

Sonja Thomas, *Privileged Minorities: Syrian Christianity, Gender, and Minority Rights in Postcolonial India*

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In *Privileged Minorities*, Sonja Thomas articulates race, identity, and gender dynamics in Kerala's Syrian Christian community from a women's studies perspective and offers insight into what constitutes minority, persuading South Asian scholars to include the intersectionality present in minority populations. Thomas compellingly presents the various layers of religion, caste, race, and class dynamics and outlines "how identity-based categories such as 'Christian,' 'minority,' and 'woman' have been mobilized in postcolonial India, problematizing the presumed link between numerical subordination and political vulnerability" (4). Divided into five chapters, this book engages with various themes, including clothing, Aryan/Dravidian racial divides, education, textbooks, mixed marriages, and protests for minority rights, which shed light on the struggles of minorities and women in postcolonial India.

Chapter 1, "Syrian Christians and 'God's Own Country,'" lays the complex historical background of the region and discusses the socioreligious and political scenario, taking into consideration caste, religion, patriarchy, women, and minority. In discussing the Kerala model of development, Thomas recognizes the gender paradox and notes that feminists have critiqued this model because of its discrepancies between expectations and experiences (33–34). In directing our attention to the paradox, she emphasizes how classifying Kerala as an exceptional model of development erases the realities of women, who face gender- and caste-based violence and patriarchal religious norms.

Chapter 2, "Clothes Reading: Communal and Secular Clothing 'Choices' and Women's Mobility in Kerala," discusses the material practice of dress, examining the replacement of Syrian Christian clothing in postcolonial India from *caṭṭa* (blouse) and *tunni* (unstitched cloth) to *sārī* and subsequently to *cūrīdār*, irrespective of religion or caste. Thomas argues that wearing *sārī* was part of the promotion of a modern secular citizen emerging after independence. More importantly, "the modern secular citizen was implicitly marked as upper-class, Hindu, and upper-caste," and wearing *sārī* revealed that women's clothing continues to "shape society and regulate them through the same system of domination that characterized Kerala's caste division in colonial India" (65).

In chapter 3, "Aryans and Dravidians: Syrian Christian Mythologies and Intersectional Racialized Oppression," Thomas discusses race among the Kerala Syrian Christians and problematizes existing categories of race as "unidirectional vectors of analysis" (68), arguing that our discussion of race must include religion and skin color.

Through this chapter she traces how Syrian Christians claim Aryan racial identity by stating their origins from upper-caste Hindu Brahmins. Thomas argues how such racial accounts depict dark/low-caste women as sexually available and place communal restrictions on upper-caste women's mobility in the public sphere. Examining these racial accounts by taking into consideration intersectional aspects presents the complexities in play against the idea of being dark.

Chapter 4, "Who Are the Minorities? Gender, Minority Rights Protesting, and the 1959 Liberation Struggle," historically analyzes the Kerala Educational Bill, dowry prohibition, and the Vimochana Samaran (Liberation Struggle) aimed at securing minority rights and argues that the category of "minority" that united all Christians was an invented identity, which was defined by dominant minority culture and created at the expense of subordinate lower-caste Christian and tribal minority communities. Thomas asserts that the simplistic labeling of minority rights remains problematic in the context of women within the Kerala Syrian Christian community.

Chapter 5, "A Life without Religion: Textbooks, Morality, and Protesting across Religious Divides," analyzes minority rights by exploring two more protests: one in 2007, against the regulation of self-financing colleges; and one in 2008, a protest organized by clergymen concerning a textbook story regarding interfaith marriage. Mixed marriages were considered a breach of agreed-upon moral standards. A person without religion due to mixed marriage was understood as living an immoral life without religion. In other words, endogamous marriage defined morality. Thomas argues that "throwing feminism and its conception of gender identity into crisis is a necessary good that can allow South Asian feminism to rethink feminist activism across group boundaries in postsecular times" (146).

In the conclusion of the book, Thomas responds to a pertinent question that she presents in the introduction: "What sort of social change can be brought about when a woman who belongs to a privileged minority community, and who is governed by communal norms that are patriarchal, takes part in public life through a religious movement that may reinforce boundaries between privileged and subordinated women" (17)? She claims that dominant minority culture overlays and interacts with a "dominant woman" (156) paradigm and pushes her readers to think through the examples in the book—from clothing to racialized subordination to protests for minority rights—about whether or not women benefit from the struggles for minority rights, but also which women benefit and what type of benefit they receive.

Thomas succeeds in providing a fascinating enumeration of women's identity and struggles, taking into consideration the intersectional aspects and offering insights into feminism among the minority population in *Privileged Minorities*. In doing so, she challenges existing categories and opens up avenues for further inquiry into minority populations in the South Indian context. Thomas presents the ideas and argues her case using Christian minorities, women, and liberation struggles, making her book accessible to a wide readership including scholars in South Asian studies, women's studies, and anyone interested in understanding race, gender, class, and caste issues among women in this region during the postcolonial period.

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