



## Which god's own country? A spatial history of Hindu-Christian tensions in modern Kerala

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# **Which god's own country? A spatial history of Hindu-Christian tensions in modern Kerala**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Kerala has long resisted the ambitions of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India; a state where despite a large grassroots presence of the Sangh Parivar, the BJP has enjoyed little electoral success. Previous scholarship has attributed this to the peculiar demography in Kerala which makes it difficult to consolidate Hindu sentiment, or to a 'secular political culture' nurtured by the socio-religious reform movements and the strong presence of communism. In recent years, the BJP in Kerala has tried to remedy this through outreach to Christian communities to position them as allies against a common 'Muslim other'. This article looks at Hindu-Christian encounters from the nineteenth century to the present to argue that these attempts can be read productively as rhetorical and strategic. Through an analysis of key incidents, I argue that historically, advocates of Hindutva forces have considered Kerala to possess a 'sacred geography' for Hindus, where other identities are seen as invasive.


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## **1. Introduction**

On 7 April 2023, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Kerala state Vice President A. N. Radhakrishnan embarked on a pilgrimage with much media attention. The aim was a three-kilometre trek up the Malayattoor hill, a sacred site for Christian communities. The journey was motivated by the ambition of national BJP leaders, who asked state leaders that they try to win over the trust of the third largest religious group in the state: the Christians.

Despite the RSS' grassroots presence in Kerala for seven decades, the BJP's electoral success has been negligible at state and national elections, with only one elected member to the state legislature (O. Rajagopal, 2016–2021) and

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one member of parliament elected to the Lok Sabha (Suresh Gopi, 2024– ). The party's vote share has hovered between 11 and 19 per cent, including over the last decade when much of the country was subsumed by the so-called 'Modi-wave'. Realising that they will need the support of either of the two large minority religions for electoral success, the BJP has, in recent years, intensified their outreach to the Christian minorities through campaigns like the *Snehayatra*. Loosely translated as 'the journey of love', the BJP leadership hope to encourage supporters to take up Christian pilgrimage and visit churches and Christian households on festivals like Easter and Christmas, to 'connect' with the state's Christians. These campaigns have produced some results, with some Christian clerics echoing the BJP's tirades against 'love jihad' and 'narcotics jihads' (K. Menon, 2023; Mannathukkaren, 2024a, p. 9).

Even as Hindutva forces attempt to assuage the fears of the sizeable Christian population in the state, events like the attacks against churches in Manipur, and incidents of hate-crimes against Christians have meant that various sections of the Christian community have been making a measured (if mixed) response to such attempts from the BJP and RSS. This article explores how relations between right-wing factions of the Hindu community and Christians have evolved in modern Kerala, to argue that we can better understand these ongoing political and social negotiations between the two if we look not at the discursive public sphere in the abstract, but rather at actual confrontations in physical spaces. I use Satish Deshpande's work on the spatial strategies of Hindu nationalism to inform my analysis and use content analysis, participant observation and interviews as methods. Specifically, the article uses examples from Kerala to argue that conservative Hindu groups have always perceived Kerala as a 'sacred geography', and that any attempt at the generous accommodation of other religions must be seen as a short-term political strategy for stitching together social coalitions to win elections.

I study contestations in Kerala to understand how and to what effect the spatial strategies laid out in Deshpande's work have been used by Hindutva groups in the region. More importantly, I ask what spatial strategies and assertions can tell us about Hindutva's acceptance of other religions, and specifically of Christianity. I proceed below by outlining the theoretical framework that guides my inquiry and discuss the historical relationship between Hindutva and Christianity in Kerala, before moving on to elaborate on how spatial contestations in the state can be understood through Deshpande's framework. Analysing a selection of cases, I suggest that we are currently witnessing a new spatial strategy being adopted by current BJP leaders in the state – one that complicates the problematic public/private binary that had become central to Kerala's public sphere in the twentieth century.

## 2. The case for a spatial analysis

Foucault observes that in the study of the history of social relations, spaces – physical lived spaces – have often been neglected in contemporary history: ‘Space was treated as dead, fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 70). However, he reminds us, spaces have a history that is closely intertwined with time (Foucault, 1984). There has been, especially over the last three decades, a reassertion of space and an awareness of the importance of spatial praxis in understanding society. Especially in India, the importance of praxis over theory has been highlighted by recent scholarship (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012; 2019; Jaaware, 2019). In a society where processes of inclusion and exclusion based on rules of purity and pollution permeate caste, gender and class relations, any inquiry into the political and social lives of ordinary people must include a study of society’s spatial relations. This article, then, is an attempt at an inquiry into the spatial strategies of one ideology that has dominated social and political life in India for a decade: Hindutva.

Writing in the early years of the rise of Hindutva politics and its violent turn in the early 1990s, Deshpande (1995, p. 3220) argued that Hindutva had an ‘identifiable spatial dimension’ that created specific ideological constructs, namely: the (sacred) site, the neighbourhood or locality and the route. Such a creation of a specific spatiality at these three levels (the distant, the familiar and the everyday), Deshpande argues, was crucial in the creation of a ‘nation space’ which links in a credible way abstract (imagined) spaces to concrete (physical) spaces. In Deshpande’s reading, the rise of Hindutva’s spatial politics does not occur in a vacuum but exploits an ‘ideological vulnerability of the “placeless” universalism’ of the spatiality of the Nehruvian nation-state (Deshpande, 1995, p. 3223). But to make an imagined space more tangible, Deshpande argued, activists of the Hindutva movement required the construction of what Foucault called heterotopias. Foucault conceptualises ‘heterotopia’ as the ‘real places’ that are physical and tangible, and can be ‘empirically experienced in an obvious fashion’ (Foucault, 1984; Deshpande, 1995, pp. 3220–3221). These are in contrast to ‘utopias’ – sites with ‘no real place’ – which are ‘abstract spaces with no immediate or necessary reference to any concrete place’ (Foucault, 1984; Deshpande, 1995, p. 3220). According to Deshpande, sacred sites like Ayodhya stirred up public sentiment because proponents of Hindutva succeeded in shaping a spatial strategy to create physical tangible places that mediate between utopias and ideological subjects (Deshpande, 1995, p. 3221).

The aspirational *Hindu Rashtra* which is envisioned as the ‘end product’ of a Hindu nation-state also provided a call for action to change the prevailing order of things. Hindutva is then a political and social claim over the future of

India; an attempt by its active proponents to manifest a 'good society' based on their religious sources (Embree, 1989, p. 213). In Embree's analysis of politics, religion and nationalism in the twentieth century, tensions have emerged because of the competing visions of just society grounded in religion – or utopia, as he calls it (Embree, 1990, pp. x–xi, pp. 12–13). Such a 'utopian' society requires the creation of real physical spaces where such a vision of society can both be practiced and reflected – both spatially and ideologically.

A spatial analysis of Hindutva, in other words, provides a useful lens with which one can study political and social developments of the last three decades in India. Harvey (2009, pp. 110–111), for instance, has commented on Deshpande's work on the spatiality of Hindutva, highlighting how it showed the complexity of the boundaries and connections between anthropology and history insofar as it focused on how Hindutva has appropriated other forms of spatial hegemony evident under neoliberal capitalism. Recent scholarship on India has studied the spatial moorings of emergent forms of Hindutva politics using this lens. Cook (2019), for instance, used Deshpande's framework to understand increased Hindutva vigilantism in Mangaluru – a south Indian city which has experienced significant communal tensions – arguing that such an assertion over national space by Hindutva groups must be read both as temporal *and* spatial. Das et al. (2021), in their study of the township of Noida, similarly seek to understand how a 'dynamic association' is established between new urban processes and Hindutva. And Berti et al. (2011) have collected a series of essays that look at how Hindutva had, by the first decade of the twenty-first century, already entrenched itself into everyday social and cultural spheres. Muraleedharan's (2023) reading of the 'Gujarat Model' through the prism of Deshpande's work also suggests how the politicising the spatial strategies of pilgrimage was used by the BJP in the state before it was scaled up over the last decade. Muraleedharan concludes that the creation of a spatial assertion embedded in ethnoreligious tradition was crucial to the Hindutva project. My attempt in this article is to argue that a reading of Hindutva along the lines of Deshpande and others, who focus on how space is both shaped, reshaped and appropriated by Hindutva elements, can strengthen the broader scholarship on 'new Hindutva' (Hansen & Roy, 2022).

If such spatial assertion and the creation of a 'sacred geography' is a lens to view Hindutva's strategies in the subcontinent, a useful endeavour for us would be to analyse how distant, familiar and everyday spaces in Kerala have been made part of the spatial strategies of local Hindutva groups. In other words, we can ask what the spatial assertions of Hindutva groups in Kerala tell us about their strategies, as well as how such strategies form part of the larger 'new Hindutva' project. In grappling with these questions, I make three arguments in particular. The first is that spatial contestation

was not driven by the intensified activity of the Hindu nationalist movement from the late 1970s onwards. Rather, space has been contested in Kerala for centuries, with caste Hindus historically laying claim to a sacred territory. The political, cultural and economic changes that unfolded in early modern Kerala meant that they opted for new methods and strategies to assert their territorial claims. The second is that the regional specificities with which such strategies have evolved over the last century to become dominant in contemporary times – ranging from early responses of caste Hindus to missionary activity, to the many contemporary attempts at outreach by the BJP – can only be fully understood if local socio-spatial contexts are considered. Finally, we see that these spatial strategies are highly adaptable to regional and social contexts, as recent developments suggest.

### 3. Hindutva and Christianity in Kerala

Hardgrave (1965) argues that it was clear already in the early stages of Kerala's postcolonial history that capturing political power meant that political parties had to rely on support from different communities. In short, no party in Kerala could expect to rule with the support of only one community. Therefore, the various communities in Kerala – often divided at a sub-religious level – have been able to negotiate their position vis-a-vis the state. Nairs, Ezhavas, Muslims and Syrian Christians are, for example, often mistakenly considered 'blocs' that vote in specific and presumably more or less uniform ways in Kerala. The relations between – and within – the various caste and religious groups have also shaped (and were shaped by) the many continuities and ruptures of modern history in the region. Such 'publicness' of religion in politics, some authors have argued, can be credited with the low levels of outright violence between communities in Kerala (Mathew, 1989; Chiriyankandath, 1993). In contrast, other scholars have warned that the liberal interpretations of a secular politics in Kerala are often misleading since tensions between various communities have not been erased but only suppressed. Arunima (2006, p. 74) argues, for instance, that contrary to popular claims regarding Kerala's modern and progressive public sphere, what emerged in Kerala in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not 'secular' in the sense that it implied a 'rupture with faith'. It appeared to be secular only in as much as it was straddled by a careful negotiation of a secular public balanced by a conservative private sphere. As we shall see, the post-1970s period, and specifically the last three decades, has resulted in a blurring of this perceived binary between the secular-public and the conservative-private, resulting in new spatial strategies.

Christians have remained a community that has enjoyed political and social power in the state. In Kerala, the Christian community is broadly divided into three groups – Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New

Christians – each further divided into a number of denominations (Zachariah, 2016, pp. 8 & 10). The Syrian Christian community which forms over half of the Christian population have exercised considerable political, social and economic power (Zachariah, 2001, p. 23). Devika and Varghese's (2010) detailed study of Syrian Christians suggests that the community remained politically relevant in the post-independence period by being pragmatic in their political positioning and adjusting as the situation demanded. They speak of the Syrian Christian zeal for 'claiming space in the institutional machinery of the government' (Devika & Varghese, 2010, p. 5). It is also worthwhile to note that socially, the Syrian Christians historically considered themselves as converts from Hindu Brahmin backgrounds, thereby positioning themselves 'above' the non-Brahmin Hindus (Thomas, 2020, p. 71). As opposed to the Latin or New Christians who were largely converted from caste-oppressed communities by missionary activity after the seventeenth century, Syrian Christians had etched their position as spice traders and landlords in some regions along the southwestern coast for many centuries (Fuller, 1976, pp. 54 & 56). Recent responses from some sections of the Christian community, and especially the concurrence of sections of the Syrian Christians with the BJP's Islamophobic politics, reflects this fact that they consider themselves a privileged minority in Kerala, and that for them, caste solidarity trumps religion (Thomas 2018, 2020, p. 74).

Such a 'claiming' of social space means that the Syrian Christian community has a history of negotiating their position in social and political life. With the changing political and social relations of the nineteenth century which challenged the traditional order in Kerala, new relations emerged between the many community groups, and tensions between Syrian Christians and other influential caste groups like the Nairs and Brahmin elites became visible in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s, confrontations arose between the Travancore Dewan, Sir C. P. Ramaswami Iyer and Syrian Christians, with the former being accused of overtly favouring 'Hindu' interests. In fact, Chiriyankandath (1993, p. 650) argues that the formation of the Nair Service Society, an organisation set up to further Nair interests during this period, was partly a result of a perceived encroachment on the Hindus' 'natural right' over the public sphere by other religions. The decline of the Hindu population from 69.9 per cent in 1901 to 61.6 per cent in 1931, and the rise of Christians from 23.6 per cent to 31.5 per cent during the same period further created tensions in Travancore (Devika & Varghese, 2010, pp. 18–19). This led to a 'hardening' of Hindu anxieties in the 1930s, manifested and assisted by Nair elitism, who accused the Christians of harbouring a plot to 'abolish the Hindu dynasty and turn Travancore into a "Christian State"; a Nair conference in 1932 declared that the "Nairs were the lords of the soil in Travancore ... and that the Maharaja was the Maharaja of the Nairs"' (Devika & Varghese, 2010, p. 19 f12).

This was also a period when the view that other religions threatened the ideological – and spatial – hegemony of (Brahminical) Hinduism was propagated by leaders of conservative Hindu organisations across the Indian sub-continent. With the setting up of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) first *shakha* in Kerala in the 1940s, this burgeoning fear of Muslim and Christian domination found a cultural and political footing. The ideologue Savarkar addressed a Hindu conference held at the Nair Service Society meeting in the 1940s, where he said that it would be 'easier for the Hindu majority to check the Christians with such a national context in which they would be reduced to a minuscule minority' (Ouwkerk, 1994, pp. 171–172 quoted in Devika & Varghese, 2010, p. 23). Golwalkar declared Christians to be the third 'internal threat', following Muslims and Communists (Arafath, 2021, p. 54): 'Golwalkar indicted Christians for desecrating Hindu sacred places like Sabarimala and described the Christian missionaries as predators in the garb of humanitarians'. And chapter 12 of Golwalkar's *Bunch of thoughts*, titled 'Internal threats', has Christians listed second after Muslims (Golwalkar, 1968, pp. 179–186). Here, he accuses Kerala Christian leaders specifically of claiming that Kerala shall be 'ruled either by the Catholics or by the Communists' (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 184). Golwalkar further claims that the first stage of the plan of Christians to establish their rule over India would begin by making the southern peninsula Christian dominated, before capturing the Himalayan belt in a 'second sweep' (Golwalkar, 1968, pp. 184–185).

Even though electoral success eluded them, Kerala always has been a favoured location for Hindutva's cultural experiments. Activities of the RSS in Kerala in the post-independence period revolved around reaching out to disgruntled landowners who felt that the rise of communism threatened their position in society (Arafath, 2021, p. 52). The church institutionalised itself in the 1960s and 1970s through training centres, schools, hospitals, research centres, small-scale industries and so on (Devika & Varghese, 2010, p. 30). The subsequent rise of right-wing Hindu elements also meant that there were now more confrontations between Hindutva factions and other political and religious groups in the second half of the twentieth century. In areas where the church was 'vociferous about the role of the Hindu fundamentalist organisations' (Devika & Varghese, 2010, p. 35), direct confrontations broke out. Such conflicts have continued mostly as sporadic incidents in the decades since. Current attempts and campaigns by the BJP in Kerala thus build on Hindutva's long and complicated relationship with Christian communities in the state. In the next section, we will analyse how the various strategies adopted by Hindutva groups can be understood through Deshpande's framework, concentrating on contests over space.

## 4. Hindutva's spatial strategies in Kerala

The general scholarly consensus is that religion has played an important role in institutional politics in Kerala. The progressive and secular image of Kerala politics has hinged on a careful balance of negotiated boundaries in the public sphere, including its spatiality. Scholars have argued that this fragile balance has seen friction in recent decades, as a result of changing social, political and economic landscapes. Specifically, the opening of India's economy in 1991, the emergence of the BJP as a major electoral force, and rising wealth within certain sections of society, have all had a lasting impact on social – and therefore, spatial – relations (Osella & Osella, 2007, p. 339; Panikkar, 2014, p. 435; K. Menon, 2023). Devika and Varghese (2010, p. 38) argue that these changes have also resulted in Christian denominations in the state downplaying their internal differences in order to create a larger Christian identity in Kerala.

In a region where class, caste and religious anachronisms and solidarities have proved crucial in social relations, a critical look at these efforts, and responses, is important. A useful point of entry for studying these changes and tensions would be identifying the spatial patterns that have emerged. Here, Deshpande's framework of looking at the ideological constructs of the (sacred) site, the neighbourhood and the route is useful. As we shall see, the assertion of religious rights over space has been part of the BJP's strategy already in the previous century, although recent years have introduced some important features particular to the social, political and economic reality of Kerala in the twenty-first century.

### 4.1. (Sacred) sites

The socio-economic reforms of the nineteenth early twentieth centuries in Kerala arguably had religion – and specifically, Hindu religion – at their centre. In fact, the response of the Brahmins in early modern Kerala who resisted these reforms was to retract themselves from the emerging mainstream public sphere, to focus energies on protecting the religious sphere and its spaces like the temples, which they considered most sacred. This is also why temples were among the last bastions of the caste Hindus to fall in the twentieth century: in fact, the proclamation which allowed people of all castes to enter Hindu temples in Kerala would only happen much after other spaces like schools, restaurants and shops, markets and libraries had been opened to the general public irrespective of caste – at least in theory. This is because for centuries, temples have had a special place in rural Kerala as economic, political and social nerve centres administered by many local rulers. Consequently, the relevance of temples as sacred sites in Kerala's history cannot be ignored. Under the traditional order, only a

select few upper caste Hindus were allowed entry into the temples which were maintained by Brahmins. Even the roads surrounding the temples were prohibited territory for those belonging to caste-oppressed communities. As we shall see, the construction of temples as sacred sites remains a powerful tool that is used by right-wing organisations in asserting their right over Kerala's sacred geography.

Deshpande argues that the creation of a non-negotiable sacred site that materialises a mythical one is central to the spatial strategies of Hindutva. He uses the example of Ram Janmabhoomi, which involved, in his view, 'struggles around/for sacred spot[s] that can be turned into an area of contest with the "other"' (Deshpande, 1995, p. 3224). Here the contest is seen as a zero-sum game (or a double-hinged door, as Jaaware (2019, p. 185) has called it) where the assertion of one's identity happens at the expense of the other. In Kerala, multiple flashpoints of such assertion of sacred sites have happened, but the most obvious one to analyse is the one centred on the Sabarimala temple, as evidenced by Golwalkar's mention of the temple in his *Bunch of thoughts*, accusing 'Christian vandals' of destroying idols and desecrating it and other temples like it (Golwalkar, 1968, p. 186). Sabarimala, a religious site sacred to Hindus, sees an estimated 10 to 15 million devotees each year, and was already the centre of a major religious and political contest in the last century, including during an arson 'attack' in the 1950s allegedly by local Christians (although this was never proven) (P. Menon, 2020, pp. 11–12), and the Nilakkal Samaram in the 1980s. The latter is seen by many as the first major event that led to the rise of the BJP in Kerala. Located en route to the Sabarimala shrine, Nilakkal was considered by devout Hindus to be sacred geography. A controversy erupted after an 'ancient cross' was allegedly discovered in the area which Christian priests then attempted to consecrate, leading to an outcry from Hindutva organisations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Chiriyankandath, 1996, pp. 56–61; Arafath, 2021, p. 54). The eventual resolution to move the site to an uncontested one was hailed by Hindu groups as a successful restoration of *their* space. Kummanam Rajashekharan who emerged as a prominent face of the movement, went on to become the BJP state president (2015–2018) and later, the Governor of Mizoram in 2018–2019.

The idea of protecting their sanctity is often used as an excuse in many temples in the state to justify various forms of exclusion. The rituals and customs of Sabarimala were used, for instance, as an excuse to rile up state-wide protests in 2018, then the Supreme Court of India ruled against the non-admission of women of menstruating age into Sabarimala. When the court ruled that women of all ages should be allowed entry, political and cultural organisations responded with significant protests and acts of disorder (Jayarajan, 2019), claiming that questions of faith, rituals and customs are best-resolved by people who practice religion. The matter was pitched as a

threat to the religious customs and sacred sites of the Hindu religion by leaders of the protests. Other temples prohibit entry of non-Hindus into temple sites citing similar arguments. All three logics of the site that Deshpande points out – the insistence on a particular site; the adamant refusal to negotiate; and the systematic setting up of a zero-sum structure – were present in the assertion of the RSS and its affiliates in Nilakkal, and over spaces like Sabarimala.

## **4.2. Neighbourhoods**

For everyday spatial strategies to work, hegemonic ideologies focus not merely on controlling actual physical sites of social life, but also on shaping the spatial practices that dictate how people engage with each other. Here, the realm of neighbourhoods becomes important since this is where social – and indeed spatial – domination is attempted. Deshpande argues that the neighbourhood ‘emphasises the everyday familiarity of the site in all its spatial concreteness’ (Deshpande, 1995, p. 3224). The lived space is where the contests over sites, practices, rituals and assertions become confrontational. What then, can the spatiality of neighbourhoods in Kerala tell us about the strategy of assertion?

On the surface, it might seem like ‘secularism’ at the neighbourhood level is what straddles the fragile balance between the (often conservative, religious) private and the (seemingly progressive, secular) public. It is true that the ‘home’ has been the most sacred geography, especially to upper caste Hindus. But again, the tensions of the neighbourhood become more evident if one looks at the assertion of religion in everyday public spaces at the neighbourhood level, such as grounds, markets, places of worship and work.

One of the earliest contests over public spaces in Kerala happened in Travancore in the early nineteenth century when women from the lowered-caste Channar community who had recently converted to Christianity were abused and their clothes torn by conservative upper caste Hindus who saw the women’s presence in a space like the market as a visible challenge to the caste hierarchy. Spaces like markets and public grounds emerged as spaces of confrontation over the last century. From the early twentieth century when public grounds – often adjacent to temple compounds – emerged as spaces for social and political mobilisation, especially for men, they have played an important role in shaping social relations. In the early modern period, these grounds across the state would be where political parties and social reformers educated the masses and made speeches that would move large crowds. Poet Kureepuzha Sreekumar, in a personal interview, explained the importance of the local ground in Vallikkeezhu, where he grew up, noting among other things that it was open to people of all castes and religions.

This ground, Sreekumar told me, had been walled a few years ago, restricting the entry of non-Hindus. Such events must be read in the context of larger economic changes since the 1990s that have led to a privatisation of public spaces on a large scale, essentially turning otherwise diverse public spaces into religious ones. This has also extended to Dalits and caste-oppressed Hindus, as the recent controversy at Vadayampady shows. In Vadayampady near Eranakulam, reports of a caste-wall emerged in 2018 when a temple decided to build a brick wall around a ground that had been used for many decades by residents of the locality, including a large number of Dalits. Such increased privatisation of space over the last three decades has resulted in the exclusion of certain castes and religions from erstwhile public spaces (Harikrishnan, 2023b, pp. 153–157).

Even some temples that used to have relatively relaxed rules about entry of non-Hindus have in recent decades adopted exclusion based on religion as a common theme, as Hema Joseph, a language-rights activist and researcher outlined to me. She mentioned that a sign prohibiting the entry of non-Hindus was put up outside her local temple in the 1980s around the time RSS gained a foothold in the area, thus alienating a section of the community from what had been considered by many like her as a 'temple of the *desam*'. Joseph's experience of Hindutva groups' appropriation of a temple as 'their' space is a classic example of how spatial strategies are implemented at the neighbourhood level.

Such contestation over everyday spaces including places of worship is, however, not a new strategy. Towards the end of the nineteenth century in Travancore, for example, several confrontations occurred between upper-caste Hindus and members from caste-oppressed communities and non-Hindus. In Mallapally, where a slave school and chapel were burnt down by local landlords, the local community is said to have vowed to rebuild the school and chapel at the same spot, as they believed it was there that they found their Lord and Saviour and would worship him again (Mohan, 2016, p. 48). The assertion of control over neighbourhood spaces, in other words, has for long remained an important element of the spatial strategy of Hindutva. But spatial strategies are only fully complete when the sacred sites and everyday neighbourhood spaces are connected through the various routes that enable some groups to create and maintain a fuller dominance over spatial practices.

### **4.3. Routes**

A. N. Radhakrishnan's attempt to hike the Christian sacred pilgrimage trail to Malayattoor hill with which I opened this article is one example of an attempt to control routes (Shaji & Balan, 2023). The event, organised as part of BJP's *Snehayatra*, became a reason for much trolling and mockery after

Radhakrishnan failed to make much headway, and was ridiculed for being merely a photo-op or a publicity stunt (Banerjee, 2023; Nishanth, 2023). One satire programme commented on the hypocrisy of the BJP in reaching out to get the support of a community that it otherwise routinely accused of 'encroaching' on (Hindu) land by harvesting crosses (Banerjee, 2023). But the BJP's realisation that pilgrimages or *yatras* form an important part of popular religious belief has surely motivated them to pursue this strategy, and the party's state and national leaders continue to see this form of outreach as important, despite the initial setback. In fact, Radhakrishnan himself would go on to repeat his attempt at climbing the Malayattoor hill a week later, this time succeeding. Speaking to reporters afterwards, he mentioned that he had come to the pilgrimage because he received a 'calling' from Jesus, just as one does from Mookambika Devi or Ayyappan, Hindu deities at the famous temples in Mookambika and Sabarimala, respectively (Nishanth, 2023).

The role of streets and processions in shaping social and political life has received much scholarly attention in recent decades. Dilip Menon, for instance, speaks of the importance of *jathas* or organised marches in shaping the communist movement in its early years (D. Menon, 1992, p. 2707). In more recent times, the assertion of Hindu identity during pilgrimages like the *Shobhayatra*, and rituals like Attukal Pongala when public roads are appropriated by practicing Hindus, has also been analysed (Sreedhar, 2017; Harikrishnan, 2023a). *Shobhayatras* are religious processions organised by mostly RSS-affiliated organisations like the Balagokulam on the occasion of Sri Krishna Jayanti (which celebrates the birth of the Hindu god Krishna). Children are dressed up as Krishna, Radha or other godly characters, and large parades occupy main streets and crossroads. Older generations remember the event as a small celebration in some isolated pockets of the state, but in recent years, it has grown to become a massive celebration during which shops remain shut, traffic comes to a standstill and usual activities in and around the main streets are suspended (Varghese, 2019, p. 173).

An editor of a leading Hindu right-wing publication in Kerala spoke to me about the importance of *Shobhayatras* in Kerala today:

... In my village earlier, about 50 or 60 people [celebrated with] a hand-cart converted to make a chariot. Now there is a permanent chariot, not a hand-cart. Even in that small village, there are about 2,000 people today. From 50 to 2,000 people. No party can bring out so many people there. No party! If you consider this a demonstration, no party can bring so many people. There are women, men and children ... people come as families. (anonymous interview, 2018)

Increasingly, these rallies are seen as a communal assertion over streets (Varghese, 2019), but such contests also continue to occur at an everyday level. Another respondent spoke to me about a recent procession that had led to tensions between Hindus and Christians in his locality:

When I work for *Hindu Aikya Vedi*, we do it only as a Hindu. There's no politics there. There are people from BJP, RSS, Congress and Communists in the Hindu Aikya Vedi here ... even now. They still believe in their ideology too. When the Murkkanad issue happened, everyone stood together ... even non-RSS Hindus stood with us in unity. When this happened, public voice was raised, irrespective of politics. (anonymous interview, 2018)

The issue he mentions was an incident when a Christian procession was refused permission to pass through Hindu temple land, which later led to a court case. In 2018, Sandy Joseph, a local resident, went to court against the temple, claiming that the temple was seeking to encroach on and cut off public access to a road that the public had been using for years. Such privatisation of previously public lands and the cutting off of access to roads have become a common phenomenon in the state in recent years and must be read not merely as 'property disputes', but as attempts at territorialising physical space. Once again, the social, political and economic re-assertion of Hindutva in Kerala becomes evident.

#### **4.4. New spatial strategies of 'new Hindutva'**

Apart from the creation of sites, neighbourhoods and routes to legitimise their claim over territory, the case of Kerala also suggests a fourth spatial strategy at work – one that thrives on the cleavages formed by referring to the public/private binary on which the secular settlement in Kerala earlier rested. In recent years, this specific strategy has played out in controversies such as the Sabarimala judgement, in alleged cases of 'love jihad', and in the gruesome murder of Kevin, a Dalit-Christian boy who was murdered for his marriage to an upper-caste Christian girl. These incidents were seen as examples of ostensibly private affairs – faith in the Sabarimala case and love/intimacy in Kevin's and the alleged love jihad cases – overflowed into the public domain. The use of 'love jihad' – where Muslim men are accused of tricking girls from Hindu and Christian communities into marriage – to claim that 'our cultures' (here meaning Hindu and Christian) are under threat from a common enemy (*in casu* the Muslim) is part of this strategy. Among other things, this 'threat' (here, of young Muslim men) stems from a general campaign to instil fear among Hindus and Christians in the state about an increase in population and wealth among Muslims (Mannathukkarren, 2024b, p. 44). There are instance of Christian weddings – including one that the author attended – in the state, where sermons during the

wedding include a remark from the church about the concern for 'our' declining population and resultant demographic changes.

In making public the issue of 'love' (a matter that essentially concerns an individual's most private space: their body), the aim is to transcend the spatial binaries of public/private. In some pockets, these efforts to create a political wedge out of what could have been a private affair have borne fruit for the BJP. John (2024) tellingly argues that even before a call for Christian outreach was made by the central BJP leadership to its Kerala cadre, local leaders had already 'identified fear of "Love Jihad" as a common ground to forge ties with Christians'. To the local cadres, such efforts at intervening in the private affairs of individuals to further the othering of specific religious communities are only the latest in a series of strategies that Hindutva groups have adopted in an otherwise hostile political environment.

Hindu right-wing organisations have also found an unlikely ally among sections of the Christian community through their love jihad campaign: the 'ക്രിസ്തംഘി'(Chrisanghi) or a Christian-Sanghi, that is, a Christian who follows the ideology of the *Sangh Parivar*. Additionally, three dioceses in Kerala recently screened the 'Kerala Files', a propagandist film that portrays Kerala as home to radical Islamists who recruit women to ISIS (Philip, 2024).<sup>1</sup> The emergence of 'love jihad' as the rallying point around which some sections of the Christian community have aligned with the ideology of Hindutva, reifies this emergent strategy. It was this issue that also led to the setting up of the Christian Association and Alliance for Social Action (CASA), a group whose website claims that they are an 'RSS-model organisation for Christians', but with 'no plans to use arms like them' (CASA, n.d.; John, 2023).

If these spatial strategies appear as a continuation of existing political efforts by the BJP to establish control in Kerala, one clear factor that has abetted these efforts in recent decades is not social or political, but economic. New forms of spatialisation that have emerged in the region are peculiar in that they share characteristics of globalisation, which is believed at least in theory to lead to deterritorialisation. Deshpande predicted in the 1990s something that numerous studies have confirmed since, namely that both neoliberalism and conservatism would co-exist in India. The spatial impact of this cohabitation has been an identity anxiety that has resulted in individuals and groups reasserting identities anchored in religion, caste and language. Deshpande therefore argues that the rise of Hindutva can be seen as a 'more or less necessary byproduct of the process of globalisation' (Deshpande, 1995, p. 3226). In Kerala, scholars have attributed the 'depoliticization' of society and the re-emergence of conservative ideologies, including Hindutva, to a mixture of the rise of (neo)liberalism, religious revivalism and the failure of socialist policies to fulfil early promises (Devika, 2007; Panikkar, 2014, p. 435; Osella & Osella, 2007, p. 339).



**Figure 1.** A flex installed along the Irinjalakuda-Thrissur main road in 2024. Credit: Author's photo.

## 5. Conclusion

The 2024 general elections gave the BJP a hard-fought victory in Kerala, when the high-profile actor-turned-politician Suresh Gopi was elected as Kerala's first BJP Member of Parliament from the state. Gopi's campaign notably included an outreach to the sizeable Christian community, about 25 per cent of the district's population (Census of India, 2011). In the months leading up to the elections, Gopi visited the Our Lady of Lourdes Metropolitan Cathedral in Thrissur and met religious and social leaders from the community. Flex boards were installed by a local wing of the BJP's Minority Morcha, showing Modi standing alongside Suresh Gopi (Figure 1). Modi was shown wearing a *mundu*, a traditional Kerala costume, in the manner of a shawl over his shoulder.<sup>2</sup> Photoshopped into the picture was Pope Francis on the other side of Modi. In Malayalam, written above the photo is *Chathikkilla Urappanu*, meaning 'Will not cheat, of that [we are] certain'. Much like A. N. Radhakrishnan's outreach politics with which I opened this article, Suresh Gopi has worked hard to sustain his image as a pro-Christian leader in a constituency where Christian votes are crucial for any candidate. Yet at the same time as the BJP is receiving a lukewarm response, at best, from Kerala's Christian communities, the impact of Gopi and other leaders' outreach in shaping the BJP's win in Thrissur have been unclear. While

some reports suggested that the win was thanks to an overwhelming support to the BJP from 'upper-caste Christians engaged in trade and business sectors' (Kurian, 2024; John, 2025), others note that it was unlikely that the community would vote *en masse* for a BJP candidate, attributing his victory more to his personal appeal (Abraham, 2024).

This persistent inability of the BJP to make significant electoral headway is part of the reason why Kerala is still considered by some as the last secular fortress in Indian politics: a state that resisted the powerful 'Modi-wave' in the 2014, 2019 and 2024 general elections. Yet, the state has now elected members both to the state assembly and national parliament, and has shown a steady growth in the percentage of votes polled (19.23 per cent in the 2024 national elections, up from 15.64 per cent in 2019). Analytically, understanding the specifics of Kerala's politics tend to rest on arguments about the state's secular political culture, nurtured by the socio-religious reforms of the nineteenth century, and the social and political influence of the communists from the early twentieth century. It is indeed true that overt vigilante violence by Hindu fundamentalists is absent in Kerala when compared to other Indian regions, and especially north India. But, as this article has indicated, political success is only a secondary aim for Hindutva groups in Kerala.

The spatial analysis of Hindutva's strategies over the last century that has been undertaken here reveals that there has been an assertion of Hindu right-wing groups in Kerala across all three levels – the site, the neighbourhood and routes – reflecting similar efforts at the national level. Such spatial strategies must of course be understood as unfolding alongside attempts at making conscious inroads into the discursive public sphere through, for example, the establishment of a publishing house, a newspaper, a journal, educational and charity organisations, and arts and cultural organisations that more or less openly espouse the ideology of Hindutva (Guillebaud, 2011; Harikrishnan, 2023b, p. 151). But nonetheless, as this article has sought to demonstrate, a purely discursive analysis of Hindutva's manoeuvring in the public sphere would be incomplete if it did not account for the significance of Hindutva's spatial-material practices and strategies over the *longue durée*.

Building on Deshpande's framework, I have argued that we are currently seeing the emergence of a fourth form of spatial strategy in contemporary Kerala. Indeed, the somewhat confusing and perhaps even contradictory responses with which some sections in the churches have reacted to the BJP's outreach can only be understood if we analyse how this new spatial strategy problematises the public/private binary with respect to the spatial order in Kerala. While this strategy arguably forms part of a wider campaign by Hindutva groups to permeate further into new institutional, territorial, conceptual and ideological spaces (Longkumer & Anderson, 2021, p. 2), the

Kerala case is a reminder that the absence of overtly communal or vigilante violence often conceals the various ways in which sacred geography is shaped and reshaped at the everyday level and across everyday sites.

## Notes

1. Christian intellectuals, however, were quick to issue a statement against the screening and expressed regret that the diocese was 'instilling negative emotions and discriminatory attitudes towards people of other faiths and for failing to teach children about love and respect for all religions and cultures' ('Christian intellectuals say church screening The Kerala Story parallel to Hitler era', 2024).
2. Detailed commentary on the politics of Modi's dress choices is given by Vittorini (2022).

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