

Salah Punathil, *Interrogating Communalism: Violence, Citizenship and Minorities in South India*

London and New York: Routledge, 2019. Xiv+162 pages. Hardcover, £120.00; eBook, £40.49. ISBN 9781138505681 (hardcover), 9780429422928 (eBook).

When we hear of clashing mobs in India, what first comes to mind? In both the scholarly literature and in the popular media, the stereotype of “communal” conflict immediately conjures images of Hindus fighting Muslims in the streets of an overcrowded urban slum, driven by primordial and irrational religious hatreds. This study by Salah Punathil seeks to complicate our assumptions about the motives and circumstances of communal violence and to expand our empirical horizons beyond the urban scene by exploring the history of twentieth-century conflicts between Marakkayar Muslim and Mukkuvar Catholic fishermen living side by side on the crowded beachfronts of the Thiruvananthapuram District in southern Kerala.

Drawing upon his Jawaharlal Nehru University dissertation in sociology, Punathil first reviews the spectrum of explanatory theories that have previously been offered for rioting between Hindus and Muslims, noting that structural violence—as opposed to direct provocation—has only recently begun to be taken into account. The author then offers a close textual reading of official police commission reports in the aftermath of local violent incidents, showing how the combatants are characterized as so fanatical and uncontrollable that police shootings were absolutely necessary to avoid further loss of life and property. For me, reading these words just as the global outrage over Black Lives Matter was mounting in the summer of 2020 sounded tragically familiar.

Punathil’s field research in the coastal Kerala towns of Vizhinjam and Beemapalli traces a recurring series of late twentieth-century clashes (most recently in 2009) between Marakkayar Muslims, who are distantly related to Marakkayars in coastal Tamil Nadu, and Mukkuvar caste Roman Catholics, whose numbers have steadily increased over time, thus challenging former Marakkayar dominance in fishing. The interesting point is that the violence is between Muslims and Christians, not Muslims and Hindus, and that it takes place in peripheral coastal fishing villages, not in dense urban slums. Punathil’s central argument is that this group violence is conditioned and trig-

gered by “spatial” competition for crowded beachfront areas to land fishing nets and boats, not by religious enmity per se, although Catholic and Muslim organizations do provide institutional support to each side. The religious faith of these two groups is only one aspect of their collective self-identity. Historically, fishing communities throughout Kerala have been ignored and bypassed by Kerala’s post-independence social reform agendas, and Marakkayar Muslims have not achieved the same upward mobility as Mappila Muslim traders in North Malabar. They have also lost ground to the Catholics in fishing, and now in places like Beemapalli, they have carved out a new economic niche as labor migrants to the Gulf and merchants of quasi-legal goods such as pirated DVDs.

Punathil emphasizes local beachfront geography and spatial congestion as the source of disputes between Muslim and Catholic fishermen, a crowded condition that also follows their boats out to sea. The crowding becomes much worse when Catholics from other locations migrate temporarily to Vizhinjam harbor during the monsoon season, making it difficult to accommodate everyone’s boats and nets on the sheltered beach. While localized grievances and perceived insults seem to have sparked many of the fights in the 1960s, the more recent factor of structural violence can be seen in the international aid–fostered modernization of fishing technology, a change that has largely benefited the Mukkuvar Catholics. The Muslims, who formerly dominated coastal fishing using sail-powered *kattumarams*, are unable to compete with industrial trawlers owned by Catholic sea captains. An unnecessary spark was kindled in Vizhinjam in 1982 when the government promoted a boat-racing festival in which Catholics and Muslims were permitted to compete as rival teams, leaving two Catholics dead at the hands of the police. The state subsequently undertook a major economic development project to transform the fishing harbor in Vizhinjam into an international cargo port, a plan that involved the forced displacement and resettlement of fishing families. Inevitably, there were suspicions and accusations about which community, Mukkuvars or Marakkayars, had been allocated the best resettlement sites nearest to the shore, leading to more violence in 1995. Punathil observes that Muslims throughout India have suffered increasing prejudice and disrespect at the hands of the Hindu majority, and this has further stigmatized the black market Marakkayar traders of Beemapalli. In the aftermath of a clash in 2009, in which the police killed six Muslims, a sandy frontier separating the two groups was established in Beemapalli by the police, who referred to it as the “line of control”—an apparent reference to the Indo-Pakistan frontier in Kashmir.

Punathil’s book is closely focused on the topic of violence, and it offers very little background information about the social patterns and cultural worldviews within the Marakkayar Muslim and Mukkuvar Catholic communities. This gap is especially noticeable for the southern Kerala Marakkayars, about whom there is virtually no ethnographic literature, despite tantalizing connections to the Coromandel and North Malabar coasts. An exception is Punathil’s discussion of the Beemapalli shrine to the local female Muslim saint, Beema Umma, which is now a significant pilgrimage destination for Muslims in Tamil Nadu. From a production standpoint, this book features excellent-quality professional photographs. However, the glossary is spotty and thin, and the book suffers from typographical errors and lack of proofreading in many places. For example, the “1901 Census” is cited in the text but is not listed in the bibliography, and a number of authors’ names are misspelled. At one point, the author puzzlingly refers to “the Dutch missionary Francis Xavier” (47).

Despite these problems, *Interrogating Communalism* is without doubt a unique and important contribution to the literature on communal violence in South Asia. As a resource for teaching, some of the individual chapters would provide fascinating supplementary reading material. This book deserves a place in all major research libraries, and it will be of specific interest to scholars of communal violence and coastal communities around the world.

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