces like prayer halls, organisations like Karayogam, libraries, public schools all emerge during this period and they all contributed to this project of “making” a public in Kerala. In the next chapter, we look closely at some of the new spaces that emerged, and the conflict of modernity and tradition as it played out in the lived spaces—the private realm.

4. Moving “out”: Nationalism, socialism and new social spaces

Traditional order in Kerala had come under much public scrutiny by the turn of the twentieth century. The result was that the dominance by caste-Hindus that continued unabated for centuries had suddenly been challenged in the social, political and material domains. The conservative Brahmin community’s initial response to modernization was to completely withdraw from the social and political arena and protect instead their religious faiths and rituals. It was not before the 1930s that a new generation of Nambuthiris chose to avail the spaces like schools, libraries, etc. that modernity was opening up for them.¹ A characteristic feature of the movement in Kerala was that modernity—and consequently, modern social spaces—became emancipatory to not just members of the lower castes who were earlier kept outside the mainstream public sphere, but also to members of the higher castes who lived under extreme laws of purity and pollution (See Section 3.1). This nuance gets unnoticed if we were to study this from a purely Habermasian framework. Jaaware (2019) argues that in caste societies, sociability becomes a double-hinged door: “one door opened outward (the backward classes came out of their own segmented sociability) and as a result of that door opening, a door was pushed inward and opened”.² The public sphere is seen here as a mutually exclusive space, where one cannot enter without challenging the hegemony of the other. The new spaces that emerged in early twentieth-century Kerala, as we will see in this chapter, tell a different story. The disintegration of the old order and the new “modern” social spaces that replaced them opened up new opportunities not just to the backward castes in Kerala, but even to large sections of the caste Hindus, Nambuthiri women and young Nambuthiri men, whose spaces were subjugated by stringent laws of bodily purity and pollution despite their caste hierarchy. Even the language used by the reformers from the different castes are similar: Nambuthiri reformer V.T Bhattathirippad writes of the “loud war-cry of revolution” in the twentieth century that woke the Nambuthiri community from its deep slumber, to “push-open the doors to freedom which had been closed to [them] for centuries and step on to the royal path of humanity”.³ It is interesting to note the similarity here with Guru and Asan’s messages to the Ezhava community that the roads to prosperity were “opening up” for them, and that they needed to seize the opportunity and take these paths.⁴

The transformations within conventional spaces and the conception of new social spaces with particular spatial practices that emerged as a result of the changes discussed already forms the crux of

¹ Mencher, (1966), pp.189-190; Lemercinier, (1984), p.168

² Jaaware, (2019), p.185

³ Bhattathirippad, (2012), p.11

⁴ Sree Narayana Guru’s (1910), and Kumaran Asan’s speech at the Ezhava Samajam (30th December 1917) printed in Bijuraj, (2017). pp.21, 31.

the present chapter. This emerging phase of modern-spatiality ends by the 1930s when arguably Kerala's first mass mobilisation happens. Although there is no marked division politically, there seem to have emerged trends that allow for such a division in time. In the 1930s, communism emerged as a political ideology that grew rapidly and the disparate reform movements that had emerged already in the nineteenth century converged politically to form broad-based alliances, changing the nature of political participation in Kerala. Spatially, the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 marked an epochal moment when the last spatial bastion of religion, the Hindu temple, was opened up to people of all castes.

In the last chapter, I began the analysis of social spaces from the most intimate and private space—that of the human body. The study of spatiality in early twentieth century begins, once again, not from the *public*, but from a closer look at the contests between *private* and *public* that characterised Kerala society at the time. The first section engages with this question, taking a closer look at the contradictions and contest between the private and public realms to understand the negotiations and compromises that were made. We see that the expansion of the public sphere brought up many challenges to the separation of public and private—an important characteristic of a “western model” of modernity.⁵ Despite these contradictions, the new social spaces that emerged allowed a traversal of castes in unprecedented ways. The following section then looks at the new social spaces that emerged in early modern Kerala that encouraged socialization and made it possible for people to meet and engage with each other irrespective of their caste backgrounds. A number of these changes happen in the backdrop of the vibrant literary sphere that now transcended regional and territorial boundaries,⁶ the socio-reform movements that were initiated in the nineteenth century, and finally, the political and nationalist movements that had emerged in Kerala's public sphere by the 1920s. The final section discusses the developments in the 1930s and 1940s that mark a new phase of political history in Kerala with the establishment of communism as an important ideology.

4.1 Home as Space: Caste, gender and confrontations in “private-publics”

While it is tempting to categorise the events of the late nineteenth and twentieth-century Kerala as binaries—old/new, traditional/modern and religious/secular—such readings would be misleading. This is not to say that there was no separation between the two, but that a study that focuses on one while ignoring the other can only tell an incomplete story because these weren't binaries, but, as I have

⁵ Devika, (2006), p.46

⁶ Vidyavinodini and Bhashaposhini regularly featured articles on the political and social life in other nations in the early decades of the twentieth century. I came across articles on the government in the UK; on socialism; Max Muller, and even one 1901 article in Vidyavinodini about women's employment in the West, citing examples from Oregon, Wyoming and New Jersey (USA), Sussex (UK), Japan and Sweden. Devika, (2012) and Menon, (2010) have pointed out that this cosmopolitanism in the literary sphere peaked in the 1930s.

been arguing throughout, are dialectical unities. Recent research on modernity, in general, have accepted this complex nature and discarded binaries and works on Kerala especially from the last three decades reflect this change.⁷ This ambivalence in defining modernity can be better understood by moving away temporarily from the realm of representations of space (conceived space) and spatial practices (perceived space), to look at the representational space (lived space). It has already been mentioned that the absolute control over the representations of space (conceived), spatial practices (perceived) and representational spaces (lived) is an attempt that any hegemonic power in society seeks. Yet, it is the contradictions that exists between the three that allows the potential to subvert these power structures. In the public sphere, these struggles and conflicts are visible in the form of the agitations, social movements and protests of the kind we see around us. In Kerala, the Channar revolt, the Malayali and Ezhava Memorials, the social reform movements and the Vaikom Satyagraha⁸ are all examples of such renegotiations warranted by a challenge to the spatiality of traditional Kerala. How did these changes affect the representational (lived) spaces? In other words, how did the transformations in the public sphere change the sphere of the private: the “indoors”?

Lefebvre draws a distinction and places the private realm as a space that asserts itself always in a conflictual way, against the public realm.⁹ This space of the “private” implies a barrier between the inside and the out, yet it is relative and “permeable” and is not a closed box.¹⁰ As recent studies on space have argued, the reading of space as binaries (inner/outer or private/public) is incomplete especially in caste-societies, because the spatial and political designations of space shift as they are embedded within everyday contexts.¹¹ The space of the lived everyday activities is, in other words, subjective: “as a space of 'subjects' rather than of calculations, as a representational space, it has an origin, and that origin is childhood, with its hardships, its achievements, and its lacks”.¹² The lived spaces shapes experience, and it is here, in the everyday lived experience—in the representational space—that we can see the conflicts that arise between the traditional and the modern, between the religious and the secular.

In Kerala, these lived “private” spaces have porous borders and often includes the rural neighbourhood—a space of comfort and community, but also of discomfort, disrespect and

⁷ See, for instance: Thiranagama, (2019), Kumar,(2016), Bose & Varughese, (2015), Osella & Osella, (2000), Devika, (2012) and Menon, (1994)

⁸ Kerala witnessed an agitation in 1924 to open the roads around the Vaikom temple to people from the lower castes, led by leaders and associations of Nair, Ezhava, Pulaya and Nambuthiri communities. Discussed also in Sections 4.2.3 and 4.2.5

⁹ Lefebvre, (1991), p.362

¹⁰ Lefebvre, (1991), p.176

¹¹ Guru & Sarukkai, (2019); Thiranagama, (2019), p.314; Seemanthini, (1997)

¹² Lefebvre, (1991), p.362

negotiation around inter-caste relations.¹³ The roots of a secular public were sown within the private space of the homes—the private publics. Even for the Nambuthiris who had withdrawn largely from the public sphere, it was here in the lived spaces that the seeds for reform and the need to “open up” were sown. V.T Bhattathirippad who was the leader of the social reform movement among the Nambuthiris, recalls young Nambuthiris assembling at his home for regular sessions of *vedivattams* (animated conversations) and the unstructured but cultured and revolutionary energies in the conversations.¹⁴ He says:

“The immediate lookout for all *vedivattam* is simple entertainment. But, when necessary, it can turn into a pit of fire out of which a revolutionary movement may be forged. To speak more clearly, the revolutionary movement within the Nambuthiri community developed from *vedivattams*. It will not be wrong to say that the Yogakshema Sabha and the Yuvajana Sangham emerged from the *vedivattam* at the southern *verandah* of Othanmarmadam in Thrissur.”¹⁵

Here, *vedivattams* are similar to the bourgeois public sphere of Habermas. However, the interests in the initial stages seem to be limited to community reforms. For VT—unlike EMS who had access to more secular public institutions and organisations at an early age—these informal spaces were his doors to the modern public. Another leader from VT’s generation, Nair reformer Mannathu also writes about his daily visits to friend and colleague Kappana Kannan Menon’s home while working in Changanassery. Here, they would discuss issues like social reforms among Nairs, the changes taking place around the world and so on.¹⁶ They would also read together and discuss English books, and this exchange of opinions, he believed, led him to be more interested in public activities and think progressively. Such narratives are constantly invoked in autobiographies of the generation that lived through this transition in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they all point towards two interesting observations. Firstly, they throw light on the caste-based social groups that formed the early public spheres in Kerala. Unlike the growth of private publics within bourgeois homes that Habermas calls the origins of the modern public sphere, these caste-based “private-publics” emerged within the homes of Nambuthiris, but also of Nairs, Ezhavas and eventually, the spaces of Dalit communities simultaneous to the growth of the broader public sphere.¹⁷ Secondly, and more importantly, the tensions between traditional and the modern with respect to changing social relations—both caste and gender—become evident if we move away from the representations of space

¹³ Thiranagama, (2019), p.326

¹⁴ Kumar, (2016); pp.248-49

¹⁵ quoted in (and translated by) Kumar (2016), pp.248-9

¹⁶ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.12

¹⁷ Thiranagama, (2019) makes this argument with respect to the Dalit neighbourhoods in contemporary times, but an analysis of narratives and autobiographies from early twentieth century show that such spaces existed even among the caste-Hindus at the time.

(conceived space) and the spatial practices (perceived space) to focus on the representational space (lived spaces). We have already seen that the transformations in the conceived and perceived spaces had already challenged the traditional social order successfully, but in the lived spaces, the confrontation and ambivalence of modernity were stark, as incidents narrated in autobiographies at the time tell us. I shall expand on three specific instances from the autobiographies of Mannathu (a Nair), V.T Bhattathirippad (a Nambuthiri) and Ezhava reformer C. Kesavan, and expand on Devaki Nilayamgode's experiences to draw on the complicated relationship between private and public in early modern Kerala.¹⁸

Mannathu Padmanabhan, Nair reformer and founder of the Nair Service Society, recollects a very interesting incident from his life, which demonstrates to us the complexity of spatiality at the time. During the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25), one Brahminand Azhakan—belonging to a Pulaya lower caste—visited his house to update him on the developments. Regarding this incident, Mannathu writes:

“I could know that they had not had their breakfast, and on informing my mother, she agreed to give *kanji* (gruel) to all of us. On resuming our talk the thought of serving food to Azhakan struck me. Could I allow him to sit along with us while taking breakfast? He was a Harijan. I had not so far taken food in the company of Azhakan's caste. These thoughts disturbed me. I thought to myself that if this posed so much trouble to me, what would be the case with my mother?”¹⁹

Here, the home—a private realm—becomes a space where the ambiguities of the modern public sphere play out with respect to inter-caste relations. Earlier in his book, Mannathu comments that he had made it a point to dine with Nairs of lower ranks when he could, but he clarifies in this instance that he had not “so far taken food in the company of Azhakan's caste”.²⁰ That this particular incident was happening in the backdrop of an ongoing agitation where Nairs were fighting alongside other castes for the lower castes' right to walk on public roads in Vaikom accentuates the *struggle* that Mannathu faces. Despite being a social reformer who was publicly fighting for the rights of lower castes, here in the representational (lived) space of his home, the contradictions continued. But it does not end there. After Mannathu's mother agreed to serve the guests, a new issue arose: “who will remove the plates?” After weighing all his options, Mannathu had an idea:

¹⁸ A limitation, as has been pointed in the Methodology section (Section 1.3) has been that written accounts of members from castes below the Ezhavas remain limited. The selected incidents are only to bring out the complexity of public/private debate and how the “home” as a representational space becomes the arena where the contests play out.

¹⁹ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.80

²⁰ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), pp. 76, 80

“I asked Azhakan who was about to take his plate, to wash his hands. When all of them had left, I enquired (sic) of my mother who would remove them, so that she would not have any embarrassment in the matter. She replied that the servant maid would attend to it. On hearing this, the servant maid said that she would not wash the plate used by a Pulaya. I did not feel the least annoyed at her words. Saying thus, as *none* (sic) *would see*, I will wash them myself, I took those plates. Thereupon, my mother took them from me, and washed them”.²¹

It is important to remember that by the 1920s, Mannathu was already a public figure and social reformer. Yet, when his home—his lived space—which temporarily becomes a semi-public in the presence of a lower caste friend, his inhibitions take over. Nevertheless, he decides to wash them himself, because “no one would see” him do this. Not being seen by the public is an important caveat for Mannathu to clean a dish used by a lower-caste friend.

V.T Bhattathirippad’s experience from a similar incident when he and Tayyapanikkar—an Ezhava—visited Narayana Menon’s house one late evening was different, although equally interesting. The three discussed some matters of public concern; and as VT and Panikkar got up to leave, Menon insisted that they stay the night since it was late. Later, while being invited indoors for dinner, Panikkar—being from a lowered caste—reluctantly refuses at first. But Menon insists: “No, you must come”. Recalling this memory, VT writes:

“We sat down to eat. As we ate, I reflected upon Nalapat’s revolutionary consciousness. That house, the bathing pond and the dishes prepared in that kitchen all resembled a Namboothiri-lifestyle. Yet, in its *thekkini*, a Nambuthiri, a Nair and an Ezhava were dining together, sitting on the same floor-mat; being served by Nalapat’s sixty-year-old mother. Nalapat’s community reform wasn’t on his tongue, but inside his home”²²

The idea of being ‘seen’ was an important component of the early public sphere in Kerala. By the 20th century, the act of being seen in public becomes an important one. In Mannathu’s case, this plays out in how he had to send away Azhakan—thereby distancing himself from the public—before taking a call on how his plates would be cleaned. Away from the gaze of the “outsider”, gender roles are reified when his mother eventually takes away the plates and washes them herself. The guests do not see this event, and Mannathu’s secular public image is restored. What is interesting is that Mannathu acknowledges this contradiction in his autobiography, noting it as “an incident that especially affected” him.. While VT mentions that they were being served by Nalapat’s mother, Mannathu’s mother is

²¹ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]) pp.79-80, emphasis added

²² Bhattathirippad, (2012), pp.39-40

presented as a person unaffected by and disconnected from the public life and reforms that her son had by then become an active part of. Finally, the role of the women as one confined to the private realm as opposed to the public image of the man is reinstalled when Mannathu's mother takes the plates away from him to wash them herself. The fact that it is a Nair household that facilitates an inter-caste dining experience in both cases hints towards the important role that the Nairs played in cajoling inter-caste relations in Kerala.

The importance of gender roles in these negotiations become even more evident from a third incident, this time from an Ezhava household. Leader of the Ezhava community C. Kesavan (1891-1969) in his autobiography *Jeevithasamaram*, narrates an incident when his mother-in-law and Ezhava reformer C.V. Kunjiraman's (1871-1949) wife Kochikka was first introduced to a blouse (*ravukka*)—an upper garment introduced by missionaries in Kerala for the lower caste-converts. When she first wore them and appeared before her family, her mother-in-law (Kunjiraman's mother) warned her “never [to] appear in public so obscenely dressed”.²³ However, because her husband liked it and for him, she would wear it at night after his mother was asleep:

“I wouldn't wear the blouse during day-time. The night was mine. When I saw that Amma [mother in law] was asleep, I would take out my blouse and wear it, duping Amma. *Vadhyar* [C.V] would come only late...”²⁴

At night, the domestic space becomes her public, and she wears the blouse for her husband's gaze. It is interesting to note that this was happening at a time when breast-cloths had already become fashionable in the public spaces in Mayyanad where they lived.²⁵ And despite being a social reformer himself, C.V. Kuunjiraman seems to have settled for his wife exercising her wish to wear the blouse at night after the mother had slept. The bedroom, in a sense, outlives its conceived role and becomes a private-public in this incident.²⁶ To borrow Lefebvre's terms, it is an example of a representational space that subverts (privately), a conceived space.

In Section 3.1.3, we discussed how Nilayamgode and her sisters saw the monthly confinement to their rooms during menstruation as the opportunity to read books which were smuggled in tactfully without any of the elders noticing. It was here, within confinement forced upon them by rituals of pollution, that she read Malayalam translations of other Indian and European literature. In another instance, she writes about her sisters' first encounter with the revolutionary literature of Nambuthiri reforms in 1931.

²³ Kumar, (2016), p.272

²⁴ From C. Kesavan's autobiography *Jeevitassamaram*, pp. 10, quoted in Devika, (2005), pp.478-479

²⁵ Devika, (2005), p.478

²⁶ Lefebvre speaks of the presence of publics within private spaces, and the opposite. Such public-privates are also invoked in a slightly different context by Thiranagama, (2019) in her work on neighbourhood household communities in rural Kerala.

A pamphlet was handed to them while they were on their way back from the temple, asking them to share it with everyone at the *illam* to read. Nilayamgode notes that having received the letter on their way back from the temple, her sister and friends began to shake with fear:

“*Edathi* [elder sister] and her friends wondered whether they should keep the mysterious papers or discard them. It was not possible to carry them around at the *illam*, at least not publicly. That would be a great crime. But how could they be thrown away? Curious to learn the contents, Edathi and her friends folded and hid the papers in their fists and sped to the *illam*... On reaching home, their fear, instead of abating, only intensified. What If someone saw the papers? Where could they hide them? If detected, things were likely to get completely out of hand and, worse still, they would lose the papers. So screwing up the sheets into a tighter ball, each of them tucked it away safely in the folds of her *mundu*. Concealing it was not enough.”²⁷

It is interesting that “publicly” is used here to refer to carrying something within the home. Outside of the home, the Antharjanam’s only ventures out into the “public” were the daily trips to the temple. This was where they had met the woman who shared with them V.T Bhattathirippad’s call to Nambuthiri women reminding them of their plight, and of a world beyond the temple-pond of their ancestral homes.²⁸ Curious to know more, they had taken and hid the letter, which they had not yet read:

“But there was just no privacy in the *illam*. Finally, they decided on the bathhouse. In the evening, when it was deserted they went to the bathhouse, carefully extracted the paper, unfolded it, and began to read slowly...”²⁹

Here again, these women were being introduced to the winds of change not publicly in libraries and reading rooms like the men were, but within the confined of what would conventionally be termed a “private” space. Yet, what we see is a diversion of these spaces into temporary semi-publics.³⁰

In the early twentieth century, we see a much more involved attempt from the women to assert their presence in the public spaces. Nevertheless, these efforts were soon replaced by a radical project to reshape identity completely and fit into narratives of nationalism and communism that were fast gaining ground by the 1930. The promise of the early twentieth century struggles to question both caste and gender roles of traditional society were soon replaced with a modernity that saw gender as the “natural”

²⁷ Nilayamgode, (2011), pp.102-103

²⁸ Nilayamgode, (2011), p.103

²⁹ Nilayamgode, (2011), p.103

³⁰ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.167-168

alternative to a caste-based social order.³¹ Consequently, there was the domestication of women and the separation of the private and public spaces with clearly defined gender roles.³² Despite early signs of resistance to this engendering from within feminist spaces, as we shall see in Section 4.3, they got brushed under the communist wave which promised to resolve the question of gender alongside that of class. Even as the contests of modernity played out actively in the private spaces, there was a new spatiality taking shape in the form of new social spaces opening up which were giving an opportunity to the people from different castes to traverse their social spaces and be a part of a broader public. In the next section, I shall expand on these spaces.

4.2 New spaces

The caste-based social reform movements picked pace in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ushering in a new spatiality that was built on the resistance to the traditional order that emerged for the reasons discussed in the last chapter. There was the need to create spaces that were shared by people from different castes—new social spaces. In most parts of India, we see such changes happening in the nineteenth century. In most of these spaces, it was an “opening-up” of the public sphere to people from lower castes. In Kerala, we have already seen that the caste-Hindus controlled the social spaces, but the prevalent rules of purity and pollution meant that there were severe restrictions on them to use public spaces freely. The creation of social spaces in early-modern Kerala was, therefore, also a way of opening up public spaces to those from the caste-Hindu communities too. As a result, we shall see that modernity is seen not as a “double-hinged door” as was the case in many other parts, but as an “alternative” shared space that members were from all communities benefitted from. Meanwhile, some existing spaces like public roads and streets are also transformed and new spatial practices that are more secular emerge.

Although this transformation in spaces affect all aspects of society, I shall focus my work on a selection of the many new spaces that were created or appropriated by the changing spatiality during this period. In this section, I shall discuss some of the most prominent social spaces that find space in the memoirs, narratives and biographies that have been studied in this research. These include spaces like public schools, libraries and reading rooms, streets, teashops and the caste-based organisations and the temples. Because of the nationalist struggle and in the backdrop of the reform movements from the nineteenth century, these spaces opened up the opportunity to traverse sociabilities like never before in Kerala history, and we shall discuss each of these spaces in detail.

³¹ Devika, (2006), p.48

³² Devika & Sukumar, (2006); Devika, (2006); Ganesh, (2018), pp.90-108

4.2.1 Education

While much has been written about the importance of education to the socio-economic transformation of Kerala society, the endeavour in the present research is to focus on the school itself as a social space. In the traditional system, systemic education was religious, and only boys of the Nambuthiri and Nair castes attended schools.³³ Lemerminier (1984) argues that the objective of this socialisation of young Brahmin boys with the wealthy Brahmin sub-caste and rich Nair boys was the reproduction of the group of religious agents, in as much as this was a group “separated” from the other castes.³⁴ The former schooling ended once they learnt how to write the alphabet, after which the Nambuthiri boys specialised in religious education,³⁵ while the Nairs were trained in the martial art of *Kalaripayattu* and warfare.

Traditionally, boys of all other communities and girls received no formal education. While boys learnt the hereditary caste-occupation, girls were mostly trained in everyday domestic chores and caste customs. For the lowered castes, the missionary movement and their schools proved pivotal.³⁶ Sanal Mohan (2016) has recently argued that the slave schools were among the first institutional spaces that theoretically opened up to everybody irrespective of their position in the caste society. In the traditional order, slave-castes did not assemble except for work or for practices such as the worship of ancestors. Their assembling in slave-schools, in contrast, was a direct resistance to caste-oppression and control over their social spaces. It became spaces where women, men and children of the lower castes interacted and learnt new practices and habits. As we have seen in the last chapter, the redefinition of the slave-body as space was an important part of the production of modern social space in Kerala, and education played an important role here. The slave schools often functioned out of slaves’ huts. What we see here was a transformation that threatened directly the control over conceived spaces that the caste-system had enforced. It is what Lefebvre called the *reappropriation* or *diversion* of space; when an existing space outlives its original purpose and the *raison d’être* that determines its forms, functions, and structures and is put to different use from its initial one.³⁷ This “diversion” of slave huts must be read within the broader scope of changes that were affecting the social space in nineteenth-century Kerala. As has already been mentioned, the disconnect that the caste Hindus (especially Brahmins) had from the lived spaces of the lower castes and the fact that these schools were situated outside the “normal spaces of the clean castes” provided for the narrow margin within which these new spaces could operate. It was, in other words, what may be called a counter-public or an early subaltern public. In essence, they developed within a cleavage in the social space of the traditional order. But the interest of

³³ Lemerminier, (1984), p.171

³⁴ Lemerminier, (1984), p.171

³⁵ Namboothirippad, (2004), pp.54-76

³⁶ Lemerminier, (1984), p.193

³⁷ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.167-168

this research is to look at social spaces where a traversal of sociabilities was possible. Clearly, the traditional system of education did not allow for such scope. But there were some winds of change in the nineteenth century, partly as a response to the threat of missionary activity among the lowered castes, and partly out of the increase in public movements in demand for education.

Within the mainstream public sphere, the education sector was gaining importance. Already in 1817, Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai of Travancore issued the following royal proclamation:

“The State should defray the entire cost of the education of its people in order that there might be no backwardness in the spread of enlightenment among them...and that the reputation of the state might be advanced thereby”.³⁸

Public schools started to be established since the early nineteenth century, but their beneficiaries were mostly Tamil Brahmins and Nair boys; the queen’s decree remained a dead letter for many decades.³⁹ Together, the Tamil Brahmins, Nairs and a minuscule section of the Ezhava population would form the Western-educated middle class by the end of the century who occupied jobs in the civil services, judiciary, etc.⁴⁰ Most schools used Malayalam as the medium of teaching, and there were more privately owned schools than government ones. As of 1891, there were a total 529 government schools (423 in Travancore, 57 in Cochin and 49 in Malabar), much below the 5383 private ones (1745 private aided and 3638 unaided private ones).⁴¹ As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Dalit and backward castes remained outside the mainstream public sphere, and only a very small section of the Ezhavas managed to gain access to public education in the nineteenth century.⁴² In 1891, there were a mere 30 people from the Ezhava community educated in English. This number had risen to 1,441 by 1911 after the government declaration (1904) that all public schools be open to children of all backgrounds.⁴³ In Travancore, for instance, the government’s educational expenditure increased from ₹110,000 in 1871, to ₹760,000 in 1909-10 and further to ₹7,853,000 by 1946-47.⁴⁴ Despite the slow start, education systems in Cochin and Malabar caught up quickly in the twentieth century. Between 1901 and 1961, literacy rates across all districts (Malabar, Cochin and Travancore) increased from 13

³⁸ Remarks by Vice President of India, Shri M. Hamid Ansari, at the function for Declaration of Kerala as the First Total Primary Education attained State in India at Kerala University, Thiruvananthapuram (13-January-2016), *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*

³⁹ Ganesh, (2017), pp.248-250

⁴⁰ In Malabar where the British laws restricted the powers of the traditional order, Nairs and Ezhavas had access to these jobs relatively sooner. In Travancore, this happened only after the Malayali Memorial (1891) and Ezhava Memorial (1896) petitions were submitted to the authorities asking the government to provide backward communities equal access to education and government jobs.

⁴¹ Dhanuraj, (2006), p.3

⁴² Lemercinier, (1984), p.172

⁴³ Lemercinier, (1984), pp.194-195

⁴⁴ Nair, (1976), p.35

percent to 55 percent.⁴⁵ The fact that educational system was developed through unaided private institutions, schools owned by the government directly, or those privately owned but publicly funded (owned by private families, missionaries, caste association such as SNDP, NSS, etc) is a characteristic specific to the state.⁴⁶

Between 1911 and 1941, the literacy rates of Christians went up from 21.2 percent to 59.3 percent while that of *Nairs* went up from 27.1 to 63.2 percent.⁴⁷ In Cochin, special schools were set up from 1914 for backward communities, and the most backward communities were exempted from school fees starting 1923. In Malabar, District Boards ran schools open to all communities already from the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ By 1930, the segregation of caste-specific schools in Travancore was done away with, and the “special schools” that were opened for the backward castes were recognized under the general category.⁴⁹ The opening up of schools created contests, and the higher caste Hindus were not always in favour of these efforts to allow lowered caste children into the same schools as them. EK Nayanar (1919-2004) who was a Nair, remembers an incident from his childhood when his father came home fuming that two children from the lower castes were being enrolled into the local government school, and the thought of Pulaya children studying with “our” children was unacceptable to him.⁵⁰ A number of the lowered caste continued to study in Muslim or Christian schools, creating a horizontal traversal of sociabilities which we have already witnessed. K.V. Kannan who belongs to the *avarna* (lowered caste) Hindus, remembers a similar incident from growing up in early twentieth century Malabar:

“When I was ten years old, I went to school to study. I had to sit on the floor because we weren’t allowed to sit on the benches. After a while, parents of caste Hindus complained, and I had to leave the school”.⁵¹

He writes that he continued his elementary education in a Muslim school. This was common for many students from the lowered castes to study in Christian or Muslim schools. As we have already discussed in the last chapter, lower caste Hindus and slave-castes were already closer in social proximity to lower caste Christians and Muslims than they were to upper-caste Hindus. It was not uncommon for the lower castes who had to compete with caste Hindus to get an education in the schools run by Christian and Muslim communities. E. Balanandan (1924-2009) recollects his time at St. Joseph’s Primary school:

⁴⁵ Nair, (1976), p.39

⁴⁶ Kumar & George, (2009), p.55

⁴⁷ Ganesh, (2017), pp.249-250

⁴⁸ Ganesh, (2017), p.249

⁴⁹ T K Velu Pillai, Travancore State Manual Vol.III, quoted in Nair, (1976), p.33

⁵⁰ Nayanar, (1997), pp.7-8

⁵¹ Kannan, (1988), pp.295-296

“Most of my companions in the school were Chrisitan boys. It was our pleasure to romp on the sands in the sea-shore after the school hours. We used to pilfer sardines and mackerels from the fishing boats anchored at the beach and enjoy a delicious meal of baked fish. The memory lingers still. My lovely village, my good neighbours, my boyhood friends.”⁵²

The importance of such secular socialization needs to be reflected on when one studies the emergence of a modern public sphere in the twentieth century. Despite the resistance from the caste-Hindus in the early stages, government schools soon emerged as one of the most important social spaces that transcended the caste and religious differences that had separated the traditional social order. In many cases, the Nair and upper-caste resistance to the lower castes attending the same schools as them was ironed out after Gandhi’s appeal to caste Hindus to reach out to the lower castes, and the nationalist movement picked up pace in the 1920s and 1930s. Many schools, especially in Malabar, were opened up to children from all castes and classes by the 1930s.

The *Nambuthiris* – being religious agents - refused initially to send their children to English schools and it was not before as late as the 1950s that *Nambuthiri* children came to mainstream schools in large numbers.⁵³ The lowest castes that were employed in basic production also remained outside the purview of modern education during this period because their position as ‘outcastes’ forbade them from any relation with higher castes.⁵⁴ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, there was already a new middle class; the local intelligentsia comprising mostly of English educated *Nairs*. While English education introduced them to Western liberal ideas, state schools were a first step in democratising the education system.⁵⁵ The Nairs, meanwhile, were benefitting from the government schools that were being established. Mannathu records in his autobiography that he first enrolled at the government school in 1888 at the age of ten, although he had to discontinue his schooling due to poverty. By 1893 when he was employed at the government school in Kanjirapally, he mentions that the government schools had opened up education to the Christian and Nair communities in the area:

“The process of modernising the educational system was begun in those days. The number of schools and teachers went up fast...Parents took a keen interest in the

⁵² Balanandan, (2014), p.12

⁵³ Nossiter, (1982), pp.12-44; Houtart & Lemercinier, (1978), p.28; Oommen, (1995), p.546

⁵⁴ Lemercinier, (1984), p.182

⁵⁵ It was only in the mid- 20th century that these schools became ‘public’ in its real sense and children from all caste, class, religions studied together. For most of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the government established separate schools for separate social groups.

education of their children, and were willing to build schools at their expense and hand them over to the government to be run”.⁵⁶

This is not surprising. The Nairs were after all one of the early groups to benefit from the government schools that were being established across the region since the early nineteenth century.⁵⁷ These schools were a new space that had opened up to them—one where they had an advantage over the Nambuthiris who were reluctant to participate due to fear of pollution. In 1891, a section of Nambuthiris, Christians, Nairs and Ezhavas came together to petition the Travancore demanding preferential treatment for the natives of Travancore in government jobs, irrespective of class, caste or creed.⁵⁸ This Malayali Memorial of 1891 was led by Nair and Ezhava leaders but reflected the political aspirations also of Nambuthiris, Latin and Syrian Christians, and Anglo-Indian communities against a common “other”—the Tamil Brahmin. Never before in Kerala had members from across all sections claimed a social space. The public meetings organised by the memorialists were presided over by leading members of the different communities.⁵⁹ More interestingly, the Ezhavas of Travancore, whose leader Dr Palpu was one of the pioneers of the memorial, were being educated in the public meetings about their fellow caste-brethren in Malabar—the Thiyyas—who were already making relative progress in education and public employment. Both transcendence of social spaces, and the knowledge of and solidarity with fellow caste-communities were both novel concepts to the lower castes and active expansion of their social spaces.

When the Malayali Memorial did not bring fruitful results, the Ezhavas—led by Dr Palpu—submitted another memorandum a few years later. The Ezhava Memorial of 1896, bearing 13176 signatures, invited the attention of the authorities more directly to the disabilities suffered by the community due to the non-admission of Ezhava children to government schools, despite repeated proclamations being passed regarding this since the early nineteenth century.⁶⁰ The government’s response was that any change to the traditional social order would cause caste antagonism and do violence to communal harmony. It was decided that separate schools would be set up for the different castes because any attempts to “force” all castes into common schools would be “futile and productive of undesirable consequences”.⁶¹ Clearly, the idea was to ensure that the social spaces of the different communities remained as distinct as possible; any solidarity that cut across the caste cleavages would prove harmful to the traditional social relations.

⁵⁶ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.9

⁵⁷ As has been mentioned, the Tamil Brahmins and a small section of the Ezhava population were others. The Nambuthiri Brahmins only took to mainstream education much later. See Mencher, (1966), Lemerancier, (1984), Chapter 5.

⁵⁸ The Regional Records Survey Committee, Kerala State, (2001), p.11

⁵⁹ The Regional Records Survey Committee, Kerala State, (2001), pp.13-14

⁶⁰ Saradamoni, (1980), pp.15-17; The Regional Records Survey Committee, Kerala State, (2001), p.15

⁶¹ Saradamoni, (1980), p.137; The Regional Records Survey Committee, Kerala State, (2001), p.17

Eventually, the Nambuthiris who had withdrawn from the public sphere started to enrol in these government schools. The younger generation of Nambuthiris led by reformers like V.T Bhattathirippad considered the education of both girls and boys an inevitable component of the Nambuthiri reforms. EMS Namboodirippad, who went on to become the first Chief Minister of Kerala and one of India's foremost Communist leaders, was born into a Brahmin Nambuthiri family in 1909. In 1925, at the age of sixteen, he was admitted to a public school in Perinthalmanna. Once again, the school itself, and the different crowds he encounters there he considers influential in his life:

“This was an important turning point in my life...joining school felt like beginning a new life—an environment entirely different from the one I had been accustomed to; friends and teachers from different castes and religions. And one didn't study by oneself or with two or three other classmates, but in classrooms with twenty-five to thirty students.”⁶²

It was as much a “new life” to EMS as it was to his lower caste classmates. Here, we see a new social space being conceived with spatial practices that transcended caste differences. They served an important purpose: children who went to these schools now had the opportunity to interact and socialise with peers from different castes and religions. This was shaping their experiences and their world-views, as EMS continues:

“In short, there was a social life and consciousness that was shaped around the institution of my school...and I dissolved myself in this environment completely. Respected teachers, classmates who were intimate compatriots, other friends that I had lesser interactions with—I had never before been in the presence of such a diverse crowd with people from different castes and religions.”⁶³

One of his teachers, Kunjukannan Nambiar, established a reading room and library next to the school premises and encouraged students like EMS to read newspapers and magazines, books, and discussions.⁶⁴ These libraries and reading rooms would also play a vital role in Kerala's modern public especially after the 1930s.

According to the 1931 census, Kerala's literacy rate was 21.34 percent, more than double the national rate of 9.50 percent.⁶⁵ A combination of schools run by missionaries, Muslims, rich Hindu households, and the government, ensured that educational policy received importance in the region. While the lower castes enrolled in schools run by missionaries of Muslims, they eventually started to get admissions into

⁶² Namboodirippad, (2017), p.74

⁶³ Namboodirippad, (2017), p.77

⁶⁴ Namboodirippad, (2017), p.77

⁶⁵ Relevant Census Data, Government of India.

the government and other private-run schools as well. From being mutually exclusive and caste-specific, education gradually emerged as a secular space. Even for the Brahmins, this was the first time they had traversed and interacted freely with members from other sections of society. It played an important role in addressing the disconnected that had existed previously between the representational spaces of the upper caste Hindus from the lower castes.

4.2.2 Libraries and Reading Rooms

By the 1930s, Nambuthiri and Nair students had started studying in public schools along with students from the other castes and religions. The school also gave him access to a reading room and library in an adjacent building where he read books, periodicals, magazines and engaged in discussions with peers. The establishment of libraries and reading rooms ushered in a new space in the modern public sphere that eventually shaped (mostly male) mini-publics where matters of social importance were discussed and debated.⁶⁶ It was often here—in the local reading rooms—that later political leaders began their association with the cultural, literary and political institutions.

Much commentary has been made on the role of rural libraries in Kerala and their role in shaping the literate and politically conscious public in Kerala. Although the establishment of public libraries started in Kerala in the nineteenth centuries, it was by the 1930s that they had permeated into all corners of the state with the efforts of locals.⁶⁷ The library movement in Malabar was slower as compared to the rest of Kerala, because British authorities were wary of political activities surrounding libraries, and tried to minimise spaces of socialising.⁶⁸ Public libraries in Tellichery, Calicut and Cannanore were established in 1901, 1924 and 1927 respectively, and small rural libraries began to appear in villages thereafter.⁶⁹

The influence of Mahatma Gandhi and the national struggle were pivotal in democratising libraries and opening up their doors to the lowered caste. One such is the Mahatma Gandhi Library and Reading Room in Irinjalakuda. It was when Gandhiji visited Irinjalakuda in 1934 that the doors of the reading room, library and the nearby Sangameshivilasam School were opened up for people of all castes.⁷⁰ Interestingly, this was even before the nearby road in front of the temple was made public to people of all castes. Libraries across the region played an important role in democratising the public sphere in Kerala, allowing people from lower castes to transcend their social spaces effectively. In doing

⁶⁶ Libraries and Reading Rooms are often used synonymously in Kerala. In literature and from interviews, it was observed that the word *Vayanashala* (Reading Room) was used more generally to mean even Libraries (*Granthashala*). On the (in)difference between the two, EMS Namboodirippad writes, remembering his experience of setting up a Library in his village in 1934: “...Back then, we didn’t call it a library; we called it a reading room. A reading room is also a library.” See Namboodirippad, (2017), p.11

⁶⁷ Nair, (1998), p.175

⁶⁸ Ranjith, (2004), p.10; Lenin, (2017), p.9; Karat, (1976), pp.38-39

⁶⁹ Bavakutty, (1982), p.252

⁷⁰ Ramanathan, (2015), p.39.

so, they also assisted the formation of an “imagined community” which was essential for the socio-political and nationalist movements, and later for the spread of socialist ideals.⁷¹ By the late thirties, networks of such reading rooms had taken the shape of a movement, and Library Conferences were held in different parts of the state.⁷² By the mid-twentieth century, there were 354 public libraries receiving government grants in Travancore alone. Cochin State had 17 public libraries, 5 large rural libraries and 224 small rural libraries by 1941.⁷³

The emergence of reading rooms as social spaces reflects in the fact that they start getting a prominent reference in the autobiographies of leaders who were born in the twentieth century. E.M.S, K Madhavan, Balanandan, E.K. Nayanar and Nilayamgode all mention directly or indirectly, that the libraries played an important role in introducing progressive ideas into the minds of youngsters. In Nilayalmgode’s case, she mentions that her brothers had started going to the local library and reading literature from different parts of the world, while she herself was confined to the home. Such a mention of libraries and reading rooms is absent in the memoirs of earlier generations such as Kanipayoor, Mannathu, and V.T. New spaces emerged, secular in nature, thanks to the influence of the nationalist movement and the communist movement. For the Nambuthiris, entry into the public sphere came at the expense of their ritual and religious faiths. For other lower castes, on the contrary, entry into the public sphere was, in some sense, an entry into public religion as well.

The reading rooms that were established by themselves or as attached to a library were used by the KCSP to spread socialist ideas.⁷⁴ E.M.S Namboodirippad noted in an interview that the early communist leaders made a conscious effort to establish a reading room and a night-school in every village by the end of the 1930s.⁷⁵ Once political theatre began to appear, plays by K. Damodaran, Thoppil Bhasi and others that discussed the social, political and economic conditions of the people were often staged by the libraries, generating discussions and forming public opinions. As Menon (1992) notes, one of the novelties of the reading rooms was the “communal drinking of tea, as one person read the newspaper and others listened. Tea and coffee lubricated discussions on the veracity of the news and of the political questions, and a new culture emerged out of the reading rooms.”⁷⁶ One may recollect here a similar observation made by Woodcock in 1967, about the teashops of Kerala where coolies scanned the newspapers or listened while others read aloud.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Nair, (1998)

⁷² Bavakutty, (1982)

⁷³ Raimon, (2006), p.312

⁷⁴ Raimon, (2006) lists the main ones to be established in Malabar in the 1930s. For a complete list, see Lenin, (2017)

⁷⁵ Namboodirippad, (1992)

⁷⁶ Menon, (1992), p.154

⁷⁷ Woodcock, (1967), p.35

4.2.3 Streets and *Kavalas*⁷⁸

Streets were among the first spaces where the traditional order was challenged in Kerala. Already, the struggles for the lower castes to walk on public roads—most notably by Ayyankali, Sahodaran Ayyappan and the Vaikom Satyagrahis—has been mentioned already. There was a clear notion that the freedom to walk freely on the public roads and streets was the first step towards the removal of untouchability in Kerala.⁷⁹ By the early twentieth century, these rights were increasingly being granted to the lowered castes, and they had started to break free from centuries of invisibility onto Kerala's social space. Or rather, a new spatiality was being formed in Kerala, which allowed a modern citizen to traverse between the conceived, perceived and lived spaces easily. Such traversal, one may recall, is essential for a democratic society to function smoothly.

In the 1920s, the *Savarna Jatha*—a march by caste-Hindus in support of allowing lower castes' demand for access to public roads in Vaikom—had already marched all the way from Vaikom to Trivandrum, and Mannathu notes in his autobiographies about the welcome they received along the streets by caste-Hindus who supported their cause:

“The sight so these people marching forward, singing songs specially composed for the occasion, touched the hearts of all those who saw them. The crowds which stood on the roadsides watching the *jatha* pass, demonstrated their sympathy and support, by garlanding its members and conveying their best wishes.”⁸⁰

Such *jathas* (marches) became increasingly common in the 1930s and 40s, especially as the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) took up mass mobilisation as part of their political method. Menon (1992) writes that these *jathas* where the landowners, tenants, cultivators and agricultural labourers all marched together, also helped create a sense of community.⁸¹ These *jathas* and the right for lowered castes to access them freely led to the emergence of the streets themselves as secular social spaces, but also facilitated the development of *kavalas*—the small junctions or crossroads in the villages—as spaces of social and political activity in the village. By the end of the 1930s, the *jathas* emerged as social spaces where people mobilised and agitated for their rights. By the 1930s, streets had broken away from the grips of the caste-order as exclusive spaces. Public spaces like streets, public roads, *kavalas* and markets had become secularised, although a lot of them continued to be dominated by men.

⁷⁸ Small junctions or crossroads in villages where men would congregate on a regular basis to socialise. It is often also the part of the village with the bus stop, post-office and other shops were concentrated. See Figure 2

⁷⁹ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), pp.77-79

⁸⁰ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), pp.83-84

⁸¹ Menon, (1992), p.2707

Even for members of the Brahmin community, this access to public spaces was crucial in shaping their worldview. We have already discussed how the idea of bodily pollution had left severe constraints on the Brahmins' use of public spaces in the traditional system. The ability to walk freely along the public road, EMS points out in his autobiography, was “new” to him—a curious detail that points to the discussion from Chapter 3 that even Brahmin lives were extremely restricted as a result of the traditional laws of purity and pollution.⁸² To EMS, these spaces opened up not within the ritualistic life of purity and pollution that he had lived, but without it. This is why he comments that this visit to Thrissur was a crucial experience from his childhood that helped shape his politics.⁸³ It was young EMS' first venture out from his ‘old’ life confined by daily rituals, prayers and Sanskrit education. Unlike his own home, the relative's place where he spent a good portion of his teenage life was along the public road. About this, he writes:

“The relatives home was only two furlongs from the public road...All these changes have left a deep impact on my life. It became regular to walk three or four miles along the public road and wander around in the premises of a traveller's bungalow in Karuppadanna.”⁸⁴

Around the same time, his family started to operate a bus service. His unorthodox practices and his

Figure 2: A Kavala near Velinellur, Kerala



Source: Photograph taken by author, 03rd July 2018.

⁸² Namboodirippad, (2017), p.51

⁸³ Namboodirippad, (2017), p.50

⁸⁴ Namboodirippad, (2017), p.47

rejection of the Brahmin way of life meant that by now, EMS was able to access freely a whole range of social spaces, unlike other practising Brahmins. He had access to the bus—a public mode of transport—and frequently travelled along the length of the route.⁸⁵ In these travels, he had the opportunity to meet people from different castes, classes and religions—something he could never have imagined from within the rigid framework of his Brahmin way of life.⁸⁶ EMS writes in no unclear term, that these two events from his childhood—the visit to Thrissur where he walked along the public roads and accessed the teashops, and the bus service which introduced him to a diverse crowd of people—shaped his worldview and opinions.⁸⁷

By the 1930s, the political nature of streets gains new prominence as young reformers and political activists began to take to communist ideas. When the young critics were denied a space at the main literary conference in Tallicherry in 1934, young socialist P. Krishna Pillai invited Kesav Dev to deliver a speech at a Youth Conference that he organised in an open market near a *kavala*.⁸⁸ In his speech, Dev came down heavily on the mainstream literary sphere, arguing that it was time for the writers to move away from the palaces to write about the toiling masses, their poverty and their struggles. It was a speech that reflected the socialist ideology that was to spread quickly in the following decade, and it was befitting that it was delivered in the *kavala* to an eager, diverse and enthusiastic crowd. By the end of the decade, *kavalas* had emerged as social spaces of importance. Rifts within the KCSP after the outbreak of World War II led to socialist leaders being expelled from the party and forced to go into hiding. When the Communist Party was formed in Kerala in January 1940,⁸⁹ their leaders were in hiding. However, they decided that the announcement had to be made publicly. The solution suggested by the leaders was to paint communist messages on the walls in public spaces and *kavalas* of north Malabar.⁹⁰ The slogans of “Long Live Communist Party”, “May Feudalism and Imperialism Perish” that appeared on the walls and *kavalas* of Malabar, Travancore and Cochin in 1940-41 announced the emergence of the Communist Party, but also the secularisation and democratisation of public spaces in Kerala’s public sphere.

4.2.4 Teashops

As people from the lower castes began to gain increased freedom of movement in public spaces, and with the emergence of a money-based economy, wayside teashops began to emerge in Kerala’s public

⁸⁵ From Irinjalakuda railway station to town and onwards to Karupadanna, roughly twenty kilometres

⁸⁶ It will be relevant here to contrast these experiences with EMS’ memory of the extremely rigid laws practiced during his first pilgrimage at a very young age, discussed in Section 3.1.2

⁸⁷ Namboodirippad, (2017), pp.50-5

⁸⁸ Kunhiraman, (2013), pp.86-87

⁸⁹ Initially in Malabar, and a year later, on 26th January 1941 in Travancore and Cochin

⁹⁰ Kunhiraman, (2013), pp.63-64

scene in the early twentieth century. Mannathu notes that when he arrived in Kanjirapally (Travancore) in 1893 as Assistant in the village school, teashops were already a presence there:

“Kanjirapally of those days was a backward area. There were no roads, except one which led to Peermade. Nor were there any good houses, public offices or a hotel worth its name. There were only a few way side tea stalls run by Christian ladies which offered *puttu*,⁹¹ plantain fruits and black coffee to the coolies who went to the plantations in the High ranges. The above were the only edibles available even to the Headmaster at Kanjirapally.”⁹²

Already, the image is of the teashop as being a space that cuts across caste, class and gender roles. The lowered-caste coolie, the Headmaster of the school (a Jacobite Christian) and Mannathu (a Nair) would meet at the teashop run by a Christian woman—temporarily traversing their social spaces. The fact that the plantations—a modern cash-crop economy—facilitated such an environment needs to be noted.

The *public* nature of teashops was once again crucial when *pantbibbojanam* or inter-caste dining introduced by Sahodaran Ayyappan (1889-1968) in his crusade against the caste system in the early twentieth century.⁹³ As has already been discussed, the concept of inter-dining was absent in traditional Kerala because it would have meant sitting in close proximity with people of lower castes, and the more serious threat of pollution through touch or saliva. In 1917, Ayyappan formally inaugurated the *Sahodara Sangham* (Association of Brotherhood), by organising an inter-dining feast at Cherai.⁹⁴ Such inter-dining also augmented the occupational mobility, which was already having an impact on Kerala’s political economy since the late nineteenth century with the introduction of public works, agricultural and allied industries, and cash crops.⁹⁵ That the caste-Hindus saw this the physical presence of different castes and their inter-dining in spaces like teashops as a serious threat can be gauged from a speech made by the President of *Purvachara Samrakshana Sabha*, which was formed to safeguard the traditional conservative customs. At their first meeting in 1919, he observed:

“If Sahodara Sangham is allowed to function for four years, the caste system will be destroyed. There is no other way so strong and effective than inter-dining to

⁹¹ A dish in Kerala which was common diet for people especially from the lower castes in the past, made by steaming rice-powder. Today, it is a common dish across the state of Kerala.

⁹² Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.8

⁹³ Venkiteswaran, (2011), p.82

⁹⁴ Ayyappan, (1917)

⁹⁵ Vinayakumar, (1999), p.111

annihilate caste...all but me at home are well-wishers of the Sangham and it is my opposition that detains them from joining it.”⁹⁶

Teashops emerged in Kerala’s public sphere as representational spaces where the traditional social relations were openly challenged. Anybody with money could, in theory, walk into a teashop and be served tea and snacks. Of course, this was not practically possible easily, as cases from across the region as late as the mid-twentieth century shows⁹⁷ But over time, most teashops in Kerala had emerged as political spaces and had an extremely influential role in shaping the public consciousness and strengthening communist thought among the common people, and cut across religious and caste divides. K. Madhavan (1915-2016) remembers the teashop in his village as the “central office” of political activism and political discussions. It was also a space where people gathered for any updates on matters of importance: “If any problem arose in the village...people usually ran to Koman’s tea shop.”⁹⁸

By the 1940s, Travancore State Manual noted that the labourer in Kerala now patronised the teashops with “stern resolve”, as tea, coffee and cocoa became increasingly popular and substitutes to local drinks like buttermilk.⁹⁹ One observer notes of the teashops in Kerala in the mid-twentieth century that in his travels across south Asia or Japan, he had never seen anything like the little teashops of Kerala in the mornings...

“...crowded with coolies scanning the newspapers or listening while others read them aloud. More than 40 newspapers in the Malayalam language are published in Kerala; they are read and discussed by people of all classes and castes.”¹⁰⁰

By virtue of automatically being spaces that necessitated interaction between the different castes, teashops could not be controlled by upper-caste Brahmins. Kanippayur’s account of restaurants in the cities (already discussed in Section 3.3.2) suggests that even in the big cities where caste-based restaurants had existed for a while, economic unviability meant that they had to eventually give way to restaurants that were either owned by non-Brahmins or hired lower caste employees for cheap labour. It is relevant here to reflect on the differences between the teashops of Kerala and the coffeeshops in London that Habermas studies in his work. Unlike the coffee-shops in Europe which were bourgeois

⁹⁶ Anon., (1094 ME), p.30

⁹⁷ I came across three recorded incidents: one of an Ezhava being fined for trying to buy tea from a Nair’s tea-stall in 1925 (Keralakaumudi, 1st January 1925); K.V Kannan’s (1988) recollection that as Harijan’s they were not allowed to “drink tea from the local teashop” (p.295); and Elayaperumal Committee’s 1969 Report observing that “some rural areas of North Malabar had teashops where special tumblers/coconut shells were kept for Harijans”.

⁹⁸ Madhavan, (2014), p.53

⁹⁹ Pillai, (1940), p.81

¹⁰⁰ Woodcock, (1967), p.35

public spheres restricted initially and only democratized with time, the wayside teashops in Kerala emerged specifically as spaces that were more accessible to the lower strata of society—a difference that existed because the higher castes kept away because of the fear of pollution. As has been argued already, this is a nuance that can only be explored when we deconstruct the coffee shop, and turn the focus on their importance as not just representations of space (conceived), but also representational space (lived).

4.2.5 Caste-based community Organisations:

Although the Malayali and Ezhava memorials of 1891 and 1896 did not provide immediate results, it provided for the first time, a sense of solidarity among the various caste groups, and drew the attention of the media and public both inside and outside the State.¹⁰¹ As we have seen in the last chapter, this was also a period when social reform movements led by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and others were picking up pace and allowing lowered castes to assert themselves in the public sphere spatially. These efforts aimed not just at fighting for access to the mainstream social spaces, but also to redefine the self as a space. Especially the lower castes whose bodies had been denied any agency for centuries were learning to mobilise and fight for their rights. The first decade of the twentieth century saw these movements gain strength and new conceptions of identity being formed.¹⁰² The idea of *samudayam* (community) as the centre of social reform led to the establishment of caste-based organisations—the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) for Ezhavas in 1903, the Keraleeya Nair Samajam (1904),¹⁰³ Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) set up by Ayyankali in 1907 and the Yogakshema Sabha (1908)—all aimed at caste-based welfare activities. The chronology of these associations also indicate the peculiarity of the reform movement in Kerala; the lower castes were the first ones to form these associational spaces, perhaps because they had realized from early experiences that collective action was important and necessary to achieve results.

The Nair and Ezhava communities who had been at the forefront of the Memorials were also the first ones to realise that such demands would be more effective if public opinion and support were gathered. Mannathu notes in his autobiography:

“The prevalent feeling was that, reforming existing customs and introducing needed changes in the usages and practices followed by the community were its concern and responsibility. It was the community that decided to give up the conduct of

¹⁰¹ The Regional Records Survey Committee, Kerala State, (2001), pp.19-20

¹⁰² Kumar, (2016), p.7

¹⁰³ First organisation in twentieth century to bring together the scattered Nair reform movements, the Samajam eventually was replaced by the Nair Service Society in 1914

Thalikettu Kalyanam without the consent of the authorities, or the priests and this holds good in the case of the abolition of the old funeral rituals.”¹⁰⁴

There was, in other words, a sense that the community must be reformed, and the changes must be made by the communities themselves. In addition, solidarity that transcended the territorial demarcations had now become possible. The relative success that the Thiyyas had gained in Malabar encouraged the Ezhavas in Kochi and Travancore to bargain for similar rights. Sree Narayana Guru envisaged the SNDP as a space where members from the community could get together to socialise and educate themselves; socialising was seen as an important part of the movement. The motive was to move from the individual to the community and from the community to the human race.¹⁰⁵ We have already discussed briefly how Ayyankali and his followers openly challenged the caste Hindus control over social spaces by riding on a bullock cart dressed in upper-caste clothes. By 1900, the right to roads was more or less achieved by the former slave-castes in Travancore.¹⁰⁶ Even before the SJPS was formed, Ayyankali had a young energetic group of volunteers who were trained in martial arts. His initial social activism was to openly challenge upper-caste Hindus, especially Nairs and cause physical harm.¹⁰⁷ Later, he led his supporters to the public market in Nedumangadu where Dalit communities were denied entry at the time.¹⁰⁸ His movement also gathered a more organised structure under the SJPS, which aimed to unite people from the lowest castes and to work for their welfare.

The establishment of all these organisations also played an important role in changing the spatiality of Kerala. The agitations made it possible for caste-specific and eventually, broader movements that cut across caste differences. By the 1920s, three decades after the Malayali Memorial, members from across castes marched together in Vaikom, with the support of the caste organisations. The idea of public meetings and gatherings meant that people started to traverse their social spaces. The meetings were held on public grounds or on the beach, and members were exhorted to strive for education and a better life. The spaces that were used often depended on the caste. Mannathu writes that the initial meetings of the Nair associations were often held where the community gathered automatically:

“As Nairs were quite inexperienced in holding meetings and speaking at them...it was very difficult to make them assemble in a public place. Hence whenever the Nairs gathered in large numbers at temple festivals, some spirited and service minded young men used to address them. The subject matter of their talk,

¹⁰⁴ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.55

¹⁰⁵ Kumar, (1997), p.256

¹⁰⁶ Saradmoni, (1980), pp.147-148

¹⁰⁷ Nisar & Kandasamy, (2007), p.66

¹⁰⁸ Saradmoni, (1980), p.149; Nisar & Kandasamy, (2007), p.68

invariably would be the proselytisation undertaken by Christian Missionaries...it was the missionaries who made us take to the platform and public speaking.”¹⁰⁹

Osella and Osella (2000) note similarly that the SNDP temples and festivals served a similar function among the Ezhava communities.¹¹⁰ Even in Malabar where the activities of the associations had not started to spread widely, we see the emergence of communities centred on shrines and temples.¹¹¹ Here, we see that the temple and temple festivals temporarily outlive their original purpose, and become a socio-political space. It is, as Lefebvre says, a re-appropriation or diversion of a social space temporarily.¹¹² The role of temples as social spaces will be expanded on in the following section. Nevertheless, the socializing function of the temple has a limitation by virtue of their religious importance and as a consequence, they cannot serve the purpose of a truly social space and be secular. This is why organisations become important, especially by the 1930s when we see that they started working together towards common goals that transcend caste differences.

For lower castes like Pulayas to whom temples were not always accessible, they met in other spaces. Here, associations and their more organized structure become important. The formation of the Cochin Pulaya Mahasabha in 1913 is an excellent example of how people from the lower castes redefined their spatiality. In Cochin, where the caste-oppression was extreme at the time, members from the Pulaya community were not allowed to assemble in public places. To assert their position and announce their presence in the public sphere, reformers Pandit Karuppan and Krishnadiyashan asked the Pulayas to row their small boats to the expanse of the backwaters and tie their boats together to form a temporary space to gather at.¹¹³ Here, from a wooden-planked platform, the association was launched, and the leaders addressed the crowd. The place was also chosen strategically because the king was attending a function at the nearby Maharaja's College. The loud and continuous drumbeats and songs are said to have disturbed this function, but it succeeded in bringing to the king's attention the plight and demands of the Pulaya community.¹¹⁴ In 1915 when Ayyankali mobilised the Pulaya women to break their stone-necklaces in protest, the meeting in Kollam was arranged inside a circus tent owned by a Dalit woman.¹¹⁵ In other instances, they used their homes, slave-schools or chapels, or the *maidans* (grounds).¹¹⁶ Through bringing people out into public spaces, these organisations played an important role in making them “visible” in the social spaces. The authorities started to take notice of their

¹⁰⁹ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.143

¹¹⁰ Osella & Osella, (2000), p.161

¹¹¹ Menon, (1994), Chapters 2 and 3.

¹¹² Lefebvre, (1991), pp.167-168

¹¹³ Remani, (2015), p.34

¹¹⁴ Saradamoni, (1980), p.159

¹¹⁵ Neelakandan, (2010), p.13

¹¹⁶ Basu, (2016), p.49

conditions and meetings some of their demands. Housing colonies, tanks, wells and co-operative societies for the Pulaya community were set up, sometimes at the behest of the administration.¹¹⁷

The Brahmins who had withdrawn from the public sphere started to organise themselves and think critically about the need for reforms within their community. Here, associations like the Yogakshema Sabha played an important role. The space that the association provided—both literally and metaphorically—helped a number of the young Nambuthiris in the early twentieth century to engage more actively with matters of public interest. In his autobiography, EMS writes that despite being introduced to progressive and political ideas from the books, magazines and newspapers that he read, it was when he visited the Sabha that he found a space to channelize his interests:

“...In Thrissur Town, there were a few *sanketams* of Nambuthiri reform movement and the Congress’ [nationalist] movement.¹¹⁸ A building—called the Yogakshema Building—where the office of the Yogakshema Sabha, their newspaper and a library operated from...”¹¹⁹

This building, along with the nearby Mangalodayam Press, the Central Bank and the residence of a Congressman Neelakanthan Nambuthirippad—these were spaces where the “traditional and the modern, conservative and progressive strands within the Nambuthiri community” convened.¹²⁰ He believes that the possibility to physically be in these spaces during his visits to the religious rituals at the nearby Brahmaswom Mathom, and the interactions he was able to have with the people played an important role in politics and public life. Even for a Brahmin boy, in other words, these were representational spaces where they were beginning to be introduced to ideas and themes that challenged the traditional order.

In the 1920s and 1930s, we see the various caste associations working together, thereby creating possibilities for a traversal of social spaces like never before. Although this had somewhat started with the Memorials signed by the different caste and religious groups in the 1890s, it took another few decades for such an association to manifest spatially. The public grounds, beaches, roads and temple festivals were all becoming political spaces in the early twentieth century, and the caste-based associations played an important role in reclaiming these spaces for the purpose of “larger good”. Encouraged by the wave of reforms that touched all caste groups and the Gandhian and nationalist

¹¹⁷ Basu, (2016), p.54

¹¹⁸ *Sanketham* may be translated into English as a “sanctuary”, “safe space”, or “a space of refuge”. EMS’ use of the word here might be conscious because the Yogakshema Sabha had at his time provided a space for progressive young minds to discuss matters that traditional Nambuthiri public spaces like the nearby Brahmaswom Mathom would not entertain.

¹¹⁹ Namboodirippad, (2017), p.49

¹²⁰ Namboodirippad, (2017), p.49

ideals that were fast gaining ground, these associations were prepared to come together and cooperate with each other, as Mannathu observes elsewhere in his autobiography:

“The NSS workers in general and its General Secretary in particular had held it as a part of their regular duty, to attend meetings convened by Nampoothiri Yoga Kshema Sabha (sic), the SNDP Yogam of the Ezhavas and the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham of the Pulayas. Once, at a meeting of the Yoga Kshema Sabha which was attended by me...a clever Nampoothiri observed that if any one who attended the meetings of Yoga Kshema Sabha regularly for twelve years could have become a Nampoothiri, Sri Mannathu Padmanabha Pillai had become a Nampoothiri a long time ago (sic).”¹²¹

Even half a decade ago, the idea that members from the Nair community would be encouraged to share the same space with Pulayas and Ezhavas would have been unimaginable. However, this had changed rapidly by the 1920s when Kerala witnessed an agitation in 1924 to open the roads around the Vaikom temple to people from the lower castes, led by leaders and associations of Nair, Ezhava, Pulaya and Nambuthiri communities. On the first day of protests, a Nair, an Ezhava and a Pulaya walked past the board that prohibited lower castes from entering. Although the leaders were arrested and the final settlement was only partial (in that three roads were eventually opened up to public while one remained restricted), the agitation brought together people from across caste and class differences into physical spaces like never before. Congress’ support to the movement and the fact that several large caste organisations lent support to the campaign played a large role in creating awareness about the caste-Hindus. The Kerala Hindu Sabha, the NSS, Kshatriya Maha Sabha, Yogakshema Sabha—all supported the campaign.¹²² Public meetings were held along the banks of the backwaters at Vaikom, Shankhumugham Beach in Trivandrum, paddy fields and public grounds.¹²³ The meeting at Shankhumugham is said to have been attended by over twenty thousand people and another one on the day of the festivities at the Vaikom temple on 21st November 1924 by nearly fifty thousand people.¹²⁴ The caste-Hindus (mostly Nairs and Nambuthiris) organised a long procession from Vaikom to Trivandrum to show their support for the cause, and public meetings were organised at each “camp-site” where they rested for the nights, which attracted large crowds. Mannathu writes about the conclusion of the procession in Trivandrum:

“The jatha [procession] reached Puthenkacheri maidan, Trivandrum on November 11, 1924. The ground became very crowded...there were tens of thousands of

¹²¹ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.93

¹²² The Regional Records Survey Committee, Kerala State, (2001), p.143

¹²³ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]). pp.79, 95; The Regional Records Survey Committee, Kerala State, (2001), p.157

¹²⁴ The Regional Records Survey Committee, Kerala State, (2001), p.158

people in the maidan. Thiruvananthapuram would not have seen a bigger crowd than this earlier or later (sic). On that day Thiruvananthapuram transformed itself, into a festival city. The members of the Jatha marched westwards to the beach...all of us addressed the gathering.”¹²⁵

King Sree Chithira Thirunal Maharaja accidentally caught himself amidst the large crowd that had gathered in Trivandrum on the last day of the procession, and could only get himself out of the crowd after many efforts and a long time.¹²⁶ Far away from the space that the king once had authority over, the Puthenkacheri Maidan and the streets of Trivandrum were, to borrow Lefebvre’s argument, appropriated or modified to serve the needs and possibilities of a group—in this case the thousands who participated in the procession. It was a spatial manifestation of the temporary transcendence of social spaces built around a common secular cause.

4.2.6 Temples

It has already been briefly discussed in the last chapter, that temple-centred rural economy was a characteristic feature of pre-modern Kerala for many centuries. Yet, the argument that temples emerged as “new” spaces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century needs some elaboration. Although it was only with the Temple Entry Proclamations in the mid-twentieth century that all temples in Kerala were opened to Hindus of all castes, the role of temples as social spaces had started to change already in the late nineteenth century, especially after Sree Narayana Guru’s installation of the *Ezhaba* Siva at Aruvippuram. To Guru, his temples were an “alternative space” and played a symbolic role as mediators of social equity. As opposed to Gandhi and Ambedkar’s support for temple entry aimed at making the caste-temples the very place for spiritual and moral redemption by opening them up to lower castes, Guru attempted to reconceptualise the temples and focus on their importance as social space.¹²⁷ Unlike Gandhi and Ambedkar who opposed the construction of parallel or separate temples, Guru travelled the length and breadth of the region, installing “alternate” temples which were more secular in character, as reflects in the message that he got engraved at the temple in Aruvippuram:

*Here is a model abode;
Where men live like brothers:
Bereft of the prejudice of caste
Or the rancour of religious differences.*¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.86

¹²⁶ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.86

¹²⁷ Guru & Sarukkai, (2019), pp.159-160

¹²⁸ Translated by Guru’s biographer Murkot Kunhappa, quoted in Mani, (2013), p.302

Without challenging the existing social space of the mainstream temples directly, he was able to create a new “alternative space” that was at once both religious and secular. This became possible because he insisted on the importance of the temple not merely as a religious space, but as a space for his community to socialise, mobilise, get educated, and strive for prosperity. By 1910, when the foundation of the Nair welfare association was laid in Peruna in 1910, Mannathu recalls that the restoration of a temple opposite the compound was undertaken and the temple’s doors were thrown open to lower castes long before the Temple Entry Proclamation.¹²⁹

Dilip Menon (1994) has shown that in early twentieth century Malabar, there emerged a transient “community of worship” where people from the village worshipped together regardless of caste (and class) differences, and “Nayar ancestors, tribal gods, local heroes and heroines and brahminical deities jostled one another”.¹³⁰ There was a syncretism that made Hindu gods and goddesses as much a part of a “lower caste” pantheon as any local hero was of an upper-caste pantheon.¹³¹ Menon argues that a study of these communities allows us to conclude that “When Siva or Vishnu...were installed at Tiyya temples, it was less a *move up* a religious hierarchy as a *move sideways*”.¹³² It was, in other words, an attempt to create a caste-based community than it was an attempt at “Sanskritisation”. Recalling our discussion in Section 2.3 regarding the ability for a person to traverse social spaces in shaping his experience, we see that although temporarily, the “move sideways” in this case also allowed him to automatically traverse caste differences vertically and share a social space with the higher caste Hindus. Consecutively, local temples and shrines became where these communities were “imagined”. Once again, we see the creation of a new “alternate” place of worship, which at once played a religious and secular role, rather than asserting or reclaiming an existing space.¹³³ It was a representational space that subverted traditional social spaces. As alternate spaces, they remained largely non-confrontational to the mainstream Hindu temples, which continued to restrict the entry of lower castes. It was only after the nationalist movement gained momentum and Gandhian ideals spread that there was an attempt to move away from these local shrines into traditional Hindu temples.

4.3 The Decade of the 1930s.

By the 1930s, Kerala had witnessed half a century of social disintegration on a scale unequalled elsewhere in India and the caste-systems that governed pre-modern spatial relations had crumbled quickly.¹³⁴ Traditional social order was in the decline and new social spaces drew out new spatial practices that governed social relations. Yet, the unresolved tensions with respect to gender—

¹²⁹ Mannathu, (2003 [1957]), p.15

¹³⁰ Menon, (1994), pp.5-6

¹³¹ Menon, (1994), p.70

¹³² Menon, (1994), p.70

¹³³ Menon, (1994), p.80

¹³⁴ Jeffrey, (1978), p.77; Nossiter, (1982), p.17

specifically the attempt and a spatial divide between the domestic and public—meant that a simply reformed version of the traditional society would not suffice. The unresolved gender and religious reforms were subsequently replaced with the struggles for economic equality and social justice. This, it was assumed, would automatically resolve the problem of caste inequality.¹³⁵ It is this gap that Marxist ideology came to fill in the 1930s in Kerala. The men and women who were unsettled with the changes turned towards this ideology, which appealed to thousands of literate, alienated people.¹³⁶ In addition, the failure of the Congress to lend support to the victims of the Moplah rebellion, the withdrawal of caste-Hindu Congressmen after the Guruvayur Satyagraha,¹³⁷ all hit the influence of the Congress party, especially in Malabar.¹³⁸ Soon the left-leaning Congress Socialist Party (CSP) was formed in Bombay in 1934 and its Kerala wing (KCSP) was founded by P. Krishna Pillai, E.M.S Namboodirippad and A.K. Gopalan in the same year. The communists in Malabar at the period attempted to create a community by renegotiating rural relations, while organising mass agitations for the rights of the peasants.¹³⁹ In the princely states, socialism developed within a framework of the struggles for responsible government that had shaped in the first decades of the twentieth century. The opinionated journalist Swadesabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai had already started writing about the need for radical political reforms and against the corruption in the Travancore government. He insisted that political awareness could only come if people of the state organised without caste and class differences.¹⁴⁰ For this, he saw public meetings as being important. Pillai's biography of Marx's life, published as a short book in 1912, is presumed to be the first book on Mark published in any Indian language.¹⁴¹ By 1918, articles on socialism seem to have appeared in literary magazines.¹⁴² In addition, the plantations, coir and other small agricultural industries that were being set up in the region also catalysed the growth of agitations for labour rights and wages. There was a sense within the Ezhava community that the educated elites from the Ezhava communities had distanced themselves from the weaker classes. Ezhava reformer C. Kesavan (1891–1969) presents these sentiments in his autobiography, where he reserves his strongest condemnation for the Ezhava elites whose style of politics he openly disagreed with. Kesavan was “disgusted by their condescending and unfeeling attitude towards poor of the community”, and

¹³⁵ Menon, (1992), p.2705

¹³⁶ Jeffrey, (1978), p.78

¹³⁷ In 1931-32, a campaign to allow lowered castes into the Guruvayur Temple took the shape of non-violent protests. Led by K. Kelappan, A.K. Gopalan, P. Krishna Pillai and Mannathu Padmanabhan, the hunger strike of 12 days was called off upon pressure from Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress.; See: Nossiter (1982), Chapter 4

¹³⁸ Nossiter, (1982), p.71

¹³⁹ Menon, (1994), p.4

¹⁴⁰ Damodaran, (1975), pp.79-80

¹⁴¹ Damodaran, (1975), p.98

¹⁴² I came across an article on socialism published in Bhashaposhini (1094 ME [1918]) on socialism, followed by another article on Abraham Lincoln's life. There seem to have been great interest in political and social events from across the world, and magazines like Bhashaposhini and Vidya Vinodini frequently published commentaries and reports.

thought they were “far too removed from popular sentiments and authentic moral passion”.¹⁴³The moment was ripe to move beyond the limited scope of community-based organisations, and create a broad-based political mobilization.¹⁴⁴

The introduction of communism and the gradual replacement of caste and religious identities by class became visible during this decade. When a handloom worker’s strike in 1933 raised the slogan “destroy the Nairs, destroy Nair rule, destroy capitalism”,¹⁴⁵ and a speech at the first all Malabar peasant meeting in 1936 declares that “there are only two castes, two religions and two classes—the haves and the have nots”,¹⁴⁶ they were also alluding to a shift occurring in Kerala’s popular imagination—the addition of class as a category different from caste. Whether it be because of the disintegration of the matrilineal system and disenchantment of the literate young generation, the failure of the Congress Party to raise the concerns of the working classes, or as a result of the movement for constitutional reforms, the decade of the 1930s was one of significant changes in Kerala. Spatially, the agitation for temple entry in Vaikom and the threat that the non-caste Hindus would convert to other religions led to the Temple Entry Proclamation in Travancore in 1936 permitting Hindus from all castes to enter the temples. There was a general urge to make the social spaces of modern Kerala more secular, and the leaders of the socialist wave played a big role in this. Here, the roles of libraries and reading rooms, teashops, and the largescale transformation of the streets and *kaavala* all played an important role in the post-1930s period in shaping social relations in Kerala.

4.4 Conclusion

By the mid-twentieth century, the nature of the public sphere—and social spaces—that were shaping up modern Kerala had become evident, and it is useful to point out some features. Firstly, the fulcrum of activity had moved away from the village temples as a new spatiality emerged in spaces such as libraries, reading rooms, and teashops. The importance of spaces in political and social mobilisation became amply evident, be it in the anti-caste agitations, or the role played by public schools in “secularising” the caste-Hindus like Brahmins and Nairs. In the first decades of the twentieth century, these social spaces allowed for the opportunity for the traversal of caste-specific sociabilities in a way unimaginable only three decades ago. In addition, this led to interesting contests in the spaces themselves. Secondly, these ambiguities played out not merely in the public sphere like schools, but also in the most private (representational) spaces like the homes, as the first section of this chapter demonstrated. All the individual cases discussed point towards a reconciliation of the caste question, at the expense of rigidifying the gender roles. This (en)gendering of space is an important development of

¹⁴³ Kumar, (2016), p.271

¹⁴⁴ Törnquist, (2018), p.15

¹⁴⁵ Jeffrey, (1976), p.21

¹⁴⁶ Menon, (1992), p.2706

early phase of modernity in Kerala, and as we shall see, shaped the nature of politics in the decades that followed. The consequence was an attempt to resolve caste-inequalities in the traditional order without substantially resolving the contradictions of gender that existed within it. The initial attempts to reform the conditions of women lost its vigour by the 1940s, once communism emerged to fill in the ideological gap in Kerala's public consciousness. In other words, the new secular social spaces that emerged in this period did a great deal to converge the many parallel caste-based reform movements already initiated in the nineteenth century, but did little to address the question of gender. They remained primarily spaces of socialising for men. And this was true especially of spaces like streets, teashops and reading rooms. The promise was that solving the class-question would automatically resolve the questions of not just caste, but also of gender.

Nevertheless, this phase saw the etching of social spaces as being pivotal in the political and social public sphere in Kerala—new representations of space emerged, which charted new spatial practices. All of these signalled, in Lefebvre's words, towards a new spatiality, and thereby, a new form of social relations. By mid-twentieth century, independence and the ushering in of electoral politics changed the nature, role and function of the political parties in Kerala. The role of the “authority” that had in the traditional order been usurped by the Nambuthiri Brahmin was now replaced by the democratically elected and legitimised entity of the State.¹⁴⁷

A Lefebvrian analysis suggests that any “authority” in society would try to control its spatiality to maintain power. As we have seen, challenging caste-Hindus' control of spatiality in traditional Kerala was an integral component of shaping the modern public sphere in Kerala. How does the emergence of the state as the new dominant political entity by mid-twentieth century affect the spatiality and public sphere? Did the spread of communism resolve the unresolved questions of gender and caste in the post-independence period? How did the struggle for space manifest itself in the post-independence society? These are some of the questions that we shall turn to in the next chapter.

¹⁴⁷ Menon, (1992)

5. State, Capital and the Struggle for control

“He can be seen prowling through the narrow by lanes like the wind...entering the homes of labourers...loitering near teashops and paan-shops...entering factories secretly. But this breeze is not one that soothes...it does not make one drowsy”

The protagonist of Kesavdev’s *Kannadi* (The Mirror, 1961) is unnamed; he is only referred to as *kaattu* (the wind). Set in the 1940s the novel questions caste and class injustices faced by the masses, *kaattu* loiters on the crossroads, teashops and by-lanes, educating masses.¹ It is “secular” in the sense that it does not differentiate between religions or castes. Naming the protagonist *kattu* is also interesting because it attaches an element of transience to the character—as if he occupies a space temporarily before moving on. As we have seen in the last chapter, the subversion of the old spatial order in Kerala also led to the creation of new spaces that were conceived and perceived differently. In other words, a new Lefebvrian spatial-triad was taking shape, which built on two main features: the replacement of the old-caste order by class; and the consequent attempt at separating the private and public spheres and engendering specific roles to each. The ideological gap that emerged from the breakdown of the traditional order was filled by the communist and nationalist movements.² Communism, specifically, was seen as an ideology with emancipatory—even utopian—ideals and channelled public action with new impetus for a modern secular public sphere in the 1930s. Spatially, *kavalas*, teashops and public schools now made it possible for people from across caste differences to interact on a daily basis. Even the Nambuthiri Brahmins who had withdrawn from the mainstream public sphere since the late nineteenth century, saw a new generation emerge by the 1930s that argued for internal reforms and more participation in the mainstream public sphere, and many of them went on to become stalwarts of the communist party.³ The Temple Entry Proclamations (1936 in Travancore, 1947 in Cochin and Malabar) was in a sense the final bastion of traditional order to be brought under the wave of reforms, as they opened the temples in Kerala to all castes, thereby ending the hegemony of the caste-Hindus over social spaces. I have already argued in Section 3.1 that the temples in pre-modern Kerala played an important role in defining the caste system spatially—the distribution of spaces revolved around the temple, just like the rules of purity and pollution revolved around the Brahmin body. The opening up of temples to all castes was, in other words, the last step towards opening up a new spatiality in Kerala that subverted the traditional system.

By mid-twentieth century, a new spatiality had emerged, as has been already argued. From the 1930s on, Kerala saw an explosion not just of newspaper, literature, journals and magazines, but also of a new

¹ Nair, (1985), pp.143-144

² Jeffrey, (1978)

³ Sunandan, (2015), pp.188-189

spatiality that was secular and progressive. Social life around libraries, reading rooms, youth clubs, film and arts societies, sports clubs and teashops became an important component of most Malayali men in the second half of the twentieth century. Even as these informal social spaces mushroomed, the state's emergence as the new legitimate modernist vanguard raised a new struggle for spaces. The result was a period that may be termed the golden decades of the modern public sphere, when it expanded and democratised in Kerala. Meanwhile, the contests between the state/political machinery in controlling these spaces, and the alternative ones that emerged continued to shape a vibrant and discursive political culture. Narratives, memoirs, autobiographies and periodicals provide useful insights into the nature of these social spaces during this phase. Twelve of my interview respondents were over thirty years of age (of which, seven were over fifty), and had memories of growing up in the time-period that I engage with in this chapter.

Continuing with an analysis of the new social spaces in the last chapter, the first section traces the expansion of the “new” social spaces through the decades under study. While some spaces already introduced in the last chapter continue to grow, we also see the emergence of new ones that mushroom out of parallel socio-political movements. As has already been discussed, a number of these spaces emerged precisely by subverting the hegemony of Nambuthiris in the traditional order. As we shall see, a new kind of spatial struggle appear to emerge from within these spaces towards the end of the century. The changing political, social and economic situation meant that this new struggle for spatiality between three new powers—the state, capital and narrow religious interests—all engaged in a tussle to control social spaces. If caste was the hegemonic order under the traditional system, the state and capital emerge as contenders in the subsequent phase, increasingly so since the 1980s. This trajectory follows Lefebvre's prediction as to how modern democracies across the world have progressed over the twentieth century. Section 5.2 deals with the causes and consequences of these struggles in Kerala. The third section emphasises some of the early attempts at hegemony and resistance in the social spaces in the context of two main challenges to conventional spaces at the time: the introduction of television, and privatization. The fourth section brings the focus back to the question of gender. The promise, as has been discussed in the last chapter, was that resolving the class question would simultaneously address the question of gender inequality. Yet, as we shall see, the expansion of social spaces reified the gendered nature of public sphere, and any active participation of women in public sphere was accepted, only as long as she also fulfilled her “domestic” roles.

5.1. The expansion of Social Spaces and (new) resistance

Public spaces can be divided based on their structure (vertical/horizontal as Chathukulam & John (2003) argue), their nature of control (external/internal as Devika & Nair, (2018) argue) or association (voluntary/involuntary as argued by Wynne, (2007)). As I had mentioned in Section 1.2, one of the

strengths of a spatial analysis like the one undertaken here is that it allows for a study of social spaces in their “representational” or “lived” form. While the structures are an important part of the representations of such spaces, the lived spaces often outgrow the structures. Although political parties and their structures like Trade Unions were the largest mobilisers of people in this phase of Kerala’s history, my framework allows us to focus on the informal and voluntary spaces in the villages that formed around the local teashops, libraries and reading rooms. This raises the relevant question: can a Trade Union, a temple and a teashop all be analysed from the same lens? For the present research, I shall keep out Trade unions or organisations that came directly under the aegis of political parties. By nature, these spaces are not independent, in that they are conceived with external institutional controls. More importantly, they do not allow a free traversal of sociabilities; they are similar to the early missionary schools and caste-associations in their early stages, or temples and caste-organisations in the pre-1930s period as discussed in the last chapter. However, the social spaces in the post-1940s phase, admittedly, had a more secular character. The interest in this section is in social spaces are those that encouraged informal interactions between people across religious and political differences, and associations that maintain at least some level of autonomy. While some of these spaces have an organised structure, the interest here is to not focus on these structures but on the spaces themselves and how they shape the “everyday social”.⁴ In other words, our interest is not so much the representations of space (conceived), but the representational space (lived).

Figure 3 : A group of men at Kozhikode beach



Source: Picture taken by author, 18th July 2018

⁴ Guru & Sarukkai, (2019), pp.3-14

Figure 4: Santa Cruz ground, Fort Kochi



Source: Picture taken by author, 24th September 2017

Library and Reading Rooms:

It is common knowledge in Kerala that early communist leaders consciously focussed their activities on the rural libraries and reading rooms, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Their importance continued to increase for the next few decades. While libraries themselves were established in the different regions of Kerala, starting the nineteenth century, conscious efforts were made to standardise their functioning and *Granthashala Sanghams* (Library Associations) were set up in Malabar (in 1937), Travancore (in 1945) and Kochi (with the expansion of Travancore Association in 1950).⁵ The 1960s and 70s were a golden period for the library movement, and the number of public libraries in Kerala under the State Library Council increased from 1747 to 4280 between 1957 and 1975.⁶ Libraries, especially those set up under the village library movement, played an important role in spreading the ideals of socialism and information about political developments outside Kerala—both national and international. The local reading rooms nourished both formal and informal associations, and encouraged young males in the area to be involved in public activities. Many libraries were established by the political parties, but a number of them were also set-up by rich landlords, teachers, or volunteers. Most importantly, they were centres where social consciousness was ‘created’ and ‘recreated’ at a rural level. As P. Achuthan, who worked with the Local Library Authority for about four decades pointed out:

In small villages as well, reading rooms were set up. The educated people succeeded in attracting and involving others too, through public discussions, talks and interpretations of ancient texts, poetry reading, etc...Often, libraries organised

⁵ The three separate Associations later merged in 1958 to form the Kerala Granthashala Sangham. Panikker, (1964), p. 74 ; Kannur District Library Council, (2011), pp.5-6

⁶ Ranjith, (2004), p.11

events where the local people participated in songs and theatre. The scriptwriters, directors, actors all came from among the village. These were all attempts to bring people into this (the public sphere).⁷

This was the general perception about library spaces pointed out by other older male respondents like K.P. Ashraf, K. Ramachandran, M.N. Karassery and Kureepuzha Sreekumar in their interviews. Here, we also get a hint of the autonomy that these spaces enjoyed for political and social engagements. Although their organisation was centralised through the Kerala Granthashala Sangham during this period, the everyday activities in the libraries—its representational space—remained vibrant and plural in most libraries. The participation of local people in the activities organised by the library meant that they had to work together in their own capacities, often putting aside caste and politics. In a sense, reading rooms epitomised the true nature of social spaces during the second half of the twentieth century in that apart from being importance spaces of socialising themselves, reading rooms also facilitated other spaces where groups of people socialised in Kerala. For instance, the village libraries often were the nerve centres from where a number of youth clubs, arts, theatre and sports clubs functioned. In other words, libraries functioned as “cultural centres” of the community at large—a feature arguably peculiar to Kerala.⁸ In this sense, they played an important role not just in creating a well-read public, but also in shaping the social capital and strengthen (secular) social relations.⁹ Male interview respondents who were middle-aged or older all spoke of the Clubs and Associations that functioned closely with the reading rooms in villages where they lived as youngsters. Irrespective of political differences, their perception of reading rooms reflected a democratic and plural nature. This was because the spaces were conceived—since the time they were encouraged by Sree Narayana Guru, but later also under the Congress and Communist parties—as spaces where public deliberation was encouraged. Regular users also perceived these spaces as such, as Ajikumar (40) recollects:

It is a centre of discussions and conversations. Sometimes, discussions got out of hand...like they do in our villages. We would talk about an issue and sometimes it ends up in an argument...never in violence. Then it would be resolved and they would talk about something else the next day—the same group.¹⁰

This repetitive nature of social spaces is important to note. It alludes to the importance of the physicality of social spaces, something that changed with the coming of digital media, internet and television. It meant that the groups who frequented the reading rooms and teashops were regulars and engaged with each other on a regular basis. Ajikumar and his childhood friends from the reading room

⁷ Personal interview, 24th July 2018

⁸ Bavakutty, (1982), p.254

⁹ Bijukumar, (2019), pp.515,517; Jussy, (2005), p.35

¹⁰ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

now have a WhatsApp group but he feels that this lacks the “personal attachment” that the physical spaces provided them. It encourages us to think of the influence of the increasingly “virtual” nature of public spaces, a theme I shall engage with in Chapter 7.

Another rural space closely connected with reading rooms were the local teashops. P. Achuthan (70), for instance, recalls the formation of the library in his village in early twentieth century:

...when one speaks of a library in the rural areas, one must mention conversations from a teashop. Even after drinking their tea, people would stay around. There used to be a teashop next to the *Desabandhu Vayanashala*. People would come there for tea but the newspaper reading would continue even after the tea was done. This was when my uncle came up with an idea. There was our land nearby so he cleaned it and set up a little shed with palm leaves, put a bench and brought newspapers. So people who finished their tea could sit on the bench nearby and continue reading.¹¹

Another respondent, Ajikumar followed up his memories of the village reading room quickly with a discussion on the close-by teashop that he would visit as a teenager.

5.1.1 Teashops

The emergence of teashops as cosmopolitan social spaces that transcended not just caste and religion but also the limitations of spatiality reflects in a memory retold by writer and critic M.N. Karassery (b.1951) from when an American academic Stephen F. Dale visited his village in the 1970s. The two heard a loud argument at a teashop near Karassery’s home. Karassery recalls: “I brought Dale home one day... ‘Are they quarrelling, what is going on there?’, he said to me. ‘No, no, it’s a political discussion’, I said. ‘Political discussion? What is there?’”¹² When they walked to the teashop nearby Karassery’s home, the locals were involved in a heated debate regarding former President John F. Kennedy’s daughter’s name! The interesting thing is it was not between someone who knows the name and someone who does not, but between two people, both of who thought that *they* had the correct name. “Dale exclaimed—‘My gracious!’”, says Karassery, adding, “Caroline or something is her name”. He recalls that Dale did not himself know the correct name and hence, could not resolve the debate. The importance of tea or coffee was also in the fact that they were recently introduced beverages into south Indian culture, and this assisted in them breaking away from taboos of what could or could not be shared by people from different castes.¹³

¹¹ Personal Interview, 24th July 2018

¹² Personal Interview, 18th July 2018

¹³ Varughese, (2017), pp.54-55

In cosmopolitan city-spaces like Kochi, K.P Ashraf's (b. 1954) recalls his engagement with the foreigners who frequented the teashops of the area in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ Apart from being interesting anecdotes, these incidents also point towards a spatial manifestation of the "cosmopolitanism of ideas" that emerged specifically in Kerala's literary public sphere since the 1920s.¹⁵ That Ashraf and Karassery's experiences suggest that a study of locally rooted cosmopolitanisms in modern Kerala must take into consideration not just the literary sphere, but also that of public spaces. Other autobiographies and memoirs from the period also allude to the creation of social spaces that centred on teashops where sociabilities were transcended,¹⁶ ideas, exchanged, and opinions formed. Babu Purushottaman (b. 1957), who set up a teashop near the famous Paragon Restaurant in Kozhikode four decades ago, recalls: "Back then, we had crowds that would spend a lot of time as they had tea...not just here, really the Indian Coffee House was a left-leaning space that shaped many friendships", he says.¹⁷ He believes that such vibrant political engagements were common across the teashops in the city and is what eventually drew him closer to active politics.

Teashops during this period in Kerala history became synonymous with political discussions and debates. Arguably, the role that they played in creating a social sphere that allowed a traversal of castes

Figure 5: Men near a teashop in Thiruvananthapuram



Source: Picture taken by author, 04th July 2018

in the early twentieth century continued. A good reflection of the importance of teashops in Kerala society during this period are the films made in the 1960s through the 1980s and even beyond. The prominent presence of a village teashop as the centre of all village activity stands out in almost all films during this period. It is portrayed as the space where events in the village are discussed, news is shared, and disputes are settled. It was where unemployed youngsters would while away time. With the economic changes in the 1990s, these spaces—and their spatiality—changed considerably, as will be discussed later. But their symbolic nostalgia as "true" social spaces live on in popular imagination,

¹⁴ Personal interview, 23rd June 2018

¹⁵ Here, Menon (2010) and Devika's (2012) works on the creation of a cosmopolitanism in modern Kerala are alluded to. Both mention a cosmopolitanism of ideas in early modern Kerala that Devika argues gave away to a more elite cosmopolitanism of objects as the twentieth century progressed.

¹⁶ Refer to Section 2.3.3 on Jaaware's discussion on society as traversing sociabilities.

¹⁷ Personal Interview, 19th July 2018

and have been adapted into virtual spaces (See Section 7.1.1) in the contemporary times.

5.1.2 Societies and Associations:

As we have already seen in Section 4.2.5, there emerged in early twentieth century Kerala, a number of caste-based associations that spearheaded the movements for social reforms. Although some literary and arts associations were also formed during this period, the popular ones in early modern public sphere were caste-based. We have also seen how struggles to open up spaces had brought together these caste associations to work together by the 1930s. The nature of associational spaces changed with the socio-political changes witnessed in Kerala by the 1940s. Associations based on political or cultural collective action—literary associations, trade unions, arts associations—took centre stage as secular social spaces became common in the public sphere. While caste-based associations like the SNDP, NSS and YKS continued to function, they were by nature less plural and continued to expand in membership but attracted only members from their respective communities. Moreover, there was a perception that these were politically and culturally “hijacked” by the interests of a few elites, and this created tensions.¹⁸ In this section, we look at the nature of some of the new associational spaces that emerged post the 1940s. Apart from the formal spaces—the arts, science and literary associations—that formed part of the mainstream public sphere and shaped deliberation on cultural and political matters, I will also try to explore the nature of the informal spaces—voluntary groups, gatherings and meetings that permeated the representational spaces of rural Kerala. Some of these emerged around the local teashops and rural libraries, as has already been discussed in the previous sections.

If the necessary condition for a vibrant social space is that it encourages deliberations on a plurality of opinions, how did the new arts and cultural associations fare? In the 1930s, the *Jeeval Sabitya Sangham* (Progressive Writers Union) was formed by drawing inspiration from the Russian resistance to war and fascism and Gorky’s turn towards cultural Marxism.¹⁹ Left sympathisers led by EMS, K. Damodaran and others argued that the association was to have an inherently political nature, and that it was the duty of writers to write stories and plays with clear politics. Opposing this view, leading writers at the time like Sanjayan (1903–1943) and Kuttikrishna Marar (1900–1973) and M. Govindan (1919–1989) argued the “art for art’s sake” line.²⁰ By 1944 when this movement was renamed the *Purogamana Sabitya Sanghatana* (Progressive Literary Organisation), the communists had declared an ideological win over the debate. At meetings organised, they distributed pamphlets declaring that they had dispelled the

¹⁸ Leelakrishnan, (2000), p.9

¹⁹ For a discussion on Gorky’s meeting in Russia and other inspirations for the formation of the organisation, see: Namboodirippad, (1992), pp.5–15

²⁰ Radhakrishnan, (2008), pp.38–50

“illusion” that art was for art’s sake.²¹ Although the progressive writers continued to work together, their 1948 Conference at Thrissur created a new rift when the Communists presented a manifesto that gave predominance to the need to address class struggles. While the left-sympathisers argued for the predominance of content over form, Mundasserry and others emphasised that even while content of literature must be progressive, its “form” was to be protected.²² The struggle, as one can see, was to maintain the independence of the association and to keep it outside of political party control. Another relevant example of an organisation that has had a long and important role in Kerala’s public sphere is the *Kerala Shashtra Sabhitya Parishad* (hereafter, KSSP). Formed in 1962, the KSSP aimed to spread scientific values and perspectives and to popularize science among the masses. Although the group drew inspiration from the Nehruvian nationalist spirit that linked science with nation building, they argued for a strict separation of science from politics and they organised public lectures, seminars, science clubs in schools, etc to popularize science and scientific temper among people.²³ The idea was to create a social space where people irrespective of political and religious differences could come together, engage on issue of science, and build scientific temper. Spaces like the Literary Organisation and KSSP were conceived as spaces that worked best outside of direct political control—their strength was their autonomy and ability to take an independent position on issues. As we shall see, the political and economic changes towards the end of the century meant that this autonomy came under threat, eventually affecting the “secular” image of these organisations.

With independence and the emergence of the State, there ensued in the institutional spaces like KSSP, PSS, etc. a struggle regarding the ownership and control of these spaces. We may recall here that such struggles are a part of what Lefebvre argued was as struggle for a control of spatiality in a given society at a given time, and the disconnect between the representations of space (conceived) and representational spaces (lived) is where an alternative social spaces emerges that challenge the dominant power structures. As the formal spaces were engulfed in post-independence Kerala in a struggle between the need for organisational independence and State control, parallel movements that provided space for a critique of mainstream politics—and specifically left political parties’ dominance—emerged in Kerala, led by the little magazines and other voluntary and informal associations.²⁴

Some of these alternate movements—like the one led by M. Govindan—specifically positioned themselves on the left, but vocally against the dominance of the Communist Party over the cultural sphere in Kerala, arguing that associations like the *Purogamana Sabhitya Sangham* could not “provide the

²¹ File No. 2446/44/C.S., KSA, Thiruvananthapuram. Malayalam Leaflet “All Kerala Soviet Friends’ Conference” held at Thrissur on 3rd May 1942.

²² Namboodirippad, (1992), pp.8-9

²³ Varughese, (2017), pp.59-60

²⁴ Panangadu, (2017), p.7

ideological or material strength necessary for these new thoughts”.²⁵ M. Govindan’s writings in little magazines like *Mangalodayam*, *Navasahiti* and *Gopuram*, etc. clearly indicate his keen interest in the political and cultural changes gripping the Western world. In his book called *Samasyakal, Sameepanangal* [Problems, Approaches] published in 1967, he writes about the literary debate in Kerala referring to the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Ignazio Silone, Yevgeny Yevtushenko and drawing on examples of Hungary, Russia and China.²⁶ The group that writer and literary critic B. Rajeevan calls the “liberal humanists” went on to establish alternative spaces to spread their ideas. In that they opposed a dominant ideology, they were, in a sense, “counter-publics”. Little magazines, seminars, public discussions, poetry reading and film-screenings were organised where matters of public concern were discussed and debated.²⁷ They did not always have a formal structure or roles but emerged as groups of like-minded people who came together purely to discuss ideas. Associated with these “unorganised organisations” for about five decades starting the 1930s were writers and critics including M. Govindan, Ponnappa Sridhar, R. Sugathan, Edasseril, N. Damodaran, reformers like V.T. Bhattathirippad and Sahodaran Ayyappan, artists like Devan, film-personalities like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and John Abraham, and thinkers like MGS Narayanan.²⁸ Although the left leaders engaged with the dissidents, the party has also been accused of tagging M. Govindan and others, and magazines like *Navasahiti* as being funded by Americans for anti-communist propaganda.²⁹ His school of humanists were engaged in an ideological battle with the party politics, arguing strongly against party controlling the arts and culture.³⁰ Out of this school was born spaces like *Kolaya*—a cultural collective of critics and thinkers in Kozhikode in the 1960s and 1970s. Issues of literary and cultural importance were discussed at the informal meetings. By the late 1970s, these efforts had died out.

The movement also led to the emergence of a large number of smaller cultural and film-societies, not always associated with the movement itself. These informal associations, independent film societies, and rural arts and sports clubs functioned outside the ambit of political parties and mushroomed across the state in the 1960s and 1970s. They also provided new spaces of public activity for people who broke away from mainstream left political parties during this period. K.P. Ashraf from Mattancherry remembers how the local film societies gave participants the freedom to think beyond the political left’s (limited) understanding of progressive politics:

²⁵ Panangadu, (2017), p.7

²⁶ Govindan, (1967), pp.51-57

²⁷ Radhakrishnan, (2008), pp.53, 59-60; Devan, (2008)

²⁸ Radhakrishnan, (2008), pp.21-22

²⁹ Radhakrishnan, (2008), p.14

³⁰ Radhakrishnan, (2008), pp.137, 234-235

There was a vibrant space of people who moved parallel to the established CPM's notions of progressive ideas. Their *koodicheral*,³¹ spending money from their own pockets, film societies—we started a film society too, called *Prajodana*...[screened] classics... those of Eisenstein and Pudovkin.³² There was a man here who brought old Hindi movies – *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai*, *Aanara*, Mehboob Khan's movies, *Pakeezah*, and other good movies as a morning show; *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus* and other films as a regular show. Then as noon-show, films of Backer [P. A. Backer], Mrinal Sen, Satyajit Ray....classics like that would be screened at Kavitha and we'd go watch them... This was around the time we created a film society, and John (Abraham) became active. They all came from this stream that broke away [from the mainstream].³³

The nature of these spaces as challenging mainstream politics is interesting, and indicate that resistance against a new kind of political control on social spaces that was taking shape during the time. These were associations that brought people together irrespective of political differences and functioned parallel to the associations of the organised left. More importantly, they introduced participants to ideas, films, poetry and thoughts of thinkers from different parts of the globe much like the early social spaces did against the traditional order. Noted poet and critic K. Satchidanandan writes how this period saw a new “fraternity based on modern sensibilities” evolve in Kerala that reached out to the latest Western thought and writing.³⁴ By nature, they were more democratic. K. Ramachandran (70) from Annur near Payyannur in the northern district of Kannur remembered that the film societies functioned “outside of political parties” and became active spaces for political and cultural engagement for a couple of decades before slowing down in the 1990s.³⁵ The cultural products of this parallel movement—such as films by John Abraham and others—introduced a “new geography” that demanded a breaking away from the political parties to introspect and be self-critical.³⁶ The film societies encouraged such a critical revision, and their independence was crucial to their success as secular social spaces. Parameswaran argued recently that such a re-reading of the failures of the left politics are contingent with Lefebvre’s framework on the importance of scale, perception and

³¹ Literally means meeting, but is used in Malayalam to denote an informal gathering of friends or people for a cause.

³² Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein (1898-1948) and Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953) were Soviet film directors and theorists

³³ Personal interview, 23rd June 2018

³⁴ Satchidanandan, (2008), p.148

³⁵ Personal interview, 22nd July 2018

³⁶ Parameswaran, (2019), p.14

experience in everyday life.³⁷

Ajikumar, who is a sympathiser of right-wing politics today, also remembers growing up in a more “democratic” space, actively participating in film societies and Arts Clubs in his village:

There used to be a ballet troupe earlier. My uncle used to write songs for it. There is a final rehearsal before the ballet went on stage. They would have a makeshift stage in a ground near my house and rehearse it. Then people would give comments on it and make suggestions... only then would they take booking to perform it. There would be dinner for everyone in the area...all the audience. It was big celebration.³⁸

Similar amateur theatre groups emerged across the state during this period, and some other respondents like K. Ramachandran and Hema Joseph pointed out that they actively participated in these in the 1980s. Using their own limited resources and often writing their own stories, many of these plays told local stories and involved all sections of the community. Older respondents recollected the staging of a play in the village as a “community event”. By the 1980s when Ajikumar (b. 1978) was growing up, theatre groups had already started to wane. Even other respondents like Hema Joseph hinted towards a change in the diverse nature of these spaces by the 1980s, the reasons for which will be engaged with at length in Section 5.2.

5.1.3 Temple Premises

The inclusion of temple grounds as social spaces needs some elaboration. As has already been mentioned, people from across castes had gained entry into temples in Kerala by the 1940s, with the Temple Entry Proclamations. One may recall Jaaware’s (2019) argument that a confrontational space—such as temples that open up to all castes—will only become an emancipatory social space when interactions happen without consideration of power.³⁹ The control over spaces in the traditional order meant that in pre-modern Kerala, temples were not necessarily walled since the Brahmins did not see a threat to these spaces being violated. Temples often owned large areas of land nearby/outside the main structures themselves which functioned as public grounds owned by the temple but frequented by everyone in the village. As caste-based social relations broke-up, these public grounds emerged as a frequent spot where people (mostly men) of the locality met. There was a sense of sociality associated with temple premises, and even non-believers would often accompany their family to the temple, and

³⁷ Parameswaran,(2019), compares two works of art that reflect on the failure of the left movement, and argues that Lefebvre’s work on rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre, 2004) provides a useful point of departure to understand the importance of such cultural products on redefining left’s cultural politics.

³⁸ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

³⁹ Jaaware, (2019), pp.33-34

stay back outside under the *althara* or the ground chatting with friends while his family prayed.⁴⁰ Of the eight male respondents across age mentioned public grounds as spaces where they socialised, five noted that the said ground was attached to a temple. Poet Kureepuzha Sreekumar (b.1955) recalls how the temple ground was where the children would meet and play:

In my childhood, there was a ground in *Vallikkeezhu*...next to Kureepuzha and near Ashtamudi Lake. We grew up playing there since our childhood. There is a temple in the centre; it was on the walls of this temple that election posters were painted/posted. It was on the walls of the temple...there is a pond, the ground, an *aalthara*.⁴¹ People from all castes and religions would come and sit in the *aalthara*. There would be football tournaments held in the ground...there was a Clement, Kottur Gopi, one Sivan...people from different caste and religion would forget all differences and come to play. There's a badminton court next to it, in the same compound. An important player there was Giyazuddin. So it was a space where Giyazuddin, Clement and Gopi could all practice sports and activities together.⁴²

Figure 6: Men sit under trees in Thekkinkaadu Maithanam outside Vadakkunnathan Temple



Source: Picture taken by author, 13th July 2018

⁴⁰ This practice seems to continue to this day. Many people I spoke to or interacted with outside the Koodalmanikyam temple in my hometown were often waiting for their wives or children to return from their daily prayers. In an informal chat, one professor who identified as being atheist told me he would accompany his wife to the local temple every day but wait outside observing the shops or listening to the announcements or talking to people as his wife finished her prayers. See Picture 7

⁴¹ A peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) with a raised base foundation for people to sit on. Common-sight outside temples in Kerala, they are sometimes now seen along grounds, seashores or public roads

⁴² Personal interview, 03rd July 2018

In post-independence Kerala, temple premises attained a democratic and secular meaning. Kureepuzha also alludes to the fact that many of these temple grounds were also spaces where poets, politicians and leaders from across religious and castes would have organised meetings and made speeches. Famous writer Punathil Kunjabdulla—a Muslim by birth—recollected in a memoir how his memory of Kozhikode was evergreen, much like the memories of the temple festival at *Arakkal*.⁴³ Unlike in the traditional order where these spaces were exclusive rights of the higher caste Hindus, temple grounds were perceived as democratic spaces in the post-reform period. Hema Joseph (b.1973) who was born to Christian parents and grew up in a Hindu majority neighbourhood, remembers frequenting the temple with her friends as a child:

Neithalakkavu temple near our place is an important temple. Everyone in my village saw it as a temple of the *desam*,⁴⁴ including myself. When I was a small child, we saw the temple as a space to play...I remember very well. On 23rd, 24th or 25th December was then the temple festival happened. So this was also when Christians celebrated Christmas. As children, we would all be in the temple during these days, in the temple grounds...There was no problem.⁴⁵

The importance of the village temple here as a social space reflects in the fact that it was considered a temple “of the *desam*”; it is a democratically “owned” communitarian public space. Hema distinctly remembered being allowed into the sanctum sanctorum of the local temple despite being Christian. She mentions later that the same temple put up a sign in the 1980s prohibiting non-Hindus from entering inside the temple. This indicates a change in the spatial practice of the temple—a deviation from its democratic and communitarian ownership. Spatial practices are vital in providing continuity and a degree of cohesion to social relations.⁴⁶ A deviation in spatial practices, in other words, indicated a change in representational space—and thereby, in social relations. We have seen this in the case of the early modern public sphere, where a change in the spatial (caste) practices was important in shaping new social spaces in the early twentieth century.

The spatial practices that governed temple grounds and gave them a “secular” nature must be read closely with the separation of the private and public spheres in post-reform Kerala. One of the consequences of the social reform movements was the perception that religious practice belonged in the private sphere. Older respondents speak of this period in a similar vein. K. Ramachandran (70) says that back in the days,

⁴³ Anon., (1094 ME), pp.122

⁴⁴ Historically, a *Desam* was the territorial unit of the military system, constituting a collection of neighbourhoods. In common use, it means a region sometimes extending beyond the administrative village.

⁴⁵ Personal interview, 27th June 2018

⁴⁶ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.33; 50

Figure 7: Men chatting as they wait outside Koodalmanikyam Temple, Irinjalakuda



Source: Picture by author, 03rd January 2019

...religion did not have any collective bargaining power...if there was a member in a communist family who was a believer, she would go to the temple and wear the sandalwood paste and whatever...it never affected the public sphere. It was an individual matter. Religion was never carried into social or political issues. In the 1970s, this tendency never existed. You can see how all religions did everything together. There was no element of mutual hatred or mutual suspicion.⁴⁷

While it may not be true that the public sphere was admittedly meant to be secular, there seems to be a definite understanding among the older generations that temples were religious spaces, but temple grounds and premises remained public spaces. As Kureepuzha (63) puts it: "...this is the case of having two pairs of footwear...a religious footwear for home, and a secular one for outside".⁴⁸ This unresolved contest between private and public spaces—closely linked to the gendering of space—will be discussed in detail in Section 5.4.

5.1.4 Other Spaces:

Since the 1940s, *beedi* companies emerged in the twentieth century across Kerala, especially in the northern parts. Often functioning as small and sometimes informal units, they played an important role in creating a political consciousness among the lowered castes and backward classes in society. Records from Kannur show the importance of *beedi* cooperatives in translating party ideology, but also

⁴⁷ Personal interview, 22nd July 2018

⁴⁸ Personal interview, 03rd July 2018

government policies into people's lives.⁴⁹ In her autobiography, K. Ajitha—a former Naxal sympathiser who took an active part in the Naxal movements in the 1960s writes that in Kannur,

“...most of the workforce were beedi workers and handloom weavers. There were thousands of families who earned a living just making *beedis*...A bus journey through Kannur would bring more clarity to this picture. In the buildings on either side of the road, one could see rows of workers. *Beedi* workers had another peculiarity. Newspaper reading was a daily routine for them. There was no clatter of machinery, nor was there any noise when experienced hands rolled the tobacco leaf and filled it up with the tobacco powder and tied it with a string. All of them wouldn't get time to read the paper, so they took turns to read newspapers every day. Others would divide the reader's work among themselves.”⁵⁰

It was also common for the workers to have classes on science and rationality, as K. Ramachandran, who has been an active campaigner for the KSSP said. He also says it was common for cultural activists and authors to address different groups of workers at their manufacturing centres on matters of public importance

They [the workers] will never look at us. They are totally engrossed in their work. But they're listening, and not just that, they would ask doubts, intervene, and engage with us at the end. Beedi companies are one of the spaces where we can come back satisfied [as speakers]. Even there, we saw a public space for cultural awareness spreading. But these ended.⁵¹

Although *beedi* companies are mostly set up as cooperatives by the left-leaning political parties, they have been included as social spaces because of two reasons. Firstly, because unlike most other public spaces, *beedi* companies have a uniqueness in that they were one of the very few public spaces that brought together men and women. Secondly, they were different from other spaces of employment in that their involvement in newspaper reading and discussions expanded their function to beyond a “material production of commodities”, to a space that actively engaged in the production of social relations and public consciousness. In a Lefebvrian sense, this means that they outlive their original purpose and the *raison d'être*, which determine their form and functions, to shape social relations.⁵² Many other social spaces came up during the course of the interviews including barbershops, seashores, toddy shops and *aalibharas*. Barbershops are particularly interesting as a space that declined because of

⁴⁹ Chaturvedi, (2015), p.172; John, (2012), p.102

⁵⁰ Ajitha, (2008), pp.44-45

⁵¹ Personal Interview, 22nd July 2018

⁵² Lefebvre, (1991), p.167

neoliberal change. M.N. Karassery believes that the invention of disposable blades and shaving kits are responsible for the end of regular homoaesthetic comradeships that had built around barbershops in twentieth-century Kerala.⁵³

5.2 State, Capital and the Struggle for control

The emergence of a nation-state, Partha Chatterjee (1993) argues, “cannot recognize within its jurisdiction any form of community except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of the nation”.⁵⁴ Lefebvre argues that the under social democracy, the state attempts to do this by seeking to master social spaces, which, “in addition to being a means of production, is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power”.⁵⁵ In other words, it is through an attempt at controlling social spaces—the “flattening of social and ‘cultural’ spheres—that nation-states attempt to promote itself as the stable centre.”⁵⁶ New social spaces were created in the early twentieth century in Kerala as the spatiality of traditional social order was broken down. Post-independence, however, the consolidation of the State meant that there was a constant pressure on these spaces to be controlled or crushed. As Pandian notes, this contest between the state (and/or) capital and the community became an indispensable component of post-colonial India.⁵⁷ Lefebvre suggests that this happens in all modern states—both state-capitalisms and state-socialisms. In Kerala, the struggle between the State’s attempt to control spaces and resistance from the communities emerged increasingly by the 1970s. In this section, I shall argue that a combination of political, social and economic pressures because of internal and external factors had an impact on the spatiality in the last decades of twentieth-century in Kerala. I shall engage with each of these pressures.

5.2.1 Political Pressures on Social Spaces:

Lefebvre argues that there is an inherent contradiction in how social and political forces engender social spaces: “the very agency that has forced spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strives to run it into the ground, then shackle and enslave it”.⁵⁸ The struggles over the independence of social spaces in post-independence Kerala become clear if we attempt to understand them with this observation in mind.

The struggle for autonomy can be seen to have gripped the institutional spaces that we discussed above in Section 5.1. Take the KSSP (‘People’s Science Movement’) as an example. Since its formation, the KSSP played a major role in spreading scientific temper among the masses through seminars,

⁵³ Personal interview, 18th July 2018

⁵⁴ Chatterjee, (1993), p.238

⁵⁵ Lefebvre, (1991), p.26; Butler, (2012), p.85

⁵⁶ Lefebvre, (1991), p.23; Fuchs, (2019)

⁵⁷ Pandian, (2002), p.1738

⁵⁸ Lefebvre, (1991), p.26

discussions, lectures, etc. It was conceived as an independent organisation separate from direct political intervention to solely undertake the popularization of science and promote scientific temper.⁵⁹ In the 1970s, however, the organisation underwent a radical organisational transition when it declared ‘science for revolution’ as its official ideology.⁶⁰ Within a decade, the membership increased from 500 (1969) to 5,859 (1981-82).⁶¹ A majority of the new membership came from left-leaning educated male middle-class males who saw the KSSP as a safe space during the Emergency declared by India Gandhi’s Congress government between 1975 and 1977.⁶² On the one hand, this expansion of membership democratised the organisation: from science being considered a domain of experts, it now accepted that the everyday activities of working classes were to be linked to modern science⁶³. Varughese argues that this ideological change was an important step in the right direction, and that “by the early 1980s the KSSP trans-figured itself into a successful social movement that radically shaped the civic epistemology of Kerala”.⁶⁴ While this was true, this move was also seen as a major step away from KSSP’s existence as a non-partisan and autonomous organisation. As should be evident by now, this affects the diversity of the space. There was dissent from within the KSSP, and some senior members like Dr Adiyodi resigned from the organisation.⁶⁵ These changes affected the public perception of the KSSP as an autonomous organisation, and during the 1980s, it came to be closely linked with the CPI (M).⁶⁶ This notion that the KSSP had shed its initial ideals meant that its role as an independent and vibrant social space came under question by the end of the century.⁶⁷ A similar trend could be observed in other organisational spaces as well. Attempts to revive an association of progressive writers and cultural activists became a difficult task for the left since the experiments of the past had left too many scars.⁶⁸ Other groups like liberal humanists (discussed in Section 5.1.2) eventually joined the new-left movements that emerged at the time. In general, progressive politics and its social spaces developed a stagnation by the 1980s, and the broadly based popular organisations—most of which were conceived as spaces of progressive social change—were undermined.⁶⁹

⁵⁹ Varughese, (2017), pp.59-60

⁶⁰ Varughese, (2017), p.60

⁶¹ Varughese, (2017), p.60; Zachariah & Sooryamoorthy, (1994), p.139

⁶² Zachariah & Sooryamoorthy, (1994), pp.138-139

⁶³ Parameswaran, (2008), p.45

⁶⁴ Varughese, (2017), p.65

⁶⁵ Dr Adiyodi, who was one of the founder members of KSSP, resigned in 1975. The same year, M.P. Parameswaran, a votary of the Marxist-Bernalist standpoint, joined the organisation as a fulltime volunteer. See: Varughese, (2017), pp.60-61

⁶⁶ Although in the Silent valley Dam project, the KSSP was at loggerheads with the CPM which supported the project. The project was eventually abandoned in 1983. Despite this, the perception that KSSP and CPM were linked emerged in the post Emergency (1975-77) period. See: Zachariah & Sooryamoorthy, (1994), pp.155-179

⁶⁷ Williams, (2008), p.123

⁶⁸ Panikkar, (2011), pp.22-23

⁶⁹ Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996), p.1855

The attempts for ideological control over social spaces led to at least two visible reactions. Firstly, it led to a number of individuals from across the political spectrum distancing themselves from the political left. The case of Dr Adiyodi has already been alluded to. The 1970s and 1980s saw many more authors, literary critics, filmmakers and thinkers distancing themselves from organised party politics citing excessive controls. Ajith Kumar—who identifies as a left sympathiser—began his active political life through the KSSP. However, when the party started to intervene in its functioning, it became difficult for the KSSP to respond effectively to people's struggles. He comments on why he distanced himself from the movement in the 1990s:

When we came ahead with the Adivasi strike, they [KSSP] could not intervene in the matter with an open mind. In my local unit, I raised a point, asking why the Parishad [KSSP] wasn't able to directly intervene for this issue. Party was distancing itself from the struggle then. This was because Janu's strike didn't happen with the Party in confidence...so the party kept a distance.⁷⁰ This distance even the Parishad kept. We disagreed to this, so I moved away, but I don't have differences with the issues they raise, and I still cooperate in possible ways.⁷¹

Even people like Ajith who are from the political left and had once been an active member of the KSSP, say people were disappointed by the lack of autonomy in decision-making and the reluctance to be critical of the state. Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996) have pointed out that one of the reasons that the mas literacy programme that the KSSP spearheaded in the late 1980s failed to take root was this perception that it was a project was conceived as a left-government initiative by the KSSP.⁷²

In the late 1970s when the new-left movements emerged, a number of young poets, singers, filmmakers and writers were attracted towards it. Already by then, a section of the authors, poets and thinkers who played an active role in the early stages of left-politics were either side-lined by the party or moved away from the party voluntarily. Already, playwright and left-sympathiser Thoppil Bhasi wrote a strongly worded article in a Party Souvenir in the 1960s, warning the communist party against distancing itself from the cultural movement and reminding the important role played by writers like Thakazhi, Kesav Dev and others in shaping the progressive politics in the state.⁷³

The response of the political left parties towards the radical left movement in general and specifically to their cultural front—the Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi (1980-82)—further widened this divide. Emerging from the radical left movement as a cultural organisation that aimed to establish its own cultural sphere,

⁷⁰ C.K. Janu is a social activist and leader of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha. In 2001, she led a protest march and a sit-in protest before the Secretariat, to demand land for the landless tribal communities.

⁷¹ Personal interview, 27th July 2018

⁷² Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996), pp.1959; Radhakrishnan (1996), p.49

⁷³ Bhasi, (1966), pp.171-172

the Vedi attracted many contemporary poets and artists who saw it as a space to fight for larger social issues that the organised political left had failed to raise.⁷⁴ It was evident from interviews also that a number of the left sympathisers saw this as a failure of the Communist Party to correct its course. Ashraf from Mattancherry, for instance, remembers that around the time he migrated to the Gulf in the 1980s, many youngsters were disillusioned by the left parties' stand on social issues. This period also saw the death of many youngsters either in direct police brutality,⁷⁵ or suicides due to disillusionment.⁷⁶

The “secular” nature of even informal associations like clubs seem to have been affected by excessive political intervention by the late 1980s. One of my respondents, Hema (b. 1973) recollects that by the 1980s, the Arts Club near her home had split into two groups based on political differences eventually, both shut down. Other younger respondents such as Sreerag and Jitheesh (both 25 years old) said that people their age group were not involved with Clubs in their respective villages because they were being hijacked by political parties. Jitheesh said that there is one Club near his home, but he wasn't interested in joining it because its members—all aged under thirty, he said—are members of the DYFI and “they go to stick posters [for the party]”.

5.2.2 Social Pressures

The second consequence was that as the secular social spaces began to be increasingly politicised or cramped down by the State, the right-wing RSS and Sangh Parivar⁷⁷ were quick to gain ground in the late twentieth century in Kerala. Accusing quasi-government bodies like academies, committees, associations like the KSSP as being hijacked by the CPM to further their agenda,⁷⁸ the RSS and its affiliated organisations made conscious and calculated interventions in Kerala's social spaces. By 1975, the RSS in Kerala had about 20,000 members—almost double the number they had a decade ago.⁷⁹ In 1981, RSS ideologue P. Parameswaran (b. 1927) arrived in Kerala and was shouldered the responsibility of spreading RSS activities in the state. Although RSS had existed in Kerala as a cultural organisation since the 1940s, it was only after P. Parameswaran's arrival that its activities began to play an active role in Kerala's cultural sphere.⁸⁰ By 1982, this number had increased to 45,900 members and the number of RSS *Shakhas* increased from 900 to 2613 during the same period.⁸¹ In 1985, the RSS organised a home-to-home campaign, had book sales and used public posters for the first time to gather support for large processions—Hindu *Sangamams*—in April 1986. Newspaper reports from the time estimated that about

⁷⁴ Sreejith, (2005); Satchidanandan, (2008), pp.148-149

⁷⁵ Satchidanandan, (2008), p.149

⁷⁶ Ashraf from Mattancherry mentioned this in his interview. He even named one Subrahmanya Das in the area who took his own life because of such disillusionment.

⁷⁷ A term used to denote the RSS and other affiliate organisations that are under its patronage

⁷⁸ Narayanan, (1998), p.xiv

⁷⁹ Jayaprasad, (1989), p.163

⁸⁰ Radhakrishnan, (1997)

⁸¹ Jayaprasad, (1989), p.163

500,000 people participated in Thiruvananthapuram, and 600,000 in Kannur.⁸² Between 1979 and 1992, three new ventures were established within a span of a short period—a newspaper *Janmabhumi* (started in 1987), a research journal *Pragathi* (published since 1979), and a new publishing house *Kurukshetra* in 1992 (Cochin).

This “wave” of organisational growth in the 1980s was augmented very much by spatial interventions, such as in Nilakkal in 1981. Located on the route to the Hindu shrine of Ayyappan, Nilakkal was considered a sacred (Hindu) geography. When an allegedly ancient cross was discovered in the area and Christian priests started attempts to consecrate it and build a Church, strong opposition was led by an action council convened by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Council of Hindus).⁸³ When the issue was resolved with the Christian bishops’ decision to move to an uncontested nearby site was hailed as a Hindu triumph—a reclamation of space that is rightfully Hindu.⁸⁴ It is also interesting that one of the major protests against the then Chief Minister K. Karunakaran’s decision to sanction the construction of a church on the site came from women protestors who prevented him from worshipping at the famous Guruvayur temple.⁸⁵ Soon after, a political front called the Hindu Munnani (Front) was formed with an aim to consolidate Hindu votes. Although the political front itself failed to make major inroads, the cultural wings of the Sangh Parivar made considerable inroads in the decade that followed. Many of the subsidiary organisations of the Parivar, such as the VHP, Kerala Temple Protection Council, and organisations that played a major role in labour, education, social service, tribal welfare, and the press—were all established in the decade.⁸⁶ The right-wing also expanded its activities in social service through their Vivekananda Medical Mission (1972), Seva Bharati (1989), etc, and in the education sector through a research centre Bharatiya Vichara Kendra (1982) and schools. Through these spaces, they reached out to the masses who started to see these organisations as ones with discipline and “attractive” socio-cultural activities.⁸⁷ At a time when the political left appeared to be revising and negotiating its cultural position, RSS appeared in Kerala’s public sphere through these conscious efforts to offer a never waning ideological commitment rooted in indigenous cultures and tradition. EMS’ observation from as early as 1979 that “the RSS wanted to use educational institutions to run shakhas”, and that they have “already succeeded in launching attacks on secular-minded historians,” points to this realisation even from among the left leaders.⁸⁸ The attempt, K.N. Panikkar (2014) argues, has been to

⁸² Kerala Kaumudi, 06th April 1986; Indian Express, 08th April 1986

⁸³ Chiriyankandath, (1996), pp.56-61. The role of women in religious agitations continues to this day, and it needs to be studied how women’s participation in religio-political parties like the BJP may be linked to the gendering of private (religious) spaces to women in the twentieth century. More on this in Section 5.4

⁸⁴ *Indian Express*, 22nd July 1983, p.1

⁸⁵ Pillai, (1983)

⁸⁶ Namboodirippad, 1979; Chiriyankandath, (1996), p.54

⁸⁷ Personal interview with Ajikumar; Jayaprasad, (1989), p.388

⁸⁸ Basu, (1997), pp.635-639

“...construct an identity between culture with religion in public sphere through symbolic actions and political mobilisations. Cultural practices that have evolved through daily-life secular experience are given religious attributes and meanings and cultural forms are traced to religious sources. As a result, the cultural common-sense hegemonic in public sphere gets a religious colour and the people who inherit and live that consciousness undergoes what Gramsci called ‘molecular transformation’.”⁸⁹

Ajikumar and Madhu, in their interviews, point out that it was this sense of “discipline” that first attracted them to the RSS *Shakhas* in their teenage at a time when these conscious efforts had made the RSS more acceptable in the religious realm in Kerala’s public sphere.⁹⁰ There was also the idea that this is where Hindus could receive education on their religion. By the 1980s, there emerged in Kerala a generation born after the social-reform movements, and disconnected from the struggles to democratise social spaces. Born into a “progressive and secular” Kerala, they felt a vacuum that RSS and affiliate organisations capitalised on. Ajikumar says on why he went to the *Shakhas* as a youngster:

Christians and Muslims go to the Churches and Mosques weekly where they get this [spiritual education]. We [Hindus] don't...our only space was Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan on television. Temples only have festivals or celebrations. It was only after Sangh came there that *Shobha Yatras* were organised on Sreekrishna Jayanthi. This started around the 1990s and continues even today.⁹¹

Shobha Yatras are celebratory processions organised by the right-wing organisations to celebrate the birth anniversary of the Hindu god Krishna. Children are dressed up as characters from mythological stories of Krishna and a procession is organised in the villages, towns or cities. As has been argued, the unresolved question of gender and religion in post-reforms Kerala was settled by engendering religion to the private realm. Consequently, religious festivals and events by the RSS encouraged participation from women, whose role as homemakers was reified during the second half of the twentieth century.⁹² Over the last three decades, *Shobha Yatra* has grown both in participation and as social events.

⁸⁹ Panikkar, (2014), p.202

⁹⁰ Personal interviews, 21st July 2018 (Madhu) and 04th July 2018 (Ajikumar); On RSS’ changing image in the 1980s, see: Jayaprasad, (1989)

⁹¹ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

⁹² See Section 5.4

5.2.3 Political Economy, Privatization and Profit: Spatiality and neoliberalism

By the 1980s, the political project of post-independence Kerala to extend previously limited bourgeois liberalisation to the people as a whole by means of popular politics hit a dead-end.⁹³ This form of governance came under strain due to a sluggish job-growth, mounting fiscal burdens, and the rising consumerism pumped by foreign remittances. In addition, the land and labour reforms that Kerala successfully implemented lacked effective follow-up and labour unions across sectors became critical of any accepted ways of promoting production, thus resulting in stagnation and mutual harm to both employers and employees of industries in Kerala.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the inflow of foreign remittances since the 1970s (especially from the Gulf countries where Keralites now travelled and worked in large numbers) had resulted in an increase in purchasing power, real estate prices and trade, while agriculture and industrial development lagged behind. The impact of foreign remittances must be restated here since it extended beyond merely the economic sphere and heralded consumerist culture into modern Kerala during the period. According to Devika (2007), the bourgeois ideal of the family reached its acceptance in Kerala by the late 20th century, and modernity assigned two values to it: the shaping of ‘full-fledged’ productive individuals, and consumption.⁹⁵ As we will see in Section 5.3, these changes had an impact on not just the economic sphere, but also affected social relations—and thereby, spatiality.

The opening up of a job market in the Gulf attracted many youngsters who had become disenchanted with the political situation in Kerala. Ashraf mentioned in his interview:

People became more interested in seeking jobs. I moved to the Gulf in 1980. There was a cut-off...a disappointment in the politics and cultural activities of the party. A conflict.⁹⁶

This “conflict” was both a cause and consequence of the changes that the decade brought about. Even as religion became an increasing presence in public life, the secular forces failed to provide secular, progressive alternative social spaces. On the one hand, there was an increased perception that quasi-government organisations were losing autonomy and being controlled by the State—mostly by left-leaning CPM sympathisers.⁹⁷ On the other hand, the representational spaces (lived) spaces were also being transformed by a combination of the economic and cultural (rise of the RSS) changes. Babu, says that in the past, customers at his teashop were almost entirely writers, politicians and thinkers. Over the years, the crowd from a nearby Income tax office became regulars, although some old crowds still

⁹³ Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996), p.2041

⁹⁴ Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996), p.1854

⁹⁵ Devika, (2007), p.2467

⁹⁶ Personal interview, 23rd June 2018

⁹⁷ Narayanan, (1998), p.xiv

come occasionally. Many of the discussions now, Babu says, surround official matters—promotions, office politics, etc.

I ask them sometimes if they have nothing else to talk about. They flinch and say no. I become a listener. I focus on my work. I don't intervene. If there's a discussion on politics I intervene.⁹⁸

Ajikumar (b. 1978) who would have belonged to the next generation of youngsters who grew up during these changes says that people across ages still use the teashop in his village of Poothotta near Eranakulam. However, he also alludes to a de-politicised nature of the space:

Recently the teashop has put up a board saying "you can't talk politics here". Because many times, this gets down to issues between people sometimes. So they put up a board saying "Please don't talk politics" (*laughs*). People drink tea and leave their ways....it doesn't get down to discussions except during election time.⁹⁹

He says that the regular customers are older people who drop by for tea after their morning walk and they read the newspaper for some time. For the younger crowds such as himself, he says the teashop is a space where they go and sit sometimes after playing, "because it's near the lake and it's nice."

Varghese (2014) has argued that the contemporary state in Kerala has worked closely with capital to create spaces and "new religiosities" that undermine progressive social spaces.¹⁰⁰ One visible change has been in terms of ownership of erstwhile public spaces. The walling of temple grounds came up repeatedly in my interviews. The ground that Kureepuzha alludes to where Giyazuddin, Clement and Gopi played together (see Section 5.1.4) was walled a few decades ago, restricting entry to non-Hindus into the premises. "The question is, who is encroaching them", Kureepuzha asks, clarifying:

We can see that there are only few cases of individuals encroaching public spaces....it is religion that is doing it most. They put a cross on a hill. There are many such hills. It will lead to big fights if a Hindu fundamentalist goes and puts a trident next to it tomorrow.¹⁰¹ Similarly, banyan trees that sprout after a crow defecate the seeds of a banyan fruit. They provide shelter to everyone for very long, until someone puts up a Hindu idol, and soon a fence around it and start rituals and prohibit non-Hindus from entering. We're losing out on shades....shades of a

⁹⁸ Personal interview, 19th July 2018

⁹⁹ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

¹⁰⁰ Varghese, (2014)

¹⁰¹ Incidentally, this actually happened in June 2019, when a right-wing Hindu group installed a trident atop the Panchalimedu hills near Kuttikkanam, protesting against the alleged attempt by the Church to encroach upon revenue land by "planting" a cross

banyan tree are being privatized by religions! Setting up archways on public roads that lead to temples. They lead you to think that the temple begins as soon as you enter, but no...they're spaces that Hindus, Muslims and everyone. No one dares to ask questions, because everyone is scared.¹⁰²

Hema Joseph, whose memory of frequenting the local temple despite being a Christian I have already alluded to, also recollects that the temple near her home banned non-Hindus from entering it in the 1980s:

I think it was around the time I finished my degree that the board banning non-Hindus came up [outside the temple], and the temple was cordoned off. Honestly, it was something that troubled me...it was the alienation of a space that we had for so long assumed to be ours, and we were being kept outside...I think around 1985, closer to 1990. There were a lot of Nair families around the temple and that is where their [RSS] activities first started. I remember it was after this that these things [the board] came up at the temple. The board came up a little after the *shakha's* activities started in the area. I remember this, in connection to that.¹⁰³

A space that was perceived as a democratic space had suddenly been cordoned off and the non-Hindus kept outside. Here, we can also see clearly that such a change was initiated by the activities of the RSS in the 1980s. Not surprisingly, it was evident that there is an intergenerational change in how the role of temples as social spaces is perceived. The younger generation's response to how they see temples makes this evident. "Now we only go to it, and come back...there's nothing else happening there...In Kasaragod, we see only people from a specific religion go to the temple festivals. You can't call it a public sphere because of this", said 25-year-old Sreerag when asked about whether he would consider temples public spaces. His friend Jitheesh adds, "When I'm with friends, we sometimes say how if we were living back in the times, we could have hung out in the temple among the refreshing smells of sandalwood and oils...not on the beach. We can't do that anymore. Say we were to talk about sex...people will stare...if we were to talk about politics, we'd get stares. We're expected to maintain silence there. Public sphere shouldn't be like that, should it? Anyone should be allowed to come."¹⁰⁴

As Osella and Osella have pointed out, the last few decades have seen the creeping in of caste identities back into the religious sphere, and temple festivals have often seen such tensions play out in the public sphere.¹⁰⁵ Ajikumar who has been an active member of the RSS hints towards this in his interview, that

¹⁰² Personal interview, 03rd July 2018

¹⁰³ Personal interview, 27th June 2018

¹⁰⁴ Personal interview, 20th July 2018

¹⁰⁵ Osella & Osella, (2000), p.37

he believes temples have become spaces where specific caste groups have their separate events without involving the larger public.¹⁰⁶ In some sense, this ambiguity arises also because of the walling of the temple premises. With this, a former public space becomes privatized. The last few decades have been marred with the contests between groups attempting such privatisation, and others who have been fighting for their rights to these spaces. These struggles allude to an increasing notion that despite the strides made in the twentieth century with respect to temple entry in Kerala, religious spaces continue to be contested spaces. There is an increasing sense among the secular and left populations in Kerala that there is a need to reclaim temple-spaces. Left intellectuals like K.E.N argue that there is a “need to stand strong against the Sangh gaining influence over temples and celebrations” to redefine these spaces in a secular and democratic sense.¹⁰⁷ Kureepuzha Sreekumar, who identifies as a rationalist, echoes this view, arguing that the tearing down of walls it’s the first step to restore the secular nature of public spaces. The political left also has taken up steps in the recent past in this front. These changes are important because they point towards a radical change in how places are perceived by people, and therefore, in the spatial practices.

Rapid economic changes unleashed with India’s New Economic Policy in 1991 further affected the spatiality of modern Kerala. The rapid spread of media, private television channels, all changes how reading rooms and teashops functioned. The rise of global capital and the fall of the Soviet Union forced the left to rethink their ideological and political positions. Together, these changes opened a new phase of spatiality in Kerala from the 1990s, which saw, on the one hand, a decline in the secular social spaces that inundated the public sphere in the twentieth century while on the other, saw a rise in privatisation of spaces as land became a valuable asset and people became richer. As the exchange value of land (as a resource) increases, the greater will be the incentive for spaces to be appropriated in ways attractive to capital.

Lefebvre has argued that one of the features of modernity is that through the domination of economic, political and cultural spheres, it conflates (or appears to conflate) the abstract and physical spaces.¹⁰⁸ Harvey has argued, pace Lefebvre, that collapse of spatial barriers in the twenty-first century has paradoxically enhanced the significance of space: “as spatial barriers diminish so we become much more sensitized to what the world’s spaces contain”.¹⁰⁹ To a certain extent, the privatization of social spaces like public grounds, and the reaction to these developments in contemporary Kerala can be analysed from this lens. As associational spaces based on particularistic loyalties like religion and caste replace conventional ones based on political ideology and class, these walls that cordon off public spaces also create exclusive spaces for different religions, sects and castes.

¹⁰⁶ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

¹⁰⁷ Kunjahammad, (2018), p.22

¹⁰⁸ Lefebvre, (1961), p.78; Lefebvre, (1991), p.59

¹⁰⁹ Harvey, (1990), p.294

5.3 Spatial Transformations

The social, political and economic pressures meant that towards the end of the century, Kerala faced a peculiar situation. The broad-based collectives built in the 1930s based on social and political mobilisation had shown promise in the initial decades but had reached a stagnation by the 1980s. The much-lauded “Kerala model” had to be revised once the economic growth rate and employment growth stagnated, and the neoliberal market-driven development appeared to become more attractive. The political left also reached a kind of ideological morbidity, for reasons discussed in the previous sections. The consequences of these changes were that a new “model” of grassroots-level movement was initiated, which brought with it a new spatiality different from the one in the twentieth century. The features of this new spatiality, and the social spaces that emerged, will be discussed at length in the next chapter. This section engages with the spatial challenges faced by the conventional social spaces (like libraries, schools, teashops) because of the changes discussed in Section 5.2.

Kerala saw its first private television channel—Asianet—air in 1993, and from its initiation, aimed at airing independent and impartial news and cultural programmes that other private channels in India shied away from during the period.¹¹⁰ By the end of the decade, there were clear signs of television emerging as a critical component of the formation of public opinion. The programmes that aired on television in the 1990s attempted to adopt the discursive and deliberative nature that prevailed in the public sphere in Kerala. The government channel was forced to follow suit and soon started to produce news-based discussions and analysis programmes. By the end of the decade, successful shows like *Ente Keralam* (My Kerala), *Varthakalkekupinnil* (Behind the News), *Kannadi* (Mirror), *Lokam Poyavaram* and *Nerkkuner* (Face to face), *Nammal Thammil* (Between you and me) had moved beyond mere presentation of news, to initiate discussions and analysis of news. *Nammal Thammil*, loosely translated as ‘Between you and me’ became Malayalam’s first talk show, and it gained traction for having discussions and debates on a diverse range of topics, and was applauded for giving voice to everyone’s opinions freely, with limited editing or censorship.¹¹¹ In other words, one can see a transformation of the function of public will formation from social spaces like libraries, teashops and reading rooms, into one’s representational spaces—the private homes. The fact that the programmes presented and debated diverse points of view was perhaps reflective of the political culture of deliberation that had been shaped in erstwhile public spaces. Yet, the fact remains that television remained a passive medium of mass communication and could never replicate the social character of the physical spaces. The impact of television sets on conventional social spaces is something that requires careful attention.¹¹² The

¹¹⁰ Harshankar, (1996)

¹¹¹ Anon., (1997)

¹¹² It has been of academic interest to some scholars in Kerala in the recent past. See for instance, Venkiteshwaran, (2014)

expansion of media and internet is an ongoing feature that continues to transform social spaces, as will be pointed out in the last chapter.

Another space that faced the threats of privatization was the education system. We have already seen how public schools played an important role in shaping the secular public sphere in Kerala history, especially since the 1930s when the nationalist and communist movements brought more and more students from across religions into these spaces. All of my older respondents were educated in government schools and consider this very important in shaping their politics and world-views. Ashraf (64), said that today's younger generations grow in a "different pattern—of ties, coats, diaries that reduces connections with real life." This perception of private education seems to be shared even by the younger generation. Two respondents—Hema Joseph (b. 1973) and Arun Shantinilayam (b.1985)—had personally moved from one type to another. Hema started her schooling at a regular government school near her home but was moved to a Convent (aided) school in Thrissur after her 4th grade. She believed that this affected her deeply. While she made some good friends at the Convent, she believes that it also gave her many "insecurities":

Till 4th grade, I studied in a small [public] school near my home. I have very fond memories of studying in that school... because it was very close to home and I used to be first in class... my mother thought Convent Schools provided better education; she struggled to move me to the convent school. But this affected me deeply...it wasn't a broad [diverse] environment like in the other school. Firstly, my studies which was seen as good in the old school was understood really bad here. Also, the school was in a central area in the town...so children of people who did big jobs studied there. I had a sense of insecurity...this severely affected my academics. I couldn't study properly, it started to lag behind after I moved here.¹¹³

Arun, who moved from a private to a public school, had a similar experience of the public school as being more diverse. He went to a private missionary school until 7th grade, after which he had to move to a public school. Unlike in Hema's case, Arun had to move because the missionary school only had until grade 7 and therefore he had to move elsewhere to continue education. When asked if he felt there was a perceptible difference in the two experiences, he said:

In every sense. Our political orientation....now the other school was like caged-farming...in the Seventh-Day [the Missionary school] I was like really protected...I was within the wall. Even their syllabus was ICSE. They stopped after 7th grade so I had to move somewhere. This is how I went to Model School [government

¹¹³ Personal interview, 27th June 2018

regular]. The same thing was happening with others also. So many of the students who joined eighth in Model School would come from other private schools, convents. From a total farmed set up, we return to a ground. If you ask if there were rules there? Yes, but nobody is going to follow the rules. There is politics there, there were elections. There was a close involvement with the public sphere.¹¹⁴

Between 1991 and 2007-08, the number of unaided schools as a share of the total went up from 2.0 to 4.1 percent (lower primary), 2.5 to 7.0 percent (in upper primary), 4.5 to 13.1 percent (high schools), and 0.00 to 25.9 percent (higher secondary schools), respectively.¹¹⁵ An extensive study of Kerala society carried out by the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) in 2006 suggested that affiliations for private schools tend to be higher among higher caste Hindus and Syrian Christians. The same study also points out that this also reflects the political preferences of the families. While LDF (Left) voter- households preferred Malayalam medium and government school, it was observed that BJP-supporters preferred unaided schools.¹¹⁶ Even if true, this observation seems to be a stretch. Both BJP sympathising middle-aged men I interviewed—Santhosh and Ajikumar (both aged 40)—specifically mentioned that they preferred sending their children to government schools, pointing out the importance that they had as social spaces.¹¹⁷ Ajikumar moved his son from an English Medium school to a public school in his village. He feels that this has made his son more confident and “social.” Santhosh says he believes public education as being important:

Public education is essential. There are many qualities that a child going to a public school earns. This is one of the reasons I chose to educate my children in the same school I was educated in. When a student leaves a school after 10 years of studying there, he will have contacts with children from every nook and corner of the village...in public schools. At the same time, when we get them to go to other private schools outside, the children don't get to know others from their own village...I say this from experience. When there is socialisation with people from the village, then they don't need to be separately educated about a lot of things. When they walk to school together, they talk about the events that happened at home that day. This is a big thing that we don't see today.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Personal interview, 21st July 2018

¹¹⁵ Kumar & George, (2009), pp.57

¹¹⁶ Aravindan, (2006), pp. 98-100

¹¹⁷ Neither of them belonged to “upper-caste” communities, though.

¹¹⁸ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

Across age, gender and political differences, respondents seem to suggest that there is a definite difference between public and private educational institutions. Jitheesh (25) believes that his public education played a role in him having a multi-cultural friends circle:

... I have a very multi-cultural friends circle. The main source of making friends are schools. This is the advantage of going to a public school. I went to Ganpath School...we had all sorts of people, every very unruly ones. There were people who think very differently... when we interact with people who studied in Silver Hills, CMI, [Private schools in the area] etc. we can see a difference The language or words that I and my friends use is not the same that others who went to private schools use. I couldn't say one is bad and the other is good. But there is a definite difference in behaviour.¹¹⁹

However, unlike the informal spaces, public schools in Kerala seem to have maintained their perception as being more secular and diverse compared to private ones. This is true partly because the government investment and efforts to modernise public schools continue to ensure that public education in Kerala is among the best in India.¹²⁰ Once again, the strength of these spaces remains the fact that not just as conceived representations of space; the broader public in Kerala continue to perceive these spaces as secular, diverse ones.

Despite this, the threats of capitalism and communalism continued to raise challenges in the 21st century. The rapid boom in land prices post-2000 only assisted these trends.¹²¹ The 1990s saw a specific contest between capitalism, religious communalism to control and privatize social spaces, and, considering the morbidity that had plagued the left-political spaces, there was the need for a radical redefinition in spatiality and how politics worked. This was taken up through the People's Planning Campaign and decentralization in the 1990s. These opened up new and powerful avenues to resist the attempts at hegemony that we see in this period, as we shall discuss in the next chapter.

5.4 (En)gendering the Social Space

We have already discussed that during the second half of the twentieth century, politics—especially left politics—argued that a resolution of the class question would automatically ensure gender equality in Kerala. However, active public life for female party-members was usually seen as an additional responsibility for them, along with taking care of the family. In contrast, the public sphere was seen as a space of (and for) men. The autobiographies of public figures from the period reflect this difference. In

¹¹⁹ Personal interview, 20th July 2018

¹²⁰ Anon., (2019)

¹²¹ Varghese, (2017), pp.79

his autobiography, communist leader E. Balanandan dedicates two chapters (out of twenty-seven) to discuss his family. He begins the second with an assertion that he was often teased by other communists for his “homing instinct” while expressing regret for not being able to spend enough time at home while his children grew up. In the 1960s, his wife (Sarojini) had resigned her job and become involved in active politics. Commenting on her term as the President of Kalamassery panchayat, Balanandan notes:

“Sarojini did a lot for the development in this area. I am really proud of her achievements...A panchayath president is always hard-pressed for time. Despite that she found time to take care of her family. She was careful not to let me know her difficulties in house keeping (sic). That was a great relief for me because I was fully engrossed in political work.”¹²²

Here, one can see, as Devika, (2005) and Devika & Sukumar, (2006) have argued, how the political space in Kerala allowed for women to play an active part, but only because they also simultaneously fulfil their household “responsibilities”. Even in the lives of ordinary people, this separation played a major role, as one of my older respondents, Vijayakumari (b. 1964) recalled. When asked if she would have gone out to many public spaces as a child, she mentioned two spaces: her school, and a *Vanitha Samajam* (Women’s Association) near her house.¹²³ She mentioned that unlike today’s girls who are free to “wander around”, she and her friends were restricted to their trips to school. Although this continued into the 1980s, another respondent Hema Joseph (b.1973) remembers frequenting the library as a teenager, although she said it was still unusual. Over the 1990s and afterwards, two changes provided women with a space to engage more actively in the public—the emergence of new social movements based on human rights, climate change, etc; and the rise of new feminist and Dalit movements.

Interestingly, both Vijayakumari and Hema spoke about their local temples as being spaces that they frequented as children. Although Vijayakumari does not bring up temples when I asked her about public spaces, she noted when I asked her directly whether she would have visited temples frequently as a child: “We are ‘temple-dwellers’ (*laughs*). From my childhood, we’d spend a lot of time at temple festivals”.¹²⁴ The importance of religious spaces in the associational life of women in Kerala needs to be paid attention. Even as associational spaces like Kudumbasree have opened up new avenues for women in public life since the 1990s, festivals like *Shobha Yatra* and *Attukal Pongala* have gained prominence as

¹²² Balanandan, (2014), p.117

¹²³ Personal interview, 07th July 2018

¹²⁴ Personal interview, 07th July 2018

religious spaces.¹²⁵ Despite all the progressive and modern values that shaped the modern social spaces in twentieth-century Kerala, the question of gender continued to remain unresolved during this period of Kerala's history, and women's roles were largely assumed to be limited to the private realm. While the last few decades have seen marginal changes in these trends with new spaces like Kudumbasree and arts organisations expanding, the fact that younger women were turning down interview requests stating that "they would not have much to speak about" suggests that such engendering of spaces is an ongoing issue.

5.5 Conclusion

The ability (and legitimacy) of the state to control social spaces is a feature of modernity. Unlike the traditional order, social democracy allows for such an intervention, often justifying it as a potential barrier against the relentless pulverizing tendencies of capital to "tear society apart".¹²⁶ Yet, Lefebvre points out that spatially, this is only a homogenization and a hierarchical ordering of space that penetrates into the everyday lives and public consciousness.¹²⁷ By the end of the twentieth century, the spatiality of modern Kerala had changed drastically from the one at the turn of the century. The traditional order and its spatiality of caste was replaced by a more-or-less secular public sphere, although the contradictions of the unresolved caste—and specifically, gender—questions continued to plague its apparently "progressive" nature. Towards the end of the century, these contradictions became too evident, and added to the social and political changes that were shaping modern Kerala. On the one hand, attempts of the state in controlling social spaces in Kerala increased in the decades after independence. On the other, the very dynamic social spaces that had emerged continued to resist such dominance.

Religious spaces also underwent a democratisation, and practices of religious shrines renegotiated with caste-based power structures being somewhat mitigated.¹²⁸ A form of agitation-politics based on shared values of social equity and justice continued to guide the political parties in Kerala after the state was formed in 1957. Many authors have written about the control that the left-wing politics exercised over the public consciousness in Kerala. This presence is what led Nossiter to note that "in so far as communism makes analogous truth claims to those of religion, Malayalis have four faiths".¹²⁹ Menon (2016) observes that the early communists and articles from the newspapers at the time presented the Soviet Union as the embodiment of a worker-peasant Utopia.¹³⁰ The alternating of governments and

¹²⁵ Sreedhar, (2017), pp.152-153

¹²⁶ Butler, (2012), p.86

¹²⁷ Lefebvre, (2003), p.95; Lefebvre, (2009), p.244

¹²⁸ Menon, (1992), p.2711

¹²⁹ Nossiter (1982), p.21

¹³⁰ Menon, (2016), pp.670-671

roots being in social reform movements rather than simply nationalist struggle also led to the politics, in general, being more left than in other parts.¹³¹ In essence, social spaces continued to play an important role in shaping the mainstream public sphere in the second half of twentieth century in Kerala. There was a mix of institutional and state-patronised spaces within political parties and trade unions, but also a number of informal and voluntary associations such as the ones discussed in this chapter. The two cajoled the struggle of spatiality between state and citizens.

The spatiality of any given society, as we now know, rests on the contradiction between a hegemonic power trying to control social spaces and an opposing force that resists them from doing so. While the economic and political (State) forces control the domain of conceived space in modern nation-states, while the community—alternate social spaces, civil-society, activists and common people—inhabit the representational space (lived space). Any attempt from a system to attribute a hermetic or finished quality to itself secretes its own ‘unconscious’ contradictions.¹³² By the 1980s, Kerala stood at economic, political and social crossroads. First, the deadlock that the economic project hit, the rise of neoliberalism and the spread of privatisation and a consumption culture put economic pressure on land—and thereby, space. Simultaneously, they increasingly came under the strain of their own attempt to control cultural spaces, which had started to drive people away from it towards alternate spaces. Meanwhile, the RSS made inroads using religious spaces like temples. However, the most pivotal changes happened with the spread of new media and television, especially in the 1990s and beyond. Physical spaces now had to compete with virtual public spaces, and new forms of associations that some respondents called “floating publics”—issue-based groups that came together for the cause of environment, human rights or arts. Many people who moved away from active politics in the 1980s found these spaces more welcoming. Even those of my interview respondents who were members of political parties were of the belief that the non-partisan issue-based associations where people mobilised for causes like environment, gender, language or human rights, had a more vibrant and plural nature than political spaces. Most importantly, unlike electoral politics, these causes gave space to women to play an active role. The next chapter deals with some of these questions.

¹³¹ Isaac, (2014)

¹³² Lefebvre, (1991), p.56

6. Capitalism, Communalism and Social Spaces

Kerala had followed a socialist model of growth in the post-independence period, relying on heavy state investment and prioritising economic development, land and labour rights, and equity over economic growth. Despite the fact that the Congress and Communist Party-led alliances took turns to form governments, the form of governance leaning on social equity and welfare state was continued. With the economic and social changes in the 1990s, the State in Kerala responded by a policy to decentralise power, and create “broad-based alliances” at the grassroots. It was, in other words, an attempt to create an autonomous and secular grassroots movement. The result was a redefinition of civil-society movements and encouragement of autonomous and localised spaces for political participation. In other words, it was a move in favour of these spaces as “representational” lived ones. Lefebvre’s work on how the socialist parties could respond to the neoliberal challenge is an extremely relevant and useful position to begin such an analysis. He asks: “what is the relationship between, on the one hand, the entirety of that space which falls under the sway of 'socialist' relations of production and, on the other hand, the world market, generated by the capitalist mode of production, which weighs down so heavily upon the whole planet, imposing its division of labour on a worldwide scale and so governing the specific configurations of space, of the forces of production within that space, of sources of wealth and of economic fluctuations?”¹ The deliberations, negotiations, and responses to the socio-political challenge from Kerala society in the 1990s have been of much academic interest.² Broadly, there was a looming threat from the decline of left-wing politics that affected Kerala society. This did not necessarily mean the left was on the decline electorally.³ What was witnessed was more of a sense of decay in the progressive social and political ideologies that had nourished Kerala’s public sphere since the reform movements, and a general sense of disillusionment with and in politics.⁴ As veteran communist leader E.M.S noted in 1995, an immediate concern was the reappearance of caste and gender evils because of the “degeneration of the cadres and activists of the socio-political movement”.⁵ Factors that had led previously forced communalism and religious politics into retreat were now losing ground.⁶ Most importantly, the unresolved questions of caste and gender that the public sphere had failed to resolve re-emerged with the feminist, environmental and Dalit movements. It became clear that neither the traditional left nor the new-left—which had responded to the socio-political and

¹ Lefebvre, (1991), p.54

² Devika, (2007); Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996); Isaac & Franke, (2000)

³ In 1987, the LDF benefitted from taking a categorical stand against alliances with communal political parties, and E.K Nayanar became the Chief Minister. The Congress-led UDF came back to power in the following elections in 1991, before the LDF was voted back into power and E.K. Nayanar was elected Chief Minister once again in 1996.

⁴ Devika, (2007), p.2464

⁵ Tharakan, (1995), pp.217-218

⁶ Devika, (2007), p.2464; Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996)

economic changes by embarking on a reimagination of decentralised civil society organisations as alternative political spaces—provided enough avenue for the feminist and Dalit causes.

All of these developments led to what has been called the second wave of mass mobilization in Kerala in the mid-1990s—one that emphasised on decentralisation and people’s planning. While the first wave of 1930s had strengthened the political spaces, the new wave focussed on creating broad-based alliances at the grassroots. These changes have been pivotal in shaping the nature of spatiality in contemporary Kerala, and raise interesting questions on the nature of hegemony and resistance. This chapter engages with this question. The first section looks at the new social spaces that have emerged in Kerala’s public sphere that have replaced in some sense the activities of the traditional spaces discussed in the last two chapters. It looks specifically at semi-autonomous spaces like Kudumbasree, but also the rise of right-based movements, and movements centred on culture, art and music. Although by conception these spaces are not very different from the spaces of the early twentieth century, this section engages with how (or not) they are affected by or resisting the question of control from political parties. The democratisation of social spaces means that inhabitants have a right to be present in all circuits of decision-making leading to the control and development of the organisation of social space.⁷ This move towards *autogestion* forms the crux of this chapter’s argument and will be explored in detail in Section 6.2

Before we engage in detail with the political response to the changes—namely Kerala’s decentralization and People’s Planning project—and their impact on social spaces, it will be useful to assess the situation and challenges to conventional social spaces. Specifically, we look at the impact of privatization on the education sector and the encroachment of public lands by private entities.

Public schools

In Kerala Padanam, a comprehensive survey of Kerala society conducted using a large sample size in 2006, it was noted that there was an increasing trend for people to choose schools belonging to their own caste/religious affiliations over public schools.⁸ Although private schools continue to increase in Kerala, the threat of privatization of education, which may have loomed large at the beginning of the 1990s, has been more or less met by increased public investment in education and measures to improve the public education system. Interview respondents from across political and age differences seem to echo this view, that public education is important for a secular society. Kureepuzha Sreekumar says:

⁷ Butler, (2012), p.145

⁸ Aravindan, (2006), p.146

A student coming from Saraswati Vidyalayam⁹ will not celebrate Christmas...they say it is not 'our' celebration, but 'theirs'. So the minds of children are being divided into 'ours' and 'theirs. Isn't this very dangerous? ¹⁰

Three other respondents—Arun, Hema and Jitheesh—had experiences of studying in both private and public institutions during their schooling, and all of them said that they felt public schools were a much more secular space in comparison because they allowed them to socialise with a much more diverse crowd. What is interesting is that this sentiment that public schools provide a more “secular” atmosphere, was shared in general even by supporters of right-wing political parties. Ajikumar and Santhosh—both supporters of the BJP—had transferred their children from private to public institutions and said that they thought this was important for their children. Ajikumar recently moved his son from a private school in Thiruvananthapuram to a public school in the village. “Here, he would cry every day. Once he moved there, things changed”, he says, adding:

I think community considerations when getting children admission in schools is a big threat. Secularism can only be maintained if children from across different religions mingle with each other. If that child studies in a Madrassa, this one in an SNDP School and he in a Christian school, they will not have any of this...People who study in government schools study with children from all communities. They aren't in a religious box...their religion is only once they reach home. In [government] school, all are equal. And they maintain that friendship wherever they go.¹¹

Ajikumar's concern with public education, however, is that his son does not get any religious education in a public school. He acknowledges, though that this religious education is something a child must receive at home, but he is unable to dedicate time because of a busy schedule:

My brother's children study in Amrutha¹²...they get religious education in school. They come home and recite prayers, etc. My son doesn't know any of this, despite my being an RSS supporter...because he studies in a government school. There is no

⁹ One of the chain of educational institutions owned by RSS' Vidya Bharati Shiksha Sanghatan set up in 1978 with an aim to devise curricula for the additional courses that provide the main content of RSS pedagogy. See: Panikkar, (1999); Sarkar, (1994). In 2016, it had over 12,000 schools across India with 3.2 million students enrolled. See: “PM Modi urges Vidya Bharati schools to aim for excellence” (13th February 2016), *The Indian Express*

¹⁰ Personal interview, 03rd July 2018

¹¹ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

¹² Amrita Vidyalayams [Schools] are a national network of schools managed by Mata Amritanandamayi Math. According to their website (<http://amritavidyalayam.org/>), they run 49 English medium schools throughout India out of which 28 are in Kerala.

other option. If I were staying home, I'd teach him something. My son is losing out on this.¹³

Ajikumar says that if he was staying at home more, he could give his son the “religious education” he needs. Santhosh—who is also a BJP supporter and part-time member of Sangh Parivar organisations—has a similar concept that education must remain public and secular, while “culture and family values” which are closely related to “our religion and tradition” can be taught to children at home. The school is seen as a secular public space, as opposed to the home, where religion belongs. Unlike Ajikumar, Santhosh lives at home and says he teaches his son religious values at home:

Children must learn everything...even bad things. It is my experience. My son knows all kinds of slangs and languages...but he would never use it in front of me. There are all sorts of students coming there [government school]—cultured and uncultured; poor and rich. But even when you see all this, we must distance ourselves. Leave behind that there. When you come here, we have our culture that you must reflect there. I've taught him all this...¹⁴

The school is “*there*”, a social space where one meets people from across religions and classes. In other words, they see the importance of public education *because* religion is seen as something that should remain within the home. However, as Ajikumar says, the fact that he works in a different place means that he regrets not being able to provide for this religious education to his son. Culture is seen here as something to be passed on in the private spaces. Santhosh concurs:

...How a person behaves, how he/she speaks to elders, these values must be taught at home. Culture is not something that can be taught by calling together a public. It must come from the family.¹⁵

In the contemporary society where the lines between public and private are fast being blurred, and where economic factors force people like Ajikumar to live and work away from the family, the resilience of such spaces is further tested. The moment an individual prioritizes religious education over the need to be secular; one might be tempted to change preferences in favour of private schools. However, for now, public education continues to be widely popular in Kerala, and the state leads in public education rankings in India. Most other conventional spaces see a more radical change, as we shall see in the following section.

¹³ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

¹⁴ Personal interview, 13th June 2018

¹⁵ Personal interview, 13th June 2018

6.1 Social Spaces in the 21st Century

Gradually, one observes, from the early 1990s, a conscious shift in focus of the left in favour of economic growth, and away from the social sector. This shift in priorities reflects in E.M.S Namboodiripad's comment in 1994, that

“Kerala faces today intense economic crisis in employment and material production, agriculture, and industrialisation. While we spent too much time and attention on social sector issues of welfare and improvement of living standards, we have not paid enough attention to economic growth and production.”¹⁶

Along with this move towards a focus on economic growth, the State also introduced the radical shift towards decentralisation and people's planning. This included a series of political and administrative reforms from the late 1980s that strengthened the local administrative bodies by giving them expanded administrative, fiscal and economic power.¹⁷ These efforts received further impetus when an Act was passed in the Indian constitution that gave constitutional status to the local-governments. This was accompanied by a redefinition of the meaning of “civil society” at the grassroots level, and a call to create broader alliances across party and ideological differences.¹⁸ The decentralization project remained one that was a matter of much deliberation and debate in Kerala's public sphere in the 1990s, with compelling theoretical and empirical arguments being made both for and against the project.¹⁹ A section of the left-politicians and academics argued that such a move would signal the abandonment of the centrality of class struggle and weaken the unity of the working classes. They saw the move as the succumbing of the political left to the capitalist and neoliberal forces, which were trying to depoliticise society. These concerns resonate with the arguments made by Brenner (2004) who, following Lefebvre's work on the transformation of social democracies in the second half of twentieth century, argues that decentralisation of decision-making towards regional and local levels is a tactic of neoliberal State in Western democracies to enhance territorial competitiveness and allow for capital accumulation.²⁰ However, such a view limits the understanding of space to its institutional aspects,

¹⁶ Namboodiripad, (1994)

¹⁷ Chaudhuri, et al., (2004), p.1

¹⁸ Isaac, (2005), pp.88-89; Devika, (2007), p.2466

¹⁹ Rajan Gurukkal and others argued that it would remain a constitutional reform that reifies the status quo and empowers private capital. Left leader P.J. James argued that it signals the abandonment of the centrality of class struggle by the political left. Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996) concluded that although the project showed promise in its initial stages, it had failed to take root. On the other side, Thomas Isaac, leading member of CPM and current Finance Minister of Kerala had advocated strongly in favour of campaigning for decentralisation as the new way forward for the political left. M.P. Parameswaran (left-leader who was eventually expelled from the CPM in 2004) also write in support of decentralisation. For more on this debate, see: Gurukkal, (2001); Devika, (2007); Isaac & Franke, (2000); Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996); Chaudhuri, et al., (2004)

²⁰ Brenner, (2004), pp.173, 216

while ignoring the emancipatory potential that the contradictions between conceived, lived and perceived spaces provide. Moreover, it fetishizes the State, by equating politics with merely institutional political spaces and structures.²¹

Those in favour of the move believed that the future of left-political action was in decentralizing power and forming broad alliances at the grassroots that cut across party, religious and ideological differences to create anti-fascist and secular fronts. In Lefebvre's argument about the transition from social-democracy to decentralized State forms in contemporary times, he urged the political left to explore the potential of *autogestion* in asserting a counter-hegemonic use of space, since it is the "one path and one practice that may be opposed to the omnipotence of the State".²² Lefebvre saw *autogestion*—most closely translated as grassroots democracy—as an essential basis for the democratization of society, born spontaneously out of the void in social life that is created by the state".²³ In Kerala, the social void appeared towards the end of the last century for reasons discussed in the last chapter. Consciously or not, the decentralisation initiated in the 1990s led to the possibility for *autogestion*. To Lefebvre, it was the radical democracy that emerges with the withering away of the state in modern times. It is a redefinition of the state as an arena for "spatial *autogestion*, direct democracy, and democratic control, an affirmation of the differences produced in and through that struggle".²⁴ Although such movements may not have the continuous character and institutional promise of parties or trade unions, a decentralised state, Lefebvre argues that they have the power to reconstruct social space from "low to high", as opposed to "high to low"; social needs would be determined here by the action of interested parties, and not by "experts".²⁵ In other words, analysis of the spatiality of decentralisation must be careful not to limit its analysis to look at the productive and instrumental aspects of social spaces dominated by the State machinery. As we have now seen, the emancipatory power of space provides for much scope to create spaces of political education and opinion formation without being "confined" to political party ideologies.²⁶ In fact, as we will see in this chapter, political parties "confine" the scope of such social spaces in contemporary times.

In Kerala, the pro-decentralization arguments had a metaphorical victory, and a number of legal and administrative measures were adopted in the 1990s that aimed at autonomous movements at the local levels that cut across religion and politics. The "ideological puritanism" that the CPM had claimed after their 1985 decision to not align with communal forces was reversed within a decade when they adopted

²¹ Butler, (2012), p.99

²² Lefebvre, (2009), p.134; Butler, (2012), p.100

²³ Lefebvre, (2009), pp.14-15

²⁴ Lefebvre, (2009), p.16

²⁵ Lefebvre, (2009), p.193

²⁶ The sense that political parties have certain constraints under which it forces people to participate was echoed by Ashraf, Ajith Kumar and Arun in their interviews.

the Madras Model Alliance—local level adjustments and indirect alliances with communal forces.²⁷ Even EMS, who had earlier taken a much-respected stand against communalism in politics, had opened up for renewed political understandings with certain communal parties.²⁸ Writing to the new generation of public workers and communists, EMS wrote in 1994 that “popular organisation—including those of youngsters—must refrain from becoming the feeder-group for any political party”—a surprising stand different from the one adopted by the party in the previous phase, as elaborated in Section 5.1.²⁹

It was with these aims that new institutional structures that focussed on neighbourhood groups were encouraged in the 1990s, the most popular of which was the Kudumbasree. The decentralization project also led to a redefinition of civil society itself, to include struggles and movements that are not directly political. The concept of *ayalkkootams* (neighbourhood groups) also gathered momentum quickly in the 1990s in Kerala, especially in the backdrop of the decentralization programme that gave power to the local administrative bodies.³⁰ They came to be seen as “alternative spaces” of development that simultaneously challenged the rapid spread of privatization and capitalism, and had some successful campaigns against corporations like the one against Coca Cola in Plachimada.³¹ It aimed at reconceptualising the displacement of the State and supplanting of its nodes of control to grassroots. Lefebvre called such a decentralization critical to the “withering away of the state” in contemporary times.³² A radical redefinition was to be initiated not merely in the economic domain, but also in the domain of civil society: “the strengthening of the social...rather than crushing the social between the economic and the political.”³³ This opens up the possibility of a qualitative transformation into a decentralised, participatory framework that “not only permits social struggles and contradictions but actively provokes them”.³⁴ Apart from institutional spaces of civil society and organisational spaces like the Kudumbasree, this allows us to expand the space of the “everyday social” to include the informal interactions, voluntary associations and public spaces that have already played an important

²⁷ Prabhash, (2000), p.3009

²⁸ Although central CPM leadership at the time had distanced themselves from EMS’ position on this. See: Tornquist & Tharakan, (1996), pp.1953, 1969; Prabhash, (2000)

²⁹ Namboodirippad, (1992), p.35

³⁰ In an interesting essay, author Kalpatta Balakrishnan makes a distinction between *ayalkkootangal* (neighbourhood groups) and *aalkkootangal* (crowds), based on their transient nature and the lack of clear public purpose of the latter. See: Balakrishnan, (2013)

³¹ Madhu, (2005), p.31

³² Butler, (2012), p.101

³³ Lefebvre, (2009), pp.128-129

³⁴ Neil Brenner, quoted in Butler, (2012), p.101

role in shaping public consciousness and social relations.³⁵ We shall look at each of these new spaces in detail.³⁶

6.1.1 Kudumbasree

The Kudumbasree (KS)—literally meaning “prosperity of the family” in Malayalam—is the poverty eradication and women empowerment programme formed under the aegis of the Kerala State Poverty Alleviation Mission in 1998 and scaled up to the whole state in 2005.³⁷ Over last two decades, KS units—often known as *ayalkkootams* or neighbourhood groups—have been accepted as a successful model for micro-finance, poverty reduction and the Self-Help Group movements, and has attracted academic interest from scholars of economics, sociology, feminist studies, business studies and applied mathematics.³⁸ The interest has triggered not merely because it is seen as a successful women’s SHG movement, but also as an economic, social and cultural movement. The present research is interested in the importance of KSG (Kudumbasree groups) as social spaces—as spaces of *autogestion*. To do so, it would be useful to look at Kudumbasree importance as a representational (lived) space, but also as perceived space (what are the practices that govern interactions within a group? How do people within and outside KS see the space?).

Over the years, participation in KSGs has become a default option for public life for a large number of women in Kerala.³⁹ Fifty-four-year-old Vijayakumari is the CDS Chairperson⁴⁰ in Manikkal Village in Thiruvananthapuram district. Speaking to me after overseeing a monthly meeting of neighbourhood groups (NHGs) in Vembayam, she says:

...it was after 2005 that we women step out bravely. Definitely, after coming to Kudumbasree, women have no problems to step out for the Employment Guarantee Programme. People who initially came in very shyly are now constantly seeking for more work outside. Even men who stayed home used to say, ‘Oh, she’s leaving as soon as the day breaks’. I have had many similar experiences till a while

³⁵ In their recent work, Guru & Sarukkai, (2019) define “everyday social” as “life as lived every day, by individuals who function within relationships with other individuals.” (pp.3-4)

³⁶ I do not argue that these are the only social spaces today, but I have identified the ones that emerged during fieldwork and from other academic and media sources.

³⁷ Devika & Nair, (2018), p.6

³⁸ See, for instance, Devika & Nair, (2018); Venugopalan, (2014); Kiran, et al., (2018). While Devika & Nair (2018) have argued that women self help groups remain embedded within larger social institutions and therefore fail to provide upward mobility or raise issues of larger political and social relevance, others Oommen, (2008); Heeks & Arun, (2010); Arun, et al., (2011) have argued that KS have succeeded in creating a social capital beyond political power.

³⁹ Devika & Nair, (2018), p.8

⁴⁰ A Community Development Society (CDS) is a Panchayat/Municipal level body formed by federating all ward level Area Development Societies (ADS), each constituting all NHGs in the ward

ago: 'Oh, she's leaving to the Panchayat, gripping her bag as soon as the sun rises', they'd remark, ignorantly. They only know we're leaving every morning...they didn't know what we did. I have experiences of being told this. Similarly, everyone has.⁴¹

The importance of Kudumbasree as a space for both the participants but also for the general public reflects here. Vijayakumari mentions that the KS remains a space with extremely emancipatory potential to challenge dominant masculine definitions of the public sphere. It is worthwhile to recollect that these women's groups emerged into a public sphere where conventional male-dominant spaces like reading rooms, trade unions and teashops were on the decline. KS provided a new space for women to play an active part in the mainstream public. A number of women now also see KSGs as a stepping-stone towards local politics.⁴² Yet, as Devika and Nair point out, the KSG's were more open to extension, practice lesser hierarchy as compared to caste-and religion-based SHGs, and were definitely not driven—at least directly—by political ideologies.⁴³ While they have argued that this meant that KS focussed on gendered domestic concerns as opposed to broader public interests, I argue that a lack of direct political intervention also allowed them to create relatively diverse participation across religion and politics.⁴⁴ The sample studied by Nair (2015) represented a mix of communities with more-or-less equal representation to Hindus, Muslim and Christian groups. Devika and Nair's observation that the KS Model assigns more value to individuals (as opposed to the SNDPGs and the CSHGs) possible explains why party affiliations may be overlooked within a KSG, as Vijayakumari's response to my question about political disagreements within the group indicates:

No. Not in Manikkal Panchayat (*laughs*) LDF has been in the front for anything in Manikkal. This has never been an issue within the Kudumbasree....it only looks at individuals, not the party. Immaterial of whether its UDF or LDF, when the government says Kudumbasree must go, then everyone goes for it...Politics is politics...it'll keep happening on the sides. When they call us to the party office for something, we go for it...it is a "side-business"⁴⁵

⁴¹ Personal interview, 07th July 2018

⁴² Devika, (2016)

⁴³ Devika & Nair, (2018), p.18

⁴⁴ They do note, however, that the KS remained more rooted in public concerns as compared to the other two SHG networks they studied—the SNDP led SHGs (SNDPGs) and the SHGs promoted by the Catholic Dioceses (CSHG). Also, the secular nature of KS Units cannot be overemphasised. A number of KS units are still formed around caste. Even in ones with mixed memberships, some members of higher castes refuse to go to or consume food offered at meetings conducted at the homes of lower caste members, like some women I was speaking to informally told me. Yet, the important thing is that KS sees an absence of structural barriers that may keep certain groups out, and thereby encourage interactions and deliberations among a more diverse crowd.

⁴⁵ Personal interview, 07th July 2018

The fact that politics is seen as “side-business” complicates the role of KS as social space; it is both a boon and a bane. While it ensures that participants traverse their caste and political identities, it also makes them “bounded spaces”—as Devika and Nair (2018: p.9) say—instead of making them spaces for critical engagement and resistance to power. Nevertheless, opening up space to Lefebvrian analysis, as this project does, allows us to consider the power of bounded spaces to challenge the conceptions of space (the cases of women in early twentieth century redefining mainstream understandings of public/private binaries has been discussed in Sections 3.2 and 4.1).⁴⁶ While it might be true that there are limitations to how much these spaces can supplement direct political participation, it cannot be denied that as social spaces, they continue to provide an immense amount of support-mechanism and an opportunity for women, especially from underprivileged backgrounds to enter public spaces. From Vembayam where Vijayakumari narrated this importance to me to Kasaragod where KS has worked closely to rehabilitate women from families affected by the endosulfan tragedy; and from running stalls at the international art fest at Kochi to engaging in small-enterprises, Kudumbasree has etched its place in the popular public sphere over the last decade or so. The argument that the Kudumbasree *ayalkekootams* (neighbourhood groups) have become tools of the larger neoliberal agenda points also towards the importance of KSGs as spaces—how do people experience these spaces? What are the issues discussed? While they continue to remain relatively independent of direct political intervention, are they being controlled by other capitalist powers? These questions need further exploration.

Even the perception of the general public on KS has evolved over time. Vijayakumari’s observation on how men mocked her and her colleagues when she joined the KS in 2005 has already been alluded to. In contrast, she says that the attitude has become much more favourable today. She was unequivocal about the fact that it was after joining KS that she felt like she played a part in public life.⁴⁷ Responses from other respondents also suggest that today, Kudumbasree is perceived by the general public as a vibrant social space in Kerala. When asked if he could think of spaces that bring together a diverse group of people, Arun (33) automatically mentioned Kudumbasree:

... not many other projects of that sort have come to my mind... maybe I haven't looked. Kudumbasree I have noticed. Because I know of people who worked in Kudumbasree. So I have observed it closely and seen that this [interaction] works there. But there is a party shadow over it, but even then it gets people to work together.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Guru & Sarukkai, (2019), p.5

⁴⁷ Personal interview, 07th July 2018

⁴⁸ Personal Interview, 21st July 2018

The fact that Kudumbasree came up in the response of other respondents when asked about examples of *pothu-idams* (public spaces) in Kerala today point to the role that KS has acquired in Kerala's public sphere today.⁴⁹ Even as representational (lived) spaces, KS show some promise in facing the communal and religious challenges faced by the public sphere. Vijayakumari mentioned rather proudly that her group was secular and had people from all castes. Other respondents seem to see as Kudumbasree as socialising spaces.

6.1.2 Rights-based movements

Although the creative energies of the new left movement of the 1970s (discussed in Section 5.2) failed politically, they transformed Kerala's cultural sphere—through poetry, fiction, theatre and cinema. Many literary figures who were disillusioned with the politics of this movement turned to the new social movements centred on right-based movements—human rights, consumer rights, environmental and tribal, Dalit, and feminist. As prominent Malayali poet and literary critic K. Satchidanandan noted later, many of these movements shared “ethical concerns with the 70's movement”, and attracted a large number of authors, activists and cultural figures.⁵⁰ These new spaces didn't turn to politics for answers, but on ethical commitments to values like justice, equality and freedom. They drew inspiration from Althusser and others who redefined the relationship between art and literature in politics; the idea that politics didn't always need to be led by a political party, and that liberal politics can be practised while simultaneously remaining critical of political party structures.⁵¹ These changes also reflected in the content of many authors and poets of the contemporary Malayali public sphere like Satchidanandan, B. Rajeevan and K.G. Sankara Pillai. K.G. Sankara Pillai who wrote about revolutionary poems like *Bengal*, *Ayodhya* and *Charithram* (History) in the 1970s turned towards a post-modernist school—his newer poems such as *Vazhi* (Way), *Cholkazhcha* and others were protests against neo-colonialism, urbanisation and commodification of the rural life.⁵²

K. Ajitha, who was in the forefront of the Naxal movement in Kerala in the late 1960s, writes in her autobiography, how the second national conference of feminist organisations held in Bombay in 1985 gave her a new lease of life after the Marxist-Leninist movement died its natural death:

“...I [had] considered feminist movements as a means of sexual promiscuity for vain women. But my experience at the Mumbai conference changed my perception of feminism...I came back from Mumbai with the firm belief in changing the

⁴⁹ Jithesh (25) said he thought KS did a great job to bring women into the public sphere, but pointed that they need to be kept independent from party interventions. Arun (33) also spoke about KS as being among the few “secular” spaces in Kerala today.

⁵⁰ Satchidanandan, (2008), p.150

⁵¹ Rajeevan, (2018), pp.19-20; K. Ramachandran, personal interview on 22nd July 2018

⁵² Hiranyan, (1997)

negative attitude of society towards women's issues in Kerala. I had decided to work for women's liberation movement from then on...That was how 'Bodhana' was formed."⁵³

Soon, other women's organizations were set up in Kerala—Sarah Joseph set up *Manushi*, *Prachodana* was set up at Trivandrum, *Chetana* at Thrissur and *Prabuddhabatha* at Payyannur being some. Around this time, female theatre also made a comeback in Kerala's public sphere after their decline in the 1940s.⁵⁴ The women's movement gained some momentum in the late 1990s with the decentralisation programme of the government and other allied projects like the Kudumbasree. *Kerala Sthree Vedi*, a forum of autonomous women's organisations was formed in 1996. Over the last two decades, Ajitha and her group have remained outside electoral politics but actively involved in other struggles for environmental and human rights causes, such as the protest against Coca Cola, struggles against projects threatening the environment, and against exploitation of the tribal communities in Attappadi.⁵⁵ The active role played by women through spaces such as these must be read alongside the success of KS units in allowing women their rightful place in the public sphere.

Over the last three decades, a number of common people have also moved away from the party structures to focus on rights-based activism. Four left-leaning respondents—K.P Ashraf (Fort Kochi), Arun and Babu (Kozhikode), and Ajith Kumar (Trivandrum)—believed that an excessive control and the 'rigid' party structures had led many people like themselves to look for spaces outside of political parties. K. Ramachandran, who has been an environmental activist for many decades now, says that these new causes have led the public sphere since the 1990s. After the 1990s, the left was carried away in the towards "electoral politics, opportunistic alliances, and economic change":

There was a situation where many youngsters felt disillusioned and lost with that kind of politics. There was a vacuum. There were several political activists who lost their faith in their politics, but at the same time had the energy to act. And they diverted it to environmental cause. There was an awareness that *development* had to be redefined...that we should not continue like this. Meetings were held at various places...we had one at *Korom* near Payyannur about development. A lot of people were invited to discuss. We had to question development. Development is not this. A paradigm shift was necessary⁵⁶

⁵³ Ajitha, (2008), pp.284-285

⁵⁴ Mathathil, (2014), pp.534-535

⁵⁵ Ajitha, (2008), p.287

⁵⁶ Personal interview, 22nd July 2018

Soon, such associations picked up cases like the movement against the Silent Valley Project in an ecologically sensitive area of the Western Ghats, Perigee Anti-nuclear struggle, Vizhinjam Port project, etc. When it appears that a movement benefits them electorally, representatives from political parties come on-board. At other times, they make it difficult to organise protests. In either case, Ramachandran argues that these movements have helped create a new collective space—a new *koottayma*—of people outside political differences. In this sense, they remain diverse, and issue-based, rather than party-ideology-based.

A number of projects, charity organisations and associations centred on social justice and health have also emerged in the last few decades or so. “Palliative care” is one such movement that came up in a few interviews when I asked respondents about spaces that bridged political and religious differences. Arun (33) says:

Palliative is an NGO, but you can still mention it here [as a social space]. There, no matter how many divisions you claim, ultimately everyone is together. Because when you're going to die, everyone dies the same. That is visible...in the last two-three years, I've been actively involved in palliative.⁵⁷

Death—the absence of life—is seen here as a space that nullifies divisions of caste, gender, religion or political differences.⁵⁸ The movement centred on the concept of charity led to a project in Kozhikode called Compassionate Kozhikode. Compassionate Kozhikode (CK) started as a platform to bring together like-minded people who can create a holistic destination out of Kozhikode.⁵⁹ The website of CK lays out that its purpose is to promote and focus on the “culture of sharing; sharing for the betterment of people and places”.⁶⁰ The idea is to initiate activities, groups, collectives and projects that spread across the city of Kozhikode—to reclaim ownership of its social spaces. Through their periodic engagement with social service, palliative care, art and cultural events, the group of volunteers—under the guidance of the then district collector Prashanth Nair⁶¹—initiated interventions such the District Collector’s Internship Program, educational scholarships, *Operation Suleimani* (aimed at feeding the poor and hungry run in partnership with hotels and restaurants in Kozhikode), *Yo Appooppa!* (an initiative to reach out to the elderly population to improve and extend their quality of life), Freedom Café, and *Tere Mere Beach Mein* (aimed at giving a facelift to the beach in Kozhikode and develop it as a vibrant space

⁵⁷ Personal interview, 21st July 2018

⁵⁸ It might be fruitful to see that this may not always be true, as the case of controversy around Asanthan’s dead body discussed in Chapter 1 demonstrates.

⁵⁹ Compassionate Kozhikode Website: <http://compassionatekozhikode.in/about>

⁶⁰ Compassionate Kozhikode Website: <http://compassionatekozhikode.in/about>

⁶¹ Prashanth Nair is a 2007 batch Kerala Cadre Indian Administrative Service officer who founded the CK initiative during his term as District Collector of Kozhikode. His constant and active engagement and approachability earned him the title “Collector Bro” among the people of Kerala.

Figure 8: Graffiti in Kozhikode, part of Compassionate Kozhikode project



Source: Picture taken by author, 18th July 2018

for socialising festivals, and tourism).⁶² The initiative also involved the redevelopment of city spaces to engage with the common public and encourage their participation. All the names and their imagery were borrowed from mainstream films, with an aim to attract youngsters (see Figure 8, a graffiti from popular film *Ustad Hotel*, used to advertise Compassionate Kozhikode's Operation Suleimani.)

Arun (33) who has been a part of the project since its inception, believes these are the new ventures that can bring people together. Having quit his job in the software industry in Bengaluru, and returning to Kozhikode a few years ago, Arun wanted to get involved with social work in the city. The works carried out by political parties did not seem like a viable option for him because he found them to have too much political interference and an emphasis on the publicity that belittles human dignity:

I remember there were students in private schools who were poor to pay fees. They would drop out. Political parties would have scholarship distributions, etc. So we would think this was the solution. But then the parties would get into publishing lists of those who got scholarships...it became about publicizing.⁶³

He contrasts such party-led initiatives with Compassionate Kozhikode:

There is no hierarchy in CK, it is a very dynamic space...Anyone who is part of the discourse or discussion is actually part of CK... so it's very organic...

⁶² A full list of 16 initiatives can be found on the CK website: <http://compassionatekozhikode.in/initiatives>

⁶³ Personal interview, 21st July 2018

As a co-ordinator of CK with the different schools in and around the city, Arun observes that the current generation have a concern for a society without necessarily being motivated by politics; their involvement, he says, is “issue-based, not political”. The fact that the project remained outside the influence of any specific political party was its strength:

...it made a lot of difference. We had different different-different people joining. To a level that we had never expected...there were women with conservative ideology, people with very fundamental ideas, and also extremely liberal people (*laughs*). People who were ready to get rounded up or beaten up for their liberal views...everyone stood together, towards a common goal. There, it was much more open and transparent. There was a freedom to communicate anything.

This “freedom to communicate” is something that Arun (also Ashraf and Babu) point out as important in these spaces, in stark contrast to the “rigid structures” that party associations provide. One of the projects, for instance, involved cleaning public rivers and wells. Arun mentions how it brought together some two to three thousand people who worked all day for this. It brought together a diverse crowd in a way few other activities or spaces did:

A very religious or political person...or people coming from opposite poles, they will think by the end of the day that they were working together towards a common goal, despite what they think of each other. That is a kind of reflection...to somewhere make them raise the question. Compassionate Kozhikode is very often just a spark, an ignition to fuel that already exists there.

In her work on political violence and community in Kannur, Ruchi Chaturvedi (2015) makes the argument that in their search for commonness and union, a new generation of disillusioned local level workers across the political spectrum often indicate conditions in which ‘anti-communitarian communities’ and anti-communitarian politics may be forged.⁶⁴ Of the three people in her study, Saleem—the only one who continued to play an active political role after being reprimanded by the Party—continued to do so through a new visual arts association and a charity that provided relief during natural disasters.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Chaturvedi, (2015), pp.182,184

⁶⁵ Saleem was reprimanded by the party apparently for trying to co-host a public event with the Muslim League. The other two people in her study—Preman and Rajeevan—had retreated into the private sphere after their bad experience with the party. See: Chaturvedi (2015), pp.182-183

6.1.3 Culture, Arts and Music

Kerala has had a rich history of literary and film festivals organised across the State. The important conferences organised by the literary and trade unions movements have been briefly discussed in the last chapter. Simultaneously, there also emerged other voluntary collectives in the twentieth century that organised such conferences, music and arts festivals across the state. Arguably, the origin of such independent arts-collectives may be traced back to the All India Writer's Conference organised by artists, writers and thinkers influenced by M. Govindan in 1964. As has been discussed in Section 5.1.2, M. Govindan's efforts had been to create voluntary associations that maintained an autonomous nature and pledged allegiance not to any political party but to the general public. In recent years, many film clubs, arts associations and independent film festivals emerged in Kerala. This includes the bigger events like biennales and the International Film Festival of Kerala, but also smaller independent initiatives like *Manaveeyam Veedhi*—a stretch of road that has become a hub of art, music, streettheatre and other cultural events—in Thiruvananthapuram, which has successfully organised events for the last seventeen years. Ajith has been involved with *Manaveeyam Veedhi* (MV) since the beginning and is now a coordinator of the events there summarises the motive of the space thus:

Manaveeyam Veedhi's politics is one of diversity. Anyone can put forward any issue there...the only condition being it must be through *kala* (art). One can speak against fascism, but it can't be a speech over a microphone. At the same time, we don't allow visible political inclinations there. Everyone participating there have different politics, we also have people with no politics, everyone.⁶⁶

These are grassroots level movements where matters of public interest are discussed, as Ajith mentions here. Visible political party lineage is avoided since the organisers decided that this was an unnecessary hindrance in bringing a diverse crowd together. *Manaveeyam Veedhi*'s autonomy—as a perceived and lived space outside direct political control—is what allows for these spaces to actively with and critique the State, rather than fetishize it. Such opposition to the omnipotence of the State, Lefebvre argued, is a necessary condition for *autogestion*⁶⁷. This is not to say that these spaces are apolitical, as Ajith points out:

What we must understand is that these people are politically conscious—they want to react to issues, while not under the banner of these so-called political parties; they

⁶⁶ Personal Interview, 27th July 2018

⁶⁷ Lefebvre, (2009), p.134

don't like to be labelled like that. This became clear during the Kathua case.⁶⁸ We organised a protest gathering thereafter the girl's death in Kathua. It was shared through Facebook and WhatsApp, and some families came with their small babies to participate. We had spread a cloth from one end of the road to the other for people to draw on...so mothers and fathers were participating with their young children. When I spoke to some of them, they said that they wanted to speak up and react to it—they were all interested. But all such gatherings organised at the time were mostly by political parties. So when an independent cultural group organised an event at Manaveeyam, they hurried to us with interest.⁶⁹

The individuals who participate in events at MV are not apolitical—far from it. At the same time, they turn to MV as a space where they can engage with public issues without being controlled by the party-structures or norms. It is a public road, modified to serve a specific purpose; a conceived space that has been appropriated for a specific purpose.⁷⁰

Another art-collective that has emerged as a major social space in the last decade in Kerala is the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB)—an international exhibition of contemporary art organised biannually since 2012 in Fort Kochi and Mattancherry areas of Ernakulam. Through initiatives that reflect on the lives, history and spatiality of the region, the KMB has emerged as a large social space where people

Figure 9: A folk music performance at Manaveeyam Veedhi



Source: Picture taken by author, 08th July 2018

⁶⁸ An 8-year old girl, Asifa Bano, was abducted, raped and murdered by a group of men in her village in Jammu and Kashmir, in January 2018. The incident made national news and events were organised in different cities to raise awareness about the issue and demand justice for Asifa.

⁶⁹ Personal Interview, 27th July 2018

⁷⁰ Lefebvre, (1991), pp.164-168.

from across differences are brought together by and for art. In the contemporary world, the democratisation of politics must be understood not just in the limited sense of participatory political action but must stimulate politics in the everyday spaces and create new ways of engaging with the local. The KMB's constant efforts to engage artistically with the area of Mattancherry is a good example. In their 2018 Edition, one of the projects was the creation of colourful street murals with scenes of everyday life and common people from the region.⁷¹ Vipin Dhanurdharan's installation at the edition was a "Community Kitchen", where anyone could come and cook and share food. The installation was a huge success.⁷² The main aim was to encourage people to come together, bridge gaps, engage productively, and he draws inspiration from the revolutionary protests of *panthibhojanam* which was organised by Sahodaran Ayyappan (discussed in Section 4.2.4). Interestingly, the busiest food-store at the last KMB was the one run by Kudumbasree units.

While a large collective like the KMB has survived, Ashraf, resident of Mattancherry, says that the independent smaller collectives struggle to survive. He gives the example of a Bob Marley festival that was being organised by some enthusiasts for many years with an attempt to revive the public sphere:

"The Bob Marley festival was one such conscious attempt to retrieve public sphere. We started it about ten years ago, with pictures, cinema, documentaries, discussions on contemporary political issues...Seeing our success, the so-called Communist Party hijacked it. We used to organise it on [Marley's] death anniversary, calling it *Paatum Porattavum*, they moved it to February, to the birthday. And they reduced it to simply *Bum-bum Bob Marley*.⁷³"

Ashraf moved away from party-based activities to independent ones based on arts, music and human rights because he felt these are more "open-door" (as opposed to the Party ones which he described as being closed-door). To him, the purpose is clear—we must encourage secular *koottaymas* that promote "public socializing, discussions focussing on progressive principles, [and] on the human elements from within religion." Since party spaces are conceived for a specific purpose—to promulgate party ideologies and maintain control, these initiatives must come, instead, from the lived spaces that people control. Such an understanding of the need for social spaces to be reconstituted from "low to high" (as opposed to previously produced "high to low") was identified by Lefebvre as being a characteristic

⁷¹ Far-left sympathisers were not convinced by these efforts. One local from Kochi said to me in a conversation that these were mere "eyewash" democratisation, and that real local artists continued to be sidelined by the KMB Foundation's efforts.

⁷² See: <https://www.fortkochi.net/community-kitchen-at-biennale.html>

⁷³ The event organised by People's Political Forum, was called Bom Bolo Bob Marley and was held on February 6th 2018. The Forum claims to be a group of independent thinkers, but Ashraf insisted that it was a Party event. Possibly, PPF one of the many left-leaning cultural organisations that function in the state.

feature of general *antogestion*.⁷⁴ Other interview respondents also shared this view that a reconstruction of civil society is necessary, and that arts and cultural organisations hold potential in today's neoliberal societies to become social spaces where people associate with each other on issue-based-politics. Hema Joseph has associated with the Malayala Aikya Vedi (Malayalam Unity Forum) which works to promote the Malayalam language for a decade now and recently took over as ac convenor. Over recent years, they have managed to get support from the wider public in promoting the regional language. She believes the success is because it wasn't promoted by any specific political party:

“The success was that it was issue-based. Although most members were left-leaning, we have members in it who come from various political backgrounds. We are presenting a politics based on language. This is related to Kerala's development.”

Comparing two different campaigns of Malayala Aikya Vedi in 2010 and 2016, she feels that people have become a lot more receptive of the importance of language protection in recent years. More recently, they led protests outside the Kerala Public Service Commission (PSC) demanding that entrance exams for the civil service jobs in the state be conducted also in Malayalam. The protests saw support from leading cultural and literary figures and politicians, and the PSC announced eventually that the demands would be met.⁷⁵ This needs to be read with the discussion regarding a revived interest in public education in recent years, contrary to the trend in the 1990s and 2000s. Arun who lives in Kozhikode and has been actively involved in the Compassionate Kozhikode initiative, also mentioned

Figure 10: SM Street and Mananchira Square, a cultural corridor in Kozhikode city



Source: Picture taken by author, 18th July 2018

⁷⁴ Lefebvre, (2009), p.193

⁷⁵ Anon., (2019)

how music groups based in and around Mananchira in Kozhikode also succeed in bringing together a diverse crowd for music even today, although a lot of them are from an older generation.⁷⁶

6.1.4 Decentralisation and Autonomy

In all the spaces discussed above, three characteristics can be identified, and it would be relevant to discuss these briefly before analysing them critically. Firstly, these new spaces demonstrate that the concept of civil society has been redefined broadly in the twenty-first century. Some of the most active civil society spaces exist not within party organisational structures, but outside of them; “issue-based” mobilization now increasingly supplements “party-based” ones. As interview respondents pointed out, common people today wish to be engaged politically, but “outside the rigid party-structures”.⁷⁷ This relative autonomy, secondly, is increasingly seen not as a weakness, but as a strength. Finally, these characteristics point towards the potential for these social spaces to be emancipatory spaces. By nature, the new spaces are conceived not under the aegis of any specific power structures (like castes, State or religion), but by issues (economic, cultural, or social). The importance of music and art as social events that engage the public through their senses (smell, sounds, touch) gather increased importance.⁷⁸ In other words, the secular progressive nature of society depends on the ability of such social spaces to continually engage with, question and critique the dominant political, economic and social forces; their ability to *autogestion*.

6.2 *Autogestion*: Contradictions and challenges

The discussion in the last section regarding the devolution of power to grassroots and initiatives to redefine a broad understanding of civil society over the last three decades points towards three important observations. Firstly, this project has succeeded in broadening the meaning and understanding of civil society organisations. New spaces such as the ones discussed in the previous section must be given their analytical importance while assessing social relations in the twenty-first century Kerala. As has been discussed, one of the specific aims of the decentralization project was to encourage such broad-alliances at the local levels. The initiatives discussed here are not completely independent of state control; Kudumbasree, Compassionate Kozhikode, Manaveeyam Veedhi, KMB, all receive some patronage and support from the governments. Yet, they come under a broader definition of civil society that is not limited to party-affiliated organisations with vertical hierarchical structures. Secondly, all the associational spaces discussed here are peculiar for their insistence on autonomy being their strength. Compared to the spaces discussed in the last chapter, the nature of

⁷⁶ Personal interview, 21st July 2018

⁷⁷ Most openly, Arun, Ashraf, Hema Joseph and Ajith mentioned this in their interviews that the strength of their movements today is the fact that they remained “free” from political parties. This is not to say that parties don’t mobilize people too.

⁷⁸ Guru & Sarukkai, (2019), pp.10-11

social movements in the contemporary times mean that these spaces seem to be conscious of the threats of political encroachment, and are resisting against such moves to keep them “issue-based”. For a large part of the twentieth century, Trade Unions and party associations played an important role in mobilising people and engaging them in public life. However, studies show that there has been a decline in class-based associations in the recent decades, which have been replaced by new forms of associational lives centred on particularistic loyalties like religion and caste on the one hand or issue-based ones on the other.⁷⁹ Jos and John observed in 2003 that the “class-based organisations had failed to cultivate or internalize civic values”.⁸⁰ Their comparative study of five regions within a panchayat showed that the most vibrant social spaces were observed in the one where the active associations were secular non-party affiliated ones like Arts and Sports Clubs. They observed that trust between members cutting across communal and caste divide was highest where non-political and non-community based horizontal organisations were most active.⁸¹ In comparison, the region where caste-based associations had increased in the recent past, it was observed that there was also a general lack of trust, although the communities felt that the trust within them had increased.⁸² Thirdly, and lastly, we see that the emancipatory potential of these spaces cannot be fully understood if we only study them as representations of space. The perception that the general public have of these spaces, and the lived experiences of these spaces are equally important. A separation of social space—into conceived, perceived and lived—allows us to study the contradictions and contests that continue to exist at the representational (lived) levels. Only recently have such attempts emerged in Kerala, with academic and policy interest turning towards the need for secular and pluralistic spaces in nourishing a democratic society.⁸³

Such an analysis reveals that social spaces are an arena of constant tussle, the contemporary one between the state, capital and religious forces on the one hand to control space, and broad-based alliances and civil society organisations in representational spaces that are constantly challenging any such attempts of control. Since the 1990s, there has been a simultaneous and rapid increase also in religious organisations and associations. A study from 2004 notes:

“...the civil society organisations that have historically played the most active role in Kerala—labour unions, political parties and political party-affiliated mass organizations—have seen the least growth in activity. In contrast, religious organizations and women’s organisations, which traditionally have not been as

⁷⁹ Chathukulam & John, (2003); Aravindan, (2006)

⁸⁰ Chathukulam & John, (2003), p.227

⁸¹ Chathukulam & John, (2003), pp.231-232

⁸² Chathukulam & John, (2003), pp235-236

⁸³ See, for instance, the Nair & Menon, (2007);Thiranagama, (2019);Christy, (2019);Varghese, (2014); Venugopalan, (2014); Chathukulam & John, (2003).

central to political life in Kerala as unions and parties, have experienced the greatest increase in activity”⁸⁴

When comparing the impact of the campaign on associational activity, respondents in the study claimed that religious organisations, women’s organisations, and secular cultural organisations had a much higher impact in the decade of the 1990s as compared to labour unions, party-affiliated organisations and political parties.⁸⁵ Even as the social spaces discussed in this chapter have upheld secular values and created broad alliances, the ever-increasing combination of capital and religion raise new challenges to the progressive public sphere. In this section, we look in detail at these contests in representational spaces.

6.2.1 Associational Life and Political Response:

Kerala Padanam, the extensive study of Kerala society conducted in 2006, notes that while 62.4 percentage respondents were members of a cooperative society and 38.2 percent of Self-Help Groups, only 23.3 percent had membership in political parties and only 16.3 percent in Trade Unions.⁸⁶ Interestingly, the response of the political parties to such spaces suggests that they try to either regulate them or appropriate them. Ramachandran who has been an environmental activist since the 1970s said that the State tried to control the events organised by the environmental activists by making it difficult for them to get permissions to organise public events for a microphone, speakers, etc. This is an indirect control over public events. In other spaces like Manaveeyam Veedhi, the activists struggle constantly to fight back against these political parties and their encroachment. Arun said the same about the Compassionate Kozhikode project, the success of which he attributes to its apolitical nature. Yet, a number of such charity initiatives are now replicated under the banner of political parties. A popular initiative in the recent years has been the initiative to deliver packed lunch to be distributed in the government hospitals for the poor (see Figure 11). Today, party-affiliated organisations have joined the bandwagon, and as some people I met in Thiruvananthapuram said to me in a casual chat, they publicise it widely and expect to make political gains from initiatives like these.

A similar trend of attempted political hijacking can be seen in the case of Manaveeyam Veedhi, the art collective whose case has been discussed above—the challenge of the organisers is to maintain MV as an independent space and not succumb to party pressure on one side, and commercialisation on the other. Once MV started getting a lot of press coverage and public support, he says some members from political parties (across the spectrum) tried to “hijack” it, by planting trees and hoisting party flags.

⁸⁴ Chaudhuri, et al., (2004), p.49

⁸⁵ Chaudhuri, et al., (2004), p.49

⁸⁶ This survey was conducted before the Kudumbashree expanded. Today, the figures for SHGs and Cooperatives would be higher. See: Aravindan, (2006), pp.158-159

Figure 11: Poster in Thiruvananthapuram by left-leaning youth organisation DYFI



Source: Picture taken by author, 07th July 2018

The patrons of MV opposed these vehemently. A few years ago, there was an attempt to introduce mobile food-courts in the area by some entrepreneurs. This is how a collective called *Manaveeyam Thervorakkoottam* (Wayside friends of Manaveeyam) was formed:

“...we knew of a move to commercialise this space through the news; to open mobile food courts in the evening through a programme called 'Food on Wheels'...naturally this would change the nature of the place, from being cultural to becoming a commercial space. We got together and fought against it.. this was during the UDF government, Muneer Sir was the social welfare minister. The food court project was under his department...we gave him a memorandum, met him and spoke to him and he withdrew the project. That was a big victory for us.”

The success of Manaveeyam has led to the government putting aside a budget to initiate similar spaces in all districts across the state. This is a welcome move. Political hijacking, as we have discussed in the case of the decentralisation campaign, only weakens social mobilizations, and the new spaces strive to maintain their autonomy.⁸⁷

Apart from weekly events centred on music, art and film, Manaveeyam Veedhi holds a yearly Queer festival for the transgender community, and as of 2018 September, were undertaking plans to hold an

⁸⁷ Törnquist, (2018), pp.21-22

international street festival.⁸⁸ Established international festivals in Kerala such as the International Film Festival at Thiruvananthapuram and the Kochi-Muziris-Biennale, which has emerged as the largest art and cultural festival in Kerala over the last decade, also create the social spaces necessary for public engagement with socio-political issues. Apart from these, a number of smaller independent initiatives like Manaveeyam Veedhi have emerged over the last decade. Even independent film societies have started to make a comeback. During fieldwork, I happened to attend a film screening by Open Frame film society in Payyannur, which had organised an event to declare their solidarity with the women in Malayalam cinema in the backdrop of the #MeToo movement. Another example in the recent years has been the Kodungalloor Film Society, a group of film enthusiasts comprising of retired and serving government officials, schoolteachers and others. The Society got noticed when they filed a petition against the Supreme Court directive in 2016 that ordered the national anthem to be played before every film, and for people to stand up in respect.⁸⁹ In general, the broad-based civil societies have allowed for new associational spaces that transcend political differences. Some, like Compassionate Kozhikode, have found a way to maintain autonomy from political hijacking by making anonymity and non-publicity a core value of their programme. This, organisers at CK believe, automatically keep political parties away since they cannot benefit electorally from an anonymous programme. Irrespective of the nature of these new spaces, one challenge remains that being mostly volunteer-based and independent, coordination and economic sustainability remain challenges, especially when a nexus of private capital and communalism have seen a rise in the last decades.

6.2.2 Religious Spaces and the Secular Response

In the twenty-first century, the struggle of the left has been to dominate the cultural space, which has now been inundated by religious alternatives. The serious threat this raises is acknowledged even by left-sympathetic scholars from Kerala. Marxist historian K.N. Panikkar has argued, for instance, that the “innumerable cultural organisations promoting and disseminating communal ideas in the guise of patronizing literature, theatre, traditional arts and science or the renovation of village temples...have led to the emergence of a cultural right in Kerala”.⁹⁰ K.E.N Kunjahammad, another left intellectual from Kerala, noted recently: “Only one organisation has succeeded in winning culturally despite losing politically—the Sangh Parivar...Indian society will have to pay a big price if popular struggles that cut across differences of opinion don't evolve”.⁹¹ These observations are not far from the truth, as interview respondents from the present research indicate. Two general observations will be relevant to make here.

⁸⁸ Since then, these efforts have been hit. Speaking over phone in early 2019, Ajith mentioned to me that this is because a lot of the funds that were collected in 2018 were channelized towards the flood relief.

⁸⁹ Varma, (2018)

⁹⁰ Panikkar, (2014), p.434

⁹¹ Kunjahammad, (2018), pp.19, 21-22; also see Kunjahammad, (2010), pp.09-31

Figure 12: Shobhayatra in Thrissur



Source: Picture taken by author, 12th September 2017

Firstly, the spread of organisations that focussed on religious spaces made it possible to mobilise women in large numbers. We have already discussed how despite early promises, the twentieth century public sphere continued to be gendered, and women were assigned their role in the private sphere. The new initiatives like the *Shobha Yatra*, and the revival of rituals like Attukal Pongala allowed women to redefine an otherwise sacrosanct space of the street;⁹² in other words, they allow for an appropriation of a social space, albeit temporarily. The RSS' activities centred on temples meant that they have succeeded in bringing women out actively into public spaces for cultural and religious activities. When the right-wing organisations across the state organise the *Shobha Yatras*, it brings together women, men and children from all caste and class backgrounds for a procession on to the public spaces. Women are regular participants at the regular Balagokulam events where children are imparted religious education, generally at a nearby temple. The high participation of women when the BJP called on volunteers to form a human-chain to protest the CPM's position on Sabarimala was noted.⁹³

Secondly, an increased religiosity along with an increased wealth meant that the “privatization” of religious spaces became common practice during this period. The case of Hema Joseph who remembers non-Hindus in her village being denied entry to the Hindu temple starting the 1980s has

⁹² Sreedhar, (2017), pp.148-149

⁹³ The LDF responded by forming a 620 kilometre long human chain on 1st January 2019 and launching a “new reformation” (*navoathanam*) campaign. In a sense, it was an appropriation of public space by both sides to prove their point.

already been alluded to earlier. By the 1990s, the walling of temple premises became common practice across Kerala. Besides Hema Joseph, Ajikumar, Kureephuzha Sreekumar and Ajith Kumar all recollect that the temples in their village were walled and public grounds ceased to be used by the larger public in the 1990s. Ajikumar also recollects that this was the period when RSS *shakhas* started organising in the temple grounds.⁹⁴ Younger respondents reflect this change. Jitheesh (25) says that he thinks temples *were* public spaces in the past, but not anymore. Gopal (25), when asked about what public spaces meant to him, mentioned that he considered the local temple premises a public space. Incidentally, the *Koodalmanikyam* Temple that he is alluding to prohibits non-Hindus from entering the temple.⁹⁵ K. Ramachandran comments that this is a recent change:

In my childhood, nobody went to the temples. There is a temple nearby but we only went to the festival. This is not the case now. Temples have something or the other going on all the time...Ramayana month, then there will be some renovation, they will fix the flagpole, then plate it in gold...there are now many activities in and around the temples. What is astonishing is that young people are there. It is not old people who are leading this.⁹⁶

At a time when secular public spaces have been reducing, the strengthening of religious spaces like temples will have a definite impact on public consciousness and the religiosity of the people. What is interesting is the nature of this privatisation. Unlike the exclusion of lower castes from temples on an ideological basis in the 19th century, what we see today is a material—spatial exclusion of sections of populations. This is augmented by the increased income inequality—the idea that whoever contributed to a temple more in wealth gains more access over the space. Osella and Osella’s study comparing Nair and Ezhava participation in the local temple festivities in the 1990s elucidates this point.⁹⁷

The control over temples, which has already been discussed, raises a more direct challenge to the left. As K.N. Panikkar has argued, the secular response to these challenges has been two-fold and unconvincing. On the one hand, there was an attempt to dissociate from the religious in the cultural sphere. Incidents from the recent past like the debate around Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan’s (of the CPIM) direction to state employees to not use office hours for celebration of (religious) festivals, a minister’s call to avoid lighting of lamps and prayers at public functions, a senior Marxist leader’s questioning of the inclusion of a Sanskrit verse in the International Yoga Day celebrations, etc. can be viewed as part of this move. The left’s attempts to uphold the secular ideal have been met, on the other

⁹⁴ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

⁹⁵ This presses another question whether it reflects that the understanding of “public” itself has been shrinking over the years.

⁹⁶ Personal interview, 22nd July 2018

⁹⁷ Osella & Osella, (2000)

Figure 13: A cultural procession held under the aegis of the CPI(M) near Taliparamba in Kannur



Source: The Hindu, 26th August 2016

hand, by instances where the Community Party resorts to over-accommodation of religious sentiments, rituals and practices. This tension continues to the day. For instance, the celebration of ‘Krishna Jayanthi’ (a religious festival celebrating the birth of Hindu god *Krishna*) in 2016 under the guise of Onam (secular harvest festival which, although with Hindu rituals and myths, is celebrated across the religions of the state) celebrations had drawn severe criticism to an extent where it ‘alienated true comrades from the party’.⁹⁸ In another instance, one of the CPI (M) processions came under a row after it featured *Thidambu Nritham*, a temple ritual (see Figure 13).⁹⁹ The unsaid rule of the communist party has urged its cadres to involve ‘culturally’ in temple festivals, while State Committee members have been asked to dissociate from going to temples.¹⁰⁰

But these moves have come under criticism from the public across political ideologies. Criticising this attempted renaissance political analyst N.N. Pearson states: ‘How can a party that has diluted its own ideology for the sake of power lead a renaissance campaign? The politically enlightened people of Kerala can see through the games.’¹⁰¹ Even in the 1990s, the equation of religion and politics came to become an important one to address. In 1997 - a decade after the CPM laid out a policy that their only God was the ‘Red God’ – the then Communist Chief Minister Nayanar’s meeting with the Pope became a matter of much debate within Kerala. Opinion pieces were written criticising the gesture and

⁹⁸ ‘Desperate Left goes on temple run’, *The Times of India*, (15th March 2016)

⁹⁹ Nazeer, (2016)

¹⁰⁰ Although there weren’t media reports with these directions, at least three people I met during field visits told me during casual chats that this was the unofficial party stand on the issue.

¹⁰¹ Devasia, (2016); also see Menon, (1995), p.23

to them, Nayanar quipped that the meeting was going to neither make the Pope a Communist nor make himself a non-Communist and that the matter need not be blown out of proportion.¹⁰²

6.3 Conclusion

The decentralisation project changed radically how civil society spaces functioned at the grassroots level—both formal spaces and informal ones. As a report observed in the turn of the century,

“...the campaign has created new structures of governance and participation...new institutions have been built, new processes of local decision-making have been created and new channels of participation have been opened. In sum, new loci of governance and new spaces of citizenship now mark Kerala’s political and developmental map”.¹⁰³

It also observes that the campaign has had a positive impact on social inclusion and opened up the public sphere to women and SCs, and that succeeded in creating a generally positive opinion of the campaign across political and religious differences.¹⁰⁴ However, they note that people from poorer backgrounds have been more involved with these initiatives, and people tend to move away as they got richer. The spatiality of contemporary Kerala, as has been discussed in this chapter, remains to maintain the autonomy of secular spaces while encouraging them to raise issues of public interest and engage with larger public constructively. Meanwhile, it is also important that these groups include people from across religious, caste, gender and class divides. The economic, political changes of the last decades suggest that each of these cleavages have strengthened as a result of an intense struggle over social spaces, between the state, capital, and communalism.

J. Devika, who has written extensively on the post-1990s decentralisation project in Kerala, notes, correctly, that the new model has seen the function of “welfare” being taken up by local communities that now fill a space emptied or created by the transformation of political society.¹⁰⁵ However, this transformation, Devika and Thampi continue, is informed “not by the new social movement’s conception of civil society as the space for redefining and renewing the domain of the ‘political’, as by a more Putnamite notion of a civil society composed of private voluntary associations”.¹⁰⁶ They conclude that this has led to a watering down of the political component of civil society, reducing their ability to be critical spaces in Kerala, as compared to Latin America where they are seen as counter-hegemonic spaces by focussing on the experience of power in the everyday lives. The present research suggests

¹⁰² Govindankutty, (1997); Vijayachandran, (1997).

¹⁰³ Chaudhuri, et al., (2004), p.67

¹⁰⁴ Chaudhuri, et al., (2004), pp.68-69

¹⁰⁵ Devika & Thampi, (2007), p.48

¹⁰⁶ Devika & Thampi, (2007), p.48

that while Devika and Thampi's conclusion may be true in the case of Kudumbasree units in Kerala, the many new social spaces that have emerged—including the arts, charity and health associations discussed in this chapter—continue to engage rather critically with the State. The problem with Putnam's understanding is that it still only looks at the “representations of space”, negating the possibility that the lived spaces often outgrow their conceived purposes. Even with Kudumbasree, the authors concede, there have been a number of positive effects on the public sphere. The true potential of such social spaces will be revealed not by approaching them from a Putnamite understanding of civil society, but by deconstructing the contradictions between the conceptions, perceptions and lived realities of these spaces. In other words, be in the case of Kerala, or that of the new movements in Latin America (that Lefebvre actually discusses in detail in *The Production of Space*),¹⁰⁷ the ability for any social space can be better understood if we consider their ability for autogestion.

The emergence of a new spatiality in the 1990s was different from the spatiality that preceded it. Firstly, the emergence of issue-based politics outside of conventional political party spaces has redefined the politics of mass mobilisation. As seen in this chapter, more and more people have come forward to associate themselves with social spaces and organisations that focus their public engagement on rights based activism, arts, music or charity. Secondly, social media and internet have etched their space in public sphere and transformed how citizens interact, organise, consume news and form opinions. Meanwhile, the encroachment on physical spaces by capital, communalism and state forces continue to be a threat.

Contemporary Kerala's public sphere can be placed in stark contrast to the one that existed a century ago. The twentieth century was a period of extremely rapid and wide-reaching changes in Kerala's social, political and economic sphere. The traditional caste-based spatiality and power structures quickly crumbled and were replaced by a new social formation with new representations of space (conceived space) and new spatial relations (perceived space). Despite such stark contrasts, one commonality may be traced out—the continued prominence of social spaces in challenging the hegemonic power structures—be it caste, state and/or capital. This struggle for control “from above”, and resistance “from below” are, as Lefebvre argued, part of the unending struggle for the control of social spaces.

¹⁰⁷ See, for instance, Lefebvre, (1991)pp.373-374

7. Spatial Contests: Hegemony and Resistance

Kerala's modern history has seen two phases of broad-based collective mobilization of people: first in the 1930s for civil and political rights and land reforms, and then since the late 1980s as part of the decentralisation campaign.¹ Both emerged at important points in history when radical social and political changes were affecting society-at-large, and these movements were pivotal in giving direction to Kerala's modernity and the public sphere. This research studies the role of public spaces in the context of these social transformations and argues that a spatial analysis is important to unravel the complexities of how modernity and the public sphere are shaped in specific contexts. By tracing the transformation of social spaces over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I argue that we can arrive at certain characteristic features that have catalysed the struggle for spatiality in modern Kerala. Understanding these changes will allow us to make better sense of how modernity was shaped in the context of Kerala. Changes in the traditional spatiality had already started to emerge in the nineteenth century; and the critical subversion of the traditional caste order in Kerala inevitably meant the re-conception, production or appropriation of conceived, perceived and lived spaces. While these new spaces played a major role in creating a politically conscious public, it failed to engage critically with the question of gender. By the 1980s, a new spatiality emerged because of the internal contradictions and external economic, social and political pressures. Consequently, the government adopted a new model of participatory politics that included the devolution of power to the local governments, and a redefinition of civil society to include broad-based alliances that cut across political differences. As a result, the transformation of space in the context of the challenge of communalism and neo-liberalism was met by a push to create grassroots level movements that uphold secular and progressive political values. The present research ends with a preliminary study of the contemporary struggles for social spaces, asserting that the conceptual tool of *autogestion* can allow us to unpack these ongoing transformations.

Social spaces in contemporary Kerala suggest that the struggle for hegemony and resistance is far from settled. These struggles continue to be manifested in the everyday lives and experiences of Malayalis. While most of these are banal everyday instances that go unnoticed, some are serious enough to challenge—even shock—the collective consciousness of a society that has taken secularism and tolerance for granted over the twentieth century. One such incident happened in February 2018, when Madhu, an Adivasi man, was lynched to death by a crowd in Palakkad district. Hailing from a tribal hamlet in the mountains, Madhu had ventured into a village in the foothills where he was assaulted by a group of about fifteen men who accused him of theft. Madhu later succumbed to the injuries, and it emerged that he stole groceries because he was hungry. The incident shook Kerala's public

¹ Törnquist, (2018), p.15

consciousness and was a matter of endless conversations, news debates and articles at the time on the questions of morality and social justice. Speaking on the issue, Adivasi poet Ashokan Marayoor pointed out:

“Every evening, all the men in the *ooru* (tribal hamlet or village) generally meet at a space called the *sathram*. The *sathram* is an adivasi’s public place. If someone in the village was missing, it was customary to check on him/her. This practice exists even today. We talk about that day’s events in the forest. Madhu’s death indicated a failure of such spaces. No one noticed his absence and loneliness.”²

He suggests that the complexity of the issue cannot be fully grasped without understanding spatiality of tribal communities. The *sathram* has been an important part of maintaining a social formation in tribal villages. This idea of the village elders meeting and discussing the events of the day was a common feature in most rural communities. Ashokan points out that this practice, which has long died in mainstream society, has also started to fade away in the tribal communities in the contemporary times. In the media trials on public morality and social justice in today’s *times*, such nuances of *space* go unnoticed. In the last few years, one can identify many such instances when a progressive secular public sphere—long taken for granted in Kerala—has begun to unravel.³ Each of them can be analysed from the perspective of changing spatial relations in the modern times. The resilience of a progressive public sphere has come to be tested repeatedly. The complexities of these questions cannot be understood if we study the public sphere or modernity as homogenous or “top-down” concepts.

In this research, modernity has been studied, instead, as contests between hegemonic powers—caste, state, neoliberalism—attempting to dominate the spatiality in society, and the resistance from democratising social spaces—*autogestion* being the near-contemporary manifestation. A study of the history of social spaces reveals that every time a hegemonic power attempts to dominate society, new ways of resistance emerge that challenge such dominance. And public spaces have played an important role in such transformations. The emergence of teashops, reading rooms, public schools and other spaces in the early twentieth century were a result of (and resulted in) the movement to break away from traditional caste-structures. Similarly, as contemporary society presents new ways of control, social spaces must respond by adopting newer ways of social mobilisation. In other words, the endeavour in this research has been to complicate the linear narrative about modernity and explore the dialectic between hegemonic powers and resistance in society, as manifested in space. Any hegemonic power,

² Marayoor & Madayi, (2018)

³ The murder of Kevin (23) by his girlfriend’s family because he belonged to a lower caste, the cases of Asanthan, the caste-wall in Vadayampady already mentioned in the Introduction, the Sabarimala verdict and the socio-political impacts, the attack on poets like Kureepuzha Sreekumar by the right-wing, are some of the many such incidents.

for its survival, must control social spaces. The problem with most studies of modern democracies is that by focussing on the public sphere alone, they fall into the trap of leaving out the actual spaces of debate and discussion that emerge from the struggle between (and in) the three components of the spatial triad—representations of space (conceived space), spatial practice (perceived space) and representational space (lived space). These constitute, in Lefebvre’s words, a dialectical unity. In the following section, I shall elaborate on the possibilities and challenges that have emerged from a preliminary study of the contemporary social spaces. Thereafter, I shall summarise the core arguments of the research, and argue why a focus on social spaces is important in the present context.

7.1. Contemporary Spaces: Possibilities and Challenges

The last three decades have seen a new form of grassroots level politics shaping up in Kerala—one that builds on *autogestion* and decentralisation, arts, music and charity organisations, and issue-based movements (human rights, environmental rights, queer rights, etc). I have discussed their features in the last chapter, but I shall summarise the strengths and point out some challenges to these new social spaces here. Although it is early to generalise on the nature of such movements, a few observations can be made, based on the data collected from interviews and participatory observations, and keeping in mind the trajectory of social spaces in Kerala’s modern history. Firstly, an analysis of contemporary movements using *autogestion* as an analytical tool makes a strong case that although these spaces may not

Figure 14: A poster of an event organised by Kudumbasree and Manaveeyam Veedhi



Source: Manaveeyam Theruvorakkoottam Facebook page

have the institutional promise or organisational strength of political parties or trade unions, they must nevertheless be nourished since they reconstruct social spaces “from below”. In other words, they have the potential to take radical democracy to the grassroots, where social needs would be determined by actions of interested parties, and not by “experts”.⁴ This, as Lefebvre argues, is the essence of true democracy, and the focus of analysis shifts from conceived spaces (representations of space) towards lived spaces (representational space).

Secondly, the state must encourage and facilitate coordination between the various independent civil society organisations that have emerged, but interest must also be taken by larger initiatives such as the Kochi Muziris Biennale in creating such networks and nurturing smaller independent organisations. Some such efforts have already been made in recent years. Recently, Kudumbasree, Manaveeyam Veedhi and *Thalika* (a biodegradable utensils manufacturer) jointly organised an event to create awareness about environmental pollution (See Image 14). Here, we see a women’s SHG movement and an arts collective jointly organise an event for an environmental cause. Similarly, on 30th December 2019, a unique campaign, supported by the government but led by volunteers and independent organisations was launched when a massive gathering of women braved the dark to walk the streets and claim their rights to public spaces across the state.⁵ Once again, spaces like Manaveeyam Veedhi played an important part. Kudumbasree has also been roped into the KMB in the last few years. Such initiatives strengthen *autogestion* by nurturing plural social spaces. That these events are organised in public spaces like roads, beaches and public grounds tell us that these spaces, which have remained pivotal to the modernisation of society, continue to be appropriated in ways that resist a neoliberal agenda. Moreover, they also encourage sections who have generally been kept outside of such spaces to appropriate them.

Thirdly, care must be taken so that these initiatives remain secular and diverse by ensuring that they cut across political, gender and religious differences. Respondents who have been actively involved in the contemporary social spaces—Hema Joseph (part of a movement to promote Malayalam language), Arun (who worked on Compassionate Kozhikode project), Ajith (member of the organising committee at the arts collective at Manaveeyam Veedhi) and Vijayakumari (member of Kudumbasree)—all validate this. They believe that the autonomy of their spaces is their strength that allows people from across political differences to come together. Although spaces like Kudumbasree have some element of caste and class self-selection because they are formed as neighbourhood groups, they still are perceived as potential secular spaces. This is also a strength because it allows them to work together for causes that they share. Bridging the class divide appears to be a challenge in contemporary times.

⁴ Lefebvre, (2009), p.193

⁵ Anon., (2019)

The main challenge in achieving the abovementioned objectives come from two reasons: the threat of digitisation of social spaces, and the encroachment of spaces by forces of capitalism and communalism.

7.1.1. *“Protests are never digital”*

The spread of television and internet have fast affected the spatiality in Kerala. As televisions started to spread rapidly in the 1990s in Kerala, a few interesting trends began to emerge which reflect the spatiality of the Keralan public sphere at the time. We have already discussed how there was an attempt at a redefinition of political engagement in the 1990s which aimed at decentralisation and inclusive development. In keeping with this, an outreach programme where the Chief Ministers engage directly with the voters and common citizens have shaped up to become an important part of governments in the last three decades, and the virtual media has played an important part in this. During the E.K. Nayanar-led LDF government (1996-2001), Asianet,⁶ Kerala’s first private television channel, ran a programme called *Mukhyamanthriyodu Chodikkyam* (Ask Your Chief Minister); a half-hour phone-in programme where he could interact live with callers from on matters of public interest. In its own way, this was a democratisation of politics unlike any seen before in Kerala.⁷ About the programme, it was noted in 1996:

‘...the CM’s on-screen persona conveyed the restraint and empathy of someone genuinely committed to the public weal. He looks and sounds different from the archetypal ‘phony’ politician. The programme has emerged as a forum for common people to ventilate their grievances directly to the chief minister...Nayanar has his ear to the phone, and hopefully he has an answer to your problem.’⁸

Within months, the programme was the most popular on Asianet and improved the CM’s rating considerably in the public eye. More importantly, it set the ball rolling in using media as a tool for transparency in governance. *Sutharya Keralam* (Transparent Kerala) was produced on Doordarshan (the state-owned broadcast channel) by new UDF government in 2005 and ran successfully for almost a decade under both LDF and UDF governments before the BJP led central government intervened and took it off air in 2014, arguing that programme was biased for the political beneficiary of the ruling Congress Party.⁹ An extremely popular mass contact programme called *janasamparkkam* was also initiated in 2004 by then Chief Minister Oommen Chandy’s (UDF), and continued when he was back in

⁶ Launched in 1993, Asianet was Kerala’s first private television broadcast channel. Unlike private channels in other parts of India at the time, Asianet aimed at promoting “book-review type” literary, cultural and news-based programmes. See: Harshankar, (1996)

⁷ Reports emerged in 1996 that CPM veteran EMS Namboothirippad would be part of a political talk show on Asianet, but this never materialised, and he passed away in 1998. Anon., (1996)

⁸ Menon, (1996)

⁹ Anon., (2014)

the office for a second time from 2011-2016. These events saw him engaging directly with society and hearing their petitions in large public events on public grounds and beaches. By 2013 when he won a UN Public Service Award for the initiative, it is estimated that Oommen Chandy had received 550,000 petitions from these outreach programmes, and resolved about 300,000 of these.¹⁰ In November 2017, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan announced his intention to appear on a weekly television show *Naam Munnottu* (We, Forward) and its first episode aired on December 31st, 2017.¹¹

Meanwhile, the genre of political and social satire, which has long been a part of Kerala's popular art forms through songs, drama or performative monologues called *Thullal* or *Koothu*. *Cinemala* was a comedy television show that started in 1993 on Asianet, and ran uninterrupted for twenty years, before wrapping up after celebrating an astonishing feat of thousand episodes in 2013. *Cinemala* played a great role in bringing the popular arts of mimicry and satire on to the common masses in the 1990s and 2000s. Although the show initially focussed on cinema, it soon dropped this element for social commentary through satire. Political and social events from contemporary society were picked up and mimicry, slapstick, burlesque and lampoon were used as comic tools.¹² Irrespective of their independent ideological and political differences, politicians, academics, political critics, actors and singers have all been prey to the show's wit and opened them to public criticism. Inspired by *Cinemala*, Malayalam television today has a number of shows that bank on a similar genre of satire for social commentary. The most popular of these is the very successful *Munshi*—a short sketch on socio-political events from everyday news performed in the format of a discussion between the characters with different religious and political backgrounds.

Continuously aired since September 2000, *Munshi* is perhaps the closest digital adaptation of the twentieth-century social spaces discussed at length in this research. In their virtual form, however, the viewers are reduced to passive recipients of the discussion—a limitation also of the news hour debates which have dramatized politics since the 1990s, pitting political opponents as 'irreconcilable opponents' with no shared space or common political interest.¹³ Yet, these debates are reduced to a battle between opinions with no one side getting the last word.¹⁴ These discussions often limit themselves to the right to one's own opinion, rather than the right to intervene in public affairs, and adds to depoliticising of the public.¹⁵ During election periods, it is customary for news channels in Kerala to step outside the

¹⁰ Anon., (2013)

¹¹ This programme continues to be telecast as of December 2019. However, the production rights were transferred from the state-run Centre for Development of Imaging Technology (C-Dit) with the CPM-controlled Kairali TV channel; a move that was objected by the opposition parties.

¹² Priyadershini, (2014)

¹³ Devika, (2007), p.2468

¹⁴ For a comprehensive study of the role of television in contemporary Malayali public sphere, see: Venkiteswaran, (2014)

¹⁵ Devika, (2007), p.2469

studios and into the teashops, reading rooms, public grounds and beaches to initiate discussion on the ongoing local issues in the area, and for a ‘heady brew of politics, music and, of course, tea’, especially around the time of elections in the region.¹⁶(See Figures 15 and 16).

Figure 15: Screenshot of *Chayakkada*: Political discussions in a teashop, Ep.2 (09 April 2016)



Source: Asianet News YouTube Channel.

Interview respondents also alluded to the powerful potential that the internet holds in helping people mobilize and coordinate quickly. Despite these possibilities, the limitations of virtual spaces in replacing conventional physical spaces were pointed out by many. Arun, said for instance, that the internet acted as a “trigger” for the “Kiss of Love” initiative against moral policing, but the “protests were on ground...the protests were never digital”.¹⁷ Environmental activist K. Ramachandran had a similar opinion:

...when you have a very concrete fight against establishment, you cannot have it through the internet. It'll be a virtual fight that won't affect them. Assume you have to picket an office to protest corruption...where does it affect them if you write anything you want online? At the same time, if you picket and *gherao* the place...or even simply sit in protest outside the office, this invites public attention. Everyone does not have access to social media or technology. A large number of people are

¹⁶ Nagarajan S (28th April 2016), ‘Heated discussions in a tea shop’, *The Hindu*, Thiruvananthapuram

¹⁷ Personal interview, 21st July 2018

Figure 16: Screenshot of “Morning walk with politics of Malappuram”, (04 April 2016),



Source: Manorama News YouTube channel

outside its purview. Virtual spaces are additional to real public protests; they are not substitutes.¹⁸

He argues that the establishment has constantly tried to suppress these by controlling physical spaces that make mobilisation difficult. Even in interpersonal relationships, digitisation does not effectively substitute for physical spaces. Ajikumar mentioned that as he and his friends grew up and moved away, everyone from the former sports club in his village created a WhatsApp group, and named it after the Club. However, he feels that the nature of these spaces is different, and he said that once when a heated political argument broke out on the group, they decided not to engage with politics over WhatsApp.¹⁹ The ability of virtual spaces like the internet and social media to assist/resist the dominant forces in society is something that needs further exploration. Data collected from my interviews provide some interesting openings for further research.

7.1.2. *“A piece of land for God” in God’s Own Country*

I have discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, that the period starting the 1980s saw a conscious and organised attempt from Hindu cultural organisations to expand their influence in the public sphere. This included

¹⁸ Personal interview, 22nd July 2018

¹⁹ Personal interview, 04th July 2018

opening schools, publications houses and organising events like *Shobha Yatra* which, although argues to be purely religious events, has clear and subversive political undertones. The failure of the communist movement to successfully resolve the question of gender and the public/private binaries allowed communal elements to encroach on religious spaces. We have seen that temples remain a prominent public space for Kerala women, especially in the twentieth century when other secular spaces like reading rooms, teashops, public grounds, etc remained outside their access. This became a useful channel for organisations like the RSS to expand their activities among the religious population. Many recent cases in Kerala reveal that this “privatization” of public spaces by temples continues to this day. Many of the interview respondents across age groups mentioned that the local temples near their homes all have been walled within the last decade or two, thereby cutting access for other religious communities to the public ground (See Section 5.2).

As Harvey (2003) has pointed out, the accumulation of spaces in the twenty-first century, unlike in the past, is not always coercive.²⁰ Privatization of public spaces must be closely read alongside the nexus of state, neoliberalism and communalism that has jointly dictated the path of *vikasanam* (development) since the 1990s in Kerala.²¹ Kerala’s growth has since the 1980s been aided by the rise of remittances from the Gulf countries that contribute about one-third of Kerala’s GDP. A major portion of the wealth has been spent on real estate, construction or other services that do not really support public welfare.²² This new wealth has also been tied closely with religion and religious spaces. A visible proof is the number of new religious institutions built or renovated in the last two decades across Kerala.

Yet, as we have seen, a revised approach towards participatory politics continues to resist a dominance of neoliberalism. The Plachimada struggle, already alluded to in Chapter 6, was an excellent example of how civil society organisations, environmentalists and activists challenged a powerful international corporation and preserved their “local” space.²³ However, despite the promise shown by *antogestion*, there continues to be the challenges of coordination, and more importantly, of political hijacking. The political parties in the last decade or so have responded to the changing political model and attempted to appropriate or undermine them. This is a second challenge to the maintenance of secular social spaces. In the case of Plachimada, the Coca Cola plant suspended operations in 2004, and the movement remained strong in its demands for compensation until 2010, after which the activities slowed down due to internal differences and lack of political support.²⁴ Meanwhile, the People’s Planning Programme which received much initial momentum, weakened in its framework because the

²⁰ Harvey (2003), p.145

²¹ Varghese (2017) has differentiated between *vikasanam* and the *purogathy* (progress) which dictated Kerala’s model till the 1980s.

²² Törnquist, (2018), p.22,25

²³ Rajesh (2019)

²⁴ Rajesh, (2019), p.444

local campaigners and organisations like KSSP gained a reputation as being communist quasi-organisation.²⁵ On the other hand, religious social spaces have gained massive momentum with the backing of organisations like the RSS, as the large participation in their religious processions, and the recent backlash against the Supreme Court order in Sabarimala shows. Secular spaces in Kerala today face a challenge of straddling their independence and putting up a fight against the religious spaces with clear affiliations.

7.2. Social Space and Modernity

If the contradictions of modern Kerala present themselves in the forms of contests in and for social spaces—like those of Asanthan’s body at Durbar Hall, the building of a “caste wall” around a temple, and the events that unfolded after the controversial Sabarimala judgement—their origins lie in how modernity itself evolved in Kerala. The answer to some of the questions can be traced back to the nineteenth century when first signs of a breaking up of the traditional order can be seen. An extremely rigid caste-dominant traditional social order had at its helm, the Nambuthiri Brahmins who controlled social spaces. A number of internal and external factors led to these structures to be challenged, but the most visible oppositions came in the form of violence in spaces like public markets (as in the case of the Channar Revolt). It was though these sporadic outbursts in public spaces like markets, roads (Ayyankali’s protests, Vaikom Satyagraha, etc), schools (the agitations to open up schools for children of all castes), temples (Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagraha) and churches (violence between “higher caste” Christians sharing space with the “lower caste converts”) that the changing order comes to be recognised. Suddenly, social spaces become important arenas where the traditional order is challenged. Here, the fact that social reform movements in Kerala emerge not from among the literate elites, but from the lowered castes amplifies the importance of physical spaces. The struggles, from the beginning, were not abstract, but struggles for access to material needs and public spaces. Although critical of caste, these movements were not always anti-religion. Gradually, the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the emergence of secular social spaces that allowed people from different castes to traverse their sociabilities. Even the caste-Hindus like younger Nambuthiri and Nair men come on board with the emerging social order by the 1940s and 1950s. An ideological void that emerged during this period was filled by the communist and nationalist movements.

The first phase of mass mobilization happens in this period, and we see a convergence of caste-based social movements and the opening up of social spaces. Eventually, spaces like teashops, reading rooms and public grounds became a part of a largely secular (yet gendered) public sphere in Kerala, and religion was designated as a private affair. The period from about 1940s up until the 1980s may be called a golden era of this secular public sphere in Kerala, nourished by the many little magazines,

²⁵ Törnquist, (2018), p. 22

libraries, youth clubs, film societies and arts and theatre movements mushrooming across the state. Everyday social activity in rural Kerala during this period centred on religious spaces, but also secular social spaces like reading rooms and youth clubs. This straddled a secular public consciousness even as religiosity coexisted. The question of gender remained unresolved when class replaced caste as a “natural” alternative in the public sphere. These unsettled contradictions re-emerge in the 1980s and 1990s. But by the 1980s, another kind of struggle emerges in the public sphere, one that closely ties state legitimacy with control of social spaces. Privatization and the rapid spread of religious organisations in the 1980s, along with other political and social changes led to an intensification of these struggles for dominance over space between the state, capital, and religion. In the 1990s, decentralisation was implemented in Kerala in the backdrop of these changes, and this led to the second phase of broad-based mobilisation and a redefinition of participatory politics to include civil society organisations, local governments and grassroots level movements. This restructuring opened up new ways in which people across political and religious differences can come together and rally around issue-based politics, charity organisations, arts and/or music. New forms of participatory organisations like Kudumbasree have also opened up new and effective ways for women into public life. These changes and the ongoing struggles have defined the spatiality of contemporary Kerala over the last few decades. To effectively combat and resist attempts of domination, grassroots level movements must be nurtured, allowed to sustain autonomously, and networks of coordination between these spaces must be built.

From the market in Travancore in 1822 to the fight by the Dalit activists against Vadayampady’s caste-wall in 2018, two things are clear: Firstly, that social spaces—markets, public grounds, teashops, reading rooms and libraries—have remained very much at the centre of shaping Kerala modernity. A historical geography of Kerala modernity reveals that the movement against any hegemonic power—be it caste, state, or neoliberalism—have emerged from representational spaces where people’s worldviews and experiences are shaped. In Kerala, the social reform movements, communist movements, and a developmental model premised on social equity and justice meant that the democratic linkages between the state and citizens happened not only through openly political spaces like political parties and trade unions but also through the informal involuntary and horizontal social spaces. The fact that such interactions were facilitated in secular spaces, as opposed to communal organisations is important in understanding where Kerala modernity stands in today’s space and time. Secondly, as the struggles for—and in—social spaces continue, the attempt must be to sustain their democratic and progressive nature. Challenge of today is that virtual spaces are fast fulfilling the social needs earlier served by physical spaces. There has been a change in how news is consumed, and television and internet convert people into passive recipients, unlike a communal news-reading practice that encouraged healthy debates. A second threat has been from the increasing privatization and communalism. On the one

hand, these threats must be challenged by broad-based secular movements rooted in grassroots politics, while on the other, care must be taken that their legitimacy is not reduced due to hijacking by political, communal or neoliberal forces. Only then can the potential of *autogestion* be fully realised.

Theoretically, this research provides a new lens to look at modernity by moving away from focussing on a despatialized concept of the public sphere, or merely studying organisational spaces. Instead, it studies space itself as at once both conceived and lived. This dialectical unity makes it possible to focus on the contradictions between how spaces are conceived by hegemonic powers, and how they are actually lived and experienced by people in their everyday lived. At a time when digital spaces are encroaching upon the conventional everyday spaces, such an inquiry into the nature and importance of physical public spaces in shaping modernity is imperative. Although this research takes Kerala as a case study, it is not difficult to see the promise of such a study of social spaces in most contemporary societies. The politics of every society manifests in its social spaces, and public spaces are where this spatiality is practised. After all, as Lefebvre rightly pointed out, “space” is where philosophy or religion, ideology or established knowledge, capitalism or socialism, state or community; all are put radically into question and must validate itself.²⁶

²⁶ Lefebvre, (1991), p.417

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List of Interviewees

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|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Santhosh Panikker (40) | 13 th June 2018 |
| 2. K.P. Ashraf (64) | 23 rd June 2018 |
| 3. Hema Joseph, (45) | 27 th June 2018 |
| 4. Kureepuzha Sreekumar (63) | 03 rd July 2018 |
| 5. A.R. Ajikumar (40) | 04 th July 2018 |
| 6. Vijayakumari (54) | 07 th July 2018 |
| 7. M.N. Karasserry (67) | 18 th July 2018 |
| 8. Babu Purushottaman (61) | 19 th July 2018 |
| 9. Jitheesh (25) | 20 th July 2018 |
| 10. Sreeraj (25) | 20 th July 2018 |
| 11. N.R. Madhu (48) | 21 st July 2018 |
| 12. Arun Shantinilayam (33) | 21 st July 2018 |
| 13. K. Ramachandran (70) | 22 nd July 2018 |
| 14. P. Achuthan (73) | 24 th July 2018 |
| 15. Ajith Kumar (43) | 27 th July 2018 |
| 16. Gopal (26) | 29 th July 2018 |
| 17. Jishnu (25) | 29 th July 2018 |