



ISSN 2455-7544  
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

# Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.4, December 2018

Editor : Saikat Banerjee

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Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.3, No.4, December, 2018

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

## Imagining the Region: Understanding Partition as a Process in the Context of Kerala

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*Submitted 25 November 2018*

*Revised 22 December 2018*

*Accepted 27 December 2018*

**Abstract:** Contemporary political climate in India has witnessed repeated invoking of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 in relation to the Muslim question, affirming its role in defining the religious identities and communal politics in the subcontinent. Academic studies on the partition have largely remained regionally contingent, centring on the northern part of the subcontinent where the event has struck physically. This paper attempts to explore the vernacular experiences of partition, one of the most eventful and catastrophic events in the history of the subcontinent, by considering Kerala, the southernmost state of India, as an entry point to the repertoire of Partition. For the same, the paper analyses two short stories “Gusthi” [Wrestling] written by P. Kesavadev and “Gandhijiyude Anthyam” [The Death of Gandhi] by Thakazhi Sivashankara Pilla. The attempt is to read the stories as partition narratives in the backdrop of Kerala’s socio-political ethos of those times. For the purpose, the paper attempts to read the narratives along with discussions around Kerala’s community formations.

**Keywords:** Partition, Kerala, Nation, Hindu, Muslim.

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Contemporary political climate in the country has witnessed repeated invoking of the partition<sup>1</sup> of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 in relation to the Muslim question affirming its role in defining the

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<sup>1</sup> Here onwards, Partition



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religious identities and communal politics<sup>2</sup> in the subcontinent. Academic studies on the Partition have largely remained regionally contingent, centring on the northern part of the subcontinent where the event has struck physically. This paper attempts to explore the vernacular experiences of Partition, one of the most eventful and catastrophic events in the history of the subcontinent, by considering Kerala, the southernmost state of India, as an entry point to the repertoire of Partition. For the same, the paper analyses two short stories “Gusthi” [Wrestling] written by P. Kesavadev and “Gandhijiyude Anthyam” [The Death of Gandhi] by Thakazhi Sivashankara Pilla.<sup>3</sup>

By engaging with the discourse of Partition in the context of Kerala, where the “dissident genealogy” of Kerala modernity offers “extraordinary claims of “exceptionalism” in relation to its communitarian consciousness,<sup>4</sup> I interrogate the common ‘prejudice’ in the scholarly analysis of Partition that this momentous event did not significantly affect South India. Through a deployment of the analytical category of ‘vernacular’ in the understanding of Partition, this paper makes a departure from the north Indian-centric narratives and explores how Partition was felt and experienced in South India, especially in Kerala. Accounts of vernacular experiences of Partition, I argue, can be gleaned from local histories of religious coexistence and communal politics.

Among the southern regions of India, Kerala has always been identified as a distinctive political and socio- cultural entity. It has been a meeting ground for almost all the major religions in India; an outcome, often on account of the trade routes rather than that of conquests. If the land had a foretaste of the colonial experience with the Portuguese-Dutch during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Kerala has also witnessed the first Marxist government coming to power through the ballot in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such rich history has contributed in creating a unique ‘Malayali’ identity, native as well as a migrant. The state as well as the society, with its towering claims of ‘exceptionalism’ has always been a constant focus of academic enquiry for its discreet communitarian consciousness and it validates an enquiry into the Malayalam narratives of Partition. The paper also traces the discourse

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<sup>2</sup> In my usage, the term communal politics ascribes to the politics that revolves around religious and communitarian identities. In Indian context, it, often, assumes the political lenience observed in any particular religious community, adhering to their religious identities. In Kerala, the term acquires a greater significance in the context of the activities of Indian Union Muslim League and Kerala Congress.

<sup>3</sup> Pioneers of Progressive Writers’ Movement in Malayalam literature. (Here onwards Kesavadev and Thakazhi)

<sup>4</sup> In his introduction titled “Hybrid Assemblages: Modernity and Exceptionalism in Kerala” to the VIII:18 issue of *Tapasam*, a quarterly journal for Kerala studies in Malayalam, V. J. Varghese brings together the articles that touch upon varied instances of Kerala Modernity and exceptionalism.



of 'exceptionalism' around Kerala vis-a-vis other parts of the country which claims an enlightened communal consciousness for the region. Such an enquiry is accomplished by analysing the narratives around the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947. An engagement with how Partition has been represented in Malayalam literature would, hence, help us widen our understanding of Partition as well as enable us to critically engage with the questions of nationalism and Hindu-Muslim relationships.

The first part of the paper analyses Partition as a historical process and the ways in which it has continued to affect the social life of the subcontinent. In the light of these observations, the second part reads the short stories as Partition narratives in Malayalam. The later section of the paper looks at the literary scenario of Malayalam in order to contextualize these narratives on Partition and discusses the role of literature in offering a vision of a modern Kerala. It discusses how the literature of the period captured the spirit of these mobilisations. Here, the paper discusses the identities which got contextualised in the literary narratives of the period and also how these narratives mirrored the social and political ripples of the period. In the backdrop of the stories, the final section attempts to understand the mobilising factors behind communities in Kerala and also the ways in which community identities were incorporated into the social movements in Kerala. While discussing the later studies which analysed these movements, the paper looks at the ways in which these movements tried to exempt the instances of communal fervour projecting Kerala as an example of exceptional communal consciousness. This part underlines the important reasons behind the development of this exceptional communitarianism in the context of Kerala.

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## I- UNDERSTANDING PARTITION AS A PROCESS

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 into the nation-states of India and Pakistan has continued to be a spectral presence creating different meanings in the lives of the people at different historical junctures. Making sense of Partition and its impact has been an arduous task as it has continued to impart varied meanings to the everyday life of the subcontinent. Historians have always been keen on exploring the manifold meanings Partition continues to make in the lives of the subcontinent. For instance, the works of Urvashi Butalia, Gyanendra Pandey, and Ayesha Jalal,





*et al* mark significant interventions in the study of Partition and are helpful in explaining how mass violence and dislocation brought into being not only the new nations of India and Pakistan, but also re-defined the “Muslim” and “Hindu” citizens who lived within their borders.<sup>5</sup> These narratives around the event of Partition have North-Western India and Eastern India as their locus of enquiry as these regions were partitioned physically and witnessed the unprecedented violence it unleashed. However, Partition as a historical process that continues to affect the entire subcontinent explains the rationale in bringing other regions like Kerala into the story of Partition.

Remembering Partition has always remained a way of looking into that time in the past when the promises of nationhood and freedom were met with unprecedented violence and it is remembered as the cataclysmic moment of communal strife in the country. The stigma of communalism has always been remained with Partition. Descriptions of all communal strife hark back to Partition. Most often the narratives around Partition are generalized into the tales of communalism. Such histories fail to incorporate the complexities and subtleties of institutional and structural changes introduced by the colonial government and also the impact of socio-economic processes on caste, class and religion-based alignments. Partition was invoked during the times of anti- Sikh riots of 1984 and also during the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 when religious identity was in serious question. Thus the significance of Partition lies not in its stature as an event that happened in 1947, but as a process that continues to influence the political, social and religious scenario of the subcontinent.

The radicalization of history encourages the need to diverge from the conventional theorizations which failed to free itself from the problematic of communalism. The debate around Partition was extended during the last two decades or so through the exploration of the regional and class dimensions of the so called ‘Muslim’ communal problem. The idea of a ‘separatist- Muslim’ has always remained a common reference point for rewriting the 'histories' of an event that casts its

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<sup>5</sup>Pandey, Gyanendra. 2001. *Remembering Partition: Violence Nationalism and History in India*. Delhi: Cambridge University Press; Butalia, Urvashi. 2000. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. North Carolina: Duke University Press; Butalia, Urvashi. Ed. *Partition: The Long Shadow*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2015. Jalal. Ayesha. *The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work across the India-Pakistan Divide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.



shadow over many aspects of state and society in the subcontinent. But most of the theorizations seem to be in a self chosen amnesia where it forces itself to forget the fact that there were powerful secular strains within Muslim Politics. Most of the early studies, it seems that, in a state centered drive to homogenize, consider Muslim as a unified, homogenous category in regardless of its regional, linguistic, cultural and class variations. They have been critiqued for their failure to unpack the notion of an all India Muslim communalism to create analytical space for the conflicting regional strands within Muslim politics. In fact, the intensity of emotions involved had more to do with the political and economic anxieties of various social classes than with a profound urge to create a Muslim/Islamic state. Most of these approaches seem reluctant in analyzing how different forms of identities and consciousness translated into a powerful campaign for a separate Muslim homeland.

However, most of these narratives were regionally contingent focusing mainly on the North Western frontier and occasionally touching upon the north eastern regions like Bengal. Considering Partition as a defining moment in the narratives of nation and the histories of communalism, it is important to foreground the stature of Partition as a historical process which has continued to impart meanings in the political, social and religious lives of the nation. It would also explain the rationale in bringing southern regions like Kerala into the narratives of Partition. Mushirul Hasan talks about a neglected reality of perceiving Partition as that point in the history when many were pushed into taking religious/Islamic positions. Kerala being an important locus in the history of Islam in the subcontinent becomes an important historical context to look at Partition and how different identities are reconstituted during this historical process.

## II – READING “Gusthi” and “Gandhijiyude Anthyam” as PARTITION NARRATIVES

It is from these propositions that the paper attempts to read the selected Partition narratives in Malayalam- two short stories, “Gusthi” (Wrestling) by P. Kesavadev published in 1962 and Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai’s “Gandhijiyude Anthyam” (The Death of Gandhi). The story, “Gusthi” by P. Kesavadev dramatizes a wrestling match in a small town in Kerala where the religious identities of the wrestlers cause a pointless discord between Hindus and Muslims at a



village teashop. The story presents the growing religious intolerance in the society in the aftermath of Partition. It presents the moment of Partition as a moment of 'madness' or irrationality. The story also seems to be unaware of any historical and social reason behind the 'sudden' outbreak of violence.

Thakazhi's story, "Gandhijiyude Anthyam" throws light on the lives of the survivors of Partition riots. They are set on a journey from West Punjab that has become the part of Pakistan, in search of a peaceful and prosperous life that has been promised by the new nation. The story uses Gandhi as the symbol of the promise of love, tolerance and communal harmony that the new nations failed to keep. The story conveys the paradox in the blood bath and poverty that accompanied the Independence. It presents Gandhi as a human God employed by the national elites in order to manipulate the masses. The story ends with the assassination of Gandhi that metaphorically suggests the beginning of a new era which is marked by the death of the ideals which were attributed to the promised nation.

The stories employ common terms, metaphors and images of violence, trauma, disaster, dislocation, homelessness and disillusionment associated with Partition. These tools have been used to describe Partition in an attempt to give this major event the manifold meanings it has in the lives of the characters. None of the texts has considered Partition as a 'political necessity.' On the other hand, Partition has been perceived as a 'distant political event.' The stories also signify the inability of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' to overcome the stereotypes of each other. The characters' involvement with historical and political realities of their times are not because of their direct participation in it but due to the repercussions of those events in the lives of ordinary people. The backdrop of the story of Thakazhi as Punjab reasserts the North-centric perception about Partition. It can be considered as a conscious attempt to disown Partition as an experience for Kerala. However, it is imagined and experienced as an unavoidable reality of being a nation, being India.

In both the narratives, nation becomes the dominant imagery. It is imagined as a better tomorrow where the values of freedom and equality are achieved. The stories portray the experiences of Partition as a moment of aberration to such imaginings of nation and warn us of the ferociousness and madness which communal identities are capable of. However, the narratives also express a deep



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A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544  
Vol.3, No.4, December, 2018

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nostalgia for one's own region and local belonging. May be, nation, in its vernacular imaginings, has to be identified along with a sense of identification with sub national identities. Kerala has always been considered successful in celebrating its sub national identity of being 'Malayali' along with its deep sense of being nation. It has always tried to be vocal and proud of its regional nationalism negotiating its importance along with the sense of being India.

The two writers, Kesavadev and Thakazhi hail from the tradition of progressive literary movement in Malayalam literature which is known for its portrayal of the socio- political scenario of Kerala. Their powerful stories disclose the socio-political and economic decadence of their contemporary society. In their socialist perception of the nation, individual becomes the basic unit of the nation. The imagining of the nation happens at individual level transgressing religious, caste and community barriers. Thus, they often express their discernment over the conflicts over religion and caste differences. The stories often recall a nostalgic past of religious coexistence along with hopes for an egalitarian nation.

Humanism which is seen as a central trope in Socialist writings is presented as the only code of resistance during such times as that of Partition. The authors seem to be sharing the belief that it is the value of humanism that is neglected during such violent times. And also, that, it is the humanistic way of looking at life that differentiates our times from that of our ancestors. The nostalgic past that they often contemplate is characterized by this principle of humanism. Kesavadev, being a writer who was concerned with the questions of class- caste politics, emphasizes the idea of 'humanism' as a vital part of imagining a nation.<sup>6</sup> However, it can also be considered as an uncritical humanism that concentrates only on the pain and sorrow of the human suffering limiting our understanding of the political and civic fault-lines that are inherent in the nation project. Thus, human becomes instrumental in the imaginings of nation rather than other community markers like religion or caste. This way of Imagining nation by questioning the existing social hierarchies and its inequalities have been part of the literary culture in Malayalam of that

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<sup>6</sup> Humanism becomes a way of imagining the nation in the writings of Progressive Writers. For instance, in the writings of Basheer, Lalithambika Antharjanam, two of the prominent Progressive Writers in Malayalam, the category called human figures as an entity that is perceived above all political, social entities.





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ISSN 2455-7544  
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period.

### III- Literature Mirroring the Society

The late 1930s witnessed tremendous changes both in the political and cultural spheres of Kerala. The political, social, cultural and religious transformations had a severe impact on the ways in which communities in general and individuals in particular perceived themselves and also 'others.' There developed a political and social sensitivity of a rare quality amidst all these political unrest and it had a tremendous impact on the creative faculty of the times. In this period, various anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, nationalist and democratic movements strengthened in an unprecedented fashion all over Kerala. Modern value concepts which were confined to the upper strata of the society in the early phase began to spread to the lower layers of the society.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the middle class, various other sections consciously entered into the mainstream of public life. Consequently political and cultural spheres became more popular and it acquired a democratic character. Such socio-political factors impacted the literary scenario as well.

As Marxist ideologies had a sway over the cultural climate of the period, literature also carried impressions of the Leftist thoughts. Marxist conception of literature is characterized by the emphasis on the ideological content in a work of art as well as its direct and indirect implications about the values established in the society. The Progressive Writers Movement in Kerala can be considered as the offshoot of the Marxist conceptualization of literature as a revolutionary tool. The formation of various organizations like *Jeevalsahitya Prasthanam*<sup>8</sup> and *Purogamana Sahitya Prasthanam*<sup>9</sup> are evidences of such trends.

Social Realism in Kerala was highly informed by its Leftist ideology. It marked the beginning of a literary tradition where the prevailing economic conditions were often problematized for further

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<sup>7</sup> With the advent of colonial modernity, a new set of value systems defined by principles of Universalism, Individualism, Rationalism, and so on gained a wider popularity.

<sup>8</sup> *Jeevalsahitya* literally means 'living literature' or 'literature of life.' This group sided with the Art for Life's Sake, against Art for Art's Sake view, and was an endeavour influenced by Marxist-Communists who stood firmly with the peasant-working class organizations to develop a new literary form.

<sup>9</sup> Progressive Literary Movement, another Left initiative in Malayalam literature inspired by the Progressive literary Movement at the national level.



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speculation. Proletarian literary movements have influenced the theory of social realism in significant ways. According to K.M. George, “there was a proletarian emphasis in the new fiction; the common man became the new hero” (104).<sup>10</sup> *Odayil Ninnu* (From the Gutter) written by Kesavadev in 1942, *Thotti* (Scavenger) by Nagavalli R.S. Kurup in 1943, *Thottiyude Makan* (The Son of a Scavenger) and *Thendi Vargam* (The Beggar Clan) by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in 1947 and 1950, respectively, can be cited as examples of the trend (George, 105). Social Realism<sup>11</sup> in Malayalam literature is considered to have its beginnings in *Jeevalsahitya Prasthanam* (1936) which was followed by the *Purogamana Sahitya Prasthanam* (1944). It can also be assumed that the Progressive Writers Movement and social-realist trends in Malayalam literature developed simultaneously. The new literary awareness helped in popularising the social movements heralding resistance and revolt against the injustices prevalent in a social system rampant with prejudices based on caste, class, community and religion. Moreover, many progressive literatures engaged themselves with issues like poverty created by the World Wars, economic crisis, landlord-capitalist exploitation, socio-religious injustice and so on. Whole sections of hitherto silenced people – landless peasants, fisherman, untouchables, the rural poor, impoverished craftsmen, men and women forced into begging and prostitution and urban workers – found voice through these writers in the form of poetry, plays, short stories, fiction and even literary criticism, probably for the first time since the age of folklore.

The discourse around Partition and the discourse of communalism in India have been read together even in contemporary times as Partition is invoked during every moment of communal strife in the country. However, the selected texts present people’s bafflement at the sudden polarization of religious identities. Partition is seen as an instance where the tradition of living with the differences is disturbed. As Ashutosh Varshney has argued, the collapse of inter- communal civic networks becomes a triggering factor for the outbreak of violence. For instance, in the story, “Gusthi” the discord at the village teashop initiates the violence. More often, communalism is seen

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<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Malayalam are mine.

<sup>11</sup> Social realism refers to an artistic movement that is expressed in visual and other realist arts and later extended to literature also. It depicts the social and racial injustice through the portrayals of life’s struggles. This movement involves the attempt to convey a message of political and social protest that is edged with satire.



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as a colonial construction which is further employed by the native elites in order to achieve selfish motives. Thakazhi's story also conceives communal tension as a phenomenon which has its roots in colonialism and nurtured further by the national elites. By drawing on Didur's argument that conceives literature as interesting commentaries on historical events, the select narratives become the 'Malayali' understanding on Partition. Though, from a 'different' (South, non Malabari) subject positions, the narratives open up the possibilities of vernacular understandings of Partition. It questions the north- centric perception about Partition and opens up the possibilities for considering Partition as a pan- Indian event.

#### IV- Communities and Kerala Model of Exception

The communities in Kerala and their politics have been developed out of multiple concerns. The national and social movements shaped by the immediate concerns of the region have imparted a different communitarian consciousness to the Kerala society. When the nationalist politics in the North foretold the religious narratives around the binary of Hindu/Muslim, in Kerala, it assumed the nature of caste-class politics. And it has been argued as one of the sole reasons behind the establishment of a unique network of inter- communal relationships in Kerala.<sup>12</sup> The narratives also suggest how the Kerala society has always managed to negate conflicts over community disparities as madness and something which is not known to Kerala. Communities served as the major mobilisational factor in shaping the politics of the region through movements for rights, recognition and reforms. Caste-community organisations served as the principle agents for political mobilisations. From nationalist movements to Communist movements, communities have served a major role in carrying the movements forward. With the advent of modernity, communities got constituted in Kerala for various reasons ranging from social reforms to political stability. Colonial modernity, with its pros and cons, paved the way for assertive mobilizations both against British

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<sup>12</sup> See the argument of Ashutosh Varshney in *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* and as well as "To Survive or to Flourish? Minority Rights and Syrian Christian Community Assertion in 20th Century Travancore/Kerala" by I. Devika and V. J. Varghese.



and local feudal lords and it necessitated an idea of collective and identification among its members. Thus, the communitarian consciousness in Kerala is often highlighted for its strife against social hierarchies and inequalities.

Social reform movements initiated by colonial modernity, missionary education and community leadership also paved the way for the reconstituting of communities during the later part of the Nineteenth Century and also to be continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. “The social reform movements organized by caste and religious organizations used ascriptive identities for mobilization against the evils generated by the ideas and values of pre modern social structure. The common ground between them was their commitment to a more progressive Kerala society through modernization” (Biju, 213). Thus, the period was marked for the emergence of a communitarian consciousness that was defined in terms of class-caste politics. Malayali Memorial<sup>13</sup> and Ezhava Memorial<sup>14</sup> are two important testimonies of the developing communitarian consciousness which have its base in caste identity rather than religious identity (Ommen, 546). The movements against untouchability and other social evils conducted as part of the nationalist struggle contributed much to the awakening of depressed classes and also in bringing a social change in Kerala. Thus, the people were forced into the course of the struggle along with the agitations at a national level. However, their inclination towards the movement was motivated by their immediate concerns of caste- class oppressions along with colonial domination.

Communist Movement in Kerala has a great impact on Kerala psyche since its inception in 1930s. The movement had an indigenous quality of its own. The movement initiated a proletarian fervour which had immanent impact on the political, social and cultural realms of the society by mobilizing the less privileged sections of the society. Through systematic ideological propaganda, the Communist Movement made crucial interventions in peasant-working class issues. They gave a

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<sup>13</sup> Malayali Memorial is a memorandum submitted by people of Kerala to Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal in 1891. Signed by more than 10,000 people who include Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, Malayali Memorial agitation requested Sri Moolam Thirunal to secure jobs for the educated Keralaite citizens in the Travancore civil service. During the time majority of the jobs were in the hands of Tamil Brahmins.

<sup>14</sup> Ezhava Memorial is a mass memorandum signed by Hindu Ezhava community in 1896. Ezhava Memorial, similar to Malayali Memorial, is a mass petition submitted by Ezhava caste to the Government of Kerala to allow the educated community people to enter government service jobs.



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revolutionary vigour to the working class movements and politicized the peasants and workers. The movement had a considerable role in triggering the anti-feudal agitations of the period. Though, the face of the movement has been its class politics, communism in Kerala played a significant role in competitive bargaining for the communities vis-à-vis the state (Biju, 212). Even within the secular ideology of their class struggle, they successfully incorporated agrarian struggles, social reform movements which have an essential caste character in the context of Kerala. There by strengthening the fight against caste, the left politics in Kerala also managed to accommodate 'communal' mobilisations.

Under the leadership of Communist party, the Aikya Kerala movement<sup>15</sup> [the movement for united Kerala] with a thrust on the linguistic identity of the region not only gained momentum but also achieved its desired end. Thus, Communism played a crucial role in the construction and dissemination of the idea of 'national popular' and cultural politics which enabled Kerala to emerge as a distinctive region within the modern India. This sub national identity has been always celebrated in Kerala, often on par with the national identity dominating all other local identities of caste, class and religion. Thus, simultaneous to various political mobilizations in Kerala based on caste, class, etc., the call for a linguistic identity also emerged.

Academic intelligentsia has always been careful not to misrecognise Kerala's community politics as religious nationalism or communalism.<sup>16</sup> J. Devika and V.J Varghese, in their analysis of the Syrian community assertions in Kerala, argue that communalism in Kerala society refers not to animosity among communities, but to intense competition around rights and resources within the field of modern politics. The article also explores how the communities in Kerala have been diligent in separating religiosity from their politics by taking instances from Syrian Christians (37). The select narratives also present imagine a nation where religious coexistence is celebrated

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<sup>15</sup> The movement initiated for the unification of Kerala in 1940s consisting of Malabar and the princely states of Travancore and Kochi.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, *Communal Road to a Secular Kerala* (1989) by George Mathew; "Communities at the Polls: Electoral Politics" by James Chiriyankandath (1993); and the Mobilisation of Communal Groups in Travancore" in *Politics, women and Wellbeing: How Kerala became a Model?* (2003) by Robin Jeffrey.





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reverberating Kerala's communitarian politics which is often identified as the secular strains within the region.

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